

DISINFORMATION TRENDS AND NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT FOR THE PERIOD
JANUARY – MARCH 2023



Kingdom of the Netherlands

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WESTERN BALKANS ANTI-DISINFORMATION HUB
EXPOSING MALIGN INFLUENCES THROUGH WATCHDOG JOURNALISM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the first quarter of 2023, proliferation of anti-democratic disinformation continued as major global issue, with particular negative impact on the fragile democracies in the Western Balkans (WB). Perpetrators of foreign malign influences have been using disinformation and related media manipulations as a useful tool to cause disruption and confusion in the Western Balkan region. The hyper-production of various disinformation narratives, in particular regarding the Russian aggression towards Ukraine, continues to damage social cohesion and disrupt democratic development in the region. These narratives constantly change, but they have one goal: to instil anti-democratic and anti-Western sentiment in order divert the policies of Western Balkan states away from the European Union (EU) and NATO. To achieve this, malign actors exploit existing societies esp. around key political and societal developments such as elections, referendums and pandemics, promoting disinformation and associated narratives to support their ideological and geopolitical goals.

Russia and its proxies from the region finds it easy to interfere in political life of the Western Balkans countries with anti-Western narratives because such narratives have already been popular for quite some time in the region. One of their key goals is to justify the ongoing aggression and blame the West for starting the war in Ukraine. Given the difficulties with the EU accession processes that lie ahead for Western Balkan countries and the general disappointment, use of such narratives in attempt to present Russia as an alternative to the EU is understandable.

This report is based on a continuous monitoring process of domestic online media in North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which also includes monitoring of social networks.

During the monitoring period, the most frequent theme for disinformation in all Western Balkan countries was “The Russian war in Ukraine”. Narratives such



as “Ukraine tries to involve Poland in the war” and “Poland plans to annex western Ukraine” appeared in the monitoring period as part of the Russian tendency to undermine Poland’s relations with neighbouring countries, using the same tactics used in the Western Balkan region.

When it comes to the EU, the most dominant narratives were that “the EU supports antidemocratic/fascist behaviour of member countries” and that the EU doesn’t really want Western Balkan countries to join, which has been present since the beginning of the invasion.

The most common anti-Western narrative presented the West as the initiator of the war in Ukraine claiming that “NATO expansion is to blame for the war”. This message is part of the global Russian disinformation discourse that circulates in the Western Balkans and implants anti-NATO sentiment in countries that want to join or have already joined the alliance. In the countries that are already members the membership is presented as a mistake.

The most common sources of disinformation that promotes the goals of foreign malign influences are online portals and Facebook profiles that do not provide transparent information on their ownership and publish unsigned articles. Although each country has its local media outlets, a connection can be inferred between Serbian tabloids and their versions which are present in almost every country of the region. Serbian tabloids even in their original version are read in the region due to the fact that large portion of the WB population can understand Serbian language and use Serbian media as a source of (dis)information.

Many of these disinformation articles not only have the potential to disrupt the democratic process of a country and instil pro-Russian sentiment, but also to cause violence and provoke radicalization inside and outside the borders. That makes mapping and monitoring crucial for better understanding and building resilience against these malign influences.



METHODOLOGY

The present report provides an overview of the results of monitoring process of domestic online media in six Western Balkan countries, namely North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, from January to March 2023. The purpose of this monitoring was to identify and analyze the disinformation instances and trends related to foreign malign influences in the region and to understand the main messages that they aim to send.

To achieve this goal, the teams of the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation partner organizations analyzed more than 1000 articles from various media outlets and social media posts, suspected of containing disinformation related to foreign influences in the region. The selection of articles was made based on the availability of verifiable facts that can be checked through professional journalistic methods, and we made sure to include those with high representation on social networks.

The conducted analysis of these articles covered several key aspects, including the disinformation message they intend to convey, the themes and narratives they relate to, their level of influence, sources of origin, media distribution in the region, and their potential to cause violence or radicalization.

