

# DISINFORMATION ON COVID-19 AND THE WAR IN UKRAINE: SHARED NARRATIVES AND CHANNELS OF DISTRIBUTION

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*Ralitsa Kovacheva. Disinformation on COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine: shared narratives and channels of distribution*

*Abstract:* The article studies some of the leading disinformation narratives on COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine (2021-2022) and their dissemination channels. The study proves that the same disinformation narratives have been used to oppose the COVID-19 restrictions and vaccines and justify Russian aggression in Ukraine. The research focuses on three leading narratives: genocide/crimes against humanity committed, the policy of nazism/fascism conducted by the authorities, and biological weapons used/experiments performed on people. The study finds that the same actors spread disinformation on both issues using mainly, but not only, social media. The main focus of the dissemination study is on Bulgaria and Central and Eastern Europe, but it also includes examples from other EU countries. Although the official Russian state propaganda pushes these narratives, we find local adjustments and specifics due to specific motivations behind using these narratives. The findings are based on the research provided by six organisations: EUvsDisinfo, EU Disinfo Lab, European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance, SCIENCE + and Factcheck.bg.

*Keywords:* Ukraine, COVID-19, disinformation, Russian propaganda, genocide, Nazism, bioweapons

## **The Bulgarian context**

If we need proof of the harmful influence of disinformation on Bulgarians, we could not find anything more convincing than the statistic of COVID-19 deaths. Bulgaria has the second highest death rate from COVID-19 per 1 million people in the world, with 36,700 deaths (by April 2022) and holds the first place in excess mortality. The death rate in 2021 is the highest in Bulgaria since 1945. Nonetheless, only 30% of Bulgarians are vaccinated against COVID-19, which ranks us last in the EU. Among the various reasons behind this dark statistic, we could distinguish the lack of a clear and consistent government policy regarding COVID-19 restrictions

and the absence of a broad information campaign in favour of vaccination. Although Bulgaria is most vulnerable to disinformation among the EU members<sup>1</sup>, it has no government strategy to fight disinformation. 72% of Bulgarians find news in social media, predominantly Facebook (69%) and YouTube (34%) – the average value for all countries covered by the Digital News Report 2022 is 30%<sup>2</sup>. The same study shows that only 35% of Bulgarian consumers trust the media.

According to Globesec Vulnerability Index 2021, the Bulgarian information landscape suffers from relatively high information manipulation and disinformation contamination. The largest number of Bulgarians, compared to all other Eastern Europeans – 45%, believe that the COVID-19 pandemic was planned by secret forces/elite operations to control the population. 51% do not believe in vaccines against COVID-19 because they believe that pharmaceutical companies are driven solely by the desire for profit.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, 43% of Bulgarians believe liberal democracy threatens their traditional values and identity. Among the world's political leaders, Vladimir Putin is the most liked – 70% evaluate him positively (the highest result among all the surveyed countries in Central and Eastern Europe). 62% of Bulgarians think it is good for their country to have an autocratic leader – the highest score among all CEE countries surveyed<sup>4</sup>.

In addition, in 2021, we had three preliminary parliamentary elections and a fourth preliminary election in October 2022. Some political parties heavily misused the issues of COVID-19 (2021) and the war in Ukraine (2022), and disinformation spread freely via traditional media<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> How It Started, How It is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022 [online]. Open Society Institute – Sofia, 2022. [Cited 7 November 2022]. Available from: <https://osis.bg/?p=4243&lang=en>.

<sup>2</sup> NEWMAN, Nic et al. Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2022 [Cited 7 November 2022]. Available from: [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital\\_News-Report\\_2022.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> HAJDU, Dominika et al. GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index: Evaluating susceptibility to foreign malign influence in 8 Central European & Western Balkan countries. GLOBSEC, 2021 [Cited 8 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-vulnerability-index-evaluating-susceptibility-foreign-malign>.

<sup>4</sup> HAJDU, Dominika et al. GLOBSEC Trends 2021: Central and Eastern Europe one year into the pandemic. GLOBSEC. 2021 [online]. [Cited 8 November 2022]. Available at: <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/globsec-trends-2021-central-and-eastern-europe-one-year-pandemic>.

<sup>5</sup> КОВАЧЕВА, Ралица. Разкази и разказвачи: дезинформация в българските предизборни кампании през 2021. В: Ковачева и др. „Дезинформацията: новите предизвикателства. Сборник с доклади от международната научна конференция „Дезинформацията: новите предизвикателства“. София: Университетско издателство „Св. Климент Охридски“, 2021, 21-43.

