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Democracies in a Digital Era:
Legal, Political and Security
challenges

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The Stalemate of Deepened Integration: Analysis of the Russian Anti-Belarus Disinformation Campaign in 2019

Introduction

December, 8, 2019 marked the 20th anniversary since signing the treaty on establishment of Union State between Russia and Belarus. Back in the 1990s, the activists and leaders of the political opposition saw this document as a threat to the sovereignty of Belarus and demanded to stop the process of crawling integration that accelerated in the second part of the 2010s. During the last two decades, Russia has been doing its best to attach its closest Western neighbor to oneself in social, economic and military dimensions. Despite numerous crises in the relationships between the two countries (so-called gas and milk wars), the developments at the end of 2019 were extraordinary, not least of all due to the large-scale information attack, launched by Russia.

During 2019, the political elite of the two countries conducted multiple meetings, where they discussed further progress of the integration process, which was described as a threatening development by Belarusian journalists and political scientists. Amid the difficult negotiations on oil taxes ("tax maneuver"), it was believed that Russia was plotting a plan of annexing Belarus in the same vein as it had done with Crimea. Both public officials and the Presidents themselves frequently expressed dissatisfaction with the way the talks were going, which led to the suspicions that Russia had suggested Belarus should give up sovereignty in exchange for certain economic benefits. Also, the Eastern neighbor was allegedly frustrated by Belarusian independent actions on international matters (e.g. reluctance to acknowledge the

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independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and its position on military conflict with Ukraine) and its attempts to conduct "pendulum policy" (i.e. balance out between East and West). The "deepened integration", in the view of Russian ideologists,[1] would be a logical development of the process of integration launched in the second half of the 1990s.[2]

Within this article, we are looking into the wave of disinformation articles, generated by the propagandist bloggers on the websites supported by Russia, launched to cover the whole of Belarusian territory with propagandist materials. In particular, we are considering the articles emerged between September and December 2019, the period of intensive negotiations between Russia and Belarus on "further integration". Within this timeframe, bloggers published dozens of posts, degrading Belarusian culture and history, discrediting political opposition leaders, as well as highlighting the benefits of integration in political, economic and social spheres. In general, those posts were designed to generate fake news, to promote Russia-centered agenda, to provoke the interest of Russia supporters among the Belarusian citizens, and, as the overarching aim, to interfere with the decision-making at the highest level. Fake news got so much attraction within the Belarusian media flow that even the Belarusian President addressed it in his speeches.

The structure of the article is as follows: first, to provide the background, we will briefly describe the history of Belarus-Russia relations since the signing of the Union Treaty in 1996; secondly, we will analyze media reports, published in the network of propagandist media September through December 2019, to a) reconstruct the strategic narrative of "deepened integration" b) to describe the ways the bloggers treated Belarusian political opposition, and, finally, c) to show the process of construction of "meaningful Others", that is, enemies of the Union State; thirdly, we will provide the policy advice based on the interviews with Belarusian political scientists and sociologists.

Methodology

This paper relies on the following triangulation of methods: first, the members of the team conducted the desk research, presupposing the analysis of the existing relevant reports and researches, devoted to the examination of the extent of the disinformation and propaganda in Belarus; secondly, articles were analyzed via the lens of content analysis to reveal the key nodal points within the articles used by the propagandist bloggers about the key events in the political life of Belarus and the most significant political figures; thirdly, we used in-depth semi-structured interviews with the experts to test the findings within the first stage of our research.

Within the desk research, we considered the reports, devoted to the latest wave of disinformation and propaganda, launched by Russia to try and influence the public opinion in

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[1] "Лев Криштапович: Белорусы и «белорусизаторы»", Витьбич, October 21, 2019, http://vitbich.org/lev- krishtapovich-belorusy-i-belorusizatory/.

[2] А. Шрайбман (2018): "Деньги или суверенитет. Чем закончится нефтяной спор Москвы и Минска", Московский центр Карнеги, December 20, 2018, https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77999.

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Belarus. In particular, we analysed the researches of Yeliseyeu (2019)[3], Yeliseyeu and Laputska (2016)[4], a report submitted by the Belarusian Association of Journalists (2019)[5], etc. All those investigations informed us about the period the disinformation campaign started, and about the most aggressive websites and their owners. Another focus at this stage was the revelation of main factors, contributing to the susceptibility of Belarus to the information attacks from the Russian side, as well as consideration of main measures, implemented by the authorities to withstand those attacks.

The content analysis in combination with quantitative analysis made it possible to reconstruct main propagandist narratives, launched strategically to influence public opinion, to discredit opposition leaders and political analysts, as well as to make alliances with other groups (such as pro-Russian Belarusians) in the context of integration talks between Russia and Belarus. In addition, we identified main themes and subtopics, serving as triggers for the bloggers. To do so, we analysed the propagandist materials that emerged in the 'Politics', 'Blogs' and other thematic sections of 10 websites supported by Russia within regional and national scope between September and December 2019 (the peak of the talks on deepened integration).

Finally, we conducted seven semi-structured in-depth interviews with the Belarusian political scientists and sociologists, as well as public figures who took part in the independent observation of the parliamentary elections, and those who campaigned against the integration. Their analyses helped us to test our findings, to reflect on the way the Belarusian media themselves amplify and disseminate the propagandist messages, as well as to formulate policy advice towards the Belarusian authorities on the practices to withstand Russian disinformation attacks. We developed questionnaire touching upon the following topics: a) attempts to interfere with the parliamentary elections in Belarus and integration talks; b) the level of media literacy in Belarus; c) the evaluation of the actions of authorities meant to withstand the information attacks; d) the possibilities of cooperation between state sector and NGOs with regard to information security issues, as well as e) necessity to learn and adopt Ukrainian experience in the relevant situations. To make the interview series unbiased, we talked to the experts from the state sector, NGO sector, as well as to the representatives of various humanities disciplines.

The following experts took part in the interviews: Aliaksei Kryvalap, media expert at ECLAB; Pauluk Bykouski, media researcher, journalist for the Deutsche Welle, consultant for the Media IQ research project; Andrei Yahorau, analyst of the Center of the European Transformation, Yury Hubarevich, politician, leader of the "For Freedom" movement, Yury Shautsou, political scientist, director of the Center for the Problems of the European

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[3] A. Yeliseyeu (2019): Fundamental Shifts in Anti-Belarusian Disinformation and Propaganda: Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Changes, Accessed 23.04.2019 from http://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Belarus- Disinformation-Propaganda-2019-ENG.pdf.

[4] A. Yeliseyeu, V. Laputska (2016): Anti-Belarus disinformation in Russian media: Trends, features, countermeasure. EAST Center, Accessed 20.03.2018 from http://east-center.org/wp- content/uploads/2016/12/EAST-Media-Review.pdf.

[5] Belorusskaja Associacija Zhurnalistov (2019): Prodvizhenie «russkogo mira» idet cherez belorusskie TV-kanaly — BAZh prezentoval monitoring prorossijskoj propagandy [The promotion of the Russian World is implemented via the Belarusian TV-channels – BAJ presented monitoring of Russian propaganda). Accessed 03.03.2019 from https://baj.by/be/analytics/prodvizhenie-russkogo-mira-idet-cherez-belorusskie-tv-kanaly-bazh-prezentoval-monitoring.

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Integration; sociologist Aksana Shelest, analyst of the Center of the European Transformation, Andrei Yeliseyeu, political scientist, analyst of the research Center of the Eurasian States in Transition (EAST); Alena Artsiomenka, sociologist, professor at the Belarusian State University, department of the social communication; and professor Andrei Vardamatski, sociologist, analyst at the Belarusian Analytical Workroom. Three interviews were conducted in person (with professor Andrei Vardamatski, media experts Pauluk Bykouski and Aliaksei Kryvalap), on the phone and messenger apps (with sociologists Aksana Shelest and Alena Artsiomenka, political scientists Andrei Yahorau and Yury Shautsou, politician Yury Hubarevich), analyst Andrey Yeliseyeu provided written responses to the questionnaires.

The main aim of the paper is to bring to light the main strategic narratives in outlets supported by Russia that generate disinformation oriented towards Belarusian audience, and to formulate policy advice to the Belarusian authorities. This paper contributes to the academic literature analysing how fake news and disinformation influence political discourses in Eastern European countries.

Case selection and data gathering

In his recent research, Yeliseyeu (2019) revealed several important trends that signalize the intensification of the Russian information attacks on Belarus. The main aim of those is to promote Russian agenda and popularize Russian-centric frames, to defame Belarusian opposition, and to degrade the Belarusian language and culture, etc[6]. The researcher argued that since 2016, the number of web-resources distributing false information messages "has increased to about 40". More than that, about 15 of them cover the events on the regional level, with about half of them extensively using hate speech: Sozh.info (Homiel region), Vitbich.org (Vitsiebsk region), Podneprovie-info.com and Mogilew.by (Mahileu region), Grodnodaily.net (Hrodna region), Berestje-news.org and Dranik.org (Brest region), and Teleskop-by.org (Minsk region)"[7]. Yeliseyeu concludes that the websites were introduced by the Russian organization CIS-EMO that had been launched on the approval of the Russian Presidential Executive Office. Proceeding from this classification, we decided to concentrate attention on the most aggressive regional websites and analyse the materials that are generated by the bloggers to try and find commonalities shared by various authors, and to identify the main strategic narratives put forward by them. Here is the description of each of the websites under consideration.

Description of cases. The regional websites supported by Russia that generate content, oriented towards the audience from Eastern regions of Belarus, i.e. Vitsiebsk (Vitbich.org), Mahileu (Podneprovie-info.com and mogilew. by), as well as Homiel (Sozh.info) and Brest regions (Berestje-news.org) were made up, using one sample with the minimal variations in design.

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[6] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[7] Ibid., p. 2.

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In the left upper corner of Vitbich.org, Podneprovie-info.com, Sozh.info, and Berestje-news.org one can find stylized coat of arms of the corresponding region, which was done, apparently, to outline the thematic focus of the content, generated by the website, and to establish trust within the users. This conformity is hardly surprising, taking into account that, according to the Who.is service, the first two websites belong to the same owner – Alexey Semenov, the employer of CIS-EMO organization. The latter, according to Yeliseyeu (2019), observed election process in several countries (most notably, in Crimea, in 2014).

Website Vitbich.org, with a monthly audience of 10,200 users per week (the website was registered on 19.02.2018) also has public pages on Facebook and its Russian equivalent Vkontakte. The categories "Vitsiebsk and region", "Belarus", "World" and also "Sport" mostly contain neutral materials (although from time to time one could find some disinformation materials there as well). Articles, promoting pro-Russian agenda, can be usually found within the sections "Blogs", "Culture and History". Arkadiy Vertyazin is the most notoriously famous author of this website, "specializing" on articles about opposition and civil society. In general, between September and December Vitbich generated 48 materials (13 on integration, 19 on opposition, 13 on parliamentary elections, 5 on "constitutive Others" – Ukraine and Poland). The website does not presuppose the function of leaving comments.

Website Podneprovie-info.com (registered on 19.02.2018) enjoys attendance of about 9 thousand users per week and has public page on Vkontakte. The categories "Regional news", "Accidents", "[Happens] in Belarus" and "Sport" largely contain neutral materials, with the main propagandist content being located within the sections "[Happens] in the world" and "History". A significant part of those articles was devoted to opposition (13) and integration (3). Website frequently reposts articles from ill-famous resources IMHOclub and sputnik.by. The users are not allowed to leave comments either.

According to the research of Yeliseyeu, Sozh.info belongs to Sergei Lushch, a former chair of the youth organization "Young Rus'" (Rus' Molodaya).[8] The website is visited by around 10,400 users per week and has public pages on Facebook, Odnoklassniki and Vkontakte. A significant amount of articles in the categories "News", "Our Homiel" and "Society" contain neutral information, with the disinformation usually being concentrated in the sections "Politics" and "Blogs". In particular, the major part of those texts was devoted to the events in Ukraine and Poland, while parliamentary elections were covered only by three materials, opposition – by 7 and integration – by 9 articles. It seems that the website does not allow users to comment the materials.

The website Mogilew.by is owned by Active Technologies LLC (the name of owner is not disclosed, with the website being registered on 10.03.2011). The articles in the categories "News", "Mahilieu News", "Interesting", "Accidents", "Mahilieu History" and "Miscellaneous" are in most cases neutral; the most of propagandist texts are located within the section "For your information". Specifically, within the period under consideration,   the larger half of

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[8] The organization promoted the ideas of Slavic Brotherhood and the unification of Belarus and Russia.

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articles with such content was focused on formation of negative image of neighboring countries – Ukraine and Poland (11). Two texts were dedicated to the parliamentary elections, one – to integration, three– to opposition. Website allows the option of commenting.

The website politring.com positions itself as a discussion platform for a dialogue between political and social groups of Belarus, and its editorial board considers "extremism and radicalism unacceptable". At the same time, events like anti-integration protests are characterized as a "picket of radicals".[9] They publish different points of view, including the comments by the independent experts and opposition politicians. It is present in multiple social media, namely on Facebook, Vkontakte, Twitter, Telegram, Instagram, Google news. Attendance statistics is closed.

Domain names of the regional websites Grodnodaily.net, berestje-news.org were purchased on the same day, February 19, 2018, along with two others, Vitbich.org and Podneprovie-info.com.[10] According to the study by Yeliseyeu, the buyer of the domain names, Aleksei Semenov, was an employee of the CIS-EMO, the organization that conducted observation missions in Crimea during the elections at the referendum 2014 and in the unrecognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[11] Both websites are organized according to similar templates, containing sections "In Brest"/ "In Grodno", "Politics", "Culture and History"/"History, "Sports", "Blogs". The sections on history contain mainly reprints from other resources that promote pro-Russian narrative, such as "Украина.ру", and the history narrative is dedicated to the events, associated with the Soviet and the Great Duchy of Lithuania periods. Both resources are present on Vkontakte and on Facebook.

Dranik.org contains the following sections: "Brest and Regions", "Politics and Society", "Economy", "Man and Law", and "Blogs". Main content for monitoring was in the "Blog" section. Out of 18 relevant materials only 3 were dedicated to the integration topic, the rest dedicated to cross-sectoral topics on the opposition, elections, and the image of the foreign countries. It is present on Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki.

Website Teleskop.by is a clearly anti-Belarusian information-analytical portal, generating both news and original blog content. The website often reposts news content from other resources, in most cases Russian ones, but also Belarusian, promoting Russian-centric agenda such as imhoclub.lv, sputnik.by, etc. or Telegram channels (e.g. https://t.me/su2050). The editor-in-chief of Teleskop.by is a notorious author of multiple biased (and sometimes outright propagandist) publications on Belarus – Lev Krishtapovich. Among the most prolific bloggers there is Vsevolod Shimov, Kirill Frolov, and Panteleimon Filippovich who often write articles for websites promoting extreme reactionary ideology. As a rule, the bloggers generate several

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[9] "Почувствовал безнаказанность: Северинец второй день собирает противников интеграции России и Беларуси в центре Минска", Белорусский политринг, December 8, 2019, https://politring.com/country/30322- pochuvstvoval-beznakazannost-severinec-vtoroy-den-sobiraet-protivnikov-integracii-rossii-i-belarusi-v-centre- minska.html.

[10] А. Елисеев (2019): "Кардинальные перемены в антибелорусской дезинформации и пропаганде: анализ количественных и качественных изменений", Исследовательский центр EAST (Eurasian States in Transition), April 2019, http://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Belarus-Disinformation-Propaganda-2019-RU. pdf?fbclid=I wAR0bfRD-1ETKJgyrAHlqw-oE9R3SwbcS3Noju7VafdUVNZ-AB7sz1AB4YZ0.

[11] Ibid.

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articles per day, with users devoid of option of leaving comments under them. According to Yandex.Metric, the website is visited by 40 to 70 thousand users per day.

Data gathering. During the preliminary stage, we identified a set of political events that occurred between September 2019 and December 2019 and were accompanied by the increased quantity of materials on the websites under consideration ("trigger events"). Thematically those events could be divided into four categories:

a) those related to the "tax maneuver", integration talks and the Union State (meetings at the highest level, public speeches of the leaders, information leaks etc.), b) those associated with the activity of Belarusian opposition (such as protests, celebrations, etc.), c) those dealing with the parliamentary elections and, finally,

d) historical/theoretical materials describing Ukraine, Poland, and the West in general as main enemies. Although the first two topics (96 and 100 materials respectively) proved to be much more widespread, the third and the fourth ones were as important (64 and 62 respectively), because they were associated with the crucial political event within the period in consideration (parliamentary elections) as well as with the attempts to construct the image of the Other. Based on those considerations, we selected 322 relevant articles. The interviews (overall – 10) with the Belarusian experts (sociologists, political scientists and journalists) served as a complementary material for our research.

In Table 1 below, we listed the preliminary selection of the relevant materials (to be added).
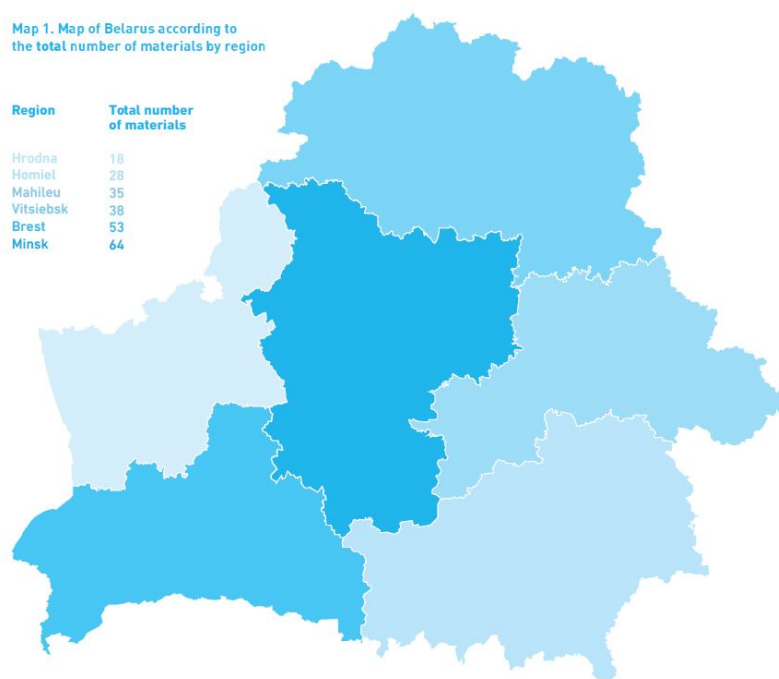
Table 1. Preliminary selection of the relevant materials

Website	Region	Monthly audience	Number of materials (Integration)	Number of materials (Opposition)	Number of materials (Elections)	Number of materials ("Others")	Overall
Sozh	Homiel	10,400	9	7	1	11	28
Vitbich	Vitsiebsk	10,147	13	19	3	3	38
Berestje-News	Brest	7,339	7	3	5	0	15
Dranik	Brest	n/a	3	18	16	1	38
GrodnoDaily	Hrodna	10,445	7	9	1	1	18
Mogilew.by	Mahileu	n/a	1	3	0	11	15

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Podneprovie - Info	Mahileu	8,762	3	13	4	0	20
Politring	Minsk	n/a	15	4	5	1	25
Teleskop	Minsk	59,607	16	0	3	20	39
Overall			**74**	**67**	**38**	**48**	

*certain articles fit into several categories (i.e. numerous topics are covered), so they are mentioned in several corresponding cells

Map 1. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials by region

Map 1. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials by region

Region	Total number of materials
Hrodna	18
Homiel	28
Mahileu	35
Vitsiebsk	38
Brest	53
Minsk	64

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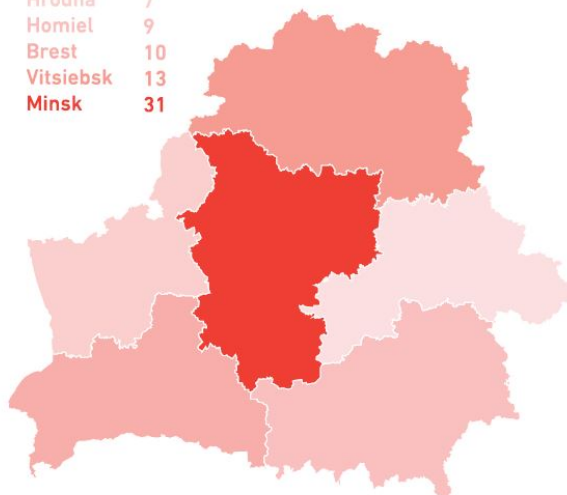Legal, Political and Security challenges

Map 2. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials (Integration) by region

Map 2. Map of Belarus according to the total
number of materials **(Integration)** by region

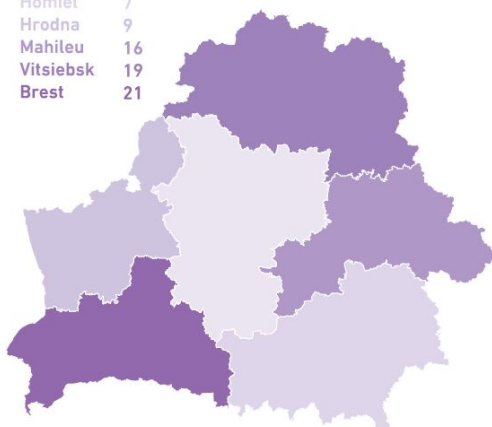| Region	Number of materials
Mahileu	4
Hrodna	7
Homiel	9
Brest	10
Vitsiebsk	13
Minsk	31

Map 3. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials (Opposition) by region

Map 3. Map of Belarus according to the total
number of materials **(Opposition)** by region

Region	Number of materials
Minsk	4
Homiel	7
Hrodna	9
Mahileu	16
Vitsiebsk	19
Brest	21

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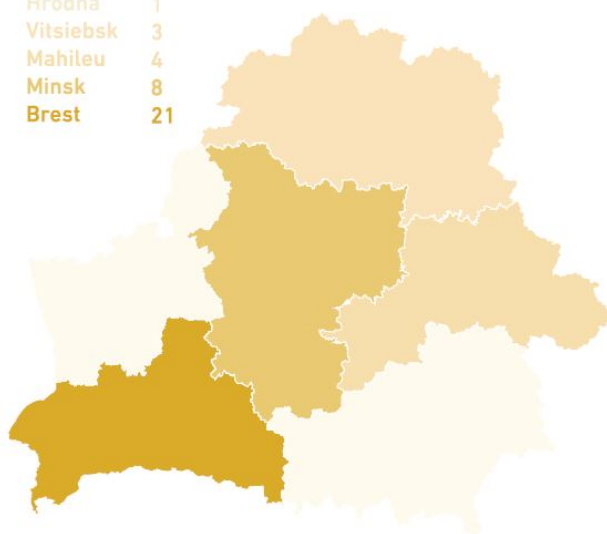Legal, Political and Security challenges

Map 4. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials (Elections) by region

Map 3. Map of Belarus according to the total
number of materials (**Elections**) by region

| Region	Number of materials
Homiel	1
Hrodna	1
Vitsiebsk	3
Mahileu	4
Minsk	8
Brest	**21**

Map 5. Map of Belarus according to the total number of materials ("Others") by region

Map 4. Map of Belarus according to the total
number of materials (**"Others"**) by region

Region	Number of materials
Brest	1
Hrodna	1
Vitsiebsk	3
Homiel	11
Mahileu	11
Minsk	**21**

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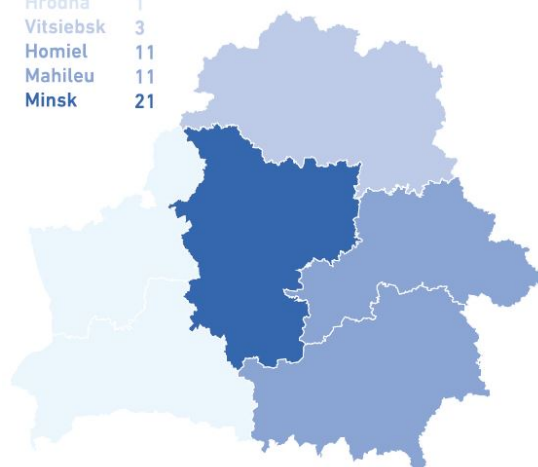
Literature review. Latest independent studies point out the intensification of disinformation and propaganda content, generated by the pro-Russian websites, Telegram channels and social media public pages. For example, experts from international research initiative 'International Strategic Action Network for Security' (ISANS) concentrated their efforts on analysis of various dangers Belarus faced in 2019. In particular in the report entitled "Coercion to "Integration": Russia's Creeping Assault on the Sovereignty of Belarus"[12] they note that Russia has been gradually enhancing pressure in virtual sphere, that is, publishing biased articles and fake news in media space. This information attack, in their view, represents a full-fledged hybrid war: "state-controlled, quasi-private and non-governmental initiatives form a wide system of interference, aimed at a 'deep integration' of Belarus with Russia – effectively coercing Belarus to give up its political, cultural and linguistic sovereignty" (p.1). Later ISANS conducted an analysis of 'toxic social media communities in Belarus', presenting their research results in the 'Map of toxic Vkontakte public pages'.[13] This interactive map, based on the qualitative data analysis of vk.com, presents the largest database of propagandist communities of the Russian-speaking social media, which "discredit Belarusian language, culture, and history, and even put in question the existence of Belarusian ethnicity" (ISANS, 2020, para 1).

