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Facts on Media Manipulations in 2020

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1.

221 analyses of media content that entailed some form of audience manipulation have been done by the Centre for Democratic Transition (CDT) through its Raskrinkavanje.me project in the first seven months of 2020.

2.

215 domestic and foreign media have participated in the spread of misinformation or disinformation in the same period.

3.

827 manipulative texts and features have been covered by our analyses, but their total number has been significantly larger.

4.

Out of the **10 media broadcasters** that took the lead in disinforming citizens, none were from the Montenegrin mainstream media.

5.

The list of **TOP TEN DISINFORMERS** in the last **7 months** is the following:

Name of the media • Number of assessments •

In4S

54

Informer

38

Alo

42

Novosti

37

Viralne objave

37

Srbija danas

29

Espresso

26

Sputnik

24

Kurir

24

Pravda

21

6.

Media from the "margins", tabloids from the Western Balkan countries and a large number of actors on social networks acted as fake news' factories and created an extensive network of misinformation and disinformation.

7.

In addition to organized groups and individuals, also influencers, musicians, actors, athletes, and other public figures participated in the spread of misinformation on social networks.

8.

In this period, social networks started removing misinformation posts from these areas as well. Facebook has launched independent fact-checking programs in Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia and Croatia. Raskrinkavanje.me has been a part of this program since the end of July 2020.

9.

Reasons for the spread of media manipulations in this period have been geopolitical, political, and economic. Moreover, a significant number of misinformation proliferators engaged in these activities out of the need to broaden their influence on social networks.

10.

Disinformation campaigns targeted the core values of Western democracies, the pursuit of real reforms of the Montenegrin society, the constitutional rights of citizens, and the secularity of the state.

11.

The creation of false narratives favouring Russia and China over the EU and the NATO has been constantly present in this period.

12.

Another important feature of this period was the raising national and religious tensions – often even hatred – as well as the radicalization of the political scene through the placement of misinformation.

13.

It was not uncommon for the various pro-fascist groups to spread hate speech on the extreme right-wing portals, in the comments below texts or on social networks, labelling citizens and entire nations and raging against anything that did not fit their value system.

14.

In January, the key reasons behind manipulations were the Law on the Freedom of Religion or Belief and the Legal Status of Religious Communities, and regional relations.

15.

February was marked by media manipulations on religious issues and protests, as well as by the implications these had on the Montenegrin society. In addition, it saw the beginning of the spread of coronavirus-related misinformation, which would intensify in the following period.

16.

March, April and May were distinguished by numerous media manipulations on the origin, treatment, and spread of the coronavirus. Through different types of conspiracy theories, citizens were misinformed about almost every important issue related to COVID-19. The virus was also the reason for an escalation of manipulations related to regional relations, and the relations between the church and the state.

17.

In June, the manipulators pushed geopolitical themes and regional relations. Historical revisionism, a permanent feature of disinformation campaigns, was re-activated this month.

18.

July saw a sublimation of sorts of all the topics used to misinform citizens in the previous six months.

19.

Montenegrin state authorities did not adequately address the long-term exposure of citizens to disinformation. They either did not want or did not find the right way to counter these phenomena.

20.

The Government and other state authorities did not introduce legal or other public initiatives for countering manipulations on the lines of more enlightened societies.

21.

State institutions used an insufficiently clear and imprecise legal framework for regulating these issues, so that they reacted to disinformation and its proliferators in a selective way.

22.

Instead of rebuttals, the Government itself labelled some disinformers as “fake news”, thus showing its ambition to extend its constitutional competencies to the assessment of compliance with the journalistic code.

23.

The Government did not react to manipulative texts of the like-minded media.

24.

The institutions of the repressive apparatus (police and prosecution) made an even bigger mistake compared to the Government, and opted for the arrest of individuals on charges of spreading panic and spreading false news. In addition, they did not treat all creators and transmitters of fake news in the same way.

25.

The Government’s decision to publish the list of persons in mandatory self-isolation, strongly criticised by the relevant NGOs, was the reason behind many media manipulations. This decision was overturned by the Constitutional Court a few months later.

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