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Caught between a rock and a hard place: Exploring the causes and gaps enabling the spread of external propaganda and fake news in the Macedonian media landscape

Working document summarizing the round table discussion held on 28.03.2024 at the Journalists' Club involving representatives of media organizations, media and civil society

Introduction

According to the *2023 Media Literacy Index*, N. Macedonia is ranked at the bottom of the list, in the last fifth group with 39 points out of 100, and surrounded by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo and Georgia. In fact, N. Macedonia scored low across all five indicators – media education, freedom, trust and new forms of involvement, and in particular in public trust and participation through new forms of communication and information.¹

On the other hand, the latest global report from *Reporters Without Borders* classifies the country as one of the so-called "satisfactory" countries with tangible progress made since 2022. However, the conclusion on the country reads that "...although journalists do not work in a hostile environment, widespread misinformation and lack of professionalism contribute to society's declining trust in the media, which exposes independent outlets to threats and attacks."²

In the same vein with the *Reporters Without Borders* conclusions, the Macedonian civil society has been pointing out for some time now that the country is quite porous to external propaganda and fake news, in particular from Russia and China. Hence, in a paper titled "*One year of Russian aggression against Ukraine*" published last year, the civil association *MOST* described the Russian propaganda in the country as large scale, multichannel, repetitive and lacking objectivity, aiming to justify aggression in Ukraine, propagate the perception that the

¹The Media Literacy Index 2023, available at: <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-English-22.06.pdf>

²2023 World Press Freedom Index – journalism threatened by fake content industry, available at: <https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry>



West wants to destroy Russia because of its Orthodox worldview, and promote the narrative of *Slavic-Orthodox Brotherhood* while fostering anti-Western sentiment.³

Warnings about foreign propaganda exposure and penetration do not come only from the civil society. In particular, the former Minister of Interior warned that as the official start of the election campaign approaches, the spread of fake news from external factors and centers of power will become more pervasive, a concern echoed by several foreign ambassadors in N. Macedonia. Actually, *Metamorphosis* Foundation in its latest regular quarterly report for the period October-December 2023, observes a *decline in the dissemination of disinformation concerning the war in Ukraine in the reporting period, and instead, a shift in media attention towards the Israel-Palestine war. The happenings in the Gaza Strip and its territory captured greater focus, resulting with production of false images, videos and posts with different narratives and sentiment.*⁴

When discussing external influences, the warnings for infiltration originating from the eastern side of Moscow, in particular China, should not be overlooked. Specifically, on several occasions in the public discourse, it was emphasized that "China's reputation is predominantly positive, especially in terms of its economy, culture, scientific and technological development, and due to the perceived lack of information, particularly reliable, objective and analytical content in the Macedonian media, it seems difficult for the general public to create an informed opinion." The experts believe that the Chinese Ambassador's columns and articles in selected print and online media and portals, thematic broadcasts about China on several TV stations, as well as China's ubiquity on social media are on "thin ice", perhaps aiming to alleviate pressure coming from the Western world about the situation in this country in terms of respect for human rights, the rule of law, fair trade practices, etc.⁵

With all this in mind, and in order to strengthen media literacy in the country, enhance the skills of journalists to recognize foreign propaganda and in general, to offer reliable news and information to the general public, ESTIMA Association started implementing the project "*Countering Foreign Propaganda and Disinformation by Strengthening the Capacity of Media and Journalists*", which is financially supported by the US Embassy in the country. The project aims to support the media and journalists in discerning the methods and techniques used to disseminate disinformation from foreign sources, safeguarding the Macedonian media space against authoritarian foreign propaganda, as well as reporting based on verified and reliable content.

³titled "A Year of Russian Aggression against Ukraine", available at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1UB50sbyYdguQLTr24-UNkdelzXuN8mFj/view>

⁴Regional media monitoring report "Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans" for the period October – December 2023, available at: <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/media-monitoring-october-december-2023.pdf>

⁵ Understanding the tools, narratives and impact of China's "soft power" in North Macedonia, available [here](#)



This approach can help citizens form credible opinions by providing verified news and by detecting and debunking suspicious content.

