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Critical analysis of propaganda activities in Macedonia and Western Balkan Region¹

1. Introduction

The question of (Russian) propaganda and (Russian) disinformation activities in the dominant political discourse was intensified in the last two years in Macedonia and in the broader Western Balkan region especially by the domestic media. There are plenty of journalistic reports of Russian efforts to send messages and to increase influence in the respective region. The significance and relevance of this topic is reinforced by the intensification of the Euro-Atlantic integrative processes in the country and the region.

Nowadays, the tremendous influence of the mainstream media over the societal processes should not be underestimated. The media is a mainstay of the democratic system of each society and its impact over the political processes and social interactions is noteworthy. The role of the media is enhanced with the development of technology and the hyper-connectivity of the globalized world where information demand and consumption are significantly increased. The media are reflection of social conditions and trends and their conveyance of messages cannot be observed separately from social and political dynamics in a given society. As an integral part of today's society, the media is arguably engaged in forming of the public opinion, but its power of influence can be observed in two directions.

On the one hand, the role of media in the society is vital and manifold. The media is often regarded as a watchdog of democracy, an effective medium that has a power to increase public awareness and to influence the general mindset. On the other hand, the mass media is a chief instrument for dissemination of propaganda, manipulation and distortion of the reality by conveying erroneous, fanciful and incomplete

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data. The media are often prone to produce instantaneous, appealing information which is often used to polarize groups and distort the facts. The media is often criticized for its ineptitude to convey impartial information, to remain objective and unbiased and to maintain resilience to interventions or influences by external factors.

Living in information-based society, the language is particularly important to spread messages, to increase influence and ideology especially by capitalizing on mass and social media platforms. The language is a basic channel of communication with the mass audience and usually reflects the ideology and other socio-political trends. Based on the assumption that media plays an important role in shaping the public opinion, it is highly important to assess the wording they employ by analyzing journalistic articles and media reports and particularly the language and lexical items contained in their reporting. In this study, the language is approached as a social construct, as an inseparable element of social and political trajectories in a given society. Moreover, the issue of propaganda and disinformation is important to be observed from the aspect of the degree, the magnitude, the interest, as well as the real impact in the Western Balkan Region. As an understudied topic in the region of Western Balkans and with limited research body, many obscurities surround the level of external influence and propaganda in the region.

Thus, the research is based on several research lines and seeks to assess the extent of Russian influence and propaganda in the Western Balkans (whether and how much it is the subject of research or the claims are empirically unsubstantiated), to explore how the media in Macedonia are positioned towards this issue and on what kind of lexical structures they rely in their reporting. The study particularly examines the media narratives in Macedonia, but also provides a brief comparative overview of media narratives in Serbia and Montenegro.

This research is highly important for Macedonia and the wider Western Balkan Region given the fact that in the previous period the Balkan countries have undergone many challenges including ill-managed transition and lingering democratic processes which have resulted with fragile institutions, shortcomings in the rule of law, poor governance and captured media. These circumstances ramped up by the challenges of the age of digitalization, the plethora of communication services and the oversaturation of information can easily contribute for susceptibility to propaganda and other subversive activities.

The importance of this issue in Macedonian context is amplified given its Euro-Atlantic tendencies and aspirations. In such circumstances, various disinformation activities can easily influence public opinion, especially when citizens face a recent decision on the very sensitive issue of changing the name as a condition for joining NATO. Thus, this research will help to elucidate some aspects of the information campaigns in the Western Balkans and to explore what kind of narrative the media utilizes in everyday reporting regarding the propaganda and other activities associated with the term (such as fake news, disinformation, foreign influence).

The burgeoning trend of focusing on these issues in both political and media discourse in Macedonia in the light of the acceleration of the euro-Atlantic agenda adds another layer of importance of the study. The study is innovative as it offers empirical examination and firsthand evidence, but also analytical intersection of secondary data.

2. Methodology and Research Approach

The research study is composed of three research stages: secondary (desk) research which relies on already existing research reports and other secondary sources available in order to explore the level of (Russian) influence and propaganda in the Western Balkans, as well as the factors that contribute for such practices; critical discourse analysis combined with quantitative content analysis of media reporting in Macedonia regarding this issue; and comparative analysis of the media narratives in two other Balkan countries (Serbia and Montenegro).

The desk analysis that was based on previous researches, open-source materials and secondary data served as a preliminary stage of the research which was aimed at examining to what extent the Balkan countries are affected by the disinformation activities, foreign influence and propaganda and whether there are already implemented counter-campaigns on institutional and grass-root level. It also sought to investigate the factors that contribute for susceptibility to propaganda in the Western Balkans.

The second stage employed critical discourse analysis (as interdisciplinary approach that is appropriate to analyze the language used in the given socio-political context) combined with quantitative content analysis of media reporting in Macedonia regarding the disinformation and propaganda and particularly in the context of the current Euro-Atlantic integrations in Macedonia. To that end, special attention was paid to the collection and analysis of press clippings and press extracts in the approximate period of about 6 months of carefully selected media based in Macedonia relying on different parameters in order to gain understanding of how media reports on these issues. The conceptual and methodological tools utilized are reflective to the standard media analysis and common metrics for designation. The study draws upon primary data retrieved from media texts without prejudice to the media formats.

The last stage employs comparative analysis of media coverage in order to assess the commonalities and differences of media reporting in Serbia and Montenegro as countries which are assumed to be largely affected by the Russian influence.

The purpose of the study is to ascertain the media framing of 'propaganda' and to systematically examine the media coverage of the external influence in the given socio-political setting. In addition, the study endeavors to assess whether the media itself is susceptible to propaganda by approaching the notion of propaganda in broader sense. To that end, several additional parameters were assessed: whether the media is neutral or under political influence, whether their stance is positive or negative/favorable or unfavorable, and whether the media abides by the journalistic standards (for instance, whether the source is quoted etc.).

The role of the media discourse in the current, present-day context is of great significance due to its capacity to influence cognition, to shape stances (to create public opinion) and to impact the course of policy in unique way. The most of what we know comes from the media, thus, this study offers a critical understanding of how media can generate, amplify and modify the dominant discourses.

3. Sampling Strategy and Unit of Analysis

The purposive sampling was utilized for data collection. In this vein, approximately 60 media texts were considered of well-known media in the time span beginning from 1st of May to 25 October 2018 covering all genre categories (news, reports, articles, reportages and commentaries). The study, also, looked upon older articles before the designated period in order to observe the consistency and variations of media reporting of the issues of concern.

The sampling strategy took several steps:

Selection of media outlets - 10 media were selected based on the following criteria: diverse readership or viewership/popularity/reputation among the audience, their role and importance in the given socio-political setup in Macedonia and the duration of their existence. Solely the traditional media (television, print and digital media) were subject of the study. The social media was deliberately excluded from the study due to the highly probable methodological and sampling difficulties. The sample included the following Macedonian media: *Television* - Sitel, Telma, Kanal 5, 24 Vesti, 1Tv, Nova TV, *Print media* - Nova Macedonia and Vecer; *Digital media* - Plus info and A1On.

Selection of media forms – roughly 70 media articles were analyzed of both standard news formats and feature articles irrespective of genre categories.

Selection of relevant dates – the study explored the media coverage pre and post referendum in Macedonia in the span of approximately 6 months depending on the availability of media articles.

Selection of relevant issues/content – articles that directly or indirectly cover the issue of propaganda and associated concepts such as fake news, foreign influence and disinformation.

The data analysis was simplified and facilitated with selective reduction (coding) and the method of recursive abstraction. The search functions of media websites and Nexis database were used for facilitation of the selection of the relevant content. The standard metrics for designation was applied, labeling the media articles as 'positive-negative-neutral', 'favourable-unfavourable', or 'supportive-critical'. Aside from the media texts, snippets of article text, headlines, subheadings and bylines were also considered. The same pattern was applied analyzing the media in Serbia and Montenegro in the period of roughly 6 months. Among the media observed in Serbia were **Television channel**: *Radio televizija Srbije* (RTS); **Print media** - *Vecernje Novosti* (also known as *Novosti*) and *Politika*; **Digital media** - *Blic online* and *Kurir.rs*. The analyzed media in Montenegro were **Television** - *Radio Television of Montenegro* (RTCG); **Print media** - *Blic Montenegro*, and *Dnevne Novine*.

4. Research Questions and Research Objectives

The main impetus underlying this research is to provide exploratory study drawing upon the following methodological tools and objectives:

desk analysis intended to examine to what extent the Western Balkan Region is susceptible to foreign influence and affected by propaganda activities

critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore the main narratives utilized by the media in Macedonia by analyzing the discursive practices and linguistic features of the selected media articles and reports

quantitative content analysis employed to assess to volume and quantity of media texts with reference to propaganda in order to assess the media interests on these issues in Macedonia

comparative media analysis aimed at examining the media reporting in Serbia and Montenegro and to offer comparative overview of the discourse practices

The study endeavors to address the following research questions:

1. Is the (Russian) influence and propaganda genuine threat in the Western Balkans or the claims are empirically uncorroborated? What factors contribute for susceptibility to propaganda in the respective region?
2. What kind of lexical means (words, language) are frequently used in media discourse in relation to 'propaganda' activities and other related terms? What kind of narrative is employed in everyday reporting regarding the external influence and propaganda?
3. How is the media positioned regarding the explored issues i.e. what is the approach in media texts?
4. What is the volume and the quantity of the media texts, i.e. the interest and attention devoted to the topics of concern?
5. Are there any commonalities or differences among the other Balkan countries in media reporting about propaganda activities, in this case in Serbia and Montenegro?

5. Research Findings

5.1. Secondary analysis

In recent years, the propaganda is considered as major challenge - real and genuine threat that has potential to undermine democracy relying on variety of tools and instruments such as soft power, economic leverage and information². The propaganda is rampant and omnipresent phenomenon that is usually contingent upon the use or misuse of internal vulnerabilities of the states. Although the issue of propaganda is not a novel phenomenon, it was amplified by the digital development and the advent of social platforms. The pervasive nature of information propaganda implies reliance on versatile modes of communication to sway audiences in different ways. The propaganda activities, nowadays, are mostly connected, but not limited to Russian information campaigns.

The reemerging interest in the recent years in the Balkans is based on the recent reports of intensified

² See: J. Bugajski, "Frontline Vulnerability: The Strategic Case for the Western Balkans", Transition Brief No. 4, Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), January 2017.

proliferation of disinformation, fake news and misleading information. The Western Balkan countries have become part of a heated debate that they are exposed to direct and indirect Russian meddling, mostly by the means of information, due to their geopolitical and strategic importance. The media landscape abounds with reports that appear to be mostly anecdotal, thus the level of risk and extent of the influence are vague and unexplored. However, it is irrefutable fact that Western Balkan countries share ideological and cultural ties with Russia especially Serbia that has strong Slavic and Orthodox tradition.

The nascent discussion on these issues directly corresponds with NATO enlargement policy that was accelerated in the recent period and culminated with integration of Montenegro in NATO and heightened potentials of Macedonia to join soon if the name dispute is finally resolved. The Russian putative presence in the region and alleged meddling in the internal affairs in the Balkan countries is claimed to be leveled at spreading and promoting anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment (as suggested by various reports) by effectively harnessing the internal vulnerabilities, *inter alia*, the interethnic intolerance, unresolved disputes and frozen conflicts in order to nudge or cause tensions and divisions in pursuing its agenda.

Many scholars agree that the propaganda is intended to exploit grievances, disillusionment and weak political leadership, especially the populist and nationalist governments by the means of soft-power operations and other tools such as strengthening political ties, fraternal links and diplomatic presence in the region³. There is a widespread consensus that the chief goals of the Russian propaganda is to shake Western values⁴ and to hinder EU and NATO enlargement in the region by fueling nationalism, using inflammatory narratives and opening sensitive issues related to the unity and coexistence⁵.

These claims are particularly relevant for the Western Balkan region which consists of newly-fledged democracies of unstable character with lack of democratic traditions and weak administrative capacities where the populism and particracy are no exception. The Media Literacy Index of 2018 pinpoints that "(T)he Balkan countries are most vulnerable to the adverse effects of fake news and post-truth" citing the control over the media, the deficiencies in education and the low trust in society as the major contributing factors to this situation⁶. According to the report, the Balkan countries are lowest-ranked when it comes to media literacy⁷.

In this context, it can be argued that the susceptibility to propaganda is determined by two factors: internal challenges and the level of media freedom. The study will dissect separately the two contributing factors.

³ See more in: V. Zakem, B. Rosenau, and D. Johnson, "Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Maligned Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime", CNA Paper, May 2017.

⁴ J. Wiśniewski, "Russia ups its game in the Balkans, but the West should avoid responding in kind", LSE, May 2017, available at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurompblog/2017/05/15/russia-ups-its-game-in-the-balkans/>.

⁵ See: M. Samorukov, "Moscow has opted for a low-cost, opportunistic approach in the Western Balkans that shifts most of the burden to local actors", Carnegie Europe, November 2017, available at <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategiceurope/74612>.

⁶ M. Lessenski, "Common sense wanted. Resilience to "post-truth" and its predictors in the new Media Literacy Index 2018", Open Society Institute – Sofia, March 2018.

⁷ *Ibid.*

5.1.1. Western Balkans and the Internal Challenges

The Western Balkan region, geographically includes Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Serbia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Albania, and Croatia. With regard to the development and the political processes, the Western Balkan countries have commonalities in terms of socioeconomic status, but also differences reflected in the political events that occurred after their independence. After the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the newly-emerged democracies have undergone sizable political and economic alterations including the transition from socialist toward market-based economies and often through ill-orchestrated democratization processes. The lingering transition has not brought progress, but an even greater decline in the economy, underdevelopment, high unemployment and poverty rates.

All of the Western Balkan countries are fragmented societies with their own issues and struggles in practicing democracy, faced with regular political and economic stand-off. The internal puzzle of the Western Balkans is characterized with considerable economic slowdown and internal turmoil. Beset by the grievances transpiring from the history of bloody conflicts and the other turbulent historical events, the Western Balkan society is largely imbued with inter-ethnic hatred and intolerance. Being plagued by conflict and internal uncertainty, as well as inter-ethnic tensions, the Western Balkan countries have become a stronghold for the rise of nationalistic policies, corruption practices and populist governments. Moreover, the high unemployment rate, disenfranchised individuals, and failure to create common national identity in some of the Western Balkan countries have contributed for the rise of nationalism and ethnocentrism, as well as for considerable political polarization in each key sector.

These challenges are considered by many as a pretext and fertile ground for foreign meddling⁸. The democratic backsliding accompanied by internal vulnerabilities and institutional weaknesses is often construed as a precondition for susceptibility to foreign influence and external interference⁹. In such environment, overburdened with socioeconomic, ethnic and political instability and general uncertainty about the future, it can be argued that the population can easily fall prey to influences deriving from diverse channels.

The Western Balkan in a geopolitical context remains a center where the interests of multiple global players converge and intertwine for different strategic interests. The Western Balkans, as a geographical determinant, represents a kind of buffer zone between East and West and has played a growing geopolitical role in recent years, especially with the refugee crisis. As for the Russian interests in the region, the nurture of the Pan-Slavic ties and the reliance on the instruments of influence are mostly streamlined at attaining cultural, economic, energy and geopolitical goals¹⁰. The Russian energy interests are particularly highlighted with several ongoing projects on the territory of Western Balkans¹¹.

It is often argued that this influence is reinforced by the inability of these countries to integrate into NATO and EU structures. The Euro-Atlantic perspectives of the Western Balkans are viewed as major impetus for

⁸ See for instance: V. Zakem, B. Rosenau, and D. Johnson, "Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime", CAN Paper, May 2017.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See: D. Clark and A. Foxall, "Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern?", The Henry Jackson Society, June 2014.

¹¹ See: M. A Smith, "Russian Energy Interests in the Balkans", Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, 2008.

democratization and inter-ethnic stabilization¹². However, it is worth noting that the political leadership over the years has predominantly demonstrated a pro-Western course except of Serbia.

Notwithstanding, excluding Croatia and Albania, where the Russian influence is minimal due to their strong pro-Western orientation (both being members of NATO), the other Western Balkan countries have more or less certain interfaces with Russia. As for the other Western Balkan countries, the level of influence exerted over their territory is particularly deconstructed with the instruments of power and analyzing the media landscape in each of the country in question.

5.1.2. The Western Balkan countries and the level of Russian influence

After the conflict and following the Dayton Agreement, **Bosnia and Herzegovina** is divided into cantons populated by three ethnically divided nations - the Serbs, the Bosniaks and the Croats - who are emotionally still burdened by the consequences of the war with constant fear of decay and still far from entering NATO and the EU, which would somewhat be a guarantee of security and survival. It is claimed that Russia's sway in Bosnia has been exerted through the Bosnian Serbs and Republika Srpska that backs the Serbian interests in Bosnia¹³. It is also argued that the propaganda activities are mainly leveled at fueling the separatist agenda of Republika Srpska¹⁴ which after Dayton Accords has become a state with its own institutions and nationalistic rhetoric.

When it comes to the press, the media in Bosnia favor diverse topics that are ideologically and ethnically determined. The media is divided along ethnic lines accordingly to the composition of the population. The media landscape encompasses *Radio-Television of the Federation of BiH* (RT FBiH) and *Radio-Television of Republika Srpska* (RTRS) operating on entity level and *Radio-Television of BiH* (BHRT) which is national public broadcaster¹⁵. The ideological orientations of the Bosnian media directly reflect the content of their reporting, their objectivity, as well as the vulnerability to external interference.

Serbia, which after a series of conflicting events remains without the territory of Kosovo, traditionally has good diplomatic relations and close ties with Russia. The close relationship hails from the shared cultural and religious traits such as the Slavic and Orthodox background, as well as the Cyrillic Alphabet and language similarities. Also, one cannot neglect the economic dimension of this relationship epitomized in the economic cooperation and infrastructure investment. The military cooperation between Serbia and Rus-

¹² See more in: J. Bugajski, "Frontline Vulnerability: The Strategic Case for the Western Balkans", Transition Brief No. 4, Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), January 2017.

¹³ M. Russell, "Russia in the Western Balkans", EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, July 2017, available at [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA\(2017\)608627](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=EPRS_ATA(2017)608627).

¹⁴ Ibid.; See also: J. Mujanovic, "Russia's Bosnia Gambit", Foreign Affairs, 6 September 2017, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/bosnia-herzegovina/2017-09-06/russias-bosnia-gambit>.

¹⁵ See more in N. Klepo, "Geopolitical Influence on Media and Media Freedom in the Western Balkans", DAVA Analytic Brief no. 3, September 2017.

sia, as reported, is also common practice with joint military drills¹⁶ and purchase of military equipment¹⁷. It is also worth pointing out about the Serbian dependency of Russian energy both on oil and gas imports¹⁸.

It is also asserted that the Russian information campaign is active on the territory of Serbia by the means of the pro-Russian media, broadcasting news in the local language – as it is the case with Russian *Sputnik* and *Russia Today*¹⁹. *Sputnik Serbia* and RT (*Russia Today*) are claimed to be today's primary channels for the Russian information line of activities²⁰. There are also several Russian-Serbian informative web portals in Serbian language such as *Vostok.rs* and *Kremlin.rs*.

Serbia, unlike the other Balkan countries, is reluctant to join NATO due to previous history of complex relationship originating from the NATO-led military campaign in Serbia back in the 1999 and openly declares its neutral status²¹. In this regard, the opinion polls conducted on the territory of Serbia attest about the supportive and positive stance of the Serbian citizens toward Russia²² which in part can be attributed to the still vivid resentful sentiment toward NATO. The Russian political support of Serbia during the Kosovo crisis and its turndown to support Kosovo's independence are also notable in this respect.

Montenegro, the last that became independent in 2006, has managed to join NATO after tumultuous political period. Montenegro is also aspiring country for EU membership, but is still far from joining the EU and is also struggling with a low economic standard and general poverty. The 2015 decision for joining NATO was publicly denounced by Russia²³ which has prompted fear of Russian retaliatory measures²⁴.

Another event that occurred in Montenegro in the anticipation of the parliamentary elections was the putative bid of political coup in October 2016 in order to overturn the Government which triggered concerns of Russian embroilment²⁵. The claims of Russian alleged involvement into the coup plot in Montenegro still remain unproven. In this respect, a study conducted by the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)

¹⁶ A. Vasovic, "Serbia hosts joint military exercises with Russia", Reuters, 3 November 2017, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-defence-russia-idUSKBN12Y1JX>.

¹⁷ M. Zivanovic, "Russia Military Deal Deemed 'Good Thing' For Serbia", Balkan Insight, 5 April 2018, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-serbian-russian-military-deal-good-thing--04-04-2018>.

¹⁸ M. Szpala, "Russia in Serbia – soft power and hard interests", OSW Commentary, 2014, available at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2014-10-29/russia-serbia-soft-power-and-hard-interests>.

¹⁹ M. Šajkaš and M. Tadić Mijović, "Caught between the East And West: The "Media War" Intensifies In Serbia and Montenegro", 10 March 2016, available at <http://csfilm.org/2016/04/on-the-media-caught-between-the-east-and-west-the-media-war-intensifies-in-serbia-and-montenegro/>.

²⁰ European Parliament, Policy Department, "EU strategic communications with a view to counteracting propaganda", EP/EXPO/B/FWC/AFET/2015-01/02, 2016.

²¹ "Membership in military alliances not considered", B92, 21 November 2014, available at https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=11&dd=21&nav_id=92337.

²² NSPM Research, August 2016, available at <http://www.nspm.rs/istrazivanja-javnog-mnjenja/srbija-leto-2016.html>.

²³ BBC, "Nato invitation to Montenegro prompts Russia warning", BBC News, 2 December 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34981973>.

²⁴ A. Crosby and L. Sceanovic, "Kremlin's Diplomatic Sour Grapes Leave Bad Taste For Montenegrin Winemaker", Radio Free Europe, 4 June 2017, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-plantaze-winery-russia-ban-nato/28527931.html>.

²⁵ A. Higgins, "Finger Pointed at Russians in Alleged Coup Plot in Montenegro", The New York Times, 26 Nov 2016 available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/26/world/europe/finger-pointed-at-russians-in-alleged-coup-plot-in-montenegro.html?module=inline>.

explores Russia's presence and interests in the country and reports the details of the alleged coup. In this context, it identifies the Serbian Orthodox Church as quite influential in Montenegro²⁶.

When it comes to the preferences and opinions of the citizens of Montenegro about Euro-Atlantic integrations, the CEDEM's research of 2016 demonstrates that the majority of Montenegrins have expressed pro-EU attitude, but reserved support about NATO (with 39.5% of the respondents expressing supportive stance)²⁷. Another research indicates that 40% of the Montenegrins view NATO's role in negative light²⁸. These facts largely contradict the Montenegro's political orientation, as well as the foreign policy directions.

In this regard, it is worth noting that the country has a large number of Serbian populations. The historical links with Serbia are also reflected in the media landscape with existence of several pro-Serbian informative portals. In addition, the data indicates that in Montenegro there are about 12,000 permanently settled Russians²⁹. Notwithstanding, the Russian interests are pretty high in Montenegro. In the last decade, Montenegro has become a tourist hub and regular tourist destination that attracts large number of Russian tourists, but also considerable real estate investments³⁰.

Kosovo, a newly-fledged state and former province of Serbia, since its independence in 2008 has been struggling for recognition and internationally acknowledged status as independent state. Kosovo has been grappling with the still unstable institutions, with control over its territory, especially over the Serbian population and with the prolonged democratic development. The security situation in Kosovo is also unfavorable³¹. Kosovo is not recognized as a country by Russia either due to some kind of solidarity toward Serbia or bigger geopolitical interests³².

The report issued by the Kosovar Center for Security Studies regarding the Russian presence in the Kosovo indicates that the Russian presence poses a serious challenge for Kosovo and its statehood³³. It underlines two major factors that warrant the claim: first, the existence of the Community of Serb Municipalities; Second, the Pro-Russian media which target primary the Kosovo Serbs. The Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center based in the city of Nis and the Serbian Orthodox Church and its impact over the Kosovo Serbs are

²⁶ R. Bajrović, V. Garčević and R. Kraemer, "Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro", Foreign Policy Research Institute, June 2018.

²⁷ Political Public Opinion in Montenegro: NATO integration, CEDEM, December 2016, available at https://www.cedem.me/images/jDownloads_new/Program%20Empirijska%20istazivanja/Politicko%20javno%20mnjenje/CEDEM_December_2016_-_eng.pdf.

²⁸ Center for Insights in Survey Research, Public Opinion in Montenegro 2017, available at http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/montenegro_ppt.pdf.

²⁹ D. Tomović, "Novi medijski blok u Crnoj Gori: Rusiji sa ljubavlju", Vijesti Online, 18 Oct 2017 available at <http://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/novi-medijski-blok-u-crnoj-gori-rusiji-sa-ljubavlju-959222>.

³⁰ RWR Report, "Strategic Analysis: Russian Business Activity in Montenegro", RWR Advisory Group, 4 March 2016, available at <https://www.rwradvisory.com/russian-activity-in-montenegro-abstract/>.

