

MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS **NORTH MACEDONIA**

—
AUTHOR / DESPINA KOVAČEVSKA
METHODOLOGY EXPERT AND EDITOR
STEFAN JANJIĆ



Co-funded by
the European Union



Norway



SMART
Balkans
Civil Society for a Safe and Secure
Future in the Western Balkans



Reporting
Diversity
Network

Author: Despina Kovačevska

Methodology expert and editor: Stefan Janjić

Publisher: Innovative Media and
Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans

Illustrator: Lana Nikolić



K2.0



Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) is established by Media Diversity Institute. Project partners include Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, Albanian Women in Audiovisual, Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0, Center for Investigative Journalism Montenegro, Innovative Media.



Co-funded by
the European Union



Norway



SMART
Balkans
Civil Society for Shared Society
in the Western Balkans

This publication is funded by the European Union and the “SMART Balkans – Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans” regional project implemented by Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA).

The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the project implementers and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA), Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) or Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM).



MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS **NORTH MACEDONIA**

AUTHOR / DESPINA KOVAČEVSKA
METHODOLOGY EXPERT AND EDITOR / STEFAN JANJIĆ

Content

5	Introduction
6	Analysis
9	Case studies
9	Case study 1: Political/electoral context
9	Case study 2: Trans women and disinformation
10	Case study 3: New technology
11	Disinformation campaigns against feminism and feminists
12	Counternarratives
13	Conclusion

Introduction

Under the motto "We have a duty to protect our children", the Holy Synod of the Macedonian Orthodox Church –AO, supported by other religious communities in the country called for a [nationwide gathering](#) against the Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Registration Records on 26th July 2023.

"We consider the legal recognition of 'gender identity' in these laws, as well as the confusing distinction between sex, gender and gender identity, to be unacceptable. By adopting the laws instead of protecting, the laws open a possibility of discrimination for the most vulnerable—women and children!" Stated the Holy Synod in their announcement.

Although [the laws were only in draft version](#), the ministry called for a broader debate to ensure comprehensive discussion and input before finalizing the legislation. Meanwhile, the church's communication shifted its focus away from gender equality and began promoting [anti-LGBTQI+ populist messaging](#), targeting even NGOs working on these issues, further fueling divisive narratives surrounding gender and sexual orientation.

This is not the first time that religious communities and anti-gender organizations have called for protests against these two laws, using the narrative of "[protecting the children](#)" as their main justification. Many NGOs working on this issue have consistently tried to explain and deconstruct this narrative, raising awareness about the importance of the Gender Equality Law. However, each time they receive a green light from institutions, new obstacles arise, repeatedly setting them back in their efforts.

Although there have been previous analyses of both laws and the disinformation surrounding them, as well as studies on [gender disinformation in sports](#), the issue remains persistent and continues to evolve. Taking in consideration the recent geopolitical developments, the issue goes beyond just legislation and its implementation—it is also a societal problem, a media problem, and ultimately a security issue that directly impacts the everyday lives of women in the country.

This is why this research goes beyond disinformation solely related to laws and legislation, expanding to analyze all available disinformation from the past four years that has targeted women and women's rights.

We analyzed over 80 cases of gender disinformation from various aspects—including the intended message, related themes and narratives, level of influence, and sources of origin—to gain a deeper understanding of this issue in North Macedonia.

This report goes beyond just mapping the flow of gender disinformation and associated propaganda, it is a critical tool for understanding, analyzing, and addressing the broader disinformation ecosystem. Carried out in synergy with in-depth research, analytical work, fact-checking, and investigative reporting, all aimed at actively countering misogynistic narratives and bolstering societal resilience against efforts to undermine gender equality, women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and ultimately, human rights.

Analysis

Gathering all gender-related disinformation cases from the country's sole fact-checking service, [Truthmeter](#), over the past four years reveals a clear upward trend, with a significant increase in the last two years.

