Kremlin Influence on Bulgarian Facebook Amid a Global Pandemic

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INTRODUCTION

This report aims to compare and contrast two network maps of the Bulgarian Facebook information landscape drawn at distinct time frames (September 16 - October 16, 2020 and February 17 – March 19, 2021). Both maps were produced using Graphika, an AI tool for social network analysis. Employing a specialized machine-learning algorithm, Graphika identified Facebook pages (which appear as individual nodes on the map) related to a list of various Bulgarian Facebook sources input by external experts.

There has been a slight increase in the number of clusters (63 now compared to 59 in 2020) – these are Facebook pages organized according to common themes and interests. Clusters are further aggregated into groups based on content similarities. In both maps, the clusters were categorized into ten groups, with no significant changes to the group labels or the nature of the clusters contained within each group. The total number of Facebook pages (nodes) found in the new map decreased slightly from 13,179 nodes in the first map to 13,038 in the second.

For the most part, the two maps overlap in terms of content and groupings. The overarching structural pattern of the map has remained the same, namely a dense, non-polar structure representing a complex information landscape that contains numerous influential international pages often linked to mainstream domestic pages. More than 50% of the map is constituted by Facebook nodes focused on entertainment, inspirational quotes, lifestyle and sports.

Compared to the previous map, the clustered nodes in the latest iteration tend to be more homogeneous and obtain a greater density score (indicating more extensive coherence between Facebook pages). These findings, taken together, suggest an overall more consistent grouping of content on the map. Differences in the density and area coverage of individual groups and clusters are, notably, reflective of computational changes rather than substantive changes in the information landscape. While the overarching structure, consequently, remains unchanged, the updated map shifts slightly towards a more multi-polar structure, with both clearer delineations between groups and clearer patterns of connections within groups. The map, in other words, entails that sharper divisions now exist between different information bubbles.

