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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN POLAND

EU DISINFO LAB



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INTRODUCTION

- Disinformation remained a little-known phenomenon in Poland for many years. Both the political class and the public paid little attention to the problem. Even though it has repeatedly created political sentiment in the country. In 2015, anti-immigrant narratives contributed significantly to Law and Justice (PiS) party gaining power.
- The situation did not change for the following years. Only the COVID-19 pandemic showed how dangerous false information can be. Unfortunately, Polish society has proved little immune to resist false content. Poland [remained](#) one of the least vaccinated countries in the EU/EEA. The government's pro-vaccination policy has proved ineffective. Many of the actions carried out by the authorities baulked at legality. This only accumulated reluctance to comply with sanitary restrictions, and gave fuel to anti-vaccine activists, ultimately resulting in a high COVID-19 mortality rate in Polish society.
- We could also see an increase in disinformation narratives during the women's strike against stricter abortion laws in the fall of 2020. The Constitutional Tribunal's ruling made abortion due to foetal abnormality impossible, which in practice meant a near total-ban on abortion. Many manipulated and falsified narratives have been created around this topic, as well as the broad issue of women's reproductive rights. These were generated primarily by far-right activists and journalists. Despite the largest protests in Poland since 1989, the Constitutional Tribunal's ruling has remained in effect to this day.
- Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine demonstrated the power of Kremlin propaganda in Poland. Thousands of social media accounts have shifted from anti-vaccine narratives to anti-Ukrainian content. In the first period of the war, however, Polish society proved immune to Russian propaganda. The Kremlin's aggressive narratives were ineffective, and Poles were willing to support Ukraine and give shelter to refugees. This also resulted in a significant increase in public awareness against disinformation, which, some extent, made Poles more resistant to propaganda. Unfortunately, economic tensions between Poland and Ukraine have caused anti-Ukrainian sentiment to grow again in recent months.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

AMANTADINE IS A MIRACLE DRUG FOR COVID-19

In late 2020, Polish doctor Włodzimierz Bodnar announced that he had discovered an effective therapy that cures COVID-19 in 48 hours. The novel treatment is said to be based on the use of amantadine, which is used to combat the symptoms of Parkinson's disease and treat type A flu. The entire treatment was to last about 12 days and consisted of regular intake of amantadine in gradually decreasing doses. The therapy became so popular that some pharmacies began to run out of drugs containing amantadine.

The therapy has [received](#) strong criticism from the scientific and medical community. Specialists unanimously stressed that the mechanism of action of amantadine in practice cannot prevent SARS-CoV-2 fusion with the patient's cells, i.e., theoretically it cannot work. The efficacy of amantadine in the treatment of COVID-19 has never been confirmed, and Dr. Bodnar relied only on his observations and one non-peer-reviewed study.

As TokFM's [investigation](#) revealed, Włodzimierz Bodnar did not receive 3.000 COVID-19 patients, as he claimed. He treated only 608 people. Of the people to whom Dr. Bodnar prescribed amantadine, 17 died. As Włodzimierz Bodnar admitted, he worked almost non-stop for a long time, writing up to 100 prescriptions a day. As TokFM has established, a visit to Dr. Bodnar costs 200zł. According to rough estimates, Dr. Bodnar earned from 500.000 to even more than a million zlotys on the experimental therapy.

In December 2021, a study purportedly confirmed amantadine's effectiveness in treating COVID-19. Many Polish politicians, including Minister of Justice Zbigniew Ziobro, echoed the narrative about the drug's effectiveness. This sparked a public debate that involved many doctors and specialists, but also anti-vaccine activists.

Contrary to claims circulating on the Internet, the cited paper was [neither published](#) in Nature nor demonstrated the efficacy of amantadine in the treatment of COVID-19. The paper is also not a clinical trial, only an in vitro study. In addition, as the authors themselves admitted, the paper's title did not reflect the study's conclusions, and the last sentence of the abstract was misleading. Hence, numerous corrections were made in the publication. It was made clear that the study was limited to in vitro testing, and recommendations for the use of amantadine in the treatment of patients with COVID-19 and suggestions for its potential in the treatment of COVID-19 were removed.