³¹ See, International Crisis Group: Kosovo, available at <https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/october-2018#kosovo>.

³² See more in: M. Smith, "Kosovo's Status: Russian Policy on Unrecognised States", Conflict Studies Research Centre, January 2006

³³ P. Kallaba, "Russian interference in Kosovo: how and why?", Kosovar Centre for Security Studies, 2007

also viewed as a threat³⁴. However, the lack of empirical evidence to uncover the direct connections with propaganda creates obscurity of the degree of the Russian influence in the country.

Lastly, **Macedonia**, has its own issues and a similar political climate as the other Western Balkan countries. Marred by the inter-ethnic divide and inter-ethnic tensions among Macedonians and Albanians (constituting 25% of the population according to the last census) which resulted with conflict back in 2001 and constitutional changes, its inter-ethnic divisions are extremely politicized for different political interests. The economic situation is also unfavorable with high unemployment rates and low economic performances³⁵.

The botched attempts of integration in the Euro-Atlantic structures due to its bilateral dispute with Greece over the name issue have led to security vacuum and volatile security environment. The further deferment in pursuing the Euro-Atlantic agenda has led to standstill in many aspects of the functioning of the country. Aside from the being stalled in its efforts to join NATO, the distant and quite elusive EU integration has become a pipedream for the Macedonian citizens.

There are various reports of Russian subversive activities in Macedonia³⁶ and attempts of spreading propaganda in the country³⁷. This question was given prominence in the light of the political crises in 2017³⁸ and again on the eve of the name change in Macedonia. The most notable media reports are linked with the referendum and the name change issues which indicate about the Russian involvement in the failed referendum in order to forestall the Euro-Atlantic integrations.

However, the possible ramifications appear to be overstated for several reasons. First, the Russian media are less impactful compared to those in Serbia (one instance is with *Ruska Rec* available on Macedonian language which influence and readership is minimal); second, the Macedonian political leadership constantly demonstrates pro-Western attitude and consistency in its commitment to pursue the Euro-Atlantic agenda; and lastly, the attitudes of the Macedonian citizens are mostly Western-centric³⁹. Several researches and polls conducted on the territory of Macedonia attest this argument. For now, the ties with

³⁴ M. Zivanovic, "Russian Centre in Serbia Scorns Espionage Claims", Balkan Insights, 11 September 2017, available at <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/russian-serbian-humanitarian-centre-rebuffs-spy-accusations-09-08-2017>.

³⁵ See for instance, 2018 Index of Economic Freedom: Macedonia, available at <https://www.heritage.org/index/country/macedonia>.

³⁶ A. Belford, Saska Cvetkovska, Biljana Sekulovska, and Stevan Dojčinović. "Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia", OCCRP, 4 June 2017, available at <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russianserbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>.

³⁷ "Russia actively stoking discord in Macedonia since 2008, intel files say", The Guardian, 4 June 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/04/russia-actively-stoking-discord-in-macedonia-since-2008-intel-files-say-leak-kremlin-balkan-nato-west-influence>

³⁸ A. MacDowall, "Fears for Macedonia's fragile democracy amid 'coup' and wiretap claims", The Guardian, 27 February 2015, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/27/fears-macedonias-fragile-democracy-amid-coup-wiretap-claims>.

³⁹ See: Center for Insights in Survey Research, Public Opinion in Macedonia 2017, available at: http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-9-18_macedonia_poll.pdf; Institute for Democracy "Societas Civilis" Skopje (IDSCS), "Perceptions on Macedonia's EU integration", May 2015, available at <http://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2009/08/Anketa-EU-integracija-31052015-EN.pdf>.

Russia are mostly cultural and religious with the tendency to be expanded⁴⁰.

Notwithstanding, Macedonian society is still torn between its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and internal challenges reflected in the economic stagnation, ethnic divisions and lack of media freedom. The media in Macedonia is regularly panned in the monitoring reports and press freedom indexes⁴¹. Macedonia is one of the lowest-placed countries (109th place) on the scale of 180 ranked countries of the 2018 World Press Freedom Index, but also lowest-placed compared to other Balkan countries⁴². This pernicious fact makes Macedonia suitable territory for spreading propaganda and disinformation.

5.1.3. Media Freedom in Western Balkans

As the secondary data suggest, the media freedom in Western Balkans is an area of great concern. Different legal, political and economic factors determine the position of the media in the region. According to the multiple monitoring reports and press freedom indexes, it is evident that the Western Balkan countries fail to keep the pace with the European countries when it comes to media freedom. There are regularly detected deficiencies and flaws in exercising media freedoms, as well as 'shortcomings in the implementation of the democratic and professional standards'⁴³.

As far as the media freedom and pluralism are concerned, the trends of deterioration are very much alike in all Western Balkan countries, with some country-specific issues reflected in the general politicization of media, state control over media, opaque media ownership and non-transparency of the funding sources, as well as the socio-economic pressures of the journalists⁴⁴.

The press in the Western Balkans is regularly dubbed as 'partly free'⁴⁵. The limited progress is also noted by the European Parliament that raises concerns in respect of the regular standstill in media environment in the Western Balkans⁴⁶. The 2017 report of the Freedom House displays that the Western Balkan countries are lowest-ranked in Europe based on the media freedom⁴⁷. The World Press Freedom has also identified

⁴⁰ E. Braw, "Mixed Feelings In Macedonia As A Russian Orthodox Church Rises", Radio Free Europe, 25 June 2015, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-russian-orthodox-church-skopje/27093507.html>.

⁴¹ See for instance, Freedom of the Press 2017, Macedonia, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/macedonia>.

⁴² "Reporters Without Borders: Macedonia ranks at 109th place according to latest World Press Freedom Index", Republika English, 25 April 2018, available at <http://english.republika.mk/reporters-without-borders-macedonia-ranks-at-109th-place-according-to-latest-world-press-freedom-index/>.

⁴³ European Parliament, Directorate General for External Policies, Policy Department, "Freedom of the Media in the Western Balkans", EXPO/B/DROI/2013/16, 2014.

⁴⁴ V. Lilyanova, "Media freedom trends 2017: Western Balkans", EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service, May 2017.

⁴⁵ Freedom House, Freedom of the Press: 2014, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2014>.

⁴⁶ "European Parliament on media freedom in Western Balkans: 'no progress' situation", EWB Archives, 3 May 2017, available at <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/05/03/european-parliament-on-media-freedom-in-western-balkans-no-progress-situation/>.

⁴⁷ Freedom House: Press Freedom's Dark Horizon 2017, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/freedom-press-2017>.

a sharp decrease of media freedom in all Western Balkan countries⁴⁸.

The prevalence of the pro-government media and the dominant practice of political control over the media are often identified as an issue of concern⁴⁹. This trend is mostly identified in public broadcasters where the political leadership controls much of the produced content. Against this backdrop, the media has turned into instrument of the political elites for anchoring their position on the political scene with politically-shaped content and political marketing, rather than preserving their status as independent information services. Although the legislation is more or less in line with EU standards, the poor implementation and the formal declaration without substantial interventions remains a problem⁵⁰.

Being highly politicized and limited to broadcasting politically-shaped content, it can be argued that the role of the media to serve as tools for combating the spread of disinformation with balanced and impartial reporting is highly questionable. The influence from the ruling parties and state-tailored information coupled with the lack of transparency of ownership of media outlets,⁵¹ make the media in Western Balkans unfeasible for countering disinformation. In addition, due to the economic and financial pressures of the media, it is also highly probable the media to be vulnerable to political influences or other external interventions.

As for the upholding to professional standards by the Western Balkan media, the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) highlights the dire results of the media monitoring study about the media proneness of not mentioning the sources of the information⁵². The investigative journalism remains a rarity in Western Balkans which is often attributed to political control over media and lack of financial resources⁵³.

5.1.4. Implemented Counter-Campaigns

Based on the observations, the Western Balkan countries are still unprepared for countering propaganda and disinformation activities. They neither possess knowledge and awareness, nor the necessary resources. There is no strategy on national level directed at building resilience against propaganda and disinformation activities. The media in Western Balkans still has a sidelined role in these processes although its contribution should be essential.

The implemented counter-campaigns are predominantly carried out by civil society organizations (CSOs). In this regard, there are two types of counter-campaigns on national level: fact checking online platforms

⁴⁸ See: Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 2018 World Press Freedom Index, available at https://rsf.org/en/ranking_table.

⁴⁹ Media freedom of the WB, p. 19.

⁵⁰ More in: S. Trpevska and I. Micevski, "Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in the Western Balkans: Comparative Analysis", Independent Journalists Association of Serbia, December 2016.

⁵¹ Freedom House: Freedom of the Press: Macedonia (2014), available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-of-press/2014/macedonia#.VYgahPmqkko>.

⁵² CRTA, "Medijsko izveštavanje o međunarodnim akterima", June 2018, available at <http://crt.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Regionala-analiza-medijskog-izvestavanja.pdf>.

⁵³ N. Ršumović, "The Uncertain Future: Centers for Investigative Journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia," Working Paper Series on International Media Assistance in the Western Balkans, Working Paper 7/2013.

and media literacy campaigns. The fact checking online platforms implemented primarily by NGOs are rife in the Western Balkan Region. The primary aim of these networks, which have skyrocketed in recent years, is to debunk the falsehoods, to promote political and media accountability and to curtail the spread of disinformation.

The most prominent fact checking online platforms include: Faktograf.hr (rating system of political claims) implemented by Croatia's NGO GONG, Istinomjer.ba/ and Raskrinkavanje.ba/ (promotes the responsibility of political parties and holders of public functions) carried out by Bosnia's NGO Zašto ne?; Medijametar.rs/ by Public Policy Institute Belgrade, Istinomer.rs/ run by Serbian CRTA and Raskrinkavanje.rs/ led by Serbian KRIK; and, Vistinomer.mk/ and Factchecking.mk/ implemented by Macedonian NGO Metamorphosis Foundation.

The media literacy campaigns are also on the rise in the Western Balkans. They are first and foremost directed at increasing knowledge, awareness and capacities of all actors potentially affected by the unsolicited effects of propaganda and disinformation⁵⁴.

5.2. Media Content Analysis

This section is focused on quantitative content analysis of 67 journalistic articles to obtain firsthand information of the extent of media coverage of issues of propaganda and disinformation. In this regard, the quantitative content analysis is defined as a "technique for objective, systematic and quantitative description of manifest content of communication"⁵⁵.

The quantitative content analysis was particularly employed to assess the quantity of content related to news and reports about propaganda by specifically addressing the volume of mentions, frequency of the content, as well as the prominence of themes (including placement and size) of the issue of concern. It was aimed at analyzing the amount and the extent of coverage of the topics related to propaganda activities and related terms (disinformation, foreign influence, fake news), the tone of the message (positive-negative-neutral) and the quotations/distribution of sources (direct vs. indirect quotes).

The quantitative content analysis took inductive approach in text analysis. The study noted that there is considerable redundancy of reports with similar themes, as well as large amount of duplicate articles which were deducted from the analysis. The empirical data is statistically processed, expressed in percentage and visualized in graphs. The total number of media texts analyzed in this country is 67 irrespective of the text formats.

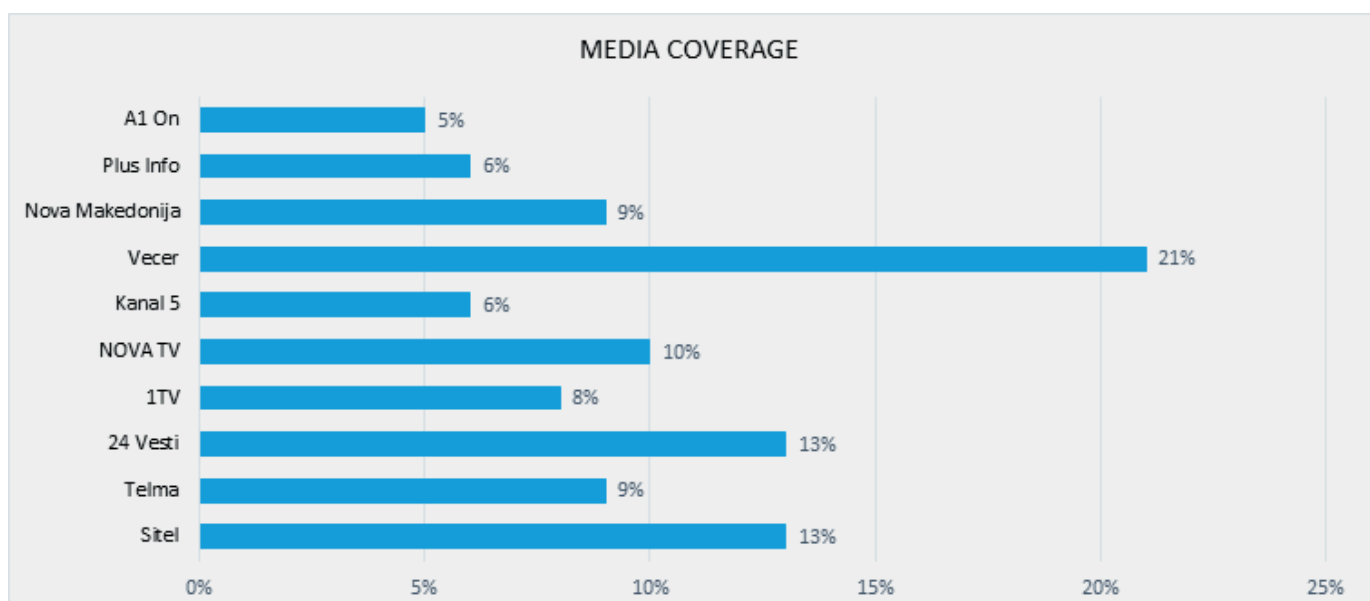
The media in Macedonia displays continuity in the frequency of reporting about propaganda compared to the previous year. However, it is apparent that there is a slight increase in the number of articles in the period before and after the referendum in Macedonia with the news articles being most frequent, while

⁵⁴ 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/>.

⁵⁵ B. Berelson, Content analysis in communication research. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952.

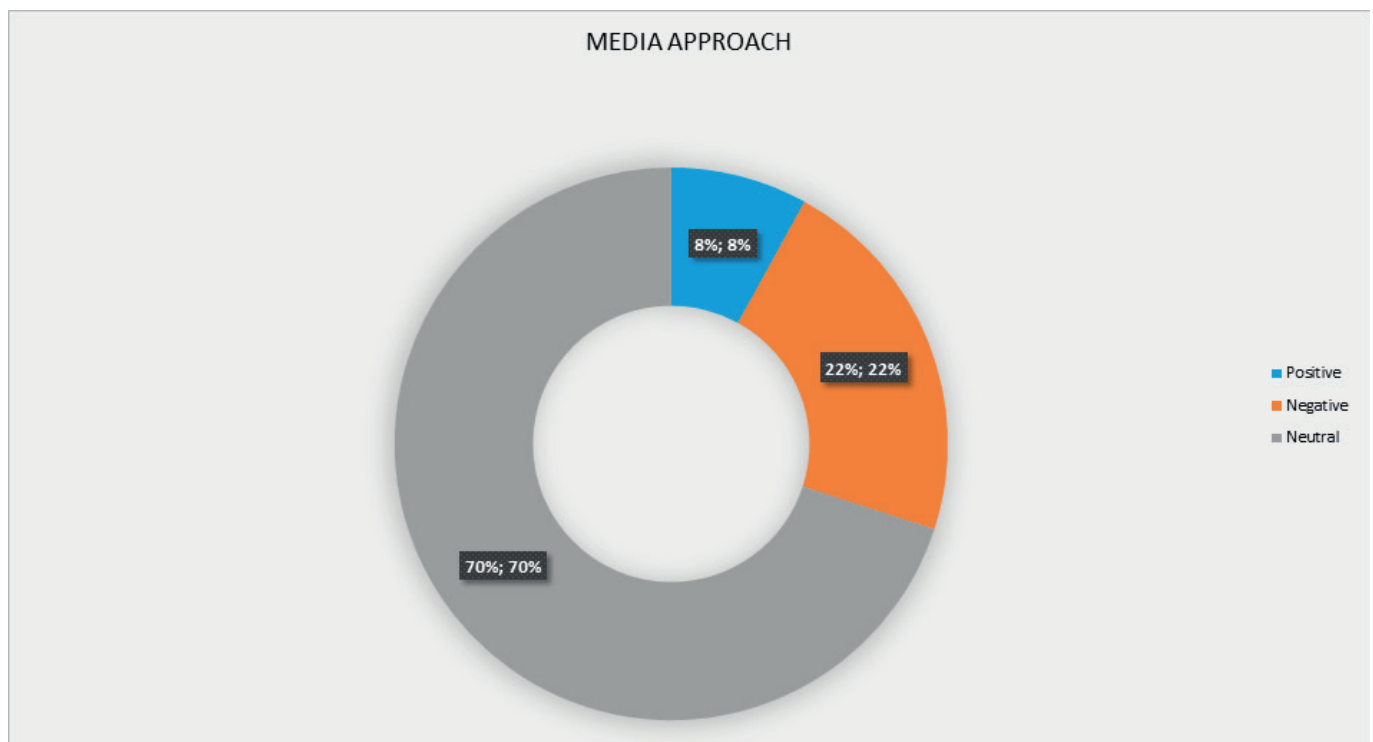
the opinions the least frequent. The findings also indicate that print media are mostly inclined to report on propaganda, while the digital media shows least interest.

MEDIA COVERAGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Total	67	
TV channels	40	
Sitel	9	13%
Telma	6	9%
24 Vesti	9	13%
1TV	5	8%
NOVA TV	7	10%
Kanal 5	4	6%
Print Media	20	
Vecer	14	21%
Nova Makedonija	6	9%
Digital Media	7	
Plus Info	4	6%
A1 On	3	5%



The highest proportion of the analyzed articles (70%) have undertaken neutral stance. Although there is a large proportion of the considered articles that do not show clear attitude, for the purposes of this research they were designated as 'neutral'. 22% of the news articles articulated negative attitude, while 8% of them presented the events with a positive tone.

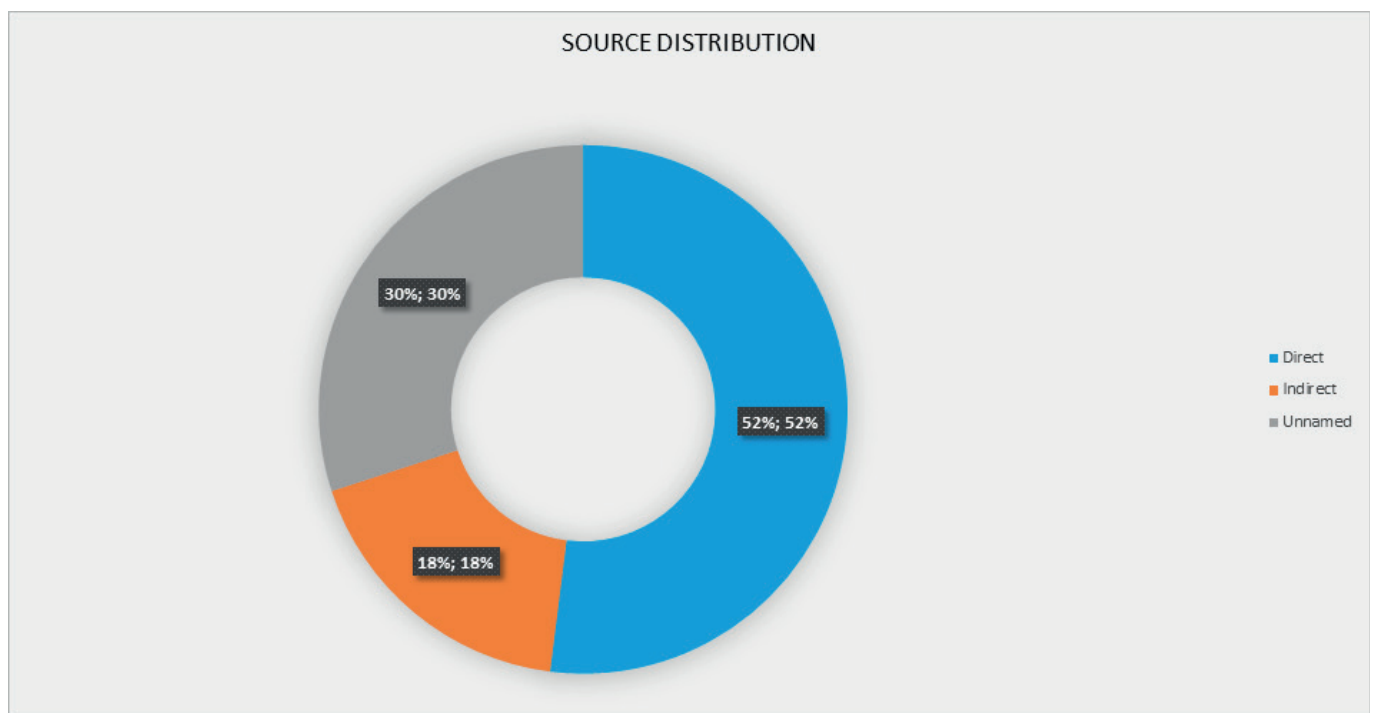
MEDIA APPROACH	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Positive	5	8%
Negative	15	22%
Neutral	47	70%



In general, the media in Macedonia relies on variety of sources when reporting about propaganda and external influence. When making reference to different sources and quoting techniques, the media harness both direct and indirect quotes with direct quotes dominating over the indirect.

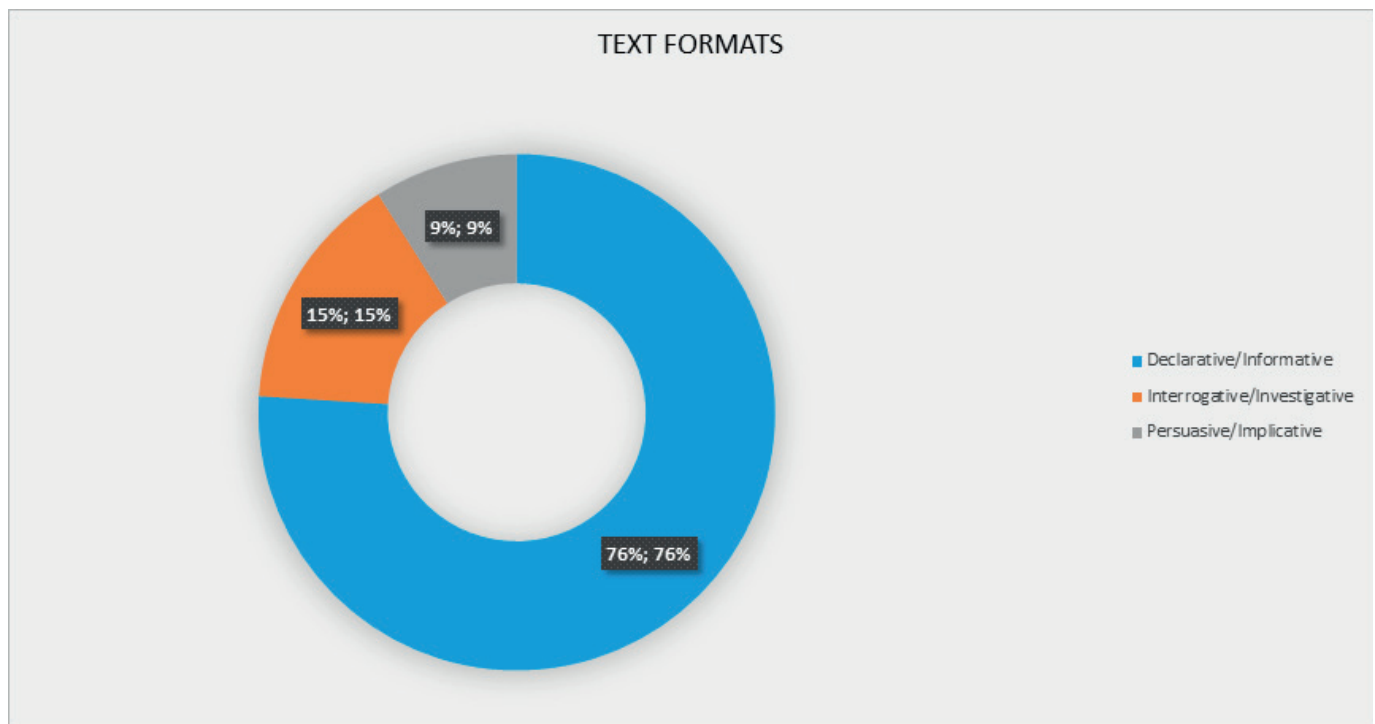
30% of the analyzed articles used unnamed sources, while 18% of them relied on indirect quotes. The direct quoting is prevalent with 52% of the considered articles. There are also media articles that report about propaganda based on unnamed sources, constituting 30 % of the considered articles.

SOURCE DISTRIBUTION	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Direct Quotes	35	52%
Indirect Quotes	12	18%
Unnamed Source	20	30%



For the purpose of the analysis, the text formats were labeled as declarative/informative, interrogative/investigative and persuasive/implicative. Out of 67 analyzed articles, 76% of them reported on propaganda with declarative and informative tone without bigger scrutiny or analysis. 15% of the media texts have undertaken interrogative approach, while only 9% relied on persuasive strategy.

