

# Susceptibility to Disinformation in Poland. The Case of Instrumentalised Migration from Belarus in 2021

Justyna LIPIŃSKA<sup>1</sup>

War Studies University, av. gen. A. Chruściela „Montera” 103, 00-910 Warsaw, Poland

E-mail address: [j.lipinska@akademia.mil.pl](mailto:j.lipinska@akademia.mil.pl)

## Abstract

The aggression on Ukraine in 2022 was preceded by hybrid attacks targeting many European countries, including Poland. An important element of the hybrid attack are disinformation and propaganda activities. The aim of the article is to interpret the results of research on the vulnerability of Poles to disinformation depending on how far we are from the place where the inflammatory events take place. The study concerned disinformation about illegal migration to Poland from Belarus in 2021. The surveyed were residents of areas neighboring with Belarus and in other statistically selected regions of Poland.

**KEY WORDS:** *fake news, instrumentalised migration, credibility of information, Polish Armed Forces, 2021, Polish Belarussian border.*

## 1. Introduction

Disinformation is a deliberate action aimed at causing changes in the awareness of recipients, changing attitudes towards phenomena, and causing a specific social, economic or political reaction. Due to the development of technology, this phenomenon has grown significantly in recent years and is easily spreading on a global scale. Disinformation campaigns sow distrust and exacerbate existing social divisions, with potentially serious security implications both within countries and around the world [2].

According to the November 2017 report of the Council of Europe, there are three categories of information disorder:

- “Mis” -information - occurs when the information disseminated is false, but was not created with the intention of causing harm;
- Disinformation - when false information is created and disseminated knowingly with the intent to cause harm or harm;
- “Mal” -information - when the information disseminated is based on facts, but was created with the aim of causing harm or harm; this is often done by making private information public [12].

Information disorder is commonly referred to as fake news and concerns false or false news as well as when dealing with a more complex phenomenon of disinformation. It happens that this term is used to describe the “inconvenient” content disseminated by opponents in a political dispute. Thus, it seems that this term is misleading and inadequate to properly describe the situation of manipulating information in the new media environment. Instead, an attempt can be made to describe the phenomenon of information disorder [2].

The results of the fake news survey from the perspective of Polish journalists conducted in 2017, which, from the perspective of mass media, show the division of fake news into three types: completely untrue - false, contradictory, deliberately fabricated facts / information are provided;

- the truth is disputable - the recipient is misled by giving the appropriate context to the facts or presenting them selectively;
- manipulation of a quote - skilful placement of a person’s statement in context, cutting out sentences that change the meaning of the statement and thus support a specific thesis [5].

An example of fake news on a mass scale in the public space was the situation in July 2021, where on the Belarusian-Lithuanian and Belarusian-Latvian, and then Belarusian-Polish borders, mass incidents occurred when migrants from the Middle East crossed the borders. Their intention was to get to the territory of the European Union. At the same time, it was possible to notice the operation of the extended disinformation and propaganda campaign conducted by Belarus. The information reaching the public concerned mainly the improper treatment of migrants by

---

<sup>1</sup>Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [j.lipinska@akademia.mil.pl](mailto:j.lipinska@akademia.mil.pl)

the Polish side. The propaganda activities were directed primarily at the inhabitants of Belarus. The information tried to show that the Polish side was responsible for the crisis on the border. This message also reached Polish citizens as well as international opinion.

Therefore, at the request of the Academic Center for Strategic Communication (AKCS) operating at the Academy of Martial Arts in Warsaw, a report was prepared based on research conducted by the Foundation Institute for Market and Social Research - IBRiS, which examined vulnerabilities to disinformation depending on how far we are located from the place where the inflammatory events take place. The research was conducted on 6-10 December 2021 in some of the Podlaskie and Lubelskie voivodeships, as they were covered by the state of emergency resulting from the situation on the border and among the inhabitants of other parts of Poland. Respondents were asked questions about the perception of fake news, as well as real information about the situation at the border, and questions aimed at checking the degree of trust in media messages.

The study included two representative groups:

- The first group: residents of towns subject to a state of emergency (registration area in accordance with the regulation of the President of the Republic of Poland of September 2, 2021 on the introduction of a state of emergency in part of the Podlaskie Voivodeship and part of the Lubelskie Voivodeship [11]) - in the review described as "Group subject to the state of emergency (B)".

- The second group: is a representative group of inhabitants of the rest of the country - described in the survey as "The nationwide group (A)".

The survey was carried out using the computer-assisted telephone interview (CATI) method in the part addressed to both groups and consisted of 17 questions, mostly closed ones, and record questions. Additionally, the inhabitants of the border region were asked 5 open questions as part of the telephone in-depth interview [1].

## 2. Analysis of the Survey Results

The crisis situation on the Polish-Belarusian border resulted from attempts by migrants to cross these borders illegally. For security purposes, the Polish government created a restricted zone. This resulted in the emergence of a large amount of false information disseminated throughout Poland, the source of which was often special disinformation activities carried out by the Belarusian side. The aim of the questions was to check whether and how the distance from the conflict site, and more broadly personal involvement in a given situation, affects the ability to distinguish between true and false information [1].

The research results indicate that the knowledge about the appearance of a given piece of information was greater in the nationwide group than in the group of inhabitants of border areas. An interesting finding is that people in the "event center" use the media very actively, but did not feel the need to verify media information. In interviews, they argued that they learned from word of mouth about what was happening in their neighbourhood, and thus did not feel the need to reach for media messages. Moreover, a higher percentage of the respondents in the border area believed that the false information about the situation at the border was true. This conclusion resulted from the answers given by the respondents to the questions describing the examples of true and false events occurring at the border and widely commented on in the media space. An example was the question of whether the respondent met with information about the lack of food for soldiers serving at the border (Fig. 1.).

