

GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF DISINFORMATION FLOWS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS



Kingdom of the Netherlands

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

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GLOSSARY

Disinformation

Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country is considered disinformation.¹

Disinformation narrative

Disinformation narrative consists of an overall message with accompanying stories, intended to influence behavior through misleading and deception, which can be communicated through combination of various contents, from instances of disinformation to conspiracy theories, but also metaphors and select truthful news and facts, and in various formats (articles, images, videos, social media posts, anecdotes, proverbs, sayings). Accepting a disinformation narrative affects the critical thinking faculties of the target, who afterwards views all new information in biased manner, through the lens of the narrative.²³

Fake News

“Fake news” is a colloquial term for a type of disinformation in which a falsehood, a distortion, or partially incorrect information is presented specifically to look like news reporting. “Fake news” has also become a problematic term, because public figures often use the phrase to describe any type of news reporting that they don’t find flattering or supportive of their agenda.⁴



Hate speech

Hate speech is “any kind of communication in speech, writing or behavior, that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language about a person or a group based on who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factors. This is often rooted in prejudice, generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive”⁵ and even lead to offline harm or violence.⁶

Hybrid warfare

Hybrid warfare are hybrid threats which combine military and non-military as well as covert and overt means, including disinformation, cyberattacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces.⁷

Influence campaigns

Influence campaigns are both coordinated, and direct or indirect applications of activities, that aim to affect the attitudes, behaviors and decisions of people within a country or a region in a way that can benefit the interests of the actors conducting the campaign.⁸

Information integrity

Information integrity is determined by “the accuracy, consistency and reliability of the information content, processes and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem.”⁹ It requires public access to trustworthy, balanced and complete information” on current affairs, government actions, political actors and other elements relevant to their political perceptions and decision-making.”¹⁰



Information pollution

Information pollution refers to false, misleading and manipulated online and offline content, which is created, produced and disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and which has the potential to cause societal or physical harm. An overabundance of information and a high incidence of low-quality information within an ecosystem reduce our ability to find and trust information. Information pollution can be categorized as disinformation, misinformation or malinformation.¹¹

Information warfare

Information warfare is an operation conducted in order to gain an information advantage over the opponent. It consists of controlling one's own information space, protecting access to one's own information, while acquiring and using the opponent's information, destroying their information systems and disrupting the information flow. Information warfare is not a new phenomenon, yet it contains innovative elements such as the effect of technological development, resulting in information being disseminated faster and on a larger scale.¹²

Malinformation

Malinformation is information based on real facts but manipulated to inflict harm on a person, organization or a country.¹³

Misinformation

Misinformation is information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.¹⁴



Propaganda

Propaganda is the more or less systematic effort to manipulate other people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions by means of symbols (words, gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps, and so forth). Deliberateness and a relatively heavy emphasis on manipulation distinguish propaganda from casual conversation or the free and easy exchange of ideas.¹⁵

Social cohesion

According to the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Conceptual Framework of Social Cohesion, social cohesion is "the extent of trust in government and within society and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals" "This publication is an information service of the Foundation Metamorphosis from Skopje, it is free of charge and must not be sold. The views expressed in the publication are exclusively positions of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the project partners or donors." on page 2¹⁶. It is a collective bond, or a common identity, members of a certain society share. It is not an ethnic, or a state identity, but more a shared common sense of mutual interests and common goals.

Social media warfare

Social media warfare describes the use of social media as a kind of weapon with the aim of causing lasting damage to certain actors such as governments or companies. Various strategies and tactics, as well as technological means are used in order to push through a political, economic, social or cultural agenda.¹⁷



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disinformation and fake news are not just a media problem, but a security problem which may hinder realization of the most important strategic objectives in the Western Balkans. It is imperative for all the countries in the region to establish close mutual cooperation and access EU and NATO expertise in creating resilience and response strategies towards foreign malign influences.

In recent years, foreign malign influence in the Western Balkans (WB) has intensified and focused on undermining democratic development of the region. Harmful external pressures make use of key political developments and events within the countries, but also manipulate with global issues such as COVID-19 and most recently – the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Since the start of the all-out Russian invasion in February 2022 there have been increased efforts by the Kremlin and its WB proxies, through massive production of fake news to approve of the aggression and to blame NATO, the EU and the USA as main culprits for “provoking” the war.

This research report maps key trends and patterns in disinformation dissemination throughout the region in the period January – December 2022 as well as foreign interests spread through propaganda and influence campaigns seen through geopolitical lens. It takes into account multiple determinants of the region: its geographical position, culture and history of the peoples as well as national needs and expectations. The research report observes the specifics of the region as a whole and separately for each country. It focuses on the phenomenon of fake news, disinformation and foreign propaganda distributed through public media and social networks that is gaining huge potential for geopolitical influence and turns into security threat. It is a phenomenon which enables a small number of actors to abuse social networks and media ecosystems for destructive influence. In a very short time they can reach a wide audience in an easy, simple and cost effective manner and spread harmful disinformation and fake news that is difficult to eradicate.



The research shows that, on the one hand, disinformation and propaganda can be discussed in the context of external threats to the functioning of democracy and good governance in the region, as a whole, and individually in each WB country. On the other hand, it confirms that foreign players are not the only perpetrators. Foreign malign actors seek and find domestic political entities, individuals and organizations willing to participate in creation and dissemination of false narratives for their own selfish purposes, not caring for breakdown of social cohesion and democratic governance.

This research report is primarily based on the findings of the project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism which covers the period January – December 2022. The project is supported by Kingdom of the Netherlands and implemented by Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society from North Macedonia and its partners from the region: The Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro, Sbunker.net media publishing organization from Kosovo, Citizens' Association Why Not (Zašto ne) from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Faktoje.al a fact-checking service from Albania and ISAC – International and Security Affairs Centre from Serbia. They all created content focused on debunking and analyzing trends in disinformation in the Western Balkans while utilizing methodology that combined fact-checking, watchdog journalism in the service of debunking and demystifying disinformation, and media monitoring.

This report shares the educational purpose of the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub project – to raise awareness and identify ripple effects of disinformation, malinformation, misinformation and propaganda. The report is intended to serve as an early warning about the consequences of disinformation which may vary and, in their worst form, develop into conspiracy theories and hate speech that give rise of extreme movements, fomenting political instability and undermining democracy.

Last but not least, the report recommends measures to counter disinformation and propaganda in each individual WB country and the region as a whole. It is crucial that every WB country establishes national multidisciplinary teams with the final purpose to create national strategies for fighting foreign malign influences. The first step has to be enhancing civic education, developing media literacy and building up critical thinking skills, especially among young people so that societies can build resilience in the increasingly networked environment. It is of utmost importance for each country to encourage cooperation between the government, business, civil sector, tech companies and consumers in order to increase public awareness of the various types of disinformation threats, strengthen capacity to identify and expose those



threats and find ways to eradicate them. In that regard, cross-border cooperation in the WB can be vital in tackling vulnerabilities of the region and undertaking joint efforts to fight foreign malign propaganda. The whole region would benefit if the countries continue to share best practices and lessons learned.

Disinformation and fake news are not just a media problem, but a security problem which may hinder the realization of the most important strategic objectives in the Western Balkans. It is imperative for all the countries in the region to establish close cooperation with the EU and NATO and access their expertise in creating resilience and response strategies towards foreign malign influences.



INTRODUCTION

The rampant spread of disinformation, state-sponsored propaganda, unintended citizen-spread misinformation, and online hate and harassment are interfering with basic democratic processes. Social media and mainstream outlets readily amplify conspiracy theories, deep fakes, and other fabricated material, with new platforms emerging regularly. The dramatic erosion of confidence in information presents an existential threat to democracies. - Reversing the Tide, Freedom House Report, 2021

Use of disinformation, such as fake news and other kinds of media manipulation, with the intention of achieving a certain goal has always been a tool in the political struggle between opposing countries. However, the modern way of systematic use of propaganda and disinformation in the Internet era, when anyone can participate in the process of creation and dissemination, pushes the limits of all that these phenomena can do. As the Freedom House, 2021 Report of the Task Force on US Strategy to Support Democracy and Counter Authoritarianism states: "Rapid changes in the ways information is created, manipulated, disseminated, and consumed have shaken our confidence in the integrity of information, with profoundly troubling effects. The rampant spread of disinformation, state-sponsored propaganda, unintended citizen-spread misinformation, and online hate and harassment are interfering with basic democratic processes. Social media and mainstream outlets readily amplify conspiracy theories, deep fakes, and other fabricated material, with new platforms emerging regularly. The dramatic erosion of confidence in information presents an existential threat to democracies."¹⁸

The report goes on to conclude that "state actors like Russia and China have been using disinformation globally for years as part of a broader malign influence strategy to sow chaos, amplify internal divisions, discredit critics, and decrease trust in the democratic process."¹⁹



Systematic and constant use of disinformation and fake news as tools of hybrid war can undermine safety, security and stability of countries, even regions. The analysis titled “NATO’s response to hybrid threats” confirms that: “NATO Allies face threats and challenges from both state and non-state actors who use hybrid activities to target political institutions, influence public opinion and undermine the security of NATO citizens. Hybrid methods of warfare – such as propaganda, deception, sabotage and other non-military tactics – have long been used to destabilize adversaries. What is new about attacks seen in recent years is their speed, scale and intensity, facilitated by rapid technological change and global interconnectivity. NATO has a strategy on its role in countering hybrid warfare and stands ready to defend the Alliance and all Allies against any threat, whether conventional or hybrid.”²⁰

Being instruments of soft power, disinformation narratives may facilitate achievement of long term goals – such as projecting power and influence of one country over another or short term goals – such as political manipulations within a country. In both cases the consequences can have huge impact on the future of nations and communities. As noted in the report “Mapping and Analysis of Efforts to Counter Information Pollution in Europe and Central Asia Region” prepared by the UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub for Europe and Central Asia (ECA) and UNDP Oslo Governance Centre (OGC): “The widespread presence of disinformation negatively affects social cohesion and further amplifies social divisions thereby creating the potential for conflicts among countries and within societies.” Further, the report affirms: “Distrust in institutions proved particularly crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an example, exposure to disinformation and conspiracy theories caused a very low level of vaccine take-up in some countries in the region.”²¹

The purpose of this research is to draw attention to the fact that creating and sharing disinformation is far from harmless. On the contrary, fake news, disinformation and misinformation as well as the media that disseminate it become information warfare the goals of which are to win over audiences for the sake of influence and creating opinions. Detailed analysis titled: “Russia’s Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment: Susceptibility to Russian Influence” published by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence gives in-depth analysis of the Russian influence in the information environment of the Western Balkans, tools used and narratives created to undermine trust in the EU and NATO.

It is impossible to imagine today’s information age without social media. It is indispensable in our everyday private and professional life but it is also the way in which institutions and companies present themselves. In spite



of its numerous positive effects, social media makes it increasingly easy to manipulate public opinion and spread fake and damaging content. In the wrong hands and with wrong intentions social media can become a powerful weapon and turn into social media warfare. "Social Media warfare describes the use of social media as a kind of weapon with the aim of causing lasting damage to certain actors such as governments or companies. Various strategies and tactics as well as technological means are used to push through political, economic, social and cultural agenda. Social media warfare is usually aimed at manipulating the perception and thus also of opinions, emotions or behavior of a specific target group, thereby harming the actual target of the attack"²²

Circulation of what seems harmless disinformation may become an instrument for geostrategic positioning. With the Internet, manipulation through written words, photographs and video content gains exponential power. The study "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them" by the Policy Department for External Relations Directorate General for External Policies of the European Union gives thorough research on the Western Balkans region as a geographical area particularly susceptible to foreign influence by Russia, China and Turkey (which changed its name to Türkiye from June 2022²³). According to the study, at first glance "this region lies beyond what is considered the immediate sphere of Russia's geopolitical interests" but "these countries' inherent vulnerabilities, expose them to information manipulation. Their structural fragility in the fields of politics, economics, society and security allows Russia to exploit and manipulate the information environment not only to amplify existing internal divisions in these countries, but also to undermine the credibility of the EU."²⁴

Other non-EU actors have their own long-term geopolitical interests in the Western Balkan region. The 2019 research report "Geopolitical Influences of External Powers in the Western Balkans" by the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies examines how and to what extent multiple external actors are increasing their influence over the political elites and peoples in the Western Balkan countries. The report considers economic, political, religious cultural and security-related factors, and their impact on the future of peace and state-building processes. The authors state that "increasingly, Eastern actors have been using hybrid threats (disinformation warfare, covert operations to win the hearts and minds of the population by Russia), spreading violent extremism (Gulf countries), potentially debt-trapping some Western Balkans countries (China), violating the EU laws on arms trade (Gulf countries) and implementing identity reengineering (Gulf countries, Iran, Russia, Turkey) in order to advance their geopolitical interests. Indeed, the Eastern actors often adopt a holistic



approach in focusing on winning hearts and minds of the Western Balkans populations.”²⁵

It is the responsibility of each of us to be aware of the existence of these phenomena, to be able to recognize them and fight against them. Preserving democratic societies in which the right to information and freedom of speech are fundamental values is something that should be a priority for all of us. As Freedom House report argues “Rebuilding trust in information and civic discourse cannot be achieved exclusively by countering disinformation and propaganda. Informed citizens who have access to the internet, digital security training and credible information are essential to building societal resilience to disinformation.”²⁶

To access the full list of key books, analyses and policy papers consulted for this report, please refer to the Bibliography, and for all other links including links to analytical articles and news items please refer to the Endotes.



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Fake news and other forms of disinformation and propaganda are not random and haphazard phenomena but elements of malign foreign efforts. It takes raising awareness, exposing existence of foreign propaganda supported by local outlets, initiating public debates and taking urgent measures to fight it efficiently.

Systematic and continuous (mis)use of disinformation and fake news takes its toll in the Western Balkans (WB) countries. Citizens lose faith in their own states and state institutions; they do not believe in brighter future and their support for Euro-Atlantic integration diminishes.

One of the main objectives of this research is to show that such state of affairs is not random and haphazard but a part of malign foreign propaganda that intends to fulfill its own geopolitical needs. Foreign state actors are investing huge means and deploying disinformation strategies to influence societal debates, create divisions and interfere in democratic decision-making. In the process, foreign malign propaganda finds fertile ground in the WB countries in the form of local media eager for financial boost and political entities impatient to come to power (or keep the satisfactory status-quo).

Another main objective is to emphasize the essential role that the civil sector can play in increasing the knowledge on disinformation and the harm it causes. Their work should be acknowledged and continuously supported. The project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism plays a very important role in documenting and analyzing disinformation trends and flows in the Western Balkans, especially disinformation originating from external actors, through methodology that combines fact-checking, watchdog journalism in the service of debunking and demystifying disinformation and media monitoring.



This research report differs from other similar ones in that it utilizes the findings of the aforementioned regional project, which documents and exposes existence of foreign propaganda supported by local outlets, comparing those insights with the other available research, analytical and policy information. The report relies on the meticulous work accomplished by Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society from Skopje, North Macedonia and its partners in this project ISAC – International and Security Affairs Centre, think tank from Serbia; Citizens’ Association ‘Why Not’ (Udruga Građana Zašto ne) from Bosnia and Herzegovina, founder of the fact-checking services Istinomjer.ba and Raskrinkavanje.ba; Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro, founder of the fact checking service Raskrinkavanje.me; Faktoje.al, fact-checking service from Albania and Sbunker.net, media publishing organization from Kosovo. They have documented over two thousand examples of misinformation, disinformation and fake news in the form of online media articles and social media posts, producing over four hundred debunking articles that fact-checked their claims. Even more, their analyses and in-depth stories clearly outline the sources, indicating geopolitical interests behind such disinformation trends, expose malign foreign propaganda and reveal foreign strategic goals within the WB geopolitical context.

Another objective of this report is to show that disinformation and propaganda are part of the doctrines of autocratic regimes and have been in used as tools for decades now. As hybrid warfare tools they are intended to win the hearts and minds of peoples in this region. Disinformation narratives can refer to global issues. However, they become even more effective when they are specifically tailored for a “victim” country or the WB region, especially when they promote “ancient ties” through pan-Slavism, religion, traditional family values as opposed to LGBT and other topics, to which local WB populations show great sensitivity and divided opinions.

Research within this project has confirmed that Russian propaganda targets far-right and far-left extremist movements to ensure backing for its aggression, weaken support for Euro-Atlantic integration of the region, subvert governments and even create pretexts for possible wars. Other foreign actors engage in hybrid warfare in manner similar to Russia. For instance, Iran, which before 2022 mostly spread its influence in the Western Balkans through “educational, cultural, and Islamic knowledge activities,”²⁷ became aggressive in 2022 and its malign undertakings manifested through cyberattacks against Albania.²⁸

Research for this report has shown that other non-EU actors currently use disinformation narratives and propaganda only as soft power methods,



usually for long-term strategic goals and presence in the region, but not for destabilization. However, their strategic goals may change.

The report confirms that globalization and technological progress have resulted in increased vulnerabilities. With the Internet, creating and disseminating disinformation via social media and online outlets has become the most cost effective way for spreading malign influence that reaches unprecedented number of people. Statistics prove that the WB region is extremely vulnerable in relation to fake news and disinformation. About 40% of the false narratives originate from social media that makes tracing sources very difficult. On social media, disinformation spreads by techniques that include video manipulation, internet automated software, troll attacks and information theft. At the same time, more traditional methods such as television, newspapers, websites and chain emails continue to play an important role. Disinformation tools and techniques used are changing fast; therefore, the response needs to evolve just as rapidly.

It takes attention and media literacy to recognize foreign malign influence and it takes organized, well-planned and systematic effort to counter it. The report stresses the responsibility of the civil society to initiate various country-based and regional projects to collect knowledge and explain the harmfulness of disinformation among different age groups. Research conducted within the project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism brought to the surface the need to alert about people's susceptibility to believe in fake news and conspiracy theories.

Media literacy in the Western Balkans region is very low, particularly among young people, and results from governments' negligence and poor educational systems. Hence, the analysis indicates that civil society organizations (CSOs) should take a pivotal role in the efforts to raise awareness and help increase media literacy and critical thinking in their communities at all levels, primarily through curricula that they will create independently or in collaboration with the academic community. There is a need for public debate on foreign malign influences that promote their geopolitical interests through fake news and propaganda, which may cause irreparable harm and must be eradicated through systematic measures. It is a prerogative for the civil society to initiate action toward building resilience to disinformation and antidemocratic propaganda and, in the process, to seek and get support from public and state institutions.

Finally, one of the most important objectives of this report is to emphasize that there are effective ways to counter foreign malign influences. Each WB country can take its own specific measures, but the fight would be much more successful with joint efforts in the region and especially in cooperation with the EU and NATO.



