

# FALSE CLAIMS IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## HOW DOES PROPAGANDA AFFECT COMMUNITIES?

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### ABSTRACT

In the article entitled „False Claims in International Development” there is an analysis on the disinformation and false claims in our current modern times, specifically from 2016 until today. From the ravages misinformation can do during a global pandemic, to how citizens of one city in North Macedonia are getting rich by publishing astonishing stories from the United States Presidential election (2020), and thus leading the analysis towards a case study on the false claims during Donald Trump’s presidency and how this misinformation affected people from Mexico. Declaring that you have „achieved” something great by making other countries (Mexico, in particular) suffer, is not a good example of leadership at all. This can relate to development in many ways. Since America and Mexico are neighbors, many development projects and involvements could be intertwined between the two nations, and it wouldn’t be just Mexico (and its citizens) who would suffer from it, but also America (and its citizens). For example, let us take the alcoholic beverages as an argument. Tequila is also produced in the US. By diminishing the relationship between the two countries, and even restricting businesses or access to businesses from Mexico in the US and vice-versa, this would be a blow towards small enterprises and even big ones that live from producing and selling alcoholic beverages such as tequila. False claims can do a lot of harm to the international stage, and not only states are affected, but enterprises as well.

**Keywords:** Community, Development, International, Misinformation, Pandemic

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### HYPOTHESIS

While there are many ways in which the development of a country, region or society can be influenced<sup>1</sup>, recently there have been relatively different ideas in the harming of development, and these are ‘fake news’, ‘misinformation’ and ‘disinformation’. The difference between these is pretty close since they seem to be used frequently in current mass-media and even by citizens that have the impression that the terms mean the exact same thing. For *fake news*, there are countries that are trying to fight with these false (or misleading) pieces of information that can cause damage to society by *inflicting* confusion, anger and even causing socio-political instability – see the case of the US Capitol building on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 (Al Jazeera, 2021).

But why would this be relevant in development? How can information damage, slow or even stop development? It is a good question that can be answered by looking into some case studies, analyzing progress throughout a period of massive spread of false claims, conspiracy theories and hate. The case of the United States of America is a special one, but not just since Donald Trump was elected President, but since Ronald Reagan started, in 1980, to call up the existence of a thing such as ‘deep state’ (Mother Jones. 2021). Telling people how important it is to “take back the country” and “bring back the recognition that the people of this country can solve the problems” is really similar to what Donald Trump used during his campaign and his mandate.

This is really important to development issues and the United States are not the only place in which disinformation is seen. The base argument for this paper is that “a lie can be crucial in making progress

<sup>1</sup> A/N (Author’s Note), For instance, lack of resources, climate change, natural disasters, political instability, wars, lack of participation, and even populist/ nationalist ideals (manipulative), etc.

and good decisions in any society”. Active and healthy co-operation between individuals, states (which are led by humans), and good communication between institutions and also the press is something that can have a positive impact upon the world, depending on the actor that we look into.

But for this paper, a closer look will be taken upon the misinformation of the former President of the United States – Donald J. Trump –, the actions that some states are taking to prevent the spread of misinformation and false claims, but also emphasize how important it is for development to have a healthy, transparent, and dedicated leadership towards society and people, and not solely for the interests of the state. Creating a sustainable, smart and developed society is a hard thing that a political administration has to target, since there are many aspects that they need to be focusing on, rather than just one; but when it comes to false claims that are – more than often – intentional rather than unintentional, it can affect how your people think and how will they act according to the global world around them in the coming decades or even the following years.

## METHODS

In order to find out how the following problems show up, the methods used in creating this paper will include press, content, and discourse analysis, but also presenting some case studies on what exactly some statal actors did in order to prevent the spreading of false claims within their own borders. Analyzing relevant websites such as those of the United Nations, Washington Post, Al Jazeera, and of European press, should answer the question regarding the relevance of disinformation in the development area.

## INTRODUCTION

Today’s world is filled with a lot of issues when it comes to development. Projects that aim helping people develop their communities show a low indicator of direct involvement since the help comes from the outside towards the inside. Instead of helping communities grow by empowering their local knowledge of the people about the area and the cultures around, the aid comes from the outside towards the inside, and that can be seen as “a powerful state/organization coming to help a small/poor one that cannot help itself on its own”.

