

WESTERN BALKANS

Baltic Region

Black Sea Region

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Western Balkans

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Disinformation and Civil Society Mapping Report

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Executive Summary

The report provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by some of the countries of the Western Balkans region (Serbia, North Macedonia, Kosovo) regarding disinformation and civil society.

This report focuses on the region of the Western Balkans, which includes Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo. The report was compiled based on information drawn from the Country Mapping Reports for these three countries, which were prepared in the period between March and April 2023. The below report includes research on the socioeconomic and political conditions for the work of civil society organizations (CSO's) in the region, analysis of the influence of disinformation campaigns in the region, with a focus on the situation following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and how it resonates throughout societies in the Western Balkans in general, as well as identification of tools and strategies for improving the work of CSO's in the region. The methodology for this report was based on research of existing available analyses and reports from recent years, analysis of relevant legal frameworks, a monitoring of dominant topics and narratives in traditional medias and social media with the help of [Gerulata software](#)⁷, as well as interviews with key stakeholders in the civil society sector in Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo. The report identifies general trends and tendencies in the region and examines the influence of foreign factors.

In the past few years, the Western Balkans has experienced a relatively stable period; however,

each of the three countries in the region have also experienced challenges, including: growing political polarization, worsening of socio-economic conditions for the civic sector, partisan-led centralization of political and economic powers, decrease in confidence in public sector institutions and the state, political pressure on and violent acts against activists, and a drastic decrease in professional standards in the media. Also, the influence of foreign factors on polarization within these societies has been significant. An increase in anti-Western narratives and attitudes, originating from foreign influences, has been evident due to coordinated activities, as well as a combination of disinformation campaigns and local support by political groups.

Key contributing factors to the growing political polarization and potential destabilization that this report addresses are two political disputes between Serbia and Kosovo, and between North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

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Serbia and Kosovo, and between North Macedonia and Bulgaria. Various local groups have been vocal and active in spreading hateful narratives about the two political disputes and propaganda through political institutions (e.g. Parliament and local municipalities), as well as through traditional and online media, in order to polarize public opinion and to reduce the chances for dialogue and solving the disputes. Through similar methods, foreign actors with local support are actively working to erode confidence in democratic procedures and the rule of law, as well as seeking to win public support through manipulative activities and narratives. The core message of these narratives attacks the EU and NATO, which, it is claimed, are trying to weaken and destroy Russia and China, but as a result of these ambitions they will themselves dissolve in the near future.

When it comes to CSO's in the region, the conditions for their work have been gradually worsening due to a decrease in donor support, corruption in state funding mechanisms, and also the inability of CSO's themselves to develop strategies and practices for stable fundraising and retaining staff, to better communicate with the wider public and connect with local communities, as well as to effectively apply new technologies in their work. Nevertheless, the experience and potential that CSO's have to contribute to positive social change remain significant and all three countries in the region could benefit from coordinated and strategic support that would help reform and develop CSO's in the above-mentioned areas.

Western Balkans countries analyzed during the Mapping process

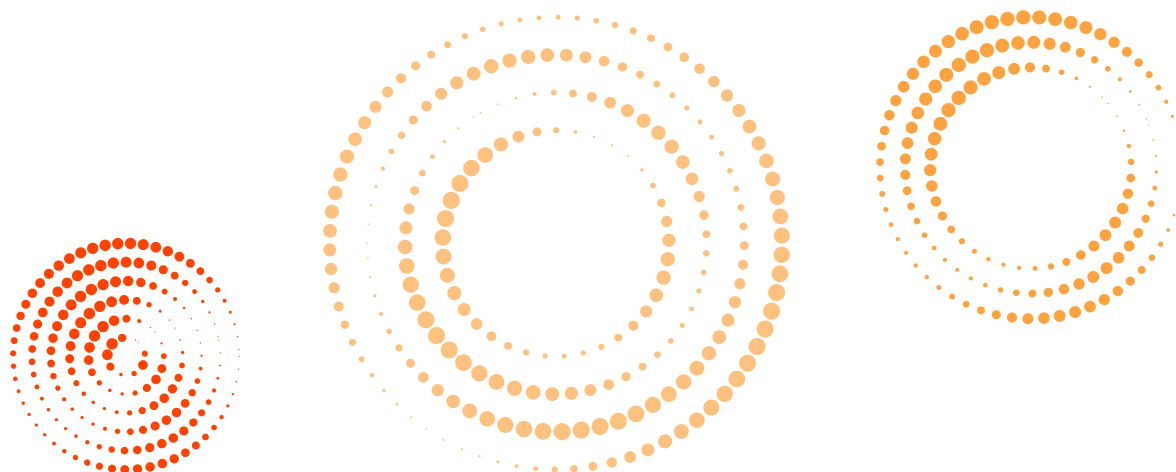


Methodology

The regional analysis comprises two components – a quantitative and a qualitative analysis – both based on research conducted in the three countries of the Western Balkans region.

The methodology used in this research is based on desk research and interviews with representatives of CSO's in the three countries of the Western Balkans region. Key documents and reports were examined and used for the three Country Mapping Reports for North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo from which consequently this Regional Mapping report was produced. Desk research for the Country Mapping Reports focused on legal documents, studies and analyses, as well as the results of public opinion polls in each country. Additionally, a total of 17 interviews¹ were collected with representatives of CSO's that operate in North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo.

Findings from the country reports and from the monitoring of public debate in traditional and social media were also included in the below report. Key narratives in the media outlets of each country were monitored with the help of the [Gerulata software package](#)⁷ and subsequently compared our findings with previous reports and analyses. In total, we monitored around 400 media sources (81 in North Macedonia, 69 in Kosovo and 251 in Serbia) for eight selected narratives and how they circulated through the media during the months of March and April 2023. The selected narratives included: NATO, war in Ukraine, economy, elections, LGBTQ, migration, women rights and NATO-EU relations.



Regional Background

Description of the region and its crucial challenges (key political and social events from the past 2-3 years, external and internal threats to governance and democracy).

In the past two to three years, the Western Balkans region has experienced a relatively calm period with no major crisis; however, various developments during this time proved to be challenging for the socio-political stability of North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo. In addition to globally impactful events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the most significant factors for the local socio-political situation of the region include complicated inter-state relations and deep-rooted disputes between states in the region. One of the most delicate issues in this context were the tense relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and the situation between North Macedonia and Bulgaria, which started deteriorating in 2021 when the Bulgarian government declined to support the start of EU accession negotiations for North Macedonia.

In the past two to three years, the Western Balkans region has experienced a relatively calm period with no major crisis; however, various developments during this time proved to be challenging for the socio-political stability of North Macedonia, Serbia and Kosovo.

Serbia and Kosovo signed the Brussels Agreement in 2013 and aimed to normalize relations between the two countries. The agreement also helped Serbia to begin accession negotiations with the EU, which are still in progress. One of the key provisions in the agreement was the establishment of the “Association of Serbian Municipalities” (ASM) in Kosovo, which was planned as a measure to give the Serb minority in Kosovo greater self-governance. However, the implementation of this part of the agreement has been stalled for several years, as Kosovo objects to several of the provisions on the grounds that they are not in accordance with Kosovo’s constitution². The agreement also envisaged normalization of economic relations between Serbia and Kosovo, free movement of people and goods, trade and energy cooperation, where some progress has been achieved. Serious disagreements remain over issues such as property rights and the integration of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovo’s institutions. One of the issues of dispute was the type of license plates Kosovo Serbs should use³. This technical matter sparked debate and protests in 2022⁴. The situation was temporarily resolved at the beginning of 2023 when Kosovo’s government postponed the decision to ban the use of vehicles with Serbian license plates for Serbs living in North Kosovo.

In March 2023, with mediation by the EU, Serbia restarted talks with Kosovo regarding normalization of their relations. After two meetings in March in Brussels and April in Ohrid, North Macedonia⁵, the President of Serbia and the Prime Minister of Kosovo verbally accepted the EU proposed document as the basis for further talks⁷. Following the agreement, Serbian officials emphasized that any future talks will not include recognition of Kosovo and its acceptance in the UN. These talks remain a key issue of political debate in the two countries. Kosovo's government was fiercely criticized by its political opponents for agreeing to a compromise on the planned formation of the Association of Serbian municipalities. Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic expected to face severe criticism for the talks with Kosovo, so in March 2023 he announced that he plans to form a new centrist political movement, called the "National Movement for the State"⁶, which aims to show that "Serbia is not against the EU and it would not support the introduction of sanctions against Russia."⁷ Vucic also announced that he plans to promote the "National Movement for the State" throughout Serbia in the spring and summer of 2023.

