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BLURRING THE TRUTH
DISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEAST EUROPE

Blurring the Truth:

Disinformation in Southeast Europe

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Preface:
Disinformation in Southeast Europe

By Hendrik Sittig

Dear Readers,

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. Disinformation existed hundreds of years ago. Today, however, it is becoming much more widespread and powerful thanks to the internet and social networks in particular. Moreover, the spread of fake news has increased in recent years - and with the Covid pandemic and the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine, it has reached new dimensions. Disinformation and fake news are the digital plague of our time. They threaten our democratic society. They polarize, divide and destroy. And most of the time, they are deliberately produced and disseminated for precisely this reason. Russia, in particular, has made this dirty game a permanent instrument of its politics at the international level. The Kremlin has repeatedly tried to divide liberal democratic societies and to influence elections and political decisions in other countries with targeted campaigns. But also domestically, disinformation is repeatedly used in many countries to discredit political opponents.

It is absolutely clear: democracy relies on pluralism, it needs pluralism - that is, many opinions that lead to a decision in the social process. But the information through which we form our opinion must be true. It has to be true especially when used as a basis for making political decisions. Anything else would be fatal. Viewed from this vantage point, democracy has begun easing into a pathological state when responsible politicians present false information as "alternative facts" and talk about a "post-truth era" in which feelings and personal convictions are more important than facts and the truth.

The countries in Southeast Europe in particular seem highly susceptible to disinformation campaigns. Poorly financed mainstream media, less evolved media competence and a low level of trust in the work of journalists provide an ideal breeding ground for the spread of false information. At the same time, simmering ethnic conflicts, such as the one between Serbia and Kosovo, or the politically complicated situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina are ideal starting

points for fueling tensions, sowing mistrust and further destabilising fragile societies.

With this book, the Media Programme of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung aims to give an overview of the current situation in the ten countries that the Media Programme observes in Southeast Europe. What kind of disinformation campaigns are there? How do they spread? What role do foreign as well as domestic actors play? What countermeasures are already being taken?

I would like to thank to all of the authors, who are proven experts in the field in their respective countries, and especially to Dr. Christopher Nehring, guest lecturer of our Media Programme at Sofia University on "Media, Disinformation and Intelligence Services", who curated this book.

Hendrik Sittig
Director of the Media Programme Southeast Europe of the
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung
Sofia, 2023

Introduction: Disinformation Today

By Christopher Nehring

Why Disinformation Matters

When the editors first had the idea to compile this volume, the war in Ukraine and the disinformation that followed in its wake were still a faraway nightmare. Before the Russian attack on Ukraine, disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic was still topic number one. This changed dramatically during the time the editors and authors of this volume strove to compile an overview of disinformation in Southeast Europe. Yet, as all regional case studies of this volume demonstrate, the topics and content of disinformation may vary, but the patterns, actors and above all, the aim of disinformation is remarkably persistent: by sowing discontent, deepening societal, political, ethnical, racial or economical conflicts and polarizing societies, alliances and partners, disinformation is employed to undermine democracy, its institutions, representatives and foundations. The major threat today's postmodern, digital and globalized disinformation poses is an attack on the very foundation of democracy. By blurring and undermining categories such as truth, facts or scientific knowledge, disinformation "corrodes the foundation of liberal democracy, our ability to assess facts on their merits and to self-correct accordingly."[1] Hence disinformation is much more than just a bundle of more or less elaborate lies, smear campaigns or covert political propaganda. By attacking our belief in the very existence of truth and facts "disinformation campaigns are attacks against a liberal epistemic order, or a political system that places its trust in essential custodians of factual authority. These institutions – law enforcement and the criminal justice system, public administration, empirical science, investigative journalism, democratically controlled intelligence agencies – prize facts over feelings, evidence over emotion, observations over opinion. They embody an open epistemic order, which enables an open and liberal political order; one cannot exist without the other."[2] This is what makes disinformation so dangerous – and why any

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[1] Thomas Rid: Active Measures. The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare, New York, 2020, p. 8.

[2] Ibid., p. 10f.

modern, digital democracy and media system needs profound knowledge about the purpose, patterns, topics and actors of disinformation. And thus, the study of disinformation leads the way towards a more resilient society, media and politics.

About this Book

This is neither the first nor the last study of disinformation. Yet it differs significantly from others in many regards. Firstly, it is the first and only study summarizing the state of disinformation in Southeast Europe. While regional studies abound, none so far has looked at all countries of the region between the Danube and the Mediterranean in a single comprehensive analysis. Secondly, this volume not only generates a concise overview of disinformation in the SEE region, but does so by explaining specific case studies, addressing current questions, showing the sources, potential, consequences, forms, narratives and a variety of countermeasures against disinformation in the region at large. Hence, the study not only explains and demonstrates the negative effects of disinformation, but also strives to point to approaches on how different countries deal with disinformation and thus how societies can become more resilient against the manipulative use of information.

Even though bringing together 12 authors from as many countries has been a challenging task, this volume is a testament to the successful collaboration of authors with different backgrounds and perspectives. To achieve this, we deliberately decided to present the findings and results of our research, observations and analyses in a language and style understandable to the common reader without prior expert knowledge of either the region or disinformation. To unify all case studies, the editors and authors of this volume agreed upon a common structure for the articles. This structure builds upon six analytical subcategories: (1) Terminology and definitions; (2) Audience and perspective; (3) Narratives, case studies and examples; (4) Media, sources, multipliers of disinformation; (5) Political context; (6) Countermeasures and resilience.

Last but not least, it goes without saying that disinformation is a global and dynamic phenomenon. This means that some of the more specific results or case studies in this volume may become obsolete within a certain amount of time. Yet, its focus on the big picture and general trends of disinformation in Southeast Europe ensure that we will make a significant contribution to a

better understanding of disinformation in our time. Here, the Russian war in Ukraine and its repercussions in SEE has once again demonstrated how long disinformation in this region of geostrategic importance has not received the attention it deserves.

Terminology: A Beast with many Names

What is disinformation? Defining what we mean when we use the term "disinformation" is no easy task. Likewise, focusing on terminology and the definition of disinformation is not a vain academic undertaking. Defining the meaning of "disinformation" is an act of power: The power to accuse an opponent of using improper, illegal and unethical instruments, the power to stigmatize information as untrue or illegitimate and the power to censor, ban or delete this information. Similar to the terms "propaganda" and "fake news", "disinformation" has turned into a slogan or even polemic used in societal and political discourse and mutual accusations or employed by populist politicians to reject criticism.[3] Yet, defining "disinformation" also matters outside of political discourse. Internet companies and social media platforms, for example, not only define "disinformation", but also to act upon that definition when flagging or deleting certain content. Deleting or flagging a tweet, post or video thus becomes a real-life demonstration of what power over public discourse means – and why definitions matter.

In today's political and public discourse there are many different terms used to describe forms of information manipulation and the manipulative use of information. Or in other words: disinformation is a beast with many names! So many names that they are often – and incorrectly – being used interchangeably. The most prominent terms include: Disinformation, fake news, misinformation, hybrid warfare, information war, propaganda, active measures, strategic communication, influence operations, psychological or political warfare and deception operations. Yet, while all forms of information manipulation and the

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[3] Besides the lack of clear conceptualization and definition, this erosion and instrumentalization is one reason why this study abstains from using the term „fake news"; c.f.: Judith Möller/Michael Hameleers/Frederik Ferreau: Typen von Desinformation und Misinformation. Verschiedene Formen von Desinformation und ihre Verbreitung aus kommunikationswissenschaftlicher und rechtswissenschaftlicher Perspektive, in: Typen von Desinformation und Misinformation. Verschiedene Formen von Desinformation und ihre. Verbreitung aus kommunikationswissenschaftlicher und rechtswissenschaftlicher Perspektive. Ein Gutachten Auftrag der Gremienvorsitzendenkonferenz der Landesmedienanstalten (GVK), Berlin, 2020, p. 11.

manipulative use of information share some common features, not all of them are disinformation. One might even argue that blurring the understanding of what disinformation is and what, for example, sets it apart from propaganda, is an effect of disinformation itself.

Probably the most common definition of disinformation in today's political discourse was put forward by the European Commission in 2019: "***Disinformation is false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted for profit or to intentionally cause public harm.***"4 And while this definition certainly captures most features commonly associated with disinformation, it misses some: First of all, one can argue that the definition also applies to propaganda, fake news or (dirty) PR-campaigns; secondly, it does not include any information about the actors and origins of disinformation; and, thirdly, it misses the main purpose and aim of disinformation: to not (only) cause public harm or generate profit, but to exert influence. This influence most often (but not exclusively) is political, and most often achieved by "negative" means, i.e., by sowing discontent, deepening societal, political, ethnical, racial or economical conflicts and polarization and undermining trust in democracy, institutions, facts etc.[5]

Taking the EU definition of disinformation as a basis, this study will use the term as meaning "***false, inaccurate, decontextualized and misleading information COVERTLY and DELIBERATLY designed, presented, promoted and spread to manipulate and exert political, financial or other influence***". This definition has certain advantages. First of all, it specifies that disinformation – unlike misinformation – is knowingly and deliberately designed and spread as a means to exert influence.[6] Secondly, it focuses on the exertion of influence as the main purpose of disinformation which includes other purposes, such as profit or causing public harm. And thirdly, this definition specifies that disinformation, unlike, for example, propaganda, usually disguises its origins and authors via elaborated schemes. This is also what sets propaganda—today understood as strategic manipulation of a large audience by governments or powerful

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4   European Commission: Code of Practice on Disinformation', 2018 (https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation).

5   Julian Jaursch: Regulatorische Reaktionen auf Desinformation, Stiftung Neue Verantwortung, Berlin, 2019, p. 7 (https://www.stiftung-nv.de/sites/default/files/regulatorische_reaktionen_auf_desinformation.pdf).

6   On the difference between misinformation (the unwitting spread of false, inaccurate and manipulative information) and disinformation see again: Judith Möller/Michael Hameleers/Frederik Ferreau: Typen von Desinformation und Misinformation, p. 11.

actors[7]—aside from disinformation. There are extended debates in academic discourse whether disinformation should be categorized as a subcategory of propaganda or whether propaganda is another form of disinformation. This study argues the former. US institutions, for example, up until the 1980's used the characteristic of hidden and covert origin of information meant to influence political and other events, organizations or groups, as their main criteria to differentiate between various forms of political influence: Covert or "black" propaganda" was opposed to official, overt or "white" and "grey" propaganda via semi-official institutions.[8] Historical approaches to disinformation have focused on the genesis of disinformation as military and intelligence deception operations and hence correctly asserted that due to its clandestine nature and covert origin "disinformation was, and in many ways continues to be, the domain of intelligence agencies."[9]

Applying this definition to certain Russian actors of disinformation may demonstrate the significance the question of covert or overt origin of manipulative information has: Official or semi-official Russian media outlets such as RT or Sputnik – while certainly deliberately spreading untrue or decontextualized information to manipulate and exert influence – have to be labelled "grey propaganda" or simply "propaganda", as their relation to a state actor pursuing an official agenda is known. Accordingly, disinformation is the term reserved for manipulative information spread by actors such as, for example, "Redfish" or "Maffick Media", front companies who pose as PR-companies or media outlets, while in fact being directly linked to the Russian state and covertly spreading misleading information to exert political influence.[10]

Thus, the question of definition and terminology is very important for the articles in this volume. It is one of the goals of this study to show and discuss the most common terms and definitions used in the countries of Southeast Europe and ask the question who and how has defined what disinformation has come to mean. In this regard, the results of the case studies highlight the problem: in general, definition and terminology receive little attention in

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[7]   Ibid., p. 30.

[8]   C.f. in extenso: Shultz, R. und Godson, R.: Dezinformatsia: Active Measures in Soviet Strategy, Washington D.C., 1984, pp. 1-16.

[9]   Thomas Rid: Active Measures, p. 9.

[10] C.f.: Susanne Spahn: Russische Medien in Deutschland. Wie der russische Informationskrieg und Desinformation Einfluss auf Deutschland ausüben, Potsdam, 2020, p. 7f.

Southeast Europe – with severe consequences for the fight to make societies more resilient against manipulative information. In most countries, the generic term "fake news" – meaning everything from covert political propaganda to poor and sensational journalism – is the most common term used to describe the manipulative use of information. In Montenegro, for example, the term has even found its way in the Criminal Code, while, at the same time, remaining unspecified. It thus comes as no surprise that malevolent politicians and pressure groups in the region happily apply and reinforce the term "fake news" to discredit any criticism and/or attack from the media, journalists or political opponents. This trend also shows that having a clear definition and distinction between different kind of manipulative information might be a first step in the fight against disinformation and towards a more resilient society.

Narratives and Case Studies of Disinformation

What is the content of disinformation campaigns and which geopolitical narratives does disinformation promote in Southeast Europe? This is one of the key questions every author of this study has attempted to answer and describe by drawing on empirical examples.

While Propaganda seeks to incite and rally support for a cause and to persuade a given target group of an idea, ideology or product, the content and narratives of disinformation are negative and disruptive. Instead of rallying support for Communism (which was the task of official and unofficial propaganda), for example, Soviet disinformation narratives focused on undermining Western democracy, liberalism or capitalism. This trend continues in today's Russian disinformation whose general narratives focus on undermining trust in and credibility of democracy, the state of law and liberalism and all its institutions.[11] The majority of disinformation today appears as "anti-narratives": anti-US, anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-natural-Covid-origin, anti-Covid-vaccinations, anti-Ukraine, anti-LGTBQ, anti-pluralistic etc. Disinformation feeds on conflict while trying to intensify conflict, cleavages, differences, mistrust and discontent.

As all case studies of this volume suggest, there are three main topics and narratives that dominated disinformation in Southeast Europe during the past years: (1) Covid-related disinformation; (2) Nationalism and ethnic conflict; and (3) the Russian war in Ukraine and its repercussions throughout the region.

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[11]   C.f.: Thomas Rid: Active Measures, pp. 1-16.

These three narratives are explained at length for each country of the region in the studies include in this volume.

In general, disinformation narratives show a high degree of adaptiveness and flexibility, always adjusting their focus to the latest hot topic and the headlines of the day. Today's digital disinformation does not strive to create long-lasting, holistic and elaborated master narratives. Today's disinformation narratives are loud, shrill, fast, often contradictory and seemingly provide easy answers to complex political and societal problems. Russian disinformation, for example, adapted the 1980's disinformation campaign about an alleged artificial origin of the AIDS-virus as an US-bioweapon-experiment both during the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.[12] China, on the other hand, tried to spread narratives during the Covid-19 pandemic that stressed an alleged failure of Europe's Covid containment measures as a marker of the inferiority of European democracy as opposed to "the Chinese model".[13] And Covid disinformation itself has two majors narratives. The first, which has lost both in quality and in quantity over the years, focused on an alleged artificial origin as a part of a global (Chinese, US, Russian, big money- or other) conspiracy; and the second on discrediting anti-Covid vaccines.[14]

Another very important and representative example of disinformation narratives in Southeast Europe is nationalism and ethnic conflict. While ever since the days of Imperialism the big powers have used conflicts between ethnic groups and nationalism as a tool to instigate and activate conflict, this narrative is particularly important in the Southeast Europe today. As the studies of this volume clearly show, nationalist groups in all countries of the region are particularly active in using and spreading disinformation. Here, they can also count on official and covert Russian support, since nationalist movements of the region are opposed to both NATO and the EU (which in turn serves Russian interests). Nationalist movements are not only active in spreading disinformation. Nationalism is also one of the most important narratives and content of disinformation in the SEE

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[12] Douglas Selvage: Moscow, "Bioweapons," and Ukraine: From Cold War "Active Measures" to Putin's War Propaganda, in: Wilson Center 22.3.2022 (https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/moscow-bioweapons-and-ukraine-cold-war-active-measures-putins-war-propaganda); c.f. also: "US biolabs in Ukraine connected to the spread of COVID-19", in: euvsdisinfo.eu, 17.4.2022 (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-biolabs-in-ukraine-connected-to-the-spread-of-covid-19/).

[13] C.f.: Vladimir Shopov: Let a thousand contacts bloom: How China competes for influence in Bulgaria, in: ECFR (https://ecfr.eu/publication/let-a-thousand-contacts-bloom-how-china-competes-for-influence-in-bulgaria/), p. 16ff.

[14] C.f.: "Coronavirus", in: euvsdisinfo.eu (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/coronavirus/).

region. The studies of this volume provide ample evidence for that, for example the Bulgarian-North Macedonian conflict over EU-accession or the study of Bosnia where political elites use disinformation to uphold ethnic division and electoral ethno-national mobilization.

As the studies also show, the Russian war in Ukraine and the following EU and NATO initiatives for increased cooperation and EU enlargement in the SEE region has triggered a new wave of anti-NATO, anti-EU- and pro-Russian disinformation. It is no surprise, as all studies mention, that the second side of Russian disinformation following the war in Ukraine sees increased ethno-nationalism and an intensification of ethnic and national conflict. Again, the disinformation over the conflict of EU accession of North Macedonia and the Bulgarian veto against it is one of the most obvious examples.

The Target Groups of Disinformation: Audience and Perspectives

Most studies of disinformation focus on the perpetrators – the authors, producers and distributors of disinformation. And while identifying and understanding their strategies, instruments and motives is certainly of the utmost importance, we should never forget that disinformation is custom-made and specifically designed for an audience. The challenges and problems disinformation pose vary according to the perspective of the observer and the recipients of disinformation: for journalists, the challenge is to judge the trustworthiness and truthfulness of information and not to allow themselves to be instrumentalized as an accelerator and mouthpieces of disinformation. For them checking facts, recognizing and debunking disinformation as well as countering disinformation with proper journalism are the most important tasks. As studies suggest, it is in fact quality media that is the most powerful (yet unintentional) multiplier of disinformation. So, for example, one of the most powerful images published by the Russian troll factory "Internet Research Agency" during the Trump election campaign, the so-called "Jesus-ad", did not reach more than a handful of followers on Facebook – but an audience of millions when published on the frontpage of the New York Times as part of an article on Russian election interference.[15] This poses a huge dilemma for serious journalism: with their reporting, even if debunking, journalists may

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[15] "Russia-Financed Ad Linked Clinton to Satan", in: New York Times, 1.11.2017; also: "Social Media Advertisements", U.S. House of Representatives, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, 10.5.2018.

actually help disinformation reach a significantly broader audience outside its own echo chambers.

While multiplying disinformation may be the biggest challenge for journalists and the media, the main problems for their readers—and viewers and for political and public discourse in general—is that they are the main targets that disinformation seeks to influence. For these target groups, the main challenge is to recognize disinformation and the rationale behind it and to become resilient against the manipulative use of information and attempts at exerting covert influence. In this volume, each author takes these different perspectives and target groups into account and assesses the challenges disinformation poses in his/her country from their perspective, discussing how they are being dealt with. As the studies reveal, a major problem for all target groups of disinformation in the SEE region is their interconnectedness. Politicians, for example, are not only a main target of disinformation, but they and the political parties they belong to are also a major force in spreading disinformation. In Bosnia, for example, several examples of party-political "troll farms" with interconnected farms of web portals have come to light. Hence, the same is true for journalists and the media in general: while quality media is the second main target group of disinformation, tabloids, party-political outlets or notable foreign propaganda, such as the Russian *Sputnik* in Serbia, are themselves dynamic actors in spreading disinformation. As a result, the general public, which is the third main target group for disinformation, is confused, disorientated, disappointed and easily mislead. While surveys from most countries show that the majority of people think they come into contact with manipulated information on the regular basis, they have a hard time defining what disinformation is, where it comes from and, most of all, to attribute disinformation to its origins. Media illiteracy is a major factor in all SEE countries and plays a very important role in the reaction of the public towards disinformation. Mistrust, disbelieve and confusion in the public domain and political communication are a result of this complex situation.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation

Disinformation is in many ways closely tied to and shaped by the media via which it is spread. Classic, analogue disinformation was spread via press articles, books, posters, leaflets/flyers, letters, movies, documentaries, rumours, interviews or radio shows. Today, the overwhelming majority of disinformation – in Southeast Europe just like anywhere else – is spread online

via websites, posts, images, videos, commentaries, leaks, ads or memes. The head of the Soviet intelligence service's disinformation unit Ivan Agayants is reported to have stated: "Sometimes I am amazed by how easy it is to play these games. If they did not have press freedom, we would have to invent it for them."[16] A postmodern modification of Agayants' saying might read: "If the internet did not exist, we would need to invent it for disinformation."

In many ways, online communication and digital culture form the perfect conditions for disinformation. Due to the characteristics of online communication the online sphere has made disinformation a lot faster, easier, cheaper and more direct. *Facilitation, amplification, acceleration and globalization* are thus some of the main features of digital disinformation. "Troll factories", such as the infamous Russian "Internet Research Agency", or automated programmes designed to manufacture and spread disinformation (bots)" are two of the most obvious testimonies of this development.

Furthermore, the digital sphere provides the actors and authors of disinformation with easier and better cover of *anonymity* compared to the analogue world. Amongst the most famous methods and tools of digital disinformation are, for example: "Hacking and leaking secret information" and setting up huge quantities of fake websites, fake accounts and fake profiles. High-profile actors of disinformation even use "false flag", "double deception" or "spoofing" techniques, copying the technology, language, symbols and outlets of known hacker groups, terrorist organisations, intelligence services or serious media outlets.[17] In other cases, known state propaganda outlets create affiliates, officially engaging in PR, journalism or advertising, while in fact being run by government-affiliated journalists and spreading political disinformation. Some examples include the Berlin-based media outlets "Maffick Media" or "Redfish", daughters of RT's video outlet "Ruptly", staffed with RT-journalists.[18] And while Russia and China[19] are suspected to be the main actors of disinformation in

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[16]   Ladislav Bittman: The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's view, Washington, 1985, p. 70.

[17]   Joscha Weber/Rachel Baig: Faktencheck: Fake News unter falscher Flagge, in: Deutsche Welle 8.7.2022 (https://www.dw.com/de/faktencheck-fake-news-unter-falscher-flagge/a-62368848); also: Thomas Rid: Active Measures, pp. 336-422.

[18]   See Fn. 10.

[19]   C.f. for example: Vladimir Shopov: Getting on the Radar: China's Rising Media Presence in South East Europe, ed.: KAS Media Program. Sofia, 2020 (https://www.kas.de/documents/281902/281951/%E2%80%9CChina%E2%80%99s+Rising+Media+Presence+in+South+East+Europe%E2%80%9D.pdf/0beb5c40-b6dd-7292-5cc3-fd8a5c1be824?version=1.1&t=1607417514942).

the SEE region, tracking disinformation all the way back to its true origins and attributing it to an institution or individual has become a lot harder (and often impossible). Just like hacks, cyberattacks and acts of cyber espionage, the fight against disinformation struggles with its very own "attribution problem."[20]

Playfulness, gamification and *cross-mediality* are other characteristics of today's disinformation that are heavily influenced by digital media.[21] Social media memes or video-clips about the war in Ukraine, designed to spread false or misleading information and trigger strong emotions amongst a (mostly very young) audience[22], are a case in point. Here, text, images, memes, caricatures, sounds and videos are employed to spread disinformation. In the age of social media, the content and the form of digital disinformation have thus become increasingly interwoven.

Last but not least, one of the most important characteristics of disinformation in the digital age is that unlike disinformation during the Cold War, disinformation today does *no longer present or advance "master narratives"* about events, conflicts or persons. Disinformation in the digital era presents a plurality of different "alternative explanations", none of which is holistic, all-encompassing or even coherent, but all of which combined, seek to undermine the very existence of truth or facts as such.[23] Covid-related disinformation as opposed to AIDS-related disinformation in the 1980's are a telling example: during the 1980's the Soviet secret service KGB invented and spread the conspiracy theory according to which the then new human insufficiency virus (HIV) had been artificially created by the US Pentagon as a bioweapon and spread around the world after being tested on prisoners.[24] At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, a plurality of adapted versions of this "artificial origin theory" were spread. Yet, the differences soon became apparent: Covid-related disinformation did not seek to

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[20] C.f.: Thomas Rid/ Ben Buchanan: Attributing Cyber Attacks, in: Journal of Strategic Studies, 39/1 2015, pp. 4-37.

[21] C.f. for example: Matthias Schulze: Desinformation: Vom Kalten Krieg zum Informationszeitalter, in: bpb.de, 2019 (https://www.bpb.de/themen/medien-journalismus/digitale-desinformation/290487/desinformation-vom-kalten-krieg-zum-informationszeitalter/).

[22] C.f. for example: Tasnim Rödder: Ukraine-Krieg: Propaganda-Schlacht auf TikTok, in: tagesschau.de, 23.8.2022 (https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/swr/tiktok-propaganda-russland-ukraine-101.html).

[23] C.f.: Thomas Rid: Active Measures, p. 427f.

[24] See: Christopher Nehring / Douglas Selvage: Die AIDS-Verschwörung. Das Ministerium für Staatssicherheit und die AIDS-Desinformationskampagne des KGB, Berlin, 2014.

present one singular, coherent "Covid master narrative" about the pandemic and its consequences. Instead, Covid-related disinformation pushed for a broad variety of different narratives, such as the "Wuhan-Lab-Theory" or vaccination-related conspiracy theories ("microchips and Bill Gates"). None of these theories were elaborate enough to incorporate the origin, the political and economic consequences AND the new vaccines at the same time. Instead, disinformation focused on undermining public trust in everything – public health systems, science, the political system, vaccination or the pharmaceutical industry. This cacophony of crude theories was not meant to persuade – it was meant to plant doubt, to distract and disturb, to spread mistrust, fear and uncertainty. And, as all studies in this volume suggest, in SEE countries, Covid-19 disinformation, sadly enough, was very successful. Mistrust against governments and political communications, the instrumentalization of the pandemic in election campaigns and media illiteracy played a crucial role for Covid disinformation across the entire region. As a result, vaccination rates in all countries in the region remained low, while death rates remained above the European average.

A last important feature of digital disinformation is its *privatization and commercialization*. Most public and academic discourse focuses on state organized and state sponsored disinformation. Yet, at the same time, *commercial disinformation* is very often overlooked, but no less problematic. Not every pro-Russian or Covid-denialist website is run by the Russian state or PR-companies secretly owned and run by intelligence officials. In the digital age, posting and spreading crude, extremist, denialist, anti-liberal or pro-Russian disinformation has turned into a lucrative business model. While in Germany, for example, marketing and PR companies offer fake online ratings for all sorts of businesses[25], and the French football club Paris St. Germain was accused of entertaining its very own "troll factory" to smear players, agents and journalists[26], Southeast Europe knows several examples of commercialized political disinformation run by private, non-state affiliated individuals for monetary reasons. The town of Veles in North Macedonia, for example, became world famous for its "fake news industry" during the 2016 US-presidential election. Several dozens of websites, posting and reposting

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[25] C.f. for example: Marco Lehner / Arne Meyer-Fünffinger /Josef Streule: Auf der Spur gekaufter Bewertungen, in: tagesschau.de, 2.2.2022 (https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/br-recherche/fake-bewertungen-101.html).

[26] C.f.: Jürg Altwegg: Was treibt die „digitale Armee" von Paris Saint-Germain?, in: faz.de 13.10.2022 (https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/medien/paris-saint-germain-soll-eine-digitale-armee-haben-18384823.html).

pro-Trump and/or anti-Hillary Clinton content were run by smalltown adolescents, some of which earning the poor youths more than 10.000 US-$ a month.[27] A similar model, but with Russia-related content was revealed to journalists in Bulgaria: "Dimitar", a private operator of numerous fake news websites, had also set up websites and social media profiles posting and re-posting pro-Russian and anti-Western disinformation for the solemn reason of generating clicks and online user interaction which earned him money via ad placements.[28] Commercial disinformation like this is not only often overlooked, but also frequently dismissed as less harmful or less important. Yet, while commercial disinformation might be only the "ugly cousin of political disinformation", it is disinformation nonetheless with anonymous authors intentionally repeating, designing and spreading malign content. And even though their personal interest might not be political, the results certainly are. Commercial disinformation revolves around and feeds on political disinformation like a parasite, accelerating and amplifying its magnitude and effects. Thus, in many ways the commercialization of disinformation, turning old-fashioned *dezinformatsiya* into todays "disinformation industry" with an economic model of its own, is the very epitome of the interconnectedness between disinformation and media, between content and form – between disinformation and the internet.

Political Context

Today's digital disinformation is a truly global phenomenon. However, its forms, content and underlying mechanisms are designed to affect smaller entities such as national states or specific groups in society. There, regional specifics play an important role. Producing, adapting and designing disinformation for SEE countries needs to take into account the particularities of the region. When political movements, parties or other actors are being supported as part of influence campaigns or when politicians or other important figures are smeared and discredited, political and media culture play an important role. Insider reports and investigations of the infamous Russian troll factory "Internet Research Agency" in St. Petersburg, for example, have shown how the production of large-scale disinformation is organized by different departments

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[27] See: Heather Hughes / Israel Waismel-Manor: The Macedonian Fake News Industry and the 2016 US Election, in: PS: Political Science & Politics 54/1 2021, pp. 19-23.

[28] See: Mina Kirkova: "Поддържах сайт с фалшиви новини, печелех добри пари": какво ни разказа един българин, in: DW, 25.5.2022 (https://p.dw.com/p/4BpgM).

within one larger unit, each department focusing on one region, country or language.[29]

This is what we mean when we talk about the political and national context of disinformation, which is an important point of reference for our analyses. Struggling with national and ethnical conflict and being at the geographical crossroads between Europe and Asia and political crossroads between NATO and EU on the one hand and China and Russia on the other, Southeast Europe is today a hotspot for disinformation. The analyses presented in this volume show remarkable results regarding the political context of the most thriving topics of disinformation during the past years:

(1) Disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic reflects global conspiracy theories and disinformation, and needed little adaption to the political context of SEE countries.

(2) Quite the contrary is true for disinformation about the Russian war against Ukraine. Here, narratives, topics and campaigns are designed for each country and its political landscape individually. This plays an important role for the content of disinformation, for example, whether a country is a member of NATO and the EU or not. This was not only true for the question of embargos and sanctions, but also concerning general anti-NATO sentiment or "neutralist" or "sovereigntist rhetoric" (e.g. in Romania). Disinformation about the war in Ukraine is heavily influenced not only by regional and national political context, but also by the wider geopolitical context. One example of this are disinformation campaigns against the accession to the EU of several countries in Southeast Europe, e.g. in Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

(3) Nationalism and ethnic conflict (or nationalistic conflict with neighbouring countries) are perhaps the most important element of the political context against which disinformation in the SEE region is produced and spread. In Bosnia, for example, conflict between the three main ethnic groups is the most important point of reference for disinformation.

(4) In most countries foreign countries – Russia and, to a lesser degree, China and Turkey – are very active actors of disinformation. Domestic groups, parties or movements, however, also play a crucial role: one the one hand, they often function as proxies for foreign (mostly Russian)

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29 Dawson, Andrew; Innes, Martin (2019). "How Russia's Internet Research Agency Built its Disinformation Campaign", in: The Political Quarterly 90/2 2019, pp. 245-256; also: Thomas Rid: Active Measures, p. 399-404.

interests. On the other hand, they also utilize disinformation as a weapon in domestic politics and as means to pursue their own interests. In Bosnia and Montenegro, to name only two, parties are known to have their own "troll farms" with an interconnected system of websites, portals and social media profiles as outlets for (domestic) disinformation. In Romania, similar mechanisms are used by political parties and business interests to discredit anti-corruption measures as being part of a "deep-state conspiracy".

Countermeasures and Resilience

How to fight disinformation and make our societies more resilient against the manipulative use of information? There are various approaches to fighting disinformation, each with its own advantages and disadvantages, some dating back decades, some children of the digital age. This study identified **eleven** such **countermeasures**:

(1) *Institutional approaches*: This state-centred approach of establishing a state agency in charge of monitoring, analysing and countering disinformation has been around for a long time. The first example was the "Active Measures Working Group" installed by the US Government during the 1980's to engage with Soviet disinformation.[30] In 2021, both the Swedish and French governments, for example, revived this approached and founded state agencies engaged in identifying and debunking disinformation ("Swedish Psychological Defense Agency" and "VIGINUM").[31] Likewise, the German government established an interagency working group (AG "Hybrid") that serves as a platform for exchange of information on developments in

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[30] C.f.: Fletcher Schoen / Christopher Lamb: Deception, Disinformation, and Strategic Communications: How One Interagency Group Made a Major Difference, in: Strategic Perspectives 11 / 2012 (https://permanent.fdlp.gov/gpo60199/Strategic-Perspectives-11.pdf); also: Todd Leventhal: What Can We Learn from the Active Measures Working Group?, in: GEC Counter-Disinformation Dispatches #8, 2020 (https://e.america.gov/t/i-e-mjdiua-l-tr/).

[31] The "Swedish Psychological Defense Agency", which began operating on 1.1.2022, was set up to "identify, analyse and respond to the impact of undue information influence and other misleading information", see: https://www.mpf.se/en/; the French "VIGINUM" was formally founded in July 2021 and its main tasks are to be "responsible for vigilance and protection against foreign digital interference (…) for detecting and analyzing digital campaigns, information manipulation campaigns involving foreign actors and aimed at harming France and its fundamental interests."; see: http://www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/rapport_thematique/viginum-annee1/.

disinformation between security agencies and several ministries.[32] The Bulgarian reformist government elected in late 2021 had similar plans to establish an interagency group of disinformation specialists, who should exchange expert knowledge, engage in debunking disinformation and making public administration more resilient.[33]

(2) Since intelligence agencies are important actors in spreading global disinformation, it comes as no surprise that *security policy* – counterintelligence and investigative police work together with penal prosecution – has traditionally been a tool to fight disinformation.[34] Yet, it seems that today's troll factories, masquerading as PR companies or media outlets, are harder to deal with for law enforcement than old-fashioned, officially recruited "agents of influence"[35]. For security services to engage with disinformation there needs to be a legal basis for prosecution, e.g. *anti-disinformation laws* (2a) or other laws providing a legal basis to investigate and prosecute disinformation.

(3) *Debunking* disinformation is another, very common approach to tackling disinformation. Engaging with disinformation, exposing its fabrication, malicious messages and untruthfulness and correcting its content seems like one of the most natural ways to counter disinformation. Here, *fact-checking* has been one of the most popular tools in recent years. As this volume shows, various debunking- and fact-checking-initiatives exist in almost all countries in Southeast Europe. One famous example is the fact-checking and debunking-initiative run by the European Commission's External Action Service "https:// euvsdisinfo.eu/". Many, but not all public media in Europe, entertain similar outlets. Yet, there is no centralized or unified approach to fact-checking and debunking, but a plurality of different initiatives and outlets within European countries. Some of them are transnational and cross-media cooperation networks of platforms and initiatives tasked with fact-checking and debunking

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[32] See: Florian Flade: Kampf gegen die Lüge, in: tagesschau.de, 16.8.2022 (https://www.tagesschau. de/investigativ/wdr/russland-propaganda-bundesregierung-101.html).

[33] C.f: Interview with Minister for Digital Administration Bozhidar Bozhanov by Lora Fileva / Vasil Hadzhijski: "Божидар Божанов, министър на е-управлението: Звено в „Информационно обслужване" ще следи за дезинформация", in: dnevnik.bg 6.7.2022 (https://www.dnevnik.bg/ intervju/2022/07/06/4365967_bojidar_bojanov_ministur_na_e-_upravlenieto_zveno_v/).

[34] C.f.: Dennis Kux: Soviet active measures. Overview and assessment. In: Parameters. Journal of the US Army War College 15(1985) 4, pp. 19-28.

[35] Herbert Romerstein: Soviet agents of influence. Alexandria, VA (Center for Intelligence Studies) 1991, pp. 1-38 (https://www.iwp.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/20140905_ RomersteinSovietAgentsofInfluence.pdf).

by major European news agencies or social media networks.[36] Fact-checking as a tool to fight disinformation has gained such popularity that some perpetrators of disinformation have tried to seize the format and turn it fact-checking into disinformation by developing "fake fact-checking outlets".[37]

(4) Forms of *censorship*, in its most neutral sense, understood as the deliberate repression of information notwithstanding the quality or origin of its content, are also one way to fight disinformation. Censorship may take on various forms, for example the legal ban of media outlets, such as the EU's ban of RT or Sputnik after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or the deletion of content such as posts, tweets or commentaries.

(5) *Technological*, i.e. automated software, *solutions* play an ever more important role in this. Social media platforms have already started to employ automated software to either flag and mark and/or delete content deemed as disinformation.[38] These solutions mainly tackle the technological side of disinformation such as automated "bots" spreading disinformation or so-called "deep fakes"[39]. Other technological countermeasures may be directed against the "economy of disinformation" and the business models behind it. Such measures include control of automated ad placement and other regulatory measures of social media platforms and "big tech" companies. Simply banning, deleting and "shadowing" them will always come late, while control or prohibition of automated distribution of advertisement provides a proactive solution against the business model behind disinformation.

While these five approaches focus on engaging with and fighting disinformation ("*negative approaches*"), others promote proactive solutions designed to make societies more resilient against disinformation in the first place ("*positive approaches*"). Here, we can observe a shift from "debunking" to "pre-bunking",

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[36] One example ist he German collectiv "Correctiv" that also works as fact-checkers for Facebook: https://correctiv.org/.

[37] One example is the Russian website "waronfakes.com", run out of Moscow for an international audience, allegedly to "debunk Ukrainian fake news about the War" while in fact spreading disinformation; see: Kathrin Wesolowski / Rachel Baig: So verbreitet eine "Faktencheck"-Webseite russische Propaganda, in: Deutsche Welle 8.3.2022 (https://p.dw.com/p/48A4d).

[38] See for example an overview over software-projects designed to tackle "fake news" funded by the German Ministry of Education: https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/shareddocs/kurzmeldungen/de/2022/02/fake-news-bekaempfen.html.

[39] One example is the "digger project"-software that is currently being developed to recognize "deep fakes": https://digger-project.com/.

from *post factum* investigations and fact-checking towards "information vaccination" and "inoculation"[40]:

(6) As journalists and fact checkers have asserted, simply deleting or flagging online content is not sufficient. *Juxtaposing* malign and questionable content with quality information and trustworthy news might be one way to break through self-reinforcing cycles of filter bubbles and echo chambers. This way, algorithm-fuelled automated content generation, suggesting "ever more of the same information" can be substituted by a "more of something else" principle.[41]

(7) High quality journalism, high level journalistic education, press ethics, press freedom or, in short, *quality journalism*. This is true not only for the domestic realm of any given country, but also for the big Western *foreign news broadcasters* such as Voice of America, BBC World, Deutsche Welle or Radio Free Europe. Quality journalism generally helps make readers, viewers, politicians and also journalists less susceptible to disinformation. And while often neglected or overlooked in their own countries, quality Western foreign news outlets broadcasting quality information to all parts of the world, thus countering and juxtaposing disinformation and propaganda with quality information, may be one of the most important instruments in the global information war.

(8) Another key element in making societies and media more resilient against information manipulation is *media literacy*. Modern, digital media in all its playful forms accelerate, modified, facilitated, amplified and globalized disinformation. And each new media comes with new challenges and specificities concerning the quality and credibility of its content. Without establishing at least a minimum of media education and media literacy one can hardly imagine how societies may catch up or even keep pace with the developments in the digital disinformation domain. Without media literacy resilience against disinformation may not be possible. One example of specific media literacy initiatives designed to "vaccinate" or sensitise readers and viewers against mis- and disinformation are video games designed to explain

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[40] C.f.: Jon Roozenbeek / Cecilie S. Traberg / Sander van der Linden: Technique-based inoculation against real-world misinformation, in: Royal Society Open Science, 18. Mai 2022 (doi: https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.211719).

[41] Such measures were proposed by fact-checkers such as the German "Correctiv" in an open letter to the CEOs of Youtube: Offener Brief an die CEO von YouTube von Faktenprüfern aus der ganzen Welt, in Correctiv 12.1. 2022 (https://correctiv.org/in-eigener-sache/2022/01/12/offener-brief-an-youtube-ceo-von-weltweiten-faktencheck-organisationen/).

and demonstrate how and why disinformation works. Studies have shown that games such as "Bad Media" and "Harmony Square" had a positive effect on educating their players about how disinformation works and making them less susceptible to false information. "Vaccinating" readers with serious news as a means to reaching the same effects – an approached that is actually quite old – showed, on the contrary, only mixed results.[42]

(9) Almost the same is true for *general education* of the population. While it may seem like a platitude, recent studies have again suggested that education and pre-existing knowledge make people less susceptible to disinformation.[43]And since disinformation may touch on any field of knowledge and topic, a broad and firm general education can help to make populations more resilient against disinformation.

(10) *Trust building measures*. Public mistrust against politicians, authorities and the media is a major factor that makes disinformation successful. Such mistrust a major problem in most societies in Southeast Europe and has deep historical roots in the mistrust against the Ottoman Empire, corrupt officials and Communist authorities and media. This most probably has also played a crucial role for significant parts of the population during the Covid-19 pandemic: On the one hand, public information repeating WHO information about the virus was often deemed "state propaganda", while conspiracy theories, on the other hand, found fertile ground and were often broadcasted even by serious news outlets. Building trust is hence a major task, for politicians, media and journalists in the region. This may take the form of a professionalisation of political communication as well as the establishment of (and adherence to) high standards of journalism. Yet, as all authors in this volume point out, such measures are either rare, unsuccessful or simply too isolated as compared to massive political propaganda and bad journalism in Southeast Europe.

(11) *Development* and *dissemination* of own *narratives*. With the Russian war against Ukraine and the return of Cold War-style confrontation and political propaganda, focusing on Russian narratives and disinformation will most probably not be enough. To convince and "inoculate" domestic and

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[42] C.f.: Jon Roozenbeek / Cecilie S. Traberg / Sander van der Linden: Technique-based inoculation against real-world misinformation, in: Royal Society Open Science, 18. Mai 2022 (https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.211719).

[43] C.f. for example: Phillip Schmid / Cornelia Betsch: Effective strategies for rebutting science denialism in public discussions, in: Nat Hum Behav 3/2019, pp. 931–939 (https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-019-0632-4).

foreign audiences against malicious information warfare, propaganda and disinformation, positive narratives about (inclusive) identities, values, beliefs and policy goals are strongly needed. Such narratives might make populations more resilient against harmful disinformation trying to sow discontent, exploiting weaknesses and cleavages. Without such a (Western, European and national) narrative, efforts to counter e.g. Russian or Chinese propaganda will only be partly successful. The dire need for such positive narratives about Europe and its role in the world is particularly strongly felt in the countries of Southeast Europe, where EU aspirations had been high for more than a decade and where strong feelings of disappointment have spread in recent years (e.g. in North Macedonia).

However, all of these approaches and countermeasures come with specific *problems and challenges*: For example, while there is almost no alternative to debunking at least some disinformation, both debunking and fact-checking are "reactionary" responses to disinformation, i.e. they are always belated and bound to reach a smaller audience than the original disinformation. In other cases, debunking and fact-checking (or even simple reporting) may significantly increase the spread and amplify disinformation. And very often it is almost impossible to judge beforehand which of these risks of either not engaging at all or a possible amplification of disinformation is the lesser evil.[44] Another problem of debunking and fact-checking is that both are rational tools, appealing to reason, common sense, knowledge and fact-based judgement. However, disinformation and propaganda very often play on and with the irrational —a with emotions, feelings, moods, trends, fears and desires. Hence, strictly rational approaches to counter disinformation may have problems reaching the same audience and meeting its expectations.[45]

Another problem, e.g., for a strict security policy and counterintelligence approaches to disinformation, is the "*attribution problem*" of disinformation. As mentioned above, digital disinformation, like cyberattacks, is often very hard or even impossible to attribute with 100% certainty to an author, origin or source. The secrecy of clandestine disinformation thus impedes efforts to investigate and prosecute it.

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[44] C.f.: Matthias Koring / Fabian Zimmermann: Fake News als aktuelle Desinformation (https://www.bpb.de/themen/medien-journalismus/digitale-desinformation/290561/fake-news-als-aktuelle-desinformation/); also: Dennis Kux: Soviet active measures. Overview and assessment. In: Parameters. Journal of the US Army War College 15(1985) 4, pp. 19-28.

[45] C.f.: Tsvetelina Sokolova: Теоретични проблеми на борбата с дезинформацията: ограничения на практиката проверка на фактите (фактчек), in: «Дезинформацията: новите предизвикателства», Sofia, 2021, pp. 173 – 196.

Censoring disinformation, either by automated deletion and flagging of content, by banning certain news outlets altogether and by passing "anti-fake news laws" or "anti-disinformation laws" also faces serious problems: defining what is to be censored as disinformation may open the door for unscrupulous lawmakers to utilize the fight against disinformation for their own purposes. Defining what disinformation is, may led the path to "*Truth Ministries*" claiming an ultimate power to decide what is true or not, thus infringing with basic democratic principles. This was, for example, the main reason the EU for years did not decide to censor even the worst Russian propaganda outlets and why Turkey's anti-disinformation law of 2022, making the spread of false or misleading information about public health, internal or external security a punishable crime, was so contested.[46] Making disinformation illegal by law may create opportunities for unscrupulous politicians and officials to exert their own version of political censorship. Even with automated IT responses, such as automated deletion, these problems cannot be solved entirely: artificial intelligence software too needs to have a human-induced basic notion of what disinformation is and is thus not free from human flaws or influence. In other words: artificial intelligence does not necessarily have an easier time recognizing disinformation. Incidents of automated deletion of satirical content mistaken for disinformation by algorithms demonstrate ostensibly that while software may be better at recognizing deep fake images, it may as well have a harder time to draw a line between human humour and disinformation.

How Successful is Disinformation and what Does that Mean for Countermeasures and Resilience?

Even after decades of analysing disinformation, there is still no definitive answer on how to measure its "success" (or better: damage) and effectiveness. Measuring the success or even the effects of disinformation has always been difficult as there is no clear-cut toolset or methodology on how to determine what "success" means and how to measure it. The Soviet secret service KGB, for example, would rate its disinformation efforts a success if their planted pieces of disinformation: (a) were picked up by any other than the original source; and (b) by the quantity of citations or reprints.[47] As insider accounts revealed, the

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[46] C.f.: Turkey introduces jail terms for 'disinformation', in: Deutsche Welle, 14.10.2022 (https://www.dw.com/en/turkey-introduces-jail-terms-for-disinformation/a-63435062).

[47] C.f.: Christopher Nehring: Kleine Brüder des KGB. Die Kooperation von DDR-Auslandsaufklärung und bulgarischer Staatssicherheit, Berlin, 2019, p. 106f.

infamous Russian troll factory "Internet Research Agency (IRA)" also followed this pattern and rate its success according to the number of posts, profiles, tweets, followers or reposts their original disinformation pieces received. Yet, as for example research into the influence of the IRA's activities on the 2016 US-presidential elections showed, only 8,4% of all IRA online activity during the time of the election campaign was related to the election and the bulk of all IRA output was: (a) devoted to audience-building; and (b) stayed within its own echo chambers.[48] Was that successful disinformation? Probably not.

Any assessment of the "success" of disinformation needs to keep in mind that the original purpose of disinformation is not mere quantity, but also the quality of influence it achieves. And here, the balance sheet of disinformation quite patchy. Just like modern digital disinformation, a lot of Cold War KGB disinformation stayed within its own echo chambers and was repeated only by media that were on their side all along. It seems like even the ludicrous increase in quantity of disinformation in the digital age does not necessarily equal an increase in quality, effect or effectiveness. Disinformation in the digital era, as one scholar put it, has become "more active, but less measured"[49].

Determining what "successful disinformation" is and how effective disinformation it is, is of the utmost importance with regard to countermeasures and resilience. Disinformation, just like any other form of malign, bad or manipulative information, has always been with us. Yet, it is: (a) the increase of quantity of disinformation in the digital age; and (b) the increase in quality, that is actual influence and real-life consequences of disinformation campaigns in recent years, that are troublesome. Countering the quantity of disinformation is something that may easily be achieved by the aforementioned "negative countermeasures", such as automated deletion, deep-fake recognition and censorship. It needs to be clearly stated, however, that these measures may work to reduce the quantity of disinformation, but will neither make disinformation as a whole go away, neither solve the quality issue, i.e. the actual amount of influence achieved. Yet, the quality of disinformation and its impact on attitudes and beliefs, electoral behaviour, etc. is a lot harder to both measure and counter. Here, the aforementioned "positive countermeasures", such as quality journalism, media literacy and general education, may provide a solution.

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[48] Thomas Rid: Active Measures, p. 406ff.

[49] Ibid., p. 12.

We need to be clear that disinformation will neither vanish, nor will there be a flawless or singular "catch-all"-approach to deal with it. So far, media, political and academic discourse have focused on such approaches more or less in isolation and individually or have placed high hopes on technological solutions alone. Yet, the complexity of disinformation, its mechanisms, forms, content, its necessary predispositions as well as the complicated metrics of its "success" suggest that *an integrative approach, that is a combination of all countermeasures* promises the best results for a resilient society.

Therefore, the editors of this volume decided to include all of the above-mentioned approaches to fight disinformation and ask the question how (and if at all) they are being implemented in the countries of Southeast Europe. Yet, the results are somewhat disheartening. Most case studies clearly point to a lack of media literacy, general education and malicious intent of domestic political actors as main factors for the far-reaching effects of disinformation in Southeast Europe. Fact-checking initiatives are the most common tool against disinformation, yet in all countries these initiatives are rather small, understaffed, underfinanced and nowhere near reaching a broad audience. Far-reaching problems in the media sector, strong foreign influence, poor journalism and above all the lack of political will and initiative to effective fight (and not exploit) disinformation are, on the other hand, important factors for the increase of disinformation during the Covid-19-pandemic and the war in Ukraine. Yet, there are also signs of hope on the horizon. For example, the "*Registry of Professional Online Media*" published by the Council of Media Ethics of North Macedonia to provide the public with a list of professional media outlets (as compared to mere portals and self-created sites). In Kosovo, to give another example, media literacy has recently been made an elective subject in high-school education. Despite several problems with the organisation and execution of media education, Kosovo is thus one of the first countries in Europe trying to put efforts of improving media literacy of pupils into action.

Disinformation in Southeastern Europe: The case of Albania

By Rrapo Zguri

Introduction

Disinformation is a global challenge that has created problems in both established and new democracies. It has also been used as an instrument of geopolitical influence. Election campaigns in different countries have often been damaged by disinformation, creating a veil of doubt in the liberal-democratic system itself. The manipulation of information has also undermined social and political solidarity in response to global challenges, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

In few places is this threat more acute than in the Western Balkans –as a February 2021 European Parliament Report notes: "*As a theatre of geopolitical dispute and sharply polarized politics, characterized by weak governance and fragile civil societies, the Western Balkans are a uniquely attractive target for both foreign and domestic actors seeking to alter, undermine or delegitimize the outcomes of democratic processes. Disinformation affects many areas of social and political life in the Western Balkans, but still, it is not the case that disinformation is the cause of democratic breakdown. Rather, it is the lack of commitment to democratic governance by domestic political actors that opens the door to the productive use of disinformation as a tool of political competition.*"[50]

Within this broad context, disinformation and manipulation of information in the Albanian public sphere have enjoyed considerable success. The delay in the maturation process of democracy and the gaps in democratic culture, associated with the abuse of new communication technologies, as well as the efforts of third parties to penetrate the country, have been among the **main factors** that have influenced the presence and spread of disinformation in Albania.

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[50] Samuel Green, Gregory Asmolov, A. Fagan, O. Fridman, B. Gjuzelov: Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, Published by European Parliament, 2022, p. 9.

The aim of this article is to offer an overview and summary of definitions, contents and narratives as well as countermeasures against disinformation in Albania. The collection of empirical data for the needs of this study is based on online keyword research as well as on the monitoring of some specific case studies. The search is limited to the last 5 years.

Terminology and Definitions of Disinformation in Albania

Manipulation of information is not a new development for Albania. During the nearly 50-year period of totalitarianism, the population was exposed to an unprecedented wave of disinformation and propaganda aimed at casting the communist regime in a positive light and presenting it as superior to liberal-democratic systems. But disinformation has been present even during the years of the post-communist transition, its reach increasing in lockstep with the proliferation of new information and communication technologies.

The term "disinformation" itself is a relatively new addition to the Albanian language. It gained currency after the fall of Communism, when Albanian scholarly studies in the field of mass communication and information began and when pluralist mass media first emerged. In Albanian, the term is more part of the academic and scientific lexicon, but it is increasingly finding a place in the political lexicon and in the media as well as in interpersonal communication. Traditionally, to express the concept of disinformation in the Albanian language, the term "keqinformimi" has been used, which literally translates to "mal-information" in English. Although they have already entered the Albanian language, the corresponding words for "disinformation" (Albanian: dezinformim) and "misinformation" (Albanian: ç'informim) are missing in the Dictionary of the Albanian Language.[51] Depending on the context, the term "keqinformimi" in Albanian expresses and represents both the meanings of the word "mal-information" and those of the words "dis-information" and "mis-information", thus serving as a polysemantic term.

In recent years, and especially after the translation into Albanian of *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* a Council of Europe publication authored by Claire Wardle and Hossein

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[51]   See: http://www.fjalori.shkenca.org/.

Derakhshan,[52] Albania has begun to differentiate: "dezinformim" is used to mean "disinformation", "ç'informim" is used for "misinformation" and "keqinformim" for "malinformation". The nuances of meaning expressed by these terms parallel those of their English counterparts, as follows:

- **Dezinformimi** (English: Disinformation) - Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.
- **Ç'informimi** (English: Misinformation) - Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- **Keqinformimi** (English: Malinformation) - Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.

Meanwhile, unfortunately, there is still no definition of disinformation proposed by Albanian authors, institutions and public discourse. For the purposes of this study, the basic definition is the one that defines disinformation as "false, inaccurate, decontextualized and misleading information COVERTLY designed, presented and DELIBERATLY promoted and spread to manipulate and exert political, financial or other influence".[53]

In some studies conducted by Albanian authors, the term "disinformation" is also used in association with, or instead of, the word "propaganda", meaning "misleading information", which is also a feature and part of propaganda information.

In normative or legal documents in the Albanian language, for example, the code of ethics of the media, the criminal code or the civil code, disinformation has not yet been established as a separate term, notion and practice. Thus, the Code of Ethics of Albanian Media has three paragraphs dealing with disinformation-related issues, as follows:

- Media should not mislead the public, and they should clearly indicate where manipulated texts, documents, images and sounds have been used.
- Media should not distort or misuse statements made in a specific context.
- Media should not publish any image, audio, or visual arrangements that

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[52] Wardle, Claire & Derakhshan, Hossein; Çrregullimi informativ: Drejt një kuadri ndërdisiplinar për studime dhe politikëbërje, Council of Europe, 27 September 2017 (https://rm.coe.int/crregullimi-informativ-final-01102019/1680989a70).

[53] C.f. the definition proposed by Christopher Nehring in the Introduction of this volume.

distort the ideas or facts of the source, with the exception of caricatures, cartoons or comic plots.[54]

Note that the Code of Ethics addresses the problems related to disinformation but does not mention or distinguish it as a term or as a category of information manipulation. In the Criminal Code issues related to disinformation are touched upon in Article 120, entitled "Libel", as follows:

"Intentional dissemination of statements, and any other pieces of information, with the knowledge that they are false, affect a person's honour and dignity, shall constitute criminal misdemeanor [...]"[55]

Apparently, the intersection of meanings between the various terms related to the information disorder create a situation in which, on the one hand, similar but distinct terms are used interchangeably and, on the other hand, older terms are preferred to newer terms not only in the academic literature but also in normative and legal texts.

The Target Group(s) - Audience and Perspective of Disinformation in Albania

Being spread mainly through the media, disinformation has called into question the public's trust in them. An opinion poll conducted in Albania on February 2021 by IPSOS Strategic Marketing with a sample of 1010 adult respondents and followed by a focus group of six journalists and editors from various media outlets, revealed that spreading disinformation is the primary reason for distrust in media.[56]

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[54] Code of Ethics of Albanian Media, (http://www.institutemedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/kodi-anglisht-final.pdf), Accessed on June 2022.

[55] Criminal Code of The Republic Of Albania, Article 120 (Amended by law no. 36/2017), (Amended by law no.89/2017; (https://euralius.eu/index.php/en/library/albanian-legislation?task=download.send&id=11&catid=10&m=0).

[56] Ilda Londo: Media polarization and media (dis)trust in Albania, ed.: SEENPM, Peace Institute and Albanian Media Institute, Ljubljana, 2021.

Thinking about the media outlets you consider the least trustworthy, what are the main reasons you do not trust them? - All answers

Reason	Percentage
They spread disinformation	48%
They are under political influences	47%
They spread propaganda	25%
They do not publish information who they are, I don't trust anonymous sources of news	14%
They promote interests of economically powerful people and companies	14%
The journalists and editors who work there do not respect professional ethics and do not serve public interest	12%
They spread hatred	10%
Something else	1%
Don't know / Refusal	14%

Source, IPSOS, 2021

When asked why they distrust media outlets, the public seemed to have a concrete answer: almost half of them (48%) cited "the spread of disinformation" as their main reason.[57]

The level of public trust in the media is determined to a large extent by the level of fulfilment of its public mission. Especially when the media fails to be, even partially, representative and a servant of the public interest, a crisis of trust begins to form. A fundamental question that could be asked in this context is: How much has the media in Albania served democracy and the democratization of the country?

A survey undertaken by the Albanian Media Institute (AMI)58 in 2019 reveals that the vast majority of the Albanian public (70%) agrees that the media

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[57] Ilda Londo: Media polarization and media (dis)trust in Albania, ed.: SEENPM, Peace Institute and Albanian Media Institute, Ljubljana, 2021.

[58] Rrapo Zguri; Media image among the public and media trust in Albania, ed. AMI, Tirana, 2019.

environment is of great importance for a country's democracy. But even though they recognized the media in general as having a very important role in relation to democracy, only about half of the respondents (48.6%) said that in fact the Albanian media have been serving democracy and the public interest to some degree. Also, only about half of the public (46.4%) said that the media have to some degree being helping the fight against corruption, thus exposing a significant deficiency in this aspect of the media's public mission. This reflects the deficits of the Albanian media in relation to democracy and is evidence of a limited role in its development and protection.

Besides damaging the media's role and reputation, disinformation has also influenced the journalistic profession and the production of news. One of the main impacts of disinformation is on journalists' sourcing techniques. In surveys and interviews with journalists most of the journalists queried declared that the current news environment made them increasingly careful about their sources in general. They describe the motivation to double-check sources as both a reaction to disinformation and as a way to protect themselves from accusations or from being labelled as "fake news."[59]

Another downstream effect is increasing distrust of sources and the accompanying increased time spent validating sources. Many journalists report that their job now takes more time due to increased information and increased awareness of the circulation of false information. Sources also seem to be more distrustful of members of the media.

A major effect outlined by journalists concerning the production of news is the increased transparency regarding the journalistic process. Many mention an ongoing push in the industry to more clearly label opinion and news articles to avoid readers conflating them and form heightened perceptions of journalistic bias that can foster increased distrust.[60]

In addition to its effect on journalism and journalistic practices, disinformation has been posing great challenges for audiences and media users too. *"Audiences may be misled as to the authenticity of the purported facts of the matter (e.g., 'vaccines cause autism') or the source of the material (e.g., 'reputable scientists say vaccines cause autism'), and factual material may be taken out of context in order to provoke a particular response,"* according to a European Parliament report.

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[59] The Effects of False Information on Journalism, Institute for the Future, Palo Alto, 2018.

[60] Ibid.

"Even the nature of the distribution channel itself may be a lie (such as the recently uncovered 'Peace Data' website). In all cases, however, the goal is the same – 'to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with political goals.'"[61]

The outlook becomes even clearer if we take into account the low level of media literacy among the Albanian public. It is well known that the lower the level of knowledge that the public has about media and news, the higher the risk of disinformation and manipulation through the media.[62] The "Media Literacy 2021" index ranks Albania 33rd among European countries, outdoing only Bosnia Herzegovina and North Macedonia. This proves once again that Albanian citizens continue to be among the most vulnerable citizens in Europe when it comes to fake news and disinformation. Even the fact that the percentage of people in Albania who believed in conspiracy theories about Covid-19 was the highest in the Balkan region[63] shows the problems that exist in the general public regarding the understanding of the messages conveyed by the media. The situation calls for improvements in media literacy among the general public, starting from students to the elderly. The continuing delays initiatives for the implementation and dissemination of media literacy in the country have experienced are deepening the risk of informational manipulation of the public.

The spread of disinformation has led to increased control efforts as well as to attacks on the media by the government and by politicians. The last few years have seen a definite uptick in Albanian political leadership denigrating the media in their speeches. The "cauldron" metaphor the Albanian prime minister uses in his arguments against some media outlets and certain actors is notable in this context.[64] This sort of language on the one hand seems to exert increased pressure on critical voices in the media; on the other hand it has tightened political control over the media.[65] It has also resulted in a decrease of trust in the media. The "fake news" phenomenon meanwhile has

[61] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, ed. by European Parliament, February 2021.

[62] Erlis Cela: Covid-19: Addressing the influence of disinformation and conspiracy theories through media and information literacy", ed. by Albanian Media Institute, Tirana, 2021.

[63] Florian Bieber, Tena Prelec, DejanJovic, and Zoran Nechev: The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans; Graz: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 2021.

[64] See: http://www.panorama.com.al/rama-i-quan-mediat-kazan-por-vllahutin-i-del-kunder-ja-cfare-do-te-bej-me-mediat-per-dy-dite-ne-tirane/.

[65] Rrapo Zguri: Media image among the public and media trust in Albania, ed. by AMI, Tirana, 2019.

encouraged politicians, business executives, and others in the public eye to label unfavourable investigations as "fake" and has emboldened their attacks on the credibility of critical reporters. This has led to an environment in which harassment of journalists is increasingly accepted.[66]

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples of Disinformation in Albania

Disinformation in Albania takes a range of shapes and forms, but, as our research reveals, the most prominent types of it are: (1) Domestic political disinformation; (2) Crisis disinformation (such as the context of Covid-19); (3) Disinformation coming from third-state actors; and clickbait disinformation.

(A) Domestic Political Disinformation

The most widely used type of disinformation in Albania is the one that is produced and disseminated for political purposes by domestic actors. Numerous politicians across the spectrum have used disinformation to damage the image of their political rivals, to gain visibility or to put their own activities in a positive light. In March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic had just started to spread in the country, the Albanian government took very strict measures to limit the movements of citizens by imposing a kind of curfew in residential areas. These extraordinary measures were heavily criticized by the media and sparked public outrage. In order to justify these measures, the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama published a video on Facebook that showed, he claimed, the Spanish police violently dispersing a citizen's protest against similar restrictive measures. Research by the Albanian fact-checking platform Factoje revealed that the violent footage was taken during the dispersal by the police of a citizens' protest in Algeria.[67]

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[66]   The Effects of False Information on Journalism, 2018, Institute for the Future, Palo Alto, 2018.

[67]   See: https://faktoje.al/si-mund-ta-shmangte-kryeministri-rama-dezinformimin-dhe-perhapjen-e-panikut/.

Screen-shot of the Albanian Prime Minister's post

On the other side and at about the same time, the leader of the opposition, Sali Berisha, posted a video of doctors in a hospital, claiming that this was how the government, and the Albanian health system, were being prepared to cope with the pandemic. It turned out the footage had been filmed in Iran and had nothing to do with Covid-19.[68]

Being part of a polarised environment, political actors in Albania have used their satellite media to publish manipulated information, often coming from manipulated sources. Standard.al, a major online news outlet linked to the opposition Democratic Party, published a report that alleged Rama's government had allowed the import of 1300 tons of toxic waste that had disappeared from Italy in early 2017.[69] The source of this false information was an anonymous online portal based in Italy that disappeared as soon as questions started being asked.

In other cases, pictures from different contexts or different times are used to mislead the public and to create wrong perceptions about actual events. Research also identified several cases of photos that had been staged, that had been doctored, or that distorted facts through manipulative shooting angles. Last year, for example, a pro-government media outlet tried to

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[68]   See: https://www.facebook.com/Fakte.al1/posts/2603819633232710.

[69]   See: https://www.standard.al/2017/02/28/plas-skandali-media-italiane-jep-alarmin-1300-konteniere-me-plehra-nga-italia-ne-shqiperi/.

downplay participation in a protest organized by the opposition through drone footage taken from a misleadingly high angle. Pro-opposition media tried to exaggerate participation in the same protest through shooting from a low angle. Shooting angle, viewpoint and perspective, we can see, can be used as tools of manipulation, as tools to add or subtract "truthiness".

However, even though it is the most widespread type, domestic political disinformation in Albania has never taken the form of a coordinated and sustained campaign. Examples are generally opportunistic in nature, and the goals are shallow.[70]

(B) Crisis Disinformation and Covid-19

The various crises the country has been facing have also served to inspire disinformation. A typical example is that of the Covid-19 pandemic. The most widespread type of disinformation related to the pandemic in Albania has been the one involving conspiracy theories. According to a BIEPAG survey, Albania was the country with the highest number of supporters of conspiracy theories in the Western Balkans during the Corona crisis. Every individual false narrative, no matter how incoherent, had a greater number of supporters in Albania than elsewhere. The number Albanians who believed at least one conspiracy theory reached 59.4% of the population.[71]

The most important narratives of disinformation related to pandemic in Albania were the following:

- COVID-19 was created in and emerged from a Chinese laboratory in Wuhan.[72]
- The Corona virus was created by the White Brotherhood or by the "Deep State" to reduce the world's population.[73]
- The Corona virus was created by Bill Gates, who wants to use vaccines to install microchips in people, which will allow him to exercise global control.[74]

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[70] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, ed. European Parliament, February 2021, p.23.

[71] Florian Bieber, Tena Prelec, DejanJovic, and Zoran Nechev: The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans; Graz: Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG), 2021.

[72] See: https://www.facebook.com/bulevardionline/posts/1189686138149571/.

[73] See: https://www.gazetatema.net/2020/05/01/perla-nga-emisoini-i-zhejit-koronavirusi-lufte-mes-iluminatit-dhe-trump-arme-biologjike-e-vellazerise-se-bardhe/.

[74] See: https://boldnews.al/2021/01/13/koronavirusi-u-krijua-nga-soros-rockefeller-dhe-gates-akuza-nga-magjistratet-peruane/.

- The aim of installing of 5G mobile networks was to speed up the spread of the virus.[75]
- COVID-19 is either a hoax or a harmless ailment similar to the common flu, exaggerated by governments or by special groups for nefarious secret purposes.

In addition to conspiracy theories, disinformation during the pandemic in Albania also appeared in the form of made-up news, for example reports about miracle drugs that can cure Covid-19[76] or about the healing effect of various herbal remedies.[77]

It appears that the main actors that have contributed to the spread of conspiracy theories are different media outlets as well as some controversial individuals who used the opportunity to promote these theories. In contrast to many countries where the main channels of spreading these types of disinformation were social networks and online media, in Albania, unfortunately, the mainstream media were also involved in this process. As a BIRN report emphasis, the country's leading television channels rolled out the red carpet for conspiracy theories against vaccines.[78] Typical here is the case of *Top Channel*, which for more than two years has offered screen time to Alfred Cako, a well-known conspiracy theorist. Cako appears on a talk show every Sunday and freely promotes his disinformation theories.[79]

According to a report issued by the State Intelligence Service of Albania (SHISH), meanwhile, the Corona crisis was also used by third players to exert their influence in the country. Without naming any specific country or actor, the service noted that *"non-Western global actors have exploited the situation caused by COVID-19 for their geostrategic goals, strengthening their position as international actors, disrupting EU/NATO and international cohesion, and supporting each other's narratives in the information environment according to their goals. Also, they used a wide spectrum of hybrid tools to undertake information operations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, such as: undertaking media campaigns, circulating fake news, promoting and spreading*

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[75] See: https://sot.com.al/bota/ekspertet-ngrene-alarmin-ja-si-rrjeti-5g-ndikon-ne-perhapjen-e-koronavirusi.