Figure 1:
Bulgarian Facebook landscape
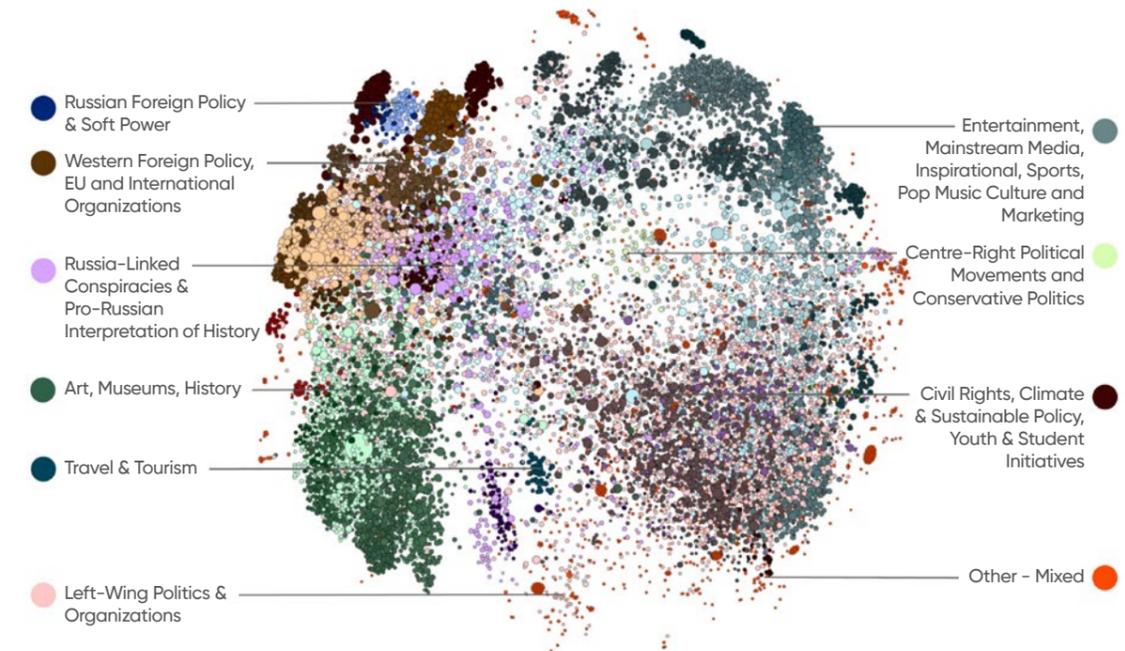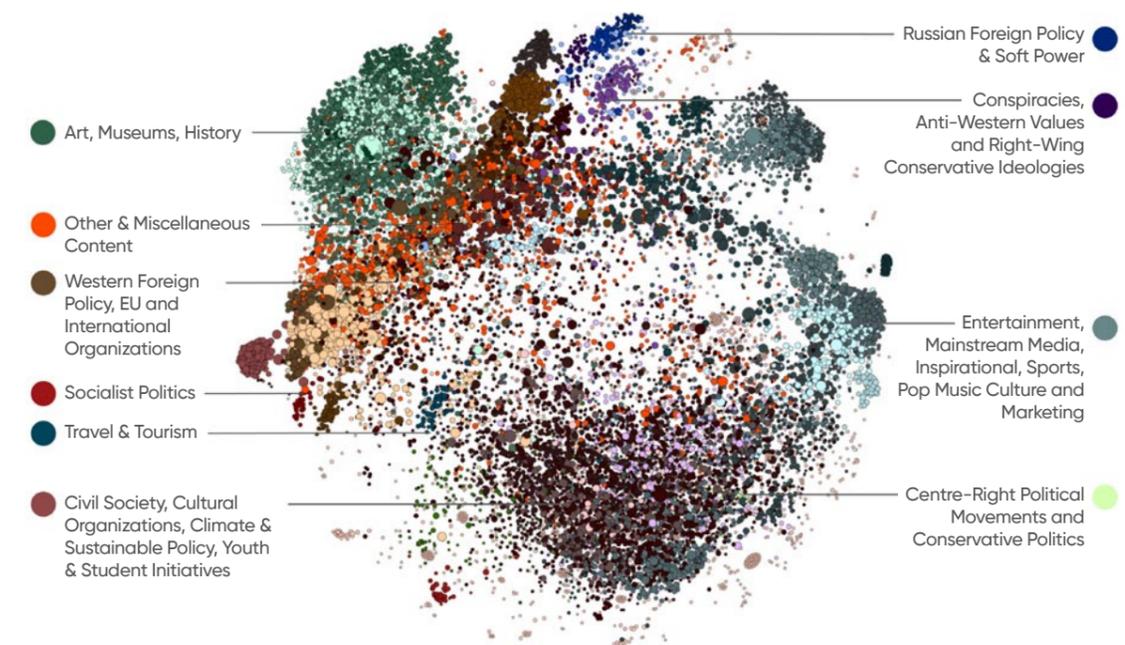(period covered: 16 September to 16 October 2020)

- Russian Foreign Policy & Soft Power
- Western Foreign Policy, EU and International Organizations
- Russia-Linked Conspiracies & Pro-Russian Interpretation of History
- Art, Museums, History
- Travel & Tourism
- Left-Wing Politics & Organizations
- Entertainment, Mainstream Media, Inspirational, Sports, Pop Music Culture and Marketing
- Centre-Right Political Movements and Conservative Politics
- Civil Rights, Climate & Sustainable Policy, Youth & Student Initiatives
- Other - Mixed

Figure 2:
Updated map of the Bulgarian Facebook landscape
(period covered: 17 February to 19 March 2021)

- Art, Museums, History
- Other & Miscellaneous Content
- Western Foreign Policy, EU and International Organizations
- Socialist Politics
- Travel & Tourism
- Civil Society, Cultural Organizations, Climate & Sustainable Policy, Youth & Student Initiatives
- Russian Foreign Policy & Soft Power
- Conspiracies, Anti-Western Values and Right-Wing Conservative Ideologies
- Entertainment, Mainstream Media, Inspirational, Sports, Pop Music Culture and Marketing
- Centre-Right Political Movements and Conservative Politics

COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW OF THE FACEBOOK MAPS

The Civil Society, Cultural Organizations, Climate & Sustainable Policy, Youth & Student Initiatives group, which contains around 3,700 nodes, comprises the largest share of the map. The group indeed accounted for 28% of both the first and second maps. The runner up encompasses the Entertainment, Mainstream Media, Inspirational, Sports, Pop Music Culture and Marketing group, its reach measured at 24% in the first and 20% in the updated map. These innocuous groups together accounted for over 65% of all nodes in both the older and updated maps.

Pages pertaining to political discussion, foreign policy issues and party politics make up approximately 12% of all pages on both maps. The Western Foreign Policy, International Organizations and the EU group ranked most prevalent in volume herein (over 8% of all nodes on both maps). The Russian Foreign Policy & Soft Power group, meanwhile, constituted approximately 1.5% of all nodes on both maps, experiencing a miniscule annual decrease in nodes. The smallest two groups remain Socialist Politics and Centre-right Political Movements and Conservative Politics, accounting for around 1% each.

A new cluster called Libertarianism (which was not featured in the first map) was included in the group on Conspiracies, Anti-Western Values and Right-Wing Conservative Ideologies. Content from this group primarily originates in the US but goes on to be consumed internationally. Comprising less than 1% of the Facebook space in Bulgaria, the new Libertarianism cluster shares its group with two others: one tailored to Anonymous-related content and anti-establishment conspiracy theories and another pertaining to Russophile interpretations of history, patriotic ideas, socialist nostalgia, and anti-liberal narratives. These nodes exert direct influence on similar far-right and far-left pages in Bulgaria and are engaged in only limited interaction with Russian civil society and cultural institutions. Similarly, the new libertarianism cluster is located in relatively close proximity to the Russian Foreign Policy and Soft Power group, whose connections with the other two clusters were already established in the first map and confirmed in the updated version.
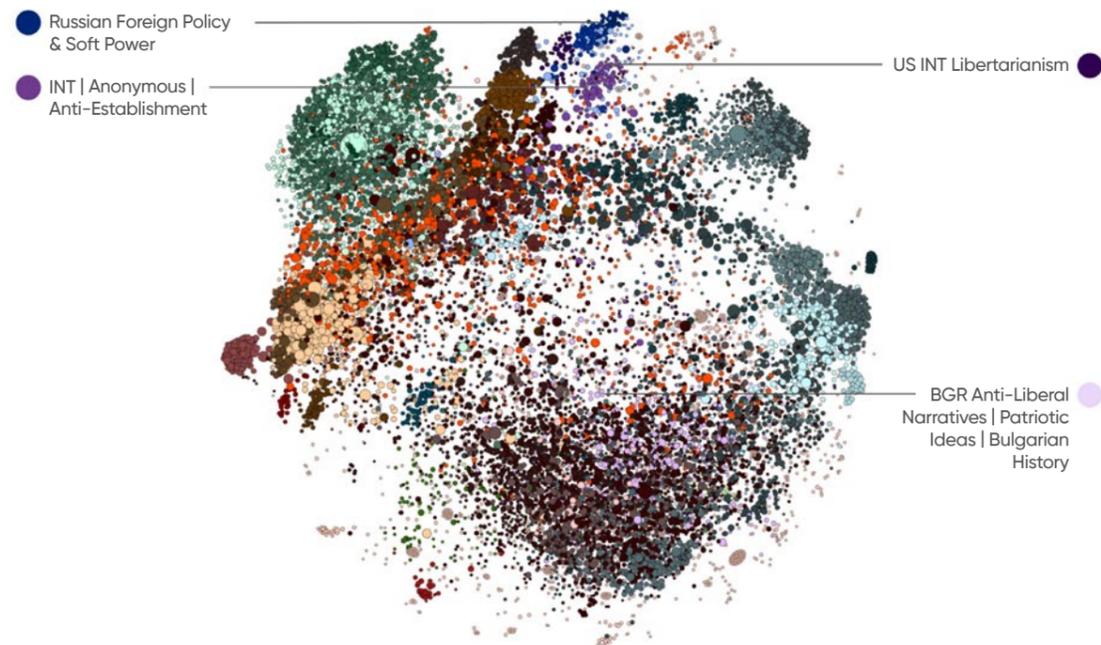
Relatively prominent examples of pages in the libertarianism cluster include the official pages of the Cato Institute[1], the Heritage Foundation[2] and Ron Paul[3], pages associated with the Info Wars show and its host Alex Jones, and pages that refer to "redpilling"[4] (some of these seem to have since been removed by Facebook). Most of these pages are based in the US and exhibit an ideologically charged opposition to and severe distrust of mainstream media, government regulation and state authorities in general. Numerous pages from this cluster promote libertarianism through sensationalism, polarization and the use of anti-liberal narratives and conspiracy theories including about COVID-19 and vaccines.[5] Their content often corresponds to disinformation narratives and conspiracies propagated by Kremlin and Kremlin-associated sources.

