



Unregistered Media as a Tool of Spreading the Disinformations in the Western Balkans: Case Study on Non-Enlargement

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Unveiling the world of disinformation within the Western Balkans

Disinformation and misinformation are global issues, either intentionally or unintentionally, that seek to undermine countries, societies and regions. As traditional media, especially in print, lost popularity and public trust, due to modern technology and habits of the younger generations.

The rise of internet news sites (internet electronic publications) has aggravated this issue, especially through the unique problem of unregistered news sites within the Western Balkans. There are no legal requirements for the online news sources to register as media outlets, as a result allowing the disregard of one's obligations to adhere to professional journalistic standards and ultimately dodge penalties.

Whilst many unregistered news sites maintain a professional standard, others exploit this lack of regulation as a means to spread disinformation and misinformation to influence public opinion for their own interests. Some of these sites are generally recognized disinformation and misinformation sources, even appearing and/or being mentioned within official studies for institutions such as the

European Parliament and prestigious universities like Stanford.

This problem extends to social media accounts that are associated with such publications and even a network of fake profiles that amplify this issue.

As of present, the Western Balkan (WB) countries lack effective and adequate solutions to this issue, highlighting the urgent need to address this complex international problem.

Legal framework

The WB countries share a similar legal framework for electronic publications. Montenegro, for example, has specific laws regulating traditional media but relies on the Law on Media to govern publications online.

The law allows online publications to register in the Media register, disclosing information about founders, company headquarters, and editors-in-chief. Registered online publications can access funding from the Fund for encouraging media pluralism and diversity, yet registration remains optional, not obligatory.

Montenegro is currently amending its Law on Media to address these issues, on top of the majority of state-owned companies financing online publications that are in accordance to their interest. However, in other WB countries, there are no plans to mandate registration for online publications, aligning with their respective national contexts.

Case study of unregistered news sites in Montenegro

In Montenegro, ahead of the October 2016 parliamentary elections, the "Crna Gora news agency" (CGNA) was established. Experts from Stanford University linked this agency to Russia's military intelligence (GRU), while Montenegrin Digital Forensic Center (DFC) associated it with Yvgeny Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency (IRA), which is connected to the Wagner private mercenary army involved in Russian aggression against Ukraine.

Stanford University experts analyzed CGNA's data sets from social networks that were provided by Facebook to the US Senate Intelligence Committee. Facebook attributed "CGNA" data sets to the work of GRU.¹

The study points out that the "agency" was aimed at *"creating untrue stories and conspiracy theories to cast doubts on the integrity of Montenegro's October 2016 elections and undermine then Prime Minister Milo Dukanović"*.²

According to the authors of the "Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019" study, the goal

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<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/prigo%C5%BEin-crna-gora-lazne-informacije/32480856.html>

² Potemkin Pages & Personas: Assessing GRU Online Operations, 2014-2019, Stanford Internet Observatory, DiResta, R. and Grossman, S. <https://purl.stanford.edu/cv483mb5313>

was to reduce the chances of Montenegro joining NATO. However, eight months later, in June 2017, Montenegro became a NATO member.³

Analysing the data, they found that GRU operation's:

"Data sets largely follow an established tactical pattern known as narrative laundering, or information laundering, in which a story is planted or created and then legitimized through repetition or a citation chain across other media entities."

This is exactly how the CGNA's article about the alleged European Commission's suspicions of electoral fraud in Montenegro in 2016 reached the Russian state news agency TASS.⁴

CGNA ceased operations in March 2017, with limited success⁵ despite numerous social media posts. In contrast, IN4S.me - another unregistered media outlet - holds significant influence, especially among the pro-Serbian and pro-Russian populations in Montenegro and the region. This portal has 48,000 Facebook followers and receives funds from state-owned companies with majority state ownership, including politicians with pro-Serbian and pro-Russian affiliations. IN4S.me is considered one of the biggest spreaders of disinformation in the Western Balkans region.⁶

Third parties (ab)use of unregistered media

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https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_144647.htm

⁴ <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/3708048>

⁵ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/lazne-vijesti-rusija-wagner/32482517.html>

⁶ https://www.disinfo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/07_Day1_DisinfoacrossEU_Presentation2_Jelena.pdf

Foreign interferences, in particular from Russia and to some extent China, can be categorized into five categories (but, indeed, not fully exclusive to it):

- **Official government communications** (Kremlin or ministry statement; official Russian social media post; statement or quote by Russian official),
- **State-funded global messaging** (state-funded foreign-facing media, state-funded domestic-facing media, foreign based Russian state-funded media; international Russian socio-cultural institutions),
- **Cultivation of proxy sources** (Russia-aligned outlets with global reach; local language-specific outlets, witting proliferators of Russian narratives; unwitting proliferators of Russian narratives; foreign state narrative amplification),
- **Weaponization of social media** (infiltration of domestic conversations; standing campaigns to undermine faith in institutions; amplification of protests or civil discord),
- **Cyber-enabled disinformation** (hack and release; site capture; cloned websites; forgeries; disruption of official sources or objective media).

