RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

HATE AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

Sandra B. Hrvatin, Brankica Petković and Sanela Hodžić

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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1.   INTRODUCTION

The hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication are integral parts of the propaganda-oriented media systems. Should we wish to understand the key characteristics of a propaganda-oriented media system, we must reflect on where, how and why the system came about. There is a long history of propaganda in terms of the way of influencing people's attitudes, opinions and behaviour. What differentiates the current propaganda-oriented media system from its previous incarnations, which operated mainly through the system of "manufacturing consent", is its totality in the realm of public communication. On the one hand, the present political elites treat the media as a key leverage for taking over power and sustaining it. On the other hand, they consider the media as a powerful economic system creating profit, above all by taking ownership of virtually all working media, channelling public funds into advertising and dismantling the economic base in which the media is rooted. Therefore, it is thoroughly wrong to consider the current propaganda-oriented media system only in terms of taking control of the shaping of public opinion without simultaneously considering the taking over of crucial leverages for the financing of loyal media outlets, verified both by the political elites and by capital.

> What differentiates the current propaganda-oriented media system from its previous incarnations is its totality in the realm of public communication.

Comprehending the functioning of this kind of system calls for analysis of the consequences for the communal life of the people that it produces (the disintegration of the community into politically led, oriented and financed groups of opinion-maker warriors). It is equally necessary to investigate how the process of the complete failure of mechanisms protecting the public interest led to a situation in which the liberal principles of the rule of law became a crucial milestone for the new models of the management of society where the "hindrance" represented by respecting the principles of human rights no longer exists. We should avoid falling into the trap of quick reasoning and misjudgement of the present media system as an anomaly connected to the historical characteristics of the transitional period of post-socialist and post-communist societies. We must not forget that the three-decade-long transition was based on recapping and replicating the media

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regulation "models" of Western European countries. The question that arises is when did these models turn into propagandist media machines whose intention is the decomposition of democracy? What was the determining factor that shaped the reverse process of turning from democracy towards totalitarianism?

Furthermore, is it not possible that the buds for this kind of development existed (and still exist) in the systems that the SEE countries replicated in their trajectory towards the liberal market economy? Considering that critical media are shutting down irrevocably, we must answer the question of whether the situation of the dismantling of the fundamental postulates of journalistic responsibility allows for the construction of a counter-system that would protect the truth? The vindication and defence of democracy nowadays depends on our ability to protect media systems that serve the public interest.

The search for the answers to these questions requires political thinking: political in the sense of not separating the economy from politics or using the economy against politics. Decisions made by the political elites that shape the future of the people stem from a very specific economic system which produces these very decisions. The same applies to media systems. Canadian lawyer Tim Wu illustrates meticulously in his book *The Attention Merchants* (2016) the way the media system operates, and how our attention is harvested and (re)sold. "To see where and when attention was being harvested, one had only to see where advertising (or propaganda, its noncommercial twin) was to be found." (Wu, 2016: 83) Wu denominates propaganda as the non-commercial twin of commercial advertising. As we will demonstrate, the present propagandist media systems generate income through a symbiotic connection with public funding controlled by the governing political elites which use this connection to sustain their power, and on the other hand, by mobilizing online communication for selling hate. Nowadays, hate generates economic and political profit.

> We must not forget that the three-decade-long post-socialist media systems transition was based on replicating the media regulation "models" of Western European countries. When did these models turn into propagandist media machines whose intention is the decomposition of democracy?

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2. WHAT IS PROPAGANDA, AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

In their book *Propaganda & Persuasion* (2012), Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell define propaganda as a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognition and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012: 7). Certain words included in the definition require additional explanation.

Deliberate means that "propaganda is carefully thought out ahead of time to select what will be the most effective strategy to promote an ideology and maintain an advantageous position." Propaganda is an **attempt** at directive communication with an objective that has been established a priori. The desired state may be perceptual, cognitive, behavioural or all three.

Beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are desirable end states for propagandist purposes and determine the formation of a propaganda message, campaign or both. Because so many factors determine the formation of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, the propagandist has to gather a great deal of information about the intended audience. Propaganda also seeks to achieve a response, a specific reaction or action from an audience that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012: 9-10). The final part of the definition is crucial for understanding the model that will be described later on.

Decoding how propaganda works requires a focus that goes beyond analyzing the media and the way it operates but also on several systemic and structural mechanisms operating within society and influencing the possibility of propaganda to work and be effective. Directing the analysis towards discovering the presence of propaganda in specific media or specific publications can never explain the functioning of the entire media system. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe in their book *Manufacturing Consent* (2002) the ways in which corporate media manufacture society's consent concerning issues that are included in the agenda of public discussion by the political elites. They point out the existence of systemic bias which allows media outlets to produce specific points of view that were previously coordinated by the political, economic and media elites. Their propaganda model is based on the perception of five filters grounded in the deliberate avoidance of certain topics and their interpretations that minimize the potential financial losses for the advertisers. In other words, the advertising money is allocated to the media under certain conditions connected to an unwritten rule agreed between the media and their financiers about not addressing certain topics. Herman and Chomsky claim that the advertisers won a "de facto licensing authority" over the way the media operates (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 25-37). In this case, the search for propaganda can be conducted not only through analyzing what has been published and how the publications are systemically partial, but also through the analysis of what is not reported on. If one wishes to stay in the business of the media (and profit from it), one must know how to meticulously choose

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the topics to be published and the ways in which they will be reported on. That is the way propaganda works in the case of manufacturing consent in society. This propaganda differs substantially from the propaganda model analyzed in this research.

