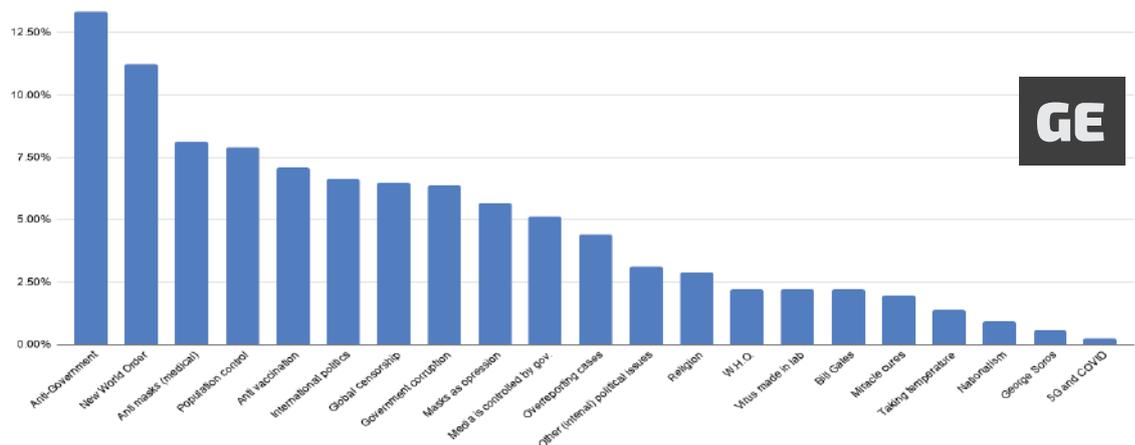
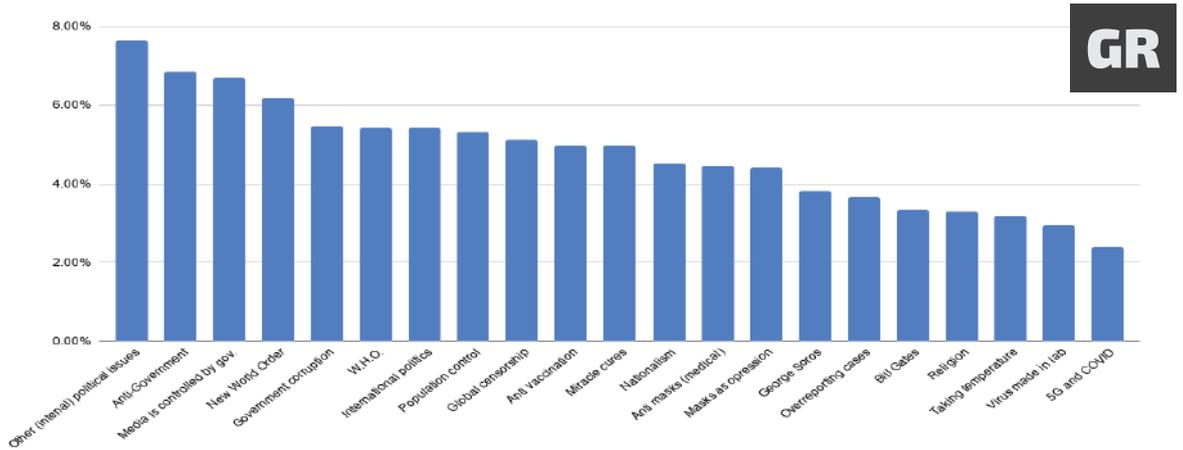
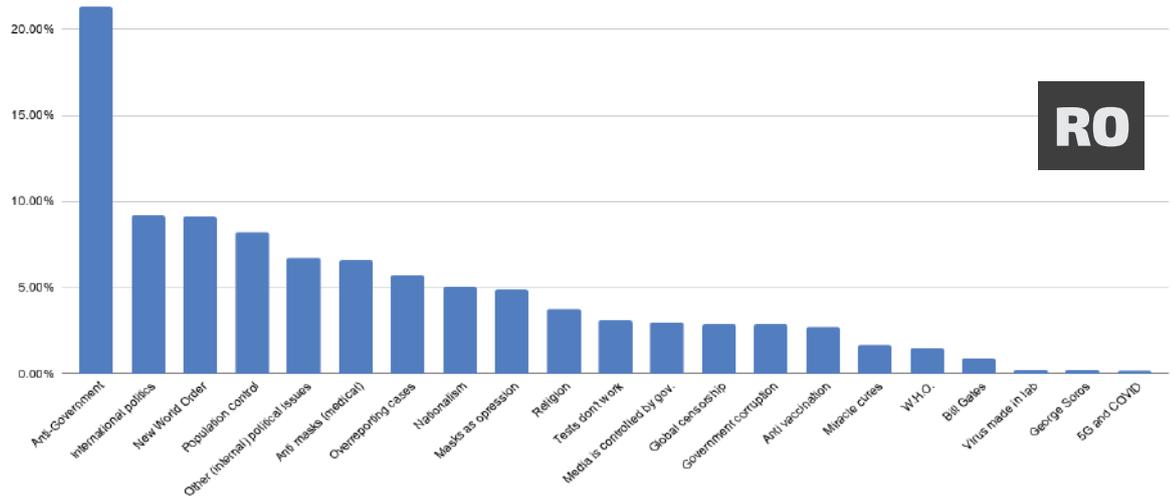


