EUROPEAN

POLICYBRIEF

UTILISING OPEN SOURCES FOR CONFLICT PREVENTION, MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION: POTENTIAL, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

INFORMING CONFLICT PREVENTION, RESPONSE AND RESOLUTION: THE ROLE OF MEDIA AND VIOLENT CONFLICT (INFOCORE)

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This policy brief discusses both the value that can be gained from the monitoring and assessment of open sources as well as the challenges of deriving targeted and reliable Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) for a better understanding of and response to violent conflict. Drawing on insights from different work packages of the INFOCORE project, special emphasis is placed on an evaluation of the utility of media and NGO contents regarding the conflicts in Syria, Burundi and Macedonia. This brief presents an effort to identify strategies for a better understanding and exploitation of conflict-related overt content across different types of media which can improve the quality of intelligence assessments and policy responses.

12 December 2016

INTRODUCTION

The findings and recommendations discussed here are intended for organisations seeking to fully exploit the potential of openly accessible information to improve their understanding of a given conflict, its dynamics, trajectory and how it might be positively influenced within a context of conflict prevention, management and resolution. Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) is often associated with governments and International Organisations, but has become increasingly attractive for news media, NGOs and individual bloggers engaged in the production of knowledge about conflict and foreign policy. It is distinctly different from other forms of intelligence, many of which are gathered by governments, such as those based on human sources (spies, interrogation, local experts – HUMINT) and signals and imagery intelligence (SIGINT, IMINT). Intelligence is knowledge produced in the service of a particular client's needs and wants through gathering, processing and analysing information, rather than the raw information contained in individual sources itself. OSINT can here be defined as the knowledge that emerges when analysts draw on a range of potentially quite diverse and voluminous publicly available sources to make analytical judgements about conflict-relevant events, dynamics and actors. OSINT sources include news media coverage, NGO reports, academic articles, public data, satellite photography, online search engines, and social media data feeds, to name just a few. OSINT can be based on a small number of high quality sources such as reports by the International Crisis Group and the Economist Intelligence Unit or it could be more quantitative and computer-assisted, drawing on a diverse set of extensive and fast-paced information streams to analyse current social and cultural dynamics and foresee future trends ('Big Data').[1] While the INFOCORE project has collected considerable amounts of digital data, this policy brief will concentrate on the smaller-scale, more qualitative production of OSINT by individual analysts accessing and evaluating a wide range of sources to arrive at more accurate, reliable, timely, relevant and actionable intelligence.

EVIDENCE AND ANALYSIS

The potential of OSINT is widely appreciated among practitioners, some of whom we interviewed for this policy brief (see Research Parameters section). As one EU official underlined, of all OSINT collected for foreign policy-making, roughly 80% is of strategic relevance and 20% of tactical utility, thus feeding significantly into processes of early warning and situational awareness, and

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[1] There is a growing literature on user-generated content as part of third generation early warning systems, helping populations to evade danger or highlighting machine learning and big data for conflict and mass atrocity prevention purposes, e.g. T. Harding & M. Whitlock (2013), "Leveraging Web-Based Environments for Mass Atrocity Prevention", *Simulation & Gaming* 44: 94-117; C. Perry (2013), "Machine Learning and Conflict Prediction: A Use Case", *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 2(3); see also the work of Patrick Meier on Ushaidi.

formulations of policy responses.[2] But also news media organisations, and in particular the audio-visual media, have set up fact-checking units specialising in OSINT techniques to enhance their news reports, for instance, to verify the authenticity of an uploaded video or a twitter feed of an air strike or a protest by using google maps, deleted websites on wayback machines, and online directories. Successful cases of open source investigation by NGOs include a report in response to the chemical weapons activities in Syria in August 2013 when Human Rights Watch (HRW) combined its own sources with social media and satellite imagery to show that the weapons were fired by forces backing the Assad government.[3] Similarly, NGOs within Syria are using social media to verify information, particularly in inaccessible regions. Probably the most frequently cited example of OSINT for situational awareness of violent conflict has been the case of the Bellingcat blog which demonstrated that MH17 was shot down by a Russian BUK missile launcher stationed in rebel-held territory which entered and later left Ukrainian territory towards Russia. The findings were confirmed by an independent joint investigation team.[4]

The benefits of OSINT can be summarised as follows (for the risks see further below):

- It provides speedy access to relevant information, some of which in real-time when it comes to video streaming or social media posts relating to events on the grounds.
- It is easily accessible and shareable as user-friendly interfaces exist with next to no restrictions on users given that there is no need for confidentiality or classification.
- It is cheaper than the maintenance of covert sources although some contents require subscription costs to databases and software packages for processing and displaying.
- It is safer than HUMINT for organisations, providing information from areas with high risks of killing, kidnapping or torture of directed human sources.
- It can provide great depth on highly technical and specialised matters as well as breadth in terms of geographic coverage.
- It is usually gathered in ways that do not pose ethical dilemmas, increasing the transparency, legitimacy, and communicability of knowledge claims based on such sources.
- It offers access to diverse sources, both in terms of their nature and who is producing information, allowing for triangulation of the veracity and accuracy of evidential and analytical claims.