The propaganda-oriented media system is recognized by its installation in the broader processes of the demise of democracy. It is a system that excludes people from politics; it depoliticizes the people by denying them a space in politics (Mastnak, 2015: 148). The people are pushed out of politics by propagandist techniques which replace them with *populus* in the sense of a nation, based on state-determined ethnic characteristics which enforce differentiation between those granted the right of political participation and those to whom this right is denied. Populism creates the appearance of political participation by exercising politics on a micro level through coordinated and deliberate attacks on those not recognized as part of the (our) people. The media plays an important role in this. On the one hand, economic centres and power networks represent themselves and their interests as politics, while the media takes on the role of the mechanism that enables the people to illustrate the illusion of democracy. The propagandist media system is based on allowing people access to politics under restricted and politically controlled conditions where the people then speak what those in power think and end up doing. The propagandist media system does not look for support in public opinion because, considering the goals of propaganda, public opinion does not exist. As expressed at the summit of Central and Eastern European countries (Serbia, Czech Republic, Poland, Croatia, Slovenia and Bulgaria) at the end of August 2020 by the President of the Hungarian Government, Viktor Orban: "Hungary wants to have a conservative and Christian-democratic approach towards European institutions and politics as such. (…) We would like to go back in history where we could discuss values such as family, nation, cultural tradition, religion." (Mekina, 2020: 19) We are in the midst of a struggle for intellectual sovereignty (Orban) of a state that is being carried out in an illiberal, authoritarian way. This struggle requires the construction of an impermeable media system in which all its parts are subjugated to a common goal, and each part plays an important role in the informational "food chain"— the amplification and systematic spreading of key propagandist messages while simultaneously preventing the formation of media channels of the opposition.

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Before we present the key aspects of the propagandist media ecosystem, we must answer a vital question: is the system we are describing an isolated characteristic of Central and Eastern European countries? Should we consider this deformed media system as a result of transition (from socialism and communism to capitalism) and the local political elites discovering the possibility of transitioning from one system to another as an opportunity for the formation of a special kind of capitalism without a market and a democratic system without democratic values? Or can we explain the current events in these countries as a kind of "normal" developmental trajectory of

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capitalism that awaits other European countries—a form of populist anarchy in which the media (especially social networks) plays out as the strongest tool for the spreading of propaganda? It should be pointed out that former socialist and communist states did not start their transition in the 80s at point zero. There was no switch that turned off the previous system overnight and turned on the new one. The idea of equating political pluralism with market economy became the foundation for the most predatory types of privatization, selling of natural resources, the intrusion of Western corporations that were unable to guarantee workers' rights in the West, and political-business liaisons between "East and West" that lasted just long enough for the local political elites to consolidate their authority. President of the Polish government, Mateusz Morawiecki, stated at the same summit of Central and Eastern European countries, held in Bled, that in the 90s nobody was bothered by "Western Europe colonizing Eastern. Now that our companies are trying to establish themselves in the unified European market, they are faced with resistance." (Mekina, 2020: 19) These are the stances promoted by the media propagandist machine while simultaneously creating a whole range of "enemies" that are said to be working against the national interests of the state. Let us illustrate some of these matters. Hungary was the first transition country that privatized (more accurately sold out) its media. Three decades later, there are scarce foreign media owners that persist in the captured media landscape. The rest has merged into a form of a propagandist conglomerate of a media ecosystem in which everything gravitates towards the centre with the concentration of power (political and economic) of a single political party and an individual, intertwined in a web of friendly business liaisons.

This system makes the media just as much a hostage of the political elites as of the economy. Advocating for neoliberal politics and its derivative populist political power that is usually prescribed with an adjective stemming from nation ("*Hungarian democracy is no worse than the German, Italian or French*", according to Viktor Orban) does not emerge from an economic vacuum. The propagandist media system does not arise and operate because its owners aspire to obtain complete control over what and how people think. This model emerged and operates because its owners realized that propaganda can be a source of substantial economic benefits. Certainly, within the economic system in question, the economic power of the media is drawn from public funds, state-oriented advertising, and the regulation which aims to legalize specific forms of operating that allows the media not to be held accountable to the market, the public or the state but rather exclusively to specific media owners and their interests for defending the acquired positions of power. Old school media (political party) agitators and propagandists gave way to propagandist experts with no political party affiliations whose role is merely to sell politics as nonpolitical. (Habermas, 1989: 238)

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The aim of this project is a form of mapping the operation of media in illiberal societies. We do not use the term illiberal the same way that the political autocrats use it in these countries. Illiberal refers to the idea that the market does not require a safety catch to protect the rights and liberties of the people. The illiberal system incessantly refers to some general (national) values that used to exist and were destroyed by "importing" liberal values from the West. In this system, we do not treat the media separately like a political or an economic institution. It is a system that allowed for capitalism to be brought to its extreme stages and where the state does not take on the role of supervision of the worst economic excesses but rather justifies them as a necessity to protect the national market within a nation-state. The illiberal system is marked by immense political protectionism. The idea that prevailed at the beginning of the transition about catching up with Europe or returning to the European house of nations has been replaced by the predominant idea of the need to persist with what is "ours" and which does not concur with the needs and desires of "our" people following the Age of Enlightenment. It is precisely at this point that the media must be introduced into the analysis. It is the media that transforms the ideas of the illiberal political project into messages explaining everyday life.

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3. HOW DOES THE PROPAGANDIST MEDIA ECOSYSTEM OPERATE?