After going through serious political crisis between 2015-2017, North Macedonia experienced a politically stable period during the past 5-6 years. The crisis in February 2015 was caused by allegations made against former government officials of widespread corruption and massive wiretapping of over 20,000 members of the opposition, journalists and civil society activists. Massive protests took place in this period, most of them organized through social media by ad hoc civic associations, which later came to be called the Colorful revolution⁷. The protests resulted in political agreement for early parliamentary elections in December 2016, after which the opposition managed to form a government. The political situation has stabilized since then, but there are still significant challenges

such as corruption and democratic governance. Meanwhile, trials against high-ranking officials from the previous and current governments are in progress and at various levels of the justice system⁸ and are contributing to low confidence in the judicial system and the rule of law in general.

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The parliamentary elections in 2020 were the first that took place after the country changed its constitutional name from the Republic of Macedonia to North Macedonia in 2019, which resulted from the Prespa agreement with Greece⁷, which brought a resolution to the name dispute after 27 years of demanding negotiations. After a difficult political process and a consultative referendum in September 2018⁷, the agreement was implemented through a series of constitutional changes and legal reforms thanks to support from some opposition members in the parliament. The coalition government of SDSM and DUI won a second mandate during the 2020 elections with the hope of finally beginning EU accession negotiations after being a candidate state for over 15 years. However, this plan was blocked when the Bulgarian government refused to approve the negotiations citing alleged violations of the 2017 Bulgarian-Macedonian friendship agreement⁷.

On 17 July 2022 the government of North Macedonia and Bulgaria signed a protocol⁷, initially proposed by the French and German governments, according to which North Macedonia can conditionally start accession negotiations only after it includes ethnic Bulgarians in its constitution.

The current government is still gathering support for the constitutional changes that are needed in order to implement the agreement with Bulgaria. Changes to the constitution require 2/3 of the parliamentary vote, meaning 80 Members of Parliament would need to support the change. Most attempts to change the constitution have so far been unsuccessful. In this case too, there is no agreement with the main opposition party, VMRO DPMNE⁹.

The key socio-political issue in Kosovo, beside the difficulties in dialogue with Serbia, relates to establishing the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC) and the Specialist Prosecutor's Office⁷. Both were established in 2015 to investigate and prosecute war crimes committed by members of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) during and after the Kosovo War in 1999. The KSC operates under Kosovo law, but its sessions take place outside of Kosovo in order to protect the safety of witnesses and judges. The KSC has indicted several former KLA commanders and politicians, including Hashim Thachi, the former President of Kosovo, while other defendants include Kadri Veseli, the former speaker of the Kosovo parliament. The work of these two institutions has caused a series of political changes resulting in early elections and changes in the Kosovo government.

During elections to the Kosovo Parliamentary in October 2019, the main opposition parties received the most votes, including: the Self-determination (Vetëvendosje), which formed out of an anti-establishment movement¹⁰ that often relied on populist ideas and received the most votes, as well as the Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) in second place. The leader of the Vetëvendosje party, Albin Kurti, became Prime Minister⁷ and formed a

governing coalition that remains in power today.

In November 2022, following several months of dispute between Prishtina and Belgrade over the status of private vehicles with Serbian license plates¹¹, which are used by ethnic Serbs in North Kosovo, ethnic Serbs who worked in the Kosovo police and administration left their posts. This move complicated the reconciliation and integration process of Kosovo Serbs in Kosovar institutions.

The Open Balkans⁷ is an initiative that advocates for a regional cooperation agreement between Serbia, Albania and North Macedonia, which was signed in October 2021. The goal of the initiative is to improve economic cooperation and cross-country relations in the Western Balkans region by promoting stability and prosperity. Under the agreement, the three countries have committed to reduce trade barriers and improve infrastructure, including roads, railways and energy grids. The agreement also includes provisions for cooperation in the areas of education, science and culture. The Open Balkans initiative is considered to be a positive step toward integration and stability in a region that has historically been marked by political and ethnic divisions. The initiative was supported by the EU as an important tool for regional cooperation and as having potential to bring the countries of the region closer to EU membership. Kosovo is not included in this initiative due to the critical position of the Serbia with regards to Kosovo's independence, while countries like Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina initially declined to participate in the process, through some political representatives recently confirmed that including these countries in the Open Balkan initiative might be possible in the future.

Civil Society

Main characteristics of the regional civil societies, regional similarities that can be distinguished as well as their role in providing support for Ukraine.

CSO's in the region face various challenges, such as limited financial resources, administrative obstacles, and political pressures. CSO's struggle with securing funding for their work and have problems with formally registering and working on concrete issues that affect the lives of citizens in each country. Additionally, there are concerns about the politicization of CSO's and their increasing co-optation by political parties.

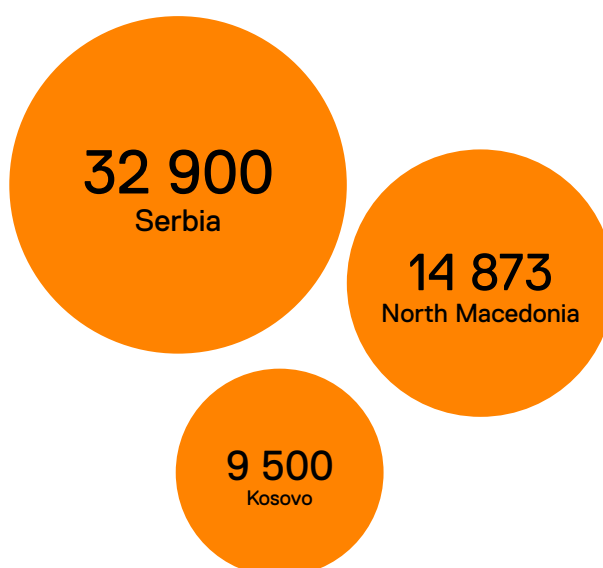
As of 2023, in North Macedonia, the official number of registered CSO's was 14,873⁷ but it is not clear how many of these are actually active. Organizations that submit an annual financial report at the end of the year are considered to be active; however, less than 30% of the total number of registered CSO's did so.¹²

In Serbia, the latest available statistics from 2022 show over 32,000 registered CSO's (in addition to 900 foundations)⁷, two thirds of which were registered during the last decade. About 32% of registered CSO's are active in the field of research and education, while 34% in the field of informal education and training.¹³

In the case of Kosovo, there is no systematic and reliable data on the number of CSO's as civil society because a diverse range of organizations can be active without needing to register with the relevant state authorities. Also, the local Department of CSO's

(DCSO) that is responsible for monitoring the work of CSO's does not have mechanisms for regular exchange of information with them. Comparing information from various sources suggests that an estimated 9,500 CSO's are registered in Kosovo, out of which around 9,000 are local CSO's and just over 500 are foreign or international CSO's. Approximately 1,500 are sports clubs and sports federations, and over 30 are religious organizations.¹⁴ It should be added that recent studies suggest that the number of active CSO's in Kosovo is around 1,000.¹⁵

Registered CSOs



Common themes – regional similarities

Based on existing country reports as well as the interviews collected for this report, we can say that most CSO's across the Western Balkans region face similar issues. A key process that affects the work of CSO's is the slow or ineffective decentralization of the government. Centralized government control remains significant and is often imposed on municipalities, regions and other sectors of society, including CSO's. Consequently, municipal governments and organizations that work at the local level spend their resources requesting help from central government rather than focusing on addressing pressing local issues. In this context, CSO's that do not conform to party politics are considered to be problematic for a government system that relies on corruption and complicity across sectors.

