Information war and fight for truth

Tactics and harmful effects of foreign perpetrated disinformation in Western Balkans

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Introduction

The publication in front of you is the result of cooperation between various stakeholders in the Western Balkans in the framework of the project "Strengthening societal resilience and countering foreign perpetrated disinformation in 6 Western Balkans countries". The project is funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia through the program activities of international development cooperation. The aim of this publication is to raise awareness about the burning problem of disinformation and its harmful effects.

The use of disinformation tactics is not a new phenomenon, what is new are the modern technology that helps move information faster and the use of information, misinformation or disinformation on social media, where each individuum is a content producer, consumer and distributor. The amount of misinformation in the past years has increased enormously and it threatens societies in the way that inflicts divisions, undermines democratic values and stalls EU integration processes. Counternarratives about climate change allow countries and corporations to ignore the effect of their actions on the planet Earth. Misinformation on vaccines in COVID-19 pandemic has even cost lives. Moreover, we have witnessed two-tracked war in Ukraine: the one on the ground and the information war. Russian war propaganda is operating on full scale. And at the end it will be important to win on both fronts.

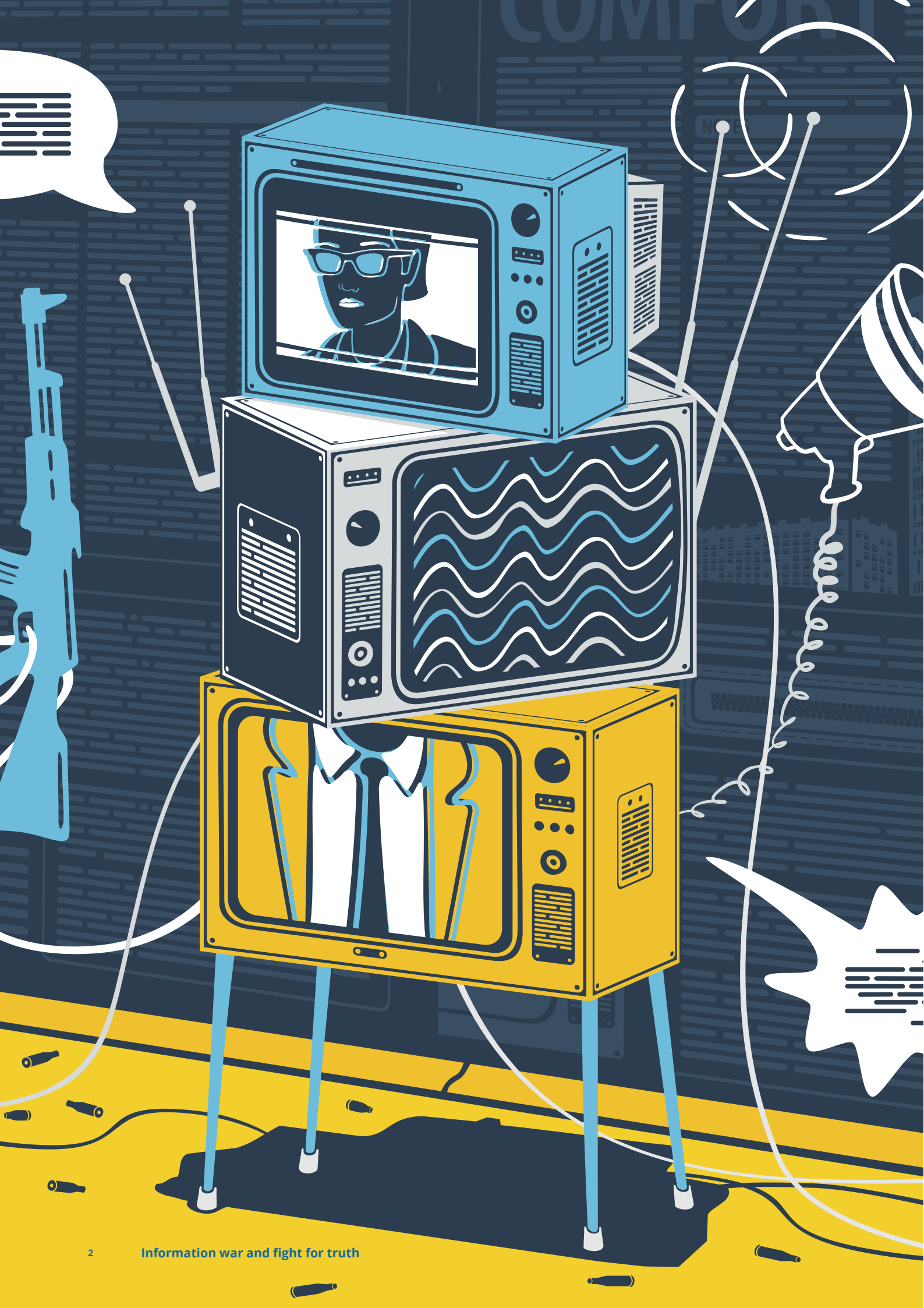
Democracy report 2021* by V-Dem Institute shows that an overall decline of democratic standards is noticeable around the globe. A wave of autocratization has reached Europe as well. According to the report, the big problem in all the countries that have fallen behind in this measurement is the polarization of societies. Disinformation that different actors place among citizens contribute greatly to this polarization. Moreover, this report shows that governments increasingly use misinformation to shape domestic and international opinion.

This publication seeks to provide insight into the situation in the Western Balkans and the harmful effects of foreign perpetrated disinformation. As the authors of this publication show foreign, mostly Russian disinformation is strongly present in the Western Balkans with the aim to keep the region politically unstable and to slow its path to the EU. Jakub Kalensky and Veera Karela present the strategy of Russian state for the use of disinformation in the Western Balkans. The use of Chinese state propaganda is presented by Ivana Karaskova. Experts from the Western Balkans write about the interconnectedness of Russian and local media. Darko Brkan tackles disinformation about the war in Ukraine in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Milan Jovanović analyzes the prevalence of the influence of foreign disinformation through the local media in Montenegro. Bardhyl Jashari presents an analysis of the involvement of the Russian media or their proxies in the society of Northern Macedonia and the narratives that emerge in different socio-political contexts.

In order to minimize the harmful effects of misinformation and disinformation, the functioning of government institutions must be at the highest level of transparency, so that citizens can trust their own government, the media must report responsibly and thoroughly check information, and media literacy must be included in the curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Finding solutions to these problems also requires awareness that these threats exist, and with this publication we want to contribute to greater awareness in the region as well as in Europe as a whole.

Katja Geršak,
director of Center for European Perspective

*** V-Dem Institue, Democracy Report 2021, https://www.v-dem.net/democracy_reports.html**



Amplify divisions, take advantage of vulnerabilities

Russian disinformation strategy in Western Balkans

Jakub Kalensky and **Veera Kaarela**, The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats

"Justified" by a years-long disinformation campaign led by the Kremlin, the war in Ukraine again reminds us that disinformation can cost lives – a pattern also observable during the COVID pandemic.[1] Malicious actors like Russia are openly using information as a weapon intended to cause harm.[2]

In this article, we look at Russia's strategy behind spreading disinformation, both globally and in the Western Balkans; the tactics and tools used to fulfil the strategy; and briefly what can be done to counter this threat.

The strategy: "What's bad for them is good for us"

The Kremlin's disinformation campaign relies on dozens of narratives in hundreds of messages, employs thousands of channels and targets millions of people, all entailing different levels of ambition and aims, depending on the environment and circumstances. Still, the major strategic goal is to weaken the West and strengthen the Kremlin as part of a zero-sum game approach. It is driven by the cynical mindset "if it's bad for them, it is good for us; and the worse it becomes for them, the better it is for us".

The collective West (namely, any country to the west of Belarus) is targeted from the most strategic level to the most tactical and local one. The messaging is seeking to undermine the unity and cohesion of NATO or the EU: explaining the Kremlin's support for the Brexit referendum or any other anti-European, anti-NATO, or anti-Western political groups, actors, and tendencies.[3] Such messaging also aims to undermine the integrity of individual countries, leading to the Kremlin's disinformation channels or the Kremlin having directly tried to boost and support the separatist movements in Scotland,[4] Catalonia,[5] Italy, and elsewhere.[6] The intention of the messaging is to drive a wedge between coalition partners, or even members of the same party, once again attacking and undermining those who are pro-West, pro-democracy, and anti-authoritarian, while supporting those who are anti-Western, anti-democratic, and pro-Kremlin.