[76] See: https://www.fishmedia.info/zvicra-lajm-te-mire-ky-ilac-bimor-sheron-koronavirusin/.

[77] See: https://femina.al/shenasi-aliu-zbulon-se-cila-eshte-bima-qe-sheron-koronavirusin/.

[78] Besar Likmeta: Televizionetishtruan 'tapetin e kuq' teorivekonspirativekundërvaksinave, Tirana, 2021.

[79] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a49JAZSkiVk.

conspiracy theories through the media and social networks, engaging the services of intelligence and state and non-state cyber actors."[80]

(C) Disinformation from Third-State Actors
"In the early 2000s, everything indicated that the countries of the Western Balkans were destined to integrate into the common European project as soon as possible," according to the Albanian analyst Liridon Lika. *"But the enlargement process has slowed down due to delays in the implementation of reforms as well as political and economic problems between Western Balkan countries, coupled by an 'enlargement fatigue' within the EU. In the context of this slowdown in EU accessions, new emerging powers tried to fill that void, such as Russia, China and Turkey, and extend their influence in the region."*[81]

The main lines of disinformation discourse coming from third parties are those that aim to damage the image and reputation of the EU, the USA and NATO in the countries of the Western Balkans and in Albania. An online comment on the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis, for example, alleges a weakening and declining role of the EU in the region and the world. In the case of Nagorno-Karabakh *"…the biggest loser is in fact the European Union… The EU has again managed, in a spectacular way, to fail to play the role of a relevant actor and peacemaker on its eastern suburbs,"* according to a comment with the headline *"Why the biggest loser in Nagorno-Karabakh is the European Union."*[82]

Another story goes even further, saying that *"over the last five years, the OSCE or even the EU and the US have not managed to successfully negotiate on any conflict, revealing significant weaknesses on their part. The US and the EU have also failed to negotiate a solution in a region very close to their area of influence, like Kosovo, while Ukraine is still in a limbo. Two more states have been added to the list of countries in crisis, Libya and now Belarus, a country in a twilight situation that defies any definitions, where stability is determined by actors like Russia."*[83]

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[80] Covid-19 dhendikimimbisigurinëgjatëvitit 2020, A SHISH Report, 2021 (https://shish.gov.al/pages/lajme/raporti_2020_1.html).

[81] See: https://orbi.uliege.be/bitstream/2268/255240/1/Liridon%20Lika%20Gazeta%20Express%20Kosova%202020.pdf.

[82] See: https://tesheshi.com/gjeostrategjia-pse-humbesi-me-i-madh-ne-nago-karabak-eshte-bashkimi-evropian/.

[83] See: http://www.respublica.al/2020/11/09/roli-i-injoruar-i-osbe-s%C3%AB-nga-putin-tek-erdogan-krizat-q%C3%AB-po-zgjidhen-jasht%C3%AB-modelit.

The minimization of relations and official communication between Albania and Russia has resulted in the latter having a negligible influence in Albania. The few articles in Albanian media that still seek to promote some kind of pro-Russian agenda are either driven by nostalgia for the Soviet Union or appear in media influenced or financed by foreign actors.

One Albanian news site claimed, for example, that *"Russia has been coherent in its stance on Kosovo, adhering to UN Resolution 1244. Likewise, it has been coherent since the beginning of the dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade, stating that Russia itself would support any agreement reached between them, and that it would behave as if 'more Serbian than the Serbs themselves.' Unlike the Albanians who have sometimes shown that they are more 'American than the Americans themselves,' or as we commonly used to say 'more catholic than the Pope himself'."*[84] This sort of reporting, in addition to consistently serving Russian interests, spreads disinformation when it comes to Russia's stance towards Kosovo, and sneaks denigrating rhetoric about Albanians in between the lines for good measure.[85]

Anti-EU rhetoric an article published in online media turns to history to support their claims, arguing that "those who tore us to pieces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were the same countries that now constitute the core of the EU, plus England."[86] This quote was pulled from a piece of commentary that praised the "historic contributions" of Russia to Albanian statehood, which in fact is clear disinformation.

Although it rarely shows up on keyword searches of Albanian media content, anti-American rhetoric is not entirely absent, popping up occasionally in the form of conspiracy theories.[87] One example involves an online video in which radical elements discuss the scenarios they believe the Americans have prepared for Tirana and Pristina, by removing nationalist politicians and veterans such as Sali Berisha, Albin Kurti and Hashim Thaçi from the political scene and replacing them with their *"evangelical lackeys, Sorosists,*

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[84] See: https://argumentum.al/lajmi/2021/01/covid-19-virusi-qe-tronditi-marredheniet-diplomatike-shqiperi-rusi/.

[85] Rrapo Zguri: From Neighbors to Great Players – International News in Albanian Media, Published by AMI, Tirana, 2021.

[86] See: https://www.botasot.info/opinione/1491264/a-eshte-gafe-e-ministrise-se-jashtme-debimi-i-diplomatit-rus/.

[87] Rrapo Zguri: From Neighbors to Great Players – International News in Albanian Media, Published by AMI, Tirana, 2021.

and other people serving American imperialism".[88] It is no coincidence that
their rhetoric clearly carries disinformation and features conspiracy
theories, an agenda of disruption and pro-Russian sentiment. To them,
*"the attack against the Russian embassy and diplomats in Tirana comes as a
reprisal to the Russian offer on the delivery of Sputnik V vaccines to Albania."*
They talk about "corruption in the US", an alleged *"American attack on the
Albanian justice system",* and plans to *"hand over the Albanian public debt to
the Rothschild family."*

A few Albanian media outlets have also published stories in their world news
sections that serve the interests of another third party striving for influence
in Albania: Turkey. An Albanian news site reported extensively on the speech
of the Turkish ambassador during an event organized by a Turkish-owned
university in Tirana, and quoted the ambassador as saying that *"Turkey is one
of the few countries that has managed to reach a fair balance between personal
freedom, economy, social life and public life. We are still able to keep the virus under
control guided by the visionary leadership of our President Erdoğan. During this
pandemic even the closest allies turned against each other for medical supplies.
However, Turkey excelled through diplomacy and sent medical equipment to over
150 countries around the world including the US, several European countries such as
the United Kingdom, France and Spain. This proves that Turkey is a reliable partner
in the fight against global challenges."*[89]

In another case, a lesser-known news site published an article glorifying the
role of China under the headline *"The 17 + 1 mechanism as a purveyor of hope
and optimism to triumph over evil through art".* China, the article claims, has
become *"one of the most important promoters of development of the wider region
of Europe in various sectors such as infrastructure, transport, trade, logistics, as well
as health, culture, education and other areas of public interest."*[90]

The chairman of the Chinese Communist Party of China and president of
China, the article informs its readers, has announced that the fifth plenary
session of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China has drafted
comprehensive plans for China's development in the form of the fourteenth

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[88] See: https://gazetaimpakt.com/edi-rama-sulmon-rusine-per-sorosin-amerikanet-do-heqin-berishen-dhe-albin-kurtin-per-sorosistet/.

[89] See: https://frekuenca.net/turqia-partner-i-besueshem-ne-luften-kunder-sfidave-globale/.

[90] See: https://zanimalsise.com/mekanizmi-17-1-si-percues-shprese-e-optimizmi-per-te-ngadhenjyer-mbi-te-keqen-nepermjet-artit/.

Five-Year Plan (2021-2025) and that China is close to achieving its goals of eradicating poverty and building a developed society with respect to all aspects of life.[91]The narrative of this article, one observes, is typical of communist propaganda, which is still fresh in the memory of Albanians.[92]

Summarizing the above findings, we may conclude that foreign-source disinformation is only a relatively small part of the Albanian disinformation landscape. The strong pro-EU and pro-NATO consensus among the Albanian public limits the bandwidth for external actors wishing to undercut the West. This may also explain the fact confirmed by our research that disinformation narratives on the war in Ukraine have not found a strong foothold in Albanian media.

(D) Clickbait Disinformation

A considerable part of the disinformation in Albania is represented by media-generated attempts to boost traffic on their websites – and thus revenue – through sensationalist reporting, often with little or no regard for the veracity of the stories thus promoted. In the economic battle for more readers or users, Albanian media, including those media outlets that used to be considered reliable and prestigious, could not escape the tendency to use sensational headlines to artificially increase the number of clicks. The most frequent victims of clickbait disinformation in Albania are show business professionals, celebrities and other public figures. Almost every day, online and mainstream media publish gossip about new celebrity relationships or celebrity breakups, including rumors that are completely baseless.

Another regular feature of clickbait disinformation involves wild speculation on aspect of public health and fake news about miracle cures, including for cancer or arthritis. Alleged remedies for diseases that affect significant parts of the population guarantee plentiful clicks for the publishers of this type of information.

In some cases, of the media's avarice for as many clicks as possible has led to disinformation being published that has seriously upset the general public. One of these cases is a piece of fake news that was published in the online portal JOQ right after the earthquake of 26 November 2019. An item published on this

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[91] Ibid.

[92] Rrapo Zguri: From Neighbors to Great Players – International News in Albanian Media, Published by AMI, Tirana, 2021.

portal claimed that a large number of victims had reached the Tirana morgue but that this fact was being kept secret by the authorities. A few days later, said authorities filed charges against the site's administrators for publishing fake news and spreading panic.[93]

Even more problematic was the publication of a fake news item on social media that announced that the first major tremor of the earthquake would be followed by another fatal tremor at midnight. The item led to riots and caused most of the population of the Albanian capital to spend the night outside their homes,[94] even though the authorities intervened soon after the piece was published, explaining that people were being victimised by disinformation.

Such practices are not simply examples of content that ignore journalistic standards but also illustrate the great level of irresponsibility on the part of the owners of these portals. They are also a consequence of the fact that irresponsible individuals have infiltrated the online environment in Albania and are ready to do almost anything for clicks, that is, for greater profit. Of course, the reaction of the Albanian society and Albanian institutions to these cases should have been stronger and more determined. The usual platitudes about "media freedom" are hardly an adequate justification for the distress the abuses caused.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation in Albania

Disinformation is not a phenomenon of the digital age As Ann Cathrin Riedel has pointed out, disinformation has long been used to damage political opponents, destabilize societies and legitimize regimes. However, digital technologies facilitate the rapid spread of disinformation, since anyone can easily distribute disinformation – even without intending to. Declining trust in the media and governments contribute to these developments.[95]

A significant role in the spread of disinformation in Albania has been played by specific factors such as the presence of biased editorial policies in the media,

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[93] See: https://gazetamapo.al/policia-procedohen-administratoret-e-joq-perhapen-lajme-te-rreme/.

[94] See: https://top-channel.tv/galeri/fotot-si-u-mbushen-mbreme-sheshet-dhe-rruget-e-tiranes-nga-alarmi-fals-per-termetin/.

[95] Ann Cathrin Riedel: Behind closed curtains - Disinformation on messenger services, ed.: Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Potsdam, 2020.

the weakening of professional standards and the high level of politicization and polarization of the media, the increasing pressure exerted by PR companies working to find room for their content in the media, the impact of economic and other interests of media owners, the neglect of rules and self-regulatory practices, the influence of personal beliefs and interests among media professionals and the high level of self-censorship among journalistic professionals.

This study on disinformation in Albania has identified political parties and politicians, PR offices of organizations or institutions, some controversial individuals, several media outlets and some third-state actors, such as Russia, China and Turkey, as the main actors behind this phenomenon.

Concerning the sources, authors and origins of disinformation in Albania, disinformation is presented both as a domestic creation and as an invasive foreign product. Meanwhile the main channels of dissemination are traditional media, new media, social networks and a range of other venues of public communication.

Political Context of Disinformation in Albania

After the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Albania has faced the countless challenges of transitioning from a totalitarian system to a free, pluralistic and democratic society. The country's political and social transition has been slow and arduous, resulting in a democratic system that is fragile and vulnerable for the time being. It is persistently threatened by political polarization, abuse of power and authoritarian behaviour on the part of the political elite. At the same time the country has had to face the challenges and problems brought by the digital transition, which has created endless confusion in the mass communication and information ecosystem.

Meanwhile, regardless of the domestic situation, Albania appears to be a geopolitically consolidated country. European and Atlantic integration constitutes the central axis of its foreign policy. The country has been a member of NATO since 2009. Albanians are the biggest supporters of EU integration in the Balkans, with approximately 87% of the population expressing their support for joining the European Union. But delays in European integration and Euroscepticism have created fertile ground for political interference by third-state actors such as Russia, China and Turkey, all

of which are increasing their presence in the field of mass communication and propaganda.

The official policy of the country in relation to **Russia** is largely predicated upon the alignment of Albania the foreign policy of NATO and the EU, as well as by the fact that Russia has been openly opposing the recognition of the state of Kosovo. These are also the main reasons that Russia's influence in Albania is almost non-existent and that even basic communication channels are missing between the two countries.[96]

In a similar vein, Albania's current relations with **China** are also influenced by US relations with the Asian superpower, which worsened during the Trump administration. It was during this period that Albania joined the list of Clean Network countries that limit or prohibit Chinese firms from entering their digital market with ambitious plans for 5G network rollout. However, the bilateral relations between Albania and China have been expanding, albeit slowly. China's influence in Albania has been mainly of an economic nature and has progressed through bilateral relations but also through the 17+1 initiative, otherwise called the "China-CEEC Summit" – a kind of extension of China's Belt and Road initiative.[97] Although bilateral relations are gradually intensifying, this intensification appears fragmented and seemingly incoherent, as well as at a rather low level of institutionalization. Albania's membership in NATO seems to be blocking the way for deeper security and technology ties with China.[98]

There is no doubt that **Turkey** is the third-most influential foreign actor in Albania. The historical, religious and cultural proximity resulting from the nearly 500 years of Ottoman occupation of the country seems to have served as a ground for the cultivation of continuity in the relations between the two countries and the two peoples. Turkey's investments in Albania, whether private or state, are numerous, selective and calculated with strategic political

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[96] Alba Cela: Albania and the Influence of Outside Actors, In: "The strategic role of external actors in the Western Balkans", Published by: Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the Political Academy of the Austrian People´s Party, 2020.

[97] Jonathan E. Hillman, Maesea McCalpin: Will China's '16+1' Format Divide Europe?, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2019 (https://www.csis.org/analysis/will-chinas-161-format-divide-europe).

[98]   Ibid.

goals in mind.[99] In the framework of the soft power approach, Turkey has invested in Albania through foundations such as *TIKA* and *Diyanet*. These investments have been accompanied by conditions, such as the repeated request of the Turkish side for the extradition or expulsion of the Gulenists from the country and the closure of their businesses and institutions, a demand with respect to which the Albanian government has been more hesitant than cooperative. Analysts of international relations also note that Turkey's new foreign policy is based exclusively on Erdoğan's ideas, opinions and initiatives, relying heavily on his personal relationships with Balkan prime ministers, among whom the association with Edi Rama stands out. Critical voices warn that Turkish policies could damage Albanian secularism as well as the stable culture of peaceful coexistence between different religious and ethnic groups in Albania.[100]

The European Parliament Report on Disinformation in the Western Balkans states that *"disinformation is a significant problem throughout the Western Balkans and an increasingly important part of the way in which both domestic and foreign actors pursue political ends. The deliberate production and dissemination of 'fake news' – full or partial falsehoods masquerading as journalism – has become a dominant method of contesting elections, shifting government policy agendas, and settling scores between business rivals. Moreover, disinformation is sufficiently pervasive in the region that it hampers the consolidation of democratic media systems, and thus of democratic governance more broadly, as well as heightening the challenges of post-conflict resolution and transitional justice. Throughout the region, information disorder reflects social and political disorder…"* These European Parliament conclusions also apply to the context of disinformation in Albania.

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Albania

Efforts to challenge and combat disinformation in Albania have been led mainly by civil society organizations and to some extent by journalists' organizations and media researchers. The government and state institutions have done very little in this regard. Civil society's efforts are focused on training journalists,

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[99] Srecko Latal, Hamdi Firat Büyük: Political Influence in Southeast Europe in Current Turkish Foreign Policy, in: South East Europe in Focus, External Actors Series: Turkey, ed. Christian Hagemann, Munich, 2020, p. 52.

[100] Ahmet Erdi Öztürk: Turkey's Soft Power in Southeast Europe during the AKP period, in: Ibid., p. 30.

journalism students and the general public, initiating studies to determine the extent of the spread of disinformation and to create a panorama of the main vectors of proliferation of disinformation, the distribution channels used and the actors that influence it, concluding with relevant recommendations for state institutions. Here we can highlight the role of the *Albanian Media Institute*, which, in addition to organizing numerous training courses and research studies, has also contributed to an update of the media ethics code as well as to the spread and inclusion of media literacy in school curricula. Starting in 2011, the Institute has drafted and published a teacher's and a student's textbook on media literacy[101], as well as lobbied state institutions for its inclusion in school curricula. Unfortunately, media literacy has not yet been included as a separate compulsory subject in school curricula but merely as a chapter or as an optional subject.

Meanwhile, journalists' organizations such as the *Union of Albanian Journalists* and the *Media Council* have helped sensitize media professionals about the consequences of disinformation and manipulation of information. The fact that about half of the criminal charges for disinformation involve media outlets or journalists is evidence of the necessity of this sensitization and awareness raising. The *Albanian Media Council* created the *Alliance for Ethical Media* in early 2020, intending to establish a self-regulation mechanism taking complaints from the public. There are nineteen media outlets participating in this initiative. Results will, obviously, take time.[102]

Albania's first dedicated fact checking organization, Faktoje, was created in 2018. *Faktoje's* mission is to *"check the authenticity of promises, statements and actions of public officials (and entities that benefit from public funds) and then tell the public the truth."*[103] However, there are still no real attempts to tackle the disinformation created or conveyed by journalists and the media in Albania.

Staff members of the *Department of Journalism and Communication* of the University of Tirana who have carried out research projects and training courses in this field have also contributed to the study of disinformation.

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[101] Bardhyl Musai, Jonila Godole, Tidita Abdurrahmani: Edukimimediatik, ISHM, Tirana, 2011 (https://www.osfa.al/sites/default/files/edukimi_mediatik_-_libri_i_mesuesit.pdf).

[102] Ilda Londo: Hate speech, propaganda and disinformation in Albanian media; ed: SEENPM, Peace Institute, Albanian Media Institute, Ljubljana,2020, p.12.

[103] Albanian factchecking platform FAKTOJE; (https://faktoje.al/njihuni-me-ne/).

So far, state institutions and politicians express their concern primarily when disinformation adversely affects themselves. In 2019, MPs of the current ruling majority proposed, under the pretext of having to fight disinformation, a series of controversial amendments to the country's Electronic Communications and Audio-Visual Media Act. The amendments aimed to regulate the content of online media outlets through a Complaints Commission – an ethics body operating inside the Audio-visual Media Authority. Local and international media organisations condemned the draft law as a tool of government censorship, and the country's president vetoed the bills, sending them back to parliament for review. The amendments were opposed by the European Commission and by the Council of Europe, among others. In January 2020, the Albanian parliament shelved the vote on the amendments to the Audio-Visual Media Act. This decision came after the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe asked the European Commission for Democracy through Law, known as the Venice Commission, to review the legislation. In its opinion, subsequently published in June 2020, the Venice Commission argued that the amendments to the Law 97/2013, "On Audio-Visual Media" should not be approved in the form passed by parliament in December 2019 and later vetoed by the president, on the grounds that they would create chilling effects on media freedom.[104]

Conclusion

Disinformation in Albania is both a domestic product and a result of foreign interference. The main channels of dissemination are traditional media, online media and online social networks as well as conventional word of mouth. The delay in the maturation process of democracy and the gaps in the democratic culture, the abuse of new communication technologies and efforts by foreign third parties to influence the country have been among the main factors promoting the presence and spread of disinformation in Albania. Being spread mainly through the media, disinformation, among other things, has adversely affected the public's trust in said media. The spread of disinformation has led to increased efforts to control the media as well as to attacks on the media by the government and by politicians. Besides damaging the media's role and reputation, disinformation has also influenced the journalistic profession and the production of news.

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[104] Internet governance in Albania and its role in media freedom, July 2020, BIRN Albania, Supported by European Union, p. 22f. (https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Internet-Governance-1-1.pdf).

The most prominent types of disinformation spread in Albania are domestic political disinformation, crisis disinformation of the type surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, disinformation by foreign state actors and *clickbait* disinformation. The most common type of disinformation in Albania is the one produced and disseminated for political purposes. Even though it is widespread, however, political disinformation in Albania has never yet taken the form of an organized and sustained campaign. Cases encountered so far have generally opportunistic in nature and short-term in terms of goals. The various crises the country has faced have also served to revive disinformation. A typical example is the Covid-19 crisis. In addition to conspiracy theories, disinformation during the pandemic in Albania also appeared in the form of made-up news. As for foreign-source disinformation, it is a relatively small part of the Albanian disinformation landscape. The main lines of disinformation coming from third parties are those that aim to damage the image and reputation of the EU, the USA and NATO in Albania. The strong pro-EU and pro-NATO consensus among the Albanian public limits the bandwidth for external actors wishing to undercut the West.

Disinformation, Propaganda and Fake News in Bosnia and Herzegovina

By Lejla Turcilo

Introduction

Disinformation in time of COVID-19 in Bosnia-Herzegovina may have had tragic consequences. An avalanche of fake news was jeopardizing public health. In April 2020, for example, the UNICEF office in Bosnia and Herzegovina felt the need to warn the country's media outlets to stop spreading disinformation about the pandemic, since people believing what they were told endangered their health and their lives[105]. COVID-19 thus served to show how information disseminated by the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina affected the lives of its citizens. Information and disinformation, in the complex and complicated media system, which reflects the country's complex and complicated state and ethnic structure, are disseminated by local media outlets[106] and other players, including influential individuals on social networks as well as media from neighboring countries (Serbia and Croatia)[107] and foreign media outlets that operate in Bosnia and Herzegovina but promote the political and geopolitical agenda of their home countries.[108]

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[105] C.f.: https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/profesija-novinar-novinarka-1/4434-pandemija-laznih-vijesti-dezinformacije-u-vrijeme-korone.

[106] According to the data of the *Communications Regulatory Agency* (CRA), a total of 43 television and 143 radio stations broadcast via terrestrial broadcasting, three public *RTV* services and 53 holders of licenses for broadcasting via other communication networks are registered in BiH. According to the data of the BiH Press Council, there are nine daily newspapers, 189 magazines (weekly, monthly or periodical), and eight news agencies. There is still no register of online media, so their exact number is not known, but it is assumed that there are around 2,000 of them. Recording the exact number of media, especially when it comes to web-portals, is made even more difficult by the fact that there is no legal obligation to register and report the ownership, that is, the publicly displayed imprint of the media. Research shows that in BiH there are currently at least 270 web portals without an imprint that publish informative media content.

[107] Due to a shared (albeit politically separate) language, media from Serbia and Croatia are very present in BiH, especially broadcasters. The main ones are *RTS* (public broadcaster from Serbia); *PRVA TV* private broadcaster from Serbia); *HRT* (public broadcaster from Croatia) and private TV stations *RTL* and *NOVA* from Croatia.

[108] There are several foreign news agencies in BiH, including *Xinghua* (China) and *Anadolu Agency* (Turkey), which provide both local and international news in the local language. Russian news agency *Sputnjik* has a branch in Serbia, and news from this source are widely presented in media in BiH, that is its part *Republika Srpska*.

This complex disinformation environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina is furthermore influenced by, and reflected in, the media environment in the country: The World Press Freedom index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) for 2022 ranks BiH 67th among countries surveyed, nine positions down from 2021, noting that „*the economic environment is difficult for journalists due to the small size of the market and lack of sustainable funding. The media of Bosnia suffer from divisions along ethnic lines within the country combined with competition from media from the neighboring countries which belong to the same language area.*"[109] This provides fertile ground for the spread of disinformation, since many media outlets follow the agenda of political parties in power in the part of the country in which they operate, have a specific ethnically rooted audience with low level of media literacy.

Reflecting on these conditions, this paper provides a brief overview of some key issues related to disinformation dissemination in Bosnia and Herzegovina, trying to explain how the combination of political influences from inside the country and from abroad, together with a divided and mostly media-illiterate audience, makes disinformation a problem that is both significant and not too thoroughly opposed.

Terminology and Definitions

When it comes to terminology widely used in the public discourse to describe various forms of dissemination of false content through media, the used commonly in the past is lažne vijesti, translated into English as fake news. "Fake news" is essentially defined as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers"[110] The term is, however, also used to refer to other classes of problematic information, including:

- unintentional reporting mistakes;
- rumors that did not start with any particular news item;
- conspiracy theories;
- satire that is unlikely to be misconstrued as factual;
- false statements by politicians; and
- reports that are slanted or misleading but not outright false[111].

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[109] See: https://rsf.org/en/country/bosnia-herzegovina.

[110] Hunt Allcott, Matthew Gentzkow: Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31(2): 214, 2017.

[111] Ibid, p 215.

Interestingly, unlike in other countries, politicians and political parties rarely use the term to try to discredit media outlets, but media outlets and/or media organizations routinely use the term "fake news" to describe bad practices by politicians or other media outlets. The Media Centre for example, one of the leading media and education NGOs, has a section on fake news on its web site, *media.ba*. The section includes educational material on disinformation as well as analysis of media content that has been proven false.[112] The web portal maintained by Radio Sarajevo, for another example, uses the tag "fake news" for reports about the *fight* against disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and around the world.[113] In these stories, the term *disinformation* is used quite often as a synonym for fake news, something that is common practice even among media specialists and academics. Generally speaking, most of the media defines "fake news" as "information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts", a definition also in line with the one used by the *Ethical Journalism Network.*[114]

Academic usage, on the other hand, prefers the term *disinformation*. When discussing the broader ecosystem of information not prepared professionally and responsibly, academic usage uses a two-dimensional classification based on (potential) harm on the one hand, intent on the other. A distinction is thus made between:

- *Disinformation.* Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.
- *Misinformation.* Information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- *Malinformation.* Information that is based on reality but used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.[115]

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[112] See: https://www.media.ba/bs/tags/lazne-vijesti.

[113] See: https://radiosarajevo.ba/tagovi/la%C5%BEne%20vijesti.

[114] The Ethical Journalism Network (EJN), which describes itself as "an international network of media created to advance education, particularly education in ethics and respect for human rights", consists of a coalition of more than 70 groups of journalists, editors, press owners, and media support groups from across the globe; more details at: https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/who-we-are.

[115] Claire Wardle, Hossein Derakhshan: Information Disorder: Towards an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy-Making. Council of Europe, 2017, (https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-researc/168076277c).

In his PhD thesis, the very first one in Bosnia and Herzegovina that deals with the issue of fake news,[116] Mladen Obrenović, a journalist and media researcher, argues that these three terms encompass the definition of "fake news" but warns that it is "*important to distinguish messages that are true from those that are false, and messages that are created, produced or distributed by 'agents' who intend to do harm from those that are not*".[117]

There is not much legislation in the country that recognizes the term disinformation. The word is used in the *Press and Online Media Code* published by the Press Council in Bosnia-Herzegovina, however. The Code states:

> "*Editors and journalists in print and online media must be aware of the harmfulness of publishing and transmitting disinformation, as this is a gross violation of the basic rules of the journalistic profession. Transmitting disinformation from another media or source does not absolve the editors of the media that transmit it from responsibility. Also, editors and journalists in print and online media must be aware that the publication and transmission of disinformation affects the loss of credibility of the media that produces or transmits such content*."[118]

The *Code of Audio-visual Media Services and Radio Media Services* of the Communication Regulatory Agency, which regulates radio and TV in Bosnia and Herzegovina, mentions disinformation in article 7, describing it as "*content that is known or can be determined to be false or misleading*"[119].

In summary, "disinformation" is the term most commonly used in academic and professional discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while in the word more frequently used by the general public is "fake news". Some analysts also use the term "information disorder" as well as the term "post-truth society", when discussing the way in audiences react to disinformation emotionally rather than by engaging their rational or analytical faculties. These differences in terminology can confuse general audiences and make it hard for them to understand the concept of disinformation in simple and more accessible terms.

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[116] M. Obrenović: True and False in News: Reporting in Service of Media and Political Manipulation, Ph.D. thesis defended at the University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Political Science, 2020.

[117] Ibid.

[118] See: https://www.vzs.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=218&Itemid=9&lang=bs.

[119] See: https://docs.rak.ba//articles/7f0a56a6-6c7d-423b-8ff9-b50bed88bc52.pdf .

Audiences and Perspectives of Disinformation in Bosnia

Most disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is mean to serve the political agenda of one the various political players in the country. Since the entire political landscape, the media, and the audience in Bosnia and Herzegovina is divided along ethnic lines, most of the stories that deal with sensitive issues involve contexts, approaches, and interpretations of events or persons that differ between ethnic groups. That, of course, does not mean that all media reporting and all political communication are based on disinformation, but the political framing of actual facts is quite often deliberately misleading. There are specific issues, however, in the context of which disinformation is widely used. Media affiliated with certain political parties and people in power use disinformation or misleading information to manipulate the public in accordance to their agenda. Due to the low level of media literacy, in many cases this approach has proven to be successful in influencing their audience. This in term means that disinformation is produced and reproduced by politicians, journalists and the general public alike. The most important dividing line concerning the audience of disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not so much the target group's profession or social class but the target group's ethnicity.

Furthermore and based on secondary research, a number of media and communication outlets in which disinformation, propaganda and hate speech are produced and disseminated in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be identified. They pertain to one of the three types of media and communication: A.) traditional media; B.) new digital media; and C.) user-generated interaction in online media and on social networks. These include: 1) traditional media that are affiliated with the centers of political power and disseminate political and ethno-national propaganda;[120] 2) anonymous portals and commercial online media that spread disinformation for political or financial purposes;[121] 3) political propaganda websites that mushroom prior to election campaigns; 4) websites and social media groups that spread radical and aggressive ethno-national and religious content[122]; 5) portals whose narratives target minority groups, such

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[120] For example: „STAV" (https://stav.ba/).

[121] For example: „Bosnjaci.net" (https://www.bosnjaci.net/).

[122] For example: „Despotovina" (https://www.facebook.com/%D0%94%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-205047956606029/).

as migrants[123]; 6) hate speech, derogatory language and insults in comment sections in online media and on social media platforms.[124]

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples

In general, political manipulation, hate speech and disinformation campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina are interconnected and aimed at spreading fear and uncertainty among citizens. Their goal is to make recipients more likely to follow and obey existing political players and their political narratives. There are three topics of particular prominence in which actors are engaged in both the spreading of disinformation spread and in the contextualization of information in accordance to their political narratives of choice:

(A) Historical Disinformation (especially War Crimes and Srebrenica Genocide)
Research shows that "*many media are divided along ethno-national lines, which is visible in their emphasis on the issues and the agenda of the respective ethno-national group and one-sided interpretations of war events, while content intended for or dealing with minorities and vulnerable groups is largely underrepresented* (RAK, 2019b)" [125] and that „*in recent years, there has been a rise in the number of online platforms that disseminate false or misleading media content, much of which is of political nature and spread for financial gain and/or political purposes*."[126]

The most important topic of disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (and probably in all other former Yugoslavian countries as well) during the past thirty years was the war of the 1990s. History and the past are thus not only subject to diverging – legitimately diverging – interpretation, but to massive political manipulation. One example for a media outlet that uses disinformation when reporting on the past is *Despotovina*,[127] a radical Serbian news portal from Bratunac that propagates a Serbian ethno-national narrative and glorifies members of the Army of the Republika Srpska. Their bias is visible, for example,

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[123] For example: „Anitmigrant" (https://antimigrant.ba/).

[124] More on this can be found in: Anida Sokol: Propaganda, Disinformation and Hate Models of Media and Communication in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ljubljana, 2020, (https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Research-publication-1-BiH-ENG.pdf).

[125] Anida Sokol: Propaganda, Disinformation and Hate Models of Media and Communication in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ljubljana, 2020, (https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Research-publication-1-BiH-ENG.pdf).

[126] Ibid.

[127] See: https://www.despotovina.com/.

in their reporting on Ratko Mladić, who was convicted for war crimes against humanity and genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY). One researcher commented on *Despotovina* that "*this outlet [...] has been identified as a problematic media outlet stirring ethno-national tensions among the local population in Srebrenica and Bratunac, an area with a heavy war heritage and difficult reconciliation process*."[128] Although it might come as a surprise that one of the media institutions that uses disinformation and fuels harsh inter-ethnic relations is part of the public broadcasting system, all media monitoring efforts so far have come to the conclusion that the *Radio Television of Republika Srpska* (*RTRS*), which is under the strong influence of the dominant political party of the Republika Srpska, is one of the leading broadcast media outlets manipulating the past. "*For example, in 2019, RTRS published the conclusions of a report of the Centre for War Research, War Crimes and the Search for Missing Civilians of the Republic of Srpska about the 25 May 1995 Tuzla massacre, according to which the deaths of 71 people were caused by local simultaneous terroristic explosions by the Bosniaks rather than artillery projectiles fired by the Army of Republic of Srpska, an officer of which was convicted by the Court of BiH in 2014 for the act. The CRA concluded that the broadcaster had failed to present different views on the subject and even violated victims' dignity by stating that 27 victims could be identified as suicide bombers and revealed the names of two*."[129] The fact-checking portal *Raskrinkavanje* labelled *RTRS* as a high-risk medium when it comes to publishing questionable content and identified *RTRS*, together with the Republika Srpska's public news agency, *SRNA*, as the single most prolific sources of political disinformation in Bosnia and Hergegovina.*130* The Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report for 2021, published by the Srebrenica Memorial Centre, states that "*among the media that appear as deniers of the genocide in Srebrenica (actors), but also as platforms that most often convey such attitudes, the Montenegrin right-wing portal IN4S and the Srpski telegraf portal from Serbia. It is a medium whose work is financially supported with public funds, through a whole series of local self-government projects in Serbia, despite the fact that it constantly violates the relevant media codes. Also, five media from Republic of Srpska are in this group*".[131]

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[128] Anida Sokol: Media usage in the Birač region and Kalesija, Sarajevo, 2019, (https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/media_usage_ habits_birac_region_0.pdf).

[129] Ibid., p. 14.

[130] Tijana Cvijetićanin, et al: Disinformation in the Online Sphere. The Case of BiH. Sarajevo: Association of Citizens 'Why not', 2019.

[131] See: https://srebrenicamemorial.org/assets/files/1625819630-izvjestaj-o-negiranju-genocida-za-2021-godinu-bosanski-jezik.pdf.

In general, disinformation is spread as part of a political agenda of manipulation of the past and of genocide denial – either by political parties and politicians, mainly in the Republika Srpska, or through media from Serbia which are widely read and influential in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

(B) Disinformation about COVID-19

For the past two years, COVID-19 has been the topic subject to the largest amount of disinformation. The fact-checking-portal *Raskrinkavanje* has conducted research on disinformation in the context of COVID-19 and has created a website with articles debunking COVID-19 disinformation.[132] Research showed that, over the course of the two years in question, disinformation content has been published by 773 media outlets and by users of three social media platforms. Most of the rated content – 184 posts in total – was published on Facebook, suggesting that this social media platform was a significant conduit for disinformation related to COVID-19 in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The next four media outlets on the list are all Serbia-based: *Srbija danas, Alo, Informer* and *Espreso*. The top-rated Bosnia-based media outlet on the list was the daily paper *Nezavisne novine*, but they are not alone: other big news websites published COVID-19 related disinformation as well (*TV Hayat, Alternativna televizija, Slobodna Bosna, Oslobođenje* and *Dnevni avaz*). All of these media outlets are privately owned.

In addition to these portals and fringe websites, however, there has also been tax-funded public media published content rated as disinformation. The public broadcaster of the Republika Srpska, *RTRS*, had nine disinformation-rated articles. The next three publicly owned media outlets on this list are Serbia-based: the national broadcaster, *RTS,* a provincial broadcaster, *RT Vojvodina*, and the national news agency, *Tanjug*. In addition to these three, two Montenegro-based public broadcasters had some of their content rated as disinformation by *Raskrinkavanje*: *RTV Budva*, a local station, *RTCG*, the national broadcaster. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, other notable public broadcasters that published COVID-19 related disinformation include the Federation entity's public broadcaster, *Federalna televizija*, the Republika Srpska news agency, SRNA, and local broadcasters such as *Radio Ljubuški, RTV USK* and *Radio Novi Grad*.[133]

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[132] See: https://zastone.ba/uzivo-pracenje-dezinformacija-tokom-pandemije-covid-19/.

[133] See: https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_covid-19_march_2021.pdf.

In addition, *Zašto ne*, a citizen's association in Sarajevo, has performed a study named *Countering Disinformation Narratives and Mapping Conspiracy Theories: The Case of BiH*[134] that has shown that about half of the country's population (47%) is mostly undecided when it comes to believing in conspiracy theories; about 29% strongly believe in them, and about 24% completely reject them. There is a definite age gap – belief in conspiracy theories is least present in the youngest cohort, 18 to 24, and most pervasive in people over 55 years of age.

Conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic have taken strong roots in society. Some of these narratives, for example the claim that the coronavirus was "deliberately released into the population" or that hospitals inflated the number of COVID-19 deaths, are believed by almost three quarters (over 73%) of the participants.[135]

Disinformation about COVID-19 vaccines, especially those that originated on social networks and on the internet in general, has also come to be widely accepted among the unvaccinated population. It can be concluded that these narratives have had an impact on people's decision to refuse immunization against the disease. Nearly three quarters of unvaccinated people believe that vaccines were not properly tested before public immunization began, and as many as 60% believe unfounded claims that they could endanger pregnancies.[136]

The research examined a number of other correlations and found that a person's vaccination status can be linked to their age, education and degree of propensity to believe in conspiracy theories. One of the findings is that unvaccinated people more often rely on online sources of information about vaccines and the pandemic, most often using Facebook for that purpose.[137]

(C) Disinformation about the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has shown how different international media outlets, together with the different political standpoints in different parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, have affected reporting. Russian media has been influential

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[134] Full report available at: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/04/Countering-disinformation-narratives-and-mapping-conspiracy-theories-_-The-case-of-BiH-7.pdf.

[135] Ibid.

[136] More on this in: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/04/Borba-protiv-dezinformacijskih-narativa-i-mapiranje-teorija-zavjere-Slucaj-BiH.pdf.

[137] See: https://zastone.ba/en/research-on-disinformation-and-conspiracy-theories-in-bih/.

in the country long before the war in Ukraine, mainly through the work of the *Sputnjik* news agency, which has an office in Serbia and whose news releases are copy-pasted by Serbian media and by media outlets in of the Republika Srpska without any critical analysis. Media in the Republika Srpska and media in the Federation thus promoted wildly different narratives when reporting on Ukraine. "*The media from both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, although reporting on the same events, consistently stressed different aspects of the conflict in Ukraine.*"[138] The media in of the Republika Srpska is aligned with the agenda of Russia and Serbia, something that is the case with respect to other topics and issues as well, while the narrative in the Federation mainly talks about the humanitarian aspect of the war and often compares the Ukrainian situation with the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. This led to a state of affairs in which disinformation dissemination about the war in Ukraine is much more present in the Republic of Srpska.

Before the Russian invasion of Ukraine began, media in the Republika Srpska, including *RTRS* – part of the public broadcasting system and located in Banja Luka – clearly sided with Russia. For example, the Oliver Stone film *The Putin Interviews* was broadcast on *RTRS* on 24 February 2022. It depicts the life of Vladimir Putin beginning with his childhood and presents him, as stated in the analysis, as "a hard-working, moderate politician who wants the best for his country and the world". The day of this broadcast, of course, was also the first day of the invasion. After the official start of the Russian invasion, *SRNA* – the news agency of the Republika Srpska, financed by its government – predominantly relied on Russian news agencies such as *TASS, Sputnik* and *RIA Novosti* in its reporting on the war, often as their only source.[139] The term "*Russian military operation in Ukraine*" is used in Republika Srpska media, including in *Nezavisne novine*, published in Banja Luka and the most influential in the Entity. The views of Russian officials are also reproduced regularly, without any contrasting opinions being given room. Russian diplomats and officials also use social media to spread their viewpoints regarding the war in Ukraine to citizens in Bosnia and Herzegovina. "*From the beginning of the Russian invasion,*" according to one media outlet, *"the Russian embassy in BiH has almost daily published announcements and translations of articles on the war in Ukraine, originally published in Russian on its social media accounts. These deny allegations about crimes blamed on Russian soldiers, explain why Russia sent soldiers to Ukraine,*

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[138] See: https://bosnia-and-herzegovina.fes.de/vijesti/default-acaed83584.

[139] See: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/republika-srpska-rusija-mediji/31846290.html.

and compare events in the eastern Ukraine with the infamous 1995 massacre of Bosnian Muslims in the eastern Bosnian town of Srebrenica."[140]

One of the characteristics of the disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine that is being spread in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the use of misleading visuals. Since in most of research citizens said that they trust TV the most, on the grounds that TV allows them to see pictures and videos of events with their own eyes, media outlets in Bosnia and Herzegovina often accompany disinformation on Russia's military actions in Ukraine with false pictures or videos.

On March 1, *Sputnjik* pushed the false claim that Ukrainian nationalists had captured about twenty vehicles of the *Organization for European Security and Cooperation in Ukraine* (OSCE). Disinformation of this kind also comes from social networks. One example is a video of a convoy of military vehicles whose headline on *Facebook* reads "The EU and England are joining the war". *Raskrinkavanje.ba* has proven that these claims are not true, and it has been concluded that such disinformation aims to create discord among Western allies and to discredit Ukrainians.

During the first month of the Russian invasion, inaccurate information about Volodymyr Zelensky, the president of Ukraine, was aired. One of the false claims was that Zelensky allegedly fled to London, a claim *Raskrinkavanje.ba* has classed as fake news.[141]

According to a report by *SEE Check*, a network of organizations for countering disinformation in Southeast Europe, a photo of Zelensky holding a jersey with Nazi symbols also made an appearance. *Raskrinkavanje.ba* and *Raskrinkavanje. me* have found the image to have been photoshopped.[142]

In February 2022, a video of an alleged "new model of an indestructible Russian armored plane" appeared on social networks. In reality, as discovered by *Raskrinkavanje.ba* and *Raskrinkavanje.me*, the video shows scenes from *Arma 3*, a video game.[143]

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[140] See: https://detektor.ba/2022/05/06/zasto-rusija-u-bih-siri-neistine-o-ratu-u-ukrajini/?lang=en.

[141] See: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/150-days-of-war-in-Ukraine-and-over-1500-disinformation-in-the-region.pdf.

[142] Ibid.

[143] See: https://www.media.ba/bs/vijesti-i-dogadaji-vijesti/dezinformacije-o-ruskoj-invaziji-na-ukrajinu-koje-su-se-sirile-u.

In general, disinformation regarding the Ukraine war is most promiscuously spread in the Republika Srpska, due to the fact that their media use *Sputnjik* and other Russian media as their main source of news.

Media, Sources, Multipliers and Political Context of Disinformation

Since Bosnia and Herzegovina is not home to a monolithic target group for disinformation but rather to three ethnically divided media audiences, each living in its own echo chambers, it is important to understand that disinformation is widely spread among certain ethnic groups – especially disinformation relating to history, past events such as war crimes or the Srebrenica genocide, and the war in Ukraine – and that all of this disinformation is actively managed by political elites. As seen in the case of war in Ukraine, disinformation can gain influence and distort public perception of events through two parallel processes: propaganda by political elites on the one hand, poor journalism on the other. Political disinformation is mainly produced by political parties and their affiliates – usually online "trolls" – or by news media – mainly web portals without any imprint or identification – affiliated with political parties. One of the most prominent examples involves the Party of Democratic Action, *SDA*, and their troll Jasmin Mulahusić, who has been arrested and whose house has been searched because of his inflamatory hate speech and spread of online disinformation.[144]

Digital disinformation by such trolls" and outlets is then disseminated through the net of so-called "portal farms".[145] These are networks of web pages and Facebook groups that are created by one person or group of persons and that systematically link to each other in order to game search algorithms, artificially increasing the visibility and reach of the content they publish. Although they look like media that are reporting news, they do not have any newsrooms, editors or journalists; they are usually run by one person or by a group of people who

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[144] See: https://ba.n1info.com/english/news/luxembourg-police-raids-home-of-bosnian-jasmin-mulahusic-upon-request-from-bih/ . He was also mentioned in documents related to international terrorism (https://avaz.ba/english/news/631130/jasmin-mulahusic-sda-s-internet-raider-is-also-mentioned-in-a-document-on-al-qa-idah%E2%80%99s-activities-in-the-world). He publishes content that is a direct propaganda for the SDA, and members of the party often tag him on their own posts as well, (https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=378092725593371&set=ecnf.100000606213957).

[145] See: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/trikovi-i-klikovi-farma-portala-danasnje.

remain anonymous and use all means to hide their identity. One of the motives for creating this sort of networks is simply profit; the other is political influence. These pages are cluttered with ads, usually from Google's AdSense platform. Most of them are associated with several Facebook groups or Facebook pages that are not usually visibly linked to the portal – they do not declare themselves to be the portal's official Facebook pages – and at first glance act like non-commercial sites that publish "entertainment" content. Facebook users are attracted this way who start "following" these pages without knowing their real purpose. People in the target demographics of these "media" outlet are almost always completely unaware both of their internal mechanism, of the fact that their purpose is to push misleading content or "lowest common denominator" content – clickbait headlines, sensationalist "reporting", etc. – and of the use of networks of Facebook pages for the promotion of these contents. One example is *Novi.ba*, a web portal that is part of a portal farm and whose official Facebook page, also called *Novi.ba*, has 969,219 followers. According *Socialbakers*, with a web site dealing with social network analytics, the *Novi.ba* Facebook page is the fifth most popular page in Bosnia and Herzegovina. According to data obtained using the *Crowdtangle* tool, the content of the *Novi.ba* portal is regularly shared on 82 different Facebook pages, many of which were created years before the launch of the *Novi.ba* portal but at some point were taken over – bought or "rented" – by this portal. The total number of people who follow one of these pages is almost 7.5 million.[146]

As this example demonstrates, the model of producing and spreading political disinformation is quite simple: group portals and Facebook pages that spread fake and/or sensationalistic content are connected in this way and link to each other to form a portal farm. The farms that are most successful in using these manipulative tactics manage to reach a huge number of people on social networks while remaining completely anonymous and below the radar of either the mainstream media or the general public. Such farms are the main multipliers of the disinformation ecosystem.[147]

After disinformation has been distributed this way, in many cases it is also copy-pasted to news media outlets as well, without any fact-checking prior to its dissemination. This is how poor journalism is contributing to dissemination of disinformation.

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[146] See: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/farma-klikova-novi-ba.

[147] See in extenso: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Dezinformacije_u_online_sferi_Slucaj%20BiH_BHS.pdf.

With low level of media literacy among the general population, disinformation spread is contributing to political manipulation and to maintaining the societal *status quo*. Quite often, especially before elections, a combination of disinformation and hate speech feeds the fear of others in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which contributes to ethno-national mobilization and often also to low voter turnout. Four main tactics of disinformation during electoral campaigns have been identified by *Zastone*: rejection (trying to diminish support of your political opponent); distortion (when trying to influence undecided voters); distraction (e.g. diverting public attention from negative features of own candidate) and dear (discouragement from voting).[148] This form of political manipulation using disinformation is often mentioned by international organizations such as the OSCE or the Council of Europe in their reports on Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Another form of political manipulation and disinformation involved the authorities in the Republika Srpska using the need to combat disinformation as a pretext to limit media freedom. In March 2020, the government of the Republika introduced fines and other punitive measures for spreading "fake news" in the media and on social networks, causing panic. The measures were due to last for the duration of the state of emergency declared over the pandemic. Authorities in Bosnia's northern district of Brcko have also enacted a prohibition related to reporting "fake news," while the interior minister of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina has called for similar measures, according to media reports. The OSCE expressed concern that this kind of measures were a form of censorship[149] and the journalists' association BH *Novinari* also protested, which led to the proposals being withdrawn.[150]

Countermeasures against Disinformation

The most prominent initiatives regarding countermeasures at the moment are due to international actors who, together with NGOs and the academic community, try to raise awareness on disinformation campaigns and improve the level of media literacy among citizens, especially young citizens. Initiatives

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[148] See: https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2021/02/Dezinformacije-u-izbornom-procesu-u-BiH-1.pdf.

[149] See: https://www.rferl.org/a/osce-concerned-about-measures-against-fake-news-in-bosnia/30507012.html.

[150] See: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/08/bosnia-trying-to-censor-information-about-pandemic-journalists-say/.

by fact-checking portals are also important, since these publish reports on disinformation in the media on a regular base.

Regarding the regulatory framework, not much has been done so far in terms of legal norms addressing the problem. One of the key laws that could help prevent web portals in particular from spreading disinformation and propaganda is the Law on Transparency of Media Ownership, a draft bill that would make relationships between media owners, media content and agendas and political parties more visible but that has not yet been adopted. Also, in spite of the fact that media monitoring during election campaigns shows significant (mis)use of disinformation in the run-up to elections, the Election Law does not mention disinformation at all.[151]

The *Code of Audio-visual Media Services and Radio Media Services* states that it is prohibited to broadcast content that can be determined to be false or misleading "on the basis of common sense or routine verification, or for which there is reasonable assumption that it is false or misleading."[152] Broadcasters have the obligation to publish corrections as soon as possible if any audio-visual or radio content subsequently turns out to be false or misleading (paragraph 2). Breach of the Code is a finable offense, with fines ranging from 500 37 500 euros.

Another normative code that has an article on disinformation, as mentioned before, is the *Code of Print and Online Media* by the Press Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a self-regulatory body for print and online media. Article 8 of the Code considers disinformation sharing as one of the most serious breaches of professional standards in journalism, and reminds media professionals of the loss of credibility they incur when they share such content.[153] However, due to the fact that self-regulatory body has no means of sanctioning media outlets that spread disinformation, it is up to the print and online media outlets themselves to respect the Code (or not).

International actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina focus on disinformation within their agenda regarding media freedom and media literacy. UNESCO tackles

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[151] See: https://izbori.ba/Documents/documents/ZAKONI/Izborni_zakon_PRECISCENI_TEKST-bos. pdf.

[152] See: Article 7, paragraph 1: (https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/kodeks_o_audiovizuelnim_ medijskim_uslugama_i_medijskim_uslugama_radija_rakbih.pdf).

[153] See: https://www.vzs.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=218&Itemid=9.

disinformation in the country through the project *Social Media 4 Peace*[154] and supports numerous activities related to media literacy and the fight against disinformation. In 2020, for example, it published: 'Journalism, "Fake News" and *Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*'[155] in multiple local languages. The OSCE ranks the fight against disinformation highly on its agenda within the scope of its work regarding freedom of media and freedom of expression, as well as regarding the prevention of violent extremism. The OSCE's focus is on education and on organizing conferences[156] as well as on public advocacy[157] and on supporting media organizations active in the fight against disinformation. The Council of Europe also works on the development of media literacy as tool for combating disinformation, through the project Media and Information Literacy for Human Rights and Democracy 2020-2022[158].

One of the newest initiatives, product of a coalition of international actors and Bosnia and Herzegovina citizens, is *The Voice for Responsibility on Networks*[159], run by the Centre for Human Dialogue in Geneva, Switzerland. In August 2022, a citizens' forum was organized in Bosnia and Herzegovina that adopted *a Charter on Responsible Use of Social Networks for Elections* in the country.[160] The aim of the Charter is to create a safe online space with minimal hate speech, disinformation, harassment, bots, trolls and manipulation. In this context, citizens appeal to political parties not to spread disinformation about themselves or their political opponents, to the media to double-check and verify information before posting it on social media, to social media platforms to reduce the spread of disinformation during election seasons, to other citizens to verify information and report content they suspect is disinformation and to international institutions to support projects and programs aimed at preventing the spread of disinformation. The 2022

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[154] See: https://en.unesco.org/social-media-4-peace.

[155] See: https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373542.

[156] See: https://www.osce.org/bs/mission-to-bosnia-and-herzegovina/489364.

[157] Every year on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day, OSCE, together with other international actors, issues a public statement advocating for better protection of media freedom. In the past three years in such statements the need for harder work on prevention of disinformation spreading in BiH is mentioned.

[158] See: https://www.coe.int/bs/web/sarajevo/media-and-information-literacy-for-human-rights-and-more-democracy-project-2020-2022-.

[159] See: https://m.facebook.com/Glas-za-odgovornost-na-mre%C5%BEama-101679085926888/.

[160] See: https://hdcentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/BiH-Charter-English-final-update.pdf and: https://hdcentre.org/news/hd-citizens-charter-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-sets-standards-for-social-media-conduct-in-run-up-to-elections/

elections were the first elections that were monitored to see whether actors respected the Charter.

Fact-checking has, in a way, moved one of the primary functions of media – verifying information before publishing it – from the media to other actors, mainly NGOs. There are two ways fact-checking is used: to monitor the veracity of political statements by leaders and to monitor the veracity of mass media content. It is worth mentioning that, although it appears to be a new phenomenon that has developed with the rise of online media, fact-checking has existed before in traditional media, albeit with a slightly different approach. For example, the role of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Press Council is precisely to mediate between the media and the public in cases where the latter is not satisfied with media content in terms of factual accuracy, approach, context, which is a form of fact-checking as well.[161] However, in its contemporary manifestation, fact-checking is mostly aimed at verifying media content and media analysis. Two main fact-checking platforms and organizations are *Raskrinkavanje*[162] and *Analiziraj*[163]. While *Analiziraj* is mainly focused on publishing expert analysis of media content and media context, *Raskrinkavanje* has a specific methodology, which is used to rate the factuality of published stories. The goal of *Raskrinkavanje*, as stated on their website, is "*to contribute to the exposure of fake news, propaganda narratives, commercial and political interests packaged in the form of reporting and, ultimately, to the construction of a more credible media sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina and beyond*."[164] They also strive to contribute to building a critical approach to media content and strengthening media literacy. One good example of their efforts is the "*Media Literacy Quiz*" on their website, in which every citizen can check his/her level of media literacy and test how much they know about strategies used to recognize disinformation.[165]

When it comes to the public perception of these two platforms, it seems that their audience and viewers do respond well to their work,[166] understanding that fact-checking is aimed at holding both political leaders and the media accountable and that the work of fact-checkers helps the public better

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[161] See: https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/kako-uloziti-prigovor.

[162] See: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/.

[163] See: https://analiziraj.ba/.

[164] See: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/o-raskrinkavanju.

[165] See:https://medijskapismenost.raskrinkavanje.ba/kviz/.

[166] Analiziraj has 16 000 followers on facebook and Raaskrinkavanje has 75 000.

understand not only the factual accuracy of published information, but also the context, the framing, and the reasons why information is presented in certain ways. Although the fact that people tend to accept fact-checkers well and quite often report to them – and to the Press Council – articles that contain disinformation[167] might seem as a sign of a high level of media literacy among the general public, this is actually not the case and media literacy education is not high on the agenda of educational authorities. The *Position Paper on National Media and Information Literacy Strategies and Policies in BiH* states that:

> "*Despite the increasing development of new technologies and the growing role played by media in society, there is no adequate government action nor public discussion in Bosnia and Herzegovina on issues related to media and information literacy. Children and youth in BiH have very limited, if any, opportunities to gain skills and competencies needed for successful living in a digital age. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina are not equipped to demand free access to information through independent and diverse media, and chaotic digital media landscape opens up opportunities for spreading various forms of distorted news and distorted information. Libraries across the country are mostly unused and although they have a potential to play a significant role in the process of lifelong learning, they are not recognized as institutional support for achieving the goals of the information society.*"[168]

In spite of the fact that media literacy is not developed systematically and strategically, especially not in the formal education system, it has been promoted and advocated for by academic community and civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina for the past ten years. The first book about the strategic approach to media literacy has been written by Lea Tajić in 2013.[169] Many scientific articles, books and strategic papers have been published since then.[170] Regulatory and self-regulatory bodies in the country have performed research on media literacy, as well as worked on educational programs and trainings. The *Communication Regulatory Agency* has established a network of stakeholders in its efforts so as to coordinate their activities. They also

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[167] In 2021 there were in total 1073 complains to the Press Council. Until August 2022 there were 101 complains. Although not all of them are related to disinformation (most of them, actually are related to hate speech), this still is a good sign that people strive for better media content in print and online media.

[168] See: https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/BH_MIL_Position-Paper_ENG-1.pdf.

[169] Lea Tajić, Medijska pismenost u BiH, Sarajevo, 2013.

[170] For example, Faculty of Political Science University of Sarajevo has published and edition of four books on media literacy: (https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/medijska-i-informacijska-pismenost/).

developed a Facebook page and a website section related to media and information literacy. The Agency works closely with the *Council of Europe* on development of media literacy strategies, including strategies for preventing the spread of disinformation.[171]

The University of Sarajevo is also working on developing a strategic approach to media literacy in formal education. The Institute of Social Research of the Faculty of Political Science of the University of Sarajevo is a strategic partner of UNESCO in a project called Building Trust in Media in the South East Europe and Turkey.[172] Besides developing a strategic approach to media and information literacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing training for teacher and librarians in the field of media and information literacy, publishing books and establishing open educational resources (OER) for media and information literacy, the Institute has developed a hybrid model of multi-component integration of media and information literacy in formal education in the country and has done a lot of lobbying for media and information literacy to become integral part of formal education at all levels.

The Agency for Pre-School, Elementary School and High School Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, through the eTwinning program and Erasmus+, has developed a *Media Literacy and Disinformation Initiative*.[173] Areas covered by eTwinning include digital literacy, digital and intellectual rights and responsibilities, digital security and data protection, digital legislation and codes of conduct, digital accessibility and digital communication. Throughout 2021, the Agency has promoted media literacy and the fight against disinformation through many activities, from professional development opportunities to networking events and conferences, from communication campaigns and publications to featured articles on their web portal.

Other actors, mainly from civil society, that work hard on developing informal media literacy training programs, doing research and promoting media literacy as a tool for combating disinformation are the *BiH Journalists Association*[174],

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[171] C.f.: https://rak.ba/bs-Latn-BA/brdcst-media-literacy; and: https://www.facebook.com/639785266045940/photos/a.2406793326011783/4124400780917687/?type=3.

[172] See: https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/medijska-i-informacijska-pismenost/.

[173] See: https://aposo.gov.ba/hr/etwinningova-tema-za-godinu-2021-medijska-pismenost-i-dezinformacije/.

[174] One of their projects includes research on capacities of NGOs in the field of media literacy: (https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/2020/12/07/istrazivanje-kapaciteti-nevladinih-organizacija-i-udruzenja-gradjana-u-oblasti-medijske-pismenosti/).

Media Centar Sarajevo[175] and *Zašto ne*, the organization that also co-owns the *Raskinkavanje* fact-checking platform)[176].

In the context of raising awareness of the general population for disinformation, it is also worth mentioning some of the documentary films produced in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of them is *A Day in Life of a Bot* by Bojan Tomić, a film that is part of the *Media Centar Sarajevo* portfolio[177] and that explains how the online spread of disinformation is functioning in the country and how some prominent people in Bosnia and Herzegovina are becoming targets of smear campaigns. Another documentary is *The Junk Folder* by Alen Šimić, also part of the *Media Centar Sarajevo* arsenal of resources,[178] which explains the phenomenon of disinformation on the internet. These films are some of the rare products offered to general public in the form of documentaries that try to explain the negative influence of disinformation on the public in the country.

In general, we may say that when it comes to spread of disinformation, countermeasures and initiatives are mainly being developed by educational institutions, international actors and civil society, whereas government institutions, with the exception of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies and the Agency for Pre-School, Elementary School and High School Education, do not place the fight against disinformation high on their agenda.

Conclusion

Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is an issue that so far has not been dealt with systematically. Starting from the use and understanding of terminology, which is different for different stakeholders ("fake news," disinformation, misinformation etc.), it is clear that not much attention has been paid to solving the problem of disinformation dissemination. The main

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[175] Media Center has created a training rpogram for families, teachers, journalists and the public „Building Resistance to Disinformation", together with organization Transitions from Prague, aimed at raising the level of media literacy of citizens in order to help them better resist the influences of disinformation (https://www.media.ba/bs/project/izgradnja-otpornosti-na-dezinformacije-program-obuke-za-porodice-nastavnike-novinare-i-sir-0).

[176] See: https://zastone.ba/organizacija/.

[177] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7xM177YrcXc.

[178] See: https://media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/film-junk-folder-o-fabrikovanom-sadrzaju-bez-granica.

problem of disinformation is connected to the ethnic and political divisions in the country, where disinformation narratives are used to support and maintain the *status quo* and to keep the main political ethno-national parties in power – which is also why disinformation campaigns are most often happening prior to elections. Apart from domestic political parties, two key main actors of disinformation spread are tabloid media from neighboring Serbia (due to spillover of their content and the shared language) and Russia (through their own agencies, as well as through media from Serbia that are closely related to them). Since the general public still has a low level of media literacy, disinformation is quite often accepted by the public as the truth.

Main actors that are involved in the process of raising awareness among general public about the dangers of disinformation and propaganda in a society as fragile as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina are NGOs and academic community. Their two main strategies are fact-checking and attempts to raise the level of media literacy. Although combating disinformation is formally part of the task of a relevant regulatory and self-regulatory bodies, there have been cases where the responsibility to impose anti-disinformation rules was misused as an excuse to limit media freedom.

In general, we can conclude that the spread of disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is regularly used as a propaganda and political manipulation tool by some of the country's political parties as well as by some foreign states, and that it remains an unsolved issue that has a strong negative impact on a largely media-illiterate general public.

Disinformation, Propaganda and Fake News in Bulgaria

By Ruslan Stefanov, Boryana Velcheva and Goran Georgiev[179]

Introduction

Bulgaria remains one of the members of NATO and the EU that are most vulnerable to malign Russian influence.[180] Bulgarian society has long been susceptible to pro-Kremlin and anti-democratic disinfxormation. Thirty years after the fall of the communist regime, many Bulgarians are still disappointed by the outcome of the transition to a market economy, and many tend to blame this on the country's pro-European and pro-Atlantic orientation or the democratic system itself. Bulgaria is also often viewed as one of the weakest links in the Euro-Atlantic chain of defence by international observers and policy analysts, with its predisposition to foreign authoritarian disinformation being a key vulnerability. China is notably less visible in public discourse but given its growing economic interests in the region, it could become a major vulnerability in the future following or building on Russia's playbook.

In 2020, only 35 % of Bulgarians expressed support for a liberal democratic form of governance, while 45 % preferred a strong-hand leadership model.[181] A vast majority of Bulgarians express feelings of social injustice due to the widespread belief that oligarchs have a strong hold over the government and use their financial resources to get preferential treatment from society and public institutions. Most Bulgarians also express distrust toward mainstream media and labelled it unfree and captured by oligarchic interests.[182] The high levels of social polarisation and economic dissatisfaction, coupled with a

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[179]   The Authors would like to express their gratitude to their colleague Svetoslav Malinov for his support.

[180]   Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD): GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021: Bulgaria, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/globsec-vulnerability-index-2021-bulgaria/).

[181]   Rumena Filipova, Ruslan Stefanov: Democracy in Bulgaria: Still Fragile after 30 Years of Transition, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2020, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/democracy-in-bulgaria-still-fragile-after-30-years-of-transition/).

[182]   Ibid.

general distrust of institutions, media, and even fellow citizens, play well to the anti-systemic, conspiratorial narratives of the Kremlin.

Bulgaria's vulnerability to the Kremlin's information influence is compounded by well-established Russophile attitudes in society. Pro-Russian views are fortified by a shared cultural, religious and linguistic heritage with Russia, which is often exalted to near-mythical status in pro-Kremlin messaging. Similar to other countries in the region, Russia has been able to exploit problems in content provision, media freedom, and ownership transparency to amplify its information influence. The combination of these factors has resulted in a strong cognitive media capture. By extension Putin and Moscow have enjoyed some of the highest popularity ratings in Bulgaria, compared to all other countries in Europe, at least up until Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

In 2020 and 2021, 70 % of Bulgarians had positive perceptions of Vladimir Putin — the highest approval rating among EU Member States, comparable only to those in Slovakia.[183] However, following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, approval for Putin plummeted more than twofold, down to 29 %.[184] Moreover, 33 % of Bulgarians now state that they consider Russia to be a significant threat to Bulgaria, a considerable increase from the 3 % in 2020 and 7 % in 2019.[185] Additionally, in the last few years Bulgaria has been able to reduce the Kremlin's extensive economic influence in the country by:

- abandoning the construction of the Belene nuclear power plant;[186]
- downgrading the SouthStream project, initially envisioned to be under equal Russo-Bulgarian co-ownership, to TurkStream, owned exclusively by Bulgaria;[187]
- supporting EU sanctions and refusing to bow to Moscow's demands to pay for Russian gas in roubles.[188]

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[183] Dominika Hajdu, et al: GLOBSEC Trends 2020: Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Western Balkans at the Times of Pandemic, 2021, (https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2020/).

[184] Dominika Hajdu, et al: GLOBSEC Trends 2022: Central and Eastern Europe amid the War in Ukraine, 2022, (https://www.globsec.org/publications/globsec-trends-2022-central-and-eastern-europe-amid-the-war-in-ukraine/).

[185] Ibid.

[186] See: https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/bulgaria-puts-end-to-belene-nuclear-project/.

[187] See: https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/eu-gazprom-deal-clears-bulgaria-of-south-stream-cancellation-claims/.

[188] See: https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-27/gazprom-says-it-cuts-gas-to-poland-bulgaria-on-non-payment.

Despite the recent economic and public opinion shift away from Kremlin, the high levels of state capture and corruption in Bulgaria, combined with Russia's centuries-old direct and indirect presence in the region, allow the Kremlin to still command support from government actors.189 Moreover, the Kremlin maintains its significant influence over Bulgaria's internal affairs, energy sector and the media landscape. Attempts to curb Russia's economic influence have led the Kremlin to resort to a far more aggressive approach — utilising the Kremlin playbook by spreading disinformation, influencing political parties, and intimidating business people in Russia — competitive industries such as arms trading. All these divide the Bulgarian society as social and traditional media are blanketed with relentless disinformation campaigns and propaganda. The role of Russia's official institutions in such propaganda campaigns, and in particular its embassy in Sofia, has been conspicuous.

