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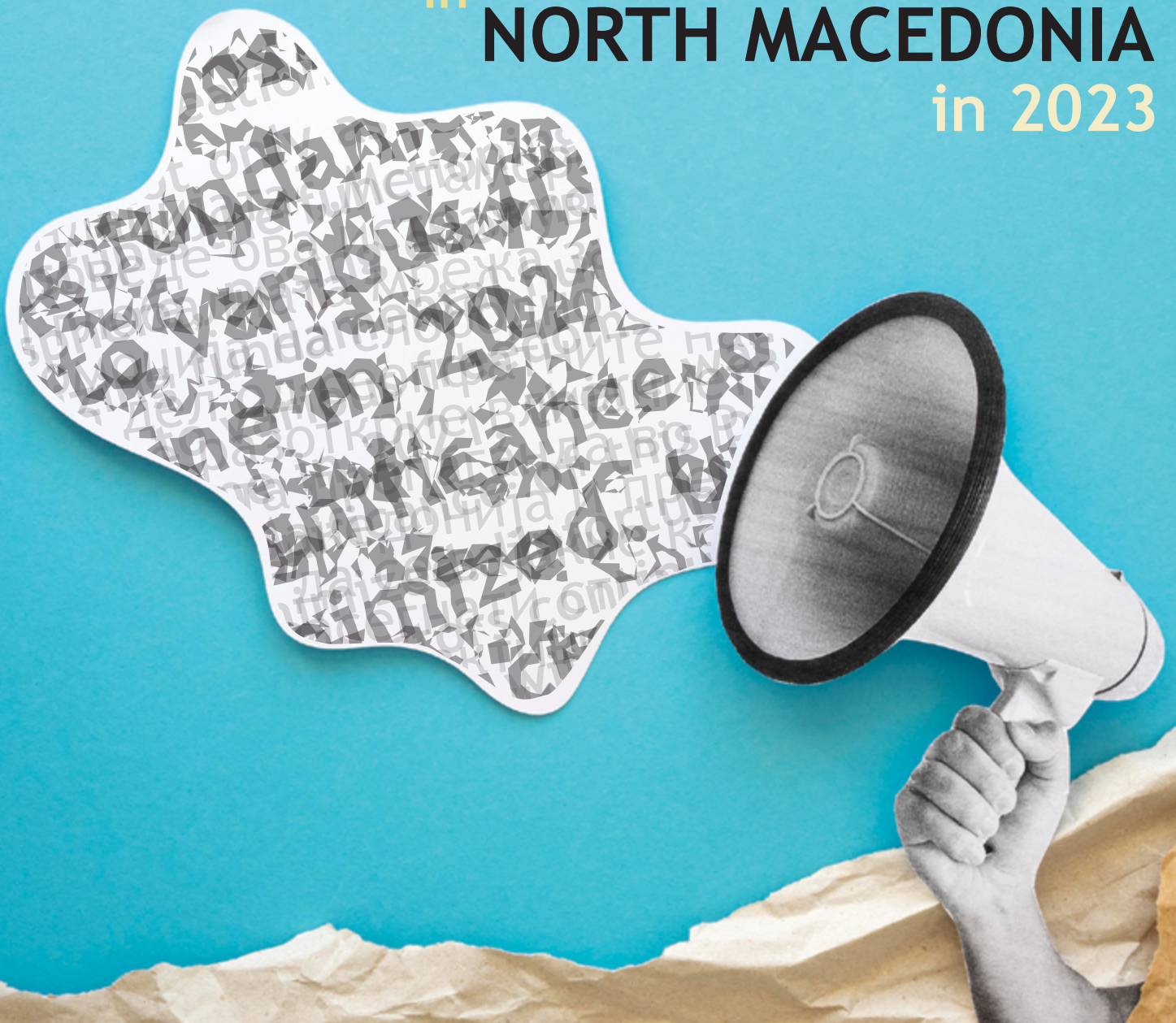
The **EFFECT** of DISINFORMATION and F O R E I G N **INFLUENCES** on the DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES in NORTH MACEDONIA in 2023

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INTRODUCTION

In 2023, the creation and dissemination of disinformation were recognized not only as a media, but also as a security problem which disrupts the functioning of democratic institutions and the media sphere, posing enormous risks to society as a whole and jeopardizing fundamental human rights – from personal security and health to various freedoms. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2021, there was a global shift in the perception of the significance of this problem, which was previously ignored or minimized. Unfortunately, substantial investments by anti-democratic actors continued to strengthen the influence of disinformation, along with conspiracy theories and various forms of propaganda and political manipulation.

The research *The Effect of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia in 2023* was conducted to determine the extent of exposure and the impact of disinformation on the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia by combining analyses of the characteristics of the disinformation flow with a research conducted on a representative sample at the national level. The applied methodology allows for comparisons with the results of previous similar research, including the complementary research conducted in 2022[1], providing insights into trends as a basis for setting priorities, conveyed in the form of recommendations toward a whole society approach. This approach seeks solutions to the structural causes of susceptibility to disinformation. Simultaneously, the results of this research will directly contribute to the process of creating a National Strategy for Building Societal Resilience to Harmful Influences of Disinformation that the government, at the initiative of civil society, has undertaken the obligation to include in the Work Program of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia for the year 2024.

The design of this research was guided by the belief that only through empirical observation can one understand real conditions, providing a foundation for robust journalistic work to demystify widely accepted disinformation and populist narratives that foster apathy, suggesting that "all are the same," and therefore seeking democracy is pointless.

Metamorphosis Foundation conducted this research with support from the global network defending and promoting free expression, IFEX, as part of the comprehensive efforts aimed at exposing the impact of foreign propaganda in the Republic of North Macedonia. Through public education, the goal is to strengthen the capacity of key stakeholders (civil organizations and activists, media and journalists, state institutions, and decision-makers) to actively participate in building resilience against harmful anti-democratic influences.

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[1] The Effect of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia in 2022;
https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/istrazuvanje-mk-v07.pdf

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

The research indicates a significant shift in the information consumption habits of citizens compared to the previous year (2022). Information through personal contacts and communications witnessed a substantial surge in the last year. While only 36% of citizens were getting informed through direct communication in their personal relationships about news and events on a daily basis in the previous year, this year, that percentage has increased to 64%. This surpasses even the percentage of citizens who get informed via domestic TV stations. Among media channels, domestic TV stations (61%) and social media (58%) are the most prevalent sources of information. Internet portals experienced a notable change compared to last year. Namely, last year, 37% of citizens used internet portals for information, while this year, that percentage increased to a remarkable 51%.

Except for regulated domestic TV stations and Facebook, which has a fact-checking program, all other media channels citizens use to inform themselves on a daily basis lack protection policy against disinformation. Although internet portals are supposed to adhere to the Code of Ethics of Journalists and certain conditions to become part of the self-regulatory framework, they generally fail to do so. Additionally, the number of internet portals in the professional media registry is significantly smaller than the number of active portals. Furthermore, we should also bear in mind that citizens also receive information from internet portals from neighboring countries (where the majority of disinformation originates), for which we have no records whatsoever.

Given this situation, it's unsurprising that the highest level of trust among citizens is in information obtained through personal contacts (24%), while domestic TV stations, the most commonly used media channel, only receive complete trust from 4%. When it comes to information obtained from internet portals and social media, less than 2% have complete trust. This indicates that, even though citizens receive information from these sources on a daily basis, they have very little trust in them. It seems that citizens have developed a stance that media should not be trusted. This skepticism of citizens towards media outlets complicates the task of professional media in providing accurate information on developments in the country and abroad, and it makes room for easy spread of disinformation.

Citizens are aware that disinformation poses a severe problem in our country, with 83% sharing this opinion. A staggering 42% of citizens have reported that they notice completely fabricated stories about someone's political goals and agendas in the media they follow every week, indicating that a large percentage of citizens are aware of the purposes of the use of disinformation.

Citizens also understand the nature of disinformation well – as much as 75% believe that disinformation fosters hate speech and divisions in society, while 68% agree that disinformation poses a threat to security. Moreover, the largest percentage of citizens (nearly 40%) think that the state lacks the capacity to deal with threats from disinformation and other forms of special warfare. However, three quarters of citizens (75%) agree with the claim that disinformation should be sanctioned by law, and an even greater percentage (87%) expects the Government to take measures to combat disinformation in the country.

These data clearly indicate that it is essential for state institutions belonging to both the legislative and the executive branch to play a proactive role in strengthening media capacities and to initiate a process for creating a national strategy to combat disinformation in order to protect citizens from the harmful influences of disinformation. Such a need was recognized in last year's research, from which the same recommendation emerged and remains a priority, especially since a large percentage of citizens believe that the state lacks the capacity to deal with disinformation threats (nearly 40%). Meanwhile, at the initiative of a group of civil organizations[2] the Government of North Macedonia undertook the obligation[3] to create a National Strategy for Building Societal Resilience against the Harmful Influences of Disinformation, as part of the Annual Work Program for 2024.

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[2] Recommendations for joint action to build societal resilience against the harmful influences of disinformation; https://metamorphosis.org.mk/izdanija_arhiva/preporaki-za-zaednichka-akcija-za-gradenje-opshtestvena-otpornost-kon-shtet-nite-vlijanija-na-dezinformaciite/

[3] Letter from the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 10–2584/2 dated October 19, 2023, to the General Secretariat of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia.

It seems that the general distrust in state institutions, on one hand, and the distrust in the media, on the other hand, only fuels the disinformation narrative, according to which all political actors, without exception, more or less spread disinformation. Thus, when we asked citizens which actors were spreading disinformation, an equal percentage of citizens reported that disinformation was spread by the diplomacy and services of the Russian Federation, as well as the diplomacy and services of the EU and the US (around 48%). The results of the research suggest the conclusion that disinformation narratives in the media used to portray the EU and the US as entirely similar or no better than Russia have evidently influenced the perception of citizens.

Citizens, to a large extent, are susceptible to disinformation and conspiracy theories. This is confirmed by the findings of the research, which recorded a high percentage of citizens who believe in disinformation narratives. So, a staggering 62% of citizens believe that "Globalists or elitists control events in the world," while 66% of citizens believe that "COVID-19 was created intentionally." Anti-vaccine disinformation was also prevalent, with 28% of citizens believing that "diseases for which they are vaccinated can be overcome with natural immunity."

Regarding disinformation related to NATO, the belief that Russia's military is stronger is still prevalent among citizens. This is due to repeatedly circulating disinformation that never fails to emphasize Russia as a superpower that even NATO should fear, regardless of whether it instils fear or admiration for it. Disinformation narratives such as "the war in Ukraine is, in fact, a war between Russia and NATO" and "there are American laboratories for biological weapons in Ukraine" are believed by citizens and originate from the Russian propaganda machine, along with the notion that "Russia is fighting against Nazism in Ukraine." As for these narratives, there was a higher percentage of citizens who believe them, as opposed to those who do not, indicating the success of disseminating disinformation from Russia to a particular group of citizens inclined to trust such narratives. Although the research shows that pro-Russian narratives have a significant presence in the media space, 30% of citizens believe that there are no entities promoting Russian interests in the country. Notably, 50% of citizens have no opinion on this matter. In the country, there is a lack of awareness about entities promoting Russian interests, and political parties engage in activities that openly or covertly deviate from the path of EU integration and NATO membership, choosing instead to make alliances with Russia. In that regard, media and influence networks that spread pro-Russian or anti-Ukrainian, anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives are not identified as exponents of the Kremlin.

The attitudes of citizens towards Euro-Integrative processes have not changed significantly compared to the previous year. The highest percentage of citizens (48%) believes that the country should become an EU member, but without making concessions to Bulgaria. An even higher 50% disagrees with the idea of amending the Constitution for the purpose of EU accession.

39% of citizens believe disinformation narratives about losing traditional family values due to EU membership, showing that disinformation attacks on the EU and NATO have an impact on the already eroded trust in Western values and the EU. This is also reflected in the reduced sense of security among citizens due to NATO membership. While last year 40% of citizens felt more secure due to the country's NATO membership, this year, that percentage has dropped to 30%.

Disinformation with the aim of presenting Russia as an alternative to the EU also plays a role in the perception of citizens. Thus, 35% of citizens believe that our country would benefit more from an alliance with a large Slavic and Orthodox power like Russia. Only 26% of citizens hold the opposite view. 42% of citizens believe that imposing sanctions against Russia is not a good policy for our country, which is yet another confirmation of the media presence of disinformation narratives aiming to emphasize our country's connection to Russia and to suggest that friendship with such a powerful force is in the interest of our country.

Citizens are divided on the influence of Russia on our country – 34% believe that Russia has a positive influence, while a slightly larger percentage (38%) have reported that Russia has a negative influence. The situation is similar with the U.S., of which citizens have divided opinions – 39% believe that the U.S. has a positive influence, while 37% believe it has a negative influence on our country.

Except for Serbia, according to the opinion of citizens, all neighboring countries have a predominantly negative influence on our country. Serbia is considered to be the country that has the most positive influence on our country. Besides the historical background for harboring such an opinion of Serbia, the fact that there is no language barrier provides Macedonian citizens with easy and regular insight into events in the Serbian social sphere. This, of course, serves as a direct open channel for the dissemination of disinformation already present in the Serbian media space. Activities related to fact-checking clearly confirm that the majority of pro-Russian disinformation that reach Macedonian citizens comes through Serbian tabloids. The presence of pro-Russian narratives is substantial, given that Serbia, among other factors, still hasn't imposed sanctions against Russia. This also enables Russian state media to operate in the country in the local language, allowing Russian disinformation narratives to freely spread through Serbian media to Macedonian citizens. Moreover, citizens are more inclined to trust media sources coming from a country they believe has the most positive

influence on our country. On the other hand, citizens neglect or are unaware of the fact that Russia officially declared the Republic of North Macedonia an "enemy country" in 2022. Additionally, the influence on our citizens' views toward Russia is also affected by the fact that Serbia, a country perceived as the friendliest by a large percentage of those who were surveyed, collaborates with Russia, which is associated with narratives that its foreign policy is an example to be followed.

Surveyed citizens consider Bulgaria to have the most negative influence on their country, with 77% holding this view.

Information gaps also provide space for malign external influences to act on the perception of citizens. A significant portion of citizens do not have an opinion on the Chinese political system (over 40%), and they have no clear stance on China's influence on our country. Given that media mainly feature information about Chinese investments and economic cooperation with China, we can clearly see there is space for creating a perception of the positive impact of China, neglecting the fact that Chinese investments might have negative consequences in the country, especially if the collaboration with China involves procedures conflicting with EU values, rules, or procedures.