Also in the Western Balkans region, Russia uses disinformation to spread anti-Western narratives.[7] Russia's invasion of Ukraine further reveals the cleavages between pro-Western and pro-Russian voices across the Balkans, with individual country reactions having illustrated this divide. NATO members Albania, Croatia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, and the NATO-leaning Kosovo, were quick to support the EU's sanctions. On the other hand, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina have refused to join in the sanctions against Russia (even though they supported the UN's condemnation of Russia's actions).[8]

Another opportunity to spread anti-Western messaging is the slow, almost stalled, process towards of obtaining EU membership, which creates opportunities for Russia to represent itself as a more attractive ally in the region. Russian disinformation

Russia's invasion of Ukraine further reveals the cleavages between pro-Western and pro-Russian voices across the Balkans, with individual country reactions having illustrated this divide.

aims to portray the EU as imposing its hegemony over the Western Balkans, yet also depicts the Union as a weak and internally torn political actor, unable to manage the crises before it.[9]

Apart from the 'pro-Western vs. pro-Russian axis', ethnic and sectarian divisions and political disorder also provide fertile grounds for amplifying harmful and divisive narratives – as used by both foreign and domestic actors. [10]

The tactics: Which message is being spread?

Such messaging often opportunistically takes advantage of a current crisis in European countries because topics of this nature hold the potential to polarize societies and gain attention. Ever since the migration crisis, these disinformers have engaged heavily in the topic of migration; following the outbreak of COVID-19, they have spread a considerable share of stories about the virus; while the same actors re-directed their efforts to defending the Kremlin's war crimes in the war in Ukraine as soon as Russia started its full-scale invasion.[11]

Alongside general-use messaging for any given audience, such messaging is often tailored to an audience. This is because the disinformers try to identify the most divisive topics, the biggest information weaknesses where it is easiest to stoke strong emotions, with these topics varying from one audience to another. In the USA, it might be racial tensions,[12] which would not be so effective in many Central and Eastern European countries, where one typically encounters, for example, disinformation targeting migrants and refugees,[13] or anti-LGBT messaging.[14] Many especially neighboring countries have historical grievances that can be abused, the disinformers might exploit various socio-economic tensions within a particular country, target ethnic, national, sexual or other minorities etc. Each weakness/vulnerability is assessed as per the "evil doctor" mechanism.[15]

Similarly, the channels used for the disinformation messaging differ from country to country, and sometimes even between audiences in the same country. Whereas platforms like Facebook and Twitter might appear to be the most important in the English-speaking world, large audiences still depend on a range of information channels like chain emails in Central Europe.[16] The ongoing war in Ukraine has finally brought attention to other P2P channels like Telegram.[17]

Popular narratives along the Western Balkans nations fall along the lines of ethnic and religious divisions and historical grievances. Serbia, seeing itself as the victim of the West due to NATO's bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo War, yearns for justice and the return of Kosovo to its fold as the cradle of Serbian and Orthodox heritage and culture. The complex division of Bosnia and Herzegovina among the three main ethnic groups hinders any decision regarding ethnicity and religion as each of the three leaders holds veto power over any Bosnia and Herzegovina matters. The narrative of establishing "Greater Albania" resurfaces in political discussions in Kosovo every now and then, adding to Serbia's bitterness concerning the region. Another layer of complexity builds on the tradition of historical revisionism and the tendency of interpreting the past in a way that is more favorable to one group than another.[18]

Emotional narratives are a powerful tool in region, with both the Kremlin and domestic actors using them for their advantage. Political discourse in the region is often flavored with strong statements accusing one another of aiming to destroy significant cultural heritage[19] or advancing one's political goals by using divisive rhetoric.[20]

The Western Balkans, where masculinity is traditionally favored and closely linked to state-building[21], is also an area for the Kremlin to amplify its anti-LGBT messaging, aimed at further diminishing the EU's core values.

An effective tool for the Kremlin to spread its views in a local language in the region is the Serbian-language news channel *Sputnik Serbia*. The channel's establishment coincides with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.[22] From a regional base in Belgrade, the Russian state-run *Sputnik News* can spread effective anti-Western sentiment across the Slavic-language population in the Western Balkans. Within Serbia, the primary hub of Russian disinformation in the region, Kremlin narratives are often amplified in local nationalist publications.[23]

Sputnik Serbia is an incredibly well-connected outlet in the whole region whose content is shared across news platforms in the Western Balkans. This content repeats the common narratives of Russian disinformation, portraying the EU and NATO as both internally weak as well as imperialist powers wishing

to extend their influence in the region. These narratives take advantage of the local nationalistic, ethnic and religious tensions, and often accuse the West and other Balkan nations of being anti-Serb. [24]

How can we tackle the problem?

Toolkits like the UK government's RESIST handbook[25] are available to help governments identify and respond to disinformation. Frameworks have been designing regarding what must be done after disinformation is identified and responded to, like the Four Lines of Defense approach, which also detects some gaps in the countermeasures taken by a government.[26] It does not appear we would have a problem answering the question "What can and should be done?". Instead, the biggest obstacle seems to be taking the threat of disinformation sufficiently seriously ("Do enough people in the relevant positions understand how great a threat we are facing?") and deciding that we are willing to do whatever it takes to mitigate this threat ("Do we have the will to act and devote enough resources?").

Major weaknesses enabling foreign disinformation to spread in the Western Balkans generally include: 1) the weaker media ecosystem that frequently uncritically relays Russian disinformation; and 2) domestic actors helping to disseminate foreign disinformation, where both factors lead to: 3) a weakened reaction to the threat from the civil service and government institutions in many countries of the Western Balkans.

A possible way of overcoming this would be to support civil society initiatives aiming to countering the threat and training the local media and civil service about the threat and methods of Russian disinformation. Some grassroots non-governmental organizations[27] are working together closely to correct false narratives and it is recommended to support these efforts. Another vital step is to strengthen provision of quality news and support independent, investigative journalism in the region. Already in place is the BIRN (Balkan Investigative Research Network), a European Commission funded project offering training and research for journalists.[28] Supporting initiatives as such are essential for building resilience to disinformation in the Western Balkans.

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The new player on the block

The effects and limits of Chinese propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe

Ivana Karásková, Association for International Affairs (AMO)

China is a relative newcomer to Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). It only engaged with these countries more substantially in 2012 after it initiated the establishing of a platform for cooperation known as the "16+1" format.[29] Unlike the Russian Federation, China started to build its influence in the region almost from scratch given that it could not rely on previously established links or knowledge of the local political and economic environment. However, in the past decade China has been on a steady learning curve, using a variety of tools to influence the societies of CEE countries.

Beijing's style of operation

Central and Eastern Europe serves as a useful laboratory for studying China's tactics and avenues through which its influence is established in the region. Since the very beginning of its engagement with the CEE countries, China's propaganda goals have seemed to closely follow Beijing's global agenda. First, China focused on weakening local political support for issues it considered to be its core interests, which include the political status and international standing of Taiwan, international support for the democratic protests in Hong Kong or the Tibetan government in exile, or the opposition to China's territorial claims in the South China Sea. Second, China's embassies and other party-state-linked entities have sought to shape a favorable perception of the country, ranging from spreading 'positive energy' about China to fighting narratives depicting it as a violator of human rights and, since 2020, as a country where the novel coronavirus originated.[30]

To achieve its goals, China has used a combination of inducements and punishments.[31] The former includes attempts to nurture political and economic elites via increased diplomatic exchange, high-level visits, (co)sponsored trips of politicians, and stronger party-to-party relations. Promises of economic benefits from the political cooperation with China, such as the offers to establish direct transport links, increase investment, and bring more Chinese tourists to the country, have also been used as tools for shaping the preferences of the political and economic elites. In the process of engagement, China has not only targeted the central government, but also incentivized its provinces, counties, and municipalities to reach out to their counterparts in CEE countries. On this level, China has also offered investment projects and (co)sponsored trips to regional or municipal representatives.[32]

By observing the establishment of contacts in the region since 2012, one may argue that China's style of engagement with CEE countries seems to be following a top-down pattern, focusing initially on contacts with the top echelons of power represented by members of the governing parties and economic elites. China has, however, gradually reached out to opposition parties and public intellectuals such as journalists, academics, or members of civil society

organizations. This pattern differs from the bottom-up model observed by analysts concentrating on Russian information campaigns in Europe.[33] Yet, it could be argued that ever since the Hong Kong protests (see below) China has also experimented with a bottom-up approach, mixing it with its previously preferred top-down model.

