

# DISINFORMATION ACTIVITIES CONNECTED WITH INFECTIOUS DISEASES- THE CASE OF COVID-19

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## Abstract

The emergence and rapid spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the COVID-19 disease have led to a global and massive surge in malicious information influence operations. Disinformation is the primary tool that influences operations. The deliberate dissemination of disinformation related to the pandemic is an example of how risks of a hybrid nature can be transferred into hybrid threats against targeted societies and states. The modus operandi at the national and international levels was quite similar. This is proven by the analysis we conducted in the first few weeks after the virus appeared in Croatia. In this paper, we will present several characteristic cases that can be used as a template for identifying upcoming threats. These examples indicate the existence of organized and targeted malicious activity against different target audiences intending to exploit (encourage, deepen) existing vulnerabilities and create new ones, incite emotions that cause social divisions, induce feelings of insecurity, defeatism, powerlessness, hopelessness, suspicion, disruption and collapse of democratic structures and processes, including health/medical infrastructure. These activities were aimed at controlling and weakening the defense capabilities of attacked societies and the states. Social networks, various online forums as well as mobile messaging applications have been identified as the most-used communication channels for disinformation dissemination.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, disinformation, hybrid threats, social networks, internet

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## INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of an unknown disease that led to numerous deaths in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, and its rapid spread at the national and international levels, mobilized numerous experts in various fields of science. Several research activities were initiated to find answers to the key questions: (a) reliable and accurate identification of the agent that caused this disease, (b) finding a way to slow down and stop the spread of the disease, and (c) finding a sustainable, effective, and harmless medicine that is suitable for human use. Very quickly, it became clear that this crisis would be significantly different from many different crises that humanity has faced in the past.

From the very beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, numerous instances of disinformation were recognized. Attempts were made to shift the responsibility for the outbreak of the disease to the “other side”. This “other side” was/is a political (or any other) opponent who was accused of intentionally releasing the virus among the population. China accused the USA and the UK of deliberately creating a virus specifically adapted for the Chinese and Russian people to negatively affect the development and capabilities (political, security, defense, economic, demographic) of China and Russia (1). On the other hand, (dis)information also began to appear in Western media, emphasizing China’s manipulation of viruses (2) in the research center in Wuhan (3) as well as the possibility that the virus reached the public

(either accidentally or intentionally) from that center (4). Societies and states affected by the virus (as well as those yet to be affected) found themselves in the situation of searching for new ways and methods of fighting not only the virus, but also various disinformation that were related to the virus's origin, spread, and possible health treatments. The faster spread of the virus and the negative consequences it caused were followed by the rapid dissemination of disinformation. At the same time, as will be discussed later, in at least one case, an attempt was made to use the pandemic situation for strong attacks (case of international terrorism) against the entire society to cause irreparable damage to human health.

### About disinformation

Modern crises, and especially future ones, require citizens to actively participate in crisis management and the elimination of unwanted negative consequences. The dissemination of accurate and complete information to the population is a crucial condition for effective and sustainable strategic communication and crisis management. The population must make decisions based on accurate, verified, complete, and facts distributed in an undamaged integral form, and situated in the real-time and space context of events, persons, and processes. This indicates the need to address several challenging issues: (a) communication with the population is one of the key prerequisites for effective future strategic communication and crisis management; (b) determination of institutions responsible for communicating messages from certain domains of human life (not everyone can and must not communicate about everything); (c) clearly defining responsibilities in the communication system; (d) developing responsibility in the leading media as communication channels; (e) ensuring the responsibility of social networks and other providers/intermediaries of information in the digital space, as well as search engines for published/offered information. Of course, it is neither the goal nor the point to introduce any kind of censorship. However, responsibility for what is written, said, and published, especially for disinformation that can cause harm to people and communities if acted upon, needs to be defined, established, and penalized according to the legal framework.