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to identify geopolitical trends in the Western Balkan region related to foreign malign influences, quantitative analysis of key disinformation trends was conducted, together with analysis of the data created within the project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism project. The project generated a Knowledge Hub database, containing data on more than 2000 disinformation articles, in-depth stories and analysis, including connection to authors, media outlets and disinformation themes and narratives. Altogether the content gathered by the Hub represents a map of disinformation trends and narratives, their flow and general patterns.

For the purpose of revealing specific geopolitical trends for each country, individual in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from partner organizations in the region: Metamorphosis – North Macedonia, ISAC Fund – Serbia, Faktoje – Albania, Sbunker – Kosovo, Why Not (Zasto ne) – BiH and the Center for Democratic Transition – Montenegro.

Furthermore, desk research and consultations with relevant geopolitical analysts from the region were conducted in relation to most topics covered in the report. Numerous published books and articles on the WB were analyzed from different aspects: to uncover connections between disinformation influences and geopolitical trends; existence of harmful foreign influences and their objectives; consequences of the foreign malign propaganda over the strategic priorities of the Western Balkans countries. Key referenced publications are noted in the Bibliography section of this analytical report.

The research monitors a limited time span January – December 2022. Nevertheless, the qualitative analysis incorporates findings of other relevant research reports and analysis, published before and during the reporting period, particularly when identifying emerging geopolitical trends relevant to the Western Balkans region.



GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS

Foreign influence through disinformation becomes omnipresent, gains momentum and, unfortunately, reaps rewards for the autocratic systems that implement it. Malign foreign actors apply a whole range of soft power tools, including disinformation, to secure long term presence and provide grounds for strong political and security influence.

False narratives and fake news which are spread over the Internet prove to be the most cost effective instrument for destructive influence. They instantly reach millions of people and change perceptions.

The region of the Western Balkans continues to be a field for strategic competition between the great powers for several reasons. Serbia continues to insist on maintaining its neutrality (although it actively participates in the Partnership for Peace program), Kosovo continues to fight for broader international recognition and membership in the UN, and the whole region shows very slow progress towards the integration into the European Union (EU). This reality and the very fact that the Western Balkan region borders with the EU makes the region interesting for foreign political influence. Russia, China, Türkiye, the Gulf States and Iran have different interests in this region but all of them show eagerness for presence and influence in order to achieve their own strategic goals. Some of the non-EU actors try to gain room for maneuver taking advantage of moments when the EU and the USA change their geostrategic focus temporarily. However, there are constant efforts to prevent destructive foreign influence which is evident from North Macedonia's accession to NATO, EU accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania as well as increased involvement of the EU and the USA in achieving normalization between Kosovo and Serbia.

At the moment, reforms in the WB states are progressing more slowly than expected while the EU is occupied with its own challenges and the Russian aggression over Ukraine. All of that contributes additionally to the "enlargement fatigue" in the EU and simultaneously damages EU's reputation in the region. Recent surveys in the WB countries show increase of the number of people who no longer want to join the EU.



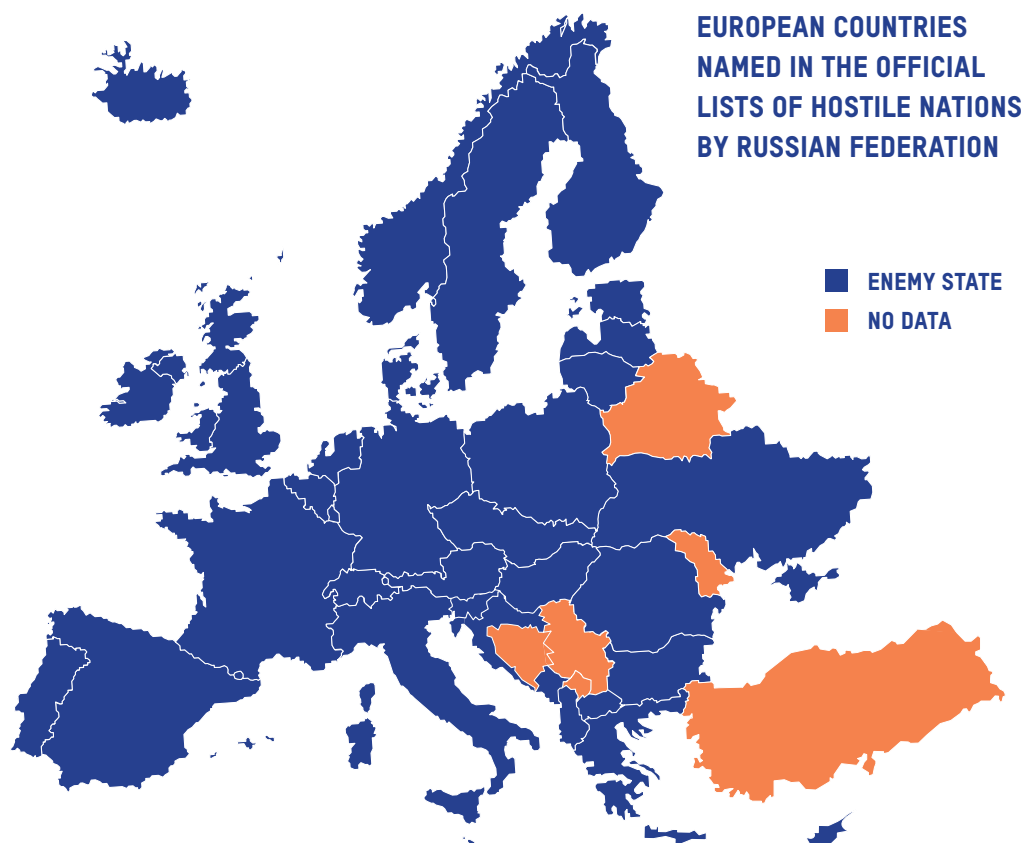
Country	NATO member	EU candidate status	EU negotiations started
 Albania	Yes	Yes	Yes
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	No	Yes	No
 Kosovo	No	No	No
 Montenegro	Yes	Yes	Yes
 North Macedonia	Yes	Yes	Yes
 Serbia	No	Yes	Yes

Table: State of Euro-Atlantic integration of Western Balkans countries as of January 2023.

Traditionally, the countries of the region maintain close ties and connections with the EU and NATO, and their member states. Trade and investment are dominated by the EU. However, due to economic and social issues, governments and societies in the WB also show interest for cooperation with non-EU actors. These actors greet such opportunities with eagerness and employ various methods to become even more visible and present. For instance, Russia has tried various methods over the years, and it turned out that influence through disinformation and propaganda over the Internet proved to be the most cost effective instrument reaching wide audiences and shaping up opinion of millions of people. Although the other non-EU actors lag behind Russia, they are accelerating use of the same tactics.

Analysis of disinformation like the one undertaken by the project Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism is very beneficial since it proves that malign foreign influence through disinformation is very present, gains momentum and unfortunately, reaps rewards for the autocratic structures that align with it.

Disinformation has the potential to change perceptions in the region. One of the most striking examples in 2022 were findings by Demostat, a Research and Publishing Center in Serbia. Survey results showed that it was a wide-spread opinion in Serbia that the country has received the largest non-refundable financial aid from Russia and China although evidence proved that the EU and the USA have been the biggest financial donors to Serbia in the last 20 years (providing 3.7 billion euros and about 900 million dollars, respectively) in grants for economic and democratic development projects.²⁹



In March 2022 Russian Federation expanded its list of hostile countries with Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia.³⁰

Russia regards the Western Balkans region as a field where it can exert significant influence with relatively small resources, predominantly through soft power and energy dependence. The purpose is to weaken and divide communities in this region, cause internal disruptions and instability, prevent NATO accession and keep these states dependent on Russian gas. While Russia is promoting “pan-Slavic” ties and belonging to the community of Orthodox Christian faith, it is also taking advantage and supporting far-right and far-left movements which directly oppose integration in the EU. Any tools have become acceptable for Russia in the process, especially propaganda, fake news and disinformation through Russia-based and “Moscow-friendly” media in the region. The fact that Russia is unable to stop its aggression now, and is suffering huge losses in Ukraine, will certainly contribute to it choosing other tools from its sharp-power toolbox in order to reduce the pressure created by the military aid that NATO countries provide to Ukraine. It is not excluded that Russia will try to open hotspots in the Balkans only to divert the attention of NATO. Disinformation and fake news from outside WB, in combination with internal actors willing to get involved for their own



selfish reasons, has many times proved to be the very handy and worthwhile instrument for such endeavor.

Country	Put on list of 'hostile countries' by Russia ³¹	Joined EU sanctions against Russia
 Albania	Yes	Yes
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	No	No
 Kosovo	No	Yes
 Montenegro	Yes	Yes
 North Macedonia	Yes	Yes
 Serbia	No	No

Table: Western Balkan countries relations to Russia after all-out invasion on Ukraine in February 2022.

China appeared as a geopolitical player after launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, an ambitious international investment strategy intended to recreate the Silk Road between China and Europe. The initiative increased the interest towards the WB region because of its geo-strategic position as a gateway to the EU. Following its own interests, China has increased investments in transport and energy infrastructure and has increased bilateral trade with all countries in the region. Both export and import with the WB countries have increased significantly. China has offered favorable financing opportunities and non-transparent direct investments opening space for corruption which is thriving among political elites in the region. China's huge investments seem to indicate that its role is not to destabilize the region, but to ensure long-term presence and wide influence. It supports EU integration, again for its own future strategic benefits. China's increased economic presence together with the region's financial dependency will inevitably turn into larger political influence. It is very unlikely that China would focus on promoting democracy, market economy and good governance as the EU. That is why both the USA and the EU still have doubts about China's long-term goals and intentions in Europe.

Türkiye has become an important player in the WB region after the wars that accompanied breaking up of Former Yugoslavia. Its primary focus is directed



towards Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, yet it strives to develop economic cooperation and impose itself as a key player among all countries in the region.

Similarities in tradition between people in Türkiye and the Balkans, paired with close political ties that promote business opportunities, have made the region a very lucrative market for Turkish companies. Ankara's resources are mainly invested into trade, banking, construction, telecommunications and critical infrastructure with primary focus on soft power and cultural and religious ties that have grown over the centuries and that are still expanding.³² Turkish influence is mainly realized through activities of the Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA). Apart from investing in the field of health, safety, education, renovation and infrastructure, TIKA renovates old Ottoman monuments and, schools (madrasas) and invests in reconstruction of mosques across the Balkans. This agency also coordinates the financial assistance provided to the Balkan countries.³³

Türkiye promotes soft power activities through culture, media and religion. In June 2022 its state-run broadcaster TRT opened the media platform TRT Balkan,³⁴ offering Internet news and radio programs in the main languages of the Western Balkans.³⁵ Türkiye's entertainment industry has had the most success as vehicle of the country's influence. Turkish soap operas have developed enthusiastic fans throughout the WB and reach millions of people, enhancing the country's soft power by popularizing Turkish culture. The German Institute for International and Security Affairs notes that "The soap operas have changed perceptions about present-day Turkish society in the Western Balkans. The image of Turks as modern, industrious people has countered the traditional image previously widespread in the region".³⁶

The interest and influence of the Gulf States (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait) over the WB region started during the wars of the late 20th century. The Gulf countries gave military support and humanitarian aid to the majority of Muslim communities.³⁷ After the wars, the involvement of these states revolved around investments in culture and religion with intention to construct mosques and schools, educate imams and spread the Wahabi interpretation of Islam. However, nowadays their influence expands in other spheres together with their investments, loans and aids. For example, UAE has significantly invested in Serbia in construction, agriculture, air traffic and military industry.

Similar to China, the Gulf States see the Western Balkans as an entrance to the EU market. Their lack of transparency in trade and procurement relations increases the region's susceptibility to corruption. Some of their non-state



actors promote radical Islamic ideas and provide support for jihadist networks that weakens the resilience of Muslim societies in the WB and poses a threat to the security of the WB region and Europe.³⁸

Iran is not a key political influence in the WB but it has its own interest in the region. Iran's economic and political involvement and influence in the region is marginal. Its cultural and religious influence is slightly higher with potential to have future security impact. In 2022 Iran's malign influence and cyber threats were focused on Albania because a large number of members of Iran's democratic opposition group, the Mujahedeen-e Khalq (MEK), are hosted there at US request.³⁹

It has been argued that Iranian global disinformation operations could be a growing trend, and one that is overlooked currently in the WB region because the Western Balkan states have not been "usually associated with highly visible Iranian presence or activities, unlike Russia and Turkey which are considered as key regional players".⁴⁰

It is important to point out that mainly Russia, but also the other non-EU actors carefully consider specific local and regional perceptions and vulnerabilities and apply a whole range of soft power tools to secure long term presence in the WB region. Currently these tools include cultural and diplomatic ties, in addition to economic, but have the potential for strong political and security influence.



INFLUENCE OF DISINFORMATION ON THE WESTERN BALKANS AS A WHOLE

Soft power expressed through disinformation and fake news can cause harm even in consolidated democracies. In transitional systems, like the Western Balkans countries, the same malign tools can wreak havoc.

In 2022 key disinformation narratives which originated from external sources revolved around Russian aggression over Ukraine and COVID-19.

The Western Balkans(WB) region had witnessed massive destruction, wars and disasters by the end of the last century. However, the lessons have not been learned and the region's potential remains unfulfilled. Many domestic political actors in some Balkan countries are not very interested in the democratic progress of the region, but rather focus on their own political survival and opportunity to remain in power (or come to power). Their lack of commitment to democratic governance leaves room for use of disinformation and hate speech as tools for political competition. Such circumstances provide fertile ground for foreign malign influence.

There was evidence that soft power expressed through disinformation and fake news can cause harm even in consolidated democracies. In transitional systems, like the WB countries, the same malign tools can wreak havoc, instigating instability, including internal and external violent conflicts.









Country	Total score 2023 (max 100)	Status 2023	Political rights (max 40)	Civil liberties (max 60)
 Albania	67	Partly Free	28	39
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	52	Partly Free	18	34
 Kosovo	60	Partly Free	28	32
 Montenegro	67	Partly Free	26	41
 North Macedonia	68	Partly Free	29	39
 Serbia	60	Partly Free	20	40

Table: Status of Western Balkans countries on Freedom House Freedom in the World 2023 report.⁴¹

In the fragile WB democracies, media freedom remains a problem, as outlined in reports by relevant civil society organizations, as well as respective European Commission annual progress reports and the US State Department reports on state of human rights. Media outlets either find themselves under control serving business interests, or face political or economic pressure. In all cases there is ample room for external influences, which manifest as disinformation campaigns and influence campaigns.

The Media Literacy Index which is “assessing the resilience potential of a number of European countries to the impact of “fake news” and the post-truth phenomenon by employing media freedom, education and interpersonal trust indicators” places the Western Balkans countries at the bottom of its list.⁴² Lower levels of media freedoms measured by Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index⁴³ correlate with levels of vulnerability to foreign malign influences as measured by GLOBSEC.⁴⁴









Country	Media Literacy Index 2022 for Europe		RWB Press Freedom Index 2023		GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index 2021
	Rank (out of 41)	Score (100 max)	Global rank (out of 180)	Global score (100 max)	(100 - most vulnerable)
 Albania	37	25	96	57.86	n/a
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	38	24	64	65.43	n/a
 Kosovo	39	23	56	68.38	n/a
 Montenegro	35	32	39	74.28	44
 North Macedonia	40	23	38	74.35	40
 Serbia	32	35	91	59.16	50

Table: Results of the Media Literacy Index, Reporters without Borders Press Freedom index and GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index for the Western Balkans countries.

Organizations implementing the project Western Balkans Anti Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism have identified and debunked hundreds of instances of fake news and disinformation articles, through fact-checks, in-depth explanatory articles and investigative stories. Their work has clearly shown the urgency for changing circumstances in which disinformation thrives. It has also reaffirmed the necessity to fight fake news and false narratives, which amplify existing divisions and undermine trust in democratic institutions at national and international level.



Eurobarometer: How much trust do you have in the European Union?			
Country	Tend to trust	Tend not to trust	Don't know
 EU 27	47	45	8
 Albania	71	26	3
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	50	44	6
 Kosovo	71	18	11
 Montenegro	47	49	4
 North Macedonia	47	43	10
 Serbia	30	60	10

Table: Results of Standard Eurobarometer 98 - Winter 2022-2023 survey.⁴⁵

Frequently, increased spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans manifests as endemic internal problem within the respective countries: some media are controlled and serve as tools of governments and political parties for short-term political gains, while other media are threatened financially because of the fierce competition and their lack of journalistic content. As a result, a number of them spread disinformation either because they are deficient in fact checking capacities or simply do it on purpose, to attract readership.

At other times, propaganda, disinformation and fake news originate from external actors but meet fertile ground among local media that support such plots and spread them further. In 2022 disinformation narratives which originated from external sources covered various topics, but most of them revolved around Russian aggression over Ukraine and COVID-19.










Support for imposing economic sanctions on Russian government, companies and individuals			
Country	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
 EU 27	74	21	5
 Albania	75	23	2
 Bosnia and Herzegovina	60	35	5
 Kosovo	88	5	7
 Montenegro	71	25	4
 North Macedonia	47	40	13
 Serbia	29	63	8

Table: Results of Standard Eurobarometer 98 - Winter 2022-2023 survey.⁴⁶

Russian propaganda usually enters the region through Serbia⁴⁷. Serbia is the largest country in the WB and probably the most influential, primarily due to its efforts to be perceived as a regional leader. Serbia's foreign policy and influential tabloid newspapers contribute greatly in creating such an image. Reporting of these tabloids which are openly pro-government and pro-Russian is clear propaganda. They replicate and amplify free content offered by Serbian branches of Russian state-owned outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today, that contain a lot of disinformation. The same content is disseminated onward in the neighboring countries without any fact checking, in many cases by online portals with no impressum, which makes it hard to determine whether they benefit from external financial sources or not. Most fake news that appear in Serbia are quickly disseminated in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) i.e. in Republika Srpska, as well as Montenegro, North Macedonia and among Serbian communities in the northern part of Kosovo.

Russian influence in the WB region does not rely on Russian investments or extensive economic cooperation, but primarily on historical and cultural ties, leaving room for broad "soft power" activities particularly among ethnic Serbs. Historical ties between Russia and Serbia date back from the pan-Slavic movement and the alliances during the First World War. There are close ties between the Russian and Serbian Orthodox Churches manifesting through donations, pompously covered by Serbian press.



