

FAKE NEWS HUNTERS V

March 1st - April 11th 2021

Report on disinformation on social media
Georgia, Greece, Italy & Romania



Main topics of misinformation, considering visibility (reach) in social media.

MAIN DISINFORMATION TOPICS

POLITICS, IDEOLOGY

- ▶ **DICT (Dictatorship):** various kinds of messages in which the government is claimed to exaggerate (or have invented) the pandemic to implement or maintain a "medical-political dictatorship".
- ▶ **CORR (Corruption):** government exaggerates the pandemic to cover up various acts of corruption.
- ▶ **NAT (Nationalism, antiglobalism):** Various types of messages centered on the idea that countries are losing their identity due to the globalist/neomarxist trend and other nationalist propaganda.
- ▶ **REL (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:** messages claiming that the "traditional" media follows the directives imposed by the government, especially when it comes to reporting the number of COVID cases.
- ▶ **INT:** messages regarding international politics such as concerning elections, or promoting countries with a "softer" approach to COVID.
- ▶ **REP (Reporting):** messages claiming that the authorities are hiding the real number of COVID cases, 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 causes).
- ▶ **OTH (Other political issues):** misinformation revolving around local political issues, other than the above.

SCIENCE, MEDICAL

- ▶ **MASK:** 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).
- ▶ **AVAX:** 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).
- ▶ **MC (Miracle cures):** messages promoting various treatments for COVID, without any medical backing, from Vitamin C to drinking disinfectant, homeopathic remedies, strengthening the immunity etc.
- ▶ **OTHERMED (Other medical misinformation):** claims that contradict medical consensus but are not in the above categories.

GENERIC CONSPIRACIES

- ▶ **NWO (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 illusion, tricking the world into believing that the new coronavirus is real, in order to take control of the world.
- ▶ **POP (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 to 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).
- ▶ **CENSOR (Global censorship):** the idea that "alternative voices" are censored 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.

SPECIFIC CONSPIRACIES

- ▶ **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 SarsCov-2 pandemic, or that the virus isn't real and the pandemic was invented in order to facilitate the installment of 5G antennas.
- ▶ **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.

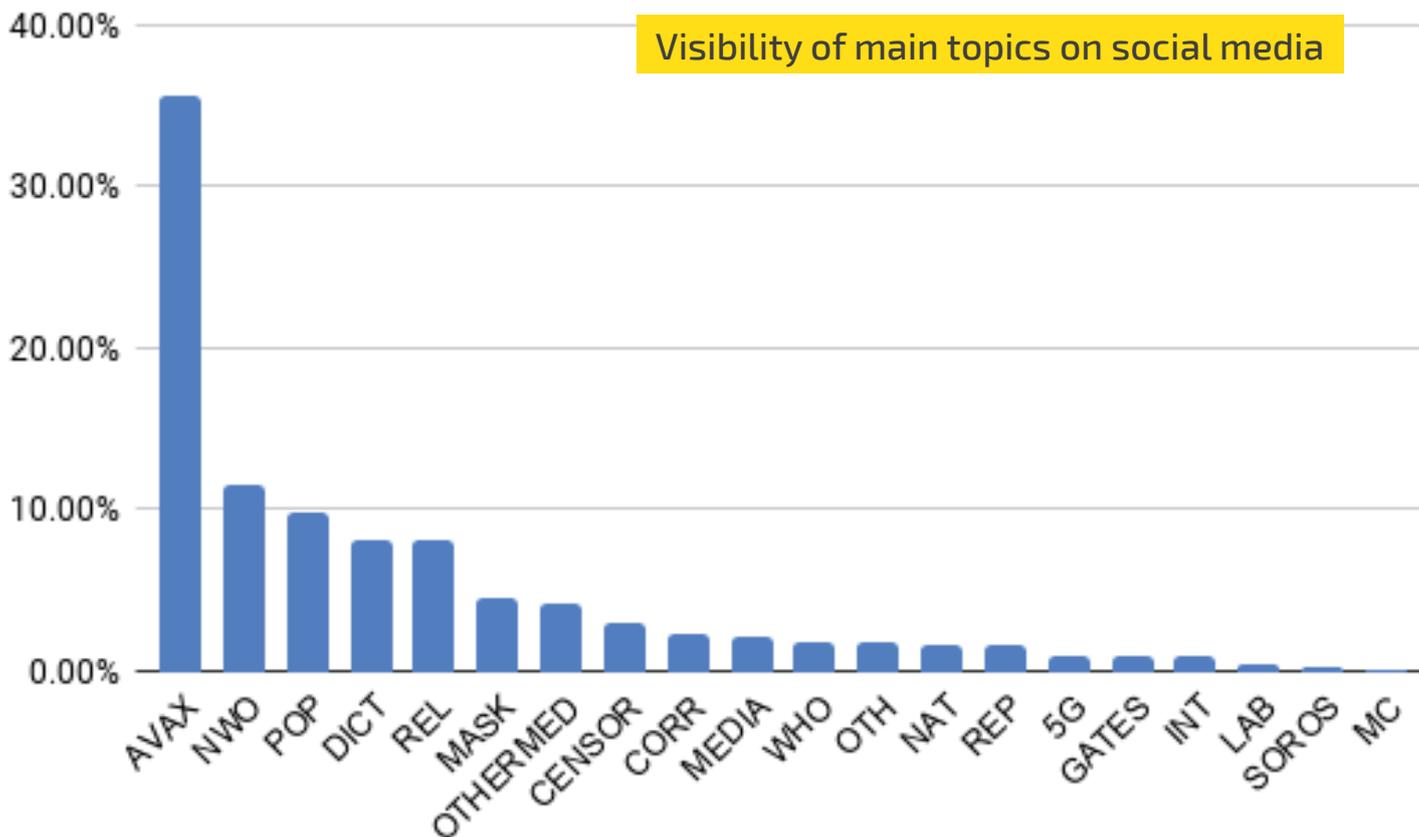
Georgia began administering the first shots of the COVID 19 vaccine in March. Therefore, most of the misinformation messages have been focused on vaccination, especially AstraZeneca. Multiple Facebook posts called vaccines a "poison-vaccine" or "killer-vaccine". Misinformation stated that AstraZeneca has dangerous side effects, causes death and contains fetal cells.

