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FINAL PUBLICATION

Info vs. Disinfo:

Building resilience to
disinformation practices
in post-Covid
environment
in North Macedonia



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INFO VS. DISINFO:

BUILDING RESILIENCE TO DISINFORMATION PRACTICES IN POST-COVID ENVIRONMENT IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Project by Euro-Atlantic Council of North Macedonia



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FOREWORD



Ilija Djugumanov,
Secretary General
Euro-Atlantic Council of North Macedonia

The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 had an immense impact on the world. The last few years challenged our perceptions on certain social phenomena and our daily routines. Since the pandemic began, we were flooded with disinformation that severely affected our reaction to COVID-19.

The rapid spread of fake news and disinformation laid out a trap for people who do not critically review the news they come across by creating easy “logical” conclusions about the origin and possible cure for the pandemic. The uncertainty of the situation, fear for one’s life and ignorance in general led to hysteria and conspiracy theories.

North Macedonia was a prime example of these phenomena considering the low levels of media literacy among the citizens. Furthermore, the education system does not promote critical thinking and questioning of authorities. Hence, many young people believe in disinformation narratives.

This poses serious threats to the liberal democracy, the legal and political order and the capabilities of the institutions to effectively deal with such crises. In this regard, the Euro – Atlantic Council of North Macedonia supported by NATO’s Public Diplomacy Division has initiated the project “Info vs Disinfo: Building resilience to disinformation practices in post-COVID environment”.

This project targets young people as a category of citizens who can and must have the greatest impact on the Euro-Atlantic integration via their innovative and original ideas, digital literacy, skills and knowledge is of great importance for North Macedonia and the region.

KEY FINDINGS

92 % of the youth spot fake news very often (daily + weekly)

88,1% of the youth recognize fake news very well or well

Only **24,7 %** of the youth respondents have participated in media literacy training several times, while **26,7 %** of the respondents participated only once!

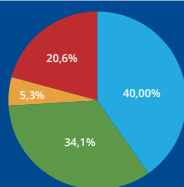
More than **48%** of the youth have never participated in media literacy training!

Is the Macedonian society resilient to fake news and disinformation narratives?



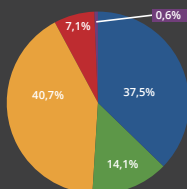
Yes	19,6%
No	49,9%
Partly	30,5%

Who handled COVID-19 pandemic best so far?



West	- 40,00%
East	- 20,6%
Serbia	- 5,3%
None	- 34,1%

Who helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic?



West	- 37,5%
East	- 7,1%
Serbia	- 40,7%
Bulgaria	- 0,6%
None	- 14,1%



1. INTRODUCTION

The adverse impact of disinformation has gained momentum in the new reality in North Macedonia that is largely a by-product of the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation with COVID-19 has demonstrated that the societies are immensely vulnerable to the vast amount of information that is often received by the population without deeper deliberation and evaluation.

The distorted and made up stories that can take the form of misinformation, disinformation or fake news have huge potential to undermine democracy, the legal and political order and the capacities of the authorities and institutions to effectively deal with the crises such as pandemics.

The situation with COVID-19 in North Macedonia has left many questions opened and unexplored including what measures should be taken for the demystification of false stories in times of emergencies, whether there is foreign influence behind such practices, whether the general perceptions were changed with regard to NATO and the West during the pandemic and what has been done so far to tackle the threat of disinformation and hostile information activities in North Macedonia and the effectiveness of the employed measures. The youth constitute an important component and an integral part of the democratic, economic and social processes in each society. They are often seen and recognized as a driver of democratic changes, reforms and transformations that move the society forward. The youth is a category of the population that is very important for the future of every country, given the fact that it represents a potential that will be present on the social scene in the coming decades, giving back to the community what was invested in it.

Therefore, the Euro-Atlantic Council of North Macedonia has initiated mainly a youth project action that directly aligns to NATO priorities since its primary purpose is to reduce the unselective receipt of disinformation and to build long-term societal resilience in North Macedonia through education and informative tools and techniques, was of immense importance.

The project is designed to contribute directly to the achievement of the goals and priorities of the young people and to empower them to impact on positive and progressive change

2. ACTION OVERVIEW

The **overall objective** of the project action was focused on building a long-term social resilience, mainly by stimulating active youth engagement by strengthening the awareness, dialogue and capacities of the target groups.

The activities included research (combination of different methodology), creation of project deliverables (short documentary video, info-graphics and publication) and final conference. The action actively engaged young people through integrated tools and multi-modal content, as well as the other actors (such as media and public institutions) responsible for countering disinformation.

The "Info vs. Disinfo" project is unique in several respects.

First, it employed youth-friendly and informative methods in order to raise the awareness among the young people about the jeopardy of disinformation.

Second, the activity actively involved young people and the broader public by examining their stances and attitudes regarding this issue.

Third, it has stimulated active societal behavior and engagement of all relevant stakeholders through cooperation and networking.

Lastly, the biggest strength of this project is that it was first of this kind in North Macedonia that combines research, public engagement and youth-oriented online multi-modal content for building resilience and tackling disinformation and other hybrid-based activities.

The main activities that were implemented in function of the attainment of the specific objective were deployed in three groups/phases:

1. *Research activities*, consisted of desk research and online surveys, 4 focus groups and 8 interviews with experts from different fields and young professionals;
2. *Networking activities*, including meetings with young people and experts and final conference for capacities building;
3. *Dissemination activities*, infographics, short documentary videos and issuing a brochure with recommendations.

The project was based on the assumption that the youth is an important factor and driving force of social changes and has the capacity to influence democratic processes and thus, indirectly contribute to the positive perception of NATO and the West. Setting a common cause among the target groups, a concrete platform for future cooperation, enhanced communication between the membership, partners and constituents were among the focal points of this project. Ultimately, the results of this action are expected to affect the transfer of positive effects to the entire social community and to build a society that is more resilient.

3. METHODOLOGY

The action was envisioned to address the problems and the needs of the target groups, chiefly through different research tools that were implemented to detect their perceptions and their level of trust, mainly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research was conducted in three phases and included both quantitative and qualitative data collection. The whole research lasted from November 2021 to December 2021 and was aimed at discovering the amount of fake news in circulation regarding the pandemic and the overall effect of COVID-19 on people's trust in the institutions and their political views. The in-depth research comprised quantitative research in the form of an online survey and a qualitative analysis via focus groups and expert interviews. By combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, it was possible to have a clearer picture of the impact of the pandemic on young people.

The online questionnaires were targeting populations with different ethnic backgrounds, age and gender situated in both urban and rural areas. The online questionnaires had been disseminated through social media tools (particularly Facebook and Instagram), emails and posted on ATA North Macedonia website.

They consisted of multiple-choice questions and had different sub-themes. Couple of questions were related to the level of trust in the institutions, followed by questions concerning fake news, media literacy and how often do people get in touch with fake news. Further questions included whether the pandemic affected their political views for example in the East vs. West debate and which were the countries who helped North Macedonia the most.

The poll had 155 respondents whose answers were later incorporated in the infographics and the further research.

Four focus groups were organized in order to gather some qualitative results and they consisted of four young people per group. The young people were of different ethnic backgrounds, age and gender and had questions similar to the online questionnaire. They were encouraged to give their honest opinions regarding the themes of media literacy, fake news, trust in institutions and East vs West debate. Furthermore, in order to get as many unique and insightful answers the participants were often encouraged to develop a certain idea they expressed by sub questions from the person in charge.

The qualitative research was continued with eight expert interviews. Four of them were conducted with experts in the relevant field and four of them with young professionals. Two of the experts were directly connected with the media literacy aspect of the research since one of them was the executive director of the council of media ethics and the other one the president of the digital transformation council. In order to get more insight regarding the trust in the institutions and the geopolitical impact of COVID-19, the other two interviews were conducted with the ATA North Macedonia President and a military expert.

The young professionals in question were two males and two females of different age, gender and ethnic backgrounds. All of them were in one way or another connected with the topic by being active in NGO's and having an interest in geopolitics.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

a. Research Methodology

The research that was implemented embraced a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology collecting both primary and secondary data.

The quantitative research was designed to extract numerical-based results and statistics expressed in percentages. The online survey was active from November 2021 to December 2021 and had 155 respondents. The participants were asked to answer 16 questions that were in a form of standardized questionnaires consisting of close-ended and rating scale questions.

The parameters that were investigated were the level of trust in domestic institutions, the spread of fake news and the participant's ability to recognize them, and the effect the fake news and the pandemic had on their political beliefs.

In this vein, the research aimed to answer some of the following research questions:

- Did North Macedonia handle the pandemic well? Which countries helped North Macedonia the most during COVID-19?
- How often do the participants encounter fake news and are they able to recognize it? Did they attend any media literacy workshops?
- Did the pandemic influence their beliefs regarding the East vs the West?

b. Preliminary Research

The situation in North Macedonia

The current situation in North Macedonia, according to previously available data and research on the occurrence and intensity of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, citizens resistance to such malicious phenomena, trust in institutions, citizens perception of the West and East, etc., the data which the National Democratic Institute (NDI) has come, 52% of the citizens in North Macedonia believe that there is a decline in democracy. On the other hand, 58% of citizens prefer democracy as a system of government, but are skeptical that basic principles such as the rule of law are achievable. For 56% of respondents, the quality of life is more important than democratic standards. Paradoxically, 72% prefer both democratic governance and the "tough hand" rule.¹

A significant majority of Macedonian citizens stated that are "very worried" about the pandemic, while the government got bad assessments of restrictions and communication during the pandemic. 87% of Macedonian citizens believe that disinformation is spread in the media. 68% of the citizens said that they trust social networks, and are informed through friends and family, while Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are mainly the platforms through which they are informed.

