



Observations and recommendations

Confronting disinformation in the Western Balkans and EU

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with the participation of

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and special guests from the Western Balkans in the audience

partners from the Associations of Journalists from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, and the Journalists' Union from Montenegro.

Reflecting on the discussion, we (CHI, FMS, FPU, NHC, PAX, and SNAV), identified key themes and developed corresponding recommendations.

Observations

Disinformation in WB countries

- All countries in the Western Balkans (WB) face increasing disinformation. It is worrisome that the disinformation is in many cases directed at dividing society, fueling ethnic tensions, and provoking aggression and destabilisation. Whereas disinformation occurs all around the world, in the WB the issue and impacts are even more prominent. In many cases Russia plays an important role in setting up disinformation; this can be described as part of hybrid warfare. Russia uses a range of tools for spreading disinformation, including the channels Russia Today and Sputnik. They are not only disinformation agents, they have been declared “fully-fledged member(s) of the intelligence apparatus and operation of the Russian government” by the US Government.
- Independent media are under mounting pressure. In Serbia and Albania, national governments are the most important sources of disinformation. They control most media and also spread disinformation along other routes, e.g. through schoolbooks, which often perpetuate ethnic prejudice and nationalist ideas. In several countries, independent media are often portrayed as traitors, funded by Western countries. This leaves little space for criticism.
- Big tech companies hold considerable influence in the WB. Platforms are companies that revolve around profit. Their business model is based on attracting as many consumers as possible, and on promoting engagement over the public interest in being informed and having a nuanced debate. More engagement from users yields more money. As a result, the algorithms of these tech giants often amplify disinformation and promote divisive, polarised content.

- These challenges are further exacerbated by AI. Local media are not prepared for the technological developments and use of AI. AI's biggest threat is the combination of scale and speed. Solutions must be structural. Whack-a-mole solutions will not work at this scale, at this pace, thus leading to dramatic changes in the local news.

Position of independent media

- The role of independent media is more important than ever. They are a beacon of reliable, trustful information, which is vital in these days of a war raging in Europe and rising tensions in WB countries. It is of key importance that independent media keep providing reliable information and identify disinformation.
- Disinformation provokes open aggression, also towards civil society organisations and professional reporters. As an example, in Banja Luka (Bosnia & Herzegovina) aggression against an LGBTQ meeting was fueled by disinformation spread on social media, with the government showing an alarming lack of support, resulting in violence against the LGBTQ community and journalists.
- In several countries, it is clear that national authorities do not take action to protect journalists, or these governments even support acts of intimidation and violence. As an example, in Serbia in the past decades, three journalists have been murdered. Only in one case, examination by the police led to the case being brought to court. Here the perpetrator was acquitted. This places independent journalists in the position of an outlaw.

Civil society

- Independent media operate within a robust civil society context, especially in countries like Serbia. A recent example of this is the large demonstrations in Serbia against the plans for mining lithium. In these cases, international solidarity with civil society is needed. However, current practice is that the EU and individual countries (in this case especially Germany and the US) support national authorities for national interest reasons. This is bad for the position of civil society in Serbia and the whole WB as it undermines the credibility of the EU as a promoter of democratic norms and values.

Role of EU and EU- member states

- In general EU and Western countries have an influential role in WB countries, also with regard to the process of accession to the EU. For instance: clear statements from ambassadors of key EU countries do have an impact. However, the issue of disinformation still gets too little attention. Best practices to combat disinformation in the Balkans could include strengthening media literacy, fostering cross-sector collaboration between media, civil society, and the judiciary, promoting fact-checking initiatives, and encouraging transparent communication from public institutions.
- Most budgets from EU countries flow to national governments, independent media get little support from abroad.
- The EU has introduced legislative measures like the Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act to mitigate the impact of disinformation and get more transparency of media ownership. While these initiatives are a positive step, they are insufficient given the scale of

the issue and currently apply only within the EU. Adapting and incorporating these laws into the Western Balkans' legal framework as part of the EU Acquis is essential.

Recommendations

1. In their contacts with WB countries **EU and EU member states should take a much more firm stand on this issue of disinformation.** States that spread disinformation should explicitly be held accountable for this. It should be made clear that this practice is completely at odds with EU values. A key requirement for (progress in) accession to the EU should be that states do respect free and independent media.
2. Moreover, **it is of utmost importance that the safety of journalists is guaranteed.** The EU and EU member states should always react and hold candidacy member states accountable if they fail to provide safety to journalists and independent voices. If states do not pursue policies to guarantee this, it should have implications for the accession process. Negotiations can be halted temporarily, or sanctions can be imposed.
3. **The EU should pay more attention to the situation and well-being of the WB civil society.** At present most contacts are with national governments, and also most funds stream to national authorities. Greater interest in civil society and increased funding for independent media are necessary.
4. **Big social media can be regulated without regulating speech.** If FB can serve ads in Albania (for example), then they should also have Albanian-speaking representatives on the ground in the country to deal with a range of issues. It is a simple requirement and a regulation on advertising that would address a range of issues, without impinging on free speech or free media.
5. **The EU should take steps in order to support that the EU Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act be considered and adapted in the WB countries as well.**
6. **WB governments** can also counter disinformation effectively by **promoting media literacy** and **implementing regulations that support factual reporting** without infringing on freedom of expression.
7. Big tech companies **should have the same level of obligations towards WB citizens** as they have towards EU citizens according to DSA and EMFA, and the EU should advocate for this.