Civil societies in the Western Balkans share common challenges, which largely relate to the wider socio-economic and political conditions of the region. Some of the most notable characteristics are as follows:

Unsatisfactory inclusion of CSO's legislative consultation

Representatives of CSO's that were interviewed for this report confirm that governments in the region declare a commitment and a willingness to cooperate on activities related to the public sector, judicial issues, and legislative reforms, which require wider public debate. However, CSO representatives often noted that government sometimes "showcase" them to the public before elections or to the international community as proof that they are open to discussion about important

issues and to include input from CSO's. In reality, however, these governments do not seek real cooperation and tend to ignore suggestions and demands from CSO's.¹⁶

Despite these challenges, there has been some progress. For example, North Macedonia took steps to improve the working conditions of CSO's by introducing changes in the law on CSO's and creating a government body responsible for cooperation with civil society - the [Council for Cooperation between the Government and the Civil Society](#)⁷. The Council monitors the conditions and regulations needed for the work of the CSO's, advocates for and/or initiates regulations that can improve the legal and institutional framework of CSO operation, consults legislative proposals, government strategies, programs and other legal acts that affect CSO's. The administrative and technical work of the Council is carried out by the [Department for Cooperation with Non-Governmental Organizations of the General Secretariat of the Government](#)⁷. So far, the work of this body has had some results, but the CSO representatives interviewed for this report underline that its impact is still limited.

The majority of CSO's in Serbia (c. 75%) indicate that their influence on local and national policies is minimal.

In Serbia, CSO's participate in consultations at the national and local levels, but CSO representatives have underlined that this practice is not effective.¹⁷ Public debates fail to give satisfactory results and lack adequate legal provisions that would ensure

better implementation and actual inclusion of CSO's. The majority of CSO's in Serbia (c. 75%) indicate that their influence on local and national policies is minimal. Sustainability of services is also a serious challenge.¹⁸ Currently, most CSO's have limited influence on local government budget allocations, yet the main source of funding for their activities is to apply for grants from local government funds.¹⁹ CSO's advocated for the Serbian government to ensure sufficient resources and to improve formal mechanisms for involving citizens in decision-making processes. They also asked the government to withdraw the 2020 decision to abolish the Office for Cooperation with Civil Society, and to reduce the powers of some government ministries²⁰, changes that were introduced through a non-transparent process and without consultation with CSO's. Introducing such changes without consultation is seen as a way of putting pressure on CSO's and of creating networks of government-controlled organizations.

In 2019 the government of Kosovo established the "Government Cooperation Council with Civil Society²¹," which is a platform for official cooperation between CSO's and the government. The Council includes 29 representatives, 15 of whom are from CSO's and 14 from state institutions. The Council is jointly chaired by the Secretary General of the Office of the Prime Minister and the Executive Director of the Civikos Platform²².

These initiatives represent a step in the right direction but their effectiveness so far is disputed by CSO's in the region and still a lot of dedicated work from both sides is needed to improve the situation.

At the local level, there is insufficient cooperation between local municipalities and CSO's, but also between municipalities and CSO's themselves, especially for regional problems. There is often a lack of information sharing, lack of active involvement of CSO's and citizens in the work of

municipalities, as well as ineffective implementation of new policies, programs and budgets.

Limited financial resources and sustainability

Issues with access to funding and donors are among the key problems that CSO's in the region. The economic crisis after the COVID-19 pandemic worsened and already difficult situation. CSO representatives interviewed for this report alarmed that a real and active independent civic society sector is not possible without the support of foreign donors. Chronic lack of funding has always been a fundamental problem for CSO's, especially considering that many of the issues that CSO's work on require continuity and long-term engagement. In most of the countries in the region there is no tradition of individual donations, so CSO's depend mainly on grants from foreign governments, foundations or international organizations.

Misuse of funds by the state or local governments has been reported continuously by CSO's. For example, a number of CSO's in Serbia received funds from the government and from political parties (GONGOs).²⁰ The GONGOs are visibly present on the local level in Serbia and structured through the local government receiving substantial help from the central government and ministries.²¹ Several suspicious calls for funding were launched by government ministries in a way that would provide grants to GONGOs in non-transparent procedures. In a few notable cases, the GONGOs were only established a few days before the call for funding was announced.²² What's more, representative that were interviewed from Serbian CSO's stated that CSO activities in Western Balkan countries have become limited in recent years because the donor community has been shrinking,

but also because of the challenges to finding competent and skilled staff.

Many CSO's in Kosovo struggle to secure sufficient funding for their activities due to limited financial resources, as well as due to the fact that support from donors is gradually decreasing.

In North Macedonia, during the past decade, governments funded NGO's that were politically closely aligned with them, in some cases the funding was awarded following open calls for funding applications but sometimes there was not even a public tender process. According to data published by the Council for Cooperation with CSO's in North Macedonia,²³ public funding allocated to support CSO's is increasing but the transparency of the funding process is still low.²⁴

Many CSO's in Kosovo struggle to secure sufficient funding for their activities due to limited financial resources, as well as due to the fact that support from donors is gradually decreasing. In 2022 the three main sources of funding for CSO's were international donors, government funding (both central and local), and contributions from the private sector.²⁵ Consequently, the CSO's priorities have largely reflected the priorities of these funders rather than the needs and interest of the communities they serve. This has weakened the connections between CSO's and their constituencies and thus called into question the legitimacy of their activities.

Political pressures on CSO's

Political pressures on the CSO's in the region are still a common experience and are expressed

through inspections or smear campaigns carried out by pro-government media, while organizations and activists receive personal threats. The expansion of online media, including social media, has been used by government supporters as a tool to harass and threaten CSO members and activists on a daily basis.

For example, in North Macedonia between 2015-2017, the government planned a rigorous inspection of CSO's,²⁶ alleging that they were working on behalf of foreign entities. The political crisis in 2015, however, prevented implementation of the plan. The State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption was assigned a key role, and the operation was then dispensed to the Public Revenue Administration, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Ministry of the Interior, the Financial Police, and, later, the Directorate for Financial intelligence. The peak of this campaign was in December 2016 and January 2017 when the former prime minister, Nikola Gruevski, called for "de-Sorosoization of Macedonian society."²⁷

Political pressures on the CSO's in the region are still a common experience and are expressed through inspections or smear campaigns carried out by pro-government media, while organizations and activists receive personal threats.

In North Macedonia, reports of political pressures on CSO's have decreased since 2017, but they are still ongoing at various levels, including pressure on environmental activists who advocate against the opening of coal mines in the eastern part of North Macedonia.²⁸ Additionally, some representatives of CSO's who were interviewed for this report indicated that CSO's often align their attitudes and policies with

the political views of local mayors in order to be able to continue to cooperate with local municipalities.

In Serbia, political pressures and attacks on CSO's are also common.²⁹ For example, in March 2022, the President of the Council of the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM) accused the CSO, CRTA³⁰, of political bias in their election monitoring and reporting.

CSO representatives confirmed that authorities in Serbia attacked organizations during environmental protests in 2021 and 2022 in relation to the "Jadar project" and Rio Tinto's company intention to open a lithium mine in western Serbia.³¹ The Basic Public Prosecutor's Office in Novi Sad launched an investigation against 12 people who participated in protests against the adoption of the General Urban Plan, which took place in July 2022 and accused them of violent behavior and assault on a policeman.³² At the same time, the Prosecutor's Office confirmed that no proceedings were initiated against members of a private security company, who used violence against protesters. Environmental defenders also confirmed that no action was taken by the Ombudsman or the Ministry of Internal Affairs regarding police violence at the same protest. Environmental activists were again subject to pressure following a protest in November 2022 in front of the Government of Serbia in Belgrade. Protesters reported that they were asked to show their IDs by police officers, who also demanded that some protesters be tested for alcohol and drugs.

CSO's in Kosovo also experience political interference, particularly when their work is connected to sensitive political issues. This often leads to harassment, intimidation and even violence against activists. For example, in 2019, the organization Transparency International Kosovo faced criticism³³ for accepting funding from foreign donors in relation to the investigation of war crimes and responsibility of domestic politicians. Some critics accused the

organization of being beholden to foreign interests rather than serving the needs of Kosovar citizens.

Ineffective communication with the public and ineffective use of media

In most cases regional media are highly politicized or commercialized, and do not engage with issues of public interest, tending instead to report on topics related to vulnerable groups only when they have the potential to have political impact. Under such conditions, CSO's struggle to inform the public about their activities or to engage the public in their projects. CSO's need to change their approach to communicating with the public, which may require additional training in how to take advantage of the available tools to improve public relations and communication.³⁴ CSO's in Kosovo often struggle to access reliable information, particularly when it comes to government policies and decision-making, which significantly limits their ability to effectively advocate for specific causes.

CSO's in the Western Balkans region still tend to be perceived as dependent on international aid and active only thanks to financial resources from abroad.

Public opinion about the legitimacy and accountability of CSO's is another challenge. CSO's in the Western Balkans region still tend to be perceived as dependent on international aid and active only thanks to financial resources from abroad. This status quo makes CSO's project- and donor-oriented and, conversely, lacking strong connections with local communities and the general public. Domestic

political actors attack CSO's for their dependence on foreign support and describe them as "foreign servants" who are willing to sacrifice national interests for the prerogatives of international donor.

