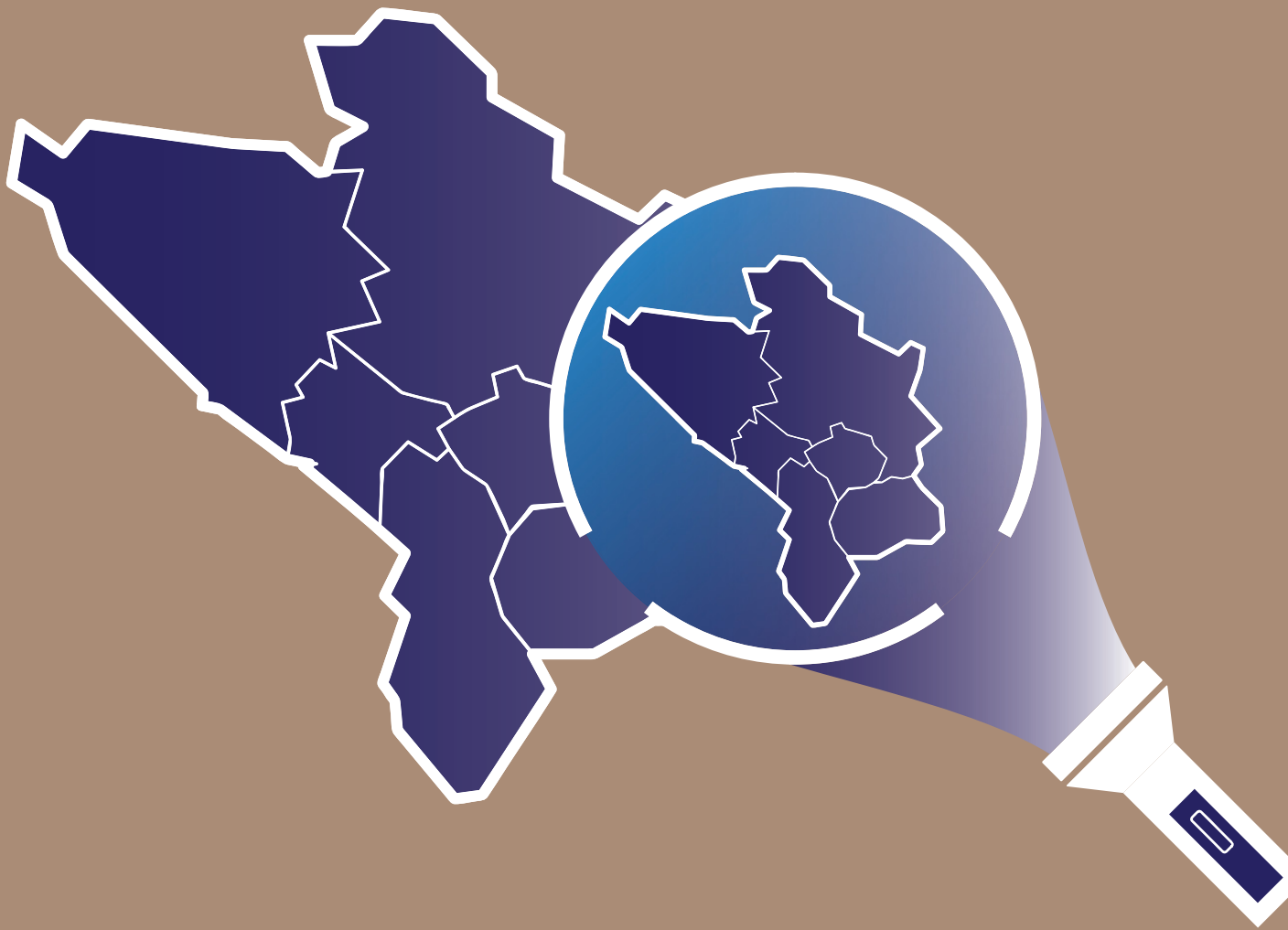


# DISINFORMATION TRENDS AND NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

**JANUARY– MARCH 2024**



Kingdom of the Netherlands







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

[antidisinfo.net/hub](https://antidisinfo.net/hub)

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2024



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ul. Ruzveltova br. 19, kat 2, 1000 Skopje,  
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**For the publisher:** Bardhyl Jashari

**Editor:** Filip Stojanovski

**Contributors:** Despina Kovachevska, Nikola Petrovic,  
Ismar Milak, Barbara Halla, Jona Plumbi, Fitim Gashi,  
Marko Vukajlović, Darvin Murić

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Throughout the first quarter of 2024, the spread of anti-democratic disinformation remained a significant global concern, as it was declared a 'super year' for elections, which take place in 72 countries home to almost half of the world population. Some of the recent (Serbia in December) and upcoming elections (North Macedonia in April) directly concern the fragile democracies in the Western Balkans (WB).

