



## **Weekly Briefing**

**North Macedonia social briefing:**  
**When Covid 19 meets 5G: Detangling the root-causes of conspiracy theories**  
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## **When Covid 19 meets 5G: Detangling the root-causes of conspiracy theories**

*In the past several decades conspiracy theories have come to increasingly pervade mainstream culture, becoming widespread and immensely popular. The Macedonian society has hardly remained immune to such trends, with conspiracy theories starting to influence popular interpretations on a rising number of issues - from vaccinations, to chem-trails and the shape of the earth. The arrival of the coronavirus pandemic in this context has meant that it too quickly has become interpreted as a conspiracy linked to anything from corporate pharmaceutical power-interests to 5G mobile networks.*

*The most commonly found reaction has been to disqualify conspiracy theories as irrational and to stigmatise their supporters. Although understandable, this approach fails to examine the deeper causes behind the spread and appeal of conspiracy theories, and what these demonstrate about the nature of contemporary institutions and socio-political relations.*

### **Perceptions on Covid 19**

The prevalence of conspiracy theories on Covid 19 is particularly evident in discussions on social media (such as Facebook, Twitter or YouTube). A quick overview of the content on these platforms indicates that the conspiracy theories that circulate globally have also found their way to the macedonian public. Some have linked Covid 19 to Bill Gates and/or big pharma. Others have doubted its existence, or claimed that Covid death rates are inflated. There are even those who have argued that the coronavirus is spread through 5G mobile networks, even though 5G is not yet available in the country. At the end of may, a group of citizens gathered in front of the Government building in protest against, as they said, “the fake pandemic, forced vaccinations and the installation of 5G antennas”. Such views may be held by a small minority. However they may not be so infrequent as to be comfortably disregarded. According to a survey aimed at checking the public’s views with regards to the crisis caused by

Covid-19, 4,9% of the respondents answered that they believe it to be linked to the installation of 5g mobile networks.<sup>1</sup>

The same survey reported a number of other indicative results. 42,7% of respondents answered that they believe the virus has been produced in a lab. Out of this number, 36,7% believe this to have been done intentionally, whilst 6% ascribe it to error. 19% think that the virus appeared naturally. A significant percentage of 10,3% do not believe it exists. (This last figure is particularly high amongst the ethnic-albanian sample - 24,7% of whom doubt the existence of a virus). Such figures are especially worrying in light of the fact that interpretations also act as guides of behaviour, resulting in the high probability that those who doubt the existence of the virus are also likely to fail to adhere to the guidance and precautions recommended by the authorities.

### **The demand and supply of conspiracy theories**

Conspiracy theories are broadly defined as interpretations which suggest that events are causally linked to clandestine groups within the institutions of politics, the medical industry, multinationals, or science labs who seek some benefit at the expense of the public. Their growing popularity in the 21st century can be analysed as a combined result of the increase in both their supply and demand.

On the supply side, the obvious domain of analysis is the internet itself. The digital revolution has changed the quantity and accessibility of information, multiplying the various channels that can be utilised for the creation and diffusion of information. Vast quantities of often contradictory information compete on an unregulated and globalised internet marketplace, which seems to replicate the broader profit-seeking logic of neoliberal capitalism. Information gains value not from its inherent truth or meaning, but from its ability to attract attention and extract profit. The result is a proliferation of click-bait content, which oftentimes is the product of so-called content farms. The coronavirus seems to have provided new ammunition for such activities, leading to what the UN has described as an ‘infodemic’.<sup>2</sup> In May 2020 Facebook stated that it had located anti-vaccination pages (such as Natural News) as the source from

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<sup>1</sup> The survey was conducted by the Macedonian Centre for International Cooperation on a representative sample of 1000 respondents in the period 16-22 of May. It is available here: <https://mcms.mk/images/docs/2020/sostojba-so-kovid-krizata-.pdf>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.un.org/en/un-coronavirus-communications-team/un-tackling-%E2%80%98infodemic%E2%80%99-misinformation-and-cybercrime-covid-19>

which coronavirus conspiracy theories about 5G and Bill Gates spread across social networks globally. According to Facebook's official statement: "The misleading pages relied on content farms in N. Macedonia and the Philippines".<sup>3</sup> This is not the first time that macedonian-based content farms have been implicated in such news stories. In 2016, over 100 websites were tracked to the city of Veles during the final weeks of the 2016 U.S. election campaign, producing fake news that mostly favored Donald Trump.<sup>4</sup> There is a clear financial rationale behind such online activities - each click adds cash to the bank accounts of content farmers. However, profit-seeking explains only one part of the story behind the supply of conspiracy theories on the internet marketplace.