One representative of a local Serbian CSO confirmed that hostility toward CSO's in Serbia relates to accusations that they "work against the independence and sovereignty of the state. CSO staff are subjected to constant attacks, so citizens often have the wrong impression of what CSO's actually do."³⁵

CSO's in the region deal with a gradual decrease in citizen engagement with their activities. The most common reasons for low engagement in civil society initiatives are claims by the citizens that they are not well informed about CSO activities, lack of time and/or interest on the part of citizens to be involved, and the belief among citizens that their participation will not make a difference in solving local problems. A key factor for citizen participation in civil society activities is trust that they can

influence decisions at the local or national level, but so far this trust is very low.

In the case of Kosovo, the Mapping research showed that public support for local CSO's is weak and that few CSO's have established strong membership bases or identifiable constituencies.³⁶ There is a general failure among CSO's to communicate with community stakeholders, build grassroots relations and encourage community participation in their work, especially in the process of identifying and planning activities and programs. The lack of citizen engagement is a serious impediment for efforts to influence government, at local and national levels, through advocacy and dialogue on policy, as well as a missed opportunity for developing organizational sustainability. Greater effort should also be made to build supportive relations with the business sector, whose importance as a key stakeholder in social and economic policy is generally overlooked by CSO's.

CSO's Involvement in the War in Ukraine

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 the Government of North Macedonia and Kosovo supported EU sanctions against Russia and pledged their support to Ukraine and the refugees from Ukraine. The North Macedonian Government also tasked several ministries to help with accepting refugees from Ukraine and sending military support to Ukraine, including tanks and airplanes.³⁷ In April 2022, Kosovo's government accepted a group of journalists from Ukraine, who had left the country as refugees³⁸ and, since that time, 13 journalists joined the program [Journalists in Residence in Kosovo](#)³⁷ with 12 of them still living and working in Kosovo. The journalists receive a monthly allowance, social insurance, and

state subsidized rent. Kosovar CSO's have been active in collecting humanitarian aid and sending it through convoys to war affected regions in Ukraine.

The Serbian government officially maintained a position of neutrality toward the war in Ukraine, stating that it supports the territorial integrity of Ukraine and a peaceful resolution to the conflict through dialogue and diplomacy.³⁹

In North Macedonia, the Ministry of the Interior's⁴⁰ statistics show that between the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and January 2023, as many as 29,419 Ukrainian citizens entered the

country, while 23,020 people left. Consequently, over 6,000 Ukrainians are still residing in North Macedonia. So far, officially 378 Ukrainians have received assistance to stay in North Macedonia for humanitarian reasons. The organization that has been most active in helping refugees arriving from Ukraine is the [Red Cross of Macedonia](#)⁷. Most refugees were allocated accommodation in Skopje, Prilep and Gevgelija. The Ministry of Health has provided the Red Cross with significant assistance in resources and logistics.

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Other CSO's in North Macedonia have had a modest response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, mainly organizing collections of humanitarian aid (e.g. food, medicines, clothing, etc.). Local CSO's also supported peaceful protests against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, organized in the main square in Skopje in April 2022, February 2023 and March 2023⁴¹ by the local association of Ukrainians in North Macedonia "Lesja Ukrainka."

Since February 2022, Serbia has seen a gradual increase in the number of refugees who arrived from Ukraine and are seeking asylum. There was also an influx of refugees from Russia who were seeking asylum due to fear of political persecution or economic reasons (e.g. the desire to run their

online businesses from safe locations).⁴² An increase in the number of Russian citizens and Russian companies in Serbia, a spike in real estate rental prices, and a rise in consumer prices are some of the resulting challenges that Serbia has faced in this period. According to data of the [Ministry of Internal Affairs of Serbia](#)⁷ (MUP), between the 25th of February 2022 and the 21st of December 2022, 219,153 Russian citizens arrived in Serbia, though most of them used Serbia as a transit country. Moreover, according to data from the [Serbian Business Register Agency](#)⁷, over 4,000 Russian entrepreneurs and firms were registered in Serbia in 2022⁴³, which is significantly more than the previous year (159 in 2021). The number of Ukrainian refugees residing temporarily in Serbia varies between 3,000-4,000⁴⁴, while some 145,513 have entered and left to other countries since 2014. Serbian CSO's like the [Asylum Protection Center \(APC\)](#)⁷ and the [Belgrade Centre for Human Rights \(BCHR\)](#)⁷ have been actively involved in providing support and assistance to refugees from Ukraine and Russia ever since the first armed conflicts in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. These organizations provide legal assistance, psychosocial support, and help refugees with asylum procedures.

In addition to CSO's, the Serbian government is also involved in providing assistance to refugees, while aid to Ukraine included support for equipment to stabilize the electric system⁴⁵, financial aid, and sending medical equipment.⁴⁶ In 2015, the Serbian government introduced several changes to its asylum laws, including the establishment of a new institution responsible for more efficient processing of asylum claims, which then proved helpful with accepting asylum seekers from Ukraine and Russia in subsequent years.⁴⁷

Overview of Disinformation

Description of the disinformation landscape in the region - main topics, overview of the most popular narratives, their sources and channels it's distributed through, general impact of the disinformation on the region's society and special focus on the disinformation related to the war in Ukraine.



In recent years the negative influence of disinformation content and campaigns in the Western Balkans has increased.⁴⁸ Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the proliferation of disinformation and propaganda has drastically increased. Regional disputes between Serbia and Kosovo, and between North Macedonia and Bulgaria have also facilitated dissemination of disinformation and propaganda. Online media and social media networks were key tools for mass spread of disinformation, which affected the way citizens were informed about these important events.

In recent years the negative influence of disinformation content and campaigns in the Western Balkans has increased.

Most of the disinformation content in the three countries in the region can easily be found on social media networks, including Facebook, Twitter and Tik Tok. Though disinformation initially spreads through these online channels, it is often then taken

up by mainstream TV and print media. Among the content creators are both currently active and former politicians, journalists as well as anonymous authors, but the media also draws content from foreign sources (e.g. pro-Russian media or social media profiles) without verifying it.⁴⁹ Online media often present an individual's personal views as "credible information."

The problem of disinformation in the region is complex and a wide range of measures would need to be implemented in order to address it effectively.⁵⁰

Serbia

The European Communication Monitor (2022⁵¹) shows that the countries of Southeast Europe have a fragile position with regard to the presence and effects of disinformation. Government and non-government sectors communication experts, who participated in this study, identified Serbia as one of the countries with the strongest influence of disinformation and fake news. Also, according to the NATO report on disinformation in the Western Balkans, "Disinformation is an endemic phenomenon

in the Western Balkans where all nations in the region are affected. When it comes to foreign disinformation, Serbia is considered to be at the epicenter.”⁵²

In regards to Serbia more specifically, a 2021 study on disinformation carried out by the European Parliament⁵³ named Serbia a launchpad for Russian disinformation operations in the Western Balkans. The key actors are local media that support and transmit Russian state propaganda, local outlets of Russian media like [Sputnik](#)⁷ and [Russia Today](#)⁷, CSO's, and local political parties.

One of the main contributing factors to the problem of disinformation in Serbia is the country's political environment and the main political actors who use disinformation as a tool for political gain. Political parties and party supporters use misleading or false information to influence public opinion, attack political and ideological opponents and gain wider support.

The flow of information between countries in the region is seamless due to close social, historical and cultural ties between Serbia, the Bosnian Serb entity of Republika Srpska, and Montenegro. Consequently, almost all media narratives, including disinformation, regularly flow across borders. Local media in North Macedonia also use sources from Serbia on a daily basis, while the Serbian media are available in regional markets, not only online, but also through the vast cable and satellite networks of telecommunication providers, including [MTel](#)⁷, [Makedonski telekom](#)⁷, [Crnogorski telekom](#)⁷, and others.

Disinformation originating in Serbia primarily relates to national lines of polarization, while international affairs serve as the background context. False, misleading and manipulative information is developed around a set of topics, notably relations between the government and the opposition, but also around the issue of Kosovo and events that affect the ratings of the ruling parties. For example, government propagandists used disinformation

tactics to attack the organizers of the environmental protests mentioned above⁵⁴ and social actions against a mural dedicated to Ratko Mladić.⁵⁵ Disinformation related to these events led to increased media reporting and helped to emphasize divisions (e.g. government against opposition or Serbia against Kosovo).⁵⁶ In over half of the news items that contained disinformation, opposition parties and individuals activists were targeted by pro-government media sources such as the online news media Alo, the national TV channels TV B92 and TV Pink, as well as local TV channels Novosadska TV and RTV Pančevo.

