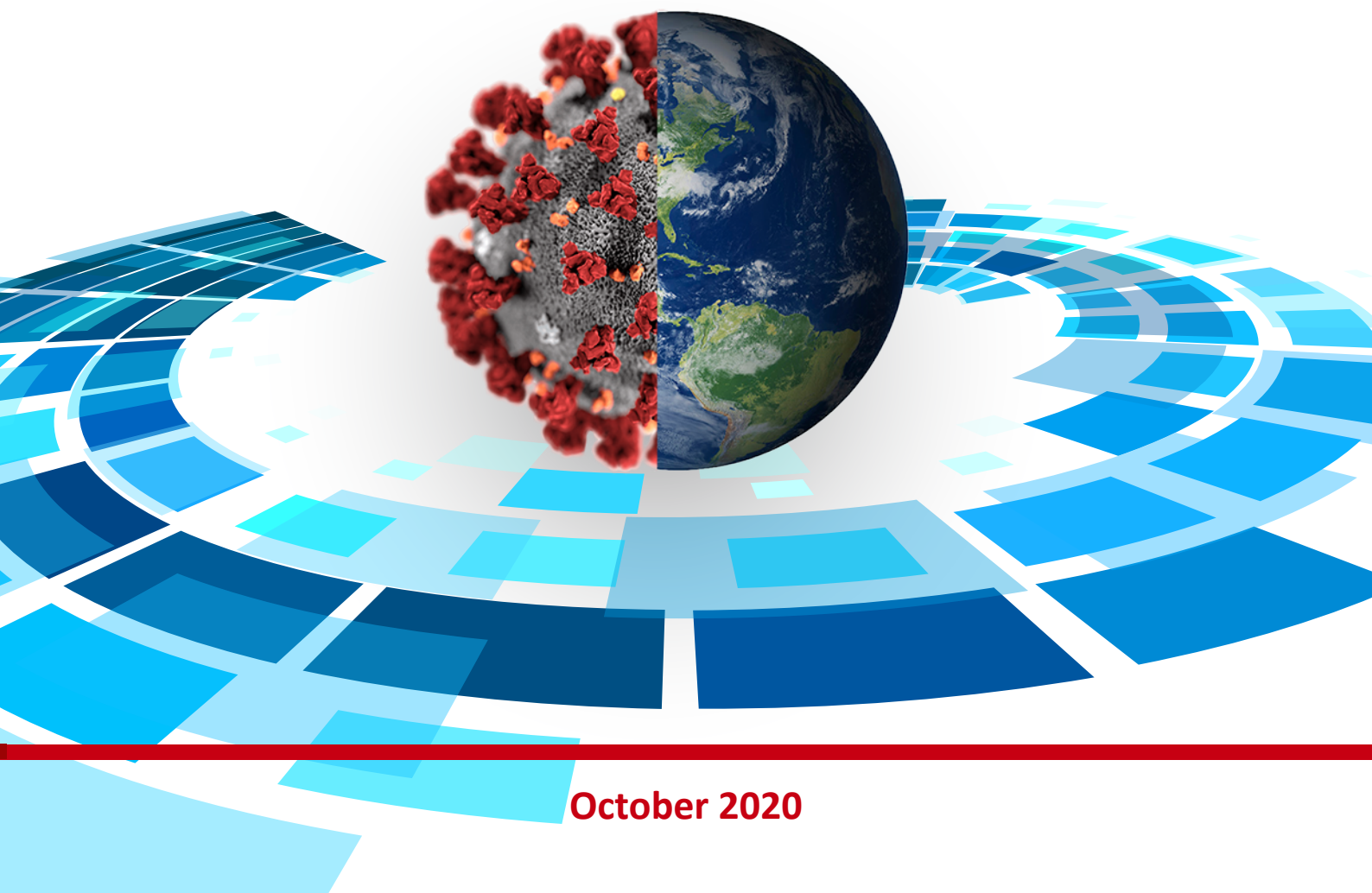


FOREIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS:
ANALYSIS OF THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC IN NORTH MACEDONIA



October 2020



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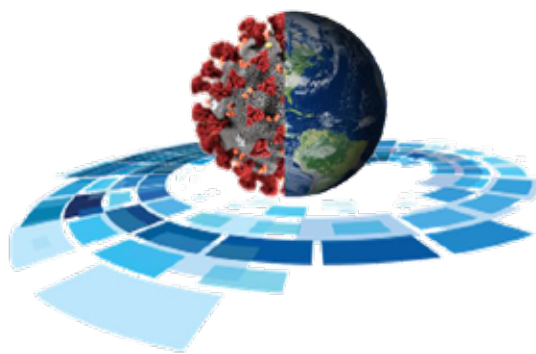
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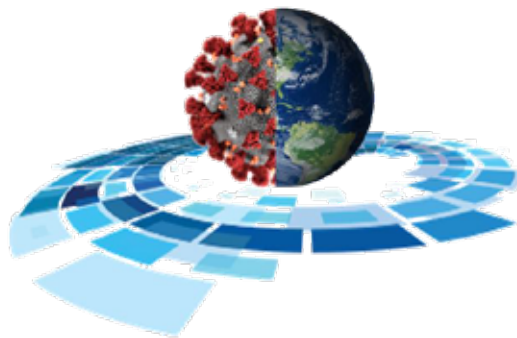


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Although propaganda, as one aspect of influence operations, does not represent a new phenomenon, during the era of mass communication and information it obtains a new dimension and an increase in potential success. In that sense, the COVID-19 pandemic represents at the same time an unprecedented opportunity for global propagandists to develop, test and perfect their tools and tactics, as well as an obligation for democratic societies to protect their fundamental values and key interests from harmful influences. This research strives to provide an insight into foreign influence operations in North Macedonia through a case study of the Chinese presence during COVID-19. For that purpose, an analysis was conducted of a sample of 546 news, articles and posts in traditional and social media from the point of view of form and content. Using a pre-determined methodology, three narratives have been identified which represent a “localized” version of the global Chinese narratives related to the origin of the virus, China’s success in handling the pandemic in comparison with the Western countries, and the assistance it provides through expertise and donations.

The research findings suggest that North Macedonia, in comparison to the bigger and more powerful states, even in the region of Central and Eastern Europe, is not in the focus of the Chinese propaganda machinery. This is due to the fact that the country at present holds limited strategic significance for China and is not an active player for the implementation of some of the imminent Chinese goals. However, many elements point out that no country, regardless how small or apparently insignificant may be, is left out of the Chinese global strategy to strengthen its own position, control the global discourse and refute all narratives that do not align with the views of the Chinese authorities. In that context, in parallel with the global trends of more active Chinese presence in foreign countries through “white” and “grey” propaganda, in North Macedonia there is also penetration of the Chinese narratives through traditional and social media, despite the fact that most traditional media outlets display a high level of balanced and professional reporting. Moreover, there is a remarkable increase in the facilitative communication used by Chinese state actors to build an audience, establish communication channels and build a trusting relationship. In combination with the detected efforts for indirect – offline influence over Macedonian media and journalists (trips, training, cooperation meetings, donation), the Chinese approach has the potential to exert influence and contribute to an alternative perception of the political, economic and geopolitical realities.