Hostile external influences, beyond political and economic aspects, utilize both disinformation campaigns and propaganda in order to alter the perceptions of citizens, promoting their own geopolitical interests. The clear presence of disinformation narratives that portray Russia as an alternative to the EU, undermining trust in the West and the Euro-Integration process, is particularly evident in the significant number of citizens who believe in these narratives. The widespread dissemination of pro-Russian narratives and the abundance of disinformation in the media create a perception that there is little difference between Russia and the U.S among citizens. Citizens believe that the Russian government bears responsibility for the invasion of Ukraine and do not justify the Russian attack on Ukraine. However, they also believe in pro-Russian narratives that aim to shift some of the blame for the war onto the U.S. (such as the existence of American biolabs in Ukraine). Such narratives pose a significant danger to the already vulnerable democracy in the country and have the potential to cause immense harm. By altering the perceptions of citizens, foreign influences also change the geopolitical convictions of citizens regarding the direction in which the country should move.

OVERVIEW OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIA

Disinformation, as a global issue, has a particularly negative impact on the fragile democracy in North Macedonia and the countries of the Western Balkans. Foreign malign influences use disinformation and media manipulations as tools to provoke polarization and confusion. The hyperproduction of various disinformation narratives, especially regarding the Russian aggression against Ukraine, continues to disrupt social cohesion and democratic development in the country. These narratives constantly change, but they have one goal: to instil anti-democratic and anti-Western sentiments, all with the aim of redirecting the country's policies away from the European Union (EU) and NATO. To achieve this, malign actors exploit key political and societal events such as elections, referendums, and pandemics to promote disinformation and associated narratives in support of their ideological and geopolitical objectives[4].

With the aim of obtaining a clear picture of the exposure of citizens to disinformation content, and thus understanding certain changes in the attitudes of citizens observed through a comparative analysis of the findings from public opinion research in 2022 and 2023, a review of the most prevalent disinformation topics, or the most prevalent disinformation content in the Macedonian media sphere during the period January-September 2023 was conducted, available in quarterly media monitoring reports with a focus on North Macedonia[5].

The following chart illustrates the most frequently represented media topics around which disinformation narratives were grouped during the period of observation.

Number of articles for each disinformation topic from 2022 to 2023

Topic	Number of articles
The War in Ukraine	450
Anti-Western	350
EU integration	250
LGBT	100
Vaccination	50
Conspiracy theories	30
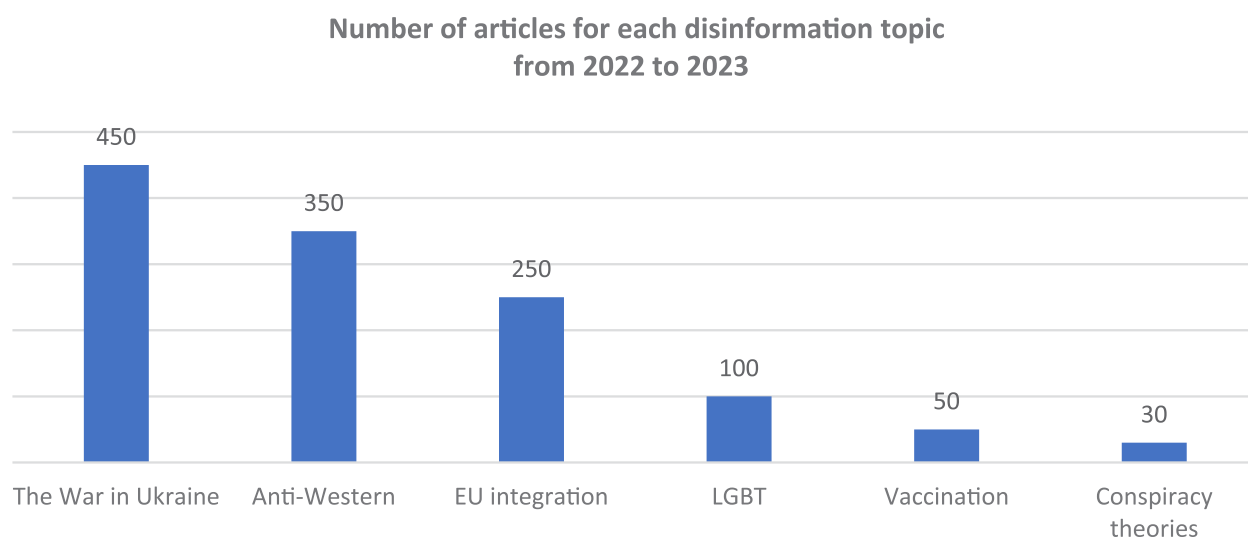
4 Geopolitical perspective of disinformation flows in the Western Balkans; https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/up-loads/2023/06/geopolitical_perspective_of_disinformation_flows_in_the_western-balkans_2022–6–1.pdf

5 Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans media monitoring report for the period January - March 2023; https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/metamorfozis-dezinformacii-i-narativi-januari-mart–2023–za-web–1.pdf

   Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans media monitoring report for the period April – June 2023; https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/media-monitoring-april-june–2023–18.pdf

   Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans media monitoring report for the period July - September 2023; https://metamorphosis.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/media-monitoring-july-september–2023–13.pdf

The overwhelmingly predominant media topic that attracted the largest number of disinformation instances was the war in Ukraine. Since the onset of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, disinformation is constantly circulating in the media, tending to justify Russian aggression. While specific narratives change, the distribution of disinformation remains the same. The most common narratives on this topic were as follows:

- The war in Ukraine is a war between NATO and Russia

- Russia is not waging war in Ukraine, but merely conducting a special operation

- Russia is fighting against Nazism in Ukraine

- Ukraine is recruiting children to the front

- Organ trafficking in Ukraine

- Ukraine sells donated military aid on the black market

All these narratives portray Ukraine in the worst possible light, as weak and corrupt, compared to Russia, which is superior and powerful, and aim to undermine the trust of citizens in the state's decisions aimed at helping and supporting Ukraine.

Anti-Western narratives in the country are linked to Russian propaganda. One characteristic of the Kremlin propaganda is cultural wars, highlighting disunity in Western societies in addressing issues where there is societal disagreement and polarization. This type of propaganda and disinformation present the "West," or Western democracies, as countries that depart from traditional values in addressing societal issues and are not guided by moral principles. As such, they are portrayed as opposed to the Russian social order that prefers traditional or "correct" values. Similar narratives prevail in the Balkan countries, making them susceptible to disinformation exploitation by grossly distorting the context in which these narratives are expressed. The most common narrative here is that the "West is destroying families, cultural and national identity, engaging in perversion and abusing children, including pedophilia, all of which is declared normal in their way of life."

Various disinformation narratives related to EU integration, although present during the period of observation, became more prominent after Bulgaria's decision to veto the start of accession negotiations for North Macedonia. These disinformation narratives portray the EU, on one hand, as a "supporter of anti-democratic and fascist behavior among member countries," and on the other hand, emphasize that "EU membership means losing one's identity." The goal is to create dissatisfaction with the EU and present other anti-European alternatives for the country. Disinformation that problematizes the loss of identity, besides creating fear, also polarizes the public and promotes Russia as a friendly country that can help North Macedonia. The most common anti-EU narratives observed during the period were:

- The EU does not want North Macedonia to really be part of the Union

- The EU is blackmailing and deceiving North Macedonia

- It is better for North Macedonia to join BRICS than the EU

- It is better for North Macedonia to be with Russia instead of the EU

- EU membership means losing identity

Most of the disinformation related to the LGBT community is often used to attack the EU or the West, while a smaller portion of the disinformation is connected to the pro-Russian narrative of preserving traditional societies and religion. In the majority of articles, the prevailing narrative emphasizes the duty to protect the family and children, creating a moral panic based on hate speech and disinformation. The most prevalent narratives in this direction were:

- European countries are sick because people there support LGBT values

- The LGBT community is a threat to the traditional way of life

- The EU, together with the LGBT community, promotes pedophilia

These disinformation narratives often intertwine with anti-gender movements, which oppose the principle of gender equality, resist same-sex partnerships, and challenge the rights of transgender individuals, ultimately reinforcing anti-LGBT narratives.

Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic ended, there was a significant reduction in the dissemination of disinformation related to the pandemic itself, but there was an increase in the number of anti-vaccination narratives, aimed at hindering the immunization process for the population. The goal of these disinformation narratives is to create fear of vaccination, causing significant harm not only to citizens, but also to public health. The impact these narratives have on reducing childhood immunization rates is of particular concern. The most common anti-vaccination narratives during the period of observation were:

↘ Vaccines are an agenda for depopulation

↘ Vaccines cause cancer

↘ Vaccines affect fertility and cause sterility

↘ Vaccines cause autism

↘ Vaccines are toxic, unsafe, experimental, and do not provide protection

Conspiracy theories imply the existence of a small group of powerful people secretly planning illegal and malicious activities affecting the course of events. Typically, these conspiracy theories lack evidence that can withstand critical scrutiny, yet they spread quickly. Whether related to Russian aggression against Ukraine, the pandemic, attacks on the EU or the West, conspiracy theories are harmful to society on various levels. The most common narratives stemming from these theories present in the Macedonian media sphere during the period of observation were:

↘ "Chemtrails" – the so-called "spraying" of the population

↘ The conspiracy theory about 5G networks

↘ After the pandemic, a "new world order" will emerge on the world stage

↘ NATO and the West are creators of Satanism

↘ There are chips in the vaccines

All these disinformation narratives exploit important societal developments with the aim of destabilizing the country and providing greater space for foreign malign influences. Disinformation narratives deepen existing polarization in Macedonian society and have a negative impact on societal processes, such as the Euro-Integration process. Disinformation is not only an informational, but also a security problem, requiring an interdisciplinary approach.

PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

OBJECTIVES OF THE PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

In order to enable the process of advocacy and to promote appropriate changes in media policies, a public opinion research was conducted in October 2023. This research examined the attitudes and opinions of the population in North Macedonia regarding media disinformation, interest in policy changes, and the influence of foreign and domestic sources of disinformation in the context of NATO and EU integration, as well as their susceptibility to various forms of foreign malign influences.

To understand the effects of disinformation narratives over the past year better and assess their impact on changing the attitudes of citizens on the topics of interest in the research, a comparative analysis was conducted with the results obtained from the public opinion research conducted in the previous year, namely, 2022. This analysis also helped evaluate the positive effects of fact-checking activities in the media and provided recommendations for measures that relevant state institutions should take to proactively counteract foreign malign influence operations in the country.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION

Citizens mostly get informed about news and events in the country and abroad through domestic TV stations. Sixty-two percent (62%) receive daily information from domestic TV stations, and 24% receive information several times a week. Furthermore, the older population primarily gets informed from domestic TV stations. Another frequent channel for information is social media, with 58% of citizens receiving daily updates from social media, while 16% do so at least several times a week. The research indicates that these two prevalent information media are represented differently among various age groups in the population. Domestic TV channels are the dominant source of information for the older population. Specifically, 81% of the population aged 65 and above, 77% of those aged 50 to 64, and 52% of those aged 30 to 49 get daily information from domestic TV stations. On the other hand, social media is the dominant channel for the younger population. As much as 77% of citizens aged 18 to 49 get daily updates on social media.

The research shows that information through personal contacts and communications witnessed a substantial surge in the last year. While 36% of citizens were informed about news and events on a daily basis through direct communication in their personal relationships, and while 35% were informed through personal contacts several times a week last year, this year, there has been a considerable increase. A staggering 64% of citizens now state that they get informed daily through personal contacts, with an additional 22% confirming they get informed at least several times a week.

Information from internet portals has also witnessed a substantial increase compared to the previous year. This year, as much as 51% of citizens confirmed that they got information from internet portals on a daily basis (compared to 37% last year), while 18% of citizens, similar to last year, confirmed that they got informed several times a week through these portals.

There has been a slight increase in the use of radio as an information medium. Last year, 13% mentioned radio as a daily source of information, while this year, that percentage is 18%. Similarly, last year, 11% were informed from the radio several times a week, while this year, that percentage is 20%.

How often do you get information from the following information channels?

Legend:
- Every day
- Several times a week
- Several times a month
- Once a month
- Never/I don't use this medium

Channel	Every day	Several times a week	Several times a month	Once a month	Never/I don't use this medium
Personal contacts 2023	64,1%	21,8%	9,1%	1,6%	3,4%
Personal contacts 2022	35,5%	34,9%	17,6%	3,3%	8,6%
Domestic TV stations 2023	61,5%	23,5%	6,5%	2,4%	6,1%
Domestic TV stations 2022	66,3%	18,6%	5,9%	2,9%	6,3%
Social media 2023	58,0%	15,6%	5,6%	0,6%	20,1%
Social media 2022	60,5%	11,9%	3,4%	1,4%	22,8%
Internet portals 2023	50,6%	18,4%	7,6%	1,8%	21,5%
Internet portals 2022	37,3%	18,7%	8,0%	3,4%	32,6%
TV stations from neighboring... 2023	12,6%	26,2%	20,5%	5,4%	35,3%
TV stations from neighboring... 2022	10,1%	20,2%	12,7%	7,4%	49,6%
International TV channels 2023	7,3%	15,8%	18,7%	8,4%	49,8%
International TV channels 2022	5,7%	12,5%	8,6%	9,1%	64,1%
Radio 2023	18,5%	19,9%	14,4%	6,6%	40,5%
Radio 2022	12,6%	10,5%	8,3%	7,7%	60,9%
Print media 2023	5,7%	9,5%	8,0%	8,2%	68,6%
Print media 2022	3,8%	4,2%	4,9%	5,4%	81,7%
Influencers 2023	10,5%	18,1%	12,5%	6,7%	52,2%
Influencers 2022	8,5%	7,6%	9,1%	6,1%	68,7%

The research indicates that citizens have little trust in the information they receive from various information channels. Trust in traditional media (TV stations, radio, and print media) is higher compared to the trust allotted to digital media. Specifically, 39% of citizens completely or somewhat trust domestic TV stations, 30% trust TV stations from neighboring countries, 21% trust international TV stations, 38% trust radio stations, while 27% trust print media.

The comparative analysis of results regarding the previous year shows a decline in trust in traditional media and an increase in trust in digital media. Trust in internet portals increased from 27% last year to 30% this year. Similarly, trust in social media increased from 21% last year to 26% this year.

