



REGIONAL YOUTH LEADERSHIP MOBILITY PROGRAMME

COUNTERING DISINFORMATION ABOUT EU
INTEGRATION IN THE MEDIA

**OPEN SOCIETY
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WESTERN BALKANS

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Introduction

This study examines the challenges posed by disinformation in the context of European Union (EU) integration in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In addition to being vulnerable to disinformation, these three countries face significant difficulties in ensuring and safeguarding media freedoms; efforts to improve the state of the media have not yet been fulfilled. This report posits that the spread of disinformation has become a key factor hindering the EU accession process in all three countries. As highlighted in the European Parliament's disinformation report, "disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception"¹. Other reports express similar concerns, arguing that "disinformation articles not only have the potential to disrupt the democratic process of a country and instill pro-authoritarian sentiment, but also to cause violence and provoke radicalization inside and outside the borders"².

In **Albania**, disinformation is primarily domestic and used opportunistically by political parties, especially during election periods. In **North Macedonia**, some improvements have been made, but disinformation remains pervasive, particularly in online media. **Serbia** faces similar challenges, with both traditional and online media contributing to the spread of disinformation. Recent legal reforms aim to address these issues, but enforcement remains inconsistent. All three countries have media self-regulation bodies and journalistic codes of conduct in place; however, these measures are insufficient without legal enforcement and broader transparency. Furthermore, the lack of specific legislation to regulate online media exacerbates the spread of disinformation.

In this context, addressing and countering disinformation about the EU is paramount for safeguarding the integrity of the democratic process and fostering a more informed and inclusive public discourse in these Western Balkan countries.

This report is based on interviews with relevant stakeholders, along with qualitative and quantitative research. It seeks to identify key trends in the spread of disinformation in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, and to explain the consequences of citizens' exposure to false information regarding EU integration. Additionally, the study aims to pinpoint the main factors and actors behind disinformation campaigns that limit citizens' access to reliable information, preventing them from making informed decisions. It also analyzes existing policies against disinformation to assess their effectiveness and shortcomings. Finally, based on these findings, the report offers **policy recommendations** aimed at combating disinformation and protecting citizens from its harmful effects.

1 European Parliament, "Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them". 23 February 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf), pg. 14.

2 Despina Kovachevska et al., "Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans: Media monitoring report for the period October – December 2023", (Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society – Skopje, December 2023), <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/media-monitoring-october-december-2023.pdf>, pg 7.

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Methodology & Ethical Considerations

This study employs a qualitative research approach, utilizing expert interviews as the primary method of data collection, complemented by desk research. The methodology focuses on gathering insights through reports, national polls, articles, and input from media professionals, scholars, and policymakers who possess direct experience or expertise in the fields of European integration and disinformation.

The selection process for interviewees was designed to ensure a comprehensive understanding of disinformation related to EU integration within the media landscape of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Interviews were conducted between April and August 2024, using in-person meetings, Skype, or email correspondence, depending on the availability and preference of the participants. Each interview followed a semi-structured format, allowing for both guided questions and open-ended responses. This approach ensured that specific topics were covered while also providing the flexibility for interviewees to share their unique insights and experiences.

To maintain the ethical integrity of the research, the following measures were taken:

Informed Consent: All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's objectives and methodology, and were required to give informed consent before participating.

Confidentiality: The identities of the interviewees were kept confidential unless explicit permission was granted to attribute specific quotes or insights to them.

Data Security: All interview recordings, transcripts, and related data were securely stored, with access restricted to the research team.

3. What is Disinformation?

The European Commission defines disinformation 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” (European Commission, 2018a, p.4). The phrase “public harm” refers to “threats to democratic political and policymaking processes as well as public goods such as the protection of EU citizens’ health, the environment or security” (European Commission, 2018a, p.4). Similarly, according to the website EUvsDisiNFO, disinformation is “false or misleading content that is created, presented and disseminated with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm. Disinformation does not include errors, satire and parody, or clearly identified partisan news and commentary”.³

Besides disinformation, there are two other related concepts: misinformation and fake news. Misinformation refers to “false or misleading content shared without intent to cause harm. However, its effects can still be harmful, e.g. when people share false information with friends and family in good faith”.⁴ Fake news is “inaccurate, sensationalist, misleading information. The term “fake news” has strong political connotations and is woefully inaccurate to describe the complexity of the issues at stake”.⁵

As demonstrated above, disinformation and misinformation are two pervasive phenomena that are often confused, with distinctions between them not universally agreed upon. Scholars like Persily and Tucker provide a useful framework for understanding these terms, emphasizing the intent behind the dissemination of information. According to them, the key difference lies in intent: disinformation is spread deliberately, whereas misinformation may be inadvertent or unintentional.⁶

Despite their differences, both phenomena share the characteristic of spreading inaccurate or distorted content. The authors also highlight the difficulty in determining intent, noting that while it is often challenging to discern whether the dissemination of certain misleading information is intentional, disinformation can generally be seen as an organized effort to spread misinformation. This organized attempt may involve national or international actors.⁷ They emphasize that the distinction between disinformation and misinformation is crucial for both theoretical understanding and practical policy responses. Disinformation, being intentional, is often linked to political or ideological goals, where actors seek to manipulate public opinion or disrupt social order. In contrast, misinformation is typically spread by individuals who genuinely believe the information to be true, often due to cognitive biases or the lack of proper fact-checking mechanisms.⁸

Exposure to disinformation not only distorts perceptions and generates false knowledge, but it can also cause severe cognitive imbalance—a condition that arises when conflicting information challenges an individual’s existing attitudes and beliefs. This imbalance can lead to mental restlessness, anxiety, discomfort, confusion, and cognitive strain. The more people are exposed to disinformation, the more likely they are to believe it, which in turn

3 Learn, EUvsDisiNFO, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/learn/#define-block-4>

4 Ibid;

5 Ibid;

6 Persily, N., & Tucker, J. A. (2020). *Social media and democracy: The state of the field, prospects for reform*. Cambridge University Press. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/E79E2BBF0>

7 Ibid;

8 Ibid;

amplifies its spread. In essence, disinformation shapes people's attitudes and behaviors, potentially leading to detrimental consequences.⁹ Education, particularly in media literacy, is crucial: "Psychologists, sociologists, educators, researchers, and policymakers must actively engage in raising public awareness about the spread of disinformation and its harmful effects, including on public opinion and mental health."¹⁰

Disinformation not only misguides individuals but also impacts society on a broader scale. It sets the public agenda, shapes discourse, and diverts attention to false, erroneous, or irrelevant issues, distracting people from genuine developments and problems. Prolonged exposure to disinformation can foster widespread skepticism and cynicism, eroding trust in media, information sources, and even in one another. This creates barriers to accessing accurate, verified information and hampers the ability to stay objectively informed. Ultimately, people may become fatigued by the constant flow of fake news, leading to disengagement from social trends and public issues altogether.¹¹

3.1 Disinformation in the Balkan Context

In recent years, the spread of false information, propaganda, and conspiracy theories has eroded public trust in domestic institutions and the EU integration process, leading to a decline in support among citizens across the Western Balkans. In Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia—like elsewhere in the region—various global developments from 2020 to 2024 have created an environment conducive to the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic provided fertile ground for the dissemination of disinformation, misinformation, and fake news by both domestic and foreign actors.

The more recent war in Gaza has also fueled disinformation in the Balkans. For instance, on October 17, 2023, a Facebook user in North Macedonia posted distressing images of child war victims alongside a photo of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, falsely claiming they were casualties of Israeli attacks on Gaza. Independent fact-checkers later revealed that the images were actually from an earlier conflict in Syria.

Several days later, on October 15, another Macedonian Facebook user spread a conspiracy theory baselessly accusing the Jewish population of orchestrating a so-called "great reset" aimed at world domination. Then, on October 18, an online media outlet amplified this misinformation by sharing a 2021 video, misleadingly suggesting it showed recent Egyptian humanitarian aid vehicles blocked at the Gaza border.¹²

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia in 2020 brought with it a surge of disinformation regarding vaccines, including claims that they contained poison and were harmful to pregnancy. Other conspiracy theories circulating on social media related to the virus and vaccines included notions of microchipping, DNA cloning, genetic manipulation, and the role of 5G technology.¹³ Such disinformation had a particularly negative impact on

9 Sanja Jachevska, "Exposure to disinformation causes mental and cognitive imbalance, stress, panic" (Macedonian Media Institute, 18 July 2024), <https://mim.org.mk/mk/aktivizam/1517-izlozenosta-na-dezinformacii-predizvikuvamislolen-kognitiven-disbalans-stres-panika>.

10 *ibid*

11 *Ibid*

12 Mat Mastracci, "Online Disinformation Surges in Balkans Amid Israel-Hamas Conflict", (Balkan Insight, 9 November 2023), <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/09/online-disinformation-surges-in-balkans-amid-israel-hamas-conflict/>;

13 Despina Kovachevska et al., "PROPAGANDA, false narratives, disinformation - the damaging influence of the Kremlin in N. Macedonia: collection of media articles", (Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society – Skopje, June 2022), <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/zbornik-mk-v06.pdf>, pg. 10

citizens' perceptions of China, North Macedonia's largest donor and supplier of vaccines.¹⁴ Even though most crucial infrastructure investments in the country are financed by China,¹⁵ Macedonian citizens still do not perceive China as a key strategic partner, largely due to its relative absence in media narratives. Although there is a Chinese embassy in the country and the Confucius Institute, which focuses on promoting the Chinese language and culture, these institutions are not seen as having a significant influence on the citizens.¹⁶

As briefly discussed, many regional and international reports warn of dangerous disinformation trends emerging in the Western Balkans. We will now examine these reports, starting with the 2023 European Index of Media Literacy.¹⁷ It ranked Albania (38th), North Macedonia (39th), and Serbia (31st) among the most susceptible to disinformation out of 41 countries. The report states that "Balkan countries, many of which continue to face internal instability and inter-state tensions in 2023, remain among the most at-risk nations in the index."¹⁸ The 41 analyzed countries are divided into clusters, grouping nations with similar characteristics. These clusters are hierarchical, ranging from the best-performing countries in the 1st cluster to the poorly performing countries in the last, 5th cluster. Serbia is categorized in the 4th cluster (problematic countries), while both Albania and North Macedonia fall into cluster 5, identified as poorly performing countries. According to the report, "the geographical pattern of the distribution of the clusters shows East-West and North-South divide with the Balkan countries and the Caucasus trailing behind".¹⁹

Last July, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Albania (BIRN Albania), in collaboration with the Science and Innovation for Development Center (SciDEV), analyzed the circulation of fake news related to Russia's war against Ukraine, Russian disinformation narratives, and Chinese and Iranian propaganda disseminated through state-sponsored media in the Albanian language across Albanian-speaking media in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.²⁰ The first two reports are particularly important in the context being analyzed here, so we will take a brief look at their findings. The report titled "False News on Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Albanian-Language Media" found that false information regarding Ukraine proliferated in Albanian-language media outlets in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia during the first eight months of 2022.²¹ The report argues that this misleading content—primarily produced overseas and circulated via social media platforms—has been translated and republished by local media outlets. These include digital-native websites, television, radio, newspapers, and their respective social media channels, driven largely by commercial interests. The second report, titled "Russian State-Sponsored Disinformation Narratives in Albania," contends that although these countries may not always be direct targets of Russian disinformation, pro-Kremlin narratives have been circulating in local media outlets more frequently than previously observed. This

14 "North Macedonia leans on China for COVID-19 vaccine campaign", (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Balkan Service, 1 May 2021), <https://www.rferl.org/a/north-macedonia-china-vaccines-/31232663.html>.

15 Ana Krstinovska, "The place of North Macedonia in China's strategy for the Western Balkans", (Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Office in Skopje, 20 January 2020), <https://bit.ly/3Mqv7IS>, pg. 3.

16 "GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021", (15 November 2021), https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Vulnerability-Index_North-Macedonia.pdf, pg. 54

17 Marin Lessenski, "Media Literacy Index 2023. Report", (Open Society Institute – Sofia, June 2023), <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/MLI-report-in-English-22.06.pdf>, pg. 7.