What is disinformation, and what are the consequences for society and the state if such malicious information content remains in the corpus of public knowledge? By definition, disinformation is (5):

Deliberately distorted, incomplete, and partially or completely incorrect information, the client and the real author of which are hidden. Its goal is to induce the target audience, by influencing them on a cognitive level, to make decisions that harm them, i.e., short-term and/or long-term changes to their corpus of public information knowledge.

The European Commission defines disinformation similarly (6):

Disinformation is false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted for profit or intending to harm the public.

This definition has a structural error. It does not explicitly address the possibility that information, while true in its content and accurate, can simultaneously qualify as disinformation. Although one could argue that such a nuance is implied in the mention of "misleading" information, it is crucial to state explicitly: that there are numerous situations where information, accurate in its content, is situated in a completely different time and space context, attributed to incorrect or fictional author. This contextual manipulation renders the information incomplete, as it is taken out of its real context, and susceptible to a different interpretation, thereby leading the recipient to make incorrect decisions.

It is essential to emphasize two theorems about disinformation that indicate all the harmful effects of unrecognized disinformation remaining in the corpus of public knowledge (7):

1st Theorem: If the public (user) perceives disinformation as true, then disinformation is true in its consequences.

2nd Theorem: If the public (user) perceives objective information as untrue, then the objective information is untrue (false) in its consequences.

### Disinformation and pandemic

As already emphasized, a pandemic is a crisis that affects the entire population, not just those who are directly infected. During the pandemic, the population expects the determination of competent and relevant bodies and institutions that are (and will be) responsible for strategic communication and crisis management. From these institutions and bodies, the population expects to

receive necessary information, instructions, and assurances about correct behavior, and measures that must be taken for their protection. Therefore, strategic and crisis communication, in the event of a pandemic, is a critical factor in dealing with such a deadly and widespread crisis. Insufficient, late, partial, or incorrectly formed or directed messages, with different content and instructions, can cause public concern, panic, wrong behavior, wrong decision-making, major economic disruptions, and even social upheavals. At the same time, they open the door for disinformation to appear and be influential. Effective and timely strategic and crisis communication by competent and relevant bodies and institutions can significantly contribute to the reduction of numerous social, health, security, and economic problems caused by the pandemic.

The pandemic crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus strongly influenced societies and states, forcing them to change and adapt previous patterns of crisis management to the new reality. Since the beginning of World War II, the world has not faced such a crisis. The appearance of this crisis was completely different from previous crises to which we had become accustomed, with more or less success in dealing with them. Previous crises, such as (a) terrorist attacks; (b) the emergence of radicalism, violence, and extremism; (c) natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, droughts); (d) attacks on critical infrastructure, technical incidents, and accidents; (e) energy and political crises, were mainly characterized by an intense and sharp effect, with a short duration in a specific geographical location. They did not hurt the entire population, and not everyone was affected by their negative consequences. The number and speed of the spread of disinformation related to those crises (causes and consequences) were negligible. Considering the nature of these crises, the security and defense systems focused their capabilities on the development of two groups of activities: crisis prevention and the development of capabilities for quick and complete recovery after a crisis event, i.e., post-crisis actions and resiliency.

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a multi-year, global, all-encompassing crisis (counting the time since the appearance of the disease, the duration of the pandemic, and the post-pandemic period in which many people have had to face the post-COVID consequences). The pandemic has hurt all domains of human existence, revealing that no one is immune to its negative consequences. It quickly spread throughout the world, thanks to globalization processes that enable fast travel and the movement of people and goods. There-

fore, one of the essential differences compared to all previous crises is related to the population: the management of this crisis required the active participation of the population to achieve the general goals of protecting the population, slowing down, and finally stopping the spread of the deadly disease. Competent and relevant state and international organizations demanded that the population change the previous rules of behavior, adapt to the new reality, play an active role in crisis management with an emphasis on the implementation of protective measures and activities, and fight against the spread of numerous disinformation disseminated in the information environment. The overall effectiveness of the crisis management depended on the citizens' reactions to the messages that came from the competent institutions, as well as the disinformation.

