

THE BULGARIAN-ROMANIAN OBSERVATORY ON DISINFORMATION (BROD): A BRIDGE TO THE FUTURE

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Abstract

The European Union is currently facing multiple crises, not restricted to but including the COVID19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine, ecological and energy-related challenges, immigration pressures, and internal social and political issues. However, Europe and the EU are also defined by their know-how, culture, multilingualism, and contributions to the evolution of Western civilisation, a legacy that should be honoured and progressed to meet contemporary challenges. Our responsibility and hope lie in transforming society sustainably and intelligently in order to respond to anticipated and unanticipated changes. One possible instrument to do so is through European media observatories like the European Media Observatory (EDMO), which can serve as hubs for this purpose. The Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory on Disinformation (BROD) is one of the hubs collaborating with EDMO, which brings together journalists, fact-checkers, public figures, and academic researchers to work towards a society better prepared to tackle disinformation. This paper provides a broad overview of its setup and discusses some of the current challenges in monitoring the progress in counteracting disinformation.

Key words: disinformation, European Media Observatory (EDMO), Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory on Disinformation (BROD), fact-checking, media literacy

Background

Disinformation as a societal challenge and the challenges in Bulgaria and Romania

Bulgaria and Romania have common problems in the fight against disinformation – the pan-European propaganda narratives and poor media and information literacy (MIL) affect both countries. Citizen susceptibility to conspiracies and misinformation in Romania and Bulgaria is the worst in Central and Eastern Europe, as shown in reports from 2020-2022. Assessing 10 EU countries, GLOBSEC established

that 48% of respondents in Bulgaria and 39% in Romania believed conspiracy theories and misinformation.¹ They found that anti-EU and anti-NATO misinformation is particularly rife, with 50% of Bulgarian respondents believing NATO is an American scheme to keep Europe subordinate. Common misinformation narratives typically focus on an ethnic minority group, representatives of a country or nation that is distant ideologically or geographically, or a group on the other end of the society's ideological, social or financial spectrum.

In this study, we focus on the situation in Bulgaria. Below we provide some examples of the key areas influencing the overall societal attitudes toward disinformation.

The pandemic as an example of societal impact

The misinformation and infodemic, linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, caused an unprecedented increase in mortality, leading to a decrease in life expectancy worldwide, and Bulgaria is one of the countries severely.² A declining confidence in childhood vaccination rate associated with the COVID-19 pandemic on a global scale had been recently reported by UNICEF³; however, we still are not able to quantify what is the impact of misinformation on such processes with a huge societal impact – the assessment of the global childhood vaccination is that the progress of a decade had been lost with these latest developments.

Media freedom

Bulgaria has moved up by an impressive 20 positions in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) media freedom rankings – from 91st to 71st place, but *Media freedom in one of the poorest and most corrupt countries in the European Union is fragile and unstable*, is written in the report. *The few independent voices in Bulgaria still work under constant pressure.*⁴

Fact-checkers density

The Balkan region, in general, has a very low number of fact-checkers compared to other parts of Europe. In 2021 AFP – a leading global news agency, providing 24/7 fast, comprehensive and verified coverage of world news across all fields, opens its fact-checking section in Bulgarian – <https://proveri.afp.com/list>, approved by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at Poynter. In 2022 Factcheck.bg, is also approved by IFCN. More and more media are making efforts and introducing

¹ GLOBSEC (2020) *Voices of Central and Eastern Europe: Perceptions of democracy & governance in 10 EU countries*. p.60 Available on <https://www.globsec.org/what-we-do/publications/voices-central-and-eastern-europe-perceptions-democracy-governance-10-eu>

² Schöley, J., al. (2022). *Life expectancy changes since COVID-19*. *Nature human behaviour*, 6(12), p.1649-1659.

³ UNICEF (2023) *New data indicates declining confidence in childhood vaccines of up to 44 percentage points in some countries during the COVID-19 pandemic*. Available on <https://www.unicef.org/senegal/en/press-releases/new-data-indicates-declining-confidence-childhood-vaccines-44-percentage-points-some>

⁴ Reporters without borders (2023) *Bulgaria*. Available on <https://rsf.org/en/country/bulgaria>

columns related to fact-checking, like Bulgarian National Television (BNT), which is making a special team of factcheckers.

Low level of media literacy

In addition, Bulgaria is traditionally at the bottom of the EU countries ranking.⁵ Although there are numerous training initiatives in this domain, there is no positive dynamics in moving up. Bulgaria is traditionally ranked last among the EU countries in this list in the years it had been compiled. Media literacy is not integrated into the educational system. At the same time, the Bulgarian Media Literacy Coalition⁶ is making tremendous efforts to improve understanding of the importance of media literacy and support practical skills. This area is also an example of dispersed efforts as multiple organisations are trying to raise media literacy which is commendable. Still, there is no unified policy, quality standards and exchange of good practices.