While everyone can engage in open source research by virtue of having an internet-enabled computer or smartphone, some organisations have invested in more sophisticated tools and training to make the best use of publicly available sources, often combining those with their own confidential sources and products. A good example is the EU's Tariqa system which uses primary sources, full-text databases of high quality news media, think tanks and academic sources such as Lexis Nexis, Factiva and Oxford Analytica, online search engines, hundreds of pre-selected RSS feeds, Google Earth and other satellite imagery, and 400 hours of audio-visual material (live TV and radio) broadcast from 43 satellite positions. Its main functions are 'crafted to meet the needs of both State and non-State actors engaged in risk assessment, crisis response, peace-building, and scenario

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[2] Interview, Oxford, 21 September 2016.

[3] Human Rights Watch (2013), Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria, September.

[4] Bellingcat, Revelations and Confirmations from the MH17 JIT Press Conference, 30 September 2016.

planning'.[5] It is not fully clear to what extent NGO materials feed into these data sources even though they form part of the expert media – together with think tanks as well as intelligence analysis and advisory firms.[6] As one Belgian official recalled, the proposition of collaborating more closely with NGOs by setting up a shared database (together with standardised templates for event monitoring and reporting), in order to improve early warning and situational awareness between European governments, EU institutions and the NGO community was rejected by EU member states due to an unwillingness to provide funds for this.[7] News media organisations have also, after appropriate fact checking through OSINT techniques, employed user generated content from mobile phones and other claims disseminated via social media for crucial insights into the social and political reality in conflict zones. For instance, one of the main purposes of the Content Centre set-up by the German public broadcaster ARD is to find and verify publicly available user-generated content, employing 8 full-time staff on a shift system in addition to tapping into a network of other journalists working for other public broadcasters..[8]

The academic literature as well as our own research underlines the potential of OSINT for strategic warning intelligence about conflict by analysing the characteristic patterns of news media coverage.[9] Our quantitative research confirms that the analysis of domestic media from within the affected country and region can help to pick up conflict warning signals earlier than international media. To use such tools adequately one has to have a good measurement of the "normal conflict noise" in particular countries to avoid constant false alarms and distinguish novel escalation dynamics from regular patterns on the ground and behind-the-scenes. These materials can also be used to assess strategic intentions, decision-making and sentiment among conflict actors, and help detect potential for escalation as well as opportunities for de-escalation. By comparing news reports emerging from the mainstream (both polarised and independent) as well as from the periphery of the media system, various actors such as government officials, members of the opposition, NGO staff and citizen witnesses can enhance their own understanding of conflict situations and improve the accuracy and specificity of their conflict discourses.

Key problems & limitations of using OSINT

One characteristic phenomenon in the information cycle on violent conflict is the simultaneous occurrence of information gaps and information overload. The former arises from secrecy and lack of accessibility and resources, particularly for countries and regions of less political and economic importance. The latter comes from the sheer volume and diversity of sources, making it hard to pick

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[5] https://joinup.ec.europa.eu/software/tariqa/description, accessed 3 November 2016

[6] It is beyond the scope of this brief to examine contents produced by the latter. NGOs have increasingly been quoted in professional news media reports to support evidential claims, interpretative frames, and agendas for action vis-à-vis violent conflict (C. Meyer, E. Sangar and E. Michaels, INFOCORE deliverable D4.2, "Research Article: NGO and the Media", 31 August 2016).

[7] Interview, Brussels, 4 October 2016.

[8] Presentation by its Head, Michael Wegener, at a conference organised by the German Forum for Media and Development on 3 November 2016 in Berlin followed by personal communication with the authors.

[9] T. Chadefaux (2014), "Early Warning Signals for War in the News", *Journal of Peace Research* 51(1): 5-18.

up weak signals amidst the information 'noise' and to successfully 'connect the dots' between apparently unrelated events. This is also aggravated by propaganda, misinformation and disinformation by conflict parties as we have seen most explicitly in the case of Russia, which has been employing human 'trolls' and automatic bots to manipulate online discourses and social media algorithms. It proves challenging to verify information and conduct a thorough source and content evaluation before using certain data. Outputs are often selected according to timeliness and based on the notion that the source is generally credible, without being able to investigate further. Accuracy as a central criterion for an evaluation of performance of different sources of information is hard to measure as it requires looking at 'betting' averages given pervasive uncertainty and can only be traced in retrospect. A helpful indicator is the degree of disagreement that is being triggered by the coverage. Conflict interpretations through framing and use of sources become fairly consistent across the media and within one country when a conflict escalates while media in opposing camps tend to polarise these narratives, as INFOCORE researchers found in the case of Israel/Palestine. Those who rely on open sources for the development of intelligence assessments and policy recommendations are only too aware of the fact that providers of conflict-related news content have inherent biases that are reflected in the construction of narratives.[10]

