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The Relation Between Political Indifference and Resilience to Disinformation

ABSTRACT

The well-informed citizen in a society is a predisposition for the empowerment of democratic government, respectively democratic society where the rule of law, freedom of media, and expression are an outcome. This study tries to analyze the relationship between politically active/inactive citizens and their susceptibility to disinformation, by age group. The methodology used is qualitative and quantitative. The theoretical overview is supplemented by an analysis of the existing data at the state level that represents the citizens' trust in the country's institutions and their trust in the media. Furthermore, as a quantitative method, the questionnaire tries to rank citizens' activity/interest in politics by age group and see how susceptible these age groups are to disinformation. The study aims to highlight that the most productive age group of citizens (31 – 45) are indifferent to politics and to reflect on the consequences that a society striving for democratization, such as North Macedonia, might have. Furthermore, the study recommends that media education be extended to different age groups of society, and media education should adjust to the characteristics of one society and reflect on the sense of national identity that, above all, impacts the success of media education in one country.

KEY WORDS

Disinformation. National Identity. North Macedonia. Media Education. Politically In/Active Citizen.

1 Introduction: A Critical Overview

One of the conditions of democracy is the availability of choice and the citizens' ability to exercise that rationally. Democracy is valid only when it includes the participation of a well-informed reasonable electorate, as Brian McNair remarks.¹ The educated, well-informed citizens' involvement in decision-making is more than necessary in a pluralistic democracy. The right to vote is an elementary human right that must be applied and valued. Political indifference or apathy prevents the processes of a society striving for democratization. According to Norberto Bobbio, the most prominent failure of the democratic liberal system is to raise an educated, rational voter. And this is reflected in political apathy.²

In a democratic society, the media has a role in educating and informing citizens through objective, unbiased, critical, and fact-based news/information that enables a healthy environment for discussion and the formation of public opinion. With technological development, the media landscape has changed information modalities. The sensationalism and click-bait culture of information has seized the public sphere, where providing a space for pluralistic ideas and forming a public opinion is no longer an attempt. Now, the 'Engineering Consent' of Walter Lipman is more applicable, adding low cost, shorter time, and colossal influence using micro-targeting tools of social psychology. Information Disorder influences democracies and has long-term implications for sowing mistrust and confusion. The framework of Claire Wardle and Hossein Derakshan has identified three types of this disorder: *Disinformation*, *Misinformation*, and *Malinformation*.³

Using disinformation through computational propaganda – algorithms, automation, and artificial intelligence, the democratic processes of a country are influenced, especially during the decision-making process, such as elections. A report showed that manipulation campaigns were present in 70 countries worldwide and were used to shape public attitudes, suppress fundamental human rights, discredit political opponents, and obscure opposing opinions.⁴ Moreover, when it comes to elections, disinformation campaigns are increasing their activity to deliberately confuse voters, decrease participation, and undermine trust in democratic values and democratic systems.

With these endeavours in mind, how can we be sure, and how can we say that we have well-informed citizens ready to make rational choices in the next ballot? Furthermore, there are many legitimate questions to pose to democratic governments when the turnout rate is never near maximum.

Many scholars have tried to understand the predictors of turnout, from individual motives to social conditions and educational status, that might encourage a person to vote or abstain. This research tries to find the relation between the persons who abstained in the last elections in the country and their susceptibility to disinformation. Are they more prone to disinformation or more resilient to disinformation? Adding to this, their trust in online media news and how all these conditions correlate.

Trust in a country's institutions and trust in the media are predominant factors for one society to feel secure and have active citizens by participating in political, social, economic, and cultural activities in its surroundings.

¹ MCNAIR, B.: *An Introduction to Political Communication*. New York, London : Routledge, 2007, p. 31.

² BOBBIO, N.: *The Future of Democracy*. Cambridge, UK : Polity Press, 1987, p. 37.

³ See: DERAKSHAN, H., WARDLE, C.: *Information Disorder: Definitions. Understanding and Addressing the Disinformation Ecosystem*. PA, USA : Annenberg School for Communication, 2017, p. 5-17.

⁴ BRADSHAW, S., HOWARD, P. N.: *The Global Disinformation Order 2019: Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation*. [online]. [2022-08-13]. Available at: <<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1209&context=scholcom>>.

