

Stability Under Threat: FIMI in North Macedonia

Analytical report on the Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in the Republic of North Macedonia.

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Executive Summary

Being a point of interest for the world's superpowers, and a country where the best thriving element is corruption, in the past decade North Macedonia has faced significant challenges related to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI). Although some of the main compounds are domestic, meaning poor media professionalism and political turmoil, the lack of coherent response from the whole society has allowed FIMI to affect the country's development and recently particularly affect inter-ethnic relations.

In the last decade, the state institutions have not been very active in countering foreign malign influences and disinformation although in 2019 the Government had some efforts by proposing a concrete plan. The national Assembly on the other hand has been inactive in the whole process, so far not addressing the FIMI issue on any Parliamentary Committee. Currently at least five Committees have the mandate to address FIMI issues but only the Committee on Defense and Security had shown interest to engage.

So far, only the civil society organizations have been fully engaged in countering FIMI, not only with fact checking and debunking, but also with initiatives for a strategic and whole-society approach to the issues of FIMI to be treated as not only a media problem but also a security issue. Metamorphosis Foundation has been on the forefront of these efforts by initiating a set of recommendations for different stakeholders including the government supported by all relevant media associations and civil society organizations.

In the meantime, current FIMI tactics tend to undermine the 2001 [Ohrid Framework Agreement](#), designed to ensure calm relations among ethnic groups. Manipulative narratives portray EU integration as a threat to Macedonian identity, spark fears among ethnic Macedonians about losing their identity.

To complete the opening phase of the negotiations for EU membership, the country needs to change its Constitution again and add the Bulgarian nation on an equal footing with other mentioned nations in the Preamble. Despite the Macedonian people, the Preamble now includes the Albanian people, Turkish people, Vlach people and Roma people. The previous

government already proposed a solution: to add "the Bulgarian people, the Croatian people, the Montenegrin people, the Slovenian people, the Jewish people and the Egyptian people". However, since two thirds of the Members of Parliament need to vote for changing the Constitution, the proposal so far is not scheduled for discussion because the previous ruling coalition had a thin majority in Parliament. The ruling coalition now though, lacks only two votes to have two-thirds majority.

The narrative around the inter-ethnic relations is that the ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia will have more gains from EU membership, while the Macedonians will lose their identity. Some extreme and anti-Western political actors, risking heightened ethnic divisions and instability, regularly use this narrative.

Political rhetoric has also contributed to the problem. Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski has been relying on this narrative in his [public speeches](#), which is very concerning. Recent electoral campaigns have seen a rise in anti-Albanian sentiment and divisive narratives from parties such as [VMRO-DPMNE](#) and [Levica](#) (The Left). Some ethnic Albanian political parties have also relied on the ethnicity narrative, like [DUJ](#) (Democratic union for integration) and AA (Alliance for the Albanians). These narratives further polarize the population and foster distrust in Western institutions.

Additionally, disinformation campaigns leverage media channels and social media platforms with limited regulation, exploiting gaps in the information space.

Cybersecurity remains a significant challenge. The national cybersecurity strategy is underdeveloped, with insufficient attention given to emerging threats like artificial intelligence. This leaves North Macedonia vulnerable to further exploitation by malicious actors.

To address these threats, it is important for the national and European institutions to focus on:

- Developing comprehensive legislation specifically targeting FIMI. This includes strengthening media regulation and ensuring transparency and freedom of speech. It is crucial to assign a parliamentary committee with a clear mandate to oversee FIMI-related issues and to ensure effective implementation of countermeasures.
- Strictly regulated and transparent public awareness campaigns for educating citizens about foreign malign influence and promoting media literacy and critical thinking, which will help build societal resilience.
- The European institutions should support North Macedonia by providing technical assistance for the creation and implementation of anti-FIMI legislation.
- Enhancing cybersecurity collaboration and addressing AI-related threats through EU-funded projects.
- Following up on previous initiatives from the civil society sector and creating the basis for a systemic approach towards countering FIMI. The National Assembly should lead this process.
- Fostering regional dialogues and encouraging cooperation between North Macedonia and its neighbors.