Givi Gigitashvili from 'Medium.com' (2020)[14] identified anonymous pro-Russian Telegram channels that targeted protests in Belarus, "attacked opponents of integration and spread pro-Kremlin narratives" amid integration talks between the two countries (Trikatazh, Bulba Prestolov, BeloRusski Dialog, Kompromat Belarus, Beloruskii Gambit, Belarusskii Insaider, Vostochnoe Pritvorstvo, and BY-News).

Yeliseyeu (2020)[15] demonstrated website's 'Sputnik Belarus' involvement into disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda campaign and summarized: "Although news on Sputnik contain explicit propaganda and disinformation in relatively rare cases, they [bloggers] often follow a certain political line and ideological instructions" (p.39). These recent studies have helped to shape and characterize the reality of Russian disinformation and propaganda campaign that has been taking place in Belarus for the last several months.

Integration and the Union State

Background

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Belarus enjoyed a brief period of "democratic opening:" the country elected its first Parliament and conducted its first free and open Presidential elections won by the charismatic non-partisan corruption fighter Aliaksandar Lukashenka. However, from the very outset of his presidency, Lukashenko sought to bypass the Parliament

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[12] "Coercion to "Integration": Russia's Creeping Assault on the Sovereignty of Belarus", ISANS – International Strategic Action Network for Security, 2019, https://isans.org/wp-content/docs/Belarus_report_eng_iSANS_ 10.03.2019_BRIEF_VERSION.pdf.

[13] "Таксічныя паблікі Беларусі", ISANS – International Strategic Action Network for Security, https://isans.org/ toxic/.

[14] G. Gigitashvili (2020): Anonymous pro-Russian Telegram channels target protests in Belarus. Accessed 20.03.2020 from https://medium.com/dfrlab/anonymous-pro-russian-telegram-channels-target-protests-in-belarus-16ac3d0a1a12.

[15] A. Yeliseyeu (2020): Propaganda i dezinformacija Sputnik Belarus' [Propaganda and Disinformation from Sputnik Belarus]. Accessed 20.03.2020 from https://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Sputnik-Belarus-Propaganda- Research.pdf.

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by taking advantage of poorly defined mechanisms of conflict resolution in the Constitution. In 1996, he won a referendum on the expansion of presidential powers (its results were falsified[16]), which allowed him to establish the one-man rule.

That same year he signed a treaty on the establishment of the Commonwealth of Russia and Belarus, which eventually turned into the Treaty on the Creation of a Union State of Russia and Belarus in 1999. This document launched the process of integration between the two countries, which mostly concerns the economic sphere, while the political developments being far less pronounced (the most important meetings, as a rule, are revolving around negotiations on oil and gas prices and usually take place before the heating season). Valeriya Kostiugova (2008)[17] stressed that the integration process has a "cyclic character." Initially, Russia and Belarus reach certain agreements and formalize them in a document; when it becomes evident that the proposals are impossible to achieve, the two sides revise the agreements and sign a new contract, thereby "raising the integration to a higher level." (Kostiugova, 2008, para 1).

At the beginning of the 2000s, Russia decided to put relations between the two countries on a pragmatic footing. The Russian president Vladimir Putin famously stated that it is necessary to sort "flies from cutlets", or the wheat from the chaff. The Russian authorities suggested intensifying the integration process in both the political realm (through adopting the Constitution of the Union state) and the economic sphere (by introducing a common currency, unifying trade rules, and launching a single natural gas transmission network). During this period, the countries signed multiple documents, treaties, and memoranda, and conducted numerous meetings. However, the informal aspect of the relations overtook the formal: the majority of agreements, adopted at the beginning of the 2000s, have not been realized, and Russia has continued to allocate money to the Belarusian government.

Since the 1990s, Russia has been the main trade partner of Belarus, with import rate being more than 50% throughout 29 years since Belarus gained independence. By 2004, Russia's import penetration ratio reached 65%, which was due to sharp increase of oil price. However, up until now this record has not been renewed. Still, in 2019, the import ration continues to grow and Belarus remains heavily dependent on Russia in economic respect. The Eastern neighbor has been actively using this aspect to try and obtain concessions from Belarus in the political sphere (such as recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in 2008 or DPR and LPR in 2014).

In February 2004, a "gas war" between the countries broke out, and Russia ended up significantly increasing gas prices for its Western neighbor (previously the price was the same as in internal Russian regions). Since then, Russia has regularly antagonized Belarus over oil and gas prices, while annually decreasing the level of subsidies. By the end of the 2000s, both countries entered several "market wars," imposing mutual restrictions on the sale of meat

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[16] Report of the Belarusian Helsinki Committee on referendum 1996, http://lukashenkorg.narod.ru/1996.htm.
[17] V. Kostiugova (2008): Rossijsko-belorusskij sojuz: jetapy restrukturizacii kontrakta [Russia- Belarus Union: the stages of contract restructurisation]. Accessed 25.04.2019 from https://nmnby.livejournal.com/86468.html.

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and milk because of their allegedly poor quality. After Western countries introduced sanctions as a result of Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war with Ukraine, and Russia retaliated by imposing so-called "anti-sanctions" on certain products, Belarus tried to circumvent the restrictions by selling to Russia importing Western products with Belarusian labels, which created more tension between the two countries. Consequently, by the beginning of 2019, Belarus remained deprived of almost all the economic privileges previously bestowed by Russia.

Analysis of integration topic in the monitored media

During the period under consideration the topic of deepening integration has been one of the most popular themes, emerged within the materials on the regional websites supported by Russia. This is hardly surprising, given that the talks on the further advancement with the project of the Union State were conducted every month on various levels (both governmental and presidential). The bloggers from the regional websites supported by Russia (in all of the regions, but especially in Minsk) identified a set of problems hindering the talks, with one of them being found within the ideological dimension. In their view, the project of integration started as a purely economic initiative, without meaningful political content. To fix this situation they introduced the ideology of the "Russian World" ("Russki mir") as a hegemonic understanding of the idea of the project, meaning that the peculiar Belarusian language and culture (deemed marginal and insignificant) could be simply substituted by the Russian ones. The assumption at the center of this project was that Russian-speaking population (and Belarusians mostly speak Russian in their everyday life) appears to be a part of Russian community and will be happy to become the citizens of the Russian Federation. Mikhail Suslov stressed that this concept has been used to justify Russia's aggressive foreign policy and its initiatives on annexation of Crimea and subsequent war with Ukraine[18].

Laruelle notes[19] that the Russian World concept serves as an empty signifier, the term with a blurry meaning, allowing connecting several complex ideas into a coherent ideological narrative (which could be tuned to substantiate various (sometimes contradictory) policies). In particular, she notes: "It serves as a justification for what Russia considers to be its right to oversee the evolution of its neighbors, and sometimes for an interventionist policy. Secondly, its reasoning is for Russia to reconnect with its pre-Soviet and Soviet past through reconciliation with Russian diasporas abroad. Lastly, it is a critical instrument for Russia to brand itself on the international scene and to advance its own voice in the world."[20]

Russian bloggers reiterate that the Russian World could become spiritual bond of the Union State, replacing two influential ideological narratives, established in Belarus by the competing

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[18] M. Suslov (2017): "Russian World": Russian Policy towards its Diaspora. In Russia/NIS Center, July, 2017, p.29. See https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/suslov_russian_world_2017.pdf.
[19] M. Laruelle (2015): The "Russian World": Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination. In Center on Global Interests, May 2015, p.1. See https://globalinterests.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FINAL-CGI_Russian-World_Marlene-Laruelle.pdf.
[20] Ibid.

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political forces. Those are the project of "official nationalism",[21] built upon the "Soviet national identity" and "nativist project of national identity", based around the importance of the Belarusian language, history and culture[22].

The former ideological narrative proceeds from the idea that the contemporary Belarusian people emerged after the World War II, with the Belarusians contributing greatly to defeating the Nazi invaders (according to the estimations of the historians, every third citizen died during the war). Lukashenka himself quite often describes himself as "a Soviet man",[23] who tries to preserve some of the distinctive practices that were prevalent in the USSR: state-planned economy, harsh control over social life, lack of political competition, etc. This political elite's conceptual commitment to the Soviet legacy has been further reflected in the official symbols: in 1995, as a result of referendum, a slightly adjusted Soviet-style coat of arms and flag replaced the white-red-white flag and Pahonya coat of arms, adopted after the dissipation of the USSR. In conceptual terms, the project of official nationalism was reflected in the state ideology project, which was developed and introduced as an obligatory course at the universities and schools in 2003. As Pikulik (2007) notes, despite the best efforts of the authorities, it did not become the basis for the self-identification among the Belarusians.[24]

The latter ideological narrative dates back the emergence of the sovereign Belarus to March 25, 1918, the day, when the Belarusian People's Republic was established. The nativist project of Belarusian identity prioritizes the national language and culture and traces back the Belarusian history to the Fourth Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The nativist project was promoted and popularized by the Belarusian intellectuals at the end of the 1980s - the beginning of the 1990s, who put forward the idea of the importance of the Belarusian national identity. It became a crucial source for the "street politics" of the 1990s-2000s, when the political opposition tried to change the situation in the country via organization of protests and peaceful revolutions.

Both of those ideologies are perceived as "contradictory civilization projects", hindering Belarusians from obtaining their "fully-fledged national identity", with the Russian World seen as an ultimate substitute to both of them. In Krishtapovich's view, for example, "Russian sovereignty of Belarusians is the foundation for the Union State, only through which the preservation of the Belarusian language and state, and, hence, the restoration of independence and achievement of sovereignty, is possible."[25] In the view of Belarusian ideologists and pro-Russia propagandists, the collapse of the USSR is considered the "greatest

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[21] "According to Anderson, official nationalism is the concept, describing the process, when the political elite tries to maintain its grasp of power vis-à-vis contending groups by instilling peculiar version of nationalism among the population. B. Anderson (2006): *Imagined Communities*, London, New York: Verso.

[22] V. Navumau (2016): *The Belarusian Maidan: A New Social Movement Approach to the Tent Camp Protest in Minsk*, 2006; J. Kurczewska & Y. Shibata (eds).Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, p. 161.

[23] "Лукашенко: Я закоренелый советский человек и историк", Intex Press, September 26, 2019, https://www. intex-press.by/2019/09/26/lukashenko-ya-zakorenelyj-sovetskij-chelovek-i-istorik/.

[24] А. Пикулик (2007): "Белорусская идеология: функционализм и тюнинг", Наше мнение, March 27, 2007, https://nmnby.eu/news/analytics/906.html.

[25] "Лев Криштапович: Белорусы и «белорусизаторы»", Витьбич, October 21, 2019, http://vitbich.org/lev- krishtapovich-belorusy-i-belorusizatory/.

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geopolitical catastrophe" (to borrow the emotional Putin's expression[26]). They reiterate that Russia, being the direct successor of the Soviet Union, has a historical mission of restoring its influence over the territories, previously covered by the USSR. In this context, the further development of the Union State project is seen as a continuation of the strategy of "gathering the Russian lands" (started in 2008 by the war in Georgia and continued in 2014 by the war with Ukraine), presupposed by the Russian World concept.[27]

Suslov also stresses[28] that the success of Crimea has been especially tempting to repeat before the presidential elections. Indeed, the difficulty of transit of power amid the decreasing popularity of Putin (so- called "problem 2024") has been widely discussed by the political scientists and sociologists. The latter suggested various variants of doing this and one of the most viable and likely in their view has been the establishment of the Union State with Putin being proclaimed the head of the newly established formation. It is easy to guess that Belarus played a key role in this scenario, and the pro-Russian bloggers used various narratives in order to justify this.[29]

Some authors developed complicated narratives built upon the distorted interpretation of Belarusian history. This trend is especially characteristic of the blogs of Lev Krishtapovich, who suggests an alternative version of the Belarusian history, in which there is no place for Mindauh and Vitaut, Radzivill, Sapieha, Ahinski, etc., because Belarusian history is "inseparable from pan-Russian, Soviet history. This is a historical choice of the Belarusian people, a centuries-long formation of pan-Russian consciousness, within which the Belarusian statehood emerged and was nurtured".[30] Hence, the bloggers imagine Belarus as an extension of Russian history and identity[31] and treat the establishment of Belarusian People's Republic in 1918 (the event is widely treated as the birth of the Belarusian nation by the national historians), merely an amusing historical incident.[32] In such a way, the further development of the Union State project should be a preferred political goal for Belarus, because it is via becoming an integral part of the Russian World, that is, accepting Russian culture and language as their own, that the country will be able to secure the true sovereignty. In any other scenario, it will be either absorbed by the EU and will be devoid of any independent decision-making within the supra-national mechanism, or it will become yet another puppet of the USA.

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[26] "Владимир Путин: "Распад СССР - крупнейшая геополитическая катастрофа века", Regnum, April 25, 2005, https://regnum.ru/news/444083.html.

[27] M. Suslov (2017): "Russian World": Russian Policy towards its Diaspora. In Russia, NIS Center, July, 2017, p.29. See https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/suslov_russian_world_2017.pdf.

[28] Ibid.

[29] It turned out that this scenario existed only in the minds of political scientists, as the political elite pulled off a much simpler idea with the introduction of amendments to the Constitution.

[30] Л. Криштапович (2019): "Какие силы противостоят строительству Союзного государства", Берестье News, December 21, 2019, http://berestje-news.org/2019/12/21/lev-krishtapovich-kakie-sily-protivostoyat-stroitelstvu- soyuznogo- gosudarstva/.

[31] А. Вертязин (2019): Белорусская филология Анны Северинец, Телескоп, October 1, 2019, http://teleskop-by.org/2019/10/01/arkadij-vertyazin-belorusskaya-filologiya-anny-severinets/.

[32] С. Иванцевич (2019): "Концепция информационного отчуждения", Витьбич, October 30, 2019, http://vitbich. org/koncepciya-informacionnogo-otchuzhdeniya/.

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In their articles, the bloggers use not only ideological arguments, but also pragmatic ones. For example, they reiterate that besides political benefits, Belarus will also gain numerous economic advantages from the integration process with Russia,[33] while the end aim of the Union State is to improve the well-being of the citizens.[34] At the same time, they aspire to demonstrate that the attempts of Belarusian political elite to build the mutually beneficial relations with the EU are harmful and in the end will bring only problems in both political and economic dimensions.[35]

Dzermant, Krishtapovich and other bloggers also frequently mention that the USA and their proxy Poland[36] are aggressively trying to interfere with the integration process and are provoking conflicts between the two allies.[37] They do this by dispatching military forces near the borders of Belarus,[38] publishing various "malicious" reports,[39] falsifying the results of general census,[40] providing financial and ideological support to the local political opposition[41] and bloggers (e.g. to NEXTA)[42] or via distribution of Pole's Card by the Belarusian neighbor.[43] The bloggers react harshly to the attempts of the Belarusian authorities to enhance the information security and delimit the influence of Russian in the media sphere (so-called conception of information security). Such attempts are called "information alienation".[44]

Summarizing, the strategic narrative on integration of Russia and Belarus has been one of the most heavily presented throughout the materials, generated by the pro-Russian bloggers. In most of them, the integration has been described as a natural process, the logical outcome of the historical development of relations between the two countries. More than that, according to the bloggers, integration is devoid of any threats to Belarus and holds only advantages both in economic sphere (Belarus will continue enjoying economic benefits), in political and military dimensions (the country will withstand the attempts of the West to absorb it and will retain its sovereignty thanks to the alliance with the bigger brother), in the cultural domain (Russian culture will fill in the ideological lacunae left by the weak national identity) and, finally, in the

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[33] "Что на самом деле сулит углубленная интеграция Беларуси и России", Гродно Daily, September 16, 2019, http://grodnodaily.net/2019/09/16/chto-na-samom-dele-sulit-uglublennaya-integraciya-belarusi-i-rossii/.

[34] Клишас: Цель интеграции России и Беларуси состоит в повышении качества жизни людей двух стран, Белорусский политринг, October 19, 2019, https://politring.com/country/29245-klishas-cel-integracii-rossii-i- belarusi-sostoit-v-povyshenii-kachestva- zhizni-lyudey-dvuh-stran.html.

[35] "Интеграция как война образов: Минску нужна своя "история успеха", Берестье News, December 27, 2019, http://berestje-news.org/2019/12/27/integraciya-kak-vojna-obrazov-minsku-nuzhna-svoya-istoriya-uspexa/

[36] "Дипломатическое фиаско польского руководства", Наш Гомель, September 2, 2019, https://sozh.info/ diplomaticheskoe-fiasko-polskogo-rukovodstva/.

[37] "Американцы провоцируют конфликт России и Беларуси", Mogilew.by, October 16, 2019, https://mogilew. by/note/193734-amerikancy-provociruyut-konflikt-rossii-i-belarusi.html.

[38] А. Дзермант (2019): "Американцы наращивают военный кулак на рубежах Беларуси", Наш Гомель, September 27, 2019, https://sozh.info/amerikancy-narashhivayut-voennyjj-kulak-na-rubezhakh-belarusi/.

[39] "Американцы провоцируют конфликт России и Беларуси", Mogilew.by, October 16, 2019, https://mogilew. by/note/193734-amerikancy-provociruyut-konflikt-rossii-i-belarusi.html.

[40] О. Коваленок (2019): "Я помню, кто я": как Польша тихой сапой заселяет Беларусь "поляками", Наш Гомель, October 2, 2019, https://sozh.info/ya-pomnyu-kto-ya-kak-polsha-tikhojj-sapojj-zaselyaet-belarus-polyakami/.

[41] "Польская дорога белорусской оппозиции: неразделенная любовь", Mogilew.by, November 13, 2019, https://mogilew.by/note/194502-polskaya-doroga-belorusskoy-oppozicii-nerazdelennaya-lyubov.html.

[42] "Польские интересы в местной обертке", Витьбич, November 1, 2019, http://vitbich.org/polskie-interesy- v-mestnoj-obertke/.

[43] "Минус крупный город. Именно столько белорусов оформили карту поляка", Витьбич, September 30, 2019, http://vitbich.org/minus-krupnyj-gorod-imenno-stolko-belorusov-oformili-kartu-polyaka/.

[44] С. Иванцевич (2019): "Концепция информационного отчуждения", Витьбич, October 30, 2019, http://vitbich. org/koncepciya-informacionnogo-otchuzhdeniya/.

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ideological realm (the concept of the "Russian World" will replace incomprehensible Belarusian ideology).

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Generally speaking, all the strategic narratives, mentioned above, serve several aims: a) to influence the decision-making process and to bounce the authorities into rush decisions; b) to influence public opinion and to win new supporters among the Belarusian population; c) "to test public reaction to certain ideas or analysis thereof" (Hubarevic, interview 1.01.2020). For the latter, for example, the outlets purposefully feed the audience certain information, making it believe that the decision on integration will be sooner or later made (ibid.). One of our respondents, political scientist Yahorau, in particular, mentioned: "Russia indeed would like to influence the public opinion in Belarus, [those people], who support integration […] They form the public attitudes, and, on the other hand, they are trying to influence the public opinion" (interview 12.01.2020). The interviewee, in particular, recalled the opinion polls, conducted by the Center for Spatial Analysis in International Relations at Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), according to which 90 percent of Belarusians support integration with Russia (57,6% backed up the alliance with Russia, while 31,8% preferred partnership based on the international agreements). However, the Belarusian sociologists[45] argued that the authors of the polls did not get necessary accreditation, while the questions were incorrectly formulated. Also, the results contradicted other multiple polls, conducted by the Belarusian accredited sociological centers.

At the same time, from the analysis of the websites it becomes evident that they were not used in a pro- active mode (or as an information warfare), meaning they did not try to actively feed the public certain agenda, but delimited themselves to the legitimization of a certain worldview instead. In other words, they did not offer outright fake news, but constructed narratives, built upon the distorted information. To do this, websites actively exchanged the links to other similar resources, creating echo-chambers, within which only certain narratives were promoted. Mainly, the media outlets tried to create the image of integration as an inevitable process that will bring only benefits to Belarus. Yahorau mentioned: "During the integration processes, one can notice the significant activity of Russian media and structures retransmitting information in Belarus – public pages, bloggers, journalists […]. Besides, there are expert groups such as IMHOclub or Sputnik. At the same time, this resource was not used to the fullest extent" (interview 3.01.2020).

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[45] А. Домбровский (2019): "Половина белорусов выступает не за союзнические, а за партнерские отношения с Россией", Інстытут Сацыялогii, December 4, 2019, http://socio.bas-net.by/polovina-belorusov-vystupaet-ne-za- soyuznicheskie-a-za-partnerskie-otnosheniya-s-rossiej/.

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The image of the political opposition in the monitored media

Belarusian political opposition: overview

Belarusian political opposition operates in a complicated environment under the authoritarian regime installed in Belarus in 1994. For the purpose of this article, the term opposition refers to non-pro-governmental political actors who operate in the public field. Political actors, including registered political parties and organizations which de facto act as such, but are denied official registration, work in the conditions where it is nearly impossible to obtain funding from domestic sources and they rather rely on external funding from foreign donor organizations.

Opposition activists experience pressure by the state and receive fines for their activities. According to the Human Rights Watch, in 2019 the laws and regulations governing public associations remain restrictive, preventing rights groups or political opposition movements from operating freely.[46] Particularly, authorities continued to deny registration to independent groups and opposition parties on arbitrary pretexts. Similarly, expression of public dissent is restricted, e.g. street protests are dispersed by the police, activists are detained, fined, sometimes disposed to brutal treatment in the detention facilities.

Belarusian elections are subject to criticism for unfair conditions for the opposition and violations of electoral standards. Thus, during the parliamentary elections 2019 both domestic and OSCE/ODIHR pointed out the lack of transparency of the vote count and the bias of the electoral commissions.[47] In addition, during the parliamentary campaign 2019 authorities narrowed opportunities for the opposition candidates for campaigning, including scarce media coverage.[48]

Observations from the media monitoring

The monitored media label a number of actors as the "opposition", naming as such not only the political parties, but also independent media, bloggers, civil activists, even those campaigning for environmental or human rights causes. The term 'opposition' is used as a synonym of nationalism, Russophobia, and radicalism that brings unrest to the society. Some materials contain explicit hate speech. Thus, a blog article on grodnodaily. net not only criticizes Tatsiana Karatkevich, leader of the Tell the Truth campaign, for her visit to the Brussels headquarters of NATO, interpreting this as a sign of collaboration with the so-called Western aggressor, but the author also states that "in North Korea someone like Tatsiana Karatkevich would be hanged upside down".[49] This observation of the hate speech content is

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[46] "Belarus Events 2019", Human Rights Watch, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/belarus.

[47] "The parliamentary elections 2019: assessments by domestic and international observers, appeals of the results", Belarus in Focus, November 18-24, 2019, https://belarusinfocus.info/election-campaign/parliamentary- elections-2019-assessments-domestic-and-international-observers.

[48] "The Parliamentary elections results: backsliding across the board, no opposition in parliament, massive fraud with turnout and rigging of results", Belarus in Focus, November 11-17, 2019, https://belarusinfocus.info/ election-campaign/parliamentary-elections-results-backsliding-across-board-no-opposition-parliament.

[49] В. Концевой (2019): "Дурной пример", Гродно Daily, December 23, 2019, http://grodnodaily.net/2019/12/23/ durnoj-primer/.

