



Disinformation in Bulgaria Related to the Israel-Hamas Conflict: Narratives, Amplifiers, and Public Perceptions

Country Report by Svetoslav Malinov

Bulgaria's media landscape has long been permeated by disinformation, making the country among the most vulnerable NATO and EU member states to Russian influence. Pro-Kremlin narratives circulate widely across both traditional and social media, often surging during election cycles through populist rhetoric and conspiracy theories. The public's high level of cognitive capture reinforces sympathy for the Kremlin's authoritarian model. At the same time, weak transparency in media ownership and funding enables government agencies to direct public money toward compromised outlets, further manipulating public opinion. In this environment, a network of politicians, academics, journalists, and business figures actively amplifies disinformation, with major platforms such as *Blitz.bg*, *Trud.bg*, *Pogled Info*, and *News Front* playing particularly influential roles.¹

Despite Bulgaria climbing 12 places in Reporters Without Borders' 2024 *Freedom of Expression* ranking, the country remains one of the lowest-ranked EU nations.² Press freedom is precarious, threatened by both political interference and a general decline in trust in independent journalism. Meanwhile, the growing dominance of social media has further complicated the media landscape, facilitating the spread of disinformation. The main **local amplifiers** - pro-Russian media outlets and certain populist political voices - have seized on this digital transformation, translating and disseminating Kremlin-backed narratives that exploit historical grievances and skepticism toward Western institutions. The ongoing war in Ukraine has fueled these efforts, offering Moscow repeated opportunities to portray the West as destabilizing and deceitful. More recently, **the Israel-Hamas conflict** has become another focal point in the Kremlin's broader strategy of deflecting attention from its actions in Ukraine while sowing confusion and discord abroad.³

¹ Center for the Study of Democracy, Building Institutional Capacity Framework for Resilience to Disinformation in Bulgaria, Policy Brief No.131, March 2023.

² BNR, [Reporters Without Borders: Bulgaria climbed to 59th place in terms of media freedom](#), 3 May 2024.

³ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), [Investigation: How a pro-Kremlin ad campaign used the Israel-Hamas conflict to spread propaganda in France and Germany](#), 11 October 2024.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale attack on southern Israel from Gaza, prompting Israel’s ongoing military response.⁴ Almost instantly, Bulgarian media outlets with pro-Russian leanings revved up their disinformation campaigns, shifting from broad anti-Western rhetoric to more targeted narratives. The knee-jerk reaction was to blame the West, a predictable move, but the more insidious strategy involved distorting the conflict to deepen societal fractures and undermine institutional trust. The flood of misleading information - driven by both state and non-state actors - has blurred the lines between fact and fiction, contorting public perception and obstructing meaningful debate on the crisis.

By exploiting the chaos of the Israel-Hamas conflict, the Kremlin has intensified its anti-Western messaging, embedding it deeply into Bulgaria’s fractured media landscape. Local enablers seek to counter democratic values, shift public opinion toward authoritarian models, and diminish collective resilience against disinformation. The following report explores how pro-Russian outlets, alongside social media platforms such as Facebook and Telegram, have amplified the most prevalent disinformation narratives related to the Israel-Hamas conflict, exacerbating divisions within Bulgarian society.

Data Collection

Data collection utilized the media intelligence tool Sensika, which provides access to a vast catalog of over 2500 news web-sites in Bulgaria, to gather content from these sources and analyze its volume and reach. Social media content was sourced from public Facebook account types – including pages, verified profiles, and public groups – using CrowdTangle, a former Meta-owned tool that offered precise metrics on post volume and reach. A Telegram dataset was collected by querying CrowdTangle for Bulgarian language Facebook posts containing "t.me" links from 2020 to 2024, scraping 2,412 Telegram groups, and using FastText to identify groups with at least one Bulgarian-language message among the last 100 messages. The analysis presented in the report encompassed:

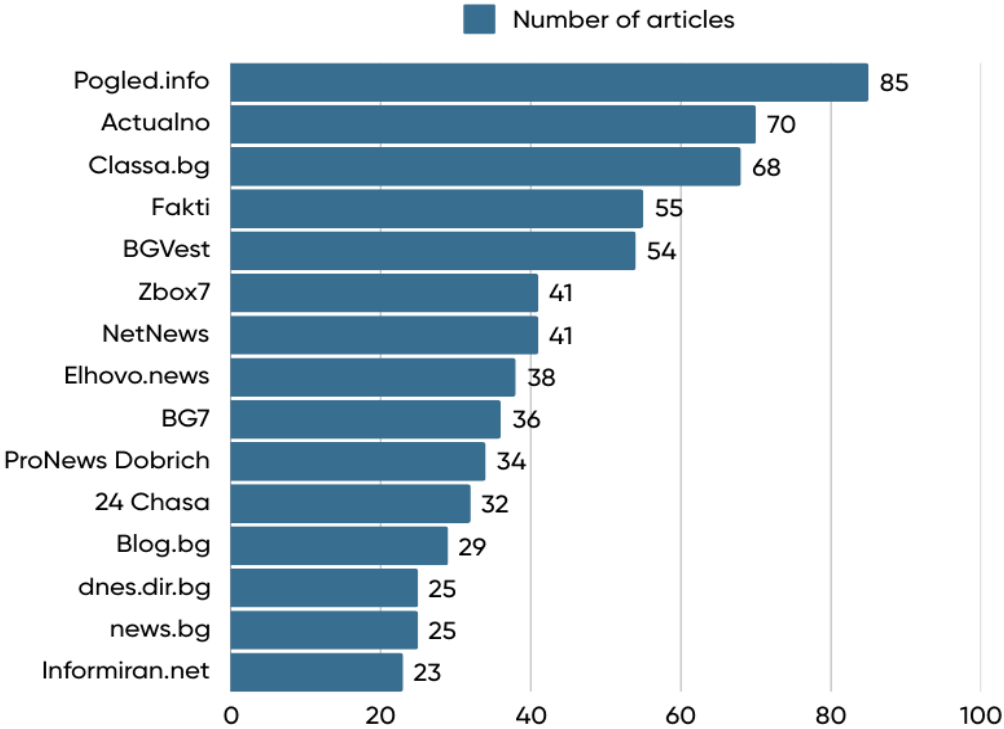
- 8,493 online media articles (October 7, 2023 - October 31, 2024)
- 24,329 messages from 197 channels on Telegram (October 7, 2023 – 23 October 2024)
- 23,534 posts from 1,625 pages on Facebook (October 7, 2023 - August 12, 2024)

⁴ World Health Organization (WHO), [One year on from the 7 October attacks in Israel: helping the helper](#), 7 October 2024.

Key Amplifiers: Online Media Outlets and Social Media Platforms

Among the top monitored pro-Russian outlets on the topic of the Israel-Hamas conflict in Bulgaria *Pogled.info* emerged as the leading source of disinformation both in terms of traditional media and as a domain shared on Facebook (Figure 1 & 2). The outlet consistently republishes nearly all of its Ukraine war coverage from Russian sources banned in the EU, including *Katehon*, *Tsargrad*, and *RIA Novosti*. While the original sources are cited at the end of the translated articles, this systematic practice, ongoing since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, remains unchecked in Bulgaria, raising concerns about the country’s enforcement of EU information security regulations.

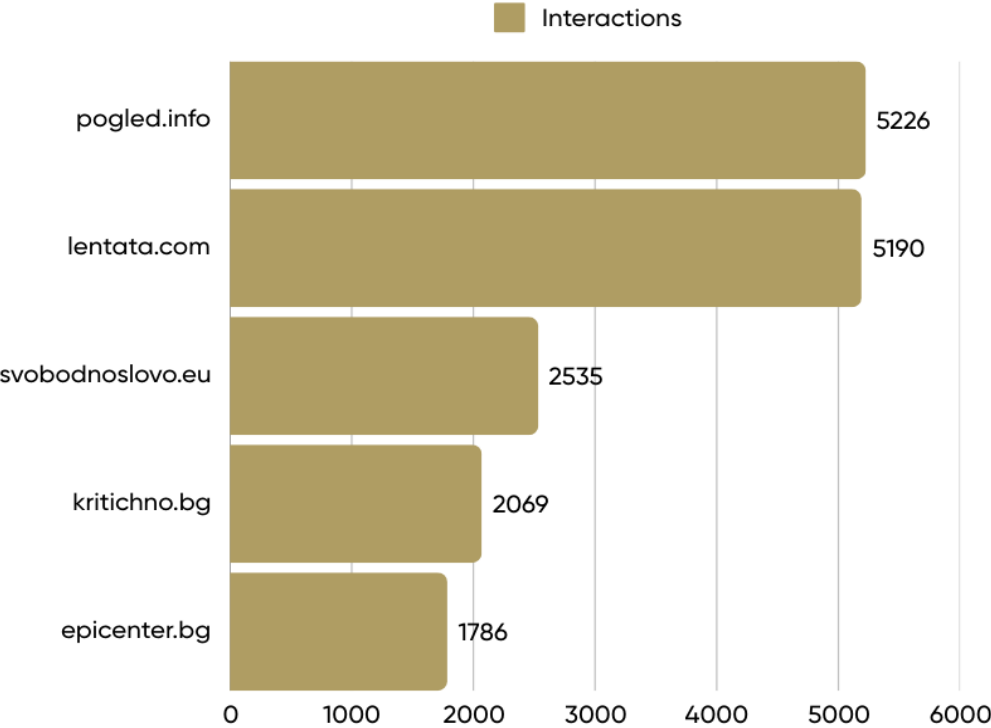
Figure 1: Top pro-Kremlin Sources Spreading Disinformation Related to the Israel-Hamas Conflict⁵



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika

⁵ This graph excludes duplicated articles from “mushroom” websites. The “mushroom site machine” – these are more than 370 anonymous sites with almost identical design (two basic patterns) and identical content (they publish the same articles). They have four main domains in common (dnes24.eu, zbox7.eu, bgvest.eu, allbg.eu), from which subdomains are cloned – for example, novini701.dnes24.eu, novinarbg.dnes24.eu, etc. From: *Russian Propaganda in Bulgaria Online* (January-March 2023) Part I. Newsletter of the Human and Social Studies Foundation, Sofia, 06.06.2023

Figure 2: Top Pro-Russian Domains Shared in Facebook by Interactions



Source: CSD based on data from CrowdTangle

The most frequently mentioned figures by pro-Russian media were former U.S. President Joe Biden, Benjamin Netanyahu, and Vladimir Putin (Figure 3). Biden faced frequent criticism, particularly over his administration's plans to explore policy options for officially recognizing a Palestinian state following Israel's war in Gaza. Numerous outlets framed this move as a potential "death sentence"⁶ for Netanyahu's government, arguing that it would further destabilize the region. In contrast, Putin was consistently praised for his political maneuvers, most notably his decision to sign the Russia-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement in September 2024.⁷ Pro-Russian media portrayed this as a testament to his ability to defy Western sanctions, positioning him as a key figure in dismantling Western hegemony⁸ and shaping a new multipolar world order.