Support for Financing the purchase and supply of military equipment to Ukraine			
Country	Agree	Disagree	Don't know
EU 27	65	29	6
Albania	80	19	1
Bosnia and Herzegovina	51	45	4
Kosovo	87	5	7
Montenegro	65	33	2
North Macedonia	39	53	8
Serbia	27	66	7

Table: Results of Standard Eurobarometer 98 - Winter 2022-2023 survey.⁴⁸

Chinese influence in the WB region is also gaining momentum. Russia and China have taken Serbian side in the conflict with Kosovo and openly condemn NATO air-campaign in 1999. Nowadays, Russia and China firmly oppose Kosovo independence and, as permanent UN Security Council members, defy its acceptance in the UN family. Moscow vetoed two UN Security Council resolutions condemning violence by Bosnian Serbs, the second qualifying the 1995 Srebrenica massacre as genocide.

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian government, and especially Serbian tabloids have had very important roles in promoting both China and Russia as Serbia's closest allies which, as Serbian tabloids like to point out - enable the country to oppose western dictate and lead its own independent politics. The same narrative is then amplified in ethnic Serb communities throughout the region,⁴⁹ by media which uncritically copy/translate content from Serbian media.⁵⁰

Some tabloids and online outlets in the region constantly emphasize the dangerous notion of "Great Albania" (a narrative about imagined state encompassing all territories inhabited by ethnic Albanians, implying ethnic cleansing of all other communities) and subtly imply that Russia and China can prevent its creation.^{51 52} These news outlets undermine trust in state institutions, but also undermine trust in the EU and the USA, presenting them as allies to Albanians and enemies to Orthodox Christian Slavs (Serbs, Macedonians and Montenegrins).



A European Parliament study titled “Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them” finds that the majority of disinformation aims at shifting opinions and discrediting opposition figures, but one third focuses on the EU and NATO. It concludes that “Serbia serves as a launchpad for the Kremlin’s disinformation operations in the Western Balkans in general, and in the context of undermining the EU, in particular.”⁵³

During the pandemic, Russian⁵⁴ and Chinese⁵⁵ soft power manifested as the so-called vaccine diplomacy. Serbian tabloids and their online outlets are probably most responsible for the fact that Serbian citizens hold opinions and beliefs which are quite different from those in the other countries of the region. A survey by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy has shown that 75% of Serbian citizens believe that China provided most help to Serbia during the COVID-19 pandemic, 10% believe that it was Russia and only 3% that it was the European Union. Moreover, 57% of respondents believe that Serbia should align its foreign policy with Russia and China, while only 13% believe that it should be aligned with the EU.⁵⁶

Various tabloids and online news outlets in the WB, as well as social media groups and influencers, portray Russia and Turkey as protectors of traditional family values, unlike the West, which is blamed to destroy family ideals and supports promotion of so-called ‘LGBT agenda’. This is a disinformation campaign that is also accepted by ethnic Albanian communities, which were otherwise considered unlikely to fall under Kremlin influence, due to animosity towards Russia’s role as supporter of Serbia within the Serbia -Kosovo issue.

The aforementioned narratives, ready-made stories and prejudices have been largely used by foreign propaganda, but also by some domestic political actors. It is not surprising that a huge number of people in the WB are taking sides in the Russian-Ukrainian war. Cleavages are a direct result of disinformation narratives spread for years. Such narratives have presented Russia as the big-Slavic brother, protector of Slavs and the Orthodox Christian religion. False narratives have been repeatedly woven into everyday reporting for years, claiming that “the evil West” has broken up Yugoslavia and now wants to destroy Russia.

Online and printed media in Kosovo and Albania share some false narratives related to Ukraine, but not the ones undermining the EU, the USA and NATO. In Kosovo, disinformation spins mostly around relations with Serbia, northern Kosovo and military threats coming from Serbia, while in Albania disinformation often comes from UK tabloids.



Fake news and disinformation disrupt normal functioning of democratic societies, economies and political systems. What is more, fake news and coordinated disinformation and influence campaigns become instruments of geopolitical influence. Therefore, fight against foreign malign manipulations must be a joint effort involving all stakeholders to demote content that is fact-checked as false or misleading, and debunk fake news and illegal content that could cause harm.

All countries in the region need to introduce media literacy and critical thinking in classroom curricula. At the same time, rule of law and media freedom need to be defended and improved, preventing media from being mere political tools that serve various interests.

It would be very convenient to be able to predict development of foreign malign influences and tools they would use. That is not always easy. However, probably the best practice would be to closely monitor internal political situations in each country, especially fake news, malformation and disinformation narratives used by political entities since foreign malign influence always paves the way in advance by heavily relying on internal supporters, both political parties and media outlets.

LOBSEC policy report “Fighting Foreign Malign Influence in Democratic States” points out practices and measures which can strengthen democracies and contribute significantly in countering foreign hostile activities and hybrid threats. These measures include long-term strategic thinking, building trust in state institutions, coordination between stakeholders, treating corruption as national security issue, allocating sufficient resources for countering disinformation, providing independence of public broadcasters, building media literacy, etc.⁵⁷ LOBSEC brief titled “Countering foreign malign influence in Central Europe and the Western Balkans” that constitutes the final output of the LOBSEC Vulnerability Index, sums up the key factors that enable and facilitate foreign influence and suggests practical techniques and recommendations for the EU and NATO to help the two regions successfully fight against hostile influences from abroad.⁵⁸



**GLOBSEC key recommendations for international stakeholders on
countering foreign malign influence in Central Europe and the Western Balkans**



It is vital to unite the efforts of all stakeholders in the Western Balkans to counter foreign malign interference whose actors are frequently transnational and may exploit all kinds of disinformation narratives directed against security and stability. A need arises for establishing foreign malign influence centers that would be tasked with tracking overseas efforts to wage disinformation, influence campaigns, undermine public confidence in democratic institutions and sow discord. Such centers would anticipate, identify, and counter foreign-backed disinformation and utilize the vast knowledge accumulated by the civil sector organizations, especially in regional projects, such as the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub.



GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF DISINFORMATION IN WESTERN BALKANS COUNTRIES

Albania

Foreign malign influences did not have discernible impact over Albania's strategic goals. Most fake news and disinformation sources in Albania in 2022 were internal and they were driven by two main motives: income and political support. Political cleavage has been far more effective for undermining social cohesion in the country than any malign influence from abroad.



Albania's primary strategic goals have been NATO and EU membership and they have gradually been realized since the country became a full NATO member in 2009 and opened the EU accession negotiations in 2022. In spite of minor political divergences, the main political parties in Albania as well as 97% of the population express their firm dedication for the EU path. NATO is currently building its first airbase in Albania, and there are talks about opening a second one as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. It is clear that Albania is making efforts to position itself as a pro-Europe and pro-NATO country that will serve as a barrier to the Russian influence in the Western Balkans.

Russian and Chinese influences have had no discernible impact over Albania's strategic goals. Recently, Faktoje.al, internationally certified fact-checking service from Albania,⁵⁹ has published an analysis on China's limited success in attempting to make inroads into Albania.⁶⁰

According to Faktoje experts, there were four topics that generated a continuous stream of disinformation in Albania in 2022: Russian



aggression in Ukraine, Kosovo – Serbia dialogue and tensions between them, Open Balkan initiative and cyber-attacks by Iran.

Most fake news and disinformation sources in Albania are internal and they are driven by two main motives: income and political support. Albania boasts an astounding, more than 600 portals that describe themselves as media or news outlets. In such a fiercely competitive environment, clickbait or sensationalist bits of news that can generate clicks, become the norm. As participants in the regional Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub, experts from Faktoje in Albania have noticed that inflammatory or outrageous claims consistently draw more attention and engagement than news, that is in-depth research and portrayed accurately. Albanian political figures use connections to media outlets to get support for their own political agendas, spreading disinformation according to their own needs along the way.

Faktoje research has shown that Albania's two main opposition parties, the Democratic Party (DP) and the recently re-branded Freedom Party (FP), have been among the main vectors for spreading disinformation. DP leader Sali Berisha, who has a large and steady following (including the one on social media), releases statements that are unverified and often border with conspiracy theories. Unfortunately, these statements on social media platforms regularly receive far more engagement than news stories by legitimate news sources. Berisha has managed to rally his supporters in several major protests over the past few years. Such political division has been far more effective for undermining social cohesion in the country than malign influence from abroad. While there are currently no studies of the impact of such maneuvers on Albania's strategic goals, they have led to moments of friction between Berisha and US ambassador Yuri Kim. Also, politicians from both the Democratic Party and the Freedom Party have made allegations that Prime Minister Edi Rama is corrupt and potentially under Russian influence, accusing him of undermining Albania's close relationship with the United States, which US Envoy Gabriel Escobar had to refute in a recent statement.⁶¹

Furthermore, Faktoje research shows that on the clickbait (disinformation for clicks) side, media outlets seem to be succeeding.⁶² This is not only the case in Albania. It is a phenomenon that spreads all over Western Balkans, proving porosity of media borders. The more outrageous the false news, the more clicks it gets. Since Kosovo – Serbia dialogue was among the most sought after topics in the whole region in 2022, there was evidence that disinformation was fabricated in one country and then shared "at the speed



of light” providing clicks for counterparts all over the Balkans. Mapping the routes of disinformation made it obvious that unreliable news sources (such as tabloids and online portals) rely on each other to generate bombastic titles and fake news⁶³. The growing tension between Kosovo and Serbia has been blown out of proportion across Albanian media, with each incident being portrayed as an advent of a new war.

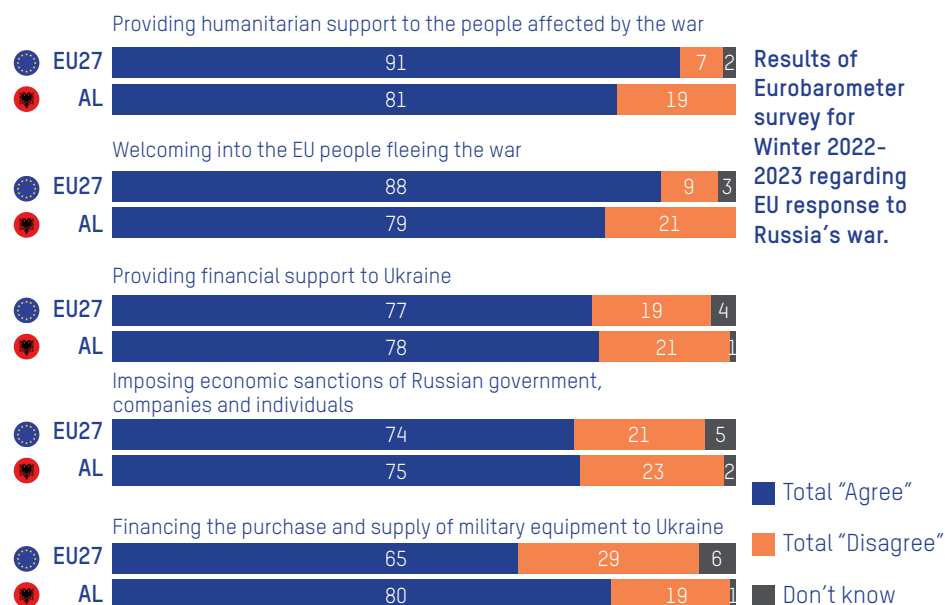
In many cases, as in all other WB countries, fake news is primarily published on social media and then shared across various outlets as official. Media outlets create their own disinformation, pick up news items that generate outrage or edit speeches and events only to inspire people to click. In the course of their fact-checking activities, debunking fake-news and analyzing media space in Albania, Faktoje have noticed a rise in conspiracy theory dissemination on social media relating to COVID-19 and pro-Russian propaganda. Groups and individuals share posts claiming that Western governments are run by globalist elites and that climate change is made up. They also decry moral decadence of LGBT rights. When spread in such a way, conspiracy theories may generate motivation to disobey executive authority and incite unlawful and extremist actions.

Albanian politicians are among the main sources of disinformation for the sake of political gain. While fake news tends to have higher engagement than average, social media posts by party leaders and other key political figures in Albania have an engagement that rivals that of the biggest news agencies.

Given the internal nature of disinformation sources in Albania, countering this challenge is very difficult. Most media outlets, including major news agencies tend to align with certain political parties thus showing different kinds of bias in their coverage.



Q2. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (%)



The war in Ukraine provided Albanian media portals with a lot of material for clickbait and fake news. Online portals have republished unverified claims and pictures about warfare and nuclear threats⁶⁴ as well as Russian propaganda regarding the reason for the war, alleged de-Nazification of Ukraine and the invasion as an attempt to protect Russia from NATO. The purpose was always the same – attracting readership. Nevertheless, Russian influence through disinformation has not turned Albania away from the EU accession path.

Alleged susceptibility to Russian influence has been used as a tool to discredit parties and individuals across the political spectrum. At times, the ruling party has tried to disgrace the opposition as influenced by Russia. Sometimes even protests motivated by social and economic issues, such as inflation, have been discredited as helping Russia. The Open Balkan project has also been the target of many speculations, especially between rival political parties. The opposition called it a Russian Creation, while Prime Minister Rama's attempts to spearhead it were labeled as anti-European and pro-Russian. The Albanian Prime Minister was accused of being manipulated by the Russian President Putin and the Serbian President Vučić. It was precisely the Open Balkan project that served as a rallying slogan for Albania's two major opposition parties when they organized several, highly attended protests, centered around the idea of Prime Minister Rama being "Vučić's lackey" and "a servant to Serbia".



Disinformation from external sources is not lacking in Albania, either. Both Serbian and British tabloids provide content that is then translated by media outlets, which copy from each other in a chain of disinformation that repeats on a daily basis.

The reason for the current situation in the Albanian media space is the fact that an attempt to set up and operate online news outlet for profit is an audacious undertaking, especially if it is not part of a traditional media group. Funding sources for media are revenues from commercial advertising, funds from business or political interest groups, government money, or donations and income from unknown sources. Funding sources are hardly transparent. Advertising money is limited and often distributed on preferential basis. Such circumstances create an environment for proliferation of fake news and disinformation.⁶⁵

According to Ornela Liperi, Editor-in-chief of the business and finance magazine Monitor, Albanian media claim to be independent, but “they are clearly divided along political lines. Links between media owners and interest groups to politicians have hurt reporting standards, especially at large television stations”.⁶⁶

With the development of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has shown greater interest in the whole WB region and especially in Albania which seems particularly interesting because of its geographical position. An article in *Per Concordiam*, an academic journal on security and defense in Europe, makes an in-depth analysis on the Chinese vision of the WB region, as a market and as a gate to the Western European markets. The authors point out that “Given the need for investment and low production costs in the region, we might see a future trade-substituting investment strategy that could potentially allow Chinese companies to circumvent trade restrictions and export products directly to the EU market of 800 million people, thanks to the free trade agreements that Western Balkan countries enjoy with the EU.”⁶⁷

Faktoje research on Chinese investments and influence in the country has shown that in spite of China’s efforts, in the case of Albania, these investments have not yielded expected results. China failed in becoming one of the main investors in the country.⁶⁸ Currently, in line with its long-term strategy for influence, Chinese government works on increasing its presence in the sphere of culture by promoting Chinese history, literature and language. There is a Confucius Institute at the University of Tirana, which promotes a number of cultural activities and language learning. An increased percentage of people in Albania view China positively. Data from the Albanian Security Barometer for



2022 points out that only 19% of Albanian citizens think that China is a peril to Albania's safety, while 76.6% do not regard China as a security threat.⁶⁹

A study of the European Council on Foreign Relations⁷⁰ sums up that Albania doesn't want to undermine good relations with Western powers and therefore remains unlikely to make any dramatic shifts in approach (to China), especially if the EU enlargement process regains momentum. At the same time China's increased intentions for influence in the WB, and particularly in Albania, has urged greater US engagement.⁷¹

Generally, foreign investors perceive Albania as a difficult place to do business. The US Department of State's 2022 Investment Climate Statement cites "endemic corruption, including in the judiciary and public procurements, unfair competition, informal economy, frequent changes of the fiscal legislation, and poor enforcement of contracts as continuing challenges for investment and business in Albania."⁷² The European Union annulled a EUR 28 million grant for the reconstruction of the country's biggest port in Durrës citing lack of transparency on the part of the Albanian government. This grant is part of the EUR 3.2 billion investment package earmarked for the Western Balkans by the European Union.

Türkyie is another important influential actor in the WB region, exercising its Strategic Depth doctrine - foreign policy to increase its influence in the Balkans and beyond, mainly through economy and culture.⁷³ According to the Albanian Security barometer for 2022, most citizens think that currently, Türkyie offers Albania the best relations, followed by the USA and Germany.⁷⁴ This is a confirmation of Türkyie's triumph in its geopolitical strategy and public diplomacy, which has enhanced Türkyie's international status, increased its credibility and promoted it as a regional leader, especially among ethnic Albanians.⁷⁵

Albania has strong political, economic and cultural ties with Türkyie, reinforced in the recent years. There are several hundred Turkish companies investing in Albania in the fields of energy, mining, telecommunications, textiles, banking system, logistics and health. Türkyie also appears as investor in culture and media. There are Albanian online portals that focus on Türkyie's internal issues, achievements and policies etc. Since there is no transparent data on funding, it's impossible to verify whether these portals are connected to Türkyie or Turkish organizations.⁷⁶

The content of the Anadolu Agency, a state news agency directly financed by the Turkish Government, is also published in Albanian. It has a Facebook page and a Twitter account that attract thousands of followers. According to



a research done by Faktoje, besides promoting Türkiye Government in Albania, Anadolu Agency includes harmful propaganda, such as articles that condemn US State Department's report on human rights abuses, or reports about the cleric Gülen and his followers.⁷⁷ Albanian online portals are not as harsh in their statements, but still echo the same pro-Türkyie approach in their media coverage. The same portals constantly praise Turkish Government investments both in Albania and the WB region. With regards to Türkyie, media experts from Faktoje have noted a number of pro-Erdogan profiles on Facebook that incite hatred towards Greece, especially when it comes to issues on maritime borders.

Iran's interest in Albania has emerged ever since Albanian Parliament agreed to allow a large number of members of Iran's democratic opposition group, the MEK, to settle in Albania.⁷⁸ MEK members were interested in starting a debate in the WB about Iran. Iran responded with its own disinformation campaign which involved "use of social media, dissemination of fake news, provision of grants for biased and slanderous reports, and even hiring reporters" to demonize and discredit the MEK.⁷⁹ Things culminated in 2022 when Iranian state cyber actors launched destructive cyber-attacks against the Government of Albania which rendered websites and services unavailable, extracted personal data and deployed destructive malware. They also created a website and multiple social media profiles posting anti-MEK messages.⁸⁰

These massive data hacks that hit Albania in 2022 have been portrayed by some online media portals with inaccuracy, fueling fears of national security threats and leaving citizens uncertain about their personal data. The situation created an atmosphere of insecurity and even panic at times, when systems at airports, border crossings and banks were down. It also reduced faith in Albanian state institutions. Assessment of the damage is still ongoing and it is not yet clear how these attacks would affect Albania's international cooperation and the EU accession. In September 2022 the Council of the European Union has issued the following statement: "The European Union, together with NATO and international partners, stands ready to support Albania's cyber resilience building on our existing cooperation on cybersecurity."⁸¹

Accusations of Russian influence have been used by Albanian politicians to spark outrage and the same trend is likely to continue. Experts in Albania anticipate more local strains of disinformation and politically motivated violence to take place around major political events, such as local and parliamentary elections.