Although Chinese influence operations in North Macedonia are in emerging stage, one should not underestimate the potential of the Chinese propaganda machinery which possesses great capacity, experience, financial means, ability to learn and adapt, especially on the long term. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake coordinated steps to build a comprehensive approach in dealing with foreign influence operations, including: strengthening the capacities of institutions, political elites, civil society and media to understand China and its positions; enhancing the ability and interest for critical analysis and in-depth reporting among journalists on topics related to the global geopolitical events; recognizing media as a critical sector when it comes to concluding agreements and memoranda to establish cooperation with foreign actors and attracting foreign investments; strengthening the economic independence from China, especially in sensitive sectors; strategic diversification of the import and export markets for Macedonian companies; upholding the values which are a state priority and strategic determination– rule of law, democracy, human rights and good governance; establishing a unified approach and a national public policy toward China; cooperation with other countries from the region which are more “advanced” in their relations with China and have had the possibility to gain more experience, draw lessons and develop mechanisms to maximize their own, national interests.



INTRODUCTION

INFLUENCE OPERATIONS¹: OLD TOPIC, NEW TACTICS AND TOOLS

Although the term propaganda dates from the Middle Ages, propaganda as tactics to exert influence over a determined target audience and promote a certain agenda existed before Christ and is being actively used today, maybe even more than ever. The reasons should be sought in technological development and the availability of communication tools, the possibility to transmit messages and spread information at unprecedented levels in terms of quantity and territorial scope. Although propaganda as a form of public opinion manipulation has broader application, **this analysis will focus on state propaganda and the attempts of foreign states to exert influence through the means of information, such as traditional and social media in the Republic of North Macedonia.**

At present, an upward trend can be observed in the interest and the research activity pertaining to disinformation and false narratives, both worldwide and in North Macedonia. But, propaganda as a tool in the service of foreign states and their interests in North Macedonia is a relatively new and under-researched topic in comparison to the other European countries and especially EU member states. Hence, this research represents a pioneer attempt to shift the focus toward this phenomenon and stir a public debate in order to find solutions to protect national interests and the fundamental values which underpin the Macedonian society.

With regard to the ways in which propaganda is used to shape public opinion, scientists differentiate between **persuasive communication** – directed toward reaching a specific goal and **facilitative communication** – intended to maintain open communication channels and build a potential audience (Martin, 1971). Facilitative communication involves creating and investing in media infrastructure for establishing and maintaining communication contacts that can be used in a given moment and building a trusting relationship, in order to achieve a certain goal when there is such a need (ibid.)

Social media are particularly convenient for this purpose because they allow to attract followers, set targets, test various messages and obtain feedback in order to continuously perfect the tactics (Molter, Diresta, 2020). In that context, today propaganda is only one part of the processes to

¹ They are also known as information operations.

manipulate public opinion known as **influence operations**. According to Rand's definition, they include tactical information collection and propaganda dissemination using specific techniques, such as selective presentation of information, half-truth, disinformation, hyperbole or understatement, spreading uncertainty and doubt, purposeful unclarity and generalization, managing the news and the agenda, denigrating and demonizing the opponent, using third supposedly objective party to spread the messages, etc. In addition to these techniques, nowadays using new technologies for manipulation (fake accounts, bots, trolls, etc.) can increase multiple times the outreach and the results of influence operations, hence augmenting the harm that they are intended to cause (European Commission, 2020).

Depending whether the source of propaganda is known or not, difference is made between "**white propaganda**" which is overt, through state media and actors overtly connected to a third country, and covert or "**grey propaganda**", used to spread information, or disinformation and false narratives without clear source and explicit connection to state actors or media (Diresta et al., 2020:3).

COVID-19 – "THE PERFECT STORM" FOR SPREADING DISINFORMATION, FALSE NARRATIVES AND PROPAGANDA

„For propagandists, every global event is an opportunity to influence people's perceptions and behavior“ (Barojan, quoted in Maksimovic, 2020). In that context, all the circumstances related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the sanitary crisis, unprecedented in recent history, affecting all the countries around the globe, causing significant economic repercussions and opening many questions related to its spreading and treatment, serve without any doubt as an excellent basis for developing and spreading global propaganda, by different stakeholders and countries, with different objectives. The World Health Organization (WHO) even coined the terms "infodemic" to name the extraordinary abundance of information, some of which is not true. In that context, Russia has been the country with the most traditionally developed and most researched propaganda machinery, but China made the spotlight as a country with particular interest to influence the global narrative. Three themes were topical for China at the global scale: **the origin of the virus, the manner in which China tackled the pandemic in comparison to the other countries and the assistance it provided to the rest of the world.**

From the beginning of the epidemic in the Chinese city of Wuhan and as it further spread in Europe, the USA and the whole world, China has been trying to retroactively change the narrative in order to "retell" the story about the origin of the virus and rethink the roles of "heroes" and "villains" (Jing, 2020). The Chinese version of the global narrative has been directed towards the minimization of its own responsibility during the initial months pertaining to the timely alarming situation so that the rest of the world could better prepare for the pandemic and prevent the huge number of sick and deceased. The faltering response in certain countries enhanced such Chinese narrative and laid the ground for the Chinese state institutions and the Chinese Communist Party to glorify the Chinese (authoritarian) model and success in dealing with the health crisis, in comparison to the "failure" of the developed democratic societies.

Furthermore, using the fact that the "zero patient" has still not been found, China tried to refute the mere possibility that the virus originated in Wuhan by inventing and putting forward

alternative scenarios suggesting that the virus is artificial, brought from the outside or that it existed in other countries before it was detected in Wuhan (Boxwell, 2020). Besides that, although China itself asked for discretion from the EU when receiving medical supplies in Wuhan in the beginning of the epidemic, China used its own assistance for the most affected EU countries (particularly Italy and Spain) in order to promote itself as a supportive and credible partner who helps the European countries when the EU abandons them (RFI, 2020).

RUSSIAN AND CHINESE PROPAGANDA – SIMILAR TOOLS, DIFFERENT OBJECTIVE

The methods used by China to achieve its goals resemble a lot of the Russian playbook, although there are important differences. What both countries, Russia and China have in common are the strict mechanisms for controlling the flow of information in their own information space, while they use the openness and the freedom of expression in other countries to disseminate disinformation and narratives which go in their favor (Lea Gabriele, quoted in Gilsinan, 2020). In both cases there are differences in the goals and narratives targeted toward domestic and foreign audiences. China's domestic priority is to maintain the stability and government of the Communist Party, which is achieved by promoting the Party as the people's protector, emphasizing its successes (in contrast to the other countries' weaknesses), silencing dissenting opinions and building a cult of the leader – in this case Xi Jinping. In the communication with a foreign audience, the accent is put on China's status of a responsible global power, the constructive role played by China in other countries and the promotion of Chinese successes in order to showcase the superiority of the Chinese model.

