

# FROM ONLINE BATTLEFIELD TO LOSS OF TRUST?

Perceptions and habits of youth  
in eight European countries



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# ABOUT

This publication was compiled as a part of the project “Countering disinformation in the V4 and the Balkan region: Mapping needs, building capacity, and generating civic activism” that aims to:

1. increase communication and outreach capacities of civil society organisations that focus on countering disinformation, supporting media literacy or increasing public awareness on crucial topics leading to a more active civil society;
2. increase media literacy and/or awareness of disinformation among the youth in the region through empowerment of civil society organisations and active involvement of young people by entertaining and engaging online communication activities.

Therefore, it provides a unique combination of data and insights from the region that enables the reader to understand more deeply the dynamics of disinformation and civil society organisations scene in the region, as well as the behaviour of young people on the internet, and social media specifically. Such a combination of data will facilitate both any future communication activities towards youth in the region, as well as more precise and targeted support of civil society organisations. Moreover, the publication emphasises the need for a diversified country-specific approach from the perspective of potential donors who should take into consideration different dynamics and complexities of the region.

## METHODOLOGY

The publication is a product of the research conducted by partner organisations in eight countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Montenegro, Poland, Serbia, and Slovakia. The results and findings of this report were gathered using several sources and research techniques. The sections covering the disinformation scene and existing countermeasures are based on data gathered by each country partner through a) desk research and b) interviews with at least three civil society organisations active in a relevant field from each country concerned.

The qualitative data presented in “youth and internet” sections were gathered through focus group discussions conducted with students between 18 and 24 years. In each country, partner organisations organised 4 focus groups of around 8 participants, approximately 2 hours long led by an expert moderator. The discussions were based on a consistent set of questions, the sociodemographic details can be found in the Annex of this report.

Having in mind inconsistencies in definitions of “young people”, this publication uses “youth” when referring to the age group of 18-24. The quotes in the publication are direct statements of the focus group participants. ●

# PARTNERS



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Research and analysis conducted by the partner organisations.  
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## INTRODUCTION

The boundaries between the “online” and “offline” world have blurred for great numbers of people who actively use the internet on a daily basis. This is especially the case for young people – being raised with cell-phones in their hands, social media platforms and technology have become an integral part of their daily lives. When hunting virtual Pokémons in parks and streets, having online Avatars or attempting to take selfies with sharks or at the top of skyscrapers, young people have been pushing the limits of possibilities and blurring the lines between reality and the online environment.

Having one account on social media is not enough, since each platform has its specific purpose. YouTube for music, entertainment or learning; Facebook for being in the loop on what events are happening around; Instagram for checking what a friend was doing during the day.

We live in the information world. Internet access equals the access to information – access to a multitude of sources and opinions, and to communities and people living all around the world. How does the constant flow of an unprecedented amount of information influence the young? Do younger generations have enough knowledge and the will to consume information? Do young people consume information, or are they being consumed by the data? Who is the master and who is the pawn?

Our research shows that young people realise that they are targets, and they are often tired of being constantly under information-attack. Thanks to many awareness-raising campaigns on disinformation and hoaxes, they also realise that all the information they see and consume must not necessarily be either true or accurate. And that contributes to their annoyance and disgust towards information sources in general. As a result, the distrust and scepticism of the young towards everything and everyone increases considerably.

This distrust is not only reflected in their online behaviour but also in key decisions that shape political and social development of countries. As in every era, great challenges lie ahead of us in terms of information consumption and intergenerational communication. This research seeks to shed some more light onto both. Having collected unique qualitative data from focus groups discussions in eight European countries, we try to contribute another piece of the puzzle to understand complexities in the lives and thinking of today's youth and its impact upon the political and social realities of our societies. ●

# KEY FINDINGS

## GENERAL DISTRUST IN THE MEDIA

Most of the young people in 8 countries analysed seem not to trust the media. They also claim to be always double-checking information before they believe a particular story to be true. When searching for information, the young prefer and use predominantly online sources – websites, news applications or social media platforms over traditional media as TV, radio or newspapers. News apps were a popular source of information for the young in a number of countries.

## DOMESTIC MEDIA MOSTLY PERCEIVED AS BIASED AND UNDER POLITICAL INFLUENCE

While a lack of trust in the media was a common conviction for young people in all countries, it is possible to observe some differences in the perceptions between domestic and foreign media. In general, the young were aware of political attempts to control domestic media and, thus, tended to have more trust towards media with foreign ownership, which, in their eyes, decreases the possibility of being biased towards certain political parties or governments. The Czech Republic was the only country in which the public broadcaster was perceived as very credible and independent. The foreign media was seen sceptically only by young Poles who doubted their ability to report accurately about domestic situation in their country.

## AWARE OF DISINFORMATION BUT NOT FULLY UNDERSTANDING ITS SCOPE

While the young in all countries were aware of information manipulation activities and the intentional spread of disinformation, not all of them clearly and fully understand the scope of these activities' impacts.

Awareness was mainly demonstrated by young peoples' claims to double- or even triple-check information before deciding whether something is true or false. Similarly, mindfulness of clickbait headlines and avoiding stories with sketchy titles was also mentioned. The spread of intentionally misleading or biased information was not automatically connected, in the minds of young people, to foreign subversive efforts by external actors. On the contrary, disinformation and "fake news" were predominantly perceived solely in terms of actors seeking economic profit. In many countries though, the young are acquainted with information manipulation and propaganda from political representatives. This was noted especially in Hungary, Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In addition, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, ethnicity plays an important role in the perception of whether particular media is perceived as objective and trust-worthy. It was also the only country where hate speech was raised as a common issue lacking effective counter-measures.

**“You can tell one story in very different ways. It matters where you put the emphasis as it can alter your narrative.”**

## DISTRUST IN THE SYSTEM LEADS TO PASSIVITY

Another finding is that young respondents lack interest in actively participating to make a difference in building up their societies. In some countries, we observed inherent distrust of media or politics. This distrust often leads the young to search for "alternative" news sources or explanations of political situations offered by disinformation outlets.

The young respondents generally claimed not to actively report disinformation on social media. What is more, Macedonian participants argued

## DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES OVERLAP

Narratives supporting anti-immigration, anti-European Union, anti-NATO; anti-multiculturalism and Western "decadence" are commonly spread in all 8 countries analysed. Disinformation narratives attempt to influence the geo-political orientation of these countries and to stir distrust of NATO and the EU. Furthermore, disinformation narratives utilise social-economic, historical or ethnic divisions and vulnerabilities of societies. Therefore, in Poland, anti-Ukrainian narratives are possible to observe: in Serbia, nationalistic and narratives supporting Orthodox values and culture are dominant and influential; in Bosnia and Herzegovina, disinformation narratives exploit on ethnic divisions and inherent distrust among the ethnic groups.

## THE INTERNET IS THE YOUNGSTERS' BEST FRIEND

Young people in all countries admitted spending several hours per day online. Google as a search engine and Facebook, Facebook Messenger, Instagram and YouTube as social media platforms serve both as an important source of information and a space for social interaction to dominate the market of young minds in the countries analysed. Activity and presence on these platforms are linked to all aspects of their lives – their work, school, but also serve as a hobby. Accounts on several social media platforms were thus a natural means for the interviewed young to stay in touch with their peers, while the preferences of social media platforms changed with age and type of content young people shared online. While social media were still mentioned as an important source of information, the young generally claimed not to trust these platforms.

Young people were most interested in content that is funny and connected to their interests. The most common topics of interest mentioned are lifestyle, entertainment, sports, music and art. Many, however, also claimed to be using online sources to educate themselves and get practical tips.

that ignoring disinformation reduced their reach. While seeing how easily false news can be spread on social media, the participants declared not to perceive social media platforms as a trustful source of information. Therefore, some admitted to being purposely cutting the time they spend on these platforms to limit their exposure to such content.

## DIFFERENT LEVELS OF MEDIA LITERACY: SELF-PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

A significant difference between the young participants from 8 countries was observed in their media literacy and understanding of how information can be manipulated. A negative outlier among the countries were the young people from Bosnia and Herzegovina, who thought that videos or images give more credibility to information than a text vulnerable to manipulative interpretations. While the spread of disinformation via textual content is indeed easily achievable, image modifications and video adjustments to spread false or manipulated information is similarly common, with many examples to be found online. This notion was pointed out by young Serbs, who declared that modified videos are the hardest to verify and clearly identify whether they portray accurate information.

## FRIENDS AND FAMILY AS STRONG OPINION-SHAPERS

Friends and family members seem to play an important role in information verification. The respondents often claimed that if they did not know whether to trust a particular piece of information, they relied on the opinions of their friends/peers or family members. In all countries, information shared or commented on by friends was considered a respectable source for young people. Often, they admitted they started paying attention or attributing relevance to a piece of news only after seeing that it had been shared by their friends. In addition, the young people in Serbia declared to follow comments and online discussions to understand public perception.

## DECLINE OF FACEBOOK RISE OF MESSENGER

Facebook has been among the most widespread social media platforms among the young since its enormous boost in popularity in early 2010's. However, the discussions showed a decline of usage among younger respondents due to several factors.

Facebook was mostly named as one of the primary sources of information about events, organisations and current issues. For many, it is considered a necessity – the young use it as a tool for the exchange of information connected with their school or work, and use it as a platform for study groups. However, the young claimed either not to – or very rarely – share content on Facebook, although claiming they receive information from their friends who post and share content. This is a paradox, since the young claimed to often rely on information shared by their active friends, yet few admit to ever posting or sharing content. This further confirms the importance of friends and family in opinion-shaping and information consumption.

**“We have usually one friend who regularly shares [information] on Facebook.”**

Facebook Messenger was identified as the number one platform for the communication and exchange of information. Moreover, many participants stated they preferred to share news directly to friends through Messenger rather than posting things online on their walls. In fact, in some countries, Messenger was named as the most used social media platform.

Increased commercialisation of Facebook and the lack of transparency of its algorithms have significantly decreased the trust of the respondents towards this platform. Increasingly negative perceptions by young people towards Facebook were observed: being aware of “information bubbles” and the negative echo-chambers it can create, they are consciously – and increasingly – limiting their time spent on Facebook. Many

participants in the discussions considered Facebook to be obsolete and criticised it for being “over-advertised” in terms of having too many ads appearing on the wall as posts, as well as in the videos. As a consequence, many young people in all countries characterized themselves as “passive” actors on this social media platform, or are considering to leave it completely.

**“I do not use Facebook because it has too many advertisements and things which do not interest me are constantly appearing.”**

## REFRESHING AND PRIVATE INSTAGRAM

Instagram was generally the first choice among younger high school students. Many prefer Instagram to Facebook due to its simplicity and clarity compared to the latter's complicated algorithms and commercialisation. Instagram was often considered refreshing and innovative, and praised for its less politicised nature reflected in the topics that young people actively follow and seek out. In all countries, Instagram's top topics were mostly connected to lifestyle and everyday life of public personalities and friends. Related

to that, the platform was often regarded as more private where one can control what and whom to see relatively easily.

The perception of Instagram was, however, not unified across the countries analysed. Czech respondents were not favourable to it, because, according to their perception, its options and usability for multiple purposes were too limited. On the other hand, young Macedonians preferred Instagram to Facebook due to its simplicity. Young Hungarians thought of it as a more private and intimate social media platform. In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, having an Instagram account was perceived as a hobby. Some

young Serbs declared to have up to 3 Instagram profiles with each having a different audience and purpose. Young Slovaks especially liked the short expiration time of Instagram Stories, which they often use to publish most intimate information and moments.