Similar to last year, this year's research shows that citizens have the highest trust in information obtained through personal contacts – a staggering 62% of citizens trust information obtained through personal contacts.

To what extent do you trust the following information media/channels?

Legend:
- ■ Completely trust
- ■ Somewhat trust
- ■ Neither trust nor distrust
- ■ Somewhat distrust
- ■ Do not trust at all
- ■ I don't know/Refused to answer

Media/Channel	Completely trust	Somewhat trust	Neither trust nor distrust	Somewhat distrust	Do not trust at all	I don't know/Refused
Domestic TV stations 2023	4,3%	34,4%	33,4%	15,2%	12,2%	0,6%
Domestic TV stations 2022	10,2%	39,4%	26,9%	14,6%	8,7%	0,2%
TV stations from neighboring countries 2023	2,7%	26,7%	39,2%	17,0%	10,3%	4,2%
TV stations from neighboring countries 2023	8,1%	41,3%	29,8%	11,6%	8,1%	1,1%
International TV channels 2023	5,6%	25,0%	35,3%	18,5%	11,6%	4,0%
International TV channels 2022	12,9%	34,7%	29,1%	14,4%	6,6%	2,3%
Radio 2023	5,5%	32,4%	30,7%	12,8%	10,4%	8,1%
Radio 2022	16,0%	42,6%	22,1%	8,4%	7,4%	3,5%
Print media 2023	2,9%	23,8%	38,0%	15,1%	13,6%	6,7%
Print media 2022	12,4%	28,4%	31,3%	9,5%	12,4%	6,0%
Internet portals 2023	1,6%	27,5%	41,6%	13,9%	11,9%	3,5%
Internet portals 2022	4,6%	22,3%	39,0%	18,4%	14,2%	1,6%
Social media 2023	1,7%	23,4%	46,2%	16,4%	10,2%	2,0%
Social media 2022	3,9%	16,7%	34,3%	27,0%	17,6%	0,6%
Influencers 2023	2,9%	20,9%	44,7%	16,5%	10,8%	4,2%
Influencers 2022	7,3%	29,1%	28,2%	18,3%	14,0%	3,2%
Personal contacts 2023	24,4%	37,3%	28,2%	5,1%	2,6%	2,4%
Personal contacts 2022	13,8%	53,6%	22,1%	6,7%	3,2%	0,6%

The majority of citizens (84%) are aware that disinformation is a serious problem in our country. Only 11% disagree with this claim.

Do you think that disinformation, or fake news, is a serious problem in our country?

	2023	2022
Yes	83,6%	88,5%
No	11,3%	7,4%
I don't know	4,8%	3,6%
Refused to answer	0,3%	0,5%

Legend:
- ■ Yes
- ■ No
- ■ I don't know
- ■ Refused to answer
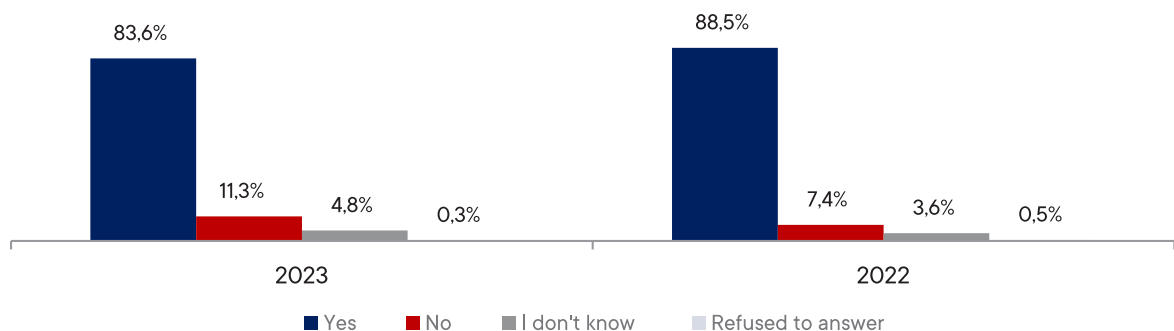
As much as 57% of citizens stated that they notice information that inaccurately or falsely represents reality on the media they follow at least once a week. This percentage has significantly decreased compared to the previous year when 69% of citizens stated that they notice inaccurate information in the media they follow at least once a week. This change may be attributed to intensified fact-checking activities over the past year, resulting in a decrease in the frequency of disinformation narratives on internet portals this year and in intensifying the activities of self-regulatory bodies in the country.

How often do you notice information that inaccurately or falsely represents reality in the media you follow?

■ 2023   ■ 2022

	Every day or almost every day	At least once a week	Several times a month	Once a month	Never, or almost never	I don't know	Refused to answer
2023	23,2%	34,1%	18,0%	9,3%	5,9%	7,3%	2,3%
2022	34,1%	34,9%	15,9%	4,3%	2,6%	7,7%	0,5%
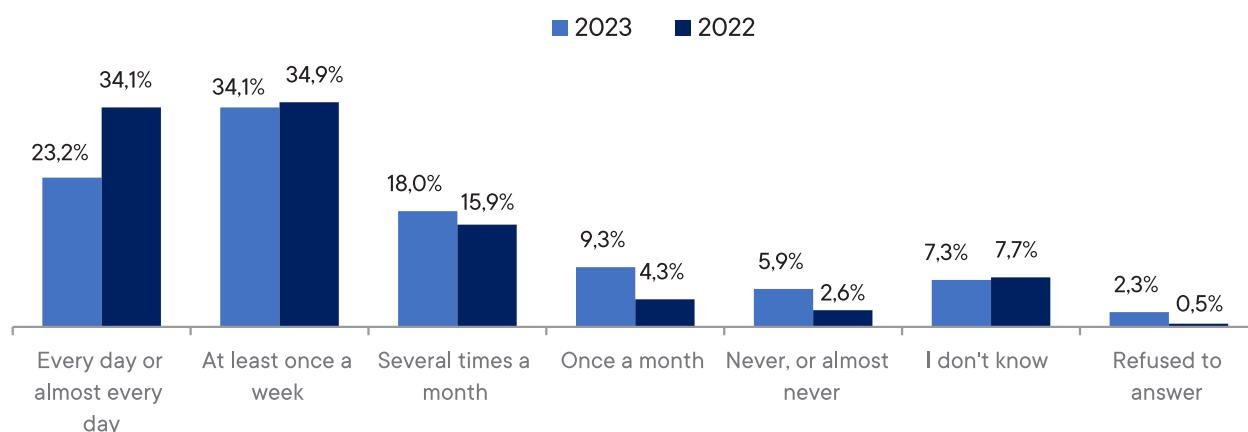
The majority of citizens believe they have a sufficient level of media literacy and are capable of recognizing fake news or disinformation in the media they follow. 31% of citizens are very confident, and 48% are somewhat confident that they can recognize disinformation in the media. Furthermore, citizens with higher education are more likely to believe they have a high level of media literacy – 40% of them believe they are very confident, and 48% believe they are somewhat confident in their ability to recognize fake news or disinformation in the media. These percentages are lower among citizens with secondary education – 29% are very confident, and 48% are somewhat confident. The lowest percentages are observed among citizens with primary education. Only 11% of them are confident, and 39% are somewhat confident in their ability to recognize fake news or disinformation in the media they follow.

To what extent are you confident about your ability to notice fake news or disinformation in the media you follow?

Very confident	Somewhat confident	Not entirely confident	Not confident at all	I don't know	Refused to answer
30,7%	47,6%	12,8%	3,5%	3,7%	1,6%
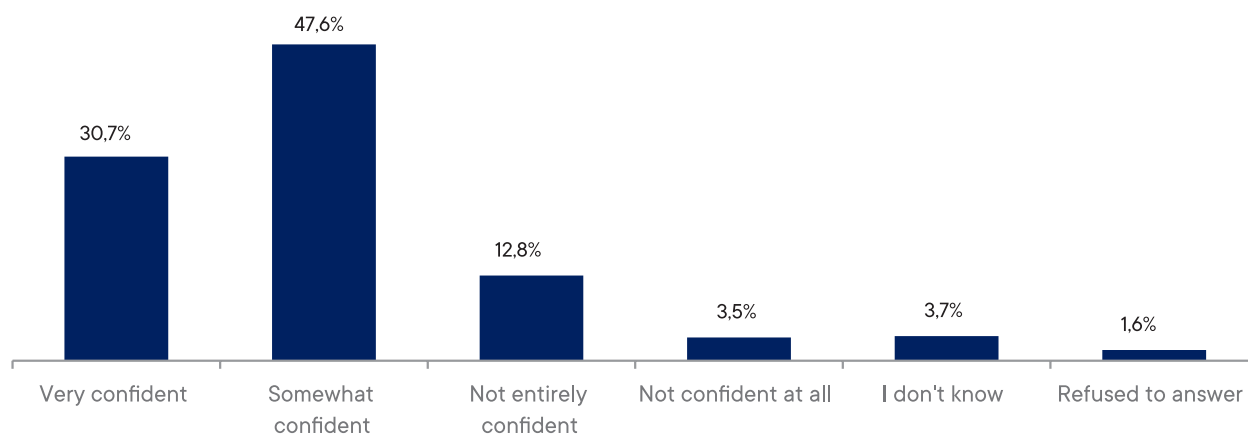
The majority of citizens (52%) believe that they notice the use of fake news in the media they follow to discredit an organization, party, state, or similar every week. 42% of citizens stated that they have noticed completely fabricated stories about someone's political goals and agendas, and almost 40% of citizens notice stories with distorted facts in order to achieve someone's agenda in the media they follow. 27% stated that they encounter a poorly crafted news story in the media they follow every week.

Have you encountered the following in the media you follow in the past week?
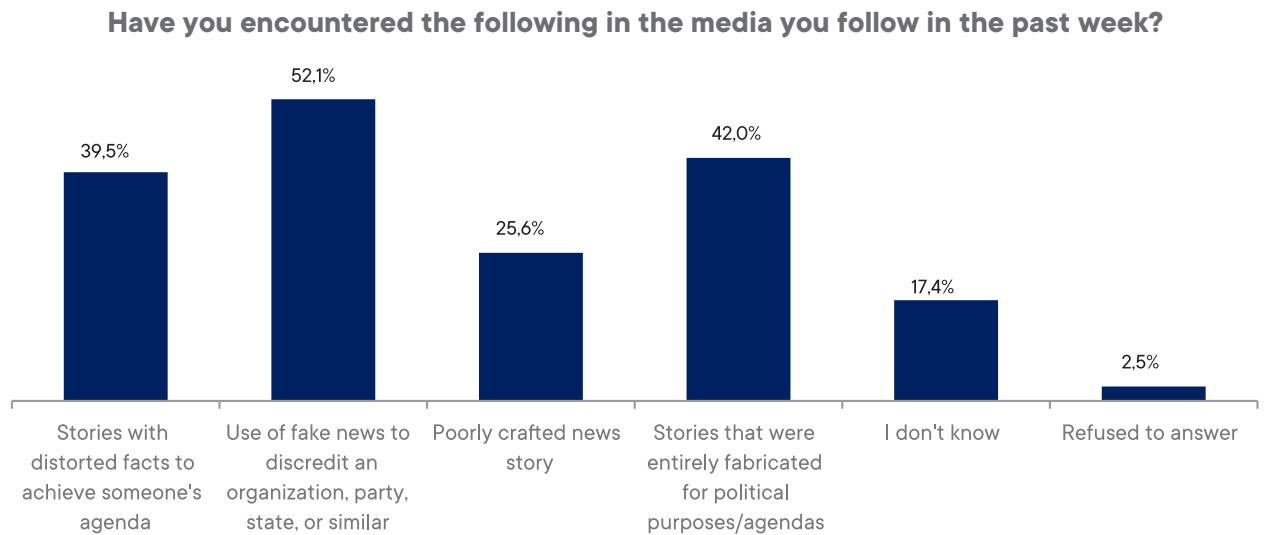
INTEREST IN POLICY CHANGES

Almost half of the citizens (46%) believe that the level of disinformation they encounter in the media is so high that something should be done to reduce it. In contrast, 28% of citizens believe that the level of disinformation is not so high, and no measures need to be taken to reduce it. Indicatively, more than a quarter of citizens (26%) have no opinion on this matter.

Nearly a third of citizens (31%) consider disinformation in the media and on social networks to be a negative phenomenon; its consequences, however, are perceived to be insignificant. In contrast, 40% disagree with this view and believe that the consequences of disinformation in the media and on social networks are not insignificant. This view is most prevalent among the population with higher education (51%), less prevalent among the population with secondary education (36%), and least prevalent among the population with primary education (24%). Indicatively, as much as 29% of citizens are resigned and do not have a stance on this issue.

Nevertheless, as much as three-quarters of citizens (75%) agree with the statement that disinformation should be sanctioned by law.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
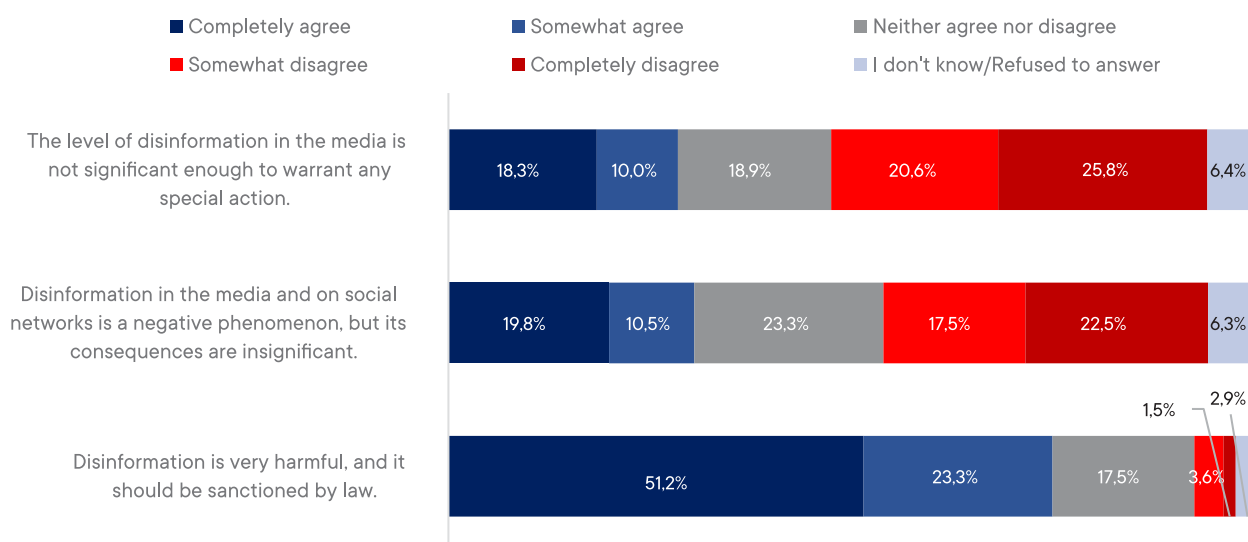
The research shows that citizens understand the nature of disinformation well and the goals of its dissemination across the media sphere. Thus, a staggering 75% of citizens believe that disinformation fuels hate speech and divisions in society. As much as 51% of citizens completely agree with this view, and 24% somewhat agree.

