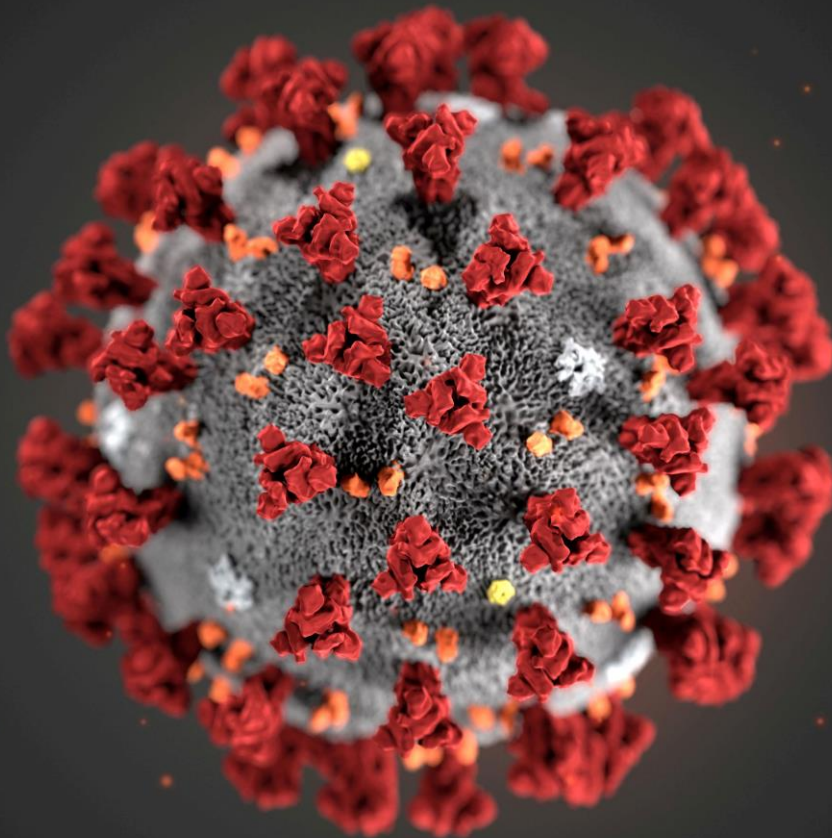




bringing the online in line with human rights



# COVID-19 – A Plague of Racism and Conspiracy Theories

A Compilation of Findings on Cyber Hate Related to the Coronavirus Pandemic by the Members of INACH

## International Network Against Cyber Hate - INACH

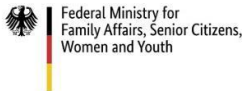
INACH was founded in 2002 to use intervention and other preventive strategies against cyber hate. The member organisations are united in a systematic fight against cyber hate, for example as complaints offices, monitoring offices or online help desks. In their respective countries, they provide important contacts for politicians, internet providers, educational institutions, and users.

Funding for INACH is provided by its members, the European Commission, the BPB and other donors. The International Network Against Cyber Hate (INACH) unites multiple organizations from the EU, Israel, Russia, South America, and the United States. While starting as a network of online complaints offices, INACH today pursues a multi-dimensional approach of educational and preventive strategies.



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## Executive Foreword

The novel coronavirus and the disease it causes (COVID-19) swept the globe in mere months. Most people in the western hemisphere had hardly heard anything about this new virus, then – suddenly – their hospitals started being overrun by COVID patients and their healthcare systems started to crumble under the pressure. Some countries were hit extremely hard (Italy, Spain, the UK), others less so, but one thing was common among all EU countries and their citizens: Their economies shut down and people were confined to their homes for months.

One more thing was also common, the loss of the feeling of security and the mourning of the life people used to live. COVID completely turned the world upside down and arguably changed how we live our lives forever.

Such major cataclysms always provide a fertile ground for hate and conspiracy theories. People, especially when they feel insecure, look for easy answers, people that they can blame, straightforward theories so they can make sense of the world once more. The pandemic has not been different. Multiple communities have been targets of vicious verbal racist attacks, discrimination has become rampant towards certain minorities and a myriad of conspiracy theories blossomed in the wake of the virus.

Many of our members diligently documented the instances of hate speech related to the Corona virus and the conspiracy theories it gave birth to. In this report, their findings will be collected, compiled and presented to provide stakeholders and the public with an extensive and overarching view of the situation and shine a light on the hardships, discrimination and intimidation that multiple communities have to face in a time when they are struggling too with a loss of financial and physical security.

