



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.  
North Macedonia

**METAMORPHOSIS**   
Foundation for Internet and Society

# **ANALYSIS OF DISINFORMATION RELATED TO COVID-19 IN NORTH MACEDONIA**



Skopje,  
March  
2021





**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

North Macedonia

**METAMORPHOSIS**   
Foundation for sustainable ICT solutions

# **A n a l y s i s**

of Disinformation  
Related to COVID-19  
in North Macedonia

Skopje, March 2021

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## Abbreviations and short form of names

<b>AAAVMS</b>	Agency for Audio and Audiovisual and Media Services
<b>AJM</b>	Association of Journalists of Macedonia
<b>CMEM</b>	Media Ethical Council of Macedonia
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organization(s)
<b>EP</b>	European Parliament
<b>FB</b>	Facebook
<b>IFCN</b>	International Fact-Checking Network
<b>IUJMW</b>	Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers
<b>MASA</b>	Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts
<b>MES</b>	Ministry of Education and Science
<b>MH</b>	Ministry of Health
<b>MIM</b>	Macedonian Institute of Media
<b>MISA</b>	Ministry of Information Society and Administration
<b>UKIM</b>	University "Ss. Cyril and Methodius"
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization
<b>YEF</b>	Youth Educational Forum



## ABOUT THE PUBLISHERS



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.

North Macedonia

### **Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom Project Office for Bulgaria and North Macedonia**

Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is a German political foundation that promotes liberal public policies and political knowledge in more than 60 countries throughout the World for the purpose of consolidating liberal democracies and building free and prosperous societies.

In North Macedonia, the main focus of the work of Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom is the promotion of democracy, rule of law, innovation, media freedom as well as political capacity-building by developing collaborative partnerships with local stakeholders. The standard instruments include political education, support for public policymaking, and political dialogue. Through its events and publications, it aims to encourage the building of a well informed and engaged society.



### **Metamorphosis, Foundation for Internet and Society**

The Metamorphosis Foundation was established in Skopje in 2004, guided by a vision of a society where engaged and aware citizens actively use innovative tools to exercise their civic rights and responsibilities, where they are vigilant in influencing and holding their government to account, and thus ensure democratic, accountable, and responsive governance. Its mission is to strengthen the awareness and capacity of citizens and civic society so that they can take on the best possible role as activists for democracy, supporting the government in fulfilling its democratic role - to work in the service of society.



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why did a large number of citizens, including journalists, politicians, university professors and other public figures yield under the influence of COVID-19 disinformation to the degree that they undertook an active role themselves in further spreading, adapting and creating rumours?

Such an occurrence is a global problem, but extremely prevalent in the Republic of North Macedonia, where society is particularly polarized and the level of media freedom and the political culture still carry the burden of the consequences brought about from the period of state capture and populist propaganda.

The study “Analysis of COVID-19 Related Disinformation in North Macedonia” provides an insight into the disinformation trends which hindered efforts to stop the spread of the pandemic during 2020. This study determines the factors contributing to citizens’ susceptibility to various types of media and political manipulation, including conspiracy theories and the commercial abuse of fear through quackery. As a European Union candidate country, North Macedonia shares features with other states in transition, such as the enormous need for the reform and modernization of the educational system and the reconstruction of the healthcare system, as the basis for restoring citizens’ trust in state institutions. The conclusions and recommendations laid out in this study have wider implications since they are applicable to every similar environment, as well as to developed democracies facing the threat of backsliding if power is taken over by any undemocratic, illiberal, or extremist movement that uses fear as a political instrument.

Through quantitative and qualitative analysis of almost five hundred articles debunking instances of disinformation and the specific lessons learnt during the process, the study provides guidelines on how a

society can oppose the infodemic through the joint efforts of all relevant stakeholders. It highlights how utilizing the strengths of the public sector, academic community, media, civil society and the enhanced efforts of individual citizens using digital tools can safeguard the health and lives of their loved ones and fellow citizens.

In that respect, stressing the necessity of applying a systemic approach to building a culture of critical thinking and societal dialogue on all levels is of key importance. Bearing in mind the high level of polarization in society, decisions about interventions against disinformation need to be based on empirical evidence and advancing the professional role of scientists and journalists.

This analysis was developed and implemented in close cooperation between the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and the Metamorphosis Foundation. It is based on direct experience acquired through the implementation of the projects Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens - CriThink, the fact-checking service Truthmeter.mk, the news agency Meta.mk and the news portal in Albanian language Portalb.mk, as well as information pertaining to the activities of all the above-mentioned stakeholders that opposed the infodemic in various ways during this particular period.

Previously, the two organizations cooperated on localization of the research “Behind Closed Curtains: Disinformation on messenger services” in Macedonian and Albanian so as to enable the public from North Macedonia to access the resources via new technologies and thereby learn how platforms for communicating with short messages are abused for the purpose of disseminating disinformation.<sup>1</sup>



## INTRODUCTION

In 2020, daily news about hundreds of newly infected and deceased patients from COVID-19 continued to agitate the Macedonian public, especially in the smaller communities where the number seemed disproportionate to the overall local population compared to the capital city Skopje. Local medical doctors claimed that such concerns stemmed from stubborn disrespect for the protective measures against the novel Coronavirus, requiring citizens to refrain from group family gatherings and to protect themselves by wearing masks. Meanwhile, citizens playing the roles of potential and actual spreaders of the virus found pretexts for their behavior in the increasing flood of disinformation.

The purpose of this study is to strengthen the resistance of the public of North Macedonia to disinformation campaigns as well as to other forms of media manipulation related to the COVID-19 pandemic by means of development and promotion of a disinformation analysis.



**“Misinformation hampers efforts to stop transmission of infectious disease wherever it spreads – and it seems to spread even faster than the disease itself,” said Margaret Harris, a World Health Organization spokesperson and medical doctor who helped fight Ebola in Congo and is now working on the COVID-19 response. “It can even lead to dangerous behaviors that increase the likelihood of being infected or failing to get lifesaving treatment.”<sup>2</sup>**

This study documents and scrutinizes the features of COVID-19 related disinformation in North Macedonia, focusing on some key target groups of citizens, as the basis for developing public policy recommendations and educational materials. The Metamorphosis team started analyzing disinformation from the very beginning of the pandemic. On January 25, 2020 the Truthmeter fact-checking service became one of the founding members of the Coronavirus Facts Alliance (#CoronaVirusFacts Alliance), the largest global initiative of its kind established by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). During 2020, it linked 99 organizations from more than 70 countries.

The experience of fighting disinformation indicates that synergies among various approaches and methodologies is required, including fact-checking, media literacy and critical thinking education, daily journalistic reporting that consciously incorporates these values, as well as interdisciplinary networking on local, national and regional levels as a means of capacity-building and joint action.

Although back in 2011 Metamorphosis warned about the growing trends of disinformation and media manipulation, the Macedonian public did not recognize spin and propaganda as a serious threat to democracy. Meanwhile, they turned into key global trends. Even though some discussions about disinformation have been more present in the public discourse lately, this issue is treated superficially and sketchily most of the time. Most key stakeholders abstain from tackling the issue. This 'deafening silence' reinforces the need for the implementation of the reforms which, as part of the European Union accession process, aim to overcome partisan politicization of state institutions.

An indicator of this is the fact that for most of the terms from this sphere, there is no official Macedonian translation which correlates to such discussions and responses from competent authorities. There is direct translation for the term "disinformation"<sup>3</sup> - explained as the opposite of true information, which in foreign literature includes an aspect of intentional lying or deceit. However, the wider concept of "misinformation" lacks a widely recognized translation into Macedonian, forcing different stakeholders to use various descriptive solutions such as "wrong" or "incorrect" news, information or opinions, not necessarily connected with malign intent.

The analysis of COVID-19 related pandemic disinformation shows that it fell on fertile ground in North Macedonia. This was due to factors such as low social cohesion, poor quality of education, lack of trust in the institutions and a low level of respect for human rights, in particular freedom of expression. The existing political propaganda structures, as well as individual and group social networks unrelated to the established power centres, facilitated the spread of the infodemic. An enormous portion of this disinformation was not originally made in the country. It was imported from the global media or arrived as cross border disinformation from the Balkans' region.

The environment in which a large part of the population is used to believing that political bias is more important than the truth is especially favourable for spreading disinformation. Quite frequently, perception of ideological and partisan benefit is the main criterion affecting the often erroneous perceptions of citizens, even when they are rationally aware that they have been served incorrect, semi-correct or twisted content. Most citizens can recognize manipulation, but they refuse to accept the values of human rights and public interest as a priority when dealing with them.

Under such circumstances, fact-checking is essential, both as a special journalism genre and as an integral part of daily reporting. However, it is not a panacea for all aspects of this infodemic. To deal with this issue, one must combine media literacy education, including digital literacy, information on the science and medicine and have state systems adapted to different target groups that have lost trust in the system. Complete transparency of national institutions and cooperation with the media – that also need capacity-building – is the basis for establishing the first line of defense from COVID-19 related disinformation.

From a long-term perspective, such problems can be resolved only by significant changes in the educational system, legal framework and economic conditions in which the media operate, as well as by reducing the level of corruption and increasing the level of social cohesion.



# 2

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM WITH DISINFORMATION

Conspiracy theories, disinformation and propaganda are not new things. They have been with us for a very long time, especially when negative events took place, or events that were new and partly unknown. Desperate to understand and give meaning to the unknown developments and changes around them, people have always been inclined to discover the “reason” or to identify “culprits” for the disease. That is exactly what is happening with the COVID-19 pandemic now. The reactions today are very similar to how people responded to disease in the past, for example, the last officially declared H1N1 (Swine Flu) pandemic in 2009. What has changed since then is not just the number of cases and countries impacted by the disease, but also the technological development of social media and the existence of an online echo-system of right-wing forces in the World.

Today, the problem with disinformation is not just fake websites and sites that generate visits, clicks, and likes with clickbait titles and content. It is more than that. It is frequently related to the right-wing and populist political structure (political parties, governments) that exploit their own media network and influence to spread disinformation about the sources and origin of the crisis by means of strong communication campaigns, blaming others for their own unsuccessful management of the crisis. In North Macedonia, a large number of websites and FB-pages and profiles were instruments for spreading such disinformation and became part of campaigns led by a media influenced by political parties.

### COVID-19 disinformation features in the Republic of North Macedonia

The main reasons why disinformation thrives in the public sphere in North Macedonia are weak social cohesion, the low level of education and trust in the institutions of the system, as well as low-quality media production. The last factor stems from political influence on the media, and, in a decade-long economic crisis that favours popularity (clicks or forms of influence), a media business model that encourages sensationalism instead of financing a model that is accountable to the public and supports quality reporting based on professional criteria.

In North Macedonia, disinformation activities use structural factors to make the population susceptible to alternative narratives (inter alia conspiracy theories). In other words, they tend to utilize and deepen the low level of trust in the institutions of the system, as well as the various forms of social divide such as ethnic, ideological, religious, national and other backgrounds.

In the media, the low level of investment in editorial capacity-building brings about an enormous amount of pirated media production – copying content from other national and international media, without specifying the source, but also without basic fact-checking that should be an integral part of the journalistic process. Subsequently, some of the media play the role of manipulation enhancers by publishing content from unsubstantiated sources or other pirated media.



An important factor is that in North Macedonia the level of media literacy and critical thinking as skills for life is relatively low, while their development is not part of formal education. The same is true for digital literacy, which includes technical knowledge for using information systems, but also awareness about their social implications, especially considering the human rights of the users. This general conclusion stems from a series of national and regional research as elaborated in part 2.2.

### **Upgrade of current manipulative practices with COVID-19 disinformation**

The current propaganda networks established between 2006-2017, including the media groups connected to the political parties that were in power at the time, as well as the party-networks of Trolls, play a major role in spreading pandemic related disinformation, modifying content for the purpose of obstructing and sabotaging the efforts of the State. Destroying trust in the system as away of scoring political points by shifting responsibility to political opponents has become regular practice.

A specific case of spreading disinformation by political parties and domestic sources, included in the report of the European Parliament, identifies VMRO-DPMNE which was, in 2020, the biggest opposition party in the country. Since the beginning of the pandemic in North Macedonia, this political party has been spreading (dis)information stating that the political-health authorities are dealing with the prevention and treatment of Coronavirus and COVID-19 in an incorrect manner. Regardless of the facts, in the period between mid-March and the end of 2020, they regularly used words like “incapable”, “political Commission” (referring to the Standing Commission on Infectious Diseases), the “Minister of infections and death” (referring to the Minister of Health) in the public space. Such vocabulary led to disinformation by implying that the health-political authorities were incapable of protecting the health of the citizens. In addition, they were also increasing disinformation with concrete statements of the following kind: “protective gear for healthcare workers is missing”, “there are no respirators, but the government is purchasing new ones in a corrupt manner”, “there are no Coronavirus tests”, “incorrect treatment protocols”, “record deaths from COVID-19” etc.<sup>4</sup>

During 2020, such disinformation was directly and carelessly reported by the media, most often by online media close to one or other of the opposition political parties. Disinformation, however, was also transmitted at regular press-conferences or spoken in the Parliament and then taken over by radio and television in their wider media space. Contrary to journalistic standards, very often disinformation was reported without consulting the other side and without checking the statements, by using various get-out phrases like: “information reported in real time”, or “current affairs news, so it must be reported.” Instead of journalistic fact checking, the public was receiving fake news, made worse by the late response of the institutions or persons in charge of them. At best, the fact-checking turned into independent research and checking of the other side of the story the same day, while at worst, editors neglected the other party even after further reports in the media such as a press-conference by the health authorities or the government.

Such collusion between political entities and the media resulted in the prevalence of disinformation in the public space. This then spread naturally and quite often intentionally through social media. Fighting disinformation became significantly slower and more difficult.

A large part of the sensationalist media also promoted manipulation related to the pandemic as a means of attracting clicks only to commercialize them through on-line advertisements or contracts with marketing companies that require high levels of activity.

It should be noted that COVID-19 disinformation has been spread by the same entities that are part of established networks which spread disinformation on every topic related to the country's advancement – be that EU integration, NATO or the name issue.

The Internet offered even more dangerous means for these entities, but also for other opportunists whose starting point was commercial; ways to profit from the crisis not only by winning political points but also by expanding audiences (social capital – number of followers on social networks or readers on clickbait), bringing in specific monetary rewards from ads or sponsorship from political or private entities.

More importantly, the **practice of ruling through fear**, promoted by extremist and right-wing populist circles in the former countries of Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s, became mainstream in the following three decades in the political life of North Macedonia. This was embraced by a large majority of the population as “normal” and desired. Similar methods of rule were applied outside the Balkans, for example, by the illiberal regimes in Central Europe and in the USA, with racist narratives related to the U.S. Civil War of the XIX century and Qanon, as well as other countries such as Brazil, Russia and India.

### **When political bias is more important than truth**

**People used to thinking within the box of fear of invasion of the neighbours or of civil war, while considering party non-approved persons as traitors, easily apply the same ideas in relation to the politicized pandemic.**

**People who treat destabilization of the perceived political opponent through spreading panic and disinformation as a legitimate political tool, and see themselves as warriors in a “silent Civil War” (that continues fighting injustices from the past) tend to treat fact-checking and other forms of professional journalism as a hostile activity. This does not refer to “party followers” only, but includes a large circle of people who are motivated not only by loyalty towards “their own”, but also by hatred towards the “others”.**

Within the framework of such a political culture, the awareness about decision-making on the basis of logical analysis of empirically collected data exists only on a theoretical level, while in practice critical thinking is used only as a sophistic form when attacking the positions of the political or ideological opponent.

The analysis of the comments on Facebook when citizens responded to fact-checking shows that for people who are used to such a political and media environment, the **political bias is more important than the truth**. In its basic form in North Macedonia, political background refers to affiliation to a certain party and/or hatred towards a certain party. The dynamics of spreading disinformation also shows that citizens identify themselves with political movements active abroad and their ideologies, especially if in party circles official or unofficial ties with them are in place.

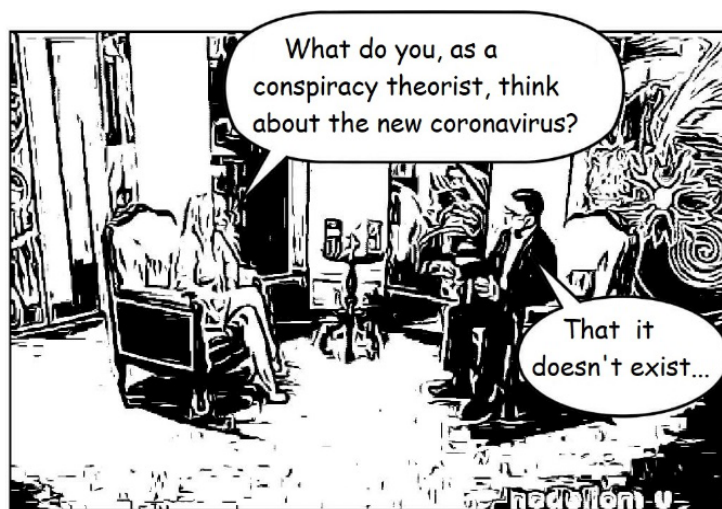
The current state of acceptance of COVID-19 disinformation of the public in the country can also be ascribed to the long-term offensive of the anti-vaccinationists who started from 2015 to more aggressively post texts about how detrimental the vaccines were. This “bombing” surely contributed to a large majority of the population accepting the conspiracy theories and subconsciously changing their belief in line with the saying, “a one hundred times pronounced lie becomes the truth”.

This trend is related to other methods of creating distrust in the healthcare system based on science, starting from the promotion of quackery as “alternative medicine” all the way to re-affirmation of religious rituals or the magic of healers/clairvoyants as a substitute for treatment in medical institutions. Such opinions are spread through the media and social networks, especially amongst people from socially deprived areas who cannot afford treatment in private facilities (the perception is that private facilities offer better services than public facilities).

## 2.1. Key disinformation trends related to COVID-19 in the Republic of North Macedonia

For the purpose of this study, the Metamorphosis team analyzed almost five hundred (479) anti-disinformation articles, out of which 391 were directly revealing disinformation related to the pandemic. These were published as fact-checking and analytical articles by CriThink.mk (138) and Truthmeter.mk (139) or without an integral part of daily reporting by Meta.mk and Portalb.mk (114).

The case-studies in the sample of articles were based on the criterion verifiable claim, that is, data that could be checked by using professional journalistic methods. Other criteria for selection were virality of the publication – the response elicited from the public and the social networks, as well as the estimated level of potential damage the specific disinformation might cause. Part of the content was identified by the fact-checkers with the use of software tools and applications used to examine the viral spread of social media content (for instance CrowdTangle), combined with years-long journalistic experience, for the purpose



Miloš Dragojević,  
"Comics against dictatorship"<sup>45</sup>



By MILOŠ

of achieving the biggest impact and dealing with the most damaging disinformation pieces related to the global pandemic, when disinformation can cause the spread of the disease and affect human life.

Such a sample of articles is not comprehensive since the total number of disinformation pieces is hundreds of thousands and would demand enormous resources for “stock-taking” and analyzing. Bearing in mind that a large amount of disinformation is copies or minimum mutations of already published content, the sample provides a clear image of the actual situation because it is based on the selection made by expert teams of specialists (journalists and digital rights experts) according to criteria impacting the public such as virality on social networks.

From the viewpoint of critical thinking, spreading disinformation on the pandemic in 2020 was mainly based on several propaganda and manipulation techniques, that is, exploitation of logical errors appealing to authority, back to person (ad hominem), incorrect analogies and metaphors, crude generalizations and slippery slope fallacy, as well as abuse of existing bias and animosity and the social proof approach – what is popular is probably true/important and the expectation that the spread of popular content would contribute to the popularity of the person sharing – medium or social media beneficiary).

