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# Disinformation and Civil Society Mapping Report

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## Western Balkans Region

August 2024

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# 1. Executive summary

This report has been created using the Country Mapping Reports from Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo, which were prepared between March and April 2024, covering the period from April 2023 to April 2024. It encompasses an examination of the socioeconomic and political conditions affecting the operations of civil society organizations (CSOs) in the region, the impact of disinformation campaigns, particularly in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and its broader implications for Western Balkan societies, and identifies tools and strategies to enhance CSO activities in the region.

## 1.1. Comparative overview

### CSOs in Western Balkans are facing ongoing protests and polarization that negatively affects their work

In 2023 and 2024, **Serbia** experienced a wave of anti-government protests. These protest were initially non-partisan but were later backed by opposition parties demanding early elections. The government portrayed these movements as influenced by “domestic traitors” and foreign actors, aiming to bolster President Vučić’s leadership.<sup>1</sup> Serbian CSOs highlighted election irregularities and sought EU support for election integrity. Notable ongoing violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community followed Pride Week 2022, but Pride Week 2023<sup>2</sup> was peaceful and without any form of obstruction. Organizers announced that Pride Week in 2024 will be held from September 2 to September 8, with the Pride march scheduled for Saturday, September 7.<sup>3</sup>

The same case scenario occurred with the Pride Week 2024<sup>4</sup> in **North Macedonia**, where a heated atmosphere and negative campaign followed the event.<sup>5</sup> The political landscape in North Macedonia was marked by a stalemate over constitutional amendments to include ethnic Bulgarians, a critical reform for EU accession. CSOs emphasized the importance of these reforms and criticized the government’s slow progress on corruption, judicial independence and EU integration efforts. Opposition-led disinformation campaigns targeted the government and EU/NATO integration initiatives.

In June 2024, **Kosovo** held its own Pride parade. As part of the event, a special panel discussion was organized to present and discuss regarding the new National Action Plan for LGBTQIA+ communities.<sup>6</sup> Besides the parade, CSOs in Kosovo were primarily focused on ethnic tensions, especially in the northern regions where hostilities between ethnic Serbs and Kosovo authorities escalated. Disinformation surrounding the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) further polarized society. CSOs criticized the government’s handling of these tensions and stressed the need for alignment with EU foreign policy.

### Use of disinformation narratives to discredit opponents

The Serbian government utilized disinformation to depict the opposition and foreign entities as threats, particularly during the election period, where narratives of election fraud and manipulation were prevalent. Key issues included relations with Kosovo and LGBTQIA+ rights, which were heavily polarized.

Disinformation in Kosovo is centered around ethnic tensions and the ASM issue, with both the government and opposition spreading narratives to blame each other for instability. This disinformation is linked to broader geopolitical alignments and EU punitive measures. In 2023, the opposition in North Macedonia disseminated disinformation about government concessions to ethnic Albanians and Bulgarians, alongside propaganda against EU and NATO integration. Online campaigns intensified polarization, undermining trust in state institutions and reforms, particularly during elections across much of the Western Balkan region.

### Western Balkan showing support for Ukraine and Ukrainian people

The Serbian government leveraged the war in Ukraine to underscore the stability provided by President Vučić, drawing parallels between local protests and the “Serbian Maidan,” suggesting foreign instigation.<sup>7</sup> The international focus on Serbia-Kosovo tensions increased due to regional security concerns stemming from the conflict in Ukraine. Kosovo aligned its foreign policy with the EU regarding Ukraine, despite lacking bilateral relations with the country. The war influenced disinformation narratives, with Kosovo’s leadership accusing Serbia of militaristic provocations. Heightened security measures and international scrutiny were notable at the Kosovo-Serbia border. North Macedonia showed solidarity with Ukraine through diplomatic actions at OSCE meetings and aligned itself with EU and NATO support for Ukraine. In 2023, the opposition criticized the government’s EU integration efforts, leveraging the EU’s focus on Ukraine and Moldova. The Ukrainian conflict prompted enhanced EU and NATO engagement with the Western Balkans, impacting North Macedonia’s strategic positioning.<sup>8</sup>

## Commonalities

### Political Instability and Protests

All three countries experienced significant political protests and instability, with opposition parties using these situations to challenge the government, particularly around the elections in Serbia.

### Disinformation and Polarization

Disinformation was a pervasive tool used by both governments and opposition to shape public opinion. Central themes in these campaigns included ethnic and geopolitical issues.