The aim of this report is not to give a detailed reiteration of our members' findings, but to provide an overview of them, raise awareness and provide another tool to bring this information to the wider audiences that might not have been reached by the original sources. If the reader is interested in the in-depth data and the specific findings of our members, they can find the links to all original reports in the Appendix at the end of this report.

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## Contributing Members

The following members contributed findings and analysis to this report:

### In the Framework of the sCAN Project



### Non-sCAN Project Contributing Members



## COVID and Hate Speech

In this chapter, we will look at which communities were targeted most by hate speech related to the novel coronavirus. The conspiracy theories that were given birth by the pandemic will be examined in the next section.

### **Anti-Asian Racism**

Many articles were published since the beginning of 2020 that reported on the rise of anti-Asian, and especially anti-Chinese, racism and discrimination related to the spread of the coronavirus in western countries.

As the sCAN Project partners detail in their report:

*"When the reports on the quarantined city of Wuhan and the Hubei province were published, some of Croatian daily newspapers started xenophobic reporting on Asian tourists, portraying them as the main source of infections. This caused verbal or even physical attacks against some Asian tourists visiting Croatia. In Italy, the most relevant episode concerns the sentence from the Governor of Veneto, stating: "We all know Chinese people eat rats", which nearly led to a diplomatic incident.*

*In France, many insults and negative comments were disseminated on online social media regarding so-called Asian food habits and traditions. In addition, videos were posted on Twitter, portraying people assumedly originating from Asian countries, who were affected by exclusionary acts in public transports and in streets. In Austria, people perceived as Asians, or more specifically with Chinese background, have also been confronted with physical attacks and direct online attacks because of their perceived or actual Asian background automatically linked to the worldwide disease."*

This shows that hate speech directed at the members of the Asian communities of Europe and Asian tourists in general had multiple layers. Essentially, people in western countries securitised Asian people and the Asian communities of their

respective countries. Asian people - on one hand - were depicted as the ones whose eating habits and culinary culture gave birth to the virus and - on the other hand - as existential threats, i.e. carriers and spreaders of a deadly virus. This racist stereotyping led to a torrent of anti-Asian hate speech online and offline. Sadly, it also led to multiple hate crimes and vandalism against Asian-owned businesses.

Furthermore, this wave of racism was not (or is not) confined to the general public. A multitude of leading politicians spewed racist stereotypes about Chinese people. Some of them even used this widespread animosity towards Asian people to deflect responsibility from their failings to contain the virus in their own countries. In essence, scapegoating more than a billion people for their political gains.

### **Anti-migrant Rhetoric**

Sadly, when the floodgates of racism are opened by a global all-encompassing event, the wave never stops at one group of vulnerable people. Anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism were the first wave of corona-related online and offline hate speech. After the reporting on China died down in the news reports and the spread of the virus globally weakened the link to and the importance of its origins, people started looking at other societal groups to blame for the spread of the disease.

As ZARA, our member in Austria noted:

*"When media reports were no longer so strongly focused on the Corona situation in China, the socially constructed groups affected by racist incidents related to the Coronavirus also changed. The reported discrimination was then mainly directed against refugees (42, i.e. almost half of the reports) or against people perceived as Muslims - i.e. exactly those people who have been particularly affected by racism over the last years."*

And as the sCAN Project partners highlighted:



*"In many countries monitored, refugees and migrants are perceived as responsible for spreading the virus, and there has been deliberate attempts by politicians to link the two – as well as to downplay the virus in comparison to the 'threat of migration', as Viktor Orban did in the beginning of the pandemic. This is not the first time this hate trend is disseminated. [...]"*

*On various, even some of the largest media, in the user-generated comments sections, our Slovenian partner has identified increased and more graphic hate speech toward refugees and migrants in relation to the pandemic. Refugees and migrants are perceived as a health threat, because they supposedly disseminate the virus uncontrollably. This theory actually builds upon some of the previous hate theories, present on social media before the pandemic, regarding refugees and migrants bringing various deadly diseases with them. Some media promote clickbait titles about apprehended migrants having fever and other symptoms of infection, which presumably raises fear in people and ignites the "fuse" for hateful comments. In Latvia, hate speech occasionally targets migrants and refugees blaming them for spreading the virus within the EU. The virus is presented a [sic!] "by-product of open borders!"*

In other words, when the anti-Asian sentiment died down, the "usual suspects" started being targeted again. Which also shows what INACH had observed in multiple of our reports: There are fleeting trends in online hate speech, just like in most social phenomena. People jump on the bandwagon, attack a certain community because of certain drivers of racism, such as this pandemic, and then look for other targets when the first one falls out of the news cycle. This trend was also underlined by populist anti-migrant politicians, especially in Eastern Europe, desperately trying to regain their agenda setting power and trying to shoehorn this new threat into the world that they had created where migration and refugees were the biggest threats to their respective societies.

