

The Western Balkans on their path towards EU/NATO accession:

The role of media and (dis)information



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Table of content

Introduction	5
Anti-NATO Disinformation in the Western Balkans	7
The Information Environment in Albania With Regard to EU/NATO Aspiration and the Role of Media	33
Bosnia and Herzegovina on Its Path Towards Europe: The Role of Media and (Dis)Information	49
The Bulgarian Path Towards the EU and NATO – The Role of the Media and (Dis)Information	73
The Information Environment in the Republic of Macedonia With Regard To The EU/NATO Aspiration and the Role of Media and (Dis)Information	81

Introduction

Yordan Bozhilov, President of Sofia Security Forum

Over the last few years, we have witnessed the mass use of misinformation and the spread of false information aiming to shape peoples' opinions and their behaviour or to influence important public policy matters. Among the most vulnerable are democratic states, which defend the freedom of speech, opinions and information. The development of technology and the global information environment creates opportunities for the people to receive information from a variety of sources, while at the same time this creates a bigger danger for them to receive false information or to be misinformed.

Western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia – which have chosen to join the EU and NATO, are not an exception from this tendency. The challenges these countries face do not only include the fact that they need to maintain pluralist societies with free media, but also to deal with the rising levels of threats, such as misinformation and propaganda campaigns aiming to deviate them from their path towards a European development.

In 2018 the Media Programme South East Europe of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and Sofia Security Forum completed a project called “The Western Balkans on their path towards EU/NATO accession: The role of media and (dis)information”.

This publication is the final stage of the project, which included a conference and an expert discussion aiming to analyse the media environment in Western Balkan countries, to show its weaknesses, but also to provide solutions for its improvement. Of utmost importance is the analysis on the kind of information people in states outside of the EU and NATO receive, taking into account the fact that wide public support is of great importance in the succession processes of both organisations.

The expert discussions as well as the articles in this publication demonstrate that while the six countries in the Western Balkans put great effort in developing the media sector, based on the principles of democracy and pluralism, they also face serious challenges. These challenges are related to the current condition of the media and their obedience to political and economic interests, the growth of opportunities for the spread of misinformation and manifest propaganda against the so longed European future. The lack of media freedom, low media literacy levels and poor regulation of the online media environment are amongst the weaknesses in the countries in the Western Balkans.

Social media expansion allows people to access new sources of information, but at the same time hide the danger of the occurrence of new channels for misinformation. This could significantly affect the attitude of peoples towards strategic priorities and the way in which they evaluate them.

Bulgarian experience after its accession to NATO and the EU has shown that targeted information campaigns are necessary in order for the provision of accurate and objective information about the structure, the activities and the policies of these organisations as well as for the entire accession process. Differently, it has to be resisted to the attempts for misinformation and anti-NATO/EU propaganda, as the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence aims to do.

Both the entire project and the articles in this publication analyse the situation, but also provide specific suggestions on how to improve the media and information environment and how to counter misinformation, as well as other negative factors. This is why this publication could be of interest and use to politicians, media experts and journalists, as well as for those who have an interest in creating a just and resistant information environment, corresponding to the interests of societies and the peoples.

Anti-NATO Disinformation in the Western Balkans

Author: Olivia Griffiths

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The following article analyses how and to what extent disinformation is taking place in the Western Balkans. It examines how regional vulnerabilities and aspirations enable dissemination of anti-NATO messaging, what key narratives are being spread, and why some of them have gained traction. It concludes with policy proposals for the Western Balkan region. The analysis is based on the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence's (NATO StratCom COE) analysis of anti-NATO narratives in the Western Balkans and NATO's enhanced forward presence (eFP) host countries. While this article predominantly focuses on disinformation in the Western Balkan countries, Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, it also includes examples from the four eFP host nations i.e., Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland to elucidate findings.

Introduction

The use of information to influence public opinion and behaviour is not a new phenomenon. However, recent technological developments have made it easier for anyone to disseminate large amounts of information in a quick and inexpensive way. The information environment is thus more complex than before and this has opened up new ways and means for false information to reach audiences and to achieve intentional or unintentional effects. The Western Balkans are no exception to this.

In order to clarify what is understood by disinformation, it is necessary to distinguish between the concepts of misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information, which are often conflated. Derakhshan and Wardle suggest nuances between these three forms of information pivot on their approaches to truthfulness and intention: Mal-information bases itself in truth, using reality to achieve intentionally harmful effects, whereas both misinformation and disinformation use false information to achieve effects and influence. In misinformation, these effects are not intentionally harmful, whereas disinformation seeks to cause harm. In the case of anti-NATO information in the Western Balkans, all three forms of information can be identified in different situations according to different contexts.

Vulnerabilities and Aspirations

Disinformation has limited potential to gain influence in societies that are strong and resilient. It must therefore exploit ideological, economic and political vulnerabilities if it is to influence the information environment. This article provides an overview of regional vulnerabilities and aspirations, with specific reference to Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, to examine how and why their respective societies may be vulnerable to disinformation specific to anti-NATO narratives. It then summarises societal attitudes to NATO and the West in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro and situates their respective positions within the wider framework of the Western Balkans.

Vulnerabilities in the countries' media landscapes have afforded new opportunities for disinformation to be disseminated and achieve potential influence. According to Rrapo Zguri, media systems in the Western Balkans reflect characteristics of Hallin and Mancini's Politicized Pluralistic Model, in which the media is 'intimately involved in the political conflicts that mark the history of the region, and there is a strong tradition of regarding them as means of ideological expression

and political mobilization¹. Key vulnerabilities in the media landscape include, but are not limited to: lack of media freedom; low media literacy levels; and poor regulation of the online media environment.

As some reports have argued, lack of media freedom in some Western Balkan countries has increased societal vulnerability to disinformation. Media ownership and control inevitably contributes to media bias and the use of disinformation to fulfil political or economic agendas. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index (BTI) report of 2018, frictions between main political parties in Albania often undermine the efficiency of democratic institutions, and parties consider the 'conflict as a tool to divide and control supporters'². This is reflected in media that is controlled by political parties, and the (dis) information published in order to maintain or attract political support, and gain leverage over political opponents. To some extent, questions of media ownership and control are inextricable from questions of systemic corruption and third-party influence in the media space, which are elucidated further on in the article. These factors all heighten the risk of disinformation, and limit the freedom of information and media transparency, thereby preventing disinformation from being exposed. For example, reports on freedom of information in Croatia indicate that journalists conducting investigations into corruption, organised crime, or domestic war crimes are often subjected to harassment campaigns³. In Albania and Montenegro, the media landscape is similarly criticised.

All three countries suffer from low media literacy levels. This is apparent on a number of levels, from the publication of disinformation without fact-checking, to the use of emotionally-loaded terminology

- 1 Hallin, Daniel C. and Mancini, Paolo (2004) Comparing media systems: Three models of media and politics, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 89 <<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/comparing-media-systems/B7A12371782B7A1D62BA1A72C1395E43>>.
- 2 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018) BTI 2018 - Albania Country Report. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung) <<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/alb/ity/2018/itr/ecse/>>.
- 3 Ibid.

in mainstream media. Popular newspapers and news portals opt for terms such as ‘accused’, ‘exclaimed’, ‘highlighted’, ‘protested’ rather than adopting neutral verbs like ‘said’, ‘reported’ or ‘stated’, and tend to use sensationalist headlines. Poor media literacy among public audiences and journalists could decrease audiences’ ability to distinguish between truths and half-truths. While increased media literacy has been proven to equip populations with the tools to recognise media bias and improve understanding of underlying, institutional reasons for this bias⁴, there has been little research into or efforts to rectify media illiteracy in any of these countries. In Albania, for example, the concept of media literacy is neither understood nor publicly debated; the term does not even exist in the Albanian language⁵.

In Montenegro, and among Serbian minorities in Croatia, vulnerabilities in the media landscape also stem from the influence of Serbian language media. The regional media market is limited and linked by regional linguistic and cultural similarities, and therefore Serbian media is widely disseminated among Serbian speaking populations in the whole region. Although Montenegro itself rarely is an original source of anti-NATO narratives, it shares (dis)information in Serbian language from the wider Western Balkan region. Therefore, regional anti-NATO narratives can easily find their way into the Montenegrin media space from abroad. The majority of them come from Serbian news outlets, Russian media in Serbian language such as Sputnik Srbija, and, more recently, from outlets in the Republic of Srpska⁶. To some extent, Serbian influence makes the dissemination of disinformation systemic where Serbian is spoken in Montenegro and in other countries in the region with Serbian speaking populations.

4 The Civil Society Facility, Media Freedom and Accountability Programme (2017) ‘Partnership in Southeast Europe for the Development of the Media’ in Media Literacy and Education Needs of Journalists and the Public in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, (March).

<http://www.mediacentrbg.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Media-Literacy-and-Education-Needs-of-Journalists-and-the-Public_REPORT_FINAL.pdf>.

5 Ibid.

6 Tomović, Dusica (2017) ‘Pro-Russian Montenegrins Publish New Anti-Western Media’, Balkan Insight, 8 October. <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/pro-russian-montenegrins-publish-new-anti-western-media-10-17-2017>>.

Finally, although online media and social media is increasingly accessible in the region, it remains unregulated or ineffectively regulated by national legal frameworks. Public media consumption is growing rapidly and the number of online news outlets, from both traditional and non-traditional news sources, have multiplied accordingly. For example, in 2011, 248,000 Albanians had access to broadband through their mobile phones. Just one year later, the number more than doubled due to increased mobile network coverage and decreasing prices, reaching 594,000⁷. Despite this increase, the European Union (EU) Progress Reports have consistently highlighted that ‘the regulatory authority of electronic media still lacks sufficient administrative and technical capacity and independence’⁸. Legal frameworks are ineffective and cannot control non-mainstream media access, nor control the content, quantity or quantity of disinformation disseminated via these channels.

Indeed, the media space in the region is increasingly vast and unregulated, leaving it vulnerable to disinformation. This is partly due to increased competition in the media landscape. As existing media players compete with new, non-traditional voices in the media space, some outlets are willingly publishing disinformation, and misinformation such as sensationalist articles, in order to increase their respective readership and audiences and retain advertising contracts. While traditional media channels may not be intentionally spreading misinformation, disinformation or mal-information, they may unintentionally publish information that has not been fact-checked, standardised or filtered to boost figures, or they may give platforms to self-proclaimed ‘experts’ and conspiracy theorists who spread anti-Western narratives. Systemic vulnerabilities in the media landscape can make nations vulnerable to anti-NATO disinformation even if the government and public position towards NATO is positive.

7 Londo, Ilda (2014) ‘Hate speech in online media in Albania’ in Hate speech in online media in South East Europe, Remzi Lani(ed.), (Tirana: Albanian Media Institute), p. 21 <<http://www.institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Hate%20speech%20in%20online%20media%20in%20SEE.pdf>

8 Ibid. p.20.

Political and economic vulnerabilities might also contribute to the dissemination of disinformation in the Western Balkans. Political polarisation and conflict among political elites, low levels of public trust towards the government elect and existing electoral frameworks, lack of government transparency, and allegations of corruption all heighten vulnerability to disinformation. Albania, Croatia and Montenegro all show signs of political and economic weaknesses, which can be exploited to influence public opinion. Montenegro's political landscape is 'fragmented, polarised and marked by lack of political dialogue, notably in democratic institutions'⁹, which makes it systemically vulnerable to disinformation. Similarly, the Croatian political landscape is weakened by allegations of corruption and friction between coalition partners at the government level. In Albania, there has been a continuous power struggle among the political elite since the fall of communism in the 1990s. While political divisions do not reflect public opinion, which is unified around the idea of the Albanian nation-state and its potential EU membership, the political elite remains deeply divided and shows 'inefficiency and unwillingness to come together in a common effort to push forward the issues of Albanian national identity and unity'¹⁰.

The rise of nationalism in Western Balkan countries has also contributed to anti-NATO narratives. Nationalist discourse has exacerbated political polarisation and historic tensions between ethnic, cultural and political identities, frequently relying on recourse to disinformation to galvanise and divide public opinion, challenge the political status quo, and also, to undermine government legitimacy. As a result, narratives that are specifically anti-NATO often appear as by-products of nationalist discourse in the media.

9 The European Commission (2018) Montenegro Report, (Strasbourg, April 2018). <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-montenegro-report.pdf>>.

10 Islami, Enfrid (2013) The necessary return of ideology: Political parties and ideological profile in Albania, (Tirana: AIIS). <<http://www.aiis-albania.org/sites/default/files/PoliticalParties.pdf>>.

Government legitimacy is easily undermined where the political landscape is divided. Questions of national sovereignty, stability and continuity rely on perceived legitimacy. Where government legitimacy is challenged, narratives challenging the status quo, such as those found in nationalist discourse, may gain traction. Umut Özkirimli posits nationalism as a reciprocal 'discourse'¹¹ between individual identities and nation-states. This implies a relationship between nation-state and individual. Where individual interests and values are not recognised, and are discounted or undermined by conflicting interests and values upheld by the nation-state, then there is no discourse. Discourse is then shifted to spheres outside of the mainstream national media. Individuals who feel marginalised or alienated by public discourse and national media may turn to alternative information sources. It is here that existing vulnerabilities are amplified, and disinformation abounds in an echo-chamber outside of the mainstream media. This is evident in Montenegro, where a lack of consensus towards critical junctures in its recent political history, political polarisation, and allegations of state corruption have called into question the legitimacy of the national sovereign power.

Vulnerabilities in the media space are also heightened by the broader economic context. It is possible to identify at least two areas where the economy can significantly impact the media landscape. First, in cases where media outlets rely on foreign or private investors for funding, or for advertisements. For example, in Croatia, the Russian company, Gazprom, advertises on both Styria and Hanza media outlets and also on smaller news portals. Foreign investment inevitably impacts outlets' media freedom and neutrality, and makes them vulnerable to pushing foreign agendas. Even where foreign investment does not directly involve media outlets, it can have an impact on the media landscape. In Montenegro, rising public debt and fiscal deficits, alongside high

11 Özkirimli, Umut (2006) *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, (London:Palgrave), pp. 218-9.

levels of unemployment are of particular concern¹². Montenegro's macroeconomic stability relies heavily on Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs). Although FDIs have played a crucial role in Montenegro's economic growth since 2006, the Montenegrin economy is overly dependent on the influx of capital from abroad. Albania is equally reliant on FDIs to bolster its economy, and the government has even implemented a number of fiscal and legislative reforms to attract more of them¹³. This reflects a more general strategy to privatise key sectors in Albania, such as banking, energy and communication sectors. This significantly increases national vulnerability to external influence in the media space and outside of it. In Montenegro, Russian FDIs make up nearly one third of the country's GDP and it is the single largest direct investor in Montenegro. Moreover, one third of all foreign companies in Montenegro in 2016 were owned by Russian nationals. Russia also plays a crucial role in supporting the Croatian economy: Two of their largest banks, state-controlled Sberbank and VTB, hold the largest equity stakes in Agrokor following the passing of the 'Lex Agrokor' law, which was designed to limit the risk of bankruptcy on the economy¹⁴.

Second, narratives may specifically exploit economic uncertainty or poor economies to bolster political narratives. For example, in Croatia, the financial crisis of 2008 has had a lasting and detrimental effect on the Croatian economy, resulting in micro and macroeconomic imbalances. To date, Croatia is still ranked among the three worst

12 In March 2018, Montenegro's public debt totalled 60.6 percent of GDP. This is largely a result of financing the construction of the Bar-Boljare highway. Although the International Monetary Fund recognised the economic benefits of this project in the long run, it concluded that existing debts required overly significant fiscal adjustments to be made, and that Montenegro will be unlikely to fund remaining sections of the highway in the foreseeable future. Moreover, a recent study conducted by the Center for Global Development identified Montenegro as one of eight countries of particular economic concern due to its highway project.

13 According to Santander Trade Portal, Annual FDIs in Albania have increased significantly over the past ten years, and averaged close to \$1 billion per year between 2008 and 2017.

14 Financial Times (2018) 'Agrokor turnaround should focus on the business, not its owners', 2 May. <<https://www.ft.com/content/cf776e70-4de8-11e8-8a8e-22951a2d8493>>.

European economies¹⁵. This has meant that anti-NATO narratives in Croatia often refer to questions of funding, for example, ‘NATO or defence spending is a waste of money’, where they would be more likely to gain traction in the context of the struggling economy. Similar narratives have been employed in Montenegro.

State vulnerability to private sector interests and high levels of corruption at both political and public levels continue to plague the Western Balkan region. Indeed, the EU enlargement strategy warned that Western Balkan countries show ‘some elements of state capture, including links with organised crime and corruption at all levels of government and administration, as well as a strong entanglement of public and private interests’¹⁶. Corruption heightens the risk of disinformation by limiting freedom of information and media transparency, and, therefore, prevents disinformation from being exposed. Evidence of third-party influence in the media space can be observed in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro. For example, Albanian political elites and parties are inextricably tied to a number of foreign and domestic businesses and criminal organisations. The BTI 2018 for Albania links high profile politicians to criminal organisations, stating that these ‘informal links manifest themselves in various forms: the influence of private businesses on political decisions, politicians’ control of power businesses, and a general distribution of public funds through party cronies, clientelist networks and personal contacts’¹⁷. Media outlets feature these connections between politics, business and criminal interests on a daily basis¹⁸. Albania’s vulnerability to

15 The European Commission (2018) Country Report Croatia, Including an In-Depth Review on the prevention and correction of macroeconomic imbalances, (Brussels, March). <<https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/2018-european-semester-country-report-croatia-en.pdf>>.

