

Медийна, предизборна и интернет комуникация
Media, Election and Internet Communication

**Media Monitoring of Disinformation Regarding
Minorities in the Election Campaign for Members
of the European Parliament in Bulgaria in 2024**

DOI 10.55206/AEIIY3653

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Abstract: The study focuses on social and electronic media events and events related to the elections of MEPs (Members of European Parliament), in which disinformation regarding minorities is directly or indirectly spread. The research design includes the compilation of a corpus (selection of TV and radio debates, video clips with election messages, publications on Facebook pages of political parties and their leaders, publications in electronic media related to the European elections, publications by representatives of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria on websites and social media channels, etc.), and the methodology combines media monitoring and discourse analysis of the appearances of Bulgarian political leaders, speakers and candidates in statements, addresses, debates, media participation, etc., in which they present their positions and comments on the election of Members of European Parliament. The first hypothesis is that the disinformation campaigns are aimed at Roma and Turks, who are the largest minorities who actively participate in the electoral process and are easily manipulated. The second hypothesis is that in the contemporary Bulgarian political discourse the emphasis should be on stimulating voters to participate in the electoral process by making a reasoned decision based on sufficient and truthful information. The third hypothesis is that the coincidence of the elections for national parliament and European Parliament will lead to an amorphous campaign with vague messages.

Keywords: elections, election campaign, minorities, media appearances, media monitoring, disinformation, social media, MEPs, democracy, migrants.

Introduction

The 2024 European Parliament elections were the third in a row in Bulgaria after the country's accession to the European Union in 2007. The previous ones took place in 2014 and in 2019. At the elections held on 9 May 2024, the turnout was about 33% – relatively low compared to the average for the European Union, but almost the same as the previous ones.

The campaign for these elections took place in the context of a dynamic political situation, complicated by the sixth consecutive elections for members of the National Assembly within the last four years, indicating political instability and the need for voter mobilization.

The regulation of election campaigns is based on the current electoral code, which defines the framework for their conduct.

The research interests were related to the study of social and electronic media events and events related to the elections of MEPs (Members of European Parliament), which directly or indirectly spread disinformation against minorities.

The aim of the study is to find out whether and how online (through which social networks and media channels) disinformation is spread against different minority groups.

The first hypothesis is that the disinformation campaigns are aimed at Roma and Turks, who are the largest minorities, who actively participate in the electoral process and easily succumb to manipulations, as is the established practice in Bulgarian elections for members of the National Assembly and elections for local authorities.

The second hypothesis is that in the contemporary Bulgarian political discourse the emphasis should be on stimulating voters to participate in the electoral process by making a reasoned decision on the basis of sufficient and true information, and not by spreading fake news and disinformation in order to manipulate public opinion and individual groups of voters.

The third hypothesis is that the coincidence of the elections for the National Assembly and the European Parliament will lead to an amorphous campaign with vague messages.

In order to achieve the aim and test hypotheses, the following two assumptions about the essence of campaign and disinformation are made as theoretical justification:

- A campaign is a coordinated set of activities aimed at promoting a cause, product or political platform to a specific target audience. In the political context, an election campaign involves organized efforts to attract support for a party or candidate through messages, debates, promotional materials and events to influence voters' decision.

- Disinformation is the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information in order to manipulate public opinion or behavior. The European Commission defines it as “verifiably false or misleading information created, pre-

sented and disseminated for the purpose of harming society or achieving certain political or economic objectives”. [1]

The design of empirical research involves the construction of a corpus – a selection of TV and radio debates, video clips with election messages, publications on Facebook pages of political parties and their leaders, publications in electronic media related to the European elections, publications on websites and social media channels made by representatives of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria, etc. The methodology combines media monitoring and discourse analysis of the appearances of Bulgarian political leaders, speakers and candidates in statements, addresses, debates, media participation, etc., in which they present their positions, comments on the election of Members of European Parliament.

Presentation of the monitoring methodology and tools

The methodology of the media monitoring used follows the following basic steps:

1. Defining the aim.
2. Identifying the key sources of information.
3. Creating a monitoring system with a selection of monitoring tools.
4. Selecting relevant keywords and phrases – elections for the European Parliament, MEPs, democracy, Roma, Turks, Ukrainians, minorities, migrants, LGBTQ+.
5. Data collection and analysis to identify key trends, influential media and opinions, as well as to measure the overall scope and response to the monitoring site.
6. Drawing conclusions.

