

THE UNBEARABLE EASE OF MISINFORMATION



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THE BUSINESS OF MISINFORMATION IN EASTERN EUROPE: OVERVIEW

Judit Szakács

Introduction

The Business of Misinformation project of the Center for Media, Data and Society (CMDs) set out to map the misinformation business in six Central and Eastern European countries: Bosnia & Herzegovina, Hungary, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, and Slovakia. The goal was to identify the individuals and businesses that own non-mainstream, local misinformation websites and their links to institutions, parties and other individuals. The reports offer an overview and typology of the most prominent misinformation websites in these countries. The authors of the country reports faced significant difficulties in identifying website owners, and even more so in gaining insights into the finances of the businesses running these websites.

All six reports find that misinformation is prevalent, yet the channels used for distribution of such content are somewhat different. The misinformation landscape in Serbia, for example, is dominated by mainstream media outlets. Small misinformation websites simply cannot compete with “misinformation giants” like the tabloid newspaper Blic. In Bosnia &

Herzegovina, mainstream media are also the main sources of misinformation. Among the alternative sources of misinformation, the most common are “anonymous, for-profit websites offering no true journalistic value.” The mainstream media in Hungary are also known as propaganda and misinformation channels. In addition to them, however, the Hungarian report uncovered large independent networks of misinformation websites. In Slovakia, misinformation websites are run by “multiple independent entities” whereas In Moldova, misinformation is spread through mainstream media and, distinctively, through Russian misinformation websites.

Of all six countries, Moldova stands out as a multilingual environment where foreign misinformation websites are competing with local players. The Moldovan media serves a population of roughly three million people most of whom speak both Romanian and Russian. Because of the small size of the market and the powerful competition from abroad, local misinformation websites in Moldova are hardly profitable. A similar situation is found in Serbia, but there, however, it is local competition that arguably undermines the financial viability of small independent misinformation websites. In Hungary, journalists also claim that the mainstream media entered the misinformation trade, putting many of the independent misinformation websites out of business.

Who Funds Misinformation?

Except for the Moldovan report, all country studies created a typology of the local misinformation sites. The Slovak report groups the websites according to their thematic focus (the category of “blogs” though seems to be different from the rest: health and lifestyle; ideology; news-focused; Christianity-related; and paranormal), whereas the Romanian and Hungarian reports differentiate them according to their purported or putative goal: “money spinners vs true believers,” as the Romanian report put it.

The Hungarian report also includes a middle-of-the-road category between the two extremes, namely websites that seem to serve an ideological goal, but that also aim to make money. The Bosnian and Serbian reports approach the issue from a different perspective, introducing in the discussion the concept of “real journalism,” which one would expect to correspond to mainstream media. These two reports also introduce a thematic distinction between “general” misinformation websites and political propaganda sites. Yet, it appears that the category of “For-profit misinformation websites without real journalism” in the reports would correspond to the “money spinners” group from other reports.

Advertising appears to be one of the primary sources of revenue for most misinformation websites. “Without online advertising these media outlets would not be able to survive for one day” in Romania. Except for Serbia, misinformation websites heavily rely on Google’s advertising sales platform. The Serbian

report, because of its focus on the propagandistic mainstream media channels, finds that websites tend to sell ads directly; there are such examples also in Slovakia and Hungary; yet, across the board, Google appears to be the dominant ad intermediary.

Price of ads on misinformation websites, 2019

Avaz.ba	Karpathir.com	Srbijadanas.com	Hlavnespravvy.sk
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Hungary	Serbia	Slovakia
€150-€255 per day	€35-€107 per month	€15-€80 per day	€900-€1,000 per 100,000 views

Note: The figures refer to banner ad prices
Source: CMD5

Advertising is such a major source of cash for misinformation channels that in Romania and Hungary, some of these websites are difficult to navigate due to the overabundance of ads. In Hungary, in many cases, “the content is created only as a vehicle to display ads.” In Slovakia, 27 of the 49 analyzed websites display ads. Yet, following lobbying by Konspiratori.sk, an NGO that brings together the country’s main publishers, advertisers were dissuaded from spending money on misinformation websites, which led to a decline in the ad revenue of these websites: Advertisers have reportedly scrapped over 17,000 ad campaigns that were planned for misinformation websites. In Bosnia & Herzegovina, the lack of access to Google-contracted advertising revenue is the reason why misinformation websites appear and disappear at a fast rate.

Misinformation websites in Slovakia more typically use other forms of fundraising, including e-commerce, crowdfunding and tax designations. A total of 10 out of the 49 analyzed websites in Slovakia raised funding from tax designations (part of the income tax that citizens can use to fund NGOs, according to local legislation allowing such designations as a way to support civil society organizations); 16 of them sell goods and services; and 15 finance themselves at least partly through crowdfunding. Several cases of false news websites doing crowdfunding and one website asking for tax designations were also identified in Romania. In one case, a misinformation website in Romania serves as a “mouthpiece” for its owner’s other business, a shop in Bucharest. There are also in Hungary cases of misinformation websites trying to raise funds, not successfully though, through crowdfunding and sales of goods and services.

In Serbia, a main source of income for some of the misinformation websites, particularly mainstream media companies, is the state budget. Informer.rs and Srpski Telegraf were awarded a combined RSD 52.5m (€450,000) of public money “for media projects of public importance.” Another major media player in Serbia, Pink Media Group, owner of Pink.rs, received a total of RSD 1.28bn (€11m) in loans from the State Agency for Ensuring and Financing Export (AOFI).

The report on Bosnia & Herzegovina notes that Simurg Media, the parent company of two misinformation-laden publications, Faktor.ba and Stav.ba was granted around BAM 30,000 (approx. €15,000) from the state budget for various projects. The report discusses this

as evidence of the company's close ties to government politicians.

State funding is a key source of cash for media outlets in other countries, too, particularly Hungary, but only the reports on Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina included mainstream media outlets in their sample. [*\(See more in the Towards a New Methodology to Track Misinformation Players chapter\)*](#)

In Slovakia, where financial data of misinformation websites are most easily found, revenues from tax designation pulled in by 10 of the most prominent misinformation platforms averaged €36,437 a year in the period 2016-2018. The most popular false news site, Zemavek.sk earned from tax designations an average of €12,717 a year. Zemavek.sk generated total revenue of €430,871 in the latest fiscal year, followed by Extraplus.sk's €133,196 and Nemesis.sk's €9,453. Zemavek.sk also relied, albeit to a lesser extent, on crowdfunding, which generated €6,562 for the website in the last fiscal year for which data are available. The most successful website to generate revenue this way, Slobodnyvysielac.sk, had sales of nearly €100,000 in 2018.

The annual ad revenue generated by Czech and Slovak misinformation websites combined was estimated at €930,000-€1.27m before the Konspiratori.sk launched the campaign to discourage advertisers from spending on such websites. All in all, the company that runs Zemavek.sk is the most profitable misinformation website in Slovakia. It was followed by the owner of Hlavnespravy.sk, which earned €153,965,

and Extraplus.sk with €133,196 in the latest year for which data are available.

In Moldova, the owner of a now defunct network of misinformation websites said that he netted €200 a month at the most in 2017. In Romania, the owner of Active News, a company that runs such websites, posted a net profit of €31,000 in 2018 but it also incurred debts of €6,800.

In Serbia, Pink International reported an operating profit of €10.2m in 2018. Yet, the company owns not only the misinformation website Pink.rs, but also a nationwide television channel, 60 cable channels and two satellite channels. The profit was generated by all of the group's outlets jointly, including the misinformation business. This kind of situation presented problems in the Hungarian report as it is sometimes unclear, based only on the financial statement, how much of the revenue was generated through the misinformation website and how much through the entity's other activities.

Misinformation businesses: key sources of funding

	Country	Ads	Crowd-funding	E-commerce	Tax designations	Public funding
Stav.ba	Bosnia	✓				✓
Tv2-friss.com	Hungary	✓				
Add-news-ro.info	Moldova	✓				
Activenews.ro	Romania	✓	✓			
Srbijadanas.com	Serbia	✓				✓
Zemavek.sk	Slovakia		✓	✓	✓	

Source: CMDS research

Networks and Connections

One main trend in the misinformation business is the fast Uniform Resources Locator (URL) recycling. In Bosnia & Herzegovina, misinformation websites tend to disappear and reappear shortly at different URLs. That happens because the owners of these websites need to “repurpose” them once they are blacklisted by Google’s ad sales system, being thus prevented from generating revenue. As soon as Google finds out that these websites spread misinformation to generate clicks, it stops serving ads to them. In Hungary as well, misinformation websites appear and disappear at a fast pace, but some of them do that as they are also threatened with legal action. For example, websites that pretend to be the official websites of established media outlets such as Blikkruzs.me, impersonating the women’s tabloid site Blikk Rúzs, or tv2-friss.com whose URL mimics TV2’s URL may be at risk of shutting down at the request of the original media outlets. Additionally, some websites have been threatened by celebrities with legal action for defamation.

In Romania, Moldova, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Hungary, misinformation websites often operate through networks or are run by a single person or entity that owns a large number of misinformation websites. In Romania, 16 of the 50 sampled websites are part of a network whereas, in Moldova, two networks, one (now defunct) consisting of ten websites, and another one consisting of five websites publishing in Russian and Romanian, have been identified.

In Bosnia & Herzegovina, a total of 46 misinformation websites were found be connected to one individual whereas in Hungary, two large and several small networks of false news websites were detected. Most misinformation websites have at least a couple of “sister sites.” By operating in networks, misinformation platforms reach a larger audience and generate more revenue than standalone websites. It must be noted that republishing articles without attribution from any website (not just from websites within the network of misinformation websites) is also a common practice in Hungary.

Key networks of misinformation websites

Hungary	Romania	Moldova	Bosnia & Herzegovina
“The impostor group”: at least 12 websites usually mimicking the URL of established media outlets	Cyd network: 10 websites focusing on current affairs	Corneliu Ababii’s network (now defunct): 10 websites featuring political attacks, gruesome accidents, natural disasters	Aldin Širanović’ network: at one point, 46 for-profit misinformation websites
“The political group”: at least 15 websites linked to a group of small political parties, earlier accused of financial fraud	Cocoon network: four websites publishing on a mishmash of topics	“Add-news” network: five websites publishing in Russian and Romanian	

Source: CMDS research

Some of the misinformation websites in Bosnia & Herzegovina, Hungary and Moldova can be traced to former or current politicians. A leader of a 2014 unrest

in Bosnia & Herzegovina was running at some point a total of 46 misinformation websites; the owner of a propaganda website was appointed Bosnia & Herzegovina's ambassador to the U.S. and later to the Czech Republic (although the appointment was eventually withdrawn). In Hungary, some hyper-partisan websites are run by current or former party functionaries; the misinformation network with the highest outreach is connected to a network of political organizations that have been accused of financial fraud in the 2014 and 2018 elections. In Moldova, a former MP was involved in operating a misinformation website. In Serbia and Bosnia & Herzegovina, owners of misinformation websites (many of which are mainstream media) have numerous political connections.

Facebook is the primary source of traffic for most of the misinformation websites, according to existing data. In Bosnia & Herzegovina and Hungary, the domain names of many misinformation websites seem to be constantly changing, but their Facebook community appears to remain stable. It is, in fact, the Facebook page that keeps directing traffic to the misinformation websites that continuously change their URLs. Moreover, the Facebook community often doesn't have much in common with the misinformation website it is linked to. In Bosnia & Herzegovina, the Facebook pages of some misinformation platforms are originally created as celebrity fan pages, and then repurposed to promote misinformation websites. In Hungary, Facebook pages whose original purpose was to feature beautiful wood carvings or poetic texts about nostalgia have been

repurposed to spread misinformation: a whole industry involving trade of Facebook groups and pages has emerged.

In Romania and Hungary, the misinformation networks often cross-post on Facebook to reach more people. Many of them recycle content as a strategy of maximizing return on investment. In Hungary, many “articles” published on misinformation websites resemble Facebook posts, written in the first person singular and calling on readers to “like” or share.

Also in Hungary, the continuous reposting of articles on Facebook may be one of the reasons why misinformation websites usually do not date their news pieces, covering instead “timeless” topics such as reincarnation or disease cures rather than current affairs. Yet, the report also finds that misinformation websites also post seasonal articles sometimes. They are however, neither relevant current affairs or news pieces nor fit for the time of publication. It is not uncommon, for example, to find stories about Christmas decorations published in June. The report suggests that some kind of automation may be a reason for such misplaced content. The Moldovan report also identifies signs of automation (automated translation of content).

Takeaways: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

The two constituencies that have most to learn from the Business of Misinformation pilot are policymakers and civil society organizations.

Take policymaking first. Attempts by governments to adopt legislation arguably aimed at combatting fake news, a growing trend across the world, are simply wrong and dangerous. While misinformation can have really bad consequences, especially when it promotes hate speech or outright violence, such legislation will only instill a chilling effect among journalists or silence critical voices. Misinformation channels always evade such legislation by reappearing in a new form or under a new name. Moreover, those websites that simply peddle innocent lies are not even worth such legal efforts.

Instead, tracking the ownership and funding of such websites can be used as a base for informed policies and adequate legal provisions that would help cut or limit the financial resources of these platforms.

Secondly, civil society organizations should learn from, replicate and support initiatives that have immediate effect on misinformation operations. The most convincing example in our sample of countries was Konspiratori.sk, an initiative of the Slovak publishing industry aimed at cataloguing misinformation websites, which prompted an impressive number of advertisers to stop channeling ad money to those websites. Two things are important about this model: one, it was driven by a group of

affected organizations (in our case, the Slovak publishing industry that has been losing ad money to fake news websites); two, it was built as a public database of fake news websites (anybody being allowed to report misinformation websites) with a transparent cataloguing mechanism consisting of an independent board of experts openly deciding who's included on the list and who's not, and publicly explaining their decision.

Methodology Challenges

We have today a spate of definitions and typologies of misinformation. The number of studies that track the spread of false news across countries, communities and professions has been growing at a rapid pace. Hefty research resources are spent on attempts to assess the impact of misinformation on people's behaviors and attitudes. But an important piece of the puzzle is still missing: the structural foundation of the misinformation phenomenon; or, in simpler words, a map of who, how and why produces misinformation.

This is what the Business of Misinformation project is trying to achieve.

The project is unique in its combination of research and journalism used to unearth the ownership structures, sources of funding, and the external links and relations (with other individuals, institutions and companies) of the most prominent misinformation websites in a group of six countries that were part of the project's pilot phase.

With Bosnia & Herzegovina and Serbia in Western Balkans, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania in Central and Eastern Europe, and Moldova in the former Soviet Union, the country sample in the Business of Misinformation pilot phase delivered diversity and allowed comparative analysis.

As in other cross-national research projects, our most difficult task was to develop a methodology that is both fit for more country contexts and able to capture relevant local specificities. The methodology-building process was made even more complicated by the fast changes that the media and communications sector has been going through. That is why we used the pilot phase to test as many methodological approaches as possible. To achieve that, we gave country researchers total freedom to design their own definition, choose their own sources of data collection and build their own categorization criteria.

While this approach clearly affects the consistence of the country reports and reduces the scope for comparability, it has numerous benefits for the quality of methodology, turning the project into a living laboratory for methodological experimentation.

It is a worthwhile tradeoff.

Not only has the Business of Misinformation pilot generated a series of rich country reports and an insightful comparative overview, but it also provided us with a solid methodological foundation on which to expand the project in a more coherent way.

BOSNIA & HERZEGOVINA: LYING FOR PROFIT

Semir Dzebo

Main Findings

- The websites creating misinformation content in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be classified into four categories based on their financial and/or political motivations and the extent to which they provide valuable journalistic contributions;
- The majority of misinformation websites are motivated solely by profit which they generate via Google AdSense;
- Established media outlets engage in misinformation practices either to compete for readers` attention or on behalf of their political patrons;
- Two relatively secretive websites have established themselves as influential leaders in misinformative propaganda, primarily preoccupied with benefiting their political patrons rather than obtaining profits;
- Due to secrecy and lack of regulation, it is extremely difficult to establish the financial background of these websites.

Introduction

Misinformation websites that publish untruthful information and manipulate facts have spread at a rapid pace in the past decade helped by the advance of new technologies, raising serious political problems. There is arguably no country in the world that is immune to such websites and the political and social consequences they bring about. However, what is often overlooked is the motivation behind the establishment and functioning of these websites.

Based on the websites' mode of operation, analysis of their content and data about their ownership structures, Bosnia and Herzegovina's misinformation websites could be divided into four categories:

- for-profit misinformation websites without real journalism
- real journalism websites with misinformation content
- real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda
- misinformation websites with consistent political propaganda.

To place the analyzed websites in one of these categories, two criteria were used:

- The primary motivation behind the website: financial gain or purposeful dissemination of disinformation (political propaganda etc.)
- The extent to which the website provides original, non-misinformation journalism.

Misinformation Websites: Four Categories

For-profit misinformation websites without real journalism

For-profit misinformation websites without real journalistic value are websites whose primary goal is to generate clicks through clickbait. The more advanced of these websites are able to generate their own content by making up stories and reports or by attributing false quotes to individuals (usually politicians).

A tier below them are websites that make up a shocking and false title to a story but copy a text from a legitimate news source on the same topic without ever addressing the shocking headline. In some cases, they only add a sentence or two related to the headline, but in most cases these additional sentences are poorly written with poor grammar and spelling).

The last tier groups websites that primarily rely on republishing content they find on other websites, while occasionally producing original content. None of these websites ever reveal the names of anyone behind them or the authors of the stories. The majority of the websites in this category do not restrict themselves to a particular niche but cover a variety of topics ranging from politics to sports to pop culture. There are some exceptions to this such as the web portal Originalno.org, which has a rather [bizarre routine](#) of including at least one false story a day about the death or murder of a famous person.

A characteristic of these types of misinformation websites is their relatively short lifespan, particularly in the case of lesser known portals whose only purpose is financial gain for their owners. These types of websites usually do not have a propaganda purpose. If they do come across as having one, it is more a case of them attempting to pander to a particular audience that brings them website clicks rather than actually having a political purpose.

The explanation for the constant creation and disappearance of similar websites of this type is financial, namely the need to repurpose the sites when they stop generating money. The majority of such websites make money using Google AdSense, the ad sales service of the search engine Google. However, when Google realizes that these websites only attempt to artificially generate website clicks, they terminate their “contract.” Then the website becomes basically useless (as a financial generation machine) and is shut down while a different one is created to fill the gap.

Consequently, a good way to keep track of these emerging websites, other than checking whether they choose names similar to the websites that were shut down, are Facebook groups that share their content: since Facebook groups and pages are more or less permanent, the owners of these websites use Facebook to promote their (ever-changing) websites and to keep their audience in spite of the changes of their URLs. The Facebook groups used to promote this content have little that would connect them to the websites directly. Instead, they are created as fan pages for

celebrities such as actors, sports personalities, comedians etc., then used to share and disseminate clickbait misinformation content. This phenomenon also sheds some light on the complicated relationship between social media companies and misinformation sites.

These types of websites represent what we usually think of when we hear the term “misinformation website” or the more popular “fake news”. As attention to these practices has increased, it has become even more difficult to establish who is behind these websites. To date, the most successful inquiry into the ownership structures behind this form of websites was made by Raskrinkavanje.ba, which found that a large number of these websites (46 at one point and 11 at the time when Raskrinkavanje published the findings of their investigation) is connected to one name: [Aldin Širanović](#).

Širanović was a key leader in the 2014 social unrest in Bosnia and Herzegovina: he was one of the leaders of the protests in Tuzla, a city from which the protest spread to the rest of the country. Due to what he claimed were threats to him and his family in the aftermath of the protests, he left Bosnia and Herzegovina and was granted asylum in Austria. Once a local fact-checking website exposed him as being behind 46 different misinformation websites, he sent threatening messages to them and also published an untrue description of the fact-checking website [claiming](#) that it is funded by the nationalist parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Širanović appears to currently [hold](#) an administrative position in the

Institute of Computer Engineering at the Graz University of Technology.

Websites with real journalistic value but also misinformation content

These are long established media outlets that are registered in the trade registry. The reason for including them in the research is a combination of a clickbait-focused strategy and their habit of republishing misinformation content that they find on other websites. Occasionally, they publish their own original misinformation content by manipulating the facts or adding an untrue element to an otherwise true story.

From direct observation, these websites lack a clear political agenda as they do not seem to consistently favor one political ideology or party. Their practice of disseminating false information could be a result of the time-pressure they work under, forcing them to publish content before they examine how accurate the report is, or a desire to boost their profit by creating clickbait titles and publishing controversial false reports that attract readers.

Websites with real journalistic value but also misinformation content and political propaganda

Much like the websites from the previous category, these are established media outlets, registered in the

local trade registry. All of the outlets in this category also happen to have printed editions. Of the three, [Avaz](#) is, by far, the gravest offender when it comes to publishing misinformation content.

There are credible speculations according to which all three media outlets included in this category have ties to certain political parties. [Faktor](#) and [Stav](#) are allegedly tied to the Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije, *SDA*) in government for whom the parent company of Faktor and Stav (Simurg Media) ran an election-targeted marketing campaign. Moreover, Simurg Media was [granted](#) around 30,000 BAM (approx. 15,000 EUR) from the state budget for various projects, all signed off by the head of the SDA and former Bosniak member of the presidency. Avaz, on the other hand, is tied to the Bosniak Alliance for a Better Future for Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Savez za bolju budućnost Bosne i Hercegovine*, *SBB BiH*) whose president is also the founder of Avaz.¹

The coverage of the three websites is consistent with these allegations and almost always favors the two parties and critiques their opponents. Avaz, however, is more blatantly publishing misinformation (clickbait, false reporting, republishing of misinformation content found elsewhere, pseudoscience) than the other two. In fact, Avaz not only publishes much more misinformation than Faktor and Stav, but their misinformation content is not limited only to politics, as is the case with Faktor and Stav. The motivations behind the publishing of misinformation content by these websites include

time-pressure and the desire to attract more readers, just as in the category above. What distinguishes them from that category though is that their political content is biased in that it is clearly aimed to portray their political patrons in a positive light and their opponents negatively.

