The Bulgarian society has long been exposed to disinformation narratives in traditional and social media. The deterioration of media freedom on the back of the oligarchization of the media market has undermined the quality and objectivity of journalism. The media environment has been further undermined by the indiscriminate penetration of social media networks, which algorithms have further amplified sensationalist disinformation. Many cash-strapped media outlets have resorted to sensationalist content aimed at click baiting audiences and not reporting truthfully. Government and EU funds have sometimes been used to encourage and supercharge such outlets, while public media have been pressured to fall in line with the official government position.

The analysis focuses on the dissemination of popular (disinformation) narratives that target voters ahead of the Bulgarian Parliamentary elections due on 4 April 2021. It examines what are the objectives of these messages and how are they linked to the main political actors in the country.

1 The Bulgarian position in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index rankings developed by the Reporters without Borders organization has nosedived from 78th place in 2010 to 111th place (out of 180 countries) a decade later.

KEY POINTS

- Facebook has become a key instrument for political campaigning through political advertising and content creation.
- Political parties have tried to use the digital nature of the election campaign to increase their leverage through pursuing popular divisive (disinformation) narratives. These have been mostly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Bulgaria’s geopolitical orientation.
- The largest political parties have the largest share of social media interactions. Yet smaller political groups with strong pro-Russian views, have significantly increased their activity in March 2021.
- Interactions (likes, shares, comments, user clicks) of Facebook posts by pro-Russian pages and groups disseminating COVID-19 related disinformation reached more than 170,000 in March
- Another major (disinformation) narrative has been that the European Green Deal is a utopian ideal that will harm country’s economy and future development.
- Nationalist parties have focused their anti-EU rhetoric on the topic of gender norms and sexuality.
- The proliferation of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria’s captured media environment is contributing further to the deterioration of media freedom and journalistic standards.
A key question is whether certain pre-election disinformation narratives are aiding the growth of the Russian political and economic influence in Bulgaria.

Key narratives

The analytical framework includes a sample of 756 public Facebook pages and groups, which have been observed over a three-week period (between 1 March and 22 March 2021). These include mainstream media outlets and influencers, pro-Russian propaganda pages, pages that disseminate xenophobic, racist, homophobic and, in general, anti-liberal messages, as well as all the major political parties’ pages and the most influential political figures’ pages. A special cluster of COVID-related pages has also been analyzed to evaluate how political actors have leveraged different COVID narratives (including conspiracy theories) to improve their popularity among Bulgarian voters.

The assessment zooms in on the prevalence and connections to the pre-election campaign of the following four popular (disinformation) narratives:

- **COVID-19 is a hoax** or at least exaggerated, meaning that measures to restrict infections are not necessary while vaccines are dangerous and could be more harmful than the disease itself.
- **Russian energy projects** need to be supported because they improve Bulgaria’s energy security, relations with Russia and ensure economic development. The EU cannot afford to stop the Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream projects and the U.S. is selfishly meddling in domestic decisions of EU member states.
- **The European Green Deal** is ruining the Bulgarian economy leading to massive unemployment in coal regions. It is based on EU and liberal delusions that ignore the lack of reliability and excessive costs of green energy.
- **The EU is hypocritical** in its democracy and transparency demands as it enables the survival of a corrupt Bulgarian government. It promotes liberal over traditional national conservative values.

The digital election campaign

The digital nature of the election campaigns has increased the public’s susceptibility to online disinformation. They have also sought to peddle narratives that aim to confuse voters and push them to embrace political notions often not based on evidence but feed off people’s fears and insecurities in relation to the pandemic and their political preferences and choices. The pre-election campaign for the Parliamentary vote has revealed very high activity by both mainstream political actors and fringe political groups in the digital space. Facebook along with YouTube have become key instruments for political campaigning through political advertising and digital presence and content creation. The public pages of the leaders of the political parties have been leading the process of digital content creation, including the president and the prime minister. The digital activity of many political leaders has been further amplified by a number of public groups and related pages that re-share content and provide a tribute for political supporters (including troll accounts) to increase the reach of the campaign or to smear political

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2 To analyze the most prevalent pre-election disinformation narratives, the assessment employs the CrowdTangle public insights tool that tracks public Facebook groups and pages allowing for the easier sorting through a large volume of content for a given period of time. By better understanding the scope of interactions with different posts and the types of reactions to them, one could draw conclusions about the publication’s impact and the observed patterns of specific content sharing.
opponents. Media outlets with a partisan spin and/or government backing have further added exposure.