The propagandist media ecosystem operates as a network of systemic corruption. It is not a question of individual media or individual media professionals that abuse the media for propagandist purposes; rather, it is an issue of the collection of systemic and structural conditions that turn the media players themselves into carriers of propagandist activities. The **legal framework** is of crucial importance among the systemic conditions. Despite the majority of the countries formally granting the media its autonomy and determining freedom of expression as a fundamental human right, the system has developed a complete lack of institutional responsiveness to the blatant violations of these principles. Financially and professionally weakened regulating institutions, which are often directly or indirectly influenced by the governing political elites, are not capable of serving the public interest. Rarely do their attempts at media market regulation, media pluralism protection or their respect for professional standards of media operating find their way past ad hoc solutions. The nonexistence of the state's strategic vision of media development and its role in a democratic society is often replaced by thoughtless changes in legislation that merely worsen the deregulated situation. This environment has given way to the instrumentalization of the media for political goals as a predominant practice.

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The prevailing mechanism of control over the media is the non-transparent **media ownership** marked by formal, fictional owners hiding their immediate connections to the leading political elites. This mechanism creates a form of "feedback loop" when it comes to influencing the media: on the one hand, the media owners are aware that they owe their takeovers to the governing political elites, while on the other hand, the survival of their media empires depends on the same politics allocating public funds to advertising. Since the media markets do not work, especially following the economic crisis of 2008, the majority of advertising money intended for the financing of the media comes in the form of **state advertising** or as income allocated by (completely or partially) state-owned companies without clearly predetermined criteria. The financial crisis has directly influenced the position and status of journalists and other media professionals. **Professional journalism and investigative journalism** became "luxuries" only afforded by rare media houses. This gap is usually filled by independent media projects mainly financed by **donations** which makes them the targets of attack by governing politics. The undesirable economic situation prevents independent media from being directly financed by their users. Having lost trust in the autonomy of the media, the users turn more and more to the **online media and social networks** in their search for information. Nobody controls the operating of these media and communication channels. Even worse, the propagandist media ecosystem is taking over this realm of the media as well. The virtual

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space is a place of creation and extinction of "media" whose ownership and financing sources are unknown. It is impossible to address their manipulations, misinformation and lies. It is not the media in the usual meaning of the word; rather, we are dealing with interconnected subsystems that serve to enhance specific messages the political elites leak to the public. The propagandist media ecosystem functions thorough a system of centrifugal forces: seemingly separated media outlets work in harmony as a machine spreading propaganda messages serving the interests of the political elites. Researching this system presents itself as an extremely difficult task. As Shiva Vaidhyanathan puts it: "we are in the midst of a worldwide, internet-based assault on democracy." (Vaidhyanathan, 2018: 180) Were we to understand the way this system works, we would analyze the whole ecosystem, not merely its individual parts. We must analyze the centre (mainstream media) as well as its peripheral parts (online media and social networks). The system of information flowing from the centre to the peripheries has been replaced by a reverse system.

The peripheries are "test fields" for information that will later become mainstream. It is necessary to point out the specific form of privatization of accountability for public communication. In contrast to the media, bound by statutory provisions on the prohibition of hate speech and discrimination, and the protection of privacy and people's dignity, the social networks operate within a completely uncontrolled system of a kind of cyber-libertarianism. Once freedom of expression becomes the key aspect of the business model exercised by social network owners, it is clear that it is of no interest for businesses to limit speech no matter how destructive it is. (Zuboff, 2019: 109-110) The companies defending their business models by appealing to freedom of expression should recognize their responsibility for these actions. It is precisely this point of failure of all the institutions of the state of law that was meant to protect freedom of expression with all its limitations.

What is standing in opposition to this propaganda machine? Even though the space within which independent media can operate has drastically shrunk, their role for the protection of democracy does not cease to be of vital importance. The media propaganda ecosystem operates as an invasive form of colonization of the public communication space. However, it is not the only one. Online communication is used as much by those spreading misinformation as those wishing to share journalists' stories crucial for understanding the time in which we are living. The bond between the media and the public that has been replaced for decades by the commercial relationship between the media and the advertisers needs to be re-established. There is no media without the public, just as there is no public without its media. In order to revive this relationship, it is necessary to go back to the roots of the journalism profession. The trust in journalism and media, which has never been at a lower point, needs to be re-established by returning the fundamental postulates of public service: transparency, public interest, and journalistic integrity. This can only be achieved by the state's

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re-involvement in the process of governance over public matters. The future of this narrative will depend upon the indignant citizens, journalists and scholars drawn to this project: indignant elected officials and policy makers who understand that their authority originates in the foundational values of democratic countries, claims Shoshana Zuboff. (2019: 522)

4. RESEARCH OF HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

Within the project "Resilience – Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey", the research team in seven countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) have explored the phenomenon of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication based on common methodology, particularly focusing on the political-economic basis of such models of media and communication.

The typical elements of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication were identified at the beginning of the research, including ownership and financing patterns, operational modalities, characteristics of editors and journalists in such media models, distinctive content, and relations with the audience. Taking these elements into account, the researchers in the seven countries provided the assessment of the media landscape and concrete examples of media groups, media outlets, and media and public communication practices with the aim of examining whether and how the hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication operate in their respective countries.

