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Policy brief

Training of Trainers

results analysis

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Summary

This policy brief is part of the FLANKS II -Dealing with the challenge of political warfare in the COVID-19 and Ukraine war context, financed under the Fund for Bilateral Relations 2014-2021, co-published by New Strategy Center, Romania. The policy brief analyzes the results of a Training of Trainers activity undertaken by the New Strategy Center in conjunction with the West University of Timisoara, under the supervision of Professor Dr. Ileana Rotaru. The initiative complements at a micro and tailor level a national survey which was conducted in March 2023, analyzing attitudes towards the war in Ukraine and support for Euro-Atlantic institutions in Norway and Romania.

In October 2023, 14 students from the West University of Timisoara participated in a Training of Trainers activity coordinated by Professor Ileana Rotaru, involving master's students from the Faculty of Political Science, Philosophy and Communication Sciences.

In November 2023, 135 students from various UVT faculties took part in the follow up activity, where the newly trained trainers passed over the information acquired during the initial phase of the project. The purpose of the activity was to create a peer-to-peer learning information environment, where students could familiarize themselves with the core tenets of information hygiene in an interactive way. The activity was organized in two sessions.

This policy brief will analyze the results of the Training of Trainers activity in the context of the national survey conducted in March 2023 as part of the FLANKS 2 projects and subsequent national surveys on the same topic, relating them to current societal and geopolitical trends in Romania and the Euro-Atlantic world.

The methodology

The aim of this activity was to establish a student-led educational approach, fostering discussions among peers about political warfare concerning the conflict in Ukraine. This youth-driven activity enhances awareness and critical thinking, bolstering resilience against disinformation, with a focus on countering Russia's influence in Romania. Recognizing local vulnerabilities, the initiative aims to address the specific challenges posed by Russian disinformation while considering unique information landscapes within the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

About the survey

According to a national survey analyzing national attitudes in Romania after a year of war conducted in March 2023 as part of the FLANKS 2 project, despite the fact that the majority of Romanians, 68.8%, are pessimistic regarding the future evolution of the country, young adults are perceiving the country's direction positively. Top concerns among Romanians are energy prices (25.2%), corruption (21.6%), and their personal and family health (18.4%).

One year post-Russia's Ukraine invasion, anxiety levels about the conflict are similar to worries about the education system (12% vs. 12.4%) as the fear of Russian military aggression against Romania or Romania's involvement in the conflict has decreased. Yet, a relative majority (44.3%) associate the war in Ukraine with heightened fear due to increased living costs. Additionally, over a quarter of Romanians (27.6%) fear Russia attacking NATO or EU members, while 11.5% worry about a rise in refugee numbers.

The survey also revealed that the majority (56.6%) attribute blame to Russia for the war in Ukraine. However, anti-Western and anti-American narratives in social media led 17.2% to hold the USA responsible, followed by Ukraine. In March 2023, more than a third (37.6%) of Romanians believed in Ukraine's victory. The prevailing sentiment in Romania advocates for Russia's withdrawal and returning occupied territories to Ukraine as the correct resolution (63.3%), with only 23.5% supporting territorial concessions to Russia to halt the conflict.

NATO troops in Romania provide security against Russia, perceived positively by 58.5% of Romanians. About one third (33.1%) worry this presence might provoke Russia. Support for NATO's presence aligns with demographics: younger and older urban residents with higher education and income, not inclined towards Eurosceptic or populist views. Yet, only 40% believe Romania should fully meet NATO obligations if another member state is attacked, revealing a significant divide in opinion.

In Romania, two-thirds (67.1%) believe other states conduct propaganda within the country. Young, educated individuals in urban areas express stronger convictions about disinformation. Russia is seen as the primary culprit (29.9%), followed distantly by the USA (14.6%), then Hungary (4.3%), and Ukraine (3.7%).