The Libertarianism cluster has emerged within a context that has witnessed Bulgarian society grow an increasing interest in global politics and cultural developments (namely the so-called culture war). This cluster, therefore, likely reflects the heightened popularity of American-style right-wing conservatism in Bulgaria and the rising activism of far-right movements over the past decade.[6] These ideologies have found a favourable audience, with Bulgarian society generally espousing conservative social values and remaining receptive to anti-liberal narratives and disinformation.[7]

The "cultural war" narrative has been instrumentalized by political groups in Bulgaria who have sought to reinvigorate centre-right and far-right politics during the past two general elections (2017 and 2021). The cultural divide, real or imagined, is further exploited by political figures to galvanize popular support against the perceived Western/global liberal encroachment on conservative values. Anti-liberal disinformation has seeped into the mainstream space and become an important factor influencing public opinion, a primary example being the 2018 Istanbul Convention, which has now become divisive.[8] The pro-government outlet, The Conservative, is an illustration of this amplification of anti-liberal narratives.[9] Its authors routinely describe liberal NGOs in Bulgaria as "heralders of neo-Marxism" - Russian disinformation narratives are only all too eager to pick on this rising polarisation in international and local politics.[10]

RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Figure 3:
Interconnections between Russian government channels and problematic pages in the updated map (visualized in 2D)

- Russian Foreign Policy & Soft Power
- INT | Anonymous | Anti-Establishment
- US INT Libertarianism
- BGR Anti-Liberal Narratives | Patriotic Ideas | Bulgarian History

The pseudo-patriotic cluster continues to serve as a bridge enabling Russian propaganda and problematic content to extend their reach to mainstream discussions (located centrally in the Facebook network) and garner a broader audience. There are considerable links, for example, between the (1) pseudo-patriotic cluster, which is part of the Conspiracies group, (2) the Travel Blogs, Tourism, Exploration, Adventure Lifestyle cluster (176 pages), part of the Travel and Tourism group, and (3-4) two Bulgarian Entertainment-Inspirational Quotes clusters that are situated even more centrally on the map.

An overview of the top pages from the cluster, employing the CrowdTangle social media monitoring tool, reveals that these pages (primarily Bulgarian) maintained roughly the same volume and frequency of posts between March-April 2020 and March-April 2021.[11] Meanwhile, the conspiracy-theory spreading page Eye to See[12] and the nationalist page I am a nationalist, both among the most problematic pages in the cluster, have attracted new followers over the past six months. The two pages have seen growth of 5% and 3%, respectively, and secured 4,511 and 2,267 new members.