This tactics has been initially used by China during the global financial and the European sovereign debt crisis, when it promoted the closedness of its market as a virtue in contrast to the openness of the market economy in Europe and the USA as a reason for their vulnerability, and has been perfected since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Chinese narratives are predominantly positive and spread a confident image of China and its superiority. All criticism is subject to censorship in the domestic media or is spun to create a perception that other countries wrongly criticize China and to bring about nationalistic sentiments among Chinese people (Wong, 2020). Contrary to this, Russian propaganda is not focused on the country's reputation, but is rather directed toward undermining the opponent's reputation by spreading confusion, creating anger and frustration, as well as direct interference in foreign states' internal affairs (Diresta et al., 2020:42).

Although it has several decades of long traditions, with COVID-19 the Chinese propaganda becomes more direct, diverse and creative. Despite the highly developed network of state media which are present in a number of countries and report in multiple languages, in the past several years China has built significant presence on social media like Facebook and Twitter. They are not available on Chinese territory, but are nevertheless used by Chinese diplomats abroad, especially since the beginning of the pandemic. Having analyzed the posts in recent years, many researchers talk about a new trend in the Chinese public diplomacy which is shifting from the doctrine of "*keeping low profile*

and biding one's time for the right opportunity"² toward a more assertive approach and a so-called "*wolf warrior diplomacy*"³. Two examples can be used to illustrate this in relation to COVID-19: the censorship of an open letter signed by the 27 EU ambassadors to China on the occasion of the 45th anniversary since the establishment of diplomatic relations before it was published in the Chinese media, because it contained a reference to the Chinese origin of the virus (Von der Burchard, Barigazzi, 2020) and the pressure to amend the COVID-19 disinformation report published by the European External Action Service which, in its initial version explicitly mentioned China as one of the actors leading a global disinformation campaign in relation to the pandemic (Van Dorpe et al, 2020). In that context, the Chinese propaganda increasingly resembles a more developed and more powerful version of the Russian propaganda (Diresta et al., 2020:42).

According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the goals of Chinese influence operations include laying the ground for a more intensive engagement, enhancing China's discursive power, debunking or minimizing "Western" narratives, especially on topics which are sensitive for China, and influencing the local media eco-system (Lim, Bergin, 2020). Their success depends on the government's responsiveness in a certain country, the importance of the principle of free press (ibid.) and the results of the cooperation with China in various areas. The long term goals include strengthening the influence over domestic political processes in the foreign country, deepening the economic dependence on China through the supply chains and direct investments, as well as building alliances to advocate for and support the Chinese global position, in different international organizations.

Online influence operations, or the network spreading "white" and "grey" propaganda, is complemented by offline activities used to synergetically enhance the influence and information. The IFJ documents such actions and classifies them in three categories: exchange and training schemes targeting journalists, cooperation between journalist associations and media content sharing agreements (ibid). These activities are a part of the Chinese strategy to exert influence over the media ecosystem in order to gain control of the narratives, spread a positive perception about China and disseminate Chinese positions using third, supposedly independent parties – foreign journalists.

² 韬光养晦 - *tao guang yang hui* – is a Chinese idiom attributed to Deng Xiaoping which is interpreted in the sense that China should not openly demonstrate its strength in international politics and should achieve most objectives discretely and behind closed doors.

³ Wolf Warrior Diplomacy, in analogy to the hero with a same name from the popular action film (站狼 – Zhan Lang) where the main character sends a message that anyone who offends China will pay a price.



METHODOLOGY

In order to test the validity and applicability of the insights acquired at the global level in the case of North Macedonia, during the period September – October 2020, **a case study research was conducted and aimed to uncover potential disinformation and false narratives related to COVID-19 as a result of influence operations in the Macedonian information space.** The research consisted of analyzing traditional media, internet portals and social media activity during the period of four months – 1 March to 30 June 2020, which was considered to be crucial in the fight against the pandemic in North Macedonia. For that purpose, a total of 22 diverse media and internet portals were observed:

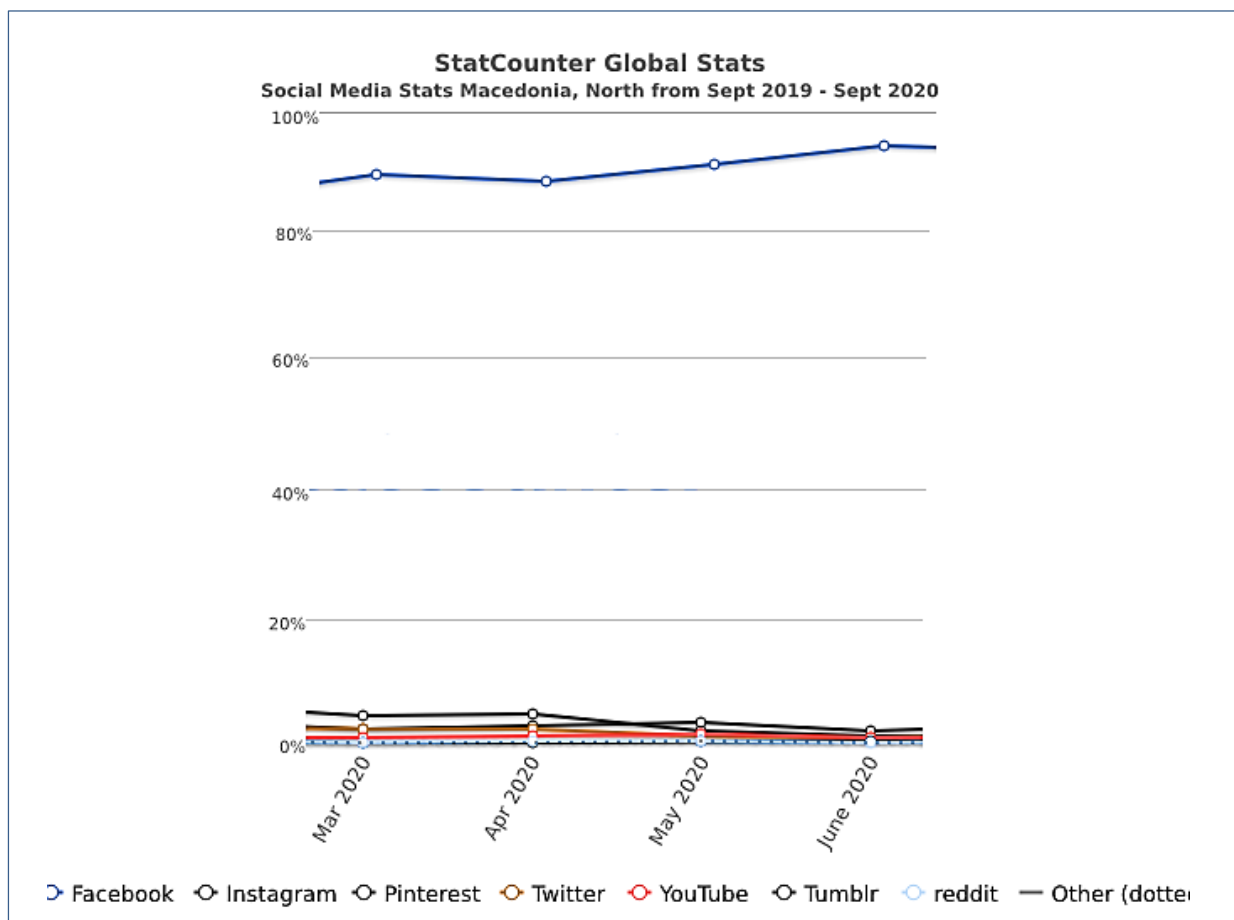
- National information agencies (3) – MIA, Meta, Makfax
- National televisions (3) – Kanal 5, Telma, Sitel
- Online television (1) – Slobodna TV
- Daily newspapers – electronic editions (2) – Vecer, Nova Makedonija
- Foreign press services in Macedonian (3) – Radio Free Europe, Deutsche Welle and Voice of America
- Internet portals of predominantly informative character (2) – IRL, Plusinfo
- Internet portals with mixed contents (6) – Republika, Kuris, Lokalno, DokazM, Infomax, Okno
- Internet portals of predominantly entertaining character (2) – Idividi, Offnet

