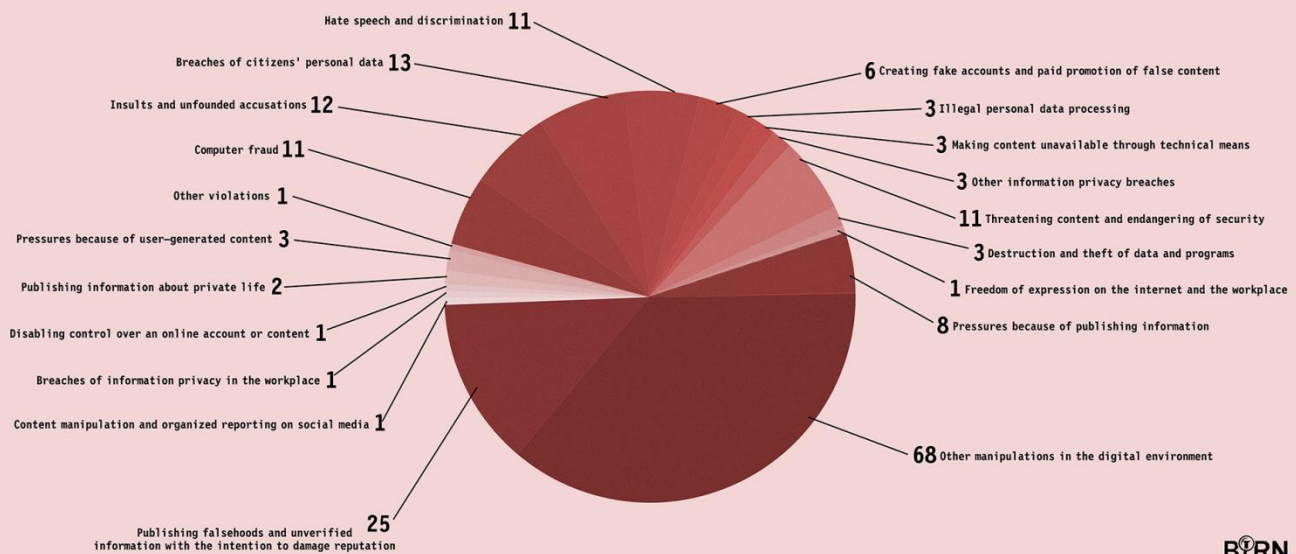# From Cures to Curses, Manipulation Flourishes in the Digital Environment

During the COVID—19 pandemic in Central and Southeastern Europe, more than half of digital rights violations were related to propaganda, disinformation, falsehoods and the publication of unverified information, BIRN monitoring shows.

From January 26 to May 26, we collected 163 cases of breaches of the digital rights in Hungary, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, Romania and North Macedonia, of which 68 are linked with manipulation in the digital environment, while 25 are related to publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation.

The number of cases per day (26.1–26.5.)

BIRN digital rights monitoring, developed together with SHARE Foundation, has shown that citizens were the most affected parties, featuring in 126 cases; state institutions or state officials were violating rights in 37 cases.

States rarely addressed the abuses arising from these violations and in 45 cases the perpetrators were unknown, while 139 had had no outcome.

Eight cases were the result of pressure related to the publication of information, 12 were linked with insults and unfounded accusations and 11 were hate speech and discrimination.

Health and personal data breaches featured in 18 cases, computer fraud took place on 11 occasions, while destruction and theft of data and programmes happened in three cases.

The total number of violations per category

Hate speech and discrimination 11
Breaches of citizens' personal data 13
Insults and unfounded accusations 12
Computer fraud 11
Other violations 1
Pressures because of user-generated content 3
Publishing information about private life 2
Disabling control over an online account or content 1
Breaches of information privacy in the workplace 1
Content manipulation and organized reporting on social media 1
Publishing falsehoods and unverified information with the intention to damage reputation 25

6 Creating fake accounts and paid promotion of false content
3 Illegal personal data processing
3 Making content unavailable through technical means
3 Other information privacy breaches
11 Threatening content and endangering of security
3 Destruction and theft of data and programs
1 Freedom of expression on the internet and the workplace
8 Pressures because of publishing information
68 Other manipulations in the digital environment

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Beyond the countries listed above, BIRN noticed an unprecedented rise of digital harm in Montenegro and Turkey, where arbitrary arrests and data breaches took place.

Hackers, data breaches and illegal processing

Leaked documents, fake websites, publication of citizens' personal and health data breaches have been a trademark of the ongoing pandemic, but the scale and consequences of the breaches and illegal processing of data have yet to be established in the upcoming period.

