



FINAL REPORT – METHODOLOGY AND CAMPAIGN GUIDE

Understanding Causes, Creating Future: An Initiative for Building Resilience
to Disinformation

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1. Introduction

Traditional mass media and, increasingly, online portals and social networks have made information more accessible than ever before. However, misinformation and disinformation employ the same channels to spread throughout the information ecosystem. In some cases, (mis)information is banal, trivial and spontaneous. On the other hand, a trend in rising are systematic disinformation campaigns with various, often political or ideological aims. Although it is a global phenomenon, each region has its specific context and features as well as disinformation channels. The Western Balkans is a region in which various domestic and international interests intersect – public space, media and politics are arenas in which various narratives regarding international actors (sometimes filled with disinformation) are promoted - i.e. there are strong narratives that both promote and denounce EU, USA and/or NATO and both promote and denounce Russia and/or China.

This paper provides recommendations **how to approach citizens, especially youth, and raise awareness of disinformation concerning international relations and actors**. This kind of disinformation may mislead public and government when it comes to general interests of society, but also undermine crucial values and institutions of democracy. While the paper results from [studies focused solely on Serbia](#) (supported by IRI's Beacon Project), it provides recommendations applicable throughout the Western Balkans. These recommendations are primarily based on research conducted March thru May 2021 as well as on two regional workshops; one bringing together journalists and the other NGO representatives. The following paper consists of an overview of the regional context and recommendations for concrete communication guidelines when it comes to wider public (and youth especially), as well as tools and a guide for monitoring communication campaigns.

This paper is primarily intended for domestic NGOs, but also for international organizations and other stakeholders interested in campaigns that treat mis- and disinformation regarding international relations.

The project consisted of three parts: (1) research; (2) public campaign; (3) development of a campaign guide. [Research activities included a public opinion poll sounding perception of international actors and media content analysis](#) of 11 Serbian mainstream online media and their coverage of international actors. [The public campaign](#) was designed based on research outcomes and aimed to raise awareness of citizens, especially youth, on disinformation and need for careful and critical consideration of everyday news regarding international actors and relations. This paper presents conclusions drawn from the information and experience gained through these activities.

2. The Western Balkans and International Actors – An Overview of the Context

2.1. The EU Integration Process

The stated priority of all countries of the Western Balkans (WB) is establishing a strategic partnership with the West - EU and USA, in most cases NATO as well. While each is in some stage of the EU integration process, some are already part of NATO (North Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro). As Kosovo is not a member of the UN, it is not eligible for NATO application either. Scars from 1990s Balkan wars and 1999 NATO bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia) have resulted in strong anti-NATO sentiment among Serbs in both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, yet both countries seek EU membership. Montenegro, Albania, Serbia and North Macedonia have the formal status of candidate country for EU membership, while Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo are potential candidates.

Although the EU integration process has been a strategic goal for the whole region for decades, stagnation is obvious. This is a result of unresolved issues with economy (low living standard in comparison to the EU, high inequality, high emigration of workers...), stability (political polarization, ethnic tensions, disputed territories...), rule of law and democracy (democratic backsliding), as well as the EU shifting its focus on other priorities. Support among citizens of respective countries for the EU integration process exists but varies significantly. According to a regional survey conducted in October 2020, the percentage of those who would vote for the accession of their country to the EU is highest in Kosovo (95%) and Albania (91%), generally high in Montenegro (83%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (81%) and North Macedonia (80%) and lowest in Serbia (64%).² Nevertheless, stagnation in the EU integration process paved the way for other global powers to present themselves as alternative strategic partners and allies, as well as trading “influence import” in exchange for economic and political benefits for governmental officials, which is especially present in Serbia.

2.2. Relations with Russia and China

The presence of Russia in the Balkans is not something new. Russia has seen the Balkans as one of its zones of interest for centuries and has had various political and military interventions, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, perception of Russia varies

¹ Nevertheless, Serbian citizens have been pragmatic when it comes to important questions regarding living conditions (the place where they want to live and work). The survey conducted as part of the projects showed that respondents give advantage to the countries of the European Union which they perceive as economically more desirable countries for living and work.

