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POLICY BRIEF

Countering disinformation in North Macedonia: how can parliament rise to the occasion?

Countering disinformation in North Macedonia: how can parliament rise to the occasion?

By Marko Pankovski and Vlora Rechica

Introduction

Disinformation campaigns are increasingly threatening democracy worldwide. The covid-19 pandemic is further exacerbating this threat, as disinformation and manipulation of public opinion is entering the public health and safety realms. In North Macedonia, efforts to address disinformation are limited to a few policy initiatives by the centre of government and informal initiatives by local and international non-governmental actors, with little involvement of parliament or the broader society.

The Parliament of North Macedonia currently plays a very limited role in terms of countering disinformation, a topic that has never been debated on the parliamentary floor. It is parliament's responsibility to hold relevant institutions accountable, by exercising its legislative powers and its oversight role, utilising its potential for international cooperation, and increasing awareness about the adverse effects of disinformation, elevating the issue to the national level. It is fundamental that parliament assumes a more proactive stance to curb the spread of disinformation.

Key points:

- Disinformation poses a serious challenge to North Macedonia, which is affecting the country's political and social fabric, and even public health and safety.

- Parliament is barely involved in the country's efforts to tackle disinformation, as these processes are mainly addressed through government strategies and action plans, as well as through media and civil society.

- Parliament should create an inter-party working group on disinformation, in charge of mapping institutions and legislation relevant to tackling disinformation, as well as providing support to relevant parliamentary committees.

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While parliament, as the country's highest representative and legislative body, might have less influence to act against disinformation content producers, it can certainly address the enabling factors and actors of disinformation. Considering that disinformation campaigns do not occur in a vacuum, this paper analyses North Macedonia's structural and institutional response to disinformation, focusing on the role of the Parliament of North Macedonia. It focuses on parliament's role in the development and oversight of anti-disinformation policies and mechanisms, who in parliament is responsible for addressing disinformation threats, and the level of parliamentary engagement in countering disinformation. Beyond parliament, this paper also briefly examines the impact of external processes in this context, such as North Macedonia's NATO membership and its European integration ambitions.

First, the paper provides a brief overview of the disinformation context in North Macedonia. Second, it provides insights into the roles of parliament, government, and the media in the fight against disinformation. Finally, it proposes ways to advance parliament's role and contribution to countering disinformation. The research is based on the collection and analysis of secondary data through reviews of literature, legislation, and international norms and practices, as well as primary data, such as interviews with relevant stakeholders from media, government, and state institutions. To empirically assess the relevance of the presented research questions, both secondary and primary research data were used.

Disinformation in North Macedonia

In 2016, North Macedonia appeared in the international news as the source of fake news misleading American voters in the 2016 United States (US) presidential elections. Many of the viral posts containing disinformation connected to the US elections originated from the town of Veles, which only gained attention after the victory of former President Donald Trump. Following increasing concerns over the negative effects of disinformation, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter removed hundreds of fake social media accounts used by North Macedonian operators, while Google suspended ads from these kinds of websites. However, in 2020, these operators had already found new ways and alternative platforms to spread disinformation, such as Parler, an American social networking service. [1]

North Macedonia itself also fell victim to fake news and disinformation. A case in point is the country's 2018 name-change referendum to North Macedonia, initiated in line with the Prespa Agreement with Greece that aimed to resolve the three-decade-long dispute over the country's name. Before the referendum, government sources, journalists, and independent analysts reported on a series of online disinformation efforts to influence public opinion towards boycotting the referendum. The scope of such a disinformation campaign, which involved both national and international actors, exposed the fragility of the country to disinformation.

This fragility was further exposed during the covid-19 pandemic, as ill-intended actors were able to shape public perception over the handling of the healthcare crisis and spread disinformation on adverse effects of vaccination. The country's internal and external political disputes seem to make it particularly vulnerable to disinformation. As one study shows, most of the disinformation campaigns aim to provoke inter-ethnic conflict, cause damage to North Macedonia's international relations, and disrupt internal political processes, such as elections.[2]

The current government, led by the Social Democrats (SDSM), which came to power in 2017, has placed countering disinformation high on the agenda. In 2019, the prime minister publicly announced the government's 'Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation[3], which includes several non-binding activities aiming to fight disinformation. The plan is divided into two parts, with the first envisaging security measures and the second envisaging proactive measures. Overall, the plan stresses the government's strategic commitment to and active cooperation with the European Union (EU) and NATO. In terms of security, the plan includes a series of internal security protocols for the government and governmental bodies to prevent external attacks on IT infrastructure, and to improve internal coordination.

