



Empowering the Geopolitical EU in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans

Disinformation Beyond External Influence GEO-POWER-EU | Horizon Europe

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Main Objective:

Contribute to the empowerment of the EU to manage security threats within the deteriorating geopolitical environment that lies in its Eastern Neighbourhood and in the Western Balkans.



Independent Variables: 1. The strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors, i.e., the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey.
2. The strategic orientation of WB/EaP countries.

Dependent Variable: EU foreign policy decisions and actions towards the two regions.



Main Ambition:

Articulate a proposal for a comprehensive EU strategy towards these regions that will employ new and reformed means and policy instruments, taking into consideration foresight concerning the strategic aspirations of other geopolitical actors.



Six specific objectives

01

Propose ideas to increase the effectiveness and adapt EU Enlargement policy to the new realities.

02

Interrogate the continued relevance of the EaP and articulate policy prescriptions for its reform.

03

Assess the influence of other geopolitical actors (United States, Russia, China and Turkey) in the two regions.

04

Provide strategic foresight about the prospects of geopolitical competition in the two regions.

05

Increase the EU strategic autonomy and its ability to contain military threats from the deteriorating geopolitical environment beyond its borders.

06

Propose a comprehensive and multidimensional EU strategy that will guide relations with the WB/EaP countries.

Conceptual Framing

Reframing Disinformation

Disinformation in the Western Balkans is frequently conceptualised as an external threat.

Our research suggests:

- Disinformation becomes effective when domestic elites instrumentalize it for political gain.
- It operates not merely as misleading content, but as a governance strategy embedded in domestic political competition.
- Foreign narratives gain traction through local adaptation and elite amplification.

Disinformation is not simply imported — it is domesticated and strategically deployed.



Methodological Design

Mixed-Methods Comparative Approach

Data Sources:

- 23 semi-structured elite interviews
- Public opinion survey (1,000+ respondents per country)
- Social media sentiment analysis (2025)
- Structured case studies

Analytical Strategy:

- Triangulation of structural, elite, and public-level data
- Cross-validation of survey and digital discourse

Limitations acknowledged:

Survey does not measure direct exposure; findings are context-sensitive.



Structural Context in the Western Balkans

Shared conditions in the Western Balkans

- Fragile democratic institutions
- Media capture and politicisation
- Ethnopolitical fragmentation
- Weak institutional legitimacy
- Declining trust in political and judicial systems

These conditions do not determine outcomes, but they shape susceptibility.

Core Finding 1: **Domestic Political Incentives and Narrative Alignment**

Core Observation

Disinformation narratives gained traction where domestic political structures created incentives for their strategic adaptation.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

- Entity-level political fragmentation shapes differentiated information environments
- Ethnopolitical segmentation facilitates selective narrative circulation
- External narratives are embedded within existing identity-based political competition

Serbia

- High concentration of media ownership and agenda-setting influence
- Strong alignment between political messaging and dominant media framing
- External narratives are strategically localized within national identity discourses

Core Finding 2: **Structural Resonance**

Disinformation aligns with long-standing grievances:

Bosnia and Herzegovina:

- Ethnic divisions
- Fragmented institutional authority
- Entity-based media ecosystems

Serbia:

- National identity narratives
- Concentrated media ownership

The same narrative produces different effects depending on institutional and social context.



Resilience Framework

Operationalising Democratic Resilience

We developed a comparative Resilience Matrix based on:

1. Political competition and legitimacy
2. Media freedom and independence
3. Social cohesion
4. Civic resistance to disinformation

Findings:

Bosnia and Herzegovina → Fragmented resilience

Serbia → Severe institutional backsliding; constrained pluralism

Civil society initiatives (e.g., fact-checking organisations) provide resistance, but effectiveness depends on institutional openness.

Disinformation is embedded in governance structures. Resilience correlates with institutional integrity.
→ Therefore, countermeasures require a **whole-of-society approach**.

EU Credibility and the Aspiration–Perception Gap

Public opinion data indicate:

- Declining support for EU accession in Serbia (below 40%)
- Persistent skepticism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Sentiment analysis shows:

- Increasing negativity toward Western actors in digital discourse
- A gap between political aspiration and affective perception

Disinformation operates within this emotional gap rather than through outright rejection of EU membership.





Concluding Insight

Disinformation as Governance Problem

1 Structural Reality

Disinformation is embedded in domestic governance structures.

2 Political Condition

Countermeasures must address political incentives — not only content.

3 Institutional Requirement

Institutional integrity is a precondition for resilience.

Strengthening democratic institutions is central to strengthening disinformation resilience.