Terminology and Definitions

Bulgaria's legal framework lacks a definition for disinformation, thus naturally limiting the country's institutional approach to countering disinformation. There have been a handful of attempts to introduce laws containing definitions over the last few years. However, most efforts have been highly politicised and incongruent with the emerging conceptual and practical standards in the EU and the rest of the Euro-Atlantic community. For example, in 2020 the nationalist party VMRO used the COVID-19 pandemic to try to introduce laws with such a broad spectrum of definitions for disinformation and fake news that it would have provided the government administration with unprecedented censorship powers, including prison sentences.[190]

In the last two years, counter-disinformation efforts have intensified in Bulgaria's non-governmental sector, which has been the staunchest opposing force to foreign authoritarian influence. Non-governmental (NGO) and civil society organisations (CSO) have employed the established conceptual and financial framework at EU level through the European Commission's (EC) Action Plan against Disinformation, the Code of Practice on Disinformation (COP),

[189] Ruslan Stefanov, Martin Vladimirov: The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe. Economic Influence and Sharp Power, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2020, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-southeast-europe/)

[190] See: https://www.dnevnik.bg/politika/2020/05/28/4072469_nov_zakon_sreshtu_falshivite_novini_vmro_iska_spirane/#_=_.

and the work of the various StratCom Task Forces of the European External Action Services (particularly the East StratCom Task Force). Both the Action Plan Against Disinformation and the COP define disinformation as "verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm".[191] Nevertheless, EU-supported initiatives, of which Bulgarian organisations are increasingly a part of, are still in the process of clearing up differences in interpretation.

Considerable uncertainty and inconsistencies regarding the taxonomy of disinformation in Bulgaria remains, especially as related to the manipulation of other types of information. Terms such as "fake news", "propaganda" and even "misinformation" are often used interchangeably to refer to disinformation, especially by the media and the general public. In addition, there is widespread misunderstanding in public discourse, when attempting to differentiate between coordinated inauthentic and genuine behaviour. Outside expert circles, disinformation is almost exclusively discussed in the context of coordinated disinformation campaigns by organized "trolling groups". This has resulted in a tendency for media and the general public to severely underestimate the level of cognitive media capture in Bulgaria, i.e. the extent to which large public groups, including journalists and policy-makers, have fallen victim to the Kremlin's incessant disinformation of the last decade.

In the political discourse in Bulgaria, just like elsewhere in Europe and beyond, disinformation and "fake news" are being used interchangeably. The latter term has been exclusively used to dismiss political opponents and their ideas and not to design any countervailing policies whatsoever. Many parties and politicians see the opportunity to take advantage of existing public attitudes - not creating them, but simply reinforcing them and utilizing them to their advantage.[192] Due to the short-term horizon of domestic politics in Bulgaria since 2020, politicians often intentionally use the term "fake news" to streamline populist agenda and promote political messages without bearing any responsibility for dissemination or the absence of any fact checking.

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[191] European Commission (EC): Action Plan against Disinformation, Brussels, 5 December 2018, (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018JC0036&from=en).

[192] Interview with Ralitsa Kovacheva, Editor-in-chief of the "Factcheck.bg"-platform, Free Europe, July 20, 2022, (https://www.svobodnaevropa.bg/a/31950617.html).

Audience and Perspective

Journalism in Bulgaria faces numerous challenges connected to the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation by Kremlin-controlled and Kremlin-aligned entities in the country. From a societal perspective, a general failure to check the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation over the last decade, coupled with a historical predisposition to favouring Russia, means that Bulgarian media continue to be pressured to cater to pro-Russian attitudes. Widespread distrust of mainstream media, dissatisfaction with democracy, and an above-average tendency to consume news from social media adds further pressure to publish sensationalist material that reflects feelings of disempowerment and disillusionment. There is also the legacy of communist-era journalism, in which editors and reporters who are used to relying on information from Russian news agencies and outlets, which they may find easier to translate and localise.[193]

Journalism in Bulgaria is especially vulnerable from a financial perspective, particularly after media ownership by large Western multinationals was supplanted by local actors following the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. Bulgarian media is highly dependent on advertising revenue, a significant part of which comes from Russian companies or local companies with business ties to Russia.[194] Many outlets are also financially dependent on the government, which in the recent past has often supported large-scale Russian economic projects, particularly in the energy sector. In addition, before the war in Ukraine essentially most, if not outright all, Bulgarian political leaders had been very careful to balance the country's Euro-Atlantic membership with clear appeasement to the regime in Moscow. Various popular outlets have fallen in the hands of local oligarchs with political clout and business connections to Russia, severely affecting their editorial policies.[195] These financial vulnerabilities are compounded by the fact that content provision from Western news agencies is often beyond the means of Bulgarian outlets, whereas Russian sources offer their content at a fraction of the price, even free of charge in some cases.[196]

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[193] See: https://bnr.bg/hristobotev/post/101632889/prof-dimitar-vacov.

[194] See: https://www.voanews.com/a/bulgaria-key-battleground-in-us-russia-energy-war/2655196.html.

[195] Bivol editorial team: How Russian corporations control power and media in Bulgaria, Биволъ, 31 May, 2020, (https://bivol.bg/russian-control-over-power-media-bulgaria.html).

[196] Some media outlets in Bulgaria are making an official request through Russian channels for funding. Such requests are normally approved. After a while, they are contacted by curators, who offer them media pieces for a sum, paid in cash. The service is cheap - it varies depending on the size of the media. From 100 to 500 euros per article", retrieved from: Nova News: No political parties and individuals in Bulgaria linked to the Kremlin and Russian propaganda, Nova TV, May 2022, (https://nova.bg/news/view/2022/05/22/).

A 2021-analysis by media experts showed that 26 % of articles published in Bulgaria's state news agency (BTA) were either beneficial to the authorities in Moscow and the Russian Embassy in Sofia or based on information by the Russian state news agency TASS.[197] This raised serious concerns that BTA behaves almost like a "Balkan affiliate of TASS" (the most quoted source) and a "Trojan horse" for the Kremlin's media propaganda within the EU.

The general public is exposed to disinformation on a daily basis, both through conventional and social media, which often has an underrated effect on policy-making on the highest levels of government. Bulgarian politics is characterised by populism, polarisation and weak leadership, meaning politicians are highly reactive to perceived shifts in public opinion and popular media publications. As such, even self-proclaimed pro-Western politicians are often pressured into making unreasonable concessions that compromise Euro-Atlantic principles and are favourable to Russia, or else risk losing public support. A good illustration of the latter are the events that occurred on 28 June 2022, when the Bulgarian government, declared 70 Russian diplomats persona non grata due to espionage. This is the largest expulsion of Russian diplomats from Europe since the UK expulsed 105 Soviet diplomats during the Cold War in 1971. The public opinion was strongly against the expulsion and many politicians and media made statements in support of the diplomats. *BSP* chairperson Cornelia Ninova, in particular, published a position on her Facebook profile in which she defined the decision as an "unprecedented act in Bulgarian diplomacy", although her party was part of the ruling majority, whose government took the decision. President Rumen Radev made a very similar statement. Both expressed doubt about the government's motives and the evidence behind them. Furthermore, in March the same year, Bulgaria expelled 10 Russian diplomats, and the Kremlin inspired voices responded in the same vein.[198]

Bulgarian public perceptions towards China are more ambivalent. China is largely seen and portrayed in the Bulgarian media through the prisms of its substantial economy, manufacturing capabilities, trading networks, and technological advancements and its population and territorial size. China has steadily increased its informational presence in Bulgaria but still remains on

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[197] See: https://www.balkanfreemedia.org/initiatives/how-russia-has-penetrated-bulgarias-state-news-agency.

[198] Maya Kirkova: The expulsion of 70 Russian diplomats from Bulgaria, Factcheck.bg, 31 July 2022, (https://factcheck.bg/izgonvaneto-na-70-ruski-diplomati-ot-balgariya/); Euractiv: Bulgaria kicks out 70 Russian 'diplomats' for espionage, 28 June 2022, (https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/bulgaria-kicks-out-70-russian-diplomats-for-espionage/).

the periphery of public opinion.[199] So far it has mostly relied on directly owned media outlets (such as "China Today") or paid content in popular local media (such as the Radio China International column in the daily "*24 Chasa*").

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples

Bulgaria has been the target of ceaseless influence operations and other disinformation-related activities by Russia for more than a decade. Pro-Kremlin disinformation is ubiquitous throughout Bulgaria's information landscape. Due to the country's communist past, Russian influence is ingrained in the cultural mainstream. As such, Russian disinformation is more comprehensible and reaches the Bulgarian audience easier compared to Western European audiences.

Recurrent disinformation narratives in Bulgaria typically focus on the most divisive topics in social, political, cultural and economic life, particularly as they relate to the country's geopolitical orientation. Topic-centred disinformation campaigns happen against a fixed background of constant anti-Euro-Atlantic and anti-democratic disinformation, which carries the hallmarks of the Soviet-era propaganda that preceded it. Pro-Kremlin disinformation played a considerable role in undermining, disrupting, and politicizing Bulgaria's national response to critical matters, such as:

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine;
- the COVID-19 pandemic;
- the global energy crisis;
- the implementation of the Green Deal;
- and Bulgaria's diplomatic row with North Macedonia.

Some of the most frequent targets of disinformation in Bulgaria are the US and NATO, which are essentially equated in pro-Kremlin messaging as being a single domineering entity that seeks global hegemony through aggressive and duplicitous means. [200] The EU is also a frequent target and is almost

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[199] Center for the Study of Democracy: Capture Proofing Media in Southeast Europe , Policy Brief No. 98, March 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/capture-proofing-media-in-southeast-europe/).

[200] Rumena Filipova, Todor Galev: Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience, Center for the Study of Democarcy, Sofia, 2018, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/russian-influence-in-the-media-sectors-of-the-black-sea-countries/).

exclusively portrayed as a puppet of the US that dictates harmful policies to its weaker members. Disinformation targeting the Euro-Atlantic community is most often accompanied by anti-democratic messaging, which resonates deeply with Bulgarians' dissatisfaction with how democracy works in their country.[201] While anti-democratic disinformation in Bulgaria does not invent any new formula, it is anti-institutional, anti-civic, Eurosceptic, and pro-Russian.

Arguably, some of the most impactful recurrent disinformation narratives in the last few years related to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination, which pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-controlled entities spread profusely throughout 2020 and 2021. This contributed to the reasons why Bulgaria was and remains the EU member with the lowest vaccination rate and with some of the worst COVID-19 related statistics throughout the pandemic.[202] A study from the EU-Disinfo Lab regarding anti-vaccine-disinformation in Bulgaria from March 2021 uncovered that many narratives that had already been debunked by fact-checkers in other countries were still quite popular in Bulgaria. Furthermore, a wide range of "home-grown" disinformation narratives were successfully disseminated. 97 % of all anti-vaxx posts included in the study did not have any fact-check labels and were still accumulating interactions although they clearly violated Facebook's policies against vaccine misinformation. COVID-related disinformation was also a key driving force behind the rise of the hyper-populist pro-Kremlin Revival (Vazrazhdane) party. The party was able to make its way to parliament in the general elections of November 2021, largely relying on disinformation and other means of propaganda in its political campaign. In the same vein, it is slated to win even more votes in the October 2022 elections.

An unprecedented three general elections and one presidential election were held in 2021 following a year of mass anti-graft protests, which created an uncertain political atmosphere in the country, ideal for the proliferation of pro-Kremlin disinformation. This was an ideal opportunity for the Kremlin's disinformation narratives to facilitate even more polarization in Bulgarian society and amplify the effects of wide-spread conspiracies. Some of the most

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[201] Center for the Study of Democracy: Capture Proofing Media in Southeast Europe, Policy Brief No. 98, March 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/capture-proofing-media-in-southeast-europe/).

[202]   Prof. Kalina Bontcheva: The Wild, Wild East of Vaccine Disinformation, Disinfo.EU, Bulgaria, April 2021, (https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/bulgaria:-the-wild-wild-east-of-vaccine-disinformation/).

popular and impactful disinformation narratives during this eight month election period were:[203]

- COVID-19 is a hoax or at least exaggerated, meaning that measures to restrict infections are not necessary, while vaccines are dangerous and could be more harmful than the disease itself.
- Vaccines were developed in a short period and are thus untested and unsafe.
- Russian energy projects need to be supported because they improve Bulgaria's energy security, relations with Russia and ensure economic development. The EU cannot afford to stop the Nord Stream 2 and TurkStream projects and the U.S. is selfishly meddling in domestic decisions of EU member states.
- The European Green Deal is ruining the Bulgarian economy by leading to massive unemployment in coal regions. It is based on EU and liberal delusions that ignore the lack of reliability and excessive costs of green energy.
- The EU is hypocritical in its democracy and transparency demands, as it enables the survival of successive corrupt Bulgarian governments.
- The EU promotes liberal over traditional national conservative values and as such threatens traditional Bulgarian culture.

The beginning of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine saw a flurry of activity by local pro-Kremlin pundits who proliferated the full array of the Kremlin's disinformation narratives that justified the war in Bulgarian mainstream space.[204] Among these narratives was the widespread notion that the war is a proxy war between NATO, as controlled by the US, and Russia, with the latter defending itself against NATO's supposedly aggressive and expansionist policies. The Ukrainian armed forces were widely presented as disorganized bands of neo-Nazis that use civilians as shields and conduct war crimes against Ukrainian citizens in order to blame them on Russia. Various

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[203] Center for the Study of Democracy: Four Popular (Disinformation) Narratives in the 2021 Bulgarian Parliamentary Election Campaign, Policy Brief No. 99, April 2021 (https://csd.bg/ publications/publication/disinformation-narratives-in-the-2021-parliamentary-elections/); Center for The Study of Democracy: Disinformation Narratives in the November 2021 Bulgarian Elections Campaign: Key Actors and Amplifiers, Policy Brief No. 105, November 2021 (https://csd.bg/ publications/publication/disinformation-narratives-in-the-november-2021-bulgarian-elections-campaign-key-actors-and-amplifie/).

[204] EDMO: A Ukraine-related Disinformation Tsunami Hit Europe in March, Monthly brief no.10, April, 2022, (https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Tenth_Fact-Checking_Report_Apr_2022_H. pdf).

articles attempted to rationalise President Zelensky's Jewish ancestry with his supposedly fascist politics.

Other viral disinformation narratives include:

- The US has been developing and testing biological weapons in Ukraine[205];
- The Russian war of aggression in Ukraine is in fact a "special military operation" aimed at the de-Nazification of Ukraine, provoked by the Eastern enlargement of NATO and the aggressive West[206];
- Western sanctions are ineffective and/or simply Russophobic, aimed at the unprovoked destruction of a great country[207].

Pro-Kremlin entities also conducted a highly effective disinformation campaign targeting Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria and elsewhere in Europe, portraying them as obnoxious and insolent free-loaders exploiting the goodwill of their hosts. Explicit pro-Kremlin disinformation went so far as to call refugees "parasites" and "leeches" who were supposedly carrying various diseases caused by secret Western-funded biological experiments in Ukraine. These narratives were a major reason why popular support for refugees in Bulgaria plummeted after the first month of the invasion.[208]

In terms of the dissemination of Chinese content, a few major examples stand out. "*China Today*" has become a recent addition to the Bulgarian newspaper market[209], focusing entirely on Chinese domestic and foreign policy developments. The editor-in-chief of the newspaper is a prominent member of the BSP and owns and publishes several pro-Russian newspapers in Bulgaria.[210] The chair of *China Today*'s editorial board, meanwhile, is none other than the last director of the Bulgarian communist party security services' political police (prior to 1989). One of the largest Bulgarian dailies, "*24 Chasa*",

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[205] See: https://www.24chasa.bg/mezhdunarodni/article/11615490.

[206] See: https://trud.bg/%D0%BF%D0%BB%D0%B0.

[207] See: https://bgr.news-front.info/2022/03/16/al-araby-zapadnite-sankczii-sreshhu-rusiya-dokazaha-svoyata-neefektivnost/.

[208] See: https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2022/05/10/4344742_v_bulgariia_i_gurciia_smiatat_che_vinata_za_voinata_v/.

[209] Rumena Filipova, Alexander Gerganov, Martin Vladimirov: Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe: Shared Patterns, Specific Vulnerabilities and Responses to Russian Disinformation, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/tackling-kremlins-media-capture-in-southeast-europe/), p. 72.

[210] Ibid.

further maintains a column, financed by Radio China International, specifically dedicated to China.

Local media networks are becoming more receptive to Chinese (dis)information narratives, a pattern particularly apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Outlets, like China Today, have sought to draw attention to the overlaps in Russian and Chinese positions in international affairs – this fits a broader coordination campaign between the global (dis)information strategies of Russia and China.[211]

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation

Disinformation is continuously spread by informal networks of influence, including various politicians, academics, influencers, journalists, and tycoons, whose interests often overlap or become entangled with those of the Kremlin. Pro-Kremlin disinformation is consistently present in both conventional and social media, with content on social media being more explicit and extremist in relative terms. To a large extent, this situation is the result of the significant transformations that Bulgaria's media sector underwent after 2010 when local oligarchs with political clout and business connection to Russia supplanted large Western media companies, resulting in plummeting journalistic standards and media freedom.[212]

The political parties that have been in power for the last 30 years practised media capture for their own needs, which significantly disrupted Bulgaria's media sector and led to its "oligarchizing". Politicians ended up advertently and inadvertently amplifying the Kremlin's disinformation in an effort to support their own interests vis-a-vis Putin's geo-political intentions for the country. Seeing the government's support for the Kremlin's projects and policies, mainstream media moguls followed suit, acting in synchrony with their political associates and informal partners, and reinforcing their own rentier projects with Russia.

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[211] Ibid., p. 23

[212] Rumena Filipova, Todor Galev: Russian Influence in the Media Sectors of the Black Sea Countries. Tools, Narratives and Policy Options for Building Resilience, Center for the Study of Democarcy, Sofia, 2018, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/russian-influence-in-the-media-sectors-of-the-black-sea-countries/).

While "traditional" mainstream parties, such as the *Bulgarian Socialist Party BSP* and the *Movement for Reforms and Freedoms MRF* are reported to have well-established and publicly known media connection, the party that exemplifies this dynamic more recently is GERB, which was in power between 2009 and 2021. Outlets publicly associated with supporting the pro-Western GERB-government, e.g. the dailies *Trud*[213] and *Telegraph*, the news agency *PIK* and the online news outlet *Blitz*[214], promoted for example the Russian gas pipelines "SouthStream" and "TurkStream".[215]

Media in Bulgaria have tended to shift allegiance depending on which party is in power and controls public procurement and advertisement revenues. Subsequently, they have tended to parrot, rather than question government narratives, including those relating to Russia.

Similarly, disinformation has been aided by media concentration. Media laws in Bulgaria have been drafted in such a way as to discourage (smaller) newcomers. A case in point is the 2019 amendment to the *Law on the Mandatory Deposit of Printed and Other Publications*[216], requested by Delyan Peevsky, a member of Parliament from the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)* party and alleged media tycoon, who, according to Reporters Without Borders at the time controlled more than 80 % of Bulgaria's newspaper distribution business.[217] The most important take from the revised law was that the size of the fines for non-disclosure of ownership unfairly affected novel and small media businesses. The big media company owners manage

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[213] A demonstration in defense of "Trud" was held in front of the Ministry of Culture. Toma Bikov, Lyuben Dilov, Asen Baltov, Kostadin Angelov, Temenuzhka Petkova and other members of *GERB* joined. Retrieved from: DarikNews, (https://dariknews.bg/novini/bylgariia/gerb-s-demonstraciia-v-zashtita-na-v.-trud-videosnimki-2293217), December 7, 2021.

[214] See: https://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2019/02/22/3394276_opornite_medii_na_gerb/.

[215] Ruslan Stefanov, et al.: The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-southeast-europe/).

[216] Law on the Mandatory Deposit of Printed and Other Publications and for the Disclosure of Distributors and Suppliers of Media Services], promulgated in SG No. 108 of 29 December 2000, last amended in SG No. 17 of 26 February 2019, (https://www.lex.bg/bg/laws/ldoc/2134956545).

[217] C.f.: https://rsf.org/en/country/bulgaria; also: Heather Conley et al.: The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe, CSIS, 2016, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-understanding-russian-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe/), p. 41.

to obscure who is in charge of the media's corporate ownership by submitting data via sophisticated, difficult-to-verify ownership frameworks which operate through a chain of offshore-registered subsidiaries[218]. The financial data submitted to official registries reveals substantial gaps in the volume of ownership information available, particularly concerning the amounts and sources of financing. Interestingly, the media that allegedly were part of Delyan Peevsky's media conglomerate, are now reported to be among the main spreaders of Russian disinformation narratives.[219]

The concentration of media ownership within a small circle of oligarchic actors with strong political influence, turned media into a tool for attacking opposing political figures, business rivals, activists and journalists. The Kremlin has successfully managed to leverage this type of media capture in Bulgaria by forging ties with local oligarchs and moguls. This facilitates Russia's goal to utilize local media companies to spread its disinformation narratives and influence the decision-making process, without the danger of being exposed as media owners or the need to invest resources for a direct presence in the media sector.

While there are very few media companies in Bulgaria owned by Russian entities, there are many domestic owners who are known to have firm pro-Russian economic and political ties, but some of them also beliefs for a variety of reasons not always related to direct economic benefits. Some major newspapers (e.g. *Standard*), several smaller TV networks (*BSTV* and *Channel 3*), and official party newspapers (such as *Duma*, the newspaper of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, *BSP*) have demonstrated strong pro-Russian stances. The Kremlin's disinformation and other types of propaganda is also disseminated by various local online news outlets, where its influence can be traced back mainly to the editorial content.

Strikingly, the number of articles containing pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives in Bulgarian online media averaged 40 a day in early 2022 before the invasion of Ukraine and 396 a day immediately after the war started. This indicates that Russian propaganda in Bulgaria skyrocketed 10 times after

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[218] Martin Vladimirov et al.: Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/tackling-kremlins-media-capture-in-southeast-europe/).

[219] Richard Carney: Autocracies That Look Like Democracies Are a Threat Across the Globe, The Conversation, January, 2019, (https://theconversation.com/autocracies-that-look-like-democracies-are-a-threat-across-the-globe-110957).

the invasion on 24 February. Even more alarming is the fact that the study in question does not even cover social media platforms.[220]

Holding some 70% of the social media market, *Facebook* remains the preeminent social media and the most prolific source of disinformation in Bulgaria. Hundreds of pages and groups in Bulgarian *Facebook* space proliferate pro-Kremlin disinformation on a daily basis with a combined potential reach in the millions of people. In fact, some of the most interacted with pages in Bulgarian *Facebook* space are ones that systematically spread pro-Kremlin disinformation. These include the page of the well-known *Pogled.info*, a Kremlin-aligned online news outlet that translates hundreds of articles and books from *GlobalResearch.ca* and the *Katehon* think-tank, both of which are Kremlin-controlled entities that amplify Russia's information influence abroad. Martin Karbovski, a highly popular showman whose posts are often some of the most interacted with on Bulgarian *Facebook* space, is another prominent amplifier of the Kremlin's disinformation. Other examples include the pages of the online outlets *Bez Logo (Without Logo)*, *Informiran.net*, *Epicenter.bg*, as well as tens of (seemingly) user-driven groups dedicated to promoting closer relations with Russia.

The pro-Kremlin "Revival"-party (*Vazrazhdane*), which has been gaining ground with each new election, is single-handedly responsible for attracting the vast majority of public attention to radical, pro-Kremlin political stances in Bulgarian *Facebook* space out of all parties active on *Facebook*. The *Facebook* pages of Revival and its leader continuously publish posts with outright pro-Kremlin disinformation. These are often some of the most interacted with posts on key political issues in Bulgarian *Facebook* space, rivalling the popularity of established pro-Kremlin outlets such as *Pogled.info*. The party was able to gain a considerable following with its COVID-19-conspiracies and anti-vaccine-disinformation and it has continued using Facebook to maintain and garner more support by producing pro-Kremlin disinformation.

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[220] The finding comes from a study of the publications on 3,500+ Bulgarian-language websites and blogs in the period 2018 - 2022 conducted by the Human and Social Studies Foundation – Sofia (HSSF): Lyubomir Gigov: Russian Online Propaganda in Bulgaria, BTA, Sofia, July 2022, (https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/290850-russian-online-propaganda-in-bulgaria).
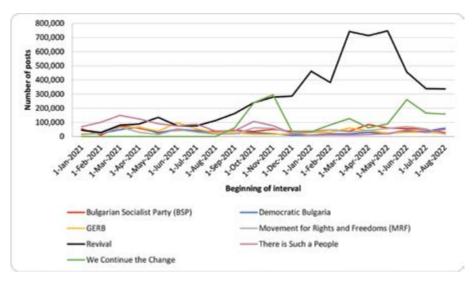
Figure 1: Bulgarian Political Parties Facebook Pages - Total Interactions per Month (1 Jan – 30 Aug 2022)

Source: CSD based on data from CrowdTangle.

When compared to the *Facebook* pages of five larger mainstream parties and their leaders, those of *Revival* and its leader have been able to consistently account for well-over 50 % of the total interactions between January 2021 and June 2022. Notably, there were three general elections and one presidential election between April and November 2021. *Revival* was only able to enter Parliament on the third try in November 2021 with 4.9 %.[221] The latest polls indicate the party will nearly double its support to 7.5 % to 8% in the snap general election slated for October 2022.[222]

The issue of social media platforms, especially *Facebook* groups and pages, being incubators of pro-Russian narratives, appears almost impossible to

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[221] See: https://bnr.bg/varna/post/101558435/cik-obavi-okonchatelnite-rezultati-ot-parlamentarnite-izbori.

[222] The Sofia Globe: Market Links Poll: Elections in Bulgaria Now Would Produce Seven-Group Parliament, 14 July 2022, (https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/07/14/market-links-poll-elections-in-bulgaria-now-would-produce-seven-group-parliament/); The Sofia Globe: Alpha Research Poll: WCC Closes in on GERB, ITN out of Parliament, 6 July 2022, (https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/07/06/alpha-research-poll-wcc-closes-in-on-gerb-itn-out-of-parliament/).

resolve.[223] The Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned entities utilise troll factories[224] and online media outlets in order to distribute propaganda even further throughout social media. Similar to other countries in Eastern European, it is not possible to simply close off Russia-controlled media companies and resolve the disinformation problem through direct deterrence measures.[225]

An in-depth contextual evaluation of the active pro-Kremlin networks in the Bulgarian public *Facebook* domain through cluster-classification illustrates the disinformation channels active on the platform.[226] Official Russian soft power public pages form a small cluster on the periphery of Bulgarian *Facebook* space, close to channels focusing on the EU, international organisations and Western foreign policy. Pages or groups which are explicitly pro-Kremlin do not actively interact with mainstream pages, and their activities are more focused on interviews with high-level Russian politicians and on Russian foreign policy topics. The main connection between pro-Kremlin disinformation channels and mainstream ones is found in channels associated with Russophile interpretation of Bulgarian history and pseudo-patriotic ideas. These are located in the direct vicinity to channels associated with civil society, indicating that disinformation could be penetrating into more general discussions.

Political Context

The pro-Kremlin agenda has been widely present in the Bulgarian political discourse, and the Kremlin has sought to influence parties across the entire political spectrum in the country. Domestic political support for Russia is enabled by Russian and Bulgarian state capture networks which hold sway

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[223] According to the first minister of e-Government Bozhidar Bozhanov, Bulgaria was prone to pro-Kremlin propaganda for years before the war started: Boryana Djambazova: Welcome to Bulgaria, where the Ukraine war is NATO's fault, Politico, June, 2022, (https://www.politico.eu/article/bulgaria-ukraine-russia-war-nato-fault/).

[224] These trolls are often people working from home. They are paid for a comment or a published article. On command, they share this 'news' in certain groups, which are indicated by the coordinating troll," ex Bulgarian Minister of E-Government, Bozhan Bozhanov, retrieved from: Sofia Globe staff, May 20, 2022, (https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/05/20/bulgaria-to-set-up-unit-to-monitor-disinformation-in-media-social-networks/).

[225] Ibid.

[226] Martin Vladimirov, et al.: Influence of Pro-Kremlin Public Pages in Bulgaria's and Romania's Facebook Ecosystem, , Center for the Study of Democracy, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/influence-of-pro-kremlin-public-pages-in-bulgarias-and-romanias-facebook-ecosystem/).

over key institutions.[227] At the same time, most Bulgarian parties cater to the pro-Russian sentiment in society by generally promoting better ties, or at least a balanced relationship with Russia. Russian influence is most visible among radical political parties. Though these groups typically play a fringe role in domestic politics, they serve to augment existing social ideological and value-oriented tensions in Bulgarian society.[228] However, they have gained popularity and have been able to attract followers by championing extremely populistic sentiments against the EU and NATO, in relation to the energy crisis and the war in Ukraine.

Disinformation in Bulgarian politics is inextricably linked to the Kremlin's influence, as well as that of local oligarchic groups with political clout and interests that overlap with those of the Kremlin.[229] The Kremlin's main vehicle of influence is corruption, specifically state capture at the hands of local Kremlin-aligned oligarchic groups and informal networks, while also directly influencing political parties which then exploit their institutional power to increase their information influence and that of the Kremlin. According to the US Department of State, Russia has provided at least $300 million to political parties, officials and politicians in countries in Central and Eastern Europa and Central Asia with the goal of exerting political influence and impacting elections in these countries.[230]

The Bulgarian Socialist Party (*BSP*), the successor of the Bulgarian Communist Party, remains the most popular Russia-inclined party and has an official cooperation agreement with Putin's United Russia party. Along with other mainstream parties, such as the influential *Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)* party, *BSP* has consistently promoted large-scale Russian economic projects in Bulgaria, including through the spread of disinformation on *BSP*'s official TV station, daily newspaper, and social media channels. During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021, *BSP* also promoted the Sputnik V vaccine,

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[227] Ruslan Stefanov, Martin Vladimirov: The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe. Economic Influence and Sharp Power, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2020, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-southeast-europe/).

[228] Center for the Study of Democracy and International Republican Institute: Bulgaria Election Monitor, 2020.

[229] Ruslan Stefanov, et al.: The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power, Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-southeast-europe/).

[230] See: https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/13/us/politics/russia-election-interference.html?partner=slack&smid=sl-share .

called for the lifting of sanctions against Russia, and portrayed the Istanbul Convention as antithetical to Bulgarian culture by restating various pro-Kremlin narratives against the international agreement.[231]

Russia has used its energy resources on multiple occasions as a tool of blackmailing other countries into taking a pro-Kremlin stance.[232] The diversification of energy supplies is one of the fundamental cornerstones of the EU's energy policy – it solidifies European energy security, prevents monopolization of the energy market and secures fair competitiveness to the energy market. *GERB* and *MRF* continued policies started by the *BSP* and the former king's movement *NDSV,* paving the way for the Kremlin's capture of some of the most lucrative assets in Bulgaria, making the country among the most economically vulnerable to Russian influence in the EU.[233]

A group of smaller radical, nationalist parties is consistently showing the strongest propensity towards willingly attracting Russian influence in Bulgaria while in power. It included *Ataka*, which was part of the *United Patriots (UP)* coalition and by extension part of the GERB-led coalition government from 2017 to 2021, and the *Volya ('Will')* movement. These parties have championed outright pro-Kremlin and anti-Western stances. Ataka's links to the Kremlin are well-documented and include an emphasis on close cooperation with the ruling *United Russia* party.[234] It has also been repeatedly alleged that the party has received financing from the Kremlin.[235] *Ataka*, notably, has been an important political player and influenced the appointment of key positions in the former government, including the Minister of Economy.[236] More broadly, the UP coalition used its position of power to promulgate nationalist and anti-liberal

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[231] Center for the Study of Democracy: GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021: Bulgaria, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/globsec-vulnerability-index-2021-bulgaria/).

[232] EUvsDisinfo: Attempts to find alternatives to Russian gas result in increased energy prices, October 3, 2021, (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/attempts-to-find-alternatives-to-russian-gas-result-in-increased-energy-prices).

[233] Martin Vladimirov, et al.: Tackling Kremlin's Media Capture in Southeast Europe, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/tackling-kremlins-media-capture-in-southeast-europe/).

[234] Ibid., p. 64

[235] Ibid., p. 65

[236] Ruslan Stefanov, et al.: The Kremlin Playbook in Southeast Europe: Economic Influence and Sharp Power. Center for the Study of Democracy, 2020, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-in-southeast-europe/), p. 71.

messages regularly taken up and disseminated by pro-Kremlin media outlets.[237] The leader of the biggest group within this coalition, VMRO, and former Minister of Defense, Krassimir Karakachanov, has repeatedly denied that Russia is a threat, refusing to condemn the Kremlin's aggressive foreign policies. He has also consistently criticized NATO and the EU for allegedly escalating tensions with Russia.[238]

GERB's over decade-long rule came to an end in April 2021 following almost a year of mass anti-graft protests throughout Bulgaria. This led to an unprecedented three general elections in the space of just seven months between April and November 2021. Since then, Bulgaria is characterised by domestic political uncertainty and reeling from the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19-pandemic, the global energy crisis and its own domestic political crisis. The country's political situation grew only more precarious with the beginning of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, particularly due to the Kremlin's outsized influence on Bulgaria's internal affairs, energy sector and media landscape. Known pro-Kremlin influence agents and politicians were immediately spurred into action in an unprecedented manner after the end of February 2022, including by amplifying the Kremlin's disinformation narratives on mainstream TV and radio stations. In the first week of the invasion Bulgaria's then Minister of Defence Stefan Yanev (and two consecutive times' Prime Minister of the care-taker governments in 2021) kept insisting the invasion was a "special military operation", directly parroting Russia's official narrative. After three days of hesitation the Prime Minister Kiril Petkov dismissed the minister on 28 February. The start of the Russian invasion into Ukraine prompted an unusually aggressive and undiplomatic behaviour on the part of the Russian ambassador to Bulgaria. On 3 March 2022, during the traditional celebrations of the Bulgarian freedom from Ottoman rule, which was won in a Russian – Turkish war, the Russian ambassador insisted the war in Ukraine was also a similar war of liberation. Incited by such brazen behaviour the radicals from *Vazrazhdane* literally attacked the Prime Minister and the Parliamentary Speaker with snow balls during the celebrations of March 3. The party also led an unlawful removal of Ukrainian flags from the building of the Sofia municipality, hoisted there by decision of the City Council in support of the Ukrainian people. Along with Poland, Bulgaria became the first EU member to which Russia cut natural

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[237] Bulgarian Election Monitor, (https://www.iribeaconproject.org/event/bulgarian-election-monitor).

[238] See: https://www.facebook.com/239611712717792/posts/1436400636372221.

gas supplies at the end of April 2022 after both countries refused to give in to Gazprom's ultimatum and begin unlawful payments of shipments in roubles. This latest episode of Russian bullying came after years of suspected foul play on the part of Russian security services in Bulgaria, including alleged involvement in multiple incidents of explosions at ammunition depots and the poisoning of a major arms dealer.

The increase in pro-Kremlin disinformation and Moscow's energy blackmail of Bulgaria substantially increased the pressure on the new government. Despite facing strong opposition from both inside the coalition and from opposition parties, the coalition government led by *We Continue the Change (PP)* managed to keep the country on a Euro-Atlantic course, aligning its policies with EU sanctions on Moscow. The newly established Ministry of e-Government was the first Bulgarian institution to take an active role in countering the Kremlin's disinformation. It was also the first institution to engage in consistent strategic communication regarding the state of the Kremlin's information influence in Bulgaria and the Ministry's activities to curb it.

Nevertheless, the Kremlin's disinformation managed to undermine Bulgaria's foreign and domestic policy efforts. Just four months after the beginning of the invasion, Bulgaria's pro-Western coalition government lost a vote of no-confidence in June 2022 after ITN, one of the coalition parties, abandoned the alliance and stripped the government of its majority. Notably, the coalition government failed to deliver on its hallmark promises to tackle endemic corruption by implementing comprehensive reforms to Bulgaria's long-ailing justice system. It also struggled to restrain the activities of Kremlin-aligned outlets, some of the most popular of which have been benefiting from government support, as well as poor implementation of ownership regulation, for over a decade. Importantly, the coalition government was also unable to shake off Bulgaria's dependence on Russian crude oil and petroleum products, asking for and being granted a derogation from the EU's oil import sanctions in June 2022.[239]

With the fall of the coalition government, Bulgaria's President appointed a caretaker administration in July 2022, which was Bulgaria's third caretaker government in a little over a year. Just like his previous two appointments of his

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[239] The Sofia Globe: Bulgaria's exemption from Russian oil import embargo confirmed, 3 June 2022, (https://sofiaglobe.com/2022/06/03/bulgarias-exemption-from-russian-oil-import-embargo-confirmed/).

second term, this third government seemed to take an avowedly pro-Russian stance, feeding pro-Russian disinformation and narratives in the Bulgarian public. In particular, the provisional government immediately moved to try to appease Gazprom to restore supplies to the country, in the process implicating the Bulgarian government as the faulty party to the contract, which the Russian monopolist did not honour in the first place. Polls show that pro-Kremlin parties are poised to considerably increase their share in the parliament, following the fourth general elections in two years on 3 October 2022, with its geopolitical orientation once again being put to the test.

Countermeasures

Political parties in Bulgaria generally do not have expertise and do not at all address in their public speaking and proposed policies the issue of disinformation as a form of hybrid threat. Moreover, most politicians misuse the term "fake news" to label their opponents' political messages. Such a combination of a lack of capacity and political focus prevents Bulgaria from adequately assessing the security risks of disinformation and from properly addressing them.

Bulgaria's legal system still lacks regulations aimed specifically at countering disinformation and disinformation-related activities. There is no one government body tasked with or vested with the powers to counter disinformation, or indeed hybrid threats in general. In other words, Bulgaria is still in the preliminary phase of developing an institutional approach to curb the spread of disinformation, as well as safeguard public discourse. The country still lacks the institutional infrastructure to detect, let alone analyse and counter, foreign influence operations and hybrid threats, or to address the critical governance vulnerabilities that enable them.

The Ministry of E-government, established in 2021, was the first government body every to take concrete steps against the spread of disinformation. In cooperation with the cybersecurity unit of the General Directorate Combating Organized Crime (GDCOC), the Ministry blocked 45,000 IP addresses associated with the Kremlin's hybrid operations against Bulgaria in the first week of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[240] The Ministry also drafted plans to establish

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[240] See: https://fakti.bg/bulgaria/656939-blokiraha-45-000-internet-adresa-u-nas-zaradi-zaplaha-ot-hibridni-ataki.

an analytical unit under it, which would be tasked with monitoring Bulgaria's information landscape for disinformation narratives and keeping relevant stakeholders (including government, private companies and media) informed. It also engaged the issue internationally by consulting with the institutions of other countries (such as Estonia, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden) on their experience and best practices. The Ministry submitted detailed suggestions to the European Council on the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA), particularly in relation to the role of large social media platforms.[241]

The Ministry also established regular contact with Meta regarding *Facebook*'s ineffective content moderation in the region, which has led to the unfettered proliferation of recurrent pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives. Similar to the experience of most other European countries, this did not seem to produce any results, as Meta appeared unwilling to provide substantive answers or discuss new means of content moderation.[242]

Bulgaria' Council of Electronic Media (CEM) also moved to impose measures curbing the spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation in the first week of the invasion. On 1 March 2022 CEM made the decision to temporarily suspend the TV broadcasting licenses of RT, Sputnik, and their various derivatives in Bulgaria. This was preceded by self-imposed measures by Bulsatkom, the largest satellite TV provider in Bulgaria, which suspended broadcasting of RT on 25 February, a day after the invasion began.

Fact-checking efforts have also taken off, although at a slower pace than elsewhere in Europe. Launched in 2016, "FACT CHECK" by the online news outlet "Mediapool" was the first fact-checking initiative in Bulgaria.[243] Its focus is on claims made by members of the Bulgarian political elite and other influential public figures, especially on wider geopolitical issues, and it is updated on a monthly basis. The platform was launched in June 2021 as an initiative of the "Association of European Journalists" to counter the growing amount of disinformation in Bulgaria.[244] The team of professional journalists has been checking claims on a variety of topics of public

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[241] Bozhidar Bozhanov: What is government doing to counter disinformation?, 1 April 2022, (https://blog.bozho.net/blog/3907).

[242] Ibid.

[243] See: https://factcheck.bg/.

[244] See: https://factcheck.bg/factcheck-bg-stana-chast-ot-mezhdunarodnata-mrezha-na-proveritelite-na-fakti/.

importance, ranging from concerns about coronavirus vaccines to the war in Ukraine.

In 2021 three other fact-checking initiatives were introduced. These include "BNR-FactCheck" by the Bulgarian National Radio, which is almost entirely focused on the Bulgarian domestic issues and local disinformation narratives. In contrast, "AFP Proveri" by Agence France Presse publishes comprehensive weekly fact-checks covering both international narratives and narratives peculiar to Bulgarian public discourse. Lastly, "Factcheck.bg" by the "Association of European Journalist (AEJ)" in Bulgaria, also founded in 2021, has established itself as the largest and most active fact-checking initiative in Bulgaria. "Factcheck.bg" publishes both fact-checks and disinformation-debunks on national and international topics of public importance on a weekly basis.[245]

Conclusion

The case of Bulgaria indicates that the problem of disinformation must be placed within the wider context of Russia's malign influence and the complete collection of the Kremlin's playbook of influence operations and instruments, which includes various soft, sharp, and hard power.[246] However, Russia's state capture power, and by extension its information influence, exploits and thrives on the democratic deficits and governance gaps of the receiving country. It feeds off social divisions and exploits internal political infighting and populist trends. These include judicial incapacity, lack of media freedom, oligarchizing of critical sectors, and ineffective or poorly implemented laws on anti-corruption, money laundering, and disclosure of ultimate beneficial ownership. Russia's influence also depends on the level of receptiveness and social cohesion behind strategic national goals. Bulgaria is among the countries in Europe, having the perfect mix of high cognitive media capture (very high receptiveness to Russian influence), serious internal social and strategic political divisions, and weak governance and institutions of justice and media independence. Hence, Bulgaria needs to set its counter-disinformation policies in parallel to

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[245] Mina Kirkova: How Disinformation Works: The "Denazification" of Ukraine, 5 September 2022, (https://factcheck.bg/kak-raboti-dezinformaciyata); Kristiyan Julzari: It is not true that an American scientist "admitted" the laboratory origin of the coronavirus, 12 July 2022, (https://factcheck.bg/ne-e-vyarno-che-amerikanski-uchen).

[246] Heather Conley, et al.: The Kremlin Playbook. Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe, Sofia, 2016, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/the-kremlin-playbook-understanding-russian-influence-in-central-and-eastern-europe/).

finally delivering on good governance and anti-corruption reforms. In addition, the country needs to start preparing to respond to the whole complexity of hybrid threats. A good start would be to begin implementing EU's rule of law, democracy and disinformation measures and action plans.

A national security priority for Bulgaria is to start building institutional capacity in identifying, monitoring and countering disinformation-related activities aimed at the country's democratic institutions by leveraging technology solutions and a holistic-social approach. Such efforts will undoubtedly be met with resistance by pro-Kremlin figures and entities, and undermined by long-standing issues related to corruption and state capture. As such, to be effective, any government-supported initiatives would need to feature considerable role for civil society and private companies through public-private partnerships.[247]

The extensive spread of pro-Kremlin disinformation in Bulgaria goes hand-in-hand with the Kremlin's economic and political influence. Thus, counter-disinformation efforts need to be accompanied by policy measures aimed at disrupting Russian economic interests and the informal oligarchic networks that prop them up. The key issues to focus on in this context are related to synchronizing national tools into a comprehensive response system, including investment screening, competition enforcement in critical sectors, such as energy and telecommunications, anti-money laundering, and ultimate beneficial ownership transparency.

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[247] Goran Georgiev, Ruslan Stefanov, Martin Vladimirov: Kremlin influence on Bulgarian Facebook Amid a Global Pandemic, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, 2021, (https://csd.bg/publications/publication/kremlin-influence-on-bulgarian-facebook-amid-a-global-pandemic/).

Disinformation, Propaganda and Fake News in Croatia

By Gordan Akrap

Introduction

Ever since its foundation in the early 1990s and especially during and after the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia, disinformation and propaganda have been a major (security) challenge for Croatia. Despite more than thirty years of experience in dealing with the manipulative use of information, these challenges still exist and still pose a danger to Croatian society. Yugoslavian and Serbian politics (both official and unofficial), for example, persistently tried to impose the narrative that democratization and free, multi-party elections are unnecessary and harmful to the future of communist/socialist Yugoslavia. At the same time, they spread a lot of disinformation, especially in the time immediately before, during and after the first multi-party elections in Croatia (April to May 1990), comparing the Croatian nation and its newly elected government to the pro-Nazi Ustasha regime of World War II.[248] Even after the end of armed conflict disinformation and propaganda activities did not cease. On the contrary, due to the turbulent international environment disinformation intensified.[249]

These historical processes and events form the background and basis for disinformation in Croatia today. Yet, as this paper will show, they are also the reason for the extensive experience Croatian society, media and politics have in dealing with disinformation – experience that has led to a relatively high level of resilience. Some narratives, e.g. narratives about ethnic dispute with Croatia's neighbouring countries, or pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives concerning the war in Ukraine, have thus had comparatively low impact.

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[248] More about in: Ivan Bilić: Kronologija raspada SFRJ i stvaranje Republike Hrvatske do 15. siječnja 1992. [Chronology of the dissolution of the SFRY and the creation of the Republic of Croatia until 15 January 1992], National Security and the Future, Vol. 6, NO 1-2, 2005 (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/volumes-and-issues/id/1129).

[249] More about in: Roman Domović: U zasjedi dezinformacija [Ambushed by disinformation]; HMCDR, TVZ, Zagreb, 2019.

Terminology and Definition of Disinformation in Croatia

There is no official definition, legal or other, of "disinformation" in Croatia and multiple terms, including "fake news", are used in public and media discourse. Neither politicians nor journalists seem to care to much for a clear definition of what they are referring to when using the term "disinformation" or "fake news".

Academic discourse, however, has engaged intensively with the phenomenon of disinformation. Prof. Miroslav Tuđman, for example, has initiated research on disinformation and its negative impact on social processes, with special emphasis on public knowledge.[250] The phenomenology of disinformation, its use and consequences led to definitions and explanations in the context of information and communication sciences. Influence operations (in which disinformation is one of the main tools) have become the primary means in the process of imposing one's will on a selected target audience. Disinformation has been primarily studied by scholars in the fields of information and communication sciences. Today, however, given the new awareness of disinformation and its negative consequences, other academic fields and professions, such as the media, journalism, political sciences or security studies also deal with the issue of disinformation.

Depending on their background and level of academic expertise, authors suggest different definitions of disinformation:

1. Any information fabricated or distorted by a government on a non-attributable or falsely attributable basis for the purpose of influencing the actions of other governments, international organizations, officials, individuals, public or private entities in a manner to further political and military objectives.[251]
2. Double-agent or wartime deception operations all „feed" true, untrue or half-true information.[252]
3. Disinformation prepared by intelligence services for the purpose of misleading, deluding, disrupting, or undermining confidence in individuals, organizations, or governments.[253]
4. Targeted distribution of incorrect information.[254]

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[250] Title of the project: Oblikovanje i upravljanje javnim znanjem u informacijskom prostoru [Shaping and Managing the public knowledge in the information space], MZOS-130-1301799-1999, initiated in 1999.

[251] Leo D. Carl: CIA Insider's dictionary, NIBC Press, limited first edition 1996, p. 170.

[252] Ibid.

[253] Ibid.

[254] Helmuth Roewer, Stefan Schaefer, Matthias Uhl: Lexikon der Geheimdienste im 20. Jahrhundert, HERBIG, Muenchen, 2003, p. 105.

From the above-mentioned definitions of disinformation, and according to the analysis of the goals that disinformation wants to achieve, the following definition has emerged:

"Deliberately distorted, incomplete and partially or completely false information, whose instigator and author are concealed and whose goal is to influence target audience decision making process on cognitive level, to cause harm, i.e. to change their corpus of knowledge in short and long-term."[255]

Prof. Tuđman offered an explanation and an expanded definition:

"Disinformation is deception with the aim of:

    (a) influencing opponents to make wrong decisions and to ensure public support for one's own behaviour, intentions, and decisions.
    (b) discrediting an opponent in the public, with the purpose of securing support for one's own behaviour, intentions, and decisions.

Disinformation has a double task and meaning:

    (c) to justify one's own behaviour, intentions, and goals by wrong (untrue, false) interpretation of other people's behaviour, intentions, and goals.
    (d) to interpret one's own (wrong, missed, or guilty) decisions, intentions, and goals by falsifying other people's decisions, intentions, and goals.

These definitions are very close to the definition of disinformation proposed by the European Commission:

"Disinformation is false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted for profit or to intentionally cause public harm."256

This definition is accepted and used in Croatia in both academic and public discourse. In the media, on the other hand, there seems to be no commonly accepted and shared terminology and definition. Some journalists use the term "fake news", some the more appropriated term "disinformation". In doing so, media and journalists often take some guidance from descriptions used in legal

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[255] Gordan Akrap: Informacijske strategije i operacije u oblikovanju javnog znanja [Information Strategies and Operations in Public Knowledge Shaping], University of Zagreb, PhD, 2011, p. 86.

[256] See: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/de/IP_18_1746.

and normative frameworks, e.g. regarding hate speech, insults and offensive language.[257] The media regulator, the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM), on the other hand, uses the term "disinformation" as defined by the European Commission.

The Target Group(s): Audience and Perspectives of Disinformation in Croatia

A special challenge that media owners, editors and journalists face is the question of truthfulness, accuracy, completeness and relevance of the information and comments they publish. They have also become aware of how strong a negative impact on society and the state can be done by disinformation that begins to work towards a specific target audience. A study on the media, media image and disinformation conducted by Standard Eurobarometer 96 in Winter 2021-2022 has produced the following results (see also table 1):

1. Respondents in Croatia are aware of the danger that disinformation can represent for the safety of society, both at the EU and at the national level.
2. Respondents in Croatia think they can recognize disinformation that appears in the public space.[258]

Data from the Reuters Digital News Report 2022 also indicate a clear challenge that the media, as well as media users, are facing from disinformation in Croatia.[259] Readers and media consumers have a low level of trust in the media outlets active in Croatia (only 38). A majority also thinks that the media are under strong political influence and that the media is strongly politicized, divided, and polarized. This leads to a serious challenge for democratic society: strong and deep media polarization that leads to a possible polarization of society, distrust in journalism, the media and public information. This in turn plays into the hands of the authors and distributors of malicious disinformation using social networks.

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[257] C.f. § 147 and § 149 of the Croatian Penal Code, 20119. These laws do not provide a legal definition but rather a description of the phenomena mentioned.

[258] See: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2553.

[259] See: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022.

QD8 Do you totally agree, tend to agree, tend to disagree or totally disagree with each of the following statements. (%)

The existence of news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false is a problem for democracy in general

	Totally agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
EU27	40	41	11	3	5
HR	42	48	6		3

The existence of news or information that misrepresent reality or is even false is a problem in (OUR COUNTRY)

	Totally agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
EU27	34	44	14	3	5
HR	38	47	10		3

You often come across news or information that you believe misrepresent reality or are even false

	Totally agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
EU27	23	47	20	5	5
HR	26	54	14	3	3

It is easy for you to identify news or information that you believe misrepresent reality or are even false

	Totally agree	Tend to agree	Tend to disagree	Totally disagree	Don't know
EU27	17	45	26	7	5
HR	24	49	20	5	2

■ Totally agree ■ Tend to agree
■ Tend to disagree ■ Totally disagree
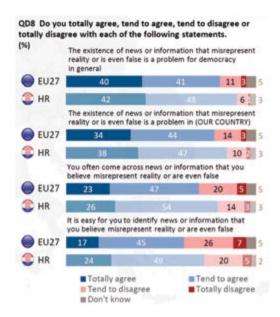■ Don't know

Table 1. Standard Eurobarometer 96 – Winter 2021-2022, Croatia

In this context it is necessary to emphasize the harmful short-term and long-term effects that disinformation can have unless recognized and denounced. Prof. Tuđman offers the following pair of observations in this context:

1. *If the public (user) receives disinformation as true, then the disinformation is true in its consequences.*
2. *If the public (user) receives objective information as untrue, then the objective information is untrue (false) in its consequences.*[260]

These observations lead to the key answer to the questions of the studies are posing: the **most important security challenge** that societies exposed to the malicious effects of **disinformation** are facing is their **inability to recognize, verify and confirm** that they are exposed to the malicious effects of disinformation and influence operations. This may lead to distrust of the population in the mainstream media, de-professionalization of journalism and the pursuit of sensationalism, which in turn may lead to the "collapse of

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[260] Miroslav Tuđman: Programiranje istine – rasprava o preraspodjelama društvenih zaliha znanja, [Programming the truth - a debate on the redistribution of social stocks of knowledge] HSN, Zagreb, 2012.

the quality of media and discourse in Croatia".[261] At the same time, societies that are unable to recognize and accept the truth and objectivity of so-called "warning information"[262] are additionally exposed to malicious effects of influence operations. The danger at hand here is that these societies do not trust the institutions that fight against disinformation by developing early detection, recognition and identification of authors and distributors of disinformation. In this case political, media and societal defence systems cannot fulfil their purpose: to warn the public about dangerous and harmful information that may cause physical (or other) harm.

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples of Disinformation in Croatia

(A) National Sovereignty, Independence and Ethnical Conflict

The Croatian state and Croatian society have been exposed to numerous influence operations and disinformation practically since the day they were born. The goals and aims varied but were primarily within the political, security and social domain. Mostly, authors and distributors of disinformation tried to portray the Republic of Croatia as a neo-Nazi or neo-fascist state that should not exist and should not be recognized as an independent and sovereign country. At the same time, these narratives and terrorist activities tried to equate the Croatian people with the criminal, pro-Nazi-Ustasha movement of World War II[263].

Other, similar narratives tried to discredit Croatian state policy and leadership by assigning sole blame for the bloody disintegration of Yugoslavia to them

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[261] C.f.: Marijana Grbeša Zenzerović, Iva Nenadić: Jačanje otpornosti društva na dezinformacije: analiza stanja i smjernice za djelovanje, [Strengthening society's resilience to disinformation: analysis of the situation and guidelines for action], May 2022, AEM (https://www.aem.hr/nekategorizirano/standardi-i-kriteriji-za-provedbu-javnog-poziva-u-sklopu-npoo-mjere-uspostava-provjere-medijskih-cinjenica-i-sustava-javne-objave-podataka/).

[262] Warning information can be understood in this context as information released to public to prevent malicious influence of detected disinformation activities against selected target audience(s).

[263] For example, pro-Yugoslavian and pro-Serbian media accused Croatian right-wing radicals, neo-Ustasha members, for being responsible for two terrorist attacks, on 19 August 1991, on Jewish institutions in Zagreb. An investigation that was eventually also endorsed by a Serbian court, however, proved that the attacks were orchestrated by members of Yugoslav military counterintelligence. See: Gordan Akrap: Information strategy and Operations in public Knowledge Shaping, 2011, PhD thesis, Radenko Radojčić: Izjava, 1994. [Testimony 1994], National Security and the Future, Vol 10, No: 3-4, 2009, pp. 56.-115 (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/volumes-and-issues/id/1148).

by distributing false or misleading narratives about the Croatian role in the defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The goal here was to disintegrate and divide Croatian society and to discredit institutions and systems that the population in Croatia believed in most (such as the armed forces or the Catholic Church). Numerous such disinformation narratives, their authors and communication channels have been recognized by Croatian authorities and their intentions were publicly denounced.[264] Unfortunately, some of this disinformation, for example disinformation about the battle of Vukovar, still circulates in Croatia and abroad.[265] By persistently repeating these narratives, their authors often try to speak to a domestic audience, pushing for the homogenization of their own public by referring to an imaginary external enemy. One recent example of this general pattern was the attempt of a "private" visit of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to the Jasenovac-Ustasha camp in July 2022. With this move he tried to divert the attention of the Serbian public away from Serbian arms sales to Ukraine following the crash of a transport plane in Greece.[266]

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[264] One example refers to the Battle for the city of Vukovar (August to November 1991) during the war. Here, the Yugoslavian military counterintelligence agency, through its unit for propaganda and disinformation activities (OPERA group), planned and disseminated a significant number of disinformation sent to a number of media institutions. Some of them claimed that Croatian political leadership did not want to help the Croatian defenders of Vukovar because they had made an agreement with Serbian president Milošević about an exchange of the territories; others accused the Croatian leadership of sending all its military help to Herzegovina (part of Bosnia and Herzegovina) instead of Vukovar; yet others alleged that the Croatian leadership wanted to sacrifice the citizens of Vukovar in order to obtain international recognition. One other, particularly cruel piece of disinformation, that was also picked up by the news agency Reuters, read that Croatian Ustasha slaughtered fourty Serbian babies in a kindergarten in a village near Vukovar in November 1991 (https://autonomija.info/na-danasnji-dan-pre-30-godina-vecernje-novosti-objavile-laz-o-ubijanju-srpskih-beba-u-vukovaru/). This particular piece of disinformation was detected and proved wrong very soon; c.f.: https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/editorials/id/1200; Gordan Akrap (2011) PhD thesis; Marko Lončar: (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/case-studies/id/1198) and: Ivica Lučić: (https://nsf-journal.hr/Online-Issues/Focus/id/1071/security-and-intelligence-services-in-bosnia-and-herzegovinabrvolume-1-number-2--summer-2000).

[265] See for example: https://crodex.net/pogledajte-jedan-od-najsramotnijih-priloga/ or https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/franjo-tudjman-na-zahtjev-da-se-iz-vukovara-evakuira-2000-djece-ne-dolazi-u-obzir-nikakvo-izvlacenje/584154.aspx; yet, due to academic discussion and evidence, this narrative lost most of its power (see: https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/news/id/1052/p/1; and: https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/case-studies/id/1199).

[266] On 16 July 2022, a Ukrainian airplane An-12 that carried 11 tons of weapons and munition and an Ukrainian crew from Serbia to Ukraine crashed in Greece. (https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/svijet/grcka-ce-zbog-palog-zrakoplova-srbiji-uruciti-prosvjednu-notu---733674.html); the very same day Serbian president Vučić announced his plans of a "private visit" to Jasenovac (https://www.dw.com/hr/njema%C8%8Dki-povjesni%C8%8Dar-kalkulirana-provokacija-aleksandra-vu%C8%8Di%C8%87a/a-62520219); (https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-vucic-croatia-jasenovac/31947346.html).

(B) Russia and the War in Ukraine

Few pro-Russian narratives were in evidence, before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in the Croatian information space. The authors had strong connections with Russia – examples include Daria Aslamova, a Russian journalist living in Croatia and writing for multiple media outlets[267] – or they lived or worked in Russia or otherwise formed connections with Russian financial, business or academic institutions). However, these narratives were very quickly and publicly denounced as inaccurate, misleading, and tendentious.[268] One prominent example for pro-Russian framing in the context of the war in Ukraine is the portal *Geopolitika* ([269]https://www.geopolitika.news/[270]). This media outlet claimed to be informing the public objectively while in fact uncritically transmitting disinformation alleging that "NATO expansion" poses a threat to Russia. They also consciously "represent Europe, the USA and NATO in a negative light"[271]. One author writing for the portal under the name of "Sophie Mangal"[272] often appears as the author of very tendentious pro-Russian content. "Sophie Mangal" is alleged to be one of several cover identities used by Russian military intelligence service (GRU) operatives for the spread of pro-Russian disinformation. Such articles are also published by the web portal dnevno.hr and its weekly print version, 7dnevno, both of which publish content of questionable veracity that tries to polarize society and the state by advocating right-wing populist political positions.[273] Some journalists[274] and politicians that publicly describe themselves as "centrist" (while often being described as rather leftist) promoted similar narratives in their comments on the topic, claiming, for example, that "in Ukraine, the USA are fighting

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[267] See: https://www.logicno.com/; https://www.logicno.com/vijesti/dopisnica-komsomoljske-istine-darja-aslamova-podigla-je-zabranjenu-zastavu-rusije-na-otvaranju-olimpijade.html; https://medium.com/@zloyodessit2.0/russias-subversive-journalism-with-croatian-passport-what-daria-aslamova-is-doing-in-donbas-28c0b175873c; or: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/kosovo-detains-russian-journalist-border-2022-08-06/.

[268] See: https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/branimir-vidmarovic-o-situaciji-u-ukrajini---704581.html, https://www.forum.hr/showthread.php?t=1283749&page=69.

[269] See: http://support4partnership.org/news/kako-rusija-siri-propagandu-na-balkanu-mediji-kao-glavni-alat-ruskog-uticaja.

[270] Ibid.

[271] Ibid.

[272] See: https://www.geopolitika.news/analize/sophie-mangal-intervenciji-sirijske-vojske-protiv-terorista-na-jugu-zemlje-protive-se-sad/.

[273] See: www.dnevno.hr and: https://7dnevno.hr.

[274] See for example: https://www.portalnovosti.com/ustasizacija-ukrajine, https://www.portalnovosti.com/u-krajina.

against Russia to the last Ukrainian, to the last euro"[275], while other narratives focused on discrediting refugees.[276] Despite such pro-Russian disinformation campaigns, a "realist approach", stating that Russia conducts an unprovoked war of aggression against Ukraine, is the main narrative in Croatian media, society, academia and politics.

(C) Covid-19

The Croatian information space was also victim of several intense disinformation campaigns related to the emergence and spread of the SARS-CoV2 virus and the Covid-19 pandemic.[277] They were aggressively disseminated via social networks, mobile communication applications and non-mainstream media channels[278]. The similarity of the content of these narratives to those spread globally – alleging, for instance, an artificial origin of the virus or global conspiracies behind the pandemic or behind protective measures or vaccination programmes – indicate that there is a connection between their creators and distributors that tends to support Russian and pro-Russian positions and media narratives.[279]

Covid-19-related disinformation and the instrumentalization of the pandemic and public health-policies during the 2020 election campaigns had a significant impact and reduced public trust in public health and other state institutions. This also led to a low level of vaccination of the population and thus to

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[275] C.f.: https://direktno.hr/domovina/beljak-u-saboru-reci-cu-ovo-pa-nek-me-ubije-cia-u-ukrajini-ratuje-amerika-protiv-rusije-i-to-do-zadnjeg-ukrajinca-do-zadnjeg-eura-280069/.

[276] One of the examples of disinformation activities in a context of migration of refuges from Ukraine. (http://www.paraf.hr/mediji-nas-uvjeravaju-da-je-iz-ukrajine-izbjeglo-4-milijuna-ljudi-pa-gdje-su-te-kolone-zasto-ih-ne-snime/).

[277] C.f.: Sigurnosna analiza: bolest COVID-19 izazvana koronavirusom SARS-CoV-2 (šesti dio) [Intelligence analysis: COVID-19 disease caused by coronavirus SARS-Cov2 – part six]; (https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3107).

[278] At the very beginning of the Corona pandemic in Croatia, the Hybrid Warfare Research Institute and Zagreb Security Forum collected many examples for disinformation circulating in social media networks and other communication channels and published a first analysis describing disinformation activities with the goal of decreasing negative influence of disinformation and increasing the public's confidence in the authorities dealing with pandemic. This analysis was published as early as 12 March 2020 and was shared with the most important media institutions in Croatia and in WB6 countries (https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/2089). In this article, we compared information that appeared in a very similar time frame in several countries (Croatia, Slovakia, Italy, Slovenia, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Israel) in which authors using medical titles as a proof of their expertise were sharing disinformation about the virus and the disease.

[279] C.f.: https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/2089.

elevated risk and physical danger.[280] In most cases, authors and distributors of disinformation related to Covid-19 (or to Covid-19 in combination with the 2020 earthquakes in Croatia) are affiliated with the right, far-right and populist political spectrum.[281] Their activism and their disinformation against the state and its Covid-policy mainly took the form of protests against Covid-certificates, protective masks or vaccinations.

Covid-19-disinformation in Croatia has a particularly negative effect on the stability of society and the state and the effectiveness of their crisis management when appearing in combination with disinformation on a series of strong earthquakes that shook Zagreb (22 March 2020, magnitude ML 5.5 and 5.0) and Sisak/Petrinja (28 December 2020, magnitude ML 5.0 and 29 December 2020, magnitude ML 6.2). All earthquakes occurred at a time when protective measures against the Covid-19-pandemic were at their highest levels. The appearance of disinformation in the media after the Zagreb earthquakes did not lead to serious negative consequences because the crisis management system in the City of Zagreb functioned well. After the earthquakes in Sisak/Petrinja, however, there were serious challenges in managing the combined crisis of Covid-19 and the earthquakes as local communities were unprepared. The media's strong interest in the consequences of the earthquakes, the desire of many citizens to volunteer and help the victims and the lack of preparation of local institutions to manage the crisis led to serious security challenges that were further exacerbated by the appearance of disinformation. One such message, allegedly posted by a volunteer helper in the area tried to discredit measures and aid organized by the authorities by describing them as chaotic and inefficient. This was shared through a significant number of media outlets (online primarily) and profiles on social networks.[282] Disinformation efforts tried to discredit the organized provision of aid, to spread disorder and confusion, to weaken the mutual trust between the population and public institutions, to encourage individual instead of a collective crisis management and to cause chaos and traffic congestions on key roads leading to and from the earthquake-affected area. Other individuals distributed disinformation

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[280] C.f.: https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3098, https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3099.

[281] C.f.: https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/hasanbegovic-ogorcen-moje-je-pravo-imati-virus-dok-ce-mjere-biti-na-snazi-moja-noga-nece-krociti-u-sabor-153703.

[282] C.f.: https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/volonter-situacija-je-grozna-ne-mogu-izraziti-bol-i-jad-koji-je-tamo/2243683.aspx.

linking the Covid-19 pandemic to the earthquake, e.g. by claiming that "victims of the earthquake in Sisak are forced to be vaccinated or otherwise will not receive help".[283]

During this combined crisis even some of the leading media institutions did not fully and consistently fact-check information coming from the crisis area.[284] They unintentionally distributed misinformation, causing additional problems for the rescuers. This demonstrates how disinformation can act as a strong multiplier in a crisis or in the event of multiple compounding emergencies.

(D) Anti-EU and Anti-NATO Narratives

Disinformation aimed at reducing the population's trust in the EU and the NATO alliance is rather insignificant in Croatia. This can most likely be attributed to the fact that modern Croatia, from the first days of existence (1990), has been clear and unequivocal about its desire to participate in European and Atlantic integration. Disinformation trying to discredit the Western alliances is mainly distributed by far-left populists such as *Radnička fronta* (Workers Front) and *Ključ Hrvatske* (Key for Croatia), formerly *Živi Zid* (Human Shield).[285] Ivan Pernar, a former member of Human Shield and current leader of The Ivan Pernar Party, openly shares Russian narratives in public.[286] Their influence on Croatian politics and the public, however, is very low at the moment. Other pieces of disinformation that appear in some media outlets in the context of the Russian attack on Ukraine are shifting focus from the Russian attack and blaming the USA and NATO for indirectly being responsible for war.[287]

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[283] See for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eKKEbZorMdk and: https://www.facebook.com/1555571634723027/posts/2875350972745080/.

[284] C.f.: https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/obitelj-tri-dana-gladovala-a-s-druge-strane-kuce-crveni-kriz-kuha-tisuce-obroka-trebali-su-samo-izaci-van-15040357.

[285] See: https://www.radnickafronta.hr/sabor-rh/49-glasanja/1765-stav-radni%C4%8Dke-fronte-oko-primanja-%C5%A1vedske-i-finske-u-nato-2.

[286] See: https://sip.hr/.

