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### **Disinformation in the Western Balkans and the crucial role of NATO/UE...**

*ABSTRACT.: The Western Balkans an attractive ground for both domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns. Recognizing this, the Kremlin began capitalizing on the region's democratic vulnerability, post-conflict tensions, and "old" resentments toward the West. NATO's and UE communication strategy directed towards the Balkan countries to support political and media systems in the fight against fake news is crucial. It is considered very positive that NATO and UE will support the Balkan countries in the fight against hybrid threat as well as at the governmental level, also in the civil, academic and at the level media, with a particular focus on social media and tech giants such as Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube, currently more focused on removal of content related to terrorism.*

**Irida Xheneti Ph.D. (Cand.) <sup>(1)</sup>**

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The Western Balkans region is very vulnerable to foreign disinformation, which has intensified in recent years.

The Western Balkans an attractive ground for both domestic and foreign disinformation campaigns. Recognizing this, the Kremlin began capitalizing on the region's democratic vulnerability, post-conflict tensions, and "old" resentments toward the West. Russian disinformation campaigns, having emerged in line with the West's sanctions, have had two goals in the Western Balkans: undermining the values and perceptions of the EU and the U.S. and delaying nations from the region from entering Trans-Atlantic institutions. According to the research conducted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, the Kremlin has been emphasizing several narratives to achieve its political goals<sup>2</sup>.

Demonising the United States and NATO; presenting the EU as weak and divided; advertising Russian military might and COVID-19 vaccine superiority, and claiming that Western vaccine producers are corrupt; and amplifying threat perceptions, myths and ethnic tensions – these are among the most frequent topics of disinformation promoted by the Kremlin in the Serbian-language media in the Western Balkans. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia are the most affected by Russian information operations that attempt to undermine the European Union and NATO in the region<sup>3</sup>.

In a broader sense, disinformation is an endemic phenomenon in the Western Balkans caused by internal factors. The latest disinformation study of the European Parliament called it a

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<sup>2</sup> The Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Western Balkans, April 28, 2021 By Jelena Jevtić

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>

“launchpad for Russian disinformation operations in the Western Balkans”<sup>4</sup>.

The flow of information between countries in the region is borderless. Close social, historical and cultural ties between Serbia, the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska and Montenegro mean that almost all media narratives, including disinformation, flow across borders daily.

Beyond the idealistic presentation of Russia's leadership and its weapons, such disinformation demonises NATO and the United States, fuels ethnic tensions and presents the European Union as a dysfunctional, racist and anti-Serb organisation. It amplifies the threat perceptions of the Orthodox population as well as a culture of remembrance that portrays Russia and the Soviet Union as powerful protectors throughout history. Over time, various media including mainstream outlets in affected countries began to use foreign disinformation content on a large scale. This was made possible because of a media landscape characterised by tabloidization, clickbait logic, poor ethical standards, little investigative journalism and news analysis, and political influences.

In practice, this means that the average media consumer learns more about the alleged advantages of the Armata tank, Nord Stream 2 pipeline, about Ukraine as a failed state which betrayed common sense in distancing itself from Russia. It is interesting the case of North Macedonia that was an example of concerted propaganda, diplomatic and intelligence activities for almost ten years prior to its NATO accession in 2020. Information activities now focus on presenting the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>

country as a victim of its neighbouring states, Bulgaria and Greece, and accusing the current pro-Western government in Skopje of giving in to Sofia's demands on the issue of identity. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 epidemic is strengthening propaganda narratives of superiority and demonisation of the West. Topics related to both science and defence are used to that effect, combined with military pandemic assistance called "ventilator diplomacy" by some experts.

Russian propaganda and disinformation promote the superiority of the Russian COVID-19 vaccine, while claiming that Western vaccine producers are corrupt.

Activities in the information space also focus on the culture of remembrance, amplifying narratives about historical victimhood and glorifying the role of the Soviet Union.

Unfortunately, the Western Balkan countries of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia are likely to continue to be fertile ground for foreign disinformation for the foreseeable future due to both external and internal factors.

Serbia's foreign policy is based on the "four pillars" of establishing balanced relationships with the European Union, the United States, Russia and China. Although EU membership remains a strategic goal, special attention is paid to fostering relations with Moscow and Beijing, which do not recognise Kosovo's independence, unlike most EU and NATO members. This creates an environment for increased action by foreign actors in the media space.

At the same time, Republika Srpska follows Belgrade's policy of military neutrality by, for example, not aspiring to join NATO and building relations with Russia.

This political positioning and the unresolved issue of Kosovo's status continue to slow Serbia's EU integration and

the NATO membership perspectives of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It allows Moscow to continue to present itself as the protector of Serbian interests. Through the continued promotion of selected narratives, the Kremlin will continue to strengthen its influence in the region.

The region lacks the infrastructure needed to combat disinformation. This is a result of inherently weak institutional settings and the positive attitudes of many towards Russia, whose information activities are not seen as a threat.

