Article

Vulnerability to Disinformation in Relation to Political Affiliation in North Macedonia

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Abstract
This study aims to analyze the relationship between political affiliation and vulnerability to disinformation in North Macedonia through the role of psychological and social constraints in shaping how individuals respond to and process information. Research has shown that politically affiliated individuals may be particularly vulnerable to disinformation in part due to confirmation bias or the tendency to accept and seek out information that is consistent with one's preexisting beliefs and ignore or refute information that is not. Using the quantitative method and cross-matched data from the empirical research, the study has shown that political affiliation affects the way individuals perceive disinformation. Correspondingly, disinformation with a negative connotation from one's affiliated political party is perceived by a lower percentage as accurate, contrary to disinformation with a negative connotation from the opposing political party, which is perceived by a higher percentage as accurate. The study also found that politically affiliated individuals are more prone to disinformation than those who are not politically affiliated. The results suggest that political affiliation plays a significant role in an individual's vulnerability to disinformation.

Keywords
confirmation bias; disinformation; North Macedonia; political affiliation; vulnerability

1. Information Space and Political Landscape in North Macedonia

The information space in North Macedonia is characterized as vulnerable to foreign influence. Russian disinformation campaigns have found their way to the Macedonian audience through various portals and traditional media. The unregulated space of online media facilitates the implementation of these malign campaigns.

According to Freedom House's report (2022), North Macedonia became a partially free country for the first time in 2022, evading the transitional period with hybrid-regime countries. Despite North Macedonia climbing 33 spots in the 2022 World Press Freedom Index and the media's freedom to exercise their profession, it is

stated: "Although journalists do not work in a hostile environment, widespread misinformation and the lack of professionalism contribute to society's declining trust in the media, which exposes independent outlets to threats and attacks" (Reporters Without Borders, 2022).

The conditions for a country to be vulnerable to disinformation rely primarily on its internal predispositions than on foreign factors, as Greene et al. (2021) indicate. High levels of polarization, with low levels of trust in media and institutions, populist communication, increased social media use, and a fragmented environment are some of the preconditions that make a country more vulnerable to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020).

Striving for democratization and EU accession, North Macedonia, a NATO member since 2020, still

struggles with a highly polarized and fragmented society, mainly on ethnic and political lines. The political spectrum is boldly divided into the ethnic Macedonian and the Albanian blocs. The Macedonian bloc is further divided along their ideological lines, which often merge with the geostrategic ones: social-democrats (Social Democratic Union of Macedonia [SDUM]) and conservatives (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization—Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity [IMRO-DPMNU]). The Albanian political bloc consists of Democratic Union for Integration (DUI), the Alliance for Albanians (AA), the Democratic Party of Albanians, Besa, and Alternativa. Pro-Russian sentiment is present in the Macedonian community due to their common Slavic origin and religious affiliation. The opposite is true for the Albanian population in North Macedonia. However, we cannot claim they are resilient to malign influences. In an already fragile environment, disinformation in North Macedonia finds a suitable landscape for dissemination and amplification by deepening the polarization and divisions in society.

In *The Global Disinformation Order*, Bradshaw and Howard (2019) revealed social media manipulation campaigns in 70 countries—48 countries in 2018 and 28 countries in 2017. Among other democratic and non-democratic states, in this report, North Macedonia was examined as one of the countries where cyber troop activity took part through social media manipulation, respectively Facebook and Twitter fake accounts: automated (bots) and human. These strategies were used in North Macedonia to attack the opposition, spread polarizing messages, and suppress participation through personal attacks or harassment (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019). Moreover, during the 2016 US presidential election, the small Macedonian city of Veles became the epicenter of generating and disseminating a global disinformation campaign on social media (Hughes & Waismel-Manor, 2020).

Otherwise, in the country's most decisive times, North Macedonia experienced orchestrated foreign disinformation campaigns, supported and disseminated mostly by domestic online media outlets and mainly Macedonian conservative and far-left political parties (Denkovski, 2020). Some of the most active and aggressive disinformation campaigns in recent years affecting Macedonian citizens took place during the 2018 referendum for NATO and EU accession respectively, the country's name change (Metodieva, 2022), and the 2021 census (Trajanoski, 2022), which was organized after 19 years (the last one was from 2002). Elections in North Macedonia are also affected by disinformation. However, this is a shorter term aimed internal campaign than a strategic foreign campaign—unless it is a question of significant changes that impact the country's geostrategic and ideological orientation, as was the case with the 2016 parliamentary elections when the pro-Russian authoritarian regime failed (Tsalov, 2020). The Russian Federation used the referendum to issue an

aggressive disinformation campaign to boycott the vote. Moscow openly opposed Macedonia's NATO aspirations (Veselinovic, 2018).

