Electoral Disinformation in the Western Balkans

Ajdin Becirovic, Delvina Sejdii, Dino Krcic, Kristina Stankovska, Tijana Radulovic, Viona Sejdu

Takeaways for the whole region

The Western Balkans, marked by complex history and geopolitics, faces a grave challenge – electoral disinformation. False information spreads via social media, distorting public opinion and politics. Tech advancements fuel vast, damaging disinformation campaigns that erode trust, deepen divisions, and obstruct citizen involvement. Polarization, foreign meddling, emotional appeals worsen vulnerability. Despite progress, persistent electoral disinformation threatens hard-won stability and democratic gains. The issue transcends borders, impacting stability, public trust, and democratic values. A comprehensive response demands cooperation, media literacy, independent journalism, accountable social media rules, and real-time disinformation monitoring.

Government, civil society, academia, tech firms must unite. Fostering transparency, accountability, critical thinking builds resilience against disinformation, safeguarding democracy. This collective effort not only secures the Western Balkans but also sets a global precedent. This paper delves deeper into each country's situation.

Albania

Albania has a lot of challenges when it comes to electoral disinformation, especially amid election campaigns, such as in other places mentioned above. The intentional spread of false or misleading information through digital channels has the potential to manipulate public opinion and exert

influence on electoral outcomes. Albania's political arena is characterized by deep polarization, which creates a fertile environment for the proliferation of disinformation. Additionally, limited media literacy and the concentration of media ownership add further complexity to the issue. Various actors, both domestic and foreign, exploit social media and online platforms to disseminate deceptive narratives, exploit societal divisions, and undermine public trust in democratic institutions, contributing to the propagation of electoral disinformation in Albania. The ramifications of such misinformation are significant, eroding trust in democratic processes, exacerbating social divisions, and hindering the development of an informed and engaged citizenry.

To effectively address these challenges, Albania should prioritize:

- To bolster independent journalism, establish effective legislation to hold social media platforms accountable and create multi-stakeholder task forces to swiftly counter disinformation campaigns.
- Addressing electoral disinformation is vital for upholding the integrity of democratic processes and ensuring that citizens are equipped to make well-informed decisions during elections. The presence of a polarized political landscape, foreign influence, regulatory complexities, and reliance on emotional appeals underscores the need for a collaborative and vigilant approach to safeguard Albania's democratic foundations.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

As a country emerging from a violent conflict in the 1990s, tremendous progress has been made in terms of the stability of the state and its institutions, particularly at the state level, from the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces, the Intelligence Agency, and many more. However, tensions appear to be stronger than ever in 2023. The quantity of harmful discourse has progressively increased in recent years, particularly in the last two years. This makes the process of healing and reconciliation for the country and its three ethnicities difficult. The apex of the hostile rhetoric is observed in election campaigns, where certain politicians and political parties use nationalist speech as a form of disinformation. Spreading false rumours about candidates, parties, or election procedures, creating fake social media accounts or websites to communicate inaccurate information, and using divisive narratives to polarize communities are all frequent techniques of electoral misinformation. Electoral misinformation can harm the democratic process. It has the potential to erode public faith in elections, disrupt the political landscape, and result in less informed voters. It may potentially contribute to societal instability or violence in severe circumstances. The only solution to this issue is the implementation of the policy recommendations below with all the ethnicities in the country as it is the only way for maintaining peace and furthering the process of reconciliation in the country and the region in general.

Based on the facts provided, the policy proposals for the issue would be:

- Legislative Mechanisms: Creating strong legislation that particularly addresses election misinformation might be a critical first step. During election seasons, laws should specify and ban the dissemination of misleading information, and sanctions should be placed on persons or institutions engaging in disinformation dissemination.

- Education and media literacy: It's important to encourage individuals to develop their analytical and critical thinking abilities. People may be taught how to assess the reliability of information sources, identify misinformation tactics, and double-check facts through the use of educational programs. In this sense, cooperation between educational

institutions, civil society groups, and media outlets is essential.

- Fact-Checking and Media Cooperation: Supporting independent fact-checking groups and encouraging media collaboration are two ways to counteract misinformation. Fact-checkers are essential in the process of confirming information, refuting untrue assertions, and disseminating accurate information to the general public.

- Grassroots Activities: Grassroots activities play an important role in combating election misinformation by encouraging civic involvement and boosting community awareness.

Kosovo

Since its independence in 2008, Kosovo has been able to establish a functional and ever-improving level of democracy, however, we are far from being safe from misinformation during election periods. Although there are rules set out to safeguard a democratic and fair process, they are not always efficient, since misinformation can take many forms in Kosovo. I would specifically mention the polarized political spectrum, improper levels of media literacy and informal campaigning as the main issues in the information system in Kosovo during elections. With any democracy, political pluralism is key to furthering proper growth and development. However, despite having many political parties, Kosovo has reached a level of polarization that has made pluralism stagnate. During the Covid pandemic, Kosovo went through three governments: the first one, the Kurti I government, was brought down by a vote of no-confidence and was succeeded by the Hoti government. A majority of the population disagreed with this transition. When the constitutional court of Kosovo decided that the Hoti government was established by unconstitutional means, leading to new elections, Kurti was able to win the elections with approximately half of the total vote. Ever since, the political spectrum has been divided into those who support Kurti and the opposition. This polarization has created an environment of deep divide between the two sides and has enabled a stronger fight between those in power and the opposition. Arguments are based on the individuals rather than the policies they try to push. A lack of media literacy in Kosovo exacerbates this issue. Media literacy in Kosovo is greatly affected by the previous issue mentioned. Many media outlets, especially in the age of social networks, prioritize quantity over quality when pushing out news stories and articles, focusing on "clickability" instead of thorough and direct reporting. Many people in these social media circles are quick to share a "scandalous" headline that an outlet has published, often without thoroughly reading the article or even not reading it at all. Lack of media literacy has created an environment where this behavior is considered normal, resulting in misleading article titles that create a false narrative and spread misinformation. The same goes for the spread of outright fake news, where outlets report without any credible sources and are not held accountable to the extent they should be. These factors make it evident that a lack of media literacy leads to a lack of accountability by viewers and readers, creating a vicious cycle of misinformation and poor journalistic conditions, which in turn undermines democratic processes.

As a result of the multifaceted issues that facilitate misinformation in Kosovo, finding a a one-size-fits-all solution is not a possibility.

- Facilitating cultural change: the polarised system solution would be based on cultural change within the electorate which can be achieved by the actors of the political scene opting towards showing a detailed program of governance instead of basing their political campaign and platform towards why the other candidates are not right to lead. It is essential to keep in mind that the people need to vote based on policy and not on the person and informal education in this field, together with efforts by the political actors to keep their agenda oriented towards policies and not petty disputes with opposing parties, could lead to a less toxic information system that does not base itself on smear campaigns.

- Education: Both formal and informal educational systems has to be set in place, to educate people on the importance of free, fair and correct media. Media education will lead to a direct system of accountability where the public will be able to correctly filter out news outlets that promote and push misinformation while also pushing forward outlets that are based on the principle of factuality and correct information. This will result in the return of confidence in the profession of journalism while also ensuring a more dignified work environment for journalists.