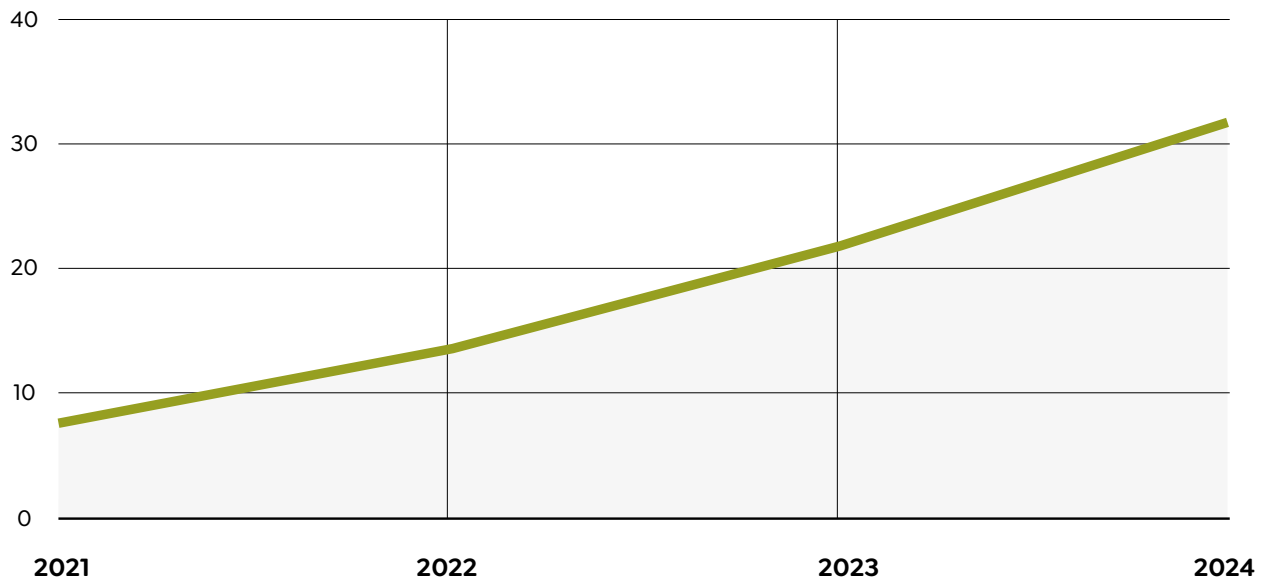


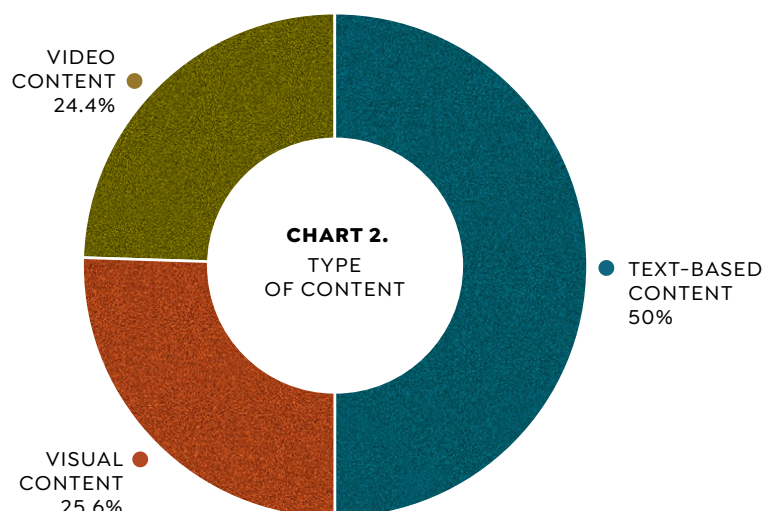
Chart 1. Annual disinformation incidents by year

In 2021 and 2022, especially during the pandemic, disinformation campaigns were largely focused on pregnant women, spreading false claims that the COVID-19 vaccines would cause [severe harm to their unborn children](#). This misinformation fueled fear and uncertainty, undermining public health efforts aimed at protecting both mothers and babies. After the pandemic, disinformation shifted towards anti-vaccination narratives, with claims that vaccines cause infertility in women.

