

Disinformation Campaigns Targeting Migrants in the Western World During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 Pandemisi Sırasında Batı Dünyasında Göçmenleri Hedef Alan Dezenformasyon Kampanyaları

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article



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ORCID:
0009-0004-2152-4820

Geliş tarihi/Received:
11.12.2023

**Son revizyon teslimi/Last
revision received:**
11.12.2023

Kabul tarihi/Accepted:
14.11.2023

Yayın tarihi/Published:
16.12.2023

Atıf/Citation:
Dengiz, B. (2023).
Disinformation campaigns
targeting migrants in the
western world during the
Covid-19 pandemic. *İletişim ve
Diplomasi*, 11, 127-156.

doi: 10.54722/
iletisimvediplomasi.1376254

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, technological advancements have revolutionised the way individuals connect and share information, yet this same era has ushered in a surge of disinformation. The unprecedented threat of Covid-19 not only posed a worldwide health emergency but also intensified the crisis of disinformation. This study delves into the complex web of disinformation, with a particular focus on its intersection with anti-migrant sentiments and policies in the Western world amidst the Covid-19 health crisis. It analyses specific disinformation campaigns that have targeted migrants in Western countries during the Covid-19 period, with a particular emphasis on examples from Europe and the United States (U.S.). The research sample comprises statements released by far-right groups and political leaders in the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, covering the period from January 2020 to December 2020. For this study, the main data source was collected from various media outlets, including online magazines, newspaper platforms, and articles. The rhetoric of far-right groups and politicians in the West was analysed and evaluated within the framework of critical discourse analysis. The study reveals that certain politicians and political groups in the West, through disinformation, legitimise their anti-immigrant stance, making immigrants scapegoats by instrumentalising Covid-19 to gain support. It further highlights that these identified political figures and groups, characterised by populist and far-right tendencies, depict immigrants as a threat by establishing a connec-

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tion between immigrants and the rapid progression of the epidemic and seeking to legitimise anti-immigrant policies.

Keywords: Disinformation, migrants, COVID-19, far-right, infodemic

ÖZ

Dijital çağda, teknolojik gelişmeler bireylerin bağlantı kurma ve bilgi paylaşma yöntemlerinde devrim yaratmıştır. Ancak aynı çağ dezenformasyonun da artmasına neden olmuştur. Covid-19 tehdidi sadece küresel bir sağlık krizi oluşturmakla kalmamış, aynı zamanda dezenformasyon krizini de yoğunlaştırmıştır. Bu çalışma, Covid-19 salgını sırasında Batı dünyasındaki göçmen karşıtı söylem ve politikalarla kesişmesine özellikle odaklanarak karmaşık dezenformasyon ağını incelemektedir. Covid-19 döneminde Batı ülkelerindeki göçmenleri hedef alan belirli dezenformasyon kampanyalarını, Avrupa ve Amerika Birleşik Devletleri'ndeki örneklerle özellikle vurgu yaparak analiz etmektedir. Araştırma örneklemini, Covid-19 salgınının erken evrelerinde Ocak 2020'den Aralık 2020'ye kadar olan dönemi kapsayan ve aşırı sağcı gruplar ile siyasi liderler tarafından yapılan açıklamalardan oluşmaktadır. Bu çalışma için ana veri kaynağı, çevrim içi dergiler, gazete platformları ve makaleler dâhil olmak üzere çeşitli medya kuruluşlarından oluşmaktadır. Batı'daki aşırı sağcı grupların ve siyasetçilerin söylemleri eleştirel söylem analizi çerçevesinde incelenmiş ve değerlendirilmiştir. Bu itibarla çalışma, Batı'daki bazı politikacıların ve siyasi grupların dezenformasyon yoluyla göçmen karşıtı duruşlarını meşrulaştırdıklarını ve destek kazanmak için Covid-19'u araçsallaştırarak göçmenleri günah keçisi hâline getirdiklerini ortaya koymaktadır. Ayrıca, popülist ve aşırı sağ eğilimlerle karakterize edilen bu siyasi figür ve grupların, göçmenler ile salgının hızlı ilerleyişi arasında bir bağlantı kurarak göçmenleri bir tehdit olarak tasvir ettikleri ve göçmen karşıtı politikaları meşrulaştırmaya çalıştıklarını vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dezenformasyon, göçmenler, Covid-19, aşırı sağ, infodemi

INTRODUCTION

In the present era, the ongoing digital transformation, driven by rapid technological advancements, has ushered in unparalleled possibilities for individuals to connect and exchange information. However, advancements in digital communication technologies have created fresh avenues for the widespread production, dissemination, and consumption of false news and disinformation. This has, in turn, complicated the task of distinguishing genuine information from fabricated content (Kalsnes, 2018). While the spread of false news has long been a part of public discourse, the 21st century has seen a significant increase in the speed and prevalence of false information, or disinformation. This increase is largely due to the rise of digital media as the primary plat-

form for sharing ideas, where the quest for user attention often contradicts the goal of spreading accurate information.

The danger associated with the spread of disinformation is emphasised by the alarming fact that on Twitter, false news can spread six times faster than true stories and false narratives can evolve into widely accepted beliefs within communities. This underscores the urgency of addressing the problem of disinformation and its potential consequences on a larger scale (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Consequently, distinguishing truth from falsehood has become increasingly challenging.

Migration continues to be one of the prominent political concerns and a significant subject of disinformation. Falsehoods and incomplete truths about migrants circulate widely on a global scale. The dissemination of false or misleading information contributes to the growth of anti-migrant sentiments and xenophobic acts of violence against migrants. The use of anti-migrant rhetoric by far-right movements has had a profound impact on both European and American political landscapes.

The crisis of knowledge, which reflects and fuels societal divisions, holds the potential to worsen existing prejudices against migrant communities. The convergence of disinformation and immigration has drawn significant attention, particularly in Western countries. False information regarding migration and migrants is not a recent phenomenon. However, the Covid-19 health crisis has exacerbated the issue. In fact, the pandemic has been characterised by what the World Health Organization (WHO) refers to as an “infodemic.” WHO defines this term as an “overabundance of information”, a mix of accurate and inaccurate data that arises in the context of an epidemic. It can result in confusion and, in the long run, diminish confidence in government officials and public health initiatives (WHO, 2020a).