## Methodology

Dealing with the issue of disinformation as a researcher and a journalist allowed me to observe how sustainable narratives have been formed around specific keywords. Moreover, these keywords and their associated narratives were the same regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines and the war in Ukraine: genocide, nazism/fascism and biological experiment/weapon.

To establish whether these narratives appear among the main narratives on COVID-19 (restrictions and vaccination) and Russia's war in Ukraine, I used the databases and research of the following organisations:

**EUvsDisinfo:** The flagship project of the European External Action Service's East StratCom Task Force. It exposes disinformation cases originating in pro-Kremlin media that are spread in the EU and neighbouring countries by using data analysis and media monitoring services in 15 languages. The website offers a searchable, open-source repository with more than 12,000 samples.

**EU Disinfo Lab:** An independent NGO focused on researching disinformation campaigns in social media targeting the EU and its member states. It uses open-source intelligence techniques (OSINT) to uncover disinformation networks, strategies, and inauthentic behaviour.

**European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO):** A consortium under the leadership of the European University Institute in Florence (Italy), uniting several research organisations and financed by the EU. It is expected to serve as a hub for collaboration between fact-checkers, academics and other relevant stakeholders. EDMO website publishes monthly fact-checking briefs and investigations.

**#CoronaVirusFacts Alliance:** It is a database created by Poynter Institute that unites fact-checkers in more than 70 countries and includes articles published in at least 40 languages.

**SCIENCE +:** The SCIENCE+ project is run by Free Press for Eastern Europe in collaboration with Free Press Unlimited. SCIENCE+ operates in Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary, Latvia, Moldova, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. SCIENCE + provides weekly newsletters on emerging popular disinformation trends in Eastern and Central Europe.

**Factcheck.bg:** Created in May 2021, it is the only platform in Bulgaria dedicated solely to fact-checking, an initiative of the Association of European Journalists-Bulgaria. Factcheck.bg is a verified signatory of the IFCN Code of principles. The website provides regular fact-checking and disinformation debunking.

Based on the research conducted by these organisations, the study defines three shared narratives about COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. Since fact-checking organisations comprehensively debunk the specific false or misleading

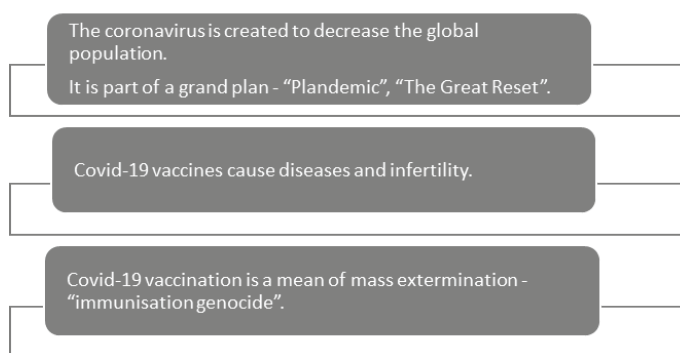
claims constructing the narratives, they will not be explained or rebooted here in detail.

The second part of the article will focus on dissemination channels, specifically in Central and Eastern Europe.

Finally, the broader impact of these disinformation narratives will be discussed.

## Narratives on COVID-19 restrictions and vaccination

The genocide narrative:



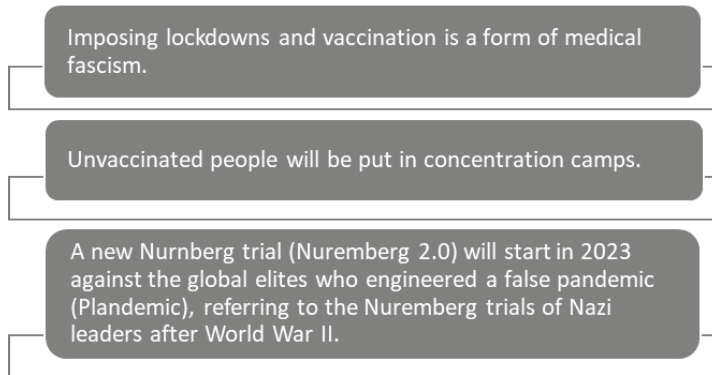
*Fig. 1: The genocide narrative about COVID-19*

There is also a particular narrative targeting Ukraine and blaming the Ukrainian government for "genocide" over its refusal to buy the Russian vaccine Sputnik V<sup>6</sup>. The most recent (October 2022) example of this narrative is represented by social media publications saying that reports of deaths due to Sudden Adult Death Syndrome (SADS) are a cover-up for a "genocide" caused by the COVID-19 vaccines<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Eeas Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19 Pandemic (UPDATE DECEMBER 2020 - APRIL 2021). EEAS. europa.eu [online]. 28 April 2021 [Cited 29 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eeas-special-report-COVID-19-vaccine-related-disinformation-6.pdf>.