Disinformation websites with consistent political propaganda and no journalistic value

These websites serve a particular political purpose. They are different from for-profit websites as their content is not as diverse, topic-wise, and they possess a more sophisticated level of writing and publishing. Moreover, their primary aim is not to maximize their own profits via Google AdSense but rather to maximize the political capital of their favored political groups. Consequently, the content found on these websites is mostly political and does not veer off into other topics unless there is a political aspect to them. On the other hand, they are different from websites with journalistic value but with misinformation content because they have a clear propaganda purpose. Yet, they are also different from websites with real journalistic value but also misinformation content and political propaganda because of the secrecy and lack of information about them.

The websites in this fourth category have two distinct features. First, there is no information on the websites regarding who their journalists and editors are (except in the case of [Poskok](#) where they list columnists but none of those columnists actually seem to work for

them, their texts being copied from other websites). Secondly, their content (both misinformation content and content in general) is primarily political and aimed at criticizing those who have opposing views.

Even though the Bosnian political environment is marked by inter-ethno-nationalist tensions, surprisingly, these two websites are typically aimed at criticizing the opposition movements and parties within their respective ethno-national constituencies. Based on the analysis of their content, Poskok favors the ruling Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica BiH*, HDZ BiH) and [Infosrpska](#) favors the ruling Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata*, SNSD), the ruling party of Republika Srpska, one of the two entities that comprise Bosnia and Herzegovina (the other being Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). In the case of Infosrpska, its content is also often re-propagated by the Republika Srpska television channel RTRS, a public broadcaster, as well as their news agency, which indicates a level of connection between the ruling structures and this website.

A deeper investigation of the ownership of these websites (to the extent possible) reveals that they are not the typical for-profit misinformation websites. While Poskok does not publish any information about its owner or editor, it is highly likely that the website is owned by Ivan Susnjar: the website lists its contributors, but other than Susnjar's articles, all other texts are taken from other websites. They seem

to be selected based on how their content aligns ideologically with Poskok's.

Susnjar is a Bosnian Croat whose political ideology is best described as right-wing Croat nationalism (the same description can be used to describe the website). He is known publicly for involvement in two incidents. The first was his arrest under suspicion that he hacked and gained access to the e-mails of a Bosniak politician from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Susnjar published a piece on his website claiming to show an e-mail exchange between the politician and the Bosnia and Herzegovina's ambassador to Rome that he appointed. In the fake e-mail, the politician was congratulating the ambassador for switching his nationality² from Bosniak to Croat for the purpose of obtaining the ambassadorial position (each nationality is allocated a certain number of ambassadorial positions in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Susnjar then defended himself by claiming that he created the false e-mail exchange using a website called Fake Mailer and that the piece was [satire](#).

It is an example of one of the distinguishing strategies of Poskok: they publish "satirical" pieces but never indicate that the piece is satire, much less that the website is a satirical one. Susnjar's political connections are clearly demonstrated by another occasion, when Susnjar was nominated by the Bosnian Croat government party (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica BiH*, HDZ BiH) for the position of general consul in Chicago, USA. All three presidents³ of Bosnia and Herzegovina approved the decision. However, citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina submitted a signed

petition to the U.S. not to give Susnjar the necessary accreditation for the position because of his spreading of nationalist views, in part, via Poskok. The U.S. acted accordingly and Susnjar [never](#) got [the position](#). Half a year later, the Bosnian Croat president of Bosnia and Herzegovina nominated Susnjar for the position of ambassador to the Czech Republic. Once again, Susnjar never got the necessary accreditation from the Czech authorities but the Bosnian Croat president refused to nominate anyone else, leaving the Bosnia and Herzegovina's embassy in Prague [without an ambassador](#) for an extended period of time.

No information about who is behind Infosrpska is available. Interestingly, Infosrpska is the only website with a .ba domain in our sample. Consequently, the information of who registered the website is available. However, the person who registered Infosrpska claims that he/she has acted on behalf of someone else.

List of websites in Bosnia and Herzegovina that published at least one original misinformation article

For profit misinformation websites without real journalism	Real journalism websites with misinformation content	Real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda	Disinformation websites with consistent political propaganda
Alternativa	Slobodna Bosna	Faktor	Infosrpska
BH Dijaspورا	Hayat	Stav	Poskok
CIK		Avaz	
Ekspresno			
Klix.online			
Narodni			
Mislipozitivno			
Originalno			
Saznajemo			
Supercarobnisvijet			
Vremeplov			
HOTTOPIX			
Zabavne informacije			
E-Dijaspора			
24h-Vijesti			
Krajina.ba			

Methodology

This report examines the state of the misinformation landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Relying on the information provided by the Bosnia and Herzegovina-based fact-checking website Raskrinkavanje.ba, a list of 42 websites that have published false content has been compiled. Out of these, 23 websites that have published original misinformation content, drafted by the website in question and not copied from another source, have been identified.

The database curated by Raskrinkavanje.ba is a living registry, websites that do not publish such pieces in

three months are removed from the list. To be able to gauge the depth of the phenomenon, our research included all the websites that appeared on Raskrinkavanje's list at some point and that have not removed or retracted false news pieces from their website.

Difficulties in finding ownership and financial data

One of the goals for this research was to obtain the financial data on these websites in order to assess the monetary aspect of the misinformation landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This proved to be the most difficult part of the research due to the secrecy surrounding these websites, especially those from the first and fourth category. Since they are not officially registered anywhere, it is almost impossible to know who owns them and all information regarding their finances is private and unavailable. One reason why this is the case is that the owners and contributors do not wish to be associated with these websites due to the false nature of their content, perhaps fearing potential legal repercussions for defamation etc. The situation is slightly better with established media outlets as they do have impressums and are registered in the trade registry. Since these are prominent players in the media landscape, some investigations into their financial ties to political structures have been conducted by journalists. However, we were not able to obtain comprehensive financial reports from these companies.

HUNGARY: PUSHING POLITICS, PICKING POCKETS

Judit Szakács

Main Findings

- It is almost impossible to obtain information about who is behind Hungarian misinformation websites; financial information about them is even harder to come by
- Hungarian misinformation websites fall on the spectrum from purely ideological sites to simple money-making machines
- Facebook appears to be the almost exclusive source of traffic for misinformation websites in Hungary
- Misinformation websites focusing on generating income are often abandoned and then brought back to life using a different domain name
- The Facebook page of misinformation websites is stable and keeps directing users to the ever-changing urls of the websites
- The websites' posts are spread via Facebook pages and groups that often bear names unrelated to the website. In a lot of cases, this can be because the websites' names have

changed. But we also found signs of an underground trade of Facebook groups and pages

- The revenue generated by placing ads on a website may not be significant but Hungarian misinformation websites appear to have at least a couple of sister-sites
- At the money-making end of the spectrum, lots of misinformation websites appear to be controlled by few individuals/groups, and some individuals/groups appear to run a high number of misinformation websites
- One of the groups identified as operating a number of misinformation websites can be linked to a network of political organizations that have been accused of fraud in the 2014 and 2018 general elections in Hungary

Introduction

This brief report reviews the findings of a small-scale study into the business of Hungarian misinformation websites. Approximately 100 misinformation websites were reviewed to gain insights into their business model, the revenue they generate and the means through which they generate it. Unfortunately, these websites are rather secretive as to their ownership structure and operating companies. They nearly always lack an “About” or an “Impressum” section. WhoIs databases generally show that the websites’ registrars are “privacy protected.” In the rare cases when this was not true in this research, linking an

email address to a company whose financial information is accessible proved nearly impossible.

Misinformation Websites in Hungary: An Overview

For the purposes of this research, looked at from the business perspective, the websites in the Hungarian sample are varied, ranging from websites that are run out of conviction/ideology to websites that appear to be only about business. The three rough categories that we placed them in are the following:

1. Websites that do not appear to aim to generate income
2. Websites that have some goal other than generating income but that also run advertisements
3. Websites whose sole goal appears to be making money

Placing some of the websites under one of these categories involves some subjective judgment. Yet, in the vast majority of cases, the analyzed websites clearly belong to one of these types.

Websites that do not appear to aim to generate income

The misinformation websites under this category contain no ads; their owners/operators appear not to be financially motivated. Some of the conspiracy theory websites fall under this category.

Vilaghelyzete.com (meaning “the situation of the world” in Hungarian), and its sister site, Alternativhirek.com (“Alternative news”), for example, aim to “awaken the world” because “the truth will set you free.” They appear to be run by a single person. While they contain no ads, these two sites do accept donations and patrons. These crowdfunding efforts may not be too successful, though. On 5 July 2019, for example, the website only had four supporters on the crowdfunding site [Patreon](#).

The satirical/parody news site Hircsarda.hu (“News tavern”) also runs without advertisements. Hircsarda.hu is one of the rare cases where the website owner could be tracked down and financial information about it was [available](#); it is run by Hírcsárda Ltd, a company with HUF 0 in turnover in 2019, and that is currently under liquidation.

Websites that have some other goals than generating revenue

The distinctive features of the websites under this category are that they do run advertisements (unlike the previous category), but they also present properly written (although, of course, mis-informative) articles (which is not the case with the third category).

Several conspiracy theory/pseudoscientific websites as well as the majority of the politically biased/hyper-partisan websites belong here. For example, Rejtelyekszigete.com (“Mystery island”) runs sometimes 5,000-character long, often original, well-

written, properly illustrated pieces on topics such as druids, peppered with Google ads. Another example of this kind is Ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com (“New world consciousness”). In addition to Google ads, this website also sells t-shirts and other merchandise. Drabikjanosblog.wordpress.com also tries to sell conspiracy theorist János Drábik’s books, magazine, lectures as well as to collect donations for his foundation.

Another example of a misinformation website trying to sell something directly is 24ora.eu, which offers credit services alongside articles such as “16-year old actress dies unexpectedly.”⁴ Another rather strange example is Mennyeitipp.hu (“Heavenly tip”), on which the first item in the navigation menu is an advertisement for a facial mask, distributed in an MLM-scheme, which has nothing to with the website’s junk news content. Additionally, any number of pseudoscientific lifestyle/health websites can be found trying to sell various products, for instance Antalvali.co.hu.

Further along the spectrum and much closer to the “money-making” category is Vilagfigyelo.com (“World watcher”). On one of the Facebook pages belonging to the website, it claims to be a site run by a group of private citizens, not as a money-making business, but “for society, for humankind.”⁵ Another Facebook page belonging to the website emphasizes that the website makes no money off visitors.⁶ Yet the website runs several Google ads while the majority of the articles seem to be simply stolen from other websites.

As for biased/hyper-partisan websites that fall under this category, the anti-Muslim website Dzsihadfigyelo.com (“Jihad watch”) is one example. In an [interview](#), the website’s anonymous founder emphasized that the site was run for ideological rather than financial reasons, adding that “the website is run by a dozen idealists, who use their free time to translate articles, to subtitle videos, to make material hitherto unavailable in Hungarian accessible for Hungarians.” Yet the website does contain Google ads. The site is also available on a Hungarian blogging platform, Blogstar where it is overrun with ads, but they seemed to be placed on the site by Blogstar and not by Dzsihádfigyelő, as the same ads appear on other blogs on the platform.

Infamous anti-migrant website Napimigrans.info (“Daily migrant,” also available at [dailymigrants.com](#)) and its sister site Hungaryexpres.com can also be included in this category, although closer to the “business” end of the spectrum. They produce very little, if any, original content, aggregating instead anti-migrant and pro-Fidesz⁷ news from a wide variety of sources. Yet the political ideology seems to be taken seriously, and this differentiates these sites from the third category.

But not only extreme-right misinformation websites exist in Hungary; there is a host of hyper-partisan leftist sites, and they mostly fall under this category. Pestibulvar.hu (“Tabloid from Budapest”), Ellenszel.hu (“Headwind”), Fuggetlennemzet.hu (“Independent nation”), Balramagyar.hu (“Hungarians go left”) and Hirhugo.hu (“News Hugó”)

are staunchly anti-Fidesz websites with clickbait-y titles and often misleading content, false context and false connection. For instance, a piece on Hirhugo.hu screams in its headline, “Boozy Orbán in action again: the prime minister picked up the bottle again”,⁸ when reporting on a picture published on the public Facebook page of Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, depicting him with some white wine spritzer in a restaurant (hardly the scandalous drinking scene the headline promised). These websites are crowded with advertisements but appear to be honest about their political affinities. Some of them, including Pestibulvar.hu, Ellenszel.hu and Hirhugo.hu are run by low-level (current or former) members of the Hungarian socialist party MSZP.

The articles on the websites in this category tend to be properly written with polished language and decent grammar and spelling, not worse than mainstream news sites. Ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com and Dzsihadfigyelo.blogstar.hu even have referenced articles, complete with footnotes. This is in striking contrast with the third category.

Money-making machines

As we approach the “business” end of the spectrum, we find a large number of sites where the content matters only insofar as it draws in the audience. The titles become more sensationalized, the articles (or often, “articles”) at the extreme of fakeness, often not only misleading but completely made up. The style of writing is much less polished; spelling and

grammatical errors abound. The pieces appear to be optimized for sharing on social media (i.e. on Facebook in the Hungarian context), and they are often very short, serving only as a means to display the advertisements. The articles are usually not dated. The websites are teeming with ads, not only by Google but also from other networks, often displaying animated, sometimes pornographic and always sickening ads for miracle cures aimed at graphically depicted health problems.

Of the conspiracy/pseudoscientific sites, Avilagtitkai.com (“Secrets of the world”) seems to be using the issues it covers only to reach a bigger audience. When you visit the site, upon clicking on any article, a new window opens, and you are taken to an illegal movie site (mozi.ma); but even if you click on the play button, you are just shown more advertisements.

Many “junk news websites” that take tabloid to the extreme fall under this category; some of them are also impostor websites such as fem3cafe.me (mimicking the url of the television channel and website Fem3 and NLcafe) or tv2-friss.com (imitating TV2’s url). Several of these websites also run political tabloid news. Interestingly enough, many of them are anti-government. An extreme example is Hirturi.blogspot.com (“News shop”), with sensationalized headlines such as “Scandal! Migrant worker called in to Hungary by Orbán used a knife to rob someone in Veszprém county! IT IS STARTING!”⁹ This example also shows that just because a website

opposes the anti-immigrant Hungarian government, it does not mean that the website is pro-migrant.

These websites appear to have found an audience hungry for scandalous news about Hungary's ruling Fidesz party, which makes sense in the overwhelmingly pro-government Hungarian media context. At the same time, and as a further proof that their political convictions are far from sincere, some of these websites also produce pro-government propaganda: anything that generates clicks. For example, in May 2019 alone, the otherwise anti-government website Bekezdes.co ("Paragraph") had four pieces on "wonderful news" for pensioners, complete with pictures of Viktor Orbán.

Beyond what appears to be a lack of genuine political belief, these websites differ from the leftist websites discussed above in their content (their focus is not exclusively political) as well as in their style, visibly less polished. They also frequently fabricate content as opposed to manipulate news content that has some basis in reality.

"Dumb Hungarians": An Example of Fabricated Content

In early June 2019, Tv2-friss.com created a whole series of articles on scandalous comments and responses about the sinking of sightseeing boat Hableány on the Danube in Budapest on 29 May 2019. The accident killed 28 people, most of them tourists from South Korea.

In an article dated 4 June 2019, this website reported that Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's childhood friend, multimillionaire Lőrinc Mészáros said that the prime minister "had better things to do" than mourning the dead all day. "What do all these dumb Hungarians think?", the article reported Mészáros as saying.

In an undated article, the website later reported that the popular television program host Gabriella Jakupcsek (referred to in a familiar name as Gabi Jakupcsek) responded to Mészáros' "arrogant outburst" by saying that she was ashamed to read the remarks and especially the part where Mészáros called Hungarians dumb. In another undated article, late government commissioner Andy Vajna's well-known widow, Tímea Vajna (again, simply called Timi Vajna) is reported as defending Mészáros. In yet another undated article, well-respected, elderly horticulturalist and television personality György Bálint (referred to by his popular name as "Farmer Bálint") is reported to demand that Mészáros and Orbán apologize for the comments. Finally, in another article published on a different website but belonging to the same group (see below), Tímea Vajna's former partner, actor Roland Damu sent a public message to "Timi" telling her to stay out of politics.

These public figures are highly unlikely to make such comments. On 7 July 2019, Tímea Vajna actually threatened to sue one of the impostor websites in this group, blikkruzs.me, which she mistook for the original women's tabloid *Blikk Rúzs* (blikkruzs.blikk.hu), for similar invented comments about a musician who had recently passed away. Still, their alleged remarks have not been reported in any mainstream news media (though Mészáros' alleged comments have been reported on other misinformation websites, likely taken from here). This whole story, leading to the production of five separate articles, has no basis in reality; it is entirely fictitious.¹⁰

Unless you sell something directly, of which some examples were given above, the way to make money online is through advertisements. Accordingly, the websites in the third category are covered with ads. The content-ad ratio often suggests that the content is created only as a vehicle to display ads. For example, a fabricated story run by Hitel.news7.hu (“Credit news”) on refugees having a May 1 picnic in a cemetery in Hungary’s Fejér county consists of two sentences and a picture, and it is surrounded by numerous advertisements.¹¹ The poorly written “story” claims that Indian migrants (of whom 2,000 are allegedly already in Fejér county, Hungary) were having a barbecue at the local cemetery. The picture used, however, is from an [Instagram page](#) called Slavic graveyards, and the location for it is Serbia.

Interestingly, the image is featured on another Hungarian misinformation website.¹² Here the “story” is written as a Facebook post in first person singular, according to which the author went to the cemetery and found people having a picnic on his or her mother’s grave. The photo also made an appearance on anti-immigrant German social media sites, claiming to have been taken of immigrants in the cemetery of the city of Magdeburg.¹³

Another example is an article on fem3cafe.me that reports a fictitious story that Viktor Orbán’s son Gáspár said his father is worse off financially than most Hungarians.¹⁴ (*See Figure 1*)

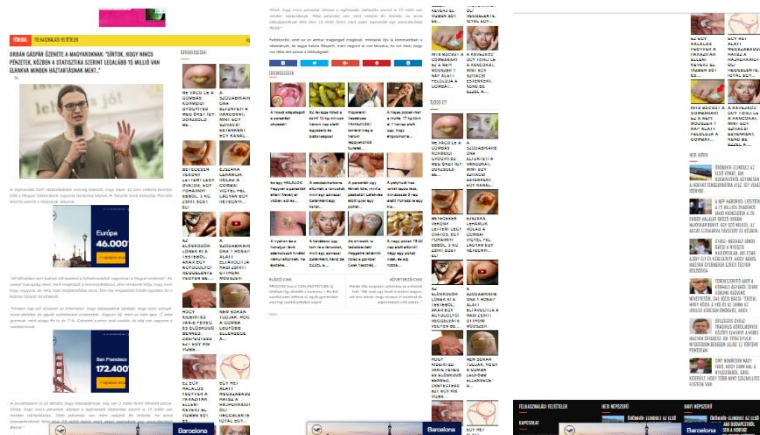


Figure 1: Page from fem3cafe.me

The screenshots were taken when scrolling down the page; the size was reduced so that all of the advertisements could be captured in three images. This one bogus 200-word article displays 40 advertisements.

The placement of advertisements is also often misleading. An article from Titokterminal.com (“Secret terminal”) on how the food industry “poisons us”¹⁵ shows that advertisements are mixed with related articles. Three of the eight links on this page are for ads.

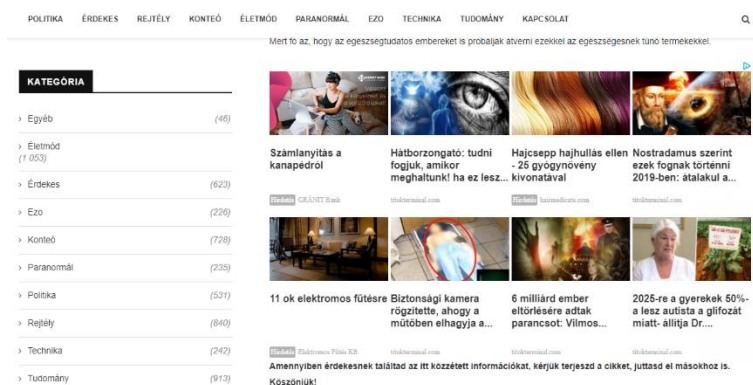


Figure 2: Page from Titokterminal.com

It is unclear how much revenue the websites are capable of generating via banners and other ads. In early July 2019, Titokterminal.com ran an ad for potential advertisers, telling them that, “tens of thousands” of visitors will see their ad. Another clue is offered by the website Latogatoknovelese.blogspot.com/ (“Increasing visitors”), which says the daily rate for banners on Netbulvar.com (“Net tabloid”, out of operation as of June 2019, but lives on as Netbulvar.eu) starts from HUF 500 (€1.5) for the smallest banner to HUF 2,000 (€6) for the largest one. Karpathir.com (“Kárpát news”) offers to run banners for a monthly rate from HUF 11,500 (€35) to HUF 35,000 (€107), depending on the size and placement.¹⁶ The profit and loss account of the foundation that [owns](#) the site, Magyar Szív-Magyar Szó Alapítvány (Hungarian Heart-Hungarian Word Foundation), shows that it had a net sales revenue of HUF 2.363 million (€7,100) in 2018; yet it is unclear whether the money was generated through the website or the foundation’s other activities.

