REPORT
ON COUNTERING DISINFORMATION IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE

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SUMMARY

Disinformation and fake news are having a bigger impact than ever before, as it is easier for anyone to post and share any news or information online. Social media and online platforms play an important role in speeding up the spread of disinformation and they enable a global reach without much effort from the author.

The ubiquitous spread of disinformation and associated phenomenon bring about and multiply real-world consequences such as distrust in institutions and expert knowledge, rising polarization in society, hate speech and crime in the extreme cases. Thus, tackling disinformation requires an interdisciplinary approach and the involvement of a wide platform of actors.

One of the approaches in dealing with the disinformation is regulation by law. However, while some regulation is necessary, media literacy i.e. education seems to be the best all-round solution to disinformation with fewer drawback and more possibilities to tailor it to different situations. More generally, any regulation of imposing restriction on freedom of expression, whatever the objective it seeks to achieve, necessarily raises a series of legal questions. Thus, media literacy, i.e. the development of critical and digital competences, is crucial to strengthening the resilience of societies to disinformation and spread of hate speech.

On the issue on fake news on European Union level, we should note: the Action Plan to step up efforts to counter disinformation and the Code of Conduct on Online Disinformation, which puts forward a wide range of media industry voluntary commitments to fight online disinformation. This Code was initiated following the Commission Communication on self-regulatory tools to tackle the spread and impact of online disinformation, in which it is suggested that media and information literacy is the answer to various accumulated problems and shortcomings in media policies and media practices in both individual EU Member states and in Europe as a whole. Some individual EU Member States have already put in place legal measures against hate speech and disinformation, while others are exploring the possibility of implementing legal solutions to the problem of fake news.

The Western Balkans and more broadly South-Eastern Europe have no legal solution to the problem of fake news, as such.

However, regional initiatives have been put forward recently to implement comprehensive policies and institutional framework for developing media and information literacy in a systematic way. In most cases, the responsibility for making citizens media literate is assigned to the education system, civil society and media regulators and often the momentum for introducing this content in the education system or for implementing research projects comes from international institutions and donors.
INTRODUCTION
Disinformation consists of verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm¹. This phenomenon is having a bigger impact than ever before as it is easier for anyone to post and share any news or information online. Social media and online platforms play an important role in speeding up the spread of fake news and they enable a global reach without much effort from the author.

A study conducted at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology found that false information and rumours spread “significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth”, and that it takes truth six times as long to reach 1,500 people as false content does.

EUROPEAN UNION APPROACH ON TACKLING DISINFORMATION
As a comprehensive policy response to disinformation, EU media policy reflects the specific roles of different actors (social platforms, news media and users), and define their responsibilities according to a number of guiding principles. These include the freedom of expression, media pluralism, and the rights of citizens to diverse and reliable information.

The European Union has outlined an Action Plan to step up efforts to counter disinformation in Europe and beyond focusing on four key areas. This plan serves to build EU’s capabilities and strengthen cooperation between EU member states by improving detection, having a coordinated response to threats, collaboration with online platforms and industry as well as raising awareness and empowering citizens². The Action Plan complements the Communication "Tackling online disinformation: an European approach"³, that puts forward self-regulatory tools to tackle the spread and impact of online disinformation in Europe, and ensure the protection of European values and democratic systems.

Four principles that guide the action are⁴:

- Improve transparency regarding the way information is produced or sponsored;
- Diversity of information;
- Credibility of information;
- Inclusive solutions with broad stakeholder involvement.

First, to improve transparency regarding the origin of information and the way it is produced, sponsored, disseminated and targeted in order to enable citizens to assess the content they access online and to reveal possible attempts to manipulate opinion;

Second, to promote diversity of information, in order to enable citizens to make informed decisions based on critical thinking, through support to high quality journalism, media literacy, and the rebalancing of the relation between information creators and distributors.

Third, to foster credibility of information by providing an indication of its trustworthiness, notably with the help of trusted flaggers, and by improving traceability of information and authentication of influential information providers.

Fourth, to fashion inclusive solutions. Effective long-term solutions require awareness-raising, more media literacy, broad stakeholder involvement and the cooperation of public authorities, online platforms, advertisers, trusted flaggers, journalists and media groups.

In addition to taking action within EU Member states and Union-wide, the Commission in its Action Plan against Disinformation stated significant interest in working with partners in three priority regions – the Union’s Eastern and Southern Neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans. Exposing disinformation in these three priority regions is complementary to tackling the problem within the Union. In that respect, the European External Action Service has set up specific strategic communication task forces consisting of experts with relevant language and knowledge skills, to address the issue and develop response strategies. They are working closely with Commission services to ensure a coordinated and consistent communication approach in the above mentioned regions. As regards the Western Balkans, the Commission is providing financial support for the setting up of a network of journalistic associations, the building of trust in media, and the reinforcing of judiciary systems to defend freedom of expression. In this area, the Commission also supports public service media, new independent media outlets, and the improvement of quality and professionalism in journalism.