18 Ibid

19 ibid p.8

20 <https://birn.eu.com/news-and-events/birn-albania-and-scidev-present-studies-on-disinformation-propaganda-and-fake-news/>

21 <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/False-news-on-Russias-invasion-of-Ukraine-in-the-Albanian-language-media.pdf>

indicates that the local information environment is not immune to such influences..²²

According to the previously mentioned European Parliament report, which analyzed disinformation and counter-disinformation trends in the region from 2018 to 2020, “disinformation is a significant problem throughout the Western Balkans and an increasingly important part of the way in which both domestic and foreign actors pursue political ends”.²³ Moreover, disinformation is sufficiently pervasive in the region that it hampers the consolidation of democratic media systems, and thus of democratic governance more broadly, as well as heightening the challenges of post-conflict resolution and transitional justice. The report further identified **three key challenges** related to disinformation: “external challenges to EU credibility; disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic; and the impact of disinformation on elections and referendums. While foreign actors feature prominently – chiefly Russia, but also China, Turkey, and other countries in and near the region – the bulk of disinformation in the Western Balkans is produced and disseminated by domestic actors for domestic purposes.”²⁴

The report posits that disinformation is not merely a consequence of under-regulated online media environments and external security risks, but rather stems from what it terms systemic weaknesses or vulnerabilities. These four key vulnerabilities are expected to perpetuate disinformation as a significant and harmful element of the socio-political landscape in the Western Balkans:

Governance: Without significant improvements in governance, the public in the Western Balkans will remain highly susceptible to the influence of disinformation.

Geopolitics: Media across the region amplify messages produced outside the area, increasing vulnerability to disinformation originating from external sources.

Enmity: Without more successful anti-chauvinism initiatives, all states in the region will continue to be easy targets for disinformation actors.

Disunity: “Mixed messages” between the EU and its member states create fertile ground for disinformation campaigns.²⁵

Annual European Commission (EC) reports note alarming developments in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia regarding the spread of disinformation. The EC report on Albania highlights that journalists and their professional organizations face considerable challenges, with limited job security and poor working conditions leading to significant risks of self-censorship, thereby diminishing their ability to resist disinformation. While the country has adopted a revised Audiovisual Broadcasting Code, it remains to be seen whether it will effectively address disinformation as intended.

In North Macedonia, the European Commission points out increasing threats from disinformation, alongside limited efforts to counter it. There is a pressing need to improve the public’s understanding of the risks associated with disinformation and to enhance media literacy skills throughout society.

In its latest report for Serbia, the EC noted that media outlets such as Sputnik Serbia and RT Balkan “produce and/or disseminate content that manipulates the information environment in Serbia,” adding that such content is widely reflected in mainstream

²² <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Russian-state-sponsored-disinformation-narratives-in-Albania.pdf>

²³ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf)

²⁴ European Parliament, “Mapping fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkans and identifying ways to effectively counter them”. 23 February 2021. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU\(2020\)653621_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf).

²⁵ Ibid, pg. 61.

traditional media outlets in Serbia and the broader region. Local civil society organizations, independent media outlets, and fact-checkers have been making valuable efforts to counter disinformation.²⁶

The countries were also urged to reduce opportunities for foreign interference and information manipulation, as well as to take steps toward strengthening societal resilience against these and other forms of hybrid threats.

In addition, regular reports from the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans), a network of media organizations and civil society organizations from the Western Balkans, provide significant insights into trends and patterns of disinformation in the region.²⁷ In its latest report covering October to December 2023, the Network argues that various external actors continued to target Western Balkan societies with disinformation and manipulation tactics, employing a range of influence operations from authoritarian regimes, including Russia's hybrid warfare strategies. In Albania, the most significant instances of disinformation during this reporting period focused on the war in Gaza, the secession of Republika Srpska, the Greater Albania project, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. According to the report, "in the absence of compelling information, media became the arena of clash of baseless theses, discriminatory language and of the spread of panic among citizens".²⁸ In North Macedonia, the most significant instances of disinformation centered around the war in Gaza and the conflict in Ukraine, with some media claiming that Russia had won the war or suggesting that Mossad created Hamas with the assistance of the CIA. According to the report: "local disinformation networks continued to propagate narratives aimed at undermining the trust in the democratic institutions, especially aimed at discrediting pro-Western political parties".²⁹ In Serbia, the most significant instances of disinformation involved misleading representations of Volodymyr Zelensky and Ukraine-EU relations, claims regarding the "irrelevance and powerlessness" of the EU, and narratives about the division within Europe and the West over the wars in Gaza and Ukraine.³⁰ The report argues that Serbia's ruling party, SNS, "is using more and more anti-Western narratives to smear its opponents, leaving the Serbian public in believing that the West is our major enemy".³¹

26 https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9198cd1a-c8c9-4973-90ac-b6ba6bd72b53_en?filename=SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf;

27 <https://antidisinfo.net/category/publications-en/>;

28 Despina Kovachevska et al., "Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans: Media monitoring report for the period October – December 2023", (Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society – Skopje, December 2023), <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/media-monitoring-october-december-2023.pdf>, pg. 12-13;

29 Ibid, pg. 20;

30 Ibid, pg. 23;

31 Ibid, pg. 22;

4. How Disinformation Hinders EU Integration

The integration of Western Balkan (WB) countries into the EU has been a long and complex journey, fraught with numerous challenges. Despite the necessity of meeting EU accession criteria, progress has been significantly impeded by a variety of factors. Many experts contend that the stagnation of the European integration process in the Western Balkans has created a vacuum that other actors, such as Russia and China, are eager to fill. Consequently, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU has intensified its efforts toward enlargement.

The pervasive influence of disinformation in the Western Balkan media has further complicated the situation. Both domestic and foreign actors have exploited disinformation to undermine the credibility of the EU in the region, deepening the divide between “EU idealists”—those committed to their country's European identity and future regardless of obstacles—and “EU realists”—individuals who may not oppose EU integration but doubt its likelihood of success.³² Russia, in particular, has wielded disinformation as a tool to obstruct the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions in the region and to distort perceptions of its invasion of Ukraine. It is important to note that domestic actors frequently contribute to the proliferation of false narratives for political gain. In countries like Serbia, where political power is concentrated within a single group, disinformation often serves the interests of the ruling elite. In contrast, in more competitive political environments such as Albania and North Macedonia, disinformation is employed opportunistically by various political actors.

However, the situation regarding disinformation and its impact on the EU integration process varies significantly among the three analyzed countries. Albania stands out as a leader in pro-EU and Western sentiment. For instance, the 2023 Balkan Barometer found that 92% of Albanians surveyed believed joining the EU would benefit the country's economy. In contrast, Serbia had the lowest level of support at 34% (a decrease of 4 percentage points from 2022), while North Macedonia recorded 50%. “After the steadily rising support to EU membership among Western Balkan citizens from year to year, this year's edition reveals a drop to 59% or 3 percent less than in 2021”, the report argued.³³ In addition, responses to the question, “When do you expect your country's accession to the EU to happen?” reveal significant insights into the citizens' attitudes toward EU integration. While 42% of Albanian respondents answered “by 2030,” 37% of surveyed North Macedonians and 40% of Serbs responded “never.”

Other reports indicate similar trends. The latest multinational survey of the Western Balkans by the International Republican Institute's (IRI) Center for Insights in Survey Research (CISR) shows broad support for joining the European Union (EU) and a strong majority who view Russia's war on Ukraine as unjustified. When asked about their support for EU membership if a referendum were held today, strong majorities in five of the six countries would vote to join, with support ranging from 68% in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to 92% in Albania. In Serbia, a plurality of 40% favors joining the EU. “There is a strong desire across the Balkans to enhance Western economic ties and join the EU. This widespread support indicates that people in the region believe further integration with the European Union can lead to lasting prosperity,” said Paul McCarthy, Director for Europe at IRI. The poll also revealed that majorities in five of the six surveyed countries consider Russia's war on Ukraine to be completely or somewhat unjustified. In Serbia,

32 <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/kri/assets/disinformation-in-western-balkans-report.pdf>

33 https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/

however, a plurality of 49% believes that Russia is either completely or somewhat justified. “While these numbers are mostly positive, the responses from Serbia are concerning. If peace and security are the long-term goals for the Balkans, Serbia should reject Russian overtures and strengthen its ties with the West,” added McCarthy.³⁴

But how has disinformation affected the EU integration process in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia? The responses vary significantly from Albania to Serbia.

According to Ledion Krisafi, Director of the Tirana Centre for Journalistic Excellence, there are more instances of misinformation than disinformation in **Albania**. Misinformation regarding the EU, which is “very low,” primarily comes from political parties. Krisafi argues that it is created with the purpose of politically attacking opponents, such as claiming that the ruling party is not doing enough regarding Albania’s EU integration. However, unlike other countries in the region, there is no significant anti-EU disinformation in Albania.

He further notes that public support for EU integration in Albania remains exceptionally high, exceeding 90%, suggesting that disinformation and misinformation have had little effect on shaping public opinion in this regard. Krisafi identifies political parties and news portals associated with them as the primary sources of disinformation: “In recent years, this kind of news has primarily come from opposition parties aiming to attack the government.”

When asked about the strategies being used to counter disinformation in the Albanian media landscape and how he evaluates their effectiveness, Krisafi responds: “In recent years, several projects and training sessions for journalists have been implemented. The problem is not with the training, as journalists recognize when this type of news is produced by political parties. The issue lies in the financial pressure on certain news portals to publish such content.” In this context, he argues that media outlets—especially independent ones—should receive more support to alleviate the financial pressures from political parties.

In **North Macedonia**, the lack of legal regulation regarding disinformation and online media is cited as the primary cause for the spread of false information. Specifically concerning EU integration, an interviewee from the Macedonian Institute for Media stated that “there is not enough reporting on EU integration in the country, and the published articles are generally framed through the lens of daily political developments.” This means that there is insufficient investigative and high-quality journalism related to EU integration, which often leads to the misinterpretation of developments in the country’s EU accession process, viewed through the perspectives of political parties.

The interviewee from the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia agrees with this assessment, adding that the domestic audience knows little about the relationships between different blocks in the EU. They believe there is a lack of reporting on the benefits of EU membership, opportunities for youth, and improvements in living standards. Instead, Macedonian media often report on the accession process in a negative light, focusing on the “sacrifices” that the country and its citizens must make, rather than the benefits they would gain. This could be a factor contributing to the percentage of individuals leaning towards Russia, China, and other international stakeholders rather than supporting EU accession.

The interviewee from the Association of Journalists of Macedonia emphasized that reporting should also examine various aspects, such as economic and political implications and social and cultural changes. Thus, a common conclusion among the

³⁴ <https://www.iri.org/news/iri-western-balkans-poll-strong-support-for-eu-membership-russias-attacks-on-ukraine-unjustified/>

interviewed journalist associations is that there is insufficient information available in the media about EU integration and the various aspects and benefits of EU membership. This lack of coverage, combined with disinformation spread by other relevant stakeholders, could negatively influence public opinion.

In **Serbia**, the consequences of disinformation are evident in the slight but continuous decline in support for the EU accession process. Ivana Nikolić, a research coordinator at YIHR Serbia and a journalist, explains that there is “little interest among the Serbian public in topics related to the EU and the integration process.” She stresses that part of the problem lies in the Serbian media’s failure to fulfill their primary role of reporting and informing the public, often providing only partial information about the EU and the accession negotiations.

Antoinette Nikolova, a journalist and founder of the Brussels-based Balkan Free Media Initiative, argues that anti-EU sentiment primarily benefits other international actors, particularly Russia. She notes that this sentiment can be reinforced by instilling fear that the integration process will undermine societal values: “They would like to keep people from being too happy about joining the EU.” Sentiments such as “Europe is going to destroy your traditional family” often play on fears related to the LGBTQ+ community and concerns for children’s safety. As Nikolova further explains, “All this kind of propaganda, these bullet points, effectively tap into the emotional and traditional feelings of the people in the Western Balkans.”

On the other hand, Tamara Filipović Stevanović from NUNS (Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia) highlights that the EU is partially at fault for the current situation, as it missed its opportunity to establish a strong presence in the 2000s and has made numerous compromises with the ruling elite in Serbia. “While time passed, an anti-EU narrative developed,” she explains. Filipović Stevanović believes that by making political deals with the current leadership, it becomes unfair to question why support for Russian influence is so strong. “When you make a compromise in one area, that compromise tends to spread to the bigger picture. If you sacrifice something, you have to be aware of that sacrifice. Many people in Serbia believe that the EU provides unconditional support to the ruling party,” she adds.

4.1 Disinformation in Albania:

Unlike some other countries in the Balkan region, Albanian media do not generally produce content that is overtly against EU integration. However, they often highlight speeches by prominent political figures who express frustration with the EU integration process. For instance, during the Bled Strategic Forum in 2023³⁵, Prime Minister Edi Rama said he is “tragically very optimistic”³⁶ about the future of the Western Balkans. Similarly, at the Prespa Forum in 2021³⁷ and during his address to the EU Parliament in 2023, Rama criticized the EU for what he perceives as hypocrisy, arguing that the Union imposes higher standards on aspiring members than it adheres to itself.³⁸ While these remarks may not constitute disinformation, their coverage in various contexts can contribute to a skewed public perception of the EU integration process.

