

BALKANS WATCH REPORT

REVIEW OF THE DISINFORMATION SCENE IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IN 2020



EUROPEAN VALUES

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EUROPEAN VALUES CENTER FOR SECURITY POLICY

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Notice:

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Media, state institutions, and NGOs should raise citizens' awareness about disinformation campaigns and make a joint effort to educate society about the dangerous consequences of the spread of such narratives.

MAIN FINDINGS

1. The highest amount of disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2020 related to the COVID-19 pandemic involved:
 - disinformation on COVID-19 vaccination, portraying vaccines as ineffective and harmful to one's health and immune system
 - false suggestions of medicine for virus treatment and prevention, stating that medicine already exists to treat the virus
 - incorrect claims about the virus' origin linked to the New World Order conspiracy theory, usually stating that the virus was human-made in a laboratory as a biological weapon to control Earth's population and minimizing its number
 - disinformation concerning the 5G network, portraying the technology as dangerous and insisting on its association with COVID-19
 - incorrect claims that face masks are ineffective and endanger one's health
2. Euro-Atlantic Integrations (EU and NATO) maintained their status as the central topic of disinformation narratives in BiH, but now taking on a COVID-19 connotation.
3. Disinformation around the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections was frequent in the BiH online information space as well, mostly containing false claims about the Democratic candidate Joe Biden.
4. As the migration crisis in BiH remained lively, migrants continued to be targets of disinformation narratives.
5. During 2020 Local Elections in BiH, disinformation narratives involved false claims about the competing political parties and their members.
6. BiH's online information space was also filled with disinformation about the Religion Law in Montenegro, as well as the country's Parliamentary elections that took place in September.
7. Certain disinformation narratives in 2020 in BiH related to children's rights and the issue of pedophilia.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Media, state institutions, and NGOs should raise citizens' awareness about disinformation campaigns and make a joint effort to educate society about the dangerous consequences of the spread of such narratives.
- Establish more fact-checking bodies and support the existing ones to make the debunking process smoother and more effective.
- Advocate for the implementation of laws supporting transparency of media ownership and protection of media pluralism.
- Create a network comprised of NGOs, media experts, journalists, and security professionals, which would advocate for the removal of anonymous portals and establish strong ties with foreign NGOs, engage in joint projects, and learn from their lessons in fighting disinformation campaigns.
- Raise the level of media literacy in BiH through implementing reforms in primary and secondary education.
- Organize Informal education programs on media literacy to teach media theory and encourage and develop critical thinking.

INTRODUCTION

Malign foreign influence in the form of disinformation campaigns has been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a long time. BiH's online information space is filled with thousands of individual media outlets and dangerous anonymous portals, which continue to pollute the web with false narratives. Disinformation spread has reached a peak since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis. Due to the absence of international political agreement about the pandemic's severity, communities have become distrustful of elites and traditional media and have become open to false narratives.¹ For example, research conducted by the BiH NGO Media Center in 2020 found that a high percentage (54%) of Bosnian youth believe that truthful information about the pandemic is hidden from the public, which indicates a high level of mistrust exists among youth towards information presented by official institutions and media.² 90% of the participants use online media as essential sources of information regarding COVID-19. Worryingly, young people in BiH use social media (Facebook and Instagram) predominantly as reliable information sources.

According to the European Values Center for Security Policy's partnering organization in BiH, Zasto ne, challenges that emerged with the COVID-19 outbreak include the hyperproduction of virus-related content, the increasing pressure to fact-check disinformation that endangers health and human lives, the lack of reliable sources and scientific information, and the increasing hostility towards fact-checkers.³ Nevertheless, Zasto ne plays a crucial role in fighting disinformation campaigns through the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje. Raskrinkavanje's team has never been busier than during the pandemic,⁴ debunking disinformation in the media and communicating cases to the public. This report identifies and analyzes disinformation topics that dominated BiH's online information space in 2020.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Zasto ne conducted an analysis of disinformation in BiH's online sphere in 2018. According to Zasto ne president and co-founder Darko Brkan, the organization concluded that most disinformation (two thirds) referred to political topics and were created to achieve specific political goals.⁵

Major Disinformation Factories in BiH

According to Brkan, anonymous websites are the major disinformation producers.⁶ Due to their anonymity and inability to tackle the problem through regulation, the rise of anonymous media outlets continues to

1 Richard Kraemer, "Malign Foreign Influence in the Western Balkans: the EVC Review 2020." European Values Center for Security Policy, November 2020, <https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Malign-Foreign-Influence-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

2 Sanela Hodžić, "Informiranje Mladih u BiH u Kontekstu COVID-19 Pandemije: Između Dobre Informiranosti i Teorija Zavjere", Media Centar Sarajevo, September 2020, https://media.ba/sites/default/files/mladi_i_covid_-_izmedju_dobre_informiranosti_i_teorija_zavjere_2909.pdf

3 Zasto ne, "Research on COVID-19 disinformation in SEE", Zasto ne, December 2020

4 "Debunking Disinformation about COVID-19 in the Western Balkans", National Endowment for Democracy, April 21, 2020, <https://www.democracyendowment.eu/en/news/1549->