In North Macedonia, for the period from 18.03.2020 to 01.08.2020, F2N2 analyzed 231 articles published on 82 portals and two social media platforms (Facebook and YouTube). F2N2 published 75 debunking analyses related to COVID-19 disinformation. This number does not include other relevant analyses related to COVID-19 disinformation that do not contain debunks. The average number of articles per analysis is 3.08. This means that one analysis has included, on average, three articles containing disinformation.²

The Friedrich Naumann Foundation conducted research in the field of disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic and conducted it in parallel in Northern Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina through its partners in these countries. Thus, if we take into account the average number of articles per analysis, in North Macedonia a lower average is observed. However, in this analysis they explained that the lower redistribution of disinformation than average can be explained by several facts: (1) Four other countries presented in this analysis use the same language, contributing to easier circulating and multiplying of disinformation (2) Other hot topics (related to elections, EU and NATO accession) were highly present in this period in North Macedonia (3) F2N2 has a slightly different approach in selection of articles for analysis/debunking, focusing on anti-West sentiments, narratives which undermine Euro Atlantic integrations of North Macedonia, and the impact they have on social media, predominantly Facebook.³

¹ National Democratic Institute (NDI), North Macedonia Public Opinion Research: Democracy, Geopolitics, Disinformation; https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Press%20Release_%20N.%20Macedonia%20REAPS%20regional%20poll%202021%20EN.pdf

² Friedrich Naumann Foundation, Disinformation during COVID-19 pandemic; page 19 ; https://www.freiheit.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/disinformation_COVID-19_march_2021.pdf

³ Ibid

In that direction, recent research results show that the most recent cases of massive disinformation flow were related to the COVID-19 pandemic and as the data from fact-checking operations reported that about two-thirds of the articles debunked in 2020 were COVID-19 related.⁴

The lack of regulation of social media platforms has contributed to an abundance of misinformation and conspiracy theories that further harm the quality of the overall information space given that 58% of Macedonians are social media consumers and consequently exposed to innumerable disinformation narratives. The online portals remain the biggest concern in spreading disinformation narratives because, unlike traditional media, they have no imprint and they are often registered offshore - this means that their true ownership cannot be determined for possible court resolution.⁵

Regarding the perception towards the Western partners, according to NDI, the research shows that the public perception in North Macedonia towards NATO remained high and almost the same with 63% (64% in 2018), while the opposition of the military alliance increased by 9% compared to 2018, and now is 24%. In contrast, support for the European Union has declined in the country. Although 67% of citizens would vote for EU membership, perceptions of the EU have deteriorated, and 19% are against EU membership - a percentage that in 2018 was 10%.⁶ The positive opinion for the United States (43%) and China (38%) decreased, while it increased for Turkey 52% (increased from 42% in 2018) and Russia 48% (which increased from 32% in 2018).⁷

In the last GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index for 2021, North Macedonia is classified as the most resilient of the Western Balkan countries examined by the Index.⁸ The Index results also support the numbers and results from the previous research. As it is stated in the Index, views sympathetic to authoritarian rule and the Kremlin and Beijing play a significant role too in North Macedonia. These attitudes are reinforced through an information space largely susceptible to foreign influence through both covert and overt media ownership and certain programs and individuals promoting the Kremlin's interests. The media landscape further suffers from a lack of diversity with the information environment affected by disinformation and manipulation campaigns⁹ and pro-Russian sentiment can be found, with narratives favorable to the Kremlin resonating strongly with Macedonians. 48% of the population, the second highest in the region, think that Western countries often unjustly accuse Russia of unlawful or fraudulent behavior. Despite an increasing interest from major global powers in the Western Balkan countries, 66% and 62% of Macedonians do not perceive Russia and China, respectively, as threats to their country.¹⁰

However, Macedonians still express the highest level of support for EU and NATO membership in the Western Balkan region. In addition, 31% and 28%, respectively, perceive the EU or the US as their key strategic partner.¹¹

⁴ GLOBSEC, Vulnerability Index 2021, November 2021, page 47 ;
https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_North-Macedonia.pdf

⁵ Ibid

⁶ National Democratic Institute (NDI), North Macedonia Public Opinion Research: Democracy, Geopolitics, Disinformation;
https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Press%20Release_%20N.%20Macedonia%20REAPS%20regional%20poll%202021%20EN.pdf

⁷ Ibid

⁸ GLOBSEC, Vulnerability Index 2021, November 2021, page 26 ;
https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Vulnerability-Index_North-Macedonia.pdf

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ GLOBSEC, Trends 2020 - Central Europe, Eastern Europe and Western Balkans at The Times of Pandemic, page 9 ;
https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/GLOBSEC-Trends-2020_read-version.pdf

¹¹ Ibid

c. Quantitative Research

The questions were conceptualized in a way to extract direct information and measurable results regarding the spread of fake news and the faith the respondents have in the institutions after the pandemic. It utilized standardized questionnaires with close-ended types of questions. The preliminary questions were posed to give demographic characteristics of the respondents.

The whole research had a turnout of 155 respondents who agreed to take part in the survey. The target audience were young people with different ethnicity, age and gender. The age range of the participants was 16-35 years. Furthermore, the respondents were divided in four age groups/categories within this range (16-20 years; 21-25 years; 26-30 years and 31-35 years).

Following the preliminary questions, the respondents had to answer 11 questions revolving around the themes of the faith in the institutions and the spread of fake news. The first six of these questions were concerned with the effect the pandemic has had on their political views and consequently the trust they have towards state institutions. In each question, they were asked to select one of the possible answers. If they were not satisfied with any of the options given, many questions had an option such as “none of the above” or other. After the first question, which asked whether North Macedonia handled the pandemic well, the focus was shifted towards the other countries of the world. Respondents were asked to name countries which in their view handled the pandemic best, and which helped N. Macedonia the most. Consequently, the respondents were also asked which vaccine they would choose.

The rest of the questions were regarding media literacy and the spread of fake news in the country. The respondents were asked how often they encounter fake news and are they able to recognize them. Moreover, they were asked whether they attended any media literacy courses so far and whether they think that the Macedonian society is resilient to fake news and disinformation. Finally, they were asked to name the cause of the spread of fake news during the pandemic, again being able to choose from given answers.

The results were processed and analyzed relying on the simple descriptive univariate analysis examining each variable separately. The results have been expressed both in percentages and displayed visually (column and sector) diagrams. In addition, they were descriptively articulated. Frequency tables and cross-tabulations were also used in order to determine the data value.

ONLINE SURVEY

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA, SURVEY RESULTS
AND CROSSTABS

ONLINE SURVEY

The online survey was designed to obtain broader insights regarding the stances of the population concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the fake news surrounding it. The representative sample consisted of 155 respondents.

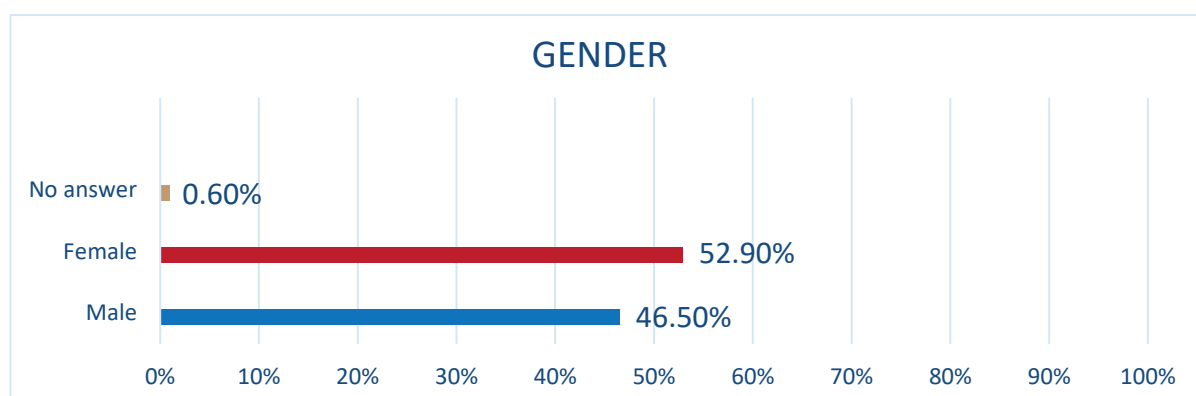
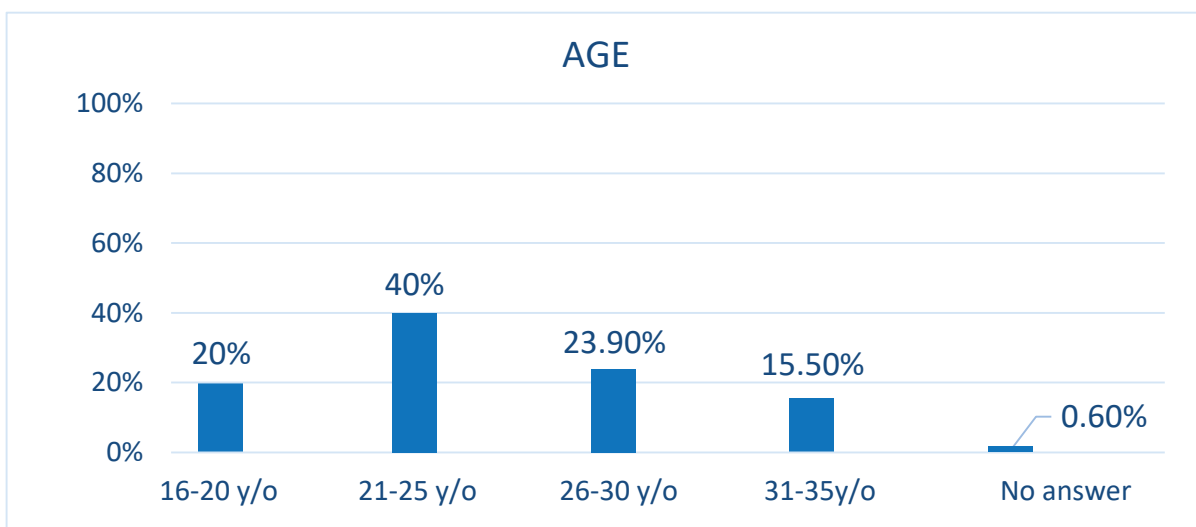
The questions revolved around two main themes. One of them was whether North Macedonia and other countries of the world handled the pandemic correctly and if so which country was at the forefront. Furthermore, it touched upon the relations that North Macedonia has with other countries after the pandemic and which states helped the most.