As a result, a study on the use of amantadine to prevent progression and treatment of COVID-19 symptoms was funded on behalf of the Ministry of Health. The [results](#) clearly showed no differences between patients taking a placebo and those taking amantadine. It is impossible to determine how many people believed in the drug's efficacy or how many people suffered from lack of proper treatment and taking amantadine inappropriately. Anti-vaccine movements to this day claim that the lack of widespread use of the drug in hospitals was the result of a conspiracy by governments and pharmaceutical companies, and that the authorities persecuted Dr. Bodnar.

THE SUDDEN TURN OF THE NARRATIVE IN THE ANTI-VACCINATION MOVEMENT TOWARDS ANTI-UKRAINIAN AND PRO-RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA

The outbreak of the war in Ukraine was a turning point in the Polish online space of disinformation. Due to the geographic proximity of the conflict, the topic evoked strong emotions. Instantly, narratives about the staged conflict or those justifying an attack on Ukraine began circulating throughout social media. Soon after, Polish social media was flooded with disinformation about the refugee crisis, which was supposed to evoke aversion to Ukrainians.

It was quickly noticed that the accounts that had so far spread disinformation in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic had a large share in the spread of conspiracy theories and false information about Ukraine. It was important information that confirmed the observations made so far. As FakeNews.pl indicated in their [report](#) from March 2021, “anti-vaccine/anti-covid” narratives were strongly associated with the Kremlin’s centres of influence.

It is impossible to determine how many people shared anti-Ukrainian content with the knowledge that they were duplicating Russian disinformation. However, this did not change the fact that thanks to the information flow network it had built up, Moscow could infect the Polish information space with the narratives it desired in no time. Russia’s sphere of informational influence was too extensive to be easily stopped.

The above phenomenon was confirmed by a quantitative [analysis](#) by IBIMS, a [report](#) by specialists from the Polish-Japanese Academy of Information Technology, a [study](#) by FakeNews.pl or a [publication](#) by NASK and the Polish Press Agency. The conclusion was unequivocal: Polish conspiracy theorist circles practically overnight went from generating anti-vaccine content to anti-Ukrainian disinformation.

In the first months of the war, these measures proved to have little effect. Polish society showed high resistance to Russian propaganda. However, the prolonged conflict led to fatigue and weakened the alertness of Poles. Currently, anti-Ukrainian narratives are beginning to rise again.

POLISH CHILDREN ARE BEING KICKED OUT OF CANCER HOSPITALS TO FREE UP SPACE FOR UKRAINIAN CHILDREN

In March 2022, information began circulating on the Polish Internet that children staying in hospitals were being discharged from them to free up space for Ukrainian children with cancer. According to anonymous reports, Polish children are said to be left unattended, and parents must seek oncological treatment for them on their own.

The source of the information turned out to be an anonymous social media account. The original post garnered few reactions, but a screenshot began circulating all over the Internet. Concerned parents began contacting hospitals and state institutions en masse.

The Ministry of Health has designated 120 different medical care facilities nationwide to receive the wounded and sick from Ukraine. However, this was not done by discharging Polish patients from hospitals. This was [confirmed](#) by several medical facilities, clearly indicating that the information circulating online is false.

Although the above fake news ultimately did not have widespread consequences, it showed that in times of crisis, a public burdened by information chaos could easily panic.

NARRATIVES

ANTI-IMMIGRANT NARRATIVES

- The first significant increase in anti-immigrant narratives could be seen in 2015. At the time, it was a prominent theme during the Polish parliamentary elections. These narratives, along with criticism of EU migration policy, proved effective. The Law and Justice (PiS) party managed to win the elections with a significant lead, and the above actions had a spotty, though not the only, share in this.
- The second rise in anti-immigrant narratives came during the 2021 Polish-Belarusian border crisis. Belarusian border guards began to push migrants from the Middle East to the Polish border. In response, the Polish Border Guard began using illegal pushbacks. The situation caused a massive division in Polish society. One part of the society called for respecting the rights of migrants, while the other wanted strong border defence. The situation is still causing huge controversy in Poland today.
- The third wave of anti-migration narratives, although much milder than the previous two, was related to the parliamentary elections in 2023. It was based primarily on criticism of the EU's migration solutions and the alleged threat posed by people from the Middle East. When it turned out that some politicians of the ruling party were involved in illegally selling visas to Poland (the so-called visa scandal), the opposition, previously critical of anti-immigrant narratives, also started distributing this content.
- Anti-immigration narratives are a common theme of disinformation. They touch on the same themes as in other countries: terrorism, increased crime, women's safety, threats to Christianity, and overpopulation by foreign ethnic groups. At the same time, Poland, even compared to the rest of the European Union, accepts numerous migrants not only from Ukraine or Belarus but also from India and Georgia. This contradicts the fact that many Poles still perceive their country as homogeneous. Polish society is just beginning to understand that Poland is an attractive destination for immigrants from many parts of the world.

