



RESILIENT JOURNALISM

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA



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Journalists, media experts, and intellectuals from North Macedonia, Germany, Ukraine, Kosovo, and Armenia working together at the International Week of Resilient Journalism in North Macedonia, 2022

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IMPRESSUM

Title: Resilient Journalism Countering Disinformation and Propaganda

Online publication Skopje / Neustadt (Weinstraße) 2023

Publishers: CIVIL (North Macedonia) and Youth4Media / Media Dialogue (Germany)

For the Publishers: Xhabir Deralla (CIVIL) and Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann (Youth4Media / Media Dialogue)

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CIVIL: www.civilmedia.mk, www.drejt.mk, www.civil.today

Media Dialogue: www.mediadialogue.eu

Youth4Media: www.youth4media.eu

INTRODUCTION

Time of action and resilience

Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns are part of the hybrid war throughout Europe, and thus also in North Macedonia. The time has come to take action.

By **Xhabir Deralla**

Propaganda and disinformation are dangerous instruments for destabilization of democratic countries and serve the goals of anti-democratic centers of power and liberal and totalitarian governments. In conditions of the Russian brutal aggression against sovereign and independent Ukraine, the whole range of threats from propaganda and disinformation campaigns has become a reality and an irrefutable fact.

Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns are part of the hybrid war throughout Europe, especially in the Balkan region, including North Macedonia. Their long-standing action has shown how easy it is to undermine democracy and threaten the rule of law, stability and security in democratic societies. Particularly in the circumstances in which the Balkan society is in: it is still suffering from the wounds of the civil wars of the 90s, the deep political, ethnic and religious polarization and tensions, the social instability, poverty and widespread corruption.

Since the start of Russia's full aggression against Ukraine on February 24, 2022, it has become more than obvious

that disinformation and propaganda are one of the weapons of war not only for the needs of the real fronts, but also at the international level. The Russian disinformation and propaganda machinery has been attacking all Western allies for a long time, and especially ahead of the start of the military actions against Ukraine.

North Macedonia has been a target of foreign, mainly Russian propaganda, for more than two decades. Disinformation and propaganda of hatred and division intensified in 2013. This included interfering in the elections when the Macedonian democracy was deeply disputed (2009-2016, but also afterwards, after the fall of Gruevski's authoritarian regime).

There are numerous examples where Russian influence can be noticed, or has been to a great extent in favor of the interests and operations of the Kremlin on the ground. Such are: the "small war" from May 9 to May 10, 2015 in the Kumanovo settlement of Divo Naselje, the attack on the Macedonian Parliament on April 27, 2017 and the extremely complicated consequences, the Referendum for changing the name in September 2018, and the current Prespa process and so on.

In parallel to the brutal Russian aggression against Ukraine, massive propaganda started in the world that included North Macedonia and the region. The propaganda is aimed at the progressive, pro-Western government, civil society and the media. Russia's main goal is to justify the aggression, the destruction and brutal war crimes, and at the same time destabilize the democratic institutions. This gives room for the emergence of anti-Western and anti-NATO structures that threaten the stability of the country.

The Russian and ultra-right propaganda is particularly fierce in the Balkan countries, especially in North Macedonia, as a new NATO member, and recently also with an accelerated EU integration process. The country suffers from deep divisions along ethnic, religious and political lines and has relatively weak and vulnerable institutions. It is an excellent ground for Russian propaganda operations.

Therefore, CIVIL with its German partners, as well as collaborators from Ukraine, has united to strengthen the capacities of the media and civil society to take an important – if not critical – role in dealing with Russian and anti-Western/anti-NATO propaganda in North Macedonia and has set an example for the rest of the Western Balkan region.

One of the main goals of our organization in 2022 was to increase the level of resilience and provide skills to journalists in North Macedonia and the region to counter disinformation and propaganda, through practical training and media production.

This led to cooperation between progressive journalists and media at the national, regional and international level, to effectively counter disinformation and propaganda.

We have many reasons to believe we are successful, but much more work and action remain. We are determined to persist on the front of facts – professionally and with high moral and human values.

The Author is President of CIVIL, and Editor-in-chief of the organization's media platform in Macedonian, Albanian and English

ACCENTS

Dr. Ressmann: Democracy needs self-confidence and self-criticism in countering propaganda



Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann, Head of Media Dialogue (photo by: Samuel Debus)

Several years ago I met Xhabir and became familiar with the work of CIVIL/CIVIL Media. We concluded that the problems with propaganda, but also democracy in North Macedonia are also present in the countries of the Eastern Partnership in the Media Dialogue project. That was the basis for launching a project with the support of the Government of North Rhine-Westphalia”, Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann, Head of the International Media Dialogue project said for Civil Media, on the occasion of the international seminar [“Resilient journalism in countering disinformation and propaganda“](#),

organized by CIVIL in partnership with Youth4Media / Media Dialogue.

“The slogan - Don't feed the flames tell the truth, means a fight against propaganda in a form directed towards telling the truth, whatever it may be, but with double fact-checking, which should bring together students and professional journalists, contribute to education in universities and bring together artists, because they are really important in conveying messages and views. This is an international network from Ukraine, Belarus in Exile, Armenia, Georgia, as well as Moldova. We now have North Macedonia and I think that this combination is excellent for sharing our experiences and showing that, like in Germany, people here too are fighting for democracy and are supported by the youth, media organizations, and that we are truly networking”, says Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann about the Media Dialogue project.

Dr. Ressmann reflected also on the Russian propaganda in Germany, talking about its visible presence, as well as about the political presence of the right-wing populism and extremism related to the Russian propaganda.

“We have influence from the Russian propaganda, in parallel with a series of conspiracies, together with the anti-corona protestors... The Russian propaganda is present in Germany through the right-wing scene, as well as the anti-corona movement; during their protest they went in front of the Russian Embassy and shouted: Putin, help! Although the war in Ukraine caused right-wing parties to be cautious, nonetheless, those connections still exist”, says Dr. Ressmann.

Ressmann stressed that there is a problem also with Russian hackers who are attacking the parliament, the

infrastructure... there is a hidden war in Germany by Russian extremists.

“We need to take advantage of the other side, which means fight for democracy, democratic values, fight for the truth”, concludes Dr. Rössmann, adding that democracy needs self-confidence, not to remain blind, but to be self-critical.

Biljana Jordanovska

VIDEO INTERVIEW LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yeuGsnlzCQc>

REPORT

International seminar “Resilient journalism in countering disinformation and propaganda”, held in North Macedonia

The international seminar “Resilient journalism in countering disinformation and propaganda” is a joint project of CIVIL – Center for Freedom (North Macedonia) and Youth4Media (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany). The project was being carefully prepared for several months, and was implemented in December, 2022. The Government of North Rhine-Westphalia, Dusseldorf, Germany, supported the project.



Resilient Journalism seminar, workshop with Dr. Wolfgang Ressmann, photo by: Samuel Debus

Journalists, media experts, and intellectuals from North Macedonia, Germany, Ukraine, Kosovo, and Armenia worked together to learn from each other, to produce and publicize numerous media pieces on topics relevant to the project.



Resilient Journalism seminar, workshop with Dr. Saso Ordanoski, photo: CIVIL

Furthermore, the implementing organizations promoted an ambitious idea to establish the International Week of Resilient Journalism, to be held in December, every year.

The program of the project was rich and dynamic, and included an intensive training seminar, with over two thirds of the time spent in practical work of the seminar participants.

Dr. Wolfgang Rössman, head of the international “Media Dialogue” project and Lena Kronenbürger, editor of fortytwomagazine from Germany, Katerina Sokolova from the Institute of Journalism in Kyiv, Ukraine, Mkrtych

Tonoyan, multimedia artist from Armenia, Dr. Sasho Ordanoski and Xhabir Deralla from North Macedonia, were all part of the one-week seminar.

The participants from North Macedonia, Germany, Ukraine, Kosovo, and Armenia produced a variety of media contents in text, video and photo formats, published in several media outlets in North Macedonia, and are being made available to regional and international media under the Creative Commons license.