Internal factors also overlap with the challenges coming from external influences. Despite North Macedonia's 2017 regime change which brought about an overall democratic transformation, still:

> Reform fatigue, clientelistic pressures from the political domain towards media (and vice versa) and party-political confrontations, coupled with structural pressures not exclusive to North Macedonia—such as the disinformation and misinformation flooding of the public sphere, exacerbated by health challenges concerning the Covid-19—have all partaken in the assessment that the media system in this country needs a new impetus for constructive change (Micevski & Trpevska, 2022, p. 8).

Moreover, Micevski and Trpevska (2022) argue that the risks to media pluralism in the digital sphere critically affect the overall state of the media system in the Republic of North Macedonia.

Since political orientation has a major impact on the citizens of North Macedonia and they are continuously exposed to disinformation campaigns, this study addresses political affiliation as an independent variable for raising a research question on vulnerability to disinformation. The research question "does political affiliation affect the vulnerability to disinformation in North Macedonia?" is tested through the quantitative method with a survey based on questions for attaining respondents' political affiliation and their ability to identify true or false information for their affiliated and opposing political party. Additionally, the study tries to answer the research question "does political affiliation impact the way the audience perceives political disinformation?" aiming to reveal how politically affiliated individuals react and perceive disinformation with positive/negative context for their affiliated party and positive/negative context for their opposing political party. The study is also interested in showing correlations between politically affiliated individuals and their vulnerability to disinformation concerning source credibility.

2. Disinformation and Confirmation Bias: An Overview

Human consciousness has a tendency to seek and interpret information and other evidence that support its already existing beliefs while ignoring those that do not match or are even against their beliefs. This human condition favors malign actors' objectives to mislead or influence political views through the spreading of disinformation.

Disinformation has become a significant concern in recent years because it can have serious consequences for individuals and society. However, the term "fake news" gained widespread attention during the 2016

US presidential election, where research from Google trends showed that people began searching for the term more frequently (Derakhshan & Wardle, 2017). This increase in fake news usage continued after the election, with the Trump administration using it to discredit media channels that published negative stories about the administration (Marwick & Lewis, 2017). Despite this, professional journalists believe that news should be accurate and true and, therefore, cannot be fake. Journalists from the *Washington Post* and other researchers argue that "fake news" does not accurately capture the complexity of misinformation and disinformation (Annenberg School for Communication et al., 2017). In this regard, Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) created an information disorder framework, where *misinformation*, *disinformation*, *and mal-information* represent the systematic disorders in the media and define disinformation as "when false information is knowingly shared to cause harm" (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017, p. 5). Additionally, the orchestrated manipulative information to influence political causes is called disinformation. Woolley and Joseff (2020, p. 6) have defined disinformation from the intent's perspective as a broad term usually referring to the "purposeful use of nonrational argument to undermine a political ideal, inflame social division, or engender political cynicism." Disinformation can also distort the context to achieve the deliberate effect. Therefore, throughout this article, "false information" is used to describe pieces of disinformation (fake news), whereas we use the term "disinformation" for the overall intended manipulation in the media sphere.

Derakhshan and Wardle (2017) argue that there are three elements to the spread of disinformation: the agent, the messenger, and the interpreter. The interpreter, or the person receiving and interpreting the message, is the focus of this research, as it aims to understand how audiences perceive disinformation and their vulnerability to it. The agents who create and disseminate disinformation use a strong understanding of behavioral and cognitive strategies for individual manipulation. It is important to use this same understanding to reveal and understand how people react to and are affected by disinformation. The concept of "empathic media," which refers to the use of personalized and emotionally targeted news produced by algorithms in the digital environment, can also be used to understand the phenomenon of disinformation (Bakir & McStay, 2017). Woolley and Joseff (2020) argue that cognitive bias theories of information consumption and opinion formation, such as attitude polarization, confirmation bias, and illusory correlation, are particularly relevant for examining the influence of disinformation. This suggests that understanding the psychological factors that affect how people consume and form opinions about information can help to shed light on the spread and impact of disinformation.

