CASE STUDY

INFLUENCERS AND THE NEW MEDIA REALITY: THE GROWING RISK OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

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Introduction

The digital space in Macedonia has been experiencing dramatic changes in recent years. Young people obtain their information almost entirely through TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. These platforms operate outside of traditional media rules, have no editors, no fact-checking, and without accountability for the impact they can create. In such environment, influencers are becoming the new "public voices," who can reach tens of thousands of people in minutes with just one video.

This development yields many positive opportunities, but also significant risks. Research carried out by European institutions show that foreign actors are increasingly investing resources in controlling and reshaping the digital space – not through classic media, but through influencers, meme profiles and coordinated digital networks. Macedonia is no exception, and our small media environment, low trust in institutions and high dependence on social networks make us susceptible to such influence operations.

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services has already established normative framework aimed at regulating influencers, but practical implementation – a registry, monitoring and analysis – is still lacking. That is why this study aims to explain how foreign influences operate in the digital space, points out which groups and platforms are most vulnerable and what can be done to strengthen media safety.

This study is prepared using on a combined methodological approach: analysis of European regulations (AVMSD, DSA, EMFA, Disinformation Code), review of European and regional reports on FIMI and digital risks, insight into documents and research of the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, as well as a detailed analysis of public reports, policies and media content related to influencers. In addition, case studies (e.g. Romania, RT/Sputnik) were used to illustrate specific patterns of influence and risks relevant to Macedonia. This is a qualitative analysis based on secondary sources, and not representative field research.

The aim of the study is to explain how influencers enter the ecosystem of foreign interference and manipulation of information (FIMI), what are the main regulatory and institutional gaps, and what are the real risks for the media and political context in Macedonia. By mapping the European standards, national regulations and concrete examples, the study proposes guidelines on how to increase the resilience of the country and the public.

The publication is intended for regulatory bodies, institutions responsible for security, electoral processes and foreign policy, policymakers in the media and digital spheres, journalists and editors, civil society organizations and researchers working on media literacy, disinformation and FIMI. At the same time, the text is also useful for influencers and content creators who want to better understand the regulations, risks and expectations regarding transparency and accountability.

What is FIMI?

Foreign interference and manipulation of information (FIMI) is not just fake news or an isolated post on social media. It is a structured, coordinated and long-term strategy. The goal is not just to spread inaccurate information, but to create suspicion, divisions, distrust in institutions, as well as to encourage political positions that suit the interests of foreign actors.

One of the most common mechanisms is synchronized publishing of content on multiple different profiles, seemingly created and run by different individuals. The research of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) identified coordinated online narratives for Macedonia that are spreading through the social networks, focused on undermining trust in the European integration processes. The most commonly used formulations are “Erasing Macedonian History” and “No to the French Proposal”, which present the EU process as a direct threat to the national identity. These messages circulate through TikTok, Instagram and YouTube profiles with high interaction, which indicates a systematic tactic to flirt with the young audience. At first glance, these videos and posts with such messages seem like an organic phenomenon, but there is usually coordination behind this as well as precisely defined goal that should be achieved with such messages.

FIMI exploits human weaknesses: emotions, the speed of information propagation and the trust that users have in the influencers they follow every day. This is why influencers are an easy target for such operations, often without being aware that they are becoming a tool for manipulation. Their posts are personal, immediate and informal, creating an impression of authenticity and closeness to the audience, and it is precisely this authenticity that can be abused. This is not just a theoretical risk. The article by BBC (Timeline of how online misinformation fueled UK riots) around the violent protests in 2024 showed that individual influencers, including Andrew Tate, significantly contributed with their messages and videos to the mobilization of young audiences and the spread of simplified, emotionally charged narratives that were then used by organized groups to further incite tensions.

The findings from Reuters Institute’s Digital News Report 2025 show that influencers are gaining trust and attention among young people, at a time when trust in traditional media is declining. They feel about their followers like they are “one of their own” and seem them as people with whom they have an informal relationship. Influencers have the power to change the behavior, attitudes and information of the audience, especially among young people. Their influence is based on trust, authenticity and familiarity, which makes them significant actors in shaping public opinion and cultural trends. But this is precisely the reason why influencers can easily become part of influence strategies.