A staggering 68% of citizens agree that disinformation is a threat to security and is as dangerous as other forms of special warfare, such as hacking attacks, false bomb threats. In this regard, 43% completely agree, while 25% somewhat agree with this view.

More than half of citizens (55%) believe that disinformation is a tool of non-democratic and authoritarian leaders and regimes, and 48% believe that the false bomb threats in schools, shopping centers, and institutions our society faced in the past period were organized outside the borders of our country.

The research shows that a larger percentage of citizens (almost 40%) believe that the state does not have the capacity to cope with the threats of disinformation and other forms of special warfare, while a significantly smaller percentage (only 27%) hold the opposite opinion and believe that the state has the capacity to fight against disinformation. As much as 26% of citizens have no opinion on this matter.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

Legend:
- ■ Completely agree
- ■ Somewhat agree
- ■ Neither agree nor disagree
- ■ Somewhat disagree
- ■ Completely disagree
- ■ Don't know/Refused to answer

One of the goals of spreading disinformation is to incite hate speech and divisions in society.
- Completely agree: 51,0%
- Somewhat agree: 24,3%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 15,1%
- Somewhat disagree: 4,0%
- Completely disagree: 1,3%
- Don't know/Refused to answer: 4,4%

Disinformation poses a threat to security and is as dangerous as other forms of special warfare: hacking attacks, false bomb threats.
- Completely agree: 42,5%
- Somewhat agree: 25,0%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 18,6%
- Somewhat disagree: 6,0%
- Completely disagree: 2,3%
- Don't know/Refused to answer: 5,5%

Non-democratic and authoritarian leaders and regimes often use disinformation.
- Completely agree: 34,7%
- Somewhat agree: 20,5%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 18,7%
- Somewhat disagree: 6,2%
- Completely disagree: 1,8%
- Don't know/Refused to answer: 18,0%

False bomb threats in schools, shopping centers, and institutions were organized outside the borders of our country.
- Completely agree: 27,8%
- Somewhat agree: 19,5%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 18,5%
- Somewhat disagree: 6,4%
- Completely disagree: 11,3%
- Don't know/Refused to answer: 16,5%

The state has the capacity to cope with the threats of disinformation and other forms of special warfare.
- Completely agree: 17,1%
- Somewhat agree: 10,3%
- Neither agree nor disagree: 26,2%
- Somewhat disagree: 14,9%
- Completely disagree: 23,7%
- Don't know/Refused to answer: 7,8%

Citizens believe that disinformation is primarily disseminated by politicians and journalists, i.e., the media. As much as 89% of citizens believe that politicians spread disinformation, while 85% believe that journalists or the media spread disinformation. Here, social media and internet portals are mentioned first. A staggering 81% of citizens have stated that disinformation is spread through internet portals and on social media.

Non-governmental organizations are a source of disinformation according to 54%, and corporations or business organizations are a source according to 51% of citizens.

Which of the following actors disseminate disinformation in the country?

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know/Refused to answer

Actor	Yes	No	I don't know/Refused to answer
Social media	81,3%	7,1%	11,6%
Internet portals	81,2%	7,3%	11,5%
Corporations/business organizations	51,3%	25,0%	23,7%
Politicians	88,9%	5,1%	6,0%
Journalists/Media	85,2%	8,7%	6,1%
Non-governmental organizations	54,0%	24,7%	21,3%
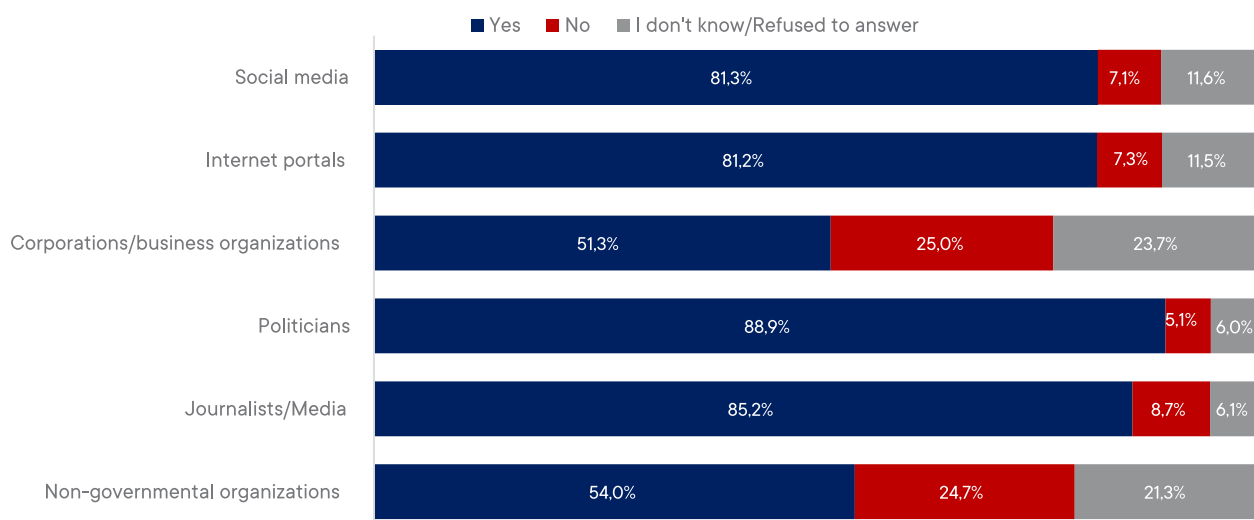
A large percentage of citizens believe that disinformation is also spread through various diplomatic services in our country. Thus, as much as 55% of citizens believe that disinformation is spread through the diplomatic services of neighboring countries, 50% through the diplomatic services of the USA, and 49% through the diplomacy of the EU.

In relation to the public opinion research from the previous year, this year, there is an increase in the percentage of citizens who believe that the diplomatic services of the Russian Federation spread disinformation in the country. Last year, 46% of citizens believed that the diplomacy of the Russian Federation spreads disinformation in the country, while this year, that percentage amounts to 49%.

According to citizens, disinformation is spread through academic institutions and scientists (41%), as well as through domestic educational institutions. The research also recorded a surge with regards to domestic educational institutions, namely: if last year, 37% of citizens believed that these institutions spread disinformation, this year, that percentage increased to 43%.

Which of the following actors disseminate disinformation in the country?

■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know/Refused to answer

Actor	Yes	No	I don't know/Refused
Scientists and academic institutions 2023	41,4%	40,2%	18,5%
Scientists and academic institutions 2022	44,7%	31,6%	23,7%
Diplomats and services of neighboring countries 2023	54,7%	24,0%	21,3%
Diplomats and services of neighboring countries 2022	56,6%	21,2%	22,2%
Diplomacy and services of the Russian Federation 2023	49,3%	24,3%	26,5%
Diplomacy and services of the Russian Federation 2022	45,9%	17,1%	37,0%
Diplomacy and services of the EU 2023	48,5%	23,1%	28,4%
Diplomacy and services of the EU 2022	52,8%	22,2%	25,1%
Diplomacy and services of the USA 2023	50,2%	20,3%	29,5%
Diplomacy and services of the USA 2022	52,4%	18,6%	29,0%
Education/educational institutions 2023	42,9%	35,6%	21,5%
Education/educational institutions 2022	36,7%	40,6%	22,7%

More than three-quarters of citizens (as much as 86%) believe that the Government should take measures to address disinformation in the media.

In your opinion, should the Government take measures to address disinformation in the media?

Yes: 85,7% No: 10,5% I don't know: 3,6% Refused to answer: 0,2%

■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know ■ Refused to answer
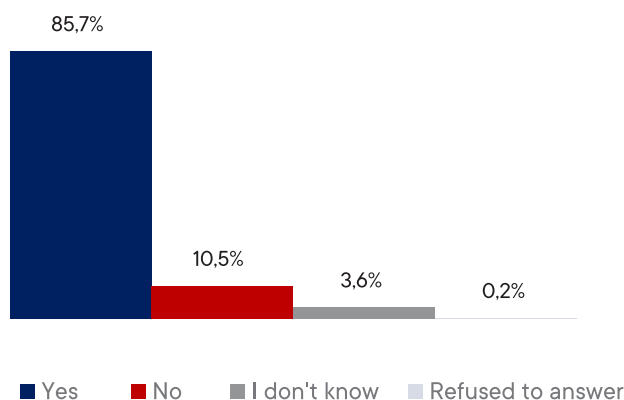
In order to address disinformation successfully, various activities and measures need to be undertaken. In that direction, 82% of citizens believe that it is important for journalists to adhere to professional standards and to pay attention to the veracity of the news they publish, and an equal percentage (82%) believe that the media should continuously report on the harmful impact of disinformation and fake news.

80% of citizens believe that in order to combat disinformation successfully, it is necessary to increase awareness among citizens about the existence of disinformation and fake news in the media, while 76% agree with specific measures related to promoting media literacy and a critical approach to information in the media. 67% believe that citizens themselves should verify the credibility of information in the media.

79% of citizens believe that it is important to adopt a Law on Protection against Disinformation in the Media, and 68% of citizens see the solution in the existence of an independent organization that will conduct fact-checking operations in the media.

How important are each of these measures?

■ Very important   ■ Somewhat important
■ Neither important nor unimportant   ■ Somewhat unimportant
■ Very unimportant   ■ Don't know/Refused to answer
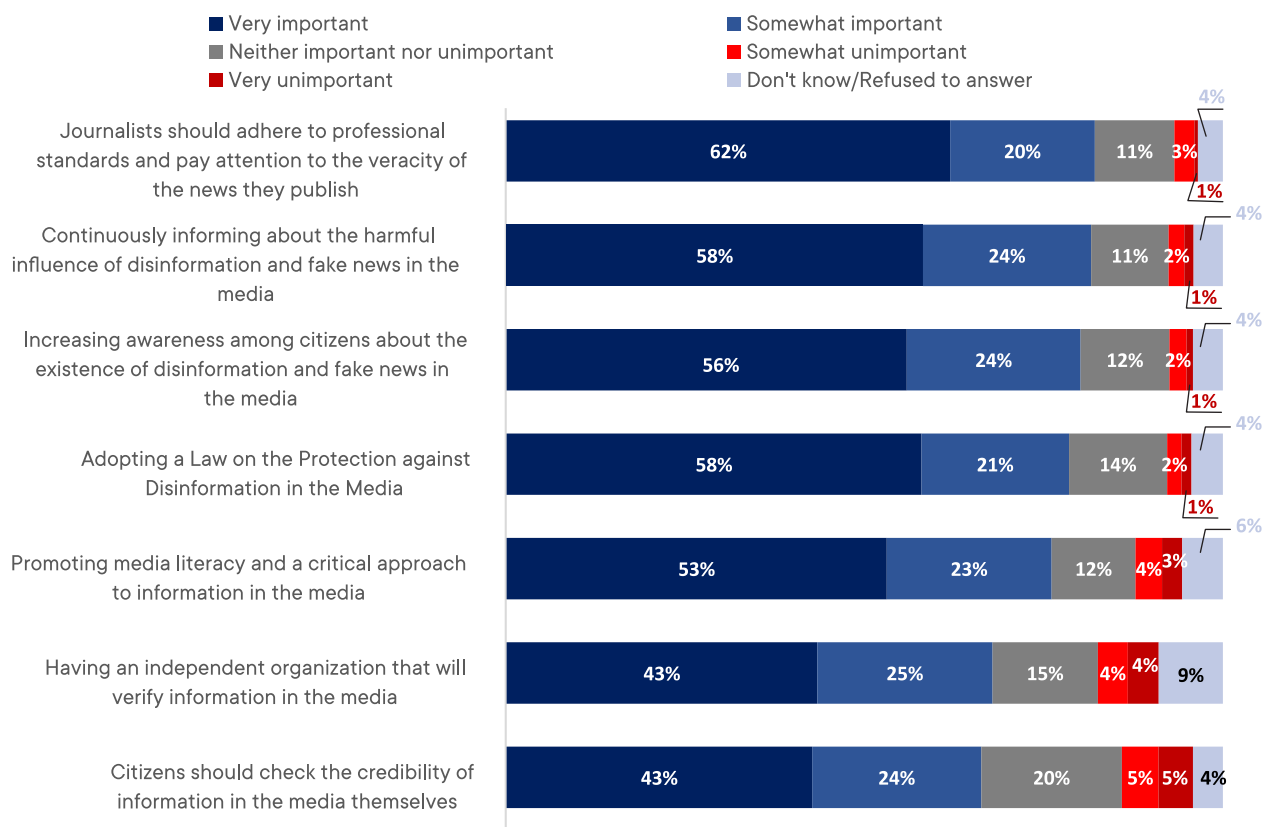

Measure	Very important	Somewhat important	Neither important nor unimportant	Somewhat unimportant	Very unimportant	Don't know/Refused to answer
Journalists should adhere to professional standards and pay attention to the veracity of the news they publish	62%	20%	11%	3%	1%	4%
Continuously informing about the harmful influence of disinformation and fake news in the media	58%	24%	11%	2%	1%	4%
Increasing awareness among citizens about the existence of disinformation and fake news in the media	56%	24%	12%	2%	1%	4%
Adopting a Law on the Protection against Disinformation in the Media	58%	21%	14%	2%	1%	4%
Promoting media literacy and a critical approach to information in the media	53%	23%	12%	4%	3%	6%
Having an independent organization that will verify information in the media	43%	25%	15%	4%	4%	9%
Citizens should check the credibility of information in the media themselves	43%	24%	20%	5%	5%	4%

More than two-thirds, or 68% of the citizens believe that online portals should be legally equalized with other media and operate as media outlets under the same legal responsibilities. Only 15% disagree with this claim.