Confirmation bias of politically affiliated individuals is one of the variables tested in this research. These biases might make them more prone to disinformation. Political affiliation can influence how a person votes, what issues they prioritize, and their general political beliefs and values. Confirmation bias, as defined by Wason (1960), refers to the tendency to search for and interpret evidence that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses. This can involve selectively attending to, remembering, or interpreting information in a way that supports one's beliefs while discounting or ignoring information that challenges or contradicts those beliefs. In his experiment, Wason (1960) found that participants tended to select cards that confirmed their initial hypotheses about the rule rather than testing alternative hypotheses, even when those alternative hypotheses would have been more informative. Namely, confirmation bias may lead people to disregard important evidence and consider only evidence that supports their beliefs, leading to incorrect conclusions or decision-making. Confirmation bias, as Nickerson (1998) notes, tends to selectively use evidence to justify a conclusion while neglecting evidence that contradicts that conclusion. It may also make it more difficult for people to consider alternative perspectives or viewpoints, as they may be more likely to dismiss or discount information that does not align with their preexisting beliefs. In the context of political affiliation, this can manifest as a tendency only to seek out information that aligns with one's political beliefs and affiliations and to ignore or dismiss information that does not. This can create a self-reinforcing cycle, as people with strong political affiliations may be more likely to surround themselves with others who share their views and consume media that aligns with their beliefs.

This tendency is related to cognitive dissonance, as described earlier by Festinger (1957), which refers to the discomfort people feel when confronted with information or situations that conflict with their preexisting beliefs or attitudes. To reduce this discomfort and maintain cognitive consistency, people may minimize or avoid exposure to information that contradicts their beliefs. Festinger (1957) suggested that people will look for sources of information that will help increase consonance but avoid sources that would increase dissonance. The same would apply to people. They will seek opinions from people they think would have the same beliefs. In this light, the "personal influence" by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) highlighted that people talk with each other and are often used as a source of important messages. Klapper (1960), through his work *Effects on Mass Communication*, believed that media does not directly impact people's choices but through opinion leaders who interpret, shape, and distribute the information to the public through a mediated two-step flow model. According to Klapper (1960), mass media reinforces the audience's beliefs and does not have a direct impact on people's choices. People are influenced only by the media they choose to watch, depending on their previous attitude toward the subject. Klapper (1960) suggested that further research should be done to understand the conditions under which media has the most

potent effects, highlighting the importance of understanding how psychological predispositions, social context, and cultural factors can influence an individual's media consumption.

One of the key factors that can contribute to vulnerability to disinformation among politically affiliated individuals is the credibility of the source of information. Metzger et al. (2020) research proved that partisan users consider more credible sources that are consistent with their attitude or political affiliation rather than sources that challenge their attitude or political belief. The study has shown that news consumers report higher levels of cognitive dissonance when exposed to attitude-challenging news sources than when exposed to attitude-confirming or balanced news sources. Even though a moderate level of dissonance was noticed in balanced news sources, this suggests that there may be some potential for further research based on the perception of source credibility and media consumption habits in the future that could help reduce disinformation vulnerability levels of partisan users.

The role of interpersonal connections and social media influencers in the dissemination of disinformation is also significant. Research has shown that people are more likely to believe and share information if it comes from someone they trust, even if the source is not a credible organization. The Media Insight Project (2017) indicates that the audience believes the news more if it is shared by people they trust. As this finding reveals, the audience believes more in the person who shares it than the organization that produces the news. Interpersonal connections are still influential. Yesterday's opinion leaders might be today's social media influencers. The relevancy of the two-step flow model in the theory of political communication, which Southwell (2017) marks, lies in the social nature of humanity, even though the evidence has shown a more complicated model of information flow than the two-step model. He suggests that future research should address social network genesis, conversational modality's impact, and environmental context's role (Southwell, 2017). Prioritizing a post from a friend rather than a credible source of information leads to the spread of disinformation or misinformation. Vosoughi et al. (2018) tested the spreading of false news and news in the same subjects and in the same manner by robots vs. humans. They revealed that bots accelerate the spread of false and true information at the same rate, but false information was spread significantly faster and deeper, especially political category of false news. The authors attribute this result to the human's tendency to engage with falsehood more than with truth. In addition, bots amplify low-credibility sources and target users with many followers through replies and mentions (Shao et al., 2018). The algorithmic design of social media platforms prioritizes popular content versus trustworthy content. This also highlights the need to consider the design of these algorithms and human social media interactions in contributing to the disinformation ecosystem.

3. Methodology

The research strategy employed in this empirical study is quantitative. In the first part, the current political and media state in North Macedonia is described. Moreover, the most prominent local disinformation cases are presented as well as conditions under which North Macedonia is a vulnerable country. The theoretical part of the study gives the definition of disinformation from different scholars and highlights the academic discussion for the term fake news. In this part, the theory of cognitive dissonance is also discussed in relation to confirmation bias and how it may impact a person's vulnerability to disinformation. The impact of political affiliation on a person's vulnerability to disinformation is also explored and is complemented by reviewing recent research studies in regard to disinformation.