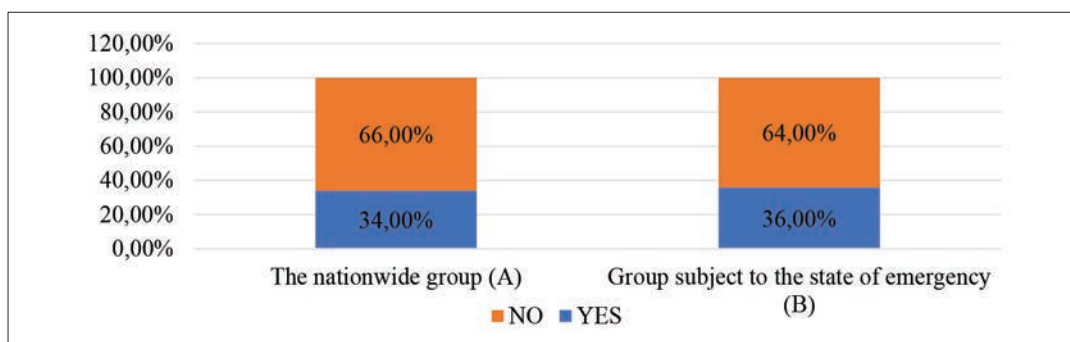


Fig. 1. Question: Have you heard the information that the soldiers of the Polish Army serving on the Polish-Belarusian border do not receive food for several days? [1].

While in the case of fake news about not receiving meals by soldiers, the result was similar (34% of respondents from the national group considered this information true, compared to 36% from the group covered by the state of emergency - Fig. 1), in the case of false information on the brutality of the Border Guard and the abandonment of the

beaten Iraqi, the percentage of people from the border area who considered them real is higher than in the nationwide group (respectively 31% to 48% and 16% to 39%).- Fig. 2.).

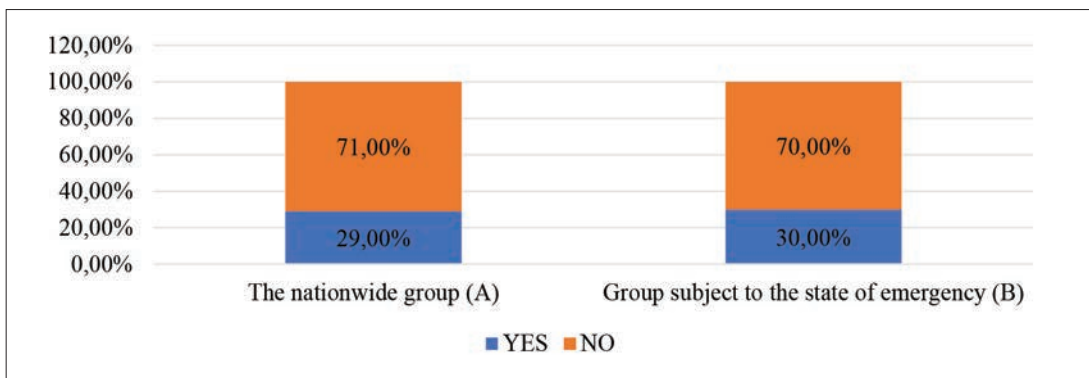


Fig. 2. Question: Have you received the information that the Polish services have brought to the border with Belarus and abandoned there an immigrant from Iraq who has been beaten unconscious? [1].

The conclusion of such research results is the statement that being in the so-called “The center of events” increases vulnerability to disinformation. This may be due to the increased sense of danger of people who are in the immediate vicinity of the events. Of course, the interpretation of particular information may also be influenced by other factors, such as: political views, age, education and relations with an officer or soldier. It is interesting that respondents from the border area more often confirmed contact with untrue information than respondents from other regions of Poland [1].

### 3. Sources of Information about Poland and the World

Market experts agree that in the fight against disinformation the key factors are: high-quality journalism, pluralism of information media, education, development of critical thinking skills and digital competences, especially among young people. Therefore, checking the sources of information was of key importance for the research conducted by the team of the Academic Center for Strategic Communication. Already in 2018, IAB Polska published the report “Disinformation in the network” [10] concerning the analysis of the credibility of information channels. It shows that the main source of false information from the country and the world is social media. More than half of the Internet users, when asked about the Internet environments where they most often encountered false information, indicated social media. They were indicated by 58% of the respondents, the second place (39%) was taken by news portals (Fig. 3.).

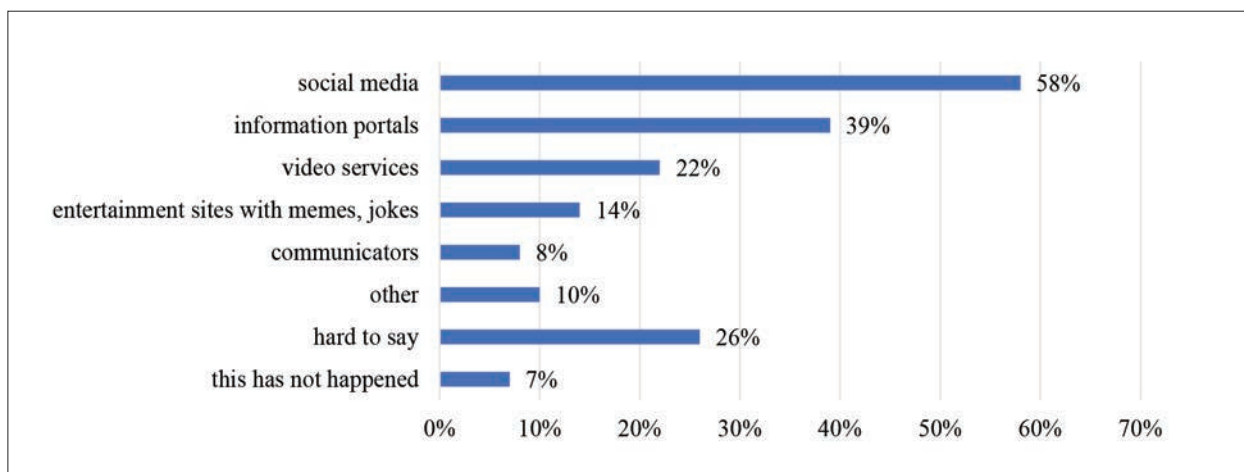


Fig. 3. Online sources of false information. [10].