### Impact of External Conflicts

The war in Ukraine had both direct and indirect impacts on political narratives and international relations in all three countries, leading to increased international scrutiny and pressure due to their regional positions and the broader European security context.

## Differences

### Nature of Civil Society Challenges

#### Serbia

Faced internal challenges related to violent protests and election integrity.

#### Kosovo

CSOs were primarily concerned with ethnic tensions and the implications of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM).

#### North Macedonia

Civil society was focused on constitutional reforms, elections, and hurdles related to EU accession.

### Governmental Narratives and Disinformation

#### Serbia

Government narratives emphasized internal stability and alleged foreign interference.

#### Kosovo

Disinformation landscape was heavily influenced by ethnic tensions and geopolitical alignments.

#### North Macedonia

Disinformation revolved around constitutional issues, elections, and EU integration.

### International Responses

#### Serbia

Election and protest issues attracted direct EU criticism and demands for electoral integrity.

#### Kosovo

Alignment with EU policy on Ukraine and management of internal ethnic tensions led to international mediation efforts.

#### North Macedonia

EU accession challenges were tied to broader Western Balkan integration efforts and internal political stalemates.

## 1.2. Country highlights



### Kosovo

#### POPULATION

1.76 million

#### OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

Albanian, Serbian

#### RELIGION

Islam, Christianity Orthodox

#### INTERNET USERS

96.6% (1.6 million)<sup>9, 10</sup>

#### MOBILE PHONE USERS

115.5% (1.92 million)<sup>13</sup>

#### ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

932 thousand (56.1%)<sup>16</sup>

#### DEMOCRACY SCORE

60/100 - Partly Free (last year's score 57/100) Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2023\*

#### GLOBAL FREEDOM SCORE

60/100 - Partly Free Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

#### POLITICAL RIGHTS

28/40 Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

#### CIVIL LIBERTIES

32/60 Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

#### INTERNET FREEDOM SCORE

no data Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

#### DEMOCRACY SCORE

38 - Transitional or hybrid regime Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

#### KEY HIGHLIGHTS

##### Ethnic tensions on the north of the country

The dialogue facilitated by the European Union to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia continued without reaching a final agreement. Tensions in the north of Kosovo, which began at the end of 2022 when ethnic Serbs withdrew from state institutions, continued into 2023. Hostilities escalated in April and May 2023 following Kosovo authorities' organization of early local elections in four municipalities. Serbs in northern Kosovo boycotted the elections in protest, resulting in mayors from ethnic Albanian parties being

elected to office in North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposavic, and Zubin Potok, with voter turnout as low as 3 to 5 per cent.

##### Spark of disinformation regarding the Association of Serb-Majority municipalities

A topic that generated ample disinformation and polarized public discourse in Kosovo was the planned formation of the Association of Serb-Majority municipalities (ASM). The draft statute presented by the Big Five (trustees from the US, the EU, Germany, Italy, and France) to

both Pristina and Belgrade sparked speculation in Kosovo, including disinformation and unchecked theories.

**Disinformation and tension regarding the use of Serbian dinar**

Kosovo's President Vjosa Osmani announced in late May 2024 that her country has accepted a portion of a US proposal regarding the use of

the Serbian dinar. Despite concerns from ethnic Serbs in the north, Kosovo adopted the euro for cash transactions on February 1. During a visit to Lipljan municipality, Osmani stated they agreed on part of the US envoy Gabriel Escobar's recent proposal and emphasized the international community's support, particularly from the US, to phase out the dinar in Kosovo. Osmani highlighted the urgency of resolving the dinar issue due to its significant impact on Kosovo.<sup>21</sup>



## North Macedonia

POPULATION  
2.06 million

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES  
Macedonian, Albanian  
(as co-official language spoken by more than 20% of the population)

RELIGION  
Christian Orthodox, Islam, Christian Catholic

INTERNET USERS  
87.2% (1.82 million)<sup>11</sup>

MOBILE PHONE USERS  
111.2% (2.32 million)<sup>14</sup>

ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS  
1.2 million (57.5%)<sup>17</sup>

DEMOCRACY SCORE  
67/100 - Partly Free Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2023\*

GLOBAL FREEDOM SCORE  
67/100 - Partly Free Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

POLITICAL RIGHTS  
28/40 Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

CIVIL LIBERTIES  
39/60 Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

INTERNET FREEDOM SCORE  
no data Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

DEMOCRACY SCORE  
48 - Transitional or hybrid regime Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

**Change in power: new government and country president**

In the second part of 2023, the SDSM-led

government, in coalition with DUI and Aleanca per Shqiptaret, aimed to secure an 80-vote majority in Parliament to pass constitutional

changes for EU accession. However, the main opposition party, VMRO-DPMNE, refused to support the amendments. The opposition rejected the inclusion of ethnic Bulgarians in the Constitution, citing Bulgaria's non-recognition of the Macedonian minority and language. The situation worsened in October 2023 when ethnic Albanian opposition parties demanded their conditions be met to support the amendments.