In your opinion, should online portals be legally equalized with other media and operate as media outlets under the same legal responsibilities?

68,2%   15,4%   16,3%   0,2%

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ I don't know   ■ Refused to answer
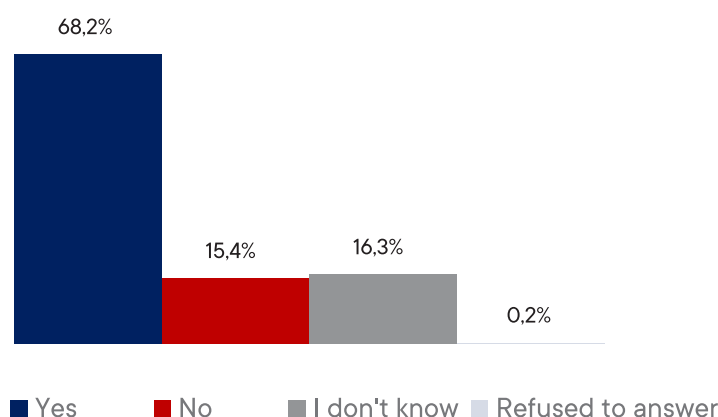
In comparison to the previous year, the research marks an increase in citizens' awareness of the responsibility that portals have towards their readers. Last year, a high 74% of citizens believed that portals have a responsibility to protect their readers from disinformation, and this year, this percentage has increased to 79%. Specifically, awareness of the responsibility of portals is lower among the youngest population aged 18 to 29 (77% believe that portals have a responsibility to protect readers from disinformatio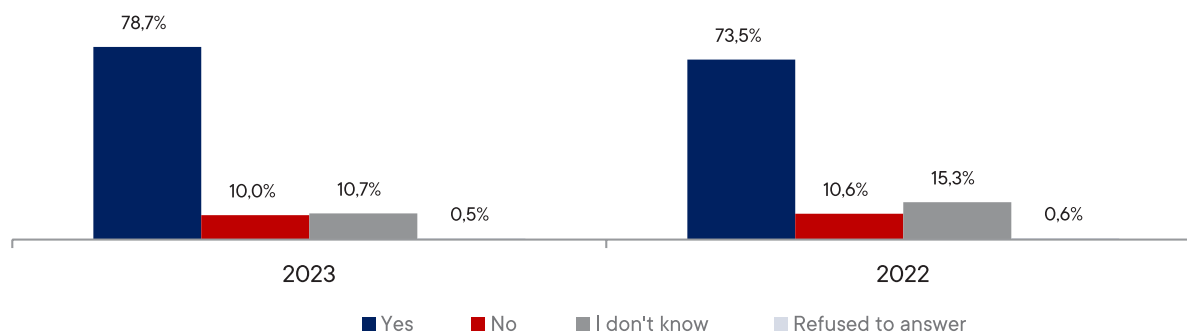n), compared to the older population—87% of those aged 30 to 49 and 81% of those aged 50 to 64 think that portals have a responsibility to protect readers from disinformation. Additionally, the population with a primary level of education demands responsibility from portals the least—59% of citizens with primary education believe that portals have responsibility regarding disinformation. This percentage is higher among the population with secondary education (76%) and highest among those with higher education (89%). Citizens from the Albanian ethnic community are much more aware of the responsibility of portals regarding disinformation (85%), compared to citizens from the Macedonian ethnic community, where this percentage is 76%.
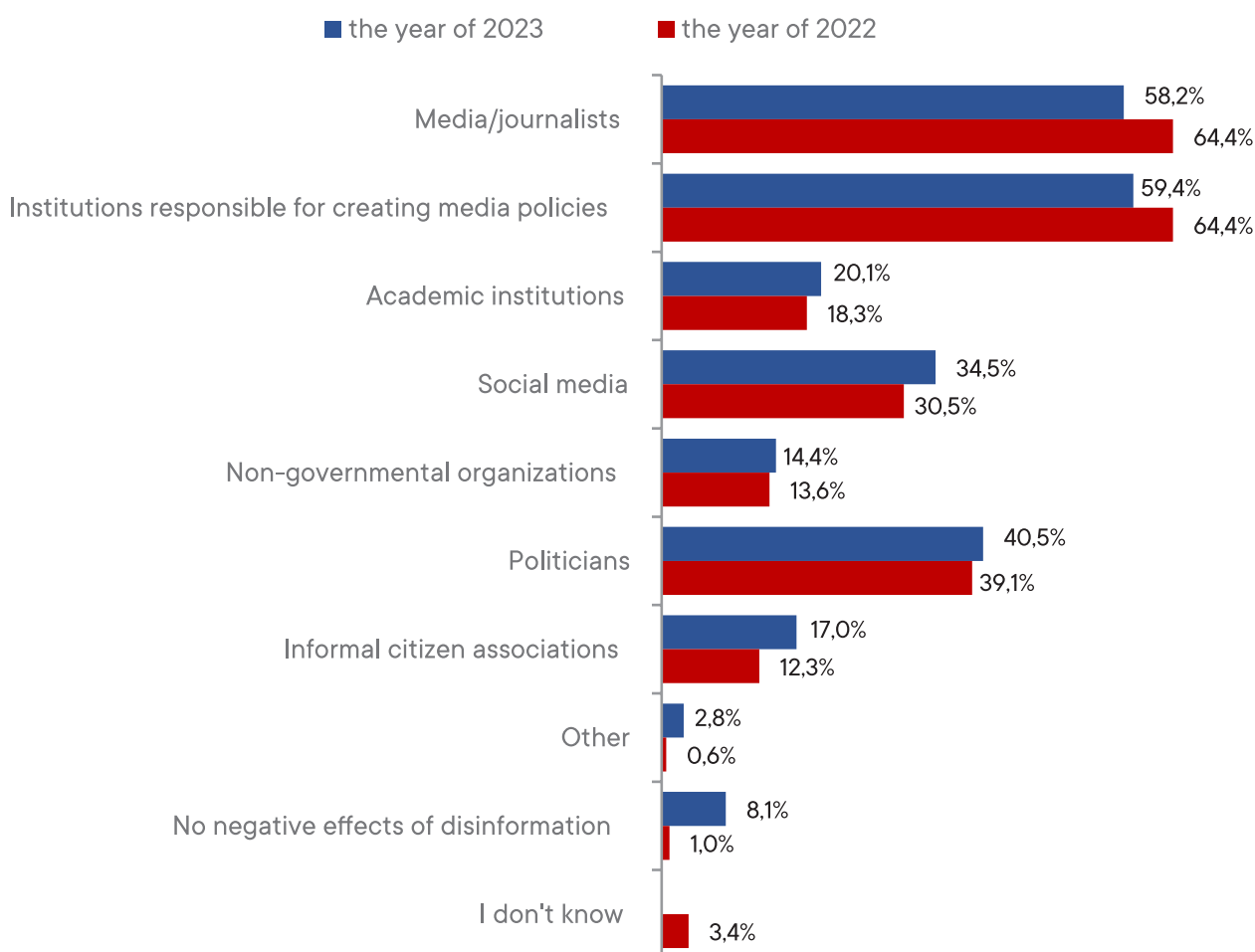
Do you believe that online portals have a responsibility to protect their readers from disinformation?

78,7%   10,0%   10,7%   0,5%
2023

73,5%   10,6%   15,3%   0,6%
2022

■ Yes   ■ No   ■ I don't know   ■ Refused to answer

Although there is a certain decrease in percentages compared to the research from the last year, most citizens in this year's research still believe that key roles in reducing the negative effects of disinformation in the media should be played by institutions responsible for creating media policies (59% this year, compared to 64% last year) and the media themselves, including journalists (58% this year, compared to 64% last year). The third crucial factor is politicians (41% this year, compared to 39% last year).

The research notes a shift in citizens' attitudes towards the role of some other actors. If last year, 31% of citizens believed that social media should play a leading role in reducing the effects of disinformation, this year, this percentage rose to 35%. The research also indicates a significant increase in expectations from informal citizen associations. Last year, 12% of citizens believed that these associations should play a leading role in combating disinformation, and this year, that percentage increased to 17%. The role of non-governmental organizations is rated the same as last year (14%), while there is a slight increase in expectations from academic institutions (20% this year compared to 18% last year, believing that academic institutions should play a leading role in reducing the effects of disinformation).

According to you, which of the following actors should play a leading role in reducing the negative effects of disinformation in the media?

■ the year of 2023   ■ the year of 2022

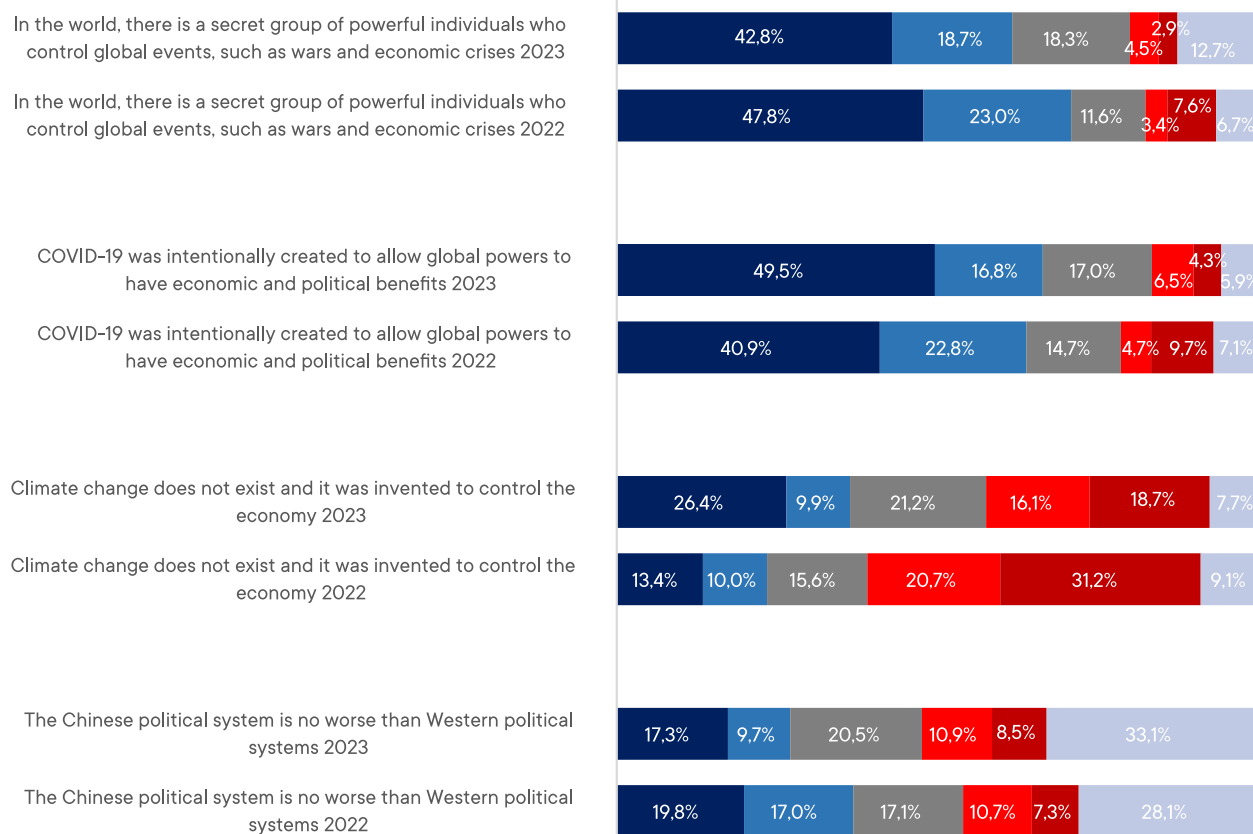|	2023	2022
Media/journalists	58,2%	64,4%
Institutions responsible for creating media policies	59,4%	64,4%
Academic institutions	20,1%	18,3%
Social media	34,5%	30,5%
Non-governmental organizations	14,4%	13,6%
Politicians	40,5%	39,1%
Informal citizen associations	17,0%	12,3%
Other	2,8%	0,6%
No negative effects of disinformation	8,1%	1,0%
I don't know		3,4%

INFLUENCE OF FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION

Conspiracy theories

The research shows that citizens are susceptible to disinformation and conspiracy theories to a large extent.

Last year, according to the measurements, 71% of citizens believed that there was a secret group of powerful individuals controlling global events, such as wars and economic crises. Although this year, this percentage significantly decreased, there is still a high percentage of 62% of citizens who still share the same belief. Furthermore, a large percentage of citizens still believe that COVID-19 was intentionally created to allow global powers to have economic and political benefits. This belief is shared by 66% of citizens this year, meaning that it is even more pronounced compared to last year when this percentage was 64%.

To what extent do you believe in each of the following statements?

