

CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND DISINFORMATION AS TOOLS FOR UNDERMINING NATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract: Fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories have been evaluated from attending closed-type gatherings, through social networks to occupying significant space in the media with national frequencies. Therefore, their transmitters have transformed themselves from obscure characters to political actors and decision-makers in state apparatuses. With a washed and adapted form, these covert ways of endangering national security attack democratic societies as well as states with fragile or democracy emerging like cancer in the human body. This paper aims to defend the hypothesis of the negative impact of disinformation and conspiracy theories on the national security of the Republic of Serbia by using examples from the last few years that have been exploited in public discourse and abused by the Russian Federation with the aim of reducing the support of Serbian citizens to membership in the European Union by placing erroneous and malicious claims related to members of the LGBT community through the prism of the alleged danger of violating the traditional form of the misuse of conspiracy theories about COVID-19 vaccines as a genetic weapon, as well as spreading misinformation that undermines the exploitation of lithium in the Republic of Serbia, which jeopardizes the economic progress of the state and therefore its national security.

Keywords: national security, disinformation, fake news, conspiracy theories
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1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of different communication platforms, social networks, and websites has led to the creation of an information ecosystem subject to various influences. Group polarization theory posits that echo chambers serve as mechanisms that strengthen prevailing group opinions and consequently push the entire group's ideology toward more extreme positions (Cinelli et al., 2021). What is problematic lies in the fact that communication within different social groups is often a one-way direction within a group of like-minded people? Social media users often react exclusively to content that deviates from their confirmation bias mechanism. On online social media platforms, the personal inclination of a user (X) towards a particular topic (Y) can be discerned through multiple avenues, including the content they create or the network of endorsements among users (Garimella et al., 2018). Reliable sources of information are often buried with disinformation and fake clickbait content. All this additionally favors the easier connection of people who believe in conspiracy theories. The very distribution of conspiracy theories is greatly facilitated due to the fact that such content is no longer spread through closed meetings and illegally printed literature, but these old ways have been replaced by modern communication tools on platforms such as Telegram, Viber, Meta, and X. In this paper, the authors will deal with the phenomenon of the promotion and exploitation of conspiracy theories and disinformation by hostile actors with the aim of undermining national security.

The pervasive and escalating skepticism among the Western populace towards press institutions is an undeniable fact. In the United States, trust in the news media's ability to report the news "fully, accurately and fairly" has steadily declined since the 1970s, hitting a record low in 2016 just prior to the presidential election. Following the election, this measure has undergone a pronounced polarization (Gallup, Citation2019).

2. CONSPIRACY THEORY DEFINITIONS

A conspiracy theory is the belief that a particular event or circumstance is the outcome of a clandestine scheme orchestrated by influential individuals (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Alternatively, some scholars define a conspiracy theory as an interpretation of an event wherein a small group of individuals act covertly to bring about the outcome (Keeley, 1999). It can be characterized by covert actions aimed at causing harm by one group toward another group, with the latter being unaware of the harmful intentions, consequences, or motives of the former. In terms of categorization, conspiracy theories can be

