GOOD PRACTICES MANUAL

FLANKS 2
Dealing with the challenge of political warfare in the Ukraine war context

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FLANKS 2 – dealing with the challenge of political warfare in the Ukraine war context. Good practices manual

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FLANKS 2 – dealing with the challenge of political warfare in the Ukraine war context

GOOD PRACTICES MANUAL

Target audience: trainers, educators, facilitators, think-tankers, government officials

Objective:

The objective of this manual is to provide a set of tools aimed at implementing a peer-to-peer educational model from students to students on political warfare relation to the war in Ukraine.

Introduction:

Through an approach that brings together young people with the task of reaching other young people on topics of high interest, we have developed and implemented a project that increased the awareness and critical thinking of a target group made of the young generation, thus boosting the resilience of this target group to disinformation campaigns. Increasing the resilience of the young generation to narratives that weaken support for the defence efforts is at the center of our endeavor.
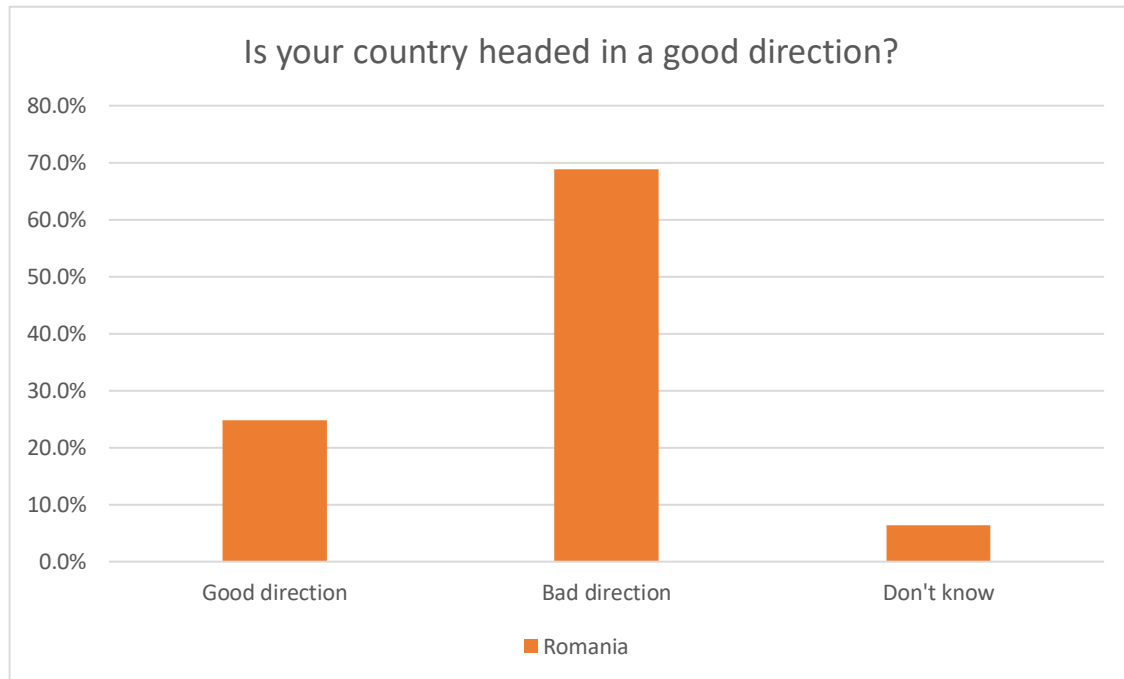
In the case of Romania, Russia's malignant influence and the fact that young people do not have information of historical relevance, do not know what is happening there now and tend to be more affected by false information or manipulative narratives launched directly or indirectly by Russians than other age groups, was identified as a particular vulnerability. Therefore, this is the main disinformation source we have aimed to tackle in our project. Even though Russian disinformation is present all over the Alliance, when drafting a similar project, one must keep in mind local realities and pervasive narratives in their own information space.