Resilient Journalism seminar, workshop with Xhabir Deralla, photo: Samuel Debus

On December 9, the organization organized a panel discussion where a selection of the media outputs were presented to the public. The event was organized on the occasion of International Human Rights Day, under the slogan

“Disinformation and propaganda violate human rights”. Resist!”

One of the conclusions of the panel discussion included the statement that “Disinformation and propaganda kill”.



Resilient Journalism seminar, workshop with Kateryna Sokolova, photo: CIVIL

Disinformation causes distrust in the institutions, polarization, insecurity, fear, tensions and violence, and has a negative impact on the economy, politics, socio-political life, stability and security of the country.

Corruption is most effectively defended with disinformation and propaganda. On the other hand, the fight for justice is a fight against corruption.

Disinformation and propaganda are the main reason due to which violations of human rights go unpunished. Furthermore, war crimes and genocide are defended with disinformation and propaganda.

Xhabir Deralla from CIVIL and Dr. Wolfgang Rössman, head of the International [“Media Dialogue”](#) project. Kateryna Sokolova from the [Institute of Journalism in](#)

[Kyiv](#), Ukraine, Mkrtich Tonoyan, head of AKOS art center and multimedia artist from Armenia, addressed the public on behalf of the project and their own organizations.



Panel discussion: Resilient Journalism, photo: Samuel Dabus

Just as all other events of CIVIL, the seminar and the events were open for interested citizens, to follow our activities online or in-person. The event was livestreamed on CIVIL's [Facebook](#) page and [Youtube](#) channel.

Biljana Jordanovska

WATCH THESE VIDEOS:

Opening Conference of the International Week for Resilient Journalism

<https://youtu.be/5jGpBs55Q-0>

Resilient Journalism - Project Week in Skopje, North Macedonia

https://youtu.be/_Ic0mw51jI

ACCENTS

Otto Graf, Chargé d'affaires, German Embassy in North Macedonia on Russian propaganda

Deputy Ambassador and Head of the Economic Department at the German Embassy in North Macedonia, Otto Graf, spoke on disinformation and propaganda, the support of the German Embassy for civil society and the media, as well as the perspectives of North Macedonia, and the support of Germany in that process.



Deputy Ambassador of Germany, Otto Graf

We asked Mr. Graf about his opinion on the media situation in the country and how Russian propaganda messages are being placed.

“In North Macedonia, the situation is specific. There are many relatively small media units, especially compared to the size of the country. And even more, people are not only consuming local media, but through the internet they watch TV from all the former Yugoslav countries. That is why the population here is exposed to local media, as well as to a variety of the media in the neighboring countries. This means that an opinion or a view of a situation is not exclusively shaped by local media, but also to a big extent by Serbian media, which are considered to be very entertaining. And for this reason, we also see Serbian, and indirectly by this, also quite a few of Russian views in this country”, Mr. Graf replied.

Germany provides North Macedonia with huge support in many areas, starting with economic ending with defense assistance. The support of the democratic processes is of great importance, and in that sense of civil society and the media.

“We, through our foreign ministry, are supporting quite a few media dialogue projects. This is where we support the situation with the media in this country. As an embassy, we are of course in relatively constant contact with the local media, with the journalists in this country, trying to feed them with the information they need and assist them with specific questions they might have”, Mr. Graf said.

In terms of the Macedonian EU perspectives, Deputy Ambassador Otto Graf said that our country is on the right track, but that much work and political will is needed. He also outlined the importance of changing the Constitution, for that process to continue at an even greater speed.

“I think now that we de-blocked the situation with Bulgaria, North Macedonia is really on track of

negotiating EU membership. Obviously there are a few things to be done. The big thing will be the change of the Constitution that was part of the deal, but I am very confident that this will be managed. Then there are the technical issues, which means that here the ministries have to work through the screening process, to open more of the chapters, to work through the whole list of to do”, Mr. Graf pointed out.

In the context of the European integration process and the reforms that must be implemented, Mr. Graf emphasized the importance of the rule of law and the fight against corruption.

“There is this big issue, and it is the rule of law, fight against corruption. This ultimately will take political will to be solved. It cannot be generated in Brussels, but in Skopje, amongst the political parties. So, at the end of the day, the timeframe is in the hands of Macedonian politics, and the key to entering the EU is also in the hands of the Macedonian government” – said the German diplomat.

Mr. Graf, expressed optimism in regards to the chances of a quick EU integration of our country, but outlined that this requires much work and political will.

“We are optimistic and I am sure that if the will is there, it could be one of the really quick EU accessions, but it will not come by itself, it needs the work and this has to be done” – said Otto Graf.

Dr. Wolfgang Ressman and Xhabir Deralla

VIDEO INTERVIEW LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fYzGJzGoMnE>

ACCENTS

Kateryna Sokolova, Institute of Journalism, Kyiv, Ukraine: There is no Russian journalist whom I can trust

The project team of “Resilient Journalism Countering Disinformation and Propaganda” included Kateryna Sokolova from the Institute of Journalism in Kyiv, Ukraine, who shared her experience and expertise in context of the Russian large-scale invasion against Ukraine, and the tremendous propaganda generated by Kremlin.



Kateryna Sokolova, Institute of Journalism, Kyiv, Ukraine, photo: CIVIL

“I am in Skopje for the first time, and I also visited Gostivar and Tetovo. The people are friendly, and the country can develop a lot in terms of tourism and the economy”, she shared her impressions with CIVIL Media.

After several days spent in the country, she says that propaganda is quite present in North Macedonia and that a way should be figured out, primarily, for the media to share verified and accurate information because the citizens deserve the truth.

“In Donbas, there was a well-organized campaign even before the war began, where people there were constantly told that they are Russians and that they should join the Russian Federation. In the temporary occupied Donbas, people were subjected to fierce brainwashing. They were subjected to that brainwashing for eight years. In general, Russia has created a totalitarian cult”, explains Sokolova, who was telling about the situation in Ukraine.

According to Sokolova, through this seminar, participants learn about the methods and techniques that are used to spread disinformation and propaganda and that this is one of the ways to fight them, with open conversations and discussions so that the citizens can understand these situations.

“The role of journalists is very important in conveying and sharing accurate information. In Ukraine, let’s say, a great part of them report directly from the war zones, but we also have colleagues who have finished their education in our country and now work for Russian media and even spread disinformation”, says Sokolova.

Sokolova also explained details of how Russian journalists work in conjunction with propaganda.

“Dmitry Kiselyov worked in Ukraine. He basically studied society. And then, when the war started in Donbas, he started the brainwashing. He began telling disgusting things about the Ukrainians”, Sokolova revealed.

She also pointed out the claims in Russian media, including on national TV stations as well, that a Ukrainian elderly woman had paid Russian soldiers to rape her. That disinformation had also been broadcasted in occupied areas of Ukraine.

“That is why I have no contact with Russian journalists. There is no Russian journalist whom I can trust”, says Sokolova.

Sonja Taneska

VIDEO INTERVIEW LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mq5JwYIROYM>

ACCENTS

Mkrtich Tonoyan, Akos, Armenia: Art is often borrowed and used for propaganda

Unfortunately, I thought we had this shortage in Armenia, like cultural journalism, but during our international activities, while visiting our partners from other countries, we noticed that this challenge exists everywhere. I would like to highlight that cultural journalism is a very important part in journalism and should be developed everywhere, says Mkrtich Tonoyan, Cultural Manager and Director of NGO AKOS, based in Yerevan, Armenia in an interview with CIVIL Media, on the occasion of the international seminar “Resilient Journalism in Countering Disinformation and Propaganda”, organized by CIVIL in partnership with Youth4Media (Y4M).



Mkrtich Tonoyan, AKOS, Armenia, photo: CIVIL

“Why I started with this... Because, to unfold a question as to what the contribution of art is to propaganda, in a bad or a good way, is that cultural journalism can do better research and tell the wider circle of readers about how things are going. Because there are a lot of confusing sites. For instance, when we see some of the propaganda sites using art, we think that those art pieces were created by that propaganda. But it isn't like that. There are independent art works, and later taken and used for propaganda”.

