DebunkEU.org

EU Disinfo Lab 2021
"Understanding Disinformation Across Europe"
Viktoras Dauksas, Head of DebunkEU.org

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DebunkEU.org IN A NUTSHELL

8 countries

100+ reports per year

50 active Lithuanian elves

110+ events

18 countries

350+ interviews and mentions global media, including:

FT · The Independent · DW · The Economist · THE TIMES

DebunkEU.org is **a disinformation analysis center and independent technology think tank which**:

- Analyses disinformation in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Georgia and Montenegro

- Monitors online election campaigns,

- Organises community training,

- Carries out media literacy campaigns,

SHORT/MID TERM STRATEGIES & TACTICS

GOOD PRACTICES: METHODOLOGY

Step #1
Source identification (who?)

- What are the most frequent issues addressed by the author, the website, or the media outlet?
- Is it a reliable and trustworthy source of information?
- When was the last time the source and/or author published information?

Step #2
Content assessment (how?)

- Does the content (e.g. photos, quotes, interviews, posts) seem suspicious?
- Is the headline shocking and/or emotional?
- Does the text in the article support the heading?
- What message is the author trying to convey?
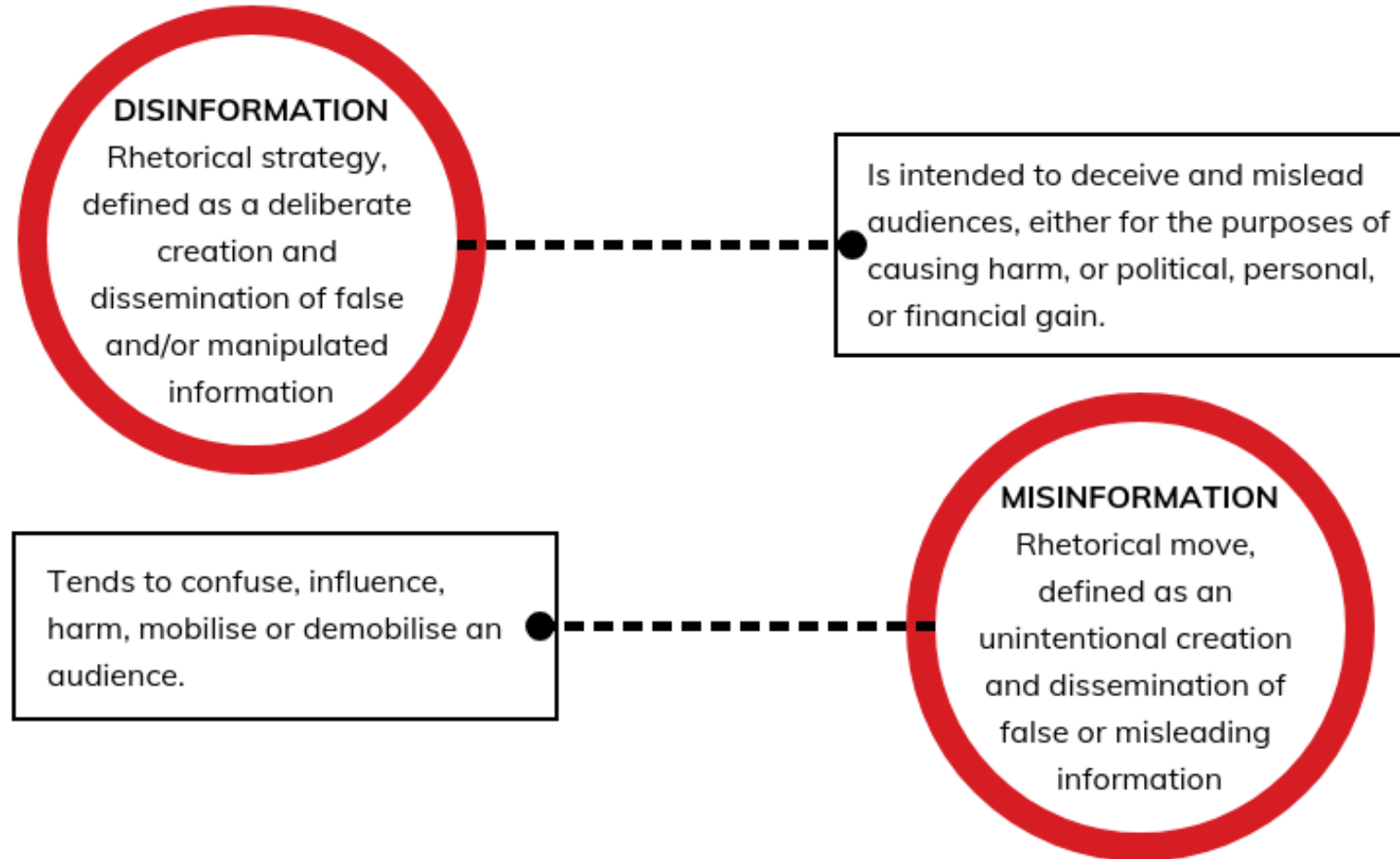- What set of rhetorical techniques are used to address the reader?

Step #3
Circumstance assessment (when?)

- What circumstances and/or context surround the appearance of information?
- Is the article or social media of the repetitive nature, i.e. does it have a corresponding 'structure'/similarities with other narratives or sources, that are interested in particular issues?

GOOD PRACTICES: METHODOLOGY

DISINFORMATION
Rhetorical strategy, defined as a deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information

Is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or political, personal, or financial gain.

MISINFORMATION
Rhetorical move, defined as an unintentional creation and dissemination of false or misleading information

Tends to confuse, influence, harm, mobilise or demobilise an audience.

DebunkEU.org
Disinformation analysis center

VERTICAL AI

Vertical AI allows to focus on a **targeted task,** which is important when analysing disinformation. It is a complex chain of actions and each of them has a **designated algorithm**.

At DebunkEU.org we distinguish between two processes:

