

**Fighting
false news
narratives**



**INFORMATION DISORDER AND
RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION IN THE
COVERAGE OF THE EVENTS IN THE
BLACK SEA WITH THE HMS DEFENDER
IN NORTH MACEDONIA**

September 2021

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DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION
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DISORDER IN COVERAGE OF THE EVENT
IN THE ON-LINE INFORMATION SPACE
DURING THE PERIOD 25TH TO 26TH

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The FN team analyzed a total of **127 articles which are part of the “first wave” of (dis)information** covering the event on the 23rd and 24th of June 2021. The articles were generated through DEBUNK.EU system but also the news aggregators' time.mk and grid.mk, as well as the google search engine were used for collection.

The overall disinformation narrative that dominated the broadcast of this event in North Macedonia, on 23rd and 24th of June, was that *“The British Government did it on purpose and Russia is military superior and has all the right to defend its sovereign territory”*. This disinformation narrative relativizes the illegal annexation of Crimea from 2014 and the armed conflicts that followed it, with no regard to the international laws with the disinformation narrative *“The Ukrainian waters are Russian territory and that cannot/should not be disputed”* followed by *“Russia is an equal player on the international scene”*. The disinformation narrative about *“Russia military superiority”*, which is continuously present, was noted as well in the following manner *“Russia is ready to attack foreign warships using diplomatic, political and military means; Next time, the bombs will hit the target, not the direction of movement; Russia uses SU-24M fighter-bomber to warn British Royal NAVY warship for entering illegally in Russian waters”*.

The articles published on the 25th and 26th of June, were referring to two key events/statements:

(1) The statements of the UK Chief of the Defense Staff, Nick Carter– the articles that appeared in NMK online space were a mix of article published on 23rd and his second statement from 25th. Within the NMK portals, as a source it is stated *“UK news agencies”*. However, this narrative started on 25th of June by the Russian media. This is usual technique used by the Russian and pro-Russian portals in NMK to publish segments of certain Russian narratives few days after disinformation was initially published in Russian media. Within these articles there is a tendency to emphasize the phrase *“UK admitted”* referring to parts of the statement of the Mr. Carter, which builds on the previous intentions of Russia to present UK as *“responsible for provocations”*.

(2) The *“news”* that *“Amid increased tensions with UK, Russia started BIG military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea”*.

Conclusion: Considering the overall period 23-26 June, the Russian disinformation about the event was present in North Macedonia, using various techniques, such as distorting and manipulating sources, to keep the disinformation narrative in the online sphere.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION DISORDER IN COVERAGE OF THE EVENT IN THE ONLINE INFORMATION SPACE ON 23RD AND 24TH OF JUNE

On June 14, 2021 two NATO warships, the British HMS Defender and the Dutch frigate *Everton* enter the Black Sea. The entrance of these two ships, exposed the fact that Russia has significant armed forces in the region of Crimea to track the movement of these two vessels and other activities in general.

On June 23, 2021, the British destroyer HMS Defender sailed out of Odessa and was followed through by a Russian Coast guard ship and a significant number of aircrafts enroute. In such cases, unless the countries have bilateral agreements the Law of the Sea is being implemented and should be observed by all the sides involved in the maritime actions.

The Law of the Sea provides that **innocent passage** can be performed in the coastal waters of any coastal state if it remains within the rules as prescribed by this law. It is evident that the HMS Defender followed all the rules as prescribed by this law which Convention was signed by most of the UN member states including Russia, as part of the UN efforts to make the member states comply with unified rules when using the Sea.

- **Ships should use legally recognized shipping lanes:** HMS Defender was using a legally recognized shipping lane.
- **The passage should be free of prejudice for the peace, good order or security of the coastal state:** HMS Defender passage was not prejudicial to the peace, good order or security of the coastal state which in this case and in accordance with the illegal annexation is not considered to be Russia.
- **The passage should be performed without stopping (unless agreed with the coastal state for using a harbor as a stop point) and should not change the course:** HMS Defender did not stopped its movement rather than that it was moving in a constant speed without change of the course.
- **The innocent passage should not be announced to the coastal state:** HMS Defender did not need to announce the innocent passage since it is not required by the law.
- **The innocent passage should not endanger the sea-life, environment, essential infrastructure or interfere with any sea works or researches:** HMS Defender did not jeopardize or endangered the sea life, environment or any other essential infrastructure, cables, pipelines hoses etc. enroute its movement.