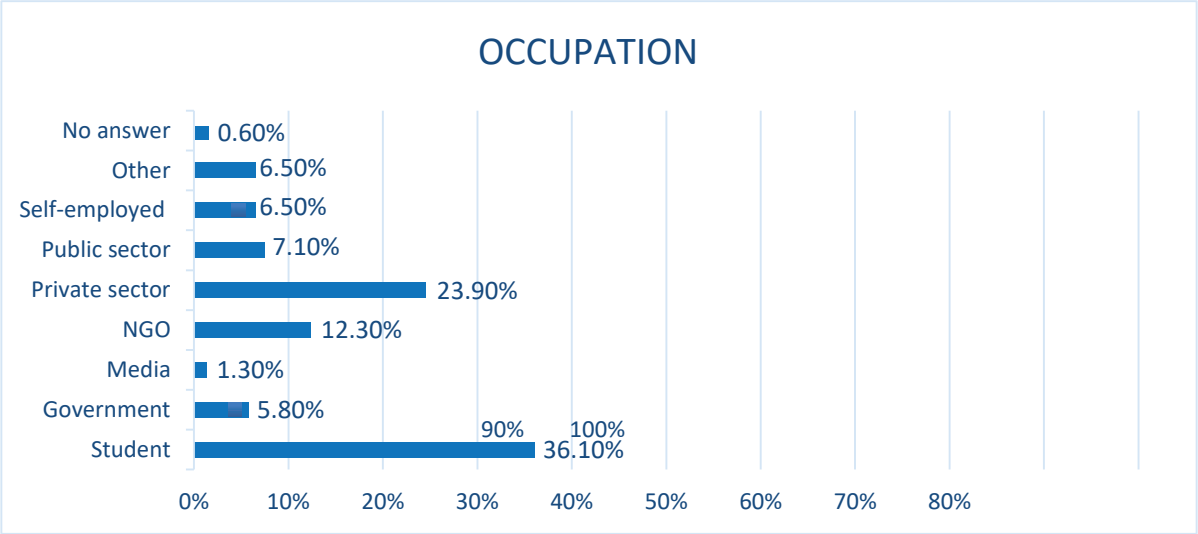
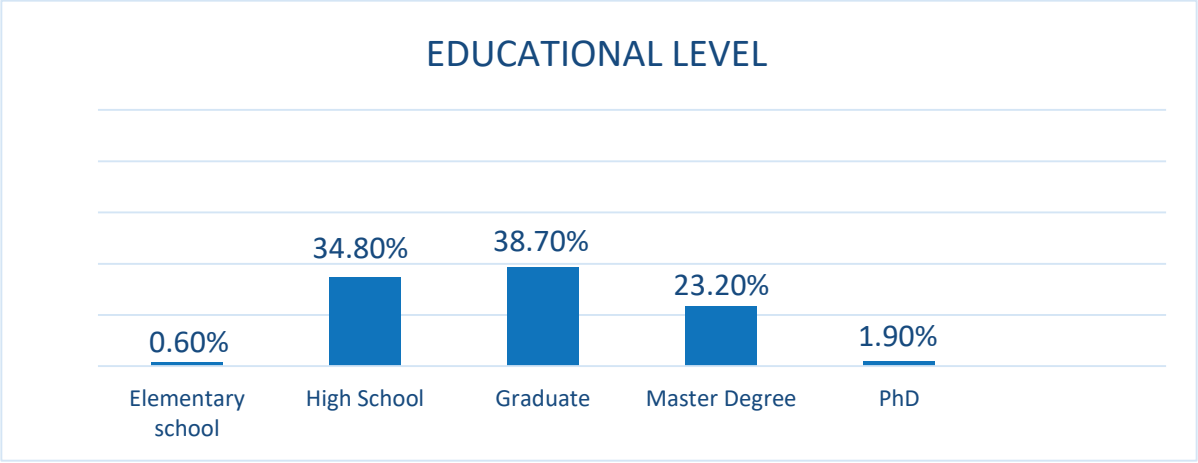
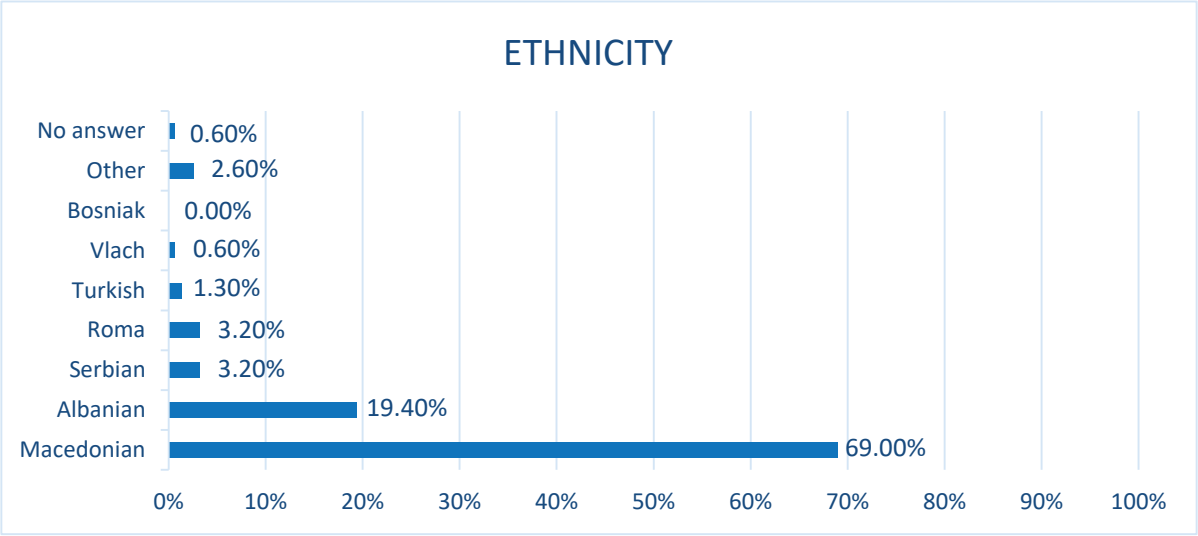
The other theme of the survey was whether the respondents are encountering fake news and if so, how often. Respondents were also asked whether they can recognize disinformation narratives, and what is their opinion on the overall resilience of the Macedonian society on this issue.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF THE RESPONDENTS

For the purpose of the research, the preliminary questions were designed to assess the demographic characteristics of the respondents of the representative sample, but also respecting the gender, age, ethnic, professional and educational component.

The whole research had a turnout of 155 respondents who agreed to take part in the survey. The target audience were young people with different ethnicity, age and gender. The age range of the participants was 16-35 years. Furthermore, the respondents were divided in four age groups/categories within the following range (16-20 years; 21-25 years; 26-30 years and 31-35 years).