This crisis has necessitated the definition of new paradigms in numerous human activities: (a) the integration of abilities and knowledge from different scientific fields (medical, social, technical, and other relevant scientific fields); (b) the establishment of a whole-of-society approach (homeland security concept) in the fight against emerging security challenges; (c) the development and implementation of effective strategic and crisis communication management; (d) strong and intensive cooperation at the national and international levels; (e) the equalization of protective measures and activities at the supranational level; (f) the fight against the negative influence of disinformation and the misuse of existing information and communication channels and technologies.

Institutions and organizations of the state and society were mostly unprepared for effective crisis management at the beginning of the pandemic. Crisis and strategic communication skills were at a low level. Disinformation appeared quite quickly in the first days and weeks after the beginning of the crisis. Regarding its causes and consequences, the crisis began to be interpreted by numerous people for whom the knowledge about the cause-and-effect relationship of the pandemic was beyond their horizon of knowledge and professional experience. This often led to negative consequences, such as increased confusion, vagueness of messages disseminated to the public, and different "medical" measures suggested as a "solution." The cacophony of messages (information overload or infodemic and poisoning the information environment with malicious disinformation or intoxication) has reduced the ability of society and the state to defend itself effectively and quickly against the negative consequences of disinformation.

Different countries have reacted differently to this kind of security challenges, especially in the first stages of the crisis, during the process of procurement and delivery of protective means and equipment, medical instrumentation, and devices, and later the procurement and distribution of medicines. The complexity and demanding nature of the challenges in dealing with a pandemic, as well as the sudden change in usual security practices and procedures, immediately open an area of activities for a malign attacker. A clear example is the very dangerous and intensive cyber-attack launched by Iran on Israel in April 2020 (8). Some states almost completely engaged their repressive apparatus in strengthening the resilience of the state and society. Israel, with an emphasis on agencies from the intelligence community (9, 10, 11), immediately began to use them in the fight against pandemic consequences at all levels. They were engaged in observing, recognizing, and monitoring trends of infection spreading, conducting surveillance of infected persons, as well as persons who were in various forms of isolation, procurement and ensuring the delivery, storage, and distribution of protective materials, medical equipment, and instrumentation, and later medicines. They were also more active in the fight against potential opponents who were trying to use the extraordinary situation for their interests, which were directed against the interests of Israel, including the fight against the negative influence of disinformation (10, 11, 12).

The USA had a slightly different position. The USA focused on identifying the cause, place, time, and manner of the virus's outbreak and its spread, combating the negative impact of disinformation, identifying its authors and the communication channels used for their spread, and analyzing the negative consequences on global geopolitical, strategic, security, and economic aspects (12). The German response to the crisis was very demanding. Namely, Germany, considering its decentralization of state repressive institutions, approached this problem quite differently (12).

Organizations such as the EU, UN, and NATO (13, 14, 15) have also begun to equalize practices in the fight against the pandemic. Special emphasis was placed on combating the negative consequences of disinformation: recognizing patterns, identifying possible authors and spreaders, and analyzing the use of various media communication channels (16), as well as truthfully informing the public and developing unified platforms to fulfill the identified goals.

### Examples of disinformation in the Croatian media space

The Croatian information environment and the associated corpus of public knowledge were (and still are) systematically exposed to numerous instances of disinformation. Information attackers exploited the fact that (a) Slavic languages are relatively similar, (b) there are numerous connections between different people living in different countries, which accelerates and facilitates mutual communication and the spread of various disinformation, (c) there are numerous (especially online media) that are visited by members of different countries, as well as the fact that numerous media outlets are interestingly networked at the national and supra-national level (1, 5, 16, 17, 18). The Hybrid Warfare Research Institute has been actively involved in countering disinformation activities even before the outbreak of the pandemic.