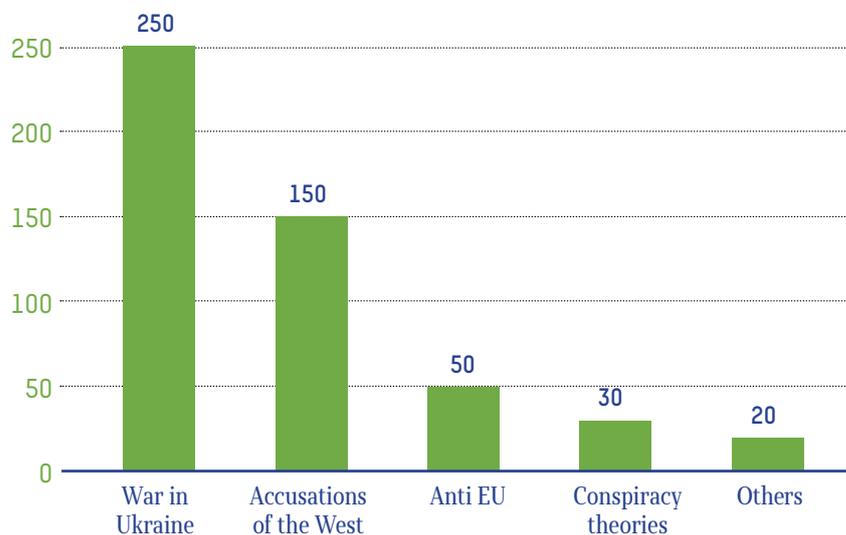




HIGHLIGHTS OF DISINFORMATION

Over the first three months of 2023 the war in Ukraine remains the most common topic of disinformation. Accusations of the West for interference/causing the war in Ukraine comes as second. When it comes to EU representation most of the disinformation articles aimed to create a negative picture of EU on one side and present Russia as an alternative on the other.

NO. OF ARTICLES FOR EACH THEME OF DISINFORMATION
JANUARY-MARCH 2023





Since the Russian aggression in Ukraine, there has been a constant stream of disinformation circulating in the media. While the specific narratives change, the distribution of the disinformation remains the same. One new narrative that has emerged is the idea that “Ukraine is trying to involve Poland in the war” and “Poland plans to annex western Ukraine.” These narratives are part of Russia’s efforts to undermine Poland’s relationships with its neighboring countries, similar to the tactics used in the Western Balkans. Another prevalent narrative is that “Ukraine is recruiting children and women” and “there is no chance to win the war.” All of these narratives serve the bigger goal of presenting Russia as a superior and powerful country.

PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON NARRATIVES ON TOPIC THE WAR IN UKRAINE JANUARY-MARCH



Russia was able to easily interfere with the anti-Western narratives in the Western Balkan countries because these narratives have already been popular in the region for some time. These narratives date back to the propaganda recycling of the Yugoslav Wars and continue with the distorted representation of Western culture. The message is clear: “all evil comes from the West, including the War in Ukraine,” while “Russia is only defending itself and it’s traditional values.”



PERCENTAGE OF THE MOST COMMON ANTI-WESTERN NARRATIVES JANUARY-MARCH



Another significant disinformation discourse that could be found in the media is the anti-EU propaganda. This narratives have grown stronger as the accession process has become more possible for Western Balkan countries. Disinformation narratives that portray the EU as “supporter of antidemocratic and fascist behavior among member countries” and as “not truly wanting Western Balkan countries to join” create polarization among people in these countries and promote Russia as an alternative for the region.





SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION

The most common sources of disinformation in the Western Balkans are online portals and Facebook profiles. These portals often lack clear ownership and publish articles without authorship attribution so it makes it easy for them to spread disinformation without any consequence. There are many ways how disinformation is spread through the WB region:

