

DISINFORMATION TRENDS AND NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT

APRIL– JUNE 2024



Kingdom of the Netherlands





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

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub’s media monitoring of the second quarter of 2024 detected that the anti-democratic actors continued to use narratives about unsettled historical and current issues to increase tensions in the Western Balkans (WB) region. While globally present anti-Western narratives, such as those about Russian aggression, continued to affect the public, the media attention shifted toward more local issues. Pre-election campaigns, Srebrenica genocide controversy, Kosovo-Serbia relations, and variants of the “Greater Albania” conspiracy theory used to incite inter-ethnic hate and increase Euroscepticism, marked this observation period.

The UN resolution vote on the Srebrenica genocide expectingly drew disinformation campaign, driven by a Serbian political agenda, framing the event as an assault on the Serbian nation, manifested as denial, distortion, or misrepresentation of the events surrounding the massacre that occurred in July 1995 during the Bosnian War. Key political voices being Ivan Stoilkovic’s Serbian Democratic Party (PDS) in North Macedonia, ridiculing the genocide by calling it “necrophiliac Disneyland” and Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska (RS) in Bosnia and Herzegovina who heightened tensions by explicitly threatening to secede RS from the unified state. Furthermore, Kremlin-affiliated individuals have backed Serbia, aligning with Moscow’s foreign policy objectives in the Balkans. This partnership enables Russia to preserve its influence in the region, which it considers strategically important.

“Evergreen” Balkan narratives around Kosovo-Serbia and “Greater Albania” continue to shadow the political developments, reinforcing negative stereotypes of ethnic Albanians in the WB as “source of crime and hatred” on one side and populistically advocating for the unification of all ethnic Albanians across the region on the other. Both used as means for distraction of the public from pressing issues through fearmongering.

2024 being the global elections year shifting the politics on the horizon didn’t surpass the WB. Disinformation and competing narratives played a pivotal role, especially in shaping voter perceptions and choices in the WB, where the tension between pro-European Union aspirations and authoritarian tendencies is already heightened.

As political dynamics change, especially during election periods, NGOs faced increased pressure, that has been seen in the case with [Georgia’s ‘foreign agents’ bill](#) and [Republika Srpska proposed ‘foreign agent’ law](#) would require media, nongovernmental organizations and other nonprofits to register as “pursuing the interests of a foreign power” if they receive funding from abroad. This poses a significant threat to the independence and effectiveness of NGOs, limiting their ability to advocate for transparency, human rights, and media freedom and could lead to further suppression of civil society and weaken democratic accountability.



METHODOLOGY

This report provides an overview of the results of the January-March 2024 monitoring process of domestic online media in North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, aiming at identifying and analyzing regional FIMI disinformation trends and understanding their main messages. Over 700 articles suspected to contain disinformation related to foreign influences in the region were analyzed by Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation partner organizations, selected by availability of verifiable facts checked through professional journalistic methods and 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 EU and NATO, and excludes misinformation, define as “verifiably false information that is spread without the intention to mislead, and often shared because the user believes it to be true.” The Methodology stipulates the intent and origin of the content suspected of being “verifiably false information,” aimed at undermining the functioning and development of democratic institutions or promoting foreign malign influences in the Western Balkans, based on a clear set of transparently outlined criteria.

By providing the context and interconnections, this methodology takes into account various types of content related to themes targeted by disinformation purveyors, 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.



