

Mapping Disinformation Narratives in Bulgaria: First Working Group Report

BULGARIA WORKING GROUP ON DISINFORMATION

April 2025

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This report summarizes the first meeting of the Bulgaria Working Group on Disinformation held on April 16, 2025. The discussion was conducted under Chatham House Rules. The insights and findings from this meeting will contribute to the CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory and inform regional approaches to combating disinformation across the Balkans.

Most importantly, the working group serves as a real-time testing ground for the observatory's methodologies. The CIDC expects it to provide a living laboratory where theoretical frameworks meet practical application. Over the six-month timeline, the observatory can implement refinements based on expert feedback, test classification systems against emerging narratives, and evaluate the effectiveness of monitoring protocols under real-world conditions. This iterative process will create a continuous improvement loop between the observatory's technical development and the working group's expertise, ensuring that the platform evolves to address the dynamic nature of Bulgaria's disinformation landscape while contributing comparable data to the broader regional initiative.

For more information about the CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory, visit, www.disinfoobs.com. To find out more about the CIDC, visit www.aubg.edu/cidc. Contact us at cidc@aubg.edu.

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Meeting 1: Identifying Disinformation Across Narrative Taxonomies

April 16, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The first meeting of the Bulgaria Working Group (BWG) on Disinformation was held on April 16, 2025. The meeting brought together experts from civil society, academia, journalism, and policy to analyze and counter disinformation threats within Bulgaria. This working group is part of a broader regional initiative by the Center for Information, Democracy, and Citizenship (CIDC) at the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), which aims to research, tag, and monitor disinformation narratives across the Balkans.

The 90-minute session focused on mapping the current disinformation landscape in Bulgaria, identifying prevalent narratives, establishing preliminary taxonomies, and discussing methodological approaches. Key insights included:

- Most disinformation narratives in Bulgaria are foreign in origin (primarily Russian and increasingly from U.S. sources) but are localized to reflect Bulgarian socio-political concerns
- Disinformation spreads through diverse channels including mushroom websites, Telegram groups, social media platforms, and influencers
- All demographic groups are vulnerable to disinformation, but young people, minority communities, and economically vulnerable populations face higher exposure
- The CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory currently tracks over 19,000 media sources, categorizing them based on editorial standards and identifying patterns of disinformation

This meeting represents the first step in a six-month collaborative process to develop evidence-based strategies for combating disinformation within the Bulgarian context while contributing to regional understanding and resilience.

PREVALENT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

Participants identified several dominant disinformation narratives circulating in Bulgaria's information ecosystem:

NATO and Security

- Fear narratives around potential war in the Black Sea region
- Disinformation regarding the shipment of F-16 jets to Bulgaria

- "Third World War" predictions and alarmism
- Anti-NATO rhetoric portraying the alliance as an aggressor rather than defender

EU Integration & Policies

- Claims that "EU will take your savings and spend them for defense"
- Portraying Bulgaria's eurozone entry as economically catastrophic
- Falsely blaming EU for procurement delays
- Narratives suggesting "EU is preparing to start a war"
- Misrepresenting EU emergency preparedness recommendations as preparations for conflict

Foreign Affairs & Geopolitics

- "Russia is good, the West is bad" framings
- Anti-Ukraine content, particularly questioning Ukraine's legitimacy and sovereignty
- Nostalgia for communism era, especially among older populations
- Polarization narratives around Bulgaria's foreign policy positions

Public Health

- Ongoing vaccine disinformation (COVID-19 and others)
- Nutrition myths and pseudoscientific health claims
- Anti-science rhetoric carried over from pandemic-era conspiracy communities
- Reference to similar campaigns in neighboring countries (e.g., Romania)

Environment & Energy

- Environmental protection efforts framed as "paid" or "failures"
- Disinformation about renewable energy, particularly claims that wind turbines kill bees
- Opposition to climate initiatives portrayed as economic protection
- Targeting of regional Facebook groups with localized environmental misinformation

Minorities & Roma Communities

- Disinformation targeting Roma education, election participation, and integration
- Narratives promoting segregation and stereotyping
- Election-related disinformation about "vote buying" within minority communities

Civil Society & NGOs

- NGOs portrayed as corrupt, foreign-backed entities ("foreign agents")
- Use of terms like "Sorosoids" to discredit civil society organizations
- Systematic efforts to undermine trust in non-governmental organizations
- Specific targeting of civic actors in regions like Plovdiv

Legislative Reforms

- 2024 constitutional amendments framed as Western imposition
- LGBTQ-related legislation portrayed as threat to national values
- Political disinformation leveraging existing legislative debates

National Identity

- Framing of Bulgaria's traditional values as "under attack"
- Creating division through emphasis on daily struggles versus national achievements
- Leveraging religious and cultural identity markers to promote divisive narratives

Media & Journalism

- Journalists accused of being foreign-funded
- Journalists accused of being biased.

DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

The working group identified several key vectors through which disinformation spreads in Bulgaria:

Digital Platforms

- Telegram public and closed groups serve as significant hubs for conspiracy content
- Facebook remains influential, particularly through regional and interest-based groups
- Specialized mushroom websites with poor editorial standards but high audience reach
- X (formerly Twitter) increasingly used for coordinated campaigns
- YouTube channels promoting alternative narratives without fact-checking standards

Media Ecosystem

The CIDOC-Sensika Observatory has categorized sources into several tiers:

- Mainstream media
- Biased content producers
- Overt disinformation outlets
- Mushroom website networks (often with hidden ownership)
- Content aggregators that amplify disinformation without verification

Key Actors

- Politicians and media figures with foreign affiliations
- Far-right and nationalist organizations
- Political parties leveraging disinformation for electoral advantage
- Influencers engaging with fringe content for audience engagement
- Regional operators targeting specific geographic communities

Cross-Border Networks

Participants noted that many Bulgarian disinformation narratives originate from Russian sources and are then translated and adapted to the Bulgarian context. There is also increasing evidence of influence from far-right and far-left groups in the US and Western Europe, whose content is repackaged for Bulgarian audiences.

TARGETED AUDIENCES

The working group discussed various demographic groups' vulnerability to disinformation:

By Age

- Young people with high digital engagement but potentially limited media literacy
- Older generations susceptible to nostalgia-based narratives and traditional media sources

By Region

- Rural communities with limited access to diverse information sources
- Border regions particularly targeted with security-related disinformation
- Regional differences in vulnerability based on economic conditions and historical factors

By Socioeconomic Status

- Economically insecure populations more susceptible to financial threat narratives
- Educational divides influencing resilience to disinformation

Key Insight

Participants emphasized that all audiences are vulnerable to some degree of disinformation, including professionals and fact-checkers themselves, due to cognitive biases and information overload. The group debated the extent to which targeting is deliberate versus algorithmic, noting that platform recommendation systems often amplify divisive content regardless of its origin.

KEYWORDS AND LINGUISTIC PATTERNS

The meeting identified recurring keywords and phrases that frequently appear in Bulgarian disinformation:

- "Third World War" (Трета световна война)
- "Antichrist" (Антихрист)
- "Demonocracy" (Демонокрация) - wordplay combining "demon" and "democracy"
- "Degenerate" (Дегенерат)
- "Collective West" (Колективният Запад)
- "Doom of Civilization" (Гибелта на цивилизацията)
- "Foreign Agent" (Чужд агент)
- "Sorosoids" (Соросоиди) - derogatory term for civil society organizations

- "EU Propaganda" (ЕС пропаганда)
- "EU Genders" (ЕС джендъри) - derogatory reference to LGBTQ+ rights
- "Green Deal" (Зелената сделка) - in negative contexts
- "Traditional values" (Традиционни ценности)
- "Christianity" (Християнство) - often manipulated in political contexts

These terms are typically emotionally charged and ideologically suggestive. The working group agreed to use these identified keywords to refine tagging and narrative clustering within the CIDC-Sensika Observatory.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACHES

Current Methods

Participants shared various methodological approaches currently employed:

- Content analysis of media outputs
- Network mapping of disinformation ecosystems
- Social media monitoring with keyword alerts
- Fact-checking initiatives with standardized verification protocols
- OSINT techniques to investigate media ownership and editorial connections

Challenges Discussed

- Difficulty establishing standardized definitions of disinformation vs. misinformation
- Cross-platform disinformation requiring different technical approaches
- Language nuances and context-specific interpretation challenges
- Resource limitations for comprehensive monitoring
- Balancing debunking efforts against the risk of amplifying false content

Proposed Improvements

The group suggested several methodological refinements:

- Developing a standardized taxonomy specific to the Bulgarian context
- Creating shared databases of identified disinformation sources
- Establishing protocols for classification by origin (foreign/domestic), type (conspiracy, pseudoscience), and thematic focus
- Improving coordination between researchers, fact-checkers, and policy analysts
- Integrating resilience strategies and media literacy into research outcomes

NEXT STEPS

The meeting concluded with agreement on several action items:

1. **Research Contributions:** Participants will contribute additional thoughts, ideas, and resources on understanding the national disinformation landscape for the next meeting.

2. **Meeting Schedule:** The Bulgaria coordinator will distribute a poll for scheduling the May meeting, which will focus on "Understanding the Bulgaria National Disinformation Landscape."
3. **Narrative Monitoring:** The CIDC team will review and expand the topics/narratives monitored in the Disinformation Observatory based on insights from this meeting.
4. **Taxonomy Development:** Work will continue on refining classification systems for Bulgarian disinformation, with input from all participants.
5. **Report Distribution:** A detailed summary of the meeting will be shared with all participants and relevant stakeholders.

RESOURCES SHARED

During the meeting, participants shared several valuable resources:

- [Stasis Theory - Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)
- [Stasis theory and Stalin: history's cautionary tale of contrarian misinformation leading to bad policies](#)
- [Critical Thinking, Analysis, and Reading - Minnesota State](#)
- [Visual Map of Cognitive Biases](#)

This report captures a range of perspectives and working assumptions shared by participants and is intended to inform ongoing analysis, rather than present definitive or independently verified conclusions.