The stereotype of the dangerous foreigner that spreads diseases is an age-old one, and just like back then, it serves two purposes now. It creates a scapegoat that can be blamed, deflecting responsibility, and it also provides the feeling of purity for the indigenous citizens of the country. 'We are not the ones spreading the virus. We are

pure, clean people. It's the "Other", the unclean foreigner with their strange customs that are to blame.' Thus, the wave of anti-Asian hate speech was followed by a torrent of anti-migrant racism and xenophobia.

### **Classist and Anti-Poor Rhetoric**

This type of COVID related hate speech is closely connected to the previous category that was discussed above. Based on our members' reports, in France, Italy and other countries newspapers created a narrative that divided societies into two parts: One of them consisted of good citizens that adhere to the restrictions and act responsibly, and the other half consisted of the bad citizens who ignore the restrictions and endanger their fellow citizens. Unsurprisingly these newspapers usually depicted people that live in poorer parts of certain cities as the baddies. This classist, anti-poor rhetoric fuelled online hate speech against the bad, irresponsible poor members of society.

As it has been mentioned, this type of hate speech was intimately linked to anti-migrant sentiment, because a lot of refugees and immigrants live in poorer neighbourhoods. Thus, scapegoating the lower classes within society naturally comes with the further scapegoating of immigrants and refugees.

### **Divine Punishment for Sinners**

Hate speech based on the concept of coronavirus as divine punishment was not very widespread, but it is still noteworthy. Our German member, jugendschutz.net found

that ultra-religious groups, such as Islamists spread hate speech against “sinners” (non-believers, the LGBTQI+ community, etc.) as the causes of the pandemic.

Our Polish member, the Never Again Association, also observed similar sentiments in Poland:

*“WROCLAW. On 1st March, during mass in the St. Michael Archangel church on Bolesław Prus Street, Fr. Leonard Wilczyński, belonging to the Salesian order, stated in his homily that the COVID-19 pandemic is “God’s punishment for living in the sin of homosexuality”. He also added that the Chinese were “dirty” and “eat bats and dead fetuses”.”*

### **Misogyny (esp. towards Muslim women)**

Just like all other manifestation of racism and discrimination, people can be targeted by hate speech due to multiple attributes at once. Several of our members, for instance in Croatia, Austria, France, and other countries reported hate speech and anti-women hate campaigns targeting women in general and often Muslim women specifically.

As they observe:

*“Many reported cases, as always, contain hateful content directed against people and groups due to more than one characteristic. Online intersectional hate speech is a highly perceived phenomenon also amidst the Covid-19 hate speech trends. [...]”*

*In Austria, another narrative shared by (far) right-wing actors is that migrant women are being preferred throughout this corona crisis. Even a hashtag is being circulated: #migrant-preference for sharing the following hateful fake news that border restrictions are stricter for Austrians than for “mi-grants”. The message is spread that no one is allowed to leave the country. Nonetheless if a “migrant” especially a woman only says “asylum” at the border, the person can pass. Moreover, intersectional hate speech has been directed against Muslim*

women. In a conspiratorial article posted on the website "fisch und fleisch", Muslims women are presented as resistant to the coronavirus.

*In France, since the beginning of the lockdown, women including young women are victims of hateful and cyber-harassment campaigns. There is a resurgence of so-called "fisha accounts" on SnapChat which are used for spreading revenge porn content. The same phenomenon has been observed on Telegram: popular channels are used for disseminating "raids" campaigns in which followers are invited to follow Instagram online stories of young women for asking them to send nudes which will be then registered and published on other accounts."*

## **Antisemitism**

There are types of online hate speech that sadly never go out of style. Antisemitism is definitely one of them. Jews are often blamed for all the different troubles plaguing the world and this was not different with this pandemic. However, the antisemitic hate speech spread online is so intimately linked to the conspiracy theories that will be discussed in the next chapter that it would be redundant to scrutinise it here. Thus, antisemitic hate speech will be examined below, linked to the multitude of conspiracy theories that the pandemic brought forth.

## COVID and Conspiracy Theories

Before we dive into the torrent of conspiracy theories that was birthed by the coronavirus, it needs to be stated that we are dividing hate speech and conspiracy theories into two chapters to make this report easier to follow and digest. This division also serves as a highlighting method, so that no conspiracy theory or attacked community gets lost in the discussion of the amalgamation of hate produced by COVID. Otherwise, the conspiracy theories that will be discussed below are just as much hateful and based on racist, anti-Muslim, xenophobic, antisemitic, etc. stereotypes, and as such they are considered hate speech by INACH.