Accordingly, the Covid-19 pandemic has not only brought about a global health crisis but has also exacerbated a parallel crisis – the crisis of disinformation. Fake news about the virus, its origins, and its impact spread rapidly on social media. The extreme right seized this opportunity to blame migrants for the dissemination of the virus despite the lack of evidence. Such narratives further fueled anti-migrant sentiments, portraying them as vectors of disease. Disinformation campaigns orchestrated by extreme right-wing groups have gone beyond spreading false narratives about Covid-19. They have systematically amplified hate speech and xenophobia, portraying migrants as a danger to public health and national security. These false claims reinforce stereotypes and fuel mistrust. Disinformation has not only amplified existing anti-migrant sentiments but also strengthened anti-migrant rhetoric. Extreme right-wing politicians and media outlets have used disinformation to justify harsh immigration policies, such as border closures and stricter asylum laws. The false association between migrants and the pandemic has provided a pretext for such measures.

Despite numerous studies in the literature exploring the intersection of disinformation with Covid-19 in a condensed timeframe (Tagliabue et al., 2020; Radu, 2020), there remains a notable gap in research on disinformation encompassing the Covid-19 era and its association with anti-migrant sentiments. Existing studies are limited in scope, primarily focusing on disinformation during Covid-19 in relation to anti-Asian sentiments (Reny & Barreto, 2020). In contrast, this study aims to fill this void by conducting a more extensive analysis. It delves into disinformation campaigns targeting migrants in Western nations during the Covid-19 period, emphasising examples from Europe and the United States to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

In this study, first, the conceptual framework of disinformation, its evolutionary path, and the challenges it presents will be thoroughly examined. Then, the aim and method of the study will be explained shortly. This study will employ a research approach focused on critical discourse analysis to examine politicians' speeches and media representations related to anti-migrant sentiments. Through this approach, the study aims to unveil the engagement of the elite in producing everyday hate speech and xenophobia in the West. The research sample comprises statements released by far-right groups and political leaders in Europe and the U.S. during the early phases of the Covid-19 pandemic, spanning from January 2020 to December 2020. The main data source for this study was collected from various media outlets, including online magazines, newspaper platforms, and articles. Subsequently, this study will delve into disinformation campaigns encountered by migrants in Western countries during the Covid-19 period, illustrating the examples from Europe and the U.S., respectively.

Conceptual Characterisation of Disinformation

In today's age of unprecedented access to information, there is a paradoxical challenge in guaranteeing the precision and reliability of information. This shift has transformed the dissemination of false and deceptive information from being merely a challenge to becoming a central threat to society. Democracies worldwide are grappling with escalating levels of disinformation. Disinformation campaigns aimed at influencing public opinion are particularly conspicuous during times of crisis and elections. In such crucial moments, the volume of disinformation can be so substantial that it clouds people's judgment, influencing their decision-making abilities. This situation poses a significant threat to democracy, as efforts to control the narrative and manipulate public sentiment through disinformation can shape perceptions, replacing reliable and truthful information crucial for well-informed democratic participation among voters. The pervasive threat of disinformation is a serious national security concern (Selvi, 2023).

In the basic communication model, there's an underlying assumption of collaboration between the sender and receiver. But in reality, not all communication is cooperative; sometimes, information can be unintentionally shared and intercepted by unintended individuals (Smith, 2011). Throughout history, the struggle between truth and falsehood has persisted. However, in the 2000s, the advent of information technologies, digitalisation, and the rapid rise of social media, in particular, have elevated the prevalence of disinformation to unprecedented levels on a global scale. This has led to the ascent of the concept of “post-truth” and a society heavily influenced by digital communication and information tools (Altun, 2023).

The term “disinformation” is not a recent development. The enduring digital revolution, driven by swift technological developments, has ushered in unparalleled opportunities for individuals to connect and exchange information (Guess & Lyons, 2020). Nonetheless, this period of transformation has introduced fresh challenges, especially when it comes to false or misleading information. As news distribution has transitioned from traditional offline sources to online platforms and social media has evolved into a predominant platform for news distribution, the reach and consequences of disinformation have greatly expanded, intensifying the issue (Guess & Lyons, 2020). Whether it's in the form of fake news, deepfakes, or propaganda, addressing the widespread spread of misinformation and disinformation has grown progressively more difficult.

Within the realm of information disorders, both disinformation and misinformation are recognised. While disinformation involves deliberately altered information disseminated to deceive, misinformation entails inaccurate information shared without the deliberate purpose of deception (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). In other words, misinformation refers to information that is incorrect, yet the individual sharing it genuinely believes it to be true. On the other hand, disinformation is false information intentionally spread by an individual who is aware of its falsehood. It constitutes a deliberate, intentional deception, highlighting instances where people are actively misled by malicious actors (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). Misinformation can manifest as information that is not fully comprehensive. Forms of misinformation encompass concealment, ambivalence, distortion, and falsification (Karlova & Fisher, 2012). It takes on diverse forms, such as the dissemination of various false information types. These include outdated news initially shared with good intentions but later discovered to be incorrect, factually correct but intentionally presented in a misleading manner, along with completely fabricated false information spread with the intent to deceive or bewilder the public (Lewandowsky et al., 2020, p. 5).

On the other hand, disinformation, frequently characterised as information that is verifiably incorrect or misleading, is created and spread with the purpose of financial gain or the deliberate intent to mislead the public. It represents a continually chang-

ing challenge that requires continuous efforts to address the primary instigators, distribution channels, strategies, chosen recipients, and the resultant outcomes (European Commission, 2018a).

Disinformation, in this context, has emerged as a major obstacle in the realm of public diplomacy during the 2000s and has reshaped the nature of the media society. It serves both as the foundation and an active participant in this evolving landscape (Ekşi, 2022). The issue of disinformation arises from the post-truth era and the prevalence of social media. However, disinformation has also given rise to its own contributors. Consequently, disinformation is not just a concept to be addressed; it encompasses individuals such as trolls and operates as an active entity with elements like filter bubbles, echo chambers, and fact-checking organisations. This dynamic presents a substantial challenge to both politics and public diplomacy (Ekşi, 2022, p. 15).

Besides misinformation and disinformation, a distinct third category, termed mal-information, emerges—a form of information rooted in reality but wielded to cause harm to individuals, organisations, or nations. In the context of mal-information, it becomes crucial to differentiate between true and false messages, as well as those containing elements of truth, but manipulated, produced, or disseminated by “agents” with harmful intentions rather than serving the public interest (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018). In this regard, mal-information constitutes a unique category where information, though based on reality, is manipulated, produced, or distributed with the explicit purpose of inflicting harm. Unlike disinformation, which involves the intentional spread of false information, mal-information introduces a layer of complexity by utilising facts to achieve malicious objectives. Despite the outlined differences between misinformation, disinformation and mal-information, the impacts on the information landscape and society may share similarities. Moreover, specific instances might display a blend of these three conceptualisations and individual cases of one may coexist with the others, either on different platforms or sequentially, forming part of a more extensive information strategy by specific actors. However, maintaining awareness of these distinctions remains beneficial since the causes, techniques, and remedies can vary accordingly (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2018).