European analyses show that profiles with large reach, including influencers, often end up included in spreading manipulative content. In its research on the German elections, GADMO/CORRECTIV documented that most of the pro-Russian content was spread through influencers with a large reach, as part of a coordinated network.

At the same time, a study of Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Allensbach Institute shows that TikTok users, especially young people, have a lower critical awareness of the origin of content, which makes the creators vulnerable to manipulation. This does not mean that influencers are intentionally spreading propaganda, but it does indicate that in an ecosystem where content goes viral in a very short time, they can easily become transmitters of disinformation without conscious intention.

This raises questions of transparency and accountability. An influencer with 10,000 followers has a real media impact greater than a local portal or radio station. Therefore, it is important that their work is treated responsibly and within the framework of the regulation.

European regulation – what matters for us?

The European Union is developing a serious system to deal with digital manipulation, recognizing that information stability is a key part of the democratic and security architecture. The new regulatory framework is built on three central pillars: Transparency, Resilience, and Accountability.

Traditionally, media regulation in Europe was only about linear television, as it was the dominant medium until around 2010. These are European directives and recommendations, which we are also required to implement in our legislation. However, with the emergence and growth of video-on-demand services, European regulation was amended and expanded in 2010 – these new media service providers have gained significant influence on both audiences and the market. As a result, the European Council's Audiovisual Media Services (AVMS) Directive included specific obligations for them, and media regulating authorities were tasked with regulating their operations. In 2018, this Directive was again amended and supplemented with an even broader scope: video sharing platforms and individuals offering on-demand audiovisual media services, i.e. influencers, were included. The Directive recognizes influencers as media actors and represents the most relevant tool for their regulation. It expands the scope of regulation of individual creators, requires transparency in advertising, and sets standards for audience protection. This provides a basis for Macedonia to develop its own regulation of influencers and place them in a framework that protects the citizens, but also increases the country's resilience to manipulative practices.

The Digital Services Act (DSA) represents the most structured and comprehensive instrument for managing content risks and limiting manipulative practices on major platforms. This Act introduces obligations to assess and mitigate systemic risks, including those arising from disinformation, manipulative campaigns and the disruption of electoral processes. The DSA requires transparency of algorithms, access to data for researchers and oversight bodies, and establishes a mechanism for regular reporting on the measures taken by the platforms.

The Code for Combating Disinformation, although is optional document from formal perspective, is becoming a significant element in the European approach thanks to its harmonization with the DSA. Platforms that join the Code commit to demonetizing disinformation content, to provide archives of political ads, to cooperate with fact-checkers, and to improve the labeling of risky content.

The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) focuses on the structural stability and independence of the media sector. It requires transparency of media ownership, guarantees editorial independence, and limits political pressures. These elements indirectly strengthen the resilience of countries to FIMI, because stable media systems have a greater capacity to distinguish legitimate information from manipulative campaigns.

To date, our country has fully harmonized its legislation only with the Audiovisual Media Services Directive, while harmonization with other EU acts should begin next year. However, it is very important to point out that the real problem is that DSA mechanisms only apply in member states. The platforms are not required to respond to requests from Macedonian institutions.

The most recent contacts and the regional cooperation with regulators from neighboring countries clearly shows that the most effective direction for our country is a collective, regional approach to digital platforms and harmonization with European standards. This means that not only us, but all Balkan countries should position themselves together before European institutions as a single front. This idea has taken concrete form in the forum in Athens, where regulators discussed opportunities for joint action, sharing experiences and coordination.

The reason for this is simple: the mechanisms provided by the DSA apply only to EU member states, so our regulators have no direct way to demand a reaction from the platforms when a problem arises. If the region acts in a coordinated manner the argument is greater, it is easier to get support from the EU, and the platforms treat joint requests more seriously. Such a joint approach is also recommended by the Council of Europe in its regional report PRO-FREX.

IV Why is the national regulation important?

The regulation on influencers in Macedonia did not arise just because it is required by European legislation, but the domestic context also played a role in that. In recent years, influencers have become one of the most influential actors in the public space, and for a large part of the young audience they are the primary source of news, advice, attitudes and behavioral models. It is easy to see that advertisers very often enter into agreements with them in order to advertise their products and services, which has increased the need for introducing clearer rules and greater responsibility regarding the content they share.

