



Mapping Disinformation Narratives in Bulgaria: Second Working Group Report

BULGARIA WORKING GROUP ON DISINFORMATION

May 2025

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This report summarizes the second meeting of the Bulgaria Working Group on Disinformation held on May 15, 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 2: Understanding the National Disinformation Landscape

May 15, 2025

INTRODUCTION

The second meeting of the Bulgaria Working Group (BWG) on Disinformation was held on May 15, 2025. The meeting brought together experts from civil society, academia, journalism, and policy to examine how disinformation circulates across Bulgaria's media ecosystem. The group meeting builds on the first discussion, focusing on examples – to track and see how they evolve, key actors involved, and platforms.

The 90-minute session focused on mapping key components of the disinformation network, analyzing narrative adaptation across platforms, refining disinformation source classification, highlighting offline and institutional dimensions of disinformation through very specific examples. Key insights included:

- Disinformation exploits gaps in official communication and public understanding
- Bulgaria's disinformation landscape is cross-platform and hybrid
- Public institutions must view communication as a tool of security, not just information
- Narrative clusters reflect strategic emotional manipulation
- Russian influence in Bulgarian education is systematic and under-addressed
- Offline vectors serve as both entry points and reinforcers, especially where interpersonal trust is high and institutional trust is low
- Cross-platform circulation increases exposure, normalizes false claims, and makes correction more difficult

This meeting represents the aim of the observatory to ensure that the narrative mapping is evidence - based and create briefs and follow on the developments. Second 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. The CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory is applying the specific cases to track how narratives and meta-narratives evolve.

NETWORK COMPONENT ANALYSIS

Participants identified that the disinformation ecosystem in Bulgaria demonstrates a multi-layered network architecture, with each component playing a specific role in the circulation, amplification, and legitimization of misleading narratives. Disinformation narratives follow a cyclical rather than linear trajectory, circulating through private groups, semi-public hubs, and fringe media before ultimately reaching mainstream platforms; in parallel, offline channels such as cultural events in schools act as both entry points and reinforcement mechanisms—particularly in contexts where interpersonal trust is strong but institutional trust is weak—while individual narratives often mutate across platforms, as seen in the case of a mobilization rumor that originated with a Telegram photo, evolved into emotionally charged Facebook posts, and later appeared on YouTube framed as expert commentary. Based on participant observations, the following roles were identified within the national landscape:

Sources

- Russian state-linked institutions such as Rossotrudnichestvo and the Russian Embassy in Sofia serve as origin points for pro-Kremlin narratives
- These narratives often focus on historical ties, military pride, or cultural affinity with Russia and are distributed through official websites, social media, and offline school programming

Hubs

- Telegram groups and closed Facebook communities act as central nodes where narratives are seeded and tested
- Reddit - such content is increasingly appearing, with AI being used to generate fake profiles - currently mostly in English, but likely to expand to local contexts given its presence in pro-Russian networks
- They function as echo chambers for disinformation concerning defense (e.g., F-16 aircraft), public health (e.g., vaccine myths), and NATO/Eurozone skepticism.
- Hubs are critical in converting fringe content into localized, emotionally resonant messages

Channels

- Channels often include public-facing pages on platforms like Facebook and Reddit, where fringe narratives reach broader audiences
- Reddit forums allow for mixing genuine public discourse with seeded skepticism, especially regarding EU integration and inflation fears

Amplifiers

- YouTube influencers, Facebook Live streamers, and TikTok creators serve as multipliers by repackaging disinformation in native, accessible formats - often presenting it as personal opinion or “insider insight.”
- Influencers often avoid outright falsehoods, instead blurring lines between commentary and misinformation
- Fringe websites also act as aggregators, republishing content from Telegram or blogs under pseudo-journalistic branding

Counter-actors/ Fact-checkers

- Journalists, researchers, fact-checking collaborations involving Bulgarian National Television, Bg Elves (a volunteer civic initiative) aim to debunk and expose influence and propaganda
- However, limited institutional coordination and visibility among older or offline populations reduce their reach.

KEY CASES AND NETWORKS S DISCUSSED

Defense & Security Disinformation

- Narratives: F-16s are obsolete, second-hand, or broken; Bulgaria is secretly mobilizing troops for Ukraine
- Anti-NATO, fear of war, state betrayal themes
- Emotions: Alarm, betrayal, suspicion
- Example: Photos of call-up papers misrepresented as mobilization orders
- Sources: Telegram, closed Facebook groups, small pro-Russian websites
- In the absence of proactive, government-led communication, the information space is filled by alternative voices -often those that amplify disinformation narratives with greater speed and emotional intensity

Infiltration of Russian propaganda in Bulgarian schools

- Narratives and instruments: Promotion of Russian identity and patriotism through contests, language programs, song competitions, poetic contests, essay writing
- Infiltration of Russian propaganda in schools masked with soft power, historical alliance, traditionalism themes
- Emotions: belonging to a different culture, pride, nostalgia, loyalty
- Example: Victory Day events with students wearing Russian military symbols.
- Sources: social media channels of Russian Embassy in Bulgaria, Rossotrudnichestvo and their social media channels, school websites
- Amplifiers: Ministry of education and its structures, Schools' Facebook and Instagram pages, Union of Bulgarian teachers website, Pro Russian NGOs websites.