16 The European Commission (2018) A credible enlargement perspective for enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans, (Strasbourg, February). <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf>.

17 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018) BTI 2018 - Albania Country Report. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung) <<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/alb/ity/2018/itr/ecse/>>.

18 Ibid.

organised crime and private interests is heightened due to poor economic development and the endemic corruption and distrust of ineffective judiciary and democratic institutions. These vulnerabilities have not only undermined Albania's EU aspirations and compromised its role as a contributor to regional and global security, but also exposed the country to a number of threats from disinformation¹⁹. Furthermore, distrust and disillusionment with governing bodies at large offer a motive for the public consumption of non-mainstream media, which is poorly regulated and where disinformation is more likely to be available. This is also true for Montenegro and Croatia.

Albanian, Croatian and Montenegrin Attitudes Towards NATO

Albania, Croatia and Montenegro are the newest members of NATO, but all three differ in their respective stances towards the Alliance. Public support for NATO in these countries is largely influenced by threat perception, geographical position and historical experience, as well as by the process through which they became NATO members. Both Croatia and Albania joined in 2009, while Montenegro joined in 2017.

Intra-national polarisation in Montenegro and Croatia towards NATO and NATO membership sits in contrast to the overwhelming public support for NATO in Albania²⁰. According to the Albanian Government,

19 Lamallari, Besfort and Zhilla, Fabian (2015) Organized Crime Threat Assessment in Albania, (Tirana: Open Society Foundation for Albania). <http://globalinitiative.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Threat_Assessment_of_Albanian_Organised.pdf>.

20 According to the BTI 2018 Montenegro Country Report, a public opinion poll conducted in December 2016 by the NGO the Center for Democracy and Human Rights (CEDEM) showed that 39.5 percent of Montenegrin citizens supported integration in NATO, while 39.7 percent of them opposed NATO membership. Similarly, opinion polls published by the CRS Report for Congress in 2008 showed that only slightly more than half of the Croatian population supported NATO membership, despite the Croatian government's efforts to inform the public of the advantages of NATO membership. Moreover, the report states that, following an attack on the Croatian embassy in Belgrade after Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in February 2008, this number increased to over 60 percent. Congressional Research Service, Vincent Morelli (ed.) (2009) 'NATO Enlargement: Albania, Croatia, and Possible Future Candidates', 14 April. <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL34701.pdf>>.

95 percent of the population are in favour of NATO²¹. While this inevitably heightens both Croatian and Montenegrin vulnerability to anti-NATO disinformation in comparison to Albania, wider contextual vulnerabilities outlined in previous sections play a crucial role in shaping the content and form of disinformation, and determining whether the media landscape is vulnerable to disinformation.

Of the three countries, the Albanian political and public will is most strongly aligned with NATO. Since joining the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1992, Albania has engaged extensively with NATO, and their membership was approved in 2009, with the EU agreeing to visa liberalisation with Albania just a year later. Unsurprisingly, very few anti-NATO narratives are disseminated as part of disinformation campaigns in mainstream Albanian media. This reflects the Euro-Atlantic outlook that informs their foreign policy agenda, and has been upheld in Albanian politics since the fall of Enver Hoxha's communist regime in December 1990, when the People's Socialist Republic of Albania became the Republic of Albania. Despite ideological differences amongst Albanian political parties, no party has presented an alternative to, or substantially altered, the country's foreign policy agenda. All parties have aligned in a Western direction and continue to aspire to EU membership.

Although the EU rejected Albania's membership bid on three separate occasions between 2009 and 2013, Edi Rama's Socialist Party (SP) has highlighted Albania's EU ambitions and endeavoured to make the reforms necessary to achieve it²². This has been a central narrative of SP's political campaign to date. In June 2014, Albania was granted official EU candidate status. However, reforms in the judiciary sector were stalled, and its ties to corruption and crime postponed the opening of

21 Ministria e Mbrojtjes, 'Historiku i marrëdhënieve NATO-Shqipëri'. <http://www.mod.gov.al/arkiv/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=516:histori-ku-i-marredhenieve-nato-shqiperi&catid=198&Itemid=589>.

22 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018) BTI 2018 - Albania Country Report. (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung) <<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/alb/ity/2018/itr/ecse/>>.

accession negotiations from the end of 2015 to 2018. To date, Albania is yet to open accession negotiations.

Although anti-Western or anti-NATO narratives have rarely featured in traditional Albanian media until very recently, vulnerabilities do exist and some anti-Western figures have been given platforms in mainstream media. As discussed earlier, lack of unregulated online media space combined with poor media literacy among public audiences and journalists has decreased societal resilience to potential disinformation.

Croatia joined NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013 as a demonstration of Croatia's commitment to democratisation and Europeanisation following the war fought between Croat forces and the Yugoslav People's Army from 1991 to 1995, following Croatia's declaration of independence from the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. NATO and EU membership finalised the Croatian independence process and secured the country's newfound geopolitical, social and economic position in Europe. Polls conducted in 2006, prior to joining NATO, suggested that public support for NATO membership was fairly low, with only one-third of Croatians expressing support for NATO membership²³. Since joining NATO, public support has slightly increased²⁴, and a Gallup world poll conducted in 2016 showed that 52 percent of Croatians associated NATO with the protection of their country, while only 17 percent saw it as a threat, and a further 19 percent remained neutral²⁵. Despite some initial public approval, the benefits of EU accession have largely been overshadowed by the

23 Hendrickson, Ryan C. and Smith, Ryan P. (2006) 'Croatia and NATO: Moving Toward Alliance Membership' in *Comparative Strategy*, Volume 25, Issue 4, (December), pp. 297-306 <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01495930601028630?needAccess=true&instName=King%27s+College+London>>

24 Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Croatia (2010) 'Poll on NATO', 1 April. <<https://www.morh.hr/en/news/news/6367-poll-on-nato.html>>.

25 Smith, Michael (2017) 'Most NATO Members in Eastern Europe See It as Protection', Gallup, 10 February. <<https://news.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx>>.

political and economic context. Aforementioned grievances have led to public dissatisfaction and disenchantment with EU membership, which has provoked anti-EU, anti-Western and anti-NATO sentiment amongst some part of population. This has manifested in the rise of the populist political party, Human Shield, or 'Živi Zid', in mainstream politics. The party advocates military neutrality, specifically calling for Croatia's exit from NATO and withdrawal from all NATO missions. Although they hold only 3 seats in Sabor (Croatian Parliament), they have gained popularity extremely quickly and are now the third most popular party in Croatia according to the Croatian daily 'Jutarnji list' polls²⁶.

The question of NATO membership is a particularly divisive issue in Montenegrin politics, and splits society in almost two equal halves²⁷. After Montenegro declared independence in 2006 it joined the United Nations (UN), successfully concluded the NATO integration process in June 2017, and was granted EU candidate status in December 2010. EU negotiations began in June 2012 with the aim of joining before 2025. The 2006 independence referendum divided opinion, splitting Montenegro 55.5 percent in favour and 44.5 percent against Montenegrin independence²⁸. This division reflected and exacerbated existing political, social, ethnic and cultural tensions, and Montenegrin society has become deeply divided. This can, in part, be attributed to the fact that those who opposed Montenegrin independence identified with Serbs and Serbian nationalism, or with Montenegro's historical ties with Russia, while those in favour strongly identified with Western politics and ideology. The ruling Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS), which has been in power for over three decades in Montenegro, is therefore

26 Jutarnji List (2018) 'Živi zid apsolutni rekorder među političkim strankama u kršenju zakona', 27 January.<<https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/zivi-zid-apsolutni-rekorder-medu-politickim-strankama-u-krsenju-zakona-velika-analiza-pokazala-citav-niz-sumnjivih-poteza-antisistemske-stranke/6975498/>>.

27 Bertelsmann Stiftung (2018) BTI 2018 – Croatia Country Report, (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung).<<https://www.bti-project.org/en/reports/country-reports/detail/itc/hrv/ity/2018/itr/ecse>>.

28 Bešić, Miloš and Spasojević, Dušan (2018) 'Montenegro, NATO and the divided society' in *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Volume 51, Issue 2, June, pp. 139-150<<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0967067X18300242>>.

inextricably linked to the pro-independence and pro-West political ideology that polarises Montenegrin society at every level. Tensions between the two opposing stances came to the fore when Montenegro joined NATO in 2017²⁹. Arguably, Montenegrins who do not support Montenegro's independence and pro-Western stance are therefore more susceptible to anti-NATO disinformation.

Main Actors and Channels Disseminating Anti-NATO Disinformation

It is possible to identify several channels and patterns that are used for anti-NATO disinformation in the countries analysed. Most of them are visible in Montenegro, where anti-NATO information achieves greater resonance with a wider audience, as mentioned previously. However, even in Albania and Croatia where mainstream political opinions are supportive towards NATO, anti-NATO disinformation can be found in non-traditional, fringe media spaces.

Main actors and channels disseminating anti-NATO information include:

- › **Serbian media** (mainly daily tabloids) which traditionally distributes anti-NATO narratives and exerts influence in the wider Western Balkan region in countries with Serbian speaking populations (particularly Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and, to some extent Croatia and Kosovo).
- › **Online media platforms** that disseminate anti-Western stances, often supported by false facts or conspiracy theories, for example, in4s.net, Slobodacg.me, Borba.me, Sedmica.me in Montenegro, gazetadita.al, faxweb.al, gazetaimpakt.com, sot.com.al, oranews.al and lapsi.al in Albania, and some of the pro – Russian online

29 Džankić, Jelena (2013) 'Cutting the mists of the Black Mountain: Cleavages in Montenegro's divide over statehood and identity' in Nationalities Papers, Volume 41, Issue 3, March, pp. 412-430, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00905992.2012.743514>>.

media platforms in Croatia, such as Novisvjetskiporedak.com or Logično.com.

- › **Russian international media in local languages**, such as Sputnik Srbija, which has an online platform and a radio station in Serbian language, and actively distributes content on social media. Another Russian media platform, Russia Beyond, provides weekly and monthly supplements to the Montenegrin media. This platform has also developed a vast social media network and an app, which is available in Serbian, Croatian and Macedonian languages, and is gaining popularity.
- › **Social media**, especially Facebook, which is the most popular platform in all countries of analysis, but also, to a lesser extent, Twitter and Youtube. Some anti-NATO influencers, like populist politicians with anti-NATO agenda, religious leaders (from the Serbian Orthodox Church or the Ostrog Monastery in Montenegro which is the 7th most popular Facebook page), and activists, have Facebook pages with a higher number of followers compared to mainstream government politicians.
- › **NGO's**, such as the 'Movement of Neutrality' or 'No to war, no to NATO' that were founded upon Montenegro's accession process to NATO.
- › **Religious institutions and leaders**, such as the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro that is very vocal about NATO related topics and participates actively in the debate against NATO or imams in Albania who promote anti-US/anti-NATO narratives.
- › **'Experts'**, including academics, journalists, and self-proclaimed experts whose views can be used for anti-West propaganda, such as the 'historian', Olsi Jazexhi, who shares anti-Western views in Albania. His views have been disseminated by fringe, conspiracy theory outlets as well as by the mainstream Albanian media.

Main Anti-NATO Narratives

The StratCom COE's study identifies several anti-NATO narratives in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro that are both generic and country specific:

- › NATO is provocative and an aggressor
- › NATO is weak and obsolete and Russia is stronger
- › NATO/defence funding is a waste of money and membership can endanger economy
- › NATO bombs with depleted uranium has caused increased numbers of cancer cases in the region
- › NATO supports Fascism/Nazism
- › NATO is a tool to carry out the US's fight against the Muslim world
- › NATO is a tool of US geopolitical interest in the region; NATO uses its members as 'vassal' states

Of note, is that anti-NATO narratives are often by-products of other narratives. For example, anti-NATO narratives may stem from radical Islam, anti-EU, anti-West and anti-US narratives, or Nationalist narratives, such as the 'Croatia-first narrative'.

'NATO is provocative and an aggressor'

This narrative is used throughout the Western Balkan region, and often draws on the historic examples of the NATO bombing campaign in former Yugoslavia in 1999³⁰. In some cases, narratives that depict

30 NATO bombings against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia were conducted in Kosovo from March-June 1999 as part of 'Operation Allied Force'.

NATO to be provocative and aggressive also draw on the NATO bombing campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995. However, they predominantly refer to the former due to the fact that it was conducted 'with the stated purpose of implementing UN Security Council resolutions but without Security Council authorisation'³¹. Similar narratives are also disseminated in eFP host countries, however, here the main focus is on NATO's aggressive posture and militarisation close to Russia's borders.

'NATO is weak and obsolete and Russia is stronger'

This narrative is also common, and often draws on contextual examples from Syria and the Ukraine. For example, the pro-Russian Croatian tabloid, Logicno.com, discusses the new stealth F-22's use in Syria, declaring it to have 'lost the battle'³² against superior Russian radar systems in the region. The narrative is also used in all eFP host countries although here, the narrative tends to emphasise that NATO is divided (and that it will not save those countries in case of war with Russia), and try to highlight the weaknesses of NATO troops in the region.

'NATO/defence funding is a waste of money/membership can endanger economy'

This narrative would arguably gain traction in both Montenegro and Croatia in the context of their struggling economies. In Montenegro, the 'economy in danger' narrative is one of the most widespread. This narrative usually follows two main lines of argumentation: First, that NATO membership is too expensive, and second, that NATO membership will lead to the deterioration of relations with Russia

31 Roberts, Adam (1999) 'NATO's 'Humanitarian War' over Kosovo' in Survival, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Volume 41, Issue 3, Autumn, p. 102 <<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/sipa/S6800/courseworks/NATOhumanitarian.pdf>>.

32 Logično (2018) 'Američki lovac 5. generacije otkrio je Rusima u Siriji sve svoje tajne', 29 May. <<https://www.logicno.com/politika/americki-lovac-5-generacije-otkrio-je-rusima-u-siriji-sve-svoje-tajne.html>>

that would destroy the Montenegrin economy. The argument that NATO membership would be too expensive was used extensively throughout Montenegro's accession process. During this period, anti-NATO campaigns recycled messaging that was successful in previous accession processes such as in Slovenia and Croatia³³. However, following accession, narratives have increasingly focused on the message that NATO will endanger Montenegrin economy and undermine crucial economic relations with Russia. This narrative is particularly resonant because myths about Montenegro's economic dependence on Russia have been well-established throughout Montenegrin history: During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Montenegro depended on Russian foreign aid, to the extent that the country's monarch was seen as a 'slave to Petrograd's temper'³⁴. Similar narratives are also prevalent in Croatian media, where Russia is perceived to be inextricably tied to the Croatian economy, for example, in the case of Agrokor. This case has led Russian Ambassador Azimov to frequently stress that 'Russia can do more for Croatia than US and EU together'³⁵, and therefore, narratives that depict NATO membership as detrimental to Croatian economic interests may increasingly gain traction if the economy does not improve. These narratives also tie more broadly into narratives about relations with Russia, such as 'NATO wrongly accuses Russia' and 'it is better having Russia as a friend'.

33 Pollitika.com (2008) 'Argumentiranje ulaska u NATO', 26 March. <<https://pollitika.com/argumentiranje-ulaska-u-nato>>.

34 Andrijašević, Živko (2018) 'Crna Gora Vjekovima Je Zavisila Od Strane Pomoći – njenu privrženost najskuplje je plaćala Rusija', Montenegrina.net, 14 November. <http://www.montenegrina.net/pages/pages1/istorija/cg_u_xix_vijeku/cg_vjekovima_je_zavisila_od_strane_pomoci.htm>.

35 Pavlic, Vedran (2018), 'Russia can do more for Croatia than US and EU together', Total Croatia News, 18 May. <<https://www.total-croatia-news.com/politics/28386-russia-can-do-more-for-croatia-than-us-and-eu-put-together>>.

'NATO bombs with depleted uranium has caused increased numbers of cancer cases in the region'

This narrative has been specifically used in relation to Montenegro, although the narrative originated from Serbia. The narrative has invented the notion of regional 'cancer epidemics', supposedly caused by the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia. Proliferators of the narrative invent evidence showing that Depleted Uranium used by NATO has poisoned soil, water supplies and air, and caused irreparable damage to regional flora and fauna. They offer questionable statistics about the rising cases of cancer, suggesting that the number of cases will peak at a future date. Despite claims made by these narratives, 'scientific and medical research continues to disprove any link between Depleted Uranium and the reported negative health effects'³⁶.

'NATO supports Fascism/ Nazism'

These narratives have surfaced in both Montenegro and Croatia. In Croatia, particularly, pro-Russian online platforms regularly publish anti-NATO content comparing NATO to the Nazi regime³⁷. For example, an article in Logično uses mal-information to draw links between Nazi Germany and NATO, using the case of General Adolf Heusinger to back up its claims and add legitimacy to their publication³⁸. Such narratives seek to undermine the moral legitimacy of NATO as an institution by appealing to public morality to alienate support for NATO.

