

Infodemic: Coronavirus and Conspiracies in the Czech Republic

Summary of findings

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- The goal of this study was to **find out how Czech websites known for spreading disinformation and other problematic content handled reporting about the coronavirus. In addition to** the topics that emerged in direct connection with the pandemic, it also focused on the functioning, information sources and editorial practices of those websites.
- **During the analyzed period** – from March to May of 2020 – **the 8 monitored websites** (AC24, Aeronet, Česko aktuálně, Důležité 24, Nová republika, Protiproud, Sputnik CZ a Zvědavec) **published 2,634 articles about the pandemic.**
 - **The most articles (366) were published in the week between March 23 and 29**, when the first government restrictions were implemented in the Czech Republic.
 - **The overall highest number of articles (1608) dedicated to the pandemic was published by the website Sputnik CZ.**
- Thematically, the analyzed texts can be divided into **3 categories:**
 - 1. Articles describing the situation in the Czech Republic and abroad**
 - **Articles in this category were generally factually correct and written objectively and simply informed readers about the situation.** Sample topics of those articles include the numbers of those infected by the coronavirus, exposition of medical research related to the virus or the impact of the pandemic on the global economy.
 - 2. Articles evaluating the reactions of individual states to the pandemic**
 - **Evaluations of the reactions of individual states have appeared mainly in the op-eds or biased news pieces** (for example the series of articles referring to Russian humanitarian aid to Italy). **The most-often**



criticized entity was the European Union (mentioned in 232 texts), whose approach to the pandemic was for various reasons considered to be a failure. **The USA was also criticized, mainly because of their supposedly selfish behavior**, and their unwillingness to help other countries hit by the pandemic. **On the other hand, China and Russia were commended for providing humanitarian aid to the afflicted countries** (mainly Italy) and management of the crisis at home.

- **There has also been criticism of Slovak government**, which ostensibly did not handle the situation well. This proves that the monitored websites aim their content not only at Czech but also Slovak audiences. **In contrast, the evaluation of the Czech government's actions was ambivalent** – while in some articles it was praised for quick implementation of restrictive measures, in others, it was criticized for its inability to address the impact of the pandemic on the economy.

3. Articles containing conspiracy theories

- There were 145 articles published containing conspiracy theories (i.e. less than 6% of the total volume of articles). **The most frequently mentioned conspiracies focused on the billionaire Bill Gates** and his supposed effort to profit from the pandemic through the sale of a vaccine. Another version of this conspiracy claimed that Gates plans to exploit the pandemic in order to implant “chips” in the world population. **According to another frequently mentioned theory, the coronavirus was developed in American laboratories and used as a biological weapon against China.** In the concluding phase of the reporting period there has been a surge of antisemitic conspiracy theories, linking the pandemic to an alleged Jewish plot.
- **The analyzed websites differed from each other in certain aspects of their reporting about pandemic.** The authors consider it important to take into account the differing functioning of websites spreading disinformation and other problematic content, while researching disinformation related topics.



- **Some websites** (Sputnik CZ and Aeronet) **published predominantly original content, while others** (AC24 andr Česko aktuálně) took **the vast majority of their published articles from other sources**. Some websites republished content primarily from Czech resources (AC24), while others (Protiproud and Zvědavec) comparatively often published texts translated from foreign websites.
- **The monitored websites also differed significantly in the style of published articles**. Several of them (Sputnik CZ and Česko aktuálně) tried to operate as standard news portals, publishing a number of factually correct articles about the development of the situation. This, however, does not mean that their coverage of the events was unproblematic since some of these articles contained conspiracy theories or violated journalist ethics (for example through manipulative titles or overly emotional rhetoric). Other websites (Nová republika or Protiproud) functioned as opinion platforms, publishing mainly commentaries characterized by the ideological position of their authors (such as distaste for the EU). For some websites (Aeronet and Zvědavec), the title of „conspiracy website“ is quite accurate, since the bulk of their articles contain conspiracy theories.
- **The monitored websites also had some common characteristics**. Mainly in March and April, practically all of them dedicated a vast majority of their content to events linked to the pandemic. The analyzed websites primarily focused on events happening abroad and the situation in Czech Republic was rather secondary. Also, all of them experienced a short-term increase in the number of visitors during the reporting period. However, this fact must be interpreted in the context of an overall higher amount of internet usage during the pandemic.