Leftist political website Pestibulvar.hu [lists](#) surprisingly high advertising prices, ranging from HUF 990,000 (€3,000) per week to HUF 1.950,000 (€5,900) per week for banners, which, if true, would generate significant revenue. The outstandingly high prices are all the more interesting because Pesti Bulvár has 33.7k Facebook-followers, which is not a particularly high number for misinformation websites. Unfortunately, and in breach of Hungarian law, the company that runs the site has not made its balance sheet and profit and loss accounts available in the Justice Ministry database. This means that it is not possible to check whether the revenues have materialized. It is worth noting that at the time of the research, only Google ads were shown at the site. In any case, even if the amounts are insignificant in themselves, what this research found is that for-profit misinformation websites rarely stand alone.

Networks of Misinformation Websites

The most striking finding of this review of Hungarian misinformation websites is that several of the websites towards the “business” end of the spectrum appear to be controlled by the same persons or companies, and that persons and companies in this business control several misinformation websites rather than running only one. In a few cases, where the registrar of the websites could be identified, WhoIs databases revealed that some of the registrants have registered more than one websites.

One notorious misinformation-site founder is “Tomi Horváth from Kerepestarcsa” (it is unclear whether this is a real person). The email-address horvath.tomi.69@gmail.com has been used to [register](#) altogether 58 (non-EU and non-Hu) domain names. Another one is partyarc20@yahoo.com, who has [registered](#) 34 domain names. Keszthelyinorbert2015@gmail.com has [owned](#) altogether 21 domain names, sometimes providing the “funny” name of Maugli Kalányos (clearly not a real person). Nstnst99@gmail.com has been used to [register](#) 15 domain names.

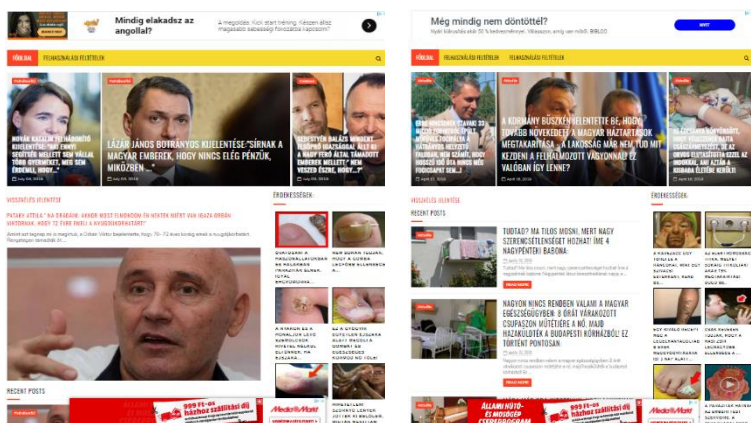
In other cases the websites referred to related sites or contained some other clear clue about their links to other websites.

However, for most of the sites it is impossible to identify the owner/operator. For this reason, in most cases the connections were made on the basis of visual and stylistic likeness,¹⁷ the usage of the same tag-lines and terms,¹⁸ and most importantly, their Facebook connection – what Facebook pages share the articles of particular websites, and, conversely, what other websites’ articles share particular Facebook pages. Yet, the Facebook connection must also be evaluated in light of the other data because the sale or “rent” of Facebook pages is not uncommon (*see below*).

The results show that even smaller misinformation websites tend to have a couple of sister sites. These sister sites sometimes cut across disinformation “genres.” For example, the pseudo-scientific diabetika.hu, the impostor site kormanyinfo.info

(“Kormányinfo” is the name of the weekly press conference held by the Hungarian Minister of the Prime Minister’s Office) and the clickbait/nationalist news site Magyarvagyok.info all belong to the same persons. While the latter two are not operational in July 2019, their Facebook communities⁴⁹ are alive and well, sharing posts from Diabetika.hu.

More importantly, two groups were identified that seem to run a larger number of sites. The first one can be named “the impostor group” because the majority of their domains imitate media organizations’ domain names. Tv2-friss.com (TV2 is a television channel), nlcafe.me (NlCafe is a women’s portal), blikkruzs.me (Blikk Rúzs is a tabloid), tudasfaja.club (Tudasfaja is a very successful misinformation website) are some of the dozen websites that seem to be currently operating. The last example shows that this group spoofs not only legitimate media outlets but also misinformation ones. (See below the home pages of four different websites of the group.)



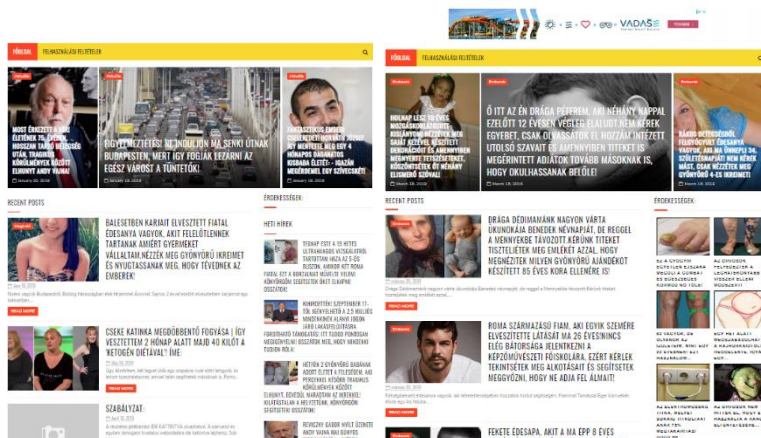


Figure 3: The front pages of tv2-friss.com, rtl-klub.me, magyarkep.me and tudasfaja.club

Beyond the unquestionable visual, stylistic and topical similarity, these websites also link to each other, though possibly by accident. For example, when you click on the “terms and conditions” page on nlcafe.me, you will get to the “terms and conditions” page on nephangja.com. Additionally, their stories are all shared by the same Facebook pages.

The persons/organizations running these sites could not be identified. However, anti-fake news site Fakepalm has been following the group’s activities and it [claims](#) to have traced the sites back to a family and a circle of friends led by a former teacher and her son in the town of Orosháza. The Fakepalm-investigation also claims that at their peak, these websites generated HUF 10m (€30,700) to HUF 12m (€36,800) a month.

The other larger group has websites that copy the mother of all Hungarian misinformation sites, Mindenegyben (“Everything together”), with names

such as Mindenegybe.com, Egyazegyben.com and Egyazegyben.co, as well as more special interest sites like the seemingly environmentalist Zoldujsag.hu (“Green news”), a site targeting the elderly, Nyugdijasok.hu (“Pensioners”), or a clickbait site about children, Gyermekek.hu (“Children”, not updated since September 2018). These sites do not look so much alike, and they differ in tone and the topics they cover, but the connection between them could be established via registrant and operator data.

Some of them were registered with the same email-address, some by the same company, and some have the same operator named on the site. Interestingly enough, these websites could also be linked to political organizations. Zöld Újság’s founder and the former owner and CEO of its publisher, which registered Zoldujsag.hu, Ottó Stekler ran for various positions representing the Hungarian Green Party at the elections of 1994, 1998, 2002 and 2006. Stekler’s wife Mária Seres, a contributor for Zöld Újság, also ran as the Party’s candidate in 1994 and in 2002. In 2004, Stekler and Seres ran for the European Parliament representing the Rural Party-Green Party. In 2010, Seres launched a new party called Civil Movement; she and Stekler both ran as the party’s candidates at the local elections that year; Seres also ran for Parliament. Zöld Újság’s publishing company, and the registrant for several misinformation sites is called Kontroll Média Ltd; its [CEO](#) Léna Sutáné Vigh ran in the 2014 general elections representing Mária Seres’ party (called SMS at that time). Stekler and Seres also ran in 2014 representing this party. In 2018, Mária Seres ran

for Parliament representing a new party called Közös Nevező (Common Denominator).

Today, the operator of several of the misinformation sites registered by Kontroll Média runs a website for György Gódcény, who headed Közös Nevező's party list in 2018. The site (doktorgodeny.hu) looks similar to misinformation sites bekezdes.co or mindenegybe.co, and while Gódcény has a pharmaceutical degree and has worked as a pharmacist, the website peddles pseudoscientific information, such as that yoghurt can help depression or vitamin D helps people with cancer. The website also sells supplements in advertisements disguised as articles.²⁰

The operator of these sites is named Média Alternatíva; originally, in 2014, it was registered as Seres Mária Szövetségesei ("Mária Seres' Allies), or SMS – the name of Seres's party in 2014. According to company registry data, it was renamed as Média Alternatíva on 30 October 2015. According to an investigative [documentary](#) released in 2019, Seres' parties were not engaged in genuine political activities; rather, their goal was to collect state funding given to political organizations to run in elections. Seres, Stekler and their collaborators are accused of pocketing over HUF 2bn (€6.2m) this way.

The Key Link: Facebook

Hungarian misinformation websites are ephemeral. Four of the 25 misinformation websites found to be highly visited in January 2019 by Urbanlegends.hu

were abandoned by early July 2019. Even the two months of this research saw some websites that were highly active at the beginning of the period disappearing or no longer getting updates at the end. Yet, while the websites appear to be dead, their content often lives on, either on a different domain or under a different name.

With the ever-changing urls, it is clear that visitors do not find these websites via bookmarked links. It appears that Facebook is the main source of traffic to Hungarian misinformation websites. The importance of Facebook in the Hungarian context has been shown in many datasets. Of particular relevance to this research is the Reuters Digital News 2019 [study](#), which found that 62% of Hungarian internet users use social media, especially Facebook for news.

Some of the websites in question use tracker widgets such as whos.amung.us, which showed, for example, that hirozon.info or hungaryexpres.com received all of their traffic via Facebook in the past 30 days. For hirozon.info, this was the case any time the website was checked in the research period for any “past 30 days.” For hungaryexpres.com, in early July 2019, the widget showed 96% referrals from Facebook, while the rest of the visitors came mostly via search engines (Google, Yahoo, Baidu).

In many cases, the “articles” on the websites themselves are also written as if they were Facebook posts and call on readers to share on.

News Article or Facebook Post?

Much of the content of misinformation websites reads more like Facebook posts than articles. An undated “article” on [magyarnepe.me](#), for example, is titled, “I WAS GOING HOME LAST NIGHT BY BUS NO 5 FROM THE 19-WEEK ULTRASOUND WHEN TWO YOUNG ROMA DID THIS HORRIBLE THING TO ME! PLEASE HELP US CATCH THEM! SHARE THIS!” The “article” is complete with a seemingly candid photo of a pregnant woman and the No 5 bus as well as a detailed description of the alleged incident and the two perpetrators. The “article” ends with a call to notify the police if you know anything, or at least to share the post, and it is signed in a woman’s name and email-address. In short, it has the characteristics of Facebook posts calling for help.

Most of the websites contain salient links to their Facebook page. At the same time, some of the websites do not advertise any Facebook page, raising the possibility that they receive visitors via other sources. However, after some digging it was always possible to connect the websites in question to a Facebook page. For example, clickbait site [Erdemesszo.club](#)’s stories are shared by a Facebook page called Newcontact,²¹ which had 222,545 followers at the time of writing.

The person who registered [Netbulvar.eu](#), on a separate site offers packages to advertisers, claiming that they have over 1.5 million people on Facebook.²² Yet [Netbulvar.eu](#)’s Facebook page is followed only by 24,000 Facebook-users, and this was one of the few sites in the sample to which no sister site was found, which, of course, does not rule out the existence of

related sites at all. The key is that misinformation sites share their articles via more than one Facebook page, enhancing their visibility. For example, sister sites Erdekesportal.com, Bovebbenportal.com, Erdekescikkek.hu, Vilagunk.hu and Mocool.eu all have their own Facebook pages but they cross-post all of the articles, thereby increasing their reach.

Yet nowhere is this cross-posting more evident than with the first large group of sites identified above (“the impostor sites”). In the time period when the research was carried out, their stories were shared by at least 11 Facebook pages simultaneously. It is possible that the real figure is even higher, but these pages were identified:

- Észbontó (“Mind-blowing”, 62k followers);
- Fából készült szépségek (“Beautiful things made of wood, 35k followers, gained in just four months);
- Nők közössége (“Community of women”, 63k followers);
- Retro Klub public group (25k members);
- 40 év felettiek közössége (“Community of people over 40,” 73k followers);
- Made in Hungária (63k followers,);
- Varázslatos világ (“Magical world,” 95k followers);
- Nem csak a húszéveseké a világ (“The world is not only for twenty-somethings”, 61k followers);
- Magyarok közössége (“Community of Hungarians”, 88k followers);

- Szóljon hangosan az ének (“Let the music sound out”, 36k followers);
- Fekete kávé Magyarország (“Black coffee Hungary”, 8k followers).

These groups appear to be suspicious. This is not only because three of them were created on the same day and one two days later, but also because what does tabloid news, real or fake, have to do with, say, wood-carving? Yet one of the pages sharing these stories is entitled “Beautiful things made of wood.” Five of the 11 pages are about nostalgia; the description of the Made in Hungária page, for example, states, “Alternative time travel! Everything retro, everything Hungarian [...] from the 1960s, 70s and 80s.”

Occasionally, there is a post that is relevant for the given page – an old television set (“Share if you remember!”) in one of the nostalgia groups or some pretty wooden cabinet on the “Beautiful things made of wood” page. Yet, the vast majority of the posts, (fictitious) remarks made by prime minister Orbán’s daughter or the equally fictitious post of a mother asking people to pray for her son who is dying of cancer, have nothing to do with the page’s supposed focus. Anti-fake news site Fakepalm seems to have an [explanation](#). According to Fakepalm, the group behind these websites buys up Facebook pages and groups, and then starts sharing its own content on them. As evidence, the Fakepalm website claims to have screencaps of one of the group members offering to buy the page “The world does not belong to twenty-somethings only.” The page’s owner says in response

to the offer that she usually sells groups when they are bigger.

This suggests that the buying and selling of Facebook pages is not uncommon in Hungary. Indeed, a simple web search brings up several forum posts and some classified ads for Facebook pages wanted and Facebook pages for sale. The rate varies greatly, depending on the number of likes and followers, the demographics reached, their engagement levels and so on. One seller [advertised](#) their page by saying the followers are mostly women over the age of 50, which means they are “adblock-free.” There are ads buying and selling pages for HUF 0.5 (1 euro cent)/like to HUF 10 (3 euro cents)/like.

Since they depend on Facebook for traffic, most misinformation websites post a high number of articles on Facebook every day. Egyazegyben’s Facebook page, for example, posted 41 times on a randomly picked single day on 31 May 2019. The sheer volume of the posts and their regularity suggests automation. For example, Titokterminal.com created 32 posts on 26 May 2019, all of them on the hour or at half past. In other cases, there seems to be some coordination among sites. On the randomly picked day of 2 June 2019, Harmonikum.co and Napjainkportal.hu both created 17 Facebook-posts appearing in sync on the two sites at seemingly random times throughout the day (such as 7:44; 15:16/17; 20:41; 23:16/17). The “impostor group” also appears to coordinate posts. On 5 June, for example, the same seven posts were shared on nine out of the

group's 11 pages throughout the day at roughly the same time.

Yet, the high volume of Facebook posts does not correspond to a high number of new articles on the websites. Articles are shared time and time again. For example, on 6 June 2019, Zoldujsag's Facebook page shared an article on reincarnation, originally posted on 23 February 2017. This "recycling" of posts is probably a reason why the articles on misinformation websites are usually undated, and, apart from reflections on political news, are rather "generic" or timeless. An article on reincarnation is just as valid (or not) in 2017 as in 2019. Yet even when the topic of the article is seasonal, little care is taken to post only relevant pieces. For example, Legjava.pro's Facebook page²³ posted a piece on Christmas decorations on 29 June 2019. This perhaps again suggests automation, which undoubtedly cuts down on costs. Instead of writing new articles, the sites just endlessly recycle old ones.

The business side of it is unclear. A person trying to sell 4-5 Facebook pages with altogether 20,000 likes [claimed](#) that the pages generate HUF 100,000 (€307) to HUF 150,000 (€46) in income every month. If this figure is realistic, then one can conclude that the business of misinformation can be lucrative.

Misinformation Websites and Mainstream Media

Hungarian misinformation websites have a two-sided relationship to mainstream media. First of all, misinformation websites of all kinds often claim to be the true source of news as opposed to mainstream media. This is obviously the case for ideology-based conspiracy theory websites, such as Vilaghelyzete.com, which claims in its header that it shares “TRUTHS that are not shown by the globalist media but that are necessary” to understand the world.²⁴



Figure 4: Vilaghelyzete.com's header

The leftist political websites also claim to reveal the truth as opposed to Hungarian mainstream media. Unlike Vilaghelyzete.com, they do not view Hungarian mainstream media as “globalist” but as government propaganda. For example, Balramagyar.hu has a pop-up screen offering the choice between “Propaganda” and “Oppositional news” – if you click on the latter, you can sign up for the site’s push notifications. The site’s tagline is “Government propaganda gets everywhere. This article only does so if you share it.”²⁵ Likewise, Hirhugo.hu states that it is “0% propaganda, 100% truth,” and it defines itself against the “oligarch media.”²⁶ Pestibulvar.hu urges readers to share its articles “to help destroy government propaganda.”

This call is placed at the end of every article on the site.²⁷

Right-wing, pro-government misinformation sites also claim they share news that the mainstream media do not cover. Maivilag.com (“Today’s world”) has a Facebook page called Cenzúra nélkül (“Without censorship”), which states in its description, “Our community was founded so that members see not only the manipulated news of the mainstream media, but also the undisclosed or maybe forbidden news.”²⁸ Vilagfigyelo.com’s Facebook page used to be called “News kept hidden.”²⁹ Flag Media Group runs a site called Elhallgatott hírek (“Supressed news”), which, ironically, shares articles from such mainstream pro-government media outlets as the daily Magyar Nemzet or news portal 888.hu.³⁰ As this example shows, given that the mainstream media in Hungary are largely [controlled](#) by the right-wing Hungarian government, the argument that Hungarian mainstream media suppress right-wing, pro-government news is difficult to make.

Even some of the clickbait websites claim that they, and not the mainstream media are the source of “real news.” Hirturi.blogspot.com’s Facebook page states, “Don’t get misguided by fake news, read the real thing!”³¹ This is rather bold for a page that reported, for example, that Charles, Prince of Wales bugged the bedroom of Prince William and his wife Catherine.³²

Beyond positioning themselves as against the mainstream media, misinformation websites very often report news from the mainstream media – but

rewritten in a more clickbait, sensationalized form. This is clearly the main feature of the political misinformation sites, which rarely break news; instead, they re-write news stories in accordance with their world view. For example, on 30 June the mainstream media [reported](#) that Hungarian prime minister Orbán wrote a letter to European People's Party president Joseph Daul, asking him not to agree to the nomination of Frans Timmermans as European Commission President. Right-wing Dailymigrants.com headlined its piece on this story as, "The war for Europe: Orbán wrote his letter – the nomination of Soros-soldier Timmermans is unacceptable."³³ The same story got reported on leftist Pestibulvar.hu as "It's over, Orbán's trying to escape – the prime minister gave up."³⁴

Another example is a story from 7 July 2019 when the Tunisian coast guard recovered the bodies of 14 migrants who had drowned. Dailymigrants.com reported on this story saying, "14 drowned migrants were fished out of the sea off Tunisia."³⁵ A further example is leftist Balramagyar.hu, which on 15 May had the attention-catching headline, "Orbán is desperately trying to get away from being held responsible – the failed politician is using a cheap trick."³⁶ This was a rewrite of an article from the daily Népszava about Orbán not wanting to meet the European People's Party's representatives before the European elections. Világfigyelo.com also used "classic" clickbait technique when reporting, "Over a thousand migrants broke through the fence at night. Video!"³⁷ Hungarian readers likely thought the article will be about the Hungarian border fence – but this

piece is a Fox News video about migrants caught when entering the US. In an even worse example of clickbait, anti-migrant misinformation, Vilagfigyelo.com reported on 5 May 2019, “Syrian migrant beats 18-year old female student to pulp on the tram,” complete with a very disturbing image of a woman with a black eye. Contrary to what Hungarian readers probably think seeing the headline, the story reveals that this happened in Germany, and also that the photo is unrelated and used as an “illustration.”³⁸

Not only political sites rely on “recycling” stories from mainstream media. This is also a favorite technique of other types of misinformation sites. Anything can be written up in the most click-generating way possible, from accidents (“Shocking details of the tragedy (video))”,³⁹ to the weather forecast (ATTENTION! ALERT FOR TOMORROW! BE PREPARED!),⁴⁰ “Alarm! Damaging hailstorm with 2-cm hail and 80 kmh winds may hit within hours!”,⁴¹ or “Brutal heat wave is coming! 43 Celsius! Meteorologists are asking you to share this so that everyone can get prepared! EXTREME HEAT WILL KNOCK OUT ALL OF EUROPE!”⁴²).

Additionally, any time an even marginally famous person dies, sensationalist tabloid misinformation websites report on his/her death as if the whole country was in mourning. For example, Hirozon.info reported on the passing away of the literary editor of an art theatre in Budapest Annamária Radnai with the headline, “HUNGARY IS MOURNING: Breaking news! THE WONDERFUL ARTIST DIED tragically and suddenly, at a young age!”⁴³ While Radnai was an

accomplished expert in her field, most of Hungary clearly has never heard of her.

