HUMANITY FOR FREEDOM FOUNDATION

HUMANITY FOR FREEDOM FOUNDATION BALKANS RELEASES REPORT ON RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN THE BALKANS: GEOPOLITICS, HISTORY, AND THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR

The Balkans have become a focal point for Russian disinformation campaigns, aimed at destabilizing the region, undermining democratic institutions, and advancing Moscow's strategic objectives.

SOFIA, BULGARIA – Today, Humanity for Freedom Foundation and Humanity for Freedom Foundation Balkans released their report entitled **RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN THE BALKANS: GEOPOLITICS, HISTORY, AND THE IMPACT OF THE UKRAINE WAR.**

The report provides an in-depth analysis of the various tactics employed by Russia to manipulate public opinion and exert influence in the Balkan countries, highlighting the significant challenges these campaigns pose to regional stability and democracy.

Humanity for Freedom Foundation President Dane Waters said: "As we have seen over the last year, and as recent as October 7, the world faces unprecedented threats from authoritarian regimes and their proxies, with eastern Europe on the front line of this battle. The Balkans will share Ukraine's fate if its leaders and the world continue to downplay the threat Russia poses to them."

"As this report suggests, the Balkans is already at war. This war is currently a disinformation war, a war to sow doubts and confusion, and a war to make the inevitable physical conflict easier for the Russians to win," stated General Konstantin Popov, Former Chief of Defense of the Republic of Bulgaria and Advisory Board Member · Humanity for Freedom Foundation.

The report explores the geopolitical and historical context of the Balkans, which makes the region particularly susceptible to foreign interference – especially from Russia whose strategic interests in the region are to undermine the unity of the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) while bolstering its influence in the Balkans. These campaigns exploit existing divisions, promote anti-Western narratives, and spread fake news to destabilize the region and weaken its ties to the West.

As stated by Berat Rukiqi, Humanity for Freedom Foundation Advisory Board Member, "Russia has a long history of using disinformation and fake news to achieve its foreign policy goals. In Kosovo, using Serbian proxies, especially in the north, is a poison that is corroding the foundations of peace and stability in the region."

As the report points out, Russian disinformation campaigns in the Balkans employ various tactics to achieve their objectives. These tactics include:

- Establishing and funding troll farms to create and disseminate fake news, conspiracy theories, and divisive content on social media platforms

- Paying public figures to promote Russian propaganda and anti-Western narratives

- Supporting pro-Russian groups and individuals in the region to create a network of influence

- Utilizing hackers and other cyber capabilities to manipulate online discourse and amplify divisive messages

- Establishing and funding media outlets that disseminate pro-Russian narratives and disinformation

Humanity for Freedom Foundation Balkans President Tomi Tsolov stated: "Through this comprehensive examination, we aim to shed light on the extent and impact of Russian disinformation campaigns on the Balkan countries, while providing viable and workable solutions to ensure the protection of democratic institutions, national security, and regional stability."

The report offers five recommendations on how the Balkan states can counter Russian influence and disinformation effectively. The recommendations focus on strengthening media literacy, enhancing cybersecurity, supporting independent journalism, promoting regional cooperation, and engaging with international partners. The recommendations are:

- **Ending Russian influence over media**: As we have seen above, fabricated news stories and social media manipulation are major components of Russian disinformation campaigns. By investing in education programs that promote media literacy, the Balkan states can empower their citizens to identify and resist false information, thereby reducing its impact on public opinion. Law makers must be prepared to directly tackle disinformation propagated by broadcasters. If necessary, they should follow western countries and ban the likes of Russia Today.

- **Implementing Strict Regulatory Measures**: Balkan states should introduce and enforce strict regulatory measures to curb the influence of Russian actors within their political systems and media landscapes. This may include banning payments originating from Russia to political parties, prohibiting payments to journalists from Russian sources, and restricting Facebook advertising from Russia sympathizers.

  Implementing strict regulatory measures, such as banning payments from Russian sources to political parties and journalists and restricting advertising from Russia sympathizers on platforms like Facebook, is crucial. The influence of figures like Reshetnikov and Malinov, and their links to Russian disinformation and political interference, underline the urgent need for these measures.

  By implementing these hard-hitting measures, the Balkan countries can significantly limit the opportunities for Russian entities to exploit their political and media environments, thereby protecting their democratic institutions from undue foreign influence.

- **Enhancing Cybersecurity Measures**: As mentioned in the report, cyberattacks and hacking have been used by Russia to target various institutions in the Balkans. The Balkan states should prioritize improving their cybersecurity infrastructure, including training specialized personnel, implementing advanced security technologies, and sharing best practices with their regional partners. This will help to protect sensitive information and critical systems from potential attacks.

- **Supporting Independent Journalism**: State-sponsored media outlets like Sputnik and RT have been used to disseminate pro-Russian narratives and disinformation. Encouraging and supporting independent journalism in the Balkans can provide an alternative to state-controlled media and contribute to a more diverse and accurate information landscape. This can be achieved through funding, capacity-building programs, and legal protections for journalists.

- **Promoting Regional Cooperation**: As mentioned in the report, Russia has supported fringe political groups in several Balkan countries. By fostering regional cooperation and dialogue, Balkan states can work together to counteract these efforts, share information on disinformation campaigns, and develop joint strategies to counteract Russian influence. This could be facilitated through existing regional organizations and initiatives or the creation of new mechanisms for collaboration.

- **Engaging with International Partners**: Working closely with international partners, such as the European Union and NATO can help the Balkan states to access resources, expertise, and support in countering Russian influence. These partnerships can offer strategic guidance, technical assistance, and financial support for initiatives aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing cybersecurity, and promoting media freedom.

By implementing these recommendations, the Balkan states can build resilience against Russian disinformation campaigns and work to protect their democratic institutions, national security, and regional stability.

This report is part of the HFF FREEDOM LIGHT series which is a series of investigative papers that shine a light on authoritarian disinformation and propaganda efforts. The next report will focus on disinformation and its influence in the destabilization of the Middle East.

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About Humanity for Freedom Foundation

A global non-profit organization based in the United States, Humanity for Freedom Foundation seeks to educate all people about the increasing threats to our freedom from authoritarian governments and movements across the world, with the purpose of pushing back those threats and helping secure freedom's future.

Humanity for Freedom Foundation President Dane Waters said: "The mission of Humanity for Freedom Foundation is clear - we must stop the erosion of freedom. Ukraine is the battlefield, physically and metaphorically, for this generational battle. Standing before us is a simple question: which side are we on? The side of peace and humanity, or violence and hatred?"

"If we fail to pick wisely, the erosion of freedom, globally, will be impossible to halt," Waters said.

About Humanity for Freedom Foundation - Balkans

Humanity for Freedom Foundation Balkans is an affiliate of Humanity for Freedom Foundation and seeks to educate all people about the increasing threats to freedom in the Balkans.

Humanity for Freedom Foundation Balkans President Tomi Tsolov said: "A few short years ago, no Ukrainian would have believed that their neighborhoods would be the backdrops to war crimes, to children being stolen from their loving parents to death and destruction at every turning. This is why HFF Balkans is critical – to help ensure that authoritarians are held accountable for their evil acts."

Ongoing activities by Humanity for Freedom Foundation and Humanity for Freedom Foundation Balkans will include global multimedia communication outreach drawing attention to attacks on freedom by authoritarians and supporting those courageous advocates and leaders who are standing up to authoritarians on behalf of the rights and liberties of us all.

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