DISINFORMATION NETWORK IN MONTENEGRO:

DO WE SEE THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM?

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INTRODUCTION

The fact that Montenegro, like most countries in Europe, faces challenges with disinformation has not set key decision-makers in motion.

The Government, the Parliament, political parties, regulatory agencies, and other significant actors do not seem to be affected by consistent undermining of social and democratic processes, which are a direct result of disinformation and propaganda campaigns of various actors.

At the level of Montenegrin society as a whole, there is a strikingly low level of appreciation that democratic processes must be protected, that they must be subject to constant improvement and investment. In Montenegro, the situation seems to be the exact opposite – the system's key actors act as if they fail to see the elephant in the room.

Montenegro does not have a strategy for countering disinformation, and the first strategic document that aims at addressing this issue is the Media Strategy, which is currently being drafted. Montenegrin media, electoral and criminal legislation do not recognise this threat, nor do they contain provisions to mitigate its detrimental impact.

For years, state institutions have been passive and demonstrated a clear lack of interest in dealing with this phenomenon, including the Parliament of Montenegro. Our proposal to establish a Committee for Monitoring Foreign Influences is still pending, despite having obtained majority support. The executive branch of the government and regulatory agencies deny jurisdiction over this matter, and have only managed to find excuses for not undertaking any activities. The existing legal framework and the manner in which the state has been treating this issue render Montenegro conducive to the development of disinformation activities.

All political actors in Montenegro express public contempt over the problem of disinformation, but many choose to secretly resort to it as needed. As a result, efforts to counter disinformation have been reduced to daily political confrontations. Fake news is but a convenient label used for political opponents, and foreign influence is an accusation used to fabricate politically convenient affairs.

Fighting disinformation is a fight for professional journalism, the kind that serves public interest. Therefore, these efforts form part of a broader context and the need to create a more favourable environment for the work of the media.

However, little attention is paid to the overall ambience. There is an unsustainably large number of outlets in our media market, who are faced with the fundamental problem of survival in the market, and the ability to operate and make a profit. Clearly, there is a media black market and illegal money flows that mostly affect those media that are most needed in our society - media that adhere to standards of professionalism, that operate transparently and publish all the relevant information about their work.

Their unfair competition, i.e. media, if outlets whose objective is to create a network of disinformation and conduct campaigns that undermine democratic processes can even be called media, have a clear intention: to put all media in the same basket and thus relativise professionalism and integrity of their operations. Therefore, their ultimate objective is to corrode trust and persuade citizens that they are all lying. If nothing is true, everything is permitted.

Additionally, both individuals and groups abuse the legal framework in Montenegro, which makes it possible to launch a media outlet by simply creating a website. Consequently, we are faced with a rapid growth in the number of unregistered media that openly spread copious amounts of disinformation.

It is also worth pointing out another interesting phenomenon on our media scene: three of the four TV networks with national coverage will soon be owned by individuals based abroad[1]. The most influential online portals[2] and radio stations[3], share a similar fate, and it is almost certain that, in the near future, only one of the three dailies published in our country will be owned by Montenegrin companies. In and by itself, this is not a negative social phenomenon, as long as these media adhere to the principles of professional journalism. However, given that some of their foreign owners may have political interests in Montenegro, there is clear potential for foreign interests to be dictating the activities of our media scene. Such a framework can be used to conduct disinformation campaigns.

Bearing in mind the practically unlimited potential of disinformation, propaganda and undermining of democratic processes that exist and are used on social networks, the scope of the problem becomes somewhat clearer.

If we consider the remarkably low level of media literacy in this context, and how poorly it is treated in the system of formal and non-formal education, combined with the low ability of citizens to think critically and comprehend

with clarity, it is clear that the outlined phenomenon in Montenegro is growing to concerning proportions.

It remains to be seen whether decision-makers will continue to act as if these problems do not affect them, whether they will continue to think that ignoring the elephant in the room can endow them with some political benefit, or whether they will finally launch specific activities to tackle the issue. This will be a clear indicator of the kind of society they want to build, and the substance of their political vision.

DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM IN MONTENEGRO

Montenegro has a diversified and robust disinformation ecosystem, whose infrastructure is used as needed to achieve geopolitical, regional, and internal political or economic objectives[4]. According to data from the Raskrinkavanje.me platform, its critical component consists of web pages and individuals on social media, tabloids, and right-wing portals from Serbia, as well as right-wing portals from Montenegro. The analysis of the way in which the outlined system operates indicates clear coordination and synchronisation in its activities.

"Traditional" media that are registered in Montenegro and adhere to the rules of transparency and editorial control are rarely sources or creators of fake news. Problems identified in

1 Goran Delić, *"Who owns "our" TV stations?"*, Center for Democratic Transition, 23/01/2022, https://www.cdtmn.org/2022/01/23/ci-je-su-nase-televizije/

2 Darvin Murić, *"Who owns "our" print and online media"*, Center for Democratic Transition, 28/01/2022, https://www.cdtmn.org/2022/01/28/ciji-su-nasi-stampani-i-onlajn-mediji/

3 Jelena Gardović, *"Who owns "our" media: Signals are coming from abroad"*, Center for Democratic Transition, 13/02/2022, https://www.cdtmn.org/2022/02/13/ciji-su-nasi-mediji-signali-stizu-spolja/

4 Dragan Koprivica, Milica Kovačević, Tijana Velimirović, *Disinformation Network and the Inadequate Reaction of the State*, Center for Democratic Transition, May 2020, https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Mre%C5%BEa-dezinformacija-i-neadekvatna-reakcija-dr%C5%BEave_WEB-6.pdf

their work revolve around biased reporting, participation in fuelling political tensions or transmitting disinformation, especially when it comes to online media.

Political disinformation and propaganda are constantly present in our media ecosystem, and their dissemination and intensity vary, while they are mostly triggered by local, regional, or global, social, political, and even sports and cultural events.

In the last two years, due to political instability and division, periods of disinformation tides have become more extensive and intense, with very short periods of reduced activity and lowered tensions.

An enormous wave of political disinformation in 2020 marked the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the subsequent protests organised by the Serbian Orthodox Church. The scope of manipulations ranged from completely inaccurate information about the content of the law, through tendentious interpretations of some of its provisions, spreading false narratives about the sale and conversion of religious premises, to significantly inflating the number of people who participated in protest walks. In moments of culmination, news pieces that had serious potential to provoke fear, incidents or even more serious conflicts were published on a regular basis.

Election processes are, expectedly, a period of intensified disinformation activities. These processes are significantly facilitated by the lack of political will among all political actors to implement electoral reform and put an end to breaking up electoral processes into smaller cycles. Thus, in the last two years, there has been almost no respite for the citizens of Montenegro, who have been constantly exposed to disinformation and propaganda in relation to elections. The goal of these campaigns is to strengthen political polarisation, radicalisation, and deepen ethnic and religious intolerance.

In addition to being fused by internal issues, the increase in the intensity of disinformation is influenced by regional and global dynamics and events. When it comes to the region, there is a notable consistent and pronounced tendency of disinformation campaigns - to deepen historic conflicts, to underline differences, to close down national borders with fear. Every couple of weeks, tabloids and anonymous portals, with the help of their allies on social media, share fake news about border incidents that did not happen, conspiracies about weapons, Bosnian mujahedeen, Albanian terrorists, extreme Serbian sports fans... According to these creators of disinformation, political leaders in the region live under constant threat of assassination, kidnapping, while regional enemies and foreign centres of power and intelligence services are conspiring against them – the MI6, CIA, NATO, Freemasons, foreign embassies and, inevitably, the Vatican.

These disinformation campaigns, which have clear political objectives, often target the fundamental values of Western democracies, the pursuit of tangible reforms in Montenegrin society, the constitutional rights of citizens and the secularity of the state[5].

The presence of Russia's and China's influence in the disinformation ecosystem of Montenegro is also a standard phenomenon. Chinese influence can fall under what is traditionally described as soft power, advertising, in a word - propaganda. In contrast, Russia's influence is much more serious, substantial, and danger-

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5   Dragan Koprivica, Milica Kovačević, Tijana Velimirović, *25 Facts on Media Manipulation*, Center for Democratic Transition, August 2020, https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/25-cinjenica-o-medij-skim-manipulacijama-2.pdf

ous. It has established a well-developed infrastructure for spreading influence in the region, including Montenegro, comprised of media, politicians, and activists. For years, this infrastructure has been patiently planting Kremlin disinformation and propaganda narratives, raising "combat readiness" in case of need. Thus, for example, the onset of the aggression against Ukraine marked the beginning of an intense disinformation campaign in Montenegro, with the objective to relativise the scope of Russia's crime and aggression against a sovereign country[6].