TEXT FORMATS	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Declarative/Informative	51	76%
Interrogative/Investigative	10	15%
Persuasive/Implicative	6	9%



5.3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

The CDA employed for this research combines the Fairclough's CDA framework with the Van Dijk's approach of analyzing media texts. The CDA from theoretical perspective is defined as "disciplinary approach to the study of discourse, which views language as a form of social practice"⁵⁶. About the importance of this type of analysis it is argued that:

"Critical discourse analysts offer interpretations [and explanation] of the meanings of texts rather than just quantifying textual features and deriving meaning from this; situate what is written or said in the context in which it occurs, rather than just summarizing patterns or regularities in texts; and argue that textual meaning is constructed through an interaction between producer, text and consumer rather than simply being read off the page by all readers in exactly the same way"⁵⁷.

In the context of this study, the CDA was employed to uncover ideologies underlying the texts of the media reporting in Macedonia. As part of the CDA a special attention was devoted to the use of language and rhetoric in everyday reporting. In addition to language and wording, the linguistic structures, the types of lexical means, choice of language and rhetoric formations, use of metaphors and hyperboles, and the lexicalisation (choice of vocabulary for depictions and portrayals) were analyzed. In addition, the influence of the socio-political factors in the present-day context was taken into consideration. The analysis devoted

⁵⁶ N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, London: Longman, 1989, p.20.

⁵⁷ J.E. Richardson, *Analysing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke; New York, 2007, p.15.

particular attention of how the events are depicted, how are the actors represented and what ideologies are implied in media texts. The representation of the events, actors and phenomena were construed in the context of current political activities and social trajectories. The study does not offer understanding of the discourse practice in terms of text consumption since there is no available data for demographic profiles of the audiences (age, gender and education).

By deconstructing the media texts, it can be inferred that the media reporting is heavily contingent upon the target audience and determined by the socio-political factors. The media typically employ similar discourses and tracks down similar patterns when addressing propaganda. The intertextuality and dialogism are common in the media texts. The lexical items used are generally coherent and comprehensible for the wider audience. The language employed by the media is predominantly official and factual featuring quotes and comments by political figures and pundits. Attributions (credit of sources) are utilized in most of the media texts with direct quotes.

As already noted, the issue of propaganda is highly treated in Macedonian media. The media devotes considerable attention to the topics related to propaganda activities. The most of the analyzed media articles that contain the notion of propaganda and disinformation have reference to Russian information campaigns. Very few if any of the texts refer to propaganda activities emanating from other sources. The themes covered by the media vary ranging from political to economic issues. These issues are largely framed in the political setting in the run-up to the name change and the referendum that followed for joining NATO. The issue of propaganda is often problematised by the media in the context of the current political turmoil in Macedonia, although the media reports do not imply ideological inclination. There are several topics which are overstated in the light of the political activities going on in the country.

In this context, the study identifies a clear indirect approach in media portrayals. It was observed that the media is less interested to report on these issues relying on investigative journalism, instead it capitalizes on declarative text formats. The media relies heavily on foreign sources and media reports, especially on Western media, in order to produce information. The highest share of the analyzed media texts are statements and quotations without deeper analysis or investigation. There is a widespread practice of straightforward translation without critical or selective approach.

Although the uncritical and unselective conveyance of messages is frequent in media reporting of the events, no indicator shows that they are ideologically determined. Speaking concretely about propaganda, there is neither explicit support of particular policy or ideology, nor particular ideological framings of the events. The political leanings are apparent or implicative in many reports, however they are not explicit.

By analyzing the tone of the texts, it can be observed that the media less often relies on modalities to express attitude toward certain issue. As already observed, most of the analyzed articles have adopted neutral stance when reporting about propaganda activities. The media generally abstains from assigning qualifications or in-group designations in order to influence readers' perceptions. No intention of sowing fear or apprehension is identified, although the foregrounding is apparent in many instances of reporting on particular events which are most common in the headlines and the lead of the media articles.

The media are sometimes inclined of using abstract terminology and nominalization, instead of speaking in succinct terms. Numbers of instances suggest that the mild and reserved rhetoric is almost invariably used without aggressive tone or persuasive communication. The instances of persuasive communication on the media are negligible, although not completely omitted. The preferences of using nominalized sentences can somewhat divert the intention and overemphasize the topic. The notion of 'propaganda' is often used in pejorative terms alluding to unfavorable consequences of such practices, but without conspicuous insinuations with suggestive words.

When it comes to the representation of the actors and events, it is evident that the propaganda activities are generally represented in negative connotation. The propaganda activities are frequently characterised as subversive activities or activities aimed at undermining the democratic principles and values. The actors involved are frequently represented with adjectives referring to their country of origin. The dominant discourses are limited to the following wording: pro-Russian, pro-Western, Russian spies, Russian diplomats, Russian influence, and so on.

As for the delivery style, almost without exception, media relies on linear narration. The passivation of the sentences is rarely used with active voice that is prevalent in media reports. In general, in respect of the propaganda and external influence, the media are not inclined to speculative reporting and formidable scenarios, instead they are more tilted toward changing course in respect of appealing and attractive information. Based on the common pattern of 'inclusion/exclusion', it can be inferred that it is a commonplace certain issues to be backgrounded such as the Macedonian position in the geopolitical context and its position as social actor. The consequences of the propaganda with regard to the Macedonian citizens are also de-emphasized at the expense of overemphasizing the political fallout or the political ramifications.

For the purposes of CDA, special attention was devoted to the headlines of the media texts which are probably the most notable part of message conveyance due to their potential to draw attention, to provide short, eye-catching content and to explicate how the information is presented to the reader. As it can be observed, the foregrounding is particularly visible in the headlines by emphasizing and giving prominence of the topics of concern. Strong words, quotations and rhetorical formations are predominantly used in the headlines. It is evident that the headlines are framed and conceptualized in a way to attract attention and draw readers, and not to convey impartial information. The headlines constructed by the Macedonian media are textbook example of Fairclough's explication of social practice which presupposes the nexus between the structures and events and are sketched in a manner to ignite curiosity and incite considerable readership.

The most conspicuous headlines include: "Is there a Russian influence on the referendum in Macedonia?"; (Kanal5); "Russian spies and diplomats spread propaganda and provoke discord in Macedonia"; "Red Alarm! Macedonia a possible target of a hacker attack in order to change the will of the citizens and hinder the success of the referendum" (1tv), "The Russians are coming or how against Russian propaganda" (Nova TV); "Russian money for black propaganda" (Plus Info); "Russian officials across Macedonia agitate for referendum boycott?" (Alsat M). These headlines are framed in a manner to foreground the danger posed in the anticipation of the referendum, but constructed in more sensationalized manner.

The news articles after the referendum rely mostly on foreign sources, mainly on Western media, to infer and recapitulate on the consequences of the failed Referendum. For instance, the media outlets provide little or no explanation on what these issues represent in the Macedonian context and generally abstain from expounding on the political implications.

5.4. Comparative Overview of Media Reporting

The comparative analysis of media reporting on the issues of propaganda was particularly employed to examine comparatively how media in Serbia and Montenegro report on and present these issues. The analysis is implemented in order to assess variations in how the media report on propaganda, external influence and disinformation in the adjacent countries, as well as to assess the similarities and differences in mapping and framing the issues of relevance.

The media analysis in Serbia and Montenegro started from the assumption that these two countries are affected the most by the Russian clout and it was therefore necessary to assess whether it is reflected in media reporting. Assuming that each country has its own set of issues and different socio-political setup, the variants of media reporting were anticipated. The polarised coverage of the events related to propaganda activities are suffice to illustrate the media political inclinations, but not the ideological orientations. In this regard, it is worth noting that the media outlets selected for the analysis are those that could be considered the most trusted among the population, while the media with clear ideological orientation either pro-Russian or pro-Western were omitted from the analysis due to their already anticipated stance.

At first glance, there are no major or sharp differences in the manner of reporting by the media in Serbia and Montenegro compared to the media reporting in Macedonia. The initial findings suggest that the commonalities are prevalent over the differences. The Balkan media predominantly follow similar trends in reporting about the events, but also employ similar lexical items. The less risky approach with fact-based reporting in both Serbia and Montenegro is preferred to the detriment of investigative journalism. Neither the ideological framings of the events, nor ideological identifications are explicit or easily detectable. As in the case of Macedonia, the media reporting in Serbia and Montenegro is largely affected by the social and political milieu in the countries. In this vein, the statements of the political figures are often placed as breaking news, even though they are not critically examined.

The variations are mostly contingent upon the contextual framing, reporting period and thematic patterns in the analyzed timeframe. The propaganda-related media coverage includes economic, political and social framings of the events with emphasis on the political ramifications. The major fluctuations are in terms of the coverage of topics with some of the themes being excluded, overlooked or minimized such as the risks and harms of the propaganda activities, as well as about the counter-campaigns being implemented to that end. There weren't detected overly dismissive media articles, although most of the events were portrayed without in-depth scrutiny.

A notable difference in reporting is that the topics in the focus of this analysis are given greater prominence in comparison to those in Macedonia, which are mostly embedded in the main news. There is a considerable difference in media representations of actors and events. The representations of the events by the media in Serbia are displayed in more favorable light. There are slight differences in respect of the

emphasis on the interrogative text formats, speculative informing (especially by the Serbian media) and overemphasized framings. The political and the ideological preferences, as well as the pro-government biases are more visible in Serbian media, although such practices are subtle and implicit given the political sensitivity of the issues of concern.

6. Conclusion

The issue of propaganda is complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that was given prominence in the recent period with the emergence of modern technologies. Nowadays, the cutting-edge technology, the profusion of digital outlets and the easy access to information facilitate and step up the pervasive nature of propaganda. This ubiquitous trend, which did not bypass the Western Balkans, proved problematic in the democratic societies.

The renewed geopolitical interest in the Western Balkans which is more or less result of NATO and EU enlargement policies, as well as the economic interests, is commensurate with the claims of Russian propaganda activities. The anecdotal and empirical evidences, as deconstructed in this study, suggest on existence of sphere of influence with Russian economic, diplomatic and media presence in the region. Arguably, this influence is exerted by nurturing political, economic and cultural ties with the countries in Western Balkan region. The findings of this study likewise indicate that the Russian sway is not equally imminent in all Western Balkan countries and not even/equal in terms of the intensity, the scope, and the interest in each country. The scarcity of empirical research makes it difficult to glean definitive conclusions regarding the level, the severity and the volume of the exerted influence.

The role of media in democratic societies is crucial and increasingly important for the development of democracy and for promotion of political accountability of each society. The power of mass media is epitomized in its mobilizing potential as a key tool for conveyance of information and opinion building. The unbiased and objective media is precondition for resilience to propaganda practices and their role is instrumental in debunking disinformation. The choice of wording and language can largely affect how information is perceived and accepted by the general public, but also it can impact the policy agenda on a long haul.

The CDA paradigm that was implemented to assess how media treats the issue of propaganda in everyday discourse has shown that the discursive strategies and the lexical framings, even though not ideologically determined, they are in line with the current political trends and social processes. The study also indicates that the media discourse in the analyzed period not invariably contemplates the facts and reality; instead it resides upon the need to appeal and match audiences' interests and expectations. The main aspects analyzed refer to the inference that the informative types of articles dominate the media discourse in Macedonia, but also in Serbia and Montenegro which is detrimental for the investigative journalism.

The long tradition of political control over media and apparent setbacks in exercising media freedom increases the likelihood of susceptibility to propaganda or other subversive activities. In circumstances of politically-curbed media and unsatisfactory level of media freedom, the free and impartial reporting is highly questionable. The downward trend in media freedom, that appears to be mostly a result of economic and financial pressures upon journalists, makes the media conducive to political influence and oth-

er external interferences. The devastating consequences of conveying unverified information in the age of digitalization can undermine democracy, to adversely affect social processes and to threaten national security. Moreover, the virulent trend of relying on information to spread influence and propaganda generate the urgency for implementing counter-campaigns and other measures to halt such practices.

7. Recommendations

Based on the observations and research findings, it is evident that swift and decisive action is needed to tackle disinformation and propaganda, to build resistance to disinformation and to curb the external influence. The media are the most important segment in these processes and the language they employ is intrinsically linked to how issues are perceived by the general audience. There are several mechanisms that should be considered in order to obviate and minimize the consequences of propaganda in Western Balkans:

1. **Promoting bottom-up approach and supporting grass-root initiatives** through dialogue and engagement is crucial in shaping the course of policy actions in addressing the issues of disinformation and propaganda. Relying on micro-targeting with individualized and direct approach capitalizing on social media platforms and digital media is important to reach out wider audience, especially the youth as a subset of population.
2. **Implementing content-selective policies and identifying the fake news portals** is significant measure for raising the quality of the content and the information that is being offered.
3. The **support of local media and high-quality journalism** is vital given the fact that the media should be leading factor for countering disinformation. Promoting favourable environment and thriving conditions for quality journalism is pivotal for the production of high-quality information and analysis based on accurate and transparent reporting which would not be constrained solely to “clickbait” news. It is also important to shore up the media capacities for re-checking the sources of information and ensuring financial sustainability through state interventions, financial allocations and subsidies aimed at ensuring diversity of sources and content, as well as economic security of the journalists.
4. **Enhancing press freedom and media pluralism** is important segment in building trust-worthy media. The independent and non-politicized media are the prerequisite for objective and impartial reporting. The media should stand upfront in opposing and minimizing the risks of propaganda and disinformation by imparting unbiased information, abiding by professional journalistic standards, and avoiding political instrumentalization of the media content.
5. **Boosting cross-institutional cooperation.** The cooperation should also be encouraged among different stakeholders by creating a network that will include the government agencies, civil society, educational institutions and the media with concerted efforts to suppress the adverse effects of propaganda.
6. Efforts for mounting **counter-campaigns should be encouraged** aimed at increasing public consciousness and dissemination of knowledge. Investing in education which should be backed by

fact-checking and media literacy campaigns is of paramount importance in strengthening abilities of the citizens to distinguish falsehoods from facts, to critically assess the messages conveyed by the media and to discern the misleading information. The current implemented initiatives in the Western Balkans are leap forward in countering disinformation and propaganda, but the local initiatives should be dominant for long-term success in hindering such practices.

7. The **furthering of the Euro-Atlantic agenda** in Western Balkans should be prioritized by the policy makers in order to ensure long term security and stability. Strengthening the economic performances is also notable to speed up the Euro-Atlantic processes, but also to contribute to economic resilience of the Western Balkan countries.

8. **Fortifying the legal framework** (including the anti-monopoly legislation) and **increasing the role of the media regulatory bodies** is also significant step in the process of countering propaganda and disinformation. The media regulatory bodies should have larger authority in regulating, monitoring and evaluating the broadcasting of content, but also should stay independent from political interventions.

9. The **support of evidence-based researches** aimed at appraisal of the level and repercussions of propaganda, the effectiveness of the implemented policies, and the role of different stakeholders is important step in providing a clear picture of the propaganda activities going on in the Western Balkan countries.

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Nataliia Haluhan

The Influence of Media Manipulation, Disinformation, and Fake News on Financial Markets: Assessments, Mechanisms, Challenges

The whole world is discussing the political challenges resulting from the spread of fake news. Though these challenges are extremely important, specific attention should also be paid to the impact that disinformation can have on the world economy – for example, through its impact on financial markets. This paper aims to identify the mechanisms of influence, and light up the possible negative consequences that information attacks may have for global economic security.

Financial markets make the power of people's predictions much more visible. This is partially caused by the speed at which financial markets operate. Another thing to note with exchanges: even though they were created to mirror the state of real markets, the very nature of some kinds of securities, especially when it comes to derivatives, is artificial. Artificial here means that they were introduced as a result of a so-called "social contract" – people agreed to treat them as a thing of real value. Consequently, derivatives tend to be even more dependent on people's psychology. As pointed out by Robert J. Shiller ¹, "although the news media – newspapers, magazines, and broadcast media, along with their new outlets on the Internet – present themselves as detached observers of market events, they are themselves an integral part of these events." This happens because of the nature of powerful market movements, which demand that the majority of people share the same views and beliefs regarding the future of the market events.

In general, there are two types of analyses one can use to look at trading on the financial markets. While the fundamental one focuses on the long-term economic indicators, a technical analysis exclusively eval-

¹ R.J. Shiller, *Irrational Exuberance. Revised and Expanded Third Edition*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p. 101.

uates the mood of the market and assesses human behavior in the short term. In a historical perspective, the influence of the news media on financial markets can be traced back to the invention of the newspaper; back then, only the fundamental classical approach was used as a means of analysis. The South Sea Company was one of the best examples thereof. Many people lost millions because manipulative information was spread regarding the company. They included Isaac Newton (who lost almost the 2000s equivalent of 3 million USD)². According to Richard Dale's study devoted to this bubble³, "...there was a widespread perception that stockjobbing and rumour-mongering were synonymous[...] There were ample opportunities and powerful incentives to manipulate the news, and thereby market prices." Robert J. Shiller's also shared a similar opinion on the power of the media when he said⁴, "The media actively shape public attention and categories of thought, and they create the environment in which the speculative market events we see are played out." Consequently, the media began to fuel the shaping of the speculative market bubbles back in 17th century and continues to exercise its power nowadays. The main difference is that, with the appearance of new technologies in general and technical analysis in particular, short-term trading is the field where news-media cause their biggest and strongest impact in our time.

The modern effect of fake news on stock markets can be visually illustrated by one of the most resonant relevant events of recent years – the message on an injury President Obama sustained following an explosion at the White House. That message was spread out in 2013 as a tweet from the Associated Press account, which later claimed to be hacked. After the message was published, the Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 143.5 points and the Standard & Poor's 500 Index lost more than 136 bln USD of its value in the seconds that immediately followed the post⁵. Although the tweet was refuted shortly thereafter and stock prices recovered, this case demonstrates the huge possibility of information to influence financial markets.

Furthermore, the 2013 incident shows the newly-emerging scope of this challenge. Namely, the further we go along the path of digitalization, the more disruptive the schemes that appear. Firstly, the number of sources that can spread disinformation has gone up; nowadays the panic on the financial market can be caused not only by official media but also by private accounts on social networks. Secondly, the speed of spreading news (both fake and real) is skyrocketing, which means a lack of time for proper analysis. Thirdly, digitalisation gives more tools for manipulation. For example, algorithms as well as bots give additional space for the shaping of public opinion.

The new scope of the fake news issue is getting more dangerous due to the fact that terrorist groups and totalitarian political regimes consider financial markets simultaneously as a source of financing and means of hybrid aggression. As experts from World Economic Forum warn, "The global risk of massive digital

² E. Holodny, *Isaac Newton was a genius, but even he lost millions in the stock market*, Business Insider, 10 November 2017, Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/isaac-newton-lost-a-fortune-on-englands-hottest-stock-2016-1>.

³ R. Dale, *The First Crash. Lessons from the South Sea Bubble*, Princeton University Press, 2016, p. 19.

⁴ R.J. Shiller, op. cit., p. 121.

⁵ M. Prigg, *The tweet that cost \$139 BILLION: Researchers analyse impact of hacked message claiming President Obama had been injured by White House explosion*, "DailyMail.com", 20 May 2015, Retrieved from <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/science-tech/article-3090221/The-tweet-cost-139-BILLION-Researchers-analyse-impact-hacked-message-claiming-President-Obama-injured-White-House-explosion.html>.

misinformation sits at the centre of a constellation of technological and geopolitical risks ranging from terrorism to cyber attacks and the failure of global governance”⁶. According to their constellation, in the hyperconnected world we live the potentially possible massive digital misinformation may cause not only major systemic financial failures but also, as a consequence, a chain of social and political clashes all over the world.



Figure1. A Constellation of Technological and Geopolitical Risks to Be Potentially Caused in a Hyperconnected World by Major Systemic Financial Failures due to Massive Digital Misinformation.

Source: Based on the World Economic Forum Global Risks Report.

⁶ Digital Wildfires in a Hyperconnected World. Global Risks 2013 Eighth Edition, World Economic Forum, Retrieved from <http://reports.weforum.org/global-risks-2013/risk-case-1/digital-wildfires-in-a-hyperconnected-world/#read>.

A current situation with Bitcoins may provide a tangible example of the negative consequences of global hyperconnectivity. Virtual assets or cryptocurrencies, the decentralized nature of which is fully artificial, get more and more supporters every day. At the same time, the value of Bitcoin is being fully created by the means of information. This is still a Pandora's Box, the opening of which may trigger a financial panic of an unpredictable size. Though this scenario can cause huge negative impact on the world economic security, a more dangerous prediction is one in which financial panic will be used as a means to change the established world order.

Thus, it is insufficient to target only the political dimension of fake news. Greater attention should be paid to the tackling media manipulation, disinformation and fake news relating to the financial markets. Similar to the healthy blood flows that make human beings strong, healthy financial streams make global society stable. Thus, fake news and disinformation regarding financial markets should be treated as dangerous as a cancer endangering the further development not only of the world economy but also of the global political system as a whole.

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Liljana Pecova Ilieska, Kire Babanoski

Monitoring the Media Content from Foreign Influence Over the EU/NATO Accession Process in Macedonia¹

1. Executive summary

This Research paper aims to map the way media were reporting about the political processes in the country, having in mind the period from 11th of July – the day NATO invitation was given to the Republic of Macedonia until the 30th of September, 2018 - the Referendum day over the issue of changing the name of the country. At a glance, the Research offers perceptions by professionals and detection of possible foreign influence over the EU/NATO accession debate in Macedonia.

The paper is written in the period when all of these processes ended, therefore somewhere in the text one may find discourse as earlier reflections of what has happened or further notices of media disinformation and possible foreign influence after the monitored period.

The project itself, far interesting enough as for the national and international relations, presents an unique opportunity to speak openly and open discussions about media reporting not only in Macedonia in that period, but wider in the Western Balkan region, which were opting to have more news sensationalism and click-bate titles in the period whereas many unsolved political issues in the region were present. This was noticed whilst presenting the media information to the public. The timing is crucial to have such a debate and shall reflect a clear understanding and ability to present it to the public. Especially having in mind the open processes of negotiation and mediation between the European Union/Commission with several countries in the region. The political situation and open issues were used in the media to disadvantage the smooth implementation path of the political Agreement (the “Prespa Agreement”) made between two neighboring countries.

¹ This report was produced in the framework of the WEASA 2018 project and under the WEASA 2018 Small Grants Program, co-founded and co-financed by the College of Europe Natolin, the Polish American Freedom Foundation and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, with the support of the Polish-U.S. Fulbright Commission.

Media monitoring process also may impact the future investments into the country from donor's perspective. Clear recommendations shall be envisaged at the end of the Paper. The general public shall be the final beneficiary of the findings with the aim of raising the level of awareness and understanding the position we are/were put in. Also, it is of utmost importance to portray the media literacy surroundings in the country in order to be able to understand and recognize the foreign influence. Therefore, some specific indicators shall be withdrawn to serve "IMPETUS" for further development of advocacy tools/initiatives. Further development of platform for monitoring could be seen as an asset if good network is developed amongst different stakeholders in the region.

This project analyzes the type of media content (news, video, governmental statement, press release, TV debates, talk-shows, columns, blog sections, etc.) and detects any foreign influence over the way the content was presented. Also, the project's research group shall establish good relations to different target groups (media, journalists, academia, NGOs, students, officials) to analyze through discussion, interviews and focus groups about the methods of understanding the media and its content. Possible disinformation impact shall be detected as well. More than 100 articles were monitored, and 87 media contents were analyzed through the method of analysis of the media reporting. Almost half - 49% of the media contents analyzed were internet portals. The type of the contents were news and a very small portion of attention was given to journalistic analyzes, interviews, columns and research stories.

The analyses showed many media content without author signed and large number of experts consulted. The same experts in the same media. Only a small part of the content included some official documents from the area being treated. Many of them did not cite, link or analyse any important relevant document.

Also, the project's methodology incorporates large number of interviews with journalists, where it presents a good overview of the perception gained from media workers directly themselves. It is highly evaluated to have professionals' opinion on the table as to raise the level of validity of the Research itself. The main conclusion from these interviews is that "the media have been hostages of influences, policies, conspiracies, blatant businesses for years... With the change of power, only new people came, old - new media, and the situation with the influence remained the same. Commenting on social media was paid, as well as posts, and additional paid marketing. It was registered who put the frame on social media FB profile that is PRO the EU, fake profiles were created for bigger paid content."

The entire campaign "Imagine future together", as well as the pre-Referendum visits of high-level representatives of the international community, may have reached a counter-effect among the citizens who felt pressure to vote and what happened there was a weak voter turnout. Also, the campaign itself, it had triggered a certain revolt and confusion among the citizens.

