CYBER SECURITY, CORPORATE SECURITY AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE (C3I)

TOWARD COMMUNITY RESILIENCE AGAINST DISINFORMATION & PROPAGANDA WITH A FOCUS ON GENDER MAINSTREAMING AND FORMS OF HYBRID-BASED THREATS VIA CYBERSPACE

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Abbreviations

ACR - Automated recognition technologies

AI - Artificial Intelligence

ATC - Advanced Training Course

CT – Counterterrorism

ISIS - Islamic State, a terrorist organization

COVID-19- Coronavirus disease

CERT – Civil Emergency Response Team

EU – European Union

ICT Information and communication technologies

 MIL – Media and Information Literacy

MIOA - Minister of Information Society and administration

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Association

PR – Public Relations

P/CVE - Prevent / countering violent extremism

SEO search engine optimization

UNESCO - The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

USAID - U.S. Agency for International Development

WB – Western Balkans

Executive summary

Toward community resilience against disinformation, propaganda with a focus on gender mainstreaming and forms of hybrid-based threats via cyberspace is a product of NATO Public Policy Division supported project aimed at enhancing national efforts to build resilient communities against disinformation. The study is a result of a combination of desk research and analysis, interviews and questioners with local community experts, individuals from the relevant community stakeholders including local authorities, media and civil society organizations whose focus is on countering disinformation and tackling gender mainstreaming challenges.

The ongoing digital convergence between cyber and physical space brought both opportunities and challenges. Both state and non-state actors have learned how to exploit vulnerabilities that the ongoing digitalization generates and turn them into threat vectors that serve their purposes. Today, authoritarian regimes master disinformation campaigns in undermining democracy and human rights. False content has potentially damaging impacts on core human rights and even the functioning of democracy. Disinformation can serve to confuse or manipulate citizens, create distrust in international norms, institutions, or democratically agreed strategies, disrupt elections, challenge gender mainstreaming policies, or fuel disbelief in key challenges such as climate change. Moreover, the information crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and the effects of disinformation from the Macedonian referendum 2019,

through and elections to the US Capitol building on 6 January 2021 have laid bare the destabilizing effects of disinformation and propaganda on democratic societies.

The ongoing digitalization has concurred Allied community space faster than NATO leaders can imagine. While Macedonian communities embrace positive aspects of the ongoing transformation the level of media and information literacy-MIL is scary. More disturbing, however, is that there is no systematic national approach to tackle the issue. In the renewed and increased geopolitical competition, this may be a serious liability for NATO.

The digital ecosystem is highly complex and with that, it is extremely difficult to precisely identify threat channels. Nevertheless, for analytical purposes, we have systemized four drivers that provide opportunities for malign state and non-state actors to exploit modern technologies and spread disinformation and propaganda across Macedonian communities. We believe that malign actors exploit a) The Impact of the ongoing digitalization on the traditional family structures, b) Data void, c) High level of politicization of media to cover corruption and d) The ongoing geostrategic competition and are therefore threat to Macedonian communities. While classical and conventional defense wisdom may object to these views our approach echoes NATO's Warfighting Capstone Concept: anticipating the changing character of war. The assumption that drove the research was that the national security threat straddles the boundaries of a multitude of underlying factors except for the military threats and use of force. Political economic, social, cultural, scientific, and industrial factors drive the way nations and alliances think about war, prepare for war and fight.

ICT and social media to a certain degree wiped out traditional family capital at the community level. Families and with that local community across the country used to enhance activities such as searching for information, shaping perceptions, incorporating values and pricing traditions while advancing knowledge. Parents usually lagging in web-based skills are not the traditional opinion-makers for youth or source for an answer. Instead, youth is

alone in exploring the user-generated environment. The problem with this, however, is that online participation and content creation require a more extensive skill set than mere consumptive internet uses. Hence, disinformation campaigns can hamper popular opinion and with that affect leaders to bring bold decisions that drive positive change and inclusion in the society.

Another growing problem that fuels the susceptibility of Macedonian communities to disinformation and propaganda is the information or data void. The challenge to Macedonian communities in this context is twofold. First, it is a technical and to a certain degree profit-driven issue that has later been exploited by malign actors. Second, the problem comes from the decline or evaporation of the relevance of local news from the community information chamber. Media manipulators use data void to spread hate, racism, fake news and incitement to violence. While abusing data void is usually focused on abusing short-term disinformation in creating chaos other approaches may involve strategic creation of new terms to divert discourse and search traffic alike into areas full of disinformation.

Today it is well accepted that within the Western Balkans, organized crime undermines state institutions, erodes democratic values, and poses a safety and security risk to states and societies. The EU disengagement from the region and consequential trade of stability for democracy left some leaders with no incentive to abide by the rule of law.

Community resistance and resilience to disinformation among others are essential in the ongoing geostrategic competition. NATO's peer competitors have learned that abusing the civil sector and among others, by manipulating information can compensate for their military inferiority. Therefore, using hybrid methods that blend the conventional and unconventional actions through multiple instruments of power (information, diplomacy economy) and domains (mainly cyberspace and with that social media) NATO's peer competitors pose serious threats to Alliance national security.

NATO's peer competitors have proven their agility in exploiting the democratic weaknesses and infecting communities with mistrust and fear by manipulating information. This may include but is not limited to influencing electoral processes, promoting authoritarian and populist agendas, foment polarization and promoting discrimination and hatred against marginalized communities, undermining human rights defenders and human rights processes, or discrediting science. NATO recognizes that disinformation from both state and non-state actors attempts to divide Allies, undermine trust in democratic institutions and present authoritarian regimes as better at dealing with the health crisis. It also presents a risk to the public by undermining vital public health messages.

Fortunately, the hybrid attempts to manipulate the public space – digital space via social media platforms and ICT have turned worldwide and relevant Macedonian stakeholders' attention. However, amid these efforts, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which gender-based discrimination also intersects with disinformation and consequently violent extremism in the online world—and why addressing it head-on is not only a priority for securing women's rights but also a key foreign policy and national security imperative.

One of the best ways to mitigate negative effects from disinformation that undermine trust in national leaders, challenge democracy and gender mainstreaming is to build resilience. Community resilience complements NATO's warfighting vision for layered resilience. A series of raising awareness campaigns, and capacity building to the relevant community stakeholders, local media and citizens will enhance community resilience against disinformation through cyberspace.

Methodology

The Baseline research and analysis is a result of combined descriptive and comparative desc analysis, interviews and questioners and evaluation gained throughout the series of activities envisioned under the project strategy and scope of work. The main assumption – hypothesis in the research was that state and non-state malign actors abuse information and communication technologies and social media to launch disinformation and propaganda against Macedonian communities to achieve strategic ends. Therefore, one of the main goals of the project was to identify and map the vulnerabilities and risks faced by communities to highlight the factors that can enable these communities to withstand the emerging trend of disinformation and propaganda with the focus on gender mainstreaming and hybrid threats via cyberspace while strengthening key stakeholders' capacities.

The target audience group of the project activities and the baseline research were local authorities, local media, Academia and late but not least local CSOs.

Limitations. The findings presented in the project is based on the work (analysis, evaluation, interviews questioners and discussion on three communities -subject of the project – usually addressed as targeted communities. Although we recognize that other stakeholders play an important role in the overall community resilience against disinformation and propaganda the project findings and recommendations are limited only to the audience engaged in the project activities.

Furthermore, while disinformation occur across different layers and fields of everyday life of the communities we have paid particular attention to gender mainstreaming and hybrid threats.

Introduction

The contemporary security environment for NATO and its Partners is complex, fluid and uncertain. Modern security threats blend between what is generally accepted as a peacetime situation and relations and waging of war. Consequently, the boundaries between political and military, strategic and tactical, kinetic and non-kinetic activities are blurring as well. Among others, for example, both state and non-state actors exploit emerging vulnerabilities from the ongoing convergence between cyber and physical space to achieve strategic ends. Weaponizing the information malign actors try to erode democratic values and processes by eroding populace trust in the leadership, polarizing political differences and amplifying stigmatization while inflicting internal tensions based on manipulation. NATO leadership understood that these developments are becoming the increasingly feasible operational reality of warfare and have therefore accordingly started to craft the future NATO strategy.

Echoing the NATO warfighting capstone concept and the framework of the new strategic concept, Cyber security Corporate Security and Crisis management initiative partnered with local authorities, local media academia and local CSOs and launched a project to enhance community resilience against disinformation with a particular focus on the gender mainstreaming and hybrid threats coming from the cyberspace. Building particularly on the vision and identified necessity of the layered resilience, the C3I led consortium launched a series of activities toward instigating community resilience at the community level. Given that gender mainstreaming and hybrid threats are among the immediate priorities the project activities tackled disinformation including these contextual issues.

This study represents a product of baseline analysis and research, interviews and questioners gathered during the project activities, including summaries of statements lectures issued by the distinguished speakers involved in the project activities (kick-off Workshop and two-day building capacities training. This study has five chapters and policy recommendations.

The first chapter seeks to understand the concept of disinformation and propaganda in general and its effects on Macedonian communities. We explore how disinformation functions in different sectors (from economy through social effects and national security) and link these findings to the community level. Then, we offer definitions that in the best and comprehensive way explain the essence of disinformation. The widespread attention of the issue has led some to misinterpret disinformation and confuse it with misinformation, or just label it as fake news. Nevertheless, some suggested that using terms misinformation and disinformation rather than fake news is more accurate. During our research and analysis we accepted the suggestion made by Wardle and Derakhshan and therefore, defined dimensions of harm and falseness, as: Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant; Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm; Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.

In the second chapter, we offer an analysis of how disinformation campaigns affect Macedonian communities. The chapter opens with the statistical analysis of general usage of the internet and social media. Then we compare this to the level of media and information literacy and conclude that the discrepancy is scary. Meaning that malign actors have wide opportunities and availability to launch disinformation and challenge. we have systemized four drivers that provide opportunities for malign state and non-state actors to exploit modern technologies and spread disinformation and propaganda across Macedonian communities. These are: The Impact of the ongoing

digitalization on the traditional family structures; Data void; High level of politicization of media to cover corruption and The ongoing geostrategic competition. All of them are explained and addressed accordingly.

