

The Western Balkans and EU-NATO cooperation: how to counter foreign interference and disinformation?



A report based on an event co-organised by the Slovenian Presidency of the Council of the EU and the EU Institute for Security Studies, on 7 October 2021.

Report

INTRODUCTION

The Western Balkans region has experienced an intensification of **foreign interference and disinformation** over the past few years. Certain domestic, regional and international actors have sought to challenge the EU's and NATO's present and historical credibility in the region, sow disinformation about the Covid-19 pandemic and attempt to undermine elections and referenda in the region. In certain cases, foreign interference in elections has taken the form of propaganda campaigns, supported by foreign intelligence activities. Such tactics prey on historical and cultural perceptions and myths and the relative fluidity with which information travels across borders in the Western Balkans.

This webinar assessed how the EU and NATO can better cooperate with each other to counter foreign interference and disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans. The event outlined and analysed the actors that are responsible for foreign interference and disinformation campaigns in the region. The webinar also reflected on the tools and tactics used by these actors in the Western Balkans. In this respect, the webinar engaged with existing **EU and NATO strategies** and focused on areas where EU-NATO cooperation can be enhanced.

The event was particularly timely because of the recent **EU-Western Balkans Summit**, which took place on 6 October 2021 in Brdo pri Kranju. Over 120 participants were present for the event and the organisers welcomed high-level speakers from the Slovenian Ministry of Defence, the European External Action Service, the Centre for European Perspective, the Regional Cooperation Council, the European Parliament, the NATO Strategic Communication Centre of Excellence and the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats.

FOREIGN INTERFERENCE AND DISINFORMATION: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

The Western Balkans is a particularly vulnerable region to disinformation and foreign interference. It is marked by **socio-economic fragility** with a need for investment and infrastructure. Although the EU is the largest investor in the region, external actors are present and they do not attach conditionality to investments. Corruption is widespread and the region has energy dependencies. The region is also home to **political fragility** characterised by a lack of trust in governments and the media, as well as questions about democratic norms and principles. The Covid-19 pandemic has not helped, and conspiracy theories are widespread. Finally, the Western Balkans is already subject to a **conflict of narratives** because of historical and ethnic divisions.

These dynamics mean that domestic and foreign actors can relatively easily initiate and sustain disinformation campaigns. Today, the Western Balkans are not home to large-scale disinformation campaigns and this makes **detection and attribution** difficult. Audiences and issues are specifically targeted. Additionally, it is important not to only focus on foreign interference because domestic actors are increasingly responsible for the bulk of disinformation. It is essential to acknowledge that disinformation is part of a wider security challenge including cyber-attacks, corruption and the active undermining of the free press and media.

Increasingly, disinformation and interference are designed to **undermine the EU's and NATO's presence** in the region. Questions about EU Enlargement to the region have provided foreign and domestic actors with an opportunity to sow doubts about the EU's intentions and objectives.

Specific conditions on the ground can greatly facilitate domestic and foreign disinformation and information manipulation. 'Click farms' have been set up to **quickly disseminate fake news** via online platforms. Traditional media outlets, lacking in media literacy skills and resources, tend to include these fake news sources in news reporting. This has the effect of 'legitimising' certain pieces of information and narratives, and traditional media outlets can — unwillingly and willingly — further promote disinformation to the public.

A major challenge is that governments in the Western Balkans do not necessarily perceive disinformation to be a **national security concern**. Many governments treat disinformation and foreign information manipulation as a communication issue. This can, in part, be explained because of a lack of human capital in government bodies but also due to the low societal media literacy across the whole region. Additionally, there is a general **lack of awareness** of the problem and academia and civil society are not consistently involved in countering disinformation.

TOOLS AND TACTICS: WHAT EU-NATO RESPONSE?

Any EU-NATO response to disinformation, foreign interference and foreign manipulation of information needs to be supported by a coherent situational analysis and concrete actions. Disinformation activities in the Western Balkans have become **commercialised and profitable** and this means that economic interests also sustain these activities. In this sense, the EU and NATO need to not just think about domestic and foreign actors *per se*, but to devise policies and strategies that undermine the regional **disinformation business model**. At the same time, the EU and NATO should not look at the region with a 'one-size-fits-all' perspective and they need to develop tailored responses and actions.

The EU and NATO have a vested interest in ensuring the resilience of Western Balkan countries. The EU is developing a range of **regulatory and situational awareness measures** that will be important for countering disinformation and foreign interference. For example, the Union's Rapid Alert System on disinformation, the European Democracy Action Plan or the Digital Services Act are useful ways of lowering risk from disinformation and foreign interference. There is a need to look at the ways in which these instruments could make a difference on the ground in the region. For example, the Union's support for regional market integration and the European perspective of the region could benefit from existing Union mechanisms and policies.

Furthermore, the EU and NATO need to better align their responses to disinformation, foreign interference and information manipulation. Such an approach can begin by acknowledging that such activities are **interconnected** with other hybrid tactics such as cyber-attacks and border pressures. Concrete actions aimed at deterring foreign interference in the Western Balkans therefore need to consider what other **response tools** could be utilised when counter disinformation strategies do not work. While this is a sensitive subject, bringing together the EU's and NATO's wide range of tools is a necessary step if Euro-Atlantic partners are to move from strategy to action.

Such initiatives can greatly enhance capacity in the region. However, the EU and NATO can do more to invest in the **media literacy capacities** of the Western Balkan countries. While such initiatives will take time to benefit the region, this should not serve as an excuse to disengage from civil society, media outlets and governments. Support for the **professional media** is vital. In addition, the EU and NATO need a coherent strategic communication approach that is able to send clear political messages to the region, while also promoting positive narratives and countering disinformation. While fact-checking is important, the EU and NATO's **strategic communication** should play to peoples' emotions and hopes.

The EU and NATO should strengthen their efforts for developing situational awareness especially as disinformation, manipulation and interference

techniques are being adapted. The forthcoming third EU-NATO Joint Declaration is an opportunity to further develop **intelligence exchange** and to share information. Additionally, the EU's Strategic Compass and NATO's Strategic Concept should also consider what concrete actions the organisations will develop for the Western Balkan region. However, overall one of the most effective ways of countering domestic and foreign actors is to match words with deeds. The region is sensitive to promises made by close partners and there is a need to implement actions that can positively influence countries and people in the Western Balkans.

Finally, the Covid-19 pandemic has undermined the EU's and NATO's presence in the region because it has inhibited physical contact with counterparts in the region. Indeed, foreign actors were able to exploit this difficult situation to spread falsehoods about the **Euro-Atlantic commitment to the Western Balkans**. As the world re-emerges from the health crisis, a key political task will be to engage with key stakeholders on the ground. This will help the EU and NATO develop a better understanding of the **information environment** including the actors involved and how tactics, tools and channels of influence are evolving. It will also help the EU and NATO move from situational awareness to political action.