Economic Disinformation (Eurozone, Inflation, Work Opportunities, Referendum)

- Narratives and topics: Bulgaria will suffer massive inflation from joining the Eurozone; LinkedIn posts on anti-EU economic "facts"
- "Too good to be true employment and entrepreneurship fake opportunities
- Cryptocurrency/ trading scams targeting people seeking financial independence.
- False promises about quick ways to get work permits abroad
- Economic anxiety, nationalism, distrust of international institutions themes;
- Example: Reddit thread mixing legit questions with economic panic, Charging station fraud scheme
- Sources and amplifiers: Reddit, LinkedIn, Facebook, user-generated content, paid or fake forum users, officials and politicians, offline channels

Nostalgia and Negative or Decline in National Pride ("Complaining")

- Narratives: “They don’t make X like they used to...”; “Back in the day we were great”; “Look at what people in the West have”; *Клета Майка България* / “They ruined the country”
- Pessimism, loss of control, national inferiority, nostalgia themes
- Emotions: Sadness, anger, fear, pride
- Example: Memes and ads encouraging buying “Bulgarian-made” as a defensive national identity
- Sources: Facebook, TikTok, meme forums, offline

Health Misinformation and Folk Remedies

- Narratives: Alcohol (e.g., rakia, vodka, wine) as a cure for health issues; “A woman said...” (ЕЖК) used as anecdotal authority
- Anti-science, over-reliance on tradition, mistrust of medical authorities themes
- Emotions: Pride, joy, wishful thinking, fear
- Example: Advice circulating in family groups, saying “vodka heals your liver.”
- Sources: WhatsApp, Viber, Facebook private groups, offline

CROSS-PLATFORM ADAPTATION PATTERNS

Key Insights

Participants shared observations that disinformation in Bulgaria spreads through a dynamic, multi-platform process in which narratives evolve as they move from closed messaging apps to public social media, adapting their tone and format to suit each platform's audience enabling broader reach, emotional resonance, and resistance to correction.

It was noted that reliable sources of information such as government institutions and official bodies are largely absent from the same digital spaces where disinformation thrives. This disconnect can create an informational vacuum in high-risk platforms (e.g., Telegram, Facebook groups, TikTok), allowing propaganda and false narratives to dominate unchecked.

Several participants reported that disinformation narratives evolve as they move across platforms, adapting tone, format, and emotional appeal. Messages often begin in private or closed channels (e.g., Telegram, WhatsApp) and migrate to public platforms (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, TikTok). Each platform plays a distinct role and the same narrative may mutate across platforms to suit different user expectations and engagement algorithms. The observed pattern exploits platform-specific trust dynamics and contributes to narrative longevity.

Disinformation Source Classification

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

Websites

- Russian official websites
- Specialized mushroom websites with poor editorial standards but high audience reach

Social Media Channels

- YouTube channels promoting alternative narratives without fact-checking standards
- LinkedIn
- TikTok

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

- Incentivized actors
- Propaganda operation requires the engagement of schools, teachers, educational structures, and the Bulgarian ministry of education
- Families, teachers and officials promoting Russian-influence initiatives within young people
- Influencers promoting dubious business opportunities without proper disclosure
- 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. Examples were given with Russian propaganda efforts in different regions such as countries in Africa, cases from Syria from years ago, which are now evident here in Bulgaria. A reoccurring pattern they observe has increasing evidence of influence online, from pan-european far-right and far-left groups, such as telegram groups in Sweden, whose content is reused for Bulgarian audiences.

TARGETED AUDIENCES

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

By Age

- Young people with high digital engagement but potentially limited media literacy - cases of 10-year olds
- Older generations susceptible to nostalgia-based narratives and traditional media sources

By Region

- Pan-european region, content reshared in Bulgaria
- Rural communities with limited access to diverse information sources
- 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

Institutions

It was suggested that propaganda operations require the engagement of schools, teachers, educational structures, and the Bulgarian ministry of education.

Key Insights

Findings appear to indicate that different age groups of minors - children under 14 and adolescents aged 14 to 17 have been targeted as they have varying levels of legal capacity and vulnerability, which must be considered when designing policies, protections, and communication strategies, particularly in contexts such as disinformation, education, and online safety.

A broader key insight participant shared is that not only children and adolescents, but society, remain highly vulnerable to disinformation due to insufficient public awareness campaigns and a lack of accessible, proactive institutional communication - leaving many information spaces unmoderated and dominated by misleading or manipulative content

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.

