

DISINFORMATION TRENDS AND NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKAN REGION



**Periodical report on
media monitoring**

January – June 2022



Kingdom of the Netherlands

The project Western Balkans Anti Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences Through Watchdog Journalism is implemented by Metamorphosis Foundation (North Macedonia) in partnership with Faktoje (Albania), International and Security Affairs Centre - ISAC (Serbia), Center for Democratic Transition - CDT (Montenegro), S'bunker (Kosovo) and UGD Zašto ne / Why Not (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	5
PROJECT DESCRIPTION	6
METHODOLOGY	7
ANALYSIS OF MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS.....	8
Country contexts	8
Themes and narratives	9
Examples/cases of radicalization of vulnerable groups.....	11
Sources of disinformation	12
MEDIA MONITORING REPORT – NORTH MACEDONIA.....	13
Country context update	13
Findings from the media monitoring.....	14
Disinformation sources.....	16
Domestic sources.....	16
Foreign sources.....	17
Most impactful narratives.....	17
MEDIA MONITORING REPORT - ALBANIA.....	18
Country context update	18
Findings from the media monitoring.....	19
Disinformation sources.....	25
Domestic sources.....	25
Foreign sources.....	25
Most impactful narratives.....	25
MEDIA MONITORING REPORT – KOSOVO	26
Country context update	26
Findings from the media monitoring.....	27
Disinformation sources.....	31
Domestic sources.....	31
Foreign sources.....	31
Most impactful narratives.....	31
MEDIA MONITORING REPORT - SERBIA	32
Country context update	32

Findings from the media monitoring.....	33
Disinformation sources.....	37
Domestic sources.....	37
Foreign sources.....	37
Most impactful narratives.....	37
MEDIA MONITORING REPORT - MONTENEGRO	38
Country context update.....	38
Findings from the media monitoring.....	38
Disinformation sources.....	41
Domestic sources.....	41
Foreign sources.....	41
Most impactful narratives.....	41
MEDIA MONITORING REPORT – BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	42
Country context update.....	42
Findings from the media monitoring.....	43
Disinformation sources.....	48
Domestic sources.....	48
Foreign sources.....	48
Most impactful narratives.....	48
Recommendations	49
Recommendations for individual media workers i.e. journalists.....	49
Recommendations for professional media organizations and related bodies	49

INTRODUCTION

Monitoring and mapping the flow of media content between countries in the Western Balkan region is essential to understanding how disinformation originating from external factors spreads so freely across country borders. Disinformation comes from multiple sources and in different flavors, as part of various trends and narratives, but resulting from a similar intent to disrupt the democratic processes and provoke conflict, especially through radicalization of vulnerable groups, using all conceivable fissures in societies to pit against each other citizens, communities and countries.

In recent years, foreign malign influence focused on exploiting key political developments and events, such as elections or referendums, pandemics, and today the Russian aggression on Ukraine. In support of the aggression, during the first half of 2022 Pro-Kremlin media spread very strong propaganda which was republished, emulated and disseminated widely throughout the region, alongside claims aimed at stopping the integration of targeted countries within the European Union and NATO.

Disinformation poses a threat to Western Balkan security and safety, and all its societies have to work together to prevent the dire consequences. This region has a fertile ground for conspiracy theories, being plagued by distrust in institutions and declining quality of journalism, while various malign actors, domestic and foreign use both traditional and online media to promote their agendas and hinder democratic developments in the region. In order to counter these tendencies, the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Project uses a tailored methodology in which the first step of monitoring of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda is followed up by debunking of identified disinformation through fact-checking and networking, as well as watchdog and investigative journalism. The combination of methods increases situational awareness and public knowledge about disinformation ecosystems in Western Balkans, which is the basis for further advocacy initiatives leading to systemic solutions.

Bardhyl Jashari

Executive director of Metamorphosis Foundation
for Internet and Society

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub project debunks the chief propaganda claims that deny the existence or minimize the importance of foreign malign influences i.e. disinformation originating from external actors in Western Balkans, providing evidence about the actual situation on the ground in the form of long-lasting public record, creating a data-driven early warning infrastructure for disinformation threats and potential harm.

Foundation Metamorphosis created a network of media outlets and investigative journalists (infrastructure) that builds fact-based public record, based on transparent methodological approach, disproving the main populist tenet of populist propaganda undercutting the democratic institutions – false equivalence.

Along with the partners - ISAC International and Security Affairs Centre, a think tank from Serbia; Zašto ne (Why Not) from Bosnia and Herzegovina, founder of the fact-checking services Istinomjer.ba and Raskrinkavanje.ba (fcs); The Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro, founder of the fact checking service Raskrinkavanje.me (fcs); Faktoje.al, a fact-checking service from Albania; and Sbunker.net a media publishing organization from Kosovo, Metamorphosis works on exposing foreign malign influence in Western Balkans by mapping the flow of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda originating from external actors through the region.

This project aims to increase situational awareness and public knowledge about disinformation ecosystems in Western Balkans, by providing a framework of a data-driven early warning infrastructure. In doing so, the project will build synergies and also identify gaps in current anti- disinformation efforts. The produced journalistic content (in-depth and investigative stories, fact- checking articles) will systematize data collection and analysis building a base for creation of a data- driven early warning infrastructure centered around the knowledge hub.

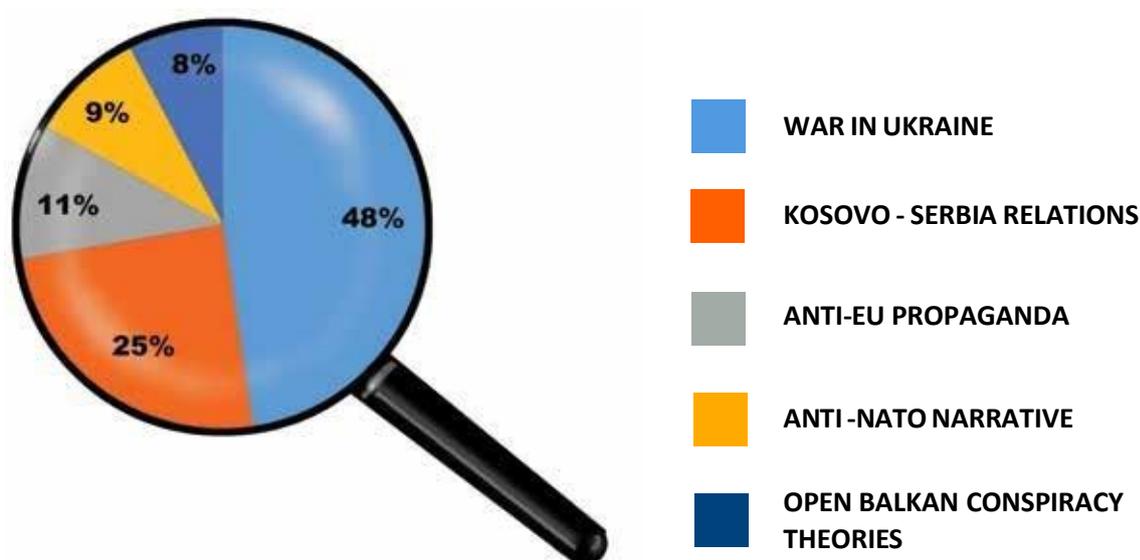
The strong focus of the project is creating an infrastructure that will enable regular and structured information sharing, situational awareness and threat assessments, and production of data-driven reports and analysis.

Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkan region the first such data-driven monitoring report, produced as a result of the work by the partner-members of the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub, achieved in the period January 2022 – June 2022.

METHODOLOGY

In order to identify trends in media reporting, as well as key disinformation trends related to malign influences in the WB countries, monitoring of the domestic media of North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia-Herzegovina was carried out within this report in the period from January 2022 to June 2022.

To determine the main disinformation trends, we analyzed more than 1000 disinformation articles, some of them containing misinformation related to foreign influences in the countries and some were subject to fact-checking and analytical articles from fact-checking services in WB countries. In the sample for the implementation of this analysis were included all available articles that contain verifiable facts that can be checked with professional journalistic methods, taking care to include all articles with high representation on social networks.

