

DISINFORMATION TRENDS AND NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2023



Kingdom of the Netherlands

METAMORPHOSIS
Foundation for Internet and Society

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

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MEDIA MONITORING
REPORT FOR THE
PERIOD OCTOBER –
DECEMBER 2023

SKOPJE 2024



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OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2023**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the last quarter of 2023, various external actors continued to target the societies of Western Balkans with disinformation and related manipulation tactics, through a range of influence operations by various authoritarian forces, to hybrid warfare by Russia. This monitoring report presents an overview of key disinformation trends affecting Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia employed by foreign anti-democracy actors, as well as their domestic proxies or allies aiming to either destabilize the region or increase their influence within it.

The armed conflict between Hamas and Israel that escalated on October 7 brought about a whole new wave disinformation in the Balkans, spread by already active propagators of anti-Western narratives. Russia benefited from the distracted international attention toward these developments, as media diverted their coverage to Middle East, reducing their reporting about the war in Ukraine. This experience might incite the Kremlin to provoke further conflicts, especially through its proxies in the Balkans.

Despite a decline in the number of disinformation articles related to the Russian war in Ukraine, persistent narratives continue to circulate across the Western Balkans media landscape and the social networks. The predominant narrative seeks to undermine Zelenskyy, portraying him as a “corrupt and dishonest politician” and emphasize a high level of corruption within Ukraine, while presenting Russia as invincible. The objective is to foster discontent among the population, potentially swaying Western Balkan governments to reconsider their support or cease aid to Ukraine. The overarching goal is to shape a negative perception of Ukraine and the West, esp. NATO, EU and USA, generating support for Russia’s geopolitical goals in the region.

The second most prevalent topic revolved around the war between Israel and Hamas. The widespread dissemination of fabricated photos and videos from the actual conflict presented a great challenge for fact-checkers, complicating their efforts to differentiate between disinformation and the actual situation. The events surrounding the conflict evoke emotional reactions from readers. Foreign malicious actors, seizing this opportunity, have exploited the narrative by attributing the conflict to the West and depicting them as “financiers of the war”.

Disinformation and fearmongering regarding a potential war in the Balkans have re-emerged in the reporting period. Alongside accusations directed at the Kosovo government for the



challenging conditions of Kosovo Serbs, the narratives have expanded to blacken all ethnic Albanians, incorporating the familiar threat of a “Greater Albania.”

Many of these disinformation articles not only have the potential to disrupt the democratic process of a country and instil pro-authoritarian 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.

Most of these hot topics of disinformation cannot involve narratives connected to Russia. The primary objective behind these narratives and false claims is to bolster the image of Russian power, highlighting its geopolitical influence. At the same time, it emphasizes the perceived influence that Russia holds in the Balkans introducing complexity to the regional dynamics, while proclaiming ‘weaknesses of those who oppose its aggression and imperialism.



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 October to December 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 500 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.





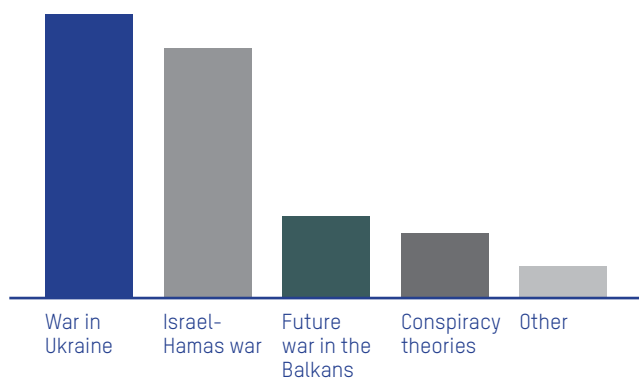
HIGHLIGHTS OF DISINFORMATION

“Russia, taking note of how developments in the Middle East have distracted international attention, might seek to provoke further conflicts elsewhere.” - Valerii Zaluzhnyi, Commander-in-Chief of Ukraine’s armed forces (CNN)

During the reporting period from October to December 2023, the conflict in Ukraine remained a prevalent subject of disinformation narratives in the Western Balkans. However, there was a notable reduction in disinformation articles specifically related to this issue.