## FUN AND EDUCATION WITH YOUTUBE

While music and entertainment are predominant reasons why young people watch YouTube, this platform plays an important role in self-education in all countries analysed. ●

## WHEN COMMUNICATING TO YOUTH...

- ▶ Do not use clickbait-style titles
- ▶ Get the “active” users on board; shared content by peers is more trusted than ads
- ▶ Make use of trusted opinion-makers & authorities to spread the message
- ▶ Be aware of local sensitivities and political developments that young people follow
- ▶ On the other hand, do not over-politicise; the young often feel tired of omnipresent political content and value the private, hobby-like and intimate space on their social media
- ▶ Make them feel included, make them feel like an important part of the society, or engage them in solving a problem – younger generations often feel left out
- ▶ Do not be patronising



## COUNTRY REPORTS: WESTERN BALKANS

# BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

COUNTRY SUMMARY			
Population	Youth in % (16-24)	Internet penetration	Internet penetration among youth
3,531,159 (2013) <sup>1</sup>	13%	61.5%	98.2%

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

There are number of internet portals spreading disinformation narratives and unverified information in the country.<sup>2</sup> A complex situation linked to different nationalities and ethnicities increases the vulnerability of citizens to believe disinformation and hoaxes. All ethnic groups have their own media that they use as a source of information, with each tending to use and build-upon certain biased narratives.

Spread of false or unverified information is quite a common phenomenon also among popular public media, some of which are: BH diaspora, Avaz, CEC, Flash, Radio Sarajevo, RTRS, Slobodna Bosna, and FTV.

Among the most common topics covered by these are: attempts to discredit political representatives or political parties, narratives about security matters including paramilitary troops, terrorist cells or planned attacks, narratives supporting ethnic divisions, and conspiracy theories.

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

► The website Raskrinkavanje.ba gathers, analyses and creates reports on the spread of misinformation in the country. Its main goal is to stop the public spread of propaganda and disinformation.

► Press Council Bosnia and Herzegovina, a self-regulatory institution for print and online media, attempts to stop the spread of false news, hate speech and propaganda in the public space.

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- Young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) seem to have a low level of media literacy and thus tend to be vulnerable to information manipulation and propaganda.
- Hate speech was identified as a serious and vastly unregulated issue in the country.
- Participants thought that videos or photos were more credible, because information provided in a text was more easily manipulated.
- The perception of trustworthiness and objectivity of particular media was specific to each ethnic group and also depended on a level of hate speech a portal allows to be published in the form of comments under their articles.
- Young people often considered local online portals as credible and relevant sources of information.

- Older focus group participants – university students – expressed symptomatic distrust towards media, especially news websites.
- Facebook was predominantly favoured by university students, while younger participants were more inclined to Instagram.
- Having an Instagram account was perceived rather as a hobby.

### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

Respondents claimed to consume information primarily from digital sources, including local news portals.

**“If the news portal is local, there is a smaller possibility for spreading disinformation.”**

Television is still considered as relevant, however, it is watched predominantly for entertainment purposes rather than for information. Although the respondents claimed to watch TV programs in similar languages from neighbouring countries, they do not follow other international media.

Al Jazeera and N1 were mentioned several times as trustworthy. However, ethnic divisions have an impact on media consumption habits. Dominant news portals depended on the regions that the participants came from:

- For students from Sarajevo – Klix.ba and Dnevni avaz,
- For students from Banja Luka – Booka
- For students from Tuzla – Slon and Klix
- For students from Mostar – 24sata and Večernji.ba

According to participants, news portals in B&H were completely biased in their selection of covered stories and in the way they process and publish information. Online portals, according to them, have editorial policies based on sensationalism without real investigation. Media were thus neither

politically neutral nor independent and must provide support to political representatives if they want to be successful or survive.

When asked about the last source used, the participants remembered the format (video or an image) rather than the content of any specific source of information. Format was considered to be a very important element contributing to trustworthiness of the information. The respondents prefer information being delivered in a form of a visual content, because, according to their perception, videos or images give more credibility to information than a text, which can provide manipulative interpretations.

**“Video gives credibility to information.”**

### SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

While young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina stated they use various social media platforms, Facebook was dominant among older participants, being perceived as more comprehensive. The use of Facebook was connected to all aspects of their lives – studying, personal connections and following personal interests. While most of the participants would read news that their friends commented on, or recommended, they themselves proclaimed to very rarely share or post content on Facebook. College participants prefer using Facebook's social dimension of event promotion or exchange of information related to their studies, however, younger participants considered it to be outdated and “out of fashion”.

On the other hand, Instagram was perceived as much more innovative and refreshing, though, some students found Instagram as superficial. The participants mainly use the platform as a hobby and during their leisure time. It was also much more popular among female participants.

**“Instagram is much more innovative and adds something new every month.”**

Some participants admitted they had more than one profile, particularly on Instagram. The reason is to have one “fake” profile to follow attractive men and women without revealing their real identity and without showing their friends whom they follow. Few participants also claimed to follow local political representatives on Instagram, which would be very unlikely on Facebook, mostly for similar reasons as above. YouTube was used both for entertainment and to acquire new practical skills.

### INFLUENCERS

The discussions did not indicate any common influencers who participants of all focus groups would follow. In general, the respondents follow the accounts of sportsmen, fashion bloggers, gamers or comedians. The inconsistency is primarily linked to the country’s structure and divisions – with each nation having a different language, they also consume different media and follow different channels and people.

Very popular among the young on YouTube were:

- ▶ MECA Cazin
- ▶ Luka KT
- ▶ OMCO (Omer Nadarević)
- ▶ Braco Gajić
- ▶ CeriX
- ▶ Maya Berović, a Bosnian singer
- ▶ DirtBike Lunatic

### PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

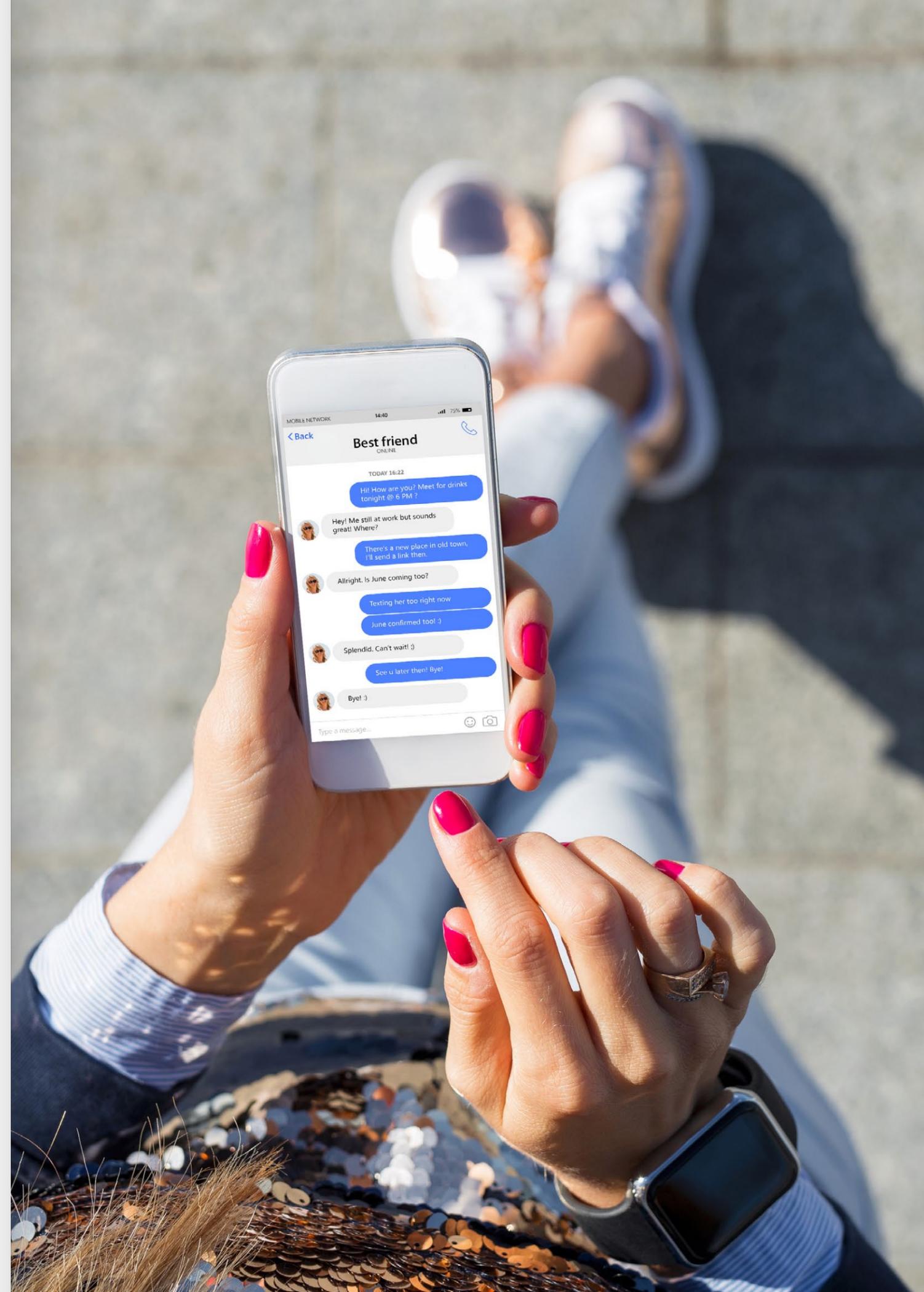
Most of the participants seemed to understand the implications of spreading disinformation, attempts to influence public opinion, and economic benefits and incentives of such actions. Besides predominantly negative attitudes towards fake or unverified news, due to a low level of media literacy, they showed attributes making them vulnerable to covert disinformation operations.

All the participants thought the best way to fight disinformation was to ignore them in order to reduce their outreach and thus their capacity to influence people. However, some of the participants related fake news only to the political sphere – considering them as a tool for discrediting political opponents and reaching their goals.

The passive stance of the participants towards false information or propaganda was clearly visible during the discussions. Despite claiming to encounter disinformation on a daily basis, they did not consider the issue important. ●

### RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Take into consideration ethnic divides** of the population and thus the inherent information bias and narratives that exist among these.
- ▶ **Lack of media literacy** – while the young students thought that they were aware of problems concerning disinformation, their low level or a complete lack of media literacy made them vulnerable towards information manipulation.
- ▶ **Hate speech is an overarching problem and lacks regulations** in B&H. Participants were sceptical of those news portals that enable and use hate speech in their comment sections to attract readers.



## COUNTRY REPORTS: WESTERN BALKANS MACEDONIA

COUNTRY SUMMARY			
Population	Youth in % (15-24)	Internet penetration	Internet penetration among young people
2.02 million (2002)	15.8%	73.6%	97.7%
Social media network share			
Facebook (46%) ▶ Twitter (10%) ▶ Instagram (6%; 80% below 25) <sup>3</sup>			

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

The lack of action and debates about the topic suggest a lack of interest and knowledge about the complexity of the problem both among the policymakers and state institutions, together with a reluctance of relevant stakeholders to cooperate. The concepts of fake news, disinformation and media falsehoods are thus relatively new and quite unfamiliar for Macedonian citizens.