Aim and Method

This qualitative study seeks to illustrate how disinformation campaigns in the West during Covid-19 have heightened anti-migrant sentiments and policies. It specifically examines the influence of the discourse of the extreme right in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. An important step of this study is sampling. As the virus began to spread globally, certain individuals and groups exploited the crisis to advance prejudiced narratives against migrants. In this regard, the research sample consists

of statements issued by far-right groups and political leaders during the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, spanning from January 2020 to December 2020. In this study, the primary source of data was gathered from media sources such as online magazines, newspaper platforms and articles. The rhetoric of far-right groups and politicians in the West, published between January 1, 2020, and December 31, 2021, in online media sources (websites), was scrutinised in the study. In this regard, the rhetoric of far-right groups and politicians in various European countries, including Balkan nations, France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom, was examined. Additionally, the study analysed the anti-migrant rhetoric during Trump's term in the U.S. amid the pandemic. The monitoring specifically focused on examining news, articles, and briefing notes released by 24 media outlets in both Europe and the U.S.

Accordingly, this study centres on language choices, examining them through the lens of critical discourse analysis. This approach allows researchers to reveal the elite's involvement in generating everyday hate speech and xenophobia. The study critically analyses the connections between language, politics, and action in this context.

As a qualitative method, discourse analysis extends beyond the analysis of individual sentences. Discourse analysis is employed to comprehend, interpret, and uncover both surface-level and underlying meanings. Its primary objective is to unveil the constructed or artificial meaning within a text and to expose the implicit or hidden meanings through thorough interpretation. In other words, the fundamental aim of critical discourse analysis is to uncover and explicitly bring to light the concealed intentions, underlying mental perspectives, and implied purposes within words, texts, and all modes of expression (Fowler, 2013). In that sense, it encompasses both spoken and written forms of language, aiming to comprehend how actions are carried out, goals are achieved, and meanings are generated across diverse layers of context (Kampf, 2015, pp. 2-3). This method demonstrates the crucial role of discourse in exerting control over people's minds, ideas, knowledge, opinions and their personal and social representations (van Dijk, 2008). In this regard, by emphasising the top-down process of social control, discourse analysis provides valuable insights to comprehend the perpetuation of racism and xenophobia within societies. It delves deeply into discursive formations to offer a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon.

Hence, building on literature that underscores the influential role of language in shaping norms and attitudes, this study employs the critical discourse analysis approach to scrutinise the discourses of far-right groups and politicians in both Europe and the U.S. Through this examination, the study aims to understand how disinformation campaigns in the West during the Covid-19 pandemic were utilised to rationalise and support anti-migrant sentiments and policies.

Migration As a Topic of Disinformation

Migration has been an enduring aspect of human history, particularly in the European context. It has become increasingly intertwined with geopolitics, trade, cultural interactions, and various societal elements. While migration offers numerous opportunities for host countries, societies, and migrants themselves, it is often regarded as a multifaceted political and policy challenge. This encompasses concerns related to integration, displacement, ensuring safe migration, and the efficient management of borders (IOM, 2018). Consequently, migration is a central topic in public policy and media discussions due to its intricate links with economic well-being, human development, safety, and security. Both at the national and international levels, media outlets frequently present daily coverage of various migration aspects, with a notable focus on the negative aspects most of the time (IOM, 2018).

Migration has assumed a central role in disinformation campaigns, particularly following the 2015 'refugee crisis,' which elevated it to a highly significant and contentious topic in European political discussions (Juhász & Szicherle, 2017). The intensified focus on migration, coupled with the increased significance of the issue, leads to demands for stricter regulations regarding newcomers. Consequently, advocating for a more balanced approach to legal migration in Europe becomes challenging (Dennison & Geddes, 2019).

Social media plays a dual role as a platform for news reporting and information acquisition while also serving as a conduit for the generation and dissemination of both misinformation and disinformation. Within Western countries, there is a growing presence of xenophobic messaging and security-related practices concerning migration, often intertwined with the dissemination of fake news and disinformation regarding immigration. These disinformation campaigns manipulate public perceptions, hindering the maintenance of policy dialogues grounded in accurate information and supported by evidence. An illustrative example is the consistent overestimation by Europeans of the percentage of foreign-born residents, partly because of the widespread circulation of claims insinuating that Europe is experiencing an 'invasion' of migrants (Swanson, 2016).

Disinformation reinforces not only pre-existing biases but also validates discriminatory measures and behaviours aimed at migrants, exacerbating the vulnerability of this already marginalised population. The mistreatment of migrants and instances of prejudice against them have been amplified by the proliferation of inaccurate information and misleading news in diverse media channels, especially on social media platforms, where these issues are exploited for political gain.

Navigating the Infodemic: Disinformation, Migrants, and Covid-19

Disinformation narratives concerning immigration have the objective of exploiting readers' anxieties to create divisions, fuel discontent, and shape the political conversation. Historically, migrants have frequently been wrongfully held responsible for various societal issues, such as economic downturns and public health crises. These purveyors of disinformation link immigration to existing uncertainties, depicting it as a potential danger to public health, especially within the framework of Covid-19.

As pointed out by both Bieber (2020) and Gover et al. (2020), pandemics have historically resulted in the stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain groups of individuals. This pattern has persisted through the years, with a well-documented practice of associating diseases with specific communities, including migrants. Consequently, biases, prejudices, and stigmatisation during pandemics have deep historical roots. An illustrative example of this is the 2014 epidemic of the Ebola virus disease, which was often characterised as an "African disease" (UN News, 2014).

In this context, pandemics can exacerbate pre-existing biases, thereby fueling the spread of extremist and hateful ideologies. The historical record demonstrates that during pandemics, prejudices, biases, and stigmatisation have been systematically exploited. Migrants, in particular, have been consistently portrayed negatively, often framed as a threat and danger to the nation. The presence of perceived threats and a prevailing sense of uncertainty can result in shifts in how individuals perceive, describe, and align themselves. Research has indicated that in times of perceived threats and uncertainty, people tend to emphasise their social identities. This means that their affiliations with various social groups, such as national, ethnic, or religious groups, become more salient during such periods (Abrams et al., 2021).

The paradox inherent in the Covid-19 pandemic is that it demands collective action while also necessitating physical separation. On the one hand, it is an unprecedented global threat that calls for united efforts transcending national borders. On the other hand, it has led to border closures and a focus on comparing Covid-19 statistics between countries. Consequently, the pandemic has the potential to strengthen the idea of a shared global identity encompassing all of humanity, but it can also rekindle nationalist sentiments and reinforce people's attachment to their national identity. It is important to recognise that these two modes of identification – identifying with all of humanity and identifying with one's nation – may have opposing effects on prejudiced attitudes towards migrants (Karakulak, 2022, p. 2).