The potential of exploiting OSINT therefore hinges not just on access and systems, but also on understanding each of the sources, their reliability, accuracy and slant. While it is understandable to focus, as Tariqa does, on high-quality sources, polarised domestic news media can also be useful if one knows how to use them and compensate for the propagandistic intent. For instance, in the case of South Sudan, a practitioner told us even though government-controlled news media are highly unreliable, an experienced observer can use a biased news story about violence to look in the opposite direction for the truth.[11] Knowing more about the source, whether NGO or media organisation, is crucial to making the best use of it. For media organisations, it is useful to understand who controls the medium, what its main editorial lines are, how well-resourced its foreign affairs coverage is as well as to assess the track-record of the individual journalist. There are worlds between the recently hired graduate or free-lancer with little knowledge of a country and its culture and a long-term foreign correspondent with in-depth knowledge, extensive networks and the ability to learn independently on the ground.[12] For NGOs, our research has demonstrated the importance of understanding differences between their funding structure, organisational culture, the importance they give to research, and country expertise. Analysing sources and inherent biases in such a way is immensely helpful for determining whether and how they can be used. Unfortunately, such information is not easy to come by and often not included in OSINT systems beyond a simple measurement of quality on a "high to low" scale. Evaluations of media biases can also be quite subjective, difficult to gather and politically contentious if this becomes public.

In addition, we see the usual problems with adequate resourcing and bureaucratic inertia in processing information. In their attempts at gathering reliable data and providing accurate

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[10] Interviews, Brussels, 17 August 2016 and 7 October 2016.

[11] Personal communication with C Meyer, 2 November 2016

[12] C.O. Meyer and F. Otto (2011), "Missing the Story? Changes in Foreign New Reporting and Their Implications for Conflict Prevention", *Media, War & Conflict* 5(4): 205-21.

assessments, intelligence analysts and political officers covering conflict dynamics for the EU and European governments are confronted with competing demands, insufficient capacities, inflexible procedures, and a resistance to sharing tools and information across or sometimes even within institutions. For some EU officials working on specific conflicts, frustration with the usability of tools such as NewsDesk is high and getting access to more comprehensive information proves problematic. National officers have highlighted the lack of coordination and manpower in times of crisis, for instance during the March 2016 Brussels bombings. Many lament the inadequacy of open source research methodologies, lack of comprehensive software, and inefficiency of targeted media monitoring services. Technical and methodological training, foreign language skills and feedback loops are further aspects that are perceived as missing or under-developed. This leads in many cases to improvised procedures in which officials create their own networks and databases rather than relying on formal arrangements.[13]

In an attempt to shed more light on the utility of contents provided by the professional news media, social media and NGOs with specific conflict or policy knowledge, some of the above issues can only be sketched here, rather than analysed in depth. The following presents selected tentative findings from ongoing INFOCORE research on three highly dissimilar conflicts: political unrest and an escalation of violence in Burundi from April 2015 onwards, inter-ethnic latent conflict in Macedonia with a brief period of escalation in May 2015, and the Syrian civil war growing out of political unrest in March 2011 and steadily intensifying in terms of violence, involvement of conflict parties and humanitarian implications.

Monitoring and responding to the conflict in Burundi: the role of media and NGO contents

Tensions in Burundi had mounted ahead of the July 2015 presidential elections and prior to President Pierre Nkurunziza's formal announcement on 25 April 2015 that he would run for a third time which prompted the latest outbreak of violence and ongoing political crisis. Days after parliament had agreed to uphold the constitutional two-term limit in March 2014, media reports emerged that Nkurunziza would seek re-election and that it would be 'up to the constitutional court to settle the matter'.[14] There was no shortage of early warning in Francophone and Anglophone news and NGO communications over the following months that this move could easily trigger renewed violence along ethnic lines.[15] Early attempts at restricting press freedom and intimidating human rights activists were also well documented.[16]

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[13] This paragraph is based on research interviews conducted with national and EU officials in Brussels between August and October 2016.

[14] *Rejecting Term Limits, Burundi President Seeks Re-election*, 26 March 2014, Africa Review, Kenya.

[15] See for instance: *Francophonie: la candidature du Burundais Buyoya fait polémique*, 13 May 2014, RTBR; The African leaders who choose power before the people, 20 January 2015, BBC News; Burundi: le président Nkurunziza sourd à l'appel contre un troisième mandat, 15 February 2015, Jeune Afrique; *Burundi: l'UE met en garde sur un 3e mandat du président Nkurunziza*, 6 March 2015, RFI; *Elections in Burundi: Moment of Truth*, 17 April 2015, International Crisis Group. Also, the NGO APRODH had contacted European ambassadors and EU institutions and warned about the impending crisis (interview, Bujumbura, 25 March 2015).

[16] See among others: Lorsque Pierre Claver Mbonimpa est emprisonné, tous les Burundais sont en danger, 3 June 2014, Jeune Afrique; Burundi: Prominent Radio Journalists Arrested, 22 January 2015, Human Rights Watch; Burundi Risks Democratic Gains by Undermining Media Freedom, 2 February 2015, Human Rights Watch.

