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Disinformation and Weaponized Communication: The Spread of Ideological Hate about the Macedonian Name in Greece

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Abstract

The study examined through ideological discourse analysis (IDA) 38 widely spread disinformation-laced news stories (or “fake news”) regarding the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) and the “Prespes Agreement” in the years 2018 and 2019. The paper explores the ideological narratives and constructions disseminated through the disinformation-laced news stories during these two years. Therefore, the study expands the relevant literature regarding democracy, disinformation, and hate campaigns by examining the ideological narratives and constructions disseminated through the disinformation-laced news stories during that two-years-period. The findings showed that those news stories were successfully weaponized and resulted in empowering identity characteristics and ideological narratives through the distancing method (us versus them), the alienation with elements of dramatization (e.g., territorial loss of the Greek Macedonia due to the “Prespes Agreement”), and the sense of victimization and dehumanization that demanded emergency actions to protect the ingroup (Greece) from the outgroup (North Macedonia and its Greek assistants).

Keywords: Disinformation, Discourse, Hate Campaigns, Macedonia, Greece

Introduction

On 20 January 2019, Greek news outlets popularized a disinformation/fake news story in Greek discourse about an individual of African origins that attacked the police in front of the Greek Parliament during a rally against the Prespes Agreement. According to the opposing viewpoints against the agreement, the Greeks lost exclusive rights to Macedonia's name. At the same time, the North Macedonians had to make several concessions making the accord seem like an act of capitulation after losing a war (Vankovska, 2020; Topalova, 2020). According to that news story, an allegedly African individual identified as such due to his skin color was suspected to be a government mole who aimed to harm the rally's reputation. The government had been claiming that the protesters were regularly using violence instead of demonstrating peacefully. The story became so popular that the individual's photos were shared online by some of the most prominent news outlets in Greece (figure 1).



Figure 1. Two front-page screenshots of the incident with the “African origins” protestor. On the left side, it is one of the most popular news outlets in Greece (protothema.gr), and on the right, the fact-checking company (ellinikahoaxes.gr).

The individual was portrayed with a Northern Epirus cape, an influential symbol of Greek nationalism, and a wooden stick clashing with the police forces. Due to the news story's popularity, the individual was forced to announce on his personal Facebook page that he was in fact Greek. According to his statements, Dimitris was a genuine Christian Orthodox, Macedonian, and descendant of Alexander the Great from the Greek city of Naousa (Daniilidis, 2019). Dimitris participated in the rally to fulfill his duty to the homeland and protest against what he regarded as a treacherous agreement. The earlier story about him being a government plant was also debunked by the only fact-checking company in Greece, proving that the story was a product of disinformation (Daniilidis, 2019).

During that rally, the clashes were considered significant for Greek society, as the then-government argued that extremists had an organized plan to invade the Greek Parliament simultaneously from five different entry points. According to Nikos Voutsis,

the then President of the Parliament, the police forces clashed with the extremists for around two hours to prevent the invasion. Although the police backed up Voutsis' announcement, some prominent media outlets seemed skeptical about the claims' truthfulness (Iefimerida.gr, 2019; Kampouris, 2019). There are thus several similarities with Trump supporters' attack on the United States Capitol in January 2021 and the possible harmful role that disinformation can play against democratic progress.

These incidents were part of the broader unrest over the Prespes Agreement. As we will see in the paper's analysis section, societal and political actors weaponized the information to realize specific goals, such as the non-ratification of the accord and the removal of the coalition government led by Syriza. Opposition political groups and parties disseminated disinformation-laced news and aimed to play a crucial part in influencing the individual's hearts and minds (Meta.mk, 2019). Such disinformation-laced news stories seemed to promote the ideological narrative that the Prespes Agreement was an existential threat that had to be stopped to protect Greece. That viewpoint seemed to be aligned with the ideological ideas disseminated by the main opposition parties of Greece, including the right-wing party of New Democracy. The Prespes Agreement was one of the crucial ideological issues that harmed the popularity of Syriza in the national elections of 7 July 2019, leading to the empowerment of New Democracy that formed the country's new government (Karyotakis, 2022).

Therefore, this paper aims to investigate in-depth the ideological narratives and constructions promoted by the disinformation-fuelled news stories during the time that the Macedonian Name Dispute (MND) dominated the Greek discourse (2018-2019). The two main conflicting ideological groups were the one in favor of the agreement supporting the then government and the second against it, as the Prespes Agreement was threatening Greece's sovereignty. To provide insights regarding the ideological narratives and constructions, the next section focuses on presenting the recent debate around the weaponization of communication and the existential threats caused by many contentious incidents, such as disinformation in territorial disputes. The Prespes Agreement's events as a part of the MND fall into that category.