Furthermore, social media posts were analyzed on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. It has to be noted that, according to statistical data for our period of interest, Facebook is by far the most widely used and influential social medium in North Macedonia when it comes to the number of clicks, that is the traffic it generates toward external pages and sources of information⁴.

The internet search resulted in a total of 245 relevant news and articles in the traditional media and internet portals and 301 posts on social media. In addition to the contents where disinformation messages could be clearly identified, related contents were singled out as well, contents which

⁴ The lowest and highest value respectively during the observed period: Facebook – 92,9-96,6%, Instagram 0,8-3%, Twitter – 0,8-1,48%, Youtube – 0,6-1%.

provide additional context or present countering narratives in order to obtain a more complete idea regarding the scope and the impact of the narratives.



Source: Statcounter

The identified contents were entered into a database using the following parameters:

- Title
- Author (where applicable)
- Link
- Date
- Narrative/key words
- Shares/reactions
- Comment/remark

The collected data was then analyzed from the point of view of both form and content. The **formal analysis** relates to the source and the channel used to spread potential disinformation or false narratives, concerned stakeholders, target audience and financial aspects (if applicable and traceable). The **analysis of the content** was conducted using Attride-Stirling's thematic network analysis technique (2001) and aimed to map out patterns of key words or sub-topics which shape the narratives. They are presented visually in the form of networks (webs) of basic, organizing and global themes. Bearing in mind the possibility of two-way communication provided by social media, the reactions of the target audience were also analyzed in terms of intensity (low-medium-high) and type of reaction (approval-disapproval). On the basis of the research findings, a set of recommendations

are provided in order to devise a comprehensive public policy approach toward fighting disinformation, false narratives and foreign propaganda.

The methodological limitations of the research are related to the fact that the internet search was conducted using language as criterion, thus the media which publish solely in Albanian were not taken into account. The search only covered contents publicly available on the media's internet sites and with open access, leaving out traditional media which do not have an online archive, as well as private groups and posts on social media. Moreover, the software tools used to analyze Twitter and YouTube also presented some constraints and for some searches in Macedonian language for the defined period, either did not show any results or showed results in similar languages (Serbian, Russian etc.). Nevertheless, bearing in mind the number of analyzed media outlets, their viewership/readership, the size of the analyzed sample of news, articles and posts, as well as the consistency of the findings, the methodological caveats do not have the potential to influence the validity of the research.



ANALYSIS OF THE KEY FINDINGS

“INFODEMIC” IN THE MACEDONIAN MEDIA SPACE: CASE STUDY OF THE CHINESE INFLUENCE

The premises presented in the introductory part, on the basis of desk review of international sources, were largely confirmed by the findings from the media observation in North Macedonia. Namely, the origin of the virus, the way China tackled the pandemic and the subsequent results, as well as the assistance it provided to countries around the world, including North Macedonia, are the key narratives offered to the Macedonian audience. If we make a rough generalization, the initial conclusion is that traditional media report about these narratives in a rather balanced and moderate way and also present the views and opinions of the parties who do not agree with China. A deeper analysis reveals that different media categories devote different amount of attention, space and time to a certain topic, or narrative, and there are also differences between media outlets within the same category (national information agencies, national televisions, foreign services reporting in Macedonian etc.)

TRADITIONAL MEDIA

National televisions

The general impression about national televisions is that they are focused on reporting about the origin of the virus. There is, to a certain extent, balanced reporting about the accusations, mostly by the USA, that the virus is of Chinese origin and the Chinese response, as well as the Chinese refusal to convene a UN Security Council meeting with a justification that it is still early to have such a discussion at the international level. When it comes to handling the pandemic, it was reported that the Chinese authorities forbid the publication of articles and opinions related to the corona virus without prior approval by the competent health authority. North Macedonian TV Stations Kanal 5 and Sitel report about the measures taken by the Chinese authorities supported by a drastic drop in cases in the most affected Chinese provinces, which is not so visible in the reporting by Telma.

According to the analysis, the narrative about Chinese assistance being distributed across the world is also present. From the reporting during the analyzed period, especially during March, April and May, the impression is that while the EU is in constant negotiations how to distribute the economic packages to its member states and candidate countries, China is showing its generosity in action around the world. News about the assistance sent to Italy in sanitary and medical supplies, support by sending expert teams, packages of masks and disinfectants to the Balkan countries, financial aid etc. range among the main news on the Chinese humanitarian engagement. Telma has the least, while Sitel has the broadest coverage of news about Chinese assistance both worldwide and inside the country. There is also an interview with the Chinese Ambassador to discuss about China's financial aid, as well as the assistance in masks and protective equipment.

National information agencies (MIA, META, Makfax)

The analyzed media in this group mostly inform the audience about the Chinese assistance distributed throughout the world. This applies especially to Makfax with 12 out of 25 news in the observed period referring to the expert assistance sent to Italy and the criticism toward Italy's authorities on the implemented measures, material assistance to Serbia and the Western Balkans, including North Macedonia. This is not the case with META which reports in a much more "modest" way about the Chinese activities related to the prevention of the contagion and the assistance received by North Macedonia in the form of tests and protective equipment. Regarding the measures to deal with the virus, Makfax reports in a more extensive way. The discourse includes Beijing's official positions and indignations regarding the criticism on China's delay in informing the international community, including a satirical video which involves President Donald Trump. In both media, the narrative related to the origin is underrepresented.