Employing disinformation propaganda as a political tool in a malign hybrid campaign against democracy and human rights against Macedonian communities is elaborated in the third chapter of the study. Cyberspace and modern technologies allow not just to influence the content, but to choose how to distribute information and promote them on social media. The intention to harm or profit that characterizes disinformation itself entails that disinformation is commonly accompanied by strategies and techniques to maximize its influence. Social media has "become a battlefield where information itself is weaponized". The anonymity that ICT offer allows one to do whatever he/she/they want and be whoever he/she/they want. NATO's peer competitors have proven their agility in exploiting the democratic weaknesses and infecting communities with mistrust and fear by manipulating information.

Malign actors are keen to promote a variety of malicious agents with the intention to cause harm. Disinformation against Macedonian communities may include but is not limited to influencing electoral processes, promoting authoritarian and populist agendas, foment polarization and promoting discrimination and hatred against marginalized communities, undermining human rights defenders and human rights processes, or discrediting science. In practice, Macedonian communities experience a high volume of disinformation that hamper ethnic tolerance and inclusion while fueling division; affecting the government's ability to improve international relations (particularly with Bulgaria, and the EU more broadly). The reasons for the success of disinformation are multifold. Chiefly, the reasons straddle the boundaries of low level of MIL among the Macedonian communities; highly politicized communities; unprofessional and highly politicized media; corrupt political elites and the prolonged EU fatigue.

The low level of MIL is the key that provides a guarantee for the success of the disinformation campaign. For example, a recent study showed that almost 65 % of Macedonian citizens involved in the study believe that COVID-19 is purposefully being spread by airplanes. On top of this the high level of corruption, distrust in the media, and high politicization of the civil sector in the past 30 plus years have all fed the disinformation-ready environment at the Macedonian community level.

However, amid these efforts, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which gender-based discrimination also intersects with disinformation and consequently violent extremism in the online world—and why addressing it head-on is not only a priority for securing women's rights but also a key foreign policy and national security imperative.

In the fourth chapter, we examined how disinformation affect gender mainstreaming, and hybrid threats. The chapter summarizes NATO efforts in the field. NATO Allais agreed upon are resilient civilian infrastructure and services to operate effectively in peace, crisis, or conflict. Resilience is also key to pushing back on potential adversaries who use a broad range of military, political and economic tools to try to weaken our societies. In an attempt to hamper civil support disturb the democratic inclusions and erode unity malign actors have spurred disinformation to hamper gender policy building and efforts to overcome some of the structural challenges that have been identified across the NATO alliance.

In the last chapter, we explain why building community resilience to disinformation and propaganda and tackling gender mainstreaming and hybrid-based threats streaming from cyberspace is important for Macedonian society. Insights derived via several studies have only made the effects of alternative approaches to achieving sustainable levels of communities' resilience more apparent. Raising awareness through rendering education and training initiatives as the desirable means of facilitating the different layers of society is the first step in enabling the community to grasp and apply the

critical impact of informed observation, to online content. To better absorb the negative impacts from the malign attacks regardless of the threat vector Macedonian communities need to learn how to identify and mobilize local resources and assets to generate absorptive and adaptive capacities against disinformation and propaganda via cyberspace.   Finally, Macedonian communities need to develop sustainable capacities that will drive transformative interventions that will sustain further malign engagement.

Metodi Hadji-Janev

I.

Understanding the concept and impact of disinformation propaganda

The early days of the internet were marked by great libertarian hope. Initially, it looked that ultraliberal thoughts were not unreachable. The believes were that the internet will echo libertarians' desire to maximize autonomy and political freedom, emphasizing free association, freedom of choice, individualism and voluntary association.[1] Unfortunately, as one independent consultant observed technology can improve or undermine democracy depending on how it is used and who controls it.[2]

The use of modern information and communication technologies-ICT for different malicious purposes proved that these technologies can amplify the threat vectors as well. In the digital age unprecedented amounts of information spread with greater velocity and at a higher volume. However, not all of this information is true, a result of research or professional journalism and with good intent. Given that internet still allows a certain amount of anonymity and building on interconnectivity and interdependence the content may be shaped by anyone and from everywhere.

Following the pure capitalistic - profit-driven logic in information sharing digital platforms unintentionally empowered clickbait content to prevail

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[1] Woodcock George (2004) [1962], Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements. Peterborough: Broadview Press. p. 16. ISBN 9781551116297. Woodcock argued that [F]or the very nature of the libertarian attitude—its rejection of dogma, its deliberate avoidance of rigidly systematic theory, and, above all, its stress on extreme freedom of choice and on the primacy of the individual judgment

[2] Interview with Kevin Gross, an independent technology consultant, in Anderson Janna and Rainie Lee (February 2020), Many Tech Say Digital Disruption will hurt democracy,
Pew Research Center, see in Ch. 3 , p.37

against editorial decisions with engagement.[3] Under this framework of observation, from the demand side, it is crucial to recognize that much disinformation runs on the exploitation of data voids or data deficits. [4] As a result, headlines that, instead of summarising the topic of the article, provide a teasing and often emotionally manipulative preview designed to pique the reader's curiosity and encourage them to read something they might otherwise skip. Common examples use phrases like "You won't believe what happened next", "This simple trick…",[5] or "Top 10 most unbelievable facts (Number 9 will shock you)".[6] The articles themselves are often low-effort material with little original content: the aim is merely to attract the click. However, so-called 'respectable' news outlets, such as the BBC, have also adopted 'clickbait'-style headlines in an effort to attract younger readers who are used to less traditional news sources.[7] With this, the assumption that the information has the same journalist professionalism and ethic behind vanished.

Besides, economic – a supply and demand logic, the modern technologies and cyberspace have influenced social and emotional aspects of our everyday lives through information's content shaping. It is well known that cyberspace and modern technologies generate an environment that stimulates end-users content creation. In this line, social networks, along with the internet architecture have altered our personal experience to information, influence and with that perception of different problems and matters. As the convergence of digital and physical worlds is ongoing and faster than ever, abuse of cyberspace and the ICT through social media have become a dangerous source that produces emotional effects. Today, the psychological

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[3] Kornbluh Karen and Goodman P. Ellen, (March 2020), "Safeguarding Digital Democracy", Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative Roadmap, The German Marshall Fund of the United States DIDI Roadmap n. 4
[4] Golebiewski Michael & Boyd Danah, (October 29, 2019), Data Voids, report available at: Data & Society — Data Voids (datasociety.net)
[5] See the blog Ashuta, (Jan 5, 2017), "You won't believe how these 9 shocking clickbaits work! (number 8 is a killer!)", credts Ashuta, available at: https://medium.com/zerone-magazine/you-wont-believe-how-these-9-shocking-clickbaits-work-number-8-is-a-killer-4cb2ceded8b6
[6] See for example: Musafir blog at: https://in.musafir.com/Blog/11-surprising-facts-about-japan
[7] Moore Matthew, (January 15, 2018), "BBC online criticised for "'pathetic" clickbait'", The Times, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/bbc-online-criticised-for-pathetic-clickbait-9cfdxgf73

effects of disinformation and propaganda are well documented.[8] In fact, the exposure to constant consumption of information by itself generates stress. Continual alerts from news sources, blogs and social media, and alternative facts feel like missile explosions in a siege without end.[9] With all the positive aspects social media platforms have proved to be fertile ground for inflammatory disinformation that has an emotional, social, economic and political impact on society.

Parallel to this, both state and non-state actors have been very active in abusing modern technologies and cyberspace for political purposes. Since the early days, Al Qaeda activities and later ISIS and its affiliates exploited the power of remotely influencing the content of the information and affect Western public opinion while accomplishing political goals. Authoritarian regimes soon have also jumped in and have mastered disinformation campaigns in undermining democracy and human rights. False content has potentially damaging impacts on core human rights and even the functioning of democracy.

Recognizing the negative effects that disinformation can have in the digital era many have tried to define disinformation for studying and addressing purposes.

1.1. Defining disinformation and propaganda

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines disinformation as false information deliberately and often covertly spread (as by the planting of rumors) in order to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.[10] Similarly, the Oxford online dictionary defines disinformation as "false information

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[8] American Psychological Association, (February 15, 2017), "Many Americans Stressed about Future of Our Nation, New APA Stress in America, Survey Reveals", available at:
https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2017/02/stressed-nation
[9] Stosny Steven, (February 6, 2017), "He once called it 'election stress disorder.' Now the therapist says we're suffering from this", The Washington Post, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2017/02/06/suffering-from-headline-stress-disorder-since-trumps-win-youre-definitely-not-alone/
[10]The Merriam Webster dictionary, Disinformation, accessed, December 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinformation

which is intended to mislead, especially propaganda issued by a government organization to a rival power or the media".[11]Experts in using the term in a political context defined disinformation as a subset of propaganda.[12] Hence, disinformation is usually defined as false information that is deliberately disseminated to deceive.[13]

Some sources link the term with the Russian origin as translated from the Russian *disinformatsiya*, began to see use in the 1950s.[14] Other sources argue that the term *disinformation* began to see wider use as a form of Soviet tradecraft defined in the 1952 official Great Soviet Encyclopedia as "the dissemination (in the press, radio, etc.) of false information with the intention to deceive public opinion."[15] On the other hand, some argued that the term did not appear in English dictionaries until 1939.[16] According to Shirley Biagi use increased in 1986, after revelations that the Reagan Administration engaged in disinformation against Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi.[17] Soon, however, the term referred generally to lying and propaganda.[18]

In an attempt to provide a better definition and understanding of disinformation Camille François, Graphika's Chief Innovation Officer established a framework for describing and analyzing disinformation through influence operations.[19]   The framework explained as ABC disinformation provided in this work offers the three vectors of analysis. These are:

[11] English Oxford Living Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, Disinformation, retrieved December 10, 2021, https://www.lexico.com/definition/disinformation

[12] Pacepa Mihai Ion and Rychlak J. Ronald (2013), "Disinformation: Former Spy Chief Reveals Secret Strategies for Undermining Freedom, Attacking Religion, and Promoting Terrorism", WND Books, pp. 4–6

[13] Bittman Ladislav (1985), "The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View", Pergamon-Brassey's, pp. 49–50

[14] English Oxford Living Dictionaries, Oxford University Press, retrieved December 10, 2021, https://www.lexico.com/definition/disinformation

[15] Taylor Adam, (26 November 2016), "Before 'fake news,' there was Soviet 'disinformation'", The Washington Post, accessed at: Before 'fake news,' there was Soviet 'disinformation' - The Washington Post

[16] Bittman Ladislav (1985), "The KGB and Soviet Disinformation: An Insider's View", Pergamon-Brassey's, pp. 49–50

[17] Biagi Shirley, (2014), "Disinformation", Media/Impact: An Introduction to Mass Media, Cengage Learning, p. 328

[18] Cunningham B. Stanley (2002), "Disinformation (Russian: dezinformatsiya)", The Idea of Propaganda: A Reconstruction, Praeger, pp. 67–68, 110,

[19] François Camille, (September 20, 2019), "Actors, Behaviors, Content: A Disinformation ABC Highlighting Three Vectors of Viral Deception to Guide Industry & Regulatory Responses", Transatlantic Working Group, available at: Francois Addendum to Testimony - ABC_Framework_2019_Sept_2019.pdf (house.gov)

- Manipulative Actors with clear intention to disrupt democratic processes or the information ecosystem;

- Deceptive Behaviours, as tactics and techniques used by manipulative Actors;

- Harmful Content pushed to hurt and/or undermine individuals, organizations, or public interest and influence the public debate.