² These results vary from survey to survey even if they are conducted in a similar period of time. Factor that can significantly impact the results is the way how question is asked (e.g. “Would you vote for accession of your country to the EU?” and “Do you think that your country would benefit from the EU membership?”, etc.) and the way how answers are structured (e.g. “yes, no, do not know” and “yes, no, I wouldn’t vote, do not know”, etc.)

across the region. A report from 2020 prepared by GLOBSEC described perception of Russia in Serbia and Montenegro as “bear hugging”, i.e. citizens of these countries generally perceive Russia positively, which is not surprising considering mind historical, cultural and other ties. **Research done in Serbia by CeSID as a part of this project showed that 72% of respondents see Russian impact on Serbia as positive.** It is important to note that more than half of the respondents in Serbia (54%) placed Russia first in terms of quality of relations with Serbia. In addition, media content analysis showed that reporting on Russia presents it in a most positive light, in comparison with reporting on other leading international actors (in case of Russia, sentiment of analyzed articles is predominantly positive – 39% of all Russia-related articles are pro-Russian).

“It seems to me somehow that the most of citizens clearly have heart in the East, while economic interest is in the West.”

(Participant of media workshop)

By comparison, according to the same report, North Macedonia was seen as a “bear feeder” by GLOBSEC, meaning that citizens of this country see relations with Russia in a pragmatic way, but also slightly positively. While Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina are not included in the report, it should be noted that Albania and Kosovo could be described, by words of the report, as “bear sceptics”. On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina is more complex, as the federal unit with Serbian majority (Republika Srpska) cherishes good relations with, and expects protection from, Russia, while the other federal unit (Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) which is mostly populated by Bosniaks and Croats, leans towards the West.

While Chinese presence [in the WB? In Serbia?] is not as traditional and well-established as Russian its rising power and ambitions are notable, though not equal in all countries. IRI’s report “Chinese Malign Influence and Corrosion of Democracy” asserts: “China sees the Balkans as a door to Europe’s broader market, and Serbia lies at the geographic and strategic heart of the Balkan region.” Furthermore, these ties are not just economic and infrastructural, but informational and political as well. CeSID’s research shows the predominantly positive perception of China in public opinion, media coverage and, most notably and interestingly, media coverage of statements of state officials. Almost half of respondents believe that China is the biggest economic power WHERE? Globally? In the WB? (49%), and 72% see the influence of China in a positive light. Media content analysis provided a similar picture. The articles published regarding China are most positive when it comes to infrastructure and health (in line with this data, the attitude Serbian citizens is not surprising, where 71% say that China fought the Covid-19 pandemic the best). It should be noted that there is no single occasion in which state officials mentioned Russia and/or China in a negative

context. During the workshop with Serbian media outlets, it was noted that a pro-Eastern trend has been clear for several years, and journalists agreed that national media should be more balanced when reporting on international actors. Open promotion of China by Serbian state officials has opened the door to Chinese influence (what we have termed “influence import”). Another [IRI report](#) noted that China exercised its influence on Montenegro as well. News on economic ties, namely a loan and a capital infrastructural project (the Bar-Boljare highway) became attractive to media, while presentation of China became more positive. **While other WB countries have not been involved with China to such an extent, a wider trend can be seen: China seeks deeper relations (and more influence) with other Balkan and European countries as well.**

2.3. Unconsolidated Democracy and Democratic Backsliding

All countries of the Western Balkans are labelled as “partly free” by Freedom House’s (FH) report “[Freedom in the World](#)”. Furthermore, some of them have experienced [democratic backsliding](#) and regression from (at least electoral) democracy to a hybrid regime³ in last 10 years. Serbia, went from one of the leaders in the WB by its democratic accomplishments during the 2000s to a severely backsliding country. The [V-Dem Institute](#) has described it as one of the top five countries in the world with the largest drop in democratic score in last 10 years and labelling it an electoral autocracy, while FH’s “[Nations in Transit](#)” has categorized Serbia as “transitional or hybrid regime.” North Macedonia has also experienced non-linear development when it comes to democracy, as [government of Nikola Gruevski](#) (2006-2016) managed to establish a hybrid regime. In 2020, Montenegro got a new government after 30 years of Democratic Party of Socialists rule which established a hybrid regime. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo, despite many changes of ruling parties, have struggled to establish and consolidate democracy, as [hybrid regime](#) persisted. These three have always been labelled as “partly free” by FH.

The consequences of being a **hybrid regime impacts a country’s foreign policy as much as domestic by opening it to opportunistic cooperation with other authoritarian countries, narrowing channels for public campaigns (considering polarized public and low media freedom) and fostering emotional rather than balanced narratives.** It creates an environment of controlling and manipulating information and thus shaping public opinion according to government’s needs.

