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## Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe

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In April 2023, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation published a comprehensive 261 page study called *Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe* in Sofia, Bulgaria. The editors are Dr. Christopher Nehring, a visiting lecturer at the Media Programme of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation for Southeast Europe (KAS SEE) at the University of Sofia, and Hendrik Sittig, director of KAS SEE. The content of the study consists of a preface, an introduction, and 10 chapters that are divided according to the principle of case studies, i.e., 10 countries in Southeast Europe: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H), Bulgaria, Croatia, Germany, Kosovo, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia. Brief biographies of 14 authors can be found on the book's final page.

This study is designed to present the current situation in the 10 countries included in KAS SEE. The study provides answers to the following questions: what forms of disinformation campaigns are present in the mentioned countries?; how do they spread?; what role do domestic and foreign actors play? What countermeasures are being taken with the aim of detecting and suppressing disinformations? By finding answers to the above mentioned problems, this study encourages and directs the development of the resilience of the most vulnerable national elements, i.e., society, media, and politics, to contemporary dangers, threats, and challenges arising from the information and communication domain.

In the preface, Hendrik Sittig refers to the very concept of disinformation and its influence on the countries of Southeast Europe. The drastic spread and new dimensions of disinformation and fake news were mainly influenced by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and the Russian aggression on Ukraine in 2022. Russia uses disinformation as a permanent tool for destabilization, polarization, and consequent destruction of Western democratic society, which relies on pluralism as a key value of social processes. Freedom of speech and expression of one's views is a fundamental postulate of the development and maintenance of democratic communities and the functioning

of their political and social actors. The accuracy, truthfulness, and credibility of the objective information that political and social actors have at their disposal is the foundation of healthy, rational, and successful democratic articulation and the healthy development of society and the country. In this respect, Southeast Europe is a focal point (*disinformation hot spot*) and extremely sensitive to disinformation campaigns, and this is significantly contributed by the lack of funding of the mainstream media, the lack of media competence and knowledge, and a general lack of trust among journalists, which creates a favorable environment for successful dissemination of disinformation. Ethnic conflicts (example of Kosovo) and/or political instability in fragile countries (example of B&H) additionally contribute to the spread of disinformation.

In the introductory part, Dr. Christopher Nehring looks at the importance of understanding the concept of disinformation and its harmful consequences for a democratic society. Despite the contextual differences in disinformation, the actors, patterns, and goals remain the same, namely the deepening of social, political, ethnic, racial, and economic conflicts, the polarization of societies,

alliances, and partnerships, and the destruction of the foundations of democracy and democratic institutions in the country. Through lies and manipulation, the concept of truth and trust is distorted, and „the foundation of liberal democracy is eroded, as is our ability to evaluate facts on their merits and to correct ourselves accordingly." In essence, Nehring considers disinformation campaigns to be a targeted attack on liberal epistemology. an order or political system that places objective truth at the fundamental source of authority. An effective fight against disinformation implies an initial understanding and a precise terminological definition of disinformation. In this way, a clear system of recognition and detection of disinformation and adequate responses and countermeasures is created. Although the definition of disinformation presented by the European Commission in 2018 provides a good or incomplete explanation, this study presents a new, supplemented definition of disinformation, which reads: **„false, inaccurate, decontextualized, and misleading information covertly and deliberatly designed, presented, promoted, and spread to manipulate and exert political, financial or other influence."**

In the introductory part, Nehring points out 11 countermeasures to disinformation, which were partly created as a legacy and experience from the analog era but partly as a product of the digital age:

1) an institutional approach that implies the creation of state agencies that would be in charge of combating disinformation;

2) ensuring the law that would enable security intelligence services and investigative bodies to implement repressive measures against sources of disinformation;

3) exposure of disinformation through fact-checking;

4) censorship;

5) use of computer software for detection and automatic deletion of disinformation content;

6) strengthening of the media themselves against disinformation through quality and credible news;

7) high-quality media, journalist education, journalistic ethics, and media freedom

8) media literacy;

9) strengthening of the formal media system;

10) measures to build trust in public institutions and the media; and

11) developing and spreading one's own narratives.