Tonoyan also addresses the role of art in propaganda in ancient times, and its use in service of the rulers.

“At the beginning, if we go back to ancient times, art itself, as a separate discipline, we can say that it hadn't existed as such. It had always been a tool for power, so kings would glorify their victories and mainly used in their monumental architecture as a storytelling. And we have this as archeological artefacts and as preserved art pieces.

Now, propagandists are looking for a new expression, such as visual art, which has an influence on the audience. The tasks and problems that art sometimes solves can be seen when it is borrowed from propagandists and used for propaganda. This can cause misunderstanding, make us think that it is actually an art contribution to the propaganda. For example, in communism and socialism, art had a political purpose”, stressed Tonoyan.

Diana Tahiri

VIDEO INTERVIEW LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ErJj4XzWZEY>

ACCENTS

Deralla: Lack of trust is a consequence of well-paid propaganda embedded in the media landscape

The media landscape in North Macedonia is rather complicated. I don't think we are an exception from other countries, where the democracy faces quite a few challenges. I would say in the Balkans, in the entire Balkan, more specifically, Western Balkan countries, the media are poor first of all.



Xhabir Deralla, CIVIL, North Macedonia, photo: CIVIL

Journalism as a profession is not popular anymore. There are fewer and fewer students applying for studying journalism. The latest figure, I think, is that not more than 15 students applied for journalistic studies in North Macedonia in the last year, says Xhabir Deralla,

President of CIVIL. The interview was conducted by Kateryna Sokolova of the Institute of Journalism in Kyiv, Ukraine, on the occasion of the international seminar [“Resilient journalism in countering disinformation and propaganda”](#), organized by CIVIL in partnership with Youth4Media (Y4M).

Deralla pointed out that, unfortunately, a large number of media outlets are connected or under the influence of centers of power in politics and the business, but also from foreign centers of power, primarily, Moscow, the Kremlin.

“The media are now connected, or under influence, or controlled also by power centers in the politics and in the business. I would even say in the underground organized crime, there are centers that try to control media as much as possible. So, in North Macedonia in many media, a large portion of the media, the landscape is occupied, controlled, financed by power centers within the country”, says Deralla.

As to the question of whether people in other countries know enough about North Macedonia and what is happening here, Deralla said that if a country like North Macedonia arrives to the cover pages of the Western press, that means that something bad is going on.

“We were on the cover pages in 2001, when there was an armed conflict in the country. Then we were on the Western cover pages also when there was an attack against the Parliament in 2017. Before that, we arrived to the cover pages of the Western press with the huge scandal of wiretapping 26000 citizens of Macedonia by the regime of Gruevski. We were on the cover pages in 2016 when a tiny little town in the central part of the country became famous for hosting a group of producers

of disinformation and propaganda, meddling in the United States elections, on the side of former President Trump.

On the other side, we are also a country that is striving for democracy. We just got the opportunity to start the negotiation process with the EU, which we waited for 17 years to start. And, of course, we were many times a country that showed great hospitality, including the 1999 refugee crisis during the Kosovo war, and also being a country where refugees would arrive from different parts of the world, including the latest war against Ukraine conducted by the Russian Federation. And that's also an opportunity for the Macedonian society, for the Macedonian state to be in the more positive light, let's say in the Western press. Meaning, we are known, at least in Europe, but also much wider", says Deralla.

Deralla considers that the media landscape in North Macedonia is complicated, as a result of journalism losing popularity and the media being poorly-situated.

"Journalism as a profession is not popular anymore. Also, it is an area, a profession in which workers in media are not protected, neither socially, not even their security is guaranteed. Now there are some changes in the law. The parliament just passed a regulation, in which an attack on a journalist means an attack on an official person. But still, there is a long way to see that implemented. Journalists are very, very badly paid, their wages are very low, their social security is not the best in the country, to the contrary, they are somewhere in the lower part of the list of social benefits that they may enjoy", said Deralla.

He added that despite the large number of professionals in their profession, nevertheless, journalists, due to financial implications, face challenges to pay for their daily bread, which makes them subject to control, to

intimidation even, but also to pressure of different types, including social pressure.

“Think tank organizations, NGOs, are taking the courage, I would even say arrogance, to analyze media on a daily basis, and provide all sorts of knowledge, and recommendations on how media should be improved and helped and everything. So, they are picking up most of the attention, while media are still sinking in their well-known problems with the financial and political, and social and security and other types of challenges every day. And, yes, there are researches, there are analyses of the media landscape, of the media conduct, and many of those authors are actually a part of some structures that are threatening the quality and the integrity of journalism in North Macedonia”, said Deralla.

Regarding the daily pressure on journalists, Deralla explains that they are under pressure financially, they are under political pressure, they are under pressure from other media owners and structures that are not really media, but propaganda centers disguised as media or non-governmental organizations

“It’s quite difficult nowadays to produce real media outputs that are providing citizens with relevant information, because the propaganda is so strong, it’s so well-paid and it’s so well-entrenched within the society, in the media landscape, that it’s pretty difficult, to say the least”, says Deralla.

“Donors in the democratic countries should consider a new plan for support of media and democracy in these countries, because it’s abused, because propaganda and criminal and political centers are infiltrated within the most sensitive sectors within societies, and actually are using Western money to promote and to conduct anti-Western

propaganda. And that's something that should be also re-thought, to give it another thought in the centers where the support for democratic processes are being decided and provided.

We need to understand that very long ago, the hybrid warfare started and it's being waged against democracy, against democracy in these countries, also in the West, whilst business centers and political centers were in a romantic, idyllic hug with Putin and with similar characters like Putin. And that's why we see these challenges now also in the European Union countries, where all sorts of far-right groups and terrorist groups are being nurtured or popping up across the continent and where the far-right political parties are gaining more and more power and even gaining government power in some of the countries", says Deralla, answering the question about propaganda and its criminalized side.

Kateryna Sokolova, Institute of Journalism in Kyiv, Ukraine

Text editing: **B. Jordanovska**

Translation into Macedonian: **N. Cvetkovska**

Camera and editing: **Samuel Debus/OK-TV Ludwigshafen**

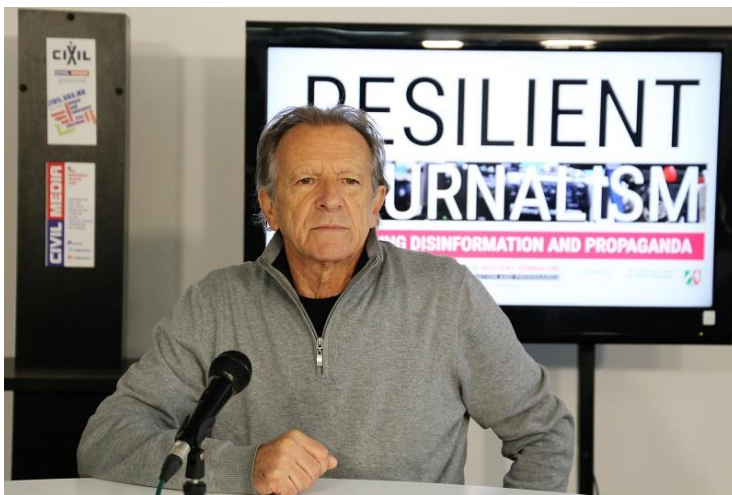
VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T9iy1-1A2Oo>

ACCENTS

Zoran Ivanov, journalist: Major generators of fake news are the headquarters of political parties

The situation with disinformation and propaganda in our country is terrible, very bad. I also judge by the reactions of citizens in open contact programs. They react to something that is unproven, unconfirmed, says journalist Zoran Ivanov in an interview with CIVIL Media.



Zoran Ivanov, journalist and political analyst, photo: CIVIL

“I can conclude (with the right to be wrong) that major generators of fake news, disinformation, and political propaganda are precisely the headquarters of political parties. It is obvious in the information that is put out in

the public from their press conferences and statements, that it is prepared and packaged “, Ivanov said.