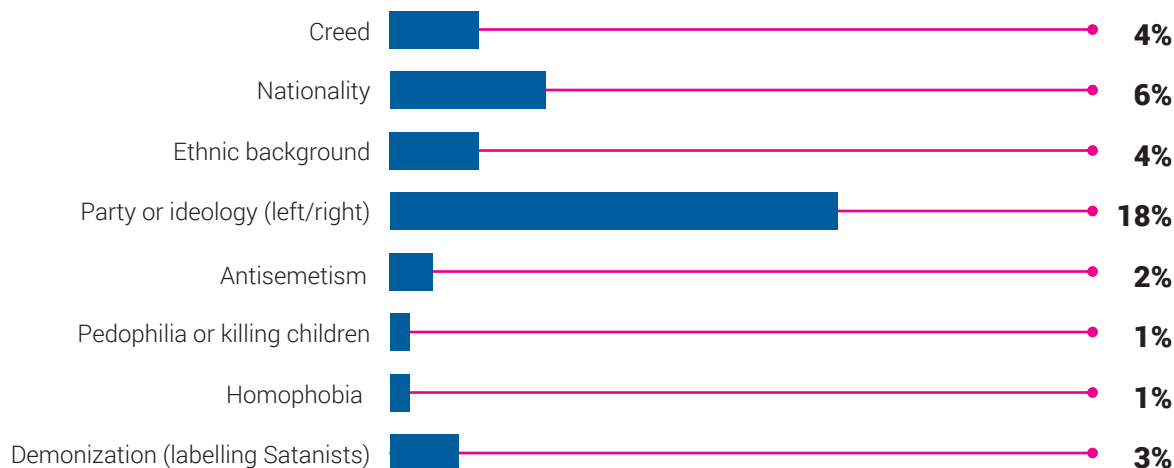
### **Origin of disinformation stories**

Approximately one third of the COVID-19 disinformation pieces published in the media and social networks in North Macedonia were not original, but adapted versions of narratives that were circulating globally, originating from the USA, EU Member-States, Russia and China. Approximately one third of the disinformation pieces in the sample were taken over by secondary reporters in the Balkan region, including disinformation pieces from neighbouring countries, mainly created by populist political forces or anti-scientific entities (anti-vaxxers, quack-doctors).

The in-country disinformation was mainly discreditations and skirmishes between political parties on a national level, that is, between the opposition and the authorities, mainly related to the precautionary measures and their effectiveness, as well as slandering the EU (implicitly NATO and the “West”). Apart from the measures, many political manipulations were connected to the elections in North Macedonia, elections in the USA or reflecting the propaganda in Serbia, very often linked to the elections there.

A common denominator of about one third (32%) of the researched disinformation was the determination to destroy the already weak public trust in the national system by sensationally causing panic and creating tension or growing outrage against specific target groups by encouraging intolerance, discrimination, sometimes to the level of hate speech in various forms (usually combined). The usual ground for domestic disinformation was the political background (especially party), but also nationality, ethnic and religious groups for the purpose of exciting witch-hunting or scapegoating. Some conspiracy theories promoted demonization of those who thought differently (“Satanists”), antisemitism, homophobia and other forms of labelling.

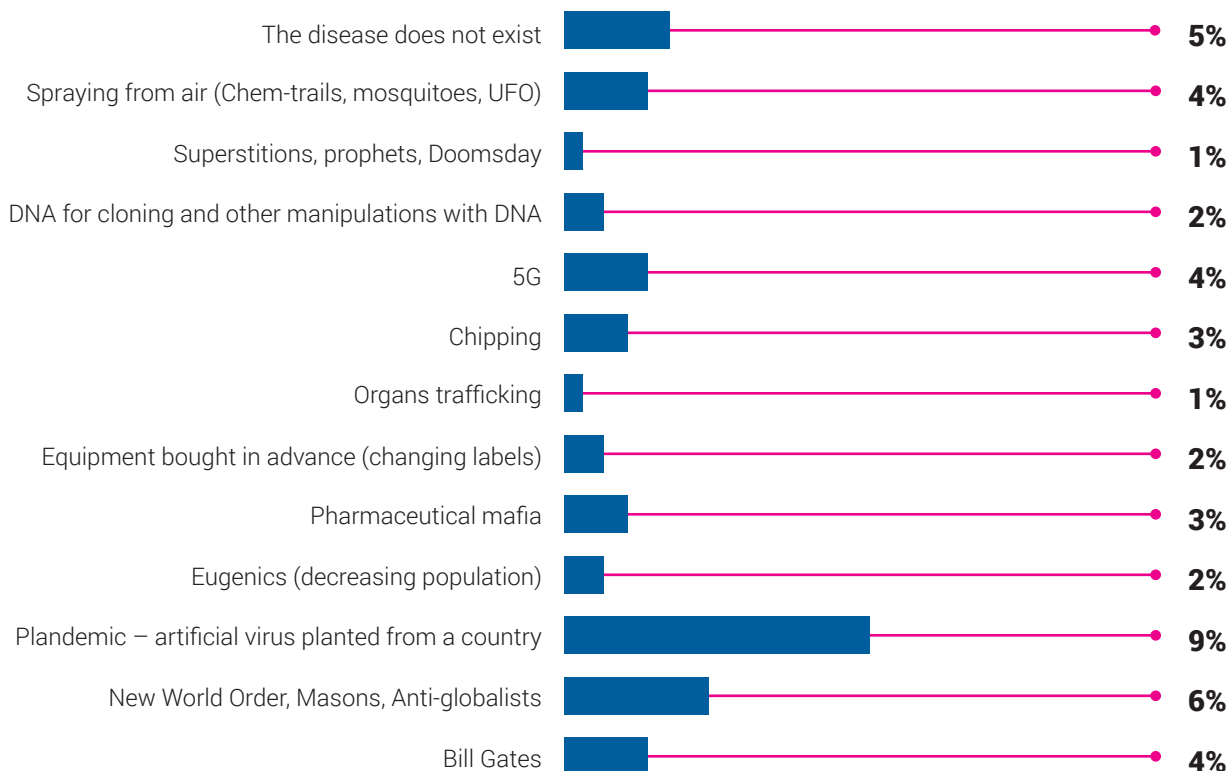
### Most frequent grounds for encouraging intolerance, discrimination and hate speech



After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, to minimize the sickness, the media and social networks were flooded with speculations and lies, supplemented with conspiracy theories about the assumption that the pandemic resulted from activities planned from centres of power, a “plandemic” (according to an influential viral video), additionally connecting the new Coronavirus in various combinations with 5G-technology, the philanthropist and Microsoft founder, Bill Gates, implanting chips (so-called

“chipping”), DNA manipulation, or recycling old stories of massive chemical spraying of the population from the sky – all as part of the plan to decrease the number of people on the planet by 2030 or to create obedient subjects. Endless disinformation called the pandemic fake, and the Coronavirus a big scam. Quackery articles and other fabrications surfaced about the harmfulness of the masks, PCR tests and vaccines.

### Frequency of conspiracy theories in the sample



The introduction of measures to fight the pandemic was also accompanied by disinformation, most often promoting the attitude that the measures themselves were nothing but an arbitrary decision of the government representing an even bigger problem than the disease.

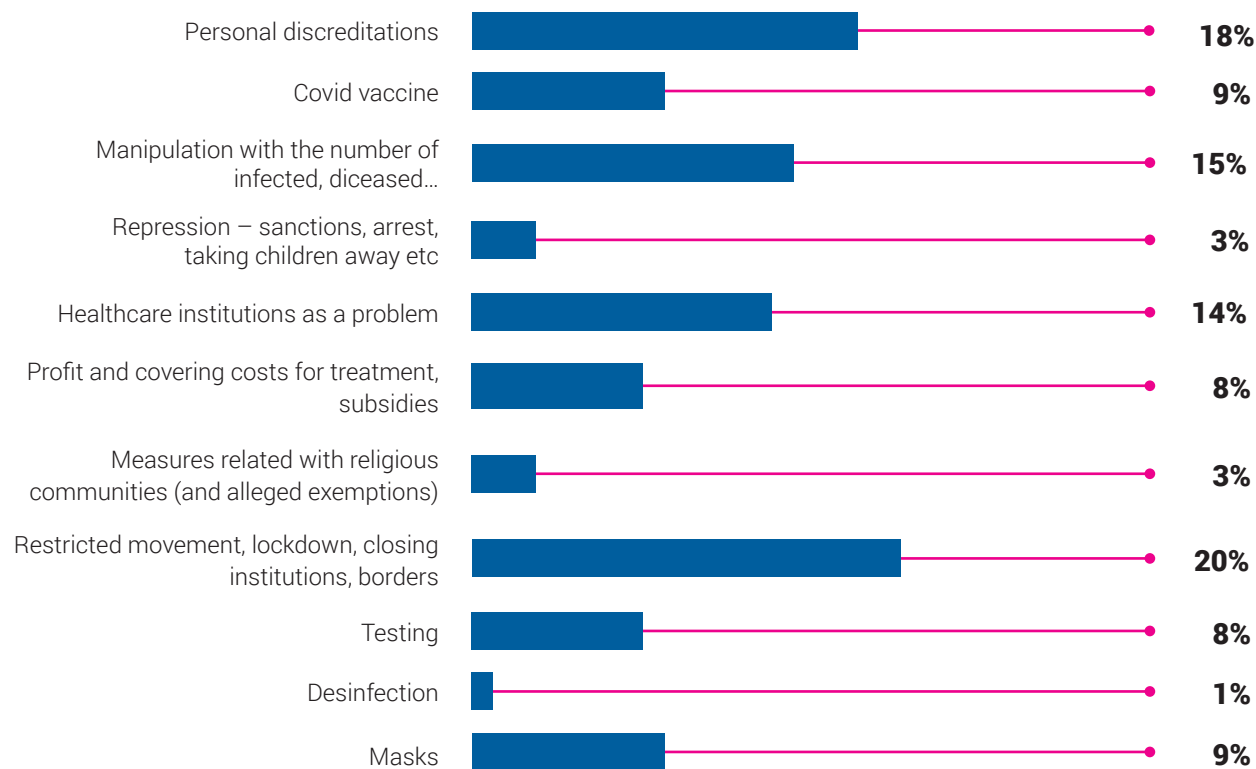
The most frequent form of manipulation of the measures was the speculations regarding the limitations of movement, introduction of lock-down and closing institutions and cross-border traffic. Discrediting persons as guilty for the spread of the disease, both as patients and as functionaries whose performance was not good enough, was the second "favourite" topic. A great deal of disinformation was directed towards destroying confidence in the health system and healthcare workers. The data about the number of infected people and the mortality rate was abused on many levels -from local to global- including the claim that a given country was the "leader in the region" regardless of whether this was for a good or a bad thing. Other frequent topics included alleged problems with the masks and tests, as well as the accusations of profiteering or scaring the population

with economic catastrophes. In the last months of 2020, disinformation relating to the vaccines that were in preparation increased.

With time, some of the conspirators stopped negating the disease and turned to speculations about its nature (how the illness works, symptoms, virus type – cold/flu or bacteria - or about quackery – promoting practices or products that make citizens refrain from science-based medicine, which was extremely dangerous since people at risk were put off from going to the doctors in a timely way.

Unfortunately, very often medical authorities pointed out that part of the mortality factor was the fact that some patients requested medical attention too late because they wasted too much time on alternative approaches such as inhalations or burning myrrh, drinking alcohol or gargling saline, eating garlic or onion, vegetables and herbs. Approximately 5% of the disinformation was of that kind, and partly referred to miracle-working drugs for other diseases, often locally not available, religious and magical rituals or salvation through sunbathing or changing of the seasons (UV-rays, snow).

### Manipulations related to the measures

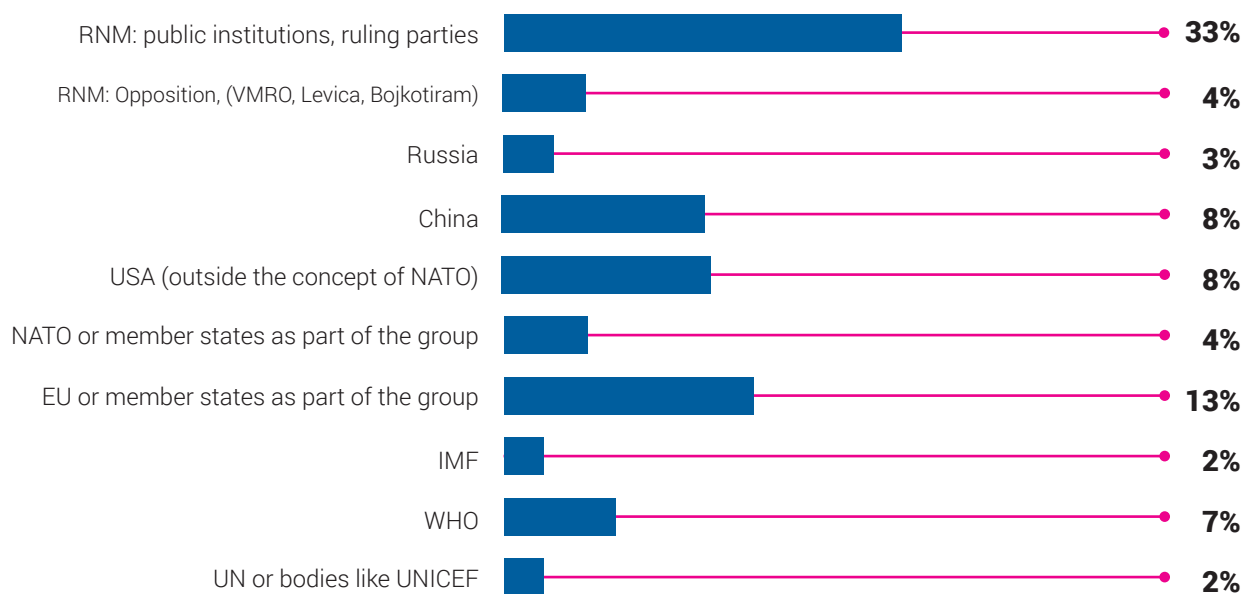


### Pandemic disinformation correlates with the propaganda schemes against EU and NATO present in the region

As guilty parties for the pandemic or other negative implications related to the pandemic, some conspiracy theory content pointed their finger at specific countries or wider groups, often loosely defined as “European governments”. For domestic disinformation, the usual “on-call guilty party” were the national institutions or the ruling parties (often without making a clear distinction), while on an international level, intolerance was mostly directed towards the “West” (EU, NATO, Member-States), and to a lesser extent China and Russia.

International organizations such as the WHO, UN and IMF were also mentioned in a negative context, often as some kind of foreign body that imposed itself on the country, thereby taking away our sovereignty, despite the fact that our country is a member of these bodies with voting rights.

#### Institutions or persons to blame i.e., “bad guys” in narratives.





## 2.2. Overview of available research and public policy papers

Research related to the pandemic disinformation problem in North Macedonia is mainly undertaken by civil society organizations or professional associations, while the academic community very rarely engages in this issue. If research is published in scientific magazines - nationally or internationally - the improbable discussion remains in narrow professional circles, without wider public promotion. Except for rare exceptions, scientists and professors, from public and private higher education institutions, very rarely participate in the public discourse on these topics.

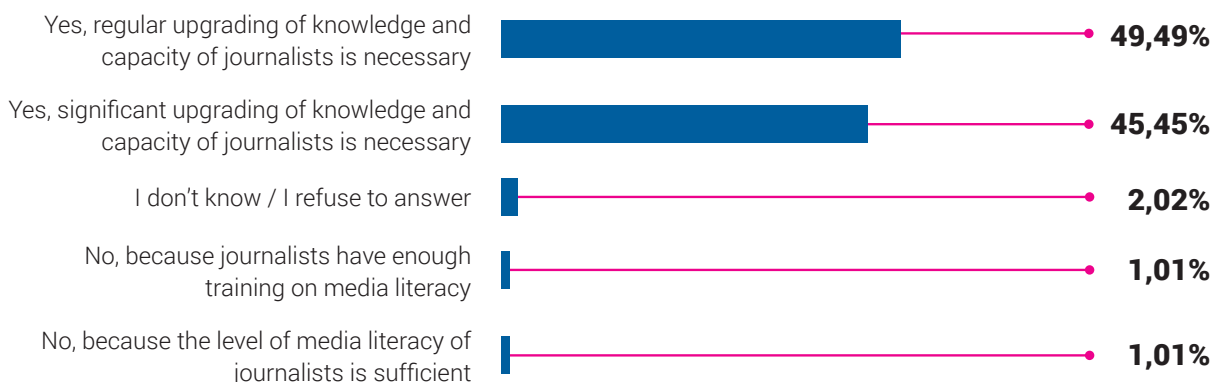
### National level research

The RESIS research **“Mapping media literacy levels in the Republic of North Macedonia with people over sixteen”**<sup>6</sup> was supported by the OSCE in partnership with AAVMS, and on the basis of a field survey undertaken in September 2019, showed significant generational differences in the levels of education, acceptance and use of both traditional and digital media with the representative sample of the population of North Macedonia over the age of 16 years. This research built upon a similar survey from 2016. It enabled tracking over time

of the development of individual patterns of media use, communication habits and skills of the audience, level of significance and critical understanding of media content, including the creative and participatory practices in the modern communication environment.

From the viewpoint of susceptibility to disinformation during the pandemic that started the following year, the mapping exercise showed that “younger generations have many more digital skills and capabilities compared to adult groups in society, while all age groups lack skills for functional literacy”. This research indicated that a large part of the sample audience had big and essential differences in the reporting of media use. The most frequent strategy for analysis was the conversation with close friends, and “very rarely do they bother to find verifiable sources.” Concerning the participatory feature, a slight improvement was noted compared to 2016. “A small part of the respondents is prepared to personally confront further spreading or expose the intentions of the author” in the frequent cases in social networks where they perceive “content offensive to groups or individuals or which violate someone’s rights.”

### Do journalists from North Macedonia need capacity-building for media literacy?



Part of the research **“Significance, presence, and awareness of critical thinking and media dexterity in the media industry,”** conducted by the CriThink project.



Pandemic disinformation finds fertile soil in the North Macedonia because the previous media environment was susceptible to such manipulation. The findings of the **research “Significance, presence and awareness for critical thinking and media dexterity in the media industry”** produced by the EU-funded project CriThink<sup>7</sup>, implemented by Metamorphosis and EuroThink, show that the weak economic fabric of the media as well as political pressures and manipulation with media content aimed at achieving political goals are the main reasons for the poor quality of journalism in North Macedonia. That makes media workers vulnerable to direct or indirect pressure. Raising awareness about the role of the media as agents of democracy is key. Improving the media environment should be a strategic goal. More than 95% of the interviewed journalists considered regular or significant upgrading of competences and capacity-building in the sphere of media literacy to be necessary.

In April 2020, the Helsinki Committee on Human Rights published a **report from the regular monitoring of hate speech**, implemented through the platform [www.govornaomraza.mk](http://www.govornaomraza.mk), noting that “during March 2020, 110 cases were registered which is 100% more than the same period the previous year. Most of the cases registered in March referred to the COVID-19 pandemic, the state of emergency declared by the President of the Republic of North Macedonia as well as the response of the citizens to the measures undertaken by the Government. The largest digital traffic, from the response on social media was observed after the official press-conferences of the Minister of Health on behalf of the Crisis Headquarters”.<sup>8</sup>

In September, the Macedonian Institute on Media (MIM) through the **research “Political and economic base of media and communication models that spread disinformation and hate speech”** indicated that the outbreak of the global Coronavirus crisis in North Macedonia “coincided with the parliamentary elections. The two topics created a charge for the escalation of disinformation and hate speech on political and ethnic grounds, but also based on health. In the period marking Easter and Ramazan holidays, religiously motivated rhetoric, intertwined with daily politics was also on the agenda.”<sup>9</sup>

In October 2020, the Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia (CMEM), in cooperation with UNESCO, published its **analysis of the most frequent violations of journalistic standards in the time of the pandemic** covering the period July – September 2020. Its findings were based on the experience of members of the media’s self-regulatory bodies. The analysis showed that the most frequent problems reported to ethics councils in the Balkans and in Europe were “sensational media

reporting, lack of privacy and personal data protection, as well as aggravated access to information”.<sup>10</sup>

MECM pointed out that in North Macedonia, “as anywhere in the World, the crisis found the journalists and the media unprepared, lacking previous experience in working in emergency situations, inappropriate equipment and not knowing how to use digital technologies. Subsequently, economic pressures and problems with certain restrictive measures imposed by the Government” surfaced along with “semi-correct, incorrect information, disinformation and biased informing, sensationalism and plagiarism”.