1. Discovery of disinformation

Here the **task for the AI is to spot and predict the most harmful stories** which then are going to be reviewed by our analysts. The data that our team has already labelled will be used to further **train** the AI to recognize similar content thus **saving the time and effort.**
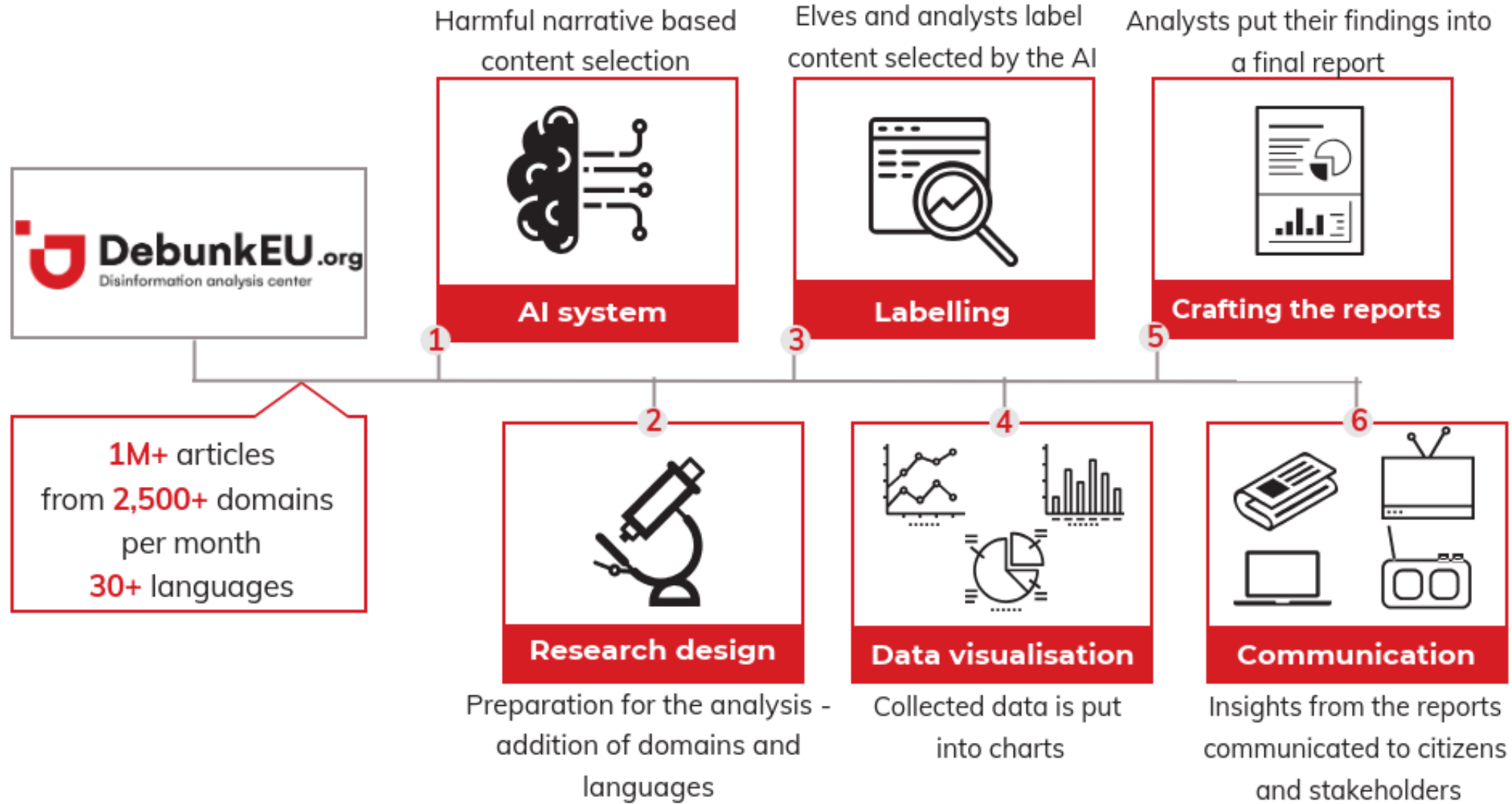
2. Analysis of disinformation

When analysis is done, it is partly automated and partly manual. The **automated tasks require 99 % precision rate**. If the algorithm is less precise, this part is done manually, and **when new data sets are collected we start automating again.**

When automating processes, we are making sure that an algorithm, given a specific task, performs it at the **highest precision rate**.

GOOD PRACTICES: PROCESS

Harmful narrative based content selection

Elves and analysts label content selected by the AI

Analysts put their findings into a final report

AI system

Labelling

Crafting the reports

DebunkEU.org
Disinformation analysis center

1M+ articles
from 2,500+ domains
per month
30+ languages

1

2

3

4

5

6

Research design

Data visualisation

Communication

Preparation for the analysis - addition of domains and languages

Collected data is put into charts

Insights from the reports communicated to citizens and stakeholders

COVID-19 DISINFORMATION

DebunkEU.org analysis of COVID-19 disinformation

March 2020 - June 2021

Reports published: **20**

Cases of disinfo found: **11 174**

SCOPE

481,416 — From **January to June 2021**, DebunkEU.org detected **481,416 articles** related to **COVID-19**, posted by **hostile media** sources.

35,549 — Of these, analysts with **DebunkEU.org reviewed 35,549** articles with potentially harmful content.

9,297 — **9,297 articles with false and misleading content** from **397 media outlets** (including 214 Facebook groups) in English, Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish and Russian languages were identified.

The impact that the analysed articles had on the audience was evaluated at 3.7 billion potential contacts, as measured by DebunkReach®.

26.2%

Mis/disinformation constituted 26.2% of the articles with potentially harmful content reviewed by DebunkEU.org
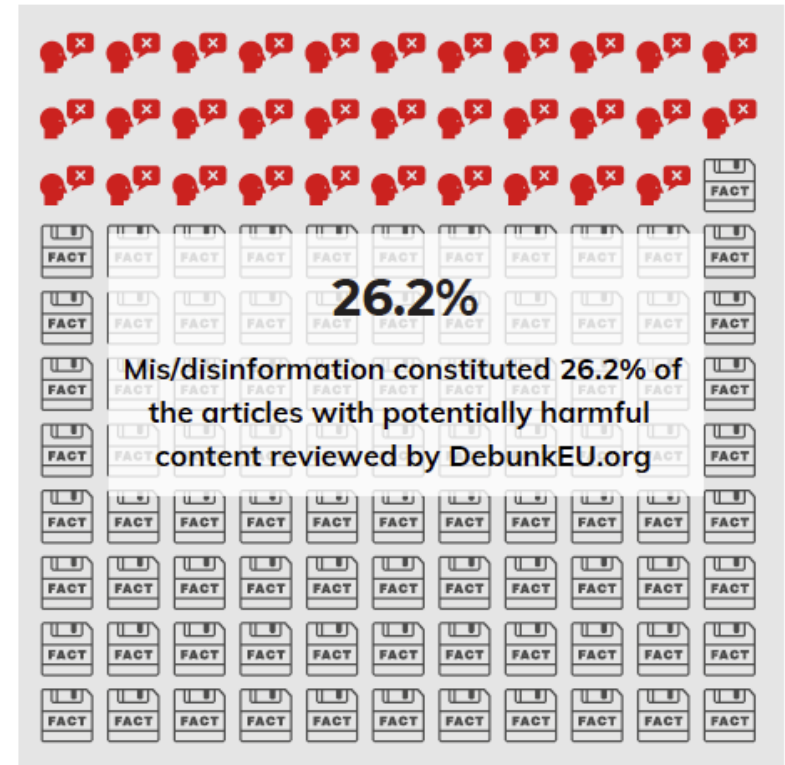
DebunkEU.org