Methodological approach:

The methodological approach was informed by a national survey analyzing national attitudes in Romania after a year of war conducted in March 2023, as well as a focus group conducted in June 2023 with 11 students from the University of West Timișoara under the auspices of Dr. Ileana Rotaru. Both sociological endeavours constitute the basis of the following ToT methodology.
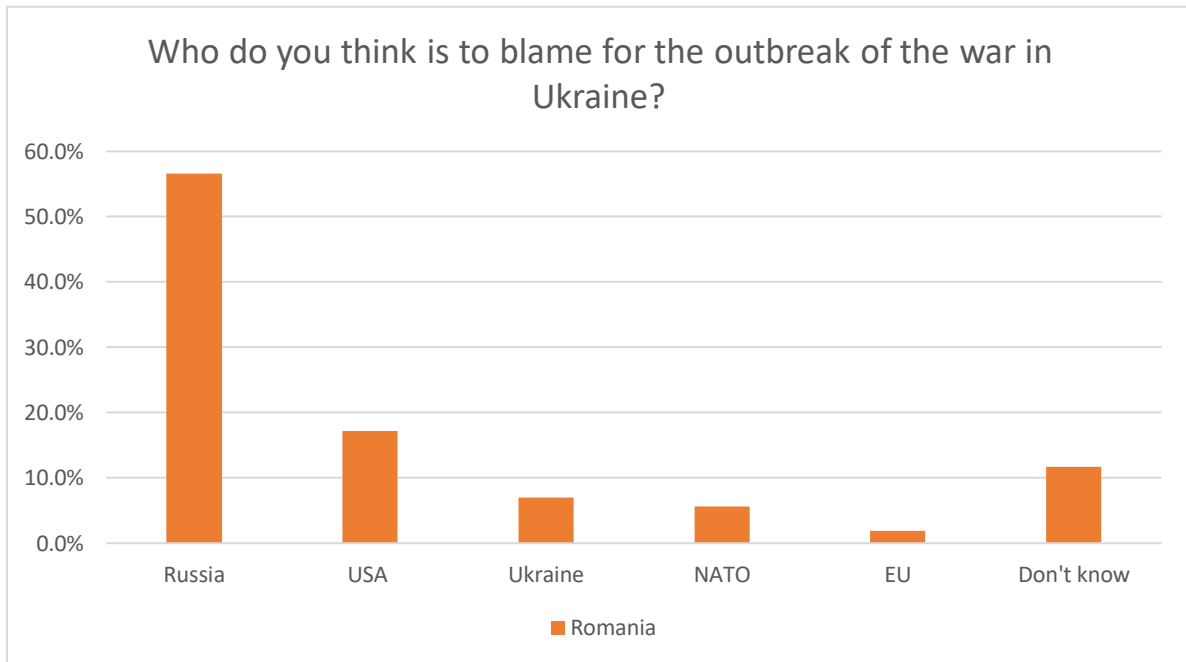
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Survey Results

The majority of Romanians, 68.8%, are pessimistic regarding the future evolution of the country. Youn adults were the most optimistic, with 38% of Romanians between the age of 18-29 evaluating the direction that their country is going in as "good".

Is your country headed in a good direction?