5 Media Centar Online Redakcija, "Većina dezinformacija u online medijima u BiH su politički motivisane", Media Centar Sarajevo, 14 May 2019, <https://www.media.ba/bs/vijesti-i-dogadaji-vijesti/vecina-dezinformacija-u-online-medijima-u-bih-su-politicki-motivisane>

6 Media Centar Online Redakcija, "Većina dezinformacija u online medijima u BiH su politički motivisane", Media Centar Sarajevo, 14 May 2019, <https://www.media.ba/bs/vijesti-i-dogadaji-vijesti/vecina-dezinformacija-u-online-medijima-u-bih-su-politicki-motivisane>

be one of the greatest challenges in the online media sphere.⁷ This problem partially arises from the fact that anyone can effortlessly register a web page using their national ID card and 50,00 BAM (ca. 25,00 EUR).⁸ The disinformation network in Serbia is more extensive than in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹ Significant players in disinformation spread in BiH are media headquartered in Republika Srpska. These media outlets are allied with Serbian media to publish and spread disinformation, most of which contains geopolitical components. Media within this disinformation network continuously publish the same false narratives using each other as sources.

Aside from the significant social media reach of anonymous portals such as Sarajevo Grad¹⁰ and Poskok,¹¹ research conducted by Zastone in 2019 found that the leading publishers of political disinformation in BiH are RTRS,¹² Srna,¹³ Alternativna TV,¹⁴ Avaz,¹⁵ Inforsrpska,¹⁶ Fresh Press,¹⁷ Slobodna Bosna,¹⁸ and Globalno.¹⁹ For example, public broadcaster RTRS appears to be the most significant producer of disinformation, followed by the public news agency Srna and commercial media outlet Alternativna televizija. Based on the number of social media (Facebook) followers, anonymous portals such as Sarajevo grad have the greatest public reach. Nevertheless, research has found that other media outlets also have a significant social media reach, especially RTRS, Alternativna televizija, Avaz, Fresh Press, and Slobodna Bosna. Together with Facebook personal profiles and sites described as the central playground for the spread of disinformation,²⁰ the specified media outlets continued to be the major actors disseminating political disinformation in 2020.²¹

The Serbian edition of Sputnik is the most dangerous foreign-owned media, spreading a significant amount of political disinformation about Bosnia and Herzegovina.²² This Russian government-funded outlet has a high public reach, offering its radio broadcasts in the local language to several radio stations from Serbia and BiH, and has an extensive social media following.²³ Reports published by Raskrinkavanje indicate that Sputnik is systematically favoring the ruling party in Republika Srpska led by Milorad Dodik. Sputnik usually presents NATO negatively, depicting it as a threat to Serbia, Republika Srpska, and Milorad Dodik.

7 Zasto ne, "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", Zasto ne, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

8 Tamara Zablocki, "Za pokretanje portala u BiH dovoljna licna karta i malo novca", Media Centar Sarajevo, 7 November 2019, <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/za-pokretanje-internetskog-portala-u-bih-dovoljna-licna-karta-i-nesto-malo-novca>

9 Zasto ne, "Međunarodna Politika Kroz Prizmu Dezinformacija", Zasto ne, December 2020

10 Sarajevo grad operates through four Facebook pages and has 471,124 followers in total

11 Poskok has 47,987 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/Poskok.info/>

12 RTRS has 77,443 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/rtrs.vijesti/>

13 Srna has 2,420 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/www.Srna.rs/>

14 Alternativna TV has 94,742 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/alternativnatv>

15 Avaz has 654,152 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/dnevniavaz/>

16 Inforsrpska has 8,585 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/inforsrpska1/>

17 Fresh Press has 151,202 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/freshpress.info/>

18 Slobodna Bosna has 71,099 Facebook followers, <https://www.facebook.com/SlobodnaBosna/>

19 Zasto ne, "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", Zasto ne, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

20 Nermina Kuloglija, "Intervju Tijana Cvjetičanin: Društvene mreže kao igralište za širenje dezinformacija o pandemiji", Detektor, 7 April 2020, <https://detektor.ba/2020/04/07/intervju-tijana-cvjeticanin-drustvene-mreze-kao-igraliste-za-sirenje-dezinformacija-o-pandemiji/>