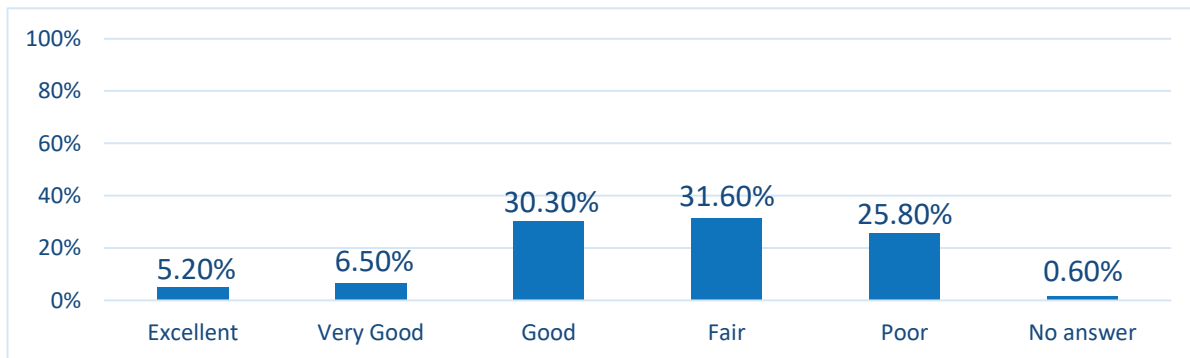




Results from the online survey

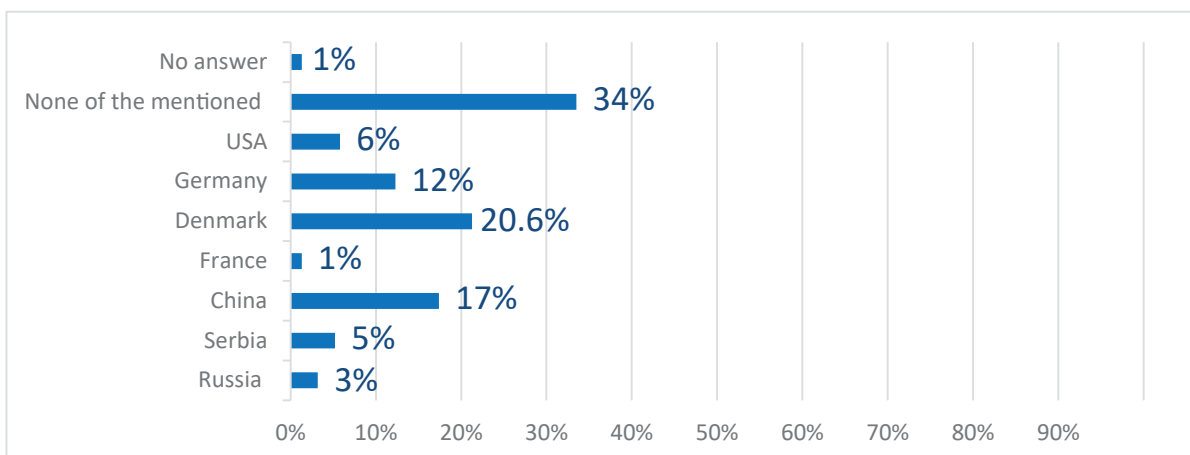
1. How well North Macedonia managed the COVID-19 Pandemic overall.

This question was posed in order to see whether the population is confident in the measures taken by the government. There were five options to vote for ranging from Excellent to Poor. Most of the respondents voted for the middle ground, which was Good (30.3%), or Fair (31.6%). The next answer that had the most votes was Poor (25.8%). There was a small portion of respondents that voted for Excellent (5.2%) or Very Good (6.5%).



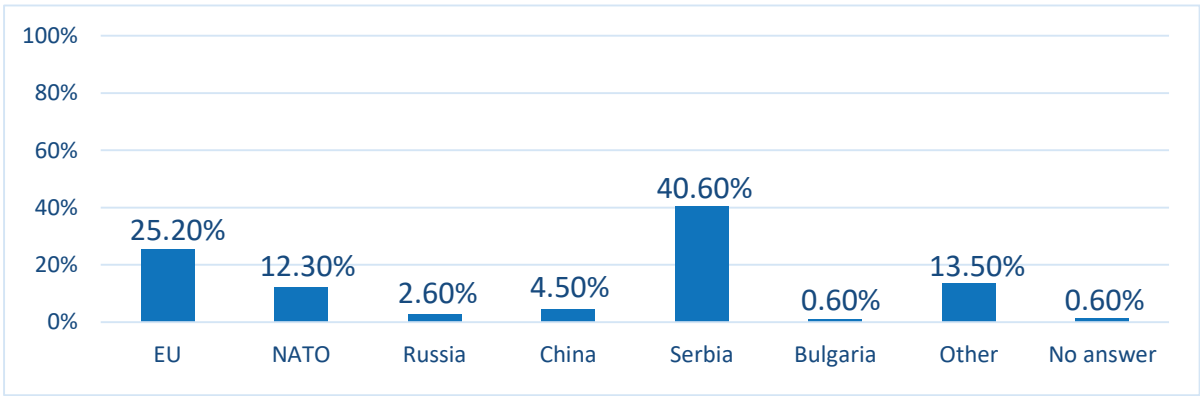
2. Who handled the COVID-19 Pandemic best so far?

This question was posed so the respondents can give their opinion on which country they think handled the pandemic the best. There were multiple countries as options from around the world. Furthermore if they thought of a country that was not on the list there was also the option "none of the mentioned". In fact, this option got overwhelmingly the most votes (33.5%). The next two highest vote getters were Denmark (20.6%) and China (17.4%). The only other country to get a substantial amount of votes was Germany (12.3%). USA (5.8%), Serbia (5.2%) and Russia (3.2%) were at the bottom.



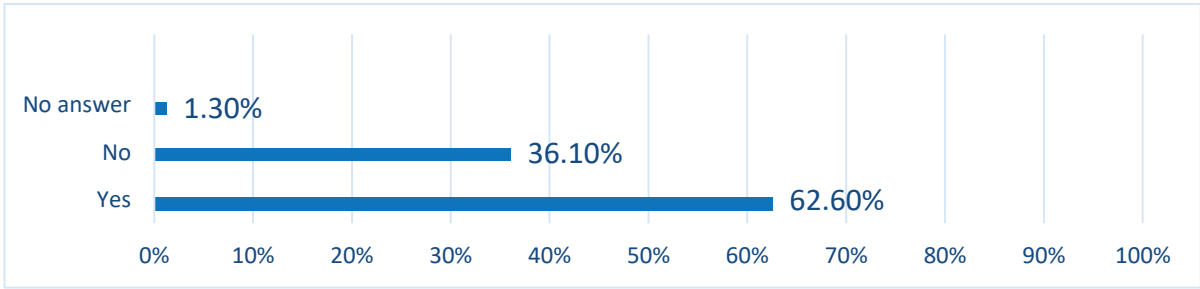
3. In your opinion, which country/International Organization helped North Macedonia the most during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Again the respondents were given multiple options to choose the country or the international organization that helped North Macedonia the most. If the country or the organization was not present they had the option "none of the mentioned". Serbia got the substantial amount of the votes (40.6%) followed by the EU (25.2%). The option "other" was next (13.5%) while NATO had (12.3%). No other option got a significant amount of votes with China (4.5%) and Russia (2.6%) at the bottom. Bulgaria got 0.6%.



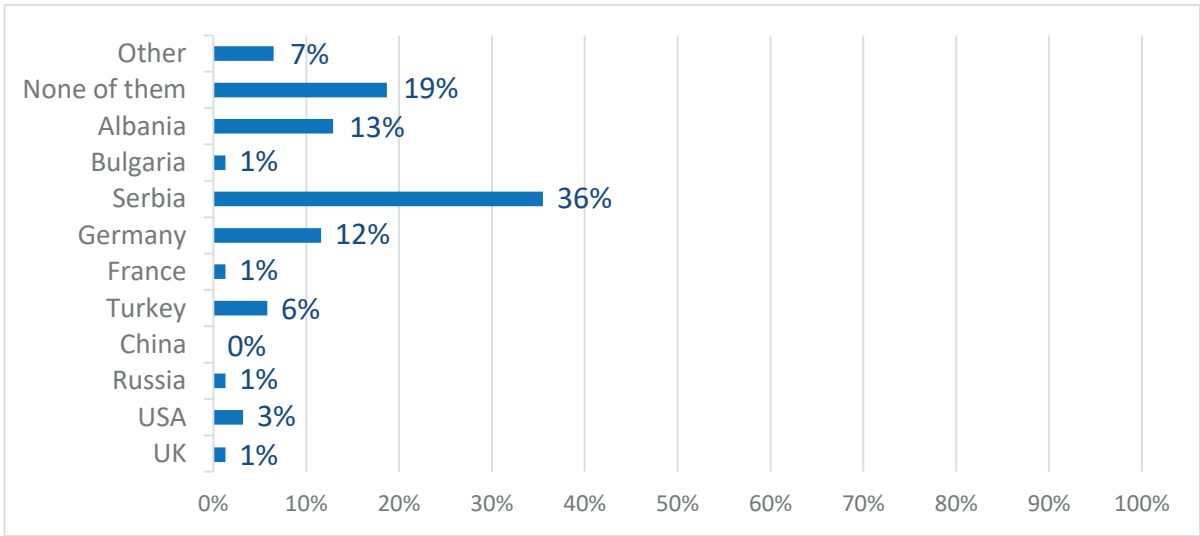
4. Do you think NATO could have helped the country in any other way during the pandemic, other than what it already did?

This question had only two possible answers and was posed so the respondents can give their opinion on the help North Macedonia received from NATO. The overwhelming majority voted “Yes” (62.6%) meaning that they believe that NATO could have done more. The rest (36.1%) think that NATO did its maximum.



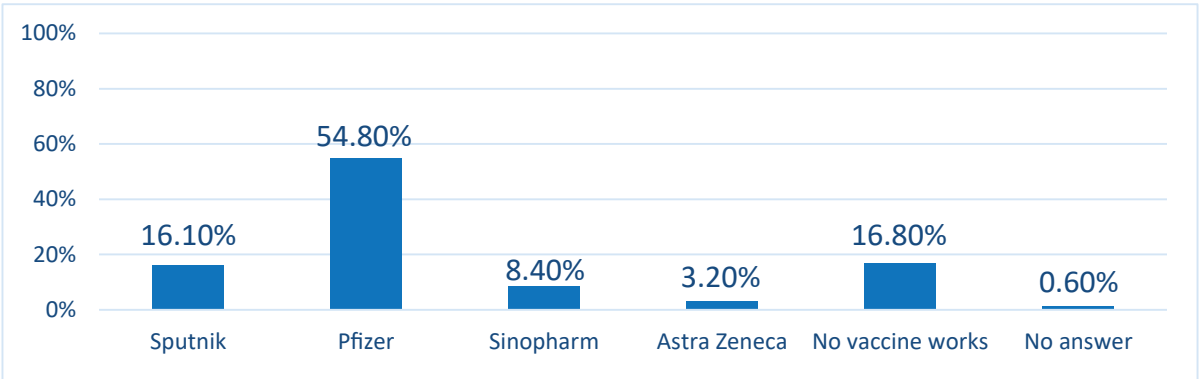
5. Which of the following countries do you think are the most sincere friends of North Macedonia?

