



POSITION PAPER:

BLUEPRINT FOR PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY FROM INFORMATION THREATS

MAY 2025



**ANTI DISINFORMATION NETWORK FOR THE BALKANS
(ADN-BALKANS)**

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Blueprint for Protection of Democracy from Information Threats

Position paper

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Executive summary

Systemic abuse of the information space through disinformation campaigns increases the erosion of public trust, leading to crisis of the democratic system. Western Balkans, as one of the most vulnerable regions in Europe, faces serious challenges in preserving the integrity of democratic institutions and processes, due to absence of regulation aligned with European standards and lack of coordinated action by democratic actors to preserve the democratic institutions. The wide process of interdisciplinary consultations initiated by the Metamorphosis Foundation and the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans), through cooperation with international and regional partners, including the international conference “Together for Truth: Whole-of-Society Approach to Safeguard Democracy” held in Skopje on April 2, 2025, resulted in determination that whole-of-society approach—which comprises integrated action of all stakeholders to strengthen resilience to information manipulation and antidemocratic foreign influences—is key to solving disinformation related challenges.

This approach resulted in the development of the guidelines to protect democracy from information threats, based on the following key elements:

- Whole-of-society approach: Including the state institutions, the media, the civil society organizations, the academic community and the private sector in a joint, coordinated approach aimed at protecting the democratic order.
- Coordinated action: Synchronized activities at national, regional and European level, based on close cooperation and exchange of information between all democratic actors.
- Proportional budgeting: Securing financial means proportional to the investment of the antidemocratic actors.
- Smart and strategic action: Focus on understanding the goals and strategies behind the campaigns of manipulation, prioritizing analytical approach and precise reaction.
- Joint regional strategic approach towards the same goal and common regional strategy: Formulating and implementing one common regional strategy to deal with information threats that would unite the efforts from the all countries from Western Balkans. Such coordinated approach is in line with the processes of the Euro-Atlantic integration that include building resilience mechanisms at national level, which are both responding to essential domestic needs and are an obligation in the process of EU integration for the candidate countries, in the areas of freedom of expression and foreign, security and defense policies of EU acquis.

Long-term priorities:

- Strengthening the elections integrity through institutional strengthening, instituting mechanisms for monitoring and swift reaction, and protection of citizens from manipulative content on technological platforms.
- Regulation of digital online platforms: Introducing legal framework for algorithm transparency, responsibility for distribution of harmful content and user protection, especially the minors, through urgent harmonization with European Union regulation, primarily the Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act.
- Demonetization of disinformation: Stimulating of information integrity through defunding of disinformation sources and inciting of ethical media practices.

The democratic societies in the Balkans region can develop effective resilience to information threats only through systemic, coordinated and long-term approach, providing protection of the citizens’ right to make informed decisions within a transparent and democratic setting.

Introduction to whole-of-society approach to protect democracy

Liberal democracies face a period of increasing and fast-evolving security threats, related to erosion of public trust of citizens toward democratic institutions, as well as constant political turbulence that shakes the stability of democratic development.

One of the key reasons for worsening of political conditions is growing abuse of information space through disinformation campaigns intended to confuse the public, spread mistrust and undermine the democratic values. This leads to crisis of liberal democracy. Similar to other parts of Europe, the Western Balkans region faces the challenge of preserving the integrity of democratic processes and institutions while building resilience to antidemocratic Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI).

This position paper is a product of interdisciplinary dialogue aimed at addressing the growing vulnerabilities of the democratic institutions in the context of technological era, and to chart a course for sustainable approach that will strengthen social responsibility in regard to foreign influences expressed via information manipulations in the Western Balkans. This type of dialogue constitutes a multi-year process that brings together relevant stakeholders such as institutions, researchers, journalists, practitioners, and activists from the countries in the region.

Metamorphosis Foundation and the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans) play a unique and crucial role as active initiator of regional cooperation in the fight against disinformation and strengthening of democratic resilience. Through inclusion of the relevant practitioners from the different spheres of society from different corners of Europe, this initiative outlines the whole-of-society approach as crucial method in defense of democracy and increasing citizen trust as its integral element, increasing the protection from manipulations.