Speculation about the number and identity of COVID - infected persons led to the mass exposure of people's personal and private data on social media and messaging platforms. In some cases, the leaks were small in terms of data, but the gravity of the action was serious, especially in situations where patients' data were revealed.

The most severe cases were reported in Croatia, North Macedonia and Montenegro.

In March, in Croatia, a message containing a list of infected patients was shared among people living on the island of Murter, mostly through messaging apps. The local police office told BIRN that they were "conducting investigations and will ... take the measures and actions prescribed by the law".

Illegal personal data processing and privacy breaches took place in North Macedonia as well. The Agency for Personal Data Protection filed criminal charges against an unknown person for publishing the personal data of citizens living in the town of Kumanovo. The perpetrator published various lists on social networks of Kumanovo residents suffering from the coronavirus, including their names, dates of birth and locations.

Citizens of Montenegro suffered most from stigmatisation and violation of personal data due to several leaks of COVID-19 patients' records. The infected patients' identities were revealed in posts on social media, sparking hate speech against them. In one case, a medical staffer in the Health Centre in the capital, Podgorica, was arrested for the crime of unauthorised collection and use of personal information.
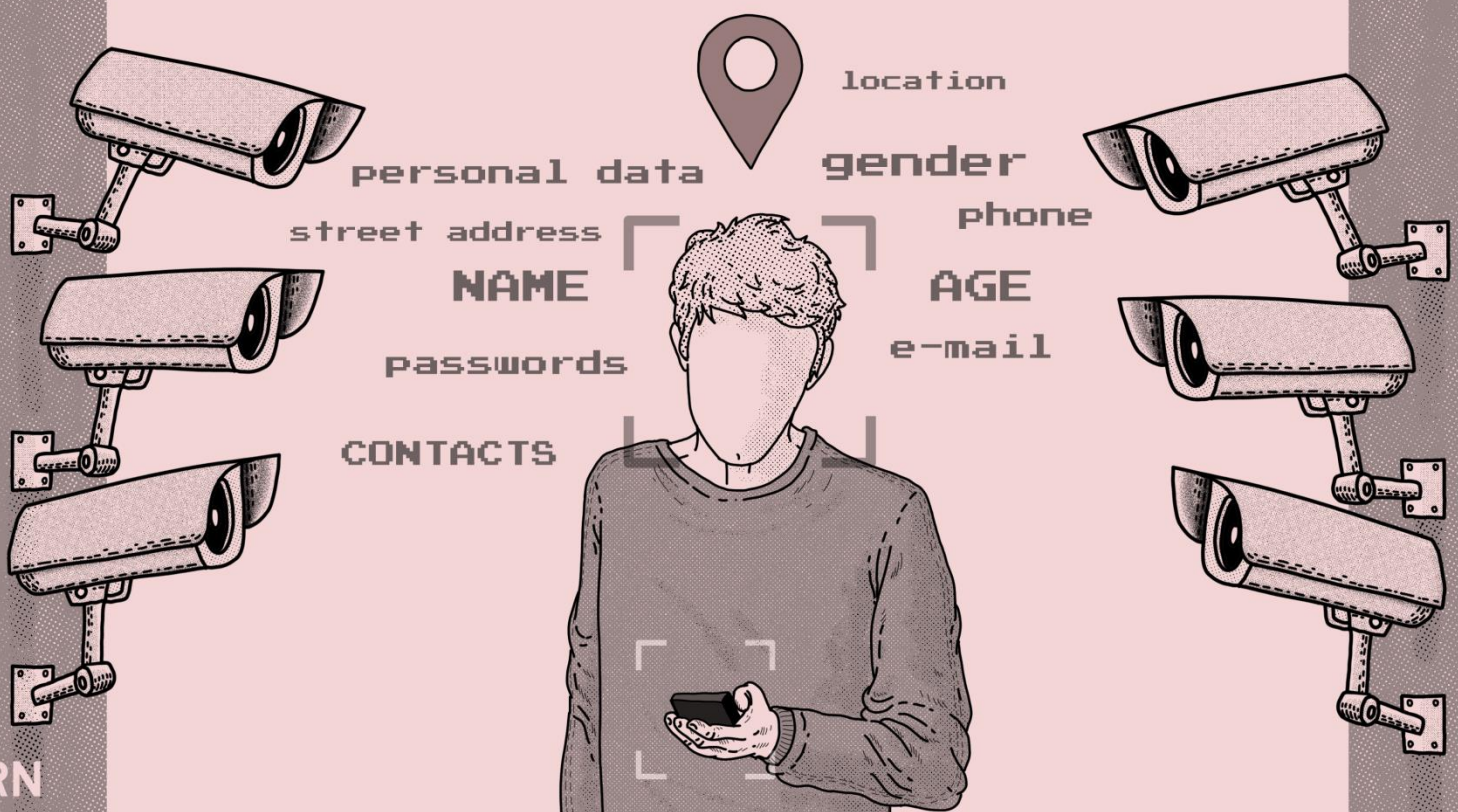
The public in Serbia became concerned when it was discovered that the login credentials for COVID-19, Serbia's information system for entry, analysis and storage of health data during the pandemic [were publicly available](#) on a health institution website for eight days.