35 <https://euronews.al/en/pm-rama-at-bled-forum-i-dont-believe-that-we-will-be-in-eu-by-2030-but/>

36 <https://rti.rtsh.al/article/rama-at-the-bled-forum-talks-on-the-financial-support-and-access-of-the-western-balkans-to-the-common-market>;

37 “Prespa Forum”, Rama: Europe can not indicate us what to do in region <https://abcnews.al/prespa-forum-rama-europe-can-not-indicate-us-what-to-do-in-region/>;

38 Albanian PM to EU Parliament: ‘Karma is a bitch’ <https://www.politico.eu/article/albania-edi-rama-european-parliament-davos-world-economic-forum-qatar-corruption-scandal-qatargate-morocco-roberta-metsola/>;

Additionally, instances of disinformation about the EU can be found on the fringes of Albanian social media, particularly on smaller websites and anonymous Facebook accounts. While these sources may have a limited audience, their followers are highly engaged and growing in number. Disinformation related to the EU surrounding the recent elections in June 2024 spans from sensationalist clickbait and careless journalism to outright Russian propaganda.³⁹ On a milder note, some articles inaccurately reported lower voter turnout or praised candidates for achievements they did not attain. For instance, one Facebook portal shared misleading statements from Italian politician Antonio Tajani, who claimed that 80% of Italy's laws were dictated by Brussels.⁴⁰ Of course, Tajani's claims were unfounded; Italian fact-checkers found that only 2.4% of Italian laws come directly from Brussels. While the European Union does require member states to align certain policy areas—such as agriculture and foreign policy—the broader anti-EU narrative suggests that the Union undermines the sovereignty of its members. This narrative portrays nations like Italy as being at the mercy of European bureaucrats, neglecting the needs of local communities. Such claims often assert that the EU is on the verge of collapse, citing political shifts like the rise of far-right parties or misinterpreting events such as Macron's alleged loss of power following French parliamentary results.⁴¹ Furthermore, these narratives are often intertwined with Russian propaganda, which blames the EU and NATO for the conflict in Ukraine. This propaganda distorts statements from European leaders to portray the EU as aggressive or destabilizing. For instance, when Kaja Kallas, former Prime Minister of Estonia, addressed the dangers posed by Russia's expansionist aims in the Baltics, her words were twisted by a Facebook account.⁴² The account distorted key moments in Kallas's speech to imply that it was the EU, rather than Russia, that sought to avoid peace. A similar distortion occurred regarding the assassination attempt against Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico⁴³, when some Facebook accounts claimed that the attempt on his life was due to his pro-Russian, anti-Ukraine, and anti-Western stance, despite the fact that his would-be assassin was affiliated with pro-Russian groups.

Recent studies indicate that, despite Albania's status as one of the most pro-European countries in the region, there has been a growing dissemination of narratives against EU policies. According to the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN), EU-related topics rank among the top five most targeted by fake news in the Western Balkan region (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Montenegro). Specifically, 12% of the 222 analyzed articles focus on EU policy issues (EFCSN, 2024).

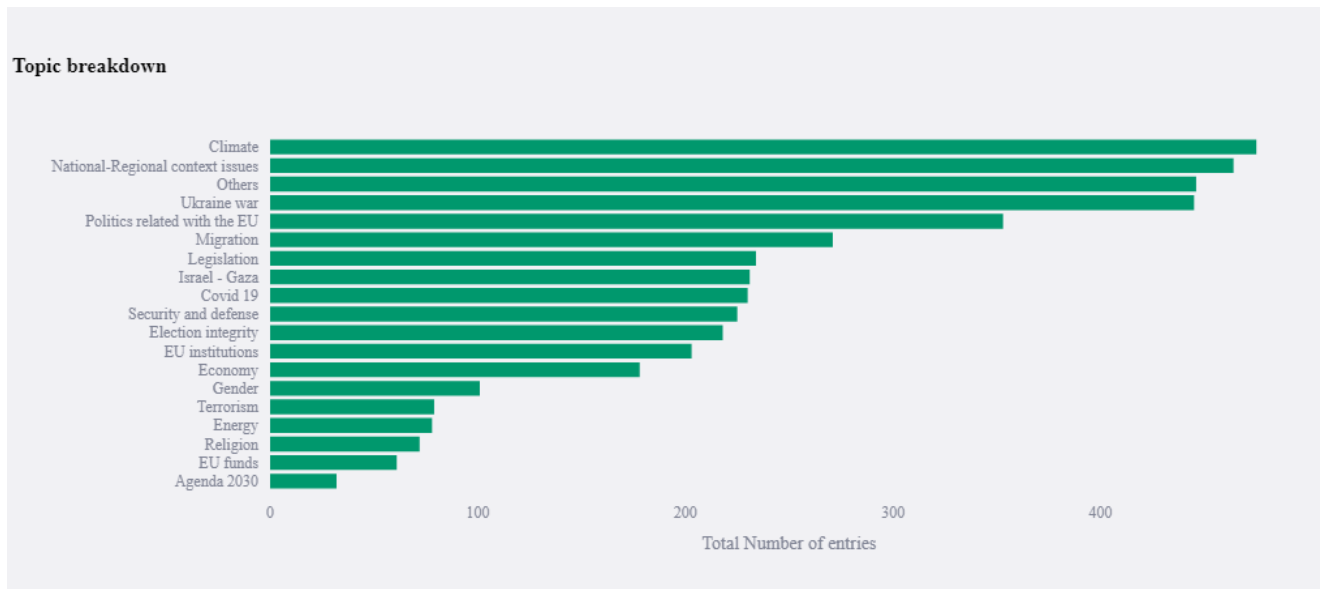
39 <https://faktoje.al/mediat-raportojne-gabim-numrin-e-votuesve-ne-zgjedhjet-evropiane/>

40 Pretendimi: 80% e ligjeve italiane vijnë nga Brukseli. Nën BE nuk ka sovranitet <https://faktoje.al/bashkimi-evropian-nuk-imponon-80-te-ligjeve-per-vendet-anetare/>;

41 <https://faktoje.al/macron-vijon-mandatin-presidencial-pavaresisht-zgjedhjeve/>;

42 <https://faktoje.al/kryeministrja-estoneze-nuk-tha-se-evropa-nuk-do-paqen-me-rusine/>;

43 <https://faktoje.al/kryeministri-slovak-nuk-u-sulmua-per-qendrimet-pro-ruse/>;



Misinformation often revolves around social issues, protection, politics, and recent elections and decisions in the European Parliament, such as:

Social issues; [The Rama - Meloni agreement for immigrants remains suspended](#)
[Marriage of LGBT couple](#)

Protection; [The missing evidence of the Serbia-France agreement on fighter jets](#)
[Fake news about the entry of French military troops into Ukraine](#)

[The return of visas for Russian tourists in line with the EU, experts - It will not affect tourism](#)

Politics;

[The Beleri case and the blockade of Greece](#)

[Visa liberalization for Kosovo has not been suspended](#)

["Vaccine diplomacy" - How Prime Minister Rama used the Western Balkans to reprimand the EU](#)

[Does the Bejleri case really threaten Albania's EU membership?](#)

Elections and decisions in the European Parliament;

[The leader of the European Parliament did not block the discussion on Pfizer vaccines](#)

[China did not threaten NATO and Europe in case Russia is attacked](#)

[The media misreport the number of voters in the European elections](#)

Several factors contribute to the spread of narratives opposing EU policies in the Western Balkans. A significant factor is the war in Ukraine, coupled with the deliberate dissemination of disinformation from Russia, often routed through Serbia. Observations indicate that the lack of a unified stance among certain EU member states, such as Hungary and Slovakia, has facilitated the proliferation of these narratives, sometimes reinforced by remarks from prominent leaders. Additionally, Russia views the Western Balkans as a strategic region to undermine the EU and NATO, further fueling disinformation.

The analysis highlights that the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia plays a crucial

role, particularly as anti-EU narratives stem from Serbia's accusations against the West. The misuse of social media, along with copy-paste journalism, accelerates the rapid spread of false information. Russia's disinformation campaigns aim to erode public trust in democratic processes, particularly through electoral interference. While the Albanian public largely supports EU integration, it has not been entirely immune to these narratives.

Anti-EU disinformation in Albanian media and social networks can be particularly damaging, as it frequently aligns with broader pro-Russian narratives⁴⁴. These narratives encompass a range of topics, including NATO, the war in Ukraine, opposition to vaccination and climate change efforts, as well as support for women's rights and LGBT+ issues in Albania. Previous reports indicate that Russia often leverages anti-LGBT sentiments to propagate its messaging across Europe.⁴⁵

4.2 Disinformation in North Macedonia

The latest Country Report on North Macedonia for 2023 highlights concerns regarding the absence of specific legal regulations for online media. This issue is particularly pressing given the increased use of information technology, which has led to rising threats from disinformation, violations of intellectual property rights, and a lack of transparency in paid political advertising.⁴⁶ The Commission recommended enhancing citizens' understanding of the risks associated with disinformation, implementing more effective counter-disinformation measures, and promoting stronger self-regulation for online media.

A recent public opinion survey conducted by the Institute for Communication Studies explored the areas where respondents most frequently identified disinformation. The findings revealed that the most misleading information is found in internal politics (48%), followed by crime, corruption, and personal security (32%). The economy, finance, and business were also significant areas of concern, with 30% of respondents identifying disinformation there. Additionally, slightly less disinformation was noted in healthcare and health (26%) and foreign policy (24%).⁴⁷ Indeed, an analysis of media articles over the past two years shows that the war in Ukraine has been the most prominent topic for spreading disinformation.⁴⁸ Since the onset of Russian aggression in Ukraine, the media has consistently disseminated disinformation that portrays Ukraine in a negative light,⁴⁹ as opposed to presenting Russia as superior and powerful.⁵⁰

Building on Russian propaganda, anti-Western narratives are the second most prevalent topic for disseminating disinformation in the country,⁵¹ followed by disinformation narratives

44 "Kremlin speaking homophobia as geopolitics" retrieved from <https://factcheck.bg/en/kremlin-speaking-homophobia-as-geopolitics/>

45 'Gayrope': This is how Russia uses disinformation against the LGBTQ+ community to attack democracies <https://english.elpais.com/international/2023-12-03/gayrope-this-is-how-russia-uses-disinformation-against-the-lgbtq-community-to-attack-democracies.html>

46 "North Macedonia 2023 Country Report" (European Commission, 8 November 2023), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf, pg. 32

47 "Public opinion survey: Citizens' practices and perceptions about getting informed and dealing with disinformation", (Institute of Communication Studies, July 2024), <https://bit.ly/3T2syKM>, pg. 23

48 Gjorgji Mitrevski, "The effect of disinformation and foreign influences on the democratic processes in North Macedonia in 2023" (Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society - Skopje, 23 January 2024), <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/themes/metamorphosis/download.php?id=42556>, pg. 8.

49 "The comparisons made between Zelenski and Hitler are baseless and manipulative", (Vistinomer, 29 July 2022), <https://vistinomer.mk/sporedbite-shto-se-pravat-pomegju-zelenski-i-hitler-se-neosnovani-i-manipulativni/>

50 "Five Kremlin narratives behind an avalanche of disinformation about Ukraine in 2023", (Meta.mk, 28 December 2023), <https://meta.mk/pet-narativi-na-kremlj-vo-pozadinata-na-lavina-dezinformacii-za-ukraina-vo-2023-godina/>

51 "The girl in the photo has nothing to do with Ursula von der Leyen's ancestors", (Vistinomer, 27 November 2023), <https://vistinomer.mk/devojkata-od-fotografijata-nema-nikakva-vrska-so-predcite-na-ursula-fon-der-lajen/>

related to EU integration.⁵² These narratives became more prevalent in the media following Bulgaria's decision to delay the accession negotiations for North Macedonia. The most common anti-EU narratives observed over the past two years include claims that the EU does not genuinely want North Macedonia to join the Union, that it is blackmailing and deceiving its citizens, and that it would be better for North Macedonia to align with BRICS or Russia rather than the EU. Additionally, there are assertions that EU membership would result in a loss of national identity.⁵³

The latest developments regarding the EU accession process exemplify how the media can distort the reality of actual events. The propaganda and disinformation narratives concerning the perceived threats to Macedonian identity,⁵⁴ language⁵⁵ and people⁵⁶ which were prevalent during the 2018 Prespa Agreement and referendum, resurfaced in 2022 in relation to the French proposal and again in 2023 regarding potential constitutional amendments.⁵⁷ These narratives were propagated by various political parties, former public officials, academic circles, and other influential stakeholders, subsequently gaining traction in the media. These messages primarily targeted ethnic Macedonians, asserting that the proposed constitutional amendments jeopardize the survival of the Macedonian people, language, identity, and history. Instead of offering impartial and accurate information about the accession process, these posts and statements foster social panic, breed mistrust in public institutions, and incite hatred, impatience, and polarization within society.⁵⁸ Such disinformation may ultimately result in political destabilization and a decline in support for the EU integration process, as it strengthens anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment.