The quantitative method investigates the relationship between politically affiliated individuals and their vulnerability to disinformation. The designed questionnaire, and its testing, were carried out with citizens of North Macedonia. The questionnaire was created with Google Forms, and the dissemination was done through group emails and through personal social media profiles. The questionnaire contained questions aimed at identifying respondents' political affiliations, and their answers were cross matched with the false information identification question results. The answers are developed with SPSS software and Microsoft Office for Windows (Word and Excel). The respondents' structure is a mixed group of political party-affiliated individuals with various educational backgrounds.

The last census held in 2021 in North Macedonia registered a total population of 2,097,319, of whom 29.52% are Albanians, the second largest ethnic group living in North Macedonia (State Statistical Office, 2022). North Macedonia is divided into six electoral units, and each of them elects 20 parliamentary deputies. This research is focused on Electoral Unit No. 6 due to the majority of deputies in that unit being of Albanian ethnicity. This electoral unit in 2020 Parliamentary Elections had 309,727 registered voters (Pankovski et al., 2020). A sample of 0.05% of the voters of Electoral Unit No. 6 was chosen: 150 voters (respondents) with a margin error of 0.3%. The voter turnout in the last parliamentary election of 2020 in Electoral Unit No. 6 was 40.74% and reserved 16 seats in the Parliament for Albanian ethnic representatives out of 20 seats from this electoral unit (State Election Committee, 2020, p. 10). This method was chosen because the vote is very discreet—According to the laws of North Macedonia, it should not be revealed. For this reason, the only technique and method we can use in this case is the anonymous questionnaire. The sample was intentionally chosen as we are interested in the correlation between the Albanian voters' political affiliation and their perception of disinformation for an affiliated political party and an opposing political party. The questionnaire generated 94% of

Albanian ethnicity respondents, with 88.7% high-level educational status respondents.

The questionnaire was distributed randomly, and the questions were structural: dichotomous questions and multiple-choice questions. The survey included closed-ended questions and agreeing/disagreeing statements for identifying political affiliation, revealing perception of disinformation, as well as defining respondents' behavior for politically consistent information and source credibility.

The questionnaire was disseminated on 9 July 2021 and remained open to the public until 1 September 2021, during which there were no active election campaigns. The question for identification of the disinformation during the 2020 parliamentary election campaign in North Macedonia was cross matched with all the other questions. The political environment when the questionnaire was distributed was not an active one, intentionally so. It is essential to consider the timeline during which the survey was conducted. The political landscape between the opponents in the pre- and post-election periods can change from time to time, depending on the pre- and post-election coalitions. The content of the false news stories is also significant and carefully chosen. It must correspond with the political context of the time when the research is done. Still, this type of research can also be tested during election campaigns to analyze how respondents' answers and political affiliation change over time according to political scene movements, campaign coalitions, and the relation of the same with confirmation bias and perception of disinformation. To obtain information about their political affiliation, a question to identify their political affiliation by asking which political party they voted for in the last North Macedonia's parliamentary elections in 2020 was engaged. Five options for answers were given for the four most prominent political parties in the country (IMRO-DPMNU, SDUM, DUI, and AA), adding one if they have not voted at all. Of the respondents, 63.3% claimed to vote for one of the four political party options and 36.7% claimed they did not vote in the last elections in North Macedonia. The respondents' percentage who claimed to vote are considered to be the politically affiliated respondents for this research. Conversely, those who did not vote are considered non-politically affiliated respondents.

In addition, eight pieces of false information were given for the political parties to measure vulnerability to disinformation. These false news stories were circulated online during the parliamentary election campaign of 2020 in North Macedonia and included sensationalism, hyperbolism, and propagandistic news for the four biggest parties competing in the country's 2020 elections (IMRO-DPMNU, SDUM, DUI, and AA). Each political party was presented with one false piece of information with a positive connotation and one with a negative connotation. The intent was to see how the audience would respond to each of them, bearing in mind their political affiliation attained through the questionnaire.

The specific focus is on the analysis of the results from the Albanian bloc of the political parties.

There are recognized limitations of this study: This research would benefit from a wider mixed group of respondents, such as different educational statuses, socio-economic groups, and mixed ethnic groups. Also, a representative sample of North Macedonia citizens and mixed focus groups with representatives of the four biggest political parties in North Macedonia would strengthen the thesis.

4. Findings and Discussion

When we talk about individual characteristics to provide a frame of reference for future researchers in analyzing the impact of disinformation on the audience, in social psychology, Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance is most cited, where the notion of confirmation bias is linked. Based on this, politically biased individuals tend to believe, accept, and share information that is consistent with their political beliefs, whether that information is accurate or not, and ignore other information that is inconsistent with their beliefs. In this regard, we analyzed the respondents' answers based on their political affiliation. Thus, for this particular study, the content of the false information is not as relevant as the connotation (negative or positive) and the political affiliation. We will consider the positive connotation of the false information as consistent with the prior beliefs of the politically affiliated party of the same party individuals; whereas the negative connotation as discrepant to politically affiliated party with the same party individuals. The below figure will show how the respondents who voted for DUI assessed false information for their political party (positive or negative connotation) and as accurate false information for the opposition political party (positive or negative connotation). Also, how the respondents who answered that they voted for the AA assessed as accurate two of the false information for their political party (positive or negative connotation) and accurate for the opponent's political party (positive or negative connotation).