A study focused on whether the media in the country provide objective information showed 50% of respondents claiming that the journalists express personal views and comments in the news. The same study showed 35% of the respondents stating that the media do not provide enough objective information, compared to 18% considering the media to be objective and 47% with no opinion on the issue.<sup>4</sup>

Disinformation websites are present in Macedonian online space (for example javno.mk). However, the country, in particularly its city Veles, had made a significant contribution to the spread of disinformation and hyper partisan stories during the US presidential campaign in 2016. City of Veles became a hub and a place where over a hundred pro-Trump websites were registered. Young Macedonians were earning thousands of Euros for disseminating sensationalist and fake stories, usually plagiarised

from right-wing American sites. In a country where the average monthly salary is some 372 Euros, it became a very attractive source of income for these young people.<sup>5</sup>

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

Currently, the media and online communities are the only actors that play a crucial role in countering disinformation in Macedonia. Except for a few awareness-raising activities predominantly calling for fact-checking, no larger campaigns have been implemented so far. Those that were directed at the general public lacked constructive strategy to reach a wider audience despite being transmitted through mass media. Also, there are neither cooperative efforts nor joint strategies among the media, official state institutions, NGO sector, and other relevant stakeholders.

One of the campaigns on countering disinformation is a project implemented by Metamorphosis Foundation – Media Fact-Checking Service Component.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia operates a Complaints Commission established to deal with cases accused of publishing false and unverified information.

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- ▶ The most used social media platform among the respondents is Instagram, followed by YouTube and Messenger.
- ▶ The area of study usually determines the topics of interest and the general usage of social media.
- ▶ A majority uses Instagram multiple times a day either for posting or watching stories and exploring.
- ▶ YouTube was considered as a primary platform for education and self-improvement.
- ▶ Facebook remains one of the most popular platforms for obtaining news and information and a primary platform for exploring events.
- ▶ Respondents generally claimed not to trust Macedonian sources while usually consulting multiple sources before reaching a conclusion.

#### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

Focus groups respondents claimed to prefer using internet and social media as sources of information rather than TV or printed magazines, which are used more for leisure-related activities such as beauty and health or sports. Digital media is seen as practical and functional due to quick and easy access to a diversity of information. The most visited websites among the participants were the portals focused primarily on entertainment such as femina.mk, crnobelo.com, kafepauza.mk, tocka.com.mk and kajgana.com.

High school students were rarely interested in portals that they considered too political, irrelevant and covering insignificant topics. The participants

also observed that the content of the Macedonian portals did not correspond to their age and cognitive abilities.

**“The [mainstream Macedonian] portals are designed for uneducated people who can easily be manipulated.”**

Some respondents tend to trust foreign sources such as BBC and CNN over the domestic ones. They often believed that domestic media relies too much on sensationalism and iteration when producing news, which discredits these portals in the eyes of the young. TV Channels Telma, 24 Vesti and Alsat, and Macedonian portals libertas.mk and fokus.mk were identified as the most trustful.

#### SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

According to a study in 2017, 95% of young people aged 18-24 actively use social networks.<sup>7</sup> Most of the respondents in focus groups confirmed this finding while claiming to spend more than two hours on social media a day.

As regards the purpose, the majority of the participants said they mostly used Instagram for entertainment, Messenger for communication, Facebook for group membership and obtaining news and information (the latter primarily applies to university students), and YouTube for education and entertainment. The educational component of YouTube was praised by all participants. For instance, the students from the Military Academy uttered that they regularly use YouTube for training and education since their area of study requires them to watch trainings relevant for their future profession.

**“YouTube does not allow many false news because it has good algorithms with a capacity to suppress these news.”**

Almost all respondents agreed that various types of content were able to attract their attention. Nevertheless, most of the high school students declared to use Facebook to receive information.

However, they said they rarely share any content themselves. If they shared anything, it was usually limited to YouTube videos, music, sometimes photos and pictures connected to charity.

**“On Facebook, many pages began as relevant media and continued as shock news.”**

Almost half of the participants articulated preference for Instagram simply because the majority of their friends were using it. Instagram was used both for posting (photos or videos), watching stories, and exploring through the ‘explore’ tool. Its preference over Facebook was mostly linked to its simplicity and visual attractiveness. Facebook was often regarded as boring and obsolete especially by the high school students. Many participants criticised the advertisement policy on Facebook underlining that such policy deters them from spending more time on it.

## INFLUENCERS

One of the most influential persons on Macedonian social media, as confirmed by the study, is Ina Mnogufina. Her short tweets were considered as entertaining and realistic and perfectly reflecting Macedonian reality.

Others mentioned by the participants:

- ▶ Political figures – especially Nikola Dimitrov, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs
- ▶ Sportsmen – Kiril Lazarov, Dejan Pecakovski or Novak Đoković
- ▶ Entertainers – Tamara Todevska, Lila Filipovska
- ▶ Bloggers – Zorannah (Zorana Jovanović)

And favourite YouTubers:

- ▶ Philip deFranco
- ▶ Paul Joseph Watson
- ▶ Steven Crowder
- ▶ Casey Neistat
- ▶ Joe Rogan
- ▶ Inanna Sarkis
- ▶ Lele Pons

## PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

The youth claimed to be aware of the existence of disinformation and the repercussions of using social media platforms for spreading false news for propaganda. Political portals were often identified as outlets prone to spreading false stories and disinformation simply because they are tilted towards or operating under the control of a political party. One such portal mentioned was Plus Info.

The participants expressed a number of concerns and criticisms regarding the lack of objectivity and professionalism in the media, making it susceptible for spreading false news. Participants commented that the struggle against disinformation should include a larger campaign for fact-checking and media literacy. The students also raised concerns about the predominance of disinformation and cited a lack of investigative journalism as one of the reasons. The oversaturation of digital content was also noted as a problem creating difficulties in recognising false stories. The click-bait era and the sensationalism in creating news content was similarly considered as one of the major issues that can boost fake news.

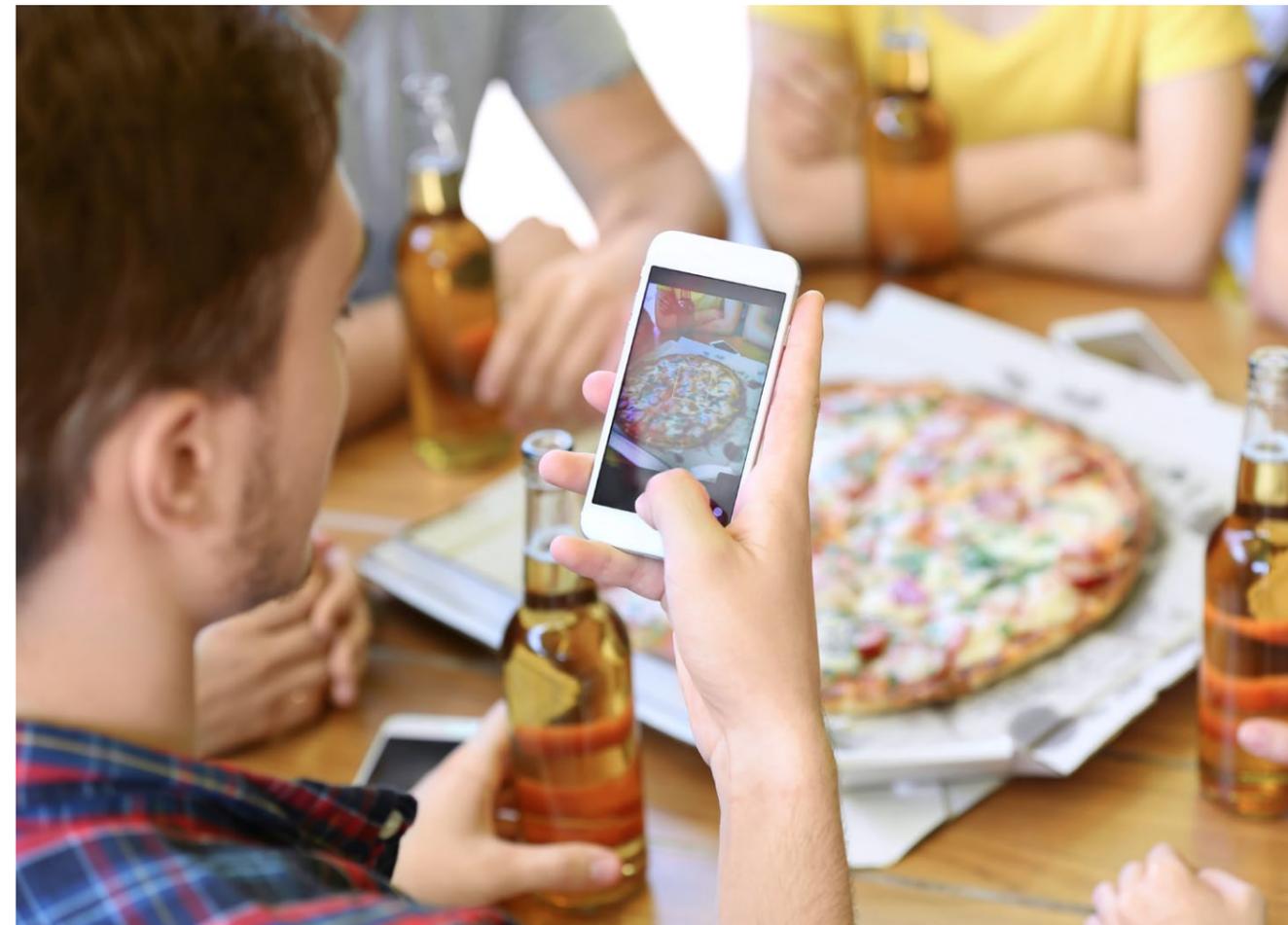
**“A filter is needed, not censorship” was one of the positions expressed by one respondent speaking about the possible measures to prevent disinformation going viral.”**

Another respondent stressed that the state apparatus must not be a filter of information mostly due to human inclination towards corruption. He emphasised that government interference should be side-lined and instead, competition should be allowed to resolve the issue.

**“It is difficult to find a neutral medium because one medium belongs to one political party and the other medium is controlled by another political party and you need to find some balance of that information by yourself.”**

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Use simple and understandable language** to provide up-front and explicit messages.
- ▶ Always **use local language** (preferably also languages of ethnic groups to be equally targeted) considering the cultural differences.
- ▶ Use social media extensively by embedding **eye-catching promotional content**, interesting enough to attract their attention – young inclined toward audio-visual content and visually packed product.
- ▶ Since **Instagram** was the most frequently used social media platform by the youth in Macedonia, it should be a primary tool for communication with young people during a campaign.
- ▶ **Motivation is the most important principle** – encouraging words, explanation of the benefits of participation and fostering brainstorming and creativity could significantly reinforce a campaign.
- ▶ It can be also beneficial to rely on **games with fun content** that will be easy and tempting to solve. This will show the youth they have the capabilities and encourage them to take further part in other activities.



## COUNTRY REPORTS: WESTERN BALKANS

# MONTENEGRO

### COUNTRY SUMMARY

Population	Youth in % (15-24)	Internet penetration
620 thousand (2011)	14%	70% (2016 est.)

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Due to the country's historical ties to Serbia, pro-Serbian narratives arguing for closer ties, or, further, unification, are widely spread in the country. Coming both from several Montenegrin as well as Serbia-based outlets consumed in the country (e.g. Fakti, Srbin.info or Vaseljenska.com), the media spreading such messages are often used to promote anti-NATO and pro-Russian sentiments as well.