The Weaponization of Communication and Existential Threats in Politics

The weaponization of communication, including the weaponization of information and language, can play a prominent role in shaping people's minds in politics (Stahl, 2016), which is demonstrated in the current study through, for example, the promotion of the Prespes Agreement, as an existential threat for Greece by different communication tools, including the disinformation-fuelled news stories. In particular, the Securitization Theory (ST), is a framework that tries to explain the process of creating an existential threat: an issue that must be dealt with urgently. Otherwise, there could be dreadful implications. Thus, a successfully securitized issue justifies extreme measures, as the issue cannot be dealt with in any other ordinary way. To securitize an issue successfully, someone (a securitizer) has to initiate the creation of an existential threat through speech acts (or communication methods), take emergency measures to protect the securitized object, and, lastly, this process must be accepted by the public. In this way, it is believed that almost every subject can be securitized, even ideological and identity-related issues, such as the Prespes Agreement and the MND. With ST, a subject that was considered political can be moved to the security realm based on the construction of a discourse that empowers these beliefs (Hirschauer, 2014; Buzan et al., 1998; Van Dijk, 2013).

Subsequently, the acts of speech (or communication methods) should not be studied only as plain sentences, but as constructions that have power belonging to a discourse, which can create a socially mutual belief system that supports a dominant knowledge favoring certain groups, or individuals (Hirschauer, 2014; Buzan et al., 1998; Van Dijk, 2013). In the current paper, based on Mealier et al. (2017), the term “constructions” refers to the grammatical mechanisms establishing connections between words that give actions and attributes to objects. The multiple constructions that are connected together create shared meanings that form a dominant storyline (narrative). The maintenance of this dominant discourse by powerful actors can promote and maintain a particular ideology that defines societal knowledge, creating even falsehoods that become so prominent throughout the years making it difficult to distinguish truth from fake (Eco, 1990, Foucault, 1972; Foucault & Rabinow, 1984), such as in the case of the MND.

In addition, regarding conflicts, Eco (2008) has revealed that a losing side can symbolically win in the long run despite its loss. The losing side needs just to keep powerful the dominant desirable version of reality, as such a communication process seems useful for populist leaders for distorting facts and attracting electoral power (Eco, 2008). That dominant knowledge can be studied through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which examines “critically social inequality as it is expressed, signalled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)” (Wodak, 2001:2). As a result, the current study explores these concerns through examining the ideological narratives and constructions disseminated through the disinformation-laced news stories during 2018 and 2019, such as the one presented with the allegedly African individual.

Moreover, the current manuscript recognizes that the emergence of the Internet, alongside the daily use of social media platforms, has intensified the weaponization of communication in politics and the creation of perceived existential threats by the audience through the dissemination of disinformation-laced news stories. The election of the 45th president of the United States of America, Donald Trump, and Russia’s interference in the electoral process are considered some of the most important recent examples of weaponized communication.

For example, in the MND, Greece accused Russia of bribery, funding groups against the Agreement, and meddling in its affairs, leading in July 2018, Greece to ban Russian diplomats from entering the country. In the meantime, North Macedonian Prime Minister Zoran Zaev also accused Russia of funding ideologically far-right groups and organizations that opposed the Agreement. Russian interference through the support of far-right groups, propaganda, and disinformation was believed to be aimed at diminishing the power of the European Union and NATO (Smith, 2018; Strickland, 2018).

Similar harmful events have intensified, as social media have become some of the most prominent tools for weaponizing communication in online and offline interaction. The dissemination of malicious information, the promotion of identity politics, and the ideological narratives that are spreading continuously to popularize certain ideological knowledge have contributed to rising levels of distrust towards politicians, journalists, and governments. Democracy is based on citizens’ access to reliable information for participating in the governing process. However, this essential democratic component is challenged through the weaponization of communication (Rosenbach and Mansted, 2018; Pascale, 2019). Nowadays, there is a globalized network of media that disseminates information daily 24/7. That was not happening in the past, and, thus, weaponized information that involved disinformation and hate discourses was not

becoming so prominent, such as the atrocities between the conflicting sides in the Balkan Wars.