ANTI-VACCINE NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION ON COVID-19

- Disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic has been at central health care narratives for two years. It caused a decline in trust in public institutions and shook faith in medicine. The effects of disinformation around COVID-19 are still felt by Polish society today.
- Disinformation topics concerned sanitary restrictions, which were presented as an authoritarian attempt to enslave Poles. They were described as sanitary segregation and compared to the persecution of Jews in the Third Reich. Wearing masks was criticised, and tests for SARS-CoV-2 were described as ineffective. The pandemic was presented as a planned conspiracy of governments and pharmaceutical companies (the so-called 'plandemic'). Many people were also looking for alternative sources of treatment, primarily drugs with untested effectiveness against COVID-19, such as amantadine, ivermectin, or hydroxychloroquine.
- However, disinformation content about COVID-19 vaccinations was the most popular. They were presented as dangerous, untested preparations. It was pointed out that they were intended to depopulate and enslave humanity or activate dangerous diseases using 5G. The vaccines were said to contain graphene, and the entire vaccination process was described as a mass medical experiment. Most commonly, vaccines were falsely presented as experimental treatments that could lead to many side effects.

ANTI-REFUGEE AND ANTI-UKRAINIAN NARRATIVES

- The anti-refugee rhetoric was the dominant message spread by Polish disinformation circles in connection with the war. It was intended to evoke hostility towards Ukrainians fleeing the invasion. Russian influence centres particularly desired it, as it hurts empathy and the willingness to help not only refugees but also Ukraine as such. Furthermore, it was also intended to create divisions and antagonisms within Polish society, which, when preoccupied with internal problems, will not pay attention to the neighbour's situation.
- Disinformation about refugees included the following topics: Ukrainians are more privileged than Poles, who become second-class citizens in their own country, PESEL (registration number) gives Ukrainians full civic rights in Poland, Ukrainians take hospital beds and there are not enough such places for Polish citizens, Polish children are discriminated against in schools because refugees from Ukraine are favoured, flats intended for Polish families are handed over to Ukrainians, Ukrainians pose a threat to the safety of Poles.
- Another type of narratives is those that are strictly anti-Ukrainian. Their goal is to cause aversion to the defending country. Such content is to influence Poles in such a way as to discourage them from both humanitarian and military aid. Their primary purpose is to arouse fear and show Ukraine as a dangerous and Nazi-filled country. The main method is to use historical animosities for this purpose, especially the Volhynian massacre.
- Narratives supporting or justifying the Russian invasion are pretty common, although much rarer than the ones described above. They are intended to warm the image of Russia and show that the war is waged for a good purpose. They present Ukraine as a threat to its neighbours and provoking the war itself, and Putin as the one who acted in self-defence.
- In addition to generating social antagonism and aversion to Ukraine, Russian propaganda also focuses on undermining the unity of Western societies. The purpose of these narratives is to create public pressure that will lead to the ease of the sanctions. It is also about making the impression that it was NATO that incited Ukraine to war and posed a threat to Russia, so the invasion was only an act of self-defence.
- The narratives of the most conspiratorial nature are those that undermine the intensity of the war and even consider the entire invasion a hoax. It is hard to say whether these narratives are desired by Kremlin propaganda. The exception is the conspiracy theory about laboratories in Ukraine producing biological weapons. It is a direct justification of the Russian aggression and was distributed by the media connected with Moscow and the power centres in the Kremlin. The remaining content expresses a general distrust of conspiracy circles to any official information. What is worth noting is the prominent role of anti-Semitism in those narratives.
- Anti-Ukrainian narratives were also eagerly shared by far-right politicians associated with the Confederation party. They started an action called #StopUkrainizationOfPoland, which was trending on X (formerly Twitter) then. Initially, it did not gain much support, but the current economic tensions between Warsaw and Kyiv mean that anti-Ukrainian sentiments in Polish society are starting to grow.

