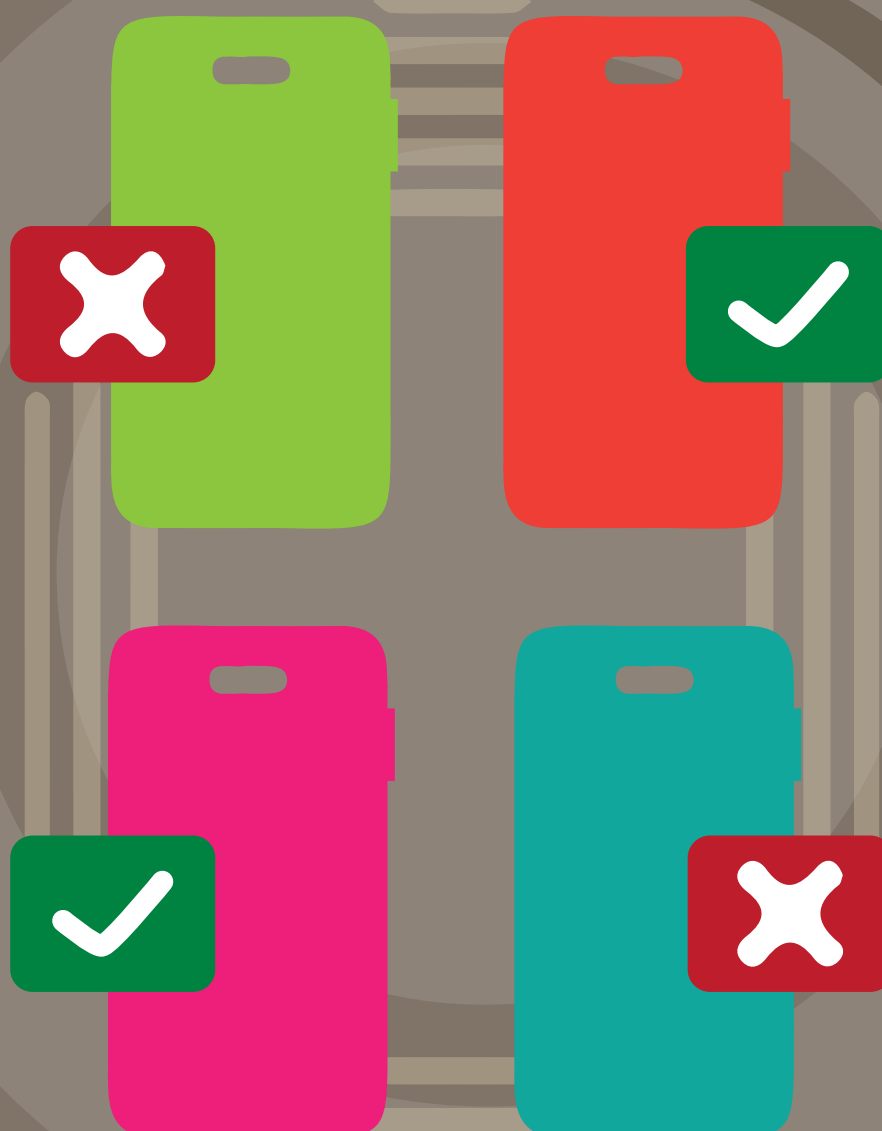


MAPPING AND ANALYSIS OF EFFORTS TO COUNTER INFORMATION POLLUTION

IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION

NOVEMBER 2022





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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network	Organization
BTD	Balkan Trust for Democracy	NDI National Democratic Institute
COE	Council of Europe	NED National Endowment for Democracy
CPJ	Committee to Protect Journalists	OCCRP Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Network
CRD	Civil Rights Defenders	OSCE Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
EC	European Commission	OSI Open Society Institute
ECA	Europe and Central Asia	RSF Reporters Without Borders
EED	European Endowment for Democracy	SIDA Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
ENEMO	European Network of Elections Monitoring Organizations	TRF Thomson Reuters Foundation
EU	European Union	UNDEF United Nations Democracy Fund
EWMI	East-West Management Institute	UNDP United Nations Development Programme
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung	UNESCO United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
FNF	Friedrich Naumann Foundation	UNICEF United Nations Children's Fund
GIZ	German Corporation for International Cooperation	UNMIK United Nations Mission in Kosovo ¹
GMF	German Marshall Fund	USAID United States Agency for International Development
HBS	Heinrich Boll Stiftung	VIKES Finnish Foundation for Media and Development
IFCN	International Fact-Checking Network	WFD World Forum for Democracy
IREX	International Research and Exchanges Board	
IRI	International Republican Institute	
IWPR	Institute for War and Peace Reporting	
KAS	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung	
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender	
MIL	Media and Information Literacy	
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty	

¹ References to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

LIST OF DEFINITIONS



Information integrity²

Information integrity is determined by “the accuracy, consistency and reliability of the information content, processes and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem.”³ It requires public access to trustworthy, balanced and complete information “on current affairs, government actions, political actors and other elements relevant to their political perceptions and decision-making.”

Information pollution⁴

Information pollution refers to false, misleading and manipulated online and offline content, which is created, produced and disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and which has the potential to cause societal or physical harm. An overabundance of information and a high incidence of low-quality information within an ecosystem reduce our ability to find and trust information. Information pollution can be categorized as disinformation, misinformation or malinformation.

Disinformation⁵

Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.

Misinformation⁶

Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.

Malinformation⁷

Information that is based on real facts, but manipulated to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.

Social cohesion

According to the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Conceptual Framework of Social Cohesion, social cohesion is “the extent

2 UNDP Strategic Guidance: Information Integrity: Forging a pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust, 2 February 2022.

3 “What is Information Integrity?”, Yonder, 28 January 2019. <https://www.yonder-ai.com/resources/what-is-information-integrity/>

4 UNDP Strategic Guidance: Information Integrity: Forging a pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust, 2 February 2022, p 4.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals”⁸. It is a collective bond, or a common identity, members of a certain society share. It is not an ethnic, or a state identity, but more a shared common sense of mutual interests and common goals.

Hate speech

Hate speech is “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language about a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factors. This is often rooted in prejudice, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive”⁹ and even lead to offline harm or violence.¹⁰

Propaganda

Propaganda is the more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people’s beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps, and so forth). Deliberateness and a relatively heavy emphasis on manipulation distinguish propaganda from casual conversation or the free and easy exchange of ideas.¹¹

Influence campaigns

Influence campaigns are both coordinated and direct or indirect applications of activities that aim to affect the attitudes, behaviours and decisions of people within a country or a region in a way that can benefit the interests of the actors conducting the campaign.¹²

8 Theme: Social Cohesion, UNDP website <https://data.undp.org/covid-19/social-cohesion/#:~:text=Social%20cohesion%20is%20the%20extent,glue%20that%20holds%20societies%20together>.

9 United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, UN Secretary-General, May 2019. <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/hate-speech-strategy.shtml>

10 United Nations Development Programme, Guidance Note: From Pilots towards Policies: Utilizing online data for preventing violent extremism and addressing hate speech, May 2022. <https://pveportal.org/research/from-pilots-towards-policies-utilizing-online-data-for-preventing-violent-extremism-and-addressing-hate-speech/>

11 Bruce L. Smith, “Propaganda”, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 17 February 2016.

12 50 U.S. Code § 3021 - National Security Council., <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/50/3021>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Information pollution is a key dilemma for societies on several levels. It is an important contributory factor to the growing security threats and development challenges in the Europe and Central Asia region.¹³ In the past decade, significant resources by international development partners have been invested in tackling this growing global phenomenon that is also negatively affecting social cohesion in the region. Through different and numerous examples of government-led and independent responses to information pollution, societies in the region are showing that they have recognized disinformation to be a serious threat to their countries' social, political and economic stability.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been an important driver that has allowed disinformation and conspiracy theories to thrive throughout the region. Coupled with growing trends of populist, xenophobic, and anti-migration narratives in politics, the pandemic contributed to the spread of false content and anti-establishment conspiracy theories that have significantly hampered public trust in institutions, which had detrimental impacts on public health. For example, in some countries, including Kazakhstan and Moldova, such trends contributed towards lower vaccination rates.

Moreover, election campaigns were recognized as one of the main flashpoints of disinformation. These campaigns targeted not just political opponents, but also journalists and civil society leaders.

This Mapping and Analysis has found that internet and social media usage correspond with the rise of access to alternative news sources in some ECA countries and territories. Accordingly, the manipulation of public opinion through social media has also been identified as an upward trend.