4.3 Disinformation in Serbia

When analyzing the annual reports of the European Commission from 2020 to 2023, there has been little progress regarding freedom of expression. Threats and intimidation of journalists, along with censorship, remain significant concerns, and self-censorship is a growing issue due to the increase in strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP). However, the European Commission welcomed the legislative amendments aimed at securing the independence of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) and noted progress in the implementation of the new media strategy.⁵⁹ The amendments to the Law on Public Information and the Media were enacted before the dissolution of

52 Jasminka Pavlovska, "The delivered demands to Macedonia and the leniency of Brussels encouraged Bulgaria to blackmail the EU as well.", (Nova Makedonija, 13 December 2023), <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/pecateno-izdanie/isporachanite-baranja-kon-makedonija-i-popustlivosta-na-brisel-ja-ohrabrija-bugarija-da-ja-ucenuva-i-eu/>

53 Gjorgji Mitrevski, "The effect of disinformation and foreign influences on the democratic processes in North Macedonia in 2023" (Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society - Skopje, 23 January 2024), <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/themes/metamorphosis/download.php?id=42556>, pg. 9

54 "Mickoski: Acceptance of the proposal is a direct blow to the Macedonian identity", (Press24, 13 July 2022), <https://press24.mk/mickoski-prifakjanje-na-predlogot-e-direkten-udar-vrz-makedonskiot-identitet>.

55 "New political manipulations and misinformation about the Macedonian language", (Institute for Media and Analytics, 20 July 2022), <https://ima.mk/2022/07/20/novi-politicki-manipulacii-i-dezinformacii-zamakedonskiot-jazik/>.

56 "The Macedonian manifesto with an open letter to the Macedonian people", (TV Kanal 5, 26 February 2017), <https://kanal5.com.mk/makedonskiot-manifest-so-otvoreno-pismo-do-makedonskiot-narod/a281412>.

57 Zharko Trajanoski; Zoran Bojarovski; Dr. Sefer Tahiri; Petrit Saracini, "Constitutional changes in the media: disinformation, media manipulations, hate speech (analysis)", (Institute for Media and Analytics IMA Skopje, September 2023), <https://ima.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/izmeni-vo-mediumite-dezinformaczii-mediumski-manipulaczii-govor-na-omraza-analizi.pdf>, pg. 7.

58 Zoran Bojarovski; Dr. Katerina Kolozova; Zharko Trajanoski; Dr. Sefer Tahiri; Petrit Saracini, "The French proposal: hate speech, disinformation, media manipulations - media analysis -", (Institute for Media and Analytics IMA Skopje, September 2022), <https://ima.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/predlog-govor-na-omraza-dezinformaczii-mediumski-manipulaczii-mediumski-analizi.pdf>, pg. 25.

59 Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiation. "Serbia Report 2023", 8 November 2023. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2023_en;

Parliament in October 2023.

However, the General Secretary of NUNS, Tamara Filipović Stevanović, argues that independent institutions like REM do not operate at full capacity and are effectively “destroyed.” She states, “We established our independent institutions, such as the ombudsman and the commissioner for information of public importance and data protection, during a democratic government. The political elites never understood how significant these contributions were to society, and none of them ever mentioned these independent institutions during their campaigns. In the end, while REM may now be ineffective, these institutions have also been compromised,” highlighting the significant political influence that persists over REM’s operations.

When examining how EU integration is represented in the media, several factors must be considered. One significant issue is media polarization in the country. According to Ivana Nikolić from YIHR, “Aside from a very small number of unbiased and objective media outlets, the situation in Serbia regarding the EU and the integration process is concerning. Many media outlets, which should primarily inform the public, often present biased information about the EU and accession negotiations. This is largely a result of the strong control authorities exert over the media, coupled with longstanding self-censorship. Self-censorship can be even more detrimental than outright censorship; journalists and their editors often alter news and reports based on what they believe the authorities will find acceptable, emphasizing positive aspects while downplaying negative commentary,” Nikolić explains.

Disinformation in Serbia is predominantly disseminated by government officials and high-ranking politicians, along with tabloids that operate under government control. Despite this challenging landscape, several fact-checking initiatives have emerged, such as the Istinomer web portal. This platform evaluates the statements of public officials and politicians while also analyzing significant social and economic issues.⁶⁰ Among the articles analyzed by Istinomer, one was published on social media by the portal “Nulta tačka,” titled “Prison Awaits Those Who Dare to Think: The EU’s Deeming of Hate Speech as a Grave Criminal Offense is Becoming More Certain!” The news referenced the European Commission’s acknowledgment of the recommendations made by the European Citizens’ Panel, which consists of 150 randomly chosen citizens from 27 Member States, regarding the topic of “Managing Hatred in Society.”⁶¹ However, as the staff at Istinomer explains, there is no record of the Commission making such claims, rendering the title of the article highly misleading.

A Serbian tabloid, Kurir, is notorious for its sensational and often misleading headlines. One article, titled “We’re sick of the EU and the thousands of absurd rules: An Italian (54) moves to Šumadija [region of Serbia] with his wife,” exemplifies this trend. In the article, the Italian citizen states, “Life in Italy is a prison in the open,” adding that life in Serbia is much better.⁶²

60 Since July 2020, Istinomer has been Meta’s official partner in Serbia for combating misinformation on Facebook and Instagram. Istinomer daily checks content in Serbian, scans for misinformation, and analyzes manipulations spreading in the media and on social networks.

61 European Commission. (2024). Tackling hatred in society: Final recommendations. Retrieved from https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/document/download/f924a377-713c-46a4-a92c-a63973b4618e_en?filename=Tackling_Hatred_in_Society_Final_recommendations_EN.pdf

62 Kurir.(26.09.2024).“Smučila nam se EU i hiljade apsurdnih pravila” Italijan (54) se sa ženom seli u Šumadiju: Ispovest bračnog para, evo zbog čega su doneli ovu odluku”. <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/9448197/italijan-se-sa-zenom-seli-u-sumadiju>

Another article titled "Thanks to Telekom, Serbia is on the Same Level as the EU"⁶³, claimed that Serbia leads the region in telecommunications and internet services, even surpassing some EU states. While negative headlines about the EU are common, they often align with the statements of the ruling political elites. Currently, the topic of lithium mining in Serbia is gaining traction, and it's no secret that the Serbian authorities support it. Recently, Kurir TV aired an interview with an unnamed individual described as an expert in the field, titled "We Are Unaware That Lithium Is All Around Us! Expert Explains: Here Is How This Metal Is Used, It Can Be a Cure!"⁶⁴.

On the other hand, social media pages should not be neglected. The Facebook page "Forum Antiglobalista" claimed on July 24 that the Netherlands is performing euthanasia on citizens who are disabled or suffer from autism and alcoholism⁶⁵, while the Facebook page "Živčana žirafa" published a post stating that German restaurants bought 3D-printed meat from the Netherlands⁶⁶. However, Nikolić argues that mainstream, traditional media are more dangerous than social media and obscure accounts when it comes to the spread of disinformation in Serbia: "Forums and social networks, as well as anything that falls under citizen journalism, are not subject to the same regulations as what you call traditional media. Additionally, it is important to point out that content from mainstream media can be more dangerous, as these outlets have a much greater reach and often follow the narratives of the government or other centers of power."

CRTA's media monitoring has found that since 2017, particularly after the start of Russian aggression in Ukraine, there has been a consistent increase in anti-EU reporting. The findings indicate that less than one-third of the narratives conveying disinformation are pro-Russian, while around two-thirds are anti-Western.⁶⁷ This raises questions about the supposed positive media stances toward the EU. It is also clear that the disinformation presented in Serbian media mirrors that found in Russian-registered media, such as articles blaming the West for "sabotaging" the Nord Stream 1 and 2 pipelines.⁶⁸ The founder of BFMI, Nikolova, argues that "since the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin has tripled its budget for media. This is official information, so you can imagine the extent of non-official activities. Russia, along with the so-called cyber troops of Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of Wagner, has operated in this space. They had a Serbian branch, where individuals were paid to spread Russian disinformation."

Nikolić also reflects on the consequences of Russia's full invasion of Ukraine for the spread of disinformation in Serbia. "According to many reports, the dissemination of disinformation in Serbia originates from Russian media, which is then republished by Serbian outlets. In these reports, the EU is often portrayed as orchestrating attempts to overthrow the government in Serbia through protests, among other tactics. It is important to note that Serbia has, in some ways, become a hub for pro-Russian propaganda, particularly following

63 Kurir.(22.09.2024.)."Zahvaljujući Telekomu, Srbija na nivou EU!".<https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/9444364/Zahvaljujuci-Telekomu-SRBIJA-NA-NIVOU-EU>

64 Kurir TV."Litijum j eu svemu oko nas, a da toga nismo ni svesni! Stručnjak objasnio: Evo u čemu se sve koristi ovaj metal, on može biti i lek!". <https://www.kurir.rs/tv/video/74777/Litijum-j-eu-svemu-okon-nas-a-da-toga-nismo-ni-svesni-Strucnjak-objasnio-Evo-u-cemu-se-sve-koristi-ovaj-metal-on-moze-biti-i-lek>

65 Tančić, T. (31.07.2023). "Holandija ne sprovodi nasilnu eutanaziju osoba sa invaliditetom da bi spasila planetu". Istinomer.<https://www.istinomer.rs/facebook-provere/holandija-ne-sprovodi-nasilnu-eutanaziju-osoba-sa-invaliditetom-da-bi-spasila-planetu/>

66 Tančić, T. (29.03.2024). "Dele se obmanjujuće tvrdnje o laboratorijski proizvedenom mesu u EU". <https://www.istinomer.rs/facebook-provere/dezinformacije-o-mesu/>

67 Rogac, MRogac, M. (2022, November 14). Russian echo in Serbian media. Istinomer. Retrieved July 12, 2024, from <https://english.istinomer.rs/analyses/russian-echo-in-serbian-media/>

68 B92.(03.01.2022). "Velika Britanija odgovorna, a Amerika?".https://www.b92.net/o/info/vesti/index?yyyy=2022&mm=11&dd=03&nav_category=78&nav_id=2237091

the arrival of Sputnik and especially RT Balkan." Additionally, mainstream media outlets like Happy TV and Pink have openly justified the Kremlin's actions, denied war crimes, and encouraged the spread of Russian propaganda in Serbia. Nikolić states that, overall, the sources of disinformation in Serbia include ministries, MPs, and the government, as well as media and journalists who often transmit information and announcements without verifying the data or adhering to basic professional standards.

To conclude, several factors contribute to citizens' decreasing support for EU integration in Serbia. While disinformation about the EU is certainly one of them, it should not be viewed as the primary cause. In our opinion, citizens' disappointment stems from the prolonged and often frustrating EU integration process, coupled with numerous "conditions" that the EU has imposed—starting with cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the early 2000s. Many citizens feel tired and apathetic, arguing that year after year, and decade after decade, little progress has been made. Economic challenges, such as inflation and instability, as well as the impact of Brexit, further exacerbate this sentiment. Last but not least, the government's proclaimed balance between the East and the West does not appear to be effective and can even be said to confuse citizens.

5. Examination of Domestic, Regional, and International Actors

5.1 Domestic Political Actors in Albania:

In Albania, domestic political actors, including political parties and their affiliated news portals, frequently engage in disinformation to advance their interests. These actors disseminate false information to discredit opponents, manipulate public opinion, and influence electoral outcomes. In recent years, opposition parties have particularly employed this tactic to attack the government, using disinformation to criticize its efforts toward EU integration and portraying these efforts as ineffective or corrupt. This strategy aims to erode public trust in the ruling party and position the opposition as a preferable alternative.

Social media platforms serve as an open forum for the rapid spread of disinformation and propaganda, often circumventing the editorial oversight typical of traditional media. Anonymous Facebook accounts and certain portals run by untrained journalists frequently distort news content for clickbait purposes. While these sources may have a smaller audience, experts argue that their followers are highly engaged and increasing in number.

Moreover, traditional media in Albania often mirror the statements and actions of political leaders regarding the EU. A recent example is Prime Minister Edi Rama's speech at the Bled Forum in 2023. The lack of a concrete date for the start of EU accession negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia led PM Rama to express significant disapproval and criticism of the EU, marking one of his most pronounced anti-EU statements.