The increased focus on the Israel-Hamas war, which became the second prominent topic in the past three months, posed a challenge for fact-checkers, making it difficult to distinguish between disinformation and the actual situation. The dissemination of disinformation narratives predicting a war in the Balkans ranked third among disinformation topics, fuelling concerns about potential conflicts between various countries in the region.

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





Despite a decrease in the number of disinformation articles on this topic, well-known narratives persistently spread throughout the WB media landscape. The prevailing narrative seeks to depict Zelenskyy as a corrupt and dishonest politician, with disinformation even extending to his wife. For instance, false claims suggest that she is spending on expensive jewellery in New York, creating a misleading narrative about their personal expenditures amid the country's desperate state.

These accusations are designed to incite anger among the population and potentially influence the WB governments to withdraw support or cease providing aid to Ukraine. The intention behind spreading disinformation about Zelenskyy's alleged corruption is likely to create a negative perception of Ukraine and by doing so to influence public opinion and potentially sway the country's support away from Ukraine and towards Russia.

PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON NARRATIVES ON TOPIC THE WAR IN UKRAINE OCTOMBER - DECEMBER



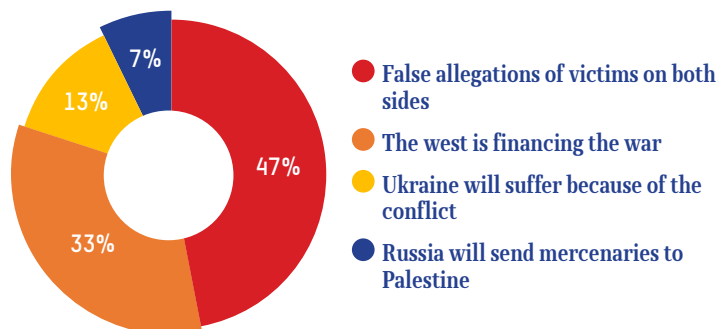
In the aftermath of Hamas militants attack on Israel on October 7, social media has been flooded with numerous videos and photos purporting to illustrate the conflict. False allegations of victims on both sides, including pictures and videos, especially those portraying the killing of children, being presented as genuine but actually sourced from movies, have prevented readers from maintaining a neutral stance. Foreign malign actors seized the opportunity to exploit this situation, attributing it to the West and portraying them as "financiers of the war" alongside with claims that "Hamas was created by CIA".



Russia played a role in the disinformation scene surrounding the conflict, with disinformation creators actively drawing parallels and connections with the war in Ukraine. The narrative suggesting that “Ukraine will suffer due to the conflict,” coupled with the insinuation that the “West now has two wars to finance” and is fatigued by Ukraine, particularly due to corruption, serves as a clear example of how disinformation aligns with existing narratives to deceive and manipulate perceptions.

The narrative that “Russia will send mercenaries to Palestine” to resolve the conflict is designed to portray Russia as a formidable and powerful entity capable of challenging the West whenever the need arises. This narrative aims to reinforce Russia’s image as a key player on the global stage, capable of influencing and intervening in conflicts beyond its immediate sphere of influence.

PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON NARRATIVES ON TOPIC ISRAEL-HAMMAS WAR OCTOMBER-DECEMBER



Fearmongering about an impending war in the Balkans has been a long-standing tactic, and given the existing polarization within WB societies and inter-ethnic tensions, particularly between Kosovo and Serbia, it is unsurprising that this topic becomes a focal point for malign actors seeking to exploit these vulnerabilities.

Narratives such as “there is a “threat” of “Greater Albania” and “Kosovo police in the North is threat to the Serb community” have the potential to instill fear and animosity towards the ethnic Albanian population in Western Balkan countries.