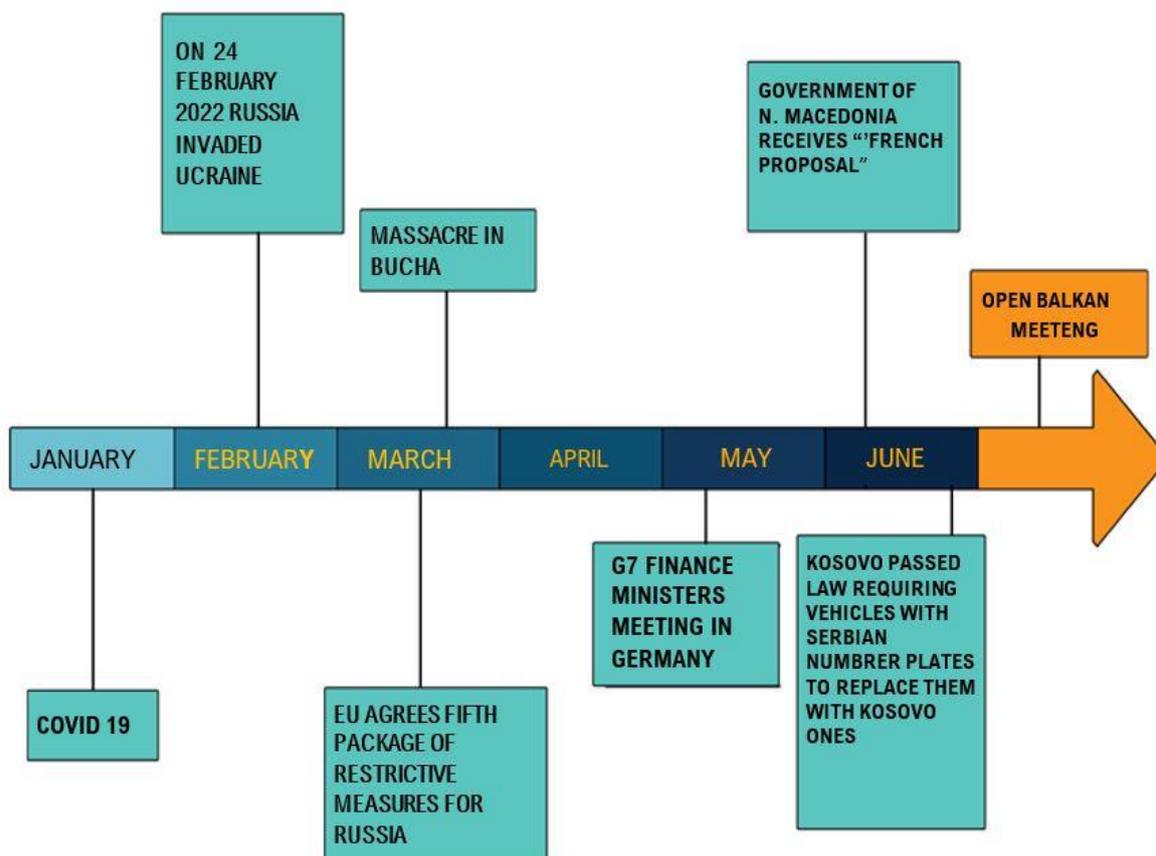


Graphic 1. Percentage of disinformation divided by topical areas

ANALYSIS OF MEDIA MONITORING FINDINGS

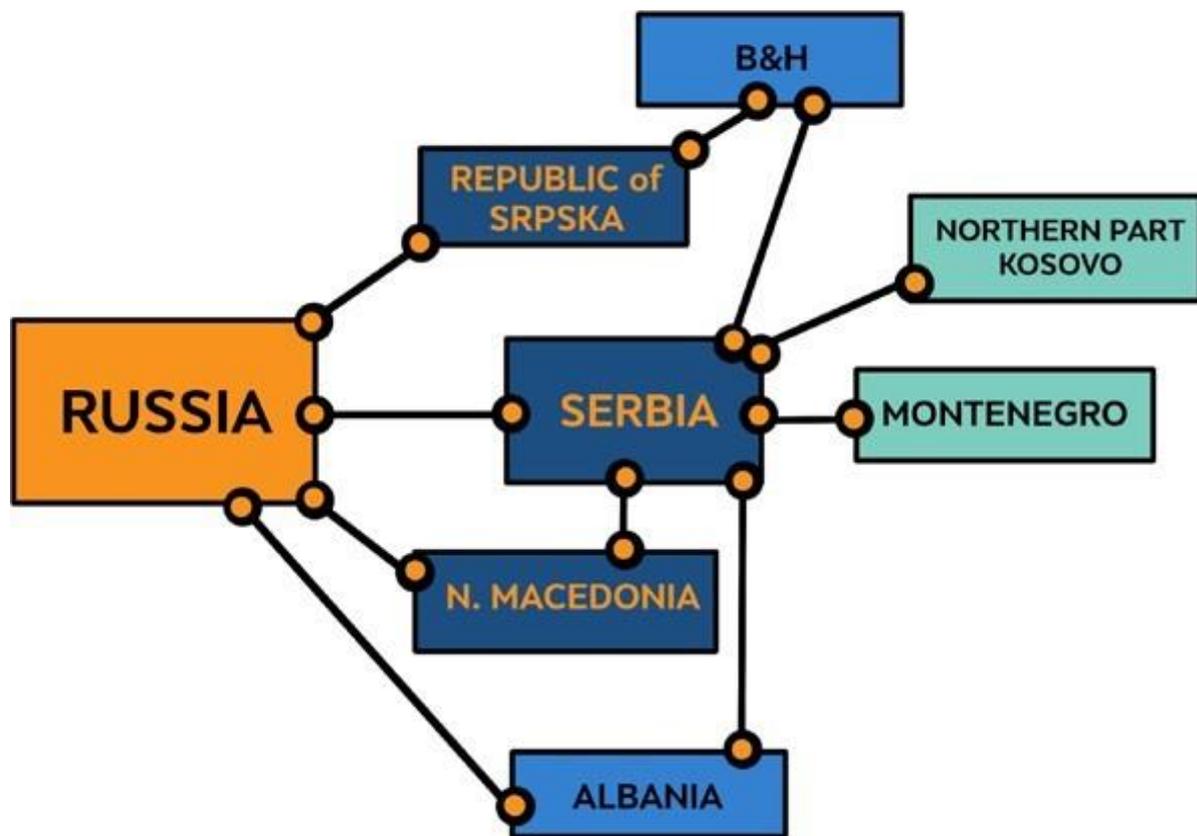
COUNTRY CONTEXTS

When we talk about the flow of disinformation, we must not exclude the country context and the main events in the WB region such as the French proposal, the Open Balkan Initiative, elections, and cyber-attacks in some WB countries. However, we must also take into account the main happenings in the region such as the war in Ukraine as one of the themes producing the most disinformation. Many of these events became a base on which different media outlets created their disinformation articles. They deliberately twisted the course and context of these events depending on whose interests they represented. All WB countries have a polarized media ecosystem, mostly owned and controlled by political parties whether or not in power, constantly saturating the media sphere with all kinds of articles about different topics full of disinformation. These media outlets mainly do not have Impressum and do not follow the code of journalists.



Graphic 2. The main events that were base for spreading disinformation narratives

Our report confirmed the findings from the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index where Serbia is marked as a highly vulnerable country to foreign media influence and also brought to attention a trajectory of distribution of pro-Russian disinformation, from Russia to Serbia (and its regions of influence such as the Republic of Srpska and the northern parts of Kosovo) to all the WB countries. Serbian media has been republishing articles from Sputnik, RT, and Telegram channels and creating a large number of pro-Russian-oriented people. It is the same case in BiH where the public broadcasting service of the Republic of Srpska (RTRS) and public news agency (SRNA), are serving as an extended arm of the Russian propaganda machine. In Montenegro, pro-Russian narratives are also derived from the pro-Serbian media because apparently in the country Serbian news is a frequent source of information.



Graphic 3. Range and distribution of pro-Russian narratives

THEMES AND NARRATIVES

The main theme in January was Covid-19, and conspiracy theories around it, but as soon as Russia attacked Ukraine, disinformation on this theme started to appear. In the whole region of Western Balkans most dominant disinformation was, and to some extent still is related to the war in Ukraine. All countries noted the war in Ukraine as one of the three most impactful themes. The most common narratives concerning this topic were:

- Unfounded information about military operations
- Distorted representation of Ukrainians and Zelensky

- US-operated biological weapons laboratories
- Nazism/Fascism in Ukraine
- Instill fear: from the Third World War to a biological disaster
- The government sending mercenaries to fight in Ukraine (this narrative appeared in Kosovo media only)

These narratives were very easily transformed into new themes such as "Dismembering the West" and "Distrust in EU and NATO". When we look at the context where most of the countries are in their EU accession period and under malign influences it is very easy to foresee that part of the Russian propaganda will also portray Russia as a friend and an alternative to the EU. The most common narratives in all the countries were:

- NATO expansion to Russian borders caused the war
- EU supports anti-democratic/fascist behavior of member countries
- EU is not to be trusted; they do not want WB countries to join them
- The West is initiating and encouraging the war

Variations of these narratives were noted in North Macedonia, where media disinformation presented the EU as being non-democratic. This is in connection with the Bulgaria- North Macedonia dispute, where Bulgaria is portrayed as the cat's paw of countries that do not support EU expansion to Western Balkans, and as anti-democratic behavior of member countries (first Greece now Bulgaria) towards North Macedonia.

In Serbia narratives like "Serbia is doing everything on its side to join the EU but the EU does not want Serbia as a member" and "The EU and NATO want to tear apart Serbia" were very present in the media ecosystem. There were even claims such as "NATO did to Serbia what Russia is doing to Ukraine", which justifies the war and recycles propaganda from the Yugoslav wars of 1990- 2001.

Most of the disinformation related to the perception of Russia originates from the Serbian media sphere. Thus, Serbian media disinformation is a significant factor of Russian influence in the Western Balkans. These are the most common disinformation spread through Serbian media:

- Russia threatening Kosovo, through Serbia
- Montenegro is a volatile country and the only salvation is to get together with Serbia again
- Creation of a Russian military base in Serbia

The above-listed narratives were later used as a base for additional disinformation about Kosovo - Serbia tensions.

Russia was presented as both a friend and an enemy in the media sphere. Nevertheless, both opposite media narratives did not question Russia's greatness and power for changing the order and making a significant impact if WB are to join the non-EU economic groups. The most common narratives presenting Russia were:

- We should not mess with Russia (spreading fear)
- Russia threatening North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia
- Putin as the defender of conservative values: traditional religions – Christian and Muslim (Chechens love him), anti-LGBT, anti-woke, no cancel culture
- Orthodox-Christian brotherhood

Besides these widespread narratives in all WB countries in Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia disinformation wrapped around Kosovo- Serbia dispute was very much present in the media ecosystem. All disinformation on this theme had a political background and aimed to portray one or another political party as pro-Russian, pro-Serbian, or both. This disinformation trend also included the Open Balkan Initiative as one of the narratives.

In Albania, the noted narratives were: “Open Balkan Initiative is a pro-Serbian and pro-Russian project that is going to lead to war”, “Albania serves Serbia’s interest”, etc. These were mostly spread through social media profiles of politicians and sometimes had an even bigger reach than media agencies or online portals.