Manipulating the discourse

Since China started to pay more attention to the CEE region, Chinese state-linked entities have attempted to spread China-positive narratives through local mainstream and fringe media.[34] Such attempts to manipulate local media discourses include mergers and acquisitions of local media outlets, the inclusion of op-eds written by Chinese ambassadors or heads of the mission for the media, offers of media cooperation via paid supplements, the establishing of cooperation with local news agencies, or journalists' fully sponsored trips to China.[35]

Perhaps the best example of manipulation of the public discourse is the acquisition of media outlets in the Czech Republic. In 2015, when the Chinese company CEFC invested in a Czech media company called Empresa Media the tone of the reporting of the media outlet owned by Empresa Media changed significantly. Before the acquisition, reporting on China consisted of a mix of positive, negative, and neutral contributions; yet, from the day of the acquisition, it started reporting on China exclusively in a positive manner. Another Empresa Media outlet began to cover the Belt and Road Initiative with a frequency unseen in any of the remaining 40 Czech – both public and privately owned – media outlets.[36]

Chinese media has also been active in several CEE countries through local versions of China Radio International (CRI), a state-owned radio which broadcasts in 65 languages, including 8 CEE languages (Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Greek, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian). Through these communication channels, China hopes to reach out to a wider public with its messages with the aim of improving China's image by promoting its unique cultural heritage, language, and traditions (so-called positive energy). Politics-related messages have depicted China as a responsible stakeholder offering globally-inclusive initiatives like the Belt and Road, and 16+1.

China's modus operandi has also shifted from overt to covert, utilizing fringe media outlets, as originally developed and nurtured by Russia.

The Hong Kong protests as a game-changer

A major turning point in China's propaganda tactics has been seen in the CEE region since 2019 in connection to the protests in Hong Kong, which began in response to the introduction of a controversial extradition bill.

First, the greater coordination of Chinese party-linked actors has been observed across the region. During the Hong Kong protests in the summer and autumn of 2019, China's embassies in Central and Eastern Europe approached the local media with offers to publish the country's respective ambassador's op-ed or an interview with the head of the mission containing the official narrative on the protests. Curiously, most of these articles included identical sentences across various languages. Chinese embassies placed op-eds or offered interviews with ambassadors to the media in the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and also in the non-EU states of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.[37] Unlike the previous attempts to manipulate narratives, these articles were published in either fringe media outlets or outlets associated with the local communist parties. In some cases, the mainstream media was also targeted. In Estonia, the publication of an article in the most renowned mainstream daily was facilitated by a PR company engaged by the Chinese embassy.[38] The incident suggests that, by 2019, the traditional media in the region may have grown aware of the risks associated with publishing unedited texts provided by China's embassies.

Second, Chinese state-linked entities switched from defensive narratives, in an attempt to rewrite the discourse towards 'positive news' and using the praise of China by foreign well-known figures to support the legitimacy and image of the Chinese Communist Party at home, to a more offensive discourse.[39] Available research suggests that China used its links with the local media to promote its version of the Hong Kong protests, claiming the protests were incited by foreign powers in an attempt to export a "color revolution."[40] China's modus operandi has also shifted from overt to covert, utilizing fringe media outlets, as originally developed

and nurtured by Russia.[41] The apparent neglect of traditional media may have been caused by editors' unwillingness to publish one-sided information. Central and Eastern EU member states might also have been influenced by the adoption of the EU investment screening mechanism, which has made direct investment in the media sector more difficult for a non-EU investor.

Disinformation enters the scene

With the start of the coronavirus epidemic in Europe in early 2020, the trends that had emerged in connection to the Hong Kong protests only accelerated. China increasingly opted for a more covert approach, making the attribution of the source of the virus more problematic. Instead of being defensive, China gradually employed offensive messaging in CEE, including posts and reposts of disinformation narratives about the 'true' origin of COVID-19.[42] These messages included references to the US biological laboratories (Fort Detrick) claiming that the new coronavirus originated in an American military base in Maryland in the USA.[43] To support these narratives, China's ambassadors and spokespersons of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs began to engage in 'wolf warrior' diplomacy,[44] a new, more assertive style of Chinese diplomacy on social media platforms, often supported by inauthentic accounts to amplify their messaging.[45]

In Central and Eastern Europe, the use of an inauthentic or sponsored audience has been most visible with the local versions of China Radio International (CRI) which have increased the numbers of its followers on Facebook. In some countries like the Czech Republic, a country of 10 million inhabitants, it boasted more than 1 million followers.[46] In comparison, Chińskie Radio Międzynarodowe which operates in the four-times-more-populous Poland had fewer than 325,000 followers.[47] A search of the Czech version of the CRI Facebook followers base revealed that a large portion of the accounts belonged to foreign nationals. CRI also offered to finance its supporters. During the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, it offered EUR 20 to Czech and Slovak students for sending messages supportive of China.[48] CRI also shot "personalized" videos with a Czech-speaking Chinese commentator discussing the epidemic situation in China. China additionally openly hired influencers to promote it,[49] while it at least nurtured, if not directly supported, other influencers offering counternarratives to divert the blame not only regarding COVID-19, but also the human rights abuses in Xinjiang.[50]

Instead of being defensive, China gradually employed offensive messaging in CEE, including posts and reposts of disinformation narratives about the 'true' origin of COVID-19.

The disinformation on the origin of COVID-19 that China has also spread in Central and Eastern Europe received another impetus after the war broke out in Ukraine. In various CEE languages, the local versions of CRI published stories about the supposed presence of biological laboratories in Ukraine, implying the development of biological weapons on Ukrainian soil.[51] This time, the Chinese narratives amplified the accusations already made by the Russian leadership and media.[52]

In the EU and NATO member states in CEE, the Chinese messaging on the war in Ukraine have mostly been outsourced from the local Chinese embassies to party-state media such as Xinhua and CRI. It has largely targeted the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, with a lower intensity of messaging in the Baltic states and in Hungary. The narratives have focused on the USA and NATO, which are blamed as the main culprits for Russia's 'pre-emptive' invasion of Ukraine. China, on the other hand, is portrayed as a peace-loving country, respecting international organizations such as the United Nations, and adhering to the principles enshrined in the UN Charter. Both the EU and Russia are depicted as victims of US imperialism. Russia, according to the Chinese messaging, is a casualty which was forced to attack Ukraine to guard itself against the USA. The true victim, Ukraine, has largely been downplayed in China's messaging. Yet, China did not repeat Russia's narrative concerning the alleged neo-Nazism in Ukraine.[53]

Conclusion

In the past decade when China has started to pay more attention to Central and Eastern Europe, China's narratives supporting anti-Western sentiments revolving around the partnership with the USA and opposition to NATO have made their way into CEE discourses. China's tactics have shifted from concentrating on mainstream media to a preference for fringe media outlets and social media. It has also undergone a qualitative change, moving from the mere spread of positive energy about China, including the promotion of the culture, traditions, and nature in China, to increasingly spreading political messages.

The cases of COVID-19-related messaging and narratives regarding the war in Ukraine targeting CEE countries reveal that most of the content for the region is based on mere translations of the Chinese originals. The Chinese content has thus so far failed to become localized for the CEE audience and hence might not be particularly effective. However, China seems to be on a learning curve. It has started to employ artificial intelligence (bots, trolls, etc.) in its influence campaigns. If this process is matched with the localization of its narratives, China may become more effective in future information operations targeting the CEE countries. Moreover, China may continue to synergize its influence operations with its other activities, such as using the local Chinese diaspora, influencers, its ties to academia and CSOs, the cultivation of elites, etc., making information operations harder to identify and neutralize. Overall, as the US–China and EU–China relations deteriorate, it is likely that in the future China will intensify its campaigns to disrupt what it sees as the West's dominance in the mainstream narratives.

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The well oiled disinformation machine

Examining the evolution of disinformation tactics and narratives in the Western Balkans

Darko Brkan, ZaštoNe

The aggression in Ukraine has taken disinformation and propaganda to a whole new level. Even before the invasion, numerous disinformation narratives were circling around in the global information and media space. Following the invasion, the amount, reach, and severity of the disinformation have grown exponentially. SEE Check[54], a network of disinformation-debunking web content from five countries of the Western Balkan region, has been fact-checking numerous invasion-related items of disinformation appearing in regional media and on social networks. After conducted around 170 debunking analyses, the SEE Check's regional newsrooms have flagged around 600 articles issued by media outlets in the region[55].

This article touches on the media landscape in the region, examines the tools and tactics used, and describes the key disinformation narratives linked to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Our observations as fact-checkers show that the region has a well-established disinformation 'machine' that includes media and social media outlets churning out narratives in a consistent manner. Certain of these narratives, as they relate to the war in Ukraine, are new, yet several others date years back. The intensity of these disinformation operations and evolution of new tactics also indicates that we are truly in an information war. Since we do not expect this to abate anytime soon, continuing with our work as fact-checkers, enhancing the cooperation of the region, and acting more broadly becomes so much more important.

Who is responsible for the disinformation in the Western Balkans?

Any effort to understand the media and disinformation (global and local) landscape when it comes to Russia's invasion of Ukraine must start by going back at least several years. South-East Europe has been at the forefront of all Russian propaganda, disinformation, and media influence operations, but has also been a melting pot in which various foreign actors are vying for influence. This has all created fertile grounds for situations with a global impact, like the invasion of Ukraine.