Moreover, the outcomes of the upcoming elections for the European Parliament in June, affecting decision making in the European Union (EU) as well as the United States Elections in November, can have crucial impact on the geopolitics of the region, while on the other hand can be affected by potential influence of Balkan diaspora communities. Recent elections in Slovakia also highlighted the risk of use of AI generated disinformation that can be deployed in the Balkans. Sporadic use of political deep fakes has already been noted in the region, mainly dissemination of globally spread images or video clips, with increasing local use of AI tools to create clickbait content.

Anti-democratic actors, from foreign authoritarian regimes to their domestic proxies or allies, utilized Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) expressed through disinformation and media manipulation to sow confusion and disrupt the region. The proliferation of various disinformation narratives, especially regarding Russian aggression towards Ukraine, continued to harm social cohesion and democratic progress in the WB, while drawing attention from issues affecting the wellbeing of citizens.

Russian propaganda seeks to manipulate public opinion, both within the WB countries and internationally to advance its geopolitical goals. This includes destabilizing the region through exploiting existing ethnic, national and cultural divides, and increasing distrust in institutions of democracy, undermining its pro-Western orientation, and increasing polarization about any sensitive topic. Additionally, by portraying Ukraine as a dysfunctional or dangerous state, Russian propaganda aims to justify its own aggressive actions and intervention in Ukrainian affairs.

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



During the monitoring period, the predominant theme of disinformation across all WB countries centered on “The Russian war in Ukraine.” Narratives such as “organ trafficking” and “misused aid from the EU” appeared in the monitoring period alongside accusations that behind the terrorist attack in Moscow are both Ukraine and the United States. Promoting the narrative that “the war is between America and Russia,” or “between NATO and Russia” portraying Ukraine as a mere puppet in the conflict, exploited ‘by both sides.’

When it comes to disinformation articles concerning the war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, media monitoring resulted noted a decrease in the quantity compared to the previous period of intense conflict. The primary narratives, like “international organizations cause harm and contribute to the number of children killed,” often exploit emotional triggers, such as the suffering of children, making it difficult for readers to critically assess the information.

The ongoing relationship between Kosovo and Serbia remains a persistent topic of interest, both domestically and internationally. Disinformation campaigns, portraying “Kosovo as a threat to Serbs” and alleging that “Kosovo aims to ethnically cleanse the Serbian population in the North”, continue to propagate fear and sow division. They are primarily targeting the population in Serbia and ethnic Serbian communities in neighboring countries, but have ripple effect on other ethnic groups too, attempting to increase fear and hatred of ethnic Albanians throughout the region.

The ongoing fearmongering regarding a potential new war in the Balkans persisted through the first quarter of 2024, particularly given the significant polarization within Western Balkan societies and the underlying inter-ethnic tensions. In addition to local disinformation, this type of narrative is stoked by FIMI-related actors, particularly those seeking to exploit these divisions to advance the interests of the Kremlin.

Local departments of Russian state-controlled media and their proxies in the WB, particularly from Serbia, consistently comment on developments between Kosovo and Serbia, spreading anti-Western sentiment and positioning themselves as allies of Serbia. Numerous Serbian tabloids frequently share statements from Russian officials and their proxies, which are subsequently disseminated across online portals throughout the WB media landscape. The regional dissemination of pro-Kremlin disinformation via Serbia by online media in neighboring countries effectively circumvents the attempts to prohibit access to Russian war propaganda media (incl. cable news channels), influencing public opinion.

Fact-checkers in the region continued to be targeted by attempts to disrupt their work through intimidation. Most visible example is the smear campaign against Truthmeter in North Macedonia during February, coinciding with the period just before the elections.



Disinformation remains not only a media problem, but a security problem as well. It can stoke division, undermine trust in institutions, and even incite violence or destabilize governments. When false narratives are deliberately spread to manipulate public opinion, they can have far-reaching consequences for both national and international security. In spite of the recognition of this problem at the level of EU, the governments of Western Balkan countries that aspire to EU membership have not taken concrete steps to address this problem in a systemic and comprehensive way during the first quarter of 2024. The announcement of the parliamentary and presidential elections in North Macedonia also froze the ongoing process of creation of National Strategy for Building Societal Resilience to Malign Impact of Disinformation based on “all society” approach scheduled for 2024.





# METHODOLOGY

The present report provides an overview of the results of the monitoring process of domestic online media in six Western Balkan countries, namely North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, from January to March 2024. 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 700 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 definition of disinformation addressed by the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub Project Methodology is “verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated in Western Balkans for political gain by external actors in order to intentionally deceive the public and undermine democratic institutions.” This definition is based on definitions used by the European Union, NATO and their members. The methodology limits the project scope to this kind of content in order to prevent overreaching into other areas.