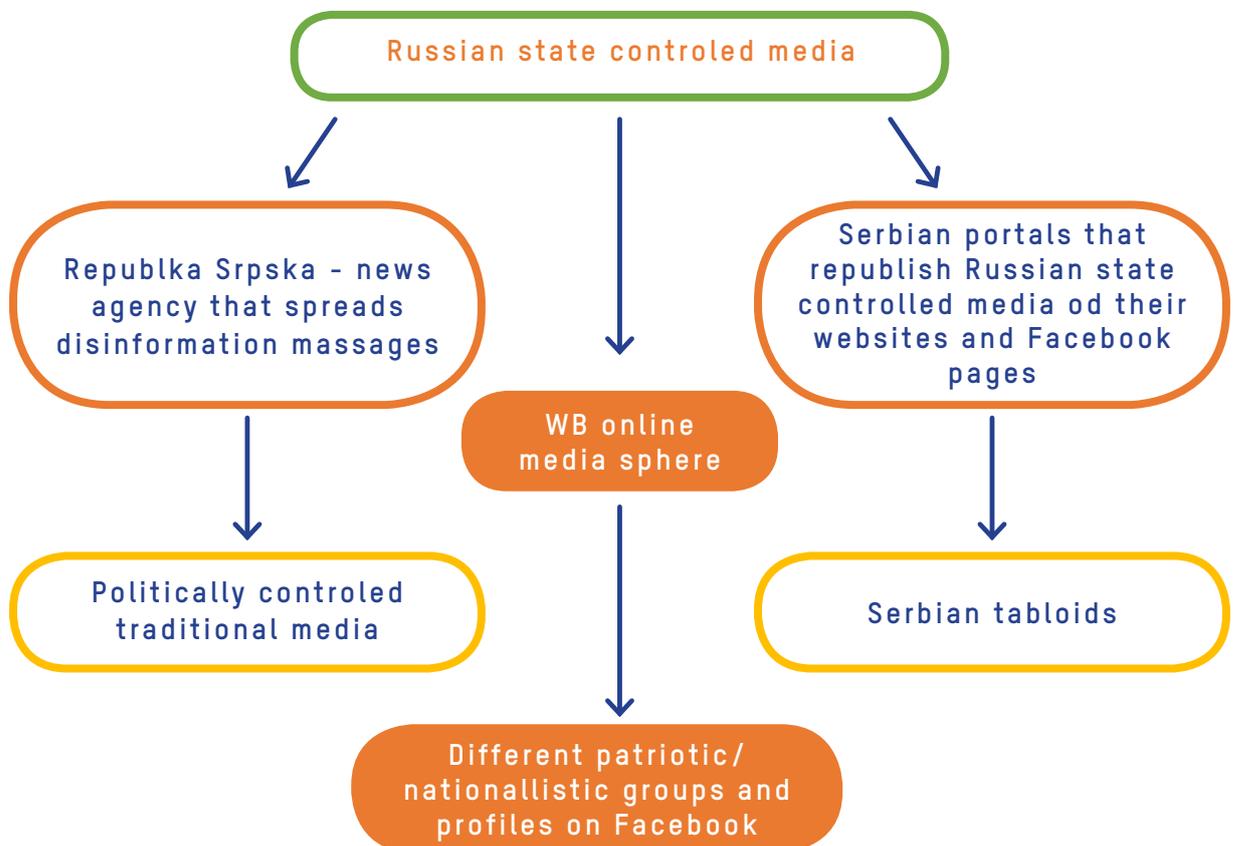
- ▶ WB online portals that republish statements from Russian officials that contain propaganda and various disinformation narratives.
- ▶ Serbian portals that republish Russian state controlled media on their websites and their facebook pages.
- ▶ Republika Srpska – News agency that spreads disinformation messages originating from official sources and politically controlled traditional media.
- ▶ Different patriotic/nationalistic groups on Facebook .
- ▶ Politicians who share pro-Russian or anti-EU views as their opinions on Facebook profiles, which the media then present as official statements.

It is concerning that official sources and politically controlled traditional media are also contributing to the spread of disinformation in some countries. This highlights the need for media literacy and critical thinking skills to help people identify and evaluate the credibility of the sources they are exposed to.





DISINFORMATION FLOW:





COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE



ALBANIA

Since the indictment issued by the US senate mentioned several Albanian businessmen and Prime Minister Edi Rama, McGonigal's arrest provided fodder to Albanian tabloids and portals for disinformation exaggerations, and speculations about the extent of Rama's involvement. Likewise, Albanian opposition used this for their electoral advantage claiming Rama is a Russian agent.

Faktoje team found out that accusations about Russian influence have abounded and been used against parties and figures in both sides of the political spectrum, including arguments that Russia is using Albania and Serbia to bypass EU sanctions. In March, an article by EU Reporter added flame to these rumours of Russian influence as the article accused Monika Kryemadhi, former opposition leader and wife of former president Ilir Meta, of having received payment from Russian companies that are deposited in Switzerland.