We first consider some data for the period prior to the invasion. Research published by civil society organization ZaštoNe in April 2019[56] investigated links among media outlets with regard to publishing the same or similar misinformative claims over a 1-year period. The conclusion reached was that only one very strong disinformation hub stands out

Sputnik again acts as the main agent between the Russian official media and the Balkans, where almost all articles are translated into a local language and published.

in the strength of the connections between media outlets within the hub compared to other media groups in the region. This disinformation hub was made up of 29 media outlets, 15 from Serbia and 14 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily from Republika Srpska. The hub contained 5 state-owned media establishments, including 3 agencies (Tanjug, SRNA, Sputnik) and 2 public broadcasters (Radiotelevizija Srbije, Radio Televizija Republike Srpske), along with around 12 commercial media outlets and some 10 or more outlets that may be considered (semi-) anonymous.

The same pattern is clear when we examine the debunked articles connected to the invasion of Ukraine. Of the 20 media outlets that published the most disinformation about the war in Ukraine, 12 come from the hub identified in 2019. Moreover, the patterns of the main driving narratives and use of claims from unverifiable sources lead to the same structures established in past years.

Sputnik again acts as the main agent between the Russian official media and the Balkans, where almost all articles are translated into a local language and published. The content is then picked up by local media among which some public ones, especially RTRS, the public broadcaster in Republika Srpska, appear almost like an official agent of the Russian government, fully aligned with all reports and messages coming from Russian official sources.

Practices and tactics over the past 2 years have also led to greater use of social media to spread disinformation. This development emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic. What we are thus seeing now is an increase in the amount and reach of disinformation items being distributed by social media accounts not owned by media outlets. Further, some of the same social media profiles that were very active with respect to the pandemic are today also spreading disinformation about the war in Ukraine. A rise is evident as well in video and photo content, which took off during the pandemic, and is being used in disinformation operations linked to the war in Ukraine.

Tactics and motives of disinformation

Examining the character of disinformation in the region concerning the invasion in Ukraine reveals a substantial amount of pro-Russian, yet also quite some pro-Ukrainian disinformation in circulation. There are obvious and important differences between these two types of propaganda efforts.

The pro-Ukrainian disinformation is mostly stand-alone disinformation, without an overarching narrative, in the majority of cases emerging from individuals as sources (even if some were also covered by official sources after having been published), without a clear distribution network. The chief goal of these items of disinformation is to boost the morale of the Ukrainian side and increase trust in both the military and institutions. These items of disinformation typically include photographs, videos or allegedly successful actions by the Ukrainian military or civilians opposing the Russian forces, together with some examples of reports about celebrities participating in Ukraine's defense[57].

On the other hand, the pro-Russian disinformation is well organized, almost always part of a larger narrative, and uses well-established distribution channels, where the message is centralized and generally comes from official sources or sources seen as connected to official sources. Most of these narratives have also been backed using pundits, 'experts' or even editorial opinion pieces, while others form part of a narrative that sometimes dates back to 2014 or even earlier.

One phenomenon we encountered is the production of disinformation specifically designed to blame the other side for having produced it. Several examples were found of pro-Ukrainian disinformation being produced for it to be reposted by a pro-Ukrainian source along with the claim that the source distributing it initially produced it. One example of this is a series of misinformative posts with scenes from war movies shot in the Balkans presented as if they were part of the conflict in Ukraine[58].

The narratives: chronology, methods, impact

Several overarching disinformation narratives set the tone and character of the propaganda operations in the first two months of the invasion. First, to understand some narratives currently being spread we need to mention certain narratives in the Russia–Ukraine relationship that have surfaced in the past few years, largely since 2014, and the change of government in Ukraine followed by the invasion

of parts of Ukraine. The main narratives then established were that the 2014 happenings in Ukraine amounted to a coup d'état supported or even organized by the USA and NATO, that Crimea had been legally annexed by Russia, that the Ukraine government after 2014 is Nazi, and that USA is running secret bioweapon labs in Ukraine for the purpose of destroying Russians. Alongside some wider narratives about NATO's spread, this shows that the tone and basis for the misinformative narratives was set years before the invasion. Below are the central narratives whose respective role in the media are explained while reporting on the war in Ukraine.

The beginning

The start of the invasion was a disinformation narrative of its own. At least 1 month prior to the invasion, the media began to predict when the invasion would commence. Claims from different sources even proposed particular dates upon which the invasion would start[59]. At the same time, Russia's official comment was that there would be no invasion. This narrative grew stronger with official claims that Ukraine had attacked Russia in its own territory by attacking a Russian Federal Security Service facility, an act then denied by official Ukrainian sources[60]. Raskrinkavanje[61], a fact-checking website from BiH, identified 37 media outlets that showed bias in reporting on this by solely relying on the Russian reporting and not publishing the Ukrainian officials' response. This was just a starting point for various misinformative and propaganda narratives aimed at shifting responsibility for the war away from the Russian side.

Justification for the invasion

The second important narrative, as noted, also requires us to travel years back in order to understand all of its aspects. Several public claims emerged that tried to either justify the invasion or blame its commencement on actors other than Russia, primarily Ukraine. As explained, one of those narratives is obviously blaming Ukraine for the initial provocation/attack that triggered the reaction by Russia. Another very popular narrative is that Russia's military action was to prevent genocide and mass slaughter being implemented or that it was about to be implemented by the Ukrainians[62], and that NATO's presence in Ukraine is the reason for Russia's 'counter-offensive'[63]. However, perhaps the most frequently used narrative as the justification concerns the presence of US biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. Numerous articles and claims appeared on this, including from official sources like Sputnik[64], stating that these biolabs exist in Ukraine. Raskrinkavanje, together with several fact-checking websites from around the world, have debunked those claims on multiple occasions[65]. These narratives have even gone so far as to claim that Russia with its 'special military operation' has prevented NATO from starting the Third World War[66].

Character of war

Another noteworthy misinformative narrative prominent in Russia's propaganda operation is a set of claims about the character of the war. The invasion has repeatedly been called a 'special operation', 'defensive operation', 'limited conflict' or 'counter-offensive' by both official and other sources, generally all pro-Russian. Raskrinkavanje has debunked all these claims on various occasions[67].

Dividing the West

Apart from discrediting Western countries (largely the USA), the disinformation narratives have tried to divide countries in the West and present them as holding opposite positions on different aspects of the conflict or even disagreeing about which actions to take. One example is the claim that France and President Macron are in favor of dialogue, while the other countries are for sanctions[68]. Some of the other claims fitting with this agenda are the claims made about Ukrainians having captured OSCE vehicles and observers[69], or that the EU and the UK have militarily joined the war in Ukraine[70].

Discrediting Volodymyr Zelensky

Volodymyr Zelensky became an instant symbol of Ukrainian resistance and proved himself to be a very devoted and charismatic leader from Day 1 of the invasion. Obviously, this signaled that his image had to be discredited. Thus, different false claims kept piling up and, ultimately, the variety and number of these claims qualifies this effort as a separate disinformative narrative. One of the most repeated narratives claims that he fled to another country or deserted Kyiv[71], made in an effort to not only discredit him but discourage the defense efforts of the population. Other stories included claims such as a woman who died while he was visiting a hospital[72], how he is promoting Nazi symbols[73], or how he is blaming NATO for the war in Ukraine[74].

Ukraine going Balkans

While most information about the invasion of Ukraine generally concerned Ukraine only, several claims and reports connected the situation in Ukraine to the situation in the Balkans. Obviously, this is a logical disinformation tactic since people are always more sensitive to topics they are closer or can better relate to and introducing the Ukraine–Balkans parallel would definitely play a role in generating greater sympathy for particular topics. The

claim that commenced this trend was a series of articles based on a statement made by a politician from BiH, Nermin Nikšić, who claimed that Putin had acknowledged genocide in BiH and that he compared it to the situation in Ukraine[75]. This then continued with several claims like speculations about a possible war in Bosnia[76] or an alleged call to withdraw US troops from Croatia, BiH, and Kosovo[77], and even claims that Kyiv is using the same tactics as Sarajevo did in the 1990s in order to gain sympathy from the West.

What to expect?

Propaganda has always been an important tool in any war since the 20th century and this war is no different. What is different are the tools used for this propaganda and the widespread use of modern communication technology and media. Noting that the set of developed structures for spreading disinformation in the region has existed for a long time, despite counteractions we can expect that its intensity and reach will not go down any time soon given that new structures are also constantly being developed.