The project focus doesn’t include all kinds of misinformation, defined by the EU as “verifiably false information that is spread without the intention to mislead, and often shared because the user believes it to be true.” This Methodology stipulates that the key aspect of the initial analysis conducted by the project team is determining the intent and the origin or provenance of the particular piece of content suspected of being “verifiably false information,” aimed at undermining the functioning and development of democratic institutions in the region and related to the promotion of foreign malign influences in the Western Balkans, based on a clear set of transparently outlined criteria. Therefore, in order to provide understanding and explanation of the context and interconnections, during the process of verification and analysis, this methodology into account various types of content related to themes which are targeted by disinformation purveyors or suspected to contain disinformation when such potential media items express potential to support disinformation narratives.

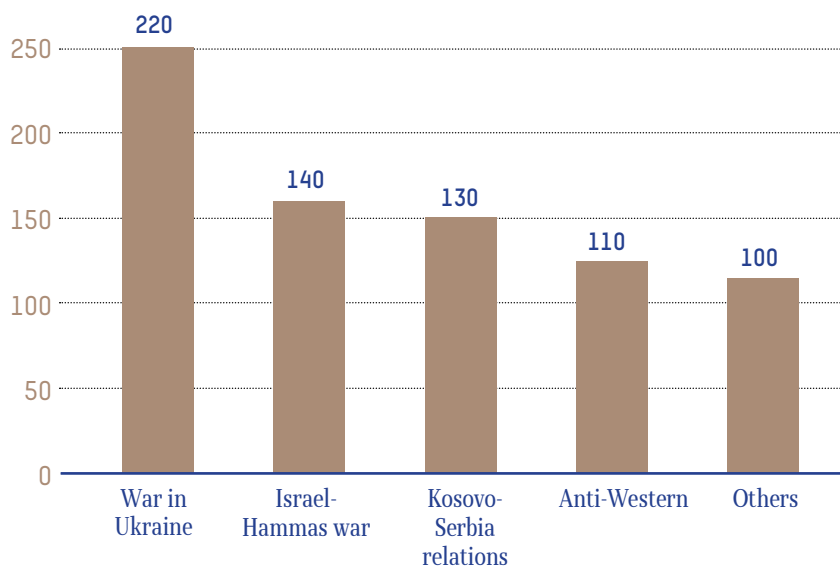
The conducted analysis of these articles covered several key aspects, including the disinformation message they intend to convey, the themes and narratives they relate to, their level of influence, sources of origin, media distribution in the region, and their potential to cause violence or radicalization.



# HIGHLIGHTS OF DISINFORMATION ENVIRONMENT

Throughout the first quarter of 2024, disinformation surrounding the conflict in Ukraine remained pervasive, with a consistently high volume of articles on the subject. Despite the ongoing international attention to events in Gaza, there has been a noticeable decrease in the dissemination of disinformation articles regarding the West Balkans compared to the period of intense conflict between Hamas and Israel. Conversely, Kosovo-Serbia relations have been a focal point of both local and international attention, with constant dissemination of disinformation exacerbating tensions and no visible resolution in sight.

NUMBER OF ARTICLES OF MOST DOMINANT  
DISINFORMATION TOPICS, JANUARY-MARCH 2024





A constant stream of disinformation has been distorting the media landscape with repetition of narratives that had been present in the region during the previous year. These included continuously repeated messages trying to build a story of “Great and powerful Russia” that needs to be perceived as an alternative to the EU. Claims and attacks targeting Ukraine often depict it as a corrupt state that misuses aid from the EU, emphasizing double standards, particularly in comparison to the treatment of Western Balkan countries. Misleading representations of Zelensky, allegations of organ trafficking, and fearmongering about the division of Ukraine among neighboring countries are clear examples of how Russian propaganda operates. Russian propaganda consistently seizes every opportunity to demonize Ukraine and fabricate new narratives, even when facts demonstrate otherwise. This was evident after the terrorist attack in Moscow, when [Russian officials unfairly accused both Ukraine and the United States](#), promoting the narrative that “the war is between America and Russia,” portraying Ukraine as a mere puppet in the conflict. By spreading such false narratives, Russian propaganda seeks to manipulate public opinion, both within Ukraine and internationally, to advance its geopolitical goals.

#### PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON NARRATIVES ON TOPIC THE WAR IN UKRAINE JANUARY - MARCH 2024



On a different note, the Ukraine-Southeastern Europe summit has provided a fresh perspective on the potential contributions of the Western Balkans to the conflict in Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s visit to Albania on 28 February, where he met with leaders from the Western Balkans, aimed to strengthen cooperation between Kyiv and its regional partners. He tried to drum up [Balkan support for his vision of peace in Ukraine](#) and promoted the [idea of joint arms production](#), but also warned that apart from destroying Ukraine, [Russia was also aiming at destabilizing the Balkan states](#). The summit participants adopted a [12-point statement](#) in which they said that Russian military aggression against Ukraine remains the biggest threat



to European security. But the statement did not mention sanctions against Russia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said this was at the request of Serbia, a traditional ally of Russia that has not joined the EU’s sanctions regime against Moscow.