21 Zasto ne, "Međunarodna Politika Kroz Prizmu Dezinformacija", Zasto ne, December 2020

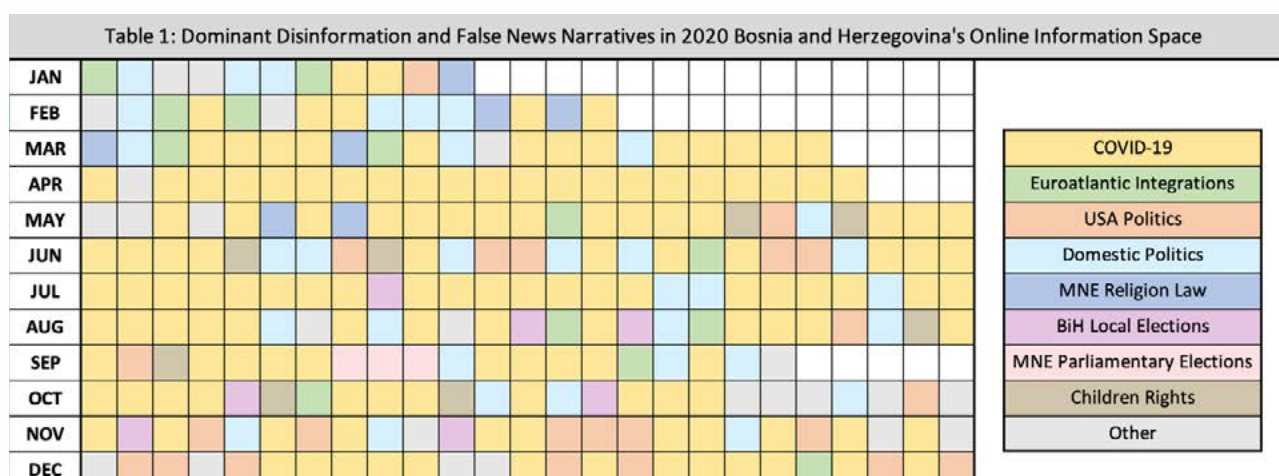
22 Zasto ne, "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of Bosnia and Herzegovina", Zasto ne, April 2019, https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf

23 EU vs Disinfo, "How Serbian Sputnik Infiltrated a Disinformation Hub in BiH", EU vs Disinfo, 14 June 2019, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/how-serbian-sputnik-infiltrated-a-disinformation-hub-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/?highlight=bosnia>

METHODOLOGY

Portal Raskrinkavanje.ba was used as a primary source for collecting the data. Additionally, the Montenegrin version of the portal Raskrinkavanje.me was used since a significant number of the news exposed had previously been published in BiH media outlets as well. Online research methods were used, meaning that the data was solely obtained from web-based sources. News debunked by the Raskrinkavanje team from January to December 2020 (marked as fake news or disinformation) were all listed and classified into different categories based on the topic of their content. Eight categories were identified: COVID-19, Euro-Atlantic Integrations, US Politics, Domestic Politics, 2020 BiH Local Elections, Montenegro Religious Law, 2020 Montenegro Parliamentary Elections, Children, and Other (see Table 1). These categories are not exhaustive, meaning that individual news encompassed two different disinformation topics in some cases. Additional information provided in the clarification of the results was used to further elaborate on the findings. For that purpose, several reports previously published by the European Values Center for Security Policy (EVC) and Zasto ne were used.

DATA ANALYSIS



Disinformation related to the COVID-19 crisis

Since its beginning, the COVID-19 pandemic has been followed by the enormous spread of disinformation worldwide, generating panic and insecurity among people. Dissemination of disinformation has led the World Health Organization to declare a so-called "infodemic" for the first time in history.²⁴ BiH was no exception to the phenomena either. Research findings indicate that disinformation on COVID-19 dominated online information spaces in BiH in 2020. At the beginning of the year, most disinformation related to virus' arrival in the region.²⁵ In April, the highest number of disinformation was debunked by Raskrinkavanje's team. The most prominent disinformation narratives identified in the sample based on the number of fact-checking analyses conducted are vaccination, medicine, virus origin and the new world order, 5G network, and masks.

²⁴ World Health Organization, "Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation", WHO, 23 September 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-covid-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>

²⁵ Amina Čeliković, "Koronavirus nije stigao u region: Il dio", Raskrinkavanje, 7 February 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/koronavirus-nije-stigao-u-region-dio-drugi>

Disinformation Narrative 1: Vaccines against COVID-19 are ineffective and harmful for health and the immune system

Vaccination was the most dominant sub-topic of COVID-19 disinformation spread in BiH. News rated as disinformation focused primarily on presenting the efficacy and safety of vaccines negatively, portraying them as harmful for one's immune system and health. For example, we could read in the media that Bill Gates had refused to vaccinate his children.²⁶ Several media throughout the year falsely reported that the vaccine would be obligatory and that children would be taken away from parents who refuse it.²⁷ Additionally, Bosnian media significantly influenced the Kremlin's media factory had an opportunity in July to admire Russia's effective response to the pandemic, reporting that the first effective COVID-19 vaccine had been developed in Russia.²⁸

Similar disinformation narratives involved claims that Reuters "presented Russian vaccine as an indicator of scientific domination."²⁹ Anti-vaccination narratives were increasingly active in December 2020 following the announcement of the U.S. FDA's authorization of a COVID-19 vaccine developed by the companies BioNTech and Pfizer. Finally, one could read that the majority of Croat doctors refused vaccination,³⁰ or that the European Union denounced the BioNTech and Pfizer vaccines.³¹

Disinformation Narrative 2: Medicine for COVID-19 treatment and prevention already exist

The spread of COVID-19 disinformation was characterized by a significant number of false suggestions for the treatment and prevention of the virus. One could even read about the domestically produced medicine MALCOVIR, which supposedly helps the virus treatment.³² Another category of medicine-related disinformation claims that coronavirus can be cured and prevented using traditional medicine and ingredients everyone has at home, such as garlic, ginger, apple cider vinegar, turmeric, etc. Many regional online portals, including Bosnian, reported in April that medicine for COVID-19 is "hidden" at the bottom of the Mediterranean Sea in Montenegro.³³

Disinformation Narrative 3: The virus was created in a laboratory by the rich as a biological weapon to control people on Earth