36 NATO (2005) 'Depleted uranium', 17 March 2005. <<https://www.nato.int/du/home.htm>>.

37 Logično (2018) 'Povijest nacizma, angloameričkih veza s Hitlerom i NATO paktu koju ne smijete znati', 21 January. <<https://www.logicno.com/politika/povijest-nacizma-angloamerickih-veza-s-hitlerom-i-nato-paktu-koju-ne-smijete-znati.html>>.

38 Heusinger was chief of the 'Operationsabteilung' in Nazi Germany during the Second World War. He testified at the Nuremberg trials, and was later appointed chairman of the NATO Military Committee, where he worked from 1961 to 1964 until his retirement.

'NATO as a tool of US plan to fight Muslim world'

This narrative is specific to Albania and targets its religious Muslim population³⁹. However equivalent narratives are disseminated in countries with a similar ethnic and religious demography, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Albania is religiously diverse and popular attitudes differ towards religion's position and role in society. Although a strong tolerant component characterises the overall perception and behavior towards religious diversity⁴⁰ in Albania, the Islamic community is becoming more vulnerable to anti-Western and anti-NATO narratives due to a rise in religious extremism in the region: According to INSTAT data, roughly 114 Albanians have travelled to conflict areas in Syria and Iraq, several small-scale mosques have been shut down for being too radical, and some imams, such as Imam Armand Ali, have gained popularity in the public media and publicly spread anti-Western narratives⁴¹. Key figures of other religions have not made any public anti-Western statements or attempted to spread anti-Western propaganda to date. This makes the Muslim population in Albania particularly vulnerable to religious indoctrination and radicalisation, and for anti-West and anti-NATO disinformation to gain traction amongst these groups. As long as these kind of radical imams and ideologies exist and find space in the media to disseminate them, Muslim individuals who have already been radicalised, or are susceptible to radicalisation, remain vulnerable because they may trust religious leaders more than government officials and politicians. Thus, anti-NATO or anti-Western narratives have the potential to gain traction among this audience. For example,

39 Albanians (in Albania and Kosovo) are often ethnically Muslim due to their ethnic and cultural heritage from Ottoman Empire, rather than religious followers of the Islamic faith.

40 Melady, Thomas P. (2010) 'Albania: a nation of unique inter-religious tolerance and steadfast aspirations for EU integration' in Religious Freedom in Albania, Ambassador's Review. <<http://www.academicus.edu.al/nr7/Academicus-MMXIII-7-013-018.pdf>>.

41 The Institute of Statistics – INSTAT (2011) 'Njoftim per Media'. <https://web.archive.org/web/20170326091156/http://www.instat.gov.al/media/177358/njoftim_per_media_-_fjala_e_drejtore_t_e_instat_ines_nurja_per_rezultatet_finale_te_census_2011.pdf>.

the radical cleric, Imam Armand Aliu, has expressed anti-Western and anti-NATO views on popular channels, including television News 24 and Ora News. Aliu's views led to him being questioned by the anti-terror police, and he was subsequently charged for hateful speech and aggravation of the public order.⁴²

'NATO is a tool of US geopolitical interest in the region/ NATO uses its members as "vassal" states'

This narrative has saturated the media space in the whole Western Balkan region. It draws on the idea of NATO's exploitation of weaker members, or the idea of NATO members submitting to the will of the US in order to achieve regional influence. This narrative is often used in reference to the actual, potential, or imagined building of NATO bases on sovereign territory in the Western Balkans.

For example, in August, Edi Rama announced that NATO would be locating its first airbase in Albania. Following this announcement, Lapsi.al, an online news portal with 136,000 followers on Facebook, posted an article with the headline: 'Polemics/Who does a NATO airbase in Albania serve?'⁴³. The fact that the decision to build the airbase was made following a meeting with US Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, was used to reinforce narratives about US influence in the Western Balkan region, and to depict Albania as a 'vassal' state for NATO/US interests that were not in Albanian interests. Although the article's claims that Albanians strongly objected to this airbase were unsubstantiated, it does raise pertinent questions about the disjuncture between NATO presence in the Western Balkans and improved democratic processes. This would seemingly resonate in a context where the Albanian population has seen no real improvement to national democratic institutions since joining NATO, which has heightened scepticism towards the practical advantages of EU and NATO membership.

42 Tpz.al (2017) 'Imami Armand Ali: Jam kërcënuar me thyrje brinjësh nga anti-terrori', 15 December. <<http://www.tpz.al/2017/12/15/imami-armand-ali-jam-kercenuar-me-thyrje-brinjesh-nga-anti-terrori>>.

43 Lapsi.al (2018) 'Polemika/ Kujt i shërben një bazë e NATO-s në Shqipëri?', 6 August. <<https://lapsi.al/2018/08/06/polemika-kujt-i-sherben-nje-baze-e-nato-s-ne-shqiperi>>.

Moreover, this incident had repercussions in the wider Western Balkan region and sparked further disinformation campaigns. Since August, disinformation stating that NATO will build military bases in Montenegro and neighbouring regions has appeared frequently in Montenegrin media. This exemplifies how true information can be distorted for use as disinformation in neighbouring countries in the Western Balkans region, and how state and non-state actors can build false narratives based on real life events in order to achieve influence.

Narratives about NATO bases were also used during Montenegro's accession process, in an attempt to undermine public support for NATO. Even now that accession has been successful, narratives about NATO bases in Montenegro continue to be exploited as a means of alienating support for NATO and dividing popular opinion. According to polls, only a quarter of the Montenegrin population clearly understands that NATO has no plans to open new bases or station troops on Montenegro's sovereign territory⁴⁴. In July 2018 several stories about a proposed NATO base reappeared in Montenegrin media, and was analysed by the fact-checking site Raskrinkavanje.me. Media outlets suggested a NATO base would be built in Sinjajevina, drawing on disinformation published in Serbian news outlet 'Politika', in an article entitled: 'A NATO Base will be built on Sinjajevina' [NATO bazu gradiće na Sinjajevini]⁴⁵. The article claimed that the Montenegrin Ministry of Defense had announced that it would build a shooting range, an area to destroy surplus weapons and a NATO base on Mount Sinajevina in the North-East of the country. This article was then republished by media in both Montenegro and Serbia

44 International Republican Institute and Center for Insights in Survey Research (2017) 'Public Opinion in Montenegro'. <<http://www.iri.org/resource/montenegro-poll-reveals-anti-western-tilt-widespread-dissatisfaction-country's-trajectory>>.

45 Đurić, Novica (2018) 'NATO bazu gradiće na Sinjajevini', 13 July. <<http://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/407279/NATO-bazu-gradice-na-Sinjajevini>>.

in PCNEN, Mondo, IN4S, Novosti, Blic, Ekspres, and Informer⁴⁶. Some of the outlets exploited this information by using sensationalist headlines as click-bait.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Similar vulnerabilities, tactics and distribution channels in anti-NATO disinformation have been identified across all three countries. However, vulnerability to disinformation does not mean that disinformation will necessarily gain traction. Traction depends on how disinformation exploits legislative and institutional vulnerabilities to disseminate narratives, how these narratives engage with the wider political, economic and social context, and whether these resonate with audiences on an ideological level. Disinformation and its effects should therefore be analysed according to regionally and contextually specific situations in order to address actual, or potential, threats and consider the implications they have for regional stability and future resilience.

The presence of anti-NATO narratives in public discourse varies from country to country, and they do not appear to have gained traction in the

- 46 PCNEN (2018) 'Politika: Kod Mojkovca niče NATO baza?', 14 July. <<http://www.pcnen.com/portal/2018/07/14/politikakod-mojkovca-nice-nato-baza/>>;
MONDO (2018) 'Nova NATO baza u Crnoj Gori!', 14 July. <<http://mondo.rs/a1118392/Info/Ex-Yu/NATO-baza-na-Sinjajevini-u-Crnoj-Gori.html>>;
In4s (2018) 'Гради се НАТО база на Сињајевини?', 14 July. <<https://www.in4s.net/gradi-se-nato-baza-na-sinjajevini/>>;
Novosti (2018) 'Crna Gora Gradi Nato Bazu Na Ovoj Planini: To je prirodni park, uništiće izvore zbog poligona', 14 July. <<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/planeta.300.html:738194-CRNA-GORA-GRADI-NATO-BAZU-NA-OVOJ-PLANINI-To-je-prirodni-park-unistice-izvore-zbog-poligona>>;
Blic (2018) 'Politika: Gradi se NATO baza na Sinjajevini?', 14 July. <<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/politika-gradi-se-nato-baza-na-sinjajevini/kz65v9h>>;
Ekspres (2018) 'Ministarstvo Odbrane Crne Gore: Na planini Sinjavini gradi se NATO baza i poligon za uništavanje dotrajalog oružja! Meštani Protiv', 14 July. <<https://www.ekspres.net/region/ministarstvo-odbrane-crne-gore-na-planini-sinjavini-gradi-se-nato-baza-i-poligon-za-unistavanje-dotrajalog-oruzja-mestani-protiv>>;
Informer (2017) 'Zločinačka Alijansa Zauzima Crnogorske Planine! Gradi se NATO baza na Sinjajevini?!', 14 July. <<http://informer.rs/vesti/balkan/389237/zlocinacka-alijansa-zauzima-crnogorske-planine-gradi-nato-baza-sinjajevini>>.

mainstream media. However, the Western Balkan region is increasingly vulnerable to disinformation in general. It is possible that anti-NATO narratives might become more attractive to societies as contexts change and evolve, even if a country is outwardly supportive of NATO membership at the moment. Therefore, it is crucial that pro-Western stances in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro are not taken for granted and regarded as an unchanging status quo. Albania's EU integration is overly protracted, and its inability to open accession negotiations has made the population vulnerable to alternative options and narratives, despite the fact that the majority still supports Western integration. This vulnerability has been heightened by increased Russian and Chinese soft-power efforts in Albania and the wider Western Balkan region, with potential for the entrance of new actors that would add further complexity to the information space. Although Russian disinformation efforts in Montenegro reduced in intensity after they joined NATO in 2009, there are no signs these efforts will significantly decrease in the foreseeable future. Montenegrin-Western integration should not be taken for granted: NATO membership still remains one of the most divisive issues in Montenegrin society, and anti-NATO stances are often founded on historic myths, nationalist sentiment, sensationalist media coverage and disinformation campaigns.

No comprehensive research has been conducted into the scope and influence of the media in Albania, Croatia and Montenegro, nor into the traction of anti-NATO and anti-Western narratives specifically. Without extensive research into specifics of the national information space, such as media literacy and consumption, the influence of alternative, non-mainstream channels distributing anti-NATO narratives cannot be fully assessed. Moreover, although mainstream media generally do not proliferate anti-NATO narratives, there is no demonstrable, coordinated regional effort to counter disinformation campaigns. Government communication strategies have barely addressed this issue, including in the case of disinformation specifically related to NATO⁴⁷.

47 The Government of Montenegro adopted the communication strategy 'Montenegro – NATO member for the period until 2020' in June 2018.

Specific steps should be taken to conduct research into disinformation, and to work towards a coherent, cohesive approach to tackling disinformation, including investing in regional media literacy, and creating frameworks that are better equipped to control the media landscape as it continues to evolve. It should not fall to government institutions alone to implement these changes: Efforts to counter disinformation should be undertaken by multiple, regional governments, as a joint effort, as well as by businesses and civilian society.

- › Improve fact-checking capabilities to educate society on how to identify disinformation.
- › Establish a pre-emptive system to detect and debunk disinformation.
- › Address vulnerabilities that stem from social division and dissatisfaction (such as distrust in government and their Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations, societal/ethnic cleavages, unresolved conflicts within society, identity issues) as identified in the article. Even if vulnerable members of society are not currently targeted by disinformation, they could become the target in the near future, if the right context arises.
- › Develop a state narrative that communicates to their populations and can propose tangible future prospects. Audience analysis is crucial in this respect. Without knowledge of the opinions and beliefs of your audience it is impossible to address their needs.
- › Work on their Strategic Communications mindset (to ensure that words match their deeds and there is no say-do gap).
- › Work towards making government processes more transparent to limit public distrust and disillusionment with governing institutions at large.

The Western Balkans on their path towards EU/NATO accession

- › Empower the media and strengthen their independence. Strong and independent (and sufficiently funded) media is key to developing critical thinking and providing trustworthy, factual information to society.
- › Review regulatory/legal frameworks for the information space, especially the virtual space (e.g. on social media), to address the deliberate distribution of false information.
- › Promote regional and national cooperation to ensure a standardised, collective approach to countering disinformation and to learn from neighbouring countries' experiences.
- › EU/NATO should increase their public diplomacy efforts in the region to address public dissatisfaction and disillusionment with Western liberal democracy principles, and focus on implementing practical measures to bring about tangible results.

The Information Environment in Albania With Regard to EU/NATO Aspiration and the Role of Media

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Introduction: A Brief History of Albanian Media and Main Developments

Albania, as an EU candidate, is working towards developing and improving its legislation and institutional framework, regarding different fields and areas of society and economy, including infrastructure, agriculture, media, environment etc. In November 2016, the European Commission recommended the opening of the negotiations with Albania, while the Council of the European Union decided on 26 June 2018 to 'set out the path towards opening the accession negotiations in June 2019', while assessing all the progress made by Albania on the five key priorities¹. Given the media environment, a boom in the number of media outlets (to all kind of media – such as television, newspapers, radio, online portals or others) is evidenced. According to different reports and studies, however, the increased number of media does not necessarily mean an improvement of the quality of the information they provide.

The evolution of the media in Albania happened right after the fall of the dictatorship in 1991. During the regime there was the central

1 Council of the European Union (2018) Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process – Council Conclusions 26 June, p. 17, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>>.

radio station – Radio Tirana – and four other local radio stations: Radio Korça, Radio Gjirokastra, Radio Shkodra and Radio Kukësi. From the 60s onwards, the Albanian Television, a wide known propagandistic and centralised media, started to work officially. After the fall of the dictatorship, all sectors of economy, society and politics started to be reformed and transformed, even the media sector started to pluralise. Today, as data from Agency of Audiovisual Media (AMA) show, there are more than 255 operators of Audiovisual Media Service, 62 of them are TV operators, 56 radio stations, 100 cable televisions, 6 online televisions and around 60 online media. In addition, 19 daily newspapers are spread around the territory of Albania, where Tirana, Elbasani, Shkodra, Fieri, Vlora are the regions with the largest number of such media outlets². According to the IREX and USAID Media Sustainability Index 2018, 'Albanian citizens have no obstacles in accessing domestic or foreign sources of information... The general population, politicians, and media outlets widely use social media, especially Facebook. The law places no market restrictions on internet-service providers. Online media are not required to register; they operate with absolute freedom, and with an accompanying lack of accountability.'³

It is evidenced that most of the newspapers or televisions are subsidiaries of other businesses. This means that in most of the cases, as stated by the European Commission Report on Albania in 2018: 'Audiovisual media ownership and the transparency of media funding and public advertising remain key issues. The editorial direction of private media continues to be strongly influenced by political and business interests.'⁴ This is considered essential in order to improve

2 Audiovisual Media Agency data (2017); IREX and USAID (2018) Media Sustainability Index 2018 – The development of Independent Sustainable Media in Europe and Euroasia, p. 5, <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>>.

3 IREX (2018) Media Sustainability Index – Europe and Eurasia, p. 9, <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>>.

4 European Commission (2018) Report on Albania, p. 28, <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>>.

media freedom and to fight challenges such as 'fake news' and third-party influences. The link between media businesses and politics is distinguished even in the latest issue of the Nations in Transit Report. This publication, during the last three years, has assessed the independence of media in Albania, with a rating of 4.25⁵ demonstrating that there are still various issues and challenges Albanian media faces. While online media outlets might offer a more diverse and independent media, the intimate connection between politics, business and the media remain solid. The report even provides information on how 'media owners continued to use their outlets to blackmail or cajole the government into giving them economic favours.'⁶

Media ownership and development in Albania can be divided into three phases:

1. First phase (1990-1994): start of the democratic changes and the establishment of the first pluralist media where political parties represent the majority of media owners;
2. Second phase (1994-1998): media outlets, owned by journalists, started to emerge; and
3. Third phase (1998 to date): powerful businessmen/businesswomen started establishing their private media outlets – press, television and/or radio⁷.

The Media Sustainability Index 2018 report states that transparency of ownership for traditional media is not a major problem in Albania because all print and broadcasting companies are registered with the National Business Centre and the database is free, accessible, and easily

5 The ratings of Nations in Transit Report are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest.

6 Nations in Transit (2018) Country Report Albania, prepared by Blendi Kajsiu, p. 7, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/NiT2018_Albania_0.pdf>.

7 Zguri, Rrapo (2017) Relations Between Media and Politics In Albania, p. 14.

searchable online. Media owners are easily identified by the public and most of them are wide-known, which makes it easy to assess their political affiliation. Yet, the big challenge is 'not to know who owns what, but who pays whom'.⁸

One interesting development of the Albanian media is the increase in the number of online media. This is due to the fact that some of the traditional media, mostly journals and newspapers, are facing financial difficulties. This is the case for one of the biggest newspapers in Albania, 'Shqip', which ended its print version and is now only available online. Another study of the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) in Albania has shown how the earnings from the major printed newspapers have shrunk during the years and now they are focusing their profits on the online media and online portals. Based on this report, the most important media undertakings (eight of them) such as Panorama Group (Panorama Journal), Media Union (Monitor Magazine), Focus Press (Gazeta Shqiptare) and Unipress (Shekulli Journal) have earned almost 52 million ALL⁹ (416 333 EUR) less in 2017, compared to 2016. In recent years, the main Albanian journals are mostly focused on publishing online and then selling printed copies of their editions. A BIRN report states that such revenues from online activities have not helped in compensating the loss from selling printed versions and/or profits from commercials.¹⁰

Nowadays, it can be said that the traditional media does not have such monopoly power over information anymore. An online version of the Tema newspaper became the country's most popular media outlet, founding its own internet TV channel, as well.¹¹ This

8 IREX (2018) Media Sustainability Index – Europe and Eurasia, p. 10. <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>>.