There was a decrease in the number of disinformation articles concerning the conflict between Israel and Hamas. However, during this time, Israel was predominantly accused of engaging in “Satanism” and “committing war crimes”. The most prominent narratives that gained significant attention and dissemination were those focusing on the suffering of children. Accusations against international organizations suggest that their assistance efforts are, in fact, “causing harm and contributing to the number of children killed” whereas accusation towards the Jews community referred to a false conspiracy theory commonly known as the “blood libel” myth, which falsely accuses Jewish people of kidnapping and harming non-Jewish children.

#### PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON NARRATIVES ON TOPIC THE KOSOVO-SERBIA RELATIONS JANUARY - MARCH 2024



Another enduring topic that has captured both international and local attention for an extended period is the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia. Disinformation campaigns portraying “Kosovo as a threat to Serbs”, alleging that Kosovo aims to ethnically cleanse the Serbian population in the North, continue to sow fear and division. Even the decision of Dinar prohibition as a currency in Kosovo was perceived as a tactic to further harm the Serbian population and exacerbate an already tense situation. Similarly, the US decision to sell Javelin anti-tank missile systems to Kosovo was viewed by the Serbian government as a move that could escalate tensions and exacerbate the situation. Russian minister of interior Zakharova is in line with Serbia and strongly condemned the decision enforcing the narrative that “Kosovo is working against the Serbs supported by the US”.



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**PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON NARRATIVES ON TOPIC THE KOSOVO-SERBIA  
RELATIONS JANUARY - MARCH 2024**



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The ongoing fearmongering regarding a potential war in the Balkans persists, particularly given the significant polarization within Western Balkan societies and the underlying inter-ethnic tensions, especially between Kosovo and Serbia. This makes it a right target for Russian malicious actors seeking to exploit these divisions..



## A NEW TREND: INCREASING PRESENCE OF AI-GENERATED DISINFORMATION

The partner organizations joined in the Western Balkans–Anti Disinformation Hub project and other fact-checking organizations from the region have documented increased dissemination of disinformation generated through use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools which started in 2023 and continued through the first quarter of 2024. Deepfakes (term based on combining of ‘deep learning’ and ‘fake’) include images, videos, or audio edited or generated using AI tools, and which may depict real or non-existent people. This type of synthetic media contents, present in the Western Balkans, can be classified in two general categories:

Audiovisual content generated abroad, disseminated globally and spread in the Western Balkans via social media as clickbait, often accompanied with introductory text and comments to place it into context of local antidemocratic narratives. These include promoting conspiracy theories (1, 2, 3, 4) to images of the Pope Francis in unbecoming outfits, such as those misrepresenting him as LGBTI+ activist waving rainbow flags, were used to spread religious discrimination and anti-gender equality messages. Synthetic images of UK royals or Japanese minister were accompanied with text undermining domestic institutions, and AI images of Russian, Chinese and US politicians were used as support for various disinformation narratives. In line with the main identified trends, deepfakes misrepresenting Russian and Ukrainian leadership, as well as situation and suffering in Gaza and Turkey were detected.

Video clips generated in the region, such as ‘joke’ deepfakes of global celebrities aimed at exploiting patriotic sentiments for clickbait, such as Elon Musk claiming to be Serbian or Albanian, or alleged US airplane promoting Kosovo PM Kurti, to very serious audio recording of AI-generated conversation of Kurti with US ambassador Hovenier presented as anti-Serb conspiracy, and the deepfake video exploiting the likeness of murder victim Liridona Adamaj, spread from Kosovo into Albania and other countries with Albanian-speaking populations from November to January.

Given the impact of audio deepfake on elections in Slovakia, regional and international experts warned that AI generated content can play major roles during 2024 in particular in relation to upcoming elections. For that reason, the project partners stepped up the production of educational media literacy content about use and misuse of AI, and use advocacy events and media appearances to build societal resilience through warning and prebunking.



# COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE



## ALBANIA

During the period of January – March 2024, Albania’s disinformation landscape remained largely consistent with previous quarters, with Kosovo and Serbia maintaining their status as focal points of misinformation and harmful narratives. Notably, Serbia heightened its criticism of key Western powers, namely the United States and the European Union. This criticism intensified as Serbia accused these entities of interference in its internal affairs, specifically alleging that opposition movements within Serbia, including widespread protests following recent elections, were instigated and financially supported by what Serbia perceives as the influential Albanian lobby.

In addition to the heightened tensions between Serbia and Kosovo, the situation in the Western Balkans was further complicated by movements of the Serbian army along the border with Kosovo. This military activity contributed to an atmosphere of increased unease and apprehension in the region.