INFOCORE conducted research interviews with local journalists and NGO staff in Bujumbura between January and March 2015, among others with high-profile human rights activist Pierre Clavier Mbonimpa who had been released from prison months earlier and was shot and seriously wounded in August 2015. He survived the assassination attempt and fled abroad but a family member was killed shortly afterwards. While Mbonimpa and other interviewees gave ample evidence of growing tensions between the government and media prior to the escalation of violence, they also highlighted how the independent news and expert media had sought to seize opportunities for de-escalation and conflict resolution.[17]

These efforts could, however, not be pursued further. The shutdown of the country's most popular radio stations in late April 2015 changed Burundi's media landscape fundamentally, with only pro-government stations such as RTNB broadcasting without interference since.[18] Local journalists working for either Burundian or international independent news media have been harassed, detained or driven into exile. This was also the case with the local correspondent of Radio France Internationale (RFI), another INFOCORE interviewee, who moved abroad after having been detained and badly injured. RFI's coverage of Burundi, which had been known for its timeliness prior to April 2015 and had prompted more local follow-up coverage, slowed down considerably and became very patchy.

While social media websites and instant messaging services were initially blocked as protests intensified, this was a temporary measure and Burundians, 90% of whom were previously relying on the radio as main source of information, have turned to social media wherever possible, and have specifically been using Twitter and WhatsApp to obtain and verify information.[19] Social media has also increasingly been used by the government in a well-orchestrated communication campaign, carefully constructing a discourse of peace and stability. A prominent example is the Twitter account of Willy Nyamitwe, senior advisor to Nkurunziza and in charge of media, communication and information. This shift in the media environment has led to new virtual interactions between members of the government and opposition, exiled journalists and activists.[20] It is also noteworthy that exiled journalists have started streaming radio programmes online from Kigali. Yet internet penetration in Burundi is very low at 4.1% and it proves challenging to gather, verify and disseminate online information, especially outside the capital.[21]

What insights as to the utility of news contents for intelligence assessments and policy responses can be gained from the case of Burundi? An examination of independent media and NGO contents prior to April 2015 reveals that these provided accurate, timely and relevant indicators for early warning which could have been exploited for preventive measures. For instance, attempts at mediation between the government and opposition might have resolved the underlying political

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[17] Interviews with Burundian journalists and NGO staff, Bujumbura, 23-27 March 2015.

[18] *Government Coup Against News Media*, 30 April 2015, Reporters without Borders.

[19] T. Vircoulon, *A l'intérieur de la crise burundaise (II) – quand WhatsApp remplace la radio*, 13 May 2016, International Crisis Group.

[20] Dimitrakopoulou, D. & Boukala, S. (under review) Exploring democracy and violence in Burundi: A multi-methodical analysis of hegemonic discourses on Twitter, *Media, War & Conflict*, 2017 special issue.

[21] Internet World Stats, data from June 2016: http://www.internetworldstats.com/africa.htm [accessed 29/10/2016].

crisis and prevented bloodshed. Also, warnings about an imminent media crackdown were circulated through these channels as early as 2013.[22] A close monitoring of news reports by RTNB as well as social media accounts of government officials before and after the escalation of violence is a useful tool for sentiment analysis and understanding of interpretative frames and evidential beliefs of the ruling elite, also providing insights into practices of disinformation and propaganda. The fact that the government arrested a group of young people and charged them with high treason after they had exchanged information in a WhatsApp group shows how closely social media is watched by Burundian government officials and how they are seeking to apply restrictive measures.[23] Tweets containing #burundi and #burundicrisis added value to situational awareness of what was happening on the ground and mirrored to some extent social reality in Bujumbura. Another relevant social media initiative is 'SOS Media Burundi', established by local and exiled journalists as a means of sharing and verifying casualty data via Twitter and Facebook. While an evaluation of selected social media reports can help fill certain information gaps, others, such as the number and situation of political prisoners, are much harder to address. Many gaps remain outside of Bujumbura which makes it difficult to investigate rumours and verify information. We find that there is considerable potential to improve situational awareness in this case through the targeted monitoring and assessment of different types of (mainly Francophone) media contents. Figure 1 below shows the extent to which domestic and foreign news media coverage preceded the escalation of violence and could thus be used for conflict warning purposes.

Figure 1: Domestic vs foreign media in Burundi: time-lag & attention span[24]
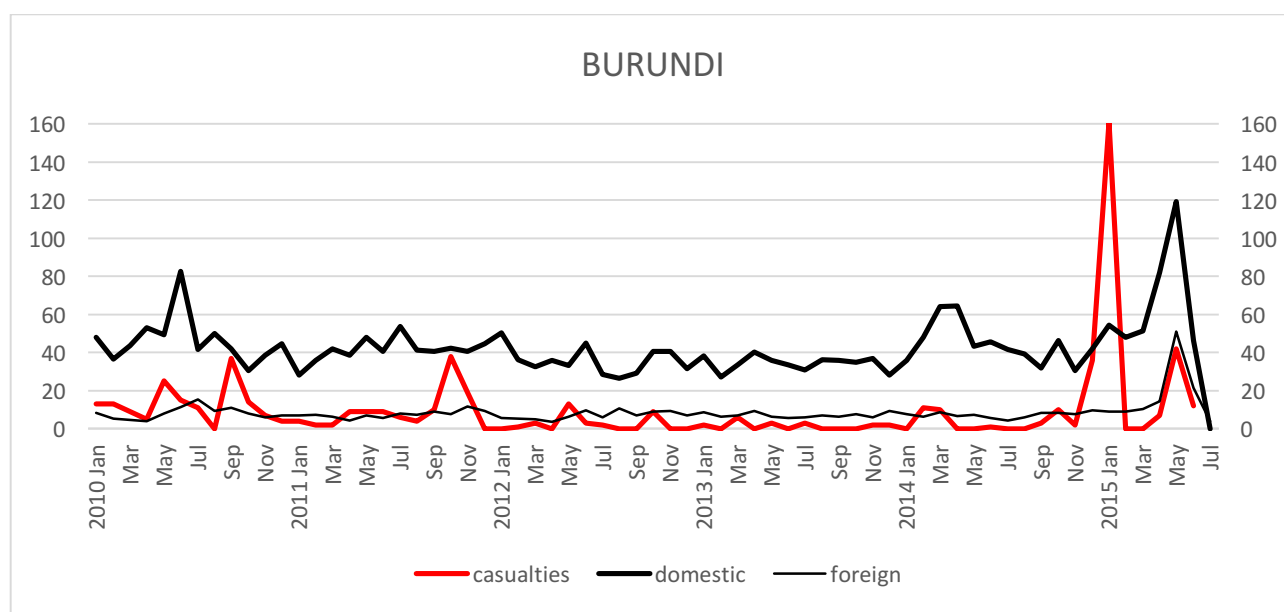
Monitoring and responding to the conflict in Macedonia: the role of media and NGO contents