Montenegro

Montenegro, like many other countries globally, faces the challenge of disinformation campaigns targeting divisive political and identity issues. Pro-Russian web portals, social networks, and platforms like Telegram have been employed to deceive the public. Anonymous "disposable" portals often emerge during election cycles, indicating the significant impact of disinformation on political discourse. Notably, during the recent parliamentary elections in Montenegro, the absence of disinformation related to identity or religious issues, but rather focusing on topics such as the economy, social policies, crime, corruption, and investments, suggests a correlation worth exploring further. The media landscape in Montenegro is susceptible to manipulation, particularly online portals, due to weak regulation and the prevalence of negative reports on political events. Some media outlets exhibit a pro-Russian and pro-Serbian orientation, disseminating narratives that align with the official positions and policies of Moscow and Belgrade, aiming to influence public opinion. Mainstream tabloids and television from Serbia, in addition to spreading questionable information, often propagate hate speech and denial of Montenegrin identity, culture, and nation. Disinformation narratives in Montenegro primarily exploit ongoing complex events within the country, taking advantage of dysfunctional institutions and increasing polarisation. The post-election periods witness a prevalent narrative suggesting that political processes in Montenegro are controlled by Western embassies and foreign power centres, often carrying anti-NATO and anti-EU connotations. Russian aggression against Ukraine is frequently invoked within this context. Although identity topics were

previously targeted by malicious campaigns, such trends were not evident during the recent parliamentary elections. However, the upcoming census, scheduled for this year or the next, poses a potential topic for disinformation campaigns, both domestically and externally, as it is viewed from an identity and political perspective. The lack of strong institutions, the relativization of foreign interference, and the prevalence of disinformation have created opportunities for foreign and domestic actors to conflict with the principles of liberal democracy and Montenegro's foreign policy. Therefore, Montenegro must strengthen its regulatory frameworks, and portal, enhance its Media Literacy and Education programmes, strengthen cooperation with international partners, encourage self-regulation and accountability among media outlets, and support the development and funding of independent fact-checking organizations.

Recommendations:

- Establish a dedicated self-regulatory media body, battling all the disinformation, including electoral ones.
- Conduct comprehensive research and analysis to understand the specific dynamics of disinformation campaigns in Montenegro, including their sources, dissemination channels, and target audiences.
- Develop a public awareness campaign to educate citizens about the tactics used in disinformation campaigns, highlighting the importance of critical thinking and

responsible information sharing.
- Foster cross-sectoral collaboration by creating platforms for regular dialogue and information exchange among government, media, civil society, and tech companies to address emerging challenges and develop effective strategies.
- Allocate resources to support the implementation of policy measures, including funding for media literacy programs, fact-checking organizations, and the training of journalists and educators.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia, which is located in the Balkans, has been struggling with the issue of electoral disinformation in recent years. Disinformation during election campaigns is the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information to manipulate public opinion and affect electoral outcomes. In the digital age and social media, disinformation has grown in reach and impact, posing significant challenges to democratic integrity and fairness. Throughout its history, North Macedonia has undergone various political transitions, including a name change in 2019 to resolve a long-standing dispute it had with Greece. This has resulted in a political environment that is polarized, which is conducive to the spread of disinformation. Further complicating the issue is North Macedonia's lack of media literacy, training and the concentration of ownership. North Macedonia's electoral disinformation causes are multifaceted. Various actors have an impact on the spread of disinformation during the elections. Those especially include

several political actors, both domestic and foreign, who use digital platforms to spread false narratives, exploit divisions, and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions. Election disinformation has far-reaching consequences. Election misinformation can erode trust in democratic processes, fuel social divisions, and undermine public trust. Furthermore, disinformation has the potential to distort public debates, limit the diversity of viewpoints, and hinder the development of an informed citizenry. Ultimately, election integrity is compromised, casting doubt on elected officials' legitimacy and weakening democratic governance. A range of policy options to help the case include media literacy programs amongst the citizens, removing censorship, supporting independent journalism and enhancing media regulations.

Based on the analysis that was conducted, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Enact legislation that holds social media platforms accountable for disseminating false or misleading information during elections, imposing appropriate penalties for non-compliance.
- Establish a multi-stakeholder task force consisting of government, civil society, academia, and technology companies to monitor and respond to disinformation campaigns in real time.
- Allocate funding and resources to support independent media organizations and promote investigative journalism, with a specific focus on fact-checking political claims and exposing disinformation tactics.

Serbia

According to various studies, the majority of Serbs have increasingly negative views of Serbia's integration into the West, while the popularity of Russia and China is high. Serbian citizens see Russia and China as the country's 'best friends', while more than half do not support Serbia's EU membership bid. Most respondents (40%) perceive Russia as Serbia's best friend, followed by China (16%)[1].Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese sources have been involved in the dissemination of disinformation. As stated in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation[2], the Balkan region is of great geostrategic importance for Moscow, due to historical and cultural ties, as well as its role as a potential economic hub linked to Western and Central Europe. In this respect, sharing what is perceived as similar ethnic and religious origins with Russia, with its size and global position, Russia sees Serbia as a key pillar of its interests in the Western Balkans. The Kremlin's support for Serbia's cause in Kosovo and Russia's rejection of Kosovo's independence has been the cornerstone of Russia's positive image and strong political leverage in Serbia in its most recent history. Traditional pro-Russian and pan-Slavic attitudes in Serbia have been strengthened by targeted pro-Russian media campaigns and the socio-political activism of pro-Russian groups in Serbia. The strong Rusophile base in Serbia is enabling the penetration of Russian information and

---

[1] Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing
https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/many-faces-of-serbian-foreign-policy-public-opinion-and-geopolitical-balancing/
[2] Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation
https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/asset_publisher/CptICkB6BZ29/content/id/122186

disinformation narratives either directly or through pro-Russian media outlets (which often happen to be pro-governmental concerning the Serbian executive too). Such outlets have promoted the Russian version of world events through different means, e.g. providing free Russian media content, emphasizing perceived Russian strengths or denouncing perceived Western weaknesses, appealing to Serbian nationalist feelings, etc. Russian disinformation has been masterfully used in Serbia to sow distrust of the EU and NATO by distorting Western political messages, inspiring conspiracy theories about the true intent of Euro-Atlantic institutions and providing counterarguments to the key points behind the support for Euro-Atlantic integration.[3] Beyond that, however, many citizens of Serbian simply lack accurate information about Serbia's historical ties, bilateral assistance, exchange programs, and partnerships in various sectors, with the West. Consequently, the media landscape in Serbia is bipolar: pro- and anti-regime. State-controlled national frequency broadcasters alleged corruption in national media-regulatory agencies, disinformation and non-stop political campaigns are what differentiates the Republic of Serbia from other Western societies. This is why Serbia doesn't have as much electoral disinformation per se, but the situation is more challenging – Serbian citizens live in a society of continuous disinformation and political campaigns, so when the elections come – it is practically already decided. For example, a pro-NATO candidate has lost the elections race before it's even started. This is how Russia (and China) secure their control over Serbian

foreign and internal policies, officials and other cultivated political assets.

The possible solutions are twofold:

- Building resilience to the disinformation: media education of citizens, media literacy subjects in schools, regulatory changes, inter-agency counter disinformation task forces, funding, independent media outlets and civil society organizations.
- Deterrence: legislative changes, criminalizing intentional spread of disinformation, changes in criminal procedural law.