Bosnia and Herzegovina

Unlike most other countries in the region, where disinformation is produced within the country, the most destructive disinformation campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) primarily come from abroad. Ethnically divisive narratives, ethnic and religious tensions and polarization in BiH have had the largest potential to end up in extremism and violence. Foreign malign influences are amplified by the nationalistic parties in the country, which use them as tools to sustain enormous levels of corruption, illegal political activities and various kinds of state capture.



Membership in the EU and NATO are the strategic objectives of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), even by the Law. The BiH Law on Defense, which is in force, stipulates that “BiH Parliamentary Assembly, Council of Ministers, the Presidency and all defense subjects within their authorities, will implement necessary activities for BiH accession to NATO membership”⁸². Nevertheless, although they themselves voted for and adopted the NATO accession legislation in the BiH Parliamentary Assembly, politicians and officials from the Serb entity Republika Srpska (RS) are declining to join or execute any steps towards NATO membership⁸³ and are supported by the Russian Federation in this endeavor. Russia claims that there is no internal agreement in BiH regarding NATO. The Russian Ambassador to BiH argues that the Strategy of Foreign Policy of BiH 2018-2023 does not mention the country’s ‘membership’ but only ‘cooperation’ with NATO.⁸⁴ He even goes further in his illegal meddling in BiH internal affairs, by calling the country’s action steps for NATO membership, unconstitutional.

The Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) continues to provide the framework for BiH as a unified state, but inter-ethnic tensions within the country continue to exist as key political problem. The BiH political life is dominated by political parties that claim to defend one of the three constitutional peoples. Republika Srpska (RS) leaders are pursuing an agenda for independence, threatening secession. Croat leaders are threatening to change the territorial organization of BiH in a way that would be detrimental to peace,



while Bosniak leaders are placing their own narrow political interests over those of BiH and rely on nationalist appeals to mobilize their voters. Above all, there is deeply entrenched corruption and nationalism, leaving room for increasing foreign malign influence.

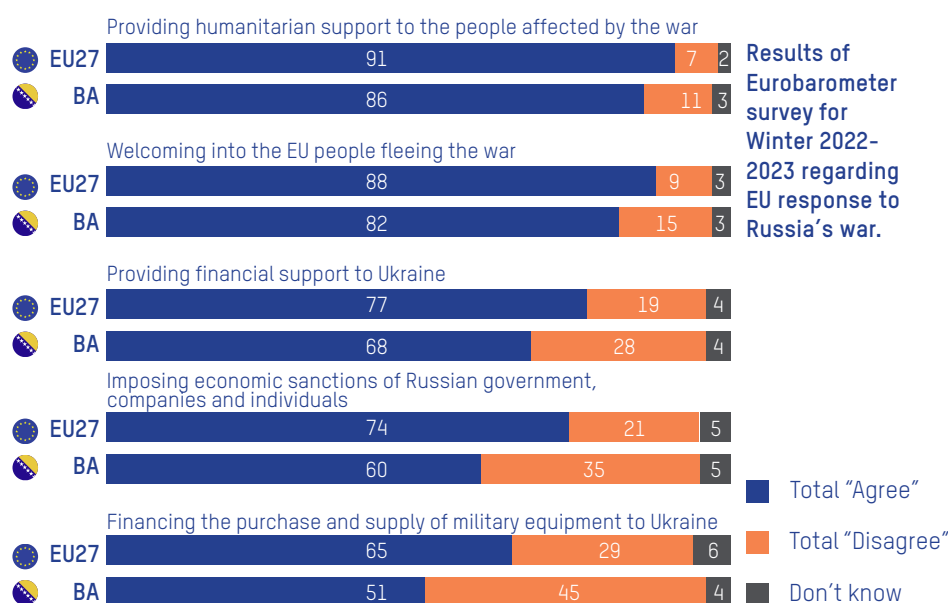
The European Parliament study “Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them” points out that “the media landscape in BiH, to a great extent, reflects the country’s complex constitutional construction. Media outlets and audiences are separated between the Muslim-Croat Federation on the one hand, and Republika Srpska on the other. News outlets in all three communities, and especially their generally private owners, usually have close ties with political parties and leaders; hence it is difficult to talk about the media landscape as separate from politics.”⁸⁵ Unlike most other countries in the region, where disinformation is produced within the country – the most destructive disinformation campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina primarily come from abroad.⁸⁶

Russian propaganda and the actions of the Russian Embassy in BiH have the potential and the intention to undermine the implementation of BiH’s strategic objectives. According to results of media monitoring and analyses by Citizens’ Association Why Not (Udruga Građana Zašto ne), most common disinformation and fake news that appeared in BiH in 2022 related to the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Posted texts, published articles and huge amount of fake photos and videos blamed the West and NATO for ‘provoking Russia’ to start the aggression, blamed Ukrainian state leadership of being Nazis, etc.

BiH seems to be fertile ground where foreign malign influence and disinformation flourishes, especially when it is putting the blame on the West for BiH’s economic stagnation and ethnic problems. According to experts in Citizens’ Association Why Not, fake news and disinformation is deliberately blending Anti-Western narratives with the predominant local conservative and nationalist ones. This has enhanced the perception of the local population that the ‘evil West’ is threatening local traditional values by promoting “decadence”, like liberalism, LGBT, human rights, etc. According to the BiH Directorate for the European Integration (DEI),⁸⁷ the percentage of BiH citizens who do not support BiH accession to the EU rose in 2022 to 16%, from 12,4% in 2021 and 9,2% in 2020.⁸⁸



Q2. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (%)



Public broadcasters in Republika Srpska are producing their own Russian propaganda and transposing Russian narratives, through uncritical quoting and transmitting of articles and other media products from Sputnik Serbia and Russia Today channel. Additionally, Russian Foreign Ministry and the Russian Embassy in BiH support Milorad Dodik,⁸⁹ the official policy proclaimed as "return to the original Dayton (Agreement) in BiH", aiming to annul the entire post-war institutional and political progress of BiH, which enabled the country to take membership in many important international organizations.⁹⁰ By the so-called 'return to the original Dayton' BiH would roll back on its entire progress in the military sector, dissolving the Ministry of Defense and unified military, the BiH Prosecutors Office, the Court of BiH, state level police agencies in charge of terrorism and organized crime, etc., which would all inevitably lead to BiH not only losing its authorities in key state sectors, but also its attained status in the international organizations and associations. The abovementioned policy specifically aims at the military, security and judicial sector, thus undermining almost all strategic objectives of BiH.⁹¹

Disinformation narratives that are identified in Serbia, are mirrored in Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially on social networks and in the media outlets in Republika Srpska. Starting from 2018, the internationally certified fact-checking service Raskrinkavanje ("unmasking" or "debunking" in Bosnian), founded by CA Why Not,⁹² started identifying and cataloguing known media manipulation campaigns targeting Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). One of the most valuable findings of their study⁹³ was the exposure of a hub of media outlets that republished the same disinformation narratives spreading similar messages. This hub consisted of 29 media outlets, almost completely located in Serbia and Republika Srpska. The



research by Raskrinkavanje showed that, even though it was impossible to prove close connection, it was safe to say that there was obvious coordination between several of the main outlets in the hub, based on the time and sequences of publishing and the number of the same reports published. This disinformation hub has been used for two main purposes: first, to propel the local position of the government of Republika Srpska, its largest party SNSD (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats) and its leaders at the expense of BiH; and, second, to promote pro-Russia messages and propagate anti-Western values⁹⁴. In the research study, Raskrinkavanje showed through examples how, in a very short time, fake news has appeared in 16 media from this hub, including Sputnik, Informer, Blic, Alo, Kurir, Srbin info, Tanjug, Vesti online, Srbija Danas, RTS, Srbin and Republika from Serbia; and RTRS, ATV, Glas Srpske, and SRNA (Republika Srpska News Agency) from BiH i.e. from Republika Srpska. In 2022 the situation on the ground became even worse with smaller media trying to make profit on the internet by providing click-bait content without having to develop their own journalistic substance.⁹⁵

According to Citizens' Association Why Not, in 2022 BiH's well known ethnic and political divisions were further deepened by the large amount of disinformation through foreign malign influence. Conflict in Ukraine has placed an additional strain on the already polarized media. Foreign malign influence through narratives from authoritarian and illiberal countries were reflected in the Bosnia and Herzegovina's media eco system. This situation resulted in significant portion of BiH population trusting the Russian propaganda, believing that the Russian aggression against Ukraine was justified and was only a counter-offensive and a "special operation"; that Russia started the invasion to destroy Nacism and US biolabs in Ukraine, that Ukrainian president was a drug addict etc. In a number of articles debunked by Raskrinkavanje, Russia's military was presented as successful on the battlefield, fighting to defend the traditional values and to protect Russians in Ukraine. Their aim was to discredit the EU, the USA and NATO, while Russia was glorified as a factor that prevented a Third World War. The USA was usually shamed and blamed as war profiteer, as guilty of buying one third of Ukrainian agricultural land or meddling in the BiH elections.

Two public broadcasting outlets stand out as single most prolific sources of disinformation in BiH, and those are RTRS (Radio-Television of Republika Srpska) and SRNA (Republika Srpska News Agency)⁹⁶. Republika Srpska(RS) public broadcasting service RTRS serves as some sort of an extended arm of the Russian propaganda, since it echoes Russian narratives uncritically and has even established its own reporting structure in the occupied regions of Ukraine. Other RS TV stations and web portals like the Alternative TV, Prijedor



24h, VijestiSrpske, etc often carry disinformation from the Russian sources. In the other BiH entity, Federation of BiH (FBiH), the main problem is uncritical transposition of Russian officials' statements which serve as basis for spreading false narratives in the mainstream media in FBiH.

Bosnia-Herzegovina, together with Serbia, has refused to join sanctions against Russia (even though they supported the UN's condemnation of Russia's actions). It is a result of the complex division of Bosnia and Herzegovina among the three main ethnic groups which hinders any decision, as each of the three leaders holds veto power.

Some politicians often apply disinformation and fake news to score political points, create distrust in BiH as a state, discredit opponents in the elections, degrade the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina and undermine the Euro-Atlantic integration of the country, contributing to the creation of dangerous and poisonous atmosphere that prevents social cohesion. Corruption in BiH, lack of public trust in judicial institutions and the legal framework as well as non-transparent business procedures hugely affect other strategic objectives of the country, such as foreign investments.⁹⁷ Investments from Western countries had been going down for a significant period of time (since 2007 and 2009)⁹⁸. According to experts from the Citizens' Association Why not, in 2022 since the Russian aggression on Ukraine, direct foreign investments have additionally diminished.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is little or no recognition that disinformation may pose a hybrid threat. Public debate on responses to such threats is largely lacking.⁹⁹

According to a study¹⁰⁰ by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), China has established an economic, cultural, and political presence in BiH but "runs no visible, overt malign influence operations" in pursuit of any particular strategic goal. For the time being, the Chinese Communist Party is interested in investing in transportation and energy, as well as in cultivating cultural, political, and academic ties. However, Chinese investments have the potential to undermine BiH accession to EU, as the major Chinese investments in BiH¹⁰¹ were not aligned to the EU standards and threaten to undermine BiH's membership in the European associations and institutions.¹⁰²

In the past years, BiH has borrowed money from the Chinese Development Bank for coal-burning plants and two highway sections. The bank could take ownership in the event of a loan default. Also, in 2022, authorities in Sarajevo canton in BiH have signed a contract with a Chinese consortium for the reconstruction of Sarajevo tram lines. BiH authorities are refusing public



oversight on the contract thus raising concerns and leaving suspicion for possible corruption.¹⁰³

China, which already has significant influence in Serbia, works on building ties and relationships with political actors in Republika Srpska, its ruling political party SNSD (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats) and with Milorad Dodik, leader of the SNSD and a member of the BiH Presidency. Chinese government does not recognize the legitimacy of the international High Representative in Bosnia, Christian Schmidt, who named Dodik as one of the main culprits for the current instability in BiH, in a 2021 report to the UN Security Council.¹⁰⁴

China has established greater presence in BiH, mainly in Republika Srpska where they find the atmosphere much friendlier than in the other parts of the country. The other constitutive part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Federation of BiH, with the majority Bosnian and Croat population is, at least declaratively, supportive of Euro-Atlantic integration. So far, cultural cooperation with China mostly relies on the Confucius Institutes at the University of Sarajevo and University of Banja Luka, as well as on the establishment of a Chinese language department at the University of East Sarajevo, which offers free children and adult courses and cultural events.¹⁰⁵

Two nonprofit organizations in Bosnia, the Belt and Road (Pojasi put) Think Tank and the Bosnian-Chinese Friendship (Bosansko-kinesko prijateljstvo) Association, aim to promote Chinese culture, cooperation with China and the Belt and Road Initiative. The public Srpska Republika News Agency (SRNA) and the Federal News Agency have cooperation agreements with Xinhua, their Chinese counterpart¹⁰⁶.

Türkiye is another important influential actor in the region. It exercises its 'Neo Ottoman' foreign policy in order to increase its influence in the Balkans and beyond. Turkish presence and influence among Bosniaks in BiH has intensified and serves as a kind of counter-balance factor to Russian influence among Bosnian Serbs. Whenever Milorad Dodik announces secession of Republika Srpska or creation of its own military forces with support from Russia, Bosniaks through their organizations and NGOs react by asking support and help from Türkiye.¹⁰⁷ Turkish influence in BiH is large and exerted mainly through main Bosniak nationalist party SDA, which has close ties with the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Turkish companies are often winning important construction tenders in Federation BiH. One of the construction companies from Türkiye, closely connected to the Turkish President, owns a media group in BiH,¹⁰⁸ which is the owner of a weekly magazine and the web portal. Both mentioned media are strongly supporting Bosniak nationalist policies of SDA and often publish articles that steer divisions among BiH ethnicities.



Due to common historical heritage, similarities in tradition, religion and modern political and economic ties, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the other Western Balkan countries are considered very close to Türkiye. Turkish influence is most visible in the Federation of BiH, where majority of population are Muslim Bosniaks. It includes trade relations, investments in banking, construction, telecommunications and critical infrastructure. Publicly Türkiye has primary focus on soft power and cultural and religious ties, such as restoration of Ottoman-era cultural and religious monuments by the Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA), which is also involved in providing aid in the fields of health, safety, education, and infrastructure.

Turkish soft power in BiH is spread through the Yunus Emre Institute, which is responsible for popularizing Turkish culture and language.¹⁰⁹ Their efforts are paying off and currently the Turkish language is being taught as an elective subject in primary and secondary schools. Through Yunus Emre and other state and non-state institutions, Türkiye offers scholarship programs to students in BiH and other WB countries.

Turkish Anadolu Agency, TRT television network and many other news outlets are present in the Balkans directly and indirectly, through cooperation with many local media outlets. Many of them broadcast in Bosnian with the aim to promote the Turkish language and culture and spread Turkish propaganda.

In the past 30 years, ethnically divisive narratives, ethnic and religious tensions and polarization in Bosnia and Herzegovina have had the largest potential to end up in extremism and violence. The abovementioned narratives are directly related to the rule of nationalistic parties, which have used them as tools to sustain enormous levels of corruption, illegal political activities and various kinds of state capture.¹¹⁰



Kosovo

The official position of Serbia of not recognizing the independence of Kosovo, and the fact that Kosovo is still a subject of powerful geopolitical interests, provide ground for foreign malign influence with intentions to feed hostilities between Kosovo and Serbia and Albanian and Serb communities in the country, threaten regional peace and stability and prevent reconciliation and normalization. As long as Kosovo and Serbia do not make positive steps ahead in their bilateral relations, both Russia and China would use their veto power in the UN Security Council to deny Kosovo's statehood.



The strategic objectives of Kosovo include sustaining a democratic, multiethnic, effective and sovereign state, with membership in NATO and the EU that will foster regional stability and enhance prosperity for its citizens and the region. Foreign hostile influence through disinformation and fake news is present but does not impact the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation. Kosovar media with primary Albanian language generally do not spread negative narratives against NATO, the USA or the EU, due to the fact that Kosovo has clearly expressed its pro-Western orientation. On the other hand, Kosovo's Serbian language media are torn between rival political influences.¹¹¹

Normalized relations between Kosovo and Serbia are key to regional stability and would enhance Kosovo's faster accession in the EU and membership in NATO. The country is fulfilling its obligations stemming from the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) and Prime Minister Albin Kurti submitted Kosovo application for EU accession on 15 Dec, 2022. In regards to NATO integration, Kosovo has not yet signed Partnership for Peace Agreement since five EU and four NATO members still do not recognize the country's independence and oppose its integration.

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Albanian and Serb communities in the country; threaten regional peace and stability and prevent reconciliation and normalization. As long as Kosovo and Serbia do not make positive steps ahead in their bilateral relations, both Russia and China would use their veto power in the UN Security Council to deny Kosovo's statehood. These two countries use this veto power as leverage to secure support from Serbia for their geopolitical goals within international institutions, as well as securing economic deals favorable to them.^{112 113}

A huge amount of external disinformation narratives in Serbian language are spread by Serbia-based and Russia-based media, which are then transposed in Kosovo. According the European Parliament study "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", there are "long-running disinformation campaigns designed to delegitimize Kosovo's statehood, undermine its relations with Europe and destabilize its governance. Core narratives in these long-running campaigns include: allegations that Kosovo is a mafia state, operating under the protection of Kosovo Force (KFOR)¹¹⁴ and thus with the implicit support of western powers; invention and/or exaggeration of threats to the safety and property of ethnic Serbs and other minorities living in Kosovo and insinuations that Kosovo is incapable of sustainable self-governance without support from Serbia."¹¹⁵

In the country, disinformation and various forms of media manipulation are created by Kosovar media, both in Albanian and Serbian, which interpret social media announcements by Serbian politicians as official statements, or reproduce disinformation originating from Sputnik Serbia or other Serbian media outlets. The consequences broaden social polarization between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and create fear and panic.¹¹⁶ And finally, some disinformation narratives in Kosovo in 2022 were intentionally created to be used as click-bait and boost readership. Those were mainly sensational news or disinformation about COVID-19.

