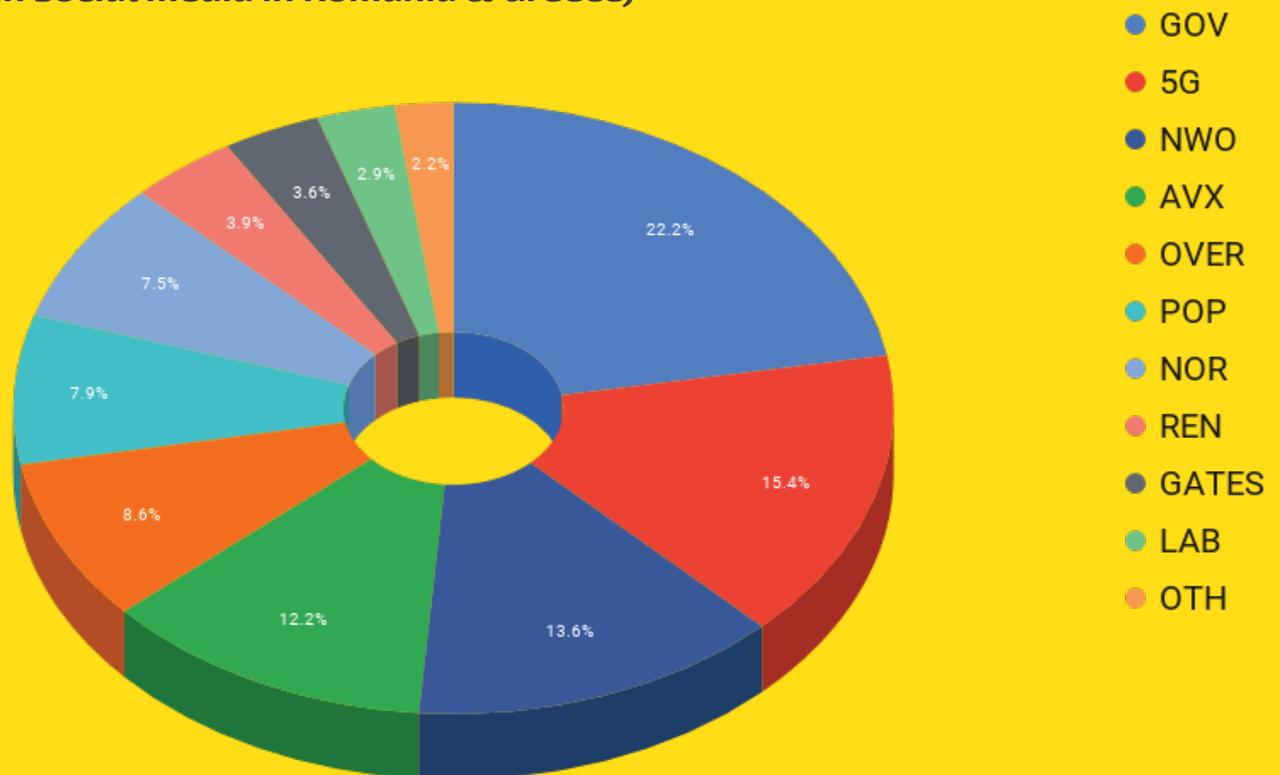


# FAKE NEWS HUNTERS

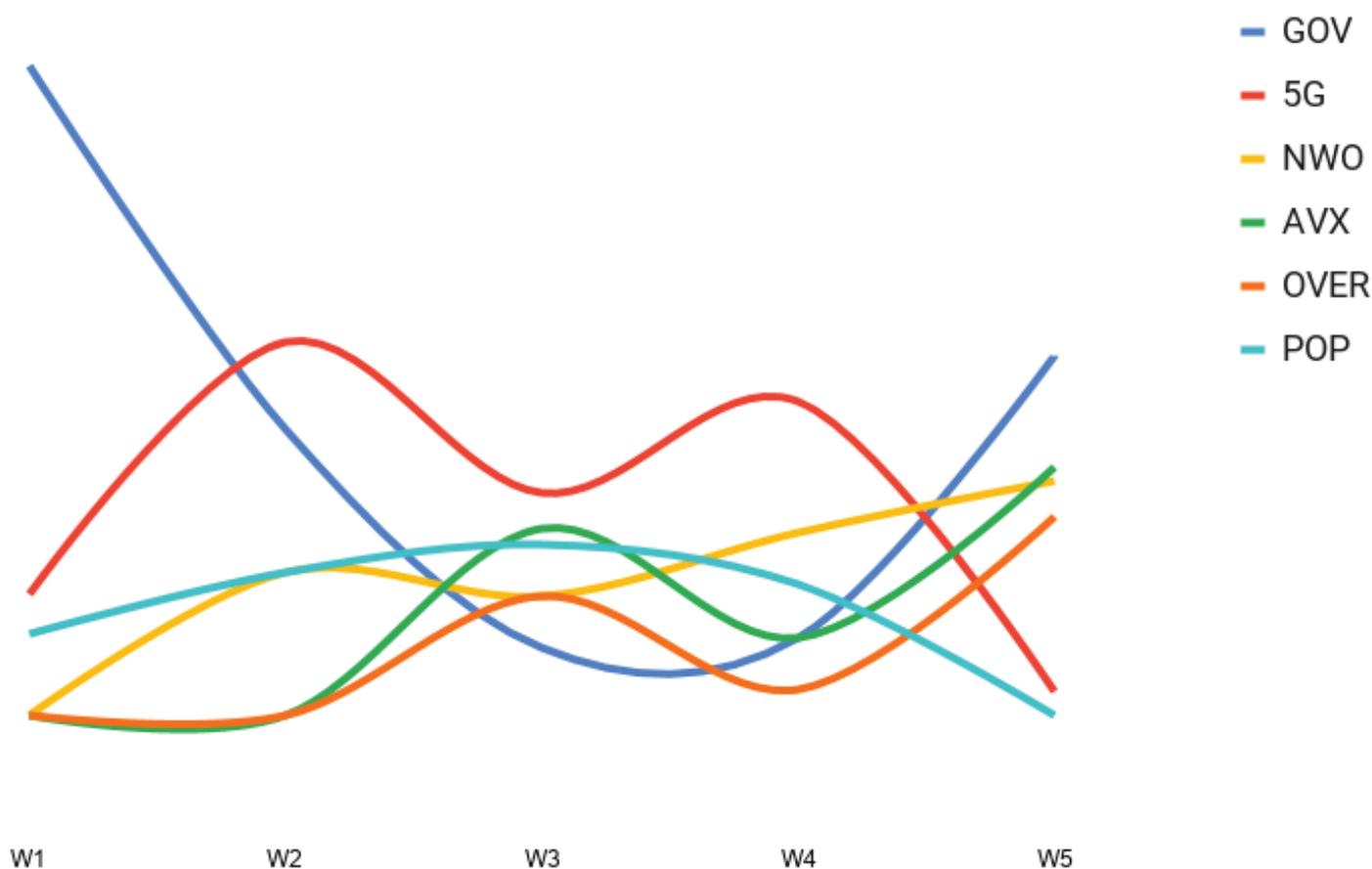
Report regarding disinformation about COVID19, spread in social media in **Romania and Greece** / April 1st - May 7th 2020

## MAIN DISINFORMATION TOPICS ABOUT COVID19 (Spread in social media in Romania & Greece)



- ▶ **GOV:** Pandemic invented so governments can impose authoritarian regime.
- ▶ **5G:** Coronavirus related to 5G - either Covid-19 is caused by 5G, or claims that pandemic is not real, invented to deploy 5G network.
- ▶ **NWO:** Various claims about "The New World Order" (eg. elites want to control us).
- ▶ **AVX:** Various claims from anti-vaccines entities (eg. pandemic not real, just excuse to vaccinate everybody).
- ▶ **OVER:** Claims about overreporting, including paying people to accept writing Covid-19 on death certificates of relatives, even if not the case.
- ▶ **POP:** Coronavirus was meant as a means to control overpopulation.
- ▶ **NOR:** Claims that pandemic is not real, but no specific reason mentioned.
- ▶ **REN:** Claims regarding religious persecution (ie. restrictions have been too tight) or nationalist propaganda (eg. it's the EU's fault, it's about bringing migrants).
- ▶ **GATES:** Various claims mentioning Bill Gates in a malicious position (eg. caused pandemic or wants to inject people with chips for control).
- ▶ **LAB:** Claims that the Coronavirus has been manufactured in a laboratory.
- ▶ **OTH:** Other disinformation themes.