The absence of common agreement on the virus's origin allowed for the dissemination of incredibly harmful disinformation in media characterized by claims that, for instance, the virus was made as a biological weapon to minimize the number of people on Earth. This assertion is closely associated with the well-known New World Order conspiracy theory, which hypothesizes a secretly emerging totalitarian world government. Additional examples of such narratives involve disinformation that COVID-19 is the greatest manipulation of

26 Amina Čeliković, "Nije tačno da je Bill Gates odbio da vakciniše vlastitu djecu", Raskrinkavanje, 24 April

2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nije-tacno-da-je-bill-gates-odbio-da-vakcinise-sopstvenu-djecu>

27 Elma Murić, "Ne, roditeljima koji odbiju obaveznu vakcinaciju neće biti oduzeta djeca", Raskrinkavanje, 2 May,

2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-roditeljima-koji-odbiju-obaveznu-vakcinaciju-djeca-neece-bitio-oduzeta>

28 Rašid Krupalija, "Ruska vakcina protiv COVID-19 nije spremna", Raskrinkavanje, 24 July,

2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ruska-vakcina-protiv-covid-19-nije-spremna>

29 Elma Murić, "Reuters nije objavio da je ruska vakcina pokazatelj naučne nadmoći", Raskrinkavanje, 20 August, 2020,

<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/reuters-nije-objavio-da-je-ruska-vakcina-protiv-korone-pokazatelj-naucne-nadmoci>

30 Marija Manojlović, "Polovina hrvatskih ljekara nije odbila vakcinu", Raskrinkavanje, 21 December 2020,

<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/polovina-hrvatskih-ljekara-nije-odbila-vakcinu-protiv-covid-19>

31 Amina Čeliković, "Evropska Unija nije odbila zahtjev za odobrenje vaccine biontecha i pfizera", Raskrinkavanje, 2 December

2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/europska-unija-nije-odbila-zahjev-za-odobrenje-vaccine-biontecha-i-pfizera>

32 Rašid Krupalija, "Prikrivena reklama lijeka za COVID-19 koji to nije", Raskrinkavanje, 18 April

2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/prikrivena-reklama-lijeka-za-covid-19-koji-to-nije>

33 Tijana Velimirović, "Zlatnih sundera ima u cijelom Mediteranu i dijelovima Atlantika a ne samo u Crnoj Gori", Raskrinkavanje, 24 April 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/zlatnih-sundera-ima-u-cijelom-mediteranu-i-djelovima-atlantika-a-ne-samo-u-crnoj-gori>

the world population ever invented by the world government to control and minimize the world's population.

To support these claims, disinformation about COVID-19 prediction dominated online information space in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Examples comprise claims that Bill Gates,³⁴ a German official governmental document,³⁵ the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympic Games,³⁶ etc., predicted the coronavirus outbreak. Bill Gates, a well-known American business magnate and co-founder of Microsoft Corporation, was in the center of this category of disinformation campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. Several portals falsely reported that Gates announced depopulation,³⁷ asserted that people would not have a choice when it comes to vaccination,³⁸ and noted that everyone who refuses vaccination would be denied access to their Windows accounts.³⁹ Several portals have gone further to incorrectly claim that protests against Gates took place in Germany and Austria.⁴⁰

Disinformation Narrative 4: 5G Network is dangerous, and 5G towers are carriers and transporters of the virus

5G network disinformation is one of the two most dangerous theories promoted by the Kremlin's media factory. The main idea is that the pandemic is being used to cover up the new 5G towers' harmful effects or that the towers themselves are transferring the virus. Starting in April, disinformation around the dangers of 5G technology and its links to coronavirus spread in BiH online information space despite the lack of scientific evidence. Several portals in BiH reported in April that the COVID-19 outbreak was a direct consequence of the 5G network's arrival in Wuhan.⁴¹ Other narratives claimed that the 5G network killed bees⁴² and birds.⁴³ To generate fear among the readers, claims about the installation of 5G transmitters in BiH, specifically in Sarajevo⁴⁴ and Zenica,⁴⁵ were also presented.

34 Emir Zulejhić, "Bill Gates nije predvidio koronavirus", Raskrinkavanje, 27 April 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/bill-gates-nije-predvidio-koronavirus-sars-cov-2>

35 Tijana Velimirović, "Dokument njemačke vlade nije predikcija COVID-19 nego analiza rizika od pandemije", Raskrinkavanje, 20 April 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/dokument-njemacke-vlade-nije-predikcija-covid-19-nego-analiza-rizika-od-pandemije>

36 Tijana Velimirović, "Ceremonija otvaranja Olimpijskih igara u Londonu nije predvidjela pandemiju", Raskrinkavanje, 20 August 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/ceremonija-otvaranja-olimpijskih-igara-u-londonu-nije-predvidjela-pandemiju>

37 Mladen Lakić, "Bill Gates nije najavio depopulaciju", Raskrinkavanje, 25 April 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/bill-gates-nije-najavio-depopulaciju-niti-ga-je-indija-tuzila-zbog-vakcina-i-to-se-vec-godinama-zna>