DISINFORMATION ABOUT WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND SEXUAL EDUCATION

- Women's rights raise considerable controversy in the Polish public space. This is especially true when it comes to the outbreak of nationwide protests against the tightening of abortion law in 2020, causing a significant split in Polish society. Far-right politicians treat feminists as traitors to the nation and agents of foreign influence. Women fighting for their rights face aggressive attacks and vulgar treatment. Some groups see feminism as a means to oppress men and destroy the natural order of things.

- The public debate on sexual education has been going on in Poland for years and has been the subject of disinformation for years. One of the main narratives is that of the World Health Organisation (WHO) and its 2012 guidelines on sexual education being harmful to children. The most popular false thesis is the alleged “teaching masturbation to 4-year-olds”, which is allegedly carried out by sex educators working with children. A related thread that recurs in disinformation about sex education is the “moral rot of the West”. It indicates that in the West, sexual education allegedly leads to pedophilia and other negative phenomena. These narratives are strongly linked to contraception that some groups treat as equivalent to abortion. This especially applies to emergency contraception, i.e., the so-called “morning after” pill. As a result of a political campaign based mainly on disinformation, emergency contraception was withdrawn from general sale in Poland in 2017. To this day, it is only available by prescription.
- The issue of abortion and in vitro fertilisation is often a target of strong disinformation campaigns. False information about abortion includes, for example, national laws on termination of pregnancy such as content about access to abortion even after childbirth in Western countries. Among conspiracy theorists, termination of pregnancy is also associated with a globalist conspiracy and attempts to depopulate humanity. Numerous false information also tries to incite fear in women by evoking alleged complications after abortion such as a high probability of death or mental problems. In turn, in vitro is treated as a morally questionable procedure that contributes to the death of unborn children. Disinformation about this procedure concerns the perception of in vitro children as products that constitute a “gene bomb”. This narrative is based on false information that in vitro children are particularly vulnerable to genetic defects. As a result of a heated political debate, in 2016, the Law and Justice government ended the nationwide in vitro program and closed its financing, but the current Parliament is working on starting it again.

ANTI-EU NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION ABOUT THE LGBT+ COMMUNITY

- Disinformation about the EU covers three main topics. The first is migration policy. The false narratives circulating around this topic have already been mentioned earlier. However, in Poland, some politicians present the EU as an enemy that is trying to force Poland to accept thousands of dangerous migrants. This narrative has been repeated for many years, but it gained popularity again due to the October referendum. It contained biased questions and presented the EU in a negative light. The turnout in the referendum was too low to be considered binding.
- The second topic is climate policy. Here, too, the EU is perceived as an aggressor imposing negative solutions for the Polish economy. Climate denialists are particularly attacking the Fit For 55 package. In January 2023, a strange disinformation campaign was pushed by far-right politicians, according to which the EU will prohibit eating meat and will force people to eat insects. The same disinformation narratives appear in the public debate on global warming as in other countries: global warming does not exist, humans do not contribute to global warming, glaciers are not melting, and all this is the conspiracy of global elites.
- The third topic of disinformation narratives is the LGBTQI+ community. The EU’s actions are also perceived as an attack on Polish sovereignty. Far-right politicians perceived LGBTQI+ activists as agents of foreign influence. Numerous disinformation campaigns concern false information about the link between homosexuality and pedophilia or the destruction of the traditional family model. There is also fake news about the dangers of raising children by same-sex couples. In 2020, during the presidential election campaign, Andrzej Duda, the candidate of Law and Justice, and Krzysztof Bosak, the candidate of Confederation, repeatedly attacked the LGBT+ community. This resulted in protests and aggressive public debate, as non-heteronormative people became the focus of a disinformation campaign.

FACT-CHECKING ORGANISATIONS

- [AFP Sprawdzam](#): Polish branch of the French Press Agency. Verifies various content, including issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. IFCN member.
- [Demagog](#): the first and largest fact-checking organisation in Poland. It has been operating since 2014. Demagog verifies numerous topics in the field of disinformation, from the COVID-19 pandemic to the war in Ukraine. Continuously monitors the Polish public debate, regularly verifying politicians' statements. The association is also involved in education through the Fact-checking Academy initiative. IFCN member.
- [Foundation "Counteracting Disinformation" — FakeNews.pl](#): The organisation was founded in 2020. It is the second-largest fact-checking organisation in Poland. Verifies disinformation on various topics: the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, LGBT+ rights, migration, women's rights, medicine, and biology. Researches the disinformation space and creates numerous reports for international organisations. IFCN member.
- [Pravda](#): Polish fact-checking organisation founded in 2020. Verifies various topics, primarily related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It also creates educational materials for students. IFCN member.