1.2 Country Overview

North Macedonia is a former Yugoslav country with a history of inter-ethnic conflict and inherited identity contests from neighbouring countries (Greece and Bulgaria). North Macedonia won its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, but has known itself as Macedonia since the time of the Ottoman Empire in 1903 and through the Revolution named 'The Kusevo Republic'. As described by Dimitar Bechev, Macedonia was a term that was supposed to include Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, Vlachs, Albanians, Serbs, Jews, etc.⁵ All these ethnic groups lived in the geographic area, fighting for autonomy from the Ottoman Empire. North Macedonia, as a multiethnic and independent country from 1991, played the role of a mono-ethnic state that brought the ethnic conflict in 2001 and ended with the *Ohrid Framework Agreement*, which guarantees minority rights.⁶ Its identity was propagated as Ancient Macedonians, Bulgari, or Slavs.⁷ The government's propaganda often incited the reaction of neighboring countries. From 2006 until 2016, during Nikola Gruevski's authoritarian regime, the country was pro-Russia oriented, with interethnic divisions, and recognized for nationalistic attitudes. The new government promised a contemporary pluralistic democratic society pro-NATO and pro-EU integration. North Macedonia became a full member of the NATO Alliance in 2020 and started EU accession talks in 2022. NATO membership and EU integration have cost North Macedonia a lot.⁸ Nevertheless, in North Macedonia, identity issues arise at decisive times for the country, attacking the government for selling the national interest. Thus, in the consultative referendum for the name change of the country and accession to the EU and NATO membership in 2018, the turnout was only thirty-seven percent, with 94 percent voting in favour.

Each year, citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia are confronted by local, parliamentary, presidential, or referendum elections. Thus, from 2016 until 2021, elections were held each year. The voter turnout is always near the minimum, except in 2016 when citizens' awareness of overthrowing the authoritarian regime increased. History has shown that when a national cause unites them, North Macedonian citizens are sensitized to make their decision. Similarly, the highest voter turnout rate North Macedonia was experienced during the first democratic parliamentary elections in 1994 with 77.6%.⁹ The figure below shows the voter turnout for elections from 2016 until 2021. The data given are from the first round of each election. The first round always has the highest turnout rate as well as Parliamentary elections, compared to local ones. The data analyzed used State Election Commission official results.

⁵ See: BECHEV, D.: *Historical Dictionary of the Republic of Macedonia*. Maryland, US : Scarecrow Press, 2009.

⁶ *Ohrid Framework Agreement*. [online]. [2022-08-13]. Available at: <<https://www.osce.org/skopje/100622>>.

⁷ See: IBÁÑEZ, F. M.: *North Macedonia's Quest for Its Own National Identity*. [online]. [2022-09-12]. Available at: <<https://www.nationalia.info/new/11298/north-macedonias-quest-for-its-own-national-identity>>.

⁸ See: ŽIVKOVIĆ, V.: *North Macedonia's NATO Membership: Decades-long Ambition Finally Becomes a Reality*. [online]. [2022-09-26]. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/26/north-macedonias-nato-membership-decades-long-ambition-finally-becomes-a-reality/>>; See also: POPOVIĆ, S.: *Opening Accession Negotiations for North Macedonia: A Symbolic Step Forward with Many Worries*. [online]. [2022-07-26]. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/07/26/opening-accession-negotiations-for-north-macedonia-a-symbolic-step-forward-with-many-worries/>>.

⁹ KRECI, V., JUSUFI, I.: North Macedonia: Local Elections and Parliamentary Political Dynamics. In GENDŹWILL, A., KJAER, U., STEYVERS, K. (eds.): *The Routledge Handbook of Local Elections and Voting in Europe*. London : Routledge, 2022, p. 445.