Well, despite all the countermeasures, Nehring concludes that the key problem in the process of finally suppressing disinformation is the difficult-to-realize possibility of 100% certainty in discovering the author and/or origin of disinformation. Also, the adoption of legal frameworks that would attempt to suppress disinformation and fake news through criminal legal means can be a double-edged sword, i.e., the possibility of state structures abusing their powers for their own purposes in terms of curtailing freedom of speech and media freedom. This would give the state authorities the right to ultimately decide what is true and what is not, which would surely violate all the fundamental principles of democracy. Despite this, there are certain positive and efficient examples, such as the establishment of the *Registry of Professional Online Media* issued by the Council for Media Ethics of North Macedonia. The register contains a list of credible media whose information the public can rely on.

In the chapter entitled *Disinformation in Southeastern Europe: The Case of Albania*, Rrapo Zguri gives an insight into the concept of disinformation with an emphasis on Albania, starting from the period of the totalitarian communist regime in

Albania, when disinformation was used for the purpose of demonizing liberal democracy and emphasizing the superiority of the dictates of communism. Word disinformation began to be used in the Albanian language shortly after the fall of communism, i.e., it is clearly differentiated from other definitions such as misinformation or malicious information taken out of context (*malinformation*) shortly after the publication of the Council of Europe publication entitled: *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*. As the key problems of Albania, Zguri emphasizes the extremely low level of media literacy of the Albanian population, the negligible level of transparency, the lack of media professionalism, poor trust in the media, and the frequent verbal clashes of the Albanian political elites with the media. Zguri recognizes three types of disinformation in Albania:

1) domestic political disinformation;
2) crisis disinformation (e.g., in the context of COVID-19); and
3) disinformation coming from third parties, i.e., *clickbait* disinformation.

In the chapter titled *Disinformation, Propaganda, and Fake News in B&H*, Lejla Turčilo specifies three key concepts: 1) disinformation as information that is false and maliciously created to harm a person, group, organization, or country; 2) misinformation as information that is guilty, whether it was not created maliciously; and 3) misinformation as information that is based on actual facts or is manipulatively decontextualized in order to blame one person, organization, or country. Turčilo points out how the administration's disinformation related to COVID-19 had tragic consequences for the citizens of B&H. In addition, numerous fake news stories drastically affected the disruption of the public health system. For example, in April 2020, the UNICEF B&H office issued a warning to the media in B&H to stop the spread of disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, Turčilo believes that the majority of disinformation in B&H is created by domestic political actors to serve a specific agenda. The ethnic division of B&H, the war past, and numerous unresolved social, political, economic, and other issues represent suitable ground for the dissemination of various forms of disinformation. The Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022 triggered an avalanche of disinformation in B&H, predominantly pro-Russian disinformation coming from the

media located in Republika Srpska.

As for Bulgaria, in the chapter entitled *Disinformation, Propaganda, and Fake News in Bulgaria*, Ruslan Stefanov, Boryana Velcheva, and Goran Georgiev emphasize how the administration of Bulgaria, even though it is a member of the EU and NATO, is extremely vulnerable to the malignant influence of Russia. The communist heritage, the incomplete process of transition, the transition to a market economy through the construction of a partnership capitalist system, and insufficient political distance from Russia are factors that essentially influence the successful creation, development, and spread of disinformation. The insufficient development of civil society and democracy is clearly reflected in public opinion. Thus, in 2020, for the purpose of scientific research, a survey was conducted in Bulgaria, which indicated that only 35% of the population supports liberal-democratic forms of government, while 45% prefer a "firm hand," i.e., an autocratic model of government. Numerous media in Bulgaria are dominantly oriented towards Russia, but the burning problem is the strong financial and interest ties of numerous Russian companies with media houses in Bulgaria. The key targets of Russian disinformation campaigns are:

1) Russian aggression in Ukraine;
2) COVID-19;
3) the global energy crisis,
4) the implementation of the Green Deal; and
5) diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and North Macedonia.