The proactive measures focus on increasing transparency to build public trust in institutions. The plan includes the creation of a task force to combat disinformation and attacks on democracy through, for example, education campaigns and cooperation with social media networks, as well as a national strategy for media literacy involving institutions, the media, and the civil society sector. The measures also include discussions between media (associations) and the civic sector to achieve self-regulation and co-regulation, and to set standards for internet portals, in compliance with the recommendations issued by the European Commission and the Council of Europe.[4]

The measures illustrated above, while extensive, lack implementation. So far, progress has been limited to transparency and media literacy activities.[5] Disinformation remains a significant problem for North Macedonia, with disinformation campaigns threatening democratic processes. As disinformation campaigns increase in strength and scope with the covid-19 pandemic, it is necessary to adapt the 'Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation' to address new challenges. The government should launch open consultations with relevant stakeholders, including media organisations and civil society, to develop a more updated and relevant plan. In particular, parliament should assume an active role in the revision of the plan, through consultations and public discussions. Moreover, parliament must step up its oversight of the current plan, including its (lack of) implementation, to better monitor plans developed by the government.

[1] R. Synovitz and M. Mitevskah, '"Fake News" Sites in North Macedonia Pose as American Conservatives Ahead of U.S. Election', 2020, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-fake-news-sites-us-election-conservatives/30906884.html>
[2] S. Greene (et al.), 'Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter them', 2020, available at <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf>
[3] 'Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation', The Government of North Macedonia, available at <https://vlada.mk/node/18641?ln=en-gb>
[4] Ibid.
[5] Interview with a government official, Skopje, October, 2021.

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(De)regulation or self-regulation

As disinformation ensues and develops in a particular regulatory and institutional environment, efforts to address this phenomenon require a mapping of the architecture in which disinformation thrives in North Macedonia. The country does not currently have any specific legislation targeting disinformation. The problem is addressed mainly through indirect and soft measures such as government action plans, media reform, and the promotion of media literacy. Parliament is barely involved in this process, and efforts to tackle disinformation remain in the hands of the government, civil society, and international organisations. Since the constitution of parliament after the July 2020 parliamentary elections, public hearings have been scarce, and none have addressed disinformation.

In the meantime, online media is playing an increasingly relevant role in democracies' survival or downfall. Social media networks and web portals are widely used by various social groups, and can be used to quickly and massively spread information or disinformation. This hugely increases the threat of disinformation. With social networks and web portals at the forefront of online communication, and with disinformation thriving in this space, (de)regulation or self-regulation has become a common dilemma in both old democracies and new ones such as North Macedonia.

While parliament must become actively involved in countering disinformation, it is important to maintain (traditional and social) media freedom and not be tempted by 'easy fixes' that might imply curtailing freedoms. Censorship must be avoided. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), the Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM), and the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) have both publicly and in our interviews urged self-regulation rather than regulation, as the latter poses a danger to media freedom, freedom of speech, and information.[6] Representatives from these organisations stressed that current legislation on offline media could be readily applicable to the online world, but it lacks implementation. Excessive media regulation leads to self-censorship and threatens freedom of speech and information. Therefore, to counter disinformation, deviations, and abuses, it is important to use the existing legislation, ensure an independent financial media market, and focus on improving digital media literacy (which was also part of the government's plan to fight disinformation). As a start, AJM and CMEM have created a website to counter disinformation and increase the credibility of media.[7]

While the Government of North Macedonia has expressed its support to these self-regulation efforts, parliament has neither offered its support nor publicly discussed these efforts or raised the question in its working bodies or plenary sessions. Moreover, MPs have not actively promoted tools to counter disinformation within parliament or on their own platforms. When considering future legislation, parliament should organise public discussions that include media perspectives, in particular regarding self-regulation. The recent 'Declaration for promotion of dialogue between parliaments and journalists' associations from the Western Balkans, signed on 26 November 2021 at a regional conference on 'Promoting the dialogue

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[6.] Interviews with representatives from the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) and the Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM), Skopje, October 2021.