He is concerned that institutions, judicial bodies and even Prosecutor’s Office do not react to the disinformation campaigns and accusations.

“Here, in the latest examples, the opposition party had two campaigns that lasted two-three days. They have no evidence, or anything. Something else worries me. That is the fact that neither the institutions, judicial bodies, or the Prosecutor’s Office react to such accusations. If it’s about crimes, dishonest acquisition of property, about accusations of millions of euros that someone has made an abuse, it ends with statements of the spokespersons or with a press conference of a party leader. In that sense, we are an atrophied information society”, said Ivanov.

As to the question who is responsible and what is needed to overcome the challenges we are facing, and that are brought by disinformation and propaganda, he stresses that responsibility lies with the media and editorial offices.

“Journalism is responsible – the media, primarily the editorial offices of the most influential media, of the established media, of the mainstream media, but also of the new portals that stick to themselves. They are the main link in society for unmasking fake news, above all, for unmasking the sources of fake news, because the citizens and I, as consumers who generally inform ourselves by reading headlines, don’t get into the topics and content and take everything for granted”, says Ivanov.

The editorial offices should request additional information, the journalists should investigate, but the appropriate institutions also need to react, underlines Ivanov.

“It is the responsibility of the editorial offices to ask for every information for which there are indications or they suspect that there is no evidence, that it is hanging in the air, that it is a purely political or party accusation, that they need to seek additional information and investigate, to ask in the institutions and so on. But the very institutions need to react to accusations of such major crimes or deviations in society. It means that we are a society and state practically with atrophied institutions, and with that qualification, unfortunately, I will say something also about Macedonian journalism, about the many fake profiles, I am pardoning this time and in this occasion the social networks because there we participate as citizens wanting to write something, but that is why there are citizens and there are institutions”, stressed Ivanov.

Biljana Jordanovska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1ni22jCC1M>

ACCENTS

Fitim Gashi, analyst, Kosovo: Russian propaganda was spreading lies about Kosovo soldiers in Ukraine

Disinformation is a big problem in Kosovo as well, and there is intensive work on campaigns that can prevent the spread of fake news, says Fitim Gashi, a journalist and political analyst from Kosovo. In a conversation with CIVIL Media, on the topic of countering disinformation and propaganda, Gashi explained the situation regarding the danger of fake news in Kosovo.



Fitim Gashi, political analyst, Kosovo, photo: screenshot

“Like in other Western Balkan countries, disinformation is a big problem in Kosovo too. We are trying to counter disinformation through campaigns that will influence and create real narratives. The situation has worsened, particularly after Russia’s aggression against Ukraine,

with the propaganda coming from Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov. They, for example, through their media were spreading fake news that soldiers from Kosovo are fighting in Ukraine, and they publish this in order to create a climate that suits them. So, conferences on disinformation are one of the ways for us to share experiences and counter propaganda”, says Gashi.

According to Gashi, people increasingly more recognize fake news and do not trust portals that do not have an impressum and are with suspicious editorials.

“People have already learned to recognize professional media and do not trust portals that do not have an impressum. These portals create fake news, some for readership and clicks, while some to create agendas they need to carry out. What we managed to do with our partners from “Metamorphosis” and others from the Western Balkans is counter disinformation, debunk it. Also, we make analyses that we put out to the public, so that the true picture about real information in Kosovo is understood”, says Gashi.

Ana Vasilevska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YwCW6UinA8>

ACCENTS

Zoran Bojarovski, media expert: We have political party leaders who are sources of disinformation

In an interview for CIVIL Media, Zoran Bojarovski, a media expert, assesses the situation with disinformation and propaganda as very serious and outlines the emphasized hybrid threats that our country has been facing over the past decade.



Zoran Bojarovski, journalist and media expert, photo: CIVIL

“The situation is very serious, and this is because disinformation, hybrid threats and propaganda in the last decade have become particularly emphasized”, says Bojarovski.

He adds that under the influence of third parties, important topics of our society are attacked, such as the multi-ethnic concept and the issue of internal stability and the democratic system.

“In our country, these are influences from third parties that target very sensitive topics of our society, topics that our society relies on, and those being the multi-ethnic concept of the state, our tendency to be part of the EU and the issue of internal stability and the democratic system. These components attacked by disinformation make our situation very serious, and this is something that requires an appropriate response precisely by those who are most called to defend these sensitive topics in our society from these influences”, adds Bojarovski.

The answers for countering such propaganda, he says, should be sought from among the most affected parties and adds that the institutions have to take such threats seriously and prepare strategies, but says that it is not enough for preventing this.

“The institutions must take this threat most seriously, and the strategies and concepts for countering disinformation at the level of institutions, at the level of the state organization has to be strategically set and strategies have to be prepared, but they are not enough, they have to be implemented, be efficient solutions and see that they give results”, says the journalist.

Bojarovski indicates media literacy as one of the main components in dealing with the spread of disinformation. He says that it is extremely important that the citizens have built a filter to be able to recognize what is accurate and what is inaccurate information and indicates that there has to be greater responsibility among those who should be in the protection of information.

“In our country we have political party leaders who are sources of disinformation, who have been concluded in Brussels and in other international organizations. You have a leader of a political party who initiates serious protests with elements of violence carried out based on disinformation that the Macedonian language is not in the EU negotiating framework. What disinformation attacks is the stability of the system, it is a weapon that attacks the system with the purpose to cause distrust”, says Bojarovski.

He adds that if you have a series of attacks against institutions that raises the question of suspicion, that worm of suspicion among the citizens will start to work, and that causes less participation of citizens in social processes and that can lead to a weak turnout at elections, which leaves room for radical political structures to come to the fore, which are far left or far right, which are sources of totalitarianism.

Biljana Jordanovska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OdXGYIYcH5o>

ACCENTS

**Ljubomir Kostovski, analyst:
Shamelessly, people in charge of
propaganda are invited to TV shows to
spread disinformation**

Situation with disinformation and propaganda country is catastrophic. Propaganda is an integral part of the media. To a great extent, reporting affects the position of political parties in our country, and political parties are always fighting for power, and that brings a lot of money. I have always seen propaganda and journalism through the prism of money. There is more money in electronic media than in the ferrous metallurgy, says Ljubomir Kostovski, analyst, and long-time journalist and editor.



Ljubomir Kostovski, journalist and political analyst, photo: CIVIL

Kostovski stresses that in our country, news are made from one center, as it happens that a leader of a political party appears 7-8 times and gives answers on different topics, which he had said at a press conference answering previously agreed and ordered questions.

He says there are political parties afraid of the media, but there are also such politicians who hold them firmly in their embrace and don't let them go, regardless of whether they are in opposition or in power.

“Television is a very important lever of government, perhaps even the most important. Some party makes it its priority. In debates that we have participated in as journalists, we see that some television stations are not ashamed to bring to a debate a person who is in charge of propaganda, as that person's job. I find this unfitting. They invite the spokesperson of a party to a debate, while this person carries with him a whole bunch of materials, carries two cell phones and constantly receives messages while the debate lasts. These are special elements that violate elementary rules. We leave our cell phones in the dressing room, so that they don't bother us, and also not to constantly receive directions on what to talk about and what to ask”, Kostovski says.

Kostovski adds that little is spoken about the truth, because well-known people appear in debates, who spread political propaganda and disinformation.

“I have attended certain debates to which I was invited, such spokespersons stopped any opportunity for debate even before the recording started, he is already counting the people and says ‘you have brought three people who will be attacking the policy of my party, and I am supposed to be defending it alone’. And he has come with a bunch of materials, with constant connections, and this

is not fitting at all, and the editorials keep doing this”, stressed Kostovski.

He stressed that there is gross violation of political propaganda advertising during election campaigns.

Sonja Taneska

VIDEO LINK:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTBRy3Rf_YM

ACCENTS

Petrit Saracini, media expert: Established media need to be involved in the fight against disinformation and in educating the public

Media expert and president of Institute for Media and Analytics, Petrit Saracini, in an interview with CIVIL Media says that the situation with disinformation and propaganda is worrying.