³ Hybrid regime is defined as a distinct regime type that combines formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices of government. Although political competition exists in such a regime, that competition is not fair. Media, finances and public resources are at disposal for government parties, which creates “uneven playing field”.

2.4. Political Impact of Covid-19 Pandemic

As fear and panic grew at the beginning of the pandemic, most countries became inwardly focused on their own interests. Access to masks and medical supplies was a challenge for many in the initial period as these became scarce resources. At that moment, China appeared as a “rising star,” coming with aid and supplies available for sale. The president of Serbia criticized the EU and declared that there was no European solidarity while praising relations and “steel friendship” with China. That was China’s first “victory” in the region during the pandemic, but not the last one. While citizens of WB countries had been anxiously waiting for vaccine deliveries from the West, China sold Serbia a million doses of Sinopharm vaccine in January 2021 with hundreds of thousands following in the next months. Further supplies of vaccines included the Russian Sputnik V along with Pfizer and Astra-Zeneca. In addition, the Serbian government signed deals to produce Sputnik V and Sinopharm vaccines in domestic facilities. This enabled Serbia to invite citizens of countries from the region to come for a jab and to create its own “vaccine diplomacy” to increase its prestige, soft power and assert its regional leadership. It should be noted that our research (public opinion poll) found that **67% of respondents in Serbia believe that Chinese and Russian vaccines are safer and more efficient than “Western” ones.** Moreover, as many as **three-quarters of respondents think that Russian science is the most advanced in the world.** Also, although there have been articles regarding safety and efficacy of Chinese and Russian vaccine in some media with otherwise predominantly positive sentiments towards China and Russia, these vaccines were actively promoted as safest and most efficient compared to Western ones.

The rest of the WB countries had been waiting impatiently to receive vaccines through the Covax program. Delays with deliveries and surging vaccination of other European countries have raised questions about the EU’s solidarity and ability to react adequately in times of emergency. Media content analysis showed that the ingrained opinion in the Serbian media is that Russian vaccine is disputed by the EMA and EU for political reasons, that EU had poor performance in vaccine distribution and USA acted as an isolationist actor. That was another factor that could open the door of the WB for other global actors.

2.5. Disinformation Campaigns and Propaganda

A report prepared for the European Parliament that focuses on disinformation in the WB showed that “disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exemption.” The report identified three key patterns or streams of (“political”) disinformation – (1) ones that challenge EU credibility, (2) disinformation regarding COVID-19 pandemic and (3) disinformation regarding elections. When it comes to foreign actors, propaganda and disinformation are noted from Russia and to a lesser extent – from China and Turkey. Example

of a concrete disseminator of narratives that could contain disinformation is branch of Radio Sputnik (and its online portal), a Russian state-controlled media outlet. However, the abovementioned report for the European Parliament, as well as a report prepared by The Edward R. Murrow Center for Digital a World (think-tank of Tuft University) underlined that the reach of those narratives would not be so significant without domestic support. In other words, domestic politicians and media amplify these narratives and disinformation for internal, particular, political interests. The other important finding, specific to the WB and in contrast to many other countries in Europe, is that traditional media outlets are the most important platforms for disinformation dissemination -not social networks - though social networks should not be neglected.

Media content analysis conducted by CeSID's team provides further evidence for these claims and conclusions. Propaganda and disinformation are widespread in traditional media⁴ in Serbia and a significant number of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives that are often based on emotions or misleading or intentionally manipulated information are supported and promoted by politicians and particularly by the government. **While media outlets' reporting on international actors are generally balanced or even slightly negative when it comes to EU and USA, it is notably positive in case of Russia and China.** Analysis of state officials' public attitudes showed even larger gap. They strongly favoured pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives that sometimes contained emotional, non-empirical, unproven or manipulated information. Journalists that work in the Serbian media outlets shared this opinion. In their experience, pro-Russian and pro-Chinese narratives dominate when it comes to officials' statements in the media.

⁴ Although the analyzed media type was online portals, it should be noted that most of analyzed media outlets have traditional media forms as well (televisions and daily newspapers) and the content is the same.