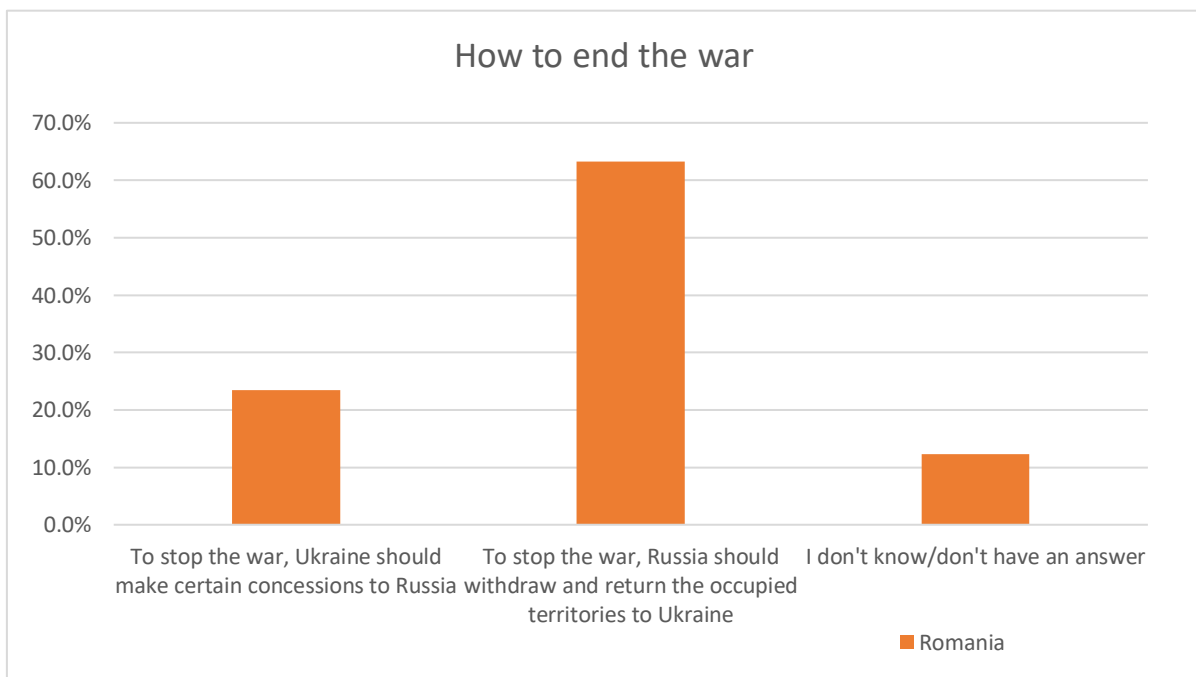(Bar chart showing: Good direction ~25%, Bad direction ~69%, Don't know ~7% — Romania)

The main source of concern for Romanians respondents is economic in nature: 25.2% the increase in energy prices (electricity and natural gas) followed by corruption (21.6%) and their own and their family's health (18.4%). One year after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the degree of anxiety regarding the conflict is on par with concerns about the state of the education system (12% compared to 12.4%), showing a real decrease in the intensity of fears related to a possible Russian military aggression against Romania, or to the involvement of Romania in the conflict. However, the increase in prices and the cost of living, in general, is correlated with the war in Ukraine being perceived as a source of considerable fear for 44.3% of Romanians, followed by the possibility of Russia attacking one or more NATO and/ or EU member states (27.6%) and the increase in the number of refugees, at 11.5%.

The survey showed that only 56.6% of respondents blamed Russia for the war, suggesting that the anti-Western and anti-American narratives, present especially in social media, circulated to dilute Russia's responsibility and blame the USA for starting the war, made 17.2% of Romanians consider that the latter is the main culprit for starting the war, followed by Ukraine. The people who consider the USA and Ukraine guilty for this war fall into the same

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profile as those who have as their political option the party on the Romanian political scene that promotes a populist and Eurosceptic platform.

Who do you think is to blame for the outbreak of the war in Ukraine?

(chart)

- Russia: ~56.5%
- USA: ~17%
- Ukraine: ~7%
- NATO: ~5.5%
- EU: ~1.5%
- Don't know: ~11.5%

■ Romania

In March 2023, 37.6% of Romanians believed that Ukraine would win this war. Regarding the perception of the way to end the war, it is unequivocally noted that the generally expressed opinion in Romania considers the statement that Russia should withdraw and return the occupied territories to Ukraine to be correct (63.3%). Only 23.5% of respondents favor certain territorial concessions towards Russia to stop the conflict.

How to end the war

(chart)

- To stop the war, Ukraine should make certain concessions to Russia: ~23.5%
- To stop the war, Russia should withdraw and return the occupied territories to Ukraine: ~63%
- I don't know/don't have an answer: ~12%