This naming and shaming tactic was not limited to those who were infected. It also included citizens who were violating self-isolation measures. Often, governments were those revealing personal information.

In Bosnia's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, authorities launched a [website](#) where they published the names of people who did not adhere to the entity's self-isolation measures. This list can still be found online.

In April, two nurses from the University Clinical Hospital in Mostar, in Bosnia's other entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, were caught recording and sharing conversations inside the hospital, revealing the faces and data of patients.

As a measure against the spread of the coronavirus, Montenegro's government published a list of individuals put in self-isolation after returning home from abroad. The lists, structured by municipalities, include the individuals' names, surnames, date when they were in isolation, and home addresses. The list was removed a month after it was published. Montenegro's Constitutional court [agreed to examine](#) whether the government violated the human rights of citizens ordered to self-isolate during the coronavirus by publishing their names.

In Croatia, the government shut down the website samoizolacija.hr, which called on people to report others who violated self-isolation rules, as it was fraudulently collecting personal data.

Citizens have also been intimidated by hacker attacks and fraudulent messages or emails, usually trying to collect their personal information or

request payments to a foreign bank or crypto-currency accounts. Internet abuses have become frequent and evident, while cybercriminals have taken advantage of the current situation created by the COVID-19 epidemic.

Exploiting people's fear of COVID-19, scams, phishing campaigns and cyber-attacks were most present in Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, North Macedonia and Romania. The Romanian cybersecurity giant Bitdefender said they "have risen by 475 per cent in March as compared to the previous month", and the numbers were expected to keep increasing.

In Serbia, bank customers received fraudulent SMS messages asking them to provide their personal data, such as unique codes, bank account numbers, etc, regarding the payment of pensions.

A scam in Hungary spread in sponsored Facebook posts promised everyone 200 euros if they took part in a gambling game. The "game" sought an initial payment for participation. In one other case in Hungary, police detained two persons for online fraud. Fraudsters were advertising the online sale of masks, but when buyers transferred payment, they did not ship anything. The victims included private persons, doctors and pharmacies.

In Romania and North Macedonia, people received trojan viruses sent in the name of the police. Victims received an email telling them that they were being investigated by the authorities and should open an attachment to find out more about what they had to do.

Emails in North Macedonian claiming to come from the Interior Ministry were sent to citizens in April, asking them to report to the police stations for an investigation. The emails also contained a faked signature from the state secretary of the Interior Ministry, Magdalena Nestorovska. She later wrote on Facebook that the messages were false and aimed only to spread panic.
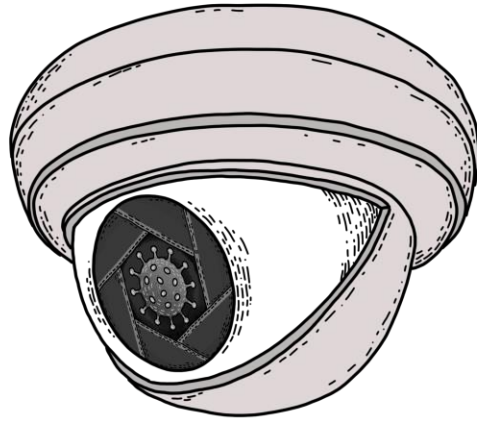
In May, a hacker group, known as the "Strong Greek Army", carried out a cyber-attack in North Macedonia and hacked the finance and economy ministries websites and then tweeted a list of emails and passwords of staffers working in the ministries.

The Croatian National Computer Emergency Response Team, CERT, also said phishing campaigns had increased and are trying to exploit the pandemic to convince users to run malicious codes on their computers.

The Twitter account of the Croatian site koronavirus.hr, set up to provide information about the coronavirus, reported on March 20 that fake messages collecting citizens' personal data were circulating in the digital environment. The sender of the message, signed as MUP HR (the Interior Ministry), asked the recipients to send copies of their ID documents.