Political contextualization: Instrumentalization of democracy and loss of citizen trust in the democratic system

European Union and the Western Balkans, as well as the countries from the rest of the continent of Europe all face a fast-growing continuity of hate speech, conspiracy theories, and monetization of disinformation via the digital platforms. These tendencies amount to continuous attack on the democratic order through information threats and manipulations, with a concrete and clear goal of losing trust in the integrity of democracy and its institutions. Such loss of trust resulting in citizen passivity and lack of active civic participation creates conditions for Instrumentalization of democratic institutions and tools—such as elections—resulting in obstruction of the basic principles of democratic governance. Instead of transparent, accountable and inclusive processes, this leads to establishment of forms of governance stray from the democratic values and further exclusion of citizens. Such authoritarian environment does not take into account the actual needs of the citizens in decision-making during its rule.

European Union takes the position of facing such threats in the framework of dealing with foreign information manipulation and interference – FIMI, in order to preserve the essence of democratic societies, protect the citizens from manipulation that adversely affect their abilities to make informed decisions and protect their rights, dignity and privacy.

EU bases its anti-FIMI approach on the mechanisms countering disinformation, upholding media freedoms and advancing media literacy. These mechanisms are included in the European regulation, the Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act. However, immunization of democratic societies can take place only through consistent application of the whole-of-society approach, which would encompass active strengthening of the media literacy for all categories of citizens, independent fact-checking by providing support for the fact-checking services, independent journalism, support for civil society organizations and institutions to deal information manipulation on daily basis.

The application of this approach presents significant challenge even for the European Union members, while the underdeveloped mechanisms for inclusion of all stakeholders in decision making in the countries who are not EU members face additional obstructions and challenges.

On the other hand, NATO prioritizes the fight against information threats within the Washington Summit Declaration. The leaders of member countries agreed to continue to develop individual and collective capacity to analyze and counter hostile disinformation and misinformation operations. In the declaration, NATO stresses the importance of close coordinating with Allies and partners.

NATO is increasing their alert and sharing mechanisms and strengthened joint responses, in particular in strategic communication. One of these mechanisms is the NATO Rapid Response Group, which underscores approach of building partnerships with civil society organizations, the private sector and the academia in dealing with information treats.

The Western Balkans countries have yet to develop the legal mechanisms used by the European Union to lead the fight to deal with information threats. This makes the region exposed to foreign antidemocratic influences and interference through information manipulation, while increasing the risk of exposing the practitioners who work on fact-checking and countering disinformation to personal attacks based on discrediting, witch-hunts, threats and other forms of pressure aimed at cessation of their work or demotivating them to continue their fight for truth.

Moreover, the absence of regulation creates an environment in which big online platform profit from their algorithms that prioritize user interaction and speedy dissemination of unverified content that distorts the truth and often enjoy impunity for promoting harmful and illegal contents. This situation raises the alarm about the need of urgent harmonization and adoption of the legislation in line with the European Union's regulation, the Media Freedom Act and the Digital Services Act, for the whole region of the Western Balkans.

Development of dedicated mechanisms for resilience to foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI) is an overreaching obligation for all EU candidate countries.

The fact that three of the six Western Balkans countries are NATO members, means that at least three countries in the region, as signatories of the North Atlantic Treaty, are obliged by its Article 3 to separately and jointly, by means of continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid, to maintain and develop their individual and collective capacity to resist information threats. The other countries from the region, which are not NATO members, are also engaged in cooperation with NATO at different levels working on regional stability and protection from foreign antidemocratic influences and information manipulation, as well as information threats.

Guidelines for protection of democracy: The Position of the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans)

Influence of information threats on the geopolitics in Europe and lessons learned about tackling disinformation threats in the Western Balkans

Dealing with information threats has mainly security and political dimensions within the context of geopolitics in Europe. Across Europe, the foreign influence in the form of attacks on democracy has been acknowledged as part continuous disinformation strategy from state and non-state centers of power, contributing to the whole disinformation ecosystem.

Most of the reports that map out this problem, both from institutors like NATO or EU, or from the academic, civic or media circles in Europe, note that the end goal (which is not the only goal) of such strategies is destruction of the democratic order and system. This takes place on multiple fronts and via a range of tools, summarized as promotion of this strategic approach by different state and non-state antidemocratic allies to achieve the same goal.

To undermine democracy, they employ serious budgets and other resources, and develop excellent cooperation and coordination in implementing the disinformation strategies. Mapping of these efforts notes differences in implementation depending on developed expertise and the local folklore.