■ Romania

The presence of NATO troops in Romania, and recent additional deployments, are mainly perceived as an element of security for Romanian citizens, with 58.5% of Romanians considering that NATO troops defend the country from Russia. Adherents of the narrative that the presence of NATO troops and the increase in the number of troops could upset Russia registered a percentage of 33.1. From the socio-demographic perspective, those who perceive the presence of NATO troops as a security element are both young people (18-29 years old) and people over 60 years old, located in large urban areas and in the capital Bucharest, with above average education, plentiful income and a political orientation that does not include Eurosceptic, populist or sovereigntist discourses. Concomitantly, there was a sizeable discrepancy regarding the perceived necessity to fulfil all NATO obligations, with only 40% of Romanians being of the opinion that Romania should firmly fulfil its obligations as a NATO member state in case an Alliance member state is attacked 67.1% of respondents in Romania agree that there propaganda inside the country is carried out by other states.
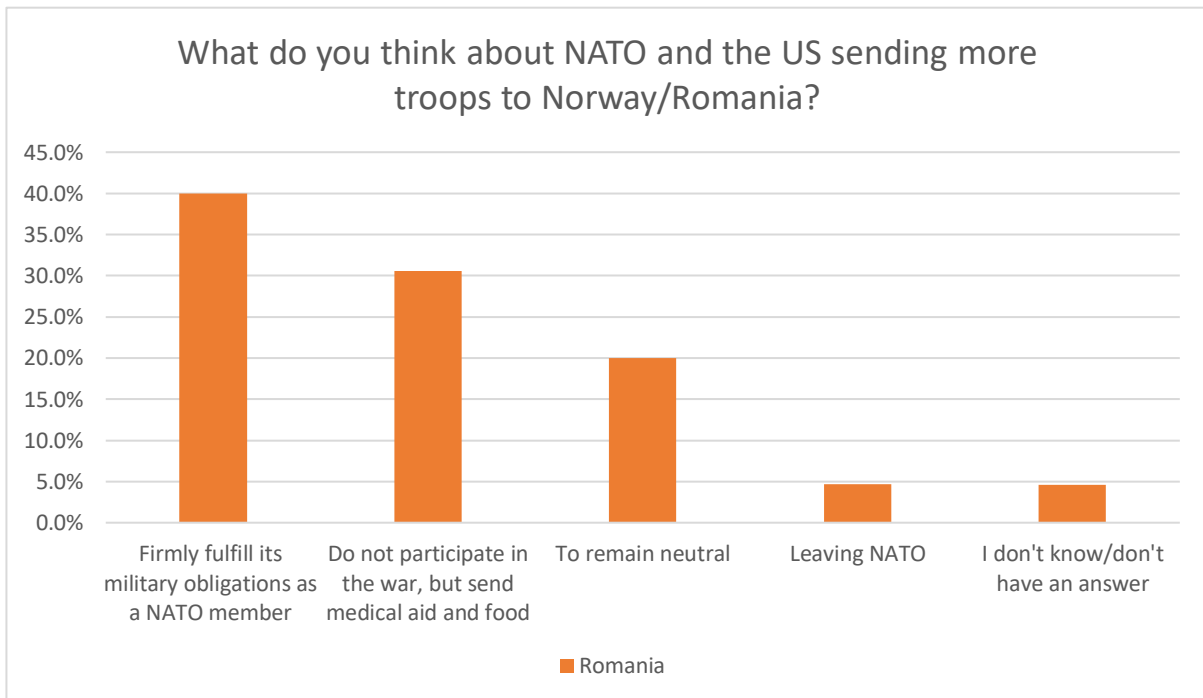
Those in the 18-29 age bracket with higher education and above average incomes residing in large urban areas, are most adamant that concerted disinformation actions are taking place in Romania. Among the states that are considered to be carrying out disinformation activities, Russia ranks first, (29.9%), followed at a considerable distance by the USA, with 14.6%. The third and fourth positions are taken by Hungary (4.3%) and Ukraine (3.7%).

Regarding the responsibility for the spread of fake news, 56% of the Romanian respondents believe that **the media is the main culprit** due to their cynical pursual of increased audience. This fact denotes a lack of trust in media institutions, which are perceived to have departed away from = their public function of informing the public in a deontological manner. According to the socio-demographic analysis, the18-29 years old bracket with higher education, inactive on the labor market and with above-average incomes are the most sensitive to these trends.