Conclusion

To conclude, in all countries of the Western Balkans urgent action is needed against electoral disinformation. The countries must unite to tackle the multifaceted challenges posed by disinformation campaigns. This involves robust media literacy programs, supporting independent journalism, enacting effective laws, and forming multi-stakeholder task forces to enhance resilience. Collaboration between governments, civil society, academia, and technology firms can swiftly monitor and counter disinformation. Upholding transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making is vital for democratic integrity. Concerted efforts are essential to overcome disinformation, strengthening democratic foundations for citizens and the international community.

---

[3] Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/59979

YATA ALBANIA

AMO.CZ

YATA ALBANIA

CEID
CENTRE FOR EURO-ATLANTIC
INTEGRATION AND DEMOCRACY

Instytut
Europy Środkowej
Institute of Central Europe

ATLANTIC COUNCIL
OF MONTENEGRO

FSI

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS

KIPRED | KOSOVAR INSTITUTE FOR POLICY
RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Atlantski Savet Srbije

Enhancing Regional Cooperation to Combat Disinformation in the Western Balkans

Authors: *Arber Thaci, Lek Grubi, Marlena Ivanović, Deborah Mucolli, Tamara Bajčić, and Kerim Sefer*

Rising Threat: Disinformation and Regional Instability in the Western Balkans

The proliferation of disinformation in the Western Balkans has become a pressing issue, largely attributed to the influence of Russian media outlets. These outlets gained prominence during the ongoing conflict in Ukraine and have been attempting to legitimize Russia's military actions in neighboring countries. Apart from Russia Today, which operates in Serbia, we must also acknowledge the role of the Radio and Television of Republika Srpska (RTRS), the public broadcaster of one of Bosnia and Herzegovina's entities. Given President Milorad Dodik's support for Russian President Vladimir Putin, RTRS is propagating a different narrative, mirroring Russia Today's mission of justifying Russian actions. This has led to condemnation from Bosnian journalists and associations, citing violations of journalistic ethics.

In July 2023, President Dodik signed controversial changes into law that effectively allowed Republika Srpska to disregard decisions made by the international envoy for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Christian Schmidt. This move

has escalated tensions, with Dodik seeking support for secessionist aspirations, leading to protests along the entity lines. The indictment against Dodik and the director of the "RS Official Gazette" further fueled the unrest. Reuters reported that top Bosnian Serb officials dismissed the indictment as politically motivated, deepening the societal divide.

Additionally, public billboards promoting messages like "The border exists" have appeared in Republika Srpska, contributing to a state of fear and instability in the Western Balkans.

Neighboring Montenegro faces similar challenges, with external influences from Russia and Serbia disseminating disinformation, primarily on political fronts. The most dangerous actors employ misinformation to divide Montenegro along religious and ethnic lines, exploiting the vulnerabilities of an already fractured society.

To effectively combat political disinformation in Montenegro and the

Western Balkans as a whole, a multi-pronged approach involving various stakeholders is essential. This article presents proposals for fostering regional cooperation to address the spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans.

Having in mind what is written below, here are some proposals [1] on how to establish a better and more functional regional cooperation in the Western Balkans for tackling the spread of disinformation:

Proposed Solutions:

- **Regional Information Sharing Network**: Establish a Regional Information Sharing Network aimed at exchanging information on disinformation campaigns among its members. Network members could include government agencies, media associations, civil society groups, independent journalists, and communication experts. Offices of the Network could be set up in key cities across the region, facilitating coordination.
- **Fact-Checking Department**: Within the Network, create a dedicated fact-checking department staffed by investigative journalists who can verify information identified as a hybrid threat. Their expertise in understanding contextual complexities is crucial for accurate fact-checking.
- **Collaboration with Governments**: Engage with governments in the region, even in challenging political climates, to seek support for the Network's mission. Collaborative successes should be shared among Network members to inspire similar initiatives.

- **Media Literacy Programs**: Develop and implement media literacy programs targeting students, particularly those studying communication and journalism. Collaboration with universities offering communication studies can help introduce relevant coursework and organize summer schools on media literacy.
- **Cross-Border Collaboration**: Encourage cooperation among media outlets across borders within the Network. Facilitate the exchange of information and investigative findings to enhance understanding of shared threats.
- **Digital Media Regulation**: Collaborate with journalist associations to propose digital media regulations that address disinformation without limiting digital access. Seek feedback and support from governments, universities, and civil society organizations.
- **International Partnerships**: Explore partnerships with organizations like NATO, the European Union, and the United Nations with similar disinformation mitigation programs. Seek their support and participation in the Network's initiatives.
- **Civil Society Awareness Campaigns**: Educate and prepare civil society to recognize disinformation by involving them in awareness campaigns. Citizen journalism can be a powerful tool against hybrid threats.

Conclusion:

The establishment of a Regional Information Sharing Network offers numerous opportunities for the Western

Balkans, including fact-checking, academic collaboration, and governmental engagement. Given the heightened focus on global security, ensuring regional stability and security is imperative. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine serves as a stark reminder of the importance of preparedness for hybrid threats that can affect regions beyond Europe.

Through this Network, members can exchange information effectively, enhancing their understanding of regional priorities and potential hybrid threats. It is essential to prioritize regional security and stability and work collectively to achieve the Network's outlined goals.

Resources

- Radio Slobodna Evropa (2023), "Diskusija u Podgorici: Kampanja dezinformacija je opasnost po crnogorske izbore."
- Digitalni Forenzički Centar (2023), "Pet godina Digitalnog forenzičkog centra – posvećenost odbrani demokratskih vrijednosti."
- Radio Slobodna Evropa (2023), "Dodik Signs Controversial Law Blocking of Decisions by International Envoy to Bosnia."
- Federal News Agency (2023), "Protests in support of Dodik at four different locations in inter-entity lines in RS."
- N1 English (2023), "BiH Court confirms indictment against RS president Milorad Dodik."
- Reuters (2023), "Bosnian Serbs Dismiss Indictment Against Dodik Politically motivated."
- European Journalists (2023), "Republika Srpska, BiH: Defamation must not be criminalized."

Media Literacy in Education – A Western Balkans Perspective

Omar Memišević, Vasilija Perović, Goran Shibakovski, Viola Kastrati, Jonas Kepi

Media literacy, as an academic field, has been subject to several capacity-building projects in the Western Balkans, funded by a wide array of civil society organizations, as well as government-funded projects. The context of media literacy in formal education in each of the countries in the Western Balkans has not been adequately explored and remains a contested niche between the non-formal education facilitators and institutional policy-makers.

According to the 2022 Media Literacy Index published by the Open Society Institute – Sofia, a Bulgarian NGO working on governance, the EU integration process, and minority rights, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia are placed at 37th, 38th, 39th, and 40th place respectively, out of 41 countries, while Serbia and Montenegro rank at 32nd and 35th place respectively. The Index ranks countries according to the clusters based on PISA scores, press freedoms, etc. When comparing the same piece of research over the years, there is a clear tendency for the countries to rank worst from year to year, which is in line with the yearly Freedom House Reports, which rank countries based on their political and democratic freedoms. When comparing the two indexes, the correlation between political freedoms, participation in democratic processes, and media literacy is evident. The aim of this policy brief is to advocate for a solution for the two challenges mentioned above by offering viable solutions for them and producing results in the mid-term.