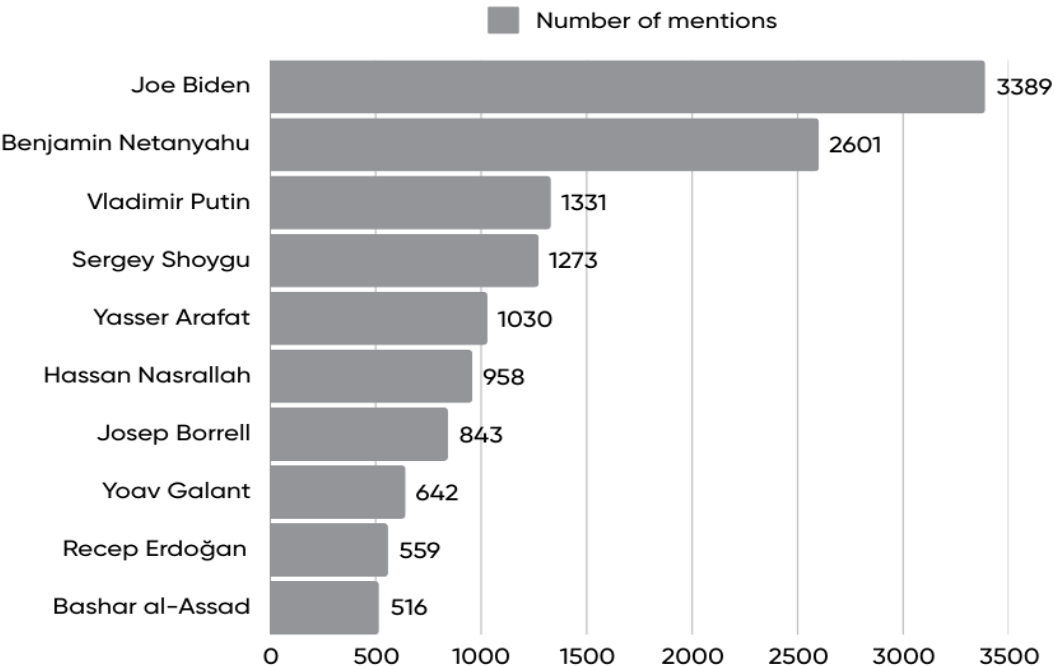
⁶ Pogled.info, "Biden announces death sentence on Ukraine and Israel", [[Байдън обяви смъртната присъда на Украйна и Израел](#)], 23 November, 2023.

⁷ Pogled.info, "Putin approves proposal to sign a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty with Iran", [[Путин одобри предложението за подписване на договор за всеобхватно стратегическо партньорство с Иран](#)], 19 November, 2024.

⁸ Pogled.info, "Stunning phenomenon: Putin defeats Western 'colossus'", [[Зашеметяващ феномен": Путин победи западния „колос“](#)], 28 October, 2024.

Netanyahu was frequently depicted as the primary obstacle to Middle East peace⁹ and the face of a regime the West blindly supports, ignoring any wrongdoing.¹⁰ At the same time, another dominant disinformation narrative accused him of dragging the U.S. into a large-scale war without its knowledge¹¹ - directly conflicting with claims that the West fully backs Israel. This contradictory messaging reflects the Kremlin’s **trial-and-error** disinformation strategy. When one narrative fails to gain traction, another is quickly introduced, shifting the focus to manipulate public perception and amplify distrust in Western policies.

Figure 3: Top Mentioned Individuals in Pro-Kremlin Sources (Topic: Israel-Hamas Conflict)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika

The “Mushroom Sites Machine”

Amplification of the narratives was also achieved through the "mushroom sites machine,"¹² as over 1,000 articles from mass-produced disinformation outlets were shared by Bulgarian Facebook users during the monitored period, demonstrating how duplicated content rapidly achieves high amplification, especially when it reaches social media.

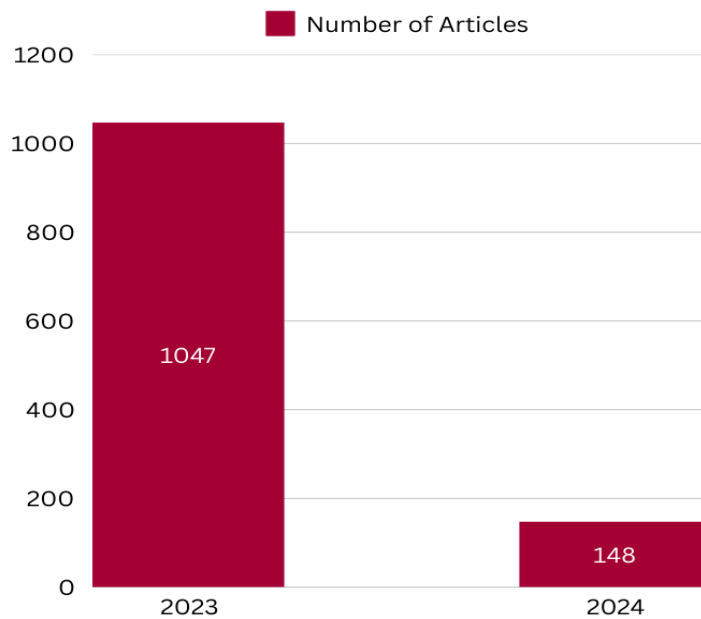
⁹ news247, “Turkey says Netanyahu is biggest obstacle to Middle East peace” [[Според Турция Нетанягу е най-голямата пречка за мира в Близкия изток](#)], 25 October 2024.

¹⁰ news247. “The collective West will turn a blind eye to all sorts of wrongdoings of the regime it supports” [[Колективният Запад ще си затваря очите за всевъзможни закононарушения на поддържания от него режим](#)], 5 October 2024.

¹¹ Pogled.info “The U.S. lost control over its allies”, [[САЩ загубиха контрол над съюзниците](#)], 4 October, 2024.

¹² Angelov, G., [I Worked For The 'Mushroom Machine': Inside Bulgaria's Cash-For-Disinformation Network](#), RFERL, 19 May 2024.

Figure 4: Articles from Mushroom Websites Shared on Facebook (Topic: Israel-Hamas Conflict)



Source: CSD based on data from CrowdTangle

Such articles were most frequently reshared on Facebook at the start of the conflict in October 2023, capitalizing on the international shockwave and covering both sides, including Hamas atrocities in Israel and Palestinians celebrating in the streets after the October 7 attack.¹³ As the conflict persisted, reshares declined and increasingly focused on criticizing Israel and the Western elite, covering only one side of the story. This shift in coverage reflected a growing bias, as reshares disproportionately highlighted Israel’s actions while downplaying context from the other side. For instance, a small spike in May 2024 reflected the International Court of Justice hearings on halting Israel’s Rafah incursion,¹⁴ in addition to Norway, Spain, and Ireland recognizing a Palestinian state.¹⁵ There was no coverage of Hamas’ armed wing praising the large-scale rocket barrage they launched on Tel Aviv.¹⁶

¹³ Blitz.bg, “Palestinian boy celebrates with assault rifle in hands Hamas attack on Israel”, [[Палестинче празнува с автомат в ръце атаката на Хамас по Израел](#)], 7 October 2023.

¹⁴ Blitz.bg, “Borrell wags finger at Israel, calls for...”, [[Борел размаха пръст на Израел, призова за...](#)], 26 May, 2024.

¹⁵ Blitz.bg, “A worldwide scandal broke out! Three European countries will recognise the state of Palestine” [[Гръмна световен скандал! Три европейски страни ще признаят държавата Палестина](#)], 22 May 2024.

¹⁶ DW, [[Israel-Hamas war: Israel strikes Rafah after Hamas barrage](#)], 26 May 2024.

Telegram: Peak Points of Disinformation

Over 95% of user reactions in the analyzed public Bulgarian Telegram channels related to the Israel-Hamas conflict originated from pro-Russian channels and chats, indicating a dominant narrative ecosystem that reinforces Kremlin-aligned viewpoints. Broader distribution patterns showed extensive dissemination of and engagement with YouTube content of influential pro-Kremlin figures Todor Angelov¹⁷ and MEP Petar Volgin¹⁸ from the pro-Russian populist party *Revival*. Both figures amplify disinformation and aim to shape public opinion.