In the initial weeks of the rapid spread of the disease, the media environment in Croatia, especially social media and mobile communication applications, was flooded with numerous pieces of disinformation. This phenomenon in Croatia somewhat flew under the radar until the release of an audio recording in which an unknown woman conveys a disturbing message, referring to herself as a "reliable source close to the Prime Minister" (19, 20). Using a dramatic voice, she warned the audience and spread disinformation about the false behavior and actions of the Croatian government and state institutions in managing the pandemic. Soon, new disinformation appeared in public (5), claiming that "the virus dies/disappears at a temperature of 26-27 °C and that, as the air temperature increases, the virus will disappear by itself"; "the need to perform exercises that people should do to independently determine whether they are infected with the coronavirus or not and what they should do, beyond the instructions of the competent health institutions, to help themselves"; and the spread of defeatist claims such as "we are guinea pigs in the games of the powerful," "we are being tested for the virus without our consent, and they have a vaccine they won't give us," "this is how they are trying to save pension funds in all countries from collapse," and "this government should be replaced, even if it requires violence on the streets." Interestingly, messages with very similar, almost identical content entered the information environment of Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Germany, and Austria, and even the English-speaking population in some other countries (Israel, and Belgium) in a very short time.

The first disinformation tends to be, as a rule, somewhat more benign in content and is not aimed at directly causing divisions and more serious problems. Each subsequent piece of disinformation contains more and more dangerous messages (considering the possible consequences for human health if they are accepted as true) and becomes increasingly difficult to identify undeniably as disinformation to the public. Many unrecognized instances of disinformation can additionally encourage some target audiences to express distrust and dissatisfaction against the institutions of the state, introducing divisions and inducing protests that could lead to the creation of a state of disorder and chaos, ultimately producing political upheavals by force. Their cumulative impact, if not recognized in time, can be very destructive to the stability of every society and state.

In addition to textual disinformation, numerous photo and video documents with manipulated content have appeared. They quickly became available to the general audience through dissemination on social networks and mobile communication applications. For example:

Train photographed in September 2019 in Kansas, USA, with the inscription: COVID-19 (5)

Photo taken in front of a hospital in Zagreb after the earthquake that struck the City of Zagreb (Croatia) on March 22, 2020, falsely attributed to being taken in front of a hospital in Italy (21).

Photo of an anti-COVID-19 protester in Belgrade holding a banner with the written text: „The measures of the crisis headquarters are from Ustasha origin. We do not want a COVID concentration camp” (22).

### AIM

This paper aims to (a) examine the hypothesis that disinformation activities distributed across various countries related to the SARS-CoV-2 virus are interconnected to some extent; (b) affirm that they appeared with the intent of maliciously influencing crisis and communication management; (c) establish a cause-and-effect relationship that can pinpoint the real authors and drivers of this disinformation; and (d) identify the intended malicious consequences sought to be achieved through its distribution.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

Considering the numerous disinformation instances that appeared during and after the pandemic, it was necessary to conduct a quantitative and qualitative analysis of selected (representative) information influence operations that entered the Croatian media space. Most of the disinformation examples were distributed in Slavic-speaking countries, despite the incompleteness and inaccuracy of the machine translations into individual languages, primarily from the Russian language.

For this analysis, we selected disinformation that appeared almost simultaneously in several different countries and societies with the same or very similar content. To obtain relevant samples, we contacted colleagues who are experts in intelligence studies, security and defense topics, and information-communication sciences from several countries gathered within the Zagreb Security Forum (Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, Greece, Italy, Israel, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia). For our analysis, we chose a few examples of disinformation that were most frequently received (more than 75% of received messages and links) by members of our Institute via mobile communication applications (WhatsApp, Viber, Telegram) as information content or as a link to some social networks such as Facebook or Instagram in the last week of February and the first week of March 2020 (23). These examples, translated into English (where necessary), were sent to our colleagues to check their possible appearance and presence in their home countries. In their responses, they confirmed that disinformation, of the same or similar content appeared in their national information environment (they received it in the same way as we did). Our colleagues have confirmed that, during that time frame, this disinformation was among the most numerous they received. In almost all countries, the disinformation “cited” “doctors/experts” from Italy, China, and the USA (the choice of institutions’ names was intentional to enhance the relevance of the disinformation content). Selected examples are listed and described on our website (23).