CARNET, the Croatian state institution for information and communication technology in schools, reported problems with online classes due to a DDOS attack. Police said a criminal investigation was underway to identify the perpetrators.

Look at the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! No, it's a drone.

Allegations about the surveillance techniques used by states are yet to be confirmed. But some states, such as Croatia and Turkey, have made clear their use of drones in their fight against the coronavirus.

In Istanbul, police started to use [drones equipped with loudspeakers](#) to urge people to return to their homes. When the drone detects a person in the street, it played the following recorded message: "I am a police drone. Dear Istanbullites, staying home is vitally important for you and your loved ones' health. Please do not go out unless it is unavoidable," the drone message says.

Likewise, in Croatia the regional office in Osijek of the Civil Protection Authorities introduced aerial surveillance systems, using drones to monitor implementation of social distancing measures. Police reported recording several violations of measures implemented by National Civil Protection Authorities, including several young men playing on a football field in the eastern city of Osijek, which was discovered by a drone. In the fight against the spread of the coronavirus epidemic, two more towns (Virovitica and Rijeka) started to monitor public areas for coronavirus infractions with drones.

Online space overwhelmed with threats, insults and discrimination

During the pandemic, while some countries limited the scope of the freedom of speech, the enjoyment of this right often led to threats, insults and discriminatory posts and hate campaigns.

This report explores the boundaries of free speech through the following types of violations:

- Hate speech and discrimination
- Threatening content and endangering of security
- Insults and unfounded accusations
- Falsehoods and unverified information directed towards damaging reputation

In total, more than 15 per cent of all monitored cases include one of these violations. The biggest number - 25 reported cases - were linked with falsehoods and unverified information directed towards damaging reputation.

Additionally, the categories from this section were frequently combined with creating fake accounts and paid promotion of false content; other manipulations in the digital environment and pressures because of publishing information.

The most commonly affected parties were journalists, medical professionals and citizens in quarantine.

Discriminatory posts and actions were directed mostly towards refugees, Chinese and Jewish people, women and the Roma community, with the largest number of cases occurring in Hungary.

As the virus spread, Chinese people living and working in the region were subjected to discriminatory language and practices. The first such case was noticed in Bosnia and Herzegovina on January 26, where the Izdvojeno.ba portal published an article filled with misinformation on the virus and its way of spreading while demanding a ban on the entry of Chinese tourists. The article created unjustified fears and veered into subjective conclusions, claiming that Chinese tourists had come to Bosnia because of its "undue display of hospitality", and adding that "we must ban them from staying in our country."

In early February, Sylvi Body, a well-known Hungarian photo model, posted a message on Instagram about the coronavirus, calling for the closure of the Hungarian border and referring to Chinese people with the derogatory term "ferdeszemű" ["slanted eyes"].

In other cases, migrants were blamed for the coronavirus. The pro-government media in Hungary reported that the virus arrived in Europe, in Italy, via a Pakistani migrant who refused to self-quarantine. This information was deemed fake news.

Hate speech cases were also very present in May when the main targets were Jewish people in Croatia and Roma communities in Romania. In Croatia, an article claimed that the coronavirus targets non-Jews and that the pandemic was created to bring about the abolition of paper money, while in Romania an MP has been fined for a Facebook post where he offensively linked Roma people with the spread of COVID-19.

Gender-based discrimination was reported in Serbia, where the victims were predominantly politically engaged individuals and journalists who criticise

the government. The deputy director of the Institute for Public Health of Serbia, Dr Darija Kisic Tepavcevic, one of Serbia's main experts on the COVID-19 response, was targeted with misogynistic insults on social media, mainly commenting on her appearance. Other victims of such attacks were female journalists. A picture of the N1 journalist Zaklina Tatalovic, taken at the COVID-19 press conference, was shared online with offensive body-shaming comments by the editor of a pro-government tabloid in Serbia.

Hate speech on social media was also a product of various false items of information about the health status of quarantined citizens who were criticised for returning to home from abroad. At the beginning of April, in North Macedonia, a citizen published a post on Facebook in which he called for the lynching of people in quarantine, and for the hotels where they are staying to be burned down.

People who got infected by the coronavirus not only faced a hard time fighting the disease but they were also subjected to abuse online. A resident of the Bosnian town of Lukavac received threats and insults via social media networks from neighbours and other residents after it came to light that she had come back from Miami after working on a cruise ship, and had tested positive for COVID-19. Threats were also directed towards her family. The victim said it had driven her to have suicidal thoughts, characterising the attacks as a "lynching".