From the results, we can assume that respondents who voted for DUI have assessed the accuracy of the false information in positive connotations for their political party in a higher percentage, contrary to negative connotations for their political party. Also, the same respondents rated a higher percentage as accurate false information with a negative connotation for the opposing political party (AA) and a lower percentage as accurate false information with a positive connotation for the opposing political party (AA). The same applies to the respondents who voted for the AA and their assessment as accurate for false information about their political party and the opponent's party. More clearly, Figure 1, presented in percentages, shows the difference in their perception. Here we can confirm the assumption of confirmation bias. The politically affiliated individuals

assessed in higher percentage the false information as true with a positive connotation for their affiliated political party; whereas, they assessed in lower percentage the false information as true with a negative connotation which might have been discrepant with their prior beliefs. The same applies to each of the political party-affiliated groups. Moreover, politically affiliated individuals in lower percentage identified the false as true positive information for the opposing political party, which might be discrepant with their prior beliefs; whereas they assessed in higher percentage the false negative information as true for the same opposing party, that might be consistent with their beliefs.

In addition, four statements were included to test how the respondents behave if they encounter politically consistent or discrepant information regarding their attitudes on social media and how the source credibility, in this case, if it is a friend, has a role. This resulted in 35.40% of the respondents agreeing that if they encounter news posted on social media with a positive context for their affiliated political party, they will probably like it; 31.20% of the respondents agreed that if they encounter news posted on social media with a negative context for their affiliated political party, they will probably ignore it (for reference, see Figure 2). Even though these questions were obviously posed, again we can see a high percentage of the individuals who agreed with the statements.

The percentage of respondents who agreed with the statements mentioned above was analyzed to see how they perceived false political news. Of the respondents who probably would like it if they encountered
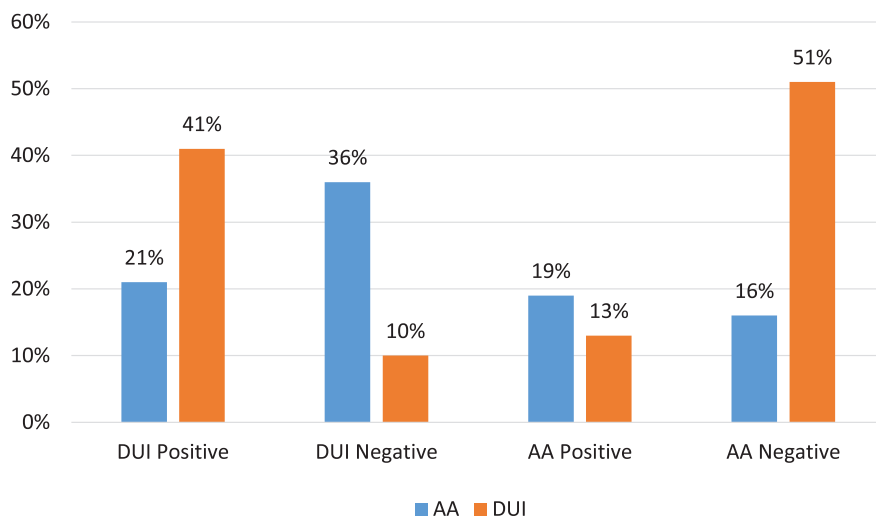

Figure 1. Politically affiliated individuals and their perception of false political information. Notes: AA voters—DUI positive = 21%, DUI negative = 36%, AA positive = 19%, AA negative = 16%; DUI voters—DUI positive = 41%, DUI negative = 10%, AA positive = 13%, AA negative = 51%.
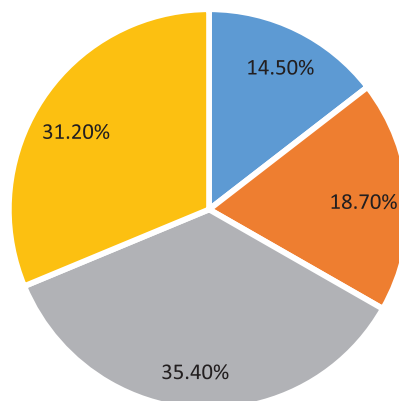