Media Literacy as an educational tool in Albania[1]

Several initiatives have been undertaken to integrate media literacy into the curriculum of Albanian schools. The inclusion of media literacy as a standalone subject or as part of

---

[1] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/piloting-media-and-information-literacy-formal-education-albania-first-phase-finalized

existing subjects such as language arts or social studies provides students with the necessary tools to understand and critically engage with media content.

So far, there have been governmental and civil society moves towards providing teachers with the necessary training and resources to effectively teach media literacy, as well as to increase media literacy prevalence in teachers. These included workshops, seminars, and professional development programs with the aim of enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills in media literacy education.

In order to fully implement the policies at hand, facilitate the exchange of expertise and resources enriching the learning experience for students and promote media literacy, partnerships between schools and media organizations, as well as non-governmental organizations, were necessary. Despite all the efforts, limited time allocated to media literacy within the curriculum and the need for further training of teachers in specialized media education methods hinder the full realization of its potential impact.

Media literacy as an educational tool in BiH[2]

Given BiH post-conflict society, media literacy equips individuals with the tools to recognize and challenge media biases, stereotypes, and hate speech, promoting intercultural understanding and tolerance, being further fostered by the rapid growth of digital media platforms that has led to the proliferation of fake news and disinformation.

There have been pushes to incorporate media literacy into the national curriculum[3]. The Ministry of Civil Affairs of BiH has lobbied for the introduction of media literacy components within subjects such as social studies, language arts, and information technology, and for a more pro-active approach in teachers' education and professional development, with varying degrees of success. Teacher training programs have been initiated to equip educators with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively teach media literacy concepts. Additionally, resources such as textbooks, online platforms, and educational materials are being developed to support teachers in delivering media literacy

---

[2] https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/bosnia-and-herzegovina-media-and-information-literacy-for-human-rights-and-more-democracy

[3] https://fpn.unsa.ba/b/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Medijska-pismenost-u-obrazovnom-sistemu-Bosne-i-Hercegovine-formalno-i-neformalno-Antonela-Opacak.pdf

education. Collaborations between CSOs and Education Ministries expose students to real-world media practices, helping them develop critical analysis skills and media production competencies, as well as fostering digital critical thinking.

By integrating media literacy into the country's decentralized curriculum, providing teacher training, and fostering collaborations with media organizations, the country can equip its students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the media landscape with confidence and discernment.

Media Literacy as an educational tool in Kosovo[4]

In an era dominated by information and media, it is crucial for individuals to possess the skills and mindset of media literacy. Media literacy is not merely about consuming information but understanding, analyzing, and critically evaluating it.

Similarly to other countries, Kosovo faces challenges related to media literacy. Various initiatives[5] have been taken to expand the knowledge of media literacy in Kosovo's society. The Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation has taken a few steps toward including media literacy as a

course in some levels of education. It developed curricula for Media Literacy as an elective course in High-Schools, but it is not a mandatory course at all levels of education in Kosovo. The Department of Journalism at the University of Prishtina introduced Media Literacy as an elective course in 2009, yet with questionable outcomes.

In 2016[6], the OSCE Mission in Kosovo started a media literacy initiative aiming at integrating media literacy as a core course in the education system in Kosovo, starting from primary schools up to universities. The OSCE Mission in Kosovo has done multiple activities to further support this initiative. According to the OSCE Chief of Mission, Ambassador Davenport, the main goal is for media literacy to be included as a core course in all levels of education in Kosovo.

Media literacy as an educational tool in Montenegro

Having a look at the practices and projects done up to now, the government and programs supported by several international organizations have made some progress in the last years in closing the digital divide, encouraging the communication system or education in the field of technology usage.

[4] https://en.hive-mind.community/blog/73,the-three-necessary-actions-of-the-ministry-of-education-for-media-literacy-in-kosovo
[5] https://www.dukagjini.com/edukimi-medial-si-lende-obligative-ne-shkolla-nevoje-e-domosdoshme/

[6] https://www.osce.org/mission-in-kosovo/545668

In a survey done on media literacy, some results show the following trends[7]. Up to 54.7% believe that it is necessary that a state always monitors and controls media content online in order to stop disinformation and fake news. 36.9% are not aware of the existence of regulatory bodies. 88.1% state that they have never filed a complaint regarding certain media content.

Within UNESCO and EU-funded project, the Montenegro Media Institute developed guidelines for teachers to foster media literacy skills among pupils in primary schools, as the introduction of media literacy, an elective subject of the primary school curriculum in the 2023/24 school year.[8]

Media literacy as an educational tool in North Macedonia[9]

Media literacy plays a crucial role in recognizing and dealing with disinformation. Higher media literacy leads to better recognition and resistance to disinformation. Media literacy in the Republic of North Macedonia is not normatively defined in the educational system, and it remains an open issue when and how it will be introduced in the country. The legislation covers different aspects of media and information literacy.[10] No subject in education is dedicated only to media literacy. But some parts are studied in several subjects in all years of primary education where media topics are treated from different aspects. Many more elements about the need to introduce media literacy can be found in the strategic documents of the state institutions in the country. Still, here the emphasis is more on information and digital literacy. UNESCO, the European Parliament, and the Council of Europe emphasize the importance of media literacy at all levels of education. One of the models for studying media literacy in primary education is the so-called inter-curricular approach, which means the introduction of media literacy in the mother tongue program, particular aspects in other subjects, and extracurricular activities. This model is applied in Slovenia from preschool to higher education in the educational system.

Media literacy as an educational tool in Serbia[11]

Media literacy and education in that context enable students to discern between credible and unreliable sources of information,

[7] *https://dfcme.me/en/public-opinion-survey-media-literacy-and-the-citizens-of-montenegro/*

[8] https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/nikola-vu%C4%8Devi%C4%87-joins-lets-choose-what-we-watch-campaign

[9] https://respublica-edu-mk.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ranlivost-na-dezinformacii-en.pdf)

[10] https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/unapreduvanje_na_mediumskata_pismenost_izvestaj_final.pdf

[11] https://national-policies.eacea.ec.europa.eu/youthwiki/chapters/serbia/68-media-literacy-and-safe-use-of-new-media

promoting critical thinking. Media literacy empowers students to become active participants in the media landscape rather than passive consumers.

The integration of media literacy in Serbian education faces several challenges, which are not exclusive to Serbia, but are also present in other Western Balkan countries, like limited resources, including outdated technology and a lack of specialized training for teachers, hinder the effective implementation of media literacy programs.

Over the years, there have been several initiatives in Serbia to promote media literacy in education. The Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development has recognized the importance of media literacy and introduced it into the 2012 National education strategy, by limited incorporation of media literacy into Serbian language, Civic education, and several others. Non-governmental organizations, such as the Center for Media Literacy Serbia, have conducted workshops and training programs for educators to enhance their media literacy skills.

General recommendations

- Introduction of media literacy in primary education through the design, planning and realization of a concept for media literacy in information and computer technology subjects with an emphasis on access, analysis and production of media content.