38 Amina Čeliković, "Bill Gates nije rekao da nemamo izbora u vezi s vakcinom", Raskrinkavanje, 7 July 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/bill-gates-nije-rekao-da-nemamo-izbora-u-vezi-sa-vakcinom-stvarna-izjava-odnosila-se-na-ekonomsku-krizu>

39 Raskrinkavanje Author, "Gates neće zabraniti upotrebu Windowsa za one koji nemaju potvrdu o vakcinaciji", Raskrinkavanje, 15 December 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-bill-gates-nece-zabraniti-upotrebu-windowsa-za-one-koji-nemaju-potvrdu-o-vakcinaciji>

40 Mladen Lakić, "U Austriji i Njemačkoj nisu održani protesti protiv Billa Gatesa", Raskrinkavanje, 9 October 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-u-australiji-i-njemackoj-nisu-odrzani-protesti-protiv-billa-gatesa>

41 Tijana Velimirović, "Nema dokaza o povezanosti 5G mreže s koronavirusom", Raskrinkavanje, 1 April 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/nema-dokaza-o-povezanosti-5g-mreze-s-korona-virusom>

42 Elma Murić, "Pčele u Ukrajini nije ubila 5G mreža već pesticidi", Raskrinkavanje, 21 May 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/pcele-u-ukrajini-nije-ubila-5g-mreza-vec-pesticidi>

43 Amina Čeliković, "Ptice nisu umrle zbog 5G mreže ni u Nizozemskoj ni u Hrvatskoj", Raskrinkavanje, 5 June 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ptice-nisu-umrle-zbog-5g-mreze-ni-u-nizozemskoj-ni-u-hrvatskoj>

44 Amina Čeliković, "U Sarajevu ne postoje 5g bazne jedinice", Raskrinkavanje, 18 August 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-u-sarajevu-ne-postoje-5g-bazne-jedinice-koje-se-postavljaju-nocu-bez-svjedoka-u-toku-pandemije>

45 Emir Zulejhić, "Ni u Zenici nisu postavljene 5G bazne stanice tokom pandemije", Raskrinkavanje, 3 September 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ni-u-zenici-nisu-postavljene-5g-bazne-stanice-tokom-pandemije>

Disinformation Narrative 5: Face Masks are ineffective and harmful for one's health and immune system

The last sub-category of COVID-19 disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina relates to the ineffectiveness and harmfulness of face masks. Many media outlets falsely reported that masks are dangerous⁴⁶ and cause different allergies and diseases such as hypoxia, hypercapnia, pneumonia, cancer, poisoning, etc.

Disinformation narratives about Euro-Atlantic integrations (European Union and NATO)

The long-term objective of Russian malign influence in BiH is to destabilize the country to the extent that its institutions are insufficiently stable and democratic to genuinely integrate within European and transatlantic communities.⁴⁷ As disinformation campaigns are one way malign foreign influence manifests, Euro-Atlantic integrations have continued to be one of the major topics of disinformation in the 2020 online information space in BiH. Classic examples of such claims are that NATO⁴⁸ and the EU are falling apart,⁴⁹ or that several EU members decided to leave the union.⁵⁰ A significant amount of disinformation classified into the first category covered Euro-Atlantic integrations negatively in the context of the COVID-19 crisis. The most popular conspiracy theory since the outbreak of the pandemic embraced anti-western narratives when the military exercise of the Defender Europe 2020 was depicted as "NATO/U.S. invasion on Europe."⁵¹

Particular media outlets also reported that the EU banned the export of medical equipment⁵² and that several EU members prohibited Russian humanitarian aircraft from using the EU air space on their way to Italy.⁵³ Similarly, the COVID-19 crisis in Italy was interpreted as lacking EU assistance,⁵⁴ and that instead of helping Italy overcome the crisis, the US.. and NATO stole 500,000 COVID-19 tests.⁵⁵ Therefore, the most frequent disinformation targets in 2020 continue to be the U.S., EU, and NATO, whereas Russia, Serbia, Republika Srpska, and China remain favored. The outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis has not weakened anti-western narratives but instead raised them to another level. Research findings make a clear match to the status-quo of disinformation narratives in BiH. On one side, they have a clear anti-western component, while on the other, they embrace an optimistic and affirmative view of Russia and China.⁵⁶

46 Tijana Velimirović, "Nošenje maski nije opasno po zdravlje", Raskrinkavanje, 31 July 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/nosenje-maski-nije-opasno-po-zdravlje>

47 Richard Kraemer, "Malign Foreign Influence in the Western Balkans: the EVC Review 2020." European Values Center for Security Policy, November 2020, <https://www.europeanvalues.cz/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Malign-Foreign-Influence-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

48 Emir Zulejhić, "Klikbejtom do NATO raspada", Raskrinkavanje, 4 February 2020 <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/klikbejtom-do-nato-raspada>

49 Tijana Velimirović, "Češka ne misli da se EU raspada", Raskrinkavanje, 10 March 2020, <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/ceska-ne-misli-da-se-eu-raspada>

50 Emir Zulejhić, "Nije tačno da još tri zemlje napuštaju EU", Raskrinkavanje, 3 February 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nije-tacno-da-jos-tri-zemlje-napustaju-eu>