Manipulation with incidents in Serb-majority areas in Kosovo saturated the media sphere in Kosovo causing narratives such as “Relocation of the Serbian army near the border”, “Denying the Rečak Massacre” and “Kosovo government is planning to attack northern Kosovo” to be among most influential ones in this country.

On the other hand, in Serbia, the disinformation was inverted and directed at spreading fear and representing Kosovo as the initiator of the conflict. In the narratives “Albin Kurt continued with provocative statements and inflammatory rhetoric” and “Kosovo wants to expel Serbs”.

EXAMPLES/CASES OF RADICALIZATION OF VULNERABLE GROUPS

During the reporting period, there were cases of radicalization resulting from disinformation, connected with the main events in the WB region. Protests were organized in North Macedonia against the French proposal, in Albania against the Open Balkan Initiative, and in Kosovo blockades including attacks after the decision of the Kosovo Government about the license plates and IDs. All had an interethnic and political background and the ones in North Macedonia even resulted in incidents. Unlike the other WB countries, in Serbia, several rallies in support of Russia have been held since the beginning of the invasion of Ukraine encouraging aggressive war. This comes as no surprise as the most susceptible groups to disinformation in almost all of the WB countries are pro-Serbian oriented citizens. In North Macedonia, this group is made up of supporters of “Levica” (left-wing nationalist and euro-skeptic political party under Russian influence), supporters of VMRO (nationalistic party) together with North Macedonian diaspora.

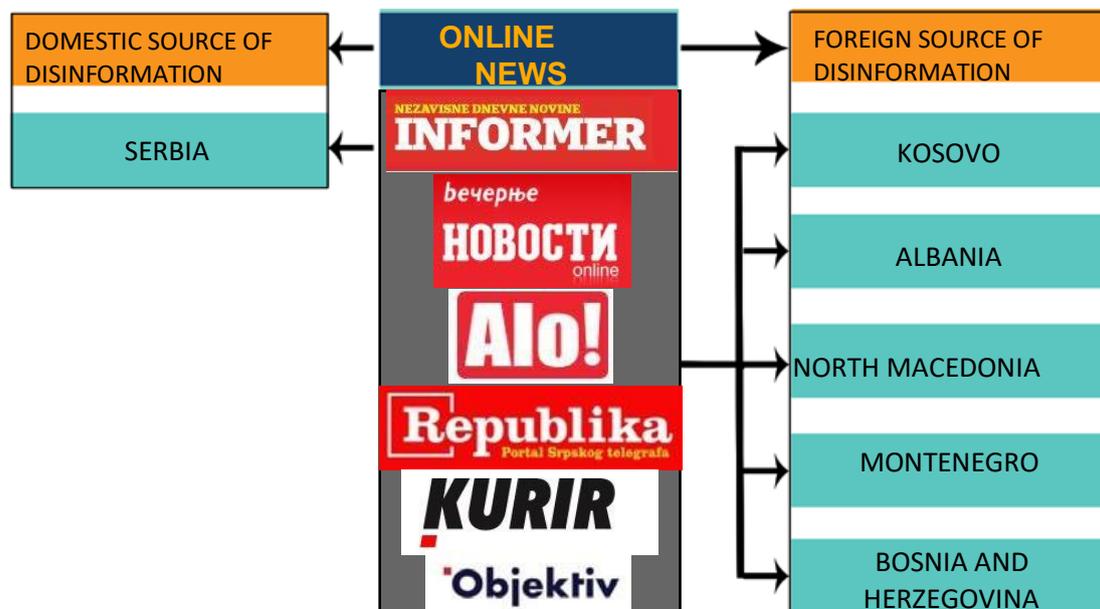
If we look at pro-Kremlin disinformation, a shared characteristic of all WB countries is that the main targets are public opinion and support for the European Union and NATO. Within these societies, the most susceptible groups to disinformation include youth and elderly people, as well as minorities and citizens with radical views.

SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION

In most of the WB countries main source of domestic disinformation were online news portals that spread propaganda by not providing context or even share strait disinformation in articles without signed authors. Some of these portals are affiliated with political parties and share statements or opinions of politicians depending on their political positioning. There online news portals have their own Facebook pages where they share this articles, thus spread the same disinformation but on a different medium. Most of the countries noted that another important source of disinformation are Facebook or tweeter profiles of politicians.

When it comes to foreign sources of disinformation in all the WB countries were Serbian tabloids that have the same version of the tabloid in most of the WB languages, or are very popular in the Serbian speaking communities or minorities in the region. Another problem in correlation with this is that almost all countries that were previously part of Yugoslavia can read and understand Serbian news so it makes it even easier to spread. The news that come from Serbia are mostly pro -Russian and anti –Western some of them are directly taken from Russian state own media.

Russian Embassies in all WB countries are also a big factor in spreading disinformation. On their twitter or Facebook profiles they share all kind of bias and fake news about the war in Ukraine.



Graphic 4. Domestic and foreign sources of disinformation and distribution through the Western Balkan online media sphere

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT – NORTH MACEDONIA

Name of the organization / media:	Metamorphosis
Location:	Skopje, N. Macedonia
Reporting period:	January 1st – June 30th 2022

COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

North Macedonian media is mostly divided between political parties' opposition, the ruling one and in the recent years a third party the left one is becoming very popular. On the other side we have the clickbait online portals sharing different news with catchy headlines but in no correlation with the content when we open them. Main events that became source of disinformation was the war in Ukraine, NATO accession and blockage in the EU integration process as well as the French proposal. Many media outlets used this to write anti-NATO and anti-EU articles, which also included disinformation on the war in Ukraine. This narrative was mainly used by the left political party Levica and their media outlets constantly filling the space with pro-Russian propaganda and also the opposition party that claims North Macedonia should not accept the French proposal.

Another source of disinformation continuing the trend from the past are social profiles of politicians where they publish their opinion and online media that portray their statements as official announcements. Our fact checking service in order to deal with these issues except the fact checking articles has been publishing counter spin articles for each statement that has been found.

In the period that has passed the only constant disinformation trend was on Covid 19 conspiracy theories and anti-vaccination calls. Many of these sources mostly Facebook profiles spread disinformation on the war in Ukraine also, especially the narrative about bio laboratories in Ukraine and spread distrust in EU and NATO which shows us they have the same pro-Russian background. We have published analysis about the Russian propaganda and the reality behind it.

FINDINGS FROM THE MEDIA MONITORING

Month (2022)	Main/key/most impactful/most important disinformation instances for this month (regardless if they were debunked or not)	Short explanation, flow/origin and impact, incl. links to debunking articles if available.
January	Main disinformation instances for this month were about the vaccination. Most of them were articles on anti-vaccination and Covid 19 conspiracy theories.	<p>Disinformation spreading lies that the vaccination will stop in most countries because it has shown as deadly for many people. That people who are vaccinated have greater risk of getting infected with the Omicron variant and that vaccines have liquid crystals or cause cancer. Conspiracy theories that Covid 19 doesn't exist were notices as well.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Austria will not prick all the people until it exterminates them! – Turthmeter - It is a lie that the police in London were closing down vaccination points and making arrests for vaccinating – Truthmeter - It is not true that the vaccinated are a "magnet" for Omicron - Truthmeter
February	<p>Disinformation about vaccination and conspiracy theories continued but not in such amount.</p> <p>Disinformation about the war in Ukraine started to appear.</p>	<p>Disinformation about the vaccines causing death continued, narratives about causing abortion and HIV were also noted. After Russia attacked Ukraine, disinformation about Russian overwhelming power started - especially fake videos about the ongoing conflict. There were media articles discrediting Zelensky as well.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Video of Russian Soldiers Parachuting Down On Kharkiv Is At Least 8 Years Old – Truthmeter - It Is Not True That Ukrainian Soldiers Have Laid Down Their Weapons – Truthmeter - It Is a Lie That Zelensky Fled Ukraine to London - Truthmeter
March	Most important disinformation this month were about the war in	The Russian Federation Embassy in Northern Macedonia posted a post on their official Facebook page explaining

	<p>Ukraine. The key disinformation this month came from the Russian Embassy claiming there was existence of Nazism and neo-Nazism in Ukraine.</p>	<p>the existence of Nazism and neo-Nazism in Ukraine. Also, narratives accusing the west of initiating the war in Ukraine and the existence of US-operated biological weapons laboratories are noted, and disinformation that there is actually no ongoing war but Russia is liberating Ukraine from the global fascism.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Counterspin: Anti-Semitic literature is not only found in Ukraine, and it cannot be a justification for Russian aggression – Truthmeter - There is no US-funded biological weapons development program in Ukraine - Truthmeter - Spreading the Wave of Lies – Military Invasion and Disinformation Invasion - Truthmeter
April	<p>The key disinformation this month came directly from the Kremlin. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs gave interview with several Serbian media and a lot of impactful disinformation this month were connected with the war in Ukraine</p>	<p>Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in an interview with four Serbian media outlets spreading the known disinformation narratives. Disinformation about Zelenskyy being related to Gorge Soros and being neo-Nazi, and theories that the corona virus is invented and being spread by Ukraine. And disinformation about Ukraine operating biological laboratories that receive US funding and are under control of Pentagon.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Counterspin: Lavrov With Another Spin Justifies Russian Aggression Against Ukraine – Truthmeter - In Ukraine, no drones were seized that contained agents for causing covid-19 – Truthmeter - The laboratories in Ukraine are not under the direct command of the Pentagon and are not for biological weapons - Truthmeter
May	<p>This month again disinformation about Covid 19 with new narratives are noted. And disinformation about the War in Ukraine and the Russian affection towards North Macedonia.</p>	<p>Disinformation that the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov allegedly criticize Greece and showed his affection for North Macedonia. Disinformation that vaccines can cause hepatitis and monkeypox and this is why we should refuse them and again that famous</p>