Celebrity, crime and other tabloid news stories from the mainstream media are also a constant source for articles to be rewritten for misinformation websites. For example, a [story](#) from the tabloid Borsonline.hu about the court hearing of two elderly men accused of discussing a plot to murder the country's leaders got reported as "They wanted to murder Viktor Orbán!" on various websites.⁴⁴ Blikkruzs.me even went as far as shouting in its headline, "BREAKING! VIKTOR ORBÁN ASSASSINATED! THESE TWO MEN DID IT AND THIS IS WHAT THEY DID".⁴⁵

"My Little Son Died": An Example of News Recycling

A story that has been making the rounds of sensationalist misinformation sites is based on a report on commercial television channel RTL-Klub, run on 11 October 2018, entitled "Boy fell, died a day later." This recounts the tragic story of an 11-year old boy who collapsed and died in a Hungarian village. A day earlier he fell down the stairs, for which he was taken to the hospital. The hospital released him after an X-ray. The cause of death is being investigated. This story has been re-written and widely published on several misinformation websites, and then shared time and time again on their Facebook pages. The most often shared re-written version is entitled, "My 11-year old little son was kicked out of the hospital. In the morning, little Dávid was dead. The cause is more than shocking. We're asking every parent who is outraged by our story to please share this. May he rest in peace!" The story is accompanied with a

picture of a hospital room and a little boy – who, of course, is not the boy who passed away, but a kid featured in several online collections of “cute boy hairstyles,” going back to 2014. The recycled story was featured on at least eight different websites⁴⁶, and shared several times on different Facebook pages. A particularly insidious example is the Hítel fórum Facebook page, which not only shared the story from its Hítelforum.hu website on 7 and 25 June,⁴⁷ but also from its other site, Hítel.news7.hu, on 12 July,⁴⁸ renaming “little Dávid” as “little Robi.”⁴⁹ This is not even the end; the fake news machine keeps on churning out reports. On 26 June, 2019, Eztnezdme.com reported with its headline that the cause of death has been found – but it was not, and apart from the headline, the article itself was unchanged from the earlier version.⁵⁰ The original news story is milked for profit as much as possible by these sites.

In summary, then, for Hungarian misinformation websites, the mainstream media are an “other” against which to identify themselves – although, of course, doubts about the honesty of such declarations can often be raised. The mainstream media also serve as the basis of one of the two main types of misinformation articles: real news stories re-written in a way to generate as many clicks as possible. (The other main type of articles is the completely made-up stories.) Yet looking at these recycled articles, a third aspect also becomes clear: in some cases, the mainstream media articles barely need to be modified; they fit perfectly on the misinformation sites. That is, women’s tabloid Kiskegyed also [reported](#) on the death of Annamária Radnai as “THE COUNTRY IS MOURNING: THE WONDERFUL ARTIST PASSED AWAY,” just like misinformation sites did.

Dailymigrants.com can take anti-immigrant articles from mainstream news outlets without modification; for example, the headline “Head of Somalian migrant gang shot to death in Denmark”⁵¹ comes straight from mainstream pro-government portal [Origo.hu](https://origo.hu/).⁵²

Of course, much has been written about how the mainstream media, in competition with misinformation sites on social media, have become more sensationalized and clickbait-y. Yet in the Hungarian context in political issues, the similarities do not stop at the writing style. Media [investigations](#) as well as [studies](#) have repeatedly [concluded](#) that “the public and private media (...) under the Hungarian government’s control has made conspiracy theories (...) and pro-Russian disinformation a daily staple of media consumption in Hungary.”

The most widely spread of these conspiracy theories claims that Hungarian-born US billionaire George Soros is planning to bring millions of migrants to Europe. On a more concrete, story-level, there have also been documented cases of straightforward manipulation on pro-government mainstream media, such as when a talk show on HírTV recently [used](#) a doctored image depicting European Commission president Jean-Claude Juncker kissing a man, or when Origo.hu in 2018 ran a picture of a dark-skinned man urinating in the underground and [claimed](#) that it was a migrant in Paris, when in fact the picture was [taken](#) several years earlier in the New York City [subway](#).

Further infamous examples of disinformation from the mainstream pro-government media include TV2

[manipulating](#) a video in 2016 to make it appear as if then right-wing leader Gábor Vona had admitted that he had attended “gay orgies” in the early 2000s, or [several](#) pro-government [media](#) outlets [reporting](#) in [2017](#) that two Arab migrants planned to blow up the subway in Vienna. These baseless hoaxes could easily have been published on the misinformation sites reviewed for this study.

Methodology

The misinformation websites surveyed for this research were primarily found through existing lists compiled by sites such as [Urbanlegends.hu](#) and [Hvg.hu](#), as well as identified by previous [research](#). After examining the websites, the Facebook pages advertised by them, if any, were looked at. If their Facebook page shared content from other websites or Facebook pages, those were also examined. Websites with similar urls (such as with the same name but ending with .info or .me) were also checked to see if they fall under the category of disinformation websites. If a person/business/email-address was connected to a website, and other websites were also registered with that identifier, those were looked at. If a disinformation website had a tagline or any sentence that was used with every article, the tagline/sentence was googled to find other websites that use it. Certain websites came up regularly as sources of articles posted on the disinformation websites; these were included in the examination. Altogether over 100 websites were studied, excluding those where the site contained no relevant content. Since disinformation

websites seem to come and go, the majority of links in the less updated lists are dead. Of the over 200 misinformation websites listed by the Hvg.hu, only about 30 had any content at the time of the research. The research was carried out during the period May-June 2019.

Once a website was identified, it was searched for an impressum, contact detail or “about us” section to track down its owner. With some notable exception, the websites contained no such information. Various WhoIs databases were checked to see the registrant, such as the [ICANN WhoIs Lookup](#), the [Robtex Lookup](#) tool, or the domain search engine [WhoXY](#). For urls ending with .hu, the official Hungarian domain [registry](#) was checked; the ones ending with .eu, were looked up in the [Eurid WhoIs](#) search. In most cases, these searches did not return any result, as the vast majority of the registrants use forms of protection (services such as WhoIs Guard or WhoIs Privacy) to hide their identity. In some cases, the historical WhoIs data helped find the person/email-address that registered the website before its registrant was masked. In the cases where the search brought up a name or an email address, Hungarian databases were checked if they can be connected to a business. In the few cases when this was possible, company registries such as [Nemzeti Cégtár](#), [Opten](#), [CégekKönyve](#), the Ministry of Information’s [registry](#) and the Hungarian tax authority [database](#) were checked for financial information. In the cases when foundations operate the sites, the [National Database of NGO Reports](#) was consulted.

The websites identified were checked for advertisements, which can be a source of income to the website owner/operator. For the analysis of the ads and trackers, the Firefox add-on Ghostery and Chrome's Adblock extension were used.

Since websites change very quickly, in certain cases internet archive the [Wayback Machine](#) was used to check earlier versions.

The List of Misinformation Websites Studies

168-ora.info	fuggetlennemzet.hu	netceleb.eu
24ora.eu	harmonikum.co	netextra.hu
5percblog.hu	hatter-story.info	netujsag.info
agyafurt.com	hircsarda.hu	nlcafe.me
alternativhirek.com	hirhugo.hu	nlcafema.blogspot.com
anephangja.com	hirozon.info	nyugdijasok.com
antalvali.co.hu	hirozon.info	nyugdijasok.hu
avilagtikai.com	hirturi.blogspot.com	oroszhirek.hu
azeletigazsagai.net	hirzona24.com	otperciheno.blogspot.com
balramagyar.hu	hitel.news7.hu	otperciheno.hu
bekezdes.co	hitelforum.hu	pestibulvar.hu
bidista.com	hu.news-front.info	rejteleyszigete.com
bovebbenportal.com	hungaryexpres.com	rtl-klub.me
bulvar.info	hungarypost.info	szerencsemano.info
buzzblog.eu	karpalthir.com	szinesvilag.com
civilkontroll.com	kerteszkedek.hu	szupertanacsokblog.hu
dailymigrants.com	ketkes.com	tenylegtippepek.com
diabetika.hu	kozszolgalat.com	teljesfilm.hu
drabikjanosblog.wordpress.com	kuffer.hu	thchungariantimes.hu
dzsihadfigyelo.blogstar.hu	legjava.com	titkokszigete.hu
dzsihadfigyelo.com	legjava.pro	titokterminal.com
egyazegyben.co	leplezomagazin.wordpress.com	tudasfaja.club
egyazegyben.com	magyarkep.me	tudasfaja.com
elfogadom.eu	magyarokvagyunk.com	tudasfaja.com
ellenszel.hu	maivilag.com	tudatosanelok.com
elmenyorszag.co	ma-reggel.me	tudnivalok.eu
elmenyorszag.com	mennyetipp.hu	tudnodkell.info
erdekescikkek.com	mindenegybe.com	tutihirek.org
erdekportal.com	mindenegyben.co	tv2-friss.com
erdemesszo.club	minden-egyben.com	tv2-most.ma
eztnezd.net	minden-egyben.com	ujvilagtudat.blogspot.com
eztnezdmeq.com	mindenegybenblog.com	valovilag1.blogspot.com
eztnezdmeq.net	mocool.eu	vilagfigyel6.com
fejezet.com	napimigrans.info	vilaghelyzete.blogspot.com
fem3cafe.me	napimigrans.info	vilagunk.hu
figyeld.eu	napjainkportal.hu	xtremeblog.net
filantropikum.com	netbulvar.eu	zoldujsag.hu

MOLDOVA: NO COUNTRY FOR SMALL LIARS

Dumitrita Holdis

Main Findings

- Moldova is a small country of roughly three million people where misinformation sites find it difficult to make financial gains
- Of the 47 misinformation websites surveilled, only eight were still operating in December 2019
- According to experts interviewed for this study, misinformation in Moldova is spread by mainstream media, who tend to be politically partisan
- A 2018 study found that 61% of Moldovans find it difficult to distinguish between fake and real news
- This study found a network of five sites that seem to use computer-generated content for their online operations. They post infrequently and do not have a social media presence. Language idiosyncrasies, grammar, spelling, and other recurrent mistakes suggest that the text is not written by a human.

Introduction

According to a [study](#) published by Internews in November 2018, 85% of respondents believed that the news they read are politically influenced and published in order to manipulate the public, while 56% declared they were not satisfied with mass media in the country. Moldovans use social media to inform themselves: 48% use Facebook and 40% use Odnoklassniki, a Russian social media platform, to consume news. These figures are significant because the lack of trust in traditional media leads the public towards other sources of information that they consider more reliable. The online space is one such source, and is even less regulated than traditional media. With regard to “fake news,” 53% of respondents declared that they understand what the term means, but 61% reported that they find it difficult to distinguish between “fake” and “real” news.

Moldovan media serves a population of roughly three million people who speak Romanian, while in urban centers, as well as rural areas with Russian, Ukrainian, and Gagauz populations, Russian is also spoken or understood. Thus, this small population is potentially served by national media from at least three countries, two of which – Romania and the Russian Federation – have considerably more resources than Moldova. Therefore, local misinformation sites may potentially compete with two significant sources from abroad.

This study aims to depict the funding strategies of misinformation websites in Moldova. However, misinformation sites as defined by the Business of

Misinformation [methodology](#) have proven difficult to find. This definition refers to websites as platforms that “systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else.” Because their financial models differ from those of small, independent online operations, neither mainstream media nor government-funded organizations were included in this study, even though spreading misinformation is part of their agenda and systematic publishing behavior.

As a starting point, the list of “fake news” sites provided by StopFals was used to canvas the field. StopFals is a USAID-funded platform run by the Association of Independent Press (Asociației Presei Independente – API). Their list of fake news items and sites is [available](#) in Romanian and Russian.

Of the 47 websites listed by StopFalk, only eight were still functional in December 2019. This sample is not large enough to draw any conclusions on misinformation in Moldova, but should also not be interpreted as demonstrating a lack of misinformation in Moldova. As I will show, although the “business of misinformation” as defined by the CMDS is dead, misinformation in Moldova is still rife. Interviews with three Moldovan media experts were conducted to clarify why “fake news” sites are going bust in the country.

Misinformation Sites in Moldova

Misinformation sites in Moldova seem to have a hard time surviving. Of the roughly 50 sites surveyed for this study, fewer than ten are still operating. In this section, I will briefly present the career of a 21-year-old misinformation baron, and discuss a few characteristics of misinformation sites still operating.

At the age of 21, Corneliu Ababii was the owner of a media trust that [comprised](#) ten websites. He was affiliated with the center-left Democratic Party of Moldova, and his sites regularly published attacks on political opponents. But more often, the sites covered gruesome accidents, upcoming natural disasters, resurrections, and terrorist attacks. While all ten sites are now dead, they were funded by advertising when operational. Ababii declared that the most money he earned from this business was EUR 200 per month. In 2017, the average salary in Moldova was roughly MDL 5,600 (EUR 270), [according to](#) the Moldovan Fiscal Authorities. Although the sum of EUR 200 might seem ridiculously low, it would significantly increase a young man's financial resources. When Ababii was [asked](#) why he was running misinformation sites, he claimed financial reasons, but added that the negative coverage was taking a toll on him, signaling that his "journalistic" activities would not last for much longer. At the time of writing this report, all ten websites were down.

This study has identified a second network of five misinformation sites that publish in Russian and Romanian. The "Add-news" network includes the

portals: Add-news-ro.info, bn-news-romania.info, news-romania24h.xyz, Edu-news.website, and Portal-news.info. The five websites are fairly young: three were established in August-September 2018, two in November 2019. They copy content from each other and host news from Romania and Moldova. Add-News has identical content to News-Romania, including the landing page. BN-News has content in Russian and Romanian and a masthead that is identical to Add-News and News-Romania. We find a large number of short items on sports and technology, as well as reports on accidents. Cross-posts from Sputnik are not uncommon. The articles are neither signed nor dated. The odd language and spelling in Romanian (Vrancha instead of Vrancea, a county in Romania, or Viorica Danchile instead of Viorica Dăncilă, former Romanian Prime Minister) leads to the assumption that the text might have been written or translated by a machine. All five websites feature heavy advertising.

Putin a ajutat refugiații ucraineni, a crescut alocația pentru copii și vârsta colonelilor



Vladimir Putin a semnat o serie de legi importante, KP vorbește despre unele dintre ele.

REFUGIIILE CU NICLIDARE VOR FI ÎNVĂȚĂTE

One example of questionable content is an article about Russian president Vladimir Putin, with the title: “Putin helped Ukrainian refugees, raised the financial aid for children and the age for colonels”⁵³ (see above). The text does not always make sense, starting with the title. Other titles such as “The child will find on the phone” (*COPILUL VA GASI PE MOBIL*, about an application to help parents find their missing children), or “No Nutrition Never Not More” (*NICI O ALIMENTARE NICIODATĂ NICI MAI MULTE*, about increasing child benefits) are nonsensical. This text is clearly not written by a human. The following questions remain: what is the purpose of these pages? Are they testing grounds for bot-generated content? Does this explain the lack of dissemination? These sites stopped posting by the end of 2019. At this point, their purpose is not clear, nor is their ownership.

Jurnal-stiri.site is a Romanian-language website which publishes incendiary content, for example the announcement of war with Russia. The site posts blatant false information about political leaders (such as former prime minister and self-exiled businessman Vlad Platothniuc, or leader of the Moldovan Liberal Democrat Party Vlad Filat), and regularly announces the deaths of movie stars and political personalities. This site is also very recent; its incorporation date was apparently November 1, 2019. Advertising is very dominant and access to articles is conditioned by Facebook shares, a rather aggressive promotion tactic. The page claims to have views ranging from 2-3,000 for political news, to 25,000 for “terrorist attacks” and fake deaths. These numbers are incredibly high for

such a site, and might be partially explained by the use of bots to increase page views.

Two Russian-language websites were also analyzed. Omega News⁵⁴ belongs to the OMG-Media Group SRL, a company run by Alexandr Petkov, who is well known in Moldova for his involvement in a series of scandals when he insulted Moldovan institutions, public figures, and public servants, such as judges and prosecutors. From 2010-2014, Petkov was a member of parliament for the Communist Party until he was expelled from the party. Omega News covers current and international affairs, health cures, and lifestyle advice. It is occasionally incendiary (e.g. announcing a war in Ukraine in the coming year), but the “medical discoveries” and “cures” it promotes are closer to fake news. Advertising on the site is heavy. The same advertising strategy is present in the case of the second Russian-language site, Bloknot Moldova,⁵⁵ whose content is much more sensationalist: car accidents, animal stories, dog attacks, fires, some celebrity news and occasional political news, again focused on scandals and inflammatory information. Former Moldovan prime minister Maia Sandu is the target of personal attacks based on hearsay and interpretations of her public statements.

With the exception of Omega News, which uses social media networks to share content (including Facebook, Twitter, VKontakte and YouTube), none of the sites seemed to have any social media presence. This in itself is quite odd, as misinformation operations tend to rely heavily on social media for dissemination.

Where Is Misinformation in Moldova?

The general lack of misinformation sites in Moldova should not be interpreted as evidence that misinformation is not present in the country. The fake news-monitoring site StopFals posts weekly analyses on misinformation news items, most of which are published in mainstream media.

In an interview for this study, Petru Macovei, director of the Association for an Independent Press (Asociatia Presei Independente - API) which coordinates the StopFals platform, confirmed that manipulation in Moldova usually originates from official channels, such as public statements by political and business leaders, or even state institutions. Mainstream media records, repeats, and promotes these statements, usually for the purpose of promoting the agendas of political and economic interest groups. In many cases, media organizations have partisan alliances because their owners have political careers or are affiliated with certain parties. See, for example, the case of Vlad Plahotniuc, former Democratic Party president and the owner of four television channels in 2015, as [described](#) in 2017 in Freedom House's Moldovan Freedom of the Press Report

Misinformation websites, like Cornel Ababii's network, are rare in Moldova, because fake news sites that operate purely for profit are difficult to support in a country with such a small population and limited financial resources.

In a written interview for this study, Vasile State and Ion Bunduchi, from the Association of the Electronic Press (Asociație Presei Electronice – APEL), confirmed that the advertising market in Moldova is very small and cannot support a large number of online media outlets. Misinformation websites rely on a mass click-bait economy, which is simply non-existent in Moldova. State claims that media advertising tends to be channeled towards television stations. For the online press, it is even more difficult to determine the source of the money than in the case of print or audiovisual media. He argues: “Even independent media organizations that have nothing to hide do not disclose their funding sources. The legislation, with the exception of publicly funded media, does not force them to do so. On the contrary, the legislation regarding “commercial privacy” protects them.”⁵⁶ State concludes that the funding sources of misinformation websites are an enigma for APEL members as well.

In conclusion: misinformation is not absent in Moldova, but its sources are located in state and commercial mainstream media. Misinformation websites as defined by the CMDS project are often online outlets, and unless an economic ecosystem develops that allows for online media to thrive, misinformation sites will have a hard time making ends meet in Moldova.

ROMANIA: MONETIZING DACIANS AND THE APOCALYPSE

Dumitrita Holdis

Main Findings

- For the purpose of this study, 108 misinformation sites were identified for analysis, and a sample of 50 were analyzed using the Business of Misinformation [methodology](#).
- For a typical misinformation-prone website in Romania, the publicly available information is: the registration date of the domain name; the IP location (not necessarily the same as the country where the content is produced); and the company that owns the servers on which the site is hosted. It is uncommon for these sites to reveal their location, their income, or the names of their staff members.
- Click-bait content is the norm, and the general trend is to have a mix of sensationalized current affairs, historical topics with a strong ultra-nationalist interpretation, religious ultra-Orthodox content, mystery-miracle-conspiracy, and alternative medicine articles. Dacian mysticism, anti-Soros content and anti-Semitism are also popular on smaller niche sites.

- Advertising is in the form of banners and pop-up windows, while sponsored content is the most common source of **obvious** funding for these sites. If other sources of funding are available to them, they are not made public or disclosed in any way.
- A noticeable trend is to set up networks or “families” of related sites. Of the 50 websites analyzed in-depth for this study, around 16 were part of a “family.”
- Misinformation sites are categorized according to their ideological consistency (money-spinners vs. true believers), their operational aspects (based on staffing, ownership, and belonging to a network), and funding sources (versatility).

Introduction

The misinformation business in Romania is elusive and difficult to measure. This study aims to depict the funding strategies of Romanian misinformation websites in order to categorize them according to their content and mode of operation. Misinformation websites are [defined](#) here as: “websites that systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be those political, social, economic, health-related or else.” A total of 108 misinformation sites were identified for analysis and a sample of 50 were analyzed using the *Business of Misinformation methodology*. Because their financial models differ

from small online operations (which can be viewed as independent voices), mainstream media organizations and government-funded organizations have not been included in the study, even if they frequently publish misinformation as part of their agenda.

Methodology

Following the money has always been a good strategy for revealing the economic, institutional, and political ties of media organizations, however, in the case of online media, this strategy is difficult to apply. In Romania, the financial data of registered companies and organizations – be it for-profit limited companies, non-governmental organizations, or not-for-profit associations – are public. It is fairly easy to trace the income, assets, and ownership of registered entities by accessing financial information in the Ministry of Finance’s databases or ownership data available from the Chamber of Commerce. Even in the case of companies registered abroad, a paper trail, as convoluted as it might be, can be detected.

For a typical misinformation-prone website in Romania, the publicly available information is: the registration date of the domain name; the IP location (not necessarily the same as the country where the content is produced); and the company that owns the servers on which the site is hosted. It is uncommon for these sites to reveal their location, income, or the names of their staff members. Working with these limitations, we aggregated all the data available related to the sampled misinformation websites.

Main observations related to content

Click-bait content is the norm and the general trend is to have a mix of sensationalized current-affairs, historical topics with a strong ultra-nationalist interpretation, religious ultra-Orthodox content, mystery-miracle-conspiracy, and alternative medicine articles. Dacian mysticism, anti-Soros content and anti-Semitism are also popular in smaller niche sites. Content is often copied from mainstream media and news agencies, with a commentary at the beginning of the article, or just a changed, sensationalized title. Reposting from other misinformation sites is also common. Current affairs are addressed as well, however, the selection is so skewed towards panic-inducing topics that it creates a very distorted image of what is actually happening in the country. However, we have also examples of smaller operations growing larger and attempting to professionalize in the process.