- It is also important for the EU to ensure that the integration process remains transparent and supportive of North Macedonia's efforts to combat FIMI, while addressing concerns about national identity and integration.

Fact is that safeguarding North Macedonia's stability and societal cohesion requires a coordinated effort from both national and European institutions.

Introduction - Civil Society most active in countering FIMI

Any discussion about Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) in North Macedonia over the past decade would be incomplete without first addressing the domestic manipulation of information and the pressures exerted by the presiding government between 2014 and 2017. Without recounting all the major political incidents or (in)direct restrictions on media freedom, it would be useful to point out that both the EU Commission progress report from 2014 and 2015, and the U.S. State Department 2015 Human Rights [report](#), state that "the situation on media freedom continued to deteriorate. Government influence on media outputs is exercised through; inter alia, state-financed campaigns. There is a scarcity of truly independent reporting and lack of accurate and objective information being made available through mainstream media to the public, and a lack of informed public debate".

During this period, neither of the two major political parties, [VMRO-DPMNE](#) and [SDSM](#), included any references to disinformation or FIMI in their party manifestos. Between the 2014 elections and the subsequent early parliamentary elections in 2016, no new laws were introduced, nor were existing laws amended to address these issues. Furthermore, the 2016 party programs [from both parties](#) similarly lacked any mention of disinformation or FIMI, reflecting a notable absence of political commitment to tackling these challenges at that time.

Two significant events can be considered the catalyst for a broader discussion on disinformation and FIMI. The first was in 2016 when North Macedonia came under international scrutiny due to the [proliferation](#) of the [Veles fake news sites](#) during the U.S. presidential elections. The second event was the subsequent change in the Macedonian government in 2017 following the parliamentary elections, during which the new administration emphasized transparency by opening ministries to demonstrate their commitment to accountable governance.

It should be underscored that the state Assembly has yet to pass any legislation or concrete and binding actions plans that specifically target these issues.

The only law that might have indirect relations with countering FIMI and is partially supposed to adhere to DSA is the [Law on Audio and Audio-visual Media Services](#).

This law regulates only the operation of audio and audio-visual media service providers, and it was passed in 2013. With the amendments in July 2023, video-sharing platforms were added as subject to legal regulation. With another [amendment in March 2024](#), the financing of state campaigns at the state and local level also became subject to legal regulation. Even the European Commission as a way of corrupting media owners and editors heavily criticized the financing of state campaigns in private media in the past. "Greater transparency is necessary regarding media advertising by state institutions and political parties," the [EC Report for 2023 states](#).

The competent authority for matters covered by the Law is the Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media Services, which is an independent and non-profit regulatory body, but it lacks capacity and funds to fully implement its mandate.

The print media are covered with the [Law on Media](#), which regulates the legal status and registration, transparency of ownership structure, the establishment of a newsroom and appointment of editors-in-chief, protection of journalists' sources, minors' protection, the right to reply and correction and the ban for publishing content with hate speech and incitement to violence. This Law was amended in March 2024, when the conditions for granting state subsidies in the print media were passed.

There is no law that currently regulates online media, but they try to function with self-regulation. The self-regulatory body (Council of Media Ethics) established a voluntary Registry of professional online news media "Promedia" which serves as a reference for professionalism in online media.

Having all that in mind, this report will further analyze other measures directly related to FIMI that have been undertaken by the Government and its ministries.

Since 2017, the two governments led by SDSM (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia) introduced action plans and strategies. The first one was the 2019 "[Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation](#)", a plan which included non-binding activities, and the 2021 "[Strategy for Building Resilience and Tackling Hybrid Threats](#)". An expert with close knowledge of the matter shared that the content of the Action Plan itself was not problematic, but rather how the Government proposed it. A significant oversight occurred while developing the plan without inclusivity; formulating it based on the needs of government institutions, rather than incorporating input from civil society and media organizations.

When it comes to the legislative branch, the Parliament has been criticized for its lack of (proactive) measures and oversight in this domain with no clear distinction of the competences of the various Committees whose mandate is related to FIMI. As the CESS', (Center for European Security Studies) [policy brief notes](#): "Currently, various committees work on different aspects of disinformation without a conceptual framework and reference to disinformation.