During the day of the event the BBC made a video article through its defense correspondent onboard of HMS Defender Jonathan Bil through which in a five-minute video more than few particularities in regards to the passage were mentioned. Most of the points above were duly noted and explained in the video. Mr. Bil also posts questions

to the senior officers on deck which unanimously claim that these waters are not Russian and that only Russia considers them as such and that the UK Royal Navy considers the passage as being conducted through Ukrainian waters.

The most important points of the BBC video that were not even considered by any of the outlets that distorted the information space in North Macedonia are the following:

1. HMS Defender was using a legally recognized shipping route.
2. HMS Defender considered the waters as Ukrainian therefore innocent passage was planned.
3. The purpose of the passage was to make a point that those waters do not belong to Russia therefore Russia has no right to warn, safeguard or attack anyone enroute.
4. The crew and senior Officers on HMS Defender were confident that it will be non-confrontational passage accepting and predicting the fact that Russia will take more aggressive approach during the passage.
5. UK as a NATO member state has the duty to call out states that do not follow the international order and it was done in a transparent manner.
6. The Royal navy and UK are willing to challenge Russia to uphold international law.

Since none of these points were made/raised within the articles analyzed, it is to be concluded that the major narrative that was published based on distortion of the facts and neglecting the UK side was that *"the HMS Defender provoked the Russian Navy by sailing in the Crimea waters"*, which contributes toward imposing a point that *"the Russian Navy has all the rights to defend its sovereignty"* and that *"those waters are in fact Russian waters"*.

Another interesting finding when analyzing the narratives was the one in which some portals produced identical articles claiming that the Royal Navy was aware that there will be a reaction from the Russian side and that the passage was done on purpose.

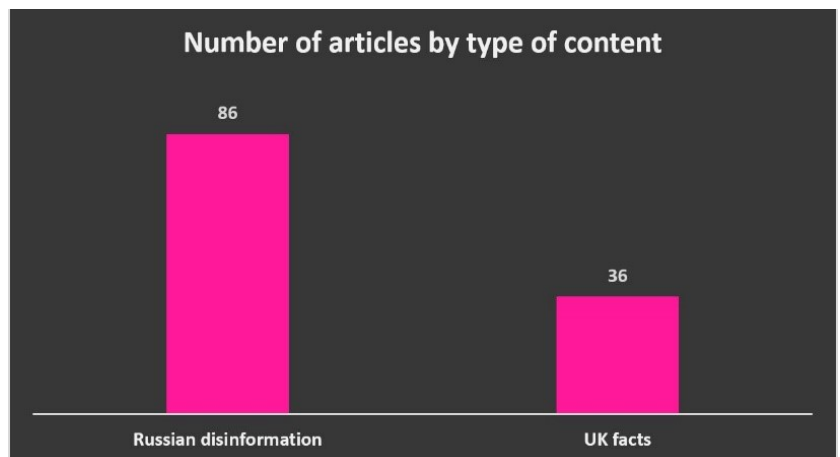
On the eve of the event the narratives that *"the British Government is lying"*, and that *"the Royal Navy did the passage on purpose"* derived from the statement of the Russian MFA spokesperson Zaharova – *"Who is lying?"*. In her Telegram post Zaharova indicates that there is a clean statement by the BBC reporter that HMS Defender is doing the passage on purpose and that the British Government is lying. The UK side and the explanations provided specifically for this segment of the event were not provided in the NMK media and web-pages. Zaharova post on her Telegram profile is at 17.49 Macedonian Local Time and as of 18.40 the portals in North Macedonia started publishing articles emphasizing the disinformation that *"HMS Defender did the passage on purpose in order to provoke Russia"*. The portals that published these articles did not referenced Zakharova, still they used the point from her post. The articles neglected once more the fact that the territory

is disputed, and that HMS Defender did not violate any international law. Rather than that almost all the portals that published this disinformation went with the narrative that “the BBC correspondent Jonathan Bil confirmed that HMS Defender did the passage on purpose being aware that it may provoke an incident”, which is a distortion and using half-truth to manipulate the public.