5.2 Domestic Political Actors in North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, pinpointing the sources of disinformation can be challenging, often linked to media ownership and financing. For privately owned media, reporting is frequently

influenced by the political or business figures providing financial support. The recent lifting of the ban on state advertising also poses risks, as political parties may influence media narratives by funding advertisements that align with their interests. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the section on the Identification of Key Disinformation Challenges in the Context of EU Integration in North Macedonia.

A recent survey highlights the sources of disinformation as perceived by Macedonian citizens. Politicians were identified as the primary source by 89% of respondents, while journalists were noted by 85%. Additionally, 54% of respondents pointed to non-governmental organizations as a source, and 51% indicated business organizations. Furthermore, 43% believed that domestic educational institutions contribute to the spread of disinformation, while 41% identified academic institutions and scientists as culprits. These figures reflect a significant level of mistrust among Macedonian citizens toward political parties, the media, and other domestic stakeholders.

5.3 Domestic Political Actors in Serbia

In Serbia, it would be misleading to assert that the ruling political elites have no influence over the media or the dissemination of disinformation. While their influence may not always manifest through direct ownership of media outlets, it is evident in the repetitive narratives and the lack of critical, objective reporting prevalent in some of the most popular media platforms.

Media ownership raises significant concerns, as many outlets are closely affiliated with the Serbian Progressive Party and its leader, President Aleksandar Vučić. In essence, domestic political actors in Serbia that contribute to the spread of disinformation include political parties, media outlets linked to both internal (government and influential figures) and external entities (such as Russia and China), as well as tabloids and government officials. Ultimately, the Serbian Progressive Party and its affiliates appear to benefit the most from this disinformation, using it to maintain the status quo, attract voters, and preserve political legitimacy.

5.4 Foreign State Actors in Albania

Foreign state actors, particularly those with strategic interests in the Balkans, significantly influence the spread of disinformation narratives in Albania, especially in attempts to portray the EU as weaker. A key player in this context is China, whose growing presence in the Balkans has extended to Albania. While Albania has fewer Chinese investments and a less close political relationship with China compared to other countries in the region, it consistently maintains a pro-U.S. stance on issues related to China. This has led some experts to characterize recent years as marked by an "economic diplomacy of empty promises."

One of the primary strategies employed by China to shape public perception in Albania is through an enhanced media presence. This is achieved through cooperation agreements with local media and the establishment of branches of Chinese media institutions within the country. Through these channels, China can promote narratives that align with its interests, subtly influencing public discourse and potentially fostering a more China-friendly environment. These efforts are part of a broader strategy observed throughout the Balkans, where Chinese media and cultural initiatives aim to cultivate a positive image of

China and engender a sense of affinity or at least neutrality towards its global ambitions.⁶⁹

Russia currently maintains minimal political and economic ties with Albania, and any association with Russia in Albanian politics is often perceived as a mark of treason. On the other hand, the diplomatic relations between Albania and Iran, established in 1999, have been complex and recently became tense. Following a significant cyber-attack on its national service system in 2022, Albania severed diplomatic ties with Iran, expelling Iranian embassy staff and accusing Tehran of orchestrating the attack. This accusation was supported by findings from Microsoft, and the incident prompted NATO, the U.S., the EU, and the UK to express solidarity with Albania.

Another serious point of contention is Albania's sheltering of the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK), an Iranian opposition group that seeks to overthrow Iran's theocratic government. With approximately 3,000 MEK members currently based in Camp Ashraf-3 in Albania, Iran views Albania's support for this group as a direct provocation.

In a study analyzing Iran's public diplomacy through its Albanian-language media, researchers mapped various forms of disinformation across different communication platforms. Over a three-month period from June 27 to September 26, 2022, they examined 715 articles published by the Pars Today News Agency in Albanian, focusing on the main themes covered.⁷⁰ A significant portion of these articles, 260 or 36.4%, fell under the theme "From the World," with the Russian aggression against Ukraine being a prominent topic. The coverage frequently aligned with Russian perspectives, portraying Russia in a positive light while depicting Western countries negatively. This reflects Iran's geopolitical interests and ideological stance in the region.

5.5 Foreign State Actors in North Macedonia

North Macedonia, situated in the heart of the Western Balkan region, attracts foreign state actors seeking to exert influence. This is often achieved by disseminating disinformation regarding EU accession, which remains a strategic objective for the country. The aforementioned public opinion survey indicates that a significant portion of Macedonian citizens believe disinformation is also propagated through various diplomatic services operating within the country.⁷¹ More than half of the respondents (55%) believe that disinformation is spread through the diplomatic services of neighboring countries, while exactly half (50%) attribute it to US diplomatic services. Slightly less than half (49%) think that EU diplomacy contributes to the spread of disinformation in the country, and the same percentage believe it is propagated by the Russian Federation's diplomatic efforts.

Long before Russia's aggression toward Ukraine, many in North Macedonia have regarded Russians as a brotherly nation. This perception may stem from the influence of the Orthodox Church, with Christianity being the predominant religion in the country⁷², as well as from neighboring countries like Serbia, which have close ties with Russia and propagate similar sentiments through their media. Additionally, the prolonged EU accession process and North Macedonia's journey toward NATO membership have paved the way for strong pro-Russian narratives to gain traction among citizens. While North Macedonia is not classified as highly susceptible to Russian influence and exhibits a degree of resilience

69 European Parliament 2022 report

70 bino and likmeta

71 Gjorgji Mitrevski, "The effect of disinformation and foreign influences on the democratic processes in North Macedonia in 2023", pg. 18

72 "Census of the population, households and apartments in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2021 - first set of data", (State Statistical Office, 30 March 2022), <https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSoopstienie.aspx?rbtxt=146>.

against foreign interference, its society remains polarized between pro-Russian and pro-Chinese factions and those who view the EU as their primary strategic partner.⁷³

The former perceptions are heavily influenced by propaganda and disinformation spread by Russian supporters, leveraging their political influence and economic power. Following Russia's aggression toward Ukraine, numerous instances of disinformation related to this topic have emerged, often arising from a reliance on information "borrowed" from foreign media rather than conducting independent research and reporting.⁷⁴ This disinformation includes unfounded claims about military operations, the motives behind the war, the influx of refugees from Ukraine to North Macedonia, the impacts of this immigration on the local population, military aid provided by North Macedonia to Ukraine, and various false narratives regarding NATO.⁷⁵

Additionally, several smaller political parties disseminate Russian propaganda through social media, increasing their influence over public opinion and aiming to alienate citizens from their existing pro-EU sentiment. There are also four registered foreign-owned broadcasters⁷⁶ and various online media outlets financed by Hungarian investors linked to the current Prime Minister.⁷⁷ Given their history of spreading disinformation and hate speech, along with a recent loan provided to North Macedonia by the Hungarian government, there is potential for a new wave of disinformation to emerge from this source.⁷⁸

5.6 Foreign State Actors in Serbia

The European Commission has urged Serbia to address foreign involvement in the dissemination of disinformation, alongside the challenges posed by domestic media that openly opposes the EU.⁷⁹ Key foreign actors in this context include China, Russia, and the EU.

The relationship between the People's Republic of China and Serbia began to intensify in 2006 with the establishment of the Confucius Institute in Serbia. Following this, the two countries signed a Strategic Partnership in 2009, and in 2017, a visa-free regime was introduced, allowing citizens to stay in each country for up to 60 days. Today, China enjoys significant public support in Serbia, which is evident in the media's portrayal of various activities involving this political actor. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia received medical aid and expertise from China in the spring of 2020. The arrival of this aid was prominently broadcast on national television, and China was portrayed as Serbia's main benefactor. However, Janjić and Subotić noted that it remains unclear whether this aid

73 "GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021", (15 November 2021), https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/Vulnerability-Index_North-Macedonia.pdf, pg 27

74 Despina Kovachevska et al., "PROPAGANDA, false narratives, disinformation - the damaging influence of the Kremlin in N. Macedonia: collection of media articles", (Metamorphosis - Foundation for Internet and Society – Skopje, June 2022), <https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/zbornik-mk-v06.pdf>, pg 28.

75 Vesna Kolovska et al., "In the sea of disinformation, Macedonian soldiers were sent to the Russian-Ukrainian front, and Ukrainian refugees became a global threat", (Association of Journalists of Macedonia, 24 April 2024), <https://znm.org.mk/en/in-the-sea-of-disinformation-macedonian-soldiers-were-sent-to-the-russian-ukrainian-front-and-ukrainian-refugees-became-a-global-threat/>.

76 Agency for audio and audiovisual media services, "Media ownership in 2024" (June 2024), <https://bit.ly/3XkIGdX>, pg. 9.

77 Goce Trpkovski, "How Hungarian olive oil kept Macedonian media afloat" (Balkan Insight, 14 February 2020), <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/02/14/how-hungarian-olive-oil-kept-macedonian-media-afloat/>.

78 Vladimir Tevcev, "Loan from Hungary: Half of the 500 million euros that the country agreed with Hungary will be for the municipalities, and half for the business" (24.mk, 15 July 2024), <https://24.mk/details/zaem-od-ungarija-polovina-od-500-te-milioni-evra-koi-zemjava-gi-dogovori-so-ungarija-kje-bidat-za-opshtinite-a-polovina-za-biznisot>.

79 European Commission. (2023a). Commission staff working document. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf p. 147

was paid for or a donation, despite the media narrative suggesting otherwise.⁸⁰

Conversely, the EU's efforts went largely unnoticed in the media for some time. Smajić pointed out that the European Union contributed to the transfer of medical aid from China to Serbia by covering transport fees for 15 flights, totaling between €400,000 and €500,000.⁸¹ After the arrival of medical packages and personnel in Belgrade, banners were displayed throughout the city reading, "Thank you, brother Xi!"

As a result of such reporting—especially prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic but still present today—it's no surprise that the PRC is viewed as Serbia's second most important political partner and security ally, with the Russian Federation taking the lead. A notable factor in this perception is the Sino-Russian support for Serbia concerning Kosovo recognition issues.

Recent studies of Serbo-Russian relations in the context of the war in Ukraine reveal that 63% of the Serbian public holds "The West" responsible for the conflict, while 68.5% view Russia as a "friend." This support stems not primarily from religious affinities toward the Orthodox Church, but rather from lingering sentiments related to the 1990s and the Kosovo conflict, where Russia is seen as an "antidepressant-like narrative" that reassures Serbian society by validating its entrenched beliefs.⁸²

Istinomer researcher Vojislav Mihailović explains that there is no emotional connection to the EU. In media monitoring results, both Russia and China are prominently referenced in the context of "brotherhood" with Serbia, while the EU is discussed only in terms of economic investments or donations, leading to a pragmatic portrayal devoid of emotional ties to European values.⁸³

In terms of media presence, Serbia has outlets suspected of being controlled by the Kremlin, such as Russia Today Balkan and Sputnik, which have been banned from the EU. However, in 2022, RT launched its Balkan branch and began broadcasting in Serbian. The European Commission has stated that RT and Sputnik jointly distort the information available to the public.⁸⁴

Domestically, a pro-Russian narrative is dominant in media outlets like Happy TV, Informer, and Večernje Novosti. These narratives claim that Russia is defending itself against a Western military apparatus that initiated the conflict, that the EU is struggling for survival without Russian energy sources, and that the West is sabotaging Russia on the international stage through various conspiracy theories.⁸⁵

According to Antoinette Nikolova, founder of the Balkan Free Media Initiative, Serbia and North Macedonia are particularly susceptible to Russian propaganda due to cultural, religious, and linguistic similarities.

Overall, CRTA's monitoring statistics indicate that Serbian media portrays Russia positively 34% of the time, negatively 57% of the time, and neutrally 9% of the time. In contrast, the EU

80 Subotić, S., & Janjić, M. (2020, April). What have we learned from the COVID-19 crisis in terms of Sino-Serbian relations? European Policy Centre. <https://www.epc.eu> p.2-5

81 Smajić, Z. (2020, April 23). Činjenice o donacijama Srbiji. Al Jazeera Balkans. <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/opinions/2020/4/23/cinjenice-o-donacijama-srbija>

82 Vuksanović, V., Cvijić, S., & Samorukov, M. (2022, December). How does Russian soft power in Serbia really work? [PDF]. Bezbednost. <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/How-does-Russian-soft-power-in-Serbia-really-work.pdf> p.8

83 Šljukić, M. (2023, March 30). Volimo Rusiju, ali znamo da su novci u EU. Istinomer. <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/volimo-rusiju-ali-znamo-da-su-novci-u-eu/>

84 European Commission. (2023a). Commission staff working document. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf p. 44

85 Rogac, MRogac, M. (2022, November 14). Russian echo in Serbian media. Istinomer. Retrieved July 12, 2024, from <https://english.istinomer.rs/analyses/russian-echo-in-serbian-media/>

is depicted positively only 8% of the time, neutrally 78%, and negatively 14%.⁸⁶ Among the four key actors, the United States is most frequently reported in a negative light (21%), with only 12% positive coverage.⁸⁷ This negative sentiment is rooted in historical grievances, particularly regarding the NATO bombing in 1999. Despite ongoing efforts to improve its reputation through economic, political, and cultural initiatives, unfavorable perceptions of the US persist.