According to the Resilience project research methodology, the typical elements of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication are the following:

Ownership patterns of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication platforms

a) non-transparent/hidden ownership, beneficiary owner particularly hidden;

b) owner affiliated/connected to political centres of power, to the ruling political party or other political parties or groupings, to extremist organizations, to criminal groups (underground), to intelligence services, etc.;

c) ownership by the government/state/local authorities;

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d) ownership by individual businessmen/tycoons with affiliation/connection to political parties or other centres of power, to the government, to extremist organizations, criminal groups, to intelligence services, etc.;

e) ownership by foreign owners, individual or institutional, connected to foreign governments or foreign political and business groups, having connections with political centres of power in the beneficiary country, and/or geopolitical interests in the country;

f) ownership by individual journalists, publicists, opinion-makers, influencers (founders of personalized online media and communication channels) with connections to political parties or other political or ideological groupings, members of the government and other centres of power, or extremist organizations, criminal groups, intelligence services, etc.

Financing patterns, material basis, business models

a) Sources of financing not known/not clear (no advertisements carried out, no data on eventual subsidies, grants and sponsorships, no financial reports available in public databases and business registers, etc.);

b) Sources of financing are other businesses of the owner in the media sector or in other sectors;

c) Advertisements (commercial or related to state bodies and institutions connected to the political centres of power and distributed in a non-transparent manner), sponsorships, etc.;

d) Grants and subsidies by the government or local authorities, including access to tax reduction scheme, loans from state funds, etc.;

e) Community fundraising (micro-donations, crowdfunding, membership, etc.);

f) Blackmailing individuals threatening to publish compromising, manipulative content;

g) Financial support from foreign business entities or governments;

h) Commercial benefits from attracting audiences are one, but not the only purpose of these media; in many cases, they are not the prevailing purpose in this type of media.

Organizational/operational modalities

a) public/state media operating on national level, such as public broadcasters, including entities such as radio, TV and/or online media, having a complex management and governance structure , but having all or some outlets and channels producing and disseminating content with hate speech,

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disinformation and/or propaganda, being under the control of individual managers or editors connected to the centres of power, ruling party, government, or think-tanks of the ruling party, etc.;

b) local media under the control of the local authorities/mayor and political party in power on a local level;

c) commercial media groups originating and operating in the beneficiary country, with one or more media outlets or channels producing and disseminating content with hate speech, disinformation and/or propaganda; with management and editorial control provided by individuals with connections to the centres of power, ruling party, government, or think-tanks of the ruling party, etc.;

d) offices/branches of private, commercial media from other countries in the region or internationally, or offices/branches of international divisions of public/state media in other countries;

e) media outlets, particularly online media, operating with a small editorial team, providing no data about who they are, operating with or without offices, on a national or local level, having hidden or open affiliation to centres of power, political parties or ideological groupings, or criminal groups, etc.;

f) individual operations with or without a registered media outlet, based on self-employment or employment in another business;

g) individual operations of social media accounts based on anonymity, often organized and coordinated to replicate or support each other in content/messages distributed; activity, including trolling, sometimes paid for by a political party or other organization;

h) comment sections in the online media of this type regularly publish messages from anonymous authors containing hate speech and disinformation without limitation and moderation, some of these commentators act in an organized and coordinated way and are paid by a political party or other organization for this activity.

Editors and journalists

a) editors of this type of media have no respect for professional standards, are not recruited on the basis of professional qualifications, take part in attacks on media, editors and journalists critical to the agenda and to the patrons they serve, engage in attacks on independent associations of journalists and in attempts to form parallel associations;

b) section with impressum – a list of responsible editorial team members (and founders/publishers) often missing in such media;

c) key personnel, including editors' positions predominantly occupied by males;

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d) journalists either a) known for bias reporting, an aggressive propagandist style of writing and communication, or for subtle manipulation of (historical) facts and false presentation of facts, events, and ideas; or b) unknown, almost anonymous journalists, mostly young, not professionally socialized in terms of respect for professional standards and defence of professional integrity, economically dependent, but poorly and unregularly paid; or being c) activists of political parties writing for hate and propaganda media instead of professional journalists or under the pretence of journalists.

Content

a) systematic production and dissemination of content (articles, reports, commentaries, titles, visual images, symbols, video, messages) with hate speech, propaganda and disinformation, including incitement to hatred against target groups and individuals, defamatory claims, prejudices and discriminatory speech, intimidation, harassment and false information, manipulation of facts and images, revisionism of historical facts, brutal negative, defamatory campaigns against targets, propaganda for political or ideological agenda of patrons, "character assassination", exploitation of fear, misogyny, Islamophobia, antisemitism, etc.;

b) such content dominates in these media and communication platforms, or in the main sections of these media;

c) the targets of such content are ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, neighbouring nations, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, Roma, Muslims, Jews, political or ideological opponents to agenda and patrons of these media and communication platforms, critical journalists and media, critical public personalities, activists of watchdog institutions and civil society organizations, academics and advocates of multicultural societies, feminists, human rights defenders, environmental organizations and activists, George Soros, the EU and other international actors when they support critical voices and express criticism towards the agenda and patrons of these media;

d) such content is particularly intensively carried out in pre-election periods, during the adoption of important political decisions and in polarized public discussions;

e) content/articles/reports/editorials/columns often not signed by authors/ authors remain unknown; (anonymous) articles are re-published among groups of such media and run simultaneously as a kind of coordinated campaign; visual material, photos often not signed, taken from sources without referencing or in a manipulated manner;

f) the content of these media outlets and communication platforms is often the subject of infringement procedures by regulatory bodies or self-regulatory bodies because of violation of content regulations in media law or violation of codes of conduct of media and journalists, or challenged and removed from social media platforms because of violation of their rules;

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g) the content of these media outlets and communication platforms is often the subject of fact-checking by professional media or civil society organizations and exposed for (systematically, deliberately) producing and disseminating false information;

h) gender-based prejudices and harassment of women in politics, journalism, civil society and academia spread on a regular basis;

i) historical events, wars and conflicts explored in a way that promotes aggressive ethno-nationalism, to justify or negate war crimes and cherish war criminals;

j) ethnic and political divisions and polarizations systematically inflamed.