In the chapter *Disinformation, Propaganda, and Fake News in Croatia*, Gordan Akrap points out how the disinformation and propaganda has been a security challenge for Croatia since 1990 and the breakup of Yugoslavia. The Serbian political structures tried to undermine the inevitable democratic processes and discredit Croatia on the international political stage by means of disinformation and various forms of propaganda, connecting them with the legacy of the totalitarian Independent State of Croatia from World War II. When we talk about the perception of the media in Croatia, Akrap detects two key problems based on statistical data:

1) lack of public trust in the media; and
2) the dominant opinion of the majority that the media is under the control of politics and is politicized and polarized.

Akrap points out that disinformation is the biggest security challenge for societies, as is their ability to recognize and confirm the malicious effects of disinformation and influence operations. All of the above directly affects the lack of trust in the media, the deprofessionalization of journalism, and the rise of sensationalism, which consequently leads to a decline in the quality of media and media discourse in Croatia. Akrap detects targeted areas of disinformation activity in Croatia:

1) national sovereignty, independence, and ethnic conflicts;

2) Russian aggression in Ukraine

3) COVID-19, and

4) anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives.

When talking about examples of disinformations in Croatia, Akrap cites two recent examples:

1. the Russian attempt to prevent Croatia's energy independence by placing disinformation about the construction of an LNG terminal on the island of Krk; and

2. the attempt to destabilize and take over Agrokor (a leading Croatian concern) through dubious financial investments that would lead to uncontrolled bankruptcy.

In the chapter *Disinformation, Propaganda, and Fake News in Germany*, Patrick Gensing also talks about the influence of Russian disinformation in Germany and points out that there is no unified definition of disinformation in Germany. Moreover, it often happens that disinformation is misinterpreted as hate speech. Since the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian aggression in Ukraine in 2022, Germany has been facing a serious problem of Russian disinformation and propaganda. Although the situation in Germany regarding the professionalism of the media is more stable compared to the countries of Southeast Europe, there is a serious threat from populist parties that Russia uses in political debates as a means of causing division in society, deepening the crisis, and undermining trust in the country, the EU, and NATO alliance. Taking into account the complex geopolitical situation in Europe and Germany's position in international relations and spheres of interest, Gensing detects "sensitive" areas suitable for the creation and spread of disinformation, such as the war in Syria, the migrant crisis of 2015, terrorist attacks, Russian aggression on Ukraine, the election in the United States of America (USA) in 2016,

COVID-19, and climate changes.

Dren Gërguri also deals with the topic of disinformation, and in the chapter *Kosovo: Frequent Disinformation and a Fertile Ground for Manipulators*, he provides an insight into the complex situation in Kosovo. Gërguri points out that disinformation and propaganda are part of the lives of people in Kosovo. In addition to inciting internal political divisions, distorting the historical role of the NATO alliance in the late 1990s, and deepening interethnic tensions on the part of Serbia and Russia, the COVID-19 pandemic significantly triggered the spread of disinformation in Kosovo. The concept of fake news is extremely widespread in Kosovo and is often equated with the concept of disinformation, but it began to be popularized in Kosovo society in 2016, during the presidential elections in the USA, when Donald Trump often used the word fake news. During 2020 and 2021 (elections in Kosovo and the COVID-19 pandemic), this concept will spread even more in society, as indicated by Google Trends data. Inadequate development of civil society, a poor education system, a large percentage of the uneducated population, an underdeveloped economy, and a low economic standard are triggers for the successful spread of disinformation in Kosovo.

Elena Marzac writes about disinformation in Moldova in the chapter *Disinformation in Moldova*. Marzac emphasizes how Moldova is facing a series of disinformation and propaganda attacks that represent an enormous security challenge for its national security. Since 2014 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, Russian national TV stations such as Russia's Perviy Kanal and Channel One have penetrated the Moldovan information space with their content via national Moldovan TV stations. Using the leverage of power in the media, Russia is placing disinformation aimed at discrediting and eliminating all opponents of Russian domination in Moldova and the region in general. The main narratives and areas of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Moldova are:

1) Transnistria as the focus of a new war;
2) political ties between Moldova and Romania and ethnic conflicts between Romania and Russia;
3) NATO as a synonym for war;
4) anti-LGBT propaganda; and
5) „Russia is good, the EU is evil".