- ■ Completely trust
- ■ Somewhat trust
- ■ Neither trust nor distrust
- ■ Somewhat distrust
- ■ Completely distrust
- ■ I don't know/Refused to answer

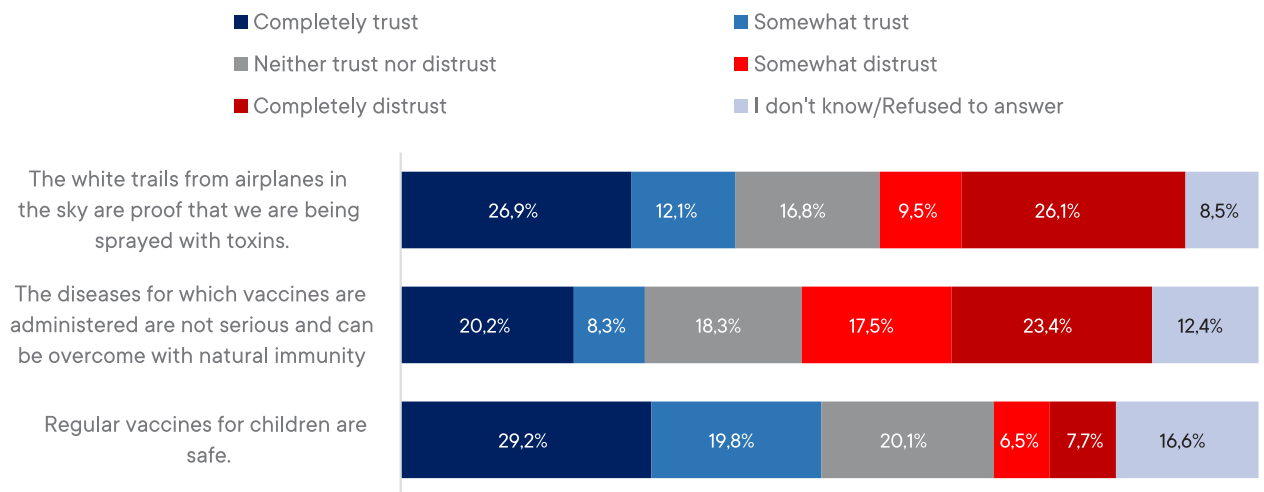| Statement	Completely trust	Somewhat trust	Neither trust nor distrust	Somewhat distrust	Completely distrust	I don't know/Refused to answer
In the world, there is a secret group of powerful individuals who control global events, such as wars and economic crises 2023	42,8%	18,7%	18,3%	2,9%	4,5%	12,7%
In the world, there is a secret group of powerful individuals who control global events, such as wars and economic crises 2022	47,8%	23,0%	11,6%	3,4%	7,6%	6,7%
COVID-19 was intentionally created to allow global powers to have economic and political benefits 2023	49,5%	16,8%	17,0%	6,5%	4,3%	5,9%
COVID-19 was intentionally created to allow global powers to have economic and political benefits 2022	40,9%	22,8%	14,7%	4,7%	9,7%	7,1%
Climate change does not exist and it was invented to control the economy 2023	26,4%	9,9%	21,2%	16,1%	18,7%	7,7%
Climate change does not exist and it was invented to control the economy 2022	13,4%	10,0%	15,6%	20,7%	31,2%	9,1%
The Chinese political system is no worse than Western political systems 2023	17,3%	9,7%	20,5%	10,9%	8,5%	33,1%
The Chinese political system is no worse than Western political systems 2022	19,8%	17,0%	17,1%	10,7%	7,3%	28,1%

This year's research also shows a shift in citizens' attitudes towards information related to climate change. If only 24% of citizens last year believed that climate change does not exist but was invented to control the economy, this year that percentage has increased to 36%.

The narrative that white trails from airplanes in the sky are proof that we are being sprayed with toxins is believed by 39% of citizens (compared to 36% who do not accept it as true).

A larger percentage of citizens (41%) do not take as true the anti-vaccine narrative that diseases for which vaccines are administered are not serious and can be overcome with natural immunity (29% of citizens believe in the veracity of this narrative). However, the largest percentage of citizens (49%) believe that regular vaccines for children are safe, compared to only 14% who think the opposite. It should be noted that a high 37% have no opinion on this matter.

To what extent do you believe in each of the following statements?

- ■ Completely trust
- ■ Somewhat trust
- ■ Neither trust nor distrust
- ■ Somewhat distrust
- ■ Completely distrust
- ■ I don't know/Refused to answer

Statement	Completely trust	Somewhat trust	Neither trust nor distrust	Somewhat distrust	Completely distrust	I don't know/Refused to answer
The white trails from airplanes in the sky are proof that we are being sprayed with toxins.	26,9%	12,1%	16,8%	9,5%	26,1%	8,5%
The diseases for which vaccines are administered are not serious and can be overcome with natural immunity	20,2%	8,3%	18,3%	17,5%	23,4%	12,4%
Regular vaccines for children are safe.	29,2%	19,8%	20,1%	6,5%	7,7%	16,6%

INFLUENCE OF PRO-RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

The prevailing opinion among citizens is that Russia's military is stronger than NATO's. Last year, 43% of citizens held this belief, compared to 18%, who believed the complete opposite. Although this year's research indicates a change in citizens' attitudes on this matter (37% believe that Russia's military is stronger than NATO's, compared to 21% who do not), it can be said that the opinion that Russia's military is stronger than NATO's is prevalent among citizens.

The majority of citizens in the country (49%) believe that the war in Ukraine is, in fact, a war between Russia and NATO. This percentage is highest among citizens with higher education (50%), compared to citizens with secondary education (44%) and citizens with primary education (35%).

As much as 39% of citizens believe that there are American laboratories for creating biological weapons in Ukraine. This narrative is significantly more widespread among the Macedonian ethnic community (43%) compared to the Albanian ethnic community (27%).

Also, a higher percentage of citizens believe that Russia is fighting against Nazism in Ukraine. As much as 31% of citizens share this belief, compared to 26%, who reject this belief as untrue.

Although a larger part of citizens (43%) do not justify the Russian attack on Ukraine, a high percentage, or a staggering 21% believe that the Russian attack on Ukraine is justified. Moreover, this is more pronounced among the Macedonian ethnic community (24% believe that the Russian attack on Ukraine is justified) and less pronounced among the Albanian ethnic community, where this percentage is 14%.

**To what extent do you believe in each of the following statements?**
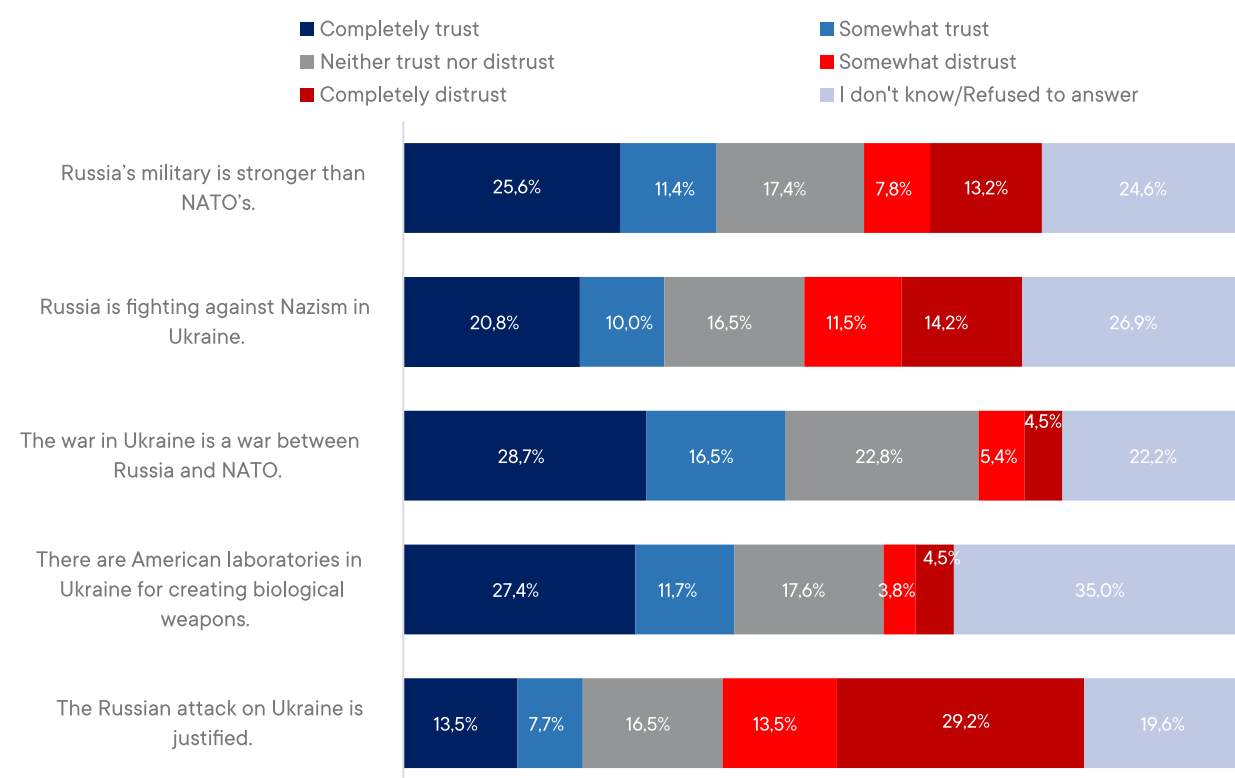
17% of citizens believe that there are sources and entities in the country that promote Russian interests. This view is most prevalent among the population with higher education (28%), compared to the population with secondary education (14%) and the population with primary education, where only 3% believe that there are sources and entities in the country promoting Russian interests. In contrast to them, 30% believe that there are no such entities in the country. As much as 50 % of citizens have no opinion on this matter.

Do you think there are sources/entities promoting Russian interests and views in the country?

- ■ Yes
- ■ No
- ■ I don't know
- ■ Refused to answer
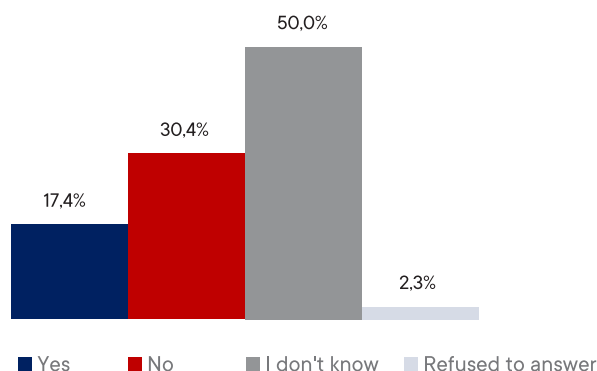
Similarly to last year, respondents who believed that there were entities actively promoting Russian interests in the country were asked to name those entities. Unlike last year, when secret services of other countries (11%), media (10%), and political parties (9%) were most often mentioned, this year, the political party Levica was most often mentioned. 15% of citizens who believe that Russian interests are promoted in the country believe that it is done through Levica. This marks a significant change in attitudes compared to the previous year when only 4% of citizens who believed that Russian interests are actively promoted in the country mentioned Levica as a source of those interests.

Public figures (9%), certain politicians (7%), certain media (5%), and the church (5%) were also mentioned as entities promoting Russian interests in the country.
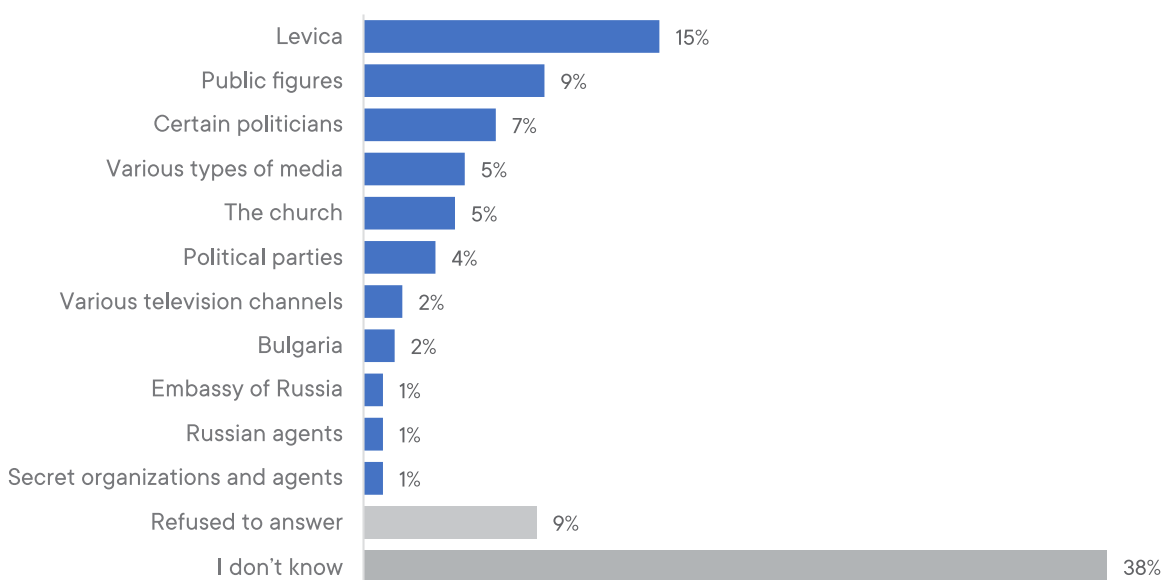
Anti-European, i.e., pro-Russian narratives still significantly shape public opinion in the country. Moreover, the research shows that they have a significantly greater influence on citizens of Macedonian ethnic origin compared to citizens of Albanian ethnic origin. Thus, 35% of citizens believe that our country would benefit more from an alliance with a large Slavic and Orthodox power like Russia (as an alternative to Euro-Atlantic integrations), while 26% of citizens do not agree with this stance. The inclination towards Russia in this context is more pronounced among citizens of Macedonian ethnic
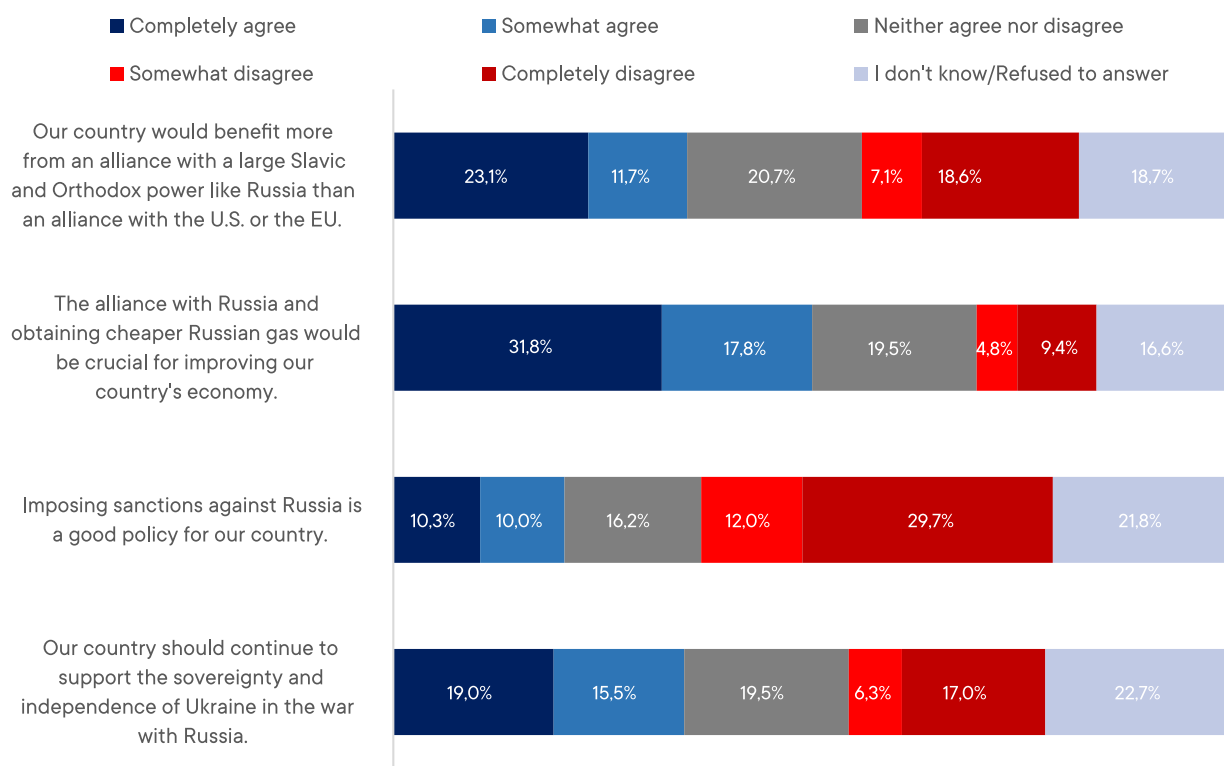
origin (37% consider alliance with Russia beneficial, compared to 23% who do not agree with this stance). Among citizens of Albanian ethnic origin, a high 30% agree that alliance with Russia is beneficial for the country, compared to 35% who do not agree with this stance.