The IAB Polska research also shows that most often it is the Internet users themselves who disseminate false information on the Internet. They are more often unknown people (58%) than a group of friends (20%). The “Disinformation Online” study was published when the IAB presented its draft Code of Good Practice on Online Disinformation. This document was prepared as part of the work of a working group established by the European Commission, which dealt with the topic of fake news in 2017. Following a public consultation on the perception of fake news, the communication “Fighting online disinformation: a European approach (COM (2018)) was published. 236 ”[6].

On the other hand, the PAYBACK Opinion Poll survey shows that over 60% of Poles know the concept of fake news, and 80% of respondents have had contact with such a message personally. Among the topics most often covered by fake news, the respondents mentioned: show business (73%), politics (69%) and lifestyle (27%). In their opinion, false information is the least often related to such categories as technology (5%) and sport (6%). (Fig. 4.).

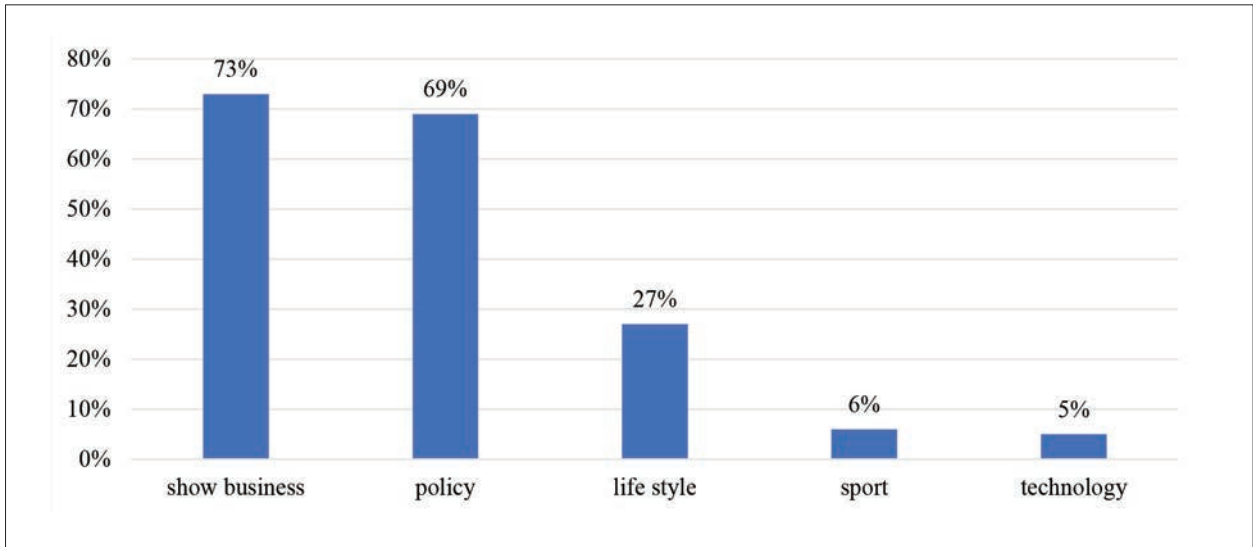


Fig. 4. Disinformation - subject. [3].

According to the participants of the survey conducted by PAYBACK, in 2017 the most fake news appeared on internet portals (76%) and in social media (70%). Less frequently, the respondents see this type of information on television (30%) and in the daily press (16%) [3] (Fig. 5.).

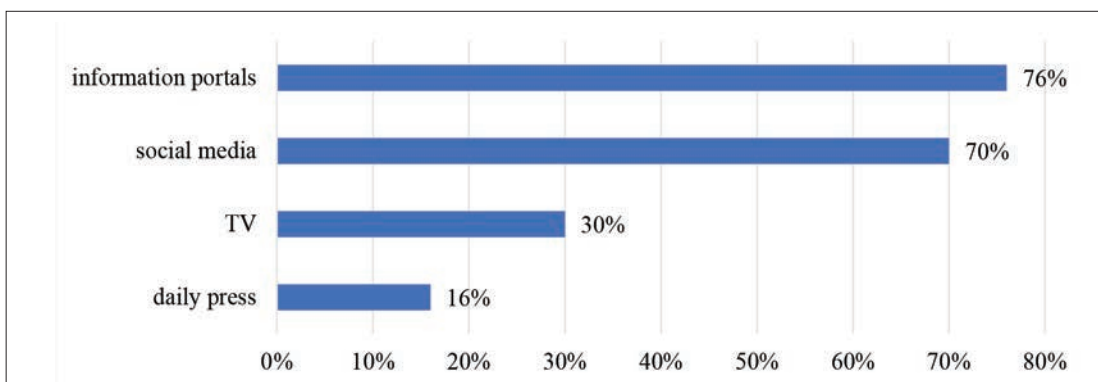


Fig. 5. The place where false information appears. [3].

According to the respondents, the main reason for the appearance of false information is the willingness to manipulate recipients (65%). Subsequently, the willingness of politicians or celebrities to draw attention to themselves (50%) and the willingness of an entity or person publishing false information (47%) to earn money were mentioned. On this occasion, the respondents also pointed to high competition among the media and the resulting race to publish news as soon as possible (35%) (Fig. 6.) [7] [2].

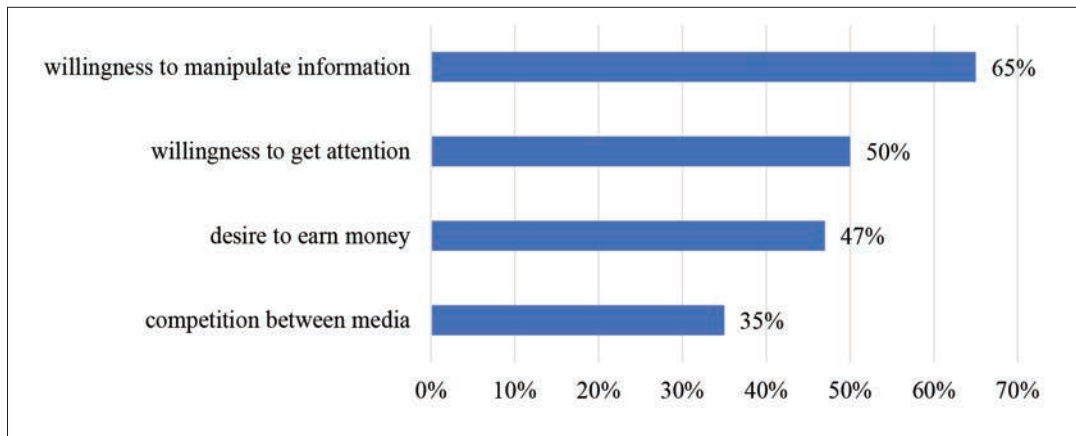


Fig. 6. Reasons for disinformation. [3].