Once again, these topic cannot be discussed without mentioning Russia. The narrative that “Russia is preparing war between the Balkan countries” serves a dual purpose. On one side, it contributes to the image of Russian power, emphasizing its geopolitical influence. On the other side, it underscores the perceived influence Russia wields in the Balkans, adding complexity to the regional dynamics.



COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

ALBANIA



As noted from Faktoje team the context of the country has not changed significantly over the reporting period of October to December 2023. Some issues, as the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia and various incidents of varying orders of concern, have continued to dominate Albanian media spaces, leading to disinformation campaigns by political figures and other forms of harmful speculation.

In addition to the Kosovo issue, several other matters have come to the forefront and captured significant attention. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti's [visit to North Macedonia](#) where he asked for greater cooperation and support for Albanians sparked speculations from both Serbia and Russia, suggesting that he might be attempting to revive the Greater Albania project. These claims gained even greater influence when the Russian ambassador to the UN repeated them during a meeting of the Security Council.

On the other hand, [statement of French President Emmanuel Macron](#) given at Western Balkan summit in Tirana about suspending visa liberalization for Kosovo was immediately published and republished by Albanian media, without verifying whether France possessed the authority to overturn such a decision. In October 2023, Albania initiated the Census process, including the declaration of ethnicity, which relies on self-declaration. Following the commencement of the census, [Bulgarian officials began visiting regions and villages inhabited by the Macedonian minority](#), attempting to exert pressure and influence in an effort to artificially establish a Bulgarian minority in those areas, contrary to publicly known facts.

In the month of December the [agreement to send illegal immigrants from Italy to Lezha](#), signed by the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and the Italian counterpart Giorgia Meloni, sparked debates and concerns among citizens. In the absence of compelling information, media became the arena of clash of





baseless theses, discriminatory language and of the spread of panic among citizens. Over this period, we have also seen an increase in speculations about war in the Balkans, led in particular by statements made by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy which were consciously twisted by Albanian media. Concerns of war and the rise of disinformation have escalated, fueled by the Hamas attack on October 7 and Israel’s subsequent retaliation in Gaza. Albanian media has extensively covered these events over the past three months.

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Israel-Gaza war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Israel wants to ethnically cleanse Gaza and build settlements for extremist Jews ▶ Israel aim is to kill children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Photos of a luxury villa resort project sketched on what remains of neighborhoods on the Gaza coast claiming to show an official Israeli government project. ▶ The photo of the Israeli soldier with the slogan “I kill children”
War in the Balkans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Republika Srpska will be seceding ▶ The “threat” of “Greater Albania” ▶ Russia is preparing war between the Balkan countries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Dodik says Republika Srpska’s secession time will be in two weeks ▶ Kurti’s ambition for “Greater Albania”, “trying to destabilize the areas populated by Muslims in Serbia and ethnic Albanians in North Macedonia ▶ Russia is preparing war in the Balkans to divert attention from Ukraine
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ukraine is recruiting children ▶ Toxic waste will be buried in Ukraine’s arable land. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ 17-year-old Ukrainians are now being killed on front lines ▶ Soros family has made an agreement with Kiev providing for toxic waste from some companies to be buried in Ukraine



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



During the reporting period the Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) media space was largely dominated by the disinformation originating from the Israel-Palestine war as reported by Why not team. Some of the mentioned disinformation also evolved around pro Palestine protests that occurred in BiH and the region, with false statements attributed to local political officials and representatives of BiH victim associations. Continued domestic political disinformation in BiH, enhanced by the state funded Russian media, encompasses misleading narratives about local political issues, BiH state institutions, officials, wartime interpretations, the Srebrenica genocide (1), the Dayton Peace Agreement (1), BiH Statehood Day, and more.

This persistent issue is exacerbated by the influence of Russia's state-funded media in the country's media landscape, in particular their departments based in Serbia that are actively engaged in spreading mentioned disinformation. This situation could get worse considering the announcements that Russia Today would soon start airing in Republika Srpska as requested by Vladimir Putin himself during his annual press conference in December.