Those cases remind us of the deliberate spread of disinformation connected with the AIDS virus when the secret services of the former Soviet Union deliberately produced and disseminated much disinformation on a global level (24). Therefore, we applied intelligence analysis methodology (24) to extract truth from the received information contents in these cases.

## RESULTS

In our study, we identified three main groups of disinformation spreaders:

Those who are aware of all the negative consequences of these activities and know that they are dealing with disinformation.

Those who were not aware of all the negative consequences but, working in good faith (*bona fide*), still spread them. In other words, they are not aware that they are spreading disinformation. In that case, by the definition of information-communication sciences, as well as intelligence studies, they were spreading misinformation.

Those who spread them as an example of good jokes, emphasizing the harmfulness of accepting disinformation over real and true knowledge.

In all three instances, the dissemination of disinformation resulted in negative and (un)intended malicious effects.

It has also been determined that disinformation of the same or very similar content is disseminated in the same timeframe across different languages in various countries, to achieve objectives that are more precisely outlined and described in the following chapter.

## DISCUSSION

In today's strongly interconnected world, a large part of communication takes place on the Internet, especially in social networks and applications for mobile communication. During the pandemic crisis, there were numerous instances of disinformation in the public information environment. Their negative influence is still present, as seen in numerous conspiracy theories related to the origin and circulation of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, medical procedures, and the use of vaccines. By analyzing the content of the disinformation that entered the Croatian (as well as other states that were part of our research) information environment in the first weeks and months of the pandemic, we recognized their interconnection. We also noticed several different goals that they intended to achieve:

Decreasing trust, i.e. encouraging mistrust in the competent and relevant health and first responders' institutions and authorities that were designated to

manage the crisis and communicate with the public.

Preventing an understanding of the complexity of the situation, encouraging frivolous and irresponsible individual and group behavior.

Reducing population trust in the government and state institutions on a general level encourages mistrust, insecurity, social instability, radicalization, and extremism of the opinions and behavior of individuals and groups, creating the necessary preconditions for organizing public protests and their transformation into violence.

Decreasing trust in the vaccine as preventive medicine and vaccination as a process. As a result, the population experiences a decline in vaccination rates, resulting in an elevated vulnerability to the disease, particularly among at-risk groups.

By increasing the number of infected and isolated people, the economic, social, defense, security, and overall capacities of both society and the state are significantly reduced. That situation triggers additional internal crisis and instability, especially when there is a lack of resources, primarily financial, to help the state navigate through the crisis period and prevent malign and unwanted processes and possible political changes caused by violent actions.

Reducing the effectiveness of the health system by overburdening it, leads to numerous other negative consequences as a logical consequence of the cascading of the crisis into other critical infrastructures of society and the state.

Overburdening the health system not only diminishes its effectiveness, but also leads to various adverse consequences. This is a logical outcome of the crisis cascading into other critical infrastructures within both society and the state.

One of the outcomes of this pandemic is the need for changes and adaptations in the analysis of existing and future hybrid risks and threats. Rare but highly impactful crises, often referred to as Low Probability - High Impact events, should not be overlooked. The repercussions of disinformation during crises significantly impact the psychological stability, health, and safety of individuals and communities. It can lead individuals to adopt radicalized views and interpretations of processes and events in society. In today's strongly interconnected world, consequences manifest simultaneously in vari-

ous areas. The disinformation instances observed in the analyzed examples were quite similar, and in some cases, identical.