DYNAMICS

Monthly dynamics by mentions

Monthly dynamics by DebunkReach®

In the first half of 2021, **January stood out** as the month with the lowest number of articles analysed by the team of DebunkEU.org (909 hits) and yet with the second-highest figure i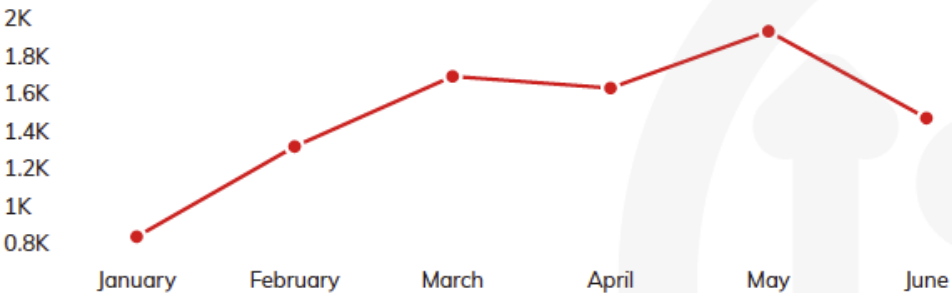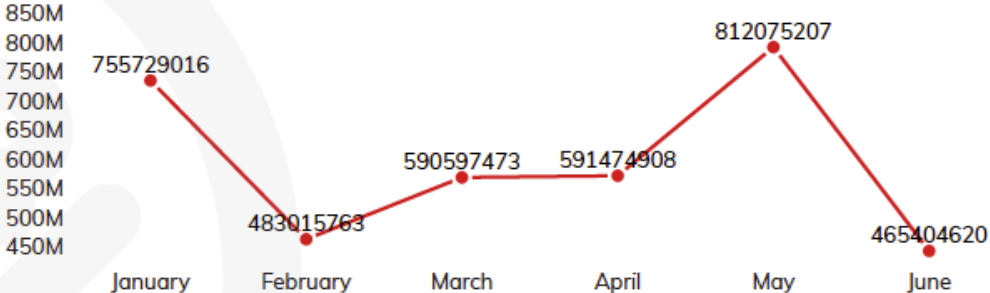n terms of the audiences affected (755.5 million potential contacts): it was the only month when **English led in terms of the impact it made with regards to reach**, as the **English-language outlet of RT** – a television and internet-based news channel and one of the most important purveyors of Kremlin propaganda - was busy **spreading and amplifying false and/or misleading claims about Western COVID-19 vaccines** (hyperbolising the effects of adverse reactions, failing to provide missing context for the articles about deaths linked to vaccination yet without any proved causal relation) at the background of then recently launched national vaccination programmes. Using the tried-and-tested rhetoric of people-elite dichotomy, RT was also **escalating in attempts to show how policymakers of the West were failing to fight COVID-19** via frustrating lockdowns.

TYPES OF CONTENT

Types of information by articles

	Disinformation	Misinformation
	8495	802

Disinformation 91.37% Misinformation 8.63%

Articles

Types of information by DebunkReach®

	Disinformation	Misinformation
	3585242246	113054741

Disinformation 96.94% Misinformation 3.06%
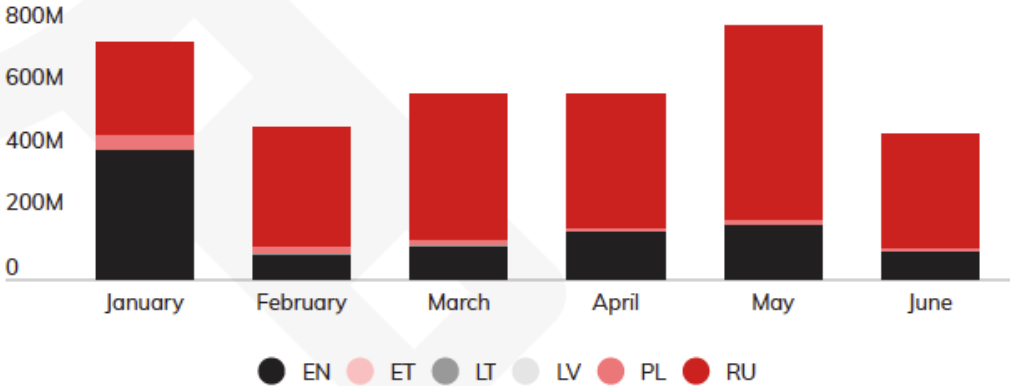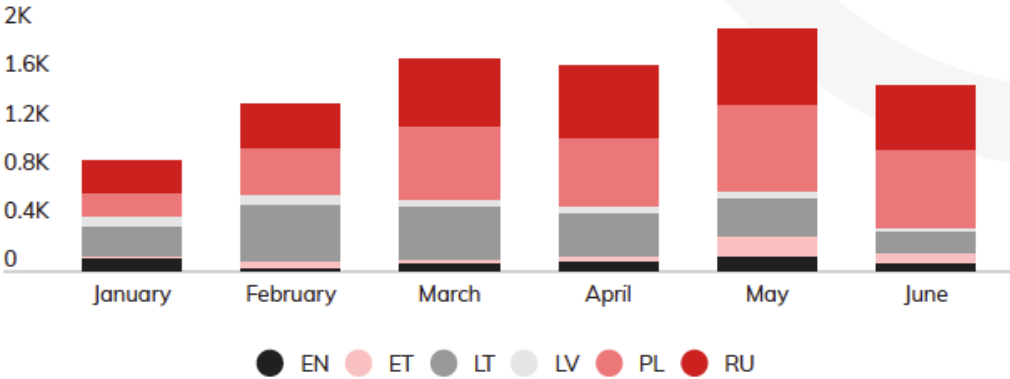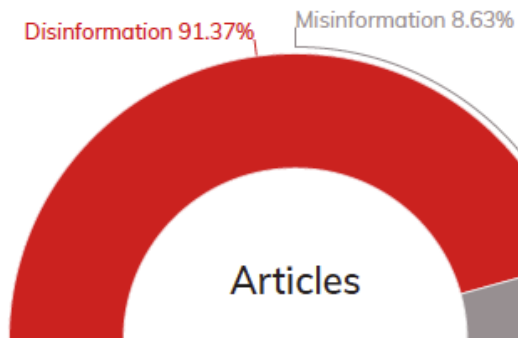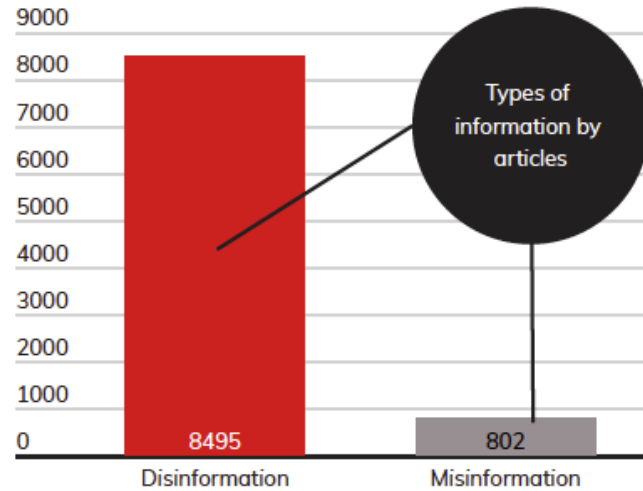
DebunkReach®

The share of **disinformation** within the false and misleading content on COVID-19 in H1 2021 stood at **91.4%**, as measured by articles. With regards to **DebunkReach®**, the share amounted to **97.0%**.

Roughly 72% of misinformation (579 hits) within the period of analysis was found in **Facebook groups and pages**, hence its share as measured by affected audiences was lower than that measured by hits.

