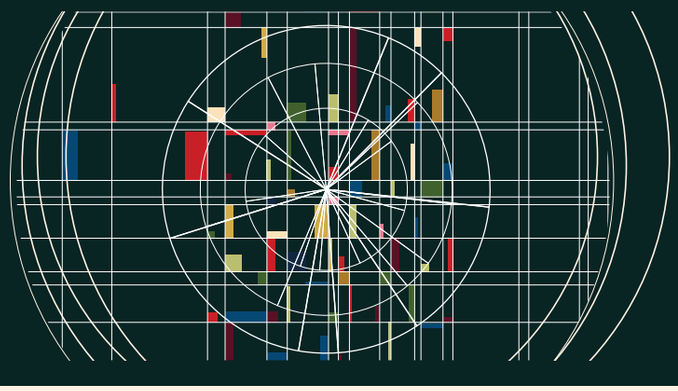
POLICY SUMMARY

Institute of communication studies

RESILIENCE INSTEAD OF DEBUNKING: RESPONDING TO FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE

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Executive summary

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) is a “intentional and coordinated pattern of manipulative behaviour” that can negatively impact democratic processes and trust in institutions. Hence, decision-makers, regulators, and media actors should treat it as a systemic risk, especially in election cycles and crisis situations, and establish a predictable, proportionate response that protects the public sphere without violating freedom of expression.

The key guideline is not to treat FIMI as a series of incidents that are to be extinguished with ad hoc rebuttals, but as a risk that requires clear positioning, predictable responses and coordination. It is therefore proposed that the FIMI approach have a concrete operational framework: (1) its incorporation into key national policies, (2) a small coordination structure with clear roles and a standard protocol for “information incidents”, (3) real guarantees of independence and protocols in the public service broadcaster, (4) greater transparency of ownership and financing and rules for political online advertising and (5) an “election protocol” for the digital sphere, including fast, verifiable clarifications of synthetic or manipulated audio and video content.

Practically, the measures involve a combination of institutional coordination and protocols for a rapid, verifiable response, strengthening the public service broadcaster, greater transparency in the media sector, and election rules for the digital domain.

Recommendations for the Government and institutions

- - Incorporate a clear definition and approach to FIMI into key national policies and strategies (national security, cybersecurity, public strategic communication), with precisely allocated roles and responsibilities among institutions.
- Establish a small, functional, coordination structure with a clear mandate to monitor risks, exchange relevant information and coordinate public reactions during sensitive periods, without the role of "arbiter of truth".
- Establish a standard protocol for "information incidents": who provides the response, within what deadline, with what sources and evidence, how clarifications are published, and how consistent, verifiable, and non-polarizing communication is ensured.

Recommendations for media regulatory policies

- Strengthen the public service broadcaster through measures that truly protect editorial independence and accountability: transparent elections of management and supervisory bodies, integrity criteria, and internal editorial rules that prevent manipulative "rebroadcasting" of controversial narratives without verification and context.
- Increase transparency in the media sector through more effective mechanisms for publicly available information on ownership and financing and clear rules for public funds (including state advertising), with independent oversight and regular accountability.
- Ensure integrity in the digital sphere during election and crisis periods through a national "election protocol" for the online environment: transparency and labelling of political advertising, procedures for rapid and verifiable clarifications of synthetic, manipulated audio and video content, and coordination with relevant institutions and independent oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Why is FIMI a systemic risk to North Macedonia?

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) does not only come down to “fake news”, rather it is a predominantly non-illegal, deliberate and coordinated pattern of manipulative behaviour that can significantly impact values, democratic procedures and political processes. The focus is on intent, coordination, manipulative nature and the use of proxies and networks that enable infiltration into local audiences and the amplification of narratives through various channels.

In a national context, FIMI manifests itself as a weakness of public communication not because "the public believes everything", but because the information system has difficulty providing stable criteria for verification, context and accountability in high-pressure moments. It is then that manipulative content is most easily "implanted" in everyday media reporting: it does not have to convince the majority, it is enough to create confusion, verification fatigue and polarization.

FIMI penetrates most easily during elections and times of crisis

The highest risk occurs in periods when society is most sensitive, during elections, events that concern security and geopolitics, crises or incidents with a strong emotional charge. Then, the pace suppresses scrutiny, and even small interventions in the context can significantly focus or sway the public’s impressions. In such situations, manipulative content does not need to “convince” the majority. It is enough to create fatigue, confusion and polarization to undermine trust in institutions and the media.