The discussions and agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, so-called Franco-German agreement in Albanian-speaking media, has continued to be a topic of speculation especially the latest meeting between Vucic and Kurti in Ohrid. The unsigned nature of the agreement and the statements made by both parties over March resulted with different disinformation narratives in the Albanian media.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Kosovo-Serbia dialogue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Kurti is a Serbian player ▶ Dialogue between Vucic and Kurti has broken down 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Kurti has signed secret agreement with Serbia</u> to establish an Association for Serbian-majority communities ▶ <u>Vucic refuses to sign French-German agreement</u> with Kosovo
Russian influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Russia is using Albania to bypass EU sanctions ▶ Russia is paying Albanian politicians to increase its influence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Monika Kryemadhi</u>, former opposition leader and wife of former president Ilir Meta, <u>received payment from Russian companies</u>
McGonigal Affair	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ McGonigal's relationship to Prime Minister Rama 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>The arrest of Charles McGonigal</u> and fact that the indictment against McGonigal mentions Prime Minister Rama ▶ Prime Minister Rama used ties to <u>McGonigal to undermine opposition.</u>





BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Main instances of disinformation were observed in the articles claiming that photos from 2016 were “a proof” that Ukraine is presenting inaccurate numbers of victims from the Russian aggression and that the scenes from the conflict were staged. Additionally in the month of January 2023 Why not team saw disinformation on social networks related to the claims that cell phone towers , routers and other devices serve as weapons in the US government to target citizens with radiation, “targeted radiation” is possible via vaccine, mobile phone or router and 5G network, these conspiracy theories aim to create fear among citizens and instill anti-vaccination sentiment. During the month of February, disinformation narratives and claims switched to a significant extent to the events related to the earthquake in Turkey and Syria and its aftermath. Additionally, a 30 years old disinformation related to the massacre of Markale in Sarajevo were observed, repeating the previously debunked claims, including the one that the massacre was not committed by the Army of Bosnian Serbs.

During March 2023, disinformation related to the massacre of Markale continued to linger in the BSH media space, including the manipulative and false claims on the US involvement in the breakup of Yugoslavia.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Misleading representations of Zelenskyy ▶ NATO is leading the war in Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Ukrainian President called for pre-emptive nuclear attacks</u> against Russia, and that <u>US members of Congress suggested</u> that Ukraine needs to cede parts of its territory to Russia.
Denial of war crimes committed in B&H	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Denial of the Markale Market massacre ▶ Army of the Republic of Srpska did not commit any crimes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ During the anniversary of the <u>massacre at Sarajevo's Markale market</u>, several media incorrectly claimed that there is no evidence that the Army of the Republic of Srpska committed this crime.
Earthquake in Turkey and Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Conspiracy theories ▶ The West is hypocritical and has double standards ▶ NATO is a terroristic organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Claims that the <u>earthquakes in Turkey and Syria</u> is a punishment against Turkey by NATO because of Turkey's intention to withdraw from the alliance ▶ The earthquake was not a natural phenomenon.





KOSOVO

During this reporting period, the ongoing dispute between Kosovo and Serbia has remained a major topic for the media in Kosovo. The Sbunker team has identified and debunked a number of articles originating from Serbia that aimed to spread fear among the population, especially in the northern municipalities of Kosovo. The impact of Serbian media, both printed and online, is very high in areas with a mostly Serbian population. According to a report by NDI, the media landscape in Kosovo is divided along ethnic and linguistic lines, with limited access to information for specific ethnic or political groups. As a result, media tends to focus on issues that interest their respective communities. Kosovo Serbs mostly receive their news from media sources in Belgrade, rather than Kosovo-based media.¹

Politicians in Serbia are also a source of disinformation. Statements were broadcast by the Kosovo media close to the government in Belgrade that accuse the authorities in Kosovo of mistreating the Serbian community in the north. The recent claims that two young men in Leposavić / Leposaviq were beaten by the Kosovo Police were vehemently denied by the Kosovo Police. In response, the Serbs protested and insinuated that EULEX (the EU rule of law mission in Kosovo) was involved in the case. However, these claims were rejected by EULEX, which stated that they were not involved in such a case.

