



Talking Points by the RCC Secretary General *Majlinda Bregu*
at the
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Current escalating geopolitical tensions are bringing forth non-military measures that have completely changed the nature of threats, giving them a hybrid character. The Western Balkans, being a region where there is competition for geopolitical and strategic interests, is the perfect playground for activities related to hybrid threats, especially cyberattacks, which are becoming larger and persistently more complex.

Among hybrid threats, a crucial threat for any country is economic dependence. External powers such as Russia, with its cultural affinities and religious ties with the Western Balkans, and especially China, have strengthened their economic foothold mainly through state-to-state loans and other forms of economic cooperation. These loans are used as a foreign policy tool to strengthen their position in the Western Balkans region.

Despite the inflows of Chinese capital, the EU remains the leading economic partner, with 70% of total foreign direct investment and 81% of exports for 2021. However, China's investments often allow it to gain popular support by delivering on short-term promises. An excellent example of this is "vaccine diplomacy" and disinformation campaigns during the pandemic.

It is a fact that, although EU support during the pandemic was reluctant at first, it was far greater than that of China or Russia. However, public perception in the Western Balkans, fueled by misinformation narratives, remains confused to this day.

Hybrid threats, especially disinformation campaigns, have become even more serious since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Again, the Western Balkans became the playground of geopolitical competition and conflicting narratives from state and non-state actors, as well as domestic players who produce and spread disinformation for domestic purposes and act as proxies for third states.

In our special BB edition after the start of the war in Ukraine, 78% of respondents were of the opinion that there has been an increase in the flow of various disinformation, semi-information, and propaganda activities related to the situation in Ukraine.

Also, 60% of Western Balkans citizens considered that government e-services were more in danger from cyber-attacks after the war in Ukraine compared to the pre-war period. This reflects last year's cyberattacks faced by the public institutions of four Western Balkan economies, three of them NATO members, causing disruption of governmental services and the leak of personal data.



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Our latest SecuriMeter findings show that 80% of citizens consider the existence of disinformation as a problem in their economy. The main concerns about what disinformation can intentionally harm the most are:

- Provoking hatred and divisive opinions (47%)
- Harming trust in public institutions (46%)
- Harming the economy and finance (41%).

Although the ranking of the Media Literacy Index 2022 shows that the Western Balkans economies have the lowest potential to withstand the negative impact of manipulated information, 51% of Western Balkans citizens feel fairly or very confident in identifying news that misrepresents reality.

An interesting finding of our SecuriMeter is on the perceived actors who spread disinformation the most. First place goes to online anonymous social networks (46%), followed by journalists (44%) and politicians (38%). The latter should be taken into consideration very seriously. While the actors who should stop the spread of disinformation are press and broadcasting management (47%), journalists (46%), and online social networks (45%).

In today's interconnected world, in which the vast majority of people have an active profile on social networks and can become instant "media outlets," it becomes increasingly important and difficult to tackle the spread of disinformation.

Disinformation is also being used to harm businesses. A study of the direct influence of fake reviews on online spending estimated that fake reviews cost businesses \$152 billion globally in 2021. Artificial Intelligence is another source of concern for the creation and spread of disinformation. By 2030, deep fakes could become indistinguishable from genuine information and easier to produce.

What could be an effective remedy to reduce disinformation and mitigate its consequences and what could really work in the Western Balkans region?

We need to address its root cause: lack of education and critical thinking skills. We need to promote critical thinking and media literacy in the region, especially among young populations, and empower citizens to identify and combat disinformation more effectively. We asked about disinformation in the curricula at schools in the region and found that hardly anything is being taught.

Secondly, education alone is not enough without a proper legal framework that restructures the online environment to discourage and counteract the sharing of disinformation. A very good example is the EU Code of Practice on Disinformation, which is still a set of voluntary measures designed to tackle the issue of disinformation, to which organizations can subscribe. However, it will become a code of conduct under the Digital Services Act once it enters into force later this year.

It is imperative that the region adopts the EU framework on cybersecurity. Through the WB Digital Summit Conclusions 2022, the region committed to undertaking activities to improve cooperation on cybersecurity within the region by increasing the protection of critical infrastructure, cybersecurity capabilities, resilience, and regional awareness in the cybersecurity area. Some initial steps have been



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taken in that regard.



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Thirdly, we are used to preparing recovery economic plans or recovery plans for natural and man-made disasters, so why not prepare recovery plans for cyber and disinformation attacks? The region should work towards a regional approach to cyber threats, including digital means and innovative solutions. In this context, it is very important that the Western Balkans join the digital single market in the area of cybersecurity, in line with the new plan to accelerate the Western Balkans' journey towards the EU, recently announced by the President of the European Commission.