Political leaders agreed on scheduled elections for 2024: presidential on April 24 and

parliamentary on May 8, alongside the presidential run-off. The opposition won both, with Gordana Siljanovska Davkova elected president, defeating former president Stevo Pendarovski by a wide margin. On June 23, 2024, the MPs in the Macedonian Assembly voted in the new government led by Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski and composed of the VMRO-DPMNE coalition "Your Macedonia", the Albanian coalition "Vredi", and the "Znam" movement.<sup>23</sup>



## Serbia

POPULATION  
6.66 million

OFFICIAL LANGUAGES  
Serbian

RELIGION  
Christian Orthodox, Islam, Christian Catholic

INTERNET USERS  
84.4% (6.06 million)<sup>12</sup>

MOBILE PHONE USERS  
125.3% (9.0 million)<sup>15</sup>

ACTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA USERS  
5.01 million (69.8%)<sup>18</sup>

DEMOCRACY SCORE  
57/100 - Partly Free (last year score 60/100) Freedom House, Nations in Transit 2023\*

GLOBAL FREEDOM SCORE  
57/100 - Partly Free Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

POLITICAL RIGHTS  
18/40 Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

CIVIL LIBERTIES  
39/60 Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

INTERNET FREEDOM SCORE  
71 - Free Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

DEMOCRACY SCORE  
46 - Transitional or hybrid regime Freedom House, Freedom in the World\*

KEY EVENTS

**Anti-government protests sparked by two mass shootings**

In May 2023, anti-government protests sparked by two mass shootings that resulted in the death of 18 people. The protests continued throughout the year under the motto "Serbia Against Violence"<sup>22</sup>. Initially unaffiliated with any political party, they formalized in October 2023 when the SPN participated in parliamentary, Vojvodina provincial, and Belgrade City Assembly elections, as well as elections for city assemblies in other cities, all held on December 17, 2023. The SPN was dissolved in 2024 due to disputes related to participation in the 2024 Belgrade City Assembly election. The Party of Freedom and Justice, Serbia Centre, and Together opted to boycott the election, while others participated under the We Choose Belgrade electoral list.

**Ethnic tensions in the north of Kosovo led to deterioration of the situation between Kosovo and Serbia.**

In 2023, the situation between Kosovo and Serbia deteriorated drastically. Protesting that the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities were not constituted, ethnic Serbs left Kosovo

institutions (the parliament, ministries, local government and judiciary) in November 2022. Consequently, Serbs in the north of Kosovo refused to take part in the local elections, which resulted in victories of ethnic Albanian mayors in municipalities populated mostly by Serbs, thus causing even more problems.

**Tensions regarding election process**

The Serbian government planned to conduct a local election solely for the Belgrade City Assembly on June 2, delaying other local elections for later in the year. This decision stemmed from the Belgrade City Assembly's inability to form itself after the 2023 election, while regular local elections were set to follow Serbia's typical electoral cycle. Ana Brnabić, president of the national assembly, argued that consolidating all local elections on June 2 would necessitate changes to Serbia's local election law and unfairly curtail the mandates of officials elected in the last regular election in 2020. After considerable debate, the law was amended on April 23, and local elections for various cities and municipalities were scheduled for April 26, 2024.

# 2. Recommendations

## CSOs challenges, needs and gaps

### Capacity Building

Invest in capacity building and professional development for staff to improve organizational effectiveness and sustainability.

### Explore Diverse Funding

Diversify funding sources by exploring alternative funding models, including crowdfunding and partnerships with private companies.

### Innovative Solutions

Implement innovative solutions and technologies to enhance project efficiency and impact.

## Countering Disinformation

### Legislation on Disinformation

Enact and enforce laws to combat disinformation and promote accurate information and sustainability.

### Support Media Literacy

Implement nationwide media literacy programs to educate the public on identifying and countering disinformation with private companies.

### Regulate Online Platforms

Collaborate with online platforms to monitor and reduce the spread of disinformation.



## Country specific recommendations

### Serbia

#### Enhance Financial Support

Increase financial support for CSOs to mitigate dependency on foreign donors and reduce vulnerability to political attacks.

#### Improve State-CSO Relations

Foster a more collaborative relationship between state authorities and CSOs to improve the civil sector's impact.