In May 2015, an incident in the ethnically-mixed town of Kumanovo sparked fears that underlying tensions between ethnic Albanians and Macedonians, which threaten the unstable peace in Macedonia and lead to occasional appearances of political unrest and violence, would be fuelled and exploited for political gains. A weekend of heavy fighting between an anti-terrorist police unit and alleged armed Kosovar Albanians turned the town into a warzone, leaving 18 dead and 38 wounded. Nothing unusual had been spotted or reported locally prior to this and the sudden outburst of violence raised suspicions that the incident had been staged by the ruling elite.[25]

An assessment of both polarised and independent media and NGO reports during and after the clashes helped improve situational awareness. While Macedonian and Albanian pro-governmental news organisations reported from very different angles, they advanced the claims that the government had been exposed to a terrorist attack and had responded promptly by neutralising the threat. Substance was given to this narrative by arresting 30 men under terrorism charges. Apart from saying that the attackers were well-trained with huge experience in guerrilla warfare, extremely dangerous and had entered Macedonia to attack state institutions, no further details were provided. Our INFOCORE team in Skopje analysed the agenda-setting and framing of events by the five main pro-governmental TV stations and found that all had constructed the same discourse by praising the efficiency and courage of the police in protecting the civilian population in Kumanovo (suggesting that this may have prevented the killing of 8000 people) and by blaming the opposition. Government officials also used the media to argue that the EU and NATO had ignored warnings about the existence of the militants and that the lack of integration within these two organisation as well as the delay in granting Macedonia membership had contributed to the escalation of violence. There was significant evidence that the editing of various news contents had been centrally organised – outside the actual newsrooms. The other side of the story was not covered and the Macedonian population was left in the dark about what had triggered the incident. Rather, partial information and disinformation were disseminated in an attempt to escalate tensions along ethnic lines and deflect attention from the deep political crisis that had engulfed Macedonia for months.

These gaps in the polarised media coverage and the government's version of events were investigated on social media and by independent news organisations. The TV stations Nova Online, Telma and Alsat-M as well as Al Jazeera Balkans and the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) together with its PRISMA branch provided in-depth and reliable information with the advantage of reporting either bilingually in Albanian as well as Macedonian or providing additional coverage in English. Their analytical approach and emphasis on warning and de-escalation led to the assessment that these were critical and authoritative sources constructing the following narrative: while the incident in Kumanovo should be taken very seriously insofar as it could reignite latent tensions between Albanians and Macedonians, the respective local ethnic communities had not been involved in the clashes, were distancing themselves from any form of violence and emphasising good neighbourliness instead. Further, by highlighting that the clashes had been between armed individuals from Kosovo and Macedonian police forces, the incident was presented as a proxy conflict between political actors on both sides of the ethnic divide – some of whom had

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[25] The findings discussed in this section are based on an interview with the INFOCORE conflict leads on Macedonia, Snezana Trpevska and Igor Micevski on 17 October 2016, reports by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and the Balkan Transitional Justice programme, as well as traditional news media coverage and social media reports.

indeed encouraged armed groups to attack government institutions and especially the police force. This perspective was also backed by videos on social media during the incident as well as various blog pieces pointing to systemic distortions by the pro-governmental media. By investigating rumours and eye witness accounts and exploring developments from various angles, these reports emerging in the periphery of the Macedonian media landscape provided valuable input for intelligence assessments and policy response. While this critical news coverage could also, despite its de-escalatory efforts, have prompted further escalation, this was mainly prevented by the fact that the international news media and NGOs picked up on local news reports. They promoted the above narrative which contributed to the EU's response – notably by the European Commission and Members of the European Parliament – in facilitating an agreement between the four main political parties in Macedonia in July 2015.[26] Figure 2, composed in the same way as Figure 1, shows the low levels of attention by foreign news media in contrast to domestic news.

