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DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN BULGARIA

EU DISINFO LAB



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Author: **Ruslana Margova** & **Dr. Milena Dobрева**, GATE Institute & Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media

Reviewers: **Patrick Gensing**, Tagesschau & **Irina Nedeva**, Association of European Journalists

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INTRODUCTION

- In recent years, Bulgaria has been in constant early elections (five national votes in two years) and governed by a caretaker cabinet for over a year. Political tensions in the country stem from several corruption scandals that have deepened institutional distrust. As a result, powerful societal and political divisions remain impossible to bridge. This mistrust in official institutions and the increasing societal divisions are an ideal breeding ground for disinformation.
- The transformation of COVID-19 anti-vaxer user accounts and groups into pro-Putin advocates is proof of the severe consequences of this mistrust. 48% of Bulgarians are satisfied with the [European Union's response](#) to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, compared to 56% of European citizens taken cumulatively. Among the sampled Bulgarian, 47% favour economic sanctions against Russia, and 39% support banning Russian state media, against the European average (74% and 67%, respectively).
- The pandemic-led rise in mortality and consequent decrease in life expectancy [severely affected Bulgaria](#), which also has very high rates of unvaccinated population, suggesting vulnerability to COVID-19 disinformation.
- As a whole, the Bulgarian disinformation landscape faces both old and new challenges, as well as domestic and external threats that feed on each other. In addition to cross-border disinformation, there are also many home-grown disinformation narratives – e.g., the misrepresentation of national history, the technology-related fears, and the shutdown of social media accounts.
- In addition, Bulgaria is traditionally at the bottom of the EU countries ranking in the [Media Literacy Index](#). The numerous training initiatives in this domain are insufficient, as the educational system does not integrate media literacy.

EMBLEMATIC CASES

There is no one such example that everybody in the country would give as an emblematic case of disinformation because of the mentioned strong societal polarisation and people's mistrust towards each other, the Bulgarian media, and the national institutions. Debunked claims usually remain a collection on fact-checking sites and are largely ignored. Regarding political attacks, party supporters tend to maintain confidence towards their elected representative despite being exposed.

Some widely circulated cases are of well-known [Europe-wide narratives](#) about the harms of coronavirus vaccines or pro-Russian false narrative around Ukrainian refugees.

However, we can outline some cases where the Bulgarian democratic community is more united.

CHRISTO GROZEV, BELLINGCAT, AND THE OSCARS

- In Bulgarian society, there is an affection for the Bulgarian journalist from Bellingcat, Christo Grozev. On 21 April 2023, it was [reported](#) that a Russian court had requested his arrest, which was widely reported in the Bulgarian media. Russian authorities declared Bulgarian investigative journalist Christo Grozev of Bellingcat a federal wanted person on 26 December 2022 for violating an article of Russia's Criminal Code – but not specifying which one. According to Novosti news agency, criminal proceedings claim that the journalist spread disinformation. Bulgarian authorities officially asked Russian authorities why he was wanted and received no adequate answer.
- In February 2023, the documentary “Navalny”, starring Christo Grozev, was nominated for a BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) award. British police have banned Grozev from attending the BAFTA because of the mentioned request for arrest. Nevertheless, Christo Grozev won an Oscar for the film [Navalny](#). One of Bulgaria's major newspapers, “Trud”, published a commentary entitled [“Navalny’ the film – disinformation that won an Oscar”](#). However, other Bulgarian media (e.g., [Bulgarian National Radio](#) or [media portal dir.bg](#)) do not support claims that the movie Navalny and Christo Grozev are spreading disinformation.
- The Bulgarian journalist [has authored investigations](#) that identified two senior Russian officers linked to the downing of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in 2014; the GRU officers involved in the 2016 coup plot in Montenegro; the three suspects in the 2018 poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal; and the 2020 poisoning of Alexei Navalny. In July 2022, the Russian Federal Security Service reported that Grozev had taken part in a Ukrainian military intelligence operation aiming to hijack Russian warplanes. Grozev found two couriers who handed money to a Russian military aviator to hijack a plane. In November 2022, Christo Grozev won the ICFJ (International Center for Journalists) “Founders Award” for excellence in journalism.

TROOPS OR NO TROOPS?

- As in other European countries, deceptive narratives about the Ukraine war are also popular in Bulgaria. For instance, a recent claim, [debunked by AFP fact-checkers](#), is that the Bulgarian government is sending troops to Ukraine.
- Their investigation shows that when Russian troops invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Kornelia Ninova, leader of the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) – who was also at that time a deputy prime minister and minister of economy and industry in Kiril Petkov's coalition government – stated that

Bulgaria would not send arms to Ukraine. In May 2022, the parliament decided that Bulgaria would send “humanitarian, financial, and military-technical aid”.