In the framework of the interview with the professors, as a general assessment, it was concluded that in the investigated period the foreign political influence in the Macedonian internal political scene was of the highest volume in the last few years. The main reason for this is the intensified activities of the Macedonian authorities in relation to the Euro-Atlantic processes. This observed foreign interest contributed to changing the general situation in the country. All interviewed professors agreed that the influence of Western European states, the United States, NATO and the EU is more positive and is in the same direction

as the strategic determination of the Republic of Macedonia, in contrast to the less intense but noticeable Russian influence with the intention of blocking the NATO integration. The impacts of the EU and NATO have increased because these organizations have an interest in stabilizing the Balkans.

According to the students, within the framework of the conducted focus groups, due to its favorable geostrategic position, the Republic of Macedonia has always been the object of interest of the countries of the region, the region, as well as the great world powers. They understand and recognize that in the Republic of Macedonia in the past few years the influence of the Western countries, EU and NATO members is evident, and especially the influence of the United States from the aspect of their geopolitical interests in relation to the Republic of Macedonia. The students said that their opinions were based on information obtained from the media outlets, online media and printed newspapers, as well as the influence of the NGO sector. The media in Macedonia have always been turned to the government and their reporting policies have always depended on the politics of the government.

Through the presented chronological analysis of the official foreign visits and meetings of the Macedonian authorities, the interest of the international community regarding the developments in Macedonia in this period is noted. At the high political level, it has been made clear to the international public that the strategic goals (NATO and EU membership) and aspirations set since the independence have now become strategic priorities of the international community as well.

The NATO Coordinator for Macedonia said that he can only assume that there have been attempts for foreign influence, similar to the political or media sector for which there are official data and data from public sources. According to his findings, the National Coordinator noted that there is some foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, and that from the Macedonian competent institutions in cooperation with partner services in the international community was documented in several cases.

1.1 About the project

The main goal of the project is to identify foreign influence into the media content and to correlate it throughout the political and national processes and situations. The main tool used is monitoring the information presented and published into the media², in relation with the discourse from the national and foreign policy makers.

Foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia is actively increased and visible as upon the signing of

² The term "Media" as presented in the current national legislation does not encompass the online portals, blogs, etc., as to we are not using here the legislative definition, but the facts presented in the 2018 IREX report: Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations, Internet news portals in MK: Print Outlets: Five daily newspapers, two weekly newsmagazines, 11 other periodicals; Broadcasting: One (radio and television) with five television channels and three radio channels; Television Stations: Five national DVB-T broadcasters, four national cable television broadcasters; five national satellite television broadcasters; 21 DVB-T regional television broadcasters; 22 local cable television broadcasters; Radio Stations: Four national radio stations; 17 regional radio stations; 48 local radio stations; one nonprofit (student) radio station; Internet News Portals: Between 80 and 100 news and opinion sites of some importance

neighborhood agreements with Bulgaria³ and Greece⁴ and efforts of the new Government to join NATO and EU accession processes.

There are serious indications that this influence is increased upon the NATO invitation received in July, the preparation phase until the Referendum for the name issue and ratification⁵ of the Agreement with Greece, as a clear precondition to NATO membership.

But far more than all of this, one must understand the context in which such influence is highly possible and engaged. A Freedom House Report researcher⁶ gave a concise description of it: “A democratically elected, ethnically inclusive government is seeking to root out corruption and other systemic abuses that grew worse under its scandal-plagued predecessor, and it could even resolve the lingering “name dispute” with Greece that has impeded the country’s path toward EU membership.” Therefore, in such environmental setting it is crucial to map how media content was (ab)used to spread propaganda, materials and disinformation about the NATO processes. On the other hand, the country had to face media reform processes as a benchmark given by the EU country’s progress report. In that sense, the ecosystem of the media platforms was working with big challenges, legislative gaps and open issues, therefore it could be easily influenced from abroad. Also, new negotiations between the Government and the media were opened in the sphere of media reform processes. Yet, nobody was willing to be put in a hot water and to clear things up in the media ecosystem in that period.

1.2 Strengths and innovation

The main strength of this project is that it is first of this kind here, so far there is no publicly available document analyzing the foreign influence over the EU/NATO integration processes into the media content. Although in the general public there is an awareness about existence of this foreign influence and recognized as a factor of importance, yet, there is no expressed effort and determination at academia or NGO sector to start fact checking and analyze this phenomenon deeply. The research itself shall be useful for the governmental services, donor impact, institutions working on the EU integration and NATO processes, security aspects, international relations and foreign diplomacy tools development, but for media and journalists as well who shall face the false reporting and seriousness of fake news propaganda towards the security of the country and its citizens’ welfare.

At the end, through the support of this project, a grass-root organization is established with the aim of researching these issues and good governance monitoring which would bring justified advocacy initiatives and policy papers related to the topics of national/regional security and the impact of media onto it.

³ 1st of August 2017.

⁴ 17th of June 2018.

⁵ The President of the country did not sign the Law on ratification of the Agreement, the Parliament has voted with 69 votes “pro” and nobody “against” or “withheld”.

⁶ V. Duhanaj, “The following countries are among those that may be approaching important turning points in their democratic trajectory”, according to the latest Freedom in the World report, 12.02.2018, <https://freedomhouse.org/blog/10-countries-watch-2018>.

1.3 Sustainability

Focus groups with students and media professionals is seen as potential sustainability to form relations and raising awareness of the issue covered. Also, it is envisaged, out of project scope, to organize two lectures on the Faculty for Security Studies. Presentation to students shall be seen as an educational training and tool how to recognize disinformation in media, as well.

If possible there is an idea to develop this further as an online learning platform whereas continuous monitoring shall be done, capacity building of journalists and training students how to perform monitoring of the media and foreign influence. Also, business chamber representatives shall be invited to interviews, trying to reach possible sustainable cooperation with them understanding the connection between stable and secure region and economic growth.

1.4 Methodology

Several research methods have been applied in order to obtain data and information regarding the subject of Research to check the hypothetical framework.

The method of analysis of media content monitored on a daily basis - for the purposes of this method the aggregator of news www.time.mk was used. It organizes media content so that content from different sources for one and the same event appears in one group - "cluster." It currently includes articles from more than 100 news sources. Media contents were filtered through www.time.mk in the period from 11.07 to 30.09.2018, according to several key words (NATO, EU, integration, North Macedonia, Prespa Agreement, USA, Russia, foreign influence, Referendum, Greece, etc.) given on the Macedonian language transcription.

In doing so, a huge number of contents were pointed out from the Internet aggregator, which are often repeated, since the media takes them from each other and republishes them. The researchers were allocating the contents that were originally published in order to identify the basic (original) content/source, and then the re-publishing process was monitored.

Also, media monitoring was exercises on a daily basis, closely following the topics, headlines and articles published in correlation to the topic.

Interviews with university professors were conducted – a conversation with professors in the field of security, political sciences, international relations and law, in order to obtain scientific knowledge and perceptions about the foreign influence on media reporting and demarcation with the real situation with the NATO / EU accession process in the Republic of Macedonia.

Interviews with journalists – open talks with journalists from the larger media in the Republic of Macedonia covering the domestic and international politics in order to obtain information about their perceptions about the foreign influence on their reporting and the editorial policy of the media for which they work.

An Interview – letter based - with the National Coordinator for preparation of Macedonia for NATO membership, Dr. Stevo Pendarovski, was conducted in order to ensure the relevance of the Research and to

determine the national position regarding the issues that are elaborated in this study.

Focus group with students - talk with students about security, law, international relations and political science to gain their views, opinions and perceptions about the EU/NATO accession process, the way of media reporting and identifying foreign influence in the overall process.

At the end of the Research there is a chronological review and analysis of official visits - a review of all official visits of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and visits and participation of the Macedonian state authorities to official events organized by international organizations and other countries.

2. Background

Namely, immediately after the signing of the Przino Agreement⁷, the country was led towards the reform processes in several areas; the European Commission prepared the urgent reform priorities for Macedonia⁸ in the area of the rule of law, the de-politicization of the public administration, freedom of expression and electoral reform. Urgent reform priorities (IRPs) is a document that builds on the Report of the Experts' Team led by Reinhard Priebe⁹. It is divided into five chapters: Rule of Law and Judiciary; Depoliticization of the public administration; Election reforms; Conducting the recommendations of the Inquiry Committee on the events of December 24th; Media: freedom of expression. In line with the negotiations on the achievement of the Przino Agreement, but explicitly with the reform priorities, the reforms in the field of media and freedom of expression are essential for the development of a transparent, democratic and free government in the country. In particular, the reforms in the "Media: Freedom of Expression" are aiming to achieve progress and resolve difficulties in four areas: public service broadcasting, governmental advertising, access to information and defamation.

2.1 Media context

The importance of media reforms and freedom of expression was recognized by the current government, which foresaw measures and activities in this field in its program (2017-2020)¹⁰, as well as within the Governmental plan "3-6-9"¹¹. Clear recommendation was issued: "Media should exercise their task to inform the public without any pressure or direct or indirect interference from public authorities. One of the recommendations is that "all media have to be free from any political pressure without any interference or intimidation. Media play a particularly important role in situations of political crisis. In the public interest it is their task to reveal possible shortcomings in the functioning of a state or a society. Therefore, public

⁷ Przino Agreement – Agreement in Skopje to overcome political crisis, Skopje, 29.06.2015, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/newsfiles/20150619_agreement.pdf.

⁸ Urgent Reform Priorities for the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, June 2015, https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/urgent_reform_priorities_en.pdf.

⁹ Recommendations of the Senior Experts' Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/newsfiles/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf.

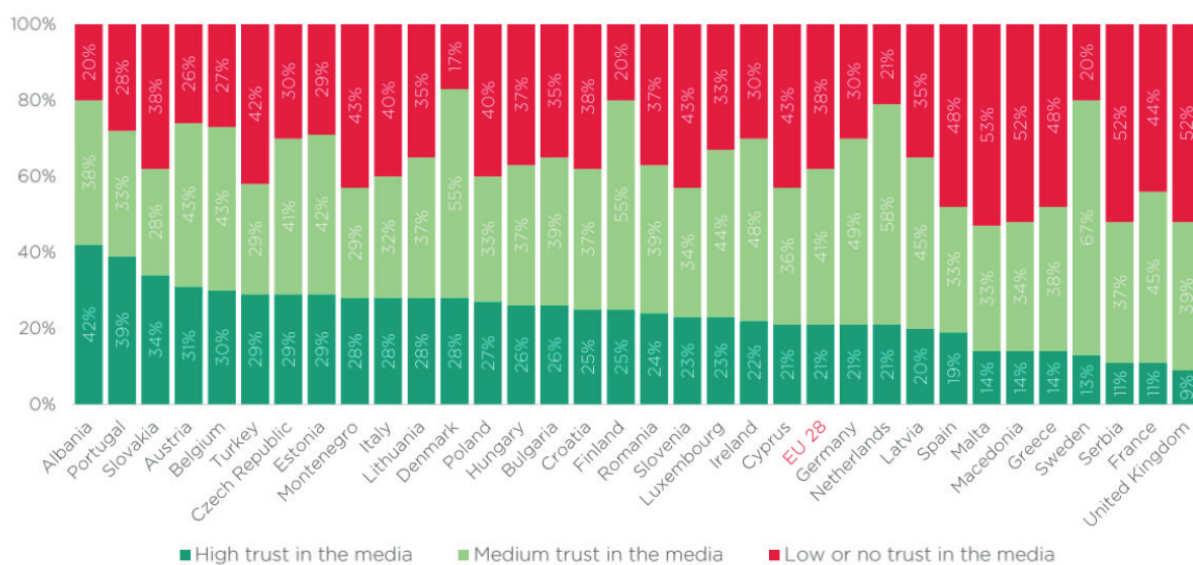
¹⁰ Programme of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia for 2017 (June-December), http://vlada.mk/sites/default/files/programa/2017-2020/Programa_Vlada_RM_Juni_Dekemvri_2017.pdf.

¹¹ Plan for Immediate Reform Priorities "3-6-9", <http://vlada.mk/plan-3-6-9>.

bodies should refrain from discouraging media to carry out their mandate”¹².

At the beginning we mentioned it is important to know the context, so the measurements of the European Broadcasting Union¹³, showed low level of trust in the region and tendency to decrease in some countries, as stated from the 2017 research.

TRUST IN MEDIA (% of population, 2017)



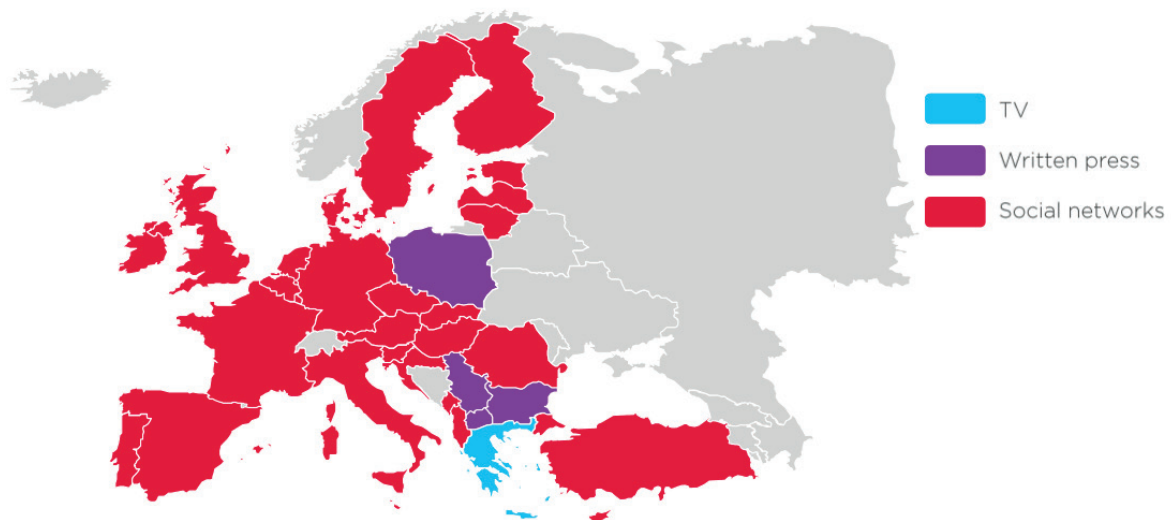
- When asked about the general level of trust in media, Albania has the largest proportion of citizens with high trust levels.
- In Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Albania, 20% or less of the population have no trust in media.
- In Malta, Macedonia, Serbia and the UK, the majority of the population do not trust the media.

Source: EBU based on Eurobarometer, Media Intelligence Service – Trust in Media 2018

¹² Recommendations of the Senior Experts’ Group on systemic Rule of Law issues relating to the communications interception revealed in Spring 2015, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/news_corner/news/news-files/20150619_recommendations_of_the_senior_experts_group.pdf.

¹³ European Broadcasting Union, Trust in media 2018, Report, 27.02.2018, <https://www.ebu.ch/publications/trust-in-media-2018>.

LEAST TRUSTED MEDIA IN EUROPE (Net Trust Index 2017)



- Social networks are the least trusted media in 28 out of 33 of the countries surveyed (85%).
- Poland, Serbia, Macedonia and Bulgaria trust the written press the least, while Greece has least trust in TV.

Source: EBU based on Eurobarometer 88, Media Intelligence Service – Trust in Media 2018

Though such research show increase in media ongoing still remains the perception in the public that foreign influence penetrated and affected the process. Was this well-prepared environment for that to happened?!

In another report¹⁴ in accordance with the Media Sustainability Index for 2018¹⁵ – “Macedonia (and Montenegro) saw the largest overall score increases this year, in comparison to 2017. The improvement across all objectives this year for Macedonia’s media sector can be attributed to political changes that prioritize media in democratic reforms. Although Montenegro’s score improvement shows promising progress and puts it in the Near Sustainability category, weaknesses in the country’s media sector include low revenue generation, declining professional development opportunities, political biases, and low adherence to professional standards.”

This Report puts Macedonian media ecosystem in the unsustainable mixed systems, which interprets as:

¹⁴ Media Sustainability Index, The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia, 2018, <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>.

¹⁵ Media Sustainability Index (MSI) Explorer, The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia (2001-2018), <https://www.mediasustainabilityindex.org/>.

“Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.”

This adds another piece into the mosaic of media development in the country and understanding the position of media and journalists. Although a significant increase was detected in meeting the professional standards and “a plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists”, yet, within the process itself, coming from the 11th of July until 30th of September remained obsolete, estranged from the professional media standards.

The media reform backsliding was acknowledged also in the 2018 Annual report of the Association for Journalists in Macedonia¹⁶ whereas: “In 2018, not only there were not any improvement in the media legislation, on the contrary there was even a certain setback, adding that during the summer holidays, without any debate and completely opaque, the Government adopted the amendments and supplements to the Electoral Code and Law on Financing of Political Parties. These changes allow parliamentary parties to spend public money to finance media political propaganda during the election campaign and referendums.” According to the AJM, such changes will have a negative impact on the freedom of the media, because it is a forerunner in the return of government advertisements, with which the previous government bought the affection of the media and influenced their editorial policy. In such context, it is quite clear that the Referendum process needed a clear path towards media coverage and the governmental steps provided the safe legal environment. No wonder all of these amendments happened right before the launch of the campaign in late August and September, before the Referendum.

2.2 “The Prespa Agreement” – a textbook case for neighbourhood collaboration or a dangerous accord?

A long history of the name issue¹⁷ lies within this question. And it is inevitable only one answer, which shall be visible only after couple of years. History shall speak about whether history was made that day or not. Whether it shall resemble the fear of territorial pretensions and change the map of Europe or bring additional limbo situation between the border lines of two neighboring countries.

There were strong echoes of concerned parties, stakeholders from different sectors, experts, countries¹⁸ and unions that gave reflection on the issue. Some of them welcomed it with open hands; others were skeptical and negative¹⁹ about the process itself or the political willingness and determination from both sides.

¹⁶ Regional platform for advocating media freedom and journalists safety, <http://safejournalists.net/mk/news-2/>.

¹⁷ H. Smith, Macedonia changes name, ending bitter dispute with Greece, The Guardian, International Edition, 17.06.2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/17/macedonia-greece-dispute-name-accord-prespa>.

¹⁸ S. Kochovska, *Nimetz: Prespa Agreement is very important for the region and relations between Athens and Skopje*, MIA, 13.12.2018, <https://mia.mk/2018/12/nimetz-prespa-agreement-is-very-important-for-the-region-and-relations-between-athens-and-skopje/?lang=en>.

¹⁹ *Prespa: A dangerous agreement*, European Free Alliance, 20.06.2018, http://www.e-f-a.org/news-single-view/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=1146&cHash=c2ceb9a9d416366f2d8e70e26630e108.

The Greek media <http://www.ekathimerini.com/> was the first to publish it online²⁰, as an English version, from whereas Macedonian media linked and republished. Why it was opted out to have a Greek media to publish it first, we can only speculate it was agreed between the two parties assuming this would bring less harm to the process itself in the Republic of Macedonia. Various disinformations was presented, different media procrastinated the benefits from the Agreement and opted out for the negativity and misinterpretations. In that period of time new media outlets and online portals have mushroomed, specifically with the name of Macedonia in it, reflecting clear nationalist position in the content²¹. All of them were highly focused on traditional values, religious beliefs, and all of them did not support the Agreement, presenting confusing interpretations of its different provisions. Such has produced much harm in the process than everything else, posting false information about the Agreement, posting fear to the public that a nation shall vanish. Such content was shared on social media mostly referring and citing the media. And quite a long period the issue remained on the social media only. No governmental efforts to explain it or to demonstrate clear description of it.

It was clear enough, but highly visited and read by the general public. Couple of surveys were posted on the portals/websites to ask the question of whether you are pro or against the name change of the country. The results of the survey were publicly available and were changing on a daily basis.

At the time foreign media were more focused on the topic of “Greece to expel Russia diplomats over FYR Macedonia deal”²², or trying to explain why Greece accuse Russia of meddling over the issue, or the history of the name issue²³. In the reporting period four Russian diplomats were expelled from Greece after evidence revealed that Russia was trying to foment opposition to a historic deal between Greece and Macedonia that is likely to pave the way for Macedonia’s NATO membership and so weaken Russian influence in the western Balkans. Greece expelled two Russian diplomats and banned entrance of two others²⁴.

The Kremlin accused Washington of being behind the Greek government’s decision to expel Russian diplomats who had allegedly tried to derail a deal resolving Greece’s name dispute with neighboring Macedonia. In a statement the Russian Foreign Ministry said that Washington is hiding behind the anti-Russian decision of the Greek government²⁵.

But the “unprecedented move” as described was a hot topic which the foreign relations representatives

²⁰ Agreement, Final Agreement for the Settlement of the Differences as Described in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 817 (1993) and 845 (1993), the Termination of the Interim Accord of 1995, and the Establishment of a Strategic Partnership between the Parties, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/resources/article-files/agglko-1.pdf>.

²¹ Prespa agreement explained simplified, part1, <https://vmacedonia.com/politics/opinions/prespaagreement-explained-simplifiedpart1.html>.

²² Euronews, Greece to ‘expel Russian diplomats’ over FYRMacedonia deal, 11.07.2018, https://youtu.be/7cv_e83_4Ps.

²³ Emmanuelle Rousseau’s Blog, “Ending the Name Dispute: Greece and (North) Macedonia finally overcoming their ancient heritage rivalry? What comes next?”, Russian International Affairs Council, 01.07.2018, http://russiancouncil.ru/en/blogs/emmanuelle-rousseau/34254/?sphrase_id=23856553.

²⁴ P. Wintour, Greece to expel Russian diplomats over alleged Macedonia interference, 11.07.2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/greece-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-alleged-macedonia-interference>.

²⁵ S. Michalopoulos, US-Russia tensions escalate over Greece, Macedonia name deal, 13.07.2018, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/us-russia-tensions-escalate-over-greece-macedonia-name-deal/>.

tried to keep it as a low profile, although Moscow responded promptly. In all of these foreign media that were following the issue closely and in detail, it was very interesting to note the commenting section under the articles published on these topics covering NATO/Greece deal with Macedonia. In all of them there were two types of discourse: either comments delivering fear that Greece shall re-write the history text books and school curriculum of Macedonia under the Prespa Agreement and the nation shall disappear, either comments defending Russia as it has nothing to do with this but that Greece is trying to deceive its nation about the right wing's anger in the country. It was clear that most of the comments are not in favor of the Prespa Agreement, nor are real time concerns over the process. The type of discourse in the comment section was aimed either to propagate fear and bad case scenarios either defending Russian position.

As for foreign influence, one must be aware that for years, Russia has worked to gain influence in South-east Europe and wants to discourage the Western Balkan countries — Albania, Bosnia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Serbia — from joining the NATO, but also is trying to deter them from joining the EU²⁶. 2018 has been a busy year for the pro-Kremlin disinformation campaign, with Russian trolls and media working hard to spread falsehoods on an ever-widening range of issues²⁷.

A lot is at stake in the region with this process. The Greek newspaper Kathimerini was constantly presenting articles of Russian interference. According to Greek media, diplomats sought to induce local officials to back street protests by offering bribes. The same was happening in the streets in front of the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia²⁸. Only several media in Macedonia published the statement of the Minister for Interior declaring such facts about Russian interference and payments. "These payments were made to over a dozen Macedonian politicians from various parties, members of recently founded radical nationalist organizations, and soccer hooligans from the Vardar club who participated in recent riots"²⁹. Other media tried to decrease the validity of it but the defamation and denouncements were mostly on the social media.

According to Mark Galeotti³⁰ from Center for European Security, the confluence of a rising series of pressures in the Balkans, as well as the attention of the Russian Security Council's secretary, Nikolai Patrushev – who has taken on the region as a special responsibility – suggests 2018 will see the launch of a renewed Russian campaign in the Balkans. Russia looks to the Balkans as a battlefield in its "political war", in part to compensate for its mixed success with "active measures" in Europe. Russia is seeking to create distractions and potentially bargaining chips with the EU, especially as this push coincides with the EU's own renewed

²⁶ D. Stojanovic, EU and Russia vie for influence in volatile Balkans region, 24.02.2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2018/02/24/eu-and-russia-vie-for-influence-in-volatile-balkans-region/>.

²⁷ FOW, News and analyses, 27.12.2018, "2018 in Figures", <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/2018-in-figures/>.

²⁸ L. Feder, Macedonia Suspects A Greek-Russian Billionaire Paid For Violent Protests To Prevent It From Joining NATO, 16.07.2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/macedonia-russia-nato>.

²⁹ S. Cvetkovska, Russian Businessman Behind Unrest in Macedonia, Organized Crime Corruption Reporting Project, 16.07.2018, <https://www.occrp.org/en/28-ccwatch/cc-watch-indepth/8329-russian-businessman-behind-unrest-in-macedonia>.

³⁰ M. Galeotti, *Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?*, Policy Brief, 04.04.2018, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm.

attention to the region. The aim is not to assert authority over the region for its own sake so much as to harness and magnify existing tensions. In Russian eyes, the EU's approach towards the Western Balkans is neither serious nor systematic and so offers Moscow opportunities to create leverage.