#### Counter disinformation

Address disinformation about the civil sector, which is mainly generated by state leadership and MPs from the ruling party, and is further echoed by pro-government media and tabloids.

### Kosovo

#### Promote Ethnic Collaboration

Encourage collaboration between CSOs representing different ethnic groups to bridge divides and promote social cohesion.

#### Streamline Funding Mechanisms

Simplify funding mechanisms and reduce bureaucratic barriers to enhance CSOs' financial stability and project efficiency.

### North Macedonia

#### Support Constitutional Reforms

Provide support and incentives for constitutional reforms to advance EU accession and political stability.

#### Strengthen Anti-Corruption Measures

Implement stronger anti-corruption measures and ensure judicial independence to enhance public trust and governance.

## 3. Key regional developments

In 2023, the Western Balkans saw a tumultuous year marked by political upheaval and regional tensions, particularly affecting Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. The interconnectedness of these events underscored the intricate dynamics at play within the region.

### Mass shootings and protests

In Serbia, 2023 began with tragic events that sparked widespread unrest. Two mass shootings in May claimed the lives of 18 people, igniting a wave of anti-government protests under the slogan "Serbia Against Violence." Initially devoid of political affiliations, the protests quickly escalated as demonstrators' demands went unanswered by the authorities. What began as a grassroots movement evolved into a broader outcry against perceived government failures and corruption. As blockades of key roadways intensified, opposition parties cautiously observed the unfolding events from the sidelines. However, as public dissatisfaction mounted and the government remained unresponsive, opposition leaders eventually supported the protests, advocating for

early parliamentary elections to address the growing discontent. Meanwhile, Kosovo grappled with its own set of challenges, particularly in the northern region where ethnic tensions remained volatile. The year saw heightened friction following Kosovo's decision to hold early local elections in several municipalities, a move that exacerbated existing divisions. Ethnic Albanian mayors were elected in predominantly Serb-majority areas, deepening mistrust and prompting accusations of political marginalization from local Serb communities. In April and May 2023, these tensions escalated further when Serbian authorities detained three members of Kosovo's police force, alleging violations along what Serbia terms the "administrative line" – the contentious border separating the two entities. The incident underscored the ongoing dispute over territorial integrity and authority, perpetuating a cycle of mutual recriminations between Pristina and Belgrade.<sup>24</sup>

## Elections

In neighboring North Macedonia, amidst the regional turmoil, political leaders prepared for upcoming elections scheduled for 2024. A consensus was reached among parliamentary parties to hold presidential elections on April 24, followed by parliamentary elections and a presidential run-off on May 8. This electoral timeline aimed to maintain stability amidst regional uncertainties, offering voters an opportunity to shape the country's leadership against the backdrop of shifting political landscapes across the Western Balkans. Serbia initially planned a local election only for the Belgrade City Assembly on June 2, delaying other local elections due to the assembly's failure to form after the 2023 election. Ana Brnabić, President of the National Assembly, argued that consolidating all elections on June 2 would require changes to local election laws and unfairly shorten the mandates of officials elected in 2020. After debate, the law was amended on April 23, and local elections for various cities and municipalities were moved to April 26, 2024.

Throughout the year, these developments illustrated the intricate interplay of domestic politics, regional relations, and external influences within the Western Balkans. The challenges faced by each nation underscored the delicate balance required to navigate towards stability and progress in a region marked by historical complexities and contemporary geopolitical pressures.



## Kosovo

### LOCAL ELECTIONS April 23, 2023

After the extraordinary local elections held on April 23, 2023, in four municipalities in the north of Kosovo (Zvečan, Zubin Potok, Leposavić, and North Mitrovica) were boycotted by the majority Serbs, candidates from minority Albanian political parties won the elections. Kosovo Serbs organized demonstrations that lasted weeks after the Albanian mayors took office.

In 2024, new elections were organized. Kosovo Serbs once again boycotted the elections due to difficult-to-reach clauses for dismissing Albanian mayors through elections.

### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

GDP growth reached 3% for the first three quarters of 2023. Growth was driven by resilient consumption (2.7% YoY), service exports (8.5% YoY), and investment activity (3.5% YoY), although merchandise exports contracted by 6.7% YoY. On the supply-side, services continued to be a key contributor to growth. In 2023, consumer inflation continued its downward trend, averaging 5%.

### SOCIAL ISSUES

Mutual accusations between Kosovo and Serbia authorities continued in June 2023 when Serbian police arrested three members of a Kosovo police patrol, claiming they had violated the "administrative line" (as Serbia refers to the border between the two countries), while Kosovo asserted that the police officers had been kidnapped.