The orientation of the top overperforming posts from this cluster also changed over the past year.[13] In March-April 2020, the most popular posts consistently included conspiracy theories related to COVID-19 shared by Eye to See[14] and pseudo-patriotic posts by I am a nationalist.[15] These posts proved disproportionately more popular than the average interaction rate of the cluster, amassing hundreds of thousands of views and thousands of interactions. The top posts in March-April 2021, by contrast, came from the socialist nostalgia page Memories from the People's Republic and the anti-establishment and conspiracy theory laden Svobodno Slovo page.[16]

While many of these 2021 posts were also problematic, both their bellicosity and popularity pale in comparison to the top posts from March-April 2020 whose overperformance scores ranked around ten times higher relative to the top posts a year later. The 2021 period included posts by the Facebook page Memories from the People's Republic that glorified Bulgaria's former Communist ruler Todor Zhivkov, the country's industrial production capabilities during the Communist regime and the extremely close relations between Bulgaria and the USSR during the Cold War.[17] Posts by Svobodno Slovo ranked third in overperformance in the 2021 period – these posts opposed GERB, the ruling political party at the time, and backed President Rumen Radev.[18]

While posts by Memories from the People's Republic and Svobodno Slovo garnered less reach than the COVID-19-centered posts by Eye to See a year prior, they are, nevertheless, reflective of the consistent and popular circulation of pro-Russian interpretations of history and narratives that also support local pro-Russian political leaders. The overperforming posts from March-April 2021, furthermore, were considerably more closely related to domestic politics (namely the parliamentary elections held on 4 April 2021). In both maps, the pseudo-patriotic cluster finds itself centrally located and serving as the primary gateway for pro-Russian propaganda and narratives to seep into more popular channels.

A primary conclusion from these observations is that the COVID-19 pandemic and an accompanying information overload exerted the most pronounced effect on the Bulgarian Facebook information landscape in 2020. With interest in the momentous crisis waning by March-April 2021, the traction of popular conspiratorial pages and posts also subsided dramatically. These posts were instead supplanted by relatively less bombastic and considerably less popular (but still problematic) items that extol the country's communist past and promote the views of pro-Russian politicians.

The pandemic, in addition to amplifying disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories concerning COVID-19, also contributed to the development of harmful content facilitating pseudo-patriotic ideas and foreign malign influence. The varied national government reactions to the pandemic and ongoing vaccine (geo)politics have influenced domestic politics, with some political figures seeking to benefit from these dynamics. In March-April 2021, a story concerning the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP)'s parliament bid to start negotiations with Russia on the procurement of the Sputnik V vaccine garnered widespread traction.[19] BSP, the successor to the Bulgarian Communist Party that ruled until 1989, has been an ardent proponent of closer ties to Russia. The Russian influence group, moreover, is generally located relatively close to the Socialist Politics group.

Despite a low heterophily score between Socialist Politics and the Russian influence groups[20], closer scrutiny of the left-wing group reveals that there are key bridge nodes that assist Russian narratives extend into left-wing political conversations. One such account is that of Rusofili,[21] a Bulgarian NGO that advocates closer ties with Russia. Its leader, Nikolai Malinov, founded the pro-Russian Revival of the Homeland party and was charged with spying for Russia in 2019. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, he more recently offered to donate 1,000 Sputnik V doses to the Bulgarian Red Cross.[22]