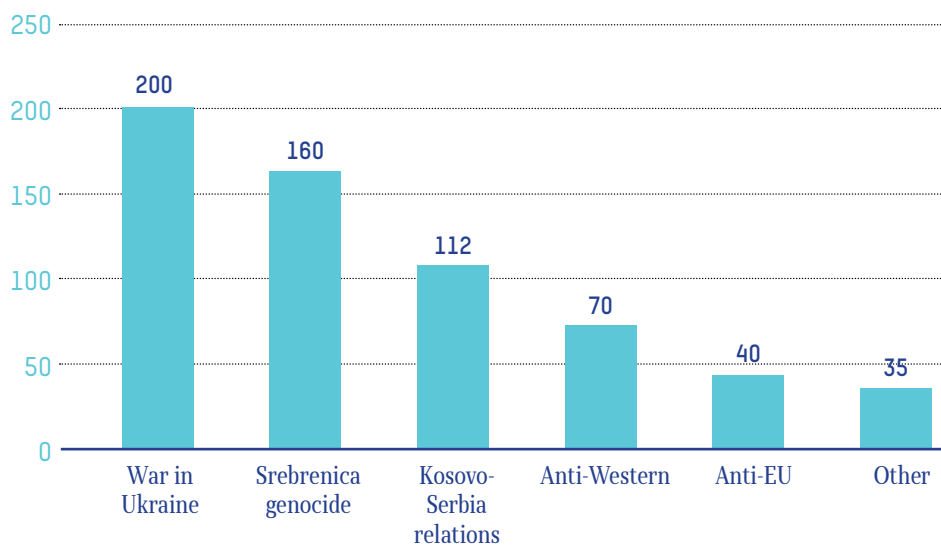
HIGHLIGHTS OF DISINFORMATION

Throughout the second quarter of 2024, disinformation surrounding the war in Ukraine remained largely consistent with patterns observed in the first quarter. The core narratives, particularly Russia’s justification of the invasion did not undergo significant shifts. However, media attention in the Western Balkans (WB) shifted during this period, with local issues taking center stage. The Srebrenica genocide, a deeply significant event in the history of the Balkans, is often surrounded by disinformation and revisionist narratives, especially during its anniversary. This year, with the added dimension of a UN resolution vote, it’s unsurprising that the genocide has gained even more attention throughout the Balkan region which made it the second most dominant topic of disinformation. The ongoing tensions between Kosovo and Serbia continue as a third topic of discussion in the Balkans has been no exception to disinformation. External actors often use harmful narratives to exacerbate divisions and polarize both the local population and the wider international community.

Anti-Western and anti-EU narratives have been widespread across the Balkans. These narratives have been cleverly adapted to various issues, from global conflicts like the war in Ukraine to local tensions, including Serbia-Kosovo relations, North Macedonia’s ongoing disputes with Bulgaria, and even seemingly unrelated events like the European Football Championship. These stories are designed to undermine public support for the EU and the West in Western Balkan countries, often portraying them as meddling, hypocritical, or even hostile to local interests.



NUMBER OF ARTICLES OF MOST DOMINANT DISINFORMATION TOPICS, APRIL - JUNE 2024

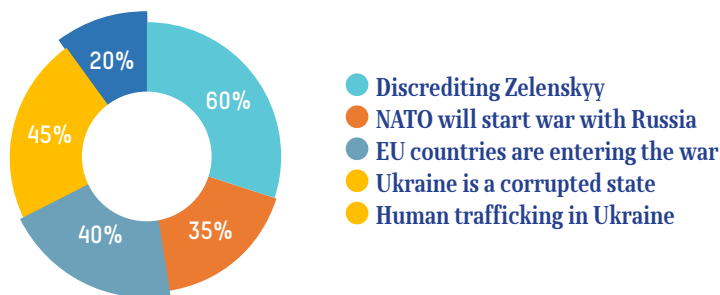


As global fatigue set in, regional media outlets started focusing more on domestic challenges, reducing the visibility of Ukraine-related coverage. This provided space for misinformation or selective coverage about the war to persist without much change, but with less scrutiny. The core narratives, particularly Russia’s justification of the invasion and Ukraine’s messaging of resilience, did not undergo significant shifts. Russia maintained its emphasis on anti-Western rhetoric and [victimhood](#).

The narrative of “Corruption in Ukraine” isn’t new, accusations of corruption were already a part of the propaganda before the war. However, since the conflict began, these claims have become more frequent. Russian media often presents Ukraine as unable to govern itself without outside involvement, reinforcing the image of a dysfunctional or lawless state, primarily attacking Zelensky’s [credibility](#) to lead the county. In addition to the narrative framing the conflict as primarily between NATO and Russia, another variation suggests that the war is fundamentally a struggle between the European Union (EU) and Russia. To advance this perspective, malign actors often make claims that EU nations, especially [Germany](#) and [France](#), are increasingly involved in the war. By emphasizing the role of these countries, they seek to portray the conflict as an extension of European aggression toward Russia, possibly to justify its victimhood narrative of a country being hated by the West for its toughness and righteousness.



PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON SUB - NARRATIVES ON THE TOPIC WAR IN UKRAINE APRIL-JUNE 2024



The [Srebrenica genocide](#), a deeply significant event in the history of the Balkans, is often surrounded by disinformation and revisionist narratives, especially during its anniversary. This disinformation can take the form of denial, distortion, or misrepresentation of the facts related to the massacre, which took place in July 1995 during the [Bosnian War](#). This year, with the added dimension of a [UN resolution vote](#), it's unsurprising that the genocide has gained even more attention throughout the Balkan region. A disinformation campaign influenced by a Serbian political agenda portrays the event as an attack on the Serbian nation, while also exposing internal tensions in other Balkan countries.

Repeating the narratives from Belgrade Serbian Democratic Party (PDS) in North Macedonia and its leader [Ivan Stoilkovic](#) denied and mocked the genocide in Srebrenica referring to it as "necrophiliac Disneyland". Worth mentioning that Stoilkovic became Vice-Prime minister in the newly formed North Macedonia Government in June.

Milorad Dodik, the leader of Republika Srpska (RS), one of the two entities within Bosnia and Herzegovina, escalated his rhetoric by going beyond mere repetition, openly threatening the [secession of RS](#) from the unified post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Kremlin malign actors were not immune to the situation and, in line with Moscow's foreign-policy goals in the Balkans, supported their key ally—Serbia. This alliance allows Moscow to sustain its influence in the region, which the Kremlin views as a zone of strategic economic importance. In 2015, [Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution](#) commemorating the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, and on 23 May 2024 voting against the Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin [argued](#) that the resolution was divisive and would "exacerbate tensions" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic divisions remain profound. Russia contended that the resolution unfairly singled out Bosnian Serbs, thereby obstructing reconciliation efforts in the region.



PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON SUB-NARRATIVES ON THE TOPIC KOSOVO-SERBIA RELATIONS IN APRIL - JUNE 2024



Kosovo-Serbia relations are severely strained, stemming from historical, ethnic, and political conflicts. In addition to the usual disinformation narratives labeling Kosovo as a “false state,” Serbia maintains its refusal to recognize Kosovo’s sovereignty, perceiving it as an essential part of its territory. By placing these sub-narratives, Serbia is trying to reinforce their “victimhood and territorial injustice” narrative and justify its policies towards Kosovo. Disinformation narratives primarily aim to depict Kosovo as a “source of crime and hatred,” reinforcing negative stereotypes of ethnic Albanians in the WB. Ultimately, these narratives seek to portray them as a threat to multi-ethnic societies and exacerbate already existing tensions.

The narrative of “Greater Albania” which refers to a nationalist concept advocating for the unification of all ethnic Albanians across the Balkan region into a single sovereign state is often used as a tool for populist rhetoric especially among North Macedonia’s and Serbian nationalistic parties, diverting public attention from pressing issues through fearmongering. This concept includes not only Albania but also territories in Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and parts of Serbia that have significant Albanian populations which highlights why this disinformation narrative is so prevalent and pervasive.

When this narrative extends beyond the Western Balkans, it takes on a new variation that distorts the representation of Albanians in the European Union, often linking them to issues in sports and religious groups that allegedly cause problems. This portrayal suggests that the challenges associated with this ethnicity are not confined to the Balkans but extend wherever Albanians reside.

The narrative amplified after Kosovo and Albania decided to remove border controls, misrepresented by Serbian media as a step toward creating “Greater Albania.” This narrative undermines regional cooperation, such as the Open Balkan initiative, which aims to promote



the free movement of goods, people, and capital across the region. By distorting the intentions behind the Kosovo–Albania agreement, this disinformation undermines efforts to build economic connections and foster trust among Western Balkan countries, which is essential for successful EU integration.

PERCENTAGE OF MOST COMMON SUB-NARRATIVES ON THE TOPIC SREBRENICA RESOLUTION IN APRIL - JUNE 2024



Anti-Western and [anti-EU narratives](#) are prevalent in many Western Balkan countries, despite the region’s aspirations to join the European Union. These narratives are often driven by various factors, including political opportunism, foreign influence, and social dissatisfaction. Dominant anti-Western and anti-EU narratives frequently portray the West as “decadent” and the EU as a “threat to national” sovereignty. In the context of upcoming elections in the Western Balkans, voters face a critical choice between aligning with the European Union’s democratic values or leaning toward authoritarian regimes that offer alternative models of governance. Disinformation plays a significant role in disrupting this decision-making process, often influencing public opinion and skewing perceptions of both paths.



COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE



ALBANIA

Albania's information environment has been relatively unchanged within the second quarter of 2024, however global and regional elections as well as meetings among Russia, China and North Korea have initiated disinformation flows spreading panic by placing wars and nuclear threats, contributing to a climate of fear and uncertainty.

After the opening on the [NATO airbase in Kuçovë](#), Albania, and the inauguration of the [Innovation and Defence Center in Tirana](#), funded by the USA, Russia has attempted to portray itself as a victim. The new base provoked [reaction from Moscow](#), which strongly opposes any NATO expansion into eastern and central Europe – especially in the Balkans which has traditionally been torn between East and West.

In May, numerous media outlets almost simultaneously reported bomb alarms in Tirana schools. The source of the alarm, whether it was sent to the [schools' emails](#) or to the [police](#), remains unclear. The media highlighted the fact that the same scheme [was used previously in North Macedonia](#). According to reports, the email sent to the schools contained a threatening message promising violence against teachers and invoking religious rhetoric.

Albanian media and social networks were heavily focused on coverage of the European Football Championship, frequently emphasizing ethnic and nationalist narratives. In this context, a video titled ["Vučić's Son Clashes with English and Albanian Fans"](#) was widely shared, adding to the heightened tensions



The results of the 2023 census in Albania which were published at the end of June 2024, show that the number of Macedonian minorities in the country has decreased by half. A report highlighted this change with the headline: [“Census 2023: Macedonians Halved! Bulgarians Measured for the First Time.”](#) The Macedonian Alliance for Integration political party of the ethnic Macedonians in Albania, [commented on these findings](#), suggesting that members of the Macedonian minority faced pressure from Bulgaria to obtain Bulgarian passports.

Relations between Kosovo and Serbia remains a major focus in the media, as they were in the previous quarter.

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation Instances
Kosovo-Serbia relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Republika Srpska would secede and join Serbia ▶ There will be war between Serbia and Kosovo ▶ The West is undermining Serbia by approving the Srebrenica genocide resolution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Republika Srpska insists on breaking away from Bosnia and Herzegovina to ask for unification with Belgrade. ▶ Vucic’s order to Serbian army: Get ready for war ▶ Resolution on Srebrenica has four goals - Washington, Berlin and London working against Serbia
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ NATO will start war with Russia ▶ France will get involved in the war ▶ Misleading representations of Zelensky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ NATO troops will be sent to fight in Ukraine against Russia ▶ Russia threatens France: We will attack French troops; we believe they have entered Ukraine
European Championship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Albanians and Serbs view each other as enemies ▶ Albanians are provocative and aggressive ▶ Distorted representation of Albanians 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Vucic’s son involved in fight with Serbian, and Albanian fans in Gelsenkirchen ▶ Clash begins on the streets between fans, Albanians suspected of starting the fight ▶ Violence broke out for the first time at Euro 2024 today when more than 100 Albanian ultras tried to attack Italian fans



BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Throughout the reporting period, the UN Resolution on the Genocide in Srebrenica and the July 11 anniversary of the genocide dominated media coverage in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the surrounding region. This focus became a platform for a new wave of persistent genocide denial and disinformation, particularly in media outlets affiliated with Milorad Dodik and Aleksandar Vučić, as well as state-funded Russian media.

Besides genocide denial, the main disinformation narratives evolved around the false claims that the adoption of the resolution will mean the “abolition of the Republika Srpska” and that this document will “declare the entire Serb nation genocidal”.

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russian state-funded and regionally affiliated media have portrayed attacks resulting in Ukrainian civilian deaths as “staged” crimes, drawing parallels to the “fake” massacres like the Markale massacre in Sarajevo. Such claims resurfaced following the bombing of a children’s hospital in Kyiv on July 8. Additionally, other instances of disinformation included false reports that some European countries are leaving NATO alongside with misleading representations of Zelenskyy trying to portray Ukraine as a corrupted state.