Governments, civil society organizations and the media are all taking measures to battle disinformation in the region. Many governments in the region have taken unique approaches to disinformation, often impacting the freedom of

¹³ The Mapping and Analysis Report consists of desk research, interviewing and consulting 40 organizations, experts, practitioners and international partners in the region between August 2020 and January 2021, covering interviewees from Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

speech and the right to information. While some governments' actions in the region are being criticized for often using an anti-disinformation narrative to battle not false but unwanted information and for their repressive legislative measures, many independent organizations and civil society activists and journalists are creating local, national and international independent initiatives to battle disinformation through policy proposals and by conducting research and polling in attempts to better understand the roots of the problem. They are also organizing media and information literacy educational platforms and awareness campaigns, arranging capacity-building training for media and journalists, and creating fact checking and debunking platforms that disseminate disinformation.

This study also found that some initiatives focus on specific types of disinformation, such as gender-based disinformation, or political and electoral disinformation, or foreign influence operations, for example. Others are using a more holistic approach to the problem, focused on the causes, enablers and drivers of disinformation rather than countering specific examples of disinformation.

Development partners in the region are active and supportive of counter-disinformation initiatives. Among the most active are USAID, the EU, the Open Society Foundation and the UNDP. Among social media companies, META/Facebook are engaged in the region through their third-party fact checking initiative.

This study proposes a set of actions and approaches for building social resilience through the development and support for innovative media and information literacy initiatives and scientific research of the disinformation phenomenon in the region.

The analysis found that investing in networking and exchange of knowledge and experiences should be prioritized. The same applies to the improvement of government responses, with the emphasis on a human-rights sensitive approach in their design.

The set of proposed measures presented in this Mapping and Analysis is directed at improving the infosphere by investing in media development, improving programming development partners' programming and on urging social media companies to incorporate principles of social responsibility to help counter information pollution.

INTRODUCTION

Access to quality information plays a critical role in public trust, democracy, peace and social cohesion. Technological advances have democratized the infosphere by multiplying the actors and channels through which information is produced and disseminated. As information becomes more accessible, it also becomes more open to influences from non-traditional actors in the infosphere – in most contexts anyone can create and disseminate information. As a consequence, the traditional actors and gatekeepers of information and news – established media and government institutions – are struggling to compete with this new reality. The information ecosystem acts in a manner akin to natural ecosystems, and, as with natural resources, more users are creating more pollution.

However, the increase in users is not the key driver of information pollution – it has become a problem in the present environment because online business models and social media algorithms prioritize content based on its engagement value rather than being premised on its accuracy or truth. False – as well as exaggerated and provocative – information generates more attention than accurate and neutral content, and therefore travels faster. In the research report *The spread of true and false news online*, a group of authors have analysed verified true and false news content that has been shared on Twitter from 2006-2017 and concluded that:

“Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information, and the effects were more pronounced for false political news than for false news about terrorism, natural disasters, science, urban legends, or financial information”¹⁴.

This has important ramifications for the democratic process as information pollution is affecting the public’s ability to make informed decisions. The Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression¹⁵, entitled *Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression*, identifies the correlation between information pollution and democratic backsliding around the world. Disinformation, misinformation

14 Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, Sinan Aral, Research, “The spread of true and false news online”, *Science*, 359 p. 1146–1151, March 2018, p. 1 of 6.

15 United Nations Human Rights Council, *Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression*. Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, Forty-seventh session, 21 June-9 July 2021. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/25>

and malinformation, together with the growth of hate speech and propaganda, especially online, are fomenting social divisions and creating mistrust towards public institutions and society. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that public health and public well-being are directly affected by this phenomenon.

The report also states, rather ominously, that information pollution, or disinformation, “is not the cause but the consequence of societal crises and the breakdown of public trust in institutions”.

This regional Mapping and Analysis report is part of UNDP’s efforts to understand information pollution as a global phenomenon, and to create coherent and effective responses by learning from the best practices applied by various actors.

Methodology

The analysis specifically focuses on information pollution in the ECA region, its many sources and platforms for dissemination. It examines disinformation trends and how different actors in the region respond to them. Further, the report looks at the gaps in the responses and the possibilities of action and overcoming these gaps. It also suggests areas of strategic action and possible engagement by UNDP and other stakeholders.

Following desk research, primary data was collected through a series of 47 interviews with recognized civil society leaders, journalists, diplomats, and some of the key personnel working for international organizations in the region. Most of the interviewees are directly involved in counter-disinformation initiatives, both regionally and within their respective countries and territories.

The report incorporates an analysis of the relevant literature, similar mappings, legal documents, relevant legislation and reports, as well as interviews. The report also closely examines media reports on current events in the countries of the region. However, the Mapping and Analysis on Belarus and Türkiye are limited to desk research.

The research was conducted from December 2021 – March 2022, hence, regarding the recent crises in the region, the events in Kazakhstan from 2-11 January 2022 and the Russia’s 24th of February invasion of Ukraine, it is still early to analyse the role and effects of disinformation during the protests and the war respectively. This in itself limits the impact of this report, without taking away from the value of this Mapping’s content.

CHAPTER 1.

BACKGROUND: THE LANDSCAPE

THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

When it comes to the main enablers and drivers of information pollution from the political, media, social and legislative environments of the region, the findings in the *Freedom House Nations in Transit* country reports state that governments of the countries in the region have played a predominant role in creating the conditions for information pollution to thrive in the region. Unstable democracies, authoritarian and corrupted regimes, weak institutions and undeveloped economies in the region are generally seen as preconditions for the rise of populism, nationalism and violent extremism – trends also reflected in the digital space. Such an environment, negatively affects the general level of trust in institutions, hampers public participation in democratic processes and estranges vulnerable groups.

The widespread presence of disinformation negatively affects social cohesion and further amplifies social divisions thereby creating the potential for conflicts among countries and within societies.¹⁶ In addition, the region is home to many frozen unresolved and active ongoing conflicts and the weaknesses and underdevelopment of its transitional democracies make it a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.

Distrust in institutions proved particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an example, exposure to disinformation and conspiracy theories caused a very low level of vaccine take-up in some countries in the region.¹⁷

A discriminatory discourse against migrants, ethnic and religious minorities and gender-based disinformation are omnipresent, especially during election campaigns. A factor that exacerbates the situation is the poor flow of information among different ethnic and linguistic communities. The language barrier is most visible between speakers of Slavic languages

16 UNHRC, Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression. <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/47/25>

17 The Critical Mass, Contaminated Trust, Public Health Disinformation and its Societal Impacts in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, 2021. https://issuu.com/thecriticalmass/docs/contaminated_trust

and of Albanian in different contexts in the Western Balkans, and among different ethnic groups in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan for example.

Gender-based disinformation and disinformation against the LGBTI community in the countries of the region usually accuse Western countries of “creating campaigns against traditional values”^{18 19}. Religious organizations and populist right-wing movements are common aggregators of these narratives, which sometimes results in violence against different groups, as in Georgia during the Gay Pride Parade in Tbilisi in 2021²⁰.

The sources of information pollution vary from country to country, as do the responses. To cite a case in point, in some countries, governments are seen as the main purveyors of disinformation, a fact we learned from our interviewees from experts in the region, for example:

“Government is controlling the infosphere through the complete control of the media in the country, and through internet censorship. During the initial stages COVID-19 pandemic, they were saying there aren’t any cases of infection in the country, and fining citizens for wearing masks in public. Later, they were imposing mask mandate, but for reasons unrelated to the pandemic, such as the desert dust.”²¹

In other countries, foreign malign influence is perceived as the main threat, as it was mentioned in Ukraine.

THE MEDIA AND INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

The level of development and heterogeneity of the media varies from subregion to subregion, and from country to country. However, according to relevant reports by Freedom House, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Without Borders and others, in most countries the traditional media landscape is either undeveloped or heavily politicized and biased. the delineation between

18 Tetiana Kozak, “A landmark court case on “traditional values” in Ukraine ends strangely - in victory for both sides”, Open Democracy, 8 September 2020. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/a-landmark-court-case-on-traditional-values-in-ukraine-ends-strangely-in-victory-for-both-sides/>

19 Joanna Hoare and Maisy Weicherding, “Russia’s influence in shrinking civic space in Central Asia”, Foreign Policy Centre, 24 May 2016. <https://fpc.org.uk/russias-influence-shrinking-civic-space-central-asia/>

20 Liselotte Mas, “Georgia: Right-wing extremists and Orthodox Church attack activists and ransack LGBT associations”, The Observers, France24, 6 July 2021. <https://observers.france24.com/en/europe/20210707-georgia-lgbt-pride-march-right-wing-orthodox-attacks>

21 Interview, Ruslan Tukhbatulin, Chronicles of Turkmenistan, Budva/Vienna, 13 December 2021.

politics and the press is unclear even in well-established democratic states, and even more difficult in the countries covered by Nations in Transit, which are often classified as Hybrid/Transitional or Consolidated Authoritarian Regimes.²²

The reports show that public broadcasters are often controlled by ruling political parties, while the ownership of the privately-owned media is often non-transparent. Local and community media are usually invisible to the advertising market, to international donors and to capacity-building projects which leads to a situation where they are underserved and lacking in capacities to provide accurate and timely reporting.