Other trends were similar to previous ones: face masks contain parasites such as Morgellons, the COVID-19 pandemic doesn't exist or it was created in China and was planned as a way to control and make experiments on humans, there is an intention to reduce the human population (by 500 million people) and establish total digital control, or bring in a "new world order" characterized by worshipping Lucifer.

Importantly, increased calls for disobedience, such as not wearing masks, not keeping social distance, were reported. Calls for "activism" have become even more aggressive in comparison to previous months and offensive with regard to those who do not share the views of the spreaders of misinformation and disinformation.

Polarization has been growing - misinformation split society in two: those who are vaccinated and those who are not and a new term - "Covid Facism" - was introduced and new, young faces (influencers) have emerged.

As an example, one Facebook user from Georgia, has around 5.000 friends and 8.253 followers and posts 5-10 posts a day, though half of her posts are flagged as false or partly false information by independent fact-checkers.



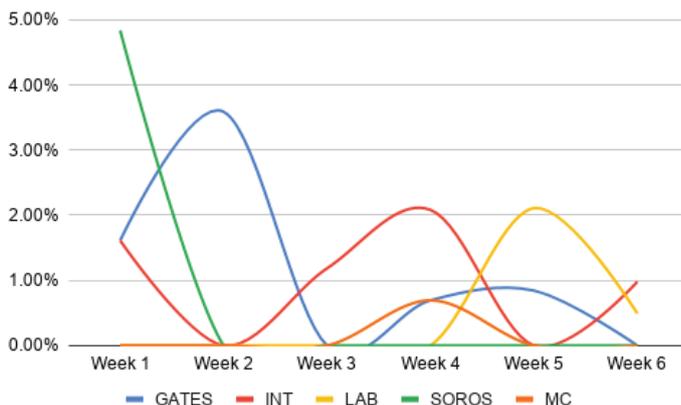
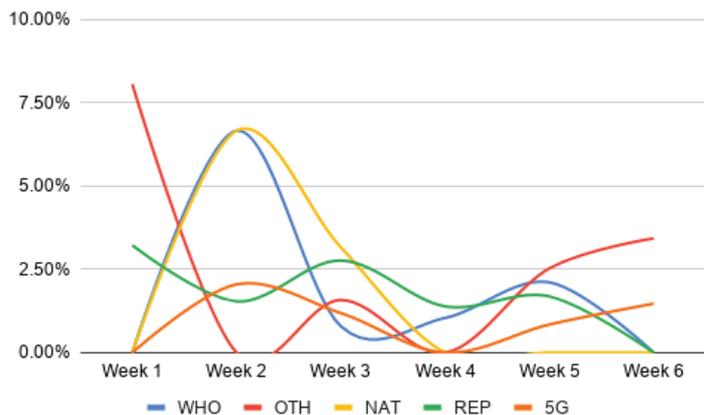
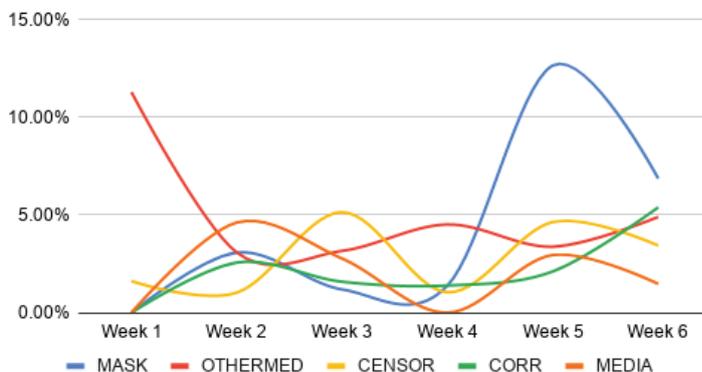
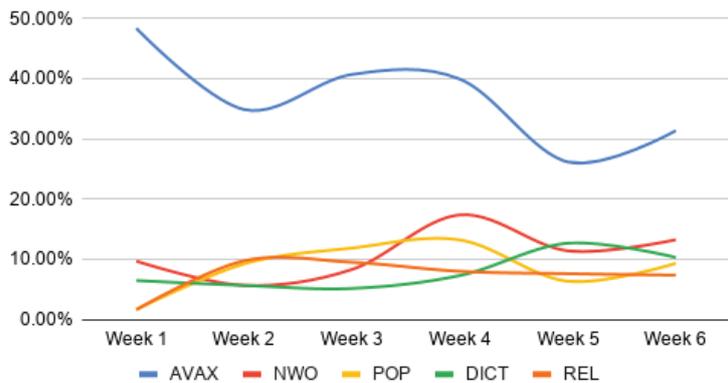
COUNTRY PROFILE

GEORGIA

According to the info she is displaying on her profile, she is from Tbilisi, graduated from Lomonosov Moscow State University, and currently works at Siberian Wellness, which is a Russian company of beauty/health products. She is using hate speech, defamatory and violent language against everyone who doesn't agree with her ideology. Even though she considers that the pandemic is completely made up and vaccines are evil - a step towards worshipping Lucifer, according to her, the Russian vaccine is good and reliable.

Another influencer, with over 4000 followers frequently refers to vaccines as a poison that aims to kill people and/or subjugate them in the long run. Her activities also include videos and live broadcasts. She also posts about "Covid-Fascism", about land, language, religion and promotes anti-vaccination rallies.

Evolution of main topics over time



The majority of misinformation combined the anti-government narratives – ie. corruption, dictatorship – with the anti-vaccination movement and the tense Greek-Turkish relationship.

Main topics have been related to claims of corruption of the government, as reactions to new movement restrictions and claims of crisis mismanagement started closing in on conspiracy theories about involvement in “global fraud”.

Misinformation messages are bridging several topics, leading to the growth of the New World Order narrative, as leaders as seen to have malevolent intentions – to control the population, to enforce a dictatorship, rather than just be average people dealing with uncertainty and political pressure. Messages suggesting a “planned” pandemic, a laboratory made virus and other anti-science narratives have increased.