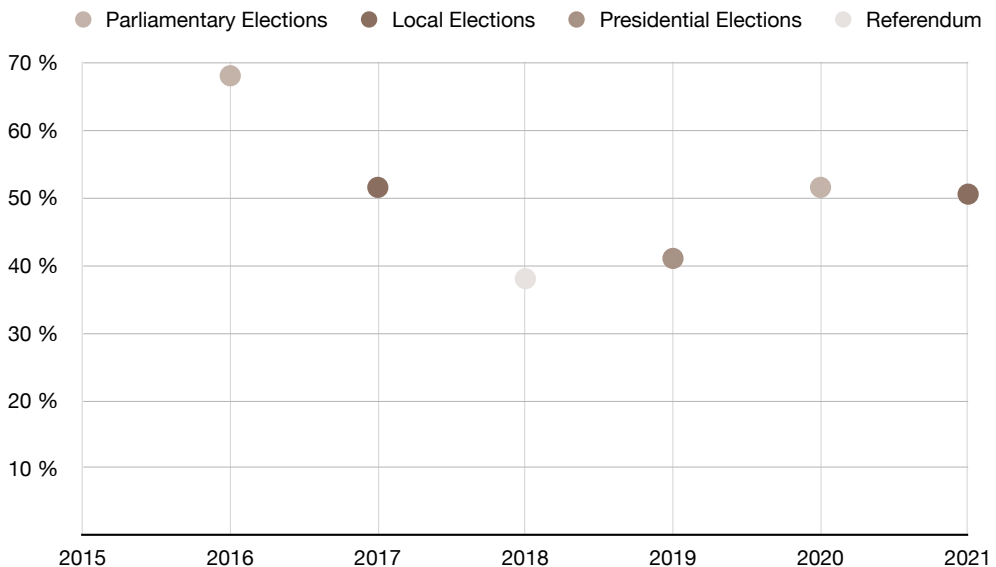


FIGURE 1: Voter Turnout in Republic of North Macedonia from 2015 to 2021

Source: own processing, data obtained from State Election Commission

After the liberalization of the authoritarian regime, the media system in North Macedonia started a new era of independence. The World Press Freedom index in 2017 ranked North Macedonia in 111th place, while in 2022, North Macedonia climbed to 57th place with the best regional score.¹⁰ In the 2021 Freedom House report, North Macedonia finally earned the status of partly free, leaving the category of states with a hybrid regime.¹¹ Even though media are free to exercise their profession, the political environment is strongly polarized, and media outlets can suffer from pressure from authorities, politicians, and business people. The lack of professional journalism is still evident, and the social media environment is often a battlespace of disinformation campaigns. Narratives in the disinformation campaigns usually use the most sensitive issues for the state. They are related to identity issues and inter-ethnic divisions to incite conflict or distort North Macedonia's path to EU integration.

Of the total population of 2.08 million in North Macedonia, there are 1.75 million internet users, from which 1.35 million are social media users.¹² Posts on social media are the primary source of information about political news and events in North Macedonia for the young generation, and television is the primary source of information among the oldest. Here we must acknowledge that each portal has its profiles on social media. Among newspapers, news agencies, television, and internet portals, statistics at the national level show that internet portals have the most complaints regarding the violation of ethical standards in North Macedonia. The most significant number of complaints are subject to Article 1 of the Code of Ethics (54%): Incorrect and unchecked information, absence of a second source of information, and the lack of at least two mutually unrelated sources.¹³

¹⁰ ŠEMIĆ, A.: *New Methodology, Old Problems: Western Balkans on the 2022 World Press Freedom Index*. [online]. [2022-09-17]. Available at: <<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2022/05/17/new-methodology-old-problems-western-balkans-on-the-2022-world-press-freedom-index/>>.

¹¹ *Freedom House*. [online]. [2022-09-03]. Available at: <<https://freedomhouse.org/country/north-macedonia/freedom-world/2021>>.

¹² *Datareportal*. [online]. [2022-09-16]. Available at: <<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-north-macedonia>>.

¹³ *Council of Media Ethics in Macedonia*. [online]. [2022-09-30]. Available at: <<https://semm.mk/en/komisija-za-zalbi-3/statistical-findings>>.

Media education is more and more present in North Macedonia. It began with non-formal education and fact-check agencies and has now widened to the educational system. Media literacy and critical thinking are included as a part of curricula in different courses but not yet as separate courses through in-depth developed content.¹⁴

The trust in the country's institutions is poor, as well as in the media. The Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCMS) research in 2021 revealed that 51.5% of citizens don't have confidence in the actual government, whereas 42% have confidence in the government, from whom 61.8% are ethnic Albanians. The opinion poll treated questions of political and institutional citizens' trust in the country and marked the opinion differences among the ethnic and political lines of the citizens.¹⁵ On the other hand, the high rate of non-trusted institutions in the country is also: judiciary with 58% and politicians with 68%.¹⁶ Trust in online media and social networks is the lowest among citizens in North Macedonia. Thus, the percentage of the citizens who do not trust online media in North Macedonia is 41%, and for social networks is 47% (using four scale measurement). The main reasons the citizens distrust the specific media are that they think that the media are under political influence and that the media spread disinformation.¹⁷

The median age of the population in North Macedonia is 39.9, respectively; the age group, 35 – 44, represents the highest percentage of the age group living in North Macedonia (with 15.5%), followed by the age group of 25 – 34, considered in 14.6%.¹⁸

2 Methodology

The methodology used in this study is a mixed method. The qualitative research method and also the quantitative method are used. The critical overview represents the theoretical overview of the subjects treated in this paper. The collection of opinion poll results at the national level and the country's socio-demographic statistics were used to analyze the general indications of the thesis questioned. In addition, reports for North Macedonia's current state are used to best interpret the actual situation. State Election Commission official voter turnout results were analyzed through the years and were used to complement the overview of the country.

A designed questionnaire represents the quantitative method to assess the percentage of the citizen's interest in politics and their participation in voting. The questionnaire was designed to measure the susceptibility to disinformation by age groups and political affiliation or non-affiliation in North Macedonia citizens. The questionnaire included ten questions and was organized within two thematic blocks: A) Political affiliation and voting behaviour; B) Perception of disinformation during the election campaign in NRM. The results from two thematic blocks were then analyzed and cross-matched through the SPSS software for Windows and Microsoft Office for Windows (Word and Excel) that is used to create various reports, graphs, and tables. The questionnaire was distributed randomly, and the questions

¹⁴ See more: SHOPAR, V., DZIGAL, S.: *Media Literacy in the University Study Programs in the Republic of North Macedonia*. Skopje : Institute of Communication Studies, 2022, p. 20.