Defining the aim of media monitoring

Tracking the media appearances of representatives of political parties and coalitions in the election campaign for Members of European Parliament in order to detect key trends and topics related to minorities and disinformation.

Identifying the key sources of information that are being monitored

The elections for Members of European Parliament in Bulgaria coincided with the elections for members of the National Assembly. This put the researchers in an unplanned situation, which seriously hampered media monitoring, because the appearances of the parties in mass electronic media such as television and radio, as well as in social networks, were strongly influenced by the prioritization of the national context – elections for members of the National Assembly.

In the last four years for Bulgaria, these were the fifth elections in a row after the elections held in April, July and November 2021, October 2022, April 2023 [2], the results of which, unfortunately, did not create a majority, and therefore a stable government.

For the purposes of this survey, media, online publications, social networks and other sources of information were selected that are most popular among different groups of voters and content users.

Traditionally in Bulgaria, television is the main source of news and information for the majority of older citizens (pensioners, e.g.), which are not active on the internet and social networks in particular.

According to the data of the National Statistical Institute as of 31.12.2023, there are 1,530,909 people in Bulgaria over the age of 65. [3] The majority of these citizens are active voters because they are the result of another model of education and attitude towards the state. In the first 20 years after 1989 in its large majority people over the age of 65 were considered supporters of the policy of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, but in the past 4 years support has fallen sharply and the number of votes received by it in the 2024 parliamentary elections is 151 560 [4] and in the elections for MEPs - 141 178 (7.01%).

According to the electoral legislation, parties have free and paid access under certain conditions to nationally presented and state-funded television and radio. They hold election studios, debates and other media formats to present platforms, positions and candidates.

Given that television offers audio-visual information, it turns out to be preferable to radio, which offers only audio. On the other hand, radio can be listened to as a background or simultaneously with other activities, while television requires concentration only on it.

The time when both media broadcast pre-election formats is usually in the evening or late afternoon with the expectation of generating a larger audience.

In the modern digital age, both media offer online options for watching and listening to and after live broadcasts.

The second channel for election campaigning and propaganda, which in Bulgaria, according to specialists, successfully competes with them and according to some already dominates, is Facebook. Social media attract the most users who are potential voters. In 2023 “According to Kepios data, there are 5.59 million Internet users in Bulgaria, with Internet penetration at 83.1%.” A total of 4.42 million social media users (65.7% of the population) are registered – 51.5% of them are women and 48.5% are men. It turns out that the most preferred platform in Bulgaria is not “Facebook” – there are 3.40 million Bulgarian accounts. However, there are more on YouTube – 4.41 million. On “Instagram” there are 1.65 million.” [5]

In the 2024 election campaign, some of the parties, such as the nationalist “Vazrazhdane” (Revival) made a very intense and targeted campaign on its official page [6], which has over 121,000 followers, and in its group, which has over 30,000 members. [7]

The YouTube channel of the party leader Kostadin Kostadinov [8] has over 92,000 subscribers.

The party, which describes itself as patriotic, received enough votes (281,434, which is 13.98% of the Bulgarian citizens who voted) to send three MEPs, one of whom is a very famous Bulgarian journalist with many years of experience in the National Radio.

Third are electronic newspapers, platforms, websites and portals. They have their own political orientation and editorial policies that are aimed at specific audiences.

Analyses of media publications related to the elections for Members of European Parliament in which the topic of minorities is directly or indirectly addressed

In the period May-June 2024, the political and social situation in Bulgaria and Europe is marked by significant changes and tensions. Political parties on the Bulgarian stage, such as “Vazrazhdane” (Revival) and “Velichie” (Greatness), are taking increasingly firm positions on key European issues. “Vazrazhdane” insists on renegotiating the European pact on migration [9], which they say would lead to increased migration pressure on the country. In addition, they oppose the Green Deal over concerns about job losses and criticize the European Media Freedom act as a threat to free speech. In parallel, the “Velichie” party has increased its influence using populist approaches and pro-Russian rhetoric, criticizing NATO and the European Union and organizing protests against military aid to Ukraine. Analysts describe it as a radical and nationalist party that skillfully manipulates the fears and hopes of disillusioned voters.