This study discusses notable examples of misinformation sites reaching mainstream publics, growing in audience and staff size, making their operations more transparent, and claiming a place at the journalism table. With the exception of one online radio station and one online TV channel, all the sites analyzed here are dominated by written content and photos, with occasional video content as well.

To the main question of this study - how do misinformation sites fund themselves? – the

discernable answer is: advertising. Anybody who has ever clicked on a fake news item knows that the sheer amount of advertising makes it difficult to focus on content or navigate these sites. Advertising in the form of banners, pop-up windows, and sponsored content is so prevalent that on some websites, even the contact page is unreadable due to heavy advertising. One noticeable trend is to set up networks or “families” of related sites. Of the 50 websites analyzed in-depth for this study, around 16 were part of a “family.” Sometimes, one server will host all the sites in a “family,” or they will have one editor - be it a real person or a Facebook avatar. Cross-posting content on social media platforms or on other, connected sites is common. Endorsing the same Facebook groups and sharing an audience is a further characteristic of the “family.”

The majority of the websites analyzed are small operations. Even small independent online media outlets in Romania have teams of five to ten people, they have headquarters on which they pay rent, they buy equipment, and worry about investigation and reporting costs. However, running a news aggregator from an apartment is a low-cost affair and can be supported by online advertising if the number of clicks is high enough. Social media platforms are a much-needed part of the media ecosystem in which misinformation content spreads. Facebook and YouTube are a significant source of information for many misinformation sites in Romania, and in a climate where trust in media is low, recommendations from Facebook friends seem to count more than adherence to journalistic standards.

Methodology

Identification of misinformation sites:

The initial list of misinformation sites used for the study was collected from two sources: [Verifica Sursa](#), a “fake news” site aggregator, and various online articles addressing misinformation in Romania. A total of 108 sites were collected on this initial list. Cross-matching the lists, 50 websites were selected for in-depth analysis using the “Business of Misinformation” methodology.

To resolve the dilemma of what exactly a misinformation site is, the visibility of the portal’s intentions was assessed together with the community of the site’s followers on Facebook. For example, if a website such as Nationalisti.ro⁵⁷ signals on its front page that it promotes a certain ideology and has a relatively small and compact community who seem to understand the intention of their organization, this site was not analyzed together with the bulk of misinformation sites.

If content can be more easily categorized, the “systematic” behavior of these sites is harder to grasp. A quantitative assessment of content would work best for determining patterns of publication in the large amount of content posted. Many of the sites post random content, with some clear preference for topics such as health, and ultra-Orthodox, ultra-nationalist, and xenophobic content. Fear mongering seems to be the overarching driver for many of these sites and this

is clearly connected to the financial incentives for click-bait content.

Data gathering

As stated in the [Introduction](#), publicly available financial data on misinformation sites is scarce. In the few instances where the companies who own these sites disclose their names, financial data was retrieved from the Romanian Ministry of Finance. Additional information on shareholders and governing structure are not available publicly for these sites. For a few cases (5 of the 50 sites analyzed), traffic data was retrieved from Trafic.ro, a Romanian a traffic-measuring tool that publishes its results online. Because websites must register at Trafic.ro to have their audience measured, and they rarely publish the numbers of visitors, the number of followers on their Facebook page was also collected to estimate popularity.

Further research on the funding of misinformation sites would require interviews with founders and editors to be able to map the business strategies of these media organizations as well as to measure their success.

Typologies

The categorization of misinformation sites can reveal aspects related to their content, operational aspects, financial strategies, and communities. A separate

section of this report will be dedicated to funding. Here, I will proceed to discuss the most common types of misinformation sites operating in the Romanian media spectrum.

1) True believers and money-spinners

The “true” intentions or the motivation of misinformation sites are difficult to identify without access to their owners or editors. In particular, and in relation to ideological and political goals, how can we decide if a site is a “true believer” or merely a “money spinner” using ideology to sell a product? While this distinction is slightly artificial – most sites will probably be both – it does exist to some degree. What I define as “true-believers” are websites that are *consistent* and *coherent* in pushing an ideological agenda. The topics (which are often quite niche: Dacian history or ultra-Orthodoxy), the symbolism, the website’s name (the Dacian Wolf, True Orthodoxy, Radio Wall) and their related media (videos, photos) and social media channels will have an overarching theme or identity. The “money-spinners” also have an ideological agenda, but it will be less coherent: they cover a large number of unrelated topics (health, paranormal activities, current politics), they will have some sensationalist titles, they tend to have names that are generic and media-related (active news, recent news, exclusive news), and they are more inclined to define themselves as “news sites.” While the “true-believers” often cover current affairs and political events, they often define themselves as opinion, cultural, or historical media outlets.

Taking a look at two examples will help make this distinction clearer. Cunoaste Lumea (Know the World) and Cocoon reveal that even at first glance, the difference between the sites' agenda is immediately apparent.

Originea limbilor romanice trebuie reevaluată corect. Lingvistic, nu ideologic

21 decembrie 2019 // 0 Comments



În acest articol, voi aduce în discuție o serie de argumente (lingvistice și extra-lingvistice) care justifică din plin faptul că latina nu este limba mamă a limbilor [...]

Studiu științific exploziv: Extraterestrii există și deja au vizitat Pământul! Astronomical Journal lansează o ipoteză șocantă

21 decembrie 2019 // 0 Comments



Extraterestrii există! Un nou studiu științific publicat de Astronomical Journal lansează o explicație uluitoare. Călătoriile interstelare au avut loc, iar Pământul [...]

Cele mai surprinzătoare lucruri, pe care nu le știați, despre pasărea din stema României!

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Despre CunoasteLumea.ro

Figure 1: Print screen cunoastelumea.ro landing page 1 January 2020

Cunoaste Lumea⁵⁸ is similar in design to a blog, and covers topics on Dacian mysticism and alternative history; it has a nationalist agenda, and covers conspiracy theories as well as technology and health, but the “Dacian” theme is present in most of the sections. The copyright is owned by a cable company, [PCNET-CATV](#), [defined](#) as a “partner” by the owner of the website, Daniel Roxin. Roxin is also the owner of Dacia Art, a Dacian-themed store located in downtown Bucharest. Both companies are heavily advertised on Cunoaste Lumea and Daniel Roxin’s blog and YouTube channel. The website has a community of 66,000 followers on Facebook, similar in size to Roxin’s personal following on the same platform. On

YouTube, Roxin's videos reach up to 170,000 views with 400+ comments. Most common are 17-23,000 views with an average of 150-200 comments. The community is engaged and seems to be attracted by the niche topic, but is also exposed to other themes and ideas such as pro-Brexit and anti-Ukrainian or anti-Hungarian news.⁵⁹

Compared to Cunoaste Lumea, Cocoon is a mish-mash of topics such as: anti-Soros, ultra-Orthodoxy, right-wing conspiracies, anti-LGBT, and nationalist ideas. Health-related, apocalyptic, and paranormal activities are also common. A considerable proportion of the content is copied from other misinformation websites or is translated from English language websites with similar agendas. The website also promotes a YouTube channel called The Arrivals, focused on the upcoming Apocalypse.⁶⁰

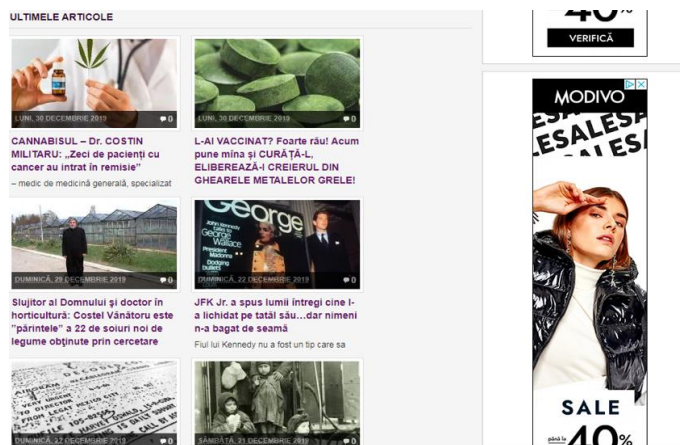


Figure 2: Print screen cocoon.ro landing page 1 January 2020

Cocoon is part of a network of sites, including: Departamentul de Informatii (The Information

Department – conspiracy), Gazeta de Informatii (The Information Gazette – very similar to Departamentul de Informatii) and Sanatate Spirituala (Spiritual Health – heavier on ultra-Orthodox content). The volume of advertising on all of these websites is so heavy that it makes the pages hard to navigate.

While Cunoaste Lumea will also re-post content from sites it supports, Cocoon is more indiscriminate in publishing. Here, volume is the key and repetition across sites is common. Cocoon's owner is Dragos Birjaru, a well-known figure in the conspiracy theory world, who works on his sites together with Camelia Chicomban, the former owner of Cocoon.ro. The site used to have a fashion, entertainment and beauty focus when it was established in 2010, but [changed](#) to conspiracy after Birjaru took over in 2014.

The fact that Dragos Birjaru believes in his news is not as relevant as the question: would he be peddling these ideas if they were not profitable? In the case of Cocoon, the profit motive appears to lead to more standardized, repetitive, and recycled content, while Cunoaste Lumea invests efforts in selecting and producing original content. Adjacent activities, like YouTube channels, stores and merchandise sold on the “true-believer” sites are more coherent when linked to an identity, as in the case of the Dacian identity, than in “money-spinning” operations.

2) Operational aspects

Examining how misinformation sites are run reveals how content is produced and distributed on these platforms. Staff resources, the entity under which they are registered, and their relationship with other similar websites not only influence their operation, but also their content production.

Staffing is vital in small online operations and understaffing seems to be as prevalent in this field as it is in mainstream online media. One-person operations seem to be common, although their actual staffing situations are difficult to verify because these sites do not list the names of any editors or writers. For 18 out of 50 sites, the name of an editor or writer is published on the website or was revealed by media sources. In 5 cases, we can also find the names of additional writers and collaborators. It should be mentioned that with the exception of Cocoon.ro and Jurnalista.ro (which is presumably led by a woman because the Romanian name of the site is a female noun), all the misinformation sites studied here are led and staffed by men.

The *owner or the entity* that registered and is responsible for the site is, in most cases, undisclosed. In 3 out of 50 cases, a limited company (SRL in Romania) is listed as the copyright owner of the website. Financial records are available from the Ministry of Finance for these three sites, and they show financially unstable operations. Netstorm SRL for Active News,⁶¹ SC Print Media RTP SRL for Exclusiv News⁶² and INPOLITICS PRESS SRL for

InPolitics News⁶³ all have debts ranging from 440 RON (c. 100 EUR) to 346,207 RON (c. 72,000 EUR). What is relevant here is that registered companies must pay taxes, and must have income to pay for headquarters and, ideally, staff. They must declare the income they make or the lack thereof.

Their relationship with advertisers must be more formal. Although a sample of three is not sufficiently representative to draw any major conclusions, we can observe that all three attempt to replicate mainstream media behavior. Current affairs are covered more extensively, with sections that cover the economy, social affairs, and international news. Advertising is present, but not in the shocking proportions found on one-man-show sites. The formalization of these sites, their efforts towards increased transparency, and their replication of mainstream media might make them look more professional to both advertisers and their public. However, none of these three sites have massive audiences. InPolitics, with 2,000 followers on Facebook, is by far the least popular, while Active News (80,000 followers) is doing considerably better. Compared to ultra-Orthodox sites such as Ganduri din Ierusalim (220,000 followers), ultra-nationalist sites such as infostiri.ro (292,000 followers), and sensationalist sites like extranews.ro (800,000 followers), the mainstream-imitators are doing worse. Going mainstream seems to be less popular and might impact these sites' revenues considerably.

The *networked* websites are an interesting category of the sample. Five networks were identified in the sample of 50, numbering around 16 members between

them. The Ganduri in Ierusalim, Cocoon, Exclusiv News, the Cyd and Bucurestiul networks share one common editor, sometimes one server, common social media accounts, and frequent cross-posting on their platforms and social media accounts. They advertise themselves as a network to companies. In the case of Extra News, for example, the Cyd network to which they belong owns 10 websites, focused on topics related to current affairs. Advertising companies will then have access to 10 [platforms](#) and their publics once it buys advertising from Cyd.ro. This is both a selling point and a funding strategy for these media outlets, but it also impacts the content they publish. Cross-posting leads to repetition and a standardized set of topics. The amount of information delivered by networked sites is not correlated with variety.

3) Funding

Again, due to their elusive nature, misinformation sites do not provide much information on their funding. They are rarely registered companies, they do not publish company reports, and they do not disclose their revenue, staff members, or their political and institutional affiliation. What they do make very visible is *advertising*. It is notoriously difficult to surf a misinformation site because of the sheer amount of advertising that pops up on the screen. Therefore, based on the publicly available information, we can conclude that misinformation websites are making considerable efforts to obtain financial resources from online advertising by pushing click-baiting

sensationalist content. A common article page on a misinformation website will look like this:⁶⁴



A random click on an article about how neo-Marxists hate Christianity on the right-wing, ultra-nationalist, xenophobic media outlet Gazeta de Informatii, also displays a banner with news on Soros's fight against the traditional family, the dangers of chlorine-treated Chinese garlic for Germans, and a title suggesting that a child fell ill after being vaccinated in a hospital. On the left, incorporated into the text, a pop-up window shows advertisements for treatments for cancer, alcoholism, and high blood pressure, and one trick to help save electricity. If we scroll down, a "Game of Thrones" video game is advertised and a picture of a political figure from the Union to Save Romania Party with a hammer and sickle in LGBTQI colors pops up:



Being small operations that usually have one or two collaborators, misinformation sites do not need considerable amounts of money to function. Paying for a server and 1-2 staff members should not be very costly in a country with low salaries like Romania, where the net average monthly income in 2019 [was](#) 3,020 RON (c. 620 EUR).

Setting up a network of misinformation websites is a strategy that tries to increase the advertising power of individual sites. The network allows for content to be cross-posted, cross-advertised, and distributed to a larger audience. A certain level of overlap between their publics is to be expected, but for click-bait purposes, spreading the net far and wide makes a lot of financial sense. Recycling content and monetizing it to the maximum is the ultimate form of turning information into a commodity. The drive is to produce more with as few resources as possible in order to extract as much profit as possible. If extreme right-wing content allow this formula to work best, misinformation sites will take advantage of it. Misinformation sites work in a mass-economy, and try

to exploit this online economy as best as they can in the form of networks. This would not be possible without an economic ecosystem supported by social media giants like Facebook or tech companies such as Google. Without online advertising, these media outlets would not survive even for one day. Given that on average, Google and Facebook [control](#) 60% of the Romanian online advertising market, it is clear that the biggest winners of the misinformation economy are the tech giants.

Some websites attempt to raise funds through fundraising campaigns, but only two sites surveyed asked for private donations ([glasul.info](#) and [activenews.ro](#)), while one site asked supporters to re-direct 2% of their income tax to their organization ([cuvantortodox.ro](#)). Alternative funding sources, such as donations, sometimes require the registration of a more formal body, such as a non-profit entity in the case of the 2% donations. ActiveNews is registered as a limited company, and can thus ask readers to donate money, but [glasul.info](#) resolved the issue by asking for donations to be paid directly into the bank account of their editor. Although the informality of their operations might save them tax money, misinformation sites do lose out on other funding strategies as long as they decide to remain informal. For organizations with a dedicated public like [cuvantordox.ro](#), an ultra-Orthodox website run by a priest with a small but engaged community of 9,000 Facebook followers, registering as an association allows them to formalize their revenue stream and potentially access grants or other forms of aid from donors. Formalizing a misinformation site, however,

brings the risk of being vulnerable to potential court cases. For very inflammatory websites, staying incognito still pays off.

One funding strategy observed in the case of the Dacian outlet cunoastelumea.ro turned the misinformation website into a mouthpiece for other businesses, in this case the owner's shop in Bucharest. Selling and advertising merchandise through an adjacent media operation boosts the business of a formal entity affiliated informally with the website. This is possible because both the shop, which sells "Dacian art," clothing, music, and so on, has a similar identity to the website.

Overall, the funding strategies of misinformation sites are relatively limited and not very innovative. With a few exceptions, these websites will be unable to exploit other sources of funding apart from online advertising.

How does content travel? The relationship to mainstream and social media

One of the biggest recent misinformation efforts in Romania was the attempt to discredit the 2017-2018 street protests as a Soros-funded movement. The protests started in January 2017 as a result of the Social Democrat Party's attempt to change the Penal Code and amnesty legislation, changes that would have benefitted public servants and politicians accused of acts of corruption. The party's then leader, Liviu Dragnea, would have been a direct beneficiary of the legislation. A series of protests erupted in all major

cities and consolidated into a loose movement under the hashtag #rezist. Although “consolidated” might be too large a word for a series of leaderless street protests, these protests were often associated with #rezist. For many, the #rezist protesters comprised a young to middle-age crowd, mostly middle-class and from urban centers, liberal and center-right in their political outlook, and staunch anti-communists. As in other countries in the region, Soros is seen as the guardian of liberalism and capitalism, but has also been associated with progressive causes such as LGBTQI rights.

The attempted association with Soros immediately suggests conspiracy, lack of authenticity, and manipulation. This is not too uncommon in the region, however, new levels of absurdity were reached when the #rezist protesters were accused of receiving money for taking their dogs out to protest. The exact sum for a dog was 30 RON, or about 7 EUR. The news originated on the now-defunct TV channel Romania TV (which was shut down and is now hosted online), a channel notorious for spreading misinformation. The channel was fined by the Romanian Council for the Audiovisual, but since it migrated online, the Council has no power over it. Soros conspiracies are virtually omnipresent in the misinformation space, but are also one of the topics that span both mainstream media as well as niche conspiracy sites.

Antena 3, one heavily-biased TV channel with owners close to the Social Democrat Party, has repeatedly covered “Soros” topics (including the alleged funding of #rezist protesters). The “Soros” topic is popular with

both mainstream and misinformation sites, in part because it is already notorious. If misinformation sites report “fake news,” mainstream sites will also report on the “fake news.” The question is: to what extent does mainstream media contribute to the legitimacy of certain topics by providing them with air time? If topics such as Soros-funded pets are covered satirically or with obvious ridicule, could a cumulative effect of coverage actually aid misinformation sites peddling Soros conspiracies? In the north-western region of Transylvania, where a Hungarian minority and a Hungarian-speaking Romanian public often watch Hungarian TV channels, anti-Soros sentiment is fueled by the Hungarian government’s narrative. In Romania, this was also attempted by the now jailed former Socialist leader, Liviu Dragnea, but without Viktor Orbán’s success. In the case of spreading misinformation, contributions from political or other public figures are invaluable. As mainstream media tends to report more on statements of characters identified as “leaders,” they are susceptible to the unintentional spreading of misinformation.

If public figures lend legitimacy to misinformation in mainstream reporting, the case is slightly different on online sites, including social media sites such as Facebook, which has attracted much criticism for spreading misinformation. Around 68% of Romanians who use Facebook [use it](#) as a source of news, while around 32% use YouTube for the same purpose. Facebook messenger and WhatsApp are also used to share information. Social media have a more intimate and personal character than other platforms, and the level of users’ trust increases when they know the

people who share information, so these contacts act like potential gatekeepers. However, in Romania the level of trust in media is very low, with only 35% of Romanians trusting the news in general, and 27% trusting news from social media. These numbers add some nuance to the argument that social media is the preferred environment for misinformation. Even when this is the case, it is not obvious how these low levels of trust might impact the consumption of misinformation on social media platforms. Still, all misinformation sites analyzed for this report use multiple social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and YouTube, but also VKontakte in some cases. They often repost content in the case of networks (or related sites) and have active followers.

Other Observations

Relations with the Romanian state

The research found one case where it was clear that the Romanian state was funding a misinformation site. USD24.ro, a current affairs news site dedicated to the Romanian diaspora from the United States, was being led by Liviu Besleaga,⁶⁵ the leader of a Romanian Republican group supporting president Trump. According to the Romanian news outlet [Reporter](#), USD24.ro received grants from the Romanian Ministry for the Romanian Diaspora (the logo of the Ministry is also advertised on the website) while it was re-posting news items from Sputnik. In the Recorder interview, Besleaga claims he did not know that Sputnik is a propaganda channel, and he quickly

removed those articles once he was questioned about them. I believe him. Because I think there is no evidence of the Romanian state actively funding misinformation sites, I did not add this to the funding section.

One interesting detail here is the fact that inpolitics.ro has debts of 70,000 EUR. It is a very small outlet, so the numbers do not add up. The owner, Bogdan Tiberiu Iacob, also collaborates with Active News, Cuvant Ortodox, and Corect News, all misinformation sites. But he also “guest posts” on the [blog](#) of the former Socialist Prime Minister Adrian Nastase. This may indicate dealings with the Social Democrat party and an indirect subvention from the state by overlooking their debt.

Website creation date (and further research):

Ten of the 50 sites surveyed were created 2010, 10 were set up between 2010 and 2015, and 30 were launched after 2015. This shows that the majority (two-thirds) of misinformation websites were created after it became obvious that misinformation pays off. The 2016 American elections represented a major financial opportunity for misinformation sites, and many such sites were created or developed around this time. But a number were created as early as 2002-2005. While their activities were probably different then, it is clear that their founders might have understood the internet earlier than many of us.

A few reports in the Romanian media and interviews with fake-news site owners showed [some](#) of the owners to have been quite [hostile](#) to reporters. For a follow-up to this study, a project focusing on in-depth interviews with fake-news site owners explaining how they understand the online eco-system, its economic mechanism, and the purpose of informing a public online would be an innovative way of approaching the subject.

