

## CSOs role in tackling disinformation in the Black Sea Region<sup>1</sup>

Gabriel Brezoiu<sup>2</sup>, Diana Ionita<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

Old, new, and frozen conflicts are highly concentrated in the extended Black Sea Region. These can disrupt the mobility of the people, their access to resources, business opportunities, and the possibility of intervention for civil society organizations. In this context, media institutions play a key role in informing people and consolidating public opinion on relevant topics, thus creating fertile soil for advanced disinformation mechanisms in the case of the controlled media holdings (Murusidze, Chankvetadze, “Protracted conflicts and security challenges in the Black Sea”, MEI, 2020).

This article looks at identifying the main tactics of disinformation in the Black Sea region, their impact, and the response given in each of the affected regions. Based on this, we aim at formulating policy recommendations targeted at civil society organizations in regards to possible interventions tackling disinformation.

Despite the legislation that allows citizens democratic participation, most of the countries in the Black Sea region do not currently have free media, as shown by the 2020 World Press Freedom Index: Romania ranks 48, Georgia 60, Armenia 61, Moldova 91, Ukraine 96, Bulgaria 111, Russia 149, Turkey 154 and Azerbaijan 168 out of 180 countries. Moreover, half of EU citizens aged 15-30 say they need critical thinking and information skills to help them combat fake news and extremism in society, according to the Flash Eurobarometer 2018. This article focuses especially on possible solutions through which CSOs can support young people in identifying, combating, and preventing disinformation in their communities.

**Keywords:** Disinformation, fake news, CSOs, civil society organization, media, media freedom, social media, populism, COVID19

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<sup>1</sup>This article is part of the Call for Articles Series “*Building Knowledge for CSO Cooperation in the Black Sea Region*”, in the context of the project “*Building CSO Capacity for Regional Cooperation within the Black Sea Region*”, implemented by FOND, and funded by the Black Sea Trust for Regional Cooperation (BST), a project of the German Marshall Fund. The opinions expressed in this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views those of the Black Sea Trust or its partners.

<sup>2</sup>**Gabriel Brezoiu** is a Romanian youth activist, trainer, and project manager active at the European level. In 2010 he founded GEYC Community that later became one of the most active youth communities in Romania currently counting over 4000 members (youth, teachers, and youth workers). In his capacity as the President of PRISMA European Network, he is promoting qualitative youth work and adoption of digital transformation among civil society organizations from the European Union, Black Sea region, and Mediterranean region. In 2018, Gabriel was included in the Forbes 30 under 30 rankings (Romania) for his achievements on the community-level impact.

<sup>3</sup>**Diana Ionita** is a Romanian youth worker, trainer, and communications specialist with 10+ years of experience in working with CSOs at national, European and international levels, including the Black Sea Region. She is currently the Head of Digital at GEYC. In her work, she focuses on promoting democracy, youth participation, no hate speech, media literacy, and digital transformation. With academic studies and experience in media, she also has an international journalist hat on her resume, adding value to the understanding of how these mass communication mechanisms work.

## **Important influences, conveyed by media messages**

Communication involves at least two parties - the speaker and the listener. Sometimes there are third parties: in-between entities to carry messages, like the media, for example, which has such transmission of information as its primary goal. Problems can develop at all three of these sources. Sometimes, speakers themselves are not sure about what they mean, which implies that what they say would often be ambiguous. Even when people know what they mean, they often do not articulate it as clearly as they should. Deliberately or inadvertently, they can conceal their true feelings or ideas. Listeners also are sources of communication problems. People often fail to listen carefully. They may assume they know what the other person is saying or will say, because they have heard it before, or they assume that one person is "just like" another person from the same group. Moreover, when people are in conflict, they often concentrate more on what they are going to say in response to their opponent's statement, rather than listening to their opponents' words with full attention. The result, again, is misunderstandings, and often unnecessary escalation of a conflict. Third parties can make communication better, or they can make it worse. The media can help speakers clarify what they are saying, and they can help listeners hear all the narratives, explaining the dynamics of conflict that are not necessarily seen by the parties themselves. Or the media can make matters worse if their goal is to manipulate the public, inflame its anger in order to sell more or to support the publisher's or government's own interests and views.