This policy paper focuses on the third category - "*Cultivation of proxy sources*", particularly unregistered media. Some individuals and institutions behind these portals benefit directly from association with the Kremlin, while others maintain a veneer of separation from Russia but primarily disseminate pro-Kremlin content. This content, produced and exacerbated by the unregistered media, facilitates the **spread of disinformation and**

propaganda across entire information ecosystems, and not in isolation.

Third parties that are (ab)using the so-called "black propaganda"⁷ approach have three advantages:

- 1) Introduction of numerous variations of same false narratives,
- 2) Plausible deniability (and different stances, because pillars do not appear to be connected),
- 3) Media multiplier effect - pillars amplify each other,

Serbian media plays a significant role in transmitting Russian propaganda in neighbouring countries, particularly in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (specifically within the Republika Srpska).⁸ In Montenegro, the mainstream media maintain a balanced position on the Russian-Ukraine conflict, while officially unregistered portals and Serbian media are the primary sources of Russian Propaganda. In the Republika Srpska (BiH) pro-Russian sentiments can be even more radical than in Serbia itself (30-40 % of the Serbian population estimated to be pro-Russian), reflected in the narratives of local media.

Both Russia and China, despite diverging interests in some aspects, are increasingly collaborating on supplying similar disinformation and propaganda narratives. For example, they have jointly promoted narratives regarding the conflict in Ukraine. China, while not fully endorsing Russia's actions, has amplified Kremlin propaganda and spread false information. The narratives propagated by mainstream and

⁷ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2086855>

⁸ [https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russia n%2520Narrative%2520Proxies%2520in%2520Balkans.pdf](https://www.gmfus.org/sites/default/files/Russia%20Narrative%20Proxies%20in%20Balkans.pdf)

unregistered (shadow) media in Serbia have reflected this collaboration.

An effective method to combat disinformation and protect democratic values involves a “whole-of-society” approach, as seen in Taiwan during its 2020 presidential elections. In the face of a disinformation campaign by China, Taiwan empowered its citizens to detect, block and debunk fake news, resulting in fair elections. This approach, based on lessons from Taiwan, should be swiftly implemented in all countries to defend against disinformation campaigns and protect democracy.

Consequences of disinformation for the Western Balkans

Since the late '90s, the WBs have been focused on Euro-Atlantic integration, with the EU and NATO as key partners. However, this orientation faces competition from non-Western countries seeking influence in the region, including Russia, China, and Turkey. Euro-skepticism in the region is low and declining, making WBs' enlargement and integration a potential source of stability. Unregistered media and third-party disinformation operating in the region aim to discredit the EU's role, using religious, ethnic, political, and economic factors. This geopolitical competition has significant potential for misinforming the region's citizens.

Disinformation related to non-enlargement includes narratives in unregistered media discrediting EU reforms and policies in the region while promoting Russia and China's investments and focusing on destabilizations in Kosovo's north. The Kremlin's disinformation in Serbian-language media in the WBs often demonizes the US and NATO, portrays the EU as weak and divided, advertises Russian military strength, and amplifies

threat perceptions, myths, and ethnic tensions.

According to the RCC Balkan Barometer, the percentage of citizens who believe EU accession will never happen increased from 22% in 2021 to 28%. These elements contain disinformation aimed at discrediting the EU's presence in the region, given the prolonged integration process compared to other countries. Unregistered media in the region is influenced by non-Western countries, and fake news often originates on social media before being shared by various outlets as official news.

A recent study on fake news by the European Parliament finds that disinformation is an “*endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception.*”⁹ The authors claimed that “*foreign actors are not the most prominent culprits*” and that “*most of the people and organizations producing and disseminating disinformation are internal.*”¹⁰ A recent study by the Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group (BiEPAG) shows that more than 75 % of citizens of WB countries believe in one of the six common COVID-19 conspiracy theories, whereas in Western Europe this number is between one quarter and one-fifth of the population. More than 30 % of WB citizens even believe that Bill Gates is using the pandemic to push a vaccine with a microchip to track people, which could

⁹ Disinformation in the Western Balkans, December 2020, available at

<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>

¹⁰ Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, European Parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 2020, available at

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

have a negative effect on future vaccinations.¹¹

Anti-EU-enlargement narratives are coming because of the dominant external media influence coming from Russia or homegrown unregistered media. For instance, Sputnik Serbia does not seem to focus too much on internal Serbian politics but implements different disinformation campaigns focused at discrediting the EU and raising nationalist tensions.¹² A study “Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans” by the Meta Morphosis in North Macedonia mentioned that at the moment, reforms in the WBs are progressing more slowly than expected and all of that contributes additionally to the “enlargement fatigue” in the EU and simultaneously damages its reputation in the region.¹³ As well, it is pointed out that the surveys in the WBs countries show an increase of the number of people who no longer want to join the EU.¹⁴