Petrit Saracini, journalist and media expert, photo: Samuel Debus

We are facing a big surge of disinformation, particularly visible in the online sphere, as well as in some established media houses, Saracini says and points to the Russian Federation as one of the sources of disinformation, as well as Serbia and its sensationalist media that are later conveyed in our country as well.

“Propaganda and disinformation are not a characteristic only for this part for which I talked about, but a characteristic of some political structures and actors too, as well as of some non-professional media outlets in the online sphere that usually are in favor of those political actors”, says Saracini.

The situation creates an environment of polarization, says Saracini, where trust in the institutions and the system is disrupted and citizens see not only the institutions with distrust, but also the media. Furthermore, he adds that the spread of disinformation is a world trend, but that it’s especially noticeable in fragile democracies such as our country.

“We, as a country, are at the bottom level of all measurements that show that in the country there is a really low level of media literacy. The process of full introduction starting from first grade and up to the fourth year of secondary education needs to speed up, namely, for the children, that is the youth to be aware and critically perceive information, that is, not to believe in everything that is served to them”, says Saracini.

He adds that the institutions should be much more transparent, in order to reduce the influence of disinformation.

“If true information is published, it is much more difficult for you to disinform”, he says.

Saracini adds that politicians must be more reserved in their discourse, because this public communication polarization brings no good to anyone.

“You could have some short-term benefit from being radical in your statements and attacking the political opponent, but that legitimizes the form of such

discussion, tomorrow that same political opponent will start using that manner of communication”, says Saracini and adds that politicians must cool down their emotions, because they are pushing citizens into conflict on many grounds, such as interethnic, political, religious and so on.

The journalist outlines that big established media houses have to be involved in the fight against disinformation and notes that they have a disturbed informative function, whereas the educational function is almost absent.

“The job of the media is not just to convey statements of politicians, but to check them and if they are not saying anything that is true or accurate, then the media needs to tell this to the audience”, says Saracini and adds that established media led by the rule to represent both sides, think that they have finished the job.

Biljana Jordanovska

VIDEO LINK:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3_vsmbq7no

ACCENTS

Bojan Kordalov, communicologist: Citizens are victims of disinformation and fake news

Communications specialist specialized in public relations and new media, Bojan Kordalov, says that statistics show that our country is facing a lot of disinformation, and points out that it is extremely important for citizens to be able to recognize disinformation.



Bojan Kordalov, communications specialist, photo: Samuel Debus

“Statistically, we are facing a lot of disinformation, both research and facts say so. We see and follow it every day, but what is most important is for every citizen to be aware that it exists among us and be able to recognize it. Part of the population thinks that it is something terrible, and

another part that it is a tool to silent someone. Fake news harm every one of us, because creators of fake news have their own goal, such as, for example, that Covid doesn't exist. However, the citizens are the victims who believed that they shouldn't get tested or receive therapy", says Kordalov and adds that demystification and inclusion of each individual in this fight is the only success.

As to the question how through action and activities to deal with the challenges that disinformation and propaganda bring about, he says that this topic should be discussed more often and that this can be achieved only if more people are involved in the process through dialogue.

"Once and for all, we need to realize that in a country there are people who think differently, this is something we forget. Here in the most direct jargon that is used in our country, bathed and not bathed, and that is a problem. We shouldn't divide and discriminate ourselves on any basis, but instead we need to find ways, because it concerns our lives. In a war such as the war in Ukraine, you can have a different view as a person, to whom you give support, but as a country we are a NATO member state, we have a strategic goal, because we decide within the framework of the NATO alliance on which side we are on, and if you carry out propaganda with fake news or fall for it, then you are undermining the position of your country", says Kordalov who further goes on to say that an important part of this fight against fake news are the authorities who can help with transparency and digitalization.

"There is no institution giving good, quality and fast services that can be a target of fake news. Here is an example, when you would have an institution issuing a

birth or citizenship certificate in two seconds or by going to the counter, without having to wait a week, as they say, just in case you were born again in the meanwhile, then there would be no fake news that would say that this institution is bad, or not working and so on. On the contrary, when you have a system that doesn't offer the service for the citizens, fake news easily finds the gap and becomes allies of the citizens", says Kordalov.

He adds that the media are heroes who in such a situation fight to tell apart fake from real news and that is something that has to be acknowledged, particularly by the authorities.

"It will contribute to setting where the goal is and where the fight is", says Kordalov who believes that the biggest ally in this fight are the media.

Biljana Jordanovska

VIDEO LINK:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRMM_RTCmM

ACCENTS

Dr. Vesna Poposka, Dean, Vizion University, Gostivar: Propaganda aims to cause collapse of an entire society with no bullet fired

The idea of propaganda and disinformation is to practically erode democratic values and liberal topics on which societies are based on. It practically is to overthrow an entire government or an entire society with an unfired bullet. Therefore, we must not withdraw and we must not give up. We must not stop here, we must take a more strategic approach as a state and as a NATO member, and as an EU candidate, says Dr. Vesna Poposka, Dean of the Faculty of Law at the “Vizion” University in Gostivar, in the interview with [CIVIL Media](#).



Dr. Vesna Poposka, university professor, photo: CIVIL

“The situation with disinformation, unfortunately, I cannot say is getting better and I am not an optimist that something will change for the better soon, on the contrary, I think that it will be one of the key strategic tools for gaining power. As you know, the context of the security environment and of the war have also changed, and the way in which countries fight each other or conquer certain strategic goals, outlined Poposka.

Among else, she said that we have numerous examples of the kind of damage disinformation can cause, the COVID pandemic was the most noticeable example, now in the context of the Russian-Ukrainian war we are again facing the same challenges. But also at home, where according to one study, the biggest problem regarding disinformation or the biggest source of disinformation are the political parties.

According to Poposka, disinformation is entering into the hybrid warfare or the new way of threats. A blatant example is a case from 2020, where due to a falsified letter from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, supposedly due to poor handling of the COVID crisis by a certain country, army forces were drawn.

“Here I would stress, particularly in our context, the influence of so-called influencers and the disloyal competition between media services that has also been registered in the area of free internet media”, said Poposka.

Poposka outlined that journalists have the most difficult job, that is why quality journalism is very important. Information needs to be verified, and services for fact-checking have an important role, as does media literacy, and it is important that we are conscious as citizens, both as an academic community and as a media community.

“I don’t know if we will win that battle, but we must not succumb in the attempts to face this problem, because if we withdraw, we have already lost the battle”, said Poposka.

Nazmi Abdurahmani

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7V04tgpn06Y>

ACCENTS

Darko Brkan, “Why not?” Association, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Fake news spread quickly between countries with language similarity

Fake news spread quickly among countries that have language similarity and disinformation practically spills over from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia and vice versa, says Darko Brkan, researcher and journalist from the “Why Not?” Association from Bosnia and Herzegovina in an interview with CIVIL Media.



Darko Brkan, researcher and journalist, Bosnia and Herzegovina, photo: screenshot

“The situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is similar to the one in the entire region, though its particularity is in that

the country is located somewhat in the center of various geopolitical influences and disinformation, both from the East and the West. Because of the language similarity, of course, information from Bosnia and Herzegovina quickly spreads to Serbia, Croatia, Macedonia and vice versa. That's one level of the problem. Another thing is, for instance, the fact that in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are actors on the ground who don't do this for the purpose of spreading propaganda, but rather to gain money. There are also those who are conditioned by a political or business influence to create disinformation", says he.

According to him, there is strong external influence from actors who spread narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to create local narratives that suit their policies.

"Recognizing fake news depends on the type of audience, age, education, and ultimately from the type of disinformation. Unfortunately, like in the rest of the region, the audience is not sufficiently skilled to recognize fake news, problematic sources and all those problems that we come to", he says.

The problem can be solved only by bringing together: fact checking, education, legal mechanisms and so on.