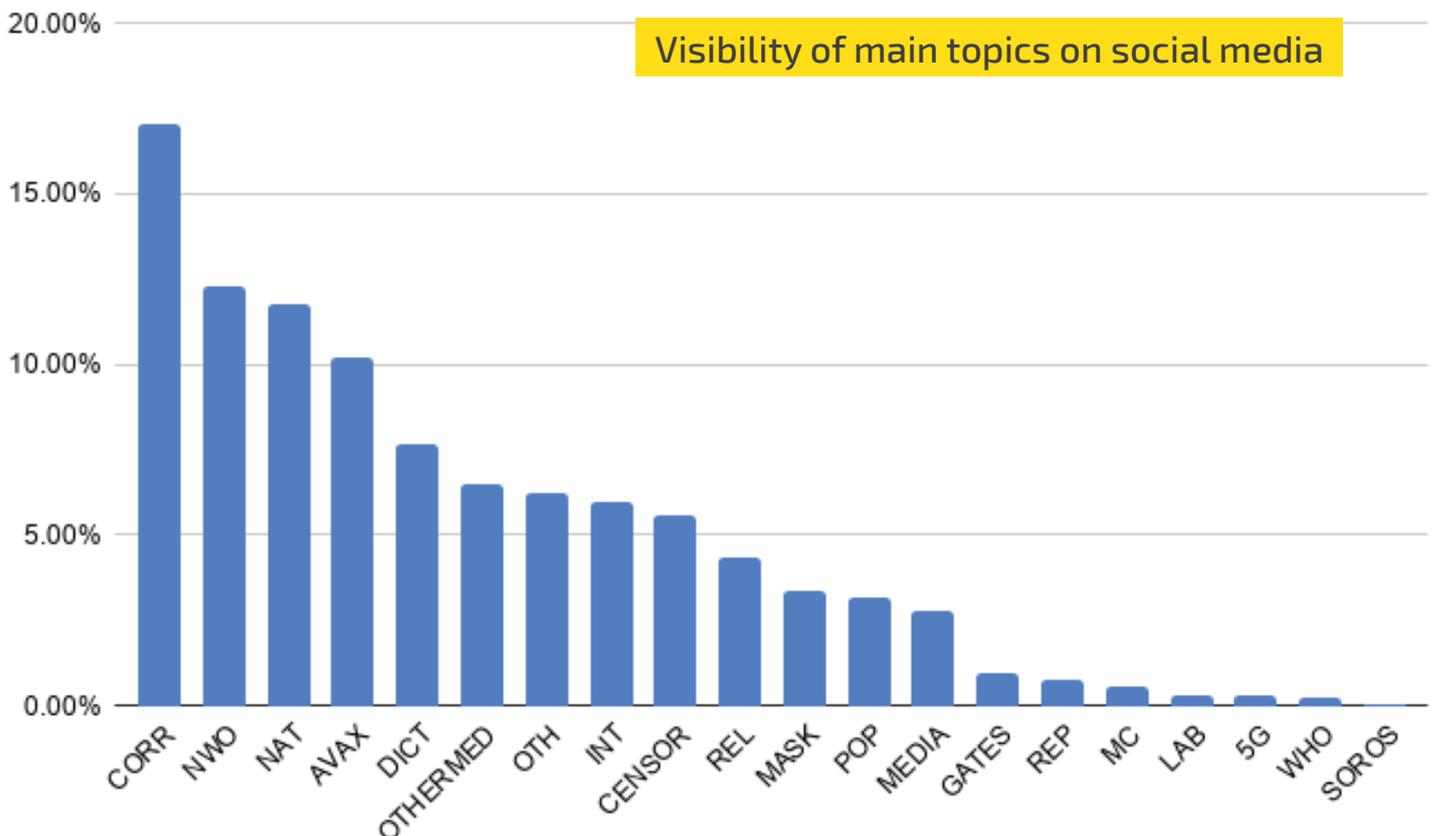
The anti-vaccination posts were mostly related to ideas such as that mix nationalistic and government corruption theories: “the pandemic was created so everyone will get vaccinated” “government wants to control us, have access to our data (in Greece citizens have to send sms message to denote their moving)”, “the vaccine changes our mRNA”, “the government murders the people with these vaccines instead of saving them”, “the vaccines are controlled by the new world order”.

Conspiracy theories about the vaccine were supported by examples from other countries like Spain, Germany, Belgium, Israel and by hate speech focused on the production companies like Astra Zaneca and Pfizer.

Anti-masks movement was reinforced with claims that “Masks provoke anxiety and deteriorate our freedom” and the refusal of rapid self-tests included promoting fear with messages such as “Kids that will be tested positive for the virus will be taken away from their families”.

Nationalism-based misinformation ranked third in terms of visibility, centered around Greek-Turkish relations, Bill Gates, the European Union, Germany and the Greek police. The police has been the target of attacks and misinformation due to intervention on riots fueled by a combination of nationalism, anti-migrant narratives and far right politics.