Threats and calls for violence against the police in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were found on Facebook. In both cases, authorities reacted promptly and perpetrators were identified and detained. By contrast, in North Macedonia, two police officers were fined for having taunted and offended people via social networks.

Violations related to damaging reputation predominantly affected governments' political opponents, independent media and journalists. In

Serbia, a Facebook page named "COVID 19" began to target prominent journalists, opposition activists and former state institution representatives. The only thing all these parties had in common was that they had publicly criticised the government.

Serbia was the country with the largest number of posts aimed at damaging the reputation of independent journalists. In three of four cases of publishing falsehoods, the journalists were women.

Journalists were also targeted in North Macedonia and Hungary.

In three cases, the clear intention was to damage the reputation of a state institution (in North Macedonia and Croatia) or a state official (in Hungary). The case from Hungary combined publication of false information and carefully selected distribution of a falsified letter of the Human Resources Minister. The fake letter stated that the number of people who died from illnesses related to COVID-19 could not be made public and that other diseases should be cited as their cause of death. The letter also contained false information about the number of COVID-19 related deaths in the country. In this case, the Hungarian police launched an investigation.

One of the cases that started in February received its outcome on March 25. This was a case from Romania, where the Ministry of the Interior ordered the "removal at source" of an online news article published by the website bpnews.ro.

Pressures and arrests for publishing information

Due to the highly controlled media landscape and poor level of media literacy, the public was overwhelmed with opposing information and its difficulty in recognising false and misleading information was far higher during the pandemic than usual. At the same time, citizens' need for timely and proper information has never been bigger.

While the flow of information continued to grow immensely, states started to massively and arbitrarily arrest citizens for posts on social media under the accusation that such behaviour could cause panic and unrest. Some countries imposed authoritarian regulations that limited the flow of information. People, media representatives and politicians were arrested and fined for their writings on social media, often without any clear criteria.

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The arrest in Serbia of the journalist Ana Lalic drew a reaction from various media and human rights organisations, such as [Reporters Without Borders](#) and [Article19](#). Lalic was detained on the first day of the imposition of a new regulation penalising anyone releasing information about the coronavirus that was not "authorised" by the Office of the Prime Minister or by individuals approved by the Crisis Management Taskforce.

Lalic was arrested for "causing panic and unrest" over a text she wrote on allegedly bad working conditions and the lack of protective equipment for medical staff in the Vojvodina Clinical Centre. She was detained for 48 hours in police custody and released on April 2.

Journalists were also arrested in Kosovo and Turkey. Tatjana Lazarevic, editor-in-chief of North Mitrovica's new local portal, Kossev, was arrested by Kosovo police for allegedly violating the curfew. She was on duty at the time. The police released her later in the day. "This is another pressure on our journalists, and an attempt to prevent our work," Kossev said.

Arrests and fines of citizens have become one of the main tactics to counter fake news and violations of the restriction measures imposed by all governments in the monitoring states. In Hungary, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia and North Macedonia, top state officials warned citizens they faced immediate sanctions for spreading fake news amid the pandemic.

Police started with detentions and arrests of citizens for social media posts under suspicion of spreading panic and causing disorder by spreading fake news.

The first arrest was reported in Hungary on March 13. This person was arrested for claiming on social media that the capital, Budapest, would soon be closed due to the pandemic. The anti-cybercrime unit of the police identified the YouTuber, detained him and he faced criminal charges of threatening public danger. Arrests continued also for information shared on

messaging platforms. For example, a man falsely claimed that a person in a Hungarian village had been infected by the coronavirus and then hospitalised and that as a result, most of those in contact with the person could be also infected, making the village an epicentre of the disease.

Hungarian police also detained a man who made false claims about COVID-19 on social media, who claimed there was no pandemic at all, and that it was just a cover for a secret entity that will take power over the world.

As Serbia declared a state of emergency, a citizen was held by the Serbian police on the grounds that he used Facebook to induce panic and disorder. The person published a photo of Serbian soldiers on his Facebook profile and added that the army and police had been deployed in his town, that bread vouchers had been distributed, and no one was paying for goods but just presenting an ID card, etc.

On March 30, a Serbian court banned a citizen from communicating with other Twitter users under suspicion that he had committed the crime of impersonation.

Serbian police reacted promptly to any posts containing threats to the police, where the attackers were citizens and politicians. The President of the Republican Party, Nikola Sandulovic, was detained for a [Facebook post](#) on suspicion of having committed the crimes of [causing panic and unrest](#), and of obstructing justice and preventing a public servant from performing an official act.