Furthermore, many of the current documents of European institutions and organisations suggested media and information literacy as the answer to various accumulated problems and shortcomings in media policies and media practices in both individual EU Member states and in Europe as a whole, for example media literacy as measure to fight fake news and disinformation on the Internet. The report of the high-level group of experts (“the HLEG”) set up by European Commission “A Multi-dimensional Approach to Disinformation” promotes “media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment”. At the same time, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted Recommendation to Member States on Media Pluralism and

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Transparency\(^8\), which includes a list of measures in the field of media literacy and education to be taken by EU Member states in order to put in place media pluralism and transparency.

The Commission has announced it will step up the activities related to media literacy promotion and fostering (implementing projects such as Media Literacy for All, Safer Internet 4 EU or organizing the European Media Literacy Week), by including media literacy in the new Audiovisual Media Services Directive with an increased monitoring of actions undertaken by the EU Member States on media literacy, as well as by sharing the best practices and educating teachers (for instance, through Erasmus+, Training and Education 2020 and other, similar projects)\(^9\).

The European documents and policies in this area leave it up to EU Member states to develop their own effective models of media literacy. In some EU Member States, an important role in this field is being played by the public media; in others, this is the domain of independent regulators; while most EU Member States have included this content in the formal education of pupils and students.

Apart from EU actions, the individual EU Member States are also exploring the possibility of legal solutions to the problem of fake news. So far, only Germany has managed to adopt a law (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz– NetzDG) that that compels large social networks and video-sharing platforms (with over two million users) to remove any “obviously illegal content”, including fake news and hate speech within 24 hours. In line with the said law, internet intermediaries and social networks can be fined up to EUR 50 million if they fail to remove the illegal content or repeatedly violate the law\(^10\). France, on the other hand, has announced a law that will regulate the issue of disinformation during election campaigns. In January 2018, Italy’s government launched a police-run website where people could report possible fake news. In November 2017, the Italian communications and electronic media regulatory authority (AGCOM) launched an initiative encouraging self-regulation on online platforms as a method of fighting fake news online\(^11\).

**SOUTH-EAST EUROPE AND THE ISSUE OF DISINFORMATION**

According to Regional Media Monitoring analysis in four SEECP participants, conducted by CRTA\(^12\) “a considerable percentage of news published lack clear sources and citations and...
feature biased reporting, which are typical characteristics for disinformation and fake news.\(^\text{13}\)

However, no one of the SEECp participants has legal solution to the problem of fake news. It has to be noted that the international bodies are warning about the risks associated with the introduction of rules, which may restrict freedom of expression\(^\text{14}\). According to International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) “education before regulation, no silver bullet but still the best shot”\(^\text{15}\). Thus, education i.e. media and information literacy (MIL), is said to be the best way to protect against fake news, considering that trying to regulate what happens on the internet is very difficult and may pose restriction to freedom of expression\(^\text{16}\).

One way of tackling the issue of disinformation in South-East Europe is through regional network of media centers and institutes\(^\text{17}\). Through this network dozens of regional actions have been carried out – from training and exchange of journalists, editors and media managers, the promotion of media ethics and self-regulation, mapping media ownership and its impact on media pluralism and independence, to empowering journalists and activists for fact-checking and countering disinformation\(^\text{18}\).

As for the media and information literacy (MIL), it is noticeable that there is no SEECp participants in the region with comprehensive policies and institutional framework for developing MIL in a systematic way and at scale. MIL as a vital tool to address the spread of fake news in the region is rather left on the margins as a toy for civil society, enthusiasts in the public sector, and international organisations\(^\text{19}\). In most cases, the responsibility for making citizens media literate is assigned to the education system, civil society and media regulators, and the active involvement of the media themselves in this process is rare. Thus, none of the SEECp participants has a systematic long-term policy in this field, and often the momentum for introducing this content in the education system or for implementing research projects comes from international institutions and donors\(^\text{20}\).

The most important actions and initiatives promoting and developing MIL, mapped by The South East European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM)\(^\text{21}\) are:


\(^{17}\) The South East European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM), http://seenpm.org/

\(^{18}\) Branka Petrović and Sandra Bašić Hrvatin, Media and Information Literacy in the Western Balkans: Unrealized Emancipatory Potential Regional overview, 2019, http://media.ba/sites/default/files/media_and_information_literacy_in_the_western_balkans_unrealized_emancipatory_potential.pdf (accessed on 10.4.2019)