The exchange of experience and long term work of Metamorphosis Foundation and its partners, in particular through the regional project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub, as well as the exchange of knowledge and expertise shared by the international institutions, governments, civil society organizations and academic circles about the ways of implementation of disinformation strategies across Europe, all point out towards the need to transition from the phase of acknowledging the problem toward the phase of instituting concrete measures to solve it. In particular for the countries of the Western Balkans, it is of key importance for all democracy actors to act upon the following guidelines:

1. Whole-of-society approach is the only approach that has resulted in effects in the fight against information threats in other European countries, which makes it applicable to the Western Balkans. This approach is based on the principle that within one country, one region, or within the entire continent, all democratic actors work on preserving democracy by:

- a) Close and open cooperation between each other
- b) Joint work towards a single goal – developing resilient, inclusive and informed society which nurtures democratic values, protects public interest and strengthens citizens trust in the institutions.

Achieving this seemingly simple solution has been a serious challenge for the Western Balkans, because it's predicated on the existence of goodwill for cooperation and building democratic community, while requiring settling the differences between different actors who work on dealing with disinformation or related issues, presuming they all work towards the same purpose.

The whole-of-society approach is the only way to achieve harmonization of separate individual efforts in society, which so far have limited impact on their own. Joining the knowledge and expertise from the academic, civic, institutional, media and technological spheres to counter disinformation threats also directs the available resources, and even the donors, in the same direction and with a same purpose, making the fight more powerful, holistic and effective.

2. **Coordinated action** – besides securing the whole-of-society approach, a coordinated action is necessary at European, regional and national levels. Mirroring the behavior and strategies of antidemocratic actors, the experience from the countries, which have developed resilience mechanisms, such as those from Nordic-Baltic region, shows that increased coordination between relevant stakeholders provides excellent effects. This approach provides forceful and smartly directed targeted responses to antidemocratic disinformation strategies aimed at Europe and the Western Balkans.

3. **Budgets allocated for anti-disinformation activities should be proportional to the level of threats and strategies employed by the adversaries.**

Antidemocratic adversaries invest significant resources in the development and maintenance of the infrastructure for production and dissemination of disinformation and information manipulation. Collusion between foreign and domestic, state and private structures, results in development of coordinated networks of influence affecting the media and wider public discourse. Such high level of strategic, tactical and operational organization is supported with investment of significant budget. In order to defend itself from such attacks, the democratic side also needs to develop an appropriate strategic, operative and tactical response, and dedicate budget proportional to the threat lev. This budget should be provided by the governments and the international organizations that have set the goal of defending from disinformation strategies or attacks, aimed at dismantling the democratic order.

In addition, the time is now for the international donors who work at regional level in the Western Balkans to synchronize their budgets towards providing minimum level of resources towards the same purpose and regional strategic approach (regional strategy).

4. **Smart and strategic action instead of fragmented and overextended work.**

While research and mapping result indicate that antidemocratic disinformation strategies are based on approach of saturating the ether with manipulative content of high quantity and with increasing speed (especially via use of AI tools), then the comprehensive and wide-ranging mapping of these contents can be considered a futile drain of energy and resources. In such situation the focus of the mapping should be the goals and strategy behind that flood of content production, as well as the actors engaged in their distribution and placement. This approach requires a dose of analysis and measured estimation, followed by careful, smart and strategic action. Such an approach goes hand in hand with the whole-of-society approach because its inherent exchange of information and knowledge between different actors enables access to information necessary for smart and strategic action. Building resilience mechanisms at national level which are both responding to essential domestic needs and are also an obligation in the process EU integration for the candidate countries, in the areas of freedom of expression and foreign, security and defense policies of EU acquis (Chapters 23 and 31).

5. Joint regional strategic approach, working towards the same goal for the whole Western Balkans, directed at building joint regional strategy, followed by continuity in implementation.

Considering that all Western Balkans countries has set EU integration as priority strategic goal, and considering that antidemocratic forces apply regional strategic approach to spreading disinformation, there is pressing need for joint strategic approach towards building democratic resilience. Initiating cooperation between Western Balkans countries to develop a joint regional strategy for dealing with information threats will largely replace the fragmented response that contributes to vulnerability of the region.

EU already uses such joint approach, resulting in development of mechanisms for all member countries (EU Democracy Shield, EU Code of Conduct on Disinformation), while the strategic approach of the European External Action Service (EEAS) also addresses the needs of the Western Balkans, which provides a good starting point to be used as basis for building the joint regional strategy.

Creation and implementation of a joint regional strategy will help Western Balkan countries to follow the EU example in implementing joint regional strategic approach, while developing resilience mechanisms at national level. It would also enable individual countries to share policy solutions.

This directly addresses the obligation of all six individual countries to build resilience mechanisms at national level as part of the process of EU integration for the candidate countries, in the EU *acquis communautaire* areas of freedom of expression and foreign, security and defense policies (Chapters 23 and 31).