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consistent with the earlier study by Andrei Yeliseyeu who pointed out that the network of the regional pro-Russian resources in Belarus contains hate speech.[50]

During the monitoring period, the media constructed a negative image of the opposition with regard to the following events: Russia-Belarus integration talks and the protests against it, as well as the parliamentary campaign 2019 (the media both criticised the opposition parties in general as corrupted by the West or incapable of mobilizing public support, and conducted information attacks on particular opposition candidates running for the elections). In addition, the bloggers covered other events, the opposition took part in, such as the reburial of the rebels of the anti-Russian uprising of 1863-1864 or the public discussions around the safety of the Astravets nuclear power plant construction.

An example of the defamation against the opposition candidates could be an article on dranik.org where the local candidate, Sergei Mazan, was called "a clown" who did not have public support among the voters.[51] In a similar vein, another dranik.org article attacked candidate Alexandr Kabanov, where the anonymous author brought details of the candidate's personal life in an effort to present him as a bad father, partner, and entrepreneur. The article contains a number of allegations which could not be either confirmed or denied, yet construct a strongly negative image of the opposition activist, and the material also contains photos of the candidates' housing property and his personal photos that were obtained in an unclear way. It is noteworthy that the article is a reprint from allbel.info, a website that publishes anonymous materials and positions itself as a "group of journalists" who write for "those who are able to think".[52]

Similar materials against the opposition candidates were published across other monitored media. Thus, in an op-ed on berestje-news.org the author not only calls the opposition "political impotents" due to the fact that they did not get any parliamentary seats at the elections 2019, but also claims that the opposition candidates act aggressively at the polling stations and groundlessly report violations during the voting. The author also praises the elected pro-government MPs, stressing their professional achievements, in contrast with the opposition candidates whom he calls shameful.[53] In the similar vein, one of the articles argues that the opposition takes part in the elections only to receive foreign grants and to get publicity.[54]

As to the coverage of the parliamentary elections per se, the monitored media covered the parliamentary campaign, the voting period and the work of the electoral commissions and the

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[50] А. Елисеев (2019): "Кардинальные перемены в антибелорусской дезинформации и пропаганде: анализ количественных и качественных изменений", Исследовательский центр EAST (Eurasian States in Transition), April 2019, http://east-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Belarus-Disinformation-Propaganda-2019-RU. pdf?fbclid=I wAR0bfRD-1ETKJgyrAHlqw-oE9R3SwbcS3Noju7VafdUVNZ-AB7sz1AB4YZ0.

[51] "Сергей Мазан: цирк уехал, а клоуны остались", Драник, October 9, 2019, http://dranik.org/2019/10/09/сергей- мазан-цирк-уехал-а-клоуны-остал/.

[52] "Амбиции не спрячешь: как Александр Кабанов строит политические планы", Allbel.info, https://allbel. info/odnako/130.html.

[53] Ю. Котович (2019): "Народная поддержка", Берестье News, November 24, 2019, http://berestje-news.org/ 2019/11/24/yurij-kotovich-narodnaya-podderzhka/.

[54] "Парламентская «вакханалия», или Как во время выборов оппозиционные партии соревнуются между собой", Драник, October 8, 2019, https://dranik.org/2019/10/08/парламентская-вакханалия-или-как-в/.

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elections results. According to Aksana Shelest, there was no significant media influence on the parliamentary campaign, given that the Belarusian parliament does not have substantial political powers.[55]

Thus, the analytical articles covered the elections neutrally, describing the advantages of the majoritarian system compared to the party lists;[56] or reporting on the elections turnout and the structure of the newly elected parliament.[57] The general narrative was that the elections were conducted correctly and in accordance with the law. Besides the criticism of the opposition participation in the elections, the media voiced criticism of the observers, both international and local, who reported fraud and violations of the electoral standards. Thus, the observers were labeled as "racketeers from the 90s"[58] and it was claimed they were "bribed by the West".[59] At the same time, the news sections of the monitored media provided the reports by the Russian and CIS observers who concluded that the elections had complied with the international standards.

The sources under consideration largely put forward an idea that for opposition the parliamentary campaign of 2019, as well as allegedly all the other previous political campaigns, was "neither a struggle for power, nor a struggle for the promotion of European values, but merely a fight for the Western grants". In other words, opposition is seen as fundamentally corrupted, with cynical leaders only doing USA's bidding. Still, in some cases bloggers generated creative narratives. For example, Panteleimon Fillipovich in the article "Parliamentary elections in Belarus: looking into the depth"[60] puts forward an idea that it will be new pro-Western pro-Catholic deputies who will dominate in the Parliament: "Catholic community will get a significant representation in the Parliament, despite the theme of interconfessional national consolidation [re-emerging in the speeches of political elite]. This majority will be always supporting West, Vatican, Poland with its dreams about the "third Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth" with Kresy Wschodnie and the Polish Roman Catholic church domination over them". Among the main candidates that go from this core, there could be, in author's view, the head of Hrodna regional executive committee Aliaksandar Sanhin, Valery Varanietski and Valery Mitskevich, the confidants of Minister of Foreign Affairs Uladzimir Makey. Both of them were known for their "Russophobic ideological position". In other words, the Russian World ideologists identify the enemies not only among the Belarusian opposition and civil society, but also within the circles of ruling political elite, namely, Minister of Foreign Affairs, who tries to build a constructive dialogue with the

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[55] Interview with Aksana Shelest (Dec 25).

[56] А. Дзермант (2019): "Выборы в белорусский парламент принесут свежую струю в политический ландшафт", Наш Гомель, September 10, 2019, https://sozh.info/vybory-v-belorusskijj-parlament-prinesut-svezhuyu-struyu- v-politicheskijj-landshaft/.

[57] К. Волнистая (2019): "Выборы в парламент Беларуси: затишье перед реформами?", Телескоп, November 25, 2019, https://teleskop-by.org/2019/11/25/vybory-v-parlament-belarusi-zatishe-pered-reformami/.

[58] "Главред «Беларусь сегодня»: Поведение наблюдателей на выборах напомнило методы работы рэкета в 90-е", Белорусский политринг, November 24, 2019, https://politring.com/country/30011-glavred-belarus- segodnya-povedenie-nablyudateley-na-vyborah-napomnilo- metody-raboty-reketa-v-90-e.html.

[59] "Андрей Лазуткин: Как устроено «независимое наблюдение» изнутри", Белорусский политринг, November 29, 2019, https://politring.com/articles/30144-andrey-lazutkin-kak-ustroeno-nezavisimoe-nablyudenie-iznutri.html.

[60] Пантелеимон Филиппович, "Парламентские выборы в Белоруссии: взгляд в глубину", Телескоп, November 21, 2019, https://teleskop-by.org/2019/11/21/parlamentskie-vybory-v-belorussii-vzglyad-v-glubinu/.

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Western countries. This trend has become especially pronounced in Belarusian foreign policy after the annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine in 2014.

There is a set of articles across all the monitored media where the modern Belarusian opposition is discussed in the context of the history. Thus, a video "How Belarusian opposition media justify Nazis" draws parallels between the Belarusians who collaborated with the Nazis under the occupation with the present day opposition actors who have ties with the West.[61] Firstly, the author aims to discredit the newspaper novychas.by that published the aforementioned article, labelling this medium as the newspaper that publishes biased materials in the Belarusian language. Secondly, the author accuses the medium of justifying the atrocities on the occupied territories during the World War II. In the original novychas.by piece it is argued that although there were collaborators among the local population, not all of them chose voluntarily to work for the Nazi invaders.[62] Although the issues around the life on the occupied territories during the World War II are a sensitive topic and could be a subject to multiple interpretations, it should be backed up by historical evidence, rather than opinion claims. The author of the video makes arbitrary statements, such as that the "collaborators" destroyed villages and murdered people under the white-red-white flag (the historic flag of Belarus and the flag currently used by the Belarusian opposition), thus casting aspersions on the image of the Belarusian opposition.

Among other history-related topics, there is a set of articles dedicated to the reburial of Kastus Kalinouski, the leader of the anti-Russian uprising in 1863 on the Polish, Belarusian, and Lithuanian territories. This event was attended by a number of Belarusian opposition leaders and ordinary Belarusians who consider Kastus Kalinouski to be the fighter for the Belarusian independence in the 19th century. This event drew attention of the monitored media who negatively covered the reburial ceremony and disputed the historical significance of the 1863 uprising. An example of such coverage could be an article arguing that Belarusian opposition artificially borrows Polish heroes such as Kastus Kalinouski and Tadeusz Kościuszko, and claiming that those figures do not have ties with the Belarusian history.[63]

In addition, the bloggers draw attention to the news related to the usage of the Belarusian language. Thus, the public initiative to collect signatures for Belarusian toponymy in Braslau region is presented as ethnic chauvinists' activities and the author calls for the unity of the Russia-Belarus Union State supporters.[64]

Another example could be the public discussion of the environmental concerns around the Astravets nuclear power plant. The Astravets plant is a subject of a heated debate among the

[61] "Как белорусские оппозиционные СМИ оправдывают нацистов", Mogilew.by, September 4, 2019, https:// mogilew.by/note/192638-kak-belorusskie-oppozicionnye-smi-opravdyvayut-nacistov.html.

[62] I. Мельнікаў (2019): "Забытыя ахвяры партызанскай вайны", Новы час, July 4, 2019, https://novychas.by/poviaz/ zabytyja-ahvjary-partyzanskaj-vajny.

[63] "Польская дорога белорусской оппозиции: белорусские национальные герои из Польши", Mogilew.by, September 12, 2019, https://mogilew.by/note/192873-polskaya-doroga-belorusskoy-oppozicii-belorusskie-nacionalnye-geroi-iz-polshi.html.

[64] "Евгений Константинов: Браславский инцидент", Белорусский политринг, December 3, 2019, https:// politring.com/articles/30200-evgeniy-konstantinov-braslavskiy-incident.html.

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Belarusian environment activists, politicians, and also an issue that complicates relations with Lithuania, where the Lithuanian authorities are concerned about environmental risks and also about the fact that the Astravets plant is being built on the Russian money, thus it can potentially be used as a tool of geopolitical influence both on Belarus and Lithuania. In that regard, the monitored media covered the public discussions on that matter, stating that the opposition, along with the environment experts, serve "Western interests", while the plant construction is safe and that Russia does not pose any threats.[65]

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Essentially any group or an individual who does not favor the current government's course of actions and pro- Russian discourse is labeled as the "opposition". The opposition is used as a negative term and the synonym of nationalism and radicalism, which is dangerous for the public order. Materials target political parties and particular opposition candidates who ran for the elections 2019. A number of articles were reprinted from other sources, promoting Russia-centered agenda. Some materials were anonymous, while attacking specific opposition activists and aiming to discredit them through publishing details of their personal lives, those details being obtained from unclear sources.

The formation of negative "Others": Constitutive role of narratives on Ukraine and Poland

While conducting the content analysis of (pro-)Russian propagandist outlets in Belarus, we noticed that a solid amount of them were devoted to the events in Ukraine and in some EU countries that are either sharing the border with Russia (e.g. Baltic states) or that the geopolitical giant is having some ideological, territorial or civilizational confrontation with.

Summarizing, we identified the following trends, typical for all of the outlets under consideration: mis- representation of information, bogus narratives, references to unreliable sources and unverified data, attempts to influence and manipulate the public opinion, usage of hate speech, Russian-centric agenda, and revisionism (biased re-evaluation of the historical events).

Unsurprisingly, Ukraine takes a special place in the materials of the propagandist bloggers in the propagandist outlets supported by Russia. Since 2014, Russia has been at war with Ukraine and has used various instruments in order to influence the public opinion and play havoc with the political process in the neighboring country. In particular, it has launched a series of information attacks, accompanied by a spread of false stories, activity of bot-nets and dissemination of disinformation to undermine the state and national security.

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[65] Л. Мережковский (2019): "Как оппозиция плодит мифы вокруг БелАЭС", Mogilew.by, September 17, 2019, https://mogilew.by/note/192991-kak-oppoziciya-plodit-mify-vokrug-belaes.html.

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However, Ukraine is not the sole aim of Russian attacks, with the political elite of Russia trying to draw into its orbit other post-Communist states that proclaimed independence in the 90's and became part of the EU family. Poland, in particular, has been another frequently criticized country in the materials under consideration. In an attempt to retain the influence over the neighboring countries (fulfilling the ambition to "gather Russian lands"), Russia attempts to attack Poland, perceiving it as the USA's proxy interfering with the process of deepening integration with Belarus. At the same time, Russia does not pretend to take control over Poland, but is open to the confrontations with the closest US ally. In some of the most popular materials, devoted to Belarus and Ukraine, Russia cultivates the ideas of the "Russian World" and Slavic triunity, calling the "'situation of the separateness' a temporary state". While speaking about the Baltic states, pro-Russian bloggers recall the situation with the Russian-speaking minority, who "became the hostages of the local ethnocracies in their own countries."[66]

Again, writing about Poland, pro-Russian bloggers like to speculate on the country's partnership with the USA, recalling historical context and common legacy. For example, the reluctance of the Polish government to invite Russia to the 80th anniversary of the World War II breakout led to a huge outcry from the bloggers: "[how did it happen that the country] that liberated Europe from the Nazi domination and suffered huge losses – 26 million people, was not invited to Westerplatte? They try to rewrite history, humiliate our country and take away the great Victory. And this is not the first time, the West does it".[67]

Regarding the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine and attempts to regulate it, the pro-Russian bloggers reiterate that the aim of the Ukrainian elite is not to find a compromise solution to the solution, but to shift the responsibility for launching the war to Russia.

It is to be noted that the relevant articles emerged in the blogs with regard to such events, as another round of Minsk negotiations or the meeting within the Normandy format in Paris. For instance, one could find the following reaction to the suggestion of the so-called Steinmeier Formula, published on website "Nash Homel"[68]: "Not even tens or hundreds of thousands took part in the protest actions "Let us say 'No' to capitulation". The crowd at Maidan in Kyiv and other cities looked sparse and unconvincing"[69] (the bloggers also used hate speech extensively). In that same article the author said that "the Ukrainian authorities dream that as the result of the reintegration of Donbas into Ukraine, the opposition will be physically annihilated, and the Donbas population will be deprived of their rights".[70] Correspondingly, the bloggers equal the separatists and Russian military officers to opposition. At the same time, the refusal of the Ukrainian authorities to grant the autonomous status to the occupied

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[66] А. Кочетков, "Русский народ: ситуация разделённости как временное состояние", Наш Гомель,

[67] В. Малышев (2019): "Иль нам с Европой спорить ново?", Столетие, September 4, 2019, http://www. stoletie.ru/vzglyad/il_nam_s_jevropoj_sporit_novo 925.htm.

[68] Д. Родионов (2019): "«Азов» вышел из-под контроля и нанес удар по режиму Зеленского", Свободная пресса, October 7, 2019, https://svpressa.ru/war21/article/245639/?fbclid=IwAR3ZrtEzRaAJ_yLTrywcV00tqw39 PmUwoXU3skz-O32 eghkIu7hHIevY594.

[69] "«Азов» вышел из-под контроля и нанес удар по режиму Зеленского", Наш Гомель, October 9, 2019, https://sozh.info/azov-vyshel-iz-pod-kontrolya-i-nanes-udar-po-rezhimu-zelenskogo/.

[70] Ibid.

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territories was represented as "the annihilation of the Russian language in all the spheres of social life".

At the beginning of the 20th century, Russian intellectuals actively discussed the ideas of Russian messiahship that were later picked up by the Russian President Vladimir Putin. In particular, he called Ivan Ilyin, the author of the concept of Eurasianism, one of his favorite philosophers. This concept lay behind the trajectory of Russian development (Eurasian Economic Union) until the outbreak of military conflict in Ukraine. After the Euromaidan in 2014 Russia launched the project on defending Russian-speaking people and gathering the former Russian territories under the title the "Russian World". In particular, one of the most prolific bloggers Aleksey Dzermant legitimized this idea in the following way: "First of all, one should take into account that the Russian identity is undergoing a crisis. In fact, after the dissipation of the USSR we were thrown back into the XVI—XVII century with the separation into West and East Rus', where Muscovy scrambles between gathering lands, isolationism, Western pressures and attempts to turn to the East, while Ukraine and Belorussiya turn into the indecisive frontier and sometimes even the front line (as was at Donbas). Depending on the political and military situation in the border region in the Eastern Europe and West Eurasia, Belarus could be either "caravanserai at the new Silk Road," controlling and conducting people, transport, goods, services and investments between Eurasia and Europe and getting some profit from it, or a stronghold, collective Brest fortress, closing key routes and opposing the increasingly likely Western aggression".[71]

At the same time, the bloggers treat Ukrainian measures taken to restore their territorial unity and their response to the Russian military aggression exclusively as the phenomena of integral nationalism. In particular, they state: "Proceeding from the psychoanalytical approach, the phenomenon of the Ukrainian integral nationalism corresponds to the "revolt against the figure of Father".[72] In other words, Russia is represented as an older brother to Belarusians and Ukrainians. The pro-Russian author Aleksey Kochetkov formulated this in the following way in his book (its excerpts were published by Podneprovie-info and Teleskop): "Today, the representatives of the Western Ukraine set the tone for the Ukrainian political life in general. We witness, how the Ukrainian state quickly moves to its self-annihilation. However, the tragedy of the contemporary Ukraine is that its political elite, who decided to stick to the integral nationalism, does not have the opportunity [to stop this failure]".[73]

It is to be noted that in general, the news or neutral articles that do not put forward Russian agenda appear to be reposted from other websites. Still, there are some unique materials, with some of them written under pseudonyms. This is, most likely, due to the threat to be persecuted in Belarus (one can recall the so-called "Regnum case"[74]), because many of the

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[71] А. Дзермант (2019): "Новая русская идентичность", Наш Гомель, October 23, 2019, https://sozh.info/novaya- russkaya-identichnost/.
[72] А. Кочетков (2019): "Истоки интегрального национализма в Украине", Поднепровье инфо, October 5, 2019, http://podneprovie-info.com/2019/10/05/istoki-integralnogo-nacionalizma-v-ukraine/.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Belarusian authors of the Russian resources "Regnum", "Lenta.ru" and "Eurasia Daily" Sergei Shiptenko, Dmitriy Alimkin and Yuriy Pavloviets spent over a year in jail, starting in December 2016. They were found guilty of inciting ethnic hatred, each was sentenced for five years of prison, but the sentences were suspended for three years.

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materials could be qualified as actions undermining Belarusian statehood and sovereignty or incitement to ethnic hatred. Given this threat, the reason behind Belarusian authorities' passive reaction to those materials remains unclear. In an attempt to explain this trend, we interviewed several Belarusian experts, who followed the latest developments closely.

The analyst of the Center of European Transformation Andrei Yeliseyeu notes that "the Belarusian state does not support those websites and even implements various measures to try and pressurize them – one could recall, for example, Regnum case. Still, on a local level, some pro-Russian initiatives could take place. They are not sanctioned from above, though. There is a common allied rhetoric [between the two countries], which is maintained by the public officials responsible for the ideological legitimization of the political processes. Hence, we witness ambivalent relation [within those circles]: both reluctance [to allow the expansion] of Russian influence, and, at the same time, repetition of the arguments on [deepened] integration".

The leader of the movement "Za Svobodu"[75] Hubarevich argued that "the authorities do not have instruments to withstand such information influence. Their staff ideologists or those responsible for the formation of the state agenda keep silence, because Lukashenka is the main speaker on the crucial questions in Belarus, and if he does not express his opinion publicly, the others do not say anything as well. This is really dangerous, because it shows that the system is rather fragile. I do not have any doubts that there are threats. [However] it is difficult to say, to which extent elites are aware of this. If there is no reaction from the side of the state or it is not sufficient, it is difficult to understand (evaluate objectively), why this happens. They either cannot deal with this, or think that everything is under control. Independent media operate most effectively in this situation – [in fact] they fulfill the functions, which should have been implemented by the official channels: they check the facts, analyze them, reveal [the dangerous bits], evaluate the reality of threats and thus withstand the information influence from abroad. [In other words] they enact the measures that the state media could not afford themselves to do, because they could be qualified as an attack of allies [...]. The authorities should be interested [in those measures], because there is an opportunity [to oppose the information attacks], without undermining themselves and revealing that this is the official position. That is why it is important to lessen the control over media, grant the opportunity for the independent media to be registered. Possibly, it is important, to a certain extent, to control, who is behind some media outlets (authorities currently do this in relation to pro-Western media), also it is necessary to pay close attention to those [channels] of information influence that originated in the East. In the long run, [the authorities] should grant them the opportunity for registration and free entrance to advertisement services. This could allow Belarusian media to scale up internal resources and not to be dependent on the foreign support, which would help in the situation, when the support of information security is necessary.

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[75] They took active part in observing parliamentary elections 2019 as well.

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Taking into account that Belarus is currently facing such serious information threats, would it be reasonable for the Belarusian authorities to cooperate with the representatives of the civil society? A sociologist, the head of "Belarusian Analytical Workshop", Andrei Vardamatsky answers negatively to this question: "[the authorities and civil society] have opposing aims: the public officials do not aspire to withstand fakes, but, rather, to disseminate and enhance the official point of view". To which extent could the foreign information influence (from Russia, in particular) be considered a threat to Belarus, though?

Experts recognize that the risks are serious; they treat the situation differently, however. Political scientist Yury Shautsou, in particular, argues that the Belarusian authorities do not evaluate those threats in adequate terms: "We did not hear any calls to come to the square from the East, as opposed to the West (the interviewee means NEXTA Telegram-channel). Sociologist, lecturer at the Belarusian State University Alena Artsiomentka says, "the current websites could influence the situation only potentially. They are not subjects in Russian Federation [currently], but we can say that they clear the way [for a more serious interference]. All those multiple websites of unknown origin, such as "Nash Gomel", that are acting on our territory and put forward Russian agenda, at some point could act within Russian smart force. Or, something in this vein, to destabilize the situation in the regions. This is not a purposeful action oriented towards this very moment, but rather a stepping stone to something.

Coming back to the analysis of pro-Russian websites' content, the authors not only attack Ukrainian statehood, but also dismiss the Ukrainian language as artificial one, using hate speech extensively. In particular, they state: "The freak of the so-called "Ukrainian language" is in fact poor, politically suicidal, linguistically artificial […]. After thirty years it is still alien to the majority of population of so-called 'Ukraine' […] For any Russian the time has come not to say something along such lines as 'Oh, I do not like Banderites, but adore the Ukrainian language,' but to recognize, at last, that the so-called 'Ukrainian language' is an enemy assault rifle, aiming at our hearts and minds, hearts and minds of our compatriots.'[76] The discussions about politically correct use of "Ukraine" or "the Ukraine" has long been present, but the author used the offensive hints in the title to offend the Ukrainians.[77]

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to highlight several aspects.

The strategic narrative on integration between Russia and Belarus has been one of the most heavily presented throughout the materials, generated not by pro-Russian journalists, but by bloggers. In most of them, the integration has been described as a natural process, the logical

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[76] В. Мицкевич (2019): "Украинский язык имеет такое же отношение к малороссийскому наречию, как нынешняя нацистская Украина к УССР", Телескоп, October 16, 2019, http://teleskop-by.org/2019/10/16/ ukrainskij-yazyk-imeet-takoe-zhe-otnoshenie-k-malorossijskomu-narechiyu-kak-nyneshnyaya-natsistskaya-ukraina-k-ussr/?fbclid=IwAR2D3jWbAaKkwKYTekjHmfg7eeAQ-EDtAe1CpUDDWQ2DzrmJeBe1dWuXevA.
[77] "Вадим Елфимов: Где Украина — в или на?!", Телескоп, November 4, 2019, https://teleskop-by.org/2019/11/04/ vadim-elfimov-gde-ukraina-v-ili-na/.

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outcome of the historical development of relations between the two countries. More than that, according to the bloggers, integration is devoid of any threats to Belarus and holds only advantages both in economic sphere (Belarus will continue enjoying economic benefits), in political and military dimensions (the country will withstand the attempts of the West to absorb it and will retain its sovereignty thanks to the alliance with the bigger brother), in the cultural domain (Russian culture will fill in the ideological lacunae left by the weak national identity) and, finally, in the ideological realm (the concept of the "Russian World" will replace the incomprehensible Belarusian ideology).

The monitored media label a number of actors as the "opposition", thus including not only the political parties, but also independent media, bloggers, independent civil activists, even those campaigning for environmental or human rights causes, as well as independent think tank experts. To sum up, any group or an individual who does not favor the current government's course of actions and pro-Russian discourse is labelled as the "opposition".