Telegram discussions of the Israel-Hamas conflict peaked three times, corresponding with escalations that disinformation actors swiftly exploited. The first surge occurred on April 13, 2024, following Iran's first direct attack on Israel.¹⁹ The second peak, on July 31, 2024, centered on the killing of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Iran,²⁰ with Israel taking responsibility months later. The final peak, around Sept. - Oct. 2024, constitutes several events such as the spill over into Lebanon,²¹ the pager operations,²² and Iran's attack on Israel in response to the killing of Hasan Nasrallah.²³ These content surges underscore how disinformation networks time their messaging to major conflict milestones, exploiting heightened public interest to circulate tailored narratives and deepen societal divisions.

¹⁷ Youtube, [Todor Angelov](#), 2024.

¹⁸ Youtube, [Petar Volgin](#), 2024.

¹⁹ Aljazeera, [Israel-Hamas war: List of key events, day 7](#), 13 October 2023.

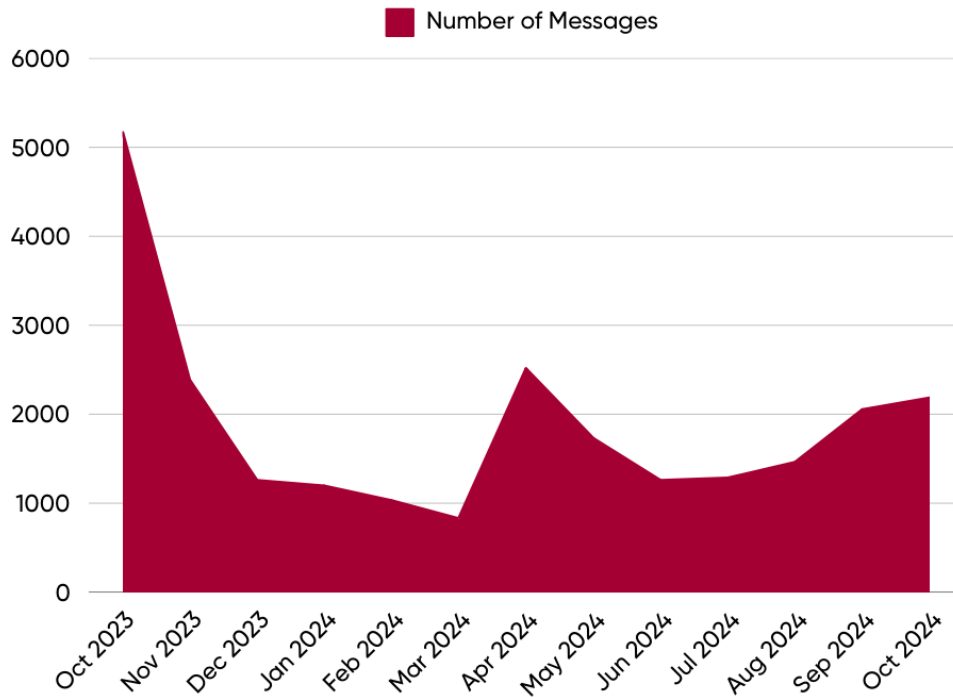
²⁰ Raja, Abdulrahim, R., Livni, E., [Ismail Haniyeh, a Top Hamas Leader, Is Dead at 62](#), *New York Times*, 31 July 2024.

²¹ ACLED, [Expanding Israeli operations in Lebanon and the escalation of the Middle East crisis](#), 4 October 2024

²² Mekhennet, S., Warrick, J., [Mossad's pager operation: Inside Israel's penetration of Hezbollah](#), *Washington Post*, 5 October 2024.

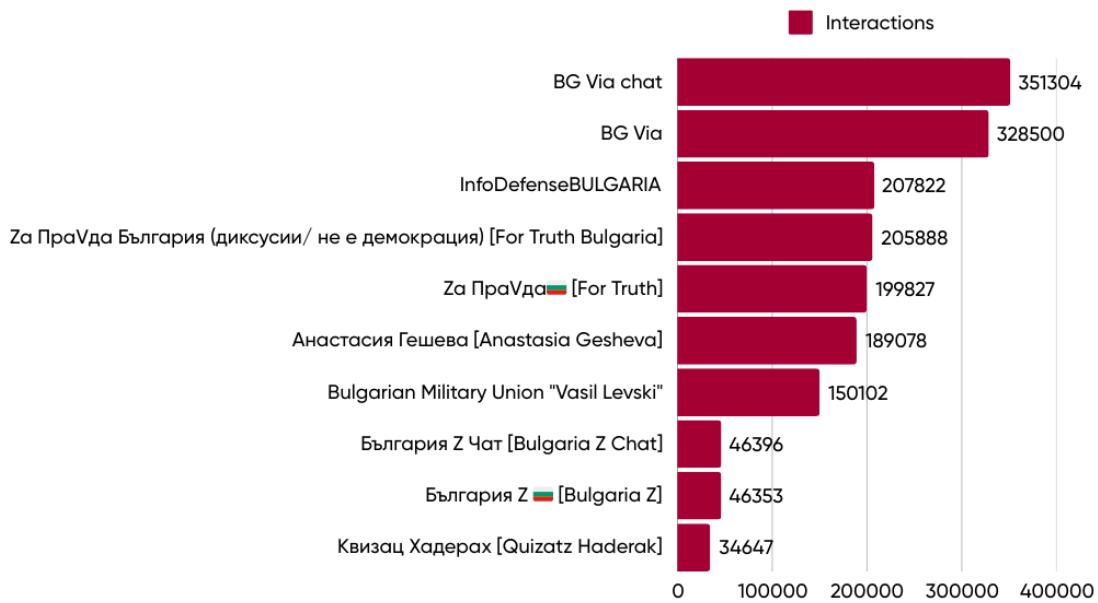
²³ Citrinowicz, D., [The Nasrallah killing is upending Iran's security strategy. Here's what to expect next](#), *Atlantic Council*, 11 October 2024.

Figure 5: Volume of Telegram Messages (Topic: Israel-Hamas Conflict)



Source: CSD based on Python-scraped data

Figure 6: Top pro-Kremlin Telegram Channels/Chats by Number of Reactions (Topic: Israel-Hamas Conflict)



Source: CSD based on Python-scraped data

Leading Telegram channels and chats spreading disinformation about the Israel-Hamas conflict are part of a well-established Bulgarian network previously known for circulating false claims about the war in Ukraine. Their most shared posts promote pro-Russian narratives,

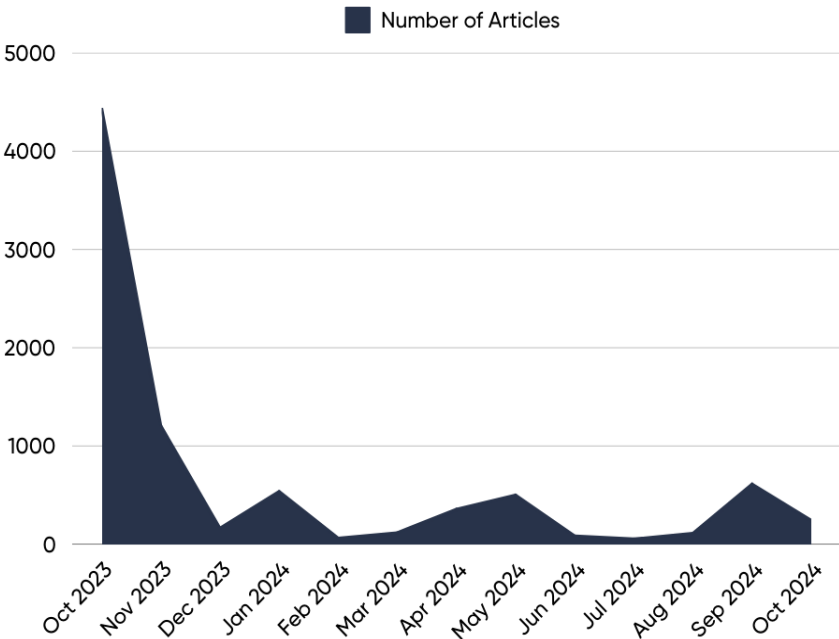
referencing so-called “Ukrainian Nazis,” alleged biolabs, and “puppet governments” under NATO, along with broader anti-NATO and anti-U.S. themes. These outlets also heavily emphasize Bulgaria’s historical ties with Russia. Notably, the top ten Telegram channels and chats alone gathered more than 445,000 interactions on Israel-Hamas content, indicating substantial reach and influence.

Overall, the social media findings illustrate a disinformation ecosystem that exploits both mainstream and fringe platforms to saturate Bulgarian audiences with pro-Russian narratives. By rapidly adjusting storylines and timing major information pushes to coincide with significant geopolitical events, disinformation actors deepen societal divides, distort public debate, and erode trust in credible news sources.

Disinformation Narratives Related to the Israel-Hamas Conflict

The Israel-Hamas conflict has generated a flurry of disinformation narratives in Bulgarian media. Figure 7 illustrates how the volume of misleading content spiked at critical moments in the conflict, mirroring spikes observed on other platforms like Telegram. From claims of unilateral Israeli influence over U.S. policy to accusations of Ukrainian arms sales to Hamas, these narratives lean on recurring conspiratorial themes such as global hegemony, “Deep State” control, and historical grievances to shape public perception.

Figure 7: Volume of Articles Spreading Disinformation Narratives (Topic: Israel-Hamas Conflict, Oct 2023 – Oct 2024)



Source: CSD based on data from Sensika

On October 7, the first day of the conflict, "mushroom" websites republished the article *Israel is preparing something scary for Gaza, Netanyahu talked on the phone with Biden*²⁴ 794 times. This extensive republishing reinforced the sub-narrative that Israel shapes global events unilaterally, using its influence over the U.S. to act without repercussions. By repeatedly disseminating this claim, pro-Russian outlets sought to promote the idea that Israel manipulates geopolitical decisions to advance its own interests - an ongoing disinformation theme observed throughout the analysis.