Where there is a well-developed internet infrastructure, a growing trend of social media penetration has occurred. According to the Hootsuite's Digital 2021²³ survey, social media penetration varies in the region (e.g. Kazakhstan – 63.5 per cent, Serbia – 52.8 per cent, Ukraine – 58.9 per cent, Georgia – 84.3 per cent at the outset of 2022), but it mainly follows the same ratio to internet penetration in all the countries. The global trend in the increasing usage of social media as the main news source among youth is reflected in the region, according to the interviewees and relevant reports.^{24 25 26}

While the internet infrastructure in the Western Balkans and Western CIS subregions is well developed, and internet penetration and social media usage are high, in some countries in the Central Asia and South Caucasus regions, governments have not invested enough in providing a digital infrastructure in remote areas in the country which means vulnerable groups have restricted access to information.²⁷

Social media accounts, being the mass communication platforms and considering the high number of users, are super-spreaders of disinformation in the ECA region. While social media penetration in Georgia reaches as high as 84.3%, according to Information Ecosystem Assessment done by Internews, over two thirds of Georgians access information on

22 Csaky Zselyke, “Media Matters”, Freedom House Nations in Transit Report 2021, p. 14. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf

23 2021 Digital Report – Digital Trends Q4 Update, Hootsuite. <https://www.hootsuite.com/resources/digital-trends-q4-update>

24 Elira Turdubaeva, Report, The status of media and the role of social media in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, IWPR/CABAR 2018. https://cabar.asia/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Status_of_media.pdf

25 Western Balkans Regional Poll, International Republican Institute's Center for Insights in Survey. Research by Ipsos Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2 February 2020 - 06 March 2020, p. 82. https://www.iri.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy/iri.org/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf

26 Between East and West Democracy, Disinformation and Geopolitics in Central and Southeastern Europe, Public Opinion Research. NDI, July 2021. <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/REAPPS2021researchpublicversion.pdf>

27 Lilia Burunciuc, “How Central Asia can ensure it doesn't miss out on a digital future”, World Bank Blogs, 21 June 2021. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/europeandcentralasia/how-central-asia-can-ensure-it-doesnt-miss-out-digital-future>

public affairs using social media platforms.²⁸ Throughout the region, various surveys and studies show a growing trend of people using platforms like Facebook and Telegram as their main news sources.

IWPR’s “Development of New Media and Digital Journalism in Central Asia” project notes:

“The main news-sharing networks remain Facebook in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and Instagram in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Among the messengers in Central Asia, the most popular news sources are WhatsApp, Telegram and Viber.”²⁹

Considering their role of spreading disinformation, unfortunately, the largest social media corporations are not doing enough to contribute to the fight against disinformation and have been accused of choosing profit over society and integrity of democratic processes.³⁰ Often without giving a reasonable explanation, they continue with the practice of non-transparency in their policies and enforcement of their rules. Moreover, according to the findings of NED’s 2021 report on the civil society responses to disinformation, they only selectively allow access to their databases that are in the public domain on their platforms.³¹ Additionally, previous research on the topic shows that they prioritize algorithms that feed sensationalism and the promotion of divisive and inflammatory ideas on their networks.³²

DISINFORMATION TRENDS

Political Disinformation

Political disinformation is an increasing concern in the region as governments, politicians and political parties, various far-right groups, and foreign

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- 28 “Georgia: An Information Ecosystem Assessment”, Internews. February, 2021. https://internews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Georgia-Information_Ecosystem-Part_1.pdf
- 29 Central Asian Audience Receives News from Social Media and Messengers, Editorial – IWPR Research, CABAR 30 September 2019. <https://cabar.asia/en/central-asian-audience-receives-news-from-social-media-and-messengers-iwpr-research>
- 30 Jake Third, [How Social Media Should Respond to Misinformation?](#), March 2022
- 31 Samantha Bradshaw and Lisa-Maria Neudert, “The Road Ahead: Mapping Civil Society Responses to Disinformation”, National Endowment for Democracy, January 2021. <https://www.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/The-Road-Ahead-Mapping-Civil-Society-Responses-to-Disinformation-Bradshaw-Neudert-Jan-2021-2.pdf>
- 32 Chengcheng Shao & Pik-mai Hu, “Anatomy of an online misinformation network” <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0196087#sec012>, April 2018

powers weaponize narratives and technology to influence politics.

Some of the major political actors in the countries of the region are using social media to manipulate public opinion in a coordinated and inauthentic manner. Some of the activities, presented in the analysis chapter, include using government resources for the creation of so-called troll factories. Through the hiring of foreign PR companies, key political protagonists are also organizing the removal of unwanted content from the internet.

Reports of international organizations and of local civil society activists and journalists interviewed for this report, almost without exception, suggest that political actors are seeking to mobilize their support based on identity politics. A civil society leader from Montenegro noted that political leaders are more comfortable with focusing on identity issues than addressing important topics:

“Topics of ethnic and national identity completely overshadowed the public and political debate on other important topics in Montenegro - such as the battle against corruption, electoral reform, and other important issues critical for the country’s accession into the European Union.”³³

Politicians frequently use a divisive rhetoric such as “us against them” in their political discourse to silence and discredit critics and criticism. They also use different methods to enhance divisions by misusing both the media and social media to manipulate public opinion and stir up tensions. For example, populist narratives to galvanize support, or attack on the media or frequent attacks on LGBTI and gender-based hate speech.³⁴ Discriminatory discourse and hate speech against vulnerable groups and civil society and gender-based hate speech and disinformation are especially widespread during election campaigns.

Foreign Influence

Influence operations have become faster and cheaper in the digital environment, resulting in heightened activity in the information ecosystem and greatly impacting elections, social cohesion and democracy. ECA is a vast region with many sub-regions located in a tense geographical zone of influence between global powers and political interests.

Various campaigns from abroad often target one or more political actors in a competition over influence in the countries. Further, some authoritarian governments are using anti-western narratives to counter criticism of the corruption and lack of reform in their own countries, and activists and journalists

33 Interview, Civil society leader from Budva, Montenegro, 15 December 2021.

34 Csaky, Zselyke and Smeltzer, Mike. “Hope and Pushback: How Citizens and Political Leaders Can Band Together to Counter Repression”. Freedom House Nations in Transit Report 2021. p. 15. https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/NIT_2021_final_042321.pdf

are often presented as “foreign agents and traitors”. Some countries in the Central Asian region are passing legislation that exemplify these narratives. According to *Eurasianet* on 5 January 2022: “Kazakhstan adopted strikingly similar legislation to Russia’s in 2015, which requires NGOs that receive support from abroad to register as ‘foreign agents’ though it stopped short of using the term ‘foreign agent’.”³⁵ Some of the governments have also weaponized the fight against disinformation against local and foreign independent organizations.

Some governments in the region are taking actions to counter disinformation from foreign influences. Legislative and policy actions have been taken to contain Russian influence in media, as for example Montenegro, where in April 2022 the government suspended the broadcasting of Russia Today and Sputnik, in line with European Union sanctions on Russia related to its war on Ukraine.³⁶ Or Moldova whose parliament in 2018 passed a law banning television channels from broadcasting news from Russian news stations.³⁷ And Ukraine, where, on the eve of the Russian attack, Ukrainian TV channels ZIK, NewsOne and 112 were forced off the air late on 2 February after the official channel owner and opposition MP Taras Kozak was targeted with sanctions.³⁸

Western governments and international organizations, which are relatively new foreign actors in the region, have been investing in building civil societies’ capacities and media capacities for decades. USAID is supporting most of media development projects together with its implementing partners, such as Internews and Human Rights Watch. The United Nations and its agencies, the EU, UK AID Direct and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) are among the most active donors in this field.³⁹

By investing in independent media development, many of those organizations are becoming a target for disinformation campaigns by various political actors and being blamed for allegedly inspiring revolution such as ‘the inspiration behind the colour revolutions’.