However, 2,767 more articles from the social media platform, constituting **82.7% of all Facebook hits** analysed within the period, were **classified as disinformation**, i.e., were found to be conscious efforts to spread and amplify deceptive claims. This may evidence a **growing awareness of manipulated information** and our growing resistance to it and yet an already established **polarisation of society in terms of views on the pandemic** and the means to fight it (such as lockdown and vaccination programmes) simultaneously, as the volume of misinformation has been declining, whereas **some sporadic efforts of spreading misleading content** with regards to COVID-19 have **translated into systematic disinformation push**.
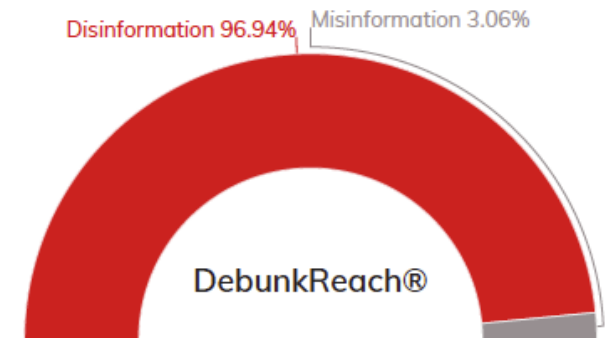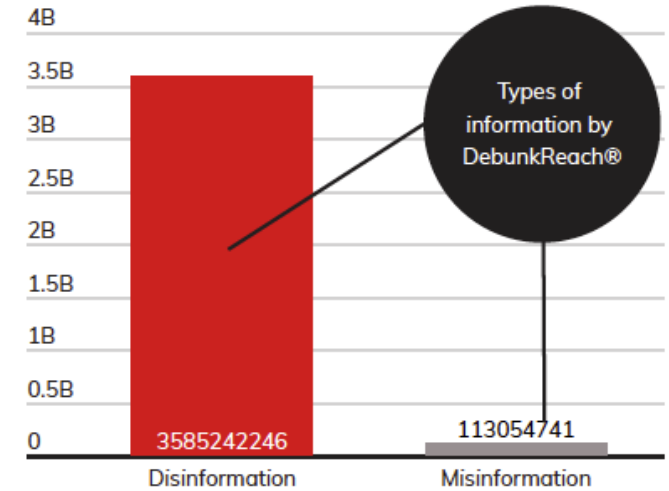
NARRATIVES

Top 5 narratives & subnarratives by articles

Narrative	Subnarrative	Value
False measures to fight COVID-19:	Vaccine has been developed without rigorous testing	2 791
	West seeks to discredit Russian and Chinese vaccines	858
	Quarantine is an unnecessary measure fighting against COVID-19	584
	COVID-19 tests are worthless	418
	The government will force people to vaccinate	360
Country fails to fight COVID-19:	Violation of liberties in the name of COVID-19	1 104
	Lithuania fails to fight COVID-19	998
	The US fails to fight COVID-19	282
	Latvia fails to fight COVID-19	267
	Ukraine fails to fight COVID-19	250
SARS-CoV-2 was created artificially:	COVID-19 is used by political elites to control humankind	613
	COVID-19 (or vaccines) was designed to depopulate mankind	326
	Misantrophes seek to profit from the pandemic	286
	The laboratory origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus	280
	COVID-19 is a biological weapon	174
Russia pioneers in fighting COVID-19:	Superiority of Russian-made COVID-19 vaccine(s)	931
	Russia's success in fighting COVID-19/helping to fight it	257
COVID-19 effect is overestimated:	COVID-19 is not dangerous	463
	Reported number of infected is incorrect	313
	Number of deaths is exaggerated	186
	COVID-19 is just a flu	77
	Doctors get additional money for reporting COVID-19 cases	60

x-axis: 0 200 400 600 800 1 000 1 200 1 400 1 600 1 800 2 000 2 200 2 400 2 600
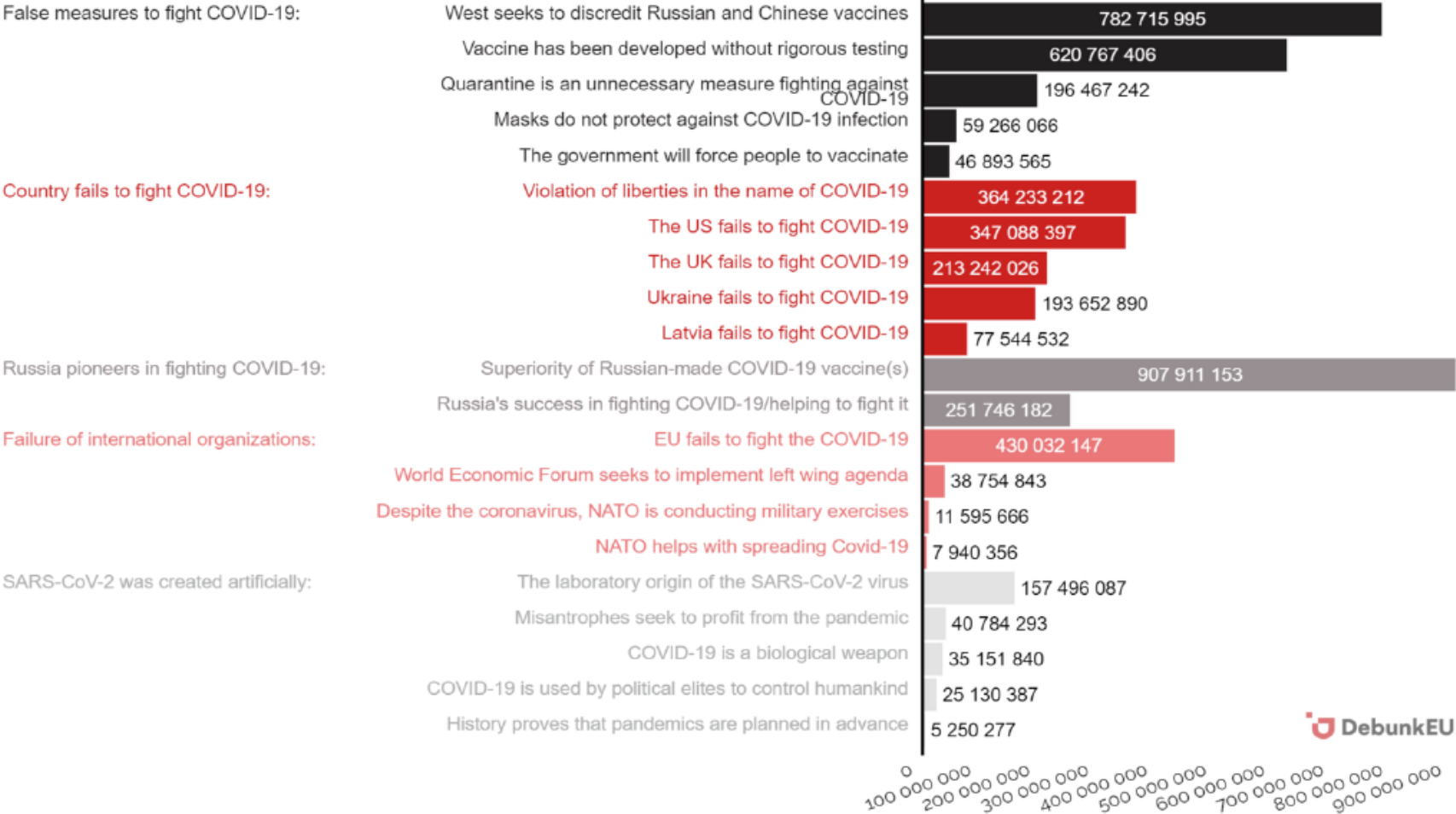
False measures to fight COVID-19 was the **top narrative** within the false and misleading coverage on COVID-19 in the first half of 2021, as **measured by articles**. The subnarrative **Vaccine has been developed without rigorous testing** added the most to its leading position and was **the most pronounced rhetoric** overall owing to national immunisation campaigns rolling out and accelerating in the targeted countries. As much as 84.5% of the second most prevalent subnarrative within the umbrella of False measures to fight COVID-19, **West seeks to discredit Russian and Chinese vaccines** came out in Russian language. Roughly 40% of the hits claiming **Violation of liberties in the name of COVID-19** was in place and that **Quarantine was unnecessary measure to fight COVID-19** came in Lithuanian language signalling the vectors of claims posted mostly by Facebook users in reaction to lockdown restrictions and (planned) vaccination certificates. It was also domestic, Lithuanian language false and misleading content, escalating the rhetoric of **Lithuania failing to fight COVID-19** (almost 77%): on contrary to the last months of 2020, when it was pro-Kremlin media promoting the narrative of Lithuania being a failure in the fight against novel coronavirus, juggling the sadly whopping numbers of new cases in the country, in the first four months of 2021 Lithuanian Facebook users were actively posting about lockdown being a sign of failure to successfully, without significant collateral damage, handle the pandemic. It is also worth to note that **conspiracy theories were most popular in Poland**: around 83% of the hits classified under **COVID-19 is used by political elites to control humankind** as well as **COVID-19 (or vaccines) was designed to depopulate mankind** came in Polish language.