As much as 50% of citizens believe that alliance with Russia and obtaining cheaper Russian gas would be crucial for improving our country's economy. This stance is, once again, more pronounced among citizens of Macedonian ethnic origin, where 53% agree, and 10% disagree with this stance, compared to citizens of Albanian ethnic origin, among whom 39% agree, and 27% disagree with this stance.

A high 42% of citizens believe that imposing sanctions against Russia, in the context of the war in Ukraine, is not a good policy for our country. This stance significantly differs among citizens of Macedonian and Albanian ethnic origin. While 53% of citizens of Macedonian ethnic origin believe that sanctions against Russia are not a good policy (12% believe they are a good policy), only 9% of citizens of Albanian ethnic origin believe that sanctions against Russia are not a good policy, compared to 47% who agree that sanctions against Russia are good policy for our country.

Opinions are divided regarding our country's policy towards Ukraine: while 35% of citizens believe that our country should continue to support the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine in the war with Russia, a high 23% think the opposite. This division in attitudes is evident among citizens of Macedonian ethnic origin, where 27% believe that our country should support the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, compared to 29% who think the opposite. In contrast, the dominant stance among citizens of Albanian ethnic origin is that our country should continue to support the independence and sovereignty of Ukraine (60% of citizens of Albanian ethnic origin agree with this stance, compared to 6% who disagree).

To what extent do you agree that:

■ Completely agree   ■ Somewhat agree   ■ Neither agree nor disagree

■ Somewhat disagree   ■ Completely disagree   ■ I don't know/Refused to answer

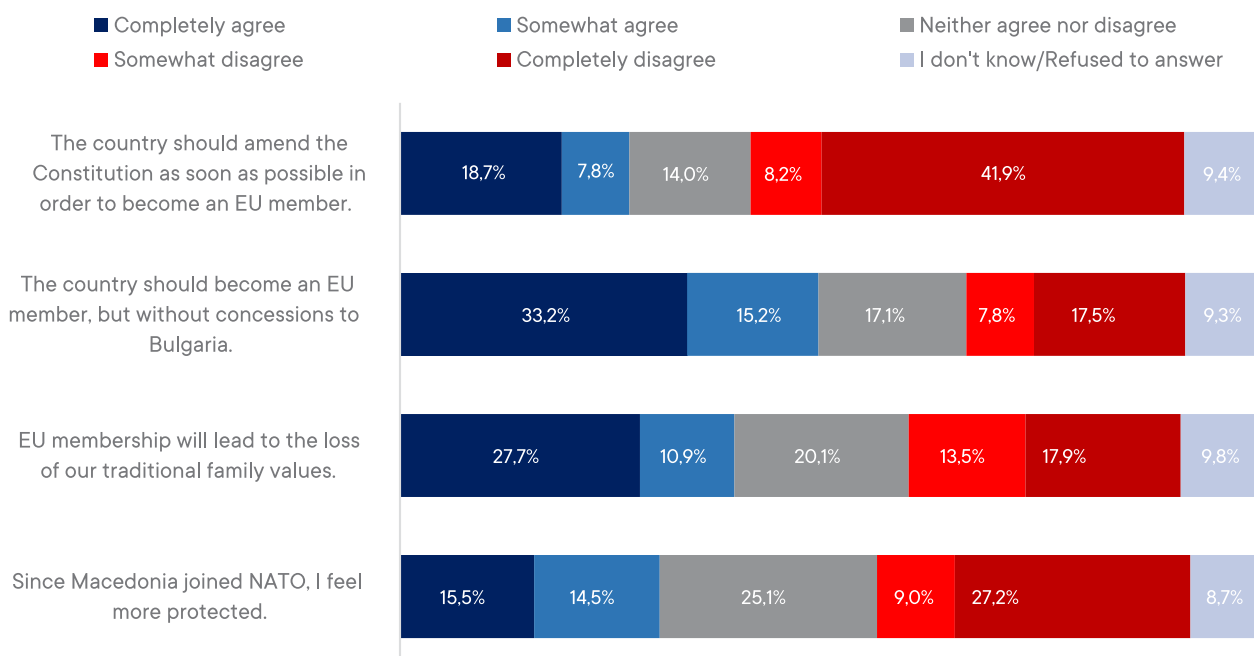| Statement	Completely agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Completely disagree	I don't know/Refused to answer
Our country would benefit more from an alliance with a large Slavic and Orthodox power like Russia than an alliance with the U.S. or the EU.	23,1%	11,7%	20,7%	7,1%	18,6%	18,7%
The alliance with Russia and obtaining cheaper Russian gas would be crucial for improving our country's economy.	31,8%	17,8%	19,5%	4,8%	9,4%	16,6%
Imposing sanctions against Russia is a good policy for our country.	10,3%	10,0%	16,2%	12,0%	29,7%	21,8%
Our country should continue to support the sovereignty and independence of Ukraine in the war with Russia.	19,0%	15,5%	19,5%	6,3%	17,0%	22,7%

GEOPOLITICAL RELATIONS OF NORTH MACEDONIA

Political pressure on the country regarding the resolution of the dispute with Bulgaria, through the present information narratives in the media over the past year, led to a certain shift in the attitudes of citizens. Thus, last year, a staggering 60% of citizens believed that the country should become a member of the EU, but without concessions to Bulgaria, and this year that percentage has decreased to 48%. On the other hand, last year, 19% believed that the country should make concessions to Bulgaria in order to successfully join the EU, and this year that percentage increased to 26%.

Nevertheless, the research shows that as much as 50% of citizens do not agree with the idea of amending the Constitution in order to join the EU, with a high 42% not agreeing with such an idea at all, and 8% somewhat disagreeing. Regarding this question, the research shows a significant difference in the attitudes of the Macedonian and Albanian ethnic communities. While only 13% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity agree to constitutional amendments (9% completely agree, and 4% somewhat agree), as many as 68% of citizens of Albanian ethnicity agree to constitutional amendments (50% completely agree, and 18% somewhat agree).

Citizens also have divided opinions on the impact on societal values that EU membership will bring. 39% believe that EU membership will lead to the loss of traditional family values, while a smaller percentage, or 31%, disagree with such a stance. As much as 20% of citizens have no opinion on this matter. Moreover, according to the data of the research, the Macedonian community is much more concerned than the Albanian ethnic community about the influence of the EU on traditional family values. While 43% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity believe that EU membership will lead to the loss of traditional family values, this percentage is significantly lower among citizens of Albanian ethnicity (26%).

Political events over the past year, as well as disinformation narratives accompanying them in the media, have definitely influenced the increase in Euro-Atlantic skepticism among citizens. Thus, last year, 40% of citizens felt more secure after the country entered NATO, while this year, that percentage has dropped to 30%.

To what extent do you agree that:

Legend:
- Completely agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Completely disagree
- I don't know/Refused to answer

Statement	Completely agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Completely disagree	I don't know/Refused to answer
The country should amend the Constitution as soon as possible in order to become an EU member.	18,7%	7,8%	14,0%	8,2%	41,9%	9,4%
The country should become an EU member, but without concessions to Bulgaria.	33,2%	15,2%	17,1%	7,8%	17,5%	9,3%
EU membership will lead to the loss of our traditional family values.	27,7%	10,9%	20,1%	13,5%	17,9%	9,8%
Since Macedonia joined NATO, I feel more protected.	15,5%	14,5%	25,1%	9,0%	27,2%	8,7%

The politics of neighboring Serbia has the most positive influence on our country. As many as 83% of citizens share this opinion (89% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity and 66% of citizens of Albanian ethnicity). This percentage marks a significant increase compared to last year when it was 73%. Another country that has a positive influence on our country, according to citizens' opinions, is Türkiye. A staggering 66% of citizens (89% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity and 66% of citizens of Albanian ethnicity) believe that Türkiye has a positive influence on our country, which is an increase from the percentage of 62% last year.

Attitudes towards the influence of the United States are divided. Namely, last year, 43% of citizens considered the U.S. to have a positive influence, while 38% considered it to have a negative influence on our country. This year, the percentage of citizens sharing a positive opinion on the U.S. decreased – 39% believe that the U.S. has a positive influence, while 37% believe it has a negative influence on our country. Attitudes towards the influence of the U.S. differ significantly among citizens of Macedonian and Albanian ethnicities. While the dominant attitude among citizens of Macedonian ethnicity is that the U.S. has a negative influence on the country (46% - negative influence, as opposed to 31% - positive), among citizens of the Albanian ethnic community, the research shows contrasting findings (66% - positive influence, as opposed to 10% - negative influence).

The research notes a significant shift in attitudes towards Russia. Last year, 40% of citizens considered Russia to have a positive influence, while 27% considered it to have a negative influence on our country. This year, the research indicates a significant shift in attitudes. While 34% still hold the view that Russia has a positive influence, a higher percentage of citizens (38%) reported that Russia has a negative influence on our country. Moreover, while citizens of Macedonian ethnicity are divided in terms of attitudes toward the influence of Russia (38% think the influence is positive, as opposed to 32%, who think it's negative), a higher percentage of citizens of Albanian ethnicity (59%) believe that Russia has a negative influence on our country, as opposed to 21%, who think the opposite.

Although a large portion of citizens (over 40%) have no clear stance on China's influence on our country, it can be noted that citizens believe China has a positive influence, with a significant increase from last year to this year. Last year, 36% of citizens stated that China has a positive influence on our country, and that percentage rose to 43% this year.
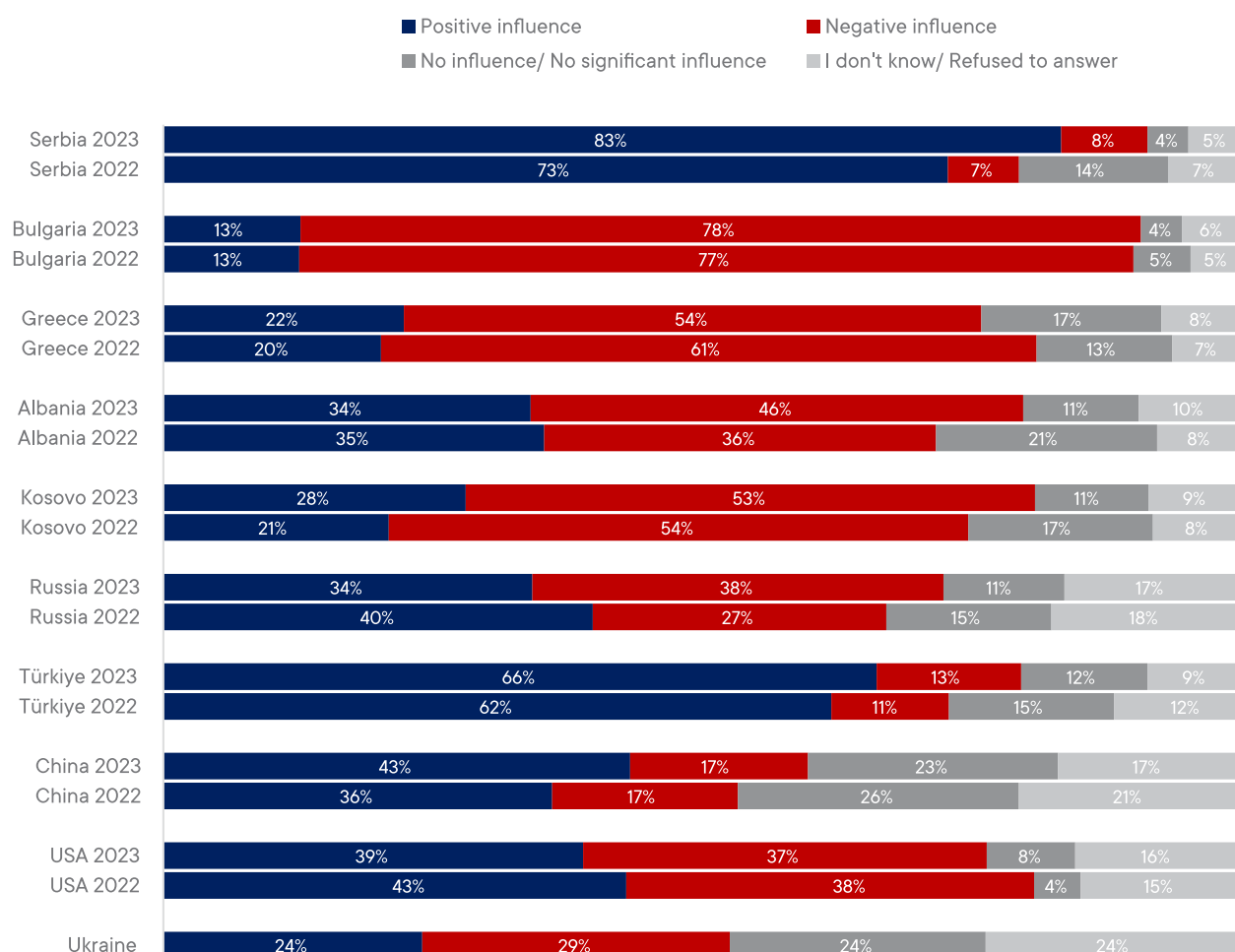
According to citizens, Bulgaria has the most negative influence on our country - 77% of citizens in last year's research, and 78% in this year's research, believe that Bulgaria has a negative influence on our country. This stance is mainly shared by citizens of Macedonian ethnicity (81%) and citizens of Albanian ethnicity (65%).