Audience relations

a) media and communication platforms of this type use propaganda to mobilize supporters of their political and ideological agenda/agenda of their patrons, but also aim at influencing public opinion on general, particularly during elections;

b) strong, emotional verbal and visual solutions, and exploitation of fear are used as well as special formats and techniques, including anonymity, use of algorithms and other techniques to attract audiences and manipulate;

c) media and communication platforms of this type are used as a megaphone, but also as a reference point for politicians, decision makers and opinion makers of similar profile in communications with citizens/audience;

d) hate speech, propaganda and disinformation campaigns in this type of media and communication platforms can lead to organized actions, protests and attacks on targets in the real space;

e) hate speech, propaganda and disinformation campaigns of this type of media and communication, in certain circumstances/periods, attract large audiences, and influence public opinion and voting.

The researchers provided their assessment of the media landscape and concrete examples of media and communication in their countries based on the research conducted between May–August 2020, relying on secondary sources such as monitoring reports and decisions of regulatory authorities, self-regulatory bodies, fact-checking platforms, and previous research on media, hate speech and disinformation in their countries, but also observing the media and conducting interviews with relevant sources. Across all typical elements of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication, the researchers also paid attention to the gender dimension as a horizontal issue.

5. REGIONAL FEATURES OF HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

5.1. Ownership and funding

The most important bases of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication pertain to the **patterns of media ownership and funding**. Ownership of many media in the countries of the region is connected to **the government or to major political parties**. **Media outlets are also often funded directly by the government or through business groups connected to the government or to the ruling parties**. For example, in Serbia, over 50% of audience shares are reportedly owned or controlled by a political party, politician or political group, or have an owner with political affiliation (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia). In BiH, there is still a large number of non-privatized local public broadcasters that are founded and directly funded by local and cantonal governments and have no guarantees of editorial independence. Media ownership in Turkey is highly concentrated and marked by political and economic alliances among media conglomerates and the government. With four of the top media owners (Kalyon Group, Demirören Group, Ciner Group and Doğuş Group) closely affiliated with the government, having 71% of the cross-media audience share, public communication is clearly dominated by a single interest group. Similarly, significant is the interference and control of the Serbian government in the media sector.

In several countries in the region, **government funding** on the national and local level is regularly provided to media that are partisan towards the government or the ruling political party, including those media that commonly break professional standards and spread hate speech, disinformation and propaganda. For instance, the authorities in Serbia provide most of funding for media outlets infamous for violations of professional standards, and spreading disinformation and propaganda. A local Serb nationalist website Despotovina.info, known for inciting ethno-national hostility in BiH, has been supported by the local municipalities of Srebrenica and Bratunac in BiH, as well as by the government of neighbouring Serbia (as noted on their website). The period of the strongest government capture of media in North Macedonia came to an end with the change of government in 2016, but some of the affiliations persist, with certain media maintaining clientelist relations with political centres of power, primarily the VMRO-DPMNE party. In Turkey, most of the media outlets that engage in hate, disinformation and propaganda have business interests with the government. An important portion of **advertising** also comes from the government or affiliated private companies. The connection of advertisers with the government and political officials, and lack of ethical considerations when placing their ads also leads to politically biased and unethical media

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being financially rewarded. In North Macedonia, for example, major brands advertise on notorious websites.

The hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication in the region can be connected to the interference of **foreign governments**, with ownership and funding of certain media outlets being directly or indirectly connected to the governments of Turkey (media in BiH and Albania), Russia (media in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro), Hungary (media in North Macedonia), Croatia (media in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro) and Serbia (media in BiH and Montenegro).

An important factor that contributes to hate, disinformation and propaganda models and adds to the impunity for it is the **lack of transparency** of ownership and funding. The data on media ownership are in part available in relevant business and media registries. **Transparency** is particularly limited in the online sphere, where many platforms do not even register as media businesses and do not provide information on their ownership or funding. There are some positive steps in this regard, with, for instance, the regulator in Montenegro keeping a registry of online media, and a register of online media being established in North Macedonia in 2020. However, the registration of online media in Montenegro is voluntary, while the register in North Macedonia is intended to increase the transparency of media that adhere to ethical norms, while those that regularly violate them are not eligible to become members of the registry. Financial transparency is even more limited. A good example is a registry of media businesses at the National Business Center in Albania, which makes available the annual balances and respective documents, as well as ownership data of online media. Across various media sectors there are elements of **hidden ownership and funding** that enable the interference of political and business actors in editorial policies, and contributes to the flourishing of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication in the region.

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5.2. Organizational/operational models of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech

The organizational and operational models of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech are numerous across the region. Some of those that the seven researchers identify involve:

Public service broadcasters (PSB), which, in the region covered by this research, are largely perverted into their very opposites: promoters of party-political, rather than public interests. They are widely considered politically biased, even a propaganda tool of the ruling parties. This is similar to the situation with **local public media** controlled by authorities and political party in power. Most notably, there is a large number of these types of media in BiH, which are directly funded by local government and are more likely to serve as their public relations channels than as genuine journalistic platforms.