9 ALL is the abbreviation used for Albanian currency 'Lek'

10 Erebara, Gjergj (2018) Treguishtypitvijoitkurrjen, BIRN, <<https://www.reporter.al/tregu-i-shtypit-vijoi-tkurrjen-vitin-e-kaluar>>.

11 IREX (2018) Media Sustainability Index – Europe and Eurasia, p. 8, <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>>.

is justified given the number of internet users in Albania, where the mobile internet penetration is around 80 percent, and 30-35 percent of households are connected to the internet.¹² Data from the Institute for Development, Research and Alternatives (IDRA) for 2017 show that 44 percent of people use online media as a source of information, 56 percent use social media, while the TV is used by 97 percent and only 25 percent of people read newspapers.¹³

Different developments of the media, like the establishment of new media outlets, an increase in the number of media, the vitalisation of new media, involving online and other developments linked to the digitalisation process, had contributed to the improvement of the current legislation or the adoption of a new one, which is both relevant and immediate. The European Commission Report of 2018 assesses Albania as: 'moderately prepared in the field of information society and audiovisual media.'¹⁴ The Constitution of the Republic of Albania sets out in its Article 22 the freedom of press, radio, and television, forbidding censorship.¹⁵ The first law on broadcast media was approved in 1998. It included both commercial electronics media and public service broadcasting. A new law was adopted in 2013: Law 97/2013 on Audiovisual Media in Republic of Albania, as amended. This law is fully aligned with:

- › Directive 98/84/EC of European Union 'on the legal protection of services based on, or consisting of, conditional access';

12 European Commission (2018) Report on Albania, p. 64, <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>>.

13 2017 Institute for Development Research and Alternatives (IDRA) survey includes ranking of preferences for sources of information, the figure is the total sum of rankings, p. 9.

14 European Commission (2018) Report on Albania, p. 65, <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>>.

15 Constitution of the Republic of Albania 1998 – Article 22 –

1. Freedom of expression is guaranteed.

2. Freedom of the press, radio and television is guaranteed.

3. Prior censorship of means of communication is prohibited.

4. The law may require authorization to be granted for the operation of radio or television stations.'

- › Audiovisual Media Services Directive – 2010/13/EC;
- › Access Directive – 2002/19/EC;
- › Directive 2002/20/EC ‘on the authorisation of electronic communications networks and services’.

Other important laws include the Law on the Press (1997); the Law on Access to Information (2014); the Law on Electronic Communications; and the Law on Protection of Personal Data.

A Report published in 2017 by the Albanian Media Institute about the media environment in the country, evidenced that the law on the press and the law on audiovisual media, do not make any distinction between national and foreign media, implying an equal legal treatment of the media, being either domestic or foreign. The law nevertheless allows for a limitation of broadcasting services from foreign media, based on international agreements, or for the limitation of broadcasting rights for special events, mainly sport ones, where domestic broadcasters hold the rights to broadcast a sport event – as foreseen by audiovisual media law. In addition, the law recognises the right of EU-based media to ‘access under equal conditions to events of high interest for the public and which are broadcast on exclusive basis by a media service provider under the Albanian jurisdiction,’ and vice versa in the case of Albanian media.¹⁶ The report shows that there are no cases of banning foreign media or blocking any programmes or websites from other countries.

As regards to the freedom of expression, the 2018 EC report states that ‘Albania has some level of preparation/is moderately prepared.’ The progress is primarily seen as strengthening the independence of the regulatory authority and the public broadcaster. ‘The Constitution and relevant laws are in line with international human rights law. They guarantee individual liberties including the right to privacy, freedom

¹⁶ Albanian Media Institute (2018) Albanian Media Scene vs European Standards, p. 48.

of expression and sanctions against incitement to hatred. Defamation remains a criminal offence, although prison sentences are not allowed. However, journalists are at risk of large fines and damages.¹⁷ Nowadays, a project about adopting an anti-defamation package has commenced in Albania. It is triggering a heated discussion and debates among media representatives, civil society organisations and state institutions. On 15 October 2018, the Electronic and Postal Communications Authority (AKEP) published a notice¹⁸ affecting 44 online media in Albania that had to be registered in the National Business Centre (QKB) within 72 hours and also to show their Tax Registration Number (NUIS) in their contact section online. If they failed to do so, AKEP had the right to shut them down for not being registered. It was said that this measure was used in the fight against defamation, as part of an anti-defamation package, which was to be proposed to the Parliament. While this action was supported by the government, some other actors raised their concerns. One of them, the Representative on Freedom of the Media of OSCE, Mr. Harlem Désir, stated that this measure might have a negative effect on media freedom and could seriously restrict public access to various source of information and erode the right of freedom of expression and information online. One of the detected problems was the unclear legal basis on which AKEP took such action and required such information from the online media.¹⁹

Another development is the process of digitalisation. This process started with some delays, but now it has entered its final stage of implementation. The Audiovisual Media Authority (AMA) has approved its own 2017-2019 strategic action plan, whilst the implementation of the digitalisation process of audiovisual transmitting was prioritised. Activities undertaken under the framework of the process of digitalisation aimed to coordinate and arrange the deadlines for closing

17 European Commission (2018) Report on Albania, p. 27, <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>>.

18 Notice of AKEP, <<https://akep.al/lajme/650-njoftimi-per-shtyp>>.

19 Official Webpage of OSCE Presence, <<https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/400271?fbclid=IwAR2Huhx7Swry3UztP7HUI6c89NxxUDsSXznZKNpk-KrxMjsCS8JgRmC5Yc>>.

the analogue transmission, finding technical solutions in supporting local/regional operators, supporting the fulfilment of conditions, as well as ensuring the quality of service and coverage on Albanian territory. AMA has also conducted an information campaign to familiarise the audience with the digitalisation process. These are the steps that have to be taken to access the digital broadcasting.

How Geostrategic Actors Are Portrayed in Albanian Media

Albania is a member of NATO (2009), and a candidate for a European Union (EU) membership (2014), expecting the start of EU accession negotiations in 2019. So far Albania has signed a Stabilisation and Association Agreement (in force since 2009) and Albanian citizens have enjoyed visa-free entry to the EU since 2010. The 2017 Balkan Barometer data show that 81 percent of Albanians believe that EU membership would be a good thing for their country, with only 5 percent believing that this would be a bad thing. With this rate of approval, Albania takes the second highest place among the Balkan countries where people see the EU in a positive way. Only Kosovo comes before Albania with 90 percent EU approval, followed by North Macedonia (54 percent), Montenegro (44 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (31 percent), and Serbia (26 percent).²⁰

The future of Albania is always seen as leaning towards the EU and Western Allies. Nowadays, the strongest Albanian allies and influencers are the EU, the United States of America, as well as neighbours, such Italy, Turkey or Greece. According to Albania's National Security Strategy Paper (2014-2019), the EU and the US are its main strategic partners.²¹

20 More than 7.000 respondents from Western Balkans countries + Croatia have been asked about the question: Do you think that EU membership would be (is – for Croatia) a good thing, a bad thing, or neither good nor bad?, Balkan Barometer 2017, Regional Cooperation Council, p. 55, <https://www.rcc.int/seeds/files/RCC_BalkanBarometer_PublicOpinion_2017.pdf>.

21 Konrad-Adenaur-Stiftung (2018) The Influence of the External Actors in Western Balkans, p. 9, <<https://www.kas.de/web/guest/einzeltitel/-/content/der-einfluss-externer-akteure-auf-dem-westbalkan1>>.

Furthermore, one of the aims of Albanian politics is aligning internal and foreign policies with that of the EU. Moreover, this has always been something that the European Union appraised Albania for. Thus, even the 2018 Report of the European Commission on Albania states that: 'Albania aligned, when invited, with all relevant EU declarations and Council decisions (100 percent alignment) during the reporting period.'²²

The report mentions other countries of strategic relevance for Albania, such as Italy and/or Greece, and Turkey. The Report assesses Albania's relations with Italy as 'very good'; its relations and cooperation with Greece as 'to be intensified'; and 'having good relations' with Turkey.²³

1. Reporting on the European Union

Reporting on the European Union, the media in Albania are focused primarily on the integration process of Albania and its progress, as well as relevant Albanian policies, but not on the EU per se. Media also report on declarations of the political parties and their statements about the integration process, as well as comments or analysis on whether Albania is approaching or going away from the EU. As, Mr. Robert Rakiplari, Editor-in-Chief of Panorama Journal, points out during an interview conducted on 4 October 2018: 'News and articles about EU integration process, serve first of all as an evaluation of the work and success of the ruling party in the country. If there is progress and positive development, this is directly translated as the ruling party and the government are working well and in the right direction'.²⁴

Articles about the European Union and EU integration are mostly found at the first pages of the newspapers and in the most important columns, such as: 'on focus' or 'politics', and in most of the cases, the headlines at the front page include information about EU-Albania relations.

22 European Commission (2018) Report on Albania, p. 92, <<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20180417-albania-report.pdf>>.

23 Ibid, p. 52.

24 Interview with Mr. Robert Rakiplari, Editor-in-Chief of Panorama Journal, 4 October 2018.

In contrast, any information, articles, in-depth analysis or explanations concerning the European Union, its institutions, or its procedures, are rare, if not missing. This leads to the non-information of the public, which witnesses the Albanian EU integration process without understanding what the EU is; what being part of the EU means for the country and its citizens; which are its institutions or what are the procedures to be followed; the rights and obligations arising throughout the process, etc. This means that Albanian citizens want to be part of the EU and support the EU membership of their country, without knowing what that means, making it almost impossible to critically assess the EU, and the EU integration process. Thus, both the media and the audience are trapped in a vicious cycle. On the one hand, there is the positive attitude of the media towards the EU integration process. At the same time, the media do not properly inform the public of all aspects of such membership, including the disadvantages or even of its 'dark sides'. As a result people support the process without critically evaluating it. On the other hand, the media could not play the role of an objective and critical assessor of the EU because the audience would not accept it.

As a result, most of the articles lack an essential element, which is an in-depth analysis of the process, as well as the policies and actors. This leads to the lack of impartiality and criticism mentioned above. On the question whether there are any critical or euro-sceptical articles on the EU, Mr. Rakiplari states: 'Such articles are very rare, because they contradict general beliefs and attitudes of the public. This means that the EU cannot be criticised because people want it and love it, and in doing so, the media would be going against this general perception, meaning no one will agree with them or even worse – no one would read that media anymore'.²⁵

By disregarding objective information in their analysis, media produce only articles focused on the 'political' aspect of the accession process. This affects the quality of the reporting in a negative manner by moving the main focus to the question 'who said what' and figuring out the way

25 Interview with Mr. Robert Rakiplari, Editor-in-Chief of Panorama Journal, 4 October 2018.

in which this can be translated into votes or popularity of political actors. The denial to conduct a detailed analysis of the process discourages journalists and media actors to further develop their professional knowledge of EU-related topics, such as EU integration, negotiations etc. In this regard, there are several cases where media representatives have made mistakes or did not provide the right information concerning the EU, its institutions, or other relevant information. The result of this approach is misleading or incorrect information and news.

2. Reporting on NATO

Joining NATO in 2009 was not only an important step towards the Euro-Atlantic integration process, but also an important sign that Albania belongs to the West. The NATO accession was defined as a 'miracle of freedom' – by the then-prime minister of Albania, Mr. Sali Berisha during the Bucharest Summit, when Albania was formally invited to join NATO. The day on which Albania became a member of NATO is celebrated by organising different meetings. The media also have a positive attitude towards the NATO membership. This is evidenced by the fact that they show what it means for Albania to be a NATO member by highlighting the developments and achievements. This is in line with the attitude of all political actors and the general public, who support and believe in NATO.

In contrast with reporting on the EU, where critical voices and analysis are missing, it is more likely to find views against NATO, or at least ones that objectively and critically analyse it. Moreover, the news about NATO have become more realistic. For example, regarding the news about NATO bombings, some media justified these actions by using specific words, such as 'mistakes' or 'forceful actions' of NATO in their titles. Other titles, however, did not try to justify NATO's actions at all. Another group of relevant articles about NATO, which are not directly linked to Albania and its development, assess NATO objectively and sometimes these articles even disapprove of NATO. Unfortunately, most of the time, these are articles written by foreign authors and foreign media, which are translated in Albanian.

The following conclusions about NATO can be made on the basis of the analysis of the three most read online media outlets in Albania: 'Panorama Online', 'Tema' and 'Ora News':

1. The day Albania joined the alliance is always reported in a positive manner, describing the relationship of the parties so far, as well as the development of Albania in this regard and some of the challenges and expectations for the future. The accession is evaluated as a success, the achievements of Albania in NATO are great, and the role of the country in the alliance is strengthened.

2. Every year Albanian media commemorate the day NATO intervened in Kosovo against Serbia. The language used in these articles is positive or at least neutral when it comes to NATO, which is seen as the liberator or the saver of Kosovo. In this regard, the articles tend to argue that NATO gave Kosovo its freedom and that it had an important role as a peacemaker and peacekeeper on the Balkans. These articles also tend to underline how vital it is for the countries of the region to join the alliance and to be part of it.

3. Articles about Russia tend to portray it as the 'enemy'. They focus on various developments or processes concerning the Russian army, such as the Russian military build-up, the different strategic and military manoeuvres conducted by Russia, aiming to affect the emotions, fear and sense of insecurity of the people. Such articles aim to create the perception that there is a never ending race between NATO and Russia, and that NATO should not fall behind Russia. This is demonstrated by titles such as: 'NATO is alarmed'; 'Russia shows its strength'; 'NATO bares its teeth'; 'NATO warns about Russian threats'.

One of the most recent developments in Albania is the fact that a new NATO military base will be established in the south eastern city Kuçovë. These news are treated differently by Albanian media. Many focus on the benefits Albania will receive from the functioning of the base; or how this development demonstrates the important role Albania plays in the NATO alliance, as well as its geostrategic plans and activities. Others

focus on the reactions of other actors, including neighbouring countries in the region that seemed scared or even Russia, which 'has overreacted about this threat'. The online newspaper Shqip, for example, referred to an article from a Russian newspaper, titled: 'A New NATO Base in Albania Threatens Escalations of "Greater Albania" Scheme'. Another media has shown the same news with the title: 'Russia is alarmed by the new NATO base in Albania'.

3. Reporting on Russia

News about Russia are somehow used to portray it as an antagonist to NATO, while there are a lot of cases where these two international players are compared or a competition is demonstrated between them. The general perception about Russia is not positive among the Albanian society. The Russian Federation has no influence over political decisions in Albania and cooperation is limited. There has been no exchange of top-level delegations between the two countries for years and Albania has not yet signed the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation with Russia. To date, none of the main political parties have made any positive statements about Russia for the following reasons: first, Russia is seen as more affiliated towards other Balkan countries, especially orthodox countries like Serbia; second, there is a contradiction between US and EU strategies and politics on the one hand, and Russia's on the other. In this context, Albania has always been oriented towards the West and tends not to have any ties with Russia. Thus, Albania is among those countries that apply sanctions imposed by the EU on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Albania, alongside Montenegro and Norway, aligned itself with this decision, modifying its national policies so that they conform with the Council's Decision of 12 September 2018 (Decision 2018/1237), which extends EU sanctions targeting Russia for another 6 months.

Another reason for Albania to take such action was that Russia was not very friendly towards Albanian people. Nowadays, Russia is one of the countries which does not recognise Kosovo and is blocking its UN membership. The last reason for Albania's action might be its

orientation towards the West and Western values and politics. Being between the West and the East, Albanians have always struggled to be accepted by the Western world and any affiliation with Russia is a setback for their aspirations, due to the fact that Russia is seen mostly as an antinomy of Western countries, ideologies and values. In this regard, most of the news and the information concerning Russia are more focused on providing the 'emotional effect', which would trigger different feelings and emotions in the reader. These would include fear, a sense of insecurity and panic. An in-depth analysis is missing and usually articles/news are short and focus on developments in the military sphere, the supremacy of the Russian army, new weapons, predictions for an insecure future, or a new world war, all of this aiming to scare the audience and make it feel insecure, yet really interested to find out more about it.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be assessed that the media environment in Albania has developed in the recent years and that the number of media outlets has increased, offering the public the opportunity to have access to various sources of information. Yet, the high number of media outlets does not necessarily mean qualitative journalism offering in-depth analysis or investigative articles and reports. The legal framework on media and information is being updated and harmonised with the EU acquis. Most of the relevant laws in this field now fully or partially correspond with the legal acts of the European Union. In Chapter 10: Society of information and Media of the EC report on Albania, the country is assessed as 'moderately prepared'.