Simultaneously, deep fake campaigns emerged throughout the reporting period, impersonating well-known figures from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. These fraudulent campaigns advised the public to purchase fake medicines and other dubious “healing” products. Additionally, there was a continuation of both new and longstanding disinformation concerning vaccines and vaccination.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Ukraine is faking the victims ▶ “Ukraine Markala” ▶ Misleading representations of Zelensky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>“Ukrainian “Markala”!</u> The West and Kiev plot against Russia an attack on the children’s hospital ▶ Volodymyr Zelenskyy owns a <u>casino in Cyprus</u>
Srebrenica resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Genocide denial ▶ There is no evidence for the genocide in Srebrenica ▶ The Resolution declares the Serbian people a genocidal nation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Former UN High Representative:</u> Many those buried in Srebrenica were brought from other towns and villages ▶ <u>Efraim Zuroff:</u> All can leave unharmed. <u>It’s not genocide</u> and anyone who calls it genocide is playing politics ▶ <u>Salkić</u> admitted that the <u>names of living people are on the monuments in Srebrenica</u> ▶ Large billboard in New York that reads <u>“Serbs are not a genocidal nation”</u>





KOSOVO

During the reporting period, events in Northern Kosovo became prime targets for disinformation. Serbian media often seized upon decisions made by Kosovo authorities, portraying them as direct attacks on the Serb population in the region. This pattern of reporting amplified tensions and fueled mistrust between communities.

Significant controversy arose when Vudi Xhymshiti, founder and chief editor of “The Frontliner” Magazine accused Deputy Assistant Secretary Gabriel Escobar of undermining Kosovo by claiming that his wife received funds from Serbia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. However, the US Department of State quickly denied the claim in a written response to Sbunker, calling it false.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories about the creation of a “Greater Albania” were also present especially after Kosovo and Albania decided to remove border controls, misrepresented by Serbian media as a step toward creating “Greater Albania.” These reports accused Tirana and Pristina of secretly agreeing to unify and criticized European countries for allegedly staying silent.

Conspiracy theories claiming NATO would invade Serbia and relocating Camp Bondsteel to Niš, as well as claims of KFOR and the Kosovo Security Force conducting joint activities in Northern Kosovo, appeared in the media but were denied by official sources.

Cyber-attack by Russian hackers targeted Kosovo’s official websites, including those of the Presidency and the Prime Minister, causing temporary outages. This attack followed Kosovo’s offer of military support to Ukraine and a statement by Defense Minister Ejup Macedonci at the “Defense 24” conference in Poland, where he discussed potential support for Ukraine against Russian aggression. After the attack, the hackers posted a warning for Kosovo to reconsider its support for Ukraine.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
Kosovo-Serbia relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Kosovo tries to intimidate the Serbs living in the North ▶ NATO would invade Serbia ▶ Kosovo and Albania aim to create the “Greater Albania” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The expropriation decision is considered <u>yet another move aimed at expelling Serbs from Kosovo</u> ▶ The <u>refusal to allow Serbian Patriarch Porfirije’s visit to the Peja Monastery</u> in Kosovo is a continuation of the violation of rights_ ▶ <u>Bondsteel will be relocated to Niš,</u> NATO will invade Serbia ▶ Tirana and Pristina are openly taking concrete <u>steps towards creating a Greater Albania</u>
The case with American diplomat Gabriel Escobar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Gabriel Escobar is undermining Kosovo ▶ US officials are corrupted and cooperate with Serbia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Gabriel Escobar receives funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia ▶ American diplomat <u>Gabriel Escobar was dismissed due to his family’s financial ties with Serbian institutions</u>





MONTENEGRO

During the reporting period, there was intense discussion regarding the resolution on Srebrenica. Although Montenegro officially voted in favor of the resolution, there were many uncertainties and mixed signals from the country's leading politicians, reflecting a lack of consensus or clarity on the issue. Meanwhile, the well-known pro-Serbian and pro-Russian communities in Montenegro were highly vocal and active in their opposition, strongly backed by a coordinated propaganda effort from Belgrade.

Minister of Police and former Director of the BIA (Security Intelligence Agency) of Serbia Aleksandar Vulin, has compiled a list of individuals deemed unwelcome in Serbia, both by law and by conscience. This list includes deputies from the Montenegrin Assembly who voted in favor of the resolution prohibiting the denial of the genocide in Srebrenica.

The situation escalated after Serbian party leader Mandić called on the Montenegrin parliament to pass a resolution on the World War II-era Croatian concentration camp at Jasenovac. This was perceived as a counter to the United Nations resolution acknowledging the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, leading to worsening relations with Croatia and resulting in three prominent Montenegrin politicians being declared "persona non grata" by the Croatian government.