# FAKE NEWS HUNTERS

Third report on disinformation on social media

Romania, Greece & Georgia, October 1st - November 14th 2020

Main Topics of Disinformation in Social Media



# MAIN DISINFORMATION TOPICS EXPLAINED

## POLITICS, IDEOLOGY

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- ▶ **Anti-government:** various kinds of messages in which the government is attacked, based on unreasonable proposals. For example, claims that the government intends to implement a medical-political dictatorship, or that it already set it up, that the government is lying about COVID in order to cover up for various acts of corruption.
- ▶ **Nationalism, antiglobalism:** Various types of messages centered on the idea that countries are losing their identity due to the globalist/neomaxist trend and other nationalist propaganda.
- ▶ **Religion:** most of the messages here claim that the measures taken to prevent the spreading of the new coronavirus are "anti-Christian" or try to limit religious freedom. Besides that, there were messages claiming that you cannot get sick in the church or that you can cure yourself through faith.
- ▶ **Media sold out to govt.:** messages claiming that the "traditional" media follows the directives imposed by the government, especially when it comes to reporting the number of COVID cases.
- ▶ **International politics:** messages regarding the US elections, or promoting countries with a "softer" approach to COVID..
- ▶ **Incorrect reporting:** messages claiming that the authorities are hiding the real number of COVID cases (see the anti-government category), but also messages claiming that people are being paid to declare that they are infected with COVID (while they are not), or to accept COVID as the death cause of some relatives (that die due to other casues).

## GENERIC CONSPIRACIES

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- ▶ **New World Order:** claims that there is a secret elite which has a plan to radically alter the world, in such a way so that they can take the big decisions. Mainly, the messages say that this elite is the cause of the COVID pandemic, or that it created a media iluusion, tricking the world into believing that the new coronavirus is real, in order to take control of the world.
- ▶ **Population Control:** claims that there are some plans to control the population (by microchips included in the vaccine, control of the virus via 5G etc) or to decimate it (due of a so called overpopulation).
- ▶ **WHO:** messages claiming that the World Health Organization is evil, involved in various conspiracies. Some messages claim that WHO is part of the NOW, others that it is part of a plan to decimate the population or that it is „sold“ to China (supporting China in the effort to become a global leader).
- ▶ **Global censorship:** the idea that „alternative voices“ are censored globally, on Facebook, Twitter, Youtube. Messages of this kind appear in connection with the deletion of some content from the big platforms (eg. Plandemic), in connection with the deletion of some Facebook groups but also in connection with fact-check type messages, added to some controversial posts.in-visible in Greece (has been included in the category "others").