**Five-week trends (April 1st - May 7th) and observations** for the main six disinformation themes and the profiles that have been disseminating most content.



### Observations on trends

- ▶ Trends in the above chart are **relative to each other** - when one theme goes down it does not necessarily decrease in absolute numbers, but is "drowned" in other themes that go up.
- ▶ There is also an **overall trend - disinformation is increasing**; there may be fluctuations (some weeks it may go down) but there was an obvious increase over five weeks.
- ▶ There is a **cyclic nature** to disinformation topics - they reach some peak, subside and grow back. (For example, one anti-vaccine article that is five years old has resurfaced and has been getting new attention on Facebook).

### Dissemination profiles

- ▶ There are **some fake accounts**, but most accounts appear to belong to **real people**. It is unclear to what extent profiles are connected to foreign interests or just fall into the "useful idiot" category.
- ▶ Profiles usually fall into **one or more of the following categories**: nationalists, chauvinists, extreme right / left, anti-globalization or supporters of opposition parties (that are not in the current government).
- ▶ There has been an **increase** in the number and activities of **FB groups** opposed to restrictions, that also spread fake news and conspiracy theories.

## Country particularities in disinformation themes

Though most topics are common, each country has seen fake news that closely follows internal politics and social issues.

### ROMANIA

- ▶ Especially in the beginning, there have been many posts with **statistics** on other causes of death, such as accidents or other diseases, to promote the idea that there is an **overreaction** to Covid-19.
- ▶ Disinformation included several **attacks** on the **current administration**, even trying to link the President with nefarious interests.
- ▶ One specific topic was about forests being cut and sold in Europe; while deforestation is a real issue, there was also disinformation claiming **illegal logging grew** under the cover of the isolation measures.
- ▶ Lately, there has been an increase in the **rumours** that people are paid to declare the **death of relatives** as caused by Covid-19.

### GREECE

- ▶ One particularity is **blaming migrants** - they either caused (or are carrying) the virus, or the pandemic is used by nefarious forces to bring immigrants to Greece. Other posts have been claiming that immigrants **do not respect the lockdown** (thus they do not respect the law).
- ▶ Claims the government will ease lockdown for Ramadan and that speakers have been banned in churches but not in mosques, aimed to create **tensions** between **Orthodox and Muslims**.
- ▶ There is a strong effort to **undermine** a recognized **fact-checking** organization.
- ▶ Anti-vaccine movement claims that Greek officials are **paid by pharmaceutical companies**; also provides misleading tips so people can avoid mandatory vaccination.



# CONCLUSIONS:

Fake news travels fast and has no borders. It grows organically and adapts to the specifics of each country. Most narratives are the same in Romania and Greece, but on the other hand, countries are facing unique fake news as well, that closely follows political or social topics of national interest.

The language used in the posts on social media is usually commanding (eg. "Must Watch This") and makes hyperbolic promises such as getting "the Real Truth", or finding out what "they are Hiding". Covid-19 conspiracies have brought together groups with different agendas, such as the anti-vaccines movement, religious zealots, ultra-nationalists, anti-globalists, anti-America and anti-Western groups and general conspiracy fans.

The level of organization is growing, the number and the activity of groups is increasing, networks are being built, and attacks have begun directed at fact-checking organizations. Facebook and YouTube are taking action, but it does not appear to be sufficient (and their action are fueling further conspiracies).

The report catches a period where some fake news gained traction but were still in a chaotic phase. When reading the posts on social media, the reader understands that there is clear common narrative, but it is spread in a hasty manner, by people who believe some of them, but not all of them. The pieces of fake news are spread in "small doses", through various people, on various channels, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, or websites.

As time passed, we observed that the narratives have become more crystallized, more focused and "influencers" or "opinion leaders" emerge, creating a clearer public discourse that is, in the end, denying the danger posed by SARS-COV-2 at various degrees. It is now obvious that this is the direction in which fake news will go for the next period, targeting not a certain political party, or a government, but the citizens' trust in the state in general, with incipient acts of anarchy, at a very small scale for now. As this narrative unfolds, it comes up with new disinformation that targets any measure of protection imposed by the state in their effort to contain the virus.

Following these patterns, the next report will trace sources of disinformation more clearly, making it easier to identify the motivation behind their connections, if they exist, to other states and evaluate / assess what they are trying to achieve.

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