As a result, phenomena such as digital hate speech, political manipulation, and radicalization have become more familiar with digital platforms as tools for this weaponization process. Thus, it is believed that new approaches should be explored to counter these harmful phenomena that undermine democracy. Furthermore, the debate about the weaponization of communication has also emerged thanks to the ideological rivalries and the threats amongst the authoritarian, hybrid, and democratic regimes for supporting their political system. The main concern though, is that the weaponization has backfired, leading democracies to operate more like hybrid or authoritarian regimes (Rosenbach and Mansted, 2018; Mercy Corps, 2019; Pascale, 2019).

As the weaponization of communication has intensified in the last decade due to the establishment of digital platforms, disinformation, hate, existential threats, and new political strategies for electoral power, aiming to promote certain ideological knowledge, the next section focuses on reviewing the importance of disinformation and hate campaigns in promoting specific ideological narratives that result in the citizens' division and the realization of political goals.

Disinformation and Hate Campaigns

“Fake news” as part of disinformation has been studied extensively in the last years in communication and journalism studies (Edson et al., 2017; Nelson and Taneja, 2018; Wasserman, 2020). However, following Wardle’s arguments (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2018; Wardle, 2018), the term “fake news” is causing unnecessary confusion, as it includes a number of different communication processes, such as misinformation, which “is information that is false, but the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2018: 44). Furthermore, it involves the process of disinformation, which “is information that is false, and the person who is disseminating it knows it is false. It is a deliberate, intentional lie, and points to people being actively disinformed by malicious actors” (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2018: 44).

As a result, the term “fake news” in the current paper refers to disinformation-laced news stories as news stories that can be malicious and fabricated. Political actors use hate as a political strategy for evoking ideological and identity-related emotions to manipulate followers and, through their support, realize political ambitions (see table 1). In addition, the term “hate campaigns” refers to communication strategies aiming to mobilize individuals to scapegoat groups and individuals perceived as minorities. The primary goal of such a campaign is to provoke fear and insecurity against minorities for the further empowerment of the hate campaigners. One crucial part of the hate campaigns is the malicious disinformation-laced news stories that present a falsified reality (George, 2020; 2021; Monsees, 2020). Dramatizations, fallacies, and other ideological constructions examined in the current paper (see the Methods and Data section) contribute to that falsified reality.

Trump was one of the most prominent individuals who started using malicious and fabricated news stories (disinformation-laced news stories) to attack his political opponents or the journalists who seemed to undermine his work by spreading lies. From Trump’s successful elections and on, disinformation-laced news stories seem to have become a common accusation in politics worldwide, a political weapon. As a result, many scholars focus on explaining disinformation (Lazer et al., 2018; Edson et al., 2019; Waisbord, 2018; Ross and Rivers, 2018). As disinformation-laced news stories can intentionally provide a false reality for achieving political goals (Eco, 2008).

Social media platforms have facilitated disinformation tactics. Recent studies and scandals have shown that disinformation-laced news stories could be spread rapidly on social media platforms, as they target specific ideological-identity characteristics, promoting a reality aligned with the users' beliefs. In that way, the users tend to believe these news stories and disseminate them through their networks (Saurwein and Spencer-Smith, 2020).

One of the main goals of those media texts shared throughout different media platforms is to empower each group's ideological narratives. For instance, white nationalists in the United States tend to use alternative media to highlight their superiority over other underprivileged groups, such as Black American citizens. The promotion of this uniqueness is associated with racism and hatred towards groups that are perceived as not having common values. One way of empowering those ideological narratives is through the spread of disinformation-laced news stories that can misrepresent the facts and promote a believable distorted reality through different grammatical mechanisms like the ones presented in the current study (Adams and Roscigno, 2005; Holt, 2019).

Such methods are not limited to extreme groups. All nation-states employ nationalistic education, which constructs a national uniqueness based on imagined communities (Anderson, 2016). The ideological constructions that are promoted by disinformation-laced news stories can be perceived as existential threats as "ideologies are about life and death" (Van Dijk, 2000: 11). In addition, news outlets — not just social media can be guilty of spreading disinformation and supporting hate campaigns or ideological constructions that undermine minorities. That is also the case in recent years. The crowded new media landscape reveals that journalism's role must be re-examined. With these disinformation-laced news stories, responsible journalism that promotes the reporting of the wrongdoings of powerful societal actors and the support of freedom of the press is threatened (Waisbord, 2018; Monsees, 2020)

For instance, Russia was accused of spreading disinformation against the Prespes Agreement (Metodieva, 2019). Similar accusations were made by the ND's leader and future Prime Minister of Greece, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, who foresaw that the "opponent [Syriza] will use all means of propaganda, even 'fake news' during the election campaign" of 2019 (Newsit.gr, 2019a). Therefore, by taking a closer look into Greece and the recent events of the MND, it seems that the independent organizations, such as Ellinika Hoaxes, the only fact-checking company in Greece (Ellinikahoaxes.gr, n.d.), was not enough to stop the spread of the disinformation-laced news stories alongside with the hate campaigns employed by various groups. That is why the paper focuses on the investigation of the Prespes Agreement's disinformation-laced news stories, explaining in the next section the study's methodology.