The main source of information regarding the war in Ukraine in Romania indicated by survey respondents is television (57.5%), followed at a considerable distance by social media platforms, with 13.8%. The percentage of those who state that they get information from international sources (websites) and national publications is relatively similar, respectively 7.3% and 6.4% (for Romanian newspapers and websites). Only 16.1% of respondents in Romania stated that they consulted the official websites of the EU or NATO to fact-check dubious news appearing online. We note that among young people between **18-29 years old, with higher education and medium incomes residing in the Bucharest capital area, are most likely verify the information through official channels.**
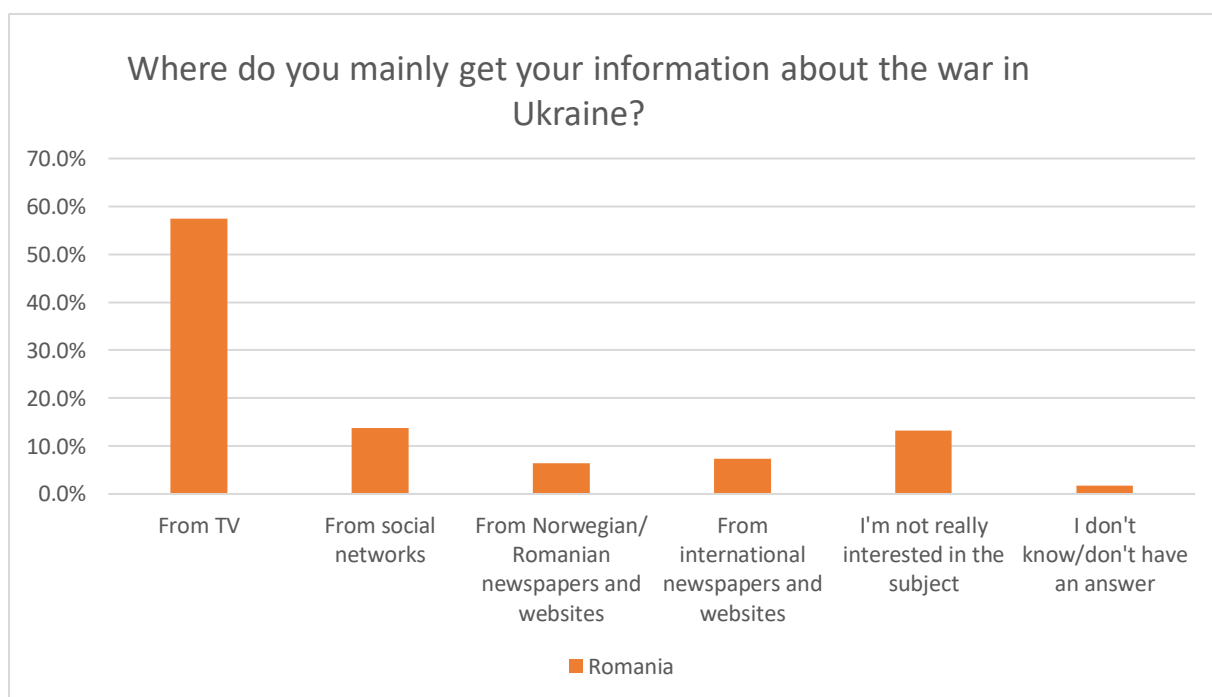
Train the Trainers Module

According to the P2P training educational model, the first stage (stage I) will consist in training and familiarizing participating students with the general theme of the training course (theoretical content) and with elements of teaching methodology (exercises, applications, strategies for approaching the scientific content) in order to prepare them as tutors for fellow UVT (stage II).

Along with family, school, church, cultural institutions (museums, houses of culture, etc.) or associative structures, the media is just one of the most important factors in education, by forming and influencing certain opinions, attitudes and behaviors in society. Their importance is underlined by the inference of the media in most aspects of social and everyday life. This fact is all the more pronounced as we talk about and live in an information society, in which the media and the mass media have experienced a considerable boom. The wide variety of these means (from the traditional media - books, newspapers, magazines - to the digital ones - internet, social media) require certain skills of use, on the one hand, but also behaviors of content use, self-defense through critical thinking, creative use.