CASE STUDIES
BATTLES THAT ARE NOT WHAT THEY SAY THEY ARE

In recent years, we have seen a growing global awareness that disinformation has become a major feature of election processes in many countries, and that it can greatly influence the outcome of elections. There is growing evidence that different countries are using disinformation to manipulate electoral processes abroad. Montenegro is no exception to this trend, which has become particularly evident in the past two years.

Our teams analysed this problem during, and immediately following the 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro[7]. The key feature of disinformation campaigns in that period was creating instability, raising tensions and undermining elections as a democratic process. Tabloids from Serbia were in the lead in this process, although similar activities could be seen in Montenegrin media, and especially on social media. In the election period, a new instrument was introduced into the disinformation ecosystem - a one-time portal entitled "Udar", which had the sole purpose of discrediting political opponents.

Shortly afterwards, in March 2021, the "Battle for Nikšić" was launched[8]. Hard as it may be to believe, this was a campaign for local elections in this municipality, which surpassed all the previously recorded levels of disinformation and fuelling of tension. The vote on who would deal with communal and developmental issues at the municipal level was presented by some media and disinformers as "D-Day". Almost all available disinformation techniques were used in this campaign. This atmosphere was generated through social networks and media by both external and internal actors.

A TV series, entitled "Battle for Nikšić" was launched on Happy TV, and tabloids from Serbia dedicated sections on their websites to the Nikšić local elections. Their reporting, often relying on "unnamed sources", was dedicated to raising tensions and fearmongering, fabricating incidents, and publishing frightening announcements and prognoses. This was especially the case at election-day, when tabloids from Serbia published identical articles overflowing with incorrect claims, published one after another, in minutes-long intervals.

On the other hand, domestic media was informing the public about attacks on individuals for wearing national insignia, with no indication of evidence. Once the police denied the

6   Ivan Subotić, Nerma Šehović, Darvin Murić, *"Nomen est omen: Kako mediji nazivaju rat u Ukrajini"* Raskrinkavanje.me, 12.04.2022, https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analize/nomen-est-omen-kako-mediji-nazivaju-rat-u-ukrajini/
7   Dragan Koprivica, Milena Gvozdenović, *Ključna obilježja predizborne kampanje u medijima,* Centar za demokratsku tranziciju, novembar 2020, https://www.cdtmn.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Analiza-Kljucna-obiljezja-predizborne-kampanje-u-medijima.pdf

8   Darvin Murić, *"Zastave i dezinformacije bitnije od programa za građane",* Raskrinkavanje.me, 27.03.2021, https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analize/zastave-i-dezinformacije-bitnije-od-programa-za-gradane/

political and national background to incidents on the day, the media would simply put an end to such allegations, without further explaining to the public what had really happened. Another portal was launched in the pre-election period, entitled "Signal", which was launched solely to spread pre-election disinformation, and which was shut down immediately after the elections.

In December 2021, local elections were held in Cetinje, Mojkovac and Petnjica. Although they took place in a context of heated political tensions, which has become an everyday phenomenon in Montenegro, these elections were held in a much more agreeable atmosphere in terms of disinformation campaigns. This is not to say that the pre-election period was devoid of sensationalism, biased reporting, disinformation and tensions.

Interestingly, these elections drew significantly less interest from the Serbian media and kept a fairly local profile. In Petnjica and Cetinje, the outcome of the elections and the balance of power between the two blocs was more or less aligned with predictions, so it was not possible to stir more intensive aggravation. Even in Mojkovac, where the winner was decided by a narrow majority, this election was not granted "historic" significance, nor did we witness a "Battle for Mojkovac" in the tabloids and social media.

THEY DON'T HATE WOMEN, BUT …

Women who dare be involved in politics in Montenegro, while holding their own positions and views, are the target of various condemnations and misogynistic attacks.