In future pandemics (it's not a question of whether there will be one, but when, where it will start, how fast it will spread, and the consequences it will bring), disinformation will again play an important role defined by the information attacker. It will occur at both national and supranational levels. If we find ourselves unprepared for the emergence of disinformation, history may repeat itself, potentially with even more severe consequences compared to those caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This consideration is essential for future planning in the effective battle against various forms of disinformation, ensuring that, with the best intentions, no harmful effects are produced. The fight against disinformation and its harmful consequences cannot be confined to a single level. Sole reliance on professionals within specific scientific or professional domains is inadequate for effective resolution. Combating disinformation requires the active engagement of both society and the state, the homeland security concept, or a comprehensive whole-of-society approach.

The pandemic has highlighted that addressing pandemics is no longer the exclusive responsibility of medical science and professionals. Due to numerous disinformation policies and the dissemination of false information, the state and society's capability to confront these health challenges effectively and swiftly was compromised.

It is imperative to conduct detailed and in-depth analyses of all factors and processes that contributed to the declaration of a pandemic.

How can the unhindered flow of scientific information and knowledge be facilitated from totalitarian societies and countries in the event of an unknown, or known but incurable (or highly lethal) pathogen appearing, which has the potential to spread rapidly?

What measures and activities can democratic societies and states undertake to prevent the swift spread of deadly diseases without jeopardizing the fundamental tenets of democracy?

How should democratic societies and states, founded on the principles of the right and freedom of expression, deal with individuals who intentionally disseminate disinformation to undermine the defense capabilities

of society, thereby increasing the vulnerability of the population and the mortality of infected persons?

These are serious issues that require an interdisciplinary approach at the societal level and involvement from organizations such as the UN, WHO, and EU.

Trivializing numerous instances of disinformation circulated during the pandemic can be an effective way to debunk them. The best example is the claim that "Covid-19 vaccines contain microchips, and that the population is forcibly and non-consensually chipped to be governed maliciously." Those who believe in such disinformation should be confronted with a series of questions: How many microchips would need to be inserted into a vial from which six vaccination doses are extracted to ensure at least one microchip per dose? What is the cost of these "invisible to the human eye" microchips, and what is the price of a bottle containing all these microchips? What is the cumulative cost of all the vials? And who can produce such a vast quantity of microchips in such a short time?

There are numerous examples of counter-disinformation activities, often disseminated on social networks and other media:

Widely circulated "college liberal meme" conveys the message: "Takes LSD from strangers in a concert parking lot but won't take vaccines because she doesn't trust the source" (26).

Visual representation of the data-information-knowledge-insight-wisdom hierarchy with a supplemented conspiracy theory (27).

Message: People who think vaccination changes their DNA, should consider it as an opportunity" (28).

Understanding, recognizing, and leveraging the experiences gained during the COVID-19 pandemic are crucial for generating better and more effective responses to similar situations in the future. High-quality analyses and studies authored by experts across various domains and at both national and supranational levels serve as excellent educational resources. Every crisis is simultaneously an opportunity, especially for learning from mistakes—a process known as Lessons Identified – Lessons Learned (LI-LL). The learning process, particularly from identified errors, should

be highly motivating. To effectively address anticipated risks and threats, science must consistently stay ahead, distinguishing between risk as the possibility of an unwanted event or process with harmful consequences, and threat as the realization or transformation of the risk into reality. In the face of unpreparedness for unexpected threats, the capabilities of the entire society need to be swiftly reorganized. Learning processes should transcend political or geographical divisions, occurring on a supranational and global level, especially when dealing with global threats. A unified approach in applying agreed-upon measures to combat new global threats is essential. In this context, efforts should focus on educating specially trained multidisciplinary crisis management experts who, when the need arises, should be capable of integrating the defense capabilities of society and the state in a relevant, reliable, safe, and credible manner, fostering international cooperation.