51 Tijana Cvjetičanin, "Nešto se dešava – Italijanski influencer i analitičar iz Srbije izmislili američku invaziju na Evropu u doba pandemije", Raskrinkavanje, 17 March 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nesto-se-desava-italijanski-influencer-i-analiticar-iz-srbije-izmislili-americku-invaziju-na-evropu-u-doba-pandemije>

52 Mladen Lakić, "EU zabranila izvoz medicinske opreme", Raskrinkavanje, 14 April 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-eu-nije-zabranila-izvoz-medicinske-opreme>

53 Mladen Lakić, "Članice EU nisu zabranile let ruskog humanitarnog aviona", Raskrinkavanje, 28 March 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/clanice-eu-nisu-zabranile-let-ruskog-humanitarnog-aviona>

54 Mladen Lakić, "Italijani ne skidaju masovno EU zastave", Raskrinkavanje, 1 April 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-italijani-ne-skidaju-masovno-eu-zastave-niti-je-pomoc-eu-za-italiju-izostala>

55 Mladen Lakić, "Ni SAD ni NATO nisu ukrali Italiji pola miliona testova na koronavirus", Raskrinkavanje, 15 May 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ni-sad-ni-nato-nisu-ukrali-italiji-pola-miliona-testova-na-koronavirus>

56 Zasto ne, "Međunarodna Politika Kroz Prizmu Dezinformacija", Zasto ne, December 2020

Disinformation about the Democratic Party and Joe Biden during the U.S. Presidential Elections

The Black Lives Matter movement and 2020 U.S. Presidential elections were the most dominant disinformation sub-topics of the U.S. related disinformation narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of the most radical examples include claims that the Democratic candidate Joe Biden described Serbs as illiterate barbaric rapists who should be held in concentration camps,⁵⁷ and called for the abolition of Republika Srpska.⁵⁸ After Joe Biden was elected president, several Donald Trump biased media outlets in BiH incorrectly reported that the U.S.'s election results had been officially declared unfair.⁵⁹

Disinformation about Prominent Politicians in BiH Domestic Politics and Migrants

This category was singled out for the purpose of classifying disinformation around figures and events present in the BiH internal politics, which is in most cases a direct outcome of the dominant ethnic tensions. Media and public communication practices in BiH are determined by ethnic tensions and contribute to their prolongation.⁶⁰ According to Sokol, BiH media outlets are affiliated with leading political parties and business circles through non-transparent and arbitrary financing and ownership patterns.

Research findings spotted a significant amount of news falsely reporting the deaths or arrests of prominent local political figures, such as Milorad Dodik, Fahrudin Radončić, Fikret Abdić, as well as the deaths of historically controversial figures such as Radovan Karadžić.⁶¹ Disinformation disseminated to deepen and prolong the ethnic conflict usually contains false claims relating to the BiH war (1992-1995.) There is an overwhelming number of such disinformation in the BiH online information space. Some examples involved statements that Zapadna-Herzegovina canton (populated mainly by Bosnian Croats) has not recognized Bosnian Serbs as a constitutive nation for decades,⁶² that the Bosnian presidency is unanimous against the recognition of Kosovo,⁶³ or that Bosnian national party SDA will soon demand the abolition of Herzegovina from the name Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁶⁴

The migration crisis is another sub-topic in domestic politics disinformation narratives, where for example, disinformation about the association between migrants and narcotics arrivals to BiH⁶⁵ are typical, as well as misleading reports on migrants' violent behavior. Some media went even further to report that BiH has been occupied by thousands of Taliban who plan to attack the Republika Srpska entity.⁶⁶ The fact that the migrant crisis is widely subjected to disinformation narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not surprising,

57 Rašid Krupalija, "Izmišljene Bidenove izjave o Srbima kruže internetom već 11 godina", Raskrinkavanje, 2 September 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/izmišljene-bidenove-izjave-o-srbima-kruze-internetom-vec-11-godina>

58 Mladen Lakić, "Joe Biden ne ukida RS", Raskrinkavanje, 7 December 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/novi-americki-predsjednik-joe-biden-ne-ukida-republiku-srpsku>

59 Raskrinkavanje Author, "Američki predsjednički izbori nisu službeno proglašeni nevažećim", Raskrinkavanje, 9 November 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-americki-predsjednicki-izbori-nisu-sluzbeno-proglaseni-nevazecim>

60 Anida Sokol, "Modeli propagande, dezinformacija i mržnje u medijima i komunikacijama u BiH", Fondacija Media Centar Sarajevo, September 2020, https://www.media.ba/sites/default/files/rsi_research_bih_local_language_final.pdf

61 Amina Čeliković, "Lažna vijest o smrti Radovana Karadžića", Raskrinkavanje, 30 November 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/lazna-vijest-o-smrti-radovana-karadzica>

62 Amar Karađuz, "Nije tačno da Zapadnohercegovački kanton više od dvije decenije ne priznaje Srbe kao konstitutivni narod", Raskrinkavanje, 16 July 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nije-tacno-da-zapadnohercegovački-kanton-vise-od-dvije-decenije-ne-priznaje-srbe-kao-konstitutivni-narod>

63 Raskrinkavanje Authors, "Predsjedništvo BiH nije bilo jednoglasno protiv priznanja Kosova", Raskrinkavanje, 17 October 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/predsjednistvo-bih-nije-bilo-jednoglasno-protiv-priznanja-kosova>