During the reporting period, state funded Russian media operating in Balkans were also observed to have been enforcing the negation of genocide in Srebrenica in Serbia (also during past elections in Serbia) and Republic of Srpska (BiH), naming it as "the greatest tool of the West against Serbs".

To summarize, during October, disinformation originating from Israel and the Gaza Strip took center stage. Moving into November and December, alongside with the developments in Israel and Gaza, internal media reporting was overwhelmingly dominated by domestic political disinformation as the celebrations BiH Statehood Day (25 November) and Day of Republic of Srpska (09 January) approached.

It was also observed that the aurora borealis that appeared over the Balkans in November was also a source of disinformation circulated by some media and social network profiles. Disinformation on vaccines, Covid19, climate change denial and other well-known conspiracy theories, like the one on "faked moon landing" were also observed lingering in the BiH media landscape during the entire reporting period. Although overshadowed by the unfolding events and reports of massacres in Gaza, the disinformation from Ukraine was still emerging during the reporting period.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Misleading representations of Zelenskyy ▶ Organ trafficking in Ukraine ▶ High level of corruption in Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ukrainian President Zelenskyy says that he came to America for “a new portion of money”. ▶ Sale of organs on the black market in Ukraine - the government is involved in it
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ False allegations of victims on both sides ▶ Conspiracy theories about the Jewish community ▶ The media is not reporting on Israel’s crimes ▶ Russia will send mercenaries to Palestine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Video of students in Cairo protesting by lying wrapped in white cloth used as evidence of victim-faking. ▶ Jewish secret society to control the world ▶ The media deliberately publishes a photo of the Dome of the Rock when reporting on the Al-Aqsa Mosque ▶ Vladimir Putin confirmed that he will send the army to Palestine.
Denial of genocide in Srebrenica	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The genocide was fake same like in the case with the holocaust ▶ Genocide it is a tool of the West to discipline Serbs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Holocaust is fake and it is implied that this is also the case when it comes to the genocide in Srebrenica ▶ The most important part of the western policy of pressuring Republika Srpska is based on the lie about the Srebrenica “genocide”.



KOSOVO



After the September 24 attack in Banjske, Zvecan, which according to the institutions of Kosovo and the European Union was characterized as a terrorist attack, Sbuker team has noted that misinformation regarding to this event continued to circulate. After the attack, Kosovo authorities published a [video](#) where the vice president of the Serbian List, Milan Radojčić can be seen among the terrorist group.

Initially, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia, Ivica Dacic, during an interview on the Serbian public television RTS [stated](#) that the video was not filmed on the day of the attack. He revised his statement a few days after Radojčić admitted of being part of the attacking group on the critical day.

Other instance where various Serbian media outlets construct [negative narratives](#) concerning Kosovo, was in the case involving the death of the former president of Finland, Martti Ahtisaari, recognized as the architect of Kosovo's independence. Within the content of articles disseminated by Serbian media, there are speculative assertions suggestions that Martti Ahtisaari received bribes ranging from 2 to 40 million euros from the Albanian mafia. These allegations were initially propagated since 2007 by Serbian media outlets but subsequently denied by the office of the former president, Martti Ahtisaari.

Misinformation from Serbian List has asserted that cemeteries in the north of Mitrovica are being deliberately damaged under the directive of the Government of Kosovo. However, this claim has been denied by the Kosovo Institutions, which maintain that no decision has been issued to damage the cemeteries. Instead, they attribute the damage to an Albanian homeowner in the north of Mitrovica, prompting an investigation by the Kosovo Police.