Methods and Data

The current study examines the disinformation-laced news stories related to the Prespes Agreement using the critical discourse analytical (CDA) method of ideological discourse analysis (IDA) proposed by Van Dijk (1995, 2000; 2013). It aims to provide insights into the following research question (RQ):

RQ: What are the ideological narratives and constructions disseminated through the disinformation-laced news stories during the two-year period (2018-2019)?

The terms ideological narratives and constructions refer to a socially mutual belief system, in which “as soon as ideological beliefs are accepted and taken for granted by all members of a community, by definition they are no longer ideologies but will count as knowledge in that community” (Van Dijk, 2013: 4). Ideologies are the social beliefs that relieved the common knowledge or social representations shared by a particular group. They demonstrate values and patterns, such as justice and freedom (Van Dijk, 2009). According to Van Dijk (2009: 193), these ideologies “may be used or abused by each social group to impose, defend or struggle for its own interests (e.g., freedom of the press, freedom of the market, freedom from discrimination, etc.)”

The ideological discourses are characterized by a polarization that focuses on highlighting a positive representation of the ingroup (us/we) against the outgroup (others/them) (Van Dijk, 2009). It has been demonstrated in other studies in the past that news can empower shared ideological beliefs through the news (Karyotakis, 2021; Van Dijk, 2009). The ideological beliefs could empower the stereotypical representation of a group against the other based on highlighting certain groups’ attitudes, promoting personal opinions, or even communicating certain events to support the shared knowledge that forms the ideologies (Van Dijk, 2009; Van Dijk, 2013).

The subsequent analysis focuses on examining the ideological narratives highlighting the us versus them relationship and how the authors (journalists-actors) present their arguments in favor of or against those narratives disseminated through the disinformation-laced information. That can be done through the actor descriptions (i.e., how the ingroup and the outgroup are described and presented), the distancing method (i.e., words that provoke distance between the conflicting sides, such as referring to Macedonians as “others” or “Skopians”), dramatization (i.e., exaggerating an event to favor the ingroup), fallacies (i.e., breaches of argumentation based on false analogies, and irrelevant arguments that aim to provoke people’s emotions), and the positive or negative comparison between the ingroup and the outgroup that can even promote the idea of victimization favoring one group against the other (Chiluwa and Chiluwa, 2020; Karyotakis, 2021; Van Dijk, 2000, see table 1). The bolded words and phrases in the study’s exemplars demonstrate these ideological beliefs and the italics explain the categories that the bolded phrases and words fall into.

In addition, the study includes some aspects of visual communication, such as images, as multimodality is a part of CDA. That happens because discourses communicate broader ideas shared through different types of texts (Breazu and Machin, 2019). Multimodality involves the in-depth investigation “of how discourses and ideologies are carried by both language and other forms of communication such as images, films, war monuments etc., and how these function to serve specific political interests and maintain certain kinds of social relations” (Breazu and Machin, 2020, p. 827).

Ideological Constructions

Examples

<p>Actor Descriptions: Focuses on how people and their actions are described in the discourse. People can be described as members of a particular ideological group or as individuals with a prominent or non-prominent role, or for example, be characterized by their actions and attributes. The “overall ideological strategy is that of</p>	<p>The Greeks against the Prespes Agreement will be presented as victims of those that imposed the agreement on North Macedonia. The discourses will promote their arguments positively and describe in a hostile manner the outgroup (see the exemplars of “Skopians” & “Macedonian Feta,” p. 9 & 11)</p>
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positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 62).	
Comparison between the ingroup and the outgroup: Focuses on how and why the ingroup and the outgroup are compared by making more vivid the negative characteristics of the outgroup and the positive ones of the ingroup (Van Dijk, 2000).	Those who favor the Prespes Agreement could be depicted as Greece’s enemies and North Macedonia’s supporters. The comparison could involve even incidents from the past (see the exemplar of “ <i>Attack of the Puppet People</i> ,” p. 10-11)
Distancing Method: Focuses on how the polarization of us versus them occurs through words implying distance between the outgroup and the ingroup members. “This familiar sociocognitive device may for instance be expressed by the use of demonstrative pronouns instead of naming or describing the Others” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 67).	The polarization of us versus them is prominent in the study, as the stories try to categorize the actors in different groups based on their ideological preferences (e.g., Macedonians are presented as “Skopians Thieves of the Greek Identity”) and highlight their differences (see the exemplar of “Panos Kammenos,” p. 9).
Dramatization: Focuses on how facts are exaggerated favoring one side against the other. Dramatization is linked with victimization. The outgroup is presented with negative words, “and especially when they are associated with threats, then the ingroup needs to be represented as a victim of such a threat” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 84).	The idea of threat is presented in several examined news stories against those that support the Greekness of Macedonia (see the exemplar in the section of “The Promotion of the Existential Threat (Victimization) & the Germans,” p. 12-14).
Fallacies: Focuses on how “contested points of view and opinions, are riddled with normative breaches of ‘proper’ argumentation” (Van Dijk, 2000, p. 71). Fallacies distort the rules and principles of argumentation, making an argument believable based on emotions.	In the study, threats seem to be empowered by fallacies that promote polarization between the ingroup and the outgroup (see the exemplar of p. 12).

