Poland's Experience in Combating Disinformation:

Inspirations for the Western Balkans

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Artur Adamczyk
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From the Editors

The Russian aggression in Ukraine is an undeniable tragedy for our eastern neighbour, and it simultaneously poses a grave threat to Poland's security. Beyond our eastern border, Ukraine valiantly fights bloody battles to preserve its sovereignty and uphold territorial integrity. The rallying slogan, "A free, independent, and secure Ukraine means a free, independent, and secure Poland", now resonates with heightened importance. Poland has emerged as a steadfast leader in coordinating aid to Ukraine and spearheading an international coalition to support our besieged neighbour.

The reprehensible, aggressive tactics employed by Russia, in clear violation of international law, have rightfully drawn widespread condemnation from the Euro-Atlantic community, which is actively working to assist Ukraine through various channels. The characterisation of Russia as an aggressor country employing 19th-century principles of force as an extension of its foreign policy is a stark and concerning reality. In its interactions with other nations, Russia has demonstrated a willingness to utilise modern tools, particularly through the dangerous methods of disinformation and the propagation of fake news, which serve the purpose of destabilising the international coalition, undermining the solidarity of countries supporting Ukraine, and tarnishing the reputations of those providing assistance, notably Poland, a leader in aiding Ukraine. Moscow's engagement in this hybrid warfare, leveraging contemporary communication tools, represents a prolonged effort to manipulate perceptions. The strategy involves an attempt to "whitewash" its international image by portraying itself as a nation beset by NATO. The distortion of reality through a deceptive narrative serves Moscow's goal of garnering international support and undermining the effectiveness of anti-Russian sanctions. This propaganda campaign particularly targets NATO and its member states, with a specific focus on countries such as Poland, which plays a pivotal role in providing diverse forms of assistance,

including military aid, to Ukraine. Regrettably, certain European countries, especially in the Balkan region such as Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, appear susceptible to Russian indoctrination. Despite these countries officially condemning Russian aggression against Ukraine, Serbia has refrained from joining the international sanctions. The establishment of the Russian media agency *Sputnik Serbia* in 2014 has proven not only to essentially poison hearts and minds of the Serbian population but also to impact residents of Montenegro and North Macedonia who understand the Serbian language. The success of such disinformation campaigns is evident in an attempted coup orchestrated by Russian agents in Podgorica in 2016, aimed at hindering Montenegro's accession to NATO. Indeed, the persistent Russian influence in the Balkan region poses a significant threat, especially to recently-welcomed NATO members including Montenegro (which joined in 2017) and North Macedonia (which joined in 2020). These nations, still navigating internal challenges and establishing themselves within the NATO structure, are particularly susceptible to disinformation campaigns orchestrated by Russia through channels such as Serbia. The vulnerability of societies in Montenegro and North Macedonia to such disinformation underscores the importance of equipping, preparing, and educating these populations in terms of detecting, recognising, and identifying false information, especially in the context of narratives that may distort the role of Poland (casting aspersions on our activities within NATO and our support for Ukraine), but, at the same time, glorifying and whitewashing Russia's actions.

The historical ties between Russia and the societies of the Balkan countries, rooted in the 19th-century support for their liberation from the Ottoman Empire, indeed present a complex challenge. Russia's ongoing narrative, invoking Pan-Slavism and the brotherhood of Orthodox churches, emphasises cultural and religious connections between Moscow, Podgorica, and Skopje. Fortunately, Russia has lost the previous competition for the Balkans with the Western world. It's also encouraging to note that Russia has not been able to solidify its influence in the Balkans to the extent it may have desired. Indeed, Russia lacks a military base in the region, including Serbia, and its economic model does not stand out as particularly attractive. The absence of a substantial military presence and the lack of an appealing economic model suggest that, over time, Russia's influence in the Balkans may face challenges and potentially weaken. Being aware of the foregoing, it has driven Moscow to increasingly rely on disinformation and fake news as tools of influence, in an attempt to foster internal instability in those countries, to undermine

their NATO membership, and to hinder their EU accession (thereby denigrating the Euro-Atlantic structures). *Sputnik Serbia* and so called "troll farms" operating on social media platforms serve as effective tools for disseminating misleading narratives. In this disinformation campaign, Poland is portrayed in a distorted light, with a false narrative suggesting support for "Ukrainian fascists".

It is indeed in Poland's interest to counteract this disinformation campaign and prevent the denigration of its image among new NATO members such as Montenegro and North Macedonia, and unequivocally to weaken Russian influence in those countries. These initiatives could wield a considerable influence in diminishing Russian activity in Serbia in the future. Hence, one of the primary objectives in collaborating with Balkan partners from Montenegro and North Macedonia to prepare this book was to monitor the infosphere and identify those entities responsible for creating and disseminating messages potentially detrimental to Poland's international image. This identifying, or essential unmasking, involves undermining the credibility of those spreading fake news by presenting real, factual information among influential professional and social groups, including journalists, academic teachers, and students. Poland, drawing on its experience in combating and discrediting Russian disinformation activities across traditional and social media, contributes its expertise and tools to support civic education. The aim is to enhance people's abilities to recognise disinformation and fortify their resistance to false content within those communities.

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The Evolution of Poland's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkan Region. Challenges Posed by Russian Anti-Polish Propaganda Spread in the Balkan States

Abstract
This article offers a comprehensive exploration of Poland's foreign policy evolution in relation to the Balkan region from 1989 to the present day. It also focuses on the intricate challenges posed by Russia's anti-Polish propaganda campaigns within the Balkan countries. The significance of the Balkans in the context of Polish foreign policy is researched, emphasising the transformation from a historically non-priority region to Poland's active support for Balkan nations' integration into NATO and the EU. This article underscores how Russia's aggressive policy towards Ukraine has galvanised Poland's resolve to counter Russian influence in the Balkans, including measures to combat disinformation campaigns and fake news. The proliferation of Russian propaganda, which seeks to tarnish Poland's reputation and discredit Western policies in the eyes of Balkan societies, not only erodes Poland's international standing but also impedes the Euro-Atlantic integration processes in these nations. Furthermore, the article outlines the key components of Russian propaganda and details the existing and prospective measures implemented by Polish diplomacy to counter disinformation within the Balkan region.

Keywords: Poland, Russia, Western Balkans, Foreign Policy, Propaganda, Disinformation, Fake News

Introduction

When analysing Poland's foreign policy evolution towards the Balkan region from 1989 to the present day, it's worth highlighting that, historically, the Balkans did not occupy a central position in Polish foreign policy. Poland's priorities primarily revolved around the East-West axis. However, following its accession to NATO and the European Union, Poland has been steadfast in its support for the Balkan countries' integration into both of these overarching structures. The annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and, more significantly, the overt Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022 have triggered a substantial intensification of Poland's diplomatic efforts to forge stronger bonds with Balkan nations. The principal motivation behind this surge in engagement has been the imperative to curtail Russian influence in the Balkans. Central to this endeavour has been the resolute stance against Russian disinformation campaigns, which have targeted not only the broader Western world but have also singled out Poland for misrepresentation. It's imperative to emphasise that Warsaw's approach in this context was primarily shaped by Poland's membership in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Consequently, it has aligned itself with the positions of the European Union and NATO concerning the Balkan region.

Before delving into further discussions on this topic, it's essential to clarify which countries are traditionally considered as part of the Balkans. Until the late 1980s the Balkan states included Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. The breakup of Yugoslavia fundamentally altered the political landscape of the region, giving rise to new entities: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia (originally known as Macedonia)[1], and Kosovo (Olszewski, 2010; Wojnicki, 2003; Karadzoski, Adamczyk, 2015; Adamczyk, Karadzoski, 2019). Over time, some of these nations sought to shed the stigma associated with the historically unstable and conflict-prone Balkan region. The accession of Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania, and Croatia to the European Union contributed to their perception as no longer being strictly classified as Balkan countries. Consequently, current policy frameworks often focus on shaping relations with a group of countries collectively defined by the EU as the Western Balkans, which encompass Serbia, BiH, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania (Olszewski, 2010; Babić, 2014).

[1] In 2018, the Prespa Agreement between the governments in Skopje and Athens led to the establishment of a new name for the Macedonian state: the Republic of North Macedonia.

The Evolution of Poland's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkan Region

In the transitional period between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Balkan region did not occupy a central role in Polish foreign policy. This phase coincided with Poland's new-found ability to independently and sovereignly conduct diplomacy. At that crucial moment, Warsaw directed its attention towards its immediate international surroundings, working to establish relations with both a reunified Germany and the newly-formed states emerging from the collapse of the USSR. Poland faced the imperative task of discovering and defining its international identity within the rapidly-evolving global order (Bieleń, 2011). A key focus of its foreign policy in the early 1990s was the pursuit of membership in the democratic structures of Euro-Atlantic integration, which was perceived as a fundamental guarantee of security for a nation situated on the border of an unpredictable East (Orzelska, 2011). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the government in Warsaw faced challenges in formulating a comprehensive and impactful policy toward the geographically distant Balkan region. Consequently, Poland found itself relying heavily on decisions made by the European Union and the United States, treated as its primary future allies and partners, when shaping its relations with that region.

A notable illustration of this approach was observed in Warsaw's response to the disintegration processes as witnessed in the Yugoslav Federation. Poland perceived these events through the lens of the unstable situation beyond its eastern border, harbouring concerns about a potential domino effect. This referred to the fear that the tumultuous events in the Balkans could trigger an uncontrollable disintegration of a collapsing culturally-and-religiously-diverse Soviet Union. In light of these apprehensions, Warsaw adopted a cautious stance, with Polish diplomacy awaiting guidance and arrangements from Western European countries and the USA. During this period, the White House maintained the perspective that issues in the Balkans should be primarily addressed by European nations. Consequently, the Member States of the European Communities emerged as the principal architects of the Balkans policy and Poland, in harmony with this approach, advocated for the preservation of Yugoslavia's territorial integrity and refrained from recognising the declared independence of Slovenia and Croatia (Orzelska, 2011). At the time, the European Communities had hoped that Yugoslavia could maintain its unity and avert armed conflict. However, as it became evident that the aspirations for independence by the Croats and

Slovenians could not be quelled, and with the government in Belgrade resorting to using the Serbian army to forcibly uphold the country's unity, the European Communities collectively declared the recognition of Croatia and Slovenia's independence in December 1991. Poland followed suit on January 21, 1992 (Orzelska, 2011). A parallel pattern unfolded in April 1992 when Western nations acknowledged the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Poland mirrored this recognition on April 9 of the same year. A similar sequence of events transpired in the case of Macedonian independence, formally recognised in 1993 under the name established at the UN forum as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).

In its pursuit of future NATO and EU membership, Poland sought to underscore its loyalty and utility by actively engaging in projects initiated by those organisations in the Balkan region. This commitment was notably demonstrated through the participation of Polish contingents and representatives in various missions and actions conducted by the West in the region (Zając, 2015). During the Serbian-Kosovo conflict in early 1999, when NATO initiated air strikes in Serbia through Operation Allied Force, Warsaw demonstrated a similarly loyal stance. The government in Poland supported this intervention, citing the imperative to address the humanitarian crisis, defend human rights, and halt ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. It is noteworthy that NATO's Operation Allied Force commenced shortly after Poland officially joined NATO on March 12, 1999. Despite Poland's formal membership in the Alliance, its aviation couldn't participate in the operation due to technical incompatibility. Nevertheless, Poland actively contributed to the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission, which aimed to restore stability and security in the region (Arnold, 2019).

An outcome of Poland's policy toward the Balkans during this period was a cooling of relations with Serbia. In its official declarations, Warsaw strategically avoided direct criticism of Belgrade, choosing instead to highlight the importance of maintaining European security and defending human rights. Simultaneously, Polish diplomacy cultivated robust relationships with Croatia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Macedonia. These countries regarded Poland as a leader in political changes, having already secured NATO membership and engaged in accession negotiations with the European Union. Poland actively intensified its contacts with these nations, sharing insights into its political transformation, economic reforms, and experiences in NATO membership negotiations (Koseski, 2019). Notably, Poland's support played a role in the positive outcome of Romania and Bulgaria's efforts to join NATO in March 2004. Considering

the objectives of Polish foreign policy, those were highly positive events, due to the fact that nations which were particularly concerned about the resurgence of Russian influence in Europe, while simultaneously aspiring to EU integration, joined NATO.

In May 2004, Poland achieved its second strategic goal by becoming an EU member. NATO and EU accession significantly fortified Poland's international standing, ensuring security and facilitating stable economic and social development. As the largest among the newly admitted countries, Poland expressed its leadership ambitions in the Central and Eastern European region. Positioned as a front-line state in the EU and NATO, Poland's foremost challenge persisted beyond its eastern border. For this reason, Warsaw consistently aimed to diminish Russia's influence in the region, which entailed efforts to strengthen ties of neighbouring countries, particularly Ukraine and Belarus, with the European Union. Hence, Polish diplomatic endeavours were concentrated on forging a coalition aimed at integrating former Soviet republics into the EU's sphere of influence (Barburska, 2018; Barburska, Milczarek, 2014).

This does not mean, however, that the Polish government lost interest in the situation in the Balkans, since ensuring European security depended – to a large extent – on the political stabilisation of that conflict-prone region (Żornaczuk, 2010; Tereszkiewicz, 2013). What is more, Poland had a vested interest in diminishing Russia's influence in the Balkan countries. In line with this objective, Warsaw strongly advocated for and supported the integration process of Romania and Bulgaria with the European Union, a process that culminated successfully in 2007 (Koseski, 2019). The accession of both Romania and Bulgaria not only bolstered the coalition established by Poland but also laid the groundwork for the future creation of the EU Eastern Partnership. Furthermore, Warsaw continued to pledge support to Bucharest and Sofia in their aspirations for further EU and NATO enlargement in the Balkans. The Polish government was a staunch advocate of this process, aligning with Poland's own interests and its desire to extend EU membership to Eastern Partnership countries (Żornaczuk, 2019). Poland's interest in the Balkans was also fuelled by its active participation in the activities of the Visegrad Group. Hungary being its member that shared borders with Serbia, was highly motivated to engage in efforts to stabilise the situation in the Balkans, hence it consistently emphasised the importance of prioritising ties with Western Balkan countries within the Visegrad Group (Griessler, 2018).

Poland, however, encountered a significant challenge in shaping its Balkans policy following its EU accession, primarily centered around the contentious issue of recognising Kosovo's independence as declared

in February 2008 (Pawłowski, 2008). This matter deeply divided EU Member States, with some endorsing the new state while others opposed it (Pawłowski, 2016; Pawłowski, 2018). The resulting internal divisions led to the adoption of individual positions rather than a collective declaration by all Member States. Polish politicians harboured concerns that recognising Kosovo's independence could strain relations with Serbia. They feared such a move might compel Belgrade to strengthen ties with Russia, potentially discouraging Serbs from actively pursuing integration with the European Union. Despite these apprehensions, Warsaw ultimately aligned itself with the positions of its Western allies, namely the United States and major EU countries such as Germany, Great Britain, and France, all of which had recognised Kosovo's independence. Indeed, concurrently, Warsaw made the strategic choice to refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with Kosovo. This decision is evident in Poland's absence of an embassy in Pristina, along with the state's maintaining bilateral relations at a notably low level, which can be interpreted as a political signal, and one particularly aimed at Belgrade. Despite this, in an effort to stabilise the situation in the Balkans following Kosovo's declaration of independence, NATO took the step of admitting Albania and Croatia into its structures in 2009, a move that garnered Poland's full support.

In 2009, when the global economic and financial crisis emerged, the European Union redirected its focus towards mitigating the crisis's impact, leading to a relative reduction in its engagement with the Balkans. This shift also influenced Poland's approach to the region, especially as Warsaw was actively involved in constructing the Eastern Partnership, a primary objective of its foreign policy at that time. However, during Poland's Presidency in the Council of the European Union in the second half of 2011, there was a notable change in Warsaw's stance towards the Balkans. The government in Warsaw, driven by its role in the EU Presidency, reassessed its position, with a particular emphasis on the enlargement process of the European Union, inclusive of the Balkan states. The enlargement process was a key priority for Poland, aligning with the goals set by its predecessors, which resulted in the successful signing of an accession treaty with Croatia in December 2011 (Babić, 2012; Żornaczuk, 2019). During this period, Warsaw faced the challenge of spearheading a persuasive pro-accession campaign within the "old" Member States, where societies grappled with the reverberations of the financial crisis, compounded by symptoms of *enlargement fatigue* (Domaradzki, Fronczak, 2018). Simultaneously, Poland supported the initiation of EU negotiation talks with Montenegro and the bestowal of

candidate status upon Serbia in 2012 (a stance tempered by expressed concerns over Belgrade's perceived proximity to Moscow). Capitalising on the momentum generated by Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, Poland declared its support for the EU's Baltic-Adriatic corridor project, designed to establish crucial infrastructure connections among Central European countries (Podgórzańska, 2013).

However, a discernible inflection point in Polish foreign policy materialised following Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent rise to power of the Law and Justice party at the end of 2015. The heretofore pursued policy, anchored in the East-West axis and characterised by close relations between Warsaw and Berlin in European affairs, underwent a deliberate contraction. In its stead, a strategic emphasis emerged on the cultivation of relations along the North-South axis. The emergence of the Three Seas Initiative marked a pivotal component of Poland's new foreign policy approach, aimed at fostering enhanced cooperation among EU Member States situated between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas.

This initiative garnered participation from twelve countries, encompassing the Visegrad Group, the Baltic states, as well as Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and Romania. Aligned with the endorsement of the United States, the initiative articulated ambitious plans for constructing a robust infrastructure network spanning transport, energy, and telecommunications (Stępniewski, 2018; Ukielski, 2018). The geographical purview of the initiative initially extended to Croatia and Bulgaria. However, policy-makers emphasised that future considerations could potentially cover additional countries within the Balkan region. In the post-2015 landscape, Poland concurrently intensified bilateral relations with Serbia and Albania, which materialised within the framework of the Group of Friends of Enlargement (Wiśniewski, 2017). Serbia held particular significance for Poland due to its status as the largest Balkan country outside the EU, coupled with its susceptibility to Russian influence, as explored further below (Szpala, 2014). In 2017, Poland took the initiative to establish the Belgrade Conference, with the primary objective of fostering cooperation between the two nations and facilitating the exchange of experiences with Serbian officials involved in negotiations for EU accession (Domaradzki, Fronczak, 2018). Building on the success of the Belgrade Conference, a parallel initiative, the Tirana Conference, was launched the following year with analogous objectives, emphasising collaboration with Albania. Poland's engagement extended beyond conferences, as it actively supported Montenegro's aspirations for NATO membership, successfully achieved in 2017, despite provocations orchestrated by Russia in Podgorica (Kuczyński, 2019).

In 2018, the European Commission responded to the evolving geopolitical dynamics of that time by unveiling a new strategy for the Western Balkans. The impetus behind this strategic move was the escalating involvement of other international actors in the region, notably Russia, China, and Turkey, which posed potential threats to Balkan stability and, by extension, European security. The European Commission announced its strategy aimed at reinforcing mutual cooperation by systematically integrating Balkan countries into the legal and institutional framework of the EU in a sectoral dimension. This sectoral integration was envisioned as the creation of a network of connections, anchoring the Balkan countries within the EU's sphere of influence, which aimed to mitigate the influence of external powers (Szpala, 2018). The genesis of this new strategy can be traced back to the Berlin Process[2] initiated in 2014 by Germany, driven by concerns regarding potential impediments to the enlargement process in the Balkans. Recognising the significance of this initiative, the European Commission unveiled its own strategy, and Warsaw opted to join the group of nations participating in the Berlin Process, a move that complemented Poland's involvement in the Three Seas Initiative. In 2019, Poland assumed the annual chairmanship of the Berlin Process and hosted a summit in Poznań. The summit's focal points included key areas critical for reinforcing the Western Balkans' ties with the EU, encompassing security and migration, socio-economic development, infrastructural cohesion (particularly in transport and energy), the digital agenda, the promotion of good-neighbourly relations, and support for the reconciliation process. A cornerstone of the Berlin Process was the Regional Economic Area, envisaging the creation of a common market in the Western Balkans aligned with EU standards. This involved the establishment of free movement of people, goods, services, and capital—a framework conducive to seamless integration with the EU's common market.

However, both the broader EU policy toward the Western Balkans and the momentum of the Berlin Process, including increased Polish engagement, encountered an unforeseen interruption with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In April of that year, the completion of North Macedonia's accession process to NATO marked a notable milestone. The pandemic, however, led to a temporary cessation in

[2] A coalition of EU Member States, including Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Italy, as well as Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo, actively participate in the Process. The following EU institutions are also involved: the European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

international cooperation. It wasn't until the large-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 that global attention refocused on the situation in Europe. Given its position as a front-line country in both the EU and NATO, Poland exhibited a keen interest in developments beyond its eastern border. Accordingly, the primary goal of Polish diplomacy became the attenuation of Russian influence in Europe, including the Balkans. Poland sought to leverage its role as the OSCE chairman in 2022 toward this end. The Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, holding the chairmanship of the OSCE, undertook a series of visits to Western Balkan countries, namely Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia. During these diplomatic missions, the emphasis was placed on the imperative of preserving security and peace in Europe. Central to this discourse was the recognition of Russia's aggressive, imperial policies as the greatest threat, posing risks not only to regional stability but also aiming to undermine the integration ties linking Balkan states with the European Union. The Polish stance on this matter remained steadfastly articulated at two key junctures, the first of which was during the Berlin Process summit held in November 2022 in Berlin, and then, at the subsequent summit of this formation in Tirana in October 2023.

The Dissemination of Russian Propaganda About Poland in the Western Balkans

In perpetrating a barbaric display of aggression against Ukraine, the Russian Federation emerges as a highly perilous aggressor employing a diverse array of tools, extending beyond direct military force. The Kremlin strategically leverages modern social communication instruments, employing a disinformation policy wherein the propagation of fake news is particularly insidious. Orchestrated by specialised Russian institutions, including so-called "troll factories", the disinformation campaign serves the purpose of fracturing and discrediting the international coalition rallying behind Ukraine. This dynamic is especially pertinent to Poland, a central hub for various forms of assistance, including military aid, to Ukraine. Moscow has a history of engaging in hybrid warfare using contemporary communication tools with the Western world, as evidenced by interference in events like the U.S. presidential election and the Brexit referendum campaign. However, the current intensity of such activities is notably elevated.

Unfortunately, certain European countries exhibit a high susceptibility to Russian propaganda, a concern that is particularly relevant for Western Balkan nations such as Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

Despite the official condemnation of Moscow's aggression against Ukraine by these countries, Serbia has notably refrained from joining the anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the international community. This reluctance to align with sanctions reflects Russia's considerable influence within Serbia, notably evident among political figures in the Serbian parliament (Skupstina), journalists, members of the cultural sector, university employees and students, as well as within the clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. (This influence is also discernible in Republika Srpska, a part of the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina).

In a substantial segment of Serbian society, there exists a perception that Putin is Serbia's most significant ally on the international stage, safeguarding its interests, especially in the context of not recognising Kosovo's independence. The Russian administration effectively wields so-called "soft power", capitalising on historical and cultural ties between Russia and Serbia. This influence is manifested through institutions such as the Russian House – Russian Centre of Science and Culture in Belgrade, dedicated to promoting Russian culture. Additionally, the impact of the Russian-funded internet portal and radio station "Sputnik Srbija", established in 2014, looms large in shaping public opinion within Serbia. The Kremlin deploys also various tools, including the Russian equivalent of Wikipedia (Vijizanije), the Russian Press Agency TASS, and the widely followed foreign television station "Russia Today" (RT), as mechanisms to influence Serbian society. Additionally, modern media instruments like Facebook and Twitter are employed, where the creation of false accounts is utilised to indoctrinate recipients, disseminate fake news, sow chaos, and foster divisions within Serbian society, thereby undermining its alignment with the West (Pogorzelski, 2017; Staniurski, 2022).

This extensive propaganda and disinformation campaign not only targets Serbs but also impacts the Serbian-speaking populations of Montenegro and North Macedonia. The effectiveness of Russian propaganda was starkly demonstrated by an attempted coup orchestrated by Russian agents in Podgorica in 2016, aimed at disrupting Montenegro's accession to NATO. This incident illustrates the perilous nature of Russian influence persisting in these countries, each grappling with multifaceted domestic and foreign policy challenges. The conducive environment for Russia's dissemination of disinformation, particularly through Serbia, is compounded by additional factors.

Notably, the robust ties between the Orthodox churches of Russia and Serbia play a pivotal role. The Serbian Orthodox Church, enjoying universal respect and wielding significant political influence in the country, mirrors a similar dynamic in Russia where the Kremlin utilises

the church as a religious tool to advance political objectives (PAP, 2023). Patriarch Kirill II of Russia and All Russia has articulated a narrative that unifies all Orthodox believers into one church and one Orthodox nation. This concept has been integrated into the narrative of Russian diplomacy, with Kirill II openly supporting Putin's military actions in Ukraine. The central message of the Russian Orthodox Church emphasises the uniqueness of Orthodox civilisation, framing it as a bulwark against foreign, purportedly corrupt liberal values of the West. Consequently, Russia's "special operation" in Ukraine is portrayed as defensive measure within the context of this narrative (Włodkowska-Bagan, 2018). The Serbian Orthodox Church serves as a significant conduit for the dissemination of Russian propaganda in Serbia, amplifying Moscow's clear intentions.

The overarching goal is to reclaim lost influence not only in the post-Soviet sphere but also in the Balkans. As such, Russia is fervently working to undermine support for European integration processes in the region, aiming to impede its closer alignment with the West (Pawłowski, 2020). A key component of this strategy involves the proliferation of anti-Polish propaganda, which forms part of broader disinformation activities designed to discredit the entire transatlantic community. Russian propagandists assert that the transatlantic community is rife with internal contradictions, casting doubt on its reliability as a guarantor of security in the eyes of Balkan societies. Therefore, it is in Poland's interest to combat not only false narratives directly related to the country but also any content that poses harm to both NATO and the European Union (Jagusiak, 2023).

In Russian media messages directed at the Balkans, Poland is portrayed as a nation entangled in disputes with its allies, including both neighbours (primarily Germany) and the United States. Poles are depicted as xenophobic and, above all, Russophobic people. The narrative suggests that decisions made by the Polish government are irrational, driven not by an objective assessment of the situation but by a pre-existing negative attitude towards all things Russian (Russian disinformation war against Poland, 2017). The Kremlin positions Poland as a provocateur seeking the presence of NATO troops, particularly American forces, on its territory, thereby escalating the potential for a broader conflict in Europe. Furthermore, Russians disseminate false information alleging direct Polish involvement in military actions in Ukraine, claiming that Polish secret services operate there.

Paradoxically, this does not deter the Kremlin from concurrently denigrating the relationship between Poland and Ukraine in the eyes of Balkan societies, portraying mutual antagonisms. Poles are ostensibly urged to fear a so-called "fascist" Ukrainian government, accused of

upholding the tradition of Stepan Bandera and refusing to apologise for mass murders of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia during World War II. Russian propaganda, as part of its disinformation campaign, alleges that both Poland and Ukraine harbour territorial claims against each other. Supposedly, Poland seeks to regain control over western Ukraine, including Lviv, while Ukrainians aim to reclaim eastern territories such as Przemyśl and Chełm (Rogalewicz, 2023; Russian disinformation war against Poland, 2017). Additionally, the influx of millions of Ukrainians into Poland is purportedly part of a plan for the Ukrainisation of the country, with indigenous inhabitants relegated to second-class citizenship. Ukrainian refugees are depicted as a substantial threat to Poland, burdening the state budget through extensive use of social benefits and ostensibly overwhelming the healthcare system. Another facet of Russian propaganda centres around the issue of disputes over the import of Ukrainian grain. This is framed as evidence of Poland withdrawing support for Ukraine and indicative of a lack of solidarity among EU members, who are portrayed as lacking a uniform position on this matter.

Russian media, as part of its campaign to denigrate Poland, extends to historical policies. The Russian Federation portrays itself as the heir to the "peace-loving" Soviet Union, emphasising its role in liberating Europe from Nazism. Consequently, Russia dismisses Polish arguments highlighting the USSR's aggression against Poland and the Baltic countries through the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In Russia's narrative, Poland is framed as having contributed to the war by conspiring with the Third Reich against the Soviet Union, casting Poland as the instigator of conflict (Baluk, 2020). Furthermore, the Kremlin accuses Polish authorities of destroying monuments to Russian soldiers, counteracting the Polish argument that this process aligns with de-Stalinisation and decommunisation efforts.

Conclusion: How to Combat Russian Propaganda Directed Against Poland?

Debunking the Kremlin's anti-Polish propaganda directed at the societies of Balkan countries is a formidable challenge, as outlined in the preceding analysis. It's essential to acknowledge Russia's historical ties with these nations, dating back to the 19th century when Moscow supported their liberation from Ottoman rule. The Kremlin's propaganda continues to leverage the notions of Pan-Slavism and the brotherhood of Orthodox churches, emphasising cultural and religious connections

between Moscow and Belgrade, Podgorica, and Skopje. Fortunately, Russia has essentially lost the competition for the Balkans with the Western world. The absence of a consolidated military presence, the lack of military bases (even in Serbia), and the unattractiveness of Russia as an economic role model indicate that Moscow's geopolitical influence in the Balkans will likely weaken over time rather than grow.

The Kremlin is aware of this reality, emphasising those "soft power" strategies, where disinformation and fake news play a prominent role. The primary objective is to destabilise internal situations in the Balkan countries, weaken their NATO membership, and impede the process of accession to the European Union. In pursuit of these goals, Russia employs various institutions, instruments, and methods discussed earlier, with one significant aim being the denigration of Poland.

Hence, it comes as no surprise that Warsaw has made it a priority to combat Russian disinformation. Both government agencies and non-governmental organisations are actively involved in this endeavour. Polish diplomacy, along with its posts and representative offices, plays a pivotal role in these efforts. A noteworthy initiative from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs is the "Public Diplomacy" grant competition, where combating Russian disinformation about Poland has been a key focus in several editions. In the context of the Western Balkans, a significant stride in this direction was the establishment of the Polish Institute in Belgrade in August 2023. The inauguration of this specialised facility in Serbia signals Poland's commitment to effectively debunking Russian propaganda in this largest and, at the same time, crucial Balkan country. This move is poised to contribute significantly to Polish public and cultural diplomacy efforts, not only in Serbia but across the entire Western Balkans.

From a strategic standpoint, several recommendations can be formulated for these activities. It appears that both Polish governmental and non-governmental institutions should ramp up their efforts in monitoring the infosphere, identifying entities responsible for generating and disseminating messages potentially harmful to Poland's image. This identification process should be followed by unmasking these entities, aiming to undermine the credibility of Russian fake news by presenting accurate information to key and influential social groups, i.e., politicians, journalists, academic teachers, and students. (Engaging the clergy of the Orthodox Church with truthful messages may prove challenging but is crucial for a comprehensive approach). Given Poland's extensive experience in combating and discrediting Russian disinformation across traditional and social media, the country can play a significant role in sharing its

know-how and instruments with Balkan partners. Collaborative efforts could focus on supporting civic education, specifically in recognising disinformation, debunking false narratives, and fortifying resilience against misleading content.

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Polish Institutes and Their Role in Polish Public Diplomacy's Engagement Against Russia's War in Ukraine

Abstract
The invasion of the Russian Federation's army on Ukrainian territory became a major test for Poland's public-and-cultural diplomacy, and its ability to mobilise its resources and to react quickly in the face of a dynamically-changing reality. Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy responded immediately to the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine. The attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine on 24th February 2022 influenced the activities and programming of events and activities of the Polish Institutes which have subsequently mobilised material, organisational, and media support for Ukraine. In the context of the war in Ukraine, Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy also expanded its understanding of its tasks and its international role. It was an unprecedented phenomenon when a number of national cultural institutes, including the Polish Institutes, gave up their communication and material space to another country in order to enable it to present its culture as widely as possible as a gesture of support and solidarity. The actions of Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the outbreak of war have taken three dimensions: firstly, support for Ukraine and Ukrainians; secondly, criticism of the Russian Federation's aggression; and, finally, the countering of disinformation related to this conflict. The Polish Institutes, as instruments of Polish foreign policy, also had the task of informing the foreign public about the scale of involvement and assistance that Poland and Poles had provided to Ukraine. The second new task was to join the campaign against both disinformation and the systemic promotion of fake news by Russia about the war and Ukraine, which hit not only Ukraine, but also its allies, including Poland in particular.

Keywords: Polish Public Diplomacy, Polish Cultural Diplomacy, War in Ukraine, Polish Institutes, Disinformation

Introduction

In 2024, Poland celebrates two important anniversaries, one being the 25th anniversary of its accession to NATO, the other being the 20th anniversary of its accession to the EU. In light of Russia's full-scale war with Ukraine, these anniversaries have continued and will continue to acquire new meanings and contexts and also make observers look at the achievements and current activities of Poland and its diplomacy in a different way. Poland's integration into the European Union in 2004 was an event of great significance in various areas of Poland's political, social, economic, and cultural life, and is an important date in the history of Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy. The development of the institutional structures in which this diplomacy now operates, the tools and ways of operating, the accumulation of experience, and the links created in European cooperation networks have facilitated its activities in the international reality after 24th February 2022 in the context of the war in Ukraine.

The Polish Institutes in Polish Public-and-Cultural Diplomacy: Organisation, Priorities, and an Evolution of the Narratives

The main accomplishment of Polish foreign policy priorities after 1989 related to the country joining NATO and European structures, which required the use of modern instruments of diplomacy, one of whose tasks was to build a positive image of Poland in the world and to win over the foreign public and its opinion-forming elites to the idea of Poland's membership in these organisations. Among the areas that Poland identified after 1989 as a resource of its soft power with significant potential in international relations and foreign policy was its culture (Jurkiewicz-Eckert, 2014). Poland had gained some experience of building cultural diplomacy already before the Second World War and additionally so during the communist era until 1989, when the Institutes of Polish Culture (the previous name of the Polish Institutes) and the Centres for Information and Culture (Surmacz, 2015) functioned, while systematically, in the new environment of a democratic state, the Republic of Poland had to build its model of cultural diplomacy from scratch and establish new state institutions responsible for shaping a positive image of the country through culture abroad (Umińska-Woroniecka,

2013). That process took a long time, but there was a clear acceleration in proceedings from 1999, when a strategic decision was taken to further develop Polish cultural diplomacy primarily as an instrument of Polish foreign policy by incorporating the Polish Institutes into the structures of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. As a result of testing various concepts and organisational solutions, Polish cultural diplomacy became part of public diplomacy in the final model developed (Ociepka, 2021). Since 2008, the Department of Public and Cultural Diplomacy within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland (MFA RP) has been responsible for the implementation of the tasks of Polish public diplomacy, with the Polish Institutes reporting to that department, which, in concert with embassies, consulates, and permanent representations, carry out the tasks of Polish foreign policy.[3]

Over the past two decades, along with the evolution of Polish foreign policy priorities after 2004 and the experience of various Polish initiatives in Europe and the world which have been influenced by the dynamically changing international environment, and in connection with new challenges in international relations, the MFA RP's definition of public diplomacy has also evolved. Its role was seen differently, began addressing and highlighting topics differently, and its goals were set in various ways (Ociepka, 2017; 2021). The MFA RP's current official definition has been in force since 2019 and states that: "Public diplomacy comprises activities of a strategic, coordinating, and executive nature, which, by shaping public attitudes and public opinion abroad, aim to gain understanding and support for the Polish raison d'état and the foreign policy of the Republic of Poland. The use of soft power mechanisms in public diplomacy, such as the promotion of Polish culture, history, science, and innovation, the Polish language, education, sports, tourism, and the economy, allows for the building of a positive image of Poland abroad and good international relations. Public diplomacy plays a very important role alongside traditional diplomacy, and its activities are aimed at foreign institutions, organisations, and societies" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2023).

[3] In the current system of public and cultural diplomacy, the following are responsible for promoting Poland and building its positive image in the world: The Adam Mickiewicz Institute – a specialised state agency established in 2000 to promote Polish culture abroad under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage; the Book Institute; the Polish Film Institute; the National Audiovisual Institute; the Fryderyk Chopin Institute; the International Cultural Centre in Cracow; POLONIKA The National Institute of Polish Cultural Heritage Abroad; and the Pilecki Institute.

In the architecture of Polish public diplomacy, a special place is assigned to 26 Polish Institutes which embrace the priorities of Polish foreign policy in their tasks, with the mission of telling the story of Poland and sharing Poland with the world, creating a positive image of Poland abroad, and translating the Polish point of view on a range of contemporary global issues and challenges. Likewise with the definition of public diplomacy, the tasks that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has assigned to those Institutes have also evolved (Umińska-Woroniecka, 2011; 2013). At present, these are: building far-reaching, quality contacts within artistic, expert, and opinion-forming circles; promoting culture, history, science, the Polish language and national heritage "in such a way that an audience with a different cultural background can better understand the Polish cultural code"; bilateral cultural exchanges, supporting the presence of Polish culture in the countries where they operate; establishing lasting contact with state and non-governmental institutions for the purpose of organising cultural, educational, and scientific events; and the participation and promotion of Poland in important international events such as book fairs. The mission of the aforementioned Institutes is to popularise the achievements of Polish science and the study of the Polish language, as well as to support researchers and students of Polish studies abroad. The task of the Polish Institutes is to join the activities of international cooperation networks such as the European Union National Institutes for Cultures (EUNIC) and to implement Poland's international commitments under bilateral or multilateral international agreements in the field of culture (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Poland, 2023). Currently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinates the functioning of 21 Polish Institutes in Europe in Berlin/Leipzig, Brussels, Bratislava, Budapest, Bucharest, Dusseldorf, Kiev, London, Madrid, Minsk, Moscow, Paris, St Petersburg, Prague, Rome, Sofia, Stockholm, Tbilisi, Vienna, and Vilnius, and 5 Polish Institutes outside Europe in New Delhi, New York, Beijing, Tel Aviv, and Tokyo. The most recently established Polish Institute was opened on the 28th August 2023 in Belgrade.

In addition to the gradual process of opening more Institutes, the leading narratives of Polish cultural diplomacy after 1989 also changed with the political shifts in both Poland and the international environment. In broad terms, these can be divided into four periods:

- From 1994 to 2004: the pre-accession period – the great and authentic story of Poland's return to Europe, with the state's main goal being to secure membership in the European Union.
- From 2004 to 2015: this period sees the affirmation of NATO and EU membership, and a civilisational success story, with the main

narrative line being that Poland is a stable EU member with huge potential for creativity and dynamism. Poland is all new!
- From 2015 to 2023: a new narrative line – Poland wants to (and must!) tell the world its story. A change occurs in the narrative vectors and there is a deliberate return to themes and topics related to Polish history and Polish readings of the past.
- After 24th February 2022: new meanings of solidarity in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine: #PolandFirstToHelp. Poland supports Ukraine, promotes Ukrainian culture and fights against Russian disinformation that distorts the true picture of the war.

Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy responded immediately to the outbreak of full-scale war in Ukraine. The attack by the Russian Federation against Ukraine influenced both the activities and the programming of events and activities of the Polish Institutes after 24th February, 2022, which have mobilised material, organisational, and media support for Ukraine. The mission of Polish public diplomacy, which is also to talk about the world through the prism of Polish values and the Polish perspective, took on a new meaning. Its task has become to make the societies of the countries in which it operates aware that this is a brutal war of historical consequences, with the survival of the sovereign Ukrainian state and its cultural identity at stake.

A great challenge has been posed by the global propaganda machine of the Russian Federation and its narrative about the causes of the war. Polish diplomacy has had to deal with the power and scale of the disinformation disseminated by the Russian Federation, which affect not only Russian society but also the perception of this war in terms of global public opinion, especially in the countries of the Global South, which are often unfamiliar with the Central European experience of the Russian threat.

The Polish Institutes and Their Response to Russia's War in Ukraine

Russia's war with Ukraine in the history of Poland's public-and-cultural diplomacy has two facets. The first was in 2014, when the Polish government, in July of that year, cancelled the implementation of a 2015 flagship event of Polish cultural diplomacy, namely, the "Polish Year in Russia", and the "Russian Year in Poland". This was the Polish government's direct response to the downing of the Malaysian airliner by the Russians over Ukraine and the Russian-induced escalating military conflict with Ukraine culminating in the illegal annexation of Crimea

and the war in Donbass in 2014. The "Polish Year in Russia" project was one of the key cultural events planned for 2015, which was organised by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute in the format of "seasons of culture as a massive dose of Polish culture" and developed by the IAM[4] in selected strategic countries in Europe and beyond. Eighty-five cultural projects were cancelled at the time, a decision that was met with a nuanced reaction from Polish artistic circles and artists, a large number of whom supported the government's position. Some, on the other hand, defended the concept and the legitimacy of organising the "Polish Year in Russia" event as one of the few already-existing channels for direct dialogue with Russian society at the time, and for presenting a Polish perspective on the EU through the telling of the story of Poland's journey to democracy along with promoting contemporary Poland through art and culture. The decision to cancel the Polish Year was not particularly in keeping against the background of the actions of other European countries; in 2014, the UK held its cultural season in Russia despite the conflict in south-eastern Ukraine and Crimea (Ociepka, 2019). At the same time, Poland maintained the channels of Polish-Russian cultural contact through the operation of two Polish Institutes in Russia – one in Moscow which had been running 1988 and one in St Petersburg since 2000. Both institutes (albeit in a limited capacity) continue to operate today in the reality of the Russian Federation's full-scale war with Ukraine.

The second facet is the reaction and action of Polish public and cultural diplomacy following Russia's aggression against Ukraine and the outbreak of war on 24th February 2022. The actions have three dimensions; the first being support for Ukraine and Ukrainians, the second being criticism of the Russian Federation's aggression, and the third being the countering of disinformation connected to the conflict (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). All these activities were given priority status. The Polish Institutes have immediately revised their programmes of cultural events and have engaged in various projects in support of Ukraine, promoting Ukrainian culture and art and Ukrainian artists, as well as material support for Ukrainian refugees. Activities were undertaken in cooperation with Ukrainian partners, the solidarity dimension of the activities was also highlighted by cooperation in support of Ukraine with other cultural institutes and embassies, as well as cooperation within the EUNIC cluster – the European Union National Institutes of Culture.

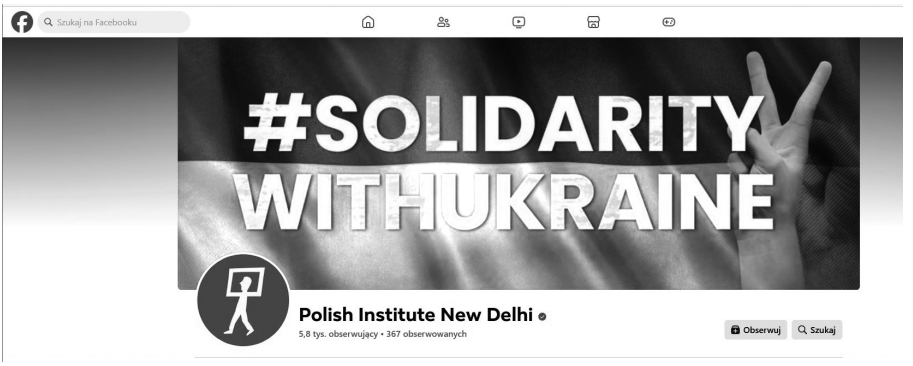
Support for Ukraine and Ukrainians

[4] IAM is the Polish abbreviation of the full name of the Institute (Instytut Adama Mickiewicza) and is used officially by the Institute.

Russia's war with Ukraine has expanded the understanding of the mission and goals of public diplomacy because the scale of the involvement of leading European institutions responsible for cultural diplomacy and the promotion of their own culture in the world in the systemic promotion of the culture of another sovereign state, Ukraine, is unprecedented in the history of public diplomacy.

Since the outbreak of war, the Polish Institutes have also been involved in the promotion of Ukrainian culture as part of the activities of various institutional actors, associations, foundations, and NGOs in order to build a global awareness of the existence of a distinct Ukrainian culture. The course of the war, the scale of destruction of Ukraine's tangible and intangible cultural heritage and cultural infrastructure, looting, and subsequent Russification of occupied territories prove that the expediency of the Russian Federation's actions threaten Ukraine's cultural security. Russia questions Ukraine's right to its own cultural identity and denies cultural rights to minorities. Russia, in fact, undermines and hinders the normal functioning of the cultural sector and cultural life in Ukraine. Supporting Ukrainian culture and its creators, helping to rescue and protect its heritage, and promoting historical Ukrainian works and contemporary Ukrainian culture and art are all essential to its survival and also help Ukraine in its struggle for the metaphorical hearts and souls of global public opinion[5]. In addition to the typical forms of cultural diplomacy, such as the organisation of performances, concerts, recitals and exhibitions, and readings and conferences, the Institutes have also become involved in fundraising along with in-kind campaigns, charity events, and regular information campaigns. An important aspect in the sphere of international communication was also the rooting in foreign public opinion of information about the type and scale of aid that Poland and Poles have provided to Ukraine, Ukrainians in Ukraine, and Ukrainian refugees in Poland, as well as publicising the possibility of assistance, coordinated by the Polish government, e.g., the #PolandFirstToHelp or #HelpUkraine campaigns.

[5] It should be noted that due to political circumstances, the Polish Institutes in Russia and China have a very limited ability to conduct solidarity actions or to fight Russian disinformation through social media activity. In Belarus, the Polish Institute's staff was drastically reduced in 2021 as a result of the expulsion of 30 Polish diplomats by the regime's authorities.



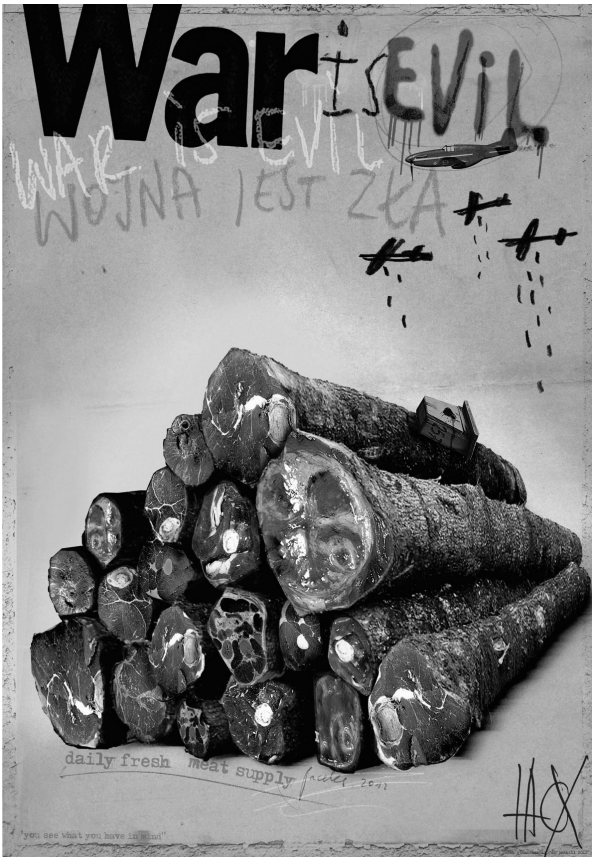
Picture 1. Solidarity With Ukraine in the Social Media of the Polish Institutes
Source: #SolidarityWithUkraine, fb wall, Polish Institute in New Delhi, https://www.facebook.com/PolishInstituteNewDelhi/ (Access 12.10.2023).

A separate – yet noteworthy – activity of Polish cultural diplomacy in support of the Ukrainian cultural sector during the war with Russia is the financial involvement of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a solidarity project of the European Cultural Foundation and the EUNIC network. Poland is not one of the leading members of EUNIC, so it is worth noting that in the situation of the war in Ukraine, the Polish authorities supported the activities of this network. The EUNIC – the European Union National Institutes of Culture – has 38 members from all EU Member States and associated countries (EUNIC, 2023a), is active in 107 countries worldwide, and is the EU's main institutional partner in the area of its international cultural relations. In addition, the EUNIC is also active in the world through 139 global clusters and also through various configurations and cooperation mechanisms. The network has had a long-standing presence in Ukraine and has been very actively involved in cultural projects, including the implementation of the EU's flagship project, the House of Culture in Kiev. In October 2022, in cooperation with the European Cultural Foundation, the EUNIC created a special call with the Culture of Solidarity – EUNIC Ukraine Fund targeting 54 EUNIC clusters or local cultural organisations from 46 Council of Europe Member States with the support of at least three EUNIC cluster members in the country. The first edition of short-term cultural projects was coordinated and financially supported by the Goethe Institut from the budget of the German Federal Foreign Office. From a total of 22 eligible applications received, 15 cultural organisations in 13 Council of Europe Member States were selected to organise exhibitions, assemblies, film screenings, and public lectures (EUNIC, 2022). The second edition of the programme held in 2023 on promoting the visibility of Ukrainian culture

in Europe was financially coordinated by the Government of Flanders with the additional participation of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Czech Centres. In 2023, 10 cooperation projects have been supported in Bulgaria, Czechia, Germany, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom (EUNIC, 2023b).

Criticism of the Russian Federation's Aggression in Ukraine

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Polish public diplomacy has made it its priority in international communication to disseminate a consistent message about the war to the world at large. The



Pictures 2. "War Is Evil". Criticism of Russian Federation Aggression on the Social Media and Webpages of the Polish Institutes and Polish Embassies

Author: Jacek Staniszewski – "War is Evil", Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Chile, facebook, 25.02.2022.

Source: https://www.facebook.com/PLenChile (Access 12.10.2023).

Picture 3. From the Website of the Polish Institute in Moscow, a Screenshot from 25.02.2022

Source: https://instytutpolski.pl/moskva/2022/02/25/ (Aaccess 15.10.2023).

invasion by the Russian army that started a full-scale war in all channels of communication of Polish diplomacy is called a war, not a "military operation", nor a "Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict", nor a "crisis". Hence, following the first communiqué of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemning Russia's aggression on 24th February 2022, a post appeared on the social media (Facebook) of the Polish Institutes and Polish diplomatic missions and the websites of the Polish Institutes on 25th February 2022. "On February 24, [the] Russian army attacked Ukraine, breaking international law, starting a war, and killing innocent people #StandWithUkraine". The post was illustrated with the anti-war poster "War is Evil" by Jacek Staniszewski.

Criticism of the Russian Federation's aggression is also expressed in the themes and content of both stationary and online projects being carried out, including those which show the suffering of the people, demonstrate the scale of the crimes committed and the destruction of Ukraine, the drama of the refugees, and which also appear in the themes of posts regularly posted on social media (Facebook, X – formerly Twitter – and others). An important element of these activities is to show the historical origins of Russia's behaviour and to explain Polish historical experiences,

Picture 4. From St. Petersburg's Polish Institute's Facebook Jacek Staniszewski's "War is Evil", a screen shot from 26.02.2022

Source: https://www.facebook.com/InstytutPolskiPetersburg/?locale=pl_PL (Access 13.10.2023)

i.e., Poland's time under communism and Polish history of the 19th and 20th centuries – the aim being to legitimise the Polish narrative of Putin's Russia as the heir to the imperial traditions of tsarist Russia and the totalitarian identity of the USSR.

Countering Disinformation by the Russian Federation Against Ukraine and Its Allies

One of the greatest challenges for Polish public diplomacy is to effectively combat disinformation and fake news disseminated by the Russian Federation in both the media space and on social media concerning Ukraine regarding the reasons for Russia's invasion and the

scale of Poland's support to Ukraine in the fight against the Russian aggressor (Legucka, Bryjka, 2022). During a briefing of the MFA's authorities with the directors of the Polish Institutes on 3rd March 2022, this task was marked as a priority for public diplomacy activities in the face of the Russian military invasion in Ukraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of Poland, 2022).

As the OECD noted in its November 2022 report, "the disinformation surrounding Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked an escalation in Russia's longstanding information operations against Ukraine and open democracies. Matched by increased restrictions on political opposition in Russia, disinformation narratives progressed from propaganda and historical revisionism – for example, insisting that Crimea had *always been Russian* – to false claims about neo-Nazi infiltration in Ukraine's government and conspiracy theories about Ukraine/US bioweapon laboratories. These efforts represent a handful of the ways in which the Russian government and aligned actors use disinformation as a weapon and to distract, confuse, and subvert opponents" (OECD, 2022, pp. 1–2).

Picture 5. An Example of the Action Taken by the Polish Institutes Against Russian Disinformation as Regards the War in Ukraine

Source: Polish Institute Tibilisi website, 18.03.2022, https://instytutpolski.pl/tbilisi/pl/2022/04/29/stop-dezinformacji/ (Access 13.10.2023).

Picture 6. Infographics on Russian Fake News on the Refugee Situation on the Polish/Ukrainian Border

Source: Chancellery of the Prime Minister of Poland @PremierRP_en. https://www.facebook.com/PolishInstituteNewDelhi/ (Access 13.10.2023). Polish Institute in New Delhi, FB, 27.02.2022.

Polish Institutes have repeatedly published posts and infographics combating Russian disinformation on their websites and social networks. The website of the Polish Institute in Tibilisi, for example, posted a clear entry entitled: "Stop disinformation!" refuting Russian messages about alleged nationalism in Ukraine, Russophobia, and the persecution of Russian-speaking Ukrainian citizens. Reference was also made to false reports about the development of US biological weapons in Ukraine. The purposes of the Russian side's use of disinformation such as sowing panic, blaming Ukraine and the West, along with diverting attention from its own plans were also identified (Polish Institute Tibilisi, 2022).

The Polish Institutes also posted anti-fake news material on their social media (X – formerly Twitter, and Facebook) about the alleged problems of refugees from Ukraine prepared by the Office of the Prime Minister of the Polish Government.

Conclusions

The Russian Federation's military invasion of Ukrainian territory and the war still raging therein became a major test for Poland's public-and-cultural diplomacy along with its ability to mobilise its resources and to react quickly in the face of a dynamically changing reality. Additionally, the narrative being constructed about Poland, Polish culture, and Polish history suddenly had to change tack and begin addressing and highlighting topics other than those which the Institutes had planned. Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy also expanded its understanding of its tasks and international role. Indeed, it was an unprecedented phenomenon when national cultural institutes gave up their communication and material space to another country – Ukraine – to enable it to present its culture as widely as possible as a gesture of support and solidarity. After 24th February 2022, the priority of a large number of Polish Institutes became one of supporting Ukraine in the public eye in Europe and beyond. For the vast majority of the audience, it would be their first contact with Ukrainian culture, literature, art, and heritage. The Polish Institutes themselves were also faced with the necessity of quickly shoring up their own gaps in their knowledge and, at the same time, passing tests of openness, ingenuity, empathy, as well as showing and convincing the international public of the dramatic situation in which Ukrainian society now finds itself and how much of its culture and cultural heritage is under threat. Incredibly important in this context were joint projects organised in partnership with Ukrainian embassies and local cultural partner institutions in order to reach different audiences.