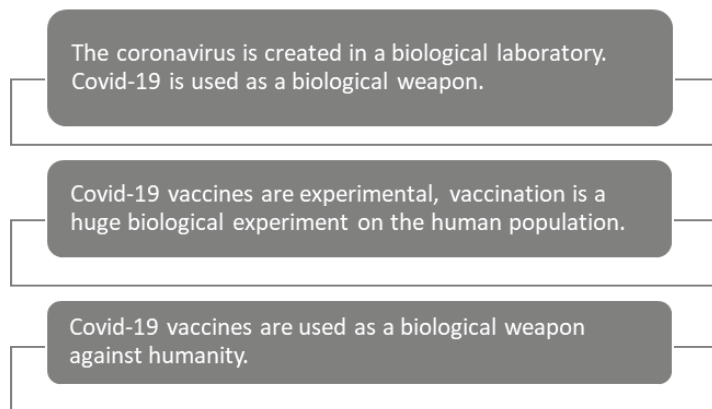
<sup>7</sup> Deaths due to SADS aren't covering up 'genocide' caused by Covid-19 vaccines. Fullfact.org [online]. 21 October 2022 [Cited 17 November 2022]. Available from: <https://fullfact.org/health/sads-covid-genocide/>.

The Nazism/Fascism narrative:



*Fig. 2: The Nazism/Fascism narrative about COVID-19*

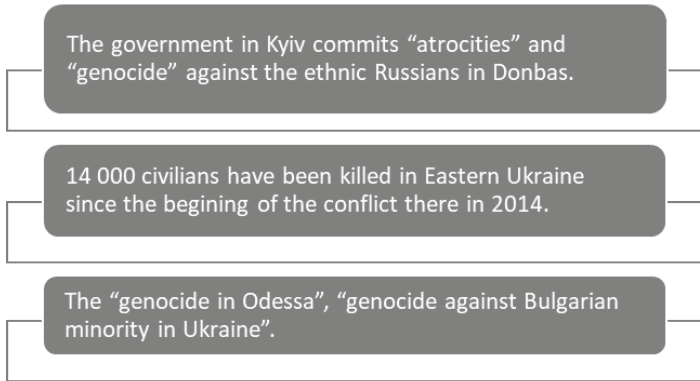
The biological experiment/weapon narrative:



*Fig. 3: The biological experiment/weapon narrative about Covid-19*

## Narratives on the war in Ukraine:

The genocide narrative:



*Fig. 4: The genocide narrative about Ukraine*

The “genocide narrative” could be traced back to 2014 regarding Ukraine<sup>8</sup> and even to 2008 regarding Georgia, when “Russia seemed ready to define genocide as more an emotional than a legal accusation”, Roy Allison points out<sup>9</sup>. This narrative was domesticated in Bulgaria, becoming one of the most shared stories on social media in the first months after the Russian invasion. According to it, two Bulgarians died in the clashes in Odessa on 2 May 2014, when over 40 people lost their lives during a fire. Even though there is no proof behind that claim, many people, including journalists, academics and other prominent personalities, still insist that Ukrainians “burn Bulgarians alive” and commit genocide against the Bulgarian minority in Ukraine<sup>10</sup>. More false claims were added to this narrative in the following months: Bulgarian monuments were destroyed by Ukrainians,

<sup>8</sup> KUPFER, Matthew, Thomas DE WAAL. Crying Genocide: Use and Abuse of Political Rhetoric in Russia and Ukraine. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace [online]. 28 July 2014. [Cited 9 November 2022]. Available from: <https://carnegieendowment.org/2014/07/28/crying-genocide-use-and-abuse-of-political-rhetoric-in-russia-and-ukraine-pub-56265>.

<sup>9</sup> ALLISON, Roy. The Russian case for military intervention in Georgia: international law, norms and political calculation. *European Security*, 18(2), 2009, 173–200.

<sup>10</sup> КИРКОВА, Мина. Няма доказателства за убити българи в сблъсъците в Одеса на 2 май 2014 г. *Factcheck.bg* [online]. 21 април 2022. [Cited 30 November 2022]. Available from: <https://factcheck.bg/nyama-dokazatelstva-za-ubiti-balgari-v-sblasacite-v-odesa-na-2-maj-2014-g/>.