Figure 4:
**Interconnections between Russian Foreign Policy and Soft Power,
Socialist Politics and pseudo-patriotism** (visualized in 2D)
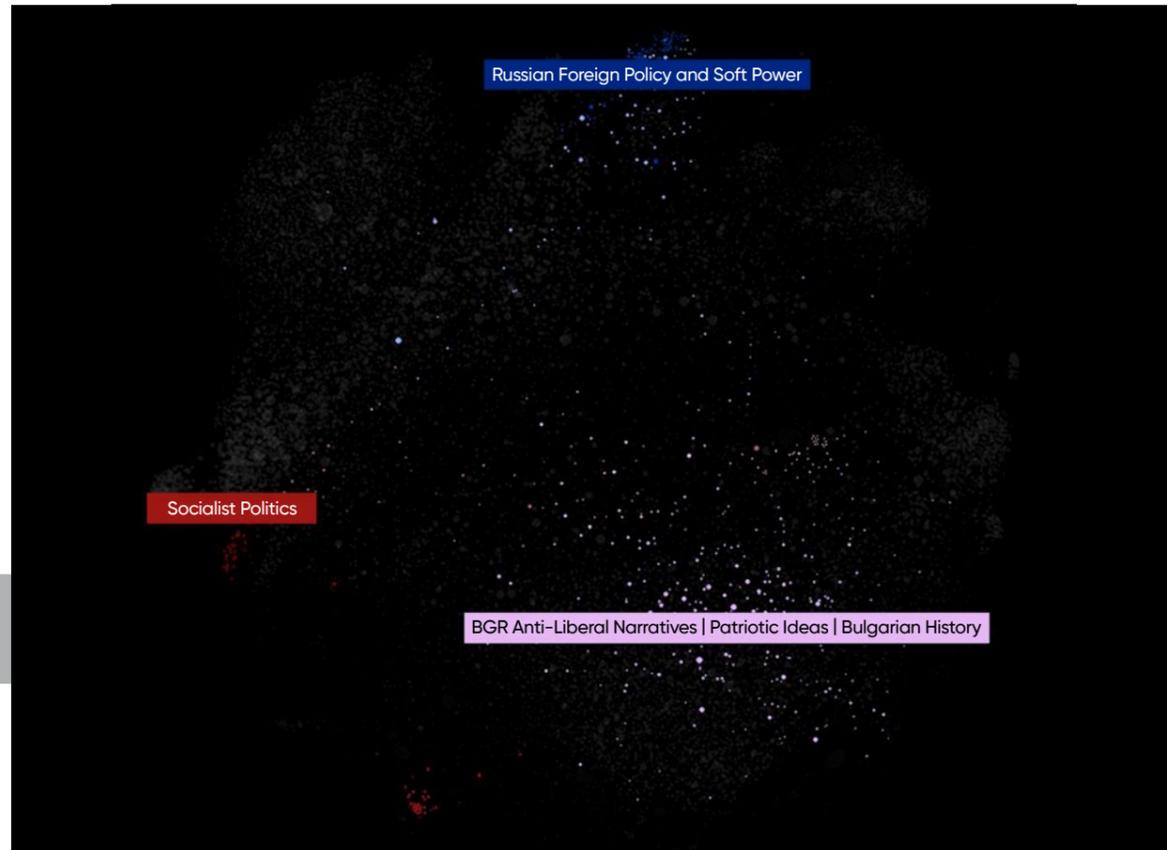
WHAT'S NEXT?

The Bulgarian Facebook information space is predominantly composed of a dispersed group of innocuous pages comprising entertainment-themed content and accounts of famous athletes and mainstream media organizations. Pro-Kremlin influence in Bulgaria is linked mostly to left-wing political pages and some nationalistic accounts that advance pro-Russian interpretations of Bulgarian history. The latter pages are situated in a cluster in close proximity to mainstream pages, thereby indicating a possible channel through which Russian disinformation, intermixed with general content, could be disseminated to a broader audience.

Notable substantive changes to Bulgaria's Facebook ecosystem over the past year pertain to the content of the leading posts from problematic sources in the pseudo-patriotic cluster. Tremendously popular and fervent posts that sought to espouse nationalism and propagate COVID-19 conspiracy theories were supplanted by posts extolling the virtues of the former communist regime and lending support to leading pro-Russian political figures in Bulgaria. These posts, relatively less belligerent in tone, proved, notably, less popular. A Libertarianism cluster not present in the first iteration of the map, additionally, was identified by Graphika and categorized into the Conspiracies, Anti-Western Values and Right-wing Conservative Ideologies group. Despite its small size, this cluster sits near the Russian Foreign Policy and Soft Power group and disseminates disinformation narratives and conspiracy theories that often overlap with those originating from the Kremlin.

To counter the expansion of disinformation narratives in Bulgaria's social media space, there is a need for[23]:

▶ A public-private partnership approach to combating the exploitation of social media for political ends.