Table 1. The study’s central examined constructions.

The disinformation-laced news stories were collected through the Google Search Engine and the website of Ellinika Hoaxes. The search period was from 1 January of 2018 to 25 October 2019. It covered all the events related to the MND and the Prespes Agreement, including the regional, municipal, community, European, and national elections that led to Greece’s government’s change. The end of October saw the last most prominent disinformation-laced news story related to the Prespes Agreement.

The keywords for the Google search were “fake news and MND”, “MND and fake news”, and “fake news and Prespes Agreement” in Greek. The word “fake news” was also used in US English, as the Greek news outlets used the term in its English form. One limitation of this approach is that it excludes stories that contain influential disinformation but have not been identified as such. Therefore, the study may underestimate the harm being caused by disinformation. However, it should be noted that the goal of this study is not to establish the impact of disinformation, but to identify key narratives contained in such stories. A total of 38 news stories were selected for analysis. The 38 fake news stories were the ones that appeared more frequently throughout the research of more than 1050 news stories. The news stories had to be appeared in at least four different news outlets to be included in the sample.

Moreover, 24 out of 38 news stories appeared on the fact-checker organization's website (Ellinika Hoaxes), verifying that those news stories were indeed so influential that they had to be debunked. Except for the stories debunked by the fact-checker organization, 14 other news stories were also included in the sample. Ellinika Hoaxes is the only fact-checking organization in Greece, which is working closely with Facebook. Also, it is the only authority in the country for debunking news stories when they become influential enough in the media landscape (Ellinikahoaxes.gr, n.d.).

The subsequent analysis focuses on examining more extensive ideologies highlighting the us versus them relationship and how the authors (journalists-actors) present their arguments in favor of or against those narratives disseminated through the disinformation-fueled information.

Results and Analysis

The Skopians Thieves of the Greek Identity (Distancing method, Dramatization, & Fallacies)

Almost all the examined disinformation-laced news stories became more prominent on right-wing and far-right websites, as well as profiles of similar ideologies that were promoting them as a tool to demonstrate the need to stop the Prespes Agreement that undermined Greece's power in Europe and the Balkans. Some of them, such as the one with the African protestor became so viral that were disseminated in some of the most influential news outlets in Greece, such as protothema.gr. Also, political actors that belonged to the right-wing spectrum, including members of New Democracy, disseminated some of them during the electoral periods of 2019.

Thus, the use of the strategy "us versus them" can be identified in almost all news stories. For example, in the story titled "Panos Kammenos for Skopjano: "Great Britain changed its name to join the EEC [European Economic Community], after a French veto," Panos Kammenos, the leader of the party Independent Greeks, forming the coalition government led by Syriza, argued falsely that:

If the **Skopians** (*distancing*) really want a solution, **they** (*distancing*) will have to do what England did, which, in order to join the EEC and at the request of the President of France, Charles de Gaulle, changed its name from 'Great Britain' to 'United Kingdom'.

In the above example, there is the use of the personal pronoun "they" with the term "Skopians" to refer to the people of North Macedonia. The term "Skopian" is considered a derogatory and racist term for referring to North Macedonia citizens. Several Macedonians have expressed their concern several times against this term, as it is believed to be used to undermine their right to self-identification. Moreover, according to their arguments, the term "Skopian" does "not only represents a total negation of Macedonian identity but also refers to someone who is culturally inferior, who does not possess a real language, who is a liar, a cultural thief and so on" (Macedonianhr.org.au, n.d.: 8). The use of the words "Skopians" and "they" show the distance between the Greeks and the Macedonians is empowering the idea of two different groups. Also, the provided exemplar is considered an exaggeration of an event (dramatization), and a fallacy, as Panos Kammenos used a false analogy to evoke people's emotions. As he is a prominent politician, his false analogy bears important authority that can influence the public.