## SPECIFIC CONSPIRACIES

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- ▶ **The virus was created in a lab:** various messages referring to the intentional creation of SarsCov-2, with variants such as „created by the americans“ or „created by the Chinese“.
- ▶ **5G & COVID:** messages claiming that either 5G is the root cause of the SrsCov-2 pandemic, or that the virus isn't real and the pandemic was invented in order to facilitate the installment of 5G antennas.
- ▶ **Bill Gates:** messages mentioning Bill gates as part of some plots/conspiracies. Generally the messages are related to the pandemic and vaccines – Bill Gates is mentioned as being involved in the creation of the pandemic or in the manipulation that tries to convince us to believe in a non-existent pandemic and sometimes he is mentioned as being behind some plans to vaccinate the population of the globe, in the process implanting chips that allow gathering information about the people or control of their behavior.
- ▶ **Soros:** messages claiming that Soros is evil, involved in many conspiracies. The messages mention him less in regard to the SarsCov-2 pandemic, but more in other contexts, for example as a "promoter of globalism" or "LGBT interests" supporter or in connection to the *Black Lives Matter* protests.

## SCIENCE, MEDICAL

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- ▶ **Anti-mask (medical):** messages that contradict the official statement regarding the benefits of masks in preventing the spread of SarsCov-2. Some messages claim that masks aren't helping, and their promotion takes place only because of corruption; others claim that masks are dangerous (the oxygen level drops, they can lead to diseases)5.
- ▶ **Taking temperature:** claims that contradict the science regarding temperature measurement, such as data theft or that this is a medical procedure that needs to be done by professionals.
- ▶ **Anti-vaccination:** messages claiming that vaccination is dangerous; sometimes these messages are connected to other themes (Bill Gates, population control), other times this is just an anti-science position, warning of serious dangers associated with vaccines, or simply ideas without proof regarding the contents of the vaccines (eg. cells from aborted fetuses).
- ▶ **Miracle cures:** messages promoting various treatments for COVID, without any medical backing, from Vitamin C to drinking disinfectant, homeopathic remedies, strengthening the immunity etc.
- ▶ **Tests don't work:** messages claiming that COVID testing do not work as the authorities say, either they show also the regular flu, or there are some issues with them.

# ROMANIA

Disinformation has continued along the same lines as in previous reports (april - august), pushed by largely the same *influencers*.

The main category for disinformation was "Politics, Ideology" and the main topic was "anti-government" - pretty far away from the rest, thus solidifying the attempt to capitalize on the existing discontent in regard to the anti-COVID measures.

Disinformation has been following the main interests, such as local elections, religious events but also the US elections.

Particular conspiracies have lost traction in Romania: there is little talk anymore about Bill Gates or Soros, about COVID being created in a lab or about the connection to 5G.

One interesting observation is that disinformation regarding face masks has grown in two narratives, a medical one (masks are bad for your health) and a political one (masks are a symbol of oppression). Taken as a whole, the anti-mask movement would get about 8.3% of the overall disinformation.