Additional value of this approach is enabling the organizations from the region that work on resilience to take the role of digital media observatories, as a system that currently has support only for EU-member countries through European Digital Media Observatory EDMO.

Priority Areas of Intervention

Preserving electoral integrity and the manner in which democratic societies respond to threats against it

Protecting electoral integrity in the era of disinformation, spread especially through social media and the misuse of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, must be an imperative that requires an advanced, coordinated, and open approach. The challenges faced by Europe regarding this issue indicate that the erosion of democratic order is largely occurring through the undermining of electoral integrity and the deliberate misleading or demobilization of citizens, aimed at influencing their choices during electoral cycles. This suggests that every democratic state and international organization, whose functioning is based on elections, must introduce a specific strategy and budget for preserving electoral integrity, fully involving practitioners who are dealing with information manipulation.

Priority efforts should be invested in cross-sectorial institutional strengthening, implementing capacities for monitoring and rapid response in real-time, promoting civic digital literacy, and fostering cooperation with technological platforms to detect and prevent malicious content.

Preserving democracy and the right of citizens to make informed decisions through fact-checking and content moderation on major online platforms

Preserving democracy and the right of citizens to make informed decisions in an era of active erosion of the protection of their rights, which major digital platforms used to provide in relation to exposing their users to harmful content, remains a pressing issue whose resolution is based on political will.

Within the process of harmonization of their legislative framework with the EU, there is a recognized need for the introduction of legal solutions in all Western Balkan countries that will enable efficient fact-checking and content moderation while protecting citizens, especially minors, from exposure to harmful content for which major digital platforms will be held accountable for their products. These legal solutions also include the obligation to ensure transparency of algorithms and the way information is presented, as well as accountability of platforms for the harmful content they disseminate.

The urgent adoption of these legal solutions and harmonization with the Digital Services Act (DSA) and the European Media Freedom Act is the most significant step toward protecting citizens and building trust in the digital information space.

Demonetization of disinformation and strengthening information integrity

Obstructing the flow of disinformation by creating a business case for information integrity is a key step toward maintaining democratic processes and protecting the integrity of the public discourse. In contexts where institutions are closed or vulnerable, it is necessary to mobilize businesses, brands, and policymakers to demonetize disinformation and promote ethical media practices. The Information Integrity Monitor (IIM) tool represents an innovative approach, that does not rely solely on fact-checking but directs efforts toward the financial mechanisms of disinformation—particularly by informing advertisers and donors with transparent, data-driven assessments of media integrity. With an adaptable model for local media environments, IIM creates conditions for stronger media accountability and support for journalism based on ethical standards.

Counter-Narrative: Responses to Attacks and Distorted Interpretations of the Fight Against Information Threats

1. Fact-checking is not censorship.

There is a strong tendency by anti-democratic actors to undermine trust in fact-checking by equating it with censorship. In case there's opportunity to debate and explain, such attempts lose their basis from the very definition of these two concepts. Fact-checking is conducted through a transparent publicly available methodology aimed at determining the veracity of information and possibly missing facts about existing content, not at removing or preventing the creation of certain content. Fact-checking provides context, adds information explaining the previously examined content, allowing each citizen to independently determine what is true on their own.

Fact-checking does not include removing of published content, but provides upgrade of the public discussion by investigating and establishing and publishing evidence related to the content and enables education on potential falsehoods. In this way, it enriches the public discourse, contrary to censorship, which aims to suppress or reduce published contents.

2. Freedom of expression is a constitutionally and internationally guaranteed right, essential for the existence of a democratic society. However, this freedom is not absolute - it also involves responsibility.

Anti-democratic actors frequently, under the guise of freedom of speech, spread harmful disinformation that often infringes upon citizens' rights, and portray all efforts to qualify such content as disinformation as an attack on freedom of speech.

According to international human rights conventions and the national legislations of all six Western Balkan countries, freedom of speech is guaranteed, but only when it does not infringe on other human rights. These limitations exist within criminal codes, which provide protection against discrimination; national, religious, and/or racial hatred; spreading racial superiority; sexual harassment; stalking; defamation; extortion; abuse of personal data, etc. Electoral codes in the countries of the Western Balkans also include provisions that proactively and reactively protect the integrity of elections and the right of citizens to make informed decisions. The laws that guarantee the security of the Western Balkans countries include serious sanctions for the spread of violent extremism, terrorism, including online radicalization, and promotion of war crimes, denial of genocide.