These examples illustrate the complexity of the societal processes and the involvement of a complex system of stakeholders from the media, including the growth of fact-checking activities and education. In addition, research into the dynamics of the spread of information and disinformation and the technological companies' involvement in developing tools helping to identify disinformation are adding to a complex domain in need of a robust collaboration platform that would allow combining the efforts of different stakeholders.

The effort of the EU – EDMO and the hubs

In order to respond to this challenge, the EU is implementing a complex set of measures, including but not limited to the 2022 Code of Practice on Disinformation⁷, strengthening media literacy skills, and supporting technological developments of tools that help identify disinformation. EDMO (The European Digital Media Observatory)⁸ coordinates these efforts with the inputs of 14 regional hubs, which cover the whole EU. For Bulgaria and Romania, the EDMO-associated Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media (BROD)⁹ started its activities in December 2022.

The importance of measuring progress

The efforts to coordinate efforts in tackling disinformation took shape with the development of EDMO. One issue which still does not have a straightforward answer is how to monitor and measure the dynamics in the disinformation domain. What

⁵ Lessenski, M. (2022) How It Started, How It is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022. Available on: [HowItStarted_MediaLiteracyIndex2022_ENG_.pdf](https://www.osis.bg/HowItStarted_MediaLiteracyIndex2022_ENG_.pdf) (osis.bg)

⁶ Media literacy coalition (n.d.) website. Available on <https://gramoten.li/en/about-us/>

⁷ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>

⁸ <https://edmo.eu/>

⁹ The project BROD (Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media) funded by the Digital Europe programme of the European Union under contract number 101083730 and under GATE „Big Data for Smart Society“ project, funded by the Horizon 2020 WIDESPREAD-2018-2020 TEAMING Phase 2 programme under grant agreement no. 857155. GATE project is funded by Operational Programme Science and Education for Smart Growth under Grant Agreement No. BG05M2OP001-1.003-0002-C01.

societal changes would support the argument that an observatory (or other efforts) is succeeding – and in what way?

The current instruments to measure information across the EU are mostly related to the monitoring of the implementation of the Code of Practice and also in creating fact sheets on the various countries, which can be accumulated and would show the dynamics of change in each particular country over time. Within this context, BROD will contribute both to monitoring the Code of Practice and also to producing factsheets on Bulgaria. In addition to these monitoring activities, there is also a long-standing discussion among the stakeholders working on tackling disinformation on how to create monitoring tools. As this is still not implemented, we can expect that a new technological monitoring system will be developed in the near future.

Research design: research question and methodology

Our primary interest in this paper is to explore how Bulgaria develops alongside the main pillars of activity in EDMO. Our methodology is based on desktop research and observation of practices from different countries, complemented by the experience of the first five months of work within the BROD project. Although this is an early stage of the project, the reflection and the discussion with the broader community of the issues around monitoring are critical.

Literature review

The digital strategy against disinformation, developed by the European Commission¹⁰, defines disinformation as „*false or misleading content that is spread with the intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain, and which may cause public harm; misinformation is false or misleading content shared without harmful intent though the effects can be still harmful.*“¹¹ The main point that makes disinformation and misinformation extremely dangerous is that they can have a range of harmful consequences as threatening democracies, polarising debates, and putting the health, security and environment of EU citizens at risk, is said in the document of the European Commission (*ibidem*).

The European Commission developed several initiatives to tackle disinformation: the European Democracy Action Plan¹² with guidelines for obligations and accountability of online platforms in the fight against disinformation; the 2018 Code of Practice on disinformation was the first time worldwide that industry has agreed, voluntarily, to self-regulatory standards to fight disinformation¹³; the COVID-19 disinformation monitoring programme¹⁴, carried out by signatories of the Code of Practice, acted as a transparency measure to ensure online platforms' accountability in tackling

¹⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2585

¹¹ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/online-disinformation>

¹² https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/new-push-european-democracy/european-democracy-action-plan_en

¹³ <https://www.cem.bg/displaynewsen/802>

¹⁴ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/covid-19-disinformation-monitoring>

disinformation. EDMO¹⁵ is an independent observatory bringing together fact-checkers and academic researchers with expertise in online disinformation, social media platforms, journalist-driven media and media literacy practitioners. The Strengthened Code of Practice on Disinformation¹⁶, signed on 16 June 2022, brings together a wide range of stakeholders with voluntary commitments to tackle disinformation.