Here the respondents were given multiple options to vote for the country they think is our most sincere friend. There was also the option “none of them” if they do not agree with any of the choices and other if they believe there is another country which is an ally to North Macedonia. Most votes (35.5%) went to Serbia followed by the option “none of them” (18.7%). Albania and Germany follow with 12.9% and 11.6% respectively. The option “other” got 6.5% while the US was next (3.2%). The other options had negligible results taking around 1.3% of the votes.



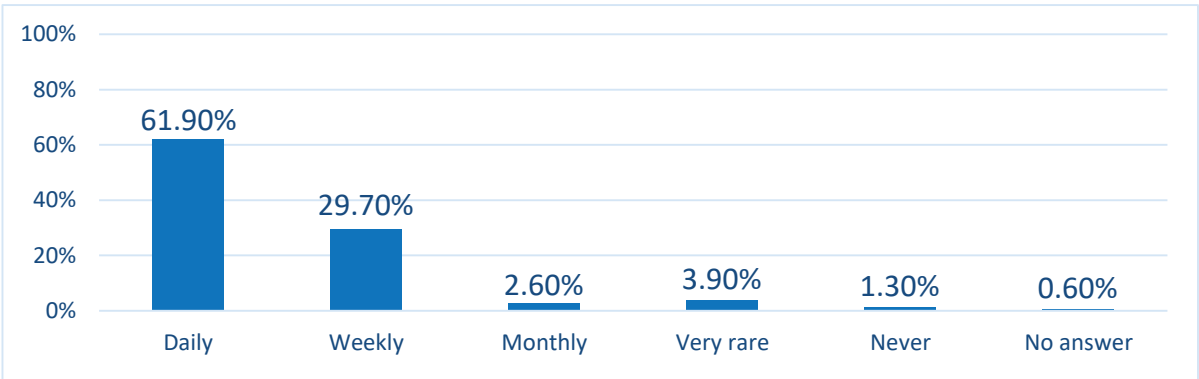
6. If you could choose, which vaccine would you choose?

In this question, the respondents were asked what would be the vaccine of their choosing and the overwhelming majority voted for Pfizer (54.8%). It was followed by Sputnik (16.1%) and the option “no vaccine works” for people who do not believe in vaccines (16.8%). Sinopharm (8.4%) and AstraZeneca (3.2%) were at the bottom.



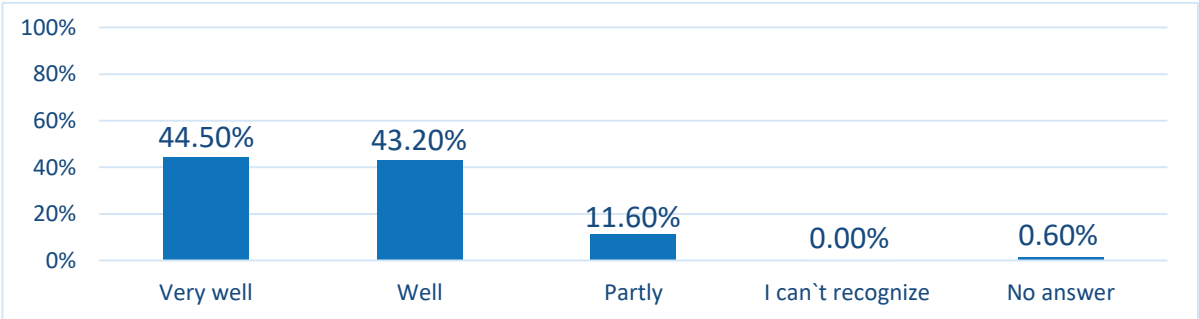
7. How often do you see fake news on social media?

The respondents were asked to answer how often they encounter fake news. There were multiple options and the majority said that they encounter them daily (61.9%). 29.7% of the respondents encounter fake news weekly and only 2.6% said monthly. The options very rare and never got 3.9% and 1.3% respectively.



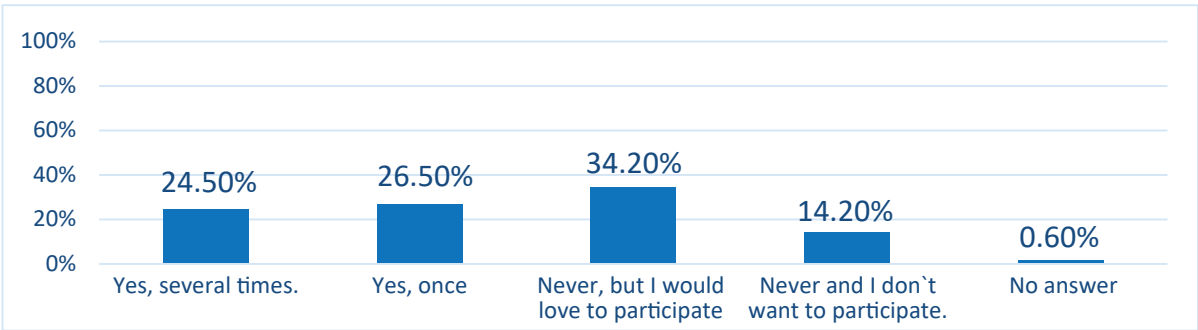
8. In your opinion, how well can you recognize fake news and disinformation narratives?

The respondents were asked to answer how well they recognize fake news. There were multiple options ranging from “very well” to “I can’t recognize them”. Most people said that they could recognize fake news very well (44.5%). The option “well” was a close second with 43.2%. The option partly got 11.6% of the vote and the option “I can’t recognize them” did not get any votes.



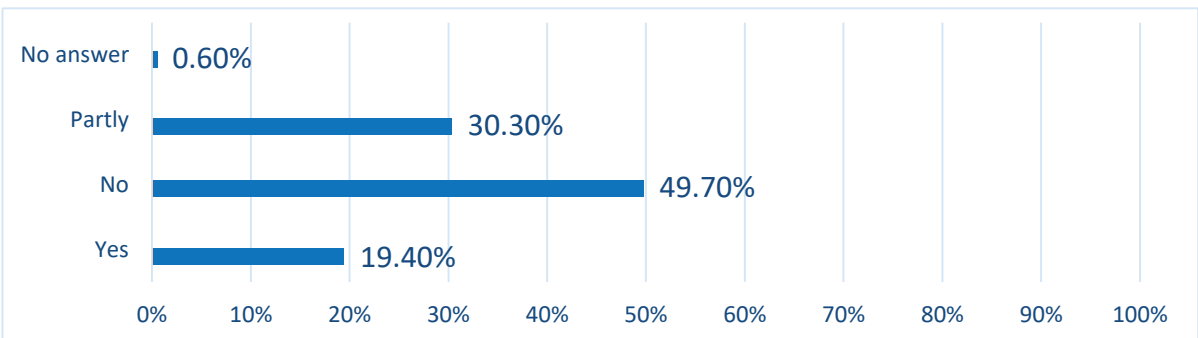
9. Have you ever participated in any training or conference on media literacy and countering fake news?

There were four options for this question, which was posed in order to find out whether the participants had any training regarding media literacy. Most of the respondents (34.2%) said that they have not attended any training or conferences regarding media literacy but they would love to. In contrast 14.2% said that they haven't been to any conferences or trainings and they would not like to go. 26.5% of the respondents said that they have attended such a conference once and 24.5% have attended such conferences several times.



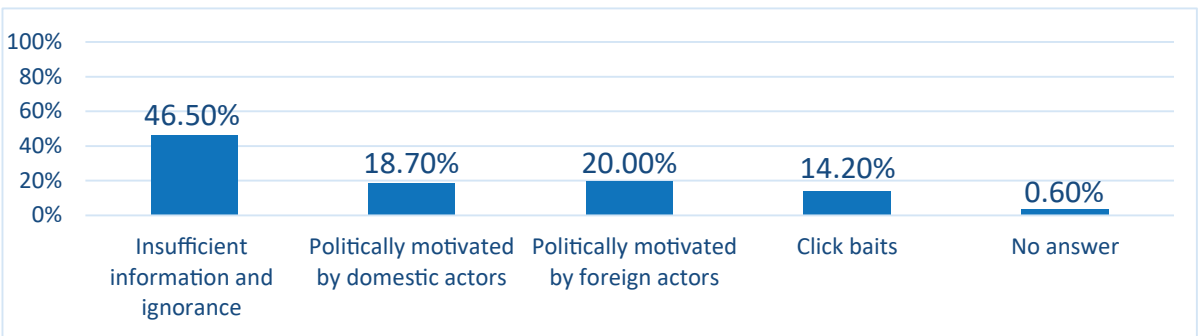
10. In your opinion is Macedonian society resilient to fake news and disinformation?

There were three options for this question. The respondents could answer “yes”, “no” or “partly” on the society’s resilience on fake news and disinformation. Most of the respondents believe that the society in North Macedonia is not resilient (49.7%). Only 19.4% think that the society is resilient while 30.3% believe that it is partly resilient.