Religion has been another issue, with Muslims and Jews getting in the crosshairs. Social Media as well as traditional Greek Media have been questioned and claims of censorship increased. Misinformation and hate speech against the



LGBTQ+ community and against transgender people has continued, trying to support the need to restrict the rights of LGBTQ+.

On week 3 we observe an increase on "Other Medicine" disinformation dissemination this is because the National Health System faced tremendous difficulties at that period because of lack of Emergency Care Units: "hospital stuff, doctors and nurses are liars and criminals, they remove any assistance to each patient before intubating them".

Misinformation on Facebook is centered around groups and pages such as "Greek resistance", "We stay in the corral- provit-19", "Wake Up Greece" and "Greek news - It happens now".

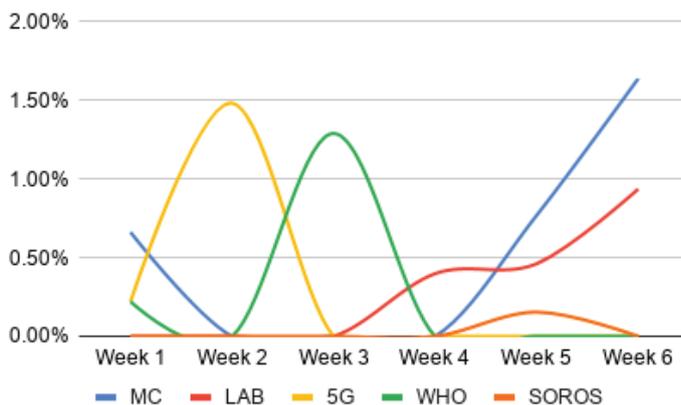
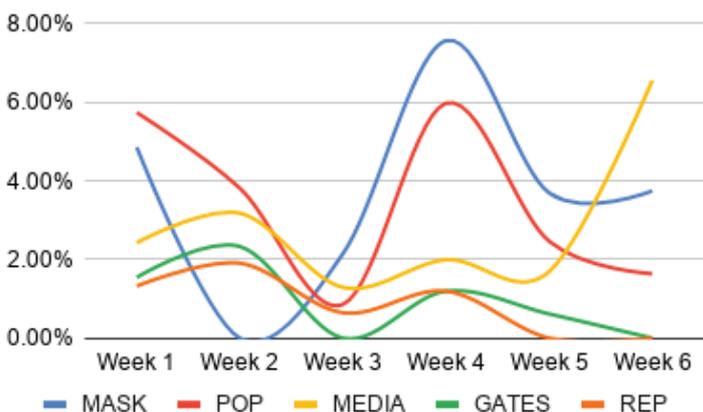
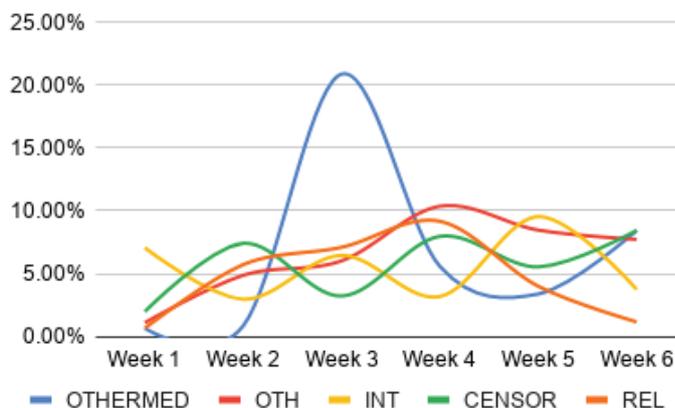
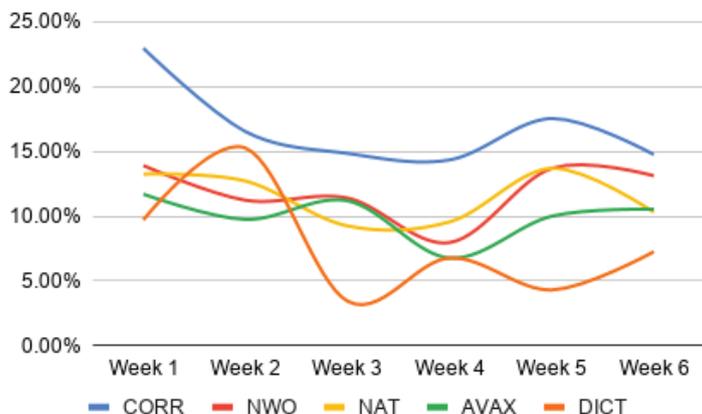
A Greek singer regularly posts, and referring to the Greek government as oppressive, liars, that they disrespect human rights and freedoms, like

going for a walk. He also very often tries to explain medical data and prove they are wrong, prompting other people to fight to keep being free and defying the measures against the spread of the virus.