Experts from Sbunker.net, have noted that, it is now customary that prior to any elections held in Serbia, there's an increase in the nationalist discourse regarding Kosovo.¹¹⁷ Serbian politicians on the left and right, in power and in opposition, compete over who is tougher in relation to policies they would pursue towards Kosovo, if they won the elections. Elections in Serbia in 2022 inspired a huge number of disinformation articles, in relation to the safety of Kosovo's northern border. Fake news appeared on websites without impressum and Facebook profiles with thousands of followers. As expected, most of them were click-bait.¹¹⁸



Online portals in Kosovo, including some in Albanian language, published fake news and disinformation before elections in Serbia in 2022¹¹⁹. Portals such as *lajmi.net*, *syri.net*, and *botasot.info* spread disinformation about Serbian Army moving to the border with Kosovo, citing a Spanish website “The Political Room,” without any prior checking that an original article did not exist on this website. In fact, the news relied on unconfirmed videos and photos, which were posted on social media. The narrative was intended to cause disturbance and fear among Kosovo Albanians, while the portals stated that they could not “verify the authenticity of the videos.” Other news outlets that published disturbing fake news, without any previous verification were: *Albasky.com* and *GazetaAktive* (both of them with thousands of followers on Facebook).

Kosovar experts from *Sbunker* estimate that the greatest distributors of fake news and disinformation about Kosovo are Serbian state officials. Their statements often create panic and tension with the purpose to alarm the international community of Kosovo’s arbitrariness. The second intention usually is to send a message that despite the alleged provocations on the part of Kosovo, Serbian state leadership shows prudence and wisdom. For example, before the elections in Serbia in 2022 President Vucic said that “Kosovo Special Police would shoot Serbs” if they organized voting in Kosovo.¹²⁰ Serbian politicians continuously affirm that there are politicians in Kosovo waiting for opportunity to provoke war with Serbia and ethnic cleansing of the country. Such statements with hostile tones are repeated by the politicians of the Serbian List (*Srpska Lista*) and distributed by local media in Kosovo.¹²¹

Sustaining tense relations between Kosovo and Serbia turns out to be a very useful strategy for the Russian Federation, enabling it to cement its influence in the region.¹²² Russia is exploiting every political crisis between Serbia and Kosovo and the issue of Kosovo’s international recognition in order to achieve its own foreign policy goals in the Western Balkans and beyond: to reaffirm “Slavic brotherhood” with Serbia and to divert attention of the EU and NATO from Ukraine. Russian Federation opposes Kosovo’s independence and threatens to use the veto power in the UN Security Council if Kosovo’s recognition ever comes to the UN agenda.¹²³ Fearing that ending disagreements between Serbia and Kosovo will diminish its stature in Serbia, Russia plays a “disruptive” role in the Western Balkans, which increases the importance of disinformation. One of the latest examples were accusations that mercenaries from Kosovo fought in Ukraine.¹²⁴ It was an attempt to once again portray the country as “exporter of extremism”.¹²⁵

Russia-aligned structures know how to manipulate history to maintain divisions among Balkan identity groups. In that regard, *Sputnik Srbija*, *RT*, *Russia Beyond* and other propaganda outlets in Serbia together with their local counterparts



tend to promote a wide assortment of narratives. It is of vital importance that the international community invest more in fighting disinformation in the Balkans and calls out Serbian officials for encouraging and allowing narratives against Kosovo, the USA, the EU and NATO. Demonization makes reconciliation and normalization exceptionally difficult, and it should be replaced by positive, trust-building messaging.¹²⁶ On several occasions, from the invasion on Crimea in 2014 to Russian all-out aggression over Ukraine in 2022, Putin and other Russian officials have manipulated the truth and made parallel between Russian “special operations in Ukraine” and NATO intervention against F.R. Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) in 1999 stating that events in the late 1990s were sowing the seed of a dangerous precedent. Spreading false narratives on these topics is a Russian instrument to distort reality and an effort to justify the aggression.

Serbian officials have returned to the war-mongering discourse after the decision of the Government of Kosovo on June 29, 2022 which obliged local Serbian citizens to change their Serbia’s license plates—deemed illegal—into Republic of Kosovo (RKS) ones. The decision was misinterpreted by Serbian officials as “a war threat” and was disseminated in online media as such, causing disturbance and revolt.¹²⁷ It resulted with long lasting protests of ethnic Serbs who blocked border crossings Jarinje and Brnjak. The incidents and the fake news about two Serbs being injured by gunfire at the barricades nearly caused conflicts between the police and protesters¹²⁸. The barricades that ethnic Serbs organized in Kosovo and the Kosovo’s state leadership decision to remove them, led to diplomatic “war” on social media and Serbia raised its combat readiness on highest level. Kosovo security experts explained the decision as an attempt by Serbia to demonstrate power near the border. The incidents were ample source of fake news on social media and online news portals without impressum, eager for revenues by clicks.

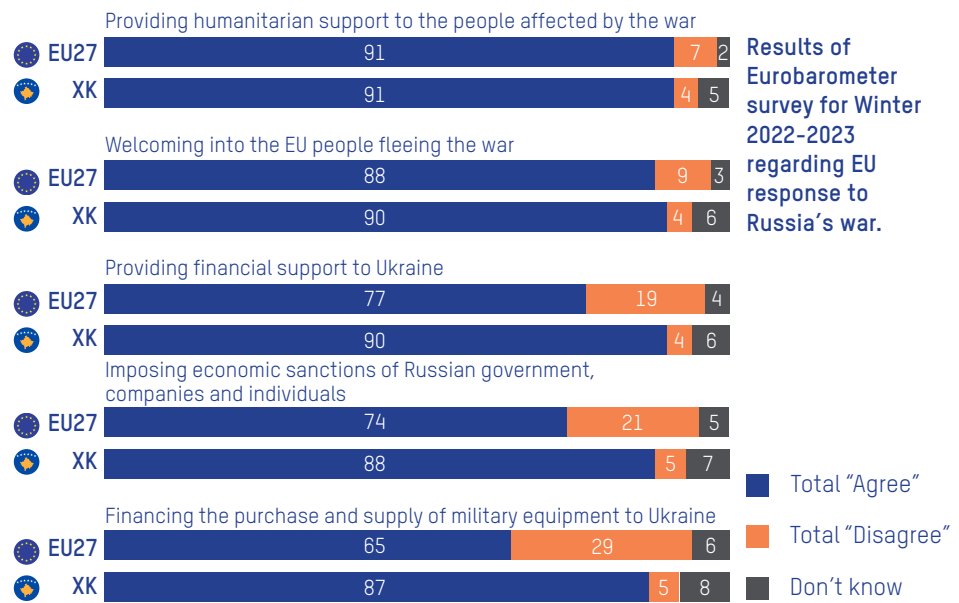
Sbunker, the Kosovo based fact-checking partner in this project, notices that almost every action of the institutions of Kosovo that has to do with law-enforcement, especially if conducted in municipalities with ethnic Serbs, causes instant reaction by Serbian officials whose comments are usually blaming and accompanied by disinformation and malinformation.¹²⁹

The initiative of the three countries of the Western Balkans, Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia, known as the Open Balkans, continues to be one of the most controversial topics in Kosovo.¹³⁰ It is partially due because it is promoted by Serbia, and probably because it is thought of as backed by Russia, since it was praised in an article published by Sputnik Serbia in November 2021 as a successful project.¹³¹ After a meeting of the representatives of the three member states, Sputnik Serbia published an analysis in which the Open Balkan



Q2. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (%)

initiative was presented in a positive light, with some of the subheadings reading 'facilitated business', 'enabling a single information system', 'companies without obligations', 'better positioning of the region'. Also, as Faktoje,¹³² a fact-checking service from Albania, pointed out, Lavrov's statement¹³³ was misinterpreted as being supportive of the Open Balkan project.



After the Russian invasion in Ukraine, the Independent Commission for Media in Kosovo (KPM) demanded removal of Russian channels in Kosovo, mainly transmitted in Serbian by the MTS operator in northern Kosovo and Kosovo operators in Albanian such as IPKO, Kujtesa and Telkos. The demand was issued to prevent propaganda and protect public safety. Russian channels that were removed from broadcasting were: Russia Today, Russia 24 and Planeta RTR.

According to an analysis by ISAC Fund, since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, the prevailing opinion in the media among the Serbian community in Kosovo has been that the war was imposed by NATO. ISAC Fund analysis points out that such narrative is certainly not far from the official narrative in Serbia, although in the UN Serbia has voted in favor of preserving Ukraine's territorial integrity. Some disinformation narratives stated that Kosovo was getting ready to expel Kosovo Serbs the same way as Ukraine expelled Russians from the eastern parts of the country; that armed groups from Kosovo were getting ready to fight in Ukraine etc. It becomes obvious that such disinformation narratives and fake news heavily harm relations between Kosovo and Serbia and undermine Kosovo's strategic goals for becoming a regional stability and prosperity factor. Fake news prevent Kosovo from



improving relations with its neighbors, especially with Serbia. The purpose of foreign malign campaigns is to portray Kosovo as being unable to establish constructive relationships, to destabilize its multiethnic democracy and to deny its ability to become a solid and reliable partner in the region.¹³⁴

An article by Mr. David.L. Phillips, the *Director of the Program on Peace Building and Human Rights at Columbia University*, warns that China, not Russia is becoming greater threat for Kosovo. He is of the opinion that China has become Serbia's primary protector providing security assistance and diplomatic cover aimed at undermining Kosovo's state-building efforts and hard work to gain greater global recognition. He underlines that China is systematically taking steps to integrate and control the economies of Balkan countries. In spite of the fact that China is currently side-stepping Kosovo, Kosovo and other countries in the Western Balkans should recognize Beijing's growing influence and guard against its malign activities.¹³⁵

In absence of formal recognition from China, Kosovo relations with China remain cold. However, data from Statistics Agency of Kosovo confirm that Chinese influence is on the rise. Imports from China grow continually and the largest Asian state tries to install its influence in Kosovo through Serbia. Currently, China's presence in Kosovo is mainly through technological equipment from Dahua and HikVision companies, whose almost 3500 surveillance cameras with face recognition capabilities, were installed in Kosovo. Since HikVision has been blacklisted by the US, installation of Chinese technological equipment in Kosovo has stopped.¹³⁶

Overall relations between Kosovo and Türkiye are defined by geopolitical, economic, sociological and historical factors. Also a great number of Turkish citizens originate from Kosovo and other countries of the WB. Once Türkiye recognized Kosovo's independence, ties between the two countries developed exponentially because Türkiye wanted to take advantage of the circumstances marked by lack of foreign investments in Kosovo. Shortage of foreign capital is somewhat consequence of disinformation reports ranking Kosovo as unsafe for investments due to crime, corruption and lack of rule of law. Huge amounts of Turkish funds were invested in Kosovo through the Kosovar-Turkish Chamber of Commerce and Turkish companies (with international partners) have won some of the largest bids. There is military cooperation between the two countries as well as cooperation in the fields of culture, sport, media etc. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has been active in Kosovo since 2004 and has enabled thousands of Kosovar students to study in Türkiye.¹³⁷



Ties between Kosovo and Türkiye that are getting closer have raised some concerns in Kosovo, especially among intellectuals, who realize that Türkiye is observing Kosovo and the whole WB region from a geopolitical point of view, as its sphere of influence. Turkish influence in Kosovo through newspapers dates from the 19th century. Nowadays there are numerous radio, TV and media outlets in Turkish that operate in Kosovo as there are also numerous NGO's. All of them serve to promote the cooperation between the two countries but at the same time spread Turkish propaganda.¹³⁸

The Gulf States¹³⁹, especially Saudi Arabia exerts the greatest influence in Kosovo, although other states such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are also present. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was one of the first states to recognize Kosovo's independence and supports it to this day. Saudi investments were directed into rebuilding Kosovo after the war. Its influence in Kosovo is big through schools, polyclinics and mosques (that Saudi helped rebuild) and by training imams in Saudi Arabia. The dominant Saudi form of influence – Wahhabism – has gained a foothold in Kosovo through Saudi diplomacy. Wahhabi schools have been set up, but it is impossible to say how many there are because they are often run illegally. Many commentators believe these schools are behind the hundreds of Kosovo citizens who have joined terrorist groups in the Middle East¹⁴⁰.

At the beginning of the year Sbunker experts estimated that in 2023, disinformation narratives which may lead to extremism or violence might be disinformation and various media and political manipulations regarding formation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities in Kosovo. They correctly forecasted that another issue which may trigger avalanche of disinformation and related manipulations would be April 23 local elections in northern municipalities in Kosovo, mainly populated by ethnic Serbs. In the future also, problems may occur because Serb minority political party Srpska Lista (Serbian List), instructed by Belgrade, might refuse to take part in the elections. Kosovo government interprets these activities as Belgrade's direct involvement in Kosovo internal affairs, and a cause of increasing tensions that are also fed by provocations, incidents and political propaganda.



Montenegro

Montenegro is considered very vulnerable to foreign influence. The country is one of the most evident examples of how easily Russia's soft power can convert into a malign influence, interfering in the internal affairs.

Here, as well as in all WB countries, a long-term strategy and multi-stakeholder approach for countering disinformation is needed that would include the government, private businesses, civil society and media organizations.



After joining NATO in June 2017, Montenegro's next strategic goal is to accede to the European Union. In that regard, the country is dedicated to strengthen its democratic institutions, achieve measurable progress in combating entrenched corruption, and bolster effective rule of law, transparency and good governance, in accordance with Euro-Atlantic standards. However, foreign propaganda, mainly Russian, which is present in domestic media and which has been present in the country for decades, is causing huge societal polarization and antagonism both among political parties and the citizens. The result is slowed down progress and absence of tolerance, diversity and inclusion which makes the media and the public unable to recognize foreign malign influence and push it back, together with the domestic antidemocratic forces.

According to the Center for Democratic Transition from Montenegro, during 2022 Montenegro's Government managed to silence Russian media by joining EU sanctions and suspending broadcast of Russia Today and Sputnik. It has suspended all broadcasting licenses or approvals for Russian sponsored media, prohibiting broadcasting by any means, such as cable, satellite, IP-TV, internet service providers, internet video-sharing platforms and applications. However, only seven of the twelve ministers in the government reportedly supported the measures, thus once again reflecting deep East-West divisions in the country. There are also opposed political opinions on the consequences of the sanctions. The pro-Russian political party Democratic Front is of the opinion that the measures would damage the economy and that tourist income would drop.



due to sanctions, while other political entities like the social liberal, green and pro-European political platform “In Black and White” (URA and Civis¹⁴¹), led by incumbent Prime Minister Dritan Abazović, nonetheless, support them.

Public opinions and attitudes reflect the same cleavages. The country’s large ethnic Serbian community is traditionally more sympathetic to Russia, while other communities are much less so.

Montenegro is one of the most evident examples of how easily Russia’s soft power can convert into a malign influence, interfering in the country’s internal affairs. This meddling can be seen in disinformation campaigns, media narratives, cyber-attacks, interference by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church as well as support for pro-Russian conservative parties.¹⁴²

According to the GLOBSEC index¹⁴³, Montenegro is one of the most vulnerable countries to foreign influence. The Media Literacy Index, measuring resilience to disinformation, puts all Western Balkan countries, including Montenegro, at the bottom of the list of 35 countries in Europe least ready to identify and fight against fake news and other forms of disinformation. It is mainly due to the situation in both the media and education.

Russia’s tactics abroad, supported by local and regional Kremlin-aligned actors, to promote rumors, sow divisions and influence political discourse,¹⁴⁴ became evident in Montenegro even in 2016, before the country finalized its NATO accession. Russian media operations ranged from creating fake media websites to bot accounts and distribution of propaganda content camouflaged as official state narrative.

Unlike neighboring Serbia, there is no Russian-owned or directly affiliated newsroom registered in Montenegro, but that does not reduce the efficiency of the Russian propaganda in the country.¹⁴⁵ Certain websites in Montenegro such as IN4S and Borba have constantly harmonized their views and opinions with official Moscow and serve as springboards for the Russian propaganda, even after Russian invasion over Ukraine. These websites publish articles that contain disinformation, aimed to glorify Russian power and justify the aggression in Ukraine. They use the official Kremlin terminology¹⁴⁶ when it comes to Russian aggression over Ukraine and the reasons why Russia ‘was forced to’ react. Putin is glorified, while at the same time Ukraine, the EU, the USA and NATO are put in negative contexts. Even more, in many of their articles, IN4S and Borba deny the Ukrainian identity reducing it to a communist creation, in a similar way that other hostile actors deny Montenegrin identity and state that Montenegro is an artificial creation”.¹⁴⁷



Serbian influence in Montenegro is as strong as the Russian. In their research¹⁴⁸ conducted in 2022 as part of the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub project and published by the fact-checking service Raskrinkavanje.me,¹⁴⁹ the investigative journalists of the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) have revealed that there are thirty-five radio emitters in Montenegro, five of which have national coverage. Two of the national radio emitters are owned by Serbian politicians – one close to the President of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić while the second with close ties to the Socialist Party in Serbia. Two more radio stations have foreign owners, one of which is a Serbian businessman, who owns online media Alo and Alo.rs, and has strong connections with Serbia’s state leadership.

Another research titled “Whose are our TV stations?”¹⁵⁰ conducted by CDT shows that the majority of TV stations in Montenegro with national frequencies belong to foreigner owners. The study concludes that the lack of interest and inactivity of the state, not only at the present moment but since a decade ago, led to penetration of financial, media and political interests from abroad.