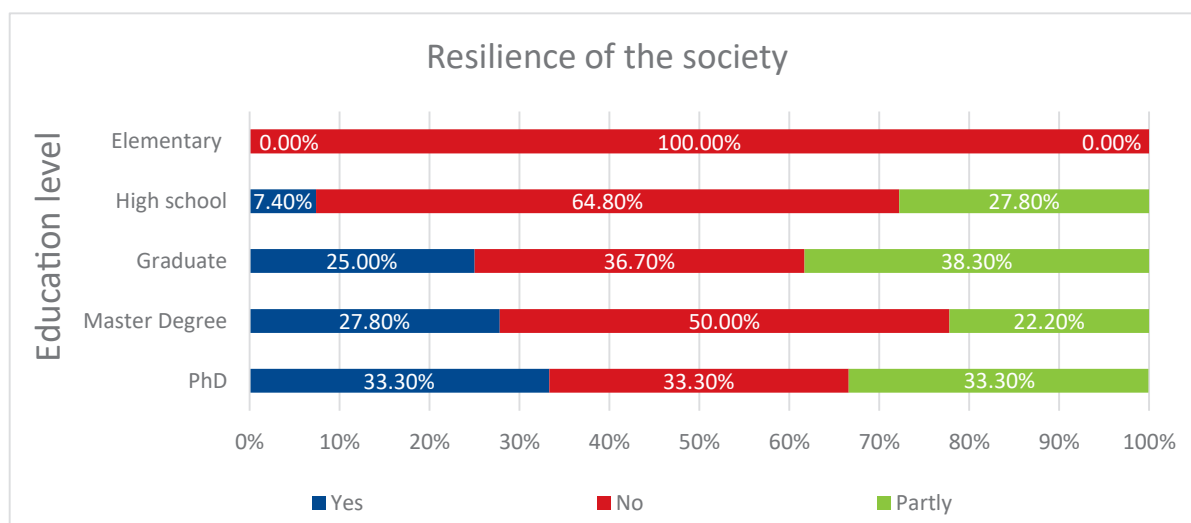
11. Do you think that fake news and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and vaccines are generated because of...

There were four options for this question and the majority thinks that fake news around COVID-19 are generated because of insufficient information and ignorance (46.5%). Next are the people who believe that they are politically motivated by foreign actors (20%) and domestic actors (18.7%) respectively. Lastly, 14.2% believe that fake news are generated for click bait.



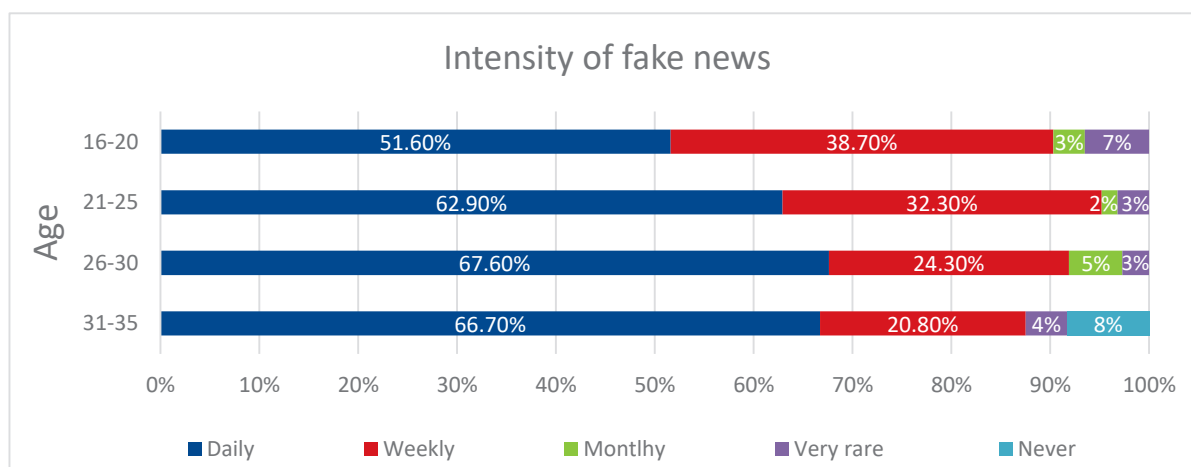
Results of the Online Survey expressed in frequency tables and cross-tabulations

Approximate measurement of the differences of the responses regarding the society resilience on fake news and disinformation among respondents with different educational level



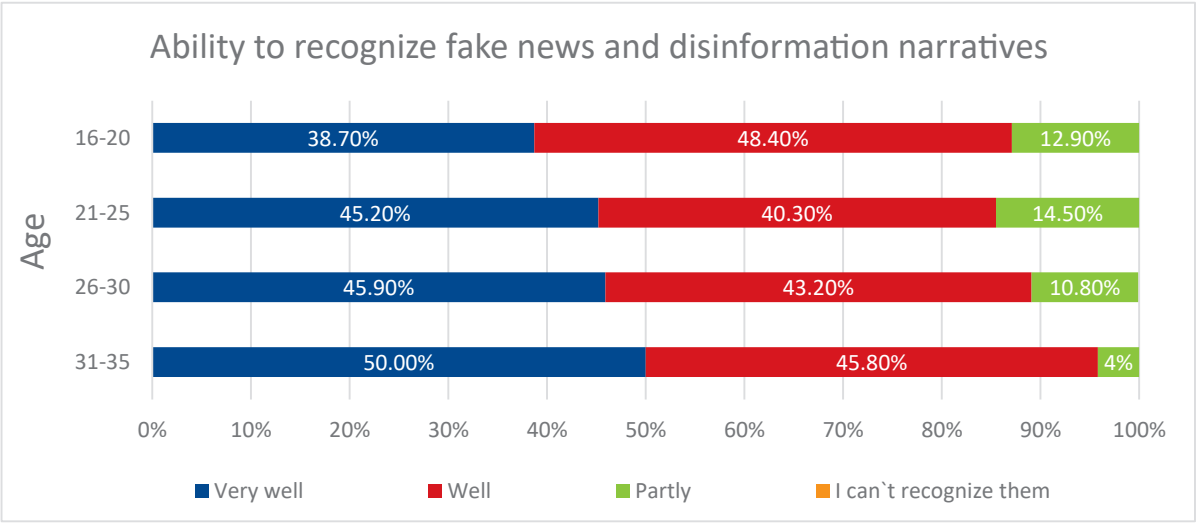
In terms of whether the Macedonian society is resilient to fake news and disinformation, compared to the level of education, in terms of a positive given answer, there is a tendency of growth of 7,4% among citizens with secondary education, up to 27,8% among citizens with completed master studies, ie 33.3% with doctors of sciences. On the other hand, among those who answered „no“, the tendency is inversely proportional to the previous one - 64,8% with secondary education, to almost halved - 36.7% for those who have a university degree.

Approximate measurement of the intensity of fake news that are circulating in North Macedonia among respondents from different age groups



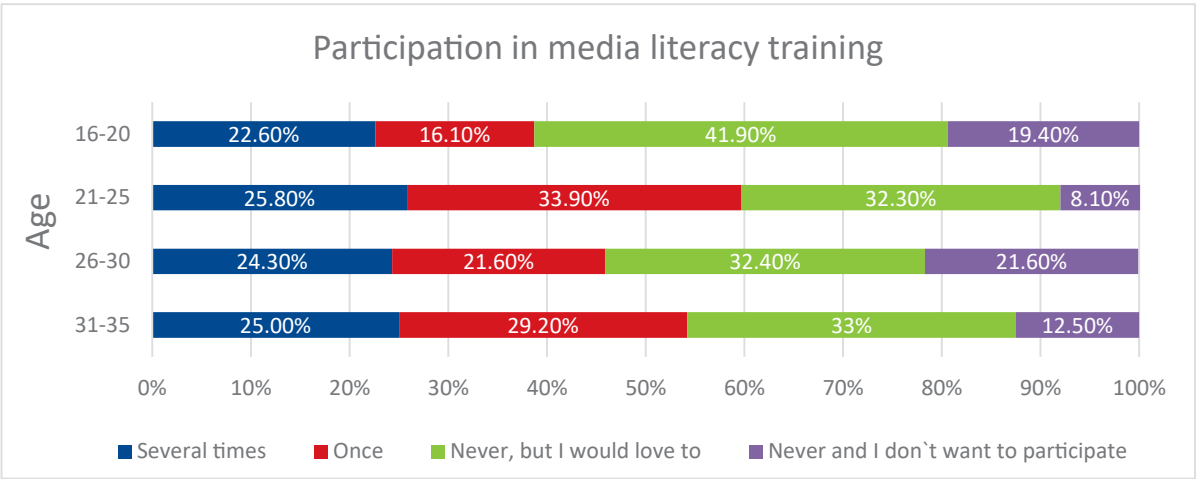
If we compare the results in terms of age and how often the respondents encounter fake news on daily basis, it can be noticed that there is a tendency of growth of 51,6 % among those from 16 to 20 years old, up to 66,7 % among those from 31 to 35 years old. On the other hand, in terms of age and how often the respondents encounter fake news on weekly basis, it can be noticed that the tendency is opposite from the previous one. From 38,7 % among those from 16 to 20 years old, down to 20,8 % among those from 31 to 35 years old.