With experience of the pandemic, the fact-checking community managed to quickly organize work on this issue while working jointly to improve the region's resilience to disinformation and shed light on the type of organized propaganda operation in the region. Still, more needs to be done, greater cooperation with the media is required, as is the bringing together of other stakeholders, including government institutions and tech companies. While the intensity of the disinformation campaigns is unlikely to abate, it is crucial that our societies become more resilient, with this beginning by working together and adopting a 'whole of society' approach. This challenge is here to stay and we must accordingly evolve to properly address it and mitigate its effects.

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Challenging times ahead

Montenegro in the grip of foreign disinformation

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Foreign perpetrated disinformation is a major challenge for the Western Balkans. While we see a number of actors in the region, the biggest and most sophisticated one is Russia, particularly when it comes to Montenegro. Russia's media-spread propaganda strongly affects the region, especially the traditional environments in which history is sometimes understood naïvely and incorrectly, and usually calculatedly, often by pointing out the traditional, fraternal relations with Russia. The high level of political polarization in the Western Balkan region and political interference in the media provide fertile grounds for harmful disinformation campaigns.

Montenegro is perhaps the leading illustration of how easily Russia's soft power can be converted into a malign influence meddling in internal affairs. This meddling is seen in disinformation campaigns, media narratives, cyber attacks, use of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church as tools of Russian soft power, and support for ultra-right-wing pro-Russian conservative parties.[78]

As Montenegro was finalizing its NATO accession process, which coincided with the parliamentary elections in October 2016, Russia became significantly active and intensified its presence through disinformation campaigns of the Russian media, a coup attempt, and GRU cyber attacks, i.e., its APT28 group. Online operations focused on the creation of fake media websites, bot accounts, and the distribution of propaganda content harmonized with the official state narrative and goals, all of which represent a par excellence example of Russia's modus operandi.[79]

After Montenegro became a NATO member, the campaign did not stop. On the contrary, it became more intense.

Serbian-Russian manuscript

Russia's main ally in the region is Serbia. Therefore, apart from being found in the domestic and pro-Russian media, the Kremlin's propaganda is visible in Serbia-based media. Russia's narratives in the regional countries are only not spread by Sputnik Serbia, but by other online and print media outlets as well. Moscow uses Belgrade in this manner to exert its influence on Montenegro.

Serbia-based media, including Montenegro-based media that are pro-Russian and pro-Serbian, continuously glorify Russia and simultaneously negate all Western values, with events in the United States and the European Union being frequently incorrectly covered. They participate in creating a favorable image of Russian President Vladimir Putin, while presenting Russia as a friend and protector of the country.

These media outlets are deeply involved in the domestic political situation in Montenegro, take sides in internal political strife, and thereby constitute a medium for strengthening Serbian political power while also spreading Russia's global propaganda. Pro-Russian propaganda fueled by Kurir, Alo and other tabloids, labelled by Twitter as media whose editorial policy is directly influenced by the Serbian government, is also read in Montenegro.

The aim of these interventions is to sow division and create discord among the citizens. The narratives involved are well received, particularly in Serbian nationalist circles which have a vested interest in exerting a political influence in Montenegro. Disinformation proliferated especially following the passing in December 2019 of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities and the subsequent religious processions.

Under the Law, religious communities in the state of Montenegro would need to prove property ownership from before 1918, namely, when Montenegro joined the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenians, the predecessor of Yugoslavia.

The pro-Russian Democratic Front and other critics declared it was an attempt to steal Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) shrines and property and promote the Montenegrin Orthodox Church, which is not recognized by other major churches, at the expense of the Serbian Orthodox Church, the dominant church in Montenegro.

At the beginning of 2020, the SOC organized mass protests in all cities of Montenegro following adoption of the Law. From the very beginning, the protests' religious character was combined with a political one. Besides many citizens expressing their dissatisfaction with the adopted law combined with the difficult social situation and corruption putting pressure on all social structures, the protests were attended by opposition political parties, which saw the political potential of the processions. The existence of obvious similarity in the interests of the SOC and the pro-Serbian political parties led to the processions being transformed into a continuous campaign for the parliamentary elections in August of the same year, with the final goal of changing the government in Montenegro.

Adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion was a significant topic in the Russian information space. In an artificially created wave of media disinformation, manipulation, narratives, and distorted reality, already seen patterns were noticed in both the behavior of certain political actors and centers of power and their media logistics tasked with creating a suitable atmosphere and influencing public opinion.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) stated that disinformation regarding adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion has led to growing tensions, with most of the disinformation about it coming from the Serbian media. The EEAS also noted that

Montenegro is perhaps the leading illustration of how easily Russia's soft power can be converted into a malign influence meddling in internal affairs.

sources of false reporting included Serbian media establishments, some of which are state-owned, the Russian media Sputnik in the Serbian language, and several Montenegrin websites[80]

Similar tactics are used in attempts to influence the tourist sector, which is of great importance for the Montenegrin economy. During the 2020 tourist season, Serbian tabloids encouraged the narrative that Montenegro was an unsafe destination, with some bizarre headlines appearing such as *snake caught on Buljarica beach causing chaos and panic or that tourists are largely cancelling their vacations in Montenegro*. This modus operandi is borrowed from the Russian media.[81] Namely, in March 2017 the Russian state media house Rossiya 1 published a short documentary claiming that *Montenegro is dangerous for Russian tourists and that there is a high risk of contracting infectious diseases, but also that the beaches are dirty, that there are minefields and political instability, as well as the arrest of Russian citizens for unknown reasons*.[82]

Russian proxy actors in Serbia and Montenegro were also extremely active during the enthronement of the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church Joanikije in the Montenegrin old royal capital Cetinje in September 2021, an event with considerable security risk. Serbian tabloids were particularly interested in the situation, reporting that the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) was inserting insiders with Serbian insignia, who would attack the police to provoke a reaction. Pro-Russian and pro-Serbian Facebook pages engaged in coordinated influence operations on Facebook.[83]

These are just some examples of the ways in which narratives are being perpetrated from the outside in some cases to disrupt or destabilize or in others to impact the socio-political situation in the country. It is also of concern that there are networks of media outlets, social media accounts and local groups, and individuals which tend to engage with narratives brought in from abroad. According to the GLOBSEC index[84], Montenegro is one of the most vulnerable countries to foreign influence.

This claim is further confirmed by the Media Literacy Index of the Open Society Institute[85], which has for years ranked Albania, BiH, Montenegro, Northern

> **Montenegro needs more efficient cooperation on all levels of society to develop its skills in identifying different forms of political manipulation of society.**

Macedonia, and Serbia at the bottom of the list of 35 countries as the European countries least ready to identify and fight against fake news, which is mainly due to the situation in both the media and education.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine

The fact Russian media do not have a registered editorial office in Montenegro does not reduce the importance and efficiency of Russian propaganda in this area. Information is precisely and consistently harmonized with the official Moscow views through certain websites and TV stations. In Montenegro, the Russian propaganda mission has for years been primarily performed by the websites IN4S, recognized by the US State Department as a pillar of Russia's propaganda ecosystem[86], and Borba. In the current situation of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, these websites regularly publish articles containing disinformation, which glorify Russian power and justify the aggression in Ukraine.

The content placed in these media is full of sensationalism and disinformation and has a direct correlation with the narratives that are placed in Moscow. The Digital Forensic Centre analyzed[87] the deceptive narratives that most often come from Sputnik or RT, and which these websites have widely disseminated. The main and basic postulate of these media reports is that the word aggression or war is not to be mentioned. Pro-Russian media prefer the terms *special military operation* or *crisis* in Ukraine, just like the Russian state leadership and Russian state media call it. Content that glorifies Russia and Vladimir Putin, and puts Ukraine and the West in a negative context, further accusing the West of having pushed Ukraine into the conflict can be found in these media establishments. It insists on Russia's military supremacy to demoralize the Ukrainians, emphasizing their losses or weaknesses, but also points out that the Ukrainians and the government in Kyiv are committing genocide against the population in Donbas. Columnists who write for IN4S and Borba stress the denial of Ukrainian identity and the portrayal of Ukraine as a communist creation, which is similar to asserting that Montenegrin identity was invented by communists and that Montenegro is an artificial creation.[88] However, all activities of the Russian and pro-Russian media have remained unsanctioned and do not receive the necessary attention of the competent institutions in Montenegro – the Ministry of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media along with the Agency for Electronic Communications and Postal Services.

Moreover, the irresponsible behavior and indifferent attitude of members of the 42nd Montenegrin Government in the technical mandate was obvious bearing in mind that they adopted sanctions against Russia (for its military aggression against Ukraine) and its media establishments Sputnik and RT just recently on 8 April, after several delays.

Conclusion

The stalled EU accession process and decrease in US engagement in the region over the last few years, which was due to a range of internal issues, have paved the way and created space for activities regarding the destabilization of Montenegro, delaying the democratization process and undermining European values, which correspond to the global rise of right-wing forces.