Below is a detailed examination of the disinformation sub-narratives spread by pro-Russian online media during this period.

Jews and Palestinians alike are victims of the West's proxy war for dominance

This recurring disinformation narrative, often pushed by pro-Kremlin outlets, claims that Ukraine's allies are waging a proxy war against Russia, using Ukrainians as mere tools. Recently, it has expanded to accuse the West, mainly the U.S., of manipulating both Palestinians and Jews to dominate the Middle East.²⁵ The narrative suggests that peace in the region was never a priority for the U.S. Instead, by fueling global conflicts, the U.S. consolidates its global power and strengthens its military-industrial complex, securing multibillion-dollar arms deals with warring factions on all sides.²⁶

Pro-Russian Bulgarian outlets also reiterate claims that the U.S. wants the conflict in Israel to continue as a way to avoid paying its national debt.²⁷ Some articles argue that starting a proxy war serves as an excuse for the U.S. to sidestep its financial obligations, citing that the U.S. has historically solved economic issues by benefiting from two world wars.²⁸ This disinformation claim is further echoed in Bulgarian articles,²⁹ that mention Martin Armstrong reinforcing the proxy-war narrative. A self-taught economic forecaster, Armstrong is a convicted felon who spent 11 years in prison for defrauding investors out of \$700 million and hiding \$15 million in assets.³⁰ Armstrong, known for his conspiracy theories, also denies the existence of man-made climate change.

²⁴ Blitz.bg, "Israel is preparing something scary for Gaza, Netanyahu talked on the phone with Biden." [[Израел готви нещо страшно за Ивицата Газа, Нетаняху се чу с Байдън](#)], 7 October 2023.

²⁵ Shlepchenko, V., "Israel is condemned: the U.S. starts the main war with the hands of the Arabs", [[Израел е осъден: САЩ започват главната война с ръцете на арабите](#)], *Pogled.info*, 18 November 2023.

²⁶ Silverhelm, T., "America's "out of control" chaos in the Middle East" [[Американският „неконтролируем“ хаос в Близкия изток](#)], *Pogled.info* 10 October 2024.

²⁷ Glasove, "Dozens of countries, including those from BRICS and the Vatican, refused to sign the declaration at Zelensky's conference in Switzerland", [[Десетки страни, сред които тези от БРИКС и Ватикана, отказаха да подпишат декларацията на конференцията на Зеленски в Швейцария](#)], 16 Jun 2024.

²⁸ Номяков, V., "The U.S. will collapse in about a year: the Great War is inevitable", [[САЩ ще грохнат след около година: Голямата война е неизбежна](#)], *Pogled.info* 26 May 2024.

²⁹ Armstrong, M., "U.S. 2024 could be our last" [[САЩ 2024 г. може да е последната ни](#)], *24 May.bg*, 3 September 2024.

³⁰ Morgenson, G., [In Fraud Case, 7 Years in Jail for Contempt](#), *New York Times*, 16 February 2007.

Additionally, the narrative intertwines the conspiracy theory of a so-called “Deep State”, which is believed to control U.S. institutions and operate above elected officials.³¹ It claims that the “Deep State’s” actions in the Middle East are driven by sinister and mysterious interests, not those of the U.S. government or its citizens.

Ukraine is supplying weapons (on the black market) to Hamas.

For some time, pro-Kremlin media have made baseless claims that Ukrainian authorities are trafficking Western weapons on the black market. Reports have circulated accusing Ukraine of diverting these arms to various destinations, even including European rioters. Given this context, it was no surprise that after Hamas' October 2023 attack on Israel, pro-Kremlin outlets quickly spread the accusation that Ukraine had sold Western weapons to Hamas. Fake stories, often disguised as credible reports from organizations like the BBC³² and Bellingcat,³³ were circulated to lend credibility to these claims. However, these stories were swiftly debunked.³⁴

Monitored articles accused senior Ukrainian military commanders of selling Western-supplied weapons on the black market.³⁵ They also amplified Dmitry Medvedev’s claim³⁶ that Ukraine is fueling both sides of the conflict by supplying arms to Israel while allegedly selling Western weapons to Hamas. According to this narrative, these arms, along with equipment abandoned by U.S. troops in Afghanistan, will further destabilize global hotspots.

To make such claims appear more trustworthy, various outlets referenced statements from Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, known for her strong anti-Ukrainian stance.³⁷ She was prominently cited for suggesting that Hamas may have acquired American weapons from Ukraine, further amplifying the disinformation narrative. There is no solid evidence that NATO-supplied weapons intended for Ukraine’s self-defense have been diverted to Hamas on a large scale. Pro-Kremlin outlets have repeatedly pushed similar baseless claims in the past, including allegations of arms being supplied to ISIS.³⁸

³¹Epicenter.bg, “Alexander Dugin: Trumpism - an ideological and geopolitical tsunami that no one expected!” [[Александър Дугин: Тръмпизмът - идеологическо и геополитическо цунами, което никога не е очаквал!](#)], 8 January 2025.

³²Euractiv.bg, Fact check: “Fake BBC video of Ukrainian politician selling arms to Hamas”, [[Проверка на фактите: Фалшив клип на Би Би Си за украински политик, който продава оръжие на „Хамас“](#)], 15 December 2023.

³³ ClubZ, “How disinformation about the Hamas-Israel conflict is spread online”, [[Как се разпространява онлайн дезинформация за конфликта „Хамас“- Израел](#)], 16 October 2023.

³⁴ Marcelo, P., [BBC did not report that Ukraine is sending arms to Hamas, a video was fabricated](#), AP News, 12 October 2023.

³⁵ NewsFront BG, “Hamas uses American weapons supplied to Ukraine”, [[Хамас използва американски оръжия, доставяни на Украйна](#)], 12 October 2023.

³⁶ Epicenter.bg, “If U.S. weapons for Ukraine fall into the hands of Hamas, Israel will face a tough battle” [[Ако оръжията на САЩ за Украйна попаднат в ръцете на Хамас, Израел ще се изправи пред трудна битка](#)], 12 October 2023.

³⁷ Kritichno.bg, “Hamas may have received weapons from Ukraine to attack Israel” [[Хамас може да са получили оръжия от Украйна, за да нападнат Израел](#)], 9 October 2023.

³⁸ Glasove, “Bulgarian weapons reach Ukraine and the Islamic State through the same business scheme” [[Българско оръжие стига до Украйна и Ислямска държава по една и съща бизнес схема](#)], 6 October 2023.

The West is trying to impose global hegemony by inciting wars in Ukraine and Palestine.

One of the Kremlin's closest to heart disinformation narratives proclaims that the West seeks to maintain its unipolar hegemony by inciting global conflicts, with Ukraine as a primary battleground. According to this narrative, the “Nazi” regime in Kyiv - installed and armed by the “collective West” - is at war with sovereign Russia, a key force in the multipolar world resisting Western dominance.³⁹ While the West fights through proxies, it is allegedly preparing for direct confrontation with Russia.

With the Israel-Hamas conflict, pro-Kremlin outlets now present the Middle East as the second front in the war between unipolar and multipolar forces.⁴⁰ Articles claim that while Netanyahu views Israel’s destiny as central, the “collective West”, led by the U.S., treats Israel merely as a tool to preserve its global hegemony.⁴¹ Such narratives are strongly promoted by Alexander Dugin, a Russian far-right ultranationalist, antisemitic figure, and the leading theorist of neo Eurasianism.⁴² His views have been widely republished in numerous articles across the monitored outlets.⁴³

Local disinformation amplifiers, like Boyan Chukov, a member of the nationalist conservative VMRO party, played a key role in disseminating similar disinformation narratives. In a lengthy interview for the pro-Russian media outlet *Pogled.info*'s YouTube channel,⁴⁴ Chukov claimed that the Israel-Hamas conflict is a battle between the Global South and Global North, and argued that Israel is effectively the 51st state of the U.S.

It is also worth mentioning that pro-Russian media outlets have used the somewhat conspiracy-laden narrative surrounding the Ben Gurion Canal during the monitoring period. Originally proposed in 1963, the canal was envisioned as an alternative to the Suez, providing one of the only two direct routes from the Atlantic and Mediterranean to the Pacific and Indian Oceans.⁴⁵ While it currently seems unlikely that this grand project will be initiated, pro-Russian outlets claim that its construction would achieve significant geopolitical goals.⁴⁶ They argue that it would not only strengthen America's closest ally in the Middle East but also weaken

³⁹ Petrov, P., “The fate of humanity is being decided,” [[Решава се съдбата на човечеството](#)], *Posoka*, 15 April 2024.

⁴⁰ Dugin, A., [The second front of the new world war has opened](#), *Pogled.info*, 28 September 2024.

⁴¹ Glasove, “Dugin: After Ukraine, the West opened a second front to maintain its global hegemony in the Middle East” [[Дугин: След Украйна, Западът откри втори фронт за запазване на глобалната си хегемония в Близкия Изток](#)], 12 October 2023.

⁴² Shekhovtsov, A., [Aleksandr Dugin's Neo-Eurasianism: The New Right à la Russe](#), *Religion Compass*, Vol. 3, pp. 697-716, 2009.

⁴³ Informiran.net, “Dugin: Denazification means the complete eradication of Russophobia in Ukraine and then everywhere” [[Дугин: Деназификацията означава пълно изкореняване на русофобията в Украйна, а след това навсякъде](#)], 12 October 2023.

⁴⁴ Youtube, “Boyan Chukov: The situation in the Middle East - English tea in an American cup, sweetened with Turkish sugar” [[Боян Чуков: Ситуацията в Близкия изток - английски чай в американска чашка, подсладен с турски шекер](#)], 25 October 2023.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ 24 May, “Israel’s goal behind the disarmament of the Palestinian territories” [[Целта на Израел зад безлюдяването на палестинските територии](#)], 3 November 2023.

surrounding nations.⁴⁷ Additionally, they assert that the canal would grant the U.S. and Israel control over a critical portion of global trade and generate billions in revenue,⁴⁸ similar to how the Suez Canal currently benefits Egypt.