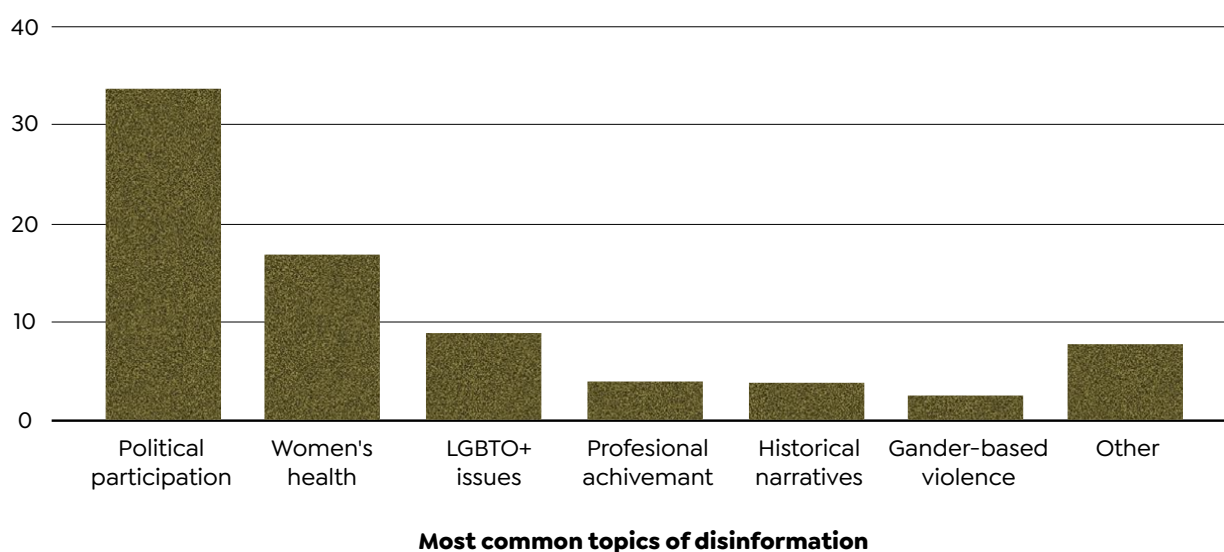
In 2023 and 2024, the number of disinformation instances doubled, with a noticeable shift in the narrative aimed at discrediting women in politics. This trend became more prominent due to increasing attacks on female politicians, often focusing on their gender and perpetuating harmful stereotypes to undermine their credibility and leadership.

More than half of the disinformation identified over the four-year period consisted of false content, with 49 out of 78 cases falling into this category. The remaining incidents included 11 instances of false context, 8 instances of false connections, and 8 instances of fabricated content, highlighting the diverse strategies used to manipulate public perception.

Disinformation was mostly text-based content, with more than half of the incidents found in news articles or Facebook statuses. The other half consisted of visual content, primarily photos that misrepresented real people or video content containing false or misleading statements.



During this period, most of the disinformation targeted efforts to undermine the political participation of women, often aiming to discredit female politicians and discourage their involvement in political processes. The second most common topic was women's health, followed by LGBTQ+ issues. It's important to note that some disinformation narratives could fit into multiple categories, but for research purposes, they were categorized based on the primary focus of the content.



If we delve deeper, we can observe a clear correlation between each year and specific events that influenced the topics of disinformation. These events often triggered spikes in disinformation, aligning with key political or social developments during those years. For example, we already mentioned the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on women's health, where disinformation about vaccines and pregnancy became widespread. Similarly, other significant political events, such as the [passing of laws for gender equality](#) and the Pride Parade, have consistently led to a rise in anti-LGBTQI+ narratives. Even the war in Ukraine was exploited to promote the perception that women are not capable of handling leadership roles or making critical decisions. Disinformation during this period sought to reinforce gender stereotypes, suggesting that women, especially in political or military contexts, were inadequate compared to men. A notable example of this was [satirical content](#) targeting the Ministry of Defence at the time, simply because the minister was a woman. She faced not only disinformation attacks but also hate speech, with much of the criticism focusing on her appearance rather than her professional qualifications or actions.