With the onset of the coronavirus disease, disinformation and misinformation have spread globally, mirroring the virus's own dissemination. Some individuals have claimed that Covid-19 is a deliberate bioweapon or linked to 5G technology, while others have pointed fingers at migration and migrants as the cause of the outbreak. This

scapegoating of migrants is a result of the deluge of information on unregulated social media networks, which is often manipulated to further political or other agendas (IOM, n.d.).

Ghebreyesus, the Director-General of the WHO, underscored in his address at the Munich Security Conference in February 2020 that “We’re not merely combatting an epidemic; we’re grappling with an infodemic” (WHO, 2020b). In this respect, misinformation and disinformation have significantly contributed to eroding the trust of the general public in democratic processes and institutions. This erosion of trust extended to experts, government officials, bureaucrats, and various institutions as the Coronavirus began its global spread in early 2020. Unverified statements and conspiracy theories regarding the virus’s source, spread, and remedies spread extensively on social media platforms, resulting in widespread confusion and an increasing feeling of distrust among the populace (WHO, 2019). Consequently, following the beginning of the coronavirus disease, public health experts have underlined the significance of monitoring and categorising misinformation with the same rigour applied to traditional health-related information available to the public (Hébert-Dufresne & Yang, 2020).

On April 14, 2020, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres raised a serious alarm about the widespread “epidemic of misinformation” surrounding Covid-19. He introduced a U.N. initiative aimed at flooding the internet with accurate facts and scientific information as a countermeasure against what he described as a dangerous “poison” that threatens lives. Guterres expressed his deep concern about a global “misinfo-demic”, marked by the spread of harmful health advice, unverified remedies, falsehoods, and baseless conspiracy theories (Lederer, 2020). He called on online social platforms to take more decisive measures to confront this disinformation and remove hateful and dangerous claims related to Covid-19. In a video message, Guterres stressed that animosity is rapidly spreading, leading to the stigmatisation and condemnation of individuals and groups. He emphasised the importance of promoting mutual respect and upholding human rights as guiding principles during this crisis (U.N. Web T.V., 2020).

In addition, Guterres astutely compared Covid-19 to an X-ray, revealing the marginalised position of migrants in Europe and the U.S. (U.N., 2020). This revelation also brought to light the glaring disparities in the accessibility of protection on different levels, be it local, national, or global. The pandemic, coupled with government responses to it, has worsened these inequalities by severely restricting migrants’ ability to move to safer countries, engage with asylum processes, and obtain basic necessities like accommodation, food, and shelter for themselves and their loved ones (Crawley, 2021, p. 7).

Accordingly, the onset of the global coronavirus disease resulted in a substantial increase in anti-migrant rhetoric and discriminatory incidents. At the start of February 2020, as the coronavirus disease evolved in Western countries, growing apprehen-

sion and disinformation resulted in a rapid upsurge of xenophobic language (OECD, 2020). This rhetoric quickly disseminated through various communication channels, encompassing both traditional news media and global social media platforms. Numerous articles explicitly held China responsible for the Covid-19 pandemic or made direct associations between the country and the virus (Coates, 2020; Cowper, 2020; HRW, 2020). Prominent figures employed phrases like “Chinese virus” and “kung flu” (Mangan, 2020).

In this regard, disinformation campaigns were initiated to specifically target migrants in Western countries during the Covid-19 pandemic. The crisis has provided Western governments with a pretext to strengthen border regulations and incorporate components of their immigration policies. Both in Europe and the U.S., the Covid-19 situation has been used to fortify border controls and implement elements from their immigration strategies, ostensibly to showcase a robust response to the pandemic. Simultaneously, some politicians in these regions have increasingly tried to capitalise on apprehensions surrounding migration by employing disinformation. They have manufactured and manipulated this fear to advance their political objectives.

Disinformation Campaigns Targeting Migrants in Europe Amidst Covid-19

Disinformation is a growing concern in Europe. The Flash Eurobarometer study on disinformation, released by the European Commission in March 2018, revealed that a substantial portion of European Union (E.U.) citizens expressed worries regarding fake news and online disinformation. To be precise, 85% of EU citizens saw disinformation as an issue within their own countries, 83% considered it a threat to democracy on a broader scale, and 73% expressed concerns about the presence of disinformation on the internet, especially during pre-election periods (European Commission, 2018b). These figures highlight the widespread acknowledgement of the challenges posed by fake news and disinformation in European societies.

Migration has historically been a significant and contentious issue in Europe, sparking debates across various realms, including politics, culture, and policy adjustments. However, in recent times, migration has also become a central theme in disinformation campaigns across the continent. The prevalence of fake news and disinformation within the framework of migration plays a fundamental role in shaping the political narrative and discourse of far-right movements in Europe concerning international migration. In their report regarding the political consequences of false information, disinformation, and conspiracy theories related to migration in Europe, Juhasz and Szicherle (2017, p. 4) highlight that propaganda outlets employ disinformation tactics to bolster the immigration policies promoted by far-right political parties. Simultaneously, these tactics are employed to undermine the very foundations of the existing European system.

In Europe, Covid-19 propagated more rapidly than expected by authorities and officials, accompanied by the spread of disinformation and baseless claims. News related to Covid-19 took centre stage in headlines from the beginning of 2020. As March commenced, global migration patterns had been severely impacted. Most airlines had halted their operations, and travel restrictions kept individuals within their houses and nearby communities (Ullah et al., 2020).

Disinformation related to migration in Europe often portrays migrants as a health threat to Europeans. It has the potential to lead to the scapegoating of migrants in various ways during the Covid-19 pandemic. Anti-migrant far-right parties and hate groups in Europe have exploited the pandemic to spread conspiracy theories about the virus's origin and disseminate false information. The reaction to the worldwide dissemination of Covid-19 has been shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including national political agendas, the implementation of stricter immigration policies, and a focus on maintaining control over borders. A troubling development in this context is the rise of xenophobic rhetoric, which presents migrants as possible carriers of the virus, posing a health risk. This narrative has turned into a main focus for extreme right populist movements in Europe advocating for strict immigration controls. Additionally, some far-right nationalists have made unverified claims, such as suggesting that migrants from Africa introduced the virus to the continent (Zargar, 2020).