After Montenegro joined NATO, the new Macedonian government expressed a strong attitude towards joining the NATO, but also put considerations about Russian reaction. The President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, said that membership in the EU and NATO is the only possible choice for Skopje, and that he expects a strong reaction of Russia when it comes to Macedonian aspirations to become a member of the Alliance³¹. When it comes to the Western Balkan countries who aspire to join the EU or NATO, there are stories about Russian attempts to stop the region from integration. According to the leaked documents obtained by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), Kremlin's goal is to stop the Western Balkan countries from joining NATO and to detach them from the Western influence³².

Russia has largely lost its fight for influence in the Balkans: Nine of the region's 12 countries (plus Kosovo, which is not a United Nations member) are in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and all the Balkan nations are aspire to be in the European Union. And yet the Kremlin won't give up, and appears to be waging a not-so-covert war against a deal between Greece and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia that removes one of the last barriers to the region's European integration. Russia denies any interference in Macedonia, despite its stated position that NATO membership is not in the Balkan country's interest³³.

Another example of increased influence is the establishment of honorary consulates in Bitola and Ohrid and increased movements and investments in that area, building monuments as well. Also, Russian's embassy in the country has administered the establishment of many "friendship associations" between Macedonia and Russia in the country, as well as opening a Russian cultural centre in Skopje and sponsoring Russian-style churches across the country, documents reads. Russia uses domestic news outlets as propaganda which is predictable, primitive and contains a gap between what it reports and the reality. There are also some Serbian websites (Pravda, Vaseljenska, Webtribune) that serve as sources for Russian propaganda in the whole region. Serbia is perceived as the Russian propaganda base in the Balkans. A number of articles serving Russian propaganda agenda were published during and after the political crisis in Macedonia³⁴.

³¹ Interview for Montenegrin radio Antena M on 12.11.2017, in: "BalkanInsider", Report on Russian Influence in Kosovo and Macedonia, 14.11.2017, <https://www.balkaninsider.com/reports-on-russian-influence-in-kosovo-and-macedonia/>.

³² Even though Macedonia has been a Western partner since becoming independent, Russia has increased its influence in the country in last years. "By using the assets and methods of so – called 'soft power', as part of the strategy of the Russian Federation in the Balkans, the goal is to isolate the country from the influence of the West", the leaked documents states, as well as that Russia has increased its cultural outreach in the country, pushing an idea of "pan-Slavic" identity and shared Orthodox Christian faith. V. Velebit, Russian influence in Macedonia: A credible threat?, 14.11.2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/14/russian-influence-macedonia-credible-threat/>.

³³ L. Bershidsky, Putin Has Lost His Influence in the Balkans, 18.07.2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2018-07-18/russia-has-lost-influence-in-balkans-but-it-still-sows-trouble>.

³⁴ V. Velebit, Russian influence in Macedonia: A credible threat?, 14.11.2017, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/11/14/russian-influence-macedonia-credible-threat/>.

Senior Russian Advisers to the President Vladimir Putin³⁵ have recently (March 2018) stayed in Macedonia at a new nationalist party in Skopje, and this is seen as an effort to extend Russian influence to this Balkan country. Previous years they were spreading the Russian influence in Montenegro and Serbia, through rich variety of actions undertaken. They expressed that Russia does not obstruct Macedonia nor does interfere in its choice if it wants to become part of NATO, but that the West, is not a good option for Macedonia.

However, the Prespa Agreement was ratified by the Macedonian Parliament³⁶ as the President of the country refused to sign the deal describing it as a “catastrophe.” The President Ivanov said he had “no mandate to sign the agreement”, which “violated the constitution of Macedonia, and made Macedonia dependent on a third party, i.e. Greece”³⁷.

Zoran Zaev, the President of the Government, speaking³⁸ at the NATO Summit in Brussels in July, 2018 indicated he was aware of Russia being behind of some of the protests outside the Parliament, but he said his country was not going to seek conflict. “We are a small country. We want to build a friendship with everybody. There is no alternative but NATO membership,” he said³⁹.

2.3 The NATO invitation

On the 11th of July 2018, NATO invitation was given to the Republic of Macedonia. As the President of the Government pointed out in his speech in Brussels: “...the membership to NATO shall consolidate the democracy, shall increase stability and security in the region and shall serve as a positive example to the Western Balkan countries.” High expectations were made to the public and a very positive media content.

All national media reported on the news, without any bias or adding additional tone of the said. It was covered internationally, echoed with a high volume. However, in that period there were couple of provocations from different stakeholders: Knut Fleckenstein⁴⁰, a Member of the European Parliament congratulated the “North Macedonians”, for which he apologized afterwards, and that raised a huge concern on the social media, and was used by the opponent media, but knowingly that he was involved in the support working group from European Parliament to the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia in 2017, to uphold the collaborative process and dialog in the Parliament, this is not something we could say that he did not had a clue what’s in the Prespa Agreement. It was clear pulse measuring at the time. Also, foreign media published stories about Macedonian sports players being North Macedonians. “But this was clear fake

³⁵ Oculus News, Russian efforts to influence Macedonia, 08.03.2018, <http://www.ocnal.com/2018/03/russian-efforts-to-influence-macedonia.html>.

³⁶ Macedonian Parliament ratifies country name deal, 20.06.2018, <http://rs.n1info.com/English/NEWS/a397808/Macedonia-Parliamnet-ratifies-new-county-s-name.html>.

³⁷ I. Sekularac, Macedonian President Refuses to Sign ‘Criminal’ Law to Change Country’s Name, Reuters, 26.06.2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-macedonia-greece-name/macedonian-president-refuses-to-sign-law-on-countrys-name-change-idUSKBN1JMOW2?feedType=RSS%3C/div%3E%3C/body%3E%3C/html%3E>.

³⁸ Speech of the President of the Macedonian Government, Mr. Zoran Zaev, <https://vlada.mk/node/15181>.

³⁹ P. Wintour, Greece to expel Russian diplomats over alleged Macedonia interference, 11.07.2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/11/greece-to-expel-russian-diplomats-over-alleged-macedonia-interference>.

⁴⁰ Knut Fleckenstein is a Member of European Parliament from the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats, http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/96840/KNUT_FLECKENSTEIN/home

news as we addressed the Sports Federation and they said it is fabricated”, said the Minister for Defense of the Republic of Macedonia⁴¹.

Right after the big invite a high level NATO representative was in Macedonia to start the technical negotiations and accession talks with the country representatives⁴². This was highlighted into the media and seen as clear rise in the support. The momentum in the media was onto the NATO Coordinator of the Republic of Macedonia.

2.4 The Referendum

On the 30th of September, the citizens of the Republic of Macedonia voted in a historic referendum. The choice before them was clear: to modify the name of the country, as set out in an agreement struck with Greece, and thereby cement Macedonia’s future in Europe; or to refuse to do so, and risk sinking back into the morass of Balkan ethnic strife and stunted political and economic development for at least another generation. Russia desperately wants the latter. Why? Because a Macedonian rejection of the Referendum means that Macedonia will continue to be blocked from joining the European Union and NATO. It means further progress in the Balkans - such as a Serbia-Kosovo mutual recognition deal - will be less likely. And it means the EU and NATO will remain inward-looking and bottled up inside current borders, rather than more confident and outward-looking⁴³.

Although it was welcomed and highly echoed from the EU representatives in the process⁴⁴, the Referendum was not successful. „The referendum is unsuccessful, because the census is not fulfilled as one of the conditions in the Law“, the State Election Commission concluded. Although over 90% of voters who went to the referendum said “YES” on the question “Are you for EU and NATO membership by accepting the Agreement between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece”, insufficient turnout means that a decision has not been made, meaning that 36.9 percent of registered voters voted in yesterday’s Referendum vote, or only 666,743 voters⁴⁵.

Looking back in July, the government cut 3.5m euros from the ministries, when the MPs on July 30th 2018, besides the Decision to announce the Referendum on the name issue, voted the Draft-decision on the redistribution of funds between the budget users of the central government and the funds, which determine the money for conducting the Referendum⁴⁶. This also meant that besides all central government’s plan

⁴¹ Statement given on a radio show <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ebxg2FOEjdg>.

⁴² MKD, Pendarovski-MacKey: Macedonia starts pre-accession negotiations for NATO membership, 25.07.2018. James MacKey is from Euro-Atlantic and Global Partnership Section, NATO Headquarters, <https://www.mkd.mk/makedonija/politika/pendarovski-mekki-makedonija-gi-pochna-pretpriustapnite-pregovori-za-chlenstvo-vo>.

⁴³ K. Volker, Don’t Let Russia Get Its Way in Macedonia, Foreign Policy, 28.09.2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/28/dont-let-russia-get-its-way-in-macedonia/>.

⁴⁴ <https://twitter.com/JHahnEU/status/1046472062678773760>.

⁴⁵ B. Bozinovska, SEC: Referendum fails, census 36,9 percents, 01.10.2018, <https://alfa.mk/%d0%b4%d0%b8%d0%ba-%d1%80%d0%b5%d1%84%d0%b5%d1%80%d0%b5%d0%bd%d0%b4%d1%83%d0%bc%d0%be%d1%82-%d0%bd%d0%b5%d1%83%d1%81%d0%bf%d0%b5%d1%88%d0%b5%d0%bd-%d0%b8%d0%b7%d0%bb%d0%b5%d0%b7%d0%bd%d0%be%d1%81/>.

⁴⁶ Netpres, How much money does the Referendum “squeeze out” from the citizens?, 03.10.2018, <https://netpress.com.mk/kolku-pari-iscica-referendumot-od-graganite/>.

for promotion, the Parliament shall have the bigger role in campaigning the Referendum. Was this a back-up plan, for the MP's and the Parliament, if the Referendum does not succeed, until the final agreement done on 11th of January 2019?!

However, it was agreed to promote it on the media for maximum of 9 minutes per 1-hour real time media program. But the media regulator opened a dilemma: whether these 9 minutes should be equally represented to those who are PRO and those AGAINST, since that would be rightful distribution of Parliament's campaign money. That instigated a large debate into the media. "Broadcasters should create equal conditions for stakeholders' access to the referendum to the forms of paid public propaganda - advertising spots, announcements, music videos that act as hymns of interested parties for the referendum that are being broadcast for monetary compensation. A total of 9 minutes for paid public propaganda should be divided into two equal halves of 4 minutes and 30 seconds, one for the subjects who will agitate "FOR" and the other for the entities that will agitate the "Against" referendum question, stated the Agency for audio, audio-visual media services"⁴⁷. But the big dilemma expanded when it was realized that there is nobody AGAINST, but actually there are people/party promoting boycott of the Referendum, which was not found as the same with voting AGAINST.

The period before the Referendum was marked with campaign supported by the EU. „The European Union has announced a campaign that promises 150m euros in aid to municipalities in Macedonia over the next four years. From the 1st of September, the ambassadors of the EU Member States will go from a municipality in the municipality to meet with the citizens, who will present the benefits of Macedonia's membership in the European Union. The campaign is being implemented by the EU Delegation in Macedonia under the name "Imagine the future together". It is on the eve of the referendum on September 30"⁴⁸. The campaign itself involved the Delegation of the EU representatives and governmental representatives/the President of the Government or other, including NGO sector representatives that supports the process. As discussed with some of the journalists, this was seen as "one big party for the same people", since the audience was not general public or ordinary citizens, but venues whereas people were present with a previous invitation. The agenda of these talks was again seen as a governmental representation, and not an EU explanatory discussion on the EU membership benefits.

3. Research findings

3.1 Media reporting analyses

A total of 87 media contents were analyzed through the method of analysis of the media reporting by fake news principles. From the graph no. 1, it can be concluded that the majority (almost half - 49%) of the media whose contents were subject to analysis were Internet portals (43 contents), followed by daily newspapers (11 contents or 13%), radio stations and blogs (10 content or 11%), television stations (7 con-

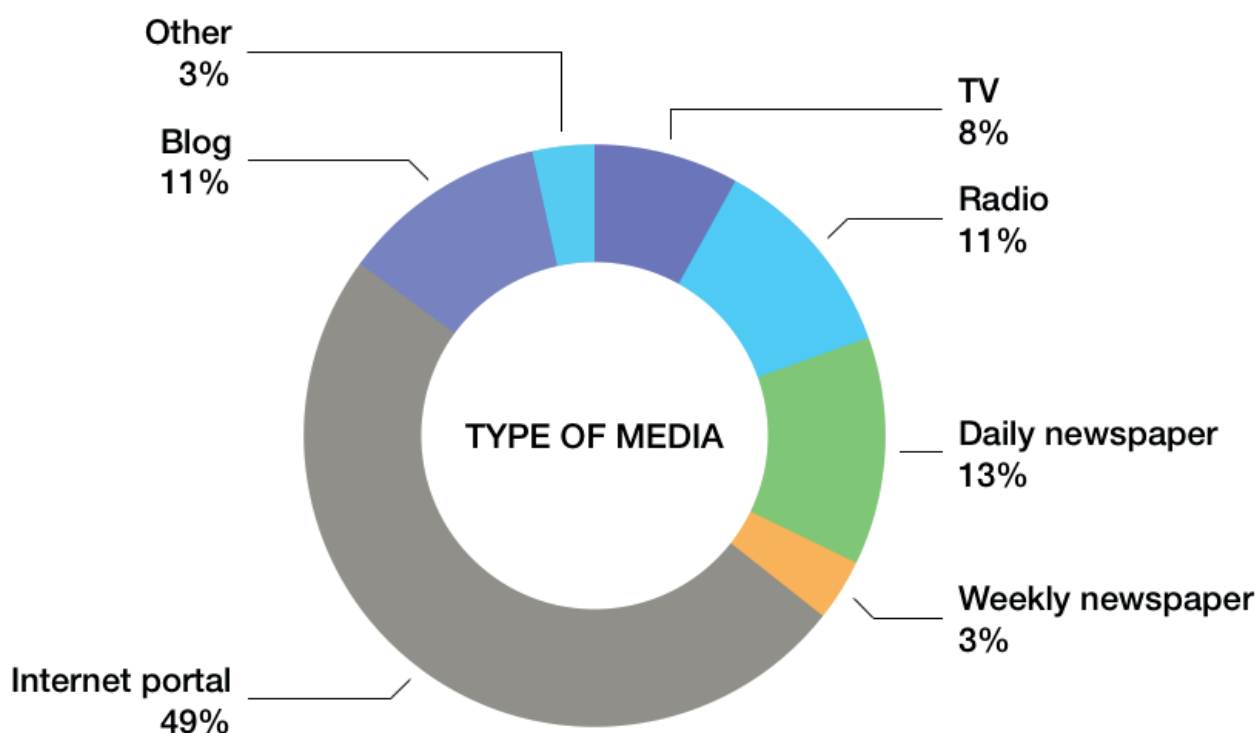
⁴⁷ F. Saliu, AAVMS with unlawful decision? SEC: Only the Parliament has exclusive time for advertising, 20.08.2018, <https://tv21.tv/mk/avmu-so-nezakonsko-reshenie-dik-samo-s/>.

⁴⁸ SDK, EU starts referendum campaign: Potential donation for municipalities of €150 millions, <https://sdk.mk/index.php/makedonija/eu-pochna-kampana-za-referendumot-najava-za-pomosh-od-150-milioni-evra-za-opshtinite/>.

tent or 8%) and weekly newspapers (3 content or 3%).

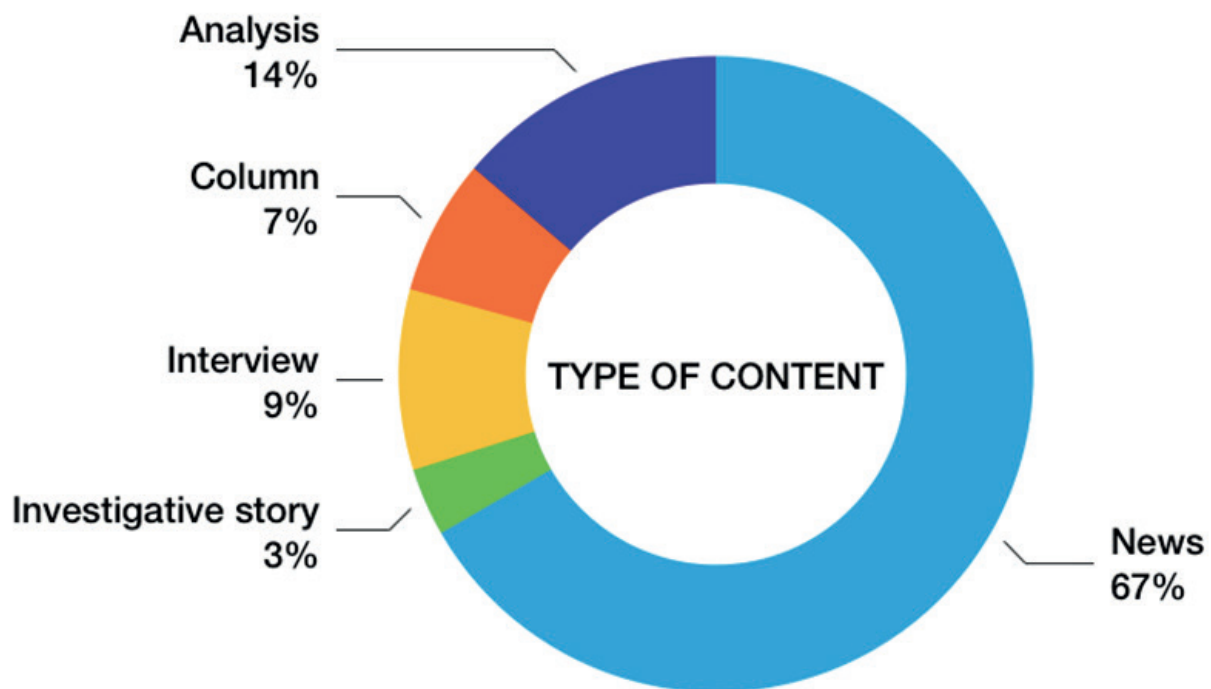
The media, whose contents were analyzed, are as follows: Radio Free Europe (slobodnaevropa.mk) and Nova Makedonija (novamakedonija.com.mk) with 7 contents, Factor (factor.mk) with 6, MKD (mkd.mk) and Nezavisen (nezavisen.mk) with 5, MIA (mia.mk), Channel 5 (kanal5.com.mk), Makfax (makfax.com.mk), and Press24 (press24.mk) with 4, A1on (a1on.mk), Vecer (vecer.mk), Deutsche Welle (dw.com), Republika (republika.mk) and Fokus (fokus.mk) with 3, 1TV (1tv.mk), Euronews (euronews.mk), Kurir (kurir.mk), Libertas (libertas.mk), SDK (sdk.mk), Sitel (sitel.com.mk) and Standard (standard.mk) with 2 and Antropol (antropol.mk), I Portal (iportal.mk), Leader (lider.mk), Mak info (makinfo.org), MKDNews (mkdnews.com), Plusinfo (plusinfo.mk), Skopje info (skopjeinfo.mk), CivilMedia (civilmedia.mk) and a personal blog with one content.

Graph no. 1. Type of media from which contents were analyzed



Regarding the type of analysed content, from the graph no. 2 can be seen that the largest number (58 content or 67%) were news, the rest were journalistic analyses (12 or 14%), interviews (8 or 9%), columns (6 or 9%) and research stories or 3%).

Graph no. 2. Type of content which was analyzed



The analysis of the media content further proceeded in the direction of examining the basic and main indicators for the possible existence of false or true news. A characteristic data from the analysis of media content is that in 46 contents, **the identity of the author is not specified**, and in 41 the author of the content is indicated by name and surname. When compiling the content, in 68 contents **an expert was consulted** in the relevant area, which certainly puts into question the possibility of having false news or attempt of the expert only to back up the media story, especially having in mind that certain media have been engaging the same experts all the time, and it looked like the expertise is divided in the media, meaning knowing in advance who's going where to propagate what. And in 19 contents there was no such consultation. Most often, in contents involving experts, it is about university professors, analysts, connoisseurs, experts, former lawmakers, former employees in the relevant bodies and bodies that are subject to analysis in the content, etc. But as many of the interviewers mentioned: **"The same experts were engaged by the same media**, so there was a clear division on which media engages which expert/ise. Only 1 content shows the voice of the people through a short survey of several people in public space, and in only 1 content is a witness to the specific event that is displayed in the content.

When analysing the contents, it was examined and whether, in order to make them more relevant, an organization was consulted. So, in 47 contents, such an organization was included within the content, and in 40 contents this was not done. At the same time, it is mostly about domestic or foreign government

institutions or diplomatic and consular offices, political parties, but also non-governmental organizations, but it is especially characteristic that in most cases **they were not directly consulted or asked**, but in the content includes part from the statement of the officials of that organization or official announcements made to the public. In some of the analysed content, it is characteristic that the authors point out that the information was received from diplomatic sources, **without further detailed indication of the type and identity of the source**.

Regarding the involvement of official documents in the content, it was done in 26 contents, and the rest (61 contents) **did not cite, linked or analysed any important relevant document** for the area being treated. Mainly, it is official announcements from ministries and political parties, and only in a small insignificant part of the contents (total of 2) direct provisions are quoted from the Prespa Agreement.

In 68 contents there is a quote from a statement within, document or announcement, and in 19 cases, such facts are paraphrased by the author.

For each content of the analysis by the researchers, the key words that are most often represented and which best reflect the actual content were highlighted. From the quantitative keyword analysis, it is ascertained that NATO is the most popular keyword in 30 cases, a referendum in 20, the EU and Russia in 16 cases both of them, Macedonia at 11, Moscow at 9, Greece at 7, Prespa Agreement and expulsion in 6 cases each of them, membership and Pendarovski in 5 cases both of them, the US in 4, North Macedonia, West, Greek diplomats, entry ban, head of political office and influence in 3 cases each of them, Russian diplomats, Germany, Switzerland, Austria, Albania, Russians, Macedonians, blockade, campaign, investment, government, interference and support in 2 cases each of them. The remaining keywords, total of 93, are represented only once throughout the analysed content.

Apart of the key words, the researchers were closely monitoring and following what else was publishing in that period. For example, it was notorious to read the same article with different headlines and propagating different message into the public with the same content. For example, when first published the headline was only citing the study findings: "Switzerland is the biggest investor in Macedonia"⁴⁹ which corresponds with the source content⁵⁰, but the very next day re-publishing news has a different headline that appeared with the same content: "Russians are the biggest investors in the Balkan"⁵¹, without source citing or even link in the article. The change in the headline is seen as pretentious influence of the media to deliver a message of fear to the general public. Also, in the same day couple of media cited that with Russian support thousands of jobs were opened in Serbia⁵², using the same very text in the original study

⁴⁹ "Nezavisen.mk", Vienna Institute: Switzerland is the biggest investor in Macedonia, Published: 05-08-2018, <https://nezavisen.mk/mk/vesti/2018/08/76816/>.

⁵⁰ F. Smailovic, "A map of the biggest investors in the region", 05.08.2018 <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/mapa-ko-su-najveci-investitori-u-regiji>.

⁵¹ Makfax, Russians the biggest investors in Macedonia, 06.08.2018, <https://makfax.com.mk/ekonomija/%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%B3%D0%BE%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%B8-%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B1%D0%B0%D0%BB%D0%BA/>.

⁵² Lider, Investors are bypassing Macedonia. In Serbia a new German factory will employ 5,000 people, 07.08.2018, <https://lider.com.mk/makedonija/investitorite-ja-zaobikoluvaat-makedonija-vo-srbija-nova-germanska-fabrika-koja-kje-vrabetuva-5->

(about the Switzerland) as in the source which can be seen again altering the findings of the study and putting into another context and communication message towards the general public. This is highly important in this digital era, knowing that people read more/or only the headings/headlines and contents is less read. In that terms, the change of the headlines is a tool to propagate and misinformation engagement.

It was interesting to monitor the headlines development in that period. One more example out of scope of the key words is the article which was published on the 10th of August from Russia beyond but it is on Macedonian language “Russia has limited the export of Macedonian peaches and apricots”⁵³, citing the source of the Federal Service of Russia for Veterinary and Phytosanitary monitoring. Here and there one could notice different types of content inserted into the public, with different background and timing when publishing, especially when correlating with other media content that specific day. But, that type of qualitative research may be a topic for another study and comparing with the Russian method of propaganda.

3.2 Interviews with journalists

The interview questions were sent towards 30 journalists. Only 18 of them were willing to participate. None of them wanted to be cited directly with name and surname and asked to remain known only to the Researchers. The journalists’ background is quite diverse in gender, personal views and most of all in types of media (TV, radio, online portal, institute for media, media regulatory, news agency, Council of Ethics for media, School for media and journalism, etc.).

There was specifically designed questionnaire for journalists. One must admit that instead of focus groups the approach changed in the middle of the monitoring process. An interview based survey was conducted face-to-face on the request of the media workers and secrecy was asked to remain as an official obligation. That is also seen as an indicator in this Research for the situation in the media sphere. The interviews were made in the period from October –December 2018, i.e. reflections are given in the period after the Referendum.

On the question ***whether they perceive some foreign influence into the media*** it was stated as clearly evident:

“mostly by buying and sponsoring domestic media by foreign businessmen. There is no direct influence onto the editorial policy but implicit – yes.”