It is estimated that disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception. But while disinformation is frequently discussed in the context of external threats to the functioning of governance and democracy, this study shows that foreign actors are not the most prominent culprits. Most of the people and organisations producing and disseminating disinformation are internal. Moreover, this study finds that disinformation is most only a symptom rather than the cause of a deeper breakdown of social cohesion and democratic governance. Among the study's key findings are the following: In countries such as Serbia and Montenegro where politics has been dominated by a single group, disinformation tends to follow the 'party line', serving the interests of the powerful and undermining opposition; • In more competitive political environments - such as Albania, Kosovo and (to an extent) North Macedonia disinformation tends to be used opportunistically by all sides, pursuing short-term aims rather than long-term strategies; The presence of deep ethnic and/or sectarian divides - such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia - fosters xenophobic disinformation campaigns by both domestic and foreign actors; When a



the NATO membership perspectives of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It allows Moscow to continue to present itself as the protector of Serbian interests. Through the continued promotion of selected narratives, the Kremlin will continue to strengthen its influence in the region.

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government's sovereignty is new or challenged – such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia, and to a lesser extent in Montenegro – politics are especially vulnerable to geopolitically motivated interference. Both domestic and foreign actors use disinformation to undermine the credibility of the European Union in the Western Balkans, amplifying and manipulating existing divisions between 'EU idealists' (who are committed to their country's European identity and future come what may) and 'EU realists' (who may not oppose EU integration but do not believe it is likely to happen). While China and Turkey are both active in this field, efforts to discredit the EU are dominated by Russia, which maintains an extensive infrastructure of media manipulation throughout the region; The COVID-19 pandemic has provided fertile ground for disinformation. Governments throughout the Western Balkans have sought to falsify their record on handling the pandemic, while others have injected many of the same false claims found elsewhere. In addition, China and, to a lesser extent Russia, have used the pandemic as an opportunity to build leverage in public opinion, at the expense of the EU and NATO<sup>5</sup>.

While disinformation affects many – though by no means all – elections and referenda in the Western Balkans, it is not the case that disinformation is the cause of democratic breakdown. Rather, it is the lack of commitment to democratic governance by domestic political actors that opens the door to the productive use of disinformation as a tool of political competition. Looking across the region, the study finds that: • In

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<sup>5</sup> European Parliament (2019), 'Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes'. Texts Adopted P9\_TA(2019)0031 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html)).

Albania, disinformation is a ubiquitous feature of domestic political competition, but efforts are generally opportunistic and campaigns are short-lived. There is relatively little evidence of attempts by foreign powers to distort Albanian politics or international affairs<sup>6</sup>.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the disinformation landscape is dominated by Serbian media, often with support from Russian disinformation networks, and the focus is on xenophobia. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the site of large-scale attempts to discredit the EU.

In Kosovo, politics are unusually susceptible to news – and thus disinformation from abroad. Serbian disinformation plays a major role, sometimes with support from Russian disinformation networks. More recently, interests linked to the Trump Administration have also gotten into the game. There is little evidence of any impact in terms of the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation, however. • In Montenegro, Russian and Serbian media are powerfully present, in particular with relation to the country's NATO membership and the 2016 coup attempt. Most disinformation, however, remains domestic, and has been an important tool in internal political competition – used particularly by the long-standing DPS-dominated government to discredit its opponents. • In North Macedonia, the recent change of government has pushed disinformation largely out of the state and mainstream media and into the margins, where it nevertheless remains a powerful force distorting internal politics. Disinformation was critical in undermining participation in the name-change referendum. In

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<sup>6</sup> European Parliament (2019), 'Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes'. Texts Adopted P9\_TA(2019)0031 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html)).

Serbia, disinformation dominates competition between political forces during and between elections. The country has witnessed significant efforts by the government to falsify the record on COVID-19, as well as large-scale international campaigns to undermine support for the EU and NATO. Finally, there is a gap between the causes of disinformation in the Western Balkans and attempts – mostly by domestic civil society, with support from abroad – to counteract it. The Western Balkans host a robust landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives, focusing on fact-checking, public education/capacity building, and media support, but the existence, location and funding of these projects track donor priorities more closely than the needs of societies on the ground. This problem is exacerbated by the severe lack of social-scientific research on the impact of disinformation or counter-disinformation in the region.

Conclusions: NATO's and UE communication strategy directed towards the Balkan countries to support political and media systems in the fight against fake news is crucial.

Despite the Russian experts claim that the United States is betting on the "myths of aggression

Russian "in order to increase its influence on the Balkan countries, ensure that the Balkans

how the EU would no longer have faith in the North Atlantic alliance, reality is different and the struggle now becomes real in the field of 'fake news'.

Within the NATO Assembly the concept of fake news is analyzed in connection to the new "hybrid warfare" strategies put in place by Russia. Of this theme the NATO Assembly addressed the Halifax Annual Session (November 2018) where two Update reports on fighting hybrid threats were presented of Russia.

With reference to the first report (Doc. 166 CDS 18, Rel. Lord Jopling, United Kingdom), it aims to raise awareness of Russia's hybrid activities, which include political interference, low use of force, espionage, crime and corruption, disinformation e propaganda, cyber attacks and economic pressures, as well as showing how some of these techniques reinforce and complement each other.

A broad spectrum of activities can be gathered under the heading "hybrid warfare", including also disinformation and propaganda cleverly used by Russia to spread fake news from the socially divisive contents in the West and the Balkans which for Russia is taking on again a great geopolitical and geostrategic importance ..

It is considered very positive that NATO and UE will support the Balkan countries in the fight against hybrid threat as well as at the governmental level, also in the civil, academic and at the level media, with a particular focus on social media and tech giants such as Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube, currently more focused on removal of content related to terrorism.

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