Figure 2. Respondents' attitudes related to confirmation bias statements. Notes: Blue stands for the statement "if you see a political news that your friend shared in social media you would probably like it and think is relevant"; orange for "if you see political news shared by a friend in social media, you would probably like it, comment, and share"; grey for "if you encounter news in social media that has a positive context for your affiliated political party, you would probably like it" is in grey; and yellow for "if you encounter news in social media that has a negative context for your affiliated political party, you would probably ignore it."

information with positive context for their political party, 31.30% perceived false political news as accurate. Furthermore, of the respondents who would like, comment, and share the political information posted by their friends, 26.40% perceive false political information as accurate (Figure 3). The respondents who agreed with these two statements are more vulnerable to disinformation since they perceived false political information in a higher percentage as true.

In supporting the relationship between the confirmation bias of politically affiliated individuals and their vulnerability to disinformation, a question of how the respondents behave if they encounter information in social media that they strongly agree with was included:

41.30% check first whether the information is true or untrue, 31.30% check who posted the information with which they agree, 18% like and share it, while 9.30% share the information automatically with close friends. This question intends to observe how the respondents behave when encountering false political information. Thirty-four point ten percent of the respondents who like and share the information with which they strongly agree are unable to identify false political news. This makes them more vulnerable to disinformation (see comparison data presented in Figure 4).

Further, let us analyze what we consider interesting for this research: the data received from the respondents who answered that they had not voted in
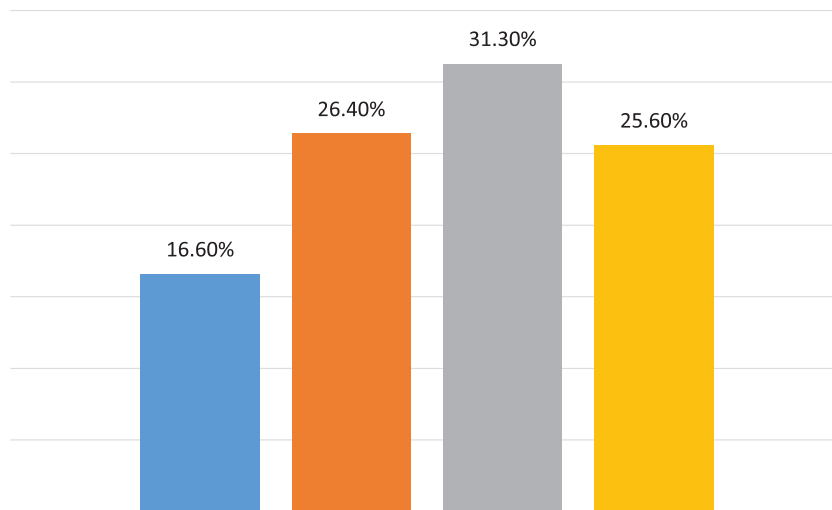

Figure 3. Vulnerability to disinformation concerning source credibility and confirmation bias. Notes: Blue stands for the statement "if you see a political news that your friend shared in social media you would probably like it and think is relevant"; orange for "if you see political news shared by a friend in social media, you would probably like it, comment, and share"; grey for "if you encounter news in social media that has a positive context for your affiliated political party, you would probably like it" is in grey; and yellow for "if you encounter news in social media that has a negative context for your affiliated political party, you would probably ignore it."
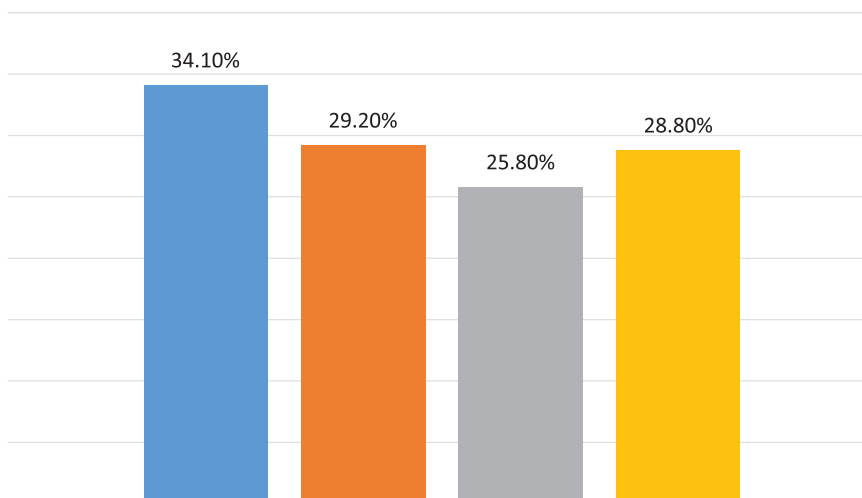