Political entities and the public in Montenegro are also divided in regards to the Open Balkan process. Experts in Montenegro estimate that currently there is “soft” Serbian influence on Montenegro’s political scene for the country to join the Open Balkan process.¹⁵¹

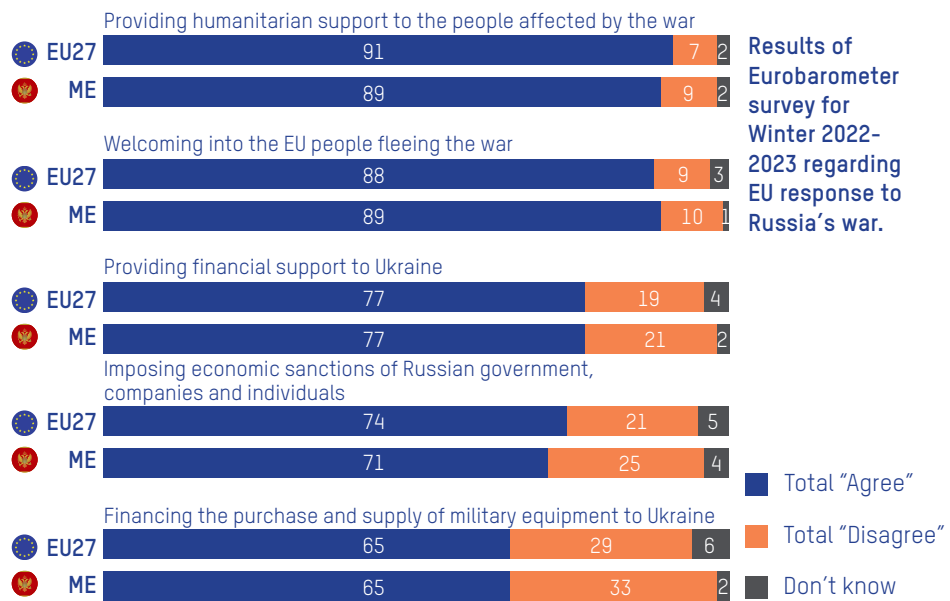
According to records of internet publications submitted to the Center for Democratic Transition by the Ministry of Public Administration in Montenegro, there are only 50 portals registered in Montenegro, although there are much more online media outlets active in the Montenegrin media space. For instance, online portal Borba, has been purchased by Adria Management Services, owned by a Serbian businessman, who also owns Montenegrin TV Adria. Information about the ownership of IN4S is not available to the public since this medium is not registered. Editor-in-chief of Raskrinkavanje.me points out that “weak regulations and lack of interest of state institutions lead to inflow of foreign money and ownership in Montenegrin online and print media that create suitable atmosphere for the spread of foreign political interest and disinformation.”¹⁵² The Global Engagement Center of the State Department recognized the Serbian portal IN4S as an integral part of the ecosystem of the Russian disinformation campaign, and a partner of the media network SouthFront.¹⁵³

The Center for Democratic Transition and its platform Raskrinkavanje.me have identified that networks of media outlets, social media accounts, local groups and individuals aim at sowing division and creating discord among the citizens. Social networks are a regular source for disinformation where information is recycled, misinterpreted or completely fabricated only to cause confusion



among readers and build distrust in the state institutions. Such a situation creates a threat that some malign sources might easily become credible. In the long run, disinformation narratives are likely to undermine democracy, erode social cohesion and ultimately prevent realization of the country's strategic goals for EU integration.

Q2. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (%)



In Montenegro, Russian propaganda is spread by domestic pro-Russian media and also through Serbia based media which are very influential in the country. Kurir, Alo and other Serbian tabloids, which were labeled by Twitter as media whose editorial policy is directly influenced by the Serbian government, are well-liked in Montenegro.¹⁵⁴ In addition to being as popular as the domestic ones, some regional online media have started to register more of their portals in Montenegro. For example, Alo Media System from Belgrade registered the portal Aloonline.me, although the company has already owned the portal Pogled.me.

Serbia-based media as well as Montenegro-based media that are pro-Russian and pro-Serbian, continuously glorify Russia and simultaneously negate all Western democratic values, often covering events in the United States and the European Union incorrectly. They participate in creating a favorable image of Russian President Vladimir Putin, presenting Russia as a friend and protector of the country.

An interesting moment happened when a survey¹⁵⁵ was published on the portal of Radio Television of Montenegro, which contained one question: "Do you support sanctions against Russia?" Out of the 740.000 votes, 81.6% were against sanctions while 18.4% were in favor. The number of votes significantly exceeds the entire population in Montenegro and serves as a proof for



coordinated bot action, since the invitation to participate in the poll was shared among mime pages and right-wing groups on Telegram and in the RIA Novosti group.

Also, events taking place in Montenegro are frequently the subject of coverage and negative commentary in Serbian media. These may be celebrations, anniversaries etc that are presented as events intended to offend Serbs or Serbia. The intention is to enhance divisions and differences among ethnic communities thus destroying social cohesion.¹⁵⁶

As in the other WB countries, disinformation does not always come from abroad. Domestic politicians make ample use of various forms of media manipulations for their own selfish purposes. Even more, politicians are often more comfortable to focus on identity issues than addressing important topics. Topics of ethnic and national identity completely overshadow public and political debate on other important topics - such as fight against corruption, and other important questions vital for the country's accession into the European Union. Montenegrin politicians, as well as their counterparts all over the Western Balkans, use divisive rhetoric to silence and discredit critics and criticism. They also use various methods both through media and social media, to increase divisions, manipulate the public and provoke tensions.¹⁵⁷

Disinformation and fake news in Montenegro create distrust in state institutions, the EU and NATO and prevent the country from achieving its strategic goals, as planned. It results in societal disorder and grows into a security threat for the democratic environment. There is not real political dialogue, but political and social polarization and social regression which leaves the country vulnerable to outside threats. However, all activities of the Russian and pro-Russian media remain unsanctioned and do not get the attention of the relevant institutions in Montenegro.¹⁵⁸

Apart from Russia and Serbia, China is developing its political and economic influence in the country. Until 2014 there was very little Chinese interest in Montenegro, but with the development of the Belt and Road Initiative things changed dramatically.¹⁵⁹ Montenegro borrowed almost \$1 billion from China's EXIM Bank and the Chinese company CRBC became the main contractor in the Montenegrin so-called "Project of the Century" – the Bar-Boljare highway. The whole arrangement signaled the level of Chinese interest in Port of Bar. The loan represented almost a quarter of Montenegrin GDP and it was only for the first section of the highway, making it the most expensive highway per kilometer in the world.¹⁶⁰ According to Montenegrin government estimates, the remainder of the highway will cost an additional \$2 billion. Although much



needed, these infrastructure projects and Chinese lending agreements are burdening the government with large debt obligations¹⁶¹ and unsustainable deals. Montenegro has already gone to seek aid from Western organizations and banks to avert a default.¹⁶²

In recent years, and particularly since EU accession negotiations formally launched in 2012, Montenegro has implemented a number of structural reforms to support economic growth as one of the country's strategic goals. However, because of the high level of public debt, the country has to prioritize public investments.

Chinese influence is evident in the sphere of education and research. The University of Donja Gorica has signed agreements with ten universities in China and is becoming a hub of Montenegrin-Chinese cooperation. It participates in numerous research projects, exchange visits and joint degree programs.¹⁶³ There is also a Confucius Institute founded at the University of Montenegro.

Chinese media influence is not significant in Montenegro. Chinese public broadcast companies have a cooperation agreement with the Montenegrin national broadcast company Radio and Television of Montenegro (Radio Televizija Crne Gore). Apart from this, there are no other direct agreements between Chinese and Montenegrin media. As in the other countries in Central and Eastern Europe, Chinese influence is spread through People's Republic of China's embassies whose representatives approach local media outlets with offers to publish op-eds or interviews with embassy staff in order to promote Chinese official views and, as they prefer to say, real accounts of important events.¹⁶⁴

According to a study conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations, "non-governmental organizations in Montenegro do not have established networks of communication with Chinese organizations; nor does the Chinese embassy support the work of prominent NGOs in Montenegro. Apart from minor cultural events, cooperation with the media and NGOs remains limited".¹⁶⁵

Currently, China's political influence in Montenegro remains limited because of the distance between the countries and because Montenegro is not the key player in the region. Also, the country is a NATO member and naturally inclines towards the EU.

Nevertheless, the current situation in Montenegro with all foreign-origin disinformation and various forms of media manipulations, including fake news, is a serious threat for the fragile democracy in the country. Here, as well as in all WB countries, a long-term strategy and multi-stakeholder approach for countering disinformation is needed that would include the government, private businesses, civil society and media organizations.¹⁶⁶



**GEOPOLITICAL
PERSPECTIVE OF
DISINFORMATION
FLOWS IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS**

CDT's findings point out that there has been evident decrease in western foreign investments in 2022 due to turbulent internal political situation which prevented the country from achieving its strategic objectives for economic development. It is estimated that significant drop of foreign investments is the result of the political instability in the country, pro-Russian positions of the two most recent governments and rising ethnic tensions, primarily between local Serbian and Montenegrin communities.



North Macedonia

Foreign malign influences actively oppose the integration of the Republic of North Macedonia within the Western, Euro Atlantic structures (European Union and NATO), deploy disinformation and take advantage of vulnerabilities in order to divert the country from its democratically chosen path. Disinformation campaigns generated in the country benefit a number of politicians and political parties only for short-term gain. Some politicians show no political maturity, readiness for dialog or solving problems but only see opportunities to come or stay in power.



North Macedonia's strategic priorities include building good inter-ethnic relations based on the principles of mutual respect and tolerance, deepening democracy and implementation of reforms, building closer ties with the USA and the EU as strategic partners, successfully running accession negotiations with the EU, developing economy, reforming the educational system, fighting against organized crime and corruption.

A centrally-located, multi-ethnic democracy and NATO ally at the crossroads of major transportation corridors in the Balkans, the country is striving to be stabilizing influence in the region. However, foreign malign influences actively oppose North Macedonia's Western integration, deploy disinformation and take advantage of vulnerabilities in order to divert the country from its democratically chosen path.

Deliberate disinformation operations, such as the Russian, push narratives tailored to reshape public attitudes. They exploit differences in media systems, target disenfranchised or vulnerable audiences, and exploit the ability to mask sources of disinformation.¹⁶⁷ The existence of alternative narratives as such is not an issue unless they rely on fake, anonymous, or unchecked information. The distinctive features of disinformation attempts are lack of quoted sources, opinions presented as facts; falsified documents disseminated as legitimate, headlines that misrepresent the content of the article, outright lies, and conspiracy theories.¹⁶⁸

Media space in North Macedonia has been stained by several disinformation narratives in 2022. According to [Truthmeter.mk](https://www.truthmeter.mk/),¹⁶⁹



the only internationally certified fact-checking service in North Macedonia,¹⁷⁰ most of them revolved around Russian aggression over Ukraine, COVID-19 pandemic and issues related to the French proposal for resolving the dispute between North Macedonia and Bulgaria.¹⁷¹ The latter, aimed at further disrupting the process of integration into the European Union.

While it is important to note that several other European and Balkan countries, besides those listed in this section, also exercise political, diplomatic, economic, media or cultural influence in North Macedonia, the focus of this qualitative analysis on geopolitical dimension of disinformation proliferation and related propaganda manipulations is only on those documented to attempt to disrupt the democratic and integrative processes during 2022. Recent experiences show that long-term anti-disinformation research and analytical work is needed to identify connections of disinformation campaigns to various foreign and domestic actors. For example, the connections of fringe political parties that overtly instigated (supposedly grassroots) anti-vaccination disinformation campaigns during the pandemic, or anti-NATO or anti-EU campaigns related to 2018 referendum and 2021 census, became clear only after February 2022, when those actors openly sided with the Kremlin.

The quantity and nature of disinformation in North Macedonia in 2022 was a proof of strong Russian malign influence, directed primarily to divert attention from Russian aggression over Ukraine, to raise polemics on the subject and seek approval of the assault. Simultaneously, it was intended to discredit the EU, the USA and NATO thus undermining North Macedonia's strategic objectives.

Apart from discrediting the EU, disinformation about the French proposal aimed at creating division in society between "patriots" and "traitors". Allegations that the Russian Federation had been abusing the protests against the French Proposal were made publicly by the President of the Republic of North Macedonia, Stevo Pendarovski¹⁷² who indicated that the country was under intensive hybrid attacks.

Fake news on the French proposal stirred a lot of emotion in the country thus opening up space for greater vulnerability. Although disinformation started as narrative that North Macedonia might lose its identity and become "Bulgarized", it quickly twisted into an anti-Albanian narrative stating that ethnic Albanians did not really care about the country and its future. Such disinformation narratives eroded social cohesion and deteriorated into hate speech undermining fundamental values. The emotions and energy that surfaced during the protests against the French proposal were regrettably channeled towards violent incidents and inter-ethnic aggression threatening to cause inner destabilization. Unfortunately, some media and political circles

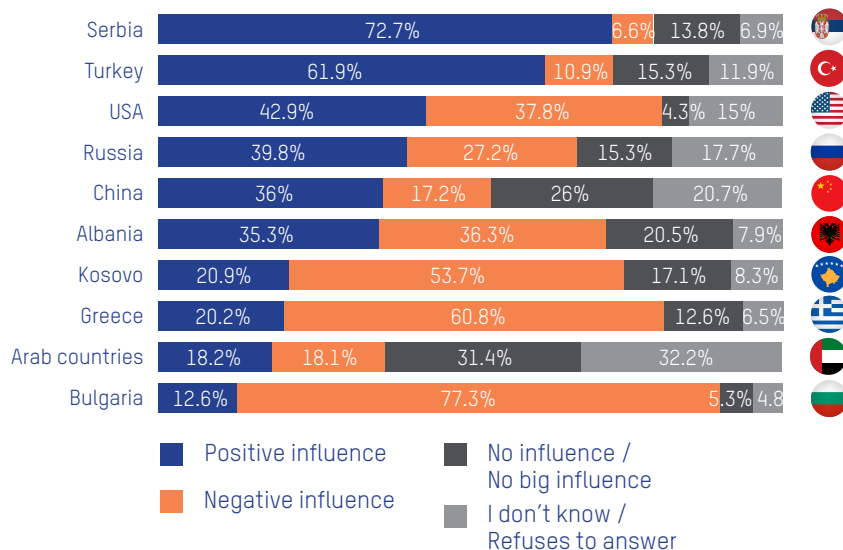


have been teaching the citizens of the Republic of North Macedonia that “hate speech is something normal” and that calls for violence are “normal part of the political discourse, even a democratic one”.¹⁷³

Disinformation campaigns generated in the country benefit a number of politicians and political parties only for short-term gain. Some politicians show no political maturity, readiness for dialog or solving problems but only see opportunities to come or stay in power.

With regards to COVID-19, narratives were more or less the same in all countries in the WB region. Yet, in North Macedonia they met fertile ground for developing conspiracy theories that was confirmed through research.¹⁷⁴ Statistics have shown that more than 70% of the citizens in North Macedonia believe in conspiracy theories, i.e. in a secret group of powerful individuals who control global events, while more than 60% believe that the COVID-19 virus was created intentionally.¹⁷⁵ Such numbers open wide space for any kind of disinformation.¹⁷⁶ In relation to the pandemics, disinformation does not always appear as complete lies, but malinformation and half-truths in which facts are manipulated or replaced by opinion.

23. What kind of influence does each of the given countries have in our country?
N=1100



Metamorphosis research on effect of disinformation and foreign influences on the democratic processes conducted in March 2022 showed that Serbia and Turkey have the most positive image among citizens of North Macedonia.¹⁷⁷

Findings of Metamorphosis Foundation within the regional project WB Anti-Disinformation Hub: Exposing Malign Influences through Watchdog Journalism, as well as results of the research on “The Effect of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia” reveal that

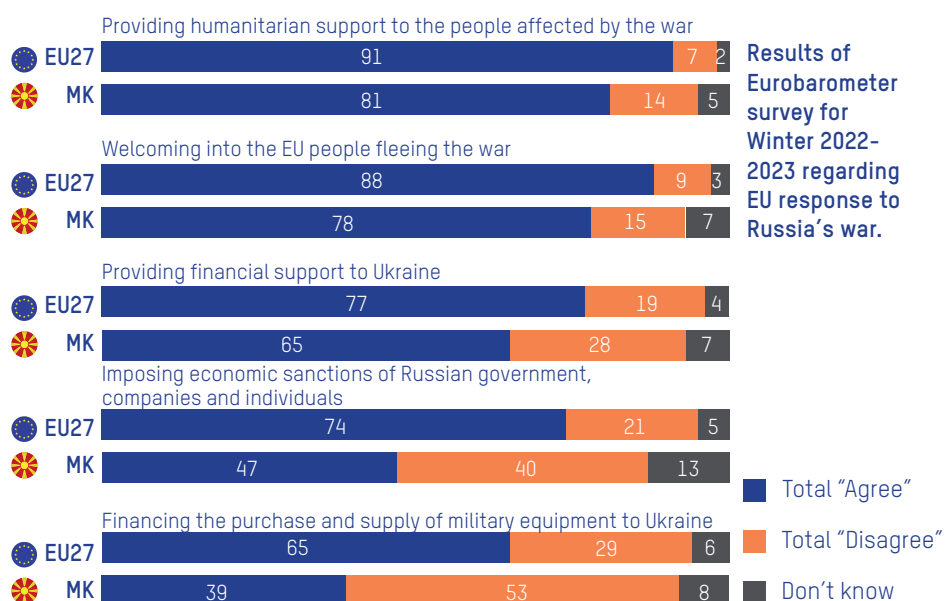


very often sources of disinformation are internal structures – domestic TV stations, social media groups, influencers and networks, internet portals and independent so-called analysts and public figures who support disinformation narratives and spread propaganda.

Many of the media outlets have Facebook pages where they copy foreign disinformation pages or content from online portals, including Sputnik and other Russian media sites that are blocked in North Macedonia. It is very hard to determine whether these internal structures benefit from external sources or finances. Yet, it is a very well-known tactics of the Russian propaganda to create local echo chambers of support.¹⁷⁸ It combines simultaneous support for far-left and far-right movements, direct funding of media outlets as well as ties with local political and economic actors with opposing views. Russian state-run media such as Sputnik or Russia Today, as well as state-allied local media, spread manipulated information and influence attitudes toward the West among targeted populations.¹⁷⁹ Selected narratives are published with the purpose to discredit the EU, the USA or NATO while strengthening Russian influence in the region. In addition, in the past decade, the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia has managed creation of about thirty Macedonian-Russian friendship associations and a Russian Cultural Center.

On domestic grounds, social profiles of politicians continue to be sources of disinformation since some online media act as disinformation proxies and publish opinions and statements as official announcements thus creating pro and anti EU polarization. The problem occurs because some politicians, at any cost, even for issues essential for the state, calculate only from the perspective whether they are in power or not.¹⁸⁰

Q2. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (%)





Very frequent source of disinformation is the Russian Embassy in North Macedonia. In situation of European blockage of Russian media, Russian diplomatic missions throughout the WB have assumed the role of spokesmen for Kremlin. Local disinformation proxies re-publish their posts without selection, filtration or fact checking which shows serious decline of journalism. Similarly, fake news generated by Russian government websites, as well as state-owned media outlets, including Sputnik and Russia Today in Serbia, as well as Russia Beyond in Macedonian, are republished by Macedonian media portals, based in the country, but also in the diaspora. These Kremlin-related sources offer free content which is very appealing for online media for it enables them to generate profit from clicks without much additional editorial effort. The activity often comes with poor quality of translation from Serbian or Russian into Macedonian and other languages, since bots and trolls as well as automation tools such as online translation apps are used by online media outlets employees, to push anti-West narratives.