Since the start of the pandemic in Europe, far-right politicians have consistently advocated for their governments to enforce strict border controls. The rise of far-right political discourse and parties, which gained followers and spread their message online, has made disinformation more prevalent and severe. In this context, both misinformation and disinformation have been instrumental in amplifying hate speech, reinforcing anti-immigrant narratives, and disseminating content that is both Islamophobic and anti-Semitic. In Europe, social media platforms have evolved into fertile grounds for disinformation campaigns aimed at migrants in the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic. This disinformation has been harnessed to nurture anti-migrant sentiments. According to data provided by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an examination of migration-related sentiments through Twitter, which serves as an innovative data source, involved the analysis of millions of tweets originating from Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom in the initial phases of the Covid-19 pandemic (December 1, 2019, to April 30, 2020). The study showed a recurring trend of somewhat unfavourable attitudes in these nations (IOM, 2021). Tweets related to both migration and Covid-19 saw a notable increase as the number of Covid-19 cases rose. Italy and Spain experienced this surge from January to February, while Germany and the United Kingdom observed it in early to mid-March. It's worth highlighting that Spain exhibited the highest daily negative sentiment scores, and these scores were mainly linked to discussions related to "racism and xenophobia" (IOM, 2021, p. 13).

Furthermore, the findings show that from late February to mid-April, as the number of Covid-19 cases increased, there was a moderate upsurge in negative sentiments directed towards migrants in Germany and the United Kingdom (IOM, 2021, p. 9). These anti-migrant narratives had real-world consequences, leading to increased instances of social exclusion and acts of violence. As an example, the United Kingdom documented a 21% rise in hate crimes directed at Asian communities in the early stages of the lockdown (House of Commons, 2020).

European political leaders took advantage of the chaos caused by the pandemic, and through disinformation, they unfairly pointed fingers at specific community groups, with migrants being a primary target. Politicians throughout the EU already started taking advantage of the Covid-19 outbreak by raising doubts about migrants. Many political parties, especially those on the far-right, swiftly drew a link between Covid-19 and immigration, particularly “illegal” immigration. A notable example of this can be observed in the Balkans, where Croatian Health Minister Vili Beroš suggested that migrants might be seen as potentially representing the source of risk for disease transmission (Gorondi, 2020a). In addition, there has been an increasing sentiment against migrants in Serbia, primarily driven by concerns about the possibility of another wave of migrants arriving from Greece. During Covid-19, organisations like Levijatan seized the opportunity presented by the pandemic to strengthen their anti-migrant stance and significance. Amid the outbreak, Levijatan organised a protest outside the migrant centre in the Belgrade suburb of Obrenovac (Kuloglija & Omerovic, 2021). Demonstrators have been observed employing slogans such as “I don’t want migrants in Serbia” and “I don’t want a Muslim state in my country” (Lažetić, 2021, p.23). Additionally, due to Covid-19, far-right parties in Serbia have issued threats to deport approximately 6,000 migrants currently living in the country (Zargar, 2020).

Hungary has experienced a rise in anti-immigrant rhetoric in recent years, and the pandemic provided a new context for its manifestation. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán claimed that the virus’s outbreak in Hungary was due to the presence of foreigners and migrants. He said that the disease was primarily introduced by foreigners and is spreading among the foreign population (The Straits Times, 2020), and also stated that they are engaged in a dual-front battle, one labelled as migration, and the other pertains to the Coronavirus. There is a rational link between the two, as both are propagated through movement (Rohac, 2020). The far-right political party Fidesz similarly linked Covid-19 to immigration. Bakondi, the chief security advisor to Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, falsely asserted that illegal migration has been considered a health concern in the past, but it has escalated to a new level with Covid-19. He emphasised that there is a relationship between migration and Covid-19. In addition, he claimed that the majority of migrants are arriving from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, countries that have been focal points for the virus, experiencing numerous cases of infection and resulting deaths (About Hungary, 2020). Hungary’s far-right pol-

iticians' assertion blaming foreigners and migration for the spread of the Coronavirus exemplifies the manipulation of information for political ends. By simplifying the complex dynamics of a global health crisis and directing blame at a specific group, Hungary's stance not only fueled xenophobia but also detracted from comprehensive efforts needed to combat the pandemic. Such a narrative can potentially foster division and exacerbate societal tensions.

Slovakia, like many nations, grappled with the intersection of disinformation, the Covid-19 pandemic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric. Exploiting entrenched racial prejudices, Marian Kotleba, the head of the neo-fascist Kotlebists—People's Party Our Slovakia (L'SNS), has sought to gain attention by disseminating false information and endorsing risky conspiracy theories. He asserts that the Covid-19 pandemic is a consequence of widespread immigration into Europe, specifically blaming refugees for introducing the virus to Slovakia. He stated, "There are immigrants running around Europe, many of them totally unchecked, bringing coronavirus here" (Sirotnikova, 2020). Furthermore, he argued that Europe is teeming with undocumented migrants of uncertain health status because of open borders (Sirotnikova, 2020).

In addition, Bulgaria's far-right factions have seized upon the pandemic to disseminate misleading information, particularly by framing migrants as culpable for the spread of the virus. In Bulgaria, there were instances of racist voices seeking to attribute blame to the Roma community for the ongoing pandemic. Bulgarian Member of the European Parliament, Angel Dzhambazki, suggested that Romani "ghettos [could] turn out to be the real nests of contagion" (Krasimirov & Tsoleva, 2020). In addition, the Bulgarian government implemented specific measures, such as roadblocks and police checkpoints, in several Romani neighbourhoods despite the absence of any evidence indicating positive Covid-19 test results in those areas. In Bulgaria, hate speech and racial discrimination against immigrants and minorities escalated to such an extent during the pandemic that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) urged the government to undertake necessary measures and halt police operations, particularly those targeting the Roma community (UNHCR, 2020a).

Similarly, despite limited evidence establishing a clear relationship between migratory flows and the Covid-19 pandemic, far-right parties in Greece exploited the purported connection for their own agendas. The Greek Solution, a far-right political party with 10 seats out of 300 in the Greek parliament, labelled migrants and refugees as a "ticking time-bomb" for the public health of Greece (Andreou, 2020). Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis expressed his intention to enhance border security in response to the new virus. During a cabinet meeting, he explained that his decision was influenced by the presence of migrants from Afghanistan and, notably, Iran, which had reported numerous cases. Additionally, he outlined proposals to construct new migrant detention centres on Greece's eastern islands, aiming to replace the current overcrowded

and unsanitary facilities (Gorondi, 2020b). Accordingly, Mitsotakis stated that “Our islands, which already face public health problems, must be doubly protected ... To put it simply, we must do whatever we can to prevent the coronavirus appearing — especially (on the islands)” (Gorondi, 2020b).