Serbia, as its key partner, has allowed Russia to maintain its presence in the region and spread its influence. The political and security synergy of these two countries created the 'Serbian world' construct drawing heavily on the concept of the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which has been accepted by numerous high political and religious actors in Montenegro, the Republic of Srpska, and Serbia.

From the Russian perspective, information warfare is permanent and the tools used for it include all possible means available – from disinformation campaigns, social media, and media misuse to cyberattacks on different states' institutions. Since Russia's abilities and methods to become part of the information confrontation are constantly developing while the consciousness of citizens and political elites in Montenegro concerning Russia's cyber activities in Montenegro is at a very low level of recognition, there is room for undisturbed Russian operations, as evident in the last couple of years. The lack of a clearly defined action plan and response, as a consequence of the inadequate attention paid to this issue by the power structures in Montenegro since 2016, strongly indicates the need for effective action.

Montenegro needs more efficient cooperation on all levels of society to develop its skills in identifying different forms of political manipulation of society.

The development of critical thinking and media literacy are a precondition for the future development of a democratic political culture that should ease the social and political tensions that may lead to incidents. Special attention should be paid to journalists on the national and local level to strengthen their professional skills for identifying and fighting adverse digital phenomena. The Government of Montenegro plays a key role in this process and therefore must take action to preserve the stability, protect democratic principles, and pursue national interests. More efficient and visible education on cybersecurity is vital. The relevant institutions should systematically perform risk analyses of the information environment, identify susceptible populations and infrastructure, and inform the public of potential risks. Further, various levels of society, from civil society, the media and government, need to find a way to collaborate while countering this challenge, one that is without doubt a national security threat to Montenegro.

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Amplifying discord

Disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia

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In both North Macedonia and the Western Balkan region, foreign malign influence through disinformation campaigns comes in waves, depending on the political situation in the region or a specific country there. While the intensity of this flow has varied over the last few years, as has its kind, which targets a range of issues potentially divisive at a given moment, there has been no period in which it has paused.

On the regional level, Serbia remains the main point of origin of many disinformation campaigns aimed at diffusing foreign influence in the region. This is partly because the highly developed Serbian tabloid journalism serves as a model and 'news' content source for clickbait-minded media from all countries in the region, enabling the embedded political disinformation to quickly spread along with the subliminal promotion of a populist, anti-democratic worldview. At the same time, criticism of the Kremlin almost does not exist in Serbian public discourse.[89]

Similar patterns are repeated in social media where conspiracy-theory-minded users serve to amply Kremlin propaganda disseminated by Serbian sources. It is often disguised or paired with compatible narratives (populist, anti-West/NATO/EU, pro-authoritarian, radical right & left, chauvinistic nationalism, Euroscepticism, religious conservativism, anti-vaccination). For instance, Metamorphosis' fact-checking service Truthmeter.mk revealed that the leaders of North Macedonia's anti-vaccine movement have been using the infrastructure of the pro-Russian political party Rodina Makedonija to stage their protests and increase their visibility and social media reach.[90]

Russian media's direct influence on the Western Balkans region

In the Balkans, this kind of influence is combined with the work of demonstrably pro-Russian media and NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) whose numbers have grown in recent years "from tens to hundreds" using "the free content offered by Russian media such as Kremlin-sponsored Sputnik, making it the most cited foreign source in the Serbian press"[91]. *Sputnik*[92] is thus one of the primary channels of Russian influence in Western Balkans media. According to *Stratcom*, thousands of texts have been identified in Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, and BiH, repeating the same narrative that "human rights are under threat", that "the European Union and NATO are under pressure and "they are not united", that "the European Union is not homogeneous", and "Western European countries are weak, corrupt, and incompetent". The most widespread narrative is that the region is a "playground for a clash of interests between East and West", stressing the region's geopolitical importance.

Apart from Sputnik, two kinds of media directly linked to the Russian government are present in the region.

The first is Russia Beyond (formerly Russia Beyond the Headlines), a PR network of websites and newspaper supplements in local languages mostly providing 'positive' contents related to Russian culture, history, or technology, often promoting products of its military industrial complex. Their supplements are published as inserts by some long-established newspapers like the Serbian weeklies *Nedeljnik* and *Geopolitika* or the Macedonian daily *Nova Makedonija*.[93] Numerous other publications have occasionally reprinted their individual articles, including *Politikin Zabavnik*, the most popular all-ages magazine distributed across the whole region. Russia Beyond produces content in 14 languages, and 5 (36%) of

them are South Slavic languages from the Balkans, indicating a particular kind of focus on this region.[94]

The second kind of Russian media present in the Western Balkans are TV channels. Cable TV operators in the region also provide access to the propaganda news channel Russia Today TV (RT) and its sibling RT Documentary. RT Doc shows films about wildlife in Siberia, yet also anti-Ukrainian propaganda with titles like "The Case: Fascism, A History" depicting the Kremlin's perspective on the conflict in the Donbas.

In line with their European Union aspirations, some Balkan countries have blocked RT. Lacking a legal mechanism to impose a ban on TV channels, the Government of North Macedonia issued a recommendation for operators to discontinue broadcasting it. Most cable networks voluntarily complied. Some, like MaxTV of Macedonian Telecom (majority owned by Deutche Telecom via Magjar Telekom) have discontinued RT but continue to broadcast RT Doc. In Kosovo, the Independent Media Commission temporarily withdrew from broadcasting channels originating in the Russian Federation (RT, Russia 24, Planeta RTR).[95]

Economic relations and related propaganda

Surveys in Serbia[96] repeatedly show that a big share of the public there has been persuaded that Russia and China are major friends[97] and a source of investments and donations for the country, while in reality the country receives them from European Union and US sources.[98]

In North Macedonia, politicians have been nurturing[99] or conforming to the perception that Russia has been an important trading partner, investment source, and export destination since at least 2012. These notions have been used as arguments in attempts to prevent the country from joining in the EU sanctions over the war in Ukraine.[100] However, data from the State Statistical Office show that the volume of trade with Russia is just 1.2% compared to 59% with the EU and 10% with the rest of the Western Balkans. Russia holds last place among the country's 20 biggest trading partners.[101]

Russian businesses are concentrated in a small, yet strategic number of sectors – such as banking, energy, metallurgy, and real estate – the energy-dependent region remains vulnerable to Russian pressure. Although such investments may not bring a significant profit to Russia, they provide an opportunity to influence the internal affairs of the countries. Russian oligarchs investing in the region have often been suspected of being involved in corruption[102] with political and religious structures,[103] as well as affairs hindering EU and NATO integration.[104] One investigation by the Special Prosecutor's Office in North Macedonia addressed the issue of the corruption of high government officials that enabled Russia to 'save' EUR 32 million on building a natural gas pipeline which was instead paid for by Macedonian taxpayers.[105]

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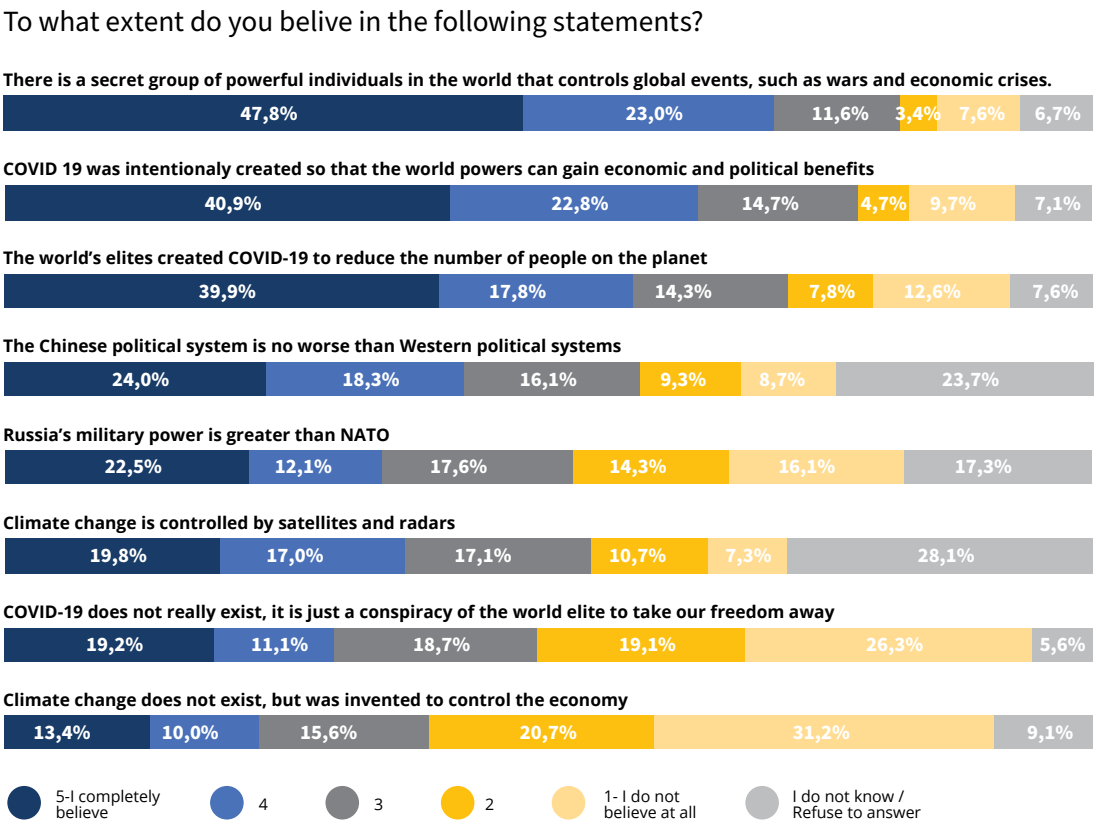
The lack of debate about foreign malign influences increases their power