The majority (56%) of Romanians attribute the spread of fake news to media seeking higher audience engagement, signaling a decline in trust in institutions that have veered from their role in ethical and informative public service. Younger, highly educated individuals with above-average incomes, not active in the labor market, are most attuned to these concerns. TV remains the primary source (57.5%) for information on Ukraine's war in Romania, with a distant second being social media (13.8%). Fewer rely on international (7.3%) or national publications (6.4%). Surprisingly, only 16.1% verify dubious news via EU or NATO official websites. Interestingly, younger, educated individuals in Bucharest are more prone to fact-check through official channels.

Our activity

Stage I of the P2P training model involved training participating students in the course's theme and teaching methods, preparing them as trainers for their peers at UVT in Stage II.

The learning unit covers media education, focusing on media competence and its application in information processing. It delves into youth behavior in the information age, strategies, communication processes, critical analysis of media messages, and the broader media system. Additionally, it introduces communication science and addresses combatting communication pathologies and misinformation campaigns. The unit aims to enable students to combat

misinformation, understand disinformation dynamics, and engage in interactive learning regarding the war in Ukraine.

The primary goal in the Module I was to facilitate the exchange of knowledge between trainers and students, fostering a deeper understanding of perceptions linked to the war in Ukraine and establishing a feedback mechanism between both parties.

The Module II started with a matching exercise introducing key concepts like parody, propaganda, and deepfake, followed by detailed presentations. Students were also provoked for discussions on misinformation and cyber security. Also, an interactive quiz using Kahoot! Followed through which the knowledge from the theoretical part were tested. The next activity was focused on analyzing news for credibility, using the C-Currency, R-Reliability, A-Authority, P-Purpose method to assess information.

The Module III focused on practical application of analysis tools from the previous module. Students, divided into groups, analyzed news items (written, audio, and video) using critical methods to identify false elements. Each group presented conclusions, and the winning team was rewarded. Also, the exercise encouraged advanced critical skills development. A recapitulation exercise at the end assessed term mastery and identifies concepts and skills gained from the training.

The "FLANKS II" project aimed to equip the next generation with tools to combat disinformation and propaganda. The project focused on engaging youth and enhancing societal resilience through an adaptable toolbox, because there is a need for tailored education for a generation born into the internet era, aiming to cultivate critical thinking and Euro-Atlantic values holistically, engaging future leaders across different fields interactively.

Results

Students taking part in the training were asked to complete a questionnaire as a precondition for enrollment in the activity and an evaluation survey at the end. The results overwhelmingly pointed towards a self-perception of knowledge improvement in relation to the ability to successfully identify disinformation attempts.

This section will thus analyze the effectiveness of the activity and indirect lessons provided by the interaction with the students, contrasting them with the survey results and societal and geopolitical realities in Romania.

According to our collected data concerning the phenomenon of disinformation and geopolitical matters, all surveyed 137 students acknowledge the reality of the disinformation phenomenon, with over two-thirds (70%) of them being exposed to false news across various media channels in recent months. However, there exists a division concerning the use of credible sources to verify the truthfulness of news (56% vs 44%).

Regarding information sources, students largely tend to avoid platforms like WhatsApp (83%), radio stations (71%), television (62%), or Facebook (59%) when seeking information on political, social, and economic matters. Instead, they slightly prefer Instagram, YouTube, or online publications for information consumption, a third of them inform themselves frequently or very frequently from these platforms.

Although a relative majority (48%) of students consider identifying disinformation neither easy nor difficult, there are differing opinions concerning geopolitical implications. While a significant portion (64%) maintains that Russia is primarily to blame for triggering the conflict in Ukraine, there is also uncertainty in assessing the implications of NATO and the US sending additional troops to Romania in the context of the Ukrainian conflict, with 48% of them that don't know how to evaluate this affirmation.

However, regarding international responsibilities, most students (61%) assert that Romania should fulfill its obligations as a NATO member state and provide military assistance in case of an attack on an allied nation.