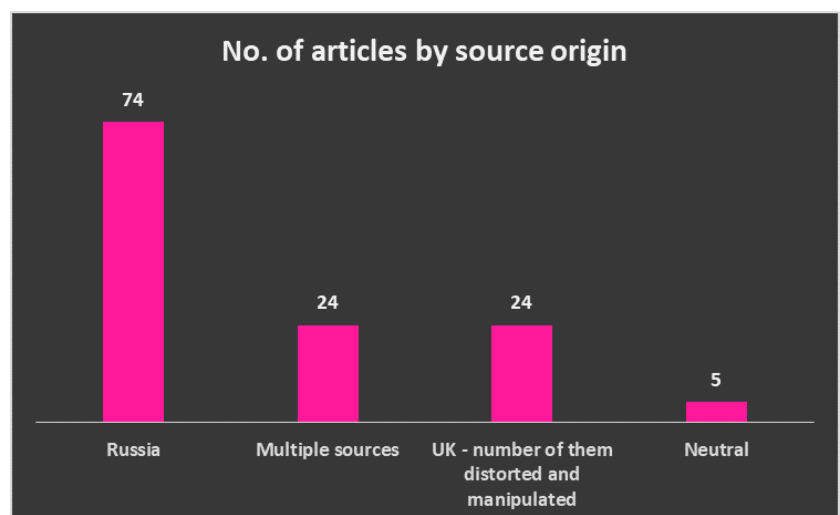
This distortion also contributes towards glorifying Russia’s Military supremacy and making the issue of the Ukrainian waters and upholding the international laws, i.e. the Law of the Sea, completely irrelevant and not important thus defining this territory as Russian.

The FN team analyzed a total of 127 articles that were published on 23rd and 24th of June referring to the event. The articles were analyzed through the way the event was broadcasted, whether articles observed the stance of both sides, what is the source of the article and if the article clearly pictures the video broadcasted by the BBC. The following statistics are worth mentioning:

The labeling of the articles based on the content showed that the Russian disinformation was spotted in 2/3 of the articles while the broadcast of the facts on the UK side was spotted within 28.5% of the articles. Only 5 articles/analyses were labeled as neutral.



Another interesting finding is the origin of the source i.e. whether it is a Russian or UK/Western source. It appears that a high number of 74 articles or close to 60% were with only Russian sources. Only 24 or 19% were with only UK sources. Sources from both sides (multiple sources) were noted in 24 or 18.9% of the articles. A number of these articles distorted or manipulated the British sources to suit the Russian narrative.



Based on the statistical analyses it can be concluded that the event was broadcasted favoring the Russian side. The Russian sources were dominating the online sphere with TASS and Interfax from the row of media/agencies as well as the statements from various Russian officials. It can also be stated that the statements were offensive toward the West and in some of the cases open threats toward the UK and the Western allies were recorded, which is another argument toward the promotion of the Russian military supremacy. One of the most concerning perspective, which is unfortunately gain for Russia from this incident, deriving from the way majority of online portals in North Macedonia broadcasted the event was that the issue of the disputed Crimean waters no longer exists, instead it is a matter of who provoked Russia and its sovereignty and how powerful Russia is.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AND INFORMATION DISORDER IN COVERAGE OF THE EVENT IN THE ON-LINE INFORMATION SPACE DURING THE PERIOD 25TH TO 26TH

- The articles published on the 25th and 26th of June, were referring to two key events/statements:
 - (1) The statements of the UK Chief of the Defense Staff, Nick Carter– the articles that appeared in NMK online space were a mix of the articles published on 23rd and his second statement from 25th. Within the NMK portals, as a source it is stated *“UK news agencies”*. Within these articles there is a tendency to emphasize the phrase *“UK admitted”* referring to parts of the statement of the Mr. Carter, which builds on the previous intentions of Russia to present UK as *“responsible for provocations”*. General Carter as the Head of the British Royal Army frequently speaks about the threats from Russia, defining it as malicious and dangerous, there are several occasions where General Carter has spoken loudly about how big threat Russia represents to NATO as alliance and to its members as well. It appears that the NMK portals have misused his statement as well, where the part *“miscalculation born of unwarranted escalation”* is transmitted with the following headlines: *“A war with Russia could have been started”* where his statement was presented in a manner that he is blaming his own army for the incident. In fact, General Carter when stated *“miscalculation born of unwarranted escalation”* referred to Russia and its non-observance of the international law and unpredictability when legal actions are taken by NATO and other countries.
 - (2) The *“news”* that *“Amid increased tensions with UK, Russia started BIG military exercises in the Mediterranean Sea”* published by pro-Russian portals aimed at showing Russia as Military superior and a country that should not be challenged thus keeping the narrative alive and circulating. Again strengthening the narrative about the *“Russian military superiority”*.