		<p>narrative about bio laboratories, USA encouraging the war and Putin destroying them, and stopping Covid 19 from spreading.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A fabricated statement by Lavrov is circulating on Facebook - Truthmeter - It is a lie that America invented covid-19 and caused a war in Ukraine to "kill a people" – Truthmeter - It is not true that the coronavirus disappeared with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thanks to Putin - Truthmeter
June	<p>The key disinformation was again, the war in Ukraine but in relation with North Macedonia. Calls for refusal of vaccination again started to be present in the media space.</p>	<p>New narrative about Russia threatening North Macedonia, having spies in the army and implication for conflict between the two countries was noted in the disinformation flow. Also disinformation about vaccination being deadly and affecting the immune system badly.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Russia did not threaten Macedonia with the Sarmat missile – Truthmeter - There are no preparations "for war with Russia" - Truthmeter - Vaccines are not a silent evil, do not refuse to protect children from deadly diseases! - Truthmeter

DISINFORMATION SOURCES

DOMESTIC SOURCES

Main disinformation sources in North Macedonia are online news portals, Facebook pages and Facebook profiles. Online news portals which publish biased news, including translation of foreign news mostly without masthead (Impressum) and are affiliated with political parties are: [Infomax](#), [Republika](#), [Kurir.mk](#), [Antropol](#). There are some owned by local owners or diaspora: [Rodina Makedonia](#) and [Bregalnicky.mk](#). These online portals have Facebook pages where they share their articles. Another source are Facebook profiles of:

- people sharing their opinion promoting disinformation or conspiracy theories.
- politicians with statements ([Dimitar Apasiev](#) –Levica ,[Hristijan Mickoski](#) -VMRO-DPMNE)

TV stations that broadcast all kinds of talk shows such as [Kanal 5](#) (Samo vistina) and [TV Sonce](#) (Jadi burek), including late night shows [Alfa TV](#) (Zaspi ako možeš), presenting dubious or politically biased “experts”, morning/daily call-in shows which allow viewers to voice opinions

and conspiracy theories without debunking. Talk shows are also broadcasted from YouTube channels of online portals [Infomax](#) (Teski muabeti).

FOREIGN SOURCES

Foreign sources in North Macedonia most impactful are the ones that come from Serbia. Serbian tabloids (newspaper/websites) like [Informer](#), [Kurir.rs](#) often copy pasted without even checking its content, poorly translated and published in the country.

Russian state sponsored media also have their share especially Russian state officials, incl. President Putin, Foreign Ministry. Their statements are shared via Tweeter account of the Russian embassy in Skopje, Sputnik News and Russia Beyond the Headlines.

MOST IMPACTFUL NARRATIVES

Most impactful themes **Most impactful narratives affecting your country, having widest reach or causing most damaging behavior**

War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unfounded information about military operations - Distorted representation of Ukrainians and Zelensky - A conspiracy theory claiming that the war was staged and is not really happening
Distrust in EU and NATO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - EU supports antidemocratic/fascist behavior of member countries (first Greece now Bulgaria) towards North Macedonia
Russian influence in the Balkans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Russia threatening North Macedonia - We should not mess with Russia (spreading fear) - Russia presented as a friendly power to North Macedonia

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT - ALBANIA

Name of the organization / media: Faktej	
Location:	Tirana, Albania
Reporting period:	January 1st – June 30th 2022

COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

In the past reports we noted that the fact that Albanian media is in the hands of a few powerful companies and individuals and their ties to the government or opposition parties majorly determine how we do our work. For this latest reporting period, in addition to the war in Ukraine, whose coverage has dwindled—compared to the previous report—the Albanian media landscape has featured an array of events that have become sources of disinformation. Chief amongst them have been the Open Balkan initiative which is a hotbed of misunderstandings and accusations within Albania (between opposition and ruling parties), and regionally (between Albania and Kosovo). Likewise, there have been concerns that Russia is interfering in Albania through the Open Balkan initiative and also other avenues. This includes a recent cyberattack on government systems that, coupled with a report by State Secret Services and some click-bait news items about foreign spies in Albania, have raised concerns that Albania is in the throes of attacks from abroad that threaten national security.

At the regional level, just as important have been the opening of negotiations for Albania and North Macedonia, and the protests regarding the French proposal, including the role played by ethnic Albanians in them. Additionally, the constant tension between Serbia and Kosovo continue to be highlighted across Albanian media, especially claims about Russian interference in Serbia, but also warnings about Kosovo’s allegedly nefarious intentions against Kosovo-Serbs.

As regards particular trends, we would say a growing prominence of Albanian new-sharing on Twitter; the weaponing by politicians of their social media following to spread disinformation, but also a lack of care by news agencies and portals in how they portray statements by politicians. Often enough, statements are taken verbatim from Twitter, Facebook, or even other official channels and presented in bite-sized format without much context. And this is even the best-case scenario, with other instances statements being twisted for click bait. In addition, we have noticed that Albanian media rely heavily on British tabloids, with unsubstantiated claims appearing on national television channels as true, and without being fact-checked. Usually, one portal will pick up a piece of news from a British tabloid, and the others will copy-paste it, changing very minimally, if at all, the text and the title.

To deal with these issues, we have made sure to publish weekly articles debunking claims that have seen a lot of coverage in Albanian media, like for example, the Macedonian protests against the French proposal, or context on the latest cyberattack. We have also published a long-form analysis to explain the problem with painting the Open Balkan initiative as a Russia-led project, featuring opinions from experts in the region. Furthermore, we are the only media in Albania that have provided constant explanation on why British tabloids are unreliable sources of information.

FINDINGS FROM THE MEDIA MONITORING

Month (2022)	Main/key/most impactful/most important disinformation instances for this month (regardless if they were debunked or not)	Short explanation, flow/origin and impact, incl. links to debunking articles if available.
January	<p>Leaking of the personal information of some 600,000 Albanians and the Albanian government's attempt to spin it to its advantage</p> <p>Violent protests between warring faction of Albania's main opposition party led to both sides claiming the other was responsible for the violence enacted.</p> <p>Miscellaneous disinformation about Russia and the potential for a war in Ukraine spawning a nuclear war/World War III.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There were two streams of disinformation when it came to the data leak. First, news portals shared the file itself and pointed at several culprits before any information had been released. Secondly, the government itself tried to paint it as a positive thing that would increase accountability re. wages and tax evasion. - In this case, political figures were key sources of disinformation, in particular former leader Lulzim Basha and aspiring leader (at the time) Sali Berisha. Once again, portals (depending on political alignment) became vectors of disinformation as well. Their claims were debunked in two articles here and here. - As threats of Russia's potential invasion of Ukraine started to grow, Albanian media portals began publishing articles containing a variety of disinformation, mostly sources from British tabloids or similarly unreliable news sources. They would translate such articles with the most common claims being the threat of new nuclear

		war or World War III. We have debunked that here.
February	<p>On February 3, former Prime Minister Sali Berisha alleged in Parliament that the Russian Embassy had threatened Albania.</p> <p>Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov alleged that Balkan and Albanian mercenaries were being hired to fight for Ukraine, a statement that was later reiterated by Putin during a call with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.</p> <p>Albanian media began following Russia's invasion of Ukraine beat by beat, often disseminating disinformation, mainly to generate clicks.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - On February 3, former Prime Minister Sali Berisha alleged during a speech to Parliament that the Russian Embassy had threatened Albania. His statements were disseminated by Albanian media without commentary and without checking if his allegations were correct. Short-lived impact. - On February 18, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov alleged that Balkan and Albanian mercenaries were being hired to fight for Ukraine, a statement that was later reiterated by Putin during a call with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Albanian leaders have categorically rejected this claim. Albanian media portals have spread the allegations without fact-checking them, including basing their sources on Russia state media. This has had a long-term impact, as similar allegations for both Kosovo and Albania have persisted. We have written about this here. - In February (and then later in March), Albanian media portals rushed to cover the war spreading disinformation in the process after picking up images and claims from unreliable websites. We wrote three debunking articles on this topic in February alone.
March	<p>The unfolding of the war in Ukraine, including claims that the Albanian embassy in Kharkiv had been bombed by Russia.</p> <p>Popular protests being painted as being pro-Russia, or aiding Russia.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Once again, Albanian portals continued to cover with war without fact-checking their sources, usually translating articles from tabloids and then copying off each other. We covered this precise

	<p>Beginning of claims that Open Balkan is a pro-Russian project.</p>	<p>phenomenon in this article, and debunked other claims here, here and here. More specifically we debunked claims about the bombing of the Albanian consulate in Kharkiv.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As inflation hit Albania hard (especially when it came to oil prices), Albanian citizens protested en masse, while the Albanian Prime Minister took to Facebook to claim that the protests were helping Russia or that Russia might be behind them. These statements were circulated by Albanian media. We debunked and explained the reasons behind the inflation here, here and here. - In March, with the invasion of Ukraine, opposition leaders and political figures began to spread the claims that because of Serbia's involvement, the Open Balkan initiative is a pro-Russian, or Russian-backed project. This has been covered by us here.
<p>April</p>	<p>April fool's joke that Prime Minister Rama would be NATO Secretary</p> <p>National survey on key policies with no transparency.</p> <p>Albanian Prime Minister dismisses reports about freedom of speech in Albania.</p> <p>Miscellaneous news stories about war in Ukraine, but especially Putin's statements about Kosovo and threat of nuclear war.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An April fool's joke from Twitter about Prime Minister Rama being elected next NATO secretary exposed how Albanian media (including the country's biggest news channel) do not fact check claims from social media before passing them on as news. Most media portals and news channels presented the joke as proper news and rather than retracting it when the claim was shown incorrect, merely deleted the original content. - The Albanian government undertook a national survey on several policy questions and said it would enact policies to