In October 2020, the **research “Pandemic or Infodemic? Critical Thinking and Conspiracy Theories in Times of Pandemic”** was published within the framework of the CriThink project. It showed that alternative narratives, especially the pandemic related conspiracy theories, were extremely wide-spread and “sticky” for Macedonian citizens.<sup>11</sup> Paradoxically, this confidence in alternative narratives went hand in hand with the high level of trust in the way the State was handling the crisis, as pinpointed by the high scores assigned to the government by citizens, although the government repressed and discouraged alternative narratives as a recognized threat to democracy. The focus groups explained this paradox through the concept of identification of many citizens with the government that they deemed a powerless victim of global games which they could not influence.

The research indicated that the concept of “infodemic” itself was problematic, and thus there was a need for an alternative and de-pathologicalized explanation of

the alternative narratives. At the same time, the health crisis brought about a public debate on the existence of an alleged bottom-up authoritarianism, inspired by the appeals for greater restrictions than the strict ones already imposed by the government, interpreted as a desire for a “strong-grasp policy”. Nevertheless, the “qualitative research (focus groups) showed that the calls for strong grasp were actually associations fighting impunity, advocating rule of law etc.”

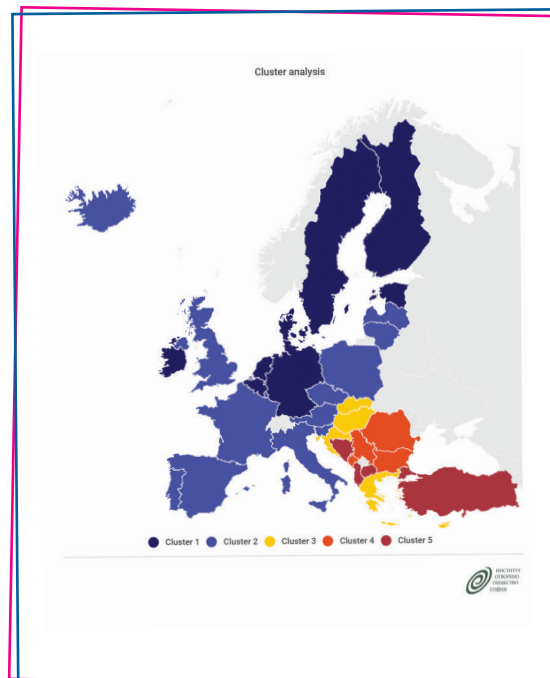
A key conclusion of this research was that endemic conspiracy theories have their own psychological rationality. Therefore, one should treat them as a consequence of structural factors that create them and make them “sticky”. Only programmes directed towards addressing structural factors can be efficient and effective. Pathologization of these narratives does not help – it only feeds them!

### Regional level research

Other regional studies undertaken in the course of 2020 confirm the general findings of the national studies concerning the situation in North Macedonia – which was not a very pleasant one!

One should bear in mind, however, that neither on a European nor Balkan level is there a common methodology that will enable comparisons between the levels of media literacy in specific countries. That is usually done indirectly by using various indicators, and often the term “media literacy” is used as a synonym for a wider range of skills, knowledge and vulnerability related manipulations.

An example of such an approach is the “**Media Literacy Index**” of the European Policy Initiative of the Open Society Institute – Sofia, that measures the “potential to resist fake news in 35 European countries, by means of indicators for media freedom, education and people’s trust.” In this index, the Balkan countries are amongst the most vulnerable to disinformation and susceptible to fake news. This ranking is not based on direct analysis of the level of media literacy of the citizens through surveys or tests, but on comparison of indicators like the results from the PISA-tests, “Reporters Without Borders” index and the “Eurobarometre” results. These ranked North Macedonia in last place in 2019<sup>12</sup>



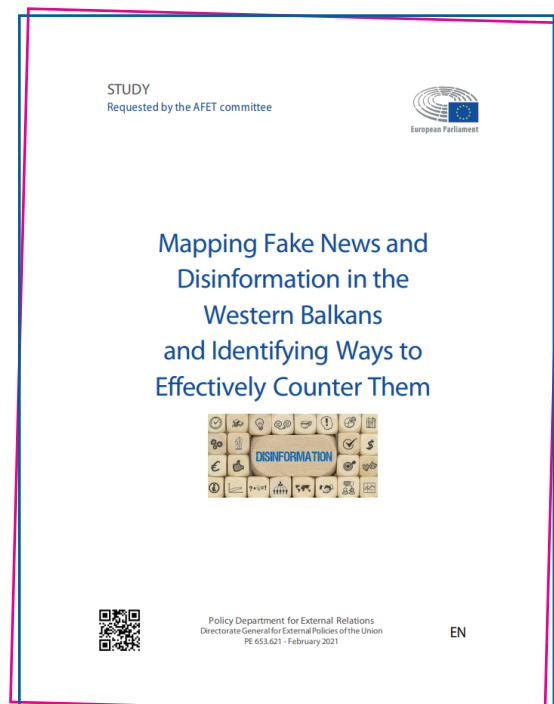
The conclusion of this research is that the citizens of North Macedonia, compared to other countries, have less capacity to assess media content critically, that is, they lack the knowledge to analyze the content published by the media, the “packaging”, to recognize spin and trends, and consequently, to utilize the media and participate in the public sphere. The methodology opens the issue of whether the assessment can be generalized with critical thinking capacity of the whole population based solely on the PISA results<sup>13</sup> of 15-year-old pupils, especially since different generations acquire education under different circumstance, some even abroad. The aspect of media freedom is also important, but it is difficult to show a direct connection with the level of media literacy of the average citizen, since the “Reporters Without Borders” index is tightly linked to the political situation that impacts the work of journalists and can change rapidly.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the fact that the term “media literacy” in the title, along with the methodology of this ranking of resistance to disinformation, may be disputable, in the last few years the term has been used as a benchmark both in North Macedonia and in the region. Donors and civil society researchers from all the countries involved agreed to use it, due to a lack of other comprehensive and more precise research methods for measuring media literacy.

In December, the study **“Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them”** was published by the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament (EP)<sup>15</sup>. For North Macedonia, this study revealed “no shortage of fissures into which the wedge of disinformation can be fruitfully inserted.” Disinformation campaigns analysed for the purposes of EP’s study aimed “to exacerbate internal conflicts (particularly between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian communities), damage North Macedonia’s international relations (particularly with Bulgaria, Greece and the EU more broadly), and to disrupt or distort critical electoral processes” such as the 2018 referendum on the name change in 2018.

The pandemic-related disinformation in the region is used to achieve political goals, “among other things, to shift general public opinion, to exacerbate internal conflict, and to affect the image – positively or negatively – of political leaders”.

By stressing the fact that “in North Macedonia, the recent change of government threw disinformation in public and mainstream media to the margins, although disinformation remains a powerful force that disrupts internal politics”, the study warns that very often disinformation is spread as the result of national factors.<sup>16</sup>



This document provides concrete examples of the President of the political party VMRO-DPMNE, Hristijan Mickoski, and the former president of the party, Nikola Gruevski, as well as media close to this party funded through Hungary are noted as sources of disinformation in North Macedonia.

According to the **public opinion survey for “GLOBSEC Trends 2020”**<sup>17</sup>, that encompasses nine countries from Central Europe and the Western Balkans, every third citizen of North Macedonia believes in COVID-19 related conspiracy theories.<sup>18</sup> The primary topic is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perception of the big players, the USA, Russia and China, in the region, the popularity of NATO and the EU, the situation with democracy in Central Europe, the readiness of the population to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and how to boost that and the influence of COVID-19 conspiracy theories on the efforts to overcome the pandemic.

COVID-19 related conspiracy theories undermine the population’s trust in democracy, and the “projection” of impressions on a certain political actor becomes a more important part of international relations and geopolitics, claim the authors. With 35% of people believing in conspiracy theories, North Macedonia is third in the region. In the group of all included countries, the trust of the citizens in the government is greater than their readiness to be vaccinated against COVID-19. Only 29% of the respondents from North Macedonia were prepared to be vaccinated, and this number was significantly higher (48%) with people who answered that they would like to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and that they trusted the authorities. 39% of Macedonian citizens believe that the COVID-19 numbers in the country are lower than what the authorities report, while 35% think that COVID-19 is imaginary so that the population can be manipulated.

GLOBSEC concludes that “disinformation and conspiracy theories will significantly impede the recovery from the pandemic”, and the readiness of the population to be vaccinated will show how capable the countries are in building the confidence of their citizens. It also concludes that the situation is giving the EU a chance to play a greater role as a key player in healthcare.

The network BiEPAG,<sup>19</sup> published the **public opinion survey “The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID-19 on the Balkans”** in December. More than half of the respondents from North Macedonia said that they did not want to be vaccinated. They did not trust the vaccine against COVID-19, which is one of the main topics of the disinformation campaign. According to this survey, almost 50% of the Macedonian respondents believed that the Coronavirus is a laboratory-grown product of China or the pharmaceutical industry, and almost 30% thought that the virus was connected to 5G-technology. About 40% believed that the American Army created the Coronavirus as a biological weapon, and the same number of people thought that Bill Gates was using the virus to “push through” vaccines with micro-chips that could follow people.

BiEPAG concluded that the fact that from the total number of respondents from North Macedonia, more than half “believe a lot” in the conspiracy theories presented, while over 60% believe in some of those theories, poses a threat for both the efforts to deal with the pandemic and democracy in the region.<sup>20</sup>

All the above-mentioned research efforts contribute to the understanding of disinformation from different aspects. More systematic endeavours in the area are required to develop solutions that will enable more precise and comprehensive definition of the state of affairs, including the development of methodologies for direct assessment of the media literacy level and related skills of various categories of the population that could be applied on both a national and regional or European level.

Measuring the intelligence quotient is not the only undertaking, since some of the questions are related to cultural differences and other features stemming from the local context. Therefore, every comparison should be made very carefully, otherwise space is given to distortion, spin, or material for creating disinformation.

In view of these risks, the Media Literacy Network of the Republic of North Macedonia adopted obligatory Guidelines on Ethical Research of Media Literacy<sup>21</sup> in November 2020.

Support for a wider expert and public debate on these issues, especially directed towards motivating the involvement of the academic community, national institutions and media is necessary.

### 2.3. Overview of public policies related to the infodemic

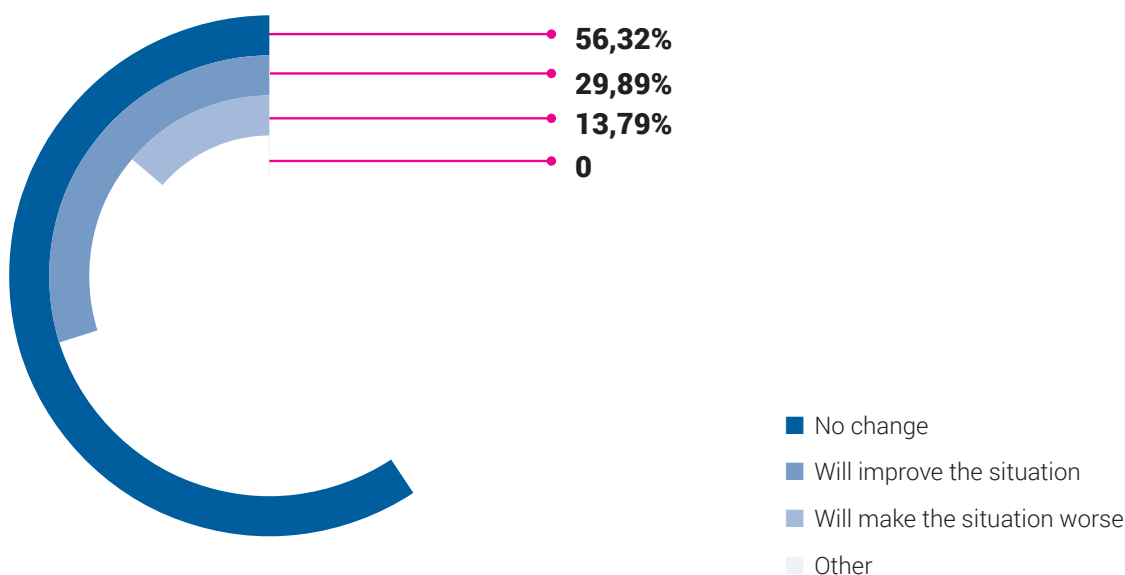
In 2018, the government of the Republic of North Macedonia initiated an **Action Plan on Decisive Response Against Spreading Disinformation and Attacks on Democracy**<sup>22</sup> (Action Plan). The Action Plan provided for security and pro-active measures. According to the Action Plan, the Government would initiate a process of creating a National Media Literacy Strategy that would involve activities and institutions, media and civil society, including the incorporation of media literacy in educational programmes.

The Action Plan, through proactive measures, foresaw active “encouragement of discussions between the media, media associations and civil society aiming at self-regulation, co-regulation and defining media standards for Internet portals as recommended by the

European Commission and the Council of Europe”. In the Action Plan, the Government advocated ongoing discussion with the media to determine the support model for developing training programmes and content, as well as cooperation with all organizations and fact-checking projects. By cooperating with the European Commission, the Government would increase participation in the Rapid Response System on Spreading Disinformation.

Nevertheless, this Action Plan lacked specific actions for implementing the measures, including a timeframe for their realization. The Plan provided for the establishment of an Action Group Against Spreading Disinformation and Attacks on Democracy, but the information on its operation was scant .

Do you think that the listed measures will improve the current situation by strengthening media literacy and decreasing the spread of disinformation?



Part of the research “Significance, Presence and Awareness of Critical Thinking and Media Dexterity in Media Industry,” conducted by the CriThink project.

According to the research on journalists and media literacy by CriThink, slightly more than half of the respondents in the survey conducted with a non-representative sample of around a hundred journalists (55,91%) said that they were familiar with the contents of the draft Action Plan, while 38,71% said that they were not. Many of the journalists surveyed had negative perceptions about the measures included in the Action Plan and doubted their effectiveness in bringing about change.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of December 2020, Prime Minister Zoran Zaev announced the 2021 Government Programme entitled **“Action 21 – For European Standards at Home!”** in which one of the ten priorities is “Action 21 – Stop Disinformation”. He announced renewed activities in the upcoming period, wide consultations with media workers and civil society and a much more serious fight against disinformation, including hate speech and other forms of hybrid threats against democracy in our society, as part of the plan for decisive action against spreading disinformation and attacks on democracy, including cyber-attacks.

The Prime Minister stressed the importance of the Protocol on Crisis Communication between the central governmental communication service and ministries, developed on the basis of the Plan that apparently helped a great deal in handling “fake news mostly published by quazi-media.” According to him, disinformation trends remain, for example, “the news related to the vaccine against COVID-19 for the purpose of making citizens distrust and undermine the invested efforts of the institutions and doctors in the fight against the pandemic.”

Zaev announced closer cooperation with fact-checkers and the most transparent approach in the media, using verified sources and information with the aim of providing objective media content of public interest.

During 2020, high governmental officials on several occasions stressed that preparations were ongoing to change policies and reforms, thus enabling the involvement of the educational sector in helping to resolve the problem of the negative impact of disinformation.

That is a step forward compared to previous periods. For example, the Strategy and Action Plan on Education 2018-2025 do not mention the term media literacy at all. The Ministry of Education and Science highlights that the **new Concept on Primary Education**, expected to be adopted at the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021, is based on integrating critical thinking and media literacy as fundamental values within the curriculum.

Taking a strategic approach at national level, especially in the planning and allocation of national resources with a special focus on the funds of the North Macedonia State Budget to resolve this specific issue, is significant. Therefore, some of the civil society organizations dealing with democracy-building, promotion of media pluralism and enhancement of media literacy advocate initiating an inclusive process for developing a national **Strategy on Fight Against Disinformation** involving all stakeholders.

The experience of the Metamorphosis Foundation, based on initiating and/or participating in the development and adoption of a series of strategic papers, starting from the National Strategy on the Development of Information Society adopted 2005, all the way to the Strategy on the Transparency of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia (2019-2021)<sup>23</sup> adopted in 2019, shows that only joint efforts and the involvement of different interest groups of national and educational institutions, including the civic and private sector can successfully and sustainability secure such initiatives.



## 2.4. Legal frameworks related to the pandemic

### Laws and regulations are relevant for spreading pandemic related disinformation

Regarding institutional responses to the challenges related to the pandemic from the viewpoint of dealing with disinformation, two laws are most relevant: the Criminal Code and the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

In the Criminal Code<sup>24</sup> regarding the acts described as spreading fake news in times of epidemics and pandemics, Article 205, Paragraph 5 states:

“Persons who will threaten the security of others with fake threats or by spreading untrue statements about the existence of an incurable disease shall be sanctioned with a monetary penalty or imprisonment up to six months”.

The second relevant law is the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services<sup>25</sup>, according to which in the area of expert supervision undertaken by the Media Agency, the main regulatory body has the right to forbid or limit the broadcasting or re-broadcasting of audio-visual content from other countries (Article 45). The same article also provides that such an action can be undertaken if the measure is performed “to protect public health”. Article 53 limits the right to video-visual commercial messages “harmful for health and security”. From the section regulating the obligations of the public service, Article 110 provides for the public service to be “obliged to inform, educate and broadcast programmes on... people’s health...”.

### Laws and regulations amended as a response to the pandemic

One of the key laws amended was the Law on Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases<sup>26</sup>, debated in the Parliament for a long time. This law, for the first time, introduced the term COVID-19 as a specific disease. The amendments of the law enabled two things. One was that the infected persons may also be treated in private healthcare institutions that fulfilled conditions for treatment, and the other was that the government could propose a wider range of measures as prevention from the pandemic. This meant that

there was no need to open a full-scale parliamentary procedure for every separate measure.

Key to this law was also the fact that the amendments allowed changes to secondary legislation which increased the powers and scope of the inspection services. These allowed them to deal with a wider range of legal entities that were breaking the government measures.

This law, aimed at improving regulation, to a large extent helped the fight against COVID-19 related disinformation when referring to infectious diseases. Above all, those improvements were:

- a) political-healthcare authorities had a wide range of possibilities to handle prevention from Coronavirus by means of secondary legislation without being accused or suspected of adopting measures outside the Constitution or using the laws to score valuable political points;
- b) diminished possibilities for disinformation related to the role of private healthcare facilities and emphasis on their connection with the public healthcare institutions as part of the overall national healthcare system.

In a series of cases, spreading pandemic related disinformation was connected with indications of other criminal acts such as hate speech, which, according to the Criminal Code (Article 319 – Causing hatred, discord or intolerance based on national, racial, religious and other discriminatory basis and Article 394 - spreading racist and xenophobic material through computer systems) could be on the basis of health.<sup>27</sup>

In several disinformation cases, an attempt was made to separate members of a specific ethnic or religious community as the guilty party for spreading the disease or for the consequences, including the upgrade of restrictive measures. Such narratives stemmed from the belief that the measures were just a form of oppression by the Government or in an international context.

### **Rule of law versus impunity**

In spite of the warnings of the Ministry of Interior<sup>28</sup>, the Criminal Code was not applied at all, in terms of spreading disinformation in line with Article 205. Instead, the Government decided to apply a strategy of actively responding to pandemic related disinformation.

Due to the regulation of the mainstream media, above all, broadcasters, serious information errors were not observed, unlike the on-line media not covered by the regulations. This was a general conclusion reached by all stakeholders in the media sphere.

An improvement was even observed compared to previous years when some television stations were uncritically promoting anti-vaxxers as healthcare experts without being sanctioned by the regulatory body<sup>29</sup>.

On the other hand, some of the traditional media were reporting scientifically unproven, off the cuff and confusing statements from politicians and/or doctors who were not working with COVID-19 patients, both from the country and abroad without checking the facts

or appropriate context and explanation. Some errors were unintentional, like the one when a very popular broadcaster in the first few months of the pandemic in North Macedonia uncritically reported the news from a big and famous news agency concerning the very good results achieved with the use of the drug “Azitromicin”, known as “Sumamed” in our region. Sanctions were not applied in such situations by the regulatory body or other national bodies.

The failure of the judiciary to act in response to hate speech cases that anyway have very rarely resulted in official investigation or prosecution – in recent history, only one court judgement exists – is part of the broader impunity issue for criminal acts related to the media. Data is not available for 2020 on whether the Public Prosecution Service and the courts initiated procedures in cases combining COVID-19 disinformation with hate speech or calls for discrimination.