Mostly due to the stalling of European accession, the Western Balkans have given an opportunity for Russia to gain an economic and political influence in a relatively cost-effective manner. Up until recently, foreign malign influence was not even the subject of public debate in the Balkan countries. Politicians were treating it very diplomatically, cautiously avoiding making any direct accusations against its originators, especially when it comes to Russia.[106]

The low level of media literacy has created an environment where the population is susceptible to conspiracy theories and foreign malign influence. In October 2020, Metamorphosis' CriThink project research showed that alternative narratives, particularly the pandemic-related conspiracy theories, were extremely widespread and "sticky" for Macedonian citizens.[107] A key conclusion of this research was that endemic conspiracy theories should be treated because of the structural factors and that, instead of pathologization, comprehensive programs for addressing those factors can be efficient and effective.[108]

Based on Metamorphosis research commenced during February and March 2022, the graph below shows that approximately half the population in North Macedonia believes in various conspiracy theories about COVID-19, climate change, and that there is a secret group of people that controls global events.



Graph: From the Metamorphosis Foundation national survey conducted in March 2022: Awareness of the presence of foreign influence in North Macedonia.

At the same time, citizens admit to lacking knowledge about the level of Russia's influence in North Macedonia. When asked whether they know of "entities or sources that promote Russian interests and positions in your country", a whopping majority of 54% answered that they did not know, 26% answered "no", while only 16% answered "yes."

Targeting vulnerable groups

Some groups have proven to be more vulnerable to particular kinds of disinformation tailored to exploit some of their inherent features. Such manipulations are paired with content compatible with existing group interests or widespread opinions or biases.

For instance, the influence of official Serbian government propaganda, from the personality cult of President Aleksandar Vučić through to anti-sanction narratives relativizing the Kremlin's responsibility for the war, is very strong on the Serbian ethnic community in North Macedonia[109] and across the region.

Micro-targeting, or adapting to the preconceived properties of different target groups, often employs narratives that contradict each other. But populist propagandists and their audiences (which then act as 'organic' amplifiers) do not seem to bother with the consistency of these claims. The systemic erosion of critical-thinking skills and lack of meaningful public debate in the media, where the form of discussion is reduced to shouting matches, provide an environment in which truth becomes irrelevant and political bias rules. This approach fits well within the populist and pro-authoritarian worldview that has been nurtured in the Balkans for at least three decades by major segments of the political elites and associated media. According to this ideological framework, the only thing that matters is raw power while other considerations like human rights, democracy, and science are seen as rhetorical tools rather than principles.

The propaganda targeting vulnerable groups often aims to improve Russia's image and increase its 'soft power' by presenting it in an overly positive light, including by promoting the personality cult of Vladimir Putin.[110]

Russia's supposed military superiority

For instance, the Metamorphosis research has identified patterns of manipulation concerning the aggression against Ukraine and the might of Russia's military,[111] which has been present in the region during the last decade,[112] initially disseminated by Russian and Serbian publications. Among some

groups, the presenting of Russia's armed forces as superior to those of NATO exploits many of the prejudices and ingrained wishful thinking stemming from the propaganda of the Milošević regime in the 1990s. These anti-West narratives include conspiracy theories about allegedly local favorite/victim nations or religions, reinforcing the ethnic tensions.

Building on this groundwork, narratives of Russia's overwhelming military superiority formed part of the pro-Kremlin propaganda at the start of the invasion in February, and were used as an intimidation tool seeking to lower political support for joining in with the EU's sanctions, promoting the notion that their local Balkan country should remain 'neutral' and not 'mess' with the mighty Russia.

Effectively, this type of populist propaganda does not necessarily intend to persuade its targets to like or love Russia/Putin, nor to accept rational arguments justifying their actions. Its purpose is to promote passivity, to deny agency to citizens and democratic institutions, and to kill off any hope that a better future is possible.[113]

Exploiting health concerns

Another important instance of targeting vulnerable groups is exploiting health concerns by using the previously established trust in Soviet and Russian science/medicine as a means of political influence, especially with regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccines.[114] In the Western Balkans, this has been extended to the promotion of 'alternative' and quack medicine in publications aimed at senior citizens.

While the commercial printed newspaper industry in the Balkans has been in steep decline, a number of health magazines with titles like "Russian Doctor," "Russian Herbalist," and "Russian Encyclopedia of Health" have been increasing since 2015. They originate in Serbia and like newspapers from no other country are exported to newsstands in its neighborhood, from North Macedonia to Slovenia. Moreover, the flagship "Russian Doctor" had expanded to local versions, enhancing its targeted impact. [115]

This approach of using health-related publications targets vulnerable groups that represent a considerable share of the voting body influencing elections, such as retired people, housewives, rural, and less-educated audiences. These audiences have proven to be particularly prone to the spread of manipulation via traditional media, social networks, and word of mouth since they are not typically reached by watchdog and fact-checking initiatives, which hold more traction among young and educated professionals.

Alternative medicine publications are also part of the trend of commercializing disinformation. Many of them act as platforms selling advertisements to local quack doctors praying on the vulnerable. One of them, a former Macedonian photographer living in Serbia who claims he is "The no. 1 physician in the Balkans", pays for 2–3 pages per issue claiming that he cures cancer via Viber consultations with "a Russian colleague". [116]

The propaganda targeting vulnerable groups often aims to improve Russia's image and increase its 'soft power' by presenting it in an overly positive light, including by promoting the personality cult of Vladimir Putin.

A weak media market and armies of trolls

The state of the media market in North Macedonia is dismal, with very few outlets functioning on a purely commercial basis. Commercial media funded by advertising must maintain a level of cooperation with the political centers of power, either directly or indirectly via the advertisers (big companies and marketing agencies). In addition, false social media content is often produced in the pursuit of advertising revenue.

This situation has provided opportunities for investors with a questionable agenda to invest in the media, offering entry points for disinformation campaigns to influence the public discourse during important political processes. For example, investigative journalists from BIRN[117] discovered that over EUR 3.2 million has been invested in the media sector in North Macedonia through several spurious transactions for marketing services. The money was mainly transferred from Slovenian companies owned by the Hungarian Peter Schatz, who owns two media companies in North Macedonia that received money for fictitious advertisements for olive oil and fridge magnets. These transactions were under a money laundering investigation conducted by Macedonian and Slovenian authorities.[118]

It is mainly those media that make up the core of the network of outlets and the armies of trolls most involved in many disinformation campaigns seeking

to discredit the pro-EU government,[119] the Prespa agreement[120], and other EU accession efforts of the country.

In North Macedonia, the troll armies of pro-Kremlin political parties received a boost after then-president Gjorgje Ivanov paid homage to Putin during the May 9 parade in 2015 (which was boycotted by NATO countries and allies in protest over the aggression in Crimea, Ukraine). Operatives from the St. Petersburg Internet Research Agency, the Kremlin's biggest troll factory, visited the country on at least one occasion. One specialist was Anna Bogachova,[121] who was later indicted in the USA for interfering in the 2016 elections. During the following period, the troll armies became more organized, coordinated, and started to use automated systems. Officials from the VMRO-DPMNE political party that ruled the country during the period of state capture confirmed that the party has a troll army engaged in hate speech and online harassment.[122] A number of individuals associated with these troll accounts have entered public life as officials from the openly pro-Kremlin political party Levica (The Left).

The referendum in 2019: Targeted disinformation

In June 2017, after coming into power the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) initiated negotiations with Greece which had been vetoing Macedonia's NATO and EU membership due to the name issue, which led to the 2018 Prespa Agreement, stipulating that the name be changed to North Macedonia. On September 30, 2018, a national consultative referendum was held where the citizens of North Macedonia voted on the question: "Are you in favor of NATO and EU membership by accepting the Agreement between Macedonia and Greece?".