Hence, in the period January-March, over 40 journalists from various media outlets (portals, news agencies, newspapers, radio, TV, etc.) underwent training in recognizing foreign propaganda. Working in synergy and divided into groups, they also produced four investigative articles that seek to shed different light on potential attempts of foreign influence in the Macedonian media space and expose possible motives and goals. This working paper summarizes the journalistic articles, as well as the opinions, attitudes and views expressed at the round table organized in March, which was attended by prominent experts and pundits in this field, including journalists, analysts, researchers and professors. The document aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current susceptibility to foreign propaganda and false narratives in the country, but also to highlight critical points and provide recommendations for strengthening the defense mechanism and timely debunking disinformation.

From the "righteousness" of the war in Ukraine to the "crisis" in the food supply

All four collaborative media articles mentioned above cover different topics and analytical angles. They are publicly available on several portals and media outlets recognized by the public for their reliability and factual reporting. Specifically, the media article entitled ["From Levica through Rodina to GROM and MAAK: what are Moscow's megaphones in the country?"](#) provides an overview of the harmful Russian influence observed among the leading media outlets and influential political parties in the region, as well as several domestic political entities that openly advocate against the country's membership in the EU and NATO and for leaning towards Russia, its alliances and national views. The journalists who authored this article provide a sharp analysis of meetings, publicly expressed views and political actions, highlighting the danger of creating an anti-Western sentiment that poses a risk of N. Macedonia drifting away from its Euro-Atlantic integration and deepening internal social divisions.

Conversely, a group of journalists in the article titled ["In the sea of disinformation, Macedonian soldiers were sent to the Russian-Ukrainian front, and Ukrainian refugees became a global threat"](#), focus on the porosity of the Macedonian media space when reporting about the war in Ukraine, alleged donations by the Macedonian Ministry of Defense such as combat jets, sending Macedonian soldiers to the battlefields in Ukraine, and the "danger" for the Macedonian economy and security from the "stampede" of Ukrainian refugees who, in fact, never reached the figure reported by some media. Journalists warn that such narratives are designed to create a distraction from what is really happening in Ukraine, and are silent efforts to justify the Russian aggression.



In their article ["Food as Kremlin's weapon for spreading disinformation in North Macedonia"](#), the third group of journalists discussed Russian information centers' efforts to disseminate disinformation about the alleged danger of deliberate destruction of traditional food production in the Western Balkans region, including N. Macedonia, the purported EU policy of introducing food products harmful to human health by using artificial fertilizers, pesticides, hormones, preservatives and additives, with the ultimate aim of creating distrust in food produced and consumed on the European continent.

The last group of journalists in their article ["TikTok, a powerful Kremlin propaganda tool for radicalized narratives and disinformation about the Russian aggression against Ukraine"](#), addressed new disinformation spreading techniques, the cooperation between Russia and China in this area, particularly via social networks such as TikTok where fake news about the war in Ukraine is amplified and views aligned with official Moscow are shared. The article discusses the pervasive proliferation of fake videos on this platform that reach the general public, as well as the need of labeling official accounts of public officials on TikTok and similar platforms to strengthen the fight against propaganda and fake news.

Challenges and obstacles to a free and credible media space

During the second part of the round table, the causes and ramifications of unreliable reporting, spreading fake news, foreign propaganda and inappropriate editorial policies were analyzed. The key takeaways of the discussion are systematized below into three categories of factors/reasons that affect the porosity of the society and the information space: socio-political, socio-economic and editorial-organizational environment in which journalists operate. These factors are crucial for timely, professional and reliable reporting. In addition, the document provides final provisions in the form of recommendations and follow-up steps aimed at countering foreign propaganda, taking timely action and enhancing overall media literacy in N. Macedonia.

