



COMBATING DISINFORMATION IN MEMBER STATES OF THE OTS: THE CASE OF THE CENTER FOR COMBATING DISINFORMATION OF DIRECTORATE OF COMMUNICATIONS OF TÜRKİYE

Disinformation, as we could also refer to as the Post-Truth Era, has transcended national boundaries under current conditions and has become a global threat (Directorate of Communications, 2021). Rapid developments and diversity in communication tools and, in turn, the uncontrollable spread of news and information indicate that this process has become a dangerous tendency. Disinformation that is thought to cause serious harm to the individuals, society, national security and international relations (Guide to Combating Disinformation, 2020), is seen as one of the most important risks that the world public will face in the next decade, overcoming current issues such as ecology, social polarization, cyber security, irregular migration, regional conflicts and economic problems (World Economic Forum, 2024). This analysis will try to evaluate the processes of combating disinformation in the member states of the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) in terms of institutions and functioning, using the example of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications Center for Combating Disinformation.

First of all, it should be noted that a similar understanding and perception has begun to form in OTS member states in their policies to combat disinformation, especially in the creation of legal infrastructure. For example, following processes such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Second Karabakh War and the Russia-Ukraine crisis, in which disinformation has been intensively processed especially in social media channels in the last five years, the Social Media Law in Türkiye came into force in 2022 (Official Gazette, 2022). Similarly, in Kazakhstan, which was exposed to intense disinformation attacks during and after the events of January 2022, two regulations, namely the Information Doctrine (Akorda, 2023) and the Online Platforms Law (Akorda, 2023), have come into force in order to increase security in the field of information. In addition, a new draft law that envisages additional regulations for the media is also under evaluation. Similar works are continuing in other OTS member states.

In the current situation, disinformation is considered an independent crime within the judicial systems of OTS states, generally carrying penalties ranging from 1 to 3 years (Official Gazette, 2022) of imprisonment, fines, or compulsory community service for the public interest. Furthermore, it is observed that sanctions such as blocking or removing access to publications that meet the criteria of disinformation are implemented, and in cases where disinformation activities are detected, regardless of whether they originate domestically or internationally, penalties such as suspension of press licenses are imposed.

Analyzing the disinformation combat practices of OTS member states, it can be said that Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan implement unique strategies and concept policies through relevant ministries and institutions. In the case of Türkiye, on the other hand, it is possible to say that the Communication Directorate (Disinformation Combat Center), directly affiliated with the Presidency, pursues a more proactive policy that is national, regional, and global in nature and content, depending on the agenda. As we can see, the fight against disinformation in Türkiye is conducted by a separate unit established within the Communication Directorate, meanwhile in other Turkic states, relevant units are established within certain ministries and institutions which are responsible for this task (Aktas, 2023).

In this context, to obtain a more detailed view of disinformation from the perspective of TDT member countries through sampling, it has been determined that the disinformation attacks against Azerbaijan during the Second Karabakh War and the Karabakh anti-terrorism operations were predominantly of foreign origin. It has been determined that these sources attempted to discredit not only Azerbaijan's but also Türkiye's state authorities, national institutions and organizations such as the army, judiciary and media in the international public opinion through perception creation, black propaganda and manipulative content. On the other hand, during the Second Karabakh War, it has been found that some circles spread pro-Yerevan news, ignored the United Nations Security Council resolutions 822, 853, 874, and 884 of 1993, attempted to conceal the fact that Armenia was an occupying force, and sought to portray Baku and Ankara as warmongers (Altınalan, 2023).

However, proactive activities coordinated by the Azerbaijani Presidency, particularly through the Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, along with other relevant ministries and organizations, have yielded effective results in combating disinformation on both conventional and social media. Similarly, proactive efforts conducted by Turkic world cooperation organizations such as OTS, TWESCO, TÜRKSOY, TÜRKPA and the Turkish Culture and Heritage Foundation, along with institutions like the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, TRT and the Anadolu Agency (AA), have played a significant role in disseminating accurate information internationally, neutralizing the impact of disinformation attacks, and preventing them (Jusipbay, 2021).