Combined, the large political parties have the largest share of social media interactions. Yet smaller political groups, some of which with strong pro-Russian and extremist views, have significantly increased their activity in March 2021. For example, Vazrazhdane (Revival), which is unlikely to surpass the electoral threshold of 4% to enter the Parliament, has taken up 15.44% of the total posts by political parties. The nationalist VMRO party has accounted for another 12.61% of the total publications. The publication of content has not necessarily translated into more interactions though. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Interaction intensity and number of posts for the main political parties**

![Diagram showing interaction intensity and number of posts for the main political parties. The x-axis represents different types of interactions: Total Interactions, Likes, Comments, Shares, and Total Posts. The y-axis represents the percentage. Each party is represented by a different color.]

*Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle Dashboards*
Key Themes

Political parties and influencers have tried to use the digital nature of the election campaign to increase their leverage through pursuing popular divisive (disinformation) narratives. These have been mostly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Bulgaria’s geopolitical orientation.

Exploiting COVID-19 Conspiracies

- **Prevalent Narratives:** Disinformation narratives about COVID-19 have been some of the most nuanced and complex in the lead up to the parliamentary elections. The main narratives are often overlapping and contradictory to one another:

i) The government’s vaccination policies are inadequate (at worst characterized as a failure and at best chaotic), ii) Chinese and Russian vaccines should be imported immediately into the country, iii) Sputnik V is effective, even better than Western vaccines, iv) Vaccines have strong side effects and are linked to deaths. The disinformation narratives have seeped into mainstream media and the posts of political parties and figures. However, the conspiracy element is more diluted, redirecting the public discussion instead towards vaccine diplomacy, i.e. the narrative that Bulgaria should be accepting Russia’s vaccine just as the claim goes Slovakia, Greece and others have done.
FOUR POPULAR (DISINFORMATION) NARRATIVES IN THE 2021 BULGARIAN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION CAMPAIGN

- **Messaging style:** Pro-Russian (including partisan) media outlets such as Bulgarian Free Television (Bulgarian Socialist Party’s TV channel), the Bulgarian subsidiary of the Russian propaganda channel Pogled Info, the pro-Russian popular online outlet ONovini and the AnonymousBG chapter have amplified the impact of the vaccine disinformation by using a strong inflammatory language. For example, AnonymousBG have linked COVID-19 vaccination to mass genocide. Additionally, nationalist political parties such as Vazrazhdane (Revival) and the Ataka party-run Alpha Television have mounted a series of posts citing claimed cases of vaccine-damage, specifically focused on the Western COVID-19 vaccines. Generally, the posts that over perform have attempted to remain neutral in tone and limit their sensationalism with the primary focus of posts being on the benefits of Bulgaria purchasing and implementing the Russian Sputnik V vaccine.

- **Data indicators:** In the first three weeks of March, there were a total of 727 posts coming from FB pages and groups of different political parties, pro-Russian outlets and mainstream channels disseminating messages linked to COVID-19 with the tallest peaks of interactions linked to COVID-19 on 5-6 March with other smaller spikes appearing regularly throughout the course of the month (10 and 16 March). The total interactions on this kind of posts during the examined period was 170,499. Zooming in on dedicated COVID-19 pages and groups only, posts are less frequent, roughly 25 posts over the three-week period, yet they still pull in between 1000-5000 interactions per post.

Figure 3. Total Interactions and Posts containing COVID-19 Narratives in Political Groups, Pro-Russian Media Outlets and Mainstream Media

Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle Dashboards
Support for Russian energy projects

- **Main narratives:** Facebook posts supporting the implementation of Russian energy projects, the TurkStream gas pipeline and the Belene nuclear power plant, are discussed most extensively on the pages and groups linked to BSP and the ruling party, GERB. The major theme is that the projects have been successful and will secure Bulgaria’s future energy independence. These narratives are more or less in line with the political-economic objectives of the two largest political parties in the country. Support for the projects is expressed by smaller pro-Russian political parties including ABV, the far-right Ataka and the nationalist VMRO. A critical perspective on the Russian energy projects as threats to Bulgaria’s democracy, sovereignty and economic independence is disseminated by the Democratic Bulgaria coalition and the Republicans for Bulgaria party of the ex-GERB second in command, Tsvetan Tsvetanov.

- **Data indicators:** There were a total of 71 posts focusing on the “pro-“ or the “anti-“ position to the projects over the studied period. A peak in interactions was reached on 22 March with another small spike in interactions occurring between 11 and 12 March.

Opposition to the Green Deal

- **Main narratives:** A major (disinformation) narrative has been that the European Green Deal is an unsustainable, utopian ideal that will not help but harm Bulgaria’s economy and future development. For example, the Vazrazhdane party Chairman, Kostadin Kostadinov’s video post condemning the Green Deal has gained the second-highest number of interactions in relation to the Green Deal with a total of 33,900 views, 2,500 reactions, 202 comments and 597 shares. Another narrative is that the opposition to the Green Deal is part and parcel of a broader slate of nationalist priorities. For example, the top overperforming post on the subject of the Green Deal was an VMRO election bulletin, which specifically includes a pledge that the party will oppose the Green Deal. This post has performed 16,800 times better than a typical post within the political parties lists with a total of 29,900 views and 806 reactions (likes, laughing faces, etc.), 497 comments and 57 views. Posts against the Green Deal policies are mixed with publications strongly condemning a possible closing of the lignite-fired power plants in Bulgaria. Almost all mainstream political parties have expressed a strong opposition against the closing of lignite plants.