As expected, MIA has the biggest quantity of reporting, especially regarding the narratives about the origin and handling of the pandemic, and less about the Chinese assistance. Its news and articles are often shared by other media and internet portals. What is interesting about MIA is the translations of articles from the foreign press which are sometimes well crafted analytical stories, for example about the Chinese propaganda which presents only the positive aspects in handling the pandemic (the success of the Party led by Xi Jinping) and leaves out the negative aspects (such as the overly full hospitals and the lack of hospital beds), but sometimes loosely argued allegations about a global plot (the so-called "Wuhan link" between the USA, China and France).

Online televisions (Slobodna TV)

This media outlet reports about the activities and steps of the international community regarding the pandemic, including about China, in a very balanced and prudent manner. What makes this outlet different from the others is the fact that the world news is presented in a more analytical way, with a certain amount of personal insight by the desk editor. The narrative about the origin is very scarce, while the news are dominated by China's assistance throughout the world and its efforts to leave an impression that it deals with the epidemic in a very successful way, as illustrated by the Chinese President appearing without a mask in some of the hotspots. Slobodna TV also presents news

about Chinese attitudes and its rebuttal of the accusations regarding its untimely information to the international community about the spread of the virus within its borders.

Daily newspapers – electronic editions (Vecer, Nova Makedonija)

All the narratives in this media category have been presented in a balanced way, with a minor prevalence of the narrative about handling the pandemic. Nova Makedonija reports about China's remarkable success in the recovery of its tourism industry after the pandemic, as well as the use of drones to prevent the spread of the contagion. Some articles report about the Chinese indignation regarding the accusations of lack of cooperativeness, but also about the Chinese assistance in the form of expert teams and equipment dispatched globally. When it comes to Vecer, in comparison to Nova Makedonija, it reported less on China and the main identified narratives refer to the origin of the virus, China's reference to WHO's reports stating that there is no proof of the virus being produced in a lab, narratives about China's assistance to other countries, including North Macedonia (in this case about ventilators), as well as the Chinese ripostes particularly addressed to the USA by publishing satirical videos mocking the American President Donald Trump.

Foreign services in Macedonian language (Radio Free Europe – RFE, Deutsche Welle – DW, Voice of America – VOA)

When analyzing the findings on the basis of the information and news published in this media outlet category, the research team explicitly concluded that these media services report in a very analytical manner, offer a bigger scope of information, including also the attitude of the journalist or the author. This should not be a surprise when taking into account that the reporting policy of DW and VOA is more analytical and less focused on the mere presentation of facts. The analysis shows that DW China-related articles and news are mostly related to the narratives about the origin and assistance, and less about dealing with the pandemic. Unlike other media, when speaking about DW, this outlet sticks out by the fact that its articles and news are usually signed by a concrete author. Using intriguing titles, for example *“Has the EU abandoned the Western Balkans during the corona virus crisis?”*, DW provides insights into the intensive assistance coming from China in the countries from our region, including North Macedonia. Moreover, in a series of news, the potential objectives of the Chinese “generosity” are being elaborated, such as its geopolitical positioning, as well as reflections about the EU's efficiency and mechanisms in the provision of assistance toward its members and candidate countries, bearing in mind that the EU's assistance is more complicated and slower than China's. DW also reports about the origin of the virus by presenting China's arguments that it has not been produced in a lab. In terms of handling the pandemic, DW authors publish articles regarding China's motivation to *“dominate”*, *“strengthen its position”* and show *“clear success in the struggle”*, as well as the conscious spread of disinformation.

The quantity of news about Chinese activities is significantly lower in the VOA in Macedonian. This service also warns against possible disinformation coming from China regarding the pandemic, by quoting opinions by domestic communication experts. This media outlet predominantly publishes news related to the way China deals with the pandemic and reports about the efficiency of its health

system, the measures and the readiness of the Chinese authorities for an investigation into COVID-19 after the pandemic is under control. The amount of news related to the Chinese assistance and the origin of the virus is limited, with only one factual report about a Chinese donation to North Macedonia containing 500,000 masks and 20,000 tests.

When it comes to RFE, it is an outlet which extensively reports about Chinese activities in a factual and balanced manner, including in terms of the distribution of all three narratives. With regard to the narrative about handling the pandemic, RFE was the only outlet to publish news about an alleged private lawsuit by local residents from the Chinese province where the pandemic started against the authorities. However, the news is dominated by the situation regarding the spread of the contagion, its further prevention as a result of the measures in place, as well as the transparency, or lack thereof, by Chinese authorities in the fight against the disease and the global communication. In the news related to the origin of the virus, RFE writes about the accusations, mostly by the USA, against China and its potential cover-up, but also about the Chinese response and denial. They also report in a factual manner about the assistance to North Macedonia, including statements of gratitude by the authorities and a statement by the Chinese Ambassador announcing additional assistance for the country.

Internet portals

Internet portals of informative character (IRL, Plusinfo)

With regard to these two portals, although the nature of their work differs, they have in common the abundance of news with informative and investigative character, hence were analyzed under one category. The intensity of their reporting on the Chinese activities and arguments on COVID-19 is limited. Plusinfo specifically has 12 news pieces, most of which refer to handling the pandemic, the progress in the search for a vaccine, the big scope of testing and newly opened testing labs in China. There are news items related to China's rebuttal of the accusations that it makes profit from the pandemic and counter-accusations to the USA that they spread false narratives about the origin of the virus. In terms of the assistance, this narrative is present with one news about 30 million tests and 10 thousand ventilators provided to Africa, after the African leaders jointly negotiated lower prices, which suggests that it is not a donation, but a procurement.

The Investigative Reporting Lab – IRL published one typically factfinding article which had wide distribution and influence. It was a news story produced jointly by a number of investigative journalists from the region who uncovered that a portion of the rapid immunological tests offered in North Macedonia, as well as France, the United Kingdom, Indonesia and Russia were not actually manufactured in the Netherlands, as it was stated, but in China and with dubious quality. The news quickly spread throughout the public and was shared by other media channels in the country and abroad. During that time, there was no reaction noted by the official Chinese representatives in North Macedonia.

Internet portals of mixed character (Republika, Kurir, Lokalno, DokazM, Infomax, Okno)

What this category of portals has in common is that they usually publish news which is not often spotted on traditional media and avoid factual reporting. Most of them report about all the narratives: for example, Republika, although in a modest manner, informs its audience about China's rebuttal of the criticism related to its late warning about the pandemic, as well as the allegations that the virus was produced in a Chinese lab. They also report about newly opened hospital wards for corona patients in Wuhan operated entirely by robots using 5G. This portal also reports on one particular news story which was not detected in the other outlets, about the Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dacic who expressed doubts that the virus could be a part of a special war against China and praised the way China dealt with the pandemic.