DebunkEU.org

NARRATIVES

Top 5 narratives & subnarratives by DebunkReach®

Narrative	Subnarrative	DebunkReach®
False measures to fight COVID-19:	West seeks to discredit Russian and Chinese vaccines	782 715 995
	Vaccine has been developed without rigorous testing	620 767 406
	Quarantine is an unnecessary measure fighting against COVID-19	196 467 242
	Masks do not protect against COVID-19 infection	59 266 066
	The government will force people to vaccinate	46 893 565
Country fails to fight COVID-19:	Violation of liberties in the name of COVID-19	364 233 212
	The US fails to fight COVID-19	347 088 397
	The UK fails to fight COVID-19	213 242 026
	Ukraine fails to fight COVID-19	193 652 890
	Latvia fails to fight COVID-19	77 544 532
Russia pioneers in fighting COVID-19:	Superiority of Russian-made COVID-19 vaccine(s)	907 911 153
	Russia's success in fighting COVID-19/helping to fight it	251 746 182
Failure of international organizations:	EU fails to fight the COVID-19	430 032 147
	World Economic Forum seeks to implement left wing agenda	38 754 843
	Despite the coronavirus, NATO is conducting military exercises	11 595 666
	NATO helps with spreading Covid-19	7 940 356
SARS-CoV-2 was created artificially:	The laboratory origin of the SARS-CoV-2 virus	157 496 087
	Misantrophes seek to profit from the pandemic	40 784 293
	COVID-19 is a biological weapon	35 151 840
	COVID-19 is used by political elites to control humankind	25 130 387
	History proves that pandemics are planned in advance	5 250 277

DebunkEU.org

The **differences in the charts** displaying the leading narratives and subnarratives measured by the number of **articles** and by **DebunkReach®** highlight the rhetoric, which was pursued by **major Kremlin-aligned media sources**, affecting wide audiences, showcasing the narratives that they engaged in promoting the most.

Thus, although *False measures to fight COVID-19* led with regards to affected audiences just as it did in terms of hits, it was **West seeks to discredit Russian and Chinese vaccines** that added the moos to it, outpacing *Vaccine has been developed without rigorous testing* (for comparison, the latter accounted for 2791 hits and a reach of 620.8 million potential contacts, whilst the former – 858 articles and 782.7 million potential contacts.)

Differences were also visible in within the *Country fails to fight COVID-19* subnarrative lineup: here, pro-Kremlin media outlets' international editions produced articles amplifying the messages on how **the US** (escalated in Q2 the most) *and the UK were failing to fight COVID -19*. It was also wide-reaching Kremlin-aligned media to promote the messages that the EU and NATO were failing to handle the pandemic: the narrative *Failure of international organisations* ranked fourth in terms of reach, whilst occupying sixth position as measured by articles.

DISINFORMATION AGAINST LITHUANIAN POSITION ON THE BELARUSIAN NPP

DebunkEU.org and LMFA ANALYSIS ON THE BELARUSIAN NPP

January - June 2021

Reports published: **6**

Mis/disinformation cases found: **1202**

DebunkEU.org
Disinformation analysis center

MINISTRY
OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS
REPUBLIC OF LITHUANIA

Since the start of the Belarusian Nuclear Power Plant (BelNPP) project in 2008, Lithuania has been raising concerns regarding the transparency and safety. These initiatives systemically face harsh opposition from the Belarusian or Russian authorities and their backed media outlets. **DebunkEU.org partnered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania** to analyse disinformation used to manipulate the news regarding the BelNPP.

https://www.debunkeu.org/articles/beinpp-spread-disinformation

ELECTION MONITORING

DebunkEU.org LITHUANIAN PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS MONITORING