SERBIA: MISINFORMATION INC.

Semir Dzebo

Main Findings

- The misinformation landscape in Serbia is dominated by established, out-in-the-open websites rather than anonymous, for-profit misinformation websites as in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Misinformation websites in Serbia are established media outlets with conventional ownership structures, which are often convoluted. Individual shareholders can be identified by tracing the connections between various companies. Some website owners are more involved in content production than others.
- Almost all misinformation websites are decisively pro-government. This not only means that it is easier to conduct business for those who favor the government, but also that positive coverage is rewarded by government in the form of public money for “media projects of public importance,” approving deferments on tax payments, and loans.
- The websites have highly organized marketing teams that produce detailed advertising price lists. They deal directly with customers who

wish to advertise on their websites rather than via Google AdSense. Unlike anonymous misinformation websites, they are not dependent on AdSense and do not have to move to a different domain if Google revokes the AdSense agreements.

- It is difficult for anonymous misinformation websites to attract attention next to these misinformation powerhouses. However, these powerhouses produce a lot of misinformation content which makes the job easier for those anonymous websites who are simply happy to repost it.

Introduction

As a result of the research on misinformation practices in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), I was able to identify four distinct categories of misinformation websites, taking into account their mode of operation, the content they produce, as well as transparency of their ownership structures and editorial practices. Those four categories were:

1. For-profit misinformation websites without real journalism
2. Real journalism websites with misinformation content
3. Real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda
4. Misinformation websites with consistent political propaganda

While this categorization can be used to classify the misinformation landscape across all contexts, the predominance of one type of website over others may vary from country to country. Despite being in the same region of the Western Balkans and sharing a border, Serbia differs from Bosnia and Herzegovina in terms of how misinformation websites operate.

Methodology

This paper presents the findings of a research project focused on the main players in the misinformation landscape in Serbia. The basis for identifying the key misinformation websites were the Serbian fact-checking websites [Raskrikavanje.rs](https://raskrikavanje.rs) and [Fakenews.rs](https://fakenews.rs). Since Raskrikavanje.rs keeps a changing list of misinformation websites, I searched their archives in order to identify the websites that appeared in their analyses over a period of time longer than two months. I used the Fakenews.rs archive to corroborate the findings from Raskrikavanje.rs and narrow down the focus onto the largest outlets. The end result was the list of eight prominent websites analyzed in this paper.

It is virtually impossible to create an exhaustive list due to the dynamic nature of the business at hand. Nonetheless, the websites analyzed here represent the core of the misinformation business in Serbia that arguably have the most influence on the content and standards of this type of reporting - if it can be called that - in the country and the region at large. All the information covered in this paper is publicly available in business registries and relevant sourced websites.

Due to the explicit focus on Serbian misinformation websites, I excluded a major misinformation website, Sputnjik Srbija, an offspring of Sputnik, which is a Russian government-owned news agency. All the websites presented here are owned by Serbian citizens (with the exception of Blic, which was sold to a foreign entity), and brand themselves as Serbian websites. This report focuses on the third category of disinformation websites due to their overall dominance of the Serbian misinformation market. While it is undeniable that misinformation websites have proliferated, those that fall into the third category exert the most influence in Serbia and operate via a distinct model that deserves a closer look. The same proliferation also requires a focus on a representative sample of the market, as including the entire population of misinformation websites would perhaps be counterproductive, if not impossible, due to their constant emergence and disappearance.

Misinformation Websites: Trends in Funding and Ownership

Who dominates the misinformation landscape?

This is a two-fold question that can be addressed by classifying the most prevalent misinformation outlets according to the four categories described above, and by providing more detailed information regarding the outlets' ownership structure, content, and finances. It is immediately noticeable that the misinformation

arena in Serbia is different from that in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Previous [research](#) shows that the most important drivers of misinformation in [Bosnia and Herzegovina](#) are anonymous for-profit websites that have no real journalistic value. One could assume that individuals who spread misinformation would try to hide their true identity due to the perceived amorality of their business. This is not the case in Serbia.

There are three possible explanations for why this is the case. First, the potential financial rewards are huge for those who engage in this type of reporting, which necessitates a corporate-like structure to maximize this potential. Second, sensationalist, clickbait journalism seems to be the winning formula when it comes to amassing clicks and website visits, which is directly transformed into profit via ad revenue. Due to the nature of the business, it makes sense for site owners to set up a permanent website and charge for ads directly in order to avoid losing their AdSense contract with Google because of the false content they publish. Third, misinformation websites in Serbia are not anonymous because the content they produce - at least that related to the domestic political context - is political propaganda for the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka*, SNS). Support for the government will secure good relations, including financial rewards in the form of public moneys allocated by the government through public calls in cities across Serbia. The government grants such subsidies to media outlets that are supposed to carry out “media projects of public value” (*medijski projekti od javnog interesa*).

The misinformation landscape in Serbia is dominated by real journalism websites with misinformation content and political propaganda (the third category in our classification), with some caveats: almost all the websites included here are heavily pro-government to the extent that they could be classified as misinformation websites with consistent political propaganda (the fourth category). Nonetheless, we include in this fourth category anonymous websites whose scope is limited to nothing more than overt propaganda, either due to their limited capabilities or lack of ambition. Since all the websites included in this analysis employ journalists and editors, and do provide some truthful information, they are better classified as real journalism websites that publish misinformation content and constant political propaganda (the third category).

For the misinformation business in Serbia, this means that there is not much room for anonymous for-profit misinformation websites, as they simply cannot compete with these misinformation giants. However, those seeking to start anonymous for-profit websites in Serbia do not have to work hard to create their content as they can simply copy content from prominent misinformation websites. The hard part is competing with the outreach and infrastructure that large misinformation websites have.

Misinformation Inc.

The misinformation websites covered by this report are professional media outlets and their ownership

and editorial structures are complex but publicly available.

They all have a corporate structure, with the real owner often hidden by a convoluted web of subsidiaries of a parent company. Of the eight websites included in this analysis, seven are domestically owned (whose owners/shareholders are Serbian citizens) and only one (Blic.rs) is owned by a foreign entity.

Blic.rs is the 6th most-visited website in Serbia according to [SimilarWeb](#)⁶⁶ rankings and a great example of these websites' convoluted ownership structures. The *Blic* newspaper was founded in 1996 and has changed owners a number of times since then. The tabloid is currently owned by Ringier Axel Springer Media AG, a Swiss-German entity. Axel Springer SE (whose portfolio also includes *Bild* and *Die Welt*) and Ringier AG each hold 50% of the shares in Ringier Axel Springer Media AG. The largest individual shareholder in [Axel Springer SE](#) is Friede Springer, one of the richest people in Germany and a member of the Christian Democratic Union party (CDU). However, the tabloid's web portal, Blic.rs, is owned by Ringier Digital AG, whose 49% stake was bought by KKR in [2014](#). KKR is an American private equity company that specializes in leveraged buyouts. It also owns a [majority stake](#) in Srpske Kablovske Mreže (Serbia Broadband Company).

Blic and another tabloid whose website is included here (Alo.rs) shared the same owner and publisher until 2017, when Alo was sold to Alo Media System,

which is owned by [Saša Blagojević](#). Blagojević is a local businessman who owns the television channel Studio B through his Global Media Technology company, and is also a director and co-owner of the marketing and consulting company Trilenium. Alo.rs is ranked the 9th most-visited website in Serbia, according to SimilarWeb rankings.

Another similar example of complex ownership is Kurir.rs (whose daily print version is one of the most widely read print tabloids in the country), which is the 4th most-visited website in Serbia, only behind Google, YouTube, and Facebook, according to SimilarWeb. Adria Media Group that owned Kurir, Kurir.rs and a number of other media outlets were [bought](#) by a company called Mondo Inc in early 2019 [for an estimated price of €25m](#).⁶⁷ Mondo Inc is fully owned by Wireless Media, a company that is 100% owned by Mobil Media, which again is fully owned by Igor Žeželj.

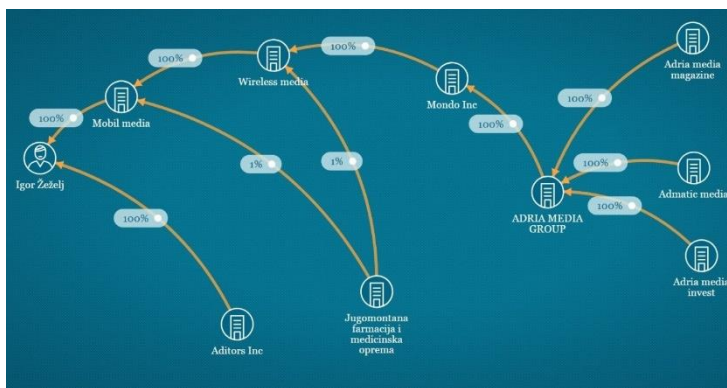


Figure 1: Companies owned by Igor Žeželj.

Source: Balkan Investigative Research Network (BIRN)

Misinformation aficionados

Shareholders in the companies that own misinformation websites are likely to be politically uninterested in the content they produce and only seek to maximize their profits, yet that is not the case for all of them. One exception is Dragan Vučićević, the owner of Insajder Tim Ltd., which fully owns Informer.rs and who is known to be deeply involved in content creation. Vučićević is an ardent supporter of the SNS, its party president, and the current president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić. In 2018, Informer.rs was [ordered by a court to pay](#) a total of RSD 150,000 (€1,300) to Stevan Dojčinović, the editor-in-chief of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) for defamation of character. Informer.rs accused Dojčinović of being “a fake journalist,” “a western spy,” “an accomplice of the mafia,” “a sadomasochist,” and “a terrorist” who was seeking to frame Aleksandar Vučić and his family. The fact-checking site Raskrikavanje.rs is a [project](#) run by KRIK.

Informer's journalistic practices, or lack thereof, earned 25 public warnings from the Press Council of Serbia for breaches of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Behavior during 2016 and 2017, making it [the leading breacher of journalism ethics in the country](#). Moreover, according to [research](#) by Raskrikavanje, Informer.rs was the largest producer of misinformation pieces that made it to the front page of a daily newspaper: it [generated](#) 150 misinformation headlines on the front page of its printed edition in 2017.

Informer's journalistic style and publications also prompted the US ambassador to Serbia to describe it as "[ordinary scum](#)," criticizing the website for its blatant disregard of factual reporting. In response, President Vučić [stated](#) that it is unbecoming for an ambassador to make such comments about the highest-circulating newspaper in the country.

The content

Considering their similar profiles, it is no surprise that the websites analyzed rely on similar themes in their reporting. The two most prominent figures in misinformation pieces are Dragan Đilas (leader of the main opposition party – Demokratska Stranka) and Aleksandar Vučić (leader of the ruling SNS). The former is generally portrayed in a negative light while the latter is almost always covered positively. The third most prominent individual is the current Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is uniformly represented positively.

A report published by Raskrikavanje provides an insight into what some of these outlets and their printed editions write about. For example, in the first half of 2019, Alo's printed edition [contained](#) 115 false and factually unfounded claims on its front pages.⁶⁸ The report further found that four words dominate the misinformation headlines: Serbs, Serbia, Vučić, and Đilas. "Serbs" are almost always mentioned in the context of being threatened, in danger, or being the victims of something. This even extends to the non-political sphere, as in the case of Alo claiming that

Albanians are to blame for Serbia's poor placement in Eurovision rankings. When discussing the current President of Serbia, Alo either portrays Vučić as in danger and the victim,⁶⁹ or as a highly capable and tough guy. The opposition are [portrayed](#) in a negative light, primarily as traitors working with outside forces.

Another Serbian fact-checking website, Fake News Tragač (Fake News Seeker), [found](#) 237 misinformation headlines on the 358 front pages of Alo's print edition in 2017. One of the most prominent themes in Alo's misinformation strategy is the threat of Albanians, which is low-hanging fruit due to the past and current situation in Kosovo: articles periodically appear on the "upcoming" war in Kosovo. Additionally, Alo's propensity for announcing wars not only applies to Kosovo, as they have also announced the "upcoming" Third World War multiple times. Another prominent theme features President Vučić and his opponents. Here, the first strategy is to defend Vučić and portray him as a victim of the opposition's devious plans, while the other tactic is to smear the opposition. Lastly, while pseudo-science takes a backseat to politics, the outlet is no stranger to promoting it too. Alo is [ranked](#) 9th in terms of most-visited websites in Serbia.

Occasionally, these outlets will take ownership and apologize for the misinformation they spread. One such rare occasion was when Informer's owner and editor-in-chief apologized for the website's piece featuring alleged provocative photographs of the Croatian president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. However, after public uproar in Croatia, Vučićević

apologized and [admitted](#) that the person featured in the photographs was in fact a pornographic actress.

Revenue streams and government connections

Misinformation websites have two main streams of revenue. The first is advertising. Misinformation websites usually enter advertising agreements directly with their customers, rather than via Google's AdSense. The benefit of operating as a real, out-in-the-open website is that they can cut out the middleman (Google) which takes a significant cut of the ad revenue. Misinformation websites in Serbia thus prefer to sell ad space on their website directly, either in the form of banners or PR messages. They have marketing departments and publish their advertising price lists. Prices vary, depending on the ad's size, location (on the front page or on a page devoted to a specific topic such as entertainment or sports), suitability for different platforms (desktop, mobile or application), type of content (image or text), and many other criteria.

Six of the eight websites analyzed here published detailed advertising price lists. The exceptions are Pink.rs. and [Republika.rs](#). For example, a PR text on the front page of [Kurir.rs](#) costs between €800 and €1,000, while a banner ad (970x250px) ranges from €1.50 to €3.50 CPM. CPM is a method used in digital marketing to calculate the price of advertising. It means "cost per thousand" or "cost per mille." For example, if a website charges \$3 per CMP, it means

that whoever wants to advertise will have to pay \$3 per thousand impressions.

[Ads](#) on the front page of Srbijadanas.com cost between €15 and €80 a day, depending on the size of the banner. The most expensive ads are the “branding” banners along the side, which cost €250 per day on the front page. Mobile advertising on [Telegraf.rs](#) ranges from €150 to €600 a day, also depending on banner size. The most expensive service offered here is a PR text delivered via a push notification on their app, which costs €2,000. They also have an option to advertise on their Instagram account via an Instagram story, which costs €350.

The second revenue stream of Serbia’s misinformation websites is public funding, which can only be accessed by organizations that enjoy a friendly relationship with those in power. First, they are awarded funds through public tenders organized in various cities across the country for the production of media content deemed a public good or of public importance. Websites generally benefit financially from their favorable coverage of the ruling SNS. The Journalists’ Association of Serbia reports that many misinformation websites are given public money to produce “media content of public interest.”

In one instance, Informer.rs, via Info IT Media Ltd (its sister company), [received](#) RSD 2.5m (€21,000) from public calls in different cities in Serbia. In total, Informer.rs, *Srpski Telegraf* (its website is Republika.rs) and Srbijadanas.com [received](#) a total of RSD 13m (€110,000) via public calls in the first half of

2018. Despite their consistent and numerous breaches of journalistic code, in large part due to their misinformation practices, these companies are viewed favorably by those in power, a sign of a symbiotic relationship between the misinformation media outlets and the country's political establishment. Informer.rs and *Srpski Telegraph* together were [awarded](#) RSD 52.5m (€450,000) in public money for “media projects of public importance.” Similarly, the Agency for Capital Investments of the Autonomous Region of Vojvodina [concluded an agreement with Blic](#), according to which the tabloid would promote their projects. Each article cost around €500, all paid from public money, and in none of the pieces did Blic note that it had been paid to report on the projects.

The second financial benefit that comes from a pro-government stance is that it makes for a “more conducive business environment.” The case of Kurir is a good illustration of this: Adria Media Group (AMG), which owns Kurir, was owned by Serbian businessman Aleksandar Rodić. During his time at the helm of AMG, Kurir maintained close connections with politicians in power until, surprisingly, in November 2015, Rodić authored a text entitled [“Srbijo, izvini”](#) (“Serbia, I am sorry”), published in Kurir, in which he acknowledged that Kurir was a part of a propaganda-spewing group of media outlets whose job was to “beautify reality.” He included Informer.rs and Pink in the same group.

Nonetheless, Rodić vowed from that moment on to report objectively about Vučić's government, which pushed Kurir into a war against other misinformation

outlets, primarily Informer and Pink. Although the relationship between Rodić and Vučić improved for a short while, in June 2017, Kurir again started publishing criticisms of Vučić, and fighting publicly with Informer, Pink, and *Srpski Telegraf*. Both the owners and editors of Informer and *Srpski Telegraf* were former employees of Kurir. In fact, [the co-owner and editor of Srpski Telgraf](#) was [a part of Kurir](#) during the first phase of its dispute with Aleksandar Vučić. The dispute was financially hard on AMG: its accounts were blocked due to unpaid taxes, which is one of the likely reasons why Rodić sold the company.

On the other hand, the case of Pink shows how the government is willing to help those who provide favorable journalistic coverage. Pink Media Group (PMG) owes part of its success to its owner (Željko Mitrović), who has maintained close ties with every government in Serbia since the early 1990s. The Center for Investigative Journalism in Serbia (CINS) [found](#) out that PMG was [allowed](#) to pay RSD 1.52bn (€13m) of its tax bill in 93 installments. It also received a total of RSD 1.28bn (€11m) in loans from the State Agency for Ensuring and Financing Export (AOFI). As CINS points out, it is not clear what exactly Pink exports to qualify for such loans. Secondly, and more problematically, one of the conditions for obtaining AOFI loans is that the borrower must have fully covered its tax liabilities. Nonetheless, in 2014, although PMG was one of the largest debtors to the state budget, it was still granted a loan by AOFI.

Assessing how much money misinformation websites make is rather difficult, as the companies running

them submit financial reports for all of their assets. In the case of companies with a high number of media outlets, it is impossible to ascertain how profitable a specific website is.

Pink International, for example, reported a 2018 operating profit of €10.2m. Besides Pink.rs, it also owns a television channel with a nationwide frequency (RTV Pink), 60 cable channels, and two satellite channels.

The financial reports of Srbija Danas Ltd provide one of the most accurate pictures of misinformation profitability. The company “only” owns Srbijadanas.com, one television channel, and a small daily newspaper (acquired in 2018, and thus not included in the 2016 and 2017 reports).

Although its profit was only €3,000 in 2015, Srbija Danas [bought](#) a television station in Novi Sad for €175,000. In 2017, it [had revenues](#) of €809,000 EUR while its profit was €256,000, a significant increase compared to its 2016 figure of €59,000.

Another company that runs a small number of entities is Medijska Mreža, which owns *Srpski Telegraf* and its associated website, Republika.rs. In 2017, it [reported](#) revenues of €3.23m and a profit of nearly €16,000. The following year, the same company had revenues of almost €3.6m with a net profit of over €191,000.

Key misinformation websites in Serbia, ranking and financial data, 2018-2019

Website name	Ranking in Serbia	Revenue, €, 2018*	Net profit, €, 2018
Alo.rs	9th	1,789,605	114,427
Blic.rs	6th	24,889,938	988,703
Informer.rs	22nd	5,686,348	596,053
Kurir.rs	4th	3,390,182	-3,891,694
Pink.rs	21st	55,691,102	10,257,292
Republika.rs (web portal of Srpski Telegraf)	Not in top 50	3,596,182	191,119
Srbijadanas.com	14th	948,433	264,938
Telegraf.rs	18th	1,780,264	-186,796

*Data for the company that owns the websites.

Notes: The average 2018 conversion rate of RSD 1=€0.0085 was used.
The website rankings were taken from SimilarWeb, data for November 2019.

SLOVAKIA: SNAKE OIL SPILLS ONTO THE WEB

*Jozef Michal Mintal, with contribution from Alex
Rusnák*

Main Findings

In the last couple of years, misinformation and disinformation websites started to sprout across many European countries, with Slovakia being no exception. The presented report looks at 49 major Slovak disinformation and misinformation websites and sketches out their ownership as well as financial background. The report succeeds in identifying the ownership or operational structure behind 35 websites. In terms of financial data, the report canvasses four sources of income: tax designation, e-commerce, crowdfunding, and advertising. In conclusion, the Slovak misinformation and disinformation website scene appears to be run by multiple independent entities using various business models to sustain operation. Transparency and accountability remain an issue in most of the cases.

- Most of the websites with an unclear or concealed background are health and lifestyle related;
- A total of 57% of websites were established during 2013-2016;

- Out of a total of 14 health and lifestyle websites only one does not display ads or sells goods and services;

Out of a total of 49 websites, 38 of them either display ads or sell goods and services.

Introduction

The websites included on Konspiratori.sk, the main tool used to identify the sample of websites analyzed in this report (see [Methodology](#)), are assessed based on a set of publicly available [criteria](#) by a [Review Board](#) consisting of journalists, scientists, media experts as well as civil society representatives. Websites are ranked on a ten-point scale, with those scoring more than six points being [described](#) as having “dubious, deceptive, fraudulent, conspiratorial, or propaganda content.” Out of 144 websites listed as such, we identified 49 that are predominately in Slovak.⁷⁰ These websites constitute our research sample. Konspiratori also includes websites that are currently not active, out of the 49 websites constituting our research sample eight appear be inactive.

Based on their content, we classified the websites according to their thematic focus into six categories as following:

- Health and lifestyle
- Ideological or supporting a cause
- News-focused
- Christian religion-related

- Paranormal
- Blogs

Lack of Accountability

Even though multiple websites claim to be transparent in terms of ownership structure and finances, the opposite is true for many of them. Many of the researched websites are in fact actively trying to conceal their identity by, among other things, abusing various anonymity services (domain privacy services or offshore hosting) as well as by publishing no contact or very limited information about themselves.