Approximate measurement of the ability to recognize fake news and disinformation narratives that are circulating in North Macedonia among respondents from different age groups



If we compare the results in terms of age and how well the respondents can recognize fake news and disinformation narratives, it can be noticed that 87.1% of young people aged 16-20 can „very well“ and/or „well“ recognize fake news, while the percentage in those between 31-35 is 95.8%.

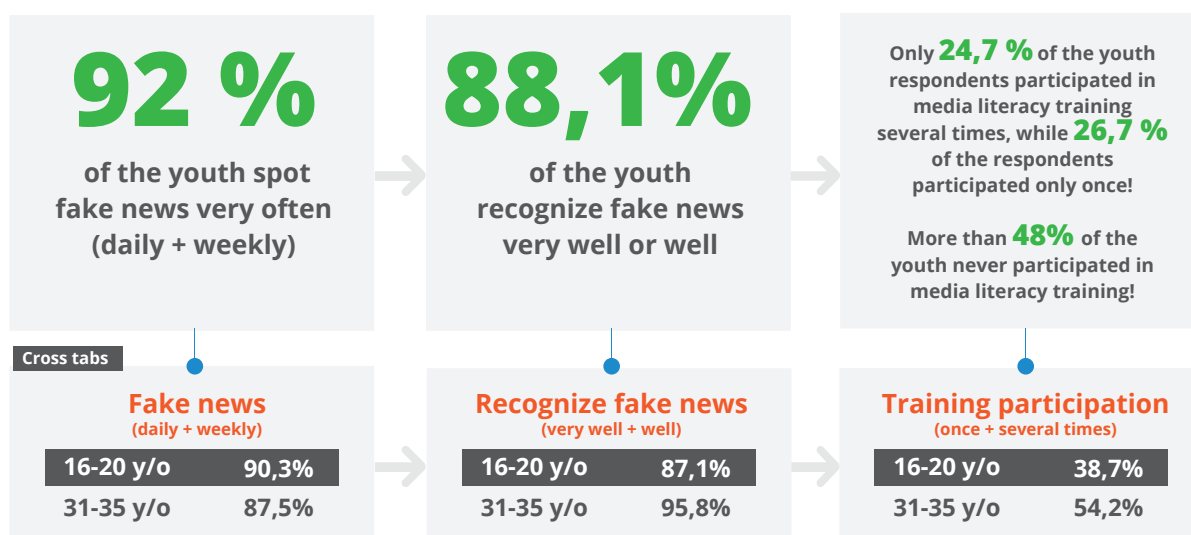
Approximate measurement of participation in media literacy trainings among respondents from different age groups



Only 24,7% of the youth respondents have participated in media literacy training several times, while 26,7% of the respondents participated only once. More than 48% of the youth have never participated in media literacy training. If we compare the results in terms of age and whether and how many times (once or more) the respondents that have participated in a training related to a media literacy, it can be noticed that those aged 16-20 have participated in a lower percentage (38.7%), as opposed to those of 31-35 (54.2%).

ADDITIONAL CROSS-TAB DATA:

"HOW MEDIA LITERATE ARE WE?!" vs.
"HOW MEDIA LITERATE DO WE THINK WE ARE?!"



92% of the youth in Republic of North Macedonia spot fake news very often (daily + weekly). 88,1% of them think that they can recognize and spot fake news very well, but only 24,7% of them have participated in media literacy training (several times).

d. Qualitative Research

FOCUS GROUPS

About / Specifics

Sixteen young professionals attended the focus groups from different professional and educational backgrounds. They discussed topics related to trust in domestic institutions during the pandemic, what are their perceptions of certain state measures during the pandemic, but also the state's response to the pandemic as a whole, what is their perception of Western partners, which countries are best dealt with the pandemic, who helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic, whether they encountered fake news related to the immunization process or the COVID-19 pandemic in general, whether they attended media literacy trainings, etc.

In addition, when creating the focus groups, attention was given to gender representation, as well as age and ethnic representation.

Results

Regarding the topic related to the trust in the domestic institutions and the state, and its dealing with the pandemic so far, 12/16 of the participants in the focus groups answered that the pandemic contributed to the decrease of their trust in the country, while among the other four participants the opinion about the country remained unchanged.

In terms of whether the state has dealt well with the pandemic so far, 10/16 participants gave a negative answer, 4 did not have an opinion, while only 2 said that the state did well. In addition, negative opinion among focus group participants is prevalent about state measures to motivate the immunization process and the vaccination process as a whole. Namely, 7/16 of the participants answered that the motivational measures had a negative effect on them, i.e. "they felt forced" and 4/16 answered that they were vaccinated for "other reasons" with nothing to do with state, and as "other reasons" they were listed either due to conscience and protection of loved ones or due to travel abroad. 3/16 has a neutral opinion - they do not know whether the state contributed to them being vaccinated or not, while two other participants answered that they were vaccinated voluntarily. None of the participants answered that the state motivated them with its measures to be vaccinated.

Interestingly, three participants had not been vaccinated yet.

Regarding which countries and/or organizations helped North Macedonia the most, generally all participants (16/16) mentioned Serbia as one of the countries. Besides Serbia, as one of the countries. Besides Serbia, the other most frequent answers given by the participants were EU (9/16), USA (7/16), China (7/16), and NATO (4/16).

„The state does not motivate the people to get vaccinated, it forces them and that will be counter effective in the long run”
- Male 25



On the topics related to disinformation, their spread and their impact, there were few general answers (16/16) among the participants. The first general answer is that disinformation and conspiracy theories have undermined the vaccination process and trust in it. The second general answer is that social networks are the places where fake news are spread the most. The third general answer is that media literacy and its incorporation as a subject in the educational process will lead to a greater society resilience to fake news and disinformation. However, although there is a general response among participants about the importance of



„People are addicted to social media and the Internet so the state cannot do much in containing the spread of fake news”
- Female, 17

media literacy, only 2/16 participants said that they have attended one or more trainings on media literacy and 5/16 said they did a fact-checking if they doubted the veracity of any information.





EXPERT INTERVIEWS

About / Specifics

The research included interviews with 8 experts (4 young experts and 4 experts with many years of proven experience in the field of their work). The topics of discussion were almost the same as with the focus groups, except that the questions were a bit more complex.

Results

There was a general response among experts (8/8) that the pandemic had put liberal democracy to the test all over the world. In addition, the young experts as a general answer (4/4), have said that not only the trust in domestic institutions during the pandemic decreased, but that before the pandemic it was very low, while among the older and more experienced experts the opinions of these topics were divided, but the same prevailed as among the young.

Regarding the state's dealing with the pandemic, 5/8 experts said that state institutions had taken some measures, but they were far from good and that they seemed uncoordinated, while only two experts said that some of the state measures were effective. There were also divided opinions on how the state is dealing with disinformation. 5/8 experts believe that the state has failed to deal with the huge amount of disinformation that emerged during the pandemic.

To the questions and topics related to the perception towards the Western partners, but also the East, as well as the help of certain countries and organizations to North Macedonia during the pandemic, there is a general answer (8/8) that Serbia is one of the countries

that helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic so far. Unlike the focus group participants who mentioned NATO in a smaller percentage, 7/8 experts noted that NATO helped significantly. In addition to the previously mentioned, as partners who helped were also mentioned: USA (6/8), EU (5/8), China (5/8). Although almost all experts highlighted the support and assistance of Western partners during the pandemic, 5/8 said that public perceptions of the West (more) and the East (less) had decreased.

„The fight against disinformation, if it appears in the media, is an issue that should be addressed, first of all, by the media and associations in the field of journalism. Experience shows that if the problem is treated this way, then this is the best way to solve it“.

- Expert





„I believe that the pandemic has negatively affected the public perception of the West, especially the EU. EU member states were one of the hardest hit by the pandemic, and here, their (non)solidarity was tested and demonstrated because many countries were taking care only for themselves - which undermined one of the basic principles of the EU"

– young professional

Regarding whether the Macedonian society is resilient to disinformation and fake news, as well as to foreign influences, 5/8 experts said that the Macedonian society is not resilient. However, 8/8 experts emphasized the importance of media literacy in the fight against disinformation and building a more resilient society.



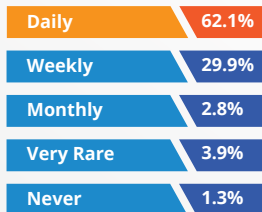


INFO-GRAPHICS

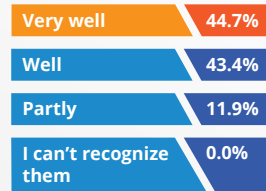
INTENSITY OF FAKE NEWS, DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AND MEDIA LITERACY IN NORTH MACEDONIA

"HOW MEDIA LITERATE ARE WE?!" VS. "HOW MEDIA LITERATE DO WE THINK WE ARE?!"

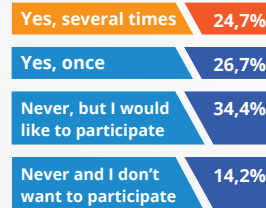
Intensity of fake news on social media



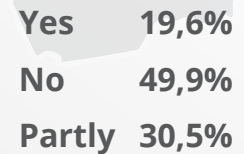
Recognizing fake news and disinformation narratives



Participation in media literacy training



Is the Macedonian society resilient to fake news and disinformation



92 %

of the youth spot fake news very often (daily + weekly)

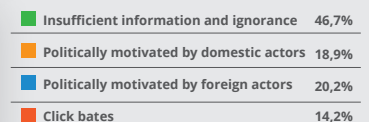
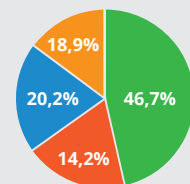
88,1%

of the youth recognize fake news very well or well

Only **24,7 %** of the youth respondents participated in media literacy training several times, while **26,7 %** of the respondents participated only once!