The main geostrategic actors for Albania, such as the European Union, the USA and NATO take an important place in the reports or broadcasts of Albanian media – mostly portrayed positively and as the strongest allies of the country. Most of the time, these have been even assessing the progress Albania had made towards its EU integration. Moreover, national political parties also need international actors' approval for their actions in order to be accepted and supported by the Albanian

public. In this regard, the EU is always portrayed in a positive manner. The EU's positive evaluation is always accepted with optimism for the future by Albanians. One of the shortfalls, however, is the missing analysis concerning the EU itself.

Articles or news on NATO often use the power of emotion, sense of insecurity or fear. The language of these articles implies that there is a military competition between NATO and Russia.

Russia is portrayed as a threat, an enemy, or a non-European/non-Western country that 'we do not want to look like and we do not want to be linked to'. This is the position taken by the media, which turns out to be the same as that of the wide public and politicians.

Support for EU membership is strong amongst the population. In addition, politicians often feel the need to ask for an EU approval, while the media acts similarly with regards to its reporting.

Bosnia and Herzegovina on Its Path Towards Europe: The Role of Media and (Dis)Information

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1. Bosnia and Herzegovina on Its Path Towards the EU and NATO

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is late on its path towards the EU, but 10 years ago, this country was ahead of Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro. Now, Bosnia and Herzegovina falls behind these countries on the path towards the EU. It took the current Council of Ministers 14 months to answer the EU Commission's questionnaire which is needed to prepare its opinion on Bosnia's application for EU membership. This is four times longer than the regional average for this activity. There is declarative support for the EU integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina from all political parties and political subjects. Non-governmental organisations are also committed to assist Bosnia and Herzegovina in its efforts to join the EU. However, the political situation hinders the significant progress that is needed. Another obvious barrier is the complex state structure and the numerous actors that have to be consulted before reaching a decision. NATO played an important role in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It managed to improve some extremely important aspects in the country, such as the abolishment of entity control over the armed forces, the establishment of the Defence and Security Committee in the Parliament at the state level and the creation of a single multi-ethnic military force. However, the situation changed in a relatively short period of time. Maxwell and Olsen cited Lord Ashdown

who declared in 2011: 'The dynamics is now moving in the wrong direction'.¹ Regressive trend reveals that one of the biggest challenges for this country seems to be the increasing ethnic tension, which since 2006 has been pulling Bosnia and Herzegovina into the abyss.

2. The Role of the Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The media play a vital role in numerous life segments in various societies. In that sense, Bosnia and Herzegovina is not an exception. The representative of the Association of Journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Borka Rudić, presented results of the research 'Freedom of media in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2018', where one of the major findings was that citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina trust the media more than they trust religious communities, NGOs or politicians. Radio Sarajevo reported Rudić's speech where she emphasised that 76.8 percent of people who took part in the research said that they trust the media the most.² Therefore, the responsibility that the media have in this country is enormous. However, the media do not receive the necessary attention. In contrast, the media (especially non-traditional media) in the European Union receive a very special 'treatment'. The European Commission makes significant efforts in the fight against disinformation online. The importance of this topic for the EU is best illustrated by the extensive measures undertaken through the communication strategy – 'Tackling online disinformation: a European approach'.³ Consultations with citizens and stakeholders about this issue included online questionnaires and interviews covering all Member States of the European Union.

- 1 Maxwell, Rohan and Olsen, John (2013) Destination NATO: Defence Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre.
- 2 Radio Sarajevo (2018) Istraživanje/Građani BiH najviše vjeruju medijima, a najmanje političarima, <<https://www.radiosarajevo.ba/vijesti/bosna-i-hercegovina/gradani-bih-najvise-vjeruju-medijima-a-najmanje-politicarima/298880>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.
- 3 European Commission (2018) Communication – Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach, <<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/communication-tackling-online-disinformation-european-approach>>. Accessed 6 August 2018.

The Eurobarometer survey was carried out via telephone interviews. According to the European Commission, over 26.000 citizens were asked about their perception of fake news and trust in news media sources. Results show that 85 percent of respondents perceived fake news as a problem in their country and 71 percent feel confident in identifying them.⁴ These results indicate a very high awareness of the existence of the problem as well as a high resistance to it.

If the goal of the media is to transmit reliable information, then additional efforts have to be made in Bosnia and Herzegovina because of the relatively low levels of critical thinking among recipients, which is a fertile ground for the fast spreading of misinformation. The awareness of the problem and the resistance to it is very low in this country. The efforts to tackle the issue of disinformation on a bigger scale are insignificant. Therefore, the state should help the survival of reliable information, while the role of media in such circumstances has to be constructive in order to ensure delivery of the relevant information. Looking through this prism, it is important to strengthen investigative journalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At this moment, it is in a much better position than in 2004. Back then, American experts and journalists Donald Pine and Drew Sullivan were extremely unsatisfied with the standards of investigative journalism which encouraged them to initiate the project called 'Centre for Investigative Journalism', commonly known as CIN. At the time, this was the first organisation in the Balkans with the clear goal to provide information to citizens and make them aware of all occurrences that could negatively influence their lives. Blagovčanin interviewed the Editor-in-Chief of CIN, Renata Radić-Dragić. She emphasised that Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted the Law on Freedom of Access to Information at the state level in 2000. However, the implementation of this law does not meet world standards of transparency. Radić-Dragić contended that CIN journalists encounter numerous problems while gathering research data. Still, they manage to inform citizens and put pressure on institutions that are expected to react to improper practices of certain actors in society.

4 Ibid.

A problematic aspect is that CIN is not secure in financial terms. It is dependent on external funding and not self-sustainable. The sponsors carry out questionnaires about CIN's effectiveness in order to make a decision about the continuation of financing of this project.⁵

DEPO portal explained how investigative journalism is associated with low levels of journalists' security, complemented by the mentioning of brutal murders of investigative journalists in the world, especially in situations in which they had targeted politicians.⁶ Brutalities do not happen in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but this does not indicate media freedom.

The executive director of the self-regulatory body in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Press Council, Ljiljana Zurovac, contended for DEPO portal that there is high number of judicial processes initiated by politicians against journalists, their publications and media in general which are supposed to have the full right to critically analyse and write about public officials and their activities⁷. This is the precise reason leading to self-censorship, which 'kills' investigative journalism. Journalists and editors question themselves whether they need such turbulences in their lives. In the words of Zurovac, judicial processes against journalists distract them from doing their job. This creates psychological and professional pressure as well as financial losses for the media. These are some of the reasons why investigative journalism is not strong in our country.

The European Union supports the free media and the investigative journalism by financing the project 'Regional platform for media

5 Blagovčanin, Predrag (2013) Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo BiH: Novinari koji ukazuju na malverzacije, kriminal, korupciju, <<http://www.tacno.net/novosti/centar-za-istrazivacko-novinarstvo-bih-ukazuje-na-malverzacije-kriminal-koruciju>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

6 Depo portal (2018) Od prijjetnji do ubistva tanka je granica: Kako bh. političari zaustavljaju pisanje medija o njima, a da to niko ne vidi?!, <<http://depo.ba/clanak/174146/od-prijetnji-do-ubistva-tanka-je-granica-kako-bh-politricari-zaustavljaju-pisanje-medija-o-njima-a-da-to-niko-ne-vidi>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

7 Ibid.

freedom and journalists' security in the Western Balkans' with the amount of 1.3 million Euro. This is the first project focused on enhancing journalists' associations and media unions' capacities for the purposes of providing more efficient protection to journalists and the media. One of the main goals of this project is to strengthen the democratic environment for the work of the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina. With the correlation of activities, the creation of additional values is expected to contribute to the fulfilment of political and other criteria which Bosnia and Herzegovina has to fulfil in the process of joining the European Union.⁸

2.1. Disinformation in the Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina

According to findings of the Centre for social research Global Analitika (2018), the topic of fake news in Bosnia and Herzegovina seems to have a historical background: fake news were mostly used in order to achieve the interests of powerful political subjects. In the former one-party system in Bosnia and Herzegovina, propaganda was very pronounced with the goal of homogenizing the population, creating cult of the leader, and preserving the political and ideological status quo. Global Analitika also reflected on the period after signing of the Dayton Accord (1995) where the public of Bosnia and Herzegovina was constantly exposed to media content that is often politically coloured with the elements of propaganda, half-truths and disinformation.⁹

Zurovac explained how internet freedom is being used for the wrong purposes. She emphasised on the significant rise of web portals without identification and contact details. Such web portals publish manipulative and misleading information accompanied by the promotion of hate speech¹⁰. BBC contended that nearly 70 percent of

8 Ibid.

9 Global Analitika (2017) Moć (dez)informacija: Korištenjem novijih tehnologija olakšano širenja 'lažnih' vijesti, <<http://globalanalitika.com/moc-dezinformacija-koristenjem-novijih-tehnologija-olaksano-sirenja-laznih-vijesti/>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

10 OSCE (2016) Free (falling) media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, <<https://www.osce.org/bih/238051>>. Accessed 30 August 2018.

the population in Bosnia and Herzegovina uses internet where filtering online content is omitted¹¹. The situation is further deteriorated by the trend of shutting down the print media and switching to the internet. This significantly reduces the quality of information.

Borislav Vukojević contended in BH magazine that suspicious web pages usually do not acknowledge the authors of the texts they post and contain aggressive ads on social networks. The goal of such pages is either economic or political. Economy, as a driving force of these pages, encompasses viral firms where one individual owns dozens of web pages spreading fake news. When the goal is political, then proliferation of such pages happens during pre-election campaigns.¹²

2.2 The Role of Traditional Media in Shaping the Information Environment for EU and NATO

Turčilo and Buljubašić were involved in the research concerning discourse of the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina about the EU¹³. This project started with the analysis of the state structure which consists of two entities. The media followed the state structure and their audience was consolidated in accordance with the initial assumptions. It is essential to point out that Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks serious research projects which analyse media content. One of the programmes enabling such projects is the Regional Research Promotion Programme. In 2013, Serbia, Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were part of the analysis of media coverage about the European Union. The traditional media outlets analysed for the purposes of this project were three daily newspapers, four radio stations and four TV stations.

11 BBC (2018) Bosnia-Herzegovina profile – Media, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17211939>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

12 BH Magazin (2018) Fenomen lažnih vijesti u Bosni i Hercegovini, <<http://www.bhmagazin.com/bih/fenomen-la%C5%BEnih-vijesti-u-bosni-i-hercegovini.html>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

13 Turčilo, Lejla and Buljubašić, Belma (2014) Zemlja izvan EU i mediji bez EU: diskurs Bosanskohercegovačkih medija o EU, <<https://hrcak.srce.hr/125140>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

The results of this study showed that the public perception of the EU in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska was completely different. The Federation observed European integration as a process which had the capacity to solve divisions in the country while in Republika Srpska it was seen as potentially dangerous for the entity. The research also provided clear indicators that the media was not very interested in topics concerning the EU per se. Most of the analysed articles and cases showed indifference towards this topic because of the protocol-style vocabulary that was used. One of the conclusions drawn was that the media provide us with information, but the educational and analytical aspects are omitted. There are no quality comments and interpretations on this issue.¹⁴

The 'Prime Communications' agency carried out research about the perception of NATO in the two entities. In 2011, interviews were undertaken with 1.000 participants over 18 years of age. The results showed that the majority of citizens from the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (81.2 percent) supported the entry of the country into NATO, while in the Republika Srpska, 54.2 percent of citizens did not support this idea, and 19.9 percent did not even express their opinion on this issue.¹⁵ Substantial difference in the attitudes towards NATO is obvious in these two entities. Such situation is reflected in media coverage of topics related to NATO. Traditional media in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina reports about NATO in a positive light. One can read the headlines and hear on the TV and radio that NATO means security of every family in Bosnia and Herzegovina and brings the necessary reforms in different aspects of society. In contrast, traditional media in the Republika Srpska have rigid attitudes perceiving NATO as potentially hazardous.

14 Ibid.

15 Večernji list (2011) U FBiH ulasku BiH u NATO podrška, u RS većina protiv, <<https://www.vecernji.ba/u-fbih-ulasku-bih-u-nato-podrška-u-rs-vecina-protiv-343232>>. Accessed 8 August 2018.

A common feature of the media in both states' coverage of this topic is the lack of educational and orientation aspect – as in the case of the European Union. Citizens know complex words related to the path of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU and NATO, but often lack thorough understanding of the concepts.

2.3 The Role of Non-Traditional Media in Shaping the Information Environment Concerning the EU and NATO

A study about discourse of the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina also encompassed the two most popular web portals. Turčilo and Buljubašić emphasised that an analysis of these web portals demonstrated an insignificant number of materials about the EU. The comments below these materials are said to be rare, which indicates that the wider audience is not interested in such topics – probably because of the lack of information and the 'dry' writing style.¹⁶

Headlines such as 'NATO sent 35.000 soldiers to Russia', 'Beginning of World War III' are examples of fake news that easily circulate via non-traditional media in Bosnia and Herzegovina.¹⁷ For example, the dean of the Faculty of Security in Banja Luka commented on the NATO summit in Brussels for the web portal 'Vesti online', which is, according to the available data, registered in Germany. Raskrinkavanje.ba analysed how the dean misrepresented the mere fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina was mentioned at a NATO summit by converting it into an alarming statement that a great storm was coming to Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially to the Republika Srpska.¹⁸ An article had the sensationalistic headline: 'NATO breaks backbone of the Republika Srpska'. In reality,

16 Turčilo, Lejla and Buljubašić, Belma (2014) Zemlja izvan EU i mediji bez EU: diskurs Bosanskohercegovačkih medija o EU, <<https://hrcak.srce.hr/125140>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

17 BH Magazin (2018) Fenomen lažnih vijesti u Bosni i Hercegovini, <<http://www.bhmagazin.com/bih/fenomen-la%C5%BEnih-vijesti-u-bosni-i-hercegovini.html>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

18 Raskrinkavanje.ba (2018) Od NATO samita do apokalipse, <<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/od-nato-samita-do-apokalipse>>. Accessed 2 August 2018.

at the NATO summit only well-known conclusions about Bosnia and Herzegovina were repeated. In contrast, his interpretation was apocalyptic. 'Messages' from Brussels which the dean represented as signs for an alarm were nothing more than well-known processes incorporated in official documents defining the relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and NATO. However, this was eventually used to deduce that 'a big storm' is coming from Brussels to BiH. 'Slobodna Bosna' and 'Novi Vjetar', web portals from the Federation responded by creating news with sensationalistic headlines, as well: Dodik's advisers on the verge of mind telling him: 'This is how you are going to end. Republika Srpska will not have 49 percent of the territory if military assets become registered on the state level'. These are all examples of manipulative and deliberate misinformation aiming to destabilise the society of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

3. Information Environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina Regarding EU and NATO Accession Compared to Other Countries

According to the Media Literacy Index of the Open Society Institute in Sofia, Balkan countries cultivate a strictly controlled media and a weak educational background making them extremely vulnerable to fake news.¹⁹ The analysis showed that Nordic countries, due to their high levels of education and media freedom, are the most resistant to the phenomena of fake news. Balkan Insight identified how fake news erode trust and are closely connected to the growing polarisation in society, which consequently erodes the quality of political debates.

Ethnic diversity and the burden of the past in Bosnia and Herzegovina represent a special dimension of the information environment. This is evident when topics related to the EU and NATO are discussed. However, the situation is almost the same in the neighbouring country – Serbia. Dejan Anastasijević is a journalist for BBC from Belgrade and he

19 Lessenski, Marin (2018) Common Sense Wanted – Resilience To 'Post-Truth' And Its Predictors In The New Media Literacy Index 2018, <http://osi.bg/downloads/File/2018/MediaLiteracyIndex2018_publishENG.pdf>. Accessed 2 August 2018.

explained the relations between the countries of the Western Balkans and the European Union. Klix.ba reported details of his speech, where he contended that in Serbia, especially in Belgrade, dominates an anti-European public opinion.²⁰ Anastasijević attributed this situation to the anti-European discourse present in the media. In contrast, the research on public opinion shows that 58 percent of citizens support the path towards EU. If certain barriers are encountered on the European path, the percent decreases, and this is all due to specific negative media coverage of certain events. The editor of NIN in Serbia at the time, Antonela Riha, participated in the conference 'Media and NATO' (2013) where she emphasised that the topic of NATO in Serbia was not on the agenda. She mentioned that only two political parties in Serbia supported NATO and that the media were not interested in exploring this topic.

An interesting example of the information environment regarding its NATO accession is Montenegro. RTCG reported about a conference, where results of a quantitative-qualitative analysis of media content were presented²¹. This monitoring was done with the clear purpose to provide a detailed insight into the role of the media in the process of NATO integration and to assess their effect on public perception from the perspective of a right to have correct and balanced information. The identified problem was the lack of analytical aspect. The exploitation of this topic for political purposes, which is in line with the practice of other countries in the region, was noted. However, in Montenegro the topic of NATO was prioritised in the media agenda. It received 60 percent²² of the entire media coverage in the country. Montenegro was following trends in monitoring cycles and they identified quantitative increase. After the first monitoring no interest in NATO was recorded.

20 Klix.ba (2018) Mediji imaju ključnu ulogu za EU integracije, novinari podložni pritiscima često plasiraju lažne vijesti u BiH, <<https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/eu-integracije/mediji-imaju-kljucnu-ulogu-za-eu-integracije-novinari-podlozni-pritiscima-cesto-plasiraju-lazne-vijesti-u-bih/180606072>>. Accessed 3 August 2018.