¹⁵ JAKOVLESKA, G., IVANOVSKA, F.: *Confidence in the Government and Local Elections*. [online]. [2022-09-07]. Available at: <<https://mcms.mk/mk/za-nasata-rabota/istrazuvana-i-publikacii/lista-na-istrazuvana-i-publikacii/2308-doverba-vo-vladata-i-lokalni-izbori.html>>.

¹⁶ BIEBER, F., NECHEV, Z.: *Media Briefing – Public Opinion Analysis on Citizens' Perception about the European Union, External Actors and Trust: Focus on North Macedonia*. [online]. [2022-10-14]. Available at: <<https://biepag.eu/publication/policy-brief-outta-trust-post-pandemic-trust-and-democratic-resilience-in-the-western-balkans/>>.

¹⁷ *Trust in the Media – North Macedonia*. [online]. [2022-09-15]. Available at: <<https://seenpm.org/north-macedonia-opinion-poll-results-on-media-trust-and-media-gender-issues/>>.

¹⁸ *Datareportal*. [online]. [2022-09-16]. Available at: <<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-north-macedonia>>.

were structural: dichotomous questions, multiple-choice questions, and scaling questions: liker scale questions and semantic differential scale -findings and results regarding the principle of transparency, participation, and efficiency. The participants were of mixed age groups, education, and ethnicities. The respondents were also from the political party affiliation diverse group. The age target was divided into five groups (> 18, 18 – 30, 31 – 45, 46 – 59, 60 <). For the online creation of the questionnaire, Google Forms was used, and the dissemination was done through group email and social media. Results were generated from 150 citizens of North Macedonia.

The limitations of this study: the research would benefit in the future if approximately 1067 citizens responded as a representative sample to this questionnaire and included an equal percentage of socio-demographic and age groups. Also, including other elements (questions) for assessing the disinformation susceptibility of the politically non-affiliated individuals would strengthen the hypothesis raised.

3 Results

As a quantitative method, the questionnaire was disseminated to all the ethnic groups living in North Macedonia (Macedonians, Albanians, Turks, etc.). We received the highest response rate from Albanian citizens, followed by the Macedonian ethnic group. The questionnaire has the highest response rate from the citizens with high-level education – university degrees, with almost 77%. In addition, of the five age groups, the 31 – 45 ages responded in highest numbers to the questionnaire, nearly 56%.

The first thematic block, A) Political affiliation and voting behaviour, asked questions where the respondents mainly answered concerning their interest in politics, political party affiliation, and voting behaviour.

Thus, in the fourth scale measurement question of their political interest, most of the respondents are not very interested in politics, with 42.8% or not at all, with 13.8%.

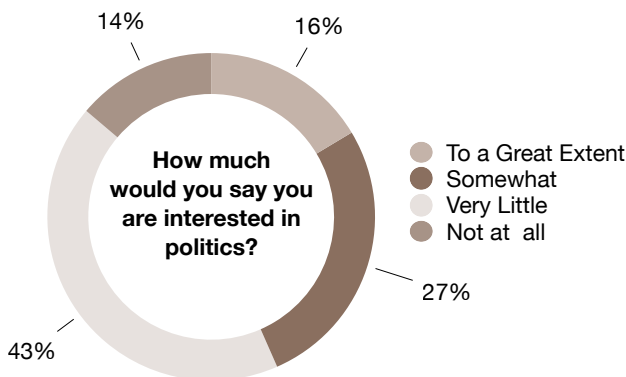


FIGURE 2: Interest in Politics

Source: own processing, 2022

The results of the respondent's interest in politics are cross-matched with five age groups. Figure 3 shows that the highest score for very little interest in politics is in the age group 31 – 45, with 48.9% and not at all with 12.2%.

How much would you say you are interested in politics?