With the outbreak of full-scale war, two new tasks appeared in the catalogue of tasks of the Polish Institutes as instruments of Polish foreign policy. The first was to present to and inform the foreign public about the scale of involvement and assistance that Poland and Poles have provided to Ukraine. The second task was to join the campaign against both disinformation and the systemic promotion of fake news by Russia about both the war and Ukraine, which negatively affected not only Ukraine but also its allies, including Poland in particular (Olchowski, 2022).

Undoubtedly, as in the case of a number of other Polish institutions, but also for the Polish public-and-cultural diplomacy, the reaction to Russia's war in Ukraine was a kind of stress test that checked its capacity to mobilise and adapt to new conditions and challenges. The fact that Poland has a network of its cultural Institutes in Europe and

around the world which, in crisis conditions, can become active actors in communicating the Polish position to the foreign public *and* have the organisational capacity to undertake or support activities within different formats and networks, certainly helped Poland to pass that particular test successfully.

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Russian vs Chinese Disinformation Narratives in Poland. A Comparative Analysis

Abstract
The paper analyses Russian and Chinese disinformation activities, showing similarities and pointing out differences of their goals, methods and narratives. While the main aim of Russian information warfare is to undermine the West and sow discord between European and Transatlantic allies, Chinese propaganda is primarily centred upon disseminating messages that build or defend the country's positive image. The common Russian and Chinese objective is to downplay America and spoil Transatlantic relations. Russian disinformation campaign is country-specific and comes up with tailor-made manipulative narratives about particular countries, including Poland, whereas Chinese disinformation narratives are more universal. Russian malign influence is a legacy of the Soviet era, whereas China started to spread misleading or fabricated news on a full-scale with the outbreak of the pandemic. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, disinformation campaigns by both Russia and China have reached their peak.

Keywords: China, Russia, Disinformation Narratives, Propaganda, Malign Influence, Information Warfare

Introduction

Both Russia and China, two autocratic political systems (www.democracymatrix.com, 2023), have been intentionally, in a coordinated manner trying to manipulate Western and global information environment to achieve their political gains. Russian and Chinese campaigns combine "elements of public diplomacy, propaganda (information showing a false image, but consistent with state policy), and disinformation (manipulated

materials designed to trigger a desired response, including polarisation of societies)" (Legucka, Przychodniak, 2020). It does not seem very likely that the two countries jointly coordinate their malign information activities, but their narratives sometimes go in line, and are the source of inspiration for one another, as well as benefit from the other's activity, in certain cases echoing each other's narratives. They also use similar tools, such as fake social media accounts, bots, and false messages promoted by their diplomatic missions. However, the overall picture of the disinformation of Russian and Chinese activities differ, despite some similarities.

Russian disinformation campaigns historically aim to undermine Western democracies, weaken trust in European and Transatlantic institutions, such us EU and NATO, undermine the credibility of independent media outlets, promote the idea that Russia is a victim of Western aggression, and that its actions are defensive in nature. They seek to sow discord, promote extremist views, create confusion and chaos, disrupt the unity of Western alliances, as well as create or exploit existing divisions within Western societies and between Western countries, which is particularly visible during the war in Ukraine. While promoting such messages, Russia's strategic aim is to restore its status as a great power, allowing it to dominate what it sees as its sphere of privileged interest. Kremlin attempts to achieve its objectives not only with military strength, but also with weaponising information. In March 2023, Russia adopted new anti-West foreign policy strategy, curbing Western "dominance", naming the US as "the main instigator, organizer and executor of the aggressive anti-Russian policy of the collective West", and identifying China (and India) as key partners for the future (dw.com, 2023).

In turn, taking into consideration geopolitical goals, Chinese disinformation campaigns – especially before 2019 which marked the peak of the pro-democratic protests in Hong Kong, followed by the break-out of pandemic – were primarily focused on advancing the interests and positive image of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). They often involved promoting the image of China as a global leader, committed to safeguard global peace and wellbeing, as well as trying to downplay criticism of the CCP, countering narratives that were critical of China's policies. At the same time, despite issues that have caused tensions between China and the European Union over the past years, such as China's counter-measures to EU sanctions on human rights, economic coercion and trade measures against the single market, growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait, not honouring of China's previous commitments related to Hong Kong, or else China's positioning on the war in Ukraine, Europe and China continue to be important trade and economic partners

and have a shared interest in pursuing constructive relations. From European side, it was demonstrated in European Council conclusions on China (on 30 June 2023), where the country was named "simultaneously a partner, a competitor and a systemic rival" (European Council, 2023). Consequently, unlike in the case of Russia, inciting tensions in Europe does not seem to be a goal of Chinese propaganda efforts. At the same time, the common Russian and Chinese objective is to downplay and demonize the role of America on the world's scene. "Although Beijing and Moscow do not seem to be currently cooperating especially closely on their propaganda campaigns in Central and Eastern European countries, their ultimate goals in this area are similar: to reduce the popular support for engagement with the United States and NATO among the general public and to sow discontent toward liberal values" (Bachulska, Pu, 2021).

Fighting and Influencing Perceptions With Words

Russia treats information as a weapon against the Western world, and this strategy is deeply rooted in its Soviet past. Information warfare was extensively used by the Soviet Union during the Cold War and has since then been used by Russia as a readily accessible foreign policy tool. Russian disinformation activities visibly intensified with its annexation of Crimea, the Russian-led hybrid war in the Donbass, as well as the Maidan Revolution in Ukraine in 2014. This is when the Western part of Europe, and European Institutions finally realised the "need to challenge Russia's ongoing disinformation campaigns" (European Council, 2015). The East StratCom Task Force was created as a part of the European External Action Service with core objective to raise public awareness and understanding of the Kremlin's disinformation operations, and to help citizens in Europe and beyond develop resistance to digital information and media manipulation. The initiative was inspired by a Polish MP Anna Fotyga, a fierce advocate of EU efforts to tackle strategic propaganda against the EU and its Member States by third parties. "Russian strategic communication is part of a larger subversive campaign to weaken EU cooperation and the sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity of the Union and its Member States" (Fotyga, 2016), she wrote in her report. Contrary to Western Europe, or even to countries from Central and Eastern Europe who do not share a common border with Russia, this awareness has always been present in Poland, a former forced member of the Eastern bloc.

China, in turn, emerged as a willing disinformation actor with the COVID-19 pandemic, together with the 2019 Hong Kong pro-democratic

demonstrations. Beijing was first attempting to influence perception of the Hong Kong protests in Europe, which laid the foundation for Chinese propaganda efforts around COVID-19, becoming more county-specific (which was not a case so far.) As a follow-up after these events, the Chinese Embassy in Poland (as well as in other Visegrád Group countries, with the exception of Czechia) set up accounts on both Twitter (now: X) and Facebook so as to promote their narratives (Karásková et al., 2020). In this way, China was proactively trying to shape local debates for its own sake. In Polish social media space, the Chinese Ambassador praised Polish authorities for "effective and proactive actions" during the times of pandemic thanks to which Polish companies were able to "avoid financial problems and save millions of jobs" (Guangyuan, 2020a). In addition, an unprecedented months-long, emotional public debate took place online, mostly on X, between the Chinese Ambassador Liu Guangyuan and his US counterpart Georgette Mosbacher who argued who took the responsibility for the pandemic: China or America (Bachulska, 2020). What is more, both parties were given the space for their op-eds in one of the most popular news portals, Onet.pl (Guangyuan, 2020b; Mosbacher, 2020). All this exposed the Polish internet users to contradictory American and Chinese narratives, which might have been quite confusing and have impact upon the wider Polish society's perception of China (as well as America).

It is worth noting that before January 2019, when a Chinese employee of Huawei was arrested in Warsaw on allegations of spying, the perception of China in Poland was positive, much higher in comparison with other countries of the region. As I myself observed in a report on Chinese influence in Poland (Ostrowska, 2019), the Polish media discourse on China was exceptionally favourable in the analysed period of seven and half years (from the beginning of 2010 till the end of June 2018). Out of over 2000 articles in mainstream media outlets concerning the subject of "China" in economic and/or political context, 58% were evaluated as neutral, 39% as positive, and only 3% as negative. In the three other countries of the Visegrád Group, the proportions were opposite. Thus, for nearly a decade the predominant image of China presented in the Polish mainstream media, as well as by politicians, was idealized, concentrating – in line with the Chinese narrative – upon potential benefits resulting from the Sino-Polish relations, despite the lack of actual data to confirm hypothetical profits. Among the Polish public opinion, such a narrative created exaggerated expectations regarding the importance of co-operation with China, as well as false perception of the actual impact of political cooperation between Warsaw and Beijing. With a growing Sino-American

rivalry in recent years, and Poland's positioning itself as one of the main American ally in Europe, the eagerness to cooperate with China has weakened, and the image of China in the eyes of decision-makers, as well as media outlets has drastically deteriorated. At the same time, Chinese diplomats systematically publish their statements praising different aspects of Chinese policy, together with emphasizing the role of China as a global peace-keeper not only on social media, but also in Polish traditional media outlets – such as *Rzeczpospolita* (Linjiang, 2022) an opinion-making daily or *Trybuna* (Linjiang, 2023), a popular left-wing daily. In this way, they validate their narratives and allow them to reach a wider audience. Consequently, potential impact of Chinese propaganda appears to have a greater likelihood of finding fertile ground in Poland, compared to Kremlin disinformation to which Poles are much more resistant.

The Virus of Disinformation in Times of Pandemic

Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, China's propaganda has been trying to counteract the damage to the country's image. As experts from mapinfluence.eu notice (Karásková et al., 2020), Beijing's propaganda at first focused on countering international criticism over its domestic response, however, it soon became offensive, spreading disinformation over the origin of the virus. It is when China seems to have adopted its disinformation strategy in line with the Russian guidebook of hybrid operations. Mirroring Russian anti-West rhetoric, China started to address those Western audiences who felt disillusioned with the West. The interweaving of Chinese and Russian disinformation narratives in the online sphere has also been observable in Poland, where pro-Russian accounts started in turn to repeat the Chinese arguments, further disseminating Chinese propaganda related to the pandemic. This pertains, for instance, attributing the outbreak of pandemic to the U.S. or else allegations of a U.S. biological weapon attack in China (Legucka, Przychodniak, 2020).

Russia's disinformation campaign related to COVID-19 was conducted by many entities, including the traditional media (RT and Sputnik, before it was banned in the EU in February 2022 following Russian invasion of Ukraine), Russian special services, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence, and trolls, bots and fake social media accounts. In regards to Poland, Russia had persistently worked to undermine the country's reputation within the European Union, a tactic which is not employed by China. This involved spreading unfounded claims about

Poland supposedly obstructing a Russian medical aid aircraft destined for Italy and impeding the flow of face masks at the Polish border. Russia's objective in these actions was to sow division within the EU and undermine Poland's stance on sanctions. Additionally, Russian media outlets disseminated information suggesting that the Polish government intended to exploit the pandemic as an opportunity to annex the Kaliningrad Oblast (Legucka, Przychodniak, 2020).

Information Warfare in Full Swing

The war in Ukraine brought disinformation activities of both Russia and China to its peak. As the analyst of the Polish Institute of International Affairs notice, Russia and China share a common narrative regarding the causes of the conflict in Ukraine, placing blame on the West, particularly the United States, for inciting Russia's actions and consequently destabilizing the security of Europe. Nevertheless, there are distinctions between the Chinese and Russian narratives. China has been shaping its global messaging surrounding the conflict in a manner that it portrays itself as a seemingly neutral partner, striving to influence the perception of its role as a mediator, as well as seeking to restrain Russia's actions (Szczudlik, Legucka, 2023). Russia, in turn, has been conducting aggressive defamation campaign addressed at selected Western countries.

In respect to Poland, one of Ukraine's main allies, Russian country-tailored disinformation campaigns aim to weaken Polish-Ukrainian relations by creating antagonism between the two nations, reduce Poles' support for further military and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, and undermine international position of Poland by accusing it of pursuing a provocative policy toward Moscow and seeking to draw NATO into the war with Russia. According to Polish Spokesperson of the Minister-Special Services Coordinator, "The propaganda message indicates that Russia is conducting a multi-pronged smear campaign against Poland, aimed at convincing the public that the Polish government has aggressive plans against Ukraine. Such actions are calculated to provoke hostility between Poland and Ukraine, as well as to depreciate Poland's image in the eyes of international opinion. The Kremlin is trying to show that Poland is a country preparing an invasion of Ukraine. The various plots used to denigrate Poland suggest that we are dealing with a coordinated campaign against Poland, which has direct ties to Russia's war against Ukraine" (www.gov.pl, 2022).

As the PISM analysts observe, the basis of Russian policy – which manifests itself in Russian disinformation narratives – is a non-recognition

of Ukraine as a state, and the portrayal of Ukrainians as puppets in the hands of international players. Since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the rhetoric of the Russian government and Kremlin media has included phrases such as the "Kiev regime", "Washington's puppets", "fascists", "Banderists", "Nazis", "neo-Nazis", even "Satanists". According to Russian insinuative narratives, the Americans were installing "biolabs" in Ukraine and were responsible for spreading viruses. Russia even manipulates the word "war" in Ukraine, calling it a "special military operation". The Russian propaganda also reject accusations of Russian crimes committed in Ukraine. It can be observed that Russia tailors narratives to different audiences. In Poland, Kremlin trolls use anti-refugee narratives and historical narratives (related to, among others, the massacre in Volhynia) in an attempt to stir up anti-Ukrainian public sentiment and undermine the willingness of Poles to help Ukrainians (Szczudlik, Legucka, 2023).

The findings of PISM's analyst demonstrate that Chinese propaganda regarding the war in Ukraine does not entirely overlap with the Russian. China avoids to talk about "Ukrainian Nazis", the need to "de-Nazify Ukraine", or to blame Ukrainians for war crimes and atrocities. It tries to make the impression that it is neutral and distances itself from Russia. Simultaneously, China's official statements regarding the war suggest its alignment with Russia's perspective and interests, indicating a degree of shared support. Chinese officials refer to the invasion or war using expressions like the "Ukrainian issue", "Ukrainian crisis", "Ukrainian conflict", "Ukrainian dispute" (pl.china-embassy.gov.cn/, 2023). Ukraine is not presented as a victim of Russian aggression, but rather a victim of a Western plot to ensnare the country in a strategic contest against Russia with the aim of undermining Putin's strength. The best example of this is the Chinese narrative (echoing Russian narrative) that the U.S. broke a pledge not to expand NATO eastward which is a direct threat to Russia who must now defend itself.

Among the disinformation narratives that are propagated by both Russia and China both in Poland, and globally, we can find claims that: the West provokes with the threat of nuclear weapons, the West violates Russia's sphere of influence, there are chemical and biological laboratories in Ukraine, Ukraine is being used by the U.S. to compete with Russia, the Americans/NATO/West are responsible for the war in Ukraine, we are dealing with the defence of the Russian Federation, and the end of U.S. global dominance is approaching.

Conclusions

The comparative analysis of Russian and Chinese disinformation activities with a special emphasis upon Poland reveals several key insights. Both Russia and China engage in deliberate efforts to manipulate the information environment for their political advantage, although their specific objectives and tactics differ. Russia's historical use of information warfare as a foreign policy tool, rooted in its Soviet past, is evident in its continued efforts to undermine Western democracies, sow discord, and weaken Western alliances. Russia's disinformation campaigns often target Poland as part of its broader strategy to disrupt European unity, reduce support for engagement with the United States and NATO, as well as diminish Polish military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine in times of war. In contrast, China's disinformation activities, which are not country-specific, primarily serve to promote or defend the image of the Chinese Communist Party, getting a more aggressive character mainly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While China's narratives may not aim to incite tensions in Europe, they are designed to influence local debates and shape perceptions.

The analysis also highlights the convergence of pro-China and pro-Russia narratives in the online sphere, signalling a shared interest in countering the influence of the West. Both countries attempt to portray the West as a threat and claim that the U.S. is responsible for various global conflicts, including the war in Ukraine. However, there are notable distinctions in their approaches. Russia employs inflammatory language, such as labelling Ukrainians as "Nazis" and accusing the U.S. of spreading viruses, to denigrate Ukraine and provoke anti-Ukrainian sentiments, especially in countries that are Ukrainian closest allies, such as Poland. In contrast, China strives to present itself as a neutral party and to distance itself from Russia's perspective. Nevertheless, China's official statements suggest a degree of shared support with Russia, reinforcing the view that both countries are working to challenge U.S. global dominance. Summing up, while Russian and Chinese disinformation strategies are not similar, their methods and narratives sometimes converge to target common objectives and counter Western, especially American, influence, and thus creating a distorted information landscape both in Poland, and all over the world.

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War in Ukraine and Russian Disinformation: The Kremlin's Efforts to Discredit Polish Nuclear and Renewable Energy Projects

Abstract
In the realm of international relations, and with the use of a neorealist framework, this research investigates the interplay between Russia's disinformation campaigns and Poland's pivot to nuclear and renewable energy. The research problem centres on the challenges Poland faces with a particular focus on Russia's disinformation, which not only disputes Poland's energy choices but also seeks to erode public trust. Employing a content analysis of Russia's state-sponsored media outlets in its Polish language variations, the study aims to discern the tactics and objectives behind these campaigns. Key findings indicate that the Kremlin's narratives emphasise supposed environmental risks, and question Poland's renewable and nuclear power ambitions and its alignment with the USA from various perspectives. These strategies systematically target Polish policy-making and public confidence, mirroring Russia's broader European disinformation trends tailored to exploit regional vulnerabilities. The endgame appears to be one which seeks to undermine trust in Western coalitions and cause rifts within the EU. The study concludes that all European nations, but especially Poland, must enhance their cyber security efforts, foster informed public discourse on energy, and consolidate ties within NATO and the EU to counteract these Russian threats.

Keywords: Disinformation, Energy, Security, Russia, Poland, USA

Background

Historical Context and Public Sentiment Towards Nuclear Energy in Poland

Certain historical events, such as the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, heavily impacted the public's perception of nuclear energy in Poland. That disaster specifically affected Poland's nuclear power projects in the 1980s and even halted the development of its first nuclear power plant at Żarnowiec (Kiełbasa, 2019). Consequently, even twenty years after the Chernobyl incident, in 2006, over half of the population (56%) were still opposed to nuclear energy (CBOS, 2006). However, by November 2020, a survey commissioned by Poland's Ministry of Climate and Environment revealed a shift in sentiment. It found that 62.5% of the Polish population supported the construction of nuclear power plants, 70% believed these low-emission plants would effectively address climate change, and 72.6% thought they would bolster Poland's energy security (gov.pl, 2020c). The war in Ukraine, which had repercussions on fuel markets leading to price surges, further influenced public opinion. The percentage of Poles in favour of building nuclear power plants jumped to 75% as at November 2022. Amidst an ongoing energy crisis and after a decade since the Fukushima incident, three-quarters of Poles now view nuclear energy favourably (CBOS, 2022).

Poland's Evolving Energy Landscape in the Wake of Geopolitical Dynamics

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24th February, 2022 accentuated inherent geopolitical tensions and further underscored the significance of energy politics in the regional and global strategic calculus. The neorealist international relations theory, which posits the relentless pursuit of power in an anarchic global order, offers a comprehensive framework to analyse such geopolitical shifts. Beyond mere military confrontations, these power dynamics encompass cyber operations, strategic communication campaigns, and intricacies of energy diplomacy.

Situated proximate to the conflict's epicentre, Poland's energy choices are not merely technical or economic, but profoundly geopolitical. Historically, fossil fuels have been the cornerstone of Poland's energy mix, with 2021 data affirming the country's substantial reliance on them, with an especial dependence on coal (Forum Energii, 2022). Yet, given regional dynamics, stringent carbon reduction targets set by the European Union, and a push for sustainable energy, Poland has been prompted to re-evaluate its energy blueprint.

In recent years, there has been a discernible policy pivot. By the end of the 2040s, Poland projects that around 74% of its electricity will be being sourced from zero-emission channels, divided between renewables and nuclear energy (gov.pl, 2020a). This vision aligns with Poland's progressive strides in the renewable sector, particularly in solar and wind energy, indicating a deliberate attempt to broaden and diversify its energy basket.

A core element of Warsaw's diversification strategy is nuclear energy. Engagements with the United States and South Korea are underway, the end game of which is the construction of Poland's inaugural large-scale nuclear plants. There's also a burgeoning interest in small modular reactors (SMRs), a venture championed by both public institutions and private industry (Juszczak, 2023).

Several factors emphasise Poland's shift towards nuclear energy. The promise of a steady electricity supply, extensive fuel-storage capabilities, and the impetus to address climate challenges through carbon-neutral energy are paramount. With the imminent retirement of older, coal-powered infrastructure, nuclear energy's relevance escalates. This nuclear blueprint, anchored in the 2020 revision of the "Polish Nuclear Energy Program" ("Program Polskiej Energetyki Jądrowej") also harnesses Poland's industrial and research capabilities (gov.pl, 2020b). One of the most explicit objectives is to commission nuclear facilities boasting a combined capacity of 6 to 9 GWe, based on generation III (+) nuclear designs. These advancements highlight Poland's dedication to prioritising safety, effectiveness, and dependability in its energy endeavours. They correspond with worldwide initiatives to utilise cutting-edge nuclear solutions that present enhanced safety measures and diminished waste output. Moreover, incorporating nuclear energy into Poland's energy mix might offer a distinct edge, especially considering the escalating international interest in greener energy alternatives.

Neorealism and the Epistemology of Russian Disinformation

Embedded within international relations discourse, neorealism postulates that sovereign entities assiduously calibrate their actions to safeguard national imperatives (Donnelly, 2000). When contextualising Russia's nuanced disinformation campaigns through this lens, one discerns a calculated endeavour to sow distrust and increase or reclaim the country's regional influence. Herein, the geopolitical contours position Poland as a cardinal nexus.

At its core, disinformation connotes the premeditated circulation of mendacious or spurious narratives, standing in contrast to misinformation, which conveys false information devoid of intentional guile (European Commission, 2022). Amidst the war, the demarcation between these terminologies becomes increasingly nebulous, compounded by a deluge of uncorroborated data vectors. Such ambiguity presents formidable challenges in delineating between veritable stories and propagandist renderings.

The disinformation both in and from Russia is organised and purposeful. Their main avenues for these endeavours are state-associated media organisations and digital platforms. These campaigns often utilise fabricated profiles and concealed connections to deliver specific disinformation to specific audiences. Rather than just offering alternative stories, Russia's approach includes circulating numerous contradictory tales to foster uncertainty.

Russian Disinformation and Poland's Transition to Nuclear and Renewable Energy

Objective

The primary aim of this research was to delve into the portrayal of Poland's renewable and nuclear energy strategies within Russia's Polish media outlets. This analysis serves to uncover potential biases, narratives, and/or geopolitical influences that could shape these representations. The outcomes might offer insights into the broader dynamics of Russian foreign policy and its intersection with energy politics. This research also aspires to understand the potential implications these portrayals may have on Poland's international relations and domestic policy decisions concerning nuclear energy.

Data Collection Procedures

In the context of writing a research paper on Russian disinformation in Poland regarding the nuclear and renewable power industry, there is the extant challenge of gaining access to sources. After the start of the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine on 24th February, 2022, many articles from Russian portals in their Polish versions were blocked, making direct analysis more difficult. Therefore, for a holistic review, various Russian media outlets across a range of platforms, including online news portals, were added. This selection included media directly overseen by the Russian state as well as affiliated channels, thus capturing a broad spectrum of viewpoints. The research focused on articles from October

2020 to February 2023[6] to track the evolution of these perspectives. Keywords in Polish and Russian such as "Polish nuclear power plans", "Polish-American nuclear cooperation", "Polish energy transition", "Polish and European nuclear and renewable energy" and "Russian views on Polish nuclear power" were used to select articles. References have been made to a number of sources to ensure the reliability and validity of the data, especially for controversial or widely discussed topics.

Analysis Approach

Upon gathering the relevant articles, a thematic analysis technique was adopted. This qualitative methodology assisted in pinpointing recurring themes or narratives within the dataset. These themes were systematically arranged for a better understanding. The sentiment affiliated with each theme was then ascertained, shedding light on the overarching stance towards Poland's nuclear and renewable energy transition. Principal insights from the articles were extracted and synthesised, laying the groundwork for the final research outcomes.

The methodology under scrutiny enabled the discernment of inconsistencies and variations within Russian media establishments concerning Poland's nuclear energy objectives. Subsequently, this yielded a more intricate comprehension of the manner in which external geopolitical determinants might be enmeshed with the formulation of the narrative. A meticulous analysis of various media pieces further unveiled the potential influence of historical antecedents and current events on the prevailing media discourses, thereby illustrating the complexity in Russia's depiction of Poland's nuclear and renewable energy aspirations.

Presentation and Interpretation

From the thematic and sentiment-based evaluations, a discernible narrative becomes evident concerning the perspective of Russian state-sponsored media on Poland's nuclear power aspirations. As Poland ventures into the realms of nuclear and renewable energy, its energy trajectory encounters multifaceted narratives, amplified notably in

[6] The starting and end dates relate to a) the *Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the United States of America on cooperation to develop a civil nuclear power programme and a civil nuclear industry in the Republic of Poland, signed at Upper Marlboro on 19th October, 2020 and at Warsaw on 22nd October, 2020*. Available at: https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WMP20210000317 (Access 10th October, 2023), and b) the aftermath of Poland's agreement between the US firm Westinghouse and the company Polskie Elektrownie Jądrowe (Polish Nuclear Power Plants) of 15th December, 2022.

the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The Russian media, by referencing significant historical incidents such as the Chernobyl or Fukushima disasters, embeds these apprehensions within the contemporary geopolitical milieu (Sputnik Polska, 2020). This shapes the perception of nuclear energy in a many-sided light, oscillating between its recognised merits as a sustainable energy source and its potential challenges. Despite acknowledging – in some instances – the rationale behind Poland's consideration of building a nuclear power plant (NPP) as an effective alternative to its coal power reality, the narrative is often punctuated with doubt, particularly in the context of Poland's historical trepidations (Sputnik Polska, 2020).

The depiction of Poland's nuclear energy plans in Russian state media has repeatedly highlighted questions of feasibility, external pressure, financial challenges, and environmental reservations.

Renewable Energy: Russian Media's Perspective on Poland's Green Endeavours

The Russian media, while recognising the potential of nuclear energy in Poland (Sputnik Polska, 2020), often raises questions about the dependability of renewable sources. Their analysis suggests that the variable nature of solar and wind energy might make them less reliable (Iljaszewicz, 2021), portraying a move towards these alternatives as a possible strategic error. A prominent argument presented emphasises the perceived shortcomings of renewable technologies. Their focus aims to highlight the potential vulnerabilities of such sources and to question Poland's transition to a more sustainable energy mix. Additionally, their analysis frequently emphasises the importance of traditional energy sources, comparing them to the perceived variability of their renewable counterparts (Nosowicz, 2021a). In Sputnik Polska's account, there is no viable option to replace coal-based energy production with affordable energy from renewable sources such as wind/solar power, as such an alternative simply doesn't exist in Poland (Sputnik Polska, 2020). The critiques also relate to Europe's and Poland's efforts to expand their energy diversification, associating these endeavours with increased energy prices (Sputnik Polska, 2022c). At the heart of this narrative is a depiction of Russia as a dominant global energy provider (Sputnik Polska, 2022a), positioned to have a significant influence on Europe's energy future. By connecting Poland's energy goals with larger geopolitical considerations, especially associating them with US agendas, the Russian media seeks to challenge the sincerity of Poland's objectives in both the nuclear and renewable areas.

The discussion shifts in tone when touching upon the supposed constraints of renewable technologies, hinting at a preference for nuclear energy. It attempts to create a divide between renewables and nuclear power, implying that the US, after encountering hurdles with renewables, now primarily sees nuclear power as its promising export commodity and a way to maintain influence in Europe (Iljaszewicz, 2021). This representation is misleading. In actuality, each energy type, including nuclear, has its unique benefits and drawbacks. The US, similar to many countries, aims for a varied energy portfolio (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2022). By elevating nuclear power as a direct alternative to renewables, the content tries to cast aspersions on the efficiency and trustworthiness of renewable sources, potentially misrepresenting a holistic energy approach of the countries in question.

Europe's Energy Policy and Geopolitical Underpinnings

In Russian narratives, Europe's and Poland's energy decisions were reportedly influenced by prevailing "Russophobia" (Nosowicz, 2021b); anti-Russian sentiment which is postulated as the cornerstone of the continent's crucial energy determinations (Sputnik Polska, 2022j). From Moscow's perspective, guided predominantly by Washington and championed by Eastern European nations, these initiatives were sculpted to curtail Russia's stature within the European energy spectrum (Nosowicz, 2021b). They are perceived to be motivated by politics, since Europe "doesn't need reality" and prefers to combine economy and politics (Sputnik Polska, 2022h). Another consideration is Poland's and the EU's ambition to achieve "energy independence from Russia" (Lenta.ru, 2022; Sputnik Polska, 2022b; Stremidlovskiy, 2022). Within this context, the West has essentially initiated an economic war against the Russian economy, apparently (Sputnik Polska, 2022m). The Polish government is not only "fervently" advocating "an anti-Russian" stance across various domains, including the energy sector (Sputnik Polska, 2022g), but is also "contemplating" the establishment of nuclear energy capabilities, which are currently absent in the nation (nangs.org, 2023). In evaluating the policy landscape, apparent incongruities in Europe's energy strategies emerge. The EU's policy gravitation towards the "Green Deal" (European Commission, 2020) allegedly contrasts sharply with prior inclinations, which favoured shale gas extraction via hydraulic fracturing. A recurrent theme threading through these divergent policies was the supposed intention to capitalise on the reorganisation of the European energy mix, predominantly to the detriment of Russia.

The European energy project bridging the EU and Russia (Nord Stream 2) seemingly stood at odds with the principle of so-called "transatlantic allegiance", thereby potentially attenuating US influence within Europe. This led to a discernible policy shift from Russian energy provisions towards alternatives, particularly American liquefied natural gas (LNG). Such a transition, punctuated by a departure from long-term Gazprom contracts, was asserted to have influenced market valuations and consequently ignited disputes over infrastructural projects such as the Nord Stream pipelines. In the Russian narrative, Germany's abandonment of Nord Stream 2 will "make the whole of Europe an American colony" (Sputnik Polska, 2022h). Launching Nord Stream 2, on the other hand, could contribute to stabilising the European gas market and lowering CO_2 emissions (Sputnik Polska, 2022f). Polish-language Russian media also claimed just before and after Russia's invasion of Ukraine that Europe could do without Russian gas for only six weeks (Sputnik Polska, 2022d). Supposedly, should the European Union intensify its sanction-based approach and opt to halt imports of Russian gas and oil, it would spell catastrophe for the EU (Sputnik Polska, 2022k). Following the intensification of sanctions and the EU's efforts to reduce its reliance on Russian energy imports in the latter half of 2022, Sputnik sounded the alarm that Europe's energy crisis had worsened, leaving consumers with bills they simply could not cover (Sputnik Polska, 2022o). It was emphasised that Ursula von der Leyen – the President of the European Commission – should tell EU citizens that a challenging winter lay ahead, which would require sacrifices from them (Sputnik Polska, 2022o). In the Kremlin's account, Western nations have been confronted with escalating energy prices and a surge in inflation due to the imposition of sanctions on Moscow and a shift away from Russian fuels. Against the backdrop of rising fuel costs, particularly gas, European industry has allegedly largely lost its competitive edge, which has also impacted other sectors of the economy (Sputnik Polska, 2022n). Russian media also questioned whether Europe would have an adequate gas supply for the winter of 2022 (Sputnik Polska, 2022p).

Skepticism Towards US-Polish Cooperation in the Energy Sector

In the current context of global energy dynamics, the energy partnership between the U.S. and Poland has become a notable point of discussion. An analysis of Russian media narratives reveals pointed questions about the motivations and benefits of this alliance.

Russian media consistently questions Poland's choice to work with the U.S. with regard to its nuclear energy ambitions. These narratives point out that, in the global nuclear energy market, the U.S. isn't the leader, especially when compared to countries such as Russia or France (Sputnik Polska, 2020). The implication is that Poland could have had a more beneficial partnership if it had rather turned to other nations, but especially France or Russia. Moreover, there's a suggestion that the U.S. might be benefiting more from this partnership (Sputnik Polska 2020), possibly also using it as a way to boost its own nuclear sector with the help of European Union funds (Atominfo.ru, 2022). Russian Polish-language media also claimed that Poland would have to secure the necessary investments for a nuclear power plant constructed by private American companies on its territory. Meanwhile, representatives from the United States would maintain full oversight over both the operations and any scientific research conducted within these nuclear facilities (Sputnik Polska, 2020).

Central to the Russian media's narrative is a portrayal of the U.S. and its aims to transform Poland into a significant nuclear energy player as a move against the European Union and Russia (Iljaszewicz, 2021). Such a perspective puts emphasis on tying the origins of US-Polish cooperation in this respect predominantly to the Trump era and seeks to reduce the partnership to a product of a single U.S. administration's policy. With the continuity of these policies under President Joe Biden, the Russian media insinuates undue U.S. influence over Polish energy decisions, potentially undermining Poland's autonomy in these matters. This overlooks the longer-standing interests shared between the U.S. and Poland that include defence, economy, energy security considerations, and global efforts to combat climate change.

The narratives expand their scope beyond that of Poland's nuclear energy decisions; they attempt to influence Polish perceptions of its major allies, most notably the USA. The Russian media account has been presenting a dichotomy between the previously "reliable" Russian gas supplies and the "risky" nuclear/LNG options advocated by the US. They warned the Europeans against relying on LNG because it "will not be able" to replace Russian gas supplies. Western countries, apparently, cannot do without Russian energy resources, including gas, and supplies from the United States to Europe will cost considerably more than those from Russia (Sputnik Polska, 2022l). Furthermore, it says, even a partial shift by Europe from Russian gas to LNG could set off another gas crisis episode in Asia (Sputnik Polska, 2022).

Environmental Concerns

Russian narratives underscore that the impending energy transitions will present a significant challenge for Poland (Sputnik Polska, 2020), because the EU's climate change policies "have made the European energy crisis worse" (Sputnik Polska, 2022n). Building on this claim, Russian media outlets also allege a purported reduced stress on ecological considerations within Poland's energy strategy (topwar.ru, 2021). These commentaries hint at a critical stance on Poland's nuclear energy aspirations, suggesting they may be harmful to the environment. In understanding these critiques, one must consider the tactical nature of Russian state propaganda efforts, often crafted to shape international opinion in favour of Moscow's strategic objectives. By promoting such narratives, there could be intent to tarnish Poland's international reputation and foster doubts surrounding its decisions in the energy sector. Differentiating authentic environmental apprehensions from those that might be inflated or steered by political motives becomes essential. The environmental angle brought up may be contrasted with Russia's energy endeavours, possibly to shift focus away from their geopolitical or ecological consequences. Additionally, the narrative underscores the EU's discourse on the environmental viability of nuclear energy, drawing parallels with the purported agreement between Poland and the US regarding nuclear energy's significance in realising carbon neutrality goals (Nosowicz, 2021b).

Poland's Energy Choices and Implications for EU Unity

Moscow's propaganda narratives concerning Poland's energy pursuits shed light on the Kremlin's expanded plan to sway global coalitions and mold viewpoints. At the core of this discussion is Poland's depiction as a country veering away from the European Union, chiefly by depending on external powers such as the US for its energy (including nuclear power) solutions (Sputnik Polska, 2020). These accounts allude to possible discord with other crucial EU participants. Such narratives, emblematic of government-sponsored disinformation efforts, endeavour to sow discord among the Western allies, in particular in the European Union. The emphasis on Poland's purported divergence from Europe seeks to weaken the unity of the European Union, a tactic exacerbated by Moscow's war of aggression in Ukraine and the energy crisis in Europe. The Russian media in the Polish language has suggested that Warsaw is reluctant to share its gas reserves with fellow EU countries (Sputnik Polska, 2022m). Given the energy decisions made by Poland thus far, the European Union

is unlikely to extend its support to the country's nuclear power initiatives (Sputnik Polska, 2020).

On the other hand, the Kremlin's disinformation apparatus scrutinises Poland's sovereignty, underscoring its vulnerability to outside factors. These viewpoints could culminate in creating skepticism within EU Member States regarding Poland, potentially endangering the bloc's harmony. The language utilised by Russia designates Poland as a kind of "fifth column", suggesting its actions resonate more with US objectives than those of its European peers (Sputnik Polska, 2022m). In general, Moscow's narratives revolve around the premise that (previous) long-term European energy collaboration with Russia elicited unease within the United States' strategic considerations (Sputnik Polska, 2022).

Financial and Operational Feasibility

Various Russian reports underline a number of uncertainties surrounding the financial models and sources for Poland's nuclear venture along with the readiness and capability of its international partners. The recurring theme is Poland's dependence on external funding and expertise, painting the whole venture as being risky and fraught with potential pitfalls (Atomic-energy.ru, 2022). The Russian disinformation narrative exploits these imagined financial and operational uncertainties to underline a supposed lack of preparedness in Poland's venture into nuclear energy (Sputnik Polska, 2020). This account may serve dual purposes; it attempts to cast doubt among the Polish populace and international community regarding the viability of the nuclear project, while reinforcing the idea of Russia's indispensable role as a stable energy supplier in the long run. What is more, by portraying the nuclear energy venture as financially precarious and operationally complex, and renewables as unreliable, the intention could be to dissuade other nations in the region from considering a similar shift away from dependency on fossil fuels, thereby potentially re-establishing Russia's influential position in the regional energy landscape in the future (Nosowicz, 2021a).

Conclusions: Russia's Disinformation Strategy and Poland's Energy Transition

In evaluating the presented narratives, it is clear that Russia's disinformation efforts targeting Poland are not merely sporadic instances. Instead, they represent a systematic strategy, rooted in neorealist principles, all aimed at altering geopolitical discourses. Within this neorealist context,

Russia's actions towards Poland's energy decisions are strategic and play in a broader game of political power and influence.

As the scale of this informational warfare grows, there's an increased urgency for the international community to sharpen its capacity to differentiate fact from fiction. This is crucial to ensure that international relations are not adversely influenced by misleading narratives. This is critical in the context of the Kremlin's war of aggression in Ukraine. Given this backdrop, Poland faces the dual task of understanding the underlying motives of such disinformation campaigns and implementing robust countermeasures to protect its energy interests and geopolitical stance.

For Poland, this entails fostering a well-informed perspective on nuclear energy and its implications for national security. Strengthening cyber security infrastructure becomes paramount, given the recognition of the digital space as a key arena for these information wars. It's also essential for Poland to engage in detailed discussions with diverse stakeholders to solidify a unified energy vision, which aligns with neorealist considerations. Moreover, consolidating and enhancing alliances within NATO and the EU will serve as a significant deterrent against external disinformation, emphasising a collective strength and resilience against such threats.

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The Role of the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) in Countering Disinformation in the European Union

Abstract
The objective of this article is to provide an overview of European Union initiatives aimed at countering disinformation, with a specific focus on the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO). In response to the growing issue of disinformation in the early 21st century, particularly in the lead-up to the 2019 and 2024 European Parliamentary elections, the European Union has undertaken various actions to address this challenge. A significant global achievement in this endeavour is the establishment of "The Code of Practice on Disinformation". Two recently adopted regulations, the "Digital Markets Act" and the „Digital Services Act", also hold a pivotal role in this context. Research communities and fact-checking entities have been entrusted with distinct responsibilities in the fight against disinformation. In this landscape, EDMO, an independent consortium established by the European Union in 2020 and headquartered at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, assumes a crucial role. EDMO operates through 14 centres located across various European Union countries. These centres are tasked with researching and analysing disinformation phenomena, supporting local communities in their efforts to combat disinformation, and conducting educational initiatives. Poland is part of a group of three states, along with Slovakia and Czechia, involved in the operation of one such centre, CEDMO (the Central European Digital Media Observatory). This article primarily focuses on the activities of the network and CEDMO, with a specific emphasis on Poland. Furthermore, the CALYPSO project has been highlighted. The study underscores that in individual EU countries, several measures related to combating disinformation require legal regulation and increased awareness. It should be noted that this article provides an overview, drawing insights

from official documents of the European Union, Member States, EDMO, CEDMO, and other independent organisations, as well as CALYPSO.

Keywords: Disinformation, European Union, EDMO, CEDMO, Poland

Introduction

Disinformation, as a misleading activity, has a rich, historical legacy that can be traced back to ancient times. It frequently served as a strategic weapon to defeat adversaries without engaging in direct combat (Smith, 2019). In modern times, disinformation campaigns are primarily linked to 19th-century Russia, while in the 21st century, they gained notoriety through the involvement of Russian Federation authorities in the 2016 US presidential elections (Mueller, 2022). Disinformation activities constitute a permanent component of Russia's military doctrine. 21st century Great Britain and the American continent was shaken by the Cambridge Analytica Ltd scandal (Schjolberg, 2020), a company specialising in political consulting, utilised Facebook user data for microtargeting, i.e., a practice involving the precise customisation of political offerings to specific voter groups. The disclosure of Cambridge Analytica Ltd's methods by *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* triggered an extensive debate surrounding the ethical aspects of such practices. The culmination of the Cambridge Analytica scandal involved a United States Congress hearing with Mark Zuckerberg and the imposition of a substantial financial penalty of $ 5 billion on Facebook by the US Federal Trade Commission. In May 2018, Cambridge Analytica Ltd went bankrupt. The company was discovered to have meddled not only in elections within the United States and the United Kingdom but also in various other nations, including Australia, India, Kenya, Malta, the Philippines, Mexico, and several others. The extent of its involvement potentially extended to approximately 200 electoral processes across different levels in 68 countries worldwide.

These events likely raised concerns within the European Union, prompting the initiation of targeted measures to combat disinformation, particularly in anticipation of the 2019 European Parliament elections. In 2015, the European Union established The East StratCom Task Force (EUvsDisinfo) (ESO, 2018) to gather misleading information and partial truths originating from Eastern Europe, including Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and others. Following a call from the European Parliament in 2017, the European Commission responded with "The Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach" (European Commission, 2018/236) addressed to the European

Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions in April 2018, outlining their strategy for addressing online disinformation. Based on this Communication and with the support of the European Council (European, 2018), the "Code of Practice on Disinformation" (European Commission, 2022) was formulated and adopted in 2018. Additionally, the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in collaboration with the European Commission, released a joint communication: "The Action Plan Against Disinformation" (European, 2018/36).

In the "April Communication" (European Commission, 2018/236), the Commission primarily defined the concept of disinformation: "Disinformation is understood as 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. Public harm includes threats to democratic processes as well as to public goods such as Union citizens' health, environment or security. Disinformation does not include inadvertent errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary" (European Commission, 2018/236). In addition, a set of fundamental principles and objectives for combating disinformation was meticulously delineated, including the transparency, diversity, and reliability of disseminated information. These initiatives aimed to foster integrated solutions by bringing together various stakeholders such as public authorities, online platforms, media organisations, advertisers, and more to combat disinformation collectively. In pursuit of its commitment to combat disinformation comprehensively, the Commission initiated the establishment of a multi-stakeholder forum. The primary objectives of this forum include the formulation of an EU code of conduct aimed at countering disinformation along with the establishment of robust and autonomous fact-checking organisations within the European Union, mirroring the successful precedent of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN 2023) established in 2015, which consists of over 100 different organisations operating on a global scale. As integral components of EU initiatives such as „Connecting Europe Facility", „Safer Internet", and „Horizon 2020", the Commission undertook a range of activities, including the creation of a platform that unites independent organisations dedicated to information verification within the European Union, with particular emphasis on secure and disinformation-resistant electoral processes, support for educational endeavours aimed at enhancing media literacy and assistance for activities that promote high-quality journalism. It was announced that a concerted effort would be made to address both external and internal threats associated with disinformation. This would

be achieved through strategic communication carried out by specialised EU units to combat hybrid threats in collaboration with the European External Action Service and NATO (European Commission, 2018/236).

EU Code of Practice on Disinformation

The "Code of Practice on Disinformation" (European Commission, 2022), based on the foregoing "April Communication" (European Commission, 2018/236), devised and adopted in 2018, established, for the first time on a global scale, self-regulatory standards aimed at combating disinformation voluntarily. Representatives of the largest online platforms, along with technology and advertising companies, agreed on a code to counter disinformation on the basis of self-regulation. Platforms such as Google, Facebook, X (then known as Twitter), and Mozilla signed "The Code" in 2018, and in 2019–2020, Microsoft, TikTok, and the European Association of Communications Agencies (EACA) also joined this list. Moreover, a multitude of technology and advertising firms have unequivocally expressed their dedication to implementing the provisions outlined in "The Code". The signatories pledged, among other things, to exercise self-assessment in the realm of disseminating information pertaining to threats against democracy and political processes, citizens' health and property, environmental protection, and safety, while upholding the foundational principles of freedom of expression and an open Internet arising from European law and European competition regulations. The signatories committed to submitting annual reports to the European Commission on their activities. The principles of participation in "The Code" include the obligation to self-asses those areas that are the subject of a given signatory's activity. They possess the authority to define the parameters of self-assessment and the specific methodologies they will employ, factoring in the diverse array of websites and tools at their disposal. The implementation of "The Code" applies to the European Economic Area. "The Code" enumerates 11 purposes that may serve as focal points for commitment implementation, along with 5 distinct commitments (European Commission, 2022).

The purposes recognise the importance of efforts to:

"(i) Include safeguards against disinformation;
(ii) Improve the scrutiny of advertisement placements to reduce revenues of the purveyors of disinformation;
(iii) Ensure transparency about political and issue-based advertising, also with a view to enabling users to understand why they have been targeted by a given advertisement;

(iv) Implement and promote reasonable policies against misrepresentation;
(v) Intensify and demonstrate the effectiveness of efforts to close fake accounts and establish clear marking systems and rules concerning bots to ensure their activities cannot be confused with human interactions;
(vi) Intensify and communicate on the effectiveness of efforts to ensure the integrity of services with regards to accounts whose purpose and intent is to spread disinformation, as per specifics assessed and determined by the relevant signatory, and consistently with Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the fundamental right of anonymity and pseudonymity, and the proportionality principle, and providing information on the effectiveness of these activities;
(vii) Invest in technological means to prioritise relevant, authentic, and accurate and authoritative information where appropriate in searches, feeds, or other automatically ranked distribution channels pursuant to Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and the principle of freedom of opinion. Be that as it may, Signatories should not be compelled by governments, nor should they adopt voluntary policies, to delete or prevent access to otherwise lawful content or messages solely on the basis that they are thought to be false;
(viii) Ensure transparency with a view to enabling users to understand why they have been targeted by a given political or issue-based advertisement, also through indicators of the trustworthiness of content sources, media ownership and/or verified identity;
(ix) Dilute the visibility of disinformation by improving the findability of trustworthy content;
(x) Consider empowering users with tools enabling a customised and interactive online experience so as to facilitate content discovery and access to different news sources representing alternative viewpoints, also providing them with easily-accessible tools to report Disinformation;
(xi) Take reasonable measures to enable privacy-compliant access to data for fact-checking and research activities and to cooperate by providing relevant data on the functioning of their services including data for independent investigation by academic researchers and general information on algorithms" (European Commission, 2022).

The commitments encompass:

1. The scrutiny of advertising content;
2. Political advertising and issue-based advertising (the transparency of political and issue-based advertising);

3. Integrity of services (regulating bot activity and closing fake accounts);
4. Empowering consumers;
5. Empowering the research community (European Commission, 2022).

Methods for measuring and monitoring The Code's effectiveness have also been adopted. In 2019, the European Commission, based on the reports submitted by the signatories, presented the first report for a period of 12 months on their self-assessment activities. Fascinating and original reports provided by signatories such as Facebook, Google, and X (formerly known as Twitter) can be accessed on the "Shaping Europe's Digital Future" website (European Commission, 2019). These reports showcase the diligent endeavours undertaken by the signatories in combating disinformation, which enabled the Commission to formulate and release guidance on strengthening "The Code", which was presented on May 26th, 2021. Platforms and various organisations embarked on a revision of the 2018 Code, and on June 16th, 2022 a draft of the strengthened Code was presented and adopted (European Commission, 2022a), which contains 44 commitments and 128 implementation measures. These cover areas such as: demonetisation (reducing financial incentives for disinformation providers), including new forms of disinformation such as deep fakes, fake accounts, and bots; transparency of political advertising (through labelling and providing information about sponsors); ensuring the integrity of services; empowering users through educational processes; empowering researchers by enabling them to access data for analytical and research purposes (including algorithms); empowering the fact-checking community (in all EU countries and in all EU languages and treating this activity as paid work); and, as a result, the establishment of a Transparency Centre and a permanent task force consisting of the European Regulators Group for Audiovisual Media Services (ERGA) (ERGA, 2023), the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) (EDMO, 2023), and the External Action Service. A strengthened framework for monitoring disinformation was also adopted.

The Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act of the European Union

It is important to highlight that both the 2018 and 2022 Codes are not legal documents of the European Union. This is a voluntary agreement entered into by willing parties, shaped by the input and recommendations of the European Union. The binding nature of this agreement extends exclusively to its signatories. The concept of the strengthened Code of

2022 is currently supported by the provisions adopted in two binding legal acts of the European Union, i.e.:

1) Regulation (EU) 2022/1925 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14th September 2022 on contestable and fair markets in the digital sector and amending Directives (EU) 2019/1837 and (EU) 2020/1828 (Digital Markets Act) (Text with EEA relevance), OJ EU L265 of 12/10/2022, pp. 1–66.
2) Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19th October 2022 on the single market for digital services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act) (Text with EEA relevance), OJ EU L277 of 27/10/2023, pp. 1–102.

The first Regulation introduced various significant elements, including the definition of „core platform service" (Art. 2(2)), which comprises online intermediation services, online search engines, online social networking services, video sharing platform services, virtual assistants, operating systems including any advertising networks, advertising exchanges, etc. The Regulation also designated "gatekeepers" as undertakings providing core platform services (Art. 3) and outlined unfair practices of those so-called "gatekeepers" (Chapter III). Furthermore, the Regulation established rules governing market monitoring and research, along with the introduction of fines for unfair practices, with penalties potentially reaching up to 10% of a supplier's annual global income. Additionally, both EU and national regulatory bodies were put in place to enforce these rules and ensure compliance (Chapter IV–V).

The second document defined „information society service" (Art. 3(a)), in particular the „intermediary service" and its types, i.e., "mere conduit", „cashing", and „hosting" (Art. 3(g)) and the concept of „illegal content" as "information that, in itself or in relation to an activity, including the sale of products or the provision of services, is not in compliance with Union law or the law of any Member State which is in compliance with Union law, irrespective of the precise subject matter or nature of that law" (Art. 3(h)). Additionally, the liability of providers of intermediary services, due diligence obligations for a transparent and safe online environment, online protection of minors, crisis response mechanisms and independent audit were specified. The European Board for Digital Services was also established, and by February 17th, 2024, Member States are to have appointed national digital services coordinators. The Regulation includes significant penalties for non-compliance with its rules, which may involve substantial fines, amounting to as much as 6% of a supplier's annual global income, or the imposition of periodic penalty payments. In cases where a particular entity engages in repeated harmful

activities, it could face a ban from conducting activities across the entire European market. Furthermore, a fundamental principle was established that what is considered illegal in the offline world should also be deemed illegal online, emphasising that all activities within the realm of digital services in the European market must adhere to European values.

Both documents were presented by the European Commission on December 15th, 2020, and, on March 22nd, 2022, they were adopted. The first Regulation has been in force since May 2nd, 2023, and the second one will be applicable from February 17th, 2024.

The Role of the Research and Fact-checking Communities in Combating Disinformation in the European Union European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)

Both the 2018 and 2022 Codes emphasised the importance of empowering the research and fact-checking communities. Among the highlighted organisations, particular significance in that respect was assigned to the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) (EDMO, 2023).

It's worth noting that in the "April Communication" (European Commission, 2018/236), the Commission had advocated for the involvement of independent research and fact-checking communities in the study of disinformation. This was aimed at enhancing the analysis and monitoring of disinformation's dynamics and its societal impact. As was previously stated, the signatories were required to submit reports to the Commission (under the new Code, large platforms were to do so every six months, while others were expected to report annually). There is, nonetheless, a need to monitor and analyse disinformation by independent scientific organisations, a responsibility entrusted to EDMO (EDMO, 2023), an independent scientific and research consortium established by the European Union on June 1st, 2020, as part of the "European Democracy Action Plan" (European Commission, 2020). Its headquarters are situated at the European University Institute (EUI, 2023) in Florence, Italy, where the European Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom (Centre, 2023) has been based since 2011. Despite being a scientific research unit established by the European Union engaged in extensive digital media monitoring, EDMO maintains complete independence from any regulatory actions of the European Union and its Member States. The consortium encompasses such entities as Athens Technology Centre (Greece), Aarhus University (Denmark), and the Italian fact-checking organisation Pagella Politica. EDMO secured funding of 11 million euros from the Connecting Europe Facility programme (project LC-01935415)

for the establishment of a platform and a network consisting of eight autonomous disinformation observation centres, operational across the territories of one or a number of European Union Member States. The primary mission of these centres is to systematically observe and analyse disinformation campaigns. Their role extends to collaborating with local authorities and media organisations to unveil disinformation efforts, as well as to advance public awareness and empower citizens with the skills required to identify and counter disinformation. Initially, the network consisted of 8 centres, yet in 2022, an additional six centres were inaugurated, resulting in a total of 14 centres in operation today. They encompass all of the European Union Member States and Norway, and are organised into the following groups (the countries and their respective centre headquarters are outlined below) (EDMO-Hubs, 2023):

Croatia and Slovenia – the University of Dubrovnik (Croatia)
Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia – the University of Tartu (Estonia)
Belgium and the Netherlands – the Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision (Netherlands)
Bulgaria and Romania – Sofia Univeristy "St. Kliment Ohridski" (Bulgaria)
Slovakia, Czechia, and Poland – Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic)
France – Sciences Po (France)
Belgium and Luxembourg – Vrije University, Brussels (Belgium)
Austria and Germany – TU Dortmund University (Germany)
Hungary – Political Capital (Hungary)
Spain and Portugal – the University of Navarra (Spain)
Italy – LUISS Guido Carli (Italy)
Ireland – Dublin City University (Ireland)
Greece, Cyprus, and Malta – the Centre for Research and Technology Hellas (CERTH) (Greece)
Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland – Aarhus University DATALAB – Centre for Digital Social Research (Denmark)

Central European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO)

As evident in the list provided above, Poland is situated within a group comprising three countries, alongside Slovakia and Czechia. The central coordination hub for this group is hosted at Charles University in Prague, Czechia. The funding required to sustain the operations of this centre is supplied from the Czech National Reconstruction Plan. Each centre bears its distinct name and maintains an individual website. In

the instance of the group encompassing Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland, it is referred to as the Central European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO) (CEDMO, 2023). Poland's representation in this organisation is led by SWPS – University of Humanities and Social Sciences in Warsaw, with Professor Karina Stasiuk-Krajewska at the helm. Furthermore, the advisory, strategic, and executive committees include individuals from prominent circles within the Polish scientific and journalistic communities. Additionally, each centre collaborates with a diverse array of local partners, encompassing scientists, journalists, fact-checkers, media professionals, and individuals possessing expertise in information technology. These teams are charged with the responsibility of vigilantly monitoring the digital media ecosystem, detecting instances of disinformation and actively countering them, along with extending support to local authorities and organising training initiatives. All the aforementioned centres are also present on various social media platforms.