		<p>respond to them. The issue remained that the questionnaire and its responses were quite opaque, there was no transparency on the number of responses and how they were collected to show that this is truly the people's will. In this case, the main source of disinformation was the Albanian government itself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Several reports showed declining freedom of speech in Albania (Freedom House, Department of State, Reporters without Borders). But the Albanian Prime Minister used mostly Twitter to condemn them, stating that they are incorrect or full of lies. We published an article about media freedom in Albania, mapping ownership and foreign influence. - Disinformation about the Ukrainian War persisted, in particular Putin's claims that Kosovo's independence was an example for Donetsk and Luhansk. Several Albanian portals portrayed this as Russia recognizing Kosovo's independence, which we debunked here. In this period, we also published an article looking at Russia's interference in Albania given also the war in Ukraine, and we also published several other articles debunking run-of-the-mill disinformation on the war.
<p>May</p>	<p>War in Ukraine, especially Russian propaganda about "special operation" and "de-nazification".</p> <p>Mike Pompeo's visit to Tirana.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The beginning of May, as Russia celebrated Victory Day, Albanian portals published Putin's speeches and many of his and his government's claims and propaganda about the war

	<p>Turkey vetoing Sweden and Finland’s NATO applications</p> <p>Prime Minister Rama’s joke about North Macedoni and Bulgaria.</p>	<p>in Ukraine. This included talks of “denazification” and a “special operation”. We debunked those claims here and here. We also looked at the position the Albanian government has taken on Ukraine and Russia, especially given the way the Albanian government parades its aid to Ukraine.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - When Mike Pompeo visited Tirana to participate in the signing of a memorandum for the gasification of Albania, his visit (and who he decided to visit) was weaponized in a fight for the legitimacy of the leadership of Albania’s opposition. Various portals, depending on political affiliation, presented Pompeo’s visit as inconsequential and not politically affiliated, or incredibly important. This once again showed how political alignment determines the disinformation spread across Albanian portals. - Turkey’s decision to veto Sweden and Finland’s NATO application was covered by Albanian media with little context to Turkey’s claims. Furthermore, Albanian-language Turkish media did its best to spread Turkey’s side of the events. We debunked or explained Turkey’s claims about Sweden and Finland here, and did a deep dive into how Turkey funds Albanian-language media here.
<p>June</p>	<p>Lavrov’s visit to Belgrade and the Open Balkan initiative’s Ohrid Summit.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - While Lavrov’s visit to Belgrade was mired in its own controversies, it took a particularly interesting turn in Albania with the opposition

	<p>Prime Minister Rama’s joke about North Macedonia and Bulgaria.</p> <p>War in Ukraine, in particular claims about Albanian mercenaries.</p> <p>Conflict between Kosovo and Serbia</p>	<p>leader claiming that his visit was to attend the Open Balkan summit happening in Ohrid around the same period. This led to a storm of posts on Facebook by the opposition leader and op-eds in Albanian media about Open Balkan being a pro-Russia project, or even ideated and backed by Russia. We looked at these claims in this article.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prime Minister Edi Rama’s joke about Dimitar Kovačevski being the next President of West Bulgaria received a lot of coverage in Albanian media where some claimed that he had caused a scandal that could undermine the ruling government and future negotiations with the EU. Most of these portals were politically affiliated with the opposition. We debunked the claims in this piece. - While coverage of the war in Ukraine has dwindled a bit, there are still some topics that do find some major traction, including claims about Albanian mercenaries fighting in Ukraine, which are published pretty regularly by Albanian media portals who republish statements with little context or attempts at debunking. We wrote about it here. - Finally, a decision by the government of Albin Kurti in Kosovo to implement reciprocity measures against Serbia unleashed a storm of statements from both parties about good will and threats to the respective populations. Again, Albanian media portals
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		and news agency report in these statements but rarely provide any context, allowing propaganda to spread.
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DISINFORMATION SOURCES

DOMESTIC SOURCES

In Albania main source of disinformation are online portals such as [Lapsi](#), [Shqiptarja](#), [Dosja](#) that spread propaganda by not providing context, but they are also much more likely to spread straight up fake news and disinformation, relying usually on foreign tabloids, social media statements, meme pages, etc. to spread outlandish claims. These news portals also have Facebook pages where they share the articles and spread the same type of disinformation.

FOREIGN SOURCES

Main foreign source in Albanian media sphere are British tabloids such as Daily Mail and The Sun their claims are taken at face value, translated and then circulated between portals. From Russian state media [Ria](#) has the central place spreading claims regarding Albanian mercenaries in Ukraine.

MOST IMPACTFUL NARRATIVES

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives affecting your country, having widest reach or causing most damaging behavior
War in Ukraine	- War in Ukraine will start World War III
Open Balkans	- Open Balkans is a pro-Russian project
Kosovo-Serbia relations	- Serbia is a threat to the region

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT – KOSOVO

Name of the organization / media: Sbunker	
Location:	Pristina, Kosovo
Reporting period:	January 1st – June 30th 2022

COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

Kosovo media reporting was mostly related with the War in Ukraine and Kosovo-Serbia disputes. The recurring tensions have resulted in Kosovo being viewed as a country with potential for destabilization due to poor neighborly relations with Serbia. Thus, Kosovo became the target of statements by senior Russian officials, such as President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who stated that Kosovo was recruiting people to send them to war in Ukraine. Media outlets from Russia and Serbia spread disinformation and misinformation and the same was distributed in locations populated with Serb majority in Kosovo, accusing the North Atlantic Alliance of bombing Serbia in '98-99. We have published an analysis about the Russian propaganda.

Misinformation of public opinion in Serbia, was also as an electoral strategy, and during this reporting time, there was an increase in the nationalist discourse of political leaders regarding Kosovo. Politicians on the left and right, in power and in opposition, competed over who is tougher in relation to policies they would pursue towards Kosovo if they won the elections. We have also published analysis regarding this narrative.

In our weekly monitoring we have had debunking articles about some statements of Serbian officials who continue to label incidents/thefts in Serb community as ethnically based, claiming they are in sync with the statements of Kosovo politicians, aimed at expelling Serbs from Kosovo. This was said without any basis or evidence confirming the ethnicity of the persons who caused them.

We have debunked, as well, some misinformative headline about the “long-awaited agreement” between Kosovo and Serbia. After the last Kosovo-Serbia agreement on energy, unknown websites but with many followers and shares, started misinterpreting the news and misinforming the public opinion. We identified some misinformative headline pretending that Kosovo and Serbia will sign long-waiting agreement. This usually happens after almost every political agreement between Kosovo and Serbia, unknown websites with many followers, start misinforming the public opinion.

Kosovo was also affected by false bomb alerts. We have identified that threatening messages from anonymous addresses were sent to the University, schools, airport, and bus stations. So far, no bomb has been found.

FINDINGS FROM THE MEDIA MONITORING

Month (2022)	Main/key/most impactful/most important disinformation instances for this month (regardless if they were debunked or not)	Short explanation, flow/origin and impact, incl. links to debunking articles if available.
January	Disinformation, misinterpretation about energy crisis and the new electricity tariffs proposed by the Energy Regulatory Office.	After the proposal of the Energy Regulatory Office to restore block tariffs for energy, some media reported inaccurate news about the price that citizens are expected to pay for electricity. Without providing additional clarifications in the headlines for the subsidy that had been announced by the Government of Kosovo, some media reported that according to the proposal, consumers who have paid 58 Euros per month for electricity, are now expected to pay 109 Euros.
February	Fake news related to the war in Ukraine and its impact on Kosovo.	Various Kosovar media continue to publish unverified news, accompanied by fake photos and videos. Due to increased interest of citizens in consuming news related to the war in Ukraine, content is spreading rapidly through social networks and online media, continuing to misinform the public.
March	<p>Some media continues to spread misinformation on the war in Ukraine and its reverberations in Kosovo because of unsolved issues with Serbia.</p> <p>Manipulative statements regarding food products from Serbia.</p>	A few hours after Russia's first attacks in Ukraine, the Kosovar media spread a lot of misinformation, exploiting the public's interest for profit. In certain cases, panic is spread with the publication of tendentious news about the statements of Russian and Ukrainian leaders. There was a harsh discourse with warnings that "The Third World War" will begin.