APPENDIX

Disinformation Topics, Narratives, Keywords & Channels

The following table represents a systematic categorization of disinformation elements identified during the first meeting. Refinements to be made as the working group progresses.

Topic	Example Narratives	Keywords	Channels	Audiences / Demographic/ Category/Comments
NATO and Security	Fear narratives around war in Black Sea region; Shipment of F-16 jets	Third World War, Collective West, Demonocracy	Telegram public and closed groups, political actors	General public; heightened sensitivity in border regions; Specific knowledge; risk of journalistic bias
EU Integration & Policies	"EU will take your savings and will spend them for defense"; Bulgaria's eurozone entry is risky; EU falsely blamed for procurement delays; "EU is preparing to start a war"	EU, Collective West, EU, eurozone	Facebook, online media, far-right politicians, EU parliament, Mass media	economically insecure populations; nuances
Foreign Affairs & Geopolitics	"Russia is good, the West is bad"; Anti-Ukraine content; Nostalgia for communism; Polarisation around foreign policy	Russia and the end of world, Doom of civilization, Antichrist	YouTube, Telegram, mushroom websites, political actors	Young people, older generations, anti-West-leaning groups; All audiences are vulnerable to some degree, including professionals and fact-checkers
Public Health	Vaccine disinformation (COVID-19 and others); Nutrition myths;	Doom of civilization	Influencers, online articles, alternative health channels	Young people; conspiracy-prone audiences; References to the latest case in Romania and health-related content; Pseudoscience
Environment & Energy	Environmental efforts framed as "paid" or "failures";	Green Deal, green energy, wind turbines;	Regional Facebook groups (e.g. Dobrich),	Residents of affected regions; rural communities

	Claims that wind turbines kill bees		local news portals	
Minorities & Roma Communities	Disinfo around Roma education, elections, and segregation	Segregation, Roma fraud; vote buying	Word of mouth, online	Minority populations and majority groups susceptible to anti-Roma narratives
Civil Society & NGOs	NGOs portrayed as paid, corrupt, foreign-backed; Discrediting through associations with political interests ("Velichie", Plovdiv)	Foreign agent, Sorosoids, NGO scam	Nationalist blogs, public TV debate	Civic actors; general public
Legislative Reforms	2024 constitution amendments framed as Western imposition; LGBTQ-related legislation	Collective West, Enforced laws	national media, online	Politically active audiences; conservative groups; local events such as vote of no confidence used as pretext for agenda setting and framing
National Identity	Bulgaria's values under attack; Focus on daily struggles vs. national achievements	Demonocracy, Degenerate, Traditional values, Christianity, religion, Antichrist,	Political speeches, influencer content	Broad audience; narrative tied to economic, cultural anxiety, nostalgia to the resent past
Media & Journalism	Journalists accused of being foreign-funded or biased	Media bias, Foreign funding, Paid journalists	Political actors, social media, alternative "news" platforms	Public trust in journalism undermined; general public; cases of targeted journalists

BWG Members and Meeting 1 Attendees List

April 16, 2025

Member Name	Affiliation	Position	Sector	Attendance
Sonya Nikolaeva	CIDC/Freelance	Coordinator	Academia/Research	■
Joanna Elmy (Moderator)	CIDC	Senior Fellow	Journalism/Media	■
Anna Velkova	Freelance	Communications Strategist	Private Sector	■
Atina Pashova-Kavardzhikova	Information Centre of the Ministry of Defence	Head of Planning Department	Government/Policy	■
Georgi Angelov	Sensika Technologies	Senior Disinfo Analyst (Disinfobs)	Private Sector	■
Ildiko Otova	Foundation for Access to Rights	Advocacy Officer	Civil Society	■
Katherine Ruprecht	American University in Bulgaria	Information Literacy Librarian	Academia/Research	■
Konstantin Hristov	Sensika Technologies	CEO	Private Sector	■
Laska Nenova	BG Be Active	CEO	Civil Society	■
Liliya Grigorova	Sensika Technologies	Lead Disinformation Analyst (Disinfobs)	Private Sector	■
Lyubomir Stefanov	New Bulgarian University	Assistant Professor in Political Science	Academia/Research	■
Petia Goolamallee	Trust for Social Achievement	Program Officer "Employment and Entrepreneurship"	Civil Society	■
Ruslan Trad	Atlantic Council	Non-resident Fellow DFRLab	Academia/Research	■
Tsvetomir Todorov	Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives	Lawyer, Member of the Board	Civil Society	■

Sector Representation:

- Academia/Research: 6

- Civil Society: 5
- Government/Policy: 3 participants
- Journalism/Media: 3 participants
- Private Sector: 4 participants

Meeting Leadership:

- **Coordinator:** Sonya Nikolaeva
- **Moderator:** Joanna Elmy (CIDC)
- **CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory overview:** Liliya Grigorova & Georgi Angelov (Sensika Technologies)