This learning unit presents general notions of media education, emphasizing the dimensions of media competence and how to practice it in the information process. In this sense, we have aimed to study the activity and relationships between youth behavior (personality, needs-based learning, skills, etc.) in the context of the information society, the study of strategies and media, communication processes in a variety of paradigms that address the field in in order to analyze and practice the skills of critical analysis and deconstruction of the media message, of the established communication relations (interactive, transactional, procedural, symbolic, etc.) in the online environment and the study of the media system as a whole. Last but not least, through this learning unit we aim at introducing young students in the scientific field of communication, once identifying its usefulness in the instructional-educational process (teaching, learning, assessment), as well as identifying mechanisms for recognizing and combating communication pathologies (cyberbulling, hatespeach, fakenews). etc.), and potential vulnerabilities to misinformation campaigns aimed at undermining trust in democratic values and cohesion at an Euro-Atlantic level:

- Enabling participating students to design and implement in educational activities specific methods and techniques to combat misinformation and deconstruct the media message by students. (stage II)
- Familiarization of the cadets with techniques and interactive teaching-learning-assessment methods regarding national, regional and continental disinformation dynamics and the war in Ukraine.

Module I

Its main objective was the realization of knowledge transfer between trainers and participating students to build a deeper understanding of the perceptions associated with the war in Ukraine and create a feedback loop between trainers and students.

The module began with a warm-up activity, built on the "I Know - I Want to Know - I Learned" model, which aimed to capitalize on the audience's prior knowledge on the main topic of discussion – disinformation dynamics in the context of the war in Ukraine - and created an anticipatory context by determining what was to be learned. Students received a worksheet in the form of a table, with the columns I know - I want to know - I learned and were instructed to complete the table with the required information, only for the first two columns, by noting everything they already knew about disinformation and the war in Ukraine (I know column) and by asking questions about what they would like to know about the proposed topic (I want to know column). After 10 minutes, the trainers collected the worksheets, analyzed the completed columns, and made a summary of what was already known, then informed the audience about the topics presented in the next stages.

Module II "Fake News or Fake Views?"

In the second part of the module, the trainers gave 3 presentations, which started with the discussion of some general aspects regarding disinformation and moved towards matters related to the war in Ukraine. The topic of these presentations was selected based on the results of the survey, focused on the 18-24 demographic. Given that information gaps were identified based on the questionnaire, but it was also possible to measure certain attitudes and behaviors on topics of interest, the contents of module 1 were mainly aimed at topics and activities that, in addition to providing information, also aimed to encourage authentic, positive attitudes, but especially informed about the topics identified in the questionnaire. Therefore, through interactive presentations, followed by the promotion of an open dialogue between trainers and students, the first presentation aimed to familiarize the audience with the core tenets of disinformation dynamics. The second presentation covered the topic in relation to the war in Ukraine. The third

presentation, the last of this module, looked at specific cases of disinformation, covering the most prevalent narratives surrounding the war in Ukraine. Each presentation was followed by a Q&A session, which contributed to the deepening of the knowledge presented.

The introduction of the basic concepts presented in the module was done using a matching exercise, based on a worksheet, of 5 notions (parody, fabricated content, propaganda, clickbait, and deepfake) with short definitions of them, which were then detailed in the presentations. Thus, the series of 3 presentations in this module focused on defining and exemplifying the mentioned notions in the context of cybersecurity, information warfare, and misinformation, and the question and answer session that followed encouraged dynamic and relevant discussions on the prevalence of misinformation and the ways to prevent and counteract it.

The next activity involved an interactive application (e.g., Kahoot!). The contestants accessed the application via mobile phones, logging in to the indicated field using a code and viewing on the main screen a series of 8 questions to which they had to answer (true or false). The questions were based on the information presented in Module 1 and covered, inter alia, matters related to the war in Ukraine, etc. The ranking of the winners of this exercise was done automatically in the application, based on the indicators that took into account the number of correct answers in relation to the speed of response. The students ranked in the first 3 places received a diploma from their trainers at the end of the activity. At the same time, the exercise ended with a review of the questions and the analysis of false answers and the identification of untrue elements in their wording.

The next activity in this module presented a method of analyzing the news to determine its true value. The method explained the stages of deconstructing a news item (C-Currency; R-reliability; A-authority, P-purpose) by applying tools to analyze the timeliness, credibility, purpose, and relevance of the content of a piece of information. The students were introduced to this method as one of the most relevant and handy tools that could be easily applied to any content. At the same time, understanding this method was important for solving the application exercise proposed in the next module.