At this point, it is worth noting the significant similarities in the perception, strategy, and initiatives of OTS member states in combating disinformation. For instance, Kazakhstan and Türkiye have implemented similar strategies in their legal frameworks for combating disinformation. In Kazakhstan, the Ministry of Culture and Information established the stopfake.kz platform in 2020, while in Türkiye, the Disinformation Combat Center (DCC) was established under the Presidency's Directorate of Communications in 2022. It is noted that both countries follow the same strategies when constructing the associated legal infrastructure. In terms of performance, the stopfake.kz platform conducted over 1,900 disinformation detections and verification activities in 2020-2021 (Egemen Qazaqstan, 2021), and identified over 700 disinformation cases in 2023, which totals the number of detected cases to over 3,000 (Ministry of Culture and Information of Kazakhstan, 2023). On the other hand, by the end of 2023, the DCC had published a total of 107 Disinformation Bulletins, which included the analysis of over 1,700 disinformation cases focusing on national and regional agendas. Conceptually, the stopfake.kz platform operates in Kazakh and Russian, while the DCC operates in five languages – Turkish, English, Arabic, French, and Greek – depending on the audience or country involved.

In addition, in Kazakhstan, with the encouragement of the Ministry of Culture and Information, the national 24kz television channel broadcasts the Fact Check program. In Türkiye, this strategy has an even wider range, and the current reports prepared by DCC regarding disinformation are served by both the center and media organizations (Center for Combating Disinformation, 2024). The activities of the AA Verification Line, which is published by the

Anadolu Agency as part of its efforts to combat disinformation, also play a significant role both nationally and internationally. When the DCC's conceptual activities are examined, it is seen that the center implements a strategy to spread the fight against disinformation throughout society and, in this direction, established the Disinformation Reporting System (DRS) in February 2023, where citizens can report news that they think contains disinformation. By the end of 2023, citizens had submitted approximately 15.000 false news cases through the DRS. The e-newsletter activities of the DCC can also be evaluated within the same concept. The Disinformation Bulletins prepared by the DCC are regularly shared with the public through the Presidency's website and the DCC's social media accounts. In these bulletins, images of disinformation and false news are provided, along with visuals supporting the truth of the same news and statements from institutions, presented transparently and understandably to satisfy the public. In this context, the DCC published the Earthquake Disinformation Bulletin, Election Disinformation Bulletin, and Palestine Special Disinformation Bulletin, especially during the earthquakes centered in Kahramanmaraş on February 6, 2023, and the general elections from May 14-28, 2023, and events in Gaza after October 7, 2023. The DCC also conducts intensive activities aimed at increasing individual awareness and digital media literacy, which are important pillars in the fight against disinformation. For example, DCC offers training to different age and education groups at various levels to raise awareness about disinformation. It collaborates with relevant public institutions and organizations to spread the fight against disinformation throughout society by signing cooperation protocols. Moreover, through its official website www.dmm.gov.tr, DCC shares information, videos, and publications related to combating disinformation to help citizens become informed on this issue. In this context, DCC prepares and presents many publications such as the "Disinformation Combat Guide", "Twitter File", "Cyberbullying Combat with Disinformation Law", and "How Does the Disinformation Combat Law Protect Children?" to the public. It is worth noting that similar activities aimed at increasing individual awareness and digital literacy in the fight against disinformation are also carried out in OTS states. In OTS member states, the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) disseminates information on combating disinformation through various platforms. In Türkiye, teyit.org serves as a platform for fact-checking, while in Kazakhstan, factcheck.kz fulfills this role. In Azerbaijan, az.teyit.org operates as a fact-checking platform, and in Kyrgyzstan, factcheck.kg serves a similar purpose. Lastly, in Uzbekistan, factchecknet.uz is the platform for fact-checking. These platforms contribute to providing a comprehensive panorama of the efforts to combat disinformation in OTS member states by verifying the accuracy of information and providing the public with reliable sources of information. In summary, despite the legal regulations implemented by OTS member states in combating disinformation, they have been found to be insufficient at the national level in certain critical situations, particularly in the face of foreign-originated disinformation attacks. The projects and initiatives conducted by OTS in recent years in collaboration with the media are of strategic importance for addressing this deficiency and enhancing security in the information domain. The declaration by OTS country leaders during the 10th Summit in Astana, stating that they continue to sustain, strengthen, coordinate, and synchronize their efforts in combating disinformation in international forums, clearly demonstrates the commitment of member countries to combating disinformation. In this context, the establishment of the Alliance of Turkish News Agencies (ATNA) as an institutional initiative of OTS provides significant signals regarding the platform through which member states aim to combat disinformation on the international level. As a result, it is expected that in the coming period, similar to examples seen in the EU, NATO, and ASEAN, OTS will develop a unique concept for combating disinformation. Additionally, the Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications (Disinformation Combat Center) is considered to be a potential model in the restructuring process for combating disinformation.

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