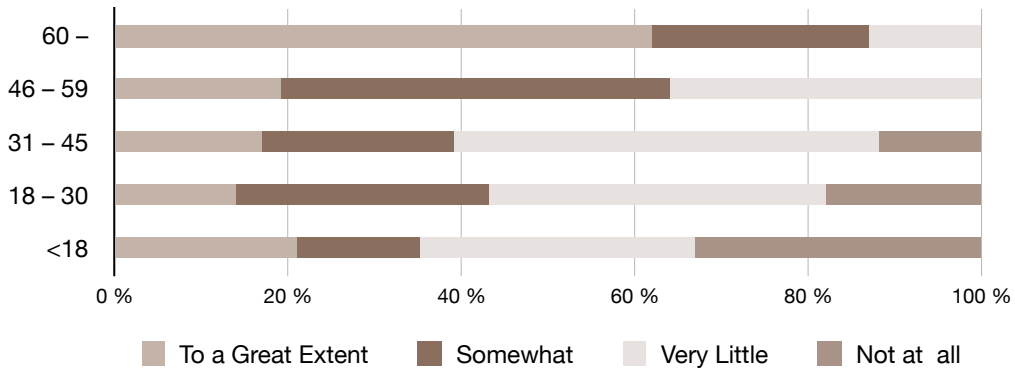


FIGURE 3: Interest in Politics by Age-groups

Source: own processing, 2022

The fourth figure presents the voter turnout of the respondents in the last Parliamentary Elections held in 2020 in North Macedonia.

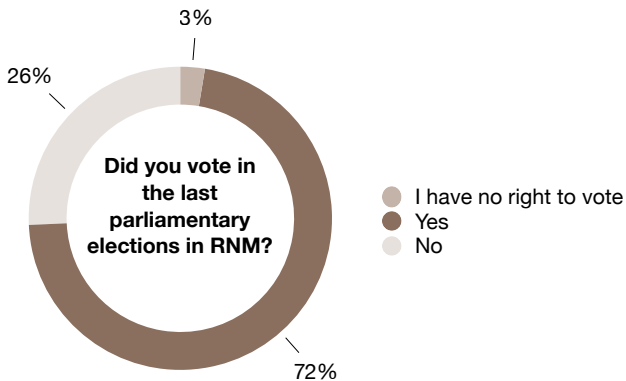


FIGURE 4: Respondents' Voter Turnout

Source: own processing, 2022

If we analyze these results within the age groups, we will see that a high percentage of the age group 31 – 45 did not vote in the last parliamentary elections.

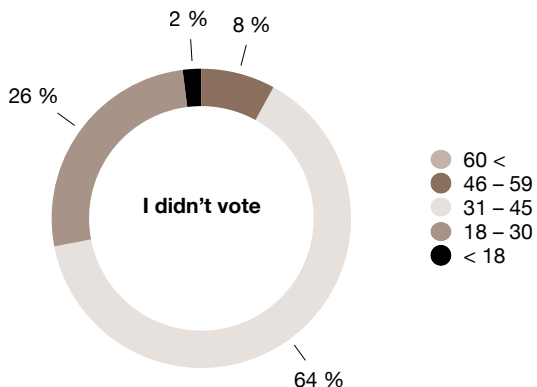


FIGURE 5: Non-voters by Age-groups

Source: own processing, 2022

In the second thematic block, B) Perception of disinformation during the Election Campaign in RNM, questions were asked about their perception of disinformation going online during election campaigns in RNM, concerning their ability to distinguish the truth from false news. In addition, this thematic block included one question with eight fake news stories about four main political parties in North Macedonia that were actually published during elections and asked the respondents to evaluate their validity with TRUE or FALSE.

In the question, how much do the respondents think there was fake news and intentionally manipulative information shared on social media during the 2020 election campaign in RNM, most of the respondents were aware that there is much fake news circulating online during election campaigns, 52%. The figure below shows the results:

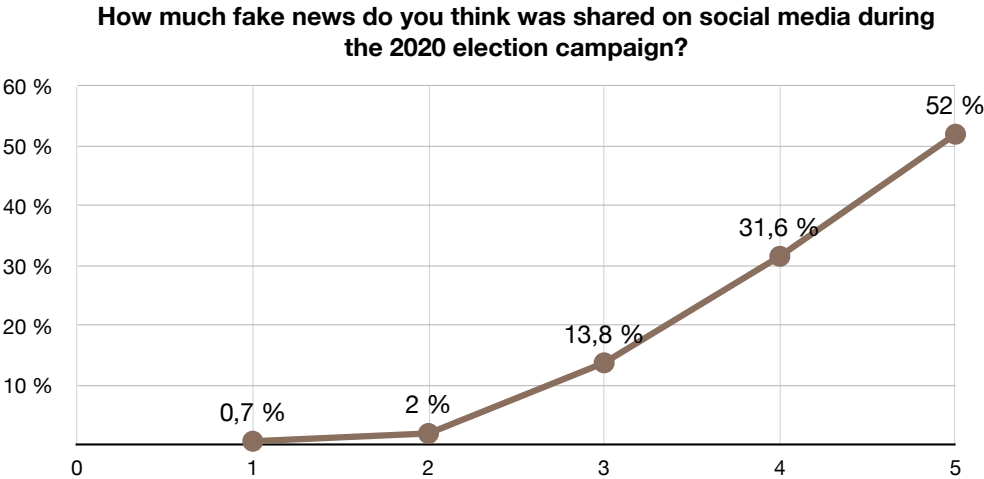


FIGURE 6: Fake News during Election Campaigns in RNM

Source: own processing, 2022

Most age groups think there was much false news circulating during the election campaign in 2020 in North Macedonia. Figure shows the age groups and their perception ranked from 1-less to 5-much.