Crisis-driven disinformation

Disinformation online expands significantly during times of political, economic and social grievances. In that way, it contributes to further

35 Zholdas Orisbayev, “Russia’s foreign agent law ricochets around Kazakhstan”, *Eurasianet*, 5 January 2022. <https://eurasianet.org/russias-foreign-agent-law-ricochets-around-kazakhstan>

36 Samir Kajosevic, “Montenegro’s Divided Government Finally Silences Russian Media”, *Balkan Insight*, 8 April 2022. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/04/08/montenegros-divided-govt-finally-silences-russian-media/>

37 Megan Reiss, “Moldova Bans Russian News Broadcasts”, *Lawfare Institute Blog*, 14 February 2018. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/moldova-bans-russian-news-broadcasts>

38 Peter Dickinson, “Analysis: Ukraine bans Kremlin-linked TV channels”, *Atlantic Council*, 5 February 2021. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/analysis-ukraine-bans-kremlin-linked-tv-channels/>

39 Complete donors table in Annex C of the Report.

polarising the public debate, to eroding public trust, to inciting violence and hatred against minorities, women and vulnerable groups and to disrupting democratic and development processes.

Emergencies and natural disasters show us the weaknesses of social resilience against information pollution in the region. COVID-19 related disinformation has been and remains pervasive throughout the region. The anti-vaccination narratives that question the very existence of the virus have significantly affected vaccination rates in some of the countries in the region. For example, according to the Critical Mass study “Contaminated Trust”, interviewed experts claimed that internet trolls, originating in Russia, impacted for the “decline in vaccination coverage” in the Ukraine.⁴⁰

Civil society leaders and journalists are increasingly being threatened and subjected to disinformation campaigns because of their investigative work, opinions, and reporting. The same applies for some ethnic and religious minorities. Moreover, times of crises have served as a pretext to further restrict freedom of speech in some countries, where the governments shut down the internet or blocked internet communication platforms.⁴¹

During the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February and March, it became very difficult to navigate the media reports on the rapidly unfolding events, since social media became the fastest and most used source of information. Russia has been proactively utilizing a combination of information warfare and cyberwarfare techniques to shape the narrative and justify its invasion. Notably, Russia resorted to coordinated inauthentic behaviour and fabricated material to sow confusion and push false claims on “denazification”.

Scholars and researchers are already making observations and recommendations on how to navigate the new reality.⁴² And social media companies have taken steps to slow the mass spreading of misinformation and to halt state-owned media disinformation. However, Telegram, now a hub for the unregulated sharing of information both in Ukraine and Russia, still permits inauthentic accounts to reach a vast audience.⁴³

40 The Critical Mass, Contaminated Trust, Public Health Disinformation and its Societal Impacts in Georgia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine, 2021, p. 27. https://issuu.com/thecriticalmass/docs/contaminated_trust

41 Freedom House, Twitter post, 4 January 2022. <https://twitter.com/freedomhouse/status/1478436670848524295?s=20&t=7WpzAGRrj8wPvX9F2mRU0Q>

42 Scott Simon, “How to spot disinformation and propaganda emerging from the Ukraine-Russia conflict”, National Public Radio, 5 March 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/05/1084729621/how-to-spot-disinformation-and-propaganda-coming-out-of-the-ukraine-russia-conflict>

43 How Unmoderated Platforms Became the Frontline for Russian Propaganda, August, 2022 <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-unmoderated-platforms-became-frontline-russian-propaganda-0>

CHAPTER 2.

MAPPING AND ANALYSIS OF KEY ACTORS AND INITIATIVES

TRENDS IN RESPONSES IN THE ECA REGION

This mapping exercise shows there are a plethora of different responses to disinformation in the region. The counter-disinformation ecosystem is diverse not just regionally, but also within countries. Some of the efforts are spearheaded by civil society organizations as in Georgia, where MDI and GRASS are leading some efforts to counter disinformation coming from abroad and from governments. In other countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, the new media, such as the website Kaktus.kg or Bolot Temirov's YouTube channel, play a critical role in debunking disinformation emanating from different sources. In countries like Ukraine, where information warfare is a part of an active conflict, a number of CSOs, media and the government are mobilized in an effort to counter disinformation and misinformation.

In addition, to the diverse counter-disinformation projects, the region does not lack donors and funding programmes.⁴⁴ Development partners in the region are active and supportive of counter-disinformation initiatives. Among the active partners engaged in responding to information pollution through various programmes such as media literacy, promoting civic engagement, raising awareness are USAID, the EU, and the Open Society Foundation. Among social media companies, META/Facebook are engaged in the region through their third-party fact checking initiative.

44 A complete list of donors is provided in the Annex C of this report.

Civil Society and Media

Civil sector and independent media are the most active players in the fight against information pollution in the region. Since the beginning of the democratic transition process in post-socialist countries three decades ago, international development programmes have been present throughout the region, and independent media associations have long been working on building media capacity by training journalists, developing ethical standards in reporting and improving the legislative framework related to freedom of speech, the independence of the media and freedom of information.

The media are developing their responses, monitoring and fact-checking platforms. They are also contributing to efforts by implementing reporting ethics and creating self-regulatory policies.

Other responses to information include education of the general population, i.e. the consumers of information, through media and information literacy (MIL) educational programmes and projects.

Governments and Public Institutions

Governments and public institutions have also taken action to combat disinformation. Government-organized and supported fact-checking platforms were reported in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Türkiye.

Most often, with few exceptions, the means and initiatives they undertake are misused by the authorities to restrict freedom of speech and criticism of government policies. Sometimes governments do so through restrictive legislation, or sometimes by creating platforms that, under the guise of fighting disinformation, serve to undermine the credibility of critical media, journalists and activists. Our interviewees in most cases were backing up the claims which were found in numerous reports:

“The government in Kazakhstan is using the Russian example and creating a legal framework to battle unwanted criticism by designating activists and journalists as foreign actors.”⁴⁵

On a positive note, some governments, for example in Ukraine and North Macedonia, are piloting inclusive initiatives, in which they are trying to include civil society actors as partners in both the planning and implementation processes. Furthermore, some of the regulatory authorities are adopting preventive rather than punitive approaches by emphasizing educational policies within policy responses contained in national strategic documents. Some are actively engaging in MIL campaigns.

45 Interview with a Kazakh civil society leader, Budva/Astana, 17 December 2021.

Advocacy and Human Rights Activism

Some responses to countering disinformation are dealing with different challenges such as through engagement on human rights, freedom of information, internet freedom or digital rights, for example. Although associations focused on such themes are not directly engaged in the fight against disinformation, through support for journalists and media, through advocacy and policy and legislative analyses and recommendations, they are providing an added value to the creation of social resilience to information pollution. Digital movements on the region are critical to the work on free speech and access to accurate information.

CHAPTER 3.

CASE STUDIES

WESTERN BALKANS AND TÜRKIYE

Civil Society and media organizations have created sub-regional networks focused on counter-disinformation efforts in the Western Balkans. These regional initiatives include fact-checking initiatives, initiatives aimed at increasing critical thinking among the youth in the region, building media capacity to counter disinformation and strengthening media accountability.

This report identified two regional fact-checking initiatives – SEEcheck and the International Fact Checking Network (IFCN)-accredited effort that to a certain extent overlaps with Facebook’s curatorial third-party programme in the region. This network includes Croatia and Slovenia in addition to the six Western Balkan countries. The second initiative is the Anti Disinformation Network for the Balkans, which includes both Western Balkans countries and Bulgaria and Greece.

The Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) is piloting several regional networking initiatives aimed at providing technical support to the media in the region. In addition to supporting capacity-building among the local and community media, a project financed by the UK Government, BIRN has initiated regional cooperation to promote and protect the public’s digital rights.

Apart from BIRN’s efforts, regional media development and journalists’ rights initiatives include the South East European Media Observatory and the UNESCO project, Building Trust in Media in Southeast Europe and Türkiye.

The initiative, *Strengthening Societal Resilience and Countering Foreign-Perpetrated Disinformation in Six Western Balkans Countries and Territories* is one of the activities within the Brdo Brdo-Brijuni Process⁴⁶ – which are efforts to “enhance resilience and boost regional cooperation in the fight against disinformation”.

46 The Brdo-Brijuni Process is an annual event aimed at EU integration of the Western Balkan countries.

SOUTH CAUCASUS AND WESTERN CIS

Government engagement varies across this subregion that encompasses Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia and Ukraine. In Ukraine, for example, there is a will and effort to involve the civil sector in the fight against disinformation, while in other countries the proclaimed fight against disinformation is often used to fight civil society and the local independent media.

There is a well-developed system of independent responses to information pollution in these societies, and there is a very active and large network of international donors that have significantly supported the creation of a systemic response to disinformation, notably by supporting the media and civil society.

There are several regional initiatives and networks which sometimes recruit journalists and activists from countries that are engaged in conflict with each other. Some of the responses provided by these networks and regional media can also serve as an innovative model for anti-disinformation activities which seek to counter the disinformation threat using a conflict-sensitive approach.