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distinguished as scientific or non-scientific, depending on whether they pertain to the domain of science, such as the AIDS conspiracy theory. Additionally, they can be ideological or neutral, depending on the presence of a strong ideology motivating the conspiracy theory, such as anti-Semitism. Further distinctions can be made between official and anti-institutional conspiracy theories, as evidenced by the contrast between official and unofficial theories surrounding events like 9/11. Lastly, there's a difference between alternative explanations and denials within conspiracy theories, with the former providing an alternate interpretation of an event and the latter outright denying the occurrence of the event. Conspiracy theories can be harmful in the form of expert conspiracy theories and non-expert conspiracy theories. One of the good examples is the thesis on ammunition with depleted uranium as the cause of malignant diseases in Serbia. And if the International Agency for Cancer Prevention does not include depleted uranium in the list of 500 substances that cause cancer, this does not prevent individual Serbian scientists and doctors from making claims that are completely contrary to scientific knowledge. Conspiracy theories from the position of professional credibility represent a special risk, especially regarding prevention measures and protection of public health. An essential element of conspiracy theories is accurate information presented out of context, but also disinformation. Disinformation encompasses all varieties of false, inaccurate, or misleading information crafted, presented, and disseminated with the intent to cause public harm or for financial gain (Disinformation, 2018). There exists a significant correlation between conspiracy theories and disinformation, evident from the provided definition. Conspiracy theories and disinformation are used with false content and can harm an individual or a specific group. We find that conspiracy theories serve as forms of "legalization" of disinformation. With the method of storytelling, disinformation becomes more receptive, accessible and viral compared to simple false content. Conspiracy theories support false claims and influence, according to the philosopher Kant "the mind creating the structure of experience." Essentially, conspiracy theories form experience and emotions in relation to various social processes, events, but also to the strategic decisions of the state.

3. CONSPIRACY THEORIES OR DISINFORMATION

What happens in the case of state-sponsored dissemination of conspiracy theories? We will consider several scenarios from a national security perspective. The first scenario use of these methods to adjust the geopolitical orientation of a certain state to the interests of the enemy state. In the case of the EU, the element of degradation of traditional values in the EU member states is used, and in this regard, this thesis is additionally strengthened by the misrepresentation of inclusion and anti-discrimination actions regarding the migrant population and LGBT persons. Russia-led disinformation campaigns often feature narratives around sexuality, gender and "race", presenting Europe as a sort of dystopian realm characterized by sexual perversion (the so-called "Gayropa") (Shevtsova, 2020). The narrative about the existence of an LGBT conspiracy in favor of which regulations are passed for the "destruction" of the traditional family is a very dominant segment of Russian propaganda, which is supported by the Russian LGBT law, which sanctions even displaying the rainbow flag (Human Rights Watch 2024). This unacceptable and populist method for the modern democratic world, based on equality and the same rights for all, actually serves to cover up the fact that the Russian Federation is at the top of the list of countries for violating women's rights, more specifically for femicide. (UN OHCHR 2021). The concealment of domestic violence in the Russian Federation is not a new phenomenon, but it is experiencing its culmination from the illegal military aggression against Ukraine and the marking of women's rights activist Natalya Baranova as a foreign agent in 2022. (Krivitsova 2023). It can be safely said that the anti-LGBT campaign and the declaration of human rights activists as foreign agents also aims to cover up corruption at a high level as well as the fact that one in five women in Russia suffers from family violence (Rollins 2022)

Depending on the target audience, conspiracy theories can have different uses and focuses. Conspiracy theories may have more destructive potential in societies that are deeply divided than in societies that are not. It can be said that this division is an additive for the spread of conspiracy theories precisely because of the single-mindedness that occurs in each of these groups. For this reason, entities that promote conspiracy theories and disinformation simultaneously work to prolong such a state of affairs in society in order to ensure the longest possible period of effect, aware that every day their theories gain more support from the population and thereby ensure the achievement of a predetermined goal, which such an operation is carried out.

Barkun outlines three key characteristics of conspiracy theories:

Nothing happens by accident: This perspective asserts that the world operates under intentionality, dismissing the notion of accidents or coincidences. According to this view, all events are meticulously planned and executed.

Nothing is as it seems: Conspiracy theorists believe that malevolent forces are constantly attempting to deceive society. Consequently, what may seem innocuous is perceived as a looming threat to the cosmic order.

Everything is connected: Building upon the first two characteristics, this aspect posits that seemingly disparate events and phenomena throughout history are interconnected and form a coherent pattern, discernible through diligent investigation (Barkun, 2013, pp. 3–4).

