Abstract

In a world where the lines between fact and fiction are increasingly blurred, this thesis delves into the insidious yet sophisticated machinery of Russia's disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans post-2022 Ukrainian invasion consequently raising the question: how the Kremlin has leveraged both traditional and new media to disseminate disinformation, and how these efforts have shaped public opinion and political discourse in the Western Balkans? Anchored by a robust historical background, the study provides an overview of Russia's engagement in the Western Balkans, tracing the geopolitical dynamics that culminate in the contemporary information landscape. The literature review offers a thorough examination of key theories and definitions central to the research, including Hybrid Warfare, Information Warfare, and the concept of disinformation itself. This sets the stage for a deeper understanding of Russian strategies in the region, providing analytical frameworks of Media Effects Theory and Agenda Setting Theory. Employing a multi-methodological approach, this research uncovers patterns of Russian influence across multiple media outlets and platforms, focusing particularly on the utilisation of traditional media and the Twitter platform as tools of disinformation.

The findings delineate the Kremlin's sophisticated already existing narratives, ranging from the war in Ukraine to regional disputes, and their impact in Western Balkans countries such as Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia. Furthermore, the study explores the role of domestic actors in amplifying Russia's disinformation campaigns. It reveals that these orchestrated disinformation campaigns have not only shaped political discourse but also contributed to shaping public opinion, often exacerbating existing divisions and tensions. The thesis concludes by outlining the far-reaching implications of these disinformation strategies for regional stability and broader geopolitical discourse, while also acknowledging the limitations of the study. This research fills a critical gap in understanding Russia's current disinformation campaigns, providing insights for policymakers, scholars, and media practitioners.