- Since a no-confidence vote in June 2022 removed Kiril Petkov’s government from power, a caretaker cabinet has been governing the country, appointed by President Rumen Radev, who recently expressed opposition to sending arms to Ukraine.
- In January 2023, former Prime Minister Petkov was quoted by Politico stating that “about a third of the ammunition needed by the Ukrainian army in the early phase of the war came from Bulgaria.” Petkov said these supplies were made covertly to avoid offending their BSP coalition partners.

NARRATIVES

WAR IN UKRAINE

Disinformative narratives related to the war in Ukraine are also spreading in Bulgaria, for instance, about [Ukrainian grain](#) flooding the country, or about [Ukrainian refugees](#) hosted at luxury hotels.

ANTI-EU SENTIMENTS

War-related hoaxes are intertwined with anti-European narratives – with claims of [mass protests](#) against the EU and NATO across Europe. Moreover, the association with gender-based disinformation is significant, blaming Brussels for attempts to legalise same-sex marriages. Another highly impactful narrative is related to the forthcoming adoption of the euro in Bulgaria and the great poverty it will [allegedly lead to](#).

ELECTRONIC VOTING AND TECHNOLOGY

In Bulgaria, individual parties are introducing their narratives related to internal political struggles – the so-called “paper coalition” (the parties that insist on using only paper ballot papers in voting during parliamentary elections) to fight electoral fraud. As has already been pointed out, Bulgaria has been holding many parliamentary elections constantly in the last few years, and the way of voting is crucial. Incumbent parties are against [voting machines](#) and are spreading false claims about them. As a consequence, new narratives are also [fostering fears](#) around Chat GTP.

NORTH MACEDONIA

Furthermore, a relevant narrative regards North Macedonia’s accession to the European Union and attempts to re-interpret [Bulgarian history](#).

GENDER-BASED DISINFORMATION

In 2018, Bulgaria refused to ratify the Istanbul Convention after a widespread disinformation campaign. Two parties sitting in Parliament in 2018, VMRO and the Bulgarian Socialist Party, claimed that the Convention promoted gay marriage and the “third sex”. Consequently, Constitutional Court to declared that the Convention contradicted the Bulgarian Constitution. The “[gender](#)” scarecrow affects the whole political and social spectrum, threatening religious values and promoting conservative values.

COMMUNITY

Different stakeholders constitute the Bulgarian counter-disinformation community:

BULGARIAN-ROMANIAN OBSERVATORY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

[BROD](#) is the [European Digital Media Observatory](#) regional hub for Bulgaria and Romania. Similarly, BROD is an independent observatory of disinformation in Bulgaria and Romania. BROD is bringing together regional fact-checkers and academic researchers with expertise in the field of online disinformation, journalistic media, and media literacy practitioners. The goal is to promote scientific knowledge on on-line disinformation in the area, coordinate the development of fact-checking services in the region, and support national and regional media literacy programmes.

FACT-CHECKING ORGANISATIONS

Internationally recognised fact-checkers in Bulgaria are:

- [AFP](#);
- [Factcheck.bg](#) (which also has an [Ukrainian version](#)).
- Several other Bulgarian media are growing their capacity in fact-checking, with a noticeable tendency to offer fact-checking sections on websites and designated coverage of verified facts.
- Bulgarian National Television (BNT) is establishing its fact-checking team, supported by the competencies within BROD.

CITIZEN-LED INITIATIVES

- There are also citizen-led initiatives, such as the “[Are you lying?](#)” project, an initiative of a group of active citizens who want to debunk misinformation in Bulgarian politics. During the parliamentary election campaign, between 3 March and 31 March 2023, they tracked the participation of 23 parliamentary candidates in national broadcasts and checked how often they spread false information.
- Furthermore, various NGOs and other organisations in Bulgaria are tackling disinformation. A non-exhaustive list includes the [Bulgarian Coalition against Disinformation](#), the [Media Literacy Coalition](#), and the [Center for the Study of Democracy](#); the latter is a member of the BROD consortium.

POLICY

- Due to the country's overall political instability and lack of a democratically elected government, a coherent state policy against disinformation is currently lacking, which is a stark contrast to the significant efforts of the European Union.
- Another sensitive topic is the [moderation of Meta accounts](#) on the one hand, and [SLAPPs cases](#) against journalists.
- Legislation proposed by Democratic Bulgaria seeks to oblige Facebook and other social networks to delete troll profiles. The Anti-Disinformation Bill will require social networks to do more to identify anonymous accounts and trolls, [explained one of the proposers](#), Bozhidar Bozhanov. The law echoes the Digital Services Act, which requires more transparency and information from social media.
- As of 4 May 2023, the [Law on the protection of persons submitting signals or publicly disclaiming information about violations](#) comes into force. The purpose of the law is to ensure the safety of persons in the public and private sectors who report or publicly disclose information about violations of Bulgarian legislation or EU acts that they came across when performing official duties or other work activities. Given the novelty of this whistleblowing law, no established practice exists yet.

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