4. CONSPIRACY THEORIES AS DISINFORMATION MEDIUM OF AUTHORITARIAN STATES

In addition to disinformation, information laundering and fake news can be used as an effective method for spreading conspiracy theories. Not infrequently, fake news gets enriched and becomes a conspiracy theory over time. Information laundering is the process of false or deceitful information legitimized through a network of intermediaries that gradually apply a set of techniques to distort it and obscure the original source (Rodríguez 2020). The category of fake news can be considered a higher level of disinformation placement. Freedom House refers to fake news as “intentionally false information that has been engineered to resemble legitimate news and garner maximum attention (Kelly&Truong 2017). In the Western Balkans, the method for information laundering is represented by opinion makers who operate on television and internet platforms. These opinion makers can be real people or hidden identities behind an account on Telegram, X, Facebook or another social network. Literature calls such individuals trolls. Authoritarian regimes such as Russia and Saudi Arabia have become major troll powers in the social media sphere, maintaining so-called troll farms that provide jobs for locals whose roles revolve around manipulating discourse in an effort to hack free speech (Krieg, 2023). What puts them in the category of opinion makers is their accessibility and impact on audiences. As stated by professional expert publications, opinion creators can be domestic or foreign actors (Rodríguez, 2020). In the case of Serbia, in the last two years of aggression, the mechanism of translation and selection of Russian propaganda content was perfected, making it more accessible to the Serbian audience. Removing language barriers through the selection and translation of material that contains the series previously debunked myths by EU vs Disinfo program. The opinion maker method is effective because influence operations are more difficult to follow. Different opinion makers focus on different topics with the same goal. One can easily identify those who talk about traditional values, children’s rights, the danger of migrants, the “expansion” of NATO and similar narratives. All these narratives, when put together in the matrix of narrative analysis, result in a deep-rooted anti-European sentiment in society. This method is far safer for achieving Russia’s goals than simply stating that “Russia is against the EU because it considers the Western Balkans its sphere of influence. “Conspiracy theories serve as a means to develop symbolic resources that allow individuals to define and confront the problem of evil” (West et al., 2021). In influence operations intended to foster conspiracy theories, the primary objective is to clearly identify the “bad guys”. This was exemplified during the COVID-19 pandemic when claims emerged from China suggesting that the virus could have originated in the United States. For instance, on March 12, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian tweeted, “It might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan”, thereby directly influencing the formation of the conspiracy theory (Observer Research Foundation, 2020). Subsequently, the narrative of COVID-19 as a biological weapon evolved into anti-vaccination campaigns, comprising both traditional and modern anti-vaccine narratives. Disinformation regarding the coronavirus proliferated rapidly, fueled by government-backed campaigns from Iran, Russia, and China, which blamed and attacked the United States as the source of the pandemic (Tucker, 2020). Notably, the target of these campaigns was primarily vaccines from Western manufacturers. The anti-vaccination and bioweapon narratives were two facets of a single information operation aimed at undermining the political West. Consequently, citizens of Serbia came to believe that the greatest assistance during the pandemic came from the People’s Republic of China rather than the EU. Both old and new conspiracy theories fueled violent demonstrations in Belgrade in July 2020, which also had repercussions in Germany and other European nations, including the Western Balkans. Thus, conspiracies can be regarded as a form of disinformation carrier aimed at persuading the target audience and inducing desired behaviors.

5. CONSPIRACY THEORIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON NATIONAL SECURITY

Traditional security threats have largely evolved. In the context of the illegal aggression against Ukraine, we see that Russia is using disinformation and conspiracy theories to influence the social consensus on aid to Ukraine. Regarding Serbia, due to the presence of Russian propaganda, a social consensus has been completely won regarding the non-introduction of sanctions against the aggressor

regime in the Kremlin. Public opinion can indeed be a weapon, and the ammunition for that weapon is disinformation. Of course, the responsibility for foreign policy decisions is entirely in the hands of the decision-makers. However, the social environment created by conspiracy theories and disinformation should not be underestimated either.

National security can be defined as the ability of a sovereign state to make and implement decisions in the field of state security in accordance with its national interests and values. If we look at the provisions of the Treaty of Westphalia from 1648, which presents the state as the dominant representative in international relations and practically limits their existence only by the force of other states, we conclude that states exist only as long as they can guarantee their autonomy with their own power (Stajić 2015). It is precisely this postulate of existence that is violated by the distribution of disinformation and conspiracy theories and directly affects the loss of state autonomy.