One of the most popular pro-Russian outlets is IN4S.net, close to the party Democratic Front (right-wing opposition alliance) established to, by the words of its founder Raicevic, protect the interests of the Serbs and respond to *"aggressive US propaganda that is spreading through the Montenegrin media"*.<sup>8</sup> As its popularity has moved the outlet to the category of the mainstream media, the articles and messages tend to be taken over by smaller outlets. The same person also happens to be the head of NGOs spreading anti-NATO sentiments.

Outlet Sedmica.me launched by a Montenegrin journalist, has gained popularity among the Serb community as well as among the supporters of the Democratic Front party because it features interviews with many Serbian and Russian public personas.<sup>9</sup>

Facebook pages spreading disinformation:

- ▶ VAKCINE – zašto im kažemo NE? – anti-vaccine movement

- ▶ NE U NATO -anti-NATO group, mainly using the narrative of NATO membership imposing a threat of a terrorist attack on Montenegro, which, among other causes, will destroy tourism

Portals with a significant bias:

- ▶ Vijesti.me – strong anti-government rhetoric; supporting certain political parties in a pre-election period; against sending troops to Afghanistan; supporters of Montenegrin Orthodox Church
- ▶ Dan.co.me – daily newspaper defending the position of Serbs in Montenegro and selling a narrative of Montenegro united with Serbia

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND CAMPAIGNS

The success of civil society actors' activities often depends on their nature, as the government possesses mechanisms and tools to limit the impact of the opinions that it considers unsuitable.

- ▶ ALFA Centar – communication and awareness-raising activities on NATO membership, face-to-face meetings and events in rural areas.
- ▶ ATA Montenegro concentrates on fighting disinformation and narratives linked to Russian influence in Montenegro, especially through statements, reports and high-level meetings and events

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- ▶ The most popular social media among the interviewed were Facebook and Instagram. These served as the most common source of information.
- ▶ YouTube is used especially for movies and music, small number of students regarded the platform as a potential source of information.
- ▶ Most of the interviewed declared they do not watch TV, do not listen to radio stations and do not read daily newspapers.
- ▶ Books and papers are, as stated by the participants, mostly read online too.
- ▶ The respondents were not really interested in political topics and issues.

### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

A generally high level of distrust towards the media, especially on the internet, was expressed by the respondents. The underlying drivers of mistrust in media among the youth were related to deep-rooted political polarisation and strong belief in mainstream media bias. They claimed to recognise that many sources can be "fake", which means they rather tend to incline towards their relatives as a source of information. This, however, was quite paradoxical to findings in a different question, during which they confirmed that relatives and friends indeed provide an important but not as trustful source of information. Respondents added they often used the internet to verify the opinions or information heard at home or at school.

Nevertheless, the Montenegrin respondents preferred internet sources over traditional media. The latter has been, to a large extent, replaced

by social media, which translates into the usage of YouTube instead of TV to mostly watch music videos and documentary channels, and Facebook and Instagram both for fun and consumption of information.

#### **"We have all information on social media."**

The respondents identified the following outlets as the main sources of information:

- ▶ vijesti.me
- ▶ quora.com
- ▶ marca.com
- ▶ Balkans.aljazeera.net
- ▶ Snapchat
- ▶ Facebook

When inquired specifically about credibility, the university students claimed to adhere to science and sources which provide *"a lot of other sources, links and facts"*, while the high school students' answers demonstrated a lower degree of awareness by identifying video materials as adding credibility to sources.

### SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Viber and YouTube are being used the most often. The growth of messaging comes as an extra layer on top of social networking rather than a replacement. In other words, the majority of students who claimed to be using a messaging application for news also used at least one social network for the same purpose.

As stated above, Facebook and Instagram are the most popular platforms used both for information and amusement purposes – consuming and sharing news, sharing pictures and communicating with friends at the same time. Several high school students emphasised that *"Facebook is not a news organization, and thus nothing originating from there should be considered as news."* They also reported to rarely post content on Facebook and if they do, it is not mostly funny clips or sport videos.

## INFLUENCERS

When asked about trustful authorities, the majority of the answers replied “no one” or “people I know well”, which further confirms a deep-rooted tendency to distrust the media.

Nevertheless, the most followed are actors, musicians, politicians and sportsmen, such as Novak Đoković, Rihanna, Brad Pitt, Jim Carrey, Beyoncé or Cristiano Ronaldo, whom they mostly follow on Instagram.

On YouTube, several channels were mentioned as watched regularly:

- ▶ Lea Stanković (Serbia)
- ▶ Cody Ko
- ▶ Liza Koshy
- ▶ Lux27 (local)
- ▶ Dolan Twins
- ▶ Philip DeFranco
- ▶ Desi Perkins
- ▶ Jenna Marbles

## PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

Many students recognised that fake news could be dangerous, especially to the parts of society that are easy to influence and do not evaluate sources critically. The respondents often expressed distrust towards the mainstream media due to their constant push of their own agenda not necessarily reflecting the truth. The awareness of a need to check

multiple sources to see the variety of opinions and thus prevent being fooled by mis- or dis-information was present among the participants, although it is difficult to assess to what extent the young practice what they preach.

The respondents mainly identified three kinds of “fake news” outlets:

- ▶ Firstly, they referred to disinformation websites developed to look similar to a widely known and recognised news site (common before the 2016 US election). These, according to the participants, are easy to spot and can be regarded as rather funny attempts to mislead.
- ▶ Secondly, several high school students regarded tabloids as spreading false stories, mostly in terms of publishing unverified or untrue content about their favourites.
- ▶ Thirdly, they also identified established US outlets, namely CNN, New York Times or Washington Post as portals spreading false news. According to several students, these supposedly often adjust the meaning of a message according to their preferences by taking a real story and cutting it into snippets to shape it within a particular frame.

Subsequently, the young emphasised that the best way to deal with disinformation and outlets spreading false information is by exposing their tactics and encouraging people to boycott. ●

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Make them feel included** – engage them in solving a problem, make them feel as an important part of society – young people often feel left out.
- ▶ **Motivate them with a prize** – it is quite difficult to get the youth’s attention without receiving something in return.
- ▶ **Define a target group** – the interests of high school and university students differ. While high school students tend to be more interested in collective activity (solving a problem or quiz in a group), the university students get motivated by more elaborate and challenging competitions.
- ▶ **Develop ways to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources** – the tendency to not trust any source is a dangerous gamble in the long term. Therefore, efforts should be made to increase the youth’s capacity to distinguish, acknowledge and use credible sources.



## COUNTRY REPORTS: WESTERN BALKANS

# SERBIA

### COUNTRY SUMMARY

Population	Youth in % (15-24)	Internet penetration
7,186,862 (2011) <sup>10</sup>	11.26% <sup>11</sup>	72.2% (2017) <sup>12</sup>

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

In Serbia, it is possible to observe two streams of how disinformation and propaganda are spread in the country – a pro-governmental and a pro-Russian track. Government and people close to the highest political representatives control media and spread particular narratives and false information about the opposition, civil society, the European Union, the United States, as well as Russia. The pro-Kremlin propaganda utilizes this media environment for further promotion of its narratives. Consequently, the actions of those trying to counter disinformation in terms of visibility and outreach are significantly limited and face significant obstacles.

- ▶ Most popular pro-Kremlin disinformation websites: Sputnik Srbija, Kremlin.rs, Vostok.rs, and srb.news-front.info
- ▶ Disinformation outlets spreading nationalistic, pro-Orthodox and pro-Kremlin narratives: vido-vdan.org, Srbin.info, Srbija dana, Republika.rs, Kurir, Telegraf
- ▶ Tabloids spreading disinformation interlinked with printed media: Informer, Alo, Srpski Telegraf, Pravda, Srbija Danas, Pink.rs
- ▶ Mainstream media Tanjug, Politika, and Radio-Television of Serbia transmit fake news coming from press and online portals and legitimize them.
- ▶ Social media groups spreading disinformation: profiles of extremist groups such as Srbska cast, Ponosim se sto sam Srbin, Facebook pages of the abovementioned webpages.

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND CAMPAIGNS

- ▶ Raskrinkavanje.rs portal, established by Krik, labels information and stories spread online based on their truthfulness, or their proximity to being completely false.
- ▶ Novi Sad School of Journalism developed website Fake News Tragac (fakenews.rs) – Fake news trail, to educate students of journalism, journalists and people in media sector, to raise awareness about the impact and threats of disinformation and to build up a community of individuals who would counter it.

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- ▶ Serbian respondents predominantly consume information from the Internet and rarely receive information from traditional mainstream media as TV, Radio and newspapers.
- ▶ The young claimed to be aware of the biased media landscape and expressed high levels of distrust in the information. If interested in any news, they declared to be double-checking it with other sources.

- ▶ In general, the respondents were more inclined to trust information they received via social networks from people whom they trust.
- ▶ The most popular mainstream media on the internet picked out were the ones easily accessible via phone applications such as Blic, Danas, N1, B92 and tabloids such as Alo and Telegraf.
- ▶ The most popular social media platform identified was Instagram. The participants stated that YouTube usually attracts younger generations while Facebook became problematic because of its increasingly complicated functions, commercialization and the presence of an older population.
- ▶ Young Serbs were skeptical of content using sensational titles as well as of influencers using their popularity for promotion of products.
- ▶ For everyday communication, the most popular platform identified was Messenger, followed by WhatsApp and Viber.
- ▶ The youth as a group is not uniform; there were differences between rural and urban areas, as well as between various academic backgrounds.

### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

Young respondents tend to consume information primarily from digital, web-based sources easily accessible on their phones. Television, print media and radio were perceived as biased and withholding information detrimental to, or dangerous for, the political elite. A high distrust of media and information online was expressed among the young Serbian participants who claimed to vet and double-check information they consumed. The most detrimental factor to them was the accessibility of news via phone apps, ownership of the media as well as whether information was shared by people whom they trusted. All students claimed to search for news on Google.

Most trustworthy media outlets, though the content would be still checked and compared with other sources, were:

- ▶ N1 (CNN affiliate for the Western Balkans)
- ▶ Danas
- ▶ Politika
- ▶ Blic
- ▶ Vecernje Novosti

When asked about the content, most of the participants expressed disinterest towards domestic or political news, due to a high level of pro-government bias of domestic media and public broadcasters. Young Serbs claimed to be highly aware of information manipulation activities. They were skeptical of content with sensational titles and claimed to often double- or even triple-check the information. However, they also admitted to be attentive to people's reactions on social networks and by following the discussions and comments to understand the public perception better.

Young Serbian respondents voiced their concern about the objectivity of RTS (usually central informative broadcast – Dnevnik), which, they claimed, as a public broadcaster should not withhold information detrimental to, or dangerous for, the political elite, but instead should inform the citizens about mishaps of politicians. They tend to trust domestic outlets more than the ones with foreign owners. However, they were also inclined to receive and trust information from social media shared by the people they trust.

**“We will rather watch something or look at a picture if it is shared by a friend than if it shows up in a form of commercial.”**

### SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

In general, the respondents claimed to be active on the most widespread social media platforms – Instagram, Facebook, Messenger, YouTube or Viber, with Instagram winning the popularity. What is more, the participants from Belgrade declared to have up to 3 Instagram profiles – one general for everyone, one closed for inner circle of friends (allowed to see more intimate content) and one business or artistic one.