Of course, pieces of advice are welcomed in the development sphere, but – in my opinion – there should be no such thing as intervention by the outside with know-all mentalities and the desire to change one culture for the purpose of development.

As we will see in the following chapters, the false claims “agenda” will be covered within the aspects of the ex-President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, and his exaggerated and often misleading public declarations, that could have just changed the near future for Americans in general.

But spreading fake news is not only bad for communities, but if we look at it from the right-wing perspective – in which the individual comes first and from that, the community has “benefits” due to the development of individuals – there are people that benefit from this “legal false claim spreading”, that is happening and the special case is one from Veles, North Macedonia. The former Yugoslavian state – especially in Veles – sees an awkward dichotomy in the area, since most buildings are specific to the Tito regime, but there are some expensive cars and people wearing expensive clothes there, that raise question marks within the community.

The issue of disinformation/ misinformation/ false claims or “Pinocchios” (Washington Post, 2019) is present around every corner of the world in many different shapes or forms. While countries struggle to develop and maintain their international status by collaborating, trading, communicating, implementing co-operative projects with other states, neo-populists, neo-conservatives, and even movements of groups and individuals from both far-right and far-left are trying to convince the general population that their views and ideas are the true and correct side of the narrative, causing violent protests, injuries, assaults, riots and even murder within their actions. These manifestations are – in general – immediately rejected and condemned by the international community, and states (like the USA or Mexico for example) can suffer from these movements of the far-right, far-left or the neo-conservatives.

## DEVELOPMENT DURING A PANDEMIC – CRISIS TIMES

The world is growing bigger and bigger – in terms of population – year by year. No matter which country contributes the most to these numbers, the fact is that our planet will have to face around 10 billion people in the next 30 years or so. That is not the main problem,

since education can change mindsets and behaviors, people can be educated in being more responsible towards the environment and towards how we cultivate our food from different sources. But there is one thing – apart from all-out nuclear war – that cannot be truly prevented by education, but only faced with on-going protection, and that is: Pandemics.

When comparing the current SARS-CoV-2 pandemic with the Spanish Flu from 1918, we can note down some differences between the two. The first thing would be that the Spanish Flu reached 50 million deaths worldwide, while COVID-19 – as of the 27<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 – has reached 2.1 million deaths worldwide. The first one lasted for about 2 years and the latest just passed its first year, infecting over 100 million people worldwide. I chose this comparison since today, traveling routes and trade routes are essential to development and the technology that we have today, pretty much saved us from a catastrophic scenario. In 1918 there were no social media platforms in order to help telling people that there is a deadly virus circulating outside peoples' homes, thus reaching the unimaginable death toll of 50 million.

Inevitably, if we were “lucky” enough and never faced such horrific scenarios, we might have never thought of finding cures and improving medicine. My point is that whenever a tragic human-caused or human-affecting event happens throughout history, there will always be consequences to it. In this case, humanity decided that there should be a global organization fighting against disease (the World Health Organization, or WHO). After World War Two, we got it all wrong and started developing nuclear weapons thinking of “destroying” but at the last moment (JFK Library, 2012), just realized we might end humanity once and for all – and stopped. When the enemy is “invisible” (viruses) and information about it is shared in different shape or form, there will be skepticism about it, as there is about nearly every subject that one can face.

As to what a pandemic can do to development there are obvious answers. Businesses shutting down, local economy stopped from functioning properly – or stopped for good –, health issues, less focus on the poor while the rich fortifies itself from danger, tensions between people and institutions, the unanswered questions, and the list can go on. The only thing that can make it worse, is the lying – misleading – behavior of leaders voted into office.