Israel dominates global geopolitics and acts as it pleases.

For decades, Russian leaders and propagandists have weaponized antisemitic conspiracy theories, tapping into deep-rooted prejudices to mislead and distract audiences.⁴⁹ One such theory, the "Golden Billion," claims that a secretive, powerful cabal of Western elites - often depicted as Jewish - controls the media, economy, and politics, aiming to dominate the world.⁵⁰ Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, President Vladimir Putin⁵¹ and others have consistently promoted this narrative, falsely portraying Russia as a victim of a Western plot and alleging that the "Golden Billion" is hoarding the planet's resources for their own exclusive benefit, at the expense of the rest of the world.

The Kremlin's propaganda machine also echoed claims that Israel operates with complete autonomy, often bypassing the U.S. and the West to pursue its own interests. While they carefully avoid directly naming the "Golden Billion" conspiracy due to its antisemitic nature and the risk of being banned under EU regulations, they still manage to insinuate that Israel is a dominant force - perhaps even more powerful than the U.S. - in the global struggle for hegemony.⁵² In this narrative, Israel is portrayed not just as part of the West, but as a key actor in a unipolar world, pushing its agenda with little regard for Western control. Some outlets even claim that the removal of Assad's regime in Syria was carried out behind the back of the U.S., with Israel orchestrating the shift in its favor.⁵³

Various outlets have also pushed a narrative suggesting Israel's significant global geopolitical influence, claiming that Trump, as a leading Christian Zionist,⁵⁴ is supported by a large network of followers. This unfounded disinformation campaign⁵⁵ seeks to portray Israel as a key player

⁴⁷ Khan, S., "The true reasons behind Israel's internal policies" [[Истинските причини за израелската вътрешна политика](#)], 24 May, 30 May 2024.

⁴⁸ Pogled.info, "Ben Gurion Canal is the basis of American projects in the Middle East" [[Каналът Бен Гурион е в основата на американските проекти в Близкия Изток](#)], 30 May 2024.

⁴⁹ U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE Global Engagement Center, [More Than a Century of Antisemitism: How Successive Occupants of the Kremlin Have Used Antisemitism to Spread Disinformation and Propaganda](#), January 2024.

⁵⁰ Maynes, C., ['Golden billion,' Putin's favorite conspiracy, explains his worldview and strategy](#), NPR, 21 November 2022.

⁵¹ The Conversation (Podcast Transcript), [How conspiracy theories help to maintain Vladimir Putin's grip on power in Russia](#), 14 March 2024.

⁵² Epicenter.bg, "Netanyahu: The fall of Assad is the result of the powerful strikes we dealt to Iran and Hezbollah" [[Нетаняху: Падането на Асад е резултат от мощните удари, които нанесохме на Иран и "Хизбула"](#)], 9 December 2024.

⁵³ Pogled.info, "Israel has placed a deadly trump card up Trump's sleeve: an indecent peace is being prepared for Russia" [[Израел вложи убийствен коз в ръкава на Тръмп: готви се неприличен мир за Русия](#)], 11 December 2024.

⁵⁴ Pogled.info, "Christian Zionism: An oxymoron, not the reality that defines America's policy" [[Християнският ционизъм: оксиморон, не реалността, която определя политиката на Америка](#)], 17 November 2024.

⁵⁵ Brog, D., [The Truth About Christian Zionists](#), Foreign Policy, 16 November 2009.

in shaping U.S. foreign policy, implying that Israel has the power to direct Trump's political decisions.⁵⁶

The Israeli government is a Zionist terrorist organization.

In October 2024, Turkish President Erdogan called Israel a "Zionist terrorist organization" in response to its attacks on Gaza and Lebanon, while continuing to criticize Western powers, particularly the U.S., for supporting Israel.⁵⁷ Pro-Russian media outlets echoed Erdogan's remarks, including his call for the UN to halt weapon deliveries to Israel, claiming this would end the war.⁵⁸ The monitored outlets exclusively amplified Turkey's perspective, with no counterbalance to Erdogan's extreme rhetoric.

Israel has abducted children from Gaza.

During the monitoring period, a video showing children imprisoned in cages circulated widely on social media, with claims that the children had been captured during the ongoing military conflict between Israel and Hamas.⁵⁹ Social media posts and comments presented two completely opposing versions of the story: one claiming that these were Israeli children captured by Hamas, and the other suggesting they were Palestinian children kidnapped by Israel.⁶⁰ Despite the widespread circulation of the video, its origins remain unclear.

However, it was determined that the video had been filmed before the Israel-Hamas conflict began and was first uploaded to TikTok on October 5, 2023, several days before the escalation.⁶¹ While the specific claim was thoroughly debunked, the incident underscores the complexity of the situation. Official evidence, including a UN report from February 2024, confirms that Israeli forces have forcibly taken Palestinian children in documented cases.⁶² This adds depth to this narrative, highlighting that the issue is not entirely fabricated and reflects a broader, ongoing concern.

Case Study: The Pager Allegations

⁵⁶ Pogled.info, "Donald Trump: America's Chief Zionist?" [[Доналд Тръмп - главният ционист на Америка?](#)], 13 November 2024.

⁵⁷ Epicenter.bg, "Erdogan calls Israel a 'Zionist terrorist organization'" [[Ердоган нарече Израел „ционистка терористична организация“](#)], 12 October 2024.

⁵⁸ Fakti.bg, "Erdogan to Israel: You are a Zionist terrorist organization" [[Реджеп Ердоган към Израел: Вие сте ционистка терористична организация](#)], 9 October 2024

⁵⁹ Grivova, V., "The video of children locked in cages is not from the current conflict between Israel and Hamas; the rest is unknown" [[Видеото с деца, затворени в клетки, не е от настоящия конфликт между Израел и Хамас; останалото е неизвестно](#)], *Factcheck.bg*, 15 October 2023.

⁶⁰ Vesti.bg, "Video of children locked in cages circulates online; experts' commentary" [[Видео на деца, затворени в клетки, обикаля интернет, коментарът на специалистите](#)], 17 October 2023.

⁶¹ Ibid (44)

⁶² UN, [Israel/OPT: UN experts appalled by reported human rights violations against Palestinians, including women and children](#), 19 February 2024.

In September 2024, allegations that a Bulgarian company supplied Hezbollah with explosive pagers have sparked international intrigue,⁶³ with pro-Russian media amplifying the narrative and local amplifiers⁶⁴ even suggesting that Hungary was strategically using the story to obstruct Bulgaria's path toward Schengen and Eurozone integration.

The saga began when Hungary's Telex reported that Norta Global, a Bulgarian-registered company, allegedly purchased thousands of pagers from Taiwan and sold them to Hezbollah.⁶⁵ According to the report, these devices were later used in deadly explosions in Lebanon and Syria, resulting in twelve fatalities.⁶⁶ Further complicating the story, The New York Times cited Israeli intelligence sources suggesting⁶⁷ that three "shell" companies facilitated the pager supply chain, with Hungary's B.A.C. Consulting named as one of the firms involved.

The Bulgarian State Agency for National Security (SANS) swiftly denied any connection to the devices, emphasizing that no pagers of the kind detonated abroad had been imported, exported, or manufactured in Bulgaria. SANS conducted a rapid joint inspection⁶⁸ with the National Revenue Agency, Interior Ministry, and Customs Agency, which confirmed that Norta Global did not engage in any transactions of concern within Bulgarian jurisdiction.⁶⁹ While some financial flows passed through Norta Global's accounts, they were listed as service transactions, and no ties were found with sanctioned individuals or entities, including Hezbollah.

Investigations into Norta Global's operations revealed it has no employees, operates from a "New Companies Agency" address in Sofia, and is owned by Rinson Jose,⁷⁰ a Norwegian citizen with minimal physical presence in Bulgaria. Legal representatives confirmed that Jose's business activities in Bulgaria were limited and primarily financial in nature.

The explosive-pager controversy exemplifies how unverified or distorted reports can be weaponized to erode Bulgaria's credibility and create friction within the EU. Despite swift denials from Bulgarian authorities, pro-Russian media outlets continued to spotlight the allegations, fueling suspicion and amplifying the narrative of Bulgarian complicity. This tactic highlights the malicious intent behind such stories: to undermine trust, delay Bulgaria's progress toward deeper EU integration, and feed into broader disinformation strategies that

⁶³ DW, "The Explosive Pagers of Hezbollah Come from Bulgaria?" [[Взривените пейджъри на Хизбула идват от България?](#)], 19 September 2024.

⁶⁴ BTV, "Prof. Chukov on pagers: Hungary wants to block us from Schengen and the Eurozone" [[Проф. Чуков за пейджърите: Унгария иска да ни препъне за Шенген и еврозоната](#)], 22 September 2024.

⁶⁵ News Front, "Bulgarian Company Supplying Pagers to Hezbollah" [[Българска компания предала пейджърите на Хизбула](#)], 19 September 2024.

⁶⁶ Gritten, D., [Death toll from Hezbollah pager explosions in Lebanon rises to 12](#), BBC, 18 September 2024.

⁶⁷ The New York Times, [Israel's Exploding Pagers Target Hezbollah](#), 18 September 2024.

⁶⁸ News.bg, "NSSA and the Ministry of Interior investigate Bulgarian trace in the exploding pagers" [[ДАНС и МВР проверяват по медийни публикации българска следа във взривяващите се пейджъри](#)], 18 September 2024.