CEDMO's first annual report was released in July 2023 (CEDMO, 2020), and provides an overview of the disinformation landscape within those three countries. According to its creators, this report was compiled by gathering information through a standardised questionnaire devised by EDMO. One significant observation in the report is that disinformation lacks any legal classification in each of the three countries. This absence of legal categorisation implies the absence of an official definition and legal provisions pertaining to disinformation. While guidelines and recommendations are accessible on the websites of both government bodies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in each of the countries, disinformation remains unregulated by law. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that each of these countries employs distinct terminology. In Czechia, the terms "disinformation", "misinformation", or even "hoax" are commonly used, with a similar pattern in Slovakia. In Poland, a Polonised rendition of the English term "fake news" prevails. Across all three countries, fragments of legislation related to disinformation are dispersed throughout various legal domains. These elements can be found in specific sections of criminal and civil codes, within realms of human rights, national security, cybersecurity, press and media regulations, and electoral codes. Consequently, this fragmented legal landscape has led to the absence of comprehensive case law development and, more significantly, a dearth of dedicated law enforcement agencies capable of effectively identifying and prosecuting such abuses and their perpetrators. An analogous situation can be observed in Poland, particularly in the domain of cybersecurity. After the adoption of "The Convention on

Cybercrime" by the Council of Europe in 2001, (the Council, 2001) it took Poland 17 years until the "Act on the National Cybersecurity System" as of 5th July 2018 (the Act, 2018) was enacted. Subsequently, additional years were required to establish dedicated law enforcement agencies. It was not until January 12th, 2022, that the legislation passed in December 2021 came into effect, establishing the Central Office for Combating Cybercrime (the Act, 2021) under the purview of the Polish police. The process of organising a nationwide network, envisioned to consist of 1,800 employees, is currently underway. The task of addressing disinformation issues and increasing public awareness in this domain primarily falls within the scope of scientific communities, exemplified by organisations like NASK in Poland (NASK, 2023), and fact-checkers, often functioning as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including, for instance, Demagog (in all three countries) (Demagog, 2023), the Czech Manipulátoři, na faktach záleži (Manipulátoři, 2023) or the Slovak Infosecurity.sk (Infosecurity.sk, 2023) or Konšpirátori.sk (Konspiratori.sk, 2023). In specific circumstances, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic or the conflict in Ukraine, public media entities also contribute to efforts to combat disinformation. They assist in identifying disinformation sources, troll farms and their creators, and work to establish the veracity of information. They also play a role in organising educational initiatives. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that such measures are only partially effective, as the most effective countermeasure against wrongdoers remains the apprehension and prosecution of those responsible for disinformation. According to the report, in the countries under consideration (but not solely), existing mechanisms are employed to combat disinformation. For instance, the instrument for granting broadcasting licenses, overseen by the Polish National Council of Broadcasting and Television, has been utilised to revoke the licenses of Russian and Belarusian public broadcasters on account of their dissemination of propaganda (it is worth noting that broader measures have been taken, such as European Union sanctions imposed on these broadcasters, however, these sanctions are considered a temporary measure). In the realm of digital political and electoral advertising within the aforementioned countries, substantial disparities and various uncertainties persist. Regrettably, awareness about the "Code of Practice on Disinformation" within these three countries remains limited, resulting in only a gradual increase in the number of signatories from this region. Nevertheless, some platforms, like Demagog, have shown their commitment by becoming signatories to the 2022 strengthened Code (a comprehensive list of all signatories of "The Code", along with

their declared areas of voluntary control, can be accessed on the "Shaping Europe's Digital Future" website (European Commission, 2022b).

CEDMO has recently commenced its operations. On its website – available in four languages (English, Czech, Slovak, and Polish) – it conducts ongoing fact-checking across a spectrum of categories, encompassing COVID-19, the economy, the environment, health, politics, science, society, and Ukraine. Additionally, CEDMO disseminates research findings and facilitates practical training sessions. CEDMO, as well as the broader EDMO initiative, face a substantial task in their mission to mitigate the consequences of disinformation. Meanwhile, the existing landscape comprises the two EU regulations, disparate and fragmentary local legislation, the voluntary Code, and the relentless endeavours of non-governmental organisations and fact-checkers in the tireless pursuit of disinformation tracking.

In connection with the efforts of fact-checkers, it is notable to highlight an intriguing project, undertaken by three countries through the ERASMUS+ programme (France, Greece, and Poland), known as CALYPSO (CALYPSO, 2022). This project focuses on fact checking, with the University of Economics in Katowice representing the Polish involvement in the initiative. A CALYPSO report was published in 2022. In the course of the report, various forms of assistance in fact-checking were analysed, leading to the identification of four distinct categories: *fact-checking services* – platforms mainly run by journalists; *verification tools* – various types of software and applications designed to automatically identify disinformation (e.g., *deep fakes*), *fact-checking aids* – tools geared at disseminating knowledge, often in the form of educational materials, such as textbooks related to media, network, and cultural education, and a *fact-checking environment* – tools take the form of interactive games that engage users in the process of acquiring knowledge on disinformation, often delivered through e-learning platforms. The CALYPSO Group is one of many organisations collaborating with EDMO.

With the upcoming European Parliament elections scheduled for 2024, it is expected that all EU tools and mechanisms for combatting disinformation will be set in motion.

Conclusions

Disinformation, as an element of hybrid warfare, has a historical presence, but its proliferation intensified significantly in the digital era. The European Union embarked on a robust effort to combat this phenomenon, particularly in the lead-up to the 2019 European Parliament

elections. The revelations of the Cambridge Analytica Ltd scandal and the Russian Federation's interference in the 2016 US presidential election served as a catalyst for EU authorities to take action. Consequently, in 2018, the "EU Code of Practice on Disinformation" was introduced. This document, deemed a global achievement, motivated its signatories to voluntarily take responsibility for monitoring their respective platforms. In 2022, the strengthened Code, alongside two legally binding regulations – the "Digital Markets Act" and the "Digital Services Act" were adopted, further bolstering efforts against disinformation within the EU. In this endeavour, the research community and independent fact-checkers play a pivotal role, contributing to the identification and combating of disinformation. Within the EU, a significant organisation in this context is EDMO, established in 2020 and headquartered at the European University Institute in Florence. It operates through 14 centres situated across the European Union. This network actively combats disinformation and is engaged in educational initiatives. In the case of Czechia, Slovakia, and Poland, these activities are carried out through CEDMO. The first annual report from this centre highlights the urgency of intensifying efforts, particularly in the domains of legislation and the promotion of "The Code". The CALYPSO project, as mentioned earlier, also plays a significant role in these endeavours.

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The Institutional and Organisational Role in the Fight Against Disinformation: European Experiences

Abstract
Living in a world which is full of information brings forth many advantages and possibilities, but also many disadvantages and threats. Nowadays, online informational resources are available through the Internet for everyone, so billions of people around the world are faced with a great deal of information on a daily basis.
One of the inherent challenges actually is for one to select the so-called "right" information, i.e., to make a crucial distinction between information and disinformation, which can bring you the exact content of the information in a timely manner. In this paper, we will analyse Europe's institutional and organisational experiences in the fight against disinformation, with a special emphasis on the activities, modalities, and methodology used for achieving this goal.
In this paper, using the descriptive method, the comparative method, and the method of content analysis along with other relevant methods, the authors will try to determine the institutional and organisational role in the fight against disinformation with Europe's experiences in mind.

Keywords: Institutions, Fight, Disinformation, Measures, Experiences

Introduction

The information component is one of the most important parts of our daily lives nowadays. For this reason, it is of crucial importance to obtain accurate, appropriate, and up-to-date information which is needed for the fulfillment of professional and private activities. There are many sources which deliver different types of information to us, some of them are formal, some of them informal, and some of them are legitimate, whereas some of them are illegitimate.

In reality, the media is the main source of information which we as consumers get, but the plurality of the media in the contemporary world can also mean, *inter alia*, a generation of disinformation, misinformation, and speculation. One of the roles of state institutions and international organisations, as well as other formal entities, is to enable citizens to receive information which is checked, verified, and accurate. However, the freedom to publish and distribute information, especially in the Internet era, can be often misused for myriad different financial, ideological, or axiological purposes. Institutions should not only follow these phenomena, but also should take appropriate measures and react to them accordingly. These measures can be legislative, executive or judicial.

However, synergy between the institution and the citizen in the fight against disinformation is fundamental, because only through that synergy can real effects and results be achieved, i.e., only through the performing of synchronised activities by both state and non-state actors do we stand the best chance of being effective in the fight against disinformation.

Disinformation as a Phenomena

According to the European Commission's *Action Plan against Disinformation*, disinformation is defined as "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". Harm, in this context, can entail threats to democratic political-and-policymaking processes by undermining the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions. The inclusion of intentionality in the *Action Plan*'s description also differentiates the term from misinformation. Disinformation can be overt, displaying factually false content, but can also take more subtle forms, such as the cherry-picking of statistics to mislead audiences and prime them in certain ways, or displaying re-contextualised or even visual material which has been tampered with. Narratives can be adjusted to take advantage of the existing information space by tapping into divisive issues. Disinformation's shape-shifting nature and agility

makes it a useful vehicle for hybrid threats or what the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats defines as a "coordinated and synchronised action that deliberately targets democratic states and institutions" systemic vulnerabilities, through a wide range of means [political, economic, military, civil, and information]". Coordinated and amplified disinformation can crowd-out rational debate and sow confusion and discord, thereby numbing decision-making capacities. Indeed, hybrid threats aim to exploit a target's vulnerabilities and generate ambiguity to "hinder decision-making processes" (Ignatidou, 2019, pp. 4–5).

The openness of today's subjects of international law in the forms of states, international organisations, entities *sui generis* etc., also mean an increased vulnerability, because the lack of systemic protection and information selection and filtration can result in an infiltration of disinformation which can be damaging to citizens, societies, and other relevant so-called "stakeholders" involved in the governing processes of a given subject of international law.

There is no universally agreed definition of "disinformation", and it is often used inter-changeably with "misinformation". The differences in definition partly come down to whether one is looking at content (i.e., whether the information is false) or behaviour (i.e., whether the disseminator of the information is seeking to deceive or cause harm). On this basis, UNESCO and others have pointed to three distinct phenomena:

- Misinformation: information that is "false but not created with the intention of causing harm", e.g., a false rumour about the UN that someone shares with their social network for benign reasons;
- Disinformation: information that is "false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country", e.g., a false rumour that someone generates or spreads to harm the UN; and
- Mal-information: information that is "based on reality and used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country", e.g., propaganda that instrumentalises true information to harm the UN (Trithart, 2022, p. 2).

Despite this distinction which is well explained (see: the UNESCO classification), we can note that there is an interaction among the different parts of the definitions, so we can therefore speak about many combinations made of the abovementioned definitions. For instance, an item of misinformation can unintentionally cause harm, whereas disinformation can be benign, because the concrete disinformation is not relevant anymore.

Institutional and Organisational Activities Against Disinformation

There are many actors that have a role to play in the spread and opposition of disinformation. In liberal democracies the state is, by definition, only one of the respondents; journalists, NGOs, think tanks, academics, digital platforms among others also play an important, if not the greatest role in detecting and countering disinformation. A successful or effective response is always multifactorial, being the result of combined efforts that are so intertwined that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, to know for certain to what extent the state's response contributed to it (Vilmer, 2021, p. 7).

However, the state possesses the biggest responsibility regarding the fight against disinformation (along with all the other variants of misinformation and mal-information). With all the institutions under its control, the state has to be the leader in this processes, while simultaneously encouraging all the other variables in the forms of business entities, NGO's, different social groups, etc.

The spread of deliberate, large-scale, and systematic disinformation is an acutely strategic challenge for many countries worldwide. The EU's legitimacy and purpose rest on a democratic foundation, predicated on an informed electorate expressing its democratic will through free and fair elections. Any attempt to maliciously and intentionally undermine and/or manipulate public opinion therefore represents a grave threat to the EU itself. Combating disinformation represents a major challenge because it needs to strike the right balance between maintaining fundamental rights to freedom and security, and encouraging innovation and an open market. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon. However, the rise of the internet and social media along with the development of new digital technologies have revolutionised the way citizens are informed of current affairs, and has been accompanied by increasing challenges related to large-scale data collection and mono-or-oligopolistic markets which are dominated by a very small number of companies.

Article 11 of the European Charter on Fundamental Rights covers the freedom of expression and information. This includes the freedom of the media and pluralism. The EU's efforts to tackle disinformation hinge primarily on policy initiatives. In March 2015, the European Council invited the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to develop an action plan on strategic communication, in cooperation with both EU Member States and EU Institutions, to address Russia's on-going disinformation campaigns. This led to the creation

of the East Stratcom Task Force within the EEAS, whose mandate is to tackle disinformation originating from outside the EU. More specifically, it counters Russian disinformation as well as designing and disseminating positive strategic communications in the Eastern neighbourhood. This was followed in 2017 by two more task forces, namely, TF South, and TF Western Balkans. In late 2017, the Commission – following widespread consultation – set up the High-Level Expert Group to offer concrete advice on tackling disinformation. The Group delivered its report in March 2018 and this formed the basis for the Commission's "Communication on Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach", based on four core principles and objectives: improving the transparency of the origin of information and how it is produced, sponsored, disseminated and targeted; promoting diversity of information in order to enable informed decision-making and supported by high quality journalism and media literacy; fostering the credibility and trustworthiness of information by working with key stakeholders; and fashioning inclusive solutions through awareness-raising, improved media literacy, and broad stakeholder involvement (European Court of Auditors, 2020, pp. 4–6).

At the moment, the aforementioned challenges are even greater because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict's current intensity and seriousness. Compared to the Russian-Ukrainian war, there is a bigger division in public opinion, but there is also more sensitive information which is spreading in the European media, especially because of the heterogenic population in the European Union countries, and especially in the Western countries.

In April 2018, the European Commission published an official communication entitled "Tackling Online Disinformation: a European Approach" (COM(2018) 236) ("the Communication"), noting that large-scale disinformation and misinformation, including misleading or outright false information, is a major challenge. Namely, disinformation actively threatens free and fair political processes, and poses significant risks to public health systems, crisis management, the economy, and social cohesion, as well as to mental health and wellbeing. According to the Commission's research, the major themes of disinformation are currently those regarding elections, immigration, health, environment, and security policies, with deceptive content regarding COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine being exceedingly pervasive in particular. In its Communication, the Commission specifically pointed to new technologies and social media as the tools through which disinformation spreads with unprecedented speed and precision of targeting, thereby creating "personalised information spheres and becoming powerful

echo chambers for disinformation campaigns". The Commission went on to argue that technology and digital media companies "have so far failed to act proportionately, falling short of the challenge posed by disinformation and the manipulative use of platforms' infrastructures". In October 2018, and in response to this criticism, representatives of leading tech companies, social media platforms, and advertising agencies agreed to the self-regulatory 2018 Code of Practice on Disinformation ("2018 Code"). The 2018 Code marked the first time in the world that industry players voluntarily agreed on a set of standards to fight disinformation, and participation significantly broadened in the years which followed. By way of follow-up to the 2018 Code, in 2021 the Commission published the "Guidance on Strengthening the Code of Practice on Disinformation" ("2021 Guidance"). The 2021 Guidance set out the Commission's views regarding how platforms and other relevant stakeholders should improve upon the 2018 Code in order to create a more transparent, safe, and trustworthy online environment. 2022's Strengthened Code is, therefore, the industry's latest response to the 2021 Guidance, and contains renewed, more ambitious commitments aimed at countering online disinformation. In the 2022 Strengthened Code, the signatories acknowledge their important role in combatting disinformation, which, for the purposes of the initiative, is defined to include "misinformation, disinformation, information influence operations, and foreign interference in the information space". Accordingly, the 2022 Strengthened Code contains 44 commitments, and 128 specific measures relating to such commitments, in the following thematic areas:

- The scrutiny of ad placements. Measures include the demonetisation of disinformation.
- Political advertising. Measures include the labelling and verification of political or issue advertising.
- The integrity of services. Measures include improving transparency obligations for AI systems, notably, deep-fakes and their use in manipulative practices.
- Empowering users. Measures include enhancing media literacy, improving functionalities to flag harmful, false information, and implementing more transparent content review-appeal mechanisms.

In June 2022, a broad range of technology companies, social media platforms, advertising agencies, and journalism organisations joined together to deliver the 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation ("2022 Strengthened Code"). The signatories – which include the likes of Google, Twitter, Meta, Microsoft, and TikTok – have

recently launched the Transparency Centre, an online hub where visitors can access data regarding actions taken and policies implemented under the 2022 Strengthened Code. The first set of reports have now been published, and give an indication as to what is being done in practice to combat disinformation and misinformation online. As of 20th March 2022, most of the 34 signatories have published their baseline reports, which are now available in the Transparency Centre Reports Archive (Farish, 2023, pp. 1–2).

The synergy manifested by the different actors, i.e., states, international organisations, technological companies, the business sector, non-governmental organisations, etc., is the best solution for fighting disinformation, although it is not a guarantee that disinformation will be eliminated. Still, in this way, the reduction of disinformation will help those actors to raise confidence in the information disseminated by the media.

Europeans see the flow of false information as a perpetual challenge to their online lives. Could they do more to root out false information? Should governments to step in? Although education and transparency are seen as crucial elements to any potential solution, all the potential approaches come with inherent difficulties. Any attempt to punish the media, for example, could quickly lead to state control and propaganda (Boyle, 2022, p. 20).

In reality, this so-called "drawing of an appropriate line" is the biggest challenge which can divide the control and filtering of the wrong information from one side, and state censorship from the other. So, incredibly careful access should be implemented, using all the instruments (those legal and technological) which any given state has at its disposal.

According to one study, the majority of people in advanced economies would see more false than true information by 2022, a worrying prediction that still gives us pause for thought about the information society we are living in. Laptops, smartphones, and tablets give us the opportunity to be aware at any time of what is happening around the globe, with social media allowing us to communicate freely with people all over the world. We are thus constantly surrounded by a flow of information.

The technological progress that we are witnessing in the 21st century highlights a paradox; our societies are becoming more interconnected, but are at the same time confronted with a number of challenges, with disinformation being one of them. Disinformation is not a new phenomenon; it is at least as old as the printing press. However, technological development and social media have tremendously accelerated the speed at which news, and in this case, false news, is diffused and have simultaneously

expanded their reach. Disinformation is a virulent trend that concerns all citizens and all sectors of democratic societies. Moreover, the EU is not ready to cope with the latest developments made in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) that will significantly impact the way disinformation is created and diffused. Overall, the EU is not entirely prepared to counter external disinformation campaigns in cyberspace. Disinformation is a complex phenomenon which has numerous, harmful consequences which affect both individuals and societies. First of all, disinformation degrades citizens' trust in traditional media. It "undermines the very fundamentals of information and credibility that informed debates are supposed to rest upon" (Scheidt, 2019, pp. 4–5). People face different false narratives which destabilise their sense of certainty about what is happening in world affairs. Moreover, disinformation undermines trust in public authorities and institutions, and confuses citizens as to what and whom to believe. It therefore undermines democracy, the rule of law, and good governance (Scheidt, 2019, pp. 4–6).

However, responsibility for treating the flow of information should be divided; institutions should treat information in accordance with their applicable authorisations and competences, but citizens should also be more careful regarding the receptive and cognitive component of information handling and consumption, or, in other words, they should check and analyse the information they receive from the media.

Current debates about fake news encompass a spectrum of information types. This includes relatively low-risk forms such as honest mistakes made by reporters, partisan political discourse, and the use of click bait headlines, to high-risk forms such as, for instance, foreign states or domestic groups that try to undermine the political process in European Member States and the European Union through the use of various forms of malicious fabrications, the infiltration of grassroots groups, and automated amplification techniques. We define it as false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or create profit. The risk of harm includes threats to democratic political processes and values, which can specifically target a variety of sectors, such as those of health, science, education, finance, and more. It is driven by the production and promotion of disinformation for economic gains or for political or ideological goals, but can be exacerbated by how different audiences and communities receive, engage, and amplify disinformation. Problems of disinformation are thus connected with wider political, social, civic, and media issues in Europe (European Commission, 2018, pp. 10–11).

Social media has changed the way humans interact with each other by allowing people to express themselves, share information, and communicate online by using computers, smartphones, tablets and, nowadays, even watches. Today, 81% of Europeans go online regularly (at least once per week). These people have access to an incredible amount of information which includes political communications, and we can surely agree on the fact that social media has changed the democratic public sphere. Social media has played a fundamental role in enhancing democracy and activism, facilitating the organisation of manifestation and giving voices to marginalised groups. Nonetheless, what we are now witnessing is how social media is polarising and polluting democracy, through fake news, hate speech, and defamation (Hinds, 2019, p. 7).

There are always two sides of the metaphorical coin; social media can help people in the distribution of useful information and offers of help, such as humanitarian aid and assistance, and by getting alternative information in many spheres which can't be managed by conventional media, etc., but social media can also be a platform for rumour dissemination, speculation, wrong information, fraud, etc. So, the possible level of influence exerted by social media depends not only on the level of usage by a state's citizens, but also by the level of confidence they have in social media.

Fighting against information manipulation effectively requires, first and foremost, identifying the roots of the problem. These roots are myriad, and identifying them is a challenge on its own; there are individual causes, linked to human nature and thus tied to psychology and epistemology. There are cognitive weaknesses and a crisis of knowledge that makes us particularly vulnerable to information manipulation. There are also collective causes, related to the dynamics of social life, crises of trust in institutions, crises of the press, and disillusionment with the digital world. Indeed, although the internet was supposed to liberate humanity, we instead find ourselves somewhat confined by it. After analysing each of these causes, we can then identify the beneficiaries, i.e., the actors conducting information manipulation, focusing in particular on state actors. Information manipulation is particularly prolific in times of war – and thus benefits all the more from the "de-specification" of war, that is, from the increasing ambiguity between times of war and times of peace. Censorship also plays a role, because it is more intense in moments of crisis and feeds into paranoia and delusions (Vilmer et al., 2018, p. 29).

Moreover, there appears to have been a reason why the European Union recently updated its anti-disinformation code, a tool at the core of the EU strategy against disinformation which has proven to be an effective tool to limit the spread of online disinformation, including during electoral

periods and to quickly respond to crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic and the war in Ukraine. In addition, although many of the existing fact-checking tools had already become prevalent in recent years, it is true that the pandemic – along with the invasion of Ukraine – has highlighted the perils of false information. In short, it can be said that there are two recurrent types of tools: on the one hand, there are those made available by existing services such as online platforms (for instance, Google's Fact Check Explorer), broadcasting companies (such as the BBC, with Reality Check in the UK), or newspapers (i.e.: De'codex by Le Monde in France). In addition, fact-checking companies have been launched with the sole purpose of providing said services. Some are backed or endorsed by platforms or media services, such as Newtral in Spain, which works closely with Facebook. On the other hand, there is Factual in Romania or Mimikama in Austria, which are financed via crowd-funding, and which represents a form of civil-society involvement in fighting disinformation (Cabrera Blázquez et al., 2022, p. 8).

Of course, there is always the dilemma about who fact checks the fact-checkers. Indeed, the public are not always be trustful of fact-checker platforms but can always ask questions about whether the fact-checker is a selective tool because it is easy to check the information about an event or fact which is near you, but it is almost impossible to do the same for an issue occurring a large distance away. The only relevant thing, therefore, is the confidence users have in their sources of information, in addition to their confidence in fact-checkers.

Europe and the West are targets of disinformation, influence operations, and foreign interference. And the responses of most Western countries have been piecemeal and slow, hampered by legal restraints and bureaucracy and lacking in any real political understanding of the problem and evidence of its impact. Adversaries of the EU and the West include states, organisations, and individuals which have developed well-established techniques and have laid the groundwork in terms of building networks, disseminating narratives, and tapping into local issues to effectively recruit unwitting grassroots supporters for current and future campaign goals. This puts the EU and its Member States at a disadvantage when it comes to countering these malicious activities. The following factors give adversary actors a significant advantage, with some of them pertaining to the nature of the disinformation activities they pursue; those actors often employ low-cost, low-risk, and high-reward tactics. They are first movers and use marginal technological advantages, meaning that their activities can be fully underway before they are even noticed. Moreover, they are less restricted by legal, ethical, or bureaucratic constraints, and

the broad range of illegitimate influence tools and techniques available to them make it difficult to identify and counteract the full extent of their campaigns (Pamment, 2020, p. 2).

We are all vulnerable to disinformation. We simply couldn't function effectively if we mistrusted and questioned everything. But the mental shortcuts we use to make sense of the world can work against us when we are being fed bad information. "Cognitive miserliness" – the rather mean-spirited term psychologists use for this – means we prefer to use as little mental effort as possible. We typically think of those who are older as being most vulnerable, and although it is a more nuanced picture than at first glance, there are factors that seem to impact on our seniors. Those who have acquired digital skills for utility later in life (contact with friends and family, online banking, etc.) are less likely to have been exposed to formal media literacy. Trust increases with age, and research has also shown older adults are more likely to believe online claims without verifying sources. The older generation has enthusiastically embraced social media, and are seven times more likely to share information without checking its veracity, and so – inadvertently – become part of the disinformation cycle (Skippage, 2020, p. 9).

In the field of traditional media, specifically in radio and television, disinformation has seemingly severely discredited news programs in the eyes of the viewers. According to data from a Reuters Institute's Digital News Report, less than 50% of respondents from around Europe trusted the news, a lower score than that of the previous year. However, television audiences and trust in television increased during the months of pandemic-related confinement, in particular with regard to television news programmes. This occurred despite the changes in the production of content and formats derived from the limited resources resulting from the restrictions. This boost, given by the pandemic to radio and television, has not, however, been enough to rebuild the credibility and stability of the audiences of the past (Rúas-Araújo et al., 2023, p. 2).

Also, here the role of media editors has to emphasised, which can sometimes be negative in the sense of their selective behaviour towards information, i.e., they can approve only the information they favour and think reliable and convenient for the audience should the editors so desire.

Conclusions

Disinformation seems to be one of the most serious challenges in the media space nowadays. Regardless of the social, economic or political circumstances, disinformation can cause serious problems and generate

a great deal of damage in each of the democratic states. This damage can be not only physical, but can also be of a spiritual nature. Bearing in mind all the experiences of and research by scientists, journalists, media experts, and other relevant factors, we can emphasise that the older population is more vulnerable to the disinformation which is presented in all types of media. This is due to the bigger confidence that older people have in the media compared with the younger population which is more fond of the additional exploration, researching, and checking of all available information, but also due to the fact that the younger generations are more skeptical towards information.

Institutions and organisations should create some mechanisms to defending themselves from misinformation, combining legal, social, and technical measures. It is likely that these mechanisms will not solve the problem, at least not completely, but it could be a good step forward in the process of creating a safe and confident media space.

We can conclude that in a globalised world full of different types of information and an enormous information flow on a daily basis, it is extremely difficult to control, filter, select, and disseminate only good and correct information. In any case, the "laissez faire" concept regarding information is not a good solution and all democratic states, along with international organisations, as well as business and non-governmental entities have to react and fight against disinformation continuously, thereby helping the citizens to receive real, correct, appropriate, and useful information.

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The Informational Influence of Russia and China in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans

Abstract
There is a notable presence of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese content in the informational space in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans. The following paper analyzes what are the main channels and narratives through which this content is spread in general, how this content has been altered or reinforced throughout the different crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and what is the public discourse regarding this influence. By collecting secondary data and identifying trends and patterns, the paper provides a qualitative and descriptive analysis of the research questions. The paper concludes that there is a steady growing trend in the presence of Russian and Chinese presence in the informational space in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans, with several main narratives present. It cannot be confirmed with certainty to what extent it influences the general public opinion, but it certainly needs to be further analyzed and comprehensively determined.

Keywords: Propaganda, Influence, Crisis, COVID-19, War in Ukraine, Pro-Russian, Pro-Chinese

Introduction

When it comes to the media presence of authoritarian countries and their propaganda in the Western Balkans and North Macedonia, it can be a significant level of sharing and distributing of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese media content.

Having considered their geopolitical position, countries of the Western Balkan countries have appeared to be at the frontline in Russia's multidimensional confrontation with the Western world. First of the many reasons for this situation are the obvious cultural, religious and historical ties of the Russian Federation with the Western Balkans, as opposed to its declining economic impact. For example, Russia, a longstanding friend of Serbia, "relies on the Serbian minorities settled in several states in the region to consolidate its influence" (Dopchie, 2022, p. 311). While NATO's presence in the region is progressing, the EU accession process remains on hold, creating a seemingly endless wait for the citizens of the region. This situation is deepening the void and opening opportunities for other influences. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine has compelled the countries in the region to adopt a specific stance toward Russia. Simultaneously, they are actively engaged in reinforcing the EU's efforts to expedite the accession process.

In these complex and multidimensional confrontations to gain influence and power, Russia has used and further mobilized the information and media space to share its narratives, thus protecting its interests mainly by slowing down the region's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Due to the region's significant geopolitical position, there is a noteworthy Chinese presence among the six Western Balkan countries. At first glance, this presence might be characterized as purely economic. However, it goes beyond that, with a focus on developing geo-economic and geopolitical influence in the broader Central and Eastern European (CEE) region. Despite the numerous conditions set by the EU, which is the primary economic and financial supporter of the region, China, particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative, positions itself as an investor that refrains from intervening in internal political affairs. Moreover, it appears willing to overlook certain aspects, such as corruption or violations of labour rights. In contrast to the conditionality of the European Union: "which is related to specific projects or domestic reforms, China's conditionality is related to the beneficiaries' activities, which may influence its relationship with China" (Krstinovska, 2022, p. 237). As an influential global policy factor, one of the main channels through which China is spreading its soft power in the WB region is the

media and informational space, subtly imposing its narratives and sharing its story in a manner that cannot be neglected.

The Main Channels That Disseminate Pro-Russian/Chinese Content

Pro-Russian content has been constantly present in several media in North Macedonia. However, in the last years, there has been a significant increase in the presence of this content in the online portals and on social media, particularly Twitter. As the PRESPA Institute's Impact and Image Observatory research found, at the top of the list of media that disseminate pro-Russian content are the portal and the daily newspaper Vecer, as well as the portals Kurir, Infomax and Local, i.e., Kanal 5 TV (Prespa Institute, 2022, p. 9). The Twitter channels through which Russian propaganda is shared are both the channels from the Russian officials, such as the Russian embassy to North Macedonia, but also some well-known pro-Russian journalists such as Milenko Nedelkovski.

In 2016, the Russia Beyond media service developed an RBTH daily as an internet portal as well as a mobile app in the Macedonian language, providing an opportunity to proliferate the pro-Russian narrative among the Macedonian population. The platform was created, as it says in the explanation, to spread Russian culture. When reviewing the content, almost every second or third article is about Russian President Vladimir Putin, his character and work, and there is also content from Russian cities and about Russian achievements.

For years, two networks of magazines, originating from Serbia, have been published on the Macedonian market through the publishing house "Color Media Plus". The most famous editions are "Russian Doctor" and "Russian Herbalist" of the publishing house "Novosti", which are distributed through direct export to Bosnia and Montenegro and/or through localized editions in North Macedonia, Croatia and Slovenia in the local languages. As has been analyzed, judging by the graphic design and the low price, their main target group is the older population, especially the retirees, who are at the same time important as a sound part of the electorate (Andonovski, 2020). These magazines' aim is to commercially exploit the positive perceptions of Russia and its culture that were already present in some of the Balkan populations, further contributing to reinforcing the propaganda positions of Putin's regime (Andonovski, 2020).

For example, in the January of 2020 issue of the Macedonian edition of "Russian Doctor":

the front page content was the "exclusive" article about "Putin's ten secrets to health". Proper nutrition and morning gymnastics are presented as "secrets" in this article, but sports such as skiing, hockey, horse riding and fishing are mentioned, which are largely beyond the financial reach of the target (retired) audience. The front page also introduces a "discovery" "straight from the Kremlin" that "Putin chooses traditional medicine", announcing an interview with Putin's personal doctor, Dr. Sergei Mironov, which, despite the headline, demonstrates a team of doctors that care for the Russian President by "developed medical-sports program". Presenting the 67-year-old Russian autocrat as a young, masculine and healthy athlete is one of the basic postulates of a propaganda narrative that presents him as a ruler with "extraordinary work ability and excellent performance", according to Mironov (Andonovski, 2020).

According to a 2021 survey by Globsec, the local Russian-owned International Slavic University radio station is the only example of open influence, but several interviewed experts pointed to TV Alfa and offNET as spreading pro-Kremlin, anti-Western narratives (Globsec, 2021).

When it comes to China, in North Macedonia, there is no direct presence of Chinese state media that would publish in the Macedonian language. The "white propaganda" is mostly directed through activities in domestic media and on social media (Krstinovska, 2020, p. 25). Chinese official positions are largely present in national media, where they are usually presented in a balanced way, by parallel presentation of the countering narratives. However, even in some traditional media, unclear contents have been detected. Such contents are significantly more present on internet portals, which share information without quoting the source and the name of the author, unlike foreign information services where the articles are usually signed, better developed and supported with arguments. The presence of "grey propaganda", which is more typical for social media, at present does not have the potential to lead to a change in public opinion and usually provokes positive reactions only among a marginal portion of social media users who are interested in conspiracy theories against the Western countries (Krstinovska, 2020, p. 25).

National television channels that tend to cover Chinese activities with minimal or no objective criticism favourably include Kanal 5 and Sitel. Similarly, the national information agency Makfax, along with the online portals Republika and Kurir, are observed to extensively share news related to China, predominantly supporting its global activities, especially during the pandemic.

The Main Narratives of Pro-Russian Disinformation in General and in the Context of the War in Ukraine

A study titled "Russian Narratives Towards the Western Balkans", published by the NATO Center of Excellence for Strategic Communications (STRATCOM), identifies several Russian narratives in the Western Balkans media. The research is based on media reports in 2018 citing the Serbian edition of the Russian state news agency Sputnik. The Sputnik website, which the Kremlin directly funds, is recognized as one of the main channels of Russian influence in the media space of the Western Balkans (Atlantic Council of Montenegro, 2020, p. 4).

Specifically, in North Macedonia, the two most commonly used narratives detected in the survey are "The Western Balkans is unstable" and "The countries of the Western Balkans are weak, incompetent and corrupt". The most rarely used narrative is that "the EU is hegemonic" (Vistinomer, 2022). The most frequently used sub-narratives in North Macedonia are "Creation of Greater Albania", "Intolerance between opposition parties", "North Macedonia is a captive state", "North Macedonia is a criminal state", "The referendum to change the name is invalid", "Russia is traditional a friend of Macedonia" (Vistinomer, 2022).

Since the start of the Ukrainian war, there has been a noticeably increased number of news and articles related to the cultural, traditional and religious connections of the Macedonians with the Russians. Although many of these articles are not new but were reposted months or even years ago, they are now used to increase the pro-Russian sentiment among the Macedonian population and, in some way, justify the Russian aggression on Ukraine. These articles often consisted of superficial information about the ties between the two countries and nations, avoiding deeper fact analysis and objective observation, thus aiming at enhancing a positive attitude toward Russia and all its activities worldwide through the prism of this country as a true friend and supporter of North Macedonia.

This is implied by the use of the terms "brotherly peoples" and "brotherly relations". These terms (which are contained in several texts, especially on social networks) promote and support the idea of a traditional connection between Russia and Macedonia, such as the news published by the portal rodina.org.mk titled "Greetings to the fraternal Russian people on the occasion of the Independence Day of Russia" (News Agency Meta, 2022).

The positive attitude towards Russia is further built by promoting Russia/Putin's alleged support for the Macedonian identity (again avoiding the explanation of whether it is a Slavic or an identity that originates from the ancient Macedonians). This is further spread in different (pictorial)

ways on social networks, emphasizing the importance and with a clear implication for those "others" who contribute to changing the name, language, and identity of Macedonia and the Macedonians (News Agency Meta, 2022).

Furthermore, this disinformation is enhanced by the narrative that Russia supports North Macedonia in the dispute with Bulgaria, as it supported the country in the dispute with Greece. The fact is that Russia supports Macedonian nationalism as it also supports Bulgarian. The former Bulgarian Prime Minister Kiril Petkov, in March 2022, announced that Russian spies were suspected of working against the historic reconciliation of North Macedonia and Bulgaria in the EU (Todorov, 2022). The Russian Embassy in North Macedonia on May 24, 2021, published a tweet with a congratulatory message to the Macedonian people for the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius, also sharing Putin's quote titled "Literacy came for the Macedonian land" (Twitter, 2021).

In contrast to this message, the Russian ambassador in Sofia, Eleonora Mitrofanova, in the video message, said that she congratulates the Day of St. Cyril and Methodius on the Bulgarian alphabet and Slavic literature because, undoubtedly, it is invaluable the role of Bulgaria in the formation and the spread of Slavic literacy, language and culture (Diplomatic spectrum, 2021).

There are some notably present pro-Russian narratives in Macedonian media since the beginning of the Ukrainian war. As it is expected, most of them are shared mainly through social media and online portals. Because of the most informal way of conveying information, views, and opinions, it is not easy to assess the level of impact they have on a wider circle of people. However, they are most certainly contributing to increasing the pro-Russian sentiment among the population.

At the beginning of the rise of tensions related to Ukraine, the media in the Republic of North Macedonia did not have too much analysis on the topic. It is interesting that in some of those that were made, there was more talk about what is bothering the Russians than about what worries the Western European countries (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2022). The next level was to develop a positive perception of Russia's military power and to accept their actions as desired. Sometimes, a positive perception is well packaged in a seemingly objective text. This impression is emphasized by the quiet admiration for Putin's tactics or "NATO disunity" and Western European countries, i.e. the "Western" disinterest in Ukraine, as well as by the one-sided portrayal of Russia as a victim (Metamorphosis Foundation, 2022).

There is also a significant presence of pro-Russian Serbian media that influence North Macedonia through several sources that are shared

originally or through Macedonian portals. One example is the Moscow-founded news portal and radio station Sputnik Serbia; it reaches large Serbian-speaking audiences in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, and it usually provides mixes neutral news with analysis aligned with pro-Kremlin interests (Presic, 2020). In most cases, Sputnik columns and analyses adopt an anti-EU instance – for example, a 2020 article argued that the Western Balkan countries would "never" join the EU. Another says that Western alliances are gradually "dissolving" due to discordance between its members (Presic, 2020). Furthermore, Russian state news agency Sputnik in its Serbian language edition on May 10, 2020. published an article entitled: "Ending the affairs with Kosovo, for NATO is a stepping stone towards Russia", which peripherally mentions North Macedonia, presenting several misinformation. More precisely, untruths were published about the alleged "division of North Macedonia for NATO", about the fact that "Zaev's government fell ingloriously", as well as about the ratings of the two largest parties in the Macedonian bloc – SDSM and VMRO-DPMNE (Vojnovska, 2020).

At the end of February 2022, one week after the beginning of the Russian military invasion of Ukraine, the Macedonian Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AVMU), on the recommendation of the government, instructed the cable operators to turn off the Russian news channels that are rebroadcast in North Macedonia. This applies exclusively to two Russian news channels, Russia Today and Sputnik, but not to other Russian channels, such as those broadcasting documentaries. However, after the providers removed the informative Russian state channels from the Macedonian television space, Russian propaganda continues to spread through Serbian television stations that are transmitted through Macedonian operators; recently, Macedonian Telecom included several new Serbian TV channels on its Max TV service (Jakimova, 2022).

There had been some media content produced and shared in Macedonia that connects Russian disinformation in relation to the Ukrainian war with other issues. For example, there had been disinformation shared through social networks, claiming that the coronavirus pandemic ended after the Russian Federation bombed laboratories in Ukraine (Facebook, 2022). This kind of disinformation tends to not only provide justification for Russian aggression but also undermine most of the already proven facts and data about the pandemic.

Main Narratives and Topics of Chinese Media Presence in General and in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Less notable but also significantly present is the pro-Chinese discourse in some of the media content shared in North Macedonia, which follows the world trend of creating and reinforcing a positive image of China as the new global force. According to the analysis of the association Estima, Chinese influence operations in North Macedonia are usually aimed at promotion of a positive perception on China as a strong and responsible global power, emphasis on positive stories and censorship of all the information considered unfavourable or harmful for the Chinese reputation, retroactive adjustment of the narratives, as well as dissemination of the Chinese positions and views on various topics (Krstinovska, 2020, p. 25). They mostly consist in spreading information published by Chinese media and official Chinese representatives, increased presence in traditional media of Chinese diplomatic representatives in the country, more intensive social media activity, promoting contents prepared by Chinese state televisions ("white propaganda"), and to a lesser extent unverified and speculative contents from unclear sources, half-truths and disinformation which support the Chinese narrative ("grey propaganda") (Krstinovska, 2020, p. 25).

Regarding the narratives related to COVID-19, pro-Chinese presence is spread through several of them. Although the initial information presented by the Chinese authorities does not raise doubt that the virus originated in Wuhan since China was confronted with the accusations of not having reported on time and of manipulating the numbers, the spread of uncertainty, open questions and speculations can be noticed, in order to raise doubt and initiate conspiracy theories (Krstinovska, 2020, p. 21). Further, there is the narrative of putting forward the Chinese success in handling the pandemic, in contrast to the Western countries (Ex: "The Chinese model is the most Successful" and "The Chinese vaccine will be a public good"), as well as the narrative demonstrating the Chinese solidarity and generosity. China used narratives related to COVID-19 "to discursively promote its narrative of the greatest and only reliable power, an ideology whose acceptance can only benefit the world's nations by applying soft power and playing the card of emotional concern for others in difficult times" (Ilik, Shapkoski, 2022, p. 104). The biggest share of the analyzed posts on this topic uses vague terminology, which usually hides the fact that the so-called assistance is frequently procurement of medical equipment and not donations - the fact that the long-awaited "donation" of ventilators from China to North Macedonia

was planned to be a procurement using EU's money is not put forward, nor is the link between the great global demand for medical equipment which brings significant profit to Chinese companies (Krstinovska, 2020, pp. 22–24).

When it comes to the Ukraine war, certain media content in North Macedonia tends to present China as the peace-promoting force, not interfering with the internal affairs of other countries, thus avoiding provoking conflicts, as opposed to the USA and NATO, whose interference is bringing and provoking war conflicts worldwide. These narratives are often backed up with statements by Chinese officials, such as the Chinese ambassador to North Macedonia and other officials.

The Public Discourse Regarding Russia and China in North Macedonia – Changes and Perspectives

According to a 2021 survey by Globsec, regarding the vulnerability of the countries of Central Europe and the Western Balkans to the influences from Russia and China, the Macedonian society is in the middle of the ladder. The general vulnerability index is 40 out of a possible hundred, while the vulnerability score focused on the information landscape is 45 (Globsec, 2021). While Chinese activities remain notably limited, Russian and pro-Kremlin influence is of greater significance. This survey showed that while a local Russian-owned International Slavic University radio station is the only example of open influence, several interviewed experts pointed to TV Alfa and offNET as spreading pro-Kremlin, anti-Western narratives (Globsec, 2021). The European Parliament has also raised concerns about the narratives shared in the country's foreign-owned media, particularly by a group of outlets controlled by Hungarian investors close to Viktor Orbán's administration. The official available data do not show a significant increase in the pro-Russian sentiment among Macedonian citizens in the period before and after the Ukrainian war.

Research conducted among citizens in North Macedonia between November and December 2021 by the International Republican Institute showed that on foreign policy, 64% of citizens of North Macedonia agree that strong relations best serve their interests with China, while 60% agree for Russia, which is an eleven-point increase for China and a six-point increase for Russia from a poll taken in February of 2020 (IRI, 2022). This research also shows strong support for the European Union (EU) and the United States. In total, 85% agree that the interests of North Macedonia are best served with strong relations with the EU, and 76% agree for the United States (IRI, 2022).

The PRESPA Institute's Image Observatory shows that there is no original pro-Russian sentiment among the citizens of the country. However, it is a mixture of factors that give the impression of authentic and complete orientation in support of Putin's aggression on Ukraine (Prespa Institute, 2022, p. 7). To the question "In general, which country or international alliance/union is the best friend of North Macedonia?", in the Image Observatory for 2020, only 4.4% of citizens chose Russia, while in 2022, this percentage was halved (Prespa Institute, 2022, p. 7).

However, it is very difficult to determine the true impact that pro-Russian disinformation has on the general public. However, the fact is that they can have significantly harmful consequences in times of crisis and especially in conditions of growing dissatisfaction in the country from the (non)support it receives in the European integration processes.

Conclusions

The dominant trend of Russian and Chinese presence in the media and informational space in North Macedonia and the Western Balkans can be graded as either steady or growing in different times during the last years, but it is certainly notable and influential. Using a wide variety of channels, such as traditional media (television, newspapers) but also online media and social networks, both Russia and China are spreading their story in the context of increasing their presence and power, thus supporting their geopolitical influence in the region. What the recent crisis, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, have in common regarding this matter is that although they had the potential of undermining the image of these two (the COVID-19 pandemic originated in China as a threat to China's image worldwide and the war in Ukraine as a result of the Russian aggression to the sovereignty of an independent country as a threat to the worldwide security), were also used to share propaganda and represent Russia as a powerful force and China as a friend and supporter of the countries in the region, as opposed to NATO and EU. Certainly, the postponing of the EU accession, particularly of North Macedonia, but also other WB countries, left a significant space for other influences to interfere and the informational propaganda used to increase Russian and Chinese presence in the region.

There are different and opposite trends among various analyses regarding the general public perception toward Russia and China showing an increase or decrease in the sentiment of the citizens in the period 2020–2022, none of them showing directly to what extent informational propaganda contributed to that results. It can be concluded that the

general public perception is a very changing and difficult-to-measure phenomenon, which should be further analyzed, particularly in relation to certain variables such as propaganda and disinformation.

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The Recognition of the Autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the Problem of Russian Interference and Disinformation in the Macedonian Public Space After the Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

Abstract
In this article, the author would like to describe the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a key element of Macedonian national identity, and would also like to examine the problem of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, its relationship with other orthodox churches, and Russia's role in this process after its aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The aim of this article is to show the importance of an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church with regard to Macedonian national identity and the recognition of its independence by other orthodox churches. This article focuses attention on the impact of Russia's aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 as regards the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In addition, it stresses the problem of Russian propaganda and disinformation in the Macedonian public space and the Macedonian authorities' reaction. The comparative method, based on a content analysis of media information, was used to describe the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Keywords: Identity, Disinformation, Orthodox Church, Autocephaly

Introduction

The issue of Macedonian national identity and the Macedonian case is highly significant in the context of the situation in the Balkans where identity issues are related with many conflicts and tensions. A special example is the so-called "Macedonian question" and the problem of the national identity of Macedonians which, as scientific research indicates, is inextricably linked to the question of faith and the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC) (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000, pp. 282–287; Sokołowski, 2022).

The research problem in this article refers to the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and the problem of Russian interference and disinformation in the Macedonian public space. The methodology is based on empirical qualitative research on Macedonian national identity with the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a key element of Macedonian identity. The comparative method was used to describe the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church before and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 based on a content analysis of media information.

In this article, the author would also like to examine problem of the autocephaly of Macedonian Orthodox Church, its relation with other orthodox churches, and Russia's role in this process after its aggression against Ukraine in 2022. The aim of this article is to show the importance of an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church for Macedonian national identity and the recognition of its independence by other orthodox churches. This article focuses attention on the impact of Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022 as regards the position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. In addition, the author would like to stress the problem of Russian propaganda and disinformation in the Macedonian public space and the reaction of the Macedonian authorities to such Russian efforts. Finally, the author shall focus on the problem of the recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate along with the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church.

Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991 after a referendum which took place on 8th September 1991. It has to be noted that the Macedonian parliament changed the constitutional name of the country to North Macedonia in February 2019 after the signing of an agreement between the Macedonian and Greek authorities in June 2018 in Nivici (Psarades) near Lake Prespa. Macedonian citizens did not support this decision and boycotted the referendum which took place on September 30th, 2018.

Macedonia is a small, landlocked country but which finds itself strategically located in the heart of Balkan peninsula in the Vardar River valley. It's a multi-ethnic country with a Macedonian-peopled majority and a huge Albanian minority. It is also a multi-religious country, with the majority of citizens (66%) being orthodox Christians, most of them Macedonians but with small groups of Serbs (1.78%) and Vlachs (0.04%). 33% are Muslim, most of whom are Albanians (25%), along with Turks (3.85%), Roma (2.66%), and Bosniaks (0.84%). A census from 2002 shows that Macedonians make up 64% of the population, with Albanians making up 25% (Sokołowski, 2018, p. 210). The next census in 2022 was, however, partly boycotted by the population, therefore, its results are less reliable (Marusic, 2022a). According to the Republic Commission for Relations with Religious Communities, Orthodox Christians make up 66.3% of the total population (or 1,310,184 inhabitants) and Muslims make up 30% (or 674,015 inhabitants) of the population (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 103; Sokołowski, 2015, p. 247; Babić, 2014, p. 388).

Macedonian National Identity

Before presenting the problem of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the author would like to discuss the case of Macedonian national identity and the situation of Macedonians in the context of relations in the Balkans. One of the fundamental questions concerns a dispute with neighbouring countries over the national identity of Macedonians. This conflict is related to several issues which include a dispute between Macedonians, Greeks, and Bulgarians over the history of Macedonia and Macedonian national identity; the Macedonians' right to have their own separate history; and their national identity being questioned, in the sense that a dispute between Macedonia and Bulgaria is ongoing over the Macedonian language and the name of the language. Bulgarian authorities do not recognise Macedonian as a separate language and consider it to be a Bulgarian dialect. The right to use the word "Macedonian" in the official names of state institutions is questioned by the Greeks. The right to use terms such as "Macedonian culture" and "Macedonian art" is also being questioned.

Since the 19th century, specifically during the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the neighbours of the Macedonians, i.e., the Greeks, Bulgarians, and Serbs believed that Macedonians belong to their nations: "the doctrine of the Greek state was that this population should be brought back, or should stay under the jurisdiction of the Patriarchy, under the explanation that they were *Greeks who had forgotten their Greek language and origin*, while

the similarity with the Bulgarian and Serbian language served as a perfect soil for the birth of a doctrine that referred to the Macedonian language as the so-called *dialect of the Bulgarian language with respect to the Serbian language*" (Gjorgiev, Pandevska, 2014, pp. 67–68). In this situation: "the one that gained the right to operate the church or a school was considered to have the right to label their believers as their *national* members" (Gjorgiev, Pandevska, 2014, p. 68). The author's research has shown that the essential elements of Macedonian national identity are a separate language, religion, history, national heroes, and state and religious holidays such as Christmas or Easter. Language, apart from religion, is one of the most important attributes of Macedonian national identity and independence. Research conducted among students from Macedonian universities confirmed that respondents emphasised the role of language and mentioned Saints Cyril and Methodius, who, in the 9th century, translated the Holy Bible into the language of Macedonian Slavs, as some of the most important national heroes. An independent Orthodox Church is also an important element of Macedonian identity (Sokołowski, 2022).

From a historical point of view, neighbouring countries more than a hundred years ago "had hidden their territorial-expansionist political practice behind the exclusivist national rhetoric that everywhere had the same wording: *liberation of our Christian brothers*. Using the territoriality paradigm in all three national projects (Serbian, Greek, and Bulgarian), one territorial constant is evident: Macedonia" (Mitrova, 2014, p. 53). At the beginning of the 20th century, Macedonian authors, including Krste Petkov Misirkov, pointed out that the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Saints Cyril and Methodius, as well as Saints Clement and Naum, were hugely important factors of Macedonian tradition, history, and national identity (Sujecka, 2013, p. 166).

Macedonian Orthodox Church as One of the Key Factors of Macedonian National Identity

During the Second World War, the idea of creating an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church emerged in the minds of Macedonians. At the first meeting of the ASNOM (*Antifasicticko Sobranie za Nacionalna Obnova na Makedonija*) on 2nd August 1944 in Prohor Pcinski Monastery, a discussion was held concerning the future of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 104). This question was in dispute among the Macedonian political elites in new People's Republic of Macedonia after the war in 1945. Speaker of the Parliament Metodij Andonov Cento presented the position that the republic should have an independent national church separated from the Serbian Church

(Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 104). During the first congress of Macedonian Orthodox Church, he said, "the Macedonian nation has a full historical right to its autocephalous church" (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 104). He belongs to a group of supporters of the independence of the MOC called the Kephalists, with a second group of supporters of MOC autonomy within the Serbian Orthodox Church being called Autonomists who were represented by Chairman of the Communist Party in Macedonia Lazar Kolisevski (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 104).

The Macedonian Orthodox Church was founded in Ohrid between October 4th–6th, 1958, during a meeting which established three eparchies. The Archbishop of Ohrid and Macedonian Metropolitan Dositej Toplicki became the leader of the church. It was then that the Macedonian Orthodox Church received autonomy within the Serbian Orthodox Church (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 105).

However, the idea of an independent church in Macedonia emerged once again. In 1967 in Ohrid, the Macedonian Orthodox Church self-proclaimed autocephaly and independence from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The definition of "autocephaly" is that of a separate, internal system of the local church, independence of the church hierarchy in a country from the hierarchy in another country, as well as the existence of separate legislation. An autocephalous church does not break canonical connections with other churches; they form the universal Orthodox Church. Importantly, it recognises the honorary priority of the Constantinople Ecumenical Patriarch (Jakubowski, Włodarczyk, 2018, p. 336). This declaration was of great importance for the national identity of Macedonians. The reconstruction and renovation of religious buildings of Macedonian Orthodox Church became a very important task. Under Turkish rule, many of them had been either converted into mosques or devastated or even destroyed (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 105).