This trend can easily be seen if we take a look at the Macedonian digital ecosystem. For example, Lila Filipovska, with over 230,000 followers on Instagram, covers topics related to lifestyle, fashion, beauty, and personal opinions on a daily basis – content that creates a sense of familiarity and strongly influences the perceptions of her followers. Stefan Lazarov, with around 159,000 followers, has developed a hybrid model of being an influencer and a podcast host - in addition to lifestyle topics, he occasionally has conversations with guests from different political orientations, which puts his platform as a space where social and political messages reach the young population that traditionally does not follow classic media. On the other hand, Branko Ognjanovski AKA Mile Panika uses satirical and comedy videos to create marketing campaigns with high reach and a strong ability for massive viral spread.

These examples show that influencers in Macedonia are no longer just simple "content creators". They are increasingly becoming important communication points that can mobilize large numbers of people, influence public opinion and convey various messages – from commercial to social and political. Therefore, a clear regulatory framework is needed – one that will protect the public interest, increase transparency and set basic rules for responsible information and communication in the digital space.

The Rulebook on natural persons providing audiovisual media services on demand (influencers/vloggers/creators) of the Agency for Audio and Audio-Visual Services establish a clear and measurable framework: a profile with at least 10,000 followers or subscribers, that posts on regular basis (at least 24 videos in a 12-month period), that has economic activity and editorial control is considered a media service provider. This implies new obligations for the entities – registration, transparency and compliance with the basic rules that apply to all other media actors. This allows for greater visibility of profiles that have significant influence and a clearer picture of how this influence is exercised in the public space.

The initial draft of the Regulation envisaged a higher quantitative threshold: at least 30,000 followers. This number was derived from analyses of how many influencers would be covered by the regulation and what the regulator's capacities are for quality monitoring of their activity. However, during the public discussion held in 2024, influencers themselves indicated that a significant number of creators with smaller number of followers have a real and consistent impact on the audience in Macedonia. Based on their arguments, a reduction in the threshold was proposed, after which the number of 10,000 followers was incorporated into the final version of the Rulebook.

But the regulation is only one part of the story. In order for it to function, two practical steps are needed: a registry in which influencers will be recorded and monitoring that will monitor their work, especially during sensitive periods such as elections. These mechanisms are still in the phase of establishment. Influencers have until 31 December 2025 to register in the Registry, and active monitoring will begin next year. After this deadline, all those entities that meet the requirements according to the Rulebook but have not registered will be contacted. If they fail to fulfill this obligation, sanctions will follow in accordance with the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. Until then, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services does not have the possibility to monitor, nor does it have the legal authority to assess risks from FIMI – it can, however, set rules, promote transparency and contribute through media literacy.

During the last local elections, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services conducted a pilot monitoring of 53 influencers sharing content on TikTok, Instagram and Facebook – the first such analysis in our country. The monitoring was exclusively intended to determine whether influencers shared content related to the local elections that took place in 2025. The analysis will be finalized early next year and will offer a clearer picture of how influencers communicate with their audience and where future monitoring should be focused.

V Context and risks for Macedonia

European institutions have long been sounding the alarm that foreign influence and information manipulation are among the most serious threats to democracy. Instead of classic fake news, today's campaigns rely on much more subtle methods: partially accurate information taken out of context, emotional messages, and their rapid propagation through platform algorithms. Artificial intelligence makes this even harder to discern - in a matter of seconds we can create video or audio that is real, but is, in fact, completely fabricated. This is documented in the European analyses of AI-related risks. This is a game changer and requires new ways of protection of the public space. But, what are the risks for our country?

Firstly, the platforms. The Research on media literacy carried out among students in the first and second year of secondary education released by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in 2024 showed that a large proportion of young people have profiles on Instagram (93.1), TikTok (87.6) and Facebook (81.3), meaning that the young audience is massively exposed to the content on the social networks. TikTok videos are the most popular and have the greatest impact on young people, and its algorithm rewards content that evokes strong emotions. Instagram, uses short videos to combine lifestyle and political messages. YouTube, which is most often used by video bloggers, allows the creation of longer videos whose excerpts are often shared on other social networks such as Facebook, so the narratives embedded in them have a longer lifespan. It is for these reasons that these three platforms are in the focus of our regulation.