These include the Committee for Education, Science, and Sport, the Committee on Defense and Security, the Committee on the Political System and Interethnic Relations, the Committee for European Affairs, and the Foreign Policy Committee.”

The aforementioned expert stated that the only body that was interested in dealing with FIMI was the Defense and Security Committee, but they have not engaged with the issue at all.

Lastly, the Office of the President of the Assembly has no dedicated departments or sectors within that specifically address this issue. Even though there were individuals and groups from various sectors and departments with the political will to tackle disinformation, this initiative appears to have concluded without further development. Mostly because of the slow-moving bureaucracy, the 2021 "[Strategy for Building Resilience and Tackling Hybrid Threats](#)" needed time to commence with any sort of work or implementation, by which time many actors from various sectors wanted to distance themselves from the strategy because of the upcoming elections.

The final notable event happened in May 2023 when then-Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski and U.S. Special Envoy James P. Rubin signed a [Memorandum of Understanding](#) (MOU) following a meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. This MOU, which was the result of prior discussions between the Macedonian Government and the U.S. Department of State, aimed to strengthen the cooperation between the two countries in countering FIMI. However, the expert we consulted notes that the MOU was supposed to be implemented by the end of 2024, with the start of the election campaign in the spring it was put on pause since the Parliament was dissolved.

After the elections and the formation of the new Parliament, it is not clear how they will approach this issue and whether they will continue the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with the USA. For this report's purposes, Metamorphosis Foundation contacted the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security with questions about their intent. However, we have not received any answers.

The only hint on ongoing efforts in countering FIMI lays in the Work Program of the Government 2024-2028: In Section VI Rights and Freedoms, subsection Free and Independent Media, the Government stated that it would pursue “Effective fight against disinformation and fake news in the media and cyberspace”. Additionally, in the foreign policy priorities, it mentioned that the country “will become a trustful and reliable partner in solving complex international challenges such as illegal migration movements, the consequences of wars on European territory and beyond, global terrorist threats, hybrid wars and threats to human rights and democracy.

The Civil Society Sector has been most active in the field, by, among other things, issuing public [“Recommendations For Joint Action For Building Societal Resilience Towards Malign Influences](#)

Of Disinformation". The main purpose of the document spearheaded by Metamorphosis Foundation is to provide a comprehensive set of guidelines and strategies for various stakeholders in North Macedonia to effectively counter disinformation and its malign influences. The recommendations are aimed at government institutions, media organizations, civil society, political parties, and private companies, emphasizing the need for a systemic, inclusive, and multidisciplinary approach to building broader societal resilience. The document stresses the importance of cooperation across sectors, the development of public policies, and the promotion of media literacy and critical thinking to protect democratic processes and enhance societal cohesion in the face of disinformation.

During the last elections in 2024, the leading party in the ruling coalition, VMRO-DPMNE, only vaguely addressed the issues of hybrid threats and disinformation in the [party program](#). The mention was limited to a brief statement: "Effective fight against disinformation and fake news in the media and on the Internet," without further elaboration or detailed strategies on how these challenges would be addressed.

Timeline:

Date	Event	Comment
December 2013	Parliament passed the Law on Media regulating print media outlets	The law laid the foundation for regulation of print media, demanding responsibility for published content.
December 2016	The Veles fake news sites gain international recognition .	This was a turning point in the approach to disinformation and later with FIMI. It raised many questions among the media and civil society community.
July 2019	The Government issues a "Proposed Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation".	The plan was announced with no prior consultation with the media community and civic sector, which resulted in labeling it as an attempt for degrading freedom of speech.
April 2021	The Ministry of Defense announces the "Strategy and Action Plan for Building Resilience and Tackling Hybrid Threats (2021 - 2025)".	The Action plan predicts in detail what steps the central Government should take. So far, there has been no evaluation of the level of implementation.