		<p>There were also reports via pictures. Some children photos, even from World War 2 have circulated claiming they were taken during the war in Ukraine. These kinds of fake news were debunked by Sbunker.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fake news related to the war in Ukraine <p>During this reporting period, some media brought back old news, related to some actions of the Kosovo Police in the northern region of Kosovo in 2021, which is populated mostly by Serbs. There were some statements by Serbian officials, who warned about the ‘existential danger’ facing Kosovo Serbs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disinformation for Kosovo police action in the north <p>There have been other manipulative statements by certain individuals in social media, related to food products from Serbia.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Manipulation of doctor's statement by DO NOT BUY SERBIAN products and other information
<p>April</p>	<p>Disinformation about the relocation of the Serbian army near the border with Kosovo.</p> <p>Misleading title about liberalization.</p> <p>A misinforming headline on the recognition of Kosovo's Independence by the five EU countries who have not yet recognized Kosovo.</p> <p>Manipulation of Serbian officials regarding British military aircraft.</p>	<p>During the week some Serbian citizens protested after Kosovo decided not to allow the organization of Serbian elections in Kosovo, there was misinformation about the alleged mobilization of the army. Serbian politicians warned about the possibility of getting involved in an armed conflict with Kosovo. Some Kosovar media fell into the trap of an article published by an obscure Spanish medium. The article relied on unconfirmed</p>

		<p>videos and photos which were posted on social media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Misinformation about the relocation of the Serbian army to the border and a misleading title about liberalization <p>Other news was disseminated claiming that the five European Union member states: Greece, Spain, Cyprus, Romania, and Slovakia were expected to recognize Kosovo's independence. But the headline was in contradiction with the content offered.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A misinforming headline on the recognition of Kosovo's Independence and other false news <p>The landing of the military transport plane from United Kingdom, which is part of the KFOR contingent, has caused Serbian officials to react by spreading misinformation that Kosovo is arming itself.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Manipulation of Serbian officials over British military plane
<p>May</p>	<p>Misinformation headlines related to Kosovo security and NATO mission.</p> <p>Manipulation with incidents in Serb-majority areas in Kosovo.</p>	<p>Before, during, and after the parliamentary/presidential elections held in Serbia on April 3, online websites without impressum continued to spread misinformation related to security in Kosovo.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Misinformation headlines on NATO <p>Without any basis or evidence confirming the ethnicity of the persons who caused them, Serb officials continue to label incidents/thefts in Serb community areas as ethnically based, claiming they are in sync with statements of Kosovo</p>

		<p>politicians, aimed at expelling Serbs from Kosovo.</p> <p>- Manipulation of incidents in Serb-majority areas in Kosovo</p>
<p>June</p>	<p>Denying the Recak Massacre, disinformation from Serbian and Russian officials.</p> <p>Misleading news about “Open Balkans”.</p>	<p>Even three months after Russia's aggression on Ukraine, misinformation statements by Russian and Serbian officials on Kosovo have been consistent. Those came from Vladimir Putin and Sergey Lavrov, who denied the Recak massacre in Kosovo and accused NATO of aggression on Serbia in 1999.</p> <p>Lavrov made these statements to make a comparison between the crimes that took place in Bucha in Ukraine and the Recak Massacre that took place in Kosovo in 1999. On other occasions too, have Russian officials drawn parallels between Kosovo and the annexed regions of Ukraine.</p> <p>- Russian and Serbian officials continue to deny the Recak Massacre</p> <p>The initiative of the three countries of the Western Balkans, Serbia, Albania, and Northern Macedonia, known as the "Open Balkans" continues to be one of the most controversial topics in Kosovo and the region. There were also published contradictory statements about Kosovo from the participants themselves, before and during the meetings in Ohrid.</p> <p>- Montenegro joins “Open Balkans” and Edi Rama does not deal with Kosovo and other misleading news about BiH</p>

DISINFORMATION SOURCES

DOMESTIC SOURCES

In Kosovo main domestic sources like in all WB countries are online news portals that share d news, including translation of foreign news containing disinformation. Some online portals are affiliated with political parties and interest groups. Some of them: [Bota Press](#), [Kosova Info](#), [Gazeta](#), [Albanian Post](#), [Kosovalajm.net](#), [Lexo sot](#), [Kosovo-online](#).

Another source are politicians that give statements to the media or spread disinformation via their social media presences (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram), here we have [Aleksandar Vucic](#), (President of Serbia), [Petar Petković](#) (Office for Kosovo in Serbian Government), [Goran Rakić](#) (Srpska Lista), [Blerim Vela](#) (Cabinet of the Presidency of Kosovo).

Another source are politicians that give statements to the media that can be misleading to the public opinion. Usually these are spread via their social media presences (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram).

FOREIGN SOURCES

Disinformation from foreign sources mostly come from Serbia.

- Serbian state officials-“Office for Kosovo and Metohija” within the Serbian Government
- Serbian media: [Informer](#), [Novosti](#), [Alo](#), [Blic](#), [RTS](#), [Kurir](#), Sputnik Srbija that share narratives about Kosovo statehood and Serbian population who live in Kosovo.
- Russian media: [Tass.com](#), [MFA of Russia](#).

MOST IMPACTFUL NARRATIVES

Most impactful themes **Most impactful narratives affecting your country, having widest reach or causing most damaging behavior**

War in Ukraine and its impact in Balkans/Kosovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Unfounded information about military operations- Mercenaries from Kosovo/Balkans fighting in Ukraine.
Russian interference in the Kosovo	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Russia threatening Kosovo by supporting Serbian actions/politics in northern Kosovo.- Russia presented as a friendly power to Serbia by building joint military bases near Kosovo border.
Manipulation of incidents in Serb-majority areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Serb officials continue to label incidents/thefts in Serb community areas as ethnically-based, claiming they are in sync with statements of Kosovo politicians, aimed at expelling Serbs from Kosovo.

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT - SERBIA

Name of the organization / media:	International and Security Affairs Centre - ISAC
Location:	Belgrade
Reporting period:	January 1st – June 30th 2022

COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

Serbia represents one of the most pro-Russian (and pro-China) oriented countries in the CEE region, and it is a highly vulnerable country to foreign media influence, as can be seen by research done by ISAC and GLOBSEC via the [“Vulnerability Index”](#). This allows ample room for both Russian and Chinese influence to enter the society. One of the main culprits of this state of affairs are politicians and political stakeholders which share pro-Russian views and help spread the Kremlin message box through numerous media either owned by state or controlled by people close to political elites.

Being emotionally and historically connected to Russia on the one hand and having negative experience with NATO bombing on the other, Serbia represents a solid ground for malign foreign influence through successful disinformation campaigns. The Serbian pro-governmental tabloids and media in general use a great deal of fabricated claims and facts when it comes to NATO, the EU, and the West in general, especially in the areas of security, defense and foreign policy, thus representing the main generators of pro-Russian and pro-Chinese propaganda.

Serbia is particularly affected by the malign influence of Russia, which today came into the fore due to the Russian aggression in Ukraine. While vast percentage of original fake news in Serbia is of local character, and intended for local use, with a goal of steering wider public from crucial important issues that government is unable or unwilling to solve, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine amount of news, analyses and opinions that are being republished in Serbia from Russian sources (mostly from Sputnik, RT and Telegram channels) has grown exponentially and is creating a large number of pro-Russian oriented public.

Also, any attempts of pacifying Republic of Srpska in BiH, bringing rule of law to north of Kosovo and strengthening sovereignty of Montenegro is perceived by those media as direct attack to Serbia and Serbian nationals in those entities solidifying decades of hostilities and instability in Western Balkans.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has deepened geopolitical divisions within Serbia and left it in a vulnerable position, with consequences that will be present for years to come. While many opposition political parties are returning to parliament in fall 2022, there is a lack of institutional know how and experience in dealing with such extensive crises as well as with

overwhelming amount of disinformation which influences both the public and decision makers.

FINDINGS FROM THE MEDIA MONITORING

Month (2022)	Main/key/most impactful/most important disinformation instances for this month (regardless if they were debunked or not)	Short explanation, flow/origin and impact, incl. links to debunking articles if available.
January	ISAC started following narratives in February.	
February	During this month disinformation news about pandemics and vaccines were active. Also fake news about alleged fall of the President Vučić which was instructed by foreign centers of power as well as disinformation about the war in Ukraine started to appear.	<p>One disinformation narrative was about Russia being provoked to invade Ukraine and that Ukraine attacked Russian territory. At the same time narrative about physical assassination of the President Vučić was spread together with news about Serbian Army being systematically weakened as a consequence of a dictate from the West.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News analysis "Hysteria in the West" - News analysis "Operation Noose 2" - News analysis "West melted and sold Serbian tanks" - Analysis of news "Ukraine invades Russia" - Narrative about the war in Ukraine
March	Disinformation about the war in Ukraine continued but with bigger focus on American bio labs in Ukraine	Foreign Minister of Russia Sergei Lavrov declared that war plans were being prepared against

	<p>and experiments on people that they conduct.</p>	<p>Russia by the West. Also, following news were present: Russia being threatened with the expulsion from the UN by Nazi-like West; Putin's decision to make Europe pay for gas in rubles will lead to the economic ruin of Europe as well as American bio laboratories in Ukraine which conducted nefarious experiments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - News analysis with narrative Russia forced to self-defense - Analysis of news "Experiments on people are being conducted in Ukraine" - News analysis of "American Biolaboratories in Serbia" - Analysis of the news "Europe is in crisis – but will not suffer a breakdown until June" - Analysis of narratives in news comments
<p>April</p>	<p>The most actual narrative during April was about hypocrisy of the West with the USA at the head.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The US is spreading lies and the vast majority of people in the West have no idea about the reality in which they live. The EU is a victim of the US interests. - The West led by the US wants fragmented Serbia. - "American hegemony is definitely failing." - News analysis "EU gives up Russian oil, America imports more" - Analysis of the news "The West is destroying Dodik?! Brussels and Washington are working on a complex operation!"