Commercial media outlets and groups; Most of the country reports note that the media outlets belonging to the traditional media sectors, most of all broadcasting, do not regularly disseminate disinformation and hate speech in the strictest sense, but many represent soft-propaganda models, as they engage in selective, one-sided reporting, favouritism towards certain political parties, neglect important perspectives, do not report critically about certain centres of power, and sometimes publish misleading information. Some of the hate, disinformation and propaganda models among the commercial media rely on favouritism of and clientelist relationships with certain political party and/or the government. Some examples include the Serb nationalist website Despotovina in BiH and pro-SBB Dnevni Avaz in BiH, as well as right-leaning IN4S.net and Borba.me in Montenegro. Other media outlets resort to disinformation and propaganda **without clear favouritism of political parties**. For instance, as researcher Ilda Londo points out, otherwise the credible current affairs programme "360 grade" broadcast on Ora TV in Albania has been increasingly releasing misleading reports during 2020, mostly related to the coronavirus and the purported superiority of the Albanian nation and culture throughout history.

Offices/branches of international divisions of public/state media in other countries, which engage in misinformation and propaganda models of communication. For instance, the Russian Sputnik has mostly been accused of pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric, pro-Serbian stances and tendentious reporting on instability in the region. **There are also private, commercial media with foreign ownership** that engage in this type of communication. Kurir.mk, Lider.mk, Deneshen.mk, Ekonomski.mk and Vistina.mk in North Macedonia, indirectly connected to the Hungarian government, are mostly reporting against the current government and in favour of the VMRO-DPMNE party.

Online media and communication platforms represent another model of propaganda, disinformation and hate. There are different sub-types within this model, including a) social media accounts b) websites of limited capacities and influence and c) established online media outlets. Online platforms that belong to this model are often not registered as a media business, or any type of legal entity, and often lack transparency (with little, if any, information available on persons responsible, ownership, funding and organizational models).

Many of the online communication platforms that belong to hate, propaganda and disinformation models are run by **small editorial teams** and, for the most part, carry news from other sources. Hate, disinformation and propaganda models concerning particular marginalized and minority groups partly also result from the **lack of workplace diversity**. For instance, as the researcher Anida Sokol notes, in BiH only twenty-six per cent of directors of television stations and thirty per cent of directors of radio stations are female. Milica Bogdanović notes that in Montenegro 50% of media editors are female,

but they do not enjoy full autonomy from the male owners and continue to publish content congruent with patriarchal ideology and gender stereotypes. The hate, disinformation and propaganda models also involve hybrid operating patterns, as in the case of Jeta OSH QEF in Albania, a website that often relies on user-generated content and often publishes misleading content, such as disinformation on the 2020 earthquake.

There is an **overwhelming amount of disinformation, propaganda, hate speech and derogatory language in the comments sections of online media** across the region. For the majority of media outlets, the most evident propaganda, disinformation and hate speech models come not from the main editorial content, but from the user comments on the online platforms of these media. While many of the comments involving hate, disinformation and propaganda are posted by people venting and expressing frustration on the web, others are politically orchestrated and affiliated with political parties. For example, an analysis of a comments section of a popular website shows that there were at least 259 trolls for the main political parties in the pre-election period in BiH in 2018. Similarly, the pro-AKP political trolls in Turkey target political opponents and help consolidate the government's power. Some of these media even engage in the moderation of users' comments, but possibly both as a strategy of attracting audience and because of insufficient capacities dedicated to moderation, propaganda, disinformation and hate models persist in their comments sections.

Another **disinformation, propaganda, and hate model** pertains to numerous social network groups and profiles of public figures and citizens, some of which have a large followership. For instance, public officials have, on occasions, published misleading information on their social profiles (such as a video on an alleged anti-lockdown protest in Spain shared by the Prime Minister in Albania), and expressed hostility towards certain groups (in BiH and Albania, for instance, on the LGBTI+ population). An extreme example is the case when Gani Kocy, the member of PDK and the General Council and the former deputy minister in Kosovo, on his Facebook account called several journalists and media outlets "Serbian septic tanks" that stink and need to be closed. Some examples of other types of opinion makers that spread hate speech that our researchers identified include the Analiz merkezi YouTube platform in Turkey, and social media platforms and posts by Milenko Nedelkovski and Branko Tričkovski, supporters of opposing political options in North Macedonia. On one occasion, the self-regulator in North Macedonia concluded that Tričkovski was bickering and engaging in inappropriate communication, while there is an ongoing court proceeding against Nedelkovski.

Some online platforms form the so-called **portal farms** with a number of Facebook pages and related domains, which not only increases their audience reach but also dissipates the attention of fact-checkers, media monitoring platforms and (self)regulators. Some online disinformation, propaganda and

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hate models involve cross-border alliances and carry on content of other similar platforms. This exchange of content is encouraged not only often by direct ideological and political affiliations but also by business models based on the pursuit of profit through disinformation, propaganda and hate speech.

5.3.   Resisting disinformation, propaganda and hate models: (self)regulation and civil society

The prohibition of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda is, in some form, part of the **laws and regulations** in the region, primarily those related to the broadcasting sector. One of the most active regulators in the region in terms of not only overseeing the implementation of professional norms in the broadcasting sector, but also in terms of collecting and publishing data on the media sector is the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in North Macedonia. However, the regulation is limited to the broadcasting sector and mostly, like in BiH, to complaints that the media regulator receives, while regular monitoring of media content is not conducted.