▶ Greater cooperation with social media providers to fact check information online and block divisive content.

▶ The financing of transparency measures for online election campaigns to ensure that all spending by political candidates and entities on social media is public and easily accessible.

▶ Political commitment to develop counter- or alternative-narratives that foster tolerance, social acceptance of otherness and the upholding of civil liberties and human rights.

▶ Facebook and other social media networks should be steered towards addressing (in the respective local languages) the disruptive effects of their platforms on debate and civic discourse with an emphasis on preventing polarization, extremism and foreign propaganda.

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1 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/CatoInstitute/.

2 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/heritagefoundation.

3 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/ronpaul.

4 In far-right culture, "redpilling" refers to the process of inducing others into far-right movements. The notion comes from a famous scene from the 1999 movie The Matrix that sees the main hero choosing between grim reality (a red pill) and ignorance (a blue pill).

5 Examples of problematic content and disinformation include the following posts from the Facebook pages of Lawrence Reed, Avoid T.V. News, We love the Alternative Media, Justin Wallis, and Reason Magazine.

6 Dzhekova, Rositsa. National Approaches to Extremism: Bulgaria Country Report. European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2020.

7 Filipova, Rumena and Stefanov, Ruslan. Democracy in Bulgaria: still fragile after 30 years of transition. Bratislava: GLOBSEC.

8 Council of Europe. (2019). Bulgaria should counter harmful narratives endangering human rights and step-up efforts to fight hate speech and domestic violence.

9 Zaprianov, Ioan. (2019). Conservatism: smoke or fire. Capital.

10 Iliev, Kuzman. (2020). The hurricane of neo-Marxism defeated the West. The Conservative. Affiliated politicians and experts writing for the platform described the Istanbul Convention as a "gender-based dictatorship" as recently as March 2021.
   Dzambaski, Angel. (2021). The Globalist Pandemic. The Conservative

11 CrowdTangle is a social media monitoring tool from Facebook that allows researchers to collect and analyze various quantitative data related to public pages and groups. Two samples of overperforming posts by the ten most followed pages in this cluster were analyzed – one covering the period from 1 March to 30 April 2020 and another covering the period from 1 March to 30 April 2021.

12 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/okodavidi.

13 CrowdTangle calculates the overperformance score by comparing the actual number of interactions for a post with the expected number of interactions. The benchmark for expected number of interactions is calculated based on the last 100 posts of the relevant post type (links, photos, status, etc...) by the same account. A full overview of how the overperformance score is calculated is available on CrowdTangle.

14 The post in question that most overperformed March-April 2020 by Eye to See, involving COVID-19 conspiracies, is available on Facebook. The fourth most overperforming post in that period, also about COVID-19 conspiracies, was shared by the same page. It is also available on Facebook.

15 The second most overperforming post in March-April 2020 by I am a nationalist is available on Facebook. The third most overperforming post in that period was by the same page and is also available on Facebook.

16 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/media.svobodnoslovo.

17 The posts are available on Facebook here, here and here.

18 The posts by Svobodno Slovo are available on Facebook here, here and here.

19 RFE/RL. (2021). Парламентът отхвърли предложението на БСП за купуване на руската ваксина [The parliament rejected BSP's proposal to buy the Russian vaccine]. Available at: https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31135062.html.

20 A heterophily score is a precise measure of connections between groups or between clusters in a map, i.e. a higher score indicates closer connection between members of a specific network.

21 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/rusofilibg-835502939799373/.

22 Eurocom. (2021). ПП „Възраждане на Отечеството" предлага да дари 1000 дози от „Спутник V" на БЧК ["Revival of the Homeland" offers to donate 1000 doses of Sputnik V to the Bulgarian Red Cross]. Available at: https://eurocom.bg/new/pp-vzrazhdane-na-otechestvoto-predlaga-da-dari-1000-dozi-ot-sputnik-v-na-bchk.

23 CSD. Countering Kremlin's Media Influence in Europe. Sofia: CSD, 2021.