Hamm has amplified Grafika's study and created the following categories related to the intentions behind disinformation campaigns:

Foreign influence – the use of disinformation by foreign actors to disrupt societies over certain issues and/or to push an agenda (foreign actor/s to a domestic audience).

Political – the use of disinformation to undermine adversaries and/or push an agenda (domestic actor/s to a domestic audience)

Lucrative – the use of disinformation to make a profit

Issue-based – the use of disinformation to serve an ideological, normative and/or financial goal.[20]

The widespread attention of the issue has led some to misinterpret disinformation and confuse it with misinformation,[21] or just label it as fake news.[22] Nevertheless, some suggested that using terms misinformation and disinformation rather than fake news is more accurate.[23] "Fake news" is inadequate to capture the complex problem of disinformation. It is also misleading because it has been appropriated by people who use the term to dismiss coverage that they find disagreeable.[24]

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[20] Hamm Lauren, (May 11, 2020), "The Few Faces of Disinformation", EU DisInfoLab, available at: 20200512_The-Few-Faces-of-Disinformation.pdf

[21] Ireton, Cherilyn & Posetti Julie (2018), "Journalism, fake news & disinformation: Handbook for journalism education and training", UNESCO, available at https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552

[22] Molina D. Maria, Sundar S. Shyam, Le Thai, and Lee Dongwon, "Fake News" Is Not Simply False Information: A Concept Explication and Taxonomy of Online Content", American Behavioral Scientist 2021, Vol. 65(2) 180–212, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0002764219878224

[23] Staats Beth, (February 11, 2021), Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation: What's the difference?, available at: https://minitex.umn.edu/news/elibrary-minnesota/2021-02/misinformation-disinformation-malinformation-whats-difference

[24] Ibid

In October 2018, the British government decided that the term "fake news" will no longer be used in official documents because it is "a poorly-defined and misleading term that conflates a variety of false information, from genuine error through to foreign interference in democratic processes." This followed a recommendation by the House of Commons' Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee to avoid the term. [25] Some studies suggest that "it is woefully inadequate to describe the complex phenomena of information pollution".[26] According to these views, "The term has also begun to be appropriated by politicians around the world to describe news organisations whose coverage they find disagreeable. In this way, it's becoming a mechanism by which the powerful can clamp down upon, restrict, undermine and circumvent the free press.[27]

A RAND Initiative to Restore the Role of Facts and Analysis in Public Life, offered an alternative approach and called for countering truth decay.[28] Truth Decay is characterized by four trends:

- increasing disagreement about facts
- a blurring of the line between opinion and fact
- the increasing relative volume and the resulting influence of opinion over fact
- declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts

We believe that it is important to make a distinction between three different types: mis-, dis- and mal-information. In this line we accept the suggestion made by Wardle and Derakhshan and the dimensions of harm and falseness, we describe the differences between these three types of information:

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[25] Murphy Margi, (October 23, 2018), "Government bans phrase 'fake news'", available at:
https://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/2018/10/22/government-bans-phrase-fake-news/
[26] Wardle Claire & Derakhshan Hossein, supported by: Burns Anne & Dias Nic, (2017), "Information Disorder:
Toward an Interdisciplinary Framework for Research and Policy making", Council of Europe, p. 5
[27] Ibid
[28] Rich D. Michael, (2018), Countering Truth Decay, RAND, available at :
https://www.rand.org/research/projects/truth-decay.html

Mis-information is when false information is shared, but no harm is meant.

Dis-information is when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm.

Mal-information is when genuine information is shared to cause harm, often by moving information designed to stay private into the public sphere.[29]

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[29] Ibid

Metodi Hadji-Janev

II.

Macedonian communities and disinformation

Modern Information and communication technologies – ICT and social media applications have entered the everyday life of Macedonian communities. The Data portal's information (compiled from different credible sources and lastly updated January 2020) indicates that the Republic of North Macedonia has 58.7% urbanization, 82% of the populace uses the internet. There are 57.6% active social media users, and a fantastic 2.10 million cell phones, which is about 100.6% of the population.[30] According to the same sources that the number of social media users in North Macedonia has increased by 55 000 (+5.3%) between April 2019 and January 2020. From January 2020 to January 2021, however, this number has increased by 9.1% or around 100 000 users. Interestingly the population decreased by 0.2%. The use of the Internet has increased as well for 1.2% or, 21 000 users. The total number of internet users is estimated at around 1.71 million which represents 82% of the total populace. Interestingly 97.2 % of the users accessed the internet via cell (mobile) phone.

Even though the age group was not specified our research indicates that youth between 14-30 years is the most dominant actors in Macedonian cyberspace using social media via different ICT. For example, according to the former Minister of Information Society and administration-MIOA, while "in Europe, over 70% of children and young people had at least one social media account in 2019, during the same period almost 75% of the population in

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[30] Data from DataReportal, (February 18, 2020), "Digital 2020: North Macedonia", by Simon Kemp, available at: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-north-macedonia

North Macedonia aged 15-19, had a profile on social networks.[31] The majority of those who use social media access to their accounts from smartphones.[32]

While consulted evidence indicates an increase of use of modern-day information technologies and social media by the Macedonian populace in general and with that by communities the level of media and information literacy-MIL is scary.[33] On the other hand, different studies indicate different levels of MIL levels of Macedonian citizens. Regardless of the approach and validity of these studies, one thing is clear, the MIL across the country is extremely low. Furthermore, which is more problematic there is no systematic national approach to tackle the issue. All efforts are from abroad, project-based and sporadic which might produce a further issue in response. For example, different interest groups might adopt a different approach which will impose a greater burden for a government official in an attempt to strategically and systematically address the issue. Namely, different agents involved in the process with highly positive intentions would likely attempt to further their agenda (for resources, social recognition, legitimacy, etc.). This may inhibit a proper response or canalize the approach to the challenge and narrow the response options.

In an era where ICT and social media remain a channel that has attracted widespread attention to different actors including actors that seek to maximize their political agenda, MIL is an essential element in building community resilience against disinformation and propaganda. However, before we explain why community resilience is a way to go for Macedonian authority as NATO members, we will first dig deep into the drivers that attract malign state and

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[31] Ministry of Internatl Affairs, (October 16, 2019), "Spasovski, Mancevski and Ademi, part of the event Traveling Classroom" (Origininal: "Спасовски, Манчевски и Адеми дел од настанот „Патувачка училница": Само со хоризонтален пристап ќе се зајакнат капацитетите и свесноста за сајбер безбедност од најмала возраст"), available at: https://mvr.gov.mk/vest/10216?fbclid=IwAR3OghzMlJB9-s90iHlS2bvWqqUlRTf1m-wNV7jffD_Ni7m6WxPvYh3-z8Y

[32] Data from DataReportal, (February 18, 2020), "Digital 2020: North Macedonia", by Simon Kemp, available at: https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2020-north-macedonia

[33] Hadji-Janev Metodi, Bogdanoski Mitko, Bogatinov Dimitar, (2021), "Toward safe and secure youth online: Embracing the concept of media and information literacy", Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, available at: https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ui=2&ik=c07c278e87&attid=0.1&permmsgid=msg-f:1666045972759486493&th=171efbfc31cca01d&view=att&disp=safe&realattid=171efbe39589411fa281

non-state actors to exploit disinformation at the community level. Then we will explain how gender mainstream has lately become a subject in the disinformation and propaganda campaigns as a part of the wider hybrid campaigns against NATO allies and how disinformation undermines democracy and human rights. Although the digital ecosystem is highly complex and with that it is extremely difficult to precisely identify threat channels for analytical purposes, we have systemized four drivers that provide opportunities for malign state and non-state actors to exploit modern technologies and spread disinformation and propaganda across Macedonian communities. These are:

- The Impact of the ongoing digitalization on the traditional family structures

- Data void

- High level of politicization of media to cover corruption and

- The ongoing geostrategic competition

2.1. The Impact of the ongoing digitalization on the traditional family as an opportunity for disinformation and propaganda against Macedonian communities

While ICT and social media applications have opened new opportunities for Macedonian communities, they have also reshaped some of the traditional constructs of communications and with that, the values and traditions developed accordingly. The cyber construct that has emerged from horizontal (rather than vertical family-based) relations and equal opportunities in the virtual world did not reflect the traditional- physical relations and postures practiced by Macedonian communities. It produced new socio-demographic traits emanating from the specific purpose for which the ICT and social applications were created. Among others, searching for information and obtaining knowledge about specific topics have changed. One example is that the local libraries except in Shtip have lost their importance.

ICT and social media to a certain degree wiped out traditional family capital at the community level. Families and with that local community across the country used to enhance activities such as searching for information, shaping perceptions, incorporating values and pricing traditions while advancing knowledge.[34] Parents usually lagging in web-based skills are not the traditional opinion-makers for youth or source for an answer.[35] Instead, youth is alone in exploring the user-generated environment. The problem with this, however, is that online participation and content creation require a more extensive skill set than mere consumptive internet uses.[36]

Social networking in general reflects the idea of the internet, which is communication in a user-friendly environment. This, nevertheless, unintentionally blends social networking with user-generated content. Many applications, such as Facebook, Flickr, Blogger, or YouTube are built on these premises. While surfing requires only consumption, online communication and content creation require political knowledge and participation.[37] This elevates the challenge to a whole new level giving that the youth is not just collecting information alone but participating in a highly influential complex environment.