Oftentimes, ideological interests (most conspicuously those of the alt-right or far right) piggyback on clickbait content to drive their own agendas forward. What complicates the story further is that other times conspiracy theories are used as labels to quickly discredit what may in fact be legitimate concerns or suspicions about various instances of foul play or contradiction at work in contemporary capitalist societies. Such a diverse combination of factors at the supply side of conspiracy theory makes them a very complex phenomena, which both reflects, feeds on and multiplies the contradictions of contemporary neoliberal conditions and relations.

On the demand side we find the consumption preferences of the contemporary public, more and more of whom nowadays have access to the internet. The most commonly found explanations are to ascribe the appeal of conspiracy theories to media illiteracy leading to the uncritical reception of clickbait content.<sup>5</sup> However, such explanations fail to take into account the psycho-social conditions behind the appeal of conspiracy theories. Namely, they arise in and reflect specific social contexts and socio-political relations. For instance, anti-vaccination conspiracy theories and movements were a completely unknown phenomena in socialist Yugoslavia, where mass-vaccinations were conducted by the healthcare authorities in the absence of any public opposition. With regards to the coronavirus pandemic for instance, it is epidemiologists who have been educated and established in the former Yugoslavia who appear to have been the most trusted amongst the general public.<sup>6</sup> This seems to suggest that oftentimes

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<sup>3</sup><https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/troll-farms-macedonia-philippines-pushed-coronavirus-disinformation-facebook-n1218376>

<sup>4</sup> <https://money.cnn.com/interactive/media/the-macedonia-story/>

<sup>5</sup> The Media Illiteracy Index in 2019 has ranked Macedonia on the lowest position in a list of 35 european countries. The Index measures Media Illiteracy and the susceptibility to fake news: <https://vistinomer.mk/makedoni%D1%98a-dlaboko-posledna-na-listata-zem%D1%98i-spered-mediumskata-nepismenost/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=velo+markovski](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=velo+markovski)

it is not the relevance of science which is dismissed or denied but the perceptions of its modern-day dependence on private business interests.

In light of this, conspiracy theories need to be examined in relation to the specific socio-economic context in which they are rooted. Scholars of conspiracy theories rightly embed them in the so-called postmodern ‘paranoid habitus’ (Melley, 2000: 19) - marked by complexity and uncertainty. In the macedonian context, the transition towards neoliberal capitalism has brought about systemic transformations, which have exacerbated the economic uncertainty and insecurity, reducing in the process the public’s trust in political institutions. At the same time, with the spread of neoliberal values, profit has become both entrenched and recognised as a key organising principle, oftentimes manifesting itself in the interlocking between private and political interests at the expense of the broader public. As a result there is now a widespread perception of high levels of corruption accompanied by low levels of trust in institutions. In a recent survey a “great deal of distrust” was reported by 37% respondents toward government; 22% towards public healthcare institutions, 37% towards parliament, 49% towards courts and the judiciary.<sup>7</sup> The Eurobarometer survey in 2019 found that 62% of macedonian citizens distrust the media in the country.<sup>8</sup> Such a level of distrust in institutions and authorities is oftentimes rooted in legitimate political and economic concerns, which makes it difficult to brush aside simply as a sign of paranoia. At the same time however it turns the macedonian public into an audience highly susceptible to conspiracy theories.

Conspiracy theories both exploit and mirror specific systemic contradictions. First, they exemplify how information becomes commodified on the internet marketplace, feeding on and perpetuating consumption preferences that can have adverse consequences to public health and well-being. Other times they play ideological functions, acting as propaganda tools that various power interests use to advance specific (geo)political agendas. On the other hand however, conspiracy theories can also stem from a rising mistrust in political institutions and authorities. As such they can be said to arise out of societal concerns with the function of profit as a main societal organising principle. Therefore, as a complex contemporary phenomena, in the macedonian context and beyond, conspiracy theories reflect the postmodern dispersion of knowledge, the neoliberal erosion of state (authority) as well as the broader implications of the precedence of profit over all other social values and aspirations.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri\\_n.\\_macedonia\\_february\\_2020\\_poll\\_presentation.pdf](https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/iri_n._macedonia_february_2020_poll_presentation.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <https://mk.voanews.com/a/media-north-macedonia-/5031493.html>