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of news "America completely revealed the cards" - Narrative Analysis – The Economic Collapse of the West
May	<p>Disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine continued as well as news about European dictate and blackmail of Serbia. Also, numerous bomb alerts in Serbia were used as a base for a narrative about organized western attack.</p>	<p>Russian ambassador to the US stated that Russia would not leave Donbass to neo-Nazis. Bundestag demanded making access to European funds more difficult for those EU candidate countries which refuse to impose sanctions on Russia. In order to continue European integration, Serbia needs to give up the Jasenovac myth.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of news "Russia could not leave Donbass to neo-Nazis" - NEW TERRIBLE PRESSURE ON BELGRADE FROM BERLIN - Analysis of the news "That's how the horde is made!" - News analysis "In order to continue European integration, Serbia needs to give up the Jasenovac myth"

<p>June</p>	<p>The most present narratives stem again from the war in Ukraine focusing on mass organ trade in war torn territories as well as information revealed by the Russian hackers about alleged Kyiv's plan to attack Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republic.</p>	<p>Mobile crematoria are helping to hide the mass organ trade in Ukraine to the EU. Hackers claim to have evidence that Kyiv was contemplating an attack on Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republic. The EU set a new condition for the states of the region - to trample on all the rights of minorities, vampirize Nazism and provoke a war against Russia. Foreign services are involved in the wiretapping scandal of the President Vučić</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Analysis of the news "How mobile crematoriums help to hide the mass sale of EU organs of Ukraine" - Sohu: Russia's unexpected response to oil embargo cuts off all EU plans - Analysis of the news "Foreign services involved in the Vucic eavesdropping affair!" - Analysis of the news "Start Ukrainian integration now!" - Narrative Analysis – All the President's Men: Russian Commentators in Serbian Media
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DISINFORMATION SOURCES

DOMESTIC SOURCES

[Informer](#), [Večernje Novosti](#), [Alo](#), [Republika](#), [Kurir](#), [Objektiv](#), [Srbija danas](#) are main source of disinformation in Serbian media sphere, but they also appear in all the other WB countries as foreign source of disinformation. Tus domestic sources of disinformation in Serbia are major foreign source of disinformation in all WB countries predominantly for those who were part of Yugoslavia. These online news portals also have Facebook pages.

TV stations on national level such as RTS, Pink, Happy TV spread biased, pro-Government, pro-Russia, anti-west fake news, conspiracy theories and play a big part in disinformation system especially for the population still informed by television.

FOREIGN SOURCES

Sputnik Serbia that is a Russian state sponsored media, plays a big role as a primary source of disinformation that come from Russia and continue through all the WB countries.

MOST IMPACTFUL NARRATIVES

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives affecting your country, having widest reach or causing most damaging behavior
War in Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Distorted representation of Ukraine and Russia- Ukraine is responsible for the war- Ukrainians and Zelensky lead a neo-Nazi-politics- Russia has to defend itself
Resentment towards the EU and NATO	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Malicious, devious, hypocritical, aggressive actors- They provoked the war in Ukraine- EU blackmails and lies Serbia- They violate international law and human rights all over the world (e.g., bombing of Yugoslavia)- They represent Nazi-politics- Decadent moral values
Chinese and Russian influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Russia and China as Serbia's true and sincere friends- Russia as a defender of orthodox values and Serbia's interests in international arena- Economic cooperation with China as booster of Serbia's economic progress

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT - MONTENEGRO

Name of the organization / media: Center for Democratic Transition	
Location:	Podgorica, Montenegro
Reporting period:	January 1st – June 30th 2022

COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

For years, the Montenegrin media scene has been characterized by strong political polarization and weak financial viability of numerous media outlets that cannot be financed from the small advertising market.

Lately, there has been a large influx of media ownership from abroad, so out of 5 televisions that have a national license, only the public broadcaster RTCG is Montenegrin-owned, while the 4 remaining televisions have owners who have ties to Serbia.

Montenegro is also a part of a larger regional language, and the language does not know the national borders set by man. Thus, the Montenegrin media space is strongly influenced by information, but disinformation coming from the region.

Topics that are constantly in the spotlight of the media are related to Montenegro-Serbia relationship, war in Ukraine and COVID crisis. Russian propaganda and misinformation related to Ukraine are strongly present, through the reporting of right-wing portals, Serbian tabloids, and a large presence in social media. COVID is mostly covered by individuals, social media pages, fighting for clicks and followers.

FINDINGS FROM THE MEDIA MONITORING

Month (2022)	Main/key/most impactful/most important disinformation instances for this month (regardless if they were debunked or not)	Short explanation, flow/origin and impact, incl. links to debunking articles if available.
January	Main instances were regarding to COVID and vaccination. Most articles were about how vaccines are deadly or harmful	Most articles were spreading online on how vaccines are causing people to have multiple health issues or even that in some cases they cause death. Also, it was the time when Novak

		<p>Djokovic was forbidden to play AO.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Covid vaccines can't change human DNA. - There is no evidence of "death" from vaccination in Serbia - Saga full of misinformation: Support for Djokovic not banned at Australian Open
February	<p>February was also full of fake stories about COVID and vaccines. At the end of the month, we had disinformation regarding war in Ukraine</p>	<p>Vaccines were connected to everything and anything at this point, from 5G to HAARP and so on. At the end of February disinformation campaign about Ukraine started to emerge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Vaccines, HAARP, 5G: A Timeless Conspiracy Theorie - The Ukrainian army has not refused to obey the state. - Zelensky, the first man of Ukraine, did not flee the country
March	<p>Ukraine was the main topic</p>	<p>As the war began, there were many articles related to Ukraine's president Zelensky. His old job came into light and became a vital part of Russian propaganda. Also, there were some articles about COVID, again.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ukrainians did not start a war in their own country. - Abuse of the old and famous video of the President of Ukraine

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - WHO did not talk about masks for soldiers in Ukraine
April	April was all about Russian propaganda trying to portray Ukrainians as Nazis	<p>During April there were many articles on Zelensky being Nazi, also fake news about Nazis being a part of Ukrainian military.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Photoshopping Nazi: Zelensky does not promote a swastika - Cetinians did not display Nazi symbols during a rally in support of Ukraine - Notorious Nazi is not part of Ukrainian police
May	May marked bio laboratories in Ukraine – narrative, also as Zelensky being a drug addict	<p>After Nazi narrative, propaganda turned to the bio laboratories as a pretext for war. There was misinformation about Butcha and Zelensky is portrayed as drug addict, and NATO came into picture.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ukrainian laboratories – 1000 times repeated lie - Video from 2019 presented as Zelensky's planning for the Buca massacre - Junkie Zelensky: Propaganda without scruples - The photo does not prove that the American general surrendered to the Russians
June	Ukraine and monkeypox	Ukraine continued to be at the center stage. But also monkeypox pandemic, combined with the fake news about relations to COVID and vaccines.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Another round of misinformation about U.S. biolabs in Ukraine - DiCaprio has no grandmother in Ukraine and has not donated \$10 million - Tabloids and homophobia: Monkey pox as a "gay disease"
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DISINFORMATION SOURCES

DOMESTIC SOURCES

Among main source of foreign manipulation of information and interference in Montenegro are online news portals [IN4S](#) and [Borba](#). Numerous accounts and pages on social networks also share Serbian and Russian sentiment and propaganda.

FOREIGN SOURCES

Due to the shared language, Montenegro is a sphere of influence of disinformation coming from the regional media. The most common sources of misinformation are the Serbian media, which are often importers of Russian propaganda into the regional media space. Among the most influential Serbian media in Montenegro are tabloids ([Kurir](#), [Informer](#), [Alo](#)), and their articles are often the subject of fact-checker evaluations.

MOST IMPACTFUL NARRATIVES

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives affecting your country, having widest reach or causing most damaging behavior
Ukraine	- Ukrainians are Nazis also as all those in Montenegro who support them and Russia is right about to start a war
COVID	- Vaccines are bad for your health and you shouldn't do it
Pro-Serbian narratives	- Montenegrins and Montenegro government are not able to take care of themselves, unless Serbia steps in

MEDIA MONITORING REPORT – BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Name of the organization / media:	UG Zasto ne/CA Why Not
Location:	Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
Reporting period:	January 1st – June 30th 2022

COUNTRY CONTEXT UPDATE

Since the beginning of the reporting period, disinformation related to the Covid-19 pandemics and vaccination dominated the media ecosystem in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mentioned disinformation was mostly related to the issues related to vaccines, high profile personalities in pharmaceutical companies, involving various forms of disinformation ranging from fake news to well-known and newly created conspiracy theories. As of February 2022, the Russian invasion on Ukraine switched the media focus and accompanying disinformation - to the unfolding events related to the war in Ukraine.

During the reporting period, UG Zasto ne/Raskrinkavanje.ba have published eighty-two debunking articles and in depth stories, mostly debunking the disinformation related to the invasion on Ukraine. Observed disinformation and manipulative reporting ranged from false announcements of the initiation of the invasion, false news on border incidents, involving false and altered photos and videos, false statements of various officials, false events, to blaming Western countries for “provoking the war in Ukraine”.

Additional problem for BiH’s media quality and professionalism, is reflected in the fact that in Republic of Srpska (RS), most of the media are pro-government and are, just like the entity government, fully aligned to the Russian political agendas and interests on various topics, including the war in Ukraine. Example that best describes mentioned situation is the fact that the public broadcasting service of Republic of Srpska (RTRS) and public news agency (SRNA) are serving as an extended arm of the Russian propaganda machine. Mentioned media are not only republishing the reports of Russian state owned on a daily basis, but also regularly producing disinformation fitting the Russian narratives (calling the invasion a special operation, calling the Donbas republics independent, having a reporting structure on the occupied territories of Ukraine, reporting solely from Russian point of view, etc.).

On the other side, the media in the other half of BiH, the Federation of BiH (FBiH), are aligned with the Western interests and EU security policies. The described situation, i.e. polarization in BiH, sets the stage for incursion of various foreign malign influences to be rooted in BiH. The examples of such foreign malign influences are noticeable in the official positions of the Russian and Chinese Embassies in BiH, which are supporting the political agendas of RS officials. An example for this claim is mirrored in the situation where RS is

currently refusing to recognize the newly appointed High Representative in BiH under the claim that he was not appointed by the UN Security Council. At the same time, Russian official institutions and state funded media like Sputnik accepted the mentioned narrative and are continuously denouncing the legitimacy of the High Representative.

Additionally, in regards to the NATO accession of BiH, the Russian Embassy often highlights there is no internal consensus in BiH regarding this issue, and is supporting the position of RS officials that RS (and BiH) are neutral (i.e. following decisions of Serbia in regards to NATO accession) and should not join NATO. In spite of the fact that the RS representatives in BiH Parliament have previously adopted the legislation related to NATO accession and are obliged to implement it.