Numerous independent studies conclude that young people tend to be more adaptive to new technologies and that this ability complies with young people's needs. Youth (age 16-30 years old) has an increased need to engage with significant others. Using novel approaches allows young people to implement/replicate offline activities.[38] through new media which is connected

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[34] Hargittai Eszter & Walejko Gina, (2008), "The participation divide: Content creation and sharing in the digital age", Information, Communication & Society, pp. 239–256, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13691180801946150

[35] Hoffmann, C.P., Lutz, C. & Meckel, M. (2015), "Content creation on the Internet: a social cognitive perspective on the participation divide", Information, Communication & Society, Vol. 18, No. 6, pp. 696–716, available at: https://www.alexandria.unisg.ch/238646/

[36] Hargittai Eszter & Walejko Gina, (2008),

[37] Östman Johan (2012), "Information, expression, participation: How involvement in user-generated content relates to democratic engagement among young people", New Media & Society, Vol. 14, No. 6, pp.1004–1021, available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444812438212

[38] Please see Annex-1 working definitions

with the increased use of social media communication channels.[39] Others have observed that the use of the internet, and social networks, in particular, stems from their usual and adjoining social circles outside their families - their friends and peers. [40] Hence, the high level of integration of these technologies into youth's daily life is an online extension of their offline life. Instant messaging, virtual networking on social media applications, the ability to instantly share content via web camera and remotely to engage in real-time interaction with significant others, just as it happens with traditional face-to-face interaction drive youth to migrate to social media and online communication. Social media platforms thus compensate for the genuine need for socialization in real life.[41]

The social media applications and the internet's magnetism for youth also come from anonymity and easy access that overcome some of the social barriers in real life. Anonymity is especially a handful of marginalized groups. These groups for various reasons are isolated from social and cultural interactions outside their circles. Easy access on top of it offers almost unlimited choices. For example, expanding horizons in terms of where to be and where to go. Furthermore, the analysts who emphasize the positive aspects of connectivity build on the argument that traditional conceptions of the digital divide in terms of access may no longer be viable because youth is able to connect and participate in online social communities.[42]

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[39] McKerlich, R., Ives, C. & McGreal, R. (2013), The Effect of Social Network Sites on Adolescents' Social and Academic Development: Current Theories and Controversies, International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, Vol. 14, No. 4, pp. 90–103

[40] Sánchez-Navarro, J. & Aranda, D. (2012), "Messenger and social network sites as tools for sociability, leisure and informal learning for Spanish young people", European Journal of Communication, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp.67–75, available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0267323111432411

[41] McKerlich, Ives & McGreal, (2013)

[42] Ahn June, (2011), "Digital Divides and Social Network Sites: Which Students Participate in Social Media?", Journal of Educational Computing Research, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp.147–163, available at: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.2190/EC.45.2.b

2.2. Data void as an opportunity for malign actors to disinform Macedonian communities

Another growing problem that fuels the susceptibility of Macedonian communities to disinformation and propaganda is the information or data void. The challenge to Macedonian communities in this context is twofold. First, it is a technical and to a certain degree profit-driven issue that has later been exploited by malign actors. Second, the problem comes from the decline or evaporation of the relevance of local news from the community information chamber.

Recent studies that try to address the issue of data void have looked into the engineering of content creation and search engines. One of the in-depth studies that explain how this process can be exploited and manipulated for spreading disinformation is Data Voids, by data and society.[43] The study explains how media manipulators use them in order to spread hate, racism, fake news and incitement to violence. Golebiewski and boyd, argue that missing data can easily be exploited because there are many search terms for which the available relevant data is limited, nonexistent, or deeply problematic. They also assert that recommender systems struggle when there is little available data to recommend. They coined these low-quality data situations "data voids"[44] The challenge with data voids, consequently, is that this can lead searchers to "the low quality or low authority content because that's the only content available".[45]

According to some other views invisible moments of vulnerability are known as data voids: when there are high levels of demand for information on a topic, but low levels of credible supply.[46] Building on the previous work in the field Tommy Shane explains how a low level of MIL leads people to rely only on

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[43] Golebiewski Michael & Boyd Danah, (October 29, 2019)
[44] Ibid p. 5
[45] Ibid, p.5
[46] Shane Tommy, (August 10, 2021), People are using Facebook and Instagram as search engines. During a pandemic, that's dangerous, NeimanLab, availaboe at: https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/08/people-are-using-facebook-and-instagram-as-search-engines-during-a-pandemic-thats-dangerous/

the channelized source of information such as Facebook and other social media for credible data. [47] This is why using social media as a search engine might be dangerous. Available data offered at the beginning of this chapter lead one to conclude that a combination of low-level MIL of Macedonian social media users is a dangerous set-up for manipulation and exposer to disinformation.

Another problem with this is that media manipulators have learned to capitalize on missing data, the logic of search engines, and the practices of searchers to help drive attention to a range of problematic content. Moreover, besides corporate interest and the ability to manipulate the search engines and exploit "data void" due to the structure of search engines, malign actors have used the void for their purposes. An excellent review in this line of how Hispanic voters were targeted by disinformation for political purposes represents the MIT review study done by Tate Ryan-Mosley.[48] The article argued that because Hispanic communities were key to some of the most critical swing districts in the 2020 election in the U.S. they have been bombarded by online propaganda.

While abusing data void is usually focused on abusing short term disinformation in creating chaos other approaches may involve strategic creation of new terms to divert discourse and search traffic alike into areas full of disinformation. This technique's focus on specific terms not only preys on the infrastructures of hashtags and keywords that exist on social media, but it echoes a longstanding political PR strategy for reshaping public debate. When combined with a breaking news situation, this type of data void can be especially damaging.[49]

Manipulation that builds on data void practices is also utilized to affect the process of search engine optimization (SEO). SEO is a process that is used by content makers to prepare their content for uptake on search engines. The initial manipulation of the system, nonetheless, came from the corporates that

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[47] Ibid
[48] Ryan-Mosley Tate, (October 2020),
[49] Golebiewski Michael & Boyd Danah, (October 29, 2019), p.23

wanted greater visibility. Although Google as a search engine has changed the SEO models to avoid potential manipulation market engineers adapted to the new design and exploit room for manipulation for market purposes.

Today, the challenge with SEO at a global level has significant effects and community level. In fact, Macedonian communities proved to be fertile ground for higher local actors to manipulate the system.[50] The problem here as Golebiewski and boyd asserted is that "SEO does not require an attacker to hack into a search engine and alter the code; it simply requires an attacker to alter the information landscape that the search engine depends on.[51] The abuse of data void and SEO in politics has been elaborated by Ari Schneider.[52] In her article on "How Trolls Are Weaponizing "Data Voids" Online", she amplified early work and research on data void and explained how media manipulators use empty spaces to orchestrate highly evolved disinformation campaigns. Unlike other forms of fake news and propaganda that were ideologically invested in national policy issues such as Brexit in the UK, or an illiberal agenda to disrupt national democratic systems, such as Russian government intervention in the US elections, the Macedonian case was reported to be driven by a naive, if misguided, youthful entrepreneurship.[53] The Veles case is a clear example of how disinformation can affect communities and immerse local actors in global issues.

Another great concern that comes with the data void stems from the decline or evaporation of the relevance of local news from the community information chamber. Losing the market competition, local community media in North Macedonia are losing against national-led or electronic media. The importance of local media as truth presenters has already been addressed and

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[50] Subramanian Samanth, (2017), "Inside the Macedonian Fake-News Complex." Wired, 15 November, available at: https://www.wired.com/2017/02/veles-macedonia-fake-news/

[51] Golebiewski Michael & Boyd Danah, (October 29, 2019)

[52] Schneider Ari, (2020), "How Trolls Are Weaponizing "Data Voids" Online", SLATE, available at: https://slate.com/technology/2020/11/data-voids-election-misinformation.html

[53] Ong C. Jonathan & Cabañes, V.A. Jason, (2018), "Architects of Networked Disinformation: Behind the Scenes of Troll Accounts and Fake News Production in the Philippines", available at: https://scholarworks.umass.edu/communication_faculty_pubs/74/

recognized across the world. A growing body of research has found that government is worse off when local news suffers. In fact, inadequate local news has been linked to more corruption, less competitive elections, weaker municipal finances and a prevalence of party-line politicians who don't bring benefits back to their districts.[54] A study on how local media can impact political polarization at the community level proved the importance of local media in filling the media void and capacities to manipulate the content and eventually disinform. [55]

While in advanced liberal democracies local media have developed sources and know-how of surviving in the market competition, Macedonian media are highly linked and dependent on national or local government money.[56] This inhibits the power of ensuring that corruption, less competitive elections, weaker municipal finances and a prevalence of party-line politicians who don't bring benefits back to their districts to be reported. Moreover, this turns local media into an easy target to be channelized in potential manipulative efforts and instead to counter to disseminate disinformation. [57]

2.3. High level of politicization of media to cover corruption

Much has been written about organized crime and corruption and its effect on the free media in the Western Balkans and with that in North Macedonia. To a certain degree discussing organized crime and corruption has become a stereotype leading one to believe that these problems are endemic for the region. Many reports, case studies and efforts, attest that organized

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[54] Darr Joshua, (June 2, 2021), "Local News Coverage Is Declining — And That Could Be Bad For American Politics", ABC News, available at: https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/local-news-coverage-is-declining-and-that-could-be-bad-for-american-politics/

[55] Darr P. Joshua, Hitt P. Matthew, Dunaway L Johanna, Newspaper Closures Polarize Voting Behavior, Journal of Communication, Volume 68, Issue 6, December 2018, Pages 1007–1028, https://doi.org/10.1093/joc/jqy051

[56] For example, The statement on the issue during the Kick of WorkShop of the NATO PDD sponsored project building community resilience to disinformation with a focus on gender mainstreaming, propaganda and different forms of hybrid threats via cyberspace in North Macedonia, https://fb.watch/9B7gbTzw9k/

[57] See an example of TV 21 The European Union Parliament, (February 2021), Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, Policy Department for External Relations Directorate-General for External Policies of the Union, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf

crime is indeed a serious problem in the Western Balkans (WB).[58] Today it is well accepted that within the WB, organized crime undermines state institutions, erodes democratic values, and poses a safety and security risk to states and societies. The EU disengagement from the region and consequential trade of stability for democracy left some leaders with no incentive to abide by the rule of law.[59] As a result, corruption and clientelism became a direct source of the Balkan autocrats' power.[60]

Such an environment harnessed captive state phenomenon in the Macedonian political arena where political elites have monopolized the coercion and with that the switch of stability/vulnerability factors such as nationalism, ethnicity and religious extremism.[61] Under the EU integration framework, they were able to corrupt the transformative forces of the civic societies and thus have inhibited the development of independent horizontal relations between people, groups, organizations, media, or enterprises. The same level of relations and avenues (horizontal) that is now space from where the manipulation starts. Instead of promoting and encouraging a self-sufficient pool of social forces independent of the state's influence, these corrupt political elites have constructed a highly dependent society, on state intervention and with that easy to manipulate to collectivist identification and authoritarian ideologies through highly controlled media.