If we attempt to map the most common narratives found in the disinformation, we can identify the following key themes:

- 1. Undermining Women's Political Participation** - Claims that women in leadership are incompetent or unfit for decision-making roles.
- 2. Women's Health Misinformation** - False narratives about vaccines causing infertility, pregnancy risks, or other health-related fears.
- 3. Anti-LGBTQI+ Narratives** - Disinformation portraying LGBTQI+ rights as a threat to traditional values, often surfacing around Pride events or gender equality laws.
- 4. Gender-Based Attacks in Crisis Situations** - Claims that women leaders are incapable of handling crises, as seen during the war in Ukraine and the pandemic.
- 5. Appearance-Based Attacks** - Disinformation targeting female politicians and public figures by focusing on their looks rather than their expertise or policies.

These narratives constantly intertwine with other dominant narratives, and a single instance of disinformation often targets multiple issues at once. For example, disinformation about women in politics may also include anti-EU sentiment, as seen during [the visit of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen](#) to North Macedonia. She was not only labeled as [dishonest and a Nazi](#) but was also portrayed as a symbol of Western civilization's so-called moral decay, reinforcing both gender-based attacks and geopolitical disinformation.

When it comes to the visual elements used to support disinformation, most often, images of women are manipulated or misrepresented. A common tactic includes falsely claiming that certain women are transgender, as seen in the case of [Kamala Harris](#) and [Michele Obama](#). Additionally, fabricated images are frequently used to deceive women, particularly in fake medical advertisements and scams related to [weight loss products](#). These types of products not only have a negative impact on women's health, but they also expose women to harmful content related to body image, diet culture, and excessive exercise. This is especially damaging for young girls, as it can contribute to eating disorders and unhealthy relationships with food and fitness.

Besides the recurring narratives of discrediting women in politics, fearmongering about women's health, and spreading anti-LGBTQI+ sentiment, there are also disinformation tactics that use women to target or attack powerful men in politics.

For example, in the case of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, his wife Olena Zelenska was falsely portrayed as greedy, with disinformation attempting to discredit him through fabricated claims about her lavish spending. Similarly, in the case of Alexei Navalny, his wife Yulia Navalnaya was targeted with [false claims of infidelity](#), attempting to undermine her husband's credibility by attacking her morality.

Another example of disinformation involves gender-based violence, where mixed narratives celebrate the death of a model in Russia, falsely portraying her as a [Nazi for criticizing Putin](#). In reality, the girl was a victim of femicide at the hands of her boyfriend. These types of narratives twist the truth, using her tragic death to serve political agendas while ignoring the real issue of gender-based violence.

In rare cases, even men who defend gender equality and promote gender inclusion are portrayed as not "real" men. These [disinformation narratives](#) aim to undermine their credibility by questioning their masculinity, often framing their support for gender rights as a weakness, mental sickness and suggestions that they are part of the LGBTQI+ community.

The language used in disinformation narratives, particularly regarding the LGBTQI+ community, often labels them as disabled or sick. Gender equality is frequently referred to as "gender ideology", suggesting that it is an unnatural or harmful belief system rather than a fundamental human rights issue.

In narratives about women's political participation, the language often shifts between labels like "satanist" and "Nazi," depending on whether the women are associated with the EU or the USA. These disinformation tactics aim to depict women in leadership roles as immoral, framing them [as representatives of the "corrupt West" in contrast to the "traditional" Russian Orthodox way](#). This narrative seeks to undermine their authority and challenge the values they stand for.

Case studies

Case study 1: Political/electoral context

The case of disinformation targeting Slavjanka Petrovska, the previous Minister of Defense of North Macedonia, stands out as a notable example of how misinformation can be weaponized against political figures. During her mandate, Petrovska faced various forms of disinformation, often aimed at undermining her credibility and professional standing.

Under Petrovska's leadership, North Macedonia made significant contributions by providing military aid to Ukraine. The assistance included sending military equipment and weapons from North Macedonia's reserves. Pro-Russian malign actors frequently attempted to undermine Slavjanka Petrovska's credibility by portraying her in two main negative lights. On one hand, they depicted her as excessively pushing Western and NATO interests, suggesting she was compromising North Macedonia's national sovereignty. On the other hand, they used satire and mockery to present her as incompetent, questioning her capability to fulfill her role as Minister of Defense.