The establishment of an independent Macedonian Orthodox Church had an impact on increased interest in the orthodox past among Macedonian citizens. This is evident by certain cultural phenomena in the field of culture characterised in the 1980s. As S.P. Ramet once said, "Macedonia is (…) interesting, having given birth to (…) "Byzantine rock" (…). Goran Trajkovski (…) a musical figure in the independent multimedia cultural group Aporea (…) explained (…): Everything in Macedonia is connected with Orthodoxy, and Orthodoxy is very much the legacy of Byzantium. The church was the chief civilizing force here for hundreds of years. So, our religion always connects us with our past (…). Our ideas in Aporea, our work, our music, are all derived from the Orthodoxy" (Ramet, 1996, p. 101).

After the establishment of the independent Republic of Macedonia in 1991, the Greek Orthodox Church actively joined the Greek states' policy of prohibiting the use of the word Macedonia in the name of its neighbour. On June 2nd, 1992, The Holy Synod of the Greek Orthodox Church decided to "unanimously send [an] appeal to the whole honoured Greek population for national urgency, unison, and combativeness" (Ljorovski Vamvakovski, 2009, p. 170). Moreover, a huge protest took place in Thessaloniki on February 15th, 1994, organised by the Metropolitan of Thessaloniki Pataleimon due to the recognition of the Republic of Macedonia by the USA. The main slogan was "Let's get [some] guns!" (Ljorovski Vamvakovski, 2009, p. 169).

In 2001, amidst utterly difficult times for both Macedonia and the Macedonian Orthodox Church, armed conflict broke out in Macedonia (Wojnicki, 2003, p. 58), as triggered by the Albanian UCK (National Liberation Army) (Trifunovic, Michaletos, 2015, p. 291). During the fighting, several orthodox churches were either devastated or completely destroyed (Sokołowski, 2015, p. 212). At this time, the Serbian Orthodox Church proposed a return to the autonomy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church within its Serbian counterpart. As a result, the Nis Agreement was signed in 2002 between the Serbian Orthodox Church and three Metropolitans from the Macedonian Orthodox Church, among them Metropolitan Jovan Vraniskovski (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 106).

In Macedonia, this agreement led to fierce social protests supported by state authorities. The Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church did not ratify the Nis Agreement. Metropolitan Jovan was deprived of his ecclesiastical dignities, while the Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church appointed him Serbian Exarch in Macedonia. There were suggestions in the Nis Agreement to remove the word Macedonian from the name of the Macedonian Orthodox Church (Stawowy-Kawka, 2005, p. 106).

The following are the words of a Macedonian researcher, thirty years after Macedonian independence: "Today's Bulgarian and Greek negation of the Macedonian identity, nation, and minority as well as the similar position (…) of the Serbian orthodox church, keep alive the Macedonian question" (Mitrova, 2002, p. 57).

The Division and Schism Between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate

The conflict between orthodox churches in the Balkans was superimposed by the conflict in the entire Orthodox world between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow. In 2016,

the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church was held in Crete under the leadership of the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Council was not recognised by the Moscow Patriarchate nor was it recognised by the Patriarchate of Antioch (Jakubowski, Włodarczyk, 2018, p. 340).

The conflict between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow become even more intense after the Patriarchate of Constantinople recognised the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church in 2018 (Roth, Sherwood, 2018). After this decision, the Russian Orthodox Church severed ties with Patriarchate of Constantinople. The Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church Hilarion said that "until it happens, until all these illegal decisions made by Constantinople are in force, we won't be able to communicate with the church which today finds itself in the midst of a schism" (Roth, Sherwood, 2018).

According to the Russian Orthodox Church, there was a schism between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. What is more, the Russian Orthodox Church followers were prohibited from participating in the sacraments of baptism or marriage in churches around the world that were under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate (MacFarquhar, 2018).

The decision on autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church would result in a significant decline in the number of the Russian Orthodox Church's believers, bearing in mind that the number of believers according to the Russian Orthodox Church is an important argument for leadership in the Orthodox world (Stroop, 2018).

The Situation of the Macedonian Orthodox Church After the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople decided to take action to regulate the status of the Macedonian Orthodox Church. On May 8th, 2022, the Patriarch of Constantinople announced that he "is in full communion with (…) the unrecognised Macedonian Orthodox Church" (Tanner, 2022). The Macedonian Orthodox Church has been out of communion with orthodox world since 1967 when the Macedonian Church declared autocephaly from the Serbian Orthodox Church. The Patriarchate of Constantinople accepted clergy and hierarchy of the MOC along with a laity of the Macedonian Orthodox Church into communion. The Patriarchate accept MOC under the name "Archbishopric of Ohrid" but with canonical territory limited to the state borders. It has to be mentioned that the Macedonian Orthodox Church has dioceses among the Macedonian

diaspora in Europe, Australia, and both the USA and Canada (Marusic, 2022b).

On 22nd May 2022, the Serbian Orthodox Church recognised the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church in Skopje. During the Divine Liturgy in the cathedral in Skopje, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church announced, "Mostly thanks to your prayers, brothers and sisters, and thanks to the prayers of all the Saints, we established unity (…) And now we bring you more (…) good news – that the Holy Synod of the Serbian Orthodox Church has unanimously met the pleas of the Macedonian Orthodox Church and has accepted and recognised its autocephaly" (Marusic, 2022c).

Russian Interference, Disinformation, and the Position of the Macedonian Orthodox Church

Due to the conflict between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the Patriarchate of Moscow, the problem of competition for influence in the Macedonian Orthodox Church and among Macedonians arose. The Russian authorities, acting together with representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, have strengthened their propaganda message combined with the disinformation.

The Macedonian citizens' organisation MOST prepared a report on Russian interference and Russian disinformation among Macedonians after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As a representative of the organisation expressed, "the media must be aware that words are weapons in the Kremlin's hands to spread disinformation" (Aleksoska, 2023). MOST published a report entitled "Fighting False Narratives – One Year after Russian Aggression on Ukraine" in which it analysed Russian propaganda and disinformation in the Macedonian online space, narratives, and sources along with the language of this propaganda and disinformation in the period from March 2022 until February 2023. In this report, MOST confirmed that there is massive presence of Kremlin representatives in the Macedonian online space.

Russian propaganda covers five main topics: (1) justifying Russian aggression, (2) war in Yugoslavia, (3) sanctions on Russia, (4) the West seeking to destroy Russia, and a fifth topic in which Russian propaganda tried to evoke emotions by referring to Slavic/Orthodox brotherhood (Aleksoska, Aleksov, 2023, p. 5). It is worth mentioning that Russia was attacking and bombing Orthodox Slavic Ukraine and killing its population while disseminating its pro Slavic/Orthodox narrative.

For the first six months, Russian propaganda in the Macedonian public space was conveying the information that Ukraine was losing the war, and during the following six months the propaganda was focused not on war but on religious disinformation. Russia was promoting *strong, friendly, and brotherly* Russian-Macedonian relations, with the Orthodox Church and Orthodoxy, as the main foundations of these relations as well as emphasising the role of the narrative about Slavic/Orthodox *brotherhood*. An analysis of Russian embassy information as posted on Facebook is also significant. Information put forth by S. Lavrov, the Head of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that the USA is an opponent of Orthodoxy, was one of the five most popular topics among users (Aleksoska, Aleksov, 2023, p. 34). It should be emphasised again that this took place at the time when Russia was committing aggression against a European country whose inhabitants were Slavs and Orthodox believers.

Russian propaganda and activity were met with a decisive response from the Macedonian authorities. In March 2022, just after the Russian invasion in Ukraine, five Russian diplomats were expelled from the Macedonian territory (Simonovska, 2023). In September 2023, another three Russian diplomats were expelled from the country and a Russian priest – Archimandrite Vasian (Zmeev) was banned from entering the Macedonian territory, having been identified as one who supported blocking the recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church as an autocephalous church (Damceska, 2023).

According to information from the Macedonian media, Vasian (Zmeev) coordinated the diplomatic policy of the Macedonian Orthodox Church throughout the year and his actions led to the absolute blocking of relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople regarding the recognition of the autocephaly for the Macedonian Orthodox Church (Nikolov, 2023). Archimandrite Vasian was the representative of the Russian Orthodox Church in Sofia, Bulgaria. Macedonian media also reported that Vasian visited Skopje every month. In June 2023, Vasjan visited Metropolitan Grigoryi of Osogovo-Kumanovo, accompanied by the Russian ambassador in Skopje (Nikolov, 2023). Macedonian authorities announced that they have received information that one of the representatives of the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church was working for the Russian secret services without naming him directly (Dimoski, 2023). This could have been one of the arguments in favour of the actions taken by the Macedonian authorities against Vasjan.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to show the importance of the Orthodox Church with regard to the Macedonian national identity, as well as the principal concern of establishing relations with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the recognising of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The year 2022 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine turned out to be crucial for relations between orthodox churches. Just a few months after the invasion began, relations were established between the Macedonian Church and the Patriarchate in Constantinople, and the Serbian Orthodox Church recognised autocephaly of the Macedonian Church. After this recognition, a significant increase in Russian disinformation dissemination among Macedonians was noticed.

When answering the question about the involvement of the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in Macedonia, it should be considered that the Ecumenical Patriarchate has maintained good relations with the Catholic Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople pursued a policy of dialogue with Catholics and, as researchers point out, the Macedonian Church has developed friendly relations with the Catholic Church (Zenderowski, 2012, pp. 179–180).

The recognition of the autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate has had a significant impact on the activity of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Balkans. Moreover, the recognition of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the recognition of the autocephaly of the Macedonian Orthodox Church by the Serbian Orthodox Church resulted in the Russian Orthodox Church undertaking activities in an attempt to ensure the isolation the Macedonian Orthodox Church from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. This led not only to the expulsion of Russian diplomats, but also the sanctioning of Vasian, a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church by the Macedonian authorities. The mentioned issue was related to the competition for primacy in the Orthodox world where the Ecumenical Patriarch is first among equals, and which was intensified even more after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As a result, tensions arose which led to the recognition and strengthening of the Macedonian Orthodox Church as a key factor of Macedonian national identity.

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Strengthening Resilience Against Deepfakes as Disinformation Threats

Abstract
This chapter looks into the loose definition of deepfakes and, in response to the inherently negative context, the authors provide evidence of the positive uses and benefits of the technology used to create deepfakes. In addition, and for balance, the authors also highlight the inherent threats concerning deepfakes along with the technology's possible employment in criminal activity. To get a better understanding of deepfakes, this chapter also looks at the websites and apps dedicated to deepfake creation and identifies the currently available state-of-the-art, open-source tools. Furthermore, it includes information about the creation of a deepfake video by actually creating one. The main aim and contribution of this paper is to strengthen resilience against deepfakes by highlighting the different factors, the associated regulations and legislation in the EU, and the regulatory situation in North Macedonia. At its conclusion, the chapter provides recommendations on how the general public can identify a deepfake video.

Keywords: Deepfake, Disinformation, Threats, Resilience

Introduction

Deepfakes, or AI-generated synthetic media capable of seamlessly altering or creating content, pose a formidable challenge to the authenticity of information and the integrity of public discourse. As these technological marvels evolve, so do the threats they pose to society. It is estimated that 500,000 video and voice deepfakes will be shared on social media sites globally in 2023 alone (Ulmer, Tong, 2023).

There are myriad possible forms of disinformation based on deepfake technologies. Firstly, deepfakes can take the form of convincing misinformation. Fiction may become indistinguishable from fact to an ordinary citizen when confronted with a deepfake video or voice. Secondly, disinformation may be complemented with deepfake materials to increase its misleading potential. Thirdly, deepfakes can be used in combination with political micro-targeting techniques. Such targeted deepfake work can be highly impactful, especially as regards so-called "micro-targeting", an advertising method that allows deepfake producers to send customised deepfakes that strongly resonate with a specific audience. Looking into recent developments in politics and media, the problem of disinformation reveals a very complex challenge. Deepfakes can be considered in the wider context of digital disinformation, alternative facts, and changes in journalism (Van Huijstee et al., 2021). Deepfakes may also exacerbate social divisions, civil unrest, panic and conflicts, and undermine public safety and national security. In the worst case scenario, this could cause violent conflicts, attacks on politicians, governance breakdown, or threats to international relations (Chesney, Citron, 2018).

As we all confront the challenges posed by deepfakes, it becomes paramount to forge a collective understanding and commitment to fortify our defenses. By fostering resilience and proactive measures, we aspire to safeguard the foundations of truth, trust, and informed decision-making in an age where reality is increasingly shaped by the algorithms of synthetic media.

In this chapter, the authors will look at the definitions of what deepfakes are and also at the negative context usually associated with them, but point out that the technology used for creating deepfakes can serve positive purposes. The available websites and apps for creating deepfakes will be looked at as well as the open source tools and their advantages. To understand the creation process, the authors will create a deepfake and provide their understanding of how ordinary members of the public can learn to identify a deepfake video when they see one.

Definition, Context, and Usage

On a technological level, deepfakes use deep learning as part of AI and enable face swapping with a combination of facial expressions. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a deepfake is "an image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Since the term "deepfake" is loosely defined, there is research on the holistic multidisciplinary definition of deepfakes (Whittaker et al., 2023), a comprehensive overview of deepfakes covering multiple important aspects of different definitions (Altuncu, Virginia, Li, 2022) as well as the need for a more concrete definition (Cochran, Napshin, 2021).

In a research paper entitled, "Tackling Deepfakes in European Policy" (Van Huijstee, et al., 2021) deepfakes are defined as manipulated or synthetic audio or visual media that seem authentic, and which feature people who appear to say or do something they have never said or done, and which are produced using artificial intelligence techniques, including machine learning and deep learning. Deepfakes are most accurately perceived as a subset within the broader classification of AI-generated "synthetic media", including video and audio, photos, and text.

Benefits and Positive Uses of Deepfake Technology

Just by looking at the definition, one can easily garner the negative context around the term, but the technology behind it also has positive potential. There are many available tools that can be used by the public where face swapping is performed with humorous intent, and when friends share the results of their deepfake creations with each other, or where people can swap movie actors' faces for other famous faces, etc. In a more serious manner, the technology can be used in the news anchoring process by using digital twin avatars that would be able to present the news 24/7. It can also be used in movie production in the reduction of the number of retakes, to age or (more usually) de-age actors, and also to break language barriers and allow for more realistic local content. Within the gaming industry, instead of voice actors, game development studios can combine deepfake tech with text-to-speech technologies to achieve multiple outcomes in a single game. In the advertising realm, it can reduce marketing expenses. This technology can also have multiple uses in the education process and address the need for more modern education. For example, historical figures can be used in order to give a better picture of their actions and speeches.

Those who have utilised contemporary smartphones for photography likely have encountered advantages stemming from fundamental deepfake technologies. Frequently, camera applications come with so-called "beauty filters" that automatically alter images to make the subjects look more attractive. More sophisticated deepfakes, involving complete face swaps or speech modifications, can also be created legally, serving purposes such as delivering critical commentary, creating satire and parodies, or simply entertaining an audience. There are evident opportunities for constructive applications of deepfakes in areas such as audio-visual productions, interactions between humans and machines, video conferencing, satire, personal artistic expression, and medical treatment or research.

Deepfake Threats and Criminal Activities

Within the negative context of the aforementioned definition, there are multiple threats that can be initiated, amplified, or combined with deepfakes.

Some of the threats of deepfakes are:

- Deepfakes being used for disinformation;
- The potential for individual defamation through the creation of videos of a victim saying things he/she has never said;
- Identity theft;
- Deepfakes being used for scams whereby the faces of celebrities or popular personas are used to promote products or services;
- AI generated or manipulated content that can affect or change political discourse.

Only a few days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a deepfake video of President Zelensky appeared wherein the president appeared to announce his surrender and asks the Ukraine forces to lay down their weapons (Simonite, 2022). In this case, it was obvious that Ukraine had both foreseen and prepared a strategy against this type of attack, and official channels rubbished the deepfake video within minutes of its release. There was also a deepfake video of President Putin in which he declared martial law and called for general mobilisation. This video was broadcast on several Russian radio and television networks (Sonne, 2023).

Deepfake videos can pose a significant threat when combined with other forms of criminal acts. The case of Indian investigative journalist Rana Ayyub serves as a good example, in which an attack on her first started with the creation of fake social media profiles. A deepfake was then created where her face was depicted in a pornographic video. That video was initially shared on social messaging apps such as WhatsApp,

but the largest magnitude of viral activity occurred when a Facebook fan page of India's Bharatiya Janata political party shared the video which resulted in over 40,000 additional shares. The last vector of attack came in the form of Ayyub being doxed, i.e., both her phone number and address were made publicly available (Ayyub, 2018).

Bearing in mind the last example, we come to a situation where the dangers of this type of content are really emphasised. In various countries, video footage may be considered a form of evidence, but the authority and integrity are usually greater when the videos come from video surveillance systems. Like any system, a surveillance system can be a target for a cyberattack, so the danger of deepfakes being inserted into surveillance systems and portraying an innocent person committing a crime can be one of the biggest threats to individuals.

Cyber-based violence represents another form of abuse of women and girls, which is embedded in the gendered social structure and power relations. "The violent acts taking place through technology are an integral part of the same violence that women and girls experience in the physical world, for reasons related to their gender" (GREVIO, 2021).

Technology-facilitated abuse is used as a tool to silence individuals, and also to limit the freedom of speech and human rights advocacy. In most cases, women who are in public and political roles are targeted by campaigns of disinformation, with an intent to discredit, humiliate, intimidate, and silence them in public life (DCAF, 2021, p. 9). Women who are high public figures are often victimised online (Al-Nasrawi, 2021). Powell and Henry (2017) frame sexual violence in cyberspace as "technology-facilitated sexual violence" and define it as an act where information and communication technology are used "to facilitate or extend sexual and gender-based harm to victims" (Powell, Henry, 2017, p. 205). Such terms and definitions give a broader understanding of gender-based violence in the digital space. It is a concept that refers to criminal, civil, or any other type of harmful sexually aggressive, and harassing behaviour being committed with aid or use of technology (Powell, Henry, 2017). Sadly, most of the deepfake content uploaded on the Internet is used for non-consensual pornography, with 98% of all deepfake videos online being pornographic content, of which 99% are women (www.homesecurityheroes.com, n.d.).

Deepfake Software

There are multiple types of software that can be used to create a deepfake, such as DeepSwap, Facemagick, SwapStram, Reface, FaceApp, and Faceswapper among others. Some of these are available as websites,

whereas some are available as iOS and/or Android apps. These websites and apps are mostly used for fun, entertainment, or satirical purposes and charge end users a fee in the form of credits or tokens for more options, datasets, and advanced AI manipulation. Although the end results are to the expected level for their purpose, more realistic and convincing deepfakes are created with open-source tools. Open-source software allows for anyone to view the code, understand how the tools work, and discover any vulnerabilities. Advanced users can edit the code, make modifications, and bug fix. There is also the cost aspect; apps and websites usually charge the end users, whereas open-source tools are free of charge. These aspects are complemented by the community of the open source projects helping other users. The two most popular software used to create deepfakes are Faceswap and DeepFaceLab. Both are Python-based and use deep learning frameworks. They are open source and available with a GPL 3.0 license. GitHub stats such as the number of "stars" (project attributes), the number of people watching, as well and the number of "forks" (new repositories which share code and visibility settings with the original upstream repository) prove these are the most popular deepfaking tools available at the moment. Although there are projects such as DeepFaceLive, from the same developer as DeepFaceLab, Facefusion, SimSwap, and others, Faceswap and DeepFaceLab are far more powerful and have larger communities. These tools come with training processes on multiple images that, most of the time, are extracted from a source and a target video.

Creating a Deepfake

To develop a deeper knowledge of how deepfake videos are made, the authors looked for a tool with set criteria to use, i.e., an open-source tool that can be used with as little expertise as possible. Faceswap and DeepFaceLab, although powerful, have a steep learning curve, so the authors chose another open-source tool called "roop". They used a video where a Prof. Ilijevski gave an interview for the Voice of America (BOA, 2020). From the 720p video, with a total length of 3:31 min, a 33-second portion was clipped. This video was set as a target, and for a source, the authors cropped the head from a photo of Prof. Nenovski. The source image had a resolution of 215 x 241 pixels.

Deepfake creation can be local, i.e., on a creator's PC, or created in the cloud. In the authors' case, they created their video in the cloud and the entire processing took just under 14 minutes. Below we can see a screenshot of the final video.

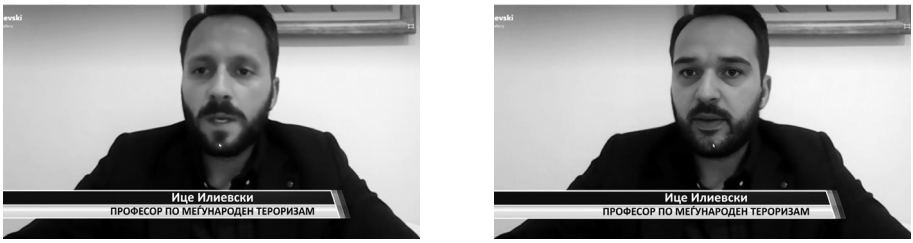

Image 1. Screenshot from the original video (left); and the deepfaked version (right)

From the obtained result, one can see that the final result is a fairly realistic video. In a direct comparison, the authors noticed a greater number of face details in the deepfake video compared to the original video. Here, we have to keep in mind that the authors had access to both the original and the deepfake video for comparison, and in most cases, the public would view the manipulated video without reference to the original video. In the process of manipulating their video, the authors changed the facial features from the forehead to the chin. They did not alter the audio, although that is possible with the aid of additional AI voice manipulation or a provided target video.

If, as demonstrated, and within a brief timeframe and with restricted resources, the authors can achieve significant outcomes using only a single image as the source, it raises well-founded concerns about the influence of powerful disinformation centres. These hubs possess substantial resources, including hardware, software, expertise, and human resources, which amplifies the potential for widespread disinformation and creates a basis for apprehension.

Strengthening Resilience Against Deepfakes

Strengthening resilience against the pervasive threat of deepfakes demands a comprehensive strategy that spans technological, legislative, and societal dimensions. The authors believe there are four pillars for strengthening resilience against deepfakes. These are: raising public awareness; building, implementing, and using better recognition tools; the media and social media company policies; and the government's regulation and legal framework. These pillars are all interconnected because higher levels of awareness can lead to better recognition tools and vice versa. Recognition tools can be created by different entities but the tools created by media and social media companies can have the best vertical integration with their products. Those companies can be

stimulated or pressed with better government acts, bills, and laws which would again lead to better tools and raise public awareness. Better public awareness can be achieved with educational campaigns, more media coverage, workshops, and public service announcements. Bearing in mind the difference in demographic, social, and cultural factors, this process has to be implemented with various media channels, social platforms, and techniques to reach a wide spectrum of target audiences.

Robust legal frameworks are imperative; ones which outline clear responsibilities and consequences for those involved in the malicious creation or dissemination of deepfakes. Collaboration at the international and industry levels is essential, fostering information sharing, research, and the development of innovative countermeasures. Continuous research and innovation, along with user empowerment through controls and transparency, round out the multifaceted approach required to fortify society against the insidious influence of deepfakes.

Regulation and Legislation in the European Union

Since deepfakes can be used as a vehicle for disinformation, the legal framework related to disinformation is also relevant in this context. The creation of a deepfake typically involves the use of personal data, and a deepfake that depicts a natural person can be considered personal data since it relates to an identified or identifiable natural person. Personal data may only be processed under certain conditions since every individual has the right to privacy and data protection. The general rules for processing personal data are laid down in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Intersoft Consulting, 2013). The GDPR provides that the processing of personal data always requires a legal basis, and also provides significant directives for addressing illicit deepfake content and grants individuals the right to rectify inaccurate information or have it removed. In each Member State, there exists at least one autonomous supervisory authority tasked with ensuring and enforcing compliance with the established rules and regulations.

In 2018, the European Commission introduced the principles of its strategy to counter disinformation. This strategy encompassed a range of coordinated initiatives across various domains, including enhancing media literacy, bolstering support for high-quality journalism, improving transparency and accountability in online platforms, and safeguarding the online privacy and personal data of citizens. One of the key instruments of the European approach to tackling disinformation online is the Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022a). The Code

was initially set up as a form of self-regulation for the leading online platforms, advertisers, and advertising industry that have committed to: 1) improving the scrutiny of advertisement placements to reduce revenues of the purveyors of disinformation; 2) ensuring transparency with regard to political and issue-based advertising by identifying sponsors and amounts spent; 3) marking automated accounts (bots); 4) empowering users through the promotion of media literacy and providing greater visibility of trustworthy content; and 5) enabling the academic research community to access platform data so that it can track disinformation online and understand its impact.

The 2022 Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation (European Commission, 2022a) builds on the pioneering 2018 Code while setting more ambitious commitments and measures aimed at countering online disinformation. The latest Code assembles a broader array of participants than before, enabling them to play a role in comprehensive enhancements by committing to specific obligations pertinent to their respective domains. These commitments encompass measures such as preventing the spread of disinformation, ensuring transparency in political advertising, fostering collaboration with fact-checkers, and facilitating researchers' access to data.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) (European Commission, 2022b), a landmark regulation for the protection of rights in the digital environment, entered into force on 16th November, 2022, and will be directly applicable across the EU from mid-February of 2024. As regards the obligations for very large online platforms and very large online search engines, the DSA starts applying even earlier. The Act contains a set of rules requiring tech companies to properly assess and mitigate the harm their products may cause, as well as to make such assessments and harm mitigation measures available for scrutiny by independent auditors and researchers. As the DSA pertains to content on social media platforms, its relevance extends to the distribution of deepfakes.

Near-simultaneously with the unveiling of the Digital Services Act proposal, the European Commission introduced the European Democracy Action Plan (EDAP) (European Commission, 2021) in December 2020. This Action Plan aims to enhance the resilience of democratic societies within the EU by: 1) promoting free and fair elections; 2) strengthening media freedom; and 3) countering disinformation. At the core of the European approach to tackling disinformation is cooperation between different actors at national and European levels, as well as a multidisciplinarity of responses. This is why the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO) (digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu, n.d.) was established in June 2020.

Special attention is now being paid to a situation concerning a new European policy for digital strategic autonomy. Strategic autonomy as an imperative requirement would force the EU to expedite its development of critical digital technologies. Other than the need to secure data protection and intellectual property, there is also the need to secure a defense against disinformation (Benedicto-Solsona, Czubala-Ostapiuk, 2023). Indeed, the European Parliament has actively participated in endeavours across the EU to safeguard democratic elections from manipulative interventions and disinformation. Moreover, it has implemented specific measures to address the adverse impacts of artificial intelligence through the adoption of various resolutions and reports.

The latest and most comprehensive document with regard to the discussion of the deepfakes issue is the resolution of 19th May, 2021, on "Artificial Intelligence in Education, Culture and the Audiovisual Sector" (www.europarl.europa.eu, n.d.). This resolution puts forth several proactive suggestions. These encompass the significance of heightening awareness about the risks associated with deepfakes and enhancing digital literacy. It also addresses the growing challenge of identifying and labeling false or manipulated content through technological methods. The resolution urges the Commission to establish suitable legal frameworks governing the malicious creation, production, or distribution of deepfakes. Additionally, it advocates for the advancement of detection capabilities and an enhancing of transparency on the content displayed to platform users, providing them with increased autonomy to decide upon the information they wish to receive.

Countering Disinformation in North Macedonia

In North Macedonia and the Western Balkan region, disinformation campaigns driven by foreign malign influence fluctuate in their frequency, aligning with the prevailing political conditions in the region or a specific country within it. Although the intensity and nature of these campaigns have varied over recent years, addressing diverse potentially divisive issues at any given moment, there has not been a period of complete cessation.

Disinformation represents a significant challenge for North Macedonia, impacting the country's political and social dynamics, as well as public health and safety. Acknowledging this threat, the current government has prioritised the fight against disinformation. In 2019, the Prime Minister publicly introduced the Government's "Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation", consisting of various, non-binding activities aimed at combating disinformation.

As disinformation campaigns gain momentum, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a pressing need to update the "Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation" to address emerging challenges. To ensure the plan remains relevant, the Government should engage in open consultations with pertinent stakeholders, including media organisations and civil society. The Government has, however, taken the lead in addressing disinformation and hybrid threats more broadly. In October 2021, it adopted the "Strategy for Building Resilience and Tackling Hybrid Threats", accompanied by a 2021–2025 Action Plan. This Action Plan incorporates parliamentary oversight activities and recommends communication channels between informal parliamentary groups and civil society.

A Metamorphosis survey from 2022 of a nationally representative sample shows that over 83% of the respondents agreed with the statement "Disinformation is very harmful and has to be sanctioned by law" (50.8% strongly agree and 32.3% mostly agree). Moreover, 90.8% of the respondents said that "the Government needs to take measures to deal with disinformation in the media" (MetaMorphosis Report, 2022). In the same research, "Citizens identify politicians (91% of respondents), journalists/media (90%), social media (81%), and internet portals (78%) as the main sources of disinformation. In their opinion, the three most important measures to deal with disinformation include: 1) journalists adhering to their professional standards and minding the truthfulness of the content they publish (79%); 2) adopting a law against disinformation in the media (74%); and 3) continuous reporting about the harmful influence of disinformation and fake news in the media (62%)".

How Can We Recognise Deepfake Videos?

In order to familiarise themselves with the convincing level of realism for this type of content, the authors searched for and watched hundreds of examples of deepfake videos. As a result, they went through and looked at such examples available on YouTube and Vimeo, as well as videos embedded in web pages. The available videos are usually not part of academic nor professional research and most of the time only the video is available, and is without any information on the production's used software and tools, the available resources, the amount of data that was used as a source, as well as the time spent training the models. However, viewing numerous videos with different levels of realism allowed the authors to get a clear idea of the state of deepfake videos. It should be noted that in their intentional search for this specific type of content, the

authors were ready for its manipulations. Such an approach cannot be expected from the general public.

From their experience, defined by the subjective factor, they can offer the following recommendation:

- **Intuition:** intuition can be a sign of a critical approach to this type of content. If there are elements in the video that question the validity of the video, they can be a sign that the video is a deepfake.

And the following are the specifics and details that can point us to a video that has been manipulated with AI:

- **Light source:** by identifying the light source, one can review the consistency and the placement of the shadows on a face in shot in relation to the shadows in the background. State-of-the-art software already offers convincing results, but there are instances where the shadows of the face do not correspond with the shadows available in the neck area.
- **Blurred or pixelated parts:** one of the anomalies can be the blurred or pixelised parts of the face. These parts are mostly positioned around the cheek areas where there is less detail compared to more detailed elements of the face such as the eyes, the eyebrows, the nose, or the mouth. We should state that this anomaly is not permanent but can appear temporarily in a video.
- **Facial details compared to background:** deepfake software collects data, builds a model, and inserts another person's face, but the background is not subject to manipulation. The end results may have less detail on the face compared to the background, but there is also some software that inserts another layer of an enhancing process, so in such cases, there can be significantly more detail on the face compared to the background. In such cases, the difference between face versus background details is different from the depth element that is obtained from the cameras themselves.
- **Face details with multiple persons:** if there is a difference in the level of facial detail on different persons in different successive scenes in videos that include multiple persons, such as interviews, it can be symptomatic of a deepfake.
- **Eye blinking:** one indicator for recognising a deepfake video is the intensity of eye blinking. In certain situations, there may be a prolonged lack of eye blinking, and in others, there may be frequent, unnatural blinking.
- **Eye movement:** natural eye movement should be in coordination with facial expressions, body posture, and the message being sent by the speaker. In an AI-generated video, this coordination may

not be retained, especially in situations where the head is turned at a greater angle and the position of the eyes remains towards the person being addressed.
- **Pupils:** another anomaly in AI-generated content is irregular pupil shapes. This is much easier to detect in pictures, but it is not as easy with regard to videos.
- **Reflections in the eyes:** the eyes are the most reflective part of the face. Within different environments, reflections in the eyes can be an indicator of a deepfake. As in the case of the pupils, this is much easier to spot in a picture compared to that of a video.
- **Audio quality:** a video with high-quality visuals, but low-quality audio, may indicate a manipulated video.
- **Background sounds:** additional sounds in addition to the sound from the speaker can be compared to visual elements occurring in the video and one should check whether the background sounds – or lack thereof – are natural to the speaker's environment.
- **Mouth movement:** mouth movement is currently the largest indicator of deepfake videos. Motion can be unnatural for the content reproduced in audio form. Also, certain mouth expressions when speaking, such as the type and intensity of a smile, can betray a manipulated video.

Conclusions

Groundbreaking advancements in AI, particularly Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs), have given rise to deepfakes; altered or synthetic audio and visual content that appears genuine. Presently, smartphone applications with user-friendly interfaces empower individuals to create relatively convincing deepfakes without the need for technical expertise. While the creation of high-quality deepfakes that are virtually undetectable to the human eye, i.e., nearly identical to the real thing, currently demands considerable technical proficiency and specialised equipment, it is anticipated that this requirement may evolve, or, rather, devolve in the foreseeable future.

In this paper, the authors have identified numerous malicious – as well as beneficial – applications of deepfake technologies. The use of deepfake technologies becomes problematic when a creator intends to deceive an audience with malicious intent or influence. The authors conclude that the risks posed by deepfake technologies to society are significant, yet contingent on specific contexts. Given their dual-use nature, these technologies should be subject to regulation.

The US 2024 elections will surely mark an important moment in strengthening not just the USA's resilience against deepfake threats; they can and probably will have global implications. Deepfakes can potentially manipulate public opinion and compromise electoral integrity, so the American elections of 2024 could turn out to be a good moment for legislative efforts and innovative solutions from companies to emphasise the urgency of countering deepfakes. The decisions that will be made during this electoral period will not only shape the USA's resilience but also set a precedent for global approaches in addressing the broader impact of evolving technological threats.

Microsoft, in an anti-deepfake initiative in order to prevent the spreading of disinformation in the US's 2024 elections, has introduced content credentials as a service tool (Hutson, Smith, 2023). Their approach is to use digital watermarking to provide information about the origin of images and videos and determine whether AI has been anywhere near them. In this initiative, Microsoft offers both cybersecurity advice and support to political campaigns. The legal perspective of this initiative is mirrored by the company expressing support for the Protect Elections from Deceptive AI Act and by advocating for legal changes. In the case of Meta, after banning political campaigns from using their generative AI advertising products (Paul, 2023), they also implemented a policy by which they would require disclosure of AI-generated or altered content in political and electoral ads (Kelly, 2023).

In the realm of deepfakes, pursuing legal action as one of its victims can be particularly difficult. Frequently, identifying the perpetrator of one's attack is a serious challenge, as attackers often operate under the veil of anonymity. Additionally, victims may find themselves without the necessary resources to initiate legal proceedings, rendering them susceptible and exposed.

Deepfake technology is a rapidly evolving field, making it challenging to accurately anticipate its future trajectory. Nevertheless, it is certain that visual manipulation is a persistent presence. Quick solutions are currently unavailable, and effectively addressing the risks associated with deepfakes necessitates ongoing contemplation and perpetual learning.

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EU Integration SWOT in a New Enlargement Framework

Abstract
Uncertainty over the future course of the European Union enlargement policy really matters for both sides of the that policy, namely, the Union, and aspirants for fully-fledged EU membership. After more than two decades of stabilisation and accession process and years of slowdown as regards the EU integration dynamic within the Western Balkans region, there are a few different opinions regarding the impact of the war in Ukraine on that EU policy which have come to the fore. After Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova submitted their applications for EU membership in March 2022, the previously-evident differences between those Western Balkan aspirants with a clear European perspective (as laid out in Thessaloniki in 2003) and their Eastern neighbours which have not made such promises are somehow disappearing. Enlargement policy rules and practices undergo changes as new circumstances come about without changes being made to the Treaties and the Copenhagen criteria. The EU enlargement map is being merged with the Eastern Partnership map, and integrated one similar to the European Energy Community map. On that map, the EU is surrounded by eight candidate countries and two potential candidates. Both sides could work on their own reform tasks and be ready for EU enlargement in 2030. We study how these unprecedented security challenges that have united Europe have impacted the EU integration dynamic and the expectations of the countries of the Western Balkans region, with a special focus on Montenegro. The expectations in this new geopolitical reality are analysed through the EU integration's SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) as a strategic planning technique that provides assessment tools. Identifying the core strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the European integration process in a new enlargement framework and a new geopolitical reality leads us to a fact-based analysis and recognition of future membership perspectives.

The general benefits of integration outweigh its risks and costs, but there are still no reasonable integration alternatives in today's circumstances, and these challenges must be openly communicated with the citizens.

Keywords: EU Enlargement Policy, EU Agenda 2030, SWOT, Western Balkans, Reforms and Expectations

Introduction

On 24th February 2022, Russia escalated its conflict with Ukraine by invading the country on several fronts in what has become the largest conventional military attack on a sovereign state in Europe since World War II. The invasion has received near-universal international condemnation and many countries have imposed sanctions on Russia while simultaneously supplying humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine.

The war in Ukraine changed the perception of Europe as an area of peace, prosperity, and stability, where common European values are being created and protected. Instability, uncertainty, political tensions, military threats, an energy crisis, inflation, and disruptions in global value chains affect all European countries.

Less than four months after the submitting of applications for EU membership by Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, it was at the June 2022 European Council where EU leaders decided to grant Ukraine and Moldova the status of candidate countries, and recognised Georgia's European perspective, marking a step towards formal candidacy. Never before had EU countries reacted so quickly in the affirmative to an application for EU membership (Sapir, 2022, p. 213). It is obvious that this fastest possible procedure for the acceptance of a new accession trio from the Eastern Partnership would not have been possible without Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine or the Ukrainian people's fight to defend European values, the country's sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

It is expected that EU leaders will soon make a political decision as regards the opening of negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and the next step is to set a date for the opening of accession negotiations. Consequently, and already in the next year, we can expect up to nine candidate countries to negotiate attaining membership in the Union.

The next enlargement is now set for 2030 and it appears that it is going to employ the "revised convoy" approach. The EU agenda 2030 will be different from previous iterations, not only because geopolitical challenges have added Ukraine and Moldova to the group of candidates, but also because the EU should enter into the institutional reform process

at the same time. As has been proposed by the "Group of Twelve" (Costa et al., 2023, pp. 42–43), the EU should set a goal to be ready for enlargement by 2030 and accession candidates should work to fulfil the criteria to accede to the EU on this entry date at the earliest. At the same time, the proposal makes clear that there is no free entry into the EU and that the timeframe is an objective rather than a set date. What remains uncertain in this proposal is the issue of a possible differentiation of Member States in the envisioning of the future of European integration in four concentric circles, each with a different balance of rights and obligations: the Eurozone (the deepest integration), the EU (all current and future EU Member States bound by the same political objectives and article 2 of the TEU), Associate Membership (with the Single Market as the integration goal), and European Political Community 2.0 (which is focused on geopolitical convergence and structured by bilateral agreements with the EU).

The EU is already highly differentiated. While all Member States are part of the Single Market, membership in other policy areas is variable, including the Schengen borders, the Common Security and Defense Policy, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and the single currency. Differentiated integration is also increased by the presence in the EU of so-called "outside insiders" such as Norway, Iceland, and Switzerland that participate in the Single Market as well as in a range of other EU policy communities such as Schengen and the Common Security and Defense Policy but do not have a vote (Schmidt, 2019, p. 295).

The presented proposal of possible further differentiation of extant Member States is a logical step forward and is very similar to the proposal of the so-called „staged" accession (Emerson et al., 2021, pp. 3–4). The authors propose that the EU's institutional structure could well accommodate a regime of progressive, conditional, and staged participation by states aiming at securing full membership, as an alternative to the current binary „in" or „out" model.

This proposal is mix of its author's wishes: buying the time that Serbia, i.e., the region, needs (European Policy Centre, Belgrade) and offering the time that the EU needs (Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels). Incidentally, the revision of an old idea, i.e., the proposal of obtaining additional funds before full membership as a carrot for Western Balkan partners trapped in a state of EU enlargement fatigue, with the metaphoric stick being the delay of accession itself, i.e., the delay of a candidate country's entry before the necessary reform of the EU institutions and decision-making process, has been completed (Djurović, 2022, p. 8).

This paper is focused on an EU integration dynamic analysis in a new enlargement framework and a new geopolitical reality. This

Table 1. Horizontal Gradual Integration: The Model of Staged Accession to the EU

MEMBERSHIP STAGE	**IV**	**CONVENTIONAL MEMBERSHIP**	
		Full participation in all policies and institutions	
		Accession to Stage IV implies that the EU will have worked out a solution (i.e., a legal proposal) for the limitation in Stage III	
	III	**NEW MEMBERSHIP STATE**	
		Further condition: a mainly good (4.5) average rating within each cluster, with no individual chapter below the rating of 4	Maximum participation in the institutions, subject to limitations; no veto right in the Council, no Commissioner in the College of Commissioners, no Judge in the Court of Justice
		Funding level equal to the corresponding amount for conventional membership	The possibility to accede to the Schengen Area and eurozone on standard conditions
		Full participation in the policies of the EU	EU citizenship rights
ACCESSION STAGE	**II**	**INTERMEDIATE ACCESSION**	
		Further condition: a minimum average rating of 4 within each cluster with no individual chapter below a moderate rating of 3	More substantial participation in the policies and institutions (e.g., speaking rights in the Council and Parliament but no voting rights)
		Funding level corresponding to 75% of the conventional membership amount	
	I	**INITIAL ACCESSION**	
		Minimum moderate average rating within each cluster (3), with no individual chapter below the rating of 2	Functioning Association Agreement (AA/SAA) Application for membership accepted (Art. 49)
		Funding level corresponding to 50% of conventional membership amount	Policy dialogue or observer status with the institutions

Source: Emerson et al., 2021.

paper will summarise the main effects and costs of integration based on Montenegro's current European path. The modified European integration SWOT analysis has been applied in order to determine: 1) the strengths of integration; 2) its weaknesses – namely, the economic challenges and investments in the integration process; 3) opportunities for more dynamic democratic and economic reforms; and 4) risks during the membership negotiation process (Djurović, 2023, pp. 355–369).

Strengths of Integration

The general benefits of integration have remained unchanged in the forms of peace, stability, prosperity, and European values. They are strongly promoted in a country that has been negotiating its EU membership for more than eleven years, that country being Montenegro. Montenegro is in the process of establishing institutional ties with the EU, from the full harmonisation of common foreign and security policy positions (CFSP), through the gradual harmonisation of legislations with the Acquis and the establishment of new institutions in the country, to the improvement of the business environment and gradual adoption of European standards in all spheres of everyday life.

The integration process includes strengthening key enlargement pillars in the country in the forms of the rule of law, economic governance, and public administration reform, and are listed as follows:

a) The rule of law
   - A more efficient judiciary – one of the key areas for the integration process, and the subject of special attention in the accession talks between Montenegro and the EU;
   - Better protection of fundamental rights, along with better protection of property rights;
   - A more dedicated fight against corruption at all levels, including high-level political corruption, organised crime, money laundering, and financing terrorism;
   - Support for dynamic democratic reforms with a focus on election legislation;
   - Visa liberalisation and the gradual growth of mobility of all factors, with a focus on the free movement of people;
   - Cooperation in the area of the judiciary, human rights protection, police, and customs;
   - IPA (Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance) support for democratic reforms, media freedom and a stronger voice for CSOs (Civil Society Organisations);

b) Economic governance and raising competitiveness:
   - The harmonisation of legislation improves the overall legal system in a country, including transparency, predictability, and property rights protection that improve the local business environment for domestic and foreign companies/investors;
   - Trade liberalisation and the introduction of the EU standards of customs policy, foreign trade, and investment promotion policy encourage economic cooperation with EU companies and includes

FDI (foreign direct investment) inflows, the facilitation of trade, and creating preconditions for export growth to the EU market (trade creation, trade diversification, and FDI);

- Economic and financial dialogue between the EU and Montenegro strongly support the fulfilment of the economic accession criteria (i.e., a functioning market economy in place that has the capacity to withstand competitive pressure inside the EU single market), along with common annual monitoring and the steering of the economy through the medium-term Economic Reform Programme (ERP). A "fundamentals first" approach to EU enlargement encourages aspiring members to tackle economic fundamentals in the first instance: macroeconomic stability; a welcoming business environment; functioning labour and financial markets; good levels and quality of education, infrastructure, innovation and economic integration with the EU and the world. It is the so-called "WB6 Light European Semester" which is a specific method of preparation for future participation in the European semester;
- ERPs (Economic Reform Programmes) support the prioritisation of investment and focus on key structural reforms; the ERP cycle produces an annual EC evaluation with policy guidance for the next midterm cycle;
- The opening of the market puts pressure on local industry but, at the same time, encourages the growth of competitiveness in domestic companies not only in order to remain present in the domestic market, but also to gain access to the EU market;
- Economic and financial dialogue between the EU and Montenegro also supports better public debt management through the development and common monitoring of the Public Finance Management programme, the mid-term Public Debt Management strategy and the fiscal strategy;
- The use of a valuable European currency (the euro) in Montenegro since 2002;
- Montenegro's following of the EU's Green Deal agenda and the developing of a sustainable and climate neutral country by 2050;
- Research, science, and education sectors at all levels enjoy a special benefit in participation in Union programs, especially in the European Higher Education Area initiatives, which encourage an increase in competitiveness, further reforms of the education sector, student and teacher mobility, and a strengthening of the research base of Montenegrin institutions and internationalisation of curricula in all fields of science;

- European standards are being introduced in all spheres of economic policies and sectors of economic activities, thereby strengthening innovation policy and encouraging technology transfer;
- European standards are particularly valuable in the areas of environmental protection, product safety, consumer protection, competition and state aid, intellectual property rights protection, and other common EU policies;
- A better supply of the domestic market (and tourism sector) with better quality and more affordable products from EU countries, which is a benefit for consumers and the tourists alike;
- More economic opportunities provide more opportunities for GDP growth i.e., the possibility of cooperation, networking, and connecting with stronger industries, along with the availability of new technological, organisational, and managerial knowledge;
- Growing pre-accession financial assistance (that of the national, regional, cross-border, and the transnational) strongly supports overall democratic and economic reforms in the country (national IPA was up to 1.1% of GDP per year in key sectors in the period 2007–2020) – through the programming and implementation of IPA projects. The administrative capacities of Montenegro's administration should be strengthened, which is a necessary precondition for the preparation of absorption capacities for the EU's cohesion policy. The Western Balkan Investment Framework and the Connectivity Agenda support the construction of the regional infrastructure with a concentration of IPA support and European bank loans to the regional project of common interests (so-called "bankable projects") – inclusion in European transport and energy networks;
- Crisis support, especially as regards the new health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The EU has provided significant support to the region and Montenegro, not only in a financial sense, but also a technical sense, and inclusion in the so-called "green lanes" for expedited procurement of valuable medical equipment and easier cross-border trade, especially at the very beginning of a pandemic.

c) Public administration capacities:
   - Administrative capacity building and functioning within the European administrative space: strengthening the administrative capacities of those Montenegrin institutions which are designed to cooperate with EU institutions and agencies along with Member State institutions, and to function in complex decision-making processes in the Union;

- Better public services; through the process of transferring knowledge, digitalisation, institutional memory, and understanding of the EU supranational system, it is possible to improve the work of Montenegro's institutions, which thus become a better provider of public services to citizens and businesses;
- Strengthening local self-government units and their administrative and financial capacities, while balancing the decentralisation level.

Weaknesses – Economic Challenges and Necessary Investments

- *An open market for EU and CEFTA companies in the medium term:* Essentially speaking, this means no customs duties on all industrial products nor the majority of agricultural products. There are customs duties up to 50% of their level for third countries only for the group of most sensitive agricultural products, namely 353 out of 3324 AGRI tariff lines (10.6%) since 2012; CEFTA 2006 trade was fully liberalised in 2014. Trade liberalisation is good from the point of view of consumers and a better supply, but not from the point of view of local producers due to their low level of competitiveness; more attractive and high-quality goods from European companies have arrived, conquering the space of domestic goods and services providers on the local market. In this way, the pressure coming from large markets on the growth of competitiveness of domestic companies is simultaneously a benefit of integration, but also a risk for those companies that cannot become competitive and experience serious problems with regard to the placement of their goods on the domestic market. It is obvious that a number of local SMEs will cease to operate. The longer the accession process, the greater the risk of less competitive firms closing down. There is strong support for these small firms and farms as part of the EU cohesion policy and CAP for the Member States, especially for undeveloped and sparsely populated areas.
- *Short term effects of trade liberalisation:* The price for these positive effects has already been paid, especially in the industrial sector through the further de-industrialisation and de-agrarisation process. Numerous, less competitive and mostly privatised companies have been closed in the metal, mining, textile, and construction sectors, with the same happening the wood processing industry, shipyards, and the food processing industry. On the other hand, some new SMEs have been established, but mostly in the service

sector. These trends have led to a deepening of structural problems in the Montenegrin economy, namely to an extremely high degree of vulnerability of the import-dependent economy to external shocks, in addition to a high dependence on tourism and related services, a gap between labour-market needs and education-sector supply, a less competitive agricultural and food processing sector, and negative internal migration from the underdeveloped north region to Podgorica and the coastal region. In the last few years, the participation of the agriculture and industry sectors in GDP terms is around 8% and 12% respectively whilst more than 80% of employees are in the service sector (Statistical Office of Montenegro, 2022).

- *Unemployment risk and negative internal migrations*: The average lifespan of a company has shortened. Continuous adjustment to the tough conditions of growing competition is required, leading to unemployment growth and strong migration flows from the North to the central and coastal regions.
- *External labour force migrations:* The local labour market is increasingly experiencing seasonal labour force shortages in tourism, construction, and agriculture, as well as serious labour-force deficits in the health and ICT sectors.
- *High costs of economic reform, the establishment of institutions and the harmonisation of legislation*: The costs of strengthening administrative capacity and necessary investments in adopting the EU standards for a small country such as Montenegro are relatively higher, amounting to 2–4% of GDP per year, based on the experience of previous enlargement countries (for example, Slovenia). Particularly large allocations are necessary for environmental protection. In addition, it was necessary to establish dozens of new institutions and bodies, but this has led to a dynamic growth of employment in public administration.
- *The risk of the less-effective use or potential misuse of pre-accession funds:* EU funds must be withdrawn, i.e., spent, according to strict EU rules, and it is necessary to fulfil commitments concerning IPA projects. Potential risks include the following: an unwillingness of the country/underdeveloped administrative capacity to withdraw funds; the possible misuse of IPA funds; funds being frozen because of backsliding in democratic reforms; the risk of non-withdrawal due to modest strategic planning capacities and the lack of spatial planning documents; and the fulfilment of the obligation to provide co-financing (in conditions of reductions of public spending and

underdeveloped multi-annual budget planning). IPA projects should be prepared in a timely manner (project documentation, clear ownership relations, plans, and cost estimates) following the so-called "n + 2" rule. Project documentation must be kept for at least seven years, in order to ensure the possibility of control. There is a chance of reimbursement in case of misuse, even after several years. AFCOS – the office of the first level of control over the spending of IPA funds – started to work with limited administrative capacities, as did the independent audit body responsible for control of managing of IPA funds and which supports accountability and transparency in the use of funds by making audit recommendations and which directly reports to the Commission. The risk of a de-commitment of some funds is very high.

- *Undeveloped infrastructure and the lack of funds for infrastructure investments:* The IPA can provide only about 10% of the necessary investments in infrastructure, while for other investment plans, the country must find additional sources of financing in accordance with sustainable public finance management. That aside, the IPA is useful for the adoption of EU standards in various areas (including the construction of various laboratories with qualified, trained staff).

Opportunities for More Dynamic Democratic and Economic Reforms

- *An informal "non-aggression pact" of political parties regarding EU priorities:* All issues of special importance for the dynamics of integration and European commitment should be discussed by the legislative powers as soon as possible (i.e., proposals of harmonised legislation marked with the EU flag); this was good practice during the previous waves of enlargement. In the case of Montenegro, this possibility has not yet been used.
- *Consensus on the EU*: A political consensus on the EU will encourage consensus on the country's development strategy, thereby speeding up economic development.
- *Improving the dialogue in the country between different actors*: The EU mediates sensitive reforms such as judicial reform or electoral legislation reform, and even proposes constitutional reforms. In politically unstable times, representatives of EU institutions may also be authorised to facilitate dialogue between the country's political parties.

- *Strong EU support for democratic reforms and the strengthening of democratic institutions:* Democracy needs strong, accountable institutions and participatory processes, centred on the national parliament. Transparent, accountable, and effective public administration is vital and it entails a professionalisation and de-politicisation of the civil service; a strengthening of the independence and effectiveness of key bodies (the Ombudsman, State Audit Institutions, the Anti-Corruption Agency, etc.) needs to be ensured and their recommendations appropriately followed-up.
- *A stronger role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):* It is crucial to strengthen participatory democracy and increase focus on the needs of citizens and firms. The CSOs' projects support the growing importance of the involvement of various stakeholders in the dialogue on the country's European integration perspective. A more inclusive dialogue and public debate on reform priorities and strategic investment is needed, an issue that the EU insists on.
- *Stronger protection of fundamental rights*: Is important to develop a climate of tolerance and respect where every citizen is treated without discrimination on the basis of gender, racial or ethnic group, religion or belief, sexual orientation, disability, or age. With the EU's support, the country strongly respects freedom of assembly and expression, as well as media freedom and values on which the EU project is built.
- *A more efficient governance and "Europeanisation" as engines of change:* More efficient governance is being introduced through the mechanism of the European Semester for candidate countries that includes the regular adoption of the ERP based on the Commission's recommendations and the joint monitoring of its implementation, i.e., the analysis of the macroeconomic situation and trends in the country, control of fiscal indicators, sustainable public finances, prioritisation of structural reforms, etc.
- *European economic integration:* The process of economic integration enables the strengthening of economic cooperation among countries through trade growth, FDI inflows, and increases in the number of business opportunities.
- *Strengthening the role of local communities and greater support for agriculture and rural development:* This is another opportunity that ought to enable knowledge transfer, training, market research, technical support mechanisms, and the establishment of European integration units within local self-governments, thus providing

support to all local actors in the preparation of EU project proposals, as well as cross-border partnerships in areas of common interest (the application and implementation of EU-funded projects).