Popularity of Facebook is, according to the findings, on a decline since "parents" generation and older people have become more active here. Furthermore, extensive commercialization, its complex algorithms and constant new features make the participants feel less in control, in comparison to "simpler" Instagram. University students claimed to rarely, if ever, share something on Facebook, with most of them calling themselves "observers" on the platform.

The participants admitted they watched YouTube on a daily basis, although the most popular domestic YouTube channels of video bloggers focus on elementary/high school students. YouTube is thus primarily used to listen to music.

**“Only kids and young people below 18 years watch domestic YouTubers.”**

## INFLUENCERS

Participants in Belgrade were generally skeptical of the so-called influencers, who use their popularity to promote products in way that does not always reflect the true characteristics of the product. However, more than half of the students declared to believe Zoran Kesić, a well-known Serbian television host and comedian, who is one of the main critics of the current regime.

**“Influencers and their marketing is predictable and not amusing at all, even if they tend to organize ‘giveaways’.”**

All students mentioned following mainstream public personalities, sportsmen and musicians on numerous social media platforms, such as:

- ▶ Novak Đoković
- ▶ Ana Ivanović
- ▶ Zoran Kesić
- ▶ Ivan Ivanović
- ▶ Jovan Memedović
- ▶ Boris Malagurski
- ▶ Mašan Lekić
- ▶ Rambo Amadeus
- ▶ Seka Aleksić

On YouTube, the respondents admitted to regularly follow gamers, experimental channels, extreme sports, reviews or funny content:

- ▶ Aca Informacija
- ▶ Hodoljub
- ▶ Dejan Tiago-Stanković
- ▶ PewDiePie
- ▶ Nixa Zizu
- ▶ Mudja (Muđa)
- ▶ Zorannah (Zorana Jovanović)
- ▶ Marija Žeželj
- ▶ Vice
- ▶ Testosteeron Test Automobila
- ▶ Yasserstain
- ▶ Dinja (Sandra Silađev)

Participants in Belgrade said that they followed those who tend to question everyday trends. Conspiracy theories is what seems to attract their attention, and influential people on the Internet are very much talking about them. The Focus Group (FG) from Niš named Aca Informacija as one of the most influential (sport) bloggers in Serbia. Students from the third FG also followed domestic YouTubers like Nixa Zizu and Mudja. Usual platforms where the young respondents claimed to follow these public personas were Instagram and YouTube.

## PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

In general, Serbian students concluded that younger and older people tend to believe in fake news more because they are not aware of the frequency of publication of false and deceiving information. For the participants, the production and dissemination of misleading or false information is what defines the domestic situation in Serbia, since supposedly all politicians spread particular narratives and biased (dis)information favouring their cause. False information is frequently used in Serbia to trigger feelings of disappointment, anger and resistance. Students noted that disinformation could have serious consequences, as people more and more do not believe in information they receive.

**“Both the government and the opposition have their channels for sharing information. If they share the same information in a same or similar way, it is probably true.”**

Students claimed to be rather skeptical of domestic media content. When determining whether to believe a particular story or not, they, on one hand, check whether any other sources cover

the same issue, but, on the other hand, also check the reactions of others – e.g. online comments or reactions of family members. Moreover, the piece should not have a sensational title.

Interestingly, all participants of focus groups admitted they had once believed information that had turned out to be false. They stated to mostly discover a lie by talking to other people or checking it on the internet. The hardest content to contest and verify for students are usually edited video recordings in the news. ●

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Focus of campaign on manipulation of domestic media with invented stories** – due to a complicated domestic situation and low awareness about Russian disinformation among the youth, we suggest not to focus on Russian disinformation activities.
- ▶ **Instagram** should be the main campaign tool for the age group of 18-25 years. However, the campaign should be comprehensive and flexible enough to cover other social networks as well.
- ▶ **Memes** are the most shared element on social networks besides videos.
- ▶ While there are **noticeable differences** between youth in terms of educational background and geography, non-academic and rural youth will be the hardest demographic to reach since they tend to be reluctant to engage in anything that can be regarded as “political”, and, moreover, have a larger tendency to believe in the pro-Russian anti-Western narratives.
- ▶ **Utilization of gender stereotypes** – the predominant online interest of men lies in “cars and women”, while a vast majority of females are interested in “fashion and beauty products”. Utilizing these differences might be a useful tool to attract the attention also among the more passive groups of youth.
- ▶ **No logos or affiliations** – (our) logos will automatically signify pro-Western bias which will most likely have a negative connotation to the most susceptible segments of population.

## COUNTRY REPORTS: VISEGRAD FOUR

# CZECHIA

### COUNTRY SUMMARY

Population	Youth in % (16-24)	Internet penetration among youth
10 578 820 (2016) <sup>13</sup>	9.6%	97% <sup>14</sup>
Social media network usage		
Facebook 77% ▶ YouTube 65% ▶ Facebook Messenger 47% WhatsApp 24% ▶ Instagram 16% ▶ Twitter 11% <sup>15</sup>		

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Czechia has several dozens of websites with thousands of followers spreading disinformation, hoaxes and particular narratives. Disinformation outlets also have a quite significant impact on shaping the public debate in the country. They enjoy popularity on social networks and their narratives and disinformation are often adopted by certain politicians and high-level state representatives. The most influential Czech disinformation outlet [Parlamentnilisty.cz](http://Parlamentnilisty.cz) has over 800 000 readers per month and is the 8th most influential 'information' web portal in the country. With few exceptions (e.g. [Parlamentni listy](http://Parlamentni listy), AC-24), the ownership and funding of these disinformation portals are anonymous and impossible to find. Disinformation narratives are often taken over and spread by various far-right extremist groups/political parties.

- ▶ Most popular disinformation websites: [parlamentnilisty.cz](http://parlamentnilisty.cz), [aeronet.cz](http://aeronet.cz), [AC24.cz](http://AC24.cz), [protiproud.cz](http://protiproud.cz), [prvnizpravy.cz](http://prvnizpravy.cz), [novarepublika.cz](http://novarepublika.cz), [cz.sputniknews.com](http://cz.sputniknews.com)
- ▶ Disinformation/propaganda social media pages: AC-24, [Parlamentni listy](http://Parlamentni listy), [Sputnik Czech Republic](http://Sputnik Czech Republic), [Protiproud](http://Protiproud), [Czech Free Press](http://Czech Free Press), [EuroZpravy.CZ](http://EuroZpravy.CZ), [Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic](http://Friends of Russia in the Czech Republic), and many more

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND CAMPAIGNS

- ▶ [Zvol.si.info](http://Zvol.si.info) (Choose your info) – campaign of students from the Masaryk University promoting information and media literacy with particular focus on social media (Facebook especially).
- ▶ Weeks of media education' annually organized by People in Need, aims at enhancing the media literacy of young people in the Czech Republic and promoting of critical thinking.
- ▶ A Czech version of the Ukrainian web site [StopFake.org](http://StopFake.org), produced by the Association for International Affairs (AMO).
- ▶ Research and activities of the Prague Security Studies Institute, namely [České volby v éře dezinformací](http://České volby v éře dezinformací) project ("Czech elections in the era of disinformation").
- ▶ Kremlin Watch – weekly reports on disinformation trends and narratives spread in the Czech Republic produced by the think tank, European Values.
- ▶ FakeHacks Ackee Hackaton
- ▶ Media platform [Manipulatori.cz](http://Manipulatori.cz) (Manipulators.cz) supporting independent, open thinking in order to open a critical debate about social and political events in the context of the Czech Republic.

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- ▶ Every respondent seemed to have created his/her own criteria when "measuring" the value of information received while students tend to trust information sources close to their own perception of reality.
- ▶ An author was stated as a crucial factor in evaluating a source of information. Trust in and authority of an author was directly connected to the positive/negative evaluation of a story by the respondents.
- ▶ The young perceived public TV and radio broadcasters as very credible.
- ▶ The respondents admitted they could be persuaded to accept information which even goes against their personal beliefs, however, in such cases, an authority (respected person) and sufficient number of relevant arguments must be applied.
- ▶ Young Czechs seem to be aware of disinformation spread online, including on social media. Social media were not perceived as trustworthy nor a good source of information.

#### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

Truth was understood by the participants as any information that is strictly objective, generally known and there are no sources informing about anything opposite. In general, students expected international sources, rather than domestic, to be more objective when reporting about the situation in the Czech Republic.

Students claimed to be looking for facts and analysing information predominantly while studying in school. From trustworthy sources of information,

they expect clear identification of sources, clear recognition of an author, consistency and facts without any subjective opinion.

Czech TV and Czech News Agency were perceived as the most credible and independent media outlets as these two are not privately owned. Public media in the country was considered as independent of political influence. The participants were aware of media ownership structures and assumed that *"when the media is owned by someone, it is normal, they write him in a better way or they just exclude mentioning him."*

Sources mentioned as the most trustworthy:

- ▶ Public Broadcaster – Czech TV, Czech TV 24, Czech Radio
- ▶ Czech News Agency
- ▶ [Idnes.cz](http://Idnes.cz)
- ▶ Respekt
- ▶ [Hospodářské noviny](http://Hospodářské noviny) (Economic Newspaper)
- ▶ [Aktualne.cz](http://Aktualne.cz)

#### SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Young Czechs have accounts on numerous social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Other social networks are rather neglected by the current young generation.

Facebook is the most important and the most used social platform in the Czech Republic, despite being perceived as biased and supporting the creation of "social and information bubbles" by the respondents. According to them, Facebook provided a good overview of interesting activities and events and helps them stay oriented in one's "social bubble". However, they did not consider the platform to be a relevant source for information, as it is increasingly based on algorithms they do not understand. As a result, they claimed to regularly cross-check it with other sources. Therefore, older participants stated they were trying to limit their time spent on Facebook. At the same time, students strongly believed that the majority of people use Facebook as the only information source. Consequently, according to their perception, the opinions of such people can be easily influenced by a properly targeted campaign.

**“Not many people know this and consider it to be normal, but the content is created to keep you interested. It does not correspond with a normal state of things.”**

According to the participants, a successful post must have three things – “shocking” (surprising, extreme, relevant to the reader) titles, interesting image/video and must be shared by people they know and trust. However, the respondents also agreed that they are rather passive consumers who rarely post anything online.

Instagram was not as popular as Facebook among the participants, who perceive it as a social platform with limited potential. Instagram was seen as even more demanding in terms of time consumption and, therefore, requires much stricter filtering. For the same reason, students also claimed not to usually follow the Instastories.

**“You have to limit the activity on Instagram, otherwise you can do nothing else than checking what is new.”**

Twitter was perceived as a very credible source of information by the young. Twitter in the Czech Republic is a widely popular social media platform among journalists who utilise it for breaking news. The participants compared Twitter to a kind of online Czech News Agency or Reuters.

YouTube is a popular social platform for entertainment and educational purposes with video bloggers and YouTubers enjoying a high level of popularity in the country. However, the respondents agreed that those did not really constitute the point of interest for the high school or university students. YouTubers are, according to the participants, mostly favoured by younger age groups of 10 – 16 years old. Nevertheless, one of the most influential and respected Czech YouTubers is Kovy who also attempts to educate and raise awareness on important societal issues to younger generations.