June 2022	Metamorphosis Foundation and other Civil Society Organizations as well as media associations propose Recommendations for Joint Action for Building Societal Resilience Towards Malign Influences of Disinformation.	The civic sector was the most active part of society when countering FIMI. The main stakeholders in the civic sector supported the recommendations were and the Government accepted them.
May 2023	North Macedonia and USA sign " Memorandum of Understanding " for Strategic Counter-Disinformation Partnership.	With the Parliamentary elections in the Spring of 2024, the implementation of the MoU has been paused. It is unclear whether it will be implemented by the end of the year as intended.
October 2023	As part of its Annual Work Program 2024, the Government took the obligation to create a National Strategy for Building Societal Resilience against the Harmful Influences of Disinformation.	It is unlikely that the new Government will implement the previous administration's Annual Work Program. Still, the Government has not publicly declared it will not take steps to strengthen societal resilience against harmful influences of disinformation.
June 2024	Program for Work of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia - 2024-2028 announced and voted in the Assembly by the new coalition in power.	In the Section VI of the Program , headlined Rights and Freedoms, subsection Free and Independent Media, the Government stated that it will pursue "Effective fight against disinformation and fake news in the media and cyberspace".

Main threats - Dangerous play of the inter-ethnic card

One of the most dangerous rhetoric used during the election campaign for the double elections that took place in North Macedonia near the end of April and beginning of May in 2024 was the one focused on inter-ethnic relations.

This rhetoric is dangerous since it can be associated with the armed conflict that took place in 2001, when Albanian insurgents fought with the state police asking for increased human rights. The conflict resulted in the signing of the Ohrid agreement in 2001, which became part of the Constitution and serves as a basis for calm inter-ethnic relations in North Macedonia.

A common narrative used lately is that the ethnic Albanian population in North Macedonia will benefit more than ethnic Macedonians if the country continues the EU integration process. Namely, the narrative states that the ethnic Macedonians will lose their identity with the inclusion of the Bulgarians in the Constitution, which is officially a pre-condition for continuing the EU-negotiations. This is used to support the narrative that the EU is only defending the interest of the member states and allows nondemocratic treatment of candidate countries.

If we include into the equation several steps that the Bulgarian state took saying that the Macedonian language is in fact Bulgarian, as well as the name-change or the [Prespa Agreement](#) with Greece in 2018-2019 when the country again intervened in the Constitution to enter NATO, it might be clearer how foreign malign centers of power can abuse the situation and saw discord, hate and extremism among the population.

The expert we consulted noted that influence campaign of malign actors “became evident during the referendum on constitutional changes and North Macedonia's accession to NATO. Bot farms were deployed to discourage citizen participation in the process. Rather than promoting direct opposition these efforts focused on generating an artificial sense of resistance, fostering apathy and demotivation among the public to undermine the legitimacy of the referendum.”

Specifically, the name change issue has been revived in recent months, starting before the double elections, Presidential and Parliamentary in April and May. Important political actors from several political parties fueled this during the pre-election campaigns, including the now ruling right wing VMRO-DPMNE, as well as the extreme left party Levica (The Left).

Other important topics exploited recently by hostile actors are the war in Ukraine, the UN resolution on Srebrenica and the escalation of the conflict in the Middle East.

The war in Ukraine has been in the Macedonian media and on social media since the start of the full-scale invasion more than two years ago. The main foreign narratives on social media in North Macedonia regarding the invasion aim to show the war as a Russian special operation. Most often, these narratives are spread to portray NATO as a terrorist organization that started the war, Ukraine as a corrupted state and the EU as interferer that makes more damage than

good. In this case, the narrative that the EU is using the candidate countries as its puppets is repeated.

Another foreign narrative was about the UN resolution on Srebrenica adopted in May 2024, which condemns denials of the Srebrenica genocide as well as glorifying convicted war criminals. It urges the members of the UN to “preserve the established facts, including through their educational systems”. This was presented on social media in the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia that it is a fake resolution that aims to portray Serbs as genocidal nation.

The main narrative regarding the war in Gaza is mostly anti-Jewish and anti- Western blaming the West for supporting Israel in their attempt for genocide against the Palestinian people.