Some prominent people have gained consistent followings as well: a doctor that opposes mandatory testing and vaccination of medical staff and also posts about how media are corrupted; a singer that posts regularly about the government being oppressive and corrupt, as well as often contradicting medical data.

Because of Facebook's attempts to limit the spread of misinformation and the work of independent fact-checkers, there were some open calls for moving from Facebook to other platforms like You Tube or VK.

Evolution of main topics over time



During March and April, Italy suffered many political and structural changes.

Since 13th February 2021, former BCE president Mario Draghi has been appointed as new Prime Minister bringing with him financial stability but also new narratives among conspiracy groups (eg. the financial cabal). Secondly, the high media attention of collateral effects of vaccinations fostered infodemic at all levels.

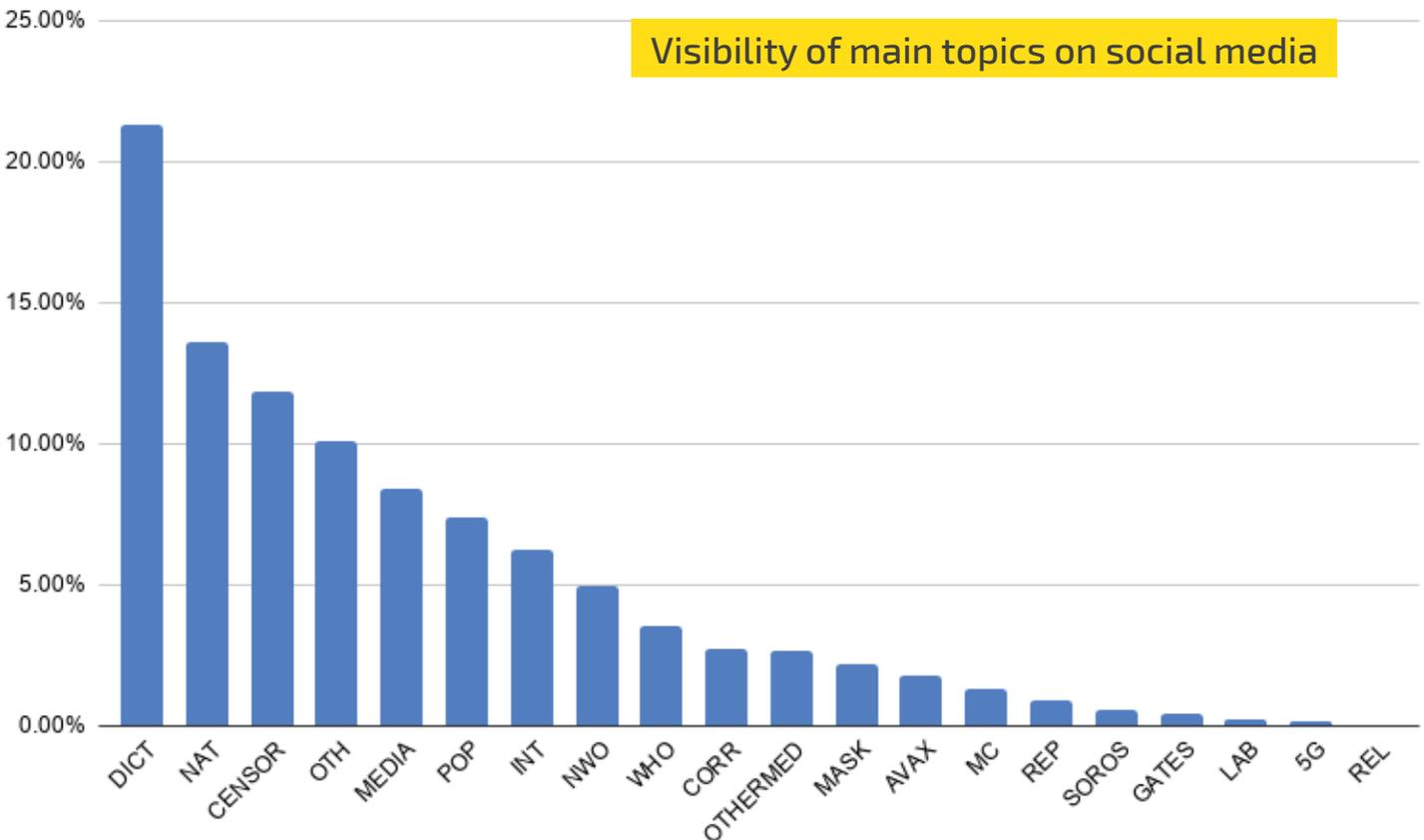
Draghi's appearance on the political scene discouraged opposition parties to denounce the so-called "health dictatorship", as was the case during Conte's government. Instead, this role was taken up by some leading intellectuals/influencers like Claudio Messora, Diego Fusaro and the movement IoApro ("I Open") which formally aims to re-open small business as fast as possible.