Nevertheless, the structure of “Skopian(s)” is common in Greek discourse. Those who have been using the word “Macedonians” to name North Macedonia’s citizens were criminalized or even physically attacked for spreading propagandistic ideas that were hurting Greece’s national interests (Christopoulos and Karpozilos, 2018). In the Greek context, it seems that the accusation of spreading disinformation-laced news stories is associated with questioning the dominant ideological narratives and constructions (Mandravelis, 2010; Christopoulos and Karpozilos, 2018). The disinformation-laced news stories during the Prespes Agreement employed even posters from movies to further dehumanize the “Skopians” and intensify Greece’s ideological narrative about having a war with North Macedonia to protect its identity.

For example, a falsified poster that was disseminated by the Greeks came from the movie *Attack of the Puppet People*. The giant beast had a badge of North Macedonia, and the individuals attacking the beast were holding a knife with the Greek flag. In addition, the caption of the photo’s right side with red letters said that the “Comitadjis are at the gates” and that “Macedonia need you” (with blue letters). Under that slogan, there was also a call for participating in the coming rally at Syntagma Square in Athens on the 4th of February 2018. At the bottom of the photo again with blue capital letters, it called for immediate national mobilization. Again, in that example, we have a fallacy, as we are talking about a false analogy that promotes the distance between the two sides, with the negative distancing word “Comitadjis.” The word “Comitadjis” was used by the Greeks in Macedonia to refer to the individuals of Greek origins who converted and served the purposes of Bulgaria. Bulgaria was Greece’s rival in the wars for Macedonia.

Interestingly, a similar photo in the past had been distributed portraying Antonis Samaras (prominent Greek politician and former Greece’s prime minister from 2012 – 2015) as an anti-communist advocate that wanted to protect the country from Communism. On that version of the poster, the most significant change was that the name Samaras was on the knife and that the badge of North Macedonia had turned into the Communist badge (figure 2). The poster seems to refer to the Greek Civil War (1943-1949), in which Greece was split into two major camps (royalists vs communists). The royalists were backed up by the USA and the UK, and the communists by the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia.

It can be argued that there was a cognitive effort to connect the ideological narrative against Communism with the fight against the Macedonians and to dehumanize the outgroup by revealing the negative characteristics of the “others” that seemed to challenge the neutral-positive characteristics of the ingroup. In the examined case, the outgroup (Macedonians) seemed to be a part of a dehumanization process that could lead to the justification of extreme actions, such as pogroms (Van Dijk, 2000; George, 2020; Fawn, 2003).

Το φωτομοντάζ σύμφωνα με το άρθρο, φαίνεται πως έγινε από τη σελίδα [Ελληνο-Χριστιανικό Ethnostedon](#) που έχει ξαναχρησιμοποιήσει photoshop στη συγκεκριμένη αφίσα της ταινίας.

Figure 2. A screenshot from the website of “Ellinika Hoaxes” that shows the two different posters. On the left side is the one with Samaras, and on the right side, the one about Macedonia.

The disinformation-laced news stories aimed to promote the idea of an enemy and the need for the Greeks to fight back, as the loss of the name Macedonia showed that there must even be a national mobilization to kill the beast. The cause of attacking the neighboring country seemed to be an essential duty of all the Greeks who were patriots. Protecting the true Greek Macedonian identity is a national matter that cannot be taken lightly. Extreme and emergency actions should have been implemented. Consequently, it seemed that the disinformation-laced new stories promoted the idea of a securitized object (ST) broadening the ways that a security threat can be spread (Monsees, 2020; Hirschauer, 2014; Buzan et al., 1998).

In these promoted ideological narratives, fallacies and dramatizations were common in the ideological constructions where the unique ingroup characteristics must have been underlined (Van Dijk, 2001). Another story that aimed to reveal how the Macedonians were stealing Greece’s cultural heritage was the one titled “What exactly is happening with the ‘Macedonian Feta?’”. Feta cheese is a Greek Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) product. As a result, the news story revealed that a Macedonian businessman was selling Feta cheese to show how the “Skopians” were continually trying to steal the Greek and Macedonian identities. Furthermore, there was an internal enemy in Greece that helped the “Skopians” steal the Greekness of Macedonia. That pattern could be identified in almost all of the examined news stories. The distancing method (us versus them), the extreme dramatization (every Macedonian is evil), and the fallacies were the most common techniques:

An advertisement that, according to Star, best captures **the attitude of Athens towards the neighboring country** (*distancing*) that ... **steals** (*distancing*) the designation “Macedonian” in many products, **taking advantage of the fact** (*distancing*) that the landscape with the brands has not been clarified yet. However, apart from the shelves in the Skopje grocery stores, one can also find the **fake Macedonian feta** (*dramatization*) in a chain of **Greek supermarkets** (*fallacy*).