During the military hostilities in 2020, a regional media project [JAM news](#), with the aim to provide impartial analysis, conducted a fact-checking initiative through which Azeri journalists monitored and verified Armenian government statements, the Armenian media and social media. For their part, Armenian journalists undertook the same exercise with the information originating from Azeri sources.

JAM news was financially supported through the Confidence-Building Early Response Mechanism ([COBERM](#)), an EU-funded programme implemented by UNDP.

[COBERM](#) assisted two similar regional projects, a regional investigative reporting initiative [OC-Media](#), which a range of other international organizations also support. [Chai-Khana](#), another regional platform, uses a different, storytelling approach in its reporting. They are women-owned platforms focused in particular on gender equality and gender-sensitive reporting.

The Baltic Center for Media Excellence (BCME), together with the Baltic to Black Sea Alliance (BBSA) and in cooperation with the Media Development Foundation (Georgia), the Independent Journalism Center (Moldova), and the Ukrainian Media and Communication Institute, has initiated the [Media Literacy Advancement Program](#), and through it they have organized a series of roundtable discussions and conferences, analyses and mappings to support these countries in the development of a strategic, comprehensive approach to improving MIL in these countries.

CENTRAL ASIA

There are several Central Asian regional networking initiatives and projects]. [CAMP – The Central Asia Media Program](#) is funded by USAID and implemented by Internews. It is a five-year programme that aims to develop “a more balanced information environment in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to increase openness among youth and adults for differing ideas, opinions and perspectives and, in turn, to increase their engagement in civic participation”.

[CABAR](#) is the IWPR’s regional analytical, informational and educational platform for Central Asia. Its mission is to develop expert and journalistic analytics, provide training on new media and extend analytical support for broad social processes in the countries of the region.

The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs is a Washington-based non-profit organization dedicated to fostering academic exchange between Central Asia and the rest of the world. It organizes regional roundtable discussions, provides scholars from the region with advice on scholarship and fellowship opportunities, and helps them liaise with publishers and partners in Europe and the United States.

The [Analytical Center for Central Asia \(ACCA\)](#) is an independent human rights media project which reports about human rights violations. Their investigative work on troll farms which were targeting activists and journalists critical of the government in Kazakhstan was mentioned in the Country Case Studies Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation.⁴⁷

[BRYCA](#) is a project that aims to promote critical thinking and to strengthen the resilience of young people against disinformation and hate speech online, as part of its global objective to promote support for civil society in the protection and promotion of human rights and fundamental freedoms worldwide. A quiz game was created as a result of the project – Qlever. The game, which targets young people across Central Asia to build youth resilience to disinformation by equipping them with critical thinking skills and knowledge, is available on mobile phones and computers.

47 Group of Authors, “Country Case Studies Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organized Social Media Manipulation”, University of Oxford, Oxford Internet Institute, 2021, pp. 221, 447. https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/127/2021/03/Case-Studies_FINAL.pdf

CHAPTER 4.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

a. The Integrity Coalition – Georgia

In Georgia, USAID has launched a five-year programme, the *Georgia Information Integrity Programme*, which is being implemented by a London-based consulting company, Zinc Network, engaged in research, media development and organizational capacity-building. The programme is a part of USAID’s Development Framework for Countering Malign Kremlin Influence.

Although the armed conflict in Georgia ended in 2008 with the six-point cease-fire agreement⁴⁸, there are continuous disinformation campaigns with the aim to influence Georgian foreign policy and its internal affairs.⁴⁹

Among the broad range of activities envisioned by the Information Integrity project, a group of eight Georgian CSOs joined forces to establish the *Information Integrity Coalition* aiming to “identify, monitor and research sources of disinformation”. Georgian civil society is a highly competitive environment, which makes organizations with similar goals and areas of expertise compete for the same resources.⁵⁰ In that regard, the first significant success of the project is the mobilization of key counter-disinformation actors in the country.

Signatory organizations are the Media Development Foundation, iFact, Institute for Development of Freedom of Information (IDFI), Institute for War and Peace Reporting, International Society for Fair Elections and Democracy (ISFED), Georgia’s Reforms Association (GRASS), the Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics and the Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI).

48 Repertoire of the Practice of the United Nations Security Council, 2008-2009, 26, Situation in Georgia, p. 2. https://www.un.org/en/sc/repertoire/2008-2009/Part%20I/Europe/08-09_Georgia.pdf

49 Naria Seskuria, “Russia’s “Hybrid Aggression” against Georgia: The Use of Local and External Tools”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington D.C., 21 September 2021. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-hybrid-aggression-against-georgia-use-local-and-external-tools>

50 Gemma Piñol Puig, “Situation Analysis of Civil Society in Georgia”, Europe Foundation 2016, p. 27. <https://paperzz.com/doc/8323683/situation-analysis-of-civil-society-in-georgia>

The *Information Integrity Coalition* represents only part of the activities envisioned by the project team, which is also engaged in building societal resilience to disinformation in Georgian society in general. The *Information Integrity Coalition* was successful in creating an environment for the cooperation of key actors. By forming the coalition to counter-disinformation cooperation at the national level, the project goal was to help to reduce the duplication of efforts, and also to create a strong united voice which could react to major disinformation events in the country. Its effectiveness has already been demonstrated, especially in the disinformation campaigns produced by far-right actors in the country and in the ongoing war in Ukraine.

The Coalition Manager, Nino Zedelishvili, notes that there are four streams of activities in the coalition's practices: monitoring ad hoc events, monitoring ongoing events, advocacy and research.

When it comes to the measurable results of the endeavour, the project team members interviewed for this research claim that it is still early to tell what the final impact of their activities will be, but there are some early signs of significant results. The project's M&E strategy consists of qualitative and quantitative research which is measuring the coalition members' capacities through a qualitative self-reporting mechanism. When it comes to audience research, a biannual poll at the national level is being conducted, through which the general population's awareness of the disinformation problem is gauged, as are the coalition and project activities. They are also monitoring and evaluating the engagement of digital data (likes, shares, comments on social media) and measuring their media presence and the way the coalition is impacting the fight against disinformation.

b. Local and community media development – examples from three subregions

Western Balkans: In 2021 the British Government launched the Media for All programme⁵¹ called *Supporting Greater Media Independence in the Western Balkans*. The programme is implemented by the British Council, BIRN, the Thomson Foundation and the International NGO Training and Research Centre. It provides expert mentoring, training and support for local media outlets, journalists, editors, owners and audiences across the Western Balkans.

The stakeholders recognized the importance and role of the local and community media in shaping local public opinion. These media, which

51 Davor Marko, "The backbone of professional and independent journalism", Thomson Foundation. <https://www.thomsonfoundation.org/latest/the-backbone-of-professional-and-independent-journalism/>

were traditionally deemed underserved by international development funding opportunities, are closer to the consumers. Apart from offering service information about their community, they are often the main source of general information. The programme provided more than 50 local media in the Western Balkans with tailored business development support, capacity-building and trainings aimed at enhancing two-way communication with citizens, strengthening gender-sensitive reporting, encouraging youth reporters and public debates, networking and exchange.

Ukraine: The Ukrainian NGO “Center for Analytics and Investigations” founded “Bez Brekhny” (No lies), a fact-checking platform in 2016. Their projects, as most of the counter-disinformation efforts in Ukraine, are mainly focused on disinformation emanating from external actors.

According to the project’s founder, Oleksandr Gorohovskiy, since 2017, Bez Brekhny has mainly focused on developing the capacities of the ⁵² media in the Ukraine’s provinces, since the project has found regional media to be the weakest point in the country’s infosphere when it comes to dissemination of disinformation. During their investigations and fact-checking assignments, while they were tracking sources of disinformation published in the mainstream media on the national level, it was found that many of these were published in the regional media first.

In 2017 the project participated in the creation and launch of the interregional fact-checking platform Checkregion-ua.info. During the three iterations of the project, they organized more than 100 regional seminars attended by students, journalists and local civic activists. They are providing journalism students, journalists and civic activists with fact-checking tools and know-how, which they implement during local elections to monitor the work of local authorities.

They also organized the International Interregional Fact-Checking Conference involving representatives of the regional media and fact-checkers from the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, Russia, and representatives of twelve Ukrainian regions. Best practices and know-how from Ukraine were shared and later implemented by fact-checkers in Central Asia and the Czech Republic.

Kyrgyzstan: the country is predominantly mountainous with many regions completely underserved by a communication infrastructure. Approximately 40% of Kyrgyzstan’s territory has limited access to information.⁵³ Some small remote rural communities have no access to traditional media at all. Due to long and complicated bureaucratic procedures for obtaining licenses and frequencies for broadcasting, some rural communities have recognized that the best option for overcoming these barriers was introducing local broadcasting serving small communities in rural areas, which does not require licensing.