Old, new, and frozen conflicts are highly concentrated in the extended Black Sea Region. These can disrupt the mobility of the people, their access to resources, business opportunities, and the possibility of intervention for civil society organizations. In this context, media institutions play a key role in informing people and consolidating public opinion on key topics, thus creating fertile soil for advanced disinformation mechanisms in the case of the controlled media holdings<sup>4</sup>.

The weakening of democratic values - such as the rule of law, human rights, media freedom, inclusiveness and equality - generates in the Black Sea Region a downward spiral of instability, with significant negative impacts for regional security. Regardless of the regulations enabling democratic civic engagement, the overall media landscape in this area distinguishes itself through biased outputs, political backing and concentration of ownership, which influences the agenda-setting, resulting in emotionally manipulative and inaccurate content, as well as through a huge concentration of financial power held by internet platforms, not clearly regulated as media, despite them curating content for the large public.

Disinformation mechanisms in the Black Sea Region imply deliberate aggressive dissemination of false information, manipulated narratives or facts and propaganda to discredit opponents, shape the public beliefs, amplifying social division, fear and radicalization and the

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<sup>4</sup>Murusidze and Chankvetadze 2020

controlled and biased media are the main tool. 2020 World Press Freedom Index<sup>5</sup> shows a very low ranking in the region in terms of media freedom, which turns it into a favorable ground for complex disinformation strategies: Romania ranks 48, Georgia 60, Armenia 61, Republic of Moldova 91, Ukraine 96, Bulgaria 111, Russia 149, Turkey 154 and Azerbaijan 168 out of 180 countries.

### **Mapping disinformation in the Black Sea Region media**

According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Romanian media funding mechanisms are ambiguous or even dishonest, ownership interests are subordinated to editorial policies, and censorship and self-censorship continue to be promoted by the mentality towards media and free speech that prevails within the state and the political class. This results in the media increasingly becoming tools of political manipulation and disinformation.

On the same note, Georgia has a quite partisan media and despite recent changes that have brought progress in terms of pluralism and accountability, owners very frequently decide on the editorial content, and abuse and threats against journalists by police are also still prevalent.

The diversity of the media has flourished as well in Armenia, but the government that emerged from the "velvet revolution" in the spring of 2018 has struggled to reduce its polarization. Like in other countries from the region, the editorial practices align with their owners' interests, being far from ensuring editorial freedom and transparent media ownership.

The leading media outlets' editorial line corresponds significantly with their owners' political and financial agendas in the Republic of Moldova as well, an issue that is notably striking during elections. Like the country itself, which is plagued by constant political turmoil and the undue influence of its oligarchs, the media are diverse but highly partisan.<sup>6</sup>

In the same lines, Ukraine has a varied media environment but the tight grip of the oligarchs on the media and an alarming number of crimes of violence against journalists<sup>7</sup>, making the achievements after the 2014 revolution, including a regulation on the transparency of media ownership, very fragile.

The systematic corruption and complicity between the media, politicians and oligarchs in Bulgaria challenges democracy, as EU grants and public funding have been awarded to media organisations, with the purpose of motivating beneficiaries to make their reporting convenient for the government or withdraw from publishing that problematic news entirely.

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<sup>5</sup>Reporters Without Borders 2020

<sup>6</sup>Rosca, Alla. "Media Security Structural Indicators: The Case of Moldova." *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 26, no. 3 (2018): 365-400.

<sup>7</sup> Radio Free Europe, May 2020.

The pressure on independent media has risen gradually in Russia as well, the framework becoming very restrictive for those who challenge the current in power rhetoric, as TV stations start to overwhelm audiences with disinformation. The “sovereign Internet” justifies selectively enforced laws with freelance journalists and bloggers/ vloggers being classified as “foreign agents”<sup>8</sup> and incarcerated.

A similar situation is happening in Turkey, the largest jailer of journalists in the world, where the witch-hunt initiated by the government against its media opponents resulted in the disappearance of numerous media outlets and the authorities tightening their influence over the remaining ones.

The conditions in Azerbaijan bring alike challenges with power control on the agenda and independent journalists being pressured through harassment, blackmail or bribery, and even incarcerated.

### **The power of critical thinking in addressing disinformation**

These circumstances from the Black Sea Region lead to an entire range of new obstacles for educators as they strive to prepare young people as individuals, to properly understand and engage effectively and critically with this hyper-rich media content contaminated by disinformation. This gets particularly tough as youth live in societies changed by the new technology, allowing social media interaction and fast access to large volumes of information. According to the Flash Eurobarometer 2018<sup>9</sup>, half of EU people aged 15-30 y/o say they need logical reasoning and awareness skills to help them counter fake news and extremism in the community. Their reliance especially on data and indicators found on social media, yellow journalism, novelty over newsworthiness, and clickbait leaves them vulnerable to such abuse by the media. The lack of critical thinking and media literacy leads to not identifying and countering disinformation and thus to more radicalisation.