"We, as a small country with a population of 3.4 million, and cannot solve the problem by ourselves, it should be a regional effort, and a global one certainly, because all global trends, EU legislation and similar have a big influence", he says.

Ana Vasilevska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lrC07GF4Qo>

ACCENTS

ACCENTS

Filip Stojanovski, Director, Metamorphosis: The surge of disinformation has increased after the Russian aggression in Ukraine

Disinformation and propaganda should be treated as part of the broader picture of national security, considers Filip Stojanovski, Director for Partnerships and Resource Development at the “Metamorphosis” Foundation. In his comment for CIVIL Media on the situation with disinformation, he says it’s important to act systematically, including various factors.



Filip Stojanovski, countering disinformation specialist, photo: CIVIL

“When we look at multiple aspects of digital rights, we primarily see information such as national security. Both in the region and broader at the European level, and also

with different research, it has been determined that we truly have a surge of disinformation. It started with a greater intensity after the Russian aggression in Ukraine. It didn't come from one source only, but as can be noticed, there are trends of disinformation that existed previously, and which are linked either to Russian or pro-Russian sources of information in Western countries or by downloading at the national level, taking information that suits certain centers of power", says Stojanovski.

According to Stojanovski, disinformation serves also to confuse the population for the purpose of achieving local political goals.

"We also have so-called cross-border disinformation, that is, spillover of information from one Balkan country to another, as well as other forms of manipulations that not necessarily have to contain lies, but any information in the attempt to provoke feelings, especially negatives feelings, to introduce discord and hatred, and to disrupt the democratic processes and the integration of the region into Europe and NATO, but to also hinder the efforts to help Ukraine. They also serve to make the population passive, to lose trust in the democratic system and to lean towards the option, and towards some political option of dictatorship, of authoritarian rule that Putin too promotes", considers Stojanovski.

As to the question how we can fight disinformation, Stojanovski says that we need to act systematically and have more factors pooled together.

"We have long years of experience in Metamorphosis with fact-checking. It is a particular genre in journalism. Once something has been published, its accuracy is checked and citizens are informed about its reliability. But fact-checking is not enough, it's necessary in a broader

system that includes development of professional journalism, media pluralism, encouraging investigative journalism, affirmation of media literacy, different approaches to increasing the educational level. So, the fight is impossible without systematic action in which all social factors will be involved, not just journalists, not just NGOs, but also institutions, educational institutions, and even the private sector. Because different forms of manipulation, fraud, commercial actions affect us all, it is therefore very important that we all fight against them in a systematic way. At the same time, maintain inclusiveness and human rights, namely, the right to freedom of expression”, he says.

Ana Vasilevska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSFqG3ym4Ew>

ACCENTS

**Elida Zylbeari, Chief Editor, Portlab:
Media education is needed in the fight
against disinformation**

In countering disinformation and propaganda, all stakeholders in society need to be involved, so that an opportunity for manipulation and propaganda does not open. In order to achieve this, we need to consider media education at the earliest age. The problem is not new, and it spreads through media and social networks, says Elida Zylbeari, Chief Editor of the internet media outlet “Portlab” at the “Metamorphosis” Foundation.



Elida Zylbeari, journalist, photo: CIVIL

“In our country, we see a greater problem with the spreading of disinformation when there are various major events, such as referendums, elections, then we see a stronger wave of spreading of disinformation, regardless of whether it has been created in the country or out of the country”, stressed Zulfari.

She further says that the aim of disinformation in the country is to destabilize the state and to create distrust in democracy.

“When in a multi-ethnic society there is distrust, it can be very dangerous and can inflict great harm to our country”, says Zulfari, adding that professional media are in a constant fight with distributors of disinformation and try through their professionalism to manage to distribute accurate information, so that the citizen has the right to receive accurate, verified information.

The fight against disinformation cannot be done by just one actor in society, says Zulfari, stressing that the media are not the only ones that can fight against disinformation.

“To achieve a comprehensive effect, many actors who have their own defined tasks must fight together, and everyone needs to perform their task. As a way of countering disinformation, media education should be provided in schools from the earliest age, in order to achieve a kind of nurturing of critical thinking among young people, who will be able to identify disinformation from an early age, with journalists also respecting journalistic principles. They will be resilient, they will not become a prey to disinformation so as not to be manipulated and deceived”, highlighted Zulfari.

She emphasized transparency as a last element in countering disinformation.

“Whenever the government and the institutions openly give their information, we then avoid the possibility for anyone to manipulate in the absence of facts. They must be available and enable free access to other journalists, and in this way, for all actors to arrive to a society resilient to disinformation”, said Zulfikri.

Nazmi Abdurahmani

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IEYIFTaCnM8>

ACCENTS

Marina Tuneva, university professor: It is dangerous ground when control of disinformation is performed by the government

There is a big influx of disinformation that creates a wrong image among the public and the citizens, but there is also a dangerous trend where it manages to make its way into the media through some narratives that point to the existence of disinformation, and as sources of this information are holders of power, officials, public figures, opinion makers, says Marina Tuneva, former Director of the Media Ethics Council and Professor at the Institute of Communication Studies.



Dr. Marina Tuneva, journalism and media expert, photo: CIVIL

“On the social networks, on the other hand, we have another problem, where some citizens trust only one source of information and they don’t even try or want to explore whether there is another source of information, and someone has helped them create their belief in this way”, she adds.

According to Tuneva, we have a need for networking for cooperation of several institutions that would prevent the spread of disinformation in the social media, in the media and in general, and in this way educate citizens for they themselves to react when they come across information that is inaccurate.

-It is dangerous ground when the control of disinformation is left to the government and the state institutions, as this can cause censorship and self-censorship of certain information by which the meaning of a critical product would be lost, more specifically, have some information unnecessarily detected as false information or disinformation, and thus prevent freedom of speech, says Tuneva.

Sonja Taneska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qJ0BzUOed04>

ACCENTS

Ramush Muarem-Cirko, journalist: Social networks are the most dangerous source of disinformation and propaganda

Propaganda and disinformation are gaining increasingly more momentum, especially on the social networks. Before, propaganda was used mostly for advertising purposes, today it has penetrated into all pores of society, says journalist Ramush Muarem - Cirko in the interview with CIVIL Media.



Ramush Muarem, journalist, photo: CIVIL

He adds that only with a positive and realistic propaganda we can fight against black and bad propaganda.

“During the corona, I published a sarcastic propaganda text on the social networks that “only in Shutka there is

no corona". That propaganda spread very quickly, though, my goal of such propaganda was to indicate that the Roma in Shutka are forgotten by society, by the system", says Muarem.

He emphasized that only with a strong campaign and media literacy will the citizens be able to be familiarized with the bad side of propaganda and disinformation.

Dehran Muratov

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V7hgo8xyofc>

ACCENTS

Dejan Georgievski, Media Development Centre: I don't expect political parties to stop spreading fake news

Dejan Georgievski from Media Development Centre, in an interview with CIVIL Media on the question about the situation with disinformation and propaganda in our country, reflects on online media and points to social media as the main source of disinformation.

He adds that he would want to be able to influence centers that are sources of disinformation, but thinks that it is an utopian idea.



Dean Georgievski, media development specialist, photo: Samuel Debus

“A good part of the responsibility lies within the audience. I am a traditional media user, that is, I have chosen a few media outlets that I trust, because I think their editorial standards and the way they work contribute to conveying real and true information”, he says.

Georgievski expects from the citizens to apply the traditional way of using the media, but believes that perhaps that is an utopian idea, because it concerns free thinking and belief.

Biljana Jordanovska

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OBq7S3e51XM>

ACCENTS

Bashkim Selmani, Professor, Tetovo University: Fight against propaganda and disinformation through special conventions and sanctioning

Security and the role of information and disinformation are the main process of events taking place in a country, both at the international level and at the state level, says Bashkim Selmani, Professor at the Law Faculty at the Tetovo University, in an interview with CIVIL Media.