In the past couple of months, we have witnessed the establishment of a new mechanism: insulting, humiliating, condemning, and sexist commenting targeting almost every woman who dares to think differently from the hateful herd, often made up of state officials. Here are some notable examples of how the mechanism works: Božena Jelušić, MP of the URA Civic Party, is a frequent interlocutor of the media, a participant in conferences and debates organised by civil society and a skilled debater in Parliament. Her knowledge and experience irritate loud and aggressive individuals, and she was often the target of coordinated attacks. Bullies on social media cannot seem to tolerate dissatisfaction with her attitudes, which is why they turn to misogynistic discrediting of the "know it all grandma" and "aunt". It is particularly concerning that MP Jelušić was a victim of misogynistic insults by her colleagues from the political scene[9]. Vojo Laković, one of the advisers to the Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, referred to her as "a grandmother who knows and sees everything"[10].

Vesna Bratić, former Minister of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, has experienced a series of misogynistic attacks in the past two years. When she first appeared on the political scene, attacks on social media mainly consisted of mocking her hairstyle and clothing. Somewhat later, she become an object of sexualisation, and an army of bots analysed her alleged aesthetic interventions and posted vulgar comments on her appearance. A caricature with her face appeared on social media, targeting her dignity, with a clear intention to humiliate and

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9   M.D, *"Frontovci vrijeđali Boženu Jelušić, ona odgovara: Ne prihvatam takvu vrstu političkog folklora"*, CDM, 20.10.2020, https://www.cdm.me/politika/frontovci-vrijedali-bozenu-jelusic-ona-odgovara-ne-prihvatam-takvu-vrstu-politickog-folklora/
10   AntenaM, *"Krivokapićev savjetnik za bezbjednost Laković vrijeđao poslanicu Jelušić"*, 29.10.2021, https://www.antenam.net/politika/219837-krivokapicev-savjetnik-za-bezbjednost-lakovic-vrijedjao-poslanicu-jelusic

discredit her persona[11], The fact that the Parliament passed a vote of no confidence for the Government of Zdravko Krivokapić motivated a surge of new insults. A photo of women's breasts appeared on the Internet, with the comment that Vesna Bratić "returned her office equipment". In addition, her debatable, right-wing and politically controversial views have been continuously commented on in the context of "women's hysteria" and labelled with various psychiatric diagnoses.

Draginja Vuksanović Stanković, SDP MP, is a frequent target of misogynistic and aggressive attacks, both in the real and the cyber world. Since her emergence on the Montenegrin political scene, her physical appearance and private life have drawn the attention of bullies. Due to insults that targeted her, the Electronic Media Agency intervened at the beginning of 2022, banning the broadcast of several shows hosted by the Serbian television Happy on the territory of Montenegro for a period of six months, due to misogynistic qualifications, verbalised by Vojislav Šešelj, targeting Draginja Vuksanović Stanković[12]. Prior to this event, the executive director of "Srpska Kuća", Emilo Labudović, dedicated a sexist text to the SDP MP, in which he referred to her a "blabbermouth" and listed a series of other insults[13]. Misogynistic and sexist attacks on her persona also came from a member of the National Commission for UNESCO, Jovan Markuš[14].

DPS MP Aleksandra Vuković did not fare much better in clashing with the pack, comprised of, in part, her colleagues from the Parliament. A few years ago, she was "accused" of writing love letters to the Democratic Front MP, Milan Knežević[15]. She has been the target of "satirists" on social media on several occasions, who created montages and caricatures that aimed at discrediting her. Women haters, particularly those targeting women in politics, do not seem to be able to "overcome" her style and way of dressing. The vice president of DPS, Sanja Damjanović, who was also a target for "cartoonists", faced a similar experience[16]. In March 2022, an "ambush" was prepared for Dragica Sekulović, a former minister and DPS MP, who was exposed to hundreds of comments containing gender-based hatred and discrimination, for which she filed criminal charges[17].

MEME SERDARI, VOJVODE, KOMITE AND HAJDUCI[18]

In the past few years, various pages, groups and meme accounts have been formed on Montenegro's social media scene, especially on Facebook, which support various narratives of political parties through "satire". Statuses that slander individuals and groups who hold opposing views are often published on these pages.