[7] See www.promedia.mk

between the parliaments and the journalists from the Western Balkans' organised by AJM in cooperation with the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia, is a step in the right direction as it showcases the importance of parliament's support towards independent media, which is a precondition to tackling disinformation.[8]

A whole of society approach

Parliament has a responsibility to utilise its competencies and needs to be increasingly active in tackling disinformation. So far, the government has been the sole initiator of activities aimed at tackling disinformation and hybrid threats in general. In October 2021, the government adopted the 'Strategy for Building Resilience and Tackling Hybrid Threats', followed by a 2021-2025 Action Plan. The action plan envisages parliamentary oversight activities and recommends communication between informal parliamentary groups and civil society. While this is an essential aspect of parliament's role in tackling disinformation, these initiatives must be led by parliament to ensure an adequate system of checks and balances.

The phenomenon of disinformation cannot be tackled by a single entity or a legislative proposal. Hence, parliament needs to be properly equipped to be able to link different aspects of disinformation to specific competencies within different parliamentary committees. Currently, various committees work on different aspects of disinformation without a conceptual framework and reference to disinformation. These include the Committee for Education, Science, and Sport, the Committee for Defence and Security, the Committee on the Political System and Interethnic Relations, the Committee for European Affairs, and the Foreign Policy Committee. The current setup discourages thematic reflections on the fight against disinformation, as no committee has clear competencies and thus no incentives to do so. In this context, parliament should consider establishing an inter-party working group on disinformation that would be tasked with coordinating the efforts of the different committees. The working group could also lay the ground for a full-blown committee on countering disinformation that would play a leading role in developing and overseeing new legislation. Next to coordination and development, the working group could gather input from outside sources (think tanks, independent agencies, etc.).

The potential of international cooperation

International cooperation is a valuable tool for the Parliament of North Macedonia to position itself in the fight against disinformation in two ways. First, international cooperation can complement the lack of parliamentary capacity to provide MPs with information on the latest policy developments. Second, international cooperation can serve as a socialisation platform for MPs to share and align their knowledge with that of counterparts from the EU, the US, and NATO. International cooperation is vital to inform and improve the work of the Parliament of North Macedonia.

[8.] 'Declaration for promotion of dialogue between parliaments and journalists' associations in the Western Balkan', Journalists Association of Macedonia, Skopje, 30 November 2021, available at <https://znm.org.mk/en/declaration-for-promotion-of-dialogue-between-parliaments-and-journalists-associations-in-the-western-balkans/>

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Most of parliament's international activity is channelled through participation in the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP). In May 2019, the Parliament of North Macedonia hosted a meeting of SEECP's General Committee on Justice, Home Affairs, and Cooperation. The session resulted in a 'Resolution on Countering Disinformation in South-Eastern Europe', which called upon SEECP participants to 'stay committed to efforts against disinformation as a topic that should be repeatedly discussed in continuity and maintained at various levels'. It also urged participants to recognise the impact of disinformation, conduct proactive measures, and pay special attention to 'effective and clear legislation that ensures the transparency of media ownership, and to develop social media guidelines, build the capacity of public communicators and promote media literacy'.[9]

At the 2019 Internet Governance Parliamentary Forum, parliamentarians were encouraged to cooperate and exchange best practices with colleagues from national parliaments on how to deal with public policy related to the Internet world. It was agreed that legislation must be reconsidered to address the challenges of the digital age, underlining the importance of engaging non-state actors. It is the role of parliaments to create legal frameworks for the current and next generations of Internet users to make Internet accessible, open, and safe for everyone. In these people-centred processes, public trust must guide parliaments, both as legislators and on the Internet itself.[10] These recommendations do not necessarily suggest greater media regulation, but rather a more significant role of parliaments in the new digital world.

Another mechanism of international cooperation is the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. During the 67th Annual Session of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly held in October 2021, the Assembly encouraged a 'whole-of-society' approach to resilience, and urged parliaments 'to integrate the protection of democratic values and institutions as well as electoral processes into the baseline requirements, notably in the face of cyberattacks and disinformation'.[11] Previously, the Committee on Democracy and Security had provided a set of recommendations for actions at the national level, urging the consolidation of internal cohesion; the building of a common transatlantic legislative approach to regulate online content to prevent the dissemination of disinformation and propaganda; the development of citizens' media and digital literacy; and the increase of 'interdemocracy and interparliamentary cooperation on countering disinformation and propaganda'.[12]

