



Enhancing Regional Cooperation to Combat Disinformation in the Western Balkans

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Rising Threat: Disinformation and Regional Instability in the Western Balkans

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

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

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

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

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

To effectively combat political disinformation in Montenegro and the

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

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

Proposed Solutions:

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

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

Conclusion:

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

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

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

Resources

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