64 Rašid Krupalija, "Nema dokaza da će SDA zatražiti ukidanje Hercegovine u nazivu države BiH", Raskrinkavanje, 22 August 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nema-dokaza-da-ce-sda-zatraziti-ukidanje-hercegovine-u-nazivu-drzave-bih>

65 Elma Murić, "Dezinformacije i pristrano izvještavanje o migrantima u Dnevnom Avazu", Raskrinkavanje, 4 August 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/dezinformacije-i-pristrasno-izvjestavanje-o-migrantima-u-dnevnom-avazu>

66 Elma Murić, "Bosnu nije okupiralo desetine hiljada talibana koji napadaju RS", Raskrinkavanje, 2 June 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/bosnu-nije-okupiralo-desetine-hiljada-talibana-koji-napadaju-rs>

especially if we consider the findings of Zasto ne's 2020 research, Disinformation about Marginalized Groups in BH Media. Zasto ne found that migrants are, together with the LGBTQ community and women, one of the three major marginalized groups subjected to disinformation narratives in BiH media, and that they are stereotypically portrayed as perpetrators of violence.⁶⁷

Disinformation about Parties and Candidates during 2020 Local Elections in BiH

Another topic of disinformation in 2020 BiH online information spaces was the local elections held in November 2020. Research results show that this type of disinformation contained mostly false claims about the competing political parties and their members, for example that the political parties DF, GS, and SNS in Banja Luka announced a coalition,⁶⁸ or that BiH presidency member Željko Komšić supported an SDA candidate running for mayor in Srebrenik.⁶⁹

Serbian Biased Disinformation Covering Freedom of Religion Law in Montenegro

The law about freedom of religion and the legal status of religious communities in Montenegro caused dissatisfaction in the Serbian Orthodox Church and opposition led by party DF (Demokratski Front). In the first half of 2020, religion law in Montenegro triggered a wave of disinformation in the region, of which a significant part was identified in the BiH online information space as well. For example, several portals inaccurately reported that the U.S. announced its intervention in Montenegro⁷⁰ and that the Montenegrin military refused to obey the government's commands.⁷¹

Disinformation about 2020 Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro

Religious law disinformation narratives were succeeded by those related to Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro, which took place in September 2020. For example, several BiH media outlets falsely reported after elections that Turkey announced military intervention if discrimination against the Muslim community in Montenegro continues to occur.⁷²

Disinformation about events organized within particular EU Member States in the context of children rights in relation to pedophilia

Research findings indicate that many disinformation narratives in 2020 in BiH were linked to children and the issue of pedophilia. The dominant disinformation contained claims that EU countries such as Netherlands and Belgium allowed for collective marriages between girls and pedophiles,⁷³ or that markets were organized where LGBTQ couples could buy children.⁷⁴

67 UG Zašto ne, "Preko Margine: Dezinformacije o Marginaliziranim Grupama u BH medijima", Udruženje Građana Zašto ne, 29 September 2020.

68 Amar Karađuz, "Nije tačno da DF i GS u Banja Luci idu na izbore sa SNS-om", Raskrinkavanje, 19 August 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nije-tacno-da-df-i-gs-u-banjoj-luci-ide-na-izbore-sa-sns-om>

69 Mladen Lakić, "Željko Komšić nije podržao kandidata SDA za gradonačelnika Srebrenika", Raskrinkavanje, 30 October 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/zeljko-komsic-nije-podrzao-kandidata-sda-za-gradonacelnika-srebrenika>

70 Amar Karađuz, "Amerika nije intervenisala u Crnoj Gori niti je tako nešto najavila", Raskrinkavanje, 19 February 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/amerika-nije-intervenisala-u-crnoj-gori-niti-je-tako-nesto-najavila>

71 Amar Karađuz, "Vojska nije otkazala poslušnost predsjedniku Crne Gore", Raskrinkavanje, 4 March 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/vojska-nije-otkazala-poslusnost-predsjedniku-crne-gore>

72 Amar Karađuz, "Nije tačno da je Turska objavila da će poslati svoju vojsku u Pljevlja", Raskrinkavanje, 10 September 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nije-tacno-da-je-turska-objavila-da-ce-poslati-svoju-vojsku-u-pljevlja>

73 Mladen Lakić, "U Holandiji se nije desilo kolektivno vjenčanje djevojčica i pedofila", Raskrinkavanje, 3 September 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-u-holandiji-se-nije-desilo-kolektivno-vjencanje-djevojčica-i-pedofila>

74 Mladen Lakić, "U Briselu se nije održao sajam na kojem se prodaje novorođenčad", Raskrinkavanje, 28 August 2020, <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ne-u-briselu-se-nije-odrzao-sajam-djece-na-kojem-se-prodaje-novorodencad>

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina's online information sphere continues to be one of the serious obstacles to the country's democratization process and Euro-Atlantic integrations. Professional journalism in BiH is in crisis due to the lack of resources, political support, and progressive media reforms.⁷⁵ Citizens are exposed less to professional, ethical journalism and more to narratives containing propaganda and disinformation, which polarize the society further, owing to unfavorable conditions in the field. Disinformation campaigns have reached their peak during the pandemic, when disinformation narratives typically characterized by anti-western attitudes now took COVID-19 connotation. Based on the Raskrinkavanje web platform's analysis, the report covered disinformation narratives that dominated BiH online information space in 2020.