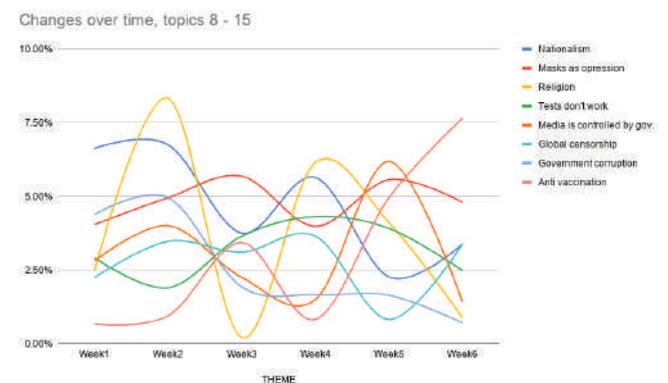
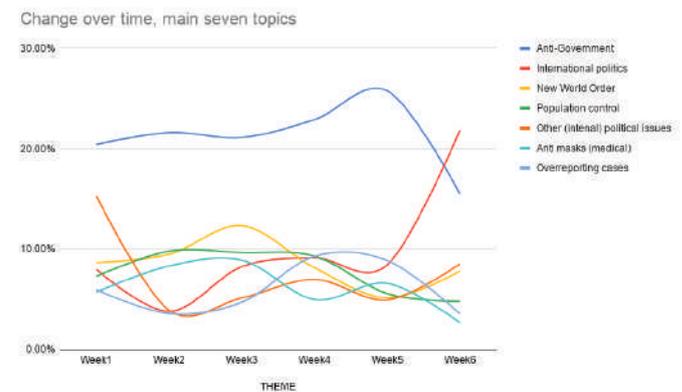
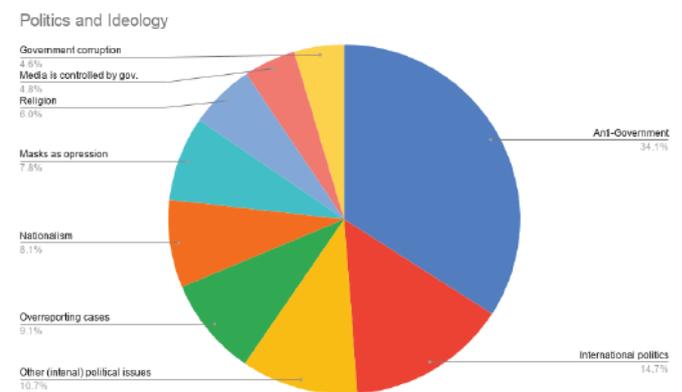
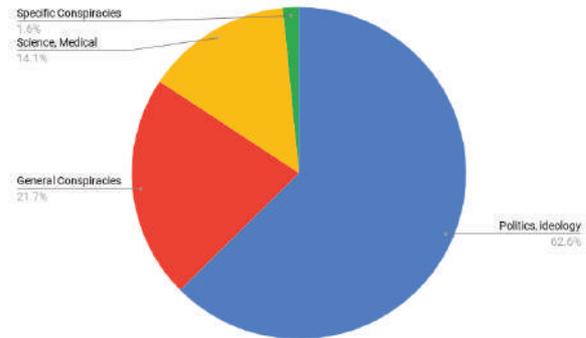
"Traditional" media has also been under attack, especially because of a financial aid programme created by the Government for media outlets, even though anti-government media has benefited.

When looking at trends over the six week period, there are a few observations that support the idea of a *influencer network of disinformation* that follows issues of interest.

For example, as the US elections drew a lot of interest, the amount of disinformation on the topic increased significantly. Romanian politics has been an important disinformation topic at the beginning of the period (right after the local elections), then decreases for a while and comes back both because the national elections are approaching but also due to some extended conspiracy theories about the US elections that claimed to have found Romanian companies or politicians involved in the alleged fraud.

*Overreporting* acts as a recurrent topic to support other anti-government messages. It consists mostly of accusations of "doctored numbers" for political motives; claims of people getting paid to declare they have COVID or that they have relatives who died of COVID have decreased, though they are still present.

Changes in topic religion also shows two spikes around weeks two and four, that matches two important religious events in Romania that normally involve pilgrimages and that have caused a lot of polarization this year.



# GREECE

During the analyzed period, online disinformation in Greece centered around anti-vaccination and anti-masks movements as well as on issues such as migration and Greek-Turkish.

A part of the current research is based on Facebook groups such as "Greek resistance" (1.600 active members) and Facebook pages such as "Wake Up Greece" (163.000 likes and 193.000 followers).

The group and the page are related since most of the group members are followers of the page and they share the same content.