In addition to internal conflicts, the disinformation landscape varied greatly across regions, stretching from Europe to the Middle East and the USA. Each region encountered its own set of disinformation narratives, driven by a multitude of conspiracy theories that intensified global tensions.



Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Child trafficking in Ukraine ▶ Ukraine is a corrupted state ▶ Misleading representations of Zelenskyy ▶ France will get involved in the war 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Non-profit organization associated with Elena Zelensky, <u>involved in the abduction and sale of minor children from Ukraine</u> ▶ <u>Zelenskyy bought the residence of Charles III in Britain for 20 million pounds</u> ▶ <u>France sent combat troops to the front in Ukraine</u>
Israel-Hamas war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Accusing Israel of war crimes ▶ Israel is responsible for the war ▶ The Antisemitism Awareness Act is against Orthodox religion ▶ Palestinians are supporting Iran 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>Netanyahu will face “life imprisonment” for war crimes in Gaza</u> ▶ Any claim that <u>Jews killed Christ will be treated as “Hate Speech” and Anti-Semitism</u> ▶ <u>Palestinians celebrate at the Al-Aqsa Mosque</u> after hearing the news of the Iranian missile attack
Srebrenica resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ There is no evidence for the genocide in Srebrenica ▶ Genocide denial ▶ The Resolution declares the Serbian people a genocidal nation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Imagine a genocide so terrible that the main <u>argument for it is not the evidence but the Hague verdicts</u> ▶ This Resolution declares <u>the Serbian people a genocidal nation</u>





NORTH MACEDONIA

Throughout the reporting period, disinformation was largely driven by two major topics: the war in Ukraine and the dual elections in North Macedonia, which took an anti-EU turn while simultaneously attempting to undermine trust in democratic processes and sow skepticism among voters.

On April 24 and May 8, North Macedonia held presidential and parliamentary elections, resulting in a change of government and the election of the country's first female president. Controversy quickly followed her election when she stated that she would not use the country's official name, "North Macedonia." At her inauguration, she only referred to the country as "Macedonia." This move prompted reactions from both Greece and the EU External Action Service, which expressed regret over the situation.

The name change has been continually exploited to fuel anti-EU sentiment, with narratives such as "the EU forced the name change in North Macedonia" and "the EU has double standards." This situation is intensifying tensions and skepticism toward European integration, while simultaneously presenting the newly elected president as a strong figure capable of challenging international agreements. It raises concerns about whether the new president is deviating from the European path.

The Left, a Euroskeptic and pro-Russian party, also competed in the elections. Their platform focused on opposing European Union integration and advocating closer ties with Russia while spreading nationalism and anti-Albanian sentiment. In its Manifesto titled "Incorruptible in Parliament", the political party "Levica" in the chapter dealing with social media advocates for criminalization and prohibition of – as they put it – the so-called "fact-checking organization" of social media.

One of the most disturbing forms of party propaganda in the pre-election period in our country is the spread of hate speech on ethnic and even religious grounds. This situation becomes even more disturbing when such content receives media space. Since there is no law regulating the work of online media in North Macedonia, most online information platforms are plagued with disinformation, propaganda, and unprofessional journalistic reporting.



Russian propaganda consistently pushed narratives of fascism and corruption in Ukraine, while distorting the image of President Zelensky. To undermine North Macedonia’s support for Ukraine, disinformation falsely claimed that supporting Ukraine would lead the country toward neo-fascism. This narrative emerged following the meeting between newly elected President Gordana Siljanovska Davkova and Ukrainian Ambassador Larysa Dir.

The Srebrenica resolution gained significant attention in North Macedonian media, largely due to the influence of the Democratic Party of Serbs in Macedonia. In addition to the usual narratives of genocide denial and portraying Serbs as victims, Ivan Stoilkovic, the party leader, Deputy Prime Minister, and Minister for Relations between Ethnic Communities in the new government, relativized the genocide by referring to it as a “necrophilic Disneyland.” This statement prompted the Bosniak Democratic Alliance (BDS) and the Bosniak National Council (BNV) to file a criminal complaint.