Radio Most and the Multimedia Center “Mediamost” were founded with the help of UNESCO in 2004 in Talas. Radio Most soon became a

52 Regional refers to Ukraine’s provinces.

53 Kyrgyzstan: Strengthening Sustainability of Community Media, UNESCO Kazakhstan, 3 October 2018. <http://en.unesco.kz/kyrgyzstan-strengthening-sustainability-of-community-media>

gathering point for other small community media in Kyrgyzstan. In 2013 the informal network of community media founded the Association of Community Media (ACM) in Kyrgyzstan which today has 27 members. Most of the community media work across the country is organized on a voluntary basis and organizations are home-grown.

ACM's main partners are UNESCO, through its office in Kazakhstan, the Deutsche Welle Academy, the FES and Kloop media organization, one of the most popular news sources in the country. ACM provides its members with logistical and legal aid, organizes trainings and introduces reporting standards.

GAPS AND POSITIVE OUTCOMES

The legal definition of disinformation remains a challenge for both governments and policy experts. In many cases in the region, the governments lack understanding of how to address disinformation while continuing to protect basic human rights such as access to information and freedom of expression. The governments in the region often use counter-disinformation campaigns not to fight against disinformation, but rather to counter unwanted information and criticism. The broad definition of norms allows for their arbitrary and uncontrolled interpretation and creates the preconditions for the abuse of the principled fight against disinformation.

There are some positive examples of governments being inclusive of civil society in the planning and implementation of their counter-disinformation actions and practices.

Women, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities have often been targets of dangerous disinformation campaigns. Civil society organizations with mandates on gender-equality are engaged in campaigns dealing with the specific problem of gender-based disinformation. When it comes to ethnic and regional minorities there is a space for cross-sectoral cooperation with actors dealing with both human rights and conflict-prevention.

NGOs chasing project funding often lose focus of their programme priorities. Rushing from project to project, organizations are becoming production lines for writing projects on all topics. As such, they shift their focus from their mission, resulting in short-term interventions. For those reasons, the effectiveness and credibility of the fact-checking platforms are on the decline⁵⁴. Some are flagged as extremely biased and as counter-propaganda activities that differ from propaganda activities only in the terminology applied. Additionally, there is also

54 Anastasia Starchenko, "Zaborona vs. StopFake: what is hiding behind Ukraine's ongoing media conflict?", New Eastern Europe, 3 August 2020. <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/08/03/zaborona-vs-stopfake-what-is-hiding-behind-ukraines-ongoing-media-conflict/>

overlap and loss of boundaries between journalism and the work of the NGO sector, in which NGOs often take on the role of the media in a range of contexts.

Monitoring and evaluation of the impact and effectiveness of the counter-disinformation efforts remain the challenge throughout the region. The actors are implementing traditional tools for qualitative and quantitative research: polls, self-evaluation and measuring of digital data and media presence. There is a space for more innovative and specialized approach to measuring the effectiveness of countering disinformation efforts. Long-term continuous general population polls focused on the research of disinformation trends, critical thinking and media literacy could be very useful instruments for measuring the effectiveness of counter-disinformation efforts at both regional and subregional levels.

There is lack of research and evidence on how the disinformation impacts crisis. The recent crises (reference is to the several crisis including in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine) and subsequent developments in the region make it important to understand what role disinformation and propaganda played in their preparation, during and after the events. Since this type of disinformation is serving to pre-empt or predict political intentions and actions, it is important to **invest in further research of crisis-related disinformation to support conflict-sensitive reporting initiatives, networking and cooperation as tools for conflict prevention.**

On the other hand, media and civil society across the region are producing effective and innovative responses to disinformation, especially in spheres where the cooperation and exchange of practices are applied.

Their responses are diverse, from engaging in two-way communication with audiences, exploring different platforms for engagement with the general public, from developing interactive multi-media fact-checking platforms to introducing media literacy and critical thinking educational programmes in cooperation with the governments. However, while there is a growing number of initiatives, **there is a gap in meaningful regional networking**, networking events and dialogues among the organizations and activists.

Media development has also been boosted and protected with support from development partners in their fight to counter disinformation. The aforementioned development partners have been investing in building media capacities for decades in the region – independent media and journalists, who were supported by and whose journalistic skills were honed through these initiatives, are thriving in the region. There are many organizations that have experienced success on local investigative and fact-checking initiatives. Due to political pressure and the state of the economy in some countries in the region, many independent media are dependent on these organizations. Some media outlets and initiatives supported by international partners, managed to evolve into popular mainstream sources of information in their countries⁵⁵.

55 Maryse Zeidler, “Journalists at TED 2019 conference fight for truth — and democracy”, Canada Broadcasting Corporation, 15 April 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/journalists-at-ted-2019-conference-fight-for-truth-and-democracy-1.5099452>

Organizations that primarily deal with human rights and freedoms rather than with media and disinformation directly, have also played an important role in countering information pollution, mainly through providing legal aid and advocacy support for journalists and activists who are directly involved in counter-disinformation efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Investing in information pollution prevention by building social resilience

Regional cooperation and networking among various actors are very important tools that are improving both the quality and effectiveness of counter-disinformation responses. All relevant stakeholders should support systemic and evidence-based approaches to build critical thinking and social dialogue at all levels, including in the education system, institutions, civil society and among the general public, through an inclusive and multisectoral approach.

This can be done through:

- Providing support for the projects aimed at MIL curriculum standardization, and working together with relevant government institutions and universities on their implementation.
- Facilitating communication among experts and the sharing of scientific knowledge with a wider audience through finding effective communication models. An apt example is the Experts Hub platform in Kazakhstan.
- Shaping and supporting government campaigns to raise media and information literacy among the general population.
- Supporting scientific research to understand the impact of information pollution on social cohesion, democratic processes and human rights. Sound points of contact for these initiatives could be already existing regional academic networks like [The Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs](#).

Prioritizing Cooperation and Networking

Supporting stakeholders' regional cooperation projects and the exchange of experiences within and between countries, through regional and inter-subregional cooperation, networking events, workshops and roundtables.

Supporting the building of coalitions and alliances among public institutions, media, internet companies, civil society and others to develop multisectoral strategies to address disinformation.

Organizing regional and subregional platforms for the constant and continuous exchange of information among counter-disinformation actors, especially on disinformation trends.

Improving government responses

The governments of the region should invest in administrative capacity-building projects by offering trainings for civil servants, especially in the field of media and information literacy.

Cooperation within the non-governmental sector and the participation of its staff in drafting media laws and laws on the fight against disinformation can greatly contribute to combating information pollution. This can be done through the formation of multisectoral task forces for instance.

Governments should develop transparent governance and freedom of information policies. The governments should foster trust and promote credibility and integrity of official information. The fight against disinformation must be waged in transparency, with accurate, evidence-based and timely information. The COVID-19 pandemic, the military hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh and Ukraine highlighted the need for governments to create protocols for emergency responses to disinformation during conflicts and natural disasters that are not in themselves misleading.

Developing human-rights-centred, socially-inclusive and conflict-sensitive approaches to counter disinformation efforts

Civil society organizations and policy experts should be encouraged to take part in the crafting of practical human rights-based responses to disinformation. This can be attained through the regional and subregional exchange networks and through events that could be used as advocacy platforms in the fight against disinformation and in support of critical voices, activists and organizations, among other functions.

Providing ongoing support to conflict-sensitive reporting platforms is critical, in particular those involving media and journalists from all countries/sides in conflicts. One example is JAM news in the South Caucasus and its reporting during the military hostilities in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone in 2020.

Civil society and the media should build multilingual media initiatives to enable the free flow of information among communities where a language barrier separates them.

Particular emphasis should be placed on projects aimed at deescalating conflicts and preventing violent extremism. One of the proposed measures can be the integration of mandatory “digital ceasefires” into mediation efforts so that actors in a conflict are requested to desist from online disinformation campaigns as a condition for joining the negotiations. Coupled with this is the

need to train mediators in how to detect or manage online provocations.

Political parties and political activists should be encouraged to build ethical standards in political action with a special emphasis on influence campaigns and on distorting public opinion through the manipulation of social media platforms.

Donors should focus more on programmes for including representatives of marginalized social groups in the media – notably women and ethnic minorities and also people from rural and remote areas.