Secondly, the types of influencers. The preliminary analyses in terms of type of service they offer (genre) show that the most present and followed are those influencers who cover topics from everyday life (cooking, travel, sports, etc.). It is this group that enjoys the greatest trust among young people, and with it goes the danger of inserting subtle political messages or manipulative content "among other things". Informal political commentators often lack editorial control and are susceptible to influence.

Thirdly, the narratives. There are geopolitical spins spreading around the EU, NATO and Russia, reinforced by messages that undermine trust in institutions and the electoral process. In parallel with that, ethnic and religious themes are being misused for rapid polarization, and targeted content towards different groups further poisons the public space.

VI

Case studies

Romania 2024 – information risks, FIMI techniques and annulment of the electoral process

The 2024 elections in Romania have become a precedent in European political history, as it was the first time that an entire election round was annulled due to suspicions of foreign influence and coordinated manipulative online activities. This case is being closely analyzed by the European Commission, the European Parliament and the Council of Europe as an example of how electoral integrity can be undermined without physical fraud, but through digital operations that operate silently, quickly and across multiple platforms simultaneously.

TikTok has emerged a crucial platform for young people to communicate about politics during Romania's first round of presidential elections in 2024. According to the TechPolicy.Press analysis (2024), the European Audiovisual Observatory document, and a number of monitoring organizations, there was a significant activation of new or previously inactive profiles with unclear editorial affiliation that simultaneously produced and disseminated political content in the run-up to the elections. These networks contributed to TikTok becoming the dominant source of political videos and messages for young voters, which was also confirmed in the post-election analyses of the European Commission in the context of the DSA procedure against the platform. Although there is no official quantitative data on the exact percentage of young people who obtained political information through TikTok, all relevant sources indicate a significant disproportion compared to other platforms and media.

Some European hubs that deal with online monitoring, such as the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO), the Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory for Digital Media (BROD) and external civil sector partners, have noted an increased volume of coordinated inauthentic behavior.

The key moment was when the European Commission, using the mechanism for large online platforms provided for in the Digital Services Act, issued a data preservation order to TikTok. With this order, the platform was ordered to preserve all data and information related to its systems as well as the efforts that the platform has made against such inauthentic behavior. This data preservation measure is intended to ensure that all evidence will be available in the future for potential future investigations. Of course, the trigger for this measure was the suspicions of foreign manipulation, unlabeled political advertising, abuse of algorithmic ranking and possible links to external actors. This was the first time that the EC activated such a measure within the framework of the DSA in order to protect the electoral process in an EU Member State.

Additionally, according to the analysis of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), the campaign did not operate in isolation: there was a significant amplification through

profiles that later turned out to be part of broader networks that regularly spread pro-Russian-critical narratives in the region. Inauthentic behavior operations were also observed through bots and networks of micro-influencers, a tactic often used by foreign actors to increase the visibility of certain political messages. From a security perspective, the Council of Europe notes that in Romania there were attempts to manipulate the electoral process through cyber activities, unclear financing, and the activation of thousands of TikTok accounts just two weeks before the vote.

When the Constitutional Court annulled the results of the first round of elections, the formal justification was not that the voting was technically irregular, but that the information environment was "sufficiently distorted" to guarantee the validity of the election outcome. With this decision, Romania became the first European example where an electoral process was annulled due to influence in the digital sphere.

For Macedonia, this case is extremely relevant for several reasons: (1) the addiction of young people to the same platforms, especially TikTok; (2) the absence of mechanisms for monitoring political advertising in the digital space and inauthentic behavior; (3) the lack of institutional access to the data that platforms provide to EU member states under the DSA; and (4) the growing role of influencers in creating public narratives. The Romanian example clearly shows that digital operations can pose a serious democratic risk even in countries with far stronger institutional capacities.