Russia has also provided an open support for one sided moves of RS Government and officials in the attempts to dismantle the BiH state authority in the sectors of health, judiciary, security and military. More accurately, the RS government in the recent period forwarded the laws and decisions to the RS People's Assembly, aiming to dismantle the state authorities in mentioned state sectors and form the RS state agencies which would "overtake" the authorities of state level agencies. Russia and RS are calling this unilateral and illegal process a "return to the BiH Constitution", as drafted in Dayton, USA under Dayton Peace Accords (DPA). If such agendas are implemented, all progress that BiH achieved in mentioned sectors on its path to EU accession would be annulled.

FINDINGS FROM THE MEDIA MONITORING

Month (2022)	Main/key/most impactful/most important disinformation instances for this month (regardless if they were debunked or not)	Short explanation, flow/origin and impact, incl. links to debunking articles if available.
January	Disinformation regarding Covid19 conspiracies; disinformation regarding the status of High Representative in BiH that was initiated in December 2021	The most viral disinformation and conspiracy theory related to covid-19 vaccines, was the one that Mr. Andreas Noack allegedly discovered graphene in vaccines, which he described as "small razors". Mr. Noack was allegedly murdered for this discovery. None of this was true. - Andreas Noack and graphene hydroxide which does not exist: There is no "razor" in Covid-19 vaccines

		<p>- A complex conspiracy theory about the alleged persecution and murder of Andreas Noack</p> <p>The evolving political issue in BiH is the “legality of High Representative in BiH”.</p> <p>Numerous media and politicians from RS, are calling the recently appointed High Representative “illegitimate” because the UN Security Council has not voted for his approval. But, there is no clearly defined procedure for appointing a High Representative and while he was not confirmed by the UN Security Council, this does not make him “illegitimate” or “illegally elected”.</p> <p>- Christian Schmidt is not an “illegally elected” High Representative</p>
<p>February</p>	<p>Disinformation related to the Russian invasion on Ukraine: False news about initiation of the war, false video and photo footage from Ukraine, defamation of the Ukrainian President</p>	<p>Prior to the initiation of the invasion on Ukraine, some media outlets have several times declared the “beginning of the war” in Ukraine. By sharing statements and reports, some websites “embellished” their articles with titles that implicitly or explicitly claim that the war between Ukraine and Russia “has begun”.</p> <p>After the 24 February 2022, many media outlets used disinformation to discredit the Ukrainian president, but also republished numerous videos and photos falsely claiming to depict the scenes from the war in Ukraine.</p> <p>- For several months now, the media has been claiming that “the war is starting” in Ukraine</p> <p>- It is not true that Macron is not in favor of sanctions against Russia</p> <p>- It is not true that Zelensky is currently out of the country</p>

<p>March</p>	<p>Disinformation related to the Russian invasion on Ukraine: fake stories about “American bio-labs” in Ukraine.</p>	<p>Countering main disinformation narratives emerged after the initiation of the Russian invasion on Ukraine, mostly coming from Russian official sources and state owned media.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The attack on Ukraine has nothing to do with "American biolaboratories" - The work of the "American biolaboratories" in Ukraine is not the cause of "epidemics of dangerous diseases" - There is no evidence that the Ukrainian army used white phosphorus - There is no Russia’s “counter-offensive” in Ukraine - The photo of the injured woman was not taken in 2018
<p>April</p>	<p>Disinformation related to the Russian invasion on Ukraine, republished from Russian official sources and emerging of the story that Russian soldiers found documents that prove that Kiev was planning an attack against Ukraine.</p>	<p>The disinformation in relation to the invasion on Ukraine dominated the month of April as well. Public broadcasting service of Republic of Srpska fully accepted Russian official narratives and old conspiracy theories and promoted them in their programe, even engaging pro-government “experts” who would further attempt to add “validity” to foreign malign narratives. Main disinformation and narratives following the first month of the Russian invasion are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dzevad Galijasevic repeats pro-Russian disinformation and old conspiracy theories - Documents found by Russian soldiers do not prove that Kiev was planning an offensive against Ukraine - The viral video does not show a "concentration camp" in Ukraine

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Nonsense about "covid drones" that the Russian army "found" in Ukraine - The footage of cocaine on Volodymyr Zelensky's desk was edited - Conspiracy video as a means of Russian propaganda about the war in Ukraine
<p>May</p>	<p>Disinformation related to Russian invasion on Ukraine: Continuation of disinformation directed at the Ukrainian president; Public Broadcasting Service of Republic of Srpska (RTRS) deepens production of foreign malign narratives by sending reporter to “the newly founded Republics of Donetsk and Luhansk”</p>	<p>In May there was a continuation of allegations that the Ukrainian President is a drug user, but also alleged information about his assets and his political actions appeared.</p> <p>Radio Television of Republic of Srpska sent a reporter, Mr. Danijel Simic to occupied areas of Ukraine. Mr. Simic reported exclusively from the Russian point of view, calling the invasion a “special operation” and referred to occupied areas of Ukraine as “newly founded Republics” although BiH and all other regional and European countries have not recognized such entities. Additionally, Mr. Simic has interviewed a Croatian war prisoner which steered comments on whether such reporting was morally grounded.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Manipulative exaggerations of the assets of the Ukrainian president - Volodymyr Zelensky did not say that he uses cocaine - Manipulative headlines about the suspension of transit of Russian gas to Europe via Ukraine - Russian propaganda in the program of the public broadcaster: How Danijel Simić reports on the war in Ukraine

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Conversations with Vjekoslav Prebeg: Why the exploitation of a prisoner of war is not objective information
<p>June</p>	<p>Disinformation related to Russian invasion on Ukraine; New wave of media releases debating the “legality” of the High Representative in BiH; Chinese blog platforms reach BiH audience as “credible sources”.</p>	<p>Media published disinformation that western officials claim that Ukraine has to give some territory to Russia. As he imposed amendments to the BiH Election Law, High Representative and his “legality” and mandate reemerged as one of main disinformative topics. Regional web portal republished information from Chinese blog, where publishing content is open for everyone, presenting it as a credible source of information.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The nuclear war put at the service of clicks and spreading fear - Media in the Service of Propaganda: The Statement of a Russian Official Presented as the "Truth About Bucha" - Schmidt's new decision and a new wave of denial of his legitimacy - How does the content of the Chinese blog platform reach the domestic media

DISINFORMATION SOURCES

DOMESTIC SOURCES

Online news portals are main provider of disinformation they publish biased and manipulative coverage of local political processes, influence of political parties, disinformation on Russian invasion on Ukraine and repercussions to the WB region, covid-19 related disinformation and clickbait content. In most of them the articles are not signed: [Slobodna Bosna](#), [Srpskacafe Mondo](#), [Iskra](#), [Glas Srpske](#), [Vijestisrpske](#), [Infosrpska](#), [Prijeedor24h](#) and [Novi](#).

FOREIGN SOURCES

In Montenegro when it comes to foreign sources of disinformation main place take regional web portals [Sputnik](#), [Informer](#), [Novosti](#), [In4s](#) and Russian official sources that promote Russian propaganda in the region and try to make pressure on local media and political actors

-[Embassy of the Russian Federation in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#).

MOST IMPACTFUL NARRATIVES

Most impactful themes	Most impactful narratives affecting your country, having widest reach or causing most damaging behavior
Russian invasion on Ukraine	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Usage of manipulative terminology like “special operation” or “counter offensive”- Denouncement of claims on Russian crimes, while at the same accusing Ukraine for crimes
Covid19 conspiracy theories, anti-vaccination	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Covid19 is not dangerous to health, it is a mild flu- Vaccines causig various terminal diseases
High Representative in BiH	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- High Representative in BiH, Mr. Christian Schmidt, is illegitimate as the UN Security Council did not elect him- High Representative is private person and “German tourist”

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the research process and data analysis conducted within the activities of countering disinformation, the Metamorphosis Foundation proposes the following recommendations as basis for joint action by all stakeholders in society aimed at solving of this problem:

- A systemic approach is needed to build a culture of critical thinking and social dialogue at all levels, starting with the education system, the relationship of institutions and stakeholders in all sectors, as well as at the family and individual level.
- Given the high multi-line polarization in the society, when preparing disinformation interventions, it is important to make data-based decisions about whether it is effective to apply a confrontational approach in a given situation (through which polarization can be enhanced), or to strive through a broad and inclusive social dialogue to give all parties a chance to reconsider some of their values, perceptions and considerations.
- Susceptibility to conspiracy theories and other alternative narratives is a consequence of structural factors that need to be addressed by specific programs, rather than by pathology or practices of politicization, rejection, or ignorance.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL MEDIA WORKERS I.E. JOURNALISTS

- Media workers, as well as the media as a whole, should strive for increased respect for professional and ethical standards in journalism, as well as increased application of self-regulatory tools.
- The media should actively participate in the fight against all types of disinformation and the promotion of media literacy by increasing the quality and diversity of media programs of informative and educational character.
- In case they do not have their own content, they should advocate for the transfer of fabricated content from all other fact-checking services or media that regularly debunk disinformation within their work.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL MEDIA ORGANISATIONS AND RELATED BODIES

- It is necessary to increase cooperation between professional media organizations as well as other institutions relevant to the media sector.
- It is extremely important to further promote the mechanisms of self-regulation as a means through which citizens have the opportunity to point out abuses by unethical media.

- In addition, it is important that public fact-checking activities be affirmed as a form of self-regulation within the media community, and as a means of encouraging public debate on the quality of media content and the kind of informal education with which professional standards are practically approaching a wider audience.