Additionally, all countries in the region have laws that protect minors and children. Through these regulations, in line with the standards of the Council of Europe, the right to freedom of expression applies in the digital space, but always within a framework ensuring protection of other human rights. Therefore, no disinformation strategy, especially those using digital platforms with intent to manipulate, harm, or undermine, can be justified by invoking the right to freedom of expression.

3. Media outlets and large digital platforms are in unequal position when it comes to accountability before the state in the Western Balkans.

While different countries in the region have different legislative framework for media regulation, they all possess active legal regulations are active and set rules for media outlet operations within their territories. If media outlets violate these rules, they face sanctions, and to ensure the state does not repressively misuse these laws, regulatory bodies and mechanisms constantly monitor media freedom and expression.

In many respects, the development of technology and the consolidation of large digital online platforms resulted in their take over of the role held by traditional media outlets, surpassing their influence. Moreover, as platforms based abroad have provided environment for traditional media outlets to engage with readers, they are in control of the visibility of their online content.

Unlike the media outlets, the domestic media regulation within the legislative framework of the Western Balkan countries excludes large digital platforms from the jurisdiction of their regulatory bodies, so the platforms do not bear responsibility for content as traditional media outlets do. This imbalance places traditional media outlets in a subordinate and dependent position, undermining their sustainability and ability to operate. This affects the efforts for information integrity, as the independent and professional media outlets are crucial pillars in the fight against disinformation and in preserving democratic public discourse.

4. The focus on one dimension of the problem relativizes the need for overall comprehensive solution of the problem.

The practitioners that deal with information threats and information manipulation in the countries of the region—regardless whether through state institutions, media, civic organizations or academia—most often focus on just one dimension of this problem.

Such dimensions can be active transparency, mapping the disinformation flow or actors disseminating them, security or protection of the constitutional order, media literacy, independent journalism and self-regulation, fact-checking etc. This is natural because most stakeholders specialize in certain area and cannot develop expertise covering all interrelated aspects. However, since the issue of information threats and information manipulation is multidimensional problem, it requires multidisciplinary approach. Applying one-dimensional solutions to a multidimensional problem results in unsatisfactory outcome, making the problem unsolvable, providing perfect arguments for the antidemocratic forces that attempt to undermine the work of these practitioners.

5. Absence of political will and the spirit of cooperation as a kind of “gift” for the anti-democratic forces.

The effects of information threats and information manipulation have far-reaching influence on all segments of society. Lack of concern for this multidimensional issue, as a problem for the whole society, resulting in lack of cooperation and absence of political will to discuss and work toward solution of this problem as common for the whole society, makes it easier for antidemocratic forces to fulfil their mission in easier, more effective and more successful manner. Promotion of the example of building resilience to disinformation through whole-of-society approach enables strengthening of social cohesion and leadership applicable in all other spheres of the societies, in the Balkans and beyond.

From positions to policies: Recommendations for the Stakeholders

1. General recommendations

- Information threats and information manipulation are a problem affecting the whole society and should be solved through whole-of-society approach, which includes:
 - Political will and spirit of cooperation
 - Consistency of various activities
 - Coordination and coordinated action
 - Joining resources and increasing investment in solving the problem
 - One common joint strategy and goal for the Western Balkans region.
- Democratic states must have inclusive national strategies for preserving the election integrity, especially covering protection of citizens from manipulative information that mislead the citizens and undermine trust of the citizens in the elections as democratic institution.
- Western Balkans countries must urgently harmonize their legislation with the European Union regulation: the Digital Services Act and the Media Freedom Act.
- Practitioners working on handling disinformation threats and information manipulation should mobilize the businesses, brands and policy creators to work together on demonetization of disinformation and advancement of media practices in the direction of strengthening information integrity.

2. Recommendations for international organizations and umbrella bodies

- The international organizations and umbrella bodies, starting with the European Union, must initiate and lead an integrated approach in the countries of the region, resulting in one regional strategy under one common goal to deal with information threats and information manipulation.
- The accession talks with the Western Balkan countries should be used as mechanism to help governments from the region navigate towards creation of such strategies at national level and one joint strategy at regional level. Such processes must be fully inclusive and nurture the whole-of-society approach.