There are attempts by Russia to divert attention from its aggression over Ukraine and such attempts are whole-heartedly and quite openly supported by certain media in North Macedonia. Activities, which are normal and desirable in peacetime, are promoted as successes and achievements during aggression, even though committed by the aggressor. Namely, quite a number of media and social profiles of organizations and institutions shared news about prominent people from NM being awarded by Russia.¹⁸¹

As Professor Mirjana Najcevska points out "such uncritical attitude of individuals, institutions and NGOs towards the awarding of various accolades related to the Russian Federation, to which is added particularly non-analytical and even disinformation approach, can have long-lasting and very serious consequences on citizens' perception on Russian aggression over Ukraine, but also much more generally, on the value systems offered by the EU and the regime of Vladimir Putin."¹⁸²

Russian disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia are launched to divert the country from its strategic priorities. Information pollution creates chaos and uncertainty, disrupts current consolidation of democratic institutions and deepens existing ethnic, religious, economic, ideological or party divisions. Such a situation becomes an open space for sowing doubt in EU and creating an illusion that there are alleged equally attractive alternatives.¹⁸³

Some disinformation campaigns are created to cause social instability by instilling fear in the common man that their normal life is threatened. This is done by spinning fake news about lack of energy, fuel, food etc. Recently, the biggest risk to the security and social peace in the country has been



disinformation about explosive devices placed in schools. Fake news and alerts imposed by malign actors have had specific purposes – to prevent normal functioning of schools and cause instability, challenge reliance on state institutions and bring unrest to a NATO country, since the hostile actions recur for months. Research by the Ministry of Interior and the Security Services in North Macedonia shows that the most recent false alarms about planted bombs were sent from IP addresses in Iran and Russia as well as from VPN addresses whose providers are from these countries. Interestingly, payments for VPN services were made with crypto-currencies making it even more difficult to identify the perpetrators.¹⁸⁴ Investigation has confirmed that this intensive hybrid attack by malign actors was launched to compromise the country's fundamental values. It is worth noting, that the same false alarms occurred all over the WB region.

Russian propaganda in North Macedonia with its many disinformation narratives has the intention to delay EU integration and strengthen distrust in pro-EU political parties which are discredited as 'puppets of the West' and 'traitors of the nation'¹⁸⁵. Foreign malign propaganda and disinformation campaigns are phenomena that occur even in developed democracies. Yet, they are very dangerous in North Macedonia and grow into a security problem.¹⁸⁶

North Macedonia's geostrategic position is a significant target of malign Russian political influence as well as growing economic pressure from China.

China is a relatively new player in the WB but its interest for influence increases significantly with the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).¹⁸⁷ As identified in the research conducted by Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), there are several goals that the Chinese Communist Party wants to achieve through its influence in North Macedonia.¹⁸⁸ China's economic objective is to establish close cooperation with North Macedonia since its geographical position is crucial for the BRI initiative and the country is a candidate for EU membership. China's strategic objective is to build Sino-centric alliance that would support China on the international scene: North Macedonia is a member of several international organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization and NATO, where the vote of each country counts. Thus, China seeks to ensure North Macedonia's friendship or at least neutrality on decisions and resolutions proposed by Western governments. And last, but not least, there is China's ideological objective in North Macedonia implemented through "soft power" tools the aim of which is to create positive image of China's economic, political and military power subtly imposing consideration of an alternative to the West.



There is cooperation between the Macedonian News Agency MIA and Chinese News Agency Xinhua.¹⁸⁹ Macedonian media do not report enough on the Chinese “soft power” in the country, so the citizens create an abstract, idealistic perception of China.¹⁹⁰ Although some domestic media tend to publish more news and information about China than others, there is no concrete evidence of direct Chinese influence in the form of funding or ownership structure. However, some media and especially online portals tend to publish articles and columns signed by the Chinese Ambassador, which disseminate China’s policies on key issues, such as the pandemic, Xinjiang, Hong Kong etc.¹⁹¹

The Chinese Embassy in Skopje and the Confucius Center, both have official Facebook pages. The Embassy’s Facebook page presents opinions and reactions on various topics sometimes grossly interfering in North Macedonia’s internal affairs. For instance, a strong public reaction of the Embassy took place after signing the Memorandum of Understanding on 5G Security and the Clean Network Program between North Macedonia and the USA.¹⁹²

The “soft power” of China is closely connected to the state propaganda and has the intention to popularize the Chinese model for social and economic development as well as the leading role of the China Communist Party.¹⁹³ The Chinese influence in North Macedonia is not realized through direct Chinese investments or increased Macedonian export. In fact, the economic cooperation comes down only to construction financed through loan from a Chinese bank, or other loans.¹⁹⁴

In North Macedonia, hostile external influences use disinformation campaigns and propaganda to exploit any country’s weaknesses in order to promote their own geopolitical interests. In the case of North Macedonia, they try to undermine confidence in the county’s western alliances and its continued path towards Euro-Atlantic integration.

Systemic weaknesses, such as corruption and impunity on the one hand and unregulated media space on the other, provide openings for malign influence. In 2017 the Special Prosecutors Office initiated two investigations of corruption related to Russian (code-named “Gift”^{195,196}) and Chinese influence (code-named “Trajectory”¹⁹⁷), but none of them had resulted in conviction so far.

Corruption enables malign investments that entrench corrupt practices and deter economic growth; it also creates openings for malign foreign campaigns through fake news and disinformation that weaken confidence in democratic and free-market systems as well as integration into Western organizations, such as the EU.



Serbia

Even though Russia is not significantly present in funding Serbian media, it is making effective use of the Serbia's media ecosystem to expand its influence.

Media laws passed in Serbia in 2014 allow the state to co-finance publications affiliated with the ruling party under the guise of serving the public interest.

Some media outlets, with their relatively high circulation and influence maintain huge anti-Western narrative and shape public opinion.



Serbia's strategic objectives include membership in the EU, sustaining military neutrality status (which is not legally adopted, but is recognized by NATO and most of the bilateral and multilateral partners), protection of sovereignty and territorial integrity (keeping Kosovo, at least *de jure* within Serbia), regional cooperation and integration within the Berlin Process and Open Balkans as well as deepening cooperation with important non Western players (Russian Federation, China, Turkey and the Gulf Countries especially UAE).

Russian disinformation narratives and propaganda which spreads through social networks, radio and TV as well as through printed and online media have affected at least one of Serbia's strategic goals – its aspiration for EU membership. Since the beginning of Russian aggression over Ukraine, the support for joining the EU has reached historical minimum.¹⁹⁸ Foreign propaganda and internal sources of fake news (mostly tabloids and domestic politicians) have been the reason for absence of social cohesion on many vital issues in the last ten years.

According to experts from ISAC Fund, The International and Security Affairs Center in Serbia, the main goal of Russian propaganda in Serbia is to show that Serbia will always be dependent on Russia, either in regards to Kosovo or energy.

Another very important Russian goal seems to be destabilization of the Balkans. It is believed that Russia is trying to cause a conflict in the Balkans so that the attention of the EU, the USA and NATO would be distracted and they would have to reduce their aid to Ukraine.



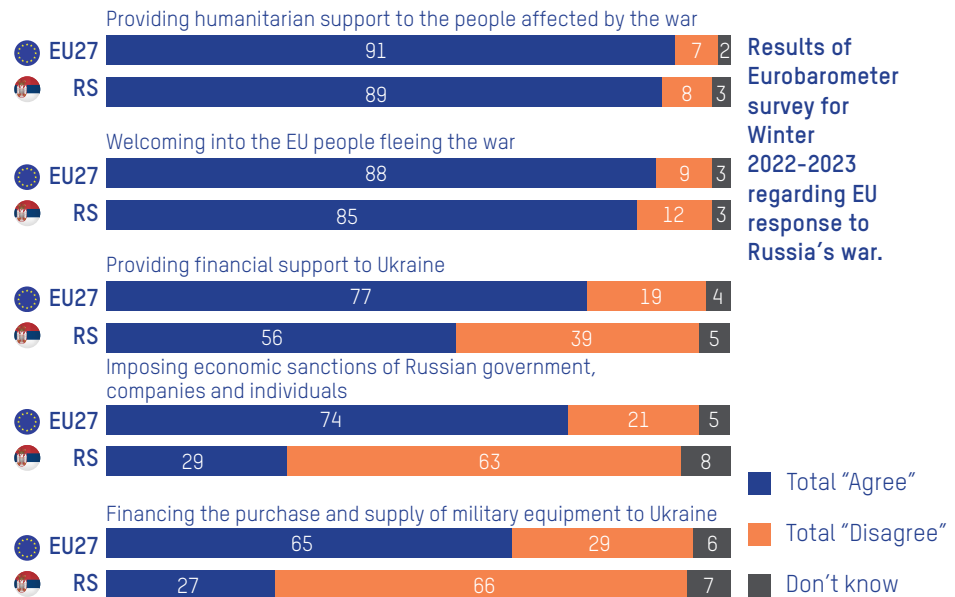
Serbia, has allowed Russia to maintain its presence in the region and spread its influence. Furthermore, “the political and security synergy of these two countries created the Serbian World construct drawing heavily on the concept of the Russkiy Mir Foundation”¹⁹⁹ threatening security and stability of the Western Balkans.

Russia’s most intensive direct presence in the Serbian media space is through local offices of Sputnik News and Russia Today. Other sources are Serbian tabloids which are spreading intensive and explosive propaganda and disinformation through printed publications that are also available online. “The web portal Sputnik Serbia, together with the accompanying mobile application in Serbian, is immensely influential, and its content can still be distributed for free by various Serbian tabloids and portals on the condition that they cite or refer to the source. Radio Sputnik includes several broadcasts that cover all important spheres of activity, such as politics, culture, energy and economy. Its content is transmitted by a private Belgrade radio station and then rebroadcasted by over 30 regional and local radio stations in Serbia. As a result, Russian media content is now available in practically every part of Serbia.”²⁰⁰ Expert research in Serbia is showing that far right opposition and extreme movements inspired by foreign malign actors do not have big media presence, except on social media. However, since the start of the COVID – 19 pandemic and especially after outbreak of the war in Ukraine their impact has increased.

The Russian-Serbian narrative is heard not just in Serbia, but also among the Serbian ethnic communities of Montenegro, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition to Sputnik, there are other web portals in Serbia²⁰¹, also backed by Russia Today, a media group owned by the Russian government. At the same time, Russia Beyond, whose content is available in Serbian, Croatian and Macedonian, in addition to thirteen other languages, glorifies Russia’s military strength, culture, economy, science, art and lifestyle.



Q2. The EU has taken a series of actions as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent you agree or disagree with each of these actions taken. (%)



Disinformation and fake news spread by the aforementioned portals and various pro-Russian Telegram channels is accepted and echoed by many Serbian media outlets, mostly pro-government. The audience of those media could get the impression that Russian occupation is justified because Ukraine was the first to attack Russia or that Russia is fighting against Ukrainian Nazi regime, as well as defending itself from imminent attack of NATO. Some media, run by individuals known to the public for being close to Slobodan Milošević, also publish content from a network of portals formed by Russian tycoon Konstantin Malofeev, who was involved in a series of operations of Russian intelligence-hybrid warfare in the Western Balkans.²⁰² These media outlets present Russia as superior, as winner on the battlefield in Ukraine and as such a great economy that it is not affected by EU sanctions. Western countries are presented as if collapsing: economically failing due to inflation, militarily due to military assistance to Ukraine and morally by supporting Nazis in Ukraine and the LGBT population. These outlets also portray Serbian – Russian relations as those of brothers-in-arms, fighting against Western corrupted world domination.

According to the study "Russian Digital Footprint in the Western Balkans", apart from disseminating Russian content, Serbian pro-government tabloids and online media "create their own fake news in order to settle scores in ruling political elites' confrontations with their political opponents and dissidents."

²⁰³



According to the same study the main feature of the media scene in Serbia is the concentration of media ownership in the hands of individuals close to the ruling coalition, which in turn leads to the lack of compliance with ethical standards in journalism. Absence of transparency during privatization has led to closure of a huge number of media outlets and has directed private media towards politicized reporting. Since the Serbian Progressive Party came to power, the yellow press and tabloids such as the *Informer* and *SrpskiTelegraf* (Serbian Telegraph) have become very popular and with high readership audience.²⁰⁴

After making an extensive research on media financing in Serbia, the media research website *Cenzolovka*²⁰⁵ has revealed that tabloids, such as *Alo*, *Kurir*, *SrpskiTelegraf*, *Informer* and others, are heavily financed by the state, despite being known for breaking the Code of Journalists of Serbia. The research reveals that media laws passed in Serbia in 2014 allow the state to co-finance publications affiliated with the ruling party under the guise of serving the public interest.

The study "Russian Digital Footprint in the Western Balkans" clearly explains the way in which Russia is expanding its influence and making very effective use of the Serbia's media ecosystem even without funding. "In order to survive, smaller media broadcast free content provided by Russia through multiple Russian portals in Serbian thus earning money by the amount of "clicks" without having to develop their own journalistic content."²⁰⁶ Another study titled "Understanding Russian Communication Strategy,"²⁰⁷ observes Russian influence in the media in Serbia and points out as a special challenge the fact that the majority of web portals that place pro-Russian content have been created in Serbia, not in Russia. These media are not even registered in the official Media Register of Serbia, contrary to law requirements. They widely exaggerate Serbian-Russian ties and hyperbolize Russia as the world's largest nuclear and energy power.

Russian grip over Serbia is, in fact, harming Serbia and preventing normalization with Kosovo which eventually must happen. Rada Trajkovic, PhD, counselor to Kosovar Minister Nenad Rašić, believes that the Russian factor in Serbia gets strength and builds Russian sentiment among the population by selling stories that the collective West has snatched Kosovo from Serbia.²⁰⁸ It is believed that **Russia is helping Serbia in the campaign against new recognitions of Kosovo independence, but also in the derecognition campaign.**²⁰⁹ Such circumstances harm not only Kosovo but Kosovar Serbs since disinformation and fake news feed animosity between the two communities.



The economic and military cooperation between Serbia and Russia is much lower than with EU and NATO. Yet, by reading tabloids and following them online, the Serbs get quite the opposite impression. According to the Vulnerability Index for Serbia, an ISAC Fund report published in November 2021 as part of a global project to assess susceptibility to foreign malign influences in Central Europe and the Western Balkans, up to 68 percent of Serbian citizens believe that “Western countries promote morally corrupt and decadent life under the guise of civil liberties.” Only 18 percent consider the EU as a strategic partner, and up to 55 percent see European integration as a threat to democracy and traditional values. According to the same poll, 82 percent of the population considers Russia to be a traditional ‘Slavic brother’, while 59 percent consider it to be the most essential strategic partner. Despite the fact that NATO conducts more military exercises with Serbia than Russia, as many as 84 percent of Serbian citizens are extremely opposed to NATO membership.²¹⁰

Pro-government media and tabloids also undermine the country’s strategic goal for EU accession frequently claiming that Serbia is under strong pressure from the West to impose sanctions over Russia or to recognize Kosovo. Comments by the EU and the US officials and politicians who criticize Serbia for not introducing sanctions are presented extremely negatively. These media outlets, with their relatively high circulation and influence maintain huge anti-Western narrative and shape public opinion. They have never reported that the so-called pressure by the EU and US politicians and diplomats, if fact, never went beyond statements.

President Vučić and the Serbian Progressive Party have embraced Russian tactics of discrediting journalists and their questions. They have also built a large network of trolls on social media that disparage anyone who criticizes Vučić’s policies. Twitter has deleted up to 8,558 accounts of this type, with many of them ‘finding their way’ to Serbian and Russian media. It was also discovered that those accounts tweeted up to 43 million times, with up to 85 percent of them receiving re-tweets. Despite being followed by only 66 other accounts, they reached up to 2.3 million Twitter users, not including those visiting Russian or Serbian portals.²¹¹

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation and conspiracy theories have spread widely in the Serbian media. They create doubt and distrust with the results being a large number of anti-vaxxers. Statistics confirm that, less than half of the population in Serbia received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, while less than a third of the population received three doses.



Apart from the Russian, Chinese influence in Serbia is gaining momentum. However, at the moment, it is not influencing Serbia's strategic goals negatively. EU has not officially declared Serbia's cooperation with China as an impediment, but has just raised concerns about most of Serbia-China deals (concerns about possible abuse of Huawei 5G technologies as well as compliance with labour laws and environmental principles). Declaratively, China supports all Serbia's strategic goals.

China's influence on Serbian media exists and published content on China and the Sino-Serbian cooperation has impact on the public. Chinese funding of media in Serbia is not as visible as its content's reach; direct influence comes from promotional op-eds and articles that appear in some mainstream outlets.²¹² However, China's huge popularity in Serbia can hardly be attributed to that influence. The prominence of China stems from constant promotion by Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić and Serbian Progressive Party elite, as well as from the overspill effect of the Russian propaganda which goes along the line: China opposes the West, so China is a friend. All of these activities create 'A Nation of China lovers'²¹³ in Serbia and promote the China Communist Party. Serbian officials have significantly contributed to a positive image of China especially during the pandemic, minimizing the impact of aid received from the EU.

According to a poll²¹⁴ conducted in April 2021 by the Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CeSID) and the International Republican Institute (IRI), the majority of citizens believe that Serbia should prioritize relations with Russia (54%) and China (28%) over neighboring nations and the EU. Citizens also believe that Russia and China are the greatest investors in Serbia (up to 72 percent), and they trust Chinese and Russian vaccines more than Western ones. It's also discouraging that only 45 percent of those polled believe democracy is the greatest form of government, while up to 24 percent say the ideal is an undemocratic rule by 'a strong arm'.

A research by the Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA) concludes that Serbia has become a 'poster child' for Chinese influence. Serbian pro-government media, as well as the President Vučić himself, do not miss an opportunity to promote the 'brotherhood' and 'the steel friendship' between the two countries. Serbian pro-government media emphasize the role of China²¹⁵ and Chinese companies in Serbia's economic development, echoing a narrative by domestic officials.

Serbia's Tanjug News Agency has cooperation agreements²¹⁶ with China's Xinhua. It provides national media outlets with Xinhua reports, which are predictably marked by a China-friendly predilection.



Similar to other countries in the WB, Serbia has borrowed huge sums from Chinese banks, mostly for infrastructure projects. Also, China is the biggest single investor in the country. The Prague Security Studies Institute estimates that the short-term economic benefits of the Chinese capital influx in Serbia are indisputable, but the potential long-term consequences are questionable because Chinese investments have been mostly in export-oriented industries, meaning that most of the profits will go to Chinese companies and that Serbia's take will be limited.²¹⁷

Chinese influence in Serbia is accelerated by the Chinese Embassy as well as the Confucius Institutes in Belgrade and Novi Sad. In cooperation with the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, the Government of Serbia has carried out a pilot project for the introduction of the Chinese language in more than 30 primary and secondary schools in the country.