The term 'opposition' is used as a synonym of nationalism, Russophobia, and radicalism which brings unrest to the society and poses a threat to the country's sovereignty. Some materials contain explicit hate speech against certain politicians.

The monitored media construct a negative image of the political opposition, portraying them as corrupt pro- Western actors who are incapable to accumulate public support and who play a marginal role in the political field. During the parliamentary campaign there was a number of opinion pieces aiming to discredit particular opposition candidates and their electoral programs. Similar characterizations and descriptions appeared during other significant events throughout the monitoring period, such as the integration talks, the calls of the opposition for the street protests. They were presented as a threat to the public order and it was alleged that such calls did not get public support.

In order to withstand information attacks from abroad effectively, it could be useful to analyze the experience of the neighboring countries, Ukraine in particular, because it is against this Eastern European country that Russia has been conducting a hybrid war for more than 6 years. It is difficult to deny that the authorities have made numerous mistakes in domestic policy: Donbas and Crimea, for example, have been on the fringes of the state policy, with Russia steadily increasing its influence in these regions over years. Something similar, although to a significantly lesser extent, we can witness in the Belarusian regions, sharing border with Russia (namely, Vitsyebsk and Mahileu ones). It is there where one can find the largest quantity of pro- Russian resources and initiatives.

The situation has been exacerbated by the ambiguous geopolitical orientation of Belarus, because the authorities prefer not to transmit clearly defined messages to the citizens in the state outlets (sometimes even promoting Russian agenda, which the latest BAJ research has clearly shown). For example, the Belarusian authorities did not recognize Crimea occupation and expressed negative attitude towards the military conflict in Donbas and Russia's role in it. Nevertheless, public opinion with regard to the events in Ukraine has been formed almost

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exclusively by the Russian media, dominating in the Belarusian media field. It is evident that the political elite did not draw the conclusion about the potential threat of close relations with Russia, and found themselves exposed to danger during the "unexpected" demands to deepen integration in 2019. Still, it seems that the authorities became aware of the risks after the exhaustive discussions on tax maneuver and integration roadmaps, which ended in nothing. One of the signs of this could be Lukashenka's announcement, made as early as in January 2020, that Belarus will launch news channel similar to Euronews. However, this is not enough, because the Belarusian state media has been operating in the conditions of censorship and restricted free speech over the last 25 years. Hopefully, the information policy of "new" state media will be unbiased and objective, as opposed to the current oftentimes propagandist materials, but it remains to be seen.

We should remember that Russia's information influence has been related not only to a biased representation of contemporary political and geopolitical events, but to certain interpretation of history. For example, the monitored websites generated multiple "articles-odes," occasioned with the 75th anniversary of victory over Nazis that described how Belarus secures the historical memory about the Great Patriotic War. At the same time, Putin's regime launched another wave of iterating the information timed with the anniversary of the victory. Main aims of this attack have been as follows. First, to exaggerate Russia's role in the war against Nazi Germany (while Belarus and Ukraine, let alone alliance forces, are represented as those playing a minor role). Also, Kremlin makes attempts to redefine the meaning of Holocaust, stressing that it was not only Nazis who were responsible for mass killings of Jews on occupied territories, but their sympathizers from Poland, Ukraine, and Baltic countries are also to blame. The chief aim of that was to deepen controversies and conflicts in Eastern Europe, focusing on issues related to historical memory and weakening partner relations in the EU. The idea behind the strategic narrative of the "Russian World" is to weaken Europe and to restore Russia's influence over Ukraine, Georgia and Belarus, as strange as it may seem.

The same goal is pursued by the pro-Kremlin media, when they disseminate fake news about COVID-19, that has been spreading at a lightning speed in the world recently. This has been done to shatter the confidence of society towards the EU healthcare system, the report of the European External Action Service (EEAS) says. According to the document, since January 22, the experts identified around 80 cases of disinformation about COVID-19. They tracked the emergence of the disinformation materials to the fake accounts in social media, which until recently have been actively spreading the news about the events in Syria, protests of "yellow vests" in France, etc. It is to be noted, that the users publish fake news in several European languages (English, German, Spanish, Italian and French).

Recommendations of experts

It is worthy to note that, according to all experts, there was a low information impact during the timeframe of the parliamentary campaign, while the opposite was observed during the Russia-Belarus integration talks. The majority of experts agreed that such influence had taken place and started long before the integration talks took place. Many experts brought up the

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examples of the publications by Russian newspaper Kommersant, which either leaked the insider information on the integration talks, or published materials   the reaction to which aimed to test the public opinion and allegedly attempted to shape the favorable opinion regarding the deepened integration.

Advice 1: the risks are not estimated adequately - additional analysis and information work is needed

The majority of the researchers agreed that the authorities underestimate the risks related to the information security and the external information influence from Russia, although political scientist Yury Shautsou gave the opposite assessment, concluding that the Belarusian authorities overestimate the Russian threat, considering that if the threat exists, it rather comes from the West rather than the East.

Political scientist Andrei Yahorau concluded that in Belarus there are structures that repeat the pro-Russian discourse, such as social media groups and chats, certain bloggers and journalists, media, including Russian medium Sputnik. Besides, there are expert groups such as IMHOclub, but, according to Andrei Yahorau, these are not used for the massive attacks.

Sociologist Alena Artsiomienka believes the authorities clearly lack the proper understanding of the scale of the information attack, conducted by Russia. Still, she believes that in the last several months, the political elite has finally started recognizing the necessity to enhance information security (although no adequate measures have been implemented in this respect). The main problem that needs to be addressed is an abundance   of Russian news content. Belarus needs to produce quality national content, but there is a lack of financial sources for this, while Russia, clearly, invests a lot of resources into the information influence: "The existing pro-Russian websites prepare the ground for the potential for the influence. All those numerous editor teams of unclear origin, such as "Nash Gomel", that operate in Belarus and promote pro-Russian agenda, rather intend to prepare for the future action in case of necessity".

Hubarevich notes that the authorities clearly lack instruments to counter the information influence: "Staff ideologists of the people, responsible for the formation of national [news] agenda, keep silence, because Lukashenka is the key speaker on all crucial questions". If he does not speak publicly, no one risks to take the responsibility upon themselves. This is, in his view, dangerous, because this creates the atmosphere of uncertainty and demonstrates the susceptibility of the system. We can only guess: either the authorities do not react, because they think that everything is under control, or they simply cannot cope with the information attacks. Independent media in this situation effectively implement the function, which is not fulfilled by the state TV-channels: they check facts, analyze the information and the reality of threats, thus withstanding the external influence.

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Advice 2: the authorities should implement harsh measures to ward off Russia

The Belarusian experts did not share the same idea on how exactly the authorities should react to the information attacks from Russia. However, they agreed that the actions should be more decisive. For example, Hubarevich says, the government has been using resolute measures against the independent media and political opposition (hence, in some cases, the media have to resort to self-censorship), but is far less audacious when it comes to withstanding Russian influence. He assumes that they simply do not have any instruments at their disposal to be able to struggle against the propagandist bloggers, putting forward Russian agenda.

Yahorau reminds that the authorities do not support the wave of disinformation in general, and adopted harsh measures against Regnum journalists in the past. Still, he believes that the situation is ambivalent, because the political elite maintains the "Union rhetoric" (meaning that they continue reassuring Russian highest ranks of their loyalty), at the same time allowing pro-Russian activities at the local level. Shautsova suggests that in this situation the Belarusian authorities should delimit the influence of Russian media, but to do this, "we should generate our own content. Another aspect is the search for technical solutions (building a system of defence), it is all about political will in the end, however".

Advice 3: to withstand information attacks, one should build cooperation between civil society and state

The experts have different estimates as to the possibilities for the cooperation between the non-state and state actors in the area of information security. Thus, Andrei Yeliseyeu notes, such cooperation is theoretically possible; the authorities, however, do not express any interest in such an interaction. Alena Artsiomienka does not believe in the likeliness of such a partnership: "Recently established Belarusian Institute of Strategic Research (BISR) declared that they would like to attract independent researchers to develop strategic plan [on withstanding the relevant challenges]; nothing has happened, though".

Andrei Yahorau considers that such cooperation is possible, and that the authorities should be more open to such a dialogue. At the same time, sociologist Andrei Vardamatski brings to the attention that the government and the civil society pursue different goals: for the Belarusian authorities, the ultimate goal is not a war on fakes, but rather dissemination and strengthening of the official point of view. Sociologist Aksana Shelest points out the low level of media literacy of the Belarusian population, which is related to the overall political passivity of the society. According to the research, the Belarusian society is susceptible to the Russian television, as is evident from the situation around Crimea in 2014. What is important, is that the recent sociological research conducted by the Center for European Transformation shows that even representatives of the active segment of the society, including opposition leaders and youth activists, hardly ever use the Western media, in part due to the language barrier and due to the easy accessibility of the Russian media.

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Sociologist Andrei Vardamatski concluded that it was not only the Russian media who "tested the ground" on the topic of the integration process, but some "fake" sociological institutions did that as well. In his article "I don't know such sociological organization as MGIMO", Vardamatski argues that the methods used for the public opinion polling on the issues of the integration are not scientific and that the purpose of such research is to make the idea of integration more popular among the Belarusians. One may conclude that the polling was conducted during the integration talks to manipulate public opinion.

Advice 4: media literacy should be increased

The majority of experts agreed that the overall level of media literacy in the Belarusian society is low, partially due to the fact that there is no specialized education starting from the elementary schools. Yeliseyeu argues that the literacy level is at the bottom, when it goes about the population and remains low among the journalists: "Even established Belarusian media could uncritically publish materials proceeding from conspiracy theories that reject scientifically proven facts such as global warming".

Artsiomienka also agrees that even independent media (which are expected to have higher level of literacy and professionalism) often make the same mistakes as the state-funded media.

According to Yuras Hubarevich, in order to improve the situation with the external information influence, the authorities should abolish pressure on the domestic Belarusian media, "giving them an opportunity for the registration and accreditation and free access to advertising services. This would give an opportunity to have internal Belarusian resources and not to depend on external financial support, which would in turn contribute to the information resilience".

Yahorau believes that the media literacy "should be taught starting from kindergartens". Another thing is the necessity to enhance national identity, which "allows to struggle against foreign interference", and to remain transparent, which will reinforce democratic institutions.

Advice 5: the conception of information security is good, but not enough

Another advice consists in the development of information security conception, which was adopted back in the first half of 2019. The document was designed to ward off the information attacks from abroad and introduced the term of information sovereignty. The latter is understood as an informational sphere, encircled by borders of the Republic of Belarus, which is devoid of any foreign influences. The document specifically focuses on the importance of the Belarusian history and language that lie at the core of the national identity and, hence, of the state's security.

Yahorau believes that this document in itself enlists crucial things, but lacks specific mechanisms on their realization. Hubarevich agrees that the conception simply does not work. Yeliseyeu is convinced that any document in this sphere is not enough and will not solve the

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relevant problem. For this one needs political will and peculiar steps that have not been implemented up until now: "The problem is not that the measures were spelled out insufficiently, but that they remain on paper".

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Anahit Parzyan

Cybersecurity and society: Challenges and the Reality (Armenia)

The cybersecurity field in Armenia is still in the early development stages and needs both conceptualization and distribution of main components and tasks to address them. Citizens, government, and private sector organizations do not fully enjoy yet a safe environment to live their life and conduct their business. The problem of that is not only the technical and institutional framework development, but the overall conception of cybersecurity importance and direct analyses of the losses cyber-attacks may bring to state systems and to population in general. With the rapid spread of technology and with the availability of smartphones, people become dependent on internet. Users, though, are not familiar with possible cyber threats, since there are no systematic state level awareness campaigns in Armenia to spread information and inform youngsters about possible crimes, so there is high probability of them to stand as victims. Currently, 82% of young people aged 15 to 24 years old are online in Armenia with tendency in getting even younger reaching 54.1% of children, who are under 15 years old. The campaign aimed to conduct a research to find out information regarding cybersecurity awareness in Armenia or unawareness related to the main topics of the campaign.

The campaign culminated with a public forum where the findings of the research were introduced, generated a discussion between, students, officials and technology specialist to find solution for further safe online surfing. The Forum culminated with a two hour special training for participants focusing on how to stay safe online as well as how to fill the cyberspace with positive content for further cooperation between young users not only in Armenia but also to build cyber-bridges with international young users for building a better and more peaceful cyberspace.

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The research was based on available data from Armenian and international open sources, interviews with officials, schools, universities and students. The conducted research focused on the following findings:

Cyber-hygiene and Privacy protection

Security has always been central for the protection of confidentiality, integrity and availability of personal data. With the increasing use of online and mobile applications, the advances of analytics and the Internet of Things, the need for data security is now more important than ever, considering the risks of new exposed system vulnerabilities and cyber-attacks, as well the vast opportunities for data combination and end users' tracking.[78]

Security of personal data is especially important in case of vulnerable groups of the public such as children, youngsters and seniors. While all the mentioned citizen groups have equal rights similar to regular adults, they are still in the risk zone from personal data processing perspective. Possible weak points can be:

- Lack of awareness of the risks involved,

- Improper compliance of the data protection methods with the principles of existing laws and regulations,

- Weak lawful basis for processing the personal data of the above-mentioned groups, etc.

Youngsters typically face different threats in comparison with the other vulnerable groups or regular adults. If compared with an adult, rather than a malicious email attachment, young people might be lured in by a scam that promises them free music or movies. Young people are also more trusting when it comes to people they have met online. Without the natural suspicion that adults develop, they might be tricked into sharing their passwords or other pieces of sensitive information. Therefore, it is important for them know how to behave safely online.

For Armenians, the principles of personal data protection are defined by the Constitution of Armenia.[79] Moreover, general rules have been pinpointed by the Law on Personal Data Protection[80] (Data Protection Law, hereafter) adopted by the Armenian Parliament on 18th of May, 2015, and entered into force on 1st of July, 2015. The given Law also covers majority of GDPR's requirements that may relate to Armenia in relation to data protection of EU citizens.

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[78] ENISA, Security of personal data, https://www.enisa.europa.eu/topics/data-protection/security-of-personal-data (10.01.2020).

[79] Amendments to the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia, (Chapter 2, Article 34), http://www.translation-centre.am/pdf/Translat/RA_Constitution/RA_Constitution_2015_en.pdf (15.12.2019).

[80] Law of the Republic of Armenia on protection of personal data,
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Additionally, Armenia has also ratified the European Convention on Human Rights the Article 8 of which covers data protection aspects as well.[81]

The Data Protection Law, adopted in 2015, defines the cases of personal data processing that is any activity related to personal data, no matter if automated, with or without use of technical means. On the other hand, the given Law does not clarify its jurisdictional scope. The Law's jurisdictional scope is further clarified through case laws and amendments to the Data Protection Law. Examples of sectoral laws in Armenia dealing with data protection-related topics are the Law on Banking Secrecy, the Law on Insurance and Insurance Activity, the Law on Combating Money Laundering and Terrorism Financing, the Law on Circulation of Credit Information and Activities of Credit Bureaus, the Labor Code of Armenia securing the privacy of workers' personal data, the Law on Electronic Communications, the Code on Administrative Offenses of Armenia, the Criminal Code, etc.[82] There are no special rules to be applied to spam, cookies and other equivalent tools. In Armenia, the number of cybersecurity threats is growing similar to global trends. According to the Police of RA, out of all the cybercrimes recorded in 2017, 67 have been cybercrimes related to theft of finances, and 26 cases have been theft of data from computers, including personal.[83] Despite many efforts invested by public bodies as well as various organizations aimed at increasing the awareness about personal data protection and preventing possible cases of violations of rights protected by the Law, the general public still remains less aware and relatively reserved towards this topic. For instance, the awareness survey of the public regarding the Personal Data Protection Law and what it entails has shown that over half of the respondents are not aware that they have the right to know, demand and receive information about their personal data stored in public as well as private organizations. Moreover, the respondents have not shown much concern if their data stored in public and/or private organizations is being processed or not.

To promote the given topic as well as to carry out the responsibilities prescribed by the Law for the last several years the Agency for Protection of Personal Data under the Ministry of Justice as well as other public organizations (United Nations representation in Armenia, "SOS Children's Villages" Armenian Charity Foundation, etc.) have been running initiatives collaboratively as well as individually. Several guidebooks have been published on different angles of personal data protection, e.g. social media-related guidebooks, special issues for younger audience, explanatory articles related to personal data usage for direct marketing purposes, etc. Different educational events have also been organized covering personal data protection topics. Due to the facts that the Data Protection Law was adopted and the Agency of Personal Data Protection was founded in 2015, it is clear that the field of personal data protection is relatively new and still emerging in the Republic of Armenia. Hence, the statistics showing a definite picture uncovering the current situation is still quite rough. Also,

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[81] Guide on Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. Right to respect for private and family life, home and correspondence, https://www.echr.coe.int/Documents/Guide_Art_8_ENG.pdf (07.01.2020).

[82] N. Beglaryan (2019): Data protection in Armenia: overview, https://www.dialog.am/storage/files/posts/posts_71034650951_Data_protection_in_Armenia_overview_2_.pdf (15.12.2019).

[83] G. Asryan (2019): The other side of the network is cybercrime, https://web.archive.org/web/20190524214124/https://www.media.am/cyber-crime-stat-in-armenia (02.02.2020).

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assumptions are often debatable when trying to define the ongoing as well as upcoming developments.

The situation is also obscure in case of vulnerable age groups such as children, youngsters, and the elderly, e.g. there is poor statistics on vulnerable groups, unplanned measures are taken for ensuring better (cyber)security of those from vulnerable groups. On the other hand, it is sure, efforts are needed to ensure safe and secure processing of personal data of every Armenian citizen within Armenia as well as outside of the country borders, given the rising tendency of data violations and threats globally. There is an obvious need to direct all the efforts for the development of the area and establishment of a healthy environment in regards to data protection.

As studies show, identity theft is more common among kids, teens and college students than any other age group,[84] and as the youth is more exposed to cybercrimes due to their extensive usage of technology and online platforms and being targeted through educational institutions, specific measures are needed for their protection. Possible options for improving the situation can be more collaborative projects targeting this age group, i.e. awareness raising campaigns, special publications, trainings, etc. Education in regards to the given topic should be strengthened by adding certain classroom hours for children in schools in order for them to understand the importance of personal data protection and as well as the activities needed for keeping proper cyber hygiene. Academic programs can also be developed to bring up a generation of professionals covering any upcoming needs of human resources in the field. International collaborations should also be increased through study visits, research projects, fighting against cybercrimes, etc. Once improved and sustained, the experience can be a used for other age groups making Armenia a reliable partner on the global platform in the field of data protection.

Safe online shopping in Armenia

While the other parts of the world have had their own development trends of e-shopping, in Armenia this field has been facing certain challenges interfering its growth. The main challenges have been legislative restrictions to deploy online payment methods (i.e. restrictions by the Central bank of RA), infrastructure failures in terms of relatively poor internet connection and coverage, local mentality giving preference to traditional shopping instead of online as well as to cash payments instead of non-cash.[85]

Neverthless, with Globbing, ONEX and Shop-In established in Armenia in the recent years, online shopping popularity has been growing lately. These shipping companies have opened the opportunity for the Armenian buyers to purchase goods from global e-retailers being shipped to Armenia within less than a month. Moreover, the opening of several online

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[84] R. Morad (2020): Why Teens Are at Risk for Identity Theft, NortonLifeLock, https://www.lifelock.com/learn-identity-theft-resources-teens-risk-identity-theft.html (02.02.2020).

[85] Panel discussion "Electronic trade in Armenia". Problems, development perspectives and features, http://www.panarmenian.net/arm/news/238029/ (17.01.2020).

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purchasing platforms has also been forming the culture of online shopping in Armenia, e.g. menu.am; goods.am, gg, etc. Finally, legislative, initiatives have also been taken by public as well as international organizations to make online shopping easy for the Armenians (Figure 9 & 10).[86]

As the field of e-shopping has not been a very popular topic in Armenia till the last few years, statistics and analysis about the field has been lacking or incomplete.[87] There is obvious lack of knowledge regarding online shopping as well. There is high vulnerability towards the security of online purchases despite the efforts of the state and banks to make this experience safe for the buyers.

- *Cybercrimes and Armenian e-buyers*

The new platforms leading to the increase of online shopping in Armenia also increase the chances for the Armenians to become the victims of cyber attacks. Moreover, the shipping companies giving locals the access to international e-shops increase the probability for Armenians to get involved in global cyber attacks.

On the other hand, despite the increasing trend of Armenians making e-purchases, this field still lacks analytics in regards to the number of cyberattack victims, most frequently used attacks harming the e-buyers, most vulnerable age groups, and so on.The information is absent also in case of the local e-retailers even though they might be keeping it inside their companies.[88] State authorities, i.e. Statistical Committee of Armenia, for now does not separate online and traditional shopping indicators; the Central Bank of RA previously has been publishing a few numbers in this regard in its periodicals which are not being published now. [89]

Safe online shopping and the youth

According to a few studies the most active age group of online buyers is 25-34.[90] However, in the recent years the younger generation aged below 25 has also been actively buying from e-retailers reaching the most active age group. For instance, in the EU in the last five years the people aged 16-24 have been making online purchasing almost as much as the age group 25-55 reaching the same volumes in 2018 (Figure 11).[91]

Even if the statistics per age groups related to various aspects of online shopping is currently lacking or is outdated for the case of Armenia, there are still many observations that the youth is using e-shopping more and more which accordingly makes them a growing target group for

[86] http://ysu.am/files/05D_Abgaryan.pdf (17.01.2020).

[87] Ibid.

[88] Armenian version of online shopping. How to avoid cheating, https://www.globnews.am/?p=24925&l=am (20.01.2020).

[89] Central Bank of Armenia, Publications, https://warww.cba.am/am/SitePages/pperiodicals.aspx (20.01.2020).

[90] Panel discussion "Electronic trade in Armenia", op. cit. (17.01.2020).

[91] Eurostat, E-commerce statistics for individuals, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/E-commerce_statistics_for_individuals (19.01.2020).

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cybercriminals. As they are a rapidly growing group of online shoppers, there more such people attacked by cybercriminals.

Over the years, banking has drastically changed and has affected the lives of millions of individuals around the globe. A very important point that is worth to be considered among the disadvantages of online banking along with the many advantages is the possible security issues that can rise among the children and both in mid or high-grade students. There's always a risk of actual and/or identity theft. It's also possible to get unauthorized access to the account via a stolen or hacked log-in credentials, which can happen even without compromising accounts.

It should be mentioned, that all the citizens of Armenia from the age of 14 are eligible to acquire payment cards issued by banks operating in Armenia. For the children under 14, payment cards can be ordered by their parents which will be attached to their bank account. This means that people under 18 will be able to perform online transactions and become vulnerable to financial harms. This is a common case for the people of 14-25 age group in all over the world, but depending on the technologically matured and development level of the country, the awareness level of secure online banking differs.

Though, there is control by police over these processes in Armenia, however there is no publicly available statistical data on the victims of online shopping for the people at the mentioned age group, because the cases on online shopping or even cyber-attacks are mainly not alarmed or not strictly differentiated from the other cases.

In order to ensure safe online shopping and avoid the mentioned most common threats, the following steps should be taken:

1. First of all, no matter if it is a website of an online bank, a retailer or a payment website, manually type in the URL — instead of clicking on a link. Check if the website is encrypted, i.e. URL starts with http:// and if not, make sure it is there;

2. Use your own electronic device when making the e-purchase;

3. Do not e-shop when using a public Wi-Fi;

4. Do not provide more personal information than required by the retailer;

5. You can get a second credit/debit card especially for online shopping in order not to use the main one, also provide your card details when you are sure in the safety of the website and the URL meant for the payment money transfer;[92]

6. Check all the reviews and benchmark the product/service to make sure it is not fake;

7. Have an up-to-date anti-malware software on your electronic device;

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[92] Protecting Your Money - Security Tips, Kaspersky, https://www.kaspersky.com/resource-center/preemptive-safety/money-online (21.01.2020).

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8. Use a dedicated e-mail address helping to reduce the risk of opening potentially malicious email or spam messages presented as sales promotions or other notifications;

9. Protect the accounts by creating strong passwords as well as renewing them periodically;

10. Check the local legislation in terms of importing the purchased product(s) to make sure there are no restrictions or tax payments.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is a real problem in today's society. According to the recent studies, 36.5% of people globally feel they have been cyberbullied in their lifetime, and 17.4% have reported it has happened at some point in the last 30 days. According to the results from the most studies, when people are engaging in cyberbullying, they are secretive about what they are doing online, they look nervous or jumpy when online. More likely they will stop using their computer or phone when someone comes near them, and become angry or upset when internet privileges are taken away (this case is more with children).