It can be observed that the portal Okno does not report about facts and there are very few news about Chinese activities. They report about the "competition" between China and the USA in producing an effective vaccine to the virus. The other news portals are mostly analytical, based on articles by renowned philosophers and journalists who elaborate on the implications for the European economy due to the dependence on China and the pandemic, as well as potential political processes which could take place in China after the end of the pandemic. DokazM published only two

related news stories alluding to connections with domestic daily politics, while Infomax focuses on the way China dealt with the pandemic with its news about mass testing in the 20-million city of Beijing, as well as the alleged demands of the Chinese President to the WHO not to publish information and to postpone the proclamation of a pandemic. It also reports that China has already developed a vaccine, as well as the Chinese allegations that the virus was “imported” to China.

With regard to Kurir, all three narratives are present, but news about the Chinese “generosity” and its assistance to North Macedonia, Serbia, Albania, Italy and the EU dominate with a total of 8 news stories, along with the Chinese appeals to avoid politization and to demonstrate international unity in order to prevent the further spread of the virus. Lokalno mostly focuses on the way China tackles the pandemic with reports about the Chinese accusations that European frozen food exports brought them a new epidemic, as well as a new type of virus discovered in some markets which may have arrived from the USA or Russia. The most salient titles include Chinese accusations that the US State Secretary Mike Pompeo “lied” about Chinese activities in relation to the virus, that the virus was produced in a lab in Maryland and the Chinese position that their vaccine will be a global good.

Internet portals of predominantly entertaining character (Idividi, Offnet)

These portals have the smallest frequency of news related to Chinese activities in the observed period. More specifically, Idividi published only one news item about the Chinese decision to increase funding for WHO by additional 30 million USD after the USA suspended their contribution. When it comes to Offnet, they usually publish analyses and interviews related to the international dynamics and geopolitics through the lens of the corona virus and in relation to all three narratives, without however invoking Chinese official positions. The focus is put on the global influence of the big countries, and all three narratives intertwine in a rather objective manner and without favoring either side. What sticks out is the news that China officially freed of all the wrongdoing the doctor who alarmed about the corona virus, who died in the beginning of February, and declared that he was a “professional who fought hard and sacrificed himself”.

Social media

The narratives presented in the traditional media are to a certain extent also presented on social media, especially Facebook. Such posts are less common on the Facebook pages of media and portals whose internet sites were subject to observation, more common on the pages of other portals and blogs, mostly of tabloid nature and sometimes on individual profiles as well. There is a significant increase in the presence of conspiracy theories regarding the origin of the virus and its purposeful use – as a weapon against China, as a worldwide conspiracy involving China and the WHO, as a tool for Bill Gates to implant microchips in all humans etc. To a lesser extent, there are posts which emphasize China’s success in handling the pandemic and the assistance it provides to other countries.

What is particularly significant for Facebook is the prevalence of sensationalist posts and titles aimed to attract attention and clicks. Most often the posts that are published include fake news, half-truths, attempts to manipulate without quoting sources, by taking out of context or by quoting irrelevant websites and so-called authorities who are either unconfirmed or unknown to the broader

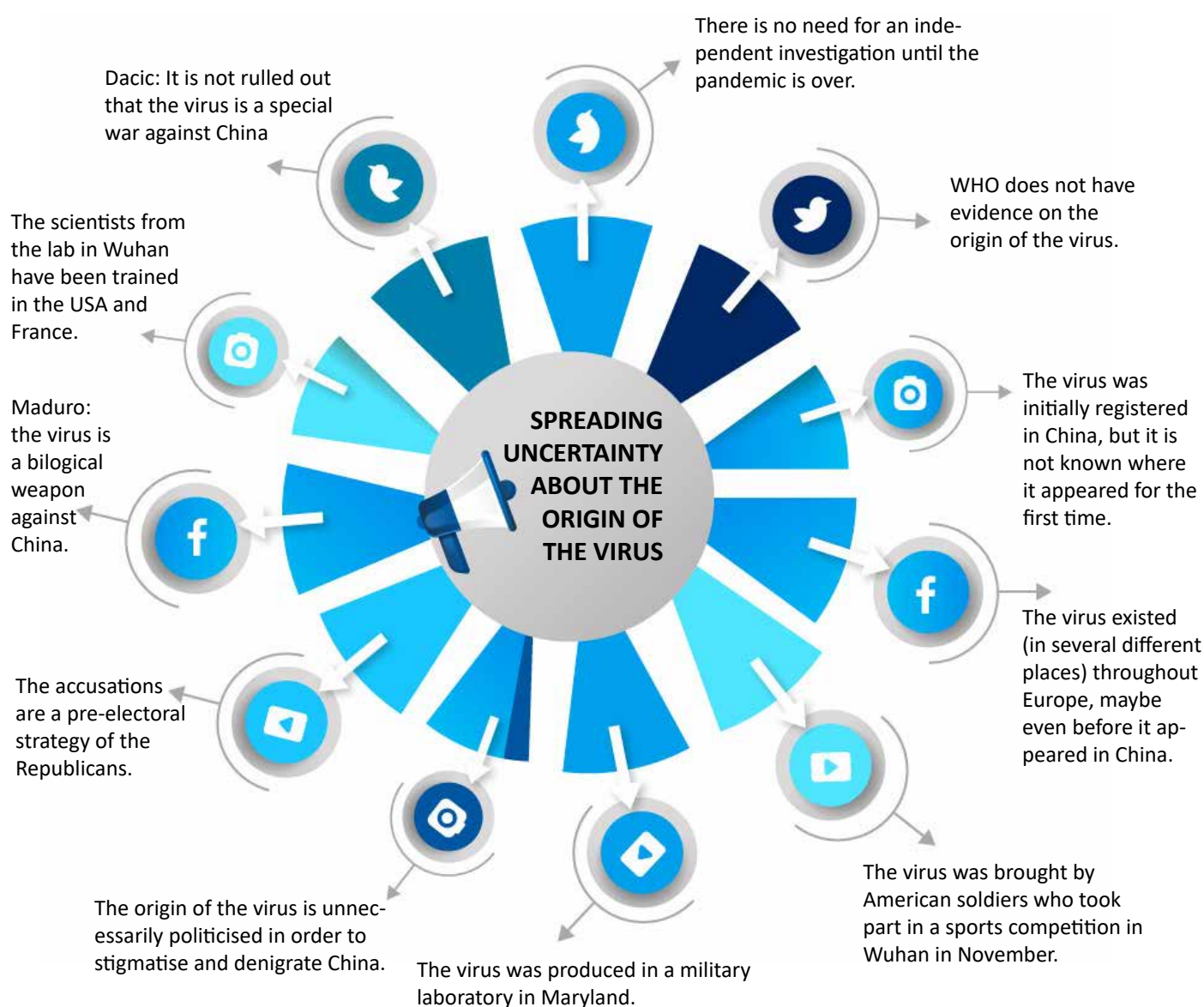
public (ie. *“according to a renowned Russian scientist”, “a famous Chinese doctor”, “lead virologist”* etc.) Those activities do not involve credible media and individuals who have the power to influence the public opinion, nor are there paid posts or viral activity with the potential to create mass dissemination and outreach. The total number of interactions to those posts in general is limited to an audience interested in global conspiracy theories and the comments are often not even related to the actual content of the post. With a maximum number of 621 interactions (503 likes, 26 comments and 78 shares) for the most popular post, the number of reactions for the following posts drops significantly, a big number of reactions and comments express disbelief and the last 100 comments do not have any interaction.