21 RTCG (2015) Mediji pretežno o NATO-u, <<http://www.rtcg.me/vijesti/otvoreno-o-nato-u/96147/mediji-pretežno-o-nato-u.html>>. Accessed 3 August 2018.

22 Ibid.

The optimistic information is that a few cycles later, NATO became a common topic, which was approached more rationally, with less emotion. Intensive and focused dialogue was present on all levels. The media was extremely important in this process.

Main Factors Influencing the Information Environment

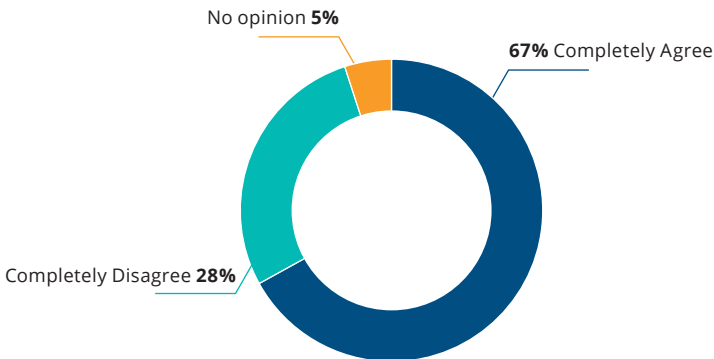
Bosnia and Herzegovina served as an example to other countries in the region in terms of media freedom. Similar to other countries in the region, in the Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index Bosnia and Herzegovina has quite a low ranking. It currently stands at the 62nd position. The reasons to be concerned are obvious and they relate to the situation where despite the existence of excellent laws, the position of journalists is difficult. BBC cites the US-based Freedom House, which rated the media environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina as 'partly free'.²³ Many journalists are exposed to political pressure, as well as threats and are especially affected by economic hardships. Out of fear to lose their jobs, journalists often make, in the words of Zlatan Musić, 'compromises at the cost of professional journalism'²⁴. A certain number of clicks (openings of an article) is the way to earn money, which is the major reason why sensationalism is frequently used.

How much does the media affect security and stability in our country? – that was a survey question conducted by Global Analitika in 2017. About 66.9 percent of respondents agree that the media contribute to the spreading of hate speech, extremist ideology and intolerance. This research was carried out within the project Prevention of Violent Extremism and Radicalism in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the Sarajevo Canton, Herzegovina-Neretva Canton and Banja Luka, on a group of

23 BBC (2018) Bosnia-Herzegovina profile – Media, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17211939>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

24 Mušić, Safet (2018) The educational approach in the prevention of hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Obrazovni pristup u prevenciji govora mržnje u BiH, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324804143_The_educational_approach_in_the_prevention_of_hate_speech_in_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_-_Obrazovni_pristup_u_prevenciji_govora_mrznje_u_BiH>. Accessed 15 September 2018.

545 people, aged from 15 to 60, where 59.6 percent belonged to the first age group (from 15 to 30 years of age), while 55.1 percent were female examinees. This result describes in-depth the effect of the media towards the development of attitudes and beliefs among citizens of different ages, across different parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is important to note that 53 percent of the respondents were from rural areas, thus demonstrating authentic results, since less than 5 percent had no opinion regarding the role of the media and security. This is also an example of how the media have the power to control the image of a country. If the media exaggerate the real dangers of terrorism, for example, it might automatically reflect on politics and tourism, at least.²⁵



Media contributes in spreading hate speech, extremist ideology and intolerance

Source: Global Analitika, 2017

Influx of politics in media coverage represents special concern, as well as a trend of pushing politics outside of institutions. Political officials in Bosnia and Herzegovina (and the region) develop and cherish practices, where they comment in front of the media serious topics, concerning the country while using unofficial information or expressing their own opinion or the opinion of the political party they are members of.

25 Global Analitika (2017) Moć (dez)informacija: Korištenjem novijih tehnologija olakšano širenje 'lažnih' vijesti, <<http://globalanalitika.com/moc-dezinformacija-koristenjem-novijih-tehnologija-olaksano-sirenja-laznih-vijesti/>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

Such activities may raise the levels of fear or rage in the wider public, which believe in the statements made by these public officials who prefer political calculations over truth. Portals have become closely associated with political parties and they spread information according to the needs of everyday politics. In February this year, the 'Dnevnik.ba' portal published information that the Ministry of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in cooperation with the Armed Forces and the US Embassy, is preparing a joint exercise with depleted Uranium on the military training range near Banja Luka known as Manjača. This location is very close to the village 'Kadijina voda', where locals live from agriculture. The information about depleted Uranium was disturbing for them. Alternativna TV reported comments that journalists collected at the fields: 'They poisoned us anyways, with this they want to finish us'; 'We are accustomed to clean air, good water and nature. Do you know what military exercise brings us?'²⁶ It is evident that the news had a powerful echo. Soon, this was officially denied by the Ministry of Defence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Ministry pointed out that the writings of 'Dnevnik.ba' and many other traditional and non-traditional media who spread the same news can be labelled, in the best case scenario, as biased and false. Deputy Defence Minister said that such news represented a classical example of disinformation. N1 BiH reported how the Ministry accentuated that the exercise was still in the primary phase: there are no details about the scenario, participants and weapons to be used.²⁷ For all military exercises in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially those including international subjects, the Ministry of Defence has to get approval from the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Operative preparations and realisation have to be coordinated with all other institutions in this country, which unmasks the real intentions of Dnevnik.ba and its obvious anti-NATO propaganda.

26 Alternativna televizija (2018) Najavljena vojna vježba na Manjači izazvala opštu pometnju, <<https://www.atvbl.com/ljudi-na-manjaci-strahuju-od-vojne-vjezbe-nato-pravih-informacija-nema>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

27 N1BiH (2018) MO BiH: Organizacija NATO vježbe u početnoj fazi, <<http://ba.n1info.com/a244600/Vijesti/Vijesti/MO-BiH-Organizacija-NATO-vjezbe-u-pocetnoj-fazi.html>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

Another example of this kind relates to a statement made by the President of the Republika Srpska that 40 British intelligence officers, masked as a military unit, were coming to Bosnia and Herzegovina with the task to eavesdrop, monitor and create information for the media.²⁸ The Times wrote that Britain would send military personnel 'to join an EU-NATO mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina to help prevent Russian meddling in a presidential election in October'.²⁹ According to The Times, the goal of this move was to demonstrate the importance of the UK in European security.

4. Campaign for combating misinformation and fake news

Fake News and disinformation are currently one of the most discussed topics, especially because fake news spread fast and are often more interesting than the truth. Scientists tried to explain this phenomenon through the prism of emotions: fake news elicits much more emotions than the truth. The Centre for social research Global Analitika wrote about a case where rumours about salt deficiency created panic on the market in some Indian countries and the consequences were fatal. In addition, fake reports about popularity of certain politicians before elections in Kenya provoked a protest in which dozens of people got killed. These are all examples of the power that information holds. While fake news might look harmless, these examples illustrate the brutal outcome it can lead to.

Furthermore, according to Global Analitika, the existence of fake news is in the widest sense a danger to the functioning of a democracy. Special emphasis is placed on the public which is daily overwhelmed by content of manipulative character and propaganda. In such circumstances it is very difficult for the wider audience to fully understand and to critically

28 Blic (2018) Dodik: Britanski obavještajci dolaze da prisluškuju i šalju informacije, <<https://www.blic.rs/vesti/republika-srpska/dodik-britanski-obavestajci-dolaze-da-prisluskuju-i-salju-informacije/jtvxqkj>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

29 The Times (2018) British troops to protect Bosnia election from Russian meddling, <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/uk-to-protect-bosnia-poll-s0vfjhzm-x>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

evaluate socio-political events. Therefore, it is necessary to regulate both traditional and online media so that its registration and ownership are transparent. It is crucial to adopt methods preventing the deception of the public and the disruption of the journalistic profession. There are two main modalities: self-regulation or legal regulation. Global Analitika noticed that more and more activists, private entrepreneurs and the civil society are involved in the fight against fake news, which is especially encouraging. To spread awareness about fake news and potential harm of such information is extremely important. In addition, the solution that could give effective results is the development of a single media register in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where online media would be obliged to send information about its founder, editor-in-chief, headquarters and contacts. In this way, transparency would be ensured, which can, to some extent, limit fake news production. Transparency can pave the way to an easier enforcement of financial sanctions for the web portals publishing fake news. However, the most viable step in the campaign aiming to combat misinformation and fake news, is the encouragement of the appropriate social culture, as well as communication with the public. Communication is a two-way street and all participants in the process have to make an effort to send and receive authentic information. Responsible institutions, organisations, journalists and citizens should spread awareness about this issue and constantly insist on finding solutions to the problem of fake news proliferation.³⁰

Therefore, Global Analitika identified network companies as important actors which should adopt a proactive approach. They have the power to create conditions in which the correct information will be more accessible and not completely hindered by the flood of fake news and propaganda. The distinction between the correct and the incorrect, verified and non-verified, fictitious and real, must become much clearer.

30 Global Analitika (2017) Moć (dez)informacija: Korištenjem novijih tehnologija olakšano širenje 'lažnih' vijesti, <<http://globalanalitika.com/moc-dezinformacija-koristenjem-novijih-tehnologija-olaksano-sirenja-laznih-vijesti/>>. Accessed 7 August 2018.

5. Recommendations For The Improvement of Information Environment by Actors

5.1 Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina

The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, during one of her stays in Sarajevo, expressed satisfaction with Bosnia and Herzegovina's progress on the path towards Europe. She highlighted the impressive steps Bosnia and Herzegovina made towards EU accession. Obrenović noticed that she didn't give a detailed elaboration of what 'impressive' means and in which spheres there is such progress.³¹ Alternatively, she pointed out some encouraging economic trends, which still cannot be felt by citizens in their everyday lives. The Minister of Foreign Affairs of Bosnia and Herzegovina commented these statements. In his opinion, it is generally very difficult to introduce this message to the citizens and explain the exact meaning of it. On the question of the meaning of the word 'impressive' in this context, asked numerous times by a journalist, the minister answered: 'We have submitted an application for membership (which is accepted) and started with the questionnaire. I thought that you know that'. Then, the entire conversation shifted to an opponent from another political party and the important messages for Bosnia and Herzegovina and its path towards the EU were shadowed by daily politics.

This example demonstrates how officials do not strive to explain to citizens complicated procedures concerning EU accession. Instead, they take the opportunity and use this topic to discredit political opponents. Consequently, information loses its value and meaningless data, which is not crucial for citizens, dominate the information environment.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's officials should become more sensible to citizens by talking in the appropriate language and elaborating on

31 Mediacentar_online (2017) Bh. mediji o EU: Izvještaji, malo analiza i nimalo komentara, <<http://www.media.ba/bs/mediametar/bh-mediji-o-eu-izvjestaji-malo-analiza-i-nimalo-komentara>>. Accessed 2 August 2018.

those events that are important to the country. An initiative should be launched to introduce a 'media literacy' subject in elementary and high schools. School workshops on fake news could be beneficial, as well. This would help teachers and students to differentiate real facts from fiction. The government should ensure that the youth receives quality education about the online space – its benefits and dangers, focusing on the spread of hate speech. An author, Mušić claims that numerous NGOs have appeared in the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina in recent years, trying to limit the spreading of hate speech and offensive comments, but most of the media ignored those appeals.³² In addition to allowing hate speech to be present in the media, some media even support or popularise it through irresponsible politics. In addition, the problem of hate speech on social networks remains in the media space, and young people are its main consumers.

The important and effective cooperation between the government and the media must be much closer, especially where non-governmental organisations are being included in ensuring the proper education of the wide public, regarding occurrence of fake news and disinformation.

5.2 EU and NATO

Debates about fake news in European Parliament are frequent, but do not result in any agreement or precise conclusions. Some members of the European Parliament argue that fines for those who fail to eliminate fake news are the best solution. In contrast, there are other members who consider this very naive. They contend that fake news and hate speech are not a phenomenon of the internet as such, but are rooted in society.

32 Mušić, Safet (2018) The educational approach in the prevention of hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Obrazovni pristup u prevenciji govora mržnje u BiH, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324804143_The_educational_approach_in_the_prevention_of_hate_speech_in_Bosnia_and_Herzegovina_-_Obrazovni_pristup_u_prevenciji_govora_mrznje_u_BiH>. Accessed 15 September 2018.

Therefore, it is the society one has to target³³. The European Union cannot do much for Bosnia and Herzegovina individually in this regard, since it struggles to solve the same problem in countries which are already in the EU. Thus, the EU Commission released the final report from the High Level Expert Group on Fake News, entitled A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Disinformation³⁴. The report is supported by a number of different stakeholders, including the largest technology companies, journalists, fact-checkers, academics and representatives from the civil society, has a number of important features, including important definitional work rejecting the use of the phrase ‘fake news’; an emphasis on freedom of expression as a fundamental right; a clear rejection of any attempt to censor content; a call for efforts to counter interference in elections; a commitment by tech platforms to share data; calls for investment in media and information literacy and comprehensive evaluations of these efforts; as well as cross-border research into the scale and impact of disinformation. Additionally, while the focus is mainly on the impact of technology on aiding the cheap and immediate creation and spread of disinformation, the report clearly states that ‘[d]isinformation is a multifaceted problem, does not have one single root cause, and thus does not have one single solution ... the problem also involves some political actors, news media, and civil society actors.’³⁵

According to many authors and reports, Bosnia and Herzegovina has to speed up the process of joining the EU. Once this country becomes a Member State, then debates about issues like the one in question, would be discussed more often and substantially than they are outside of the EU framework.

33 European Parliament (2017) Fake news: how to counter misinformation, <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/headlines/eu-affairs/20170331STO69330/fake-news-how-to-counter-misinformation>>. Accessed 3 August 2018.

34 European Commission (2018) Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation, <<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>>. Accessed 6 August 2018.

35 Reuters Institute (2018) Six Key Points from the EU High Level Group’s New Report on Disinformation, <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/risj-review/six-key-points-eu-high-level-groups-new-report-disinformation>>. Accessed 12 September 2018.

NATO was very proactive on the issue of fake news since it created a Facebook game named 'The News Hero' which was presented in July 2018 by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence in Latvia. Forbes (2018) explained that this is a social game created to help readers identify misinformation online.³⁶ Those who play the game have to classify news into two categories: real or fake news. Gamers are the head of a publishing company and their right assessment is awarded extra points. An example of a suggested headline is 'Melania Trump Hired Exorcist to Cleanse White House of Obama Demon'. In the words of Guerrini this fake news created a powerful effect that a spokeswoman for the first lady had to deny headlines and ensure wider audience that such stories are 'not true in any way'. Players of 'The News Hero' have the possibility to access a fast-checking tool, which helps with the verification of stories. Eight people worked for four months on this app, aiming to develop a critical thinking in media consumers. Unfortunately, in one week this game received only 134 likes. Predictions are that the game could be used as a tool in schools as it would be efficient in enhancing the attempts to strengthen media literacy.

This game is an excellent idea. However, it has to be made more exciting in order to attract a wider audience (more action and sophisticated graphics). It would be such significant step if NATO staff decides to educate officials and citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina on a higher level about all the benefits this country can get from the membership in the alliance. Intensive education about fake news and NATO efforts to combat them would be important for this country.

5.3 International Organisations and NGOs

International organisations and NGOs can be perceived as key actors in raising awareness about the necessity of a 'healthy' information environment. Representatives of these organisations should insist on

36 Guerrini, Federico (2018) NATO's Latest Weapon: A Facebook Game For Fake News Countering, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/federicoguerrini/2018/07/31/natos-answer-to-fake-news-a-facebook-game-to-spot-online-misinformation>>. Accessed 12 September 2018.

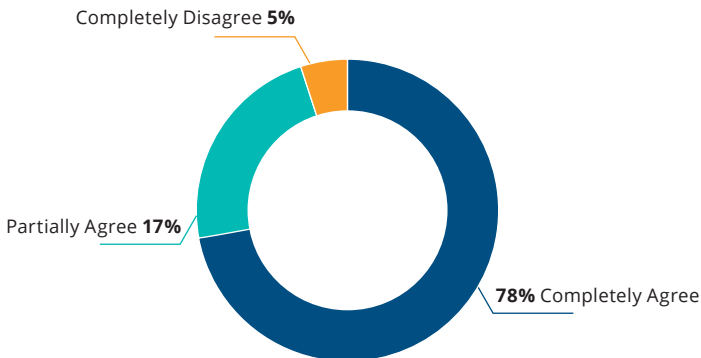
ensuring free media space for citizens (especially young ones) who have meaningful stories to share; examine citizens' attitudes about different aspects of integration processes and examine their knowledge about these processes. According to the analysis conducted by Turčilo and Buljubašić, journalists have to receive education in order to become specialised in European topics and to raise the quality of their reports about the integration processes.³⁷ This would include different trainings and support of their professional development. The Bosnian society faces a deficit in analytical texts which essentially require time and certain resources. Aida Fazlić, the producer of the TV Show 'Euroimpuls', mentioned that it is of immense importance to understand that European integration is not only 'political adjustment and political answer' but rather a process concerning every citizen of this country. People have to receive quality information about the path of Bosnia and Herzegovina towards the EU and information about what to expect once this country manages to get closer to the Union, including the question of whether and in what way their lives will be affected.