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives	Most impactful disinformation instances
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The war is between NATO and Russia ▶ Discrediting Zelenskyy ▶ Ukraine is a corrupted state ▶ Organ trafficking in Ukraine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Germany and <u>NATO are sending 90 thousand soldiers</u> to the front with Russia ▶ <u>Zelenskyy bought a casino in Cyprus</u> ▶ <u>Zelenskyy bought a mansion</u> from British King Charles ▶ Former healthcare Minister of Ukraine is suspected of “<u>selling human organs abroad</u>”
Anti-EU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ EU will not enlarge anymore ▶ EU forced the name change in North Macedonia ▶ EU has double standards ▶ EU supports fascism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ French Parliament adopted a resolution to stop the EU enlargement process ▶ The <u>EU supports pedophilia and stole Macedonia’s name</u> ▶ The <u>European Union is fascist</u> in its foundations and that it was built by elites who established fascism
Srebrenica resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Genocide denial ▶ The Resolution declares the Serbian people a genocidal nation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ <u>The Serbs are genocidal people</u>, that’s what was voted a while ago in the UN, at least that’s how the North voted



SERBIA

From April to June 2024, the dominant narratives in Serbian media continued to revolve around the war in Ukraine and the escalating tensions between Belgrade and Priština. These topics were frequently discussed with a strong and pervasive anti-Western sentiment, reflecting widespread skepticism and criticism of Western influence.

Furthermore, Serbia witnessed significant events in its foreign policy, particularly concerning [Kosovo's candidacy for membership in the Council of Europe](#) and the [United Nations General Assembly's Resolution on the Srebrenica genocide](#). Another prominent theme was the growing discourse around the secessionist ambitions of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina. These issues further contributed to the already charged atmosphere in Serbian media, adding layers of complexity to the ongoing narratives.

At the same time, prominent pro-government and pro-Russian media outlets in Serbia persistently promoted established anti-Western narratives. These narratives emphasized the portrayal of Western political pressure on Serbia and the perceived [stigmatization of the Serbian people](#).

When it comes to bilateral relations, it is important to mention the [Joint Statement between the Republic of Serbia and the People's Republic of China](#) on deepening and raising the comprehensive strategic partnership and building a Serbia-China community with a shared future in the new era signed by the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping. Additionally, [several memorandums of understanding were signed](#) between television companies, [news agencies](#) and radio stations between Serbia and China. The pro-government media wrote superlatively about the official interstate meeting between President Vučić and Xi, emphasizing the historical significance of the visit.



<p>Serbia-Kosovo relations</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ “Mirdita ,good day” is a provocation for the Serbian people ▶ Kosovo is a false state ▶ Kosovo is source of crime and hearted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The “<u>Mirdita, good day</u>” festival that will be held on the very days when the Serbian people celebrate Vidovdan, has been <u>nothing more than a crude provocation.</u> ▶ Such a cultural policy - in which “Mirdita” is held in Belgrade on Vidovdan - <u>is distributed from those power centers that keep part of our territory under military occupation.</u>
<p>Srebrenica resolution</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Genocide denial ▶ The resolution on Srebrenica is part of a planned attack on Serbia ▶ The West accuses Serbs as genocidal people to justify their own defeats ▶ Labeling Serbia as genocidal as a political tool 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Except Srebrenica there is also an <u>attack on Serbia and the Serbian people in Serbia</u> with attempts to seize Kosovo and Metohija ▶ They are trying to justify their defeat and hang the burden of a genocidal nation and use <u>Serbia as a scapegoat</u> ▶ The resolution on Srebrenica imposed <u>the most difficult qualification on Serbia</u> and its people
<p>Chinese influence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ China as Serbia’s true and sincere friend ▶ China as a defender of Serbia’s interests in international arena ▶ The friendship between Serbia and China bothers the West 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ The bombing of the embassy was a humiliation for the <u>Chinese people! China is our greatest friend in the world!</u> ▶ <u>The friendship between Serbia and China bothers the West!</u> Xi Jinping has made it clear what he thinks about the bombing of the embassy!