## INFLUENCERS

Students seemed not to be easily influenced by anyone while having their own strong opinions. However, provided with strong and solid arguments, they claimed to be open to change. “Idols” and strong opinion makers who the respondents trust are:

- ▶ Martin Veselovský (DVTV)
- ▶ Jindřich Šídlo (Seznam Zprávy)
- ▶ Petr Honzejek (Hospodářské noviny – Economic Newspaper)
- ▶ Alexandr Mitrofanov (Novinky.cz/Právo)

With YouTube being popular among the young, the most viewed Czech video on YouTube came from Kovy (YouTuber Karel Kovář) with 7 815 500 views. Other popular YouTubers are:

- ▶ Erik Meldik (professional YouTuber) with the outreach of 2,643,482<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ Jiří Král (professional YouTuber) with the outreach of 1,737,110
- ▶ Zuzka Light (fitness YouTuber) with the outreach of 1,729,537

## PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

While the participants of focus groups were aware of disinformation and fake news, the concept is still not fully and clearly understood. Some students differentiated between “entertaining” and “harmful” fake news, but the distinct identification of harmful impact was not generally clear-cut.

**“When you have some “fake news”, for some group of people it might be funny but for some who do not have a sense of humour, it is dangerous.”**

The respondents, however, believed that disinformation and propaganda were a large-scale problem and recognised that some are purposely created and disseminated in order to manipulate certain groups of people. ●

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Know your target audience** – there will always be a difference between students from grammar school and in vocational trainings and university students, or between students in primary and secondary education. The more the information fits in the behavioural patterns of the target group, the higher acceptance can be expected.
- ▶ **Identify credible icons** – trusted opinion makers or public personas who could be the voice of the campaign.
- ▶ **Credibility of the message** – credible article/information should not have an emotional background, or subjective interpretation of facts. The information should be logically structured, in an ideal case, it should encompass arguments in favour and against the topic so that the recipient can create his or her own view.
- ▶ **Do not forget to use all attributes of credibility** – always add the name of author, do not use pictures from archives, rather try to use pictures capturing the situation. When possible, try to include direct quotes and statements.
- ▶ **Proper communication channels** – a campaign would have to go “through” the social media filters and breach the “information bubble” the young are living in.



## COUNTRY REPORTS: VISEGRAD FOUR HUNGARY

### COUNTRY SUMMARY

Population	Youth in % (16-24)	Internet penetration	Internet penetration among youth
9.8 million (2016)	10.1% (2017) <sup>17</sup>	88%	89%
Social media network usage			
Facebook 81% ▶ YouTube 71% ▶ Facebook Messenger 58% Instagram 20% ▶ Google Plus 13% ▶ Twitter 13% <sup>18</sup>			

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

The political environment, a centralised nature of public institutions (especially education, which is also over-politicised) and a lack of media pluralism strongly contribute to the outreach and presence of government narratives spread by pro-governmental institutions. Consequently, the actions of those trying to counter disinformation in terms of visibility and outreach are significantly limited.

- ▶ Most popular disinformation websites: hidfo.ru, avilagtikai.com, magyarkozosseg.net, vilagfigyelo.com, Orosz hírek.
- ▶ Pro-government websites spreading disinformation: 888.hu, pestisracok.hu, magyaridok.hu, Origo.hu, Echo TV, TV2.
- ▶ Disinformation/propaganda social media groups: Kiállunk Oroszország mellett, MIKSZ, Facebook pages of the abovementioned webpages

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

- ▶ Fake news hunter by Átlátszó.hu, a crowdsourced independent media watchdog – the most relevant for youth, due to its youth-friendly format and approach. However, the initiative has not managed to reach a big audience yet.
- ▶ Urbalegends.hu – organic and independent debunking page
- ▶ Tényleg.hu (really.hu) – a debunking page focusing on historical misconceptions, ran by an active history teacher
- ▶ Ténytár.blog.hu – a blog debunking political misinformation with independent critiques of government
- ▶ Factcheck.hu – a governmental propaganda page “debunking” the critics of the government (used primarily by governmental actors)
- ▶ Work of Political Capital on Russian influence – analytical materials, workshops for decision-makers, influencers and journalists, public events, interviews for the media and trainings for journalists

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- ▶ The respondents stated they primarily consume information from social media, but they do not trust these platforms.
- ▶ Trust in peers as news sources was rather strong – especially younger participants tended to rely more on their peers.
- ▶ Young Hungarians said they have a general awareness of biases in the media landscape. Most of the participants agreed there is no objective journalism in Hungary and all outlets are biased to some extent.
- ▶ The participants considered themselves to be “fake-proof”. Respondents believed that, unlike older generations, they can detect fake news and distinguish the truth much better, as they are growing up in the online information environment.
- ▶ The respondents were aware of social media’s side-effects such as echo chambers, fake news and filter bubbles.
- ▶ The interviewees primarily used Facebook and Messenger for chatting; Instagram was ranked as the second most used platform and it was considered as more private and intimate.

#### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

The respondents claimed they consumed information primarily from digital sources. Television, print media and radio were barely mentioned or completely absent from their answers when evaluating potential sources of information. The most detrimental factor to them was time; therefore, they prefer easy-to-understand news pieces that one can read within 5 minutes rather than longer articles.

Most commonly used sources named by the interviewees were either rather friendly towards or critical of the government:

- ▶ Index.hu (critical)
- ▶ HVG (critical)
- ▶ Origo (close ties to the government)
- ▶ 444.hu (critical)
- ▶ some local papers

Those watching TV also named the two biggest commercial channels: RTL Klub (critical) and TV2 (close ties to the government).

When asked about the content, most of the participants expressed disinterest towards political news, due to the omnipresence of politics in their life. Still, many of them considered Facebook as their number one news source despite being aware of its unwanted influence on their news consumption habits. They appeared to be aware of how social media is being manipulated through algorithms and how Hungarian mainstream media is under the control of different political forces.

**“Politics is everywhere, I’m thinking of leaving Facebook because of the news saturation.”**

One of the main differences between the younger and older participants was that the younger tended to rely more on their peers as a news source. The high school students claimed to communicate via Facebook Messenger most of the time and thus share the news there instead of on their Facebook wall.

**“Previous generations wasted their time in front of the TV. They ate and drank in front of it. Our generation does not watch TV but the older ones still do it a lot. When they were younger TV was exposing them to a lot of rubbish as well and they wasted their time too. Just like we do in front of our computers and phones.”**

The credibility of a news source was rated depending on who posted it on Facebook: they usually unfollow those who are posting too often. However, those who post less and share similar opinions on key political issues were considered more credible.

High school participants from Pécs differed the most from the other three groups as many of them preferred tabloids and sport news over political news. They also named “Kasza Tibi’s” Facebook page as a source of information (one of the most popular pages in Hungary run by a celebrity/influencer, Tibor Kasza). He regularly shares pro-governmental narratives as he has an agreement with the government-friendly tabloid “Lokál”. While the focus group with Budaörs high school students was composed of students with middle-upper class family background, this was not the case for the Pécs focus group.

## SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Many focus group participants noted the echo chamber effect as a negative repercussion of the social media. In their news feed, they experience a lack of opposing views. They claimed to only see information, which is in accordance with their political views and general interests.

Youngsters said they primarily use Facebook and Facebook Messenger. Although Facebook remains the most popular, participants claimed that they use Messenger for communication rather than scrolling through Facebook’s news feed.

**“It is a bit over-hyped that the youth is 0-24h present on social media.”**

Many of the participants claimed they are on Facebook for only 10-15 minutes a day, as the experience has been destroyed by ads, especially in videos. They remarked that they usually do not share content on Facebook unless they could help someone, e.g. with looking for accommodation. Closed Facebook groups were considered a good platform, where they claimed they feel more confident sharing political content and debating.

Instagram, the second most used social media, has lately become even more popular as one of the telecommunication companies offers unlimited Instagram access, in certain cases. The respondents considered it a more intimate and inspirational platform, however, high-school students criticised it for portraying a false, distorted picture of many users’ lives that discourages them from using it.

YouTube was not considered very popular among the participants. They mostly use it for listening to music and watching video-blogs (vlogs).

## INFLUENCERS

Overall, the focus group participants claimed they did not trust anyone except their family, close friends and a few news portals. Although they considered their close friends the most trusted sources of information, they are more critical of their Facebook friends. Overall, they admitted they rather trust those they either know personally or consider credible due to their past and opinions. Most of the influential people they named come from YouTube’s entertainment scene.

Many vloggers were perceived as credible public personas because they achieved the popularity without any help and without serving any political interests. This makes them credible messengers in the eyes of the interviewed youth. The most trusted influencers:

- ▶ Csaba Magyarósi (YouTuber) – focuses on phones, travelling, food and women.
- ▶ TheVR – a duo vlogging about games, technology, and everyday issues.
- ▶ PamKutya – two brothers who became famous after making the Hungarian parody of Despacito.
- ▶ Gergely Szirmai (YouTuber HollywoodNewsAgency) – focuses on movies and his own impressions.
- ▶ Péter Dancsó – one of the first vloggers, talks about and makes fun of movies.
- ▶ Róbert Puzsér – a contested drama-seeking personality regularly present in all types of media.

- ▶ Puszi, Erzsi! (Gergely Homonnay) – a cat, Erzsi, communicates about everyday issues, news, and political events in a critical way.

Accounts with the biggest outreach and impact:

- ▶ TibiAtya’s Facebook page – a virtual-only influencer, playing the role of an alcoholic priest constantly posting mostly non-political fun content, such as memes or videos etc.
- ▶ Tibor Kasza’s Facebook page – a singer, TV celebrity, “influencer” posting different types of content, being paid to share articles from one of pro-government propaganda outlets.
- ▶ Mindenegyben blog – the biggest and probably the oldest fake news blog, listing all kinds of trivial content; it is not entirely a political fake news page, rather it focuses on more classical health and food related matters.<sup>19</sup>

## PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

In general, respondents were able to detect business-driven disinformation attempts but were unaware of politically motivated disinformation and fake news. When asked about the reasons behind spreading disinformation, many argued that profit-making interests are driving these tendencies – that is why click-bait titles are so popular. The university

students were also able to name the best-known disinformation outlets operating in Hungary and argued that FB friends sharing news from these pages are considered completely unreliable. Very few of the participants in general (mostly older ones) associated fake news with political events. Only one mentioned Russian disinformation and the US election in the context of fake news.

The participants considered the fake competitions the worst and most dangerous forms of fake news types. They believed that older generations are much more likely to share fake content because of not growing up in this information environment, contrary to the youngsters. A 17-year-old summarised this phenomenon as follows:

**“I think it is much easier for us to decide on what is credible and what is not, i.e. what can we simply skip while scrolling, while my father might struggle with this (...) We grew into this. (...) I think we have a special ability to make distinction between true or false information. All right, there might be a few things which even we cannot recognise but in general I think we are good at this.”**

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Communicate through social media using credible messengers such as YouTubers** – Although vloggers usually share fun content, most of them are feeding in political and social questions and are considered as credible messengers as they are “average citizens” who became popular thanks to their own efforts. There are quite a few vloggers open to sensitive political content who could potentially be approached as part of a cooperation.
- ▶ **Content should not include overly strong political narratives, as the young are tired of it. It should be funny, engaging, and somehow related to their lives** – Without touching upon sensitive and contested political issues, it would be good to highlight that fake news can be used for manipulating voting behaviour and political decisions and that it is not only a tool to steal uninformed users’ money through fake quiz games and gain advertising revenues through click-bait titles. Although many consider themselves resilient and well-informed about disinformation, it is unknown if they actually are. Another way of approaching the issue could be a scam based on the GLOBSEC campaign in Slovakia, which could prove they might not be as immune as they think.