OTHER NGOS AND MEDIA

- [OKO.Press](#): Polish online news and opinion website on political and social issues, mainly focused on investigative journalism and control of government activities. The site aims to promote democratic values, human rights and government transparency by publishing fact-checking, research, and analysis.
- [Reporters Foundation](#): specialises in investigative journalism. Journalists of the foundation investigate corruption in the government and public institutions, as well as Russian influence. The Foundation runs two websites, the Polish [FrontStory.pl](#) and the international [VSquare](#). Cooperates with investigative journalists from all over Europe.
- [Wojownicy Klawiatury](#): fact-checking initiative engaged in the fight against manipulated content. The Bronisław Geremek Foundation and Polish Robert Schuman Foundation created the project.
- [Konkret24](#): Group of journalists that work as fact-checkers in TVN, a Polish free-to-air television station, network and a media and entertainment group in Poland.
- [Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis Foundation / Fundacja Centrum Analiz Propagandy i Dezinformacji](#) works to raise awareness of hazards from propaganda and disinformation related to hybrid, information or psychological warfare. It carries out educational and research projects and runs podcasts on disinformation.

PUBLIC AND GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

- [NASK](#): A Polish research and development organisation and data networks operator. NASK conducts projects against disinformation and monitors the security of the Polish computer network. The institute operates a computer emergency response team — CERT Polska.
- [FakeHunter](#): Fact-checking organisation of the Polish Press Agency.

POLICY

- Poland does not have comprehensive policies to combat disinformation. Attempts to introduce them during the COVID-19 pandemic and the outbreak of war in Ukraine had limited effects. They were based on ad hoc government actions and ongoing attempts to combat individual fake news. Polish intelligence services do not have a clear policy for reporting disinformation threats. There are also no clear guidelines for public institutions on counteracting disinformation, and no permanent structures in the government are dedicated to this issue. The full scope of recommended changes in counteracting disinformation in Poland can be found in [this report](#).
- There is no general legal act in Poland that would [introduce](#) legal solutions regarding disinformation. Prosecution of false information may be based on personal injury grounds, such as defamation. However, public damage due to the repetition of lies or false information is recognised by law only during elections. Additionally, the Polish Penal Code includes provisions for protection against hatred of ethnic, religious, or racial groups. However, there are no provisions in the law on protection based on gender or sexual orientation. There are also provisions prohibiting the promotion of totalitarian regimes, such as fascism or communism. A special provision also applies to Holocaust denial. More about the fight against fake news based on the current law in Poland can be found in this [report](#).
- In 2021, the then Minister of Justice, Zbigniew Ziobro, tried to introduce a law on freedom of speech. The new law was intended to protect citizens against attempts by internet corporations to limit public debate. However, the act's provisions [raised](#) justified concerns about misuse by the authorities. They could be used to restrict freedom of speech and protect only content that was favourable to the ruling party. The parliament has not yet voted on the bill. It seems doubtful that the bill will ever be introduced as Poland prepares to implement the Digital Services Act.
- The protection of journalists and whistleblowers in Poland is low. In the World Press Freedom Index, Poland [was](#) only in 66th place in 2022, compared to 2015, in 18th place. The EU whistleblower directive has also not been implemented, although the government [announced](#) that the work is nearing completion (implementation date expired on 17 December 2021).
- The problem of freedom of speech in Poland is also related to the politicisation of public broadcasters, primarily TVP. It has been used many times by the ruling party to promote a favourable agenda and criticise the opposition. After losing the 2023 elections, TVP journalists [admitted](#) to spreading government propaganda.
- The attempt to introduce a law limiting foreign ownership of Polish media also [aroused](#) great controversy. The so-called Lex TVN Act, was perceived as an attempt to limit the activities of the private television TVN, owned by the American company Discovery. The passage of the bill by parliament sparked protests. Ultimately, the president vetoed the bill.

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