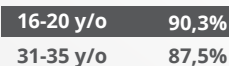
More than **48%** of the youth never participated in media literacy training!

Fake news and conspiracy theories about Covid - 19 and vaccines are mainly generated because of:

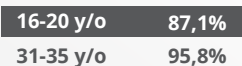


Cross tabs

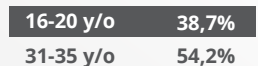
Fake news (daily + weekly)



Recognize fake news (very well + well)



Training participation (once + several times)



Focus groups

3/16 participants have attended a workshop on media literacy

"I do not double check information because I believe I have gained the skill of immediately recognizing fake news".
Male, 25 years old
(hasn't participated in media literacy training)

MYTHS AND TRUTHS ABOUT COVID-19 IN NORTH MACEDONIA

Myth 1

COVID-19 was made by NATO to keep people inside while the Alliance deploys troops on Balkan soil.



Truth

NATO is a defensive Alliance that serves and protects its member states.

As confirmed by the WHO, all available evidence suggests that the coronavirus has a natural origin in animals and is not a constructed virus. There was no evidence found that the virus was made in a laboratory, or otherwise engineered.

It was first isolated from three people with pneumonia and acute respiratory illness.



Myth 2

NATO and the western system failing in their response to the coronavirus pandemic - why do we need NATO?



Truth

NATO Alliance is playing its part to support Allies in the fight against COVID-19.

Even though NATO is primarily a military and political organization, through the EADRCC, the Alliance has coordinated help and donations for many NATO member and partner countries.

NATO's help includes facilitating the airlift of crucial medical supplies and equipment, matching requests for support with offers from Allies and partners and delivering innovative responses



Myth 3

In the Balkans, only China and Russia are sending help, western countries closed the borders.



Truth

The West provided substantial help to the WB6 during the pandemic.

EU supplied almost €42 million for immediate support to the WB6 health sector to procure medical equipment such as masks, ventilators, visors and testing kits.

In collaboration with WHO, additional €7 million were donated to prepare the region for the effective reception and administration of COVID-19 vaccines.

In addition, many western countries (such as Austria, USA, Poland, etc.) donated vaccines



Myth 4

North Macedonia did not get help from NATO and the allies during the pandemic.



Truth

NATO's EADRCC responded by delivering ventilators, masks, disinfectant and other medical equipment to a request made by North Macedonia

Namely 60 ventilators were delivered by NATO. Furthermore, many NATO members had donations to North Macedonia via EADRCC. Slovakia donated 4 ventilators, while Latvia and Estonia aided with disinfectant detergent with 6000 and 1000 liters respectively. The Czech Republic made a donation of 1 000 000 masks and Norway donated medical supplies worth 180 000 euro. Poland donated 200 070 Pfizer vaccines.



Myth 5

Receiving a vaccine will alter your DNA.



Truth

The vaccine is not able to alter or modify a person's genetic makeup or DNA.

It never enters the nucleus of the cell, which is where our DNA is kept. This means the vaccine does not affect or interact with our DNA in any way.

Instead, it works with the body's natural defenses to safely develop protection or immunity to disease.



PEOPLE'S VIEW AND PERCEPTION IN POST-COVID ENVIRONMENT! WEST AS A SUBJECT, MACEDONIAN SOCIETY AS A BATTLEFIELD!



WHAT YOUNG PROFESSIONALS THINK?

Who helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic?



3/4 young people think that **SERBIA** helped the most



2/4 young people think that **NATO** helped the most

COVID-19 & its effects - level of trust in liberal democracy



2/4 young people think that the pandemic had a negative effect on the level of trust in liberal democracy

COVID-19 & its effects - public perception towards the West



2/4 young people think that the pandemic led to a more negative perception towards the West

Qualitative Data - Interviews with young professionals



WHAT DO THE EXPERTS SAY?

Who helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic?



2/4 experts say that **SERBIA** helped the most



3/4 experts say that **NATO** helped the most

COVID-19 & its effects - level of trust in liberal democracy



3/4 experts say that the pandemic had a negative effect on the level of trust in liberal democracy

COVID-19 & its effects - public perception towards the West



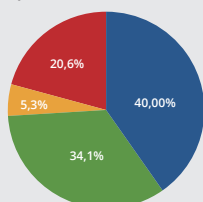
2/4 experts say that the pandemic led to a more negative perception of both (the East and the West)

Qualitative Data - Interviews with experts

PERCEPTIONS OF THE BROAD PUBLIC (AGED 18-35)

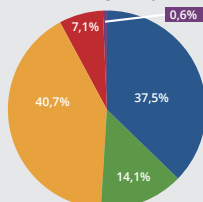
ONLINE SURVEY

Who handled COVID-19 pandemic best so far?



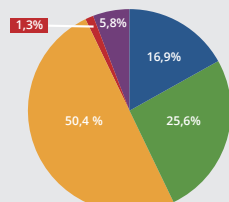
West - 40,00%
East - 20,6%
Serbia - 5,3%
None - 34,1%

Who helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic?



West - 37,5%
East - 7,1%
Serbia - 40,7%
Bulgaria - 0,6%
None - 14,1%

North Macedonia's most sincere friends?



West - 16,9%
East - 1,3%
Neighbours (Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania) - 50,4%
Turkey - 5,8%
None - 25,6%

FOCUS GROUPS

Who handled COVID-19 pandemic best so far?

Germany
Serbia
Malaysia
UK
China
Israel
Russia
South Korea
Japan
Turkey

Israel, Serbia and China mentioned more than once

Who helped North Macedonia the most during the pandemic?

3/16 China
6/16 NATO and the West
9/16 Serbia

COVID-19 & its effects - public perception towards the West

3/16
3/16 young people say that the pandemic changed their views towards the West in a more negative manner

5. CONCLUSION

Within this project, via innovative practices and research of public perceptions on topics that are relevant, especially today during the pandemic, the obtained results are confirming most of the previously conducted research on the topic, which only proves that much needs to be done in a way of promotion of some processes and good practices. In addition, the research goes beyond what was done so far, since it measure attitudes, vulnerabilities and perceptions during pandemic. It also measures the intensity of fake news and disinformation narratives, as well as through a process of demystification, it tries to restore the trust of the Macedonian citizens in the domestic institutions and the state in general, the trust in the liberal democracy, the West and the trust in the vaccines.

Creating a society that will be more media literate and resilient to disinformation, between the participants in the focus groups, as well as the experts was emphasized as necessary for the country in the long term.

The two month research that was conducted with youth from all the territory of North Macedonia, showed that 49,9 % of the youth think that the Macedonian society is vulnerable to fake news and disinformation narratives. In addition, 30,5 % of them, think that the society is partly resilient to fake news and disinformation narratives.

92% of the youth in Republic of North Macedonia spot fake news very often (daily + weekly), 88,1% of them think that they can recognize and spot fake news very well, but only 24,7% of them have participated in media literacy training (several times). This raise the question, how media literate is the Macedonian youth and is this the main reason for the low level of resilience among the youth?

Discussions with young people in the focus groups also show that still many young people did not participate in any training or media literacy conference - something that is worrying, given that there is more and more disinformation on social media.

Given the quantitative and qualitative data obtained, it is evident that young people in North Macedonia still, with a high percentage, see NATO and the Western countries as partners. Even when the trust in liberal democracy and the domestic institutions has declined during the pandemic, the trust in NATO and the West it remains on high level. Even though, it is worth mentioning that in most of the cases the help from NATO and the Allied countries was not adequately presented and recognized.

One of the general conclusions is that disinformation and conspiracy theories have undermined the vaccination process, the trust in domestic and international institutions and the trust in the liberal democracy. Another general conclusion is that social networks are the places where fake news is spread the most and in that regard, media literacy and its incorporation as a subject in the educational process will lead to a greater society resilience to fake news and disinformation narratives.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

As each country and society, North Macedonia should strive to create secure and favorable environment where the young people will be educated in order to have a clear goals and understanding of the main problems, but also to realize their full potential.

Disinformation, propaganda and fake news are present from long time ago and they are challenging the societies worldwide, but during the pandemic and with the rise of the use of the social networks, their intensity became dangerous.

- Developing the digital skills among the youth - incorporating media literacy in formal and non-formal education in order to increase knowledge, awareness and understanding among citizens of ways to counter fake news, disinformation narratives, propaganda and conspiracy theories.

- Closer cooperation and support of the state institutions, to the local and international NGOs and organizations in the fight against the modern digital threats.

- Finding a new creative ways to fight fake news and disinformation narratives and developing new and innovative approaches on central and local level in order to increase the awareness and the societal resilience. Creating a relevant database of traditional and social media. Young people should be confident that the information they receive on daily basis are correct and from relevant sources.

- Demystification of the fake news and the conspiracy theories by relevant state and non-state actors, in order to bring back the trust in the state institutions and the liberal democracy as a concept.

- Develop a general strategy for closer cooperation with NATO sectors involved in the fight against disinformation, especially putting the focus in the time of crisis, organizing media literacy trainings, policy roundtables, conferences and producing a content, such as research publications and video documentaries in order to widely spread the correct information.

- Better communication strategy of the state (mainly health institutions) in order positively to promote the preventive measures for infection with COVID-19, as well as promotion of the vaccination process.

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