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**100 DAYS OF EXPOSURE TO UNTRUTHS,  
CONSPIRACY THEORIES, PSEUDOSCIENCE,  
ETHNO-NATIONALISM AND CLERICALISM  
IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC**

# **Disinformation Network and the Inadequate Reaction of the State**



**B | T | D** The Balkan Trust  
for Democracy  
A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND



 **Raskrinkavanje.me**



## Disinformation for (geo)political and economic reasons

The key topic in the field of (dis)information in the last 100 days, as expected, was the coronavirus pandemic. Unverified and inaccurate information has been spread, similarly to the times before the pandemic, in two main directions: the first and much more intense one, which saw most of the disinformation arriving from outside of our media space, and the second one, whose key actors were from Montenegro.

The causes of these two lines of mis/disinformation are different. They are, above all, **geopolitical** – related to the communication strategies and tactics of global political players. After a fashion, they tried to “explain” the causes and consequences of the pandemic from their own point of view. This was accompanied by a plethora of conspiracy theories, pseudo-scientific claims, anti-vaccination outlooks and the pushing (planting) of different political agendas under the guise of the pandemic.

Next, there are the **political causes** that can be traced to the established ways of communication at the state and the Western Balkans regional levels. Well-known political goals of the WB regional players have been adapted to the new circumstances, and their communication with different audiences did not relent during this period. At the state level, we witnessed disinformation aimed at implementing political agendas that undermine the core values of Western democracies (anti-EU and anti-NATO false narratives), radicalization of political circumstances, belittling what Montenegro has done in the fight against the virus, or simply activities aimed at preventing Montenegro from going down the road of more enlightened communities. The Church was an active contributor in this sense. In order to preserve the political position it had gained before the pandemic through its fight for “religious rights”, it did not refrain from giving advice that could negatively affect the health of citizens.

Sensationalism and conspiracy theories collect a large number of clicks, thus the **economic moment** should not be disregarded either. Mis/disinformers had the opportunity, in these extraordinary circumstances, to even earn some extra money.

And finally, there was the need to stand out, i.e. **increase one’s influence**, which was one of the unavoidable causes of the infodemic in our country.

The Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) has contributed to the fight against COVID-19 in its own right, through the Raskrinkavanje.me project. We prepared and published 80 ratings in which we tackled over 400 media texts, feature stories, and a smaller number of social media posts. The analyses covered as many as 150 media outlets that made some type of “violation”, as defined by our methodology.

Even though we tried to cover as many mis/disinformation channels as possible, it was physically unfeasible to monitor every article, feature or post, so there might be something we had missed. However, what is important is that the most salient examples of mis/disinformation have been covered in detail. Key assistance in our work was provided by mindful citizens, who first of all read our reviews extensively, and then got involved more directly by “flagging” suspicious news, which we proceeded to cover in our texts. In addition, important media outlets have supported our efforts by disseminating our analyses and conclusions, as well as through their professional attitude towards our work.

With thanks to the Balkan Trust for Democracy (BTD), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) for their support, we remain open to any well-intentioned criticism and discussion of our findings presented in this publication.

In Podgorica, May 2020



# II

## Overview of the media landscape: the highs and lows of the disinformation network

### Mainstream media acted in the public interest

Key media outlets in Montenegro have generally passed the “reporting in the public interest” test. On both levels: in informing citizens, and in preventing the spread of mis/disinformation. This was not an easy task, given that newsrooms operated in limited conditions, and under the constant pressure resulting from different events.

There were, of course, several oversights in the activity of these media as well. However, it cannot be said that they were made out of the intention to create a false narrative or a false representation of reality, but rather that they resulted from an operational error, lack of editorial capacities, or the need to drive up the readership.

Our conclusion is confirmed by the fact that these media outlets had only a dozen or so controversial ratings, a figure that results inconsequential in comparison to the overall frequency of information.

A careful analysis of media coverage shows that some of these outlets have even started to introduce a fact-checking component into their work. Although this is still in its infancy, it seems that media outlets might have figured out the right way to fight disinformation.

### Tabloids and right-wing media as fake news factories

For tabloids and media from the “margins”, the exact opposite applies. On the one hand, they operated as filters for feeding mis/disinformation into our media space, while, on the other, they acted as its creators or producers.

The number of ratings and reviews that we provided in relation to the reporting of this segment of the media landscape is remarkably higher. The key direction of their “work” is the creation of false narratives that favor Russia

and China as opposed to the EU and the NATO. Moreover, there were the usual ethno-nationalist narratives, affirmations of clericalism, stigmatization of citizens and the spreading of hatred towards anything different or anyone who thinks differently.