While several counter disinformation campaigns are ongoing and all well-intended it seems that these efforts are not coordinated and are sporadic with a high level of politicization.[62] On the other hand, both opposition and ruling political elite-related media accuse each other of spreading

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[58] See more: Global initiative, available at https://globalinitiative.net/oc-western-balkans/

[59] GIS, (April 18, 2018), "GIS Dossier: The Western Balkans", available at: https://www.gisreportsonline.com/gis-dossier-the-western-balkans,politics,2527.html

[60] Marovic Jovana, (December 17, 2018), "Rethinking the Fight Against Corruption in the Western Balkans", The Berlin Process, available at: https://berlinprocess.info/op-eds/rethinking-the-fight-against-corruption-in-the-western-balkans/

[61] See for example: Kemp Walter, (March 2005) "Selfish Determination: The Questionable Ownership of Autonomy Movements", Ethnopolitics, No. 1, p. 85-104, available at: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17449050500072531?journalCode=reno20

[62] See for example Blazevska Katerina, (July 26, 2019) "Critics of Government plan to counter disinformation or knocking on the open door", (Original title: Критики на владиниот план за борба против лажни вести или тропање на отворена врата") DW, available at: https://www.dw.com/mk/a-49753323 ,

disinformation. At the same time, the EU has openly warned that media freedom is concerning. In its 2019 country report on North Macedonia, the European Commission demands the strengthening of the independence and capacity of the media regulator and the public broadcaster, as well as "ensuring effective operations and management" of the public broadcaster in order to promote its autonomy and reporting quality.[63] Although the promising transition of ruling elites in 2017 was supposed to resolve the issues of corruption in the media, the 2021 Vibrant Information Barometer, sponsored by USAID, concludes that the ruling coalition failed to launch long-promised reforms to the country's ailing media ecosystem.[64]

An additional problem is that the quality of the information in North Macedonia is in a steady decline. Moreover, the abundance of fact-based information produced for the sole purpose of weaponizing it against political or business opponents. The Vibrant Information Barometer study also indicates that news organizations' financial instability in an overcrowded market has resulted in seriously understaffed editorial offices. The 24-hour news cycle and the insistence on being first with a story and getting the most clicks mean that few media in North Macedonia rely on well-researched and sourced stories.[65]

Moreover, that media owners are not really bound by citizenship, but with profit. Media owners are usually businesspeople with diverse portfolios who use their media as leverage to secure lucrative government contracts or as a blunt weapon against their competitors. According to Hasipi, the journalist from the community of Tetovo "Not one owner of a television station is a journalist. They invest in media only to protect and defend their other businesses from the state". [66]

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[63] Rusch Lina, (2020), "Media Freedom in North Macedonia", KAS, available at: https://www.kas.de/en/web/balkanmedia/media-freedom5
[64] Vibrant Information Barometer, (2021), North Macedonia, USAID, IREX, available at: https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/vibe-north-macedonia-2021.pdf
[65] Ibid, p.3
[66] Ibid, p.5-6

While corruption and organized crime have long been observed separately from national security concerns, the contemporary geostrategic competition seems to defy this logic.

2.4. The ongoing geostrategic competition and disinformation at the community level

Community resistance and resilience to disinformation among others are essential in the ongoing geostrategic competition. NATO's peer competitors have learned that abusing the civil sector and among others, by manipulating information can compensate for their military inferiority. Therefore, using hybrid methods that blend the conventional and unconventional actions through multiple instruments of power (information, diplomacy economy) and domains (mainly cyberspace and with that social media) NATO's peer competitors pose serious threats to Alliance national security.

To mitigate emerging threats each NATO member country needs to be resilient to resist and recover from a major shock caused by a hybrid or armed attack. Demonizing the United States and NATO; presenting the EU as weak and divided; advertising Russian military might and COVID-19 vaccine superiority, and claiming that Western vaccine producers are corrupt; and amplifying threat perceptions, myths and ethnic tensions – these are among the most frequent topics of disinformation promoted by the Kremlin. With this NATO's peer competitors seek to penetrate to the community level and infect the trust bottom up. The epicenter of the disinformation campaign that attacks the Macedonian community is Serbia. The latest disinformation study of the European Parliament called Serbia a "launchpad for Russian disinformation operations in the Western Balkans".[67]

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[67] The European Union Parliament, (February 2021), Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the Union, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf

The main subject of the disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia is related to international issues. The reason for this is that the malign actors have recognized that the Name issue, the EU accession and the NATO membership have all been connected with the identity issue. This later has turned into a political battle between the political elites polarizing the issue in the geostrategic context as well. Therefore, the malign actors that spread disinformation try to exploit the geopolitical context of the name change and exploit domestic divisions by involving cross-border and diasporic communities. What is also interesting is that these actions exploit another dangerous phenomenon that has been hiding behind the general EU integration agenda. Namely, although reports about media corruption by the now opposing political party are true and although there is significant evidence of journalists who supported opposition political elite have instigated anti-western campaigns, only a few reports have elaborated how the ruling political elite have corrupted the civil sector including monopolizing the fact-checking sector. One such scandal where EU funds (particularly related to countering disinformation) were corrupted was reported by the investigative story published by BalkanInsight. The 2020 story titled North Macedonia Hit by 'EU Funds for Hair Salon' Scandal, revealed how the corruption scheme affects efforts to counter disinformation through increasing media literacy. Allegedly, the money instead of ending at the civil sector and professional who know how to raise awareness and build capacities against disinformation were provided to a hair salon. The owner of the salon according to the study, asked that the grantees who he provided with money do not need to perform anything but cash the money to him. [68]

With this instead of curing the problem, they have eroded trust in the civil sector and particularly in the media. Nevertheless, this also significantly provides space for disinformation to exploit democracy and human rights.

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[68] Marusic Sinisa Jakov, (October 13, 2020), "North Macedonia Hit by 'EU Funds for Hair Salon' Scandal", BalkanInsight, available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/10/13/north-macedonia-hit-by-eu-funds-for-hair-salon-scandal/

Metodi Hadji-Janev

III.

Disinformation propaganda as a political tool in a malign hybrid campaign against democracy and human rights and Macedonian communities

As UNESCO-sponsored research summarizes it disinformation can serve to confuse or manipulate citizens; create distrust in international norms, institutions, or democratically agreed strategies; disrupt elections; or fuel disbelief in key challenges such as climate change.[69] Another research led by the MIT Media Lab found that lies disseminate "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth' and falsehoods were '70 % more likely to be retweeted than the truth".[70]

Later, illustrates another challenge that comes from disinformation in the digital age. Cyberspace and modern technologies allow not just to influence the content, but to choose how to distribute them and promote them on social media. The intention to harm or profit that characterizes disinformation itself entails that disinformation is commonly accompanied by strategies and techniques to maximize its influence.[71] In fact, the concept of deception as a political manipulative effort is well developed. In the masterpiece, The Art of

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[69] Bontcheva Kalina and Posetti Julie (eds.), September 2020, "Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression", UNESCO Broadband Commission Report,

[70] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, "The spread of true and false news online", Science, Vol. 359(6380), 2018, pp 1146- 1151,

[71] Colomina Carme, Sánchez Margalef Héctor, Youngs Richard, (April 2021), The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world", Requested by the DROI subcommittee European Parliament, p. 12

War, Sun Tzu wrote that "All warfare is based on deception".[72]   Unlike the general belief that waging a war is usually considered to be a military business run by people in uniform, both state and non-state actors, are keen to exploit modern technologies and social media and attack "soft targets".[73]

Hence, social media has "become a battlefield where information itself is weaponized".[74] The anonymity allows one to do whatever he/she/they want and be whoever he/she/they want. The advent of the Internet opened a new arsenal of tools that can be used for manipulation including online hacking, aliases, bots, unattributed websites filled with fabricated content, social media avatars posting fake news. Moreover, in a liberalized World empowered individuals and groups specialized in national security matters, previously working for governments, are offering their services for commercial and national security purposes as well.[75]

NATO's peer competitors have proven their agility in exploiting the democratic weaknesses and infecting communities with mistrust and fear by manipulating information. Malign actors are keen to promote a variety of malicious agents with the intention to cause harm. This may include but is not limited to influencing electoral processes, promoting authoritarian and populist agendas, foment polarization and promoting discrimination and hatred against marginalized communities, undermining human rights defenders and human rights processes, or discrediting science. NATO recognizes that disinformation from both state and non-state actors attempts to divide Allies, undermine trust in democratic institutions and present

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[72] Tzu Sun, "The Art of War", text as written by Sun Tzu in the translation of Lionel Giles, first published in 1910, Rule 8,

[73] The term "soft targets" usually refers to civilian sites where unarmed people congregate in large numbers, but not just the places the civilians themselves to. See for example Oxford Dictionaries Online, "Soft target", available at: https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/soft_target; or see: Forest James J.F., (2006), "Homeland Security: Protecting America's Targets", Greenwood, p.36

[74] See for example: Singer P.W., Brooking ET. (2018), "Like War: The Weaponization of Social Media", Eamon Dolan/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, New York

[75] Entous Adam & Farrow Ronan, (February 11, 2019), "Private Mossad for Hire, Inside an effort to influence American elections, starting with one small-town race", The New Yorker, available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/02/18/private-mossad-for-hire

authoritarian regimes as better at dealing with the health crisis. It also presents a risk to the public by undermining vital public health messages.[76]

Malign actors exploit internal division and highly politicized Macedonian society and inject disinformation aiming to erode among others community trust into the system. The campaign builds on the existing local issues and exacerbates internal conflicts by bringing them to geopolitical competition. Thus, the process harm regional stability and the EU integration aiming to grow to the level to inhibit populace support to crucial government decisions when needed-ex. hamper or prevent a public vote in supporting Government's decisions to support NATO efforts against aggressive peer competitors.

In practice, Macedonian communities experience a high volume of disinformation that hamper ethnic tolerance and inclusion while fueling division; affecting the government's ability to improve international relations (particularly with Bulgaria, and the EU more broadly). The reasons for the success of disinformation are multifold. Chiefly, the reasons straddle the boundaries of low level of MIL among the Macedonian communities; highly politicized communities; unprofessional and highly politicized media; corrupt political elites and the prolonged EU fatigue.