The next question was added to see the perception of their confidence in distinguishing true from false information on social media regarding political news. At a higher rate, the respondents are confident in their ability to distinguish true from incorrect political information, with 37% wholly confident and 21% very confident.

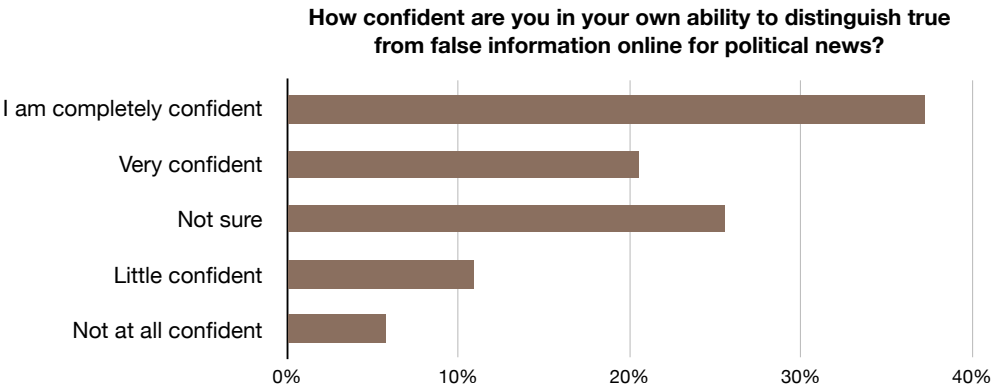


FIGURE 7: Perception of Ability to Distinguish True from False Political Information

Source: own processing, 2022

We can see that the older the age group, the higher the percentage of their confidence to distinguish True from False news. Thus, in the eighth figure, the age group of more than 60 years old has the highest rate of the answer completely confident. See the results in the figure below for each age group. Their perception of being able to recognize false news might not be parallel with their vulnerability to disinformation (see: Figure no. 10).

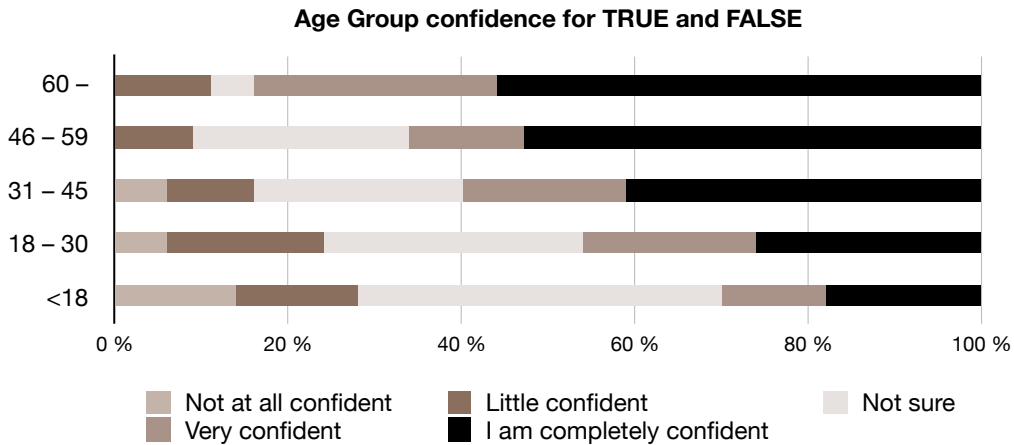


FIGURE 8: Perception of Ability to Distinguish True from False Political Information by Age Groups

Source: own processing, 2022

The following figure represents the respondents' ability to evaluate the news as false or true. Eight pieces of information for four main political parties circulated online during the 2020 Parliamentary Elections in North Macedonia are given. All of the presented news are false. We can see that none of the eight pieces of information was wholly identified as fraudulent.

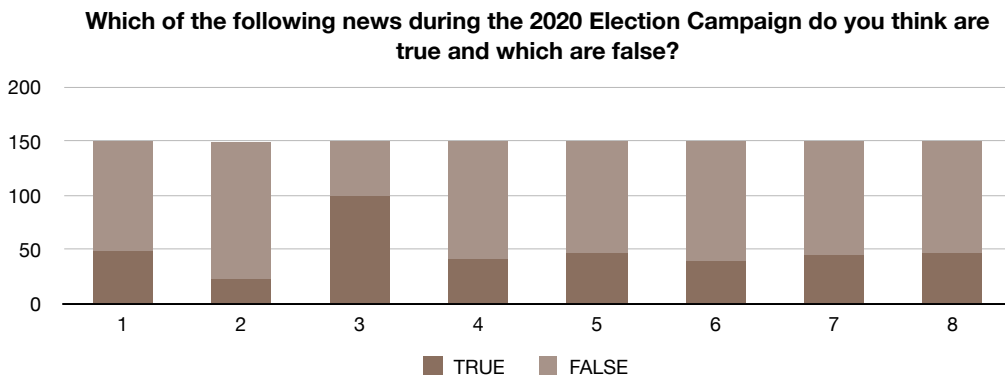


FIGURE 9: True or False Chart

Source: own processing, 2022

The percentage of the respondents who ranked the eight news as accurate information is shown below, differentiated by age group, where the highest rate has the oldest age group (60 <, and 46 – 59), and the lowest percentage has the 31 – 45 age group.