## 2.5. Media self-regulation mechanisms in pandemic conditions

From the beginning of the pandemic, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) called for responsible reporting<sup>30</sup> Together with the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), they published recommendations on the protection of media workers during COVID-19<sup>31</sup>. In the following months, AJM organized tests and assistance for journalists free of charge.



The ability to self-regulate played an important role in terms of noting the violations of the Journalists’ Code, above all in the off-line area. It also worked with reported disinformation cases in the traditional media. On social networks and its website, CMEM promoted all possible solutions. During the peaks of several negative trends, it published special publications on statistics of cases of disinformation in pandemic conditions, guidelines on responsible reporting of media and journalists and several appeals and statements.

As a response to the growing epidemic of fake news or “infodemic”<sup>33</sup>, the CriThink project published a series of educational articles with practical guidance for journalists<sup>34</sup>, and citizens, consumers of media content<sup>35</sup>.

Regarding the use of the self-regulation mechanisms, one needs to mention that according to its Rulebook, the CMEM Appeals Commission can act only on applications submitted by identifiable, natural persons who can act on behalf of legal persons as well. Most appeal cases were from persons who were directly involved in a dispute with a specific medium (for slander or insult).

Such a system requires someone from the outside to submit an appeal against a specific medium on suspicion of spreading disinformation, so that the Commission has a legal basis for decision-making. This is a limiting factor for citizens. Considering the connection of some media with political and criminal centres of power potentially leading to repercussions and revenge, citizens refrain from formal communication with CMEM and avoid submitting appeals on issues of public interest.

On the one hand, a series of media abuses passed “under the radar” of the Commission, but examples of citizens appealing on public interest issues were also noted during 2020. Such was the case with the television station that reported disinformation on the drug “Sumamed”.

For CMEM to be able to act on an increased number of appeals, the capacity of the Commission needs to be seriously built up (in terms of available working hours, funds, human resources) to promptly deal with the influx of media disinformation cases. That implies a complicated and long-term process for which consensus from all CMEM-members is required as well as amendments to the procedures related to the nature of the body.



# 3

## LESSONS LEARNT

### 3.1. Role of national institutions as sources of information on COVID-19

Once the pandemic was declared in March 2020, the actions of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia demonstrated the importance of transparency as a leading principle of good governance.

In the first half of the year, before the crisis management system was fully established and operational, there were a few issues with gaffes and other actions, which were misused by the media and social network groups to undermine confidence in the system or in particular public officials. Since this was happening in the pre-election period, the national institutions were additionally burdened with the provisional structure of the government, when both the ruling parties and the opposition took up temporary, pre-elections positions. In many cases, this resulted in mutual accusation instead of joint action.

In the second half of the year, once people with clear mandates and political responsibility were appointed following the elections, the number of incidents of that kind decreased (though not fully<sup>36</sup>). Improved transparency lessened the tensions and reduced the effects of disinformation. This was especially evident when apart from the transparency on a central level, journalists were given better access to healthcare institutions to interview doctors and patients, thereby dramatically

diminishing the intensity of the conspiracy theory regarding the non-existence of the virus.

koronavirus.gov.mk is a focal point on Internet through which governmental authorities present official information on the pandemic in North Macedonia.

Government officials from the Cabinet of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet of the Minister without Portfolio in Charge of Communication, Accountability, and Transparency (position terminated in August 2020), when referring primarily to tackling disinformation, highlighted the improved transparency and openness for cooperation with all media, media organizations, and individuals. They emphasized that the Government “has no exclusivity in the fight against disinformation, conspiracy theories and manipulations”, and that the “battle is mutual” with joint efforts of all stakeholders in society.<sup>37</sup>

Based on the plan for decisive action against spreading disinformation and attacks on democracy, the Government developed a protocol for crisis communication between the central governmental communication service and the ministries, applied from the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis.

In the first months of the pandemic, the focus of efforts was ensuring that there was clear and comprehensive information, while the focal point for the public was the Minister of Health, Venko Filipche. The Minister, who is a doctor by vocation, was engaged in delivering press conferences for the media, explaining in detail specific measures and situations, sometimes by repeating the information more than once.

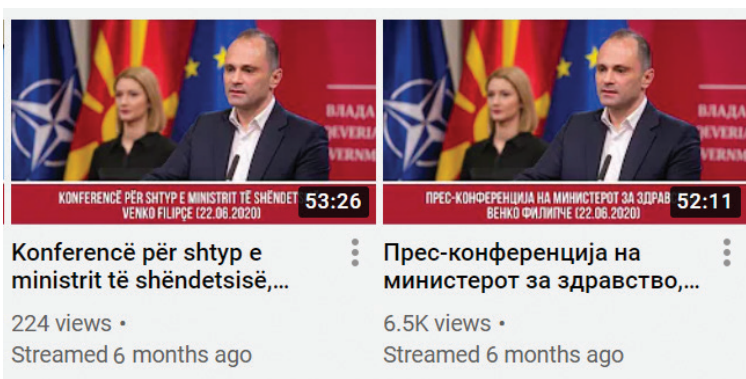
At the same time, a system for informing citizens on the Internet was developed and an official presence on social networks and a channel via the popular application “Viber” that had 50.000 members by the end of the year. Daily statements were published on the channel, passed on to other media with the facts on the number of newly infected, cured and deceased people on a national level and by municipality.

Unlike other countries from the region, where independent journalists pointed out that the official national statistics did not match the data from the field, like in Serbia<sup>38</sup>, credible suspicion in that respect was not noted in North Macedonia.

National institutions established a system of regular bulletin-reporting through which every citizen could receive timely and detailed data on the number of infected, cured, and diseased people at municipality level, including service information on the introduction and implementation of precautionary measures. This significantly contributed to calming the feelings of panic and hopelessness of the population, created by various sources of disinformation.

Off the cuff statements by officials from national institutions or public functionaries, claiming that all was under control, while numbers of infected and deceased citizens from COVID-19 were enormous, undermined the ongoing efforts by the central government to be more transparent, and were seen as insincere by citizens. Unskillful and amateurish attempts to spin or selectively present facts to create a feeling of security generated public confusion and mistrust in the institutions. Such attempts made citizens turn for information elsewhere, without set criteria on the credibility of the sources.

Another aspect that had a great impact on citizen’s perceptions of the measures was the political bickering and blaming between the parties. This made it difficult for the technical government which had been established in January, one hundred days before the initial date for early parliamentary elections which in the end were held in July.



Press-conferences of government officials on COVID-19 were broadcasted on the official youtube channel of the Government in Macedonian, Albanian and in sign language. ([youtube.com/user/VladaMakedonija](https://youtube.com/user/VladaMakedonija))

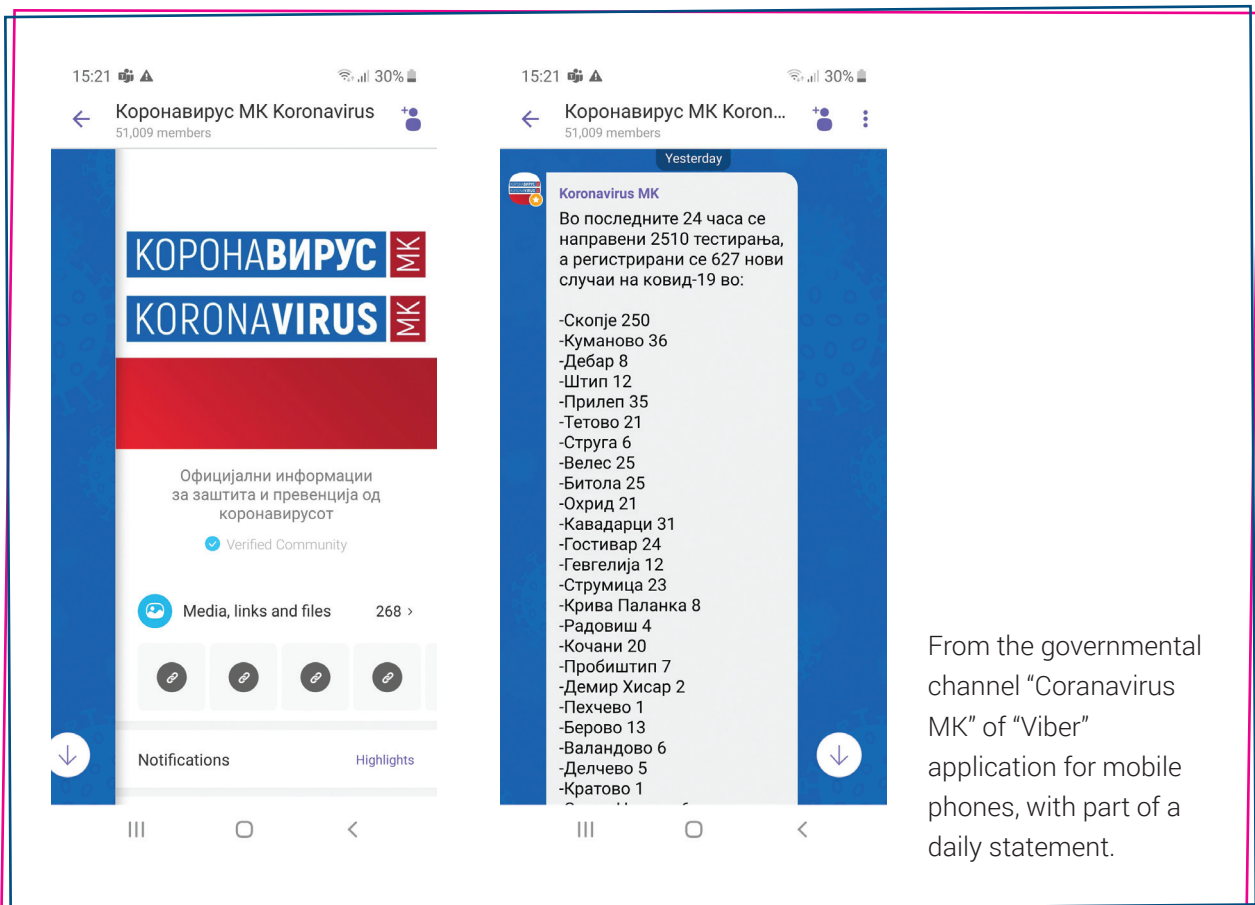
Especially detrimental was the conflict within the technical government on the issue of responsibility for impunity for rally-gatherings that did not respect the prohibitions of grouping, keeping distance, wearing masks and basic hygiene, such as during religious rites. The period of initial spreading of the infection coincided with the pre-election period and several religious and family events, especially those that attracted expected crowds such as Easter and Ramazan. In many cases, the authorities tolerated religious institutions or some priests who did not respect the measures or who spread disinformation, as well as organizers of political rallies of smaller or larger size. In doing this, they demonstrated a populist approach by refraining from any action that might affect the popularity of a certain political player.

A case that illustrated the lack of cooperation between the forces of order and the health authorities was the controversial statement of the technical Minister of Internal Affairs, Nake Chulev from VMRO-DPMNE, who in May claimed that he would not sanction citizens for

violating measures<sup>39</sup>. The media close to the party interpreted such a decision as a courageous act against “pressures”, while the other side, ministers from SDSM, accused him of spreading COVID-19.<sup>40</sup>

This tendency to disagree when it came to health measures within the Government had a serious effect and politicized the whole crisis, opening space for disinformation originating from various national factors and wider acceptance, adaption and spread of disinformation from abroad that was deemed compatible to one political option or another. For example, disinformation coming from right-wing circles from the USA or Serbia were welcomed by the local right-wingers, while the contrary was acceptable to left-oriented citizens.

Endemic impunity was also a factor that reduced the confidence of the citizens in the institutions as it strengthened the perception of selective and biased institutions according to political affiliation instead of scientific-health criteria. Therefore, in many cases



From the governmental channel “Coronavirus MK” of “Viber” application for mobile phones, with part of a daily statement.

of gatherings related to political or religious centres of power, from protests to celebrations, where video-material from the events showed that measures were not complied with, the organizers were not sanctioned appropriately. Such examples were not always along party lines, but they became part of the landscape of

“undetermined” citizens who tended to see politics or the social “elite” together (consisting of politicians, functionaries, high clergy, businessmen) as a source of corruption.

### **Campaign against disinformation in the case of the application “Stop Corona”**

A case that shows the influence of disinformation is that of the mobile application “Stop Corona”, released by the Ministry of Information Society and Administration (MISA) and the Ministry of Health in April 2020. The tool is for citizens who discover that they are infected with the virus COVID-19 and want to help health authorities identify other persons from their “cluster”, that is, people that they were in contact with in the previous 14 days.

Users who install the application receive a verification code for their apparatus. If they are physically close to another mobile telephone with an active application, both mobiles exchange data via the BlueTooth network that has a range of a few meters. On the mobile phone itself, the application creates a list of the codes of all contacts received in the same way, without accessing other personal data. If the user determines that he/she is infected, he/she sends the list to the Ministry of Health’s server.

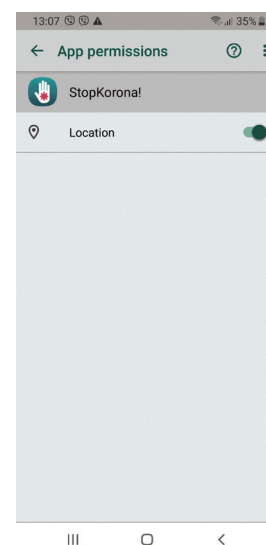
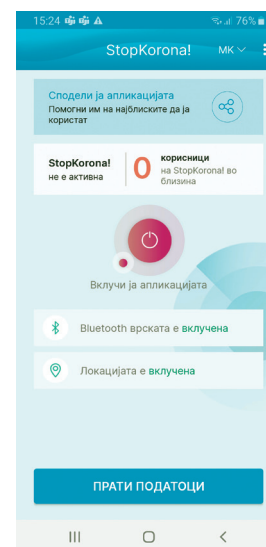
The main benefit of the use of this application can be found on the application’s website [stop.koronavirus.gov.mk](http://stop.koronavirus.gov.mk) where it is stated that “If someone who has been close to you is infected with COVID-19 and he/she shares the data with the Ministry of Health, you shall be informed so that you can undertake timely measures of self-isolation, testing and healing. In addition, it explains that by sending the application data, the users contribute to breaking the chain of spreading the virus faster through “fast identification of infected persons”.

Application “Stop Corona” has access only to information about the location.

Despite the notifications published in the Privacy Policy, and additionally checked by software experts who inspected the programme code, disinformation spread that the application allowed the government to spy on its citizens, thus discouraging many potential users.<sup>4142</sup>

Apart from various on-line articles, Facebook posts, and tweets, one mainstream media outlet in North Macedonia was also involved. On 22nd April, TV "Alfa", a national television with indications that it receives funds from Hungarian companies, dedicated a whole night-talk show<sup>43</sup> to spreading speculation about the application. In the show, probably as protection from defamation lawsuits, the false accusation that the application was used for intercepting communications was not explicitly uttered. The hosts gave their "personal opinion", explaining that they would personally not use it, while the accusations were made in the form of leading questions such as: "why would they need to have access to our photos, camera or microphone with this application?" Unfamiliar faces presented as "IT experts" were also playing with speculations without pointing out the well-known fact that it is easy to determine the data permitted to be accessed by an App on any phone (on Android phones via options from App info in the part Permissions), while for the application "Stop Corona" access is provided only to the location of the phone and not to any other function.

The small number of installations of the application compared to what was predicted forced the Government to discontinue the campaign for its use. Information on its real efficiency was not published and that in itself was a factor that influenced the trust of citizens as potential users, apart from speculation and disinformation.<sup>44</sup>





### 3.2. Role of healthcare institutions and healthcare workers

National and international healthcare institutions play a key role in dealing with disinformation related to medicine, especially when some centres of political or economic power try to make a political impact or profit through various kinds of manipulation in the form of quackery and charlatanism. Where there is weak social cohesion and strong polarization, related to active efforts to destroy confidence in the institutions, healthcare institutions are faced with the need to reconstruct their reputation, literally from scratch, with some segments of the population, if they want to fight conspiracy theories.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed negative perceptions about the role of the healthcare system in a significant segment of the population which had grown in the previous three decades. This was unlike the socialist period before the 1990s when it was unheard of to doubt the credibility of science, especially of national and international medical institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

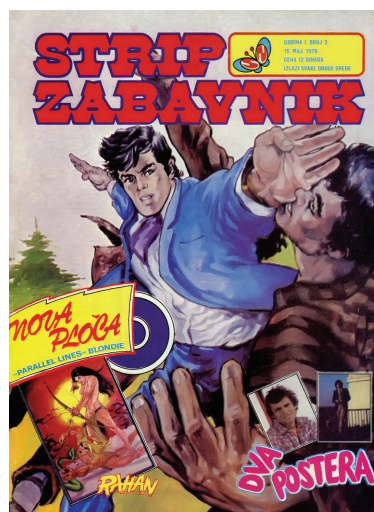
The import of anti-UN, ultra-right conspiracy theories on the “new World order” from the USA and their entanglement with local propaganda found fertile soil in the Balkans. Factors such as distorted trust in the whole UN system after 1990, generally accepted perceptions about the diminished quality of public health and frustration from the inability to access the expensive services of private healthcare have been the basis of the decade-long media and social promotion of “alternative medicine”<sup>47</sup>, quack doctors and anti-vaxxers.

The WHO as part of the UN-system was a special target of disinformation based on lies and spin about its structure and competences. Like the ultra-right propaganda in the USA, the WHO was presented as a dominating foreign body instead of an organization of which the country is a member.

As a response to global and national fact-checking initiatives, specific centres of power or non-formal groups that profit from spreading disinformation and hate speech started contra-campaigns or other similar kinds of sporadic activities. Some of them abused the facts checked by the fact-checkers, whose work is limited, by definition, to confirmed facts that can easily be empirically verified by methods of

#### Changed perceptions of the WHO

The last high level of trust in the institutions was demonstrated in 1972 when Social Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, with the help of WHO, managed to quarantine areas at risk and massively re/vaccinate people when dealing with the last Smallpox epidemic in Europe.<sup>45</sup>



In the following two decades, the WHO and the medical profession enjoyed high respect, strengthened by popular culture, such as domestic films (*Variola Vera*, 1982) and imported comics such as the French comic strip “Docteur Justice”<sup>46</sup> where the main hero is a WHO doctor who is also a martial arts master, published in the well-known “Strip Zabavnik” of “Dnevnik” from Novi Sad from 1979 to 1988.

objective journalistic research. They contradicted the WHO, medical and scientific institutions and official information from national sources which were used as primary sources.

A challenge in this area was the lack of definite scientific conclusions about the nature of COVID-19 despite the need of a large part of the public audience for simple, clear and undisputable “truth”. For those people, the conspiracy theories with their dogmatic approach proved to be more appealing than the complicated scientific explanations (that imply previous understanding of the scientific method applied as well as statistics and probability). Under the circumstances, the changing positions of the WHO which depended on the evolution of the scientific consensus made the work of the fact-checkers more difficult.

For example, it took months before the WHO confirmed that the virus was airborne or to change initial recommendations because only some risk groups needed to obligatorily wear masks (to prevent market shortage in low access conditions). That is why fact-checkers could not rely only on official news, but needed to explain the broader context and check other scientific studies and expert opinions— for which bigger public action by medical institutions and the wider academic community was required to make that information accessible outside narrow scientific circles.

The national response to the need for information relating to the pandemic in North Macedonia was focused on creating a system where the official information was transmitted from one source, the Ministry of Health which, to a certain extent, had a positive impact on decreasing the media cacophony. The daily bulletins with official information on the number of infected and deceased people, as well as the openness to discuss details upon the request of journalists, contributed to reducing public confusion and panic.

### **Appeal for openness of AAVMS**

In the beginning of June, the regulatory body AAVMS “noted a practice of favouring specific media by competent healthcare institutions thus giving them Coronavirus related information first”.<sup>48</sup> The Agency appealed to competent bodies to disseminate full information to all the media at the same time and enable equal access to all of them. The specific institutions referred to were not revealed. In the second half of 2020, complaints of this kind were not noted, neither from the media inclined towards the opposition, nor the independent media.



In such circumstances, most public healthcare institutions (public health institutions, public healthcare centres, national hospitals polyclinics etc.) as well as private healthcare institutions (hospitals, clinics etc.) did not make public statements about the general conditions, except when the information given was directly related to them.