According to the Citizen’s Dialogue 2019 Report<sup>10</sup>, when asked about how to tackle disinformation, citizens designate education and access to fact-checking tools as the top 2. Regulation only comes as a third choice.

### **Policy options: CSOs involvement in tackling disinformation**

**Regulation:** when it comes to regulating media and the internet, CSOs can play a key role both in the participatory process of establishing the regulations and in informing/training citizens to understand and apply these guidelines.

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation, Реестр иностранных средств массовой информации, выполняющих функции иностранного агента, December 2020, <https://minjust.gov.ru/ru/documents/7755>

<sup>9</sup>Flash Eurobarometer 455 - "European Youth" Report 2018

<sup>10</sup>Missions Publiques 2019

The European Commission<sup>11</sup> has put in place a "clear, comprehensive and broad set of actions to tackle the spread and impact of online disinformation in Europe and ensure the protection of European values and democratic systems". In this direction, understanding the disinformation as

*"verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public",*

the following measures have been adopted to tackle it:

- *The Code of Practice in Disinformation* which was voluntarily adopted by the so-called tech-giants is a set of worldwide self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation. Aiming to ensure a more robust framework for monitoring its implementation of awareness raising tools and removing posts containing disinformation, the European Commission is expected to issue guidance to enhance the Code of Practice in spring 2021;
- [\*The European Digital Media Observatory\*](#) is a CEF funded project aimed at creating a European hub for fact-checkers, academics and other relevant stakeholders able to build capacity and enhance cooperation;
- [\*The Action Plan on disinformation\*](#) aimed at building the capacity of the Member States;
- [\*The Communication "Tackling online disinformation: a European approach"\*](#), launched in April 2018, focused on several tools to tackle the spread and impact of online disinformation in Europe and ensure the protection of European values and democratic systems, particularly in the context of the upcoming European elections in May 2019.

**Education:** Having access to various types of target groups, CSOs are a legitimate player when it comes to leading information campaigns and educational activities in both formal and nonformal settings. Several initiatives targeting young people, in particular, trained them on how to identify fake news and check the facts<sup>12</sup>.

## Recommendations

Young people are high consumers of media, particularly social media. To support their education, formal and nonformal education stakeholders should work together and design national and regional campaigns in order to tackle disinformation<sup>13</sup> and to identify populism.

Studies showed that COVID19 pandemic was one of the most appealing topics for spreading disinformation and misinformation<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, more efforts should be allocated in the direction of transparent news, fact-checking and debunking of misleading information.

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<sup>11</sup>European Commission, Media Convergence and Social Media (Unit I.4) 2021

<sup>12</sup>European Economic and Social Committee, Divjak, and Forbici 2017, p.24-25

<sup>13</sup>OECD 2019, p. 250-252

<sup>14</sup>PWC UK, n.d.

Furthermore, independent journalists and media should be further supported and encouraged to report accurately about the pandemic while the current efforts of the social media to flag the pandemic related content and to indicate the official sources should be continued, improved and enhanced by the participation of the users<sup>15</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

In the past months, Black Sea region countries faced an increased level of disinformation connected with health, economic and political topics where scientific facts and rumours have been introduced as facts in order to propagate fear and to decrease trust in the governmental officials. This phenomenon can be easily quantified through a link with the World Press Freedom Index that illustrates how disinformation level is higher in the countries experiencing a weaker media freedom with less capacity to get involved in fact-checking and debunking the fake news.

During the pandemic, the CSOs were often responders providing support during the crisis situation: collecting donations, providing volunteers, informing and debunking fake news and supporting the authorities in implementing the health measures. In the post COVID19 recovery we see a higher importance for the CSOs involvement in educational and raising awareness programmes increasing the media literacy skills of the citizens and supporting independent journalists that can make use of the social media to convey their message in a more genuine way.

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<sup>15</sup>European Commission, DG Connect 2021

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**Appendix: Freedom of the Press Index 2020 – Black Sea Region. Source: Reporters Without Borders**

