



Hendrik Sittig: "The Russian propaganda machine is destructive. The goal is the destruction of our liberal societies."

Translation of the interview with Hendrik Sittig, Head of the KAS Media Programme Southeast Europe, for the Bulgarian National Radio "BNR", published on April 01, 2023. Link to the original interview in Bulgarian: <https://bit.ly/3Lgb7mi>

Disinformation is the deliberate distortion of facts or even falsification, the manipulation of information and the spread of fake news. In the digital age, the spread of disinformation has reached new heights, leading to social division and thus threatening a democratic society. Disinformation comes in various forms and reaches us through various channels that are spreading at a breath taking speed. The Russian aggression against Ukraine has clearly shown how disinformation can also serve as a military tool on the information front. This was the subject of an international conference organised in Sofia by the Media Programme South East Europe of the German Konrad Adenauer Foundation. During the conference was presented the foundation's analysis entitled "Blurring the Truth – Disinformation in South East Europe".

What are the similarities and differences between the ten countries studied in the region?

When we talk about the similarities and differences, there is a distinct boundary that I can draw, and that is between the Slavic and non-Slavic countries in the region. When we talk about foreign influence through the media, we are mainly talking about Russian influence. So it is logical that in the Slavic countries, this influence, and the deliberate disinformation accordingly, is significant. Serbia is the most prominent example of this. But the same applies to Bulgaria, Moldova, the Bosnian Republika Srpska and North Kosovo.

In countries such as Romania, Albania and North Macedonia, there are also pro-Russian forces acting as conduits of disinformation, but they are considerably weaker, even marginalised, I would say.

A particular aspect of disinformation in South East Europe is the incitement of ethnic and cultural conflicts. An example of this is the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, as well as the conflict over Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But also the historical disputes between Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia. These types of conflicts are the ideal breeding ground for disinformation, for spreading fake news and insinuations that tickle national sentiments.

I must say it very clearly – the Kremlin knows that this is the case and has been ruthlessly exploiting it in the hybrid war that Russia is waging. Have no doubt: Russia spares no expense in spreading false information to fuel old conflicts and create new ones.

When you say that there are pro-Russian forces operating in the ten countries of South East Europe that you have analysed, let us clarify what you mean – are you talking about Kremlin-led campaigns or local-level political players?

The analysis of the situation in the entire region shows that this is a mixture of various players and channels. What is common is the origin of disinformation, and that is the Kremlin. But let us be clear – propaganda channels are also maintained by others, for example, China and some Arab countries. But the main difference is that the Russian propaganda machine is destructive. The goal is to destroy our liberal societies. The goal is to divide people.

For too long we have underestimated what disinformation can do to us, and we have not taken any measures. I am talking not only about politicians in South East Europe, but all over Europe.

What are the channels for spreading disinformation, manipulative information?

Propaganda and disinformation have always existed and will continue to exist. But not as pervasive as in the digital age we live in. The internet and social networks allow disinformation to spread at the speed of light. Imagine what will happen when artificial intelligence becomes a part of our daily lives!

Disinformation thrives thanks to the multipliers, those who spread it. The multiplier is not Russia. Russia is the originator, and then it is the turn of the “useful idiots” who, without thinking, spread fake news mainly on social networks. Excuse me for the expression “useful idiots”, but it turns out that it is already part of the terminology on this topic. Multipliers are all sorts of people – scholars, politicians, journalists, but also ordinary social network users. Very often, they spread fake news without realising it.

Disinformation spreads particularly well in an uncontrolled, unregulated environment such as the Internet.

What would you say to those who would accuse you of attempting to impose censorship?

Balance is difficult. Regulation should exist, but in no case should it be state regulation. The media should be able to regulate themselves. I will give you an example with Germany: there is a media council operating in our country in which all media are represented. It is a voluntary organisation of publishers and journalists. In this council, political parties and institutions are not represented in any way.