Interestingly, the same findings indicate that supporters of Aleksandar Vučić are more likely to believe that aligning with Russia or China could serve as an alternative to EU accession. This trend is not surprising, as support for Russia has become so prevalent that no political leadership can afford to oppose it without risking voter backlash.⁸⁸

6. Identification of key disinformation challenges in the context of EU integration

Albania: In Albania, disinformation is often used opportunistically by various political actors to achieve short-term goals rather than long-term strategies, as noted in a report by the European Parliament. Studies indicate that, compared to other countries in the Western Balkans, disinformation in Albania is primarily domestic. Political parties frequently deploy disinformation against one another, especially during election periods. There is relatively little evidence of foreign powers attempting to distort Albanian politics or international affairs. Instead, disinformation is commonly leveraged by media outlets to generate clicks and boost traffic, as well as by political actors and their affiliates for political gain. Media freedoms in Albania face significant structural challenges due to the interplay of powerful economic and political interests, which sometimes extend to organized crime. This issue is thoroughly explored in the Safe Journalists Indicators Report 2022.

Despite an increase in the number of media outlets, **media ownership** remains highly concentrated among a few individuals or family-run groups. These owners often use their platforms to assert political and economic control, heavily influencing reporting, editorial policies, and agenda-setting, as detailed in the MOMA 2023 report.⁸⁹ Additionally, repeated attacks on journalists indicate a disparity between the number of reported incidents and the actual experiences of journalists on the ground.⁹⁰ The European Commission has raised concerns about Albania's media landscape, particularly regarding the significant concentration of media audiences and ownership. While reliable audience data is scarce in many markets, it is clear that a small number of family-owned groups dominate the broadcasting and print media sectors, controlling the majority of revenue.⁹¹

Many media outlets in Albania are owned by individuals with strong political affiliations, leading to biased reporting that favors specific political parties or figures. Given these substantial challenges, the media in Albania is particularly susceptible to disinformation

86 Istinomer. (2021, February 26). Kina i Rusija u medijskom plusu. Retrieved July 11, 2024, from <https://www.istinomer.rs/arthiva/saopstenja/kina-i-rusija-u-medijskom-plusu/>

87 Istinomer. (2021, February 26). Kina i Rusija u medijskom plusu. Retrieved July 11, 2024, from <https://www.istinomer.rs/arthiva/saopstenja/kina-i-rusija-u-medijskom-plusu/>

88 Vuksanović, V., Steric, L., & Bjelos, M. (2022). Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine. In Western Balkans Security Barometer. Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Retrieved July 10, 2024, from https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/WBSB-2022_Serbia-Report-1_Dec-2022_%281%29.pdf

89 <https://albania.mom-gmr.org/>

90 SCiDEV, BIRN Albania, and Qendra Faktoje, in collaboration with OBC Transeuropa:

Questionnaire on the Safety of Journalists and Freedom of the Media in Albania

91 https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/0154dce1-5026-45de-8b37-e3d56eff7925_en?filename=59_1_58088_coun_chap_albania_al.pdf

and propaganda driven by political interests. This vulnerability could significantly impact the country's efforts toward EU integration, especially regarding how the EU is portrayed in the media.

Government Pressure and Censorship. There have been instances where the Albanian government has exerted pressure on journalists and media organizations to conform to its narratives. This pressure can take various forms, including threats, legal actions, and other intimidation tactics aimed at suppressing dissenting voices. The Albanian government employs a complex strategy that involves both incentives and penalties to control media narratives. Major media outlets may receive financial support and favorable deals, while those that criticize the government often face fines, regulatory inspections, and other retaliatory measures. These government incentives are not only extended to media companies but also to other businesses owned by the same individuals, which blurs the lines between business interests and media independence.

Financial Dependence. Media outlets in Albania frequently rely on funding from businesses and political parties, leading to significant conflicts of interest. Advertisers with political affiliations can exert influence over editorial decisions, compromising the independence of news reporting. This financial dependence further complicates the media landscape, making it difficult for journalists to report freely and objectively.

North Macedonia: The Macedonian media landscape faces significant challenges, with Freedom House assessing the country as "partly free" in 2024.⁹² This assessment highlights that media is polarized along political lines, with private outlets often financed or supported by political or business entities that influence their content. Conversely, North Macedonia's ranking in the Reporters Without Borders Media Freedom Index improved significantly in 2022, moving up 33 places to 57th out of 180. In 2023, it rose to 38th, thanks to legislative measures aimed at enhancing journalists' safety.⁹³ By 2024, the country was ranked 36th⁹⁴. However, concerns about widespread disinformation, lack of professionalism, and weakened trust in the media persist, exposing independent journalists to threats and attacks.⁹⁵

A concerning development for independent media occurred with the adoption of amendments to the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in early March 2024.⁹⁶ These amendments lifted the existing ban on state advertising and introduced provisions for state and local-level campaigns.⁹⁷ Several journalist associations opposed these changes,⁹⁸ particularly as they were implemented ahead of parliamentary and presidential

92 "Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2024 - North Macedonia", 2024, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/freedom-world/2024>

93 "N. Macedonia shows progress in regard to media freedom", (Deutsche Welle, 3 May 2023), https://www.dw.com/mk/s-makedonija-napreduva-spered-slobodata-na-mediumite/a-65500645?maca=maz-rss-maz-pol_makedonija_timemk-4727-xml-mrss

94 "Reporters Without Borders, 2024 World Press Freedom Index - North Macedonia", 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>

95 "Reporters without borders: Macedonia has progress of two places in media freedom, but with widespread disinformation and unprofessionalism remain", (Radio MOF, 5 May 2024), <https://www.radiomof.mk/reporteri-bez-granici-makedonija-so-napredok-od-dve-mesta-vo-slobodata-na-mediumite-no-so-rashireni-dezinformacii-i-neprofesionalnost/>.

96 Law amending and supplementing the Law on Audio and Audio Visual Media Services (Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 55/24).

97 "State advertisements are returning to private media, the Parliament lifted the ban", (360 Stepeni, 29 February 2024), <https://360stepeni.mk/drzhavnite-reklami-se-vrakaat-vo-privatnite-mediumi-sobranieto-ja-ukina-zabranata/>.

98 "ZNM, SSNM, MIM and SEMM: Trade union journalist and media associations are against legalizing media corruption through the return of paid campaigns in the media", (Znm.Org.Mk, 8 April 2022), <https://znm.org.mk/%D0%B7%D0%BD%D0%BC-%D1%81%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%BC-%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BC-%D0%B8-%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%BC-%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%84%D1%81%D0%BA%D0%B-8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0/>

elections, viewing them as a threat to media independence and the public's right to impartial information.⁹⁹

Disinformation is especially prevalent in online media, which is not regulated by the existing Law on Media.¹⁰⁰ This law does not address online media or disinformation, and there is no specific legislation in North Macedonia governing online reporting or the dissemination of false information. The European Commission's latest Country Report on North Macedonia for 2023 reiterated this shortcoming, emphasizing that the lack of regulation leads to violations of intellectual property rights and an increase in disinformation threats.¹⁰¹

Research from the Institute of Communication Studies indicates that Macedonian citizens are aware of the disinformation problem. Recent surveys reveal that nearly half of respondents (49%) express doubt about everything published, while 36% believe what they read is reliable simply because it's published. Only 15% completely trust the media, with trust levels increasing with age. Notably, almost a third of respondents (31%) reported never checking the publisher of news, and 40% never verify whether the author of the text is credited. This data suggests that while citizens are skeptical of the information they receive, they often do not take steps to verify its source.

When asked about recognizing disinformation or fake news, 44% of respondents said they can sometimes recognize it, while 29% are confident they can always identify untrue news. Conversely, 16% stated they can rarely recognize it, and 8% said they cannot identify disinformation at all.

These responses indicate a high level of vulnerability to disinformation among citizens, stemming from both their inability to recognize it and their lack of motivation to verify information sources. Combined with insufficient legal regulation and undue influence on both traditional and online media, it is clear that immediate nationwide action is needed to combat disinformation effectively.¹⁰²

Serbia: In Serbia, existing regulatory mechanisms for tackling disinformation lack a comprehensive approach. Most of these mechanisms are self-regulatory or impose positive obligations for responsible reporting, with sanctions for spreading disinformation primarily focused on disrupting public order or inciting panic. However, even in such instances, the implementation of laws often proves problematic.

A notable example occurred during the devastating floods in 2014 when a 19-year-old posted on Facebook about dead bodies floating in the flooded city of Obrenovac. This false claim was later reported by the tabloid Kurir.¹⁰³ While the young man received a suspended sentence of 10 months, it remains unclear whether Kurir faced any sanctions for disseminating the same false information.¹⁰⁴ This case raises questions about the effectiveness and consistency of regulatory frameworks. If existing mechanisms are poorly implemented or selectively enforced, the introduction of new regulations may not yield meaningful improvements. The case also underscores the significance of social media

99 "Political consensus on media corruption through abuse of the European flag in the Parliament", (Znm.Org.Mk, 24 February 2024), <https://bit.ly/43LfayB>

100 Law on Media (Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 184/13 and 13/14 and Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 63/24 and 74/24).

101 "North Macedonia 2023 Country Report" (European Commission, 8 November 2023), https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_693%20North%20Macedonia%20report.pdf, pg. 32

102 "Public opinion survey: Citizens' practices and perceptions about getting informed and dealing with disinformation", (Institute of Communication Studies, July 2024), <https://bit.ly/3T2syKM>, pg. 19-22

103 Milojevic, J. S., & Kulic, M. (2020). „Lažne vesti" ili dezinformacije: (samo)regulatorni okvir i izazovi u praksi. Srpska politička misao, 67(1), <https://doi.org/10.22182/spm.6712020.8>

104 Jevtić, M. (2016). Građansko i profesionalno novinarstvo u medijima u Republici Srbiji [PhD dissertation, Univerzitet u Beogradu: Fakultet političkih nauka]. pp.150–151

in the disinformation landscape, as content can easily transition from social platforms to traditional media outlets.

Ensuring unbiased and truthful reporting is further complicated by ambiguous media ownership. Proving the personal ties between media owners and political elites can be challenging. These affiliations often lead to biased reporting that aligns with the narratives of the ruling elite, potentially favoring specific international political or economic actors.

Access to information is another critical issue, particularly for older generations who primarily rely on traditional media. This reliance raises concerns about national frequency distribution, as opposition-supporting channels or those critical of the ruling party are often available only through cable networks, which are not widely accessible across the country.

Tamara Filipović Stevanović, General Secretary of the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (NUNS), notes that outlets like Informer have signed agreements with various local television stations to broadcast their content. However, these arrangements are primarily financially motivated, obscuring the transparency of financial transactions. "While this may facilitate content sharing at the local level, it is problematic as it prioritizes financial gain over journalistic integrity," she argues.

Regarding media registration, Filipović Stevanović asserts that the Association advocates for journalism to remain an open profession without formal licensing restrictions, as such measures could be detrimental in systems with limited democratic capacity.

7. Existing Efforts to Counter Disinformation

Albania: In 2019, the Albanian parliament enacted anti-defamation legislation aimed at combating disinformation. This law allows the government to impose fines of up to EUR 16,000 on media organizations for disseminating fake news. However, it faced strong criticism from Albanian journalists, human rights organizations, the OSCE, and the Council of Europe, who viewed it as an attempt to muzzle the media.¹⁰⁵

The parliament also adjusted two laws to empower the Albanian Media Authority (AMA) and the Authority for Electronic and Postal Communications to hear complaints about news websites, demand retractions, impose fines of up to 1 million leke (approximately \$9,014), and suspend their activities.

"We call on journalists to continue reporting truthfully and correctly, and not to fear these regressive laws," the media organizations stated. Editor Enton Abilekaj remarked, "This law implies that if we do not like your news story, we can remove it and fine you."

Dunja Mijatović, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, emphasized that the laws urgently need improvement. The powers granted to the AMA, the potential for excessive fines, and the ability to block media websites without a court order could pose a serious threat to freedom of expression and media.