According to the research conducted by World Health Organization in 2016 in 43 countries, it was found that on average, bullying peaked at age 13 for girls and 11 for boys. The lowest rate was found in Armenia with 1 % of girls and 4% of boys. Though, the lowest rates according to the report is found in Armenia, however, the rates mentioned can be resulted because the cases on bullying, especially cyberbullying are not alarmed. It should be also mentioned, that, sometimes there is no differentiation between the cases on bullying and cyberbullying considered by police or other related bodies.

UNICEF also warned of the dangers posed by online violence, cyberbullying and digital harassment for the 82% of young people aged 15 to 24 years old who are online in Armenia, and called for concerted action to tackle and prevent violence against children and young people online. Globally, 70.6% of the world's young people between 15 and 24 are online. The online population in Armenia is getting younger with 54.1% of children under 15 years old online. While older students may be more exposed to cyberbullying than younger ones, children are not immune from harmful content, sexual exploitation and abuse, and cyberbullying.

According to the survey conducted among the young people in Armenia, 86.4% have already heard about cyberbullying before, 72.1% have witnessed cyberbullying, 23.7% have been cyberbullied, 81.3% have not reported about the cyberbullying he/ she experienced/ witnessed, 68.4% think cyberbullying happens all the time, 11.9% have posted negative comments about someone, 56% have used bad language online, and 25.4% have posted pictures or information about someone without their knowledge. Also, 13.6% have threatened someone online, 35.6% have been threatened online, 62.7% think cyberbullying is

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common problem in Armenia, and 66.1% is aware about the possible consequences of cyberbullying.

Given the abovementioned, the most efficient ways of dealing with cyberbullying among the participants state that the Government of Armenia should adopt enforceable mechanisms to fight cyberbullying, a legal punishment system has to be established, and victims should report their cases to police. It is also stated, that both schools and universities have to teach about cyberbullying for increasing the level of awareness.

The digital era has changed the traditional realm and operational ways of organised crime. The increasing usage of high technologies, including access to internet transferred major criminal activities into the online sphere. Since there are no physical borders in the virtual environment, criminals can act from a country distant from the victim's, which may be located on the other side of the globe.

Therefore, detailed and systematic analyses of the situation should be conducted to detect problems and to develop a national strategy on implementing cybersecurity raising awareness campaigns to protect different target groups from ongoing and growing cyberattacks. The Campaign focusing on the above-mentioned issues in cyberspace targeting high school students, university students and their lectures introduced the research to around 120 participants, focusing on tools and techniques teaching and guiding them in to serf safely online, protect themselves and their personal data from possible cyber intrusions and develop positive content. The forum provided with open platform for officials and students to discuss and to evaluate the cyber related issues and to generate a good ground for cooperation in this newly developed manmade sphere.

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Marija Jankuloska

Critical overview of counter-disinformation campaigns in Western Balkans[93]

1. Introduction

The spread of fake news and disinformation has become a common practice in Western Balkans. In pursuing particular (political or lucrative) goals, states or non-state actors frequently prey on false and misleading information. As in the other parts of the world, this practice in the territory of Western Balkan is commonly realized by individuals (human factor) or computerized bots and most often with reliance on traditional media or social media platforms.

The issue of fake news and disinformation can have an enormous impact on the formation of public opinion, given the fact that the general public is daily exposed with wide range of information and often absorb them in unselective way and without deeper considerations. Many reports indicate that although the public is aware that the Internet is full of information that may be fake, the low level of media literacy and the lack of specific tools for recognition make it difficult for individuals to remain immune to such tendencies.

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Even though these processes are not a novelty, they have been invigorated and amplified by the development of digital technology and the advent of social media. The fast-paced nature of technology has swayed the way the information is consumed by the general audience. The oversaturation of messages, news and information has undermined the trustworthiness and reliability of the sources which provide them. In this regard, the internet has become a vulnerable and convenient medium for disseminating a wide-array of information that the public often approaches them indiscriminately and without much scrutiny.

In response to such activities, many actors in Western Balkans (institutions, media and NGOs) resorted to multiple counter activities such as media literacy campaigns and fact checking online platforms. However, till now, there is nether analysis and evaluation of the effectiveness of such campaigns, nor developed indicators for reconsideration or reassessment.

In this regard, the impetus underlying this study is in the necessity to explore the common practices for countering the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation and to examine the level of awareness and the general constructions by the media and the policy makers which are crucial actors in debunking and countering fake news and disinformation. Moreover, this research tends to develop tailor-made indicators for measurement of the effectiveness of counter-disinformation campaigns in the region of Western Balkans based on the previous empirical research and the analysis of the best practices.

The study is envisioned to prompt reforms and effective policies on a long haul by providing policy recommendations, but also to improve the existing practices for countering disinformation (the media literacy and fact checking campaigns in Western Balkans) by providing practical tools for evaluation of the effectiveness and providing a roadmap for improvements.

2. Methodology and Research Approach

The study employs combination of secondary data and first-hand evidence. The research activities are separated in three research phases: *desk research and theoretical analysis* intended to explore the common disinformation practices which are prevalent in the countries of Western Balkans and the factors that amplify them, along with the approaches and measures implemented with purpose of tackling such practices; *content and discursive analysis* of political and media statements in North Macedonia in order to examine the general constructions, the level of awareness and interest as regards the existence and the gravity of the overflow of false and misleading content; and *indicator development* based on exploration and critical analysis of the best practices that will serve for measurement and reevaluation of the past, ongoing and future counter-campaigns.

The first stage encompasses desk research, literature review and theoretical analysis of the disinformation practices, the conceptual framework and the track record of the measures that have been undertaken in Western Balkans for the purposes of countering disinformation. In addition, this phase will draw upon the concept and etymology of fake news, disinformation

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and the analogous terms, as well as the factors that affect their amplification, and will ascertain their role and impact in the current socio-political setting in the Western Balkans.

The content analysis of political statements and media reports in North Macedonia as a case study is particularly employed in order to assess the level of awareness, as well as the level of interest for developing effective policies for countering disinformation. It utilizes summative content analysis with both qualitative and quantitative approach to understand the messages, the purpose and the impact of such narratives. A smaller sample of discursive analysis was conducted in order to gain insights on the discursive practices and the general framing of the analyzed issues.

The final stage of the study is focused on indicator development and policy recommendations for measurement of the effectiveness of the existing and future counter-campaigns in Western Balkans. The indicators are interpretative, measurable, context-specific, tailor-made and divided into four categories: (1) functionality/operability, (2) availability/accessibility, (3) transparency and (4) efficiency. They will serve the organizations that deal with counter-disinformation campaigns to assess, to compare and improve the performances of their campaigns.

The purpose of this study is not solely to delve into the source of these phenomena (i.e. fake news and disinformation), but, also, to critically address the treatment of these issues, and to offer concrete and practical solutions that will serve for reconsideration and reassessment of the campaigns designed to tackle the issue of fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans.

3. Research Questions and Research Objectives

The research activity endeavors to provide an extensive and thorough research drawing upon diverse methodological approaches in order to attain the following **research objectives**:

- To examine the conceptual framework, the contributing factors of the rapid proliferation of false content and the previous practices for countering disinformation in Western Balkans, as well as to deconstruct the rationale behind such practices by relying on secondary data and open-source materials (*desk analysis and literature review*).

- To collate and evaluate the political statements and media reports in the last two years in North Macedonia regarding the issue of fake news and disinformation in order to assess the political awareness for the importance of countering disinformation based on the volume and quantity of media texts and political statements (*quantitative content analysis*).

- To glean qualitative inferences regarding the context in which the particular narratives are being utilized, to uncover patterns and correlations of their statements and to understand the contextual premises of the political communication and interaction

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with the public in giving prominence of particular issue or topic (*qualitative content analysis and discursive analysis*).

- To identify, analyze, and deconstruct the components for evaluating success and effectiveness of the previous and current counter-campaigns in Western Balkans based on critical overview of the existing counter-campaigns and to develop common metrics (around 20 effectiveness indicators tailored to the local context) along with recommendations for policy makers, NGOs and media in Western Balkans (*performance analysis and summative evaluation*).

The study is designed to address the following **research questions**:

1. What aspects shape the susceptibility of the Western Balkans to the practices of fake news and disinformation?

2. How is the issue of fake news and disinformation approached and treated by the social and political actors in Western Balkans? What are the particular mechanisms, if any, employed to counter or downplay the adverse effects of such practices?

3. How is the issue framed and understood in the political discourse in North Macedonia and in the broader region?

4. What is the countries' political and media actors level of awareness, interest and capacity to intercept these phenomenon? How are the political and media actors positioned toward this issue?

5. What are the major impediments to the success of the counter-campaigns and what are the prospects for improvements?

4. Secondary analysis

4.1. The phenomenon of fake news and disinformation and its manifestation in the Western Balkans

In the recent years, the phenomenon of fake news and disinformation has gained notable relevance in the public and political discourse in the Western Balkans. The prevalence of the issue of fake news and disinformation in the overall public debate is a logical consequence of the burgeoning tendency for distortion and fabrication of the facts for attaining concrete and tangible goals. As a central feature of certain political campaigns or as a part of the external actors' bids to exert influence, especially as part of the so-called hybrid activities, they pose a myriad of challenges ranging from ethical and epistemological hurdles to political and socio-economic concerns.

The existing data indicate that the motives for engaging in disinformation activities usually vary, but in most cases they are either socio-political (usually entail affiliation to certain group

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or political organization) or financial and lucrative (associated with profit-oriented companies, advertising, etc.). These processes prey on the vulnerabilities and societal weaknesses that persist in a given society. These trends are more or less intended to serve several objectives among which to decrease public trust in media and public institutions, to stir resentment and fear or to mobilize support for certain political or non-political cause.

Even though the terminology of fake news and disinformation is used interchangeably in the public discourse, often overlapping with other concepts such as propaganda, there are some remarkable differences in the taxonomy and the meaning of the wording. The basis for differentiation lies in the preconception of causing damage, its dependence upon larger political campaigns, as well as on several other components that constitute the concept of a misleading narrative. These trends unfold in specific circumstances and are predetermined by different political and social trajectories.

The European Commission defines *disinformation* as "verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public".[94] Its consequences are described in relation of causing public harm and imposing threat to democratic, political and policy-making processes.[95] The content within the disinformation narratives is not imperatively false. It may involve genuine information that is fabricated or distorted or to be a combination thereof. Nowadays, the disinformation is extensively exploited as instrument for exercising power and influence and is mostly connected with the Russian propaganda activities.[96]

The notion of *fake news* represents a newly-coined and often challenged term which was given prominence during the US Elections in 2016 and usually has wider usage than the term disinformation. This neologism or buzzword, popularized by social media platforms[97], depicts news that capitalize on false information, speculation and sensationalism in order to attract significant attention.[98] It can take a form of inaccurate reporting, promoting political stories with false facts, labeling or spreading hatred towards political opponents.

On the other side of the spectrum, the *misinformation* is a colloquial term employed to depict an instance of inadvertent or accidental conveyance of false information where the purveyor unwittingly and unconsciously engage in such activity. Contrary to the instances of disinformation and fake news, this occurrence is benign and in most cases is innocuous. Another interrelated term that can be encountered is the *mal-information* or utilization of genuine information with malevolent intentions.[99] Aside from these concepts, the

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[94] European Communication "Tackling online disinformation", 13 September 2019, available at https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/tackling-online-disinformation.

[95] Ibid.

[96] More broadly on how Russia utilizes disinformation as part of the hybrid activities in F. S. Hansen (2017): "Russian Hybrid Warfare: A study of disinformation", Danish Institute for International Studies, available at https://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/950041/DIIS_RP_2017_6_web.pdf.

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[98] See more broadly in J. Carson (2019): "Fake news: What exactly is it – and how can you spot it?", *The Telegraph*, 20 November 2019, available at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/0/fake-news-exactly-has-really-had-influence/.

[99] M. Kujawski (2019): "Misinformation vs. Disinformation vs. Mal-information", 5 September 2019, available at http://www.mikekujawski.ca/2019/09/05/misinformation-vs-disinformation-vs-malinformation/.

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propaganda is depicted as a part of systematic information activities and in association with larger political campaigns.[100]

The phenomenon of disinformation and fake news is gaining momentum in the Western Balkans. Influenced by multiple factors and vulnerabilities which are inherent and specific for the Western Balkan countries, this trend was intensified over the last years. The 2018 Media Literacy index of the Open Society Institute in Sofia reported that the susceptibility to fake news is at the highest level in the Western Balkans compared to the other European countries.[101] The report attributes this trend to lack of media freedom and the educational deficiencies that exist in the Western Balkans society.[102] Other reports point the finger to the absence of impartial journalism in the region.[103]

With reference to Western Balkans, the data regarding the primary links and actors, the level and the magnitude of the disinformation practices and the purposes and motivations of such practices is scant and mostly anecdotal. As under-explored field that lacks empirical leverage, the issue of disinformation poses serious challenges upon the exercise of democracy, and especially upon the effectiveness and the efficiency of the counter-measures that ought to be employed.

The false news and disinformation as a phenomenon have enormous potential to influence the exercise of democracy through direct or indirect influence on electoral processes, impact on the creation/formation of the public opinion and general effect on confidence building and trustworthiness in the institutions and political establishments. Although there are no detailed researches regarding the psychological effects of the disinformation activities, some of the conducted studies attest that the confusion of the populace is one of the primary end-results.[104]

Speaking in the context of Western Balkans and based on second-hand evidence, the common factors that influence and step up the disinformation processes in the region can be classified in four categories: (1) personal factors, (2) socio-political challenges, (3) the overall position of the media and the (4) digitalization and the rapid technological progress. Each Western Balkan country has its own specificities that impact the way the disinformation practices are manifested and exercised, but in most cases the political, economic and social commonalities prevail.

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[100] See more in N. Bentzen (2017): "Understanding disinformation and fake news", European Parliamentary Research Service, April 2017, available at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA(2017)599408.

[101] "Balkan Countries Most Vulnerable to 'Fake' News: Report", available at http://www.cimusee.org/mil-resources/learning-resources/balkan-countries-most-vulnerable-to-fake-news-report/.

[102] Ibid.

[103] EWB (2019): "Disinformation and fake news widespread in the Western Balkans", *European Western Balkans*, 5 December 2019, available at https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/12/05/disinformation-and-fake-news-widespread-in-the-western-balkans/.

[104] A. Mitchell, M. Barthel, J. Holcomb (2016): "Many Americans Believe Fake News Is Sowing Confusion", *Pew Research Center*, 15 December 2016, available at https://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/.

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Personal factors

The personal factors include, but are not limited to the level of media literacy, the cognitive characteristics of the recipients of the messages, the different perceptions and the level of education. Some researches attribute the rampant spread of disinformation to the preexisting beliefs of the people that often generate difficulty to discern truth and to distinguish facts from falsehoods.[105] According to some other studies, the individuals express proneness to like-minded content and the selective exposure is in line with their interests and beliefs.[106]

Although there are no particular specificities for the Western Balkans on how the personal factors are materialized, preexisting divisions deeply rooted in the overall political disillusionment and discontent, the inter-ethnic bigotry which is result of long-term ethnic rifts and tensions and the political preferences can be considered as major factors that influence the manner people perceive the things they stumble upon.

Socio-political challenges

The socio-political challenges, which have many forms and are predominantly connected to the transition processes and the economic underperformance, are rife in the Western Balkan Region. Ranging from ill-managed democratization processes to corruption practices, the region is experiencing deterioration in terms of exercising democracy.[107]

Most of the Western Balkan countries, over the last decades, have faced considerable economic and political changes that shaped the way the democratic processes have been implemented. The ineptitude of practicing democracy is mainly epitomized in the sluggish transition processes, political inexperience and the radical switch from state-controlled to market-based economies. These changes have affected the region in a unique way, making the Western Balkan countries vulnerable to the multiple forms of external influences and disinformation practices.[108]

First, the transition period was characterized with economic backsliding, socio-economic disparities and high level of politicization resulting in significant political divisions and polarization. These tendencies ramped up by the ethnocentric, nationalistic and revisionist policies which continue to be dominant in the region of Western Balkans have become the source of conflict and discord.[109] These occurrences have led to the significant partisanship of

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[105] See for instance, D. Jackson (2018): "ISSUE BRIEF: The 'Demand Side' of the Disinformation Crises", *National Endowment for Democracy*, 2 August 2018, available at https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-the-demand-side-of-the-disinformation-crisis/.

[106] A. Guess, B. Lyons, B. Nyhan, J. Reifler (2018): "Avoiding the echo chamber about echo chambers: Why selective exposure to like-minded political news is less prevalent than you think", January.

[107] See, Z. Csaky (2016): "Back Where We Started in the Balkans", *Freedom House*, 20 April 2016, available at https://freedomhouse.org/blog/back-where-we-started-balkans.

[108] V. Zakem, B. Rosenau, D. Johnson (2017): "Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime", CNA Paper, May 2017, available at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/45fa/921a642e7e41c2d10e08b1108a6f80b040ff.pdf?_ga=2.212090647.2013340599.1578748069-1649987953.1577564483.

[109] See more broadly in J. Nordman (2015): "Nationalism, EU Integration, and Stability in the Western Balkans", in: IFSH (ed.), OSCE Yearbook 2015, Vol. 21, pp. 151-163; or S. Kulenovic (2019): "Western Balkans and the Return to Arms: Can the EU stabilize the region?", Policy Paper, 3 October 2019, available at https://www.vocaleurope.eu/wp-content/uploads/Western-Balkans-and-the-Return-to-Arms-Can-the-EU-stabilize-the-region.pdf.

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the Western Balkan societies which has contributed to peoples' indifference about facts and their fluidity and adaptability toward the political shifts.

Second, the uncertainty and the security vacuum that the Western Balkan countries have experienced due to the lingering Euro-Atlantic integration processes and the overall standoff of the EU's enlargement policies, can be construed as a major contributing factor in the processes of intensifying the disinformation campaigns, the hybrid activities and the external meddling in the region.

Media Landscape

The role of the media in shaping the public opinion is irrefutable. The mass media has the capacity to influence the cognitive perceptions and to shape the general mindset in a given socio-political context. But probably its most significant role is being a watchdog of democracy by safeguarding it through its informative and monitoring mechanisms. As a backbone of any democratic society, the media has a critical role in ensuring government's accountability and providing citizens with objective and factual information. In this sense, it can be argued that the media has crucial part in anchoring democracy and is intrinsic for democratic consolidation of each country.

The media landscape in recent decades has experienced dramatic shift. This was reflected in the news ecosystem changing its course and the way the journalism is exercised, with social media platforms taking their lead as news providers.[110] The digital advertising, stepped up by the algorithm technology, overshadowed the print advertising and has led to sharp decline in newspaper ads revenues.[111] This, in turn, has contributed the publishing companies to shift their focus toward the digital marketing strategies.[112] The media landscape is characterized with over-reliance on click-bait and sensationalist content or content that attracts more viewership, frequently dubbed as "attention economy", to the detriment of the high-quality journalism.[113] In addition, the targeted advertising and the selective exposure have implicated the way the information is consumed and perceived by the general public.

One issue that is specific and inherent for the Western Balkan countries is the situation with the media freedom. Based on the existing data, it could be inferred that the situation of media freedom in Western Balkan countries is unfavorable. Many reports and press freedom indexes refer to the lack of prerequisites for exercising media freedom in Western Balkans among which are the socio-economic pressures upon journalists, the obscure media ownership, the general politicization of the media and the government control over media content.[114] Many

[110] See for instance, E. Bell (2016): "Facebook is eating the world", Columbia Journalism Review, 7 March 2016, available at https://www.cjr.org/analysis/facebook_and_media.php.
[111] S. Vranica, J. Marshall (2016): "Plummeting Newspaper Ad Revenue Sparks New Wave of Changes", The Wall Street Journal, 20 Oct. 2016, available at https://www.wsj.com/articles/plummeting-newspaper-ad-revenue-sparks-new-wave-of-changes-1476955801.
[112] Ibid.
[113] A. Marwick, R. Lewis (2017): "Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online", Data & Society Research Institute, 15 May 2017, p.42, available at https://datasociety.net/output/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/.
[114] See for instance, I. Saric (2019): "New Report Shows Democratic Backsliding in the Balkans", OCCRP, 7 June 2019, available at https://www.occrp.org/en/27-ccwatch/cc-watch-briefs/9901-new-report-shows-democratic-backsliding-in-the-balkans ; "The EU Should

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of these reports indicate that the Western Balkan Region fails to keep abreast with the other European countries when it comes to the exercise of the media freedom.[115] The state-controlled content and the government interferences in the media reporting have undermined the media independence and have suffocated the critical media in the region.[116] The biased, tilted and slanted media is invariably a source of distorted and polarizing narratives rather than source of factual and impartial reporting.

The second issue is the general distrust in media which undoubtedly affect peoples' perception of the content broadcasted by the Western Balkan's media.[117] The lack of trust in domestic media is also evident among young people in the Western Balkans which they perceive as biased and under political influence and in response resort to other sources of information and foreign media.[118]

Technology

The digital technology facilitates, accelerates and amplifies the adverse and virulent trends of capitalizing on the rapid proliferation of information in favor of disseminating fake and misleading content. It is mostly enabled through the myriad of advantages that the technological development can offer for the purposes of spreading disinformation such as the reduction in costs, the easy access to large amount of data, as well the existence of diverse and multiple channels for collation and sharing of data where each citizen is a potential target. The fast flow of information in general has triggered many advantages, but also challenges to the functioning of democracy.

The information flow was facilitated with the technological shifts that happened in the recent decade, such as the advent and massive growth of social media platforms. The social media platforms can be regarded as effective tool for enhancing the participatory democracy, but also they can assist in promoting verbal violence, hate speech and propaganda.[119]

Living in a digitalized society and in an age of information, the role of the information can be observed in two directions. On the one hand, it keeps people connected and informed by providing huge amounts of information in short period of time. It also provides advertising and business opportunities with easier pathways for exposing products and services, as well as for reaching out the potential consumers. Besides these benefits, probably the most

Set Explicit Press Freedom Requirements for Candidate Countries", *Freedom House*, 4 September 2014, available at https://freedomhouse.org/blog/eu-should-set-explicit-press-freedom-requirements-candidate-countries.

[115] F. Bieber, M. Kmezic (2015): "Media Freedom in the Western Balkans", Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, August 2015, available at http://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BIEPAG-Media-Freedom-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf.

[116] See for instance, "Croatia: Media Freedom in Turbulent Times", *SEENPM*, August 2016, available at https://seenpm.org/croatia-media-freedom-turbulent-times/; or A. McDevitt (2016): "Fighting Corruption in the Western Balkans and Turkey: Priorities for Reform", Transparency International 2016, available at https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/fighting_corruption_in_the_western_balkans_and_turkey_priorities_for_reform.

[117] See, Trust in Media 2017: EBU Report, available at https://www.epra.org/news_items/trust-in-media-2017-ebu-report and "Телевизиите во канџите на довербата/Television in the clutches of trust", Telma.tv, 22 June 2018, available at https://telma.com.mk/televiziite-vo-kandhite-na-doverbata/.

[118] D. Hajdu, K. Klingová (2018): "From Online Battlefield to Loss of Trust?", *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*, October 2018, available at https://www.scribd.com/document/391568261/From-Online-Battlefield-to-Loss-of-Trust#from_embed.

[119] See, S. Cottee (2018): "Can Facebook Really Drive Violence?", The Atlantic, 9 September 2018, available at https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/facebook-violence-germany/569608/.

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important advantage of the information-based society is its capacity to boost participation of people that can actively engage in many social platforms, to impart and share information and to express opinions and thus, to actively participate in democracy.

On the other hand, the information can be used for various subversive activities by states and non-state actors as a powerful medium to spread propaganda, to exercise power and influence and to sway the public perceptions. The information can be utilized as a control tool by authoritarian regimes or as an asset for gaining political advantage. The more channels and pathways exist, the more the public is exposed to different unverified information that usually is consumed uncritically and unselectively.