“Macedonian media are somehow accustomed to function under the cap of the state, it is easier to survive when they lean towards the government, no matter which party is in power.”

“Given the fact that the media space in Macedonia is crowded with internet portals that are without imprints, from which mainly spread false news, it cannot be claimed that the placement of information is from a credible source, that is, a foreign factor behind it, especially in the media whose shows

000-lugje/.

⁵³ Russia beyond, Russia limits the import of Macedonian peaches and apricots, 10.08.2018, <https://mk.rbth.com/economics/81774-rusija-ogranichi-uvoz-praski-makedonija>.

or projects are funded by donations or money to international organizations or funds of European countries or the United States. The media lost their credibility and influence due to party pressures that are the main reason for journalists' self-censorship."

"Yes, I think that in the media, external interests can be easily recognized, not only now, but also in the period that is behind us. External interests are visible through various forms of influence on the media. Much of the media creates the editorial policy guided by various types of foreign influences. The impact is increasing whenever the state prepares for decision-making of particular importance, whether it is a referendum, elections or decisions at the local level as those for environmental protection, and foreigners have some interest in their adoption. There are always different kinds of experts, analysts, and consultants that depend on the decision that is being made. In the past period, we often had experts from the Netherlands and Germany, but analysts from neighboring countries, Bulgaria, Albania, Kosovo, Greece...The financial support of the media through the implementation of different types of projects is an impact in itself that obliges journalists in the media by means of quiet self-censorship to pay attention to the choice of topics on which they will work, and colleagues speak for open guidance, the texts they prepare to be in a certain, general direction. Janko Bacev and "Edinstvena Macedonia" called for a boycott, who publicly stated that they are advocating Macedonia becoming a member of the Eurasian alliances, a place of NATO and EU, and on several occasions assured that Russia is a friend of Macedonia who believes that the referendum should be boycotted. We also had experts and analysts from Serbia who pointed out how harmful it would be for Macedonia to give up the name, which indirectly called for a boycott. They sent texts, interviews and often held press conferences to urge the public not to go to the referendum.

"If only the path of money and media financing is monitored as compared with the journalistic products that emerged from the specific media, a very clear picture of the foreign influence presence."

"There were loud rumors that journalists were bribed during the Referendum."

"There was no foreign influence on the referendum through boycott. There was a support of the Macedonians from abroad, but they are still concerned when working with the idiosyncratic identities. I was in Boycott movement, and my whole family boycotted, I was an observer, I did not meet with anyone, went to the office when they gave me the accreditation. I sent a report on e-mail. #IBoycott /#Бойкотирам is real people who are not in the political party but is dissatisfied, frightened, poor and there is no foreign manipulation here. I see also the USA Ambassador influence and interference when he addressed in the Parliament speaking about corruption and having material for it. The media are always in desperate condition these 27 years. We have no media for awakening people's awareness or accurate information, without sensationalism. There is no confidence in the media and, as I said, the interference is more than internal influence than from the outside".

"Well the Hungarian ownership of media is quite clear evidence of that, isn't it?!"

"Impacts are also noticeably exclusively from the media - national televisions, which were qualified as "pro-government" in the time of the former government. Direct impacts from foreign factors are not, but indirectly, external influences through the policies of the current government, especially at

the time of the pre-referendum campaign. In the same period, when the foreign offensive was apparent as a pressure for the referendum to succeed, a different way of transferring the statements of foreign high-ranking officials was noted. The most obvious is the influence of those television debates that are projects funded by foreign money, and is most often seen in the way the main news is regulated in national televisions. There was a stronger presence in the framework of the referendum campaign, with the EU advertising spot for all that was being interpreted by a certain section of the public as interference with a referendum vote that is the exclusive right to self-determination of every citizen. And when there are foreign statements or messages in the largest percentage of cases are foreigners from Western European countries. The impact comes from the West, it is mostly present in the media that are directly financed by donors from the United States, the Netherlands, France, Belgium, UK, other European countries. Except for the official events and press conferences, the EU Delegation did not have a special treatment and frequent briefings, but it did happen more than NATO organizations. The latter never requested or organized a briefing, press conferences to explain their mission here.”

“I do not know what kind of external interests it is, but of course there are donations from the international community, institutions and embassies. When there are media donations then this is clearly and transparently stated at the end of the issue / article / insert in the newspaper / part of the portal. On the other hand, there are external interests if it can be said by the opening of news houses and foreign media outlets (Turkish media outlets for example). In Macedonia, editorial policies are affected more by domestic power centers.”

“Yes, from that period there was a frequency of international elites that visited the country and those meetings could not remain unnoticed through the media. Messages that were sent could not have been sent, and even those media that did not support the referendum could not notify us about visits and about how the meetings were going. The influence is here. It has existed over the past few years. It is noticed through foreign correspondents, foreign collaborators, “journalists of trust - journalists close to a particular cause”, and they are being asked and interviewed exactly by those interlocutors who will support that thesis, EU practices that correspond to the thesis are not shown negative things, money that is not easily provable - the media that were known to be financed through VMRO-DPMNE projects and campaign-part of them collapsed, but some of them have Hungarian ownership (Kurir, Netpress, Republica...)”

“Yes, there is an external influence. Most often through some media (comments, conclusions and thoughts sometimes without realistic reason). Most often, this is done through debate that shows that are projects paid from abroad, in order to influence public opinion. And there is an increase in sponsorships and paid commercials. I think the media are at the moment extremely divided and politicized and not always objective in the reporting. The damage from this yet to be seen and felt.”

Others recognized with no doubt foreign influence through the political antagonism especially when one wants to hide behind the strategic goals of the country and present it in that way into the media:

“Media information in the Republic of Macedonia, as well as in other spheres of social organization and action, is synthetically related to the public political discourse, which is often a key factor

for determining the public information in conditions of political mobilization. Foreign influence on domestic politics directly affects the media. Hence, the intensity of the foreign influence coincides with the intensity of the external influence on the media. The subjective approach to editorial policy within electronic mass media is an expression of the affiliations that certain media have in terms of a particular business, ideological, ethno-national or political structure. Also, there is an increase of foreign sponsors into media and foreign authors, consultants, correspondents mostly engaged from Greece, Bulgaria, Albania. Also, there are big organizations in the country influencing the process by giving support as EU, USAID, different NGOs, etc.”

“My impression is that foreign influence is increasing, precisely because of the recommendations they give to the state, because of the visits of foreign politicians. On the other hand, in the media sense, the presence is also evident through the projects that are realized through the Macedonian media.”

“USAID, UNDP, the projects of the Council of Europe Office, and also the World Bank’s observation also plays an important role here. It’s not journalism, but it is an influence, the impact is indirectly (through money also affects politics).”

“In the pre - referendum period certain media intensively placed negative and bad examples of the importance of EI membership from neighboring countries (Bulgaria Croatia) and created chaos”.

“Macedonia has been increasingly positioned as a battleground for geopolitical power centers in recent years, and this is reflected in the media. These interests are most often present through media that openly support the policies of the great powers. So yes, there is influence over the editorial policy into the media. Yes, in cases when reporting events with a great deal of attention or special treatment, but are completely outside of the Macedonian context or when the Macedonian context is explained through the prism of obvious interests of other states, outside the Macedonian strategic goals set and affirmed through the three decades of independence, and verified by citizens on all relevant surveys. Often it is about placing false news, so we need to fight with the well-known tools - producing more serious content with relevance and truthfulness on one hand and publicly detecting and publishing such “fake” articles. If you look at internet portals such as the media of the so-called “Orban Group” will see ads for Hungarian companies, which are completely irrational. So you have banners of a Hungarian company, and if you click on banners, the link leads you to a website of a Hungarian company, all in Hungarian. It can only be guessed what is the interest of a foreign company to advertise in Macedonia in an unknown language for these citizens.

” In the Referendum period, the number of foreign experts was visibly increased compared to the previous one, analyzing the current process or transferring state experiences with the accession to NATO / EU. Experts who could be seen in the media came from Greece, Croatia, Albania ... I would say more that it is the interests of states rather than international organizations, Russia, the United States, Serbia. Undoubtedly, there was a Russian influence for the failure of the referendum. The foreign influence on the referendum was manifested through small groups that appeared in public and advocated failure of the referendum process. Directly foreign influence in these cases on the media I do not think there was, but starting from the moment that journalists are usually looking for the

other side of the story, these groups managed to get in some cases and much more affordable position than the others in the media to place their theses. Foreign influence depends on the interests of external factors in which direction Macedonia should move. To a large extent, above all Russian influence, it turned out to be very negative on the Referendum process, after information emerged that Russia incited a “campaign against” and undermining the Referendum. Social media was again used at large to spread propaganda for misinforming citizens through playing on the map of national feelings. The media in large part are trying to have a balanced approach to reporting, although in the last period there is a certain level of sensationalism, unbalanced and unethical reporting. In the debates on “for” and “against” the change of the state name, as well as in a series of public appearances about the role of the eight-member deputies who decided to support the constitutional changes, hate speech was registered after ethnic and political affiliation, sexual orientation, marching towards foreign representatives and organizations.”

“I recognize the impact, but not an attempt to help reform the media sphere. In particular, I think that some countries are more active and more open in financing certain programs that deal with political issues, which in itself means that they have a direct impact, however much the governments of those countries are bound by the views of the media using their grants. It is minimized by the flocculation that they are obscured by the content and do not share the opinion with the author of the show or television. And the influence is increasing with the ambassadors increasingly visible and present in those televisions, the same interlocutors debate on various topics, so exactly what can be expected from their statements, and also the embassies of countries that grant grants often contact the editors of those media. Some journalists or editors openly advocate the policies of some foreign countries. As far as I can see, some journalists or political scientists from Russia have been involved in recent times. Mostly ready-made texts or announcements by analysts from Brussels and Washington, are less engaging as regular commentators. As an international organization that has a greater influence, primarily through financial funds, it is, of course, SOROS. That’s the first thing that comes to mind. Regarding the EU and NATO policies, however, the governments of the member states in these institutions have the greatest influence, through their embassies in Macedonia, but also directly, through various forms of forums and financing. The European Union at its headquarters in Brussels works very closely with Macedonian media and journalists. They have financial support and everything in constant contact with each other. “

“If the media were not dependent on money, the impact would be minimized.”

“The number of foreign analysts-consultants has increased since the start of negotiations with Greece to change the name, which stands as the main obstacle to opening the way to the EU and NATO. An example would be the group “Ohrid” which supports the process of membership of the Republic of Macedonia in the EU and NATO. It includes the ex-NATO Secretary General George Robertson, Javier Solana, Bulgarian President Plevneliev, the Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt, the ambassadors Allen Le Roa and Wolfgang Ischinger.”

Raising the number of correspondents in the country is seen as high level of interest. Therefore, we asked about the number:

“What is known to me is that in the period before the referendum and on the very day of the referendum there were foreign correspondents from over 100 countries. Have there been correspondents / teams with permanent residence over the past year I have no information. However, I know that many of our correspondents from the country reported on key processes for foreign media.” This also presents another indicator of the number of foreign media interested in the state of play but interpreted by national media workers.

“There are a lot of foreign correspondents reporting for their media abroad.”

” I know that he has a relatively new correspondent for the Russian Information Agency.”

“There are almost no permanent correspondents. Or I do not know. During the election cycles, interest in Macedonia is growing. And in the meantime, depending on the actuality of the topics, an increased interest of the media companies from the Balkans, incidentally wider than Europe and the world, can be noticed.”

“If you are thinking of interests through foreign investment in the media, then there are several in some newspapers, portals and television, for example. If it is thought of influence through concrete production, then some of the embassies and international agencies through projects have supported certain media content in the past years, in order to increase the media diversity. If one considers external interests in terms of influencing editorial policy on the media, I cannot say that there are explicit influences of some foreign countries.”

“There are no foreign relevant experts and analysts, but it comes down to commissioned texts from their sister parties just before big political events. For example, a year ago, it was obvious that the transfer of US congressmen, which had drastically different views on major issues in the Republic of Macedonia, was visible. Some of them were transferred from the then position, and part of the opposition. There are also cases from the previous government that were “hired” experts to write positive reviews for the government.”

“Macedonia is quite interesting for monitoring in the media considering the overall situation in which it is located. Most of the correspondents from the region monitor the political developments in the country. Permanent correspondents have the Reuters agency, as well as Deutsche Welle and Al Jazeera balkans. But during the Colorful Revolution and the migration crisis journalists from Russia today, German Build, the AFP, CNN, BBC, the Hungarian M1 and many others could be seen.”

It is very important to detect ***whether there is an awareness of the foreign influence over the media workers/journalists***⁵⁴. To this question it was answered that there is clear influence by financial bribe acts.

“There is, of all kinds: financial, blackmailing, threatening. A lots of journalists have been out of work

⁵⁴ On 20th of November 2019 - one media portal published stories about blackmails and threats towards journalists.

in the past period -

#I boycott Campaign on the social media had the impact through social networks - journalists were obliged to comment on statuses and networks, their views on commentators, provoke debates and avalanche reactions, spread false news, attack other profiles and create reactions and confusion. Journalists had to become influencers. 90% of the media cannot be divided into party, but pro- and anti-European, and the media with Hungarian capital have already been seen where they are targeted. There are no more divisions of opposition media and media with the government, because it is about ideologies and propaganda.”

“In Macedonia there is a Boycott organization, which is composed of citizens of the Republic of Macedonia who are against the change of the name and the Constitution. Apart from the Russian flag that Janko Bacev of the other organization, Macedonia Boycott, was flying, there is no evidence that there are any influences. It all comes down to speculation, without certain facts.”

“The impact is most often coming from the media in which journalists work. If there are individual cases, then it is implemented through projects on which they operate and depend on cash.”

“There is direct and indirect influence. Directly, they establish professional, which then pass into personal contacts. Indirectly, through grants for various projects. However, cooperation through intelligence and counterintelligence services is not unknown.”

“Russian, there is no dilemma. It’s new to the public, which became visible before the Referendum. Other impacts are regular and in continuity and on other issues. After all, the most influential European leaders came to Macedonia to support the referendum and the Prespa Agreement. There were two directions, Russian and Serbian influence in conditionally speaking media supporting the right, and US and EU influence in the media supporting the left. Some of the media even show a greater inclination towards the foreign factor than to the domestic one. Hungary has established itself in several media that were direct supporters of Nikola Gruevski’s policies, through their purchase.”

“The Macedonian media have never been weaker in resisting the influence from outside and at home. There is almost no independent media. Polarization is obvious, to the extent of intolerance. Journalists from both camps are in a state of hostility, there is no way to choose, nor a place to whom and how to disparage. Journalism has been downgraded to the lowest professional branches, largely relying on inexperienced cadres, untrained in resistance, poorly trained in a journalistic response. They are sent with prepared questions, all of which are with exceptionally low salaries and distorted integrity. Despite well-paid, few editors and managers are known to be frequent guests in foreign embassies. Yes. There is influence, both internally and externally.”

“I have no encouraging statement on this issue. The media have been hostages of influences, policies, conspiracies, blatant businesses for years ... With the change of power, only new people came, old - new media, and the situation with the influence of the influence remained the same. Commenting on social media was paid, as well as posts, and additional paid marketing. It was registered who put the frame on social media FB profile that is PRO the EU, fake profiles were created for bigger paid content.”

“I am disturbed by any kind of influence; I think that decisions should be made without influence, for free conviction. However, the foreign influence for the referendum were positive, since it contributed to raising public awareness of membership in alliances.”

“I cannot say whether it is a foreign influence on editorial policy. But what was noticed was that in media coverage, generally speaking, there was obviously a greater presence of foreign actors, mostly ambassadors and senior officials from Western European countries, especially during the period of the political crisis, before the elections in 2016 and before the referendum 2018, which is, that is, a media reflection of everyday events in reality.”

Surprisingly, or not, at the same time we’ve got this answer as well:

“I cannot say if there is a foreign influence specifically on journalists, I do not have such information that some foreign actors/embassies and the like influenced a journalist. Journalists, according to previous research, mostly follow and advocate the policies of editors and the media. Yet, the Russian Embassy had some incidental statements which, however, cannot be attributed to the term continuous and effective influence. Certain groups that were referring to the boycott of the referendum also declared themselves representing positions of other states. But these groups cannot be said to have broad influence, nor credibility in society. The referendum was unsuccessful, but I would not say that it was because of the foreign influence.”

“Foreign media influence has been particularly noticeable in recent years, although it has existed in the past, but was much subtler and at a higher level. Today, Russian, Arab and American influence is evident in many media. Apart from the news that is translated into Macedonian, there are portals that are basically without scrupulous in the battle for influence and according to the comments on the social networks are read and shared. On the other hand, the Macedonian journalists have worked for several media magnates, who at the same time are owners of large companies and are all politically exposed to each other. Hence, it cannot be pure journalism, or freedom of writing. I personally recognized Russian and Serbian influence in TV media, portals, even in statements by professors, experts, etc.”

In post-Referendum Macedonia there is a situation in which, through some spilled media, there is a battle between foreign (intelligence) influences. Left-wing media, funded by a large non-governmental organization, recognize and publicize Russian influences in the media. On the other hand, the right-wing media, due to some of their attitudes or interests, lead an open war with this Western European organization, which appears as a financier of several media in the Republic of Macedonia. In recent times, this clash has been intensified and diplomatic-consular offices and other services from some of the countries and the region have become increasingly involved.

“I cannot argue, but I think that what recently made Telma’s chief editor-in-chief, when he banned journalists to publicly write and publish personal views, was not the result of his personal decision”⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ He literally posted on his Facebook profile to tell the journalists working in the TV media not to publish their personal political views and positions on social media as this shall be seen as violation of professional standards.

Reflecting the rumors of the public about the campaigning process, the governmental steps towards informing the general public in due time, we asked ***whether the presence of high level representatives of NATO/EU in Macedonia were enough visible to the process and efficient in its effort to pass the message.*** Some of the journalists expressed concern that it was left more as daily informative process, and not planned in advance, “which gave a sense of more like putting a pressure than real engagement”. Or this:

“The EU campaign coincided with the start of the Referendum campaign and was aimed at its support. I consider that the visibility of the EU and NATO institutions is visible to the public, although EU activities are more dominant in this regard.”

“I would say that we were more looking for them and asking from the EU to have a statement, than they did, there was not big contact. Exceptions are the moments when they had to communicate something to us. Answers to the questions that we asked - we waited for days.”

“In my opinion, perhaps the presence and engagement of EU and NATO institutions, especially in the pre-referendum period, was overshadowed. Although they had excellent cooperation with the media. The entire campaign “EU for you”, as well as the pre-referendum visits of high-level representatives of the international community, may have reached a counter-effect among the citizens who felt pressure to vote and what happened there was a weak voter turnout. Also, the campaign itself, inside the country, voted for European Macedonia, and not for Northern Macedonia, in which the benefits from EU and NATO membership would be explained in a real way - as if it had triggered a certain revolt and confusion among the citizens. Some asked for additional explanations. In addition to so many lies and corruption these years, the only thing the people ask for is sincerity, even if it is not perfect.”

“Not enough, given the importance of the process. The engagement of both organizations and the Macedonian government had to be stronger and more constructive in the attempts to bring the process closer and the necessity of this time to the citizens. The media are still far from professional. There are no serious editions, number and quality of journalistic staff. Hence it is easy to be influenced. But for me, the innermost is most dangerous for me, because, through those pressures from the inside, the medium itself is weaker, and then external influences are more easily touched. Resistance to pressures grows proportionately with the economic power of the media as a firm and the professionalism of the journalist as an employee.”

“The media within the pre-Referendum campaign did not elaborate the complete picture of what Macedonia and its citizens will receive and what they lose from the Prespa Accord. With the exception of several portals and Alfa TV, all other national media skipped the themes that criticized the Prespa Agreement only by keeping up with the strategy to succeed.”

“It was obvious that EU projects were being advertised by the DEU - they were styled by their influence, but what exactly they were saying about the benefits of the EU. It was an aggressive campaign for the benefits of joining the EU. So far, the money from EU funds has fallen due to the fact that this money is easily controlled and verifiable and cannot be easily misused. And there is already an investigation into the abuse of subsidies in agriculture about the percentage of the use of money as

an indirect impact for EU benefits.”

“The state is small enough so there is a great visibility. These institutions are still highly relevant, with all their weaknesses and defects, they are trusted for the perception of everything that has been served over the past few years. Everything that is moderate is good, but in the recent period it happened like a bombardment of news and it was considered too much, like interference in the state’s internal affairs and more than it should. On the one hand, reforms are being promoted and reforms are being sought, and on the other hand there is a gag, the escape of Gruevski and the EU does not react now, with the narrative “We do not interfere now” and here I see a controversy.

“A transparent process was only the EU campaign on the reasons why the MK should be part of the EU family. I think that the EU/NATO institutions were sufficiently present in the Macedonian public, and the EU had its own campaign that was not directly related to the referendum, but the timing of the broadcast was before the referendum, which supported the parliamentary and government campaign for the referendum. There is still no reliable analysis and research on the state of the media and the impacts of various power centers on media content after the government changed in the MK. Personally I consider that the media are far more free from the previous system of government, but, unfortunately, the quality of journalistic content does not increase. This is due to serious problems in the media industry that are not the result of just one impact or one problem. Media sector reforms have not yet started, although they were announced as a priority and are part of the Priebe Report. Part of the reasons why this is so is the delayed process of changing / bringing new laws in this area.”

Also, which coincides with many similar statements: “I could not identify the presence in the media with the influence, because in that case, appreciating the presence of a large number of foreign politicians in the media in the pre-referendum period, the referendum was supposed to be successful. What was not the case. We can talk about increased presence, but not for increased influence, at least not on the majority of citizens.” This confirms prior perception of not efficient campaigning process.

Asked to measure the perception of the influence, regardless is positive/negative or external/internal – the highlight of it was:

“The media is a tool for creating a chaotic situation and contributing to the confused situation of the audience. Non-professionalism and fake news kill the media. Lacking a basic sense of responsibility and impunity contribute to the poor state of the media.”

Yet, we can fully agree on this as well:

“The efforts of the EU and Western actors in the pre-referendum period were aimed at supporting the referendum and its success, which personally I wanted to see it as a positive impact on me. However, I would add that it was a little overemphasized and exaggerated, and perhaps there was a certain percentage of counter-effect on the citizens. People are tired and irritated when someone from the outside repeatedly treats them that way and explains to them what is good for them, as someone superior explaining it to someone inferior and ignorant. However, I think that the support, or I can freely call it the pressure on the political elites by Western European countries, was positive

and necessary during the political crisis during 2016 and 2017.”

“If one considers the overall influence (internally or externally) over the media, I think that there is a difference from the period of the previous government, from the aspect that the propaganda, the influences from different centers of power, the uniformed and conducted reporting, pressures and control were evident at that time on the media ... Now the situation in the media sphere is more relaxed - most media have mitigated their editorial policy with a cheering tone, many of the spokesmen of the previous government are no longer on the screens, some media that openly supported the previous government was closed and so on. However, it cannot be said that there are dramatic shifts in the positive direction, especially considering that the legislative changes related to some solutions in the media sphere have been locked in Parliament for months, and this government also has several errors in communication with media and so on. It can be said that there is a greater scope for criticism by journalists, although the political elites and this government do not have sufficient capacity for self-correction, the government expresses readiness for dialogue and debate with media representatives and their problems. But in order to evaluate the overall influence that both political and business elites have on the media, it is necessary, however, to have a field research so that we can speak on the basis of arguments.”

“There is a positive and negative impact. Positively because they enable education of journalists, visits to renowned world media, exchange of experiences, donations of equipment and technique, comparative experiences. Negative ones, when they are exercising their own influences, which sometimes affect the political processes and making major decisions for the state (Framework Agreement, Amnesty Law, Law on Flags, Law on Languages) as well as creating public opinions that are not always in the interest of the state. Media owners in the Republic of Macedonia open up media to exercise their influence, not because of the strengthening of the media sphere or democratization of society. Currently, the Republic of Macedonia has the worst media climate in its history. If in the past television was a sphere of influence of four big businessmen in Macedonia, now the situation is even worse, due to the lack of order in the portals and social media. Today we have almost dead print media, a small number of weekly newspapers, party-controlled televisions and portals. It's the portals that make the biggest mess in the media space. Some of them are funded by external factors and this is easily recognizable and legible. Part used for racket and political compromises among political rivals and their owners are people who have nothing to do with journalism and for which even the term “yellow press” is a compliment. Journalism employs people without basic knowledge of the political processes and the functioning of the institutions. There are journalists recruited exactly from political parties... Instead of a correction of power and parties, the media turned into their striking needles and pawns, so instead of political shows in which political representatives will face each other on a debate, we have political shows in which as experts journalists are presented to serve different political parties. It is precisely the division in the state that is most reflected in the division between the media and the journalists.”

“Also, due to financial interests, media ownership, commercial and political advertorial content, some of the media are already recognized by the general public as non-professional reporting.”

“Public funds, including communication funds for EU-funded actions in Bulgaria, should not be used to influence the editorial independence of the media and should be disbursed on a fair basis applying transparent criteria agreed upon with the media industry.”