Hostile actors use several gaps in the information space to share their propaganda. In the domain of mainstream media, specifically online media outlets, the market is underdeveloped and fragmented. This leaves hundreds of small media outlets on the brink of survival with only several journalists and editors and low advertisement prices. To gain more views and clicks, these outlets are ready to publish virtually anything that attracts attention without having in mind the basic journalistic principles and professional standards. There is a wide gap for disinformation narratives to enter the mainstream, mainly through translation of articles firstly published in Serbia, but also by republishing statements from official Kremlin without doing any fact-checking. Serbian online tabloids alongside Sputnik RS and RT RS are still a source that is used for spreading Kremlin messages in North Macedonia because most of the population understand and reads Serbian language. Traditional media, like TV and newspapers are no exception, where content published by Serbian TV channels with Russian propaganda is republished without any filter. One of the still existing daily newspapers, Nova Makedonija regularly publishes interviews with the [Russian](#) or the [Chinese](#) ambassadors, amplifying their propaganda and misinformation.

Additionally, malign actors use almost all social media platforms to spread their influence and messages disseminated by bots or even by audiences that support their beliefs. Third party fact-checking organizations like Metamorphosis Foundation help decrease the reach of false narratives on Facebook, Instagram and Threads, while platforms like TikTok, YouTube and X have almost no regulation.

The Russian embassy in North Macedonia is [very active](#) both on X and Facebook. They republish statements from Russian officials and comment the current events in the country especially when it comes to EU related questions.

Political parties such as Levica (The Left), besides being Kremlin echoing tool that portrays NATO as a terrorist organization, is also opposing the institutions and the Ministry of Defense for providing aid to Ukraine and abiding to its NATO's obligations. Levica, in addition to spreading Kremlin narratives openly supports the Russian diplomacy in the country and does not miss the opportunity to meet with the Russian ambassador criticizing the government regarding the imposed sanctions on the Russian Federation.

Apart from the closeness to Russia, Levica openly talks about the importance of cooperation with China, so their rise from only two to six Members of Parliament heralds a new geopolitical picture. They claim that in the new multipolar world, small countries like North Macedonia, if they want to survive, must be in good relations with all superpowers and Western globalization must be stopped, even if it means war.

After the change of government Levica reinforced their already established anti-Albanian stance and present themselves as a counterbalance to the ethnic Albanian political parties in the Assembly, often inciting hate speech and polarization among citizens and their supporters.

The Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski has also shown elements of anti-Albanian sentiment. He [warned publicly](#), without giving any details or showing proof that DUI threaten the inter-ethnic relations and will try to disturb the stability of North Macedonia in the near future.

When it comes to the UN resolution about Srebrenica, the Serbian minority was very vocal on this topic. Repeating the narratives from Belgrade, Serbian Democratic Party (PDS) in North Macedonia and its leader Ivan Stoilkovic denied and mocked the genocide in Srebrenica referring to it as "necrophiliac Disneyland". Stoilkovic is a [deputy prime minister](#) in the new government responsible for good inter-ethnic relations.

Another example of anti-Western influence is the anti-gender movement alongside with the anti-vaxxing movement in North Macedonia. They can incite divisions and polarization, especially for the elderly or new parents. One thing to understand about the anti-gender movements is that they are not a group of concerned parents who have spontaneously come together and are bravely and defiantly fighting against western indoctrination. The "Coalition" [website](#), lists their partner organizations, among which Family Watch International as a major partner and the Gender Identity Challenge Skandinavia (GEND) is a major supporter.

They constantly push misinformation and spins to present gender equality and secular education as the greatest evil, presenting it as a plan for permission to change gender. They have support in the Macedonian Orthodox Church.

In fact, the Russian influence in North Macedonia through the Orthodox Church is quite substantial. In September last year, high-ranking Russian priest, [Vasian Zmeev](#) was banned entrance in North Macedonia together with three other Russian diplomats. Since he was the chief of the Russian Church's vestry in Sofia, one week later he was also expelled from Bulgaria. The media reported that the behavior of the Russian clergyman exceeded by far the limits of activities permitted by international law.