3. Campaign Design

3.1. General overview

The overarching goal of campaigns that could use these guidelines is **to increase resilience of the WB societies to disinformation and other negative information/media contents** (propaganda, spins...) and involve citizens in creating a “resilience net”. Societal resilience is understood as ability of a society to persist, adapt and transform (if needed). More specifically, societal resilience in this context refers to defence of democratic values in the WB societies – quality information, balanced media reporting and argument-based public deliberation. By sharing its experience in campaign design and implementation it hopes to encourage similar projects to be conducted by others.

3.2. CeSID Campaign “Read three times, cut once” – Lessons Learned

In accordance with the context and narratives mentioned in the previous chapters CeSID implemented a campaign “**Read three times, cut once**” targeting primarily the younger generation. The basic principles of the campaign were firstly formulated on the basis of findings collected through content media analysis and public opinion poll conducted in Serbia, but also through a broad desk analysis that included other countries in the Western Balkans.

The campaign consisted of **two short video clips** (up to 30 seconds each) **and two different promo materials/posts that were shared on social networks**. It also included a PR component. Prior to the start of the paid component of the campaign, CeSID created three infographics that presented the basic findings of content media analysis and public opinion research, and final infographic showing conclusions and connections between media content analysis and public opinion poll findings. All mentioned content had been shared on social networks of CeSID and it is available on CeSID’s web site.

The campaign focused primarily on unverified and inaccurate information related to international actors trying to raise awareness of citizens (especially youth) regarding this topic. According to the plan of targeting youth one specific video post focused on younger population (target group 18 to 29 years). As main campaign message CeSID had used a motto “**Read three times, cut once**”. This message had been boldly expressed and visible in all campaign promo material. Following hashtags were used as part of the campaign: #pažljivočitaj (read carefully) and #triputačitajjednomseci (read three times, cut once).

As CeSID’s research and campaign **tackled topical issues and offered “intriguing” findings**, several (national) media outlets prepared reports based on a press release that was sent to media.

It was evident that **video clips got more attention and higher reach than “static” posts** - with

reach, impressions and especially - engagement. Clips were short, had both voice cover and subtitles and encouraged critical thinking.

In general, the campaign was set to be **neutral** - it did not favour any single actor, but called on critical approach to all information regarding international actors. It resulted in **low intensity of bad or aggressive reactions**. This is especially positive result as Serbian international politics is a highly emotional topic.

The campaigns shortcomings were primarily found in the tools. While press releases allowed penetration into the media to some extent, core message of the campaign was limited to social networks, which target only certain categories of population. Nevertheless, optimal mixture of tools led to a successful campaign within limits of available resources.

3.3. Communication Goals and Messages

Overall goal is to spark critical and careful understanding of information regarding international actors and to increase resilience of the WB societies to disinformation and other negative information/media contents. A more specific goal of communication is promotion of need for balanced coverage of international actors in media which can be conceived as openness, "openly and critically" towards all actors.

In background of the campaign, an open bias should not be felt, even less, a strong negative narrative towards other actors (primarily towards China and Russia, in Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska and, to some extent, Northern Macedonia). The baseline assumption of the project that CeSID implemented was that a large part of the public has a positive opinion about Russia and China, as well as on their influence on Serbia. After broad research, both with citizens and content media analysis, this assumption was proven. Bearing this in mind (as well as political and socio-economic similarities between Serbia, Montenegro, Republika Srpska and North Macedonia) it is reasonable to assume that any type of direct campaign against the influence of these two countries on Serbia could only cause "boomerang effect" and result in a negative reaction from the public.

Therefore, all activities should be designed in a neutral tone or a tone that invites and calls for discussion and critical thinking about external influences.

“When it comes to donations, in previous years the European Union and the USA had a policy of donating but not promoting. It is important to change that policy and I generally believe that some things are changing. It is important that different levels of society work together to deal with disinformation regarding international actors.”

(Participant of media workshop)

Communication messages should take into account different contexts (primarily political and social) in different countries in the Western Balkans, including the two largest discrepancies in Kosovo and Albania where there is a predominant Western (EU, US, NATO) sentiment. The communication messages must take into account the following observations. Communication about international actors is: (1) complex, (2) multidimensional, (3) burdened with misinformation, and (4) emotional charge.

Some of the possible campaign messages can be:

- (1) Read three times, cut once.
- (2) Between the lines also matters!
- (3) Read between the lines.
- (4) Small letters are also important!