### **China's Biological Weapon**

As it was stated in the Executive Foreword of this section of the report, these conspiracy theories are closely linked to the racist hate speech trends that are discussed in the first section. Hence, the conspiracy theory that China developed the virus in a laboratory in Wuhan and then deliberately spread it across the globe to increase its global hegemonic power started emerging and spreading across the internet in parallel with the frightening rise of anti-Asian sentiment.

Several of our members reported hate speech instances linked to such or similar conspiracy theories. Since conspiracy theories can be great tools in geopolitics, several states spread them at some point during the first wave of the virus in Europe and in the US. Multiple sources reported that Russia launched a disinformation campaign to sow distrust and hinder the response against the virus in western countries. China also spread disinformation that stated that the US developed the virus to use it as a weapon against China. In other countries, rumours emerged that

the US wants to invade Europe and they were using the virus to weaken the nations of the continent.

As our members observed:

*"Many partners report that one of the main theories is that the United States of America are preparing an invasion of Europe.*

*In Slovenia, this theory was even supported by pictures of the US army disembarking in Europe (the actual source of the pictures was a US-led multinational military exercise DEFENDER-Europe 20). It states that the United States of America are preparing a hostile takeover of Europe.*

*In Czech Republic [sic!], first misinformation about the coronavirus appeared online in late January, when a server administered by the Russian Defence Ministry accused the United States of having developed Covid-19 as a biological weapon: "The narrative that the virus is an artificial, biological weapon created by the American government for use against China was later taken up and spread by Chinese Government propaganda" according to [Semantic Visions](#) company. The Press Agency Reuters also reported according to a European Union document, that Russian media have launched a "significant disinformation campaign" against the West in order to worsen the impact of the pandemic and disseminate distrust and panic."*

## **The Great Replacement**

The great Replacement is a fairly new conspiracy theory that was concocted by a French author in 2010. It gained real popularity during the second half of the 2010s with the rise of the "alt-right" in the US. On the face of it and in its name, the great replacement is a new far-right conspiracy theory, but it builds on eons old far-right tropes of white people being culturally and physically pushed out by immigrants with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

As many other conspiracy theories, this one has also been updated to include the pandemic. In other words, many extremists spread this theory since the start of the pandemic by stating that Muslim immigrants spread the virus, and this will bring forth the great replacement sooner. Others argued that leftists, NGOs and liberal politicians are using the pandemic and the closing of the borders to bring in more refugees and immigrants into European countries and speed up the replacement of the indigenous population.

As our members recorded:

*"On various, even some of the largest media, in the user-generated comments sections, our Slovenian partner has identified increased and more graphic hate speech toward refugees and migrants in relation to the pandemic. Refugees and migrants are perceived as a health threat, because they supposedly disseminate the virus uncontrollably. [...] Some media promote click-bait titles about apprehended migrants having fever and other symptoms of infection, which presumably raises fear in people and ignites the "fuse" for hateful comments. In Latvia, hate speech occasionally targets migrants and refugees blaming them for spreading the virus within the EU. [...]"*

*In Austria, the daily newspaper Oe24 published an article with the title "Virus, Terror: Why the new asylum-storm is so dangerous" and the following sub-headline "Migrants could be infected with the coronavirus. And in masses terrorists want to infiltrate", warn secret service experts. [...]"*

*In Germany, right-wing extremists use the closing of national borders to avoid the spreading of Covid-19 as proof that closing national borders is indeed possible and according to them "necessary". They claim that, therefore, the opening of German borders to refugees in 2015 was a deliberate strategy by the German government to further the conspiracy theory of the "Great Replacement". Furthermore, the arrival of refugees in Europe, especially in Greece, is likened to the spread of the Coronavirus. The comparison to a virus is dehumanising refugees and is used to propagate drastic (even violent) actions against them. Same in Slovenia, content disseminated on social media refer to the same concept of "Great replacement". It states that the country lockdown and quarantine were all a plan of NGOs and members of left parties for bringing migrants into the country without any resistance."*

## Antisemitic (and adjacent) Conspiracy Theories

Antisemitism is an age-old form of hatred that is always at hand for extremists and racists to concoct theories that aim to provide easily digestible explanations for why our mind-bogglingly complex world works as it does. This pandemic has not been any different. COVID-19 brought a barrage of antisemitism to the online and offline spheres, most of it linked to different conspiracy theories, of which the most widespread ones will be discussed below.