Bulgarian names were forcefully changed by the Ukrainian authorities<sup>11</sup>, and the Bulgarian language was forbidden in Ukrainian schools<sup>12</sup>.

As for the victims of the conflict in Eastern Ukraine, 14 000 is the overall number of victims (before 24 February 2022) of what the International Criminal Court defines as an “international armed conflict”, given there is “direct military engagement between the respective armed forces of the Russian Federation and Ukraine”. The number of civilian victims is around 3400, as most of them died in 2014-2015, before the implementation of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement, signed in February 2015. The number includes 298 victims of the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17), which was shot down in July 2014<sup>13</sup>.

The Nazism/Fascism narrative:



*Fig. 5: The Nazism/Fascism narrative about Ukraine*

<sup>11</sup> ВАСИЛЕВА, Катерина. PolitiCheck: Няма насилствена смяна на имената на българите в Украйна, както твърди Костадин Костадинов. Factcheck.bg [online]. 7 June 2022. [Cited 30 November 2022]. Available from: <https://factcheck.bg/politiceck-nyama-nasilstvena-smyana-na-imenata-na-balgarite-v-ukrajna-kakto-tvardi-kostadin-kostadinov/#>.

<sup>12</sup> NIKOLOVA, Vanessa. PolitiCheck: There is no forced name change of Bulgarians in Ukraine, as claimed by Kostadin Kostadinov. Factcheck.bg [online]. 15 December 2022. [Cited 16 December 2022]. Available from: <https://factcheck.bg/en/politiceck-it-s-not-true-that-bulgarian-language-is-not-taught-in-public-schools-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>13</sup> The Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court. Report on Preliminary Examination Activities, 2019 [online]. [Cited 20 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/sites/default/files/itemsDocuments/191205-rep-otp-PE.pdf>.

According to EUvsDisinfo, after 24 February 2022, the mentions of the word “Nazi” in pro-Kremlin media outlets increased three times and of the word “genocide” five times<sup>14</sup>.

## KEYWORDS ABOUT UKRAINE IN THE RUSSIAN STATE-CONTROLLED MEDIA\*

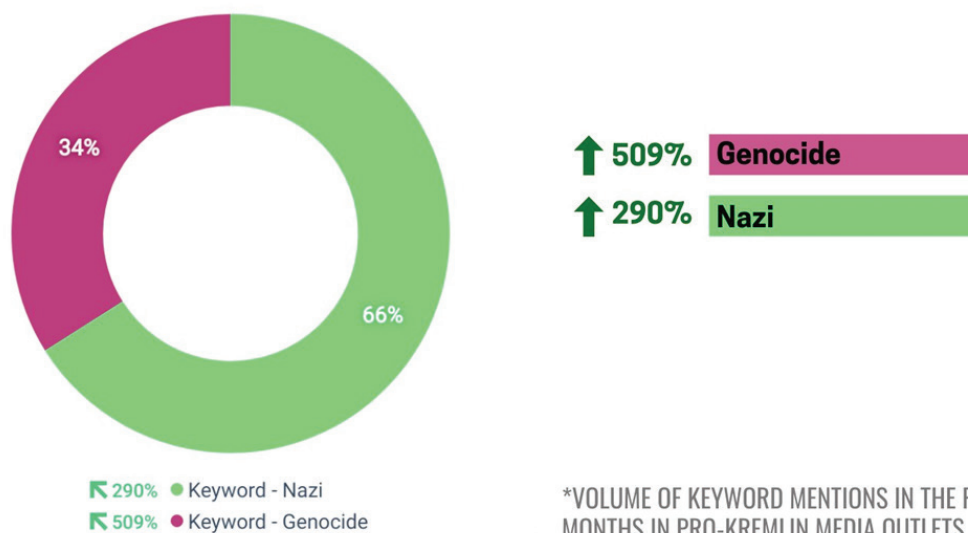


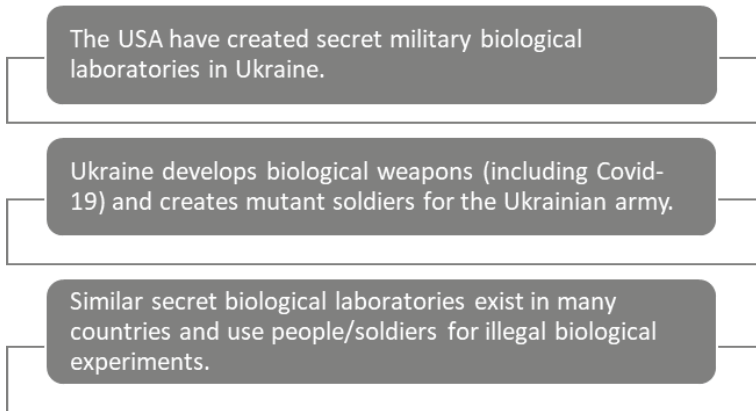
Fig. 6: Mentions of “Nazi” and “genocide” in pro-Kremlin media outlets after 24 February 2022<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> EUvsDisinfo. Twitter.com [online]. 1 March 2022. [Cited 10 October 2022]. Available from: <https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo/status/1498613080959471618>.