The Macedonians were eager to steal parts of the Greek identity. That is why they are being portrayed through the distancing descriptions as an outgroup. Also, they seem

to exploit Greece through fake products even in Greek supermarkets. That description uses words that exaggerate the event and by using an irrelevant argumentation aims to provoke people's feelings. A similar news story was showing that there was a conspiracy to help the Macedonians steal the Greekness of Macedonia. It was focusing on exaggerating how some Greeks and the news media in the country were supporting the enemy (outgroup). In order to show this tendency, there was the constant use of the possessive determiner "our":

Prior to the Prespes **treacherous** (*dramatization*) agreement, **our media** (*distancing*) presented some changes to signs containing the 'Macedonia' in Skopje, as part of the **propaganda campaign to convince the Greek people** (*fallacy*) that something has changed in Skopje and to see the agreement in a positive way. Now, it is revealed that signs bearing the name 'Macedonia' are being withdrawn from **our** (*distancing*) side of the border!

Prespes Agreement is presented in a dramatized way ("treacherous"). There are again words that empower the distance between the two sides, such as "our," and a false argumentation that wants to provoke the emotions of the people. The construction of the narrative that the Macedonians are the evil thieves that try to steal essential parts of the Greek identity was a constant pattern in the majority of the examined news stories. It involved the weaponization of communication through different techniques, such as the use of coordinated hate (i.e., "Skopians") that created a division based on absurd arguments and racist reasoning (George, 2014; Van Dijk, 1995).

According to the fallacies promoted by the disinformation-laced news stories, these two groups (the thieves and their assistants) share a common identity. These news stories seemed to empower the misrepresentation of certain facts and to make believable a specific reality (Adams and Roscigno, 2005; Holt, 2019) that benefits the ingroup. Finally, these distorted ideological narratives included another important element, an existential threat that also supported the victimization of those Greeks that stayed firm in their patriotic values (not giving the name Macedonia to Greece's neighboring country) and, thus, were attacked by the enemies.

The Promotion of the Existential Threat (Victimization) & the Germans

The existential threat as an ideological narrative was associated with Macedonia's name and the possible territorial losses linked with the region of Macedonia. Several disinformation-laced news stories promoted by the news outlets spread the idea that a powerful actor was imposing on Greece the acceptance of a compromise with North Macedonia. That compromise had dreadful results as the country once again had to accept the imposed terms without any resistance.

The process of the existential threat that is linked with the territorial claims and the ideological narrative of the Greeks for being the victims of the powerful actors has a long tradition. Greece was created with the involvement of powerful countries, such as Russia, the UK, and France. The country's dominant nationalistic narrative blames some of those countries for not letting Greece thrive and become as powerful as the Byzantine Empire. The dominant ideological narrative emphasizes its citizens' unique characteristics associated with the remarkable civilization of ancient Greece and the Byzantine Empire, an ingroup that is powerful but cannot thrive throughout the centuries because several other nations were restraining it (victimization). In the

country's ideological discourse, the nation's continuity is achieved due to the constant resistance to external forces and threats (Heraclides, 2011; Avdela, 2000).

According to Avdela (2000: 239), "Greek nation is understood as a natural, unified, eternal, and unchanging entity, not a product of history." Furthermore, Greece seems to be a xenophobic example in Europe as "popular cultural norms and attitudes remain essentially xenophobic and anti-foreigner, with a great emphasis on maintaining ethnic homogeneity" (Christou, 2006: 1046).

Moreover, from the time of the financial crisis and on that Greece signed the MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) and was forced to follow extreme austerity measures that no other country in recent history worldwide has gone through (Manoli, 2016), there was an exaggeration of its representation as a victim of major countries, such as Germany. Besides, this representation was empowered by the German news coverage disseminating hate towards the Greeks, for instance, by blaming them for being lazy and not working so much as the hard-working Germans. A standard stereotypical narrative that highlighted the ingroup characteristics and demonized the outgroup (Capelos and Exadaktylos, 2015; Bickes et al., 2014).

