



Truth in the Age of Disinformation: Investing in Fact-Checking Organizations in the Western Balkans

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The Disinformation Dilemma in the Western Balkans

Disinformation — verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public and may cause public harm — has become a pervasive issue globally, with profound implications on societal trust, public discourse, and democratic processes.¹ In the Western Balkans, a region marked by its intricate sociopolitical fabric, transitional democracies, and history of ethnic tensions, the prevalent and concerning phenomenon of disinformation exposure shapes residents' attitudes towards health, politics, and public safety, irrespective of their specific location.

The spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans, encompassing traditional news, fake websites, and social media, exacerbates divisions and threatens democratic stability in the region. In our digital age, these rapidly spreading false narratives can fuel conflict and disrupt governance. Consequently, prioritizing countermeasures against disinformation is essential for policymakers, civil society, and

the international community. This paper aims to present a focused policy framework for the Western Balkans, highlighting solutions that bolster democratic institutions, increase media literacy, and create a healthy information environment. In the context of European integration, mitigating disinformation is not only about preserving trust and accuracy but is vital for safeguarding the region's future and aligning with democratic values.

The Roots and Repercussions of Disinformation in the Western Balkans

The problem of disinformation in the Western Balkans is deep-rooted and far-reaching, impacting many societal and political areas. Amplified by the rise of digital platforms, misleading narratives create a complex web of untruths that exacerbate societal divisions, heighten political tensions, and undermine democracy. The media in the region, often criticized for partisan biases, lack of transparency, and susceptibility to political sway, along with a low level of media literacy, contributes to an environment ripe for the unchecked spread of disinformation.

In Albania, low trust in media due to limited fact verification and underrepresentation of

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[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU\(2021\)653635_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/653635/EXPO_STU(2021)653635_EN.pdf)

perspectives fosters disinformation.² Outlets often resort to sensationalism and politically motivated false reports to sustain viability, as seen with Prime Minister Edi Rama's implication in false reports.³ Major outlets like Top Channel, Ora News, JOQ Albania, and Gazeta TemA are conduits for disinformation, and following a 2019 earthquake, the Albanian regulator AKEP temporarily blocked news portal "Jeta osh Qef" for spreading panic.⁴⁵ Albanian legal framework provisions indirectly tackle disinformation, but their long-term effectiveness is limited.

Bosnia and Herzegovina's political complexities greatly influence its disinformation challenges, exacerbated by media outlets using false narratives to advance political objectives. Prominent sources include Nezavisne novine, smaller news portals like Novi Horizonti and Cazin Danas, and various Facebook pages.⁶ The strong connections between Republika Srpska and Serbia enable media narratives, including those containing disinformation, to transcend national borders. Much of this disinformation revolves around Republika Srpska and tends to be international, featuring campaigns designed to fuel xenophobia, promote anti-Western sentiments, and portray Western Balkan values as contradictory to those of the European Union.⁷ Quantitative analysis reveals widespread genocide denial and

conspiracy theories about ethnic groups. As per the Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2022, there were 693 instances of genocide denial identified.⁸ The Sarajevo Canton government proposed a law imposing fines for spreading fake news in May 2023.⁹

Kosovo's disinformation landscape focuses on delegitimizing its statehood and destabilizing governance.¹⁰ Main disinformation channels include mainstream media outlets like Klan Kosova and Gazeta Express, and politicians such as Isa Mustafa and Kadri Veseli.¹¹ Amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Kosovo found itself targeted by Russian hybrid warfare, including allegations from high-ranking Russian officials claiming recruitment of mercenaries from Kosovo, along with Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, for involvement in the Ukraine conflict.¹² In response to this Russian propaganda — largely characterized by creating adverse narratives about Kosovo and its treatment of Serbs — the Kosovo authorities have taken several steps, such as banning Russian-originated media outlets and online platforms known to generate false information about Kosovo.¹³

Montenegro faces external disinformation activities, with major topics encompassing Covid-19, internal politics, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with misleading narratives about Covid-19 causing considerable societal impact, as indicated by low vaccination rates and prevalent

² <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/restoring-trust-journalism-albania>

³ [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)

⁴ [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)

⁵ <https://dosja.al/lajm-i-fundit-rama-mbyll-portalin-e-pare-joq-nuk-askesohet-brenda-shqiperise/>

⁶ [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)

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ <https://srebrenicamemorial.org/en/news/srebrenica-genocide-denial-report-2022/97>

⁹ <https://ti-bih.org/ti-bih-the-new-law-in-sarajevo-canton-is-a-continuation-of-the-attack-on-freedom-of-expression-in-bih/?lang=en>

¹⁰ [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)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://tass.com/world/1406183>