<sup>15</sup> Source: <https://twitter.com/EUvsDisinfo/status/1498613080959471618>



The biological experiment/weapon narrative:



*Fig. 7: The biological experiment/weapon narrative about Ukraine*

The biolabs narrative became extremely popular in Bulgaria and was thoroughly studied by the Bulgarian fact-checking platform Factcheck.bg<sup>16</sup>. This narrative was pushed by Bulgarian journalist Dilyana Gaytandzhieva who is identified by several anti-disinformation platforms as an author with “pronounced pro-Russian leanings.” Her articles have been published on the Kremlin-sponsored website “News Front”, described by the US State Department as a “disinformation and propaganda media, self-proclaimed as an “alternative source of information”<sup>17</sup>. Gaytandzhieva is the author of several “investigations” about “biological experiments” conducted by the Pentagon with Ukrainian, Georgian and Bulgarian soldiers in the last few years. This story has been told by Russian state-controlled media for years and is extensively debunked by many media and organisations<sup>18</sup> in

<sup>16</sup> VASILEVA, Katerina. There is no evidence that Ukraine is developing biological weapons in Pentagon-funded labs. Factcheck.bg [online]. 18 April 2022. [Cited 11 October 2022]. Available from: <https://factcheck.bg/en/there-is-no-evidence-that-ukraine-is-developing-biological-weapons-in-pentagon-funded-labs/>.

<sup>17</sup> GEC Special Report: Pillars of Russia’s Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem. U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE [online]. August 2020. [Cited 11 October 2022]. Available from: [https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem\\_08-04-20.pdf](https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Pillars-of-Russia%E2%80%99s-Disinformation-and-Propaganda-Ecosystem_08-04-20.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> LOMSADZE, Giorgi. Does the US Have A Secret Germ Warfare Lab on Russia’s Doorstep? The inside story of a Kremlin disinformation campaign in Georgia. Codastory.com [online]. 19 April 2018. [Cited 11 October 2022]. Available from: <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/does-the-us-have-a-secret-germ-warfare-lab-on-russias-doorstep/>.

different countries<sup>19</sup>. EUvsDisinfo follows back the narrative of “Ukraine builds weapons of mass destruction”, including biological weapons, back to 2014<sup>20</sup>.

To sum up, the research shows that the same three disinformation narratives of genocide, Nazism and bioweapons have been used concerning the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The EDMO Belux project also identified the same narratives among the leading seven narratives on the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine in Dutch-speaking disinformation communities:<sup>21</sup>

2. Calling out crimes against humanity	False claims that the Covid-19 and vaccination campaigns are a planned genocide.	False claims that Ukrainians are conducting a genocide in Donbas.
3. Reductio ad Hitlerum	Misleading comparisons between anti-vaxxers and Jewish communities discriminated during the Nazi era.	Manipulated and decontextualised visuals to accuse Ukrainians of being Nazis.
4. Conspiracy theories on secret lab activities	Unproven claims that Covid-19 was fabricated in a Wuhan lab.	Unproven claims of US-funded biolabs in Ukraine.

*Fig. 8: Leading narratives on the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine in Dutch-speaking disinformation communities<sup>22</sup>*

<sup>19</sup> LOGUERCIO, Laura, Tommaso CANETTA. The five disinformation narratives about the war in Ukraine. EDMO [online]. 11 March 2022. [Cited 16 November 2022]. Available from: <https://edmo.eu/2022/03/11/the-five-disinformation-narratives-about-the-war-in-ukraine/>.

<sup>20</sup> Weapons of Mass Delusion. EUvsdisinfo.eu [online]. 10 March 2022. [Cited 11 October 2022]. Available from: <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/weapons-of-mass-delusion/>.

<sup>21</sup> SESSA, Maria Giovanna. From Infodemic to Information War. Disinfo.eu [online]. 10 May 2022 [Cited 11 October 2022]. Available from: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/from-infodemic-to-information-war/>.