KEYWORDS AND LINGUISTIC PATTERNS

Some participants reported recurring keywords and phrases that frequently appear in Bulgarian disinformation:

- "Third World War"
- F-16 is "obsolete", "second hand", "broken"
- "F16 isn't better than the fighter jets that we already have"
- "We are sending troops to Ukraine"
- Fake job opportunities or "too good to be true" offers
- "Poor mother Bulgaria" #KletaMajkaBulgaria
- "They ruined the country" /Съсипаха я тази държава
- They don't make *X* like they used to...
- Kids these days are the worst!
- Back in the day...
- We used to be great (with the implication that now we are not);
- Look what people in other countries have (implied – we don't have said thing but we want it); People on the West have it easy/easier; Life is simpler/better/cheaper/happier elsewhere (i.e. not where we are and/or where we have the most say/control);
- A bad/The worst season for tourism (summer and winter editions);

These terms seem to be typically emotionally charged and ideologically suggestive. The working group agreed to provide sources and links of these identified keywords and narrative mapping 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

- Information vacuum and lack of information and proactive communication campaigns on key topics
- Biases in communicators
- Cross-platform disinformation requiring different technical approaches
- Resource limitations for comprehensive monitoring
- Circulation and repletion of offline narratives in small groups, communities, schools

Proposed Improvements

Not all observations have been corroborated by data. The group suggested several methodological refinements:

- Gathering examples and links to simplify the mapping of meta-narratives
- Creating shared databases of identified disinformation sources
- 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, cases, specific examples, and links to resources on mapping the national disinformation landscape;
2. **Meeting Schedule:** The Bulgaria coordinator will distribute a poll for scheduling the June meeting, which will focus on "Media Literacy and Public Awareness";
3. **Narrative Monitoring:** The CIDC team will review and expand the topics/narratives and links monitored in the Disinformation Observatory based on insights from this meeting;
4. **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:

- <https://bntnews.bg/news/na-fokus-uchenicheski-konkursi-s-ruska-vrazka-v-kalendara-na-mon-1337330news.html>
- <https://bntnews.bg/news/na-fokus-ruska-propaganda-v-balgarski-uchilishta-1336860news.html>
- <https://fakti.bg/en/bulgaria/969164-sled-ubiistvoto-na-magi-strah-e-skoval-haskovo-ima-li-naistina-spisaci-s-momicheta-misheni-na-seksualno-nasilie>
- https://www.reddit.com/r/bulgaria/comments/1arih6z/what_happens_to_bulgaria_once_the_country_adopts/
- <https://eaworldview.com/2019/02/russia-youth-strategy-syria/>
<https://theglobepost.com/2018/10/08/patriotic-russian-youth-camps/>

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 Platforms, Links, Narrative Themes, and Network Classification

This report summarizes observations, illustrative examples, and preliminary perspectives shared by participants during the meeting. These reflections are provided to inform further analysis and dialogue, rather than to present definitive findings. The content represents working assumptions and subjective interpretations, which have not been independently validated or supported by empirical data. Accordingly, any conclusions drawn should be regarded as provisional and interpreted with caution.

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

Source/ Platform	Link to Case/ Examples	Narrative Themes	Observed Patterns	Classification
Reddit	https://www.reddit.com/r/bulgaria/comments/1aarih6z/what_happens_to_bulgaria_once_the_country_adopts/	Economic insecurity, Eurozone fear	Anonymous posts mix fact with anxiety-laced disinfo	Hub / Amplifier
Websites and social media channels	Telegram channels (e.g., Russian cultural centers)	NATO distrust, pro-Russia	Visual/ideological campaigns shared through closed loops	Source / Channel
Facebook	Public and private groups on Security; memes	NATO, cultural nostalgia, political distrust	Cycles from fringe groups to public discourse	Amplifier / Channel
YouTube	Pseudoscientific health videos; defense commentary	Vaccine skepticism, military policy	Emotional appeal via long-form commentary	Amplifier
WhatsApp / Viber	Private messages and anecdotal chains	Folk remedies, anti-vax, alcohol health claims	Difficult to trace; personal trust networks	Closed Channel
LinkedIn	Economic referendum posts	EU integration fears, inflation	Mixed professional and populist messaging	Secondary Hub
Websites, official social media channels	https://bntnews.bg/news/na-fokus-ruska-propaganda-v-balgarski-uchilishta-1336860news.html	Russian cultural normalization, language and worldview	Institutional amplification and indirect endorsement	Aggregator / Amplifier
Offline – Education System	School curricula, cultural contests, Victory Day events	Russian cultural identity, military valorization	State-facilitated normalization of Russian influence in education	Offline Institutional

BWG Members and Meeting 2 Attendees List

May 15, 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	■
Maya Dimitrova	Bulgarian National Television	Journalist, Researcher	Journalism/Media	■
Laska Nenova	BG Be Active	CEO	Civil Society	■
Liliya Grigorova	Sensika Technologies	Lead Disinformation Analyst (Disinfobs)	Private Sector	■
Vladimir Milenski	Atlantic Council of Bulgaria	Retired Military	Government/Policy	■
Petia Goolamallee	Trust for Social Achievement	Program Officer "Employment and Entrepreneurship"	Civil Society	■
Ruslan Trad	Atlantic Council	Non-resident Fellow DFRLab	Academia/Research	■

Sector Representation:

- Academia/Research: 3
- Civil Society: 3
- Government/Policy: 2 participants
- Journalism/Media: 2 participants
- Private Sector: 3 participants

Meeting Leadership:

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