

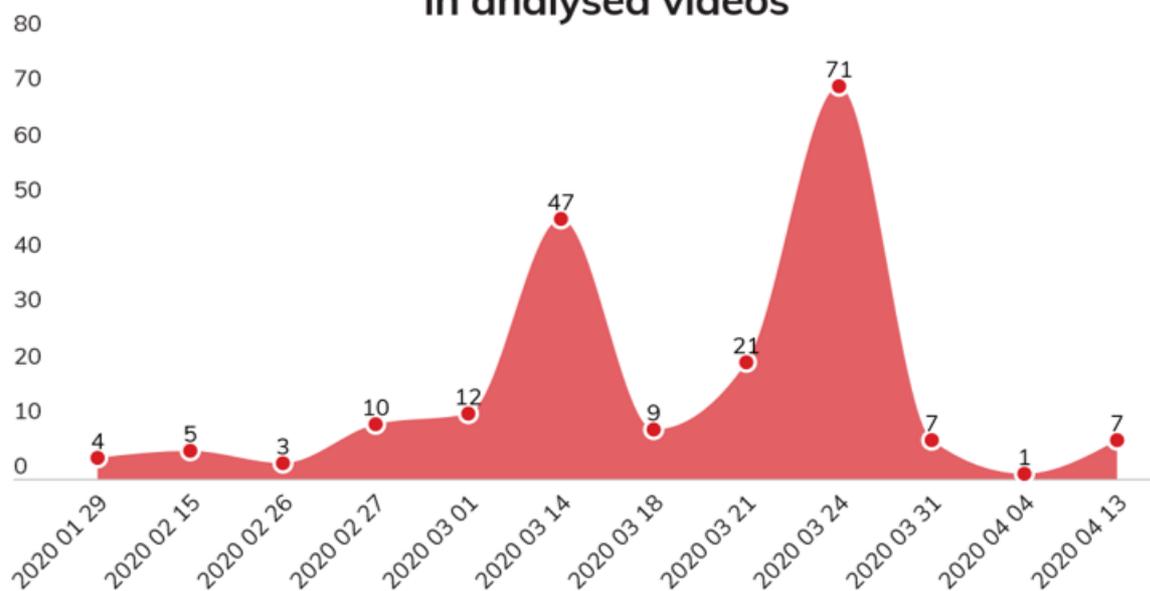
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Debunk EU research: conspiracy theories in Lithuania spread nearly 200 false statements – from scary delusions to dangerous disinformation

As demand for information during the COVID-19 pandemic increased, its supply was also filled by supporters of various conspiracy theories, and they are increasingly using the video format. Unproven treatments for coronavirus, charges against Bill Gates, military tribunal for Barack Obama, arrest of Celine Dion, US military invasion to Europe, pedophilia, 5G threat to the neuroimmune system – everything fits in one video of conspiracy theory. Analysts at Debunk EU have investigated 12 videos in 7 YouTube channels. Nearly 200 false statements have been identified here, and these videos have been viewed by 1.2 million to date. Debunk EU warns of long-term consequences – petitions against 5G alone have already been signed by about 25,000 Lithuanians.

“Once facing a tangle of hard-to-believe facts and fiction, most of us don’t take them seriously – who could even believe in conspiracy theories? However, according to studies, there are far more believers than we could imagine. For example, the research of University of Chicago reveals that at least one conspiracy theory is believed by half of the US population*. Therefore, this problem is actually much more serious than it looks at first sight,” says Algirdas Kazlauskas, Chief Analyst at Debunk EU.

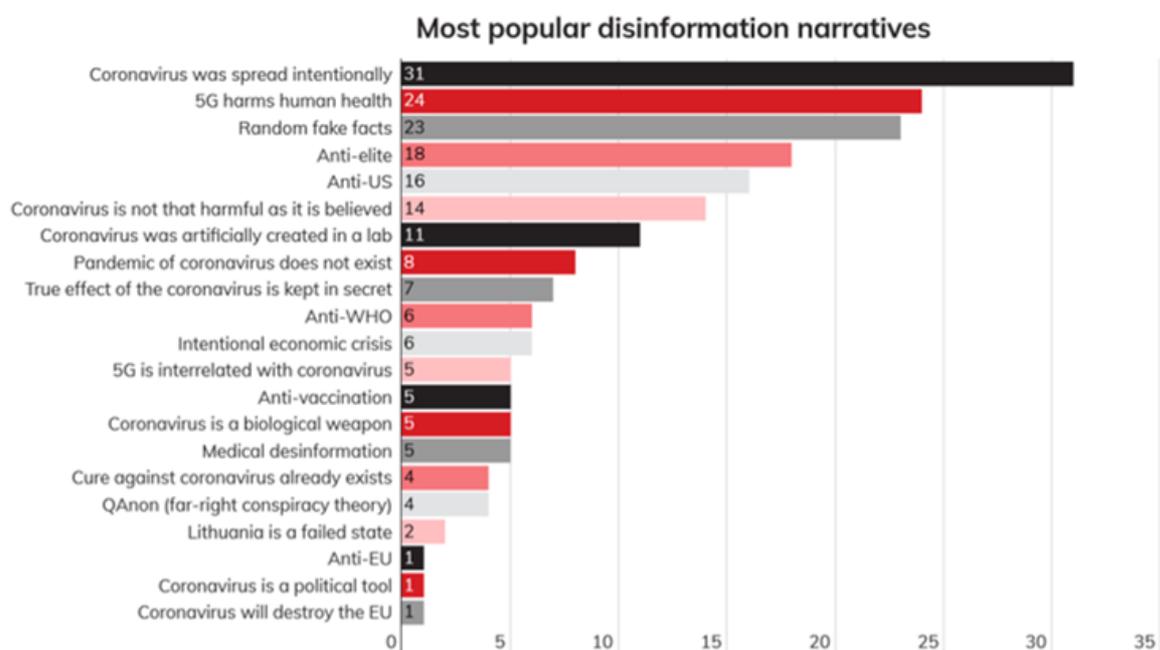
Dynamics of disinformation cases on YouTube in analysed videos



According to him, the conspiracy theories attract people at all times, and extraordinary events are favorable for their rise. “The main secret of conspiracy theories’ popularity is a compliance to the basic psychological needs: the desire to understand complex phenomena, the desire to feel safer and “control” it, or the desire to belong to a certain exclusive group.”