Given that political literacy, experience and culture across the Macedonian communities are collectivist, and determinist most Macedonians vaguely change the support to the political option regardless of the democratic performance even despite the corruption scandals. For example, although allegedly the wire-tape scandal indicated that opposing party VMRO DPMNE was immersed in a high level of corruption the core political support remained very strong long after the scandal.[77] In fact, VMRO DPMNE won the election

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[76] NATO, (July 17, 2020), "NATO's approach to countering disinformation: a focus on COVID-19", available at: NATO - NATO's approach to countering disinformation

[77] Roland Gjoni and Timothy Less, (December 5, 2016), "Why Macedonia's Discredited Rulers Will Win Again", https://balkaninsight.com/2016/12/05/why-macedonia-s-discredited-rulers-will-win-again-12-04-2016/

after the scandal in 2017. Similarly, despite the devastating scandals that the ruling elite generated since 2017, they still won the last parliamentarian elections (although devastatingly lost the local elections). [78]

In an attempt to justify corruption some journalists including chief editors of some of the most influential TV media houses have produced media trying to blame the West for the scandals implying that the wire-tape scandal was orchestrated by the Western foreign secret services.[79] Later, evoking nationalism (the old Western Balkan tactics) to hide corruption some prominent journalists at the time have entered vicious circles of demonizing the West. This was a cure to the ears of the loyal supporters who rushed to seek hope in the "Russian brotherhood". As this practice goes, religion, symbolic history (although traditionally Macedonians have received little help if not more harm from Russia) release the facts and relevance of the issue.

Pressed by the high demand for sensationalism, and mass production of the information to feed the market-driven 24 hours news cycle, even the distinguished journalist from the West became a part of the disinformation scheme. Driven by the pursue of low-cost information and profit by the need for information mass production, foreign media rely on outsourcing local journalists. In such an environment mixing op-ed information and articles with facts (predominantly written on anecdotal, not empirical evidence), usually, information about alleged relations of VMRO DPMNE to Russian influence was labeled as fact.[80] Suddenly, the party that was pro-western since its inception now struggles to prove its relation to the West. Moreover, the now ruling party

 MacDowall Andrew, (2016), "Macedonia's Political Mess Lingers Long After Wire-Tapping Scandal", World political review, available at https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/19008/macedonia-s-political-mess-lingers-long-after-wire-tapping-scandal

[78] Dimeska Frosina, (November 02, 2021), "Five Things To Know About The Fall Of North Macedonia's Prime Minister", Radio Free Europe, available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/north-macedonia-zaev-analysis/31541802.html

[79] See for example The European Union Parliament, (February 2021),

[80] In some cases the low level of professionalism can be seen where the reporter informs that Belgrade is the capital of North Maceodnia (or the reader can get such feeling). See for example how Andre MacDowall begins the article about addressing the political crisis situationback in 2016. Instead of Skopje, the reporter begins with Belgrade-serbia. See: MacDowall Andrew, (2016), "Macedonia's Political Mess Lingers Long After Wire-Tapping Scandal", World political review, available at
https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/19008/macedonia-s-political-mess-lingers-long-after-wire-tapping-scandal

vigorous media supporters such as Frontline news for example, usually label all critics to the ruling party as anti-Western and any opposing views to the ruling political elites about the contextual EU integrative bilateral issues as anti-western. Such an environment is highly polarized and ready for manipulation.

The low level of MIL is the key that provides a guarantee for the success of the disinformation campaign. For example, a recent study showed that almost 65 % of Macedonian citizens involved in the study believe that COVID-19 is purposefully being spread by airplanes.[81] On top of this the high level of corruption, distrust in the media, and high politicization of the civil sector in the past 30 plus years have all fed the disinformation-ready environment at the Macedonian community level.

Fortunately, the hybrid attempts to manipulate the public space – digital space via social media platforms and ICT have turned worldwide and relevant Macedonian stakeholders' attention. However, amid these efforts, relatively little attention has been paid to the way in which gender-based discrimination also intersects with disinformation and consequently violent extremism in the online world—and why addressing it head-on is not only a priority for securing women's rights but also a key foreign policy and national security imperative.

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[81] Sloboden Pecat, (2021), "Анкета: Речиси 65 отсто од граѓаните сметаат дека ковид-19 е креиран во лабораторија за да се контролираат луѓето", MIA, available at: https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/anketa-rechisi-65-otsto-od-gragjanite-smetaat-deka-kovid-19-e-kreiran-vo-laboratorija-za-da-se-kontroliraat-lugjeto/

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IV.

NATO, disinformation, gender mainstreaming, and hybrid threats

Along with the substantial change of the world in the past decade and the rise of the competition, NATO has been working on the update of its Strategic Concept. The last Strategic Concept adopted at the Lisbon Summit in 2010 will serve as a baseline for building upon elements that are still actual and in the flashlight. Nevertheless, the raise of the authoritarian NATO peer competitors has renewed the geostrategic competition in a highly dynamic and subversive mode. Today for NATO to succeed in this competition and preserve core Euro Atlantic values success, among others, demands a strong and resilient society.

Rapidly emerging technologies that change the essential structure of peace, crisis, and conflict require a new approach to their technological edge. Disinformation as 'verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public' has the potential to lead to a range of consequences, such as threatening democracies, polarizing debates, and putting the health, security and environment of citizens at risk. Large-scale disinformation campaigns are a major challenge for NATO and require a coordinated response from Allies, social networks, news media and the citizens[82].

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[82] Digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation

Leaving freedoms and human rights untouched, the disinformation needs to be handled delicately and carefully, putting the last as a priority challenge. Disinformation is so created as to impair people's confidence in democracy and the institutions practicing it. As we all could witness in the past years, disinformation easily leads to and supports polarization in the view of decision-making processes and the amount of democracy vested in them. Consequently, it reflects upon the trust in NATO.

The increase of the use of the internet, specifically during the Pandemics, a time when almost everything is processed digitally, has put disinformation in the frontline and under the flashlight. Thus, the necessity to be handled swiftly and efficiently has turned into a priority, since the general environment changes almost on a daily basis. Measures have already been worked upon, leaving the question of how well and successful to be answered by the period that follows.

 Disinformation has already given us the impression that is able to leave predominantly the adverse effects on society as was the case with the 2019 Referendum in North Macedonia.[83] This and a number of similar past events have shown how vulnerable society actually is. It essentially takes steady, effective and prompt reactions to pertain and uphold the trust of citizens in public institutions at the national and EU levels.

Disinformation has become a powerful tool at the disposal of almost everyone. It can affect almost every field of social dwelling, and therefore, can touch key points as democracy, overall habitat and peace leaving citizenship unarmed against this contemporary threat, which evokes strong, powerful and end–to–end reaching measures in order to prevent it.

While each actor has its own strategy, means, and objectives, their individual efforts reinforce and amplify each other. This creates a densely interconnected and at times overwhelming information environment in which

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[83] Veselinovic Milena, (2018), "Macedonia sees low turnout in name change referendum amid disinformation campaign", CNN, available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2018/09/29/europe/macedonia-name-referendum-nato-intl/index.html

the distinction between fact and fiction is blurred. [84]As such, disinformation and propaganda inhibit the citizens participation in governance by affecting their ability to access and agree on verified facts. Furthermore, this generate increasing societal polarization and frustration with democracy; and negatively affect public confidence in electoral processes, culminating with eroding populace's trust in the leadership.

One particular dimension that disinformation campaigns exploit is gender mainstreaming. This is done in a subversive manner emphasizing some traditional and historic roles of the women and attempting to inflict suspicion on the efforts to enhance gender equality and proper policy crafting that will ensure gender mainstreaming. Technological innovations, initially celebrated for their democratizing potential, have come under increasing scrutiny for their harmful effects on democracy, social cohesion, and women's rights.

Disinformation thus affects national and local community efforts to integrate a gender perspective into the preparation, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies, regulatory measures and spending programmes, with a view to promoting equality between women and men. Furthermore, using disinformation campaigns focused on gender equality malign actors affect Macedonian populace trust and belief in the efforts to ensure gender mainstreaming proper implementation. Cascade effects may inhibit gender perspective to the content of the different policies, and addressing the issue of representation of women and men in the given policy area. Both dimensions – gender representation and gender responsive content - need to be taken into consideration in all phases of the policy-making process"[85].

While most women restrict their online activity as a result of social media's toxicity, silence does not grant protection. The disproportionate and often strategic targeting of women politicians and activists discourages women

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[84] Sanchez Linda, (2021), "Bolstering The Democratic Resilience Of The Alliance Against Disinformation And Propaganda", NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Committee On The Civil Dimension Of Security, p.4
[85] htpps://eige.europe.eu

from running for office, pushes them out of politics, or leads them to self-censor and disengage from the political discourse in ways that harm their effectiveness. The psychological toll on them and their families is incommensurable.[86]

Authoritarian leaders have proved capable to authorize disinformation, manipulate the content and exploit technology that is particularly good at spreading misogyny and lies. Moreover, the abusers exploit the democratic voids and generate problems that are hard to rightfully identify and properly address. Although sexist attitudes are integral to understanding violent extremism and political violence, social norms per se don't explain how attacks against women in politics have been weaponized for political gain and cynically coordinated by illiberal actors that take advantage of algorithmic designs and business models that incentivize fake and outrageous content. A new wave of authoritarian leaders and illiberal actors around the world use gendered disinformation and online abuse to push back against the progress made on women's and minority rights.[87] While female politicians and activists have largely been left to fend for themselves in an online world that is increasingly toxic and violent, recent NATO efforts represent a small and valuable contribution to systematically tackle these challenge.

Gender-related issues in the security sector have been highly emphasized over the past few years in order to increase the understanding of the valuable role of women in enhancing counter-terrorism, preventing and countering violent extremism contributing to more substantial responsibilities of women in these processes, and most recently towards their role in pertaining safe and secure cyberspace promoting equality of women in the respective defense and security sectors. The regional and NATO countries have been working devotedly combining relevant state institution representatives,

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[86] Women Around the World, (May 6, 2021), "Gendered Disinformation, Democracy, and the Need for a New Digital Social Contract", available at: https://www.cfr.org/blog/gendered-disinformation-democracy-and-need-new-digital-social-contract
[87] Di Meco Lucina & Wilfore Kristina, (March 8, 2021), Gender disinformation is a national security problem, Brookings, available at: Gendered disinformation is a national security problem (brookings.edu)

civil servants and NGOs, policymakers and practitioners in finding the best practices for implementing gender mainstreaming in the field of ensuring safe cyberspace and promotion of equality of women. Gathering together experts, policymakers and civil representatives, young researchers and young professionals in the field of social sciences (security, politics and law) in research, discussions and sharing the best practices is done through a variety of programs, forums and projects that usually and most importantly are organized internationally. Thus, covering the topics and sharing practices in numerous cases where the damage varies from the minimum up to the worse scenarios of this aspect.