The most notable acceleration tools for facilitating the flow of disinformation nowadays are the different forms of *algorithms* (created for the purposes of generating ad revenues, based on the most searched content on the search engines), *computerized bots and botnets* (social media accounts operated by computers), *trolls* (fake social media personas created to instigate desired discussion or behavior), *deep fakes* (fake videos created by composing pieces of genuine video and audio files) among others.[120] In addition, as the technology progresses, newer forms of digital marketing emerge backed by machine learning algorithms which have potential to boost the disinformation processes.[121]

Engaging on social media and online sources to access information has become ubiquitous trend and the Western Balkan countries were not bypassed by the global dynamics. The people and especially the youth as a subset of population are more reliant on social media (mostly accessing it through mobile devices and smart phone applications) for obtaining news information than to traditional media. One of the latest studies conducted in the region of South-Eastern Europe attest this tendency.[122]

4.2. Overview of the counter-measures in Western Balkans

The accuracy of the information being re-shared numerous times without proper verification is often questionable. These malignant trends of utilizing the novel forms of communication for spreading disinformation proved to be problematic in democratic societies. The potentials for tackling these trends are usually at odds with the principles of democracy and often are at verge of infringing the widely affirmed freedoms such as the freedoms of speech, press and assembly.

Nevertheless, variety of tools and mechanisms are at the disposal for the government, media and NGOs to deal with the issue of fake news and disinformation. Internationally, the global players such as Google and Facebook employ 'reporting' and 'flagging' as methods for

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[120] More broadly in NDI (2018): "Supporting Information Integrity and Civil Political Discourse", December 2018, available at https://www.ndi.org/publications/supporting-information-integrity-and-civil-political-discourse.
[121] See more broadly in D. Ghosh, B. Scott (2018): "Digital Deceit: The Technologies Behind Precision Propaganda on the Internet", New America Policy Paper, January 2018, available at https://www.newamerica.org/public-interest-technology/policy-papers/digitaldeceit/.
[122] D. Hajdu, K. Klingová (2018): "From Online Battlefield to Loss of Trust?", *GLOBSEC Policy Institute*, October 2018, available at https://www.scribd.com/document/391568261/From-Online-Battlefield-to-Loss-of-Trust#from_embed.

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suppressing the spread of false and misleading content.[123] There are some stricter and more robust means for curbing the disinformation flow such as the case of shutting down the social media accounts[124] and blocking ads from pages that have track record in sharing false stories[125], while there is also urgency for better algorithm transparency.[126] On a national level, the prevalent practices that the most countries approach to for curtailing these tendencies are chiefly centered on three principal measures: debunking fake and misleading narratives, identifying and exposing disinformation sources and increasing media literacy among citizens. As far as the Western Balkan countries are concerned, both offline and online methods have been employed in recent years in order to counter the disinformation practices and to contribute in building resilient information society. The resort to diverse tools and approaches is commensurate with the elevated level of threat perception and the conceived necessity for hindering further exposures to disinformation practices.

The dominant counter-campaigns are implemented mainly by the civil society organizations (CSOs), while the measures of the media and the governments are less impactful and usually have sidelined role in hindering these trends. The most notable are the fact checking online platforms which are focused mostly on the "supply side"of the disinformation activities (by labelling, debunking and exposing) and the media literacy campaigns that target the "demand side" of the issue (through educational and informational tools).

The fact-checking online tools, which are on the rise in the Western Balkans, imply set of actions intended to uncover or verify the accuracy and reliability of the distributed news or information. Their primary aim is to debunk false stories, but also to curb the spreading of disinformation and to further media and political accountability. They usually operate either as media watchdogs and debunking pages or as rating systems of the political claims. The emergence of the fact-checking can be located in the early 2000s in the United States leading to widespread inception of similar campaigns all around the globe.[127]

The leading fact checking online platforms in the Western Balkans include: Faktograf.hr implemented by Croatia's NGO GONG, Istinomjer.ba/ and Raskrinkavanje.ba/ carried out by Bosnia's NGO Zašto ne?; Medijametar.rs/ and Istinomer.rs/ run by Serbian CRTA and Raskrikavanje.rs/ led by Serbian KRIK; and, Vistinomer.mk/ and Factchecking.mk/ implemented by Macedonian NGO Metamorphosis Foundation.

The other growing trend in Western Balkans is the implementation of the media literacy campaigns which are predominantly focused on the prevention strategies such as reliance on education and training tools for increasing the societal resilience and citizens' critical thinking,

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[123] See more in L. Leong (2017): "Fighting fake news: how Google, Facebook and others are trying to stop it", *TechRadar*, 25 May 2017, available at https://www.techradar.com/news/fighting-fake-news-how-google-facebook-and-more-are-working-to-stop-it.

[124] Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (2018): "#TrollTracker: Facebook Uncovers Iranian Influence Operation", 26 October 2018, available at https://medium.com/dfrlab/trolltracker-facebook-uncovers-iranian-influence-operation-d21c73cd71be.

[125] S. Shukla, T. Lyons (2017): "Blocking Ads From Pages that Repeatedly Share False News", *Facebook Newsroom*, 28 August 2017, available at https://about.fb.com/news/2017/08/blocking-ads-from-pages-that-repeatedly-share-false-news/.

[126] P. Brown (2017): "Study: Readers are hungry for news feed transparency", *Columbia Journalism Review*, 24 Oct. 2017, available at https://www.cjr.org/tow_center/study-readers-hungry-news-feed-transparency-algorithms.php.

[127] L. Graves, F. Cherubini (2016): "The Rise of Fact-Checking Sites in Europe", Digital News Project, 2016, available at https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/rise-fact-checking-sites-europe.

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awareness and knowledge in order to improve their ability to recognize disinformation and to distinguish facts from falsehoods.[128]

The following overview displays the counter-disinformation landscape in the Western Balkans with an emphasis on larger campaigns and online platforms.

CROATIA

Faktograf.hr is the only operating fact-checking tool in Croatia implemented by the **NGOGONG**. Its principal aim is to evaluate the statements and promises by the Croatian political figures, to assess their veracity and to debunk falsehoods. This site estimates the statements by politicians and public officials, the fulfillment of the election promises and the accuracy of their claims in the digital space.[129] They rely on rating scale system (from 1 to 5) for assessing the validity of the political statements.

The **Agency for Electronic Media (AEM)** based in Zagreb is operating a media literacy portal (medijskapismenost.hr) that is implemented together with UNICEF and targets parents, childcare providers and teachers. It is aimed at informing, educating and empowering the designated target group regarding media literacy.[130] As indicated on their website, this online portal provides information on how different media genres present the topics related to children, prioritizing topics such as the problem of disinformation, Internet safety, media representation of violence and media and children's' development.[131]

BOSNIA

Raskrinkavanje.ba, a fact-checking initiative implemented by the Bosnian **NGO "Zasto ne (Why Not?)"**, is aimed at unveiling facts through verification of media information and exposing the non-credible sources. The specific and unique aspect of this fact-checking tool is the exposure of the disinformation sources operating on the territory of Bosnia, which are categorized in "Red flag" list (list of media outlets that are proven to publish fake news) and "High-risk" list (list of media for which there is a reasonable doubt that they could publish content of questionable veracity).[132]

Istinomjer.ba is a monitoring online tool, also run by the Bosnian **NGO "Zasto ne"**, which is designed to promote political accountability of the political parties and the holders of public functions by measuring the fulfillment of the election promises. It checks and assesses the statements of the public officials and the fulfillment of the pre-election promises.[133]

The **Press Council of Bosnia and Hercegovina**, a Self-regulatory Body for Print and Online Media, operates an online complaints platform that allows citizens to complain on print and

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[128] See for instance, "60 New Trainers to Advance Media Literacy in the Western Balkans", SEENPM, available at http://seenpm.org/60-new-trainers-advance-media-literacy-western-balkans/.

[129] https://faktograf.hr/metodologija/

[130] https://www.medijskapismenost.hr/

[131] Ibid.

[132] https://raskrinkavanje.ba/metodologija

[133] https://istinomjer.ba/o-istinomjeru/

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online media reporting. It is designed to promote the professional standards of the journalism and to protect citizens from unprofessional media reporting.[134]

SERBIA

Raskrikavanje.rs, implemented by investigative journalism center **KRIK**, deals with issues related to information that is disseminated in the Serbian media landscape (*inter alia*, fake news, censorship, disinformation, pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, manipulation, media bias, spins, clickbait and propaganda) and its aim is to combat the spread of disinformation.[135]

Fakenews.rs, run by the **Novi Sad School of Journalism**, deals with deconstruction of news distributed by the domestic and foreign media. It also manages an online course "Deconstruct Yourself" which operates as a guide for detecting and reporting fake news.[136] The **Report Fake News** page that functions under the fakenews.rs portal is another tool for suppressing fake news by providing the opportunity of every citizen to report if there is knowledge for purported fake news. Their goal is to raise awareness among the journalists and the wider community on the importance of hindering the spread of fake news and disinformation.

Medijametar.rs, project also run by the Serbian **CRTA**, is a monitoring tool of the print media in Serbia. As it is indicated on the Medijametar's website, its objective is to improve the professional and ethical standards of the media reporting and analysis.[137]

KOSOVO

Internews Kosova and **BIRN (Balkan Investigative Reporting Network)** have implemented a joint project supported by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in a form of online accountability platform entitled **kallxo.com**. It is not exclusively focused on media accountability, but some of its activities also cover this particular field.[138] Within this framework they operate the Krypometer which is fact-checking tool that assesses the political statements.[139]

MONTENEGRO

The **Digital Forensic Center of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro** constitutes a digital hub designed to counter disinformation and fake news by relying on research and investigation for providing verified information and educational tools for enhancing the digital and media literacy.[140] The Center's website provides a database of all the investigated and debunked disinformation, fake news and misinformation cases. One of the Center's milestones is the

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[134] https://english.vzs.ba/
[135] More broadly on https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/o_nama.html
[136] https://fakenews.rs/o-nama/
[137] https://www.medijametar.rs/index_eng.html
[138] https://kallxo.com/per-ne/
[139] J. Xharra, F. Ispahiu (2016): "Krypometer, Kosovo's first fact checker", Pristina Insights, 08 December 2016, available at https://prishtinainsight.com/krypometer-kosovos-first-fact-checker/.
[140] https://dfcme.me/en/about/

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monthly publication/newsletter dubbed DFC Magazine which editions are publicly available on the project's website and which is directed at providing insights and information on the activities related to disinformation and hybrid threats going on in the Western Balkans.[141]

Center for Democratic Transition based in Podgorica has joined the already successful projects designed to debunk falsehoods by launching Raskrinkavanje.me, the Montenegrin version of the successful counter-disinformation campaign operating in Bosnia and Serbia, focused on the deconstruction of the veracity of the news published on the territory of Montenegro.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Factchecking.mk, probably the most prominent campaign in North Macedonia, was implemented by the Macedonian NGO **Metamorphosis Foundation** together with Vistinomer.mk. The first platform (implemented from November 2012 to February 2017) was "aimed to enhance professional and ethical standards in Macedonian journalism" by fact-checking and several educational and informational tools.[142] Vistinomer.mk or Truthmeter.mk is the only online platform on the territory of North Macedonia that assesses the promises of the political leaders and promotes political accountability.

F^2N^2 (**F**ighting **F**ake **N**ews **N**arratives) is a new initiative on the territory of Macedonia, launched by the Macedonian NGO **MOST**, which activities are centered on countering disinformation narratives by exposing fake stories, conducting analytic reports and identifying the disinformation channels.[143]

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) as an NGO assists in safeguarding the professional standards for reporting and the Code of Journalists. It contributes to the efforts of countering fake news by managing an online platform for press complaints and the decisions are made publicly available.[144]

5. Content analysis

5.1. Sampling and Unit of Analysis

This section explores the dominant political and media constructions of the concept of fake news and disinformation in North Macedonia. This analysis was particularly employed in order to gain insights what aspects of fake news and disinformation are problematized in the public discourse, how is the discussion pitched in the specific socio-political context and how is the issue perceived and represented by the mainstream news media and the incumbent political actors. The North Macedonia was particularly selected as a case study for this research phase for two specific reasons: the familiarity and the foreknowledge of the author about the media

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[141] https://dfcme.me/en/publications/
[142] http://factchecking.mk/about-us/
[143] https://f2n2.mk/en/about-us-2/
[144] https://semm.mk/en/komisija-za-zalbi-3/delovnik

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outlets in North Macedonia and the overall position of North Macedonia on the 'fake news' scene.[145]

The content analysis is a practical research tool for unveiling the messages of the text and for uncovering the rationale and the correlations of such messages by deconstructing the words, phrases and the narratives contained in the text. The content analysis is integral part of Laswell's multifold model of communication or "who says what through which channel to whom with what effect".[146] According to Berelson, the content analysis can be defined as "a research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication".[147] In this regard, Krippendorff accentuates the importance of the qualitative content analysis for "making reliable and valid inferences from data to their context, with the purpose of providing knowledge, new insights, a representation of facts and a practical guide to action".[148] The media content analysis was complemented by discourse analysis in order to gain understanding of the discursive practices and the policy context in which they are employed.

For the purposes of content analysis, specific sampling methodology was implemented in order to obtain comprehensive and more objective results. It explores any political narrative contained in the political statements, speeches and interviews within the media articles; and media reports relayed via traditional media outlets in North Macedonia irrespective of the type of media format.

The sampling methodology was focused on selection of several traditional media outlets based in North Macedonia and a total of 10 media outlets were considered and analyzed. The whole sampling strategy in the selection of the sample sources included selection of *source type*, *article type*, *relevant dates* and *relevant content*.

The selected **media sources** included: traditional media outlets (print media, TV channels and online portals), press releases and speech transcripts and speeches and addresses by political figures contained in the selected media articles. The criteria for inclusion of the media outlets was based on their readability and importance in the Macedonian society (data retrieved from available sources such as Alexa.com),[149] the length of their existence as a criterion for determining their socio-political impact and the existence of operable search engine and maintainable archive on their websites. Overall, the analyses included the following media: TV channels (24 Vesti, Sitel, Telma, Kanal 5, Alsat), newspapers (Vecer, Nova Makedonija) and online portals (Plus Info, A1 On and Makfax).

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[145] S. Cvetovska, A. Belford, C. Silverman, J. Lester Feder (2018): "The Secret Players Behind Macedonia's Fake News Sites." OCCRP, July 18, 2018, available at https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/the-secret-players-behind-macedonias-fake-news-sites.

[146] H. Lasswell (1948): *The Structure and Function of Communication in Society. The Communication of Ideas*. New York: Institute for Religious and Social Studies, 1948, p. 117.

[147] B. Berelson (1952): *Content analysis in communication research*, New York: The Free Press, p. 18.

[148] K. Krippendorff (1980): *Content Analysis: An Introduction to its Methodology*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, p. 108.

[149] Top Sites in Macedonia, available at https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/MK.

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The selection of the **type of media articles** was mostly focused on collation of news, reports and feature articles. For practical reasons and for more concrete results, the editorials and the op-eds were excluded from the analysis, as well as the blogs and social media pages. With regard to the **relevant dates**, the research timeframe included media articles published in the period from 1 January 2018 to 1 December 2019, the last two years since the debate was intensified in North Macedonia.

The content was categorized in themes and categories in order to facilitate the analysis of the particular narratives. Manual coding was applied for simplification of the analysis. As regards the sampling type, the probability sampling was employed for the quantitative content analysis, while smaller, purposive sampling was used for the qualitative content analysis. Overall, the news items were gathered and analyzed mostly by the means of the following keywords: *disinformation*, *fake news*, *counter-disinformation*, *fact-checking campaigns*, etc.

For the purposes of analysis of the political statements, the following parameters are considered: the frequency of terms used such as *fake news*, *disinformation* and *misinformation*; *counter-measures*, *counter-campaigns*, etc.; the frequency of narratives related to the necessity of countering disinformation; level of straightforwardness, precision and clarity of the messages; and the function that is exercised by the purveyor of the message (function, not affiliation to political party in order to ascertain at what level is the statement).

As for the media analysis, the variables that are explored are the thematic concentration of text in the articles dealing with fake news and disinformation; the prominence given by the media (including the length of the articles, the section type and the imaginary); the treatment of the themes and concepts (the media approach, the portrayal of actors involved, representation of events); and the utilization of quotations (both direct and indirect).

5.2. Key takeaways

The analysis exhibits several important takeaways that depict and explain the dominant discourse practices in framing the issues of fake news and disinformation. It also attests the degree of interest by the public to deal with and to prevent the potential implications that transpire from the spread of fake news and disinformation.
First, the analysis suggests that the public narratives associated with the phenomenon of disinformation and fake news are not constant and homogenous. At first glance, the heterogeneity of the linguistic interactions is indicative of variation of coverage and dissenting stances of the political actors how the country should address the challenges imposed by the intensified disinformation activities. Nevertheless, the political statements are consistent regarding the severity and the harmful effects that the disinformation activities can pose to the institutional and democratic stability in the country. The contrastive positions are mostly evident in terms of the measures designed to hinder and to offset the damaging effects of the disinformation activities.

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Second, the media and the political actors exercise important role in reifying the concept of disinformation and simplifying it in relation of making it more comprehensible for the general audience. This objectification of the otherwise complex and abstract term is a positive stride in the process of making the subject less intricate to the general audience. The discussion is circumscribed within several thematic areas concerning disinformation activities: disinformation for the purposes of spreading Russian propaganda, the necessity of enhancing media literacy and the youth empowerment for recognizing the false content.

Both, the political and media narratives evidently demonstrate considerable interest regarding the jeopardy of the disinformation activities. It is contemplated in the number of media articles published in the two-year period and the number of political statements and initiatives detected by the analysis with slight increase in media articles in 2019 compared to the previous year. It can be seen in the following table and graph.

Graph 1: Number of articles per medium

MEDIA COVERAGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Total	**335**	
TV channels	**166**	
Sitel	**48**	**14%**
Telma	**25**	**7,5%**
24 Vesti	**50**	**15%**
Kanal 5	**25**	**7,5%**
Alsat	**18**	**5%**
Print Media	**58**	
Vecer	**19**	**6%**
Nova Makedonija	**39**	**12%**
Digital Media	**111**	
Plus Info	**41**	**12%**
A1 On	**47**	**14%**
Makfax	**23**	**7%**

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PERCENTAGE OF MEDIA COVERAGE

| Media	Percentage
Makfax	7%
A1 On	14%
Plus Info	12%
Nova Makedonija	12%
Vecer	6%
Alsat	5%
Kanal 5	7,50%
24 Vesti	15%
Telma	7,50%
Sitel	14%
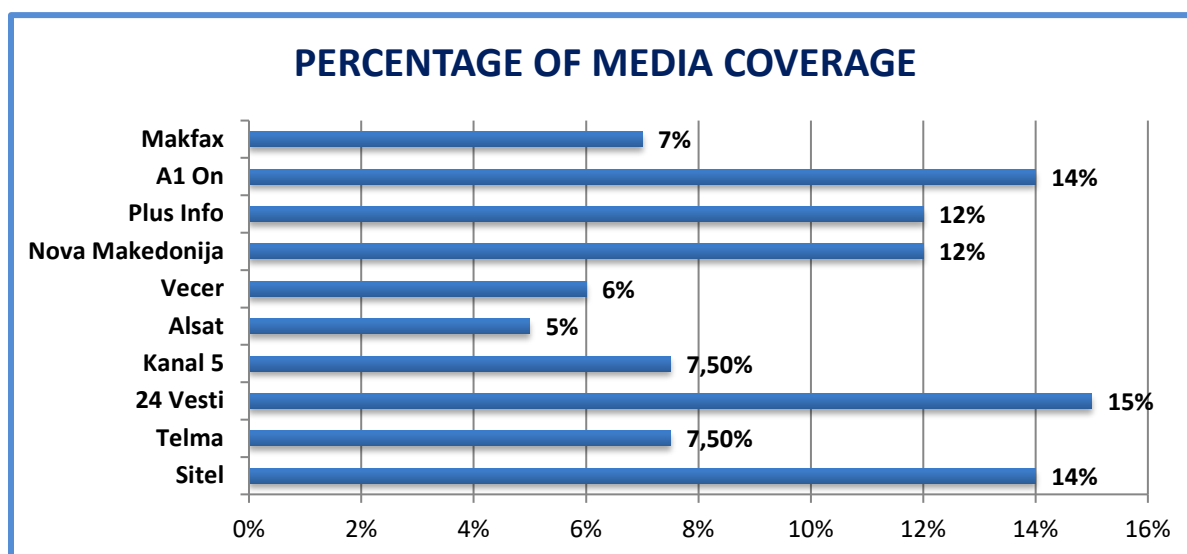
The situatedness of the disinformation in the society is depicted by hyperbolizing the adverse effects, but often understating the agents that lead toward disinformation. As for the discursive representations, they are often boiled down to aggregation practices or collective representations of the actors involved (both active and passive) in terms of numbers or general adjectives (some, many, several, few, etc.). The media often display proneness toward employment of gradable adjectives in order to augment significance of the relayed content. The attributive adjectives are mainly employed in the descriptive sequences of the text or statement in relation of depicting certain event.

Although there is a considerable media coverage, it suffers from incompleteness and imprecision. Many of the media outlets are inclined toward foregrounding the issues that involve political statements of significant political figures, high-level events and the measures implemented by the government, while the fact-checking efforts are largely overlooked and neglected. Furthermore, the media is prone toward backgrounding the investigative and research efforts by the independent bodies and academia.

In respect of the tone of the narratives and the general approach, the analyses relied on the common metrics for labeling and detecting the narrative approaches. For the purposes of this analysis, the media articles were tagged as positive, negative, neutral or ambivalent (for the texts which approach was difficult to be detected). The media approach is generally neutral and largely reliant on foreign sources.

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Graph 2 displays the Media Approach in percentage

MEDIA APPROACH TOWARD IMPLEMENTED MEASURES	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Positive	80	24%
Negative	36	11%
Neutral	165	49%
Ambivalent	54	16%
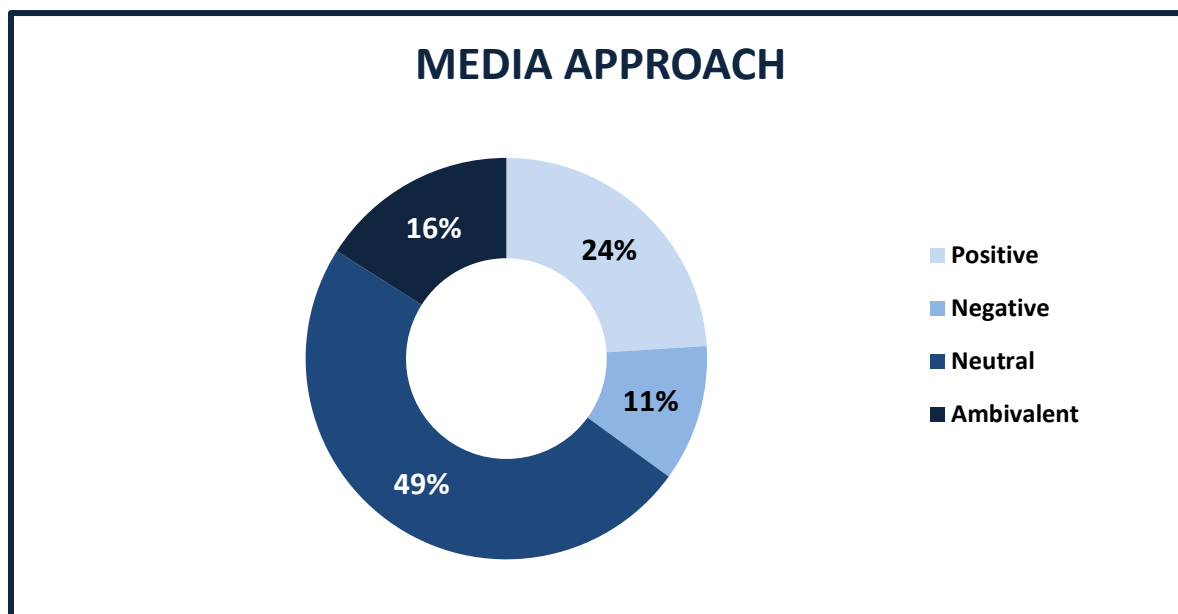
The content analysis detected two tendencies of media and political framings of the social actors and events which are inherent for both the media and political actors. The first tendency refers to the classification of the actors involved in disinformation practices for both the perpetrators (i.e. purveyors of the fake news and disinformation, often dubbed as *the Russians, the hackers,* etc.) and the victims (i.e. target audience, frequently alluding to *youth* as subset of population) with narratives that delineate the social categories (among which the nation, ethnicity and age). The other identifications are also used, oftentimes to express relational affiliations or characteristic attributes. The second tendency is embodied in the depersonalization practices where the actors are represented through abstraction and objectivation. When the press report on disinformation or fake news, it usually relies on state institutions or their representatives.