Returning to the ACKS research, the respondents were asked the sources from which the respondents obtain information about Poland and the world. The research confirmed the trend of the Internet increasing importance with age. The respondents most often declare that they use internet portals in search of information about the situation in Poland and in the world (63%). The second place was taken by TVN / 24 (42%), followed by radio (40%), social media (36%) and TVP and Polsat (33% each). (Fig. 7.).

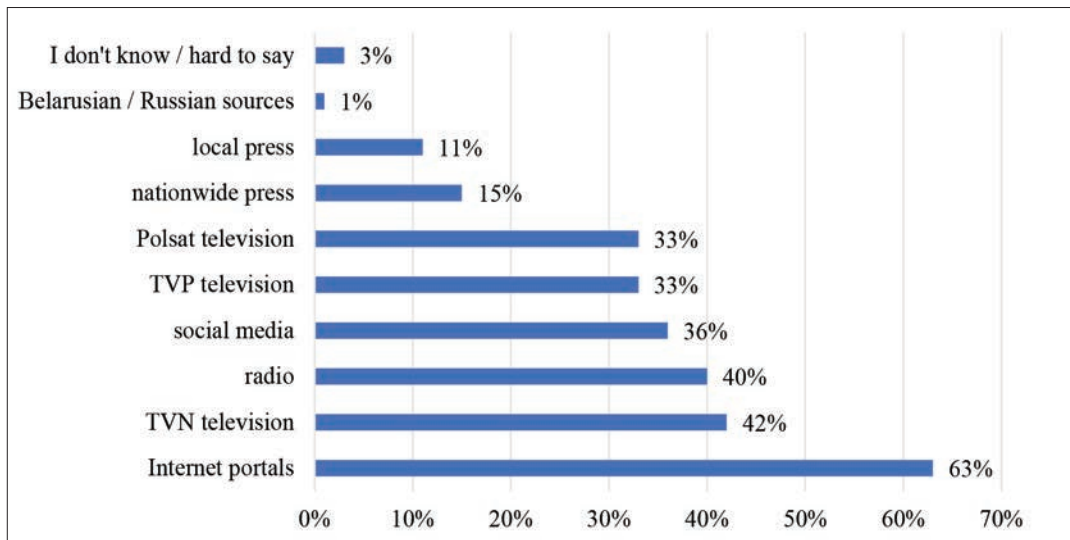


Fig. 7. Question: From what sources do you obtain up-to-date information about Poland and the world? (nationwide group). [1].

In the border region, news portals (67%), television (TVN - 47% and TVP - 42%), social media (43%) and radio (41%) play a significant role. (Fig. 8.).

By checking which internet portals are the most opinion-forming, it turned out that in the nationwide group the most popular are: onet.pl (67%), wp.pl (55%) and interia.pl (21%). (Fig. 9.).

In the border region, onet.pl loses 20 percentage points to wp.pl and these portals turn the first place - wp.pl (67%), onet.pl (47%) and interia.pl (21%) (Fig. 10.).

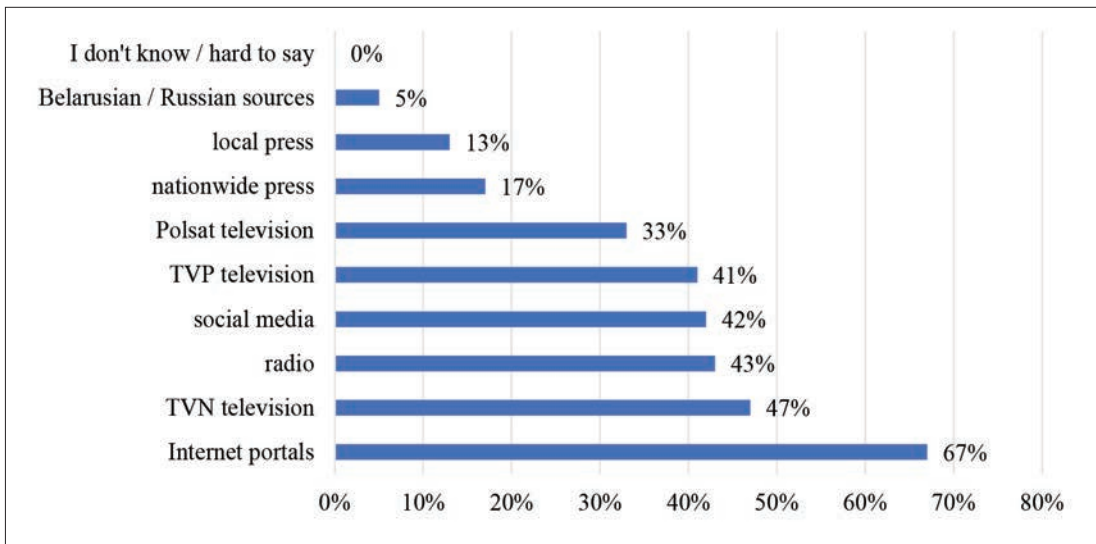


Fig. 8. Question: From what sources do you obtain up-to-date information about Poland and the world? (border region). [1].