The same trend has been noted in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Sarajevo police arrested one person for making threats to police in comments on the news portal Klix. In the town of Bijeljina, a person was arrested after threatening the police on his Facebook page.

In some cases, authorities fined citizens for posts on social media that were deemed to contain false information. A citizen from Bosanska Gradiska was fined 1,000 marks (500 euros) for "causing panic and disorderly conduct". The woman claimed on Instagram that the local government was hiding the fact that another person from the town had tested positive for COVID-19.

In another town in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a person was issued a 200 BAM (100 euros) fine for publishing a recording of a conversation with an employee of the Zenica Medical Centre on Facebook that according to the authorities was causing panic. Citizens of Bosnian Serb entity Republika Srpska were also fined for commenting on the government's performance on Facebook.

In Montenegro, the authorities put Radovan Rakocevic, an opposition activist, in custody for 72 hours for the offence of spreading panic after he shared an article on Facebook from a Belgrade tabloid, Alo, which claimed that Montenegrin President Milo Djukanovic had been infected with the coronavirus.

The Prosecutor's Office said a medical staffer in the Health Centre in the capital Podgorica, known only by the initials M.R., had been arrested for the crime of unauthorised collection and use of personal information.

In Hungary, an opposition politician, János Csóka-Szűcs, has also been detained on May 13, while his phone and computer have been seized. Police said Csóka-Szűcs was interrogated over a Facebook post in which shared a call for an anti-government demonstration.

Hungarian police also detained a man and placed him in custody on suspicion of fear-mongering over a post on Facebook in which he claimed the country's leaders had deliberately timed the lifting of curfew restrictions to coincide with the peak of the coronavirus pandemic that could lead to mass infections.

Forms of manipulation: from conspiracy theories to false measures

Out of 163 cases, the largest number, 68, were linked with manipulation in the digital environment. They mostly contained different fake news, uses of false identity online, shared conspiracy theories, or were posts classified by the authorities as causing panic and disorder.

Here is a list of some subjects that have been highly manipulated online in different ways:

- Medicines which can cure the virus, vaccines and laboratory tests
- Disinfection procedures
- Tips and advice on how to cure the virus
- Number of infected people
- Information about infected persons
- Information on medical institutions and their work
- The start of the virus/how it developed
- State measures and actions that have never been declared nor taken
- Supermarkets and food shortages
- 5G
- Other conspiracy theories
- Online education and information relevant to students
- Offensive posts and videos to quarantined citizens or to those who have arrived from a foreign country
- Disturbing announcements regarding the COVID-19 outbreak

One reason for this large number is the poor level of media literacy in the monitoring countries, where few people fact-check the news and information they receive online, while media often publish unverified information. In some countries, like Serbia and Hungary, the levels of media freedoms are low, with mainstream media often spreading disinformation, while independent media are called fabricators of lies.

Nearly 25 per cent of all cases classified as manipulation in the digital environment had some kind of an outcome. These outcomes can be listed as follows:

- Website or content removal by the state
- A request for the removal of the problematic post
- Detention or arrest of a person
- The official statement in regards to the event or a public apology

Looking at the response per state, in Romania, most cases in this category ended with content removal. In Serbia, Hungary and Croatia, an arrest was the most common response.

Manipulated information, conspiracy theories and unfounded claims emerged en masse on social media platforms and news portals when most of the countries introduced emergency measures.

In Hungary, a chain letter titled "An Italian doctor about the coronavirus – Important information" circulated on Facebook containing "tips" about the virus that had no real basis or could be dangerous for those who took the letter seriously.

In Serbia, a man was arrested on suspicion of spreading panic and disorder by sharing fake news on Twitter, after he posted claims that Serbia would implement a 24-hours-long curfew. A man was released the next day after the police confirmed he was not the original author of this information and had got it from his wife who worked in a government ministry.

It was not only citizens who spread disinformation on social media. In North Macedonia, a police inspector used Facebook Live to stream videos of himself walking during the general curfew. The Interior Ministry said he had acted contrary to instructions for using social networks and had damaged the reputation of the force.

The disinformation campaign did not avoid YouTube, where the content that blamed the expansion of 5G technology for the COVID-19 outbreak or blamed multinational companies or foreign governments for the pandemic, was distributed the most. In Croatia, one citizen even destroyed WiFi equipment, thinking it was 5G infrastructure. Mentions of the influence of 5G networks on the pandemic were noticed in Romania and Serbia, both on news portals and social media.