Facebook is the only social media in North Macedonia where direct presence has been noted of Chinese state actors – the Chinese Embassy in Skopje and Confucius Institute. The Institute has been present on Facebook since its founding in 2013, albeit in the beginning with a much smaller number of posts in comparison to today. The page of the Embassy has been created on 30 November 2019, amidst the global campaign initiated by the Chinese government for increased presence on foreign social media and more active diplomatic engagement. The opening of a Facebook page of the Embassy has been followed by the opening of Facebook profiles of Chinese diplomats in the country.

The Facebook page of the Institute has shared only 3 posts regarding Chinese donations in North Macedonia, while the page of the Embassy features around 30 posts on COVID-19. Most of them refer to the Chinese model and success in dealing with the virus, followed by shared statements of official Chinese representatives pertaining to the origin of the virus and responding to the accusations by the USA, as well as information about donations. It is interesting to note that there is no information on the Facebook page about a donation or procurement of ventilators, although several traditional media relayed statements by North Macedonian officials that it is being negotiated and expected. Besides, 3 posts present the idea by the Chinese President about the creation of a global health community or developing a health component in the framework of the Chinese global Belt and Road Initiative, which as a topic has not been found in the traditional media. A number of viral links have been shared as well as videos with a great number of views worldwide. Still, the maximum number of interactions per post is limited, with 54 “likes” (for a donation) or 13 shares (of a video where teachers and students from a school in Washington DC cheer the Chinese people in its fight with the virus).

THE NARRATIVES IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT: WHAT IS BEING SAID AND WHAT IS BEING LEFT OUT?

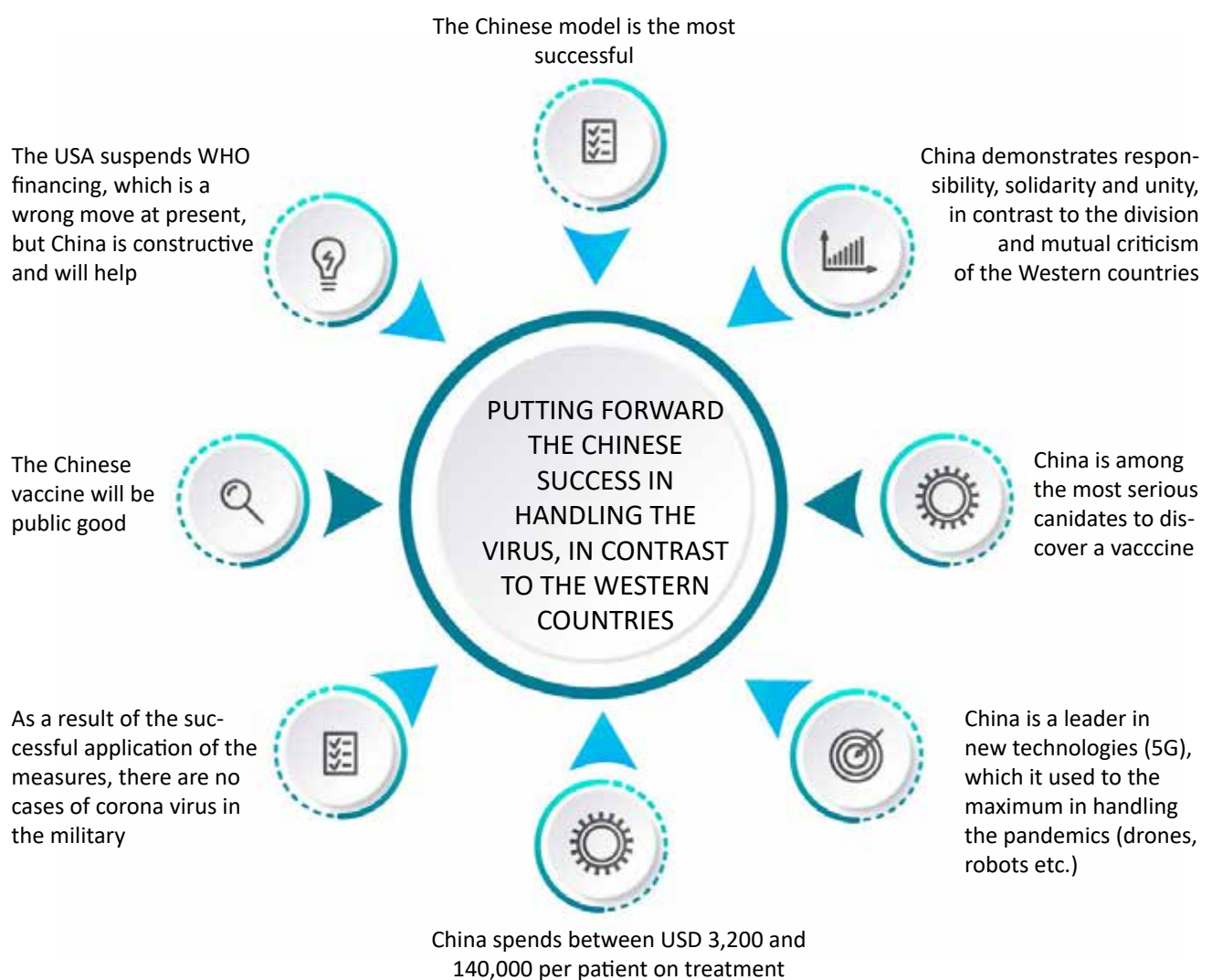
NARRATIVE 1: Spreading uncertainty about the origin of the virus



What has not been explicitly noted in the Macedonian media is the retroactive adjustment of the narratives when it comes to the origin of the virus since the beginning of the year. Although the initial information presented by the Chinese authorities does not raise doubt that the virus originated in Wuhan, since China was confronted with the accusations of not having reported on time and of manipulating the numbers, spread of uncertainty, open questions and speculations can be noticed, in order to raise doubt and initiate conspiracy theories. At the same time, very little is being reported about the censorship of information by the Chinese side – even in a document signed by the EU

ambassadors, as well as censorship of all medical articles related to COVID-19. Moreover, in the context of China's objections to an international independent investigation regarding the origin which could clarify the dilemmas, it has not been mentioned that China threatens to use economic measures against the countries supporting the idea of an independent investigation, like Australia (Needham, 2020).