Unsurprisingly, the highest amount of disinformation in 2020 was related to the pandemics and fell into the first category titled COVID-19. The most prominent sub-topics identified in the sample based on the number of fact-checking analyses are vaccination, medicine, virus origin and the new world order, 5G network, and masks. Vaccination was the most dominant sub-topic of COVID-19 disinformation spread in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Much of the disinformation focused on presenting the efficacy and safety of vaccines in a negative way, portraying vaccines as harmful for one's immune system and health. Another sub-category of disinformation involved a significant number of false suggestions on the treatment and prevention of the virus. Since the beginning of the pandemic, online media spaces were overwhelmed with false information on virus origin and the well-known conspiracy theory of the New World Order. In this case, disinformation contained narratives that the virus is man-made to control the population and minimize its number on Earth. Moreover, disinformation about the dangers of 5G technology and its links to coronavirus has spread in the BiH online information space despite the lack of any scientific evidence. The last sub-category of COVID-19 involved disinformation about face masks, generally portraying them as ineffective and harmful.

Secondly, Euro-Atlantic integrations have continued to be one of the major topics of disinformation in 2020. Similarly, disinformation containing anti-western attitudes was present in BiH during the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections, mostly promoting false claims about the Democratic candidate Joe Biden. A significant amount of disinformation falls into the Domestic politics category, which identified dominant disinformation about figures and events active in BiH political scene. Research shows that migrants continue to be significantly present in disinformation narratives. During 2020 Local elections in BiH, disinformation narratives involved false claims about the competing political parties and their members. At the beginning of the year, Religion Law in Montenegro triggered a wave of disinformation in the region, including in BiH. Religious law disinformation narratives were succeeded by those surrounding the 2020 Parliamentary elections in Montenegro, which took place in September 2020. Lastly, many disinformation narratives in 2020 in Bosnia related to Children's rights and the issue of pedophilia.

The spread of disinformation is a dangerous activity, especially in times when the health and livelihoods of all humankind are endangered. Therefore, governments, civil society, media, citizens, and medical workers should all be aware of the dangerous consequences of disinformation spread and make a common effort to resolve the issue. The information sphere in BiH is characterized by the lack of critical and analytical approach and the minimal number of media outlets occupied with investigative journalism. Fact-checking platforms continue to be one of the major actors in fighting disinformation spread in BiH. However, it would be favorable to establish more fact-checking bodies and support the existing ones to make the debunking process smoother and more effective. Media, state institutions, and NGOs should raise citizens' awareness

⁷⁵ Anida Sokol, "Istraživanje Mediacentra Sarajevo: Propaganda, dezinformacije i mržnja u bh. medijima", Media Centar Sarajevo, 14 September 2020, <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-preporuke/istrazivanje-mediacentra-sarajevo-propaganda-dezinformacije-i-mrznja-u-bh-medijima>

about disinformation campaigns and make a common effort to educate society about the dangerous consequences that arise from the spread of such narratives.

Due to non-transparency and ownership issues, anonymous portals pose a major threat to the online information sphere. A draft of a law about the transparency of media ownership and protection of media pluralism was introduced four times to the BiH Parliament; however there is still no response to the issue. Implementation of this law is crucial to further develop free and responsible media, which is considered a pillar of a liberal democratic society. Incapacity to implement media transparency reforms and donor support for democratic media will damage pro-western media outlets, continue the rise of disinformation producers, and intensify malign foreign influence in BiH. One solution might be creating a publicly recognized network comprised of NGOs dealing with media topics, media experts, journalists, and security professionals. The network should advocate for the immediate implementation of media transparency reforms. It could use already existing analyses and conduct new ones to advocate for removing anonymous portals that actively participate in disinformation campaigns. It would be preferable to establish strong ties with foreign NGOs, engage in shared projects, and learn from their lessons in fighting disinformation campaigns.

Low media literacy and unfavorable media circumstances in BiH are suitable for the spread of disinformation narratives. Compared to European countries, the media literacy index in BiH is very low.⁷⁶ For example, Finland's media literacy index is very high (78) because of the 2014 education agenda adopted due to the increased spread of disinformation originating from Russia. The media literacy index can be raised in BiH by implementing reforms in primary and secondary education. Additionally, informal education programs on media literacy should take place on a regular basis where media theory would be taught, and critical thinking would be strongly encouraged and developed. As the Czech media literacy and hate speech expert Jaroslav Valuch put nicely, media education should not only involve fact-checking presentation and training but also teach the public how journalism actually works.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Marin Lessenski, "Media Literacy Indeks 2019", Open Society Institute Sofia, 29 November 2019, https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019_-ENG.pdf

⁷⁷ Anida Sokol, "Valuch: Medijsku pismenost usmjeriti na one koji beneficiraju od lažnog sadržaja", Media Centar Sarajevo, 12 September 2018, <https://www.media.ba/bs/magazin-novinarstvo/valuch-medijska-pismenost-treba-biti-usmjerena-na-one-koji-benefitiraju-od>

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