⁶⁹ Svobodna Evropa, "NSSA: No pagers like those exploded in Lebanon have passed through Bulgaria" [[ДАНС: През България не са минавали пейджъри като взривените в Ливан](#)], 20 September 2024.

⁷⁰ News.bg, "Norway also investigates whether it is connected to the explosive pagers" [[Норвегия също разследва свързана ли е с пейджърите бомби](#)], 25 September 2024.

benefit the Kremlin's geopolitical goals. By casting doubt on Bulgaria's reliability, these accusations ultimately serve to fracture EU unity and distract from critical policy issues.

Perceptions of Disinformation Narratives among Youth

While previous studies have focused on assessing social vulnerabilities to disinformation, conspiracy thinking and foreign influence among the Bulgarian population at large⁷¹, the level of acceptance of various disinformation narratives, including pro-Kremlin ones or related to recent conflicts such as the Israel-Hamas one, among young people has not been examined in-depth.

An online survey conducted in January 2025 among 1,003 young Bulgarians in the age group 16-25 aims to bridge this gap. It seeks to shed light on the: 1) level of awareness and perceptions of the Israel-Hamas conflict and frequently disseminated disinformation narratives associated with it; 2) main information sources young people draw on in relation to the conflict, 3) patterns of receptiveness towards more traditional pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives that are frequently disseminated in the Bulgarian online and social media, both not related to the Gaza war.

The survey results show that **young Bulgarians are quite indecisive on several aspects of the Gaza war and are not well informed about the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas**. This is further reflected in the high level of confusion and polarized opinions about disinformation narratives circulating in online media about the conflict. Young people mostly refer to traditional sources such as TV to get informed about the Gaza war, as well as to online news sites rather than to social media. They are highly uncertain about the accuracy of the information that has reached them on this topic.

Despite the high share of indecisive responses (40%) regarding the justifiability of the respective attacks by Israel and Hamas against the other party, **more young people tend to disapprove of military action on either side in the conflict (37%) - than to justify it**.

At the same time, more traditional and well-established pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives - unrelated to the Gaza conflict, but "hitting closer to home" - are significantly more recognizable among young people and have higher approval rates, especially those related to the **Russian war against Ukraine, Bulgaria's membership in the EU, NATO and the Schengen zone**, and most notably the overarching notion that **the Bulgarian government is serving foreign interests**. The results provide valuable insights for policy-makers, educators and civil society to guide tailored preventive and resilience building measures targeting young people.

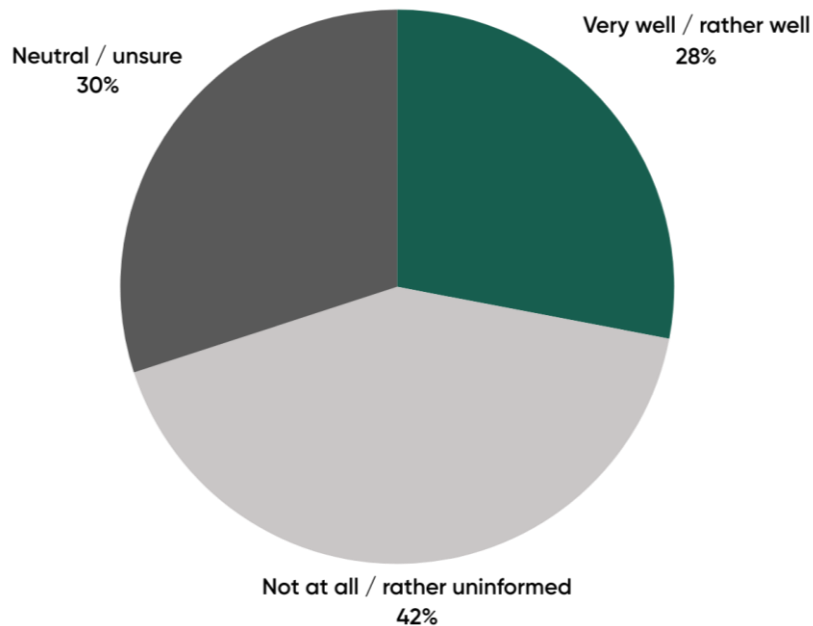
⁷¹ Central European Digital Media Observatory (CEDMO) and Bulgarian-Romanian Observatory of Digital Media (BROD), [*Conspiracy beliefs, disinformation, and factual relativism in East-Central Europe: insights from a comparative survey in 2024*](#), 2024.

The Israel-Hamas conflict: low awareness among youth

The majority of young people in Bulgaria are either uninformed (42%) about the war between Israel and Hamas or provided indecisive answers (30%). Only 28% say they are very well or rather well informed. This indicates that the topic is not of major interest to young people.

Figure 8: Level of Awareness about the Israel-Hamas Conflict

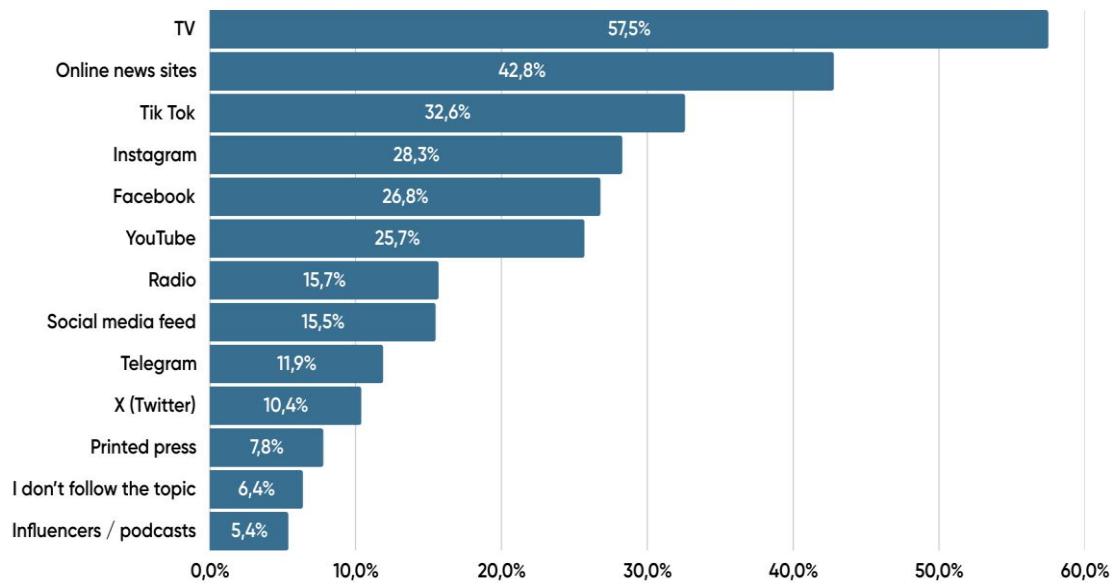
How well informed are you about the Israel-Hamas conflict?



The majority of those who are well or moderately informed on the issue received information on the Gaza conflict from “official sources” such as TV (57,5% of youth), followed by online news sites (42,8%). Although Bulgaria is among the EU Member States with a high percentage of internet use in the age group 16-24, with nearly 80% of young people using social media every day, social media networks are less frequently used by the respondents to follow the war in Gaza specifically. This could indicate that the Gaza war is not among the interests and topics they engage with on a daily basis through social media.

Figure 9: Sources of Information

*From what sources did you most frequently get information/news about the Israel Hamas war?
(Base: 1,003 respondents)*

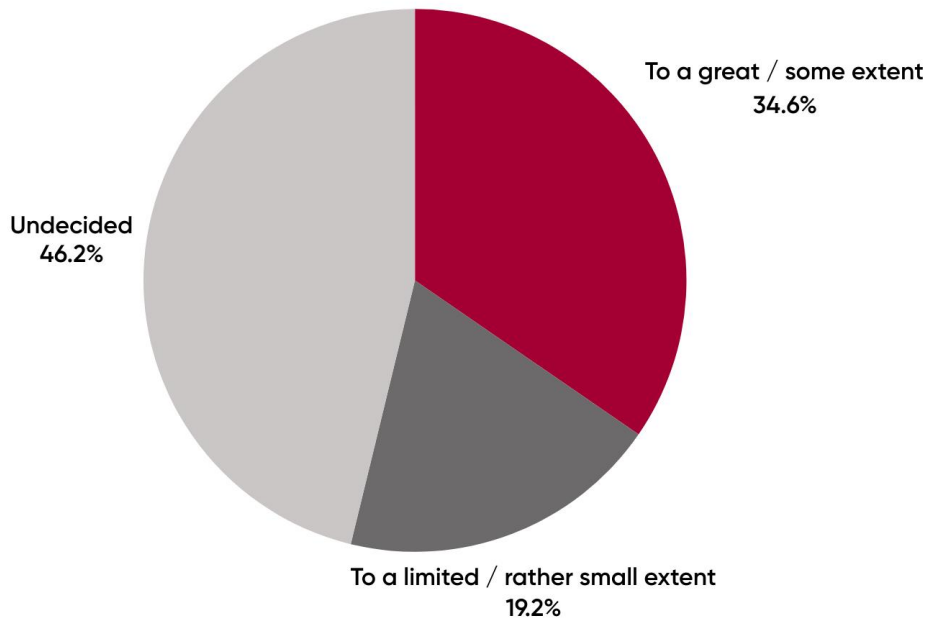


The predominant reliance on television and online news sites as main sources of information does not translate in high confidence in the accuracy of information, given that almost half of the respondents (46,2%) cannot say for sure if this was the case. Some 35% believe it was accurate to a great extent or mostly accurate, while 19% believe it to be mostly inaccurate. These responses could also indicate a low ability among this age group to judge the credibility and accuracy of information, which is associated with low media literacy skills - trends well recognised in comparative EU-wide studies⁷² that specifically affect young people.