The Greeks had painful memories of the German occupation during the Second World War and the Bavarian rule that constructed the modern Greek state. Those memories that are part of Greece's ideological nationalistic narrative resulted in recreating the hostility and hate towards the Germans who seemed to be keen on exploiting the country (Apostolou, 2000; Fidler, 2015). Thus, some stories for the MND and the Prespes Agreement accused Germany of imposing agreements and losses threatening the country's existence. It was not a surprise that, for instance, the news story titled dealing with Germany's plan about a unification of Macedonia according to a map of the DW became viral on the Greek Internet. According to the news story, Germany, by using Deutsche Welle (DW), was promoting the creation of one country called Macedonia that would be consisted of all the parts of the Land of Macedonia, including the Greek part of Macedonia:

The assignment of Macedonia to the **Skopians** (*distancing*) with the "Prespes Agreement" is not only **nationally harmful** (*dramatization*) but may also be **nationally dangerous for the whole of Greece** (*dramatization*). That is shown by maps of the German DW, which essentially 'creates' a '**pseudo-Macedonian**' **nation's** (*fallacy*), an **insidious desire of Berlin** (*fallacy*) for a satellite state in the central Balkans and at the same time **crippling Greece nationally** (*fallacy*).

The news story tried to strengthen the idea that there are fundamental differences between Greeks and the Macedonians through the constant distancing words, the dramatizations that exaggerate the impact of the Prespes Agreement, and the false analogies that aim to provoke emotions in the readers. These news stories through these techniques were intensifying the threats coming from the Prespes Agreement, implying that Greece is the victim of that accord (victimization).

Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor, seemed to be portrayed as a politician that wanted to punish Greece for its culture. It was evident that powerful forces tried to harm the country once again for the believers of those stories. These ideological constructions that include victimization, the idea of injustice, and the existential threat of losing even the Greek territory of Macedonia formed a common knowledge that justified the struggle against the treacherous Prespes Agreement. Consequently, it was not surprising that many Greeks accepted the disinformation-laced news stories and their fallacies as real. They offered empathy and radicalization amongst those fighting against the

Prespes Agreement that treated Greece as a victim, rationalizing the believers' extreme actions (i.e., mob and hate attacks). Also, they kept alive the nationalistic narrative about Greek cultural uniqueness. Lastly, they attracted sympathizers that became a part of this significant national cause, which was the struggle to secure the Greekness of Macedonia.

Conclusion

The current paper aimed to explore what are the ideological narratives and constructions disseminated through the disinformation-laced news stories during 2018 and 2019. It showed that the use of disinformation-laced news stories resulted in empowering the existing ideological narrative and constructions that were already dominant in the Greek discourse. One of their primary use seemed to be to convince their believers that immediate actions must be taken against those that threaten the ingroup's existence and systemically victimize it, proving that the weaponization of communication plays an influential role in shaping the public's political opinions (Stahl, 2016). Besides, it challenges the democratic process by disseminating hate (Rosenbach and Mansted, 2018; Pascale, 2019; George 2020).

In the examined case, hate was directed against the then-government of Greece that signed the treacherous Prespes Agreement, North Macedonia which was trying to steal Greece's cultural heritage (including the Greek territory of Macedonia), and the powerful countries like Germany that are continuously exploiting Greece for their own sake. The threat, hate, and victimization seemed to become essential parts of a shared identity of those trying to protect Greece and maintain its crucial nationalistic narrative of its uniqueness, challenging the role of journalists who did not seem capable of stopping the spread of these fake stories (Waisbord, 2018; Monsees, 2020).

The disinformation-laced news stories seemed to be weaponized successfully and used in empowering identity characteristics through several ideological constructions, such as the negative representation of those individuals that go against their knowledge, the distancing method (us versus them), the alienation with elements of dramatization (e.g., territorial loss of the Greek Macedonia due to the Prespes Agreement), fallacies that are linked with generalizations (all Macedonians want to steal Greece's culture), and the sense of victimization and dehumanization that demanded emergency actions to protect the ingroup from the outgroup. In the end, this weaponization process seemed like a matter of protecting the dominant ideological narratives that were perceived as the only truth (e.g., the story with the poster from the movie *Attack of the Puppet People*).

Subsequently, disinformation-laced news stories can be crucial tools in promoting a certain knowledge amongst specific groups and dividing the unity of the citizens. That division can probably be further exploited for realizing political ambitions, especially in sensitive political issues like the MND, which is strongly associated with the ideological nationalistic narrative of Greece's construction as a nation-state.

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