The limits of media regulation are also illustrated in the fact that the public service broadcaster RTRS in BiH has not changed its practices after the dozens of fines it has received in the last few years for the violation of professional norms. In addition, media regulators are exposed, to a differing extent, to political pressures and influences. A decision of the Montenegrin Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) from beginning of 2020 on three-month suspension of broadcasting of certain shows of Serbian television stations, including Happy TV and Pink TV, for promoting hatred, intolerance and discrimination against Montenegrin nationals was an important precedent in media regulation, but civil society actors asserted that it only confirms the bias of the regulator as the decision came only when the disseminated content was damaging to the interests of the authorities. In BiH, paradoxically, in mid-2020, the person who had been a director of RTRS in the period of frequent violations of professional norms, was appointed as director of the Communication Regulatory Agency, which is a turn that might mark a disruption of the Agency's previously creditable track record.

The legislation and court practice concerning hate speech in the region have been reticent and insufficient to undermine the culture of impunity.

Other governmental bodies, such as **Ombudsmen** as well as the **Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination** (CPD) in Albania, currently have a marginal role in fighting hate, propaganda and disinformation models. Of the five complaints on discrimination and hate speech in media outlets that the CPD has received so far, it confirmed discrimination in two of them, requesting a public apology from the media outlet concerned. The body, however, does not have executive powers.

The **legislation and court practice** concerning hate speech in the region have been reticent and insufficient to undermine the culture of impunity. In North Macedonia, there are provisions against discrimination, racial hatred and nationalistic intolerance (with one ongoing court case) but the Criminal Code does not include provisions on hate speech, which diminishes an effective judiciary response. In BiH, the criminal codes address hate speech under somewhat narrow 'incitement to hatred' clauses, and the handful of

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court cases brought so far indicate that the court practice has been inconsistent. In Albania, there are similar clauses under the Criminal Code, but there has been no court practice concerning hate speech.

In **Turkey**, the media regulatory body has been largely instrumentalized for control of media critical of the government. The Radio and Television Authority of Turkey (the RTUK) has been mainly issuing broadcast bans and fines to channels that oppose the AKP party. In efforts of the ruling AKP party to suppress critical voices in social media in Turkey, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Wikipedia have been blocked on a few occasions in the past. The Penal Code, and the Anti-Terror Law (TMK) are also misused for silencing critical voices in Turkey and it is feared that if a new bill on social media, being drafted in mid-2020, passes, that will only exacerbate the problem.

The policy of media outlets on pre-, post- or no moderation of user generated comments differs from one media outlet to another, and is dependent on both the capacities of individual media outlets and whether they value the public interest over financial gains (as heated user comments tend to attract an audience).

Self-regulatory frameworks have played an important role in the promotion of professional norms among print, as well as online, media. In BiH, the Press Council does not tackle the content on social media and non-journalistic online platforms, which means that large areas of online communication remain outside of the self-regulatory mechanism. On the other hand, the self-regulator in North Macedonia (CMEM) reacts to reported violations of professional norms on different media and communication platforms, including Facebook posts. In Albania, self-regulation has just been established, while in Montenegro, the polarization within the media community does not allow for the existence of a single, functional self-regulator, and instead, only a handful of media outlets have internal Ombudsmen receiving citizens' complaints.

The **policy of media outlets** on pre-, post- or no moderation of user generated comments differs from one media outlet to another, and is dependent on both the capacities of individual media outlets and whether they value the public interest over financial gains (as heated user comments tend to attract an audience). Media outlets are often inundated with thousands of comments on a daily basis which they do not manage to moderate. An interesting example of clamping down on hate speech, disinformation and propaganda while public health was endangered during the coronavirus pandemic is Vijesti online in Montenegro, which switched from post-moderation to pre-moderation of user comments.

Watchdog and fact-checking organizations across the region have been debunking content involving disinformation, exposing instances of disinformation and false content, being both acclaimed and criticized by media actors.

Furthermore, **watchdog and fact-checking organizations** across the region, such as Crithink and Vistinomer in North Macedonia and Istinomer in Serbia, have been debunking content involving disinformation. For instance, in BiH, Raskrinkavanje.ba has been exposing thousands of instances of disinformation and false content reaching tens of thousands of followers on its Facebook page, and being both acclaimed and criticized by media actors. Finally, across the region there is a lack of media literacy programmes and education that promotes a better understanding of hate, disinformation and propaganda models.

6. CONCLUSION: PUBLIC MONEY MISUSED TO FINANCE HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Our research shows that there are numerous examples of disinformation, propaganda and hate models of media and communication in the region, some of them very powerful in terms of their political and financial background and influence on public opinion.

These hate and propaganda media and communication models are not marginal phenomena that have appeared accidentally. In most of the countries in the region, they are significant elements of the media system and are established and maintained systematically to absorb public money and spend it on serving the political agendas of their patrons in the political parties that benefit from the radical polarization of the society.

The identified models and examples of propaganda, disinformation and hate function as propellers of the populist political narratives and income-acquiring tools. Both the political elites (including domestic and foreign political groups and governments) and the media owners have clear political and/or financial interests in disseminating hate, disinformation and propagandist content. On the other hand, quality, highly professional media that serve an important democratic function increasingly struggle for audience and revenues, and face pressures and a lack of sustainability. This means that hate, disinformation and propaganda models are here to stay, and the countries of the region need to take decisive action against them and in support of those media that stand for professional values.

The **disregard for professional ethics** is widespread. Broadcasting media platforms seem to be mostly free of hate speech and straight-out disinformation. This may be partly due to the work of regulatory bodies and the presence of editors and media managers still dedicated to professional ethnics, but in countries like Kosovo, also a result of a strong international involvement and cross-ethnic cooperation between journalists. Propaganda, disinformation and hate models are particularly present in online media, and they especially permeate social media and user-generated content. Lack of (self)regulation in the online sphere nurtures a culture of impunity for propaganda, disinformation and hate models. However, the self-regulatory bodies in most of the countries of the region have been exposing hate, disinformation and propaganda models. Social media companies are also starting to cooperate with local organizations and to remove disinformation and hate speech originating from this region. The judiciary has been processing some cases of hate speech and panic and disorder through disinformation, but there is a need to improve both the legislation and court practice.