“If the issue is in relation to political thought, I generally assess the foreign influence in Macedonia as positive, because it helps the state, in the context of reforms, in relation to the correct guidelines that I personally consider to be and necessary. The influence of the media in general is always great. Through the media it focuses on something, or defocuses the public from something that is of some interest at a given moment. There is an internal influence on the media, and this has always been the case, although, as a rule, it should not be so. There is also an external impact on the media, but this is not so directly expressed. The external influence is greater on politics, and not so much on the media.”

3.3. Interviews with university professors

For the purpose of a more comprehensive study of the subject and a hypothetical framework, as well as perceiving the perceptions of the scientific community for the subject of research, interviews were conducted with several university professors:

Associate Professor Katerina Veljanovska Blazevska, PhD (Faculty of security studies, MIT University - Skopje)

Assistant Professor Blagoj Conev, PhD (Faculty of security studies, MIT University - Skopje)

Full Professor Zlate Dimovski, PhD (Faculty of security - Skopje, University “St. Clement of Ohrid” - Bitola)

Associate Professor Marjan Nikolovski, PhD (Faculty of security - Skopje, University “St. Clement of Ohrid” - Bitola)

Assistant Professor Ice Ilijevski, PhD (Faculty of law - Kicevo, University “St. Clement of Ohrid” - Bitola)

Full Professor Trpe Stojanovski, PhD (Faculty of security - Skopje, University “St. Clement of Ohrid” - Bitola)

Associate Professor Vasko Stamevski, PhD (Faculty of law, International Slavic University “Gavrilo Romanovic Derzavin” - Sv. Nikole).

Professor Katerina Veljanovska Blazevska underlined that the Republic of Macedonia is a “mixed interest” ground, part of the political elites that have ruled on the political stage for years and are proficient in the votes of the electorate, part of the interests of the external influence (starting from the neighbors) and wider in the context of the geopolitical predispositions that certain countries have directed, from their personal strategic aspect, to the Republic of Macedonia. According to her, in the past few years, foreign influence in the country has been observed on several occasions. Initially, it is about internal interference in the political scene through suggestions and guidance from prominent foreign political actors and lead-

ers of relevant political institutions. Furthermore, there is a particular use of the foreign factor for sharing certain “risk” policies by leading political parties, who in one way learned from the time their PR lesson - based on their support and praise from foreign political actors - like-minded. In the context of a direct impact on the editorial policy of the media, it is apparently not publicly interpreted; it can be further seen through the boards from which the media houses are compiled, as well as the capital in their establishment.

Furthermore, she pointed out that the greatest influence when it comes to analyzing and interpreting foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia can be seen through the functioning of the civil society. In the context of the aforementioned, it is not known to the public which projects are financed by foreign foundations and institutions, as well as in which ideological direction the politics of these are moving. The openness of the Macedonian society in every field, multiethnic, social and cultural, created conditions for particular growth and development of the non-governmental sector with undoubted expansion, so that the openness towards cooperation with external organizations and institutions and the use of their funds for the needs of different target groups in the country greatly contributes to a significant foreign influence (especially from the aspect of integrating attitudes according to the principles of the donor organization).

According to her findings, there was a certain foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, and the entire public was aware of it, primarily because foreign delegations, at the same time supporting the upcoming referendum at an intense pace were present in the country and participated in a seemingly PR positive campaign to support referendum exodus in order to gain legitimacy, but also to encourage a positive outcome of it.

Regarding the visibility of the presence and engagement of the NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia through the media and the effectiveness of their efforts, she explained that the media regularly conveys the main, essential content to the public when it comes to NATO / EU integration. All this happens, first of all, because, regardless of whether it is speaking about the position of the political authority / opposition, it does not go beyond the NATO / EU framework, that is, the guidelines lead to full integration into these institutions. Regarding visibility for the public, the same depends on how public is educated in terms of what the functioning of NATO / EU means, ie it is necessary to speak about a segmented public, which in a different way is involved in the idea of integrating the country into these institutions, and to a different extent justifies them. It is here that the media program needs to be brought closer to the capacity of public understanding. The efficiency of the media in the transmission of these contents, on the other hand, depends on the perception of the editorial policy of the media towards the current situation in the country, so that this issue of efficiency and effectiveness is necessary to consider precisely from these two aspects.

Prof. Veljanovska Blazevska assesses the foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia partly positively, first of all, if the foreign factor that has influence in the country is moving in the same direction with the strategic framework for aspirations and international representation of the country. Only in this way, foreign influence can be encouraging to create a positive image of the country’s future success stories, primarily on the basis of the transfer of foreign experiences and easier to overcome the developed obstacles in action in different social segments.

According to her perception, the overall foreign influence at the moment on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia is assessed partly high, especially if it is said about the positioning and functioning of the political scene.

Professor Blagoj Conev believes that in the past few years and at the moment in the Republic of Macedonia there are interests of Albania, Serbia, Turkey, Greece and the United States through NATO. The state is in the form of realizing their strategic and geopolitical interests, and those of the United States and NATO are for the stabilization of the region.

According to him, foreign influence cannot be noted on the reporting policy, as well as on the editorial policy of the media in the Republic of Macedonia. This is supported by the fact that none of the media is direct or through projects funded by a foreign foundation, whether it is state or private. Unlike the foreign influence, the direct influence of the political parties in Macedonia is evident. For him, it is normal in the non-governmental sector in each country to have an influence on a foreign country or a non-governmental organization or foundation. This is due to the fact that the NGO sector is financed predominantly by foreign foundations or a partner foreign NGO.

According to him, the boycotting of the referendum considers that there was no foreign influence. But there was enormous pressure on the success of the referendum by European and American officials and politicians.

To a certain extent, a small political party was defined as a pro-Russian factor, but it cannot be defined at all as a factor in the political scene in the Republic of Macedonia. In short, it can be said that there was no pressure from abroad to boycott the referendum.

Regarding the visibility of the presence and engagement of the NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia through the media and the effectiveness of their efforts, he says that it can be said that they are present in the public, but insufficient to be persuasive in order to personify the doctrines for which advocate. Namely, greater affirmation is needed not of the organizations themselves, but of the values that are characteristic and determining both for the EU and for NATO in order for the ordinary citizen to understand the need for Macedonia's membership in these organizations.

For Professor Conev, it is normal to have a foreign influence in every country that strives to enter into an alliance of states and to determine it as positive because we have to identify ourselves as aspirants and implement the values of the union in which we are ready to enter.

As a positive influence it enumerates: the rule of law, respect for human rights, the development of the democratic system, and a number of other factors that must change under foreign or European influence.

Regarding the overall foreign influence at the moment on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia, he pointed out that although some kind of foreign influence is noticed, it is not so high that it can generate politics in itself. However, the impacts of the EU and NATO have increased because these organizations have an interest in stabilizing the Balkans.

Professor Zlate Dimovski said that in the past few years and at present there are several types of interests

in the Republic of Macedonia, which he shares in political, economic, military, intelligence and social, which he points out as crossing, belonging to different countries, neighboring countries, European countries, as well as countries outside Europe.

Furthermore, it adds that there is a foreign influence on the media reporting policy in the Republic of Macedonia, which is felt on their editorial policy, through: financing, providing the public with half-truths, orders for alleged journalistic research, especially influence of citizens' opinion, placement of information on defocusing the public, tensioning through false and targeted information, as well as production and earmarked use of the so-called "experts".

He agrees that a certain foreign influence is observed in the functioning of the non-governmental sector in the Republic of Macedonia, through: financing, receiving suspicious projects, training abroad, and various benefits of members of non-governmental organizations. Also, in the function of tensioning or defocusing the public, they are included occasionally strange and up to that point conspiratorial or non-existent organizations. Such organizations, depending on the center they lead, also appear as organizers of protests, expressing civil disobedience, counter-protests, etc.

Professor Dimovski agrees that some foreign influence was present in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, but considers that the presence and engagement of the NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia were not and are not visible enough to the public through the media and effective in their efforts. The alleged representation of the benefits and limitations of EU and NATO membership are not sufficiently clarified because they are clarified only through the prism of obtaining funds and greater foreign investment. Everything else is foggy, vague, contradictory and imperceptible to the general public. The overall foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia is to a large extent assessed as negative. In our country we need to create a climate of self-awareness, realizing the real needs, avoiding the thought that a benefit must be obtained from each activity, avoiding the idea that someone else should work, not us. Foreign influence places ideas, outlines situations for people with another culture, a way of perceiving the situation, personal responsibility, and awareness of every move. Distrust, insecurity, skepticism, deception, crime are increasingly implanted in these areas and all this is experienced and accepted as a lifestyle. Hence the complex of general conspiracy and deception appears.

According to him, the foreign influence currently exists in the Republic of Macedonia as an influence in the sectors of financing, budgeting, defense, security, culture, etc. Many things are expected from the outside, we admire foreign opinions, over-emphasizing given outsiders for many situations and striving to satisfy only those demands, and emphasize the imposed opinion that everything that is domestic should be neglected, booked, pushes and inevitably.

Professor Marjan Nikolovski in the interview explained that the Republic of Macedonia, according to its favorable geostrategic position, has always been an object of interest to the countries of the region, as well as to the great powers. The Middle East countries have an interest through the Republic of Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina to infiltrate the heart of Europe. China as a major economic force seeks to influence through the Republic of Macedonia to the market in Europe. The Republic of Macedonia has concluded a strategic partnership agreement with the United States and they would never give

up the dominant influence they have in it. Russia subtly seeks to reduce this influence in the Republic of Macedonia, thus stopping the expansion of the United States. Of course, the EU Member States are also interested in the safe operation of the Republic of Macedonia, as they also safeguard their security.

According to him, the media are a powerful weapon in the creation of public opinion. In a five-year research at the Faculty of Security - Skopje under the title "Public Opinion of the Citizens for Corruption", on a sample of over 1200 surveys from all over the territory of the Republic of Macedonia, the results indicated that the citizens are informed through the media the most and this is several times the percentage of information through the media, unlike other forms of information. This suggests that the one who owns the media can influence the creation of public opinion. The foreign factor, criminal organizations and politics through media owners can have a huge impact on the citizens' opinion on social phenomena.

Regarding the civil sector, prof. Nikolovski considers that, unfortunately, he has not yet occupied the right place in the system in the Republic of Macedonia, and that he is still somewhat marginalized, and that comes particularly to the fore in the security sector. The civil sector is under foreign influence, and financing of activities of certain non-governmental organizations can influence the phenomena in the Republic of Macedonia. We can not yet talk about independent civil society associations that will have the function of protecting the rights of citizens, which is also the core meaning of their competence and formation.

According to his knowledge, there was a certain foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum. He thinks that a quality assessment has been made through the opposition party to influence the citizens not to go to the polls, and thus succeed in the goal of failing the referendum, which is the work of certain external influences. Regarding the visibility of the presence and engagement of NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia through the media and the efficiency in their efforts, he indicated that NATO / EU institutions are present as much as is allowed. Any increased presence and influence would mean leaving their mandate, that is, there would be a danger of their involvement in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. Further, he explained that foreign influence should be analyzed from the perspective of their global interests. If certain phenomena in the Republic of Macedonia go in favor of their global policy, they will support them, if certain activities are not undertaken, they undertake other warning activities and return the course that is their own. According to his perception, the Republic of Macedonia has never been the object of interest of the foreign factor, so it can freely be said that today the activity of the most foreign intelligence services is present, which by feeding information feed their governments to take on the future steps for gaining of major influences in the Republic of Macedonia, and thus wider in the region.

Professor Ice Ilijevski underlined in the interview that major powers such as the United States and Russia have a strong interest in the Western Balkans, and therefore in the Republic of Macedonia. The ones for NATO enlargement and others in an attempt to prevent Euro-Atlantic integrations.

He believes that the media reporting policy and their editorial policy have not expressed any foreign influence, although the independence and impartiality of information is not excluded. However, the media are more representative of party attitudes and work on certain agendas that may be related to a foreign factor. Foreign influence is most expressed on social networks through electronic media and the creation of false news. Regarding the foreign influence on the non-governmental sector, he pointed out that such an

impact was expressed through the receipt of financial resources and grants by other countries and larger non-profit organizations. This is most often done for the purpose of creating public opinion and supporting certain interests.

According to him, the presence of some foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, although there is no direct evidence pointing to a certain foreign influence in the pre-referendum period, certain institutions and officials in the Republic of Macedonia did not exclude Russia's influence on the boycott of the referendum.

For the visibility of the presence and engagement of the NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia, Prof. Ilijevski notes that, through the visit of the Republic of Macedonia, the support to the Euro-Atlantic integrations is especially evident to many leaders from the world.

It further recommends that the Republic of Macedonia should protect itself from the gross interference of foreign forces in its internal politics. However, legitimately and to a certain extent, the great powers through their diplomacy will defend their interests. His perception of the overall foreign influence at the moment on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia is that this is expressed greatly and certainly contributes to the general situation. The struggle for the supremacy of the great powers does not exclude the Republic of Macedonia, with which one can expect an even more pronounced direct and indirect influence.

According to Professor Trpe Stojanovski, in the functioning of the non-governmental sector in the Republic of Macedonia, there is a foreign influence, which consists in the presence of the donors, who have funds, and the funds they need for the domestic non-governmental organizations. According to his findings, there was some foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, and that influence came from centers that have a negative attitude towards NATO integration of Macedonia. However, this impact was lower compared to Macedonia's interest in NATO and EU integration.

Furthermore, he agreed that the presence and engagement of NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia are sufficiently visible to the public through the media and effective in their efforts. Institutions have had a proactive role in promoting and highlighting the benefits of integration of the country. It coincided with the dominant interest among the majority of citizens, aware of what NATO / EU integration means, on the one hand, and what is the alternative, if this opportunity is missed. He assessed the foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia as very positive, so that almost every serious state, a friend of Macedonia, was clearly set up with the support of the citizens. Foreign friends were aware of the sensitivity that Macedonia is facing.

According to his perception, in terms of the overall foreign influence currently on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia, prof. Stojanovski pointed out that the positive influence and support to Macedonia dominates.

Professor Vasko Stamevski as the main interests in the past few years and currently existing in the Republic of Macedonia points out the interests of NATO / EU on the one hand and Russia on the other, which are mainly for political and economic reasons.

Regarding the existence of foreign influence on the media reporting policy in the Republic of Macedonia and their editorial policy, he believes that in the last period it was noticeable that the presence of information related to the current political situation and political processes, with the existence of some degree of interest in the international factor for solving the political crisis, which was mostly manifested through the media (written and electronic). According to him, taking into account the events in the last few months, the presence of foreign influence, which was channeled through individuals (part of them and members of political parties), evidently showed that they are supported by other countries, interest groups and other non-governmental organizations.

Furthermore, he has no personal knowledge of whether there was a certain foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, although in the public there was often mentioned a foreign state that through its installations tried to influence the citizens in regard to their boycott.

For the visibility of the presence and engagement of the NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia through the media and the effectiveness of their efforts, he believes that the public can largely understand the views of the representatives of the NATO / EU institutions, if he perceives and analyzes them from the real aspect and with a critical review. The effectiveness of their efforts largely depends on the personal attitudes and political determinations of the citizens, although their efforts and engagement are sufficiently represented in the media space.

According to prof. Stamevski, the foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia does not have a big positive impact on the internal political conditions, although the presence of foreign representatives is evident and their intention for integration of the Republic of Macedonia is manifestly manifest. On the other hand, the presence of the foreign factor (regardless of the reason for which they have come or giving their opinions) has a negative impact on the citizens, and according to them, foreigners interfere in their, with the Constitution, guaranteed political, economic and other rights and freedoms.

According to his perception, in terms of the overall foreign influence currently on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia, it is under serious foreign influence. The reason for this is the current political situation, which is a product of two different streams, one of integration, and the other for a boycott of the Prespa agreement. The intention of some of the foreign representatives is to inform the citizens that the integration of the Republic of Macedonia is needed, while others deny the integration, with the view that it should pay an expensive price (name, identity etc.), and there are also states that leave the Republic of Macedonia to resolve the name issue of its own choice.

3.4. Focus groups with students

Within the research, two focus groups with ten students in security, law, international relations and political science were conducted. The focus groups were realized on 05 and 07.12.2018 with duration of one and a half hours. The students were ready for discussion, so a pleasant and fruitful atmosphere developed in which they shared their personal thoughts and views on the topic. Given that there were no differences in relation to both groups of students (in both groups there were students from the specified areas of study), the results of the interview that was conducted with them will be presented and interpreted in the

continuation.

Throughout the conversation, students pointed out that, judging by the geostrategic position, it is undoubtedly that Macedonia is an interesting piece for every great power in order to realize its personal interests in the race for conquering new spheres. Not only in the past few years, but also for centuries, even centuries ago, there has been the aspiration of the great powers, and therefore their dominant influence in the state at the economic, political and military-strategic level. More specifically, they agreed that in the Republic of Macedonia in the past few years the influence of the Western countries, EU and NATO members is evident, and especially the impact of the United States in terms of their geopolitical interests in relation to the Republic of Macedonia is evident. Students noted that their opinions are based on information obtained from the media outlets, online media and printed newspapers, as well as the impact of the non-governmental sector. They perceive the influence they have in terms of control in the field of politics and decision-making by politicians. Some of the students explained that there is an influence from Greece through the name issue, as well as from Bulgaria through the issuance of Bulgarian passports. But as the collision between the United States and the EU on the one hand increases, and Russia and Turkey, on the other hand, the smaller countries in the Balkans are becoming more and more important for these opposing forces. At the moment, both sides have an interest in Macedonia, but in recent years the United States and the EU with an offensive are much closer to winning and joining Macedonia in their company.

According to students, influences from many external factors can be easily detected in countries like Macedonia. The media in Macedonia have always been turned to the government and their reporting policy has always depended on the policy of the government. When in recent years the government promotes membership in NATO and the EU, foreign influence on our media is inevitable. Furthermore, they pointed out that professional journalism in the Republic of Macedonia has never been adequately represented in the Macedonian media.

There is always a great influence from the current political constellation, and in that sense, bearing in mind that the current governing structure enjoys strong support from foreign countries, it indirectly expresses foreign influence. By monitoring information from written media, monitoring comments in contact programs and social media, as well as the declining quality of debates, where each participant points out his positive experience and his benevolence to international forces, the answer to this question is again confirmed. Because of this we have enormously reduced the circulation of written media, declining interest in public participation in direct contact TV shows, and even avoiding simple interviews.

The students also unanimously believed that a large number of NGOs in the Republic of Macedonia are under direct influence of foreign countries for several reasons. The first and most important reason is the financial influence that certain foreign countries have on the non-governmental sector, which has been publicly disclosed on many occasions, which further entails factual inability for genuine independence. Furthermore, under the wing of financial donors, the non-governmental sector advocates and represents their ideology and goal, hiding behind their "non-governmental" character. They further pointed out that capital is merciless, and that it stirs everything in front of itself. Thus, the establishment and functioning of the non-governmental sector cannot be independent. And how it would be independent, when all the funds in the non-governmental sector are predominantly from external capital. According to one of the

students, the non-governmental sectors are just one good, elegant form of painless penetration into the system of those who are “drowning” into problems (unemployment, economic instability, investments and reforms in all spheres ...), offering them “ help “by giving certain privileges to those who need to complete the intended purpose.

The majority of students agreed that there was a pronounced foreign influence in support of the referendum, but not in the direction of his boycott. Notorious is the fact that in the period immediately before the referendum, the Republic of Macedonia was visited by leaders and officials from a number of Western countries who clearly declared themselves as supporters of the referendum in the direction of the EU / NATO integration process.

The students also confirmed that the presence and engagement of NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia are sufficiently visible in the public through the media, especially in the last two years. This is why a significant part of the media space in the Republic of Macedonia is reserved for declaring their efforts and acquainting the general public with them.

Some of the students further considered that the foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia greatly influenced issues that are of essential importance for the sovereignty and autonomy of a state, and in that sense they assessed it to a greater extent as a negative one, from the aspect of the fact that behind the integration paradigm, has direct involvement in identity issues, for which the right to decision is solely the people. Another group of students felt that it was not so easy and simple to assess the foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia.

Of course, the foreign influence has negative and positive sides towards the Republic of Macedonia. Here politicians who are elected by the people should lead the policy that will suit the Republic of Macedonia. It is negative that everything that should have happened from the beginning of the 21st century takes place in two years in Macedonia and the Macedonian people remains intimidated and confused by all that happens overnight. The divisions occurring in our societies for issues that were previously well-worked would be accepted by the majority of the people are negative.

The recommendation of the students here was that if the foreign influence is well managed, it would be positive for Macedonia, but in order to manage well with the foreign influence one should first have a well-restrained power and a reasonable opposition, which sadly we do not have at the moment, and this results in internal instability of the state that directly affects the people.

Currently, taking into account the overall current situation, the Republic of Macedonia is a cross-section of various foreign influences that greatly undermine the independence and sovereignty of the state de jure, but de facto determined by the positions of the leading world powers and their interests.

According to students, Macedonia has never been more influential than it is now, or it's so public now that it's too obvious. The overall foreign influence on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia is very great, and according to the student perception, it is obvious that it will be present for a long time. Our country has recently been in the center of attention of the United States and the EU, which is assumed that by joining Macedonia in the EU and NATO, Russia and Turkey will significantly cut the way in trying to re-influence the Balkans. It is no coincidence that the EU and the United States are pushing the Republic

of Greece and the Republic of Macedonia to find a solution to the name dispute for soon the Republic of Macedonia will join the EU and NATO and not be a free zone where other world actors can act.

The foreign influence on the Republic of Macedonia has always been and it is obvious that it will remain for a long time. According to the students, it is important that the Republic of Macedonia build its own position and move on to a path that will become a country that will have its own weight in the Balkans and thus the external influences will be less harmful and more beneficial.

3.5. Interview with the National Coordinator for preparation of the Republic of Macedonia for NATO membership

For the purpose of more complete research of the subject and a hypothetical framework, as well as perception of the perceptions of the government, an interview was conducted with Dr. Stevo Pendarovski - National Coordinator for the preparation of the Republic of Macedonia for NATO membership (hereinafter: National Coordinator). In the period covered by the survey (11.07.2018-30.09.2018), he held two press conferences (with answers to journalistic questions), 4 television interviews, 3 interviews in written media and 11 statements for electronic or written media. In addition, he took part in the referendum campaign in which he talked about the entry of the Republic of Macedonia in NATO in 7 television interviews, 4 interviews in written media, 8 statements for written and electronic media, 23 posts on social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and 28 addresses of citizens' gatherings in 14 municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia. Regarding the subject of interest of the research, the National Coordinator pointed out that in the recent years, especially after 2014, in the NATO context, there is an increased interest of the Russian Federation in the developments in the Republic of Macedonia, given that the Alliance, according to official Russian documents, is a strategic opponent of that state. This increased interest is also reflected in the increased activities of the diplomatic missions of the Russian Federation in our country. Of course, there is influence from Western European countries and the United States in the context of our approach to NATO / EU, but this influence is caused by our strategic decisions to become a member of those organizations.

Regarding the media reporting policy in the Republic of Macedonia and their editorial policy, the National Coordinator pointed out that there is a foreign influence and that it is of two (general) types: in the first, the media use information coming from foreign sources, according to their own autonomous choice, taking into account the interest of its audience. In the second, the media predominantly use sources coming from the same country or the same linguistic region, but not by their choice, but following the origin of their owners or the dominant shareholders in the ownership structure. In the first case, editors themselves, on their own estimation, occupy a party, in the latter they are forced to take a concrete side under the pressure of the political preferences of their owners.

From his position as the National Coordinator for the preparation of the Republic of Macedonia for NATO membership, he stated that he had no knowledge of foreign influence in the non-governmental sector. In that part, he said that he can only assume that there have been attempts for foreign influence, similar to the political or media sector for which there are official data and data from public sources. According to his findings, the National Coordinator noted that there is some foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum, and that from the Macedonian competent institutions in cooperation with partner services in the international community

was documented in several cases. At this point, there is a court procedure for at least one case where it has been proven that several persons have received financial means to act in that direction. According to him, generally speaking, the level of understanding of the citizens of the very essence of NATO and the EU, the values on which they are built and the way of their functioning, are not on satisfactory level, clarifying the visibility in the public of NATO / EU institutions in the Republic Macedonia through the media and the efficiency in their efforts. This was confirmed by the fact that the Republic of Macedonia, as a state, had never adopted a media strategy for explaining and bringing citizens closer to the essence and values of the Euro-Atlantic institutions, primarily because the support for NATO and EU membership was always at a very high level. However, in recent years, several initiatives of this kind have been undertaken in the non-governmental sector, which in particular have intensified after receiving an invitation to join NATO in the Republic of Macedonia.

On our request for assessment of foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia, the National Coordinator responded that the political and media influence coming from the EU / NATO member states is generally positive, because it relies on the values of liberal democracy, market economy and human rights. Of course, there are negative examples in that part, but the general trends are positive. The influence that comes from the Balkan states, especially the states that were part of the former Yugoslavia, as well as from the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the USSR, is generally negative, because it reflects their achievements in the construction of mature democratic societies, and those countries after all the parameters have modest achievements in that segment.