RT - Russia Today and Sputnik: Regulatory responses and policy framework

Since the European Union introduced restrictive measures against the Russian state-controlled media RT – Russia Today, Sputnik, Rossiya RTR/RTR Planeta, Rossiya 24/Russia 24, TV Cenre International, NTV/NTV Mir, Rossiya 1, REN TV and Pervyi Kanal, several countries have restricted their propagation due to the assessment that they function as instruments for spreading propaganda and manipulative narratives.

Macedonia, in 2022 and 2023, following the adoption of decisions to introduce restrictive measures in accordance with the Law on Restrictive Measures, also banned their broadcasting through the operators of public electronic communication networks. Although the government has banned the rebroadcasting of these program services, it does not mean that their content has completely disappeared from the digital space. There is a real possibility that parts of their messages will continue to circulate through other online formats such as short videos, memes or repackaged "analytical" materials that users share on social networks. This model has already been observed in other European countries and in the region, where content with a similar narrative appears on profiles, pages or portals that are not directly related to the original media. Although there are no formal analyses for Macedonia, the media ecosystem and the way in which the platforms work indicate that it is also possible for certain messages or topics to continue to spread in a modified or localized format in the country.

VI

Regional models of coordinated campaigns

European analyses of foreign influence indicate that the Western Balkans are particularly sensitive to coordinated disinformation activities. The report of the European Audiovisual Observatory emphasizes that the region is already under increased pressure due to the war in Ukraine and that foreign actors are using information manipulation campaigns to influence political processes. In doing so, the line between "foreign" and "domestic" influencers is blurred, as media space, languages, and political connections overlap across the region.

The research of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue provides a clearer picture of what these models look like in practice: the analysis shows that the majority of disinformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia is spread by domestic political actors and media outlets close to parties, not just foreign sources. The majority of messages have an anti-Western tone, and a significant portion of them support Kremlin positions.

In the section on Macedonia, this report notes that Eurosceptic messages are present in public discourse and that organized online campaigns with messages such as "Erasing Macedonian History" and "No to the French Proposal" are appearing through the platforms X, Facebook and YouTube. These contents present the European process as a threat to identity and undermine the trust in institutions and European integration. Overall, the findings show that coordinated campaigns are not just a theoretical risk for Macedonia, they are already documented and are part of a broader pattern of influential activities in the region.

VII What Macedonia needs to do in order to protect influencers and the public

Influencers today play a role that a few years ago was exclusive only to television: they shape attitudes, influence behavior, and are often the first source of information for young people. That is why it is important to create a system that will protect both them and the public from manipulation and foreign influences.

Three clear and achievable steps are needed to achieve this.

1. **Completion of the Registry and introduction of regular monitoring**
   The Registry is the first requirement for knowing which influencers have a large reach and influence. Once this database is complete, the next step is regular monitoring, especially during election periods or when there is an increase in manipulative content.

2. **Greater transparency in influencer content**
   Audiences need to be clear when content is paid for or endorsed by a particular entity, whether it's a product, a political message, or a social issue. This is important because influencers often have a high level of trust among young people, and it's that trust that can be exploited by third parties.

3. **A common institutional approach for the purpose of risk monitoring**
   No single agency can deal with foreign influence alone. The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services is setting the regulations and other institutions have a role in identifying risks. Coordination is required, a system in which institutions exchange information about trends, inauthentic behavior, and potential manipulative campaigns.

VIII Influencers as new media

Influencers today are performing the function that traditional media is losing. They communicate directly, without formal barriers and editorial filters. This creates a sense of closeness and trust among young people, something that the classic media outlets cannot achieve anymore. It is precisely this closeness, however, that makes influencers vulnerable to manipulation.

The example of Romania shows that foreign influences can distort the electoral process using networks of profiles and micro-influencers.

This study has several key messages:

» Influencers are a significant part of the media ecosystem and should be treated as such.

» They can be both a target and a tool of foreign influences, sometimes without even knowing it.

» With proper regulation, transparency, and institutional coordination, influencers can become part of the solution, not the weak point in the digital system.

It is crucial to note that influencers do not threaten public space.

The public space is threatened by the fact that we do not have clear rules, tools and mechanisms that protect them and the audience.

With a strong Registry, clear standards, and better coordination, Macedonia can create a digital environment in which influencers can freely create, communicate, and influence, but within frameworks that protect democracy and increase the resilience of the entire society.

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