EU and US experts raised concerns about close cooperation between Chinese Huawei and Serbian Government, particularly the Ministry of Interior. Yet in 2019, Serbia had decided to go all in on Chinese technology. As part of the Smart City project²¹⁸, in 2021 smart cameras for video surveillance with advanced facial and license plate recognition software were announced to be installed at more than 1000 locations in Belgrade, in cooperation with Huawei. This project and the Data Center launched in Kragujevac have been estimated by The Center for Strategic International Studies CSIS to be a serious security risk for Serbia.²¹⁹

In the year marked by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and unprecedented energy crisis, there was a record level of foreign direct investments in Serbia in line with the country's strategic goals. According to the National Bank of Serbia, the EU was the largest investor because of Serbia's macroeconomic stability, favorable business climate and agreements on free trade with other countries. However, experts estimate that record investment levels are partially due to arrivals in Serbia of thousands of Russians and Ukrainians, who have chosen to transfer their businesses because of the war in Ukraine.²²⁰ Estimates of number of Russians who relocated to Serbia range from over 100.000 in November of 2022²²¹ to over 200.000 in April 2023.²²² Over 18.000 Ukrainians have also moved there.²²³



KEY FINDINGS

Disinformation is one of the major concerns of democratic countries in the 21st century. Behind fake news and other forms of disinformation, there are strategies and intentions to manipulate public opinion and erode the stability of states and their institutions.

It takes attention, critical thinking skills and media literacy to recognize foreign malign influence and it takes organized, well-planned and systematic efforts to counter it

The following key findings have surfaced during the research for this report:

- ▶ Systematic and continuous disinformation narratives take the toll in the WB countries. Citizens lose faith in their own states and state institutions; they do not believe in brighter future and their support for Euro-Atlantic integration diminishes.
- ▶ Civil Society organizations play an essential role in raising awareness to foreign harmful influence through disinformation and fake news. Their work that combines fact-checking, watchdog journalism in the service of debunking and demystifying disinformation and media monitoring is crucial in analyzing disinformation trends and flows in the region, especially if originating from foreign malign actors.
- ▶ Disinformation campaigns, in particular by third countries, are often part of hybrid warfare which also includes cyber-attacks and hacking of networks. Foreign state actors are deploying disinformation strategies to influence societal debates, create divisions and interfere in democratic decision-making.
- ▶ Disinformation, fake news and propaganda are part of the doctrines of Russia, China, Turkey and Iran; have been in use for decades now and are having strong influence in the countries where they are directed.
- ▶ Russia's hybrid warfare (disinformation narratives included) aims to impede EU and NATO integration, destabilize governments, annex territories and create pretexts for war
- ▶ Currently, other non-EU actors use disinformation narratives and propaganda as soft power methods, usually for long-term goals but not destabilization



- ▶ While Russia is promoting “pan-Slavic” ties and belonging to the Orthodox-faith community it is also taking advantage and supporting far-right and far-left movements which directly oppose integration in the EU and NATO. In such cases any tools become acceptable, including propaganda and disinformation through Russia-based and Moscow-friendly media in the region.
- ▶ Iran’s hybrid warfare is turning similar to the Russian. In 2022 it became aggressive and manifested through cyber attacks
- ▶ Disinformation narratives can refer to global issues. However they become even more effective when they are specifically tailored for the “victim” country or region
- ▶ Globalization and technological progress have resulted in increased vulnerabilities. In the age of Internet, creating and disseminating disinformation via social media and online outlets has become the most cost effective way for spreading malign influence that reaches unprecedented number of people
- ▶ It takes attention and literacy to recognize foreign malign influence and it takes organized, well-planned and systematic efforts to counter it. The Civil Sector Organizations have a very important role in this regard especially in raising awareness and mobilizing public and state institutions to counter disinformation
- ▶ Disinformation campaigns can have short-term objectives (usually influencing a particular political outcome within a country) or long-term objectives (such as changing perceptions of large groups, for example undermining trust in the EU, the USA and NATO)
- ▶ Research has shown that the WB region is extremely vulnerable in relation to fake news and disinformation
- ▶ About 40% of the false narratives originate from social media. Such modus operandi makes tracing the sources more difficult
- ▶ Disinformation spreads mostly by social media, by techniques that include video manipulation (deep-fakes), internet automated software (bots), troll attacks on social media profiles and information theft. At the same time, more traditional methods such as television, newspapers, websites and chain emails continue to play an important role. The tools and techniques used are changing fast - the response needs to evolve just as rapidly



- ▶ Governments in the WB countries do not take serious measures for uprooting online disinformation narratives and for implementing strict rules and regulations because they use the same methods for their own political gain. Civil Society organizations can have a significant role in initiating public debates on the problems of disinformation, freedom of expression and the citizens' right to proper and accurate informing. It is very important that all stakeholders become fully aware of the consequences of disinformation and the responsibility they carry in that regard
- ▶ Anyone can take part in exposing disinformation and fake news by reporting it to fact-checking platforms
- ▶ Media literacy in the WB region is very low, especially among young people, and results from governments' negligence and poor educational systems. Civil Society organizations can have significant impact if they: initiate various country-based and regional projects to collect knowledge; explain harmfulness of disinformation among different age groups especially young people; increase media literacy and critical thinking primarily through curricula that they will create independently or in collaboration with the academic community; help create content and promotional campaigns that present fact-based positive narratives to the public
- ▶ There are ways to counter disinformation. Each country can undertake its own measures but the fight against disinformation would be much more successful with joint efforts in the WB region and in cooperation with NATO and the EU (on projects such as EUvsDisinfo and FIMI).



RECOMMENDATIONS

Disinformation is a major challenge for the fragile democracies in the Western Balkans (WB). Foreign malign actors invest huge financial means to boost social polarizations and ethnic cleavages through fake news and disinformation campaigns. Each WB country and the region as a whole need to address this problem while respecting fundamental values and freedoms, such as the freedom of speech. If unaddressed, disinformation can undermine the trust of citizens in democracy and democratic institutions. It can contribute to divisions within societies and interfere in democratic decision-making processes. In the WB, it can undermine trust in the EU, the USA and NATO. Therefore, strong commitment and swift actions are necessary to preserve the democratic development of the region. Criminal Codes in most WB countries do not provide regulation against false news. Yet, current events indicate that there have to be stricter regulations for online media that would prevent irreparable harm. A broad political dialogue on when and how to apply sanctions will provide that freedom of speech is not restricted. Following positive practices from the EU and the USA could be very helpful. It is crucial to develop regional cooperation and harmonize legislation with EU. At the same time it would be vital for all WB countries to take part in the new platform launched by the EU for countering disinformation campaigns by Russia and China.²²⁴

Priority recommendations in country context

Having experience in fact checking and debunking disinformation and fake news, organizations implementing the Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub project pointed out some crucial actions to counter disinformation in each of the WB countries.

According to **Faktoje**, the fact checking service from **Albania**, the internal nature of disinformation in Albania makes combating it very tough. Most media outlets, including major news agencies tend to align with certain political parties and thus show those biases in their coverage. Ensuring that these portals follow ethical codes of conduct may run against the Albanian Government's past attempts



to use such measures to stifle dissent. Considering these two elements, some key steps to reduce distribution of disinformation would be to: establish fully independent media with journalists that are trained to spot disinformation, conduct in-depth research and check facts; provide more opportunities to fact checking establishments so they can keep politicians honest by following up on statements and promises; provide training for fact checkers on how to navigate social media tools to ensure that their attempts at debunking reach a broader audience; provide media literacy courses in schools, starting from middle school and into university and establish fully independent boards to review the output and funding of media portals and make that easily available to the public.

Citizen Association **Zašto ne (Why Not)** from **Bosnia and Herzegovina** estimate that in their country it is necessary to amend and enhance the legislation related to media, in order to reduce number of anonymous media and regulate the unregulated market of electronic media. In their opinion, it would be advisable that major technology companies like Google engage proactively in enforcing their own rules and guidelines, which would consequently result in termination of anonymous web portals. Additionally, it is advisable for the other actors, like official institutions to invest more in the development of fact checking, debunking and strategic communications as well as to provide greater support to the credible journalism.

The Center for Democratic Transition in Montenegro evaluates that media literacy should be the first step in understanding the broad scope of disinformation. People in Montenegro are still used to traditional media. The media landscape has changed, but habits stayed. Mass production of new information makes it impossible to tell between truth and disinformation. Talks and discussions about media literacy and dangers of disinformation should start in elementary schools, all the way up to universities. They should continue as public debates for the elderly.

The team of **Sbunker from Kosovo** evaluates that, on the one hand, development plans should define responsibilities and tasks of state institutions for increasing the ability to stop disinformation. On the other, plans should foresee strengthening professional and objective journalism through self-regulation of the media. It is important to coordinate legal and strategic initiatives for developing protective capacities and functions. The focus should be on advancement of collective (public and private) skills for information sharing, early warning, raising collective awareness and protecting free information flow. It is necessary to initiate discussions about media literacy and raising awareness of disinformation from elementary schools to universities. This can be done by including media literacy as a subject in schools.



So far, Kosovo authorities have halted broadcast of channels from the Russian Federation in order to stop Russian propaganda and protect Kosovo's public safety. However, this decision has to be extended to online platforms and social networks so as not to leave the public vulnerable to disinformation from external actors.

Experts in **Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society from North Macedonia** point out that it is most important to raise awareness and introduce media literacy into the educational program so as to teach people how to identify disinformation and its sources; educate members of the Parliamentary Assembly on the weight of their public statements and on real meaning of political immunity; trace financing of media outlets and check the editorial staff and urge the Government to adopt a national strategy for fighting disinformation.

ISAC Fund from Serbia is of the opinion that the state should invest more in media. In order for the media to survive, they need capital, which they get through advertising. Numerous media channels in Serbia are directly tied to the government through advertising campaigns of government owned companies. In Serbia, it is necessary to act on separating media from government and political parties. Another crucial aspect is education. Rise in extremism in school kids is becoming a serious problem and it is really important to properly educate children from the young age on the values of multi-cultural, multi-national and anti-xenophobic society. At the same time it is vital to improve critical thinking and the media literacy skills of children and adults.

Priority recommendations at regional level

Disinformation campaigns have the potential to change people's perceptions and opinions, influence politics and even impede realization of a country's strategic objectives. Therefore, it is an imperative for all countries in the Western Balkans region to:

- ▶ encourage cooperation between the government, business, civil sector, tech companies and consumers to raise public awareness of various types of disinformation threats; strengthen capacity to identify and expose disinformation threats.
- ▶ build systemic approach in creating culture for critical opinion and dialogue at all levels - in the family, in the education system and between institutions and stakeholders in all sectors.



- ▶ make inclusiveness the critical principle so as to make joint decisions and build consensus through consultations with all stakeholders on the basis of transparency, provision of information and consistent understanding of the scope of application, as well as voluntariness, equality and non-discrimination.
- ▶ build resistance to disinformation through inclusivity since disinformation is an issue with multiple dimensions affecting national security, freedom of the media, fight against corruption etc. It is necessary to strengthen the role of the civil society as a driver of democratization, and to ensure multidisciplinary approach by including the state institutions within their competences.
- ▶ make data-based decisions particularly because of polarization and fragmentation of societies in most WB countries.
- ▶ recognize structural factors responsible for populations' susceptibility to disinformation and conspiracy theories and make action steps to address such phenomena via concrete programs.
- ▶ facilitate cross-border cooperation among all WB countries with the civil sector organizations as leaders in the process due to their experience and participation in many successful projects.

Recommendations for state institutions

- ▶ Governments and the other competent institutions should lead the process of countering disinformation and fake news, on the basis of democratic principles and human rights already articulated by civil society and media organizations.
- ▶ Institutions, in partnership with the media and the civil society organizations, should create public policies, strategies and mechanisms to increase the resistance to disinformation and to develop media literacy, bearing in mind that this security issue goes beyond the media sphere and must include joint action with all competent state institutions.
- ▶ Institutions, in partnership with the media and the civil society organizations, should assemble national multidisciplinary teams to monitor and analyze methods of foreign malign influence, activities and channels for spreading it as well as effects it has on the local audiences so that eventually they can create national strategies for fighting foreign malign influences through disinformation.



- ▶ Countering disinformation should be compatible and complementary to the process of implementing urgent reforms in the media field as well as to the urgent alignment of the legal framework with all relevant EU directives and regulations, especially those that address the issue of spreading disinformation, content that promotes hate speech, terrorism and other forms of crime.
- ▶ State institutions should strengthen resistance to disinformation by integrating media and digital literacy into curricula for professional upgrading.
- ▶ State institutions should increase the level of proactive transparency and openness, which will enable direct and more efficient support for the efforts of the media, services and civil organizations, which work directly to detect disinformation.
- ▶ State institutions should take a proactive role in creating a favourable legal and social environment for financial investments in the media industry. It is particularly important to improve the legal conditions for investments aimed at strengthening self-regulatory mechanisms, as well as raising awareness of the role of the media as drivers of democracy in the society. Improvement of journalism should be treated as a strategic goal.
- ▶ State institutions should also:
 - ▷ foster media literacy in schools - support the provision of educational materials by independent fact-checkers and civil society organizations to schools and educators.
 - ▷ Provide budget to increase national capabilities for countering disinformation and for developing new tools necessary to combat online disinformation.
 - ▷ Build societal resilience by financing specialized trainings, public conferences and debates.
 - ▷ Invest in civil society - enhancing civic education, critical thinking, and media literacy is fundamental to building resilience, especially in an increasingly networked environment.
 - ▷ Enable use of new tools for content verification, tools to verify audiovisual content and technologies for digital content verification.



- ▷ Build resilience by strengthening laws and regulations for online media outlets and implement “real-name registration” rules to help create more transparent, trustworthy and accountable online ecosystem.
- ▷ Encourage regulations in the digital market space as a tool for countering the click-bait tendencies that would reduce financial incentive to disinformation.
- ▷ Establish close cooperation with the EU and NATO and access their expertise in creating resilience and response strategies. Increase cooperation with EU and NATO agencies on Countering Hybrid Threats.
- ▷ Build mechanisms to combat disinformation in the context of the new hybrid threats. Get involved with NATO programs launched to analyze the information space, such as “Setting the Record Straight”, in order to detect trends in disinformation, be able to react more quickly and develop specific content.
- ▷ Establish close cooperation with the European External Action Service (EEAS) and contribute to investigation on FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference) threats.

Recommendations for political parties and politicians

Political parties and politicians have to:

- ▶ Refrain from using disinformation as a tool for political fight in public speeches, on social media, in the Parliament, in everyday contacts with citizens.
- ▶ Upgrade internal political mechanisms in political parties for countering disinformation and up level ethical codes of conduct.
- ▶ Resist using automated systems for spreading disinformation, hate speech and violence.

Recommendations for advertising companies

Advertising companies should:

- ▶ Upgrade advertisers’ ethical codes of conduct. In line with corporate and social responsibility, advertisers should build tools and monitor that in their regular activities they not to sponsor media that spread disinformation.



- ▶ Take into consideration self-regulatory solutions, consult registers of professional media and cooperate only with those who meet professional standards.

Recommendations for media workers, journalists, media owners, media organizations

- ▶ Media workers and journalists should advocate for increased compliance with the professional and ethical standards in journalism, as well as increased application of self-regulation tools.
- ▶ Journalists should participate actively in the fight against disinformation and in the promotion of media literacy by increasing quality and variety of media programs of informative and educational nature.
- ▶ Media outlets should invest in building fact-checking capacities so that the media quality would be recognized by audiences.
- ▶ Media outlets that do not produce anti-disinformation content should join the fight against disinformation by (1) reporting on and transmitting viable fact-checked content and (2) by exposing and unmasking disinformation.
- ▶ Media organizations should increase cooperation with other professional media organizations and other institutions relevant to the media sector.
- ▶ Media organizations should strengthen promotion of self-regulatory mechanisms as means enabling citizens to alert to abuses by unethical media. Media should empower consumers - make fact-checked content more visible and widespread
- ▶ Fact-checking should be affirmed as a form of self-regulation within the media community
- ▶ Media should encourage independent, professional journalism, investigative journalism and fact-checking. Quality news media can uncover and dilute disinformation and provide citizens with high-quality and diverse information
- ▶ Media organizations should develop indicators of trustworthiness and foster online accountability



Recommendations for civil society organizations

Civil society organizations have to:

- ▶ Accumulate knowledge on disinformation, build public archives and build capacities for debunking false-news and disinformation narratives (through fact-checking platforms) so as to efficiently expose malign influences.
- ▶ Cooperate with media, media organizations and journalists in order to understand how and why citizens, and sometimes entire communities, are drawn to disinformation narratives. Define a comprehensive answer to this phenomenon by providing positive contra-narrative to the foreign malign propaganda which resonates with the local audiences.
- ▶ As many organizations as possible should: start their own projects in order to raise public awareness on disinformation or join projects of the non-governmental sector that is already working on debunking disinformation. Simultaneously, they should work on diversifying target groups in their communities, particularly the most susceptible to the negative impact of disinformation. Different approaches should be contemplated in order to explain the harmfulness of disinformation among different age groups, with a particular emphasis on young people.
- ▶ Civil society organizations should create content and promotional campaigns that present fact-based positive narratives to the public in order to reduce the vaccine hesitancy. This is particularly urgent considering that diseases that were eradicated through vaccination are reoccurring in the WB region.
- ▶ An increasing number of local and grassroots civil society organizations should be involved in the efforts to increase media literacy and critical thinking in their communities, at all levels: through curricula that they will create independently or in collaboration with the academic community, specially developed for the fight against disinformation related to medicine (such as vaccines) and the health system, referring to the current practice of fact-checkers in the country. Specifically, this means cooperation between journalists and experts specialized in the fields that are the subject to disinformation, whose professional knowledge should be the basis of debunking.
- ▶ Civil society organizations that operate in the field of media literacy and fact-checking will increase their influence and opportunities



for cooperation by joining the national Media Literacy Network and the regional or international networks engaged in the fight against disinformation.

- ▶ Civil society organizations should start or intensify their lobbying activities and representation before the government in order to increase support of public and state institutions in the fight against disinformation, strengthening of media literacy and critical thinking. They should urge appropriate state bodies (prosecutor's office, judiciary) to enforce relevant laws against impunity for crimes that threaten the freedom of expression and deprive citizens of their right accurate information.



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