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These punitive measures are crucial, but they alone are not a panacea against propaganda, disinformation and hate models. The problems will persist as long as the **political class** acts as a major driver of these models. The governments across the region have been a major lever of hate, disinformation and propagandist communication models, with individual media being captured (through ownership and funding) for political and economic promotion. Ironically, it is public money that often feeds hate, disinformation and propaganda models, as government funding is channelled to some of the most notorious platforms. This is particularly evident in Serbia, where the government directly funds propagandist and tabloid media.

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There is a particular need to **increase the transparency of media ownership and funding**, providing region-wide information on direct and related ownership of all types of media outlets and other communication platforms through easily accessible registers. The introduction of an obligation for media outlets to publish basic financial data and information on major sources of funding should also be considered.

The consequences of propaganda, disinformation and hate speech are overwhelming. Hate, disinformation and propaganda are directly inciting hostility and bringing harm to different (ethnic, gender, religious, sexual and other) groups. Furthermore, these models have become the norm and the central feature of the culture of communication (particularly online). The public in the region is increasingly accustomed to the derogatory language and sensationalistic content which resonates in our collective memory as the imagery of the sinister other (foreigners, other ethnic groups, Jews, Roma people, women as a political minority, LGBTI+) becomes more copious, familiar, appearing as credible, and easily available for the next slur.

Ultimately, these hate, disinformation and propaganda models **step on the core democratic values**, while distorting our views and shifting attention from real political thought and engagement.

> The consequences of propaganda, disinformation and hate speech are overwhelming. Hate, disinformation and propaganda are directly inciting hostility and bringing harm to different social groups. These models have become the norm and the central feature of the culture of communication (particularly online).

6.1.   The fight against hate, disinformation and propaganda media and communication models

Imposing **more regulation** on media and communication platforms is not necessarily the way to go. Instead, **the current regulations and institutions need to be strengthened and improved**. The definitions of hate speech in the criminal codes across the region need to be revised to include not only provision against "incitement to hatred", but also include against expressions of negative stereotypes and stigmatization. It should be particularly ensured that hate speech spread by public figures and media with potentially high reach and influence gets penalized. The judiciary must be decisive in putting an end to the culture of impunity. Relentless policing of online content and penalizing all hate speech is contrary to the principles of democracy and can limit the freedom of expression.

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The **political pressures that media regulators face** need to be confronted and regulators enabled and capacitated to promote professional ethics. Independent funding and the appointment of highly qualified personnel is the first condition.

In parallel with penal and self-regulatory mechanisms, the countries of the region need more elaborate, systemic soft mechanisms, including funding for quality journalism, sensibilization of both journalists and the public about hate, disinformation and propaganda, and subjecting those communication models and practices to research, public judgement and disdain. At present, international assistance is the main supporter of quality journalism, but in the future, public funding must be transformed in an instrument of support for quality journalism. Stronger demands from civil society are needed to make the procedures transparent, to establish the criteria for journalistic excellence and to prevent propagandist and sensationalistic media from receiving government funding.

The **self-regulatory bodies, fact-checking and media watchdog platforms, media researchers, NGOs, educational institutions and organizations, public institutions** (such as Ombudsman institutions) and other actors can contribute to these restorative measures by monitoring and pointing out hate, propaganda and disinformation instances and models, condemning hateful, propagandist and disinformation-containing reports and statements, educating media, journalists and the public, etc.

The **companies that manage social networks** are also increasingly engaging in the region. During the pandemic, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram started removing misleading posts from the region, and partnerships with local fact-checking organizations will enable more regular removal and flagging of misleading content from the region.

Importantly, **the political class and public sector need to become a part of the solution**. This means, first, that both direct and indirect interference of the state in media ownership should be prevented. Private and legal entities that are closely affiliated with ruling parties should not be allowed to own media outlets. Secondly, public funding for the media should be put in the service of public interest, i.e. awarded to quality media based on relevant criteria and legitimate and transparent procedures. With a high number of communication platforms belonging to hate, disinformation and propaganda models, and with the associated growing difficulties for the public to get reliable information, governments and the nongovernmental organizations in the region should both provide **media and information literacy promotion programmes**. Media and information literacy should particularly be made an important part of regular formal education, in order to systematically promote the development of skills that will help the public to understand and condemn hate speech and disinformation in the increasingly challenging communication environment.

> The political pressures that media regulators face need to be confronted and regulators enabled and capacitated to promote professional ethics. Independent funding and the appointment of highly qualified personnel is the first condition.

> There is a need to employ multiple measures and a collective, collaborative effort across numerous sectors, including the media, politics, education, the judiciary, science and technology, culture and other sectors in order to strengthen instruments and institutions, but also to empower individual citizens and communities to oppose and prevent the normalization of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication.

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Ultimately, no single measure and approach alone will be sufficient to counter the hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication. **There is a need to employ multiple measures and a collective, collaborative effort across numerous sectors**, including the media, politics, education, the judiciary, science and technology, culture and other sectors in order to strengthen instruments and institutions, but also to empower individual citizens and communities to oppose and prevent the normalization of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication. We need social and political mobilization, a civil defence movement to protect human dignity and humanity in our communication and in the media as the most valuable institutions where professionals serve the public interest for credible information and plural, critical views.

The political class and public sector need to become a part of the solution.

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