Considering the mediums for spreading misinformation, while Facebook started to take steps against it by closing several profiles, our study reveals that consistent and organized groups are developing across other channels like Telegram. In the next report, we will analyze this phenomenon as well.

THE MIGRATION OF MISINFORMATION

The ongoing Facebook campaign against COVID-19 disinformation is dramatically changing the social media scenario. While advocating for freedom of speech, some of the profiles we monitored decided to challenge these policies, making claims about platform-based censorship, aiming at "raising awareness" while gathering consensus to capitalize upon in a later stage. This is the case of the ByoBlu channels - that suffered from Facebook and YouTube new policies more than any other platform and therefore started fundraising to buy a digital TV channel to continue spreading their message.

Other groups, like IoApro, decided to maintain two different profiles - the one on Facebook, calling for opening as fast as possible to inject new liquidity into small business realities severely hit by pandemic, and the Telegram one, where conspiracy theory and disinformation are spread among the public daily.



Social media space continued to be dominated by the “political medical dictatorship” narrative. Since the number of cases, hospitalizations and deaths have grown since the start of March, the Government imposed new restrictions such as limiting stores’ opening hours or imposing curfews. Although there are valid critiques of the authorities’ behavior (some Civil Society Organizations complained about the lack of transparency and inconsistencies in reporting of data), misinformation networks focused their attention on the wrong points and issues.

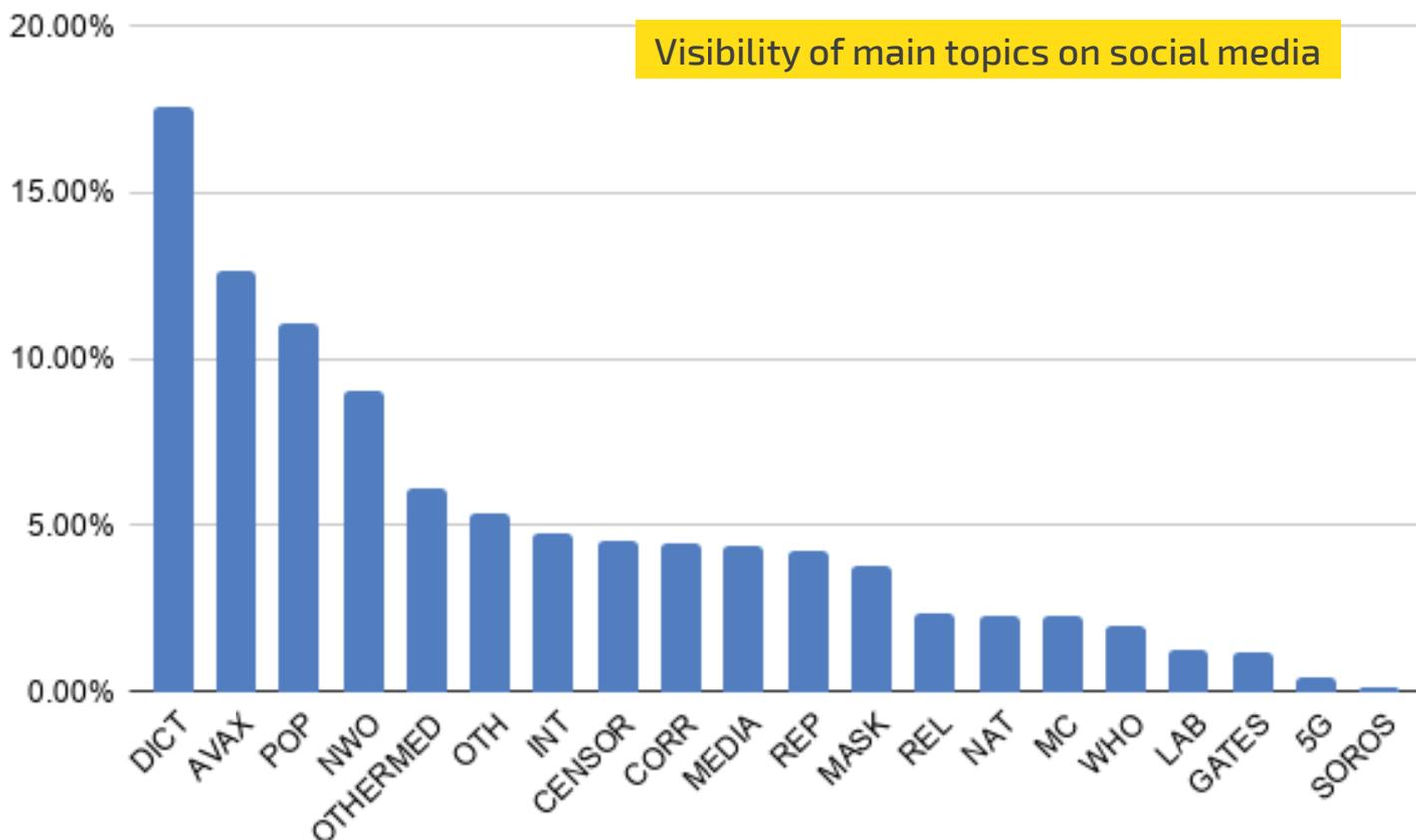
One example is the social media fame of a controversial doctor who claimed, without evidence, of successfully treating more than 1000 COVID cases using different protocols than the recommended one.