¹³ https://www.kpm-ks.org/en/lajmi_i_plot/3468

conspiracy theories.¹⁴ Disinformation was also widespread regarding a tragedy in Cetinje, in which 11 people died and six were wounded, sparking false reports that were disseminated not only by domestic media but also by regional outlets.¹⁵ Despite widespread disinformation, legal regulations do not explicitly define 'fake news,' but the Criminal Code includes a provision against 'causing panic.'¹⁶ The government is addressing the problems in its 2022 to 2026 'Media Strategy.'¹⁷

North Macedonia saw disinformation campaigns influence electoral processes, as seen in its 2018 referendum and 2020 elections. A study published by the Prague Security Studies Institute found that Twitter activity related to the referendum and the elections could be linked to automated accounts or bots.¹⁸ The media in North Macedonia and various experts and academics have also repeatedly depicted France as backing Bulgaria's assimilation policy.¹⁹ Such portrayal, coupled with conflicting messages from the EU and specific member states, has stoked Euroscepticism, deepening inter-ethnic discord and breeding misconceptions about EU stances.²⁰ The emphasis on past conflicts

and the questioning of EU values add to these negative sentiments, opening doors to alternative solutions and alliances, potentially shifting public sentiment towards other global powers like Russia or China.²¹

In Serbia, a 2022 CRTA report depicted a media landscape rife with propaganda and manipulation, with outlets like Alo and Kurir accounting for over half of all disinformation-containing news, with nationally-covered TV Pink outperforming others in disinformation dissemination.²² Despite the constitutional provision for freedom of expression, threats to journalists, unclear media ownership, and the state's significant role in the media sector challenge these freedoms.²³ The fear of government retaliation or economic repercussions has prompted self-censorship, deterring media outlets from criticizing the government, as reported by media association representatives.²⁴ Broadcasts from Russia Today and Sputnik continue despite EU suspensions.²⁵

The spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans is a tangible and urgent issue, not just an abstract concern. Without prompt and decisive action, it threatens to further divide societies, destabilize political landscapes, and obstruct progress toward democracy and peace in the region.

¹⁴ <https://www.cin-cg.me/dezinformacije-i-lazne-vijesti-u-crnoj-gori-epidemija-za-koju-jos-nema-lijeka/>

¹⁵ <https://www.cin-cg.me/dezinformacije-i-lazne-vijesti-u-crnoj-gori-epidemija-za-koju-jos-nema-lijeka/>

¹⁶ Human Rights Action, A statement on the occasion of invoking the provisions related to the criminal offense "Causing panic and disorder" and imprisonment of journalists on that occasion, 13 January 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3DjwkVx>. Accessed on: 7 October 2021.

¹⁷ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/MONTENEGRO-Summit-for-Democracy-Written-Commitments-English-Accessible-Finale.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.balkancrossroads.com/nm-identity-at-stake-on-twitter>

¹⁹ <https://meta.mk/en/media-narratives-about-eu-as-a-factor-of-increased-russian-influence-in-north-macedonia/>

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² <https://crt.rs/en/report-mapping-disinformation-in-the-serbian-media/>

²³ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/serbia>

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ <https://autonomija.info/dzejms-rubin-ruske-dezinformacije-u-srbiju-i-crnu-goru-stizu-direktno-preko-rt-i-sputnjika/>

The Complex Factors of Disinformation

Several factors compound the complex and multifaceted nature of disinformation in the Western Balkans. Understanding these underlying issues is crucial for developing effective strategies to counter the problem.

Factors	Description
Lack of Media Literacy	Low levels of media literacy in the Western Balkans make it easier for disinformation to spread. The 2022 Media Literacy Index ranks Montenegro (35th), Albania (37th), Bosnia and Herzegovina (38th), Kosovo (39th) and North Macedonia (40th) at the bottom among 41 European countries. ²⁶
Political Polarization	Profound political divisions in the region provide a fertile ground for disinformation, which exploits existing biases to deepen these divides, even when the information is false. Such disinformation campaigns tend to exacerbate societal fault lines, threatening social cohesion and democratic dialogue in the region.
External Influences	Disinformation in the Western Balkans extends beyond a domestic issue, frequently fueled by external actors advancing their geopolitical interests through societal destabilization and erosion of trust in democratic institutions. Instances such as alleged Russian interference and manipulation from other foreign entities intensify the region's disinformation challenge.
Weak Institutions	Weak media and government institutions play a crucial role in the disinformation landscape. They often lack the resources, standards, or independence to provide reliable, balanced reporting or to counter disinformation effectively.

Addressing disinformation in the Western Balkans involves a multi-dimensional approach that acknowledges and tackles these underlying issues. Enhancing media literacy, bridging political divides, mitigating external influences, and strengthening institutions make it possible to create an environment less susceptible to disinformation's deleterious effects.