## COUNTRY REPORTS: VISEGRAD FOUR

# POLAND

COUNTRY SUMMARY		
Population	Youth in % (15-24)	Internet penetration
31 million (2011)	13.6%	78.1% <sup>20</sup>
Social media network usage		
Facebook 73% ▶ YouTube 71% ▶ Facebook Messenger 44% WhatsApp 19% ▶ Twitter 17% ▶ Google+ 13% <sup>21</sup>		

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

Due to a lack of experts on disinformation issues in the country, the research and data on sources and actors is still limited and incomplete. Nevertheless, there is a recognition of both the disinformation efforts coming from external actors with the aim to destabilise, as well as of the use of propaganda-like narratives from the Polish representatives to achieve their own political goals. The external disinformation efforts are internally fostered by organisations and movements promoting pro-Russian, anti-Ukrainian or general anti-establishment narratives. According to the study in late 2016<sup>22</sup>, Kresy.pl and “Ukrainiec NIE jest moim bratem” (A Ukrainian is not my brother) are among the most influential outlets spreading pro-Russian narratives on Facebook.<sup>23</sup>

The following five online outlets have been identified as disinformation with the highest reach by the study in mid-2017<sup>24</sup>:

- ▶ [zmianyhaziemi.pl](http://zmianyhaziemi.pl)
- ▶ [dzienniknarodowy.pl](http://dzienniknarodowy.pl)
- ▶ [alexjones.pl](http://alexjones.pl)
- ▶ [Wolna-polska.pl](http://wolna-polska.pl)
- ▶ [Pch24.pl](http://Pch24.pl)

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

There are several NGOs, journalists, online communities and individuals focusing on countering disinformation in Poland although there were no campaigns specifically dedicated to the issue in the past two years. Several entities concentrate on awareness-raising activities, primarily by using media (both traditional and online), i.e. monitoring information space and reporting on disinformation/propaganda activities.

Current projects in Poland:

- ▶ Polish version of StopFake.org project.
- ▶ Stowarzyszenie Demagog – project demagogl.org.pl fact-checking political representatives’ speeches and statements together with workshops for high school students – Akademia Fact-Checkingu
- ▶ Fundacja Bezpieczna Cyberprzestrzeń (Cybersecurity Foundation) with its InfoOps research project focusing on the issues of manipulation of the Polish information sphere.
- ▶ CAPD (Center for Propaganda and Disinformation Analysis) – NGO focusing on a structured and analytical approach to the challenges linked to information and psychological warfare, including through cooperation with media and other NGOs in the country.

### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

The internet is the most popular medium among young people in Poland. 99% of Polish citizens aged between 16-24 years are regular Internet users.<sup>25</sup> The respondents believed that the internet sources were more trustworthy, although they could not say why. The participants also expressed the opinion that information or news repeated by others, especially on a massive scale, generally means that the information is true.

**“If something is repeated by everyone it means it is true.”**

The second most popular medium mentioned during the discussions was radio, both in its traditional and online form. Students mostly listen to commercial and entertainment stations such as:

- ▶ RMF Maxxx
- ▶ Eska
- ▶ VOX FM
- ▶ Radio ZET

Watching TV is rare, although the respondents had good knowledge about news programs in Polish TV, which they claimed to watch sometimes in the evening. They recognised the differences in political worldviews of the public and private channels, especially being aware of the public broadcaster’s pro-governmental narratives. While recognising these divisions also in other media sources, they stay rather sceptical towards journalists in general due to their subjectivity. The participants claimed to closely watch the authors of the articles and commentaries – they declared not to trust the outlets without information on authorship. Surprisingly, a lesser degree of trust had been expressed towards foreign media, or local media funded by foreign entities.

**“The media say what people want to hear.”**

Although printed media are consumed exceptionally, the participants often mentioned reading regional both printed and online outlets. However, all of the interviewed had problems

- ▶ Center for European Policy Analysis – US think-tank with an office in Warsaw – its StratCom programme monitors and exposes Russian disinformation activities, in particular countries of Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland.

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS’ FINDINGS

- ▶ The internet was the most popular source of information for the respondents due to the flexibility and freedom it provides. YouTube, and the biggest and most popular online media outlets such as onet.pl, interia.pl and wp.pl, were listed as the most trustful sources.
- ▶ Although Polish respondents stated they rarely watch TV, they have a good knowledge of television content as their families often watch them.
- ▶ While students have mainly superficial information about the situation in Poland and in the world, most of them were interested in local news (news about their city and/or region). For this purpose, they proclaimed to use both local printed and online media.
- ▶ Following news systematically and periodically was perceived as too time-consuming, therefore, the respondents follow news outlets only when interested in a specific issue or topic.
- ▶ The participants trusted sources they felt they knew well, including their friends whom they consider credible and know they would never lie to them.
- ▶ The respondents did not trust Facebook and influencers because they were aware of the sponsored content. However, one the other hand, they stated to trust influencers “whom they know well” and whom they have followed for a long time, even if they promote some products on their channels.

identifying their favourite websites, especially information outlets. They emphasised that they did not use blogs and websites to receive information. The participants claimed to mostly look for information only when interested in a specific issue instead of following the news regularly. As a consequence, their knowledge of world events or domestic issues in Poland is limited and rather “accidental”. They admitted to mostly receive information from Facebook, also via notifications, YouTube and Instagram. The interviewed also mentioned groups and pages on Facebook, including the pages of different media outlets.

**“First reaction is always emotional, only then you start verifying information.”**

## SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube were noted as the most popular social media, followed by Snapchat and Facebook Messenger. Facebook is primarily used to follow school groups and personal communication with friends. Respondents claimed to rarely watch videos on their walls, only when shared by friends, mostly in a private message. Similarly, they rarely share anything on their personal walls.

Instagram is mostly used to follow their friends and topics of their personal interest, such as lifestyle, cooking, travels and sports.

The purpose of YouTube was primarily linked to listening to music, as well as to receiving practical and useful information (for example “how to” guides), sometimes also from the comments below the videos.

**“Truth depends on political views.”**

The participants noted that Snapchat is mostly used both to follow and geo-locate friends. When they seek to do something or go somewhere particular, Snapchat helps them to look for friends nearby.

## INFLUENCERS

In general, the closer the personalities are to young peoples’, the more trustful they were considered. Facebook was generally not considered a trusted source among the participants, because of extensive sponsored content. The same applies for influencers, who are, according to the respondents, mostly paid by sponsors. While they admitted the possibility of following such influencers, the participants were very much aware of the product placement on their channels and accounts.

Related to that, the discussions proved that friends and families are among the strongest influencers whom the respondents trust and who help them decide what sources to use. However, this perception of authority decreased among the young participants with the increasing age of their family members. While the opinions on whether to trust friends were divided, all acknowledged to read and consume what their friends shared or recommended on social platforms.

The participants also proclaimed to distance themselves from public figures (actors or musicians) who present their political views publicly. They believed that such people should not openly proclaim opinions linked to internal politics as they have a strong influence on their large followers-base.

The respondents claimed to mostly follow public persons, including athletes, football players, fitness trainers, celebrities, fashion and lifestyle bloggers, and musicians, mostly on Instagram and YouTube, not Facebook.

According to the ranking “Blogosfera i social media 2017”<sup>26</sup> the most popular people on Facebook and Instagram in 2017 were the following: Robert Lewandowski, Wojciech Szczęsny, Anna Lewandowska, Kuba Błaszczykowski, Suchar Codzienny, Ewa Chodakowska, Tom Swoon, Łukasz Piszczek, Sylwester Adam Wardęga, Martyna Wojciechowska, Kamil Bednarek, Joanna Krupa, Angelika Mucha, Marita Surma, Julia Kuczyńska, Joanna Kuchta.

## PERCEPTION OF “FAKE NEWS”

The participants declared they were able to distinguish between disinformation and truthful information, unlike the older generations who, according to the interviewed, lack critical thinking and media literacy. However, when it comes to understanding the terms, there is a general lack of knowledge about the context. The respondents only identified fake news with lies – further awareness of motivations was missing. Moreover, the majority could not explain the meaning of either disinformation or influence, with the exception of Ukrainian students who were familiar with, and could name, examples of Russian disinformation about Ukraine and its subversive influence on Ukrainian society. ●

Most popular on Facebook:

- ▶ SA Wardęga 1.62M followers
- ▶ Abstrachuje.TV 1.25M followers
- ▶ Maffashion (Julia Kuczyńska) 907K followers

Partnering Polish CSOs working with young people further identified the following accounts as the most consumed by the young:

- ▶ Littlemoonster96 (Angelika Mucha)
- ▶ Arlena Witt – English teacher on YouTube
- ▶ Jarosław Kuźniar – Instagram influencer
- ▶ Polimaty – educational YouTube channel
- ▶ Krzysztof Gonciarz – vlogger on YouTube
- ▶ SciFun – educational YouTube channel

**“Everyone has their truth and what is the truth no one knows.”**

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Match their interests** – Since young people use social media mostly to follow their friends and private interests, it is difficult to reach them with our message. The solution would be to convey it through a group that matches their interests, i.e. schools’ pages and groups on Facebook or their favourite channels on Instagram.
- ▶ **Involve schools** – Due to a lack of trust in media, communication with students might be more effective if we involve other active “influencers” of students into the contest and campaign, which will require active involvement of the schools and universities in the process.
- ▶ **Teamwork** – Consider the participation of teams instead of individuals, which might make the students more motivated.
- ▶ Consider **involvement of Ukrainian students** at the Polish universities as they have more knowledge and experience in Russian disinformation and influence.

## COUNTRY REPORTS: VISEGRAD FOUR

# SLOVAKIA

### COUNTRY SUMMARY

Population	Youth in % (15-24)	Internet penetration
5,397,036	13.8%	96% (2007) <sup>27</sup>
Social media network usage		
Facebook 73% ▶ YouTube 64% ▶ Facebook Messenger 45% Instagram 18% ▶ Pokec 14% ▶ Google Plus 14% <sup>28</sup>		
Social media network share of the youth		
Facebook 90%, followed by Snapchat and Instagram <sup>29</sup>		

### DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE

According to a website called *konspiratori.sk*, there are around 120 different disinformation websites<sup>30</sup> currently operating in Slovakia. Most articles featuring disinformation and propaganda content are spread covertly, mixed with regular articles and press releases taken from the formal Slovak news agencies.

A warning sign in recent months has been increasingly positive and in some cases even defensive attitudes by various political and state representatives towards these outlets, which increases their credibility and puts them on the same level as mainstream or investigative media. A continuous tendency of political representatives is the attempt to influence the public service broadcaster. Recently, new management made executive decisions to cancel or reorganise shows and investigative broadcasts, triggering personnel changes in key positions. Ever since, over 60 journalists signed a petition calling attention to inappropriate working conditions. Some of the testimonies of journalists working for the public service broadcaster revealed attempts from the management to push forward and broadcast various disinformation narratives.

Disinformation narratives are often taken up and spread by various far-right extremist groups/political parties. Moreover, due to linguistic and cultural proximity, it is also possible to observe a free flow of disinformation narratives between individual Czech and Slovak outlets.

- ▶ Most popular and influential disinformation websites are: *hlavnespravy.sk*, *zemavek.sk*, *infovojna.sk*, *slobodnyvysielač.sk*.
- ▶ Disinformation/propaganda social media groups: *Som Slovak a som na to hrdy...*, *Marian Kotleba za predsedu vlády SR*, *Slobodný vysielateľ*, *Sila pravdy*, *Milujeme Rusko*, *GINN Press* and many more.

