

CROSS-COUNTRY REPORT

Black Sea Disinformation Watch: How social media ecosystems amplified Israel-Hamas war narratives in Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia

The Black Sea region remains a critical frontline in the battle against disinformation, as countries in this area face systemic vulnerabilities stemming from media polarization, political influence over the press, low media literacy, and a growing reliance on social media for news consumption. Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia have each experienced long-term exposure to Kremlin-backed propaganda narratives, intensified further during major international crises.

Within the framework of the „**Disinfo4BlackSea**” project, supported by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF) and implemented by G4Media and CRPE (Romania), CSD (Bulgaria), Veridica.ro, and expert teams from Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova conducted a comprehensive regional research effort. The project combined media monitoring, advanced social media listening tools, and disinformation mapping across five countries. In addition, opinion barometers were conducted in Romania and Bulgaria to assess public perceptions of the Israel-Hamas conflict and to measure vulnerability to disinformation narratives.

The Israel-Hamas war of 2023-2024 provided fertile ground for Kremlin-backed disinformation campaigns across the Black Sea region. A comparative analysis of Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia shows that while country-specific media dynamics differ, the use of social media ecosystems and online amplifiers to spread disinformation followed strikingly similar patterns.

Bulgaria: The Mushroom Sites Machine and Facebook as a Disinformation Vector

In Bulgaria, the online disinformation landscape is dominated by what experts call the "Mushroom Sites Machine": over 370 anonymous websites reproducing identical content. These websites publish articles that are systematically shared and amplified on Facebook, which remains the most influential social media platform in Bulgaria.

According to the *Country report for Bulgaria*, key disinformation amplifiers include pro-Russian outlets such as Pogled.info and platforms linked to fringe conspiracy networks. The narratives pushed through these channels frame Israel as the aggressor and promote anti-Western rhetoric, blaming the West and portraying Vladimir Putin as a defender of global stability. Sensika media monitoring identified over 8,493 articles related to the Israel-Hamas war in Bulgaria during the monitoring period.

Notably, the mushroom sites created hundreds of clones of four main domains, such as dnes24.eu and bgvest.eu, with subdomains like novinarbg.dnes24.eu. These sites

contributed significantly to content amplification, ensuring that pro-Kremlin narratives reached large audiences, particularly on Facebook where interaction levels were the highest.

Ukraine: Russian-Language Telegram Channels and Sham News Outlets

According to the *Country report on disinformation targeting Israel-Hamas conflict*, in Ukraine, the disinformation ecosystem relies heavily on Russian-language Telegram channels and low-ranked sham news websites. Despite a general decline in the use of Russian-language media within Ukraine, Telegram remains a critical platform for Kremlin-aligned narratives, particularly in the temporarily occupied territories.

Two dominant narratives were identified: that Ukraine supplies Western weapons to Hamas and that Western allies are abandoning Ukraine in favor of Israel. These narratives were systematically distributed through Russian-controlled media and Telegram channels, with the top three sources accounting for 45% of all disinformation articles analyzed. Media monitoring showed that out of 3,039 disinformation articles, a significant portion originated from sham websites like Mupzem-pushkino.ru and Lenta.ru. These sources were complemented by highly active Telegram channels like Ukraina.ru, which had over 189,000 followers. The Kremlin's strategy focused on undermining public trust and projecting Ukraine as globally isolated and corrupt.

Georgia: Emotional Manipulation and Framing Through Pro-Government Media

According to *the Country report*, Georgia presents a more complex scenario, where the mainstream media largely avoided direct disinformation but exhibited framing bias aligned with pro-government and Kremlin narratives. However, Russian-linked platforms like Sputnik Georgia, For.ge, and NetMedia.ge were instrumental in spreading anti-Israel and anti-Western narratives.

Telegram and Facebook were key dissemination platforms, but the tactics in Georgia leaned more towards emotional manipulation through visuals, recycled content, and selective reporting that amplified anti-liberal sentiment. The disinformation focused on portraying Israel as a tool of Western hegemony and downplaying Hamas's attacks. Media monitoring identified 7,049 articles on the Israel-Hamas conflict in Georgia, with pro-Kremlin outlets amplifying false claims and recycling old footage to manipulate emotions. Coverage from Russian-aligned platforms consistently omitted Hamas' attacks on civilians, focusing instead on Israel's military actions.

Comparative Insights:

Across Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia, the experts assessments indicated the Kremlin's disinformation strategy leveraged:

- Facebook in Bulgaria for mass amplification via "mushroom" websites.
- Telegram in Ukraine as the primary channel for disinformation in Russian-speaking areas.
- A mix of Telegram, Facebook, and local pro-Russian platforms in Georgia, combined with emotional framing and selective reporting.

Common narratives included accusations/disinformation that Ukraine supplied weapons to Hamas, Israel controlled global politics, and the West used the Gaza conflict to pursue geopolitical dominance.

The social media ecosystems in Bulgaria, Ukraine, and Georgia proved central to the dissemination of war-related disinformation. While the specific platforms and amplification strategies varied, the common objective remained: undermining trust in Western institutions, reinforcing anti-liberal sentiments, and manipulating local audiences with polarizing narratives.

Future efforts to build regional resilience against hybrid threats must prioritize monitoring social media ecosystems, investing in digital literacy, and strengthening cross-border collaboration in counter-disinformation initiatives.

SOURCES:

The Kremlin's Weaponization of the Israel-Hamas War in Ukraine's Information Space - Country Report by Elizaveta Polyakova (CSD)

Russian Disinformation on the Israel-Hamas Conflict in Georgia: Tracking Kremlin-aligned Narratives - Country Report by Guga Chomakhidze (CSD)

COUNTRY REPORT ON ROMANIA - Disinformation Targeting the Israel-Hamas Conflict: Insights from Romania- Bianca Toma, Maria Suciuc - CRPE

Disinformation in Bulgaria Related to the Israel-Hamas Conflict: Narratives, Amplifiers, and Public Perceptions - Country Report by Svetoslav Malinov, CSD

Disinformation in the context of the Israel-Hamas conflict as seen from Moldova - Country Report by Vitalie Călugăreanu, Journalist, Republic of Moldova

Disclaimer:

This report is part of the project "**Investigating the Impact of Disinformation Targeting the Israel-Hamas War in the Black Sea Region,**" funded by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF). The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of EMIF or the project's partner organizations.

Date:

Bucharest, February 2025