<sup>22</sup> Source: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/from-infodemic-to-information-war/>

## Same narratives, same channels of distribution

As the war broke out, “Staunch no-vax protesters” suddenly became “pro-Russian supporters”, fact-checkers all around Europe warned<sup>23</sup>. In Bulgaria, the most active anti-vaccine group, “THE FRAUD COVID-19”, significantly changed its name to “THE FRAUD COVID-19/UKRAINE-22 (PART FOUR)”. According to EurActive, Czech anti-vaxxers turned into pro-Russian activists<sup>24</sup>. In one of the largest Czech anti-vaccination Facebook groups, “NEOČKOVANÍ CZ, SK pro MÍR! In NE VÁLCE!” (Unvaccinated CZ, SK for PEACE! NO WAR!), the narrative about “COVID-fascism” appeared already at the beginning of January. At the beginning of February, pro-Russian narratives appeared, and on February 24, Russian propaganda had already been openly shared within the group<sup>25</sup>. Slovaks who relied on dubious sources for their information on COVID-19 are now avid consumers of the disinformation about the war in Ukraine, “Balkan Insight” writes<sup>26</sup>. A recent opinion poll shows a possible link between the disinformation on COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine. Asked on which side Slovakia should stand geopolitically, 20.8 percent of the unvaccinated respondents chose Russia, compared to 4.8 percent of vaccinated respondents. On whether Western or Eastern Europe is closer to their way of life, values and culture, 40.4 percent of the unvaccinated chose Eastern Europe, compared to 24.2 percent of vaccinated people. In Poland, 43 web pages regularly disseminate anti-Ukrainian and pro-Russian war propaganda. Some of them were established during the COVID-19 pandemic and concentrated on anti-vaccine propaganda and pandemic conspiracy theories, OKO.press reports<sup>27</sup>.

The same trend is also present in other EU countries, especially Germany. Most of the German Querdenker (‘alternative thinkers’), who opposed vaccines

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<sup>23</sup> LOGUERCIO, Laura. Tommaso CANETTA. How COVID-19 conspiracy theorists pivoted to pro-Russian hoaxes. EDMO.eu [online]. 30 March 2022. [Cited 12 October 2022]. Available from: <https://edmo.eu/2022/03/30/how-covid-19-conspiracy-theorists-pivoted-to-pro-russian-hoaxes/>.

<sup>24</sup> ZACHOVÁ, Aneta. Czech anti-vaxxers turning into pro-Russian activists. EURACTIV.cz [online]. 22 February 2022. [Cited 12 October 2022]. Available from: [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/czech-anti-vaxxers-turning-into-pro-russian-activists/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/czech-anti-vaxxers-turning-into-pro-russian-activists/).

<sup>25</sup> NAGY, Nikolett. Vaccine skeptics quickly became pro-Russian activists. 24.hu [online]. 14 May 2022. [Cited 12 October 2022]. Available from: <https://24.hu/tech/2022/05/14/covid-19-koronavirus-alhitek-szkepticizmus-oltasellenesek-orosz-propaganda-alhitek-dezinformacio-kozossegi-media/>.

<sup>26</sup> FRANCELOVA, Nina H. From Vaccination to War: Slovak Disinformation Outlets Quick to Shift the Conversation. Balkaninsight.com [online]. 6 April 2022. [Cited 12 October 2022]. Available from: <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/06/from-vaccination-to-war-slovak-disinformation-outlets-quick-to-shift-the-conversation/>.

<sup>27</sup> MIERZYŃSKA, Anna. 43 portals broadcast anti-Ukrainian propaganda in Polish every day. OKO.press [online]. 1 May 2022. [Cited 12 October 2022]. Available from: <https://oko.press/antyukrajnska-propaganda-po-polsku-raport-z-sieci>.

and containment measures, have embraced pro-Russia positions<sup>28</sup>. Analysis by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) Germany reveals that “online German-speaking communities of COVID-19 skeptics, anti-vaxxers, far-right and right-wing populists are among those more susceptible to Russian propaganda”. During the pandemic, de.rt.com was their favourite domain for COVID-19 disinformation, but in the months before Russia’s invasion, they started sharing content from de.rt.com more frequently than any other source<sup>29</sup>. “Open Democracy” founds that content from Russian state-controlled media like RT Deutsch and Sputnik questioning scientific consensus about the pandemic and the efficacy of vaccines was widely shared in German-language Telegram groups, fueling mass anti-lockdown protests across Germany<sup>30</sup>.