On March 28, 2024, seven members of Albania's ruling Socialist Party (SP) proposed the establishment of a special parliamentary committee to address disinformation and foreign interference in democratic processes. The committee will focus on scrutinizing media disinformation, foreign financial support, and economic influences, ensuring compliance with transparency laws, especially regarding election financing. It aims to

¹⁰⁵ Semini (2019) discusses the passing of fake news laws in Albania amid media protests. Erebara (2020) highlights concerns from rights groups regarding Albania's disputed media law. The Venice Commission (2020) provides an opinion on the draft amendments to Albania's law on audiovisual media service.

propose measures to enhance platform accountability, maintain content transparency, and curb inauthentic online activities while protecting free speech. The committee will also collaborate with media, businesses, and civil society to combat foreign interference and disinformation, providing annual reports to the Assembly. Comprising 13 members, the committee will be chaired by a representative from the majority party and is set for a one-year term, extendable by the Assembly.

This initiative aligns with a Memorandum of Understanding between Albania and the US, signed on February 15, 2024, and follows a regional declaration against disinformation. The committee was swiftly approved by the Albanian Assembly on April 3, 2024, though concerns about its purpose and transparency were raised by opposition members. The Albanian Media Council has expressed worries about the committee's potential impact on media freedom, questioning its objectives and possible biases. Critics argue that this move might distract from more urgent issues like corruption and media integrity.

North Macedonia: In the absence of a legal framework regulating disinformation and sanctioning its spread, journalist associations have opted for self-regulation by developing codes of professional standards for online journalism.¹⁰⁶ While the creation of such codes demonstrates their commitment to professional and responsible reporting, consistent adherence is crucial for them to have a meaningful impact.

The Code of Journalists of Macedonia, prepared by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, was adopted in 2001. It contains 17 principles and ethical values that, if respected, ensure journalists take responsibility for the information they publish. This code aims to promote the fundamental values of the profession and the standards that every journalist should follow, contributing to the fight against disinformation and media propaganda.¹⁰⁷

In 2021, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia developed the Guidelines for Ethical Reporting of Online Media to further extend the Code's principles to online platforms.¹⁰⁸ These guidelines include explanations for applying the Code's provisions and special rules applicable solely to online media, such as archiving published content and ensuring transparency regarding online media operations.

Another self-regulatory effort was made by the Association for Interactive Advertising IAB Macedonia in 2018. To establish and uphold fair, ethical, and professional practices for content creation and publication in online media, they introduced a Self-Regulatory Code of Ethics for Good Professional Practices in Digital Publishing. This code aims to prescribe best practices in digital publishing and advertising, addressing legal gaps related to online media.¹⁰⁹

With 2024 being an election year in North Macedonia, featuring both parliamentary and presidential elections in April and May, the new Code of Conduct in the Online Sphere During Electoral Processes and Referenda was particularly relevant.¹¹⁰ Developed by

106 Vesna Nikodinoska, "Regulatory and self-regulatory framework to tackle hate speech and disinformation in North Macedonia: Review" (Macedonian Media Institute, Skopje; Peace Institute, Ljubljana and SEENPM, Tirana, December 2021), https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1330/MK_chapter4_regulatorna%20i%20samoregulatorna%20ramka-9-2-22.pdf, pg. 13.

107 "AJM provided a Code of Ethics for the media in Macedonia", (Association of Journalists of Macedonia, 3 October 2017), <https://znm.org.mk/znm-obezbedi-etichki-kodeks-za-mediumi/>.

108 "Guidelines for ethical reporting of online media (Application of the Code of Journalists in the online sphere)" (Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia, 2021), <https://semmm.mk/attachments/01-02-2021/Насоки%20за%20етичко%20известување%20во%20онлајн%20медиумите.pdf>.

109 "Self-Regulation Code of Ethics of Good Professional Practices in Digital Publishing in the Territory of the Republic of Macedonia" (Interactive Advertising Bureau IAB Macedonia, 2018), https://www.iab.mk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Samoregulatoren-etichki-kodeks-_final.pdf.

110 "Code of Conduct in the Online Sphere During Electoral Processes and Referenda" (2023), <https://izborenkodeksonline.mk/kodeks-za-odnesuvanje-vo-online-prostor/>.

the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in collaboration with various journalistic and civil society organizations,¹¹¹ this code was published in October 2023.¹¹² Its goal is to guide political parties and their candidates regarding online statements and to provide reporting standards for traditional and online media during electoral processes. All stakeholders influence public opinion and thus share a responsibility to prevent the spread of disinformation, hate speech, and discriminatory language online.

While there have been numerous attempts at media self-regulation to combat disinformation in both traditional and online media, these efforts may not suffice. Most initiatives are driven by journalist associations, with participation being voluntary, as is adherence to the codes of conduct. Furthermore, there are no effective repercussions for non-compliance with these codes, underscoring the need for legal regulation and potential sanctions.

Serbia: Both digital and traditional media in Serbia have proven problematic in terms of disinformation and politically influenced reporting. The existing regulatory framework addresses both media types, and with the adoption of new laws in 2023, there is now a clearer definition of what constitutes “media.” In October 2023, the new Law on Electronic Media¹¹³ and the Law on Public Information and the Media¹¹⁴ were enacted, introducing significant changes regarding online media. Specifically, online platforms such as social media, forums, blogs, and portals cannot be classified as media under the law unless they are registered in the Media Register.¹¹⁵ The Law on Public Information and the Media outlines the registration procedure, requirements for founders, and the rights and responsibilities of founders, publishers, and journalists. It mandates the accuracy, completeness, and truthfulness of published content, with sanctions ranging from fines to the revocation of work permits for non-compliance.

This raises questions about how false or manipulated information on unregistered online media platforms is managed under the existing regulatory mechanisms. The Law on Electronic Communications¹¹⁶ addresses this issue by requiring internet providers to cooperate with relevant authorities when the dissemination of false information threatens national security or public order.

Tamara Filipović Stevanović, General Secretary of NUNS, explained the regulatory framework’s approach to registered and unregistered media regarding civil lawsuits: “We have the law on public information that applies only to editorially structured content. Registered media must adhere to this law, but there are online outlets that are media in nature yet choose not to register, and they have that right.” She further noted that “unregistered media may find themselves at a disadvantage because the law of obligations applies to them. If someone sues an unregistered media outlet for defamation, the burden of proof lies with that outlet, whereas in cases involving registered media, the burden rests

111 “Regulating election campaigns online with codes of conduct: the example of North Macedonia” (OSCE/ODIHR, 2023), https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/2/7/560972_1.pdf

112 “The Code of Conduct in the Online Sphere During Electoral Processes and Referenda promoted”, (Nova Makedonija, 12 October 2023), <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/politika/promoviran-kodeksot-za-odnesuvanje-vo-onlajn-prostorot-za-vreme-na-izborni-procesi-i-referendumi/>.

113 Zakon o elektronskim medijima. Sl. glasnik RS. Br. 92/2023.

https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_elektronskim_medijima.html

114 Zakon o javnom informisanju i medijima. Sl. glasnik RS. Br.92/2023. https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_javnom_informisanju_i_medijima.html

115 Krivokapić, N., Colić, & Maksimović. (2015, March). Pravni položaj online medija u Srbiji (V. Joler & Đ. Krivokapić, Eds.). Share Foundation. Retrieved July 15, 2024, from https://resursi.sharefoundation.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/vodic-pravnipolozaj_onlajn_medija_u_srbiji_-_preview.pdf p. 11

116 Zakon o elektronskim komunikacijama. Sl. glasnik RS. Br. 44/2010, 60/2013. https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_elektronskim_komunikacijama.html

with the plaintiff. This puts unregistered media at a disadvantage because the plaintiff must prepare a stronger case.”

Additionally, the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics, adopted by the Journalists Association of Serbia and the Independent Journalists Association of Serbia in 2015, serves as a self-regulatory mechanism that sets standards for the authenticity of published information, the independence and safety of journalists, and the responsibilities of the profession while preventing corruption and conflicts of interest. The Press Council is responsible for overseeing the implementation of this Code. Filipović Stevanović emphasized the repercussions of failing to adhere to the Code: “A journalist who does not follow this code does not receive protection from the journalistic community or associations. This delineates who advocates for public interest versus those who act for different motives, such as political or business interests.”

In addition to governmental actors and the Press Council, civil society organizations and other NGOs have contributed to the fight against the spread of false and misleading disinformation, a fact recognized by the European Commission in its 2023 Country Report.

Despite these efforts, Serbia still lacks comprehensive instruments and mechanisms to effectively address disinformation. The domestic legal framework primarily highlights the positive obligation of the media to report truthfully and accurately, underscoring the need for more robust measures.¹¹⁷

8. Findings

8.1 Albania

As numerous reports have indicated, disinformation in Albania is widespread, evident across the political spectrum and throughout the media landscape. However, disinformation specifically related to EU integration in Albania is relatively low. The primary actors in disseminating disinformation are political parties and the news portals affiliated with them. Foreign-source disinformation constitutes a minor aspect of the Albanian disinformation landscape, often manifesting as misinformation rather than outright disinformation.

In recent years, opposition parties have frequently propagated this type of news, primarily aimed at undermining the government by claiming it is not sufficiently advancing Albania's EU integration. Unlike other countries in the region, Albania lacks significant anti-EU integration disinformation campaigns. Public support for EU integration remains robust, exceeding 90%, suggesting that disinformation and misinformation have not significantly influenced public opinion. Furthermore, when disinformation or misinformation about the EU originates from political parties, public perception often aligns along party lines. Supporters of the ruling party tend to embrace its narratives regarding EU integration, while those aligned with opposition parties are more critical.

Over the past few years, several projects and training sessions aimed at countering disinformation have been implemented for journalists. The challenge does not lie with the training itself—journalists are generally aware of disinformation tactics used by political parties. Rather, the financial pressures faced by numerous news portals to publish such content pose a significant problem. To mitigate this issue, greater support for journalists and small independent media outlets is essential, helping them to resist political financial pressures.

117 European Commission. (2023a). Commission staff working document. Retrieved April 17, 2024, from https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_695_Serbia.pdf

While Albania maintains a largely positive stance toward the European Union, it is not entirely insulated from the growing wave of EU skepticism and the disinformation that often accompanies it. Many mainstream Albanian media outlets have adopted a cautious approach in their coverage of the EU, particularly regarding the 2024 EU elections held from June 6 to 9. Nonetheless, disinformation about the EU is increasingly proliferating on the fringes of Albanian social media, especially on smaller portals and anonymous Facebook accounts. Although these sources may have a limited reach, their audiences are dedicated and expanding, contributing to a wider spread of disinformation.

8.2 North Macedonia

The respondents to the interview generally believe there have been improvements in media freedom in North Macedonia over the years. However, they also note that the media, particularly online platforms, continue to contribute significantly to the spread of disinformation. Online media are often the most frequent violators of the Code of Journalists of Macedonia and other ethical standards, frequently “borrowing” content from other journalists without proper verification or citation, which creates fertile ground for misleading the public.

Efforts to combat disinformation in North Macedonia include media literacy programs, fact-checking initiatives, and regulatory measures. According to a respondent from the Association of Journalists of Macedonia, “addressing the root causes of disinformation requires a multifaceted approach that includes media literacy education, responsible journalistic practices, and ensuring transparency in media ownership and funding.”

Regarding reporting on EU integration, respondents expressed dissatisfaction, stating that media coverage typically portrays EU enlargement in a negative light. Instead of focusing on the benefits of EU membership in various areas, such as opportunities for youth or the dynamics within the EU, the coverage tends to emphasize challenges and setbacks. Effective reporting should aim to provide accurate, balanced, and comprehensive information about the benefits, challenges, and implications of the integration process.

While traditional media are regulated by law, respondents do not believe this is the sole reason for differences in reporting on EU integration. They attribute varying approaches to financial pressures, editorial policies, the influence of political parties and business interests, audience preferences, and the operational dynamics of online platforms.

The spread of disinformation about EU integration can stem from various factors, including the political agendas of certain domestic or foreign actors and the rise of nationalist movements that view EU integration as a threat to national sovereignty, cultural identity, or economic prosperity. Additionally, both traditional and online media may propagate such disinformation to attract audiences and generate clicks for financial gain. According to a respondent from the Macedonian Institute for Media, disinformation is primarily spread by “domestic individuals, groups, and media that subscribe to anti-EU narratives, as well as foreign actors, including Russia, China, and neighboring countries.”

When discussing the effectiveness of existing regulations in North Macedonia to address disinformation in both traditional and online media, a respondent from the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia noted that “there is certainly room for improvement.” They emphasized the need to raise media literacy among the population through visible debunking of disinformation, support for media self-regulation, and greater transparency in media ownership. There is also a call for amending existing laws or introducing new

regulations specifically targeting disinformation, in line with EU standards.