The Greek government has additionally used the risk of Covid-19 transmission as a rationale for progressing with a controversial proposal to create “closed” facilities for asylum seekers who are stranded on the Aegean islands of Lesbos and Chios (Zargar, 2020). In reaction to the coronavirus disease, the government implemented prejudicial and hazardous measures targeting migrants. These measures compelled them into mandatory quarantine facilities without the proper registration of their entry into Greece, essentially resulting in their confinement within Reception and Identification Centers (RICs) (Reliefweb, 2023). Within Greece, migrants residing in the RICs experienced a specific and biased set of regulations designed to restrict their movement. These segregative policies were notably more severe and enforced for extended, uninterrupted periods compared to those applied to the general population. These regulations remained largely unchanged from March 2020 until June 2022, effectively establishing an ongoing state of lockdown and a de facto detention situation for migrants compelled to live within the RICs (Reliefweb, 2023).

In France, disinformation is employed as a tool to manipulate public opinion and reinforce racist narratives that sow fear and mistrust of foreign cultures or ideologies, further accentuating the “us vs. them” narrative (Wang et al., 2021). During the health crisis, migrants and racialised minorities are unfairly targeted and subjected to discrimination. As Covid-19 spread in France and lockdown measures were announced in March 2020, both mainstream media and social media started highlighting purported instances of public health non-compliance in the suburbs of Paris, primarily among individuals with North and Sub-Saharan African backgrounds and their descendants. These communities were wrongly accused of jeopardising the whole nation due to their failure to adhere to safety protocols and containment measures (Wang et al., 2021).

French politician and Member of the European Parliament Jean-Paul Garraud expressed concerns that unauthorised immigration, coupled with the E.U.’s intentions to reopen its borders, might result in a potential resurgence of infections, a second wave (as cited in Wondreys & Mudde, 2022). Far-right political groups such as Le Pen’s National Rally (R.N.) often linked migrants with the spread of diseases. Paradoxically, they also criticised European institutions such as the Schengen open-border area, even though their own countries are part of it (Reuters, 2020). In a more indirect manner, Marine Le Pen, the head of the National R.N., conveyed her endorsement for government-imposed curfews to enforce pandemic measures. She expressed her support for the suspension of the Schengen agreement and the implementation of the border checks at the Italian border (Trilling, 2020).

To take another prominent example, disinformation depicted migrants as a threat to health in Austria. Former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, in a press conference, falsely attributed the widespread transmission of Covid-19 to migrants from the Western Balkans, specifically claiming that individuals with ties to the Balkans and Türkiye introduced the virus to Austria (Omalar, 2021). He and Interior Minister Karl Nehammer primarily pointed to the “Western Balkans” as a region from which the virus could potentially be imported into Austria. Kurz stated, “We had very low infection rates in the summer after the lockdown, and then returning travellers, especially those who spent the summer in their countries of origin, have brought infection back into the country” (Prugger, 2020). Hence, by depicting the migrants as health threats, the far-right narrative in Austria positioned migrants as convenient scapegoats for the challenges posed by Covid-19.

In Germany, far-right parties established a connection between the pandemic and ethnic minority populations residing within their borders. They have advocated for the suspension of the Schengen Agreement. They have criticised European leaders for prioritising open borders over the health of their citizens (Gostoli, 2020). Various parties, including the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Vlaams Belang (V.B.), have falsely accused minority communities, particularly Muslims, of disregarding government regulations and thereby jeopardising the well-being of the “native” population (Wondreys & Mudde, 2022).

Italy and Spain, the European countries most severely affected by the initial wave of Covid-19, witnessed a prevalence of narratives that combined anti-migration themes with health-related concerns in the spring of 2020. These nations also encountered a disproportionately high volume of disinformation narratives related to wealth, such as false claims about asylum seekers receiving substantial daily allowances or migrants having superior access to housing and social benefits compared to native citizens. This trend was particularly notable in the period following the first wave of Covid-19, when the political discourse shifted towards the economic implications of lockdowns (Neidhardt & Butcher, 2022).

In Italy, the right-wing political figure Matteo Salvini intensified his anti-immigration discourse, and he took advantage of the coronavirus crisis to criticise migrants. He stated that permitting migrants to disembark from Africa, where the virus’s presence was confirmed, is reckless. Salvini argued in a press briefing, raising concerns regarding African asylum seekers (Tondo, 2020). In late February, Salvini explicitly called for two main objectives: suspending the Schengen Agreement and preventing immigration from Africa. He contended that these actions were necessary to contain the virus’s spread and protect the Italian population (Pirro, 2022, p. 8). Similarly, Sicily’s regional president, Nello Musumeci, orchestrated a populist campaign of disinformation targeting migrants. After months of intensifying anti-migrant rhetoric, he

shared on Twitter that “Sicily can’t continue to submit to this invasion of migrants” (Einash, 2020). Following this, he issued a decree mandating the evacuation of all immigrants from the island, along with the immediate closure of hotspots and immigrant reception centres (Wallis, 2020).

Far-right entities in Spain have seized the opportunity presented by the pandemic to amplify disinformation campaigns. Misleading narratives have sought to blame migrants for the spread of the virus, portraying them as vectors of disease. Isabel Díaz Ayuso, a politician from the People’s Party (P.P.) and the president of the Community of Madrid attributed the spread of Covid-19 in the southern districts of the city to the immigrant population. During the state of the region debate, the president asserted, “Yes, indeed, [the virus] is being produced, among other things, by the way of life of immigrants in Madrid” (Viejo & Mateo, 2020).

Vox, a Spanish far-right party, sought to exploit the Covid-19 pandemic as an opportunity to bolster its anti-immigrant discourse. The party proposed differential treatment for irregular immigrants in public health during the health contingency. Additionally, Vox suggested extending the stay of irregular foreigners in detention centers for the duration of the health contingency. Furthermore, if deemed insufficient, they proposed the expulsion of these individuals from Spain at the conclusion of the quarantine period (Gonzalez, 2020). The parliamentary spokesman for Vox, Iván Espinosa, directed an appeal to undocumented immigrants: “Those who are contemplating migrating to Spain, do not come because the limited resources we have are meant for the Spaniards who have lost their jobs,” he declared later, emphasizing that “the country cannot welcome anyone, and it lacks the capacity to provide financial support” (Europa Press, 2020).