Dr. Bashkim Selmani, university professor, photo: CIVIL

He points out that they are basic components, which among information and disinformation and propaganda play a major role and victimize certain goals of the states

themselves or of discretionary rights taking place at the international level.

According to him, it has been shown that disinformation and propaganda are not being sanctioned, and that a single group or a single country cannot deal with preventing or minimizing the consequences of propaganda, so that is why special conventions are needed to regulate this or sanction certain media or individuals, states, in terms of propaganda.

“I think that this space has been used by intelligent states for achieving their goals, because without sanctioning at the international level of certain groups and states, the propaganda will be even more aggressive”, said Selmani.

Nazmi Abdurahmani

VIDEO LINK:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuDEGvAbBxE>

INTERVIEW

Ilija Dzugumanov, Secretary General, Euro-Atlantic Council of North Macedonia: A better communication strategy is needed

Ilija Dzugumanov is the Secretary General of the Euro Atlantic Council of North Macedonia. In regards to the situation with disinformation and propaganda in North Macedonia and the region, Dzugumanov, in an interview for [CIVIL Media](#) points out that a certain part of the media in the country are susceptible to disinformation from certain media and individuals promoting the interests of Moscow.



Ilija Dzugumanov, security expert, photo: private

CIVIL Media: What is needed to overcome the challenges of disinformation and propaganda?

Dzugumanov: Disinformation, propaganda and fake news have been present for a long time and challenge societies worldwide, but in times of accelerated digitalization, and especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the increased use of social media, its intensity has become dangerous.

In that direction, it is necessary to work on developing digital skills among the citizens, and particularly among the youth – incorporating media literacy in formal and informal education with the purpose to increase knowledge, awareness and understanding among citizens about the ways how to counter fake news, disinformation narratives, propaganda and conspiracy theories.

A better communication strategy is needed for all state institutions, especially in times of crises, with the purpose of timely and accurate informing. This would limit the space for spreading disinformation. Also, closer cooperation is needed and a centralized approach of the state institutions, local and international NGOs, in the fight against contemporary digital threats.

Creating a relevant database for traditional and social media, as well as increasing the importance of the register of professional media, could be of huge significance in overcoming the challenges of disinformation and propaganda.

CIVIL Media: What kind of propaganda and disinformation do we most often encounter, what is the damage and what are the consequences?

Dzugumanov: We usually encounter party political propaganda – the internal one, which comes from inside, and the one that comes from the neighboring countries and is most often orchestrated by Russia – the external one, which in most cases is connected to identity, religious or other sensitive social issues, which usually stands in the way of the Euro-Atlantic path.

Foreign malign activities are at the same time both a cause and a consequence of weak and vulnerable societies and governments. Various factors, including domestic actors and policies play a strong role in building resilience towards foreign influence.

Such occurrences create huge discord in societies, they increase polarization, but also increasingly more impact the socio-economic conditions and increase the security dilemma among citizens.

CIVIL Media: What kind of activities do you take to deal with such destructive occurrences?

Dzugumanov: The Euro-Atlantic Council of North Macedonia, through the two-year project “Disclosing and exposing states affected by Russian disinformation operations: Automatic analysis, monitoring and vulnerability assessment” led by the GLOBSEK Institute from Slovakia that began in 2018 and was implemented in 8 countries of Central and Southeastern Europe, worked on researching propaganda and disinformation by mapping online disinformation and its sources, as well as analyzing public attitude and vulnerability to propaganda and false information by using unique quantitative and qualitative information and tools. One of the results may be found of the following link:

<http://vulnerabilityindex.org/north-macedonia.html>

Through the project “Information vs. disinformation: Building resilience to disinformation practices in post-Covid environment in North Macedonia”, which was primarily oriented towards the youth, the primary goal was to reduce the unselective receipt of disinformation that is ever more present in the new reality in North Macedonia, to a great extent as a byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within the framework of the project, quantitative and qualitative research was performed on the topic, mainly with young people. Eight interviews were carried out with experts and young professionals, 4 focus groups, as well as over 155 questionnaires, from which infographics were made with the purpose to better present the results. Furthermore, the project had an influence on building long-term society resilience through education and informative tools and techniques.

The project titled “Generation Z: Building up resilience to disinformation” was organized in partnership with the Atlantic Club of Bulgaria, supported by the US State Department. This joint research focused on discovering the meaning and consequences of memes with political content, as well as on answering the question of what propaganda techniques are used in these images with an entertaining content that we all see on social media.

In the first phase, research was carried out on more than 1000 memes on political, economic and social topics prevailing in Bulgaria and North Macedonia. The second part of this project had the purpose of organizing a three-day training for media literacy and fight against fake news, intended for over 40 students and young professionals – journalist, employed in NGOs and institutions. The project “Strengthening democratic resilience in North Macedonia: Tackling the Kremlin

playbook in Southeast Europe” has the goal of mapping Russian influence in our country through economic relations and potential influences in the media.

Aneta Tasova

Link: <https://civilmedia.mk/dhugumanov-potrebna-e-podobra-komunikatsiska-strategija-na-site-drzhavni-institutsii-za-da-se-namali-prostorot-za-shirene-dezinformatsii/>

OPINION

Journalism and civil society: Allies in the fight against propaganda

Take a few minutes to answer this question: Was there a piece of news that you recently read online or watched on TV that altered your emotional state?

Then ask yourself: How did that piece of news make you feel? Did it encourage you to think about taking a certain action?

If you answer the first question with “yes”, and you can identify your reactions to the following two questions, then the author of that piece of news has achieved the intended result. That is, through a carefully crafted message, to make you think and act in a way that serves the agenda of the author. Whoever she, he, they, the author may be.

The present-day social fabric is under the pressure of disinformation, propaganda, partial truths, and fabricated facts. Such complex information disorder exacerbates already-existing mistrust, fueling tensions. The digital platforms create an environment that is conducive for propagation of fake news and feed the information disorder. Anyone can create and disseminate content.

Faced with this level of information disorder, cooperation between ethical journalism and civic engagement is critical to raising the level of access to verified information, to responsible use of digital tools, and to developing critical and analytical thinking.

Ethical journalism, education, and citizen engagement contribute to developing the skills needed to filter fake

news and propaganda and invest in peace engagement, producing benefits that improve the lives of all.

At the workshop “Resilient Journalism in Countering Disinformation and Propaganda” (5-10 December 2022) in Skopje, journalists and activists from the region initiated a cooperation network with counterparts from Ukraine and Germany. As the first step to establishing the annual Week of Resilient Journalism and Society, such network contributes to media literacy at all levels.

Linda Baleta, The Balkan Forum

OPINION

Street art, art only or purposeful mass messaging?

A walk around Prishtina, Kosovo, exposes you to colorful and engaging paintings in public spaces. Since 2017, Prishtina has been a destination for [Meeting of Styles](#) (MOS), which brings together artists from the world to enable intercultural and cross-border cooperation. Besides the murals that are a product of the MOS, the city is overtaken by street art: graffiti, murals, drawings.

Some are bold and direct, while some are more subtle or even abstract. At first sight, their purpose is to display art for all to enjoy and revel in its delight. At a closer look, each mural around Prishtina has explicit or implicit messages.

The mural “Broken Dreams” by artist Fitore Berisha seeks to raise awareness of women and girls about domestic violence. It is dedicated to all women and girls murdered by their husbands or partners. It is painted on the wall of an apartment building in a busy street near Prishtina center.

The bright orange mural showing a girl with a suitcase with the slogan “I don’t want to live I want to leave” can be interpreted in various ways by passers-by. It can be a protest of the artist against current circumstances, or it can be a message about the isolation of Kosovo.

Is street art another effective tool for propaganda and message diffusion, in a format that infiltrates the emotions of its audience?

“Street art is where artists express themselves. If it is from the bottom, from the people, it cannot be propaganda. But the same platform can be used for propaganda,” says Mkrtych Tonoyan, Director of Akos, a cultural NGO in Armenia, one of the participants in the workshop “Resilient Journalism in Countering Disinformation and Propaganda” in Skopje, where Tonoyan gave a presentation about art and propaganda.