On 28 February Tirana hosted the Ukraine–Southeastern Europe summit, which aimed at enhancing cooperation between Kyiv and its partners in the region. During Zelenskyy’s visit to Tirana, an important narrative emerged regarding the presence of Vucic. Some interpreted his attendance as indicative of Prime Minister Rama’s perceived proximity to Serbia, suggesting that it influenced the meeting’s agenda to appease Vucic. This included the omission of any mention of sanctions against Russia, a topic Serbia has staunchly opposed joining. Several portals republished this claim, further amplifying speculation about the dynamics between Albania, Serbia, and Russia.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Kosovo-Serbia relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Kosovo wants to ethnically cleanse Serbs</li> <li>▶ Serbia is trying to intimidate Kosovo</li> <li>▶ Serbia wishes ill to Kosovo</li> </ul>	<p>Kurti's government is trying to <u>eradicate Serbs from the North of Kosovo</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Serbia has sent army to Kosovo border expert argues that <u>Serbia's decision is an act of aggression</u></li> </ul>
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ukraine is behind the terrorist attack in Moscow</li> <li>▶ Russia will start war with NATO</li> </ul>	<p>The perpetrators fled towards Ukraine after the attack, proving who is behind it. "Bild" reveals the secret documentary -<u>Russia may start a big war with NATO</u> in February</p>
Anti-Western	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ US is trying to provoke a war in the Balkans</li> <li>▶ The West wishes ill to the Balkans</li> </ul>	<p><u>US is funding Kosovo in its mission to expel Serbs</u> from Kosovo and threatens the very existence of Serbia</p>







## BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Throughout the reporting period, the media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) remained heavily influenced by disinformation originating from the Israel-Hamas war, while disinformation related to Ukraine resurged to levels seen before the current conflict in Gaza. However, the most detrimental misinformation included persistent false narratives surrounding events such as the unconstitutional celebration of Day of Republika Srpska on January 9, the anniversary of Sarajevo Markale Market massacre on February 5, and the 25th anniversary of 1999 NATO intervention against FR of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) on March 24. As before, the issue of Srebrenica Genocide was constantly exploited well ahead of its anniversary of 11.

Other prevalent disinformation narratives included manipulative claims regarding the strength of the Russian economy, exaggerated reports on the debt of the Republic of Srpska, false information regarding EU accession processes, and clickbait articles repurposing content from previously published pieces with sensationalist headlines.

After March 22, the Republika Srpska's public broadcaster, state news agency, and affiliated media outlets disseminated disinformation from the Kremlin regarding the terrorist attack in Crocus Hall in Moscow, to wrongly implicate Ukraine and the West in the incident.

Furthermore, disinformation, conspiracy theories, and manipulative reporting extended to issues concerning climate change and health matters, reflecting a broader trend of misinformation across various domains.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ukraine is behind the terrorist attack in Moscow</li> <li>▶ Ukraine is facing a lack of new soldiers due to the exhausting war with Russia</li> <li>▶ Corruption in Ukraine</li> <li>▶ Drug testing on infants in Mariupol hospitals</li> </ul>	<p>Perpetrators of the terrorist attack received <u>significant amounts of money and cryptocurrencies from Ukraine</u></p> <p><u>Ukraine is now calling people with Down syndrome</u> to the front lines because Zelensky has no more military-fit recruits</p> <p>Ukraine is burying soldiers in mass graves so it can <u>avoid paying pensions or death benefits to their families</u></p> <p><u>Babies were used for experiments</u> conducted in the psychiatric ward of the Mariupol hospital</p>
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Egypt is on the side of Gaza</li> <li>▶ Israel is committing atrocities towards Palestinians</li> <li>▶ Israel is violating human rights of the prisoners</li> </ul>	<p><u>Egyptian teenager delivering aid to Gaza</u> residents via a hole in the border wall</p> <p><u>Israelis set traps for starving Palestinians</u> in the form of food cans that are actually bombs</p> <p><u>People brutally torturing and killing two prisoners</u> in Syria presented as it happened in Gaza</p>
Denial of war crimes committed in BiH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Markale Market massacre was staged</li> <li>▶ The West is behind the staging of the Markale Market massacre</li> </ul>	<p><u>Markale Market massacre was a project developed in America</u> and the goal was to retaliate against Republika Srpska.</p>





## KOSOVO

The decision made by the Kosovo Central Bank on December 27, 2023, to exclusively adopt the Euro as the currency for cash payment transactions in Kosovo stirred various reactions and interpretations. Despite the existing legislation and regulations designating the Euro as the sole official currency in the country, authorities have acknowledged that since the end of the war, the Serbian Dinar is commonly used as an official currency within the Serbian community. The political party Serbian List interpreted the Kosovo Central Bank's prohibition of all Dinar currency transactions as a deliberate effort to make life more challenging for Serbs, ultimately aiming to expel them from Kosovo. However, the authority announcing the decision refuted this narrative.

However, beside these narratives, Dinar issue affected the relations between Kosovo government and international community, with warnings for further escalation in the north of Kosovo. The European and USA required the Kosovo government to find a proper solution, which does not affect the salaries of Kosovo Serbs, who receive money from Serbia. On this issue there are ongoing negotiations in Brussels, but there is no solution yet.