- *More opportunities for the reduction of regional development gaps*: Another opportunity lies in strengthening the economic, social, and territorial integration of the country along with the integration of statistical regions into a single national development plan, which could also imply preparing the developmental direction of Montenegro as a medium-term development strategy, a Smart Specialisation Strategy, sector strategies, strategic documents on climate change, and green and digital development.
- *EU pre-accession assistance:* Financial support from the EU is a powerful instrument of fostering democratic and economic reforms in the country, and is likely to have a positive impact on the mobilisation of funds for investments from both domestic and international sources (public and private), as well as through mixed forms of the mobilisation of financial resources for development. All these forms of cooperation regarding the additional mobilisation of funds for investment contribute to the further institutional strengthening of the Montenegrin administration, and *vice versa.*

Threats – Risks During the Accession Negotiations Process

- *A weak communication strategy*, especially in the final phase of the accession process: The action plan and the budget of the communication strategy are never sufficient. Mobilising resources for these activities is key to bringing the idea of integration and the lives of Montenegrin citizens within the Union closer to everyone – not just those who really want it, but especially those who do not understand the process or are afraid of the changes it brings (which might be negatively reflected in one's way of life, sources of income, or overall living environment).
- *Hidden resistance to integration as a fear of "de-sovereignisation"*: Montenegro regained independence after 88 years in 2006. Despite the prevailing opinion that we do not have any declared Eurosceptics in political groups or among key actors in the country, there is the possibility of latent resistance to dynamic integration as a reaction to the growing, so-called "interference" of Brussels on key political and economic issues in the country, already during early stages of the accession process.

- *Turning to populism:* After 23 years of the Stabilisation and Association process and 11 years of EU accession negotiations, it is not an easy task to maintain enthusiasm for integration or the credibility of the EU enlargement strategy. The long duration of the process and the weak presence of the Union in the Western Balkans in recent years have negatively affected citizens' support for deeper democratic and economic reforms. Rising income and wealth inequality as well as economic insecurity fuel the popular resentment of the political elites and influences their return to populist rhetoric. The speeches of local politicians are full of mentions of Europe and European integration commitments, but not as incentives for reforms but rather as an acceptable narrative for election campaigns and public appearances (the verbal abuse of the vocabulary of the EU agenda is used as a cover for the postponing of essential reforms by the political elites). The commitment fatigue extant in the region, including Montenegro, is a reaction to enlargement fatigue in the EU. In addition, the growth of populism, nationalism, phenomena such as so-called "post-truth", "fake news", and "hate speech" on social networks, strongly affect all countries of the world, especially small countries such as Montenegro.
- *Endangering the concept of the civic state, electoral engineering, and the growth of ethnic distance*: Since regaining independence in 2006, the growth in the number of municipalities in Montenegro is evident, many of which are ethnically homogeneous municipalities with a predominantly minority population. In addition, the number of newly-established political parties is also growing, and the majority of them are political parties representing minorities (using the "principle of the affirmative action", Art. 79 of the Constitution), which, in the long-run, has a negative impact on the civic concept of the state ("Montenegro is a civil, democratic, ecological and state of social justice, based on the rule of law", Art. 1 of the Constitution). Ethnic gaps are growing with the participation of a number of political parties with a national sign, and there is a declining trend of support to the civic parties: the phenomenon of the so-called "Bosnianisation" of Montenegro's society, i.e., division established on ethnicity, especially with the aforementioned pronounced growth in the number of municipalities dominated by political parties or coalitions created on an ethnic basis (Vujović, 2022). Under the conditions of many years of political crises and unstable governments, along with the deterioration of the security situation in the country and serious foreign interference in internal affairs, pro-Serbian and

traditional minority parties (representing the Albanians, Bosniaks, and Croats) are currently seeking to homogenise their electoral body. On the other hand, given that there is no majority ethnic group in Montenegro, this causes the strengthening of the pro-Montenegrin ethnic dimension among other parties, which further strengthens the ethnic distance between Montenegro's citizens. This gap is an opportunity to host a stronger EU presence in the country along with its support in preserving the valuable heritage of Montenegrin society as a civic state, in which there is room for all confessions, ethnic groups, and cultural diversity. Throughout its centuries-old history, Montenegro has been an example of multi-ethnic and multi-confessional harmony that the country can be a so-called "little Europe", and it should remain so.

- *A risk of not-respecting the constitutional norm regarding separation of the religious communities from the State* – numerous cases confirm this worrying and negative trend.
- *The reduction of the Government's discretionary power in conducting economic policy:* The discretionary rights of the Governments of candidate countries in conducting economic policy is significantly and gradually being reduced, especially in the field of debt management and subsidies (the EU pays special attention to issues of competition and state aid). In this context, it is necessary to negotiate transitional periods for all policy changes carefully and have a reasonable explanation for decisions and actions taken in these areas. Processes are becoming more transparent and key information needs to be published. Sometimes, the Government's intention is to postpone this reduction of discretionary power.
- *The surplus of "conditionality"(ies) as a consequence of weak institutions and a lack of citizen's trust:* This can be presented in the example of the EU's insistence on changing the country's highest legal act in the early phase of the integration process; we have witnessed many years of so-called "soft" pressure from the EU to change the Constitution, as the highest legal act, in the early stages of the integration process, in order to encourage more transparent reforms in the judiciary (changes in the procedures for the election of key positions in the judiciary, the election and competencies of the Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils, the position of the Constitutional Court, etc.). High-ranking European officials sent "messages and recommendations" pushing for a change to the Constitution, as this is a condition for opening key negotiating chapters in the area of the rule of law (chapters 23 and 24). Since

gaining candidate status for membership in the Union (December 2010), this set of recommendations was officially presented to Montenegro's authorities as a path towards the opening of accession talks. Through many years of difficult negotiations and with the support of several opinions prepared by the Venice Commission, the Montenegrin Parliament finally adopted a set of constitutional amendments on 31st July 2013 (Constitution, 2013). In the following years, it turned out that a two-thirds majority in the Parliament of Montenegro was an almost impossible mission to achieve and even a three-fifths majority is rarely possible for the appointments of the Head of Supreme State Prosecutor or half of the members of the Judicial Council. Instead of experiencing faster judicial reforms, Montenegro entered into a deep political crisis. Numerous political parties started to make various deals with these appointments quite openly, putting party interests above the public interest. The next example involves an EU recommendation in the case of the complete decriminalisation of defamation in 2009. Time has shown that it was premature for steps to be taken in such a direction, given the overall situation in the country and the region. Instead of improved political dialogue on the public scene, there was a deterioration in the quality of public dialogue, especially dialogue in the Parliament of Montenegro. The lessons learned from these examples can be summarised as follows – any EU recommendation should be carefully analysed and implemented into the national legal framework, taking into account the local context, potential risks, and misuse of these changes for the political parties' interests. Not all recommendations are based on the one-model-suits-all principle, and some are not even applicable as such. It is important to listen to the EU's recommendations, but not to underestimate their essence and timing.

- *The loss of clear boundaries between the executive and legislative powers:* In the numerous recommendations from the EU institutions during the negotiation process, the transfer of competencies from the Government to the Parliament is often recommended, in order to make the processes more transparent, which makes the division between the executive and the legislature unclear. The executive loses some of its competencies but remains formally and fully responsible for the quality of reforms required by the EU agenda; but, on the other hand, the role of the Parliament is stronger, seemingly going beyond the limits of its Constitutional roles, where sometimes the control function exceeds the basic

legislative function. According to the Constitution of Montenegro, "Power is regulated by the principle of the division of power into that of the legislative, executive, and judicial. The relationship of power is based on balance and mutual control" (Article 11 of the Constitution of Montenegro). Consequently, and in relation to the previous risk, there is a strengthening of various forms of overt or covert forms of political trade when it comes to important legal acts and the deadlines for their adoption. The abovementioned issues undermine the essence of reforms and trust levels in state institutions. In addition, instead of the Government, a group of MPs frequently propose amendments to some legal acts and adopt them with a mere simple majority, without the obligatory public debates, without a compatibility statement on alignment with the acquis, and without a Regulatory impact assessment document.

- *An undeveloped institute of lobbying:* There is poor representation of Montenegro before the EU institutions and Member States, which needs to be significantly strengthened in the coming period.
- *A risk of "unprepared" entry:* The first phase of the accession process creates the impression that it is progressing quickly, and at the same time increases readiness for membership, which is not necessarily the case (such are the experiences of Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia). If a country does not simultaneously strengthen its institutions and administrative capacities, the risk of formally concluding negotiations increases. In Montenegro, however, there is essentially no administrative capacity (strong institutions with trained people) to allow the country to be able to function effectively in the EU. Some EU funds and projects may not be utilised because of the unprepared state and local administrations that do not know how to withdraw resources from (open) structural and investment funds. On the other side of the coin, contributions to the EU budget are fixed, so the net balance of receipts and allocations to the EU budget must be considered. That is why the key message here with regard to getting ready for membership is to do it properly rather than quickly.
- *Unclear reading of EC reports:* Although Montenegro was a regional leader of integration for years, economic and democratic reforms need to be more dynamic and measurable. Often, different domestic actors read the Commission's assessments differently, so there is no consensus on the assessment and quality of conducted reforms in the country. The EC made some effort in the enlargement reports with the introduction of a standardised descriptive form

of assessment by negotiating chapters in 2015 (an assessment of the overall level of achievement of EU standards in an area and an assessment of progress between the two reports in that area), and, in 2020, with a clustering of the chapters and the development of a stricter negotiation methodology that brings preventive and corrective action if the country lags behind or backslides in key areas of reforms.

- *The EU's problem with respecting fundamental European values in some Member States:* We are also witnesses to the fact that, in the Union itself, there are countries that openly oppose long-standing recommendations of the Council, the Commission, and the European Parliament, regarding the respect of basic European values as laid out in Art. 2 of the EU Treaty. The so-called "nuclear" clause, Art. 7 of the EU Treaty, was initiated against Poland and Hungary, due to a deterioration of the system of fundamental European values in those countries. From the point of view of a candidate country that is required to make clear and unambiguous progress in these areas as a condition of future membership, concessions to these countries and the postponement of serious sanctions are perceived as a fall of confidence in the strength of the EU institutions and doubts about the ability to defend fundamental democratic values within the Union (Priebus, 2022). Confidence in the accession process and its credibility will depend on further developments in this area in the Union itself along with the Union's capacity to deal with them.

Conclusions

Analysing the benefits and opportunities, subtracting the costs, and carefully considering the risks that accompany a country's integration process into the European Union, we firmly believe that Montenegro, despite all the risks, should remain with the same strategic commitment. Our conviction is based primarily on three facts:

a) The window of opportunity for a speedy integration of Montenegro into the EU was lost in August 2022 with the fall of the 43rd Government. Montenegro experiences postponed institutional integration and a lack of the benefits that come with EU structural funds, in spite of the country's advanced economic integration and the opening of its market. However, the general benefits of integration still outweigh its risks and costs.

b) There are no reasonable alternatives as regards integration choice in today's circumstances which, unfortunately, include geopolitical risks.

Montenegro has developed a strategic partnership with the Union since regaining its independence, and the EU remains a rational choice and a strategic foreign policy priority to be pursued.

c) Integration is a costly process and is not merely a political endeavour. Montenegro must improve its negotiation techniques and strengthen its negotiation team, preserving the institutional memory of the negotiation process with the EU. Politicians must respect expert negotiators and allow them to propose a balance of the acceptance of new obligations under conditions of postponed membership and, most probably, staged accession under the umbrella of the convoy approach. The acceptance of additional, rigid rules should be negotiated in line with raising financial assistance.

d) Last but not least, Montenegrin citizens have rather positive expectations from the EU accession process and the support for EU membership is clear and growing. Accession to the EU is not only a strategic foreign policy commitment of Montenegro, but also an optimal development strategy for the country, where membership is seen as a confirmation of a well-chosen path of constant societal changes and improvements, which does not end with fully-fledged membership. Therefore, with dedicated work, and with open and frequent communication with its citizens, key actors in the process should continue to strive to achieve this valuable goal, that is, Montenegro's membership in the European Union.

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The Impact of the War in Ukraine on the Western Balkans and Montenegro

Abstract
The source of the Ukrainian problem lies in the protracted and complex history of the country, whose borders were altered multiple times during the Soviet era, resulting in a diverse range of population identities, from the predominantly anti-Russian and pro-Western Galicia in the northwest to the predominantly pro-Russian Crimea in the far southeast. Vladimir Putin's regime launched an attack on Ukraine's independent, sovereign state without justification, warning, or attempts to address the alleged causes through existing international mechanisms, or because of what he perceived as a reason to resort to military force and war as a solution. Russia's aggression against Ukraine has resulted in a tectonic disruption of the international order. The United States, Russia, and China now stand at their greatest distance from each other since the end of the Cold War. Putin's expectation that the high level of dependence of major European states such as Germany, France, and Italy on Russian energy resources would lead to discord among EU members and subsequently with the United States did not materialise. Instead, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has united the EU and NATO more than ever since World War II. The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO (countries that, faced with the Russian threat, decided to abandon their traditional neutrality and join the Alliance) will enhance NATO's credibility and reshape European security architecture. In response to Russia's invasion, the European Commission has responded to Ukraine's request for EU membership by recommending candidate status for Ukraine along with the Republic of Moldova, a decision unanimously approved by the twenty-seven EU leaders in June 2022. The escalation of tensions between Russia and the West in the context of the war in Ukraine could also have implications for the Western Balkans, a traditional hotspot of European security-based issues and challenges. The Western Balkans is a region characterised by weak governance, fragile

civil society, geopolitical disputes, and internal and regional factors that make it highly susceptible to local and external disinformation campaigns. Given its fragile institutions and inadequate capacities to protect government infrastructure, as well as the significant influence of organised crime and corruption in the security system, Montenegro is highly vulnerable not only to various forms of cyberattacks, but also to the influence of disinformation and negative campaigns, particularly due to Russia's intensive political and security activities in the Western Balkans.

Keywords: Aggression, Russia, Ukraine, EU, NATO, Western Balkans, Montenegro, Disinformation

Introduction

In this study, special attention will be devoted to the aggression of Russia brought about against Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, as will the causes of the aggression, and the potential consequences of this aggression on the security of the Western Balkans and Montenegro as one of the smallest states in Europe.

Under the direct influence and with the direct organisation and support of Moscow, pro-Russian political forces in Crimea held a referendum in March 2014, in which the majority of participating pro-Russian citizens voted for independence from Ukraine and to join Russia. Russia secured and supported this declaration via military intervention. Crimea was annexed to Russia with the presence of Russian military forces as one of its autonomous republics, a move that did not receive international recognition. From then on until the immediate Russian aggression, a conflict between pro-Russian rebels – supported by the Russian armed forces – and Ukrainian security forces unfolded in eastern Ukraine, specifically in the Donbas region.

Regardless of the outcome of the war in Ukraine, it may signify a turning point in the global security architecture, given that this conflict has raised questions about national sovereignty, democracy versus autocracy, human rights, and the global world order, with evident implications for the world economy amid increasingly unstable global markets.

As at the preparation of this study, all European states, except for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina due to a blockade by Republika Srpska, have imposed a series of economic (and other) sanctions and measures against Russia. Ukraine has been granted candidate status for EU membership, and its army has received significant assistance in terms of armaments and equipment for the successful conduct of the war with Russia, particularly from the United States, the EU, and NATO. Simultaneously, the strengthening of NATO in multiple directions

represents one of the most significant international responses to the Ukrainian crisis.

In contrast, Russia seeks to enhance alliances with China, India, South Africa, Brazil, North Korea, Turkey, Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Iran, and Serbia, attempting to establish a new alliance that would represent adequate parity and a new balance of power in international relations.

The exacerbation of relations between Russia and the West in the context of the war in Ukraine could have implications for the Western Balkansas mentioned above, it has been a hotspot of European security issues for some time. An important segment of the strategy to regain spheres of influence lost after the Cold War consists of pro-Russian forces in the former Yugoslav republics, whose role the international community often overlooks.

The Western Balkans is a region characterised by weak governance, fragile civil society, geopolitical disputes, as well as internal and regional factors that make it highly susceptible to local and external disinformation campaigns, which Russia consistently exploits. This particularly applies to Montenegro, one of the youngest and smallest European states, with very limited military and security resources.

The Main Reasons for Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine

The source of the Ukrainian problem lies in the country's protracted and complex history, during which its borders were frequently altered in the Soviet era, resulting in a diverse range of population identities. These identities vary from the predominantly anti-Russian and pro-Western identity of Galicia in the northwest to the predominantly pro-Russian Crimea in the far southeast. After Ukraine became internationally recognised as an independent state in 1991 for the first time, this diverse identity landscape had a political consequence, leading to shifts in power between political forces predominantly relying on support from the northwestern or southeastern halves of the country, which can be described as a political seesaw. Following Viktor Yanukovych's victory in the 2010 presidential elections, it appeared for a while that this seesaw had tilted in favour of the pro-Russian southeast. However, in late 2013, the situation became complicated due to Yanukovych's refusal (under pressure from Moscow) to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. A three-month-long political crisis escalated into violent clashes on the streets of Kyiv and a coup in February 2014, following the "Euromaidan" violation of the agreement on a transitional government that the opposition had reached with Yanukovych (Petrović, 2010).

Under the direct influence and with the direct organisation and support of Moscow, pro-Russian political forces in Crimea responded by holding a referendum in March 2014, in which the majority of the participating pro-Russian citizens voted for independence from Ukraine and to join Russia. Russia secured and supported this declaration via military intervention. Crimea was annexed to Russia with the presence of Russian military forces as one of the autonomous republics, a move that did not receive international recognition. In the rest of the conditionally pro-Russian part of Ukraine, the situation was also complicated due to the willingness of the Donbas region (Donetsk and Luhansk) to arm themselves against Ukrainian forces, as well as the Ukrainian readiness to suppress the rebellion. During 2014 and early 2015, a civil war ensued in which Russia, through direct military support to the so-called "rebels", prevented the Ukrainian army from defeating those "rebels" and allowed a ceasefire to be achieved *and* also managed to retain control over parts of Donbas through two agreements reached in Minsk in 2015. From then on until the immediate Russian aggression on February 24th, 2022, this conflict remained frozen due to the absence of a political solution. The escalation occurred with Russia's attack on Ukraine, with over 100,000 soldiers being deployed along the entire Russo-Ukrainian land and sea border, from the far north to the far southwest.

Source: https://ichef.bbci.co.uk/news/976/cpsprodpb/B6E3/production/_130091864_ukraine_control_quad_13_06_23_2x640-nc.png.webp (Access 9.10.2023).

This represents an unprecedented act of aggression in modern European history since the end of the Cold War. The attack and conduct of the war ruthlessly, brutally, and intentionally violated not just all international legal and humanitarian rules, but also other rules regulating the behaviour of sovereign and independent states in international relations, committed by one of the permanent members of the UN Security Council. This attack is, therefore, a precedent that needs to be halted, followed by international mediation and negotiations, and concluded with a peace agreement, while holding those responsible for committing war crimes accountable. European and global political, diplomatic, legal, and military history have numerous examples and experiences of how to address such situations. Recent events following the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia can serve as a starting point for prosecuting war crimes, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) based in The Hague (IFIMES, 2022).

Vladimir Putin's regime launched an attack on Ukraine, an independent sovereign state, without justification, without prior notice, and without attempting to address the alleged causes through existing international mechanisms, through what he saw as a reason to resort to the use of military force and war as a solution. There has not been a case such as this one in European history since the end of the Cold War. The wars in the former Yugoslavia, culminating in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, were part of the events surrounding the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the broader international context of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the USSR (Lampe, 2004). In this particular case, there is no way the aggressor could find any justification for its actions. Even if there were, war is not the way to seek solutions. Furthermore, the aggressor consistently claimed or misled the global public and leading Western politicians by stating that there would be no war, no attack, and that units would be withdrawn from border areas after military exercises, all of which were said in an extremely cynical tone. When the attack began, Mr Putin labelled it a "special operation," a sarcastic and arrogant evasion of its true name.

It is also important to note that Ukraine was a member of the UN (as was Belarus) when it was still part of the former Soviet Union. After its dissolution, the Russian Federation and Ukraine established productive and peaceful neighbourly cooperation. The pinnacle of this cooperation was reached with the Minsk Agreement of 1993, under which Ukraine transferred all of its nuclear arsenals to the Russian Federation in exchange for security guarantees and independence. This was also confirmed by the signing of the Memorandum on Security Assurances under the auspices

of the OSCE in Budapest in 1994, which welcomed Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine into the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT).

In military and political terms, 2022's attack represents a continuation of Putin's policy of destabilising the Russia-EU/NATO space, which is reflected in the creation of frozen conflicts using a combination of political, military, and hybrid methods. This is also a revival of Brezhnev's geopolitics – Russian imperialism has not disappeared, and Russia has not abandoned the two former Brezhnev doctrines of limited sovereignty and forward defence (Vukadinović, 2008). Events are unfolding in line with these doctrines. Based on these principles, new doctrines were developed on which Putin founded his foreign policy when he became President of Russia in 2000. The document "National Security Concept" from 1997 was amended and supplemented in 2000 (the so-called "Putin doctrine"). The "National Security Strategy until 2020" document (adopted in May 2009, and amended and supplemented in 2015), points out that the main threats to the national security of the Russian Federation are:

a) NATO;
b) the deployment of anti-missile defence systems in Europe;
c) Asia and the Middle East;
d) EU and US support to Ukraine, right-wing nationalism in Ukraine, WMD;
e) terrorism;
f) misuse of ICT;
g) transnational organised crime and;
h) climate change and more.

Good examples include the attack on Georgia in 2008, subsequently leading to declarations of independence by Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and, seven months after the aggression on Ukraine, Moscow, contrary to international law, declared four Ukrainian regions as Russian territory. Preceding this, referendums were held in wartime conditions in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine, as well as in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions in the south, subsequently formalised as part of Russia's territory. Simultaneously, a classic occupation is ongoing in Transnistria (Pridnestrovie) within Moldova, where former Soviet, now Russian, units remain on the territory of this independent state, which specifically chose a neutral status for this very reason. In all of these cases, the pretext is the protection of Russian-speaking populations subjected to violence and inappropriate treatment by certain countries. This raises the question of what would happen if

sovereign states were to attack other sovereign states based on the language and alleged protection of their population, particularly in multi-ethnic societies.

The Implications of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine on the Stability of NATO and the EU

The Russian aggression in Ukraine has resulted in a tectonic disruption of the international order. The United States, Russia, and China today stand at the greatest distance from each other since the end of the Cold War. Regardless of the outcome of the conflict in Ukraine, it could signify a turning point in global security infrastructure, given that this conflict has raised questions regarding national sovereignty, democracy versus autocracy, human rights, and the global world order, with evident implications for the world economy amid increasingly unstable global markets. The abrupt rise in commodity prices is the most immediate economic consequence of the aggression in Ukraine, and the war threatens supplies of essential goods from both Russia and Ukraine, including food, energy, and fertiliser. Disruption to or the cessation of grain shipments through Black Sea ports could have catastrophic consequences for food security in impoverished countries. Concurrently, Russia's aggression in Ukraine has resulted in the largest refugee and immigrant crisis in Europe since World War II.

Contrary to Putin's expectations that the high dependence of major European countries such as Germany, France, and Italy on Russian energy resources would lead to discord among EU Member States and subsequently with the United States, this did not materialise. Instead, Russia's aggression against Ukraine has united the EU and NATO more than ever since the times of World War II. At the time of the writing of this work, all European states, except for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, have imposed a range of economic and other sanctions against Russia. Ukraine has been granted candidate status for EU membership, and its army has received substantial assistance in terms of weaponry and equipment for the successful conduct of the war with Russia. Up to this point, the United States has provided Ukraine with over $70 billion, while the EU has contributed €68 billion. The United Nations General Assembly has adopted two resolutions condemning Russia's aggression against Ukraine by an overwhelming majority.

In contrast, Russia seeks to enhance its alliance with countries such as China, India, South Africa, Brazil, North Korea, Turkey, Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Iran, and Serbia, attempting to create a new alliance that would

represent a significant parity and a new balance of power in international relations.

Considering that Russia is the world's largest country in terms of territory, with still highly significant and underutilised natural resources, whether it can emerge from this highly complicated situation without significant consequences or whether its actions have led both itself and the rest of the world into a game of Russian roulette with an uncertain outcome remains to be seen in the near future.

Russian Aggression Against Ukraine and Changes in NATO

The Summit in Madrid on July 1st, 2022, provided NATO with an opportunity to return to its core purpose: the collective defence of the Euro-Atlantic area, after a long period of attempting to articulate its role following the end of the Cold War especially after September 11th, 2001. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been a growing awareness of the significance of NATO membership. Concerns regarding its relevance and obsolescence (which French President Emmanuel Macron characterised as "brain death" in 2021) have been replaced with increased enthusiasm for strengthening the Alliance.

The strengthening of NATO in multiple directions represents one of the most significant international responses to the Ukrainian crisis. The new NATO Strategic Concept, adopted on June 28–29, 2022, (Nort-Atlantic Council, 2022) focuses on Russia as the main security threat, including cyber activities that could potentially trigger the collective defence clause of the Alliance. The new concept also revises NATO's approach to China, which was previously referred to as a partner but is now considered a challenge to the rules-based global order.

This represents the most significant change in the post-Cold War history of the Alliance, with a sharpened and expanded focus on NATO's purpose and clear signals to major Asian allies of the United States: Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea.

Progress in defence spending by most NATO member states, as well as a significant increase in the number of high-readiness troops (from 40,000 to 300,000 within one year) with new deployments along Russia's borders, will make NATO even stronger, more unified, and focused on its mission with significantly more resources.

The accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO, both of which decided to abandon their traditional neutrality and join the Alliance in response to the Russian threat, will enhance NATO's credibility and expand the land area of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe's (SACEUR) operations by over 866,000 square kilometres, altering the European

security architecture. Seven out of eight Arctic Council members will be NATO members, aligning NATO more closely with the EU in terms of membership; only Austria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Malta are EU members but not NATO members. Finland and Sweden have the capability to manoeuvre and conduct operations in Arctic conditions on land and at sea, as well as control the airspace in the northern Baltic Sea region. As longtime NATO partners, their partnership spanning two decades and with extensive experience in joint military exercises, the Finnish and Swedish armed forces are NATO-compatible and interoperable. With Finland and Sweden's joining, NATO's eastern border will move closer to two important Russian cities: St. Petersburg, a vital naval port, and Murmansk, a key military base housing the Russian Northern Fleet with its nuclear submarines. The new border will enable the establishment of a new defence ring for entire Western Europe, as air defence capabilities and early warning systems will be based closer to the Alliance's border.

The concept specifies that NATO and the European Union will increase cooperation with China and emphasise the importance of the Indo-Pacific for NATO, noting that "events in that region can directly affect Euro-Atlantic security". Therefore, NATO will strengthen its "dialogue and cooperation" with its Indo-Pacific partners, including Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea, whose leaders participated in the aforementioned Madrid summit for the first time. For the first time in an official document, it is mentioned that "hybrid operations against allies could reach the level of armed attack and could lead the North Atlantic Alliance to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty" (NATO 2022 Strategic Concept).

The concept emphasises that the Western Balkans and the Black Sea region are strategically important for the Alliance, which will continue to support the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of countries in these regions and intensify efforts to enhance their ability to respond to various challenges and threats they face, as well as to increase their resilience to malicious influences from third parties. The significant announcements contained in the Strategic Concept will undoubtedly pose significant challenges for NATO member states and carry the risk of a loss of credibility if not adequately supported.

The Effects of Russian Aggression on Ukraine and on Changes in the EU

Moscow's demands for a revision of the European security order and its insistence on a so-called "sphere of influence" in its neighbourhood, effectively limiting the sovereignty of neighbouring countries, ultimately

found expression through the Russian invasion of Ukraine, marking the most serious conflict in Europe since the end of World War II. Prior to the war in Ukraine, Russia was the primary source of energy supplies for the rest of Europe, Russia being the world's largest exporter of natural gas, the second-largest exporter of crude oil, and the third-largest exporter of coal. Three-quarters of its gas and almost half of its crude oil were directed towards Europe. Russian threats and coercion by reducing or halting energy supplies to EU Member States resulted in the European Commission announcing a complete phase-out of Russian fossil fuels by 2030, along with plans to drastically reduce the use of Russian gas and increase gas storage capacity. Many saw the war in Ukraine as an opportunity for the EU not only to free itself from dependence on Russian energy but also to meet climate protection goals by developing renewable energy sources and enhancing energy efficiency. The EU's plans to make Europe independent of Russian energy "well before 2030" represent an energy revolution that involves potentially conflicting ambitions, including diversifying imports and significantly expanding the use of renewable energy. In any case, policymakers will face very difficult political choices, along with significant costs and the need to overcome serious dilemmas (Thompson, Pronk, van Manen, 2021).

In response to the Russian invasion, Kyiv officially applied for EU membership, to which the European Commission responded by recommending candidate status for Ukraine, along with the Republic of Moldova, a recommendation that was unanimously approved by the twenty-seven EU leaders in June 2022. Besides its other clear effects, this decision also signals that the response to Russia's aggression is considered a shared responsibility of all EU Member States.

Any unease stemming from the feeling that other countries with clear European aspirations have been overlooked was replaced by a widespread sense of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. After accepting the French proposal to overcome the Bulgarian/North Macedonian dispute over identity issues, the EU held an intergovernmental conference with North Macedonia and Albania in Brussels on July 19th, 2022, officially commencing negotiations with those two countries. North Macedonia was granted candidate status in 2005, but it had to wait until 2022, firstly due to a dispute with Greece over the country's name and then with Bulgaria over identity issues. Albania was granted candidate status in 2014 but also had to wait as it was part of a package for commencing negotiations with North Macedonia. At the same time, Ukraine and Moldova will metaphorically jump ahead of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in the Eurointegration process. The latter two have been waiting for an

invitation with the status of potential candidates for years, with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg designating Bosnia and Herzegovina, along with Moldova and Georgia, as states where Russia could provoke new instability.

Likely prompted by this development, and combined with the accelerated granting of candidate status to Ukraine and Moldova primarily motivated by political and security factors, government heads of EU Member States confirmed the European Commission's recommendation and awarded candidate status to Bosnia and Herzegovina on its path to European Union membership at a summit held on December 15th, 2022. Bosnia and Herzegovina became a potential candidate for EU membership in 2022 after having submitted its candidacy application in 2016. As previously emphasised in the recommendation, Bosnia and Herzegovina was asked to work on reforms and fulfil the 14 priorities set by the European Commission, which had already been assigned to Bosnia and Herzegovina back in 2019. Concerning Kosovo, the European Parliament adopted a decision on visa liberalisation for Kosovo on April 18th, 2023, concluding all relevant decision-making procedures. In line with the agreed text of the decision, Kosovo citizens will be able to travel freely to Schengen area countries from January 1, 2024.

Russia, the EU, and the Western Balkans

On Europe Day, May 9th, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron delivered a speech in which he emphasised that EU Member States, faced with this new geopolitical context, must find a clear way of thinking about Europe, its unity, and stability. He stated, "We have a historic duty *not* to do what we have always done and say that the only solution is accession, and I am telling you this honestly, but rather to open historical reflection appropriate to the events we are experiencing about the organisation of our continent". He highlighted that the European Union, given its level of integration and ambitions, cannot be the sole means of structuring the European continent in the short term. Furthermore, he added, "our historical duty is to respond to this question today and create what I would describe here as a *European political community*". While states from the Western Balkans may eventually join the EU, in the short or medium term, they might remain stuck in the European so-called "waiting room of concentric circles" without a realistic chance of obtaining EU membership.

Not everyone in the rest of the EU shares Macron's opinion. The prospects for EU enlargement can also be viewed within a scenario that involves deepening the institutional and legal ties between Ukraine and

the EU after the end of the war, but not full membership. This model could also be applied to Turkey and the Western Balkans. On the other hand, the potential halt to the European integration process, a decline in the prospects of EU membership, or redirecting the Western Balkans to an "alternative European track" would likely exacerbate negative political and security trends in the region and contribute to the growing dissatisfaction among its citizens. Despite strong public support for the European integration process in all Western Balkan countries (Serbia being the exception), possible political and socio-economic stagnation and the lack of tangible results on the European path would certainly create additional space for the strengthening of right-wing, anti-European forces and the activities of third parties, along with the maintenance and strengthening of Russian influence and the growth of China's economic and political presence in the Western Balkans.

Security risks in the Western Balkans have also been noted in the "Strategic compass for stronger security and defense of the EU until 2030" (European Council, 2022), which states that "security and stability in the entire Western Balkans are not yet complete, also due to increasing foreign interference, including information manipulation campaigns, as well as the potential spill-over from the current deterioration of the European security situation". It calls for "tangible progress in the rule of law and reforms based on European values, rules, and standards" and acknowledges that "the European perspective is a strategic choice, of fundamental importance for all partners aspiring to EU membership".

Considering the new geopolitical context following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which poses a challenge to Euro-Atlantic Europe and potentially leaves the Western Balkans exposed as a battleground for future conflicts, a timely EU response that involves concrete actions to integrate the region could preempt the spread of malign influences in the region.

The Effects of Russia's Aggression Against Ukraine on the Western Balkans

The escalating tensions between Russia and the West in the context of the war in Ukraine could also have repercussions in the Western Balkans, which has traditionally been a sensitive point in European security. An important segment of the strategy to reclaim spheres of influence lost after the Cold War involves pro-Russian forces in the former Yugoslav republics, whose role is often overlooked by the international community. Therefore, the best way to understand Russia's role in its close cross-border neighbourhood, including the Western Balkans, and to project its power generally, is the thesis that Russia views its neighbours as either

enemies or vassals – vassals it controls, and enemies it politically and militarily intimidates.

Consequently, a possible gateway to the region could be Serbia, which, like Russia, has not accepted territorial losses from the 1990s after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and questions the independence of the successor states, assuming a role similar to that of Russia's in Ukraine since 2014. In this sense, a clear analogy can be drawn between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, or Russia and Serbia as their largest states, where it is implied that Moscow and Belgrade assert historical rights to spheres of influence in their respective neighbourhoods.

In light of the war-based developments in Ukraine, Serbia has found itself in a delicate position, attempting to navigate between Russian interests and the West. While it condemned the endangerment of Ukraine's territorial integrity and supported the adoption of a UN resolution condemning Russian aggression, Serbia is the only European country that has not imposed sanctions on Russia, along with Bosnia and Herzegovina, which, due to its specific political structure, has been blocked by Republika Srpska from making such a decision. By refusing to support democratic principles and values, Serbia's official policy has returned to the starting points of Milošević's policies from the early 1990s and aligned itself with Russia's murderous, aggressive policies. The invasion of Ukraine introduced new circumstances, and Serbia's recognisable position of methaphorically sitting on two chairs has lost its significance. If this country does not turn toward the West and accelerate its European integration, it could lead to a halt in its negotiation process with the European Union and a form of deeper political isolation.

The Kremlin, directly and indirectly through its proxies in the Balkans, undermines the chances of regional countries for NATO membership while having an ambiguous stance towards the European Union. Russia promotes an alliance with Russia as a political, military, and economic alternative to the West. Through its key exponents in the Western Balkans and proxies for destabilising other countries, Russia could cause instability with deeper security implications to redirect the West's (NATO's) attention to this part of the European continent. In this regard, one should not overlook the assessments that, after the attack on Ukraine, Russia might attempt to further destabilise the Western Balkans, as the escalation of the crisis in Ukraine has been accompanied by radicalisation in Western Balkan countries, especially given the behaviour of Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, which has nearly led to the disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with continued conflict between Serbia and Kosovo. To prevent possible interethnic conflicts,

EUFOR Althea sent, on March 4th, 2022, an additional 500 troops as an emergency measure. More troops came from Austria, Bulgaria, Romania, and Slovakia while Russia invaded Ukraine. An additional 500 EUFOR soldiers were deployed to parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina where incidents have been recorded, especially in returnee settlements, according to the head of the European Union (EU) delegation to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Johann Sattler. EUFOR Althea is the EU's longest-running military operation, its only land mission, and the only mission with an executive mandate to use force.

The Western Balkans is a region characterised by weak governance, fragile civil society, and geopolitical disputes, both internal and regional, which make it highly susceptible to local and foreign disinformation campaigns. The region's democratic vulnerability favours Russia's activities, which, since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the sanctions imposed by the EU and the US, has launched an extensive disinformation campaign in the Western Balkans aimed at undermining the values and perceptions of the EU and the US and obstructing the ambitions of regional countries on their path to European and transatlantic integration (NATO, 2015).

This extensive campaign involves several narratives through which the Kremlin seeks to achieve its political goals in the region, which it spreads through organisations and exponents that are not members of political parties. Within this network, there are numerous non-governmental organisations, associations, and fraternities closely linked to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), which, in coordination with the Russian Orthodox Church, conducts a continuous information campaign. Some media outlets directly disseminate disinformation and propaganda from Russian media controlled by the Kremlin (Atlantic Council of Montenegro, 2022).

Immediately after Russia attacked Ukraine, media activities under Kremlin control, as well as those of their followers in Montenegro, intensified. The daily dissemination of narratives, propaganda, and disinformation campaigns aims to distort reality and deceive the public. Numerous narratives and a series of dubious information pieces, video recordings, and photographs that have appeared in Russian state media were also transmitted by certain Montenegrin and regional media. While almost all Western Balkan countries have been targeted by pro-Russian disinformation campaigns in recent years, at the local level, this has hardly been recognised as a security problem or even an issue of interest. The situation on the ground is not encouraging, and the region seems particularly susceptible to fake news and misinformation. This is confirmed

by the Media Literacy Index of the Open Society Institute, which has consistently ranked Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia at the bottom of the list of 35 countries as European states least prepared to identify and combat fake news, largely due to the state of the media and education. In the 11th package of sanctions against Russia, the European Union included sanctions to prohibit the broadcast of Russia Today in the Serbian language. However, Serbia has not taken any measures against Russia since the beginning of the aggression in Ukraine, despite calls from Brussels, which is perplexing as the country is a candidate for EU membership and is expected to align its foreign policy with EU policies.

Various activities of state, formal, and informal actors contribute to this situation, which, through their actions, contribute to disinformation and the spread of nationalist policies in the Western Balkans. A very good example is the "Non-Paper" by Janez Janša from April 2021, titled "Western Balkans – The Way Forward," which was published on the Slovenian portal necenzurisano.si on April 14th, 2021. This document emphasises the unresolved national issues of Serbs, Albanians, and Croats as the main issue in the Western Balkans, whose EU membership is guaranteed when all countries meet the conditions set forth by the European Council's decision in Thessaloniki back in 2003. Later, the then-Prime Minister of Slovenia denied that he had participated in the creation of this document, but it was made available to the entire European and broader public, and it specified new maps in the Balkans that implied Kosovo's accession to Albania, Republika Srpska to Serbia, and Herzegovina to Croatia. This project stimulated and motivated nationalism in these states, while causing panic and a fear of new wars among Montenegrins, Bosniaks, and Macedonians, on whose behalf this project would be implemented, similar to the conflicts of the 1990s.

In a continuation of the negative campaign, the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, visited Moscow on May 22nd, 2023, and discussed "important geopolitical issues" with Putin. By these actions, he showed that he does not respect any institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina and openly works against Bosnia and Herzegovina's integration into the EU, given the EU's sanctions against Russia. Immediately afterwards, on June 21st, 2023, members of the Parliament of Republika Srpska voted to cease publishing the decrees and laws of the High Representative of the OHR, Christian Schmidt, in the Official Gazette, which means that in this entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they will no longer be recognised as official laws because, "in their opinion", the UN Security Council did not confirm his appointment.

This action directly violates the implementation of the Dayton Agreement, as the High Representative is responsible for monitoring the implementation of peace throughout the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Just a few days later, on June 27th, 2023, the National Assembly of Republika Srpska decided not to apply the decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina on its territory anymore. This legislative body adopted the Law on the Non-Implementation of Decisions of the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Republika Srpska, with 56 votes in favour out of 65 present deputies (Dnevne novine Vijesti, 2023a). Thus, the official policy in Republika Srpska has further complicated an already very complex situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and created the conditions for its secession, which would result in a new war in the Balkans. In response to Republika Srpska's actions, the Prosecutor's Office and the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina have acted. The Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina proposed in an indictment against the President of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, that he be prohibited from performing the function of the president along with any public function in accordance with the provisions of the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina confirmed the indictment on September 11th, 2023 against Dodik and the Director of the Official Gazette of Republika Srpska, Miloš Lukić, who are charged with the criminal offence of the non-execution of the decisions of the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of these developments further complicate the security situation, which could be effectively exploited by Russia to provoke new conflicts in the country (Dnevne Novine Vijesti, 2023b).

Since declaring independence in 2008, the political debate and rhetoric in Kosovo have primarily focused on EU membership. European and Euro-Atlantic ambitions for Kosovo were also included in the Declaration of Independence. However, unregulated relations with Serbia, a country which blocks Kosovo's integration into international structures, along with mutual accusations between the two sides on various issues have hindered both parties on the path to EU integration. So far, with the mediation of EU officials, 12 agreements have been reached, almost none of which have been fully implemented. The first technical dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo for the normalisation of relations was held on March 22nd, 2011, in Brussels. One of the most important of those dialogues is considered to be the Agreement on the Principles of Normalization of Relations, signed on April 19th, 2013, known as the Brussels Agreement, and which envisaged the formation of the Community of Serbian Municipalities in northern Kosovo. However, even after 10 years since this Agreement was

signed, there has been no initial progress on this issue due to different views on the implementation model of this Agreement.

In an attempt to find a satisfactory solution for both sides, the EU engaged a Special Representative for the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, Miroslav Lajčák, and the US's Gabriel Escobar, who, through synchronised action, managed to reach two agreements that promised that this issue would finally be resolved. The first agreement on the normalisation of economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo was signed on September 4th, 2020 at the White House in the presence of then-US President Donald Trump. Two versions of the document for the Serbian and Kosovan sides were signed by the current President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, followed by Prime Minister of Kosovo Avdullah Hoti. US officials assessed the Washington Agreement as a new beginning for the Western Balkans (European Western Balkans, 2023).

Ten years after the signing of the *Brussels Agreement*, on the initiative of the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, and the Chancellor of Germany, Olaf Scholz, with direct mediation by the Commissioner for Foreign Policy and Security, Josep Borrell, in Ohrid on March 18th, 2023, after 12 hours of negotiations, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti, reached an agreement on the *Implementation Annex of the Agreement on the Path to the Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia*.

Unfortunately, like all previous agreements, these latest ones did not yield any of the expected results. Instead of an agreement on the formation of the Community of Serbian Municipalities and the implementation of other agreed principles, Serbs in northern Kosovo, under the direct influence of Belgrade, abandoned all Kosovo institutions, including the police, at the beginning of 2023. Subsequently, they refused to participate in local elections, which were organised and conducted by Kosovo authorities with the participation of Albanians and representatives of national minorities, but without any Serbs. Immediately after the elections, newly elected municipal officials, mostly of Albanian origin, assumed positions in all municipalities where Serbs made up the majority. Serbian demonstrators reacted in such a way to attempt to prevent their entry into municipal buildings.

On May 30th, 2023, during violent protests, 30 KFOR (NATO) personnel and 52 demonstrators were injured. To prevent any further escalation of the conflict, NATO decided to urgently reinforce KFOR with 700 new personnel. At the same time, the National Security Council of Serbia authorised the President of Serbia to raise the combat readiness of the Serbian Army to level I and to deploy special police forces along

the administrative border with Kosovo. Already on June 27th, 2023, the EU took measures due to the lack of actions for de-escalation in the northern Kosovo situation and informed the Government of Kosovo of those measures.

However, instead of de-escalation and a reduction of tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, on September 24th, 2023, in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo, an armed group of Serbs attacked a Kosovo Police patrol, resulting in the death of a Kosovo Police officer. In a counter-action by the Kosovo Police, three members of the armed Serbian group were killed, and six were arrested. The Government of the Republic of Kosovo characterised this action as a terrorist act and sought assistance from the United States, the EU, and NATO (Dnevne Novine Vijesti, 2023c).

To prevent future conflicts, at the meeting of the North Atlantic Council of NATO on September 30th, 2023, it was decided that more military troops would be deployed to Kosovo. As stated by the NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg, the allies of the alliance expressed deep concern about the growing tensions in northern Kosovo (CDM, 2023).

All these events are indicative of the deliberate implementation of a negative campaign and the creation of conditions for the atmosphere of insecurity and fear in the Western Balkans, especially in unstable areas such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

The Impact of Russian Aggression Against Ukraine on Montenegro

As one of the smallest states in Europe, Montenegro regained its independence in 2006 by separating from Serbia. After 11 years, on June 5th, 2017, it became a member of NATO (Tahirović, Petrić, 2015), after having obtained candidate status for EU membership in 2010 (Djurović et al., 2010), with official negotiations with the EU beginning in 2012. Often regarded as a leader in EU integration efforts in the Western Balkans, Montenegro opened all 33 negotiation chapters while closing 3 chapters. Unfortunately, for the past three years, Montenegro has not achieved the expected results in the negotiation process and has not closed any further chapters.

After a change in government after 30 years in Montenegro, on August 30th, 2020, all the weaknesses of Montenegrin institutions, its vulnerability, and division within Montenegrin society became evident. The Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) played a key role in this process of change. During the COVID-19 pandemic, and with disregard to the measures taken by the state to protect the population, the SPC organised

daily processions in the form of protests against the government's law on the status of the SPC in Montenegro. Thus, the new 42nd Government of Montenegro was practically formed in early December 2020 in the Ostrog Monastery, which the new Prime Minister, Zdravko Krivokapić, referred to as the government of the "*12 apostles*."

After just 16 months, that government lost its legitimacy, and the 43rd Government of Montenegro, known as the "Minority Government" was formed, led by Dritan Abazović, the former Deputy Prime Minister. Mr Abazović's government lost parliamentary support after only 100 days due to its signing of the Fundamental Agreement with the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) in Montenegro. The opaque process of drafting and signing the agreement, which recognises the legal continuity of the SPC in Montenegro for six centuries longer than in its home country of Serbia and prescribes a series of state obligations towards the SPC, was a stumbling block within the parliamentary majority. The latest political crisis related to the relationship with the SPC can be interpreted as that which is likely to deepen ideological divisions and social antagonisms, which Russia may seek to exploit through its proxies in Montenegro. The three most recent governments in Montenegro have lost support due to issues related to the SPC, and it is inevitable that the long-standing political instability will result in Montenegro slowing down on its European path.

The process of change in Montenegro effectively began with the emergence of a new political entity, the Europe Now Movement (PES), whose candidate, Jakov Milatovic, defeated a 30-year political leader and former President of Montenegro in the second round of the presidential elections on April 2nd, 2023. In the parliamentary elections held on June 11th, 2023, the same political entity, PES, won the most seats in the Montenegrin parliament (24 seats), and the process of forming a new government of Montenegro is underway. Whether Montenegro, with a significantly rejuvenated structure of party cadres, will manage to overcome existing political and national divisions and embark on an intensive process of meeting the necessary standards and norms for EU membership, or whether the antagonisms will continue and culminate in unforeseeable consequences for Montenegro, remains to be seen.

Considering its fragile institutions and inadequate capacity to protect government infrastructure, coupled with a high level of organised crime and corruption within the security system, Montenegro is highly susceptible to various forms of cyberattacks and the influence of disinformation and negative campaigns. Following cyberattacks in 2016 and 2017 during the finalisation of Montenegro's accession to NATO, which coincided with parliamentary elections in October 2016 and were orchestrated by the

Russian military intelligence service GRU, specifically their ATP28 group employing sophisticated tools globally targeting Kremlin opponents, Montenegro faced poweful cyberattacks again in August 2022. The target of those attacks was the entire information technology infrastructure of the Government of Montenegro, which rendered official websites and emails inaccessible, and employees of state institutions were instructed to disconnect their computers from the network to protect data.

The National Security Agency of Montenegro announced that Russian agencies were behind this cyberattack, categorising it as a so-called "hybrid" war that had been prepared over an extended period and had not been executed in any other country to date. NATO allies were informed about the attack, and the United States, along with France, sent teams to Montenegro to work with their Montenegrin counterparts in mitigating the consequences of the most serious cyberattack on the government's information and telecommunications infrastructure thus far. Simultaneously, an initiative was launched, highlighting the readiness to support the establishment of a regional cyber protection centre in Montenegro (Montenegro Atlantic Council, 2022).

Key judicial institutions in Montenegro have been blocked for two years, requiring a two-thirds majority for their appointments. However, the process of electing the President of the Supreme Court and the Chief State Prosecutor has been blocked for an extended period due to party interests that play a crucial role in the selection of members of the Judicial and Prosecutorial Councils. Considering that, in the past two years, and with direct assistance from Europol, representatives of key security institutions from the previous thirty-year regime have been arrested, such as the President of the Supreme Court of Montenegro, the former Director of the Police of Montenegro, the President of the Administrative Court, as well as numerous senior officials from the Police Directorate and the National Security Agency, it can be concluded that organised crime had had a significant influence on the functioning of key security institutions in Montenegro. Therefore, organised crime, corruption, and the exploitation of ethnic and religious differences by political structures in Montenegro are the key issues that have entirely hindered the country's integration into the EU. Whatever the mandate for the formation of the new 44th Government of Montenegro, President of the Europe Now Movement Milojko Spajic, will succeed in forming a credible, pro-European government in the coming period remains to be seen. In any case, Montenegro faces significant challenges and threats in the future. Given the country's political, ethnic, and religious divisions, as well as the very weak state and number of local institutions that lack

the adequate capacity to resist information campaigns and disinformation coming from Russia and being executed through the state organs of the Republic of Serbia and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, the developments in the coming period are yet to unfold.

Conclusions

Taking into account the historical process of the formation and legacy of the Russian Federation, its Euro-Asian territorial position, the heterogeneity of its population, and the potential of its natural resources, alongside its absolutist system of governance bearing significant characteristics inherited from the Russian Empire and the communist USSR, it can be concluded that it significantly differs from the Western value system and the functioning of democratic Western societies. In developing antagonism toward Western civilisational values, where the Russian Orthodox Church also plays a significant role, Vladimir Putin's Russia has constructed an authoritarian and oligarchic system of rule in the state, and seeks to restore the power and position of the Russian Federation in the international community, reminiscent of the Soviet era.

In addition to substantial energy resources, including vast quantities of natural gas and oil, the Russian Federation possesses one of the largest nuclear potentials in the world, particularly concerning nuclear weapons with tactical warheads. Through this, it has threatened and imposed continuous threats on its neighbours and European states.

Furthermore, Russia aims to create a new system of international relations where the United States and the European Union will not have a leading role, through new alliances with similar authoritarian regimes, primarily including China, India, South Africa, Brazil, North Korea, Turkey, Syria, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Iran, as well as Serbia. By utilising the pan-Slavic cultural heritage and its closeness to Orthodox churches, especially the Serbian Orthodox Church, Russia skillfully conducts continuous information propaganda and influences Slavic peoples in the Balkans, attempting to divert them from pro-Western orientations and win them over for the realisation of its foreign policy objectives.

However, with its aggression against Ukraine, one of the largest former Soviet states and a state with significant grain resources in Europe, Russia, as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, exposed the perfidious governance system in Russia entirely and has achieved the opposite effect of what was expected. The European Union has significantly united and finally made decisions to find appropriate mechanisms to enable permanent independence from Russian energy

sources. All European countries (except Belarus, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) have united in providing unconditional support and assistance to Ukraine while simultaneously imposing a broad range of sanctions on Russia. NATO has united more than ever in its history, and has simultaneously strengthened ties with two additional members, Finland and Sweden, both of which are direct neighbours of Russia.

In this process, alongside Ukraine and Moldova, the biggest challenge for the EU is the Western Balkans. The enlargement process and the admission of new EU members are significantly lagging, primarily due to:

- dysfunctional Balkan states and the slow fulfilment of assigned standards in the accession process,
- problems in the functioning of the EU following the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's aggression against Ukraine, necessitating a new approach to the enlargement process,
- the malignant and continuous hybrid influence of Russia, using traditional methods through the Russian Orthodox Church on specific states and peoples in the Balkans.

Furthermore, the security situation continuously becomes evermore complicated in the Western Balkans, where stabilisation following the wars in the former Yugoslavia has not been achieved. Balkan political leaders still dominate the political scene on nationalist grounds, exploiting the national and religious divisions that exist in the region. This state of affairs is particularly evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as they are in relations between Serbia and Kosovo, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Montenegro, Albania and North Macedonia, and also between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Balkan nationalists, emboldened by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, have initiated various political activities to redraw borders in the Balkans, aiming to unite territories where their people live (Serbia, Croatia, and Albania).

To prevent such dangerous tendencies, it is necessary, above all, to engage the EU and the US more concretely in strengthening support for Western Balkan countries on the economic and security fronts, enabling this region to maintain its pro-Western course and become a part of the EU as soon as possible.

How President Putin of Russia will react in such a highly unfavourable situation remains to be seen. Whether he will try to open a new front in the Western Balkans, thereby damaging the EU and NATO, or whether it will be a new front in Russia's immediate vicinity or the Middle East, or whether he will resort to drastic measures involving the use of tactical nuclear weapons in Ukraine, potentially leading to a third world war is unknown, yet something we may face in the near future.

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Disinformation and Its Influence on Democratic Processes in Montenegro

Abstract
This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive and clear overview of Russian objectives and sources of influence and disinformation in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on democratic processes in Montenegro. This contextualised approach is based on an analysis of disinformation efforts and activities through the specific lenses of key events such as the parliamentary elections in 2016, 2020, and 2023, Montenegro's fully fledged membership in NATO, and the population census. These events are critical moments in the country's recent history and have been susceptible to external influences, particularly from sources aiming to shape narratives and perceptions. By examining disinformation efforts surrounding these events along with the insights into the strategies employed and the narratives promoted, the impact on public discourse is highlighted. This analysis can help identify patterns, understand the evolution of disinformation tactics, and assess the overall influence of external actors in shaping the information landscape in Montenegro during these significant events.

Keywords: Disinformation, Fake News, Democratic Processes, Montenegro, Russia

Introduction

This chapter aims to provide a comprehensive and clear overview of Russian objectives and sources of influence and disinformation in the Western Balkans, with a specific focus on democratic processes in Montenegro. This contextualised approach is based on analysis of disinformation efforts and activities through the specific lenses of key events such as the parliamentary elections in 2016, 2020, and 2023,

Montenegro's fully fledged membership in NATO, and the population census. These events are critical moments in the country's recent history and have been susceptible to external influences, particularly from sources aiming to shape narratives and perceptions.

By examining disinformation efforts surrounding these events along with insights into the strategies employed and the narratives promoted, the impact on public discourse is highlighted. This analysis can help identify patterns, understand the evolution of disinformation tactics, and assess the overall influence of external actors in shaping the information landscape in Montenegro during these significant events.