3.4. Target Groups

One of the first questions regarding a campaign is identification of target group(s). The proposed campaign must include segmentation of target groups, not only because it is vocationally correct, but also because there is a generation gap in societies in the Western Balkans in terms of media use and media consumption⁵. The campaign also should consider the fact that the youth in the Western Balkans follow global media trends, while the penetration of the Internet and social networks among the population over the age of 55 has slowed down and is often very limited.

⁵ The CeSID/Propulsion survey done as part of the USAID-funded New Literacy initiative revealed that 44% of respondents under the age of 24 primarily get informed via social networks. The **Gen Z** population also states above average that the influencers are their main source of information. The population older than 54 (**Baby Boomers**), however, uses more traditional media. 64% of Baby Boomers point out television, while in **Generation X**, in addition to television, print and radio are set aside above average.

In principle, two target groups have been identified: primary and secondary.

Primary target groups include: (1) **The youth in the Western Balkans, population aged 15-29** and (2) **Civil society organizations from the Western Balkans.**

Why are these target groups considered to be primary target groups? Firstly, the general youth population is seen as the primary target group of the campaign as this is the group the future should be built on; also, this is the category of the population that can develop or adapt its narratives on the basis of arguments, easier than the older citizens can. Public opinion poll conducted as a part of the project showed that the youngest group of respondents (15-19 years old) has the most ambiguous and least coherent answers. Thus, the informational and educational campaigns can be done more efficiently with the youth.

“In my opinion it is important to pay attention to the fact that younger citizens tend to be more Eastern oriented, and I believe that influencers could be helpful in tackling this issue.”

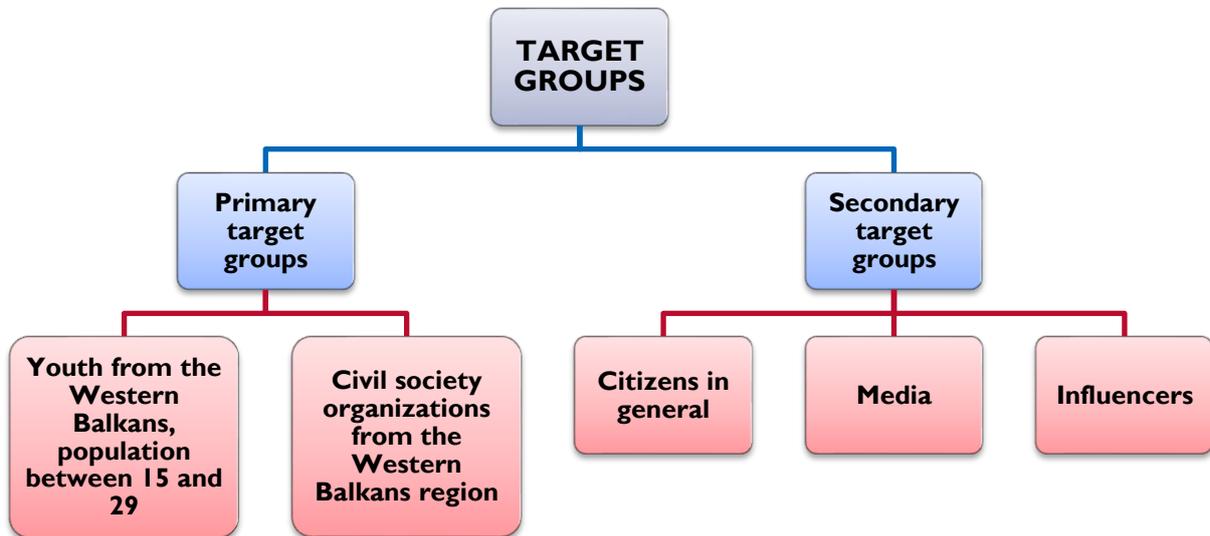
(Participant of media workshop)

The main feature of this target group is their dispersed and unfocused attention (and this is an aggravating circumstance for the campaign), but they do not have rigid attitudes. A general pattern among youth in the WB, as a [GLOBSEC study](#) showed, is that they generally prefer social networks over traditional media, perceive media outlets as biased, have low trust in public broadcasters and consequently avoid participation in public sphere because of a general distrust in system(s). They are users of the Internet and social networks, which facilitates access, and at the same time makes it cheaper compared to the campaign through the mainstream media. Finally, the focus on young people would ease building the critical-based attitudes (societal resilience) using the bottom-up approach. The CSOs from the Western Balkans are a natural ally for mediating problems from citizens to institutions, but also a target group that can be influenced and additionally sensitized to communicate differently their activities.