NARRATIVE 2: Putting forward the Chinese success in handling the pandemic, in contrast to the Western countries



In contrast, international media report about a number of intelligence reports claiming that China was late to report or delayed the warning to the WHO and the rest of the world. Furthermore, the documents intended to transfer the lessons learnt by China to the rest of the world are more a political eulogy of President Xi and the Communist Party than a practically useful public policy document. For example, in the most famous such document – a *White Paper* published by the Chinese government on 66 pages, the name of the President as the main protagonist in the events

has been mentioned a total of 53 times, while there is no mention of any mistakes or omissions (State Council Information Office, 2020).

In this topic there is also retroactive adjustment of the narratives: in the case of the official statistics of deceased people in Wuhan, which has been later revised as a result of “methodological adjustment”, which raises suspicion of manipulation; and in the case of Li Wenliang, one of the first doctors who tried to warn against the seriousness of the disease and the inadequate reaction of the public authorities, who was first punished and after his death, in order to appease the domestic reactions of netizens, was proclaimed to be a hero. Media also report about lawsuits regarding the Chinese responsibility and failure in its response, not only external (by the State of Missouri), but also private lawsuits within China. What is also rarely mentioned is the allegation that Chinese scientists had already been tasked to work on a vaccine in the middle of January, while the other countries received initial virus samples at the end of January.

NARRATIVE 3: Demonstrating the Chinese solidarity and generosity



The biggest share of the analyzed posts on this topic uses vague terminology which usually hides the fact that the so-called assistance is frequently procurement of medical equipment, and not donations. The fact that the long-awaited “donation” of ventilators from China to North Macedonia was planned to be a procurement using EU’s money is not put forward, nor is the link between the great global demand for medical equipment which brings significant profit to Chinese companies. The Chinese authorities refute the responsibility for the faulty medical equipment and tests arrived from China on several occasions (in the Netherlands, Spain, Bosnia and Herzegovina etc.), as well as the allegations that China is pressuring Germany to obtain praise about the Chinese assistance, that it boasts with the assistance provided to the EU, while it asked for discretion when the EU provided assistance to Wuhan, or in other words that it is manipulating with the so-called “*politics of generosity*” (Borrell, 2020).



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

NORTH MACEDONIA IN THE GLOBAL TRENDS: NASCENT STAGE OF INFLUENCE OPERATIONS

Chinese influence operations in North Macedonia largely follow the world trends and narratives. They are usually aimed at the promotion of a positive perception on China as a strong and responsible global power, emphasis on positive stories and censorship of all the information considered unfavorable or harmful for the Chinese reputation, retroactive adjustment of the narratives, as well as dissemination of the Chinese positions and views on various topics. They mostly consist in spreading information published by Chinese media and official Chinese representatives, increased presence in traditional media of Chinese diplomatic representatives in the country, more intensive social media activity, promoting contents prepared by Chinese state televisions (*“white propaganda”*), and to a lesser extent unverified and speculative contents from unclear sources, half-truths and disinformation which support the Chinese narrative (*“grey propaganda”*).

In North Macedonia there is no direct presence of Chinese state media which would publish in the Macedonian language. Thus, the *“white propaganda”* is mostly directed through activities in domestic media and on social media. Chinese official positions are largely present in national media where they are usually presented in a balanced way, by parallel presentation of the countering narratives. However, even in some traditional media unclear contents have been detected, or obfuscations. Such contents are significantly more present on the internet portals which share information without quoting the source and the name of the author, unlike foreign information services where the articles are usually signed, better developed and supported with arguments. The presence of *“grey propaganda”*, which is more typical for social media, at present does not have the potential to lead to a change in the public opinion and usually provokes positive reactions only among a marginal portion of social media users who are interested in conspiracy theories against the Western countries.

Given a set of political and geopolitical circumstances, such as the experience with the recognition of Taiwan and the cautious foreign policy toward China from then on, the bad experience with the highway construction financed by a Chinese loan and built by a Chinese contractor, the perspective for North Macedonia (not) to join the EU in near future, the limited *“weight”* of the

country at the global scene etc. the Chinese focus at present is not aimed at using persuasive communication techniques and tools. Instead, for the time being, the Chinese strategy seems to be lagging behind the global trends, China prefers to maintain low profile on many issues, avoids confrontation and carefully chooses occasions when it can score points.

But, Chinese influence operations in North Macedonia are in an emerging stage and fall within the scope of facilitative communication – establishing and maintaining effective communication channels and target audience. This is supported also by the attempts to influence media representatives using the tactics already identified by the IFJ: paid trips (training for journalists in China in 2014), attempts to establish relations between professional associations (visit and meetings of the All-China Journalists Association which is in fact related to the Communist Party in 2017), donation of masks (2020), as well as through the increased activity of Chinese diplomatic representatives on traditional media (through interviews, op-eds etc.) as well as on social media (Facebook).

The “delay” in the development of China’s propaganda tools in North Macedonia, which is a common characteristic for several countries in the region of South-East Europe, can be ascribed to China’s current limited interest in these countries, but not to a lack of capacity, tradition or know-how. Unlike Russia, China is a relative newcomer in this region, but its “learning curve” and the capabilities it possesses are in steep ascent. Therefore, a comprehensive approach needs to be developed in order to protect the plurality of thought as a fundamental value, to prevent the “localization” of false narratives and generally to strengthen the resilience toward foreign propaganda. In that sense, simply detecting and removing fake profiles and bots is merely removing the direct and visible symptoms, but does not resolve the root causes. It is necessary to undertake a series of coordinated steps to change public policies which would include:

- Strengthening the capacities to understand China and its positions among journalists, institutions, and civil society in order to launch an informed public debate and fight disinformation.
- Enhancing the ability and interest for critical analysis and in-depth reporting among journalists in relation to global geopolitical events.
- Clear labelling of contents that have been paid, ordered or obtained from third states or state actors in traditional media.
- Defining policies and legal solutions which would ensure some kind of professional verification to distinguish between online media and internet portals, in order to increase the transparency and professionalism in reporting, strengthen media’s financial sustainability and reduce the possibility for third countries to exert influence.
- Recognizing media as a critical sector when it comes to concluding agreements, establishing cooperation with foreign actors and attracting foreign investments.
- Further increase of the population’s media literacy through targeted campaigns.

- Gradual strengthening of the economic independence from China, especially in sensitive sectors such as medical equipment, devices and medications, machinery, technology etc.
- Gradual strategic diversification of export and import markets for Macedonian companies.
- Unambiguous adherence to the values which are both a strategic direction and state priority – rule of law, democracy, good governance, human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- Establishing a unified approach and national China policy which would provide a comprehensive overview and approach to the cooperation in different areas, in order to:
 - Understand the vulnerability in the cooperation in certain sensitive areas,
 - Present a consistent attitude by different state actors,
 - Reduce the opportunities for Chinese influence in one area by using the dependence on China in another area.
- Cooperation with countries from the region which are more “advanced” in their relations with China, or in other words have had the possibility to acquire more experience in the cooperation, to draw lessons and to develop adequate mechanisms to maximize their own, national interests.

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