Generally, the same amount of discretion was adopted by the medical faculties and the Doctor's Chamber. They conducted expert discussions about the nature of the disease and other topics in their own closed circles and only with their peers, to avoid misinterpretation and confusion amongst laypersons. Without this approach, people without medical education, who can only partially understand expert knowledge, can interpret the exchange of opposed expert opinion as conflict and that may discourage them from complying with the measures and allow their judgement to turn into selective fact-picking that corresponded with previously adopted prejudices.

On the other hand, when doctors or people from the sphere of science and education went beyond this framework and gave scientifically ungrounded opinions or their own interpretations in an imprecise manner, making the statements susceptible to additional incorrect interpretations, medical authorities rarely published retractions or even responses. This made the work of fact-checkers and professional journalists more difficult.

From time to time, the Macedonian Doctor's Chamber used its Facebook page to publish retractions, like the result of their inquest regarding a case when a patient pretended to be a medical doctor<sup>49</sup> or the appeal from 8<sup>th</sup> June from some of the doctors who were said to "continue to put their opinion before knowledge, WHO-guidelines and national health authorities, thereby acting contrary to the official protocols, evidence-based medicine and the Medical Deontology Code. These doctors do not report the sick for testing and treat them in-house, while some even think that the virus does not exist at all or believe in the conspiracy, thereby increasing the risk of spreading the infection"<sup>50</sup>.



Journalistic stories like the photo-report "Twelve hours with the Ambulance: Long and Hectic Night with Exhaustion and Unbearable Pressure"<sup>51</sup> on "Meta.mk" contributed to busting the myth that the "illness does not exist".

During 2020, the health authorities periodically responded directly to disinformation related to drugs. For example, in the beginning of December, as a response to indications that the drugs “Remdesivir” and “Favira” were being sold “illegally” via the internet for treating Coronavirus, the Minister of Health, Venko Filipche, pointed out that those drugs help other illnesses and situations as well, stressing the fact that drugs that do not cure a concrete diagnosis cannot be prescribed.<sup>52</sup>

Rarely, medical institutions publicly confronted disinformation on the abuse of their peers, such as the opinion that the virus was nothing more than a form of flu, that people were dying from COVID-19 due to ill-treatment of sick people, or that the disease was spreading due to the incompetence of the Infectious Disease Commission composed of politically affiliated doctors who acted as the government told them.


Doctors rarely went public with statements opposing quackery such as the recommendations for saline (mixture of salt and water), various edible products and medically unsubstantiated advice that might postpone hospital treatment for someone who was curing themselves at home. Also, there’s no scientific evidence that any of these so called remedies help the immune system of the people infected with the COVID-19 to fight the virus infection and its consequences.

**The importance of various forms of journalistic reporting**

In the course of the year, public information affirming the work of the healthcare staff combating Covid-19 was also missing. Except for the relatively rare cases of sharing photos on social networks, even the doctors involved in this struggle refrained from action that could distort the situation, such as “bragging”. That brought about a general absence of awareness about the situation both on a systemic and personal level. Subsequently, information on the tremendous efforts of medical staff went public only sporadically, as was the case with Dr. Trajce Neskovski from the Pulmonology and Allergology Clinic and his efforts invested in Debar and Skopje, about which the public became partially familiar only after his death in a traffic accident<sup>53</sup>

In the first half of the year, the focus on statistical data (“numbers”) in public communication of medical authorities had a negative effect on some sections of the population with lower education. For people with low mathematical skills, news based on statistics is complicated and even offensive and contributed to the creation of an inappropriate perception that a bureaucratic construct was in play, especially since manipulation of official data was part of the arsenal of corrupt political centres of power in the last few decades .

Realizing the need of citizens to know about the situation not only through numbers quoted at press conferences for on-line media, but also through credible reporting from the field, some professional media initiated the creation of documentary photo and video stories on the unconceivable efforts of medical staff and personal testimonies of doctors, nurses, paramedics as well as the rare cases of patients ready to present their experience despite the fear of stigmatization, dominant in some environments.



Reporter stories like “Forgotten heroes in the fight against COVID-19: portraits of ambulance staff”<sup>54</sup> in Meta.mk contributed to strengthening public empathy.

### 3.3. Role of political parties

Unfortunately, during 2020, the political parties and their artillery of public relations weapons did not get fully involved in the fight against pandemic related disinformation, and some of them even tried to openly exploit the situation to win “political points” and/or to blame and shame political opponents. These conflict trends were not overcome even in the pre-election period (January-July), when all political parties became part of the ruling structure as an obligation stemming from the 2015 Przhino Agreement, forming a caretaker government whereby some key ministries were led by the opposition.

Generally, the parties held back from openly fighting COVID-19 related disinformation, but also from the wider context. Not once from the many cases when arguments were publicly stated that a party or party-functionary, with or without intent, played a role in spreading disinformation, was a party announcement published, distancing the party from the statement, apologizing to the public or helping the fight against disinformation by publishing checked facts. This general argument refers also to cases when parties and politicians were active sources of disinformation, as well as to cases when they were victims of someone else’s manipulation.

The persistent use of fear and the frustrations of citizens related to the pandemic and the preventive measures for party purposes, especially the attempts to redirect guilt towards political opponents by diminishing trust in the institutions of the system, contributed to reducing the efficiency of the measures and increasing the ongoing polarization and divisions of society.

The ongoing practice of accusation and verbal attack whatever the price, of implementing a continuous, negative and destructive campaign against political opponents, even if that meant spreading COVID-19 related disinformation, proved that the main priority for some parties was earning political points, even if that forsook the truth, cost human lives and spread the pandemic.

Mixing opinions on COVID-19 and insisting on verbal retribution whatever the price, even with perceived injustices from more than five years ago, or a whole decade ago, was part of that practice. Political parties have a long memory from the worst of times, and they thought that they were entitled to spread COVID-19 related disinformation if that would damage political opponents for something that happened in the past



#### COVID-19 spin and the elections

The early parliamentary elections were originally scheduled for 12th April, but due to the state of emergency, they were re-scheduled for 15th July. In the pre-election period, because of manipulation by political parties<sup>55</sup>

and the media close to them, there was bidding for different election dates<sup>56</sup> combined with accusations that lives would be sacrificed intentionally<sup>57</sup>, accusations about the protocols and procedures<sup>58</sup>, and the preferential treatment of some groups of voters<sup>59</sup>.

in a completely different context. This was using defocusing methods instead of critical thinking.

Most parties have an established practice of helping and supporting hidden party e-editions that spread disinformation on social networks to attract audiences with sensational news. This practice of “shadow ownership” where the owner de jure is a commercial entity, but de facto is a political party made it possible to avoid legal and political responsibility for the actions undertaken and disinformation spread.

### Inconsistency of opposition political parties

Since the beginning of the pandemic, in several cases, representatives of the ruling political parties (SDSM, DUI) or of the opposition have helped the spread of disinformation and public confusion with their behavior. Lack of transparency at lower levels or in local government units (LGU) was also a factor that prevented confidence building in the institutions, with both journalists and the broader public.

Having unclear procedures meant that opportunities to demonstrate leadership were missed. These included the consistent application of measures, transmitting confusing messages to the public on whether a message was a decision, decree, order or protocol or whether it could be legally implemented. Such was the case of the citizens’ right to practice their religious freedoms and rights, wearing masks outdoors or the prohibition/ recommendation to avoid groupings indoors, at home, in villas. While wearing a mask at all public events during 2020 became an unwritten rule for most European Union leaders, it did not become a systemically incorporated element in the public relations strategies of the political parties.

Some of the problems with these procedures were part of the broader context, whilst lack of a widely accepted rationale or accountability for them was the basis for spreading additional disinformation. These included:

- insufficient and badly implemented political will to sanction legal persons that abused state subsidies as a measure provided for those affected by the pandemic;

- flirting with the public from time-to-time regarding religious or general folk traditions which could have been dangerous for spreading the virus;
- continuous ‘flirting’ with various interest groups, especially in the second half of the year with adopting or applying measures or protocols intended for implementation by various economic operators or segments of the private sector in the catering and tourism industry.

### Party influence on social networks – opposition troll armies

According to statements from their leadership, some of the political parties established **troll armies**, directly controlled by the party governing structure, working in symbiosis with the media close to the party concerned<sup>60</sup>. For example, a former Minister and Member of Parliament from VMRO-DPMNE publicly announced the existence of a party team charged with spreading hate speech, media lynch and political propaganda on the Internet.<sup>61</sup> A series of anonymous profiles engaged in the campaign #Bojkotiram (“I Boycott” - against the referendum for entering EU and NATO with a different name) in September 2018, turned out to be managed by persons connected with the party Levica.

Party armies of Trolls, at first glance, seem to be the core connected with the communication centre of a specific party, a basic team of more experienced specialists who cooperate with the media close to the party. The basic team manages networks and fake profiles as well as Facebook pages and groups whose relation to the party is not transparent, and they are used to increase visibility and create an illusion of mass. In some cases, the broader party membership is encouraged with various methods to support such profiles or pages by sharing, liking, and commenting on them, for example, by imposing a “norm” for a daily response to content or by receiving direct orders from the municipal committees and/or private messages and group service messages, the so-called messengers.



There are indications that specialists who transferred expertise from Russia in 2015 played a role in the establishment and building of such networks.<sup>62</sup> Party Troll farms also cooperated with **commercial troll farms** from abroad, who operated like mercenaries and provided services on profiles managed by people or automatically (bots).<sup>63</sup>

National commercial Troll farms were active in the country and they spread disinformation as a means of earning cash through ads for readers from the USA and Western Europe<sup>64</sup>, Public data however, on how much the membership of these two types of networks overlaps is not available.

Some political parties openly misused their presence on social networks to spread disinformation originally published by the Troll armies. For example, in the **campaign against fact-checking**, aimed at creating perceptions that fact-checking was equal to censorship, the

campaign implemented a media lynch of reporters and activists with direct threats, hate speech and a series of harassment activities, including advocating violence against organization employees. The campaign started in November and the Facebook pages of some parliamentary parties (local committees of VMRO-DPMNE and Levica) participated directly, publishing slanderous posts from pages of anonymous administrators.<sup>67</sup>

Later, the campaign was joined by the President of VMRO-DPMNE, as well as people from the academic sphere who took over the role of spokespersons, for example, a university professor who had had an ambassadorial position during the time in government of the then main opposition party. Through their FB-profiles some of the leadership of Edinstvena Makedonija (United Macedonia) party, advocating for the interests of the Kremlin and modelled on Putin's United Russia party, were also actively involved.



### Campaign against the fact-checking concept and the reporters applying it

In November, media close to the right-wing political parties initiated a campaign calling fact-checkers censors, since they apparently “deleted” patriotic content from Facebook. Through defamation, they instigated violence against them. Although the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia assessed this behaviour as unprofessional<sup>65</sup>, this media lynch continued with statements given by politicians<sup>66</sup>, surrogates and Troll armies.

### 3.4. Role of the private sector

Although by right, every member of society, with ethical behavior, can and should contribute to the fight against disinformation, the role of the private sector in this study is examined through the viewpoint of its influence on the media. However, information was not available about whether companies from North Macedonia, within the framework of their social responsibility policies, corporate social responsibility, internal ethical codes or codes of conduct, or with their chambers or associations have incorporated this issue.

The role of business entities that were direct media owners was important because as such they could directly influence the editorial policy, as well as a much broader circle of business providing financial support for media through advertisements and sponsorship.

Information obtained from representatives of business entities, as well as of civil society experts on socially responsible enterprises, indicate that businesses give the responsibility of allocating funds for advertisements to separate units or marketing agencies or public

relations agencies, with the main criterion being the ability through a medium to influence a specific target group (by location, language, age and field of interest) or the general public.

In November 2019, the Register of Professional Online Media (promedia.mk) was published. The Register was established by CMEM and AJM and cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce of Macedonia was announced. The Chamber was expected to guide the business community so as to avoid advertising “in media that do not fulfil membership criteria and regularly violate ethical standards.”<sup>68</sup> In the meantime, no report has been published to see whether this endeavour supported an ethical approach to disinformation in advertising, resulting in change of the behaviour of the business community.

The screenshot shows the CriThink website interface. At the top, there are logos for the European Union, the project 'Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens - CriThink', and other partners like 'EY 360 TEBE' and 'METAMORPHOSIS'. A navigation bar includes links for 'НАСЛОВНА', 'ЗА ПРОЕКТОТ', 'ПРОВЕРКА НА ФАКТИ', 'ЕДУКАТИВНИ НАПИСИ', 'ВЕСТИ', 'Е-БИБЛИОТЕКА', 'ГРАНТОВИ', and 'КОНТАКТ'. The main content area features an article titled 'Кој прв почна да шири дезинформации за 5Г?' dated 11/08/2020. The article includes several images of birds and a caption: 'Иста лажна вест за помор на врлчиња имаат објавено „Курир“, „Информакс“, „Република“ и „Вечер“.' Below the article is a text box: 'Како преку јавно достапни алатки може да се види кои домашни медиуми постепено влијаеле за креирање на погрешните мислења поврзани со 5Г-технологијата (5G).' To the right of the article is a contact form with fields for 'name', 'e-mail address', and 'message...', and a 'Send' button. Below the form is a graphic titled 'ПРЕГЛЕД НА ДЕЗИНФОРМАЦИИ И МАНИПУЛАЦИИ ЗА НОВИОТ КОРОНА-ВИРУС КОВИД-19' with an illustration of a virus and people.

The analysis of CriThink, “Who Started First to Spread Disinformation on 5G?”<sup>69</sup> indicated that telecommunication companies were paying ads in media that spread conspiracy theories or colloquially put “they were shooting themselves in the foot”, since they were funding the destruction of the trust in their own (future) services.

In the course of the year, there were no publicly known cases of advertisers that terminated their cooperation with a given medium due to the spreading of disinformation.

In a situation when the primary factor for securing profit of a given medium is popularity, the main criterion becomes the number of readers or spectators that the advertisement may reach or influence politically, and the quality of reporting. This makes both owners and advertisers prone to favouring editorial policies or media outlets that can demonstrate a big outreach. The most inexpensive way to demonstrate this is through sensationalism. The costs are additionally reduced with piracy, unauthorized taking over content belonging to others (copy-paste journalism).

Amongst on-line media, such a trend resulted in a brutal "fight for clicks" through hyper-production of low quality content so that it could influence the generators of news and social networks with quantity. COVID-19 related disinformation and speculation proved to be extremely "clickable" thanks to the citizens need to find out the latest information that could save their lives in a deadly pandemic.

From the viewpoint of advancing public interest, such a situation is unsustainable. Reduced quality of

journalism or its disappearance by turning media into machines for economic or political propaganda, without applying ethical standards, leads to less democracy and lower quality of living. The practice of unauthorized taking over content puts the owners at risk of copyright violation lawsuits.

An additional impact on the media business is the endemic impunity because the ownership and editorial structures of some media – who purposefully spread disinformation – are linked to human rights violation cases (hate speech, putting at risk the safety of reporters or abuse of media power for other criminal acts such as racketeering) or are suspected of corruption in funding from national or foreign sources.

Only a limited number of commercial media such as the production "360 Degrees" and the portal "I Want to Say" refer to the fact-checking practice in their operation thereby indirectly contributing to strengthening public awareness about the importance of the concept.

Usually, commercial media are fully aware when they ignore this part of journalism (regardless of the fact that they follow with extreme interest the procedures of the fact-checkers acting publicly) or treat it as a threat, and fully aware or not, join forces with the disinformation campaigns against the concept.



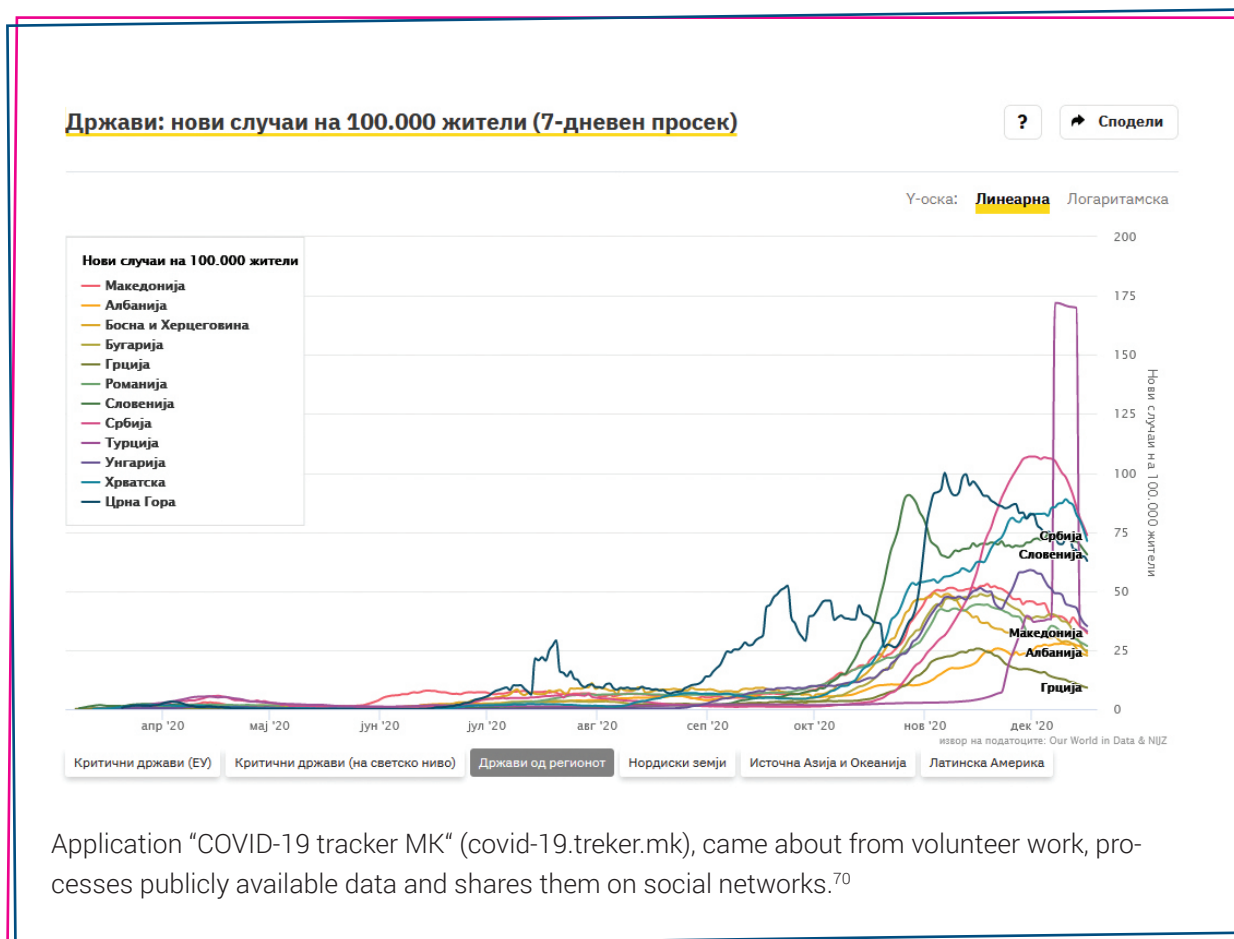
### 3.5. Role of civil society

Considering the general struggle to fight disinformation, civil society organizations in North Macedonia played a key role in launching initiatives to promote media literacy, critical thinking, journalistic standards and fact-checking. The number of organizations that were constantly active in this field was relatively small which speaks about the low capacity and lack of resources for such organizations in the country, especially outside the capital, in smaller towns and rural areas.

Capacity-building efforts in this sphere were mainly implemented through projects supported by foreign donors where more experienced organizations managed sub-granting schemes. For example, the programme of the Delegation of the European Union

(IPA Civil Society Facility and Media Programme 2016-2017) awarded three grants to Metamorphosis, MIM and “YEF” during the period 2018-2021.

Some civil society organizations did not participate in disinformation related activities because they were afraid of vengeance from the centres of power disseminating them. For example, just a few from thousands of CSOs publicly opposed the campaign against fact-checking (AJM, CMEM, Union, MOST, Civil, Helsinki Committee on Human Rights).