News portals in Serbia, Romania, Hungary and Croatia often published manipulative content that had false information.

An online media outlet in Croatia, IstraIN, published an article claiming that a vaccine against the coronavirus had been created before the outbreak of the disease. Media in Serbia, such as nova.rs, Tanjug and Novosti, widely published incorrect advice and the findings of a microbiologist from Wuhan. Only nova.rs portal removed an article after it was discovered it is false information.

The state also intervened in some cases, providing an outcome for cases linked with fake news, with Hungary and Romania ordering closures of certain pages. In March, the Romanian Interior Ministry ordered the closure

of the website breackingnews.xyz and the "removal at source" of an online news article published by the website bpnews.ro. In April, Romanian authorities continued with these practices and blocked the websites romania-veche.ro, genocid.ro, bpnews.ro, r.news-romania24.xyz and news-romania24.xyz.

April was the month with the largest number of cases reported under this category. Some 30 out of the total 68 cases of manipulations in the digital environment were collected that month.

Information circulating in April and May, which was manipulated or false, mainly referred to the curfew, to transportation, the number of COVID-19 patients and tests, students' exams, quarantined citizens, 5G transmitters, enforced microchipping and the funding of religious communities. In almost all cases from this category, citizens were the affected parties.

Violators — the rise of 'unknown' attackers

In comparison to the cases of online violations reported before the COVID-19 outbreak, our monitoring noted a significant rise of those in which the attackers cannot be determined. The number of these cases increased 10 times on a monthly level.

The collected cases show citizens being exposed to serious abuses committed by "unknown" persons. These "unknowns" have been making Facebook pages, using the name of the virus to persecute independent journalists and free-thinkers, to send fraudulent messages to destroy computer software systems or to steal money, and create fake accounts of portals to spread conspiracy theories or medical disinformation.

Unknown perpetrators were also responsible for computer frauds, destruction and theft of data and actions making content unavailable through technical means.

The number of cases in Hungary with "unknown" attackers increased significantly and was mainly related to computer frauds.

Cases have also shown how states can be violators of digital rights and freedom. The increased number of cases which had arrest or detention as an outcome revealed the tendency of the state to use its power more than was necessary, especially to arrest journalists and citizens for posts on social media.

From having double standards, when it comes to reactions to fake news, to use its authority to silence people, governments often acted against the interests of their citizens. Scepticism and distrust in state institutions also grew. According to the monitoring findings, in almost 25 per cent of all cases, the state itself or a state official was described as the attacker of certain guaranteed rights and freedoms.

Currently, citizens are those carrying the biggest burden of arbitrary decisions, fake news and state pressure. In the digital environment, in 126 cases, citizens were the ultimate victims of different violations.

Media regulations across the region [have been tightened](#) under states of emergency and journalists have been arrested on accusation of spreading misinformation concerning the response of authorities to the spread of the coronavirus. Some countries, like Serbia, sought to centralise the dissemination of official information and banned certain media from regular briefings.

Media regulations were not the only regulations that suffered limitations. Citizens' freedom of speech was also seriously limited while their digital rights and freedoms were abused on many occasions.

The first worrying legal initiative was noted in Croatia, where the government proposed a change of the Electronic Communications Act under which, in extraordinary situations, the health minister would ask telecommunications companies to provide data on the locations of users' terminal equipment. Opposition lawmakers warned that if the amendment was adopted, it could limit citizens' rights to freedom of movement and their privacy. The government initiative is still pending.

In Hungary, the Bill on Protection against Coronavirus, giving the government almost total control of the flow of information about the pandemic, was adopted at the end of March. Additionally, the Hungarian government decided to limit the application of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR, and to extend the deadline for public institutions to provide requested data through FOI regulations from 15 to 45 days.

Romanian civil society organisations also drew attention to a lack of transparency by the authorities and the possibility of media freedoms being curbed by state-of-emergency provisions. [Provisions enacted as part of the state of emergency](#) to combat the spread of the coronavirus allowed the authorities to shut down websites that publish fake news and exempted the authorities from answering urgent inquiries from journalists. Access to a dozen websites [has been blocked since then](#).

In North Macedonia, the media faced new procedures for the issue of [work permits](#) during coronavirus curfews. The government insisted that its pandemic measures would not affect the public's right to information, but, in practice, institutions were [less responsive to FOI requests](#).