[Disinformation article](#) circulating online presented a fabricated dialogue from a supposed telephone conversation between Defense Minister Slavjanka Petrovska and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, claiming he cried over the phone bagging her for help. Although the article was published in the "satire" section the comments under the post reveal that many Facebook users who engaged with the content did not realize it was satire. Out of over a thousand comments below the text, only one comment quotes the part of the text in which it is mentioned that it is satire, and most of the other comments are attacks on the minister. This type of disinformation is particularly harmful to women politicians, as it not only spreads false narratives but also undermines their credibility and authority in a gendered way. In the case of Slavjanka Petrovska, the satirical article mocked her professional competence and portrayed her as being easily manipulated, which plays into harmful stereotypes about women in leadership positions.

Case study 2: Trans women and disinformation

In North Macedonia, trans women are still a relatively rare and marginalized group, with limited visibility and representation in public life. The social and cultural environment tends to be conservative, so disinformation often revolves around protecting children. This has become a common strategy used by those opposing transgender rights and gender inclusion. These narratives typically frame the issue as a threat to children's well-being, suggesting that transgender rights or acceptance might lead to harmful consequences for minors.

This [example](#) shows an unnamed woman in a video speaking in Serbian claiming to have been fined 263 euros in Germany for refusing to send her son to school dressed as a girl, which is presented as an example of how European countries supposedly force parents to accept gender nonconformity for their children. Fact checkers from both Serbia and North Macedonia contacted the German Ministry of Education, which denied the possibility of such a case occurring.

The narrative that parents will be forced to send their children to school dressed in the opposite gender is a [common disinformation tactic](#). After the case involving the fabricated video went viral, it spread locally and led to similar disinformation being attributed to a school in Skopje. In this instance, the false claim suggested that a school in the capital was enforcing gender expression policies that required students to dress according to the opposite gender, further fueling fears among parents.

The Municipality of Aerodrom in Skopje has denied false claims about gender-related activities at the school. The proposed student activity was reviewed and modified after consultation with school management and municipal services, with no gender expression policies being implemented.

Case study 3: New technology

AI-driven disinformation targeting women in North Macedonia is often imported from global sources, adapting international political narratives to fit local contexts. These campaigns frequently aim to discredit women in leadership, particularly those advocating for progressive change and gender equality. In this case, Kamala Harris, the U.S. presidential candidate, has served as a key reference point, illustrating how disinformation crosses borders to reinforce sexist and politically motivated attacks.

A significant portion of the disinformation surrounding Harris focused on undermining her credibility, with false claims about her eligibility, political positions, and personal life. AI-generated content played a crucial role in spreading these narratives, amplifying misinformation at a rapid pace and making it more difficult to detect and counteract. One striking example is the fabricated link between [Kamala Harris and Jeffrey Epstein](#), the convicted sex trafficker. This disinformation narrative suggested, without any factual basis, that Harris was somehow connected to Epstein's criminal activities, attempting to damage her public image through guilt by association.

This case illustrates the global reach of disinformation campaigns and how AI is being used to create and spread misleading content more efficiently than ever before. By adapting high-profile international figures to fit local disinformation efforts, these narratives reinforce deeply rooted sexist stereotypes and political biases. Women in leadership—particularly those advocating for social progress—are frequent targets because they challenge traditional power structures. Disinformation tactics work by linking them to controversy, questioning their integrity, and exploiting societal fears to weaken their credibility.

As AI technology continues to evolve, the ability to manufacture and amplify falsehoods will only become more sophisticated. This makes it even more critical to develop fact-checking mechanisms, media literacy initiatives, and digital resilience strategies to combat AI-driven disinformation and protect women in leadership from targeted attacks.

Disinformation campaigns against feminism and feminist

There are several organizations in North Macedonia that consistently spread anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, often intertwining these ideologies to portray them as part of a larger, unified "evil collective" associated with the West. These groups frequently frame gender equality movements, feminist advocacy, and LGBTQI+ rights as part of a Western agenda that threatens traditional values, societal norms, and religious beliefs.