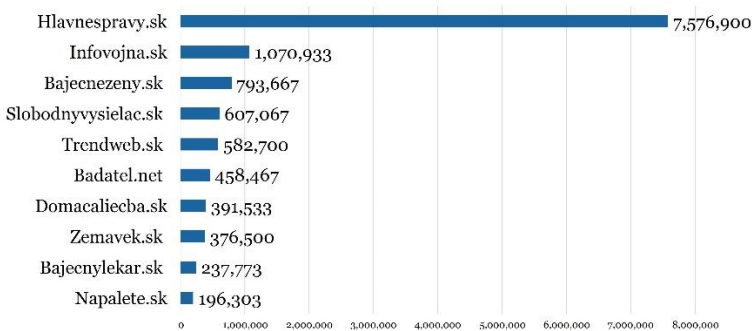
In terms of financial transparency, the situation is in many ways similar. Financial transparency is, however, also lower for other reasons. One of them is that in various cases there are multiple legal entities affiliated to the same website, which makes it harder to untangle financial details, e.g. Hlavnespravy.sk being affiliated to Heuréka evolution-HS o.z., Heuréka evolution s.r.o. and Heuréka Evolution, o.z., three different legal entities.

Another reason for lower financial transparency stems from the type of legal entity used to operate these websites. In multiple cases websites are operated by a civil society organization or a sole trader. Even though these kinds of entities in most cases must file a financial statement, compared to other types of legal entities such as limited liability companies, their financial statements, do not have to be made publicly available, according to the Slovak legislation.

Most Popular Websites

In terms of monthly visits, Hlavnespravy.sk solidly dominates the top of the misinformation portals in Slovakia, with 7.5 million monthly visits. Whereas health and lifestyle websites account for the majority of the 10 most popular misinformation portals in Slovakia, news-focused websites dominate when it comes to aggregated monthly visits.

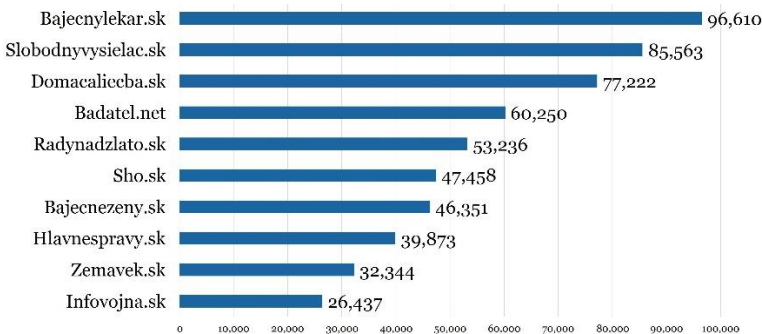
Top 10 websites by number of monthly visits



Note: The number of visits calculated as monthly average for February-April 2019

Source: Similarweb

Top 10 websites by number of Facebook followers



Source: Facebook (as of 22 May 2019)

However, a slightly different picture appears when looking at the number of followers on social media. Health and lifestyle websites clearly dominate on Facebook in both the number of spots in the top 10 ranking as well as by aggregated number of followers. The strong relation between health and lifestyle websites and social media is also illustrated by analyzing the incoming traffic to these websites.

The five websites whose traffic is mainly generated by social media are Bajecnyzivot.sk, Bajecnezdravie.sk, Trendweb.sk, Bajecnezeny.sk and Bajecnylekar.sk. More than 80% of each of these websites' incoming traffic comes from social media.

Based on data provided by [Similarweb.com](https://www.similarweb.com), Facebook is the social media platform that generates the highest traffic for Slovak misinformation websites. Other social networks that send traffic to these websites include Pinterest, YouTube and VKontakte (a Russian social network). Pinterest is more popular with health and lifestyle websites whereas YouTube and VKontakte generate more traffic for news-focused websites.

Who Pulls the Strings?

A total of 14 of the 26 cases where we were able to establish with a high probability the entity behind the websites are operated by a civil society organization (in Slovak, “*občianske združenie*”)⁷¹; five are operated by a private limited liability company (in Slovak,

“spoločnosť s ručením obmedzeným”); another five are operated by a sole trader (in Slovak, *“živnostník”*); and two are operated by an individual.

In the nine cases in which we were able to establish the entity behind the website, but with a lower probability, five are presumably operated by a legal entity, and four by individuals.

Most of the researched websites appear to be operated by independent entities, with the only observed exception being Slobodnyvysielac.sk and Slobodyvyber.sk both being operated by the same civil society organization. However, it's impossible to definitively rule out the existence of any further connections due to the ownership structure of some of the researched legal entities.

Content-wise we found that the largest group of websites with a concealed identity are health and lifestyle websites, with a total of 7 out of 14 cases.

Who Funds Misinformation?

There are four main sources of income for the misinformation websites canvassed in this report:

- tax designations
- e-commerce
- crowdfunding
- advertising

In some cases, we were also able to identify other sources of funding, using data from the local trade registry, financial statements, tax filings or publicly available contracts. In five cases, we were able to collect data for the full financial background of the entity operating the website. However, because of legal restrictions, this was not possible for in other cases.

Tax designations

Under the Slovak tax system, Slovak taxpayers [can allocate](#) 2% (or 3% in certain conditions) of their tax liability to a qualifying entity of their choice. A total of 10 websites out of 49 analyzed in this report use tax designations as part of their funding.

The obtained tax designation for all 10 cases in total averaged €36,437.91 a year for the period of 2016-2018.⁷² Unsurprisingly, most of the funds collected through tax designations go to larger websites. Zemavek.sk dominated with an average of €12,717 a year.

Revenue from tax designation attracted by Slovak misinformation websites, in €, 2016-2018 (top beneficiaries)

Website	NGO running the website	2016	2017	2018
Zemavek.sk	SOFIAN Publishing o.z.	9,242	13,084	15,825
Slobodnyvysielac.sk / Slobodnyvyber.sk	Združenie ľudí za lepšiu budúcnosť o.z.	10,068	12,481	67
Infovojna.sk	INFO VOJNA o.z.	4,433	0	13,382
Tartaria.sk	Občianske združenie TARTARIA o.z.	no	2,714	4,981

Source: CMDS based on data from Slovak Trade Registry
Amounts in euro, truncated to zero decimal digits.

Believe it or not: freeze lemons, zest them and get rid of diabetes, cancer and obesity

This was a widespread hoax shared by various Slovak health and lifestyle websites. As other health-related hoaxes before, the article was merely a poor translation of already published stories from foreign outlets and widely circulated chain e-mails.

The article suggests that lemons and lemon juice not only prevent and cure cancer, but also boost the immune system, prevent diabetes, kill parasites, improve cholesterol and can be used for a full body detox.

However, there is no credible study proving the positive effect of lemons on cancer prevention and treatment. Even though a few studies recently indicated that citrus fruits contain natural substances, such as limonoids and modified citrus pectin (MCP) that may enhance the body’s ability to fight cancer, the research is inconclusive and mostly based on in-vitro and animal testing.

Potentially the most dangerous claim is hidden at the end of the article. Referencing an anonymous study, it argues that contrary to conventional chemotherapy, “lemon treatment” only kills cancer cells, thereby leaving healthy cells intact and improving the condition of the cancer patients. Besides being false and a blatant lie without any empirical evidence in research, such a claim poses a high risk to cancer patients who in their struggle might opt for alternative ways of treatment, thereby decreasing their chances to be cured.⁷³

E-commerce

A total of 16 websites were observed to fund their operations through sales of goods and services,⁷⁴ mostly books and news and magazine subscriptions. Some of the websites including Zemavek.sk and Slobodnyvysielac.sk also run larger e-shops selling their own merchandise. For example, Slobodnyvysielac.sk sells a variety of products ranging from t-shirts to mugs and shot glasses to umbrellas and even roasting pans for chicken.⁷⁵

Some of the websites focused on health and lifestyle including Badatel.net and Biosferaklub.info also operate their own e-shops that sell mostly books and dietary supplements. Badatel.net in many of its pages redirects readers to an affiliated e-shop⁷⁶ specialized in selling herbal medicines. According to some [reports](#), both the e-shop selling herbal medicine as well as Badatel.net are operated by the same person who resides in Slovakia.

In a separate case, Vedomec.com redirects its visitors to Damianvit.sk, an online store that sells herbal medicines. Similar to Vedomec.com, Damianvit.sk e-shop is clearly trying to conceal its ownership structures. Damianvit.sk appears to be operated by a shell company registered in the U.K. According to various investigative [reports](#), Vedomec.com and Damianvit.sk are operated by the same person, a Slovak expatriate living in London.

Yearly revenue from sales of goods and services generated by Slovak misinformation websites (for latest available fiscal year)

Website	Funding, in €
Zemavek.sk (SOFIAN, s.r.o)	430,841
Extraplus.sk (Mayer media, s.r.o.)	133,196
Nemesis.sk (Pyramid Group, s.r.o.)	9,453
Arindrexler.com	n/a
Badatel.net	n/a
Biosferaklub.info	n/a
Davdva.sk	n/a
Infovojna.sk	n/a
Lifenews.sk	n/a
Otvoroci.com	n/a
Panobcan.sk	n/a
Protiprudu.org	n/a
Slobodnyvysielac.sk	n/a
Tartaria.sk	n/a
Magnificat.sk	n/a
Vedomec.com	n/a

Note: data is reported for legal entity owning/operating the website.

n/a: not available

Source: Registeruz.sk

Zem a Vek published an edited picture of the then Slovak presidential candidate Zuzana Čaputová with a photo-shopped nose to appear more Jewish

Contrary to the hoax about lemons as a cure for cancer, the following case was an original created and spread by Zem a Vek (Earth and Age), rather than just a translation from a foreign outlet.

In its article, the magazine used a photo of then presidential candidate Zuzana Čaputová taken from the DennikN news portal. First, Zem a Vek claimed the photo was taken from its archive. Second, the photo of Zuzana Čaputová was modified to “make her look like a Jew.” Using image-editing software, her nose was hooked and her lips made bigger in order to resemble “stereotypical” physical features of a Jewish person.

The content of the article and the so called “Jewish nose” invoked similarity to the Second World War Nazi antisemitic propaganda. After public outrage and various journalists calling Zem a Vek out on this case, the magazine retracted the photo. However, it never apologized or explained why Čaputová’s photo was edited in such a way.

Crowdfunding

A total of 15 websites canvassed by our research, particularly news-focused and ideology-powered websites, finance themselves through crowdfunding. The degree of sophistication of the crowdfunding campaigns varies broadly. All that some websites such as Protiprudu.org do is to only publish their bank account number and ask for donations. Other, more elaborate campaigns, like the one run by Slobodnyvyslielac.sk, offer various payment options for donations including text messages, PayPal and Bitcoin.

The degree of transparency when it comes to crowdfunding also varies. Some of the websites do not publish any information about the funds received through crowdfunding (e.g. Parlamentne-volby-2016.sk). Other websites publish monthly financial

reports in which they release information about their sources of funding (e.g. Slobodnyvysielac.sk).

Unsurprisingly, larger websites appear to collect more funding. On the high end, calculated as mean based on data from May, April and March 2019, Slobodnyvysielac.sk pulls in on average €8,657 a month from crowdfunding. In contrast, less popular websites such as Slobodavockovani.sk earn a couple of hundred euros a year from crowdfunding, based on self-reported data.

Yearly revenue from crowdfunding generated by Slovak misinformation websites (for latest available fiscal year)

Website	Funding, in €
Slobodnyvysielac.sk	98,859
Protiprudu.org	n/a
Zemavek.sk (Fond Sofian)	6,562
Slobodnyvyber.sk	5,443
Slobodavockovani.sk	3,000*
Davdva.sk	n/a
Hlavnespravy.sk	n/a
Infovojna.sk	n/a
Lifenews.sk (Inštitút Leva XIII.)	n/a
Magnificat.sk	n/a
Dolezite.sk	n/a
Slovenskeslovo.sk	n/a
Panobcan.sk	n/a
Parlamentne-volby-2016.sk	n/a
Rudovasky.com	n/a

*unclear reporting

n/a: not available

Source: self-reported data, “Transparent Account”

Advertising revenues

The ad revenue generated yearly by 122 misinformation websites in the Czech Republic and Slovakia is estimated to range between CZK 23.9m

(€930,000) and CZK 32.4m (€1.27m), according to a [study](#) from 2017 conducted by OSF Prague, a local NGO.

However, this source of revenue has declined in the last few years mostly as a result of the work done by [Konspiratori.sk](#), which has been lobbying advertisers to stop spending money on these websites. Within only one year since its inception, advertisers [scrapped](#) more than 17,000 campaigns planned for misinformation websites because of the work done by Konspiratori.sk.

A total of 27 websites in our sample display ads. Many of these websites use Google's advertising platform, but some of them also use direct ad banner selling. Some websites are upfront about acknowledging that they sell ad space, but others tend to mislead readers, saying that they do not sell ad space when in reality they do so. For example, Nazorobcana.sk claims on its home page, in large fonts, that it doesn't carry ads, but an ad is displayed just above the disclaimer.

Zombies, under the influence of psychotropic substance, are fighting among the Ukrainian forces in Donbas. They continue to fight even after being shot in the head

According to this hoax, citing the Deputy Defense Minister of the Donetsk People's Republic "people's militia command" Eduard Basurin, members of the Ukrainian army were fighting in the Donbas conflict zone under the influence of an extremely powerful psychotropic drug. Moreover, as cited by the article, Basurin claimed that the

alleged psychotropic substance makes Ukrainian soldiers turn into fearless and painless zombies.

To make his claim even more absurd, Basurin recalled a situation in which Ukrainian soldiers continued fighting even after being shot multiple times in their head and chest, with the alleged effects of this new psychotropic drug being reported to last for up to 10 days.

The hoax appeared in the Czech version of Sputnik. Since the Slovak and Czech languages are linguistically close and among native speakers almost mutually understandable, and since there is no Slovak version of Sputnik news, the article was also highly read and shared by the Slovak readership. As for the hoax, there is no scientific or other form of evidence to support the existence of the so-called zombies, nor do we have any proof of psychotropic drugs that would turn human beings into immortal soldiers. This hoax was debunked by several international and domestic news agencies.⁷⁷

Overview of misinformation websites in Slovakia, by content and funding sources

Website	Content category	Tax designations	E-commerce	Crowd-funding	Ads
Dennikpolitika.sk	News-focused				✓
Dolezite.sk*	News-focused			✓	✓
Extraplus.sk	News-focused		✓		
Hlavnepavy.sk	News-focused	✓		✓	✓
Infovojna.sk	News-focused	✓	✓	✓	
Medzicas.sk*	News-focused				
Nadlani.org	News-focused				✓
Napalcte.sk	News-focused				✓
Nazorobcana.sk	News-focused				✓
Necenzurovane.net	News-focused				✓
Nemesis.sk	News-focused		✓		✓
Otvoroci.com	News-focused		✓		
Priezor.com*	News-focused				
Protiprudu.org	News-focused		✓	✓	
Slobodnyvyber.sk	News-focused	✓		✓	
Slobodnyvysielac.sk	News-focused	✓	✓	✓	
Slovenskeslovo.sk	News-focused	✓		✓	✓
Zemaveck.sk	News-focused	✓	✓	✓	
Iifenews.sk	News-focused and Christian religion-related		✓	✓	
Panobcan.sk	News-focused and ideological or supporting a cause		✓	✓	✓
Badatel.net	Health and lifestyle		✓		✓
Bajecnezdravie.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Bajecnezeny.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Bajecnylekar.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Bajecnzyivot.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Biosferaklub.info	Health and lifestyle	✓	✓		
Domacalicheba.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Medicalcentrum.eu	Health and lifestyle				✓
Radynadzlato.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Radyprezdravie.sk*	Health and lifestyle				✓
Radyzdravie.sk*	Health and lifestyle				✓
Slobodavockovani.sk	Health and lifestyle	✓		✓	
Trendweb.sk	Health and lifestyle				✓
Vedomec.com	Health and lifestyle		✓		
Davdva.sk	Ideological or supporting a cause		✓	✓	✓
Idemvolit.sk	Ideological or supporting a cause				
Parlamentne-volby-2016.sk	Ideological or supporting a cause			✓	✓
Rozhladna.org	Ideological or supporting a cause				
Rudovasky.com	Ideological or supporting a cause			✓	✓
Sho.sk	Ideological or supporting a cause	✓			
Tartaria.sk	Ideological or supporting a cause	✓	✓		
Anti-illuminati.wbl.sk	Paranormal				
Arindrexler.com	Paranormal		✓		
Cestaclovcka.sk	Paranormal				✓
Mysteria.sk*	Paranormal				✓
Zahadnysvet.sk*	Paranormal				✓
Je-to-inak.livejournal.com*	Blog				
Lucasperny.Blog.pravda.sk	Blog				
Magnificat.sk	Christian religion-related		✓	✓	

Note: data was collected between 23 May 2019 and 3 June 2019.

*inactive website

Source: CMDS

Yearly revenue of companies owning/operating websites or directly associated companies (2018)

Website	Operating company	Revenue (€)
Zemavek.sk	SOFIAN, s.r.o.	430,906
HlavyneSpravy.sk	Heuréka evolution, s.r.o.	153,965
Extraplus.sk	Mayer media, s.r.o.	133,196
ZahadnySvet.sk	Next Media Group, s.r.o.	99,751
Nemesis.sk	Pyramid Group, s.r.o.	9,453
Napaleta.sk	Medialis spol. s.r.o.	6,700

Note: displayed are legal entities whose financial statements must due to the type of legal entity be publicly available.

Source: CMDS based on data from Slovak Trade Registry

Methodology

A useful tool providing an extensive database of Slovak and Czech misinformation/ disinformation websites is maintained by [Konspiratori.sk](https://konspiratori.sk), a project [run by](#) Konšpirátori.sk o.z., a civil society organization in Slovakia. Konspiratori.sk is a database of websites that

produce and publish false information in various forms and formats.

To obtain information about the owners of domains in our sample we used WHOIS databases⁷⁸, which, in line with the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) [regulations](#), store contact information about the owners of all registered domains.

A total of 45% of the websites canvassed by our research listed the owner of the domain. The remainder used various ways to hide the identity of the owner. Two websites were not included in this sample as they are subdomains on a blogging platform.

In addition to WHOIS, we also researched all 49 websites to identify their “About” sections or contact information pages that would list the name of the entity owning or running the website. We also used information obtained through [various](#) investigative [articles](#) and blogs, as well as by searching the Investigative Dashboard [databases](#). In 26 cases we were able to establish the entity owning and/or operating the website with a high probability. In nine cases we were able to establish the entity owning and/or operating the website with a lower probability. However, in 14 cases we were not able to establish who is behind the website at all. In conclusion, the owners of 28.6% of all researched websites are anonymous.

Website traffic data was provided by Similarweb.com. Financial data was obtained through publicly accessible databases (registeruz.sk, finstat.sk,

Investigative Dashboard databases), self-reported data, and transparent accounts.

METHODOLOGY

Definition

The Business of Misinformation country reports struggle with definitional issues, lack of a common definition making it difficult to compare findings. Four country reports focus on alternative (non-mainstream) misinformation websites; the report on Bosnia & Herzegovina includes some mainstream media outlets; and the report on Serbia focuses entirely on mainstream media organizations. Overall, very different samples are assessed.

Another definitional problem highlighted by the Romanian report is how “information” and “misinformation” are defined. The Romanian report argues that websites that are open about their purpose and have a community that understands their intentions should not be grouped together with the more covert misinformation websites. This was not the approach taken by other reports; the Hungarian, Slovak, Serbian and Bosnian samples do include hyper-partisan websites; the Hungarian one also covers satirical sites.

Main Sources of Information

All six reports use local fact-checking websites or “fake news” website aggregators (such as Verifica Sursa in Romania, Konspiratori.sk in Slovakia or

Raskrinkavanje.ba in Bosnia & Herzegovina) as their starting point to identify misinformation websites. Some, such as the Hungarian report, also look at other studies for further examples. The sample of analyzed websites varies widely, ranging from the eight websites analyzed in the Serbian report to over 100 websites assessed in Hungary.

Criteria

To identify the most important or most popular misinformation websites, the reports use different tools. The Slovak and Serbian reports sort the websites by the number of visits, relying on the analytics company SimilarWeb. The Romanian study finds traffic information for some websites (five out of the 50) on a Romanian traffic measurement website. Some of the Hungarian websites include a traffic measuring widget. The Moldovan and the Bosnian reports make no mention of site popularity/importance.

Most of the reports also look at the size of the Facebook communities connected to the misinformation websites, either as a tool to establish their popularity, for lack of better data, or, as in the Slovak case, as an additional metric. The Slovak example, however, shows that this may be deceptive. The websites that attract the highest number of visits are not necessarily the ones with the largest Facebook communities.

The popularity of Facebook pages must be taken with a grain of salt also because “buying” followers and “likes” (through paid advertising or other marketing

methods) is a tactic sometimes used to boost the popularity of a Facebook page.

Mapping Ownership

Except for Slovakia, all reports had major difficulties in tracking the ownership of the misinformation websites. The Slovak researchers managed to identify the owners of 35 of the 49 websites analyzed. To map ownership, country researchers first consulted the “About us” or “Imprint” pages of the websites and various *whois* databases, with the Slovak and the Hungarian reports finding that many websites use privacy services to hide their owners/managers.

Previous investigations into local misinformation websites by fact-checking groups, journalists and researchers were also used. The report on Bosnia & Herzegovina partly, and the report on Serbia exclusively analyze mainstream media outlets; their operational and ownership data are more readily available. The Slovak report also used the Investigative Dashboard databases.

All in all, it appears that successfully identifying the ownership of misinformation websites depends less on the methodology used and more on the local misinformation context, including previous attempts by local media to investigate the phenomenon.