This is not the first time that Serbian politicians have spread disinformation in a form of claims that the Government of Kosovo is intending to ethnically cleanse the Serbs from Kosovo.

¹ [Information Integrity in Kosovo - Assessment of the Political Economy of Disinformation.pdf \(ndi.org\)](#)



MONTENEGRO

Since the start of 2023 Montenegro was expecting rounds of elections. First, there were presidential elections announced, but it's a prelude for the snap parliamentary elections that are probably going to happen this year. On that front CDT team has seen mainly one side spreading disinformation and giving the advantage to one candidate and one party with the help from tabloids and TV stations from Serbia.

This period has also been marked by the political turmoil, since Montenegrin government is still in its technical mandate, and nobody can predict what's going to happen in the future or who is going to erupt as a leading political force since the demise of DPS and loss that Milo Đukanović suffered at presidential elections and following his resignation.

Montenegrin society is still divided, and two blocks are following separate media outlets and get their information that are mostly biased. This leaves the room for the editorial practices to go down the path of even more biased reporting or even disinformation or fake news. Problem on the other hand is that 1 in 10 people in Montenegro say that they believed in fake news once a week according to an opinion poll conducted by the Damar agency for the needs of the Centre for Democratic Transition (CDT).

Narratives about the war in Ukraine claiming that "Ukrainians are Nazis" continued to be present alongside with narratives that promote anti – vaccination.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Presidential elections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Pro-Russian and pro-Serbian candidates and better political options	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Pro-Russian and pro-Serbian candidates are the only ones worth following, that is the only way out of the mess and moral degradation of Montenegrin society.
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Misleading representations of Zelenskyy▶ Zelenskyy tried to involve Poland in the war	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ <u>Zelenskyy ask NATO to strike Russia with nuclear weapons</u>▶ <u>Volodymyr sold Ukraine</u>. The three regions are no longer theirs
Conspiracy theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Conspiracy theories involving : vaccines, 5G, food shortage, supernatural powers etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▶ Those who <u>received the “vaccine” are now connected to the Internet</u> Bodies with the ability to be constantly monitored





NORTH MACEDONIA

The media in North Macedonia has been flooded with disinformation narratives since the beginning of the war in Ukraine. Metamorphosis team have observed a rise in anti-Western and anti-EU narratives, especially in relation to the ongoing dispute with Bulgaria. The lack of transparency in the negotiation process has resulted in a surge of disinformation. Messages such as “The EU supports antidemocratic/fascist behaviour of member countries towards North Macedonia” were present in the media sphere as a part of a larger narrative that “The EU is defending fascists in Ukraine”. These narratives aimed to distort the public perception of the European Union and provoke anti-EU sentiment between citizens.

Anti-NATO disinformation narratives were also present in the reporting period, they portray NATO membership as a mistake and spread propaganda that “life got worse after North Macedonia joined the alliance”.

During the reporting period the series of false bomb alarms in schools and other institutions intensified, resulting in disruption of the work of both targeted institutions and wider communities, affecting family members and wider society. These form of disinformation combines element of cybercrime, through use of anonymous emails, causing fear and panic among children and parents. The series started in October 2022. After a January pause, the campaign intensified in February, with a record of 439 recorded bomb threats during that month. In March the Ministry of Interior implemented a new protocol which excluded public notification about unverified threats, with police conducting checks with heightened security. In several cases the perpetrators were identified as locals, while Minister of Interior Oliver Spasovski stated that some of them were sent from IP addresses in Iran and Russia, as well as VPN addresses whose providers were from these countries. Prime Minister Dimitar Kovachevski reiterated that such cyber warfare and hybrid attacks are part of the war being waged in Ukraine, also occurring in many NATO member states.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Anti-EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ EU want to destroy our traditional values ▶ EU wants to make our children LGBT 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>EU preaches desecration at Orthodox Christian cemetery</u> ▶ First-graders from Skopje are “mistakenly” <u>learning about a “happy family” between two men and two women.</u>
Anti-NATO/ Anti-Western	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ NATO is leading the war in Ukraine ▶ NATO expansion is to blame for the war ▶ The West is hypocritical and has double standards ▶ The West is leading the war in Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Russian and Ukraine have been misled by the West to go to war at their own peril</u> ▶ <u>The collective West claims that Putin is a dictator</u>, who wants to destroy a sovereign nation with aggression.
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ukraine is recruiting children ▶ Zelenskyy sends women to be killed at the front ▶ Zelenskyy tried to involve Poland and Belarus in the war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Ukraine reduced the age threshold for military service from 17 to 16 years old</u> ▶ Zelenskyy tried to involve <u>Poland directly in the war</u> in Ukraine- he failed, but <u>now he is trying Belarus.</u>