Socio-political context and trends

During the discussion, all speakers and participants agreed that foreign influence and propaganda narratives are present in the country, especially from Russia, Serbia and China. According to the attendees, that is a threat to the country's security, undermines trust in the institutions, fosters hatred, incites violence between Macedonians and smaller ethnic communities, but also intra-ethnic divisions in the communities themselves on several grounds (primarily party / ideological). Participants in the round table contend that exposure to foreign propaganda and fake news in the country is not a recent trend, but a pervasive phenomenon since 2008 - before and after the NATO summit in Bucharest when the country was prevented from becoming a member of the alliance by Greece due to the then unresolved name dispute.



Foreign influence and fake news continue to proliferate with a snowball effect, in an orchestrated and organized manner in the following period – the series of snap elections before 2015, the 2015-2017 political crisis, the period before and after signing the Prespa Agreement, the period covering the negotiations with Bulgaria and the French proposal to unblock negotiations with the EU, and experts are confident that they will intensify in the upcoming period with the two elections this spring. Civil society activists, who monitor freedom of expression and media environment, argue that harmful and fabricated narratives in the country are most often spread by simply reproducing articles, columns and news with pronounced anti-Western content. According to them, the portals are the most actively involved in these activities and are often supported by a segment of the political spectrum - parties that openly share similar views (Levica, Grom, Rodina, Edinstvena Macedonia, etc.). Then, the so-called social network bots, users with fake profiles and others, take the stage and spread them harmoniously, intensively and purposefully throughout the Internet space, civil society activists argue. Representatives of civil society claim that Russia is the leader in spreading fake news in the country. The penetration of news from Moscow is quite widespread - an example of such fake news is the information of alleged 30 Macedonian citizens who died in Ukraine and 90 of our fellow citizens present on Ukrainian battlefields as mercenaries.

"Many of the media outlets presenting this to us, took the information without analyzing or verifying it with some of the competent state institutions. You just cannot publish one-sided information without checking with the other side. You should give a broader context, check that the information is correct and whether you have an independent source other than the Kremlin to confirm this information."

According to civil activists, news coming from Moscow intend to "justify" the war in Ukraine, create moral allies and supporters of the Russian aggression in Ukraine. The aim is also to reinforce anti-NATO sentiments in the country and maintain that Russia is more powerful than the Alliance and invincible. They add that success has been partially achieved, referring to some opinion polls showing that 35% of citizens think that it is more useful to be in an alliance with a big Slavic and Orthodox power like Russia, while 42% of respondents believe that imposing sanctions against Russia is not a good decision.

Similar views were expressed by the academic community. According to them, the Balkan region will increasingly become the target of hybrid attacks, primarily from Russia, and also from Serbia, but far more moderately. In their view, the goal would be to ignite interethnic relations, but also spread distrust in the institutional capacity of the country and beyond, which would result in apathy and frustration. They add that the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue will be used to exert influence on our country, as will the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the outcome of Republika Srpska's leadership intentions for alleged secession. University professors also identify several tools used to spread Russian influence in the country and beyond:



- attempts to finance smaller political parties - the Public Prosecutor's Office should remain vigilant and take action upon receiving tip-offs;
- energy dependency on Russian energy supplies;
- building connections between information centers from Moscow and suspicious news portals in the country;
- cultural and info events aimed at raising citizens' awareness of the greatness and importance of Russia and Russian culture that could go beyond the generally acknowledged and recognized status and significance of the Russian culture and literature and turn into justification of the Russian aggression and glorification of Putin's regime;
- reinforcing the religious sentiment of the Macedonian and Russian people, primarily in terms of the significance and influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC).