[287] Some smaller media outlets are claiming to pursue a so-called "balanced" approach to the Russian aggression against Ukraine, stating that it is a war of aggression, but a war of aggression that has been provoked by the USA and by NATO; c.f. for example: https://www.portalnovosti.com/okruzivanje-rusije.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation in Croatia

All studies, surveys and analyses of the Croatian media market and its fight against disinformation indicate that disinformation in Croatia is primarily and most vigorously spread in the digital domain rather than by analogue media.[288] Hence, digital media are the most important playground for disinformation in Croatia. Print media, as well as leading TV channels, still have a high level of editorial and journalistic quality control and are less likely to publish information of suspicious or dubious content. A special challenge is the dissemination of disinformation using social media and applications for mobile communication in the context of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. This disinformation was not disseminated via mainstream media in Croatia, which, on the contrary, pointed out its untruthfulness and harmfulness. However, sensationalist and tabloid media repeated and spread disinformation published on social media-profiles of individuals and groups that are known distributors of disinformation.[289]

Another important aspect of disinformation in Croatia is that it often originates abroad. Disinformation related to historical topics, e.g. World War II, the Croatian War of Independence and the breakup of Yugoslavia, is very often first spread in neighbouring countries and then retransmitted into the Croatian information space. Examples include misleading information and accusations originating in neighbouring countries about Croatian authorities deliberately hiding and protecting General Ante Gotovina from ICTY prosecution.[290] Given that these activities have been going on for a long time and always use the same or similar narratives, it is interesting to monitor the use of communication

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[288] See: Marijana Grbeša Zenzerović, Iva Nenadić (2022).

[289] One example is Dr. Nada Jurinčić, who wrote a series of comments with questionable and outright false claims about the origin and nature of the Sars-CoV2 virus, lethal cases of Covid-19, about false testing and "forced vaccinations" with a fake vaccine; c.f.: https://www.logicno.com/politika/dr-nada-jurincic-o-koroni-farkomafiji-i-kriminalim-organizacijama-szo-i-un.html; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qddEYgsivVU; https://www.hop.com.hr/2022/07/24/intervju-za-pamcenje-iz-2020-dr-med-nada-jurincic-specijalist-pedijatar-ljudi-zasto-pristajete-na-vlastito-ubojstvo/; https://slobodari.com/izjava-ja-dr-nada-jurincic-s-punom-strucnom-etickom-i-kaznenom-odgovornoscu-o-tzv-pcr-testovima-i-nacinu-uzimanja-brisa-za-taj-test/.

[290] See on this pattern: Gordan Akrap: Informacijske strategije i oblikovanje javnog znanja, National Security and the Future, [Information Strategies and Public Knowledge Shaping], Vol 10, No 2, 2009, pp. 77-151 (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/case-studies/id/1189); (https://www.icty.org/en/case/gotovina); (https://www.dw.com/hr/carla-del-ponte-u-vjesniku-hrvatska-nema-drugog-izbora-nego-locirati-gotovinu/a-2278497); (https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/gotovina-posljednjih-godina-zasigurno-nije-dolazio-u-bih-805532); (https://www.nato.int/sfor/media/2003/ms030620.htm); c.f. also: Florence Hartman: Mir i Kazna, Profil knjiga, Zagreb, 2007.

channels through which they are distributed. This shows that these narratives have become rather ineffective as they are recognizable to experts and large parts of the interested public in Croatia. Therefore, it seems like disinformation aimed to discredit the Croatian state or people often tries to primarily appeal to another audience, e.g. the domestic public in the countries it originates, with the aim of unifying the population against an alleged "external enemy" and of diverting attention away from social, political or economic challenges.

Lastly, there is another important disinformation: Private political marketing intertwined with propaganda activities on the part of some PR companies. This phenomenon very often appears in the context of pre-election and election campaigns and very often uses untrue, half-true or decontextualized information produced to achieve better political results for its customers. Such activities may lead to the radicalization of society with respect to numerous sensitive topics. Again, disinformation relating to the Covid-19 pandemic may serve as an example for this pattern: The government's public health policy, especially protective measures, became one of the main subjects of the opposition's electoral campaign for the 5 July 2020 parliamentary elections. Before the election campaign, trust in, and approval of, the government's crisis management was relatively high but then decreased as a result of electoral campaigning.[291] And even though the government parties won the election, divisions within society intensified and disinformation become more influential, as proved by the increasing number of publications, posts and shares of disinformation on social media and other non-mainstream online media.

Political Context of Disinformation in Croatia

Disinformation in Croatia has multiple causes, multiple goals and different clients, authors and distributors. These can be divided into several groups: First, disinformation with a domestic political background in the context of attempts to retain or conquer power in elections; and secondly, disinformation originating in the neighbouring countries with political, social and security goals. Mainly it involves de- and recontextualization of meaning and content.

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[291] C.f. for example: https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/drugi-dio-ekskluzivnog-istrazivanja-koje-bi-mjere-gradjani-poduprli-i-sto-bi-novcano-kaznjavali---626974.html; https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/istrazivanje-dnevnika-nove-tv-sto-gradjani-misle-o-covid-potvrdama-cijepljenju-ali-i-komu-najvise-vjeruju-u-stozeru---682195.html; and: https://dnevnik.hr/vijesti/koronavirus/ekskluzivno-istrazivanje-sto-gradjani-misle-o-zivotu-u-novoj-normali---603019.html.

Examples of disinformation narratives with a domestic political background are the claims that the *Hrvatska demokratska zajednica* (Croatian Democratic Union, HDZ) is a criminal organisation that corrupts Croatian society and the Croatian state[292], that the HDZ was responsible for crimes in the context of the privatization of the Croatian economy after 1990[293], that the *Socijaldemokratska partija* (Social Democratic Party, SDP) was responsible for the disarmament of Croatia before the war in 1990"[294], that the SDP never wanted an independent Croatia, and similar historical disinformation. Such narratives are often instrumentalized during election campaigning and aim to divide society and the electorate.

Examples for disinformation originating in the neighbouring countries are Serbian narratives about "Greater Serbia" or the "Serbian World," which affect Croatia as a matter of course.[295] The political situation of Bosnia and Hercegovina also plays an important role for disinformation in Croatia. The lack of a minimal agreement about the structure and future of Bosnia and Herzegovina between its three ethnic groups makes BiH very sensitive to disinformation that is spread in almost all countries of former Yugoslavia. Both examples clearly indicate that the breakup of former Yugoslavia and the various conflicts between its main ethnicities (Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks and Albanians) during the 1990s continues to be a very important factor for disinformation today. Other examples can be found in dubious journalistic publications in Bosnia and Hercegovina. The Croatian intelligence services are alleged, for example, to be organizing and encouraging Islamist terrorism in Bosnia and Hercegovina as a pretext for accusing the Bosniak population and its politicians of Islamist radicalism.[296]

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[292] C.f.: https://www.nacional.hr/beljak-hdz-je-korupciju-doveo-do-savrsenstva/.

[293] C.f.: https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/tko-je-opljackao-hrvatsku-komunisticki-direktori-ili-rodijacki-kapitalizam-hdz-a-1586331.

[294] C.f.: https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/jeli-sdp-doista-razoruzao-hrvatsku-kako-to-tvrdi-milijan-brkic-evo-sto-je-utvrdilo-saborsko-povjerenstvo-koje-je-osnovao-hdz-7912224.

[295] C.f.: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpski-svet-srbija-balkan-/31521168.html; also: https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/focus/id/1351.

[296] See: https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/4226; https://www.academia.edu/83560254/_Dis_information_Activities_of_Intelligence_Agencies_in_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina; c.f. also: https://www.oslobodjenje.ba/dosjei/kolumne/dozvolite-da-se-prebrojimo-780657; https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/izetbegovic-ostro-odgovorio-miroslavu-tudmanu-on-kaze-da-je-mudzahedine-u-bih-doveo-alija-ali-je-upravo-obratno-svi-su-dosli-kroz-rh-6505465; and: https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/politika/nevjerojatno-bakir-kao-i-alija-izetbegovic-tvrdi-da-su-mudzahedine-doveli-hrvati-6555240. Croatia did not encourage violent Islamization or radicalization of Bosnia and Hercegovina. During the war in the 1990s and at the request

The political context of disinformation related to the Russian attack on Ukraine, on the contrary, is less important today. Pro-Russian narratives and disinformation on the war were rather quickly identified and rejected by experts, the political establishment and most of the media, which is why their impact in the country is relatively low. Two examples are very instructive: The first involves disinformation activities related to Croatia's intention of building an LNG terminal on the island of Krk. The goal of these activities was to steer Croatian decision-making away from building the LNG terminal since it had no benefit for any Russian financial and energy sector companies.[297] Another interesting aspect of LNG terminal disinformation: Organized protests against the LNG terminal that were accompanied by anti-NATO propaganda with slogans such as "NATO GO HOME! NOW! NO TO WAR! NO TO NATO! ", indicating strong Russian interest in the topic.[298]

The second example was the Russian attempt to gain financial control over Agrokor, the largest Croatian business concern, via a dubious financial investment leading to an uncontrolled bankruptcy, which was avoided after government action.[299]

Russia was also one of the main actors behind the planning and dissemination of disinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic.[300] Particularly active in this

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of international organizations, Croatia allowed free entry, movement, and passage through its territory to humanitarian organizations and its members and took in around one million refugees from Bosnia (https://www.jutarnji.hr/globus/mate-granic-kako-smo-90-ih-zbrinuli-milijun-izbjeglica-297028). At the request of Bosnian president Izetbegović, the Croatian president F. Tuđman allowed free entrance and travel to and through Croatia for members of different humanitarian agencies with Islamic background (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/volumes-and-issues/id/1133) (pp. 11, 228 and 264); (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/volumes-and-issues/id/1132) (p. 113); (https://nsf-journal.hr/online-issues/volumes-and-issues/id/1136) (p. 106). Later, when it became apparent that these organizations were used as a cover and a channel for smuggling mujahedeen fighters into Bosnia, Croatia changed its attitude and forbade work of all of those organizations (c.f.: Ivica Lučić: https://nsf-journal.hr/Online-Issues/Case-Studies/id/1112/bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-terrorismbrvolume-2-number-3-4-autumn-winter-2001).

[297] C.f.: https://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/tko-stoji-iza-tvrtke-koja-je-usla-u-fajt-s-drzavom-oko-lng-terminala-foto-20180308. The government proved resilient against these attempts and did not alter its decision.

[298] See: https://www.vecernji.hr/biznis/tvrdnja-da-iza-gasfina-stoji-ruski-kapital-lazna-je-vijest-1243400.

[299] Cf., for example, an interview by the Russian ambassador to Croatia: https://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/veleposlanik-anvar-azimov-otkrio-zanima-li-se-rusija-jos-za-inu-1148770; on the whole affair see: https://www.vecernji.hr/biznis/agrokor-kronologija-krize-koja-je-obiljezila-2017-1215013.

[300] C.f.: https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/2089, https://zagrebsecurityforum.com/analysis/id/3107; c.f. also on Russian disinformation distributed in the EU and wider public: (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/category/blog/coronavirus/).

regard is the Serbian version of *Sputnik*.[301] Disinformation was especially intensified at the time when organized vaccinations began as well as after the catastrophic earthquakes of 2020, a time the public was exposed to multiple crises. The goal was to encourage popular dissatisfaction with and resistance to the protective measures against the pandemic, to encourage distrust in vaccines, to strengthen the anti-vaxxer-movement, to deny the existence of the disease and to reduce the cohesion and resilience of society.

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Croatia

European democracy is very sensitive and vulnerable. There is a thin line that separates freedom of expression from the abuse of that right. And there is an even thinner line that separates deliberate from unintentional sharing of disinformation in the public discourse. In view of the numerous negative experiences with – and the challenges that Croatia has faced due to – the spread of disinformation in the past, as well as due to analyses of the effects of various influence operations in other countries, Croatia has initiated a series of countermeasure that try to mitigate the negative consequences of malicious influence operations.

One tool to combat disinformation in Croatia are – as in most other countries – fact-checking-initiatives that debunk disinformation, propaganda and misinformation. Probably the best-known fact-checking organization in Croatia is *faktograf.hr*, a member of the International Fact-Checking Network and a fact checker for Facebook in Croatia.[302] *Faktograf* is partially funded by the US National Endowment for Democracy and via different projects of the EU Directorate-General for Communications Networks, Content and Technology as well as other projects.[303] And while *faktograf* figures as the "main" fact checker in Croatia, their articles and editors have been subject to debates questioning their objectivity, bias and expertise.[304] In one case, they were accused of trying

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[301] See: https://lv.sputniknews.ru/columnists/20180809/9061335/biologicheskaja-vojna-opyty-virus.html.

[302] See: https://faktograf.hr/.

[303] C.f.: https://faktograf.hr/o-nama/.

[304] C.f: https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/faktograf-objektivni-provjerivaci-cinjenica-ili-pristrani-politicki-aktivisti-15071471?fbclid=IwAR2xOt0zcbIi4buK03ftRhyFF6D4LeSZ86vZwyvfhDnmsHgYuykgd34Y4p0; https://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/sokantno-indexov-novinar-fizicki-napao-taksista-smetali-su-ga-krunica-slika-ante-gotovine-872168/; and: https://crodex.net/znate-li-koju-je-skolu-zavrsio-petar-vidov-koji-je-na-celu-faktografa/.

to discredit the "competing" fact-checking organization *Infodemija.org*.[305] With quarrels like these and doubts about objectivity, bias and expertise, fact-checking as a tool of fighting disinformation has not yet gained the same standing in Croatian society and media that it may enjoy in some other countries.

The most important institution in the fight against disinformation in the media sphere in Croatia is the Agency for Electronic Media (AEM), a body established by Croatia's electronic media law. The AEM is "*an independent regulatory body that promotes public interest and pluralism of the media, with professional and transparent actions it justifies public trust, encourages media literacy (...) and ensures equal conditions for the development of the media and media freedoms*."[306] AEM actively participates in the work of international regulatory bodies and networks as well as the work of the European Commission's Directorate General for Communication Networks, Content and Technology. AEM is also the central body that conducts research and analysis on malicious information in the media operating in Croatia.

Acknowledging the difficulty and complexity of the challenges that societies face from disinformation, AEM launched a program aiming to strengthen Croatian society's resistance to disinformation, information reliability and safety when consuming media content and using social networks, journalistic standards and media literacy.[307] For example, AEM developed a web portal dedicated to teaching media literacy to children, parents and teachers.[308] This web portal is operated jointly with partners such as media experts and academic networks and is a good example of how the young generation may be taught to recognize disinformation activities. Another part of this project is the organisation of different workshops all around Croatia.[309]

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[305] C.f.: https://twitter.com/nbakic/status/1482705742784352257.

[306] See: https://www.aem.hr/agencija/.

[307] C.f.: https://www.aem.hr/nekategorizirano/standardi-i-kriteriji-za-provedbu-javnog-poziva-u-sklopu-npoo-mjere-uspostava-provjere-medijskih-cinjenica-i-sustava-javne-objave-podataka/.

[308] See: https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/.

[309] For example, as part of the 5th Media Literacy Day in May 2022, 558 events with more than 1,500 activities were held across Croatia. More than 33 thousand participants, primarily children and young people, took part in lectures, workshops, film screenings and other events in kindergartens, schools, faculties, libraries, cinemas, media, and associations. Between 2018 and the present day, 32 educational documents and 20 video lectures were downloaded more then 650 000 times; c.f.: https://www.aem.hr/projekti-medijske-pismenosti/.

In addition to AEM, the academic community in Croatia conducts extensive research on disinformation. Research and analysis activities are carried out at almost all universities in Croatia.[310] Particularly noteworthy are university programs that aim at educating future experts in the social sciences and humanities, law, and the security and intelligence community.

Conclusion

As research and recent examples suggest, the Croatian public and Croatian political institutions are aware of the challenges disinformation poses. This may be due to the fact that disinformation has always been around ever since Croatian became independent in 1990. Nevertheless, Croatia is exposed to disinformation with a political agenda that polarizes society. Apart from historical disinformation relating to the wars of the 1990s and the breakdown of Yugoslavia, domestic political disinformation and disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic were the most important kinds during the past few years. Especially combined crises, such as the earthquakes in Croatia during the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, have the potential to severely damage public trust and cause physical harm. In general, one can conclude that far-left organisations and groups in Croatia tend to be the authors and distributors of disinformation about NATO and EU, while far-right individuals, groups and their media are spreading disinformation about Covid-19 and similar public health and science topics. Yet both are working for the same goal: to undermine public trust in the authorities, democracy, the media and truth itself. Democratic societies are not immune to the negative consequences of influence operations and media outlets (especially those whose ownership is not transparent) can be used as a powerful instrument to exert influence on the public and on politics.[311]

This is why great responsibility rests on journalism as a profession, which must hold itself to high professional standards. Furthermore, the creation of a strong, professional and reliable network of experts from various scientific disciplines who can confront emerging security challenges with guidance and ethical principles is also important. The activities of the Croatian AEM are going in this direction. Supported by the academic community, mainstream media

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[310] C.f.: Marijana Grbeša Zenzerović and Iva Nenadić (2022).

[311] Gordan Akrap, Miroslav Tuđman: Do we need rules of engagement for Information and Media Operations?, IIHA and Akademie für Politische Bildung, Tutzing, 2–4 May 2014.

and relevant NGOs, AEM is working actively on education and provides support (financial, informational, logistical) for the fight against malicious disinformation activities on the national and international levels. Fact-checking, on the other hand, while an important tool in all efforts to combat disinformation, has not yet reached the same standing and reputation in Croatia as it enjoys in other countries. For one of its next project, the government hopes to create a network of relevant, credible experts that will use their knowledge and time to help society fight disinformation, integrated on the national and on the EU level.

Disinformation, Propaganda and Fake News in Germany

By Patrick Gensing

The Federal Republic of Germany is characterised by a relatively high level of trust among the population in politics and the media. However, studies and surveys show that there is an ever more isolated minority that distrusts democratic institutions and the media and produces, spreads and consumes a large amount of disinformation. In these milieus, disinformation and propaganda are widespread, and dubious sources are considered more trustworthy than quality. Recent years have shown that disinformation can influence political debates in Germany and foster immediate effects. This was true during the so-called "refugee crisis of 2015", but also in response to terrorist attacks, public health crises and disasters. Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and even more so after the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022, dealing with Russian propaganda and disinformation has also become an important issue.

Terminology and Definitions of Disinformation in Germany

There is no law or legal text providing any authoritative definition of the term 'disinformation' or any other term describing the manipulative use of information. Some legal provisions, such as the "*Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*" (Network Enforcement Act) often mix and confuse disinformation with other phenomena, e.g. hate speech.[312] Furthermore, there is no authority or institution in Germany that provides an official definition or any sort of official terminology regarding disinformation. Both colloquially and in political and media discourse, the term "fake news" is still very common. At the same time, this very imprecise term is subject to professional criticism since it has become a political platitude and is seriously overused, for example by populists such as Donald Trump or by the Russian government, in attempts to ward off criticism. In academic and journalistic discourse, the term "fake news" is therefore

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[312] See: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/umgang-mit-desinformation/
netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz-1875134.

avoided.[313] Instead, many experts prefer to use the terms "targeted false reports" or "disinformation". The advantage of these terms lies above all in the fact that they refer to the motivation behind disinformation, that is, the intent to spread misleading or false content to confuse or manipulate public debate and escalate existing conflicts.

The German Federal Government provides some official information about disinformation. In order to educate the public it has set up an online page answering questions such as *What is disinformation*, *What is the difference between misinformation and disinformation*, and *Why is false news dangerous*? Their answer is: "*Misleading and false information becomes [...] a danger when it has the aim of deliberately deceiving or influencing people and is spread deliberately. This is called disinformation. The intention behind it is thus the essential difference to false news.*"[314] This definition shows that the most important criterion is the intention behind disinformation, that the public or another addressee is to be deliberately misled.

The term "misinformation", as opposed to "disinformation", is hardly used in Germany. Misinformation describes, for example, grossly erroneous journalism or unclear communication by authorities. The difference to disinformation lies in the fact that there is no intention to mislead. Hence, the danger caused by misinformation can be limited by an ethos of publishing corrections, and reputable media can restore confidence in their credibility through such measures should they have reported incorrectly or incompletely. Such corrections distinguish reputable media from actors that deliberately rely on misleading content to reach their target audience or to place their messages. This guideline is also part of the official German press codex: "*Published news or allegations, in particular of a personal nature, which subsequently prove to be false, shall be immediately corrected in an appropriate manner by the publication organ which made them.*"[315]

Since there is no authority or agency that provides a normative definition or normative terminology, public discourse generates and repeats its own

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[313] See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/353482154_Desinformation_in_Deutschland_ Eine_Expertinnenbefragung_von_Fiete_Stegers_von_der_Hochschule_fur_Angewandte_ Wissenschaften_HAW_Hamburg_im_Auftrag_der_Vodafone_Stiftung_Deutschland.

[314] See: https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/umgang-mit-desinformation/was-ist-desinformation-1875148.

[315] See: https://www.presserat.de/pressekodex.html.

terminology and uses several terms interchangeably. The distinction from other phenomena is not always clear. State propaganda, for example, also uses targeted disinformation to confuse or unsettle the public. In her analysis of totalitarian rule, Hannah Arendt explained that the mass use of lies and half-truths leads to the population losing a common concept of truth, which creates disorientation and constant doubt.[316] Targeted false news, disinformation and propaganda are not new phenomena – but due to the digital revolution and the resulting fundamental change in political communication they have grown in significance in recent years.

The Target Group(s): Audience and Perspectives of Disinformation in Germany

In Germany, it is relatively easy not to encounter disinformation. This is because deliberately misleading reports are very rare or even impossible to find in major quality media. Public broadcasting is a strong, politically independent institution and has the mandate to inform the population in a balanced way and to contribute to the formation of public opinion. Various large private-sector newspapers and magazines as well as television channels also play a central role in shaping public opinion, although the quality of news on private television varies. In tabloids, on the other hand, sensationalism and clickbait, e.g. through exaggerated headlines, are common phenomena that sometimes cross the line to deliberate deception.

Trust in German media is comparatively high. Around 81 percent of respondents of a study on "Credibility of the Media" conducted by the *Westdeutscher Rundfunk*, a public broadcaster, in 2019 said they considered public radio stations in Germany to be trustworthy. Public TV stations, on the other hand, were a trustworthy medium for 79 percent of the participants. In contrast, only seven percent of the respondents considered social media networks such as Facebook to be trustworthy.[317] The *Tagesschau*, a daily news show run by another public broadcaster, the ARD, is the most trusted news source in Germany: in January and February 2022, it was credited the highest level of trust among the German media surveyed –67 percent, according to a Reuters study. The other leading public broadcaster news program, *heute* by

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[316] Arendt, Hannah: Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft. Frankfurt a.M., 1955.

[317] See: https://de.statista.com/statistik/studie/id/68726/dokument/umfrageergebnisse-zur-glaubwuerdigkeit-der-medien-in-deutschland-2019/.

the ZDF, and the class of regional and local daily newspapers followed with 66 and 63 percent, respectively.[318]

While the majority of the population trusts mainstream and public media, there is a minority that is strongly prejudiced against journalists and reporters. Accordingly, there is hostility against media and reporters and the number of assaults during demonstrations has increased during the past years.[319] Journalists who deal with topics such as disinformation or extremism are often met with hostility, insults and threats.[320]

Mainstream and public media outlets are one major target of disinformation. These attacks come from various social backgrounds –pandemic sceptics ("*Querdenker*") during the Corona pandemic, right-wing and neo-fascist extremists or other activists who see the establishment media as a major enemy. Recurring accusations are that public media spreads state propaganda, that they are not independent and that they manipulate the people. Critical circles often compare today`s media with their counterparts during the totalitarian regimes of Nazism or Communism – the expression "*Gleichschaltung der Presse*" for example, alludes to the historical function of the press as Joseph Goebbel's propaganda tool).[321] However, the multitude of false allegations about the media and about journalists has not led to a general loss of trust among the population. It is only a minority who are open to such allegations and whose prejudices are mutually reinforced by reading and believing their own theories. Authors of such allegations often portray themselves as the only objective, ideologically neutral and critical voices in the country. One example is Boris Reitschuster, a journalist and long-time correspondent in Russia who claims to practice "critical journalism, without preaching, without ideology." In fact, his reports on the Corona-pandemic are very one-sided and biased.[322] Media activists of his kind deliberately try to cast unsubstantiated doubt on

[318] See: https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/877238/umfrage/ranking-der-vertrauenswuerdigsten-nachrichtenquellen-in-deutschland/#:~:text=Eine%20Forsa-Umfrage%20von%20aus%20dem%20Jahr%202021%20attestiert,leicht%20%C3%BCber%20dem%20Durchschnitt%20der%20untersuchten%20L%C3%A4nder%20weltweit.

[319] See: https://www.reporter-ohne-grenzen.de/deutschland/.

[320] See: https://correctiv.org/in-eigener-sache/2021/05/03/pressefreiheit-wenn-hass-fuer-journalisten-zum-alltag-wird-tag-der-pressefreiheit-corona-berichterstattung-faktencheck-correctiv-drohung-beleidigung-hatespeech-hassnachrichten-freie-presse-be/.

[321] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/podcast/feindbild-medien-101.html.

[322] See: https://www.volksverpetzer.de/corona-faktencheck/reitschuster-faktencheck-unserioes/ and https://www.volksverpetzer.de/corona-faktencheck/reitschuster-faktencheck-unserioes/.

legitimate media and portray them as untrustworthy. For journalists, this leads to the problem that they are portrayed as stooges of secret powers, a recurring theme during the Corona-pandemic. During this time, several challenges arose for journalism: journalists themselves first had to understand the unprecedented event of a global pandemic, had to build up expertise and find credible experts. When events come thick and fast in times of crisis– like in 2015, when hundreds of thousands of refugees came to Germany, or in 2020, when the pandemic broke out, or in 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine – journalism first has to keep up with the events – and then find the time to reflect critically and question government decisions. Activists who follow strong ideological motives or who only care about gaining name recognition use such times of crisis to present themselves as a supposedly critical corrective to the mainstream media.

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples of Disinformation in Germany

Germany lies at the crossroads between Western and Eastern Europe. It is a global economic power but is less significant politically and especially militarily. Germany's role in international politics is always the subject of controversy. While there is strong support for integration into the EU and NATO and for a close alliance with the USA, there are also wide-spread calls for Germany to take on a neutral role in the dispute between the USA and Russia or China, or even to form closer ties with Moscow. The question of national identity and Germany's role as an immigration country are also big issues that keep showing up in political debates and conflicts.

Germany's political and military integration into the Western alliances, (im) migration, the war in Ukraine and the Corona pandemic have hence been the most important topics of disinformation during the past years. It is at these important political and social breaking points that disinformation intended to exacerbate existing conflicts to destabilise the country can be observed. In recent years, there have been several major issues and conflicts that have led to heated public debates and that have been fuelled by disinformation.

One of these, starting in 2015, was the issue of refugee policy and migration. From 2020, the Corona pandemic was the absolutely dominant topic in the public sphere and the amount of disinformation has reached new heights since then. Factors were the great uncertainty caused by the pandemic, the anxiety

among the general public, the spread of new communication channels such as WhatsApp and Telegram, and an increasing polarisation in discussions about appropriate measures against the spread of the Corona virus. In general, it can be said that all major contemporary social issues that lead to polarisation are accompanied by disinformation. It is interesting to note that since the start of the Russian war against Ukraine many influential pandemic sceptics, denialists and anti-vaxxers have switched their topic, now spreading Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine.

(A) Disinformation after the Russian Attack on Ukraine: Fake Anti-Russian Riots

One example for disinformation after the Russian attack on Ukraine appeared in the spring of 2022. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, various reports of alleged "Russophobic violence" were spread online. While there in fact some real acts of violence against Russian citizens or Russian Germans, the incidents were isolated and few in number. In some cases, their background remained unclear, in others the reports turned out to be unsubstantiated, exaggerated or outright invented.[323] Yet all of these incidents were immediately taken up by official Russian propaganda in order to spread the narrative of a "Russophobic mood" in Germany.[324]

An example of such an invented attack appeared at the beginning of March 2022. In messenger services, thousands of users shared misleading messages about an alleged attack on people of Russian origin. "*Racial hatred in Hittfeld near Hamburg - unknown fascists destroy KVG buses because the driver has Russian roots*", one report on Facebook read. Commenting on a video of a few buses that had been damaged, some severely, the user continued: "*First it's the unvaccinated and now the Russians who are being held responsible for things they have no responsibility for or influence on whatsoever.*" On the Telegram channel of just one anonymous news site, a video on the incident reached about 380,000 views in a few days. There had in fact been incidents in late February in which buses belonging to KVG Stade GmbH & Co, a company in Hittfeld in northern Lower Saxony, had been seriously vandalised. There is, however, no evidence of any political background, anti-Russian or other. Both the company and local police stressed the completely fictitious nature of such allegations. The false reports continued to be spread anyway, by profiles that

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[323] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/report-mainz/ukraine-russland-auswirkungen-101.html.

[324] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/investigativ/monitor/putin-propaganda-101.html.

also shared a lot of similar content.[325] With many videos and photos, date and location remain completely unclear, as does the precise nature of what is actually shown. Nevertheless, they are portrayed as evidence of extreme hostility against Russian-speaking people. The Russian embassy in Berlin as well as the International Council of Russian Germans – whose chairman, Waldemar Herdt, has travelled to annexed Crimea in 2019 and met with the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Marija Wladimirowna Sacharowa – took such disinformation as a pretext to call on the public to report alleged cases of anti-Russian attacks. The Russian embassy claimed on Twitter that it had already received hundreds of such reports, yet never published them.[326]

Along with the questionable reports of alleged attacks, several online petitions emerged that had been started by previously unknown Russian-German groups. A data analysis shows that the first Facebook page to share one of the petitions was a German-Russian motorcycle group. The group's Facebook page featured a man who, according to some sources, was active in organizing public protests of "concerned citizens" following the fabricated rape of a Russian German minor by refugees. This "Lisa case" turned into a public scandal in 2016 with even Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commenting on the case.[327]

While politicians and security experts did fear in early 2022 that disinformation instrumentalizing actual hostility and invented attacks could lead to real unrest, it soon became apparent that there was no wave of anti-Russian incidents and that[328] attempts to trigger protests through disinformation failed. Nevertheless, Russian state media still reaches people in the German-Russian community. Their actual influence remains hard to be measured. Germans of Russian origin, however, reported conflicts in their families and community about the war in Ukraine.[329]

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[325] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/angriffe-russen-fake-ukraine-101.html.

[326] See: https://russische-botschaft.ru/de/category/stophatingrussians/.

[327] See: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/urteil-in-berlin-fall-lisa-endet-mit-bewaehrung-1.3553054.

[328] C.f.: https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/angriffe-russen-fake-ukraine-101.html.

[329] See: https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/russische-community-100.html.

(B) False Reports on Islamist Terrorist Attack in Berlin

Terrorist attacks are also subject to disinformation in Germany. On 19 December 2016, the Islamist Anis Amri drove a truck into a crowd at a Christmas market on Breitscheidplatz in the heart of Berlin, killing 13 and injuring 67. This was biggest terrorist attack in German history. Amri initially managed to escape, but the authorities were able to identify the Tunisian and, on 23 December, Amri was shot dead by police officers in self-defence during a routine check in northern Italy. The terrorist organisation "Islamic State" (IS) spread a message on its website on 20 December 2016 that the perpetrator had acted as a "soldier of the Islamic State".[330]

There were numerous unanswered questions surrounding the attack, for example about the role of radical Islamic communities in Berlin, but also about failures on the part of the intelligence services who had been monitoring Amri for quite some time before the attack.

In addition to public debates about such failures, false reports and disinformation circulated. For example, videos appeared on YouTube with conspiracy theories according to which the Islamist attack had been staged by the German government as a "false flag" operation in order to enforce tougher surveillance laws.[331]. Such stories were spread, among others, by Michael Palomino, who had promoted similar conspiracy theories about the 2014 downing of flight MH17 over Ukraine.[332]

Another narrative claimed that the attack had been staged by the government but that it had not been an actual attack: all those involved were just actors. In this version too, the goal was to legitimise tougher state control of the population.[333].

Another example of targeted false news was a WhatsApp message sent by a Berlin resident warning, a few days after the Breitscheidplatz attack, about an

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[330] See:https://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/anschlag-in-berlin/is-sprachrohr-veroeffentlicht-angebliches-amri-video-14589395.html.

[331] See: https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2018-04/verschwoerungstheorien-sprache-forschung-germanistik-soeren-stumpf.

[332] See: https://www.mimikama.at/anschlag-in-berlin-wirre-false-flag-behauptungen/.

[333] See: https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Anschlagsleugner-Mit-einem-Deep-State-Szenario-wird-gegen-eine-Deep-State-Entlarvung-argumentiert-4505805.html; https://www.heise.de/tp/features/Anschlagsleugner-Mit-einem-Deep-State-Szenario-wird-gegen-eine-Deep-State-Entlarvung-argumentiert-4505805.html.

alleged terrorist cell planning attacks on Berlin shopping centres. According to the police, the false news spread "like wildfire" and further unsettled many people who were already shocked by the terrorist attack. The man later admitted to having made up the news, the police said.[334]

Last but not least, the right-wing populist party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) tried to instrumentalize the attack for political gains. One of the party's main activities since its foundation in 2015 have been attempts to drum up irrational fear of criminal and terrorist refugees and migrants. In the case of the Berlin attack, the perpetrator, who had several criminal convictions, had indeed come to Germany as a refugee using different identities. After the attack, AfD politicians spread sweeping claims about refugees in general being aa major security risk. In addition, AfD officials shared a misleading photo intended to give the impression that a makeshift memorial for the victims of the Islamist attack had been neglected, trying to stir up sentiment against the political system.[335]

Thus, disinformation and false news about the Islamist attack further fuelled the already polarised debates about immigration and asylum policy in Germany. In particular, the above-mentioned made-up WhatsApp message about an alleged terrorist cell caused many headlines and a lot of uncertainty. This example vividly shows how disinformation can work in crisis situations and how important it is to quickly refute such false reports.

(C) Disinformation about Election Fraud: False Rumours Meant to Undermine Trust

Elections are another target of disinformation campaigns. Here, false reports and rumours are intended to shake citizens' confidence in the rule of law. In Germany, allegations of vote rigging have been surfacing repeatedly in the run-up to and immediately after elections for several years. Most of the time, alleged manipulations are mishaps in individual polling stations. Moreover, statements by individuals presented as evidence of systematic fraud have often been ripped out of context. Around the 2021 parliamentary election, there were also warnings of an alleged threat of manipulation.[336] As some disinformation

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[334] See: https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/polizei-ermittelt-urheber-von-terror-geruct-3794323.html.

[335] See: https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/anschlag-in-berlin-afd-verbreitet-fake-news-ueber-verwahrlosten-gedenkort/20624758.html.

[336] See: https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/hintergrund/2021/09/27/diese-falschinformationen-und-irrefuehrenden-geruechte-kursieren-ueber-die-bundestagswahl-2021/.

narratives in messenger chat rooms with tens of thousands of followers claimed, only those who had been vaccinated against Corona or had recovered from Covid-19 would be allowed to vote.[337] One report, for example, claimed that an employee in a local election station in Brandenburg had reassigned votes cast for the right-wing populist AfD to the Green party. An investigation proved that this accusation was untrue,[338] as was the claim that only vaccinated people were allowed to vote.[339] The federal government had also publicly confirmed that "*voting at the polling station is possible without any Corona vaccination or test*."[340]

According to one analysis, the spread of disinformation about alleged electoral fraud in Germany is mainly limited to right-wing radical demographics. In these milieus, however, scepticism and hostility towards democracy and the political system could become entrenched and false reports like the examples mentioned above reach thousands of people on messenger services like Telegram.[341] The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has been analysing the spread and impact of disinformation for years. In a study on the federal election (LINK), the institute found that multiple false narratives and lies were spread around the election. In its report, the experts emphasise that the 2020 US presidential election showed how damaging misinformation and disinformation about the integrity of democratic elections can be for society's trust in democratic processes. Overall, however, the majority of the online community in Germany has proven to be resistant against the delegitimization of elections and their results. In contrast to the US, the online dissemination of such disinformation about election results in Germany is limited to conspiracy theorists and far-right circles, the report says. The same experts explain this limited effectiveness of election fraud disinformation with high trust in the media as well as an electoral and party system that is less prone to polarisation. The same study also points out that even beyond election day, different conspiracy narratives are being combined and linked to each other. Election fraud narratives, for instance, are being amalgamated with "Corona dictatorship" narratives, anti-Semitic conspiracy narratives and a general distrust of established media as well as political institutions.

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[337] See: https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/wie-afd-und-co-das-vertrauen-in-die-wahl-untergraben-4765450.html.

[338] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/wahlbetrug-brandenburg-101.html.

[339] See: https://faktencheck.afp.com/http%253A%252F%252Fdoc.afp.com%252F9NB8D7-1.

[340] See: https://bundeswahlleiter.de/bundestagswahlen/2021/fakten-fakenews.html.

[341] See:https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/an-overview-of-the-electoral-fraud-narratives-used-to-undermine-the-2021-german-federal-election/.

(D) Corona: Disinformation with Serious Side Effects

The Corona pandemic, the related protective measures and vaccines against Covid-19 have been the single most important locus of disinformation in Germany during the recent past. The disinformation proved to be surprisingly adaptable and saw fundamental shifts in its narratives. While during the first year of the pandemic, most disinformation was about the origin of the virus, disinformation shifted its focus to vaccines against Covid-19 as soon as they were licensed in Europe in late 2020. Various types of vaccine-related disinformation were already circulating when only the elderly, other high-risk groups and members of certain professions could get vaccinated. One such narrative spread in the Telegram groups of the pandemic sceptics movement ("*Querdenker*"), Ugur Sahin, the boss of BioNTech and father of one of the vaccines, had refused to be vaccinated. The origin of this targeted hoax was presumably the anonymous media project "Anonymous UK Citizen", which has since been blocked on Twitter[342] but is still active on Telegram.[343] This was classic disinformation based on a completely and deliberately twisted interpretation of his statement. Quotes from an interview with Sahin were taken out of context and turned upside down. Sahin had emphasised several times that he would "of course love to get vaccinated as well" but that the legal basis – namely the prioritisation in force at the time – also applied to him and his employees. It was simply not Sahin's turn yet and he emphasised that he did not want to jump the queue. This, however, was used in disinformation narratives to proof Sahin's doubt in his own vaccine.

Since the end of 2020, false or unsubstantiated claims about alleged risks and side effects of the vaccines have appeared almost daily. Particularly great was the fear that the vaccine could alter patients' genetic material. This is, however, another misunderstanding: the so-called mRNA enters the cell and is "read" there. Afterwards, it is degraded. A change in the genetic material does not take place. Another claim that is spread continuously is that many people have died as a result of vaccinations. Politicians of the right-wing populist AfD, among others, have spread misleading figures. The webpage of the Russian broadcaster *RT Deutsch* featured news of an alleged "vaccination massacre".[344] Over the course of the pandemic, *RT Deutsch* has become one of the most important sources for Corona denialists (so called "*Querdenker*")

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[342] See: https://twitter.com/AnonUKCitizen/status/1467525765474443264.

[343] See: https://t.me/s/AnonUKCitizen/254.

[344] See: https://web.archive.org/web/20210226061855/https://de.rt.com/meinung/111970-ohne-karte-bei-nacht-und-nebel-durch-die-covid-klippen/.

in Germany. However, *RT Deutsch* has taken a heavy blow in September 2021 when YouTube deleted the state broadcaster's videos after repeated violations of its guidelines.[345]

Another disinformation narrative had predicted a mass death of all vaccinated people for September 2021. Even some celebrities, such as the singer Michael Wendler, wrote that "almost all" vaccinated people would be dead by September at the latest, citing a dubious doctor.[346]

The stories of microchips that would be implanted by syringes or a planned genocide through vaccination were easy for most people to recognise as abstruse horror stories. Misleading or distorted reports intended to stir up diffuse fears, however, proved to be far more effective. Unlike in many other parts of the world, however, stories of vaccines being microchip implantation vectors did not reach a broad audience in Germany. In addition to concerns about alleged long-term effects of the vaccinations, it was alarmist reports about risks to children that evidently unsettled many people. For example, an anti-vaxxer-Telegram channel posted news about vaccinations being "experiments on children" in December 2021.[347] Similar stories were spread in 2020 when Corona denialists invented stories according to which children suffocated under masks. Bobo Schiffman for example, a medical doctor and Corona denialist, claimed, without offering any evidence, that two children had suffocated under simple cloth masks. This was an outright lie.[348] While at the beginning of 2021 disinformation still focused on alleged deaths and side effects of vaccinations, the focus gradually shifted and new narratives emerged. Billions of vaccinations worldwide had shown that the vaccines were safe.

It is not the vaccinations but misleading reports and disinformation that show the most serious side effects: several anti-vaxxers died of Covid-19 because they believed the false claims. Scepticism about the vaccines was also deliberately linked by right-wing radicals with abstruse conspiracy theories concerning a "Corona dictatorship" in Germany. Such narratives included crude

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[345] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/rtde-youtube-101.html.

[346] See: https://www.br.de/radio/bayern2/sendungen/zuendfunk/dr-coldwell-hat-uns-verklagt-aber-wir-haben-gewonnen-100.html.

[347] See: https://www.br.de/nachrichten/deutschland-welt/faktenfuchs-behauptungen-zur-corona-kinderimpfung-im-faktencheck,SsQDlUO

[348] See: https://www.volksverpetzer.de/corona-faktencheck/zweites-kind-fake/

and anti-Semitic comparisons of pandemic sceptics to "Jews during Nazi rule" or to anti-Nazi-resistance fighters.[349] Some of them even went so far as wearing yellow "unvaccinated" badges mimicking the yellow stars that Jews had been forced to wear under Nazi rule.[350]

The fuel and glue of this movement was delivered digitally – via Telegram channels, Facebook groups and blogs. Telegram disinformation groups could reach tens of thousands of users, that of cookbook author Attila Hildmann among them. Publicists such as Boris Reitschuster, once considered a respected journalist, reached a large audience online with his radical criticism of the government's management of the pandemic. During the pandemic, the Russian state channel *RT Deutsch* also became a major source of buzz and amplification for the denialist movement, which, at its peak, managed to mobilize tens of thousands of protestors.

(E) A "Flood" of Disinformation

The extreme floods in Central Europe in July 2021, in which many people lost their lives, also showed how fatal false news can be in times of crisis. Parts of Belgium, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland, Germany and other countries in the neighbourhood were particularly affected. In two German regions (Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia) at least 130 people lost their lives. Soon after the flood, heated discussions about the causes and origins of the flood as well as the authorities' crisis management started – and where subject to disinformation campaigns.

Various scientists and experts, such as Ralf Merz, a hydrologist with the Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research in Halle, and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research explained the floods as a consequence of global climate change.[351] Stephan Brandner, politician of the right-wing populist AfD, on the other hand, came up with his own, "alternative" explanation: In an interview, he claimed that in Germany alone there were 25,000 to 30,000 wind turbines, which would "of course also take the energy out of the wind", thus adversely affecting the weather. "I don't want to say now that wind turbines are to blame for the floods," Brandner said, "but the climate is a complex

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[349] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/faktenfinder/ns-vergleiche-antisemitismus-101.html

[350] C.f.: https://www.mdr.de/nachrichten/thueringen/mitte-thueringen/erfurt/urteil-ungeimpft-juden-stern-strafe-100.html

[351] See: https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/panorama/klimawandel-auswirkungen-wohnen-gesundheit-landwirtschaft-100.html.

system and if you change something in one place, it could change something elsewhere".[352] This claim was, however, completely rejected by experts such as Toralf Staud, editor at the science portal *klimafakten.de*.[353]

Other disinformation narratives and activism directed against the crisis management of the local authorities, meant to undermine trust in the state and its ability to manage the crisis appeared in the aftermath of the flood. Accusations read that the authorities and aid organisations had allegedly not acted quickly enough. This targeted disinformation had tangible consequences. According to the police in the district of Ahrweiler, which was hit particularly hard by the floods, a vehicle painted to resemble a police van and bearing the banner "peace vehicle" drove around the area spreading false messages about an alleged reduction of emergency forces.[354] Similarly, videos and messages have been circulating on social networks and messenger services falsely claiming that police and firefighters were largely idle instead of providing assistance.[355] The page *Q-Factor*, for example, reported the alleged discovery of numerous corpses of children on its Telegram channel.[356] These messages spread like wildfire and more than 170,000 users were exposed to the story on Telegram alone.[357] Reports like these had to be debunked by local police. Law enforcement demonstrated connections between the activists trying to undermine the state's crisis management after the flood with members of the Corona denialist and anti-vaxxer movements.[358] These disinformation campaigns showed how populist activists could exploit a natural disaster to deliberately attack the state's crisis management, to create confusion and to ultimately to undermine public trust in the German state and its political system.

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[352] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i3aH9zv_uFw.

[353] C.f.: https://www.tagesschau.de/multimedia/audio/podcast-faktenfinder-klimawandel-101.html.

[354] C.f.: https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/id_90506924/-friedensfahrzeug-als-vermeintliches-polizeiauto-an-der-ahr-spd-will-gesetz-aendern.html.

[355] See: https://geistblog.org/2021/07/22/unter-ahrweiler-befand-sich-der-regierungsbunker-terraherz/.

[356] See: https://perma.cc/497S-QMQQ?type=image.

[357] C.f.: https://faktencheck.afp.com/http%253A%252F%252Fdoc.afp.com%252F9HB7RX-1.

[358] See: https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/hochwasserkatastrophe-querdenker-101.html.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation in Germany

As all case studies show, disinformation in Germany is mainly disseminated digitally. While disinformation is not a new phenomenon, digitalisation and the triumph of platforms such as Facebook have allowed actors to network and to reach new audiences. There are activists who operate in a grey area between activism, self-promotion and journalism and who work with disinformation to make money or to push their political agenda. A few radical politicians, mainly from the right-wing populist spectrum, Russian propaganda channels such as RT, artists such as the singers Xavier Naidoo and Nena and other celebrities such as Michael Wendler also played an important role in spreading disinformation during recent years. The role of prominent multipliers of dis- and misinformation has been paramount in Germany. Only with the help of such multipliers can disinformation leave its native digital echo chambers and reach the general public. During the Corona pandemic, well-known media personalities picked up grossly misleading and false claims about vaccinations, thus increasing their audience as well as their credibility.

Within the German online community, disinformation is spread via various digital channels: While Facebook's relevance in this context is becoming smaller, YouTube continues to play an important role. However, messenger services such as Telegram and WhatsApp in particular have become the most important channels when it comes to spreading disinformation.[359]

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Germany

Since the US presidential election in 2016, the topic of disinformation has become a major public issue in Germany. Establishing fact-checking units at major (public) media and broadcasters was one important reaction. As a consequence of the election and in view of the parliamentary elections in 2017, the public broadcaster *ARD* set up the "*tagesschau*'s *faktenfinder*". In addition, there are various other projects that deal with targeted false reports and the phenomenon of disinformation. For example, the news agencies *dpa* and *AFP*, the investigative journalism NGO *Correctiv*, *ZDF* and *Der Spiegel* also occasionally offer fact checks.

Besides media and journalistic initiatives, regulation of the big social media networks, in particular with regard to either flagging, banning, fact-checking

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[359] See: https://www.vodafone-stiftung.de/expertenbefragung-desinformation-wahl-gesellschaft/.

or juxtaposing dubious content with commentary reflecting a different viewpoint, has become a hotly debated topic in Germany. The pressure on big platform companies like Facebook has increased significantly, especially in terms of demands by politicians. This has led to at least some steps being taken. Facebook, for example, has answered to public and political pressure by establishing a cooperation with fact-checking partners in Germany.[360] Google has promised to foreground fact-checks, featuring them prominently in its search results, and to offer special tools.[361]

A third approach is the introduction of censorship and media regulation. How to deal with propaganda such as *RT Deutsch*, the German version of the Russian state broadcaster, remains an open question Since the beginning of March 2022, RT content is (temporarily) no longer allowed to be distributed within the EU.[362] While some see this as a necessary step to curb the destructive effect of Russian state propaganda, other voices warn about censorship measures as being a restriction of press freedom. "If you stand up for freedom of speech and freedom of the press," Galina Timchenko, the editors of the Russian exile magazine *Meduza*, told the *Standard*, an Austrian newspaper, "you can't ban media, even if they are false and only spread propaganda." With its ban decision, she said, the EU was mirroring the behaviour of autocrats like Putin.[363] On the other hand, Germanies Minister for Culture, Claudia Roth, as well as politicians from most other parties, however, defended the ban of RT: "From the Putin regime's point of view, Russia Today and Sputnik are central instruments in a supposed information war."[364] The Russian war of aggression and the atrocities in Ukraine, which Russia's propaganda dismisses as lies, provide impressive arguments for proponents of the temporary ban on RT – but there does not yet seem to be a strategy for how to proceed in the long term.

The temporary ban on RT content notwithstanding, the broadcaster continues to spread its propaganda via new distribution channels. In addition to calls

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[360] See: https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/ueber-uns/2018/12/17/ueber-die-kooperation-zwischen-correctiv-faktencheck-und-facebook/.

[361] See: https://toolbox.google.com/factcheck/explorer.

[362] See: https://netzpolitik.org/2022/sanktionen-gegen-russland-eu-verbietet-verbreitung-von-rt-und-sputnik/.

[363] See: https://www.derstandard.de/consent/tcf/story/2000134038137/sperre-russischer-sender-umstritten-verboten-im-namen-der-freiheit.

[364] See: https://www.welt.de/politik/deutschland/article237277525/RT-und-Sputnik-So-verteidigt-Claudia-Roth-das-Verbot-der-Propaganda-Medien.html.

to share content, the channel is relying on new Internet addresses similar to its original one. Furthermore, social media profiles, e.g., groups such as "German-Russian Friendship" or "Stand Up for Peace", disseminate links to RT posts and content on Facebook. Russia's diplomatic missions too have become more important in carrying the Kremlin's narratives to the world. The Russian Embassy in London has been doing well with provocative social media posts for years anyway; since RT was banned, Russian embassy and ministry profiles seem to be taking an even more coordinated approach, using retweets to gain reach for each other. After the reports of the atrocities in Butscha, various Russian embassy accounts, including in Germany, posted and shared claims that the Butscha killings had been staged.[365]

What is striking is that the Kremlin's statements on Butscha and other war crimes allegedly committed by the Russian army, such as in Mariupol, are often inconsistent with one another and anything but stringent. On the contrary, contradictory narratives are spread. Some will claim that the corpses were actors, then some others might say that the victims were murdered by Ukrainian "Nazis". This has been the case since at least the Mariupol hospital airstrike back in March: victims were mocked as actors; Moscow denied the attacks; at the same time, claims were circulating that Ukrainian battalions had entrenched themselves in the clinic. It seems as though there were suitable stories readily manufactured for all cases.[366]

The Russian propaganda machine's scattershot approach is a big challenge for journalism, the media and fact-checkers worldwide since it can muddy the waters with a large number of confusing and contradictory reports pushed at the same time, so that in the end various "alternative" accounts stand next to each other. If a story is no longer tenable because the evidence to the contrary is too overwhelming, there are still "alternative versions" that the Kremlin and its supporters can fall back on. In this way, the Russian propaganda machine greatly undermines the effect of fact-checks. It is only slowly becoming clear that the Russian propaganda machine does not want to disseminate its own narrative, but is designed to sow unsubstantiated doubts across the board, so that reliable information is no longer considered credible as a consequence and objective, well-founded discourse is derailed.

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[365] C.f.: https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/truth-or-fake/20220404-debunking-russian-claims-that-bucha-killings-are-staged.

[366] See: https://www.mimikama.at/entbindungsklinik-in-mariupol/.

Conclusion

In Germany today, disinformation plays a role in all major crises: the war in Syria and the following refugee crisis of 2015, terrorist attacks, Russia's imperial ambitions in Eastern Europe, the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the US, debates about climate change. Finally, the outbreak of the Corona pandemic brought a new dimension of disinformation. The Russian war of aggression on Ukraine was also accompanied by massive disinformation. This shows that in the most relevant public debates in recent years in Germany, there have always been attempts to accompany them with disinformation. Russia plays a central role in this context; the Kremlin's propaganda also supports populists who act in the interests of the Russian regime and help fuel conflicts and further polarize debates. Their aim is not to propagate their own content or any one specific counter-narrative to the existing political and social reality, but to destroy trust, sow doubt without cause, and thus foster an overall social climate of mistrust and fear.

This polarization is further promoted by the mechanisms of social media; the principles of social media and populism are symbiotic: expressions of opinion that are particularly emotional and geared toward quick reactions are rewarded, thoughtful and nuanced content is not. Moreover, a vocal minority has built astroturf networks to create the appearance of numbers, gaining unwarranted political relevance and the ability to drive issues.

While new theses appear daily on social media, it often takes days for targeted false reports to be refuted. Disinformation therefore always has a head start in terms of time. This makes it all the more important to educate as many people as possible about the mechanisms and goals of disinformation so that its destructive effect cannot unfold in the first place. Journalism can make a contribution, but it cannot win the fight against disinformation alone. At a time when every person on social media is not only a consumer, but also a producer, we do not need state intervention, but media competence and trust in legitimate media institutions to win the battle against disinformation – and thus defend democracy and the liberal constitutional state.

Kosovo: Frequent Disinformation and a Fertile Ground for Manipulators

By Dren Gërguri

Introduction

Disinformation and propaganda have become part of everyday life for the citizens of Kosovo. Until the emergence of COVID-19, election campaigns were the periods when all sorts of manipulated information (disinformation, misinformation, political propaganda and campaigning) exploded. This has changed with the appearance of the COVID-19 virus. One of the consequences of this virus in the information environment is the daily circulation of misinformation or disinformation. Today, the moment a topic is of interest to the public, in addition to the news, a new wave of disinformation and propaganda will appear.

The origin of the virus, the effects of the virus, vaccines against the virus, and the effects of vaccination are some of the misinformation-laden narratives that have been produced in the past two years on the subject of COVID-19. Meanwhile, every government decision related to the Serbian population in the north of Kosovo is accompanied by disinformation and propaganda, as was the wave of disinformation after the start of the war in Ukraine. All these manipulated information, on any topic, undoubtedly create confusion in the general public, which would often be the goal of those who manipulate information. This confusion then leaves room for different interest groups (political, business, etc.) to extract different benefits – financial, political or ideological profits.

"Fake News" - The most popular Term in Kosovar Society

In Kosovo, as in many other countries, the most widespread term for the manipulation of information in society is 'fake news'. Citizens use this term for all manipulated information, not distinguishing between disinformation and misinformation. In the media discourse, this varies, because there are journalists who use the term 'fake news' while others prefer 'disinformation' or

'misinformation'. In scholarly articles and publications, the term 'information disorder' is also found, in addition to the three terms mentioned above.

Why is the Term 'Fake News" the most popular in Kosovo?

One of the keywords for the 2016 US presidential election was 'fake news'. This term was used a lot by President Trump. His example was then followed by prominent participants in public discourse in Kosovar society as well. Thus, 'fake news' reached every household, much faster than the words 'disinformation' and 'misinformation', which began to be used by researchers and some journalists in order to be more specific about the type of manipulation.

The search trend on Google for Fake News varies, but it is noticeable that it has increased in the last three years. This was mainly influenced by two factors, the general elections held in 2019 and 2021 and the local elections in 2021, as well as the appearance of the pandemic in Kosovo in March 2020.
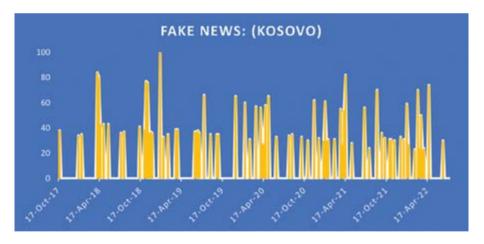

Figure 1: The frequency of 'fake news' for the territory of Kosovo in Google Trends (2017-2022). Source: Google Trends, accessed July 20, 2020, https://www.google.com/trends.

This terminology is also used in different forms by the two media regulatory bodies in Kosovo, the *Independent Media Commission* (IMC), an independent institution charged with "regulation, management and supervision of the

broadcasting frequency spectrum in the Republic of Kosovo"[367], and the Press Council (PC), a self-regulatory body established in 2005 that includes some of the country's online media.[368] In 2016, the Independent Media Commission approved the Code of Ethics for media service providers,[369] where article 6 deals with the accuracy of the news. "*Media Service Providers* (MSPs)" have to report the news accurately and present them in an impartial manner. They must not broadcast material that they know or should know is false or misleading."[370] The institution does not use any of the above-mentioned terms in the Code, however. The document does not contain the words "disinformation" or "misinformation", neither does it contain "fake news". Meanwhile, a May 2022 update to the Code of Ethics published by the Press Council has added a part to the second chapter, "Reporting the Truth", that focuses on "fake news". (It does not, however, define the term).[371] PC thus uses the term 'fake news' when it refers to the manipulation of information.

The parts of the legal framework of the Republic of Kosovo dealing with the issue of media and information do not use the terms 'disinformation', 'misinformation', or 'fake news'. Disinformation in Kosovo, in legal terms, is sanctioned based on the *Civil Law on Defamation and Insult*, adopted in 2008. According to the law, defamation "means the publication of a untrue factual statement that its publisher knows or should have known to be untrue and that injures another person's reputation". [372]

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[367] Independent Media Commission, About the IMC, (https://www.kpm-ks.org/en/kpm/311/per-kpm/311).

[368] Press Council of Kosovo, About us, March 2015, (https://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/?lang=en).

[369] Independent Media Commission, Code of Ethics for Media Service Providers in the Republic of Kosovo, March 2016, (https://www.kpm-ks.org/assets/cms/uploads/files/Legjislacioni/1493714855.8029.docx).

[370] Independent Media Commission, IMC 2016/3, Code of Ethics for Media Service Providers in the Republic of Kosovo, March 2016, (https://www.kpm-ks.org/assets/cms/uploads/files/Legjislacioni/1493714855.8029.docx).

[371] Press Council of Kosovo, PRESS CODE OF KOSOVO, (http://presscouncil-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/presscode_design_47x10.5_EN_May-2022.pdf).

[372] Law No. 02/L-65, Civil Law Against Defamation and Insult, (https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2503).

Reasons for (not) using the Term 'Fake News'

There are two main reasons why the term 'fake news' should not be used to cover disinformation and misinformation. For one thing, people tend to use the term indiscriminately. Some call untrue information 'fake news', some use the term to refer to information they think is suspicious, others to information that has been manipulated. In fact, politicians sometimes describe inconvenient news items as 'fake news' in a reflexive attempt to discredit them.

The second reason is related to the meaning of the word news. An item being 'news' means that the item shows something that has happened. The word 'lie' means the act of hiding the truth and telling something that is not true. An item thus cannot be both news and fake at the same time, because there is a contradiction within this phrase: a thing is either News or it is a Lie.

Another question, meanwhile, is how to act when 'fake news' is confused with satire or parody, which is information that is manipulated, but not with the intention of causing harm. To avoid this issue, the terms 'disinformation' or 'misinformation' can be used to increase clarity. The difference between disinformation and misinformation is their aim and intention: Disinformation is the intentional manipulation of information or fabrication to harm and mislead people, while misinformation is information that is false or misleading other than by design.[373]

Journaliststs' Gatekeeper Role, Information-Seeking Habits and Multipliers of Disinformation in Kosovo

Disinformation is a daily challenge for society, the media, and journalists. It is no longer enough for the journalist to carry out the task of keeping society informed. Today's information can reach the public and the journalist at the same time. The journalist is no longer able to fulful his traditional gatekeeper role. The journalist must still try to convey all information while preparing the news, respecting professional and ethical standards, however. This is more difficult to achieve, but there are cases of Kosovar journalists succeeding. One case in port involves a report that circulated on Facebook about an alleged

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[373] C.f.: Dren Gërguri: Fake News, çrregullimet informative në epokën digjitale (Prishtinë: Dukagjini, 2022).

terrorist attack in Kosovo, which was refuted by journalists' reporting.[374] Another example involves a doctored photo that alleged, under the logo of the newspaper *Gazeta Express*, a cooperation agreement pertaining to the 2019 elections between the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK), the largest party in government after the 2017 elections, and Lëvizja Vetëvendosje (LVV), the largest opposition party and thus the PDK's main opponent at the time. This too was refuted by online media.[375]
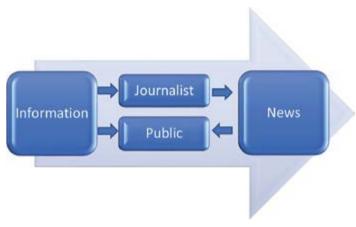

Figure 2: The role of the journalist as a 'gatekeeper' in the age of digital media. Source: Author

The high level of use of the internet and social media has created favourable conditions for those who spread misinformation, especially considering the lack of media literacy and critical judgment towards media content among a majority of society.

This has added one additional responsibility for journalists: journalists can no longer be content with verifying the information they publish themselves but need to go a step further and verify news published by others, for instance on the various social media pages or groups. Journalists must debunk misinformation produced by others and strive to keep society well informed. They must thus defend society against manipulated information that can be produced by individuals or certain social groups, or even sponsored by the state.

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[374] Syri.net: Mos i besoni mesazhit se në Kosovë do të ketë sulm terrorist: Është FAKE news [Do Not Believe the Message That Says There Will be a Terrorist Attack in Kosovo: It is FAKE News], 01 December 2021.

[375] See: https://www.facebook.com/GazetaExpress/posts/10156490513781711.

In addition, various forms of disinformation, including audio-visual manipulation, have made it necessary for newsrooms to hold occasional training sessions with journalists to make sure than journalists are up to date with respect to the latest technological developments and know how to use the latest tools for checking photographs or videos for manipulation. This is a practice that is missing in most media offices in Kosovo, even though their encounters with manipulated information is inevitable and extensive. A report by the Press Council in Kosovo from July 2022 recommends that "journalists and editors should be given more opportunities for training in fact-checking, deconstructing fake news and dealing with questionable sources of information."[376]

On the other hand, society is often faced with disinformation narratives that aim to create wrong beliefs about certain issues, or to distort the truth to create confusion and fog. The lack of critical judgment on the part of citizens means they are facing misinformation unarmoured and unarmed, making them vulnerable to manipulation. In Kosovo, education, gender, and economic status have been important factors determining the way citizens analyze the information they receive. A study by Qerimi and Gërguri[377] has come to the conclusion that citizens with less formal education and weaker economic status are more inclined to believe disinformation than those with more formal education and better economic status. The same study has diagnosed a gender disparity: in Kosovo, women are more vulnerable to disinformation than men. These findings show that Kosovo is a favourable environment for those who want to spread disinformation and benefit from it, either economically or in other ways.

Although the issue of media literacy has been discussed in Kosovo for more than a decade, the Ministry of Education has not yet been convinced to add the subject of media literacy to pre-university school curricula as a compulsory subject. Currently, classes on media literacy are elective and are taught in but a few schools in Kosovo. Moreover, there is no national curriculum. Together with the lack of current and suitable literature available in the Albanian language, this makes it extremely difficult to develop the subject of media literacy

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[376] See: https://www.presscouncil-ks.org/kmshk-publikoi-raportin-mbi-keqinformimin-dezinformimin-dhe-lajmet-e-rreme/.

[377] Gëzim Qerimi & Dren Gërguri: Infodemic and the crisis of distinguishing disinformation from accurate information: Case study on the use of Facebook in Kosovo during COVID-19, in: Information & Media, p. 94.

in Kosovo's schools. Any delay in this direction will result in more societal difficulties and disorders. Time is running short for institutions to become aware of this issue and to develop strategies and curricula for teaching young people.[378] The Ministry of Education has included media literacy in a five-year draft Strategic Plan for education as part of its digitalization efforts, a plan which also includes competence building for educators and teachers and the use of digital content in the education sector.[379] However, media literacy is about more than just the digitalization of books. As such, it is still not properly included in this strategy in the way that Kosovar society needs: an extension of media literary training to the entire educational system, making sure than all young people everywhere are taught about media, lead about their access and use, and develop critical judgment. In addition, efforts should be made to spread media literacy skills to other age groups, from those who have recently completed their education to the elderly – an age group quite vulnerable to misinformation.

All these gaps cause the public to be targeted frequently and in a variety of forms with manipulated information. People tend to more easily accept information that reinforces their preconceived beliefs and, unless they are used to critically analyzing what they are told, can easily allow themselves to be manipulated and deceived

In the early stage of COVID-19-pandemic, disinformation was aimed at people who did not believe the virus existed. For example, in a July 2020 survey, 29% of respondents stated that they did not believe COVID-19 existed in Kosovo.[380] Later on, the main target group for Covid-disinformation were people undecided about or opposed to vaccinations. Yet, it is quite interesting to note is that, unlike in many other countries, there never developed an anti-vaccine movement of any significance in Kosovo. What few anti-vaccination protests there were failed to attract a large number of participants.[381]

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[378] Remzie Shahini-Hoxhaj, Arben Fetoshi, Muhamet Jahiri: Media and Information Literacy as high societal priority in Kosovo, presentation, 4th International Media Literacy Research Symposium, Madison, USA, June 27–28, 2022; also: Faton Ismajli: Faji është te mungesa e edukimit, jo krejt te mediat, Hibrid.info, 31 May 2020 (https://hibrid.info/faji-eshte-te-mungesa-e-edukimit-jo-krejt-te-mediat/).

[379] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWrG7fR8PgQ.

[380] See: https://telegrafi.com/sondazh-nga-pyper-29-03-per-qind-e-qytetareve-nuk-besojne-se-covid-19-ekziston-ne-kosove/.

[381] See: https://www.gazetaexpress.com/qytetaret-ne-prishtine-protestojne-kunder-vaksinimit-te-detyrueshem/.

Information-seeking habits have however changed significantly since the pandemic: "*From 5% who have 5 hours or more during the day being informed, this percentage has tripled after the appearance of COVID-19, reaching 15%*".[382] In addition, social media use is common in Kosovo,[383] therefore even those who produced and distributed disinformation mostly did so through social media: profiles, pages, or various and sundry groups. A piece of misinformation about COVID-19 disseminated in the Albanian language could reach over 13k interactions on social media[384] in Kosovo and other states in the region where Albanian is spoken.

Facebook is the main platform used for disinformation, partially due to the large number of users it has in Kosovo, nearly 900 thousand.[385] Facebook pages made to appear like legitimate media outlets on the one hand, trolling on the other hand are the two most frequently used tactics for disseminating misinformation. Facebook allows anyone to pose as a media outlet simply by placing their page in the "media" category. Facebook makes no attempt to verify whether the page in question belongs to a real journalistic institution doing actual reporting. The easy with which a page whose title includes the word "news" can be placed in the "news & media websites" section facilitates fraud.

Fake profiles, trolls, and bots are used to interact with posts so that citizens are fooled by the numbers of likes, comments, and shares, which "*may lead people to think that, as long as that information is so widespread, it may be true, but in fact, everything is an illusion created by bots or trolls*".[386] In most cases it is very difficult or even impossible to identify is the actors behind the digital disinformation, although the content and the narratives created or supported often suggest that the creators may affiliated with a certain political party or a certain interest group. Meanwhile, when citizens contribute to the spread of misinformation, they often do so without realizing that they are falling

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[382] Gëzim Qerimi & Dren Gërguri: Infodemic and the crisis of distinguishing disinformation from accurate information: Case study on the use of Facebook in Kosovo during COVID-19, in: Information & Media, p. 94.

[383] Alban Zeneli: Fragmentation of the Media Audience in Kosovo in the Era of the Internet, Journal of Media Research, 13(36), 2020.

[384] Dren Gërguri: Top 5 Disinformation during COVID-19 in Albanian language, May 2020, (https://drengerguri.com/top-5-disinformations-during-covid-19-in-albanian-language/).