Future avenues on the road of FIMI

Predicting the emergence of new disinformation topics or narratives in North Macedonia is challenging due to the country's unique position within the broader information ecosystems. Much of the disinformation circulating in North Macedonia is not homegrown but rather "imported" from the region, particularly from [Serbia](#) and Russian state-controlled media in Serbian language. Additionally, disinformation from [other countries](#) also permeates the local media landscape, making it difficult to anticipate specific new trends or narratives.

Several potential avenues for future disinformation campaigns may be exploited in North Macedonia. One of the most significant is the persistent issue of inter-ethnic relations. Disinformation efforts may seek to inflame divisions between Macedonians and Albanians, potentially leading to increased tensions. A specific area of focus might be the "[Bulgarian deal](#)," particularly the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority in the preamble of the Constitution. The leading party in the ruling coalition, VMRO-DPMNE, has openly opposed "opening the Constitution," despite its commitment to future EU integration. Conversely, the Albanian coalition "European Front", which is DUI and their partners, may view the inclusion of the Bulgarian minority as a crucial step toward EU integration. This divergence in perspectives could lead to accusations of betrayal, with Albanians potentially being labeled as "traitors" for not perceiving the "threat" from Bulgaria with the same level of concern.

Another potential vector for exploitation lies with several reactionary online commentators and political influencers. While their individual followers count may not be particularly large by international standards, they hold significant influence within North Macedonia's digital landscape. For example, in their last bid to create an overtly Albanophobic/Islamophobic narrative, they [started](#) an [online boycott against](#) the supermarket 'Kipper' owned by ethnic-Albanian businessman, for allegedly discriminating against Christian citizens by not stocking pork produce and alcohol.

Another potential avenue for disinformation is the growing perception that the EU integration process is slow and inflexible. While this may not be a new topic, it remains significant as it could deepen distrust in the EU and its member states, reinforcing the broader narrative that "the EU doesn't want us" or that "the EU will dissolve before we integrate with it." This sentiment could be further amplified by EU-skeptic parties like Levica (The Left), which have vocally opposed the constitutional amendments. Despite holding six seats in Parliament, the prevailing view is that Levica is the only true Macedonian opposition party, especially given SDSM's delayed internal elections to choose a new leader after their huge loss at the double elections. As a result, Levica has enjoyed disproportionate media attention furthering its influence and potentially exacerbating skepticism toward the EU.

The Support for Ukraine does not weaken

Since assuming their respective offices, both President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova and Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski have signaled their support for Ukraine. To that point, President Siljanovska-Davkova met with the [Ukrainian ambassador](#) in North Macedonia Larysa Dir, reaffirming the support for Ukraine against Russian aggression. The President also had a telephone conversation with the [President of Ukraine](#), Volodymyr Zelenskyy, stating her direct support. Lastly, Siljanovska-Davkova participated in the [Conference on the Reconstruction of Ukraine](#) in Berlin, where she also gave an address in support of a Ukraine “Marshal Plan”.

Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, too, signaled his support for Ukraine. He [met Zelenskyy](#) during the Meeting of the European Political Community in London, where Mickoski emphasized Macedonia's unequivocal support to Ukraine and the Ukrainian people. Support for Ukraine is seen from Defense Minister [Vlado Misajlovski](#)'s and Foreign Affairs Minister [Timcho Mucunski](#)'s participation at the NATO Summit in Washington.

Thus, since the heads of the Executive and Legislative branch signaled their support for Ukraine in the first few months of their tenure, no significant threat is expected. The only exception might be the MPs from Levica, who have [repeatedly condemned](#) the [government](#) and Ministry of Defense for providing aid to Ukraine and following NATO's recommendations, claiming that this represents dragging the state into war and that the country is turning into a protectorate of a military organization. They might inflame the already [divided public sentiment](#) on this issue.

Poor cybersecurity, AI potentials not fully used

Although there has been some disinformation based on generative AI circulating on Macedonian social media, most of it consists of reshared or reposted content from foreign politicians or leaders. This is largely because AI-generated disinformation in North Macedonia has not yet reached the advanced stage seen in other countries. A significant barrier to this is that most sophisticated deepfake and AI-altered content is trained on vast datasets in native languages, primarily English. In North Macedonia, there has been virtually no targeting of politicians or public figures with this technology due to the lack of sufficient content required to produce realistic deepfakes that can pass the "human-eye test." Furthermore, there has been no demonstrated interest from domestic or foreign actors in employing this technology to influence the local political landscape.