## TACKLING VS. PROFITING FROM FALSE CLAIMS

Different actors – individuals, authorities, organizations or even states – are impacted or have encountered the term of ‘fake news’ or ‘disinformation’ and ‘misinformation’ a lot during the last two decades. From amazing stories to conspiracy theories, the idea of academic research and knowledge seems to be the last resort to which people go to when it comes to decisions and actions. One of the first things to be noted here is “the drive to censor fake news” in Romania. Since information can be spread easily in the 2<sup>nd</sup> decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, individuals or public/ private entities are often abusing this power of ‘freedom of speech’. There is nothing wrong with expressing your sole opinion on a subject. But there is something else in convincing – or at least trying to convince – other to join you in your beliefs. That is, indeed, propaganda. Freedom of speech should start with “In my opinion...” or “I think...”, not with misleading accusations and provoking others to rally against a ‘bigger enemy’.

In an effort to stop the spreading of ‘fake news’, the Romanian Government has decided that during the pandemic, punishing websites that spread fake news was going to diminish the damage done to its credibility. In an article published by *Balkan Insight*, it is stated that:

*The websites that are punished for spreading fake news about the coronavirus pandemic, and the government's response to it, have normally published what most rational persons would rapidly identify as plain lies. One is the Orthodox Christian news platform ortodoxinfo.ro, whose access was restricted on 24 April, after it published an item of news about a supposed government plan to “kill pensioners in concentration and extermination camps”. (Balkan Insight, 2020)*

One Social-Democrat deputy, Liviu Plesoianu, raised some questions when it came to who can decide what is ‘fake news’ and what can be published/ censored, mentioning that the government should not have a referee role in deciding what is fake and not. “Whoever decides what is fake news today can decide what is fake based on the preferences of the moment” – Cosmin Pojoranu, Factual.ro (Balkan Insight, 2020).

On the other side of the fence, however, there is one perfect example in North Macedonia where some people are getting rich over publishing amazing stories about what is happening in the United States, especially before the 2020 Presidential Race.

*Many of the fake news websites that sprang up during the US election campaign have been traced to a small city in Macedonia, where teenagers are pumping out sensationalist stories to earn cash from advertising.* (BBC News, 2016)

Since the interview is covering a teenager group that does not care about the story being true or false, and only caring about making money, that aspect is – in an unethical/ moral way – improving lives in the city of Veles. This “digital gold rush” provides an amazing opportunity for people in the city, since the average salary is just 350 euros a month, and you can even “notice some very new and very smart cars while the down-at-heel bars are full of excited young men drinking fancy cocktails” (BBC News 2016). When the city of Veles was part of Yugoslavia, it was actually called *Titov Veles* after the former Yugoslavian President – Josip Tito – but as noted in the interview, today’s city name is jokingly used as *Trump Veles*.

*“Do you think if your kid had made 30,000 euros a month, you’d make a problem?” he asks incredulously. „Come on! You’d be so happy...” – The right-wing mayor of Veles* (BBC News 2016).

This is a perfect example of how fake news can directly affect a community’s/ society’s economy, and that is, by obtaining funds from the „cost per click” algorithm, which gives - through Google and the Macedonian state in this scenario - roughly about 1.20\$ per 1000 clicks. (Recorder, 2020)

If the story reaches 100.000 clicks - which is easy when it comes to sensational stuff being posted on the Internet – they will make about 120\$ per post/ story. Some „news” and „sensational stories” can reach millions of clicks, even tens of millions, depending on the time and context in which they are published. If they reach 10.000.000 clicks for one post, they will make 12.000\$ per post, which is a huge amount of money for a community living with a 350\$ a month base salary.

### CASE STUDY – TRUMP’S DISCOURSE ON MEXICO

Another great example on how communities are affected is the discriminatory discourse of the former US President, Donald J. Trump on the issues with Mexico and the Latin-American citizens. In a speech, he claims:

*„The invisible enemy has been very tough on Mexico, and we have areas along the border where we’re in great shape because right there, because of that [Trump’s border barrier], that we’re in great shape. But on the*

*other side, in Mexico, they’re suffering greatly with the virus. It’s been incredible what we’ve achieved. And we didn’t do the wall because of COVID; we did the wall because of security and drugs and other things. But it turned out that, in the middle of it all, along came this horrible plague.”* (Washington Post, 2020)

One of the points from the UN Sustainable Development Goals was to “encourage official development assistance and financial flows, including foreign direct investment, to States where the need is greatest, in particular least developed countries, African countries, small island developing States and landlocked developing countries, in accordance with their national plans and programs” (UN Development Agenda). As for the United States during the 2016–2020 period, President Donald Trump always wanted America to be First and that is all. The isolationist ideas and the spreading of the personal cult among his supporters lead to disastrous consequences. He even withdrew the US from UNESCO in 2017.