Figure 2: Domestic vs foreign media in Macedonia: time-lag & attention span[27]
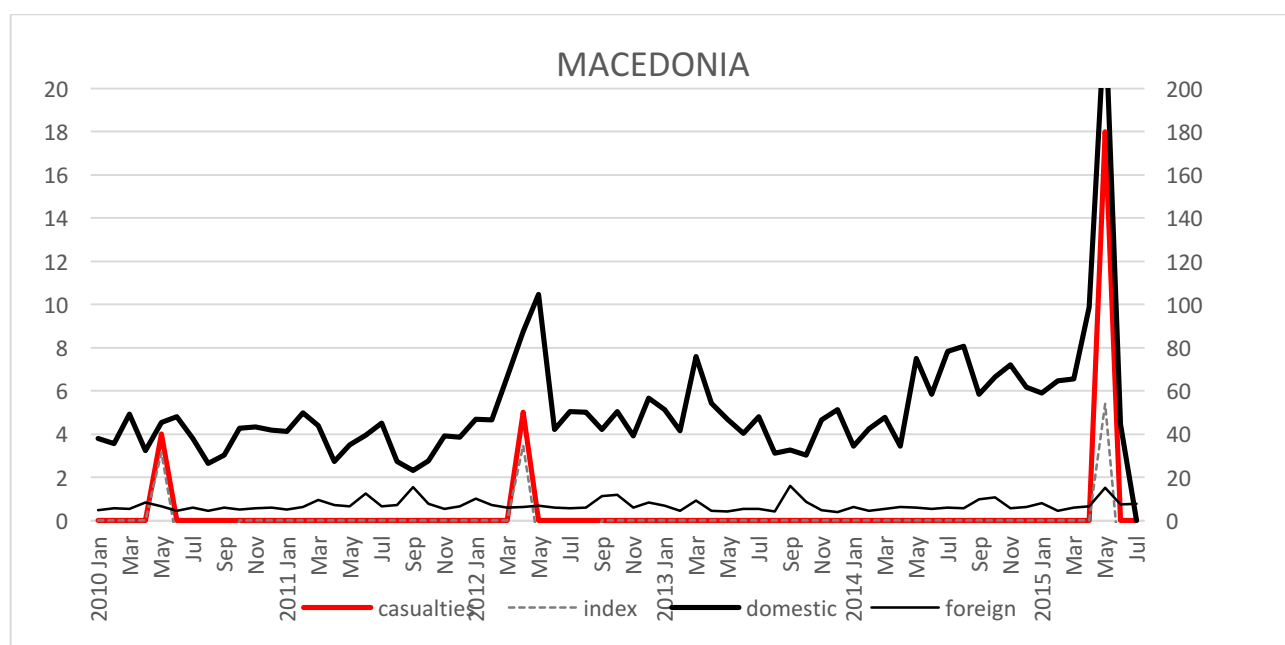
Monitoring and Responding to the Conflict in Syria: The Role of Media and NGO Contents

The period from March to September 2013, during which reports on alleged chemical weapons activities against the Syrian population emerged amidst a sharp escalation of violence, is particularly revealing when exploring the utility of media and NGO contents for intelligence assessments and policy responses. European governments and the EU pondered policy options such as whether the EU arms embargo on Syria should be lifted so that parts of the opposition could be armed and whether military intervention should be contemplated regardless of UN Security Council agreement. Both scenarios were controversial, especially in light of information gaps which made it hard to

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[26] European Commission (2015), Agreement in Skopje to Overcome Political Crisis, 15 July; The Economist Intelligence Unit (2015), Macedonia: Agreement with EU on Political Crisis, 23 July.

[27] Analysis and data provided to the authors by Christian Baden and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt in 2016.

establish whether the Assad regime had utilised chemical weapons. UN investigators were only allowed into Syria on 18 August and their mandate authorised them to establish whether chemical agents had been used, not by whom. While most media organisations and NGOs were unable to maintain a presence in Syria, they drew on networks of local informants and OSINT research methodologies to collect evidence and report on developments on the ground – often also to support interpretative frames, evidential beliefs and calls for actions. European intelligence analysts and policy-makers relied heavily on these outputs when assessing developments and discussing crisis responses.[28]

International NGOs such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, HRW, Médecins sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam and the International Crisis Group had more enhanced information gathering capacities than the professional news media and were often perceived as providing timely, accurate and relevant knowledge. Their reports were carefully researched, using a broad range of publicly available sources as well as confidential research interviews.[29] The semi-local Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) played a prominent role by providing factual information on casualties with detailed breakdowns, identification of victims, numbers of missing and detained persons, troop movements, and developments in besieged or contested areas. Following the Ghouta chemical attacks on 21 August 2013, SOHR was the first NGO to be quoted across European mainstream newspapers for casualty figures and details on the location. Local branches of international NGOs such as the Syrian Red Crescent and Lebanese Red Cross uncovered further facts on developments on the ground and assessed regional implications. Especially noteworthy is the use of OSINT methodologies by HRW which led to the verification of video footage on rebel actions and publication of high-impact reports during this time. In one, HRW weapons experts verified reports by blogger Eliot Higgins, documented 59 unlawful air attacks by regime forces and gave evidence of the use of cluster weapons.[30] For another one, HRW reviewed video and photo footage of the scene of the Ghouta attacks – among others of rocket components and further remnants – and used GPS data and satellite imagery to map the impact zone of the rockets in addition to using other sources such as Skype interviews with witnesses and survivors and expert reviews of the victims' clinical signs and symptoms. The investigation led to the suggestion that Sarin had likely been used and that the weapon systems employed in the attacks were in the possession of Syrian government armed forces.[31] MSF became a key factual authority in the immediate aftermath of the attacks by stating that doctors in three MSF-supported hospitals had treated about 3600 patients, most of whom had arrived in the space of less than three hours, with neurotoxic symptoms and that 355 had died. These NGOs clearly had their own agenda and advanced various