Investing in Media for a Healthy Infosphere

Donors should continue their support for the media in capacity-building and for journalists by providing legal and digital protection. Additionally, in order to build long-term sustainability, donors in the region should work closely with local NGOs to further strengthen their capabilities and ensure initiatives function over longer periods. Donors should design programmes promoting activities aimed at decentralizing the infosphere by investing in small-scale, local and community media which are often underserved in existing programming. Examples of good practices are reported in Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and the Western Balkans – and they are covered in the Case Study in the Chapter 4.

Support projects to build and improve journalistic and ethical standards. Civil society organizations should act as mediators and create platforms to overcome the division of the media scene along the political divide where articles and investigations of the opposing media will also be published.

There is also a need for programming oriented at countering crisis-driven disinformation. Journalists should be equipped with conflict- and crisis-sensitive reporting knowledge and skills.

Improving Donor Programming

UNDP can act as a convener for donors' cooperation in the region through strengthening partnerships among donors and implementers of development projects already active in the region, for example, the European Endowment for Democracy, National Endowment for Democracy, OSCE, SIDA, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID and others.

Donors should work on the development of a platform or a common database for exchanging information on existing actors and initiatives in the region.

Donors should work on the development of a joint strategic guidance document that would minimize duplicative programming and improve the efficacy of counter-disinformation efforts.

Insisting on the corporate responsibility of social media companies

Regional and subregional internet governance conferences should be organized more frequently.

Some topics that could be raised through this platform include the following ones:

- a. Social media companies should work on a more transparent approach when it comes to their algorithms, to their enforcement criteria policies and to the labelling of state-linked media in order to allow users for informed decisions,
- b. Social media companies should continue to engage with local organizations and individuals to develop third-party fact-checking projects.
- c. Social media companies should develop external, independent oversight boards, and employ an ombudsman to allow users and the public to institutionally challenge their decisions through easy and transparent procedures.
- d. Social media companies should be more open to sharing relevant and critical data that is already in the public domain and is shared by consenting users for the purposes of research and analysis.
- e. There is a need for additional vigilance and for action by social media platforms during times of heightened tensions, potentially divisive elections and conflicts. A case study of the social media policies during the Ukraine crisis could be beneficial for future actions – what differences they made and how they impacted human rights concerns.

ANNEX A: INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
1. The Albanian Media Institute	Albania	OSCE EU OSI FES KAS Norwegian Embassy, Netherlands Embassy, UK Embassy USAID EWMI IREX UNESCO Hedayah
2. Faktoje.AI	Albania	IFCN USAID NED
3. The Media Initiatives Center - Media.AM	Armenia	USAID
4. The Union of Informed Citizens - Fact Investigation Platform	Armenia	EU UNDEF USAID GMF Freedom House IRI RSF OSF
5. The Yerevan Press Club	Armenia	FES EU SIDA
6. The Media Diversity Institute	Armenia	UNESCO UNDP TRF

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
7. The Freedom of Information Centre Armenia	Armenia	USAID
8. The Oxygen Foundation	Armenia	SIDA UKAID USAID OXFAM EU NDI Visegrad Foundation Austrian Development Agency British Embassy
9. Media for Informed Civic Engagement MICE	Armenia	USAID MIC
10. Funded by USAID		
11. Implemented by MIC		
12. Azerbaijan Internet Watch	Azerbaijan	None listed on the website
13. The Institute for Democratic Initiatives: Fakt Yoxla	Azerbaijan	IFCN
14. The Press Club of Belarus - Media IQ	Belarus	Visegrad Fund Canadian Embassy in Belarus British Embassy in Belarus Netherlands Embassy in Belarus
15. The Digital Skills Coalition Belarus	Belarus	Eastern Partnership (EU)
16. The Belarusian Association of Journalists	Belarus	RSF Article 19 FES CPJ CRD
17. BIRN	Bosnia and Herzegovina	OSF NED OSCE EU Rockefeller Brothers Fund UNDP
18. Zašto Ne? - Raskrinkavanje.ba - Istinomjer.ba	Bosnia and Herzegovina	IFCN Facebook NED GMF

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
19. Media Centar Sarajevo	Bosnia and Herzegovina	EU
20. Social Media 4 Peace	Bosnia and Herzegovina	UNESCO EU Antena Sarajevo
21. CABAR	Central Asia	IWPR
22. The OXUS SOCIETY	Central Asia	IWPR CABAR United States Institute of Peace European Neighbourhood Council
23. The Analytical Centre for Central Asia ACCA	Central Asia	None listed on the website
24. Idea Central Asia	Central Asia	OSF
25. BRYCA : Qlever.	Central Asia	EU MediaNet – International Centre for Journalism MSCF – Media Support Center Foundation Public Organization “Gurdofarid” MJDC – Modern Journalism Development Centre
26. The Central Asia Media Program CAMP Funded by USAID Implemented by Internews	Central Asia	USAID Internews
27. Georgia’s Reforms Associates GRASS - Factcheck.ge	Georgia	USAID EED GMF Netherlands Embassy in Georgia
28. The Atlantic Council – Digital Forensic Research Lab	Georgia	Atlantic Council

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
29. The Institute for the Development of Freedom of Information IDFI	Georgia	UNDP USAID SIDA HBS GMF OSI Visegrad Fund UKAID
30. The Georgian Charter of Journalistic Ethics: Media Checker	Georgia	UNDP USAID OSI IREX UNICEF GIZ
31. The Tolerance and Diversity Institute (TDI)	Georgia	USAID Netherlands Embassy
32. iFACT	Georgia	None listed on the website
33. The Georgia Information Integrity Program Funded by USAID Implemented by ZINC	Georgia	USAID
34. The Media Development Foundation MDF- Myth Detector	Georgia	UNDP OSI USAID UNESCO Swiss Embassy in Georgia Netherlands Embassy in Georgia DW academy
35. Adil Soz	Kazakhstan	Article 19 UNESCO USAID OSCE Netherlands Embassy in Kazakhstan Norwegian Embassy in Kazakhstan VIKES

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
36. The Legal Media Center	Kazakhstan	USAID UNESCO Soros Fund IREX VIKES Netherlands Embassy Finnish Embassy British Embassy FES OSCE EU German Embassy
37. MediaNet - Factcheck.Kz	Kazakhstan	USAID Internews Chevron KAS
38. The National Teachers' Association KazTEA	Kazakhstan	US Embassy
39. Bilim Barine	Kazakhstan	US Embassy
40. Experts Hub	Kazakhstan	US Embassy, implemented by Red Point Communication
41. Infodemiya	Kazakhstan	US Embassy
42. The Geopost	Kosovo	US Embassy TechCamp Kosovo
43. The Institute for Development Policy INDEP	Kosovo	USAID GMF Rockefeller Brothers Fund EU
44. The New Social Initiative	Kosovo	UNMIK
45. The IPKO Foundation	Kosovo	UNDP OSCE WBF SIDA USAID US Embassy Norwegian Embassy Kosovo Government

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
46. Internews Kosova - Kallxo-Krypometer	Kosovo	IFCN UNDP NED Norwegian Embassy EU Kosovo Government
47. Edumedia	Kosovo	OSCE
48. Ponder	Kosovo	OSCE
49. Innovations Lab		
50. Monitoring Information Integrity Disorders	Kosovo	NDI
51. KLOOP	Kyrgyz Republic	Soros Fund Internews
52. Internews Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz Republic	USAID
53. The Community Media Association	Kyrgyz Republic	DW Academy UNESCO Internews UNDEF FES
54. The Soros Fund Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyz Republic	None listed on the website
55. The Institute for Media Policy	Kyrgyz Republic	UNESCO
56. The Media Development Center - FactCheck.Kg	Kyrgyz Republic	Internews Soros Fund
57. T-Media	Kyrgyz Republic	None listed on the website
58. Politklinika	Kyrgyz Republic	EU Internews NED Soros Fund IWPR
59. Temirov Live	Kyrgyz Republic	None listed on YouTube channel.