Misinformation networks turned her into their champion, claiming that she is a rare instance of a medic that hasn’t sold out to the government, and turning all critiques of this doctor into proof of the nefarious intent of the government and medical personnel

Moving patients from a hospital that was decided to become a COVID hospital has been used as another proof of this narrative, with some influencers going to the hospital to livestream “protests” against the decision (that was in fact based in the real problem of not having anymore Intensive Care beds available).

The misinformation movement managed to organize a few medium sized protests (up to a few thousand participants) in several cities in Romania, protests that have not been generally met with force from authorities, in order to not escalate the situation further.

The protests have seen a mix of participants and promoters, from the usual misinformation influencers to leaders of the radical right-wing party AUR. Some protests were directed to “criminal doctors”, to the dismay of most of Romanians and xenophobia became an issue, with some protestors targeting the nationality or ethnicity of public figures such as the mayor of Timișoara, who is



March 1st 2021 - April 11th 2021

FAKE NEWS HUNTERS - V ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

PROJECT COORDINATION:

- ▶ Nikos Panagiotou - Associate Professor/Head Peace Journalism Lab, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Digital Communication Network Southeast Europe Hub
- ▶ Diana Filimon - President of Forum Apulum, Community Leader at Digital Communication Network

GEORGIA RESEARCH TEAM:

- ▶ Team leader: Tiko Tsomaia - Professor, Georgian Institute of Public Affairs
- ▶ Researchers: Elene Lomadze, Nino Chakhunashvili, Nino Khuchua, Nino Apakidze, Tamar Gegenava

GREECE RESEARCH TEAM:

- ▶ Team leader: Erasmia Tsipou - media professional, M.A. researcher
- ▶ Researchers: Ioannis Delimaris, Ioanna Georgia Eskiadi, Areti-Zoi Katsivelari, Calliope Konstantinidou, Marianthi Variozidou, Aliko Vasileiou,

ITALY RESEARCH TEAM:

- ▶ Team leader: Leonardo Delfanti - MA student (journalism), Aristotele University of Thessaloniki
- ▶ Researchers: Irene Delfanti, Giada Mosaner and Vittoria Corrado

ROMANIA RESEARCH TEAM:

- ▶ Team leader: Ciprian Cucu - Vicepresident Forum Apulum, Lecturer University of Alba Iulia
- ▶ Researchers: Rareş Antal, Ana David, Sorana Horşia, Corina Panait