In the United Kingdom, political actors of the ruling Conservative Party have persistently connected the high Covid-19 death rates to either minority ethnic communities not following constraints or individuals with health comorbidities that increase their vulnerability to the virus. For example, in July 2020, a Conservative Member of Parliament (MP) drew widespread criticism for making statements on a radio station suggesting that minority ethnic communities were not paying enough attention to the seriousness of Covid-19. This MP, Craig Whittaker, specifically mentioned Muslims, migrants, and Asians (Omalar, 2021). He asserted that the “vast majority” of individuals violating lockdown rules belong to black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) communities, offering no evidence to substantiate his claims. He suggested that BAME people, especially Muslims, were “not taking [the coronavirus pandemic] seriously enough” (Williams, 2020). Interior Minister Priti Patel also claimed that migrant groups are more susceptible to contracting the virus, attributing the high death rates in the country to this factor (Omalar, 2021).

According to Tell Mama, a United Kingdom-based organisation that monitors Islamophobic incidents, in March 2020, they observed multiple cases where far-right groups allegedly tried to link the virus's spread to British Muslims. The organisation had to actively counter several claims circulating on social media that accused Muslims of breaking lockdown restrictions by persisting in attending mosques for prayers. Additionally, there were documented instances of attacks against Muslims. For example, a prominent white nationalist posted a tweet alleging that Muslims were alleged to be violating the lockdown by gathering outside a mosque in Wembley. Tell Mama took measures to disprove this particular assertion (Parveen, 2020).

In this regard, the rise of disinformation campaigns against migrants in Europe has been an alarming trend in recent years, with a particularly significant impact during the Covid-19 pandemic. These campaigns have not only sown confusion and distrust but have also contributed to the amplification of anti-migrant sentiments, especially within the context of extreme right-wing influence. The Covid-19 pandemic presented far-right groups an opportunity to exploit public fears and further their anti-migrant narratives.

Disinformation Campaigns Directed at Migrants in the US During Covid-19

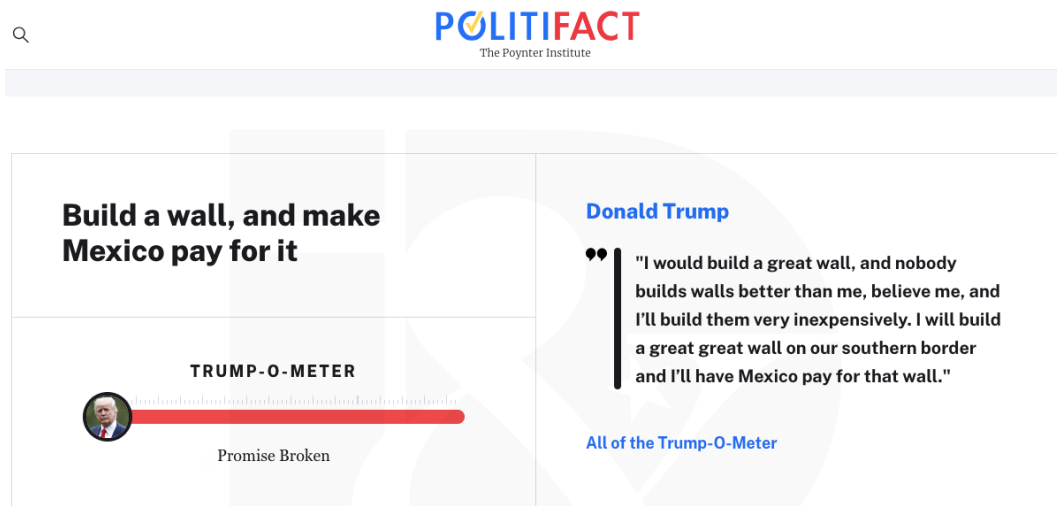
The spread of disinformation gained substantial attention in the U.S. especially after the 2016 presidential election. Research conducted by Grinberg et al. revealed that a minimal 1% of the population was responsible for up to 80% of the encounters with fake news sources, and an even smaller fraction, just 0.1%, was behind nearly 80% of the sharing of such sources (Grinberg et al., 2019).

Disinformation and fake news have been enduring issues within the immigration discussion in the U.S., fostering anti-migrant sentiments and generating animosity among certain segments of the population (Kessler, 2021). Far-right factions and supporters actively pushed conspiracy theories concerning the origins and causes of the virus. They seized the opportunity presented by the ongoing pandemic to advance their agendas, often linking the virus's spread to migration. These narratives were used to target groups like migrants and minorities, portraying them as scapegoats.

During the Covid-19 crisis, former U.S. President Donald Trump's approach to migrants was characterised by a controversial blend of policies and rhetoric, which at times involved elements of disinformation. The Washington Post Fact Checker team reported that during his presidency, Donald Trump made a total of 30,573 false or erroneous claims, averaging around 21 such claims per day. Interestingly, almost half of these false claims were made in his final year in office. By embracing an exclusionary approach, the Trump administration's core focus was opposition to immigration, and its central political message was defined by anti-migrant rhetoric infused with elements of racism and animosity (Keggler, 2021).

Even before assuming office, Trump consistently underlined his position on immigration. His renowned catchphrase “America First” implicitly suggests a perceived threat where the interests of the U.S. should take precedence over everything else. During his presidential campaign on June 16, 2015, Trump famously announced his intent to construct a wall along the US-Mexico border to counter illegal border crossings. As shown in Figure 1, he proclaimed his intent to construct a substantial border wall in the south, with Mexico footing the bill (Valverde, 2020).

Figure 1. Donald Trump's Pledge To Build a Southern Border Wall



Source: Valverde, 2020

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, the Trump administration utilised the baseless assertions and racial concerns to expedite the deportation and removal of migrants. In the early phases of the pandemic, during an Oval Office address, Trump characterised Covid-19 as the most robust and all-encompassing endeavour to combat a foreign virus in contemporary history. As depicted in Figure 2, he also claimed that by persistently implementing these stringent measures, his administration will substantially diminish the risk to their citizens and will ultimately and swiftly conquer this virus (LeBlanc, 2020). He repeatedly reiterated this commitment at rallies reminiscent of political campaigns throughout his time in office, vowing to construct a “grand, attractive wall” spanning the 1,954-mile border in the south between Mexico and the U.S. (Garrett, 2020).

Figure 2. Trump's Characterization of Covid-19 as a "Foreign Virus"

CNN politics SCOTUS Congress Facts First 2024 Elections

Trump calls coronavirus a 'foreign virus' in Oval Office address

By Paul LeBlanc, CNN
© 2 minute read · Updated 11:05 PM EDT, Wed March 11, 2020



(Source: LeBlanc, 2020)

In February 2020, the WHO Director-General, Ghebreyesus, coined the term "Covid-19" for the new coronavirus disease and stressed the significance of finding a specific name to prevent inaccurate or stigmatising labels regarding the pandemic. However, former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo persistently referred to it as the "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese coronavirus," even subsequent to the WHO's official declaration. As illustrated in Figure 3, this phrase, used by the Trump administration, has linked the perception of the disease with foreignness, suggesting that the virus is both of foreign origin and a potential source of danger (Zimmer, 2020). As a result, due to the anti-migrant sentiments of politicians, the outbreak has not only generated fear and anxiety in the U.S. but has also led to an increase in xenophobic and racist attacks targeting migrants.