In the last four years Global Analitika – one of the few non-governmental organisations in Bosnia and Herzegovina – is conducting research regarding media, disinformation, fake news and its consequences to security and stability in the country and the region. Previously Global Analitika has conducted a research from 1st March to 1st August 2018 in collaboration with printed and electronic media, radio and TV, independent journalists and other non-governmental organisations dealing with media. Two target groups participated in the research entitled *Media and their influence on the security in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. The first group was of journalists and editors (anonymously) from five radio and TV media, five printed media, 10 electronic media. The second target group contained 200 respondents in an online survey. The aim of the research was to determine the attitudes of personnel providing information to the public and to

37 Turčilo, Lejla and Buljubašić, Belma (2014) Zemlja izvan EU i mediji bez EU: diskurs Bosanskohercegovačkih medija o EU, <<https://hrcak.srce.hr/125140>>. Accessed 1 August 2018.

discover consumers' attitude towards the information being published. Among the questions in the questionnaires, we will highlight one per each target group which would provide us with the main reason to analyse attitudes towards fake news and disinformation.

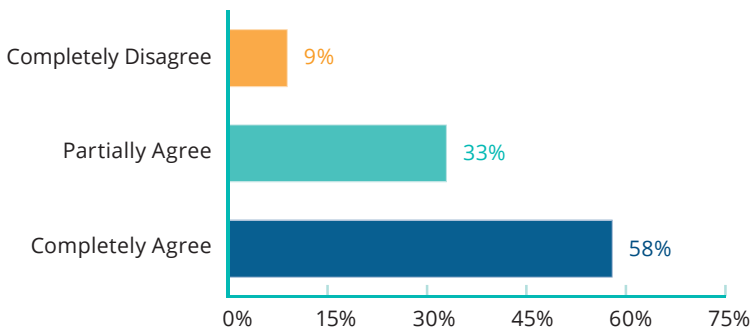
The question 'Does the media, for the purpose of financing by political parties and using their influence, deliberately produce media content that has an aim of spreading hate, intolerance, xenophobia and so on?', was intended for 200 respondents through online voting. Out of 200 respondents between 18 and 35 years old, 78 percent believe that the media are influenced or developed by political parties aiming to spread political rhetoric and thus contributing to the continuous intolerance against other ethnicities or minorities. Among the 200 respondents, only 17 percent, i.e. 34 respondents, partially believed that the media are used in the name of gaining political power or certain goals for some political parties. By getting such a high number of people that are well aware of some of the goals of certain media, we can conclude that the information has reached people who are not easy to be manipulated. Also, 5 percent of the people did not believe that the media are used to achieve the goals mentioned above. This gives us hope that people who participated in the online survey can differentiate between the goals of the media and their news.



Media produce content with an aim of spreading hate, intolerance and other negative phenomenon because of financial support by political parties?

Source: Global Analitika, 2018

Thus, the question that certainly should worry us is why media representatives, such as journalists or editors, due to lack of professionalism, enable media to be sensationalistic or manipulative regarding certain topics affecting the security of society. The outcome of the survey conducted among the journalistic target group was that 58 percent of respondents completely agreed that media deliberately publish and spread certain news, manipulative or fake, only because of the financial gain. The meaning of such a statement is that salaries in the private sector, such as the ones in non-state media, depend on how many clicks your news get. This defines how much you earn. The average salary in Bosnia and Herzegovina is around 400 EUR, and the number of clicks your story gets defines how much you will earn that month. The result is that the integrity and ethics of journalism is being sold for clicks. This is so because legislation concerned with the financing of journalists is not well enforced. Therefore, media owners can easily determine in which direction journalism ethics can go. Furthermore, this encourage media to be manipulative or to distribute fake news.



Does media representatives deliberately and for the financial gain publish certain news with an aim of manipulation?

Source: Global Analitika, 2018

6. Conclusion

The topic of fake news in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a new phenomenon and it has its historical background. Nowadays, with the omnipresence of the internet, freedom is being used for the wrong purposes and manipulative information is getting momentum. A research demonstrates that the state structure of the two entities in BiH is reflected in media content. Respectively, audience is consolidated in accordance with which of the two entities it belongs to. The lack of analytical perspective is a common feature of journalists profiled on EU and NATO topics. Sensationalism is used frequently and such an approach can be extremely harmful when reporting on important and sensitive issues in the country.

This paper demonstrated how politics and media started to cooperate at the expense of citizens by deteriorating the real role of professional media. Media became a weapon in everyday political battles. If this trend does not slow down, our society is running a risk of not having access to the truth, which would hurt democracy, as well as proper evaluation of socio-political events. In order to create a healthier information environment, which would create favourable climate for the objective assessment of Bosnia and Herzegovina's path towards the EU and NATO, the key actors should consider following recommendations. This includes the recommendations of the EU Commission's High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation:

1. Significant financial support for independent news media, fact and source-checking, and media and information literacy, with an emphasis on independent initiatives, free from potential interference from public authorities or from technology companies who might be tempted to use such projects as public relations exercises;
2. Creation of a network of Research Centres focused on studying disinformation across the EU.

If our country wants to strive towards the path of the European Union and NATO, then it should follow their recommendations in order to provide an adequate response to fake news and disinformation. There is only a few research centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina, besides Global Analitika, that are dealing with these issues. The issues discussed by these few research centres, which provide their capacities for research on fake news and disinformation, are primarily concerned with media financing and the lack of financial support from the country. If financial support is improved in the context of these issues, either from internal or external supporters (such as bigger access to European Funds), there will be more opportunities for innovative approaches for countering fake news and disinformation.

Also, besides financial support, Bosnia and Herzegovina officials should become more sensible to the citizens by using a more understandable vocabulary and explaining certain events in more detail. A 'media literacy' subject should be introduced in elementary and high schools. School workshops on fake news could be beneficial as well. Bosnia and Herzegovina has to speed up the process of joining the EU. It can do so by implementing the necessary policies. NATO could dedicate more time and funds in order to attract wider audience to try out their game, which already exists, but needs certain improvements. International organisations and NGOs can play more proactive role. They can provide trainings and support to journalists in order to advance their professional development. If some of these recommendations are implemented, one could witness, at least a slight improvement in the wider audience's ability to differentiate journalistic facts from fiction.

In the end, another important recommendation for countering fake news and disinformation in the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, would be the further education and training of journalists and editors. These trainings would be about the actions journalists can take with regards to issues such as fake news and misinformation; about how education in journalism can incorporate this topic into the curricula; and how these trainings can address the importance of professional reporting for the security of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Bulgarian Path Towards the EU and NATO – The Role of the Media and (Dis)Information

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The Bulgarian path towards the EU and NATO in the late 1990s until 2007 was successful and an active public communication policy was conducted all these years.

We were lucky back then as we lived in a much more peaceful and calmer media environment – no social media, no online 24 hours news cycle, no trolls, nor bots. Audiences were not so fragmented. People even read in-depth newspaper articles. It all sounds like a paradise now.

Bulgaria declared the EU and NATO membership as its national priorities, which received the support of the main political parties. On the basis of this political consensus, communication strategies were developed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defence. They were approved by the Council of Ministers. I took part in the development of the NATO accession communication strategy. Its main goal was to build public trust through up to date and objective information about NATO and the EU. The strategy was created in accordance with the NATO Membership Action Plan.

Both strategies were coordinated and the government conducted and approved the communication programmes based on them. Spokesperson teams from different ministries and agencies were appointed.

Throughout the communication process, we were supported by the so-called third parties and communication partners – NGOs, public opinion leaders and academics. Communication activities were aimed not only at the population in the capital and the big cities, but all around the country. Younger generations were among the specific target groups.

Back then, we believed that it was enough to objectively inform the audience through print media, radio and TV. Now this sounds as a very idealistic public communication model which is also outdated.

The media environment was not so complex and the speed of communication was not as high. This is because nobody used Twitter, Facebook or YouTube back then.

Unsurprisingly, the media, which were linked to some of the political parties, covered EU and NATO topics in a negative manner. However, they were speaking mainly to their own audiences, which had no chance of being turned into NATO or EU supporters anyway.

The main mistake was that these proactive communication activities created some kind of fake expectations in the general Bulgarian audience. The EU and NATO memberships have been accepted by the general public as a panacea that will solve all domestic political and economic problems. Another fake expectation was that changes would happen very fast, right after the accession. Because of that, the pace of the changes disappointed many Bulgarians. Their frustration was transformed into negative attitudes towards the EU and NATO.

The scope of the changes, expected to result from the EU and NATO membership, was misinterpreted by the general public. For every negative political or economic development, even as a result of local authorities' failure, people blamed the EU and NATO, asking how such things could be happening once it has become an EU and NATO member.

The high expectations created about the EU and NATO membership made people and authorities more passive in solving their political and economic problems, as well as absorbing EU cohesion funds. In the first few years after accession, people expected to receive benefits automatically.

One of the main lessons learnt from Bulgaria's experience in its accession to the EU and NATO is that governments should provide in-depth information of what exactly EU and NATO membership means. They should specifically answer the questions about what would be changed and what people and state authorities should achieve by themselves.

The second lesson learnt is that public communication efforts shouldn't cease after the accession. Not only in Bulgaria, but in many other EU and NATO countries, even old members, communication strategies and programmes weren't conducted long after the accession, which resulted in the loss of the public trust, especially losses of the trust of the young generation.

It was surprisingly disappointing that the day after the Brexit voting, Google's search engine showed a record number of thousands of searches on what the EU means and what the people lose when their country leaves the EU.

Trust in the EU and NATO – Bulgaria, 2018

A downward trend in the credibility of the EU is observed in many European countries and it should not be neglected. Combined with the rise of nationalist and populist formations across Europe, this trend signals erosion of the pro-European enthusiasm.

Bulgarians may be highly critical of certain elements in the country's development since the accession to NATO in 2004 and to the EU in 2007. Still, the membership in both the EU and NATO remains a priority for them.

Bulgarian citizens continue to be among those who highly value Bulgarian membership in the EU. Though this confidence has noticeably dropped from over 70 percent in 2007 to around 50 percent in 2018¹, it is still much higher than confidence in key national institutions, such as political parties, the Parliament, and the judiciary.

When asked in June 2018 whether Bulgaria should leave NATO, 49 percent of Bulgarians said they would support the country's stay in NATO, compared to 22 percent who supported leaving the organisation.

The Bulgarian Presidency of the European Council is evaluated as a success by more than 60 percent of Bulgarians. The majority believes that the image of the country has improved, and the main achievement is the introduction of the topic of the European perspective for the Western Balkans. It turned out that 48 percent of Bulgarians were informed about the presidency and 43 percent learnt more about the Western Balkans as a result.

Obviously, the media played a key role in the formation of these public attitudes and spreading information.

The Role of the Media

The media have a key role in spreading true, in-depth and objective information about NATO and the EU. However, the lack of trust in the media not only at national, but also at global level prevents it from fulfilling its function.

The Eurobarometer survey on fake news and disinformation, which the European Commission presented on 12 March 2018², showed that

- 1 Alpha Research (2018) Отношение към членството на България в НАТО, < <https://alpharesearch.bg/monitoring/11> >.
- 2 European Commission (2018) Synopsis report of the public consultation on fake news and online disinformation, 26 April, < <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/synopsis-report-public-consultation-fake-news-and-online-disinformation> >.

Bulgarians stand first in the European Union in their distrust in the media, being especially sceptical about the print media.

Only 4 percent of Bulgarians say they trust the newspapers unconditionally (comparing to 10 percent of the EU average). Nearly half of Bulgarians (41 percent) say they do not trust this source of information (compared to 27 percent as EU average), 43 percent have some trust in the media (63 percent in the EU)³.

Every day, 40 percent of Bulgarians come across fake news (37 percent in the EU). Only 14 percent of Bulgarians believe they can identify fake news (15 percent in the EU). For 69 percent of Bulgarians and 44 percent of other Europeans, fake news represents a problem.⁴

Many other studies, like the one conducted by Edelman Communications in 2018⁵, confirm that the media lose trust. For example, 63 percent of respondents do not know how to recognise good journalism from rumours and lies, or whether news are acquired from a reliable media. Almost half of the respondents interact with news media less than once a week, and 25 percent do not use any media because they consider them too burdening and negative.

An interesting outcome of the survey is that respondents perceive the term 'media' as a published journalistic product, but also as a distribution platform.

- 3 Peucheva, Ralitsa (2018) Едва 4% от българите вярват на печатните медии, Investor.bg, 12 March, < <https://www.investor.bg/ikonomika-i-politika/332/a/edva-4-ot-bylgarite-viarvat-na-pechatnite-medii-257354> >.
- 4 European Commission (2018) Tackling disinformation online: Expert Group advocates for more transparency among online platforms, 12 March, < http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-18-1746_en.htm >.
- 5 AEJ (2018) Кризата с доверието в медиите се задълбочава, Association of European Journalists, Bulgarian section, 30 January, < <http://www.aej-bulgaria.org/bul/p.php?post=9150&c=26> >.

The Relationship Between the Mistrust in the Media and the Increased Risk of Manipulation

At first sight, mistrust in the media should protect us from the influence of fake news. However, the high distrust in traditional media – print, radio, television – leads to the expansion of the impact of online platforms.

The Eurobarometer survey shows that the lack of trust in the media has led to a failure to recognise the truth (59 percent), distrust in government leaders (56 percent) or business (42 percent)⁶. These trends affect negatively public communication activities related to the EU and NATO.

On the other hand, the credibility of experts and the so called ‘a man like me’ increased. We should keep that in mind and use it in our future communication strategies, when we try to explain what the EU and NATO memberships mean.

Because of the new media, the communication model is changing. Unlike ten years ago, politicians, government leaders and communicators, as well as journalists, are increasingly giving up their leading role in shaping public opinion.

Public opinion is to larger extent influenced by views and statements, very often extremist or manipulative, disseminated through social networks from the so-called ‘people like us’.

6 European Broadcasting Union (2018) Trust in Media 2018, 27 February, < <https://www.ebu.ch/publications/trust-in-media-2018> >; Mediapool.bg (2018) Okolo 70% ot balgarite vyarvat na novinite po radioto i televiziata, 12 March, < <https://www.mediapool.bg/okolo-70-ot-balgarite-vyarvat-na-novinite-po-radioto-i-televiziata-news276608.html> >.

According to members of the Association of European Journalists⁷, which has 20 national sections across Europe, trust in public institutions is clearly one of the main targets of disinformation. Only high professional standards will help journalists to keep their leading role of providing information, serving the public interest and supporting national priorities such as the EU and NATO membership.

In Bulgaria we already know that the EU membership is not a panacea or a medicine for a 'sick' media environment. Moreover, it is not healthy for the society to barely trust the media, as this would, sooner or later, result in mistrust in public institutions and international organisations such as NATO and the EU.

In conclusion, we are all a little bit confused and disappointed, because it is clear now that the new online media and dynamic communication environment don't automatically lead to democratisation. On the contrary, it can even be a threat to society.

It is highly likely that fake news and online disinformation will be the ones to trigger the demand for quality journalism and thus ensuring the public interest. Such a process should be backed by the EU, NATO and individual governments.

7 European Federation of Journalists (2018) New report sets guidelines for EU effort to tackle disinformation, 25 October, < <https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2018/10/25/new-report-sets-guidelines-for-eu-effort-to-tackle-disinformation> >.

The Information Environment in the Republic of Macedonia With Regard To The EU/NATO Aspiration and the Role of Media and (Dis)Information

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1. Introduction

The freedom of expression and the independence of the media in Macedonia has been continually deteriorating in recent years. The European Commission, the US State Department, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, OSCE, Freedom House, Reporters without Borders and other credible international and local civil society organisations, have all brought to our attention the dramatic decline of media freedom in the country. In the course of 2017 and 2018, hope for a positive shift has emerged due to the political changes in the country.

The main challenges in the recent years included: physical attacks and threats on journalists followed by impunity, financially weak and politicised mainstream media, restrictive media legislation that needed to be amended, limited media market, weak and politicised public broadcasters.

The media reform was announced by the Government in the beginning of its mandate in 2017 and in the end of 2018 the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services was adopted by the Parliament of Republic of Macedonia.

The Public Broadcaster – Macedonian Radio Television, remains financially weak and unattractive for the general public – with a rating of less than three percent according to the latest polls.

The expected reforms in the media sector are more than necessary since they are expected to set out the prerequisites for the independent work of the Agency of Audio and Audiovisual Media Services and the Macedonian Radio Television (MRT). These two institutions have been criticised in the past years in international reports, including the EU progress report, for being under the political influence of the previous government. That is why there is an urgent need for the new laws to be enforced and some others to be adopted. Such changes are expected to strengthen the financial independence of these institutions, as well as offer a new model of management that will be more resistant to political pressure. In addition, the MRT should serve as a role model to the commercial media with its ethical reporting and the provision of accurate information.

The judicial reform is also very important since there are around 50 open cases concerning violations of the rights of journalists and hate speech, which remain unpunished. The prosecutor's office and the courts should protect the integrity of journalists and the media, which will be encouraged to report more freely and to tackle sensitive topics.