- Update of primary education curricula and inclusion of topics that will encourage critical thinking of media content, especially on social networks where students are most exposed.

- Empowerment of pupils with skills and knowledge of media literacy and using the media to articulate their own interests as active citizens in society.

- Development of policies for continuous training and education in the field of media literacy of teaching staff in primary education.

- Promotion of cooperation between all stakeholders in society with the aim of promoting media literacy in primary education.

- Harmonization of the legislation in the education policy for the development of media literacy in accordance with European standards and recommendations.

Conclusion

The aim of this cross-sectoral initiative, coming from the grassroots of the Western Balkans youth, is to examine and propose innovative solutions and approaches to

media literacy in education, not just for six countries but the region as a whole.

Learning how to critically analyze media provides students with skills they need when entering college or starting their careers. As digital citizens, we must consistently engage with media content thoughtfully and sceptically. We become informed consumers and ethical contributors in an increasingly interconnected world by equipping ourselves with media literacy tools. With repetition and reinforcement over time, students are able to internalize a checklist of skills for effectively negotiating the global media culture in which they will live all of their lives.

By integrating media literacy into education, many obstacles can be overcome simply by pointing out how to determine the difference between the world of media and the reality surrounding us.

Unregistered Media as a Tool of Spreading the Disinformations in the Western Balkans: Case Study on Non-Enlargement

Authors: **Milos Rudovic, Dino Krcic, Donada Rata, Hassan Hasic**

Unveiling the world of disinformation within the Western Balkans

Disinformation and misinformation are global issues, either intentionally or unintentionally, that seek to undermine countries, societies and regions. As traditional media, especially in print, lost popularity and public trust, due to modern technology and habits of the younger generations.

The rise of internet news sites (internet electronic publications) has aggravated this issue, especially through the unique problem of unregistered news sites within the Western Balkans. There are no legal requirements for the online news sources to register as media outlets, as a result allowing the disregard of one's obligations to adhere to professional journalistic standards and ultimately dodge penalties.

Whilst many unregistered news sites maintain a professional standard, others exploit this lack of regulation as a means to spread disinformation and misinformation to influence public opinion for their own interests. Some of these sites are generally recognized disinformation and misinformation sources, even appearing and/or being mentioned within official studies for institutions such as the

European Parliament and prestigious universities like Stanford.

This problem extends to social media accounts that are associated with such publications and even a network of fake profiles that amplify this issue.

As of present, the Western Balkan (WB) countries lack effective and adequate solutions to this issue, highlighting the urgent need to address this complex international problem.

Legal framework

The WB countries share a similar legal framework for electronic publications. Montenegro, for example, has specific laws regulating traditional media but relies on the Law on Media to govern publications online.

The law allows online publications to register in the Media register, disclosing information about founders, company headquarters, and editors-in-chief. Registered online publications can access funding from the Fund for encouraging media pluralism and diversity, yet registration remains optional, not obligatory.

Montenegro is currently amending its Law on Media to address these issues, on top of the majority of state-owned companies financing online publications that are in accordance to their interest. However, in other WB countries, there are no plans to mandate registration for online publications, aligning with their respective national contexts.

Case study of unregistered news sites in Montenegro

In Montenegro, ahead of the October 2016 parliamentary elections, the "Crna Gora news agency" (CGNA) was established. Experts from Stanford University linked this agency to Russia's military intelligence (GRU), while Montenegrin Digital Forensic Center (DFC) associated it with Yvgeny Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency (IRA), which is connected to the Wagner private mercenary army involved in Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Stanford University experts analyzed CGNA's data sets from social networks that were provided by Facebook to the US Senate Intelligence Committee. Facebook attributed "CGNA" data sets to the work of GRU.[1]

The study points out that the "agency" was aimed at "*creating untrue stories and conspiracy theories to cast doubts on the integrity of Montenegro's October 2016 elections and undermine then Prime Minister Milo Dukanović*".[2]

According to the authors of the "Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019" study, the goal

was to reduce the chances of Montenegro joining NATO. However, eight months later, in June 2017, Montenegro became a NATO member.[3]

Analysing the data, they found that GRU operation's:

"*Data sets largely follow an established tactical pattern known as narrative laundering, or information laundering, in which a story is planted or created and then legitimized through repetition or a citation chain across other media entities.*"

This is exactly how the CGNA's article about the alleged European Commission's suspicions of electoral fraud in Montenegro in 2016 reached the Russian state news agency TASS.[4]

CGNA ceased operations in March 2017, with limited success[5] despite numerous social media posts. In contrast, IN4S.me - another unregistered media outlet - holds significant influence, especially among the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian populations in Montenegro and the region. This portal has 48,000 Facebook followers and receives funds from state-owned companies with majority state ownership, including politicians with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian affiliations. IN4S.me is considered one of the biggest spreaders of disinformation in the Western Balkans region.[6]

Third parties (ab)use of unregistered media

---

[1]
https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/prigo%C5%BEin
-crna-gora-lazne-informacije/32480856.html

[2] Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019, Stanford Internet Observatory, DiResta, R. and Grossman, S. https://purl.stanford.edu/cv483mb5313

[3]
https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144647.ht
m

[4] https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-
panorama/3708048

[5] https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/lazne-vijesti-
rusija-wagner/32482517.html

[6] https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-
content/uploads/2022/11/07_Day1_DisinfoacrossEU
_Presentation2_Jelena.pdf

Foreign interferences, in particular from Russia and to some extent China, can be categorized into five categories (but, indeed, not fully exclusive to it):

- **Official government communications** (Kremlin or ministry statement; official Russian social media post; statement or quote by Russian official),
- **State-funded global messaging** (state-funded foreign-facing media, state-funded domestic-facing media, foreign based Russian state-funded media; international Russian socio-cultural institutions),
- **Cultivation of proxy sources** (Russia-aligned outlets with global reach; local language-specific outlets, witting proliferators of Russian narratives; unwitting proliferators of Russian narratives; foreign state narrative amplification),
- **Weaponization of social media** (infiltration of domestic conversations; standing campaigns to undermine faith in institutions; amplification of protests or civil discord),
- **Cyber-enabled disinformation** (hack and release; site capture; cloned websites; forgeries; disruption of official sources or objective media).

This policy paper focuses on the third category - "*Cultivation of proxy sources*", particularly unregistered media. Some individuals and institutions behind these portals benefit directly from association with the Kremlin, while others maintain a veneer of separation from Russia but primarily disseminate pro-Kremlin content. This content, produced and exacerbated by the unregistered media, facilitates the **spread of disinformation and propaganda across entire information ecosystems, and not in isolation**.

Third parties that are (ab)using the so-called "black propaganda"[7] approach have three advantages:

1) Introduction of numerous variations of same false narratives,

2) Plausible deniability (and different stances, because pillars do not appear to be connected),

3) Media multiplier effect - pillars amplify each other,

Serbian media plays a significant role in transmitting Russian propaganda in neighbouring countries, particularly in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (specifically within the Republika Srpska).[8] In Montenegro, the mainstream media maintain a balanced position on the Russian-Ukraine conflict, while officially unregistered portals and Serbian media are the primary sources of Russian Propaganda. In the Republika Srpska (BiH) pro-Russian sentiments can be even more radical than in Serbia itself (30-40 % of the Serbian population estimated to be pro-Russian), reflected in the narratives of local media.