Figure 3: Trump's Misnaming of Covid-19



CULTURE

Why Trump Intentionally Misnames the Coronavirus

When conservative figures continually refer to the "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese coronavirus," it's clear they're doing it to make a point.

Source: Zimmer, 2020

Disinformation and untrue narratives were employed by the administration to redirect responsibility for the pandemic's consequences onto external elements, including migrants. This cultivated an environment of fear and ambiguity. By depicting migrants as potential spreaders of the virus, the Trump administration capitalised on public health worries to rationalise immigration restrictions, such as border closures and a decrease in migrant admissions. The Trump administration utilised a metaphorical framework, comparing the battle against the virus to a war, in order to enforce strict restrictions on the entry of migrants and asylum seekers into the U.S. (Birdsall, 2022). Trump has used the Covid-19 pandemic as a reason to implement strict asylum policies. These policies are expected to persist even after the pandemic subsides, potentially becoming permanent measures (Gilman, 2020, p.1).

During Trump's presidency, the issue of migration in the U.S. became increasingly associated with security concerns. This shift in approach led to the implementation of policies such as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), which have had a significant impact on migrants, especially during the pandemic. The decision to halt MPP hearings due to the Coronavirus has further solidified the securitisation of migration. This move puts asylum rights at risk and challenges the U.S.' commitment to the non-refoulement principle, which is crucial for preventing the return of individuals to situations where they may face harm. The suspension of MPP hearings can be interpreted as an attempt to frame migration as a security threat (İnalçı, 2021, p. 6).

As depicted in Figure 4, on March 20, 2020, the Trump administration, citing the Covid-19 pandemic, implemented a ban on allowing asylum-seekers to enter the U.S. This action was carried out through an order issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Dearen & Burke, 2020). The stated reason behind this decision was that permitting asylum-seekers to enter the U.S. borders was considered a potential threat to the public health of both border officials and the broader American population (Kanno-Youngs & Semple, 2020). The Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), Alex M. Azar, made unfounded claims that illegal immigration at the borders during the Covid-19 pandemic led to various health challenges (Kanno-Youngs & Semple, 2020). In contrast to the aggressive deportation of migrants from U.S. soil, the UNHCR and the WHO have indicated that such a drastic approach is not necessary. Alternative methods have been prevalent to impede the spread of the virus that also align with international regulations and the rights of asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2020b).

Figure 4. Trump Administration's Ban on Asylum-Seekers During the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: Dearen & Burke, 2020

In late September 2020, Facebook took action by removing several advertisements from the Trump campaign because they were spreading misleading and factually inaccurate information about both Covid-19 and immigration (Paul, 2020). Additionally, the ads contained text suggesting that an increase in migrant numbers could pose potential public health risks (Budryk, 2020). "We rejected these ads because we don't allow claims that people's physical safety, health, or survival is threatened by people on the basis of their national origin or immigration status," stated Andy Stone, a representative from Facebook, in communication with NBC News (Kent & Ingram, 2020).

In this respect, Covid-19 has added a new dimension of complexity to the issue of immigration, with disinformation campaigns playing a pivotal role in shaping public discourse. In the U.S., the Trump administration's approach to migrants during the pandemic exacerbated this problem. His administration leveraged the pandemic to advance anti-migrant rhetoric and impose stringent immigration policies through false narratives and scapegoating.

CONCLUSION

Disinformation has significantly contributed to eroding public trust in democratic processes and institutions. The diminishing of faith in experts, civil servants, officials, and these institutions turned into a critical concern as the Covid-19 virus began spreading globally in early 2020. False assertions and conspiracy notions concerning the virus's source, transmission, and treatment were widely disseminated on social media platforms, resulting in confusion and public distrust (Altun, 2023).

During COVID, technology has both facilitated and magnified the spread of an infodemic. This infodemic has persistently undermined the global response to the pandemic and posed a threat to efforts aimed at controlling it. Moreover, disinformation has contributed to the division in public discourse on matters associated with Covid-19, intensifying hate speech, elevating the potential for conflicts, violence, and human rights infringements, and jeopardising the long-term potential to promote democracy, human rights, and social unity (Reliefweb, 2020).

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, the rise of disinformation campaigns targeting migrants in the Western world shows a problematic aspect of the contemporary information landscape. Misconceptions and unfounded allegations about foreigners have evolved into potent propaganda instruments for xenophobic political factions and opportunistic leaders. By analysing the extreme right political discourse in the European countries and the U.S., this study has revealed that the use of disinformation amplifies anti-migrant rhetoric and heightens animosity towards migrants. It has also shown that by employing disinformation, Western countries capitalise on the opportunity to implement and fortify anti-migrant policies. Migrants have been exploited as convenient targets by far-right politicians who leverage the pandemic for their own political gain. Western countries have used the opportunity to advance contentious measures that not only restrict access to protection but also establish structures that marginalise migrants even more profoundly (Crawley, 2021, p. 1).

In this regard, this study contributes a nuanced perspective to the existing body of research, providing insights into the specific ways in which disinformation campaigns have fueled xenophobia and influenced policy decisions. Comparing the findings of this study with similar published research in the field underscores the global nature of the challenge. Studies examining the convergence of disinformation and anti-immigrant sentiments emphasise the transnational impact of harmful narratives (Juhasz & Szicherle, 2017). While this research aligns with these broader trends, it delves deeper into the unique context of the Covid-19 pandemic, showcasing how a public health crisis became a breeding ground for the amplification of anti-migrant sentiments.

All in all, the temporal dimension introduced by this study, focusing on the pandemic period, highlights the urgency of addressing disinformation in times of crisis. The consequences of such disinformation are far-reaching, impacting both the lives of migrants and the fabric of the societies. Given the limitations of this article in comprehensively addressing the long-term impact of disinformation on migrant communities, a noteworthy avenue for future research lies in conducting an in-depth analysis of the potential enduring consequences. This research could particularly focus on the realms of integration and overall well-being within migrant populations. By exploring how disinformation influences these aspects over an extended period, researchers can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by migrants in the aftermath of targeted disinformation campaigns.

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Hakem değerlendirmesi/Peer review:

Dış bağımsız/Externally peer reviewed

Çıkar çatışması/Conflict of interest:

Yazarlar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir/The authors have no conflict of interest to declare

Finansal destek/Grant support:

Yazarlar bu makalede finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir/The authors declared that this article has received no financial support.