[385] See: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kosovo#:~:text=Data%20published%20in%20Meta's%20advertising,in%20Kosovo%20in%20early%202022.

[386] Dren Gërguri: Fake News, çrregullimet informative në epokën digjitale (Prishtinë: Dukagjini, 2022), p.119

prey to manipulation. Qerimi and Gërguri, in their study, found that citizens failed to distinguish between false and true news[387] and therefore spread misinformation believing it to be real. Consumers' inability to distinguish between fake news and real news and the lack of critical judgment towards the media content they are exposed to are things that various actors can take advantage of in order to deliberately create wrong beliefs in society that can result in wrong actions by citizens on certain issues. The wide variete of actors that can be involved includes institutions such as the Russian Embassy in South Africa[388] which on one occasion used a manipulated photo in one of their propaganda tweets against NATO and Kosovo.

Figure 3: Collage of altered picture published by Russian state institutions in 2021, compared to the original published by Reuters in 1999.[389]

The tweet in question was not the first time that this photo had been used for propaganda. The same photo appeared in material pushed by RIA Novosti, a Russian state news agency, in August 2014. Clearly, the media is an important tool that can be misused to promote certain kinds of propaganda.

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[387] Gëzim Qerimi & Dren Gërguri: Infodemic and the crisis of distinguishing disinformation from accurate information: Case study on the use of Facebook in Kosovo during COVID-19, in: Information & Media, p. 94.

[388] See: https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1374653660240695298.

[389] Damir Sagolj: 30 years of Reuters Pictures: Part one, (https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/30-years-of-reuters-pictures-part-one).

РИА Новости Рат у Украјини 2014. и у Југославији 1999.

Figure 4: Screenshot of Russian state news agency 2014 broadcast, using a doctored image of Sherife Luta.[390]

Narratives of Disinformation and their Political Context in Kosovo

Kosovar society has found itself challenged by various forms of information disorder in recent years. The pre-pandemic period in Kosovo is characterized by two types of large disinformation campaigns. In the domestic domain, the country was inundated with disinformation during the 2019 election cycle. Citizens were exposed to various kinds of misinformation about daily politics with the aim of influencing their vote. In the external domain, disinformation campaigns were wages attacking Kosovo as such – mainly from Serbia, but sometimes also with Russian involvement. The emergence of the pandemic changed the information environment, often contaminating it even more with false information that produced or supported false narratives.

Case Studies

(A) COVID-19 Disinformation
The spring of 2020 brought a huge wave of misinformation about the COVID-19 virus. The daily presence of disinformation about the pandemic was a radical change – previously, disinformation used to be pushed at different specific occasions, but not daily. This daily misinformation about COVID-19

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[390] Centar za geostrateške studije, РИА Новости Рат у Украјини 2014. и у Југославији 1999. (https:// www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OLu4EYqEjk&t=146s).

found Kosovar society unprepared to withstand the constant exposure to manipulated information. Its effects on the convictions or actions of Kosovar citizens were evident at times. They were particularly noticeable in the context of a survey of Kosovar citizens a few months into the pandemic, the survey finding that 29% of those polled did not believe that COVID-19 was real.[391] Citizen's vaccine hesitancy[392] can also be credited to misinformation about the alleged harmful effects of vaccination.

Disinformation regarding the origin of the virus, disinformation painting Kosovo's health institutions as incapable of managing the situation, and various kinds of misinformation about vaccines were used to build false narratives regarding public health.[393] Disinformation narratives with global reach were translated into Albanian and disseminated in the Kosovar information environment. Conspiracy theories about an artificial origin of the virus and about vaccinations implanting microchips went as viral in Kosovo as they did elsewhere.[394] In addition to global disinformation translated into Albanian there was misinformation of local origin. Examples include the case of Daut Demaku, an Albanian writer who published a video statement claiming that the use of garlic from Rahoveci would offer protection against COVID-19. The video earned around 600 thousand views and generated over 11 thousand interactions such as likes, comments and shares.[395]

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[391] See: https://telegrafi.com/sondazh-nga-pyper-29-03-per-qind-e-qytetareve-nuk-besojne-se-covid-19-ekziston-ne-kosove/.

[392] See: https://kosovapress.com/pse-qytetaret-e-kosoves-hezitojne-te-vaksinohen/.

[393] Rexhep Maloku: Virusi i rrenave, Koha Ditore, 22 March 2020; Krenare Cubolli: Cila është vaksina për dezinformata?, Radio Evropa e Lirë, 11 April 2021.

[394] See: https://fol.mk/doktori-amerikan-trondit-boten-tregon-te-verteten-e-koronavirusit-nuk-ka-vdekur-asnje-jane-manipulime-me-vaksinen-do-na-vrasin/?fbclid=IwAR046zQb-jPMRsYcJeDvoEUT2rTm9ApLaapMxRqSK4_CaEFDjToACcxilKSY).

[395] See: https://www.facebook.com/146297427325/videos/1290483941140240/.

Figure 5: Top 5 Disinformation in the Albanian language during COVID-19 (March-April 2020)[396]

Facebook pages and groups were the main conduits of disinformation about COVID-19 all over the world, and a number of sites of this kind were created targeting Kosovo once the pandemic reached the country. Most of them were sharing disinformation more for financial intent than to delegitimize democracy or the government. Their content was not political per se but mainly dealt with the virus as such, the vaccine, etc. These Facebook pages and groups presented themselves as media outlets in order to appear more trustworthy, expand their network and get more clicks on their posts.

(B) Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia
Another notable narrative has to do with Kosovo's relations with Serbia. False narratives are being created by Russia and Serbia about NATO's intervention in Kosovo, the alleged mistreatment of Serbian citizens in Kosovo, and Kosovo's alleged preparations for war against Serbia. These false narratives have been around for over a decade, and disinformation campaigns to reinforce these narratives are activated time and time again.

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[396] Dren Gërguri: Top 5 Disinformation during COVID-19 in Albanian language, May 2020, (https://drengerguri.com/top-5-disinformations-during-covid-19-in-albanian-language/).

Figure 6: Doctored image used on Twitter by Russian Embassy in South Africa. The 2021397 tweet is on the left and the 2022398 tweet is on the right. Source: Twitter

Russia and Serbia constantly try to spread the false narrative that 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia was wrong and illegal. In addition to manipulating the Russian or Serbian public, disinformation that supports this narrative is also spread in other countries, as was the case with tweets (figure 5) made by the Russian Embassy in South Africa on the anniversary of the NATO bombing. For two consecutive years now, this institution used manipulated photographs to further anti-NATO and anti-Kosovo propaganda. In March 2021, the same Russian Embassy used a manipulated photo of an Albanian refugee, misidentifying her as a Serbian victim of the NATO bombing. In March 2022, the very same Russian diplomatic body used a photo from the Iraq war while referring to the NATO bombing of Serbia. The same photo was also used by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia a few days later. [399] The Ministry, however, eventually deleted the tweet in question[400] and later posted a new tweet without the manipulated image.[401]

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[397] See: https://twitter.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1374653660240695298?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

[398] See: https://twitter.com/embassyofrussia/status/1504428496931672067?lang=en.

[399] See: https://twitter.com/DanielS18352008/status/1507157418031169538/photo/1.

[400] See: https://twitter.com/DanielS18352008/status/1507157418031169538/photo/2.

[401] See: https://twitter.com/MFASerbia/status/1507017590366871572.

Figure 7: A tweet from the Serbian Ministry of Affairs in March 2022, using a photo from the Iraq war[402]

Meanwhile, various media outlets in Serbia often misinform that Kosovo is allegedly preparing for war, keeping the possibility of war in the public consciousness and generally manipulating perceptions in ways that suit the propagandists.

Figure 8: Front page of Serbian newspapers on 4 July 2022, "Srpski Telegraf" and "Objektiv"

The Serbian press reported about Kosovo's fictitious preparations for war in the summer of 2022. The narrative was reinforced by public statements on the part of of the Serbian heads of state.[403]

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[402] See: https://twitter.com/DanielS18352008/status/1507157418031169538/photo/1.

[403] See: https://euronews.al/en/balkans/2022/07/08/petkovic-kurti-wants-to-denigrate-serbs-in-kosovo-he-should-return-to-dialogue/; and https://www.srbijadanas.com/vesti/kosovo/pripremaju-likvidacije-nasih-ljudi-na-kosovu-vucic-upozorio-pristiinu-i-zapad-ne-pomisljajte-da-2022-08-11.

The *Informer*, a daily tabloid, fabricates stories about attacks on the Serbs that Kosovo is supposedly planning[404] and on Prime Minister Kurti supposedly calling for war[405]. *Srpski Telegraf*, another daily newspaper, propagandizes with a headline claiming that "Kurti calls for war in Kosovo, calls the Serbs criminals, threatens the integration of the north" (see figure 7), while *Objektiv* carries a frontpage headline announcing that "Kurti calls for WAR", the word 'war' being printed in red (see figure 7). The idea that Kurti is calling for war is brought up again in August by Petar Petkovic, an official of the Serbian state.[406]

When tensions regarding the situation in the north of Kosovo flared up at the end of July, following Kosovo's decision to reciprocate against Serbian treatment of Kosovar travel documents starting in August, the disinformation campaign about the possibility of another war in Kosovo resurfaced. The previous declarations of the Serbian heads of state and the earlier disinformation that circulated in the Serbian media had already created the impression that there could be a war in Kosovo and, considering the tension in the northern part of Kosovo, Serbian propaganda seemed determined to make it a reality. During the July campaign, Telegram was used as a propaganda tool: multiple profiles distributed misinformation in a coordinated manner, some stating that the Serbian army was ready for war, some claiming that the Kosovar army was about to attack the Serbs in the Kosovar north.[407]

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[404] See: https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/717286/kosovo-metohija-albin-kurti.

[405] See: https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/716649/kurti-priziva-rat-srbe-kim-predstavlja-kao-kriminalce-zlocince-najavljue-integrisanje-severa-vucic-ovo-jasno-upozorio.

[406] See: https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/kurti-zvecka-oruzjem-i-priziva-rat-petkovic-na-delu-sinhronizovana-kampanja-protiv/zp186fn.

[407] See: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-rusija-telegram-proruski-drustvene-mreze-dezinformacije/31969041.html.
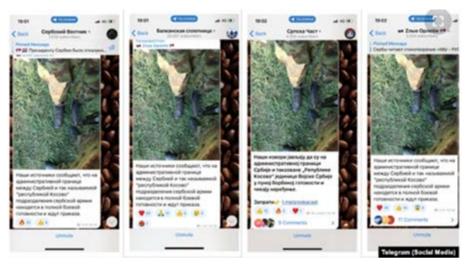
Figure 9: Screenshots of different Telegram profiles where disinformation was shared. Source: https://www. slobodnaevropa.org/a/kosovo-rusija-telegram-proruski-drustvene-mreze-dezinformacije/31969041.html.

A study of 200,000 Telegram posts conducted by the Oxford Internet Institute[408] concluded that links to reputable news sites are shared less frequently than links to known sources of misleading information. Telegram has been used to a great extent to spread misinformation about the war in Ukraine, but starting in the summer of 2022, Serbian and Russian Telegram channels have also been used to spread propaganda regarding Kosovo.

In the politics of Kosovo and the surrounding region, disinformation is one of the weapons that can endanger stability and create unrest. In Kosovo, the Albanian-Serbian interethnic relationship is one area in which disinformation that can have serious effects on society. Most misinformation focuses on this issue.

(C) Disinformation about the War in Ukraine
In the case of Kosovo, external actors like Serbia or Russia can directly affect the internal conflict, producing propaganda and disinformation that attacks the interethnic relationship and creates tension between Albanians and Serbs. This interference is the main danger for the state of Kosovo. Since the beginning of

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[408] Aliaksandr Herasimenka, Jonathan Bright, Aleksi Knuutila, Philip N. Howard: Misinformation and professional news on largely unmoderated platforms: the case of telegram, Journal of Information Technology & Politics, http://doi.org/10.1080/19331681.2022.2076272, 2022.

the war in Ukraine, the interference has intensified due to the use of the case of Kosovo by the Russian state as a justification for its actions against Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has used the case of Kosovo as a precedent for the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as separate republics carved out of the state of Ukraine. "Very many countries of the world did this," according to Putin, "including our opponents in the West, in respect of Kosovo. [...] That's a fact that very many states of the West recognized it as an independent state. We did the same in respect of the republics of Donbass."[409]

Kosovo also appeared in the context of Russia's propaganda narrative on some other occasions. In addition to misinformation, there were multiple attacks on police in northern Kosovo between April and July of 2022,[410] there has been tension concerning roadblocks,[411] and Albanian residents in that area have been subject to beatings.[412]

The *International Fact-checking Network* (IFCN) has created a platform on which disinformation about the war in Ukraine is debunked by IFCN members, fact-checkers located in a number of different countries. Their efforts show that most disinformation about the situation in Ukraine has been identified in India, with 358 distinct instances, and in Spain, with 341. Almost 40 instances of disinformation have been identified in Kosovo.[413] The majority of disinformation identified involves visual manipulation such as photos or videos that predate the conflict and that were not actually taken in Ukraine being misdated and misidentified. "The most frequently used channel for dissemination of these articles was social media, dominated by Facebook".[414] On the other hand, there are but few attempts to push Russian narratives. An example of this type of manipulation is an article claiming that NATO and the USA provoked or started the conflict in Ukraine published by Chinese media operating in Albania.[415] In Kosovo, 6% of news items analysed used Russian sources, while 40.9% relied

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[409] See: https://tass.com/politics/1443661.

[410] See: https://www.dukagjini.com/reagojne-presidenca-dhe-kryeministri-ne-lidhje-me-sulmin-ndaj-policeve/.

[411] See: https://www.evropaelire.org/a/kosova-veriu-serbia-bllokada/31967800.html.

[412] See: https://www.kosovopolice.com/en/official-information-no-4-informacion-zyrtar-nr-4/.

[413] International Fact-Checking Network, (https://ukrainefacts.org/), data gathered on 18th August 2022

[414] Shkelzen Osmani, Alban Zeneli: War in Ukraine: Propaganda and disinformation, ADS/hybrid and Department of Journalism, University of Prishtina "Hasan Prishtina", March 2022, p.6.

[415] See: https://albanian.cri.cn/news/world/3128/20220324/744960.html?fbclid=IwAR1rMZVCy-qn_777t7KzH31tEF9dSsMahJiEUSta3xM_RiKGpjp6vzlNQA8.

on international sources, out of the 48.9% of news items that had identifiable sources in the first place.[416] A majority of news reports have been made using major world media sources such as the BBC, CNN, Reuters and AP. This result is replicated by another piece of research that was focused on the reporting on Kosovar television in the period from 1 February to 31 March 2022.[417]

The Great Unknown: China

Chinese influence currently does not reach the level of Russian and Serbian propaganda, which are obvious and have been continuous in Kosovo. After the start of the war in Ukraine, there were several cases of Chinese propaganda being distributed in Kosovo, by Chinese media operating in Albania and potentially reaching all Albanian speakers in the region. *Radio Ejani*, which Facebook categorizes as a media outlet controlled by the Chinese state,[418] published an article attacking NATO. Referencing NATO's intervention in the war in Kosovo, the article claimed that "NATO has repeatedly ignored the United Nations and caused war wounds in other countries."[419] In addition to *Radio Ejani* there is *CRI Online Albanian*, another media outlet categorized as controlled by the Chinese state and publishing in Albanian. The publication[420] constantly propagandizes against NATO and the United States of America and tries to change the general approval NATO and the USA enjoy among the Albanian-speaking public. As underlined in an April 2021 NDI survey, "favorable views of US, NATO, EU are consistent; declining for China and Russia compared to 2019".[421]

Conclusion on Narratives of Disinformation in Kosovo

COVID-19, elections, and the conflict with Serbia are the three most frequent topics of disinformation campaigns in Kosovo. The main disinformation

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[416] See: https://pikasa.ai/post/13/cnn-sputnik-or-kiev-independent.

[417] Dren Gërguri et al.:Roli i medieve në përceptimin e publikut të Kosovës për luftën në Ukrainë, [The Media Role in the Kosovo's Public Perception of War in Ukraine], Departament of Journalism, University of Pristina "Hasan Prishtina", July 2022.

[418] See: https://www.facebook.com/CMGShqip/about_profile_transparency.

[419] See: https://www.facebook.com/100069414030566/posts/334671332189999.

[420] See: https://albanian.cri.cn/news/world/3128/20220406/747669.html.

[421] National Democratic Institute, Kosovo Public Opinion Survey, April 2021, p. 8.

narratives relate to these three issues. Sometimes they partially overlap. The pandemic coincided with elections in Kosovo, leading to a flood of misinformation that lasted from the spring of 2020 into the spring of 2021. In addition to passing wave of misinformation about COVID-19 there was misinformation related to the parliamentary elections on 14 February 2021 and the corresponding election campaigns. The fact that disinformation was now a daily occurrence was one of the consequences of the pandemic regarding the Kosovar information environment. During the run-up to the 2021 general and local elections, held right in the middle of the pandemic, disinformation campaigns would target voters with multiple narratives, from narratives seeking to affect Albanian-Serb relations in the State of Kosovo – most notably, the accusation that one of the Kosovar parties was collaborating with the Serbian List, a Serbian party considered a satellite of the Serbian government – to narratives accusing politicians of corruptions or discreditable romantic affairs.

Countermeasures: Lack of Institutional Strategy and Media Literacy

Disinformation in the digital age is an issue whose effects on Kosovar society should be studied. Kosovo is one of the countries that has declined to use legal tools to combat misinformation during the pandemic. Campaigns by Kosovar institutions regarding misinformation on topics surrounding COVID-19 were few, which often allowed misinformation to go viral and adversely affect society. The lack of a strategy for communication between institutions in times of crisis and the lack of coordination sometimes in evidence between central and local levels of government weakened the effect of the measures undertaken.[422] General education about media literacy,[423] professional journalism by mainstream media,[424] and targeted debunking efforts were three main approaches taken to counteract COVID-19 disinformation.

There continues to be a dearth of research done by media studies scholars, sociologists, or academics in other fields. Initiatives by civil society, being

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[422] See: https://www.facebook.com/asociacioniikomunavetekosoves/photos/pse-nuk-jan%C3%AB-rihapur-sot-institucionet-parashkollore-n%C3%AB-komunat-e-kosov%C3%ABssot-nuk/2999109186843627/.

[423] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB6mD3lc8uU.

[424] Lirika Demiri: Ndikimi i pandemisë COVID-19 në gjendjen ekonomike të gazetarëve, kameramanëve dhe fotoreporterëve, October 2020.

oriented towards training, have likewise not yet produced all that many published studies on disinformation. An analysis of the most viral instances of COVID-19 disinformation covering the period from March to April 2020 was published in June of the same year.[425] The findings of the analysis also measure the effectiveness of disinformation based on comments and messages made by users who contributed to disseminating the false information, because the fact that a single piece of disinformation could reach over 13 thousand comments, likes, and shares is evidence that disinformation is believed by part of the citizenry.

A study[426] about disinformation in election campaigns in the run-up to the 2017 general elections explains the forms of disinformation that were used and discusses some examples that were circulated in the media at the time. "Previous practices [of disinformation] from countries like the USA or France were also used in Kosovo, with the use of real media names and, changing only the domain, such as *'kosovasot.live'* instead of *'kosova-sot.info'*, or *'gazetaexpress. net'* instead of *'gazetaexpress.com'*."[427] This type of manipulation is known as "imposter content".[428]

Despite citizens being frequently confronted with various disinformation campaigns, state institutions have not acted with concrete steps to ameliorate the problem either through education and training or even just through blocking or disabling the addresses that distribute disinformation.

Two fact-checking platforms that operate in Kosovo are part of the International Fact-Checking Networking IFCN: "*Krypometër*"[429], a project of *Internews Kosova*, a local civil society organization, and *Hibrid.info*[430], a fact-checking platform created by *Action for Democratic Society*, another civil society organization. Fact-checking is an important instrument against disinformation and fact-checkers are an important actor in today's information environment. Porter and Wood conclude that fact-checking consistently increases people's

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[425] Dren Gërguri: Top 5 Disinformation during COVID-19 in Albanian language, May 2020, (https://drengerguri.com/top-5-disinformations-during-covid-19-in-albanian-language/).

[426] Dren Gërguri: Komunikimi politik në epokën e medieve sociale, KAS: Prishtinë, 2020.

[427] Ibid., p. 109.

[428] C.f. Claire Wardle: Understanding Information disorder (https://firstdraftnews.org/long-form-article/understanding-information-disorder/).

[429] See: https://kallxo.com/krypometer/.

[430] See: https://hibrid.info/.

trust in accurate information, regardless of their location or political party and regardless of the topic,[431] therefore it is important that fact-checking platforms are accepted as an important source of information for citizens in Kosovo. Politicians' statements or other public proclamations are challenged by fact-checkers in Kosovo, as are information and news published in the country's media outlets. This is significant and impactful because politicians, journalists and other public actors are held accountable for their statements and the accuracy of their reporting.[432]

Another initiative of note is *EduMedia*, an OSCE project that aims to produce a media education show.[433] The show aired its fourth season in 2022. It was originally broadcast on *RTK*, the Kosovar public service television channel. Seasons two and three were broadcast on *Klan Kosova*, while season four in 2022 moved to *Kohavision* (KTV), one of three television stations in the country with national reach. In this show, topics related to media literacy, digital education, and disinformation are discussed. In the second episode, the focus was on audio-visual manipulation, with guests talking about different instances of this sort of duplicity. Examples used included a forget document claiming that the government was prohibiting the construction of hospitals near the University Clinical Center of Kosovo, later refuted by the government, and cases of misleading clickbait.[434]

Media Literacy as a Soft-Power Approach to Resilience against Disinformation

Currently, media literacy is an optional subject[435] within pre-university education and as such is taught by several schools throughout Kosovo. Teachers have to submit lesson plans to their respective headmaster, and then

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[431] Ethan Porter, Thomas J. Wood: The global effectiveness of fact-checking: Evidence from simultaneous experiments in Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, PNAS, vol. 118, no. 37, 2021.

[432] Gentiana Ahmeti: Lajmi i rremë për gjuajtje me armë në Prishtinë, 14 August 2022, (https://kallxo.com/krypometer/lajmi-i-rreme-per-gjuajtje-me-arme-ne-prishtine/); Taulanti Osmani: Avdullah Hoti ndërron fjalët brenda 3 ditëve për dialogun, 6 October 2020, (https://kallxo.com/krypometer/avdullah-hoti-nderron-fjalet-brenda-3-diteve-per-dialogun/).

[433] See: https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/382993.

[434] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQRKyEUACl4.

[435] See: https://www.koha.net/arberi/335308/nagavci-kosova-duhet-te-avancoje-ne-kontekstin-e-edukimit-medial/.

approval must also be obtained from the Municipal Directorate of Education. The lack of staff, the lack of a national curriculum, and lack of suitable literature, however, present major challenges to the teaching of media literacy in Kosovo even as an elective subject. In spite of the issue being discussed by various organizations over the years, the Ministry of Education has not yet taken any action, leaving the details of the instruction in the elective subject to the teachers. This means that media literacy classes in Pristina use a different curriculum than media literacy classes in some other municipality.

An initiative that has helped prepare media literacy teachers has been organized by the United Trade Union of Education, Science and Culture of the Republic of Kosovo in cooperation with some of the professors of the Department of Journalism of the University of Pristina.[436] Over 1000 teachers from all over Kosovo have been trained in this module in 2019-2020.[437] The training has encouraged teachers to work with their students on topics surrounding media literacy, either in dedicated media literacy classes or as a part of classes on other subjects. At the university level, the subject of media literacy is included in two bachelor's programs, one in the Department of Journalism (Faculty of Philology) and one in the Faculty of Education. The Department of Journalism also offers a course about information disorder in the post-truth era as a part of its master's program. Media literacy as a university subject also exists in two other public universities in Kosovo, the Faculty of Education of the University of Gjilan and the University of Prizren. However, these offers are not enough for Kosovar society to be prepared for the various forms of informational deregulation. This is confirmed by an NDI study published in July 2022, in which citizens rated their preparedness for dealing with information disorder 2.9 on a scale from 1 to 5.[438]

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[436] See: https://www.sbashk-rks.org/index.php/lajme/2142-nis-edukimi-medial-edhe-ne-disa-shkolla-te-gjilanit-dhe-podujeves-gazeta-express-15-qershor-2019-8-15-rreth-60-mesimdhenes-te-gjilanit-dhe-podujeves-kane-ndjekur-trajnimin-e-edukimit-medial-te-organizuar-nga-profesoret-e-departamentit-te-gazetarise-se-uni.

[437] See: https://www.epokaere.com/mbi-1-mije-mesimdhenes-trajnohen-per-edukim-medial-nen-organizimin-e-sbashk-ut/.

[438] National Democratic Institute, Information Integrity in Kosovo: Assessment of the Political Economy of Disinformation, July 2022, (https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Information%20Integrity%20in%20Kosovo%20-%20Assessment%20of%20the%20Political%20Economy%20of%20Disinformation.pdf).

Conclusion

Kosovo cannot be immune from the contamination of today's global informational environment. Having to deal with propaganda and disinformation in new forms, resulting from new technological developments, is a challenge that cannot be avoided. Thus, the Kosovar institutions must be committed to train society and prepare it for different forms of propaganda and manipulation of information.

The COVID-19 pandemic as well as the conflict with Serbia have been the most important subjects of disinformation in Kosovo during the recent past. Especially the unresolved conflict with neighbouring Serbia will most likely continue to be one of the sensitive issues where Kosovar society can be the target of disinformation campaigns. The tense situations in the north of Kosovo and the circulation of disinformation that tended to worsen and escalate tensions are examples that best reflect the danger posed to Kosovo by propaganda and disinformation. These events were also partly overlapping with political propaganda during recent election seasons, with the various strains of disinformation interacting and intensifying each other.

The current information environment, mainly characterized by a very high level of digitalization and use of digital media, yet accompanied by a very low level of digital media literacy, puts Kosovo in a very unfavorable position. On the one hand, Kosovo has achieved great technological development: the internet has been built up to cover almost the entire territory, and the share of Kosovars using online technology is high. On the other hand, the average citizen lacks media literacy skills and is unprepared for what the internet has to offer. The need to learn how to proparly use new media is immediate. Every day that passes without positive action is another day on which Kosovars continue to navigate the internet insufficiently prepared. Media literacy in the entire educational system, both pre-university and university, is necessary. The commitment of civil society to contribute to the extension of media literacy in different social groups is necessary. Institutional action to create the prerequisites for the development of the subject of media literacy in schools and cooperation with civil society regarding other parts of society is necessary.

Disinformation in Moldova

By Elena Marzac

Introduction

Moldova faces a series of challenges fuelled by long-lasting disinformation and propaganda that represents an enormous challenge to its national security. Information security has been severely affected in recent years by disinformation and the propagation of disinformation, both in printed media and online spaces. Further on this article will showcase the disinformation landscape in Moldova, its main channels of dissemination and the appropriate countermeasures implemented by the authorities at regulatory and institutional levels.

Terminology and Definitions of Disinformation in Moldova

According to the amendments to the Law on Freedom of Expression of the Republic of Moldova no. 64 from April 23, 2010[439] the following terms are used in connection to the topic of information:

I. *"Media information space"* is the information space made up by all media services available in written, audiovisual and online means to the people residing in Moldova and abroad who have access to the national information space;"

II. *"Public information space"* is the space consisting of the media information space plus any other type of information publicly distributed by any other means available (platforms, online networks, physical advertising and information boards of any kind);"

III. *"False information"* is information that goes against public interest, and which is exposed through a mixture of facts, opinions, real or unreal images, as well as true, partially true or untrue situations taken out of context. The initial purpose of false information is to, intentionally or unintentionally, distort reality and cause deception;"

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[439] Law No/ 64 dated 23.04.2010 on Freedom of Expression (https://www.lawyer-moldova.com/2012/09/law-on-freedom-of-expression.html).

IV. *"Information affecting the security of the public information space"* is false information capable of generating panic, tension, social or military conflict, technocratic disasters, humanitarian catastrophes, among others. False information shall be described as such if it:
- incites hatred or violence;
- justifies or promotes military aggression, hybrid aggression, or elements thereof;
- comes from public authorities declared/recognized as aggressor states in a military conflict;
- justifies or promotes terrorism;
- justifies, promotes or glorifies dictatorial regimes;
- is hostile to democratic values and processes;
- endangers public goods, such as democratic regimes, security national, social cohesion, public safety, public health, balance environmentally friendly and the like;
- establishes the prevalence of an ideology in relation to other ideologies through the volume and area of spread;
- contravenes the provisions of the bodies empowered to manage the exceptional situations, such as siege or war during decreed situations;"

V. *"Disinformation"* signifies the process of intentionally spreading, in bad faith, information affecting the security of the public information space.

According to recent amendments to the Code of Audiovisual Media Services of the Republic of Moldova No. 174 of 2018[440], the notion of disinformation is defined as: *"the intentional dissemination of false information created to harm a person, a social group, an organization or a state's security."* However, the legislation does not include the definition of false information. The Security and Intelligence Services of the Republic of Moldova use the term 'disinformation' in the context of defining the term '*information warfare*', which they describe as "*a set of actions carried out by state or non-state entities in the information space through propaganda, media aggression, manipulation, and disinformation. These include digital, cyber-, and psychological threats, with the purpose of undermining sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of a particular state.*"[441]

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[440] See: https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=112566.

[441] See: HP257/2018 (legis.md).

The Target Group(s): Audience and Perspectives of Disinformation in Moldova

The 2018 Disinformation Resilience Index ranked Moldova as the weakest performing country (out of 14 states) in terms of "Population Exposure and the susceptibility to Kremlin-led media" (3.2), and "Quality of systemic responses" (3.0). Moldova was attributed the second weakest ranking (after Belarus) in "Digital warfare vulnerability" (2.6) [442]. A report published by the Romanian Centre for European Policies (CRPE) in July 2020 shows that Moldova is one of the most affected European countries by disinformation campaigns. In this respect, Moldova is a barometer for the effect of disinformation.[443]

Russian propaganda represents the main challenge for the information space in Moldova. Due to a long process of Russification during the Soviet period (1940-1991), a media space heavily controlled by Russian interests during the 1990s and its geographic location, Moldova is a victim of the clash of strategic communication between ideologies, in this particular case, the West and the Russian Federation. The Republic of Moldova is a multicultural country with a polarized political environment that makes it vulnerable to external influence, manipulation, propaganda, and disinformation. Disinformation remains a particularly acute problem for Moldova, posing a severe threat to its democratic development, and national security. In rural areas of the country, people remain particularly vulnerable to manipulation and lack the knowledge to identify and counter disinformation. On one hand, in the context of the information war triggered by the Russian Federation's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, disinformation has penetrated the Moldovan national information space through Russian TV stations, such as Russia's *Perviy Kanal*, or *Channel One*, in Moldova[444], *NTV Moldova*[445] or *RTR Moldova*, that are currently used by a large section of the population in Moldova. On the other hand, the long period of domestic political struggle in Moldova and the political control over most local media outlets has been used to discredit political opponents

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[442] Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021, (https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf). Disinformation Resilience Index, 2018.

[443] Alexandru Damian, Vladlena Subernitchi: Toxic election period: Disinformation and propaganda in Chisinau (2020), (https://www.crpe.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Campanii-electorale-toxice_a1.pdf).

[444] See: https://www.1tv.ru/?as=category/news!&&&&&ysclid=l961h462wx561057961.

[445] See: https://www.ntv.md/ru/.

and direct and indirect electoral agitation. Thus, media consumers in Moldova have become hostage of both the phenomenon of foreign and domestic propaganda.

(A) Journalists as Target Group for Disinformation in Moldova

The unavailability of trustworthy information on issues of public interest is one of the factors behind the growing consumption of disinformation in Moldova. The correlations between disinformation and access to public information, as well as access to investigative and independent journalism and media diversity and plurality are very strong and interdependent. While independent media are unable to provide objective and qualitative information, disinformation and misinformation trends find fertile background to spread false and manipulative information.

National media organizations in Moldova, as well as international organizations, identify the restriction of access to information as one of the most significant problems faced by journalists and the media in the country. In the last 20 years, organizations like *Freedom House* and *Reporters Without Borders* have highlighted the following as the most significant challenges for the activity of journalists and media in Moldova[446]:

- limiting access to information;
- intimidation;
- physical attacks on journalists;
- internal disinformation and external propaganda;
- political and oligarchic control on regulating institutions and the media.

Mass media researchers[447] consider the main challenges for journalists to be the politization of the media and the restricted access to information of public interest.

In this situation, media in Moldova is an easy target for manipulation, which in turn further decreases public trust in them.

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[446] Victor Gotisan, Natalia Ionel: Why access to information is still a problem in the Republic of Moldova, 2020, (https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Gotisan_Ionel_Brief_FINAL_RO.pdf).

[447] Victoria Dodon, Cornelia Cozonac: What information is being kept hidden by authorities?, 2018, (https://www.investigatii.md/ro/investigatii/integritate/ce-informatii-tin-in-secret-autoritatile).

Media outlets are often used to spread propaganda and disinformation. Domestically, much of the media serves private interests mostly linked to political actors which promote biased or ambiguous information to improve the image of its owners and to support their own political agenda. Between six and seven TV stations (the most important ones – *NTV Moldova*, *Primul* in Moldova, *Accent TV*, *Ren TV Moldova*), news portals, channels on the Telegram network, and several printed newspapers that are directly or indirectly controlled by the Socialist party, while widely read newspapers in the country are the local versions of *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove*[448] and *Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove*[449], all of which are regional branches of the Russian newspapers of the same names. This politicization also takes the form of media segregation, through which some media institutions have privileged access to state information, while others are arbitrarily denied such access.[450] This also increases socio-political polarization and mistrust between citizens and the government, which, consequently, undermines representative democracy[451].

(B) Disinformation as a Challenge for Politics and Society

The vulnerability of Moldova to propaganda and disinformation is a legacy of the Soviet past. One of the ideas promoted by the leadership of the USSR was that the state disseminated only truthful information, and the so-called "propaganda" transmitted from the outside was aimed at destroying the state and Soviet values. Given its Soviet heritage, Moldova's small and poorly developed media space was easy to exploit, and it became one of Russia's first targets in the ongoing hybrid warfare against post-Soviet countries looking for a future in the West. Pro-Russian sentiment among the country's ethnically diverse population, combined with a nostalgia for the Soviet past (usually strongest among the older generation) simplified the spread of false information throughout the country.[452]

Media is used in a well-known political game to divide society into two camps: the pro-European one and the pro-Russian one. Once the public opinion is divided

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[448] See: https://www.kp.md/politics/.

[449] See: https://aif.md/.

[450] Victor Gotisan / Natalia Ionel: Why access to information is still a problem in the Republic of Moldova, 2020, (https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Gotisan_Ionel_Brief_FINAL_RO.pdf).

[451] See: https://www.kp.md/daily/27456/4661728/.

[452] C.f.: Victoria Bucataru: Media Literacy and the Challenge of Fake News, 2018, (https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/3-Media_Literacy_Challenge_Fake_News_ENGLISH.pdf).
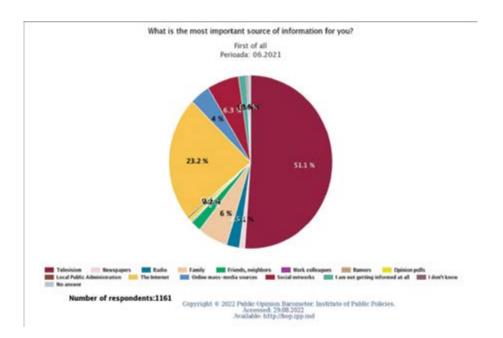
this way, Russian propaganda sources strengthen and substantiate the flow of information oriented towards bombarding the local population with misleading information, mainly through television. This content is being consumed mostly by Russian-speaking ethnic groups in Moldova, such as Bulgarians, Ukrainians, Gagauzians, Russians, Roma, and people of the Soviet generation. According to the study "*Resistance to disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe*" conducted in 2018[453], these groups remain the most vulnerable to Russian propaganda. The most negative factor is that the policies promoted by governments in the past influenced the appearance of language-related problems, in which political parties would artificially create divisions among the lines of Russian-speaking and Romanian-speaking people. For this reason, ethnic minorities have all mostly being labelled as "Russian-speaking" in the education system and in the media ever since independence. This factor gave space to television and radio channels (see above for examples) intended only for "Russian speakers" and retransmitted mostly from the Russian Federation. Thus, Moldova's Russian-speaking population has been living in its own "echo chamber" for a long time. Its effects on disinformation are amplified by the following elements:

- Interinstitutional weakness in the alignment on issues related to domestic media institutions;
- Lack of synergy between the relevant institutions in informing the public;
- Lack of a common message to deliver due to an absence of consistency in the communication at the national and inter-institutional level;
- Very modest financing from both the government and NGOs on large-scale information campaigns;
- Skepticism and lack of interest among the population and representatives of the media industry in the Republic of Moldova;
- Atavisms from the Soviet period towards NATO, the US, the EU and other organizations.
- A lack of cohesion in the message delivered by the media, which leads to a decrease in trust from the population towards public institutions;
- The use of mixed messages by public institutions' representatives (for example, in national security topics) which are not clearly and consistently articulated or where there is no conceived justification for a particular policy, thus cultivating perceptions of disorder, hesitation or weakness.

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[453] See: Disinformation Resilience Index in Central and Eastern Europe in 2021, (https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DRI-report-2021.pdf).

(C) Disinformation as a Challenge for Readers, Viewers and Media Users

A wide range of cases demonstrate that people's use of the media is ritualized rather than instrumental, and habitual rather than active. According to the 2021 "*Barometer of Public Opinion*"[454] Moldovans are active media consumers. Around 85 % watch TV several times per week or every day; 76 % use the Internet at the same frequency; 43 % listen to radio daily or at least once a week; and only about 15% read newspapers during the week. Over three-quarters of respondents (78%) consider TV the most important source of information; 62 % get their news primarily via the Internet; radio is less popular, being used by only 18.2 % of respondents, while newspapers are barely mentioned at all (3.6 %). Approximately 2 % of respondents admit that they are not interested in news and are not informed at all.

What is the most important source of information for you?
First of all
Perioada: 06.2021

Number of respondents:1161

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Accessed: 29.08.2022
Available: http://bop.ipp.md

Interestingly, television dominates the information market in this area with 66.4 %, followed by social networks, with 34.6 %. On the internet, government institutions' websites have low visibility and news sites are far below social media as an information source. It should also be noted that rumors — 1.3%, co-workers 4.3%, family — 6.5 % as well as friends and neighbors — 10.8 %, i.e., unskilled and indirect sources, along with social networks in the general

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[454] See: https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Raport-BOP-2021_.pdf.

sense, cover an important part of the information space, certainly even more important than the old written mass-media.

Moldova is also prone to this phenomenon. One Soviet era legacy, especially among Moldova's older generation, is consuming Russian entertainment shows, but not necessarily seeking information from the Russian media. Russia's TV entertainment, old and new shows, are still well-made and generously funded, and continue to attract a large audience.[455] This attracts viewers and users from these groups to Russian media, where they are then also exposed to state propaganda and Russian narratives.

In a state where the media is dominated by sources from the Russian Federation and with a major level of security concerns raised by disinformation and propaganda, the overall picture shows precarious and marginal sources of information on security issues, even among people interested in this topic. At the level of demographic differences, people over 60 years of age get twice as much information from television – 85.2% – compared to those aged 18-29 – 40.4%. The former still prefer newspapers, radio and traditional written press. The internet, in general, and social media are the prerogative of young people – groups 18-29- and 30–44-year-olds – exceeding 50 % of preferred sources. They also used social media increasingly as a source of information. This was similar to the answers given by people with a high level of economic stability. Trust in Russian media has remained stable over the past three years: 42.5 per cent of BOP respondents trusted Russian media a lot or somewhat in November 2018[456], and 42.9 per cent responded the same way in February 2021[457].

As a result, Russia is perceived as a threat only by 24.1 % of the participants, followed by the option of "there are no such threats" – 21.8%. The survey is completed by terrorist organizations – 20.5 %, followed by "I do not know/do not want to answer". NATO and the US are found in the survey as threats with 10.5 % and 10.2 %, respectively, while Romania is perceived as such by 4.4 % of poll participants. On the other hand, Russia is the preferred option for the Gagauz and Bulgarian minorities, with 37.5 % – more than three times

[455] Alla Rosca: Public Opinion, Mass Media, and Foreign Policy of the Republic of Moldova: Between the Two Realms, Journal of Romanian Studies Vol. 3, No. 2, 2021, (https://infocenter.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/jrs_02_2021_FF_ARosca-Article-1.pdf).

[456] The Barometer of Public Opinion[in Romanian], Institute for Public Policy (IPP), November 2018, (https://ipp.md/2018-12/sondajul-sociologic-barometrul-opiniei-publice-noiem brie-2018/).

[457] The Barometer of Public Opinion [in Romanian], Institute for Public Policy (IPP), February 2021, (https://ipp.md/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/BOP_02.2021.pdf).

compared to the average – while the Russians and Ukrainians are much less inclined to opt for this solution – 23.4 %.[458] Along the same lines, the future expectations of the population regarding Moldova's development is also very interesting: It finds an independent Moldova, member of the EU, in ten years a possibility – with over 32 %; a merged Moldova with Romania – 8 %, less than the option "I do not know/do not want to answer". Instead, it should be noted that territorial reintegration with the separatist region of Transnistria is mentioned, in ten years, by only 4% of the poll participants.[459] At the demographic level, independence is preferred by Russians and Ukrainians – with 48.7 %, and optimism for joining the EU is registered among young people aged 18-29 – 40.9 %. EU scepticism is highest among Russians/Ukrainians. It should be noted that Gagauzians and Bulgarians opt for the Eurasian Union in a proportion of 41.4 % – 13 times more than the average of 3.1 % – while only 7.8 % of the Russians opt for this choice. From that we can infer the impact of Russian media propaganda, especially in the south of the Republic of Moldova, in the Autonomous Territorial Unit of Gagauzia, as well as a link between ethnic Russians and the neutrality and independence of the Republic of Moldova, which is of major relevance in targeting various Russian propaganda groups.[460]

(D) Lack of Confidence in Mass Media Outlets by the Population

According to a survey on perceptions on security issues, the main external threats remain false news, propaganda, information warfare, and misinformation with 50.9%, followed by the conflict in Transnistria, 43 % (perceived as originating from an external source) and generic war in the region with 31.1 %. Foreign hybrid attacks represent 26.3 % of the polls.[461] It should be noted that disinformation is not reflected as internal affairs subject, even if many of the elements of this propaganda are produced internally, and are rather projected by external actors, mainly the Russian Federation.

According to an *Internews* survey, the EU press is considered the most trustworthy by most respondents (42 %), followed by Russian media (35 %) and Moldovan media at the end of the list with 24 %. The program format,

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[458] Ibid.

[459] Ibid.

[460] Iulian Chifu, et al: The Public Opinion on Threats Security Institutions of the Republic of Moldova, 2021, (https://infocenter.md/perceptia-populatiei-despre-amenintari-si-institutii-de-securitate-ale-republicii-moldova-2/).

[461] Iulian Chifu, et al: The Public Opinion on Threats Security Institutions of the Republic of Moldova, 2021, https://infocenter.md/perceptia-populatiei-despre-amenintari-si-institutii-de-securitate-ale-republicii-moldova-2/.

equipment and content created by Moldovan media broadcasters, such as *TeleRadio-Moldova*, are considered to be outdated, and thus not trusted by the public.[462]

According to the survey "*Popular Covid-19-fake news in Moldova and people's (dis)information sources*" conducted in May 2020 by the Moldovan think tank "*WatchDog*" in cooperation with CBS Research, respondents claimed that they kept informed on the most recent news on the COVID-19-pandemic by watching TV (77.2 %) and accessing websites (42.2 %).[463] Out of 1003 respondents, only one person denied all false or manipulating statements. 16.3 % of survey participants said it is rather hard or very hard for them to understand what information was accurate and whether the information presented was true or not.

Misinformation, fake narratives, and manipulation are part of the significant number of media products in the Moldovan media environment. The "*Monitoring Report of the Independent Journalism Center*"[464] showed that media outlets, such as "*Accent TV*", "*Unimedia.info", "Sputnik.md*", and "*Kp.md*" spread disinformation during the state of emergency declared during the first months of the COVID-19-pandemic. Obscure local websites with profound nationalist and/or religious touch insist on anti-vaccination messages. In his local online newspaper – *Flux.md*[465], the former politician Iurie Rosca who seeks to re-enter the sphere of public opinion by promoting conspiracy theories, presents his views on the new COVID-19 vaccine. He believes the vaccine is a cover for implanting microchips and thus control human behavior. An associated idea is that it is Bill Gates who orchestrated the pandemics to make vaccination mandatory globally and thus reduce the population of the planet.[466]

Despite a high level of politicization and influence by political and business interests, mass media in Moldova is underfunded, resulting in the production

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[462] Internews: The perception of the population about mass-media and media skills in the Republic of Moldova, 2020, (https://consulting.md/files/reports/46/INTERNEWS_Final_report_24.11.20_RO.pdf).

[463] Maria Dulgher: Popular COVID-19 fake news in Moldova and people's (dis)information sources, 2020, (https://www.moldova.org/en/survey-popular-covid-19-fakes-in-moldova-and-peoples-disinformation-sources/).

[464] See: Mapping Media Freedom records 626 violations in 2021, (https://www.ecpmf.eu/monitoring-report-2021-626-media-freedom-alerts-recorded-in-europe-in-one-year/).

[465] See: https://www.facebook.com/flux.md/about/?ref=page_internal.

[466] See: https://www.moldova.org/en/survey-popular-covid-19-fakes-in-moldova-and-peoples-disinformation-sources/.

of poor-quality programs. The absence of a free media market and the dependence on monopolized media is creating economic uncertainty for journalists and giving rise to self-censorship. The lack of high standards in journalism, low product quality and editorial inconsistency, together with financial reductions, are making Moldovan media uncompetitive vis-a-vis foreign (mainly Russian) outlets.[467]

Disinformation Narratives and Topics

Since its independence in 1991, Moldova has been constantly targeted by strong pro-Kremlin propaganda. These attempts of influencing the small country range from election interference, territorial dispute (e.g., Transnistria), LGBTQ-issues and creating inter-ethnic tensions. The latest topic and narrative has more specifically been the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The main goal of all this propaganda and narrative has been to spread anxiety and fear among Moldovan society. Mainstream Russian propaganda actively promotes the narrative that, by refusing to be on Russia's side in the context of the war in Ukraine, the pro-European government in Chisinau creates instability for Moldova. In general, the **main narratives and misleading claims** are mostly related to the war in Ukraine, refugees and migration, an anti-European and anti-NATO agenda, EU enlargement, anti-American and anti-Romanian sentiments, Russophobia, Transnistria and governmental deception. Russian propaganda shaped some carefully crafted deceptive narratives that in the perception of broad audiences ended up being established as the truth.

Sociological surveys revealed the main narratives of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Moldova during the recent past are:[468]

1. **Transnistria** and thus Russia's military presence on the territory of the Republic of Moldova. Narratives are promoted that claim that if Moldova asks for a withdrawal of troops, that might lead to war and Moldova will become a battlefield.
2. **Ethnic conflict between Romanians and Russians:** Russian narratives promote the view that President Maia Sandu cooperates only with

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[467] See: https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MDA.

[468] See: The Public Opinion on Threats Security Institutions of the Republic of Moldova, 2021, (https://infocenter.md/perceptia-populatiei-despre-amenintari-si-institutii-de-securitate-ale-republicii-moldova-2/).

Romania and will be against Russia, even if she has demonstrated so far that she is ready to cooperate with both sides.

3. **NATO means war:** Russian narratives promote the view that if Moldova joins NATO, then any neutrality is automatically canceled and war almost inevitable.

4. **Anti-LGBT propaganda:** Russian narratives promote the view that if Moldova follows the path of liberal EU policy, then "homosexual propaganda" will automatically turn Moldovan children into homosexuals.

5. **Russia is good, Europe is bad**: As the majority of Moldovans were raised during the Soviet period, views such as: "I lived in the USSR for more than half of my life and Moldova owes the few things it has to the Soviet Union. All the factories were built during the Soviet era. All scientists were educated during the Soviet era, while nothing good came out of Europe." Thus, Russian narratives promote a clear dichotomy between Russia, the Soviet Union and "the West".

Moreover, the same study found, that the most **common disinformation narratives other issues** in Moldova are:

(1) The War in Ukraine Will Spread directly to Moldova
Here, unverified and untrue information spread news such as "Moldova will be involved in the war and will be attacked", "American military planes landed at the Moldovan airport of Marculesti", "Ukraine is attacked from the Transnistrian region", "Diplomatic missions in Chisinau were evacuated".

(2) Delegitimization of the EU Accession Process
Here, unverified and untrue information spread news such as "Ukraine and Moldova will be "enslaved" by the European Union", "the EU candidate status was granted to Moldova in exchange for joining EU sanctions against Russia" or unfounded allegations that "Romania will annex Moldova when joining the EU".

(3) Anti-Romanian Propaganda
Here, the most important claims read that "Romania will annex Moldova when joining the EU". The subject of unification with Romania would colonize Moldova once admitted to the EU and that NATO membership would turn the country into the most important U.S. vassal in the region. Other narratives portray Romania as a mere colony of the West joining EU and NATO.

(4) Anti-NATO Sentiment

Here, the most important claims read that "NATO-membership means giving control over the Moldovan Armed Forces to NATO representatives or to the Romanian armed forces", "NATO and EU-membership will worsen the relationship with the Russian Federation, which is the best political and economic partner for Moldova" and that "Security and defense co-operation with NATO, the United States, Romania and any NATO and EU Member States will be misinterpreted as a preparation for war against Russia".

(5) COVID-19 Pandemic

Concerning Covid-19, the most important disinformation narratives in Moldova were very similar to global mis- and disinformation. False claims spread conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus, on the one hand, and, on the other, tried to discredit the vaccination process. The most important narratives were as follows:

- Secret global elites have created and spread the virus to reduce world population
- The pandemic will lead to the disintegration of NATO / EU
- The US wants to establish global hegemony under the umbrella of the pandemic
- COVID-19 does not exist, or it is a simple cold and vaccines are intended to implant microchips into humans so that they can be controlled
- There is a direct link between 5G technology and the spread of the pandemic
- The virus is a biological weapon created by the USA and NATO.

These efforts can be loosely classified as a tool of hybrid warfare carried out by Russian actors as the Russian media channels in Moldova identified above were important mouthpieces of these narratives. Consequently, the enormous negative economic effects created by the pandemic have prolonged the government's ability to focus on crucial reforms (i.e., justice reforms or anti-corruption efforts), thus undermining their reform-agenda, increasing societal tensions and political instability.

(6) Moldova is a "Failed" state

Here, the most important claims read that the future development of Moldova is possible only in co-operation with the Russian Federation and through regional structures controlled by Kremlin. Moldova must make unilateral concessions and take Russia's interests into account in foreign and domestic

policy, otherwise, it will remain without access to energy resources and the Russian market. In essence, these narratives propagate the partial surrender of sovereignty of the Republic of Moldova to the Kremlin.[469]

(7) The Presidential Elections of 2020 and the Pro-European Government

The 2020 presidential campaign in Moldova was atypical: the old geopolitical cleavage was not as stark as during the elections of 2016 and disinformation played a major part in the November 2016 presidential election, when a piece of disinformation about the arrival of 30,000 Syrian refugees to Moldova following a supposed deal between then-presidential candidate Maia Sandu and German Chancellor Angela Merkel[470] was widely thought to swing the vote in favor of then-president Igor Dodon, the Socialist, pro-Kremlin candidate. His main electoral narrative was that Sandu was a Western puppet who was unfit to lead the country and the narrative of geopolitical rivalry between East and West has often been used as a scarecrow for manipulation and disinformation. Yet, despite these efforts and with the high support of the Moldovan diaspora, Maia Sandu won the elections in 2020. The results of the first round of the presidential elections were a heavy blow for Dodon's electoral staff and were launched on various anonymous channels on *Telegram* the main directions (pennant-themes) of disinformation against Maia Sandu, who was accused of wanting to destroy the country, being a unionist (with Romania) and a Russophobic. She was blamed of wanting to close the country, schools and hospitals, wanting to liquidate districts and town halls, and legalizing LGBTQ+ parades and same-sex marriage.[471] In order to justify these wild allegations, Dodon's Socialist party used video platforms such as *YouTube* and *Odnoklassniki*. Fortunately, platforms like *Facebook* tightened the information it allowed on its platform regarding social issues, such as elections and politics and users are now forced to go through an identification process in order to avoid the risk of disinformation. But Dodon's "political technologies" found niches for disinformation campaigns and black PR in the video content and in digital disinformation. In the last days of his campaign, Dodon and his party used narratives that instigated fear through an attempt to bring the radical pro-Russian electorate to the polls. He denounced an eventual union of the Republic of Moldova with Romania and the start of a civil war in case Maia

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[469] C.f.: Chased into Europe's Embrace, 2022, (https://euvsdisinfo.eu/chased-into-europes-embrace/).

[470] See: https://actualitati.md/socant-presa-maia-sandu-le-a-promis-europenilor-ca-va-accepta-30-de-mii-de-imigranti-sirieni-daca-va-cistiga-alegerile-prezidentiale.

[471] See: http://www.e-democracy.md/elections/presidential/2016/docs/maia-sandu/201611071/.

Sandu won the elections. By doing so, Dodon recycled messages from his 2016 presidential election, asking the pro-Russian electorate in the south and the north of the country not to accept such a thing. A survey by "Watchdog MD Community"[472] in the fall of 2020 indicates that most respondents did not believe in disinformation and propaganda narratives launched at that time in the context of the presidential elections.
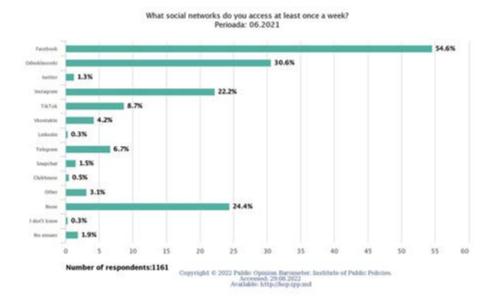
Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation in Moldova

Analyzing the causes of Moldova's vulnerability to propaganda and disinformation, we must not overlook the factor of development of the digital space, which offered the possibility to access information and news from different countries. Plus, the unlimited accessibility to social media platforms including those from the Russian Federation, which in fact can be considered as pioneers in the seizure of the local cyberspace, offered an endless possibility to send disinformation messages, bypassing the bureaucratic procedures present in the process of disseminating information through TV and radio stations.

According to a report published by the digital communications agency Gramatic.md[473], the most popular social network in Moldova is the Russian website Odnoklassniki.ru, with over one million users. The Russian social network Vkontakte occupies the third place, with more than 250 000 active users. The average profile of an Odnoklassniki user is a high school graduate (over 37 %), who lives in the center of the country (over 54 %) and is 20-29 years old (over 31 %). This data suggests that Russian social media networks are amongst the most important sources of information in Moldova. Thus, they also provide for ample opportunity to promote Russian narratives and propaganda.

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[472] Sondaj sociologic: Evoluția percepțiilor privind dezinformarea în contextul pandemiei COVID-19 și preferințe politice, WatchDog.MD, 2020, (https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=860928024441549).

[473] See: https://gramatic.md/socialmediareport/.

What social networks do you access at least once a week?
Perioada: 06.2021

Facebook	54.6%
Odnoklassniki	30.6%
twitter	1.3%
Instagram	22.2%
TikTok	8.7%
Vkontakte	4.2%
Linkedin	0.3%
Telegram	6.7%
Snapchat	1.5%
Clubhouse	0.5%
Other	3.1%
None	24.4%
I don't know	0.3%
No answer	1.9%

Number of respondents:1161

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Accessed: 29.08.2022
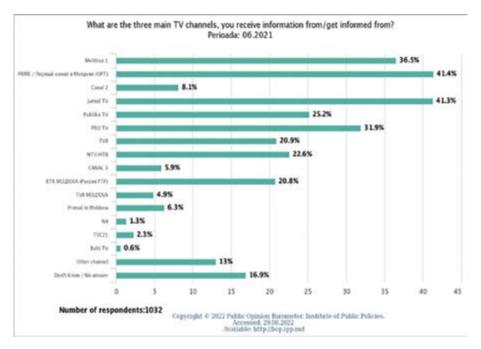Available: http://bop.ipp.md

Besides social media, the Russian Federation uses quite a wide range of tools to promote its "objective truth" and to influence the population of Moldova: TV, radio, print media, internet, social networks, etc. Which are the most important actors and sources that promote Kremlin narratives in Moldova? These are:

a. Traditional media, including the online extension affiliated to the media holding of Igor Dodon and the Socialist Party (*Pervyi Kanal, RTR, NTV, STS* and *TNT*) and rebroadcast by local media companies. Furthermore, newspapers like *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Moldove* [474]and *Argumenty i Fakty v Moldove*, which Moldovan versions of their Russian mother-media. Also, Russian(-language) Internet platforms rank among the most popular online platforms: *ru, Vkontke.ru, Mail.ru, Sputnik.md, Point.md and Noi.md*, telegram channels.[475] Currently, in Moldova, about 140 TV stations and channels are broadcast or retransmitted via cable. Of these, 41 broadcast media products only in Russian, and 76 - in both Romanian and Russian. The latest surveys show that 19 % of people have a lot of trust in the Russian press, while in the local press - 8%, and in the Romanian or European - only 8%. The most popular Tv channels are Moldova 1 (public broadcaster) and Prime/ORT (retransmitted from Russian Federation) with 41,4 % of popularity; 23 % of respondents

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[474] See: https://www.pravda.ru/news/politics/1702312-v_blizhaishee_vremja_dolzhna_nachatsja_ataka_na_pridnestrove/.

[475] See: https://t.me/+QJZbWy8f7vDAUiFo; and: https://t.me/wargonzo/5496.

preferred NTV, another channel retransmitted from the Russian Federation. The quality of Russian broadcasts is clearly superior to domestically produced ones, having a larger audience, which again plays an important role in the propaganda process. In the domestic pro-Russian press, the Broadcasting Council's initiatives to sanction or stop some Russian channels rebroadcast in Moldova and which use practices of information manipulation and unbalanced presentation of subjects are criticized.

b. NGO's, such as the *Russian Institute Strategic Studies/RISI,* the *Foundation for public diplomacy "A.M. Gorceakov",* the *Orthodox Church*[476] and Russian cultural programs.

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[476] Pro-Russian political forces (e.g., the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova, PSRM, and their leader, former President Igor Dodon) are the main supporters of the *Metropolitanate of Chișinău and all Moldova* (MOC), which is subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. The MOC plays a dominant role in the country as it includes about 80% of Moldovans. While in office, Igor Dodon repeatedly emphasized the importance of the Orthodox Church as one of the pillars of Moldova's statehood. In turn, MOC dignitaries traditionally engage in election campaigns during which they often support candidates with pro-Russian views. In regions of the country dominated by the Russian-speaking population, the support of the clergy for pro-Russian politicians is particularly high (e.g., Bishop Marchel of Bălți and Fălești). It should be noted, however, that in 2020, to limit the spread of COVID-19, the ruling socialists did not hesitate to make decisions that were criticized by the Orthodox Church; c.f.: https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/MDA.

c. Political proxy organisations controlled or supported by Moscow which promote pro-Kremlin policy and Russian narratives. This role used to be played by *Party of Communists* (PCRM, now PSRM) with its informal leader, President Igor Dodon (supported by various NGOs, cultural centers, and young league).

Digital Disinformation

In Moldova there is no register of media outlets - including online media - therefore the exact number of online periodicals is not known. The 2017 census of media outlets identified 181 news sites, and the media needs study conducted in 2021 by the IJC[477] found that online media make up the largest segment of the media market at 28%. Given the speed with which the online environment is developing, this segment will continue to grow. The data indicate the growing popularity of Facebook and Instagram and the drastic decrease in the popularity of *Odnoklassniki*. The *Vkontakte*-network also saw a decrease of almost 70,000 users in the seven months between November 2020 and June 2021. At the same time, the app *TikTok* is gaining popularity in Moldova as well as globally. *TikTok* was accessed by half of Moldovans between the ages of 18 and 25 in 2020.

Anul	Rețea socială / număr utilizatori		
	Facebook	Odnoklassniki	Instagram
2018	760.000	1.168.000	250.000
2019	1.100.000	809.148	610.000
2020	1.480.000	372.150	840.000
2021	1.600.000	305.150	960.000

Source: Gramatic Social Media Report

The Political Context of Disinformation in Moldova

The Republic of Moldova is facing numerous vulnerabilities that are exploited by both the Kremlin and its allies and agents of influence inside the country. Moldova is usually characterized as an unstable democracy with systemic corruption and a deep cleavage regarding national identity. As a result,

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[477] Study on the Needs of the Media Institutions in the Republic of Moldova, 2022, (https://cji.md/studiul-necesitati-mass-media-2022/).

Moldovan national identity is complicated and divided between those who consider themselves Moldovan and those who consider themselves Romanian. This **lack of national and societal cohesion**, **corruption** and **the weakness of the rule of law** facilitate impunity for Russian facilitators and agents of influence, including illegal financing of these actions. This fact is enhanced by the strong activity of the local proxies and go-betweens (e.g., oligarchic, kleptocratic forces). An important fact is the lack of cohesion in society is manifested by the existence of significant parts of society (no less than 30%) that see Moldova's future development differently from the majority and the political leadership. Moldova's pro-Western and pro-Russian fractions became increasingly divided since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 with almost 40 % of the population consider war in Ukraine as a liberation of Donetsk and Lugansk regions and liberation of Nazism.[478]

Ethnic diversity is also one key aspect of the political context of disinformation in Moldova. The Republic of Moldova presents an ethnic diversity common in most post-Soviet countries, with some local peculiarities: According to the last census in 2014[479], 75.1% of the population declared themselves; Romanians were 7.0 %, Ukrainians, 6.6%, Gagauz people, 4.6%, Russians, 4.1%, Bulgarians, 1.9%, Roma, 0.3%, and other ethnicities, 0.5%. Different ethnic minorities (Gagauz, Ukrainians, Bulgarians, Roma or Jews) that speak preponderantly Russian, are more vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda. In different parts of the country like Transnistria, Gagauzia, northern part of the country Russian influence is very strong. There is still an ideological differentiation between the ethnopolitical terms Moldovan and Romanian. The 'two' languages are the same, a fact confirmed even by the Constitutional Court of Moldova, but some politicians use this narrative as an argument against closer relationships with Romania, NATO, and the EU. Another issue with ethnic diversity policies in the Republic of Moldova is that for an extended period all of the minority ethnic groups have been treated as 'Russian speakers' in the educational system and the media. Rather than translating legislation into all the minority languages, the state decided to present it to the public only in Romanian and Russian. At the same time, all the minority language schools in Moldova teach Russian as primary language and the minority language as the secondary one. Thus, by choosing not to deal with the issue of promoting minority languages but rather adopt Russian as a proxy language, the state has led most ethnic minorities to consume media mostly in Russian.

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[478] See: https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=860928024441549.

[479] See: https://statistica.gov.md/en/population-and-housing-census-in-2014-122.html.

Another important factor in the spread of pro-Kremlin narratives and other disinformation is the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which is under the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church. While 90.13 % of the population of the Republic of Moldova claim to be Orthodox, most are not ardent followers. At the same time, a significant number of frequent churchgoers can be influenced by narratives promoted by the Church. Hundreds of zealots, for example, protested against an equal rights law in 2013, claiming it was the first step to legalizing same-sex marriages. The law merely guaranteed protection against discrimination in working relationships. Most of the protesters declared that they were blessed by the head of the Church to participate and would do it again if asked.

Another very important factor in Moldova`s domestic political and social context to (particularly pro-Russian) disinformation, is demographics. The older parts of the population who grew up in Soviet times are generally not only more open and more easily susceptible to such narratives but are also more likely to consume Russian-speaking media. They rely on traditional sources of information and informal communication to get news. Also, their limited income does not allow them to buy newspapers or magazines. This is exploited by parties that produce papers and distribute them free of charge. Often these publications promote false narratives, disinformation and propaganda, such as a story about 30 000 Syrian refugees who were supposed to come to Moldova if the pro-Western candidate, Maia Sandu, was elected president. According to the last Opinion Barometer (April 2021)[480], over 41 % of people older than 60 would vote for joining the Russia-led Eurasian Union. For comparison, from the 18-29 age group, only 36 % would vote for the same. One explanation for this situation could be Soviet nostalgia, widely present among older people.

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Moldova

According to the sociological survey "*The public opinion on threats and security institutions of the Republic of Moldova*"[481] the main external threats remain disinformation, propaganda, information warfare and misinformation – with 50.9 %. This clearly shows that there is a high level of perception and awareness of disinformation as a crucial security threat in Moldova. This

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[480] See: http://bop.ipp.md/en.

[481] Iulian Chifu, et al: The Public Opinion on Threats Security Institutions of the Republic of Moldova, 2021, (https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Duxqmhpc90pZ262kLDW9Hy1He_0gIxtn/view).

threat, on the other hand, is perceived as external (i.e., Russian and "Western"), and not a domestic problem and threat, even if many of the elements of this propaganda are produced in Moldova. Hence, it does not come as a surprise that disinformation, propaganda and information warfare have been subject to several legislative initiatives.

The primary document that defines information security in the media dimension is the '*National Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova*',[482] adopted by the Parliamentary Decision No.153 of July 15, 2011. Paragraph 47 states that challenges in the media sphere are part of the national security threats to the Republic of Moldova. In this respect, the strategy reported that the normative framework should be adjusted by the introduction of appropriate, active monitoring, control, and implementation mechanisms to protect Moldovan society from misinformation attempts and manipulative information from the outside. While capturing the essence of the issue, the strategy does not provide actionable and measurable outcomes and is limited to declarations of intent. Neither does the *law regarding the Information and Security Service* (ISS) provide a clear framework for dealing with information security[483]. The Parliament adopted in the first reading the draft law 123/2022[484] with amendments to several laws including the Law of Freedom of Expression, Law on Security and Information Service, Penal Code, and Contravention Code. It introduces notions such as "threats to information security", "false information", "information that affects the security of information space" and "disinformation". It also provides that the prohibition of disinformation in the media information space is not considered censorship.

A similar legislative amendment was also approved by the Parliament in 2017, but in December 2020 the parliamentary majority dominated by the Socialist Party canceled those amendments and Russian informative and analytical programs once again had access to the Moldovan media space.[485] On March 2, 2022, in the context of the war in Ukraine, the Commission for Extraordinary Situations returned to this ban and obliged radio and TV stations to "suspend the broadcasting and retransmission of all programs that were originally

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[482] See: http://lex.justice.md/viewdoc.php?action=view&view=doc&id=340510&lang=1.

[483] See: https://sis.md/en/legislative_acts.

[484] See: https://csometer.info/updates/moldova-adopts-new-anti-disinformation-law.