Figure 4. Vulnerability to disinformation and encountering agreeing information in social media. Notes: Blue stands for the statement "you like it and share it," orange for "you check who posted it," grey for "you share to a close friend group," and yellow for "you check whether the information is true or untrue."

the 2020 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia. We consider them as a politically non-affiliated audience. We can assume that this part of the audience is independent of their political beliefs and attitudes to perceive the disinformation as true or false. The table below shows that the trend of their assessment is constant for all the political parties and is not biased. In addition, a negative connotation for SDUM ranked in higher percent as accurate information. Nevertheless, this does not show a comparison data with another political party, with a positive or negative connotation with a higher or lower percentage of the perceived disinformation (see Figure 5.)

Considering this, politically affiliated individuals are more prone to disinformation than the rest of the non-politically affiliated audience. In support of this, the figure below represents the comparison in identifying each false news stories as accurate between politically affiliated and non-politically affiliated audiences (see Figure 6). As we can see politically affiliated individuals identified as true in higher percentage compared to non-politically affiliated individuals each given false information.

Thus, we assume and raise another hypothesis for in-depth research in the future that politically affiliated individuals are more vulnerable to disinformation than politically non-affiliated individuals, as we can assume that the two hypotheses raised for this study are confirmed. Political affiliation affects the vulnerability to disinformation, as well as political affiliation impacts the way the audience perceives political disinformation.

5. Conclusion

This study has comprehensively analyzed the vulnerability to disinformation of politically affiliated individuals in North Macedonia. North Macedonia's highly politicized and fragmented landscape accelerates disinformation dissemination, and online unregulated media contributes to this phenomenon. Russian disinformation campaigns interfere with Balkan countries' political and geostrategic orientations. North Macedonia is vulnerable to foreign influence, particularly Russian disinformation campaigns, which often spread through various
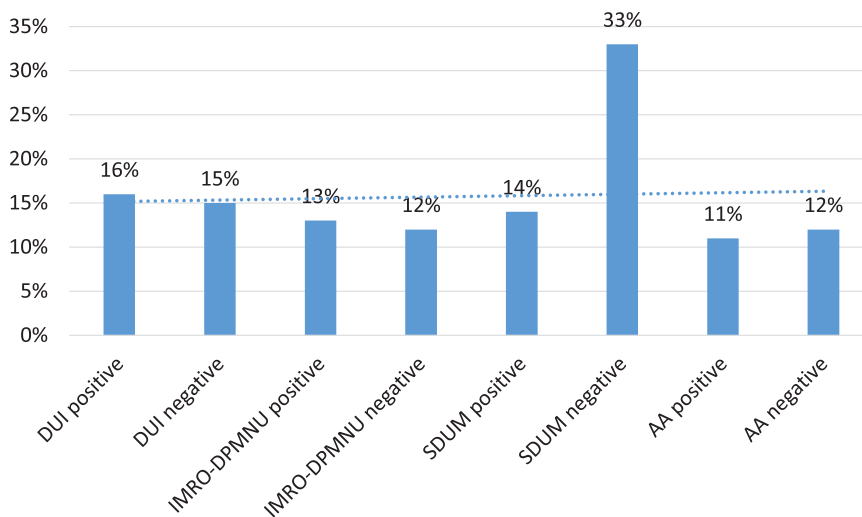

Figure 5. The perception of false information from politically not affiliated respondents.
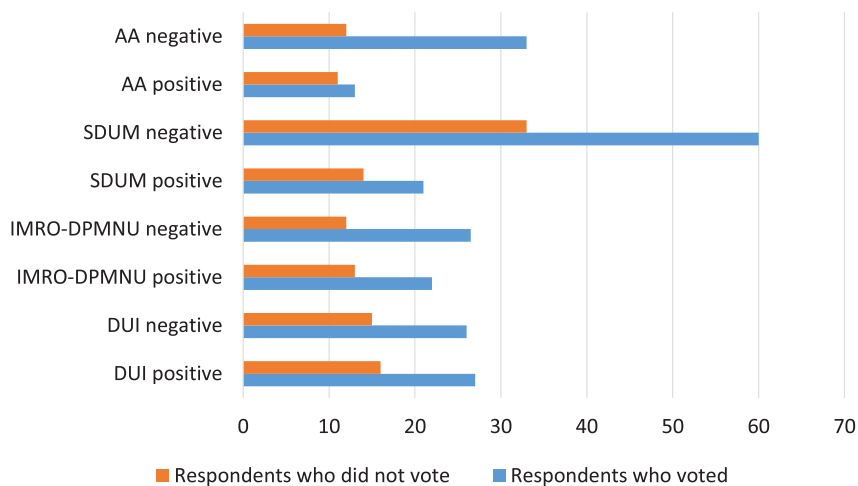