The results of the recent European elections confirm the growing influence of these parties. Abroad, Bulgarian voters gave the most votes for the Coalition “Continuing the Change” and “Democratic Bulgaria” with 26.99%, followed by “Vazrazhdane” with 18.61% and “Velichie” with 10.78%. This trend is worrying because their combined result exceeds that of traditional right-wing parties.

Furthermore, the European Network Against Racism points out that minorities continue to be underrepresented in the European Parliament – only 4.3% of members are from ethnic minorities, far below the 10% of the EU population identifying as such. This limits the ability to create policies that meet the needs of the diverse population of the Union.

“Vazrazhdane” further strengthens its far-right positioning by considering an Alliance with Germany's Alternative for Germany party in the European Parliament. [10] This raises serious concerns about the growing influence of neo-Nazi and pro-Putin groups in European institutions.

The social situation in Bulgaria is also tense, especially with regard to the rights of the LGBTQ+ community. A report by ILGA-Europe [11] puts the country in one of the last places in Europe for legal protection of LGBTQ+ people with a score of only 23%. The restrictions on the freedom of expression and association of this community are a worrying reality, both in Bulgaria and globally.

The legacy of the communist regime, which persecuted and persecuted LGBTQ+ people, continues to influence today's public attitudes. The holding of a Gay Parade in Sofia provoked sharp reactions and aggressive comments, which underscores the serious tension on the issue.

In addition to social tensions, there is also the spread of disinformation. Fake news about alleged EU coercion to introduce sex education and adopt the Istanbul Convention has emerged. The proliferation of misleading images, such as fake photos of Eurovision contestants generated by artificial intelligence, is also indicative of the scale of the problem. There is also tension in sport, and the case of the punishment of the Nantes player [12] for refusing to wear a rainbow jersey has caused a serious public outcry. [13]

The economic consequences of homophobia are also significant. Studies show that the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people can contribute to economic development and well-being. However, the lack of tolerance and equality continues to hold back the country's potential progress in this direction. [14]

Monitoring on websites and social media from roma for roma

Facebook page Roma for Democracy [15] has 12,000 likes, 15,000 followers. On May 6, 2024 the campaign started with this post: “We are delighted to announce the strengthening of our Roma for Europe campaign, marking a significant step towards transformative change in the run-up to the 2024 European Parliament elections.

This post introduces the initiators, users, and targets. Roma for Democracy stands as a pivot for this campaign within the transnational network of the Roma Foundation for Europe, together with respected members such as the Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative, the Roma Education Fund and the European Roma Institute of Art and Culture. Together, they cultivate a robust digital community that boasts over 250,000 social media subscribers and a wide reach across EU member states”.

The channel is dominated by publications, which can be grouped in the following categories:

- Videos with messages of Roma leaders who are not from Bulgaria - in the first few days of the campaign a total of 5 publications with personal video messages was uploaded, and in the middle of the election campaign a video with several leaders presenting the Roma Foundation for Europe;

- Then Miglena Mihaylova – a famous Roma woman who is a lawyer made a video statement announcing the series of conversations, which were published between May 22 and June 4. This is also the main focus of the campaign aimed at Roma. The talks were with the candidates for MEPs from the Coalition “Continue the change - Democratic Bulgaria” Radan Kanev, Daniel Laurel, Borislav Sandov and Denitsa Simeonova, and Nikolay Hadzhigenov, MEP candidate from

the “We are coming” party. It is impossible not to note that there is a strong presence of representatives of a coalition that claims to be right-wing.

- The third type of publications are short video messages branded on the same background made by young Roma activists from Bulgaria.

- Also of interest are the direct connections on the day of the elections from different parts of the country, in which observers in the sections in the Roma neighborhoods share direct impressions. The platform ZOOM is used and communication is moderated again by Miglena Mihaylova.

Initiatives of the Amalipe Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance

The *Amalipe* Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance [16] has implemented numerous initiatives to promote civic activity, tolerance and understanding of democratic values among young people, with a particular focus on the upcoming European Parliament elections in 2024. The main objective of these initiatives is to raise awareness of democratic processes, to encourage participation in elections and to strengthen the civic activity of the younger generation, including representatives of the Roma minority.