Figure 10: Trust in Information

To what extent do you consider the information that has reached you regarding the Israel Hamas war to be correct (Base: 584 respondents who are well/moderately informed about the conflict)?

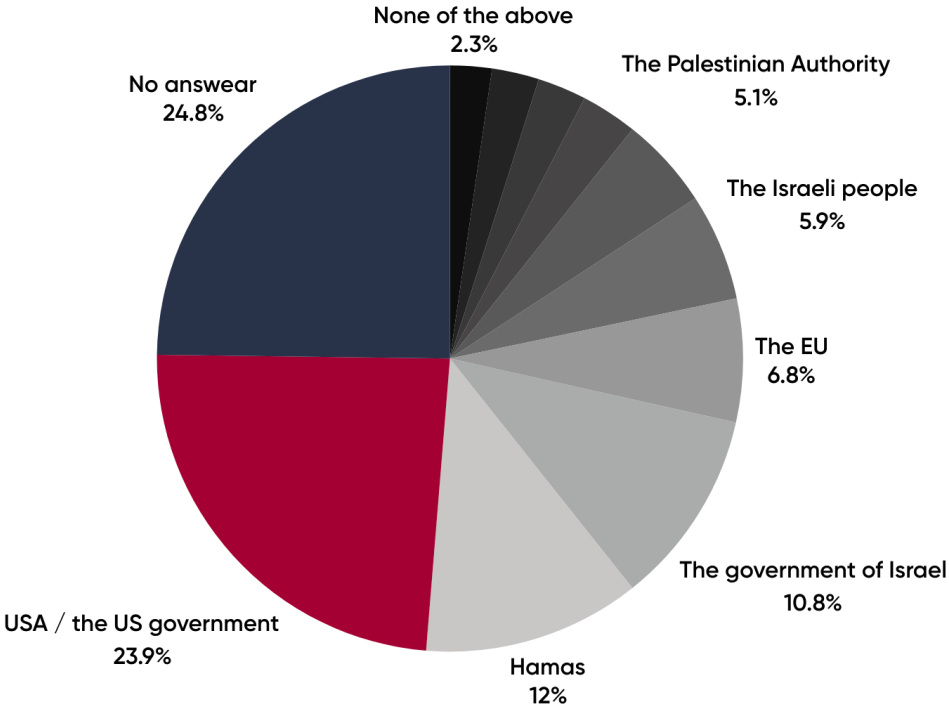
⁷² Marin Lessenski, [The Media Literacy Index 2023. Measuring Vulnerabilities of Society to Disinformation.](#) Sofia: Open Society Institute.



Who is Who in the Gaza War: Polarized Views

Among those who are well or at least moderately informed on the topic, one quarter did not express an opinion about who is most responsible for the conflict in Gaza, while 24% believe the USA and the US government to be the main culprits. The share of those interested in the topic blaming one of the two main sides of the war is lower - with 12% pointing to Hamas and 11% to the Israeli government. Only 6,8% see the EU as the main actor responsible for the conflict.

Figure 11: Opinions on the Actor Most Responsible for the Current Conflict in Gaza

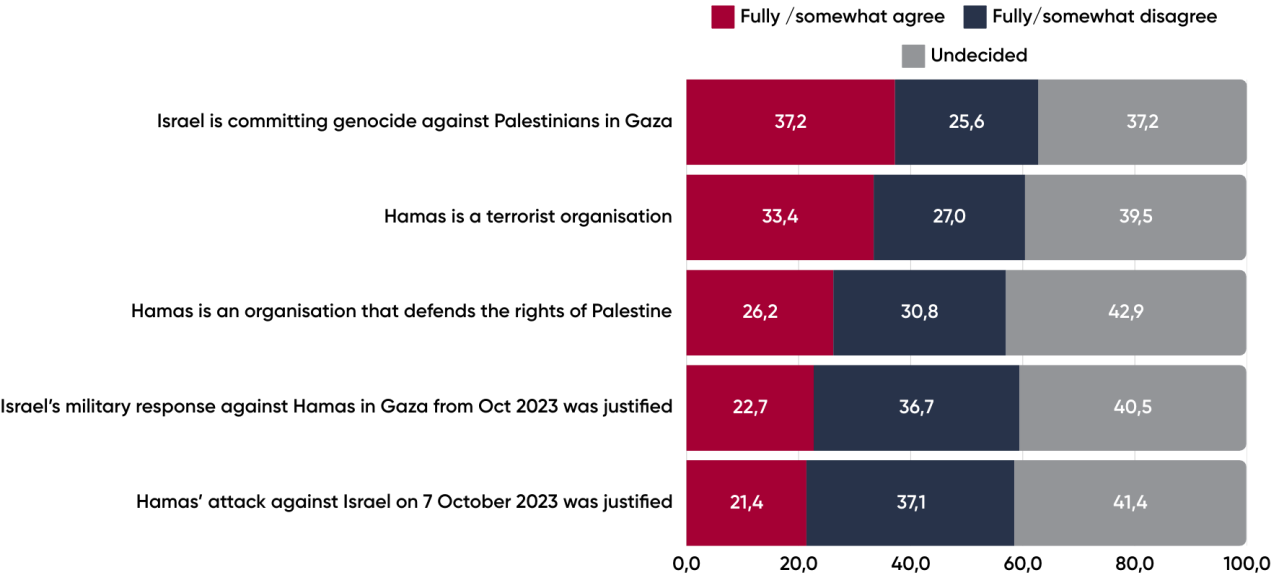


Given the relatively limited awareness of young people of the Gaza war and moderate-to-low level of interest in following the topic in the information space, it is not surprising that respondents were deeply **divided in their opinions when asked if the attacks of either Israel or Hamas against the other party are justified**. Over 40% are unsure, while among the rest, around 37% disapprove of military action on either side, and only 21% justify Hamas’ attack on Israel from 7 October 2023 fully or to some extent. Similarly, only 23% agree (fully or somewhat) that Israel was right to launch a counterattack on Hamas.

Respondents are also split in their opinions of Hamas as an organization, with slightly more willing to condemn it as a terrorist organization (33,4% agreeing mostly with this statement, while 27% disagreeing), while 26% tend to agree that it defends the rights of Palestinians (30,8% disagree).

At the same time, 37% of respondents who follow the topic tend to agree that Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza, while 26% disagree. In either case, nearly 40% of respondents are unsure what to think of either statement. This indicates that young people are having a hard time understanding the complexities of the war and forming a firm opinion.

Figure 12: Perceptions of Israel and Hamas' Actions



Misleading Narratives about the Israel-Hamas Conflict: a Split Stance

Given that young people seem to be divided in their opinions on the Israel-Hamas war, and also struggle to assess which information on the topic is accurate, it is key to understand to what extent pro-Kremlin narratives about the war have taken root among this target group. The survey tested the level of approval of seven narratives that are most often disseminated in the Bulgarian information environment by pro-Kremlin sources. These were tested on the entire sample, not only with those informed on the topic, to assess if these narratives have an impact on young people’s attitudes, regardless if they have good prior knowledge on the topic or not.

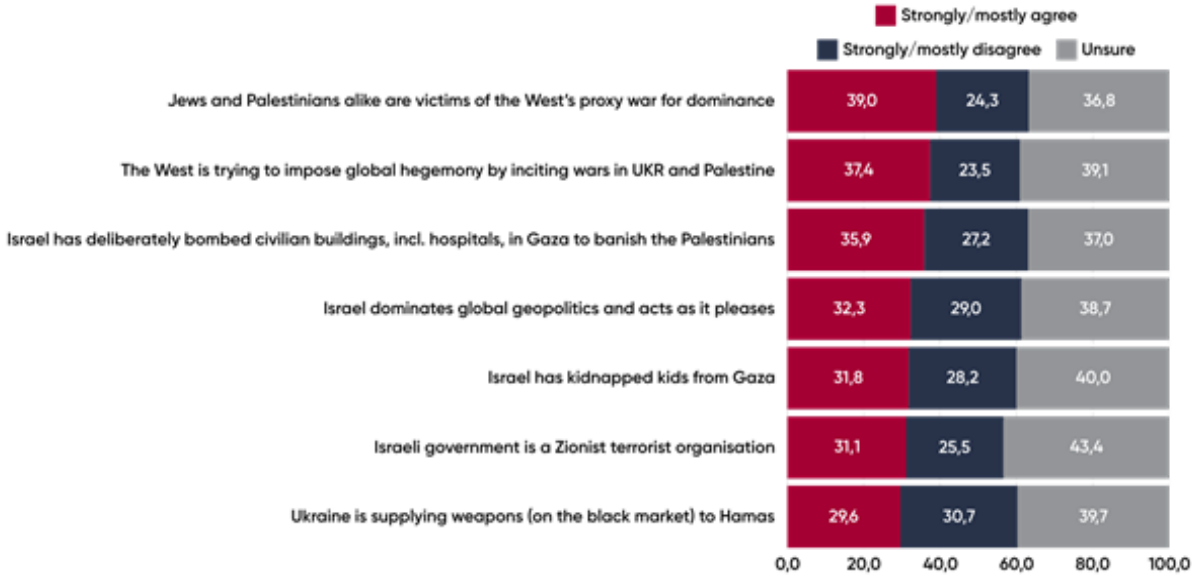
For all seven narratives, the share of those who are unsure and neither agree, nor disagree ranges between 37% and 40%.

The most believable narratives are anti-Western - namely those portraying the West as leading a global proxy war of which Jews and Palestinians alike are victims (39% approval vs 24% disapproval), and as seeking global hegemony by inciting wars in Ukraine and Palestine (37,4% agree). **Anti-Israel narratives** come second with around 32% of respondents mostly agreeing that Israel has kidnapped kids from Gaza or has global geopolitical dominance and does as it pleases.