[485] Parliament of the Republic of Moldova, Law No 257 dated 22.11.2018 on the approval Strategy of the Information Security of the Republic of Moldova for the years 2019-2024 and its Implementation Action Plan, (https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=111979&lang=ro).

produced in states that have not ratified the European Convention on cross-border television"486. The key element introduced to the new law is the concept of "information security," which involves protective measures against "misinformation attempts or manipulative information from the outside." Yet, the Law does not counter the full array of Russian propaganda since it only refers to retransmissions' audiovisual programs, online and print platforms are open to publication and amplification of manipulative content. Sputnik and Komsomolskaya Pravda Moldova profit from this unmonitored space to spread propaganda to the Moldovan public. Moreover, local authorities refuse to enforce the Law and comply with central audiovisual legislation, especially in Gagauzia and Transnistria. Documentary films, artistic films, and serial movies produced in the Russian Federation that depict the myth of the "glorious Soviet past" still air unchecked across Moldovan television. They are blatantly revisionist and seek to blunt Moldova's capacity to self-govern. Moldova is in desperate need of controls on these programs.

The Parliament, the Broadcasting Coordination Council (regulator of the TV and radio markets), the Ministry of Justice (registrar of news agencies and newspapers), the President (guarantor of national security), and the Security and Intelligence Service (the body dealing with hostile information activities on the territory of Moldova) are the key actors dealing with the response to disinformation. Two of the key authorities that are engaged in the process of monitoring disinformation actions are the Broadcasting Council (BC) and the Security and Intelligence Service (SIS). The primary stated mission of the BC is by definition to be "the representative and the guarantor of the public interest", and according to Article 10[487], "the protection of program services to safeguard consumers' rights is ensured by the BC". However, when asked about the performance of BC and its activity, the majority of media experts[488] consider that BC have a more reactive, rather than proactive position regarding sanctioning false news, manipulation and propaganda by mass-media. The Broadcasting Council is directly responsible for monitoring and sanctioning TV stations in Moldova for actions associated with disinformation and propaganda, in accordance with the provisions of the Code of Audiovisual

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[486] See: https://www.moldpres.md/en/news/2022/03/02/22001612.

[487] The Code No. 174 dated 08.11.2018 of audiovisual media services of the Republic of Moldova, (https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=33713&lang=ro).

[488] Baltic Centre for Media Excellence, Independent Journalism Centre, Media Literacy Sector Mapping in Georgia, Latvia, Moldova and Ukraine: Moldova Country Report, (https://cji.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ML_Moldova_Country_Report_2021-1.pdf).

Media Services and with the objectives set forth in the Information Security Strategy. Thus, the BC has the legal obligation to ban the dissemination of foreign TV channels that broadcast disinformation and propaganda by prohibiting the journalistic activity of foreign citizens and stateless persons within the territory of the Republic of Moldova. The Broadcasting Council is the authority responsible for monitoring and sanctioning broadcasting companies for promoting disinformation and propaganda and applying the monitoring methodology to service providers under the jurisdiction of the Republic of Moldova.[489]

A much more complex task, in the sense of monitoring the activity of other participants in the exercise of freedom of expression – in particular, the electronic media and social networks – lie with the Security and Intelligence Service. The basic mission in ensuring information security in the Republic of Moldova lies with the heads of public authorities and institutions. The general coordination of the activity and control of measures regarding the protection of information is carried out by the Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova. According to the Information Security Concept of the Republic of Moldova490, the Information and Security Service of the Republic of Moldova is designated as the coordinating authority responsible for monitoring and coordinating the process of implementation of the Action Plan of the Information Security Strategy of the Republic of Moldova for the years 2019-2024.[491]

In addition to the legal provisions related to freedom of expression and access to information, but also those related to ensuring information security, the current legal framework also provides guidelines for professional organizations, such as the Code of Ethics of Journalists of the Republic of Moldova[492.] The Code's main priorities are to combat disinformation, and the commitments assumed by journalists by signing the Code include:

[489] Analysis and Strategy for Increasing Resilience to Disinformation in the Republic of Moldova, 2021, (https://ipre.md/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/informd_study_against_disinformation_in_moldova.pdf).

[490] Law No. 299 dated 21.12.2017 on the Conception of Information Security, (https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=105660&lang=ro).

[491] Parliament of the Republic of Moldova: Law No 257 dated 22.11.2018 on the approval Strategy of the Information Security of the Republic of Moldova for the years 2019-2024 and its Implementation Action Plan, (https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=111979&lang=ro).

[492] See: https://consiliuldepresa.md/en/page/moldovan-journalist-code-of-ethics.

a) to collect information from credible and quotable sources,
b) to ensure pluralism of opinion, including by collecting opinions with which the journalist does not necessarily agree,
c) to check the facts from different sources.

At the same time, compliance with the provisions of the *Code of Ethics of Journalists* is the responsibility of each journalist, and the Press Council monitors and issues recommendations and findings of a violation of this Code. The Press Council is a member of the media self-regulatory organizations network in the Eastern Partnership countries and in the Russian Federation and is also a member of the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe (AIPCE).

The *Moldovan media resilience profile* presents a fragmented and uneven landscape. The governing party has declared repeatedly that it prioritizes the fight against propaganda[493], but this has yet to transfer into clear policy measures. Some of the prior decisions in dealing with linguistic issues, as well as the lack of political will to implement the requirements of the 'Broadcasting Code' have led to a media market that is dominated by Russian media. The structure of media ownership suggests that this situation favors a series of political actors who allegedly control some of the most popular TV channels in the country.

Concerning fact-checking and debunking initiatives by media outlets and NGOs it needs to be asserted that their number remains very low and their outreach very limited due to limited resources available for this type of journalistic activity. All of the existing fact-checking initiatives depend on foreign financial support and may not be sustainable for the long term if this support dries up. There are three major initiatives to expose and combat disinformation, including one that deals with reporting fake social media accounts used for promoting hostile narratives. The first and the most significant initiative is the "*Stop Fals!*"[494] campaign initiated by the Association of Independent Press (API). Through this project, API aims to build the capacities of independent media and its network of member-constituents through specialized service provision. It also develops a media campaign against fake and tendentious information. It has also produced several videos and audio investigations about propaganda and publishes a monthly newspaper supplement about propaganda.

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[493] See: https://newsmaker.md/ro/rus/novosti/a-fost-necesar-maia-sandu-reactie-la-declaratiile-lui-lavrov-ca-moldova-interzice-stirile-rusesti/?ysclid=l9ci5t1jv4916923324.

[494] See: https://stopfals.md/.

Another example is the "*Sic.md*"[495] project has ambitious goals to identify lies, inaccuracies and manipulations in public impact statements and inform citizens in a simple and accessible way. "*Sic.md*" also deals with monitoring the public promises of politicians as well as notifying breaches of ethics in media and public declarations. "*Sic.md* also can be considered a tool for political accountability, including for pro-Kremlin politicians' declarations, which expands its coverage compared to the "*Stop Fals!*" campaign.

Yet another project is "*TROLLESS*"[496], which was developed during the 2nd Media Hackathon[497] ('The Fifth Power'), organized by the *Centre for Independent Journalism* and *Deutsche Welle Akademie*. The primary purpose of the project, a browser extension, is to identify the sources of manipulation in new social media spaces and to isolate them. Besides that, there are a number of projects by the *Center for Independent Journalism*: *Mediacritica*, media monitoring reports, as well as media projects administrated by NGOs, such as "*DeFacto – we defend ourselves from propaganda*" and video analyses made by the "*WatchDog. MD team*"[498]. "*Mediacritica.md*" is an information portal that combats the phenomenon of propaganda and manipulation in the press and fosters critical media consumers in Moldova. This site is a platform for a national campaign that aims to inform consumers of media propaganda and disinformation about the phenomenon and to prepare them to identify false information disseminated by the media and social networks.

Besides fact-checking and debunking, there are also a couple of *media literacy* projects, even if their number – again due to limited resources – is also quite low. One initiative is "*Novateca*"[499] which is a network of more than 1000 public libraries in each of Moldova's 35 administrative regions, providing the public with 21st-century technology tools, digital literacy learning resources, and community services that address local needs. Another media literacy project is "*MEDIA-M*" (Media Enabling Democracy, Inclusion and Accountability in Moldova), which was launched by *Internews*[500] in 2017 and funded by USAID for a period of five years. This program aims to promote the development of an independent, professional media that gives citizens access to various

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[495] See: https://sic.md/en/.

[496] See: https://www.facebook.com/trolless/.

[497] See: http://hackathon2.media-azi.md/.

[498] See: https://www.watchdog.md/.

[499] See: https://novateca.md/en/.

[500] See: https://internews.md/.

perspectives and to create a media sector that is more resilient to political and financial pressures.

Conclusion

Torn between integrating with the West or remaining in Russia's orbit, Moldova is particularly vulnerable to foreign, i.e., Russian propaganda. The propaganda circulating in the country focuses particularly on disenfranchising NATO, the European Union and the West in general. This phenomenon triggers political polarization within Moldovan society, which influences the public agenda and the decision-making processes in the country. Moreover, it undermines the security policies and ordinary democratic course set by the current government, all while undermining confidence in state institutions and increasing non-compliance with the rules set by them.

This general political context is also mirrored in a fragmented, Russian-dominated media market and severe obstacles to implementing anti-disinformation and media literacy-initiatives. Mistrust against the media and political actors and insufficient information from official first-hand sources pushes citizens to use "alternative" and often misleading sources if information to keep up with what's happening domestically and in the region. In the context of the war in Ukraine, as well as during the COVID-19-pandemic, the scale of this phenomenon is being felt massively with news that intentionally misinform the public and have a significant impact on the public's perception and thus real-life consequences.

North Macedonia: Disinformation – the Enemy of Democracy and Societal Cohesion

By Marina Tuneva

Introduction

Disinformation, propaganda and fake news are global problems that cause a variety of harmful effects, both among individuals and in a wider societal context. These phenomena affect the way people interpret daily developments.

Disinformation narratives are manufactured for a variety of reasons. They can be harmful not just because of the way they are orchestrated, but also because of the way they are supported by various malicious actors. They become particularly dangerous when disinformation and fake news is spread by actors with high levels of authority who enjoy the trust and command the attention of the citizens. Digital technology reinforces these narratives and social media networks have become platforms where individuals and groups contribute to the amplification of these problems. From a historical perspective, social networks are often considered the main source of news in countries where traditional media are weaker.[501] Polarization for various reasons contributes to the support of disinformation and propaganda and their rapid spread throughout a society.

The existence of these phenomena in North Macedonia has been a dominant topic of public discourse for several years. Society is highly polarized along different lines – political, ideological, ethnic. Several important events and contributing factors have been leading to the creation of disinformation and propagandistic narratives. Different actors have begun to make use of these trends to advance political objectives. Concerns about the amount of disinformation and its impact reach new highs during major political events,

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[501] Challenges and Opportunities for News Media and Journalism in an increasingly digital, mobile and social media environment, Council of Europe Report DGI, 2016 (https://rm.coe.int/16806c0385).

for example the referendum concerning the recent change of the country's name. There have been worries that disinformation, in combination with the polarization of society, threatens democracy as it shapes public attitudes about different issues, including major political events. It can also lead to less trust in institutions and the state system in general.

This paper will try to explain the ways disinformation is perceived and understood in North Macedonia. It will provide a basis for an understanding of these phenomena in the local context. To do so, we rely on findings from past research, surveys of documents, and analysis of information posted on social media. As the audience is regularly exposed to disinformation and fake news, we will focus on discussing this problem from audience's perspective as well. Fake news and disinformation campaigns are especially problematic in fragile societies, and there is a growing debate on how to address these issues. There are several ways in which various stakeholders can deal with falsehoods and disinformation. Many of these are options that do not endanger freedom of expression and journalism. Measures that aim at protecting the public from the impact of disinformation will be recommended.

Disinformation and "Fake News" – Definition and Terminology in North Macedonia

The complex public health and political situation in North Macedonia in the past five years, a period encompassing the surge of the pandemic in 2020 and several crucial political events, intensified the use of terms "disinformation" and "fake news" in the public discourse. Various terms (fake news, disinformation, misinformation) are all in use among different societal groups, both online and offline. The use of the terminology is usually linked to the professional background and knowledge the individuals and communities have on this topic.

"Fake news" as a phrase has gained a lot of popularity, especially in informal communication among people and in the discourse on social networks and other online platforms. As the number of research initiatives in this field has increased, the term "fake news" has been slowly replaced by "disinformation". Scholars and media experts have made attempts to create a more unambiguous and specific definition, given the popularity that the term "fake news" has reached. They have started using the terms "disinformation" and "misinformation" rather than "fake news" to describe manipulated or inaccurate information. In this way, efforts were made to eliminate the association of "fake

news" with other meanings and contexts that made it generic as a phrase. Journalists, media and academic community avoid using the term "fake news". The term "news" refers to information of public interest that is true, accurate and verifiable. Information that does not meet these criteria cannot be credited with being news. This is why the phrase "fake news" is seen as a contradiction in terms.[502]

The definitions of "disinformation" and "misinformation" in North Macedonia are mainly based on globally accepted interpretations of these terms. Disinformation is described as *false or misleading content that is spread deliberately or with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm*.[503] It is perceived that disinformation is spread in organized manner, often reinforced by automated technology and intersecting communication strategies.[504] Misinformation is understood to be *false or misleading content that is shared without malicious intent though it can still have harmful effects*.[505]

In North Macedonia there is no regulation pertaining to disinformation and the professional media community strongly opposes the idea of placing any provisions in a legally binding document. In an effort to protect the public from the harmful influence of disinformation and misinformation, there are strong commitments on the part of, and recommendations by, the professional media community and civil society organizations, supported by international media organizations, aimed at strengthening of media self-regulation mechanisms and media literacy. The self-regulatory documents of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) and the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) contain provisions that emphasize publishing correct, accurate and verified information, making distinction between facts and opinions and reporting in an impartial and balanced manner.[506] The Code of Journalists applies to all media, traditional and online. Similar provisions are contained

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[502] UNESCO: Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, 2018, (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552).

[503] European Commission: Tackling Online Disinformation, 2018, (https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation).

[504] UNESCO: Journalism, Fake News & Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, 2018, (https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552), p. 7.

[505] European Commision: Tackling Online Disinformation, 2018, (https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation).

[506] Association of Journalists of Macedonia: Code of Ethics, Articles 1, 3, 13, 14 (https://znm.org.mk/en/code-of-ethics-of-journalists/).

in the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in the Online Media[507], published by CMEM.

Fact-checking services and media organizations in the country, on the other hand, operate with terms such as "propaganda, fake narratives and disinformation",[508] "disinformation narratives, manipulation, information distortion"[509], "hate narratives and disinformation"[510], explaining the phenomena in a broader context and relating it with other accompanying trends.

Disinformation and its Influence on the Public and Politics

Dissemination of propaganda narratives and disinformation influence the media's reputation and the citizens' trust in journalism. Research findings indicate that trust in the media in North Macedonia is limited – 49% of the respondents in a 2021 survey claim they trust the media, while the same number of people (49%) show distrust.[511] Citizens often cannot differentiate between professional media and other actors in the digital sphere that produce and spread information via social networks.[512] In general, both social networks and online media are considered unreliable sources of information.

A 2021 study by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia[513] studied the experiences of news media institutions with publishing content on social networks. Most of the respondents shared their concerns that news products lose value when published on social networks, as they are

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[507] Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia: Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in the Online Media, 2021 (https://semm.mk/dokumenti/korisni-resursi/kodeks/850-nasoki-za-etichko-izvestuvanje-na-onlajn-mediumite).

[508] See:https://metamorphosis.org.mk/?s=%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%B7%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8).

[509] See: https://f2n2.mk/en/.

[510] See: https://mim.org.mk/en/research/1274-research-hate-narratives-and-disinformation-in-online-media-and-on-social-networks.

[511] Vesna Nikodinoska: Professional Journalism and Media Literate Public – Crucial for Increasing Trust in Media, North Macedonia, 2021, p.11, (https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Resilience-research-publication-3-North-Macedonia-English.pdf).

[512] Ibid, p. 6.

[513] Marija Dimitrovska: Journalism, Social Media and Self-regulation: Opportunities and Challenges, Skopje, 2021 (https://semm.mk/attachments/20-12-2021/JOURNALISM%20AND%20SOCIAL%20NETWORKS_CMEM.pdf), p. 16.

countered by malevolent actors spreading manipulative content there. Respondents believe that there is a lack of timely reaction on the part of platform operators, particularly in the context of problematic content such as hate speech and disinformation. Therefore, journalists and editors demand stricter measures from Facebook and other social media platforms in addressing these phenomena, as well as in eliminating bots and fake profiles.[514]

The spread of disinformation and other malicious content on social networks was particularly intensified during the pandemic. This had negative consequences for a large part of the population, resulting in mass disbelief regarding the seriousness of the infection and non-observance of the prescribed protective measures.[515] Growing disinformation campaigns have helped conspiracy theories take deep root[516] and the (un)intentional manipulation of public opinion led to inflated toxic nationalism in an already fragile society.[517] A study from 2021 for example suggests that nearly two-thirds of the North Macedonian citizenry believe that the coronavirus was created to control humans. Around 65% of respondents said they supported the unfounded theory that COVID-19 was artificially created in a lab.[518]

Young generations are also concerned about the consequences of the dissemination of disinformation and misinformation. Research findings[519] indicate that 49.9 % of country's youth believe that North Macedonian society is vulnerable to fake news and disinformation narratives. In addition, 30.5% of respondents think that society is partly resilient to fake news and disinformation narratives. Many young people are still susceptible to misinformation and disinformation narratives. The reasons indicated are low

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[514] Ibid, p. 20.

[515] Snezana Trpevska / Igor Micevski: Monitoring Media Pluralism in the Digital Era: Country Report – The Republic of North Macedonia, North Macedonia, 2021 (https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/71968/the_republic_of_north_macedonia_results_mpm_2021_cmpf.pdf?sequence=1).

[516] USAID, Irex: North Macedonia: Vibrant Information Barometer 2021, 2021 (https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/vibe-north-macedonia-2021.pdf).

[517] GLOBSEC – Ideas Shaping the World: Vulnerability Index: North Macedonia, 2021 (https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_North-Macedonia.pdf).

[518] See: https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2021/12/01/two-thirds-in-north-macedonia-believe-covid-was-created-to-control-humans-study.

[519] Euro – Atlantic Council of North Macedonia: Info vs. Disinfo: Building Resilience to Disinformation Practices in Post – Covid Environment in North Macedonia, 2021 (https://www.atamacedonia.org.mk/en/media-centre-/upcoming-events/557-informacii-protiv-dezinformaii).

levels of media literacy among the general public and a lack of critical thinking skills. In the Media Literacy Index 2021[520], which scores and ranks 35 countries in Europe according to their capacity to withstand 'post-truth' and its negative ramifications, North Macedonia is ranked dead last. This poses serious threats to liberal democracy, the legal and political order and the ability of its institutions to effectively deal with such crises.[521]

Political influence over media is also considered one of the main reasons for distrust. Citizens identify politicians (91%), journalists/media (90%), social media (81%) and internet portals (78%) as the main sources of disinformation.[522] Such a symbiosis between politics and media, according to the participants in the study, leads to domination of disinformation in the public discourse which makes the fight against disinformation even harder.[523] There is growing concern that, in a country as polarized as North Macedonia, disinformation poses a threat to democracy, especially during elections. Media experts continue to warn that disinformation contributes to an environment in which country's democratic values and strategic decisions are undermined.

Disinformation and its Narratives in North Macedonia

The social and political context in the country in the past five years has been continuously creating a fertile ground for escalation of disinformation and misinformation narratives and campaigns. This is particularly evident in the online sphere.

(A) Referendum Boycott

Among the most influential disinformation campaigns is the one related to the 2018 referendum on the country's name change. Weeks before the vote, social media platforms became not only channels for sharing political attitudes, but also venues for deliberate polarization and misleading content. These

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[520] Marin Lessenski: Media Literacy Index 2021 Double Trouble: Resilience to Fake News at the Time of Covid-19 Infodemic, Sofia, 2021 (https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MediaLiteracyIndex2021_ENG.pdf).

[521] Ibid.

[522] Metamorphosis Foundation: The Effects of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia, Skopje, 2022 (https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/themes/metamorphosis/download.php?id=34792).

[523] Ibid.

disinformation efforts made many North Macedonians boycott the referendum and decreased voter turnout.[524]

Various boycott groups and anonymous social media accounts were involved in disinformation campaigns few months before the scheduled date of the referendum, 30 September 2018. False information prevailed in these campaigns, whose master narratives were „*We access EU and NATO as North Macedonians*", "*The Macedonian language is not protected*", accompanied with patriotic and identity-related slogans, such as „*Macedonia eternal*", „*Never North, only Macedonia*", and „*We don't give away the name*", along with messages from Macedonian writers and revolutionaries. Nationalist messages, threats and hate speech dominated in social media posts. The disinformation narratives also contained an anti-NATO and anti-EU messages - „*They want to destroy us*", „*Genocide against the Macedonian people*".[525]

Among the most influential campaigns against the referendum was the one using the hashtag „#*Bojkotiram*" (Eng.: "I boycott"). It enjoyed massive participation of citizens on Facebook and Twitter. The Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity stated it has found evidence that Twitter bots were being deployed to suppress voter turnout. The organization found that accounts calling for a boycott that had been created two months ago at the time made up 10% of the online conversation — a figure they say is almost three times higher than in the Italian election.[526] DFRLab indicated that far-right Twitter accounts were amplifying the boycott campaign. The boycott hashtag garnered around 23,800 mentions, of which 19,300 were retweets, meaning retweets constituted 80.9 percent of the total content.[527] The drive was dominated by just nine Twitter accounts, one of which made 110 contributions per day.[528] The campaign had one of the top trending hashtags in Macedonia, with about 3,900 tweets on 8 September.[529]

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[524] See: https://www.gmfus.org/news/how-disinformation-harmed-referendum-macedonia.

[525] See: https://bit.ly/3QIopYQ.

[526] See: https://www.kbzk.com/cnn-europe-mideast-africa/2018/10/01/both-sides-claim-victory-in-macedonia-name-change-referendum/.

[527] See: https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-boycott-campaign-in-macedonia-features-familiar-characters-ef0f1aab52b6.

[528] See: https://prizma.mk/aleksandar-botot-vojnata-na-tviter-za-makedonskata-dusha/.

[529] See: https://medium.com/dfrlab/electionwatch-boycott-campaign-in-macedonia-features-familiar-characters-ef0f1aab52b6.

It turned out that the disinformation campaign played a crucial role in the process. The referendum was not successful as fewer than half of the voters turned out to vote. The failure of voters to turn out was partly a result of the new type of information struggle, which is increasingly being noticed in nationalist circles.[530] The opposition, led by the right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE, as well as the #Bojkotiram-movement played a major role in the low turnout to the referendum. Based on the analysis by the fact-checking service Truthmetar, the country was a target of pro-Russian influence propaganda and Russian political influence, which became especially evident before the name-change referendum.[531]

(B) The "French Proposal" for Accelerating EU Accession

The EU invitation for opening the accession process for North Macedonia was conditioned on solving the bilateral dispute with Bulgaria. The so-called "French proposal", aimed at removing the Bulgarian blockade over identity and history issues, caused a surge of reactions, some of which involved spreading disinformation and hate speech, especially on social media. While there are still no systematized data and analyses about disinformation narratives, many analysts criticized the government for being non-transparent, saying it created a blank space for spreading of all kinds of information against the country's interest.[532]

Social media played a significant role in articulating different opinions by many political and societal actors, but also in spreading disinformation. The country's president, Stevo Pendarovski, warned that North Macedonia was a target of disinformation campaigns aimed at inciting anti-Western sentiment among citizens and advocating vague alternatives to European integration.[533] Considering the negative influence of disinformation, former US-ambassador Kate Byrnes stressed the importance of *credible and legitimate sources for information about the entire process*.[534]

Narratives related to the treatment of the Macedonian language in official documents had the greatest emotional impact, being a reason for a high

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[530] See: https://prizma.mk/aleksandar-botot-vojnata-na-tviter-za-makedonskata-dusha/.

[531] See: https://vistinomer.mk/ruskata-propaganda-so-dezinformacii-vo-makedonija-pred-referendumot-vo-2018/.

[532] See: https://bit.ly/3daez3g.

[533] See: https://novatv.mk/pendarovski-kako-chlenka-na-nato-i-kandidat-za-eu-sme-meta-za-dezinformatsii-potrebna-n-e-otpornost-na-niv/.

[534] See: https://skopjediem.com/2022/07/15/byrnes-french-proposal-protects-macedonian-language/.

volume of disinformation.[535] Government sources assessed the French proposal as a "solid base", but the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE, the nation's main opposition party, rejected the proposition, arguing it favoured Bulgarian demands dismissive of Macedonian history, language, identity and culture. "*We do not need Europe if we have to be assimilated*" and "*Bulgarization of North Macedonia*", their slogans ran. Government representatives have opined on several occasions that fake news, disinformation, and hybrid threats were being used to weaken the state's position. They accuse the opposition of being behind the attacks., Vice Prime Minister Grubi also mentioned in his statement the "long Russian arm" and stated that foreign agents were interfering in the protests against the French proposal[536]. There were numerous displeased responses, including insults and curses on social networks and partisan edits to Wikipedia pages. Fabricated posts were published on Twitter containing the phone numbers of the deputies from the ruling coalition, exhorting the citizens to "tell them not to betray the Macedonian people".[537] The delays in the country's European integration process caused by the Bulgarian veto created an opening for attempts to manipulate the people's emotions, exploiting their justified frustration.[538] The long wait in the antechamber of the European Union, first because of a naming dispute with Greece and now thanks to Bulgaria contesting Macedonian identity, has left many in North Macedonia tired of waiting, doubtful of the EU's good faith, and unconvinced of the bloc's power to integrate and push the country forward.[539] For years, the EU, and the West, have been losing leverage. For some, Russian propaganda has been filling the void, convincing Macedonians of Russia's military might, the genius of President Vladimir Putin, the West's 'double standards' in its treatment of Skopje.[540] In an interview for Deutsche Welle, though, Andreja Stojkovski, director of the Prespa Institute, said that support for Russia is less pervasive than it seems, being created by bots and fake news and reinforced by the failure of EU enlargement."[541]

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[535] See: https://vistinomer.mk/dezinformaciite-i-manipulaciite-za-i-okolu-francuskiot-predlog/.

[536] See: https://bit.ly/3pvWzn7.

[537] See: https://bit.ly/3pg0hkx.

[538] See: https://bit.ly/3bwk3oJ.

[539] See: https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/22/forget-sputnik-russian-propaganda-has-other-paths-into-north-macedonia/.

[540] Ibid.

[541] See: https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/North-Macedonia/North-Macedonia-war-in-Ukraine-and-authoritarianism-216966.

(C) The War in Ukraine

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine has also worsened polarization in the country. Mdisinformation and spin floats on the surface of the sea of thousands of news items that are published on a daily basis. The incessant clash of conflicting claims and opinions that is the news makes it difficult for the common reader to distinguish truth from falsehood.[542] A large portion of misinformation and disinformation can be found on social media and in online media indifferent to professional standards of reporting.

False accusations, misleading information, and manipulative use of language on social media are all elements that contributed to establishing a certain narrative of the invasion, a framing trying to justify the Russian attack. On 24 February 24, for example, Macedonian portals published articles with headlines claiming that thousands of Russian soldiers were parachuting into Kharkov, promoting a video that was shared on social networks. Fact checking revealed that the video was at least eight to ten years old.[543] Misinformation also spread on the day after the invasion that alleged Zelensky was preparing to flee to London. The allegation was proven untrue both by fact-checking and by video blogs Zelensky recorded in the center of Kyiv.[544] After the Russian state news channels were removed from Macedonian television, Russian propaganda continued to spread through Serbian television stations transmitted through Macedonian operators.[545]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has shown not only the power of disinformation to spread easily, but also how difficult the struggle to recognize and suppress it is. The Council of Media Ethics had numerous complaints related to unprofessional and sensationalist reporting regarding the events in Ukraine. There have been complaints about sensationalist headlines, simple coverage of a fabricated content, content that was manipulated to the point of even using footage from video games as elements of the misinformation campaign.[546] Content referring to expected gas shortages as result of the crisis was shared without verification, causing great panic among the population.[547]

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[542] See:https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/blog/the-horror-of-propaganda-or-when-the-dead-rise/.

[543] See: https://vistinomer.mk/shirenje-na-branot-od-lagi-voena-invazija-i-invazija-od-dezinformacii/.

[544] Ibid.

[545] See: https://bit.ly/3QkJuJ0.

[546] See: https://mk.voanews.com/a/6494665.html.

[547] See: https://goce.mk/dezinformacziite-szodadoa-nepotrebni-rediczi-za-nafteni-derivati/.

The panic among the citizens arose after announcements on social networks that the price of diesel fuel would reach 100 denars. The resulting difficulties at gas stations were similar to those observed in most countries in the region.[548]

(D) The COVID-19 Pandemic

The spread of disinformation and other harmful content on social networks was particularly aggressive during the pandemic. According to a 2021 study,[549] approximately one-third of the COVID-19 disinformation pieces published in the media and on social networks were adapted versions of globally circulating Covid-disinformation, originating in the USA, in EU member states, in Russia and in China. Their content was, however, adjusted and synchronized with domestic political issues, such as EU-accession, NATO-membership and the disputes with Greece and Bulgaria about national identity.

The Council of Media Ethics reported about the existence of semi-correct – i.e., incorrect – information, disinformation, biased reporting, sensationalism and plagiarism.[550] A 2020 study[551] showed that "alternative narratives", especially pandemic-related conspiracy theories, were extremely widespread and "sticky" for Macedonian citizens.

No systematized data is available on disinformation, but the *CriThink* and *Vistinomer.mk* (Truthometer) fact-checking operations report that about two-thirds of the articles they debunked in 2020 were related to COVID-19. Some of the most prominent disinformation efforts tied to the COVID-19 pandemic were localized versions of global conspiracy theories such as claims that the pandemic did not in fact exist but instead was a engineered with a view to population control, that the pandemic was fake, that the virus was artificial, that the virus was being sprayed from airplanes, that the new 5G technology caused COVID-19 and that vaccines actually contained nanochips for population

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[548] See: https://bit.ly/3SHyqqN.

[549] Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, Metamorphosis: Analysis of Disinformation Related to Covid 19 in North Macedonia, Skopje, 2021, (https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/analysis_covid-19_disinformation_north_macedonia.pdf).

[550] Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia: The Critical Role of Media and Press Councils During Covid – 19, North Macedonia, 2020, (https://semm.mk/en/documents/publications/792-the-critical-role-of-media-and-press-councils-during-covid-19).

[551] EuroThink, Metamorphosis: PANDEMIC OR INFODEMIC? Critical Opinion and Conspiracy Theories in a Time of Pandemic, Skopje, 2020, (https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/themes/metamorphosis/download.php?id=30262).

control.[552] Vaccination rates remained generally low, as belief in conspiracy theories regarding the COVID-19 pandemic remained high.[553] According to a report by the Institute of Public Health, 47.6 percent of the North Macedonian population has received at least one dose of one of the vaccines, with 46.6 percent of the population having received two doses.[554]

Different Sources of Disinformation, Similar Patterns of Spreading

Disinformation in North Macedonia is mostly a matter of online media.[555] Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube remain the primary vectors for spreading disinformation and misinformation. Traditional media mostly observe professional standards, as they are regulated by law and monitored by the regulator, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. However, a tendency to spread disinformation via their online editions has been reported by the Council of Media Ethics.[556] This has led to the adoption of new, official "Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in the Online Media" in 2017, which also apply to electronic publications that maintain separate webpages and regularly publish news there.[557]

When online media with similar political and ideological views produce and disseminate disinformation and propaganda, it is common practice for them to do so in a coordinated manner, sometimes even publishing identical headlines and content.[558] In addition, as a result of political and business considerations as well as for reasons involving ethnic identity, different groups and different

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[552] See: https://vistinomer.mk/laga-e-deka-kovid-19-ne-postoi-deka-ne-prskaat-od-avioni-i-deka-ne-chipiraat-so-vakcinite/.

[553] Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis Skopje: North Macedonia in 2021: Major Events that Shaped Politics in North Macedonia in 2021, 2022, (https://idscs.org.mk/en/2022/01/10/north-macedonia-in-2021-major-events-that-shaped-politics-in-north-macedonia-in-2021/).

[554] See: https://bit.ly/3AdW7zM.

[555] CMEM: Statistical Overview of the Adjudications, 2021, (https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zhalbi/statistichki-pregledi).

[556] See:https://meta.mk/vozachot-vo-soobrakajkata-na-ruzveltova-ne-bil-pijan-tuku-mu-se-sloshilo/.

[557] Council of Media Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in the Online Media, 2017, (https://bit.ly/3phk2Ir).

[558] Vesna Nikodinoska: Professional Journalism and Media Literate Public – Crucial for Increasing Trust in Media, 2021, (https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Resilience-research-publication-3-North-Macedonia-English.pdf), p. 5.

influencers produce and spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech on social networks.[559] According to a 2021-analysis by the European Parliament, public figures such as politicians from the opposition and the government alike, journalists and other political commentators also produce propagandistic content and disinformation, which could potentially reach many people via their Social media accounts.[560]

Media sharing similar political and ideological views often copy content from social media and publish it without any verification, thus causing audiences to mistake the content for the product of professional, responsible journalism. Facebook or Twitter posts should not be just copied and posted. On the contrary, sources should be contacted, additional explanations sought and only accurate information published.[561] Media institutions themselves recognize that social networks as an important platform for reaching wider audiences, posting their content and getting news-related feedback.[562] Therefore they actively use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and LinkedIn. These platforms are considered main channels for news distribution, as important as the media institutions' own websites.[563]

Due to the complex political situation both in the country and worldwide in the past five years many international and domestic actors involved themselves in the creation and dissemination of disinformation. In a recent interview, President Stevo Pendarovski said that Russia made the most serious hybrid threats in the Balkans, including political propaganda and disinformation campaigns. The complexity and intensity of hybrid threats in North Macedonia are similar to those during the run-up to the 2018 referendum.[564] In an earlier interview, Pendarovski stated that Russia had been intensively interfering in the country through its people, political actors, installations, etc.[565] There had been speculation that NATO and the EU

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[559] Ibid.

[560] See: European Parliament: Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 2021, (https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

[561] Council of Media Ethics (2021) Journalism, Social Media and Self-regulation, https://semm.mk/attachments/20-12-2021/JOURNALISM%20AND%20SOCIAL%20NETWORKS_CMEM.pdf, p. 17.

[562] Ibid, p. 8.

[563] Ibid. p. 6.

[564] See: https://360stepeni.mk/pendarovski-za-etnos-se-soochuvame-so-seriozna-kampana-na-dezinformatsii-produtsurana-od-rusija-ista-kako-po-prespanskiot-dogovor/.

[565] See:https://meta.mk/tret-pat-pretsedatelot-pendarovski-ja-obvinuva-moskva-deka-se-mesha-vo-vnatreshnite-raboti-na-severna-makedonija/.

would not support the country during the pandemic (which turned out to be completely unsubstantiated). The objective of this hybrid strategy was clear: undermine citizens' confidence in NATO and the EU, convince them to start consider putting their trust elsewhere.[566]

Based on a Globsec survey regarding the susceptibility of the countries of Central Europe and the Western Balkans to Russian and Chinese influence, North Macedonian society is ranked broadly in the middle of the pack. While Russian disinformation and propaganda exploit anti-Western instincts present in the country, the Chinese influence operations in North Macedonia are mainly aimed at promoting a positive perception of China.[567] Media experts claim that, regardless of the massive amount of interference coming from Russia and China, the domestic media space remains friendly to the West.[568]

Disinformation and its Complex Political Milieu

North Macedonian society and its political context have been providing fertile ground for waves of disinformation for years. It still remains a significant problem for North Macedonia, with disinformation campaigns threatening democratic processes.

Geopolitically, the country, being centrally located and a NATO ally, is at the crossroads of major transportation corridors and is considered a stabilizing influence in the region. In an analysis of public opinion,[569] the US is perceived the foreign actor with the greatest influence in the country (45.16%), while Russia came in last (2.7%). The perceived influence of the EU in North Macedonia has dropped to its lowest ranking in recent years (from 44.8% in

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[566] See: https://samoprasaj.mk/naacik/ima-ogromen-volumen-na-dezinformacii-so-eskalacijata-vo-ukraina/.

[567] See:https://mk.voanews.com/a/china-russia-macedonia-/5912386.html.

[568] See: https://mk.voanews.com/a/voa-stranski-vlijanija-kaj-makedonskite-mediumi-article/6347928.html.

[569] Institute for Democracy Societas Civilis: Od pofalbi do razocaruvanja: 2012 analiza na javnoto mislenje za makedonskiot proces na pristapuvanje kon Evropskata Unija, 2022 (https://idscs.org.mk/mk/2022/02/23/%D0%BE%D0%B4-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D1%84%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B1%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%BE-%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B7%D0%BE%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B0-2021-%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BD/).

2019 to 9.5% in 2021). Only a few Macedonians see the EU as the entity with the greatest influence (7.8%).[570]

Internal and external political disputes seem to make the environment particularly vulnerable to disinformation. Many of the political challenges originate in specific events that have transpired since the country gained independence in 1991. Armed conflict erupted between security forces and rebels in 2001, contributing to ethnic tensions between Macedonians and the ethnic Albanian minority in the country. Twenty years later, ethnic divisions in North Macedonia have largely subsided, but there are still echoes of the past.[571]

The long history of domestic issues, such as corruption, poor adherence to the rule of law, or weak democratic institutions, have also made society susceptible to waves of disinformation. A political crisis began in 2015 that resulted with a government change in 2017. The country, led by a coalition government of the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia and the Democratic Union for Integration, joined NATO in 2020 and received the green light to begin EU accession talks. Prior to its NATO accession, North Macedonia was subject to concerted propaganda for almost ten years.[572] According to the Organized Crime and Corruption Report, Ivan Savidis, one of the richest businessmen in Russia, has paid at least 300,000 euros to Macedonian allies in his campaigns against NATO accession and against the name change. This money was paid to Macedonian politicians, extreme nationalist organizations and football hooligans.[573]

The external challenges – Bulgaria's blockage of EU accession negotiations, the COVID-19 pandemic, the energy crisis, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine – are testing the government's wherewithal and the citizens' commitment to the envisioned Euro-Atlantic path.[574] A large amount of disinformation has been created and disseminated in relation to all these issues. Disinformation campaigns that involve foreign relations mostly focus on issues of identity

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[570] Ibid.

[571] See: https://balkaninsight.com/2021/01/22/20-years-on-armed-conflicts-legacy-endures-in-north-macedonia/.

[572] NATO Review: Disinformation in the Western Balkans, 2020 (https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html).

[573] See: https://www.occrp.org/en/28-ccwatch/cc-watch-indepth/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia.

[574] US Department of State: Integrated Country Strategy, 2022 (https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ICS_EUR_North-Macedonia_Public.pdf).

rather than on the integration process itself. Many of the disinformation narratives present the country as a victim of its neighboring states, Bulgaria and Greece, the current pro-Western government of giving in to Sofia's demands on the issue of identity.[575]

Countering the "Enemy of the Truth" – Countermeasures against Disinformation in North Macedonia

There is no law concerning disinformation in the country and consequently there is no body legally responsible for debunking disinformation. The government's one and only attempt to change this involved the Proposed Plan for Resolute Action Against Spreading of Disinformation.[576] The Proposed Plan contained guidelines for establishing protocols for crisis communication between the government's communication service and ministries aimed at combatting disinformation on social media and internet portals. In addition to this, it also envisaged an action group consisting of the prime minister, representatives of a number of ministries and security institutions that would combat disinformation. However, the professional media community opposed the Proposed Plan, being especially vocal against the paid campaigns in private media outlets it would have entailed. The Proposed Plan not being accepted by the expert community, the government did not proceed with its further development.

Disinformation in North Macedonia is thus subject to self-regulation. The *Code of Journalists*[577] contains several articles relating to disinformation. Article 1 for instance requires information published to be accurate and verified, while article 3 – relevant in context of addressing disinformation – requires media outlets to publish corrections and rebuttals in case of inaccuracy in reporting. The 2017 *Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in Online Media*[578] contain additional provisions for preventing disinformation and misinformation. The *Guidelines* also stipulate that online media are required to supervise their online editions and moderate

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575 See: https://iges.ba/en/security/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/.

576 Government of RNM: Draft-Plan for Decisive Action against the Spread of Disinformation, North Macedonia, 2019 (https://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/dokumenti/predlog-plan_za_akcija_protiv_dezinformacii_final.pdf).

577 AJM: Code of Journalists, North Macedonia, 2001 (https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/).

578 CMEM: Guidelines for Ethical Reporting in Online Media, 2021 (https://bit.ly/3pHNYyQ).

user generated content.[579] With to the aim of strengthening online media self-regulation, the *Council of Media Ethics* established a *Registry of Professional Online Media* in 2020. As of today, more than 130 online media outlines have been entered into the *Registry*.[580] The purpose of the *Registry* is to enable readers to distinguish professional portals from those that breach ethical standards and publish manipulative content, propaganda and disinformation. In addition, *Time.mk,* the most important news aggregator in North Macedonia, which sources news from many media outlets in the country, organizes its newsfeed in topical clusters and has introduced an option to distinguish between media belonging to the Registry and media outside of it. This is perceived as an effort to allow users to filter media content based on criteria other than purely quantitative, for example the number of clicks or visits.[581]

There are several fact-checking initiatives for debunking disinformation. The *Metamorphosis Foundation* runs the fact-checking services *Vistinomer.mk* and *Crithink.mk*. Since July 2020, *Vistinomer.mk* has been a *Facebook* partner for debunking disinformation.[582] The civil society organization *Most* runs the "Fighting Fake News Narratives" project (*f2n2.mk*), which combats disinformation on the internet.[583]

Other organizations and educational institutions, such as the *Macedonian Institute for Media* and the *Institute for Communication Studies*, research disinformation in traditional media and in the online sphere and implement campaigns to combat this phenomenon. Both organizations have been implementing national and regional projects aimed at fighting disinformation by conducting research, organizing training, producing educational tools, etc. The *Institute for Communication Studies* and the *Macedonian Institute for Media* have created a valuable resource base for combatting disinformation: https://stopdezinformacii.mk/.

The investigative platform *BIRN/Prizma* and the *Investigative Reporting Lab* also often address the problem of disinformation in their reporting. The team of investigative journalists cooperates with the academic community, technology

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[579] Ibid.

[580] See: https://promedia.mk/page1.php?lang=mk.

[581] See:https://prizma.mk/portalite-pomegu-siniot-i-tsrveniot-algoritam/.

[582] See: https://metamorphosis.org.mk/aktivnosti_arhiva/fejsbuk-vo-partnerstvo-so-metamorfozis-i-vistinomer-zapochna-programa-za-proverka-na-fakti-vo-severna-makedonija.

[583] See: https://f2n2.mk/.

experts, social media users and citizens in their efforts to address this issue. The *Investigative Reporting Lab* has reported on the "fake news factories" in Veles publishing misleading and inflammatory political articles targeted at US readers during the run-up to the 2016 presidential elections.[584]

Media experts and prominent media and educational CSOs believe that increasing media literacy levels is an important way to fight disinformation. Several media literacy initiatives targeting different segments of the population are being implemented in the country. Among these is "*YouThink*", a USAID media literacy project[585] focusing on the integration of media literacy as a topic in primary and secondary education. The main focus during the first year of the project was the revision of educational programs and inclusion of media literacy in primary schools. 3,000 teachers have undergone training to teach media literacy. The project is being run in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau for Development of Education.

A Media Literacy Network, administered by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, gathers over 60 CSOs, media, institutions and state agencies and conducts activities related to combating disinformation and raising awareness in the general population. The Network on Addressing Hate Speech in the Media has a similar mission. The Public Service Broadcaster MRT has a legal duty to promote media literacy and has been gradually increasing its production of programs in the field.

As of yet, there are no studies or analyses on the effectiveness of the disinformation campaigns, nor on the effectiveness of efforts on the part of fact-checking initiatives to counter them. It thus remains hard to say what the best way to counter disinformation in North Macedonia is.

Conclusion

Disinformation exists in the public discourse in North Macedonia. It is a phenomenon mostly present in the online sphere. Regardless of the efforts by some traditional media to combat disinformation, the widespread use of social media impacts when and how people first hear about news events.

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[584] See: https://irl.mk/tanite-igrachi-od-sad-pozadi-makedons/.

[585] The Project is implemented by IREX in cooperation with local partners - Macedonian Institute for Media, Institute of Communication Studies and Youth Educational Forum (2021-2026).

In the flurry of dramatic domestic and foreign political events over the course of the last five years, as well as due to the health crisis caused by the pandemic, it turned out that identity issues still have the strongest potential in terms of generating and spreading disinformation in North Macedonia. Political events such as elections and referendums, the country's name change as well as disputes with neighboring countries have been a fertile ground for many disinformation campaigns, all of which have promoted anti-Western narratives. In a politically and ethnically polarized country like North Macedonia, disinformation often escalates into hate speech, threats and verbal violence between opposing groups. All this undermines democracy and social cohesion.

The geopolitical position of the country makes it susceptible to disinformation from foreign countries and actors, which is mostly directed against its twin aims of EU and NATO integration. High-ranking politicians publicly pointed to Russia as one of the sources of most serious hybrid threats on the Balkans, including political propaganda and disinformation. These disinformation campaigns are amplified by domestic actors and media pursuing their own political agendas and interests.

Political actors, both foreign and domestic, remain the main source of disinformation. The media, especially online media and social networks, have a crucial role in this process. This stems primarily from their potential to reach a wide audience, but a second reason is their clientelist relationship to political power centers. Media sharing similar ideological-political orientation publish information and disinformation in a coordinated way, the content then being amplified by groups and influential profiles on social networks.

Fight against disinformation requires a joint and coordinated engagement of different societal stakeholders– state institutions, the media, civil society, education and youth groups. Transparency of institutions is a prerequisite for reducing the oxygen available to speculation and for ensuring trust among citizens. Professional media work, the observance of ethical standards and verification of published information are necessary for citizens to have access to reliable information. This in turn requires the support of self-regulatory mechanisms and fact-checking initiatives. Apart from increasing social, systemic and media resilience, however, it is also necessary to work on strengthening of the personal resilience against disinformation. One of the mechanisms is the strengthening of citizens' media literacy skills and knowledge from the earliest age, a fact that should be recognized and taken into account by institutional actors.

Disinformation in Romania

By Ciprian Cucu[586]

Introduction

On 13 August 2022, David Popovici, a 17-year-old Romanian swimmer, broke the world record for the 100m freestyle race, to much national and international acclaim. However, not everyone was eager to congratulate the teenager: anti-vaxxers dug up a statement promoting COVID vaccination he made only a week before and started attacking him[587]. Facebook users called him "a psychopath" and wrote that he was not a suitable role model for anyone because he was endangering the lives of others by promoting vaccination. He was "advised" to stick to sports and to refrain from giving medical advice, and was accused of having been paid or manipulated into making his statement. Some suggested he was not actually vaccinated, but just claimed to be, in order to get benefits from the government.

Though COVID cases have been rising over the course of the last moths, there are no longer any COVID restrictions, and people are more interested in the war in Ukraine, in rising inflation and in the energy crisis. So why are some people still hung up on COVID-related conspiracy theories?

This paper investigates the rise of false narratives in the public discourse in Romania focusing on the last five years, starting with the way language has evolved to cover concepts related to manipulated information and an overview of how society has been impacted by it. It provides case studies on important false narratives, then takes a look at the main actors promoting them, the political context that makes it all possible and gives an overview of the – insufficient, unfortunately – countermeasures that have been adopted.

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[586] I would like to thank the following extraordinary people for taking the time to discuss disinformation in Romania: Ioana Avădani, Oana Despa, Mihai Ghiduc, Codruța Simina, Mircea Toma, Marian Voicu.

[587] See: https://www.facebook.com/alina.mihai.1829405/posts/pfbid035inXFrzwVLY3GyGuDtYwDt19uYS9CCrDAYa5sLd1VLQaiUZG7AgSnJ8dprM2YXZwl.

Terminology and Definitions of Disinformation in Romania

Since information manipulation became a mainstream interest around 2016 (mostly because of Trump and Brexit), "fake news" has been a popular expression, widely used in public discourse. The term is used to express essentially any kind of concern with information quality and is usually left untranslated.

The "fake news" label has also widely been used by political leaders to dismiss critiques from their opposition. In March 2019, for example, Dan Nica (S&D[588], a leading Romanian MEP sent an open letter[589] to Antonio Tajani, then president of the European Parliament, complaining about fake news spread by Frank Engel (Luxembourg, EPP[590]). In January 2021, Florin Cîțu (Prime Minister at the time) posted that some comments made by the opposition were fake news[591]. In some cases, such accusations are referring to real, straightforward disinformation campaigns that have been presented using the term "fake news" to be easier understood by the public.

The popularity of the expression, especially in original English, did decrease in the last couple of years, being partly replaced by its Romanian translation – *știri false* ("false news"), but also by other terms such as disinformation and propaganda.

Most CSOs, journalists, fact-checkers and researchers interested in "information disorder"[592] have come to understand the distinctions between these different concepts, but there are no commonly accepted definitions, and the general public is not as nuanced. For example, Romanian does not differentiate between disinformation (intentional spread of false information) and misinformation (false information spread without intent). There is only one word — *dezinformare* (the equivalent of disinformation) that can mean both, depending on context.

One possible solution is to use Romanian adaptations such as using *informare greșită/eronată* ("wrong/erroneous information") for misinformation, but there is no common standard, so such attempts may not reach the wider audience.

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588 S&D: "Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats", a political group in the European Parliament.

589 See: https://adevarul.ro/news/politica/liderul-euroalesilor-psd-acuza-fake-news-coleg-motivul-povestit-vede-dancila-fenomenul-coruptiei-1_5c925535445219c57e763ceb/index.html.

590 EPP: "European People's Party" , a political group in the European Parliament.

591 See: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/premierul-florin-citu-acuza-psd-de-fake-news-exista-o-singura-explicatie-1430550.

592 See: https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-report-version-august-2018/16808c9c77.

The evolution of the public discourse has mostly been driven by smaller, independent media outlets that pay attention to the particularities of different cases, while larger, more mainstream outlets seem slower to adopt these changes. *Press One*, for example, a small independent media outlet founded in Cluj-Napoca in 2015, has a category named "Disinformation & fake-news." The titles of the articles available in this category seem to avoid using "fake news," replacing it with *stiri false* ("false news") but also using other terms, such as "propaganda" or "disinformation." A different approach can be seen on the website of *Antena3*, a major Romanian media outlet, that still shows many titles containing the expression "fake news" in English.

As specific language continued to develop, new terms and concepts have been picked up by independent journalists, fact-checkers, and influencers that followed international media. Today, young adults who follow independent outlets or foreign media and spend time on Facebook[593] are likely to use a wider array of terms when referring to issues in the information ecosystem, while older adults and very young people are more likely to use "fake news" for everything.

One recently adopted term is "*narativă*" [/ˈnarativə/], a term borrowed directly from the English "narrative," generally used to point out false narratives. Use of the Romanian word "narațiune" (the actual translation of narrative) is also steadily growing.

"Conspiracy theory" has also an unclear correspondent in Romanian, with the word "conspiracy" in the expression being used either in the form "*conspiraționistă*" [/konspiraˈtsionjstə/], or in the form "*conspirațională*" [/konspiraˈtsionalə/]. People who are spreading conspiracy theories are usually called "*conspiraționiști*" [/konspiraˈtsionjʃti/] (eng. conspiracists); this term is sometimes used loosely, to refer to people who believe or share any misinformation/disinformation, or even for people who are merely uninformed. Actual conspiracists and spreaders of mis- and disinformation have begun to use this term ironically, suggesting that this term is just part of the mainstream propaganda that attacks them for telling the truth[594].

[593] Facebook remains the most popular Social Media Network in Romania as of 2021, even though Instagram and TikTok are growing and preferred by young people (https://www.romania-insider.com/study-facebook-social-media-romania).

[594] See: https://www.facebook.com/615797168507934/posts/3860377980716487; and: https://www.facebook.com/razvan.constantinescu1/posts/4484171851626404.

Public discourse has also been influenced by the most popular false narratives in circulation. For example, the word "antivaxxer" is frequently used, both in its original English and in the literal translation "*antivaccinist*", to describe people promoting the refusal of vaccination, in the context not just of COVID but also in that of generic vaccinations for children. Similarly, people who seem to promote Russian talking points after the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 are sometimes called "*putiniști*" (eng: putinists).

On the other hand, groups that frequently spread false information have started using their own terminology. There is a common motif in such groups to blame all the worlds' problems on "*globaliști*" (en: globalists). They are also commonly referring to the COVID-19 pandemic as to the "pLandemic", translated literally in Romanian as "*plandemie*," and to facemasks as "muzzles," used in the literal translation "*botnițe*".

The Target Group(s): Audience and Perspectives of Disinformation in Romania

Wide propagation of false narratives has created confusion regarding national and international events, contributed to the proliferation of populist and radical ideas, undermined the public's trust in media, and generally promoted a pessimistic outlook on the future.

Aggressive spread of false narratives during the COVID pandemic has sown confusion and left many people with a fundamental distrust in authority, both in the sense of government institutions but also in relation to experts, scientists, and doctors. In March 2021, for example, a group of people protesting restrictions in the city of Bacău in the north-east of Romania, entered the courtyard of the local COVID hospital where they shouted "assassins" at medical personnel[595], convinced that doctors were part of some larger conspiracy to control or decimate the population.

The COVID crisis and the associated infodemic[596] also helped a radical right-wing party – AUR (Alliance for the Unification of Romanians) – to enter Parliament. They have since continued to poll between 10%-15%, mostly due to COVID-related disinformation and anti-Western propaganda.

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[595] See: https://ziaruldebacau.ro/protestele-anti-restrictii-au-degenerat-in-bacau-manifestantii-au-patruns-in-curtea-spitalului-de-urgenta-si-i-au-facut-asasini-pe-doctori/.

[596] See: https://www.who.int/health-topics/infodemic.

Political discourse, in general, has shifted to accommodate a media ecosystem where information disorder is an important topic. Government institutions, parties, and political leaders instrumentalized the "fake news" term to dismiss critical news or attack media outlets. Dan Vîlceanu, a leader in the National Liberal Party (NLP) and former minister of finances, criticized as "fake news" a public service announcement displayed on the TV crawler[597] during an interview. Monica Anisie (NLP) posted, while minister of education, an image labelling as "fake news" an opinion expressed by a journalist on Facebook. The post consisted of the logo of the ministry and a screenshot of the journalist's opinion with a large red "fake news" rubber stamp superimposed over it. The Bucharest District 1 Public Order Directorate criticized an investigation into their acquisitions during the pandemic[598] using the label "fake news;" the institution even took the media outlet to court but lost. A similar case is that of George Simion, one of the leaders of AUR, who had several conflicts with journalists while enjoying the benefits of having his own column in a national paper (*Adevărul*). One of these conflicts led to Mr. Simion creating a list of "toxic and false" media organisations on Facebook, providing the first name (*G4Media*) and encouraging his followers to add more.

Politicians have also attempted, and sometimes succeeded, to co-opt some journalists into pushing their preferred narratives or tried to strongarm others out of publishing critical articles. The 2022 World Press Freedom Index reports on these developments, claiming that "the aggressive political discourse against journalists" and "disinformation campaigns led by certain media and politicians" on top of opaque funding and media owners' interests are "transforming the press into an instrument of propaganda."[599]

As societal confusion grew due to information manipulation, responsible journalists – journalists who pay attention to traditional professional standards and who care about ethics in journalism – are also faced with declining trust in the media. In terms of trust in the media, Romania ranks 29 out of 38 countries examined in a recent *Reuters Institute* report.[600] Good journalists suggest

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[597] See: https://www.g4media.ro/iesire-nervoasa-a-lui-vilceanu-la-digi24-sunt-siderat-ca-sunt-intr-o-emisiune-si-vad-fake-news-in-direct.html.

[598] See: https://www.facebook.com/politialocalas1/posts/3840660669309778/.

[599] See: https://rsf.org/en/country/romania.

[600] See: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf.

that false information is easy and fast to produce, but that investigating and debunking it consumes important resources and limits their ability to do other work. Some also point out that distributing their work is limited by social media platforms that do not always distinguish between spreading false information and debunking it. Thus, there is a growing feeling of despondency among them, of being overwhelmed by the sheer volume of manipulated information. The overwhelming confusion and the transformations in the media ecosystem have also affected the general public, especially young adults who were hoping to see some reforms during recent years but are now rather pessimistic about the future.

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples of Disinformation in Romania

Romania is a member of the EU and of NATO and has generally been mostly pro-Western and rather anti-Russian[601], facts that do affect its information ecosystem. However, "sovereignism" – a reactionary movement that bridges populism and nationalism, aiming to "bring back control" to the nation state, and specifically to "ordinary citizens"[602] – has been on the rise in recent years, pushing anti-Western and anti-globalist false narratives. "Romania, a colony of the EU/the West" is their main narrative, but they are quick to spread all conspiracy theories that involve the existence of a hidden global elite intending to decimate the world population or to take control of the people. Examples include the "New World Order," the "Great Reset," the "Great Replacement" or the "Agenda 21/2030."[603]

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[601] Russia has historically been expansionist and aggressive toward Romania as well as culpable for the Romanian communist era. These attitudes have been confirmed in a poll from 2018 that showed 31% of Romanians consider Russia "the biggest enemy to Romania's interests". (https://www.romania-insider.com/study-romanians-pro-us-russia-enemy)

[602] Linda Basile, Oscar Mazzoleni: Sovereignist wine in populist bottles? An introduction, European Politics and Society, 2020, 21:2, 151-162 (https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2019.1632576).

[603] See: https://www.facebook.com/615797168507934/posts/5048808148540125; also: https://www.activenews.ro/stiri/NOUA-ORDINE-MONDIALA-PE-INTELESUL-TUTUROR-IN-7-ETAPE-SI-11-PASI-DE-LA-PANDEMIE-LA-SUPUNERE-TOTALA-171235.

This movement has been promoted by public figures such as Călin Georgescu[604], Senator Diana Șoșoacă[605] and Archbishop Teodosie[606] as well as by journalists and influencers such as Iulian Capsali[607], Oana Lovin, Dan Chitic or Iosefina Pascal. All have been parroting Russian talking points and have been frequently promoted by Russian-affiliated media such as Sputnik,[608] though there is no proof of coordination or direct connections to the Kremlin.

Historically, internal politics has been the centre of public discourse and a main source of disinformation in Romania, both as a tool of political communication –using disinformation as a campaign tool – and as a reaction to Romania's fight against corruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine have shifted attention to global issues, and topics from the "culture wars"[609] have also been imported, together with disinformation regarding sexual education or homosexuality. A WHO sexual education guide has been misrepresented on nationalist, religious and conspiracy-prone websites[610] to suggest a hidden intention to promote the

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[604] A former UN Special Rapporteur on Hazardous Wastes who became a public figure after being proposed for Prime Minister by AUR, an extremist party. He lost the party's endorsement after praising Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, the founder and leader of the Legionary Movement, an ultranationalist and violently antisemitic organization active throughout most of the interwar period. Mr. Georgescu stated that "Russian wisdom" can be the salvation of Romania, called the NATO defensive base in Deveselu a "diplomatic embarrassment", claimed Ukraine is "a made-up state" and praised Putin for being a patriot.

[605] Independent senator, former member of AUR. Known for her aggressive discourse that includes ultranationalist motifs, antivaxx propaganda and various conspiracy theories. She is the epitome of souvereignism, frequently claiming that Romania should not get involved in the affairs of others and mixing this approach with conspiracy theories about the global elites and malevolent Westerners that want to enslave Romania. She also opposed a Romania-Ukraine assistance treaty, claiming it would make Romania a legitimate target for Russia.

[606] A controversial figure in the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox Church, known for a fundamentalist position sometimes at odds with official church policy. He has persistently promoted COVID-denialist and anti-vaccination conspiracy theories as well as anti-Western propaganda. He has praised Putin as a "builder" of churches.

[607] Film director and journalist/editor for various media outlets, known for his views that combine religious fundamentalism with conspiracy theories and an anti-Western positions.

[608] See: https://www.g4media.ro/propaganda-rusa-si-a-ales-favoritii-in-2021-sosoaca-teodosie-si-aur-capete-de-afis-in-topul-sputnik-au-intrat-si-presedintele-academiei-romane-ioan-aurel-pop-terhes-sau-liviu-dragnea.html.

[609] See: https://sociologydictionary.org/culture-war/.

[610] See: https://www.activenews.ro/opinii/DOCUMENT-%E2%80%9EStandarde-pentru-educatia-sexuala-in-Europa-.-Cum-vor-OMS-si-BZGA-Germania-sa-ne-distruga-copiii-prin-sex-de-la-0-ani-167628 ; https://infocrestin.com/recomandarile-oms-masturbarea-timpurie-a-copiilor/.

"LGBT agenda." These false narratives got widely shared on social media and found supporters in conservative politicians. SDP Senator Călin Matieș posted, in June 2021, that President Klaus Iohannis wants children "to be taught the practice of masturbation (as per WHO demands)" and that sexual education is a way of turning children gay.[611] The 2018 referendum to prevent same-sex marriage[612] also pointed to the "LGBT agenda" and equated homosexuals with paedophiles. One narrative suggested that it's only a matter of time until the government will end up taking children from Christian families, under the guise of protecting them, to give them up for adoption to homosexual couples[613].

(A) Ukraine as an Enemy of Romania

At the beginning of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, sovereigntists claimed that the invasion was the next step in the "great reset" globalist agenda,[614] while other influencers suggested it was a hoax meant to cover up COVID misdeeds[615] or made fun of "weak" progressives[616] who would not be able to defend Romania if needed. An older clip showing Zelensky, in a show, dancing in high heels and women's clothes, has been used to ridicule him, paint him as weak and a promotor of "neomarxism."[617]

Narratives evolved copying Russian propaganda: Ukraine was a part of Russia, it had been taken over by Nazis, the war was a result of NATO "expanding eastwards" or Zelensky not wanting to negotiate. The "US biolabs"[618] narrative started showing

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[611] See: https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/derapaj-al-unui-senator-psd-la-adresa-lui-iohannis-omul-asta-chiar-vrea-ca-in-scoli-copiilor-sa-se- predea-de-fragezi-practica-masturbarii-3594999.

[612] The idea has originated in Evangelical circles in the US and was exported in several Eastern European Countries. See: https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-romania-referendum-20181005-story.html.

[613] Narrative built around cases where child protection services in Norway and Finland investigated Romanian families. Sources: https://balkaninsight.com/2016/01/13/norway-decision-over-romanian-family-spurs-protests-01-12-2016/ and https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/17/romanian-right-turns-finnish-custody-fight-into-anti-western-propaganda/.

[614] See: https://www.activenews.ro/opinii/10-Semne-ca-Razboiul-din-Ucraina-este-o-parte-a-Marii-Resetari-173311.

[615] C.f. the statement by Dr. Răzvan Constantinescu, a leading figure among conspiracy theorists: "The globalist elite is trying to erase proof of pandemic misdeeds through a fake war".

[616] Referring to SRU (Save Romania Union), seen by most conservatives as the most progressive party.

[617] See: https://www.facebook.com/100064686406556/posts/330364115796466.

[618] The claim that the US had funded and is operating illegal biolabs in Ukraine, which would explain their interest in fighting Russia (https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2022/02/25/fact-check-claim-us-biolabs-ukraine-disinformation/6937923001/).

up, as did the narrative claiming the conflict was a proxy war between Russia and the US. Calls for peace began to grow, as well as anti-NATO/anti-EU narratives.

One prominent narrative claimed that Ukraine had been constantly "hostile" towards Romania, for which reason Romania should decline to help them. The narrative used two main points – a historical territorial dispute and a set of laws restricting the use of ethnic minority languages in Ukraine. Both have been exaggerated and interpreted in a nationalistic manner.[619]

The first involved Budjak, Hertsa and the northern half of Bukovina. These regions have been, at times, part of Romania, but were occupied by the USSR and annexed to (Soviet) Ukraine in 1944. The narrative blames modern Ukraine for not giving these territories back.

The second point focused on restrictions on using Romanian in Ukrainian public administration and education. These laws, passed to strengthen knowledge of Ukrainian and to limit Russian influence in Ukraine, have been rightly criticized,[620] but are not particularly focused on the Romanian minority, as propaganda claims.

This narrative has been circulated long before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. One article[621] from 2016 claimed that Bukovina and the Budjak are "Romanian territories under Kiev's occupation" and that there is a process of "uprooting" people in the area. Another article[622] from 2017 talked about "ethnic cleansing" and insisted Romania should ask for its former territories back, to ensure the "safeguarding of the ethno-cultural identity of Romanians" in those territories, a message closely resembling 2014 Kremlin narratives regarding Donbas. Similar articles continued to appear occasionally until 2022, when a surge of such articles surfaced between February and May[623].

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[619] See below for examples and references.

[620] See: https://www.rferl.org/a/council-europe-criticizes-ukrainian-language-laws/30312541.html; also: https://freedomhouse.org/article/ukraines-education-law-may-needlessly-harm-european-aspirations.

[621] See:https://www.napocanews.ro/2016/05/romanii-nu-uita-ca-bucovina-de-nord-si-bugeacul-sunt-sub-ocupatia-ucrainei.html.

[622] See: https://www.activenews.ro/stiri-diaspora/Dosarul-tradarii-romanilor-din-Ucraina.-Doua-organizatii-romanesti-au-cerut-denuntarea-Tratatului-cu-Ucraina-dar-MAE-a-respins-solicitarea-sustinand-ca-relatiile-bilaterale-inregistreaza-%E2%80%9Eo-dinamica-pozitiva-partea-I-146335.

[623] See: https://strictsecret.ro/plangem-mila-ucrainei/; also https://www.cotidianul.ro/deznationalizarea-romanilor-din-ucraina/; https://curierulromanesc.ro/asimilare-sau-anihilare-despre-teritoriile-romanesti-din-ucraina-limba-romana-si-cea-moldoveneasca.

Some articles[624] dug up a controversial statement made by Zelensky in 2020 that turned out to have been poorly translated,[625] while others promoted the idea that Russia will ask Romania to take part in splitting up Ukraine.[626] Influencers were quick to spread this narrative further: on 24 February, Iulian Capsali posted on his Facebook page that he will not show solidarity towards "the state that is most hostile towards Romania". He was echoed by Iosefina Pascal, who claimed that Zelensky conditioned giving rights to the Romanian minority on receiving military assistance against Russia.[627] Senator Șoșoacă was one the most important promoters of this narrative, speaking or posting on multiple occasions about the "stolen" Romanian territories[628] and about Zelensky's speech from 2020.[629] In June 2021, Senator Șoșoacă voiced opposition in Parliament to the assistance agreement630 that Romania signed with Ukraine; she reposted her position in 2022 when the law ratifying the agreement was promulgated, claiming that it would imply Romania was to become a party to the conflict.

(B) The "Deep State" - Imported Propaganda
Some of the most important false narratives in Romania during the past years (but before COVID) have targeted anti-corruption measures and the activity of the National Anticorruption Directorate (NAD) that has resulted in criminal convictions for many high-ranking officials, especially during the term of Laura Codruța Kövesi (2013-2018). Main claims suggested that the anti-corruption efforts were entirely politically motivated, or were a plan to undermine Romanian economic and judicial leadership for the benefit of foreign interests.[631]

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[624] See: https://www.puterea.ro/ce-spunea-zelenski-pana-deunazi-bucovina-de-nord-a-fost-ocupata-de-romani/.

[625] See: https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-23618028-presedintele-ucrainei-bucovina-nord-fost-ocupata-romani-trecut-peste-suta-ani-tras- vreo-concluzie-din-aceasta-poveste.html.