The conflict in Gaza has become a tool wielded by the media and various individuals to disseminate information lacking reliable sources and documentation. Notably, on November 12, 2023, the Kosovo national football team played against Israel as part of the qualifications for Euro 2024. In connection with this event, Agim Musliu, the director of the 'Octopus' Institute, made an [unsupported claim on Platform X](#), asserting that Serbia had planned to exploit the match in Pristina and provoke an incident.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Kosovo's independence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Kosovo was forcibly taken from Serbia ▶ Albanian mafia bribed foreign representatives to facilitate Kosovo's independence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Aggression against an independent country was committed when <u>Serbia was bombed and Kosovo was taken by force.</u> ▶ Martti Ahtisaari, who is considered the architect of Kosovo's independence took bribes ranging from 2 to 40 million euros from the <u>Albanian mafia</u>
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ministry of Defence of Kosovo supports Hamas ▶ Serbia wants to use the war in Gaza to make Kosovo hostile to the West ▶ Serbia will attack Kosovo for supporting Israel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Member of the Kosovo Security Force (KFS) has opposed the official stance and <u>supported the terrorists' massacre.</u> ▶ <u>Serbia is planning international incident in Pristina,</u> in the football match between Kosovo and Israel
Kosovo-Serbia relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Kosovo police in the North is threat to the Serb community ▶ Kosovo government disrespected the memorial park in the north of Mitrovica 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>The decision to build the police station in Zubin Potok</u> it an institutional pressure from official Prishtina on the Serbian people in Kosovo. ▶ Albanians opened a road through old <u>Serbian cemeteries in the north of Mitrovica</u>



MONTENEGRO



Except disinformation coming from foreign malign influences, the reporting period was marked by the narratives following population census in Montenegro. Although it's a statistical matter, CDT team found that politics played a major role in it.

Population census became focal point of pro-Serbian and Serbian media to promote pro-Serbian narratives. As census started, pro-Serbian outlets pushed disinformation about purported results and other narratives which “showed” that they were right all along. Mostly pro-Serbian media and individuals emphasized three questions out of many and those were: nationality, language and religion. The underlying assertion was that there existed a larger population of Orthodox Serbs in Montenegro who predominantly spoke Serbian, than what is common knowledge and that the census results will validate this claim. Proponents argued that it should result with constitutional changes by politicians in the ruling coalition.

Since the outbreak of conflict in Gaza, misinformation has been circulating regarding the events on the ground. Disinformation has emanated from various sources, and the narrative has been further complicated by the unwarranted involvement of global actors such as the USA, Russia, and Turkey, despite their lack of direct connection to the situation. Additionally, there has been a noticeable surge in anti-Israeli sentiment amid the ongoing developments.

Disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine still remained on the social networks especially the ones discrediting Zelenskyy and presenting Russian domination over the West.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Population census	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ We are all Serbs, or we are all Montenegrins ▶ There is a larger population of Orthodox Serbs in Montenegro 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ List of population censuses from 1909 to 2011: from 95% of Serbs to the current unrealistic 29.07% ▶ Those who declare themselves as Serbs in the census to save copies of the census forms
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Russia will send mercenaries to Palestine ▶ The West will help Israel instead of Ukraine ▶ The war is staged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Putin confirmed he is sending the army to Palestine ▶ America urgently decided to send 8 billion dollars of military aid to Israel ▶ The video shows how the war between Palestine and Israel is staged like a movie
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Discrediting Olena Zeleska ▶ Corruption in Ukraine ▶ Russian army is more powerful than the American 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Olena Zeleska spent more than a million dollars on expensive jewellery in New York ▶ The Americans admitted: the Russian army is the best in the world



NORTH MACEDONIA



During the reporting period, the Metamorphosis team observed a reduction in the dissemination of disinformation concerning the Ukraine war. Instead, there was a noticeable shift in media attention towards the Israel-Palestine war. The happenings in the Gaza Strip and its territory captured greater focus, resulting with production of false images, videos and posts with different narratives and sentiment.