According to the data from the State Electoral Commission, the turnout was 36.91% of the total number of voters; 666,743 voters went to the polls, with 609,813 voting "FOR" and 37,700 voting "against", while 19,221 ballots were invalid. The turnout fell far short of the 50% threshold needed for the results to be binding. It is difficult to assess the extent to which this outcome was due to Russia's interference, but it is important to note that much of the nationalist propaganda and discording narratives related to the referendum was fueled by the Kremlin.

In the months leading up to the referendum, a large number of Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts conducted a massive campaign to boycott the referendum, spreading false information about NATO and the EU, provoking interethnic tensions across the country. A study conducted by the Transatlantic Commission on Election Integrity found that automated 'bot' accounts made up 10% of the conversation about the referendum and mainly promoted the boycott.[123]

Sputnik Serbia also claimed that the name-change referendum in North Macedonia (from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) was dictated by the West. Ignoring its consultative nature, it described the referendum as invalid due to the low turnout, which "showed that Macedonians have something to say and that it is an example of how the West interferes in the internal affairs of other countries." Meanwhile, Russia was presented as a protector of the right of the Macedonian people to independently decide on the new name of their country.

The Russian Embassy and its network of influence

Russia's influence in North Macedonia is conducted directly through the Embassy and its diplomatic infrastructure (consulates, scholarship funds, etc.) and by proxy entities, involving regional and domestic political actors, academic institutions,[124] personalities ("influencers"), civil society organizations, and media entities.[125] The impact of provocative statements given to the Macedonian media and appearing on social networks has been amplified via pro-Kremlin regional media. Moreover, there are political structures in opposition that keep inviting Russian propagandists, such as the imperialist ideologue Aleksandr Dugin, to lecture at public events in the country and through his presence in the media.[126] The Russian geopolitican Leonid Savin, who incited interethnic tensions and spread fear about joining NATO, served as trainer for the proxy political party United Macedonia[127] that was created using Putin's United Russia as a model.[128]

Although the Russian Federation did not publicly officially oppose the EU accession of countries from Eastern and South-East Europe, the situation on the ground is quite different. The Kremlin does not refrain from activating its propaganda infrastructure to stop, derail, or slow down the accession activities whenever possible.

These efforts are generally smaller in scope, size, and intensity, as well as more reserved than those used to stop countries like Montenegro and North Macedonia from becoming NATO members.[129] In 2018, prior to the referendum the Russian ambassador openly threatened the Macedonian voters

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with the lives of their children, stating that in the case of a NATO–Russia conflict their country would be the target of 'retaliatory strikes' if it joined the alliance.[130]

However, when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine led to the EU's sanctions against Russia, Russia declared the EU members and candidates that had joined to be "hostile nations."[131] The 'tradition' of threats continued as the Russian Foreign Ministry and Russian embassy in Skopje announced the making of blacklists of 'Russophobes' who question Russian imperial policy, the newly adopted censorship laws proscribing official terminology about not using the word "war" but a "special military operation" in Ukraine.[132]

As push came to shove upon the start of the invasion, the assets developed by the Russian embassy and its network of various political, business, and academic collaborators over the years were activated to provide platforms to spread the Kremlin's propaganda. For instance, Dimitar Apasiev MP, who had previously promoted spins of the truth while denying the human rights abuses by Russia and China,[133] was instrumental in inviting the Russian ambassador for a photo op at the Parliament[134] at the time when Russia had expressed hostility towards the country.

Bulgaria: The next obstacle for North Macedonia on its path to the EU

Although they signed a friendship agreement in 2017, Bulgaria and North Macedonia have reached a low point in a new dispute that is blocking the EU accession processes. There are ever more hatred-triggering appearances by politicians, public figures, and parties on both sides, which are indicated to be a consequence of Russia's influence in the two countries.

In this sense, Russian officials and other actors have been making provocative statements that add to nationalist outbursts, provoke negative emotions, heat up the atmosphere, and thereby affect the whole context of the Macedonian–Bulgarian dispute. This wave of distrust is fueled by social networks used as a tool to spread and amplify disinformation, sow discord, generate hate, and circulate biased opinions, thus shaping the public discourse in line with Russia's disruptive interests.

Still, we can witness the activation of resources and networks in and around North Macedonia, ones that the Kremlin has worked on establishing for quite some time, capable of "setting the scene" and nudging the internal discontent for whatever reason in the hope that the activities and events that follow will get their own acceleration after the Kremlin's resources have provided the initial push.

Many observers have noted that some Bulgarian political parties or politicians issuing provocative statements[135] and inciting diplomatic scandals have been linked to Russian influence. This group includes the hardline[136] president Rumen Radev, who was labeled pro-Russian during the 2017 elections.[137] Similarities in rhetoric between the Putin regime's historical 'arguments declaring Ukraine "an artificial nation" created by Communists,[138] and similar statements by Bulgarian politicians about Macedonia[139], have also been observed.

Simultaneously, many Macedonian political and media actors who were the loudest in spreading hate towards Bulgaria and Bulgarians, advocating the stance that the EU/West is on their side aiming to destroy the country (in the same way as they advocated the West's complicity in the previous dispute with Greece), have been linked with Russian and Serbian influence. The dispute is used by populist opposition parties to increase distrust and frustration with the government, portraying it as weak and traitorous for engaging in the negotiations. The main populist message is that the dispute will never be resolved, that the negotiations with Bulgaria are hopeless, that North Macedonia will never join the EU, with the conclusion that 'we don't need the EU anyway'.

The means to sow discord include official statements and postings on Twitter accounts of Russia's embassies in Skopje and Sophia, which have often published content about history, including controversial topics that incite an emotional response and attract media attention. Since 2021, the embassy in Skopje has been particularly active with hundreds of tweets per month, as opposed to several for its Sofia counterpart. The troll armies run by the pro-Kremlin political parties in North Macedonia have increased the reach of these tweets.

Pro-Russian propaganda and media resources in North Macedonia and the region, which supply a bigger number of direct, sharp comments and statements by propagandists, influencers, and pro-Kremlin politicians, are much more openly, directly and provocatively encouraging negative feelings towards Bulgaria in the hope of producing follow-up activities on the ground, such as incidents that would deepen the dispute.

Citizens demand protection from disinformation

The legal framework in North Macedonia does not criminalize the spread of disinformation or false content in the media. False content affecting individuals' personal reputation is subject to civil suits under the Defamation Law. For the judiciary to intervene in cases of false advertising and fraud, the individual who has suffered direct financial harm must submit a complaint. This provides a loophole for all the quack doctors using the media and social media. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government announced that it would enforce the Criminal Code stipulations against spreading panic that apply in a state of emergency, but no one was charged. The Criminal Code also contains stipulations against the use of media and information systems for the promotion, justification and negation of war crimes and genocide, but no one has been charged for that either, despite there being multiple cases related to both the Yugoslav wars from the 1990s and Russia's war against Ukraine. The judiciary has tackled just a few of the hundreds of public cases of hate speech in recent years. Such impunity encourages further abuse.

In 2018, the government of the Republic of North Macedonia initiated an Action Plan on Decisive Response Against Spreading Disinformation and Attacks on Democracy[140] (the Action Plan). The Action Plan provided for security and pro-active measures, including the "encouragement of discussions between the media, media associations, and civil society aiming at self-regulation, co-regulation, and defining media standards for Internet portals as recommended by the European Commission and the Council of Europe". However, this Action Plan lacked specific actions for implementing the measures, including a timeframe for realizing them.

The latest research by the Metamorphosis Foundation shows that, unlike the past when disinformation related to foreign malign influences was virtually a taboo media topic, the citizens of North Macedonia show greater awareness of the problem.

A survey of a nationally representative sample conducted in February and March revealed that over 83% of the respondents agreed with the statement "Disinformation is very harmful and must be sanctioned by law" (50.8% strongly agreed and 32.3% mostly agreed). Further, 90.8% of the respondents stated that "the government needs to take measures to deal with disinformation in the media."

Citizens identified politicians (91%), journalists/media (90%), social media (81%), and Internet portals (78%) as the main sources of disinformation. In their opinion, the three most important measures for dealing with disinformation are:

- journalists must adhere to their professional standards and ensure the truthfulness of the content they publish (79%);
- adopting a law against disinformation in the media (74%); and
- continuous reporting about the harmful influence of disinformation and fake news in the media (62%).

The majority of citizens considers Internet portals as being responsible for protecting their readers from disinformation (74%) and approve potential legal amendments that would include them in the media regulation governing the work of other media (TV, radio, print), stipulating legal responsibilities.

Some civil society organizations dealing with democracy-building, the promotion of media pluralism, and enhancement of media literacy advocate initiating an inclusive process involving all stakeholders for developing a national Strategy on the Fight Against Disinformation.

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