Finally, the interviewees advocate for a comprehensive approach to tackling disinformation, including enhanced media literacy, more visible debunking of false information, and identifying the sources and motivations behind disinformation campaigns. They suggest that regional or international cooperation could provide alternative solutions, such as establishing common standards and frameworks to combat disinformation by sharing best practices, coordinating efforts to identify and counter disinformation campaigns, and potentially harmonizing regulations for a more cohesive approach.

8.3 Serbia

All interviewees expressed a pessimistic view of the current media landscape in Serbia and the spread of disinformation. They raised concerns about unprofessional reporting, the decline of democratic capacity, difficulties in maintaining media independence, and the deep-rooted polarization within the media scene. Additionally, they noted that the Serbian Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media is not operating independently, as much of the Serbian media landscape is under the influence of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS).

When discussing the roles of international actors in spreading disinformation, respondents highlighted that since 2022, Russia has been leading an anti-Western propaganda campaign in Serbia through media outlets like RT and Sputnik. Antoinette Nikolova pointed out that the Kremlin has tripled its budget for media activities since the onset of its aggression in Ukraine, with Serbian propagandists receiving substantial financial support from Russia. The Serbian political leadership is attempting to balance its relations with both East and West, often highlighting the EU as a key economic partner while simultaneously relying on China and Russia for political backing.

Nikolova also emphasized the dangers of Russian propaganda in both Serbia and North Macedonia, noting that Serbian media have a significant influence on North Macedonian outlets due to political ties and language similarities. This raises the risk of disinformation from Serbian sources reaching Macedonian audiences.

Nikolić remarked that Russia and China benefit from the spread of false information, and their reach should not be underestimated, as disinformation often travels from Russian media to domestic Serbian outlets like Happy TV and Pink. While media and state ownership in Serbia are problematic, the more significant issue lies in the personal and financial ties between media ownership and political leadership, which are challenging to trace. Tamara Filipović Stevanović cited Telekom as an example, highlighting its lack of transparency regarding its business structure and operations, noting that information about its ownership is often classified as a trade secret.

Regarding the influence of traditional and digital media platforms, the respondents agreed that there is a lack of effective implementation to impact larger internet platforms. Both Nikolova and Filipović Stevanović suggested that the new Digital Services Act and the European Free Media Act in the EU could have positive effects on the region by regulating disinformation on online platforms. They emphasized the need for Western Balkan states to have a voice in the creation of such regulations, suggesting that candidate countries and their journalists' associations should be included as observers in the negotiation process. Filipović Stevanović also mentioned discussions about regional cooperation to develop a framework similar to the Digital Services Act (DSA).

In terms of legal recognition, registered digital media are protected by law. However,

Filipović Stevanović explained that judges often treat unregistered online media as if they were registered if they meet essential characteristics of a media outlet. “When the court sees that a portal is unregistered, it doesn’t matter; if it has an editorial structure and meets all characteristics of a media outlet, they choose to judge it according to the law on public information,” she stated.

When it comes to addressing disinformation related to the integration process, Nikolova argued that cutting funding is essential until the political elite takes the issue seriously. She noted that governments often see Europe as a financial resource, simulating improvements in areas like rule of law and media freedom while failing to implement the European Commission’s recommendations. However, Ivana Nikolić contended that while disinformation can never be entirely eradicated, it must be countered through state action, NGOs, or a combination of both. “Disinformation will always exist because there will always be actors responding to misinformation for various reasons. However, this does not mean we should give up the fight against it,” she asserted.

Nikolić emphasized the importance of improving media literacy among the public and enhancing overall education. “We can debate the best ways to achieve this goal and discuss who should take on this role—the state, the NGO sector, or both—but recognizing the importance of media literacy is key in the fight against misinformation,” she concluded.

9. Conclusion

Disinformation is a global phenomenon that permeates our daily lives. It refers to false or misleading information that affects public opinion and influences citizens’ decisions. The spread of disinformation is often intentional and linked to political or ideological goals, leading to negative feelings such as confusion, fear, and panic. Furthermore, it results in reduced trust in public institutions and the media. Therefore, it is imperative for countries to combat disinformation and protect their citizens from exposure.

This is especially significant for Western Balkan (WB) countries striving for EU membership, as public opinion on EU integration can significantly influence this process. Informed individuals make informed decisions, yet the citizens of Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia are increasingly exposed to disinformation regarding the EU and face challenges in ensuring and safeguarding media freedom, ultimately hindering the accession process. The integration of WB countries into the EU has been a long journey, and progress has been significantly slowed by various factors, including media influence. Notably, the three countries selected for this study are ranked among the most vulnerable to disinformation.

A wide range of actors disseminate disinformation, which is further propagated by both traditional and online media. Domestic actors include politicians and political parties, especially during pre-election periods, followed by journalists. Conversely, several foreign countries and their supporters continuously share anti-Western and anti-EU narratives, including disinformation, such as China, Russia, Turkey, and the USA. All these stakeholders contribute to the ongoing issue of false information and mislead the citizens of the aforementioned countries.

In the fight against disinformation, persistent challenges hinder efforts to overcome this problem. These challenges include political ownership of private media, which influences the content published, as well as government pressure and censorship that affect citizens and may provoke threats or verbal and physical attacks on journalists and media crews. Additionally, a lack of financial independence further complicates the situation. While

there are existing efforts to combat disinformation—such as relevant laws, policies, and various forms of self-regulation initiated by journalists' associations—the lack of effective regulation remains a significant problem. Insufficient media literacy and the inability to recognize disinformation further increase citizens' vulnerability.

Although some progress has been made in the battle against disinformation in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, it is evident that further efforts are required. This conclusion is particularly relevant regarding disinformation about EU integration, as citizens in all three countries remain hopeful for EU membership. Thus, it opens the door to the idea of regional cooperation aimed at jointly addressing this issue.

10. Policy Recommendations

Foster a Supportive Environment for Journalists: Governments should create conditions that empower journalists and media professionals to act as public watchdogs, ensuring accountability among decision-makers. Political and economic entities must refrain from exerting undue influence over the media, while public officials should actively promote media pluralism.

Support Independent Media Financially: Establish funding mechanisms or grants specifically for independent media outlets to enhance their financial independence. This support will reduce their reliance on political parties and discourage the publication of politically motivated disinformation.

Enhance Fact-Checking Initiatives: Invest in independent fact-checking organizations by providing resources and support to effectively address false information. Encourage collaboration between media outlets and fact-checking organizations to ensure accurate reporting and public awareness.

Prioritize Media Freedom in EU Accession Talks: The EU should emphasize media freedom during accession discussions, recognizing that attacks on journalists and the media undermine democratic values. Additionally, EU institutions must strengthen collaboration with civil society organizations, media, and journalists' associations, acknowledging their role as reliable watchdogs and key partners in the reform process.

Regional and International Cooperation: Establish common standards and frameworks to combat disinformation by sharing best practices and coordinating efforts to identify and counter disinformation campaigns. Harmonizing regulations can create a more cohesive approach across borders.

Implement Regulations Inspired by the Digital Services Act (DSA): Develop and implement regulations inspired by the DSA, particularly at a regional level, to help Western Balkan states align their national legislatures with EU standards. The DSA promotes responsible practices for digital platforms concerning content moderation, advertising, algorithmic processes, and risk management, especially in preventing the spread of disinformation during elections.

Align National Legislatures with the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA): Strive to align national laws with the EMFA, which introduces regulations addressing public service media, media ownership, and state interference. The EMFA sets clear standards, promotes transparency, supports local and regional media, and establishes rapid response mechanisms for journalist safety.

Strengthen National Media Regulations: Enhance the implementation of existing national

regulations and secure the independence of national media regulators to ensure effective oversight.

Promote Media Literacy Initiatives: Increase public awareness and capacity to identify disinformation through media literacy initiatives supported by public institutions. Educating citizens will empower them to protect themselves from misleading information.

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ANNEX 1: Respondents in the interview on disinformation in the media on EU integration

Albania:

Tirana Centre for Journalistic Excellence

The Tirana Centre for Journalistic Excellence (TCJE) focuses on providing coverage that strengthens democracy and rule of law in Albania. It also aims to assist in improving media freedoms, highlighting excellence in journalism and strengthening the role of media in Albanian society. TCJE came together in 2012 in response to the fact that despite the slew of nominally independent media outlets, there is often lack of quality reporting on sensitive subjects due to the media often bowing down to political and economic pressure, resorting to biased reporting.

MCN TV (Media Expert)

MCN is a national television network that has established itself as a leading source of news, entertainment, and cultural programming. As a national television network, MCN has an extensive reach through a combination of cable, satellite, and digital distribution, MCN strives to make its content accessible to a wide range of audiences. MCN's programming lineup is diverse and caters to the interests and preferences of its diverse viewership. The network covers a broad range of genres, including news, sports, documentaries, reality shows, dramas, comedies, and lifestyle programs.

Albanian Media Institute

The Albanian Media Institute (AMI) was established by the end of 1995, thanks to the grant provided by DANIDA and the assistance of the Danish School of Journalism. After more than a decade AMI has been consolidated, constituting at present one of the main actors of civil society in Albania and one of most important journalistic training institutions in the Balkan region. AMI is substantially engaged in media policy issues in Albania, such as the improvement of media legislation, Code of Ethics, various issues related to freedom of expression, access to information etc. In addition, the Institute has organized several research works, the most important one being "Monitoring Albanian Media Landscape".

North Macedonia:

Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia

The Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) is a non-governmental, non-political and non-profit organization. It is a body of self-regulation of the media through the application of moral sanctions on those who do not observe the professional standards and the Code of Journalists. It bases its work on the principles of transparency and accountability and it freely promotes its views and opinions, takes initiatives and participates in building and upgrading of professional standards and ethics and their protection and promotion in the media in the country.

Association of Journalists of Macedonia

The Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) is an independent national, civil society

organization that aims to defend freedom of expression and to advance professional standards in the media. It has supported journalists in crisis, especially those that have been physically or verbally attacked and also provided legal support in particular to those facing defamation suits. It continues to play a key role in advocating for journalists' safety and media reform domestically and regionally.

Macedonian Institute for Media

The Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM) is a non-governmental, non-political and non-profit organization founded by the Danish School of Journalism, USAID/IREX Pro Media and the Macedonian Press Centre in 2001. It has gradually grown into a massive media platform in North Macedonia, encompassing into its professional network the bulk of the media outlets in the country. It enables free and easy access to media literature, up-to-date resources for professional development and education, media research and analyses, as well as opportunities for joint production.

Serbia:

Independent Journalists Association of Serbia, Tamara Filipović Stevanović (General Secretary)

Independent Journalists Association of Serbia (NUNS) is a professional organization with around 3300 members. Founded in 1994, NUNS has as its main objectives the promotion of free and pluralist media in Serbia; the advancement of professional and ethical standards; the protection of the rights and interests of media professionals as well as the promotion of cooperation among journalists and journalistic organizations in the country and abroad.

Balkan Free Media Initiative, Antoinette Nikolova, journalist and founder of the Balkan Free Media Initiative

Founded in 2021, the Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI) is a Brussels-based independent organization founded to address the gap in advocacy and accountability on media freedom issues in Southeastern Europe. Its goal is to strengthen and safeguard free and independent media to advance democratic values in the region. BFMI monitors and analyses often overlooked structural issues around media ownership, regulation and funding in the Balkan region and brings greater international attention to these issues and their consequences for peace and democracy in the Balkans.

Youth Initiative for Human Rights (Serbia), Ivana Nikolić, Research Coordinator

Youth Initiative for Human Rights (YIHR) is a regional network established in 2003, operating through independent local organizations in 5 countries – Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia. From its inception, YIHR has based its activities on principles of regional co-operation and establishing/maintaining connections between young people in the region. The basic values of the YIHR are truth, justice, accountability, equality, freedom, democracy and peace.

ANNEX 2: Questionnaire on disinformation in the media on EU integration for journalists associations' representatives

What is your perception of the current media landscape? How prevalent is the spread of disinformation and what impact does it have on public discourse?

Considering the significant role media outlets play in shaping public opinion, what is your stance on the manner EU integration is being reported on? Do you find that reporting on that topic is lacking?

Is there a difference between the manner of reporting on EU integration in traditional and online media? If so, is that difference influenced by the stricter regulation of traditional media rather than online media or are other factors influencing it?

Why do you believe disinformation on EU integration is spread in the first place? Which actors benefit from this phenomenon?

Who spreads disinformation - national or international actors? Which foreign actors are supporting the spread of disinformation in your opinion?

How do you assess the effectiveness of existing regulatory frameworks in addressing disinformation in traditional and online media? Is there room for improvement?

If national regulatory mechanisms fail to tackle the issue of disinformation, do you believe anything can be done on a regional or even on an international level?