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Recent reports confirm that the most active sources of disinformation in Serbia receive significant amounts of public funds. For instance, “in the online news media, the two media (Alo and Kurir) that spread more disinformation than others (Blic, N1 and Nova) receive more support from project co-financing and state advertising. Two printed dailies (the Informer and Večernje novosti), in which disinformation is found almost on daily basis, also receive public funds. The TV station that most frequently produces disinformation (TV Pink) received the most state advertising (and other benefits).”⁵⁷

In Serbia the main disinformation narratives in local media that were registered in the past period related

to anti-Western politics supported by a significant number of political parties and organizations. The following is an example of such a narrative: “The criminal opposition is plotting with the West to illegally overthrow the Serbian President, Aleksandar Vucic, and the government led by the Progressive Party (SNS).”⁵⁸ The pro-government media often attack opposition leaders, Dragan Djilas, Vuk Jeremic and Bosko Obradovic, as well as other government critics from the media and CSO sectors. Among the politicians, disinformation is mostly found on the extreme right. Politicians and CSO's that focus on LGBTQI+ rights and gender equality as well as on war crimes in the 1990's experience the most pressure from disinformation narratives.

In this context, one of the most frequent narratives used is that Serbia has many enemies, both internal and external, who want to weaken and destroy the country.⁵⁹ The position of victim is then used to justify the meta-narrative that the country needs a strong and brave leader who will sacrifice and save Serbia from them its enemies.⁶⁰ Such narratives serve to justify a centralization of power with the President, Vucic, who is involved in a wide range of issues, from basic communal issues to high politics and diplomacy. The Serbian pro-government media have normalized the perception that the national leader should be omnipresent in the media and express opinions on all key debates on daily basis.⁶¹

The analysis showed that anti-western disinformation published by Serbian media coincides with pro-Russian disinformation campaigns⁶², as identified by the [EUvsDisinfo project of the European External Action Service \(EEAS\)](#)⁷. One of the most persistent stories published in Serbian media claims that the entire Western military machine is deployed against Russia, leaving the latter no choice but to retaliate with full force in Ukraine.⁶³ Several variations of such unsubstantiated claims were reported since the beginning of the war by numerous mainstream

media sources, including TV Happy, Informer and Večernje Novosti.

The second front for the dissemination of disinformation are anti-opposition campaigns. Government officials make statements that aim⁶⁴ to suppress critical voices and to stigmatize critics as “traitors and collaborators of foreign powers”⁶⁵ by making unfounded or unverified claims about them. For example, during the opposition protests that followed the parliamentary elections in 2020, opposition members were depicted as “criminals and collaborators of foreign states.”⁶⁶ Similar attacks and pressures took place when diplomatic talks resumed between Serbia and Kosovo.⁶⁷

Anti-Albanian narratives in Serbia intensified when negotiations with Kosovo restarted in 2022. Ethnic Albanians living in Serbia and representatives of Kosovar authorities⁶⁸ were described as arrogant and primitive, and labeled as “supporters of the fake state Kosovo” and “terrorists,” while media reports frequently used the term “Shiptars”⁶⁹, which is considered to be a derogative term for ethnic Albanians. Statements made by Kosovo's Prime Minister were often qualified by Serbian officials and reported in the media as provocations.⁷⁰ The aim of such narrative was to create an atmosphere of intolerance and to minimize the possibility for dialogue or agreement with Kosovo.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, the main trends of spreading disinformation and manipulative content were similar to previous years with the most common disinformation being about domestic political issues, the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and different conspiracy theories.⁷¹ Since 2021, a common disinformation topic was Bulgaria



and its blocking of the start of North Macedonia's accession negotiations with the EU. The EU and its representatives were also the targets of disinformation in this context as they were presented as indirect supporters of the Bulgarian blockade.

Russian disinformation in North Macedonia is mainly disseminated through online media and social media, as well as through some smaller political parties like "Sole Macedonia" and "Levica." In Kosovo, the Albanian language media often transmits and comments on the role of Serbian language media in supporting Russian disinformation, which causes disputes and polarization between Albanian-speaking and Serbian-speaking populations in Kosovo.

In North Macedonia, the most common disinformation narratives relate to internal political topics and focus on attacking political opponents.⁷² The use of disinformation is the preferred political tool among anti-Western and far-right political groups, and it is spread mainly through online and social media. In their coverage of the parliamentary elections in 2016 and 2020, and local elections in 2021, local media showed a strong bias and partisanship toward candidates affiliated with the governing party. One of the main tactics was to spread hateful narratives and disinformation about political opponents. A common example of this tactic is the meta-narrative about "government incompetence," which is used by local political parties to attack the ruling coalition, but also to erode confidence in state institutions and the political system in general when referring to democracy, elections and pluralism. Such narratives are often combined with spreading views that countries like Russia, China and Turkey are stronger states because of their "strong political leadership,"

These narratives often aim to impact on other important processes like building support for

Ukraine in the current military conflict with Russia and for North Macedonia integration with the EU. This narrative was especially common in a recent wave of false bomb threats between October 2022 and March 2023. The bomb threats were considered by the government as hybrid warfare⁷³, as indicated in the statement by the Minister of Internal Affairs, Oliver Spasovski⁷⁴ (06.03.2023):

"The latest reports about bombs were sent from Iran and Russia, so far a total of 720 objects received threats. The last few alerts were sent from IP addresses in Iran and Russia, and via VPN addresses whose providers are also from these countries, and interestingly, the payments for VPN services were made with crypto currencies, which makes detecting that activity even more difficult."

The above-described narrative is frequently combined with the narrative that "the government is submissive to Western centers of power" and is controlled by foreign political and economic forces thus making it traitorous and working against the will and support of the people.⁷⁴ In the context of the normalization of disinformation for political purposes, it should be noted that attacks on political opponents increased significantly in the last decade and gained political legitimacy on the Macedonian political scene.⁷⁵ The consequences of tolerating and encouraging the use of hate speech and disinformation by political parties and their supporters in the public sphere, including the local media, led to a dramatic deterioration of the quality of public political debate, especially in the online sphere.⁷⁶

Kosovo

In Kosovo, disinformation has been used to provoke political and ethnic tensions. Many people in Kosovo, especially younger generations, lack the skills to critically evaluate the information they see in the media. This makes them vulnerable to disinformation and propaganda, as they are often not able to distinguish between reliable and false information. Political disinformation is prevalent during election campaigns and significant political events. Political parties and their supporters often use false information to discredit their opponents and to spread propaganda. This polarizes public opinion and divides society, as people become entrenched in their preferred party's views.

Kosovo is a multi-ethnic society, with Albanians and Serbs being the largest ethnic groups. False information about events or incidents quickly spread through social media and other online platforms, leading to misunderstandings, mistrust and increase tensions between the two ethnic groups. It should be noted that Kosovo is often a target of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns that aim to undermine its sovereignty and the legitimacy of its institutions.

Some of the more impactful cases of disinformation in recent years include:

- Russia's state-owned Serbian-language outlet, Sputnik Serbia, falsely reported that "Kosovo will secede from the 'Power Network of Serbia.'" ⁷⁷
- Sputnik Serbia reported – and other Serbian websites re-transmitted – an allegation that "in times of crisis, the EU proclaims that Kosovo is, in fact, Serbia's responsibility." This report was a misrepresentation of a report in the EU Observer in which Serbian CSO's called for cooperation with Kosovo in combating COVID-19;
- The Serbian website, "Informer," claimed that Kosovo Albanians planned to kidnap Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic as a retribution for statements he made on Kosovo.⁷⁸

It should be noted that Kosovo is often a target of pro-Russian disinformation campaigns that aim to undermine its sovereignty and the legitimacy of its institutions.

These misinformation and propaganda campaigns about Kosovo were mostly published in local or regional Serbian-language media and then cited or quoted by other media thus increasing the scale of the negative reactions.