Both Russia and China, despite diverging interests in some aspects, are increasingly collaborating on supplying similar disinformation and propaganda narratives. For example, they have jointly promoted narratives regarding the conflict in Ukraine. China, while not fully endorsing Russia's actions, has amplified Kremlin propaganda and spread false information. The narratives propagated by mainstream and

---

[7] https://www.jstor.org/stable/2086855

[8] https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russian%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf

unregistered (shadow) media in Serbia have reflected this collaboration.

An effective method to combat disinformation and protect democratic values involves a "whole-of-society" approach, as seen in Taiwan during its 2020 presidential elections. In the face of a disinformation campaign by China, Taiwan empowered its citizens to detect, block and debunk fake news, resulting in fair elections. This approach, based on lessons from Taiwan, should be swiftly implemented in all countries to defend against disinformation campaigns and protect democracy.

Consequences of disinformation for the Western Balkans

Since the late '90s, the WBs have been focused on Euro-Atlantic integration, with the EU and NATO as key partners. However, this orientation faces competition from non-Western countries seeking influence in the region, including Russia, China, and Turkey. Euro-skepticism in the region is low and declining, making WBs' enlargement and integration a potential source of stability. Unregistered media and third-party disinformation operating in the region aim to discredit the EU's role, using religious, ethnic, political, and economic factors. This geopolitical competition has significant potential for misinforming the region's citizens.

Disinformation related to non-enlargement includes narratives in unregistered media discrediting EU reforms and policies in the region while promoting Russia and China's investments and focusing on destabilizations in Kosovo's north. The Kremlin's disinformation in Serbian-language media in the WBs often demonizes the US and NATO, portrays the EU as weak and divided, advertises Russian military strength, and amplifies

threat perceptions, myths, and ethnic tensions.

According to the RCC Balkan Barometer, the percentage of citizens who believe EU accession will never happen increased from 22% in 2021 to 28%. These elements contain disinformation aimed at discrediting the EU's presence in the region, given the prolonged integration process compared to other countries. Unregistered media in the region is influenced by non-Western countries, and fake news often originates on social media before being shared by various outlets as official news.

A recent study on fake news by the European Parliament finds that disinformation is an "*endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception.*"[9] The authors claimed that "*foreign actors are not the most prominent culprits*" and that "*most of the people and organizations producing and disseminating disinformation are internal*".[10] A recent study by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) shows that more than 75 % of citizens of WB countries believe in one of the six common COVID-19 conspiracy theories, whereas in Western Europe this number is between one quarter and one-fifth of the population. More than 30 % of WB citizens even believe that Bill Gates is using the pandemic to push a vaccine with a microchip to track people, which could

---

[9] Disinformation in the Western Balkans, December 2020, available at https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html
[10] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 2020, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf

have a negative effect on future vaccinations.[11]

Anti-EU-enlargement narratives are coming because of the dominant external media influence coming from Russia or homegrown unregistered media. For instance, Sputnik Serbia does not seem to focus too much on internal Serbian politics but implements different disinformation campaigns focused at discrediting the EU and raising nationalist tensions.[12] A study "Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans" by the Meta Morphosis in North Macedonia mentioned that at the moment, reforms in the WBs are progressing more slowly than expected and all of that contributes additionally to the "enlargement fatigue" in the EU and simultaneously damages its reputation in the region.[13] As well, it is pointed out that the surveys in the WBs countries show an increase of the number of people who no longer want to join the EU.[14]

And as concluded in the EU paper even if the EU does no longer take enlargement formally off the table, it will be effectively scuttled by a combination of information manipulation and public disaffection, as governments shirk conditionality and citizens cease to believe in a European

future. That, in turn, would shatter the structure of political party systems and economic landscapes geared towards EU integration, causing further dysfunction and dislocation – fertile ground for disinformation.[15]

Conclusions

The challenge of regulating online media is common in WB countries, with minor differences. In particular, the regulatory process has been incredibly slow, exacerbating the problem given the rapid evolution of digital technologies and social media communication channels. Unregistered media outlets have become platforms for sensationalism, unprofessional reporting, public deception and misinformation. This issue is compounded by their often serving as an "extended arm" of numerous officially registered media outlets.

This media and information chaos aligns with the foreign policies of countries such as Russia or even China, as heavily explored in this paper. The impact of this influence is not solely due to favourable media environments but is rooted in historical events, political relationships, and individual actors.

The romanticization of Russia, but in its current role and as a historical "strong player", has not risen accidentally. The portrayal of autocratic leaders like Putin as "strong leaders" standing against the West has resonated with some in the region. This may reflect a long-standing desire for strong autocratic leaders similar to those from socialist regimes such as Josip Broz. Some segments of the population believe that unfavourable political situations and

---

[11] Ibd.

[12] The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, December 2020, available at https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf

[13] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 2020, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf

[14] Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans, April 2023, available at file:///C:/Users/donada/Downloads/geopolitical-analysis-34-final.pdf

[15] Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans, April 2023, available at file:///C:/Users/donada/Downloads/geopolitical-analysis-34-final.pdf

widespread corruption can only be resolved through a "steel fist" approach. This form of thinking transcends political affiliations such as those on the left or right.

Within this context, it's important to note that not all media outlets directly follow hybrid threat matrices. Many are simply susceptible to creating and transmitting dis- and mis-information due to issues such as poor access to reliable sources, unprofessional practices, and journalists motivated by a myriad of pre-existing narratives, often influenced by pro-Russian or Chinese media campaigns.

Also, a significant portion of the population fails to recognise the harmful impacts of pro-Russian and Chinese narratives, which often present an alternative to alliances like NATO. This is driven by factors such as weak media literacy, which has been particularly evident during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited development of media literacy in still transitioning countries, both within the region and globally, is a result of poor policies and a lack of strategic action to address the issue. The decline of traditional media, influenced by political and financial challenges, has also contributed. Lastly, inadequate journalist education, resistance to contemporary trends, and a lack of understanding of hybrid threats and geopolitical dynamics further intensify this issue.

Recommendations

Here are important recommendations for addressing disinformation:

- Accelerate the process of passing the laws on online media, which includes mandatory registration and transparency of ownership, etc., a unified register of all online media and which all relevant stakeholders support;

- Financially support organizations analysing the media landscape to detect unregistered media, especially those known for spreading disinformation;

- To pay particular attention to freeing the central regulatory agencies for communication from political influences, which could be achieved by establishing a general political consensus on the media as one of the main representatives of a democratic society;

- Promote media and media literacy as key components of democratic society development through collaboration between government organizations and domestic/international non-governmental organizations. Emphasize democratic values and media freedoms;

- To encourage cooperation between the government, business, civil sector, tech companies and consumers to raise public awareness of various types of disinformation threats; strengthen capacity to identify and expose disinformation threats;

- To finance and encourage the development of a larger number of "watchdog" and "fact-checking" media organizations to deal with these issue professionally;

- Implement media literacy programs in primary and secondary schools, involving teachers and professors, especially those teaching media- and information-related subjects;

- In addition to developing a media literacy program according to general principles, it is necessary to understand the domestic socio-political reality and, through that prism, approach the importance of the media literacy segment;