Tabloids and right-wing media with the highest number of rated content

Outlet	N. of ratings	Ratings
Informer	21	Fake news dissemination, conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, biased reporting, clickbait
Alo	20	Fake news, fake news dissemination, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, biased reporting, clickbait
Viralne objave	20	Fake news, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, error
In4S	19	Fake news, fake news dissemination, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, biased reporting, clickbait
Espresso	14	Fake news dissemination, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, biased reporting, clickbait
Novosti	14	Fake news, fake news dissemination, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, biased reporting, clickbait
Srbija danas	14	Conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, biased reporting, clickbait
Kurir	13	Fake news dissemination, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, biased reporting, clickbait
Sputnik	11	Fake news, fake news dissemination, disinformation, manipulated content, biased reporting, clickbait
Pravda	10	Fake news, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, disinformation, manipulated content, clickbait

Tabloids and right-wing media created a mis/disinformation network in which they played different roles, depending on their individual influence and the size of their readership. The more widely-read outlets brought stories by their like-minded peers on a global level to the WB “media periphery”, with a day or two of delay and a translation into Montenegrin-Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, creating also a significant portion of their own “content”. The outlets with less readership acted *inter alia* as platforms for placing mis/disinformation on social networks, i.e. into the reach of a large number of people.

### Social networks and messaging – important means of disinformation

Social networks were also an important link in this chain, supporting disinformers and their mentors for the past 100 days. A feature of this communication channel is an almost total absence of accountability for what is published. Some citizens acted as professional “editors” of their personal media, while others clearly and openly put themselves at the service of mis/disinformation, spreading fear, doubts, conspiracy theories, pseudo-scientific claims and ethno-nationalist false narratives. Therefore, not a small number of citizens have acted as a platform that is willing to publish what even the worst media outlets do not have the courage to do.

In this sense, significant damage was done by politicians, athletes, musicians, actors, media owners and even presidents of some countries who became overnight experts for the treatment of COVID-19, or the electromagnetic transmission via 5G networks; “saving” us from the harmfulness of a future vaccine, or “contributing” in some similar way to the well-being of humanity. In some cases, this went as far as to require official refutation by doctors and other actual experts.

In this period, social networks themselves intensified their activities in this field and reacted in the right way: Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram started removing disinformation posts originating from this area as well.



In the cases when disinformation did not effectively spread through the media and / or social networks, the dissemination via SMS, Viber, WhatsApp, and other platforms was initiated on several occasions. Not a small number of citizens participated in spreading circular messages with disturbing information or false advice for the treatment of COVID-19, which could directly endanger human health.

#### U IZRAELU NEMA SMRTI OD C-19!

Rekao im je super vijest ... Ovako je stigla i evo kako je šaljem.

Postignut je lijek za virus Covid-19 ili način za njegovo uklanjanje.

Iz Izraela dolaze informacije da ovaj virus tamo nije uzrokovao smrt.

\* Recept je jednostavan \*

1. \* Limun \* 🍋

2. \* Soda bikarbona \* 🍷

Miješajte i pijte kao vrući čaj 🍵

svako popodne, djelovanje limuna s toplom soda bikarbonom 🔥 odmah ubija virus 🦠 potpuno ga eliminira iz tijela. Te dvije komponente alkaliziraju imunološki sustav, jer kada padne noć sustav postaje kiseli i obrana je niža.

Zbog toga je narod Izraela opušten zbog ovog virusa. Svi u Izraelu noću piju šalicu vruće vode s limunom i malo sode bikarbone, jer to dokazano ubija virus.

Dijelim ga sa svom obitelji i prijateljima, tako da nitko od nas ne dobije virus. Prepuštam to vašim kriterijima 🙏🍷

\* Molim vas prosljedite to odmah \*

## III

### How the State behaved: a case of can't or won't

Unlike its reaction to the pandemic, the way state authorities reacted to the infodemic was expected: it was important that, under the pretext of public health safeguarding, the Government's interests remain protected – regardless of the consequences for the democratic values of the society, i.e. freedom of expression, media environment, selectivity in the application of repressive measures, or the stifling of critical thought. Although the mis/disinformation problem in the Montenegrin media landscape has persisted for years, there are still no concrete democratic measures for its countering. More on that in Section IV of this Summary.

#### “Fake news” labeling

Together with other executive branches, the Government in this period continued pursuing its ambition to extend constitutional competencies so as to encompass also the evaluation of the respect (or lack thereof) of the journalism's professional code. This odd venture into research therefore persisted – it is the Government that “exposes” false news. Instead of rebuttals, in certain cases the media were directly offered labels, which could be interpreted as an attempt to unduly influence their work.