Professors argue that there are examples of all of the above tools – investigative articles that point to the influx of foreign money into some Macedonian party accounts; Russian oligarchs present in the country, and especially influential in the oil sector; events and happenings in primary schools where under the veil of learning the Russian language, the greatness and power of the Russian Federation are impressed upon young generations (including some state faculties); news portals with ambiguous ownership and editorial policies that promote Russian views on the war in Ukraine, but also about the purported need to reposition the strategic commitments of N. Macedonia, pointing to closer relations with Moscow), etc.

However, they consider the ROC influence to be the most indicative. In particular, the closeness between some of the bishops of the Macedonian synod and some Russian priests, the presence of Russian emissaries from the ROC to shape the MOC's position on the Autocephaly of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, as well as the way of bypassing the Ecumenical Patriarchate to finally obtain the Tomos are all examples of how the ROC influence can affect the MPC positioning. This in turn, also impacts the country's geo-political position. For the scientific community, the clear presence of Serbian TV stations with pronounced anti-Western editorial policies and overt pro-Russian views is a problem, suggesting that this approach has a dual purpose – spreading Russian influence, but also strengthening Serbian positions in the Macedonian society on a series of issues affecting Serbia.

During the discussion, attendees also pointed to China. Some of the journalists claim that China's influence is noticeable, but not as visible because it is less aggressive compared to Russian propaganda. Specifically, the Chinese influence is more subtle and seeks to present China as a friendly country and culture, and contrary to the Russian influence, it is not directly aimed at creating crises and compromising security. Journalists also add that there are examples of organized events and trips to China for predetermined journalists, thus creating personal



connections. This in turn paves the way for spreading exclusively positive news about the most influential Asian country.

During the discussion, the issue of reproducing content without critical analysis from Chinese into Macedonian media outlets was also raised, alongside the dissemination of explicit pro-China content without specifying whether it is sponsored or commissioned, thereby fostering a covert yet direct influence in shaping the opinions of readers and viewers of such media outlets. While media are obliged to indicate when content is sponsored or commissioned, it was observed that this obligation can be circumvented in practice, for instance with indirect funding through commercial channels, and not for the content in question. As such, self-regulatory bodies cannot act unless a specific complaint has been filed with them. The main challenge though, for understanding and addressing China's influence on the information space, was said to be the limited knowledge about China's approach to this endeavor and the frequent failure of relevant stakeholders to recognize such Chinese efforts.

Personal and editorial integrity – a must-have filter?

In an era when social networks have become primary sources of information, journalists are gradually losing their role of reporters, and spend much of their time "putting out fires" ignited by content circulated and consumed on the networks. According to media workers, this provides fertile ground for spreading numerous and diverse fake news stories, even trivial ones, such as those "informing" that when we become an EU member state "we will not be able to make ajvar in the yards, or export crooked cucumbers". Journalists argue that one of the reasons for this is the personal (questionable) integrity of journalists themselves, but also editorial integrity, including the entire editorial board (if any). The proliferation of fake news and propaganda is particularly striking in the online space, where some portals lack defined ownership, an impressum, or a clear organizational structure, and are created only to spread disinformation.

Based on the journalists' experience, in most cases, there is typically one or a few individuals behind them, financed by foreign or domestic centers of power. Namely, with the popularity of social networks, the centers of power put far less effort than in the past when they had to look for channels to reach a particular journalist, and even make threats and bribes. Statistics from the Council of Media Ethics underscore the seriousness of the issue of journalistic and editorial integrity, particularly within online media. Based on the results, in 2023, out of 132 complaints about unethical reporting, 110 were related to online media. According to the Council's representatives, this implies that over 37% of the complaints are about a breach of Article 1 of the Code of Journalists, which stipulates the following:

"A journalist is entitled to unrestricted access to all sources of information deemed to be in the public interest. The journalist shall be obliged to publish



accurate, verified information and shall not withhold essential data and falsify documents. If an information cannot be confirmed or is based on an assumption/speculation, this should be indicated and disclosed. The accuracy of the information should be checked to the fullest extent possible."