Despite the recently improved climate in the media sector, the image of the country when it comes to freedom of expression and the independence of the media still remains poor. In this context, the Freedom House Report for Macedonia¹ ranks the country as partly-free, whereas the Media Sustainability Index 2018² – recently issued by IREX – gives an affirmative perspective that positive change is expected. However, reports also emphasise that concerns, such as the impunity

1 Freedom in the World (2017) Report Macedonia, <<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2017/macedonia>>.

2 IREX (2018) Media Sustainability Index – Europe and Eurasia, <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>>.

issues, remain. Reporters without Borders rank Macedonia 109th on the World Press Freedom Index³ in 2018, which makes the country one of the inferior in the region. This is a drop down of almost 80 positions, given that the country was ranked 34th in 2008 when Macedonia was enjoying the reputation of a country cultivating one of the best media environments in this part of Europe.

2. Points of Research

A) Instruments for putting pressure on journalists: physical and verbal attacks, imprisonment, poor labour conditions;

In 2018, there are fewer physical attacks against journalists and fewer reports about direct pressure on journalists. According to the information from the Association of Journalists in Macedonia in 2018 there were 6 attacks against journalists comparing to 18 in the previous year. New cases of violence against journalists are investigated by the Ministry of Interior, which according to the Public Prosecutor's Office and Criminal Courts, is not satisfactory and therefore the impunity remains. This is confirmed by the latest EU Progress report of 2018 stating that '(t)here is an improved climate for media and journalists who are readier to criticize misbehavior of officials and censorship. It is essential that the authorities demonstrate zero tolerance towards all incidents of physical and verbal abuse or threats against journalists and that these are effectively followed up by the police and Public Prosecutor's Office.'

By December 2018, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) has recorded 51 cases⁴ of attacks over journalists since 2013, half of which took place in the past year and a half. There are several categories of the attacks,⁵ most of which fall under the classification of physical violence, which is often conducted by unknown offenders.

3 Reporters without Borders (2018) World Press Freedom Index, <<https://rsf.org/en/ranking>>.

4 Safe Journalists, <<http://safejournalists.net/mk/1484-2>>.

5 Safe Journalists, <<http://safejournalists.net/mk/homepage>>.

From the formal communication that AJM conducted with the institutions, it can be concluded that the Ministry of Interior failed to investigate all cases initiated by AJM, especially older cases. In addition, the Prosecutors' Office failed to raise charges for many cases, which ultimately resulted in just a few court proceedings concerning the attacks on journalists before criminal or/and civil courts. In this context, the first noted court verdict from the Criminal Court in Skopje regarding physical violence against journalists, which took place in the city centre of Skopje, where two journalists were harmed in 2016, represents a step forward. The violator was sentenced to six months imprisonment at first instance. This officially seized the practice of impunity.

One of the most recent cases, in which a large number of journalists were attacked, was the incident that happened in the Parliament on 27 April 2017⁶ when a group of protesters entered the Parliament building in Skopje. Several journalists were physically attacked and another large group faced life threats. According to the statements of the local attorney's office contacted by the AJM, during the incident, five journalists are victims of physical attacks and 12 other have experienced emotional distress, all present during the events of 27 April. They have initiated lawsuits seeking compensation for material and non-material damage at the Prosecutor's Office. This case is particularly interesting for international organisations and the European Commission since its proper resolution would demonstrate the democratic capacity of the country.

Labour rights in the media community are extremely low due to the nonexistence of collective agreements in the private media, low salaries and employment contracts that often fail to provide basic social rights to journalists. The assessments of the media market published by the Agency of Media and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU), which is the Macedonian media regulator, states that the average number of

6 Day, Matthew and Sherlock, Ruth (2017) 'More than 70 injured as protesters storm Macedonia's parliament and attack politicians and police', Telegraph, 28 April, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/04/27/protesters-storm-macedonia-parliament-social-democratic-leader>>.

employees in commercial TVs is 1245, 201 in radio stations and 901 in the public broadcaster. It remains unclear what is the total number of journalists operating in these media channels, as well as in the printed and online media. Despite the lack of official data about the number of journalists who operate in the country, the rough estimation is that this figure is not larger than 1000 professional journalists employed in all media outlets operating in the country. The Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers of Macedonia (SSNM) released the publication 'White Book on Professional and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers', which is based on a research on a representative sample of 300 professional journalists. It claims that 59 percent of the journalists have full-time work contracts with all the accompanying social benefits. 12 percent of journalists are engaged in fixed-term contracts, the average length of which is 6.4 months. The rest have either honorary contracts (17 percent), or have not signed any contracts at all (11 percent), meaning that they have no social benefits. It can be concluded that more than a quarter of professional journalist in Macedonia have no social security benefits.

A positive change in this sense is possible and that is why in the recent years new models of media financing are debated in the country as a basic pre-condition for increasing the social status of journalists and strengthening media independence. In this context, the media should seek new models of financing, including financing from the audience (such is the case in the region and Germany), as well as models of public subsidising of print media. Regional and local broadcasters should be able to actively participate in the creation of media legislation in order for the media to stay on the market and to be less influenced by the municipalities and other centres of power. In addition, in 2018 the Macedonian Information Agency expressed readiness to sign the first collective agreement with the independent Trade Union.

In recent years, the national broadcasters TV Telma, Alsat M (bi-lingual in Macedonian and Albanian) but also the national cable 24 TV are the ones that can be considered as critical media. In addition, the weekly political magazine Fokus is often perceived as critical.

There are several web portals in which a small group of investigative journalists operates and deals with corruption scandals such as Novatv.mk, Prizma.mk. These web portals are dominantly funded by EU and US funds in the form of grants.

B) The public broadcaster (Macedonian Radio Television – MRT): financially dependable and under the influence of the ruling parties

The public broadcaster in Macedonia, the Macedonian Radio Television – MRT, was founded by the Parliament of Macedonia in 1993 and this media outlet is the sole public broadcaster that exists in the country and is also a member of the European Broadcasting Union. At the moment, MRT, is composed of two channels: MTV 1 that broadcasts content 24 hours in Macedonian language, and MTV 2 that broadcasts content on 6 minority languages. The Parliamentary channel that mainly broadcasts the sessions of the Parliament of Macedonia can be considered as a third channel. In addition, a satellite channel exists that broadcasts content abroad. In the structure of MRT, the Macedonian National Radio broadcasts in Macedonian language on channels 1 and 2 and on the languages of the minorities on channel 3. Based on the official data published on Mrt.com.mk, there are currently 901 individuals employed within this media outlet and the average age of an employee within this media is 58 years old. The work of the MRT is regulated by the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Content. Apart from that, MRT has 17 other bylaws, including the Statute, a Procedure on internal organisation, the Ethical Code, the Rules for employee protection etc.

The public broadcaster (MRT) was criticized in the past for its biased reports, in particular during election campaigns. Based on recent international and local reports dealing with the monitoring of the work of the media, it can be concluded that the two major problems MRT faces include political inclination towards the ruling political parties and the financial dependency, making MRT one of the biggest debtors in the country.

At the moment, the new government, led by SDSM, has a declarative commitment to reform the MRT through amendments in legislation. These changes, that are also requested by local media organisations, should provide independent and sustainable financing model through direct financing from the national budget, as well as through changes in the structure of the management led by individuals nominated by credible organisations based on pre-determined criteria. These measures were set in July 2017 as urgent measures of the new Government and they are supposed to set basic preconditions for positive development of MRT. However, this is still ongoing.

C) The media regulator (Agency of Media and Audiovisual Media Services – AVMU) under the influence of the ruling parties

The Agency of Media is the media regulator in the country and its competences are regulated by the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. Article 6 of this law sets out the basic roles, of AVMU, which are to ensure transparency in the broadcaster's work, to safeguard the protection and development of pluralism in the sphere of audio and audiovisual media services, to encourage and support the existence of diverse and independent media, etc.

As of January 2014, with the newly adopted law, the structure of AVMU is transformed, i.e. the role of the Council of the Agency (composed of 7 persons) has decreased and wider authority is given to the Director. In addition to this, in its last Progress Report, the EC emphasises on their concerns about political pressure on members of the agency and recommends that the capacity and the independence of the regulator should be strengthened. Despite this, the same report, as well as other reports from local journalists associations in 2017⁷, welcomed the steps of the Agency to address hate speech and unprofessional reporting of the media. Another positive element highlighted in the last EC Progress Report is the level of transparency in AVMU's work, although there is still room for improvement.

7 Association of Journalists of Macedonia (2017) AVMS found hate speech against Albanians on TV Sitel, <<http://znm.org.mk/?p=2979&lang=en>>.

The basic weaknesses of the Agency of Media are its exposure to political pressure and the model of financing. Another weakness is the negative practice of reissuing media licenses despite the large number of media outlets and the lack of serious analysis concerning the necessity of new media, given the limited media market.

In addition, several amendments to the Electoral Code were passed by the Macedonian Parliament on 25 July 2018 in a fast-track procedure, as a result of a political agreement between the leaders of the four main political parties. An amendment to the Electoral Code empowers the State Electoral Commission to register and monitor online media reporting on the elections. Another amendment gives the authorities the possibility to have preselection campaigns that would be paid from the national budget. These amendments directly affect the media, which may cause negative consequences in their work and may limit the freedom of speech. These amendments were criticised by the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ)⁸ and by the Platform for protection of journalists by the Council of Europe⁹.

D) Judicial practice in cases where journalists are involved

When it comes to defamation and insult cases, where journalists are involved, there is an improvement of the judicial practice in the country. There were more than 300 cases of criminal lawsuits against journalists back in 2012. After the decriminalisation process, supported by the former OSCE's Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović, the rough number of active cases, based on the information from the attorney office, indicates that there is a decrease to 35-40 active cases at the national level.

- 8 European Federation of Journalists (2018) Macedonia: Election Commission authorised to fine media for 'Unbalanced Reporting', <<https://europeanjournalists.org/blog/2018/08/13/macedonia-election-commission-authorized-to-fine-media-for-unbalanced-reporting>>.
- 9 Council of Europe (2018) The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – Amendments to the Electoral Code Empower State Election Commission to Issue Fines to Media for 'Unbalanced Reporting', 9 August, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/media-freedom/detail-alert?p_id=sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_col_id=column-2&p_p_col_pos=4&p_p_col_count=9&sojdashboard_WAR_coesojportlet_alertPK=39164635>.

In 2017, a decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the case 'Selmani and Others v. the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia'¹⁰ was published. It was related to the events of 24 December 2012, where journalists were forcibly expelled from the gallery of the Macedonian Parliament. The European Court found a violation of two of the rights, guaranteed by the European Convention on Human Rights – the right to freedom of expression under Article 10 and the right to a fair trial under Article 6 of the Convention. This judgment is the first in which the infringement of the right to freedom of expression is ruled on, which is very important for democracy and the rule of law in the country. At the same time, the decision of the Court is considered as a victory of the journalist community and has shown that justice is always worth fighting for. This decision is an additional proof that the judicial institutions in Macedonia have failed to meet their primary mission, which is to protect and promote the freedom of expression.

E) The Media market

The media market remains weak and limited, given the high number of existing media in the country. The annual spending on advertising, according to the Media Sustainability Index (IREX)¹¹ is 35.6 million Euro, based on the estimates of the total advertising spending by industry insiders. From this amount, 23.4 million Euro goes to television, 2.8 million Euro to radio, 1.4 million Euro for print, around 3.5 million Euro to digital media and 4.5 million Euro goes to out of home commercials. These funds annually go to approximately 150 traditional media and up to 150 online informative media outlets. As a consequence of the small media market and the vast number of media, the economic position of the media is difficult. The socio-economic position of journalists makes them vulnerable to pressure by the local centres of power.

10 European Court of Human Rights, <[http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{"itemid":\["001-170839"\]}](http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{)>.

11 IREX (2018) Media Sustainability Index – Europe and Eurasia, <<https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-full.pdf>>.

Based on the assessment of the media regulator, the media landscape in Macedonia is comprised of 67 TV stations, 14 out of which operate at the state level, 30 at the regional level and 23 at the local level. Five TV stations at the state level have licenses from the media regulator for broadcasting via terrestrial signal and others are via cable or satellite signal. In addition, there is a total of 73 radio stations, 4 out of which at the state level, 17 at regional level (16 commercial and one non-profit radio) and 52 at local level (50 commercial and two non-profit).

Other traditional media on the national level include the national print media outlets, in total a number of 5 dailies (Vecer, Nova Makedonija, Sloboden Pecat, Koha and Lajm) and 2 national weeklies – Fokus and Republika. Here, it is important to be mentioned that some of the most popular daily newspapers (Vest, Utrinski and Dnevnik) were closed in the course of 2017 due to financial losses, all part of the company Media Print Macedonia (MPM), previously owned by the German WAZ media group. The print media are generally financed by commercials but also by adverts from the central and local authorities. The average cost of a daily newspaper is around 25 cents (15 MKD) and this amount cannot even cover the production of the daily editions and the distribution. Weeklies are charging higher price and this is around 80-90 cents per copy (50 MKD) but again given the larger content and better quality compared to the dailies, this price is insufficient to provide financial sustainability of these media. In addition, there are approximately 100 informative web portals operating in Macedonian and other minority languages on national level.

To conclude, the Macedonian media landscape is comprised of around 250-300 traditional and online media outlets – all competing on a small media market which does not exceed the amount of 35 million Euro. An exception of these figures is the public broadcaster, the MRT, which has a separate budget, as it is mainly financed by the broadcasting tax, which is non-efficient.

In July 2015 the Government imposed a moratorium on governmental campaigns in the media. This led to significant reduction of the budgets of the mainstream media, given that the government itself is among the top 50 advertisers, according to the media regulator.

Currently, a vast number of media are striving to compete on a distorted media market, which creates poor conditions for the media to fulfil their legal obligations to produce the minimum required domestic programme and to produce quality informative content that serves the public interest. In particular, regional and local media are mostly affected, although there are indicators that the local municipalities continue to support them with public funds in a non-transparent way.

The distorted media market creates a situation in which media outlets are forced to lean towards the government of the day, hoping to receive public funds as a reward for their servitude. On the other hand, the journalistic and partially the media community welcome the allocation of funds for investigative journalism and the creation of informative content, although these funds are insufficient.

F) The role of information in the accession to the EU and NATO

Respect for human rights and the rule of law are among the preconditions for countries' accession to the EU and NATO. The media reform in Macedonia is one of the benchmarks that the country should fulfil in order to be positively evaluated by the EU through its regular country progress reports and by NATO standards. In fact, the EU assesses whether the legal and institutional framework for protection of fundamental rights is in place and if reforms have enhanced compliance with European human rights standards, the full implementation of which requires sustained efforts. In its 2018 report on the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, the European Commission finds: 'As regards freedom of expression, the country has achieved some level of preparation and made good progress, notably through an improved climate for the media and decreased pressure

on journalists. The country needs to address remaining challenges, including reform of the public broadcaster¹².

In the process of accession it is necessary to further strengthen the national framework and its full implementation through methods, building the capacity of the media regulator. The role of information in the accession process is a very important one. In order to further enhance this role, building the capacity of the media regulator broadcaster is important. The state must provide a favourable environment in which the media and journalists can work free and without external influences.

3. Conclusions

In order to improve the media environment several measures have to be taken. The immediate measures should include:

1. Ceasing the practice of impunity towards journalists' attackers. The Ministry of Interior and the new Minister must take concrete steps to investigate cases of attacks on journalists (51 in total) and to submit evidence to the Prosecutors office, where legal procedure will be initiated in front of the courts.
2. Increasing transparency of the public institutions through concrete measures. For example, each minister could hold weekly public meetings with journalists (or similar positive models from the region) weekly.
3. Implementing the newly adopted amendments of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in line with the urgent priorities set in conformity with the EC in several areas with the following order:

12 European Commission (2018) Key findings of the 2018 Report on the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 17 April, <http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-18-3405_en.htm>.

- a. Changing the structure of the organisations and institutions that nominates members within the Council of the Agency of Media and the members of the Programme Council of MRT, whereas the Parliament is having the obligations to adopt the nominees with 2/3 majority. This will guarantee minimum conditions for the independence from political influence of the regulator and the public broadcaster. All potential members of these bodies should have the right to apply for these positions based on an open call that will give fair access to all interested parties.
 - b. Electing new Director of MRT based on the strengthened criteria so that this position is managerial and professional.
 - c. Establishing external audit of the financial and material work of the MRT annually.
 - d. Increasing the budget of MRT by setting aside one percent of the budget every year for this media outlet. This is a good model that will provide sustainable and independent source of financing given that the broadcasting tax has not been collected in an efficient manner in the last years.
 - e. Imposing proportionate fines on the media in order to be suitable for all types of media. Within the current law, they are horizontal and this creates an instrument for pressuring the smaller media outlets especially the regional and local. Enforcing and foreseeing a subvention model (or a fund) based on EU practices in order to create possibility for these media to increase the quality of the programme and to be more professional.
4. Immediate amendments to the Election Code:
- a. Deleting all provisions that were part of the political agreement of Przhino (ad-hoc body for monitoring of media content, editor within the MRT set by the opposition party and others).

- b. Deleting the provisions within the Election Code referring to the web portals and the fines.
 - c. Banning paid political propaganda.
- 5. Immediate amendments to the Labour Law:
 - a. Implementing the undertaken obligations by the government programme for amendments to the Labour Law providing for real protection of workers, including journalists and media workers,
 - b. Amending to the provisions of the Labour Law concerning the right of strike. Workers are discouraged from exercising this right by the current law as the penalties for minor procedural mistakes in organising strikes are very high,
 - c. Changing the Labour Law in the area of representativeness of trade.