At the end of November, a tragic incident of double murder, of 14-year-old girl and 73-year old man, deeply impacted the public in North Macedonia. False information regarding various aspects of the case, esp. the identity of the perpetrators, the motives behind the girl's tragic death proliferated online, fuelling speculations and political manipulation, with attempts to inject ethnic dimensions. Prompt investigation led to arrest of several suspects in the country and issuing international warrant for Ljupcho Palevski AKA Palcho, who had later been apprehended in Turkey and awaits extradition. Palevski is the founder and president of the small political party "The Right" (orig. Desna), which exhibits a clear pro-Russian stance, utilizing Russian neo-Nazi symbols and promoting pro-Russian narratives in cooperation with other fringe right wing parties, alongside disseminating hate speech targeting specific ethnic communities particularly expressing anti-Albanian sentiment.

Key political developments in the country related to the preparations for the presidential and parliamentary elections that meanwhile were scheduled for April 24 and May 8. Local disinformation networks continued to propagate narratives aimed at undermining the trust in the democratic institutions, especially aimed at discrediting pro-Western political parties. Alongside disinformation this negative political communication and propaganda includes combination of speculations, and exploitation of truthful information about current issues such as corruption scandals and other developments that can affect the reputation of future participants in the electoral process.

A particularly disruptive and divisive strain of propaganda involves creation or deepening inter-ethnic tensions between other ethnic groups and Albanians, with a conspiracy theory of "Albanisation" of the country, alleged takeover of control of public and private sectors by Albanians. This is a version of "Greater Albania" narrative and its version "Tirana Platform" employed after 2016 elections by domestic Macedonian nationalists and the Kremlin. It is primarily targeting ethnic Macedonians, aiming to make them feel threatened and disenfranchised, in order to manipulating voting patterns and election coalition building.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Hamas was created by CIA ▶ The West is responsible for the war between Israel and Palestine ▶ Western weapons delivered to Ukraine ends up in the hands of Hamas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Hamas is a paramilitary organization created by the Israeli Mossad <u>with the help of the CIA</u> ▶ Western weapons delivered to Ukraine <u>ended up in the hands of Hamas in Israel</u> ▶ Now <u>the West desperately wants a war</u> between Israel and Palestine
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Russia has won the war ▶ Ukraine is sending pregnant women to the front ▶ Misleading representations of Zelenskyy ▶ Nazism in Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Russia beat Ukraine, EU and NATO</u> ▶ The West will fight until the last Ukrainian man and also until the <u>last Ukrainian woman</u> ▶ <u>They will kill me soon</u>, Moscow will use all means to get rid of me
Murder of 14-year old girl	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ People present present at the OSCE Summit kidnapped the girl ▶ Police involvement in the kidnapping ▶ This case has an ethnic background 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>World pedophiles come to the country</u> and kidnap a girl ▶ Oliver Spasovski distributed passports to criminals around the world, <u>Ljupco Palevski was no exception</u> ▶ It should be clear to you that not all of them are of Macedonian nationality and that <u>there is a national background behind it</u>



SERBIA



During the reporting period the major narratives in Serbian media continue to be related with the war in Ukraine and increasing tensions in Belgrade-Pristina relations with emphasis on strong and all present anti-western narratives. ISAC team reported new source of various global disinformation: beginning of a new Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza Strip which started on October 7. Besides those now already traditional topics, which are inputted in almost any subject (sports, culture, health, astrology, climate change, etc.), the media in Serbia in this period were mostly dealing with internal political struggle as general parliamentary and local elections were drawing closer (elections were held on 17th December).

The relations between Belgrade and Pristina are on a long term deterioration path despite increased pressure of western international community. The situation has further deepened as defensive campaign of political leadership of Serbia's ruling party SNS (Srpska Napredna Stranka – Serbian Progressive Party) is using more and more anti-western narratives to smear its opponents, leaving the Serbian public in believing that the West is our major enemy.