Secondary target groups: (1) **Citizens in general**, (2) **Media** (incl. investigative journalists and media associations) and (3) **Influencers** (incl. celebrities, social figures and authorities from different fields)⁶.

⁶ More on impact of influencers on youth and which influencers were cited among youth in Serbia as the ones they follow is in [report](#) from 2020 called “Youth and Influencers: Symbiosis of a Modern Society” (only available in Serbian language).

Graph 1, Target groups



Why these target groups? It is necessary to make campaigns that (at least in parts) reach the total population having in mind that the Western Balkans countries have a large share of the elderly population, especially Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mainstream media - still very influential in the Western Balkans - should become more sensitive to reporting on international actors in a critical but responsible and professional manner. Investigative journalists could be important allies in fight against disinformation and propaganda, as they approach various topics with more agility and in-depth analysis. Aside media, the growing influence and reach of influencers and the social networks they use (Instagram and, increasingly, TikTok) must be considered.

Journalists and NGOs representatives that participated in the CeSID's workshops stated that education of journalists is important. Aside resource deficits that impede more thorough reporting and analysis of international relations, journalists and NGOs representatives underlined that journalists lack knowledge of international relations, international actors, their presence in the region, etc. Moreover, participants do believe that fact-checking is job and responsibility of media outlets and should be a part of journalistic education. When it comes to influencers' role (especially their reach among youth), journalists see potential for their engagement in campaigns that fight against mis- and disinformation.

“What IREX did during the 2000's [education trainings with journalists] is something that is generally needed for the journalistic profession.”

(Participant of media workshop)

3.5. Communication Channels and Tools

Basic communication channels planned for media communication can be divided into direct and indirect. In these campaigns, it is impossible to bypass direct channels (this applies in particular to secondary target groups, older population of the Western Balkans and the media outlets) of communication, namely:

- (1) door-to-door campaigns with citizens,
- (2) face-to-face events with civil society representatives, and
- (3) working meetings/events with media representatives.

When it comes to indirect or media communication channels (more focused on youth population of the Western Balkans), the communication should include (the list is not final):

- (1) press releases;
- (2) interviews;
- (3) offline campaigns;
- (4) online campaigns;
- (5) social media accounts and
- (6) campaigns with micro-influencers.

Press releases should not be frequent, nor should be overemphasized, but should be reserved for major events, with officials or for campaign presentations. Interviews, along with administering social media accounts, should form a strong and indispensable part of the PR component campaign. Interviews should follow a good occasion, (the idea is not to organize them just for sake of doing). It is desirable to organize interviews with those who can influence the public, not necessarily with people involved in the campaign. Account administration must be continuous and on a professional basis. Content form depends on target groups. The campaign should include both an offline and an online component, despite the constant growth of the internet the mainstream media remains vital in the Western Balkans.

Table 1 – Communication tools for different target groups

Target group	Main communication channels	Explanation
Primary target groups		
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online campaigns • Social networks • Campaigns with influencers 	As youth primarily use internet and social networks in particular for fun and information, successful campaigns must be “online”. Campaign

		<p>messages should be brief, intriguing and consider the fact that social networks are primarily for fun. In addition, it should be noted that video content is in rise and especially popular among youth. Online Influencers are most popular among youth – which could be used for campaigns. Main criteria for hiring are type of campaign message as well as influencer’s image and reach.</p>
Civil society organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct contact • Media events • Press releases 	<p>Generally, CSOs are cooperative and want to be involved in campaigns with message that they support. Having that in mind, it is not expected that CSOs would show initiative to be involved in on-going campaign. Rather, direct contact or press releases that call for action would encourage CSOs to be involved, as they feel that they are welcome. Another similar tool are media events in which all potential ally CSOs could present their point of view and be involved in campaign directly in front of media.</p>
Secondary target groups		
Citizens in general	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online campaigns • Offline campaigns • Social networks • Interviews • Press releases 	<p>General public can be targeted with various communication tools. As it consists of various groups (and each group has its features), the best approach is to use mixture of tools/approaches. For instance, it is not possible to reach all groups equally with social networks, as some (marginalized, poor, old) do not use it like some others.</p>
Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct contact • Press releases 	<p>Although media can be reached indirectly as well (e.g. through online or offline campaign), more efficient way is to approach directly, like with CSOs. In such a way, media outlets, media associations and individual journalists would rather consider campaign message (and</p>