The narratives that meet somewhat lower approval among the target group include the notion that Ukraine is supplying weapons to Hamas on the black market (29,6% agree) and that Israel is a Zionist terrorist organization (31% agree fully or mostly).

Figure 13: Attitudes towards misleading narratives about the Israel-Hamas conflict

(Base: all 1,003 respondents)



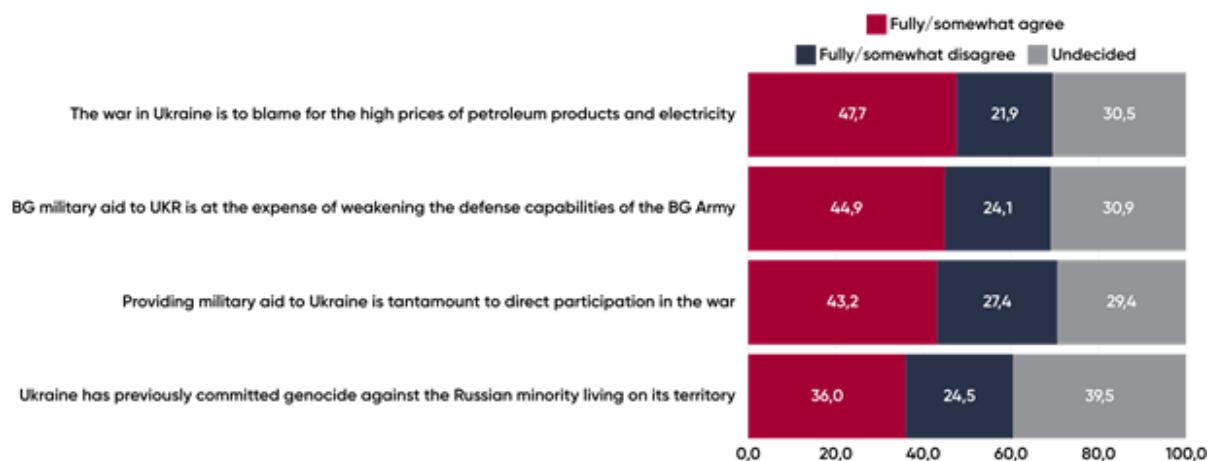
Disinformation Narratives “Closer to Home”: Wider Reach

In comparison to respondents’ attitudes on various narratives about the Gaza conflict, pro-Kremlin narratives about the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine that is “closer to home” appear to be more recognisable among young people and approval rates are higher.

- Nearly **50% of respondents agree that the war in Ukraine is the cause for high electricity and gas prices** (only 22% disagree).
- Nearly **45% think that Bulgarian military aid to Ukraine weakens our own defense capabilities**, while 43% believe that **military aid to Ukraine is direct participation in the war**.
- A high share of respondents (40%) is undecided on the notion that Ukraine committed genocide against Russian minorities on its territory, while 36% agree with this narrative.

Figure 14: Attitudes towards Pro-Kremlin Disinformation regarding Ukraine

(Base: all 1,003 respondents)



The survey further tested perceptions of a number of well-established disinformation narratives, unrelated to the Gaza war, that have been integral to the Kremlin’s disinformation and manipulation campaigns in the Bulgarian information space, including on Bulgaria’s EU and NATO membership, its accession to Schengen⁷³, the Eurozone, as well as on sanctions against Russia.

The narrative most resonant among young Bulgarians (52% approval) claims that Bulgarian politicians and the government are serving foreign forces at the expense of national interest. Over 40% of respondents further tend to accept the misleading statements about the negative effects of the country’s joining of the Schengen zone or the Eurozone, as well as with anti-EU/NATO narratives. Another 37% also believe that the sanctions against Russia harm those imposing them (while only 25% disagree).

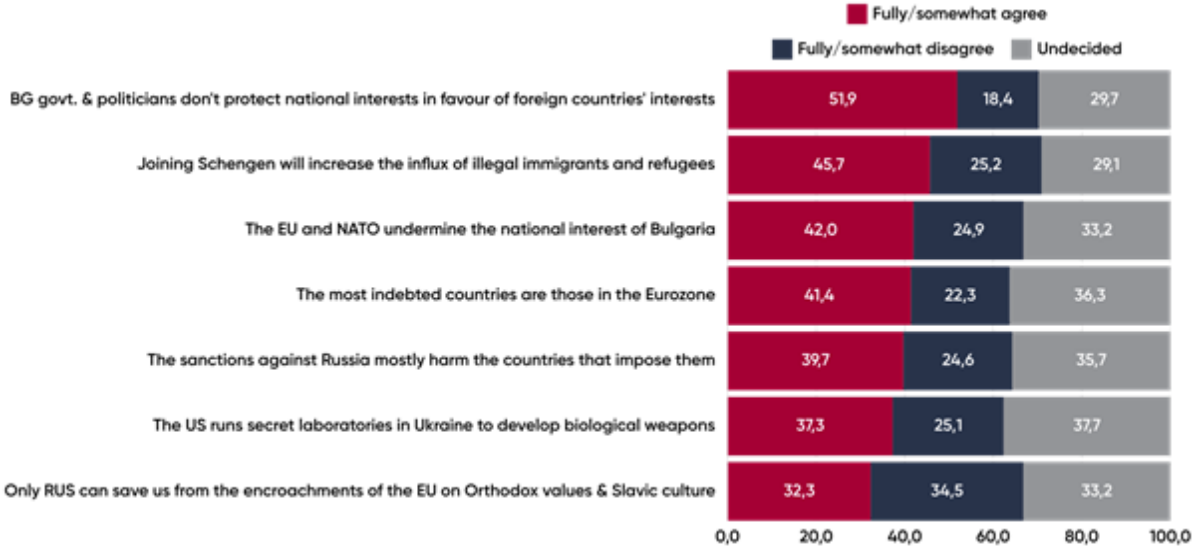
The false story of the US-run development of biological weapons in secret laboratories in Ukraine is found credible by over 37% of respondents, while one quarter do not believe in it.

Opinions are highly divided on the notion of Russia as the only defender of Orthodox values and Slavic culture against EU encroachment are highly divided, with approval rates (32%) only slightly lower than disapproval (34,5%).

⁷³ Georgiev, G., *Webs if Deceit: Online Information Manipulation Networks in Bulgaria and Romania*, Sofia: Center for the Study of Democracy, 2025.

Figure 15: Attitudes towards Anti-Western Disinformation Narratives

(Base: 1,003 respondents)



While young people’s pro-Russian orientation is not as explicit as among the general population (18 and older), anti-EU/NATO or other misleading narratives disseminated by the Kremlin are taking hold among young people.

The comparison of perceptions of various Gaza-related narratives with those of pro-Kremlin messages targeting relatable domestic issues, indicates that Bulgarian youth is more susceptible to the latter, which are well recognizable and entrenched in the local information environment. In youth's perceptions, the Israel-Hamas war appears as a distant foreign conflict that is little understood and does not feature prominently on their social media feeds. However, while they mostly reject the military attacks of either side in the war, anti-Western and anti-Israel statements are clearly taking hold including conspiracy narratives.

Coupled with low media literacy rates, a highly captured media environment in Bulgaria and insufficient skills to assess the credibility of information on politics and world affairs, the results amplify the need for decisive action against further cognitive capture among susceptible social groups such as youth.

What's Next

The Israel-Hamas conflict has become a prime example of how pro-Russian actors exploit high-stakes international crises to spread false or misleading narratives in Bulgaria's fractured media environment. From claims about biased Western hegemony to allegations of Ukrainian arms trafficking, disinformation tactics adapt quickly to generate public confusion, deepen distrust in government and institutions, and distract from the Kremlin's own geopolitical maneuvers. Combined with insufficient oversight of media funding and ownership, these manipulative strategies erode Bulgaria's resilience as an EU and NATO member state. By unveiling the key amplifiers, dominant narratives, and digital platforms that perpetuate these falsehoods, this report underscores the pressing need for coordinated efforts to protect democratic discourse in Bulgaria and maintain unity against external malign influences.

Efforts to counter disinformation in Bulgaria should include the full and effective enforcement of EU sanctions targeting Kremlin-linked media outlets. A critical next step is also enhancing Bulgaria's capacity to identify and regulate platforms that republish or amplify Kremlin-controlled narratives. Strengthening the strategic communication units within relevant ministries and state agencies, based on best practices from EU counterparts, will require adequate funding, access to advanced technology, and intelligence tools to counter disinformation more effectively. At the same time, public awareness and education initiatives, developed in collaboration with civil society, must focus on promoting media literacy and critical thinking among the general public, including the integration of disinformation identification into national education curricula. To ensure consistency and coherence in these efforts, a comprehensive strategic communication plan with regular evaluation mechanisms is essential, allowing Bulgaria to adapt to evolving threats and stakeholder feedback. Finally, proactive collaboration with NATO, the EU, and international allies will ensure that Bulgaria's work against pro-Kremlin narratives forms part of a broader, unified response to Russian geopolitical maneuvers.

The results of the conducted survey and evident general confusion among the young population over the topic of the Israel-Hamas conflict also spotlight the critical need for meaningful engagement with younger audiences. Influencer-driven, relatable storytelling resonates more strongly with youth than animated content or abstract arguments. To reinforce these online efforts, offline reforms must ensure that school environments promote tolerance, desegregation, and open dialogue, mirroring the values presented in counter-disinformation campaigns. Policymakers should work with social media platforms to help users, particularly young ones, understand algorithmic biases that amplify disinformation, hate speech, and extremist content. By integrating these educational programs and policy measures with a whole-of-society approach - uniting government agencies, civil society, academia, media, and private industry - Bulgaria can create a more resilient information ecosystem and shield its democratic processes from malign foreign influence.

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