The Government apparently took a liking to this, so it transferred the “fake news” label to the political context and applied it onto political criticisms of its activities. Regardless of how justified or accurate the criticism was, this was really a red flag: such a label by the government, in place of a rebuttal, entails a call for the prosecution to react, and therefore a call to react against political criticism.





### Selective arrests as a means of countering disinformation

The institutions belonging to the repressive apparatus (police and prosecution) went a step further and committed an even greater mistake in comparison to the Government, opting for the arrest of individuals on the charges of spreading panic and false news dissemination. An additional problem lies in the fact that they did not treat all fake news creators and disseminators in the same way.

### Lists of citizens as a “reminder” of times long gone

The publishing by the Government of the list of persons in mandatory self-isolation constitutes a violation of the constitutional right to privacy. Some measures and restrictions on the rights of citizens in the conditions of a pandemic may be justified, but in more regulated countries they are introduced through decisions and legal acts that are published in the Official Gazette, and not by government announcements on Twitter. The Constitution is intended for both regular and emergency situations, and must be respected at all times. The list was removed from the government website just like it had been published.

In parallel with the publication of this list, an “expanded” one was put in circulation as well, containing alongside basic information also the personal data of the citizens in question. Neither the government nor the prosecution have explained to the public how this other list came into circulation, and whether anyone would be considered liable for it.

Hereafter, another list was published, this time with precise data on COVID-19 patients. The prosecution responded, disclosing the name of the individual accused of passing information on to unauthorized persons. Despite the announced extension of this investigation, we have not heard so far whether anyone else is considered liable in the case.



# IV

## The raging of the ethno-nationalists and the stigmatization of the isolated and the sick

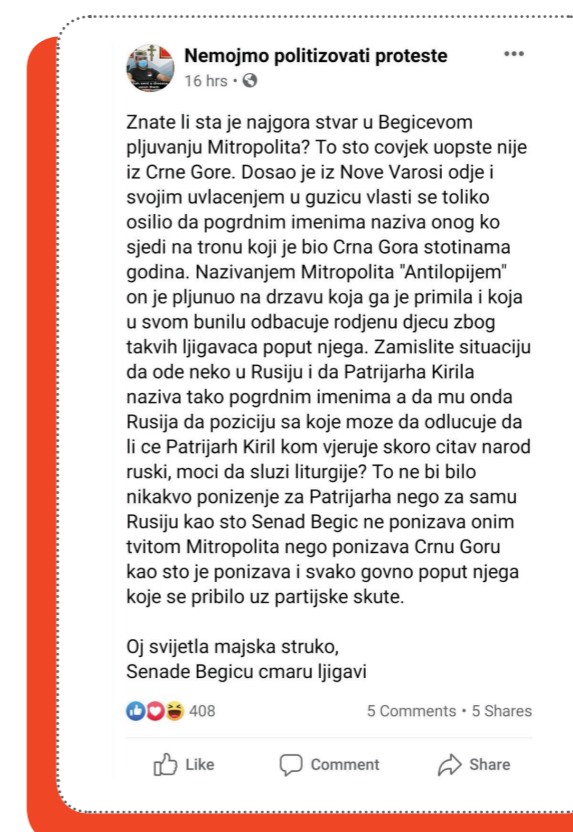
Various pro-fascist groups spread hate speech on extreme right-wing portals, in the comments sections or on social networks, labeling citizens and entire populations, and raging against everything outside their value systems.

These extremist groups have instigated a wave of stigmatization and abuse of both individuals and entire populations living in Montenegro. Their assertions included calls to ethnic and religious hatred, racial and other discrimination, but also calls to violence.

The example of Dr. Senad Begić, who underwent an actual online lynch due to his name and professional engagement, is particularly significant. The Raskrinkavanje.me project team has registered several controversial posts on this topic.




100 days of exposure to untruths, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, ethno-nationalism and clericalism in the context of the pandemic



In addition, the publication of the list of persons in mandatory self-isolation led to the creation of an “online militia” of sorts, which set out to stigmatize citizens and analyze their private lives. In this case, it may be said that the motive is not politics but provincialism, as evidenced by the launch of an application that aimed to map the locations of those who are in self-isolation.

The Raskrinkavanje.me team collected at least 30 examples of hate speech. If one NGO managed to register this mass phenomenon, competent state bodies could have probably done the same.