Figure 6. Comparison of vulnerability to disinformation between the politically and non-politically affiliated audience.

portals and traditional media. In 2022, North Macedonia became a partly free country, according to the Freedom House (2022). While journalists can exercise their profession freely, widespread misinformation and a lack of professionalism contribute to a decline in trust in the media. This leaves independent outlets vulnerable to threats and attacks. Factors that make a country vulnerable to disinformation include polarization, a low level of trust in media and institutions, increased social media use, and a fragmented environment. North Macedonia, a NATO member since 2020, is characterized by a highly polarized and fragmented society, particularly along ethnic and political lines. The country has also been the target of foreign disinformation campaigns, which have been supported and disseminated by domestic online media outlets and political parties. In recent years, disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia have affected the outcomes of significant events such as the 2018 referendum on NATO and EU accession, the country's name change, and the 2021 census, as well as elections. Hence, its geostrategic orientation often suffers from eastern influence.

Disinformation is characterized by the spread of false or misleading information that is intended to deceive and cause harm. Disinformation can also be spread with the intention of distorting the context to achieve a specific effect. People are vulnerable to disinformation because of cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias and attitude polarization, which can lead them to accept and seek information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and ignore information that contradicts those beliefs. The theory of cognitive dissonance contributes to people's vulnerability to disinformation, as people may seek to maintain cognitive consistency by avoiding or minimizing information that conflicts with their preexisting beliefs or attitudes. Political affiliation can impact an individual's susceptibility to confirmation bias, a cognitive bias that refers to the tendency to seek out and give more weight to information that aligns with one's preexisting beliefs while discounting or ignoring information that challenges or contradicts those beliefs. This can lead individuals to be more vulnerable to disinformation, particularly when it comes to information related to their affiliated political party. Understanding the psychological factors that contribute to confirmation bias, such as the need for cognitive consistency and the desire to avoid dissonance, can help to shed light on the ways in which political affiliation may impact an individual's vulnerability to disinformation, as well as how they perceive and interpret information that relates to their affiliated political party versus an opposing party.

The results of this study suggest that politically affiliated individuals tend to believe, accept, and share information that is consistent with their political beliefs and attitudes and avoid or minimize information that is inconsistent with those beliefs. The study found that politically affiliated individuals are more likely to believe false information with a positive connotation for their own political

party and false information with a negative connotation for the opposing political party. This suggests that politically affiliated individuals are more likely to accept false information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and attitudes and are less likely to accept information that challenges those beliefs. Additionally, the study found that politically affiliated individuals are more likely to engage with information on social media if it is consistent with their attitudes and less likely to engage with information that is discrepant with their attitudes.

The study suggests that the impact of disinformation is influenced by individual characteristics such as confirmation bias, respectively, biased information processing. This study argued that the audience's perception of disinformation depends on their political affiliation. Namely, the political affiliation of the audience prevents the audience from objectively assessing information. The results of this study suggest that politically affiliated individuals who would engage with positive political information for their affiliated political party might be more vulnerable to disinformation. Specifically, it appears that about 31.30% of respondents who agreed that they would probably like information on social media with a positive connotation for their affiliated political party perceived false political news as accurate.

The tendency to prioritize information that confirms one's preexisting beliefs may lead individuals to be more likely to perceive false political information as accurate if it comes from a source that is consistent with their attitudes and political affiliations. Social interactions between people are still powerful and play a crucial role in the social media environment. Additionally, about 26.4% of respondents who agreed that they would like, comment, and share political information posted by their friends perceived false political information as accurate. This result suggests that politically affiliated individuals who are more likely to engage with information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs and attitudes posted by their friends are more vulnerable to disinformation. The credibility of the source of information is also a key factor in how politically affiliated individuals will respond to incoming messages. They are more likely to consider sources that are consistent with their attitudes and political affiliations as credible. The phenomenon of echo chambers as homogenous group gatherings encourages the dissemination of disinformation in an environment of mutual trust. Interpersonal connections and social media influencers play a significant role in the spread of disinformation. It is important for individuals to critically evaluate the information they encounter online, including checking the source and verifying the accuracy of the information, to avoid spreading disinformation and protect themselves from its harmful effects.

This study found that confirmation bias plays a role in the vulnerability of individuals to disinformation, particularly in the context of political beliefs and attitudes. It also suggests that other factors, such as the source credibility and influence of interpersonal connections,

contribute to this vulnerability and highlights the importance of considering these factors in future research on disinformation. This study also revealed that politically affiliated individuals are more prone to disinformation compared to non-politically affiliated individuals, which could be studied in the future.

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