		participation in it). ⁷
Influencers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct contact • Online campaigns • Social networks 	<p>Persuading other opinion-makers (influencers, celebrities, people with local legitimacy...) is important step for a campaign. It could be done (1) directly, through contact or (2) indirectly, through various campaign tools. Direct method is efficient and increase chances for influencers to be involved in message-spreading. However, diffuse campaign with indirect influence may have a long-term impact and motivate opinion-makers to spread message either as a part of the campaign or later on.</p>

The choice of media mix that will be used depends on the available budget, since the involvement of mainstream media advertisement significantly raises the price.

When it comes to communication tools, the dissemination of content or materials is essential for direct contact, whether it is communication (*door to door*) with citizens or activities with civil society organizations. CSOs that plan to organize a communication campaign must initially prepare a clear and coherent communication framework (and methodologically if they planned the campaign to be preceded by some research) and share it with colleagues from other organizations (not just from their own country) to collect feedback. After that, the campaign is set with media professionals (from media agencies), depending on the goals and budget dictated by the framework.

Below, in the Chapter 3.6, we will make a few recommendations on what such a campaign should include.

3.6. Communication Recommendations

Understanding that the Western Balkans is not a homogeneous whole (despite the similarities), and that the campaign depends on the budget, we propose several recommendations that could be included in communication campaigns in the Western Balkans. Also, the goal is to draw attention to recommendations of those who will create and/or implement them.

⁷ Media associations that can be helpful are Independent Journalists Association of Serbia - NUNS, As Media, Online Media Association (Serbia), Association of Journalists, Association of Professional Journalists, Montenegrin Association of Journalists (Montenegro), Journalists Association of B&H (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Journalist Association of Macedonia...

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- ✓ **Clear and concise messages in the campaign;**
 - Campaigns that inform and deal with misinformation should contain a message that is clear, understandable to all, and that in a short way draws attention to the fact that the content in the media and on the Internet is not necessarily true.
 - ✓ **Affirmative campaign;**
 - Campaigns should be as affirmative as possible. Accusing an (international) actor who enjoys popularity in the domestic public can cause a counter-effect.
 - ✓ **Avoiding terms that are incomprehensible or unattractive in the campaign;**
 - Although they can be analytically useful in reports, academic papers and expert seminars, when talking about a campaign aimed at a wider audience, many terms (corrosive capital, malignant influence, foreign authoritarian influence...) besides causing confusion, misunderstanding and misinterpretation, also can provoke resentment having in mind their ideological sentiment.
 - ✓ **Promotion of information and media literacy programs;**
 - While the first and logical target group are journalists, civil society and politicians, such programs must find their way deeper roots into society through cooperation with local CSOs, cultural and educational institutions, local governments, etc.; The youth should be considered while creating a campaign program.
 - ✓ **Young people as an important link in the fight against misinformation require a distinct approach;**
 - Youth-targeted programs and campaigns must consider the specificity of the themes, languages and tools that are most commonly used by young people. In that sense, the messages should be current, interesting, informal, interactive and provocative if necessary. Educational programs related to (dis)information should also be adapted and to state the types and causes of mis- and disinformation on the channels on which they are most exposed (social networks, online portals, influencers, peer rumors).
 - ✓ **Promotion of education of journalists when it comes to reporting on international actors;**
 - Educational programs and seminars aimed at basic acquaintance with international actors, their relations with Serbia and their presence, as well as the most common misconceptions circulating in the media. Special focus on young or future

journalists. In addition, fact-checking when it comes to international relations could also be a part of such an education.

- ✓ **Promotion based on values and interests;**
 - The fight against systematically produced disinformation that benefits one and to the detriment of another international actor should find a balance in campaigns that promote cooperation in international relations that is based on values (democracy, human rights), as well as interest (economic exchange, technology, education, donations...). Benefits or dangers of a cooperation should be presented more on a concrete way than on an abstract one.
- ✓ **Any campaign or program must respect local context, public opinion or other country's specific.**
 - A campaign at the regional level or one that is copied can cause a countereffect if not adapted to the local context. A good campaign in one society does not automatically mean a good result in another.