In addition to institutional efforts are those of various companies and organisations. Some of them are funded via the Horizon programme. For example, WeVerify¹⁷ is a Horizon 2020 project¹⁸ which had launched the development of a secure and highly scalable *Database of Debunks and Known Fakes*.¹⁹ It currently indexes over 50,000 fact-checks published worldwide (including those by AFP Fact Check (available in 26 languages), AFP Proveri (in Bulgarian), AFP Factuel, Correctiv, Full Fact, and the BBC. In particular, WeVerify enhanced both TrulyMedia (the EDMO CSP) and the InVID-WeVerify browser plugin as complementary tools for content verification. The plugin is a popular verification tool used in 197 countries worldwide by more than 57.000 (41% of them in Europe) journalists, fact-checkers, human rights activists and NGOs, media literacy scholars and researchers to debunk disinformation.

While the development of instruments which also would work with Bulgarian language is beneficial, it is not going to answer all issues around disinformation. The problem with the prevalence of misinformed beliefs in Romania and Bulgaria is exacerbated by the insufficient actions taken by the online platforms towards curtailing misinformation in these two countries and providing tools analysing Bulgarian and Romanian languages. Therefore, urgent action is needed to strengthen and promote fact-checking and research on disinformation campaigns in both EU Member States

At the same time, the 2023 World Press Freedom Index has placed Romania 53rd²⁰ and Bulgaria 72nd.²¹ Bulgaria also had the lowest level of GDP per capita in the EU in 2021,²² with Romania, according to the statistics of the World Bank. With the prolonged COVID-19 crisis and its severe negative impact on the economies of these countries, the financial viability of the news media sector has become even more uncertain.

Moreover, a study by one of the Bulgarian partners Vitosha Research/CSD Group²³ confirmed the existence of patterns of ownership, economic dependency and (in)formal political links between media outlets in some Balkan countries and pro-Russian groups and interests, which are then correlated with corresponding trends of employing Russia-originating propaganda narratives.

¹⁵ <https://edmo.eu/>

¹⁶ <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/2022-strengthened-code-practice-disinformation>

¹⁷ <https://weverify.eu/>

¹⁸ https://research-and-innovation.ec.europa.eu/funding/funding-opportunities/funding-programmes-and-open-calls/horizon-2020_en

¹⁹ <https://www.veraai.eu/posts/dbkf-at-ebu-dts>

²⁰ <https://rsf.org/en/country/romania>

²¹ <https://rsf.org/en/country/bulgaria>

²² <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=EU>

²³ <https://csd.bg/>

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these problems and negatively impacted press independence in Bulgaria and Romania by reinforcing the pre-existing internal and external factors. CSD's regional good governance network SELDI²⁴ further outlined the dangers of media capture, which exacerbates disinformation and media pluralism.

After the pandemic and the infodemic, the situation with disinformation did not improve, and the war against Ukraine enriched the environment with new narratives²⁵.

Findings

As a European Union country, Bulgaria faces many problems common to all European countries related to fact-checking, research and media literacy, but at the same time, Bulgaria has its own specifics. These specifics apply to all areas of activities addressed by the EDMO: Fact checking, Research, MIL, Collaboration with national regulators, and Policy analysis.

Fact-checking.

As already mentioned, there are two IFCN²⁶-approved fact-checking organisations in Bulgaria: the Bulgarian version of AFP²⁷ and Factcheck.bg (with the Ukrainian version²⁸ and one more²⁹). A number of other Bulgarian media are growing their capacity in fact-checking as well – lately, the trend for offering fact-checking sections on websites and designated coverage of checked facts by different types of media is very noticeable. Bulgarian National Television³⁰ (BNT) is in the process of establishing its fact-checking team, supported by the competencies within BROD. Since the beginning of BROD hub's work, in addition to the AFP fact-checks, the BNT team has been gaining strength and building its structure. It now has several fact-checked stories that are not just about politics – something that makes BNT unique among the Bulgarian fact-checkers³¹. BROD's efforts are about promoting an in-depth approach to news.

Fact-checking and disseminating reliable information have been at the very heart of all activities of AFP for many years. A global news agency with more than 2.000 journalists overall operating in six languages in its core news agency business enjoys a journalistic reputation that hinges on the factual accuracy of the news it publishes. AFP's statute and internal editorial charter guarantee accurate, independent reporting ever since the creation of this institution in 1835. AFP has a robust structure in Bulgaria. On top of these structures, the specialised fact-checking editors ensure that

²⁴ <https://seldi.net/>

²⁵ <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Periodic-insight-n.14-Disinformation-narratives-about-the-war-in-Ukraine.pdf>

²⁶ <https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>

²⁷ <https://proveri.afp.com/list>

²⁸ <https://factcheck.bg/uk/>

²⁹ <https://factcheck.bg/factcheck-bg-veche-s-proverki-i-na-ukrainski-ezik/>

³⁰ <https://bnt.bg/>

³¹ <https://bntnews.bg/news/proverka-na-fakti-otpravya-li-teritorialni-provokacii-kam-balgariya-osnovniyat-oponent-na-erdogan-1232829news.html>

the story about to be published is accurate and well presented. These different layers ensure that the fact-checking is up to the best quality standards.