On May 15, 2024, in the city of Sofia, the “Amalipe” Center and the active youth of the Center organized a debate with representatives of the parliamentary parties to take part in the upcoming elections for members of the European Parliament. [17]

The *Amalipe* Center organizes numerous educational programs, including trainings “Peers train peers”, aimed at increasing knowledge about the European Union, its institutions and the role of elections. Information meetings are held at universities, where young people from the 11th and 12th grade are introduced to the democratic values of the European Union, the academic environment and the opportunities for higher education. International Youth trainings also offer a platform for the exchange of experience and knowledge. One of the key initiatives involves visiting the European Commission, the European Parliament and other institutions where young people learn about their structure and functions. These visits are aimed at increasing the motivation to participate in elections and strengthening the understanding of democratic processes in the European Union. [18]

Inter-school debates on topics such as “Should young people vote?” and “Bulgaria's participation in the European Union” provide Roma youth with a platform for expressing opinions, developing argumentative skills and recognizing fake news. Participants learn constructive discussions and position defense, thereby building a culture of meaningful public debate. In addition, young Roma trainers share knowledge with their peers, motivating them to participate in the electoral process and overcome the barriers to participation in democratic life.

The *Amalipe* Center organizes an annual school competition on the theme “My opinion matters for united Europe”, which inspires hundreds of young people to express their ideas through creative projects.

Podcasts have also been created on topics such as tolerance, discrimination and the dreams of young people, which draw attention to the role of the European institutions and the importance of elections. [19] Debates with representatives of parliamentary parties enable young people to ask questions about education, youth policies and the future of Europe. They promote a culture of constructive dialogue and show young people the importance of engaging with key societal issues.

Through these initiatives, The *Amalipe* Center creates an environment that supports the active civic participation of young Roma. They develop leadership, communication and critical thinking skills while strengthening solidarity and cooperation in the educational community. Young people are encouraged to be active participants in building a more tolerant and democratic society. The activities of The *Amalipe* Center confirm the importance of civic activity and education as a basis for shaping the future of Europe and engaging young people in democratic processes.

General conclusions with answers to questions from the media monitoring methodology

1. In Bulgaria, the minority groups that are subject to disinformation are traditionally the Roma and that is why we formulated the first hypothesis, which, however, has not been proven.

2. Social media, social networks and other communication channels where misleading, fake and false information about minority groups is published in online media that have policies with a negative attitude towards Roma, as well as party publications – websites, pages, video channels of nationalist or far-right parties such as e.g. <https://fakti.bg> and Facebook.

3. Negative publications targeting minorities are not published in the same media and there are no separate media targeting specific minorities – e.g. Roma, Russians, Ukrainians, Arabs or LGBTQ+. The media market in Bulgaria is not large enough to support a medium that targets its negativity only to a minority. There are media outlets that openly use hate speech against the Roma, but they are an exception. They don't have the word "Roma" in their vocabulary, they use the offensive word "Gypsies."

4. Minority groups themselves draw information from various sources. After 1989 and after the establishment of the National Council on ethnic and demographic issues targeted publications in minority languages in Bulgaria have been funded for many years. Newspapers and magazines were published in their mother tongue. Such are the newspaper "New life "in Turkish, "Yerevan" in Armenian, "Drom Dromender" in Roma. Over the past ten years this practice of targeted funding has been discontinued, and for this main reason most newspapers are not published on paper or are not published at all.

5. Ethnic minorities in Bulgaria have their own media and communication channels.

- In 1991 “Vahan” (“Shield”) in Plovdiv was created, and in 1994 “Heyer” (“Armenians”) - in Burgas. They, as well as the “Yerevan” newspaper, are no longer under state subsidy. They are issued in Bulgarian and Armenian and reflect only what concerns the Armenian community and Armenians around the world. From September 2004 in Plovdiv, the newspaper “Parekordzagani tsain” (The Voice of the benefactors) was published once a month in A3 format with a colorful first and last page. Since 2011 the newspaper has been published twice a month in Bulgarian and Armenian.

- The Roma have their own channels of communication in the form of the website of the *Amalipe* center, the *DROM Dromender* Agency, pages and groups on Facebook. *Drom Dromender* now has an electronic version and can only be read online at: <https://ddrom.net/>

- The only newspaper published on paper is the organ of the Jewish organization *Shalom*.

However, their impact on the campaign for the European elections was not possible to establish due to the focus on social and electronic media embedded in the methodology.

6. Media monitoring found that different minorities were informed and activated to participate in different ways during the election campaign for members of the European Parliament.