Due to the dangers presented in the paper by disinformation and conspiracy theories for national security, the existing general definitions of national security should certainly be expanded to include new challenges, risks and threats so that decision-makers have a formal basis for taking adequate measures to protect states. This especially applies to state leaders who, apart from a political biography, do not have an adequate education in the field of security and therefore are not aware of the destructive power of conspiracy theories and disinformation. Such political leaders mainly pay attention to armed threats and technological and natural disasters, believing that the exclusive absence of them enables the smooth functioning of the state. For this reason, the state aimed for when we say "national security" must mean, in addition to the absence of external armed threats or political pressures, economic, demographic, ecological, religious, ethnic, cultural threats on the internal level and the stable resistance of society to conspiracy theories and disinformation.

Truman saw the Cold War as a war over strategic narratives: "We are currently engaged in a cold war, which must have a discernible objective, or else it would be futile. This conflict is driven by the belief that if two systems of government are allowed to coexist without direct confrontation, our democratic system, due to its greater appeal to humanity, will ultimately prevail. It is believed that democracy will triumph over dictatorial regimes because of its superior appeal to the human soul, heart, and mind" (Taylor, 1997).

The use of narratives plays a pivotal role in triggering action across various spheres of life, ranging from energy security to the construction of mines and foreign policy decisions. Weaponized narratives, a concept rooted in the framework of hybrid warfare, are crafted by adversaries and deployed in a rapid succession of interconnected stories. These narratives are designed to be compelling, making them difficult for individuals to dismiss. They have the capacity to reach a global audience within seconds and at minimal cost, thus exerting significant influence (Herman, 2017). Energy security can be undermined by agitation against nuclear power plants, while at the same time the supply of natural gas from Russia stands out as the only and safe alternative. The outcome is energy dependence on Russia, which must be an alarm for decision makers (Zivotic & Obradovic, 2023).

Economic security can be undermined by agitation against the opening of lithium mines. Now when the lithium project is being activated throughout the EU, the project was stopped in Serbia due to the spread of disinformation and false narratives. The issue of lithium exploitation in Serbia, instead of focusing on the technological progress of the country, the increase of national wealth and the creation of new jobs, has become a forbidden and politically unpopular topic that has polarized our society(Obradovic, 2023). The consequence is the loss of strategic position and the weakening of the country's economic power, which came as a continuation of the open spreading of falsehoods about the nature of the aggression against Ukraine, which led to the opposition of citizens to the introduction of sanctions against Russia.

6. CONCLUSION

Conspiracy theories, with their undisturbed placement and spread, lead to a decline in trust in democratic institutions, thus directly undermining national security and making the state vulnerable to external influences. In this way, over time, the state loses its sovereignty in making decisions and unwittingly becomes a puppet in the hands of the aggressor state. Political violence on the streets of Belgrade in the form of several days of blockade of the international highway, violent demonstrations during which the buildings of the mayor's office and the city assembly were demolished, as well as the attempt to force their entry into the building of the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia was not only accompanied by mass broadcasting of disinformation and conspiracy theories that were processed in this paper, but they also preceded the violence in the streets, i.e. were a kind of trigger for the gathering of protesters. These violent demonstrations directly caused the decision of the Government of the Republic

of Serbia to suspend the Jadar project, i.e. the realization of lithium exploitation. Spreading disinformation and conspiracy theories by pro-Russian pressure groups that organized numerous rallies in support of the Russian Federation after broadcasting the content had the effect of not imposing sanctions due to The Russian aggression against Ukraine, as well as the fact that today in the Parliament of Serbia there is a large number of people's deputies and parliamentary caucuses who openly support the Russian Federation with the spread of Euroscepticism and opposition to Euro-Atlantic integration of the Republic of Serbia.

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