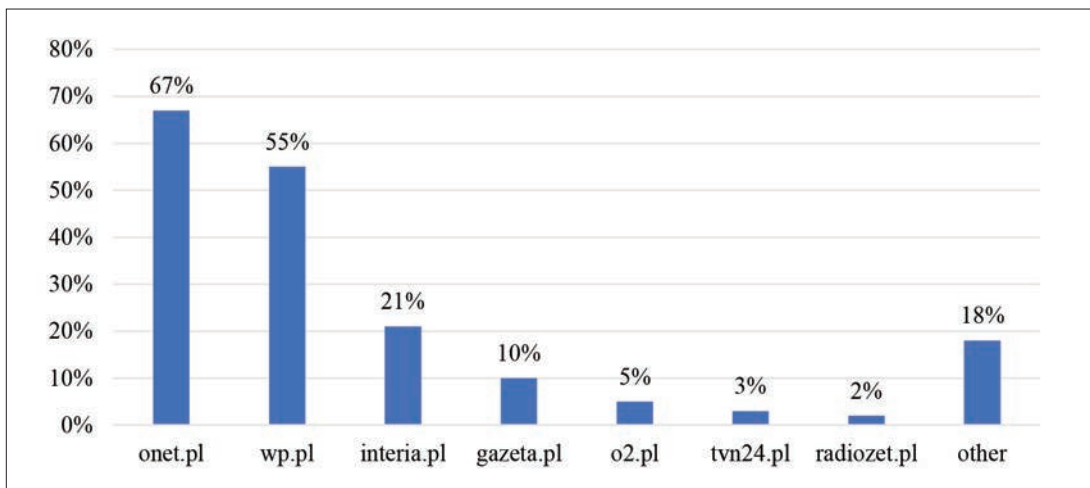


Fig. 9. The popularity of information portals - nationwide group (A). [1].

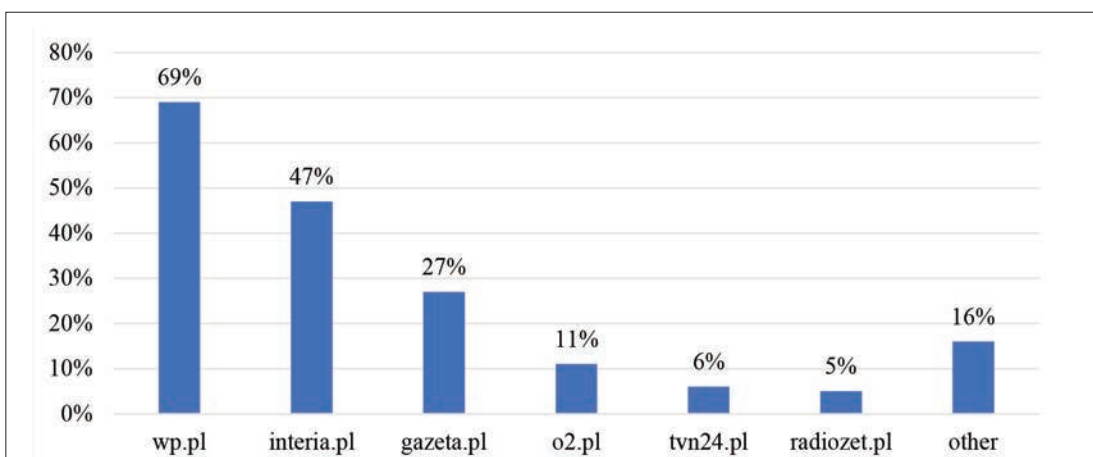


Fig. 10. Popularity of news portals - group covered by the state of emergency (B). [1].

The research also confirmed the growing importance of the Internet as a source of information, especially in young and old people, i.e. up to 59 years of age. For all age groups in the nationwide group, the Internet was indicated by as much as 63 percent. surveyed throughout the country and 67.3 percent. in the border region. On the other hand, social media is a source of information for 35.5 percent. Of respondents throughout the country and 42.7 percent. people in the group covered by the state of emergency. Research shows that the internet and a little less social media are the primary sources of information for people aged 18 to 59. It is interesting that in these age groups we can observe significant differences between the border region and the rest of the country. The indications for obtaining information from the Internet are significantly greater in the border region than in the rest of the country. The Internet is indicated as a source of information by as much as 93 percent. Young residents of the border region aged 18–19 and 73% people of this age across the country (20 percentage points difference). In the case of people aged 30–39, the difference is 9 points in favor of the border region, in 40-year-olds it is 11 percentage points, and in 50-year-olds it is 15 percentage points in favor of the border region. In the case of social media, they were indicated as sources of information almost twice as often by young people (up to 29 years old) from the border region (83%) than by the nationwide group (47%). In the group of 30-year-olds, the indications were more even (50 to 53% in the nationwide group), in the case of 40-year-olds more often they were indicated by residents of the border region, while in the group of 50-year-olds, respondents from the group subject to the state of emergency had 11 percentage points advantage. It can be concluded that when we are personally involved in a given matter, then we actively search for information that interests us in various media, we do not just wait for the media message. Such possibilities are offered by the Internet and social media. Internet portals and social media as a source of information are the domain of younger people and their popularity decreases with age. Television is the main source of information for middle-aged and older people, and we can see that the older the respondents, the less the popularity of commercial TV and the growing of public TV. Comparing the results for both groups, we can see that in the border region, Poles more often actively seek information and obtain it from slightly more diverse sources than in the case of the entire country. (Fig. 11.).