- To develop education programs for journalists and highlight the advantages of transparent journalism, which include - for example - the benefits of financing from various EU funds;

- Journalist education programs must include a special segment on the recognition of hybrid threat matrices and the actions of media that are under such influences;

- To initiate the development and popularization of crowdfunding, which would facilitate the popular public support for activities of the media, fact-checking, etc.;

- To develop a program of "*algorithmic literacy*," whereby citizens become familiar with the basic functioning of the social

media platforms through which they are influenced;

- Traditional and registered media must use their resources also for the purpose of media literacy among the population;

Truth in the Age of Disinformation: Investing in Fact-Checking Organizations in the Western Balkans

Authors: Stefan Veljanovski, Mirella Bilalagic, Elizabeta Mrnjačević, Arlis Alikaj

The Disinformation Dilemma in the Western Balkans

Disinformation — verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause public harm — has become a pervasive issue globally, with profound implications on societal trust, public discourse, and democratic processes.[1] In the Western Balkans, a region marked by its intricate sociopolitical fabric, transitional democracies, and history of ethnic tensions, the prevalent and concerning phenomenon of disinformation exposure shapes residents' attitudes towards health, politics, and public safety, irrespective of their specific location.

The spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans, encompassing traditional news, fake websites, and social media, exacerbates divisions and threatens democratic stability in the region. In our digital age, these rapidly spreading false narratives can fuel conflict and disrupt governance. Consequently, prioritizing countermeasures against disinformation is essential for policymakers, civil society, and the international community. This paper aims to present a focused policy framework for the Western Balkans, highlighting solutions that bolster democratic institutions, increase media literacy, and create a healthy information environment. In the context of European integration, mitigating disinformation is not only about preserving trust and accuracy but is vital for safeguarding the region's future and aligning with democratic values.

The Roots and Repercussions of Disinformation in the Western Balkans

The problem of disinformation in the Western Balkans is deep-rooted and far-reaching, impacting many societal and political areas. Amplified by the rise of digital platforms, misleading narratives create a complex web of untruths that exacerbate societal divisions, heighten political tensions, and undermine democracy. The media in the region, often criticized for partisan biases, lack of transparency, and susceptibility to political sway, along with a low level of media literacy, contributes to an environment ripe for the unchecked spread of disinformation.

In Albania, low trust in media due to limited fact verification and underrepresentation of

---

[1]

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf

perspectives fosters disinformation.[2] Outlets often resort to sensationalism and politically motivated false reports to sustain viability, as seen with Prime Minister Edi Rama's implication in false reports.[3] Major outlets like Top Channel, Ora News, JOQ Albania, and Gazeta TemA are conduits for disinformation, and following a 2019 earthquake, the Albanian regulator AKEP temporarily blocked news portal "Jeta osh Qef" for spreading panic.[45] Albanian legal framework provisions indirectly tackle disinformation, but their long-term effectiveness is limited.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's political complexities greatly influence its disinformation challenges, exacerbated by media outlets using false narratives to advance political objectives. Prominent sources include Nezavisne novine, smaller news portals like Novi Horizonti and Cazin Danas, and various Facebook pages.[6] The strong connections between Republika Srpska and Serbia enable media narratives, including those containing disinformation, to transcend national borders. Much of this disinformation revolves around Republika Srpska and tends to be international, featuring campaigns designed to fuel xenophobia, promote anti-Western sentiments, and portray Western Balkan values as contradictory to those of the European Union.[7] Quantitative analysis reveals widespread genocide denial and

conspiracy theories about ethnic groups. As per the Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2022, there were 693 instances of genocide denial identified.[8] The Sarajevo Canton government proposed a law imposing fines for spreading fake news in May 2023.[9]

Kosovo's disinformation landscape focuses on delegitimizing its statehood and destabilizing governance.[10] Main disinformation channels include mainstream media outlets like Klan Kosova and Gazeta Express, and politicians such as Isa Mustafa and Kadri Veseli.[11] Amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kosovo found itself targeted by Russian hybrid warfare, including allegations from high-ranking Russian officials claiming recruitment of mercenaries from Kosovo, along with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for involvement in the Ukraine conflict.[12] In response to this Russian propaganda — largely characterized by creating adverse narratives about Kosovo and its treatment of Serbs — the Kosovo authorities have taken several steps, such as banning Russian-originated media outlets and online platforms known to generate false information about Kosovo.[13]

Montenegro faces external disinformation activities, with major topics encompassing Covid-19, internal politics, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with misleading narratives about Covid-19 causing considerable societal impact, as indicated by low vaccination rates and prevalent

[2] https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/restoring-trust-journalism-albania
[3] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf
[4] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf
[5] https://dosja.al/lajm-i-fundit-rama-mbyll-portalin-e-pare-joq-nuk-askesohet-brenda-shqiperise/
[6] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf
[7] Ibid.

[8] https://srebrenicamemorial.org/en/news/srebrenica-genocide-denial-report-2022/97
[9] https://ti-bih.org/ti-bih-the-new-law-in-sarajevo-canton-is-a-continuation-of-the-attack-on-freedom-of-expression-in-bih/?lang=en
[10] https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf
[11] Ibid.
[12] https://tass.com/world/1406183
[13] https://www.kpm-ks.org/en/lajmi_i_plot/3468

conspiracy theories.[14] Disinformation was also widespread regarding a tragedy in Cetinje, in which 11 people died and six were wounded, sparking false reports that were disseminated not only by domestic media but also by regional outlets.[15] Despite widespread disinformation, legal regulations do not explicitly define 'fake news,' but the Criminal Code includes a provision against 'causing panic.'[16] The government is addressing the problems in its 2022 to 2026 'Media Strategy.'[17]

North Macedonia saw disinformation campaigns influence electoral processes, as seen in its 2018 referendum and 2020 elections. A study published by the Prague Security Studies Institute found that Twitter activity related to the referendum and the elections could be linked to automated accounts or bots.[18] The media in North Macedonia and various experts and academics have also repeatedly depicted France as backing Bulgaria's assimilation policy.[19] Such portrayal, coupled with conflicting messages from the EU and specific member states, has stoked Euroscepticism, deepening inter-ethnic discord and breeding misconceptions about EU stances.[20] The emphasis on past conflicts

and the questioning of EU values add to these negative sentiments, opening doors to alternative solutions and alliances, potentially shifting public sentiment towards other global powers like Russia or China.[21]

In Serbia, a 2022 CRTA report depicted a media landscape rife with propaganda and manipulation, with outlets like Alo and Kurir accounting for over half of all disinformation-containing news, with nationally-covered TV Pink outperforming others in disinformation dissemination.[22] Despite the constitutional provision for freedom of expression, threats to journalists, unclear media ownership, and the state's significant role in the media sector challenge these freedoms.[23] The fear of government retaliation or economic repercussions has prompted self-censorship, deterring media outlets from criticizing the government, as reported by media association representatives.[24] Broadcasts from Russia Today and Sputnik continue despite EU suspensions.[25]

The spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans is a tangible and urgent issue, not just an abstract concern. Without prompt and decisive action, it threatens to further divide societies, destabilize political landscapes, and obstruct progress toward democracy and peace in the region.