The Impact of Disinformation on the Work of CSO's

The impact of disinformation on CSO's in the region is significant. Numerous cases were registered where disinformation campaigns were

used by political parties, their supporters and partisan media as a form of threat against and attack on organizations and activists.⁷⁹



The representatives CSO's who were interviewed for this report stated that disinformation campaigns spread narratives of fear by fostering moral panic on social media networks, web portals, and, sometimes, on television. Most often these attacks target CSO's that deal with LGBTQI+ rights and gender equality issues. One example of such a disinformation campaign that was mentioned above took place in North Macedonia and claimed that "Young children would supposedly be taught how to change gender roles in school" or that "Monkeypox will spread at the Pride Parade," or that the "Pride Parade is a high-risk health event." In recent years, one of the most frequently spread disinformation narratives was that instead of writing mother and father in the school records, parents will be substituted with administrative words such as Parent 1 and Parent 2. In North Macedonia in November 2020 and on several subsequent occasions, employees of the [Metamorphosis foundation](#)⁷ were targeted with disinformation and threats through online and social media with the title "These are the people who delete content from Facebook in Macedonia." ⁸⁰

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Disinformation circulated in the Serbian language throughout the region has an effect on Kosovar media and society. Often some of this content is redistributed in the Albanian media or directly leads to the creation of counter narratives and "counter-disinformation campaigns."⁸¹ Many of these disinformation narratives claim that Kosovo is a failed state that was created by the West, that Albanians are committing atrocities against Serbs, and that Kosovo is a hub for organized crime and Islamic terrorism. Similar narratives about the "failed state" and "artificial nations" are widely present in the region, similar to Russian narratives against Ukrainian, and they are used in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro, primarily by nationalist and other right-wing political groups based in Serbia and Bulgaria. For example, in the dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia, different political representatives from Bulgaria often make provocative statements that "Macedonia and the Macedonian language are inventions of the communist party after the World War II." In a similar way, political representatives from Serbia, such as [Vojislav Seselj](#)⁷ and his [Radical Party of Serbia](#)⁷, dispute the right to an independent state for ethnic Bosnians, Montenegrins and Macedonians.

A common fake news and disinformation narrative relates to the security situation in the north of Kosovo. Usually, Serbian media publish disinformation on this topic and then it is transferred and commented in online media in Kosovo and on the social media platforms. Another common narrative relates to the context of Kosovo's restarted talks with Serbia and that [Serbia is trying to regain its regional hegemony by destabilizing the region](#)⁷.

The Disinformation Landscape in the Region Related to the War in Ukraine

Russian influence and disinformation in Serbia, and its spread further in the region, became more visible in 2014 after the Russian annexation of Crimea. Information coming from Russia was regularly disseminated through local media outlets and some political groups so that it spread throughout the region to Montenegro, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Additionally, pro-Russian media content was present in the "mainstream" media.⁸² Serbian media, and especially the tabloids that are politically inclined in favor of the current government, are the most common sources of disinformation for the entire region. Of the 20 individual media sources that were monitored in the research for this report, those that had the widest distribution included sixteen from Serbia, two from Montenegro and two from Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In regards to the war in Ukraine, representatives of Serbian CSO's who were interviewed for this report reported that the media outlets that were most strongly influenced by the Russian propaganda include: [Happy TV](#), [Vecernje Novosti](#) and [Politika](#). [Informer](#) and [Alo](#) are a print and an online media source, respectively, that had more domestic propaganda, while [Novosti](#) contained Russian and domestic propaganda. The influence of Russian propaganda is recognizable through one-sided articles and programs in which the Russian aid and their sources are dominant.⁸³

“[Sputnik](#) and [Russia Today Balkans](#) are not the most pro-Russian media, as there are domestic media that are more pro-Russian than the Russian media”

Some of the CSO representatives we interviewed noted that since September 2022, Serbian media has sought to be more balanced and lenient in its reporting on the war in Ukraine (i.e. less aggressive toward Ukraine, less supportive of Russia).

The most common characteristic of the pro-Russian narratives is to support Russia by emphasizing its military power and to criticize or ridicule the Ukrainian side. This kind of reporting usually relies on quotes and one-sided statements from Russian officials and media sources.

Variations of narratives about “The Great and Mighty Russia” are common, ranging from glorification of the Russian army and its weapons, to ridiculing opponents of Russia.⁸⁴ Media reports are filled with detailed information about Russian troops and the weapons used by the Russian side, the capacity of the Russian nuclear arsenal, as well as statements made by Russian representatives about the military achievements of the Russian army in the battlefield.⁸⁵ Numerous articles compare the military strength of Russia and Ukraine, emphasizing Russia's decisive advantage, which is substantiated by tough statements from Russian officials, such as Vladimir Putin or Dmitry Medvedev, who threaten to „crush their enemies“ or to “erase them from the face of the earth.”⁸⁶

Sanctions against Russia are presented as ineffective, while economic counter-measures by Russia are followed closely and praised as resourceful. Such propaganda also contains criticism of NATO and the EU⁸⁷, and ridicule and cynicism toward supporters of Ukraine. Criticism

of Russia and the actions taken by Western countries are often qualified as “Russophobia” and “Anti-Russian hysteria,” as is often evidenced in statements by Russian political representatives.

Two categories of disinformation were common in the above-described context. The first aims to spread Russian military propaganda, which disseminates official statements from Russian officials to the general public. The second category is disinformation that is produced for domestic needs in each of the three countries, but is also favorable to Russia. It can be difficult, however, to distinguish between these two categories because there is significant overlap between them. For instance, disinformation narratives that originate in Russia are often used for domestic political purposes in Serbia and North Macedonia. Moreover, most media outlets in North Macedonia, which uncritically transmitted pro-Russian content, are also critical to the government of North Macedonia. An example of such a case can be when the media in North Macedonia claimed that Russia's military aggression of Ukraine was, in fact, a “proxy” war between Russia and the “hypocritical NATO” (and more specifically, the United States and the United Kingdom), wherein Ukrainians are merely “pawns” of the West that will ultimately be @ @disappointed and abandoned.⁸⁸ This claim is often intertwined with a narrative about “the tricked Macedonia” which asserts that, although North Macedonia made significant sacrifices in order to achieve its Euro-Atlantic integration, the country was ultimately misled by the “hypocritical EU and the West” in the same way that the Western powers are now misleading Ukraine. This polarizing narrative, which originates from Russian sources, is regularly published and commented on in media in Serbia and North Macedonia, as well as transmitted from the Serbian or regional media.

An especially common narrative related to the war in Ukraine creates connection between North Macedonia and Ukraine by presenting both countries as alleged victims of “Western hypocrisy” (e.g. “the West is sacrificing Ukrainian and Macedonian people for their political and economic interests”). In the case of Ukraine that sacrifice is the loss of human lives, while in the case of North Macedonia it is “erasing national identity.”

The media sources that were monitored for this report in North Macedonia and Serbia regularly published statements of the Russian side uncritically and with a one-sided approach. We also documented narratives that disseminated the notion that the war in Ukraine is a proxy war of Western countries and NATO, which „aims to weaken or destroy Russia”, as well as narratives that posit that the goal of Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine is not to gain territory but to pursue “denazification” and “demilitarization” of Ukraine (i.e. to secure a neutral Ukraine where there will be no anti-Russian propaganda).⁸⁹ For example, the spokesperson of the Russian Ministry of Defence, Igor Konashenkov, was reported to have commented as follows:⁹⁰

“Leaked secret documents show that Ukraine prepared a military intervention in Donbas. During the special military operation, Russian forces gained access to secret documents of the Command of the Ukrainian National Guard. The documents confirm that the Kiev regime is preparing a secret offensive operation in Donbas in March 2022.”

In the case of Kosovo, events taking place in Ukraine were often linked to regional and domestic developments. For example, Russian political and military leaders, including President Vladimir Putin, compared the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, initially by occupying the separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and later the invasion of the whole country, with NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999. Moreover, the foreign minister of Russia, Sergey Lavrov, claimed on Twitter that a large part of the anti-tank weapons of the Stinger and Javeline brands from Ukraine come through the black market from Kosovo and Albania.⁹¹ Lavrov's post was published in June 2022 on the official Twitter page of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and caused a wave of fierce reactions in Kosovo.

Finally, narratives related to refugees from Ukraine, mostly in Serbia and North Macedonia, are often conflicting and contradictory. Despite their messaging about the causes and motivations for the war, even pro-Russian narratives often sympathize with and express solidarity with refugees, while placing the responsibility for the war on the West or on the Ukrainian government, which is portrayed as a victim of the West and of NATO. The most frequently repeated claims posit that Ukraine planned a military operation against Donbas, that Ukraine developed American bio-chemical laboratories, that the activities of Ukrainian radicals and neo-Nazis forced Russia into action to save the population of ethnic Russians and civilians in the Donbas.

