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ONLINE DISINFORMATION RISK ASSESSMENT - PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN CROATIA 2019-2020

There is a **medium risk** of online disinformation in Croatia's campaign for presidential elections on 22 December 2019 and (possibly) 5 January 2020. Facebook is the most widespread social media platform in Croatia. A number of factors reduce disinformation risks: The Croatian public has a relatively high trust in traditional media and much less trust in social media (30%). Also, social media platforms introduced several transparency tools. On the other hand, there are factors that increase disinformation risk: there have been reports on social media disinformation in previous elections in Croatia and there is a concern that candidates may use inflammatory rhetoric, hate speech and disinformation during the campaign. Also, there is a significant increase in using social media as platforms for political debates.

Social media consumption, trust in media

In January 2019 Croatia had [3.79 million Internet users](#) which is 21% more users than in January 2018. Internet penetration in Croatia in January 2019 was 91%.

In January 2019 the total number of active social media users in Croatia was 2 million, which is 48 percent of the total population. Facebook is [the most widespread social media platform](#) and at the beginning of 2019, the platform had 1.9 million users. Instagram had 1.2 million users. Facebook is the most popular among 25-34 years old users and Instagram among 18-24 years old users.

According to Reuters Digital News Report 2019, In Croatia, [89% of news is gathered online](#) (including social media) compared to 78% from TV. Social media (without other online content) is a news source in 53%, print 43 and radio – 27%. 76% use the smart-phone device for news weekly, 40% trust the news, 30% trust news on social media, top social media for news is Facebook (56%), followed by YouTube (28%).

According to the OSCE/ODIHR's [Needs Assessment Mission Report](#), [TV](#) is still considered to be the main source of information, but there is a significant increase in Internet news portals and social media as platforms for political debates.

According to The European Broadcasting Union 2019 Trust in Media Report, there is a medium trust in national news, low satisfaction with national democracy and medium political pressure on public state media. The public thinks public service media enjoys media freedom. Other relevant findings include: medium trust in radio (50% trust, 45% tend not to trust; EU-wide average 59% vs 34%), medium trust in TV (50% trust, 49% tend not to trust; EU 50% vs 46%), low trust in written press (41% trust, 54% tend

not to trust; EU 47% vs 46%), low trust in the internet (39% trust, 49% tend not to trust; EU 32% vs 53%), low trust in social media networks (30% tend to trust, 53% tend not to trust).

According to data from Eurobarometer 2018, 71% respondents in Croatia claim that they are exposed to fake news (68% in the EU), 67% claim that they can identify fake news easily (58% EU), 80% think fake news is a problem (71% EU), 81% claim that fake news endangers democracy (76% EU).

Public Attitudes and Trust in Institutions

According to the 2019 Eurobarometer standard report only 13% of respondents trust parliament and government (EU average is 35%), which is lower than in 2018 when 18% trust the parliament and 19% trust the government. Only 12% of respondents trust political parties, 86% do not, while 2% do not know.

Electoral Context and Administration

Croatia is a parliamentary republic with a directly elected president. The president serves as a head of state and appoints the prime minister and cabinet members with the consent of the parliament. The parliament is a unicameral legislative body composed of members elected to a four-year term. The current 151 MPs represent 20 different parties which combine forces in various coalitions and parliamentary factions.

The President is elected in the first round if he/she receives more than 50% of the vote. If not a second round will be held, where the two top winners from the first round compete. Elections take place in country as well as in more than 40 other countries where Croatians live.

Opinion polls show that the incumbent president Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović enjoys around 30% of public support, while the two other candidates, former PM Zoran Milanović and singer Miroslav Škoro enjoy around 20% each. However, this might change as Škoro is assembling a wide right-wing coalition of supporters who are disillusioned with the ruling Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).

Financing election campaign on social media

No piece of legislation (election law, law on political financing, and law on media) recognizes social media as media. The Agency for electronic media (AEM) does not monitor social media. The AEM could have a more active and substantive role in overseeing media coverage of the election campaign, including sanctioning mechanisms, ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report says.

In the context of the campaign for the 2019 EP elections some social media companies provided tools for better understanding of targeted political ads on social media, but the (self)regulation of political advertising on social networks continues to develop.

A new Political Activities and Election Campaign Financing Act was adopted in March 2019 and will be applied to these elections. The rulebook that goes along to this law obliges candidates to disclose funding for social media campaigns in their financial reports. Paid Ads are not monitored for their

content. To monitor the implementation of the law, Facebook's and Google's transparency tools will need to include sufficient data in a research-friendly manner.

Political Context

There is no specific evidence that the upcoming elections will be attacked by foreign actors.

According to the ODIHR report, there is a concern that candidates and other actors, including high-level state officials, may use inflammatory rhetoric and hate speech during the campaign, targeting national minority groups and immigrants. Potential hot topics include the role of the president (constitutional changes, immigration and migration, the status of Croats in Bosnia and Hercegovina, fascism and communism, organized crime, corruption and demography). These issues could be used by disinformation actors to influence public opinion.

There have been reports on social media disinformation in previous elections in Croatia. In the 2014 and 2015 elections, HDZ engaged media companies to manipulate public debate with FB profiles and groups, to erase negative comments on HDZ profiles and to [troll opponents](#). Also, at the beginning of September, a FB message apparently sent [by the HDZ youth chapter invited their members to open fake profiles](#) and be active on social media in the upcoming elections in line with instructions received by the headquarters. All parties state that they would refrain from manipulative behavior on social media, but there is a medium risk of such disinformation because some political players already use such tactics. For example, the candidate Ivan Pernar, with more than 250.000 followers on Facebook, is infamous for spreading disinformation on vaccination and migration.

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