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[28] C. Meyer, E. Sangar and E. Michaels, INFOCORE deliverable D4.2, Research Article: NGO and the Media, August 2016; C. Hobbs, M. Moran and D. Salisbury, Introduction, in: Open-Source Intelligence in the Twenty-First Century, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 2-3.

[29] The below overview is based on Meyer, Sangar and Michaels (2016).

[30] Human Rights Watch (2013), Death from the Skies, April, https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/04/10/death-skies/deliberate-and-indiscriminate-air-strikes-civilians.

[31] Human Rights Watch (2013), Attacks on Ghouta: Analysis of Alleged Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria, September, https://www.hrw.org/report/2013/09/10/attacks-ghouta/analysis-alleged-use-chemical-weapons-syria.

calls for action but provided nonetheless significant depth and diversity of knowledge in a timely and accessible manner.

Figure 3: Domestic early warning and foreign media spikes[32]

SYRIA

casualties ------- index domestic foreign
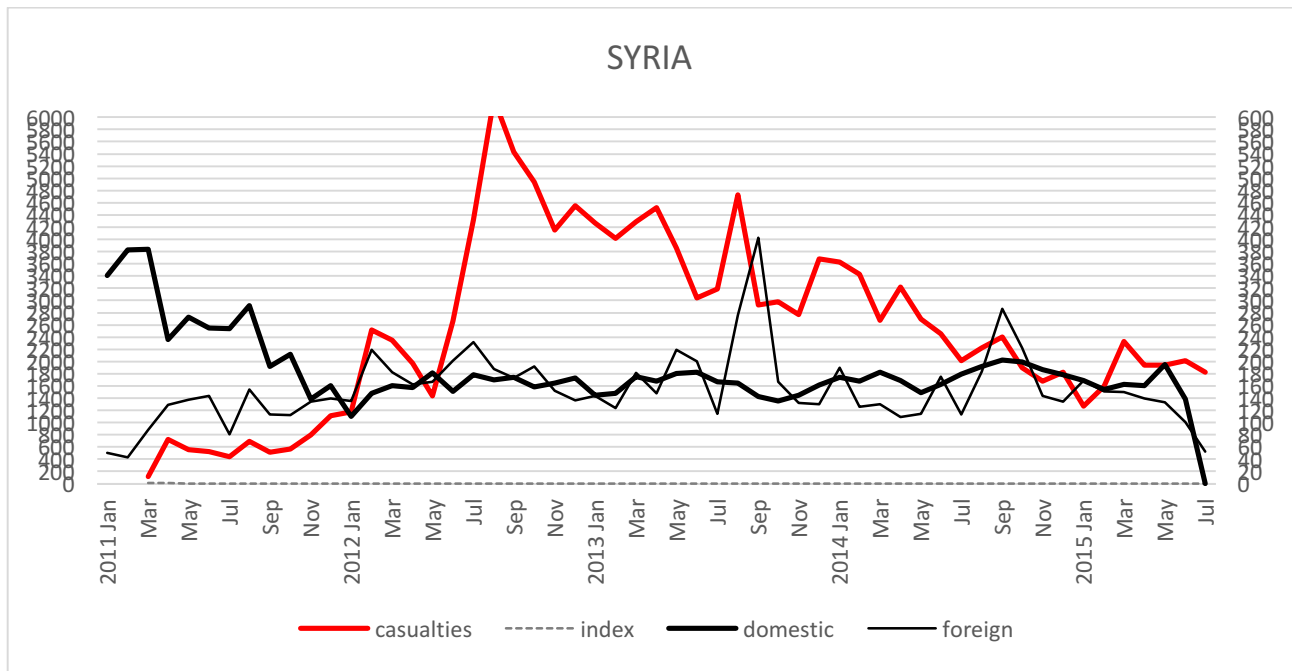
POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

How to improve the use of OSINT – some recommendations

OSINT offers substantial opportunities for improving governmental as well as public understanding of conflict dynamics, particularly in situations where direct access for external observers is becoming problematic. At the same time, reliable, accurate and timely OSINT on conflict dynamics often suffers from the extensive restrictions placed on many providers of public information, particularly but not only news media, where critical reports are often countered by propaganda and misinformation. Yet, our findings suggest that the content provided by domestic actors is particularly valuable as it picks up warning signs earlier than foreign coverage and thus helps to monitor and assess rising or falling tensions across different types of media in a timelier fashion. **We therefore recommend organisations to invest in systems that can gather, process and analyse**

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[32] Analysis and data provided by Christian Baden and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt in 2016.

domestic media and NGOs as timely sources of conflict warning and indeed to recognise their role as potential actors contributing to conflict escalation or de-escalation.