The first wave of conspiracy theories stated that the virus is not real, and it is just a hoax created by the Jews for different purposes. As our member in the UK, CST recorded, people posted memes with texts like the one below:

*"Corona virus is a hoax by the vax kikes teamed with the banker kikes. As usual, the vax kikes want to pump u and your kids full of aluminium and mercury to turn u into a nigger tier retard who's content doing a menial job for 50 years. As usual the banker kikes want to crash the economy and tighten the money supply so that (a) small indie businesses go out of business, then large US-UK-Israel companies can move in and take the market. (b) people default on their mortgages and lose their homes to the banks (c) large businesses plead for loans from western banks (d) governments plead for loans from western banks which they can repay by taxing the people. Same kikery that's been recurring for centuries."*

The second wave argued that the virus exists, but - as we saw with the conspiracy theories in the previous chapter - it was deliberately created by Jews to reach their malignant goals.

As CST observed:

*"An alternative angle for conspiracy theorists is to accept that COVID-19 really exists but assume that it has been deliberately created and spread for malevolent purposes. There are several variations on this theme: that there is a 'Zionist agenda' to depopulate the world by killing huge numbers of people; that coronavirus is part of a plot involving some combination of the United States, Israel and China; that Israel or the Jews developed coronavirus and*



*blamed it on China to try to start World War Three; that prominent Jewish and non-Jewish businessmen such as George Soros (a regular hate figure for conspiracy theorists) have a financial interest in spreading the virus and then developing a vaccine; or some combination of these theories. Whatever the angle, the final destination of the theory remains the same: to blame the Jews in some form or another."*

Our Israeli member, FOA, also recorded a multitude of antisemitic hate speech and conspiracy theories related to the pandemic. Their records are very similar to CST's findings. A torrent of Twitter and Facebook accounts spreading antisemitic conspiracies about Israel creating the virus, about Israeli soldiers spreading the virus on purpose to as many Palestinians as they can, and of course about Jews and Israel creating and spreading the virus to reach the new world order, a centuries old conspiracy theory among far-right groups and neo-Nazis.

Eastern Europe was sadly not free from antisemitic conspiracies spreading either. The Never Again Association recorded that:

*"[...]Pawela referred with full respect to an "authority" (as she described him), namely the Russian biologist, Igor Nikulin, who "in his interview for Russia Today in Arabic stated that the coronavirus is a biological weapon developed in order to reduce the population of our planet by ninety percent. He claims that the outbreaks of this infection point to the responsibility of the United States". Pawela added that it "could also be Israel". Continuing on the same subject, she stated that "it is possible to create an ethno-virus which will selectively infect members of a given nation with Arab or Jewish roots." According to Pawela, "since 1998, the Israelis have been trying to develop such a biological weapon which would be targeted at and affect only Palestinians", whilst stating that at the same time the USA ran a project which would encompass "all pathogens which would target some races, but spare others. And maybe this research is already so advanced that the US government felt it was ready to test it and try it out somewhere!"*

And there were also massive amalgamations of several conspiracy theories that argued that Bill Gates and George Soros (often used as a stand-in for the proverbial "Jew") created the virus for financial gain so Gates could earn more money on forcing

anti-vaxxers to get vaccinated against the virus, or to chip them via the vaccination and gain control over them. Sometimes the newly developed 5G network was also mixed into the theories as a tool that Israel and/or Gates are using to spread the virus, weaken the US or other countries and gain global domination.

From these examples one can see that there is nothing new under the sun. The bases of these theories, such as the new world order, the Jews spreading a plague to gain domination or Soros (i.e. the Jews) doing something evil for financial gains are all eons old antisemitic conspiracies that reach back hundreds of years. Such theories are always being recycled to fit a global ongoing event, in this case, the COVID pandemic. INACH is running a project right now that focuses on exactly that, the constant rehashing of age-old racist and antisemitic tropes to fit modern narratives and sow hate and violence. The ReAct Project can be found [HERE](#).

## **Appendix**

**sCAN Project** – [Hate Speech Trends during the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Digital and Globalised Age](#)

**ZARA** – [CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS in AUSTRIA: ZARA’s observations throughout the corona crisis – since March 16th 2020](#)

**ZARA** – [Rassismus Report 2019 \(German\)](#)

**CST** – [Research Brief: Coronavirus and the Plague of Antisemitism](#)

**FOA** – [Fighting Online Antisemitism \(FOA\) Briefing Note - Monitoring Online Antisemitism Related to COVID-19](#)

**Never Again Association** – [The Virus of Hate: Brown Book of the Epidemic  
A selection of xenophobic incidents documented by the  
“NEVER AGAIN” Association in the context of the  
coronavirus epidemic in 2020](#)