### Civic initiatives for COVID-19

The focus of civic initiatives related to the pandemic was to secure accurate information to oppose the detected disinformation and to implement counter-activities. An example of an information related project is the localization of the Slovenian non-profit application for following data on the spreading of COVID-19, "Sledilnik", or "Tracker" for North Macedonia, that included volunteers translating into Macedonian and Albanian.

Some CSO specialists in specific areas published information editions for their target groups. For example, HERA had a separate section on its website on the impact of COVID-19 on sexual and reproductive health<sup>71</sup>).

The media review of published articles for 2020 does not indicate examples of civil society organization's response to disinformation related to their expert areas.

### Civic initiatives for the direct fight against disinformation

Unlike the entities from commercial sector such as media companies and advertisers, civil society organizations played a key role in recognizing and highlighting the problem with disinformation during 2020. Civil society initiatives to counter this problem usually in the two ways – through engagement of existing media outlets owned by civic associations, or by implementing special projects for fact-checking as a specialized genre of journalism, promoting media literacy or analysing the phenomenon of disinformation from various aspects. The following table provides an overview of projects and media related to this topic.

Civil society organizations secured funds for these kinds of activities mainly from foreign sources, more precisely from NATO and EU Member-States. To date, no information is available about the participation of national donors, especially the private sector, in funding activities fighting disinformation.

Very often, projects fighting disinformation were not only ignored by the commercial media, but also by other CSOs. The general impression was that civil society organizations were more inclined towards the projects that they had already worked on on the topic, rather than contributing to further dissemination of current content against disinformation.

Project/specialized medium	Web-address	Implemented by	Est.	Language
Truthmeter	vistinomer.mk	Metamorphosis	2011	MK, AL, EN
Media Fact-checking Service	proverkanafakti.mk	Metamorphosis	2012	MK, AL, EN
With Critical Thinking to Citizens with Media Dexterity - CriThink	crithink.mk	Metamorphosis, Eurothink	2018	MK, AL
Stop Disinformation	stopdezinformacii.mk	MIM, IKS, SSNM	2018	MK
Fighting Fake News Narratives	f2n2.mk	MOST	2018	MK, AL, EN

Medium	Web-address	Established by	Est.	Language
Portalb	portalb.mk	Metamorphosis	2012	AL
Radio YEF	radiomof.mk	YEF	2013	MK
News Agency Meta.mk	meta.mk	Metamorphosis	2014	MK, EN etc.
CIVIL MEDIA	civilmedia.mk	CIVIL	2015	MK
FrontLine	frontline.mk	Shortcut	2019	MK

The following **media, owned by civil society organizations**, or other legal persons, opened separate sections or categories publishing articles fighting disinformation, such as checking facts, news, or other analytical content in this area.

A more general role in the fight against disinformation that civil society organizations played was that they were part of the system of **self-regulation within the framework of the journalistic profession** (see chapter 2.4), as were the media organizations that specialized in the **promotion of professional journalistic standards**.

- Organizations that were part of international networks were the:
- Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (semm.mk)
- Association of Journalists of Macedonia (znm.org.mk)
- Macedonian Institute for Media (www.mim.org.mk)
- Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (ssnm.org.mk)

In the Republic of North Macedonia, sources of disinformation were often involved in spreading **hate speech** and various forms of discrimination as instruments for political propaganda. Several organizations were continuously active in identifying and opposing hate speech, inter alia, by demanding accountability from public institutions in charge of implementing the Criminal Code in this area. These include the following organizations which were active at the time:

- the Helsinki Committee on Human Rights (mhc.org.mk) which manages two platforms for reporting hate speech cases (govornaomraza.mk) and hate crimes (zlostorstvaodomraza.com).
- the CIVIL – Centre for Freedom (civil.org.mk), which monitors hate speech as part of its regular activities, especially during elections and similar important events.
- Metamorphosis, which focuses on hate speech on the Internet, through the Resource Centre “Stop Hate Speech on the Internet” (nemrazi.mk).

### Networking at national level

In 2017, on the initiative of the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services, the **Media Literacy Network** (mediumskapismenost.mk) was established. This national network promotes media literacy as a value. It also promotes the results and enhances the influence of its members from the area in a broader sense, especially by organizing joint events. The most important of these is the annual event “Days of Media Literacy” that is synchronized with UNESCO’s “Week of Media Literacy”.

The network has 62 members (public institutions, ministries, civil society organizations, educational establishments, and broadcasters). It is always open for new members. During 2020, the network undertook activities for building institutional structures (working bodies, public relations strategy), thus enabling its greater efficiency.

## Networking at international level

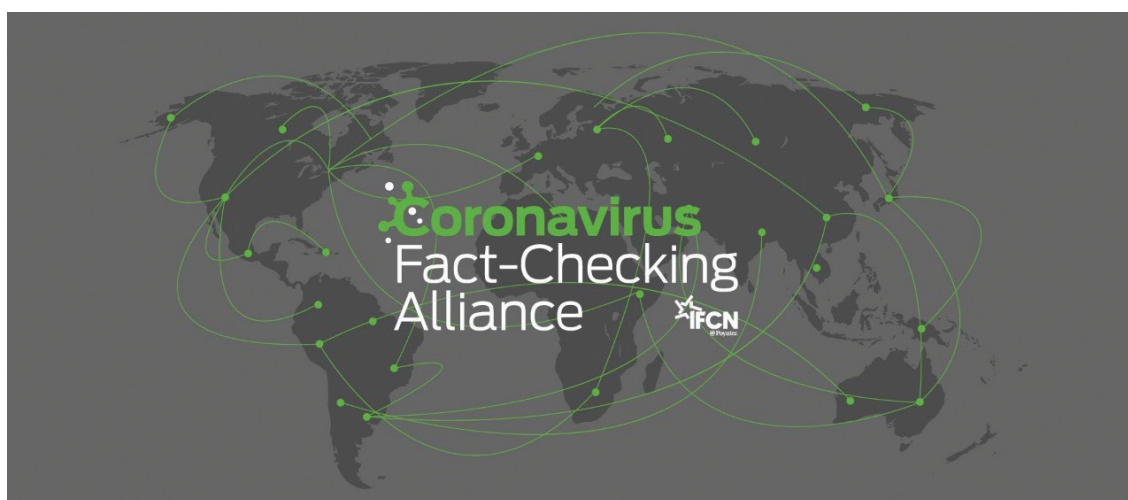
Some of the CSOs from North Macedonia are also members of international networks fighting disinformation.

The most significant network is the **International Fact-Checking Network - IFCN**, the largest network of its kind in the World established in September 2015. The network developed a Code of Principles<sup>72</sup>, underlining the quality assurance and transparency obligation of its members. Licensing of signatories on an annual basis is done by the network. The Metamorphosis Foundation participated in the establishment of IFCN, while the service "Truthmeter" is one of the 75 newsrooms for fact-checking on a global level.

As a response to spreading COVID-19 related disinformation, IFCN-members established **Coronavirus Facts Alliance** (#CoronaVirusFacts Alliance) on 25<sup>th</sup> January 2020, the largest joint initiative in this area on a global level. The following year, an additional 99 organizations from over 70 countries joined.<sup>73</sup> The main tool of the Alliance is the database<sup>74</sup>, that collected over 10,300 fact-checks worldwide, originally done in 40 languages within one year. "Truthmeter" contributed with around 180 from North Macedonia. Comparable data is entered in English and Spanish, enabling analysis and identification of trends. The Alliance offers various forms of support for the projects of members through grants from different donors, administered by IFCN.

Regionally, during 2020 organizations from the North Macedonia were active in the following networks with a thematic focus on promoting the fight against disinformation.

- ACTION SEE - Accountability, Technology and Institutional Openness Network in the South-East Europe region (actionsee.org), established by organizations that introduced fact-checking first in the countries of the Western Balkans amongst which is Metamorphosis.
- ADN Balkans – Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (antidisinfo.net), has heterogenous members, including fact-checking and media organizations, individual media from both candidate-countries and EUMS in the Balkans. It was established by Metamorphosis, together with 9 other organizations from Serbia, Kosovo, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria.
- SEE Check (fb.me/SeeCheckNetwork) is a network of fact-checking portals fighting disinformation from the countries of the former Yugoslavia, except for Kosovo. The association MOST with the portal F2N2.mk are members of this network.



[poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/](https://poynter.org/ifcn-covid-19-misinformation/)

### 3.6. Role of the academic community

Despite the huge potential of the scientific-research institutions, and the need for their involvement in the fight against pandemic-related disinformation, in the course of 2020, the academic institutions, such as the Macedonian Academy of Science and Arts (MASA), universities and institutes were generally absent from public debate in this matter.

Public information on the work of scientists who research this topic is scarce and depends on the personal enthusiasm of such researchers who are usually involved in international research networks and projects. In 2020, the number of scientists who gave public statements as a response to specific COVID-19 related disinformation or with an analysis of trends is relatively small, especially in terms of the total number of academic staff in both public and private scientific and educational institutions.

Contrary to the lack of presence of expert scientists in the media, during the same period quite a few media outlets continued to promote as authority figures or “experts” persons who were not directly engaged in COVID-19 research, prevention or treatment of patients or related issues<sup>76</sup> but used the media platform to promote political opinions or off the cuff personal views. Media transmitted such statements without journalistic filter or basic fact-checking. The authority position of these figures relied on their academic positions as

experts in different fields, or because of their positions as politicians or celebrities. In several cases the media promoted persons who have acquired formal medical education but were not licensed doctors actually practicing medicine or working COVID-19 patients, nor were they involved in any credible scientific research in the field.

Such people often gave opinions contrary to the scientific facts or, in cases of university professors, gave statements based on what they had heard from the media without an analysis of scientific standards. In addition, the way these statements were made was imprecise or vague, thus confusing the public and enabling further media manipulation. Part of such statements also contained elements of discrimination and hate speech. Despite the reactions of human rights organizations, these statements were generally ignored by both mainstream media and “host” academic institutions from where these persons derived their public authority.

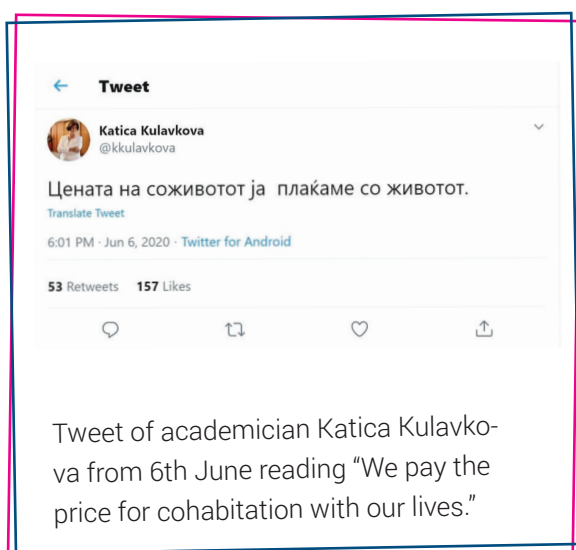
An example was the scandal with the academician Katica Kulavkova, member of MASA, who tweeted that the blame for spreading COVID-19 lay with certain ethnic/ religious communities, denying the concept of cohabitation in a multi-ethnic society<sup>77</sup> Experience from the Balkan wars from the Nineties proved that the “alternative” of that concept is ethnic cleansing and

#### Appeal to authority

is a fallacy when the opinion of a person presented as an authority is exhibited as evidence for the validity of a specific opinion, while used for political demagoguery and commercial marketing.

For example, in “The Thinker’s Guide to Fallacy”, scientists are employed by companies selling cigarettes in the USA to refute or minimize the harmful effects of tobacco. The same companies also funded the establishment of the American Tobacco Institute.<sup>75</sup>

genocide. Following the response from citizens, the academician closed her Twitter profile. No institutional response mirrored the reaction of the Helsinki Committee<sup>78</sup> neither from the Prosecution Service, nor from the academic institutions concerned, while the nationalistic oriented media and the party Troll networks presented Kulavkova as a victim of political prosecution.



As in many similar cases, most of the media did not show any interest in holding to account people who spread disinformation from a position of power in the academic community. They thus controlled significant national resources and the opportunity to influence both peers and students.

While commitment for revealing the objective truth is a basic tenant of science, academic institutions in North Macedonia generally don't initiate ethical procedures against their employees who have been spreading disinformation or promoting discrimination. During 2020, there was no public information about any initiative on an institutional level for holding a member of an academic institution accountable for making public statements that violate the basic ethical standards or codes of conduct.

### 3.7. Role of the national system of formal education

#### Reform process at national level

As a response to the pandemic and infodemic, in relation to the educational system in 2020, the Ministry of Education and Science played a key role, and, to a certain extent, the Bureau for Development of Education as the body that implements changes in the curriculum and builds capacity and assesses the work of the teachers in primary and secondary schools.

On 10<sup>th</sup> March, as a measure against the spread of COVID-19, the Government closed the schools. This was followed by a gradual introduction of distance learning methods<sup>79</sup>. To have enough time to prepare for the school year 2020-21, especially for the teacher training on how to use e-learning systems recently introduced, the beginning of the school year was moved from 1<sup>st</sup> September to 1<sup>st</sup> October.

Apart from implementing the decision to move from physical presence to distance learning as a preventive measure for students and teachers, data on other implemented measures relating to the pandemic in the public educational system (primary and secondary education) is not publicly available. Namely, there was no extraordinary change of curriculum or introduction of new content explaining the pandemic to both teachers and students or training on how to deal with pandemic related disinformation. Data on extraordinary educational measures related to the infodemic is also not available for the public universities, that are autonomous in relation to public institutions, but also for private educational institutions at every level.

Regarding policies that would influence the future, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the need to introduce a series of reforms to modernize education. This included the introduction of media literacy which had a positive impact on the increase of political will<sup>80</sup> (readiness of relevant decision makers among public officials to provide institutional support) so that the process initiated in 2019 could be, finally, completed. The work of the multi-sector working group consisting of 16 members from public institutions, academia, civil society dealing



with media literacy and the media community, as part of the Coalition on Media Literacy established by MIM, did not continue its work during the spring of 2020 due to the fact that education staff was too busy managing the urgent activities in the educational system as a response to the pandemic.

**The readiness to face media manipulation “should become part of the intuitive response of every future citizen whom we are developing now through the educational system, creating an individual capable of critical thinking and differentiating between what is true and what is false” – Mila Carovska, Minister of Education and Science of North Macedonia**

On the other hand, the results from the process were used by public institutions in the preparation of comprehensive education reforms by introducing a new Primary School Concept. When announcing the consultation process on the Concept, relevant public officials such as the Minister, Mila Carovska, stressed that the goal of the reform was integrating critical thinking and media literacy within the framework for all levels of education, starting from first grade.<sup>81</sup>

Additional consultations between Metamorphosis and MES indicated that the new Concept would enable a modular introduction of media literacy content (from a broader viewpoint, including digital literacy and creating resilience to disinformation) as modules in all subjects, by amending the curriculum and creating teaching content in the first half of 2021 so that they can start implementation in the following school year. A big factor in accomplishing this change is securing resources for teacher training for which is needed a readiness to cooperate with civil society organizations with experience in non-formal education in the field of

media literacy and an educational package of content adapted to the local context.

The MES is planning primary education reforms to serve as a model for other parts of the educational system which provides integrated media literacy in the upcoming years.

### Role of schools and teachers

Information received from parents and pupils in primary education point out that in the course of the pandemic, schools and teachers did not offer additional pandemic related information, except for the service information connected with teaching.

More specifically, no attempts were noted on the part of the teachers or parents to provide explanations about widely spread disinformation on COVID-19 from their field of expertise within the framework of teaching, for example, during Science classes. Lessons on micro-organisms and diseases exist within the framework of Biology for seventh grade, and that could have been supplemented with discussions on the Coronavirus, while knowledge from lessons on water in the environment explaining the water cycle and condensation could serve as the basis for discussing conspiracy theories regarding the fake story of spraying from planes.



### 3.8. Role of social media platforms

The most popular social media platforms in the Republic of North Macedonia are Facebook and Twitter amongst adult generations, and YouTube and Instagram amongst younger citizens. In addition, TikTok and Twitch are popular with children. In response to the pandemic, on a global level, each of these platforms undertook specific measures to inform users, and some have even introduced mechanisms to directly confront the influx of disinformation.

#### Promotion of credible sources of information related to the pandemic

Some of these activities included promotion of the official sources of information such as the WHO. With the establishment of local official sources by the governments of individual states, that type of information was included in communications with users, adjusted according to the locality. For example, when searching for keywords related to COVID-19, users were prompted to use a special page called “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Information Centre”, which provides links to the pages of the national and international institutions, starting with the Ministries of Health all the way to UNICEF and the WHO.

Some platforms can mark a presence of an institution or public figure on certain social media (pages, profiles, channels) as official, by confirming the connection with a specific entity, thereby strengthening their credibility with users and reducing the possibility of identity theft by others, including pages by private persons who would falsely present themselves as official sources. In response to the pandemic, the social networks, in cooperation with the authorities, provided additional verification of official pages/profiles of public institutions that were not labelled as such. This included the special pages or profiles developed for the purpose of disseminating official and verified information about COVID-19, run by government institutions.

An example of such cooperation is the establishment of a special status for the channel of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia on YouTube, as a primary means of broadcasting press conferences hosted by the Minister of Health or other relevant representatives. According to a statement given by a representative of the Government of North Macedonia,<sup>82</sup> the governmental YouTube channel was the target of coordinated attacks, including abuse of the reporting system by flooding it with false user reports. After reporting this threat, YouTube secured special status for the channel, which within the platform algorithm made it immune to certain types of reports, automatically blocked their operation provided they were numerous and allegedly secured technical protection from other types of ill-intentioned actions.

For users from North Macedonia, a special page on Facebook on pandemic related information (facebook.com/coronavirus\_info) offers data on the state of affairs and institutions in their country.

## Fight against disinformation on social media

According to the publicly available information, the activities to fight disinformation on some social network platforms generally fall into two areas. One is to upgrade the already existing mechanisms for reporting violations of the terms of use and the other is the introduction of new actions specifically designed to reduce the impact of identified disinformation.

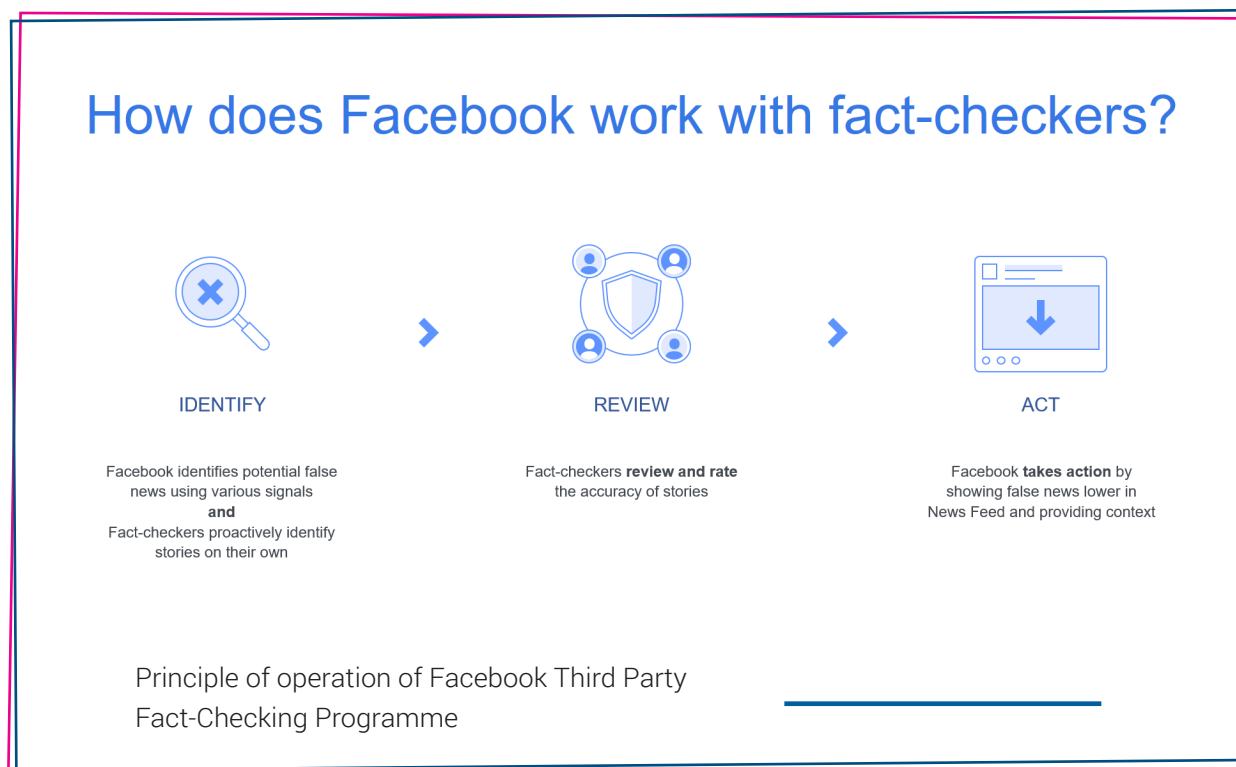
**Every social network user when he/she becomes a member of a given platform, signs a valid legal contract obliging himself/herself to adhere to rules of use. The principle of pressing the button “I agree” in an application has the same legal effect as a signature in a hard copy contract and is part of the laws on electronic trading in North Macedonia, EU and USA.**

The current popularity of social networks has made them the most influential content distribution platform on the planet. Such infrastructure is “technologically neutral” from an ethical standpoint because so far there is no way to embed ethics into algorithms to distinguish “good” from “bad” content without human intervention. At the same time, such a situation makes algorithms susceptible to manipulation by people who do not apply ethical principles in their social media activity.