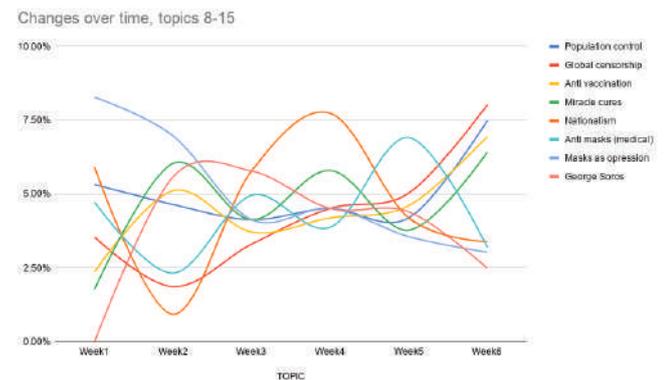
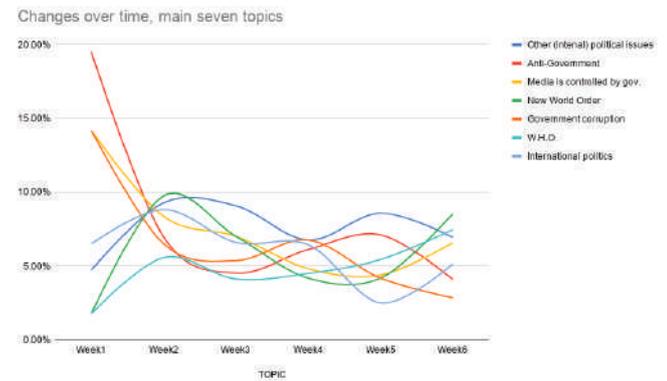
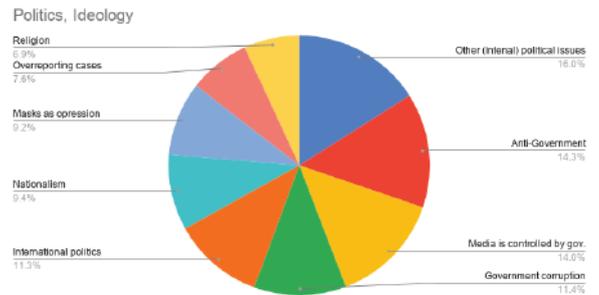
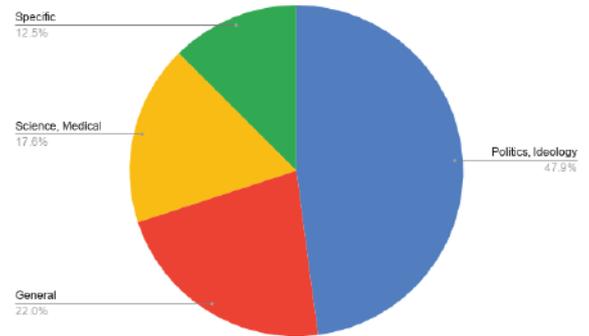
As the number of cases in Greece has increased and the context of the pandemic has changed (ie. the development and plans for distribution of the vaccine), the misinformation increases and adjusts accordingly.

Disinformation narratives have a wide range like Covid-19 disinformation, nationalism, far right posts, anti-science, Greek-Turkish relations and religious issues. Until the 20th of October most of the content was related with Greek-Turkish relations and refugee issues but then when the cases and deaths increased and Greece was under lockdown, disinformation about Covid-19, anti-masks movement, lack of trust on science and doctors and anti-vaccination movement increased. This seems to imply that disinformation messages follow the flow and topic of the news and are adjusted based on current events.

Nationalist propaganda is still an important driver of disinformation and seems to connect both to foreign policy issues as well as to issues about COVID, such as messages against USA, Germany and Bill Gates, who is responsible for the new vaccine with biochip.

Other disinformation topics include the corruption of Greek government, the corruption and financing of doctors and health officials, the narrative against lockdown and false numbers of deaths and cases at a time when the virus is just a flu and not deadly.

Also this is the first period when generalized attacks on journalists and media are visible, a worrying trend that shows the lack of trust in media.



# GEORGIA

Among the main trends in the disinformation flow of Georgian social media are anti-governmental narratives.

Most of the pages and profiles observed during the research spread disinformation on the government taking part in different kinds of conspiracies. Attacking the government for its involvement in global fraud and global corruption schemes is a main trend. Politicians, journalists and health officials are accused of deceiving their population. The politicization of pandemic-related issues is widespread in anti-COVID-19 and anti-vaccine Facebook groups.

In some cases, especially where religion is a driver, the narratives are very emotional and dire. For example, one user calls on other members of a group to prepare together for the Apocalypse and talks about collecting the necessities of life in the field and combining skills that are needed for living in the wild.

Disinformation sites / users also attack the media, on the grounds that it is a powerful tool in the hands of the government. This behavior includes publicly criticizing journalists, writing abusive comments, and attacking TV presenters, guest speakers, such as doctors or other experts, by the members of the group.