The Turkish minority has traditionally been active through pre-election meetings with party leaders and parliamentary candidates. Face-to-face communication is still leading. Facebook is used as a communication channel for young people. There is an official page of the Youth “Movement for Rights and Freedoms”, as well as pages of the regional youth organizations of the party.

The official Facebook page of the Youth *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* [20] has 24,000 followers.

The Roma in Bulgaria are divided into Christians and Muslims. The second group claims Turkish ethnic identity and is a target group of *Movement for Rights and Freedoms*. Another part of the Roma ascribe to a Bulgarian identity and try to find a place in different political formats and formations.

The main channel of communication is no longer just meetings with candidates, but also Facebook and other video sharing channels.

7. It is difficult to answer the question of the ratio between verbal and visual misleading and/or false information during this campaign, because it was “2 in 1” and the focus was on the elections for the National Assembly.

Overall, the campaign was quite weak and ethnic minorities were not commented on in a negative light or targeted with false information.

8. The low turnout even among Roma is an objective indicator of the lack of information and interest. The traditionally high turnout of the Turkish minority in the elections for MEPs is also in the downward direction.

9. It was interesting to check whether there are representatives of minorities on the lists for the elections of Members of European Parliament. Out of a total of 31 parties and coalitions that participated in the elections for MEPs, 17 on their lists are persons who are not of Bulgarian ethnic origin. The list of candidates includes representatives of other ethnicities and nationalities living in Bulgaria – Jews, Arabs, Chinese, Hungarian, Roma, Turks, Bulgarian-Croat, Bulgarian-Cuban and others. The total number of candidates with a non-Bulgarian ethnic identity and name on the lists of parties and coalitions which participated in the elections for members of the European Parliament is 38. On the list of “Vazrazhdane” there is a Turk, a Russian and a Hungarian. Twenty-two of the candidates have Turkish names, of which 13 are on the list of the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms*. There is also a Roma on this list who is the mayor of a village. [21]

10. Only two representatives of minorities were elected as Members of European Parliament, – Ilhan Kyuchuk and Taner Kabilov from the list of the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms*.

General conclusions about the most influential media and opinions, general reflection and reaction to the topic of monitoring, inference of trends

A total of 2073730 Bulgarian citizens voted for Members of European Parliament. [22]

295,092 (14.66%) voted for *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* and three MEPs were elected, two of whom Turks – Ilhan Kyuchuk and Taner Kabilov, and the third is the very popular Bulgarian journalist – Elena Yoncheva, who was nominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party in the previous European Parliament.

- In Bulgaria, the media with the largest coverage and the largest audience interest is television. The three leading and largest television channels are the Bulgarian National Television, bTV and Nova TV. In their broadcasts – regular as the “Referendum” of BNT and the “Face to Face” of bTV – election debates and presentation of candidates and positions of parties for the European elections were held. Viewership was high. In addition, the broadcasts are available for viewing on the video channels of these three media.

- Secondly, we put YouTube as an influential media because of the video messages, discussions, presentations, meetings with candidates for MEPs published and watched.

- The third media and network is Facebook. The parties communicated with their primary and potential voters on their official pages and in their supporters’ groups,.

Some parties have over 10 Facebook groups they control. This is, for example, GERB.

The *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* has an official page, its youth organization also has an official page, but also many regional youth organizations maintain their own.

As a party that protects the interests of the Turkish minority and some of the Turkish-speaking Roma, the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* focused more on the elections for National Assembly and had fewer messages related to the European Parliament elections.

In terms of media coverage and influence on the Roma community, two general conclusions can be drawn:

- The *Amalipe* Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance works systematically to enrich the political culture of young Roma in the framework of various projects and initiatives. The center has a well-maintained website, Facebook page and Channel in YouTube.

- Both younger and older audience were activated within the project “Roma for democracy” through the specially created webpage, where various video and audio-visual materials were published.

The coincidence of the elections to the National Assembly and the elections to European Parliament adversely affected the subject of our observation, as it was very difficult to detect events and activities aimed at the European elections themselves. The “2 in 1” logo was a flagship for many media outlets.

In general, it can be concluded that in the framework of the campaign, Turks and Roma were not victims of disinformation and media manipulation, with which the first hypothesis is refuted.

However, there have been verbal attacks by the candidates for MEPs in the direction of gender policies and migrants.

Manipulations, fake news and photos were used against sexual minorities in Bulgaria and abroad.

