

*Closing remarks - ‘Spread of disinformation during the pandemic and its impact on the Western Balkans.’*

*Closing remarks by Dr Mary Drosopoulos,*

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Dear friends and colleagues,

I will try to summarize the main points of today’s discussions, which have been very interesting, both due to their insightful and relative content, but also for contributing to a pluralistic conversation, where different voices and opinions have been heard.

This conference has come at a critical point in time. Following up last year’s conference, the panelists that we heard today have aspired to provide a window on current developments, by discussing existing gaps and shortages, but also good practices and arising opportunities at a policy level, but also within the capacity of civil society, academia and journalism.

The spread of false information and demagogic propaganda are phenomena that have steadily been evolving together with our societies, as a direct reflection of significant developments affecting the flow of history. In our days, however, disinformation has taken new forms: the social changes arisen as consequences of the covid-19 pandemic have offered a fertile ground for the cultivation and spread of false and deliberately harmful information via different channels, among which online platforms and portals, that have become even more popular due to the seclusion imposed during lockdown. During the pandemic we understood the importance of accurate information. Speaking specifically about the Western Balkans, the latest Securimeter findings indicate that digital threats have been identified by citizens as aspects of a new type of digital warfare, against which they often feel unprotected. As has been heard today, ‘disinformation is too much of a problem and it affects us all’. Regarding its remedy, as our scholars underlined, our approach should be as multifaceted and as versatile as the problem itself.

At an EU level, as we speak, the European Commission is taking actions to fight disinformation via a strengthened Code of Practice, a tool that aspires to evolve into a co-regulatory instrument, as outlined in the Digital Services Act. Today we have

had the opportunity to hear about what has been happening at a regional level. The key idea that could be extracted from today's presentations is probably the phrase 'building resilience'. Resilience among institutions, citizens and communities overall so that we can identify, understand, monitor and eventually manage and prevent disinformation. Resilience can be accomplished only via a systemic, holistic approach, encouraging cross-border and cross-sectoral cooperation; commitment, continuity, transparency and proactiveness have been identified as key factors in the success and sustainability of this endeavor.

In the first panel, the discussions evolved around what governments can do. The panel has aspired to provide a space for speakers to present good practices from their context, identify public responses and introduce possible models of cooperation in handling disinformation. Among the ideas that have been voiced is the need to invest in education and media literacy. We heard about initiatives aimed at cultivating media literacy at an early stage, starting from primary and secondary education and in some cases, even promoting a substantial reform in teaching curricula. Also, state-driven media literacy initiatives among teachers. In this framework, cooperation with academia and other organizations or practitioners that are close to youth has been perceived as vital.

The second main point discussed has been monitoring and regulation. Speakers highlighted the importance of including monitoring in public risk assessment and counting on the findings of bodies providing accurate, research-based information. One of the issues tackled has been a shift in regulation, oriented towards the content provided by online media. The importance of finding effective mechanisms of self-regulation and co-regulation has been identified as a key point together with the need of establishing a culture of not only fact-and-content checking, but also source checking. Many challenges have been identified towards this cause, the first being the rapid technological developments, bringing us against new online phenomena. The answer lies not in demonizing digitalized technology, but rather using it for our societies' benefit. Furthermore, a source of controversy is how far or how deep should one go with regulation; the public discussion that followed both in the q&a section, but also the third panel, touched upon the thin lines that need to be taken into consideration in any attempt to monitor and regulate online content, so that in attempt to protect democratic values we do not fall into the trap of jeopardizing fundamental democratic rights, such as freedom of thought and expression.

A subject that was mentioned in the first panel but further elaborated in the second panel, about media and civil actors, is that of professional and quality standards in journalism practice. Television has traditionally been and continues being the most popular media channel in the region. Figures, however, show a growing public distrust towards media. Furthermore, with people's eyes being mainly on small screens, online information and journalism gaining ground. Issues of anonymity in the digital realm and ambiguity of sources and subjects behind the information shared have been more relevant than ever. Alongside media literacy, it is also imperative that good journalism is promoted all over the region. This might mean resetting journalism as it is known and reopening questions about the quality standards and ethics.

Good practices *do* exist in the region. A message that could be extracted from panelists' input would be that it is worth investing more in creative and innovative media practices so as to have 'smart audiences'. Based on the input that we received today, it could be said that media could help fill in a gap or shortage of the schooling system, by contributing together with academia and civil society in cultivating among people two vital competences: analysis and critical thinking. All panels concluded that the remedy to disinformation would be via a cross-sectorial approach, where different fields and actors could come together and help instill in all the members of our communities, including, of course, the elderly, the necessary skills and competences that would allow people to respond efficiently to the question: is this information true or not?

Concluding, in times when information spreads rapidly, we can be more effective by learning from each other and working together. The time to react is now. The conference has been a space to discuss the latest trends in the field and share experiences; it should also be seen as an indispensable opportunity to network and discuss ways to put ideas into practice. The future of the region lies very much in synergies, provided that these have a meaningful and sustainable character. It is important that the interesting suggestions that we heard today are also institutionally supported by adequate policies at a national and regional level. After all, as we heard in the opening speech, we need 'not only to talk the talk, but also to walk the walk'.