Spanish fact-checking organisation Maldita.es reveals that some prominent disinformation actors have turned from spreading falsehoods about COVID-19 to a full-hearted defence of the Russian attack on Ukraine<sup>31</sup>. An analysis of several organisations participating in the EDMO fact-checking network (AFP, Correctiv, Demagog, Maldita, Mimikama, PagellaPolitica/Facta, Verificat, and TjekDet) shows that “the shift from pandemic to war among disinformation spreaders” is observed in Spain, Italy, Poland, Denmark, Germany, and France<sup>32</sup>. The main channels remained the same: Telegram channels, social media, and misleading news websites. “As a consequence, communities which have been most exposed to COVID-19 disinformation are now more likely to be the main recipients of pro-Russian disinformation”<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> MIGUEL, Raquel et al. The virus, the war, elections, and much more... What did fact-checked disinformation look like in the first six month of 2022 in France, Germany, and Spain? Disinfo.eu [online]. 22 July 2022. [Cited 10 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/what-did-fact-checked-disinformation-look-like-in-the-first-six-month-of-2022-in-france-germany-and-spain/>.

<sup>29</sup> SMIRNOVA, Julia, Francesca ARCOSTANZO. German-Language Disinformation about the Russian Invasion of Ukraine on Facebook. Institute for Strategic Dialog [online]. 1 March 2022. [Cited 12 November 2022]. Available from: [https://www.isdglobal.org/digital\\_dispatches/german-language-disinformation-about-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-on-facebook/](https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/german-language-disinformation-about-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-on-facebook/).

<sup>30</sup> LOUCAIDES, Darren, Alessio PERRONE. Germany’s COVID sceptics fuelled by Russian media and far-Right conspiracies. OpenDemocracy.net [online]. 31 March 2021. [Cited 30 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/germanys-covid-sceptics-fuelled-by-russian-media-and-far-right-conspiracies/>.

<sup>31</sup> MALDITA.ES. From COVID-19 denialism to pro-Putin hoaxes: the mutation of disinformation groups on Telegram in Spanish. EDMO.eu [online]. 18 March 2022. [Cited 10 November 2022]. Available from: <https://edmo.eu/2022/03/18/from-covid-19-denialism-to-pro-putin-hoaxes-the-mutation-of-disinformation-groups-on-telegram-in-spanish/>.

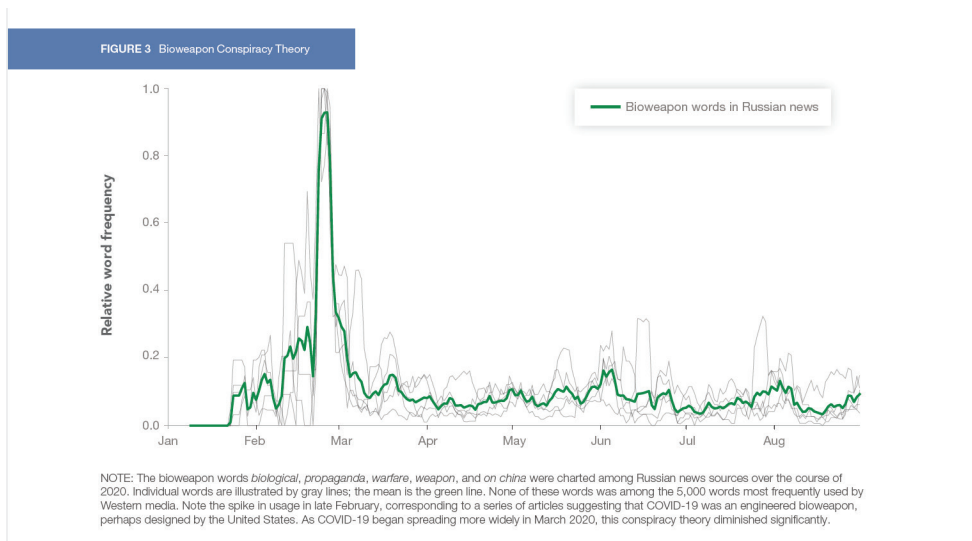
<sup>32</sup> LOGUERCIO, Laura, Tommaso CANETTA. How COVID-19 conspiracy theorists pivoted to pro-Russian hoaxes. EDMO.eu [online]. 30 March 2022. [Cited 12 October 2022]. Available from: <https://edmo.eu/2022/03/30/how-covid-19-conspiracy-theorists-pivoted-to-pro-russian-hoaxes/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibidem.