In the country where, as previously stated, the ruling elite supports and feeds false and negative narratives, the freedom of speech and freedom of media suffer greatly which was particularly obvious during the election campaign for 17. December elections in the following forms: the state officials abusing their positions for party campaign, the overwhelming advantage of ruling party in prime time on national media carriers, the lack of any dialogue vs. only conflicting attitude towards opposition, the prosecuting and ostracizing of non-government supporting journalists, very high number of SLAP cases against non-government controlled media. All of this followed with unlawful support to the pro-government tabloids and hostile attitude of government officials towards non pro-government media paint a gloomy picture for the future of freedoms and media in Serbia.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Misleading representations of Zelensky ▶ High level of corruption in Ukraine ▶ Ukraine misuses the help from the EU ▶ Europe is getting tired of Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ukrainian president fears mass protests in Kyiv ▶ More and more EU countries are against supporting Ukraine, but official Brussels will not agree with the “victory of Russia”.
Resentment towards the EU and NATO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ EU will dissolve ▶ Russia are causing enormous damage to the EU ▶ EU blackmails and lies Serbia ▶ EU and the West in Serbia’s election process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ All the world knows Europe is irrelevant and powerless ▶ The European Union can only torture us ▶ The West has a great desire for “Maidan” to happen in Serbia and the Balkans
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The war showed all the weakness of Europe ▶ Ukraine will suffer because of the conflict ▶ The West is financing the Israel-Hamas war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Europe is so divided that a conflict in the Middle East could cause civil strife in the EU ▶ West is now scattered on two fronts and will not have money to finance both the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Gaza war



KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR

The whole Western Balkans region

- Disinformation and fearmongering surrounding a potential future war in the Balkans, especially about conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, as well as secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Reviving the conspiracy theory about threat of “Greater Albania,” strategically aimed at fostering polarization and tension within societies with ethnic Albanian populations, especially in North Macedonia and Serbia.
- Russian involvement in Western Balkans’ internal politics is often by disinformation campaigns that portray Russia as having significant influence in the region. This narrative introduces complexity to the regional dynamics by creating perceptions of heightened Russian involvement in Balkan affairs.
- Disinformation fueling anti-Western sentiments, esp. discrediting EU and NATO, misconstruing political or economic developments in member countries, furthering Russia instigated narratives of ‘imminent demise of the West.’

Albania

- Disinformation around the Israel – Hamas war will persist in capturing the attention of the Albanian public, as some Facebook pages exploit the conflict to radicalize young Albanians, particularly those promoting a more extremist interpretation of Islam.

Bosnia and Hezegovina

- Disinformation justifying nationalist rhetoric and secessionist threats from Republika Srpska leadership.
- Disinformation aimed at discrediting the West and disrupting the constitutional order and various aspects of institutional and legal framework at country level.
- Increase of the quantity pro-Kremlin disinformation narratives due to announced increased presence of Russian state media like Russia Today.

Kosovo

- Disinformation regarding the steps taken by the Kosovar executive to address the ongoing situation in the north of Kosovo and the initiative for removal of



mayors from municipalities predominantly inhabited by Serbs in Kosovo through a petition.

Montenegro

- Disinformation regarding the results from the census about what it is going to show in terms of nationality, spoken language and religion.

North Macedonia

- Disinformation and propaganda related to the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for May 8, 2024, including about the makeup of the caretaker government, and participants in the election campaign.
- Disinformation aimed to increase inter-ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians, especially promotion of conspiracy theory about “Albanisation.”
- Disinformation campaigns actively promoting anti-EU sentiment, particularly in the context of upcoming constitutional changes needed to solve the issue with Bulgaria, as well as discrediting of the West and NATO in regard to geopolitical issues.

Serbia

- Disinformation about the December elections and subsequent pro-democracy protests, coming from domestic and foreign sources. The likelihood of having to repeat Belgrade elections no later than spring 2024 adds to the significance of the city for all political parties.
- Disinformation campaigns targeting the opposition, where they are branded as criminals and traitors by the current government, supported by external actors, particularly from Russia and to some extent China, contribute to the complexity of the political landscape.
- Disinformation campaigns aimed to justify government crackdown on civil society and independent media, which are possible after consolidation of the new government.



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