From the AI-generated or manipulated content, there have been sparse examples that have mostly focused on foreign leaders ([Emmanuel Macron](#), [Vladimir Putin](#), [Kamala Harris](#) or public figures ([Kate Middleton](#), [Pope Francis](#)), anti-Semitic [conspiracy theories](#), [manipulated content](#) based on [real events](#), as well as some (to some extent) inconsequential topics such as [large sea animals](#) or [monsters](#) or [Russian technology](#).

In terms of cybersecurity, the European Commission's [North Macedonia 2023 Report](#) stated that there has been limited progress in terms of cybersecurity on a national level. However, the Ministry for Digital Transformation started with the preparation of the [new National Cyber Security Strategy](#) for the period 2024-2028. To date, there have been no public statements or official plans from North Macedonia's government or major institutions identifying AI as a significant threat, reflecting the country's current focus on addressing more immediate digital challenges such as cybersecurity and disinformation.

Inclusive and systemic response is essential

At this moment, it is hard to compare the policies of the previous and the current government in North Macedonia around countering FIMI. The previous Government was addressing the issues of foreign malign influences and hybrid attacks verbally, although not many concrete steps were taken. The new Government, however, few months since being sworn in to office, has not publicly shown any signs of their plans for countering FIMI. Except maybe through several general statements about supporting information integrity, given following their meetings with Western officials and one mention of countering disinformation in the Government four-year work program.

The Draft plan for a decisive action against spreading disinformation and attacks on democracy, [presented](#) by ex-prime minister Zoran Zaev in June 2019, is not implemented. The ex-prime minister himself stated that the plan was a sublimation of recommendations from the European Commission, the Committee of Experts for Qualitative Journalism at the Council of Europe, NATO's Communications Sector, the British government, USAID, and the European network of digital diplomacy supported by the US Department of State.

The government then proposed the creation of an [Action group](#) to fight disinformation and hybrid attacks on democracy, where representatives of the offices of the Prime Minister, the President, the Assembly, the Minister of Communications, Transparency, and Accountability, Ministries of Interior, Defense and Foreign Affairs were suggested as members, as well as the Directorate for Security and Counter-Intelligence, and the Intelligence Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia.

The announcement of these plans was sudden, with no prior consultations, no communication with journalists, and representatives from civil society or media organizations. This might be an explanation why this plan was immediately attacked by several renowned NGOs like the Association of Journalists of Macedonia. Other columnists and editors of online media outlets also publicly reacted which all together created a negative environment towards the plan. This might be one of the main reasons why almost nothing was implemented. It was portrayed as an attempt at censorship.

On the other hand, the new government, including the Assembly, the central government, the prime minister and the president of the republic are much less vocal when it comes to FIMI. Foreign information manipulation and interference is rarely mentioned publicly, and there are no new formal initiatives regarding ways of dealing with it while the old initiatives are now invisible. One could argue that there has not been enough time since the elections and the formation of the new government and the new institutions to address this issue, but fact is that almost no one in North Macedonia talks about FIMI now.

Collaboration among all societal stakeholders in combating hybrid threats is evident and necessary. One notable initiative that has emerged in the country in recent years is the [USAID YouThink project](#) that strives to integrate media literacy within the formal education system and engage youth. Another significant effort is the Metamorphosis Foundation-led regional project [Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism](#), supported by the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which maps disinformation flow and directly debunks disinformation through fact-checking, and produce content and knowledge that is reused and disseminated through its established [anti-disinformation network \(ADN\)](#) for increased outreach. The third is the advocacy initiative that resulted with [Recommendations for Joint Action for Building Societal Resilience Towards Malign Influences of Disinformation](#) prepared by civil society and adopted by the government of North Macedonia as basis for inclusive policy-making process for creation of comprehensive national strategic framework.