The notion of disinformation is frequently employed by the media and the political actors with reference to its propensity to cause harm and to undermine democracy. It is almost invariably utilized in pejorative connotation. Another touchstone of the media and political narratives is the orientation to use analogous connections to depict or warn about the potential disastrous effects of disinformation. For instance, they often rely on examples alluding to the devastating consequences of conveying unverified information such as the examples of conflict-inducing

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narratives that often promote inter-ethnic bigotry in the region, false alarms that instigate panic among the populace and the instances that endanger the public health (e.g. the reports concerning the outbreak of the measles in the region, anti-vaccine narratives and so on).[150]

When the quotations are in question, the media demonstrate propensity of citing authoritative figures and pundits on the one hand and political figures on the other, often by awarding predicates for underscoring the importance of their messages and placing them in the headlines sections. The media most frequently embeds direct quotations (straight citations), but the indirect quotations (paraphrasing) are also dominant. The unnamed sources or texts without sources are also present, although in lower extent. The statements often referenced by the media are in large extent statements of high-level political figures.

Graph 3 displays the type and the frequency of the media quotations

SOURCE DISTRIBUTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Direct	114	34%
Indirect	96	29%
Unnamed Source	70	21%
Without Source	55	16%
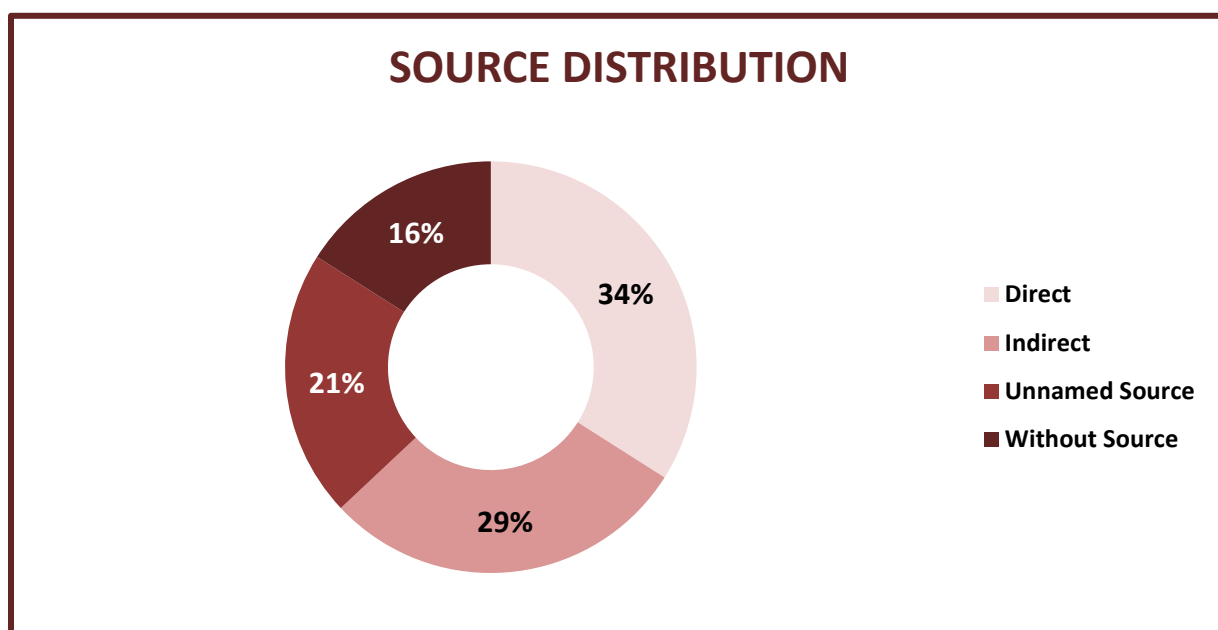
The media most often is viable toward declarative/informative text formats (in a form of statements and announcements), while the interrogative/investigative articles are less dominant. The imaginary is often utilized in media texts, in most cases with photographs and rarely with illustrations or caricatures. The articles concerning fake news are mainly sorted in

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[150] See for instance, "Вртлогот на лажните вести/ The spin of fake news", Telma TV, 22 June 2018, available at https://telma.com.mk/vrtlogot-na-lazhnite-vesti/.

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the thematic area about the internal affairs and the foreign politics when reporting about external influence.

Graph 4 displays the most utilized text formats

TEXT FORMATS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Declarative/Informative	261	78%
Interrogative/Investigative	63	19%
Persuative/Implicative	11	3%
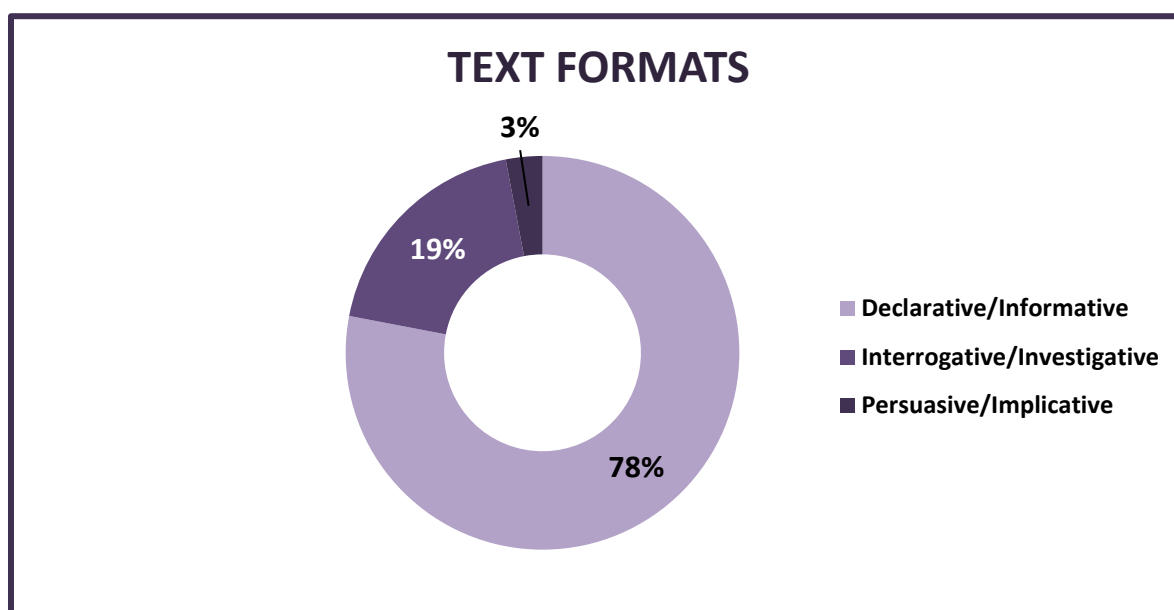
Graph 5 displays the thematic sections

THEMATIC SECTIONS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Foreign Politics	110	33%
Internal Affairs	192	57%
Economy	26	8%
Other	7	2%

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THEMATIC SECTIONS

- Foreign Politics
- Internal Affairs/Domestic Politics
- Economy
- Other

2%
8%
33%
57%
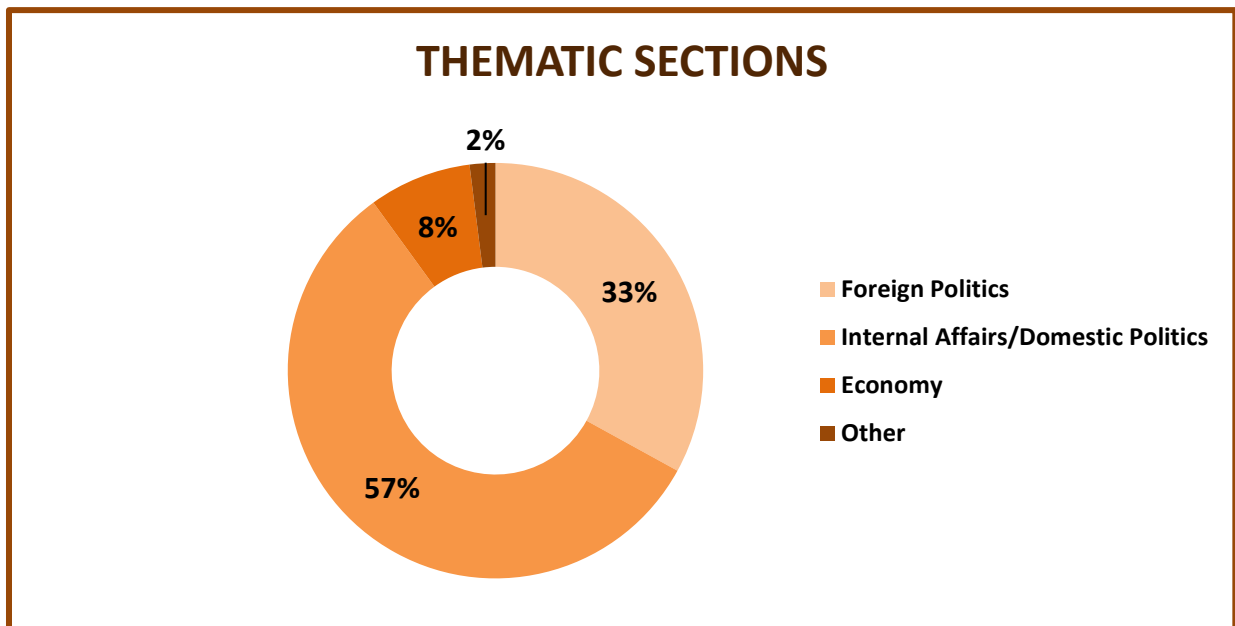
6. Effectiveness of the counter-disinformation campaigns

Regarding the fact-checking campaigns, aside from the poor and inadequate attention paid by the media and political actors, the general opinions by the expert community diverge. There are a lot of dissenting voices regarding the productivity or redundancy of such fact-checking tools. Some claim that these campaigns are effective tool for countering disinformation.[151] According to the study of the Annenberg Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, based on the findings of their cross-sectional research from 2012, the fact-checking keeps people more accurately informed about politics.[152] Others are questioning their efficiency and capacity to promote truth, to hold political actors accountable and to generate political impact.[153] The counter-arguments contained in their fact-checking articles are also challenged or penned as some of them being considered as tendentious.[154] There are also expressed concerns over the manual fact-checking with some questioning its effectiveness and proposing development of automatic fact-checking technology.[155] One study, even points out

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[151] B. Adair (2012): "The value of fact-checking in the 2012 campaign", *PolitiFact*, November 8th, 2012, available at https://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2012/nov/08/value-fact-checking-2012-campaign/.

[152] Annenberg Public Policy Center, "The Public Still has a Lot to Learn About the 2012 Presidential Race but Those Who Seek out Fact Checking on the Internet Know More.", 26 September 2012, available at https://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/the-public-still-has-a-lot-to-learn-about-the-2012-presidential-race-but-those-who-seek-out-fact-checking-on-the-internet-know-more.

[153] D. Carr (2012): "A last fact check: It didn't work", *The New York Times*, 6 November 2012, available at https://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/06/a-last-fact-check-it-didnt-work/?mtrref=undefined&gwh=F8860E0CFD79DEC6BAFD477D9177A9F1&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL.

[154] G. Marx (2012): "What the Fact-Checkers Get Wrong", *Columbia Journalism Review*, 5 January 2012, available at https://archives.cjr.org/campaign_desk/what_the_fact_checkers_get_wro.php.

[155] A. Moschitti (2016): "Automatic Fact Checking Technology for Improving our Society", 2 May 2016, available at https://ec.europa.eu/futurium/en/content/automatic-fact-checking-technology-improving-our-society.

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to the jeopardy of emergence of biased perceptions of the presented corrections among the general audience.[156]

Based on observation and critical overview of several fact-checking websites, the analysis has identified two sizable problems that could challenge the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of the existing fact-checking campaigns. The first problem of this multifold concern pertains to the overall visibility of these campaigns. There is still no comprehensive research in the region of Western Balkans regarding peoples' stances with respect to their familiarity, favorability and overall perceptions toward fact-checking and other counter-disinformation campaigns. Although the quantitative researches focusing on measuring peoples' perceptions regarding fact-checking are less common in Western Balkans, the studies conducted outside of the Western Balkan region display dire results when the familiarity of the general public with the fact-checking is in question. For instance, one study designed to ascertain the familiarity and favorability of the American public toward fact-checking, highlights that roughly half of the respondents were unfamiliar with the fact-checking.[157]

The second problem ties with the target audiences and their predispositions (e.g., age, education, Internet literacy, political interest) in relation to their ability to understand the complexity of what the fact-checking implies. Specifically, the fact-checking websites represent a convolution of complex and highly-proficient articles and these intricacies can pose difficulties for less educated or less politically informed individuals. The third concern, that urges for greater vigilance that the fact-checkers should consider, is the risk to descend into one-sided approach. It generates the risk the target audience to inhabit position that is in line with the fact-checkers' stances and positions, even if they are erroneous. Namely, the fact-checking process entails individual factor including the preexisting beliefs of the fact-checkers, their subjectivity and often inadvertent human errors. Forth, the other chief challenges are associated with peoples' beliefs, sentiments and perceptions which are not uniform and each could perceive and apprehend the messages contained in the campaigns differently. The relative perceptions that can be due to the overall polarization within the Western Balkan society could implicate the way the overall messages of the fact-checking are understood and interpreted.

As for the positive aspects, it can be argued that the counter-disinformation campaigns implemented in the Western Balkans have several assets: First, they ensure the political accountability by demystifying the political claims and promises and their connections with the reality. Second, they hold the media accountable for the information being placed in the public by breaking down and exposing the disinformation sources and debunking misinformation. And lastly, they provide citizens with easily accessible information about the

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[156] R. Kelly Garrett, B. E. Weeks (2013): "The Promise and Peril of Real-Time Corrections to Political Misperceptions"in *Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (pp. 1047-1058), Association for Computing Machinery, New York, available at https://rkellygarrett.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Garrett-and-Weeks-Promise-and-peril-of-real-time-corrections.pdf.

[157] B. Nyhan, J. Reifler (2015): "Estimating Fact-checking's Effects", American Press Institute, 28 April 2015, available at https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Estimating-Fact-Checkings-Effect.pdf.

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veracity and authenticity of the political claims, the media information and the content broadcasted by the media or spread via social networks.

There is little or no consensus how to evaluate and assess the implemented campaigns in terms of their performance and results attained on a long haul. In this respect, the end-result of this article was to summarize the positive aspects of the already functioning online platforms, to critically overview and recap the weaknesses and to develop measurable, tailor-made and interpretative indicators for future evaluations and assessments.

The following indictors which are sorted into four categories (Functionality/Operability, Availability/Accessibility, Transparency and Efficiency) are the summative results of the observations:

Category 1 – **Functionality/Operability**
Indicators:
1) There are regular updates on the website of the online platforms.
2) There is functional and operable search tool on the website (the search tool is also operationalized for advanced searches).
3) There is functional and maintainable database of all the published articles on the website.

Category 2 – **Availability/Accessibility**
Indicators:
1) The data presented is easily accessible online.
2) The content of the online platforms is available and accessible for different social categories (e.g. young people, elderly people, people with different educational level, people with cognitive disabilities, people that are less technologically versed and literate, people that are less informed or interested about politics, laymen community).
3) The existence of such campaigns has satisfying visibility (this can be assessed by the number of informational campaigns disseminated via traditional, social and outdoor media; statistics on search traffic).

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Category 3 – **Transparency**
Indicators:
1) There is transparent organizational structure (the organizational structure is available online along with the professional background, function and role in the whole operational team).
2) The funding sources of the counter-disinformation platforms are transparent and public.
3) The conducted evaluations of the project/programs (both internal and external) are publicly available.
4) The methodology of the implementation process is well-explained and publicly available.
5) There is a communication with the professional public for suggestions and improvements.
6) There is an opportunity for engagement of the wider community (it can be mostly evident by existence of q/a section on the online platforms)
7) The sources of information are regularly cited.

Category 4 – **Efficiency**
Indicators:
1) Quantity of articles and analysis published monthly.
2) Quantity of fake news debunked.
3) Number of visits of the online platforms per week (statistics).
4) The level of political impact of the counter-disinformation campaigns (regular analyses conducted on the political impact, impact assessments).
5) Number of retractions or corrections of the debunked information made by the media and other relevant actors.
6) The level of interruption of spreading the debunked disinformation narratives.
7) Number of quotations of the website content by the media and the political actors.

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7. Conclusion

The recent trends of dispersion of fake news and disinformation into the virtual traffic, enabled by the digital technology and the advent of social media, have instigated major concerns globally. The issue of fake news and disinformation is becoming more and more prevalent in the Western Balkans as well.

Influenced by a number of factors specific for the Western Balkans, including the socio-economic vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses, the region has become fertile ground for misuse of the power of information from various actors whether it is political propaganda by external actors or for national political interests. The unbridled and pervasive nature of disinformation practices coupled with low quality of information and politically-curbed journalism which is dominant in the region, has sparked complex and multidimensional issues that impact the way these trends are dealt with. Against this backdrop, more and more actors are realizing the need and urgency to take measures to tackle this phenomenon.

Notably, the capacity of the disinformation practices to manipulate cognition, to obscure facts and to distract the audience with often incendiary and misleading narratives, attests the urgency for employing effective tools for its suppression. Given the fact that the digital technology provides different and versatile avenues in facilitating the possibility of the disinformation and fake news to go viral and to spread instantly with unprecedented and ubiquitous consequences, many complexities arise in the processes of countering such practices.

The already implemented campaigns are leap forward in the process of countering disinformation processes, but represent an unsettled and indeterminate question in relation to their sufficiency and effectiveness to eradicate them and to offset the potential long-term societal implications. The potential push-back can range from the inadequacy of the human factor and the probable biases to their (in)ability to generate long-term societal resilience. Likewise, it is noteworthy to point out that these campaigns are aided by foreign funds, while domestic initiatives are still lacking or they have sidelined role.

In a nutshell, based on the primary findings of the elaborated study, it can be inferred that there is a considerable interest by both the media and the political actors in North Macedonia and relatively equal distribution of news stories that target fake news and disinformation among the print, TV and digital media. Regarding media, even though there is a considerable media interest, in general, there are no investigative practices with the informative articles dominating over the investigative articles. The second major inference is that there is a sizable quantity of counter-disinformation campaigns. It is important to note, that although there plenty of counter-disinformation instruments in the region of Western Balkans, in the paucity of researches, cost-benefit analysis and impact assessments, one cannot reach definitive conclusions upon their political impact and their overall effectiveness in countering

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disinformation. However, these campaigns are positive stride that attest the awareness of the actors in charge to deal with disinformation and fake news.

8. Recommendations

The effectiveness of the fact-checking and the wider media literacy campaigns in one of the most salient features that attest the overall workability and employability of the implemented campaigns. The inclusion of all the political actors, media and civil society is vital in reaching out the most appropriate solutions. In this regard, the following recommendations can assist in the process of considering the most adequate solutions:

1. **Ensuring visibility of the counter-campaigns**. First, the public is important catalyst of boosting the effectiveness of the counter-disinformation campaigns, as well as the readership of the content available on the online platforms. Second, it provides inclusiveness and it is indicative that everyone can use the platforms. The simple and direct approach is vital and indicator that the platforms are not just available for highly educated individuals and politically-acquainted and that is understood by different categories of users.

2. The **role of education should not be overlooked**. Backing media literacy campaigns (both online and offline) through educational and informational tools are crucial in making people less susceptible to disinformation, to stimulate critical thinking and to increase understanding. These campaigns cannot exist alone without being corroborated from governmental initiatives, social packages and media engagement in the processes of raising awareness.

3. **Boosting diversity and pluralism in counter-disinformation campaigns** is one of the most important features in galvanizing more effective counter-disinformation responses. The diversification of the mechanisms for countering disinformation which should include different actors (NGOs, media, institutions) is essential for triggering whole-society approach for more effective performances of the implemented measures.

4. It is important to consider or resort to **automatic fact checking technology** and to develop systems for **semantic processing** that will complement the manual checking and will be less time-consuming.

5. The **support of researches** that will focus on measuring people's stances, beliefs and perceptions on fact-checking and media literacy campaigns should be prioritized. It will provide insights about the position of the general public upon their acceptance and familiarity and will open the prospects for improvements.

6. **Investing in independent media, high-quality journalism and media pluralism** by strengthening the regulations and establishing special regulatory bodies is an imperative that should be fostered in development of resilient media capable to produce impartial and factual content.

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Oleksii Lyska

E-participation in Ukraine: The Current Stage and Perspectives

1. Interview

Łukasz Król (College of Europe, Natolin): The focus of your project - namely e-participation - sounds fascinating. How would you define this topic to a reader who has not come across it beforehand?

Oleksii Lyska: The idea of e-participation is very simple – it's about how you can communicate with your government (either local or central) via information and communication technologies (for example, e-mails, websites, gadgets). E-participation allows you to be informed about public affairs and to express your position, convey your thoughts or concerns to authorities by using electronic ("e" in the term "e-participation" means electronic) tools, channels, devices.

ŁK: How does e-participation in Ukraine compare to e-participation in other countries?

OL: E-participation is becoming more and more popular among Ukrainians, though the level of participation is still slightly low at this moment. For instance, a survey I took part in as a researcher several years ago revealed a growing number of people who use internet communication to discuss the policies of local authorities - 10% did so in 2017 in contrast with only 6% in 2014. And the figures are increasing! The recent project has confirmed this tendency – many of our respondents are well informed about the existing electronic tools they can use to express their viewpoints and quite actively participate in decision making by using IT. Though, of course, there are still some technological challenges and mindset barriers that prevent e-participation from becoming more widespread.

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ŁK: What were some of the most surprising findings that have come from your discussions in focus groups?

OL: I was impressed with the respondents 'awareness regarding the available tools and current possibilities for e-participation. They accurately recalled the existing "arsenal" of options, even identifying some that are quite rare for Ukraine. However, taking into account the low level of public involvement in the practices of e-democracy and reluctance of many Ukrainians to use IT to be heard, we have much big room for improvement in this direction.

ŁK: One of the really cool things I have found in your reports is that people can authenticate for e-government programmes by using their bank accounts. Something similar can be done in Poland, too - you can, for example, use your online bank login to authenticate to the national tax portal. What are your views on this?

OL: BankID is a quite reliable and well-protected system in comparison with other types of authentication. The National Bank of Ukraine (NBU) started the project in 2015 based on the experience of other countries, such as Estonia, Latvia, Finland, and Sweden. The NBU controls the system and encourages commercial banks to use it (so far, more than 10 banks are connected to BankID). Apart from access to e-services (state or commercial), it provides opportunities for e-participation (for example, e-petitions and public budget). However, during the focus groups, some of the participants reported they hesitate to use the system. They fear that their personal data might leak or they might even lose money stored in their bank accounts (though I have never heard about this happening). Fortunately, in many cases, along with BankID, there are other options for authentication if people wish to use e-participation tools. Those options include e-signatures. If someone really wants to, say, vote for a public budget project, they can do it in several ways.

ŁK: The concept of e-petitions is fascinating. I know that, in some countries (for example the UK), the government has an official web platform for petitions. In others, all petitions are done through private platforms. Do you think that one format is superior to the other?

OL: I'd say the both types of platform – governmental and private - could complement each other. According to Ukrainian law, citizens may approach the President of Ukraine, the Parliament, the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, and a local self-government body with electronic petitions. Those are submitted through the official website of the relevant body, or the website of a public association that collects signatures in support of e-petitions. Thus all the beforementioned actors (the President, the Cabinet, the Parliament, many of local authorities and some NGOs) have separate platforms for e-petitions.

The problem is, citizens are not always well informed about the competencies, responsibilities, and functions of each body and quite often approach the "wrong" authority, which is not responsible for the addressed issue, with their petitions. Another common issue occurs when citizens do not check the list of already registered petitions and submit similar ones. As a result, none of those petitions will be considered due to the lack of sufficient voter

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support. Of cause, this ends up with situation that leave citizens disappointed in both the authorities and in e-participation in general. This means that they might, in the future, vote without any expectations of being heard or even stop voting altogether.