Given that facing such challenges requires active participation from the entire population, a special role should be dedicated to the distribution of truthful and accurate information to the public. Simultaneously, there should be efforts to combat disinformation using strategic communication abilities. Another crucial group to be educated for crisis management and action in such situations is political decision-makers. There will be instances where decisions proposed by competent experts may not be accepted or may be implemented in a modified content and context due to political considerations regarding potential negative impacts on the decision maker's political rating. Decision-makers must possess the strength and courage to make decisions that might be temporarily unpopular, but benefit the entire society in the mid- and long-term, especially in crises like the one experienced. These challenging decisions distinguish between a mere politician and a true statesman.

## CONCLUSION

In the pursuit of strengthening all capacities within society and the state to combat modern security challenges, including the early detection of disinformation, enhancing social resilience to its harmful influence, as well as identifying the authors and distributors of disinformation, various activities need to be undertaken, such as:

Supporting the efforts of public authorities and optimizing communication resources with local, regional, and national public health partners and institutions.

Disseminating pertinent pandemic information (public health information) to educate the public and vulnerable non-health sectors.

Mitigating social and economic disruptions.

As a primary objective, both during and after the pandemic outbreak, sustaining and enhancing public trust in the work of health authorities.

Proactively, promptly, and comprehensively addressing the adverse impacts of disinformation with the help of all relevant bodies, institutions, organizations, and companies from the private, public, state, media, civil and academic sectors.

The examination of contemporary crises and conflicts encountered in recent decades highlights a distinct characteristic: the integration, creation, and simultaneous management of multiple crises. A comprehensive and proactive approach to addressing modern security challenges is the sole assurance of fostering society's resilience to these challenges. This is exemplified by the crisis caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

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## S A Ž E T A K

### DEZINFORMACIJSKE AKTIVNOSTI POVEZANE SA ZARAZNIM BOLESTIMA – SLUČAJ COVID-19

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Pojava i brzo širenje virusa SARS-CoV-2, uzročnika bolesti COVID-19, dovela je do globalne i masovne pojave brojnih i različitih, ali ipak sličnih zlonamjernih informacijskih operacija utjecaja. Glavno sredstvo u provođenju tih operacija utjecaja su protuobavijesti, plasirane na nacionalnoj i međunarodnoj razini. Namjerno širenje protuobavijesti povezanih s pandemijom ima sva obilježja pretvaranja rizika hibridne prirode u hibridne prijetnje u odnosu na napadnuta društva i države. Modus operandi na nacionalnoj i međunarodnoj razini bio je prilično sličan. To dokazuju i analize koje smo napravili u prvih nekoliko tjedana nakon pojave virusa. U ovom radu prikazat ćemo nekoliko karakterističnih slučajeva koji se u budućnosti mogu iskoristiti kao obrazac za prepoznavanje nadolazećih prijetnji. Navedeni primjeri ukazuju na organizirano i usmjereno zlonamjerno djelovanje protiv različitih ciljanih publika s ciljem iskorištavanja (poticanja, produbljivanja) postojećih te stvaranja novih ranjivosti, poticanja emocija koje uzrokuju društvene podjele, izazivanja osjećaja nesigurnosti, defetizma, nemoći, beznađa, sumnjičavosti, poremećenosti i kolapsa demokratskih struktura i procesa, uključujući zdravstvenu infrastrukturu. Ove su aktivnosti bile usmjerene na slabljenje obrambenih sposobnosti te pokušaj kontrole funkcioniranja obrambenog sustava društva i države. Društvene mreže, različiti (osobito internetski) forumi kao i mobilne aplikacije za razmjenu poruka identificirane su kao mediji koji se najčešće koriste za širenje protuobavijesti.

**Ključne riječi:** COVID-19, protuobavijesti, hibridne prijetnje, društvene mreže, internet

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