Russia's primary goals in the Western Balkans can be distilled into three key aspects. Firstly, the Kremlin seeks to assert and project a global-power status. Secondly, it endeavours to obstruct the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region by actively opposing NATO and EU integration, thereby contributing to increased instabilities. Thirdly, the Kremlin strategically exploits the Balkans, with a particular emphasis on the Kosovo issue in order to advance its foreign policy agenda on a global scale, notably in asserting perceived dominance over nearby territories. Importantly, these objectives align more closely with Russia's overarching foreign policy stance than with the nuanced dynamics of the Western Balkans region.

In contrast to the early 2010s, recent Russian strategic foreign policy documents do not extensively address the region. Russia maintains moderate aspirations for cultivating positive relationships with Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, which is evident in the tools employed to influence the region, where Russia opts to nurture contacts and exert influence through individual politicians, the Orthodox Church, the media, and various proxy groups.

Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro 2016, 2020, and 2023, and Membership in NATO

Russia's influence in Montenegro is prominently manifested in its adeptness at promoting specific narratives and disseminating disinformation through diverse media channels. Despite the absence of a direct military presence in the region, Russia strategically supports far-right nationalist figures and organisations. The overarching objective is to achieve destabilisation by fueling polarisation and fostering anti-Western sentiment. While these efforts may not have completely severed Balkan countries from the West, they have undeniably empowered malignant actors, contributing to increased activity and destabilisation within entire governments.

One of the most notable instances of interference was the attempted coup in Montenegro on the eve of the parliamentary elections in 2016. The coup ultimately failed due to poor organisation, primarily because Russia relied on a loosely connected network of proxies, involving radical Serb nationalists and a motorcycle gang known as the Night Wolves. Additionally, the indecisiveness of several politicians, who withdrew their support just days before the planned events, played a significant role in the unsuccessful attempt. This episode, while concerning, highlights that Russia may not always be the strategic mastermind it is sometimes perceived to be.

Following the failed coup, 13 individuals, including Russian intelligence (GRU) officers Eduard Shirokov and Vladimir Popov, were convicted in absentia of "attempted terrorism", and "creating a criminal organisation". However, a retrial is currently underway, reflecting the ongoing legal developments surrounding this incident. On the same day of the coup attempt, the Montenegrin authorities were struck by cyber-attacks. Those attacks were attributed to the APT28 group, also known as Fancy Bear, which, according to the US, is tied to the GRU.

In August 2022, Montenegro's government websites and critical infrastructure systems were targeted by large-scale cyber-attacks. Despite "Cuba ransomware" – a Russian-speaking gang – claiming responsibility for part of the attack, the Montenegrin National Security Agency blamed the attack on Russia, stating that some organisations are a disguise to hide Russian government involvement.

Russia utilises a variety of detrimental tools that have proven successful in molding the political environment of the Western Balkans. The reach of Russian media in Serbia extends effortlessly to audiences in Montenegro, eliminating the necessity for substantial investments in propaganda. The impact of Russia in Montenegro is most apparent in its adeptness at advancing its narratives and disseminating disinformation through various media channels, including Russian media outlets operating in Western Balkan nations, the infiltration of Russian narratives into local media, and orchestrated disinformation campaigns via social media.

In the past few years, Russia has escalated its engagement in the Balkan media landscape by leveraging local outlets as conduits for propagating pro-Russian narratives and cultivating anti-Western sentiment. The influence of Russian media in the Western Balkans is considerable, given that local and European news sources constitute a substantial portion of the region's media landscape. Moreover, Russian disinformation and narratives have permeated the region to such a degree that significant

segments of society now harbor a favourable perception of Russia and its political leadership.

A collaborative effort between Russia and Serbia to propagate propaganda and circulate fake news has been substantial, notably with Serbian media playing a pivotal role in advancing pro-Russian narratives in Montenegro. The utilisation of Serbian tabloids, online portals, and right-wing media has formed an intricate network that magnifies pro-Russian sentiments. Furthermore, Russian media actively involves itself in molding perceptions, endorsing political figures aligned with Russian interests, and exerting influence on public opinion.

The interplay between Russian and Serbian media channels underscores a deliberate effort to shape narratives, particularly during periods of political crises and events such as elections. The Russian media's involvement intensifies during crucial moments, exerting a significant influence on Montenegro's political landscape. Notably, political rallies orchestrated by the then-opposition party Democratic Front in 2015 and 2016 aimed to catalyse a change in government and oppose Montenegro's NATO accession. These rallies garnered substantial backing from the Russian establishment, aligning with Russia's strong advocacy for a NATO membership referendum rather than a parliamentary vote during that time. Politicians from the Democratic Front frequently participated in various events organised by different Russian actors. During that period, the Russian media exhibited a clear preference, focusing on Marko Milačić, the leader of the Movement for Neutrality and a current member of the Montenegrin Parliament. In the lead-up to the 2016 elections, Milačić's Facebook page garnered immense popularity, especially among followers from Serbia and Republika Srpska. This created the impression that the notion of Montenegro abstaining from NATO accession enjoyed widespread support. Sputnik, in particular, published 30 pieces highlighting Milačić's work in 2017 alone. He was frequently interviewed by Russian media, and he also contributed articles to Sputnik Serbia. Milačić played a crucial role not only in popularising the Sputnik Serbia portal in Montenegro but also in advancing the narrative against NATO accession.

The appointment of Milan Knežević, a leader of the Democratic Front, as the chairman of the Montenegrin Parliament's Security Committee, garnered significant attention. Headlines such as "PRO-RUSSIAN FORCES cleaned up Montenegrin special services" surfaced on the Vzgled webpage, highlighting the perceived influence of pro-Russian elements. During the Democratic Front leader's visit to Moscow, the radio show Govorit Moskva delved into topics such as the alleged non-existence of

the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin Parliament's accusation of Serbia, Serbs, and the Serbian Orthodox Church of genocide through the passage of the Srebrenica Resolution.

The anti-NATO and anti-Western narrative disseminated by Serbian media remained highly intensive. These media outlets actively involve themselves in domestic political situations, taking sides in internal political strife, thereby serving as a tool for bolstering Serbian political power in addition to disseminating Russian global propaganda. The relationship between Russia and Serbia goes beyond Russia merely using Serbia to exert influence in Montenegro; rather, there is mutual interest among Serbian nationalist circles in contributing to this influence.

The adoption of the Law on Religious Communities has sparked Russian disinformation campaigns. Although the Russian Embassy in Montenegro's FB page posted a statement from MFA spokesperson Marija Zaharova on 19th December, 2019, stating that "Russia will not interfere in internal issues in Montenegro", by 30th December, a Russian MFA press release expressed grave concern about the consequences of the legislation on the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro. Three main narratives regarding the Law followed:

- The Law on Freedom of Religion is a US and Vatican conspiracy against the Serbian Orthodox Church;
- NATO considers the Orthodox Church as a strategic enemy;
- The Law will destabilise Montenegro and is directed against Russia.

The Russian media, as exemplified in the following case by TV Constantinople, actively propagated the notion that Montenegrins were not a distinct nation but rather Serbs. According to this narrative, the Law on Religious Communities aimed to eliminate Montenegrin Serbs' identity. The evolving political landscape in Montenegro, especially the change of government in the 2020 elections, captured the keen interest of Russian media. The disinformation campaign initiated by Sputnik Srbija, which played a pivotal role in sparking protests against the Law on Religious Communities, significantly influenced the parliamentary elections in Montenegro in August 2020.

Russia's state news agency, RIA Novosti, underscored the significance of the Serbian Orthodox Church in mobilising voters. Commentators anticipating a potential shift in Montenegro's foreign policy towards Russia were given a platform in media outlets including Television 360 and Russia's TASS news agency. This concerted media effort reflected Russia's strategic interest in shaping narratives and influencing political developments in Montenegro.

Russian Influence Through the Media in Montenegro

IN4S stands out as the most prominent website in Montenegro for disseminating Russian disinformation. Notably, its portal features a section called "Russian View", providing daily updates on developments in Russia, alongside narratives depicting Russia's supposed dominance over the US and NATO, often citing anonymous NATO and US officials, with Sputnik Serbia frequently used as a source. In Montenegro, the IN4S web portal plays a pivotal role in promoting pro-Russian and pro-Serbian propaganda.

According to a report from the State Department's Global Engagement Centre, IN4S is an integral part of the propaganda ecosystem in the Russian disinformation campaign. Established in 2009, the portal was notably active before Montenegro's NATO accession. Gojko Raicevic, the editor of IN4S, is recognised as the leader of the non-governmental organisation No to War – No to NATO. The portal disseminates content that denies Montenegrin identity, opposes Western principles, and advocates for a shift in foreign policy toward Serbia and Russia. It is worth mentioning that at least five pro-Russian web portals were established in Montenegro after it had joined NATO – Ujedinjenje (Unification), Sedmica (Seven), Princip (Principle), Nova rijec (New Word), and Magazin (Magazine).

The absence of site registration requirements and the lack of information about the owners or founders in Montenegro's legal framework pose challenges in discerning direct links to Belgrade or Moscow. This ambiguity extends to a considerable number of local portals which exploit these conditions to disseminate false or misleading news without clear accountability.

In summation, Russia's influence in the Western Balkans encompasses a spectrum of strategies, ranging from political interference and cyber-attacks to media manipulation. The interconnectedness of Russian and Serbian efforts underscores the complexity of the influence landscape, impacting political, social, and informational dimensions in the region.

Population Census – Between Statistics and Politics

The second population census in independent Montenegro, initially slated for 2021, faced a two-year delay due to health-related and political crises. The census is now scheduled to take place by the end of this year, although the original dates had been set for November 1st to 15th, 2023, later postponed to the end of November. The census plays a crucial role in providing data for the country's strategic development plan. However, instead of serving as a tool for obtaining a comprehensive socio-

demographic profile of Montenegro, the census is increasingly perceived as being exploited for political purposes. This trend is not unique to Montenegro but is observed throughout the region. The census has raised contentious questions related to national, religious, and cultural orientations, reflecting a broader issue of politicisation in census data collection.

The inaugural census in independent Montenegro occurred in 2011. By 2021, the socio-political landscape had undergone substantial changes. Montenegrin society today is experiencing heightened polarisation, reaching levels not seen since the 2006 referendum. The political landscape witnessed a significant shift in August 2020 with the end of the long-standing rule of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). Following this electoral change, certain political entities, in collaboration with the Serbian Orthodox Church, have initiated a nationalist campaign that distinctly targets the upcoming population census. This political shift and collaboration indicate a deliberate effort to influence the narrative and outcomes of the upcoming census.

Pro-Serbian and pro-Russian propagandistic media outlets, exemplified by IN4S, initiated a campaign two years ago, in 2021, under the slogan "It's not Montenegrin if it's not Serbian". This campaign revolved around a fabricated narrative about the supposed threat to Serbs and Serbian identity in Montenegro. Simultaneously, aggressive propaganda was disseminated against various national, religious, and cultural communities in Montenegro. Drawing parallels to the 2011 census, the current campaign is rooted in the denial of Montenegrin identity, accompanied by a rejection of Montenegrin state symbols. The orchestrated effort aims to manipulate public perception and influence the outcomes of the census through a divisive and misleading narrative.

The mobilisation of pro-Serbian and pro-Russian proxy associations, Orthodox fraternities, and individuals, coupled with the revival of narratives depicting the alleged jeopardy of Serbian national identity in Montenegro, acted as a precursor to coordinating activities within the coalition For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG). This collaboration extended to media outlets closely aligned with the coalition, including Borba and IN4S, as well as specific websites and individuals. The implied threat of destabilising Montenegro was made contingent on the inclusion of this coalition in the formation of the 44th government. This coordinated effort underscores a strategic use of various elements to influence political outcomes and advance specific interests.

Serbia played an active role in the lead-up to the 2011 census. Mlađan Đorđević, the secretary of the Council for Cooperation with National

Councils of Serbs in the region and an advisor to the then-president of Serbia, Boris Tadić, was frequently present in Montenegro before the census. Montenegrin media reported that he spearheaded an assertive campaign with the objective of encouraging as many citizens as possible in Montenegro to identify as Serbs during the census. Tennis superstar Novak Đoković was also involved in that campaign. This concerted effort reflects a strategic engagement by Serbian figures to influence the demographic categorisation in Montenegro during the 2011 census.

An analysis conducted by DebunkEU.org on 554 articles related to the census, published between September 1st and November 30th, 2021, in Balkan regional media outlets, highlighted that nearly 40% of these articles were deemed problematic. The central finding underscores the highly politicised nature of the census discourse. Both sides in the debate convey a shared message that the census is susceptible to manipulation. Supporters of the census accuse the then-government of manipulating the results of the previous census, while opponents express concerns that the current majority might manipulate the forthcoming results.

During this period, interest in the topic reached its peak in the September, primarily due to two significant events. Firstly, there were protests against the appointment of Serbian Orthodox Church Bishop Joanikije in Cetinje, vehemently opposed by the "pro-Montenegrin" side. Secondly, the government adopted a draft of the Law on Census, making the prospect of organising the census more imminent. This development ignited a heated debate between proponents and opponents of the census. The analysis conducted by DebunkEU.org found that out of the total 210 media pieces, almost 40% were labelled as misleading. Within this category, more than half were identified as disinformation, while the remainder fell under the classification of misinformative. Notably, a significant majority of the analysed content originated from media based in Montenegro, accounting for nearly 80%. The second-largest number of outlets contributing to this content were based in neighbouring Serbia, making up a little over 15%.

However, when focusing specifically on false and misleading content, the research reveals that two-thirds of such content came from local Montenegrin media, while the remaining third originated from media based in Serbia. This breakdown emphasises the substantial role of local Montenegrin media in generating misleading narratives surrounding the census.

The percentage of citizens identifying as Serbs has consistently served as a pretext for Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić to directly involve himself in the internal affairs of Montenegro. This pattern of behaviour

was reaffirmed during the negotiations regarding the formation of the 44th Government of Montenegro. The demographic composition and identity dynamics in Montenegro have been a recurring focal point in the relationship between Serbia and Montenegro, providing a basis for political involvement and influence.

The announcement by Prime Minister-designate Milojko Spajić that the "For the Future of Montenegro" coalition would not be part of the new government triggered a tumultuous reaction in both Serbia and Montenegro. There is a notable synergy observed among political structures, media, activists, analysts, and far-right organisations advocating for the inclusion of For the Future of Montenegro in the government. The public is being subjected to misinformation, emphasising the purported endangerment of Serbs and the manipulation of citizens' electoral will.

Activities in the online sphere have intensified, not only exerting pressure but also intimidating and radicalising Montenegrin citizens who identify as Serbs. This is done with the aim of directing them toward the political entities led by Mandić and Knežević, portrayed as the alleged true representatives of the interests of the Serbian people in Montenegro. Similar campaigns are being conducted in Serbia, disseminating identical narratives through the media. The pressure resulted in the formal inclusion of the For the Future of Montenegro coalition in the new government, with Mr. Mandic elected as the Speaker of the Parliament of Montenegro. This development underscores the intricate interplay between political maneuvering, media influence, and public perception in the region.

Perceiving the census as a competition between various ethnic and civic groups, such as Montenegrins and Serbs, Bosniaks, Albanians, and Croats, with a rivalry between civic and national identities, could have long-term negative consequences for Montenegrin society. Such a divisive perspective may contribute to heightened tensions, polarisation, and a sense of competition among different communities within the country. It could potentially undermine social cohesion and the development of a shared national identity.

Conclusions

The presence of Russian disinformation in Southeast Europe (SEE), and especially in Montenegro, has experienced a notable increase in recent years, reflecting the strategic interests of the Kremlin in the region. Russian narratives are disseminated through various channels, including statements from Russian political leadership, activities by Russian embassies and their social media accounts, state-owned media outlets,

collaborations with local partner media, along with the involvement of politicians, individuals, parties, and associations. A noteworthy hub for these efforts is "Sputnik Srbija", which plays a significant role in propagating Russian narratives across the region. This multifaceted approach highlights the comprehensive strategy employed by Russia to shape perceptions and influence developments in Montenegro.

The influence of Russian disinformation in the region is often facilitated by a combination of factors. Alongside economic influence, which enables political and media sway, several conditions contribute to the fertile ground for Russian disinformation in Southeast Europe (SEE). These include weak media literacy, underdeveloped institutions, limited public awareness, and a shortage of local research capabilities.

In the context of Montenegro, web portals and social media have played a significant role in spreading Russian disinformation. The online environment, coupled with weak media literacy, can and do make it easier for false narratives to gain traction. Additionally, political and ethnic tensions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and early elections have undoubtedly shaped the information landscape, providing opportunities for external actors to exploit existing vulnerabilities and influence narratives to their advantage. Recognising and addressing these multifaceted challenges is crucial for developing resilience against disinformation campaigns in the region.

It is important to highlight that the complex political landscape in Montenegro, wherein issues of national identity, government formation, and the upcoming census are intertwined and influenced by external actors, particularly pro-Serbian and pro-Russian media and entities within Montenegro. Their shaping of narratives around identity and demographic issues could bring to potential collapse of the civic concept in Montenegro, bringing it to a state deeply divided between different ethnic groups.

Efforts to frame the census in a way that fosters unity, inclusivity, and a recognition of the diverse identities present in Montenegro are essential for building a more harmonious and resilient society, and encouraging a narrative that promotes collaboration and mutual respect among different ethnic and civic groups is crucial for fostering a positive and cohesive societal fabric in the aftermath of the census.

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The 2023 Elections in Montenegro – A Real Political Breakthrough?

Abstract
This political analysis looks at the most recent presidential elections, which were held in the spring of 2023, as well as the early parliamentary elections in June 2023. The main research question relates to the significance of the results of both elections – whether they represent a real rather than merely symbolic political breakthrough in the recent history of the Montenegrin state. Several research methods typically used in political science were applied: the comparative method, the historical-descriptive analysis, as well as the systemic and decision-making methods. All of these made it possible to carry out this political analysis in its present form.

Keywords: Constitution, Political Parties, Alternation, Competitive Elections, Disinformation

Introduction

Montenegro is an interesting example of a Balkan country that originated from the Yugoslav federation, but has followed a different path of systemic transformation compared to the other countries in the region. These differences stem from a number of reasons: 1) this republic had traditions of statehood even before the formation of the Yugoslav state in December 1918; 2) as a result of the break-up of the Yugoslav federal state in 1991/1992, it was the only federal republic to declare its will to keep the union state intact (along with Serbia); 3) the emancipation processes in the country did not start until the mid-1990s, which resulted in the dissolution of the state union of Serbia and Montenegro in May 2006 and the creation of an independent state; 4) the absence (until July 2020) of alternation of power and the long-standing hold on power of the political camp centred around Milo Djukanović

(the post-communist Democratic Party of Socialists) (Wojnicki, 2007; Bujwid-Kurek, 2008; Walkiewicz, 2009).

Milo Djukanović's strong and dominant position resulted from a number of complex socio-political, economic and even cultural reasons. These included a strong and persistent tradition of individual rule and a lack of established traditions of democratic political institutions; the first elected parliament did not come into being until 1906. Other factors included the patrimonial social model with its cultural and religious foundations, which translated into the emergence of clientelistic arrangements in socio-political life. These tendencies could be seen during the more than thirty-year rule of the political camp centred around Milo Djukanović (Garde, 1992; Bieber, 2003; Domachowska, 2018; Lakota-Micker, 2021, pp. 49–67).

The existing model of non-alternative exercise of state power in Montenegro began to fade from the mid-2010s. Eventually, the first alternation of power, though not problem-free, occurred following the elections to the country's Assembly in the summer of 2020, after the ruling camp failed to secure an absolute majority of parliamentary seats. However, this was not a complete alternation, as Milo Djukanović was still in office as head of state while serving as leader of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS).

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Presidential Election – A Chance for an Alternation of Power

It should be pointed out that the Orthodox community acts as an important "veto player" in the Montenegrin state and society. One of the major election promises of the main electoral coalition that forms part of the current government, For the Future of Montenegro, was to amend the law on freedom of religion. Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić repeatedly stressed that this would be one of the first decisions of the new

coalition government. Finally, on 17 December 2020, the government adopted the draft amendment to the law and submitted it to the Assembly. At a session on 29 December 2020, the parliament passed the amendment (*Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o slobodi vjeroispovjesti ili uvjerenja i pravnom položaju vjerskih zajednica*) with the support of 41 members of the governing coalition. The amended law deleted the most controversial regulation, which required all religious communities operating on the territory of Montenegro to register their property. At the same time, it added regulations that allow the state to register a particular property, but only through the courts. It is worth noting at this point in our analysis that the vote was boycotted by the opposition groups. At the same time, dozens of people, mainly supporters of the opposition DPS, gathered in front of the parliament building to oppose the changes to the law on freedom of religion (Domachowska, 2021).

The Montenegrin government and leaders of the Democratic Front (*Demokratski Front*, DF) unequivocally asserted that President Milo Djukanović bore the primary responsibility for inflaming public sentiment and organising protests against the enthronement of the Metropolitan of the Serbian Orthodox Church (*Srpska pravoslavna crkva*, SPC). They also highlighted the fact that the demonstrations in Cetinje were joined by politicians of the opposition Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (*Demokratska partija socijalista Crne Gore*, DPS), which was headed by the President. The government side's crowning argument was the detention of Veselin Veljović, a close associate and national security adviser to the Montenegrin president, during a demonstration on 5 September 2021. He was detained on suspicion of physically attacking police officers. President Djukanović strongly rejected these accusations and publicly insisted that the responsibility for the events in Cetinje lay with the Montenegrin government and the SPC (Domachowska, Pawlowski, 2021).

The presidential campaign in the winter and spring of 2023 took place against the backdrop of a deepening political and institutional crisis in Montenegro. The Montenegrin parliament held its sessions with some MPs absent as the opposition boycotted its proceedings, while an interim government led by Dritan Abazović was in charge from August 2022, after a no-confidence vote was passed. From September 2022, the Constitutional Court was blocked as it had only three sitting judges instead of seven, which meant that it was unable to rule on constitutional complaints. A presidential election was called in mid-January 2023, which provided the political impetus for a vote on vacancies in the Constitutional Court. Eventually, at a meeting on 28 February 2023, the Assembly of Montenegro elected three of the four missing judges of the Constitutional

Court. The largest political factions reached consensus under direct pressure from both the United States and the European Union, the latter of which threatened to halt Montenegro's EU accession process. The agreement on the judges was seen as an important step towards stabilising the political situation in Montenegro as well as giving new momentum to Montenegro's EU accession process (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2023d).

Both the presidential campaign and the election day itself proceeded in a fairly calm atmosphere, though not without minor incidents. During the election campaign, Jovan Milatović was attacked, verbally and physically, at a rally in Cetinje. The website Raskrinkavanje.me also reported acts of disinformation, such as fake surveys, the improper use of the name of the polling agency, and the inability to verify the agency's existence. The state media in Montenegro received fairly positive ratings in terms of how evenly they allocated their airtime to individual candidates. By contrast, the regional media was accused of favouritism: for example, the Serbian TV channels Happy and Pink promoted A. Mandić. On the election day, the Serbian website Nacionalist.rs reported on a meeting between D. Vuksanović Stanković and M. Djukanović that allegedly took place on that day, which was, however, denied by both political parties: *Demokratska Partija Socijalista* (DPS) and *Socijaldemokratska Partija Crne Gore* (SDP). As for the conduct of the voting itself, it should be noted that CDT and the Centre for Monitoring and Research (*Centar za monitoring i istraživanja*, CMI) reported irregularities on the election day, which mainly included interrupted voting, destroyed ballots, the photographing of ballots, a member of the election committee leaving their place, pressure to elect a particular candidate (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2023d).

Jakov Milatović, co-founder of the Europe Now party, scored a resounding victory in the second round of the presidential election in Montenegro that was held on 2 April. He received 60% of the vote, while his main rival, incumbent President Milo Djukanović, garnered 40%. Turnout was around 69% of eligible voters. Djukanović won the first round with 35% support, but the three challengers fielded by the ruling coalition (J. Milatović, Andrija Mandić and Aleksa Bečić) together secured 58% of the vote. These candidates transferred their support to Milatović and appealed to their followers to end the rule of Djukanović (Kobeszko, 2023a).

According to a report by the Centre for Monitoring and Research (CEMI), as well as OSCE, the second round of the presidential elections took place in accordance with general democratic standards and the election day proceeded in a fairly calm atmosphere. However, the monitors pointed to a number of irregularities in the work of the lower levels of

administration, instances where voting lists were photographed, as well as the interference of the religious community in the electoral process. They also noted that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) publicly expressed its views on individual candidates, thus exerting at least an indirect influence on the electorate. However, such irregularities generally did not distort the electoral process (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2023c).

The incumbent president positioned himself in the campaign as a guarantor of the country's independence and a defender against both Serbian and Russian influence. At the same time, he asserted that he was still pursuing the project of preserving the multi-ethnic and secular model of the state. By contrast, Milatović emphasised the need to complete the changes initiated after the last parliamentary election in 2020, particularly to give a new dynamic to the process of European integration and to wage a consistent fight against corruption (Kobeszko, 2023a).

For more than 10 years of the country's independence (2006–2016), the political camp centred around Djukanović strongly emphasised the need to maintain good relations with Serbia. The situation changed after the camp of Prime Minister and later President A. Vučić consolidated its power in Serbia. The events that followed the 2016 parliamentary elections in Montenegro, when Djukanović's camp accused Russia (and indirectly Serbia) of attempting to stage a coup aimed at torpedoing the Balkan country's bid to join NATO, added to the strain in mutual relations. Although the government failed to provide credible evidence, these accusations made it easier for Djukanović to consistently portray his political camp as a "bulwark" against attempts to build a "Serbian world" in the Balkans – an idea that draws on the Russian ideology of "Russkiy mir" (Kobeszko, 2023a).

At the same time, it should be noted that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church was in an institutional crisis and had been mired in internal disputes for years, resulting in the separation of two dioceses. Metropolitan Mihailo, who had been head of the Church for more than a quarter of a century, failed to strengthen the CPC's position in Montenegrin society. Moreover, the CPC's position appeared to be increasingly marginalised, despite President Milo Djukanovic's assurances in 2018 that he would secure autocephaly for the CPC, following the example of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Domachowska, 2023).

Political Consequences of the Presidential Elections

On 11 June this year, the movement Europe Now! *Pokret Evropa Sad* (PES), which was co-founded by new President Jakov Milatović, won

the early elections to the 81-member Montenegrin Assembly with over 25.6% of the votes. The electoral bloc Together!, whose main force is the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) that was led until April this year by the long-time political leader Milo Djukanović, came second with 23.2%. The pro-Serbian bloc For the Future of Montenegro, the coalition Democrats and United Reform Action, the Bosniak Party and the Socialist People's Party-DEMOS also won parliamentary seats. Meanwhile, three seats in the new parliament went to representatives of the Albanian minority, while the Croatian minority secured one. Turnout reached 56% of those eligible to vote (Kobeszko, 2023b).

It is worth mentioning that the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) assessed in its report that despite the institutional crisis related to the problems with forming a government since August 2022, the elections could be deemed as compatible with democratic standards and conducted transparently. However, it noted that some incidents happened during the elections, including the premature closure of the electoral commission, attempts to take out postal ballots, as well as efforts to put pressure over the telephone and persuade voters to support certain candidates. According to the Montenegrin police, before the elections 165 different institutions (schools, kindergartens, public offices) received messages with threats that explosives had been planted, but fortunately these turned out to be false. Therefore, such incidents did not have a significant impact on the voting process (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2023a).

The citizenship issue is an extremely important topic in a country as small and young as Montenegro. Due to its tiny number of citizens, any growth in citizenship could significantly affect the country's demography and *ipso facto* shape its political scene. This was the main reason why the requirements for obtaining Montenegrin citizenship were formulated in such a way as to make them difficult to meet. Their liberalisation in 2022 sparked discontent among part of the population. The concerns articulated by the Montenegrin people focus on the Montenegrin Serbs and the neighbouring country of Serbia. Indeed, both states and nations share mutual distrust and recriminations. The Montenegrins highlight Serbia's attempts to meddle in Montenegro's internal affairs, as well as "Greater Serbian nationalism", which explicitly questions the distinctiveness of the Montenegrin nation (Domachowska, 2023b).

Another important issue raised by analysts involved the relations between political parties, which refrained from attacking their potential opponents since they did not exclude the possibility that they could become part of a governing or parliamentary coalition after the elections.

As noted by the Podgorica-based Centre for Monitoring and Research (*Centra za monitoring i istraživanje*, CEMI), the election campaign was populist and designed to promote party leaders rather than to present specific political visions and programmes. CEMI pointed out in its report that this type of campaigning made it impossible to get to know candidates on the electoral lists and to consciously involve the public in the electoral process (Jagiełło-Szostak, 2023b).

President Djukanovic called early parliamentary elections in March this year as a consequence of long-standing difficulties in forming a majority government in the Assembly that was elected in 2020. From April 2022, power in Montenegro was held by the government of Dritan Abazović, which was backed by some parliamentary factions (United Reform Action, Socialist People's Party, Bosniak Party, Albanian minority MPs); it was approved with the support of DPS, which, however, did not nominate any representatives to this government. After a vote of no confidence in the cabinet was passed in August last year, it was supposed to run the country until the formation of a new majority cabinet; however, it remained in power as an interim government (Kobeszko, 2023b).

The centrist movement Europe Now won around 26 percent of the vote in the early elections to the Montenegrin Assembly, which translated into 24 seats, while the Together coalition led by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) won 23%, which gave it 21 seats. The alliance For the Future of Montenegro came third in the electoral race, winning 15% of votes and 13 seats. It is worth pointing out at this point in our analysis that the victorious movement Europe Now was founded in June 2022 by two former ministers of finance and economy, Milojko Spajić and Jakov Milatović. The former led the party in the early elections that ended on 11 June 2023, while the latter won the second round of the presidential election last April by defeating the country's long-time leader Milo Djukanovic, who has alternately served as prime minister and president of Montenegro since 1991 (Weaver, 2023).

As Ognjen Mitrović from CEMI commented: "The elections have officially proven that Europe Now is the most important player on the Montenegrin political scene. It is difficult to predict whether a stable government will be created after the elections; it will certainly be very difficult to form one" (Weaver, 2023). Indeed, the formation of a new government majority turned out to be quite a challenge for Montenegrin politicians, as the government coalition that was formed in the summer of 2022 consisted of seven factions: the Socialist People's Party (SNP), the United Reform Action (URA) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP), as well as several national minority factions – the Bosnian *Bošnjačka Stranka*

(BS), the Croatian *Hrvatska Građanska Inicijativa* HGI, two Albanian ones: (DP) *Democratska Partija* and (FORCA) *Nova Demokratska Snaga*.

Although more than four months have passed since the parliamentary elections (as of 18 October), a new government has still not been formed. Several political reasons have stood in the way of this: the fragmentation of the political scene, the deep socio-political divide between supporters and opponents of the policy symbolised by Milo Djukanović, and the presence of numerous factions representing the interests of ethnic and national minorities in the Montenegrin political mosaic, which has further hindered the formation of a stable parliamentary majority as the basis of a new cabinet.

The Montenegrin Assembly has been "sliced" into three main parts as a result of the most recent elections: the presidential faction Europe Now holds 24 seats, the bloc of former leader Milo Djukanović (centred around the DPS) has 21 seats, while the social democratic factions that represent the Serb minority (SNP) have secured 24 seats. The parties of national minorities (Bosnian, Albanian and Croatian) hold another ten seats. In this situation, the task of forming a stable majority configuration is anything but simple. Politicians have decided that holding another general election (the third this year) is not an option. At the same time, they have agreed that the best option is to keep the government led by ethnic Albanian Dritan Abazović in power. This solution should be seen as particularly beneficial for the newly elected President Jakov Milatović, whose strategy is to strengthen the position of his party in view of the necessary early elections, which are likely to take place next year. Apart from this, the existing arrangement with a caretaker government that merely performs the task of administering the country increases the real power exercised by the head of state.

On October 31, after an all-night debate, the Montenegrin parliament expressed a vote of confidence in the government of Milojek Spajić, appointed prime minister in August. The new cabinet was supported by the coalition formed as a result of the early parliamentary elections that took place on June 11. Its members included the centrist Europa Teraz! Movement, some MPs belonging to two large electoral blocs – the pro-Serbian For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) and the centrist-liberal Democrats and United Action for Reforms, as well as the Socialist People's Party (SNP)-CIVIS and two Albanian minority groups. In the 80-seat chamber, Spajić's government will have a majority of 46 votes, while the strongest opposition group in parliament will be the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS), whose club currently has 17 deputies (Kobeszko, 2023c).

The most important program demands of the new executive power include: accelerating European integration, strengthening the country's position as a reliable ally in NATO, pursuing a good-neighbourly policy and consolidating state finances, also through reforms of the pension and health insurance systems. However, progress towards European integration will also depend on continuing internal reforms, mainly the fight against corruption, and improving the justice system, but also on the consolidation of public finances and active attraction of foreign investments (Kobeszko, 2023d).

Table 1. Democracy Assessment by Freedom House

Country	Democracy Level 2023	Democracy Level 2022	Type of Political System
Bosnia and Herzegovina	37	38	Hybrid regime
Croatia	54	54	Unconsolidated democracy
Kosovo	38	38	Hybrid regime
North Macedonia	48	47	Hybrid regime
Serbia	46	46	Hybrid regime
Slovenia	79	79	Consolidated democracy

Source: Muk, Sošić, 2023.

Reports by Freedom House define Montenegro as a hybrid or transitional regime. In 2023, the democracy level in the country was rated at 46 points out of a total of 100. This represented a regression from the previous year by 1 point, which was related to the protracted constitutional crisis caused by the renewed dysfunction of the political system, the resignation of two consecutive governments in quick succession (2021, 2022), unconstitutional moves that hampered the electoral process and the dysfunction of the Constitutional Court, as well as the blockade of the procedures for the formation of a new government after the 2023 parliamentary elections (Muk, Sošić, 2023). It is worth juxtaposing Montenegro's position with those of other Balkan states which were part of the federal Yugoslav state until 1991. As we can see, Montenegro's situation is similar to the assessments of Serbia and North Macedonia. However, it is better than that of Kosovo and Bosnia. The starting point, which is achievable within a few years, is to catch up with Croatia, a country that reports by Freedom House describe as an unconsolidated democracy.

Conclusions

All this poses considerable challenges to the transforming political system of the young state of Montenegro. Its complex socio-political situation was reflected in the outcome of the presidential and parliamentary elections. Some voters opted for new leaders, including the candidate for president, while also giving a "red card" to representatives of the old, incumbent political elite symbolised by Milo Djukanović. At the same time, some of the dilemmas of Montenegro's democratisation process are cultural, historical and some even structural. The election of new political leaders alone will not remedy the internal situation, as this requires the efforts of the vast majority of the political elite. Also necessary is a consistent process of shaping a mature political culture that supports the functioning of democratic political institutions. External factors (membership in NATO structures, aspirations to join EU institutions) can only play a supplementary and supportive role.

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Fake News and Disinformation Through a Montenegrin Prism

Abstract
Fake news and disinformation represent a global challenge in the digital age, and Montenegro is no exception. This paper explores the phenomena of fake news and disinformation, while first analysing the presence of these two concepts in different social spheres. In the context of Montenegro, an insight into the communication forms of fake news and disinformation in our country has been provided, and the relationship of the legal system and judicial institutions to this problem is discussed. Special attention is paid to the influence of regional media on the Montenegrin public, both in a positive and negative sense. Although Montenegro is a relatively small country, it faces the same challenges as many others, including political polarisation, media concentration, and foreign actors using disinformation to achieve their goals. Studying this problem is crucial for developing appropriate media competencies, strengthening journalism, and raising awareness among citizens in order to combat the impact of fake news and disinformation on society and democracy in Montenegro.

Keywords: Fake News, Disinformation, Montenegro, Region

Fake News and Disinformation in Social Spheres

Fake news and disinformation are types of information that intentionally spread false or misleading claims with the aim of manipulating public opinion, creating confusion, pursuing political or economic interests, and/or causing harm to individuals, groups or institutions. They are most often spread through traditional media, social networks, and other online platforms (Ireton, Posetti, 2020, p. 6). Fake news, unlike journalistic errors or misunderstandings, is based on falsehoods and/or unverified

information (Beckett, 2017). Disinformation, on the other hand, is the spreading of false information or the manipulation of real information in order to achieve a desired result. The fact is that this is about something that can have serious consequences such as: a breaking of the public trust; a significant slowdown of democratic processes; a polarising of society; confusion and panic being caused; public health and safety being affected, etc. (Butler, 2018).

Fake news and disinformation can have an impact in different spheres of society. They are often used for political purposes in order to shape public opinion, discredit political opponents, or manipulate elections. Such information can cause a polarisation of society, reduce trust in political institutions, and undermine democratic processes (Guess, Lyons, 2020, pp. 24–25). As an example, we have the use of fake news to manipulate political debate. Politicians or political groups can spread disinformation about their opponents and thereby discredit them or create an unfavourable perception of them. As previously mentioned, fake news can seriously affect electoral processes. Disinformation about candidates, parties, and election procedures can raise doubts about the legitimacy of elections. In addition, they can encourage people to turn to more extreme views and refuse to compromise, which can make governing and cooperation in politics more difficult (Makaš, 2021, p. 3). Fake news and disinformation can also represent a threat to national security. Foreign states or organisations may spread disinformation to destabilise other countries or even incite conflict (Banićević, 2018, p. 24).

Dealing with fake news and disinformation in politics requires efforts on multiple fronts, with the main goal being to preserve the integrity of the political process and enable citizens to have access to accurate and reliable information in order to make well-informed political decisions. Fake news often targets ethnic, religious, and racial divisions in society. It can increase tension between different groups and thus cause conflicts. Such disinformation can encourage intolerance, hatred, and discrimination (Grambo, 2019, p. 1317), and it is clear that disinformation about alleged attacks or provocations can result in violence between different ethnic or religious groups and often encourages the polarisation of society by directing people to adopt more extreme attitudes, thereby making dialogue and cooperation between different groups more difficult. They are often used for political purposes in order to mobilise voters or discredit political opponents, which can further exacerbate ethnic and religious divisions in society. So, we see that disinformation can make the processes of integration and cohesion between different groups in society difficult, and this often has long-term, negative consequences for the stability and harmony of

a community (Šćepanović, 2023). Dealing with the impact of fake news on ethnic, religious, and racial fronts requires a combination of educating citizens with regard to media literacy, supporting investigative journalism that uncovers disinformation, transparency about information sources, regulation and sanctions for the spread of hateful disinformation, and on cooperation between government agencies, civil society, and the media in order to prevent the damage that fake news can cause to society. Of course, it is also necessary for citizens to have a critical attitude towards the information they consume, and to look for reliable sources of said information.

It is in the sphere of public health that fake news and disinformation can also have serious consequences. By that, the author refers to the spread of various disinformation about pandemics, vaccines, and medicines, which can lead not only to a decrease in trust in health institutions, but also to the endangerment of public health (Cacciatore, 2020, p. 4). For example, disinformation about the supposed dangers of vaccinations or false claims about epidemics can lead to irrational reactions and the rejection of medically-proven methods of prevention and treatment. Indeed, disinformation about vaccines often leads to lower vaccination rates which can, in turn, lead to the emergence and spread of infectious diseases that would otherwise be under control, which very clearly poses a serious public health risk. Also, fake news promotes inaccurate and/or untested medicines and treatments for various diseases. This can lead to potentially dangerous situations where people use medications or therapies that do not help, and which can even go on to harm their health (Mirjačić, 2021).

Fake news can also have an impact on the economic sphere by influencing investment decisions and even the market itself. Incorrect information about companies, products or economic trends can lead to a loss of investor confidence and thus to market stability disruption (Christov, 2019, p. 5). When fake news is spread that implicates corruption, incompetence or unethical behaviour by financial institutions, it can lead to a loss of consumer and investor trust. This may cause a withdrawal of deposits from banks and a decrease in investment levels. Fake news often advocates investment in unproven products and projects, and people who are misled by such information can lose money through investment opportunities that turn out to be fraudulent. Fake news related to economic events, such as inflation, interest rates or unemployment, can lead to an inaccurate understanding of the economic situation. This can affect the economic decisions of companies and individuals (Drašković, Radović, 2011, p. 71). Dealing with fake news and misinformation in the

economy requires a multidisciplinary approach along with cooperation between different actors in order to protect the stability of the economic environment and the interests of consumers and investors.

Fake news and disinformation are serious challenges for the media and journalism sphere. Their spread through social networks and other platforms has the effect of endangering the integrity of journalism, reducing public trust in the media and making the work of journalists more difficult (Ognyanova et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). So, it is clear that fake news can damage the reputation of journalism and journalists. When the media or journalists are caught spreading disinformation, it can lead to a loss of public trust and a violation of journalistic ethics. Also, the digital revolution and social networks make it easier for fake news to spread. Information can spread quickly through social media, and image and sound manipulation technologies make it difficult to identify false information (Greifeneder et al., 2021, pp. 3–4). Dealing with fake news and misinformation in the media requires a combination of education, journalistic ethics, technological innovation and regulations in order to preserve the integrity of the media sector and provide accurate and reliable information to the public.

We see that fake news and misinformation can have a wide range of negative consequences in many social spheres. That is why it is important for citizens to be media literate, to critically evaluate information, and to check sources before drawing conclusions or sharing information with others.

Montenegrin Experiences

Introduction

Fake news and disinformation are a global phenomenon from which Montenegro has not been spared. In the age of the digital era and the spread of social networks, information is transmitted quickly and it is easily accessible to a wide range of people. However, with this increase in the availability of information, there has also been a rise in fake news and disinformation. Montenegro, like many other countries, faces the spread of fake news that can have serious consequences for society. Fake news is often used for political purposes in order to shape public opinion, destabilise a current government or manipulate elections. It can polarise society, cause mistrust among citizens and create an atmosphere of confusion and insecurity. Disinformation is also used to spread fear, intolerance, and hate, and often focuses on ethnic, religious, and political divisions within society. Such disinformation can have serious consequences for social cohesion and peace.

One of the challenges in combating fake news and disinformation in Montenegro is the lack of media literacy. Citizens often do not have enough knowledge nor the required skills to recognise fake news or check their sources of information. A lack of critical thinking and a lack of the ability to check information sources can lead to the acceptance of incorrect information as the truth. People often accept information that confirms their existing views, without critically considering opposing points of view. Also, the speed with which information spreads through social networks makes it difficult to verify its authenticity (Jelić, 2022).

However, Montenegro is taking certain steps to counter this problem. There are civil society organisations that deal with media literacy and work to educate citizens on how to recognise fake news (Institut za medije Crne Gore, 2021). Also, the media are aware of their own responsibility in the fight against disinformation, and, to a significant extent, they try to check information before publishing it.

Likewise, the Government of Montenegro is aware of the problem of disinformation and is taking measures to suppress the spread of fake news. The introduction of regulations regarding digital media and online platforms is one of the steps being taken. Also, it is cooperating with international organisations and other countries in order to exchange experiences and best practices in the fight against disinformation (Centar za istraživačko novinarstvo Crne Gore, 2022).

Communication Forms of Fake News and Disinformation in Montenegro

Fake news and disinformation appear in different forms of communication in Montenegro. By that we mean (Bogdanović, 2021, pp. 12–15):

- social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, which are often platforms where fake news and disinformation are spread. They allow the rapid dissemination of content among users, such as articles, photos, and videos. What is worrying is that the truth or reliability of information is rarely checked before it is shared;
- websites and blogs that are numerous and that intentionally spread fake news and disinformation to gain clicks or promote certain political or ideological views. These sites often look like credible news sources, but actually spread unverified and/or fabricated information;
- emails and instant messages where senders may use various deception techniques such as impersonation or information manipulation to convince people to share fake news or disinformation. These forms

of communication make it easy for individuals to reach a target group to whom it is necessary to spread false information;
- traditional media (TV, radio, and newspapers) and that, despite having professional standards for checking information before publishing it, sometimes fake news can appear on those platforms as well. It may be the result of poor journalistic practice or the deliberate dissemination of disinformation by journalists or publishers through print media, television or radio.

We will look back at the example of the spread of fake news and disinformation, by which we refer to the year 2015, when Montenegro witnessed political protests and tensions related to that year's parliamentary elections (MINA, 2021). In this context, disinformation and fake news began to spread.

Fake news claimed that the protests were violent and that the demonstrators were trying to overthrow the government by force. Disinformation about the size and intentions of the protests was also spread. The aim of that disinformation was to discredit the protests and portray them as being violent and hostile towards the authorities. This disinformation could have caused concern and fear among citizens, so the organisers of the protest reacted quickly to deny the fake news and to highlight the peaceful nature of the protest. The media also reported on the protests and tried to provide accurate information about their development (Rujević, 2015). This example highlights the importance of citizens' media literacy in order to be able to distinguish true information from disinformation during political protests, and also emphasises the role of the media in publishing accurate and objective information.

We can see how fake news can be used during political protests to influence public perception and political tension. Transparent reporting, media literacy, and the ability to distinguish false from true information become key factors in such situations in order to preserve public safety and democratic processes.

It should be emphasised here that a frequently-used method for the placement of fake news and disinformation to the public in Montenegro is to hijack the politics and public debates that take place in its domain. Various politicians and political parties most often exploit this method with the aim of discrediting opponents and manipulating public opinion. This way of acting is especially present during election campaigns, and that is why it is important to highlight the importance of media literacy and the critical thinking of citizens in Montenegro as essential prerequisites for combating fake news and disinformation.

Regional Media and Montenegrin Public Opinion

Considering the specifics of Montenegro as that of a multiethnic and multiconfessional state, the influence of regional media on its public can be significant. These media often play a key role in shaping the perception and informing citizens from surrounding countries about events, political issues, economy, culture, and other aspects of our society. Here are a few key factors that affect the presence of regional media in Montenegro:

- ethnic and religious identity – Montenegro has various ethnic and religious groups, including Montenegrins, Serbs, Albanians, Bosniaks, Croats, and others (Monstat, 2011). Regional media often reflect the specific interests and perspectives of these groups. In this way, they can shape perceptions on certain issues and can also influence political attitudes and preferences;
- politics – regional media often cover political events at the local level, including local government elections. Their coverage of political topics can influence political choices and decisions at the regional level (Delić, 2022);
- culture and language – Montenegro has different cultural traditions and linguistic groups. Regional media promote and preserve these differences through their program content, which can contribute to the preservation of cultural identity (Al. H., 2023);
- local economic topics – regional media reports on local economic issues, commerce, employment and investments. These media can influence local economic decisions and attract the attention of investors;
- social and environmental activism – regional media often play a key role in promoting social and environmental initiatives at the local level. Their reporting can encourage citizens to take action and change perceptions about important social issues.

It is important to note that the influence of regional media can vary depending on many factors, including the circulation, viewership, listenership, and online presence of these media. Also, social networks and digital media have become increasingly important channels for informing citizens, and regional media often rely on these platforms to reach a wider audience (Didiugwu, 2013, pp. 711–712). In any case, regional media play a significant role in shaping public opinion in Montenegro and also play an important role in the democratic process and in the variety of information made available to citizens. Of course, this can also include spreading disinformation through the media in order to achieve a certain goal or create a favourable perception of an issue.

Therefore, regional media often have a high visibility and presence in the Montenegrin media space. Their content, news, and information can easily reach the Montenegrin audience, which means that the regional media can have a greater influence on the formation of public opinion (Talmil.org, 2023). It can be said that the media of a country that meets the following two criteria have the greatest influence on Montenegrin public opinion; the same language and a common border. According to these conditions, it would refer to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia. There is also Albania, with which Montenegro shares a border, but there is a language barrier, so it can be assumed that the influence is effectively halved. Finally, if we look back at the countries of the former Yugoslavia, we also have Macedonia and Slovenia. Macedonia has a different language and does not border Montenegro, so it can be assumed that the influence of their media is negligible. Slovenia is a country that, according to many criteria, leads the way in relation to the entire region, yet it does not seem to be a good fit in that region; it is vastly more developed in, *inter alia*, the cultural, economic, and political spheres. Of course, apart from the linguistic and geographical similarities, it is important to take into account the political, historical, and cultural connections between Montenegro and other countries in the region. These factors can additionally strengthen the influence of regional media on Montenegrin public opinion.

Two important facts should be highlighted here. The first refers to the fact that external influences and the placement of fake news are not phenomena specific to Montenegro only, but are present in many countries around the world. These challenges can be particularly pronounced in the age of rapid information exchange through the Internet and social networks (Rodríguez-Fernández, 2019, p. 1715). The second of the two facts would be that the influence of the regional media is not necessarily negative or focused on the spread of fake news and disinformation. Regional media can also provide important information, analysis, and perspectives on events in the region, which is important for understanding context and interrelationships.

Nevertheless, there is a real and great possibility that some regional media may spread fake news or misinformation that can significantly influence Montenegrin public opinion or political processes. In order to face these challenges, Montenegro has taken steps such as: improving the media literacy of citizens; promoting media transparency and responsibility; and strengthening the capacity to recognise and suppress disinformation (see more: https://www.medijskapismenost.me/). Additionally, it is important for citizens to be critical and check sources of information in order to protect themselves from the spread of fake news and disinformation.

The Attitude of the Judiciary and the Legal System of Montenegro Towards Fake News and Disinformation

Regarding the attitude of the judiciary and the legal system of the state of Montenegro towards fake news and disinformation, there are now laws and regulations that deal with these issues. In Montenegro, there are certain legal frameworks that are applied in the fight against fake news and disinformation. For example, the Law on Electronic Media in Montenegro prescribes the obligation of the media to transmit accurate and verified information. Also, it is prescribed that the media are responsible for spreading inaccurate news and that they can be sanctioned should they do so (Ministarstvo kulture i medija, 2022). In addition, Montenegro has introduced the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, which applies to the online space. The purpose of this law is to suppress hate speech and the spread of disinformation that may encourage intolerance and discrimination (Paragraf.me, 2021).

It is important to note that the application of laws and the legal system is crucial in the fight against fake news and disinformation. The judiciary has a role in prosecuting those who intentionally spread fake news and disinformation in order to cause harm or cause a certain disruption in society. However, it should be emphasised that the implementation of these laws can be challenging. Identifying, tracking and prosecuting individuals or groups that spread fake news and disinformation can be complex. Also, it is important to ensure that such legal regulation does not limit the freedom of expression and journalism.

In addition to those laws and regulations, education and awareness-raising in citizens as regards the recognition of fake news and disinformation play a key role in combating this problem. Civil society organisations, media institutions, and educational institutions in Montenegro implement campaigns and education programs in order to improve the media literacy of citizens and empower them to critically evaluate the information they consume (see more: https://www.medijskapismenost.me/).

Therefore, Montenegro has legal frameworks related to fake news and disinformation, and the judiciary has a role in prosecuting those who violate these laws. However, the implementation of the law and the fight against fake news and disinformation requires a comprehensive approach that also includes educating the country's citizens.

Concluding Remarks

Fake news and disinformation represent a serious challenge in today's information society. Their wide spread and potential impact require

a comprehensive approach that includes citizens' media literacy, media professionalism, and appropriate legislative frameworks and regulations.

There are several ways in which Montenegro can face these problems.

One of them is the establishment of independent media regulatory bodies that ensure respect for journalistic standards, ethics, and integrity. These bodies should consist of neutral experts (and not representatives of various political parties), be impartial, transparent and responsible, and should have the authority to sanction any media entities that spread fake news and disinformation.

Secondly, it is important to ensure the freedom of the media and the independence of journalists. This includes the protection of journalists from pressure, threats, and political influence. State institutions should promote an atmosphere where journalists can freely report and investigate without any fear of negative consequences.

In addition, strengthening Montenegrin citizens' media literacy can be a long-term solution. Education about media literacy should be included in school programs and in training courses/sessions for adults in order to enable citizens to critically evaluate information, to check sources, and to understand the mechanisms of spreading disinformation. Furthermore, encouraging highly professional standards in journalism can reduce the spread of disinformation. Supporting journalistic organisations and investigative journalism can help preserve the integrity of the media sector. Also, Montenegro can cooperate with international organisations and partners in order to exchange information and best practices in the fight against disinformation. This may include cooperation with the EU, NATO, and other relevant organisations.

There is also transparency regarding media ownership that can help identify potential conflicts of interest and political influence on media coverage. The authorities can require media to publish information about their owners and sources of funding.

One of the proposed solutions is a systemic approach that could be crucial in solving the problem of fake news and disinformation. Therefore, creating a synergy of state institutions and establishing a strong framework that protects media independence would be an important step towards curbing this problem. It is crucial that the systemic approach is not limited to just one political period or government, but to reach a broad consensus on the importance of media freedom and the fight against disinformation. Continued support and engagement of civil society, academic institutions, and international organisations can also be helpful in creating an environment that supports media independence and the fight against fake news.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that this is a complex problem whose solution has only been partially tackled in Montenegro. It requires a comprehensive approach that includes changes in legislation, education, media practices, but also in citizen awareness.

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Serbia: An Exemplary Partner of China in the Balkan Region

Abstract
After announcing new proposals of the 16 + 1 framework of cooperation in 2012 along with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has become a new, important player both in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Western Balkans (i.e., post-Yugoslavian countries). From the very beginning, Serbia, still a major player in the Western Balkans region, has been an active partner of China's, undoubtedly accepting a new role as one of China's patrons, akin to that of Turkey or Russia in previous times. Similar to other countries from the region, particular attention is being paid to these new relations, relations which are even partially replacing former partners, including the EU and the USA.
This article is focused on the bilateral relations of two hugely different countries with unequal potentials, China and Serbia, and provides some preliminary conclusions from this decade-long cooperation, with all its ups and downs. Some preliminary explanations are given regarding what is at stake and what kind of opportunities or challenges a relatively small country such as Serbia can encounter in its dealings with one of the emerging global giants.