Almost all disinformation campaigns run through social media. That means that the reaction against fake news should also be there. Regulation in this area is extremely difficult, but necessary. Since last year, in the EU we have had the legislative package on digital services, which is to be introduced in all Member States. Unfortunately, I see a problem for Bulgaria, because I do not feel that any efforts are being made to regulate the digital space. I think that the government and, in particular, the Council for Electronic Media should pay attention to this issue.

How can one recognise quality media, reliable information?

Serious media and journalists do not identify themselves with politicians or parties. Neither from the ruling parties, nor from the opposition. The issue is related to journalistic education, to the understanding of the role of journalists. This is not an easy task. I am also a journalist, after the German reunification I studied in Leipzig, the forge of journalistic personnel in the former GDR. At that time, the role of journalists was understood as a conduit for the aspirations of the ruling Communist Party. In a democratic society, journalists are observers of social and political processes, not participants.

Another problem we observe throughout South-Eastern Europe is the insufficient media financing. This concerns both journalist remuneration and the ability of the media to support themselves from their activities as media. Of course, in all ten countries covered by our study, there are excellent exceptions, examples of serious media and good journalists. But unfortunately, these are just few.

Mr. Sittig, you divided the countries in South East Europe into Slavic and non-Slavic. Is that the only prerequisite for Russian influence? What is the importance of the understanding of a democratic society, of its structure?

Cultural and historical ties with Russia are a very important prerequisite, but not the only one. For me, the more significant problem is the underdeveloped quality journalism. When there is a healthy media environment in a democratic society, when journalists understand their role in a democratic society, then they have the trust of viewers, listeners and readers. In such an environment, disinformation does not thrive or does not thrive easily. Unfortunately, this is not the case in the ten countries in South East Europe that we studied.

In general, in the countries of the region, people do not particularly trust the elites, regardless of whether we are talking about politicians, public figures or institutions. And this is transferred to the media as well. One reason is that these societies are not entirely democratic.

Who is susceptible to disinformation?

There are many intelligent people, with good education and scientific titles, who are also susceptible to disinformation. And not only with regard to Russia. We seem to have forgotten the pandemic – do you remember the anti-vaxxer movements, the conspiracy theorist protests? They, too, were victims of disinformation playing with people's fears. Unfortunately, Bulgaria is an eloquent example of this.

How can we counteract disinformation then?

The most important tool is media competence. If we look at the past 20-25 years, I think we have lost an entire generation that grew up with the dizzyingly fast developing digital media. Our grown-up children do not know any other communication environment, but none of us, their parents and teachers, have managed to tell them how to live in this environment. Not to mention that no one explains to them the role of the media and journalists in a democratic society. I am talking not only about Bulgaria. Everywhere in Europe, I have been asked whether Facebook posts are journalism. No, this is definitely not journalism.

Nowadays, anyone can post something on social networks, regardless of whether it is true or not, and regardless of their motives for doing so. That is why I believe that we owe it to our children to provide media literacy education at school, so that they can distinguish between serious news and manipulative information. I am very glad that a pilot project on media literacy as a school subject is being launched in Kosovo.

These are measures that would bring results in the future. What can be done now, in the short term?

A means against disinformation are the fact-checking independent organisations and departments within the media. They are important, but completely insufficient, as they actually react to the fake news that has already been spread. Furthermore, fact checking reaches a limited group of people depending on the platform used. And disinformation spreads quickly and transitions from one channel to another.

Disinformation always targets people's emotions, arouses fears, creates doubt and confusion. And fact-checking websites on the internet typically contain dry scientific information that no one wants to read.

A tool against disinformation are, of course, serious media. And that means they need to be well financed to do their jobs. Let me give the example of Germany again, where public media enjoy the highest level of trust. Over 70 percent of Germans trust the information they receive from public radio and television. In these media, fake news cannot make its way. And their viewers and listeners, accustomed to reliable information, cannot succumb to manipulation.

Strengthening civil society. Cultivating a sense of responsibility in people, as democracy is not limited to politicians and parties. On the contrary, citizens are at the heart of a democratic society. However, citizens must understand their role, believe in the power of democracy and defend it, including against disinformation.

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