The detected problems related to the rules of use of social networks that had an impact on the spread of COVID-19 disinformation in 2020 and in 2021 are outlined below.

- Some media promote their content not only through an official page (where by logging-in they establish business relations with Facebook), but also through other, unofficial pages with repetitive content. On the other hand, that uniformity of content of different pages can serve as an indicator for algorithms (but also for citizens) that a spamming or trolling scheme is operating.
- Currently, there is no limitation to the number of pages administered by the same administrator. There are indications that some administrators administer a dozen pages (much more than the scope of personal interests of a specific individual), which seems like a spamming machine. The Facebook algorithms apparently limit the sharing of links on pages. Users who are extremely active in sharing links on pages get warned, followed by “time out” or a three-day term when they cannot share. Such a measure has not been noted with page administrators.
- For the time being, the existence and operation of the so-called **Facebook page farms** is not regulated. Such websites are conceived as several pages linked to the same web-address (some of them don’t even have their own identity, and are even in the testing phase), posting only clickbait articles spread afterwards through FB-pages to receive as many likes as possible. The pages with tens of thousands of likes accumulated are sold to the websites that need such pages to increase visibility without investing proper effort in reaching out to the audience.
- There are no sanctions for **trading with FB-pages, which is part of the grey economy** (not from the platforms, nor from the public institutions). In North Macedonia, but also worldwide, there is a widespread underground economy of trading Facebook pages. In North Macedonia, a page with tens of thousands of followers sells for 250 euros, but worldwide, pages whose content can be commercialized and where various products can be promoted and thus receive money from advertisers related to the topic covered by that page can cost hundreds of thousands of Euros. This is illicit trading, of course, which is contrary to the policies of the Facebook community, and forbidden by national authorities in some countries, and may be linked to tax evasion and money laundering.

Dependence on algorithms to resolve issues in the communications with its users makes social networks susceptible to manipulation and abuse. Communication between people is complex and largely depends on instinct, body language, tone of voice and type of message. All of these features, and numerous others, are either invisible for the algorithms or difficult to handle, subsequently causing many errors in the process. The history of development of digital technology shows that it is common for workers to be replaced by digital tools or computer-controlled



machines, but not vice-versa. Valuable times and resources are wasted, especially by users who are victims of abuse by others, because a bad algorithm is more expensive than an employee doing a much better job.

There is a need to hire experts who know the local context in a given community to analyze the complex interpersonal communication on social networks. The algorithms that enable automated functionality should be developed in collaboration with experts and users, segment by segment, through an inclusive approach. Often, the solutions imposed globally carry embedded assumptions and bias related to the culture of their creators or other decision-makers.

Some social networks incorporate the fight against disinformation or popularly called “fake news” within their infrastructure. During 2020 and in early 2021 such actions usually involved **marking** the content recognized as particularly harmful disinformation, **but not its removal**, as is done in cases where their teams, according to internal criteria or in consultation with the authorities of specific countries or other entities, will determine violation of the terms of use and national laws (Criminal Code, Law on Copyright).

In June 2020, Facebook expanded its Third-Party Fact-Checking Programme<sup>83</sup>) in the Western Balkans region, and the Republic of North Macedonia started cooperation with the Metamorphosis Foundation and its fact-checking service Truthmeter<sup>84</sup>. The selection of partners was made from the ranks of organizations certified through a non-partisan International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).

The focus of this programme is to identify and deal with viral disinformation, especially that related to obvious deceptions that are not fact-based. According to the **methodology**, priority is given to **claims whose inaccuracy can be proved**, especially current or trending ones that are important to the average citizen.<sup>85</sup>

**Facebook's partners do not have the ability to directly remove (delete, block) content that is marked as false or manipulative on other grounds. Experience from the first 5 months of work in North Macedonia shows that some marked content was removed by the authors themselves in an attempt to interrupt public debate, intensified by debunking inaccurate information, with a link to detailed explanation that is publicly available on the Truthmeter website (vistinomer.mk) in a special fact-checking section.**

The programme policy<sup>86</sup> clearly indicates which types of content do not fall within its domain: it does not cover analysis of opinions or interpretations that are not directly fact-based, that may be proved inaccurate based on objective journalistic analysis, as well as announcements and ads originally posted by politicians and parties in their official presence on Facebook.

When a fact-checker rates a news item as fake, Facebook disables its promotion through paid ads, and may resolve to display it below in the News Feed, significantly reducing its further spread. This prevents the spread of the deception and reduces the number of people affected by the news. The pages and domains that constantly share fake news may also be reduced in scope, and their ability to earn and advertise will be removed. In addition, when a post is marked as disinformation, Facebook warns people who view it or try to share the marked post.

By the spring of 2021 the terms of services of social networks didn't not include significant sanctions for spreading disinformation via **personal profiles**. After marking posts as disinformation, one can assume that the profile will lose part of the audience who believed in them, but no empirical evidence exists on how much, if at all, the traffic was reduced.

An incentive for owners of Facebook pages that encourages compliance with the terms of use is related to the ability to earn money by posting content on the platform. Some platforms have introduced demonetization measures that reduce the ability of pages to earn money or use ads to promote their content, or use some multimedia features, if they have been repeatedly violating the terms of service. However this has not applied to personal profiles used for spreading disinformation. During 2020 and during early 2021 personal profiles had no restriction and could also spread disinformation through live videos. Owners of such profiles can create an unlimited number of groups and pages to use as new outlets replacing ones that had been restricted in the past.

In the effort to deepen cooperation between the social network platforms and professional journalists, including fact-checkers, it is necessary to initiate a public debate on methods of escalating sanctions against private profiles that constantly spread disinformation, with the intention of reducing access to the various options available on social networks. These might include restriction on the number of live videos, restriction of the right to manage a large number of pages and groups and inability to conduct surveys.

Unfortunately, so far, the majority of mainstream and online media in North Macedonia have not expressed willingness to initiate and participate in such debates, which is evident from their ignoring of fact-checking activities (on and off Facebook), and ignoring and not opposing campaigns that discredit<sup>88</sup> through disinformation, hate speech, and incitement to violence against journalists. Exceptions are articles on similar debates taken from foreign media.

In the period August-December 2020, as part of the Truthmeter programme, about one hundred and seventy posts on Facebook from North Macedonia were checked. 59% of the checks were about COVID-19 pandemic related disinformation, mostly conspiracy theories sabotaging life-saving measures. Some of the posts contained not only disinformation, but also violated the terms of use in other ways, such as spreading hate speech or inciting violence against medical professionals<sup>87</sup>.

Users from North Macedonia have shared content marked as disinformation in other countries. Such posts appearing on their pages or profiles will also have a warning that they are disinformation, and be linked to the articles with an explanation by members of the international fact-checking partnership.

### 3.9. Particularities related to the multicultural feature of North Macedonia

Considering that the Republic of North Macedonia is a multiethnic, multicultural, multi-lingual and multi-confessional community, the question whether certain ethnic or religious groups were specifically targeted, or specifically responded to particular types of COVID-19 related disinformation is often posed.

Previous experience shows a linguistic division of the media environment into three general parts – media with Macedonian working language, media with Albanian language, and a range of small media in the languages of other communities (with quite a limited scope). This division is a factor in political communication, through cases of sending different messages from the same source in different languages. Editorial policies of individual media that direct their coverage only to specific regions or target groups are an issue for insufficiently informed citizens.

The research entitled “Pandemic and Infodemic” of the CriThink project from 2020 indicated some differences

in the perceptions of the surveyed citizens who declared themselves as ethnic Macedonians or ethnic Albanians. Thus, to the question “Does our government hide information or not?”, the Albanians expressed a lower level of distrust than the Macedonians, (43% opposed to 49%), that can be seen in terms of whether political parties that declare themselves ethnic work actively on creating those perceptions or not.

The experience of journalists covering the fight against disinformation pointed to examples of false claims that resonated with some social groups, despite the frequent disinformation about new ways and remedies to “cure” Corona, the imaginary effect of 5G, “chipping” through vaccines and their “bad” effect which were common.

One of the most frequent and biggest disinformation in the Albanian media in North Macedonia was the rumour that 4,000 Euro were given to Albanians to say that someone from their family had died from Coro-

ДЕЗИНФОРМАЦИЈА!

In June, many media outlets broadcasted the disinformation that Greece would de facto introduce ethnic selection for entry from North Macedonia as one of the measures against COVID-19, implying that the Albanians and the Roma, that is, the Muslims, were to blame for the spread of the virus. The effect of such operations was to encourage ethnic and religious tensions.<sup>90</sup>



navirus. This disinformation spread primarily through Facebook” comments in order to convince people that Coronavirus did not exist and that, apparently, it was a government campaign designed to increase the official number of infected people in order to receive European funds. These claims from bots and suspicious profiles were published by several portals.<sup>89</sup>

The phenomenon stated above is not limited to ethnic Albanians only. Such claims were spread via the profiles of ethnic Macedonians as well. From the discussion with citizens from Skopje and East Macedonia, these claims were accepted as true. In Spring, Summer, and even Autumn 2020, in face-to-face communication, statements were given by some celebrities and relatives of infected or deceased people (also face-to-face discussion), claiming that their loved one had other symptoms, but that 500 to 2,000 Euros had been offered to them by the healthcare institutions to sign that the patient had COVID-19. Such claims stem from the long-lasting exposure of the public in the country to various conspiracy theories that escalated with the first mass appearance of anti-vaxxers in 2015.

The disinformation that Greece was closing the borders only to Albanian municipalities in Macedonia which had many infected people was initially reported by the Macedonian language media<sup>91</sup>, but it was widely spread in the Albanian media. To disinform the public, a false photo was also published, allegedly from the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs that claimed that such a ban existed, but the news was retracted by the ministries of foreign affairs of both Greece and North Macedonia.<sup>92</sup>

Intruding on the inviolability of the home was also one form of manipulation that resonated with the Albanian public. For example, there were media stories from July (three days before the elections) that the Police would most probably be coming into private homes due to the increased number of persons diagnosed with COVID-19. The whole disinformation chain started from a statement given by the Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, Agim Nuhiu, that was taken out of context and intentionally manipulated. The truth, however, was that he had appealed to people not to organize weddings or

other types of celebrations, because the Police would intervene with arrests, sanctions and putting guests in collective quarantine. The news was broadcasted even by the media in Albania and Kosovo.<sup>93</sup>

The ways of spreading disinformation at local level, within smaller communities such as a municipality, town, or village, followed patterns that differed from national level. Disinformation disseminated from local political and economic centres of power were especially effective in environments with extremely low level of socio-economic development such as poverty and lack of education. In such circumstances, the main method of spreading both information and disinformation was word of mouth. Local power centers used digital media less consistently and as one-way communication channels. Lack of media in local languages or dependency or susceptibility to the influence of other local strongmen played a key role in these situations.

An example of this was the widespread opinion about the death of the politician and business magnate, Amdi Bajram amongst the majority Roma population in the municipality Shuto Orizari (which is part of City of Skopje metropolitan area). In October, Bajram caused a scandal by organizing a wedding abroad (Turkey) to avoid the ban on such celebrations in his own country<sup>94</sup>, which was one of the measures against the pandemic. Bajram had several chronic diseases<sup>95</sup>. When he died a week later, the Clinic “Zhan Mitrev” announced that he was COVID-19 positive<sup>96</sup>. The family denied any connection with the illness<sup>97</sup> and organized a controversial massive funeral that was not in compliance with COVID-19 protocols for the deceased<sup>98</sup>. A month later, an interview conducted with inhabitants of the municipality proved that the perception promoted by the family was persistent even to the extent that one respondent claimed that apparently “Zhan Mitrev himself said that Amdi did not have Corona”.

The experience of the team of Metamorphosis over the last decade shows that even in the sphere of daily reporting and fact-checking, citizens appreciate it when they are provided with accurate and timely information in their mother tongue or when stories are adapted to the local context, for example, by taking regional identity into consideration.



### 3.10. Cross-border disinformation

Part of the disinformation related to the pandemic can be categorized as cross-border disinformation that is, stories that originated in one country are taken over by another where they mutate and adapt to the local context or conspiratorial need, only to continue to spread within the region. Often such disinformation returns to the country of origin with additional credibility because they are from abroad or from a country for which inhabitants have a high regard.

The Balkans is especially vulnerable to the spread of such disinformation due to a combination of common factors (such as knowledge of languages of some countries and cultural ties from the past) with points of separation (such as language barriers and culture or media isolation because of historic, political, and other reasons). Both types of factors are fertile environments for spreading disinformation. It is easy to misinterpret or spin news which originated in a language that is not spoken by the majority of the public, and even easier to accept disinformation in a familiar or compatible language.

For example, the media in Serbia has great influence in Montenegro, Bosnia and North Macedonia, while the media from Albania is appreciated by the ethnic Albanian population in Kosovo and North Macedonia. In both cases, local media take over content via so-called “copy-paste journalism” thereby recycling inaccurate data in a sensational manner without making the basic check.

One of the main features of cross-border disinformation is the lack of explanation about the context, which is especially appropriate for presenting irrelevant, and even malicious persons or organizations from other countries as relevant and secure sources.

#### Examples of cross-border disinformation

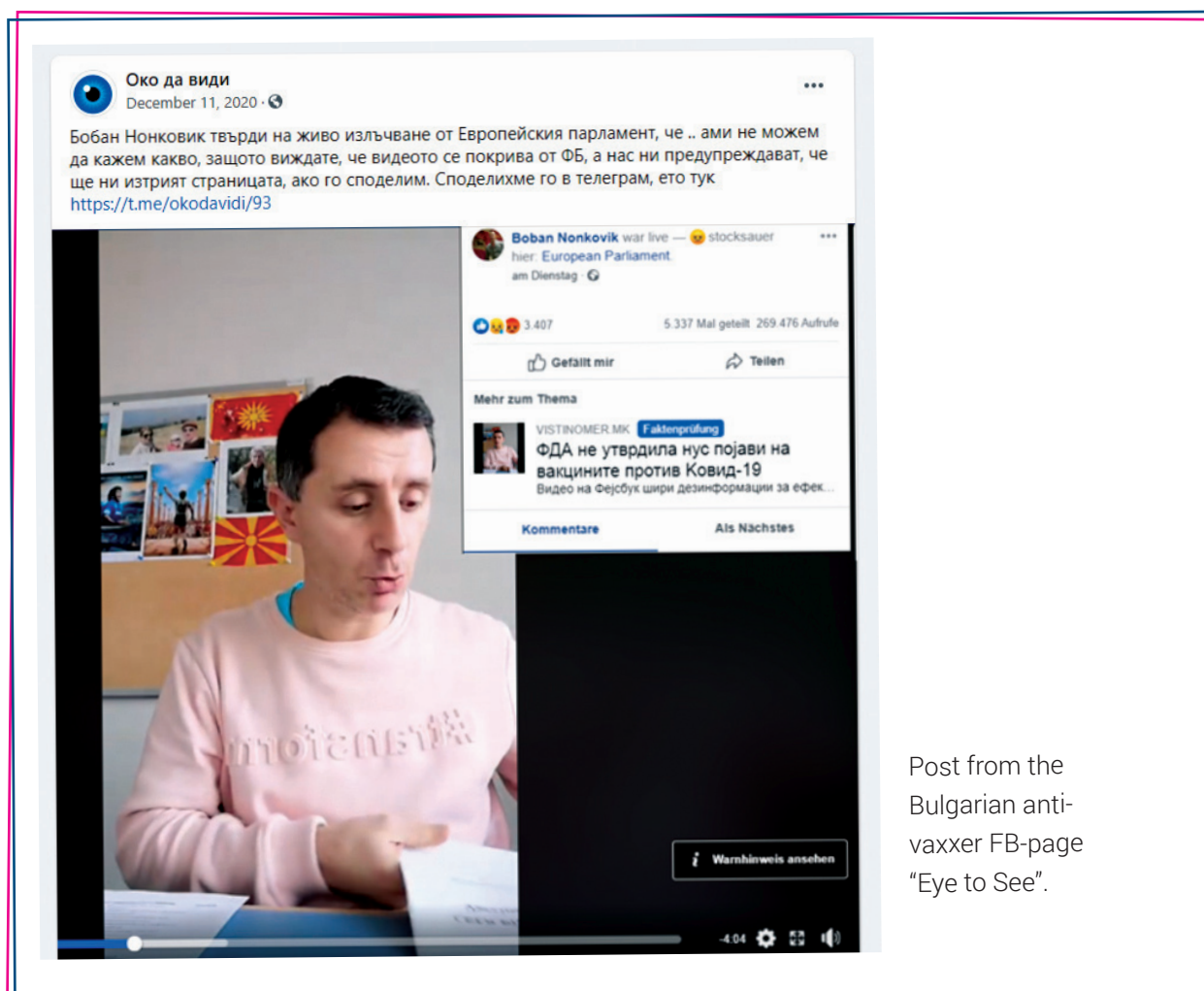
An example of cross-border disinformation is the claims not grounded in science or off the cuff and vague claims published at the end of March 2020 by a Macedonian professor of medicine given in an interview for a medium that is part of the local propaganda network, funded via Hungary. Parts of this interview were taken over by a Serbian right-wing organization and additionally manipulated to produce series of short clips with subtitles in Serbian which spread throughout the whole territory of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>99</sup>



Checking the facts from the clip from North Macedonia that spread disinformation on a regional level.

Spread of these clips subsided in Serbia after publication of a fact-check conducted through cooperation between the Serbian fact-checking outlet Istinomer and the Metamorphosis team. The videos were popular among social network users in North Macedonia as well and shared as “evidence” of the expertise and importance of that person who became even more popular through a continuous process of self-promotion<sup>100</sup> Eventually, he was invited as a high-level party functionary – a member of the Executive Committee of the party VMRO-DPMNE<sup>101</sup> - to take a position on the issue.

Last December, in another case, the facts checked as part of the programme for cooperation with Facebook prevented the spread of more cross-border disinformation between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. This involved marking as untrue a viral video containing unsubstantiated information on the deadly consequences of the COVID-19 vaccines from a Macedonian propaganda-driven reporter.<sup>102</sup> This was enough for the management of the Bulgarian anti-vaxxer page with 83 thousand followers to decide not to publish the story<sup>103</sup>, fearing the negative rating it would receive on Facebook.



Post from the Bulgarian anti-vaxxer FB-page “Eye to See”.

### 3.11. Role of the donor organizations and the international community

The merit of the international community and international organizations that operate as funders of civil society organizations and the independent media in North Macedonia cannot be disregarded, neither in an historical context, nor during 2020. In circumstances where both public and private national sources of funding were unavailable, the international community were the ones that broke the spiral of silence that had resulted from the dominance of propaganda in the country at the time of state capture (2006-2017).

For example, NED (the National Endowment for Democracy) supported the establishment of the Truthmeter fact-checking service back in 2011 as a tool for political fact-checking, further supported by BTM (the Balkan Trust for Democracy). The following year, USAID enabled the creation of the Media Fact-Checking Service as a project implemented by Metamorphosis between 2012 and 2017.