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
60. Media-K Program Financed by USAID Implemented by Internews	Kyrgyz Republic	USAID
61. Promo-Lex	Moldova	CRD ENEMO ABA (American Bar Association) USAID Norwegian Embassy in Chisinau Netherlands Embassy in Chisinau UNDP Moldova GMF OSCE OSI SIDA NED EU British Embassy in Chisinau UN
62. MediaPoint	Moldova	OSI
63. The Association of the Independent Press - StopFals	Moldova	NED UNICEF USAID UNDP OSI
64. The Independent Journalism Center	Moldova	USAID Finnish Embassy in Romania US Embassy in Moldova DW Academy OSI IWPR OSCE EU British Embassy in Moldova
65. The Media M Program Funded by USAID and UKAID Implemented by Freedom House and Internews	Moldova	USAID UKAID Freedom House Internews

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
66. MIL training for teachers	Moldova	DW Academy
67. The Center for Democratic Transition CDT - Raskrinkavanje.me	Montenegro	IFCN Facebook GMF NED
68. The Atlantic Council of Montenegro - DFC	Montenegro	US Embassy NATO British Embassy GMF
69. Institut za medije Crne Gore	Montenegro	None listed on the website
70. The Macedonian Young Lawyers Association (MYLA) https://myla.org.mk/?lang=en	North Macedonia	CRD OSI Visegrad Fund UNCHR EU Netherlands Embassy
71. Metamorphosis - Vistinomer - Meta	North Macedonia	USAID EU NDI Visegrad Foundation British Embassy OSF EU Netherlands Embassy
72. MOST - F2N2	North Macedonia	OSF US Embassy
73. The Association of Journalists of Macedonia	North Macedonia	None listed on the website

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
74. The Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability CRTA - Istinomer	Serbia	IFCN Google USAID Microsoft GMF NDI OSCE Internews EU German Embassy SIDA FNF OSF
75. Crime and Corruption Reporting Network KRIK - Raskrikavanje	Serbia	OCCRP NED OSF EU Rockefeller Brothers Fund CRD SRT Internews SIDA US Embassy
76. Novosadska novinarska skola – Medijska pismenost 77. FakeNewsTragac https://fakenews.rs/	Serbia	EU SIDA Serbian Government GLOBSEC OSI NED US Embassy
78. The Media Coalition	Serbia	USAID
79. Go Group Media– JAM news	South Caucasus	EU UNDP

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
80. OC Media	South Caucasus	UNDP EED NED OSF British Embassy Georgia Netherlands Embassy Georgia GMF TRF Swiss Embassy Georgia
81. Chai Khana	South Caucasus	Israeli Government British Government UNDP EU Norwegian Embassy in Georgia
82. The COBERM program	South Caucasus	EU UNDP
83. The Open Society Institute (OSI) Tajikistan	Tajikistan	
84. Ravzana	Tajikistan	OSI US Embassy in Tajikistan
85. Media Consulting: Nuqta.tj https://www.linkedin.com/in/nabi-yusupov-84476194?originalSubdomain=tj	Tajikistan	OSI
86. Internews in Tajikistan	Tajikistan	USAID
87. Factcheck.tj	Tajikistan	None listed on the website
88. Your.TJ	Tajikistan	OSI
89. Mediasavod.tj	Tajikistan	OSI
90. Teyit	Türkiye	Facebook TikTok CRD HBS Ashoka
91. Alternatif Bilisim	Türkiye	None listed on the website

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
92. The Freedom of Expression Association	Türkiye	SRT Swedish Government CRD Netherlands government EED Article 19
93. The Common Future Association - Dogruluk Payi	Türkiye	IFCN
94. Factchecking Turkey	Türkiye	Bosphorus Center for Global Affairs
95. Turkey Blocks	Türkiye	None listed on the website
96. Chronicles of Turkmenistan	Turkmenistan	None listed on the website
97. Turkmen News	Turkmenistan	None listed on the website
98. The OSCE Centre in Ashgabat	Turkmenistan	OSCE
99. The Centre for Democracy and the Rule of Law CEDEM https://cedem.org.ua/en/who-we-are/	Ukraine	UNDP OSCE COE Internews IREX USAID EU SIDA
100. The Digital Security Lab	Ukraine	None listed on the website
101. The Center for Analytics and Research - BezBrehny https://without-lie.info/	Ukraine	Prague Civil Society USAID Internews German Embassy US Embassy
102. The Media Reforms Center – StopFake https://www.stopfake.org/en/main/	Ukraine	IFCN
103. Texty-Feykogryz	Ukraine	USAID Internews
104. TrollesUA	Ukraine	None listed on the website
105. The Media Literacy Academy	Uzbekistan	None Listed, Commercial Project

INDEPENDENT ACTORS AND INITIATIVES		
ACTOR OR INITIATIVE	COUNTRY/ TERRITORY OR REGION	DONORS AND PARTNERS
106. The Modern Journalism Development Centre	Uzbekistan	DW Academy USAID British Embassy in Uzbekistan Article 19 MediaNet, Kazakhstan
107. The Journalist Preparation Centre JM	Uzbekistan	UN USAID UNESCO OSCE
108. NeMolchi (focused on violence against women)	Uzbekistan	None listed on the website.
109. The National Association of Electronic Mass Media	Uzbekistan	None listed on the website.
110. Factchecking.Uz	Uzbekistan	Internews
111. Strengthening Societal Resilience and Countering Foreign Perpetrated Disinformation	Western Balkans	CEP Slovenia NED Slovenian Aid
112. The IRI Beacon project	Western Balkans	IRI
113. SEECheck	Western Balkans	Facebook IFCN
114. AND Balkans	Western Balkans	Regional grassroots factchecking network
115. The SEE Digital Rights Network	Western Balkans	BIRN SHARE Foundation
116. The Southeast European Media Observatory	Western Balkans	EU
117. Building Trust in Media in South East Europe and Türkiye	Western Balkans	UNESCO, EU

ANNEX B: DONORS AND PARTNERS

Donor/partner	Number of organizations/ Initiatives supported	Countries, territories, subregions
1. USAID	34	Albania, Armenia, Central Asia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan
2. Open Society Foundation OSF, OSI, Soros Fund	25	Albania, Georgia, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central Asia, South Caucasus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic
3. EU	25	Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, South Caucasus, Ukraine, Western Balkans
4. UNDP	13	Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Moldova, South Caucasus, Ukraine
5. Dutch Government (embassies, Foreign Ministry)	12W	Albania, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, North Macedonia, South Caucasus, Türkiye
6. Meta (Facebook)	12	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Türkiye, Western Balkans, Georgia, North Macedonia, Ukraine, Serbia, South Caucasus
7. Internews	12	Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan
8. NED	12	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, South Caucasus, Western Balkans

Donor/partner	Number of organizations/ Initiatives supported	Countries, territories, subregions
9. US Government (embassies, the State Department)	12	Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, North Macedonia, Tajikistan, Ukraine
10. OSCE	11	Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan
11. British Government (embassies, the Foreign Ministry)	10	Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Georgia, South Caucasus
12. GMF Balkan Trust for Democracy Black Sea Trust for Democracy	10	Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, South Caucasus
13. UNESCO	10	Albania, Armenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan
14. SIDA	9	Armenia, Georgia, Kosovo, Moldova, Serbia, Ukraine
15. IFCN	9	Albania, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, Türkiye, Ukraine, Western Balkans
16. Civil Rights Defenders	6	Belarus, Moldova, North Macedonia, Serbia, Türkiye
17. Norwegian Government (embassies, the Foreign Ministry)	6	Albania, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Moldova, South Caucasus
18. Deutsche Welle	5	Georgia, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Uzbekistan
19. FES	5	Albania, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic
20. Visegrad Fund	5	Armenia, Georgia, Belarus, North Macedonia
21. Article 19	4	Belarus, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan
22. German Government (embassies, the Foreign Ministry)	4	Moldova, Kazakhstan, Serbia, Ukraine
23. IREX	4	Albania, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine
24. IWPR	4	Central Asia, Moldova
25. KAS	4	Albania, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Serbia

Donor/partner	Number of organizations/ Initiatives supported	Countries, territories, subregions
26. EED	3	Georgia, South Caucasus, Türkiye
27. IRI	3	Armenia, Kyrgyz Republic, Western Balkans
28. Rockefeller Brothers Fund	3	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia
29. UKAID	3	Armenia, Georgia, Moldova
30. UNICEF	3	Georgia, Moldova, Montenegro
31. Atlantic Council	2	Georgia, Montenegro
32. Freedom House	2	Armenia, Moldova
33. HBS	2	Georgia, Türkiye
34. Prague Civil Society	2	South Caucasus, Ukraine
35. RSF	2	Armenia, Belarus
36. Swiss Government (embassies, Foreign Ministry)	2	Georgia, South Caucasus
37. Thomson Reuters Foundation	2	Armenia South Caucasus
38. VIKES	2	Kazakhstan
39. Austrian Development Agency	1	Armenia
40. Canadian Government (embassies, the Foreign Ministry)	1	Belarus
41. Council of Europe	1	Ukraine
42. CPJ	1	Belarus
43. EWMI	1	Albania
44. FNF	1	Serbia
45. GIZ	1	Georgia
46. GLOBSEC	1	Serbia
47. Hedayah	1	Albania
48. Israeli Government (embassies, the Foreign Ministry)	1	South Caucasus
49. OXFAM	1	Armenia
50. Slovenian Aid	1	Western Balkans
51. Swedish Government (embassies, Foreign Ministry)	1	Türkiye
52. TikTok	1	Türkiye

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