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11   V.Kadić, "SRAMNA FOTOMONTAŽA: Društvenim mrežama kruži slika gole ministarke i sveštenika (FOTO)", Novosti.rs, 21.01.2021, https://www.novosti.rs/crna-gora/vesti/957027/sramna-fotomontaza-drustvenim-mrezama-kruzi-slika-gole-ministarke-svestenika-foto

12   CDM, "Šešelj nastavio sa monstruoznim uvredama na račun Vuksanović Stanković", 05.01.2022, https://www.cdm.me/politika/seselj-nastavio-sa-monstruoznim-uvredama-na-racun-vuksanovic-stankovic/

13   Emilo Labudović, "Pisma sa sela kojeg više nema: Alapača", In4s, 22.04.2021, https://www.in4s.net/pisma-sa-sela-kojeg-visee-nema-alapaca/

14   Redakcija Pobjede, "Besprizorne uvrede člana Vladine komisije Jovana Markuša na račun Vuksanović-Stanković", Pobjeda, 13.01.2022, https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/besprizorne-uvrede-clana-vladine-komisije-jovana-markusa-na-racun-vuksanovic-stankovic?fbclid=IwAR3fSuAr2iHz-L9xzN-7f7wdqtM-lUEem10x39viLiqEk1dgefAevG-WQS9g

15   Jelena Jovanović, "Knežević: Vuković mi piše ljubavne pjesme, Gvozdenović je bježao preko žardinjera", Vijesti.me, 28.11.2017, https://www.vijesti.me/zabava/54145/knezevic-vukovic-mi-pise-ljubavne-pjesme-gvozdenovic-je-bjezao-preko-zardinjera

16   Redakcija Pobjede, "Sramna karikatura Damjanović, hitno procesuirati odgovorne", Pobjeda, 27.02.2021, https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/sramna-karikatura-damjanovic-hitno-procesuirati-odgovorne

17   Gradski.me, "Sekulić podnijela krivičnu prijavu protiv urednice portala Volim Podgoricu", CDM, 03.04.2022, https://www.cdm.me/hronika/sekulic-podnijela-krivicnu-prijavu-protiv-urednice-portala-volim-podgoricu/

18   Translator's note: Serdari and vojvode are references to Ottoman and Montenegrin monarchical military ranks; hajduci is a reference to romanticised outcasts and thieves who resisted the Ottomans; while komite is a historic reference to the political movement in Montenegro that opposed unification with Serbia in 1918.

This kind of "political activism" first emerged eight years ago, with the Facebook page Stari Liberal. For a long time, it was the most visited meme page, which criticised the Government at the time, mostly from a conservative and nationalist position, and often running a negative campaign against individuals. The page was inactive in the period January - September 2020, during the church protest walks and parliamentary elections, after which it continued with posts targeting all actors on the political scene.

The "golden era" of Montenegro's meme scene coincided with the organisation of church protest walks – processions, opposing the draft Law on Freedom of Religion. A group of related mime pages emerged, which became known among users of social media under the code name "Mim serdari". The most prominent pages in this group are the МИМистарство оностраних послова, Nemojmo politizovati proteste and The Neprijatni[19], and according to them, this group also includes the pages Antimim, Rožajske noći / Prodajica Stvarčica, Nismo mi takav lokal, Crmničke mudrosti, Ekološka država Crna Gora, Novopečeni, Mim republika and others[20].

During the church protests, these pages provided clear support to the Serbian Orthodox Church, and took part in coordinating and promoting the processions and protest gatherings. During the parliamentary elections, they supported the then opposition, and after the elections, they supported the new government. Research established that, in the pre-election campaign, the aforementioned meme pages established a pattern of sharing

links with other entities on Facebook, within a network of coordinated inauthentic behaviour[21]. In relation to important political issues, particularly in critical political moments, their endorsement of the Democratic Front became evident.

In addition to regular attacks on parties and individuals from the former government mim, they also target civic parties, independent media, NGOs, and foreign embassies. In this context, they spread hate speech and label individuals on a regular basis[22], and there were examples of arrests of their alleged administrators, on suspicion of causing panic and disorder[23]. Since the beginning of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, all of these pages have joined the pro-Russian front.