July - October 2020

Reports published: **3**

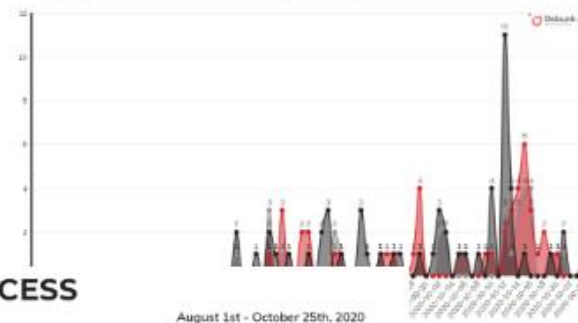Content pieces analysed: **8204**

https://www.debunkeu.org/articles/disinformation-about-elections
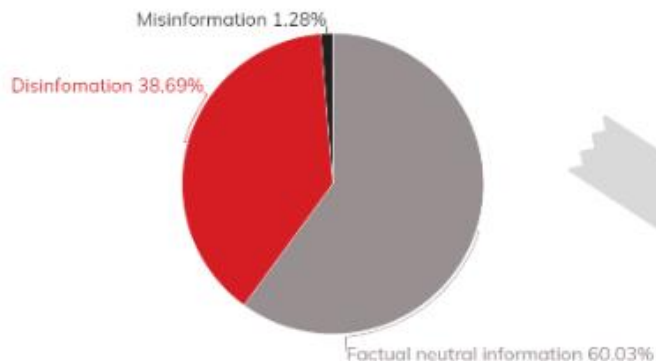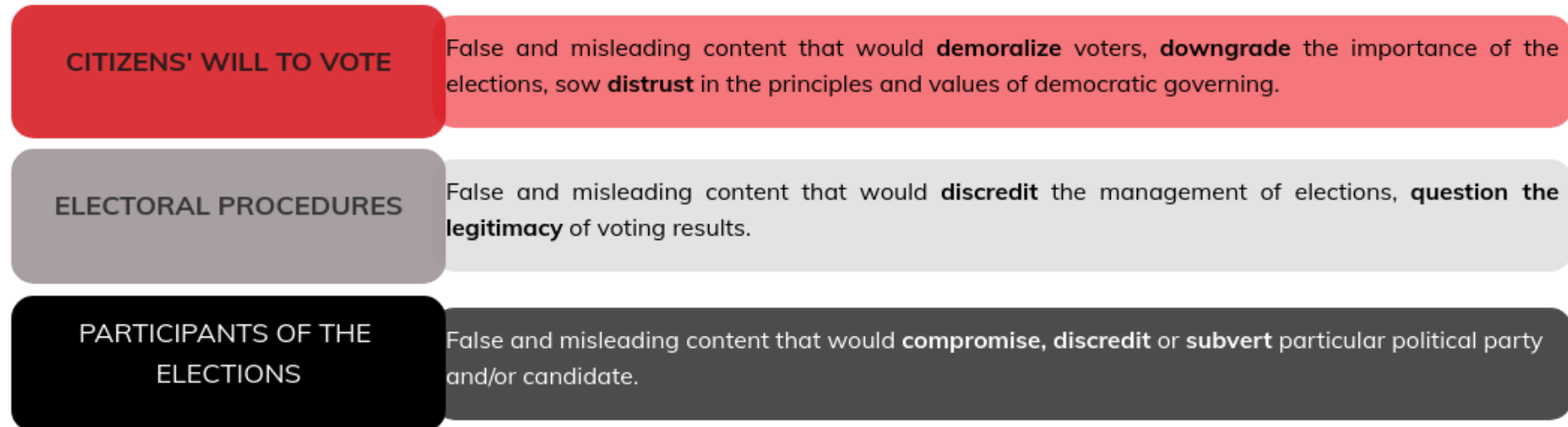
ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Election interference from both external and internal state and non-state actors seeks to spread divisive narratives, and confuse voters, influence the outcome of an election, create confusion about electoral information discredit democracy itself and influence how a country is perceived externally.

Following the examples of electoral interference in national elections and strategies, that were used extensively from 2017 to influence the electoral process in different countries, analysts from Debunk EU distinguished between at least **three areas of risks**, associated with information environment:

CITIZENS' WILL TO VOTE	False and misleading content that would **demoralize** voters, **downgrade** the importance of the elections, sow **distrust** in the principles and values of democratic governing.
ELECTORAL PROCEDURES	False and misleading content that would **discredit** the management of elections, **question the legitimacy** of voting results.
PARTICIPANTS OF THE ELECTIONS	False and misleading content that would **compromise, discredit** or **subvert** particular political party and/or candidate.

Based on this categorization, information was aggregated into narratives, that would capture distinct stories and/or repeating messages, targeting the 2020 national election to the Seimas of Lithuania, and would present a more structured picture of the areas, that were targeted the most.
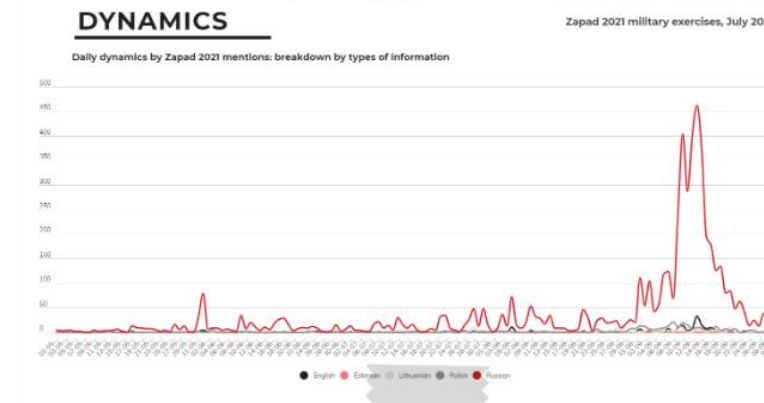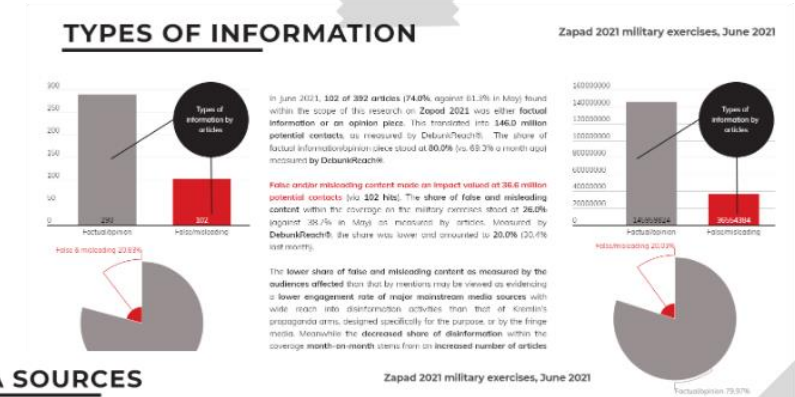
MILITARY EXERCISE ANALYSIS

DebunkEU.org and NATO StratCom CoE analysis on Zapad 2021

May - September 2021

Content pieces reviewed: **6275**

Cases of disinfo found: **1309**

Disinformation analysis about the surge of migrants organized by Belarusian regime

September 1 - October 15, 2021

Content analysed from:

Migrant linked **Facebook groups** — 766

Online **media from origin countries** of migrants — 679

Regional **hostile (Kremlin affiliated)** media sources — 1295

English-language media outlets — 352
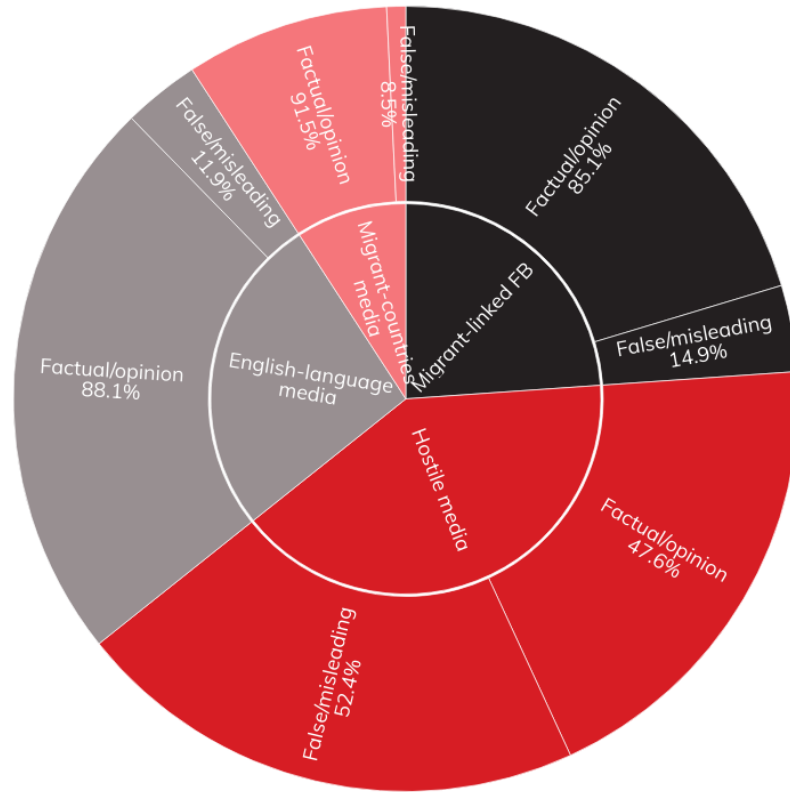
3306
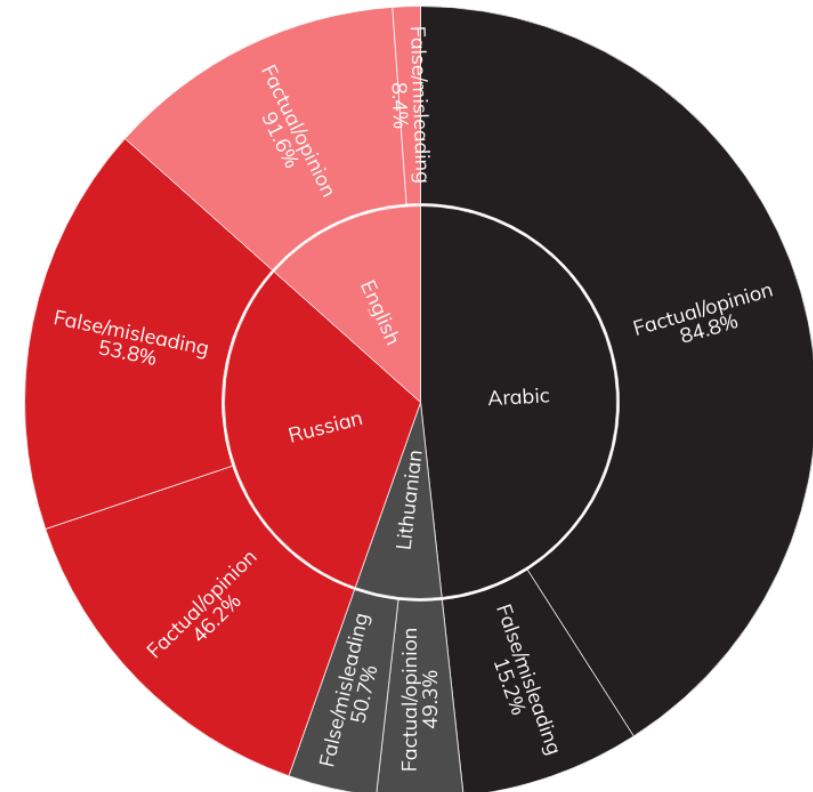total content pieces

out of which

919
were false/misleading

Disinformation analysis about the surge of migrants organized by Belarusian regime

Types of information by conditional classification

- False/misleading 8.5%
- Factual/opinion 91.5%
- Migrant-countries media
- False/misleading 11.9%
- Factual/opinion 88.1%
- English-language media
- Factual/opinion 85.1%
- False/misleading 14.9%
- Migrant-linked FB
- Factual/opinion 47.6%
- False/misleading 52.4%
- Hostile media

Types of information by dominant languages

- False/misleading 8.4%
- Factual/opinion 91.6%
- English
- Factual/opinion 84.8%
- False/misleading 15.2%
- Arabic
- False/misleading 53.8%
- Factual/opinion 46.2%
- Russian
- False/misleading 50.7%
- Factual/opinion 49.3%
- Lithuanian

Russia - 93

Belarus - 88

Tajikistan - 17

Turkey - 25

Syria - 130   Iraq - 2810   Afghanistan - 88

Iran - 87   Pakistan - 23

Senegal - 16   Mali - 19

The Gambia - 18

India - 65

Guinea - 79   Nigeria - 30

Cote d'Ivore - 23   Togo - 26   Cameroon - 134

Sri Lanka - 67

Somalia - 19

Congo - 204   DRC- 19

4146 illegal immigrants have entered Lithuania in 2021 (**as per October 19, 2021** according to the data from Lithuanian border control).

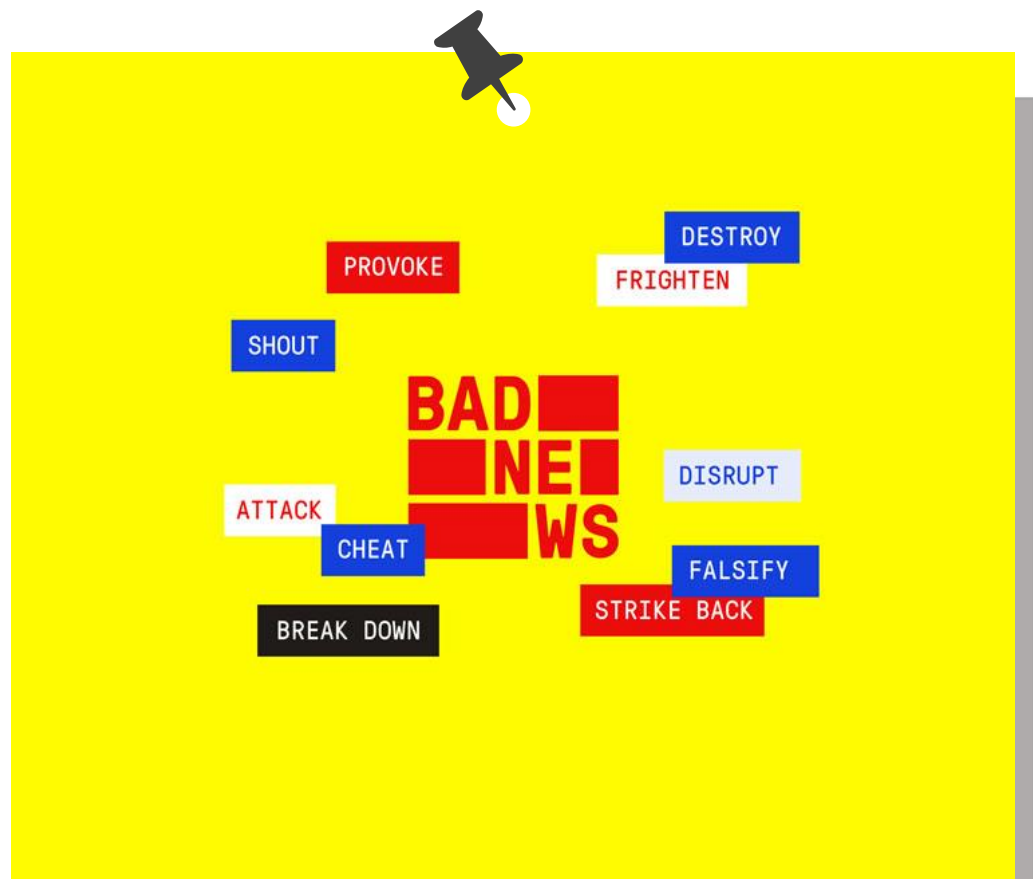**Note:** number of migrants from other countries not shown on the map **- 87.**

