

„Addressing the challenges posed by disinformation in the Western Balkans“

Online Webinar

11-12 November 2020

Statement by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

More than 100 participants, representatives of regional organisations, governmental institutions and media have gathered for a two-day online conference on 11-12 November 2020 co-organised jointly by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT), the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE) and the European External Action Service (EEAS) in order to discuss challenges posed by disinformation in the Western Balkans.

The event has served as an occasion for discussing the impact of disinformation from different angles, involving experts, practitioners and regulators. As highlighted by speakers, disinformation can be related to external interference and hybrid threats, as information operations have been used to delegitimise democratic processes or to steer the public conversation around certain topics. Finding adequate responses to minimise the impact of disinformation should be part of a comprehensive security strategy.

Disinformation, however, is often domestically produced and spread for a variety of reasons: disinformation produced for profit and advertisement revenue may have no less detrimental impact on public debates than operations explicitly conducted for political goals. Civil society organisations, journalists, and fact checkers have highlighted the scale of the problem and the complexity of countering the spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans; regulators have outlined and discussed the challenges they face in stymieing disinformation without falling into the traps of regulatory overreach.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted how disinformation represents a direct threat not only to democracy, but to the health and welfare of people across the world. Indeed, Covid-19 has vividly illustrated how the spread of disinformation and misinformation can cost lives and thwart efforts to contain the pandemic.

In the Western Balkans, disinformation is cause for growing concern. Similarly to what happens elsewhere, social media and instant messaging platforms may be exacerbating the impact of disinformation. Unfortunately, however, in some instances disinformation is produced or spread by mainstream media and political leaders. Disinformation can be politically motivated, can be promoted by outside actors, or can be produced as a business, mainly to profit from advertising revenue. In either case, in the Western Balkans such disinformation often moves swiftly across borders.

In response, civil society organisations and fact-checkers have started coordinating activities. Such initiatives are important, and need to be supported and strengthened.

Fact-checking contributes to contrasting the further spreading of disinformation, but a comprehensive response to disinformation cannot rely on fact-checking alone. There is a need to build resilience, by promoting media and data literacy through dedicated programmes targeting both youth and adults.

Cooperation with social media platforms contributes to reduce the spread of disinformation, but the companies behind these platforms have not yet fully come to terms with their responsibility. Full transparency on *all* sponsored contents and on the mechanisms that determine content prioritisation should be only the first steps of a broader effort at rethinking, in cooperation with partners at the EU level, the regulation of the privately-owned public spaces that are central to the information environment.

Quality journalism must be supported, but assistance must come without threatening editorial independence, in particular in a region where many international organizations constantly denounce limited media freedom. Governments and international donors should support quality journalism and fact checking, and should take action in line with the [Declaration adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers “on the financial sustainability of quality journalism in the digital age”](#).

Recommended measures include a beneficial tax regime, financial support schemes and the possibility of media outlets to operate as not-for-profit organisations and receive donations from philanthropic programmes. Dedicated resources should also go to training programmes for bringing new skills into newsrooms (e.g. data journalism and multimedia), as well as funds favouring cross-border reporting.

Adequate legislation protecting journalists, whistle-blowers, and reducing the risk of SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation), should be introduced. Fearless reporting and engaging, quality journalism contribute to a more resilient public sphere, holding to account those in power as well as other sources of information.

Governments in the region should follow best practices tried and tested in other European countries and promote media and data literacy programmes, taking inputs from the positive experience of Finland. Such initiatives should adopt a holistic, life-long, digital-positive approach to digital culture aimed at empowering people to express themselves and constructively engage in an healthy public debate online.

If mainstream media are often part of the disinformation problem, independent regulatory authorities are of primary importance, in particular for avoiding opacity of ownership and concentration of media. Governments should do more to promote well-functioning of regulatory authorities and ensure their independence.