A representative example of such projects was the Advanced Training Course event "***Gender Mainstreaming in Counter-terrorism Efforts in Western Balkans***", North Macedonia, which was aimed at incorporating gender perspectives in CT and P/CVE efforts in the region of Western Balkans, and in the broader security sector realm as to analyse the drivers to radicalization processes through gender lenses. The importance was to throw light on the mechanisms for gender inclusion in CT and P/CVE policies and programs and more broadly in the defense and security realm, the role of gender in enhancing NATO's CT agenda and how can they contribute with their professional experience in the process of creation of more effective gender-sensitive CT and CVE policies and approaches. The recent intention to rely on best practices and best-fit solutions to address the novel challenges, as well as to stir legal, political and security considerations to incorporate gender perspectives and develop gender-sensitive approaches to combat terrorism, radicalization and violent extremism shook the community and arouse impressive interest at its very beginning.[88]

''The hybrid-based threats in general and via cyberspace do not only require new capabilities, but also new partners, new processes and, above all, new thinking. Hence, the importance of the creation of a SEE Network of

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[88] https://gender-mcewb.com/

defense security and academic experts on building resilience against hybrid warfare capabilities that can work across borders with other NATO and Partners' experts and link state-of-the-art research and practice"[89].

Fragmenting the abuse of the modern technology, the exposure, the vulnerability, the pros and cons of the actual technology used and moreover, sharing the concerns of the future use of the aforementioned regarding that the cyber defense mechanism is more developed than the hackers' and pointing to the interdependencies between the cyber attacks' success and the overall human nature is another aspect of the way modern technology is perceived and applied[90].

A chronological review of experts' experience has already been provided, on this occasion related to cyber security and geopolitics, exposing the threats to democracy, rule of law and human rights with specific emphasis on the importance of the international institutions and the strategy and tactics they have the capacity to provide[91].

The challenge lies in the best practices of handling this type of threat, which requires answers to the question: How the NATO efforts and gender mainstreaming on one hand, and the disinformation and hybrid threat on the other are intertwined, focusing outmost on the points of intersection. Answering the points of overlap can instigate improvement upon the understanding on how these threats affect people's lives, the governments, the non-governmental sector, how controllable the damage is and the ways to address and handle such situations, promptly with minimum damage. The necessity of protection requires intervention by the fields and subfields that need to be protected but also consulted and gathered together as to counter, prevent and maximize the resilience of the hybrid threats via cyberspace and sustaining it safe.

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[89] Addressing by the Minister of Defence od Montenegro, Olivera Injac, during the C3I organized ATC, supported by NATO SPS, (September 2021), https://atc-strength.com/highlights/
[90] Mitko Bogdanoski, (September 2021), https://atc-strength.com/highlights/
[91] Kenneth Geers, (September 2021), https://atc-strength.com/highlights/

The recent studies show that during the pandemic, Authoritarian actors support and complement one another. China's disinformation campaigns during the pandemic, for example, have been promoted to a great extent by Russia's extensive propaganda apparatus.[92] Brandt and Taussig, argued that RT and Sputnik are indeed among the top five non-Chinese news outlets retweeted by China's state-funded media. This trilateral convergence of disinformation and propaganda campaigns has had a mutually reinforcing effect that gives the false and harmful messages spread by these authoritarian countries a veneer of legitimacy.

At the same time Macedonian citizens are both the primary catalyst in the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda and the first line of defense against these threats. Therefore, building community resilience against disinformation is an essential step in the overall NATO's resilience against disinformation.

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[92] Sanchez Linda, (2021),

Elena Trajanovska

V.

Why community resilience to the disinformation campaign

In an immensely polarized society, indiscriminately exposed to disinformation campaigns, it remains a critical priority to address and define more closely the political and social landscape in which communities establish their role as genuine generators of social values. Disinformation campaigns undermine the very connective tissue that communities represent as the social identity guardians, pillars of people's trust in institutions, society's potent source of development. Targeting the various strata constituting a diverse and everchanging structure of the building blocks of society that communities represent, provides for direct and progressively amplifying effects producing implications on the very nature of mechanisms driving social change, thus exploiting the vulnerabilities that the lack of knowledge and awareness, as well as the absence of common understanding and approach, reveal. Today, more than ever we find ourselves faced with the necessity of creating a common platform, a common language as means of interpreting, and thus combating a constant, indefinitely accelerating influx of information, diverting and diluting efforts to sustain a solid grasp of common identity and value system.

In the analysis of how to best counter disinformation campaigns targeting the community, which in part should pave the way towards building resilience, it is of paramount importance to define the full impact of these campaigns referring both to short-term and long-term impacts. The former mainly concern provoking and exploiting emotional response to sensational topics;

exploitation of already present societal divide regarding ideological, political, gender-based, ethnic and religious differences; health issues related disinformation campaigns; damaging reputation on individuals, governments, companies, etc., as well as creating panic relating to financial issues and decision-making in this area. On the other hand, the long-term impacts refer primarily to manipulation and radicalization of audiences; blurring the lines between credible and untrustworthy content; increasing distrust of online information sources, as well as undermining trust in democracy and confidence in governments.[93]

Within this context, the contemporary media landscape has provided direct, unfiltered access to audiences, as it has never been possible before. Moreover, the reach has increased to an extent that no age group has been left unaffected by social media platforms, as well as their business model heavily based on analysis of user behavior, which in turn targets their interests and preferences for the purpose of maximizing time spent online on those very platforms. Another consideration, having a view on the contemporary media environment relates to even deeper penetration in the psychology of audiences, namely the creation of the so-called information bubbles, which further broaden the community divide and contribute to polarization and the emergence of narrowly defined groups, serving as echo chambers amplifying messages that drive action or provide for inaction on the audiences' part. This, on the other hand, closes the loop, which starting from the analysis of user behavior results in shaping opinion and pushing audiences to action, or in many instances apathy and inaction. These echo chambers or so-called information bubbles become self-propelling generators of online activity resulting into content sharing, as well as secondary no less powerful engines of disinformation campaigns themselves.

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[93] Public-Private Analytic Exchange Program, (October 2019), "Combating Targeted Disinformation Campaigns - a whole-of-society issue", available at:
https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ia/ia_combatting-targeted-disinformation-campaigns.pdf

Having all this in mind, combatting disinformation campaigns becomes an issue of growing complexity, posing inordinate difficulty of dissecting societal tissue and arriving at a singular solution to remedy their effects. Attempts at approaching this challenge via technical interventions; however, has shown limitations as to the audiences' perception of such censorship of disinformation spreading as a source of resentment and conspiracy theories.[94] Moreover, the said approach envisages investment of tremendous efforts, and even if effective, seldom provides for timely and consistent effects. This is due to the inconceivable power of information-spreading tools' indestructible replication, as well as their inordinate adaptability to such methods. Nevertheless, automated tackling of disinformation has provided a mapping of AI and other tech-based initiatives, launched across the globe aimed at detecting, debunking and countering disinformation. In this context, the Study "Automated tackling of disinformation" by Aleaxndre Alaphillippe, of DesinfoLab, and Kalina Bontcheva, of University of Sheffield sheds light on the remedial initiatives concerning the most influential social media platforms and the effects thereof, while also pointing to some instances of compelling need for transparency. Furthermore, the study provides a clear insight into the diversity of motives driving disinformation campaigns, relating their execution to users' behavior, emphasizing the effortlessness in the process of disinformation creation and dissemination. Furthermore, drawing from the findings of the study "Regulating Disinformation with Artificial Intelligence (AI)" conducted by Dr. Trisha Meyer of Vrije Universiteit in Brussels and Professor Chris Marsden, University of Sussex, one can reach an awareness of the threat of disinformation for freedom of expression, pluralism and the functioning of a democracy. The study explores the usage of automated

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[94] Hsin-Hui Cheng, (Jan 27, 2021), "Why communities need to think of misinformation as more than just a falsehood", available at: https://www.cip.uw.edu/2021/01/27/community-approaches-misinformation/

recognition technologies (ACR) and points to the necessity of human involvement in this entire process.[95]

Insights derived via similar studies have only made the effects of alternative approaches to achieving sustainable levels of communities' resilience more apparent, rendering education and training initiatives all the more desirable means of facilitating the different layers of society grasping the critical impact of informed observation, awareness driven approach to online content, which in turn is aimed at recognition and understanding of dangers posed by disinformation resulting in behavior change leading up to sufficient level of communities' resilience to disinformation campaigns.

Investing in education and training for the young population in discerning truths and lies; however, efforts should equally be made to address the needs of identifying and building immunity to disinformation campaigns among the other members of the population, as well.[96]

Empowering communities through education and training of their members, irrespective of age, gender, ethnicity, etc. is meant to create a tendency of a continuous learning approach towards dangers posed by disinformation, addressing the nature of the evolving media and especially the social media ecosystem. These efforts may best flourish when drawing on history, culture, and idiosyncrasies, which closely define the communities they aim to educate and train, thus using the very identity disinformation aims to undermine as a powerful tool to promote a shared value system, which community members can easily relate to. Education in greater awareness as well as in techniques of how to best assess information teaches how to develop critical thinking and take active participation in our modern-day interconnected world, where access to information has been entirely democratized, paradoxically posing threat to democracy, transparency and

[95] European Science-Media Hub, (March 20, 2019), "The promise and limitations of technological solutions to disinformation", available at: https://sciencemediahub.eu/2019/03/20/the-promise-and-limitations-of-technological-solutions-to-disinformation/
[96] Stephanie Nurobronner, (September 21, 2018), "Building Resilience Against Disinformation: Need for Wider Education", available at: https://think-asia.org/handle/11540/8951

societal awareness, reflected via communities' levels of resilience to all forms of deceiving sources of information.