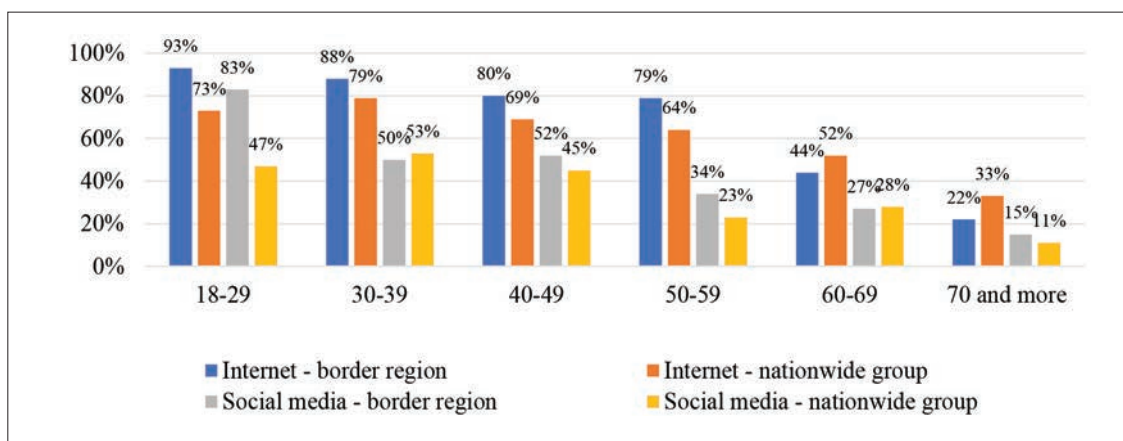


Fig. 11. The popularity of information portals by age of respondents. [1].

Additionally, the respondents were asked which of the indicated commonly used sources of information is the most reliable for them. It found that 78 percent of the respondents in the area covered by the state of emergency found their sources reliable. In turn, in the nationwide group, 90 percent were of such opinion. subjects. (Fig. 12.).

Looking at the credibility of the sources from the age perspective of the respondents, it turned out that the nationwide group, depending on the age group, ranged from 83 to 98 percent. of the respondents assessed the information as reliable (Fig. 13), while in the group covered by the state of emergency, the group of young people up to 29 (69%) assessed the information as reliable was much more skeptical (Fig. 14.). Similarly, people over 70 assessed the credibility of information at 73%. It may mean that when a given situation affects us directly, it increases the sense of danger. We also become more suspicious [1].

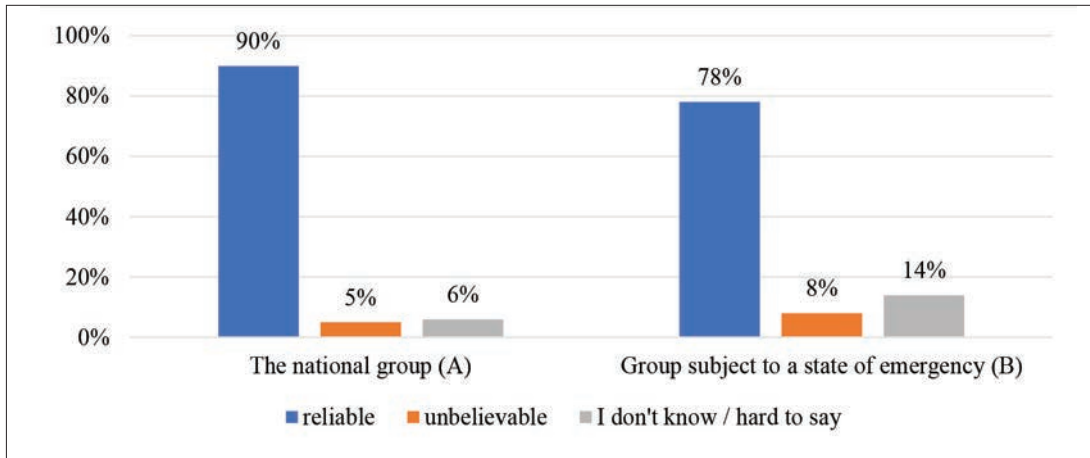


Fig. 12. Reliability of sources by place of residence. [1].

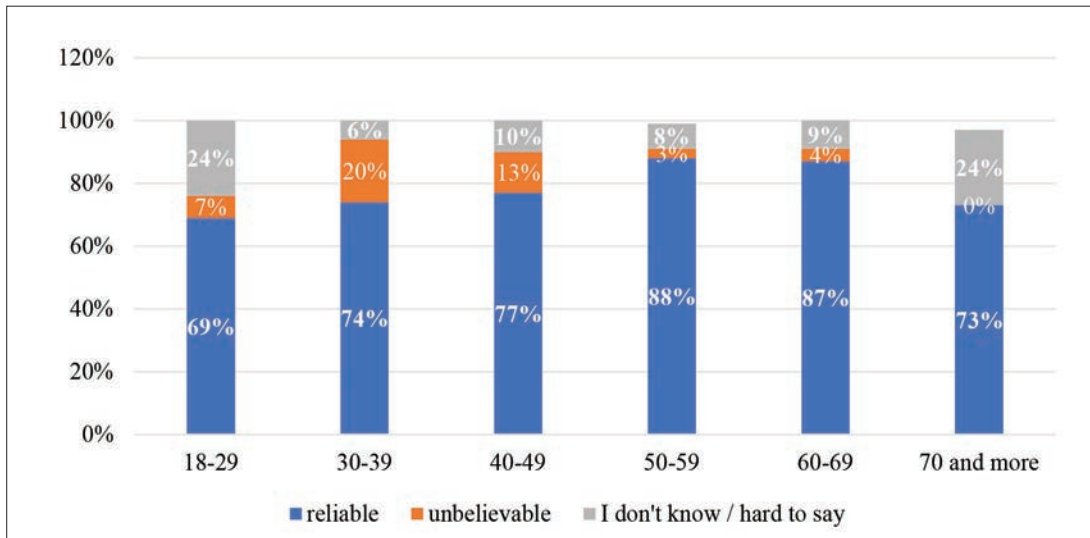


Fig. 13. Reliability of sources by age in the nationwide group. [1].