Mapping Funding

Exploring the monetary aspects of misinformation by collecting financial data about the misinformation websites has proven to be even more difficult. Slovakia is again an exception: the Slovak report unearthed revenue and profit data for the majority of the websites sampled, mostly using data from the Slovak Trade Registry. Like in Slovakia, the law also requires companies in Romania and Hungary to file financial reports. However, in these two countries it is impossible in the first place to identify the legal entity behind the misinformation websites. In one of the rare cases, in Hungary, when the company behind a website could be identified, its financial statement was not filed with the Ministry of Justice database (in breach of local law). Additionally, self-reporting on financing raised through crowdfunding, common for some Slovak websites, is absent on the Hungarian websites that use this funding method.

In conclusion, the primary problem in such a mapping exercise appears to be identifying the legal entity that runs or owns the misinformation website.

The other problem in countries such as Moldova and Bosnia & Herzegovina is that, unless companies are publicly funded or regulations force all companies to make public their financial reports, financial information can't be tracked through public records. Also, in Serbia, where the researcher chose to include mainstream media outlets, the financial data were available, but these statements covered all the assets of the companies, making it impossible to tell how much

of the revenue was generated by the misinformation websites (a problem also encountered in Hungary).

TOWARDS A NEW METHODOLOGY TO TRACK MISINFORMATION PLAYERS

Definition

The pilot phase of the project showed that clearer definitions are needed to achieve more comparability. The biggest methodological question is whether to include mainstream media as many of these media play an important role in spreading misinformation and propaganda in many countries. Yet, their inclusion would not be without issues. While their ownership and finances would probably be much easier to map than those of independent misinformation websites, the focus of the study would suffer a significant shift.

Whether to include mainstream media or not depends on the research question. If the question of the project is changed to “who funds misinformation?” then the mainstream media, including publicly funded media must be included. If the “business of misinformation” remains the focus, then including mainstream and especially public service media could not be justified.

If non-mainstream websites remain the focus, more effort should be made to ensure that the misinformation websites chosen for analysis are the important ones. The metric of “importance” may differ in different contexts, but if the focus is the business side of misinformation, then the audience reach

should probably be the most suitable metric. Additionally, if a social network such as Facebook is found to be important in a particular context, then the number of interactions a website's posts generate should also be included.

As a side note, the importance of the social network could and should be established by looking at the sources of traffic to the websites, using, again, an analytics company.

Considerations About Mapping Ownership

For mapping the ownership of the misinformation websites, the reports did not find the most suitable method. Consulting the websites' imprint as well as *whois* databases either reveal the owner or not, in most cases. If investigative journalistic work or previous research is available, it should be consulted. Investigative journalists may have better tools to track down the owners of these sites; if possible, they should be enlisted in this part of the project.

Considerations About Financial Information

For financial information, the researchers have consulted available local databases, run primarily by tax and fiscal authorities. The quality and quantity of data that can be found in these databases vary widely. An additional problem is that website owners that can

be tracked down often have a variety of activities, running multiple media outlets or even owning completely unrelated businesses. As a result, it is often impossible to tell from the financial databases what portion of their revenue is generated by the misinformation business.

Another way to go about this problem, used by some research projects, is to try and estimate the potential revenue by looking at the number of ads on the website (if advertising is the main source of income for the websites analyzed). If information about the advertising prices is available, coupled with traffic information about the website, a well-informed estimate about their revenue figures can be made. The two approaches combined may bring us closer to mapping the finances of misinformation companies.

Mapping Connections

In the pilot phase, after researchers' work was finished and their country reports published, we engaged journalists to follow up on the key misinformation players to identify the nature of their links with other individuals and entities, be they businessmen or politicians, public administration bodies, private companies or NGOs. The work carried out by journalists as part of the pilot project was published on their own media platforms. (*See the articles [here](#).*)

Based on the experience in the pilot phase, involvement of journalists should be better connected with the researchers' work for two reasons. First,

mapping ownership and finances sometimes requires journalistic investigation. (*See Considerations About Mapping Ownership*) Second, connections between the analyzed websites and other entities are extremely important to understand how these misinformation operations infiltrate other sectors and industries; hence, identifying these connections should be part of the project rather than a series of disparate follow-up investigations.

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About the Project

The [Business of Misinformation project](#) was run by the Center for Media, Data and Society, mapping the individuals and companies that own misinformation websites and their links to institutions, parties and other individuals. It canvasses websites that systematically and methodically create and target false information to persuade audiences to adopt ideas and ways of thinking embraced by their original promoters or their sponsors, be

those political, social, economic, health-related or else. It includes players in the misinformation industry consisting of locally run online portals that are presenting themselves and are perceived as independent voices.

About CMDS

The [Center for Media, Data and Society](#) (CMDS) is a research center for the study of media, communication, and information policy and its impact on society and practice. Founded in 2004 as the Center for Media and Communication Studies, CMDS is part of Central European University's School of Public Policy and serves as a focal point for an international network of acclaimed scholars, research institutions and activists.

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Notes

¹ It is important to keep in mind that the terms government and opposition are rather fluid in the Bosnian political context due to the high degree of decentralization. However, the author of this study uses these terms when deemed that they appropriately reflect the context.

² In the domestic context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, „nationality“ is used interchangeably with „ethnicity“.

³ Bosnia and Herzegovina has a three-member presidency, one member for each of its “constituent peoples”: Bosniak, Croatian and Serbian.

⁴ Available online at <https://24ora.eu/szomoru-gyaszhir/> (accessed on 23 July 2019)

⁵ See more information at https://www.facebook.com/pg/vilaglatohirmagazin/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 23 July 2019).

⁶ See more at https://www.facebook.com/pg/ValosagAmitTudnodKell/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 23 July 2019).

⁷ Fidesz is the political party of the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, in power uninterruptedly since 2010.

⁸ See more at “Piás Orbán ismét akcióban: megint alkoholhoz nyúlt a miniszterelnök (+videó)” (in Hungarian), available online at <https://hirhugo.hu/2019/06/05/pias-orban-ismet-akcioban-megint-alkoholhoz-nyult-a-miniszterelnok-video/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

⁹ See more details at <https://hirturi.blogspot.com/2019/05/botrany-az-orban-altal-behivott.html> (accessed on May 30, 2019).

¹⁰ Links to the stories:

Mészáros Lőrinc: Már elnézést, de a miniszterelnök úrnak fontosabb dolga is van annál, hogy a hajóbaleset... (Lőrinc Mészáros: Excuse me, but the prime minister has better things to do than the boat accident...) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/mesaros-lorinc-mar-elnezest-de.html>

Jakupcsek Gabi nyílt üzenete Mészáros Lőrinc arrogáns kirohanására a hajóbalesettel kapcsolatban – kérek szépen minden jóérzésű magyar embert, aki teheti ossza meg soraimat! (Gabi Jakupcsek’s open message in response to Lőrinc Mészáros’ arrogant outburst about the boat accident – I’m asking decent Hungarians to share my words if they can!) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/jakupcsek-gabi-nyilt-uzenete-mesaros.html>

Vajna Timi felszólalt Mészáros Lőrinc védelmében a hajóbalesettel kapcsolatban – “Ha néhai férjem itt lenne, elmagyarázná nektek, hogy mi a dolga egy... (Timi Vajna spoke up in defence of Lőrinc Mészáros about the boat accident – “If my late husband was here, he would explain to you what it is...) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/vajna-timi-ismet-felszolalt.html>

Bálint gazda üzenete az ország vezetőinek a dunai hajóbalesettel kapcsolatban – “Csak akkor legyen kedves

megosztani, amennyiben igazat adnak kérem tisztelettel...” (Farmer Bálint’s message to the leaders of the country about the Danube boat accident – “I kindly ask you to please only share if you think I’m right) <https://www.tv2-friss.com/2019/06/balint-gazda-uzenete-az-orszag.html>

Damu Roland kijózanító válasza Vajna Timinek, aki felszólalt Mészáros Lőrinc védelmében a hajó balesettel kapcsolatban: “Miért szólsz bele olyanba, ami...” (Roland Damu’s sobering response to Timi Vajna, who spoke up in defence of Lőrinc Mészáros about the boat accident: “Why do you barge in things that...” <https://www.ma-reggel.me/2019/06/damu-roland-kijozanito-valasza-vajna.html>

¹¹ Felháborító: Május 1-én a temetőbe sütögettek, grilleztek a menekültek..., available online at <https://hitel.news7.hu/felhaborito-temetobe-sutogettek/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

¹² See more at <https://otpercpihenoblogspot.blogspot.com/2019/05/ma-ahogy-kimentem-edesanyam-sirijahoz.html>, accessed on 3 August 2019.

¹³ See more at <https://www.mimikama.at/allgemein/grillen-auf-dem-friedhof-magdeburg/>, accessed on 3 August 2019.

¹⁴ Orbán Gáspár üzenete a magyaroknak: Sírtok, hogy nincs pénzetek, közben a statisztika szerint legalább 15 millió van elrakva minden háztartásnak mert... (Gáspár Orbán’s message to the Hungarians: You’re crying that you have no money when statistics say that every household has at least 15 million saved because...), available online at <https://www.fem3cafe.me/2019/04/orban-gaspar-uzenete-magyaroknak-sirtok.html> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

¹⁵ Ragasztott felvágott, rákkeltő popcorn: így mérgeznek minket tudunkon kívül az élelmiszerekkel!, available online at <http://titokterminal.com/ragasztott-felvagott->

rakkelto-popcorn-igy-mergeznek-minket-a-tudtunkon-kivul-az-elelmiszerekkel/ (accessed on 23 July 2019).

¹⁶ See more details at <https://karpathir.com/2017/02/15/reklam/> (accessed on 8 August 2019).

¹⁷ This was only an indication of a possible connection to be checked via other means. Most of the misinformation sites use free web templates so it is possible that they look alike even if they are not connected.

¹⁸ After some false leads the research proceeded with caution – many misinformation websites repurpose materials from other similar sites without attribution. This means that they can contain the same sentences without being related.

¹⁹ See <https://www.facebook.com/Kormanyinfo-127241867843149/> and <https://www.facebook.com/magyarorszag.magyarok/>

²⁰ For example, <http://doktorgodeny.hu/a-jollakottsaghormon-segit-az-elhizas-legyozeseben-111954>, accessed on 27 August 2019.

²¹ See more at <https://www.facebook.com/newcontactmagyarorszag/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

²² See more at <http://latogatoknovelese.blogspot.com/p/csomagok.htm> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

²³ See more details at <https://www.facebook.com/Legjavapontpro/> (accessed on 23 July 2019).

²⁴ See more details at <https://www.vilaghelyzete.com/> (accessed on 16 August 2019.)

²⁵ See more details at <https://balramagyar.hu/hirkuldo/> (accessed on 16 August 2019.)

²⁶ See more details at <https://hirhugo.hu/impresszum/> (accessed on 16 August 2019.)

²⁷ See, for example, <https://pestibulvar.hu/2019/07/01/orban-legnagyobb-hazugsagat-lepleztek-le-semmi-nem-igaz-abbol-amit-most-rola-allitanak/>

²⁸ See more details at https://www.facebook.com/pg/nemkellmas/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 18 August 2019).

²⁹ See more details at <https://www.facebook.com/vilaglatohirmagazin/> (accessed on 19 June 2019).

³⁰ See more at <https://valovilagi.blogspot.com/> (accessed on 12 August 2019.)

³¹ See more at https://www.facebook.com/pg/hirturi/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 21 August 2019).

³² See more at <https://hirturi.blogspot.com/2018/07/kiszivargott-erzsebet-kiralyne.html> (accessed on 21 July 2019).

³³ See <http://dailymigrants.com/haboru-europaert-orban-megirta-levelet-a-soros-katona-timmermans-jeloltsege-elfogadhatatlan/>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

³⁴ See <https://pestibulvar.hu/2019/06/30/vege-mindennek-menekul-orban-bedobta-a-lapjait-a-miniszterelnok/>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

³⁵ See <http://dailymigrants.com/tizennegy-vizbe-fulladt-migranst-halasztak-ki-tuneziai-partoknal-a-tengerbol/>, accessed 22 August 2019.

³⁶ See <https://balramagyar.hu/2019/05/15/ketsegbeesetten-menekul-orban-a-felelossegre-vonas-elol-ilyen-ocskatrakkal-probalkozik-a-bukott-politikus/> (accessed on 20 May 2019).

³⁷ See <https://vilagfigyelo.com/tobb-mint-ezer-migrans-tort-at-ejjel-a-keritesen-video/> (accessed on 6 June 2019).

³⁸ See more at <https://vilagfigyelo.com/18-eves-diaklanyt-vert-agyba-fobe-verte-a-villamoson-egy-sziriai-ferfi/>, accessed on 6 June 2019.

³⁹ See more at <https://egyazegyben.com/megdobbentoek-a-tragedia-reszletei-video-116087>, accessed on 12 July 2019.

⁴⁰ See <http://diabetika.hu/figyelem-riasztas-erkezett-holnapra-keszujlenek-fel/>, accessed on 15 June, 2019.

⁴¹ See <http://nyugdijasok.hu/riado-orakon-belul-lecsaphat-a-pusztito-jegeso-2-centis-jegdarabokkal-es-80-km-oras-szellel-115755> (accessed on 25 June, 2019)

⁴² See <http://eztnezdme.com/brutalis-hohullam-jon-43-fok-a-meterologusok-kerik-a-megosztasat-hogy-mindenki-felkeszujjon-extrem-hoseg-tarolja-le-egesz-europat/> (accessed on 27 June 2019).

⁴³ See <http://hirozon.info/2019/06/28/gyaszol-magyarorszag-most-jott-a-hirtragikus-hirtelenséggel-fiatalon-elhunyt-a-csodalatos-muveszno/>, accessed on 29 June 2019.

⁴⁴ See “They wanted to murder Viktor Orbán!”, <https://www.minden-egyben.com/hirek/megakartak-olni-orban-viktort/>, accessed on 15 August, 2019, or “Breaking! They wanted to murder prime minister Viktor Orbán!”, <http://hirozon.info/2019/06/27/most-jott-a-hir-meg-akartak-olni-orban-viktor-miniszterelnokot/>, accessed on 15 August 2019.

⁴⁵ See <https://www.blikkruzs.me/2019/06/friss-megakartak-olni-orban-viktort-ez.html>, accessed on 15 August 2019.

⁴⁶ Szupertanácsok:
<https://szupertanacsokhu.hu/2018/10/12/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat-reggelre-elhunyt-davidka-az-oka-tobb-mint-felhaborito-kerunk-miden->

szulot-ossza-meg-okulasul-akit-szinten-felhaborit-a-tortenetunk-isten-nyugoszta/, Magyarok vagyunk: http://magyarokvagyunk.com/borzaszto-haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-magyar-kisfiut-masnapra-meghalt/?fbclid=IwAR1U-oIdLcyCf7_oKObB2qPreoOGMtLIDQmAtiCdcF7GBPNtZo3lC-zokM, Szerencsemanó: <http://szerencsemano.info/cikk.php?id=9005&fbclid=IwAR1NodoNUJ51QF7GFIGteJIqlhesGv8nAZ8f4zKOvHrM8LQUsRd9YgU-LLY>, Mindenegyben: <https://www.minden-egyben.com/hirek/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat>, Egy helyen: <http://egyhelyen.info/2018/10/12/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat-reggelre-elhunyt-davidka-az-oka-tobb-mint-felhaborito/>, A nép hangja: <http://www.anephangja.com/2018/10/haza-zavartak-korhazbol-11-eves.html>, Fem3Café: <https://www.fem3cafe.me/2019/05/haza-zavartak-korhazbol-11-eves.html>, Hitelnews: <https://hitel.news7.hu/11-eves-kisfiu-miutan-hazazavartak/>, Hitelfórum: https://hitelforum.hu/haza-zavartak-a-korhazbol-a-11-eves-kisfiamat-reggelre-elhunyt-davidka-az-oka-tobb-mint-felhaborito/?fbclid=IwAR35tkz5xlsVWF8Rm7aPpYfAOha_dtJKsnmTY6YXv-x9fYXpduX8rwtz6k4, all accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁴⁷ 7 June 2019:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2174718565982909&id=842171652570947 and 25 June 2019:

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2206587216129377&id=842171652570947

⁴⁸

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2236122563175842&id=842171652570947

⁴⁹ See https://hitel.news7.hu/az-oka-felhaborito/?fbclid=IwAR2YMwTD1MkEePvPNukJsK_edXzEZKvnz4sIPaW58bZ9MlOubWsxPIO2thc

⁵⁰ See <http://eztnezdmeq.com/kiderult-hogy-a-haza-zavart-11-eves-kisfiu-mitol-halt-meg-a-korhazbol-haza-zavartak-reggelre-elhunyt/>, accessed on 21 August 2019.

⁵¹ See <http://dailymigrants.com/szomaliai-migransbanda-vezeret-lottek-agyon-daniaban/>, accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁵² Unfortunately, some of the negative tone of the Hungarian term “migránsbanda” (migrant gang) is lost in translation.

⁵³ Putin a ajutat refugiații ucraineni, a crescut alocația pentru copii și vârsta colonelilor (Putin helped Ukrainian refugees, raised the financial aid for children and the age for colonels), publishing date not available, retrieved on February 14, 2020 from <http://bn-news-romania.info/news2/single-post.php?id=20>

⁵⁴ Available online here: <https://omg.md/>

⁵⁵ Available online here: <http://bloknot-moldova.md/>

⁵⁶ This is a direct quotation from an email sent by Vasile State on December 12, 2019, and translated from the Romanian by Dumitrita Holdis.

⁵⁷ See here: <https://www.nationalisti.ro/>

⁵⁸ Accessible online here: <http://www.cunoastelumea.ro/>

⁵⁹ See this example: Dr. MIRCEA DOGARU: Națiunea ucraineană – invenția serviciilor secrete germano-austro-ungare (Dr. Mircea Dogaru: “The Ukrainian Nation – an invention of the German-Austro-Hungarian secret services,” published on 2 December 2019, available online here: <http://www.cunoastelumea.ro/dr-mircea-dogaru-natiunea-ucraineana-inventia-serviciilor-secrete-germano-austro-ungare/>

⁶⁰ Available online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myXUxPCgKDo&list=PL53D8FEoCoA3F88FD>

⁶¹ Website accessible here: <https://www.activenews.ro/>

⁶² Website accessible here: <https://www.exclusivnews.ro/>

⁶³ Website accessible here: <https://www.inpolitics.ro/>

⁶⁴ Source: gazetadeinformatii.ro. Click on a random article, in this particular case, see here: <https://www.gazetadeinformatii.ro/postarile-celor-3-de-la-usr-bulai-caramitru-axinte-nu-sunt-accidentale-ele-fac-parte-dintr-o-strategie-mai-ampla-neomarxistii-urasc-crestinismul/>

⁶⁵ Liviu Besleaga's Facebook profile: https://www.facebook.com/Liviu.Romania?__tn__=%2CdlC-R-R&eid=ARClM_gFF_ydJRFKkTIrIhWAJeVTKk-82Um1xk4M3NKKVpXLXgwPHbqsuQZjwHBFDRNUYCsb6I2S1Oxe5&hc_ref=ARTd4HCg1toQJjWoh_ygf3L3eGOiQVtWkCrjc43YRSt93QOWYJwLuyxSA71YpHamoqA

⁶⁶ All SimilarWeb rankings mentioned in this paper are for November 2019.

⁶⁷ This is the estimated price for the purchase of the media publishing house Adria Media Group that owned Kurir, Kurir.rs and a number of other media outlets.

⁶⁸ Information from the printed edition is included in this study, which is mainly focused on online content, because the content is almost identical: articles from printed edition are usually published first, or covered in some other way, online.

⁶⁹ See <https://www.alo.rs/vip/estrada/albanka-sabotirala-poene-za-nevenu-bozovic-makedosnki-ziri-potpuno-nepoznat-nasim-pevacima-i-kompozitorima/230033/vest>

⁷⁰ This approach omitted some popular Czech misinformation/disinformation websites, which are also accessible to Slovaks due to the language similarity.

⁷¹ Hlavnespravy.sk self-declare two different types of legal entities operating/owning the website. A civil society organization as a publisher and a limited liability company as a service provider. Due to ambiguity of the used terms,

hlavnespravysk was in this report counted as being operated by the civil society organization.

⁷² Calculated as total funds collected in all cases for the period of 2016-2018 and then divided by three.

⁷³ Source: <https://domacaliecba.sk/verte-tomu-ci-nie-citrony-zmrazte-postruhajte-zbavte-sa-cukrovky-rakoviny-i-obezyty/>

Debunking: <http://www.center4research.org/lemons-prevent-cancer/>
<https://uamshealth.com/healthlibrary2/medicalmyths/lemons-cure-cancer/>

<https://dennikn.sk/1008402/kto-zaraba-na-hoaxoch-o-rakovine-obchodnik-z-presova-ktory-predava-vyzivove-doplanky-za-50-eur/>

<http://sites.nationalacademies.org/BasedOnScience/lemons-cannot-cure-cancer/>

⁷⁴ Commerce had to be visible on the website and excluded sale of ad space.

⁷⁵ See more information at <https://obchod.slobodnyvysielac.sk> (accessed on 5 July 2019).

⁷⁶ See more information at <https://drbuzgi.com/> (accessed on 5 July 2019).

⁷⁷ Source: <https://cz.sputniknews.com/svet/201702144747040-dlr-ukrajinske-zombie-bojujici-vystrel-hlava/>

Debunking: <http://euromaidanpress.com/2018/06/28/dehumanizing-disinformation-as-a-weapon-of-the-information-war/>
<https://svet.sme.sk/c/20463950/zombie-ukrajina-drogy-hoax-fake-news.html>

⁷⁸ The research was carried out using whois.com on 22 May 2019.