The second recommendation emphasises the need to adjust collection, interpretation and analysis to the conditions of each country/conflict case. Amidst the mass of information, researchers can fall into the trap of thinking that they have sufficient information whereas in reality there may be distinct information gaps due to inaccessibility of certain areas or security risks, political restrictions on media, or efforts by conflict parties to spread disinformation. **Country expertise remains crucial for analysing structural gaps in media or NGO coverage relating to parts of the country, particularly communities or issues, requiring at times a shift towards harvesting information directly from citizens through social media and web-uploads. Such knowledge is also central for cross-checking, triangulation and verification.** OSINT can be just the first rather than the last step in information-gathering and assessment processes, triggering for instance fact-finding missions on the ground.

While OSINT is particularly useful for event-related information, verification of what has happened and thus testing of evidential claims, it runs into difficulties for analytical let alone prescriptive challenges. While the production of OSINT requires some technical skills, particularly around big data and the use of social media, the main analytical challenge relates to country expertise, knowledge of conflict dynamics and sensitivity to the specific psychological traps of expert judgement (confirmation bias, mirroring imaging, denial, etc.). **We warn against over-investment in data gathering and processing to the detriment of cultivating country knowledge and training in making analytical judgment given cognitive and motivational biases.**

Sources used in OSINT require more background or meta-information to make them useful for analysts and contingent on each country/conflict case. Questions that should be answered are: who is funding a specific source, how large is its budget, who controls the source, what are its audiences, circulation and geographic reach and, to the extent possible, does it have a particular slant on certain issues or in relation to the conflict parties? There is no one-size-fits-all approach and analysts need sufficient fine-grained knowledge about which sources can be, more or less, trusted on which issues and in which countries. In the case studies, we have highlighted that different types of sources can rise and fall in importance given local conditions. In some settings, social media and bloggers play an important and in others a negligible role. One also needs to distinguish between OSINT for early warning and conflict management purposes.

Finally, we believe it is important to invest in public communication about the potential and limitations of OSINT, particularly in instances when it is based on social media and user-generated content. It is important that decision-makers and the public at large in different countries understand the value and challenges of producing and using OSINT, as well as the risk of being misled about events, actors and dynamics through manipulation by media organisations with a propagandistic purpose, political activists and hired online commentators as well as web-based applications designed to influence social media. At the same time, it needs to be highlighted that conflict knowledge is not simply a question of perspective and political beliefs, but can be significantly improved by critically monitoring, assessing and cross-checking a combination of diverse sources. A comprehensive and common understanding of conflict across European publics is crucial for a discussion, and ideally convergence, of views on whether and how to act.

This policy brief has drawn on underlying research by the authors and Eric Sangar within the context of INFOCORE's WP4 on the role of NGOs as communicators as well as sources of evidential claims about conflict.[33] It relied on more than 120 interviews with NGO practitioners in six conflict cases and four Western capitals conducted by INFOCORE researchers, plus 6 interviews with experts on open-source intelligence in the UK and Belgium. In addition, the policy brief has drawn on the insights of other work packages within the INFOCORE project comprising more than 200 research interviews with political actors and officials (WP2) as well as journalists (WP1) and a content analysis of journalist transformations to media coverage (WP7), social media (WP5) and strategic communicators (WP6). Two of the three conflict case studies presented here benefited from advice of the INFOCORE conflict leads, namely Marie-Soleil Frère and Anke Fiedler for Burundi and Snezana Trpevska and Igor Micevski for Macedonia. We are grateful to Christian Baden and Keren Tenenboim-Weinblatt for the content analysis data and graphs. The usual disclaimer as to the sole responsibility of the authors applies.

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CONSORTIUM   Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität – LMU – Munich, Germany

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[33] See also the conceptual and methodological papers on the INFCORE website, namely here
http://www.infocore.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/INFOCORE-conceptual-framework-WP4_NGOs-and-media.pdf
and here: http://www.infocore.eu/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/INFOCORE-methods-paper-WP4-NGOs.pdf

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FURTHER READING

Forthcoming Publication From the Project

1) Under review (with M.S. Frere and C.Baden) 'Navigating the Complexities of Media Roles in Conflict: The INFOCORE Approach', Introduction to Special Issue on Media Influences in Conflict, *Media, War & Conflict*

2) Under review (with E. Michaels and E. Sangar) 'Changing perceptions through the media? The influence of Non-Governmental Organisations on media coverage of the Syria conflict, 2011-2014', *Media, War & Conflict*

Other Readings Cited Above

3) C. Meyer and F. Otto (2016) How to Warn: 'Outside-in Warnings' of Western Governments about Violent Conflict and Mass Atrocities, *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 9, No 2, pp. 198-216.

4) 2012 (with F. Otto) 'Missing the Story? Changes in Foreign News Reporting and Their Implications for Conflict Prevention, Media, War & Conflict, Vol. 5, No 4, 205-221.

5) T. Chadefaux (2014), "Early Warning Signals for War in the News", *Journal of Peace Research* 51(1): 5-18.

6) C. Hobbs, M. Moran and D. Salisbury (eds), Open-Source Intelligence in the Twenty-First Century: New Approaches and Opportunities, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.