While organizations like the "[Coalition for the Protection of Children](#)" (KZD) often present themselves as defenders of traditional values, their financial support and influence come from both American and Russian Christian organizations, creating a transnational network that strengthens their messaging and tactics. Their influence has been evident in various scenarios, such as [successfully canceling discussions](#) meant to educate students about medical services and care for transgender and gender-diverse individuals.

Additionally, these groups have been behind the blacklisting of [exhibitions](#) that showcase gender-related issues or LGBTQI+ topics, preventing the public from engaging with diverse perspectives and experiences. These organizations not only actively oppose LGBTQI+ rights but also frequently target feminism in their messaging. On their social media platforms, particularly Facebook, they have been vocal in their stance against feminists, the [latest post](#) mentioning feminism claims that "Feminist movements, often associated with organizations like those funded by George Soros, aim to create division between the sexes by promoting the idea that women are victims of male toxicity. This perspective suggests that such movements encourage linguistic changes in languages like Macedonian, leading to the creation of feminine forms of traditionally masculine nouns, which some view as distortions of the language."

In many of their posts, feminism—often labeled as "radical feminism"—is portrayed as something harmful, especially to traditional women. It is depicted as a movement that primarily benefits the LGBTQ+ community and serves the economic interests of certain groups. This is not only disinformation but a harmful narrative that distorts the true meaning of feminism, contributing to the wider information disorder.

In this effort, they are often supported by the Macedonian Orthodox Church. However, they show no hesitation in spreading [disinformation](#) when certain church positions do not align with their views. A notable example is the attack on nun Eftimija who became a target after giving an [interview](#) to a media outlet, stating that in a democratic world we should not promote religious totalitarianism. Once again, the focus of the backlash was a woman, revealing the deeply gendered nature of these smear campaigns.

Another stance comes from male influencers who present themselves as media figures, often targeting feminists through their YouTube channels. These influencers frequently use derogatory terms and mock feminism. One such individual is associated with the "[Bojkotiram](#)" movement. On his Facebook profile and [YouTube videos](#), he relentlessly [attacks feminism](#), claiming that it is not about equality, but rather the hatred of men. He also uses the hashtag #ФеминизмотЕКанцер, which translates to "feminism is cancer," further promoting his negative and harmful narrative.

These groups present feminist issues through the lens of the anti-gender movement, framing them as part of a broader "Soros-funded agenda." By doing so, they distort the true goals of feminism and LGBTQI+ advocacy, presenting them as threats to traditional values and societal norms. This narrative not only misrepresents the movements but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes. Their use of disinformation, particularly on social media and public platforms, amplifies this toxic rhetoric, further entrenching a regressive and harmful view of gender equality and human rights.

Counternarratives

In North Macedonia, various actors, including civil society organizations, media outlets, and institutions, attempt to respond to and counter gender-based disinformation. Their approaches range from media literacy campaigns and fact-checking initiatives to advocacy efforts and policy recommendations.

Regarding how fact-checkers address gender-based disinformation and harmful narratives, we spoke with a fact-checker and journalist from Truthmeter (Vistinomer).

"The very fact that I am a woman comes with harmful myths, such as the expectation that I should handle housework, run the washing machine, do the dishes, care for the children, and earn less than my husband. In my opinion, these are among the most damaging stereotypes. Society can work to challenge them by promoting awareness that parenting is a shared responsibility, not a task where a husband merely 'helps' his wife, but rather acknowledges his equal role as a parent", the fact-checker said.

In our report, a significant portion of disinformation cases focused on LGBTQ+ issues. We asked about the impact of such disinformation on LGBTQ+ individuals.

"Disinformation is particularly harmful to transgender individuals because it not only targets them directly but also obstructs their ability to seek solutions for managing gender dysphoria. Additionally, disinformation influences health policy, as governments that respond to misleading narratives may cut funding for transgender healthcare, further limiting access to essential medical support", she said.

On the other hand, Lila Milikj, activist and president of the NGO Stars, says that the impact of disinformation on transgender people has serious consequences both on an individual and collective level.

"Disinformation is increasing stress, anxiety, and depression, limiting access to healthcare through false claims about transitioning, and reinforcing internalized stigma that hinders self-acceptance. Additionally, misleading narratives fuel discrimination and violence, making trans people even more vulnerable", Milikj states.