Another neighboring country that has a predominantly negative influence is Greece. 54% of citizens share this opinion (the research shows a decrease from last year when this percentage was 61%). Regarding Greece, there are significant differences between citizens of Macedonian and citizens of Albanian ethnicity. While 62% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity believe that Greece has a negative influence (19% believe it has a positive influence), among citizens of Albanian ethnicity, opinions are divided (32% - positive influence, 30% - negative influence).

54% of citizens (53% last year) believe that Kosovo has a negative influence on our country, while 28% believe it has a positive influence. Regarding Kosovo, the research shows the greatest difference in attitudes between citizens of Albanian and Macedonian ethnicity. While 77% of citizens of Albanian ethnicity believe that Kosovo has a positive influence on our country (8% believe it has a negative influence), citizens of Macedonian ethnicity have the opposite view - 66% believe that Kosovo has a negative influence, as opposed to 13% who believe it has a positive influence.

Attitudes towards the influence of Albania are divided, with an increase in negative sentiment in the past year. Last year, 36% of citizens believed that Albania had a negative influence, but 35% believed it had a positive influence on our country. This year, the percentage of citizens who believe that Albania has a positive influence remained almost the same (34%), but there was a significant increase in the percentage of citizens who perceived the influence of Albania as negative (46%). Regarding attitudes towards the influence of Albania, there are significant differences between citizens of Macedonian and citizens of Albanian ethnicity. Namely, while 76% of citizens of Albanian ethnicity believe that Albania has a positive influence on our country (as opposed to 5% who believe it has a negative influence), the stance of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity is different - 59% believe that Albania has a negative influence, as opposed to 19%, who believe it has a positive influence.
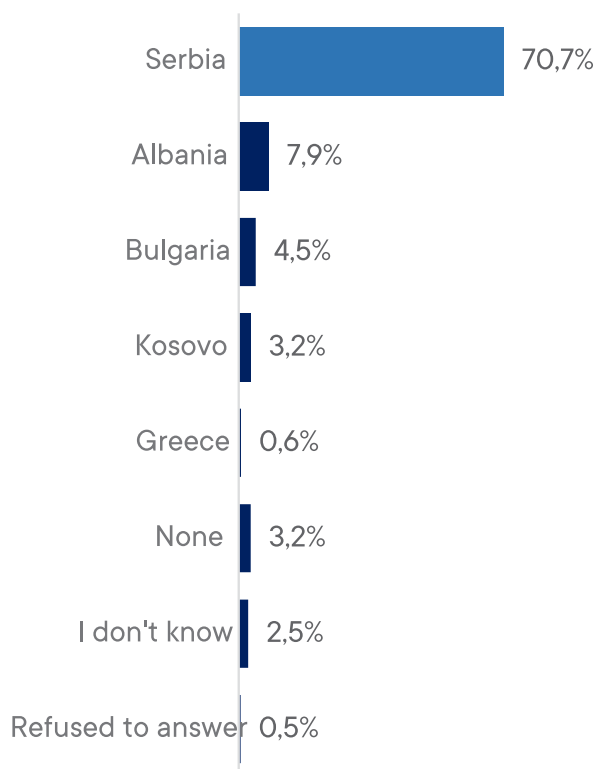
What influence do the following countries have on our country:

■ Positive influence   ■ Negative influence
■ No influence/ No significant influence   ■ I don't know/ Refused to answer

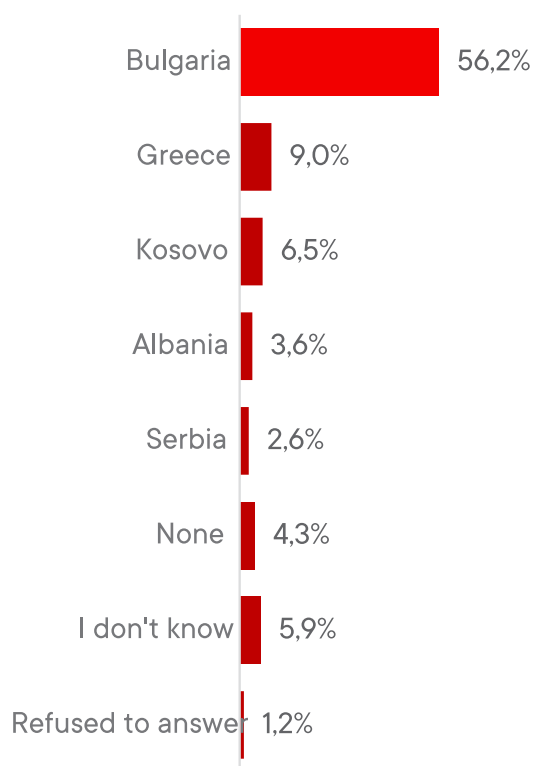| Country	Positive	Negative	No influence	Don't know
Serbia 2023	83%	8%	4%	5%
Serbia 2022	73%	7%	14%	7%
Bulgaria 2023	13%	78%	4%	6%
Bulgaria 2022	13%	77%	5%	5%
Greece 2023	22%	54%	17%	8%
Greece 2022	20%	61%	13%	7%
Albania 2023	34%	46%	11%	10%
Albania 2022	35%	36%	21%	8%
Kosovo 2023	28%	53%	11%	9%
Kosovo 2022	21%	54%	17%	8%
Russia 2023	34%	38%	11%	17%
Russia 2022	40%	27%	15%	18%
Türkiye 2023	66%	13%	12%	9%
Türkiye 2022	62%	11%	15%	12%
China 2023	43%	17%	23%	17%
China 2022	36%	17%	26%	21%
USA 2023	39%	37%	8%	16%
USA 2022	43%	38%	4%	15%
Ukraine	24%	29%	24%	24%

Of all neighboring countries, Serbia is considered to be the greatest friend of our country. A staggering 71% of citizens stated that Serbia is the greatest friend, and this percentage has increased compared to last year, when it was 66%. Regarding this question, there is a difference in attitudes between citizens of Macedonian and citizens of Albanian ethnicity. For citizens of Macedonian ethnicity, Serbia is the only friendly neighboring country (85% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity share this view), while for citizens of Albanian ethnicity, there are three countries friendly to our country - Albania (29%), Serbia (27%), and Kosovo (12%).

Of all neighboring countries, according to the opinions of citizens, Bulgaria is the greatest enemy of North Macedonia. As much as 56% of citizens share this view. Regarding this question, the research does not indicate a difference in attitudes between citizens of Macedonian and citizens of Albanian ethnicity - 58% of citizens of Macedonian ethnicity, and 49% of citizens of Albanian ethnicity, believe that Bulgaria is the greatest enemy of our country. A comparison with last year's research shows an increase in negative sentiment towards Bulgaria - last year, 50% of citizens believed that Bulgaria was the greatest enemy of our country, and this year, that percentage has increased to 56%.

Which neighboring country is North Macedonia's greatest friend?

Country	Percentage
Serbia	70,7%
Albania	7,9%
Bulgaria	4,5%
Kosovo	3,2%
Greece	0,6%
None	3,2%
I don't know	2,5%
Refused to answer	0,5%

Which neighboring country is North Macedonia's greatest enemy?

Country	Percentage
Bulgaria	56,2%
Greece	9,0%
Kosovo	6,5%
Albania	3,6%
Serbia	2,6%
None	4,3%
I don't know	5,9%
Refused to answer	1,2%

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the research process and data analysis, the following general recommendations are provided:

A systemic approach to build a culture of critical thinking and social dialogue at all levels is necessary. This starts with a proactive role of state institutions in shaping public policies, enhancing the quality of media coverage on sensitive topics, and strengthening media and digital literacy through educational systems and through educational programs in the media, as well as through reforms addressing the relationships between institutions and stakeholders across sectors and levels.

The increasing use of online media, from internet portals to social networks, which citizens consider to be major sources of disinformation, underscores the need to address the accumulated problems related to the lack of regulation in this area by amending laws and regulations with the aim of preserving and promoting freedom of expression in accordance with EU standards.

It is necessary to raise the level of media integrity through increased adherence to professional and ethical standards in journalism, along with greater implementation and visibility of self-regulation mechanisms. Media outlets should implement internal mechanisms to enhance their resistance to disinformation by introducing fact-checking procedures. At the editorial policy level, prioritizing proactive reporting on disinformation trends, along with promoting media and digital literacy, is essential.

The media should commit to conveying verified content from fact-checking services, other media outlets, as well as civil organizations that regularly expose disinformation and disinformation narratives within their work.

The low level of trust in the institutions of the democratic system, ranging from the Government and its organs, to the media as a pillar of democracy, coupled with the expressed civic awareness of the harmful effects of disinformation, followed by a demand for resolving the situation, makes it a priority to adopt a systematic approach. This should begin with the creation of a national strategy to strengthen resilience to the harmful impacts of disinformation, through an inclusive process that takes into account all previous experiences in overcoming polarization.

Promoting public debate on the geopolitical context, the flow of disinformation, its sources, and the interests it promotes, particularly anti-democratic tendencies associated with foreign authoritarian regimes, is imperative. State institutions, the academic or scientific-educational community, media, and civil society have a responsibility to proactively inform citizens about situations through positive narratives based on facts, informative and educational content, public debates grounded in journalistic research, and expert analyses.

Results from the research indicate a continued susceptibility to conspiracy theories and other alternative narratives, which is a consequence of structural factors and the continuous pressure and dissemination of disinformation through some media outlets, especially on social networks. These conditions should be addressed through specific programs based on collaboration among all societal actors, rather than through pathologization or practices of politicization, rejection, or ignorance.

Considering the high polarization in society along multiple lines, particularly biases associated with political affiliation and resistance to the scientific approach in medicine, it is important, when preparing interventions against disinformation, to make decisions based on data in terms of whether applying a confrontational approach (which could strengthen polarization) is effective in a given situation or whether it is preferable to strive for a broad and inclusive societal dialogue to give all sides the chance to reconsider some of their values, perceptions, and thoughts.

Creators of public opinion should be aware that the lack of information and sustained public debate leads to information gaps, providing space for malignant external influences to act on citizens' perceptions with the aim of undermining democracy. Therefore, the recognition and re-evaluation of disinformation narratives should become an integral part of all forms of public communication and content creation.

State and public institutions, private companies, and civil organizations should upgrade ethical codes to incorporate the

fight against disinformation as a core value and further develop appropriate working procedures and criteria for handling media service procurement processes.

All institutions, especially those in the health sector, should support media, services, and organizations directly involved in uncovering health-related disinformation (especially on outbreaks and vaccination) by promoting the disseminated content on their social media profiles and web pages.

State institutions from the legislative and executive branches should play a proactive role in strengthening the financial capacities of professional media and creating a favorable environment for financial investments in the media industry, treating the improvement of the media landscape as a strategic goal.

Civil organizations should continue creating and accumulating knowledge related to the issue of disinformation, especially initiatives to raise public awareness about the harmful effects of disinformation and methods to build resistance against them, targeting various groups within their communities that they perceive as most susceptible to the negative influence of disinformation, particularly the youth and older populations.

ANNEX: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY OF THE MEDIA MONITORING OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

This report provides an overview of the results from the monitoring process of domestic online media from January to September 2023. The aim of this monitoring was to identify and analyze disinformation trends related to foreign malign influences in the country and understand the main messages they aim to convey. To achieve this goal, the Metamorphosis team analyzed over 400 articles from various media and social media posts suspected of containing disinformation related to foreign influences in the country. The selection of articles was based on the availability of verifiable facts that could be checked through professional journalistic methods, including articles with high social media presence. The analysis of these articles covered several key aspects, including the disinformation messages they intended to convey, the topics and narratives they addressed, their level of influence, sources of origin, media distribution, and their potential to provoke violence or radicalization.

METHODOLOGY OF THE PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

A quantitative research methodology was employed to conduct the research. The data collection technique involved conducting Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviews (CATI) and an online platform specialized for this type of research. The data were processed using the IBM SPSS Statistics software program, employing descriptive statistical methods.

To achieve the aims of the research, a questionnaire with 37 closed and open-ended questions was prepared.

To check the logical coherence and clarity of the questions, the questionnaire was pilot-tested on 10% of the total samples, followed by additional technical corrections.

For the purposes of this research, a quantitative research methodology of a multi-stage stratified representative sample was used. According to the geodemographic structure of the population, North Macedonia is divided into eight regions: Skopje, Polog, Pelagonija, Vardar, Northeast, Southeast, Southwest, and East regions, encompassing urban and rural communities. The number of respondents is proportional to the total population in each region.

The main sample includes 1,100 households, with each household representing an individual aged 18 and above.

A total of 34 municipalities were included in the research, covering both urban and rural settings, representatively selected from all eight statistical regions in the country. The fieldwork took place from October 20 to November 1, 2023.

The statistical error for research of this kind is + / -3%, which is a normal deviation for this representative sample.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS:

		%	N
Sex	Male	49.4%	543
	Female	50.6%	557
Age	18 – 29	14.4%	158
	30 – 49	38.3%	421
	50 – 64	26.7%	294
	65+	20.6%	227
	Refused to answer	0.0%	0
Education	No education/incomplete primary education	1.0%	11
	Primary education	5.8%	64
	Three-year secondary education	3.8%	42
	Secondary education	59.8%	658
	Associate's degree	7.5%	82
	Higher education (bachelor's, master's, doctorate)	21.8%	240
	Refused to answer	0.3%	3
Ethnicity	Macedonian	73.5%	809
	Albanian	23.6%	260
	Serbian	0.5%	5
	Aromanian	0.6%	7
	Turkish	0.7%	8
	Roma	0.6%	7
	Bosniak	0.4%	4
	Other	0.0%	0
Employment status	Employed in the private sector	42.8%	471
	Employed in the public sector	13.7%	151
	International institution	0.3%	3
	NGO sector	0.4%	4
	Unemployed	9.2%	101
	Pupil/student	4.5%	49
	Homemaker	0.6%	7
	Private entrepreneur/business owner	2.6%	29
	Freelancer	0.7%	8
	Retired person	22.9%	252
	Farmer	2.3%	25
	Something else	0.0%	0
Place of residence	Urban	67.2%	739
	Rural	32.8%	361
Region	Vardar	7.4%	81
	East	8.7%	96
	Southwest	11.5%	126
	Southeast	8.4%	92
	Pelagonija	10.0%	110
	Polog	15.4%	169
	Northeast	8.3%	91
	Skopje	30.5%	335