Investing in education and research initiatives, thus becomes a crucial factor in acquiring a better understanding of disinformation and how to combat it. This can be made possible by establishing a strong and active link between public institutions and academia, certainly with immense and direct involvement of the community, in this way drawing benefits from insights acquired via research conducted by institutions closely examining this issue.[97] Robust resilience in Allied nations is essential to NATO's collective security and defence. Each NATO member needs to be resilient to resist and recover from a major shock such as a hybrid or armed attack, natural disaster, a health crisis (including pandemics), or, failure of critical infrastructure. Resilience is a society's ability to resist and recover easily and quickly from such shocks and combines both civil and societal preparedness and military capacity.[98]

Therefore, raising the awareness via educational and training programs remains the key tool in building resilient communities, resisting disinformation, equipped with the knowledge and understanding of identification and prevention methods in the effort to achieve a sustainable level of trust in public institutions by also empowering members of communities to face the challenges posed by the contemporary media environment, as well as to form a robust platform for defending and protecting shared values, all the while preserving unity of identity through diversity.

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[97] Sagar Kaul, (November 26, 2021), "Tackling disinformation in the current age", available at: https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/tackling-disinformation-in-the-current-age/
[98] NATO (2021) "Increasing Societal Resilience: Innovative Ways To Counter Disinformation And Hostile Information Activities", available at: https://www.nato.int/structur/pdd/2021/2021_05_26_Resilience_Application_Guidelines.pdf

Recommendations

Security threats vectors surrounding the Alliance are unidirectional. Unlike the Cold War or the immediate aftermath, contemporary security reality is highly unpredictable and threatens NATO from abroad affecting national security but also from inside exploiting democratic weaknesses and challenges introduced by societal digitalization. Malign foreign state and non-state actors gained unpredictable asymmetric power and are capable of affecting the civilian sector, and especially the population. While expeditionary reality will remain relevant, NATO members and with that Macedonian leadership must therefore adopt a whole-of-society approach to resilience, in which all civilian and military actors work in synergy and can respond effectively to crises of every nature. Although resilience is high on the agenda much remains to be done to strengthen the capacity of the Alliance and our societies to counter present and future risks. Macedonian leadership is a peace of the NATO security and defense puzzle. Building on the logic that NATO is strong as its weakest member Macedonian leaders must work to secure national defense and with that mitigate any options for Malign authoritarian actors to exploit security and defense vulnerabilities of the Alliance. The following recommendations are the result of the research and analysis conducted during the NATO PDD's supported project.

Recommendations for national and community leadership

1. Reaffirm commitment to the democratic values and principles that underpin the Alliance.

2. Depoliticize the processes procedures and functioning of the public administration. Instead reassure that professionalism, a merit-based system and zero tolerance to corruption is embedded in public administration performance and services

3. In particular, ensure that vocal and well supported public relations commitment to women's equal rights are operationalized in a comprehensive gender mainstreaming and tailored made actions

4. Reassure that partnership with the CSO and media sector is based on the democratic frameworks not on the partisan premises and support and provide space for CSOs and national and local media professional engagement

5. Build on the Alliance's capacities and partner with the CSO sector and national and local to ensure that media and information literacy is a priority and developed in a systematic and coherent manner. A special focus during these efforts should be given to raising awareness and capacity-building campaigns and actions tackling election processes, promotion of NATO values, addressing good practices in countering disinformation and promoting gender mainstreaming.

6. Invest in technological resilience and address the data void effects

7. Promote regional cooperation and explore a regional approach to malign efforts that undermine Alliance's unity

Particular recommendations to community leaders

1. Ensure proper communication among the relevant stakeholders to address the growing threat from disinformation and propaganda via cyberspace and through social media platforms,

2. Identify local resources (human capacities and other relevant resources- places, software, private sector, academia etc.) that could be used in overall resilience efforts against disinformation and propaganda and other forms of hybrid-based threats via cyberspace

3. Identify and stimulate local CSO sustainability and develop collaborative programs that will help in enhancing accountability and transparency but also in developing overall community adaptive capacities against disinformation and propaganda and other forms of hybrid threats via cyberspace

4. Ensure proper awareness and capacity building efforts and actions to enhance gender mainstreaming efforts at the local level

5. Ensure fair and transparent relationship with the local media and whenever possible stimulate their professional development within the established democratic and Euro-Atlantic practices

6. Within the local communities, mandate develop programs and invest in building media and information literacy among the relevant local stakeholders

7. Explore available funds and programs to partner with Alliance communities and enhance cooperation and sharing good practices at the bilateral and regional level

8. Partner with national representatives in NATO and explore options to introduce NATO values to the community

9. Draw lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future crises resulting from climate change with a particular focus on raising awareness and capacity building against disinformation and propaganda and different forms of hybrid-based threats via cyberspace

Conclusion

NATO military and political leaders are well aware that NATO and partners face long-term, dynamic and persistent competition from multiple directions. Transposing non-physical domains, like cyber and space, and the pervasive information environment onto traditional warfighting domains (air, land and maritime) leads to a multi-dimensional battlespace: physical, virtual, and cognitive. To compensate for their military inferiority NATO peer competitors have proven keen to abuse other spheres for political purposes and strategic ends. The use of modern information and communication technologies for different malicious purposes proved that these technologies can amplify the threat vectors as well.

Besides, economic – a supply and demand logic, the modern technologies and cyberspace have influenced social and emotional aspects of our everyday lives through information's content shaping. It is well known that cyberspace and modern technologies generate an environment that stimulates end-users content creation. In this line, social networks, along with the internet architecture have altered our personal experience to information, influence and with that perception of different problems and matters. Blending through multiple sectors both state and non state actors manipulate the information in various ways to instigate doubt, confusion erode trust in democratic institution, values and governance. Launching a decay composed of increasing disagreement about facts, a blurring of the line between opinion and fact, the increasing relative volume and the resulting influence of opinion over fact,

declining trust in formerly respected sources of facts both state and non-state actors are weaponizing information and attack NATO's communities avoiding robust defense structures.

At the same time Macedonian communities for good of course, have increased the usage of modern technologies embracing the ongoing digitalization. Nevertheless, the level of media and information literacy is concerning. AT the same time there is no systematic national approach to tackle the issue. All efforts in this context are from abroad, project-based and sporadic which might produce a further issue in response. Different interest groups might adopt a different approach which will impose a greater burden for a government official in an attempt to strategically and systematically address the issue. Although with positive intentions, different agents involved in the process with would likely attempt to further their agenda (for resources, social recognition, legitimacy, etc.). This may inhibit a strategic and system-based response or canalize the approach to the challenge and narrow the response options.

Malign actors that create and disseminate disinformation exploit 4 channels: i) the Impact of the ongoing digitalization on the traditional family structures; ii) data void; iii) high level of politicization of media to cover corruption and iv) the ongoing geostrategic competition.

Social networking in general reflects the idea of the internet, which is communication in a user-friendly environment. This, nevertheless, unintentionally blends social networking with user-generated content. Many applications, such as Facebook, Flickr, Blogger, or YouTube are built on these premises. While surfing requires only consumption, online communication and content creation require political knowledge and participation. This elevates the challenge to a whole new level giving that the youth is not just collecting information alone but participating in a highly influential complex environment.

Another growing problem that fuels the susceptibility of Macedonian communities to disinformation and propaganda is the information or data void. Our study identified that the challenge to Macedonian communities in this context is twofold. First, it is a technical and to a certain degree profit-driven issue that has later been exploited by malign actors. Malign actors have learned to manipulate data void and search engine optimization. Second, the problem comes from the decline or evaporation of the relevance of local news from the community information chamber. While in advanced liberal democracies local media have developed sources and know-how of surviving in the market competition, Macedonian media are highly linked and dependent on national or local government money. This inhibits the power of ensuring that corruption, less competitive elections, weaker municipal finances and a prevalence of party-line politicians who don't bring benefits back to their districts to be reported. Moreover, this turns local media into an easy target to be channelized in potential manipulative efforts and instead to counter to disseminate disinformation.

Community resistance and resilience to disinformation among others are essential in the ongoing geostrategic competition. NATO's peer competitors have learned that abusing the civil sector and among others, by manipulating information can compensate for their military inferiority. Therefore, using hybrid methods that blend the conventional and unconventional actions through multiple instruments of power (information, diplomacy economy) and domains (mainly cyberspace and with that social media) NATO's peer competitors pose serious threats to Alliance national security.

Disinformation can serve to confuse or manipulate citizens; create distrust in international norms, institutions, or democratically agreed strategies; disrupt elections; or fuel disbelief in key challenges such as climate change. Moreover, or research complements previous findings that lie disseminate "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth' and falsehoods are more likely to be retweeted than the truth. Cyberspace and

modern technologies allow not just to influence the content, but to choose how to distribute them and promote them on social media. The intention to harm or profit that characterizes disinformation itself entails that disinformation is commonly accompanied by strategies and techniques to maximize its influence.

In practice, Macedonian communities experience a high volume of disinformation that hamper ethnic tolerance and inclusion while fueling division; affecting the government's ability to improve international relations (particularly with Bulgaria, and the EU more broadly). The reasons for the success of disinformation are multifold. Chiefly, the reasons straddle the boundaries of low level of MIL among the Macedonian communities; highly politicized communities; unprofessional and highly politicized media; corrupt political elites and the prolonged EU fatigue.

Leaving freedoms and human rights untouched, the disinformation needs to be handled delicately and carefully, putting the last as a priority challenge. Disinformation is so created as to impair people's confidence in democracy and the institutions practicing it. As we all could witness in the past years, disinformation easily leads to and supports polarization in the view of decision-making processes and the amount of democracy vested in them.

One particular dimension that disinformation campaigns exploit is gender mainstreaming. This is done in a subversive manner emphasizing some traditional and historic roles of the women and attempting to inflict suspicion on the efforts to enhance gender equality and proper policy crafting that will ensure gender mainstreaming. Nevertheless, at the national and Macedonian community level, the question of gender mainstreaming in general ANTO security and defense context and in disinformation particular context has been vaguely addressed.

To withstand the negative effects that stream through cyberspace and particularly disinformation campaigns Macedonian communities need to be resilient. This will help national leaders to preserve positive aspects of modern

technologies and ensure continuity in democratic processes and proper gender mainstreaming. For this Macedonian government need to invest in community resilience in stimulating absorptive and adaptive raising awareness and capacity development efforts. This will then lead to empowering local communities to implement transformative actions and withstand the malign efforts to undermine Macedonian freedom, exploit internal challenges and subvert trust in the Alliance and capabilities to guarantee a way of leaving.

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