Structures in favour of the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) have also tried to use meme pages on Facebook to promote their objectives and attack opponents, but without much success. Among the pages on this spectrum, Crna Gora Transparentno and Politika Crna Gora stood out as extremely active during the church protests and the pre-election campaign in 2020. These pages became far less active by the end of 2021. Pro-DPS accounts seem to have lost the battle on Facebook, but are experiencing a boom on Twitter, where the pro-Serb meme scene is failing to gain traction.

The content on this social network gravitates around daily campaigns to smear individuals, parties and organisations, promoting insults and verbal violence. The modus operandi

19   This page was removed from Facebook dozens of times, due to sharing inappropriate content, only to be launched again, which is why we only have access to its latest version.
20   M.Sekulović, *"Kritikovali smo staru, a nećemo štedjeti ni novu Vladu"*, Dan online, 31.12.2020, https://old.dan.co.me/?nivo=3&rubrika=Drustvo&clanak=774061&datum=2020-12-31

21   Milica Zrnović, Ivan Vukčević, Vladimir Simonović, *Preoblikovanje izborne kampanje korištenjem društvenih medija u Crnoj Gori*, Centar za monitoring i istraživanja CEMI, oktobar 2020, https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/YuB3uEJmdxFQaJbbggunzf7DWhj4HyYO036XGIZh.pdf
22   Katarina Janković, *"Manipulacija pod maskom humora"*, Pobjeda, 28.09.2020, https://www.pobjeda.me/clanak/manipulacija-pod-maskom-humora
23   Volim Podgoricu, *"PUŠTEN ADMINSTRATOR MIM STRANICE: Ko su crnogorski MIM-ovci, najoštriji i najduhovitiji kritičari društvenih dešavanja"*, 06.08.2020, https://volimpodgoricu.me/novosti/pusten-adminstrator-mim-stranice-ko-su-crnogorski-mim-ovci-najostriji-i-najduhovitiji-kriticari-drustvenih-desavanja

seems to be the same, while the "values" that the perpetrators endorse are somewhat different, albeit only in the sense of how they are interpreted.

At the end of last year, with an increasingly pronounced fragmentation within the ruling coalition, it became obvious that other groups from that ideological spectrum were "arming" themselves with anonymous channels on social networks. Linked sites and profiles that are continuously promoting and supporting Zdravko Krivokapić, some members of his government, Marko Milačić and the Serbian Orthodox Church, are slowly becoming recognisable for their targeting of other political entities. Facebook accounts that stand out in this group include the following: Fakt.me and Prof War Room. These pages have been particularly active in defending the government of Zdravko Krivokapić during the vote of no-confidence against his government, and protests in support of the government. During the period of aggression against Ukraine, Fakt.me has been broadcasting Kremlin propaganda.

A WORD FROM A PSYCHOLOGIST: WHY DO WE SUCCUMB TO DISINFORMATION?

The level of interest in the concept of so-called fake news is experiencing a dramatic increase with the advent of social media, but manipulation of news for political and war propaganda purposes coincided with the emergence of mass media. Today, new technologies have enabled each of us to potentially become a medium – a source of information available to a large number of users. This phenomenon leads to dramatic fragmentation of the media space and to competition of information sources, i.e. a flood or inflation of information from different sources and with different degrees of accuracy and credibility.

Therefore, it is very difficult to establish the veracity of numerous allegations that appear on various topics in the space of mass media, and especially in the domain of social media. The phenomenon of false information in general, and disinformation, in particular (deliberately fabricated false information with the intention of manipulating the public), rightly gained importance in all debates related to modern theories of communication and modern technologies and communication tools.

In this context, disinformation related to incitement of hatred among identity groups deserves special attention, including the following: nationalism, religious hatred and intolerance, persecution of certain social groups such as minority races, cultures or sexual orientations.

Any piece of information that achieves an emotional effect has a significant pragmatic aspect, i.e. it has the potential to influence the behaviour of the recipients. Provoking emotions such as anger, rage, hatred, fear, helplessness, despair, etc. can have a highly significant impact on the behaviour of large groups in the population. These tools are widely used in so-called identity politics, a form of political action that is primarily based on symbolic and identity determinants.