New rules overwhelmed the region, and Serbia was not an exception. [New rules](#) on the flow of information about the coronavirus gave the Central Crisis Staff led by Prime Minister Ana Brnabic the exclusive right to inform the public about anything linked with the crisis. After [the arrest of journalist Ana Lalic](#) for reporting poor conditions in a hospital, on President Aleksandar Vucic's request, the Prime Minister agreed to withdraw the new ruling penalising anyone releasing information about the coronavirus outbreak that was not "authorised" by her office.

Another consequence of the emergency decisions was that [FOI requests](#), a vital tool for journalists, became impossible during the pandemic.

In neighbouring Bosnia, the Serb-led entity, Republika Srpska, was urged to [withdraw a new decree](#) banning the spread of panic, as journalists' unions complained of repeated moves to censor information about COVID-19 under the guise of preventing misinformation. The decree, which followed the introduction of the state of emergency in the entity, stipulates fines of 500 to 4,500 euros for individuals and companies that spread panic and fake news through the media and social networks.

Tracking

During a press conference on March 19, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that since there had been "some catastrophic exceptions" regarding quarantine measures for Serbian citizens coming back from abroad, the police were monitoring "Italian phone numbers".

"We monitor Italian mobile phone numbers, not to spy, but to see if some people are in roaming and moving around," Vucic said. He added that there was "another method" of tracking people's movements even when they left their phones behind. This method used by the state in the COVID-19 outbreak remains unknown.

On the other hand, in Croatia, 44 civil society organisations sounded an alarm over a proposed amendment to the Electronic Communications Act, warning that "monitoring every cell phone in the country is not a measure to protect citizens from the coronavirus but an unnecessary violation of human rights".

Finally, the first country in the Western Balkans to launch an official [contact-tracing app](#) to tackle the spread of COVID-19 was North Macedonia, where the government is at pains to stress that user data will be protected. [StopKorona!](#) went live on April 13 as a Bluetooth-based smartphone app that warns users if they have come into contact with someone who has tested positive for the coronavirus, based on the distance between their mobile devices.
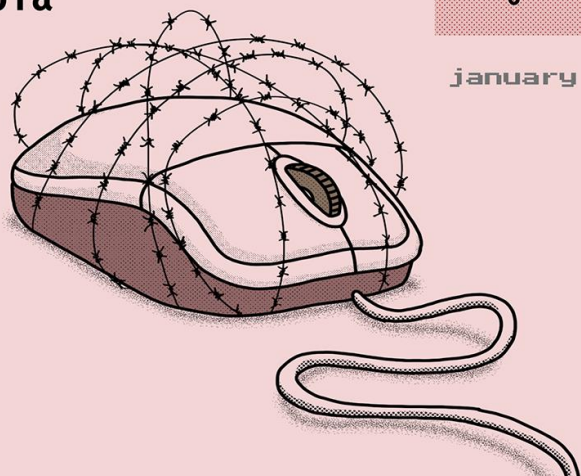
[Digital rights and rights to privacy and freedom of expression](#) on the internet have all faced serious limitations and breaches. In the semi- democracies of the region, dominated by regimes with elements of authoritarianism, there is legitimate concern about disproportionate interference in citizens' personal data and concern that the newly imposed measures are not properly tailored to achieve their objective while minimally damaging guaranteed rights.

The number of cases per country/per month

	january	february	march	april	may	TOTAL
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1	0	9	8	0	18
Croatia	0	1	12	15	3	31
Hungary	0	2	11	9	2	24
North Macedonia	0	1	8	10	5	24
Romania	0	3	6	10	4	23
Serbia	0	1	13	20	9	43

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The life of citizens during this period has completely shifted to the online world, where harmful behaviour usually remains unnoticed by authorities preoccupied with offline violations. During the monitoring period, the lack of a human rights-based approach towards people in the digital environment led to discrimination, hate-speech and threats. Although protection of basic human rights and fundamental freedoms should be guaranteed on the internet in the same way as it is offline, in practice we have seen an increase in the number of cases of online violations. Forms of violations have been evolving as well.

A lack of knowledge and understanding of the online space and the subsequent lack of internet regulations have opened a Pandora's box, allowing different state institutions to arbitrarily, partially and unequally interpret people's online behaviour.

The intense nature of the battle for control of the narrative on the virus has made meaningful oversight of online life and practices and establishing accountability for online acts, harder than ever.

Champions of Digitals Activism: Croatian pensioners union

Why: They reacted against an MP Ivan Pernar who argued that COVID-19 measures should be abolished as older people will die anyway

Digital Intruder of the Month: Montenegro

Why: The government published personal data and list of citizens in self-isolation