This is a statement that can be criticized a lot by international diplomats. Declaring that you have „achieved” something great by making other countries (Mexico, in particular) suffer, is not a good example of leadership at all. Simply saying that „we are doing great, they are doing bad, and that’s an amazing achievement” is not something to be proud of.

This can relate to development in many ways. Since America and Mexico are neighbors, many development projects and involvements could be intertwined between the two nations. As stated in the USAID website (<https://www.usaid.gov/mexico/cdcs>): „The US-Mexico partnership is central to securing our shared border, advancing economic growth, and expanding markets for U.S. Businesses.”. It will not just be Mexico who would suffer from that claim of ex-President Donald Trump, but also Americans.

If we take the alcoholic beverages for example, Tequila is also produced in the US (Thrillist, 2016). By diminishing the relationship between the two countries, and even restricting businesses or access to businesses from Mexico in the US and vice-versa, this would be a blow towards small enterprises and even big ones.

### MISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA IN DEVELOPMENT – TRUMP AND THE ECONOMY

One way of making yourself a believable candidate for the Presidency is by having a lot of people believe that the media is the one that lies – very popular statement, known by a lot of people around the world



– and that you (the candidate) are the one telling the utmost truth. Some of the Presidents' lies contain things that target Americans' hearts, emphasizing on the past and well-known issues such as: World Trade Center, Terrorism and being the best country in the whole world. Examples follow the ex-President quoting various things such as:

will not only harm but actually impact how the future decades will look like.

Withdrawing from the Paris Climate Accord, ex-President Donald Trump emphasized that it was “a one-sided accord and an unfair one” for the United States. This is simply not a good-enough reason to withdraw. The Earth is a single sphere, and the

Statement	Reality
“We’ve spent \$7 trillion in the Middle East, as of two months ago.” (Washington Post, 2018)	“The wars against Iraq in the Middle East and Afghanistan in South Asia were all together costing the US about \$1.6 trillion. And that was coming from 2001 to 2014, not from the past two months (April 5th, 2017)”. (Watson Institute, 2021)
“We’re going to the southern border. As you know, we’ve completed the wall.” (Jan. 2020)	“As of mid-January 2020, only 40 miles of Trump’s border barrier had been built on land where there had been no previous barrier”. (US Customs and Border Protection, 2020)
“Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador were not able to do the job of stopping people from leaving their country and coming illegally to the U.S. We will now begin cutting off, or substantially reducing, the massive foreign aid routinely given to them.” (Trump tweet, Oct. 22). He added: “The countries didn’t want them back. And I stopped all payments to those countries. I stopped everything going to those countries. And after we stopped for about a month, you remember after we stopped for about a month, they called. They said we’d love to have them back.” (Washington Post, 2019)	“Thousands of people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have sought refuge in the United States during both the Obama and Trump administrations, fleeing gang violence and poverty in their home countries. This exodus has been going on since 2014.” (Washington Post).

These are just some examples, but it shows how the aid for a less developed country can end simply through misinformation, and people cannot do much about it. The worst part, as I have mentioned, is that some of the claims are actually reinforced by touching a sensitive „chord” of the American people - 11th of September 2001. By mentioning the presence of „people from the Middle East”, ex-President Trump focuses the attention of the people towards remembering what damage a terrorist attack can make, and thus winning credibility among the American people in an easy manner, and thus, gaining more and more conservative supporters, spreading the fear of being targeted through them, creating the impression that he – and only he – is the ultimate savior.

#### DEVELOPING AND DEVELOPED COUNTRIES – CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUES AND EDUCATION

We are at a certain point on global politics in which some countries have to be more generous than others for various and justified reasons. As an example, South Africa can never match the aid that the US can offer, neither would Germany or the UK. When it comes to issues that affect the future of humanity as species, thinking about our own current/ present good

United States are not immune to global effects just by withdrawing and keeping their economy safe. They are going to suffer from climate change just as much as the Northern/ Southern hemisphere countries will. The former President even repeated this claim for about 65 times during his time as a President, which is a lot, since in this Climate Accord, “each country sets its own commitments” (Washington Post).