The majority of the respondents who voted for e-petitions reported during our survey that don't know their results, as they just don't follow the process (end even don't remember the issues raised in the petitions). This phenomenon might be explained by the disappointment based on the previous negative experiences and a lack of trust.

ŁK: How have local and national governments reacted to e-petitions?

OL: There are several acts which regulate the process of how authorities react to petitions. In brief, those regulations install several "filters" to exclude petitions that, say, are not relevant or not serious. For example, to be reviewed by the President, the Cabinet, or the Parliament, an e-petition should first receive no less than 25,000 votes during three months. After that, the petitions that overcome this barrier are reviewed. And it's up to the authorities to decide if such petitions will be taken into account or not. For example, one of the fastest-growing petitions (it took less than 1 day to receive the needed 25,000 voices) called for President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to resign. However, since according to the Constitution of Ukraine the issue cannot be initiated via petition, the request was declined – and the President notified the authors and voters about that on the website.

There are interesting cases when opposite requests are expressed in petitions. For instance, in 2018, in the official web-site of Lviv City were registered three e-petitions – one with a demand to build a waste treatment plant in the city, another two to prohibit the building of the plant. All the petitions received the necessary number of votes to be reviewed by the city's management. The authors of the petition were invited to discuss the issue in the City Council. After the debates, neither of those petitions was supported by the Council.

2. METHODOLOGY of the focus-group interviews in the framework of the project "E-participation in Ukraine: The Current Stage and Perspectives"

Introduction

The methodology of the focus-group interviews is developed in the framework of the project "E-participation in Ukraine: The Current Stage and Perspectives" (hereinafter referred to as "Methodology") implemented by the Kharkiv Regional Union "Youth Initiatives" with financial support provided by the College of Europe Natolin, the Polish American Freedom Foundation, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Black Sea Trust, and the Polish-U.S. Fulbright Commission via the WEASA 2019 SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM.

The Methodology is prepared by Oleksii Lyska, Ph.D.

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Aim and tasks of the activities

The aim of the focus groups interviews is to investigate the state of affairs of public participation in decision-making in Ukraine by using E-tools.

Within the aforementioned aim, **the tasks of the focus groups** are the following:

1) to determine the level of public involvement in decision-making via E-tools

2) to identify the most popular E-tools for citizen participation in decision-making

3) to find out the barriers for citizen participation in decision-making

Questions to be asked:

1.1. Have you ever heard about the possibilities to express your opinion via E-tools?

1.2. Have you ever used E-tools to participate in decision-making at local or national level?

2.1. Which tools and methods have you used (if any)?

a) E- petitions (a1) – writing and submission; a2) – signing)

b) participatory budgeting (b1) – project submission; b2) – voting)

c) appeals, proposals and complaints to local authorities via Internet (c1) – writing and submission; c2) – signing)

d) Internet discussions of policies of local or national authorities

e) other tools

3.1. What does prevent you to use E-tools (or to use them more actively) to participate in decision-making?

3.2. If you could change anything about the E-tools practices to make them more efficient, what would it be?

Locations

The focus-groups should be conducted in 2 municipalities: (Chuguiv City and Pervomaisky City).

The location should be a safe and convenient site, easy for access (located in the city center, proximity of the public transport), and provide a point of neutrality. Neutral locations are needed to avoid either negative or positive associations with a particular site or premises (Powell & Single, 1996).

Possible options of the venues: public spaces (e.g. conference rooms, libraries, houses of cultures, youth hubs, community meeting houses).

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Participants

Participants: local residents of the selected municipalities, citizens of Ukraine who have the legal right to vote (aged 18+).

The participants should not be experts or professionals in the topic of the discussion. The scope of their expertise and/or professional duties should be beyond the area of public participation and/or E-tools.

The participants should not take part in any qualitative research at least six months before the focus groups.

Considering participants of the focus groups, it should be crucial to avoid situations during the meeting when someone (due to professional status, expertise, position etc.) dominate the discussion, suppress or block possibilities of the other participants to freely express their attitudes and thoughts!

The number of respondents 8-12 for each focus group.

Recruitment

To recruit the participant of the focus groups the following methods might be used: advertisements, contacts through employers, community facilities (clubs, houses of culture, libraries, youth hubs), training and enterprise councils, and personal contacts (Smithson 2000: 107).

The persons invited to participate in the focus groups should meet the criteria defined in the paragraph "Participants".

The participants should not be notified about the subject of the focus groups in advance.

To ensure that enough people show up, the number of invited persons should exceed (+ 1-2 persons) the needed number of participants of the focus groups.

Moderator

Moderator – is a well–trained professional, a skilled facilitator. He/she must be well-informed about the purpose and objectives of the study and able to manage the communication process. The moderator must be a good listener and observer, patient as participants respond to questions (or not respond), free from distractions, non-judgmental and flexible. He/she must keep the participants on target in a mild and friendly manner to ensure that the relevant topic remains the focus of attention during the discussion without hindering participants from articulating their opinions and thoughts. The moderator should serve as a neutral third party and must avoid giving his/her personal opinion (Gibbs, 1997). The moderator must also be able to use the probing questions in a productive and timely manner (Sagoe, 2012; Villard, 2003).

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Assistant

Assistant provides background support: arranging the meeting room, checking and testing equipment (including recording ones), handling distractions (i.e., late arrivals, excess noise), debriefing with the moderator after each session and providing feedback on the analysis report. He/she may also give leadership to participant arrival and welcome, refreshments and the preparation, operation and monitoring of the recording equipment. The assistant should be observant of the group participants. He/she takes notes (including verbal comments and body language from participants) during the interview sessions. The notes should include session date and address, time (start and end) of the session, names of the participants, their reactions to the questions, expressions, attitudes, intensity of the conversation, general atmosphere during the interview (Sagoe, 2012; Villard, 2003).

Description of the interview

The focus groups begin with the moderator welcoming participants. The moderator introduces him/ herself, explains the aim and tasks of meeting, ethics code and rules of the interview.

In particular, the moderator makes the following statement:

"I, _____ (name), a moderator of today's meeting, represent the Kharkiv Regional Union "Youth Initiatives", which is conducting this focus group in the framework of the project "E-participation in Ukraine: The Current Stage and Perspectives" with financial support provided by the College of Europe Natolin, the Polish American Freedom Foundation, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Black Sea Trust, and the Polish-U.S. Fulbright Commission via the WEASA 2019 SMALL GRANTS PROGRAM.

The purpose of the survey is to investigate the state of affairs of public participation in decision-making in Ukraine by using E-tools. The survey will result in a number of recommendations on how to improve the system of public participation in decision-making, particularly via E-tools.

You will be asked to answer questions. Please, response freely. No one "has" to answer a certain question. There are no right or wrong answers. However, it is important to speak one at a time.

The session will be recorded. All your responses will remain anonymous and strictly confidential. Nobody, except for the interviewers, will have access to them. However, for the interviewers to monitor the work, please register and leave your contact phone number and/or e-mail."

The moderator asks participants to introduce themselves to provide credibility to the research study and make each participant more comfortable with others in the group. After that, the moderator asks the questions (beginning with the simple ones), trying to receive answers from all the participants, ensuring their involvement and stimulating the group's dynamic. The moderator stimulates discussion with comments or subjects. Participants are encouraged to

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express their positions and even disagree with one another about the topics. They can influence each other by responding to ideas and questions. At the end of the meeting, the moderator thanks participants for their contributions and assures them of the confidentiality of their insight.

The moderator should encourage different group members to speak and freely express their own opinions and views. The moderator should avoid situation of a dominant voice overriding other voices.

The duration of each focus group interview session is 1,5-2,5 hours.

Reporting

The documents to be provided after each focus groups are:

- List of participants with signatures
- Audio record of the focus group (as an audio file)
- Report

Report

The structure of the report is the following:

1. Date, start time and end time of the meeting.
2. Venue (address).
3. Moderator's name and surname.
4. Participants (number and characteristics).
5. Answers of the participants to the questions. Participants' attitudes toward the questions. Participants' behavior, non-verbal signs (emotions, intonation, gestures etc.). Atmosphere during the discussion.
6. Main ideas (answers, comments, proposals, remarks) expressed during the meeting.
7. Findings and recommendations of the focus-group.

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REPORT on focus group conducted in the framework of the project "E-participation in Ukraine: The Current Stage and Perspectives" no. 1

Date: February, 4, 2020

Location: City of Chuguiv, Youth Hub "City"

Address: Kozheduba Str. 24 (2nd floor), City of Chuguiv, Kharkiv oblast, Ukraine

Moderator: Oleh Kulinich

Participants: 9 persons - 3 males and 6 females from 23 to 43 years old. The participants of the focus-group discussion included: public servants (4 persons), civil society activists (3 persons) and ordinary citizens.

They were quite open for discussion and sharing of their personal experience. Even those, connected to the local authorities spoke frankly regarding the barriers and problems for further implementation of the electronic services into the process of decision making (participation).

The discussion regarding e-tools, which could be reached by Ukrainian citizens, were quite proactive and friendly, showing the eagerness of the participants for the open discussion.

According to the results of the first round of questions, the participants knew such electronic tools as:

- E-Petitions to the Supreme Council of Ukraine, President of Ukraine, local authorities (at local and regional levels);

- Participatory budget;

- Electronic consultations with the citizens (through the web site);

- Citizens' appeals;

- "Communal dispatcher" – the tool, which enables the citizens to inform the communal enterprises, responsible for water, electricity and other services deliveries and get their respective reactions;

- Surveys in the social media (In Chuguiv such surveys are done through the local newspaper's official Facebook account. As an example: what date is more suitable for celebrating the new year events). The participants described the surveys quite positively, emphasizing that they are "very simple", "urgent" and "vital".;

- Specialized Viber-messenger groups with the local authorities' representatives involved;

- Telegram-bots of communal enterprises.

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Among the tools mentioned, there was a brand-new approach for Ukraine – the consultations, introduced by law only recently, but already implemented in city. It enables the citizens to provide their comments and propose amendments to the projects of decrees of local authorities.

Among the participants of the focus-group the most often used electronic services were (descending):

- Voting for the projects for participatory budget. Voting for submitted projects for the public budget proved to be the most popular electronic tool used by the focus group participants in Chuguiv. In particular, 8 out of 9 participants reported their experience of using it (one participant also reported her own experience of submitting projects to the public budget). Moreover, while talking about their own voting practice, some of the participants emotionally emphasized its results - "very successfully", "without problems!", Although they noted that there were certain challenges during the voting: "not very convenient electronic platform", "often failures";

- Participation in the official surveys, initiated by local authorities, in the social media (and one participant emphasized that "I always participate");

- Voting for petitions at different levels (mostly to the President of Ukraine). At the same time, describing their experience of signing e-petitions, residents of Chuguiv reported that they do not know about the results of consideration of these petitions: "I don't know about their results - I didn't track", "I don't remember what the case ended", and most do not remember question, even to whom it was addressed.;

- "Communal dispatcher";

- Submitting projects for participatory budget voting;

- Launching of the petitions.

One participant has made the statement that she had never used an electronic tool due to the absence of trust in the perspectives of implementation of such decisions, recommended by the citizens. Another participant, who has twice voted for the public budget projects, stated that he had "not heard of other opportunities before".

Three participants informed that they had never used such tools despite the fact the tools are more than accessible. The reason – they had no need in them.

Among the most often barriers, preventing the citizens from more intensive involvement into the process of decision-making through the electronic tools:

- Lack of information about such possibilities;

- Problems with the access to websites;

- Authentication troubles and/or lack of methods of authentication;

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- Being afraid for personal data licking (especially, in case of going through the bank-based identification);

- Being afraid to lose money from the bank account as far as the authentication is done through bank authentication.

- Having no time and/or desire to participate in such activities;

What could help in this situation:

- To show more proactively the results of the project implementation (in case of participatory budget) – success stories;

- To disseminate more information regarding possibilities and tools available through all the channels available;

- To raise the usability of the e-platforms and tools;

- To work at raising of motivation;

- To decrease the risk of personal data loses;

- To identify reliable speakers, who could promote the tools.

The absolute majority of the participants underlined the fact that the popularity of this or that tool was depends on the level of trust to it.

The possible reliable information sources:

- The leaders of public opinion (for instance, their FB-pages)

- Sign plates at the objects;

- The official FB-pages of the local authorities;

- Unofficial groups/pages in social media ("to be filtered before use" but informative).

In this, it was mentioned by 7 participants, success stories could be the most inspiring and motivating way to raise both the trust and motivation of citizens. The so-called "gypsy radio" - rumors – could be much more effective than official information channels. The sign plates should be put on each object, built or reconstructed within a participatory budget project.

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REPORT on focus group conducted in the framework of the project "E-participation in Ukraine: The Current Stage and Perspectives" no. 2

Date: February, 6, 2020

Location: City of Pervomaiskyi, Youth Hub "Komora"

Address: Staryi Gromadskyi Centr, City of Pervomaiskyi, Kharkiv oblast, Ukraine

Moderator: Oleh Kulinich

Participants: 11 persons - 4 males and 7 females of different ages (for 25 to 55) and social status. The participants of the focus-group discussion included employees of municipal facilities and enterprises (4 persons), civil society activists (2 persons) and ordinary citizens.

All the participants were open for discussion and sharing of their personal experience, expressing their thoughts regarding the barriers and problems on the way of further implementation of the electronic services into the process of decision making (participation) at local and regional level.

The discussion regarding e-tools, which could be reached by Ukrainian citizens was held in the friendly and calm atmosphere.

According to the results of the first round of questions, the participants knew such electronic tools as:

- E-petitions to the Supreme Council of Ukraine, President of Ukraine, local authorities (at local and regional levels);

- Participatory budget;

- Posts in the social media, which including "tagging the mayor" there in order to attract his attention;

- The official website of the City Council (the appeals from the citizens);

- Surveys in the social media conducted by local authorities;

- Electronic services and possibility to submit the feedback at the website of the local Center for Administrative Services Provision

Apart from that, several participants referred to the electronic queue service (as an electronic queue to the doctor), as well as the filing of declarations by persons authorized to perform state or local government functions, arguing that these services could also be considered as e-tools (although not everyone shared this position).

The method of attraction of attention of the local authorities by tagging the Mayor in the social media appeared to be quite popular in the city due to the fact that the mayor is very

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proactive there, presenting the achievements of the city council and communicating through it with the citizens.

Another feature of the Pervomaiskyi City – the electronic platform for participatory budget has been developed by an NGO "Chesno" (national-wide free platform).

Among the participants of the focus-group the most often used electronic services were (descending the significance):

- Voting for the projects for participatory budget;

- Participation in the official surveys, initiated by local authorities, in the social media;

- Publications on the FB-pages of the city council and the mayor;

- Signing e-petitions at different levels (mostly to the President of Ukraine);

- Submitting projects for participatory budget voting;

- Launching of the petitions

Four participants informed that they had never used such tools even though the tools are accessible. The reason – there was no need in them.

One participant mentioned that he had negative experience with the participatory budget voting – he failed to pass the authorization process.

Among the most often barriers, preventing the citizens from more intensive involvement into the process of decision-making through the electronic tools:

- Being afraid that a person voted for or against something online (in case of petition, for instance) could be identified by public;

- Lack of information about such possibilities;

- Lack of trust in the possibility of a decision to be taken, based on the public onion, expressed through the e-tools;

- Authentication troubles and/or lack of methods of authentication (example: a participant lives at the nearby village and considers herself to be a city community member because she works and pays the taxes there);

- Having no time and/or desire to participate in such activities;

- Problems with the access to a website;

- Being afraid of personal data leaking;

- Being afraid to lose money from the bank account as far as the authentication is done through bank authentication.

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During a small discussion, the majority of the group agreed upon the fact that the absence of smartphone and/or computer could not be considered as a barrier for participation, due to the fact that the PCs are available either at work or at public spaces (such as the youth hub of library, for instance).

But the desire and/or motivation are absent.

What could help in this situation:

- To show more proactively the results of the project implementation (in case of participatory budget) – success stories;

- More publications in the media needed;

- To disseminate more information regarding possibilities and tools available through all the channels available;

- To raise the usability of the e-platforms and tools with unified procedures;

- To work at raising of motivation;

- To decrease the risk of personal data loses;

- To identify reliable speakers, who could promote the tools.

The absolute majority of the participants underlined the fact that the popularity of this or that tool was depends on the level of trust to it.

Very interesting idea regarding the installation of e-terminals in the public places where a person could vote in case it has no access to the internet by other means.

The possible reliable information sources:

- Sign plates should be put on each object, built or reconstructed within a participatory budget project;

- The leaders of public opinion (for instance, their FB-pages);

- Sign plates at the objects;

- The official FB-pages of the local authorities;

- Unofficial groups/pages in social media ("to be filtered before use" but informative).

Likewise in Chuguiv, during the meeting with first group, it was mentioned by 5 participants that success stories could be the most inspiring and motivating way to raise both the trust and motivation of citizens. The so-called "gypsy radio" - rumors – could be much more effective than official information channels.

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Armenuhi Chiflikyan

Insults in Cyberspace: Who is Liable?

Unprecedented developments in information technology have made the instantaneous, broad, and potentially, anonymous information dissemination an integral part of our lives. More than 4 billion people (almost 57 percent of the world population) form an interconnected entity of Internet users today[158]. Therefore, IT-related debates are rapidly becoming an integral part of many legal deliberations, bringing with them an urgent need to ensure the protection of dignity and reputation in the information realm.

By making communications more available, the internet reality greatly amplifies the opportunities for an infringement of entities' right to dignity and reputation.

(Easy)) opportunities for violations) = (difficult)) liability issues related to these violations).

If an insult happens in physical space, the liability holder is more definite. But if the same actions happen in cyberspace, for example, when someone comments under someone else's post on Facebook, then we need to clear up *who the right actor of liability will be.* We have four options here.

1/ the one who made a comment containing the insult,

2/ the one under whose post the comment was written,

3/ the one whose wall was used for that post,

4/ maybe Facebook's administration itself?

Let's look at the case law of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). In the famous case of *Delfi AS v. Estonia*, the Estonian company Delfi AS published in its online news portal an

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[158] https://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/

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article entitled *SLK Destroyed Planned Ice Road* [159]. The aforementioned company provided the opportunity to comment on the article. 20 out of a total of 185 comments contained offensive language (hate speech and direct threats to the physical integrity of individual) towards SLK's majority shareholder, who, after six weeks, sent a request to Delfi AS to take down the comments.

The court found that, when there is an obvious humiliation of the honor and dignity of an entity, the person responsible for website shall monitor comments recorded in the space of the website to ensure protection of honor and dignity of entities and to remove derogatory comments even when there is no request about their removal.

At the same time, the way in which such monitoring is carried out has no effect on the reduction of the website owner's liability: the monitoring can take place before a person's comment is posted or afterwards. Although the entities who write comments on the website are responsible for their comments, this does not mean that the owner of the website is absolved from all liability. A few days after the publication of an offensive comment in cyberspace, the protection of the honor of the person may be ineffective, because it will already be widely distributed among thousands of users.

In another case – «Magyar Tartalomszolgáltatók Egyesülete and index.hu Zrt v. Hungary»[160] [3], the ECHR stated that regard must be had to the specificities of the style of communication on certain Internet portals. Expressions used in comments can belong to a low register of style and be common in communication on certain Internet portals – this reduces the impact of those expressions. The court also mentioned that national courts of Hungary didn't address the issue of liability of the authors of the comments, and imposed the whole liability on the operator of the Internet portal. In the opinion of the ECHR, it is too heavy a burden for operators of the Internet portals to monitor all comments of third parties without corresponding request for removal.

Therefore, it is important to take into consideration all the circumstances of each case.

But one thing is clear – in cyberspace, the author whose comment contains an insult should be the first actor of liability. Only thereafter should the liability of the owner of the website be discussed.

When there are more actors between the author of the comment and the website owner, we should stipulate some sequence of liability.

For example, on Facebook there can be 4 holders of liability. The liability of the author of the comment comes first. And then come in turn other actors connected with each other (and with the first actor). But they can hold liability only in the case of corresponding removal request.

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[159] «Delfi AS v. Estonia», app. No. 64569/09, 16 June 2015.
[160] «Magyar Tartalomszolgáltatók Egye sülete and index.hu Zrt v. Hungary», app. No.22947/13, 02 May 2016.

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If we try to create a Venn diagram showing the atribution of liability, it will have the following nested structure:
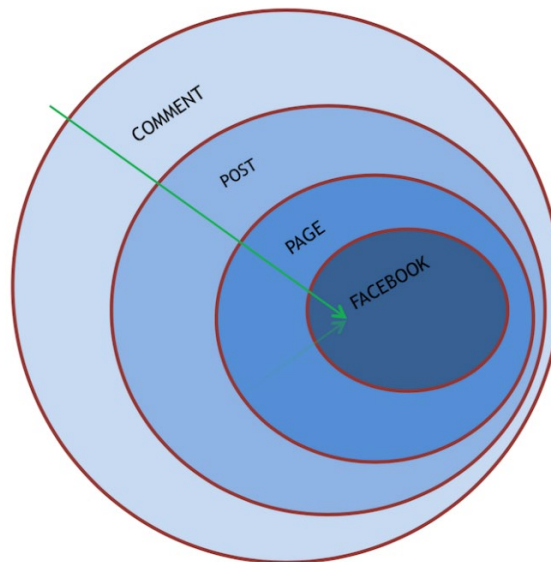
The chart above describes four different layers of liability attribution. The first layer is the liability of the comment author. The second is the layer of liability of the author, under whose post the comment is written. The third layer signifies the liability of the wall owner. Finally, the fourth layer is the liability of Facebook's administration. This is meant to signify a hierarchy of responsibility when it comes to attributing liability.

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Legal Means of Defending Democracies Against Disinformation

Kremlin disinformation campaigns pose a direct threat to democracies both new and old as they try to undermine the stability of our societies and to manipulate our views and choices. The strategic objective of these campaigns is to weaken and destabilize the West at every level. Starting from 2014 sixteen European elections have been influenced by the disinformation campaigns[161] attributed to Kremlin backed groups.

And the used tools, techniques and methods are getting more and more adaptable, ingenious, aimed at very specific social groups. At the same time our response is insufficient, we are overlooking some defensive strategies against disinformation.

Various solutions have been already undertaken to counter these threats. But I would like to look on the legal status of national laws adopted resulting from disinformation campaigns led by Russia.

First of all, it's necessary to constantly collect and document cases of pro-Kremlin disinformation. It's necessary to develop a monitoring system for newly emerging disinformation attacks. Broad monitoring tasks should become the priority for national governmental bodies and all European organizations.

A good example is the activities of the Lithuanian Armed Forces StratCom Department which has an experience of neutralizing disinformation before it has time to spread.

Second, we need to get the full consensus that media and information are strategic assets. Attacks on these assets should be followed by targeted sanctions. International community

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[161] J. Kalensky (2019): *Testimony*, disinfoportal, https://disinfoportal.org/testimony-jakub-kalensky/.

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should adopt regulations that would allow levying fines against outlets that are reporting false information.

Furthermore, western nations should consider applying coordinated sanctions against foreign officials who lead state organs that engage in information warfare against western democracies.

Third, we should intensively work with media as the goal of the disinformation campaign is to maximize the number of possible sources spreading the same disinformation messages as often as possible.

For example, the European Court of Justice ruled that EU countries can take action against a broadcaster that shows programs deemed to spread hate speech. After a Russian TV channel broadcasted in Lithuanian a program that was inciting hatred based on nationality, it was allowed to be distributed online only as part of packages available for an additional fee.

As to the social media platforms, through which the disinformation is disseminated, they are not responsible for producing wicked content, but rather are used to spread it as fast as possible. That's why EU is working with the industry through a voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation to fight disinformation. However it's only a first step to stop the spread of disinformation online[162] and as of now it's clearly insufficient. European Commission latest report card on this voluntary effort sums to the platforms could do better.

Legal means will also fulfil the important task of raising warnings about disinformation. Well informed and educated public, media, and government will provide the most resilient form of defense against foreign malign influence and disinformation campaigns for all democracies. This is evident from countries like Ukraine that have long been subjected to heavy disinformation and propaganda campaigns on behalf of the Russian state and have since implemented law identifying information security as a vital part of national security.[163]

The disinformation challenge has always changed with the times and will continue to do so. Learning from each other remains the best way of staying ready to counter it.

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