Regional Case Studies

Case #1

North Macedonia

Disinformation narratives about pandemics

Topic

This disinformation campaign negatively affected the trust of citizens in public institutions and weakened social cohesion.

Description

In response to the health measures that were introduced to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus several protests were organized in North Macedonia in Skopje in 2021 and 2022.⁹² The protests were used as a platform to spread disinformation about the pandemic and the coronavirus. The movement opposing COVID-19 measures and vaccinations expressed criticism in various media publications and circulated hateful messages containing insults, threats and hate speech against health authorities and citizens

As a result of these disinformation campaigns, North Macedonia had one of the lowest percentage of vaccination in Europe, with around 40% of population receiving a vaccination.

who supported vaccination and followed the restrictions on movement that were introduced by the authorities.⁹³ The most common disinformation narratives took the form of conspiracy theories that the virus was artificially created and the vaccination is imposed in order to obtain financial profits for the pharmaceutical industry. The Minister of Health, the Commission for Infectious Diseases, health workers and others were targeted in these attacks.

Such claims underpinned narrative that portrayed health authorities as “servants of evil forces,” who treat citizens (including children) as “experimental animals.” The term “killers” was often used to refer to health authorities and medical workers. Similar disinformation campaigns were present in Serbia and Kosovo, where similar methods were used to oppose vaccination and to disobey health measures introduced in response to COVID-19. As a result of these disinformation campaigns, North Macedonia had one of the lowest percentage of vaccination in Europe, with around 40% of population receiving a vaccination.⁹⁴ The measures against COVID-19 and the vaccination programs were often used to also underpin political attacks on the government, which resulted in low trust in the health authorities.⁹⁵

Case #2

Kosovo

Serbia wants to destabilize the whole region

Topic

The disinformation campaign served as a tool to discourage serious diplomatic talks between Kosovo and Serbia, which aimed to normalize relations between the two countries.

Description

The disinformation campaign served as a tool to discourage serious diplomatic talks between Kosovo and Serbia, which aimed to normalize relations between the two countries.

One of the most interesting cases was the narrative that claimed that the Serbian government is working to destabilize the region in order to help Russian geopolitical interests vis-à-vis EU, NATO and the USA. This case illustrates how partial information and disinformation, which pleases public opinion, can be powerfully combined to effectively spread disinformation. In December 2022, Kosovo's Interior Minister, Xhelal Svecla, claimed that Serbia, under Russia's influence, aimed to destabilize Kosovo by supporting the Serb minority in the North, which had been blocking roads and protesting for close to three weeks.

Different subnarratives were used to support this claim, for example, that Serbian authorities exercised influence on the Serbian minority in the North of Kosovo, that politicians from Republika Srpska had taken actions to enable a political stalemate in Bosnia and Herzegovina, that policies advocated by pro-Serbian parties in Montenegro contributed to the extended political instability there, and that the disputing of the national identity of ethnic Macedonians and Bosniaks.

Some subnarratives also speculated about the presence of pro-Wagner group activists from Serbia at protests in the North of Kosovo in October-November 2022. Arguments that underpinned this narrative were consistent with the position outlined by Kosovo's Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, who had stated in December 2022 that establishing a Community of Serb Municipalities in Kosovo would not be allowed because he does not want Kosovo to end up with a political structure similar to Bosnia's semi-autonomous Republika Srpska (RS).⁹⁶ In his view, accepting a union or association of Serbian municipalities in Kosovo would amount to the same as forming a Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹⁶ This narrative is disseminated primarily by supporters of the government in Kosovo and politicians associated with the ruling Vetvendosje party. This narrative decreases the chances for dialogue and successful negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia.

Case #3 Serbia

EU is the latest embodiment of the Nazis

Topic

This disinformation campaign supported anti-western narratives and negative attitudes towards the EU and other Western countries and organizations.

Description

Anti-Western narratives have a constant presence in Serbian media since the nineties, which relates to Serbia's recent history and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, but also to the issue of Kosovo.

Local pro-Russian analysts in Serbia, who spread disinformation, are often invited to television debate shows, such as Pink TV and Happy TV, which are broadcasters with national TV licenses and which. These shows usually air in primetime. For example, during one such show participants stated that "the German government is the heir of Nazism, which continues to spread Nazi ideas, like the dominance of Germany in Europe, but this time through the institutions of EU." Supporters of this narrative claim that "EU institutions are centralized just like state institutions had been in Nazi Germany, that the EU Commission controls strong propaganda based on fake images of the EU as a democratic organization⁹⁷, and that there is widespread corruption of political parties and leaders in Europe."⁹⁸

This narrative complements disinformation spread by Russian think-tanks, such as "[Russian World](#)"⁹⁹, which claims that "there is no difference between the EU and Hitler's Germany."⁹⁹ Such claims are often transmitted and quoted uncritically in Serbian tabloids.

"Serbia, put your finger to the forehead! There is no country in the EU that did not belong to Hitler's coalition, or that was not subordinated by him! This is the brutal truth is that they want to hide at all costs!"¹⁰⁰

Such narratives are also linked to claims that Ukraine is a Nazi state controlled by the EU and the West, and was pushed into war with the nuclear super power Russia. Anti-Western narratives have a constant presence in Serbian media since the nineties, which relates to Serbia's recent history and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, but also to the issue of Kosovo.

Regional Response to Disinformation

In 2020 a new law was passed in Serbia to regulate the media and combat disinformation.¹⁰¹ The law established the [Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media \(REM\)](#)[↗], as the entity responsible for monitoring and sanctioning media outlets that spread disinformation. Many CSO's argue that the law is too generic and could be used to suppress free speech and media freedoms. Additionally, experts often suggest that a more comprehensive approach is needed, which would include education campaigns and trainings to help citizens distinguish between reliable and unreliable sources of information. According to CSO representatives, the government in Serbia is not active in the fight against disinformation, mostly because it uses these same methods to strengthen its own political power.

There are number of CSO's in Serbia that analyze, research and fight against disinformation in the country, including: the [SHARE Foundation](#)[↗], the [Center for Investigative Journalism of Serbia \(CINS\)](#)[↗], the [BIRN Serbia](#)[↗], the [Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia \(NUNS\)](#)[↗], the [Fake News Tragac](#)[↗], and the [Digital Forensic Center \(DFC\)](#)[↗]. These organizations also engage in media literacy trainings and fact-checking.

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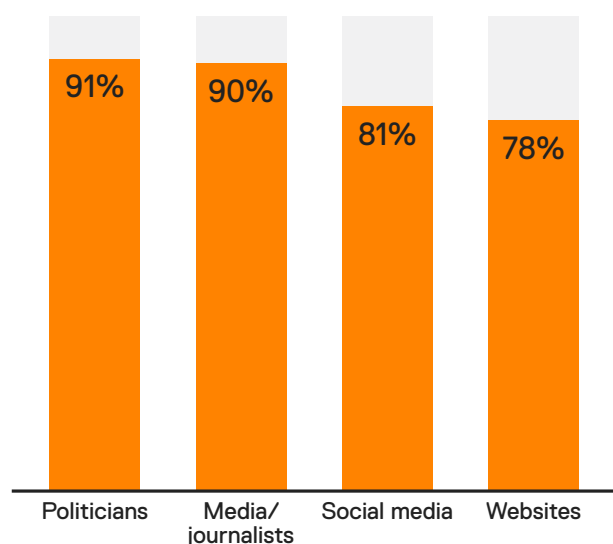
In North Macedonia, the government prepared an [Action Plan to tackle the issue of disinformation and fake news](#)[↗] in 2019 and CSO's were invited to contribute to the process. In response, journalist

organizations urged that the government should consent to media self-regulation rather than to introduce government control of media content (within this initiative, several such activities have already been undertaken by relevant media organizations¹⁰²). Despite the pledge to self-regulate, the government began to implement its Action Plan; however, in 2020 and 2021, no official reports were available regarding the implementation of the action plan. Some improvements have been noted, such as the creation of a Register of Professional Online Media by the Council of Media Ethics (CMEM) and the Association of Journalists (AJM), and which now includes around 70 members. This initiative promotes self-regulation of online media outlets by committing them to respect a Code of Journalists and by publishing decisions by the CMEM.¹⁰³