 **It was very unpleasant / Psalam 118** 2 hrs · 🌐

Odavno ja zastupam teoriju da korona ide na glib nego ajde rekoh možda je slučajnost da su Italijani prljavi i baš najviše njih zakačio taj virus, a sad kad sam vidio da u Tuzi maltene ima više zaraženih no u cijelu Crnu Goru jasno mi je da virus napada glibave ljude i narode. Bože mi oprostite što ovako pričam, ali tamo na brzu hranu žena rukom kida zanokticu na nožni palac i veli sačekaj samo sekund eto me, pa ti istom tom rukom stavlja prilog u hamburger.

👍🤔 125 7 Comments

👍 Like    💬 Comment    ➦ Share    🗨️

🏠 [in4s.net/bagovani-fejsbuk-torpedo-bosnjacke-stranke-adnan-muhovi](https://in4s.net/bagovani-fejsbuk-torpedo-bosnjacke-stranke-adnan-muhovi) 2

Одговори

**Pravi Bodin** 02/04/2020 13:52 at 13:52

Odv\*\*\*ni Turčin, takav mu je i DNK !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Nikada Polimlje i Raška oblast neće biti sandzak i bošnjačko-turski vilajet. Sada su oni postali bošnjačke velikosandzaklije i bošnjački velikocnogorci!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Primorje, Zeta, Lijeva Rijeka, Polimlje, Potarje, Stara Hercegovina i Boka su prava Srbija !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Tako je bilo a tako će i biti !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

👍 71    🗨️ 1

**Руевит** 08/05/2020 19:20 at 19:20

ОБРЕЗАЊЕ полних органа дјече је врста злочина!  
Обрезање оставља трајне последице на психу!  
Обрезани нијесу могли да прођу службени тест..  
Обрезани имају често трауме, стрес и растројства,  
Обрезани обично без разлога мрзе необрезане,  
Обрезани се боје, имају непознати и велики страх.  
Обрезани се стиде у спортским свлационицама.  
Обрезани се стиде себе и под туш иду са „шортсом“  
Обрезани су затворени и као да увијек тугују.  
Обрезани стално носе нож или неко друго сечиво.  
Обрезање је у много земаља забрањено и кажњиво.

Жена са обрезањем мушкарцем ријетко има оргазм.  
Жене су им нервозне и ако и оне нијесу обрзване хоће да се тјеше.  
Обрезани мушкарци могу бити врло нервозни и насилни, нарочито над слабијима, женама и дјечи.  
Родитељи свих „вјера“ немојте чинјети злочин својој дјечи! Очеви и Мајке немојте ОБРЕЗИВАТИ своје синове и кћери!  
Лажни су учитељи који вам кажу да то треба.  
Бог је створио човјека НЕОБРЕЗАНОГ!

👍 15    🗨️ 6





# V

## How do more enlightened societies fight disinformation?

State authorities of Montenegro did not adequately counter the long-term exposure to disinformation of the public and its citizens. They either did not want or did not plan to tackle these phenomena in a way in which enlightened communities do. However great the delay, the formation of an inter-ministerial team tasked with preparing a strategy and action plan for the activities in this area sounds encouraging.

Through the work of our research center and the two years of experience we have gained in working on the Raskrinkavanje.me project, CDT has prepared a set of proposals and recommendations, and is ready to support the work of this team. Our vision of the anti-disinformation system is based on the experiences of the most progressive countries in the contemporary world. These countries have created an efficient and sustainable system in which the standards of freedom of expression and media freedom have remained at the highest level.

Until then, and in order to inform the citizens, we present some of the instruments that have been used to counter mis/disinformation in modern and progressive societies, and which may be interesting for Montenegro as well:

- Adapting the Criminal Code and media laws for mis/disinformation countering (Sweden, Denmark, France, Germany);
- Incorporating the fight against fake news into electoral legislation (France);
- Establishing new institutions or expanding the competencies of the existing ones that deal with the media, in the sense of providing specialization in the fight against fake news (Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain);
- Drafting and signing of a special Code between the Government and the media which regulates relations related to this topic (Denmark, EU);
- Establishment of a media support fund to combat fake news (UK);

- Initiating a dialogue to build consensus in this area with all relevant society actors, with a special focus on cooperation with civil society (Denmark);
- Participation in international anti-disinformation systems (EU);
- Increasing the level of media literacy of citizens in various ways (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, etc.).





Drafting of this document, prepared by the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), is supported by the Balkan Trust for Democracy of The German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF-BTD) and the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this document are the sole responsibility of CDT and do not necessarily represent the views of GMF-BTD and USAID or the US Government.



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