In addition to fact-checking organisations, there are also citizen-led initiatives, such as the *Are you lying?*³² initiative of a group of active citizens who want to debunk disinformation in Bulgarian politics. During the parliamentary election campaign, between 03 March 2023 and 31 March 2023, they tracked the participation of 23 parliamentary candidates in national broadcasts and checked how often they spread false information.

Research.

As the topic of disinformation becomes critical, the number of academic and policy research organisations doing different types of studies in this area is also growing. One of the partners in BROD is the Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD). CSD's mission is to build bridges between scholars and policymakers. BROD's first achievement is a framework for analysing disinformation narratives on the example of perceptions around the Ukrainian Refugees in Bulgaria (Kiely and Gargova, 2023). The paper argues that the current approaches to understanding and examining disinformation narratives often lack a localised contextualisation considering cultural and historical factors that inform them. The Gramscian theory and a discourse analysis approach supplemented by Natural Language Processing (NLP) are proposed for multilayered informative, comprehensive and actionable results.

Media and Information Literacy.

The Media Literacy Coalition plays a significant role in Bulgaria regarding developing educational content and promoting media literacy, organising events related to the topic (<https://gramoten.li/en/projects/>). However, Bulgaria remains at the bottom of the media literacy ranking. A survey in 2020 shows that 60% of teachers did not set a task related to finding and assessing the reliability of a source of information and less than 1% set such every day after explaining to their students how to do that. Only 8% of all respondents conducted a lesson for this purpose; the same is the share of teachers that set the task of finding and verifying information sources weekly. Every second teacher declares that he has not set his students the task of working in cooperation. Only 2% described situations related to fact-checking in the media concerning the pandemic as examples of some tasks with information sources.³³ Furthermore, other NGOs in Bulgaria are aiming to tackle disinformation. One year ago, in April 2022, the Bulgarian Coalition against Disinformation³⁴ got launched.

Collaboration with national regulators.

BROD works to bring together the different actors in combating disinformation and has already had some meetings with the Council for Electronic Media, the national media regulator.

³² <https://www.lazheshli.com/>

³³ <https://gramoten.li/en/2020/06/23/only-8-of-teachers-have-trained-students-to-check-sources-of-information/>

³⁴ https://bulgaria.representation.ec.europa.eu/novini-i-sbitiya/novini-0/predstavyane-na-blgarska-koaliciya-sreschu-dezinformaciya-2022-04-01_bg

Policy analysis.

Due to the 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. Some political parties are interested in legislation that obliges social networks to delete troll profiles. One of the proposed documents - Anti-Disinformation Bill, is inspired by the already existing Digital Services Act of the European Union, 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* came into force. The purpose of the law is to ensure the protection of persons in the public and private sectors who report or publicly disclose information about violations of Bulgarian legislation or acts of the European Union, which became known to them during or on the occasion of the performance of their work or official duties or in another work context. This law regulates the conditions, order and measures for the protection of persons in the public and private sectors who report or publicly disclose information about violations of Bulgarian legislation or acts of the European Union that endanger or damage the public interest and the right of the European Union, as well as the terms and conditions for submitting and considering such signals or publicly disclosed information. Since it is a new law, no established practice exists yet.

The Commission produces an annual Strategic Foresight Report³⁵, which informs the Commission Work Programmes³⁶ and multi-annual programming exercises. These exercises are conducted through a participative and cross-sectoral foresight process, led by Commission services in consultations with Member States, discussion with the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System (ESPAS)³⁷ and external stakeholders.³⁸

Conclusions

As the topic of disinformation is interdisciplinary, many different players are involved in it. The problem is how to consolidate efforts, create a sustainable and workable model that can continue to exist, and, most of all, address the whole of society to be sensitive and tackle disinformation.

The experience in a number of other countries shows (Germany, Finland, Sweden) that the question now is not *whether* to have media literacy classes but *how exactly* to have them. In many of the areas of intervention related to disinformation, Bulgaria lags behind, because it still configures the main tools and instruments to intervene.

Bulgaria is lagging when it comes to understanding the need for fact-checking – many editors, not without reason since fact-checking should be immanent for journalists, do not understand the additional, separate fact-checking. Simultaneously, journalists argue they cannot avoid spreading disinformation because politicians

³⁵ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight/2022-strategic-foresight-report_en

³⁶ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-documents/commission-work-programme_en

³⁷ <https://www.espas.eu/>

³⁸ https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/strategic-planning/strategic-foresight_en

spread as much. At the same time, it is imperative that standards are set for fact-checking. Moreover, there is no specific legislation on the subject in Bulgaria.

In conclusion, there is substantial work to be done and BROD will continue working across the various key areas to tackle disinformation in the next two years.

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