Asked about his role with regard to foreign influence through the media in the Republic of Macedonia, he pointed out that within his responsibilities he is active in the public and in the media by presenting facts that he tries to reduce the influence of false news related to integration of the Republic of Macedonia in NATO.

According to his perception, in recent years, the foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia was greatest before and after April 27 last year and in the period before, during and after the referendum, especially in the wake of the procedure for changing the Constitution of the Republic of Macedonia. At present, foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia is present, but not even at the level of influence on the main political trends.

3.6 Chronology of officials' visits

For the needs of the research, a review of official visits of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and its representatives by official state representatives was also made, as well as visits and participation of the Macedonian state authorities to official events organized by international organizations and other countries.

The review of the visits is compiled and displayed through the official publicly available information from the web site of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, referring to the period after the signing of the Prespa Agreement with the Republic of Greece until the holding of the Referendum in the Republic of Macedonia.

The review is given in the Appendix to the analysis.

From the chronological review, it can be concluded that 20 meetings of government representatives were held only in the middle of July, and in September 38 meetings, especially in the pre-referendum period⁵⁶. In the Macedonian public, this was assessed as an enhanced diplomatic offensive ahead of the Referendum, as well as a positive signal and support for Macedonia for all the activities that it carried out on the path of Euro-Atlantic integration. During that time in Macedonia, among other diplomats and statesmen, the NATO Secretary General, the German Chancellor, as well as other senior representatives from the US administration arrived. The main appeals from all of them were that after the Prespa Agreement was implemented, Macedonia would become a NATO member, and messages were sent to the citizens not to miss such a chance, since the referendum was approaching and it was a matter of a sensitive referendum. to change the constitutional name of the state.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Due to its favorable geostrategic position, the Republic of Macedonia has always been an object of interest to the countries of the region, the region, as well as to the great world powers. In the last few years, an increased direct foreign interest has been noted in the Republic of Macedonia due to the announcements for intensified activities for moving the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country. This interest contributed to changing the general situation in the country. On the one hand, the influence of the Western European countries and the United States, which dominated the entire process, was in view of the strategic goals and interests of the Republic of Macedonia to be part of NATO and the EU. On the other hand, with the intensification of this process, there was an increased interest of the Russian Federation in the activities in that field, with the intention of slowing down the integration. Within this period there was a cross-section of interests belonging to the countries of the neighborhood and Western European countries. The interests are in different spheres: political, strategic, economic, military, intelligence, social, etc.

When analyzing the main objective of the project, as a general assessment, it was concluded that in the investigated period the foreign political influence was of the highest volume in the last few years.

The official foreign visits of the Macedonian institutions and authorities at high political level made it clear that the strategic priorities and goals of Macedonia since becoming independent (NATO and EU membership) have now become strategic priorities of the international community. However, on the other hand, it is concluded that the citizens' awareness and understanding of the Euro-Atlantic processes and integrations is not at a satisfactory level, although their support is still strong and high, and the functions, role and competencies of the Euro-Atlantic organizations are not clear enough known.

The overall process was very intense both on a national and international level. The result is however achieved. The Prespa Agreement was supported by the Parliament with 81 votes on the 11th of January, 2019. The media played a big role into this, knowingly or not, the media were the crucial element of the entire process.

⁵⁶ During the August there was no one official visit.

Couple of conclusions & recommendations can be withdrawn from all of the above:

The media ownership provided solid basement for all fake news and propaganda to be very possible and foreseeable.

The media environment was already set up to produce fake news and only facilitated its production.

“If the media were not dependent on money, the impact would be minimized” said one journalist.

The media reform processes were controlled in its implementation due to further exploit all the possibilities in their benefit.

The campaigns in that period were either too aggressive by foreign representation either were not informative enough on the level of “the citizen”.

There was no visible ownership of the process by the citizens, nor the involvement of the ordinary citizen in the campaign.

Fake news educative materials should be developed for high school and student’s education for further active citizen’s engagement. Trainings must be taking into consideration, for example to establish such lectures “School for NATO/EU” to leverage the knowledge and understanding of what actually we need to do in the forthcoming process. IMPETUS is considering such an activity with the high school students that are graduating and students from law faculties/defense/security.

Presentation of this Research in the rural areas could be considered as raising the awareness of propaganda and recognizing what has been as a fake news in the last year.

Open topic – grants should be developed and customized for journalist’s/media workers who want to write about something or investigative journalism should be supported more.

Joint work of researchers and journalists, like this one, showed excellent performance, exchange of views, mutual debate and quality of discussion. Also, it gave scientific validity of their positions and perceptions at times when trust in media is low. Donors may attribute more such type of activity.

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Appendixes

Chronology of officials' visits:

07/10/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, on the sidelines of the EU Summit on the Western Balkans in London, with representatives of the Ohrid Group, friends and supporters of our country, led by Sir George Robertson.

07/10/2018

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, Theresa May, chaired a session on "Foreign Policy, Bilateral Issues and Heritage of the Past", which won a special agreement on the Macedonia-Greece name dispute and strategic partnership between the two countries, which was signed on June 17 in Prespa. She, with a special gesture, invited the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev and the President of the Government of the Republic of Greece, Alexis Tsipras, together with her on a special photo session.

07/10/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, as part of his activities during the EU Summit on the Western Balkans, with the High Representative for Security and Foreign Affairs of the EU, Federica Mogherini.

07/10/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the President of the Government of the Republic of Croatia, Andrej Plenkovic.

A brief meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, on the sidelines of the summit with the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Angela Merkel.

07/11/2018

The FAO Program Framework for Macedonia for the period 2018-2020 was signed between the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the Government of the Republic of Macedonia.

07/11/2018

Participation of Prime Minister Zaev in the panel "NATO Engagements: Dialogues at the Summit in Brussels" within the NATO Summit.

07/12/2018

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, began his activities at the NATO Summit of Heads of State and Government with the participation and address at a meeting of the leaders of the member states and partners in the "Resolute Action" mission in Afghanistan.

07/12/2018

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, at the Summit of Heads of State and NATO, received an invitation to join the alliance handed over to Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at a ceremony.

07/13/2018

The Government of the Republic of Macedonia signed a State Aid Agreement with the US company TELAMON.

07/13/2018

The Macedonian government delegation on the sidelines of the NATO Summit of Heads of State and Government in Brussels met with United States Senators Tom Tils from the Republican Party and Jin Shayan of the Democratic Party.

07/13/2018

The President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, had a meeting with the Ambassador of the Republic of France to the Republic of Macedonia, Christian Thimonier.

07/16/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the Ambassador of Australia to the Republic of Macedonia, who ends his term, Julia Fini.

07/17/2018

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, received the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, who, with this visit, realized his announcement immediately after the decision of the European Council that he would come to Skopje on July 17th marked the start of the screening process for our country before the opening of the negotiation chapters with the EU scheduled for June 2019.

07/20/2018

The President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, accompanied by the Mayor of the City of Skopje, Petre Shilegov, met with the Mayor of Ljubljana, Zoran Jankovic.

07/20/2018

To the Cabinet of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, a letter of congratulations was received on the occasion of the agreement on the name dispute between Macedonia and Greece and the strategic partnership between the two countries by Victor Orban, signed on behalf of the Visegrad Fourth.

07/23/2018

The President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, participates in Mostar at the traditional manifestation Mostar Peace Connection, where before the start of the event, he informally talks with the hosts, representatives from the Center for Peace and Multiethnic Cooperation, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of BiH, Denis Zvizdic, Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras and Montenegrin Prime Minister Dusko Markovic.

07/24/2018

The Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, received a delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Federal Republic of Germany, led by the Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth.

07/25/2018

Meeting of the National Coordinator of the Republic of Macedonia for NATO, Stevo Pendarovski and the Director of the Euro-Atlantic and Global Partnership in the Political and Security Affairs Division at the NATO HQ in Brussels, James McCay.

07/25/2018

President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia Zoran Zaev received a NATO delegation led by James Mackay, Director of the Euro-Atlantic and Global Partnership in the Political and Security Affairs Division at the NATO HQ in Brussels.

07/25/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev with Mats Staffansson, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Sweden to the Republic of Macedonia.

09/01/2018

Participation of the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defense Radmila Sekerinska at the Security Forum - Dubrovnik 2018 with the topic "Strengthening the Resilience of the Mediterranean, Europe and the Western Balkans".

09/02/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev and the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic at the border crossing Tabanovce Presevo and announcement of the start of the implementation of the joint border management project One Stop Shop.

09/03/2018

The Secretary General of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Dragi Rashkovski, accompanied by the state secretaries and representatives of the line ministries of the Republic of Macedonia, held a working meeting with the state secretaries and representatives of the ministries from the Republic of Bulgaria, which expressed readiness for intensifying the

cooperation between the two countries.

09/03/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with Andrew Page, Director of the Western Balkans at the British Ministry of Foreign Affairs, accompanied by Rachel Galloway, Ambassador of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the Republic of Macedonia.

09/04/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with Christian Helbah, South East European Special Representative of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

09/04/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, accompanied by Bujar Osmani, Deputy Prime Minister in charge of European Affairs, with participants at the conference organized by the Aspen Institute in Skopje.

09/05/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with Andres Christian Hoagard, Ambassador of the Kingdom of Denmark to the Republic of Macedonia.

09/06/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with Jean Asselborn, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

09/06/2018

Joint Press Conference of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia Zoran Zaev and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, on which they informed about the joint activities in the framework of the official visit of the NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg and the delegation of the Alliance that accompanied him.

09/07/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, and the Federal Chancellor of Austria, Sebastian Kurz, who is paying an official visit to our country with a government delegation.

09/07/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with Olivier Kadik, Senator from the Republic of France and a representative of the French citizens outside France, accompanied by the Ambassador of the Republic of France to the Republic of Macedonia, Kristijan Timonienie.

09/08/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Angela Merkel, on the first official visit to the Republic of Macedonia.

09/08/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the US Senator and Chairman of the National Security Committee and the Subcommittee on European and Regional Security Policy, Ron Johnson.

09/08/2018

Meeting between the Minister of Information Society and Administration Damjan Mancevski and the Minister of Digital Politics, Telecommunications and Media in the Greek Government, Nikos Papas.

09/11/2018

A contract with the European Investment Bank worth EUR 100 million for favorable financing of small and medium-sized enterprises

09/12/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev with the President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci.

09/12/2018

Meeting of the Minister of Diaspora in the Government of the Republic of Macedonia Edmond Ademi accompanied by the Director of the Emigration Agency of the Republic of Macedonia, Nikola Shalvarinov, with the President of the Republic of Slovenia Borut Pahor and the President of the National Assembly of Slovenia Dejan Zidan.

09/12/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the Head of the Dutch Diplomacy Blok.

09/12/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, and the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs of Albania, Ditmir Bushati.

09/13/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the President of the European Parliament, Antonio Tajani, just before addressing the parliamentary session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg.

09/13/2018

Visiting EU High Representative for Security and Foreign Affairs, Federica Mogherini of the Republic of Macedonia, who arrived together with the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev.

09/13/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, together with the Minister of Foreign Affairs Nikola Dimitrov and his associates, with the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs of the USA, Aaron Ves Mitchell, accompanied by the US Ambassador to the Republic of Macedonia, Jess Bailey.

09/14/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, accompanied by his associates, with a delegation of the International Financial Group (IFC), part of the World Bank, led by Webke Schlumberer, Regional Director for Europe and Central Asia, accompanied by the Regional Director Central and Southeastern Europe, Thomas Lubeck.

09/17/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the Secretary of Defense of the United States of America, James Norman Mattis.

09/17/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with Manuel Saracin, Member of the German Bundestag.

09/17/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, accompanied by the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Radmila Sekerinska and several of her associates, with the Minister of Defense of the Republic of Italy, Elizabeta Trenta, and her delegation.

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev with Allen Duncan, British Minister of State for Europe and America.

09/18/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia Zoran Zaev and the EU Commissioner for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement Johannes Hahn, accompanied by members of the Delegations of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and the Directorate for Neighborhood Policy and Enlargement of the European Commission.

09/18/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the newly appointed Head of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, Ambassador Clemens Koia.

09/20/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, in Washington, with the Vice President of the United States of America Mike Pens.

09/21/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, during the visit of the United States of America, with representatives of the Forum for Democratic Macedonia - a community of emigrants from the Republic of Macedonia and their descendants from all over the world (FDM).

09/21/2018

Minister of Local Self-Government Suhail Fazliu and project applicants signed contracts for co-financing projects from the first public call within the Cross Border Cooperation Program between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Greece.

09/25/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, accompanied by the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and Minister of Defense, Radmila Sekerinska and his advisory team with Dejan Zidan, President of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia, accompanied by a Slovenian Parliamentary Delegation as well as the Slovenian Ambassador to Macedonia, Milan Jazzec.

09/26/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia Zoran Zaev, accompanied by the Ambassador of the Republic of Greece Dimitris Janakakis, Deputy Minister of Environment and Physical Planning Jani Makraduli, the Mayor of Gevgelija Sasho Pockov and other mayors in Gevgelija with businessmen from the southeast region of Macedonia and from Greece and Bulgaria.

09/27/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the Ambassador of Canada to the Republic of Macedonia, based in Belgrade, Kati Chaba.

09/27/2018

Farewell meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, with the Head of the NATO Office in the Republic of Macedonia, Captain Gorazd Bartol, an officer in the army of the Republic of Slovenia.

09/27/2018

Meeting of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia, Zoran Zaev, accompanied by his advisers, with a delegation led by the Austrian Minister for European Union, Art, Culture and Media Gernot Blimel.

09/28/2018

Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Macedonia and Chief Political Negotiator and Head of the Delegation for Negotiations with the European Union Dr. Bujar Osmani, Minister of Justice Renata Deskoska, Special Advisor for Euro-Atlantic Integration of the President of the Government of the Republic of Macedonia and Chief Technical Negotiator and Head technical negotiating team Bojan Maricic and State Secretary at the Secretariat for European Affairs Kalinka Gaber held a meeting with the Commissioner for European Neighborhood Policy and Negotiations for the enlarged European Union Johannes Hahn.

Interview questions⁵⁷

1. Whose interests have been in the past few years and currently exist in the Republic of Macedonia and what kind they are?
2. In your opinion, is there a foreign influence on the media reporting policy in the Republic of Macedonia and their editorial policy?
3. Does the functioning of the non-governmental sector in the Republic of Macedonia show some foreign influence? Please explain your position.
4. According to your knowledge, was there a certain foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia in the pre-referendum period with the intention of boycotting the referendum?
5. Does the presence and engagement of the NATO / EU institutions in the Republic of Macedonia are sufficiently visible to the public through the media and effective in their efforts? Please clarify your position.
6. Do you evaluate foreign influence in the Republic of Macedonia to a greater extent as a positive or negative one? Please explain your answer.
7. According to your perception, assess the overall foreign influence at the moment on the general situation in the Republic of Macedonia.

⁵⁷ These questions were the bases, which were developed further on in the interviews and discussions with different target groups. Slightly modified were given to the journalists in order to get their specific point of view on the matter, and some specific interview questions were added to the NATO Coordinator as well.

Maryna Dorosh

Why media literacy is not a panacea in countering disinformation?

If we consider media literacy as the main antidote to disinformation, then stakeholders expect that an educated audience will think critically and will reject harmful content. There is no doubt that media literacy is essential for the modern person, but we need to keep in mind that it's not a "silver bullet" solution for the media's problems. Firstly, much more research should be conducted when it comes to impact assessments of media literacy activities and identifying those methods which really lead to the changes in behavior. Secondly, it's a risk to shift the responsibility away from the media producers and policy makers to media consumers.

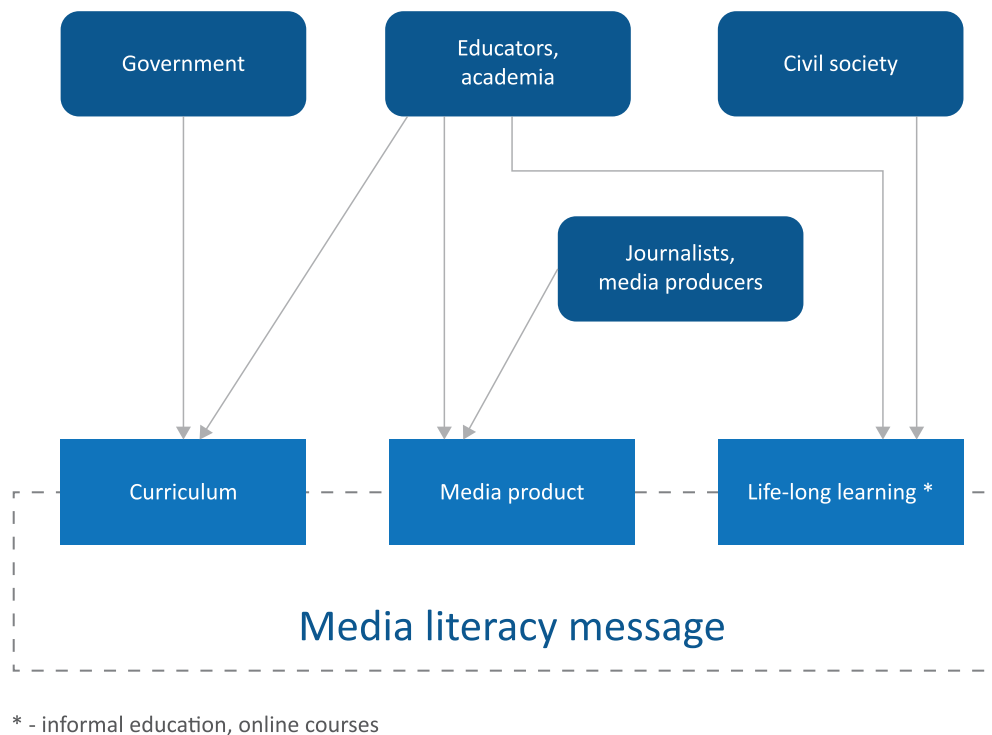
Today, media literacy regularly appears on the Ukrainian and world agendas: educators, politicians, scientists, journalists and activists emphasize the importance of the development of critical thinking among the youth and adults. Different initiatives are implemented, among them teacher trainings, online courses, fact checking projects. Indeed, media literacy is essential in a time when democracy is threatened by populism and disinformation. But its role shouldn't be exaggerated and it can't replace other, "harder" actions in the information field.

Challenges in Ukraine

The concept of the implementation of media education in Ukraine was adopted in 2010, but back then this topic was a marginal one. Society was not fully aware of the importance of media literacy. The awareness appeared after the dramatic and tragic events - the Revolution of Dignity, the annexation of the Crimea by Russia, the occupation of the Donbas and the war that Russia continues to wage in eastern Ukraine. These events brought unprecedented challenges for all areas of life, including journalism.

The objective coverage of events became pivotal, so the problems of the information landscape that were previously hidden (at least for the major part of society) were exposed. Among them: violations of journalistic standards (they appeared as a result of unprofessional work or as an intentional bias in the news); the dissemination of inaccurate information, especially in the Internet; and Kremlin propaganda, which

existed in the information landscape during the all years of Ukrainian independence but wasn't discussed, and it became more aggressive after the 2013.



As a result, civic institutions increased the efforts focused on improving of journalistic standards and on the media education of the audience. The latter was primarily implemented by civil society organizations and, to a less extent, by state educational institutions. Among the most prominent initiatives is a website StopFake which debunks Kremlin disinformation, it was launched in 2014 by Kyiv Mohyla Journalism School lecturers, graduates and students. Another one is a pilot program with participation of around 200 schools, offering an elective course in media literacy for high schoolers. It is implemented by the Institute of Social and Political Psychology¹. Another one, Learn to Discern program (2015-2016), implemented by IREX in partnership with the local organization Academy of Ukrainian Press and StopFake, was aimed at the enhancing critical thinking of the adults: up to 15 thousand people were reached through those trainings². The trend of the recent years is the development of the online courses, among them News literacy online course (created by Detector Media, 2017), "Media literacy for educators" (online platform Prometheus, 2018), fact-check online course (Voxcheck, 2018).

¹ https://ms.detector.media/mediaprosvita/mediaosvita/scho_take_eksperiment_iz_mediaosviti_v_ukraini_15_zapitan_ta_vidpovidey/

² <https://www.irex.org/project/learn-discern-l2d-media-literacy-training>

Media literacy deficiency was not unique to Ukraine. In the United States, the election of Donald Trump raised public awareness and in effect new research was conducted about the impact of the fake news on the elections. A new study by the Pew Research Center showed that only a quarter of adults in the U.S. can completely separate the facts from the opinion in the news³. To solve this problem, a number of initiatives are being implemented in the U.S. The most prominent one is the development of the new school curriculum to teach better information literacy and improve “civic online reasoning.” It is organised by the Stanford History Education Group (SHEG). The other one, led by the Poynter Institute and funded by Google.org called MediaWise, describes itself as a “groundbreaking endeavor aimed at helping middle and high school students be smarter consumers of news and information online”⁴.

The trigger which boosted the development of media literacy defines, to a large extent, the content of the programs. For instance, in Ukrainian programs for adults as the main issues circle around the definition of propaganda and hate speech, and understanding journalism ethics and standards (for example, the online course on news literacy is structured according to six basic standards of journalism). Another key topic is media ownership and the influence of owners on the content of news. It must be noted that, on the central Ukrainian TV channels, the political standpoint has been and is currently being defined by the interests of their owners (the majority of those are oligarchs who use the media as a tool for promoting their political and/or business interests). As a result, instead of high-quality and unbiased news, the audience can often see masked pre-paid news (dzhinsa, or jeans news). These issues are usually in the focus of media literacy programs, while less attention is paid on social media algorithms, cybersecurity, advertisements, stereotypes in media.

It is notable that, during the last years, many Ukrainian media experts tend to define media literacy as a key solution for the most pressing problems in the information landscape. The discussions and roundtables about disinformation or biased news very often come to the conclusion that the most efficient way to solve these problems is to develop media education. There are no doubts that it is extremely important to consider ML as a long-term strategy in countering propaganda, populism and improving general well-being in the digital world. But media educators are not responsible for the media.

In the words of Sonya Livingston from the London School of Economics⁵, media education sometimes seen as a ‘silver bullet’ solution or ‘last resort policy’ in dealing with information crisis and fakes. She underlines that it is important to put forward the question of whether the media are accountable and think about the audience, and then, as a follow-up query - to ask whether the people are critical and trust the media.

Indeed, media education is an essential component in countering disinformation, but stakeholders need to take two important things into consideration. The first thing relates to the impact assessment of media literacy activities. Scientists and practitioners struggle to discover good ways of evaluating the effectiveness of ML methods. During the Media literacy 360 Conference⁶ (organized by the Digital Communication

³ <http://www.journalism.org/2018/06/18/distinguishing-between-factual-and-opinion-statements-in-the-news/>

⁴ <https://www.poynter.org/news-release/2018/poynter-receives-3-million-from-google-to-lead-program-teaching-teens-to-tell-fact-from-fiction-online/>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rf39YNKUtdo>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwTinFMRgC8&t=2s>

Network), Roman Shutov from European Endowment of Democracy outlined that the biggest challenge facing all media literacy initiatives is the question of how to measure their impact, especially in countering disinformation, as we still don't have any research of what leads to behavior changes.

Secondly, media literacy as an antidote to disinformation must be put in a broader context and complex of actions. They differ on the international and national level and depend on the most significant challenges in the information sector. As it was mentioned, for Ukraine it's releasing media from the political influence of their owners. Besides the biased news on the TV channels some popular Ukrainian websites, namely "Strana" and "Vesti" follow hidden pro-Russian agenda and spread questionable and partly-true statements and news (the repetition of the Kremlin messages in their content was found out in the monitoring of Detector Media during February 2017 – August 2018)⁷. That's why one of the necessary measures against disinformation is increasing the transparency of media, including online media. This can be done by developing new legislation on media transparency. It should oblige media companies to publish the information about their owners, editors and funding, and suggest real consequences for the violation of the law.

The paper "Taming the Hydra: How to Resist Kremlin's Information Aggression?" (compiled by the Internews Ukraine NGO with the support of the European Union and the International Renaissance Foundation)⁸ outlines a number of other measures, among them the development of legislative action against the conscious spread of disinformation (here the biggest challenge is to find a balance with freedom of speech) and find better solutions for content moderation by continuing the dialogue with Facebook and other technical companies (in particular, increasing the expertise of people coordinating the area of Ukraine/Eastern Europe - those who are responsible for monitoring content, banning users for hate speech. It is recommended to work on developing a trust-based partnership for improving network policies and prompt responses).

Those necessary measures require political action and one should not lose sight of the main issue, which is the intentional and mass scale projection of military objectives on the civilian public space. It requires much more than just education and only a coordinated effort may ensure that the country would eventually build up real resilience to the threats of digital age propaganda.

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⁸ https://drive.google.com/open?id=1_5XSwh-MwQaYMsol0kPbmhdzIGjaqWHB

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