As a victim of hate speech and disinformation herself, Lila Milikj shared her experience, but did not receive a positive response or an effective mechanism for addressing the harm caused.

"I have reported several cases of disinformation attacks to the Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO), but none of them received a positive decision. The cases were expressly dismissed with the argument that the trans community is not legally regulated in Macedonia, which is a clear indicator of the systemic discrimination we face", she said.

"Additionally, when reporting hate speech, not only was there no effective response, but I also encountered discriminatory treatment from the employees of the institutions. Instead of recognizing the seriousness of the problem, their attitude showed a lack of understanding and a lack of will to protect trans people from violence and discrimination, which shows that my life is not valuable, and it is not valuable to the entire trans community either", says Milikj.

A fact-checker, who wished to remain anonymous, emphasized that journalists should first educate themselves when reporting on sensitive issues like gender and LGBTQ+ rights.

"Journalists can help prevent disinformation by learning about the topics they cover, consulting with doctors or professionals to understand the biological aspects better, and ensuring they present accurate information. While fact-checking is crucial, including personal stories from transgender individuals can also be a powerful way to humanize the issue and challenge harmful stereotypes", the fact-checker said.

Conclusion

Gender disinformation, along with disinformation in general, has increasingly become a significant issue. It has now surpassed being just a media problem and has evolved into a security problem as well. The media landscape has become so complex, and when we add harmful narratives into the mix, we are faced with information disorders that develop faster than the mechanisms for regulation can keep up.

Since our analysis focuses on gender disinformation, it is crucial to recognize how deeply these narratives impact not just public opinion but also individual identities. The spread of gender-related disinformation contributes to the broader issue of misinformation, distorting societal understanding of gender equality and reinforcing harmful stereotypes.

This is the first strategy used by disinformation disseminators, clearly demonstrated in the case of the Gender Equality Law. By attempting to present the Gender Equality Law as being the same as the Law on Registration, they inserted a false narrative into the media, equating the two. By claiming that, with just a signature, a man could become a woman and vice versa, they created confusion and distorted the actual content of the law. As a result, the availability of accurate information from the officials decreased, leading to a situation where the public was no longer informed. Instead of fostering a constructive debate, we were met with protests, media blackening, and panic.

By aligning with the religious community and portraying the issue as one [linked to LGBTQI+ rights](#) that could harm children and lead to them becoming transgender, they gained sympathy from both parents and believers. This fearmongering, coupled with the religious community's view of women as key contributors to traditional society, contrasts with the new law, which is framed as a source of demoralization and Western propaganda that threatens to destroy our society.

The same narrative was [supported](#) by the opposition party at the time, [VMRO-DPMNE](#), which, after coming to power and forming the government, continued down the same path of defining what constitutes a ["true marriage."](#)

But there was a sudden turn of events when the new Minister of Education decided to keep the gender concept in the educational system. In response, organizations like the Coalition for the Protection of Children, and similar groups, claimed to be defending the public from what they labeled as "gender ideology" launched [attacks](#) to the new minister from their own ranks and targeted her for introducing gender topics into textbooks. Using this as a means to silence opposing voices, these groups framed the inclusion of gender studies as a dangerous imposition.

We have seen the same tactic before in the attacks on Nun Eftimija, who tried to reason and gave an interview to an online media outlet about the role of religion in today's democratic system. Attacking and spreading disinformation on social media, even targeting their own supporters, serves as a warning of what will happen to anyone who dares to hold a different opinion.

As harmful narratives about gender continue to circulate, they not only distort public opinion but also undermine individuals' understanding of gender equality, fueling division and confusion. These tactics, often used to silence dissent and protect narrow ideological views, underscore the need for more effective mechanisms to combat misinformation and foster informed, respectful dialogue. Moving forward, it is crucial to strengthen efforts to promote accurate, inclusive information and defend the rights of marginalized communities from harmful narratives that seek to undermine progress. Only through continuous education and collective action can we hope to address the growing challenge of disinformation and build a more tolerant, informed society.



MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS:
NORTH MACEDONIA



Co-funded by
the European Union



Norway



SMART
Balkans
Local Societies Engage and Succeed