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Media reporting on the Law on
Freedom of Religion or Belief

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Dangerous manipulation and inadequate response of institutions



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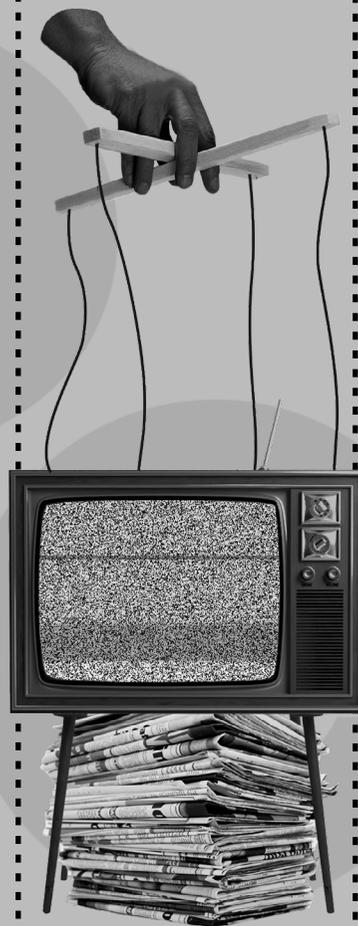


After adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion of Belief, a campaign of spreading media manipulation was launched in the media space, where the opinion of the citizens of Montenegro is created. Since October 2018, when we began to work on the project of fact-checking the media content – Raskrinkavanje.me, this was the fourth major cycle of “bombardment” with disinformation.

The first trigger was [a harmless event in a court in Kotor after which Sara Vidak was arrested in 2018](#), the second one were the events [surrounding the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Irinej Gavrilovic, being barred from entering Montenegro](#), and then unexpectedly - this sport turned into media hysteria during [the 2019 ABA League Finals](#).

In January 2020, media manipulations were, according to the established model, set in two directions. The first – general one, was aimed at questioning the values of Western democracies, Montenegro's membership in NATO, the existence of Montenegro as a state, the existence of the Montenegrin nation, the civil society. All this was accompanied by the spread of known false narratives, innumerable chauvinistic messages, hate speech, insults and the like.

The second one was contributing to the “debate” and the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This level of manipulations was aimed at provoking and intensifying tensions and hindering dialogue, i.e. any possibility for key actors to overcome this conflict in a democratic and enlightened manner. Manipulations ranged from completely inaccurate



information about the content of the Law, through tendentious interpretations of some of its provisions, spreading false narratives about handing over religious objects to the Vatican, to a significant exaggeration of the number of people taking part in protest walks. The campaign culminated with an announcement of disinformation about the arrival of Kosovo special forces to help “appease” the protests in Montenegro.

Most of this “news” came from the media registered in Serbia, but the media from Russia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republic of Srpska) were active as well. Of course, media from Montenegro participated in all this, more precisely one part of them. There were those who tried to support and assist these media manipulations as much as possible, but also those who tried to create their own counter-campaign by biased reporting.

During these events, without the necessary preparation of legislation and procedures, the Cabinet of the President of Montenegro, the Government, some ministries and even political parties have introduced the practice of “exposing” fake news and thus tried to influence the work of the media. Thus, the executive authorities expressed their ambition to extend their constitutional powers to evaluation of the compliance with the journalists' Code of Ethics.

The State Prosecutor's Office and the Police have made their “contribution” to preventing disinformation by arresting journalists or distributors of fake news accusing them of wanting to cause panic and chaos.

The CDT team and researchers of our project called [Raskrinkavanje.me](https://raskrinkavanje.me) have analyzed hundreds of articles, reports and TV shows during January, and below are our most important conclusions:

1. At the beginning of 2020, the media space of Montenegro was the target of an organized spread of media manipulations aimed at influencing events related to the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief. This was the most intense of the four major campaigns of this type in the last 18 months.

2. The media both inside and outside Montenegro participated in the spread of these manipulations, this time not only in the online but also in the traditional media.

3. Unlike previous disinformation campaigns, this one was characterized by a more intensive involvement of not only private media but also public broadcasting services, which, when “covering” events in Montenegro, included high state and church officials from Serbia, and occasionally even from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Russia.

4. State institutions have made several omissions and missteps when opposing these campaigns, and thus, consciously or not, have provided added impetus to new disinformation campaigns against Montenegro. This raised a legitimate question as to whether the behavior of the institutions was actually a “blurry hunt” and an attempt to influence the work of the media?

Frequent exposure to disinformation over the previous years, did not prompt the Montenegrin institutions to act, so they were unprepared for this wave as well - without a strategic approach and developed procedures for such happenings.

5. Instead of preparing for these campaigns, they have chosen an unusual role for themselves - to “expose” fake news. Instead of retractions, the media received labels from the institutions that could be interpreted as an attempt to influence their work.

6. Institutions belonging to the repressive apparatus (the Police and the State Prosecutor’s Office) have gone even a step further and made a bigger mistake, opting for the arrest of individuals on charges of spreading panic and spreading fake news.

7. The Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) has, in the past, inadequately responded to these occurrences and has had no influence on the broadcasting of controversial content. It did not, at least briefly, stop that part of the campaign that was happening on TVs that are not broadcast from Montenegro. It did not create a clear legal basis to prevent the broadcasting of hate speech or national security threats. Lack of reaction has raised the question of political interest of the authorities to broadcast these contents, as well as whether the AEM’s past activities in this field have been in the public interest?

The fact that undemocratic actors and opponents of Western values try to trick us into nationalism, chauvinism, offend us or cause tensions, etc., does not give anyone the right to oppose them in inappropriate and undemocratic manner - there is only one way - strengthening the rules, procedures and independent institutions. And more independent media.

Therefore, it is time for **action**, because the next campaign of this type will be coming soon. Let us **finally adopt** media laws with a maximum degree of consensus. Let us **bring together a team** of people who know how democratic societies fight media manipulation. Let us **create an action calendar** and get started right away - one important thing at a time. Let us **prepare a strategy**. Let us **amend the laws** in this area, with the utmost protection of the right to freedom of expression, just as democratic states do. Let us **prepare by-laws** that will define procedures for countering these phenomena without the possibility of abuse. Let us **prepare intensive campaigns** to raise the level of media literacy of citizens. Let us **give the powers** to an independent institution to run this fight more effectively. Let us **be a good example** to others, not an encouragement to justify new campaigns.



{ Let us welcome the next strike **with a real democratic response** }
- or admit we are **similar** to those who attack us. }