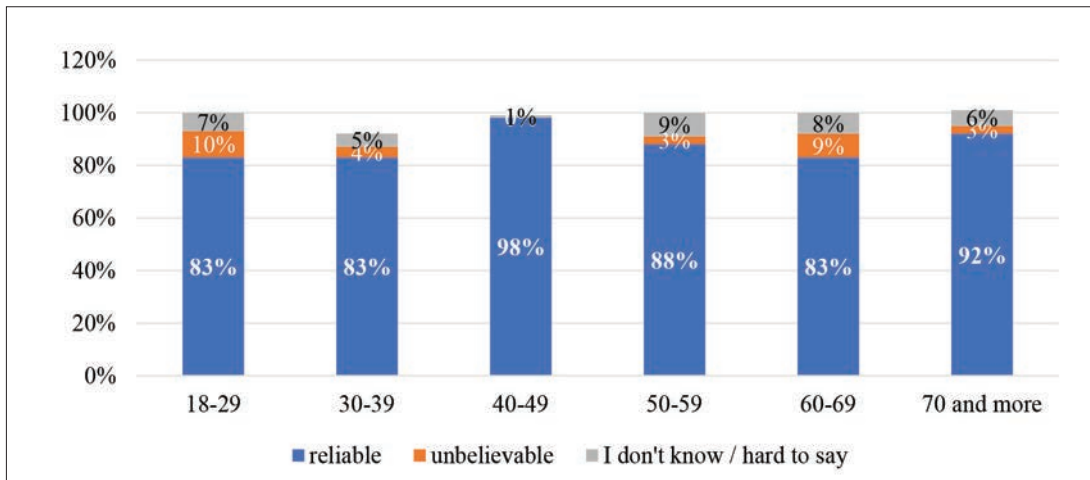


Fig. 14. Reliability of sources by age in the state of emergency. [1].



#### 4. Fighting Fake News

Asking the question of how the respondents react, knowing that they read false information on social media, it turned out that they most often ignore the post (72%). Only 12 percent. of all Poles and 14 percent. residents of the border region post a comment, pointing out that the information provided is fake news. Less than one in ten objects to the post in order to remove it, and one in twentieth blocks the person publishing it. Few declare that they write private messages to people promoting false information or post their corrections on their own profiles - 1 percent each. indications. The respondents, if they ignore false information published in social media, they do so mainly because they do not want to get involved (36%) or because they do not believe that their actions will be effective (26%). Less than one in ten respondents do not know the person who published the fake news, so they had no reason to react (8%). In turn, 7 percent. claims that fake news relates to unimportant topics or the topic was not interesting (6%) (Fig. 15). In the study, the participants' declarations coincide with the results of the experiment carried out by scientists from the University of Washington [8], [4]. The team watched 25 participants browse their Facebook or Twitter feeds while, without their knowledge, the Google Chrome extension randomly added fake content in some real posts as if it had been posted by someone they were following. Interestingly, the survey participants were indeed sceptical of fake news, but did not take any action in this direction. The question of whether false information, despite the fact that we have ignored it, leaves a trace in our memory and whether we are able to distinguish after some time whether something we remember was true or not, requires separate research.

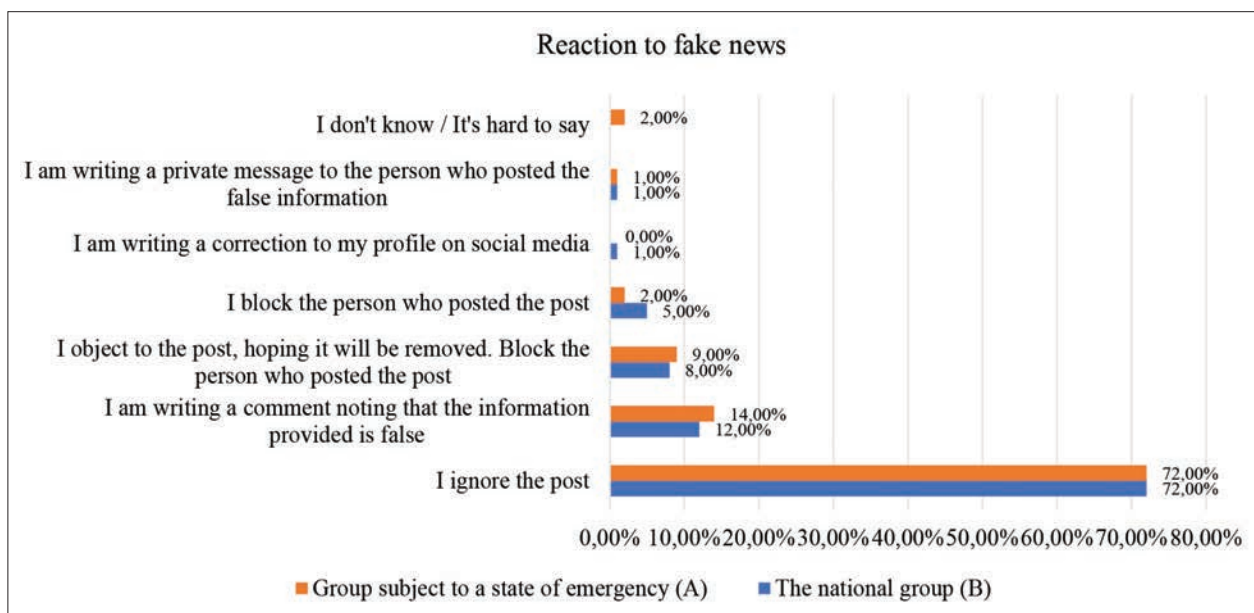


Fig. 15. Reaction to fake news. [1].

#### 5. Assumptions from the Survey Research

The research confirms the trend [9] regarding the continuous increase in the importance of the Internet. The Internet stands out as the first source of information for adults up to 59 years of age. On the other hand, for respondents over 60, television ranks first. The surveyed inhabitants of the country most often declare that they use internet portals to search for information about the situation in Poland and in the world (63%), while in the border region 67% indicate them. subjects. Comparing the results for both groups, it can be noticed that in the border region the inhabitants look for information more actively using more diverse sources than in the case of the entire country. The indications examining the sources of information from the Internet indicate that it is used more often by the border group. This may indicate that when we are personally involved in a given matter, then we actively search for information that interests us, without waiting for a media message. Most of the respondents assessed the sources of information they use as reliable, but in the region such an indication is less frequent (78%), and in the nationwide group, this opinion was expressed by 90%. subjects. This may mean that when a situation affects us directly, we also become more suspicious. People who use social media report that when they read a post they think is untrue, they simply ignore it. Here, the studied groups do not differ from each other. The reasons for ignoring false information are the lack of need / willingness to get involved and the belief that actions are futile and lack of time.