SERBIA

During the period of January to March of 2023 ISAC team found that two major disinformation topic in Serbian media continued to be the war in Ukraine and tensions in Belgrade-Priština relations with emphasis strong anti-western narratives. The only major event was International tribunal in Hague issuing arrest warrant for President Vladimir Putin and Ms Maria Alekseyevna Lvova-Belov under charges for the war crime of unlawful deportation of population (children) and that of unlawful transfer of population (children) from occupied areas of Ukraine to the Russian Federation on 17 March, which, as expected, draw a strong response from all levels of Russian media structures. There were no other major events that influenced narratives coming from Russia but the continuation of pro- Russian and anti-Ukraine and anti-Western campaign is as strong as ever. This campaign is ranging from constant claims that Ukraine has no way of winning the war, especially as its western allies are running out of weapons and ammunition, to claims that Ukraine is preparing attack on Transnistria, and to claims that US recruiting Jihadists for attacks on Russia, all of those flavored with constant threat that Russia is ready and able to use nuclear weapons.

Incomplete and imprecise information's from highest political elites have marked this period in regard to disinformation about the negotiations and meetings between Belgrade and Priština representatives concerning EU presented agreement of normalization. Both sides are trying to present this process as their victory/commitment to peace/unavoidable solution due to the pressure from US and EU. The process was shortly shadowed by another case of violence of Albanians towards Serbs in Kosovo in the beginning of January.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Russia has to defend itself ▶ Ukraine has no way to win ▶ Russia is fighting neo-Nazism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Ukraine’s failure is inevitable, there is no way that Russia will lose this war nor that Ukraine and NATO will win it</u> ▶ <u>Ukrainian politician who escaped from the Nazis: I am grateful to the Russian authorities</u>
Resentment towards the EU and NATO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ They provoked the war in Ukraine ▶ EU blackmails and lies Serbia ▶ They violate international law and human rights all over the world (e.g., bombing of Yugoslavia) ▶ They represent Nazi-politics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The West has strong anti-Serbian perspective. This is clearly visible in poll proudly presented by Russia Today office in Serbia claiming <u>Serbs are absolutely against the introduction of sanctions against Russia</u>
Chinese and Russian influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Russia and China as Serbia’s true and sincere friends ▶ Russia as a defender of orthodox values and Serbia’s interests in international arena 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>United States of America will redirect all its efforts to push China out of Southeast Asia to maintain its hegemonic position, leaving Ukraine aside.</u>



KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR

WB region

- Disinformation due to the extended duration of the Ukraine war, with the EU and European countries perceived by some as an active party that contributes to continuation of combat activities by supplying weapons to Ukraine
- Disinformation against the European Union and the European/Western values
- As countries all over the Balkans wrestle with a series of anonymous false bomb alarms, disinformation narratives about who is behind the bomb threats.

Albania

- Disinformation on media and social profiles of political parties alongside with negative political advertising in order to hurt their opposition expected due to the upcoming Albanian elections on 14 May.

Bosnian and Hezegovina

- Increased anti- US and anti-NATO narratives coming from Republika Srpska alongside with specualtions about law on state property insisting that state property belongs exclusively to the Bosnian state and not to the entities.

Serbia

- Disinformation campaign run by pro-government media in Serbia, with the claim that Serbs are not desirable in Kosovo.
- News and posts on social media that are opposing the Serbia – Kosovo peace agreement

Montenegro

- Post-election misinformation spectacle in Montenegro were political topics and government formation remaine in the spotlight of biased media reporting

North Macedonia

- Disinformation narratives attacking EU and member countries for having undemocratic behavior towards North Macedonia





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