Module III, "From theory to practice"

The module was entirely dedicated to the pragmatic application of the analysis tools presented in the previous module. Taking into account the results of the research report based on the analysis of the initial questionnaire, the application exercise proposed the analysis of 3 news items from 3 different sources (newspaper, audio news, video news). The exercise consisted of the concrete application of the critical methods of information analysis to identify the false elements in the news, aiming at the development of advanced critical skills of research, interpretation, analysis, synthesis, and justification. The students were divided into groups of 4 and 5 members each and received the 3 sources of information - written article, audio news, and video news, as follows: written article (2 copies/group), and were allocated 15 minutes for the analysis; the audio news ran in plenary 3 times, followed by 15 minutes dedicated to the analysis; the video news ran in plenary 3 times, followed by 15 minutes dedicated to the analysis. During the activity, students analyzed the news received using the critical tools presented in the previous module, to determine the true value of the details from each source. At the end of the 45 minutes, a spokesperson from each group presented the conclusions of the analysis (false elements and how they were identified). The trainers who managed this activity got together to determine the winning team, which received a prize at the end of the module. For a better understanding of the exercise, each news item was analyzed in plenary, discussing the false elements and how to identify them.

At the end of the 3 modules, the trainers proposed a recapitulation exercise, with the purpose of verifying the degree of mastery of the terms, concepts, and methods presented in the workshop. Thus, students were asked to mention, orally, 3 terms (concepts) from what they remembered or found interesting, 2 ideas they would like to learn more about, and 1- a capacity/a skill or an ability that they considered they had acquired as a result of the training activities.

Module IV. Successful stories – case study

In this module the trainers provided some hints on how to share knowledge on discussed questions in the most efficient manner to the target groups as well as present some additional available resources dealing with questions related to political and information warfare.

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- Short presentation of relevant additional resources on information and political warfare with some examples on deciphering of the examined content – debuncking, fact-checking sources
- Q and A session with participants
- Short anonymous evaluation of the Training for Trainers exercise (5 min)

Innovation:

The "FLANKS II" project aims to provide tailor-made innovative resources for the successor generation to be more aware, knowledgeable and resilient to disinformation, propaganda and hostile information activities. By engaging young people at the core of the project, the consortium seeks to increase societal resilience among the young generation through a toolbox that can be further replicated.

The project partners identified the lack of capacity to comprehensively address a generation of students who were born after the internet was created and whose approach to learning is radically different from that of the previous generations. Thus, there was a need to design educational content that taught basic facts, critical thinking, and inspired Euro-Atlantic values holistically, rather than in a disparate fashion, and to do so in an interactive way that engaged an audience composed of the young generation, future practitioners, and leaders in various fields, including military, political science, and mass media.

Constraints:

When using the good practices presented in the document, one must take into consideration the essential particularities of the engaged public. The contents of the workshop modules are purely adapted to the information gaps identified by the assessment phase of the project. Therefore, when drafting the questionnaires, one must take into consideration the sensitive nuances in their particular context, especially if applied to security challenges and threat perception in particular countries.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the students validated the findings from the March 2023 survey, which highlighted a low awareness among respondents about consulting official NATO and EU websites or media institutions to debunk false information online. This underscores the need to promote debunking tools and resources among the younger generation, who are both highly exposed to online disinformation and open to adopting new technologies. Additionally, young people believe that self-protection from fake news, disinformation, and propaganda should be prioritized, followed by intervention from state institutions or independent organizations designed for this purpose. From a pedagogical perspective, the P2P educational model effectively addressed the critical insight that young people are more open to learning about disinformation and propaganda when the instructors are more familiarized with their needs and concerns and they find more similarities on cognitive, emotional and socio-psychological level among each other. Consequently, they are more receptive to tailored education aimed at fostering critical thinking. Without ongoing and sustained efforts to combat and monitor this phenomenon, society risks polarization and confirmation bias, which could ultimately undermine trust in democracy and its institutions.

Overall, our project has refined students' perceptions regarding disinformation, geopolitical issues, and the responsibilities in countering false information. These findings highlight the critical importance of discernment in information consumption and the need for targeted strategies to address disinformation across different demographics. The results are particularly relevant in the context of the highly contested information environment surrounding the national and European elections in 2024.

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