The second hypothesis that in the contemporary Bulgarian political discourse the emphasis should be on stimulating voters to participate in the electoral process by making a reasoned decision on the basis of sufficient and truthful information has been partially proven, especially with regard to the Roma and Turkish minorities.

The functioning of communication channels between the representatives of each ethnicity increases the level of awareness and trust, as well as protects against disinformation and media manipulation. The wide popularity of the website and the channel of the *Amalipe* Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance and the *Roma for democracy* Facebook page gives us reasons for this with regard to Roma.

With regard to Bulgarian citizens with a Turkish ethnic identity, the many Facebook pages of the youth organizations of the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* play the role of a main channel for informing and motivating activity in the electoral process.

The third hypothesis is that the coincidence of the elections for the National Assembly and the European Parliament will lead to an amorphous campaign with vague messages we consider proven.

Discussion questions

In a media analysis of the 2017 elections Ivanka Mavrodieva concludes that “Consequently, we can conclude that the pre-election campaigns for the National Assembly since 1990 have included the use of printed and electronic media, and after 2001 parties gradually published on online media and since 2003 – on blogs and social networks.” [23] These conclusions outline the evolution of election campaigns in Bulgaria and highlight how digital technologies and social networks have transformed political communication. The use of media in Bulgarian election campaigns since 1990 is an adaptation to technological innovation. From print and electronic media to the gradual introduction of online platforms after 2001, the campaign took its messages into new spaces, with blogs and social networks becoming important channels after 2003. This expansion enriches forms of communication, but also leads to challenges such as audience fragmentation and message control. Ivanka Mavrodieva’s estimates and forecasts deserve serious attention. Her conclusions are that “The candidates for MPs prefer verbosity, ornateness, abstract words, and clichés. Election campaigns have started to include social networks and virtual forums; they have been evaluated as virtual tribunes for personal speaking but not as a virtual agora including discussions. Probably during the next election campaigns the roles of social networks (Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) will increase. Speeches, political presentations, press conferences and debates will be broadcast online following the model of livestream. Visual elements, video clips, multimodal presentation and multimodality will combine with traditional tools.” [24]

A lot of these 2017. predictions have already been realized in modern campaigns. Social networks have indeed become an important platform for political communication, with visual content and TV channels playing a key role. This underlines the need to adapt to the changing media environment and to use social networks more effectively as an interactive platform for dialogue.

The evolution of election campaigns in Bulgaria after 1990 demonstrate constant adaptation to new communication technologies. However, while social networks provide new opportunities to connect with voters, the lack of interactivity and the dominance of personal speech limit their potential as a means of genuine public dialogue. To build a more effective and engaging campaign, it is important that prospective candidates rethink their approach by combining new technologies with authentic content and discussion opportunities.

Conclusion

In the framework of the monitoring study, a preference of candidates for European elections to traditional media for audience communication was found, without neglecting the opportunities of social media as a platform for proclaiming those in the context of the election campaign. It targets mainly groups susceptible to disinformation with a lack of education, social adaptation and variable preferences in voting attitudes. In thematic terms, mostly disinformation topics are selected, indicating value contradictions with inconsistent moral tendencies, providing confusion in the meaning fields of groups susceptible to disinformation.

It is reasonable to say that Bulgaria is facing complex challenges related to increasing political polarization, social tensions and disinformation. These processes require a thorough analysis and a careful approach to achieve stability and progress at both national and European level.

Note: *The study was done as part of implementing the project “Minorities as the object of disinformation during the elections for Members of European Parliament” funded by Tides Foundation, on the recommendation of Google.org Charitable Giving Fund (Grant Reference #: TF2210-110492), the purpose of which is to implement a Central and Eastern Europe accelerator program and fund, with local partners, with the aim of addressing disinformation in Central and Eastern Europe.*

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Manuscript was submitted: 18.11.2024.

Double Blind Peer Reviews: from 19.11.2024 till 20.12.2024.

Accepted: 21.12.2024 .

Брой 62 на сп. „Реторика и комуникации“ (януари 2025 г.) се издава с финансовата помощ на Фонд научни изследвания, договор № КП-06-НП6/48 от 04 декември 2024 г.

Issue 62 of the Rhetoric and Communications Journal (January 2025) is published with the financial support of the Scientific Research Fund, Contract No. KP-06-NP6/48 of December 04, 2024.