This implies that the breaches were largely deliberate and intentional, suggesting that self-regulation has not reached the sought level. While there are efforts, such as the portal www.promedia.mk aiming to consolidate portals meeting the Council's mandatory criteria for inclusion in the register of professional online media, it is evident that there is still a long way to go. The Council underlines that this is a longstanding challenge, especially given the inherent difficulty of regulating the Internet space. More specifically, the speed and anonymity provided by the Internet enable disinformation campaigns to be more pervasive compared to traditional media, making them challenging to counteract. The Council also adds that N. Macedonia, like many other countries, is facing significant challenges when it comes to foreign propaganda because it is among the nations in Europe with the lowest levels of media literacy, which exacerbates the situation and creates fertile ground for spreading fake news. Very often, parties and organized teams (at the local and state level) are the key links in the entire process.

Journalists' socio-economic conditions: You get what you pay for?

The attendees at the round table also addressed a very important segment and factor - the socio-economic environment in which journalists and media workers operate. They argue that the well-being of this category of workers can serve both as a barrier against and a conduit for influence on the information disseminated in public discourse, media outlets, and the online space. To maintain the integrity and professionalism of journalists, expand the pool of professionals and reinforce their role of defenders and authentic reporters, their economic and social standing should be continuously bolstered and supported. Unfortunately, the journalists' Union (SSNM) asserts that the country is experiencing a contrary trend.

There is low motivation for work, and it comes as no surprise that the so-called "conduits" through which propaganda and disinformation flow would appear and be exploited by foreign centers of power. SSNM representatives referred to the data from a recent extensive survey covering 1,694 journalist positions, of which 1,039 were full-time employees at media outlets. The findings showed that out of the total number of respondents, 25.2% were media workers in online media. Of the 681 respondents working in Internet media, only 39.1% were full-time employees. The situation is even more dire in media outlets outside of the capital. Of the 139 journalist positions in 32 local and regional TV stations, 61% are freelance positions, and only 54 journalists are full-time employees. These numbers are striking and worrying - on average, each local or regional TV station employs 1.69 journalists, which means they operate with less than two journalists. However, the reality is different, as freelancers bear the burden, without receiving health, pension, and social security contributions. The situation with radios is no



different. Among the 62 local and regional radios covered, there are only 65 full-time journalists, or an average of 1.5 journalists per radio. According to SSNM, freelancers assume the greatest workload, and receive only monetary compensation, without paid contributions and without insurance. SSNM contends that the survey presents worrisome data about the very amount journalists receive. It argues that about half of the journalists earn a salary whose amount is below the average salary calculated for the period May-June 2023. Also, it claims that to make real progress in this regard, big media outlets should speak out and set an example for the smaller ones, and the ones outside of the capital that a journalist's work is compensated and valued.

Conclusions and recommendations

The round table concluded with a fruitful discussion, underlining several important steps to be taken by both the competent institutions and the civil society, but above all, by media outlets and journalists themselves, especially by bigger TV stations:

- A comprehensive and whole-of-society approach in the fight against disinformation and foreign influences, with visible commitment by the competent institutions, in particular the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services;
- Redoubling efforts of primary and secondary school teaching staff to improve media literacy among young people, in close cooperation with the civil society;
- Promoting labor and social rights, including the economic and social standing of journalists, to improve their existential well-being, which is closely related to ensuring personal and professional integrity;
- Finding appropriate mechanisms and methods for self-regulation of Internet portals in cooperation with professional associations such as the AJM and the Ethics Council;
- Strengthening the organizational integrity of the media by admitting errors and publishing corrections in prominent places, as a basic standard for building trust;
- Amending the legal framework on freedom of expression and reporting to strike a balance between protecting against disinformation and preserving fundamental human rights and freedom of expression, in line with the EU best practices;
- Further supporting and strengthening trust in the public service to establish it as a reliable indicator of media freedom and expression.