Kremlin and Belarusian regimes and their network of affiliated media and troll factories

(Breaking) news reports: the stance of Latvia Lithuania, Poland, and/or the EU

Statements by Belarusian officials: official publications, state media

The news on socioeconomic, politic etc. developments in specific countries

Amplification by pro-Kremlin media - leaving the quotes as they are (neutral)

Audiences: Russian, former USSR

Amplification by pro-Kremlin media - structured to form a piece of disinformation

Audiences: Russian, former USSR

Explication by experts (disinformation actors), journalists, and via add-ons

Audiences: Belarusian

Audiences: the Baltics

Amplification by pro-Kremlin media designed specifically for propaganda/disinformation purposes

Audiences: Russian, former USSR

LONG TERM
STRATEGIES & TACTICS

MEDIA LITERACY: GAME'DUCATION APPROACH

The initial goal of 100 000 players **exceeded with** **118 613** **citizens** in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia whohave played the game **163 103** times.

BadNews game advertisements were shown **51 945 503** **times** and reached **3 225 944** **unique users** in the Baltic countries

Players made **22 754 148** **pageviews**.

Throughout the span of communication campaign, **33** **press releases** were published by media.

22.35% **of respondents** indicated that after playing the game, they started evaluating the content they see online more critically

Civic Resilience Course for universities

DISINFORMATION ANALYSIS TRAINING: THEORY

Course cover prototype

Disinformation Analytics:

hands-on crash course

Countering disinformation is a team effort: nobody gets there unless everybody gets there.

This course will help you understand the modern "post-truth" information sphere and put you on a path towards becoming a disinformation analyst.
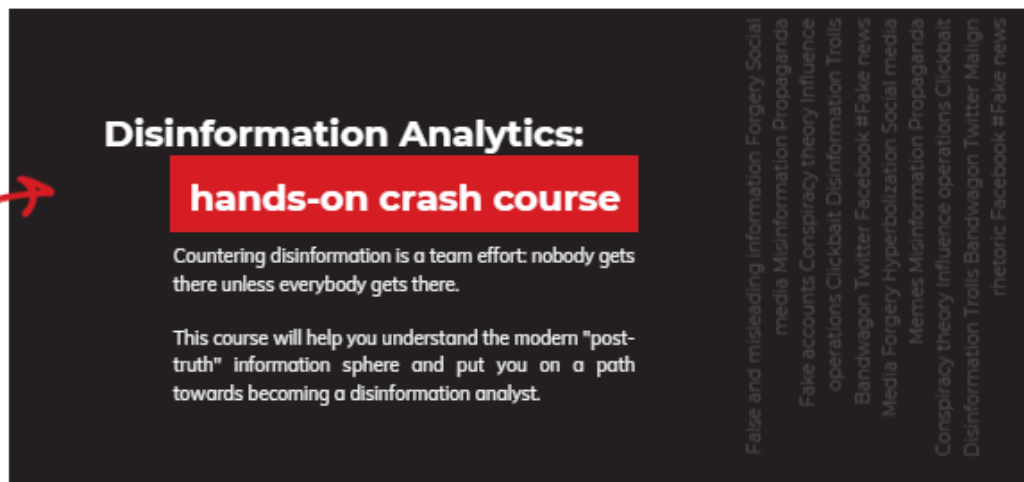
Course interface prototype
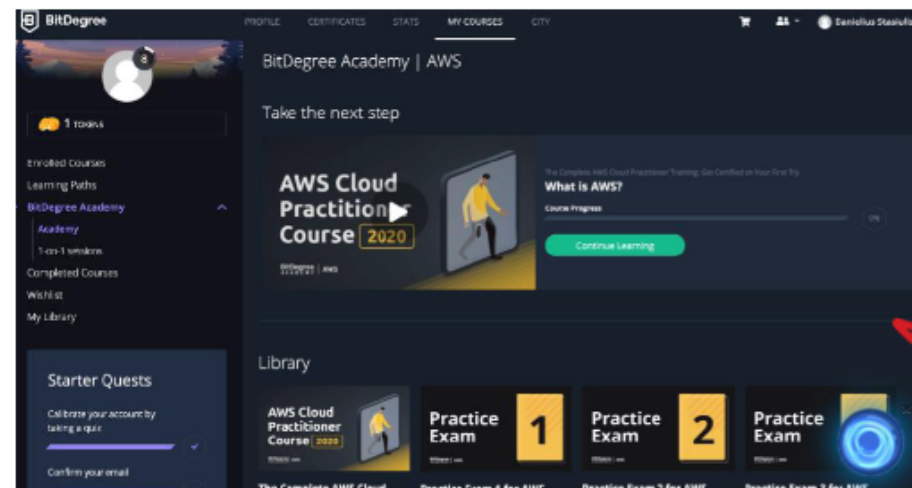
Providing knowledge on the most prominent disinformation **narratives, techniques, actors and sources** in a **3-4 hour** course.

Granting students a **certificate** upon completion of the course so they can join DebunkEU.org or other organisations.

Making the course **widely available** so more people can start contributing to global disinformation countering efforts.

Combining expertise of our analysts with **state of the art technology** with the help of Lithuanian digital course platform BitDegree.

DISINFORMATION ANALYSIS TRAINING: PRACTICE

The **digital course provides the basis** for building disinformation analysis skills further.

DebunkEU.org provides an opportunity to **put this knowledge in practice** with **4-8 weeks follow-up training.**

Future analysts are **given access** to use the DebunkEU.org platform and **practice labelling** harmful content.

They work on an **assigned research project** with a **supervision** of our senior analysts (meetings 2 times per week).

Students produce **their own analysis reports** which are **evaluated** by our analysts and **published** on DebunkEU.org

REACH OUT TO US

As a growing NGO, we are always on a look-out for **new opportunities, projects and collaborations**.

Therefore, if you could share valuable insights and ideas with us - **please email us at** viktoras@debunkeu.org

Contacts of organisations to explore possibilities of **joining our efforts**,

Ways to **scale** our ongoing projects in other countries,

Ideas for media literacy and disinformation countering activities.

Featured Reports

2 March 2021

'Non-existent Russian threat' and suppression of free speech dominate the disinformation landscape

26 February 2021

Kremlin media: Lithuania risks Baltic unity by forbidding allies to import energy from Belarus

18 February 2021

Waging the 'vaccine war': attempts to prove the superiority of Sputnik V by using disinformation

5 February 2021

2020 has ended with allegations of the Baltics meddling in Belarus and suppressing Russian media

Latest News

DebunkEU.org

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"Understanding Disinformation Across Europe"
Viktoras Dauksas, Head of DebunkEU.org

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