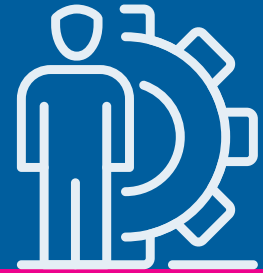
In 2017, the European Union supported the establishment of the national Media Literacy Network, followed by a three-year long support for a project from the same field implemented by Metamorphosis, MIM and YEF.

The embassies of NATO Member States have supported a series of small initiatives related to the fight against disinformation or the development of media pluralism, such as the Embassy of the USA with the project F2H2 implemented by the association MOST.

Private donor organizations such as the Foundation Open Society – Macedonia, which is part of the Open Society Foundations Network and the Sigrid Rousing Trust have supported activities in this field as well.

In times of COVID-19 and the infodemic, critical re-thinking of traditional tools for fighting disinformation is necessary. In the justifications of such programmes, accepted arguments prevailed, but not other concepts based on broader research and analysis, and especially not on those that consider structural factors that make a given society more, or less, resilient. The debate on the growth of fake news is moving along different lines from the debate on the crisis of liberal democracy, the development of right populism and the general dominance of the populist spirit of the time. The debate on the growth of alternative narratives is happening separately from the debate on ever-growing inequalities (especially in the developed World), along with corruption of the elites as a threat to security etc.

In the course of designing local policies, one should have in mind the local context and not push forward approaches that explain the growth of disinformation as being a consequence only of the individual shortcomings of some people (such as literacy, education or awareness level). Neither should haphazard conclusions be limited to general concepts such as the low quality of education of adult citizens, that seen through the EU concept of Lifelong Learning is often implicitly deemed an immutable state. The debate ought to expand and include fundamental sociological research.



# 4

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### General recommendations for all stakeholders

- A systematic approach is required in order to build a culture of critical thinking and social dialogue at all levels, starting with the educational system, the relation between the institutions and the stakeholders from all sectors, as well as at family and individual level.
- Bearing in mind that society is highly polarized along several lines, when preparing disinformation interventions, it is important to make evidence-based decisions on whether in a given situation, it is more effective to apply the confrontational approach (through which polarization can be enhanced) or to strive towards a broad and inclusive social dialogue, to give all parties a chance to reconsider some of their values, perceptions and thoughts.
- Susceptibility to conspiracy theories and other alternative narratives is a consequence of structural factors which need to be addressed with specific programmes instead of pathologization or practices of politization, rejection or ignoring.
- COVID-19 information, especially that from public and medical institutions, should be adapted to educate the public, in the form of explanations comprehensible to the general public, especially to citizens who are laymen or have a lower level of general education. In many cases, the use of professional, medical and other jargon or

using complex explanations is unacceptable to citizens who do not have a high level of education, encouraging them to turn to conspiracy theories, chewed up and adapted for them as a target audience. The textual explanations should be clear and educational, preferably supported by graphics or multimedia content, illustrating and making the information easier for everyone to understand.

### Recommendations for public institutions

- The institutions, in partnership with the media and civil society organizations, need to make policies and create instruments to develop media literacy and strengthen resistance to disinformation.
- Codes of Ethics that apply to employees should be upgraded to incorporate the fight against disinformation as a core value for further development of appropriate working procedures.
- All institutions, especially those in the field of healthcare, should support the media, the services, and organizations that directly detect COVID-19 related disinformation by promoting content developed on their profiles on social networks and websites.
- Public institutions of the legislative and executive government should take a proactive role in strengthening the financial capacity of the media, as well as in creating an enabling environment for financial investments in the media industry.

- Investing in awareness-raising on the role of the media as a driving force of democracy in each society is especially important, while the improvement of the situation with the media should be treated as a strategic goal.
- The Ministry of Education and Science in cooperation with the Ministry of Health should establish a special fund for enabling cooperation with the academic community, universities and science institutes for the purpose of implementing scientific research on the presence of COVID-19 related disinformation.
- The Government should fully implement the "Action Plan for Decisive Action against Spreading Disinformation" as soon as possible. Its draft version was presented to the public on 24th July 2019, but implementation is stuck, especially when it comes to the second part of the Action Plan titled "Proactive Measures". It is high time for the Government to start implementing its own Action Plan in the following manner:
  - Activate the action group composed of high-level officials.
  - Implement planned educational campaigns for the public and employees and officials in the public administration.
  - Initiate a discussion with the media and non-governmental organizations on how to support the production of media content on topics related to fighting disinformation.
- Public institutions should initiate a process for creating a national strategy for fighting disinformation, which would take into account experience from the implementation of the Action Plan, as well as the need for its upgrade in pandemic conditions.
- It is necessary to maintain the consistency of messages and information shared by national authorities and medical institutions, not only for local events, but also for activities at regional and global level, especially by bringing information coming directly from the WHO to the local public (particularly for people who do not speak English and cannot consume information directly), as well as responses to disinformation related to events in neighbouring countries, preferably in coordination with the relevant institutions there.

### **Recommendations for healthcare institutions and the medical professionals**

- Competent institutions in the field of healthcare such as the Ministry of Health, the Institute of Public Health, the Public Health Centre, and public health institutions should establish formal cooperation (through an Agreement or Memorandum) with civil society organizations, the media and the fact-checking services, to work directly with them to detect COVID-19 related disinformation in terms of providing timely, detailed information and answers to questions connected to processing topics linked to identifying disinformation.
- Both public and private health institutions should regularly monitor what is being published about the COVID-19 related pandemic. This applies to both information and disinformation, but also to what has not been published and what should be published, because that helps prevent the spread of the pandemic.
- Health institutions, professional associations and chambers should regularly publish expert opinions related to spreading disinformation, especially regarding the vaccination and treatment of Coronavirus, for the purpose of publishing statements and clarifications that are extremely important as sources of arguments in fact-checking.
- It is also important to increase public presence of the professional self-regulation bodies in the medical field, including the Doctor's Chamber and the bodies in charge of ethics within the medical scientific-educational institutions, especially in cases of unprofessional conduct and unauthenticated statements given by people who are promoted as medical professionals through the media and social networks.
- Doctors who work directly with patients should be informed of the key pieces of disinformation affecting their work to be able to provide recommendations and advice, as well as to prevent patients from taking drugs on their own.
- For medical institutions to be able to qualitatively monitor the flow of news and information on this topic, they should, at least, have trained people (depending on the number of shifts) to work with search engines, social networks, and Really Simple Syndication (RSS) applications.

- Public health centres and hospitals should pay particular attention to news and information from their local communities, and to respond to disinformation or lack of useful information at local level or in the areas/environments/regions where their patients come from.
- Medical institutions should develop procedures and train staff for communication with the public, alone or with the assistance of the Ministry of Health. In any case, the most important thing is to be aware of the “pulse of the public” regarding the pandemic in their communities, and to have a trained person in charge who can answer reporters’ questions to expose disinformation when it appears at local level.
- Like all other institutions, the hospitals in particular should have a developed plan and procedures to deal with risks in case they are subject to disinformation or hacker attacks. At the very least, the health facilities must have developed a scheme of possible risks and solutions in case of disinformation attack, political or polarized advertisements, and other forms of reinforced negative sentiments against the hospital, hacker attacks on the infrastructure for the purpose of blocking work and/or publishing data obtained by hacking computer equipment in the hospital (hack and leak operations).

### **Recommendations for national and public officials, including civil servants:**

- Similar to the political parties, national and public officials, as well as other employees in public institutions and bodies employed as officials or on any other basis, should be offered an opportunity to voluntarily sign a Declaration against fake news concerning COVID-19, committing themselves not to spread or encourage the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation.
- In public appearances, the officials should be limited to their area of expertise, while explanations of issues related to the pandemic should be given to relevant experts in the field of medicine or other branches of science.

### **Recommendations for the political parties**

- Similar to signing the Declaration on Fair, Free and Democratic Elections before each election, political parties should sign a public declaration against fake news, in which they, as political parties and their highest officials, will commit themselves to avoid spreading or encouraging COVID-19 related disinformation in the upcoming period. Although not a mandatory document, non-compliance could serve as a topic of interest for the media in any subsequent response to spreading disinformation by the parties.
- To train their supporters, parties should constantly and repetitively express and reiterate their unconditional support for the measures proposed by the WHO to prevent the spread of the pandemic, as well as to take concrete steps to prevent COVID-19 related disinformation from the medical field.
- Political parties should stop using the global health crisis for a political showdown and stop blocking the pandemic related processes. The example of finding a mutual language and agreement when voting on the Law on Financing Political Parties indicates that the parties can end an ongoing negative campaign aimed at blemishing political opponents. A common approach is the only way for a society to deal with the pandemic with as few casualties as possible.
- The political parties should stop supporting and financing portals and social media which incites the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation, above all, by not publishing statements that are not substantiated by facts or which oppose the sound advice of relevant international and national institutions.
- Parties should end the practice of tolerating and even encouraging their leadership when they give COVID-19 related disinformation. In such cases, the parties should issue statements denouncing the harmful conduct of their members and point out the science-based facts, especially about medical conditions, and protective measures.
- Parties that have done that in the past should stop tolerating, even encouraging the portals and social networks that they can influence when they publish COVID-19 related disinformation as “clickbait” just to increase the scope of such tools for the sake of enhancing party influence with the public.



- Parties that have done so in the past should stop all contacts with national and international Troll farms. Experience from the campaign against the referendum in 2018 showed that renting such farms to manipulate the perception of important and current issues in the country's national and international relations has far-reaching consequences for the country.<sup>104</sup>
- Parties should discontinue the practice of coordinated, constant and daily sharing of content on social networks containing disinformation on COVID-19, even slander and insults related to the pandemic by local party branches, with or without the order of the leadership, for the purpose of earning political points with the public at the expense of the truth.

### **Recommendations for private companies, marketing agencies and other advertisers that enable the operation of media outlets**

- The advertisers need to upgrade their Code of Ethics and policies for corporate social responsibility with criteria that would enable regular checking (monitoring) as to whether their funds are being used to fund media that spread disinformation.

### **Recommendations for the media management – owners and editors**

- Media owners and managers should increase cooperation with the fact-checking services and other bodies fighting disinformation. One form of such cooperation is that they themselves take over the fact-checking of articles. A positive example are media outlets that have established a special section for fact-checking, and they tend to publish their own fact-checks or takeover content from fact-checking services in the country or the region at the discretion of their own editors.
- The media should stop publishing content that contributes to spreading uncertainty and aversion among the public regarding COVID-19 vaccines. An example is refraining from denial and opposing the measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic recommended by the WHO and adopted by the Government.
- Regarding vaccination, the media should promote a scientific approach to their audience, that is, the appropriate population groups for which they are intended, whereby citizens should be instructed

to get vaccinated in consultation with a doctor. They should not choose favourites among the vaccines of different manufacturers, provided they are approved for use on the territory of the country by competent authorities such as the Bureau of Drugs, nor should there be unprofessional bidding to enable covert advertising of any health products by commercial distributors.

### **Recommendations for individual media workers and journalists**

- Media workers, and the media in general, should strive towards increased respect for professional and ethical standards in journalism, as well as increased use of self-regulatory tools.
- Those employed in the media should actively participate in the fight against all types of disinformation and in the promotion of media literacy by means of increasing the quality and diversity of media programmes of an informative and educational nature.
- In cases where they do not have their own content, they should commit to publishing/broadcasting content produced by other fact-checking services or media that regularly debunk disinformation as part of their remit.

### **Recommendations for professional media organizations and related bodies**

- Cooperation between the professional media organizations and other institutions relevant to the media sector needs to improve.
- It is extremely important to further promote self-regulation mechanisms as a means for citizens to point out abuse by the unethical media.
- It is important to affirm public fact-checking activities as a form of self-regulation within the media community, and as a means of encouraging public debate on the quality of media content, and a type of non-formal education that brings professional standards closer to a wider audience.

### **Recommendations for civil society organizations**

- Civil society organizations should continue with the creation and accumulation of knowledge related to the problem of disinformation, building content archives that would gather knowledge and explanations for the exposed manipulation and disinformation, which could be published under



licenses that allow use by other bodies. An example of such a resource is the CriThink website (crithink.mk), which also contains an archive of analytical and educational articles and an e-library with multimedia content, digital editions, and training materials. That way, each of the civil society organizations would be able to download the content and distribute it on their own websites or social networks, to initiate and lead training projects for its target group, as well to contribute with its content in the same way.

- As many organizations as possible should start their own project of raising public awareness on disinformation, or to join projects in the non-governmental sector that are already working on debunking disinformation. At the same time, they should work on reaching out to various target groups from their own communities that they consider to be most susceptible to the negative impact of disinformation. Different approaches to explaining the dangers of disinformation in different age groups, with a special emphasis on youth should also be considered.
- Civil society organizations should create content and promotional campaigns that present positive, fact-based narratives to the public, thus providing information on the measures to prevent the spread of the pandemic and on the benefits of vaccination to reduce vaccine hesitancy. This would also challenge those advocating against COVID-19 vaccines.
- More local and grassroots civil society organizations should get involved in the efforts to increase media literacy and critical thinking in their communities at all levels, through curricula created independently or in cooperation with the academic community, specifically developed to fight COVID-19 disinformation, calling upon the current practices of fact-checkers in the country.
- Civil society organizations working in the field of media literacy and fact-checking should increase their influence and opportunities for cooperation by joining the national Media Literacy Network and regional or international networks dedicated to fighting disinformation.
- Civil society organizations should start lobbying and advocating to increase the support of public and governmental institutions in the fight against disinformation and in strengthening critical thinking, and to strive for relevant public bodies (prosecution, judiciary) to implement appropriate laws and discourage impunity. The government should continue to develop and implement public

policy documents, starting with the second part of the Action Plan for a decisive fight against disinformation.

### **Recommendations for creators of educational policies and curricula**

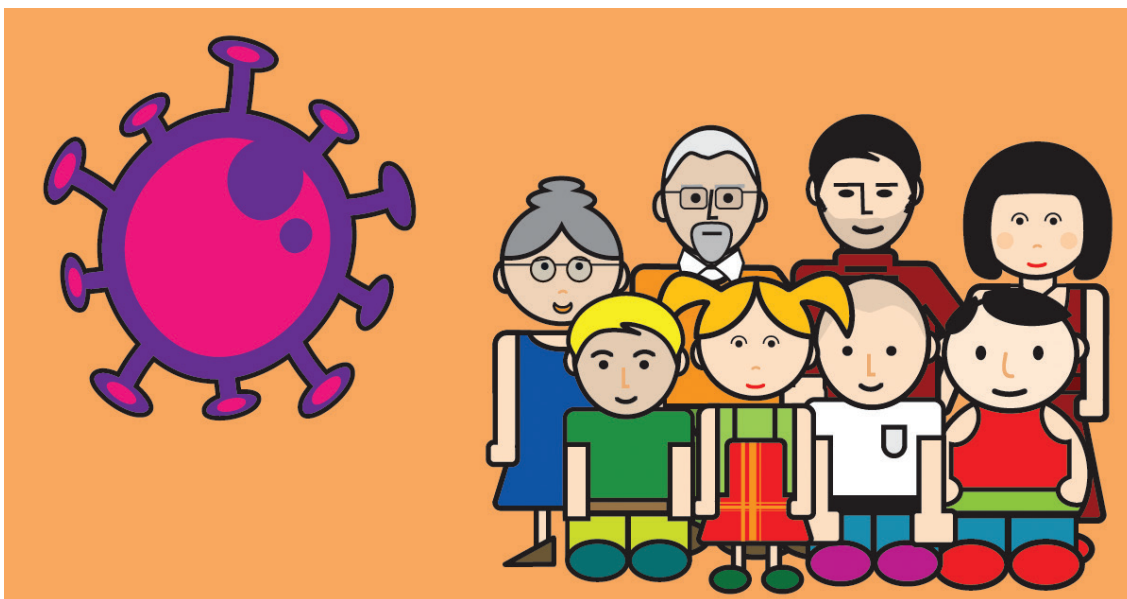
- It is extremely important to revise the curriculum of the studies for journalism to stimulate the development of media literacy and critical thinking.
- The capacity of higher education institutions should be improved in accordance with the actual technical and technological conditions in the media.

### **Primary and secondary school teachers should:**

- be aware of the need for inclusion of modern examples in their teaching, especially in combining the existing teaching content with COVID-19 related information.
- be able to contribute to the development of critical thinking from the youngest age.
- lobby publicly for the introduction of media literacy in educational programmes.

### **Recommendations for members of the academic community such as scientists, university professors and researchers**

- The academic community should be actively involved in preventing the spread of COVID-19 related disinformation, by promoting and supporting science-based data and information, through clear and unequivocal support for the internationally recognized measures to help prevent the pandemic, as well as explaining to the general public the rationale and scientific grounds on which they work. Scientifically based disclosures of COVID-19 disinformation should be considered in ways that are convenient and appropriate to the scientific community, such as virtual debates, panels and seminars.
- Scientists and educators should support the current civil society organizations, media and fact-checking services, as well as other professional media by establishing a form of cooperation with them, especially by making their professional capacities available as sources of verified information and scientific truths.



“COVID-19 affects everyone”, an illustration of the importance of the mutual fight against the pandemic by CriThink.mk.

- One of the most important activities for the academic community in the fight against disinformation is to deal with disinformation coming from their own environments. The academic community is uniquely positioned to counter disinformation given by individuals with an academic background who can cause great harm to the public discourse and are quite viral given the expertise of the source. This part of the fight against COVID-19 and the disinformation thereof should be implemented by the academic community urgently and comprehensively with institutional support, so that the expert component of exposing disinformation can be accompanied with the institutional component.
- Members of the academic community should lobby publicly for the establishment of a special national fund for conducting scientific research that would address various topics related to the presence and spread of disinformation.
- The academic community should get involved in the development of open, educational resources for media literacy and the strengthening of critical thinking led by civil society organizations. They should focus their efforts on providing free of charge curricula and educational materials in local languages to oppose disinformation that affects different audiences such as children, adults, and

the elderly population, both in analogue (hard copy) and in digital form. The academic community is uniquely positioned for this activity, given their experience in the production of didactic materials. Also, those with a specialist knowledge in the field of psychology are well placed to advise, such as the recent explanation of a number of phenomena and features in relation to human behaviour when faced with disinformation, and the ways to overcome them.

### **Recommendations for social media platforms**

- Social media platforms should set clear criteria and provide clear information on the profile owners, pages and groups regarding the sanctions applied in case of spreading disinformation on the platforms concerned. A great deal of confusion exists about the enforcement of these sanctions. Firstly, regarding the duration of the sanction, whether it is of limited or unlimited duration, but also in terms of type and comprehensiveness of the sanction.
- The platforms should upgrade their internal policies and rules so as to introduce educational measures for the owners of individual profiles, which

according to the current systems are exempted from all forms of escalating sanctions which affect pages or official profiles of the institutions.

- In addition to Facebook, other social network platforms should create their own fact-checking programmes and cooperate with fact-checkers around the world, and to regularly support such cooperation.
- They should create video transcription tools in as many languages as possible, through which fact-checkers can analyse video content by keyword search, instead of having to look at videos from beginning to end, searching for disinformation.
- Social media platforms need to step up their efforts against “unauthentic behaviour” that is, the use of Troll farms, fake profiles and other forms of coordinated and orchestrated creation of fake narratives for popularity and public interest in specific content.
- In cooperation with the authorities, the platforms should develop mechanisms to prevent trading of sites or profiles, which are resold in order to use the acquired audience for commercial or political purposes.
- Social networks need to develop more efficient mechanisms for direct communication with the users of current algorithms that are subject to manipulation through false login or in resolving disputed situations when sufficient contribution from experts familiar with the local context is not included, especially in terms of national human rights frameworks.



## ENDNOTES

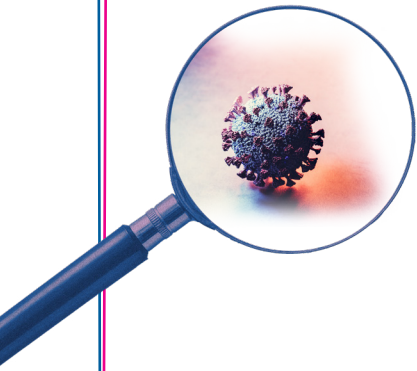
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