The fight against disinformation and manipulation has been a focus of CSO's in North Macedonia since 2017. Several of organizations, including the [Metamorphosis foundation](#)[↗], the [MOST coalition](#)[↗], the [Institute for Media Analysis \(IMA\)](#), the [Institute for Communication Studies \(ICS\)](#)[↗], and the [NGO Info Centre](#)[↗], have been included in activities in this field. Most of the funding that supports these programs, however, is from the EU, the USA, the UK, and other Western sources. Recent research on the effects of disinformation and foreign influences on democratic processes in North Macedonia¹⁰⁴ found that citizens identify politicians (91%), journalists and the media (90%), social media (81%) and websites (78%) as the main sources of disinformation. Over 83% of respondents agreed with the statement that "disinformation is very harmful and must be sanctioned by law," while 90.8% of respondents answered that "the government should take measures to deal with misinformation in the media."¹⁰⁵ The situation with

media literacy in North Macedonia is worrying, considering that the country is at the bottom of the list (position number 35) of European countries whose citizens are resistant to the influence of fake news. These are the findings of the [Media Literacy Index 2021](#)¹⁰⁶, published by the European Policy Initiative of the [Open Society Institute - Sofia](#)⁷.

Disinformation and foreign influences on democratic processes in North Macedonia according to citizens



Source: [Metamorphosis Foundation](#)⁷

According to representatives of Kosovar CSO's who were interviewed for this report, the government in Kosovo is not active in combating disinformation. There are no state actions to fight against disinformation and the main media associations also do not undertake work on this issue.¹⁰⁷ Kosovo lacks a strategy on media education, including media literacy and digital literacy. More activities in the long term are needed to improve the situation. Most CSO representatives do not use digital tools to a satisfactory degree. Several CSO's in Kosovo work to combat disinformation and promote

media literacy, including: the [BIRN Kosovo](#)⁷, which runs a fact-checking platform called the [Krypometer](#)⁷, and the [Kosovo Center for Security Studies \(KCSS\)](#)⁷, the [Internews Kosova](#)⁷ and the Action for Democratic Society, which runs the website, [Hybrid.info](#)⁷. International organizations, such as the UN and the OSCE, have also been active in this field and are focus on specific social groups, especially young people⁷.

In April 2022, IREX (a USA-based organization) launched the [Balkans Regional Media Literacy Network \(BMLN\)](#)⁷. The network aims to be "a hub for experts, organizations, and programs across the region to collaborate, further media and information literacy efforts, and promote resilience to disinformation." The network hopes to bring media literacy experts from the Balkans together to cooperate on various events and activities. Furthermore, a consortium of organizations, including the [Balkan Forum](#)⁷, the [Bulgarian Hub for United Balkans \(BHUB\)](#)⁷, journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria, the [European Movement in Serbia \(EMinS\)](#)⁷, the [FRONT.Online](#)⁷ in Kosovo, the [IDEA South East Europe in North Macedonia](#)⁷, and the [Insajder Serbia](#)⁷, began to work together to promote regional cooperation between media outlets across the Balkans. The initiative includes capacity-building for young journalists, as well as co-productions and joint-conferences in order to prevent issues and abuses of public information and media work. The work of the consortium highlights the advantages of economic cooperation between countries in the region, as it tackles issues related to media freedom, objective and professional reporting practices, standards for investigative journalism, as well as fighting against disinformation, hate speech and nationalist rhetoric.

CSO's Needs and Gaps

Key needs and gaps appearing in all the region's countries based on in-depth interviews with activists and CSOs.



Overarching needs and gaps in all three countries

As noted in part 'Common themes – regional similarities' of this report, regional CSO's deal with numerous problems and issues, but one of the most common issues is sustainability. On the one hand, support from foreign and international donors is decreasing; on the other hand, support from the state budget is often misused as it goes toward the creation of a "government-friendly" CSO sector, or even toward legalized corruption of CSO's. Due to the specific socio-economic and political context, CSO's in the region have been partially transformed into a job-market where the key goals and roles of civic organizations are often neglected, resulting in low trust by both citizens and potential donors. When asked about the negative factors that affect their work, the CSO representatives interviewed for this report pointed to low capacity of material and human resources, limited finances and the political pressures on their work.

In the past years, most local CSO's continued to rely heavily on foreign support. In some cases, this drove CSO's to implement donor-driven agendas rather than focusing on their core mission. Larger organizations continued to have more access to

longer-term funding, while smaller organizations often relied on short-term funding. EU funding continued to be widely available in the region, but its requirement for co-financing presents an obstacle for some organizations, since in most of the states in the Western Balkans it is difficult to secure funds that can be used as co-financing. Several organizations from North Macedonia, for example, reported that EU funding increasingly placed limits on the percentage of financial support available for salaries and human resources, which prompted organizations to hire external consultants rather than to strengthen their own staff expertise and capacity.

For example, the majority of CSO's surveyed in Kosovo¹⁰⁸ consider their staff to be highly trained and professional, but still lacking the skills that are needed to develop strategies, collect data and effectively implement fundraising activities. CSO's also have small and mostly inactive memberships, do not communicate effectively with community stakeholders and are otherwise poorly supported by their constituencies.

In general, CSO's also confirm that they need knowledge about fact checking tools that can be useful in their work, especially considering the constant changes in the field of data analysis.

Moreover, CSO representatives confirmed that they need to improve their capacities for networking and community-building. For example, the representative of the CSO [CESID from Serbia](#)⁷¹⁰⁹ stated that the organization does not have staff that are specifically responsible for communication and that everyone tries to contribute to this important task.

An issue that affects many CSO's is poor communication and cooperation between CSO's. Although they have formal platforms for cooperation (e.g. sector-wide associations and networks), efforts for joint and coordinated activities, as well as sharing of knowledge and experiences are lacking or unsatisfactory.

The most notable issues and needs that were mentioned by regional CSO representatives include:

- **Advocacy and awareness-raising:** CSO's often work to raise awareness about important social and environmental issues in Serbia, and advocate for policy changes to address them. They express a need for support in developing effective advocacy strategies and campaigns, and for engaging with policymakers and other stakeholders.
- CSO's often face **legal and regulatory challenges**, such as restrictive laws or bureaucratic obstacles. They require support with navigating the legal landscape and advocating for more favorable policies and regulations.
- Various CSO's recommend **media literacy** as a long-term remedy against disinformation, especially in cases when disinformation is being used to attack CSO activists or to limit their work when they try to improve their connection and cooperation with local communities.
- **Lack of strategic planning** is a common weakness as most regional CSO's focus on short-term projects and activities instead of longer-term activities.

- **Fundraising skills:** this includes developing alternatives to funding from foreign donors and understanding the procedures to apply for European Commission funds. This is also connected with understanding the organizational mission and vision so that CSO's often choose to pursue a wide range of activities rather than to focus on or specialize in a specific area.
- Proper **analysis of community needs:** CSO capacities to analytically approach the field of their activities remains weak, which affects effective project implementation.
- **Cooperation between CSO's:** organizations often consider each other as competition, so CSO's tend to be passive or non-cooperative despite opportunities for cooperation. Effective cooperation between CSO's could benefit all sides and also strengthen CSO's ties with their communities, thus fighting against the spread of mistrust between CSO's and their communities.
- Poor public relations and managing **relations with the media:** CSO's need proper training on how to communicate and cooperate with the media, including the capacity to use new digital tools and platforms to improve their visibility and public communication strategies.

Regarding the needs and challenges of front liners involved in the effort of supporting Ukraine, the following could be mentioned for all three countries: providing funds for broader humanitarian activities, increasing capacity to engage more local staff and to mobilize volunteers, improving communication with local media, better sharing of information with state institutions and other CSO's, regional networking with CSO's that work on providing support to Ukraine, as well as various equipment and technology solutions that could help in their work.

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- 62

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Icon Tags

Disinformation:



NATO



EU



US



LGBT



Women's
rights



Elections



Ethnic
tensions



History



War in Ukraine



Refugees
from Ukraine



COVID

Needs and Gaps:



Financial
stability



Human
resources



Countering
disinformation skills
and knowledge



Media literacy
and critical
thinking



Effective
communication



Relationship-building
(media, state, local
government)



Digital
transformation



Cooperation
between CSOs



Legal and
regulatory
challenges



Strategic planning
and (crisis)
management



Community
needs diagnosis

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