---

[14] https://www.cin-cg.me/dezinformacije-i-lazne-vijesti-u-crnoj-gori-epidemija-za-koju-jos-nema-lijeka/
[15] https://www.cin-cg.me/dezinformacije-i-lazne-vijesti-u-crnoj-gori-epidemija-za-koju-jos-nema-lijeka/
[16] Human Rights Action, A statement on the occasion of invoking the provisions related to the criminal offense "Causing panic and disorder" and imprisonment of journalists on that occasion, 13 January 2020. Available at: https://bit.ly/3DjwkVx. Accessed on: 7 October 2021.
[17] https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MONTENEGRO-Summit-for-Democracy-Written-Commitments-English-Accessible-Finale.pdf
[18] https://www.balkancrossroads.com/nm-identity-at-stake-on-twitter
[19] https://meta.mk/en/media-narratives-about-eu-as-a-factor-of-increased-russian-influence-in-north-macedonia/
[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.
[22] https://crta.rs/en/report-mapping-disinformation-in-the-serbian-media/
[23] https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/serbia
[24] Ibid.
[25] https://autonomija.info/dzejms-rubin-ruske-dezinformacije-u-srbiju-i-crnu-goru-stizu-direktno-preko-rt-i-sputnjika/

The Complex Factors of Disinformation

Several factors compound the complex and multifaceted nature of disinformation in the Western Balkans. Understanding these underlying issues is crucial for developing effective strategies to counter the problem.

Factors	Description
Lack of Media Literacy	Low levels of media literacy in the Western Balkans make it easier for disinformation to spread. The 2022 Media Literacy Index ranks Montenegro (35th), Albania (37th), Bosnia and Herzegovina (38th), Kosovo (39th) and North Macedonia (40th) at the bottom among 41 European countries.[26]
Political Polarization	Profound political divisions in the region provide a fertile ground for disinformation, which exploits existing biases to deepen these divides, even when the information is false. Such disinformation campaigns tend to exacerbate societal fault lines, threatening social cohesion and democratic dialogue in the region.
External Influences	Disinformation in the Western Balkans extends beyond a domestic issue, frequently fueled by external actors advancing their geopolitical interests through societal destabilization and erosion of trust in democratic institutions. Instances such as alleged Russian interference and manipulation from other foreign entities intensify the region's disinformation challenge.
Weak Institutions	Weak media and government institutions play a crucial role in the disinformation landscape. They often lack the resources, standards, or independence to provide reliable, balanced reporting or to counter disinformation effectively.

---

[26]

https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/4/534146.pdf

Addressing disinformation in the Western Balkans involves a multi-dimensional approach that acknowledges and tackles these underlying issues. Enhancing media literacy, bridging political divides, mitigating external influences, and strengthening institutions make it possible to create an environment less susceptible to disinformation's deleterious effects.

Potential Strategies for Combating Disinformation

Several potential policy solutions could include:

1. **Enhancing Media Literacy Education**: Implementing comprehensive media literacy programs in schools and through public campaigns can equip citizens with the necessary skills to discern false information from truth. This can involve teaching critical thinking skills, understanding how media works and recognizing the signs of misinformation.

2. **Investing in Journalistic Training:** Training journalists to spot disinformation and to develop specialized skills can aid in producing quality fact-based content. Programs that focus on enhancing journalistic integrity, standards and independence can be beneficial.

3. **Investing in Fact-Checking Organizations**: Fact-checking has been shown to be an effective tool in reducing belief in misinformation and leaving a more enduring mental imprint than false claims, regardless of political affiliation. This

effectiveness has been demonstrated across different countries, cultures, and political environments.[27]

4. **Promoting Transparency in Media Ownership:** The introduction of regulations that demand transparency in media ownership can contribute to combating the influence of disinformation.

5. **Review Legislation on Hate Speech and Disinformation:** The existing legislation pertaining to hate speech and disinformation should undergo review to reflect recent developments, with the review process being evidence-based and involving comprehensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

Prioritizing Fact-Checking as a Key Countermeasure

Addressing the multifaceted problem of disinformation in the Western Balkans requires a well-coordinated strategy that tackles the core issue: the acceptance and spread of false information. Despite ongoing efforts by international organizations and civil sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia to counter disinformation through media literacy training projects, these initiatives often remain fragmented and call for more strategic integration.[28] To ensure a substantial impact, this policy paper strongly advocates for strategic investment in building the capacities of independent, robust, and credible fact-

[27] https://www.news-medical.net/news/20210907/Fact-checking-is-an-effective-tool-to-combat-misinformation-study-shows.aspx

[28] https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html

checking organizations in the region. Entities such as FakeNews Tragač, Faktoje.al, Istinomer, Istinomjer, the Metamorphosis Foundation, Raskrikavanje.rs, Raskrinkavanje.me, Raskrinkavanje.ba, Krypometri, and hibrid.info are already actively working to verify the accuracy of news stories and provide the public with reliable, unbiased information. Each is certified by The International Fact-Checking Network and shares the common goal of increasing transparency and media literacy.[29]

Several of these organizations, including Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, the Metamorphosis Foundation, Truthmeter, and Istinomer, are also part of Facebook's Fact-Checking Programme, a global initiative combating the spread of false news on Facebook and Instagram.[30] This program downgrades the visibility of false-rated articles and provides users with additional context, thereby reducing the circulation of misleading content. Facebook takes more robust action against repeat offenders, limiting their distribution and ability to monetize or advertise on the platform. Additionally, the SEE Check network, which includes Fake News Tragač, Raskrinkavanje.me, Raskrinkavanje.ba, and Raskrikavanje.rs, is a collective effort aiming to enhance media accountability, boost media literacy, combat misinformation, and advocate for improved media ecosystems and journalism standards.[31] By focusing on debunking disinformation, raising public awareness, and sharing knowledge, these organizations aim to create a robust, sustainable response to the pervasive disinformation problem.

To fully leverage their potential, the following strategic actions are necessary:

- Immediate investment is required in organizations combating disinformation, potentially in the form of financial support, capacity-building programs, technology transfers, and international cooperation.
- Fact-checking organizations should be protected from political and other undue influences to maintain their credibility and independence. This may be achieved through stringent regulations, transparency requirements, and external audits.
- The integration of fact-checking efforts with media literacy initiatives can amplify the impact of both. This may involve partnerships with educational institutions to foster critical thinking and media literacy skills among journalists, youth, middle-aged and the elderly.
- Implementing a 'train-the-trainer' approach in a disarming disinformation program can create a robust network of professionals capable of fighting disinformation within their respective countries. This program can combine online and in-person workshops, providing journalism professionals with the essential skills, techniques, and funding to conduct their own disinformation training sessions, workshops, and events.
- Tailoring disinformation fighting efforts to the specific needs and characteristics of Western Balkan countries is crucial, understanding who the most impactful audience would be in each country.

[29] https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories
[30] https://www.wired-gov.net/wg/news.nsf/articles/Four+Western+Balkans+factchecking+organisations+join+Facebooks+platform+again
[31] https://seecheck.org/index.php/about/

Given the urgent need to counter disinformation in the Western Balkans, these strategies provide a comprehensive and potentially impactful approach. Through investment in fact-checking organizations and media literacy initiatives, we align with broader goals of strengthening democratic discourse, fostering informed citizenship, and building resilience.