George Orwell has famously said that all art is propaganda but not all propaganda is art.

Tomorrow, when I go out, I will do so with the intention to observe the surrounding street art in an effort to discern its explicit or implicit meaning and messages. Decoding the message will probably help connect the dots as to who the person behind the art is, and what is the influence they are trying to exert upon me.

Linda Baleta

DOSSIER

Russia's special military and propaganda operation against Ukraine and the democratic world



At the very beginning of the large-scale Russian invasion against Ukraine, numerous internet portals and some traditional media outlets in North Macedonia intensified the propaganda under the Kremlin's dictate. Some of them fell for the propaganda tricks, but many of them "arbitrarily" and "single-handedly" engaged in an open pro-Russian propaganda.

With the intense propaganda to which the Macedonian public was exposed in this critical period, the impact of the long-lasting Russian influence in all key areas became visible. Hence, under the influence of the Russian propaganda that some media and other entities and public figures were spreading, many citizens in North Macedonia welcomed the news about the military invasion on Ukraine with admiration and approval.

Russian propaganda denies war crimes in Ukraine

The first sign of hesitation regarding uncontrolled spread of disinformation and Russian propaganda is noted after the discovery of the horrific war crimes. Hundreds of dead bodies of civilians were found in settlements near Kyiv, occupied by Russian aggressors for a month. The shocking discoveries took place after the counteroffensive of the Ukrainian defenders at the beginning of April, 2022.

Then, part of pro-Russian media and active social media users, appalled by the extent and brutality of the crimes against civilians in Ukraine, withdrew and stopped their “cheering” for the Russian military aggression. Nevertheless, the Russian propaganda, after the first wave of public condemnation for the crimes, continued with their action even more intensively.

After the discovery of war crimes, a more intensified, not entirely unsuccessful, campaign tried to “sell” disinformation and false claims that the dreadful scenes were staged. Disinformation that the war crimes did not take place were publicized intensely, falsely claiming that Ukrainian and Western propaganda is only trying to denigrate the Russian army. The propaganda went so far as to shamelessly claim that the victims were not caused by the Russians, but by the Ukrainians themselves!

Support from the right-wing and nationalist political parties

The Russian propaganda in the media and on the social networks is strongly supported by right-wing and nationalist political parties that are not always so open, as is the Levica party.

Still, the pro-Russian position of right-wing political parties, though not declared publically (they usually don't have a position), can be identified through the media that are under their control or through the actions of the their troll factories on social networks.

Admiration and gloating for the suffering of civilians

CIVIL's monitoring notes that, in parallel to the disinformation that falsely claims that "war crimes had not taken place", pro-Russian propagandists on the social networks and partly in media, are expressing admiration and gloating for the suffering of civilians. They, by using explicit and hate speech, approve crimes such as torture and mass executions of entire families, raping of women, children, and even babies. So, on the one side – denial, and on the other – admiration and gloating at the same time. Illogical, but effective.

Some propagandists not only don't deny the crimes, but also approve and glorify them, but with all their strength try to deny that Russian soldiers and paramilitary formations are stealing and looting private houses. Their "value system" allows them to enjoy and glorify destruction and horrific tortures, killings and rapes, but not that they steal household appliances, personal items, clothes, money and jewelry from the homes and of the dead bodies of Ukrainian civilians.

Main propaganda narratives: "special military operation" for "liberation" and "denazification" of Ukraine

Russian propaganda is insistently trying to rationalize the invasion as a "special military operation" for "liberation" and "denazification", as well as for "preventing genocide

against the Russians in Ukraine” and “defending Russia from NATO”.

As opposed to that, the greater part of the world public is disqualifying these claims as completely not true and absurd.

Occupation of parts of Ukraine in 2014, and aggression on February 24, 2022 were an unprovoked acts of aggression against a sovereign, peaceful, democratic and independent state, completely contrary to international laws. Claims of the propaganda from the Kremlin that war crimes have not been committed in Ukraine are largely contested, yet propaganda is very strong and effective.

Photo and video evidence from the ground and the thousands of shocking testimonies of victims of the Russian terror in Ukraine, along with reports from the media, relevant international institutions and organizations, and military intelligence sources, speak quite clearly of what is really happening on the ground. Investigations for war crimes are in progress, and increasingly more evidence point to the fact that Russia is committing genocide in Ukraine. However, propaganda in many of the country’s media keeps denying all that.

Denying the Ukrainian nation, language and identity

Moscow uses particularly rude and belittling vocabulary in terms of Ukraine. “Ukraine doesn’t exist”, “Lenin granted Ukraine’s independence”, “Ukrainian language, culture and identity do not exist” – are some of the Kremlin’s narratives in an intense, multiple-year propaganda war.

In Ukraine itself, before 2014, Putin managed to install and strengthen powerful pro-Russian structures at all levels and in all areas, starting from the economy, media and civil society, up to the army, police and political establishment.

Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich, wasn't working for the Ukrainian interests. To the moment when his government was overthrown, Yanukovich worked on fulfilling the Russian economic, political and security interests. He worked on weakening democratic institutions, and turned Ukraine into a logistic and industrial service point of Russia.

■ The Ukrainian colorful revolution spoiled Putin's calculations

In all variants, Putin needed Ukraine for its geostrategic position and all of its available resources. With Yanukovich heading the country, he had no need to worry about their "bright criminal future".

However, the Ukrainian colorful revolution spoiled Putin's calculations ([Revolution of Dignity](#), 2014). And while Brussels was admiring the creative protestors and was searching for "neutral" and "objective" assessments of the democratic transition in Ukraine, "little green men emerged" in parts of the country's industrial east and strategically important Crimean Peninsula in the south, and occupied somewhat more than seven percent of the territory of sovereign and independent Ukraine.

■ The "maskirovka" put into function long before the invasion in 2014

Putin's propaganda machinery is multilayered, sophisticated and long-lasting. The methodology of running a propaganda is rooted in the infamous military

propaganda doctrine known as the “[maskirovka](#)”, which developed during the time of the first leader of the Soviet Union, Vladimir Ilich Lenin.

The hybrid war against Europe and Ukraine had intensified for at least five years before the first military invasion of Russia against Ukraine (2014). [Europe chose to be “blind”](#) to the horrible threat. One may conclude that this all is rooted more than 80 years ago, ahead of the incursions of the then expansionist and militant regimes in Germany and Italy.

Fierce propaganda and hybrid attacks against the West

The Russian propaganda and hybrid attacks in the past decade have been fierce. It represents a variety of actions for long-lasting undermining of the trust in the institutions, democracy and rule of law in the countries of the West.

Among else, the propaganda had the goal to hide the systematic and structural violation of human rights and freedoms in Russia.

One of the ways of achieving this goal was to relativize everything – “they are all the same”. Furthermore, the propaganda narratives claim that West is to blame the difficult situation of the Russian citizens, not Putin’s dictatorial rule.

In parallel, we see glorification of the “strong hand” regimes and belittling of the democratic processes in Europe and the world. This was accompanied by deep corruption at the highest levels, penetration in the economy and creating European dependence on Russian energy resources.

A “special war” is conducted on Balkan soil

In 2016, [NATO revealed](#) that hybrid attacks had been launched against some member states of the Alliance and announced the decision to activate Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. It led to establishing counter – hybrid support teams in 2018.

The “special war” (Yugoslav expression), that is, the hybrid war, only intensified in 2014. The impact of the hybrid threats that came from Russia are strongly felt in the Western Balkans region, including North Macedonia.

Some of the right-wing political groups in the country welcomed this threat readily and put themselves in the service of the Russian propaganda that still lasts until today.

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RESILIENT JOURNALISM

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA



INTERNATIONAL WEEK OF **RESILIENT JOURNALISM**
COUNTERING DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA
December 5-10, 2022, Skopje, North Macedonia

supported by:

The State Government of
North Rhine-Westphalia



ISBN-10 608-4815-39-1
ISBN-13 978-608-4815-39-6
EAN 9786084815396