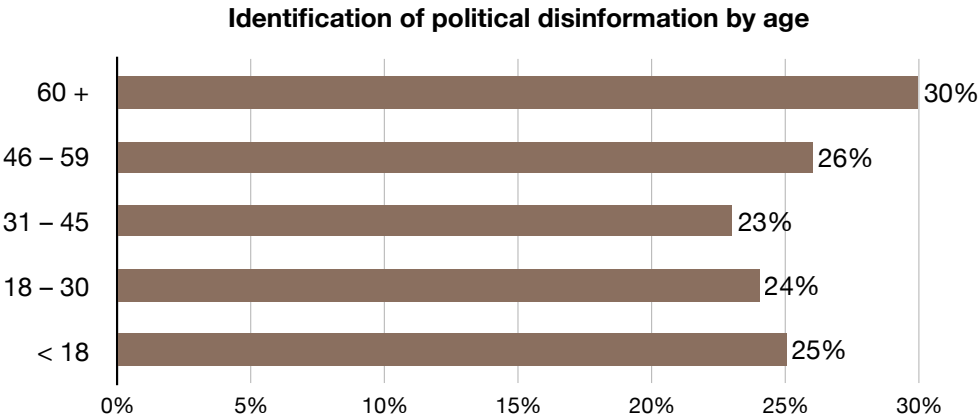


FIGURE 10: *Identification of Political Disinformation by Age*

Source: own processing, 2022

We have chosen to consider the respondents who voted in the elections for politically affiliated individuals. Thus, non-affiliated is the percentage of those who did not vote in the polls. The following figure is indicative to show that the non-affiliated individuals in the lower percent identified the given false information as accurate. In contrast, politically affiliated individuals, at a higher rate, identified given incorrect information as accurate.

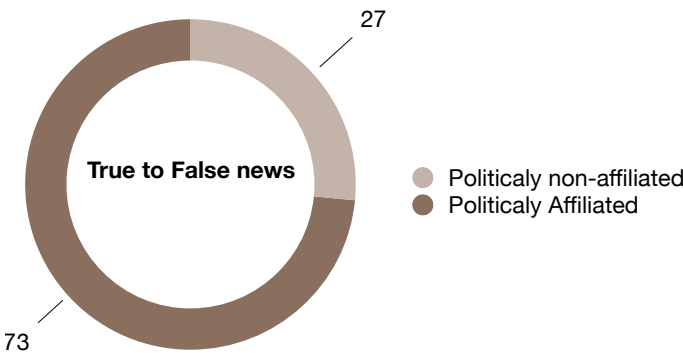


FIGURE 11: *Identification of Political Disinformation by Political Affiliation or Non-affiliation*

Source: own processing, 2022

When we compare the interest in politics of the Politically non-affiliated and Politically affiliated individuals, surprisingly, there is a slight difference in the percentage showing no significant difference in non-politically affiliated individuals' non-interest in politics as we expected to see. See the following figure for comparison.

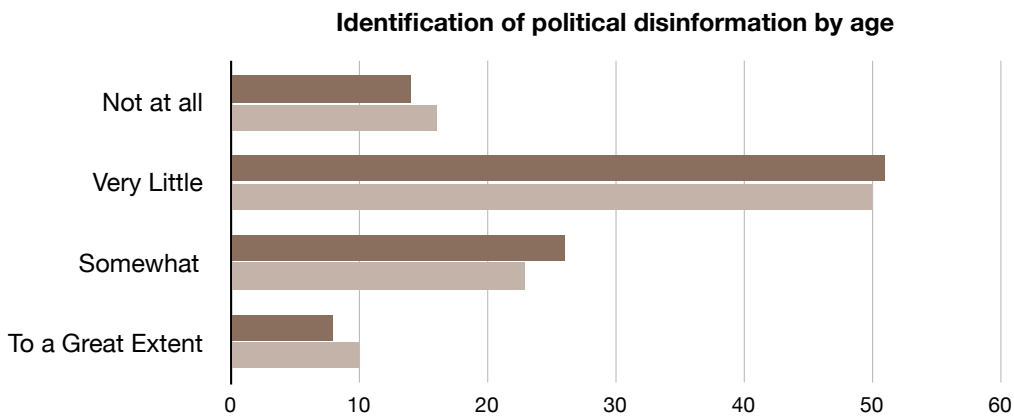


FIGURE 12: Interest in Politics by Politically Non-affiliation and Politically Affiliated Individuals