Potential Strategies for Combating Disinformation

Several potential policy solutions could include:

- 1. Enhancing Media Literacy Education:** Implementing comprehensive media literacy programs in schools and through public campaigns can equip citizens with the necessary skills to discern false information from truth. This can involve teaching critical thinking skills, understanding how media works and recognizing the signs of misinformation.
- 2. Investing in Journalistic Training:** Training journalists to spot disinformation and to develop specialized skills can aid in producing quality fact-based content. Programs that focus on enhancing journalistic integrity, standards and independence can be beneficial.
- 3. Investing in Fact-Checking Organizations:** Fact-checking has been shown to be an effective tool in reducing belief in misinformation and leaving a more enduring mental imprint than false claims, regardless of political affiliation. This

effectiveness has been demonstrated across different countries, cultures, and political environments.²⁷

- 4. Promoting Transparency in Media Ownership:** The introduction of regulations that demand transparency in media ownership can contribute to combating the influence of disinformation.
- 5. Review Legislation on Hate Speech and Disinformation:** The existing legislation pertaining to hate speech and disinformation should undergo review to reflect recent developments, with the review process being evidence-based and involving comprehensive consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

Prioritizing Fact-Checking as a Key Countermeasure

Addressing the multifaceted problem of disinformation in the Western Balkans requires a well-coordinated strategy that tackles the core issue: the acceptance and spread of false information. Despite ongoing efforts by international organizations and civil sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia to counter disinformation through media literacy training projects, these initiatives often remain fragmented and call for more strategic integration.²⁸ To ensure a substantial impact, this policy paper strongly advocates for strategic investment in building the capacities of independent, robust, and credible fact-

²⁷<https://www.news-medical.net/news/20210907/Fact-checking-is-an-effective-tool-to-combat-misinformation-study-shows.aspx>

²⁸<https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>

checking organizations in the region. Entities such as FakeNews Tragač, Faktoje.al, Istinomer, Istinomjer, the Metamorphosis Foundation, Raskrikavanje.rs, Raskrinkavanje.me, Raskrinkavanje.ba, Krypometri, and hibrid.info are already actively working to verify the accuracy of news stories and provide the public with reliable, unbiased information. Each is certified by The International Fact-Checking Network and shares the common goal of increasing transparency and media literacy.²⁹

Several of these organizations, including Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, the Metamorphosis Foundation, Truthmeter, and Istinomer, are also part of Facebook's Fact-Checking Programme, a global initiative combating the spread of false news on Facebook and Instagram.³⁰ This program downgrades the visibility of false-rated articles and provides users with additional context, thereby reducing the circulation of misleading content. Facebook takes more robust action against repeat offenders, limiting their distribution and ability to monetize or advertise on the platform. Additionally, the SEE Check network, which includes Fake News Tragač, Raskrinkavanje.me, Raskrinkavanje.ba, and Raskrikavanje.rs, is a collective effort aiming to enhance media accountability, boost media literacy, combat misinformation, and advocate for improved media ecosystems and journalism standards.³¹ By focusing on debunking disinformation, raising public awareness, and sharing knowledge, these organizations aim to create a robust, sustainable response to the pervasive disinformation problem.

²⁹ <https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/signatories>

³⁰ <https://www.wired-gov.net/wg/news.nsf/articles/Four+Western+Balkans+fact-checking+organisations+join+Facebooks+platform+again>

³¹ <https://seecheck.org/index.php/about/>

To fully leverage their potential, the following strategic actions are necessary:

- Immediate investment is required in organizations combating disinformation, potentially in the form of financial support, capacity-building programs, technology transfers, and international cooperation.
- Fact-checking organizations should be protected from political and other undue influences to maintain their credibility and independence. This may be achieved through stringent regulations, transparency requirements, and external audits.
- The integration of fact-checking efforts with media literacy initiatives can amplify the impact of both. This may involve partnerships with educational institutions to foster critical thinking and media literacy skills among journalists, youth, middle-aged and the elderly.
- Implementing a 'train-the-trainer' approach in a disarming disinformation program can create a robust network of professionals capable of fighting disinformation within their respective countries. This program can combine online and in-person workshops, providing journalism professionals with the essential skills, techniques, and funding to conduct their own disinformation training sessions, workshops, and events.
- Tailoring disinformation fighting efforts to the specific needs and characteristics of Western Balkan countries is crucial, understanding who the most impactful audience would be in each country.

Given the urgent need to counter disinformation in the Western Balkans, these strategies provide a comprehensive and potentially impactful approach. Through investment in fact-checking organizations and media literacy initiatives, we align with broader goals of strengthening democratic discourse, fostering informed citizenship, and building resilience.