\(^{19}\) Ibid

\(^{20}\) Ibid

\(^{21}\) Ibid
**Athens:** Regarding the media and information literacy (MIL) initiatives, Athens would like to draw attention on a significant regional initiative: Athens has the leading role of the newly established UNESCO GAPMIL European Sub-Chapter Mediterranean Group, aiming at boosting policy-making and action on media literacy in South Eastern Europe. The National Centre for Audiovisual Media and Communication (EKOME S.A.) published a White Paper on Media and Information Literacy. The White Paper aims at contributing to a national strategic plan that would promote, inter alia, activities on media and information literacy and awareness raising campaigns against disinformation. The code of conduct for online content in Greek media aims at ensuring fair competition, professional ethos and at combating hate speech in the field of journalism, The Hellenic Public broadcaster (ERT S.A.) has set up a pilot fact-checking group, which operates (a) as a single service across all ERT units in order to map and combat digital media disinformation and propaganda networks and (b) as a potential meeting point of independent fact-checkers and recognised bodies in applied research on misinformation, disinformation, propaganda and dissemination of fake news. The pilot group has set as a top priority the development of media professionals’ digital skills, the promotion of investigative journalism and the monitoring of developments in the field of news content production through the encouragement of studies and research with the use of new technologies. To this end, the Ministry of Digital Policy, Telecommunications and Media puts special emphasis on cooperating with media professionals, the civil society and academia by initiating various seminars and trainings related to enhancing journalistic capacities on combatting online disinformation. In the context of the European Action Plan Against Disinformation, adopted in December 2018 in Brussels, Athens is part of the Rapid Alert System, which was established to combat disinformation in a joined-up manner, ahead of the European elections and beyond. Athens also salutes the Code of Conduct on Online Disinformation which was initiated following the European Commission Communication on self-regulatory tools to tackle the spread and impact of online disinformation and puts forward a wide range of media industry voluntary commitments to fight online disinformation.

**Belgrade:** Creative Drive project - with seminars for teachers and librarians, summer camps, festival organized by the Novi Sad School of Journalism; School of Media Literacy for high school and university students organized by the Margin Centre; introducing Language, Media and Culture as an elective subject in grammar schools (starting from school year 2018/2019); activities of the Ministry of Culture and Media in the coordination of main stakeholders aimed at adopting a strategic approach and legal arrangements based on good practices in MIL promotion; EU Delegation programme supporting media reforms, including support to the Ministry of Culture and Media in drafting The Guidelines for development and enhancement of media literacy in pre-university education as well as support for planning MIL promotion and support to public service media in producing media content for youth.

**Podgorica:** Activities of the regulator - Agency for Electronic Media (campaign and survey); activities of the National Library in study development, teacher training and translation of a MIL publication; follow-up activities by the National Library (drafting national MIL strategy

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and teacher and librarian workshops); introducing Media Literacy as an elective subject in formal education; teacher training for Media Literacy as an elective subject.

**Sarajevo**: Project “Strengthening media literacy in Republika Srpska”, organised by the RS Ministry of Transport and Communications; drafting of MIL strategy by the Ministry of Civil Affairs of B-H; Project “Building Trust in the Media in SEE Countries and Turkey”, led by the Institute for Social Research; Raskrinkavanje - website for fact-checking and critical analysis of media content; activities of the regulator - the Communications Regulatory Agency (studies, debates, campaigns, guidelines).

**Skopje**: Media literacy network linking close to 40 stakeholders, under the auspices of the regulator - Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services; Makedox – travelling cinema, local youth film clubs, documentary film handbooks and workshops for teachers and students; Vistinomer - fact-checking website; Medium, supplement in "Nova Makedonija" daily produced by high school students; Medium website; media camp and media labs in schools; campaign “Dr. Dragan - expert manipulator”, organised by the Macedonian Media Institute, with video and audio clips on how to identify media manipulations, propaganda and disinformation. The aim of the project, which will be implemented with financial assistance from the European Union, is to improve effectiveness, responsibility and ethics of civil society and journalists in using the right of freedom of opinion and expression through promotion of news and digital literacy.

**Tirana**: MIP elements in school curriculum; activities of the regulator-Agency for Audiovisual Media (public debates, work with universities); MIL research, debates and advocacy actions by the Albanian Media Institute; Safer Internet initiative; Faktoje - fact-checking website.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The rapid technological development and the rise of social media that came as a result, among others, of weakening confidence in institutions and media, and being a faster way of obtaining information today, opened space for new beneficial developments but also for harmful influence, both domestic and foreign, on political processes in the SEE Region. Data clearly show that SEE region is susceptible to the negative effects of fake news in their societies. This is due to a number of reasons, lack of coordinated approach and absence of adopted national policies regarding disinformation and fake news, including educational activities in schools and cooperation with various NGO’s and media representatives on this matter.

Regional cooperation is one of the prerequisites of full European cooperation and thus SEE region must look for sustainable and long-term solutions regarding tackling disinformation, without disturbing media freedom and imposing media over-regulation. The dissemination of false information or fake news represents a global problem, but except for general guidelines, it is left to be dealt with on individual level. Governments and parliaments in the SEE region, through the SEECP platform can exchange experiences and best practices with wider community that already works in this field, on how to deal with this rising concern issue that will prevent fake news from interfering in domestic politics, economy and other societal processes.
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12. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), https://www.ifla.org/node/29021

13. The South East European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM), http://seenpm.org/