Another important issue was the upcoming referendum on the dismissal of four ethnic Albanian mayors of municipalities in Kosovo with majority Serbian population, scheduled for 21 April 2024. The referendum is intended to solve the issue of representation of local population in public institutions, that has been lacking due to the boycotted of the 2023 local elections by the Serbian community, which was supported by Belgrade.

The visit of the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Albin Kurti on February 9 to Skopje was accompanied by unconfirmed reports that he had received death threats. Such claims were later denied by the authorities of North Macedonia. This disinformation was debunked through a joint article by Sbunker and Metamorphosis.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Kosovo-Serbia relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Albanians in Serbia are not safe</li> <li>▶ Serbia is a threat to Kosovo</li> <li>▶ Kosovo tries to intimidate the Serbs living in the North</li> <li>▶ Kosovo authorities want to provoke conflict in the North</li> </ul>	<p><u>The bus of the “Polluzha Tours” travel agency was attacked near Niš in Serbia</u>, as reported by some media.</p> <p>An <u>explosive device was thrown at the property of a Serbian owner</u> in Ranillug, near Kamenica.</p> <p>The removal of signs with symbols and photos of Serbian and Russian personalities is <u>an attempt to occupy the North</u></p>
Prohibition of the Serbian Dinar as a currency in Kosovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Another way to put pressure on the Serbs</li> <li>▶ Attempt to expel Serbs from Kosovo</li> <li>▶ The Dinar deepened disagreements with the EU and the USA</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ The prohibition of Dinar currency transactions is <u>a tendency to expel Serbs from Kosovo</u></li> </ul> <p><u>The decision is being deliberately made</u> so it will provoke resistance from the Serbian community</p>





## MONTENEGRO

The political situation in Montenegro remains volatile, with the public divided into various factions susceptible to disinformation. This susceptibility often stems from existing biases, which politicians and their marketing team's exploit. During the reporting period, a major focus in Montenegro was the outcome of the population census. Despite official data not yet being available, there were attempts by both domestic and international actors to influence preliminary results.

A notable aspect of Montenegrin politics is the strong pro-Russian sentiment, which perpetuates beliefs such as the notion that the State Department of Montenegro is actively engaged in subversive activities and that Ukrainians are labeled as Nazis, with blame for conflicts placed on NATO rather than Russia.

Events, such as Israel's military actions in Gaza, have led to widespread dissemination of online content related to the suffering of the Palestinian people. Unfortunately, much of this content is false, yet it finds traction among certain segments of the population, particularly Muslims.

Beyond local issues, disinformation campaigns have targeted various global topics, ranging from the World Economic Forum in Davos to climate change and anti-Western narratives. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have proven to be fertile ground for disinformation, often serving as distractions when other narratives falter. Additionally, advancements in AI technology have facilitated the spread of manipulated photos and videos, further complicating efforts to combat misinformation.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Nazism in Ukraine</li> <li>▶ Annexation of Russian territories by Ukraine</li> <li>▶ Ukraine started the war</li> <li>▶ Hungary, Poland and Romania will divide Ukraine among them</li> </ul>	<p>Pro-European demonstrators hung a <u>large picture of Adolf Hitler on the building of the Kyiv City Assembly</u></p> <p>Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed a decree on the <u>annexation of certain Russian territories by Ukraine.</u></p> <p><u>Hungary is already talking about asking for its share, Poland, Belarus and Romania too.</u> Therefore, Ukraine will not exist.</p>
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Satanism in Israel</li> <li>▶ Abuse of children by the Jewish community</li> <li>▶ Accusing Israel of war crimes</li> </ul>	<p><u>Tunnel under a synagogue was discovered in New York</u> used for sex trafficking of children and other illegal activities.</p> <p><u>Time magazine declared Israel’s prime minister</u> killer of the year</p>
Conspiracy theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ World Economic Forum is a gathering of satanists</li> <li>▶ Pandemic</li> <li>▶ Anti-vaccination</li> </ul>	<p>In Davos they will agree on <u>which “viruses” they will create and how many people are planned to be killed</u></p> <p><u>Vaccines against Covid killed</u> half a million children and young people</p>





## NORTH MACEDONIA

During February 2024 a smear campaign was launched against the Truthmeter fact-checking service, attempting to undermine its anti-disinformation work and the concepts of fact-checking and truth seeking in general. It included hate speech and incitement of violence against Metamorphosis employees by local actors that often promote anti-democratic narratives representing interests of authoritarian regimes and local populist parties, alongside other kinds of manipulations. Domestic and international journalist organizations, incl. ICFJ and Reporters Without Borders, as well as the EU ambassadors, condemned this attempt to curtail freedom of expression.