### COUNTER-DISINFO ACTIVITIES AND INITIATIVES

- ▶ *Demagog.sk* – fact-checking of political discussions conducted by the Slovak Governance Institute.
- ▶ Slovak daily *Dennik N* prepared an educational manual *Lies and Conspiracies* for teachers and students of high schools explaining the mechanisms of manipulation used by disinformation media outlets and the related risks.

- ▶ *Konspiratori.sk* – a database of media outlets spreading disinformation, propaganda and lies.
- ▶ Most of the mainstream media and online outlets such as *sme.sk*, *dennik.sk* or *aktuality.sk* have designated sections debunking disinformation.
- ▶ *Blbeonline.sk* (*Schmuck online*) – website collecting posts, comments from Facebook pages spreading disinformation and providing an overview of trends of the most shared disinformation on Facebook.<sup>31</sup>
- ▶ Facebook pages as “Die” (*Zomri*), “Disinformation and hoaxes” (*Dezinformácie a hoaxy*), “Why are people crazy” (*Prečo ľudom hrabe*) or “I’ll eat even a chair-lift” (*Zjem aj vlek*, which is a parody on the famous propaganda outlet *Zem a vek*) debunking and making fun of propaganda and disinformation.
- ▶ The Strategic Communication Program of GLOBSEC Policy Institute – conducts unique public opinion polls via GLOBSEC Trends and analytical materials, E-learning courses on Media and Disinformation, awareness-raising campaign with Slovak video bloggers, cooperation with influencers and journalists, organization of public debates and international conferences.

### YOUTH AND INTERNET

#### MAIN FOCUS GROUPS' FINDINGS

- ▶ An overwhelming majority stated they rely on online resources and media. The respondents rarely use traditional media as TV, radio or newspapers as a source of information.
- ▶ Podcasts are getting increasingly popular – both for entertainment and as a source of information.
- ▶ The respondents admitted to often start paying attention to a piece of news only if they see that it had been shared by their friends.

- ▶ Trustworthiness of media is an important factor taken into consideration before a story or information is read/consumed by the respondents.
- ▶ Active public engagement of the young, especially on Facebook, is quite rare. Posting extensively without ‘reasonable’ content was noted as an undesirable practice.
- ▶ The respondents admitted to sometimes looking for alternative media because they distrust mainstream media and seek to get a “balance” of views.

### CONSUMPTION OF AND TRUST IN MEDIA

The respondents declared they consume information primarily from web-based sources. Television, print media and radio were noted as barely used, and if so, most students follow media that have both offline and online presence. The main source of news identified by most of the students was simply ‘Facebook’. Many participants declared that they started paying attention to a piece of news only after seeing that it had been shared by several people or pages. Thus, the young rely on their peers as a news source.

The most detrimental factor to the respondents was the value of objectivity, which was identified as an important characteristic of the media they follow. Participants did not necessarily expect all the content to be unbiased, but the media must provide a clear distinction between news reporting and commentary or opinion pieces. Participants expect clear identification of used sources, direct quotes from the people involved and/or experts, and copyright/authorship citations under photos from trustworthy sources of information. They were also aware of click-bait tactics.

In addition, young people also claimed to evaluate trustworthiness based who or what page shared the information. Other indicators are bad grammar, excessively long sentences, pictures and videos as well as captions that do not correspond with the text.

Most commonly used news sources named were:

- ▶ sme.sk
- ▶ hnonline.sk
- ▶ dennikn.sk
- ▶ aktuality.sk
- ▶ local news online portals

## SOCIAL MEDIA CONSUMPTION

The respondents named numerous social media platforms where they are active. They considered Facebook to be an absolute necessity for the young, since they use it as a working tool for learning about assignments, facilitating group work and finding out about events. However, the vast majority of the participants claimed that they either post rarely or do not post on Facebook at all. Posting extensively without 'reasonable' content was even labelled as an undesirable practice, something common among "grandparents". While students fear spamming others and hence being perceived as annoying, there were also concerns about privacy. Sharing posts among friends via Messenger was thus increasingly common.

Most of the participants claimed to use Instagram, which they perceive as less political, serious and commercialized than Facebook while focusing more on lifestyle and the everyday lives of personalities and friends. Instagram stories were especially praised as a tool and the most liked feature, where people post with less self-censorship, knowing that stories disappear in 24 hours and thus provide the most intimate and immediate information. This platform was viewed by many respondents as 'less serious', citing that they can even post a picture "in a pyjama".

The participants noted they used YouTube on a daily basis predominantly for music, educational purposes or fun. Very few claimed to follow YouTubers – this is perceived as a phenomenon of younger generations in early teenage years. If someone admitted watching YouTubers, it was usually framed as a guilty pleasure, "just to unwind". Generally, participants prefer videos that show something beyond a personal life of the vlogger. Sajfa's work was provided as an example, as his videos now also cover his travels.

## INFLUENCERS

Students were generally reluctant to name people they 'trusted'. Despite following certain influencers, they claimed to always try to look up more sources of information and eventually make their own mind. While Zuzana Kovačic-Hanzelová was mentioned as one of the most trustworthy public persons, the others were John Oliver, or populist politicians Igor Matovič and Boris Kollár.

When it comes to favourite online personalities, the discussion did not bring big conclusive results as everybody had their own specific areas of interest which they follow online. People mentioned were, for example, favourite streamers (a person streaming video games live for an audience), politicians, actors or athletes such as:

- ▶ Sajfa
- ▶ Moma
- ▶ Eliška Hudcová (Time to Fit Instagram page)
- ▶ Samo Marec
- ▶ Andrej Kiska
- ▶ Kamil Aujeský (Marketing Backstage)
- ▶ Late night comedians

YouTube channels named as the most watched:

- ▶ Pewdiepie
- ▶ Zrebný and Frlajs
- ▶ Moma
- ▶ Sajfa

## PERCEPTION OF "FAKE NEWS"

Slovak students were aware of hoaxes, fake social media accounts and fake comments under articles or disinformation websites active in Slovakia. The participants mostly expressed their disbelief over how "anyone could fall for it", but eventually, many confirmed to have some friends or family members who follow and regularly share disinformation. The discussions and perceptions about this topic can acquire a patronizing manner hinting at stark divisions in society and class undertones.

The declared reason why students sought 'alternative' news sources comes back to their attempt to escape 'the black and white reporting' of traditional mainstream media, which they

also stated they follow. Other reasons included confirmation bias, attempts to go beyond one-sided reporting, distrust of conventional media, difficulties of some to evaluate the truthfulness of information amid an excess of information, as well as geopolitical and ideological battles funded by governments.

**"They are just too dumb to see that it's a complete nonsense."**

While the young claimed to have encountered disinformation spread online, most of them chose not to engage in fights on the Internet unless they feel a personal connection to the post. ●

## RECOMMENDATIONS – COMMUNICATING WITH YOUTH

- ▶ **Make them feel included** – engage the young in solving a problem, make them feel like an important and equal part of society.
- ▶ **Do not be patronising** – in general, people do not want to be called stupid.
- ▶ **Distrust in media is a huge problem** – young people are becoming more and more reluctant to search for the truth, they do not believe in or trust anything.
- ▶ **Instagram**, not YouTube, should be the main campaign tool for the age group of 18-25 years.



# FOCUS GROUPS PARTICIPANTS

SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	AGE RANGE	GENDER		
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>					
▶ Secondary Mixed Chemistry School in Tuzla	32	18-26	16 M		
▶ Secondary Economic School in Banja Luka			16 F		
▶ University of Mostar					
▶ University of Sarajevo					
<b>Czechia</b>					
▶ Střední odborné učiliště elektrotechnické Pilsen VOŠ a SPŠE Pilsen	29	18-24	17 M		
▶ Střední průmyslová škola stavební, Pilsen			12 F		
▶ SPSD, Pilsen					
▶ Gymnázium Lud'ka Pika Masarykovo gymnázium, Pilsen					
▶ Gymnázium Na Vítězné Pláni, Prague					
▶ Gymnázium Litoměřická, Prague					
▶ Gymnázium Nad Štolou, Prague					
▶ Gymnázium Arabská, Prague					
▶ Vysoká škola chemicko-technologická, Prague					
▶ Czech technical university, Prague					
▶ Charles University, Prague					
▶ University of West Bohemia, Pilsen					
▶ University of Economics, Prague					
▶ Florida State University, Prague					
<b>Hungary</b>					
▶ Budapest University of Technology and Economics			38	17-30	21 M
▶ Eötvös Loránd University	17 F				
▶ High school in Budaörs					
▶ 9 different high schools					
▶ University of Pécs					
<b>Macedonia</b>					
▶ High School „Orce Nikolov“	34	16-24	12 M		
▶ Military Academy „Gen. Mihajlo Apostolski“			22 F		
▶ FON University					
▶ International Balkan University					
▶ University of Southeast Europe					
▶ Saints Cyril and Methodius University High School „Dimitrija Cupovski“ Veles					

SCHOOLS	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	AGE RANGE	GENDER
<b>Montenegro</b>			
▶ Gymnasium „Stojan Cerovic“ in Nikšić	39	19-23	20 M
▶ Gymnasium „Panto Mališić“ in Berane			19 F
▶ University of Montenegro			
▶ Mediterranean University			
<b>Poland</b>			
▶ Zespół Szkół Ponadgimnazjalnych in Zamość (high school)	27	18-24	18 M
▶ Maria Curie-Skłodowska University			9 F
▶ University of Łódź			
▶ Liceum Ogólnokształcące in Suwałki (high school)			
<b>Serbia</b>			
▶ 3rd Belgrade Grammar School (gymnasium) 10th Belgrade Grammar School „Mihajlo Pupin“	41	18-24	23 M
▶ Philological Grammar School			18 F
▶ Zemun Grammar School			
▶ University of Niš			
▶ „Borislav Mihajlovic Mihiz“ High School			
▶ Belgrade university			
<b>Slovakia</b>			
▶ Bilingual high school Sučany	35	18-24	13 M
▶ Technical University in Zvolen			22 F
▶ High school Nové Zámky			
▶ Comenius University			

# USAGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AMONG PARTICIPANTS

	BA	CZ	HU	MK	ME	PL	RS	SK
<b>Number of participants</b>	32	29	38	34	39	27	41	35
<b>Facebook Messenger</b>	23 (71%)	29 (100%)	38 (100%)	30 (88%)	35 (89%)	24 (88%)	33 (80%)	33 (94%)
<b>Facebook</b>	21 (65%)	29 (100%)	35 (92%)	27 (79%)	35 (89%)	24 (88%)	33 (80%)	31 (88%)
<b>Youtube</b>	25 (78%)	27 (93%)	27 (71%)	33 (97%)	36 (92%)	21 (77%)	38 (93%)	32 (91%)
<b>Instagram</b>	28 (87%)	17 (59%)	20 (52%)	34 (100%)	30 (76%)	13 (48%)	33 (80%)	26 (74%)
<b>Snapchat</b>	6 (18%)	1	5 (13%)	10 (29%)	11 (28%)	10 (37%)	1	6 (17%)
<b>Twitter</b>	1 (3%)	4	3 (7%)	3 (8%)	19 (49%)	2 (7%)	2	–

## Viber

- ▶ 92% from Montenegro
- ▶ 34% from Bosnia and Herzegovina
- ▶ 32% from Serbia

Montenegro: 18% listed Pinterest and 30% Tumblr

Serbia: 29% listed WhatsApp

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