And as concluded in the EU paper even if the EU does no longer take enlargement formally off the table, it will be effectively scuttled by a combination of information manipulation and public disaffection, as governments shirk conditionality and citizens cease to believe in a European

future. That, in turn, would shatter the structure of political party systems and economic landscapes geared towards EU integration, causing further dysfunction and dislocation – fertile ground for disinformation.¹⁵

Conclusions

The challenge of regulating online media is common in WB countries, with minor differences. In particular, the regulatory process has been incredibly slow, exacerbating the problem given the rapid evolution of digital technologies and social media communication channels. Unregistered media outlets have become platforms for sensationalism, unprofessional reporting, public deception and misinformation. This issue is compounded by their often serving as an “extended arm” of numerous officially registered media outlets.

This media and information chaos aligns with the foreign policies of countries such as Russia or even China, as heavily explored in this paper. The impact of this influence is not solely due to favourable media environments but is rooted in historical events, political relationships, and individual actors.

The romanticization of Russia, but in its current role and as a historical “strong player”, has not risen accidentally. The portrayal of autocratic leaders like Putin as “strong leaders” standing against the West has resonated with some in the region. This may reflect a long-standing desire for strong autocratic leaders similar to those from socialist regimes such as Josip Broz. Some segments of the population believe that unfavourable political situations and

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans, Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, December 2020, available at <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf>

¹³ Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, European Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Affairs, December 2020, available at [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

¹⁴ Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans, April 2023, available at <file:///C:/Users/donada/Downloads/geopolitical-analysis-34-final.pdf>

¹⁵ Geopolitical Perspective of Disinformation Flows in the Western Balkans, April 2023, available at <file:///C:/Users/donada/Downloads/geopolitical-analysis-34-final.pdf>

widespread corruption can only be resolved through a “steel fist” approach. This form of thinking transcends political affiliations such as those on the left or right.

Within this context, it's important to note that not all media outlets directly follow hybrid threat matrices. Many are simply susceptible to creating and transmitting dis- and mis-information due to issues such as poor access to reliable sources, unprofessional practices, and journalists motivated by a myriad of pre-existing narratives, often influenced by pro-Russian or Chinese media campaigns.

Also, a significant portion of the population fails to recognise the harmful impacts of pro-Russian and Chinese narratives, which often present an alternative to alliances like NATO. This is driven by factors such as weak media literacy, which has been particularly evident during events like the COVID-19 pandemic. This limited development of media literacy in still transitioning countries, both within the region and globally, is a result of poor policies and a lack of strategic action to address the issue. The decline of traditional media, influenced by political and financial challenges, has also contributed. Lastly, inadequate journalist education, resistance to contemporary trends, and a lack of understanding of hybrid threats and geopolitical dynamics further intensify this issue.

Recommendations

Here are important recommendations for addressing disinformation:

- Accelerate the process of passing the laws on online media, which includes mandatory registration and transparency of ownership, etc., a unified register of all online media and which all relevant stakeholders support;

- Financially support organizations analysing the media landscape to detect unregistered media, especially those known for spreading disinformation;

- To pay particular attention to freeing the central regulatory agencies for communication from political influences, which could be achieved by establishing a general political consensus on the media as one of the main representatives of a democratic society;

- Promote media and media literacy as key components of democratic society development through collaboration between government organizations and domestic/international non-governmental organizations. Emphasize democratic values and media freedoms;

- To encourage cooperation between the government, business, civil sector, tech companies and consumers to raise public awareness of various types of disinformation threats; strengthen capacity to identify and expose disinformation threats;

- To finance and encourage the development of a larger number of "watchdog" and "fact-checking" media organizations to deal with these issue professionally;

- Implement media literacy programs in primary and secondary schools, involving teachers and professors, especially those teaching media- and information-related subjects;

- In addition to developing a media literacy program according to general principles, it is necessary to understand the domestic socio-political reality and, through that prism, approach the importance of the media literacy segment;

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- To develop education programs for journalists and highlight the advantages of transparent journalism, which include - for example - the benefits of financing from various EU funds;
- Journalist education programs must include a special segment on the recognition of hybrid threat matrices and the actions of media that are under such influences;
media platforms through which they are influenced;
- Traditional and registered media must use their resources also for the purpose of media literacy among the population;
- To initiate the development and popularization of crowdfunding, which would facilitate the popular public support for activities of the media, fact-checking, etc.;
- To develop a program of "*algorithmic literacy*," whereby citizens become familiar with the basic functioning of the social