An important aspect of this initiative was the extensive consultation process involving key state institutions, such as the Cabinet of the President and the Prime Minister of North Macedonia. The engagement of the executive branch underscored the national importance of the initiative, recognizing its potential to counter foreign malign influences, especially in the context of the war in Ukraine, EU accession efforts, and NATO defense activities.

Central to the development of North Macedonia's strategic approach against disinformation was the emphasis on building societal resilience through professional media reporting, transparency of state institution, education, capacity building, and media literacy using a whole-society approach. The development and refinement of initial Recommendations for combating disinformation have been instrumental in laying the groundwork for a comprehensive strategic framework. These recommendations, shaped by the input of a diverse group of stakeholders, reflect a consensus on the necessity of a coordinated and whole-society approach to address the challenges of disinformation effectively.

The previous Government officially accepted the Metamorphosis initiative and included it in the Work Plan for 2024. The process should now transition from planning to implementation, with the potential to significantly affect the resilience of North Macedonian society to foreign malign influence. The new Government has not yet committed to any of the recommendations, although in the four-year [Work Program](#) for 2024-2028 an “effective fight against disinformation and fake news” is mentioned.

Conclusions and recommendations

North Macedonia faces significant challenges in combating FIMI, with external and domestic actors exploiting ethnic tensions, political divisions, and the EU integration process. Despite some governmental efforts, the country lacks comprehensive legislation and a coordinated institutional response to these threats. The rise of disinformation narratives, especially around sensitive topics like the "Bulgarian deal" and the EU accession process, has created fertile ground for malicious actors to destabilize the country and undermine democratic processes.

Addressing these threats requires a multifaceted approach. So far, according to the expert we spoke to, an informal voluntary-based inter-ministerial group of individuals within the government tried to address FIMI on a national level. This is not an adequate response that warrants a broader systemic approach. Thus, as noted in the CESS policy brief, the state Assembly should play a more proactive role by establishing a dedicated committee to oversee FIMI-related issues. This committee should work closely with civil society, media organizations, and other stakeholders to strengthen media literacy, transparency, and public awareness campaigns. Additionally, collaboration with international partners, such as the EU and NATO, will be crucial to developing effective countermeasures, enhancing cybersecurity, and building societal resilience to disinformation. Thus, we propose the following recommendations:

Recommendations:

- Making the national Assembly, as a legislative body, the main national institution tasked with coordinating the efforts against FIMI. More specifically, the Assembly would achieve this through its Parliamentary Groups.
- The state institutions together with professional media associations and civil society organizations, through previous inclusive process should work to establish a way of supporting production of factual, in-depth and investigative journalism content that would help online media outlets become more sustainable. Special focus should be given to innovative media approaches, using data journalism, pre-bunking and fact checking.
- A specific Parliamentary Group should be designated to handle FIMI-related issues. While the Committee on Defense and Security may seem appropriate, another option is to establish a new entity that will include representatives from the civil society organizations and will be dedicated entirely to countering FIMI. This group would hold formal responsibility and involve a diverse range of stakeholders to comprehensively address the issue.
- Due to serious abuses of power by previous governments, the Committee should conduct its work directly with other interest groups, such as Media and CSO

organizations, guilds and unions, regulatory bodies, and other international partners, such as the EU, NATO and various Embassies. Freedom of Speech and independent media must remain a priority. Independence from political influence is of outmost importance.

- In line with the previous recommendation, the Committee should base its work on the recommendations already presented by CSO, NGOs, and guild organizations.
- The state institutions in coordination with the civil society should develop comprehensive legislation specifically targeting FIMI.
- Strictly regulated and transparent public awareness campaigns for educating citizens about foreign malign influence and promoting media literacy and critical thinking
- The European institutions should support North Macedonia by providing technical assistance for the creation and implementation of anti-FIMI legislation.
- Enhancing cybersecurity collaboration and addressing AI-related threats through EU-funded projects.
- Following up on previous initiatives from the civil society sector and creating the basis for a systemic approach towards countering FIMI. The National Assembly should lead this process.
- EU to ensure the integration process remains transparent and supportive of North Macedonia's efforts to combat FIMI, while addressing concerns about national identity and attempts to stir inter-ethnic relations.