## Who is behind

Even though the studies cited above do not always point explicitly to Russia as responsible for creating and sharing disinformation about COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine, it is evident that these narratives correspond to the Kremlin propaganda messages. According to a report by the European External Action Service on the narratives and disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic, “the main narratives originate from Russian state-controlled media and chiefly focus on promoting Sputnik V, denigrating Western vaccines, and blaming the EU for its failure in vaccination or its COVID-19 handling”<sup>34</sup>.

A study by the RAND Corporation researchers found that Russia employed information manipulation during the COVID-19 pandemic to serve its agenda<sup>35</sup>. The study points out that as early as February 2020, Russian media started publishing articles suggesting that COVID-19 was an engineered bioweapon, potentially even one designed by the United States.



6: Fig. 9 Bioweapon words in Russian news<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Eeas Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation Around the COVID-19 Pandemic (UPDATE DECEMBER 2020 - APRIL 2021). EEAS. europa.eu [online]. 28 April 2021 [Cited 29 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eeas-special-report-covid-19-vaccine-related-disinformation-6.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> JOHNSON, Christian, William MARCELLINO. Bad Actors in News Reporting: Tracking News Manipulation by State Actors. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021 [online]. [Cited 29 November 2022]. Available from: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA112-21.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-21.html)

<sup>36</sup> Source: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA112-21.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA112-21.html)

Another narrative pushed by Russian media was that the public health measures implemented during the pandemic were “part of a sinister plot by governments to exert totalitarian control”.

## Conclusions and discussion

Based on the presented argument, the study concludes that the same disinformation narratives and distribution channels are used regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. These narratives are marked by specific keywords: genocide, Nazism/Fascism, and bioweapon/experiment. Conspiratorial thinking and unfounded claims are other common denominators. According to the analysis of the Science + team, conspiracy claims serve as a bridge between medical fakes and anti-Ukraine propaganda. As Polish fact-checkers at Demagog noted, “the overlap between COVID-19 and pro-Russian disinformation does not stop at the sources, but it also tends to recycle the same mechanisms exploited to shape and spread hoaxes”<sup>37</sup>. The general narratives are the same, but specific elements are adapted to fit into the local contexts of different countries and audiences. In many countries, local players used the Kremlin propaganda clichés to serve their political and commercial goals. “Local pro-Kremlin actors, including various portals and pages on Facebook, always grab a topic which is current and they spread narratives that support these aims,” explains Dominika Hajdu, a researcher at the Globsec think-tank<sup>38</sup>. According to the Slovak expert on disinformation, Tomáš Kriššák, many of the websites and Facebook pages spreading these narratives just used the moment to grab the attention and to attract more audience<sup>39</sup>. In Bulgaria, we see clickbait farms using the topics of the pandemic and the war for commercial goals.

However, political actors are also misusing these topics to achieve their short-term political goals. There is a striking similarity between the Bulgarian political party “Vazrazhdane” (Revival) and the Hungarian Normal Life Party (NÉP). They have actively used the pandemic and the war as a pretext to criticise their national governments. They both share pro-Russian disinformation narratives and support Russia’s positions. According to Graham Brookie, senior director of the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, “the amplification of pro-Kremlin narratives about the war isn’t really about Russia, it’s about the ongoing

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<sup>37</sup> LOGUERCIO, Laura. Tommaso CANETTA. How COVID-19 conspiracy theorists pivoted to pro-Russian hoaxes.

<sup>38</sup> FRANCELOVA, Nina H. From Vaccination to War: Slovak Disinformation Outlets Quick to Shift the Conversation.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem.

skepticism that these groups have in their own governments”<sup>40</sup>. Here is the eye of the perfect storm created by overlapping the topics of the pandemic and the war in Ukraine: both were used to enhance distrust and dissatisfaction of democratic governments and institutions.

No of these narratives is hardly new in the Kremlin’s repertoire- some of them, such as the genocide narrative and the bioweapon narrative, was actively used during the Cold War. However, they were ideologically branded and politically motivated. The pandemic allowed them to camouflage and hide their Russian origins, not without the help of the ultraconservative conspiracy groups in the West. In a sense, using these specific narratives during the pandemic, Russia has prepared the scene for its ultimate performance – invading Ukraine and declaring war on what it calls a rotten world order. It is hardly a coincidence that Putin’s formulation of the “new world order”<sup>41</sup> highly resembles one of the oldest and most popular conspiracy theories.

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<sup>40</sup> KAYALI, Laura, Mark SCOTT. Anti-vax conspiracy groups lean into pro-Kremlin propaganda in Ukraine. Politico.eu [online]. 17 March 2022. [Cited 29 November 2022]. Available from: <https://www.politico.eu/article/antivax-conspiracy-lean-pro-kremlin-propaganda-ukraine/>.

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