The risk is further exacerbated by structural weaknesses in the media ecosystem: an economically vulnerable market, incomplete transparency of ownership and financing, dependence on platform visibility, and insufficiently clear rules for online political advertising. In such an environment, manipulative narratives easily gain “local legitimacy” through repetition, selective transmission, and pseudo-analytical tones, without necessarily having direct control over the media.

Why are rules, roles and routines crucial?

The current approach remains fragmented. FIMI is mentioned in several policies and documents, but it still lacks a single, clear operational framework that states who monitors the phenomenon, who assesses it, who coordinates the response and how institutions communicate when manipulative content is spread through media and online channels. In such conditions, the response is often late and inconsistent: different institutions send out different messages, and the public reaction easily turns into a political debate rather than a verifiable clarification that helps the public orient itself.

An additional problem is that the link between cybersecurity capacities and information operations management is weak. Even when there are technical signals or indications, they are rarely translated into timely and clear public communications that mitigate damages and remain proportionate and human-rights compliant. This creates a “gap” in which manipulative frameworks find their footing before official clarifications emerge, and the media report in an absence of verifiable information.

This requires a shift from ad hoc debunking to a predictable system – agreed roles, a standard protocol for "information incidents", regular exchange of relevant information and proactive transparency that narrows the space for speculation. To the media, this means clear editorial routines for verification and contextualization in sensitive periods, as well as measures that reduce the "grey zone" through transparency of ownership, funding and political online advertising. This is not a mechanism for "content control", but a practical framework for trust: rules and procedures that make public responses fast, verifiable and consistent, reduce the damage from manipulation while preserving freedom of expression and media pluralism.

How to quickly read FIMI (in 4 categories)

For practical assessment, it is useful to follow a "matrix" with four questions:

Actors:

who is behind the activity (state/non-state actors and proxies).

Behaviour/ tactics:

what techniques are used (coordination, covert networks, amplification, false authenticity).



Channels:

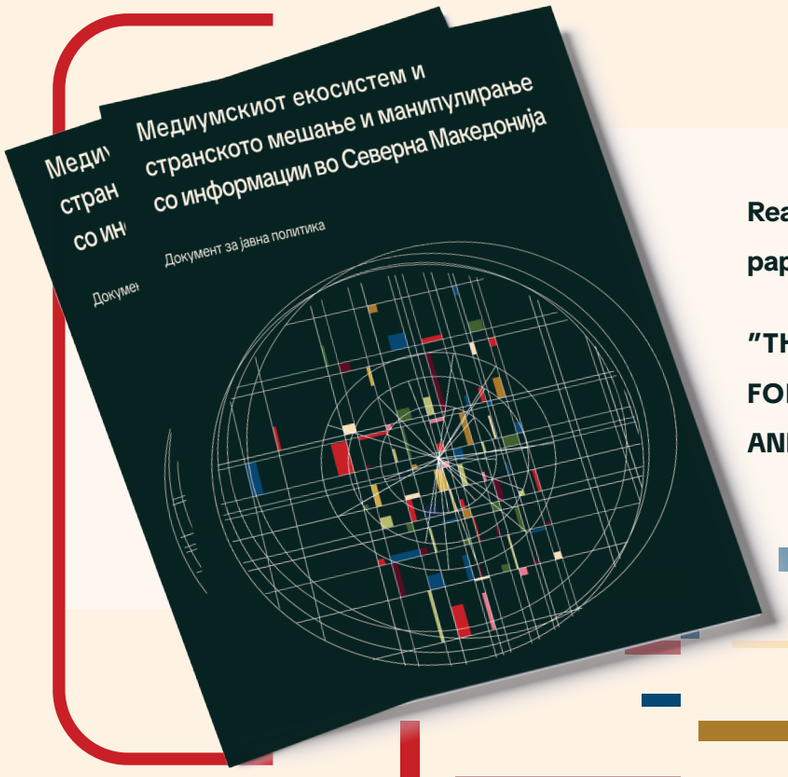
where does the activity take place (web portals, social media, video platforms; specific links/posts as evidence).

Effects/goals:

what is achieved (polarization, loss of trust, demobilization, pressure on institutions/ media).

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Read more on this summary's topic in the policy paper

"THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM AND FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA"

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