Practically, the president could – and can – unilaterally change the commitments offered by former presidents which is allowed under the Accord. Also, ignoring the potential “green jobs” that could be beneficial for American citizens. (Washington Post, 2021)

Education is also something that is being targeted as being used as a “manipulation tool”. It is a bit ironic, coming from the spreader of over 30,000 false or misleading claims (Washington Post, 2021) during the four years of his mandate. But as for education, he quotes that “They [Democrats] also want to indoctrinate your children in school by teaching them things that aren’t so. They want to indoctrinate your children.” (Edusource, 2020). Also, according to the Washington Post, this claim is baseless, since Joe Biden has not suggested any form of change to the school’s curriculums (and these are also managed locally – at a local level).

This is a very toxic statement that can ultimately have deep connections into the Grassroots Development idea, that starts from bottom to the top. If the ex-President managed to convince people that Democrats are in fact „indoctrinating” children in schools, we might see a dramatic downfall in the numbers of children that go to school in the following years. Parents might be skeptical when leaving their kids to school, and undoubtedly there would be less students going to universities because of this Trump false, misleading claim. As the election results showed, both candidates broke the record for being the most voted presidential candidates (CNN, 2020), as Joe Biden won the election (and the popular vote) with over 81 million votes, while Donald Trump had over 74 million votes. My point is that if half of these 74 million people that voted for the republican candidate truly believe that the opposing party is willing to ‘indoctrinate’ – strong word – them, they might try to change the way in which education is made (for example: schools for republican families – just a theory). Also, being heard at the worldwide level, less and less students might choose to come study in the US after all the popularity downfall that the ex-President Donald Trump has “provided”, even though the international community sees some hope within the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States – Joe Biden.

#### WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE NEAR FUTURE?

Rallies and violent protesters that have the motivation to “defend” their country can damage development in many ways. Since our country of origin can determine how we are perceived as an individual/ company, the leader of a state has to be the one who assures peace, stability and respect within its citizens are assured by his words and actions.

Considering the storming of the Capitol building during the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2021, after the President mentioned: “...we’re going to walk down to the capital and we’re going to cheer on our brave senators and congressmen and women, and we’re probably not going to be cheering so much for some of them. Because you’ll never take back our country with weakness. You have to show strength and you have to be strong. We have come to demand that Congress do

the right thing and only count the electors who have been lawfully slated, lawfully slated...We’re going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue. I love Pennsylvania Avenue. And we’re going to the Capitol.” (Trump, Campaign Rally, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021). This was a clear message for the people – that he lost, and he cannot accept the loss. He did not even join the crowd, but rather decided to watch all the crowd that stormed the Capitol from TV.

What comes next is really unpredictable, but a history of the past events will be taken into consideration to other nations worldwide. Many organizations from other countries, many employees from other companies will want “justice” – as they view it – without accepting other opinions and approaches on their views. We might just face the decade of the return of extreme nationalism (not patriotism), but this time, like never seen before – all round the World.

#### CONCLUSION

As the UNDP mentions: *human development focuses on improving the lives people lead rather than assuming that economic growth will lead, automatically, to greater wellbeing for all. Income growth is seen as a means to development, rather than an end in itself* (UNDP, Human Development). Crucial as it is to the wellbeing of communities, what we can learn from all the spread of misinformation, refusal of collaboration and hate speech in any of its forms, is that a lie can indeed be crucial in stopping progress and turning what it seems to be a good decision into a catastrophic consequence, in the society of one’s country, but also to the countries that it is tied to.

Misinformation is a serious issue, and ‘fake news’ are present all around the world wide web – internet –, creating confusion and manipulating people in different shapes or forms. Education can be the only successful weapon we might have in this battle against false or misleading information, since tackling it in a hard way can be tagged as an attack on human’s ‘freedom of speech’, and thus creating more and more chaos, fueling the ‘fire’ that has already been created by the false stories and declarations, or pieces of information in general.

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