## 6. In-Depth Interviews

There were also approximately 20 minutes of telephone interviews with respondents from the group under the state of emergency. The aim of this study was to check how the inhabitants of the zone assess the reliability of information presented by the media on the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border and the general assessment of changes introduced by the state of emergency. The assessment of the reliability of the information message indicated that the opinion that the message was unreliable prevailed. Negative opinions were influenced by allegations of manipulation and the adoption of false narratives, as well as, according to the respondents, excessive blowing up of the situation at the border by the media. An important voice was the statement that the lack of journalists in the border area negatively affects the overall message. The respondents accuse both public and commercial media of dishonesty. The respondents noticed that the media were looking for sensation by force and additionally tried to propagate their narrative. Polsat is the station that the respondents have little to complain about. The general picture that residents have about media messages does not give them a sense of confidence, but more a sense of disinformation. It is also worth noting that some of the respondents assessed the media message about the border without any complaints. General assessments of the situation on the border with Belarus are varied. A large proportion of respondents declare that the introduction of the state of emergency did not generally affect their lives. The positive changes in the private sphere show an increase in the sense of security and the sense of being cared for. There were many opinions that the changes related to the introduction of the state of emergency changed the lives of the inhabitants of the border area for the worse. The negative condition resulted from: frequent inspections, restriction of economic freedom, isolation from family and friends, fatigue with sirens and helicopters, and in some cases limitation of livelihoods (blocking tourism, trade). In terms of private life, opinions have emerged about trauma and nerves related to both the threat and the “cut-off”, although these are not dominant indications [1].

## 7. Conclusions

Disinformation is one of the most serious threats to modern society. The development of modern technologies, including the Internet, allowed, among others to access multiple sources of information and share it in real time and without any restrictions. Along with the speed of spreading information, the possibility of its manipulation, modification and, consequently, creation of false messages has increased significantly. The results of the study on the impact on susceptibility to disinformation, on the sense of credibility of state institutions' messages and trust in the media among residents of the border area and other parts of Poland allow for a thesis that being in the vicinity of a place / region in a crisis situation - despite the apparent availability of information “at first hand” - affects the increased susceptibility to disinformation. This means that it is worth paying attention to an efficient communication policy aimed at people exposed to disinformation. In the case of the inhabitants of the border zone in which the crisis occurred, the information role, apart from the traditional and “new” media, was performed by the Territorial Defence Forces, which contacted local government officials, representatives of local communities, e.g. village leaders, as well as residents of the areas covered by the state of emergency. Another example of activities aimed at broadening the information awareness of the inhabitants of the border area was the publication of a special edition of “Polska Zbrojna” by the Military Publishing Institute cooperating with the Operational Center of the Ministry of National Defence. The special issue of the journal was addressed to those most vulnerable to disinformation caused by the crisis at the border. The Land Forces, Police and Border Guard, whose visible activities at the border had a positive impact on opinions and information about the situation, also had a positive impact. The results of the survey show that for each subsequent situation of a nature similar to the current crisis, intensive information activities should be carried out. The results of the research also supported the thesis that the Internet is of key importance as the primary source of information for a large group of society. However, it is disturbing that Poles - regardless of the distance from the inflammatory zone - do not feel the need to fight fake news. Even when misinformation is found, most do nothing to rectify it. All subsequent campaigns to combat disinformation should therefore focus not only on the correct selection of sources, but also on methods of action aimed at limiting the spread of fake news. [1].

## Acknowledgements.

The presented research was commissioned by the Academic Center for Strategic Communication (ACKS) at the War Study University in Warsaw, Poland and was aimed at examining susceptibility to disinformation depending on how far we are from the place where the inflammatory events take place. The author would like to thank the ACKS team for the opportunity to participate in the creation of research tools and work on the development of the collected research material.

## References

1. Badanie podatności na dezinformację. Raport z badania. Biuletyn Akademickiego Centrum Komunikacji Strategicznej, 2022, 3, p. 3-32.
2. Postrzeganie telewizyjnych programów informacyjnych i publicystycznych. CBOS, 2001, 106/2021, p. 1, <https://www.cbos.pl/PL/publikacje/raporty.php>, (dostęp: 7.01.2022 r.).
3. **Wardle C., Derakhshan H.**, Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making. Council of Europe report, DGI(2017)09.
4. Fake news – dezinformacja online. Próby przeciwdziałania tym zjawiskom z perspektywy instytucji międzynarodowych oraz wybranych państw UE, w tym Polski. Departament Strategii Biura KRRiT, 2020, p. 10-11.
5. Fake news – wyniki ankiety Payback Opinion Poll, PAYBACK Opinion Poll, 2017, p. 7.
6. Fake News on Facebook and Twitter: Investigating How People (Don't) Investigate, <https://programs.sigchi.org/chi/2020/program/content/32398>, (dostęp: 7.01.2022 r.).
7. [http://publicdialog.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Raport\\_Badanie-fakenews-23-05-2017.pdf](http://publicdialog.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Raport_Badanie-fakenews-23-05-2017.pdf), (dostęp: 15.07.2022).
8. <https://iab.org.pl/aktualnosci/raport-iab-polska-to-media-spolecznosciowe-saglownym-zrodlem-dezinformacji-fake-news-w-sieci/> (dostęp: 07.07.2022).
9. <https://www.payback.net/pl/baza-wiedzy/komunikaty-prasowe/raport/fake-newsnajczesciej-pojawiaja-sie-w-show-biznesie-i-polityce/>, 2018. (dostęp: 12.08.2022).
10. <https://www.washington.edu/news/2020/03/18/how-people-investigate-fake-news-on-twitter-and--facebook/>, (dostęp: 7.01.2022 r.).
11. Raport Dezinformacja w sieci. Analiza wiarygodności kanałów informacyjnych, IAB Polska, 2018, p. 15.
12. Rozporządzenie Prezydenta Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej z dnia 2 września 2021 r. w sprawie wprowadzenia stanu wyjątkowego na obszarze części województwa podlaskiego oraz części województwa lubelskiego (Dz.U. poz. 1612 z 2021).