In the reporting period the War in Ukraine remained the most dominant topic of the disinformation landscape of North Macedonia. Considering the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack in Moscow, falsely attributed to Ukraine, the prevailing narratives have remained largely stagnant. Macedonian online audiences had been subjected to is a constant repetition of recycled falsehoods. This tactic embodies the strategies utilized in Russian propaganda.

We've observed misinformation painting a favorable picture of Russia, even within discussions that critique the EU. Some narratives depict Russia as the fifth-largest economy worldwide and the leading one in Europe, while others distort the EU's financial assistance to Ukraine to suggest a conflict between the EU and Russia rather than with Ukraine. Other anti-EU narratives seek to portray the union as employing double standards, particularly concerning North Macedonia, alleging that its policies only bring harm to the country.

In February, the anti-vaccination sentiment rose alongside a new wave of disinformation concerning the vaccination of children in kindergartens, coinciding with the whooping cough epidemic declared in Skopje. According to the Law on the Protection of the Population from Infectious Diseases, during declared epidemics, inspectors have the authority to restrict unvaccinated or incompletely vaccinated children from attending kindergartens in order to safeguard all children. However, this measure was perceived as discriminatory and fascist. The anti-vaccination movement has been disseminating disinformation in the past, with key figures often linked to the pro-Russian party Rodina.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ukraine is behind the terrorist attack in Moscow</li> <li>▶ Discrediting Zelenskyy</li> <li>▶ Ukraine is a corrupted state</li> <li>▶ Organ trafficking in Ukraine</li> </ul>	<p><u>The United States, Great Britain and Ukraine</u> are behind the terrorist attack in Moscow</p> <p><u>Zelensky bought two yachts</u> more expensive than 75 million dollars</p> <p>Permanent sites for <u>organ harvesting and separation of body parts</u> are located in the city of Izyum and the village of Borova in the Kharkiv region.</p>
Anti-EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ EU is satanic union</li> <li>▶ EU has double standards</li> <li>▶ EU is destroying farmers</li> </ul>	<p>Much <u>evil has been done to Macedonia</u> by the EU</p> <p><u>The EU is destroying villages and farmers</u> on purpose, so that there is no food</p>
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Abuse of children by the Jewish community</li> <li>▶ WHO is satanic organization created to do harm</li> <li>▶ International organizations are harming children in Gaza</li> </ul>	<p><u>Jews abducted and abused children</u>, in tunnels found under the synagogue</p> <p><u>Satanists in the WHO kill children in Gaza</u> instead of helping them</p>







## SERBIA

During the period of January to March of 2024 the major FIMI-related narratives in Serbian media continue to be the war in Ukraine and increasing tensions in Belgrade-Pristina relations, with emphasis on strong and all present anti-Western sentiment. This type of disinformation flow was complementary to the flood of domestic disinformation related to the aftermath of the controversial parliamentary elections that took place in December of 2023, targeting different local political actors, and civil society organizations engaged in development of democracy, election monitoring, as well as independent media promoting professional journalism incl. factchecking.

The Russian media, with renewed vigor since Ukraine's counteroffensive, pushes four main narratives to sway Serbians: Russia defends itself and global liberties from Western imperialism; NATO's support for Ukraine aligns with fascism; sanctions on Russia harm the West, not Russia; and the West is hypocritical, especially regarding Serbia.

The relations between Belgrade and Pristina are on a long-term deterioration path despite increased pressure of western international community. Serbian politicians are certainly not being constructive in trying to come up with feasible solutions for accumulated problems in relations with Kosovo and regularly use anti-western narratives. The situation has further deepened as Serbia is still in election campaign new Belgrade elections are provisionally set for 2<sup>nd</sup> June and Kosovo authorities banned the usage of Serbian currency Dinar for regular use in the North of Kosovo. The move of Kosovo government in banning usage of Dinar is quickly deteriorating Kosovo's government relationship with western countries, which in turn is shown as a sign of victory of Serbian politics.

The latest development in Belgrade-Pristina relations is the call for citizens of Serbian dominated municipalities in the northern Kosovo to go on referendum to dismiss their disputed Albanian mayors that were elected as city majors in those municipalities. This call was rejected by Srpska lista a major Serbian party in Kosovo and a close partner of SNS, a ruling party in Serbia.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Ukraine is behind the terrorist attack in Moscow</li> <li>▶ French army will enter the war</li> <li>▶ Romania is preparing the deployment of French troops in Ukraine</li> </ul>	<p>The terrorist attack in Crocus is a monstrous and brutal <u>operation under a false flag</u></p> <p><u>France is entering the war</u>: The army is deployed on the border of Romania and Ukraine</p>
Anti-western	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ The West provoked the war in Ukraine</li> <li>▶ The west will provoke a third world war</li> <li>▶ Media does not report of other world conflicts</li> <li>▶ Sanctions to Russia harm the West</li> </ul>	<p>The West threatens to send troops to Ukraine: bluff or <u>announcement of the third world war</u></p> <p>Texas against invasion: <u>If this were happening in Russia, the Western media would be buzzing</u> that country is falling apart</p> <p><u>The isolated one is not Russia but the West</u></p>
Serbia-Kosovo relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ Arming of Kosovo will destabilize the region</li> <li>▶ USA is supporting the ethnic cleansing of Serbs</li> <li>▶ Kosovo is a fake state</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▶ <u>With arming secessionists in Pristina, former, current and future terrorists is USA is allowing the silent ethnic cleansing of Serbia</u></li> </ul>





# KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR



As a part of early warning mechanism, anti-disinformation experts from the Western Balkans countries stress the following disinformation-related issues and trends as particularly important for the second quarter of 2024 and the period beyond.