[626] See: https://www.incorectpolitic.com/rusii-propun-romaniei-impartirea-ucrainei/.

[627] See: https://www.veridica.ro/dezinformare/dezinformare-zelenski-conditioneaza-drepturile-comunitatii-romanesti-din-ucraina-de-ajutorul-bucurestiului.

[628] See: https://www.facebook.com/DianaSosoacaOficial/posts/pfbid02yfzRWJt24Dnmmtm9paGCjBZ4JrtKUtBT3 QbsAPdcgdXo8ncygysj7H4zE6K2RYDnl.

[629] See: https://www.facebook.com/DianaSosoacaOficial/posts/pfbid0jVe5tgGLhsWpMJo2yJ7cs6rr9G2Amnv7L4nuvZUSvFaH5rq67BF3qdH 77aWxz7ujl.

[630] See: https://www.defenseromania.ro/acordul-de-cooperare-dintre-romania-si-ucraina-a-fost-adoptat-proiectul-vizeaza-inclusiv -achizitia-de-armament-si-tehnica-militara_611345.html.

[631] See: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/18433.pdf, p.8.

These narratives gained political support in the SDP, the party taking a turn towards nationalism around 2014.[632] In 2017, the party leader, Liviu Dragnea, pushed for reforms many thought would weaken the judicial system[633]. Faced with large protests in many cities in Romania, SDP leaders and several media organizations (mainly *Antena3* and *RomaniaTV*) started to attack the protests, claiming they were part of a coup directed by foreign interests and that protestors had been paid by George Soroș. *RomaniaTV* even claimed participants were paid extra if they brought a dog to the gathering.[634] The two stations were eventually fined by the *National Audio-visual Council (NAC)* for their coverage of the events.

These narratives were finally gathered under the term "parallel state", an adaptation of the term "deep state" used by Donald Trump to refer to a secret group of bureaucrats, media, and law enforcement figures he claimed were working against him[635].

SDP leaders remained purposely vague, never actually naming any deep state members but alluding to Kövesi and to Florian Coldea — a prominent figurehead of Romania's main domestic intelligence agency (Romanian Information Service, RIS). Soon enough, anyone who criticized or opposed Dragnea's vision for government risked being considered a collaborator or an enabler of the deep state. This included NATO and the European Union: "I think that all our foreign partners should acknowledge that they have encouraged, even partly financed this parallel state and this foul system."[636]

The deep state narrative dominated the public discourse in Romania for almost two years, pushed by most SDP politicians and their partners. In effect, the narrative had become an official platform plan, as a resolution

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[632] This may have been more an electoral strategy than an ideological stance, since Victor Ponta (SDP) put emphasis on him being Romanian and Orthodox, unlike his opponent Klaus Iohannis, an ethnic German and Protestant.

[633] See: https://republica.ro/daca-ordonanta-13-ar-fi-fost-in-vigoare-azi-n-ati-mai-fi-pus-capul-pe-perna-oug-13-pe-intelesul-celor.

[634] See: https://adevarul.ro/entertainment/tv/protestele-rtv-antena-3-incendiul-nu-reusit-lovitura-stat-continua-fiecare-protestatar- primit-100-lei-cainii-30-lei-foto-video-1_5885255d5ab6550cb8b306dd/index.html.

[635] See: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/06/john-boehner-book-trump-obsession-deep-state-conspiracy.

[636] See: https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/dragnea-nato-si-ue-au-finantat-statul-paralel-944886.

adopted in the party's Executive Committee meeting of November 2017 claimed, among other things: "[...] the latest actions of the unlawful parallel state, under the guise of the fight against corruption, have the obvious aim of harassing and, eventually, beheading the legally elected political power, so as to render it incapable of fulfilling its Government Plan."[637] After Dragea's downfall, the narrative suddenly disappeared; it is now a marginal theme, referenced only occasionally.

(C) 2020 Election Fraud - A Never-Ending Disinformation Campaign
The 2020 local elections in Romania focused on a few tight races, with SDP incumbents challenged by candidates backed by NLP and SRU (Save Romania Union). One such race took place in District 1 of Bucharest, between Dan Tudorache (SDP) and Clotilde Armand (SRU). On 29 September, two days after the vote, Oana Lovin and Codruța Cerva started livestreaming in front of the district's electoral office. Both had been part of the "anti-anti-corruption" movement[638] and had been active in the electoral campaign, supporting Gabriela Firea (SDP), incumbent General Mayor of Bucharest. On 30 September, during their flagship talk show, "Daily Review", *Antena3* claimed that CCTV footage from the electoral office shows SRU members illegally accessing archived ballots.[639] Firea, Tudorache and Marcel Ciolacu (SDP president) quickly reposted the clip on their social media, calling for a revote.640 Influencers followed suit.[641]

Law enforcement clarified that the video showed no wrongdoing: the people in the room were checking vote tallies, not the votes themselves, and did so under appropriate supervision. Still, media outlets and influencers persisted. *Antena3* and *RomaniaTV* kept "discussing" the video and were eventually fined by the NAC. Luis Lazarus[642] kept talking about how Romanians did not go to France to steal elections (referring to Clotilde Armand, who had been born in France).

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[637] See:https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/cex-al-psd-declaratie-de-razboi-statului-paralel-si-ilegitim-830602.

[638] They supported and spread the narrative claiming anti-corruption was a plot to undermine Romanian political and economic power.

[639] See: https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/imaginile-fraudei-la-alegeri-presupusi-membri-usr-plus-umbla-la-sacii-cu-voturi-paziti-de-jandarmi- 583196.html.

[640] See: https://www.facebook.com/gabifirea/posts/pfbid037kd1ZboMqkNHk2riPtzQfWBMDh65BQSub3gJVxn76TSVafsPCZRUhBZdWtrVtZqrl.

[641] See: https://www.facebook.com/LuisLazarusZeusTV/videos/2206213946190447.

[642] A popular tabloid TV personality turned nationalist activist and journalist/influencer.

Gheorge Piperea[643] predicted that the President would declare martial law to prevent further challenges to the election. Lovin and Pascal[644] spread the "bags of stolen votes" narrative that claimed some SRU members had been carrying stolen votes in the backpacks they happened to have been wearing.[645]

An investigation that was opened soon after the election is still undergoing at the time of writing (July 2022), providing opportunities for some media outlets and influencers to continue spreading false narratives. In April 2021 and again in August 2021 several articles (*EVZ, Qmagazine, RomaniaTV*) claimed that the recount had shown there had been fraud and that Armand (SRU) had lost. In August 2021, *RomaniaTV* presented new images claiming to show Armand (SRU) looking into bags with votes; these reports have also been proven false.[646]

Meanwhile, influencers continue to point to the "fraud" any time they find an occasion. For example, Oana Lovin used the 2022 Eurovision incident[647] to suggest voting was rigged. She posted a screenshot from the video footage, long-since debunked at the time, writing that "these folks won't allow you to vote for a damn song and you believe they would let you choose your leaders?"[648]

The persistence in spreading the fraud narrative without evidence and disregarding evidence to the contrary suggests this disinformation campaign will continue for the foreseeable future, for an audience already convinced of its truth.

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[643] Lawyer and professor of business law, known for his anti-globalist and anti-Western positions but also for spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories on Facebook.

[644] Former counsellor to Maria Grapini (MEP, S&D). She became a popular "disinformation influencer", promoting false narratives about COVID and the war in Ukraine.

[645] See: https://www.facebook.com/IosefinaIosefinaPascal/videos/272511433796864/; https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=328098891586008.

[646] See: https://www.g4media.ro/romania-tv-continua-sa-o-acuze-pe-clotilde-armand-ca-ar-fi-fost-prezenta-in-camera-cu-buletinele-de-vot-desi-primarul-a-negat-vehement-hoarda-de-hoti-la-furat-de-voturi-burtiera.html.

[647] Eurovision organizers changed the points awarded by Romania and Moldova, claiming they had identified incorrect voting patterns. (https://www.romaniajournal.ro/spare-time/eurovision-judging-scandal-regarding-romania-and-r-of-moldova/).

[648] See: https://www.facebook.com/OanaLov369/photos/562784078528593.

(D) Money for COVID-Disinformation

COVID related false narratives started with denial – "COVID is just a flu" or is made up completely. Conspiracy theories started appearing, targeting Bill Gates, claiming "COVID was produced as a bioweapon" or linking the pandemic to 5G. Vaccination was targeted even before the vaccine was completed, but anti-vaccination narratives intensified after the first rollout. After May 2020, the main narrative became "the pandemic is a pretext to install a political-medical dictatorship", while sovereigntists suggested COVID was just a step in a *globalist* plan to establish a new world order. Ironically, most such narratives have been circulating globally and were just translated/adapted.[649]

Only a few narratives were local. For example, limitations on religious activities during lockdown were presented on social media as attempts to destroy the national identity.[650] Another narrative used images of trains and trucks filled with lumber to claim the real reason behind the lockdown is to allow (foreign) companies to cut down the forests.[651]

One particular disinformation narrative started in the spring of 2020 as a rumour on social media: the idea that relatives of people who die in hospitals were being offered money to claim COVID had been the official cause of death.[652] The rumour seems to have been built on a misunderstanding of several COVID related measures. For example, a government decision from April 2020 outlined a set of rules for the relatives of people who died of COVID, including a requirement to use protective equipment when identifying the body. The same document recommended hospitals not to perform autopsies due to safety concerns, except when an investigation was required. This fuelled conspiracy theories that claimed the government and the WHO had something to hide.[653]

Conspiracy theorists were already claiming that the number of COVID cases and deaths were exaggerated to allow the government to impose an authoritarian regime. At the same time, there were discussions regarding bonuses for

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[649] See: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/17/covid-misinformation-conspiracy-theories-ccdh-report.

[650] See: https://www.facebook.com/615797168507934/posts/3019709984783295.

[651] See:https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=312693839694186&extid=CL-UNK-UNK-UNK-AN_GK0T-GK1C-GK2C&ref=sharing.

[652] See: https://www.facebook.com/615797168507934/posts/3051409944946632.

[653] See: https://larics.ro/stop-fals-coronavirus-cum-se-inventeaza-dovezi-pentru-conspiratii-interzicerea-autopsiilor-in-cazuri-covid/.

medical personnel that handled COVID cases and some financial support from the European Union. This was all connected in a narrative that suggested the government needs to report as many deaths as possible to scare people, while also getting more money from the EU. Doctors and public health officials would also be directly interested to get paid extra for each COVID victim.

The first important spreaders were *RomaniaTV* and *Organized Crime Harm Reduction (OCHR)*, an obscure NGO. On 5 May, the *OCHR* website posted an article consisting of a mashup of rhetorical questions and erroneous interpretations of public documents that lead to conspiracy theories. It also quoted an anonymized Facebook post claiming the number of deaths was not as large as reported and that "some acquaintances" were offered around 400 Euros to declare COVID as a cause of death of a relative.[654] The very next day, *RomaniaTV* claimed to also have anonymous sources that confirmed this and invited Eugen Chiracu, president of *OCHR*, to comment. The story continued on 7 May, with *RomaniaTV* claiming that three hospitals in Bucharest had been offering up to 2000 Euros to relatives of deceased patients.[655]

Doctors, authorities, and journalists quickly debunked the story: the cause of death is solely the responsibility of the doctor, relatives are never required to accept the decision or sign any document in relation to this. One media investigation[656] showed that OCHR, the only available "source" for the claims, was a shady organization that was previously preoccupied with the rights of inmates. In fact, "most of its activity of 2019 was centred around a single inmate: Liviu Dragnea" (the former leader of the SDP). In all of the reporting, the articles and the discussions no hospitals making offers of money were actually named, and neither were any persons receiving offers of money. The story was always about "an acquaintance" or "a friend of a friend".

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[654] See: https://ochr.ro/marile-minciuni-din-timpul-pandemiei-de-coronavirus-v-1000-de-oameni-cer-adevarul/.

[655] See: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjhQ2j6rwYw.

[656] See: https://pressone.ro/asociatia-drepturilor-detinutului-liviu-dragnea-a-lansat-operatiunea-decese-fictive-de-covid.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation

A recent report by the *European Parliament (EP)* as well as one by the *Reuters Institute*[657] show that, in Romania, TV and radio have better reach and enjoy higher levels of trust than the online ecosystem. Traditional media are also used more for active engagement with news, while social media has a more passive connection – individuals are not *looking for news* on social media. In fact, the EP report shows that only 55% of social media users have mentioned they are using platforms to get information or news.

TV and radio are, therefore, more likely to influence the way people understand events, including through propagation of false information. Most narratives start online and are amplified on TV and radio. It's very common for traditional media to turn social media posts, especially from politicians or influencers, into news, or to discuss them during talk shows.

There are two main TV channels that have been constantly pushing misinformation, disinformation, and propaganda, *RomaniaTV* and *Antena3*. They have been frequently fined by the NAC[658] and are most often featured in reports by media monitoring initiatives.[659] These two TV channels also happen to be leaders among news stations in terms of reach,[660] each having around double the audience of the next-largest news channel, *Digi24*. Other TV and radio stations that aggressively distribute false information and promote a conspiracy theory approach have been appearing in the last period, as many political leaders or business owners have realized that there was a significant audience for this type of content. Examples include *News Romania*,[661] a channel that took over a marginal station *eStrada* in April 2021, *Metropola TV*,[662] which went from local to national station in January 2021 and *Gold FM*, which has been turned from a music station

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[657] See:https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=82708; and: https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News_Report_2022.pdf.

[658] The NAC does not monitor false information but rather checks for "balanced" reporting and respecting ethics standards. The number of fines is proof of the channel's lack of adherence to journalistic good practices.

[659] See: https://www.paginademedia.ro/derapaj/.

[660] See: https://www.paginademedia.ro/audiente-tv/sinteze-lunare/audiente-tv-prime-time-mai-2022-20730993.

[661] The NAC recently decided not to renew the broadcasting licence of *NewsRomania*, a decision that will force the channel to close down.

[662] The station is owned by the town of Voluntari, a town that had one and the same mayor for the last 22 years: Mr. Florin Pandele (SDP), the husband of Gabriela Firea, former general mayor of Bucharest.

into a news and politics station in 2020.[663] *Gold FM* has recently received the largest fine ever imposed — about 22.000 Euros, for egregious claims about Ukraine, such as "Ukrainians are a nation of thieves and girls of loose morals", Ukraine had "farms of children" and Ukraine trained "ISIS style children battalions". [664]

These stations have also hired some of the more active and popular "misinformation influencers":[665] *News Romania* hired Codruța Cerva and Iosefina Pascal, *Gold FM* also hired Iosefina Pascal, and *Metropola TV* hired Oana Lovin.

Regarding social media, Facebook remains the social media network most widely used in Romania, though young people are more likely to use Instagram, Snapchat or Tik Tok.[666] Monitoring reports[667] published in 2020-2021 have shown that most Facebook accounts spreading false information belong to real individuals. As trust in authorities, experts and media decreased, misinformation influencers got more prominent. The Facebook page of Gheorge Piperea has almost tripled its likes since the pandemic started, according to CrowdTangle data. Oana Lovin's page grew from a marginal page with around 1.000 likes in February 2020 to over 45.000 likes in July 2022, even after facing several penalties from Facebook. Iosefina Pascal, who has also constantly been complaining about "censorship" on the part of Facebook, has seen similar growth for her page.

Misinformation influencers are very diverse: lawyers, current or former politicians, fashion gurus, even professors, journalists, and doctors. There is no evidence they are coordinating[668] but rather that they are competing for attention in an information space driven by characteristics such as nationalism, a conservative worldview, and a conspiracy theory mindset.[669]

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[663] The change happened when the station was purchased by Andrei-Cosmin Gușă, the 23-year-old son of Cozmin Gușă, a former politician, political adviser and journalist, known for anti-Western views and for endorsing conspiracy theories.

[664] See: https://www.g4media.ro/radioul-lui-cozmin-gusa-a-primit-de-la-cna-cea-mai-mare-amenda-pentru-dezinformari-despre-ucraina-si- rusia-pagina-de-media.html.

[665] "Users that have frequently posted misinformation/disinformation on their profile or page, with the 'public' visibility setting, and that have drawn significant attention in terms of reactions, comments, and shares." Ciprian Cucu: Mapping the Romanian Facebook Misinformation Network, *Journal of Media Research*, Vol. 15 Issue 2(43), 2022.

[666] See: https://www.romania-insider.com/study-facebook-social-media-romania.

[667] See: https://issuu.com/forumapulum/stacks/a7ac53cf2e5c432aafa11cbb2b0984d9.

[668] Findings show influencers have their own networks of followers that do not overlap in a significant way. Ciprian Cucu: Mapping the Romanian Facebook Misinformation Network, *Journal of Media Research*, Vol. 15 Issue 2(43), 2022.

[669] See: https://issuu.com/forumapulum/docs/fnh2, p. 4.

As Facebook sometimes removed aggressive posts or (temporarily) suspended influencers' accounts, the "Facebook censorship" narrative[670] grew more popular, so many influencers started using Telegram, some already having over 10.000 followers there.

Standalone online outlets that promote false information have proliferated as well. There are countless fringe outlets that promote radical politicians and spread wild conspiracy theories and propaganda, such as glasul.info, 4media. info, evadare.ro, incorectpolitic.com, or ortodoxinfo.ro. These websites do not disclose authors' names or ownership information, and their domains are registered by private individuals.

Another category contains more "established" outlets, such as *Active News*, *R3media* or *Official Media*, focused on promoting antivaccination narratives and sovereignist talking points. Some propaganda outlets (eg. *Curierul Românesc*, *Patriotii.info*, *60m.ro*) have been found to be coordinated by AUR, an extremist political party.[671] Others are openly promoting Russian narratives, such as *Vesti din Rusia* (eng. News from Russia) run by Vyacheslav Samoshkin — a Russian national with Romanian citizenship, or *În prima linie* (Eng. "In the First Line"), the blog of Georgiana Arsene, a Sputnik journalist.

Finally, there are some publications that have had a history of good journalism, but partly turned towards propaganda and conspiracy theories in recent years, mostly due to changes in ownership. One example is *Romania Liberă*, a media outlet founded in 1877 that still publishes a print version. Owned by the WAZ (Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung) group between 2001 and 2010, the paper changed its policies and focus after Dan Adamescu, a controversial businessman, became its sole proprietor.[672] Another example is *Evenimentul zilei*, a newspaper that started as a tabloid, printing one the first fake news items in post-communist Romania: a 1993 story about a hen that gave birth to live chickens.[673]

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[670] See:https://www.facebook.com/425531824675521/posts/835090037053029; also: https://www.facebook.com/615797168507934/posts/3696086233812330.

[671] See: https://pressone.ro/reteaua-de-aur-partidul-plateste-facebook-pentru-a-si-amplifica-mesajele-sub-identitati-false.

[672] Mr. Adamescu was criticized for various dealings, such as misappropriating the funds of a football club he invested in in 2012. He was convicted in 2016 of bribing judges to get favourable rulings in lawsuits relating to his businesses. In 2009, he was quoted as saying "We can't afford to remain an EU colony".

[673] See: https://www.mediafax.ro/social/a-fost-celebra-stire-gaina-care-a-nascut-pui-vii-un-fake-news-povestea-din-spatele-titlului-dezvaluita-dupa-25-de-ani-de-ion-cristoiu-17665135.

The media outlet changed ownership several times and was considered of good quality for a while. Lately it made a hard turn toward conspiracy theories and propaganda, under the ownership of Dan Andronic, a Romanian journalist and political advisor.

Political Context of Disinformation in Romania

Post-communist Romanian politics has been shaped by a conflict between liberal democracy and so-called "original democracy", an expression first used by the first post-communist president, Ion Iliescu, to describe his vision for the future. It would have amounted to little more than autocracy in practice and would have retained communist power structures. Romania chose the first path, joining the EU and NATO, but only after some time and serious struggle, since it "missed a real lustration of communist cadres and de-communization in the first post-communist decade, despite attempts from civil society to do so."[674]

Former members of the nomenklatura took over parts of both the economy and political power and developed a set of ideas and values called "*Balkan Rural Industrial Communism* or BRIC"[675], centred around the idea that Romanians should control resources and that so-called corruption is just one of several legitimate ways of doing business and politics.

After the mid 1990s, as political leaders failed to improve living standards, pro-Western sentiment grew, but political visions rooted in nationalism and orthodoxy did not disappear, finding expression in various civil or political movements such as *Noua Dreaptă* (Eng. "The New Right"), *România Mare* (Great Romania), *România Unită* (United Romania), or the more recent AUR (Alliance for the Unification of Romanians).

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[674] Cristina Matiuta: Political cleavages in post-communist Europe. Romania as a case study, Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2018, pp. 147-164 (https://ies.lublin.pl/en/rocznik/yearbook-16-2018/issue-3/political-cleavages-in-post-communist-europe-romania-as-a-case-study-en-translation/).

[675] The term was proposed by sociologist Barbu Mateescu and describes a weak state with normalized corruption. "Rural" since almost half the population lives in rural areas; "industrial" refers to the lack of (technological) innovation in the economy; "Communism" suggests an authoritarian mindset that believes the leading party should not be questioned; see: https://sociollogica.blogspot.com/2017/04/crib-face-si-vede-numai-crib.html.

Mainstream parties have also made attempts to capture this demographic. The SDP campaigned for a while under the slogan "proud to be Romanian", while the NLP proposed Marian Munteanu as candidate for mayor of Bucharest, although he had been criticized for his alleged positive view of the interwar fascist movement in Romania.[676]

Ultraconservative and ultranationalist ideas coalesced into a grand unified conspiracy theory. According to its proponents, everything from privatization to promoting democracy and the rule of law is in fact a *"diversionist plan of «colonial western powers» to distract citizens of new EU and NATO member states from the transfer of not only natural and economic resources into the hands of foreign capital, but even of the judicial system".*[677] This is the source of the "Romania, a colony of the west" narrative, a narrative that has taken on various shapes and has been promoted with various degrees of success in the last decade. This narrative was especially connected to the fight against corruption that itself led to the "deep state" narrative described in section 3.

Ethnical tensions between Romanian nationalists and the large Hungarian minority in Romania, especially in Transylvania, is also an important context for disinformation today. These tensions have led to conflict several times. The first and worst of these episodes was the "Black March",[678] a series of clashes between Hungarians and Romanians in Târgu Mureș in 1990 that left five people dead and many wounded. The events were apparently triggered by a series of rumours about Hungarians intending to "take" Transylvania, rumours that have been at least in part spread by pro-government press. This incident is considered by some to have been an intentional disinformation campaign meant to rebuild the communist Secret Police (*Securitate*) into the new Romanian Information Service (SRI) to "protect the national unity of the state that was, allegedly, under attack".[679]

More recently, conflicts arose around the Military Cemetery at Valea Uzului, where international soldiers from WWI and WWII are buried. In 2019, a group of Hungarian activists covered up some recently placed crosses, in an artistic protest aimed at DUMR (Democrat Union of Magyars in Romania) which, they

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[676] See: https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/27669588.html.

[677] See: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bukarest/18433.pdf.

[678] See: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/20/when-romania-flirted-with-a-fate-like-yugoslavias/.

[679] See: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/article/RAPORT%20FINAL_%20CADCR.pdf, p. 623.

claimed, did not represent their interests. Considering the gesture an attack on Romanian war heroes, a group incited by local politicians stormed the cemetery during a commemoration organized by the Hungarian community. The incident received a lot of attention in the press and on social media, being turned into a propaganda tool by various nationalists such as George Simion, who would become the leader of the extremist AUR party but was at the time a nationalist activist.680 Another important source of societal polarization has been the so-called "culture war". The "BRIC vision" is rooted in a romanticized view of history, endorsing a specific mixture of nationalism and orthodox religion and holding it up as a cultural ideal. The EU is seen as supporting ideas and people who challenge this cultural hegemony; thus, it is attacked as a "neo Marxist" supra-national entity that encroaches on our sovereignty[681] and wants to destroy our *millenary* traditions.

The sovereigntist movement, which includes artists, influencers, journalists, lawyers, and politicians, is especially keen on pushing such narratives. Attempts to pass legislation regarding sex education or even civil unions have been attacked as neo Marxist ploys to destroy Romanian culture. The SRU is also a frequent target of similar attacks because of their more progressive position.

Finally, recent changes in the dynamics of the intersection of politics and media had a detrimental impact on Romanian society and its political discourse. In 2020, the government decided to hand out over 40 million Euros to media organizations, as a means to alleviate the financial pressure brought on by the pandemic, but also to enlist media to help in promoting official information about COVID. The decision was intensely criticized by independent journalists and media experts, because it "undermined the credibility of the smattering of decent press still in the country, since they [the government] gave credibility to the stereotype that the media has sold out".[682]

680 See: https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/eveniment/crucile-romanesti-ridicate-in-cimitirul-eroilor-maghiari-din-valea-uzului-trebuie-daramate-a-decis-tribunalul-bacau-povestea-unui-scandal-ce-l-a-avut-in-frunte-pe-george-simion.

681 Cristina Matiuta: Political cleavages in post-communist Europe. Romania as a case study, Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2018, pp. 147-164. Available on (https://ies.lublin.pl/en/rocznik/yearbook-16-2018/issue-3/political-cleavages-in-post-communist-europe-romania-as-a-case-study-en-translation/).

682 See:https://pressone.ro/presa-in-pandemie-cu-o-mana-se-iau-bani-de-la-guvern-pentru-a-informa-corect-cu-cealalta-se-scriu-stiri-alarmiste-sau-false-care-alimenteaza-confuzia.

A 2022 investigation has also shown that political parties have increased their PR and advertising spending with media, doubling the amounts from last year.[683] The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the NLP, which are currently in a government coalition, have spent over 7 million euros on media subsidies. According to some reports, this has had the effect of increasing positive coverage about the two parties[684] and limiting the number of negative news items as well as news items on subjects that would be sensitive for the government.[685]

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Romania

A media literacy study[686] published in 2021 by the *Open Society Foundation* showed Romania to be placed 28 out of 35 countries, and second to last among the EU countries in the study. Media literacy is also getting worse in Romania, the country's score having dropped four points since 2017 according to the same study.

Monitoring beliefs in conspiracy theories around the COVID pandemic[687] showed that over 65% of Romanians believe the pandemic was started by global elites trying to take control of the world. Also, almost 30% believe there is a global plan to implant people with chips through vaccination. Not even increasing numbers of infections and deaths were able to sway public opinion, as a *Politico* investigation has shown.[688]

A report[689] published in 2022 by the *Euro-Atlantic Resilience Centre (E-Arc)* concluded that "Romanians have internalized global conspiracist narratives. (…) conspiracy theories and erroneous information have prevailed over arguments presented by the scientific community or by authorities."

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[683] See: https://spotmedia.ro/stiri/politica/partidele-au-cheltuit-in-doar-5-luni-peste-7-milioane-de-euro-pentru-presa-si-propaganda-psd-a-dat-de-22-ori-mai-multi-bani-decat-usr.

[684] See: https://romania.europalibera.org/a/exclusiv-s-au-dublat-banii-pentru-presa-psd-si-pnl/31928472.html.

[685] See: https://www.g4media.ro/o-presa-platita-sa-taca-sau-sa-tipe-la-ordinul-marilor-partide-pe-banii-tai.html.

[686] See: https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MediaLiteracyIndex2021_ENG.pdf.

[687] See: https://www.strategicthinking.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/4.02.2022-Capitolul-7-Sondaj-INSCOP-STG-GMF.pdf.

[688] See: https://www.politico.eu/article/as-infections-grow-in-romania-so-does-corona-scepticism/.

[689] See: http://e-arc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Barometrul-rezilientei-societale-2022.pdf.

Romanian law has little to say about false information. Defamation claims can be actionable and, in the case of a plaintiff's verdict, can lead to the defamatory content being ordered taken down, as well as to damages awards.[690] Intentional communication or spreading of known false news, data, or documents is punishable by 1 to 5 years in prison, but only if there is a threat to national security.[691] During the COVID pandemic, there have been discussions around a legal provision punishing actions that counter disease prevention, but it proved to be difficult to apply to disinformation.

The NAC is the only official media supervisor in Romania, limited until recently to TV and radio. A new law meant to transpose the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive (Directive 2018/1808) has been passed in June 2022, providing some regulations relating to "video sharing platforms". How efficient the actual implementation will be remains to be seen. There is currently no way to send petitions to the NAC regarding videos shared on *YouTube* or other platforms.

The NAC does try to make sure that audio-visual media "correctly present facts and events"[692] and that information is "correct, verified and presented impartially and in good faith".[693] While the institution has achieved some positive outcomes, both by organizing meetings with media organizations to discuss ways of improving information quality and through sanctions, critics feel that the effort is insufficient. Criticism has grown during COVID, as mainstream channels have aggressively spread false information and helped build public profiles for controversial figures that were pushing unverified claims and conspiracy theories.[694] Some journalists and researchers[695] believe that the NAC does not have enough resources, in particular specialized personnel to monitor and analyse disinformation narratives and other forms of information manipulation.

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[690] Financial compensation for non-material harm, for example mental or physical suffering; c.f.: https://www.coe.int/en/web/execution/article-4.

[691] See: https://lege5.ro/gratuit/gezdmnrzgi/art-404-comunicarea-de-informatii-false-codul-penal?dp=gqytsojwge3te.

[692] Audiovisual law 504/2002, Art. 3, Paragraph 2; see: https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/gm4dqnjz/art-3-dispozitii-generale-lege-504-2002?dp=gizdimzugm4dm).

[693] NAC decision No. 220* / 2011 in regard to The Reglementation Code for Audiovisual Content. Art. 64, Par. 1-b; see:https://www.cna.ro/IMG/pdf/DECIZIE_nr._220_din_24_februarie_2011_versiune_consolidata.pdf.

[694] See: https://republica.ro/unde-este-cna-ul-zplangere-z-publica.

[695] See: http://e-arc.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Barometrul-rezilientei-societale-2022.pdf.

The E-Arc report states that the institutional and legal context of Romania shows "a small number of tools, imperfectly suited to the current phase of technological development. (...) Legal provisions and relevant institutions do not cover the whole spectrum of threats and do not allow for a quick and efficient counteraction".

However, the same report states that turning disinformation into a felony is "anachronistic" and that the rights of citizens, including freedom of expression, should be at the centre of any legal provision. This is echoed by most journalists, CSOs and researchers, who point to the possibilities that the government would end up abusing laws that decide what is and is not manipulated information.

On the other hand, the fear of giving too much power to the government has recently blocked a recent civil society initiative proposing a monitoring system that would have helped flag problematic content. The presence of government representatives in a meeting led to some media articles misrepresenting the initiative as one proposed by the government. Similarly, a provisional list of terms to be monitored that included "government corruption" as a possible example, was seen as proof that the initiative could end up being used to limit press freedom.

While journalists and other experts are adamant that stricter laws can have unintended consequences and are not a solution to information manipulation, they point to the need for more "political vision". This would imply creating a strategic, systemic approach, that would touch on different areas. It should give working definitions for terms such as media literacy, mis- and disinformation. It should fund impact studies on disinformation and countering disinformation actions as well as other research. It should focus on building up societal trust in authorities, by improving transparency and public communication. Finally, it should develop a framework for the education system, to use its internal mechanisms to provide media literacy and reasoning skills to teachers as well as tools to help them include such topics in their lesson plans.[696]

In the meantime, countermeasures remain to be handled by around a dozen small and medium CSOs and independent media organizations. Larger,

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[696] C.f. personal interviews of the author with journalists, the president of the largest NGO involved in media literacy and a NAC member in 2022. The author would like to express his gratitude to: Codruța Simina, Oana Despa, Mihai Ghiduc, Marian Voicu, Mircea Toma and Ioana Avădani.

mainstream organizations, including public broadcasters, seem to focus on the speed of reporting rather than quality, often making mistakes[697] – some even inadvertently pushing false narratives, as shown in previous sections. Public broadcasters have also been criticized for being too close to the government, for example allowing political leaders to turn interviews in PR opportunities.[698]

Media outlets that have been actively tackling information disorder by debunking false narratives, providing factual arguments based on correct facts on polarized topics, or writing exposés on key persons or organizations behind them, include *Press One*, *Scena 9*, *Europa Liberă* (Free Europe), and *Mindcraft Stories*. Some CSOs are also running projects to maintain outlets that target false information, such as *Eurocomunicare* (antifake.ro), *Alternative Sociale* (veridica.ro), and *Funky Citizens* (factual.ro). Since July 2022, *Funky Citizens* is also an official Facebook fact-checker.[699]

There is also a platform – larics.ro – built by a specialized department[700] of the *Institute for Political Sciences and International Relations "Ion I.C. Brătianu"*, but it may be worth mentioning that the institute's director, Dan Dungaciu, has been criticized for some of his positions and failed predictions.[701]

The largest active media literacy programme is implemented by the *Centre for Independent Journalism* (CIJ), but smaller projects have been run by other CSOs as well, such as *Mediawise Society, Active Watch, Forum Apulum, Funky Citizens, Amurtel, Romanian Youth Movement for Democracy (RYMD)*, or *Intercultural Institute of Timisoara* (IIT). Usually, such projects include media literacy training for students and teachers, but there have been programmes for local journalists and librarians working in public libraries as well.

Most of these initiatives are funded by foundations such as the *Romanian-American Foundation, German Marshall Fund* or *EEA and Norway Grants*, and

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[697] See: https://www.paginademedia.ro/derapaj/derapaj-florin-salam-mort-stirile-pro-tv-20817298.

[698] See: https://www.edupedu.ro/intrebare-de-moderator-tvr-pentru-ministrul-educatiei-cum-sa-facem-ca-plagiatele-sa-nu-mai-poata-fi-folosite-in-scopuri-politice-cum-s-a-intamplat-in-cazul-domnului-premier-ciuca/.

[699] See: https://funky.ong/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Comunicat-parteneriat-Factual-Meta.pdf.

[700] Laborator de Analiza a Războiului Informațional și Comunicare Strategică (Laboratory for Information War Analysis and Strategic Communication).

[701] See: https://www.g4media.ro/pariu-pe-un-cal-mort-intruchipat-de-o-lebada-neagra-cum-a-fost-sustinut-aur-de-dan-dungaciu-analistul-cu-post-la-academie-care-a-monopolizat-discursul-pe-republica-moldova.html.

by embassies of European countries and the US, and are awarded on a competitive basis through a grant mechanism. Some funding comes from individual donations, and, on rare occasions, projects are funded by private companies (e.g., *Mindcraft Stories* is funded by *BRD Groupe Société Generale*).

Though working on these issues began almost 20 years ago, results have been limited, mostly because of the lack of political will. This is visible especially regarding education, where there has been little institutional support to those trying to bring new approaches in a system that is mostly rigid, hides its failings to protect its image and, above all, abhors change.

Conclusion

The information space in Romania has grown increasingly chaotic and confusing over the last five years, especially under the pressure of media organizations and influencers intensively promoting false narratives, from political propaganda to disinformation campaigns and wild conspiracy theories. Specific language evolved to allow nuances in addressing the information disorder phenomena, but there is no standardisation, and the generic term "fake news" is still being overused.

Proliferation of false narratives contributed to lowering trust in the media, which in turn increased the consumption of manipulated information. While some journalists are stoking the flames of mis- and disinformation, the ones who are trying to fight it are feeling overwhelmed. Many politicians have weaponized "fake news" to attack their opposition, or even journalists. Extremist politicians in particular have taken advantage of the trend and have been happy to push their own distorted narratives.

Main false narratives have been typical, from COVID conspiracy theories claiming "globalists" are trying to impose a "new world order", to parroting Russian talking point relating to the war in Ukraine. While the narratives around Ukraine seem to have a hard time getting mass support, the ones related to COVID have taken hold of Romanians' minds: 65% of Romanians believe the pandemic was started by global elites trying to take control of the world and almost 30% believe there is a global plan to implant people with chips through vaccination. Before COVID, internal politics and anti-corruption was the preferred topic for disinformation, highlighted in the "parallel state" narrative that dominated the public discourse between 2017 and 2019. "Culture war"

issues, such as sex education and homosexuality have also been important themes that produced important false narratives. Main sources of false narratives include "misinformation influencers" on Facebook and Telegram, two major TV stations and a growing ecosystem of fringe outlets, that started appearing as politicians and business owners realized there is an interested audience.

These developments point to the main conflict in post-communist Romania: the clash between a western-oriented, liberal minded civil society and an authoritarian traditionalist mindset shared by some business and political leaders, many of whom rose from the ranks of the former communist power structures. Unfortunately, the lack of political will and vision has led to a failure to implement sufficient countermeasures. Legislation is lagging technological progress, and authorities seem either unwilling or unable to address the issue. A system of sanctions or indictments against people or organizations can lead to freedoms being curtailed, which is why the strategy is opposed by most journalists and experts. In the meantime, country scores in media literacy are getting worse, since the group of media organizations and CSOs working to provide such programmes is too small and underfunded to be able to tackle the already huge ecosystem thriving on manipulated information. However, with more funding starting to become available and more organizations coming into the fold, there is still hope that things may improve, regardless, or even in spite of the governments' actions.

Disinformation in Serbia

By Stefan Janjić

Introduction

Two current crises with global consequences — the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine — have clearly shown how wide-reaching the disinformation market is in Serbia and what damage it can cause. In Serbia, there is a long tradition of disinformation, which culminated during the 1990s wars, when information manipulation was used as a tool to spread nationalism, national intolerance and justify war crimes.[702] Waves of manipulative and deeply polarized reporting appeared later as well, in parallel with the crises that Serbia was facing, including the NATO bombing in 1999, the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000, the assassination of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in 2003, the dissolution of the state union with Montenegro in 2006, the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2007, the world economic crisis in 2009 and the change of government in 2012. Unlike those crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine are happening in the era of the internet, which enables the rapid spread of disinformation, but also acts as a platform for the promotion of fake experts and media influencers. Although citizens' trust in mainstream media in Serbia is low, these outlets still have high visibility and influence. Tabloid media (newspapers and television) that openly support the ruling party, but also pro-Russian narratives, were identified by fact-checkers as the most common sources of disinformation. Those same media receive a lot of financial support from the state and municipal budgets, through the advertising of institutions and the system of grants.

Another special problem is that disinformation spills over from Serbia to countries that belong to the same language area (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro), and partly also to Slovenia and North Macedonia: research on disinformation related to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine showed that Serbia is the most common source of disinformation in the Western Balkans.

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[702] Dubravka Valić Nedeljković: Rikošet reči, Argument, Belgrade, 1997.

Terminology and Definitions

In public discourse in Serbia, there are several different terms for false and misleading information: the most common are "*dezinformacija*" (disinformation), "*lažna vest*" (false news) and "*fake news*" (used in English, without translation). There is no good translation for "misinformation" in Serbian, and when talking about incorrect or misleading information that was spread by accident, due to insufficient knowledge or attention, the term "*greška*" (mistake) is most often used. The semantic nuances by which these terms differ have been the subject of discussion for several years, but mainly at the level of academic discourse[703], while the general public mostly perceive of these terms (*dezinformacija, lažna vest, netačna vest, fake news*) as synonyms.

In the Serbian "Dictionary of Synonyms" disinformation is defined as "deception, hoax, fallacy, trickery, fabrication, false alarm, false news, false belief, distorted fact, false information"[704], but also as "*novinarska patka*" (literal translation from the German: *Zeitungsente; Engl.: press hoax*), which is an expression that is still used as slang for disinformation, although it is considered old-fashioned today. All proposed *synonyms* indicate that disinformation should be understood as false information that is spread *intentionally*, which automatically excludes cases that should be rated as "misinformation". It is difficult to surmise why there is no good translation for "misinformation" in Serbian. One explanation could be that the semantic needs were satisfied by the term "*greška*", meaning wider ("*greška*" can also be a typo), while a second explanation could be that it is sometimes difficult or even impossible to proof the intentions of the author of inaccurate content, which would be necessary for us to discern *disinformation* from *misinformation*. In academic discourse, we can also encounter an attempt to translate "misinformation" as "*misinformacija*", but that expression did not catch on into public and media discourse, probably because it represents a bad example of "*Serblish*" - a clumsy combination of Serbian and English.

Some media experts question the term "*lažna vest*" (fake news) itself: they believe it is an example of an oxymoron, since one of the fundamental

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[703] For example: Čedomir Markov: Kada kažeš „lažna vest" na šta tačno misliš? Kvalitativna analiza upotrebe izraza „lažna vest" u medijskom izveštavanju u Srbiji. Građani u doba dezinformacija (ed. Aleksandra Krstić). Udruženje za političke nauke Srbije, Belgrade, 2021; Stefan Janjić: Medijske inicijative za borbu protiv lažnih vesti: od manipulacije do dekonstrukcije. Mediji civilnog društva kao alternativa medijskom populizmu, senzacionalizmu i lažnim vestima, Novi Sad, 2019.

[704] Pavle Ćosić et al.: Rečnik sinonima, Kornet, Belgrade, 2008.

characteristics of news as a journalistic genre is to be true. Čedomir Markov, who analyzed the use of the term "*lažna vest*" in media reporting in Serbia, came to the conclusion that "*lažna vest*"- similar to *fake news* in English - is often used to reject and discredit political criticism and opponents and deal with political opponents. In addition, the term "*lažna vest*" is also used as a "*trendy phrase to denote various forms of alleged falsehood, to mobilize the attention of the audience by emphasizing that the information being communicated is true, or to indicate that some information could be fake*".[705]

"*Lažna vest*" is mentioned in Serbian legal acts only once, in an article of the Criminal Code (2005) concerning crimes against public order and peace. That article states: "*Whoever causes panic, or serious disturbance of public order or peace, or frustrates or significantly hinders the implementation of decisions and measures of state bodies or organizations exercising public powers, by presenting or spreading fake news or assertions, shall be punished with imprisonment from three months to three years and a fine. If the act was committed through the means of public information or similar means or at a public meeting, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years*".[706] However, the code does not provide a detailed explanation or definition of the term "*lažna vest*", which leaves room for selective application of the cited provision. According to publicly available information, 34 people were reported for this criminal offence in 2020, and eight of them were convicted[707]. For example, a man was arrested in March 2020, during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic on suspicion of spreading panic on a Viber group spreading false news that gas stations would not sell fuel to individuals and that citizens would only be allowed to leave their homes to go to the store.[708]

On the contrary, the Code of Journalists of Serbia (2015)[709], even its section that refers to truthfulness of reporting, does not mention "*lažna vest*" or

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[705] Čedomir Markov: Kada kažeš „lažna vest" na šta tačno misliš? Kvalitativna analiza upotrebe izraza „lažna vest" u medijskom izveštavanju u Srbiji. Građani u doba dezinformacija (ed. Aleksandra Krstić),Udruženje za političke nauke Srbije, Belgrade, 2021.

[706] Krivični zakonik, 2005, (https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni-zakonik-2019.html).

[707] Jelena Jovović, Dubravka Valić Nedeljković: Izveštaj o nacionalnom regulatornom i samoregulatornom okviru protiv dezinformacija i govora mržnje. Novosadska novinarska škola, Novi Sad, 2021.

[708] Danas.rs: MUP: Uhapšen Beograđanin zbog izazivanja panike preko vajber grupe, March 19, 2020, (https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/mup-uhapsen-beogradjanin-zbog-izazivanja-panike-preko-vajber-grupe/)

[709] UNS & NUNS: Kodeks novinara Srbije. Savet za štampu, Belgrade, 2015.

"*dezinformacija*" at all. In the "Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System in the Republic of Serbia 2020-2025"[710], adopted by the Serbian government in January 2020, the term "*lažna vest*" is mentioned once in the list of negative phenomena related to the development of freedom of expression, but without definition. The term "*dezinformacija*" is also mentioned once here in a similar context within the chapter on digital competences, where it is stated that "changes in audience preferences and technical capabilities have led to negative phenomena reflected in the spread of hate speech or disinformation (fake news in English)". Yet again, no detailed explanation on the meaning of the term disinformation, which here has been equated to „fake news", is given.

Overall, "*dezinformacija*" and "*lažna vest*" have become, as in many other languages, "buzzwords" of public discourse and there is no general consensus regarding their precise meaning. The fact that there is no definition of the terms "*dezinformacija*" and "*lažna vest*" in any Serbian law contributes to this problem.

The Target Groups: Audience and Perspectives of Disinformation

(A) Journalists and the Media

When considering the impact of disinformation on journalists in Serbia, we can single out **three key areas**: production, reputation and financing. The first mostly affects journalists employed in media with a large content production. Editorial policies based on copy-paste journalism and short deadlines create pressure on journalists to publish as much content as possible in the shortest possible time. This model of journalism, mostly present in online media, leaves very little time for journalists to check the news before publication, and even implicitly demotivates them to do so. This can explain the frequent cases when dozens of media outlets from Serbia publish identical disinformation: In May 2021, for example, more than 20 media outlets republished a satirical news story about a man from Bosnia and Herzegovina who pretended to be a priest[711]; in July 2019, more than 40 media published false news that the mandatory military service will

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[710] Government of Serbia: Strategija razvoja sistema javnog informisanja u Republici Srbiji za period 2020-2025, Belgrade, 2020, (https://www.media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/medijska_strategija210_cyr.pdf).

[711] C.f.: https://fakenews.rs/2021/05/16/duhovnik-prevarant/.

be re-introduced starting from 2020[712]; in June 2021, more than 60 media outlets published edited footage with an Arab sports commentator[713]. In such occasions, it happens that even media outlets with strict content control, such as Public Service Broadcasting (PSB), join mainstream portals in publishing unverified content.

The second area of influence is reputation and trust. It can be assumed that citizens often uncritically build their image of the media and journalists based on the worst actors on the media scene, those who often spread disinformation.[714] This can indirectly, through generalization, affect the reputation of serious media that respect ethical norms and uphold high standards of data verification. The report "Information in the digital environment in Serbia" by the Center for Media Research published in 2020 showed that the general trust of citizens in the media is extremely low and that only 20 % of respondents agree with the statement that in most cases the news can be trusted.[715]

The third area of influence refers to media financing, through a paradoxical mechanism that provides rich sources of funding to the media recognized as frequent sources of disinformation. This is made possible through open calls for media grants that municipalities and ministries announce each year. Within its *"Ke$formation" project*[716] the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK) has launched a special database that compares the public funds which are received by a certain media outlet and the number of pieces of disinformation that it has published. For example, *„Informer"* — a media that two fact-checking portals (*„Rasrikavanje"* and *„FakeNews Tragač"*) recognize as one of the „champions of the disinformation market" — received almost 15 million Dinars

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[712] C.f.: https://fakenews.rs/2019/07/17/vise-od-40-medija-prenelo-laznu-vest-o-obaveznom-vojnom-roku-od-2020/.

[713] C.f.: https://fakenews.rs/2021/06/28/vise-od-60-portala-naselo-na-salu-arapin-nije-pevao-u-prenosu-eura/.

[714] The 2018 IPSOS research "Fake news, filter bubbles, post-truth and trust" showed that Serbia is the first among the 27 surveyed countries in terms of the number of respondents who agree with the statement "The media misleads people". The study "Misinformation in action" found that fake news exposure was associated with a decline in mainstream media trust: Katherine Ognyanova, et al: Misinformation in action: Fake news exposure is linked to lower trust in media, higher trust in government when your side is in power. The Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review, 2020.

[715] Snježana Milivojević, Danka Ninković Slavnić, Snežana Bajčeta: Informisanje u digitalnom okruženju u Srbiji, Centar za medijska istraživanja, Belgrade, 2020.

[716] C.f. : https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/kesformisanje/.

(more than EUR 120 000) through such grants in 2017/8. This system of open calls is mentioned to strengthen reporting on topics of public interest, such as corruption, human and minority rights and ecology at the local level. Open calls also contain a provision concerning the level of professionalism: it is stated that the grant award committee will take into account whether the applicants have a track record of violations recorded by state authorities, regulatory bodies or self-regulation bodies in the previous year.[717] However, KRIK's research shows that commissions in a large number of local governments do not pay attention to this criterion, so money is allocated to politically eligible media, regardless of the recorded violations of the Code of Journalists and the number of detected disinformation. This puts the professional media at a disadvantage, while the media that spread disinformation are "rewarded" for their loyalty to the ruling parties.

(B) Readers, Viewers and Media Users

The same report ("Information in the digital environment in Serbia" by the Center for Media Research 2020) shows that two-thirds of respondents express concern about the accuracy of information, which is higher than the EU average (51 %) and the world average. When it comes to sources of disinformation, the results show that more than half of respondents (51 %) are most concerned about inaccurate or misleading information they receive through websites and apps, while social networks (as a whole) are in second place with 20 %. Among social networks, the greatest concern was expressed about Facebook.[718]

There is an enormous number of problems caused by disinformation in Serbia. One of them, perhaps the most important one is mistrust. Reuters' "Digital News Report 2022" shows that in the developed Scandinavian countries citizens have more trust in the media, more trust in PSBs and a lower level of so-called "selective news avoidance", which is based on decision "to ration or limit exposure to news, or at least to certain types of news"[719]. In Serbia, the level of trust in the media is very low. Accustomed to the dominant model of media propaganda and disinformation, citizens can react suspiciously to true content.

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[717] For example: http://www.kultura.novisad.rs/sites/default/files/konkursi/-Tekst_konkursa_Informisanje_2022-.pdf.

[718] Snježana Milivojević, Danka Ninković Slavnić, Snežana Bajčeta: Informisanje u digitalnom okruženju u Srbiji, Centar za medijska istraživanja, Belgrade, 2020.

[719] Reuters: Digital News Report 2022, Reuters Institute & University of Oxford, Oxford, 2022, (https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2022-06/Digital_News-Report_2022.pdf).

Although no research has been conducted on the impact of disinformation on the decision of citizens to get vaccinated during the Covid-19 pPandemic, it is indicative that the anti-vaccination campaign in Serbia was very strong, and that the number of people vaccinated was below the European average[720], despite the availability of a sufficient number of vaccines. A study conducted by the Open Society Institute Sofia titled "Resilience to Fake News at the Time of Covid-19 Infodemic" showed that in 2021 Serbia was at the bottom of European countries according to the media literacy index (29/35).[721] Unfavorable results were also reported by IPSOS on the basis of a survey of *misperceptions*: according to the "misperception index" study (the level of citizens' misperceptions on matters of public interest), Serbia ranked at the bottom of the list of European countries.[722]. Another IPSOS survey conducted in 2018 ("Fake news, filter bubbles, post-truth and trust") shows that Serbians have high self-confidence when it comes to their own resistance to disinformation. 76 % of respondents from Serbia reacted positively to the statement «I am confident that I can tell real news from ‹fake news› (entirely made up stories or facts)», making Serbia fourth among the 27 countries surveyed. However, only 44 % of respondents agreed with the statement «I am confident that the average person in Serbia can tell real news from 'fake news'»[723]. And 68 % of respondents agreed with the statement «The media misleads people», according to which Serbia is convincingly the first among the countries in which the survey was conducted. According to data from the „European Communication Monitor" (2018) survey, the three European countries with the greatest impact of false news were the Czech Republic, Romania and Serbia. The statement «The public sphere in my country is influenced by fake news» was marked as correct by 46.4 % of respondents at European level. In Serbia, that percentage was 68.2 %.[724]

[720] Our World in Data, (https://ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer), (People vaccinated, European countries).

[721] Marin Lessenski: Double Trouble: Resilience to Fake News at the Time of Covid-19 Infodemic, Open Society Institute Sofia, Sofia, 2021, (https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MediaLiteracyIndex2021_ENG.pdf).

[722] Madhurima Bhatia: Perils of Perception Ipsos Global Study, IPSOS, 2019, (https://www.ipsos.com/en-in/india-ranks-12th-misperception-index-among-37-nations-perils-perception-ipsos-global-study).

[723] IPSOS: Fake news, filter bubbles, post-truth and trust, IPSOS, 2018, (https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2018-09/fake-news-filter-bubbles-post-truth-and-trust.pdf).

[724] See: http://www.communicationmonitor.eu/2018/06/13/ecm-european-communication-monitor-2018/.

The effect of disinformation can in certain cases be low or invisible, but there are also cases when citizens suffer direct and tangible damage due to false information. The portal „*FakeNews Tragač*" created a «Register of Manipulative Sites»[725]. Those platforms mainly use three types of scams: manipulation related to the advertising of medical products and manipulation related to investment platforms and manipulative sweepstakes and services. For example, in October 2022, it was discovered that a large number of Serbian citizens lost money on the «*Kangaroo treasure*» platform, which was also promoted using manipulative techniques.[726] Today, this register lists more than 100 websites (in Serbian) and new ones are constantly appearing.

(C) Politics and Society

Disinformation undermines the development of democracy and the strengthening of human rights in Serbia, and this phenomenon becomes more and more prominent with every passing year. A special problem is the combined spread of disinformation and hate speech, as well as the normalization of this type of inflammatory public discourse, e.g. about women, migrants and the LGBT+ population.[727]. For example, after several editions of Pride Parade and Pride Week in Belgrade under relatively peaceful conditions, an extreme anti-LGBT campaign based on disinformation and hate speech was launched in Serbia ahead of Europride scheduled to take place on September 2022 in Belgrade. Through various false narratives, theories about the connection between the LGBT+ movement and pedophilia, as well as about the role of the "ideology of homosexuality" in the "establishment of the new world order" and the "fight against family values" were spread by right-wing movements (such as *Antiglobalisti Srbije*[728]) and political parties (*Dveri* and *Zavetnici*).[729]

Public figures such as Dr. Branimir Nestorović (pulmonologist), Dr. Jovana Stojković (psychiatrist) and Mila Alečković (psychologist), who gained popularity on anti-vaccinationism and anti-scientific claims, became politically engaged

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[725] See: https://fakenews.rs/2021/03/31/prevarantski-oglasi-na-vise-od-stotinu-sajtova/.

[726] See: https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/piramidalna-sema-srbija-internet-prevara-kangaroo-treasure/.

[727] C.f.: Stefan Janjić: Govor mržnje na portalima i društvenim mrežama u Srbiji, Novosadska novinarska škola, Novi Sad, 2020, (https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Govor-mrznje-na-internetu.pdf/).

[728] Antiglobalisti Srbije (eng. Antiglobalists of Serbia) organized a petition against Europride online and offline, (https://www.peticije.online/reci_ne_paradi_ponosa_u_septembru_2022_god).

[729] See: https://seecheck.org/index.php/2022/10/06/europride-myths-cancellation-and-looking-for-the-culprit/.

and contributed to the strengthening of right-wing parties and movements. For example, Dr. Branimir Nestorović was the most prominent public figure who supported the coalition of right-wing parties *Dveri* and the „*Movement for the Restoration of the Kingdom of Serbia*" in the general elections of 2022. Anti-vaccinationism in Serbia was extremely strong even before the Covid-19-Pandemic and was mainly directed against the MMR-vaccine (a vaccine against measles, mumps, and rubella) and inspired by Andrew Wakefield's false research on the link between autism and this vaccine. Such campaigns directly threaten public health: at the end of 2021, it was announced that MMR immunization coverage was only 38.3 percent during the first six months of that, while only with 95 percent of the vaccinated can it be considered that sufficient collective protection is provided to prevent an epidemic.[730]

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples of Disinformation in Serbia

During the past five years, there were several groups of dominant disinformation narratives in Serbia. They mostly concerned foreign policy (war in Ukraine, conflicts in the Western Balkans), science (5G technology, MMR and Covid-19 vaccines) and human rights (migrant crisis, women's rights, LGBT+ rights). In the sections below, one example for each of these topics will be presented in chronological order. It should be emphasized that platforms for disseminating disinformation (such as Facebook groups) gather a large number of users who "switch" from one "hot topic" to another. This shows that individuals inclined to believe one manipulative narrative (e.g. about vaccines) are more likely to be exposed to the next.

(A) Migrant Crisis
Since 2015, a large number of refugees and migrants have passed through Serbia, as a country that is on the migrant route from the Middle East to Western Europe. In 2015, there were 579 518 expressed intentions to seek asylum in Serbia, mostly from Syria (52.1 %), Afghanistan (27.82 %) and Iraq (13.13 %). For the sake of comparison, their number in 2015 — at the peak of the crisis — was 35 times higher than the previous year.[731] At the beginning,

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[730] See: https://rs.n1info.com/zdravlje/danas-opao-broj-dece-koja-su-primila-mmr-vakcinu/.

[731] Vlada Republike Srbije: Migracioni profil Republike Srbije za 2015. godinu, Vlada Republike Srbije, Belgrade, 2015, (https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migracije/Publikacije/migracioni%20profil%20 2015.pdf).

an affirmative narrative about migrants prevailed in public discourse, which was accompanied by reminders of the plight of Serbian refugees during the nineties. Such a positive, compassionate attitude, however, began to fade when the borders were closed, and Hungary installed barbed wire along the entire length of its border with Serbia. In 2019 and 2020, reporting on migrant issues intensified, primarily in light of the assessment of the number of migrants who could be granted permanent leave to stay in Serbia and the consequences of such demographic change. The environment in which the topic was discussed was highly unfavorable, accompanied by conspiracy theories, false news and xenophobia. Right-wing parties and movements made unsubstantiated announcements of the mass settlement of migrants, alleging the newcomers had terrorist and extremist intentions. At the same time, a whole series of Facebook-pages that spread false information about alleged crimes commited by migrants (robberies, rapes, destruction of public and private property) were created. All over Serbia, petitions against migrants were organized, while so-called "People's Patrols" threatened migrants and spread hatred, under the guise of fighting for the safety of citizens.[732]

The most popular Facebook group dedicated to this topic was called "*STOP naseljavanju migranata*" and gathered more than 300,000 followers.[733] Although the administrators of the group formally stated a set of rules regarding the prohibition of discrimination and the spread of disinformation, the dominant content was exactly that — discriminatory and manipulative discourse. A journalist from „*Raskrikavanje*" investigated the background of this group and discovered that its founders are close to right-wing movements and parties, including the "People's Patrols".[734] One of the leaders of this group told the journalist that "*his followers will not accept vaccines, nor do they allow any division of Kosovo*". He also said that he advised other administrators to "*mix a little bit of anti-migrant content with texts about the dangers of vaccines and LGBT movement*". Based on this statement, it is easy to surmise why the group later changed its name (to "*STOP Censorship*" from January 2021) and why it expanded its thematic range to vaccines, 5G technology, the war in Ukraine and the Europride-parade.

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[732] Stefan Janjić: Govor mržnje na portalima i društvenim mrežama u Srbiji, Novosadska novinarska škola, Novi Sad, 2020, (https://novinarska-skola.org.rs/sr/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Govor-mrznje-na-internetu.pdf/).

[733] Its current name is „ZA slobodu" (For Freedom), (https://www.facebook.com/groups/zaslobodu/).

[734] See: https://birn.rs/mrznja-lazi-i-patrole-srpska-antimigrantska-brigada-se-igra-vatrom/.

Various manipulative and hateful narratives were spread through untrue and misleading information about migrants who were labeled a threat to public health; a threat to the core values of Serbian society; a threat to the economic and social security system; and as potential terrorists, thugs, thieves and rapists. One of these narratives that started a wave of xenophobic outbursts in 2020 was about the alleged construction of a mosque in the village of Dučina in central Serbia. The portal *FakeNews Tragač* found that this construction was supposed to be a botanical garden, although the developer still hasn't received a building permit[735]. Although this false information was published by fringe portals with low readership, it gained enormous visibility owing to various Facebook pages and groups, including "*STOP Censorship*". In February 2020, the "Anonymous Serbia" Facebook page published a collage of 12 photos of women allegedly attacked by migrants, with the message "European women, survivors, attacked by migrants. Many are not alive. 40 000 criminal attacks of migrants in 2019 in Germany alone». However, there was no evidence that the women shown in these pictures were victims of migrants (they were mostly victims of domestic and police violence, as well as traffic accidents). In addition, most of the photos were taken before the migrant crisis peaked in 2015.[736] According to the pattern already described, the amount of manipulative narratives about migrants began to decrease with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, when the focus of anti-migrant-disifnormationwas redirected to health issues.

(B) The Covid-19 Pandemic

The beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic was marked not only by a health crisis, but also by rising tensions in society, and consequently by a growing amount of disinformation. Journalist Ana Lalić from Novi Sad was arrested at the beginning of April on suspicion of "committing the criminal offense of causing panic and disorder" with her article about poor conditions in the Clinical Center of Vojvodina[737], although in no way, neither before nor after her arrest, was it established that any information in her text was incorrect. This unprecedented case alarmed media professionals in Serbia, as well as international human rights institutions. Two months later, Ana Lalić received the Freedom of Speech Prize awarded by Deutsche Welle[738].

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735 See: https://fakenews.rs/2020/04/25/drustvene-mreze-umesto-botanicke-baste-sagradile-dzamiju/.

736 See: https://fakenews.rs/2020/02/05/laz-do-lazi-2020/.

737 See: https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=635.

738 See: https://beta.rs/drustvo-vojvodina/126757-ani-lalic-nagrada-za-slobodu-govora-koju-dodeljuje-dojce-vele.

At the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic, from March 12 to April 12, 2020, the research team of "*FakeNews Tragač*" detected a total of 43 false and manipulative narratives on this topic.[739] These were transmitted a total of 241 times in various online and traditional media.[740] Since the beginning of the pandemic, the reporting strategies of the tabloid outlets had been based on fear, exaggeration and the promotion of pseudoscience. Incorrect content about the Corona virus has a distinct potential to go viral, as the example of these 241 false stories, which were shared a total of 223 466 times on Facebook alone, demonstrate. These figures suggest that the average content was shared through different pages and profiles as many as 927 times. The most popular false information here was that China declared the end of the epidemic (March 29), which was published by at least 43 media outlets and had almost 47 000 shares.

Among the mainstream media, the most common sources of disinformation were "*Informer*", "*Srbija danas*" and "*Espreso*". Some of the false narratives observed came from foreign sources, mostly China, Italy and USA were translated into Serbian and transmitted through the media and communication applications.[741] According to the narratives concerned US-scientist Charles Lieber had been arrested for "selling the virus to China", for example. Yet, the majority of the false content (71 %) was originally created in Serbia. If we look at the thematic categories, the most common false and manipulative narratives created in Serbia include:

(1) ineffective and harmful advice for the prevention and treatment of Covid-19;
(2) conspiracy theories about the virus (theories about the impact of the 5G network and the artificial origin of the virus);
(3) inaccurate news about the political aspect of the crisis.

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[739] False narratives were related to advice for preventing covid, conspiracy theories (pandemic as an excuse for chipping the population, 5G technology as a cause of pandemic), Serbia's success in the fight against the pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on the economy and ecology, and so on.

[740] Stefan Janjić, Tijana Femić & associates: Korona virus i infodemija u Srbiji, Novosadska novinarska škola, Novi Sad, 2020, (https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Korona-i-infodemija-u-Srbiji-2020.pdf).

[741] See: https://fakenews.rs/2020/04/05/ne-carls-liber-nije-prodao-virus-korona-kini/. The Factcheck. org portal found this to be false news: https://www.factcheck.org/2020/02/no-link-between-harvard-scientist-charles-lieber-and-coronavirus/.

If we separate false information with a positive and negative connotation (that is, optimistic and pessimistic), their ratio is 50:50. However, it should be noted that false news with a positive tone stood out for its virality, since the three false content items with the highest reach on Facebook had a positive message, such as that the end of the epidemic had been declared in China (46 900 shares); that Cristiano Ronaldo turned his hotels in Portugal into temporary hospitals (41 000 shares); and that Serbian President Vučić's address was seen by 500 million users of the Chinese social network "Weibo" (40 500 shares). In this period, disinformation related to alleged prevention measures, sent to friends and family members "with good intentions", was very common. Garlic, alcohol, cocaine, incense, water vapor created by cooking orange peel, exposure to high temperature, gargling, and taking a few sips of water every 15 minutes were mentioned as a preventive measure or potential cure. Citizens often forwarded such advice to each other via chat applications, without taking into account the origin of such advice and possible contraindications.

The study "Disinformation during Covid-19 Pandemic" conducted by several fact-checking organizations in the Western Balkan region, with a sample of 4 656 factchecked false articles[742], showed that "*Alo*", a Serbian tabloid, was the most common source of disinformation in the entire Western Balkans, i.e., Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. It was followed by two other media outlets from Serbia: "*Srbija danas*" and "*Informer*": "*Among the 20 media outlets with the highest number of published manipulations, as many as 15 are from Serbia, which confirms the dominant role of the Serbian media system in creating and spreading dis- and misinformation not only in the country itself, but throughout the entire region.*"[743]

At the beginning of 2021, before the start of mass immunization, the amount of misinformation about Covid vaccines began to increase. The anti-vaccine propaganda during the corona virus pandemic had its background in the campaign against MMR-vaccines, which had been going on for almost a decade. Fear-based manipulation and ignorance continued in a new context, so various fringe doctors and charlatans claimed that the vaccine against Covid-19 causes a number of diseases, including cancer, epilepsy, sterility, and head

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[742] The analysis includes the findings of *Raskrinkavanje* from Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Faktograf* from Croatia, *Raskrinkavanje* from Montenegro, *F2N2* from North Macedonia and *Raskrikavanje* and *FakeNews Tragač* from Serbia.

[743] Tijana Cvjetićanin (ed.): Disinformation during Covid-19 Pandemic, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, Sarajevo, 2020.

deformation. As one result, Serbia, despite having a large number of vaccines at its disposal, remained below the European average in terms of the number of immunized citizens.

(C) The War in Ukraine

An analysis of pro-Russian disinformation before the war in Ukraine shows that Russia has been presented in the Serbian media for years as the antithesis of the West: The West wishes evil to Serbia - Russia defends our country; scientific and technological progress in the West is developed only for profit - Russian science has a soul; Western societies succumbed to the "new world order" — Russia holds on to traditional values.[744] When the war in Ukraine began, the study "Serbia 1999 and Ukraine 2022 — similarities and differences" by the "New Serbian political thought" from 2021 showed that more than 60 percent of Serbian citizens believed that the USA and NATO were responsible for the war in Ukraine, while only 3.5 percent believed that Russia was responsible.[745]

The regional analysis of the "*SeeCheck*" network, published 150 days after the start of the war in Ukraine, showed that fact-checking initiatives recorded 1 396 manipulative or false articles related to this topic in Serbia. Out of the 20 most common sources of disinformation, 16 were from Serbia: *"Apart from social networks, in some countries, such as Serbia, pro-Russian manipulative media content dominated the 'mainstream' media, because such a narrative is largely aligned with unofficial stance of official politics in Serbia"*[746]. The Serbian edition of Russian state-affiliated foreign broadcaster "*Sputnik*" was the source with the highest number of false and misleading information. After the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, fact-checking organizations from the Western Balkans noted a significant increase in "disinformation about alleged disinformation": *"In one of the cases, it was about Twitter accounts from Serbia, which presented themselves as Ukrainian sources, and who published photos of Serbian actors from Serbian war films and series and presented them as Russian soldiers on the battlefield"*.

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[744] Predrag Mijatović: Фальшивые новости – Analiza dezinformacija o Rusiji pre rata u Ukrajini, Novosadska novinarska škola, Novi Sad, 2022, (https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Predrag-Mijatovic-Lazne-vesti-o-Rusiji.pdf).

[745] See: https://www.glasamerike.net/a/6497516.html.

[746] Darvin Murić & associates: Globalni narativi i lokalni akteri: 150 dana rata u Ukrajini i preko 1.500 dezinformacija u regionu, SeeCheck, 2022, (https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2022/08/Globalni-narativi-i-lokalni-akteri-150-dana-rata-u-Ukrajini-i-preko-1.500-dezinformacija-u-regionu-8.pdf).