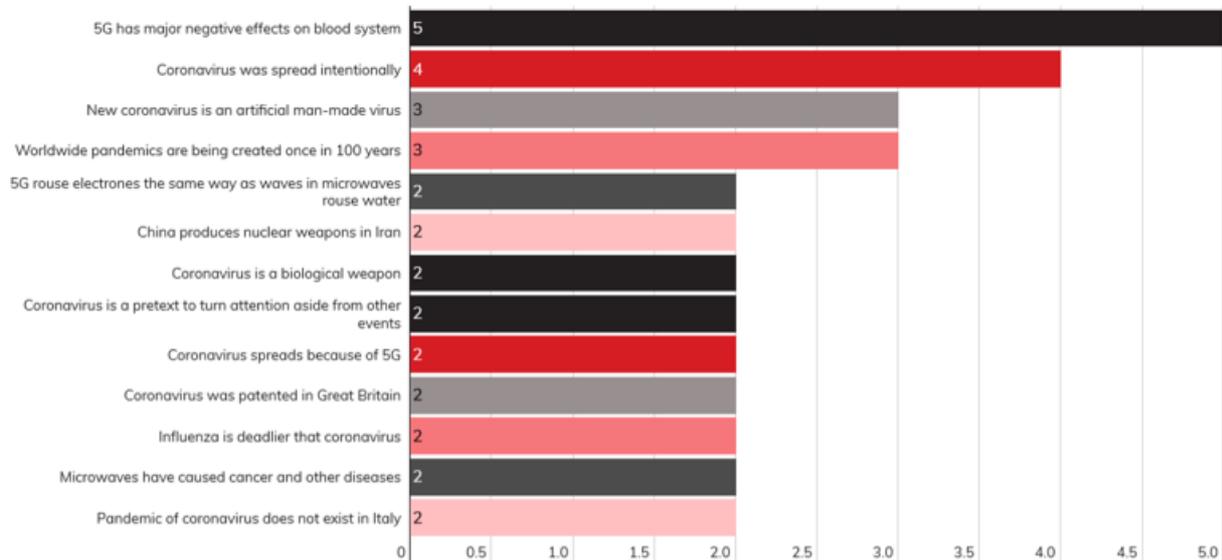
There is no specialization – everyone talks about everything

12 videos (published from January to April) were selected for Debunk EU research, they contain 197 false statements. The Debunk EU research revealed two main topics of the videos: the COVID-19 pandemic, the development of the 5G network and the alleged connection between them. The following narratives were used to develop these themes: coronavirus is artificially created in the laboratory; the COVID-19 pandemic is a pre-planned and artificially motivated process by powerful political and economic forces which seek to disrupt the current world order; the coronavirus is not so dangerous and the COVID-19 pandemic does not really exist – it is just a media conspiracy; the real truth about coronavirus is hidden from people; the 5G network is harmful to human health, so the outbreak of coronavirus and the development of the 5G network are directly related.



Despite the fact that some conspiracy theories contradict the others, they were spread by the same individuals, sometimes even discussing them in the same video. The statements range from hard-to-verify ones that require deep medical, physical or other knowledge to confirm or deny, to occasional and absurd ones like “Hillary Clinton cut a girl’s face”, “Ellen DeGeneres is a man” or “Vladimir Putin is a Samogitian”. Conspiracy theories also often deny official statistics: “Only a couple of people died of coronavirus in early March in Italy” or “There is no pandemic in Germany”. Debunk EU analysts were fact-checking the statements on the basis of official sources like the World Health Organization, NASA, the European Commission, other international organizations and verified media outlets.

Main claims related to COVID-19



The long-term consequences range from petitions to physical activities

“It is important to note that the availability of conspiracy theories is now higher than ever: the number of official views of the analyzed videos is approaching 1,5 million. Such a high level of involvement can have long-term consequences. For example, the conspiracy theory about 5G damage may affect the implementation of technology – this is already being manifested in petitions, in Lithuania alone the number of signatures is approaching 25,000. Moreover, the cases of Western countries show that 5G disinformation can also provoke active physical actions – we already have dozens of cases of reportedly burned or otherwise destroyed telecommunication towers”, A. Kazlauskas points out.

Debunk EU Chief Analyst emphasizes the importance of critical approach. “In the age of social media, the ability to select reliable information and its sources has become more important than ever. This now requires the mobilization of opinion leaders and the media to highlight these issues to the public.”

*J. Eric Oliver and Thomas J. Wood (2011). Conspiracy Theories and the Paranoid Style(s) of Mass Opinion. University of Chicago.

Debunk EU

In 2017, a team of highly qualified disinformation experts and IT development professionals united under Debunk EU project to start collaboratively countering the ever-increasing issue of disinformation in Lithuania. After acquiring funding from Google DNI and DELFI, the largest online news organization in the Baltics, the team has developed a highly advanced tool based on artificial intelligence, which can analyze more than 30,000 articles a day, by spotting the fake news in 2 minutes after the publication.

Debunk EU was noticed by such media giants as “The Financial Times” and “Deutsche Welle”. The tool has been presented in 17 countries, including the United States, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Serbia, etc.

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