## For the whole Western Balkans region

- Disinformation aimed to affect the upcoming elections or propaganda manipulations regarding the conduct of and the outcomes of recent past elections. These include the December 2023 elections in Serbia, and upcoming elections in North Macedonia scheduled for April and May, as well as European Parliament elections scheduled for June.
- AI generated disinformation including deepfakes of politicians or public figures aimed to sway public opinion, in particular to manipulate the outcome of the elections.
- Disinformation due to the constant narrative spread that the European Union (EU) and NATO, as well as the EU and NATO countries, are entering the war with Russia by supplying weapons to Ukraine. Such narratives aim to decrease support for Ukraine at EU and country level, at a time when sanctions against Russia increasingly impact its economy and war effort.
- An increased presence of misinformation that pushes the Kremlin narratives that it is hopeless and meaningless to help Ukraine, which will lose anyway because it is inevitable, that Ukraine and its leadership are corrupt, and that money provided for military and other aid end up in private pockets.
- Disinformation about contribution to the number of children killed and abused in Gaza by the Jewish satanists and international organizations.
- Fearmongering regarding a potential war in the Balkans, through escalation of the tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, and tensions around threats of secession of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina.



### **Albania**

- Disinformation increasing distrust in the West and institutions of liberal democracy such as NATO and EU, inciting euroscepticism, exploiting the challenges in the process of integration into the European Union.
- Using the the issues between Kosovo and Serbia as vectors of disinformation targeting the public in Albania.
- Proliferation of anti-NATO narratives, stoking fears of a potential war between NATO and Russia, that would adversely affect all NATO members including Albania.
- Escalation of speculations about escalating conflict and war in the form of ‘predictions’ related to military conflict between Israel and Iran, in particular because Iran has initiated hybrid attacks against Albania during the previous year.

### **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH)**

- Disinformation including genocide denial about the upcoming UN General Assembly scheduled for May, regarding the Resolution on Srebrenica Genocide, Designating International Day of Reflection, Commemoration.
- False claims that the UN Resolution will unjustly label Serbs as ‘genocidal people’ and threaten the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Disinformation campaigns targeting minority groups such as Bosniak returnees in the Republika Srpska, especially in its Eastern part, as well as inciting hatred against the entire Bosniak population within this BIH entity.
- Anti-Western narratives portraying NATO and EU member states as ‘colonial force’ that has adverse effects in various regions, in particular Middle East and Africa, combining historical references with manipulations about discrimination of migrants within EU, and the conflict in Gaza.
- Another line of expected polarizing narratives regarding discrimination of migrants based on their religion, national origin, color of skin, drawing manipulative comparisons between Bosnian refugees and economic migrants from the Balkans on one hand as white, and migrants from Asia and Africa as non-white.

### **Kosovo**

- Disinformation surrounding the issue of the use of Serbian Dinar as currency by local Serbian community, particularly the decision related to its use, continues to elicit strong reactions from the international community and Serbs. It has been interpreted as a move aimed at marginalizing the Serbian community in Kosovo.



### **Montenegro**

- Pending results from the census leave room for disinformation and speculations promoting positions of various actors across the political spectrum.
- Disinformation about upcoming new elections is likely to be spread, especially due to divisions within ruling parties and government coalition.
- People still tend to believe that Russia is not to blame for destroying Ukraine and that there is nothing wrong. Spreading of more disinformation along these lines is highly likely.

### **North Macedonia**

- Disinformation narratives attacking EU and member countries for having undemocratic and hostile behavior towards North Macedonia.
- Disinformation aimed to increase inter-ethnic tensions between Macedonians and Albanians especially in the pre-election period and during the formation of the new government right after the elections.

### **Serbia**

- Disinformation about the proposed independence of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and subsequent union with Serbia.
- Disinformation regarding the upcoming referendum on replacing elected Albanian mayors of Northern Kosovo municipalities, which have Serbian majority populations (Zubin Potok, Zvečan, Leposavić, and North Mitrovica.)
- Disinformation supporting long standing narratives of Serbian victimhood and ‘proving’ animosity of the West towards the Serbian people, from misrepresentation of the events wars in the 1990s starting with breakup of Yugoslavia to upcoming UN Resolution on Srebrenica.



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