A particularity in Georgia is that we have observed a decline in misinformation as coronavirus cases are on the rise, with messages related to symptoms and complaints overtaking anti-COVID posts. At the same time, some of the profiles active in spreading misinformation and disinformation have been blocked.

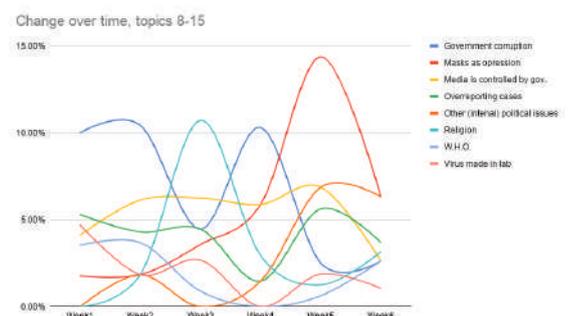
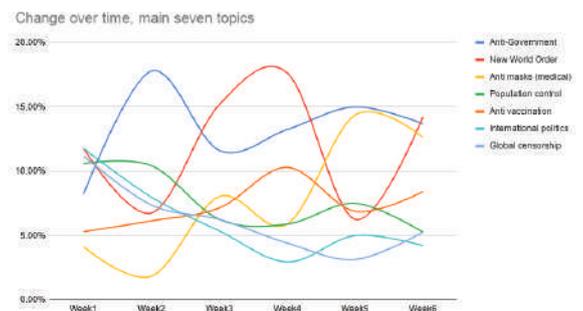
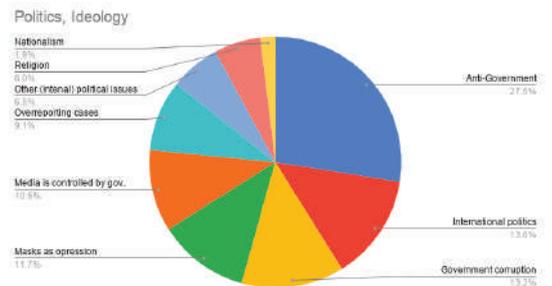
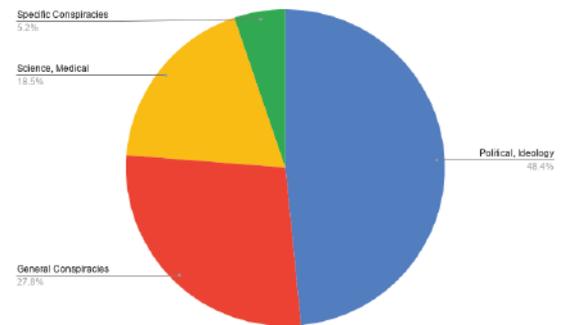
One important observation is that disinformation is spread via self-proclaimed activists, that are forming groups to pose as authentic advocacy initiatives. They are creating protest events and video-posts.

In order to better understand the disinformation matrix built around COVID-19 in the Georgian social media, the following main trends should be considered:

*The pandemic is not real, it is entirely created by world politics actors, government, media and health representatives;*

*The pandemic was created to establish a new order and control people;*

*Vaccines, masks and various treatments / prevention are dangerous for health.*



# CONCLUSIONS:

In all the three countries, disinformation messages on social media are **following current events** that capture the attention of the general public. Influencers, pages and groups follow events that get attention and use them to build interpretations that support their narratives, on the backdrop of a somewhat generalized belief that the government/international organisations/the media are somehow conspiring towards some nefarious goals (eg. to take over the world / control the population). Examples of such events include **local issues**, such as elections, religious events or specific statements of political figures as well as **international issues** such as the US elections.

**Nationalism and religion** continue to be drivers of disinformation in all countries, as **politics and ideology** is - by far - the most present category.

Media seems to be an increasingly interesting target; this includes "traditional" national media outlets, that are being attacked as having "sold out" to the government's interests, but also social media giants (Facebook, Twitter, Google) that are being accused of censoring "truth" for the interests of some hidden elite.

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