9. 'Resolution On Countering Disinformation in South-eastern Europe', SEECP PA, Skopje, 10-11 May 2019, available at <http://rspcsee.org/assets/userfiles/GC%20JHS%202019/Resolution_Skopje_10-11_May_2019.pdf>
10. 'Message from the Meeting of Parliamentarians participating in the 14th UN Internet Governance Forum', Inter-Parliamentary Union, available at <https://www.intgovforum.org/multilingual/index.php?q=filedepot_download/7505/1807>
11. 'Developing a Whole-of-Society, Integrated and Coordinated Approach to Resilience for Allied Democracies', NATO Parliamentary Assembly, available at <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-10/2021%20-%20NATO%20PA%20Resolution%20466%20-%20Resilience_0.pdf>
12. 'Bolstering the Democratic Resilience of the Alliance Against Disinformation and Propaganda', NATO Parliamentary Assembly, available at <https://www.nato-pa.int/download-file?filename=/sites/default/files/2021-04/013%20CDS%2021%20E%20-%20DEMOCRATIC%20RESILIENCE%20AGAINST%20DISINFORMATION%20AND%20PROPAGANDA%20-%20SANCHEZ_0.pdf>
13. Hearings conducted by the European Parliament, see https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/inge/events/events-hearings

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Finally, the European Parliament (EP) offers a good base for North Macedonia in terms of operationalising efforts to identify the threat of disinformation at the national and European levels. In June 2020, the EP created a Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including disinformation. The Committee has since held several hearings on disinformation, covering an extensive list of the effects of disinformation on Europe's social and political life.[13] While the EP has been firmly pushing for more decisive action by the EU to tackle foreign interference and disinformation, efforts by the Parliament of North Macedonia to tackle disinformation as one of the core issues in the democratisation process have been very limited. The EP's efforts, although focused on the EU itself, can offer valuable guidance for aspiring countries, such as North Macedonia.

The way forward

There is a solid case for the Parliament of North Macedonia to step up its activities in countering disinformation. As disinformation affects society, the legislature will need to address the issue through its basic functions of law-making, oversight of the executive, and representation. This paper proposes five lines of action for parliament to become active in tackling disinformation.

1. *Inclusive decision making.* When developing and considering new legislation related to disinformation, parliament must continuously consult relevant stakeholders, foremost journalists and journalist associations, civil society, and education experts. This should include regular hearings, consultation sessions, and public debates. Regulatory impact assessments, which are currently not performed by the Parliament of North Macedonia, would be another effective mechanism. These would enable parliament effectively to assess the potential effects of legislation while ensuring inclusive participation of relevant stakeholders.

2. *Exercising oversight.* Parliament must hold the government and relevant ministries accountable regarding their commitments to tackle disinformation and hybrid threats. Parliament needs to actively monitor and evaluate the implementation of the 2019 Plan for Resolute Action against the Spreading of Disinformation, and the 2021 Strategy for Building Resilience and Tackling Hybrid Threats and the 2021-2025 Action Plan. The oversight of these processes must be performance-oriented and involve different stakeholders in evaluating the impact of said strategies beyond simply 'check-listing' the implementation of envisaged activities. In doing so, parliament should make better use of external input to boost the legislature's knowledge on disinformation, for example from the independent Agency of Audio and Audio-visual Media Services or media and civil society.

3. *Operationalisation of disinformation as a concept.* Parliament should operationalise the concept of disinformation, by identifying parliamentary committees with direct competencies in countering disinformation and relevant legislation and institutions from the executive branch. One way of doing this is creating a parliamentary inter-party working group on disinformation tasked with mapping and supporting relevant

institutions, legislation, and competent parliamentary committees, and exploring the option of establishing a dedicated committee focused on disinformation. Moreover, a vital prerequisite to exercise oversight is increasing the capacities of parliamentary administration and services, foremost the Parliamentary Institute. These capacities are crucial to provide MPs with relevant and up-to-date information regarding the latest developments on disinformation.

4. *Awareness-raising.* Parliament needs to increase awareness about the harmful effects of disinformation through enhanced individual engagement of MPs. This includes communicating about the effects of disinformation to local constituencies, for example through the parliamentary TV channel. In this respect, MPs need to show a good example by holding each other accountable when cases of misinformation occur within parliament itself.

5. *International cooperation.* Parliament must utilise international cooperation mechanisms, foremost the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the South-East European Cooperation Process, as well as its cooperation with the European Parliament. These bodies are powerful platforms for MPs to get acquainted with recent approaches towards disinformation that could be applied in the domestic context. Parliament needs to build on these mechanisms, enhance cooperation and follow up on the recommendations and commitments.

These recommendations are aimed at firmly positioning the North Macedonian Parliament in the fight against disinformation, allow MPs to lead efforts against disinformation in the country, and set an example in North Macedonia and abroad.

Bio's

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