In order to analyse the destructive potential of such information or disinformation, we will apply the prism of evolutionary psychology. It enables the analysis of human behaviour through models of instinctive behavioural programmes, shaped by millennia of evolution of our species and by millions of years of evolution of related species.

Bearing in mind that a key characteristic of human behaviour is social functioning and use of group collaborative mechanisms, there are numerous programmes related to the functioning of groups. Among them, the mechanisms for recognising one's own group and separating it from others are of particular importance. Members of one pack must be able to recognise the boundaries of their own social environment and identify potential threats coming from other packs through competition for basic survival resources. While it is relatively easy for us to recognise the boundaries within our own pack of related species, people belong to many different identity-based units, ranging from family, through religion, nation, ideology, political affiliation, preferences on sports clubs, etc. In essence, it is precisely this complexity of human identity determinants that makes identity politics one of the most direct and effective forms of manipulating human behaviour. Identity politics relies on "drawing" relatively arbitrary boundaries between identity determinants.

We can only imagine how easy it is to provoke an emotional reaction of fear using, e.g. disinformation related to hostile intentions or activities of another group. Even mere exposure to members of external groups (for example, mass immigration of members of other cultures) affects the activation of instinctive defence mechanisms. Disinformation linked to paranoid interpretations of intentions, or manipulation of facts in order to activate mechanisms of hatred and violence, find a very fertile ground in human psychology in general. Age-old mechanisms of competition and distrust between groups and packs very easily find their way through layers of cognitive and intellectual mechanisms. Subsequently, they are manifested in the form of specific acts and actions - from voting for xenophobic, extreme right-wing or even supremacist or fascist political currents, to acts of targeted aggressive actions such as assassinations, physical conflict and the like.

Another well-established phenomenon is strengthening of identity affiliation and identification with one's own group in the conditions of perception of external attack or aggression. That is why, oftentimes, political leaders and groups that support a higher degree of identification with their own group (nationalist parties, national-chauvinist, clero-national and similar movements) systematically use false information to raise the level of identification with their own symbols, causing a sense of fear and endangerment.

 It is important to note that the effectiveness of these manipulative actions is based on the intensity of the emotional reaction - the stronger the provoked emotion, the more likely it is that the mind will not cope with, or revise the provoked reactions. Although it is clear that the uneducated and lower-educated groups within the population are most susceptible to such phenomena, not even the most educated members of the population are immune to them.

Authors such as Tversky and Kahneman point to the phenomenon of so-called "fast" thinking, i.e. instinctive, illogical, irrational and emotional thinking based on patterns and prejudices. Activation of "slow thinking" mechanisms that is critical, more objective, balanced, and fact-based depends, to a large extent, on the degree to which alarm mechanisms are activated. If the levels of alarm and stress are high, our neurological mechanisms switch to a "fast" thinking mode, and we become extremely susceptible to manipulative forms of communication. Only once we have accepted that we are all inevitably subject to these mechanisms, do we have the right to ask

ourselves whether there are those among us who are particularly subject to it.

In that sense, we can refer to people who are uneducated, as well as individuals who are exposed to unfavourable and stressful conditions of growing up and life in general. They may be particularly vulnerable to such mechanisms. There are significant indications that conservative right-wingers (as well as extreme left-wingers, according to some authors) have defence programmes that are constantly latently active. That is why they are the first to react to disinformation, and have the most intense reactions.

For all of us, but especially for people who hold right-wing and conservative attitudes, the perception of the attitude of what we have defined as "our" group is of critical importance. Expressing an attitude that opposes the majority is one of the most difficult endeavours for human beings. Different attitudes provoke defensive reactions of the group and can result in violence or excommunication of those who think differently. Therefore, one of the forms of manipulation is to provoke the impression of mass and "general acceptance" of an attitude or opinion, through the use of bots and similar mechanisms.

Disinformation is very successful, inter alia, because it abuses certain elements that are instinctive and emotional in nature, mechanisms that have been inherent in our species since time immemorial, and whose impact on human behaviour is much older than thinking, reason or logic.

Although lies as such, their manifestations, such as false information, and identity politics are not a novel invention, the power of today's means of communication makes them extremely effective. He who successfully controls the media space has the power to control human behaviour by manipulating emotions and instincts.

CENTAR ZA
DEMOKRATSKU
TRANZICIJU

22.
GODINE