3. Recommendations for the international donors

- Coordinate donor efforts to avoid fragmentation, overlap or contradictory interventions, directing them towards one regional strategy.
- Change the approach in the region that incites competition rather than cooperation between the practitioners, by including conditions that enable increasing cooperation among the practitioners, supporting joint synchronous activities towards the common goals.
- To support the approach based on one long-term common strategy instead of short-term project activities.
- To invest in maintenance and further strengthening of the existing capacities of the local actors—civil society organizations and networks—in order to provide for long-term sustainability of their work.
- To include local and regional actors in the process of creation of their donor strategies, ensuring that their interventions are based on the real needs, contexts and community experiences.

4. Recommendations for the state institutions from the Western Balkans region

- Governments should establish clear mechanisms for response to disinformation campaigns focused on transparent, timely and consistent communication.
- Ministries of European affairs or other government bodies in charge of European integration should start the process of national strategies based on whole-of-society approach and full inclusivity, while the existing initiatives should be upgraded and strengthened.
- Ministries or other government bodies in charge of digital transformation should start urgent harmonization of the legislative frameworks with the EU regulation, primarily the Digital Services Act and the Media Freedom Act.
- State election commission should initiate and lead strategies for preserving the integrity of the elections with a focus of protecting citizens from electoral manipulation and manipulations using digital platforms.
- Media regulatory bodies should lead the implementation of the Digital Services Act and the Media Freedom Act.

5. Recommendations for the practitioners dealing with information threats and manipulation

- To accept the whole-of-society approach and coordinate their annual programs and resources towards a common strategic goal with a focus on returning the citizens' trust in democratic society, and the individual actors that comprise it.

6. Recommendations for media outlets and media organizations

- To establish internal mechanisms for prevention of spread of information manipulation within their newsrooms, especially in case of sensitive and security issues.
- To strengthen and upgrade the self-regulation mechanisms which would differentiate them as professional media, as a way to return the trust of the citizens in the media
- To invest in editorial independence of the newsrooms, build fact-checking and journalism capacities that can recognize and neutralize manipulative narratives.

7. Recommendations for practitioners networks

- To work together on joint and coordinated approach and one joint regional strategy for handling the information manipulation.
- To secure synchronicity in the action of the networks and their members
- To incite mutual cooperation and coordination to avoid parallel narratives and confusion in the public space.
- To work on joint standards, definitions and systems of recognizing and categorization of information manipulation.
- To establish channels and mechanisms of systemic and structured communication with the relevant institutions at European and global level, including the European Union, NATO, OSCE, UN and others, with a goal of information exchange, harmonization of approaches and amplification of joint efforts to deal with information threats.

8. Recommendations for the academic community

- To join the whole-of-society approach with one common strategy and goal/
- To conduct interdisciplinary research about the causes, consequences and efficiency on the responses to disinformation.
- To contribute to development of educational programs for media and digital literacy, based on facts and critical thinking.

Call for joint action: Neutrality and passivity are no longer an option

In a time of serious attacks on the democratic system and the citizens' trust in it, carried out through information manipulation and disinformation strategies, the protection of democracy demands a coordinated and strategic approach that involves all democratic actors within society.

In a time of serious attacks on the democratic system and the citizens' trust in it, carried out through information manipulation and disinformation strategies, the protection of democracy demands a coordinated and strategic approach that involves all democratic actors within society. The Western Balkans, a particularly vulnerable region due to insufficient regulatory preparedness and political fragmentation, must adopt a whole-of-society approach and transform it into a sustainable framework for resilience against disinformation strategies, foreign influence, and technological misuses, especially through the urgent harmonization of regulations with those of the EU.

The long-term resilience of the Western Balkans can only be built through a unified regional strategy, budgets proportionate to those of anti-democratic actors, political will, and coordinated action. In contrast to fragmented efforts, such an approach ensures a collective response to systemic threats, resulting in a stronger impact and initiating the restoration of public trust in democratic institutions, safeguarding citizens' right to make informed decisions as a cornerstone of the democratic process.

Recommendations for further reading

1. Disinformation Trends and Narratives in the Western Balkans Region - media monitoring reports;
2. 3rd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats;
3. NATO's approach to counter information threats;
4. Hybrid CoE Trend Report 2: Western Balkans;
5. Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 11: Understanding Russia's Influence in the Western Balkans;
6. Social identities and democratic vulnerabilities: Learning from examples of targeted disinformation;
7. Multi-year study: information to influence behaviours in the military context by HCCS;
8. Research program on Hybrid threats by HCCS;
9. GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index;
10. Fighting disinformation in Central Europe: StopFake's best practices;
11. Extremism and Momentum: How Călin Georgescu Has Risen in the Polls by Expert Forum, Romania;
12. Data Access & Election Integrity: Lessons from Online Disruptions.

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