Keywords: Serbia, China, Western Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), 16 + 1 Cooperation Framework, Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-Europe Relations

China as a New Global Player – In Europe

When, in April 2012 in Warsaw, the then-prime minister of China Wen Jiabao announced a new vision of cooperation with the post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), almost everyone was

taken aback by the proposal, including not only the countries in focus, but also the most important partners at that time, that is, the USA and the European Union (EU). Most countries of the CEE region accepted the Chinese initiative known as the 16 + 1 framework as something promising and simultaneously realised that China had enormous potential and would quickly emerge as a new source of potential investment. Initially, they become almost comfortable with the idea of China bringing them new development impetus. This rang especially true in the period almost immediately after the outbreak of the global economic crisis of 2008 and the following Eurozone crisis (partially identified with Grexit, or Greece's deep economic crisis), as the new Chinese proposal came in an era of disillusionment of a "new Europe" when all the new EU Member States were experiencing significant budget deficits, a credit crunch, and a liquidity squeeze as well as shrinkage of foreign direct investment (FDI) from the EU by 50% (Mitrović, 2020). While in the Western Balkans, that is, in most of the post-Yugoslavian countries where the crisis was much deeper, expectations towards new offers from China varied even more greatly. For crisis-stricken countries, it really was an amazingly interesting offer. Only later did China's new partners realise that they would have to deal with a real new power hub which arrived on their doorstep wanting to play according to its own rules. However, at the beginning, only experts in the region were conscious that 16 + 1 was nothing more than another Chinese initiative, or cooperation framework, towards the Third World or Global South countries, akin to the China-Africa Forum or CELAC, or cooperation with the Latin American countries (see more Jakóbowski, 2020, pp. 69–103), to mention the other most important examples.

The sudden and unexpected Chinese proposal of the so-called "12 measures" (among others, the creation of Secretariat and Advisory Committee, setting up a special investment fund and especially a USD 10 billion credit line, an increase of bilateral trade, and the establishment of special economic and technical zones, among others; Kong Tianping 2015) was also a great surprise for the EU. Almost immediately both in political but also analytical circles, a deep suspicion appeared that, through these actions, China is metaphorically yet essentially knocking on Western doors and trying to undermine the traditional links – and influence – of the Western powers in the region (Godemont, Vasselier, 2017). Nothing has changed as far as the attitudes of the institutions in Brussels are concerned, starting from the European Commission and including the major Western capitals, despite the fact that the available data have clearly shown that real capital from China is going primarily to

major Western countries (Germany, France, Great Britain, and Italy) and not to the CEE region.

This cautious approach towards China in the EU and especially the US has been even more visible since the opening of another, much bigger Chinese proposal just a year after the initiation of the 16 + 1 formula. This time, in autumn 2013, a real global vision was announced by President Xi Jinping. Known in Chinese as *Yidai yi lu*, and finally described in English as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), from the very beginning it was treated as a first-rate example of the new Chinese role on the global scene, that of a major, emerging – or re-emerging in China's case – global power. This was obvious from the very beginning in the CEE countries, but even more so in the West, starting from the US, where the elites and ruling circles quickly realised that they have a new ambitious player, ready to undermine Western (US) domination, if not to de-rail the ruling, value-based order.

According to Vangeli (2019), the BRI as a new proposal is also an exemplary case of an exposure of Chinese norms and facilitates the following principles: *sovereignty first*, *rule-by-law* (that is, imposed from above, by central authorities, a notion different from that dominating in the Western, i.e., *the rule of law*), *flexible means to a common end* (which means a lot of flexibility and improvisation in the implementation of proposals, and a lack of clarity or transparency in particular projects), *priority of growth and stability*, (that is, mainly economic reasoning and the calculations that underpin it). Simultaneously the idea of *win – win*, i.e., mutual benefits, was strongly promoted in those projects by the Chinese side. However, the one-sidedness of such cooperation, meaning the domination of the Chinese counterparts in it, was detected early on and later confirmed by subsequent events.

Both the BRI and 16 + 1 proposals were shown to the outside world as two large initiatives under the umbrella of "China – Europe Land-Sea Corridors" (Pavlićević, 2018, p. 55) which a leading Chinese specialist on the CEE region, professor Song Lilei from Shanghai, has described as a "testing ground" for cooperation and the coordination of efforts in people to people contact, trade and investment connectivity, technology and innovation, agriculture and forestry, healthcare, political parties, and local government dialogue (*How the 16 + 1 Cooperation Promotes BRI*, p. 7). To put it briefly, it was seen as an economic gateway to Europe. Both initiatives stressed strengthening connectivity, road and railway connections, trade facilitation, monetary cooperation, and people-to-people links, all under the umbrella of Peaceful Development and the win-win (mutual benefits) semantic. It was absolutely not surprising, then, that

the Donald Trump administration, in power since early 2017, dramatically changed its position towards China, shifting its attitude from previous engagement and cooperation to a new strategic competition posture. First, in some US documents, starting from new military and security strategies, China was defined as a competitor and even a threat, and secondly, already in March 2018, President Trump initiated, and never pushed back on, a trade and customs war. Pretty soon, a near-tangible anti-Chinese sentiment appeared, grew almost exponentially, and the whole situation was compounded by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It was the moment when the Western world realised how deeply imbedded it was in value-chains which had started in China. This impression and conclusion that China is a competitor and even a threat to the West was solidified once more after Russia's open aggression in Ukraine in February 2022, when China, albeit cautiously, supported Russia, while the West united around Ukraine. Since then, even the most serious magazines and thinktanks have started to talk about a "new cold war" or Cold War 2.0 in relation both with Russia, and especially China, treating the latter as the biggest challenge to the West and the US' hegemonic power.

Slowly but surely, the EU also started changing its attitude towards China, realising that both 16 + 1 (temporarily 17 + 1 when, in 2019, Greece joined the framework) and especially the BRI were nothing more than a platform for Chinese expansion and tools for growing power and influence, used – for instance – to encroach upon the high-tech sphere in and possibly to take it from Europe (the famous case of the factory automation systems company Kuka in Germany serves as an example), and not only platforms of fruitful cooperation as had been proposed by China. China's CEE partners also realised that the strongly promoted *win-win* strategy by the Beijing authorities, that of so-called 'mutual benefits', usually leads to the same outcome; that being one of advantage for China, as all the projects, which were mainly infrastructural in nature, were implemented not only from Chinese sources and via loans, but also by Chinese engineers and, frequently, the Chinese work force.

The real watershed moment in China/CEE relations came in 2014 when Russia forcefully annexed Crimea. The world was soon witnessing a harsh war on the Donbas region. Since then, some countries of the region, starting from the Baltic states, Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia, but also Poland, were paying much bigger attention to their security positions than – as was constantly being promoted by China – investment, trade, and business agendas. In those states' eyes, China then became a less important partner than it initially had been after the announcement of the 16 + 1 and BRI proposals. This growing, negative attitude was confirmed

during the Covid pandemic, when the atmosphere towards China changed massively, with the Chinese image in the West becoming deeply tarnished (as confirmed by recent polls by the PEW public opinion polling agency), and almost cemented itself after the full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine, when China was mostly presented by local and all Western media as a supporter, if not an open ally, of Russia. This strong change of attitude towards China is visible in many documents, declarations, and analyses. In Europe, it started from the – symbolic – term of describing China as a "systemic rival" in a European Commission statement from early 2019. Later it led, as for now, to Germany's first-of-its-kind strategy towards China, announced in summer 2023 wherein China was described as a "partner, competitor, and systemic rival". "China has changed – it was declared – so we need to change our approach to China" (*Strategy on China*, 2023, p. 9). However, Germany, like many European countries, is not ready to accept the new attitude coming out of the US towards China, which could lead towards a de-coupling or break of existing links. Instead of that dangerous, yet suggested notion of de-coupling, as President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen stated in a speech in late March 2023, it is better to implement a new strategy, that of de-risking, that is, continuing our mutual relations with China, but without any major risks (Von der Leyen, 2023).

"The time has come to diminish our dependence on China". These words have recently been openly declared in many Western countries, but not all of them. In the CEE region, there are two exemplary cases of continuous engagement in cooperation with China (a third is Greece, however, it is not a part the region). One is Hungary, and the other is Serbia, one within the EU, one outside it, albeit with candidate status, however, since 2012. Both are very interesting case studies, showing differentiations of approach towards a contemporary, ever-growing China, mostly seen in the West as a great challenge, if not a threat. But not in these two particular cases. Let's take a look at the Serbian case.

Serbia as a Destination – Serbia as a Legal and Major Heir to the Former Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia

Traditionally, at least since February 2nd, 1955, when the former Yugoslavia and China established official relations (Republic of Serbia, N.D.), the former Yugoslavia had good contact with the Chinese. Of course, there was no tradition of common heritage or shared history or religion as there had been with Russia (Vangeli, 2016, p. 19), but there also was no complicated historical background as there had been with Turkey,

or, recently, with the US (military intervention in 1999, the declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008, or Russia's full scale aggression on Ukraine in 2022). Due to this, China, as a distant partner, without any burdens or historical prejudice in the background, was received warmly, especially as a new source of investment and as a partner ready to support Serbian growth after the traumatic years immediately following the so-very-bloody dissolution of Yugoslavia.

At the beginning of this century, one of the founding pillars underpinning bilateral relations between Serbia and China was the US Air Force's bombardment of the Chinese Embassy building in Belgrade in May 1999 (3 people died, and almost 20 were injured). Since then, politically both countries were closely tied and found themselves together in a major anti-Western (US) camp, consolidated after the declaration of Kosovo's independence, which – according to one Serbian expert – "essentially 'hijacked' Serbian foreign relations" (Pavlićević, 2016, p. 99).

Only a decade later, in 2009, Serbian President Boris Tadić put forth the more balanced proposal of "four pillars of Serbian diplomacy", i.e., simultaneous engagement in four different directions; EU, US, Russia, and China (Tadić, 2009). In exactly the same year, China established strategic partnership relations with Serbia. Since then, bilateral cooperation levels constantly grew and, in June 2016, during a visit by President Xi Jinping in Belgrade, the relationship was enhanced in a special Joint Declaration of the highest possible level in Chinese terminology, that is, a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Two major events in the international arena have changed mutual approaches and sped-up bilateral cooperation in general terms. The first was China's 16 + 1 initiative from April 2012, an initiative seen from the very first instance in Belgrade as a great investment and trade opportunity. Of course, the announcement of the BRI initiative by president Xi Jinping in 2013 was another important catalyst and accelerator of this bilateral relationship. However, the other event, namely, Russia's forceful annexation of Crimea in early spring 2014, and the subsequent open war in the Donbas region, has deeply changed the atmosphere not only in Europe, but the whole of the West. Many partners of Russia, so tightly linked to China by business, trade, and economic relations, have started since then to focus more on security than trade considerations. Paradoxically, the latter events pushed Serbia rather more towards Russia and China, and less towards the other two partners from the aforementioned "four pillars", with the US being shown in Serbian media practically the same way as it is in Chinese and Russian media. (The US, of course, has appeared as a strong promoter of NATO's eastern-bound enlargement mainly towards Ukraine).

Russia is a traditionally important partner as regards Serbia, the countries linked by common culture and religion, while China started to appear as the greatest chance to modernise infrastructure (starting from a so-called "flagship" of the 16 + 1 proposal; Chinese bullet trains connecting Belgrade with Budapest for approximately EUR 2 billion) as well as a source of financial support and an important trade partner.

The conformation of a new spirit in bilateral relations was the aforementioned official visit of President Xi Jinping to Belgrade in June 2016, the first of this kind after a 30-year break. It was then when President Aleksandar Vučić described China as an "honest friend of Serbia", words which would be repeated by him on many occasions including during his frequent visits to China, and also during his personal participation in the BRI Summits (Forums) of 2017, 2019, and 2023. He also personally participated in the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games in Beijing in February 2022. Until the pandemic, the Serbian president paid visits to China every year (followed by many other high-level politicians and businessmen), and went there once again for a Third Summit (Forum) of the BRI in October 2023, when several other bilateral agreements were signed, including those for the further implementation and finalisation of the flagship project of the Belgrade to Budapest high-speed train.

Brotherhood, or a *xiongdi* relationship, was also mentioned several times during the visits of the prime ministers of both countries, which – with the exception of Covid time – took place almost annually. In political terms, the relationship is described by both sides as "excellent" or even "unparallel in the whole of history". Since 2017, both sides have started to use the term "synergy in development strategy" while the Chinese side has started to show relations with Serbia as being exemplary in the 16 + 1 framework and also more widely on a global scale. Finally, President Vučić has declared, openly, that "Serbian people love the Chinese nation" (Ciborek, pp. 246–247), which would be repeated by him several times, especially during the early stages of the pandemic, when Serbia, like many of the CEE and European countries, realised how deeply dependent they are on medication and medical equipment which is produced in China.

Serbian politicians were unhesitant and deliberate in doing business with China, external circumstances notwithstanding. As a result, in the second decade of this century, the People's Republic of China has become the most important trade and economic partner of Serbia from Asia, and – according to the data provided by the OECD – one of the most important partners overall, albeit behind Germany and Italy, but already surpassing Turkey. (OECD: *Serbia – Overview*). Another breakthrough took place in 2022, when the volume of bilateral trade with China amounted to USD

6.15 billion, of which exports from the Republic of Serbia amounted to USD 1.17 billion, and imports from the People's Republic of China amounted to USD 4.98 billion. Thanks to this, the People's Republic of China was the second most important foreign trade partner of the Republic of Serbia after Germany (the EU is in a different category) ("Bilateral relations").

It is worth noting that, in 2012, China was not visible among the most important partners of Serbia both in the export and import spheres. At that time, on the export side, the leading partners for Belgrade were Germany (11.2% of all volume), Italy (10.8%), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (8.8%). While on the import side it was Germany (10.8%), followed by Russia (9.2%), and Italy (8,6%). In the year 2020, the situation changed, not necessarily with regard to Serbia's export partners (Germany – 12.4%, Italy – 8.2%, Bosnia and Herzegovina – 6.2%), but rather on the import side, where China emerged as a second partner (8.1% of all share), behind Germany (13.2%), but ahead of Italy (7.1%) (Ciborek, pp. 258–259). The data proves that, akin to the other Chinese partners in the CEE region, meaning practically all of them, China has a very positive trade balance and is one of the major sources of supply of different categories of goods of myriad sorts, starting from consumables up to automotive parts and high-tech items (with a big role being played by the Huawei company in the latter). However, the constantly-growing trade deficit (in 2020 Serbia's export was USD 369.1 million, import from China USD 3,249,3 million – almost ten times the difference) is already an issue of concern in bilateral relations.

The list of new Chinese investments in Serbia, which started at the beginning of the second decade of this century with the construction of Pupin Bridge in Belgrade, has been diversified and constantly growing since then. Among the most important examples, one can specify: video surveillance equipment (Dahua Company, 2016); the Smeredevo steel mill (Hesteel, 2016); a car parts factory (Minth Automotive Europe, 2018); a BOR copper mining and smelting complex (Zijin, 2018); a car headlight factory (Xingyu, 2019) (ECFR, Mapping China's Rise); a "Smart Cities" project in Niš (2019); the first industrial park in Serbia in the Belgrade suburb of Borca (2020); and, recently (2023), a radial-tyre assembly line constructed by Linglong Tyres.

Among the most important bilateral agreements are not only those on bilateral trade and economic cooperation (including high-technology) from August 2009, but also on the establishment of Cultural Centres (December 2014), visa exemptions (November 2017), and a strategic partnership with Huawei (February 2017; including supplies for the

modernisation of all cyber and telecommunication systems in the country, including the Ministry of Internal Affairs). In September 2020, pandemic lockdowns notwithstanding, and with the participation of Prime Minister Ana Brnabic in an official ceremony, Huawei opened its own Centre of Cyber Innovation in Belgrade, whose task it is to implement 5G technology in the country. This agreement was forced by the authorities in Belgrade, even if there were some protests against it (and strong links with China) both on the streets, mostly due to the (mis)management of the investments or privacy issues, as well as in diplomatic circles (the US was especially anxious on the issue of access to such high-tech, also upping the geopolitical game in this region).

Serbia is continuing its deep engagement in its bilateral relationship with China, the new situation in the region and on the global scene notwithstanding, especially after a fully-fledged Russian intervention in Ukraine. The authorities in Belgrade seem not to be worried at all by the new circumstances, described by many observers and experts (Kavalski, 2021, p. 90) as a new chapter of bilateral relations with China, during which the CEE's political (sometimes even business) elites – followed by mainstream media – are making a new assessment of China in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russian aggression in Ukraine. Near-tangible, growing vigilance about Beijing's intentions in the region can easily be detected. In other words, the majority of CEE countries were becoming either suspicious or disappointed (or both) of or in China's engagement in the region well before the pandemic and then after the Russian aggression in Ukraine, wherein China is seen as a colluding partner (if not an ally) of the Russian Federation. The situation in Hong Kong after the mass demonstrations of June 2019 which were subsequently crushed by the authorities in Beijing, and, later, the Taiwan issue were both additional, important catalysers. Indeed, some countries of the region, most notably Lithuania and the Baltic states, have started to improve their relationships with Taiwan, instead of those with Beijing. Serbia, however, remains steadfast and continues to be a strong believer in bilateral relations with China.

Conclusions

The world has changed tremendously since the announcement of China's 16 + 1 framework and its BRI project. Instead of initial priority of economy, trade and infrastructural investments ("economy, stupid!"), as was initially stressed by the Chinese side, at least from 2014's forceful annexation of Crimea and certainly after February 24th, 2022 (Russia's

full-scale intervention and war in Ukraine), more and more frequently it is that we realise that a new slogan has started to dominate our agenda; "security, stupid!". Meanwhile, from the very beginning of greater Chinese involvement in the CEE region, both the EU and the US see Chinese engagement in the CEE region as a security challenge. This issue is certainly rising, as can be detected in the approach to Chinese proposals, with the questions of Huawei, ZTE, and 5G equipment at the top of the agenda. An intense competition for high-tech has been initiated, and some partners of China (the Baltic countries, Poland, Romania, and Czechia) see it more as a negative challenge. Some others, however, most notably Serbia and Hungary, constantly see Chinese proposals as attractive and further promote the fruitful development of bilateral relations. They still see China's offers more akin to an opportunity than a challenge.

After a decade of intensive dialogue between China and the countries of CEE region, the results of engagement of a new, rising power are mixed, to say the least. A new approach towards China has appeared, which is due mainly to three strategic reasons, that is: 1) Donald Trump's administration-influenced change of attitudes towards China, from that of previous engagement (since the early 1970's) to strategic competition and, later – during the subsequent Biden administration – open rivalry; 2) growing competition, especially in the high tech sphere (rare earth, semiconductors, space, etc.) and shifting perceptions of China during the COVID-19 pandemic, leading in some aspects (media coverage, axiological rivalry, etc.) to a new Cold War; 3) Russia's fully-fledged aggression on Ukraine with emerging two camps, one democratic and around the US (the West), and a second, autocratic camp, once again in the East, but close this time not around the Kremlin, but Zhongnanhai (the headquarters of Chinese authorities in Beijing).

This changing geopolitical and geostrategic landscape deeply divided the countries of the CEE region. Some of them, starting with the Baltic States, but also including Poland, Romania, and Czechia, have changed their approaches towards China, including in their approaches more security reasons and replacing trade, market, economic or business calculations, as China had originally planned. It is more than obvious that many of China's original goals in policy towards the region have not been achieved, which leads some authors and experts (see especially Czubkowska, 2022; Karásková, 2022) to the conclusion that China has lost the CEE region and that its achievements are weak and recently diminished, while simultaneously creating the image of China as a "new coloniser" and a danger to us all.

To some extent it is also a fate shared by one of the flagships of China's cooperation with Serbia, namely, the high-speed Chinese bullet train project to connect Belgrade and Budapest. Due to its lack of transparency and different business traditions and mentality (personal relations in China, regulations, rules and institutions in the EU and Europe, etc.) at the time of this writing, only a part of it has been implemented, connecting Belgrade with Novy Sad.

Even Chinese experts, blaming the US as a factor of uncertainty and source of obstruction and interference in China's CEE cooperation (*Ten Years*, 2023, p. 88), recognise this new situation. They especially stress the fact that it happened mostly after the Russian intervention in Ukraine, whereupon mutual trust was heavily damaged. Since then, China/Europe relations, and of course those with the CEE region, have faced many new challenges, starting from "strategic competition between China and the US" (*Ten Years*, 2023, p. 5). As one can see, even in the new German strategy on China from July 2023, the phrase from the European Commission documents was adopted, describing China as a "cooperation partner, economic competitor, and systemic rival" (Von der Leyen, 2023). Experts on China emphasise, however (deterrents, restraints and obstacles notwithstanding), that China is still committed to developing a comprehensive strategic partnership with the CEE countries, as, according to them; "The China-CEE cooperation is a systematic and long-term project, which can't be done soon, won't be done once and for all, and neither disappear overnight" (*Ten Years*, 2023, p. 103).

It is more than obvious that for China both the 16+1 platform and the BRI project served as tools of strengthening its presence in Europe, through building a stronger influence in Europe and in the EU. CEE countries were seen as an important doorstep to the continent and potential source to make multiple economic, trade, and geostrategic gains. By creating new – mainly infrastructural – projects, new investment, and by maintaining a continued presence in the countries of the region via trade, finance, and connectivity, they are spreading Chinese interests under the umbrella of the Chinese Dream (and eventually "Rejuvenation", a phrase so frequently employed by Chairman Xi Jinping).

China's rising global ascendance, and many examples of Chinese investments that might be a challenge for a recipient country (such as Montenegro's highways, or the Hambantota sea-port in Sri Lanka, to raise just the symbolic cases), leads to a restrained approach of EU institutions and its many Member States. Due to the visible rise of Chinese influence in Europe, and certainly due to the harsher rhetoric of the US about China, some of the CEE partners of the latter have taken a much

more realistic assessment of the "comprehensive strategic partnership", as proposed by China. Some of them, especially in the Western Balkan region, and with visible cases of Hungary (an EU and NATO member) and Serbia (not a member of Western alliance) are strongly pushing for further cooperation with China. Serbia, being the case study of this article, formally still maintains the "four founding pillars" of its diplomacy (the EU, US, Russia, and China), as declared in 2009, however, unlike many other countries in the CEE region, is rather increasing than diminishing its engagement with China.

One can detect three main levels of this – mostly bilateral – cooperation, that is, those carried out on central, local, and sub-regional levels, with emphasis on the first two. Instead of "strategic competition" as proposed by the Western camp, the authorities in Belgrade still are ready to cooperate with China. This can be confirmed by multiple factors including the opening of direct flights between Belgrade and Beijing, fresh investments (a new assembly line of high performance radial tyres due to an investment of some EUR 800 million by the Linglong Tires company, and, despite earlier failures, further efforts both in the Smeredevo steel works, and Belgrade-Budapest high-speed trains, etc), and excellent bilateral political relations. However, even if initial focus on transport infrastructure remains predominant, it is visible that recently it has been supplemented by extensive investments in many new sectors ranging from energy, retail connected to tourism and telecommunication to Artificial Intelligence through Smart City projects in Sarajevo and Belgrade (Bastian, 2022, p. 4).

The bilateral relations of China and Serbia seem to be an exemplary case; there is political will on both sides, constant, high-level exchanges of visits, increasing people-to-people diplomacy, thinktank activity and scientific exchange, mutually positive media coverage, and an almost identical assessment of the current political global scene (negative as regards NATO and the US, standing rather with Russia and not Ukraine, with a focus on the growing role of the Global South). However, some cases – such as the bullet trains to Budapest, the Smeredevo steel mill and the environmentally disastrous consequences of that particular investment, the deep involvement of Huawei and other Chinese companies including Hikvision, Dahua, and/or ZTE in the cyber systems of Serbia with deep concern on the growing invigilation of society (Czubkowska, 2022, pp. 309–314) show that with strong, or even giant partners such as China, some caution is necessary, as the capacities and potentials on both sides are so different. Also, and which is no less important, China's strongly promoted slogan of mutual benefits (*win-win*) has frequently proved to

provide another formula, i.e., 2 – 0 to China, with China being a double winner (of money supply and later debt, and of market access).

Serbia seems to be a passive recipient of the Chinese strategic (BRI) and foreign policy initiatives (the 16 + 1 and many bilateral others). On the other hand, there is a visible, pro-active stance of Serbian authorities in relation to China, with politicians at the top – in contrast to most Western countries recently – seeing China rather than an opportunity and not a challenge nor threat. They provide ample space for exploring and deepening Chinese relations. However, even in these seemingly blooming relations, questions of transparency, procedures, and standards have emerged.

Serbian development strategy heavily relies on foreign investment (FDI), thus China, with its wide-ranging offer, is seen in Belgrade, as in Budapest recently, as an almost ideal (economic, trade, business, or even strategic) partner. The case of neighbouring Montenegro should be a proper reminder, however, that China does indeed give a great deal, but sometimes takes even more. Meanwhile, Belgrade has chosen to permit the penetration of various sectors of its market and society. No doubt that more legal scrutiny and political questioning of some proposals would be more than welcomed in the theatre that is bilateral cooperation. Yes, there is no question that Serbia, under the leadership of President Aleksandar Vučić, is increasingly becoming the principal investment gateway for China in the Western Balkans (Bastian, 2022, p. 11). At the time of the writing of this study, the Serbian authorities to continue their open policy towards China seems to be indisputable. For how long, though? Nobody knows for certain, but it will probably be for a long time, however, because it is worth quoting here in the final conclusions a remark made by President Aleksandar Vučić who, in March 2020, made a vocal disavowal of the EU's policies in the Western Balkans and Serbia. Expressing his opinion loud and clear, he stated: "I believe in Chinese help. The only country that can help us is China. To the others, thanks a lot for nothing" (Bastian, 2022, p. 12).

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The Balkans as a Geopolitical Playground for the 21st Century – Threats and Challenges

Abstract
This paper's aim is to provide a retrospective of the current geopolitical situation in the Balkans. This includes a brief analysis of methodology and means used by the great powers (China, France, Russia, the US, and the UK) in achieving their goals of dominance. The author's main objective is to demonstrate that realism as a theory in international relations is the best explanatory tool for the geopolitical situation in the Balkans of the day. In this context, the comparative method was used in the paper.

Keywords: Balkans, Realism, Soft Power, Russia, USA

Introduction

In the eyes of the great powers, the Balkans has been a zone of interest and a springboard for further penetrations in different directions for centuries. With its geopolitical magnetism, it attracted and still attracts global and regional powers, whose parallel and intertwined interests create a geopolitical knot in the Balkans, and thus an important geopolitical feature. It is about strategic movements and wedges from different directions. The Germanic factor has been projecting the direction of movement northwest-southeast for centuries, which is reflected in the idea of penetration to the east, i.e., the southeast [Drang nach (Süd) Osten]. In contrast, the Islamic factor tends to move in the direction of southeast to northwest, towards the centre of Europe, and one example is the penetration of the Ottomans. Russia, on the other hand, is trying to move in a north-east to south-west direction, towards the Mediterranean

and the warm seas, while the United States aims to control all directions, either directly or through allies and pivot states.

The next important geopolitical feature is the so-called "line of contact", created as a result of the intersection of two traditional religions, Christianity (with Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism as confessions) and Islam, and three civilisation-cultural circles (the Western, Orthodox, and Islamic civilisations) in the Balkans. It is interesting to note that during the Cold War, the area of the Balkans, especially Yugoslavia, was characterised by complicated issues specially constructed from two opposing directions. The Soviet Union tried by all means possible to dominate that area from the aforementioned northeast-southwest direction, while the United States strove to displace the USSR in the southwest-northeast direction. Therefore, the confrontation between the two biggest powers of that time did not spare the Balkans, which was a chessboard for the geopolitical tricks of Moscow and Washington as well as the pivot states.

At that time, the Russian sphere of influence covered a significant part of Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the struggle for influence in the Balkans was constant, and the control of Bulgaria and Romania and the Black Sea coast was unquestionable. However, after the end of the Cold War, the situation in the aforementioned regions changed in favour of the USA, and saw Russia retreating deep into the centre of the continent. An important goal was to use Russia's economic and military stagnation and geopolitical defensiveness in order to occupy the key strategic areas of the Balkans and prevent the Russians from returning to, as far as Russia was concerned, the second most important geopolitical zone.

The Balkans, due to the aforementioned line of contact, was not spared from major political, military, or territorial changes, which radicalised the process of balkanisation, understood as political instability and territorial disputes. With the re-composition of the international order in the post-Cold War period, sensitive and nodal zones such as the Balkans found themselves in a geopolitical vacuum, which the United States skillfully used to establish control and drag the countries of Southeastern and Eastern Europe into the Atlantic structures. In the past three decades, 14 countries have joined NATO, from Estonia in the north to Bulgaria in the south, forming a chain through which the Euro-Atlantic powers control Eastern Europe and the western shores of the Black Sea. This clearly shows the geopolitical consistency of the Euro-Atlantic structures, which tried by all means available to build and strengthen the so-called "Western Wall" towards Russia. Romania and Bulgaria, which were under Russian control during the Cold War, now belong to the Euro-Atlantic circle of states, which is just one example of the changing balance of power in Southeast Europe.

On the other hand, there is Eurasian integration; a Russian-initiated project, as an alternative to American unipolar globalism. It is being formed in the Heartland, the heart of the continent, capable of gradually displacing it from the peripheral areas (the Rimland) of the Old World by creating continental alliances/axes. The project of the Eurasian Union is seen as the beginning of a gathering within the impregnable tellurocratic fortress (given that, as an area in the depth of the continent, the farthest from the world's seas, naval forces have the least influence on it). It is a geographical pivot of history of sorts, that takes place in phases at the same time as Russian foreign policy directions towards the creation of continental alliances on the edge of the Eurasian continent. In the first of those phases, Russia tends to relativise the position of Atlanticised Europe, i.e., the European Union, by establishing a mutually beneficial relationship. In the second phase, it wants to help the emancipation of Europe/European Union from the USA and its transformation into a special pole of power in a multipolar world. "The Russian tellurocratic Behemoth is directed towards the American thalassocratic Leviathan in Europe" (Stepić, 2009). This encouraged Atlanticists both to build and plan alternative networks of various pipelines, as well as to create a preventive geopolitical curtain, a kind of replay of the so-called "buffer zone" from the Baltic to the Black Sea from the interwar period, which serves to separate and disrupt relations between Russia and Germany as a key, central member of the European Alliance.

However, we must remember that the pace of integration of the post-Soviet space is proceeding much more slowly and is still faced with significant dilemmas and obstacles; without the accession of Uzbekistan in Central Asia and, above all, Ukraine, the geo-economic and geopolitical unification of the post-Soviet space will be incomplete. Without them, neither broader geopolitical integrations and reorientations beyond Russia's closer neighbourhood nor the creation of strategic alliances with multipolar power centres in the Old World viewed from the perspectives of so-called "large spaces" can be seriously approached. On the other hand, the global economic crisis radicalised the internal contradictions of the European Union to the widest of extents, which grew together with its enlargement fatigue. Behind the deep economic problems, the European Union clearly reflects two rather different geopolitical concepts from which the Union was created, and which, through the historical development of this supranational creation, were in an ambivalent relationship of simultaneous rivalry and alliance. One of those concepts is the Central European geopolitical axis of "tellurocratic" Germany and its historical allies, recovered after the world war disasters. The other

concept is personified by the forces of an Anglo-Saxon-type Atlanticist "thalassocracy". They formed, and, during the Cold War and in the post-Cold War environment, have managed the creation and development of the European Union since the time of the European Economic Community. Other countries, such as France, but also the countries of Scandinavia, the Mediterranean basin, or those of the former Warsaw Pact, oscillate in their preference around one of these two options.

Realism and Soft Power

It appears that current struggles of geopolitical concepts over the Balkan region (but not only) is based on realism that believes that power and national interests determine the behaviour of actors in international relations. In this sense, the thinking of George Kennan, a famous American diplomat who wrote at the beginning of the Cold War that Americans should stop discussing vague and unrealistic goals such as human rights or improving the standard of living and democracy, is interesting. He suggested that the USA would have to act directly from a position of power. He concluded that the fewer idealistic slogans there were, the better. In his opinion, the policy pursued by the USA when faced with the beginning of the Cold War is almost irrational because it is "utopian in expectations, legalistic in concept, moral in demands towards others and selfish in the degree of nobility towards ourselves. (Kennan, 1972, pp. 70–71). Kennan also opposed Bill Clinton's decision to bomb Yugoslavia in 1999, considering it a strategic mistake. He was convinced that the move represented a call for awareness in Russia, which, like any other actor, needs to protect its national interests by strengthening its power potential. With Putin's coming to power this happened precisely at the beginning of 2000. It accelerated the creation of the balance of power in international politics, which is another characteristic of realism, probably the most controversial for supporters of other approaches. Thus, the Americans lost the opportunity to shape relations and order that would enable them to maintain their disproportionate position at the time, and due to the increase in the power potential of other actors in the world political system, the process of forming a completely new order began. In all this, ideology and idealistic slogans play almost no role. All this applies to relations in the Balkans as well.

If we agree that everything is about power, let's have a closer look at how the Russians use their power potential, especially this so-called "soft" power. With its total potentials, viewed on a global scale, i.e., shares in various parameters of state power (both hard and soft), Russia is still

weaker than the USSR was at its peak in the 1950s and early 1960s. In the first ten years after the end of the Second World War, the former Soviet Union successfully handled elements of power that now have a common denominator – soft power. After several brutal interventionist actions in countries controlled by the then-Eastern military bloc, the USSR was recognised as clearly parading its muscle, particularly through the use of military force or the threat of military force. Circumstances that befell the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and that lasted throughout the 1990s greatly influenced the deterioration of the levers of hard power, while the influence of soft power could not even be spoken of. With the beginning of the new millennium, Russia made significant efforts to regain the status of a world power and increasingly exploited the levers of soft power. The use of soft power begins in that period, but its delay can be seen because the countries of the former Warsaw Pact had already become members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, while membership in the European Union or the pursuit of European integration has drastically reduced the free space for Russian influence in the former Eastern Bloc states. The previous use of soft power instruments was clumsy and ineffective in relation to their potential, especially towards countries whose population is Russophile, such as Serbia or, to a certain extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, or Macedonia.

Since many fear of Russian soft power in the region, it would be interesting to have a closer look at the phenomenon. Firstly, we need to note that soft power as a concept was constituted for the first time in Joseph S. Nye's work "Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power", published in 1990 (Nye, 1990). For him, "soft power is the power to get what you want which is desired by attraction, not by compulsion or payment" (Nye, 1990, p. 74). According to Nye, the "ability of a state to use soft power is based on three basic resources: the culture of the state, political values (at home and abroad), and external politics (which must be legitimate and moral in the eyes of others)" (Nye, 2011, p. 112). Culture is a very important resource of power, since some aspects of culture are universal, some national and others related to certain social classes or groups. For example, the cultural appeal of the West, especially the USA (whatever one might think about the US culture personally), is strongly accepted around the world. American movies, series, literature, music, art, and lifestyles affect billions of people, especially youth populations in many countries around the world. Political values of a given state play a big role in spreading its soft power, if that country adheres to them both internally and externally in their foreign policy plans. Economic resources are also important resources of soft power, which can attract

others state(s) and achieve desired outcomes. For example, Russia can expand its soft power if it establishes the project of the Eurasian Union, attracts the countries of the post-Soviet space, and shows them the possibility of achieving economic development. Although at first glance it looks paradoxical, even military resources can be a source of soft power (i.e., cultivating the cult of invincibility). There are many aspects of how to use soft power. The most famous use refers to attraction, which depends both on the quality of the actor which is doing the attracting, as well as the target who is watching the attractors' activity. If qualities such as ideals, values, and visions of the future are attractive, then there is a greater chance of a successful targeting. The second aspect is persuasion, which is closely related to attraction. It is realised by using arguments in order to influence the target, and involves a degree of manipulation which must be concealed as best as possible (Nye, 2011). It is obvious that the state that owns more numerous resources of power, with a smart strategy, can execute influence on weaker states. It is, however, quite possible that a state that is less well-endowed with power-based resources can achieve a desired outcome in a conflict with a stronger state, provided that it makes a proper conversion and good use of the power it does have. As a confirmation of the correctness of this hypothesis, there is the example of the Vietnam War in which Vietnam was an incomparably weaker country than the USA, but eventually won the war. Without doubt, at the base of power relations lie power resources. However, confirmation that certain resources can produce an expected result depends on the ability of the state to convert resources into an appropriate strategy and achieve a desired outcome. Therefore, Nye defines so-called "smart power" as a combination of "the hard power of coercion and payoffs, on the one hand, and the soft power of persuasion and attraction, on the other" (Nye, 2011, p. 12).

Russia understood that one of the essential prerequisites for spreading influence is the usage of alternative, effective, and directed information and educational systems. In this sense, soft power is imposed as Russia's key resource in the Eurasian space. Usage of the widest range of humanitarian instruments with the aim of forming a positive image of Russia is most often directed towards the young population as the most interactive part of the post-soviet societies. Russia is "using the power of information, the attraction of culture, and the implementation of specific policies of a country" (Nye, 2004, p. 11), with aspirations of spreading influence using this model. There are several sub-segments of soft power that is the focus of Russia. They are primarily culture, education, media, and non-governmental organisations, with the biggest breakthrough in these

spheres referring to Russia's closest environment – the Commonwealth of Independent States.

When it comes to the Balkans, for Russia, it no longer presents the ideological/political importance it used to have during the Cold War, when most of the states of that region were being led by communist leadership parties. Ideological interests were replaced by economic ones, but this area still retains its military-strategic significance, despite the fact that the fall of communism and the disintegration of the Social Yugoslav Federation changed that part of Europe via an increased number of countries while at the same time drastically reducing their influence and military potential. The weakness of the Russian Federation at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century was exploited by NATO for its eastward expansion, which Russia perceived as a threat. All the countries in the region, with the exception of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, became NATO members. It is understandable that the expansion of NATO in the Southeast region of Europe is not particularly pleasing to the Russian Federation. Therefore, Serbia's military-neutral position is very much acceptable, even though Belgrade today has incomparably less importance than in times of being the capital of the Yugoslav Federation (1945–1991). However, it needs to be said also that Russia itself has contributed this strong suppression of its geopolitical interests from the region due to its political indecisiveness, especially in the pre-Putin period (1991–2000), and also due to its geopolitical wandering and confusion when it comes to the Balkans region.

There are many reasons why Serbia is probably the most suitable ground for the effects of Russia's soft power in the region. Among the most significant reasons are that Serbs are Slavic akin to Russians; they share the same Orthodox Christian faith, there are deep historical connections between Serbs and Russians with joint performance in some turbulent periods of contemporary history, Russians represent the interests of Serbia in international organisations, not forgetting the widespread Russophilism in Serbian society. It should be noted that although it is formally and existentially referred to the European Union, due to internal division and absence valid internal communications, Serbia is still wavering in geostrategic orientation (e.g., a multi-vector foreign policy and declared military neutrality in the Constitution of 2006).

The Serbian political elite has traditionally relied on to Russia and expected its support during the turbulent 1990s. However, collapse of the Soviet Union and the support of Slobodan Milosevic of putschists against Mikhail Gorbachev rendered Russian support negligible. At that time, Russia was mostly supportive of the policy of the Contact Group

for the former Yugoslavia until Boris Yeltsin's withdrawal from power. The nature of the relationship only changed when Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000 and enacted his turnaround in relation to the West, which reflected his attitude towards Serbia. At the political level, a new era of good mutual relations is also reflected in the non-acceptance by Belgrade's foreign policy of the European Union as regards the war in Ukraine. From an economy standpoint, this relationship is characterised by, *inter alia*, Serbia's energy dependence on Russian sources of supply, the Russian-majority shareholding in the Serbian oil monopolist NIS (Naftna Industrija Srbije), and Russia's participation in infrastructure projects such as railway modernisation.

Conclusions

The creation of energy corridors to Central Europe via the Balkans is only the first (albeit insufficient) step of a potential return of Eurasian Russia, which could change the balance of power in the region. However, there is still a long way to go when it comes to covering the potential geopolitical leap of Eurasian Russia. Frankly, it might become realistic only when (or if) the continentalist reintegration of the post-Soviet space is completed. In other words, a strategic return to the Balkans is not achievable unless Russia and Ukraine become a part of a single state once again. Whether this is a realistic scenario or not is a different question. Meanwhile, Russia is trying to maintain and even somewhat increase its geostrategic involvement (energy, economic, cultural and, to some extent, security) in the central Balkans without major confrontations with the Anglo-Saxon Atlanticists. Russia uses its three main pillars of influence: position in the international community (as a permanent member in the UN Security Council); historical, cultural and political ties with the Orthodox peoples in the Balkans; and the growing economic importance of Russia for the countries of the region. Its priorities are therefore unchanged (with efforts to intensify them quantitatively): 1) energy policy; 2) so-called "identity policy"; and 3) security policy (enabled by bilateral and multilateral arrangements). Their immediate realisation, only in the case of a full reintegration of the Heartland within the Eurasian Union project, opens space for a comprehensive, so-called "entering" into the Balkan area's parts of the Rimland and the strategic change in the balance of power there. Atlanticists are very well aware of that, and, therefore, it can be assumed that if the project of the Eurasian Union starts to develop in a successful direction, it will only strengthen efforts to fully (forcibly?) integrate Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

into the Atlanticist geopolitical zone. This would close this potentially dangerous geopolitical gap currently located in the hinterland of their space for strategic performance. This is the reason why, for example, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will have a great impact in the Balkans.

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Conceptual Model for Building Disinformation Resilience

Abstract
The paper examines selected issues related to the problem of disinformation and building community resilience to disinformation. In recent years, analysis in this area has been particularly active due to the massive increase in the use of false information in various areas of social and economic life and the damage it causes. The aim of this study is to develop a conceptual model of the process of building resilience to disinformation, which, in the future, could form the basis for automating and autonomising this process with the help of computer systems. The research methods used were literature analysis and criticism, selected elements of computer simulation, and heuristics. As a result of the work, an adequate conceptual model was proposed and its elements were analysed. The results are of a practical nature for educating and influencing opinion formers and various information consumers, and of a scientific nature for conducting further research to improve tools and techniques for identifying and countering disinformation.

Keywords: Fake News, Disinformation Resilience

Introduction

Over the centuries, the development of civilisation has required access to key resources, the ability to process and use them, and knowledge and information about the wider environment in which individuals and

their groups functioned. In principle, this situation did not change until modern times. What has changed is the level of sophistication of the elements that enable communities to sustain and develop. In this context, information about the environment began to cover an ever wider range of issues, an ever greater level of detail, and an ever more complex set of relationships.

In the distant past, information was created, transmitted, and collected through speech (memory) and writing (signs and images), the latter belonging mainly to centres of power and to centres of wealth with sufficient material and intellectual capital. Very often these were the same centres. For the centres of power, access to information was necessary to ensure their long-term continuity, to maintain the internal and external security of the functioning of a dominated territory, and to be able to influence the subordinated population to shape their behaviour and opinions. For the centres of wealth, an additional aspect was the multiplication of their wealth and resources, including through contacts with the outside world.

With increasing prosperity and the introduction of new technologies for the widespread recording of information (the invention of printing), the collection, processing, and transmission of information began to affect other areas of life, including various aspects of economic life, the functioning of societies and human collectives, science, health, and political life. Information became a resource that could provide an advantage in the competition for power and material goods. Equally important were the possibilities for its rapid transmission (communication) within structures pursuing the same goals.

Today, with the development of technology, it is possible to observe and record events in the real and virtual world on a very large scale. In the general case, these events can be defined as a record of the state of the world at a given moment (static) or period (dynamic). Photos, videos, and recorded or transcribed statements by people about events can be created and instantly transmitted to any place on Earth. They can be played, copied, edited, analysed, and transformed, and/or new information can be created from them. The participants in this process are individuals or their more-or-less organised groups, information and communication technology systems, and automatically or autonomously operating machines. Information has become a kind of propellent for the functioning of societies, and it is created in its original form in relation to past events or predictions of future events. It lives very briefly (momentarily) in the present and is quickly transformed, changed, and grows into further information, affecting the recipients and being the premise for their actual actions, generating further events.

This phenomenon is especially prevalent within the virtual realm, including social media. Communication between individuals is characterised by the ease of transferring information, its high velocity, its low cost, its targeted audience selection, and the breadth of content. Any participant in this landscape can generate and disseminate information immediately on virtually any subject, at any moment, and by any means. These activities are executed in a decentralised manner and are characterised by diversity and variability. Their quantitative magnitude is vast, and it is challenging to measure their qualitative dimensions accurately. The recipients of this information are primarily individuals who are subject to information overload, inundated with vast amounts of messages that inadvertently influence their perception of the world. As a result, they are directed towards making dependable decisions in line with the information authors' objectives.

In addition to the variety and complexity of information that appears in public spaces or dedicated environments, it is crucial to consider the accuracy of information when describing the course of past or anticipated events. It is possible to encounter incomplete, outdated (considering the dynamics of events), or even false information. Incomplete information only depicts a partial state of the world. Outdated information refers to information that is no longer relevant in the current context. False information, on the other hand, provides an inaccurate depiction of reality.

The literature offers various definitions of false information, including the commonly used term "fake news". For this paper, the following definition of fake news is adopted; fake news refers to intentionally fabricated and disseminated falsehoods aimed at inducing the recipients to act in the sender's interest or to refrain from activities that contradict it. It can also alter the recipient's mental state as envisioned by the sender. The term "creator" (and/or "sender") refers to an individual or entity with a stake, be it tangible or intangible, in the behaviour of the fake news recipient.

In numerous cases, it can be extremely challenging to ascertain the veracity of information reported. This predicament is especially prevalent on social media where sourcing and verifying information can often be a hopeless task.

Understanding the impact and effects of false information on the functioning of societies and economies has become the subject of scientific research and focus for state services, including those responsible for security. Detecting whether the information is fake presents technical difficulties. The content is quickly and easily generated, disseminated,

transformed by recipients, and re-disseminated. "Content" covers a range of topics and issues and may include subjective elements. Organising and structuring it can prove challenging. False news can be disseminated through misleading information, advertising, gossip, or false statements made by individuals, as well as through jokes and other types of content. Automated analysis has limited efficacy in ascertaining the intended meaning of content, which typically requires human attention for identification. The identification of false news can be based on identifying the characteristics of the users (senders as well as recipients), the content itself, and the context in which it was transmitted.

False news is employed to befuddle and alter the perceptions or opinions of audiences on particular subjects, with the intention of directing them to make choices or decisions that are in line with the objectives of the disseminator of the inaccurate information. The plethora of inaccurate and deceptive information in the digital realm, particularly on social media platforms, presents a risk of individuals being swayed by its influence. This also endangers the proper functioning of social networks and the e-economy. The prominence of fake news became more apparent following the 2016 US presidential election, with the hypothesis suggesting a rise in polarisation amongst political voters to manipulate election results. False information, commonly referred to as fake news, has infiltrated political discourse as well.

The analysis and counteraction of fake news present significant challenges given the time required to undertake such tasks. False news stories are intentionally crafted with the intention of appearing authentic and are prepared ahead of specific events. Those who spread fake news choose the precise moment to release it, as these stories operate in an environment with a plethora of information related to the same event. In modern times, intricate cases necessitate laborious analysis undertaken by skilled interdisciplinary teams who possess access to specialised databases and utilise supportive information systems to identify false information.

Once fake news is identified, restoring the accuracy of the message becomes a complex process. By this point, there are likely numerous replicas of the incorrect information in its original and modified forms circulating through various communication systems. Many individuals have already internalised the false news, and some may have acted based on it. The restoration of the genuine message is often a simultaneous process with the continued spread of false news. It can be extremely challenging to communicate an accurate message to this group and counter the impact of its current beliefs. The individual behind the false news may attempt to impede the efforts to uphold the truth during

this period. Thus, a significant gap exists between the generation and propagation of false information and its detection and removal from the information sphere.

To identify fake news, linguistic aspects of the content being examined, the reliability of the sender, and modes of information dissemination are commonly used. As a result, this activity is restricted to analysts, which restricts the scope and applicability of this method. Ultimately, an objective should be to develop real-time information systems that can detect, investigate, and interpret false information. Social media should be the first area of operation for such systems, followed by other virtual spaces. Organising this field should greatly aid in the eradication of fake news from the physical world.

The methods and tools for responding to fake news once it has been identified, however, are a separate matter. These issues comprise management considerations for institutions and communities (such as identifying who should respond and when), legal matters (such as how to regulate the law in this context and how to hold fake-news senders accountable for their actions and their outcomes), regulatory matters (such as how to accurately and thoroughly correct false information), financial matters (such as who should bear the costs of these actions), and several others.

This paper describes a descriptive, conceptual model of the environment for building resilience to disinformation, aimed at structuring the description of the problem, including the specification of its elements and their attributes, as well as indicating the relationships between them. The activities necessary to build a community's resilience to disinformation have been outlined, and the model has been built in a way that is appropriate to the analysis of the environment in which fake news is created and affected. The proposed model can provide material both of an utilitarian nature, to educate and influence opinion formers and various information consumers, and of a scientific nature, to conduct further research to improve tools and techniques to counter disinformation.

The breadth of the subject matter has forced the authors to limit the considerations in the various areas to issues of a fundamental nature, whose elaboration is necessary only to understand the argument being made, following a top-down approach. The authors plan to further develop the work at the application level, especially in the area of the possibility of automating and autonomising the process of detecting fake news.

Outline of Literature Analysis

The term "fake news" was first used in the literature almost 100 years ago, in 1925, in an article in Harper's Magazine, which highlighted the negative impact of disinformation on the public and the possibility that such information could spread rapidly through various types of media (McKernon, 1925). Since then, many researchers have analysed the phenomenon of fake news and its impact on society. A particularly important role has been attributed to fake news in the last 10 years, when false information, containing erroneous and untrue data, has been widely disseminated by various types of media, leading to an impact on the outcome of decisions made by the public, for example, the presidential election in the United States, the referendum on Brexit, and/or the coverage of Ukraine's war with Russia.

Exactly 10 years ago, the World Economic Forum drew attention to the possibility that disinformation can be spread not only accidentally, but also consciously and intentionally, meaning that the creator of fake news specifically wants to mislead their audience (World Economic Forum, 2013). Three years later, the term took on a particular meaning in the context of the US presidential election. It was defined as misleading information in the form of misinformation or disinformation in the form of messages, stories, theories, or opinions that spread rapidly through social contacts or the media. A very clear distinction was made between misinformation and disinformation based on the intent of the action. Misinformation contains information that is untrue but is not deliberately given and is not intended to cause harm to the audience. Disinformation, on the other hand, contains untrue information that has been developed and disseminated with the intention of causing harm (Wardle, Derakhshan, 2017).

The definition of fake news has also been researched by British institutions. The result of their research was the development of a report by a parliamentary committee which came to the conclusion that the term fake news had not been properly defined and, in fact, has not been assigned attributes, or characteristics that would allow it to be properly defined (House of Commons, 2019). Ongoing research has not reached an agreement/consensus on a single definition of fake news (Shu et al., 2017). Many researchers have attempted to develop a typology of fake news by defining it as, for example, satire, parody, fabrication, manipulation, propaganda, or advertisement (Tandoc, 2018). Waszak, on the other hand, tried to add to already existing formulations such as fabricated news, manipulated news, advertising news, and irrelevant

news (Waszak et al., 2018). However, none of these definitions have been adopted by the organisation as a whole, which, at the same time, makes it difficult to communicate properly between the institutions and researchers in question.

Given the situation described above, more and more voices around the world have begun to replace the term fake news with the terms misinformation and disinformation – the key being the correct definition of these terms and their differentiation.

In the study presented here, the authors have provided their definition of fake news, but have also adopted for further consideration two main categories of information containing false data, in the form of misinformation and disinformation. However, in the following section of the study, they will not distinguish between the concepts but will focus on a comprehensive approach to the issue of misinformation reporting.

Basic Terms and Definitions

The term "information" can be found in many different areas of human life – science, economics, art, religion, etc. The term is defined on the basis of different theories and scientific fields, e.g., cybernetics, economics, and sociology. For the purposes of this paper, the authors have adopted their own definition, in which information is a message or set of messages about events that have occurred in the real or virtual world and that have been made available or published in a form that allows the recipients to relate to them and react accordingly. This approach derives from the framework and needs of the project within which this work has been developed.

A message is a text (a set of ordered characters), sound, or image (static or dynamic) transmitted in the process of human or machine communication. To a message can be added a set of quantitative data about the elements of the message, to which a numerical value can be assigned. Events are the change(s) in an environment (changes in the state of the environment) that are observable and describable. An event can also be the result of an analysis of changes in the environment, containing a set of conclusions resulting from the processing of data by a human or computer system. The real (physical) world is a four-dimensional space-time (realistically experienced by humans) in which events occur. Mental states are also part of the physical world. The virtual world is the Internet, broadly defined as a collection of computers (computing machines), computer programs, and telecommunications tools. On the Internet, it is possible to collect, process, transmit, and distribute data and information in the digital (digitised) form.

"Publication" means making information known to an undifferentiated audience and sharing it with a predetermined audience. Publication or distribution can be done by a human or by a computer system. Recipients of information may also be both human or computer systems. The recipient's reference to the information is the ability to absorb (assimilate and remember), analyse, and interpret the information to draw useful conclusions from the recipient's perspective. The recipient's response to the information may involve taking action in the physical world or in the virtual world. Actions can be physical (changes in the state of the environment) or mental (changes in the state of consciousness/knowledge).

Information can have different attributes. The authors of the paper distinguished the following: completeness, consistency, relevance, timeliness, accessibility, appropriateness, and credibility.

Completeness of information means the optimal amount of data that is needed for the recipient to gain knowledge about the event of interest so that they can draw conclusions and take action. Optimality means that nothing can be removed from a set of data without losing the ability to make an action decision based on the information, but also that nothing more needs to be added. Consistency of information means that the various elements of the information are mutually congruent in terms of the content, form, and validity of the data in the context of the objectives of the information. Adequacy of information (relevance) means its adaptation (fit) to the level of competence (knowledge, skills, and experience) of the recipient, without losing completeness and consistency. Information can be said to be up to date (timeliness) if only the time between the event and the time the information reaches the recipient has elapsed due to the need to observe, describe, publish, and disseminate the event, and no changes have occurred in the scope of the event itself that would require the information to be updated. Any change in the scope of the event requires the information to be updated. Information is considered accessible to the recipient if the original form of the information and its history of updates can be accessed at any time. The accessibility of information is its equivalence (isometry) with other information on the same event. Isometry is the ability to transform one piece of information into another by making a finite number of equivalent changes to the content of the information. Appropriateness of information means that the information is presented in such a way that the recipient can interpret it correctly. Credibility of information is the confidence of the recipient in the accuracy of the data and the reliability of the message.

Information can be unitary or complex (aggregate). Unitary information describes a single event (also: a single, integral object or process).

Aggregate information describes a set of related events (also: a set of objects or processes) consisting of individual events.

In the field of disinformation problems, it is also necessary to organise the conceptual apparatus of what is a real problem, a problem model, a conceptual model, and what are the assumptions about the conceptual model for the problem under study.

According to the basic considerations of philosophy, especially existential philosophy, the appearance of problems in life is natural and people experience them throughout their lives. The nature and aspects of problems are manifold and complex. Problems occur on the scale of individuals as well as whole human communities. The natural tendency of human beings is to strive to solve problems. Civilisation has developed a number of ways of doing this. One of these, particularly useful for problems that can be described quantitatively or qualitatively, but with quantified quantities, are methods that use modelling.