Source: own processing, 2022

4 Discussion

The purposeful use of manipulative information with the intent to deceive and harm is one of the concepts of defining disinformation campaigns. In North Macedonia, this concept finds a suitable landscape to function. The information space reflects the complexity of society, where the demand side plays a vital role in multiplication and dissemination. The low trust in the country's institutions and media predisposes the country to be vulnerable to disinformation. The lack of professional journalism and genuine media education at all levels of the educational system leaves a vacuum for enhancing a resilient citizen that embraces democratic values and participates in a country's development toward democratization. A participatory common sense of the citizens in one society strengthens institutions and raises an accountable and responsible government overall. The analysis of voter turnout in the last six years showed a low percentage of citizen participation. Many factors contribute to this in North Macedonia, but North Macedonia has made great steps to turn its orientation and is continuously attempting democratization. Even though the highest number of citizens in this research voted in the last parliamentary elections, their interest in politics is low. When the median age in a country such as North Macedonia is 39.9, and results show that the 31 – 45 age group has the highest percentage of respondents that did not vote in the last elections, one could assume the percentage of political abstention in a country level by this age group. Their interest in politics at a lower rate is indicative when 35 – 44 represents the highest percentage of age group living in North Macedonia.

During election campaigns, North Macedonia's online information environment becomes a battlespace of disinformation. Online media outlets have a crucial role here, where narratives with nationalistic sentiments, discrediting a public figure, or inter-ethnic incitement try to undermine the democratic values and the country's path to the EU. Additionally, it decreases trust in the media and institutions. Most citizens in this research know that much manipulative information is circulating during election campaigns in RNM. Still, in NM, the primary source of information for political news is online media, especially among the young generation.

There is much effort to include media education in all instances of society, from non-formal education to school curricula. But it is essential to mention that these endeavours must engage critical thinking as a concept of the functioning of the educational system at all levels and not only as a single course during a project timeline. Moreover, it is surprising that most of the citizens in this research are confident about their ability to distinguish true from false information, especially the older generations. This confirms the strengthening of attitude with age. On the other hand, age groups, confident about their ability to distinguish true from false information

at a higher rate, could not identify the incorrect information given for political parties (see figure no. 10). These age groups were revealed to be more susceptible to disinformation. In contrast, the 31 – 45 age group, which had the highest rate of abstention during the last elections, was revealed to have the lowest rate of identifying the given false political information as accurate. For this research, this age group turned out to be the most resilient to disinformation.

Additionally, politically active citizens in this research were shown to be more susceptible to disinformation because of a higher rate of identified political false information as accurate. This reminds us of the confirmation bias concept, which explains that politically affiliated individuals are more prone to disinformation because they engage and believe in narratives that confirm their prior beliefs. In contrast, non-politically affiliated individuals could identify a higher rate of false political information as false, which makes them more resilient to disinformation. Comparing their interest in politics, the research showed that there is no considerable difference between politically affiliated and non-affiliated individuals, with a slight difference in the percentage of non-affiliated individuals with less interest in politics, which is pretty much expected.

5 Conclusion

As a sensitive and fragile multiethnic society, North Macedonia has failed to unite its citizens around a common goal. It has not been able to create a strong national feeling that would represent all citizens equally and form social cohesion. The cultural and ethnic mindsets differ, and there is no common challenge to unite them. From this perspective, the educational system encounters difficulties adapting its curricula to new trends and the EU. Still, it has failed to make substantial changes that should enable the growth of the responsible citizen who cherishes their own culture and history, respects others, and becomes an active citizen, resilient, and ready to contribute to society. Critical thinking should be a norm in primary schools and not a lesson for classical teaching.

If the most active age group of citizens abstains from elections, how can we ensure that the next government will be democratic? The political apathy of the most productive age group in one society leaves the government in lethargy, confident that it will win the next elections with no efforts to democratization processes and to improve the living standard of the citizens. The democratization process means accountability, transparency, and responsibility. The greater political participation of citizens forces the government to win the sympathy of the more significant majority instead of only its partisanship electorate.

When speaking of foreign influences and disinformation campaigns, one should remember that their power relies on the society's generated suitable environment for them to take form and generate meaning. Meanwhile, resilience to the disinformation of non-politically affiliated individuals who, after all, are interested in politics, opens the door to political parties and politicians for reflection and action on how to mobilize this passive electorate. Simultaneously, researchers might study socio-economic and education factors when referring to this group's abstention and their resilience to disinformation.

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