Disinformation about the war in Ukraine can be divided into three main thematic categories:

(1) False narratives in which the authorities in Ukraine, as well as the Ukrainian people, are presented as "Nazis" or pro-Nazi oriented. A large amount of such disinformation was accompanied by tampered images to which a swastika was added: President Zelensky was shown in viral social media posts (in Serbian) holding a jersey with a swastika, while in the original photo he can be seen holding a jersey with the number 95.[747] Following the same model, Nazi symbols are added to images of tanks, flags and buildings in Ukraine.

(2) False narratives serve to deny Russian war crimes in Ukraine. For example, in August 2022, *"Informer"* published an article entitled "French Humanitarian Exposes Kiev's Lies". The tabloid relied on the claims of former French soldier Adrien Boquet who was allegedly present at the "directing" of this massacre in Bucha. *"In addition to not offering any evidence for his stories, he was caught in a lie — French fact-checkers from Liberation obtained information about his entry into Ukraine during that period and established that at that time (end of March) Boquet was not in this country at all"*, the fact-checking portal *"Raskrikavanje"* wrote[748].

(3) False narratives concerning the "background" of the war. In this context, there are various incorrect and unverified claims about biolaboratories, nuclear weapons, child trafficking, as well as the alleged strategy of Western countries to colonize arable land in Ukraine. On July 28, 2022, the daily *"Politika"* published an article stating that Americans "bought a third of the arable land of Ukraine" and that during 2021three consortia with American capital had become "owners of 28 percent of all arable land".[749]

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[747] See: https://fakenews.rs/2022/03/02/zelenski-kao-nacista-dokazni-materijal-iz-fotosopa/.

[748] See: https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Informer-negira-masakr-u-Buci-koristi-nedokazane-tvrdnje-diskreditovanog-coveka-1070.

[749] See: https://fakenews.rs/2022/08/25/lazna-vest-politike-da-su-amerikanci-kupili-trecinu-obradivog-zemljista-ukrajine/.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation in Serbia

More than 2 500 media outlets are registered in Serbia: 937 newspapers, 333 radio stations, 244 TV stations, 28 news agencies and 835 online media.[750] A large number of unregistered media, mostly online portals, should be also taken into account. That seems as a huge media offer, disproportionate to the size of the Serbian population (approx. 6.8 million). The potential audience is, however, somewhat wider, due to language proximity between Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Montenegro. Fact-checking initiatives in Serbia cannot verify such a large amount of content, but are mostly focused on the most popular media, so, overall, it is difficult to draw consistent conclusions about the entire media market in Serbia and the spread of disinformation.

The portal *"FakeNews Tragač"* has a list of the TOP 15 most common sources of disinformation since 2017 (when the portal was founded) to date. In October 2022 that list included the outlets *Alo, Informer, Kurir, Srbija danas, Espreso, Srpski telegraf, Blic, Večernje novosti, Telegraf, Srbin info, B92, Pink, Objektiv, Pravda* and *Mondo*[751]. At the end of each year, *"FakeNews Tragač"* awards Gold, Silver and Bronze Pinocchio awards to three media outlets that published the highest amount of disinformation during the year. Tabloid *Alo* (newspapers and portal) "won" the Golden Pinocchio 3 out of 4 times, and *Informer* (newspapers and portal) once. *Kurir* (newspaper and portal), *Srbija danas* (portal) and *Espreso* (portal) were also among the award winners.

On the other side, the fact-checking portal "*Raskrikavanje*" conducts annual analyses of manipulative content on the front pages of Serbian tabloids. Their study for 2019 included four tabloids; at least 945 false news items were detected over the course of a year: *Informer* led with 317 detected lies, followed by *Alo* (259), *Srpski telegraf* (227) and *Kurir* (142).[752] In the following year 2020, which saw the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, *Raskrikavanje* examined the content published by another tabloid (*Večernje novosti*) and noticed almost 1 200 false news items on the front pages of five daily newspapers. This time, the largest number of disinformation was noticed in *Srpski telegraf* — as

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[750] See: https://rs.n1info.com/biznis/studija-u-srbiji-zvanicno-radi-2508-medija-trziste-neodrzivo/.

[751] In cases where one media company uses multiple platforms under the same name (newspaper and portal / TV and portal), the number of observed disinformation and manipulations is cumulatively counted for all platforms under the same name.

[752] See: https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Najmanje-945-laznih-vesti-na-naslovnicama-cetiri-tabloida-u-2019--557.

many as 403. It was followed by *Alo*, *Informer, Večernje novosti* and *Kurir*[753].
The 2021-study showed that on the front pages of six tabloids (*Objektiv*
was additionally included) there were close to 1,000 false, unfounded and
manipulative news items: *Informer* was again in first place, followed by *Srpski
telegraf*, *Alo*, *Objektiv*, *Večernje novosti* and *Kurir*.[754] In this context, the practice
of Adria Media Group, the publisher of *Kurir*, should be singled out: they hired
a media expert as an ethics manager, which is a move that has not been seen
among tabloid media, but not even among the professional media in Serbia.
In an interview for CINS, the ethics manager explained his role as an advisory
one, saying that "*every day he analyses published content, notes mistakes and
explains how to avoid them in the future*".[755] In the following period there was a
significant decrease in the number of ethical violations in *Kurir*, according to the
records of the Press Council, but also a significant decrease of the amount of
disinformation.

When it comes to TV stations, disinformation is most often spread on
commercial TV channels with a national coverage, such as *TV Pink* and *TV
Happy*. These stations provide a wide space for political propaganda and
pseudoscience. *TV Happy*, whose program until recently was mainly based on
reality content, during the pandemic shifted to talk shows with often obscure
guests and topics. Analysis of *TV Happy's* program dedicated to vaccination
showed that this media manipulatively shaped the context of reporting on
this topic in the period from the beginning of December 2020 to the end of
February 2021: "*TV Happy* mostly 'opens its door' to public figures who have
parascientific, non-scientific and pseudo-scientific attitudes and opinions
towards vaccines and vaccination against Covid-19, declaring themselves
against some or all of the vaccines available to us".[756] Similar manipulative
discourse and violation of professional principles were observed during the
war in Ukraine, when TV Happy became one of the pillars of pro-Russian
propaganda in Serbia.

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[753] See: https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Na-naslovnicama-pet-novina-blizu-1-200-laznih-i-
neutemeljenih-vesti-u-2020--godini-829.

[754] See: https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Na-naslovnim-stranama-sest-tabloida-blizu-1000-
manipulativnih-vesti-1054.

[755] See: https://www.cins.rs/petar-jeremic-menadzer-za-etiku-u-amg-smanjili-smo-prekrsaje-
kodeksa-u-kuriru/.

[756] Jelena Jovović, Milica Janjatović Jovanović: Ova vrata su svima otvorena – Kako je TV Happy
kontrolisala tekst i kontekst izveštavanja o vakcinama i vakcinaciji, Novosadska novinarska škola,
Novi Sad, 2021, (https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Jovovic-Janjatovic-Jovanovic-TV-Happy.
pdf).

In the sphere of online media, disinformation is common both on mainstream portals and on anonymous, unregistered ones. In addition to the sites dealing with manipulative advertising, which are explained in section 2 of this report, there are also sites that are purposefully created to spread false news. This mechanism operates in two patterns, depending on whether the primary goal is profit or political influence. The website *"Šta ima novo"* is an example of the first model: at the beginning of 2019 it mainly published bizarre news about the deaths of public figures who are actually alive. The daily average number of posts was 30, and visibility was ensured through reposting on Facebook pages with thousands of followers. The names of these pages are in no way associated with news content (for example: *Serbia, are you awake?; Jokes from Serbian films and series; Miloš Teodosić*, etc.). These pages are used so that anonymous portals can quickly get clicks, and thus profit[757]. An example of the second model is the website *"Prismotra"*, which was, for months, publishing texts targeting journalists, non-governmental organizations and political dissidents and accusing them of anti-state activities and so-called "autochauvinism". In this context, *"Prismotra"* represented only a "flywheel", since its texts were later shared by a number of other mainstream and local portals. In February 2020, *"Prismotra"*'s article about journalist Vanja Đurić, titled "The new N1 television journalist made films against Serbia" was republished by several local outlets: *TV Bečej, RTV Pančevo, RTV OK, TV Novi Bečej, RTV Subotica, Dunav TV* and *RT Caribrod*. All of these outlets are members of the Association of Electronic Media of Serbia *"ComNet"*, which brings together dozens of local radio and television stations, newspapers and portals[758]. This warrants the conclusion that such defamation campaigns are not spontaneous, but are instead well organized. The *"Prismotra"* website was registered in Panama, and was suspended at the end of 2020. It was not, however, the first portal of this type: the *"Istraga"* portal published almost identical content, aimed to discrediting individuals and organizations until the period when *"Prismotra"* began its work.[759].

The aforementioned research on disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine indicate that Facebook is by far the most dominant social network for disseminating disinformation. Of the total number

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[757] See: https://fakenews.rs/2019/03/12/sajt-sta-ima-novo-tokom-marta-sahranio-23-zive-javne-licnosti/.

[758] Stefan Janjić, Tijana Femić & associates: Korona virus i infodemija u Srbiji, Novosadska novinarska škola, Novi Sad, 2020, (https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Korona-i-infodemija-u-Srbiji-2020.pdf).

[759] See: https://www.cenzolovka.rs/etika/suspendovan-inkriminisuci-portal-prismotra-net/.

of anti-vaccination disinformation recorded by the fact-checking portals *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, *Fakenews.rs* and *Raskrikanavanje.rs* from January to October 2021, as much as 46 % was observed on Facebook.[760] To a large extent, groups and pages dedicated to pseudoscientific content contribute to this. Twitter in Serbia has 7.5 times fewer users than Facebook[761], but has a great influence on the media agenda setting. In early 2020, Twitter removed 8 500 "bot" accounts believed to be in the service of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. Research by the Stanford Internet Observatory showed that these accounts most often shared news from portals that fact-checking initiatives recognize as frequent sources of manipulation — *Informer*, *Alo* and *Pink*: "More than 8 500 accounts worked over the course of several years—ramping up their activity in mid-2018 and 2019 in particular—to boost the SNS and its leader, Aleksandar Vučić. They did this by retweeting and posting cheerleading replies to Vučić-aligned tweets (more than 12.5 million retweets of pro-Vučić accounts); by sharing links to content on Vučić-aligned websites (more than 14.8 million links); and by attacking Vučić's opponents, especially *the "Alliance for Serbia"*.[762] Today, the term "bot" in Serbian refers more to anonymous accounts of party activists rather than to accounts managed by artificial intelligence. Broadly speaking, the degree of use of modern technologies for the purpose of manipulation (deepfakes and other forms of AI) in Serbia is at an extremely low level.

Political Context of Disinformation in Serbia

Pro-Russian narratives have been present in most Serbian mainstream media for years. According to research published by the National Democratic Institute in July 2021, eight months before the start of the war, Serbia was the only country in the Western Balkans with a dominant favorable opinion of Russia (67 % favorable, 11 % unfavorable, 22 % don't know). 58 % of respondents answered "against", and 28 % "for" to the question "If the referendum for EU membership were held this Sunday, but joining the EU also means ruining the relationship with Russia, how would you vote?", while 52 % of respondents agreed with the statement "Country should not follow its European path, if

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[760] See: https://fakenews.rs/2021/12/16/zlatni-pinokio-za-alo-srebrni-za-informer-bronzani-za-espreso/.

[761] See: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-serbia.

[762] Daniel Bush: Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia: An Analysis of Government-Linked Influence Operations in Serbia, Stanford Internet Observatory, Stanford, 2020, (https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/serbia_march_twitter.pdf).

it means spoiling its good relations with China"[763]. This kind of pro-Russian sentiment creates an environment in which pro-Russian propaganda is profitable, so tabloids – in addition to news celebrating Vladimir Putin – often offers gimmicks with his image, such as posters, calendars, stickers and the like. The media has thus been promoting the cult of the Russian president for years: he is depicted as the protector of Serbs and Serbia, but also as an advocate for so-called "territorial integrity" of Serbia. The same study also indicates that Serbia has the most unfavorable attitude towards the EU among WB countries (40 % unfavorable, 28 % favorable opinion).

Serbian tabloid media often fuel the already high tensions in society through disinformation. A study from 2016/2017 showed that during the course of a year, two tabloids — *Informer* and *Srpski telegraf* — mentioned the term "war" a total of 265 times on their front pages. This includes "the beginning of global war, the beginning of war between Serbia and neighboring countries (primarily with Croatia), and finally a civil war in which — according to them — the opposition, financially supported by foreign foundations, wants to overthrow the government of Aleksandar Vučić and cause chaos in Serbia"[764].

In the general elections of April 2022, the coalition around the Serbian Progressive Party won with 44 % of the votes, and its leader Aleksandar Vučić won the presidential elections with 60 % of the votes. The Serbian Progressive Party is formally pro-EU (it is an associated member of the European People's Party), but at the same time advocates strong relations with Russia. As an analysis by the fact-checking-portal "*Raskrikavanje*" suggests, all leading tabloids in Serbia, as well as all commercial televisions with a national coverage, are openly pro-government oriented, and most of them are also openly pro-Russian.[765] The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, has friendly relations

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[763] NDI: Between East and West Democracy, Disinformation, and Geopolitics in Central and Southeastern Europe, NDI, 2021, (https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/REAPPS2021researchpublicversion.pdf).

[764] Stefan Janjić, Stefani Šovanec: Najava rata na naslovnim stranama srpskih tabloida, CM, 13/43, 2018.

[765] The pro-regime and pro-Russian editorial policy of these media is confirmed by the analysis of cover pages conducted by the Raskrikanvane portal. Analysis shows that the presidents of Serbia and Russia are the most frequent actors on the front pages; they are presented in an exclusively positive context, as the saviors of Serbia. See: Analysis for 2019, (https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Najmanje-945-laznih-vesti-na-naslovnicama-cetiri-tabloida-u-2019--557); Analysis for 2020, (https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Na-naslovnicama-pet-novina-blizu-1-200-laznih-i-neutemeljenih-vesti-u-2020--godini-829); Analysis for 2021, (https://raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Na-naslovnim-stranama-sest-tabloida-blizu-1000-manipulativnih-vesti-1054).

with Dragan J. Vučićević, the owner of the "*Informer*", a tabloid with the highest circulation, as well as with the owner of the most watched commercial television, *TV Pink*.[766] The pro-government editorial policy of these and other media is rewarded with a privileged position — *Pink*, *Happy*, *Prva* and *B92* televisions have a privileged status with a national coverage (which is currently limited to five channels), while tabloids receive money from advertising by state bodies, as well as grants won through the abovementioned open calls.[767]

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Serbia

The most important countermeasures against disinformation in Serbia are campaigns for media and information literacy, on the one hand, and four fact-checking initiatives, on the other hand. However, there are no comprehensive studies or surveys on the success and effectiveness of disinformation campaigns, nor on the efforts dedicated to countering disinformation. According to the results of a survey conducted in 2021, 34 % of respondents from Serbia answered that they were familiar with the work of at least one fact-checking initiative[768]. Additional visibility of their work can be provided by a

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[766] In his interview for the research "Disinformation in a polarized environment: the media image of Serbia", the owner of *Informer* openly admits: "I support the president of this country, Aleksandar Vučić, and his politics." Source: Milica Kulic: Disinformation in a polarized environment: media image of Serbia. Citizens in the Age of Disinformation (ed. Aleksandra Krstić), Association for Political Sciences of Serbia, Belgrade, 2021; The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, was on several occasions special guest at the family celebrations of Dragan J. Vučićević, the owner of Informer. Source: https://www.republika.rs/vesti/srbija/377486/aleksandar-vucic-na-zabavi-povodom-rodenja-sina . The owner of TV Pink Željko Mitrović also admitted that he openly supports the President of Serbia: "I support Vučić because half of Serbia is with him!" Source: https://www.kurir.rs/stars/1559857/zeljko-mitrovic-za-kurir-podrzavam-vucica-jer-je-uz-njega-pola-srbije. The media monitoring carried out by BIRODI indicates that the TV Pink news program serves to promote the Serbian Progressive Party and Aleksandar Vučić. Source: https://www.birodi.rs/birodi-rem-da-istrazi-da-li-je-izvestavanje-pinka-u-vezi-za-pogodnostima-koje-vlasnik-pinka-dobija-od-drzavnih- organs/. CINS, an investigative journalism portal, has written on several occasions about the privileges TV Pink receives through debt deferrals and export credits. Source: https://www.cins.rs/drzava-pinku-odlozila-placanje-preko-152-milijarde-duga/.

[767] A comparative analysis of the number of detected disinformation and the grants from municipal budgets was conducted within the project Ke$ormisanje by the fact-checking portal Raskrikavanje. See: https://raskrikavanje.rs/kesformisanje/index.php; Portal Cenzolovka published one of the analysis on the advertising of state institutions in tabloids close to the ruling party, (https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/novac-za-oglasavanje-projekata-od-izuzetne-vaznosti-za-novosadjane-odlazi-beogradskim-tabloidima-koji-podrzavaju-vlast/).

[768] Brankica Petković & associates. Media trust in the Western Balkans: Together apart. SEENPM, Ljubljana, 2021, (https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Resilience-research-e-book-all-reports-media-trust-with-CIP-final.pdf).

partnership with the Meta company. This kind of cooperation in Serbia actually lowers the visibility of those contents on Facebook that factcheckers have assessed as incorrect.

It is noteworthy and rather telling that, while there are four big fact-checking organizations in the country, no public media in Serbia has an in-house fact-checking department, section or outlet. The four fact-checking portals that operate in Serbia are: *Istinomer* (www.istinomer.rs), *Raskrikavanje* (www.raskrikavanje.rs), *FakeNews Tragač* (www.fakenews.rs) and *AFP Činjenice* (cinjenice.afp.com). The *Istinomer* was launched in 2009 as the first fact-checking website in the Western Balkan region. During the first decade of its work, *Istinomer* was dedicated to verifying statements of politicians and then expanded its fact-checking activities to the analysis of disinformation published on social networks and in the media. In July 2020, *Istinomer* entered a partnership with Facebook to combat disinformation.

The portal *Raskrikavanje* (www.raskrikavanje.rs) was established by "KRIK" (Crime and Corruption Research Network) in 2017. The project was launched through a partnership with the *"Zašto ne"* (Why not) CSO from Bosnia and Herzegovina. They share a similar methodology and classification of manipulations, which includes the following categories: false news, censorship, manipulation, disinformation, pseudoscience, conspiracy theory, unfounded information, bias, spin, mistake, satire, covert marketing, clickbait, and propaganda.

The portal *FakeNews Tragač* (www.fakenews.rs), for which the author serves as an editor, was founded in 2017 by the Novi Sad School of Journalism as part of its Debunking Disinformation project. The site is primarily dedicated to the analysis of disinformation, but it also features an educational section which provides tools for analyzing the credibility of textual and visual media content. In addition to short analyses, *FakeNews Tragač* also publishes large research on continuous, complex manipulations.

The fourth portal *AFP Činjenice* was launched in 2020 as the Serbian edition of the AFP fact-checking service, created in 2017. In this capacity, it is also part of Facebook's partnership to combat disinformation. Fact-checking content is occasionally published in other media, which are not strictly specialized in countering disinformation, such as *Nedeljnik*, *VOICE* and *Cenzolovka*.

Concerning normative and legislative countermeasures against disinformation, efforts have been limited: in Serbian legislation, disinformation is mentioned

only in the Criminal Code in the context of spreading panic and fear through false news. There are no special laws regarding disinformation, nor are there special state institutions that deal with these issues. In 2018, the ex-Minister for Innovation and Technological Development Nenad Popović proposed the establishment of a working group of the Serbian government to combat false news on social networks.[769] Media professionals reacted negatively to this initiative since it was seen as a new potential form of censorship and that idea never took off.

Media literacy is a key factor in combating disinformation. Raising the level of media literacy and resistance to disinformation requires stronger efforts by the education system, state institutions, non-governmental organizations, and fact-checking initiatives. Yet, according to research conducted by "Propulsion"[770], based on self-evaluation (citizens' perception of how they navigate the media environment), the media literacy index of citizens in 2021 was 3.88 on a scale from 1 to 6[771].

In recent years, the civil service has drafted important documents that recognize the importance of education reform in Serbia as well as the importance of media and information literacy (MIL). Reforms were introduced at the beginning of the school year 2018/2019. MIL is mentioned in the Strategy for the Development of the Public Information System and in the Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020.[772] In these documents, raising the level of MIL among children is set as one of the goals that should be accomplished by transforming libraries into media libraries, which would provide opportunities for acquiring new knowledge in the media domain. The Ministry of Culture and Information launched a national consultation in mid-2018 to bring together all actors dealing with media literacy in Serbia, with the ultimate goal of identifying good practice models that would be an integral part of the strategy for the systematic introduction of media literacy in primary and secondary

[769] See: https://rs.n1info.com/vesti/a402060-popovic-protiv-laznih-vesti-samo-na-drustvenim-mrezama/.

[770] Belgrade-based organization focused on innovative social impact communications and media literacy.

[771] See: https://novapismenost.propulsion.one/.

[772] See: Government of Serbia: Strategija razvoja sistema javnog informisanja u Republici Srbiji za period 2020-2025. godine, Government of Serbia, Belgrade, 2020, (https://www.media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/medijska_strategija210_cyr.pdf); Government of Serbia: Strategija razvoja obrazovanja u Srbiji do 2020. godine, Government of Serbia, Belgrade, 2012, (https://www.mpn.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/STRATEGIJA-OBRAZOVANJA.pdf).

schools. The working group responsible for drafting the MIL curriculum was appointed by the ministry in October 2018. By the end of the year, it made the first step by defining the number of classes for the media part of the program "Language, media and culture".[773] Starting from the school year 2018/2019, a new elective course "Language, media and culture" was offered to students of grammar schools. The goal of this course is to contribute to the improvement of communication skills, the development of media culture and the adoption of cultural patterns that will enable the student to navigate the modern world, build an identity and develop professionally. The total number of classes during the school year is 37.

Non-governmental organizations of various provenance also deal with MIL in several ways, e.g., by organizing seminars for the professional development of teachers, workshops, camps, and festivals for students, courses for secondary school and faculty students and media production. In this regard, the programs of the Novi Sad School of Journalism ("*Creative drive*", *"Digital media classroom"*, accredited by the Institute for Advancement of Education and Upbringing, Republic of Serbia), IREX Serbia *("Learn to discern"*) and Propulsion ("*New Literacy*") stand out. The MIL programs of the Novi Sad School of Journalism include seminars for teachers, summer MIL for teachers and students, festivals of creative skills. In cooperation with the publishing house Clio, the transformation of school libraries into "infotheque" is encouraged.[774] The *"Learn to Discern"* project, which has been implemented by IREX Serbia since 2018, includes education for educators in the field of MIL, trainings for young people under 30 years of age, as well as the online educational program *"Promišljeno i provereno"*[775]. The *"Nova pismenost"* project[776] by the organization "Propulsion" includes public events and campaigns dedicated to the MIL theme, as well as research in this area.

Conclusion

Various forms of information manipulation are present in Serbian media and social networks. Their goal can be political/ideological influence or profit, and most often a combination of the two. The system of spreading disinformation

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[773] See: http://www.usprv.org.rs/dva-casa-u-gimnazijama-vise-bez-klasicne-nastave/.

[774] See: www.novinarska-skola.org.rs; and https://medijskapismenost.org.rs/.

[775] See: www.promisljeno.rs.

[776] See: www.novapismenost.propulsion.one.

is well-coordinated — in the mainstream media, there are frequent cases of "copy-paste" disinformation published by a large number of newsrooms at once, while on social networks and chat applications there are groups with a large number of users who switch from one current topic to another, spreading unverified and inaccurate content, often combined with toxic discourse and hate speech. Researchers and fact-checkers recorded numerous examples of special social media pages or websites specifically intended for targeting certain sensitive groups, as well as sites for manipulative advertising of products and services. The effects of disinformation are generally not immediately visible, but the examples of continuous distribution of fake news and propaganda against vaccines and the LGBT+ population show us that disinformation can quickly and directly affect public health and the safety of citizens.

A step towards solving these problems is the establishment of MIL initiatives, as well as the introduction of media literacy as a school subject. However, these are solutions that will produce results in the long term. Fact-checking initiatives can offer a faster response to disinformation, but their visibility is very limited. In Serbia, four fact-checking initiatives have been launched (*Istinomer*, *Raskrikavanje, FakeNews Tragač* and *AFP Činjenice*), two of which (*Istinomer* and *AFP*) cooperate with Meta to fight online disinformation. On the other hand, there are no laws regulating this domain in Serbia, nor are there special institutions that deal with this issue. It would be necessary that, in addition to Meta, other tech companies, such as Google and *TikTok*, establish programs for countering disinformation too. The issue of state interference in this domain brings a lot of concerns, since state intervention can be abused as a new censorship tool. For now, however, there are no clear indications that the state authorities are planning active involvement in tacking issues in this area.

Disinformation in Montenegro
by Natasa Ruzich

Introduction

Since 2016, experts have been sounding the alarm about the quick spread of "fake news", that is dis- and misinformation, on social networks by citizens with no or low media literacy. Many theorists have pointed out the improper use of the term "fake news". In his book "*Osnove novinarstva*" [Core Principles of Journalism], Stjepan Malović points out that the basis of journalism is truth, and that news needs to be truthful or else it is not news at all. Therefore, every published article needs to be written in compliance with the professional and ethical standards of truth, accuracy, fairness, balance and impartiality.[777]

The problem of false information is not new. In the 17th century, in the weekly publication *La Gazette de France*, publisher Théophraste Renaudot apologised to his audience for any false information he might have published with the following words: "*I hope I am not mistaken when I say that even the harshest critics will find some justification or an excuse for the occasional error, for this work needs to be done within as little as four hours – which is the time I have at my disposal each week after I receive the texts by post to assemble, edit and print these lines that you are reading*".[778] Time was a problem in the 17th century because of technological constraints, but contemporary journalists claim that technological development has only made their job harder and imposed an even faster pace in the struggle with competition. In today's world, obtaining information is not difficult, but journalists are prone to what Louis Alvin Day calls the "feeding frenzy", when journalists rush to publish a piece of sensationalist news as quickly as possible — an act that may result in a violation of professional standards and, ultimately, a loss of credibility *vis-a-vis* the audience.[779] In the past, "fake news" used to be called – a canard. Dušan Đurić, for example, explains that the term originated at the time of Frederick

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[777] Stjepan Malović: Osnove novinarstva, ed. Golden marketing - Tehnička knjiga, Zagreb, 2005, p. 19.

[778] Korni Daniel: Etika informisanja, ed. Clio, Beograd, 1999, p. 18.

[779] Luis Alvin Dej: Etika u medijima- primeri i kontraverze, ed. Medija centar, Beograd, 2004, p. 112.

the Great's rule, when newspapers were obliged to label unverified news as "N.T.", short for *non testatum*.[780]

In the 21st century, the publication of false and inaccurate information has almost become a daily occurrence because social networks have facilitated and accelerated the transmission of various types of information disorders in the global village. Media illiterate citizens, as well as "astroturfers", i.e. bots and trolls who aim to disinform and spin the public, contribute to this situation. Bearing in mind the above, in this paper we will analyse the situation in Montenegro regarding the spread of disinformation. Our main starting premise is that Montenegrin citizens are exposed to disinformation mainly on social networks. An auxiliary hypothesis is that traditional and online media follow professional and ethical standards of reporting in terms of truthfulness and accuracy.

"Fake news" vs. Information Disorder: Terminology and Definitions of Disinformation in Montenegro

Technological development always brings forth new forms, methods and techniques of manipulation. Disinformation, "fake news", deepfakes, information disorder, post-truth and filter bubble are just some of the terms we find more and more often in the papers of media theorists. Analysing the legal framework of information manipulation in Montenegro, Marina Đukić explains that the concept of "fake news" was first introduced in 2016 in the European Parliament resolution on EU strategic communication to counteract propaganda against it by third parties. This report was compiled amidst rumours that Donald Trump had won the U.S. presidential election with the "help" of "fake news" disseminated on social networks.

In 2017, the Collins English Dictionary declared "fake news" word of the year, and in 2018 EU institutions started paying more attention to the term and the phenomenon. The European Parliament conducted an analysis of the legal framework to address "fake news", while the Report on fake news and online disinformation of the same year pointed out the necessity of correcting the term "fake news" and suggested using "disinformation" instead.[781] According

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[780] Dušan Đurić: Novinarski leksikon, ed. YU marketing press, Beograd, 2003, p. 251.

[781] Marina Đukić: Odgovor Evropske unije na problem lažnih vijesti – regulativni okvir u nastanku, part from: Vjerodostojnost medija: doba lažnih informacija, Filozofski fakultet, Tuzla, Bosna i Hercegovina, 2019, p. 30.

to Ciboci, Igor Kanižaj and Danijel Labaš the European Commission defined disinformation as: "*A term that includes all forms of false, inaccurate or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit.*"[782] In their Report prepared for the Council of Europe, Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakhshan differentiate between three types of information disorder: *disinformation* (information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, organization or country); *misinformation* that is the result of unverified reports; and *malinformation* that is based on reality, but is used to inflict harm on a person, company or institution.[783] Wardle has also come up with a classification of false information and disinformation, differentiating between:

1. Satire or Parody: No intention to cause harm but potential to fool;
2. Misleading Content: Misleading use of information to frame an issue or individual;
3. Imposter Content: When genuine sources are impersonated;
4. Fabricated Content: New content is 100% false, designed to deceive and do harm;
5. False Connection: When headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content;
6. False Content: When genuine content is shared with false contextual information;
7. Manipulated Content: When genuine information or imagery is manipulated to deceive.[784]

Building upon the typology of Edson Tandoc, Zheng Wei Lim and Richard Ling, Milica Kulić writes that "fake news" may appear in the form of satire, parody, fabricated news, photo manipulation, advertisement and promotional content, as well as propaganda.[785] In deviation from the classification presented by Claire Wardle, a difference is made between satire in which real events are ridiculed on television and parody which is based on false information with elements of humour.

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[782] Lana Ciboci, Igor Kanižaj, Danijel Labaš: Kako prepoznati dezinformacije i lažne vijesti, Agencija za elektronske medije, UNICEF, Zagreb, 2018, p. 7.

[783] Kler Vordl, Hosein Derakšan: Informacijski poremećaj: Ka interdisciplinarnom okviru za istraživanje i kreiranje sektorske politike, Savet Evrope, Beograd, 2017, p. 23.

[784] Ibid, p. 19.

[785] Milica Kulić: Definisanje lažnih vijesti: stari koncept, novi pojmovi, part from: Vjerodostojnost medija: doba lažnih informacija, Filozofski fakultet, Tuzla, Bosna i Hercegovina, 2019, p. 10.

In Montenegro in recent years, many handbooks have published their definitions of disinformation and "fake news", which rely on the definitions and recommendations of the Council of Europe and their classifications. However, the majority of the Montenegrin society and public as well as political discourse continues to use incorrect terms that are not in line with the recommendations of the Council of Europe and those of the European Commission. The Criminal Code of Montenegro, for example, mentions the term "*lažna vijest*" which means "fake news".[786] Research papers by international organisations and the non-governmental organisations also use the term "fake news" when assessing the level of media literacy of citizens. In 2018, the UNICEF report "Parents, Children and the Media", based on a sample of 1050 parents and 655 children, revealed that 38 % of children aged 12 to 17 and 49 % of parents in Montenegro had heard of the term "fake news", but the majority could not explain what it means.[787] Thanks to numerous training events organised by international organisations, the NGO sector and the media, the situation improved considerably in the last four years. Fact-checking organisations also use the term. According to the explanation of the methodology on the "raskrinkavanje. me" website, the texts in which different types of manipulation are recorded can be classified as "fake news", conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, manipulation of facts, disinformation, spin, biased reporting, historical revisionism, stealth marketing, click bait and satire.[788] On the platform in question, as well as on the website of the Digital Forensic Centre, we can often find warning notices that a text published by a media or on one of the social networks is "fake news". In the methodological explanation on the www.dfc. me website one can learn more about the classification of disinformation, "fake news" and disinformation. "Fake news" refers to false information that is not based on facts and aims to harm a specific person/organisation/ institution, while disinformation is a combination of true, semi-true and false information that is used for the same purposes as "fake news".[789] The above confirms that numerous stakeholders in society use diverging and incorrect terminology when distinguishing different types of information manipulation. Even fact-checking organisations use the term "fake news" and do not classify information disorders in accordance with the recommendations of the Council of Europe.

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[786] Criminal Code of Montenegro, Official Gazette no. 003/20 of 23.01.2020.

[787] UNICEF, IPSOS: Parents, children and media, Podgorica, 2018, (https://aemcg.org/wp-content/ uploads/2018/11/Istra%C5%BEivanje-Djeca-roditelji-i-mediji-12.11.2018.pdf), p. 28.

[788] See: https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/metodologija/#1618316862219-f4487dba-3c1c.

[789] See: https://dfcme.me/o-nama/

Media Illiteracy as Key Characteristic: The Audience targeted by Disinformation in Montenegro

According to data for 2020, there are more than 150 media, 22 television and 53 radio stations, as well as 70 web portals on the Montenegrin market. The number of online media is continually growing, the market is unregulated, which makes it difficult to estimate the precise number of active portals. Montenegrin media are forced to fight for survival on a small market with an estimated worth of €11 million.[790] The 2021 Irex report for Montenegro registered 130 electronic and print media, i.e., one media outlet per 5000 citizens, while the Media Trade Union of Montenegro claims that the citizens were able to get their information from 200 media on the market in the past year, though the precise number of employees in media outlets is unknown. The Statistical Office of Montenegro estimates the population of Montenegro at 619,211. The working-age population aged 15 to 64 accounts for 66.1 percent of the citizens, minors constitute 21.6 percent, and persons older than 65 – 16 percent.[791]

This data warrants the conclusion that the target audience of disinformation in Montenegro is quite diverse and that media contents are consumed by baby boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), millennials (1981-1996), zoomers (1997-2012) and Generation Alpha.[792] A research conducted by the Digital Forensic Center on a sample of 922 respondents in 16 Montenegrin municipalities showed that Montenegrin citizens remain faithful to traditional media, and in particular that 87.8 % of the respondents get their information via television, and 65 % via the internet.[793]

The audience of disinformation in Montenegro has not been sufficiently studied, but based on the Media Literacy Index, as well as numerous surveys conducted by UNICEF, we can conclude that the citizens have low media and

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[790] Ana Nenezić, Miloš Vuković: Mediji u Crnoj Gori, Medijska asocijacija Jugoistočne Evrope (MAJE), Podgorica, 2020, p. 15.

[791] MONSTAT: Population Estimates and Basic Demographic Indicators, (https://www.monstat. org/uploads/files/demografija/procjene/2021/procjene%20stanovnistva%20i%20osnovni%20 demografski%20indkatori.pdf).

[792] Michael Dimock: Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins, 2019 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z- begins/).

[793] Digitalni forenzički centar: Medijska pismenost, korona virus i građani Crne Gore, Podgorica, 2021, p. 4.

information literacy. In 2019, Montenegro ranked 31st out of 35 countries in the media literacy ranking, dropping one position two years later.[794] Despite the involvement of families, educational institutions, international organisations and NGOs, the process media literacy improvement has been slow. In 2021, two surveys conducted by UNICEF registered a low degree of media literacy. In the same year, based on a sample of 821 respondents in 24 Montenegrin municipalities, it was established that one-third of the citizens believed in coronavirus conspiracy theories; one-third did not, while one-third were uncertain. The citizens who believe in conspiracy theories usually have a lower level of education (46 %), do not speak English sufficiently well to check information (45 %); do not use the internet (47 %); have no trust in science (57 %); and believe that insisting on equal rights has gone too far (43 %).[795] In the same year, a survey conducted on a sample of 1018 respondents in 23 municipalities showed that one-third of the citizens believed that the claim that the human factor influenced climate change was false. A similar opinion was shared by only 32 % of the respondents in Nigeria.[796]

Apart from citizens with low media literacy, another problem that contributes to disinformation in society are the conditions in which the media in Montenegro operate. The Media Trade Union of Montenegro states that, according to the Statistical Office, there are 1445 people working in the Montenegrin media sector. Researching the socio-economic position of journalists, based on a survey of 87 journalists, the Trade Union found that every fourth journalist earns a net salary between €500 and €600, while 44 % of the respondents had another job.[797] As many as 78 % of journalists were working overtime, with 72.5 % receiving no compensation for the overtime work. Only 6 % of journalists do not work on weekends, and as many as 57.5 % journalists are not specialised in a particular area. Despite the freedom to work, the respondents felt pressure from the editor affecting their work overall (35.6 %) or to some extent (40%). With such figures in mind, it is clear that journalists are neither motivated nor paid sufficiently to dedicate themselves to

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[794] Media Literacy Index, (https://osis.bg/?p=3750&lang=en).

[795] UNICEF, IPSOS, British Embassy Podgorica: Opinions of Montenegrin Citizens on Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories About the Coronavirus and Vaccines, 2021 (https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/media/21191/file/IPSOS_istra%C5%BEivanje_o_teorijama_zavjere.pdf).

[796] UNICEF, Ipsos, British Embassy Podgorica: Opinions of Montenegrin Citizens on Climate Change, 2021 (https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/izvjestaji/stavovi-gra%C4%91ana-crne-gore-o-klimatskim-promjenama).

[797] Bojana Laković Konatar: Socio-ekonomski položaj medijskih radnika u Crnoj Gori, Sindikat medija Crne Gore, Podgorica, 2021, p. 7 & 8.

their work, but must fight for survival instead. This factor affects the quality of reporting and the possibility of fact- and source-checking.

Yet, based on semi-structured interviews according to the 2021 IREX report, Montenegrin media operate up to professional standards and do not spread disinformation and misinformation. However, one of the interviewees – *TV Vijesti* director Marijana Bojanić – points out that finances have a great impact on the quality of reporting. She explains that it is difficult to generate a quality product in a financially deprived environment.[798] A study conducted by the Digital Forensic Center in 2021 on a sample of 922 respondents showed that the citizens' opinions are somewhat different from those of experts: According to the survey, one in four respondents (24.2 %) had a negative opinion of Montenegrin media when it comes to respecting professional and ethical standards.[799] As many as 38.8 % of respondents stated that Montenegrin media leave out some important facts in their reporting, while 40.9 % stated that the media reports on the same event differ depending on the outlet.[800] Having in mind the pressures to which journalists are exposed, it is clear that there are breaches of professional and ethical standards in certain situations. Journalists should be the first line of defence in combatting information disorder, but as long as they are poorly remunerated, overburdened and not sent to specialist trainings by their editorial staff, it is evident that journalists cannot live up to the task. One of the main prerequisites for adhering to professional and ethical standards is freedom, i.e., the media not being exposed to any sort of political and economic pressure. According to the *Reporters Without Borders* index, Montenegro is ranked 63rd in media freedom and has improved significantly in comparison to last year, when it found itself in the 104th position.[801] This has been the best indicator since the country gained its independence in 2006, and this gives hope that the quality of reporting on topics of public interest will improve.

Political and social events in Montenegro are most often the focus of disinformation. The opposition parties, i.e. the Democratic Front, the Democrats and the United Reform Action won the majority for the first time in the parliamentary elections held on 30 August 2020. Several months later,

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[798] IREX: Vibrant Information Barometer, 2021 (https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/vibe-montenegro-2021.pdf).

[799] Digitalni forenzički centar: Medijska pismenost, korona virus i građani Crne Gore, Podgorica, 2021, p. 15.

[800] Ibid.

[801] Reporters Without Borders: Index 2021 (https://rsf.org/en/index?year=2021).

on 4 December 2020, an expert government was formed headed by the leader of the Democratic Front list, Zdravko Krivokapić. This government collapsed on 4 February 2022. After the collapse of the expert government, a new government headed by URA-chairman Dritan Abazović was elected on 28 April 2022, but his government was brought down again on 20 August. Abazović signed the Basic Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church on 3 August 2022, which heavily divides the Montenegrin society, and part of the citizens protested against the signing of this document because they did not want the churches and monasteries in Montenegro to become property of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Political turbulence was accompanied by rumours about candidacies for ministerial mandates, and the fall of the government and the signing of the Basic Agreement were predicted a few months before they actually happened. All these events, the collapse of the expert government, the formation of a minority government, candidacies for a new mandate, the signing of the Basic Agreement and political rallies at expressing support for the Ukrainian people were accompanied by false information and disinformation. For example, a photograph from a rally in Cetinje against the war in Ukraine appeared on Facebook on 3 April 2022, and the symbol of Nazi Germany was photoshopped into the Ukrainian flag in the hands of one of the participants of the event.[802]

Disinformation in Montenegro is generally most often distributed on social networks where, among other things, fake profiles of politicians may also be seen. On Facebook, a photo of Prime Minister Dritan Abazović and the leader of the Democrats Aleksa Bečić was shared on 9 August 2022 with the caption that they have reconciled and that the DPS and SDP parties will be "thrown out" of the government.[803] However, even online media publish disinformation on occasion. For example, most Montenegrin portals on 3 April 2022 reported that Patriarch Kirill called for the destruction of the Ukrainian people, allegedly saying that Ukraine must be destroyed like the Nazi-Reich. Failures of Montenegrin online media are more and more frequent because journalists do not fully respect professional and ethical standards. Darvin Murić from the Centre for Digital Transition explained that "the media do not check sensitive information, nor do they understand

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[802] See: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=129941389612265&id=100077892125719.

[803] See: https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid037xR2bnPiaxwkit2N8mCoRhMUyWQ4NiDeXaxEfm3Ldmp21TQgiHbMefRuQdjWmXvHl&id=100044511311045.

the danger of sharing semi-information and disinformation at time of heightened tension". He also pointed to the low level of media literacy of political actors who fall prey to disinformation.[804]

Narratives, Case Studies and Examples of Disinformation in Montenegro

Since 2016, Montenegro has been faced with a lot of so-called "grey" or semi-official propaganda. A 2021 survey conducted by DFC showed that 81.9 % of the respondents were familiar with the term "fake news", while 73.2 % claimed they had recognised fake news in Montenegrin media, 34 % of the citizens claimed they recognised fake news daily or frequently.[805]

(A) Disinformation on the War in Ukraine

Disinformation in Montenegro is most often spread via social media at times of **crisis**, such as the war in Ukraine and the COVID-19 pandemic. In the report "Shadows of Ukraine over Montenegro", the Digital Forensic Center states that, unlike the European Union where certain Russian media outlets have been banned, pro-Serbian media in Montenegro, such as the web portals *IN4S* and *Borba*, tried to justified Russia's attack on Ukraine: "*The content that is placed in these media is full of sensationalism, fake news and disinformation, and correlates directly with the narratives that are placed in Moscow.*"[806] When reporting on the war against Ukraine, such pro-Russian media do not use the terms "war" or "aggression", but "crisis in Ukraine" or "special military operation".[807] Russian President Vladimir Putin is depicted in a positive light and the supremacy of the Russian Army is glorified, whereas the West is accused of pushing Ukraine into conflict, and the Ukrainians of committing genocide against the population in Donbas. As one scholar put it: "Columnists who write for *IN4S* and *Borba* emphasize the denial of Ukrainian identity and the portrayal of Ukraine as a communist creation."[808] In the report, the web portal *IN4S* is cited as a bad practice example because, as the third most visited news portal in Montenegro

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[804] See: https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/crna-gora-izjave-informacije-reakcije/31334419.html.

[805] Digitalni forenzički centar: Medijska pismenost, korona virus i građani Crne Gore, Podgorica, 2021, p. 22.

[806] Milan Jovanović, Branka Gardašević: Sjenke Ukrajine nad Crnom Gorom, Digitalni forenzički centar, Podgorica, 2022, p. 25

[807] Ibid, p. 26.

[808] Ibid.

according to "*SimilarWeb*", a website engaging in the ranking of websites in the digital world, ever since the war in Ukraine started "*it incites hatred, supports war actions, relativizes and justifies aggression and attack on a sovereign state, and targets dissidents*."[809] The war in Ukraine has created a rift between internet users in Montenegro. On Instagram emerged pages such as "*cg_revolt, crna_gora_srpska_sparta, etnarh_cg*" and others, which call for protests in Montenegro and praise Putin, sharing videos taken from *RIA Novosti*.[810] Apart from these portals and social media, disinformation is also spread via Telegram groups, such as the one headed by Vladislav Pozdnyakov, an emigreé Russian activist whose organisation "Male State" was banned in Russia for ostensible extremism, with over 60 000 followers and daily reports from the frontline.[811]

(B) Covid-related Disinformation in Montenegro

Society in Montenegro has also been subjected to disinformation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. A DFC survey showed that "*almost half of the respondents (47.3 %) stated that they noticed fake news and disinformation on the coronavirus and vaccines on social media (64.9 %), news portals (47.9 %), and television (31 %).*"[812] Research by the fact-checking website "*DebunkEu.org*" showed that in September 2021 alone, 190 misleading texts about the corona-virus were published in Montenegro and Serbia. False narratives about vaccines were spread by radical right-wing and pro-Russian sources from Serbia, recording a large number of visitors in Montenegro: "*Vaccines against the Coronavirus were presented as ineffective, useless, experimental or made too quickly, but also as the cause of serious adverse events and death, and were linked to Nazism*".[813] Due to the spread of disinformation on social networks, international organisations were sometimes forced to react. For example, UNICEF has warned citizens that disinformation is being spread on the internet citing UNICEF as a source, stating that citizens should avoid ice cream and cold food in order to protect themselves from the Corona virus.[814]

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[809] Ibid, p. 27.

[810] Milan Jovanović, Branka Gardašević: Sjenke Ukrajine nad Crnom Gorom, Digitalni forenzički centar, Podgorica, 2022, p. 28.

[811] Ibid, p. 34.

[812] Digitalni forenzički centar: Medijska pismenost, korona virus i građani Crne Gore, Podgorica, 2021, p. 28.

[813] See: https://www.rtvbudva.me/vijesti/u-crnoj-gori-i-srbiji-u-septembru-190-obmanjujucih-clanaka/50833.

[814] UNICEF: Upozorenje šire se lažne vijesti o koronavirusu koje navodno potiču od Unicefa, Podgorica, 2020 (https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/price/upozorenje-%C5%A1ire-se-la%C5%BEne-vijesti-o-koronavirusu-koje-navodno-poti%C4%8Du-od-unicef).

Another source of Covid-related disinformation were private citizens and activists. One example was Milivoje Brković, who was arrested because he wrote on his Facebook profile on 12 March 2020 that according to his information, there are thirteen citizens in the country infected with Covid-19.[815] That information was incorrect because the first case was registered five days after that, i.e. on 17 March 2020.

Another source of disinformation are web portals. Many Montenegrin online media published the information that the cure for corona lies on the seabed in Montenegro, citing German professor Hermann Ehrlich, who claimed that with the help of the golden sponge that can be found in the Mediterranean sea, it would be possible to cure Covid-19. This information was also published by the Public Broadcaster Service portal in April 2020[816], although guideline 7.2 of the Code of Journalists of Montenegro stipulates that media professionals must be careful when publishing information about medical research and not give space to quack doctors, healers, etc. However, bearing in mind that people in crisis situations feel a sort of information hunger, i.e. they want to get as much information as possible, portals strove to be the first and did not check the content they published. In their public appearances, fact-checkers emphasized that the media mostly reported on the pandemic professionally, but they drew attention to failures in controlling comments on portals where citizens spread misinformation and conspiracy theories and lead an anti-vaxxer campaign.[817]

A UNICEF survey conducted in 2021 on a sample of 821 respondents from 24 municipalities strongly suggests that Covid-related misinformation had a severe impact on the attitude and behaviour of citizens in Montenegro. The study showed that 49 % of citizens do not believe in conspiracy theories regarding vaccination, 31 % have no definite position on the matter, and 20 % have doubts about vaccination. This third category does not trust their child's doctor (35 %), health institutions (34 %), do not trust science (35 %), are exposed to disinformation and misinformation about the coronavirus (32 %). The survey also showed that 43 % of respondents believe that the consequences of the vaccine are covered up so that the pharmaceutical companies continue to make money. A third of citizens (33 %) believe that

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[815] See: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/425176/uhapsen-milivoje-brkovic-zbog-sirenja-laznih-vijesti-o-koronavirusu.

[816] See: https://www.facebook.com/434618853276192/posts/d41d8cd9/3742754019129309/.

[817] Murić Darvin: Mediji da uklanjaju teorije zavjere i lažne vijesti iz komentara, CDT, 2021 (https://www.cdtmn.org/2021/12/03/mediji-da-uklanjaju-teorije-zavjere-i-lazne-vijesti-iz-komentara/).

the risk of adverse effects is greater than the benefits of the vaccine, 31 % accuse pharmaceutical companies and health workers of spreading deception regarding the vaccine, while 29 % believe that vaccines cause autism and other mental disorders.[818]

(C) Disinformation on Migration

But the war in Ukraine and the pandemic are not the only topics that generated information disorder and disinformation. Based on an analysis of the contents on three web portals – *Vijesti*, *CDM* and *IN4S* – one study of the way migrants and migration are portrayed in Montenegro came to the conclusion that migrants were most often depicted as victims, i.e., persons in need of help. The content on the web portals is mostly complied in accordance with professional and ethical standards, although some online media ran an anti-immigrant campaign. The portal *IN4S* stood out in this case, rarely reporting on migrants in the period from 20 to 30 November 2019, and re-publishing articles from other outlets with a narrative according to which migrants are dangerous and violent. The study found that this outlet often quoted the Bosnian political analyst Dževad Galijašević who is known for spreading various types of disinformation and conspiracy theories. The author explains that said source most often uses the narrative where "*migrants are terrorists and a security threat to the country in which they arrive", and that they pose an "epidemiological threat"*.[819] Analysing the narratives in light of the current political and social developments, the study concludes that "*established online media do not succeed in being fully committed to professional standards. They usually publish press releases, statements or information which often have a narrative that contains inflammatory language or disinformation*".[820]

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[818]   UNICEF, IPSOS, British Embassy Podgorica: The views of the citizens of Montenegro on disinformation and conspiracy theories about the coronavirus and vaccines, 2021 (https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/sites/unicef.org.montenegro/files/2021-06/lektorisano.IPSOS%20Conspiracy%20theories%20izvjestaj_FINAL%20MNE%20SAJT%20%28002%29_0.pdf)

[819]   Milica Bogdanović: Snažni: Mediji bez mržnje i dezinformacija, Institut za medije Crne Gore, Podgorica, SEENPM, Tirana i Mirovni institut, Ljubljana, Montenegro, 2020, p. 9.

[820]   Ibid, p. 22.

Media, Sources and Multipliers of Disinformation: Social Media – the main Source of Disinformation in Montenegro

In the 2021 report by the International Research and Exchanges Board "Irex"[821] Aneta Spaić explains that Montenegro is confronted with the problem of "fake news" and hate speech, but that these phenomena are much more prevalent on social media and online forums than in traditional media.[822] The report also says that "fake news" and hate speech have been on the rise in Montenegro since 2016, when fake Facebook and Twitter accounts were used to spread disinformation. However, media expert Duško Vuković recalls how during the parliamentary election campaign in 2020, online media such as "*Udar*" emerged with the aim of discrediting certain persons and political parties.[823] The web portal in question was registered just before the elections and attacked various political actors and parties by spreading false and inaccurate information. For example, "*Exclusive: Krapović wants to be on the black and white list*" which stated that the former mayor of the Municipality of Budva wanted to switch parties (from "Democrats" to United Reform Action - URA), referring to anonymous sources. Or in the text entitled "DPS official organized his daughter's wedding despite the measures" that announced that the mayor of the Municipality of Ulcinj Ljoro Nrekić violated the Covid-19 measures of the National Coordination Body, accusing him of endangering the health of local residents.[824] There seems to be a consensus even among the political elite in Montenegro that national politicians are actively involved in spreading disinformation for political purposes. For journalist and media expert Radoslav Dejanović the potential sources of "fake news" are: politicians, institutions, media, keyboard warriors, snake oil salesmen and influencers.[825] The member of the Montenegrin Parliament Branka Bošnjak similarly claims that politicians in

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[821] *International research and exchanges board* (IREX) is an international organization that cooperates with over 100 different countries around the world with the aim of fighting corruption, stopping the spread of disinformation and improving society in various areas with a focus on civil society, youth, technology, media, gender equality and education.

[822] IREX: Vibrant Information Barometer 2021, (https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/vibe-montenegro-2021.pdf).

[823] Ibid, p. 5

[824] DFC: Udar portal - from anonymous information to conspiracy theories, 2020 (https://dfcme.me/portal-udar-od-anoninmih-dezinformacija-do-teorija-zavjere/).

[825] Radoslav Dejanović: Priručnik za provjeru informacija iz medija – metode i alati za analizu lažnih vijesti, dezinformacija i ostalih onlajn manipulacija, Društvo za zaštitu novinarskih autorskih prava, Zagreb, 2020, p. 28-35.

Montenegro use disinformation in order to discredit political opponents.[826] Her colleague from the DPS, Nikola Rakočević, agrees with regard to the purpose for which disinformation is used and points out that many people profit from disinformation wars. Traditional media, on the other hand, while certainly not free from guilt in spreading false or misinformation, does not seem to be the most important player in the spread of disinformation. Mainstream media in Montenegro sometimes publish false information, due to a lack of prudence and disregard for professional standards. For example, in late 2021 many Montenegrin online media published the information that the then-Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić decided to get vaccinated against Covid-19, but no outlet verified the authenticity of the account, which was in fact a satirical Twitter account.[827] In the same period, one outlet published that protesters during a major demonstration against the enthronement of Metropolitan Joaniki of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the Cetinje monastery threw a Molotov cocktail at the police, after which the Prime Minister ordered the police to use teargas. However, it turned out that the protesters had not attacked the police, although *TV Vijesti* aired an alleged video recording of the assault.[828]

Social media, on the other hand, is full of disinformation, profanities and various other content that violate the rights of other online users. The NGO "Center for Monitoring and Research (CEMI)" monitored social media from March to August 2020, covering 25 outlets, 59 public pages and accounts, 19 public authorities, 9 State-owned enterprises, 20 political parties and 11 social media accounts of politicians.[829] This period was chosen because of the parliamentary election in Montenegro, held on 30 August 2020. The research established that social media activity rose by 51 % in the run-up to the election, with the emergence of numerous fake accounts. Despite using the Facebook Ad Library, the researchers had difficulties determining the location of page administrators, but research showed that the majority of administrators come from Montenegro (69), Serbia (8), Germany (3) and the US (1). However, it should be kept in mind that VPN software enables

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[826] CDT: Političari skloni dezinformacijama i na njima profitiraju, 2022 (https://www.cdtmn.org/2022/04/01/politicari-skloni-dezinformacijama-i-na-njima-profitiraju/).

[827] See: https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/zanimljivo/576744/mediji-se-upecali-na-dezinformaciju-da-je-krivokapic-odlucio-da-se-vakcinise.

[828] See: https://www.standard.co.me/drustvo/dfc-utvrdio-da-molotovljev-koktel-nije-bacen-u-sest-ujutro-i-da-je-snimak-nastao-tri-sata-kasnije/.

[829] Milica Zrnović, Ivan Vukčević, Vladimir Simonović: Preoblikovanje izborne kampanje korišćenjem društvenih medija u Crnoj Gori, CEMI, Podgorica, 2020 (https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/YuB3uEJmdxFQaJbbggunzf7DWhj4HyYO036XGIZh.pdf), p. 8 & 22.

location hiding, so this data should be interpreted with reservations. Further analysis revealed that the profiles of several group members were fake and located outside of Montenegro. In the run-up to the election, disinformation was shared via numerous fake profiles. One such story claimed that French President Emmanuel Macron called upon Montenegrins to vote for the opposition. It turned out to be a manipulated photo.[830] After analysing 115,532 posts by Facebook pages of different societal actors (25 media outlets, 17 political parties, 5 politicians, 11 governmental institutions, 21 meme pages), the report concluded that "*online communication has been rendered meaningless because it does not contribute to the development of digital democracy.*"[831] Citizens with low media literacy do not have a culture of dialogue and do not base their opinion on facts, but instead insult and humiliate other internet users using profanities. Technology is used to spread animosity and polarise the public sphere in respect of important social and political issues. The reason for this situation should be traced back to the fact that the legal framework does not regulate the online media and social network market. The authors of the study believe that the spread of political hate speech is also "*manifested as a symptom of social pessimism and political instability in the country, while simultaneously reflecting a crisis in the field of human rights*."[832]

The Political Context of Disinformation in Montenegro

One major context factor for all politics, political propaganda and disinformation in Montenegro is the apparent opposition between pro-Western and pro-Serbian/pro-Russian attitudes. Montenegro became an independent state in 2006. Despite the fact that the independence of Montenegro was voted in a referendum held in the same year, its society was still polarized, which was also evident in the 2011 census: According to the census, Montenegro's population included 44.98 % Montenegrins and 28.73 % Serbs.[833] Until the parliamentary elections in 2020, the country was governed by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) led by the current president of the country, Milo Đukanović. From 1998 to 2002, Đukanović was the President of the Republic

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[830] See: https://twitter.com/dfcmedotme/status/1299807561806381057.

[831] Teodora Gilić, Maja Bjelić, Milica Zrnović: Izvještaj o rodno zasnovanim dezinformacijama i online nasilju prema ženama u politici u Crnoj Gori, CEMI, Podgorica, p. 10.

[832] Ibid, p. 23.

[833] MONSTAT: Population Census of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2011 (https://www.monstat.org/userfiles/file/popis2011/saopstenje/saopstenje(1).pdf).

of Montenegro, Prime Minister in the period from 2008 to 2010 and from 2012 to 2016, and he has again held the position of President of Montenegro since 2018.[834] The DPS has always based its policy on the promotion of European values and the desire for a stronger connection with Western partners. Their political opponents, the pro-Serbian opposition parties such as the "Democratic Front" and the "Democratic People's Party", on the contrary, promoted the establishment of closer cooperation with Serbia and Russia through their political agenda.

After the 2020 parliamentary election, when there was a regime change as the party headed by Milo Đukanović suffered a defeat after a thirty-year-long stint as the ruling party, this division between pro-Western and pro-Serbian forces reached its peak. In December 2020, the Parliament elected a government headed by Zdravko Krivokapić who spearheaded the "Democratic Front" campaign. The long-awaited reforms did not yield substantial results, and the politicians within the coalition carried on with mutual accusations and verbal attacks. In early February 2022, the expert government of Zdravko Krivokapić was brought down by a vote of no-confidence and the process of forming a minority cabinet was initiated, with Dritan Abazović, leader of the "United Reform Action" (URA), as the prospective prime minister. The minority government was formed on 20 April 2022, but similarly collapsed four months later.

This political situation and the societal rifts are also mirrored in the Montenegrin media market, which is divided into pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian media. This is one major context factor for disinformation and information manipulation in the country. While pro-Montenegrin media root for European integration, EU accession and a full commitment to NATO, pro-Serbian media under Russian influence strive to turn Montenegro away from the West. Yet, until today and despite strong pressure and divisions, Montenegro is still pro-Western. On 5 June 2017, Montenegro became the 29th member of NATO, and it applied for EU membership in 2008, initiating pre-accession negotiations on 29 June 2012.[835] A survey conducted by the agency "De Facto Consultancy" in 2022 showed that 74.4 % of its citizens still support EU membership.[836]

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[834] C.f.: https://dps.me/predsjednik/.

[835] C.f.: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/montenegro/evropska-unija-crna-gora_me?s=225.

[836] C.f.: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/politika/608249/clanstvo-crne-gore-u-eu-podrzava-744-odsto-gradjana.

Countermeasures against Disinformation in Montenegro

The fight against different types of information disorder involves state institutions, the educational system, international organisations, the NGO sector and the media, which try to educate citizens how to read between the lines, in accordance with the media literacy concept map. In addition to numerous training events, seminars and campaigns, the NGO sector in Montenegro has launched websites that deal with the monitoring of social networks and media. The "Center for Democratic Transition", for example, has founded the web portal "*raskrinkavanje.me*" that analyses different types of disinformation and warns citizens against manipulations and false information. Another example is the "Digital Forensic Center" that actively organises training events for citizens with the aim of recognising different types of information disorder, and conducts surveys on the basis of which it creates publications.[837]

Concerning legal regulation, Article 398 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro – one of the few exceptions in Europe – contains a special provision prohibiting the dissemination of "fake news": "*Any person who spreads or disseminates fake news or claims, thereby causing panic or a serious disturbance of public order or peace, or significantly obstructing the enforcement of decisions and measures of state authorities or organisations that perform public functions, shall be punished by a fine or a term of imprisonment of up to one year.*"[838] According to this provision, if the offence is perpetrated via the media or other means of public information or at a public gathering, the perpetrator shall be punished with a term of imprisonment of up to three years. Two years ago, the Article was applied and three journalists from Montenegrin web portals were arrested for spreading fake news. In January 2020, *Fos media* journalist Anđela Đikanović was arrested for publishing an article claiming that members of Kosovari special forces ROSU were at the disposal of Montenegro's security services on the day of a demonstration. She claimed she had obtained the information from a reliable source, but the editorial staff issued an apology and took the article down.[839] In the same period, the editors of the portals *Borba* and *IN4S*, Dražen Živković and Gojko Raičević, were also arrested for publishing that there had been an

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[837] C.f.: https://dfcme.me/obuka-istrazi-ukazi-12/.

[838] See: Criminal Code of Montenegro, Official Gazette 003/20 of 23.01.2020.

[839] See: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/416580/novinarki-fos-media-odredeno-zadrzavanje-osumnjicena-za-izazivanje-panike-i-nereda.

explosion at Villa Gorica, as this was later established to have been a minor fire caused by an installation defect.[840]

The legislative framework, governing the media, on the other hand, does not mention the term "fake news" or disinformation, but Article 24 of the Law on Media states that the media owner shall be responsible for the media product, and in case of publishing false, incomplete content, the owner, editor-in-chief and the journalist shall be liable if they had not been acting with due journalistic care.[841] Truthfulness and accuracy also represent the first principle of the Code of Journalists of Montenegro, according to which journalists must not publish false or malicious information.[842] Media professionals are obliged to avoid headlines that could lead the audience to an erroneous conclusion about any event or person, which is meant to protected media audience against sensationalism and clickbait. Journalists are allowed to use social networks as an information source, but in this case, they must pay special attention, i.e., double check their sources.[843] However, despite these rules, unintentional mistakes do happen in the race to publish information as soon as possible. In 2019, for example, the *MINA* agency published the information obtained from a reader that a crocodile had been spotted in the Gorica park in Podgorica. Most Montenegrin media re-published this information without checking. Eventually it turned out to be a hoax.[844] According to guideline 3 of the Code of Journalists of Montenegro, a media outlet is required to supplement incomplete information and publish a correction in case of publishing incorrect information and unfounded criticism. Improving media literacy is another strategy in the fight against disinformation in Montenegro. Two years ago, for the purpose of improving media literacy in society at large, the "Agency for Electronic Media" and UNICEF launched the campaign "*Let's choose what we watch*".[845] UNICEF played an important role in raising awareness among parents that the media must not be a babysitter to their children and that parents and children must be aware of the challenges brought about by the media.

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[840] C.f.: https://www.antenam.net/drustvo/hronika/145667-zbog-lazne-vijesti-o-eksploziji-u-vili-gorica-uhapseni-raicevic-i-zivkovic.

[841] See: Law on Media, Official Gazette 082/20 of 06.08.2020.

[842] See: Code of Journalists of Montenegro, (https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/f/255576.pdf).

[843] See: Ibid.

[844] C.f.: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/388773/krokodil-sa-gorice-je-zapravo-djecija-igracka.

[845] See: UNICEF: Pokretanje kampanje "Birajmo šta gledamo", Podgorica, 2018 (https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/price/pokretanje-kampanje-%E2%80%9Ebirajmo-%C5%A1ta-gledamo).

This was reflected in a 2020 survey on a sample of 807 respondents in 24 municipalities. By comparing the results obtained in 2018, 2019 and 2020, it was established that following the campaign as many as 47 % of parents talked to their children about the media content they consume. In 2018, this was practiced by only 21 % of parents, while only 30 % of parents limited their children in terms of the content they watch, whereas in 2020, 55 % of parents had introduced certain limits for their children in terms of the content.[846] For example, a 2018 survey of 1,050 parents and 655 children found that around 40 % of children find it difficult to recognize false information on television, while parents are more confident when assessing their level of visual literacy. Meanwhile, a discussion is under way on the draft of a media strategy along with an action plan, dealing, among other things, with the socio-economic position of journalists and their safety, the survival of traditional media and the regulation of the media market, media self-regulation, public broadcasting, hate speech, disinformation and media literacy.[847] The goal of these initiatives is to regulate the media industry and improve the socio-economic position of journalists, as well educate the citizens by improving the standard of commenting. Even though this is a "soft approach" that does not directly target the spread and production of disinformation, these initiatives may contribute to better journalism and make Montenegrin society more media literate and resilient against all types of information disorder.

Conclusion

Based on the descriptive method, i.e. by studying various publications, research, primary and secondary sources, we come to the conclusion that citizens in Montenegro are exposed to disinformation primarily on social networks, which has been particularly dangerous in the period of political instability since 2020. Various crises at the global and domestic level, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the economic crisis, the war in Ukraine and the instability of several Montenegrin governments, have resulted in undermining the way the media and social networks are perceived by citizens — not as a forum for the exchange of opinions and criticism, but rather as a space of insults, disinformation and conspiracy theories or the promotion of pseudo-science. Citizens with no or low media literacy are not aware of

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[846] C.f.: UNICEF: Parents, Children and the Media, 2020 (https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/media/17381/file/Podaci%20o%20medijskoj%20pismenosti%20MNE.pdf).

[847] C.f.: https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/drustvo/594433/nacrt-prve-medijske-strategije-na-raspravi.

their responsibility when posting inaccurate or false information on social networks. There is also a large number of bots and trolls on social networks that are professionally engaged in spreading disinformation. According to research by the "Centre for Investigative Journalism", almost every political party in Montenegro has such a "war room": *"The networks of bots and trolls in Montenegro are most often comprised of young party members who see that as a springboard for further advancement in the party. The task of "botting" and "trolling" is also given to those who got a job in a state company or were given some favour through a party, and they express their gratitude in this way."*[848]

Traditional media in Montenegro generally respects professional and ethical standards, but could not avoid inadvertent errors resulting from the conditions in which they operate. Work overload, low salaries and the inability to develop professionally and increase the level of media literacy affect the quality of information and, ultimately, the level of information of citizens in crisis situations. Milica Kovačević, member of the "Centre for Democratic Transition" points out that research has shown that online media most often succumb to biased reporting, fuelling political tensions or transmitting disinformation.[849] Bearing in mind that freedom is a prerequisite for respecting professional and ethical standards, and that the journalists are the weakest link in the pyramid scheme of the media, it is clear that the responsibility for spreading disinformation lies with editors as well.

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[848] Andrea Jelić: Mreže botova i trolova u Crnoj Gori: vojnici na zadatku, CINCG, Montenegro, 2022 http://www.cin-cg.me/mreze-botova-i-trolova-u-crnoj-gori-1-vojnici-na-zadatku/.

[849] Andrea Jelić: Dezinformacije i lažne vijesti u Crnoj Gori: epidemija za koju još nema lijeka, CINCG, Montenegro, 2022 (http://www.cin-cg.me/dezinformacije-i-lazne-vijesti-u-crnoj-gori-epidemija-za-koju-jos-nema-lijeka/).

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