In this paper, an (analytical) problem is taken to mean a situation in the world (real or virtual or mental) that needs to be analysed, resolved, and a solution found. A real problem is an objectively existing problem that has actually occurred. A real problem is characterised by a very high level of quantitative complexity, structural complexity – the varying nature and degree of connections between its elements, and qualitative complexity in terms of the types and kinds of objects and processes that make up the problem. A problem model is a set of concepts (symbolic objects) and relationships between them that describe the real problem, given the assumptions made at the outset. A problem model is usually approximate in nature. The purpose of approximation is usually to enable perception of the problem or to enable effective problem-solving.

Applying for the isolationist position, the structure of a typical approach to problem solving using modelling is as follows: a given entity uses a model as a representation of the real problem under study, for a specific purpose, presented to an audience with some degree of similarity between the model and the real problem.

A conceptual model is a model that represents objects in a way that is independent of how it is implemented. In an interpretative sense, a conceptual model is universal in nature. It can be implemented in any environment or tool. The conceptual model is also the basis for creating data models of the problem under investigation. The conceptual model should be formulated in such a way that it is accessible to its audience, taking into account their content embeddedness and ability to receive information. In terms of usability, it should enable the selection of an efficient tool and its effective and efficient implementation in that tool.

The conceptual model should be independent of the tool solution to be developed and should provide insight into various aspects of the problem to be solved (the essence of its impact on reality). The preparation of the conceptual model is based on the analysis of the requirements of the problem to be solved. The terminology used in the conceptual model should be consistent with the terminology of the problem to be solved. The conceptual model can also be used to verify and validate the correctness of the understanding of the problem. Based on the conceptual model, the next stage of the implementation work is to create a logical model of the data describing the problem to be solved.

The conceptual model for building disinformation resilience is an open model (without feedback), with multiple inputs and multiple outputs. The transition function of the model is the multi-stage processing of inputs into outputs. Each of the model's inputs has its own unique characteristics to build the structure of the primary data and can ultimately take quantified values from a predefined set. The input processing includes the analytical part, the information processing part, and the disinformation response part. The analytical part also takes the form of a data structure in terms of the elements that make up disinformation resilience. The structure elements have their own characteristics and can take values from a predefined set. The information processing part has a defined entity structure with characteristics of its elements and defined processing methods. The disinformation response part defines sets of actions to be taken with their characteristics. The outputs of the model are knowledge bases in a possible different implementation form, together with the characteristics of their contents.

A Conceptual Model for Building Disinformation Resilience

Based on the presented and described classical method of conceptual model construction, a structure of the conceptual model dedicated to building disinformation resilience was developed. The model consists of three main elements:

- Inputs to the model – representing key characteristics related to the creation/development of fake news.
- The process of building resilience – this consists of three stages that allow you to analyse the data obtained, process the information, and then determine how to deal with incompatible information.
- The outputs of the model – these are key actions to prevent the spread of misinformation to subsequent recipients.

A detailed diagram of the model is shown in Figure 1.

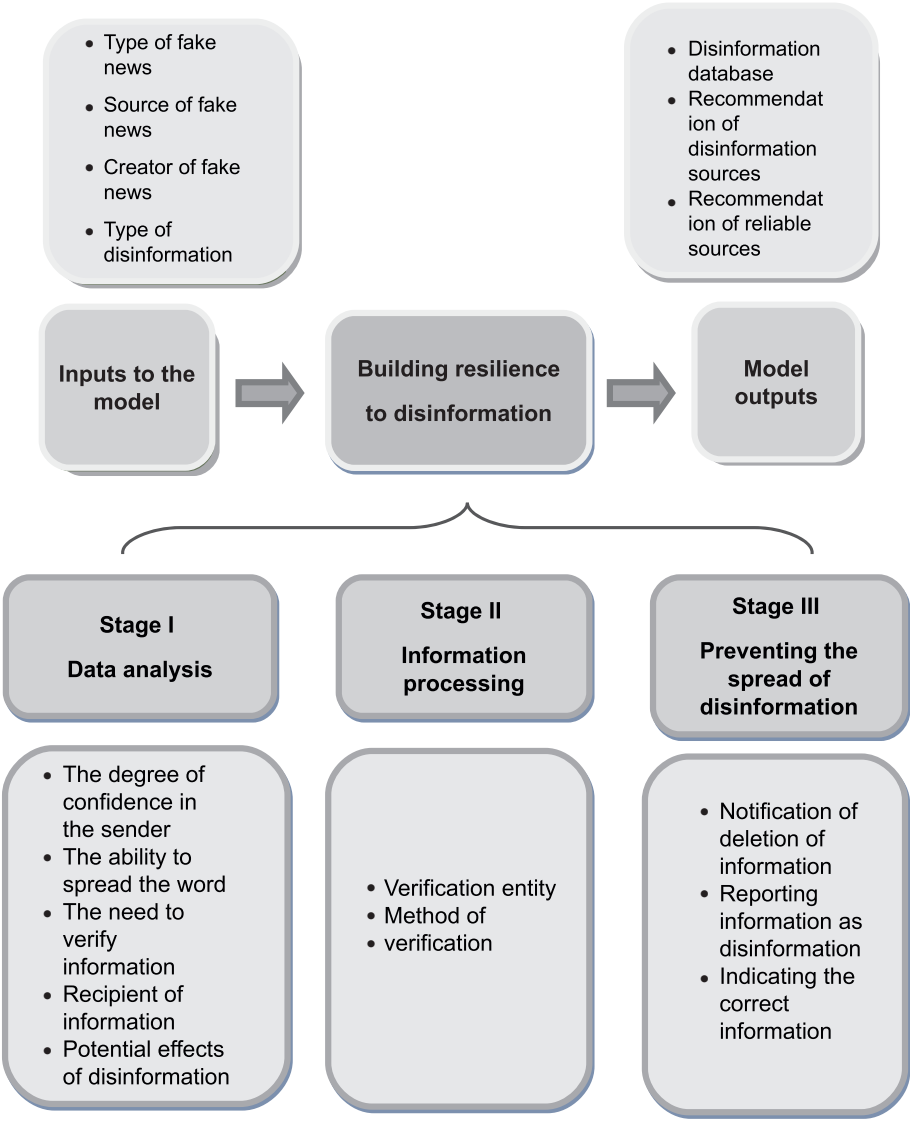

Figure 1. Conceptual Model for Building Disinformation Resilience
Source: The author's own study.

Characteristics of Model Inputs

The inputs to the model are the key attributes of information that are suspected of conveying incorrect, false data to a wide audience, i.e., constituting misinformation or disinformation. Four attributes of

disinformation have been identified, including the type of fake news, the source of the fake news, the creator of the fake news, and the type of disinformation created. Each element is described in the tables below. Each attribute is presented according to a fixed template, i.e., the possible states/values assumed by the attribute and the characteristics of the state.

Figure 2 shows the states adopted under the attribute type of fake news, describing how the disinformation was created, developed and disseminated, introduced into a given environment.

Researchers of the phenomenon of fake news point out that there is no classification and no correct typology of the concept of fake news. As a result, it is difficult to define its types in detail. However, for the purposes of the study, the authors relied on the standard division into misinformation and disinformation, understood as the unintentional and intentional dissemination of information with inconsistent data, respectively (Wardle, Derakhsan, 2017).

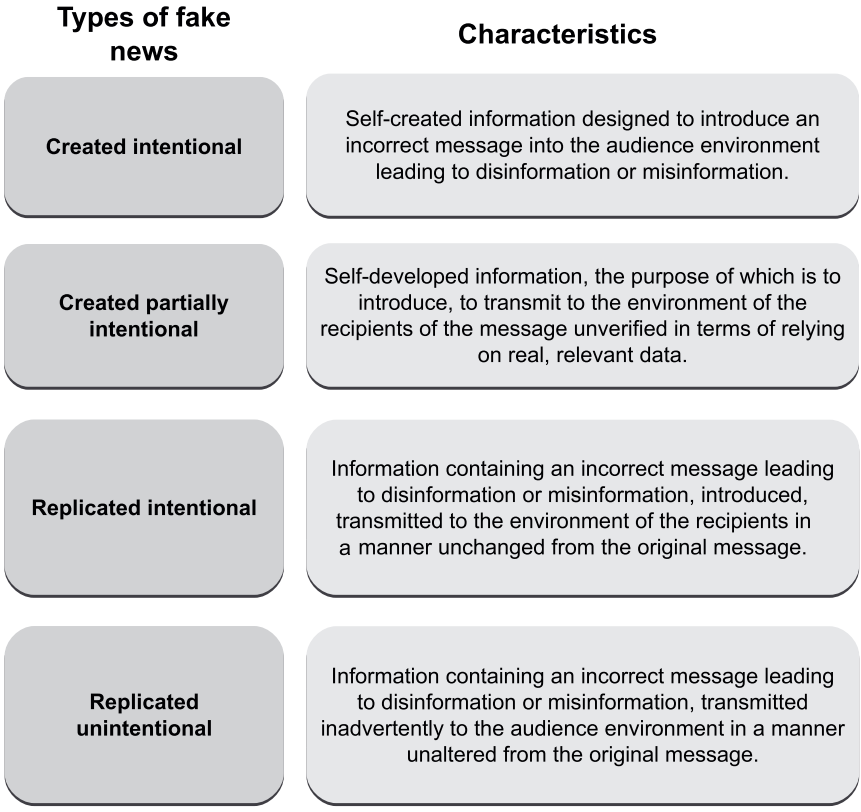

Figure 2. Types of Fake News
Source: The author's own study.

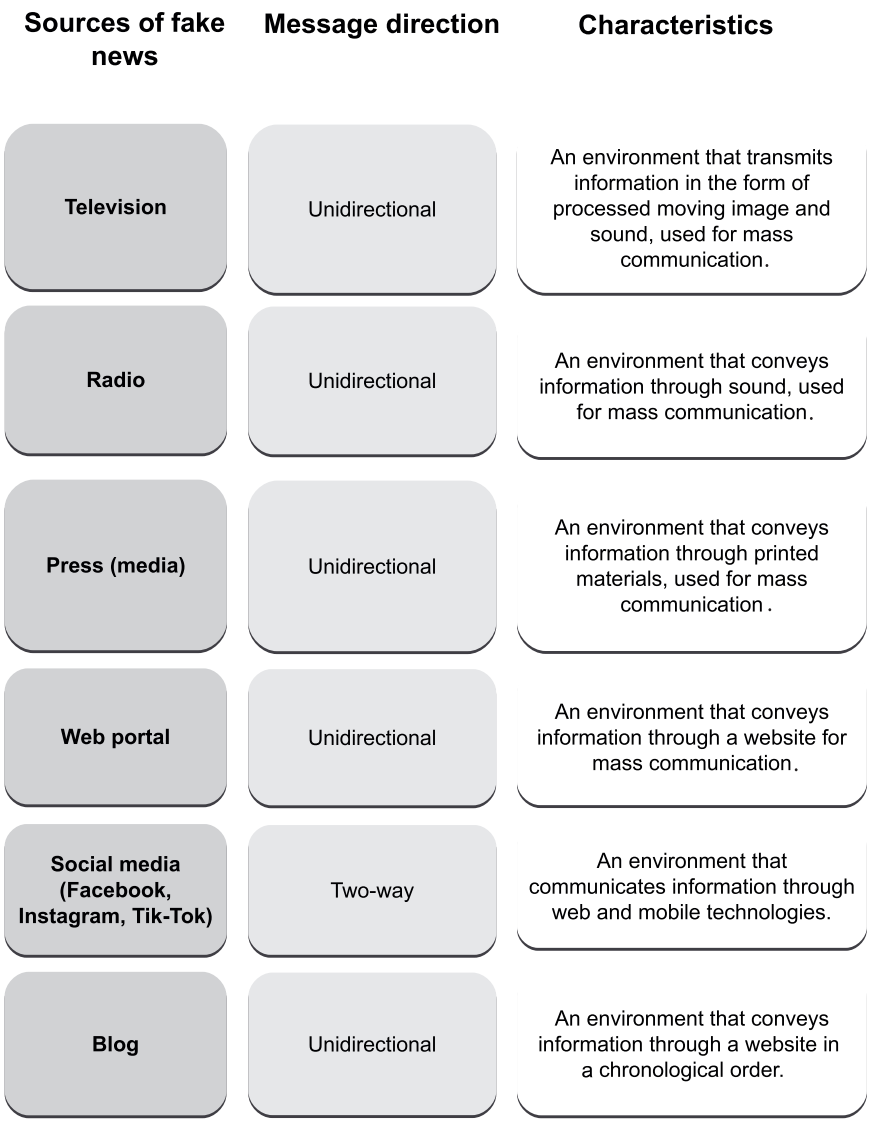

Figure 3. Sources of Creation of Fake News – Part 1
Source: The author's own study.

Figures 3 and figure 4 show the states assumed within the attribute of the source of fake news, presenting the main environments in which disinformation is developed or processed for further transmission to the recipient. At the same time, the description also defines the direction of transmission as one-way or two-way, depending on whether the transmission is from the source to the receiver or can also be in the opposite direction.

The results of surveys of users of online platforms are worrying. Namely, users trust information obtained in this way at the same level as information obtained from TV or radio. At the same time, they show less trust in newspapers (Kim, Johnson, 2009). There is a noticeable tendency for the public to become increasingly involved in obtaining information from specific sources, which should be subject to particular scrutiny in terms of creating or reproducing false information.

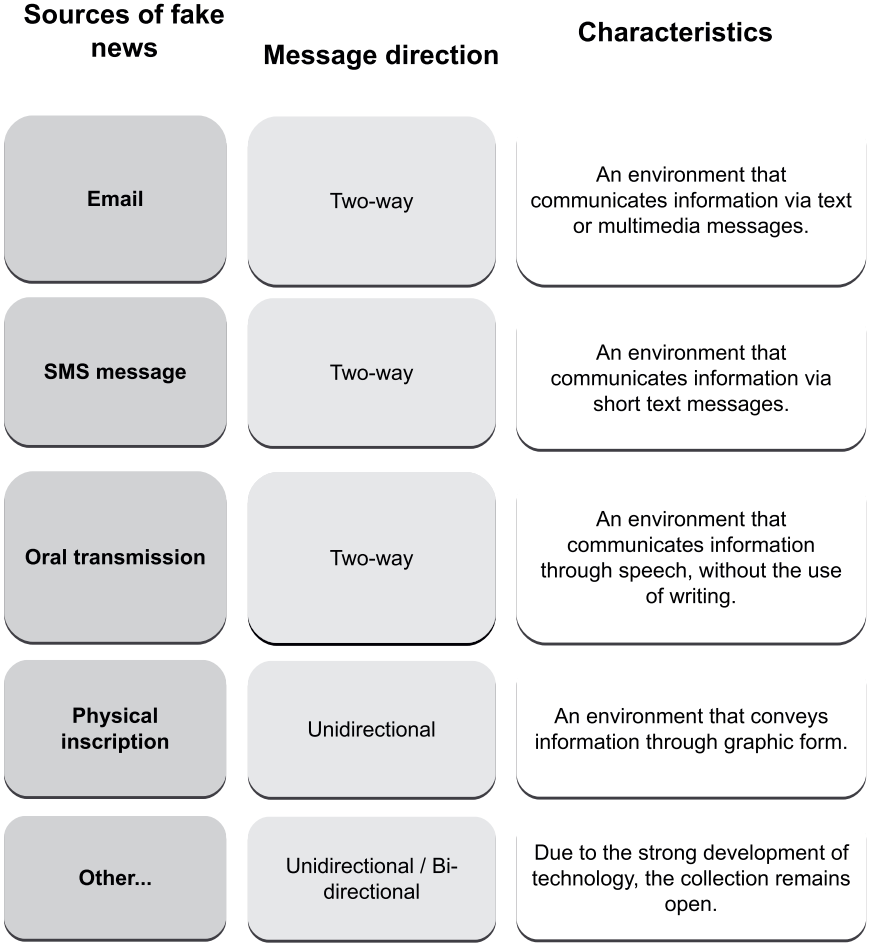

Figure 4. Sources of Creation of Fake News – Part 2
Source: The author's own study.

Figure 5 shows the states adopted under the attribute of the creator of fake news, representing the main entities that develop disinformation and transmit it to the recipient. The standard classification applies

to information developed by humans or machines. At the same time, the literature points out that the bots that produce fake news are very dangerous, as they can create a lot of news in a very short time, for example, in mere seconds (Shao et al., 2018).

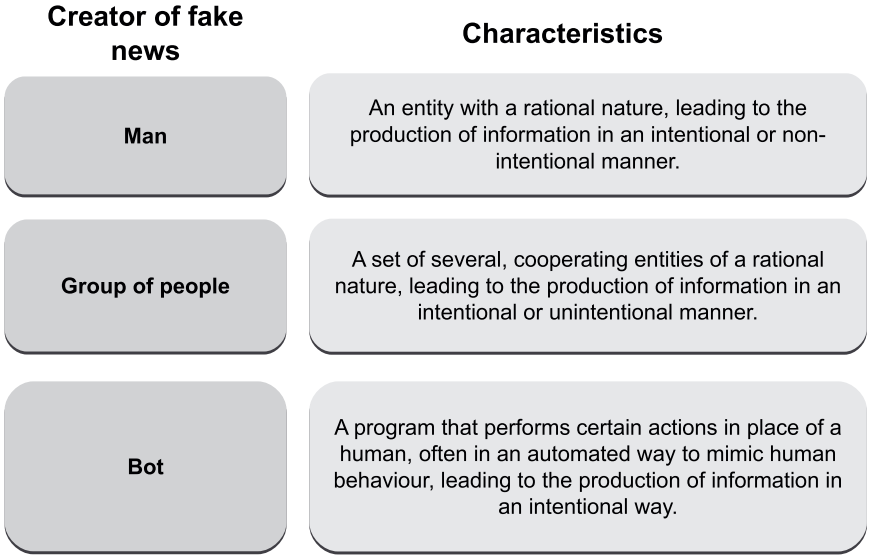

Figure 5. Creator of Fake News
Source: The author's own study.

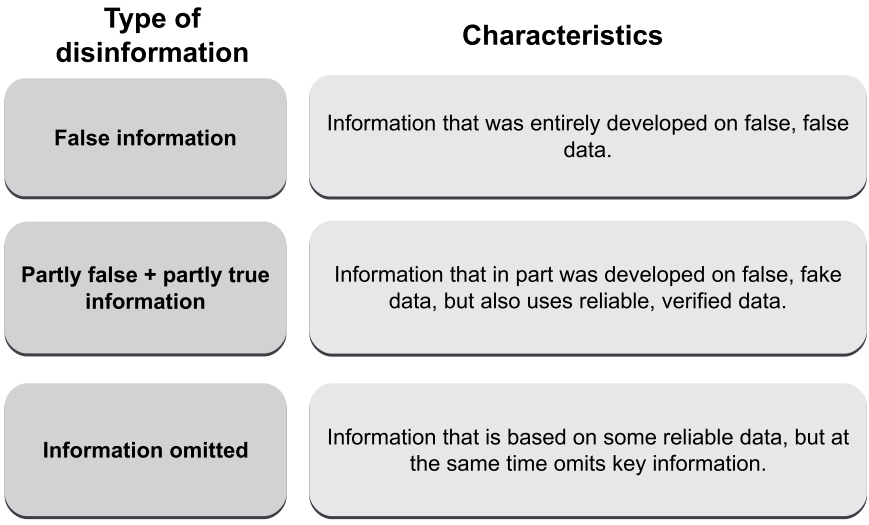

Figure 6. The States Adopted Under the Disinformation Attribute Type
Source: The author's own study.

Figure 6 shows the states adopted under the disinformation attribute type, describing the type of irregularities and disruptions that characterise the information in question. As mentioned above, many researchers contradict each other when formulating a definition of fake news. In this study, the authors focused on examining two main types of fake news: misinformation and disinformation. Accordingly, three categories of fake news types were identified: completely false information; partially false and partially true information; and the omission of important facts in a given news story (Wang, McKee, Torbica, Stuckler, 2019).

Building Resilience to Disinformation

The core part of the model, which includes activities related to building resilience in response to information containing incorrect data, was divided into three stages, the first being data analysis, the second being information processing, and the third being the prevention of information propagation. Each stage was described by a set of attributes and a description of the states associated with them.

Stage I – Data Analysis

As part of the data analysis, five attributes were identified that refer to characteristics that allow information to be classified as disinformation or misinformation, including the level of trust in the sender, the ability to spread information, the need to verify the information, the recipient of the information, and the potential impact of the disinformation. Each attribute was presented according to an established template: the possible states/values of the attribute and the characteristics of the state in question.

Figure 7 shows the states taken by the attribute level of trust in the sender of the information, which covers the credibility or otherwise of the source developing or processing the information in question. This attribute is related to the source of disinformation identified and described earlier.

Currently, there are no large-scale data sets maintained on sources that are credible to the receiver. In most cases, a particular recipient trusts a particular means of communication, as mentioned earlier, or relies on his or her knowledge and experience. Thus, there is a lack of solutions that would facilitate the qualification of a given source or inform about the confirmed level of reliability, but this will be mentioned in more detail in the model's results on recommendations.

Figure 8 shows the states assumed under the attribute of the ability to spread information, including the speed of the spread and the extent

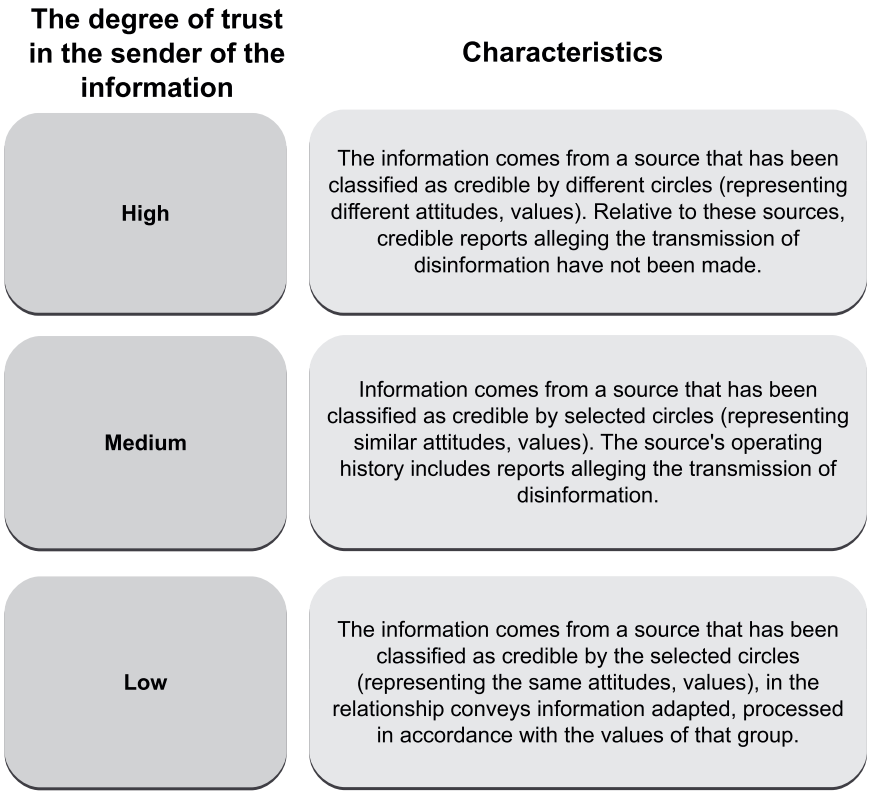

Figure 7. The States Taken by the Attribute Level
Source: The author's own study.

of the spread. Both attributes are based on predetermined sources of fake news and the means of processing it.

Figure 9 shows the states that fall under the attribute of the need to verify information, including the degree of verification of the source of the information in question and the degree of emotionality contained in the news, in relation to actual events.

The literature contains the results of a number of studies aimed at developing the most likely patterns of behaviour of individual recipients of information – mainly at the level of the individual and the larger collective. At the level of the individual, information is evaluated on the basis of its source and the context it contains, while the possibility to spread depends on the level of trust in the information. At higher levels, cascading effects and networked ways of spreading information can be observed (Karlova, Fisher, 2013; Metzger et al., 2003). There are also

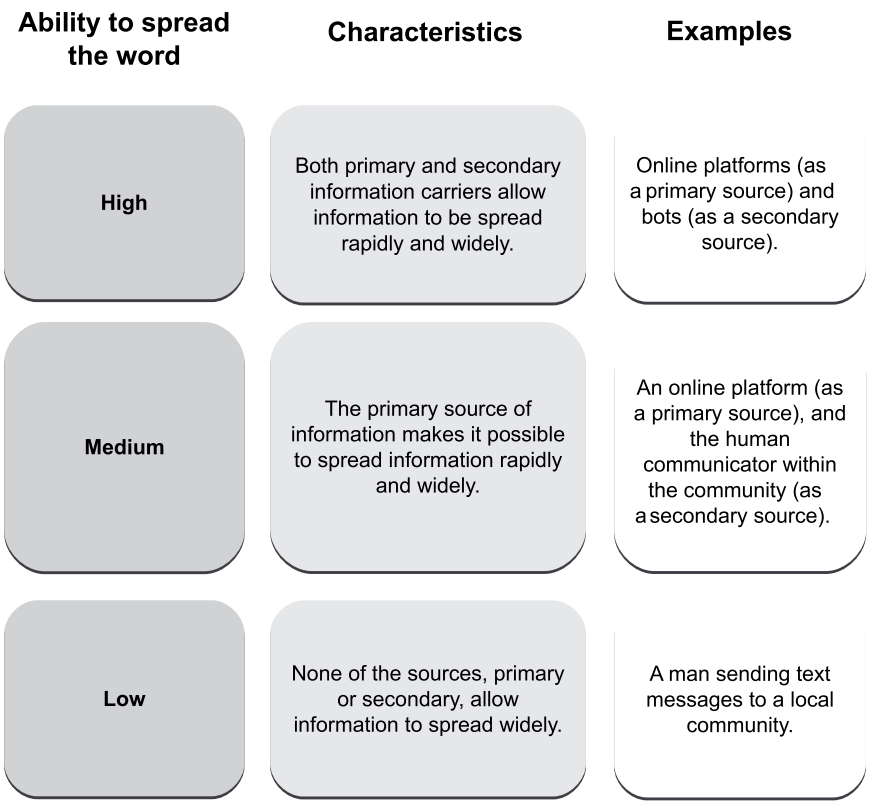

Figure 8. The States Assumed Under the Attribute of the Ability to Spread Information

Source: The author's own study.

attempts to develop recommendations for action to verify information and classify it as misinformation or disinformation. For example, sources that publish around 100 articles per week require additional verification as they are more likely to generate fake news (Shao et al., 2018).

Figure 10 shows the states taken within the information recipient attribute, which represents the type of recipient (persons, groups of persons, or program) to whom the information is addressed. This attribute is important from the point of view of the possibility of rapid dissemination of information or the extent of its spread.

Many researchers point out that the success of spreading fake news also depends on the recipient and his or her character or physical characteristics. For example, Guess and his colleagues found that people with conservative views were much more likely to spread disinformation than those with liberal views. A similar situation was found for the age

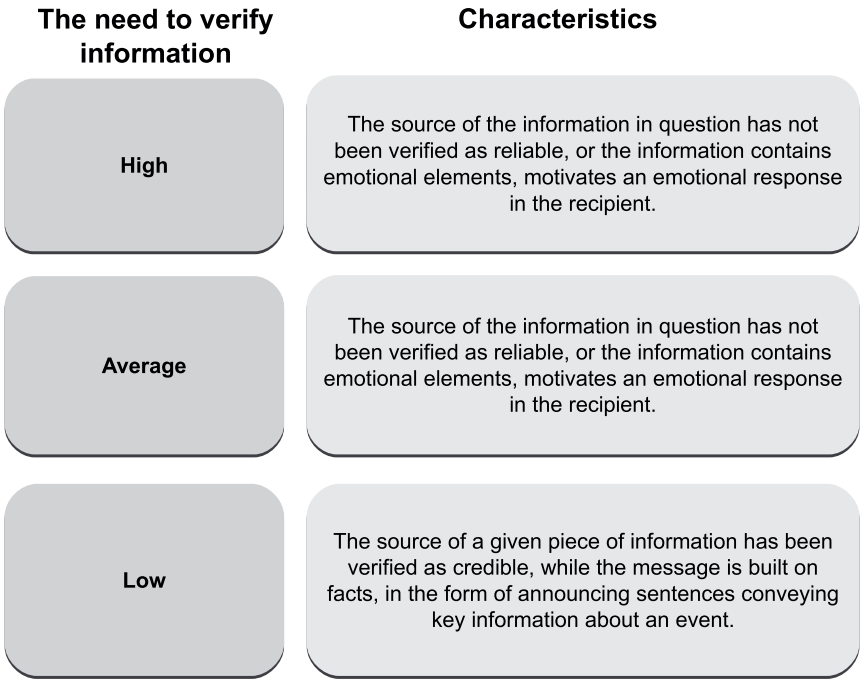

Figure 9. The States That Fall Under the Attribute of the Need to Verify Information
Source: The author's own study.

of the recipient. People over 65 were almost 6 times more likely to spread disinformation than younger people (Guess et al., 2019).

In addition, an increased spread of disinformation and misinformation was observed among individuals who remained anonymous to each other in the communities concerned (did not have accounts as representatives of a particular organisation or institution) or belonged to informally organised groups (Kouzy et al., 2020). Today, it is quite easy to identify bots whose accounts are commonly referred to as super-spreaders, whose task is to spread a lot of information in a short period of time. Their modus operandi focuses on a few online accounts, and a limited number of sources, without a broad view of the issue being described. Interestingly, bots most often spread information within a few seconds of its publication, rather than later (Shao, 2018).

Figure 11 shows the states assumed under the potential impact of the disinformation attribute, which represents the magnitude of the impact of a given disinformation event. From the perspective of the resilience-building process, this attribute is extremely important, as the greatest

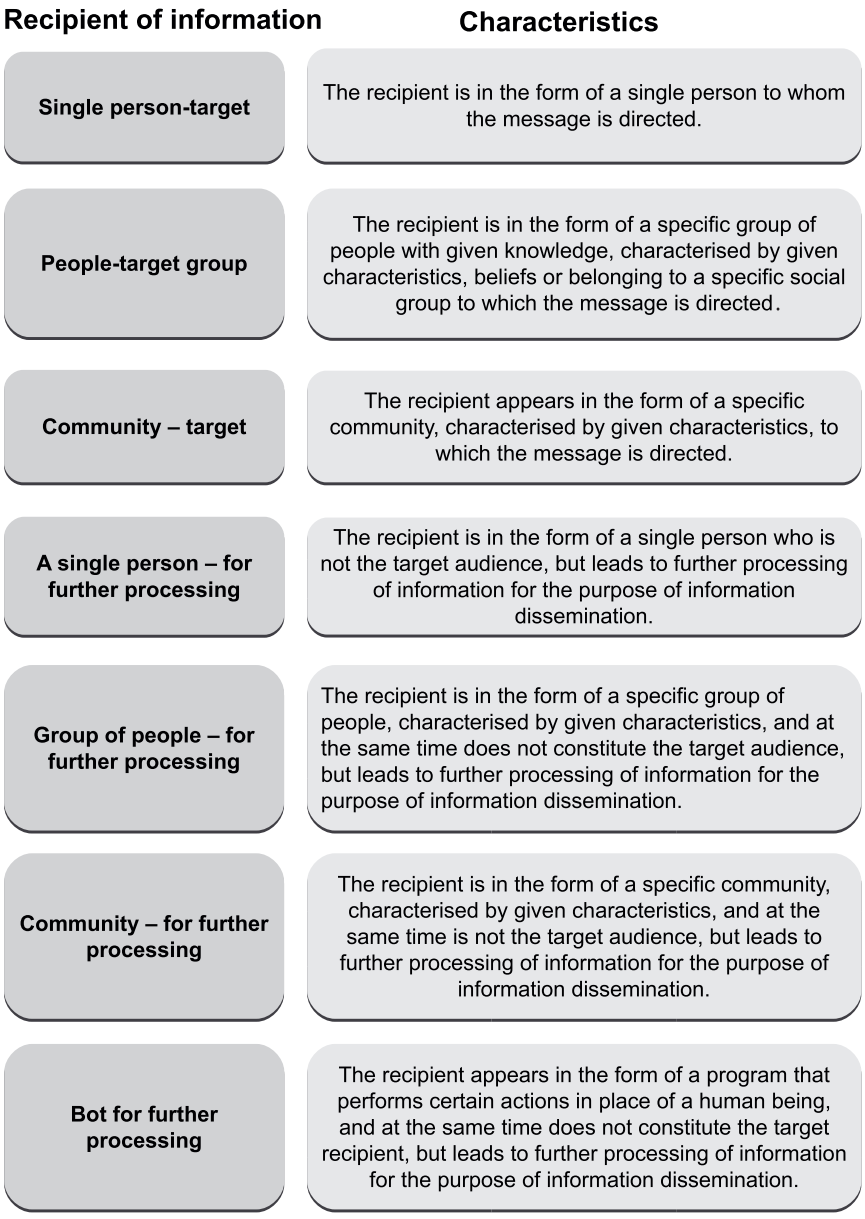

Figure 10. The States Taken Within the Information Recipient Attribute
Source: The author's own study.

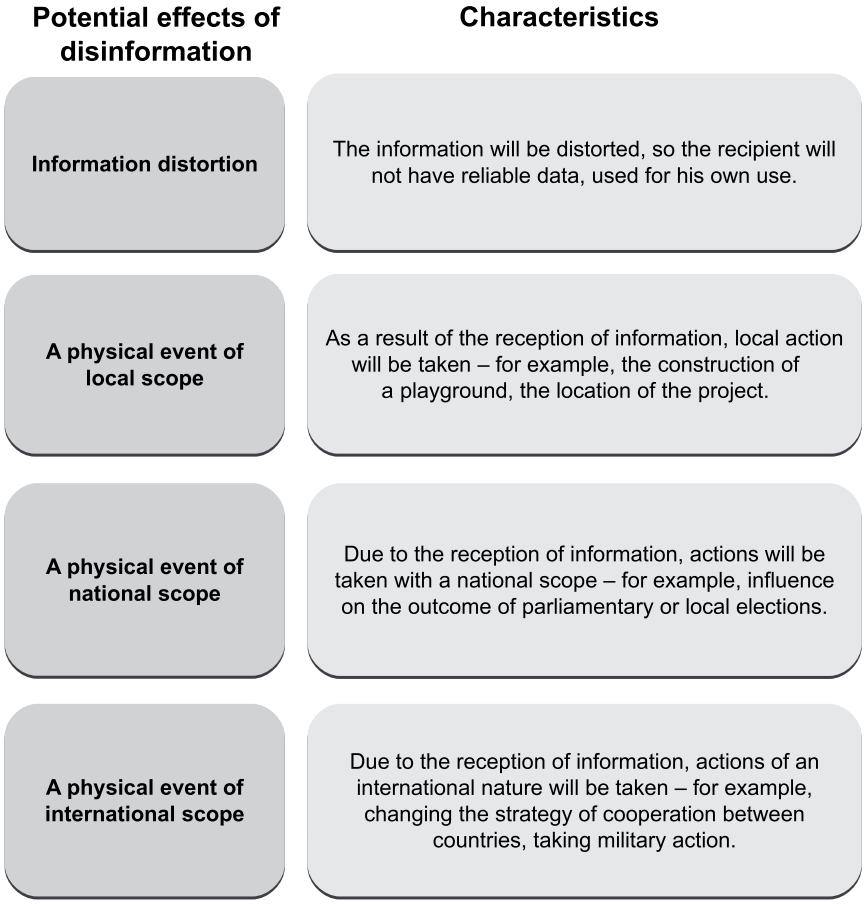

Figure 11. The States Assumed Under the Potential Impact of the Disinformation Attribute

Source: The author's own study.

risk and threat is posed by information that can trigger events on an international scale.

Stage II – Information Processing

In the context of information processing, two attributes were defined that relate to the way in which the verification of information potentially classified as disinformation is carried out along with the entity responsible for carrying out this verification. Each attribute has been presented according to an established template; the possible states/values that the attribute assumes and the characteristics of the state in question.

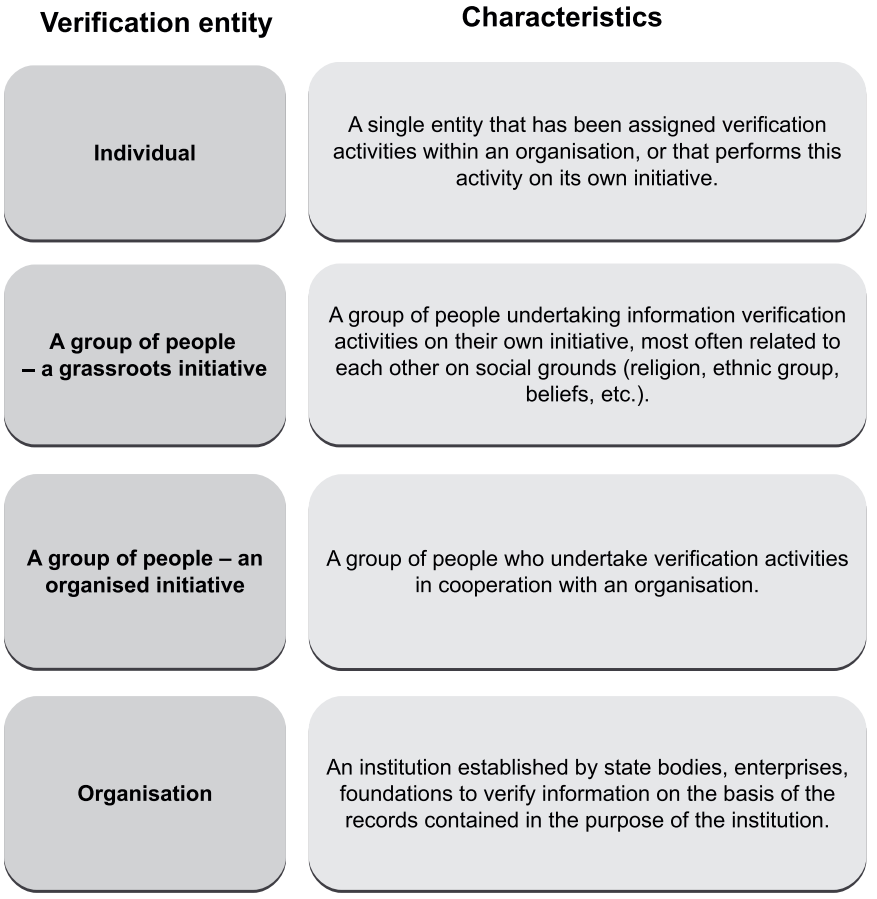

Figure 12. The States Assumed Under the Verification Entity Attribute
Source: The author's own study.

Figure 12 shows the states assumed under the verification entity attribute, covering the range of entities that can be entrusted with the process of verifying information as disinformation. Depending on the availability of entities, the nature of the information, or the ability to perform verification in a given environment, the range of entities may be narrow or wide.

Many studies point to the need for information verification. A grassroots initiative and the conduct of such a study by individuals (who are knowledgeable about the subject or particularly interested in verifying data) is often mentioned, but these activities tend to have a narrow scope of impact. Much more effective are activities carried out by organised groups of people. However, regardless of the number of people involved

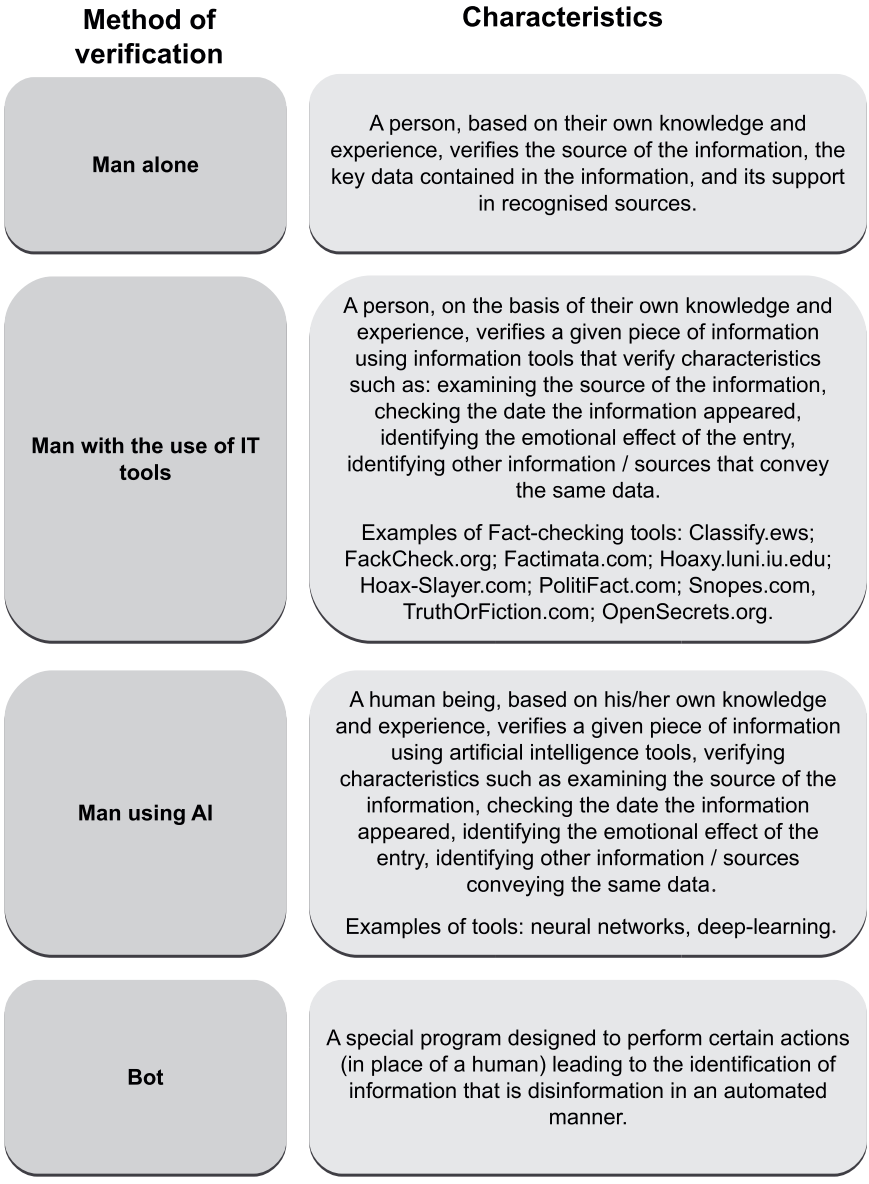

Figure 13. The States Adopted Under the Attribute of How Verification is Performed

Source: The author's own study.

in verification, it is necessary to provide appropriate tools that have been adapted to the way fake news is spread (Torres et al., 2018; Lazer et al., 2018; Rini, 2017).

Figure 13 shows the states adopted under the attribute of how verification is performed, covering the range of entities that have the ability to perform the process of verifying information as disinformation. The two main groups that can be distinguished are verification performed by a human (possibly assisted by more or less sophisticated IT tools) or by a machine that performs the process automatically.

In the literature, there are several ways to perform information verification. The most difficult is to do the verification yourself, based on attending training courses, and using fact-checking websites or automated mechanisms to test the authenticity of the source. It is also possible to take a systematic approach, using special algorithms to search for bots and cyborgs that develop or disseminate false information (Lazer et al., 2018). Some research has been done to build mathematical models for information verification, but none of them has proven to be fully effective at this point (Shu et al., 2018; Tong et al., 2018; Papanastasiou, 2020). However, it is important to keep in mind that when validating information, the effectiveness of the use of a given tool largely depends on its adaptation to individual cognitive abilities and emotional characteristics (Torres et al., 2018). To date, therefore, there is a lack of fully automated algorithms for the efficient identification of fake news.

Stage III – Preventing the Spread of Disinformation

As part of the prevention of the spread of disinformation, three attributes were defined to determine how to proceed when a piece of information is confirmed to be disinformation. These attributes included reporting the information as disinformation, reporting the deletion of the information, and providing the correct information. Each attribute was presented according to an established template, i.e., the possible states/values the attribute could take, and the characteristics of the state in question.

Figure 14 shows the states accepted under the attribute of reporting information as disinformation, which defines the range of entities/organisations to whom the fact of identifying disinformation should be reported. A prompt response from the identified authorities will make it possible to reduce the possibility of spreading disinformation.

Figure 15 shows the states accepted under the "notification of removal of information" attribute, which defines the range of entities/organisations that should be notified of the need to remove information that has been verified as disinformation. This attribute is extremely important, as removing information at the source, i.e., at the sender of the information, can significantly reduce the speed as well as the very fact of the spread of

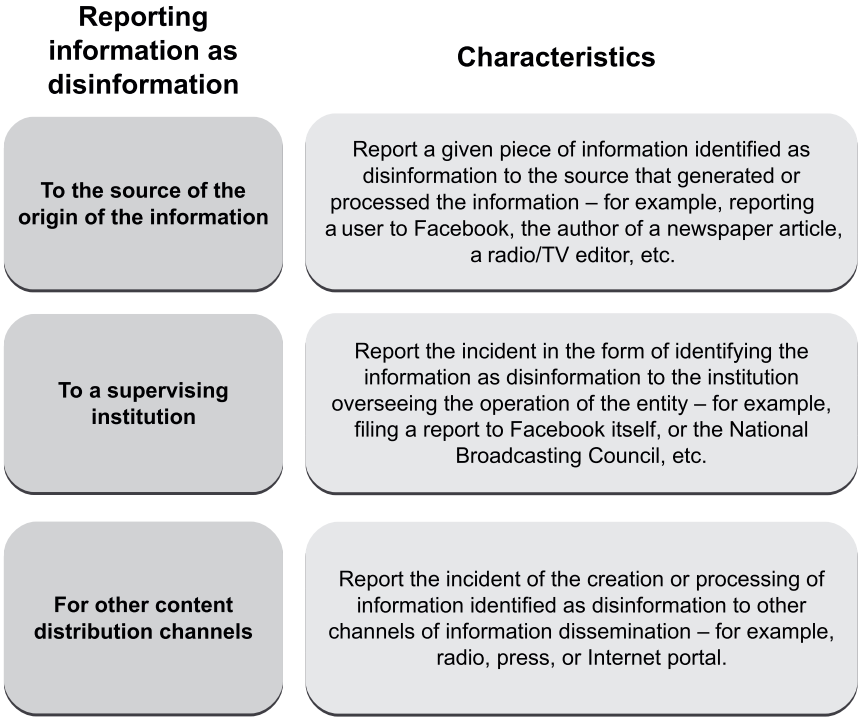

Figure 14. The States Accepted Under the Attribute of Reporting Information as Disinformation

Source: The author's own study.

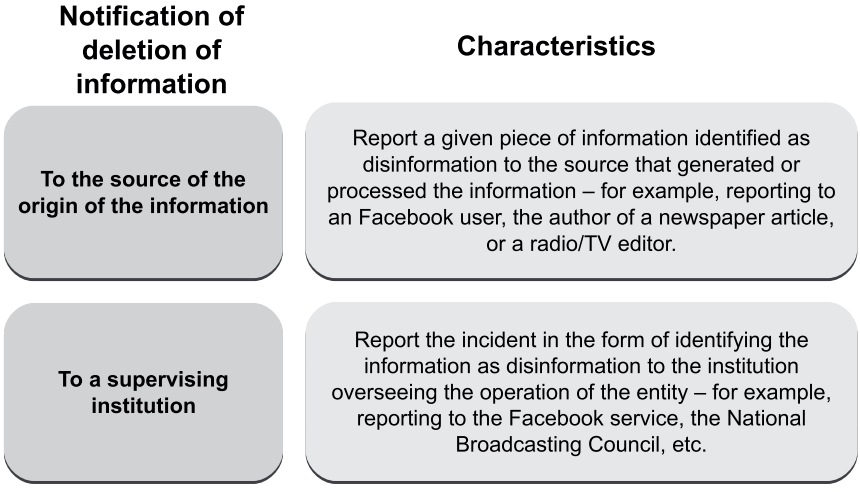

Figure 15. The States Accepted Under the Notification of Removal of Information Attribute

Source: The author's own study.

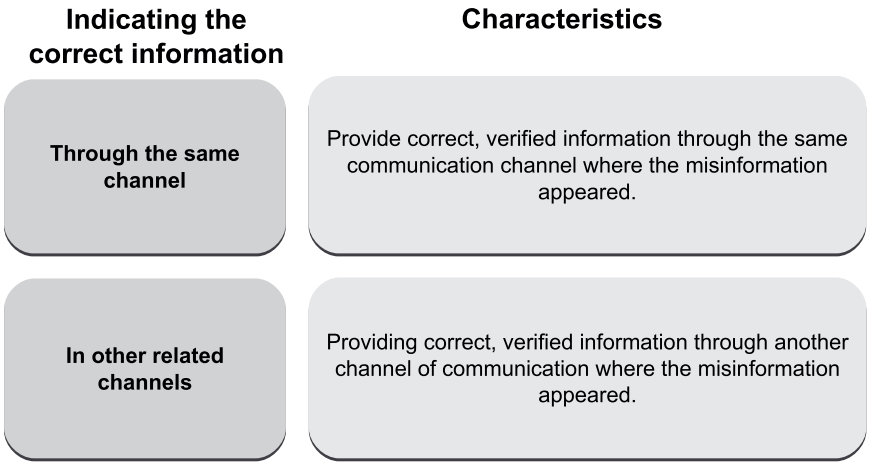

Figure 16. The states adopted within the show correct information attribute
Source: The author's own study.

information – the absence of the information in question significantly prevents its reproduction.

Figure 16 shows the states adopted within the "show correct information" attribute, which defines the ability to disseminate correct information that is not disinformation, but responds to the input of incorrect data. In many environments, such an action is key to reducing the effect of disinformation by covering up incorrect information with reliable data.

Characteristics of the Model Outputs

The outputs of the model represent key actions that can be taken to mitigate the spread of disinformation. These actions provide recommendations for building a system of organisational, environmental, or societal resilience to disinformation. The conceptual model identified three main activities, namely, building a database of information that constitutes disinformation, determining recommendations for sources that generate and/or process disinformation, and determining recommendations for sources that generate and/or process correct, verified information. Figure 17 illustrates and characterises these activities.

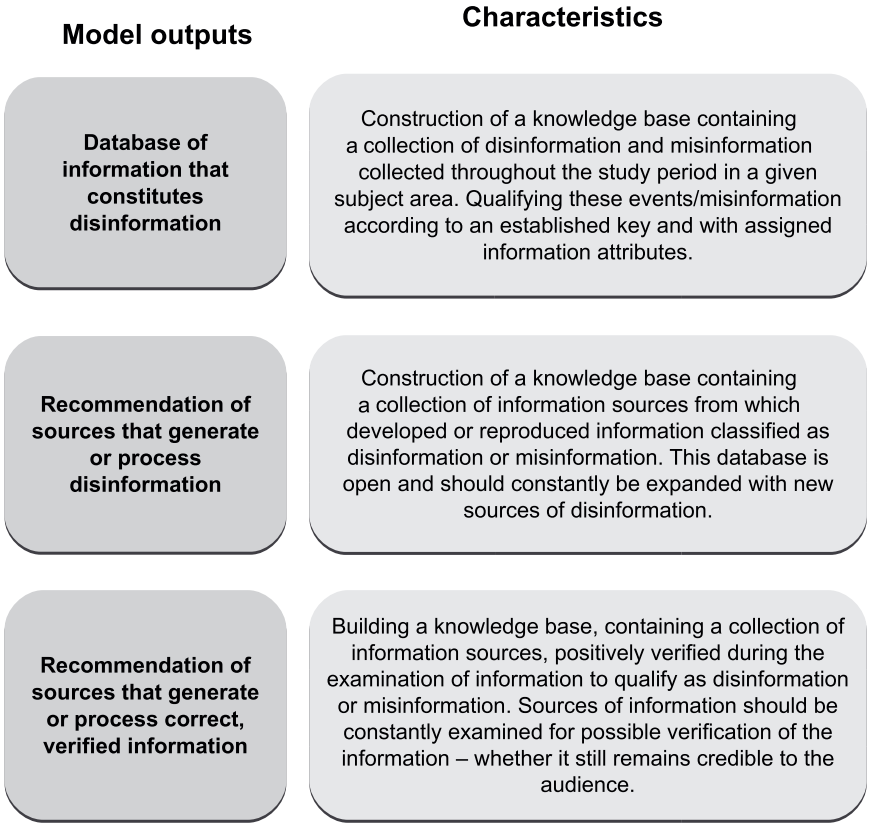

Figure 17. The Key Actions That Can Be Taken to Mitigate the Spread of Disinformation
Source: The author's own study.

Conclusions

This paper analyses selected aspects of the problem of building disinformation resilience. The research methods used, in particular, elements of the computer simulation method, made it possible to achieve the stated objectives of the work. Basic information on the problem was systematised and structured. The main result of the work performed is the proposal of a conceptual model of the problem under study. In practical terms, the model can be used to describe the problem and can be used as a basis for building knowledge bases of real problems and recommendations for evaluating the reliability of information sources. The direction of the work should be the development of a more accurate

model and, on this basis, the creation of a logical model of the problem data. Work should then be undertaken to automate the identification of incorrect information.

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The Russian aggression in Ukraine is an undeniable tragedy for our eastern neighbour, and it simultaneously poses a grave threat to Poland's security. The reprehensible, aggressive tactics employed by Russia, in clear violation of international law, have rightfully drawn widespread condemnation from the Euro-Atlantic community, which is actively working to assist Ukraine through various channels. The characterisation of Russia as an aggressor country employing 19th-century principles of force as an extension of its foreign policy is a stark and concerning reality. In its interactions with other nations, Russia has demonstrated a willingness to utilise modern tools, particularly through the dangerous methods of disinformation and the propagation of fake news, which serve the purpose of destabilising the international coalition, undermining the solidarity of countries supporting Ukraine, and tarnishing the reputations of those providing assistance, notably Poland, a leader in aiding Ukraine. Moscow's engagement in this hybrid warfare, leveraging contemporary communication tools, represents a prolonged effort to manipulate perceptions. This propaganda campaign particularly targets NATO and its member states, with a specific focus on countries such as Poland, which plays a pivotal role in providing diverse forms of assistance, including military aid, to Ukraine. Regrettably, certain European countries, especially in the Balkan region such as Serbia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia, appear susceptible to Russian indoctrination.

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