The example of North Macedonia is similar to Moldova, but Marina Tuneva writes about it in the chapter *North Macedonia: Disinformation—the Enemy of Democracy and Societal Cohesion*. North Macedonia is a deeply divided country in ethnic, political, and social terms. Extremely low media literacy, a lack of trust in the government and the media (according to recent research, only 49% of the population trusts the media), a low rate of education and insufficient investment in education, economic underdevelopment, corruption, etc. are factors that enable the capillary spread of disinformation. As with the example of previous countries, Tuneva points out how the COVID-19 pandemic was the main object of disinformation. Under strong Russian influence, an anti-NATO and anti-EU narrative has been spreading in North Macedonia for years. The military supremacy of Russia in the context of the aggression in Ukraine and the future changes on the international stage that will lead to the collapse of the EU and NATO and the rise of Russia as a regional and global factor of peace and security are emphasized.

In the chapter *Disinformation in Romania*, Ciprian Cucu emphasizes how the COVID-19 pandemic was the subject of numerous disinformation and conspiracy theories that spread rapidly in Romania. As in the example of Kosovo, fake news is to a large extent equated with disinformation, and the main contributor to this was the ruling political option, which used the word to discredit the opposition. Populist and sovereigntist parties in Romania that advocate anti-globalist and anti-EU narratives, highlighting Romania as a "colony of the West" that needs to be freed, contribute significantly to the spread of disinformation in Romania. A malicious narrative about Ukraine as an enemy of Romania and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy as a supporter of neo-Marxism and the instigator of war is spreading strongly. In addition, there is a strong attempt to discredit the anti-corruption activities that led to numerous arrests of high-ranking officials in Romania during the term of office of the chief prosecutor of the Romanian National Anti-Corruption Administration, Laura Codruța Kövesi (2013–2018). At the same time, numerous claims are spreading that the two arrests were politically motivated and served the purpose of undermining the Romanian economy and the judiciary, but for the purpose of foreign interests.

Stefan Janjić writes about the situation in Serbia in the chapter *Disinformation in Serbia*. Janjić points out that Serbia is extremely fertile ground for the creation, development, and spread of disinformation. The COVID-19 pandemic, the narrative about Ukraine as the initiator of the war, the irrational favoritism of Vladimir Putin, the appropriation of Kosovo as part of Serbia, and the anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives are strongly expressed in Serbia. Numerous right-wing radical and populist parties in Serbia spread hate speech, polarize society, and destroy the education system in Serbia. Additional incentives for the spread of disinformation in Serbia are a high level of corruption, strongly expressed ethnic hatred, unresolved social issues, low economic standards, and a high crime rate. At the same time, the quality of the media in Serbia is extremely low, and a lot of sensationalist content is produced. The fact-checking system in Serbia simply cannot function due to the amount of content that is published and the fact that the media, in quantitative terms (about 2,500 media outlets registered in Serbia), are disproportionate to the number of inhabitants. Based on the analysis of the fact-checking portal Raskrinkavanje, Serbian tabloids produced at least 945 fake news stories in 2019. Portal Informer is the leader in terms of the number of lies produced, with a total of 317, followed by portals Alo with 259, Srpski Telegraf with 227, and Kurir with 142 lies. During the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the Večernje Novosti tabloid published 1,200 fake news stories. As for TV stations, commercial TV stations like TV Happy and TV Pink are leaders in spreading fake news, propaganda, and pseudo-scientific theories. The mentioned TV stations are extremely pro-Russian and participate in spreading disinformation and fake news about Ukraine. According to recent public opinion polls, Serbia is the leading country in the Western Balkans in terms of support for Russia. About 67% of the population considers Russia's actions justified. Precisely for this reason, Serbia needs radical socio-political changes that, along with the system of fact-checking, will lead to an improvement in the situation. Also, strengthening the visual system and introducing media literacy as a subject must be imperatives for future positive changes.

This holistic study provides numerous insights into key terminological issues, integrates individual knowledge, and brings together relevant experts.

Considering the importance of information in the modern age and the detection of dangers and threats arising from its misuse, this study provides the necessary knowledge and objective data that are key to taking the necessary measures to detect and combat disinformation, fake news, and propaganda.