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 at influencing upcoming elections or manipulating perceptions of past elections is a major concern. These efforts often focus on spreading false information to disrupt the voting process or distort public understanding of election results. These include municipal elections that will be held in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 6 October, possibility of local elections in Montenegro in September, as well as the closeness of the presidential elections in the USA.
- The ongoing narrative of “Corruption in Ukraine” and the misleading portrayal of President Zelensky, often repeated, aim to discredit not only him and his family but also Ukrainian officials. This disinformation reinforces Russia’s efforts to depict Ukraine as a dysfunctional or lawless state. By framing the war as an economic burden, especially for the EU, disinformation suggest that NATO is coercing countries into spending money on Ukraine while implying that this financial aid is being misused or stolen.
- Narratives, fueled by political opportunism, foreign influence, and social dissatisfaction, often depict the West as “decadent” and the EU as a threat to national sovereignty. With upcoming elections, voters must choose between aligning with the EU’s democratic values or supporting authoritarian regimes that propose alternative governance models
- Disinformation actively spread about the proposed independence of Republika Srpska from Bosnia and Herzegovina and its subsequent union with Serbia. While such a scenario is highly unlikely, this narrative is being promoted both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Serbia, potentially fueling regional tensions and instability.



Albania

- Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia will serve as key sources of disinformation, along with rising anti-NATO narratives and concerns about a potential conflict between NATO and Russia.
- The rise of extreme right parties in the European Parliament following the recent elections opens a possibility for malign actors to misinterpret these developments in Albanian media.

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BIH)

- An increase in disinformation and hateful narratives surrounding the anniversary of the Croatian Storm operation on August 5th, claims aimed at distorting the historical context or consequences of the operation.
- The ongoing disinformation surrounding the Croatian Storm operation will affect vulnerable groups in Croatia, particularly the Serb minority, along with Serb refugees residing in Bosnia.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina is preparing for the 2024 Local Elections for mayors and municipal assemblies across 143 municipalities in Republika Srpska and the Federation. As the early election campaign unfolds, a significant amount of disinformation is emerging, with expectations of malign influences aimed at undermining the electoral process and outcomes.

Kosovo

- Expected broader tensions between Kosovo and Serbia, with both sides accusing each other of provoking violence.
- Disinformation surrounding the potential opening of the Ibar Bridge in Mitrovica. The government's warnings and the widespread reactions suggest that the opening could potentially exacerbate tensions in northern Kosovo. Especially with government and local leaders having different views on whether reopening the bridge will improve or worsen regional tensions.
- The ongoing unsolved issue with the Serbian dinar that has been a hot topic for disinformation narratives connected with the Kosovo authority's behavior towards the Serbs in the North.
- Controversy about the recent adoption of a new law concerning the Independent Media Commission has sparked significant controversy. This law, which aims to regulate online media, has the potential to give the Kosovo government excessive control over media outlets.

Montenegro

- With snap elections in Podgorica scheduled for autumn and a government reshuffle that appears unstable, these elections may serve as a testing ground for upcoming snap parliamentary elections. Given the events of the last elections in Podgorica, a significant amount of disinformation surrounding various themes that are important to the people of Montenegro can be expected.



Serbia

- The rise of nationalist narratives tied to the idea of Republika Srpska’s secession from Bosnia and Herzegovina is gaining momentum. Although this is largely used as a “smoke screen” by politicians, the rhetoric is stoking dangerous tensions and fueling instability in the region.
- A major issue that could lead to serious incidents is the ongoing situation in northern Kosovo, where legally elected but de facto undemocratically chosen mayors (of Albanian ethnicity) in the predominantly Serbian municipalities of Northern Mitrovica, Leposavić, and Zubin Potok are refusing to step down from their positions.
- Misinformation and an inevitable clash between the official government stance, which views lithium mining in Serbia as an unmissable economic opportunity, and members of the Green movement along with concerned citizens who believe such a project will have severe long-term consequences for the environment and quality of life. The intensity and scale of this confrontation remain unpredictable, but tensions are rising.

North Macedonia

- Disinformation narratives are targeting the EU and its member states, accusing them of undemocratic behavior toward North Macedonia. These narratives claim that North Macedonia is being unfairly pressured to uphold the Prespa Agreement, despite allegations that the other party has not fulfilled its obligations. This disinformation risks undermining trust in EU institutions and fueling domestic tensions.
- Anti-Albanian discourse is becoming increasingly prevalent in the media, driven largely by populist political parties. This rhetoric of “Greater Albania” exacerbating ethnic divisions and has the potential to incite further regional tensions.
- Disinformation about the topic of abolition of the mechanism called “balancer”, which aims to ensure fair and adequate representation of employees is portrayed as an attack towards the Albanian population in North Macedonia.



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