In the context of the spread of false news, students attribute the highest responsibility to mass media (64%) but also to state institutions (74%) for shielding against the influence of disinformation and then everyone individually should be responsible (64%).

Students' primary concerns regarding the conflict in Ukraine revolve around its implications for Romania, the conflict's potential expansion, humanitarian impact, and economic consequences.

These conclusions underscore the complexity of students' approaches and perceptions toward the disinformation phenomenon and geopolitical situations. They highlight the necessity for discernment and awareness in information consumption and the handling of sensitive international matters.

Compared data

Compared with other surveys that approached disinformation phenomenon and geopolitical perspectives among Romanian populations, our results can be partially confirmed. More exactly, looking at the results from INSCOP surveys that shows categorized data for young people (18-29 age) and west region that includes Timisoara, on geopolitical matters from the latest poll from November 2023, the same proportion of students (64%) as the young people in Romania considers Russia as the main culprit for starting the war in Ukraine and a greater concern among young people about the expansion of war has been identified, as 35 percent fear Russia attacking some NATO member countries.

Some differences were noticed in relation to the subject related to the actions that Romania should take in the event that a NATO state were attacked, so that more of the students (61%) interviewed in our study are inclined that Romania should fulfill its NATO membership obligations in comparison with young people from Romania (45%) and from the west region (44%), according to the latest data from the INSCOP survey. Also, fewer of the students (36%) have a good opinion about the fact that NATO and the USA send more troops to Romania in the context of the war in Ukraine compared to the average of young people (56%) in Romania and the western region (57%).

From the available data from March INSCOP survey approaching the phenomenon of disinformation, we can confirm that the vast majority of young people (71%) believe that the phenomenon of disinformation is real and the majority of young people (57%) have been exposed in recent months to fake news and misinformation propagated through various media channels, attitudes confirmed by our study as well. It can also be confirmed that students (young people) consider the mass media to be most responsible for the spread of fake news in Romania (64% vs 69%).

Survey data indicates that a third of young people (35%) use reputable sources to confirm the veracity of news, but our data indicates a higher proportion (56%). This difference could be explained by the fact that the majority of respondents are students majoring in fields related to communication sciences, such as digital media, marketing or advertising, which might imply that they would be more aware of the phenomenon of misinformation than young people studying in other fields and know how to use debunking platforms.

Also, young people believe that people should protect themselves from the influence of fake news, disinformation, propaganda and then by state institutions or an independent organization, specially created for this purpose, the ranking in our survey has a different order: 1-state institutions, 2-mass media and then at the individual level.

From data presented by the last security barometer of November 2022, we can confirm that the majority of young people (50.5%) believe that Russia is to blame for today's situation in Ukraine. Also, young people prefer to get more information from social media platforms than from classic sources of information such as television or newspapers as was shown from your research. On the same topic in the Standard Eurobarometer 98 for Winter 2022-2023 and barometer of young people in Romania from September 2022 it's indicated that they lean towards acquiring information through social media channels.

In the Flash Eurobarometer from April 2022, it was shown that young people felt more confident (63%) to recognise disinformation when they encounter it than in the data collected by our research.

Conclusion

Overall, we can conclude that your project nuanced some perceptions among students regarding disinformation, geopolitical matters, and responsibilities in countering false information. These findings emphasize the importance of discernment in information consumption and the need for tailored approaches to address disinformation across various demographics as the present project was carried out.

The results overlap with a highly contested information environment in the context of the four elections that will be held in Romania in 2024 (European Parliament, national Parliament, local and presidential elections) and rising war fatigue after almost two years of war.

For the most part, social trends and attitudes have confirmed that there is an acknowledgment of disinformation in Romania, but there still are challenges in identifying this complex phenomenon. Even though students or young people are more open to learning about disinformation and propaganda and therefore more receptive to tailored education that aims to cultivate critical thinking, without continuous and repeated efforts to combat and monitor this phenomenon, the society could lead to polarization and confirmations bias that will undermine trust in democracy and its institutions.

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