Despite the prevalence of Facebook posts with a negative sentiment vis-a-vis the Green Deal, publications championing the EU-led energy transition can also be found among the 38 most overperforming posts on the topic. For example, posts from environmental NGOs have produced two of the most over performing posts on the topic, with 7,690x and 7,870x more interactions respectively. The posts discuss the urgency for climate action and the need for a coal-exit and the closure of TPP Bobov Dol.

- **Data indicators:** the coverage of anti-Green Deal (disinformation) narratives spiked on 5 and 14 March. Over the rest of the period, there were smaller spikes on 8, 11, 16, 18 and 22 March. The total number of interactions on posts related to energy transition and the Green Deal is 20,271 across 130 posts. Video posts are performing more strongly and are the main mechanisms for the dissemination of (disinformation) narratives.
There is a sense that anti-Green Deal narratives are being hidden under a broader list of issues by political candidates amongst and linked to other more populist and polarizing issues.

Figure 4. Total Interactions and Posts containing anti-Green Deal Disinformation Messages in Political Parties and Pro-Russian sources

Source: CSD based on CrowdTangle Dashboards

The Dual Nature of the Anti-EU Rhetoric

• **Main narratives:** i) There is widespread corruption in Bulgaria enabled by a captured judiciary and European institutions protecting the government; ii) the EU failing to roll-out vaccine campaigns as another evidence of its governance deficits revealing its inferiority to Russia and China; iii) the EU as a promoter of decadent values based on “Gender ideologies” and “the LGBTQ+ agenda” undermining traditional, national, orthodox values.

• **Key Actors:** The sources of anti-EU narratives have been fairly evenly spread between pro-Russian and mainstream media outlets e.g., Pogled Info, Mediapolis, Svobodna Evropa, and Kapital/Dnevnik, etc. However, despite being a popular topic, anti-EU rhetoric takes on a dual nature in the Bulgarian discourse.

Generally, nationalist parties (e.g., Vazrazhdane and VRMO) have focused their anti-EU rhetoric on the topic of gender norms and sexuality. Whereas other parties and both (problematic and mainstream) media outlets have focused disinformation messages on the vaccine rollout failure across Europe and the corruption in the Bulgarian judiciary.

• **Data indicators:** A total of 918 posts have been analyzed over the three-week period in March. Interactions on this side of the infosphere peaked around 12 March following VRMO David Alexandrov’s calls to purge the Bulgarian law from anti-family gender propaganda (on 10 March) with a surge of posts from far-right and nationalist parties. Anti-LGBTQ+ narratives have had a total of 10,531 interactions for 60 posts only making homophobic messaging by far the most widespread propaganda message in relation to the EU perceptions.
What’s Next?

The proliferation of anti-democratic propaganda in Bulgaria’s captured media environment is contributing further to the deterioration of media freedom and journalistic standards. Political parties are exploiting the capture of the Bulgarian media space and the lack of a coherent governance system for digital content creation to spread disinformation narratives including those that serve to increase Russian sharp power influence in Bulgaria. In addition, the public’s vulnerability to Russian disinformation that promotes anti-liberal, xenophobic, racist and anti-LGBT strengthens the structural problem with the lack of understanding by many Bulgarians of the nature of democratic governance. Nationalist and pro-Russian parties are exploiting these vulnerabilities to achieve an outsized negative impact on the decision-making and functioning of democratic institutions.

To counter the expansion of disinformation narratives in the Bulgarian digital space, there is a need for civil society and government institutions in Bulgaria to develop a public-private partnership approach to tackling the abuse of social media for political ends. Such manipulation can easily exploit social vulnerabilities and divisions to tilt the scales in favor of a particular candidate. Social media should be sensitized and urged to address in the local languages the disruptive effects of their platforms on the democratic public discourse, focusing in particular on polarization, extremism, and foreign propaganda. There is a need for greater cooperation with social media providers on fact checking information online and blocking divisive content. In attempt to improve the fairness of the electoral process in Bulgaria, Facebook has launched a third-party fact-checking program. Bulgaria should develop financing transparency measures related to political campaigns online that would make all spending by political actors on social media public and easily accessible.

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3 Center for the Study of Democracy, Capture Proofing Media in Southeast Europe, Policy Brief No. 98, March 2021.

4 Facebook: Journalism Project, Facebook’s Third-Party Fact-Checking Program.