## North Macedonia

### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

April 24, 2024

### PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS

May 8, 2024

Leaders of parliamentary political parties in North Macedonia agreed that the next elections in the country would happen according to schedule in 2024

- presidential elections on April 24, 2024, and two weeks later, on May 8, 2024, parliamentary elections in parallel with the presidential run-off.

### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Overall GDP growth in 2023 was 1%, which was lower than expected, mainly due to weak demand from the key export markets in the eurozone. While the service sectors contributed to growth, industrial production and construction recorded declines. Private consumption started to pick up towards the end of the year alongside a fall in inflation, and the contribution from net exports was positive, reflecting lower imports and robust growth in the export of services. At the beginning of 2024, the government issued several new debts in the domestic market, with yields declining from 4.1% to 3.8%.

### SOCIAL ISSUES

The opposition won both elections, with Gordana Siljanovska Davkova elected president, defeating former president Stevo Pendarovski by a wide margin.

On June 23, 2024, the MPs in the Macedonian Assembly voted in the new government led by Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, composed of the VMRO-DPMNE coalition "Your Macedonia", the Albanian coalition "Vredi", and the "Znam" movement.



## Serbia

### PARLIAMENTARY, PROVINCIAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

December 17, 2023

The opposition's demand was granted on December 17, 2023, when early parliamentary, provincial and local elections were organized in Serbia.

### ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Despite the multidimensional crisis lasting over 3 years, Serbia has managed to preserve the stability of its economy and maintain consumer and investor confidence. This is evidenced by cumulative real GDP growth of around 12% from 2020 to 2023, record inflows of FDI, continued growth of employment and wages in the private sector, and a record level of FX reserves.

### SOCIAL ISSUES

A wave of anti-government protests under the slogan "Serbia Against Violence" was organized after two mass shootings.

400  
media  
sources

## 4. Methodology

The methodology employed in this research is grounded in desk analysis and interviews with representatives from civil society organizations (CSOs) in three Western Balkan countries.

Essential documents and reports were reviewed and utilized for the individual Mapping Reports for North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo, which subsequently informed the Regional Mapping Report. The documentation reviewed included various legal materials, laws, regulations, research studies, analyses, opinion polls, and interviews, all of which are cited in these reports. The research involved conducting interviews with CSO representatives from these three countries, incorporating their experiences and testimonies into the findings. Additionally, the country reports' findings included monitoring the public communication sphere in both online and social media domains. Key narratives in the media and these specific societies were tracked and compared with previous reports and analyses using the Gerulata software package.

Throughout March and April 2024, a total of seven selected topics and the circulation of key narratives about them were monitored and analyzed across approximately 400 media sources (81 from North Macedonia, 69 from Kosovo, and 251 from Serbia). The selected topics included NATO, the war in Ukraine, the economy, elections, LGBTQIA+ issues, migration, women's rights, and NATO-EU relations. Additional topics and narratives specific to certain countries were also tracked and specified as necessary. The report's methodology primarily involved reviewing existing analyses and reports from recent years, analyzing legal frameworks, monitoring dominant trends and narratives in mainstream and social media through the Gerulata software, and conducting interviews with key stakeholders in the civic sector in these three countries. It identifies trends and tendencies in the region and examines the influence of foreign factors.

## 5. State of the Civil Society

### 5.1. Background situation in the Western Balkans

#### Common Themes – Regional Similarities

Across Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, civil society organizations (CSOs) face common challenges and exhibit similar dynamics:

##### Legal Framework and Registration

All three countries provide legal frameworks for CSOs, with varying degrees of registration requirements. Notably, Kosovo allows for activity without formal registration, leading to challenges in tracking active organizations.

##### Dependency on International Funding

CSOs in all three countries heavily rely on international funds, which can influence their priorities and sustainability. This dependency highlights financial vulnerabilities and limits autonomy.



## Key External and Internal Threats to Functioning of Governance and Democracy, Systemic Threats to CSOs

### External Threats

**International Political Dynamics:** Relations with neighboring countries and international bodies can influence the regulatory environment and funding availability for CSOs.

**Global Events:** External events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical tensions (e.g., Russo-Ukrainian conflict) impact donor priorities and funding levels.

### Internal Threats

**Political Interference:** Governments' efforts to control or influence CSOs through legislative changes, funding restrictions, and administrative pressures undermine their independence.

**Public Perception and Engagement:** Limited public understanding and engagement with CSO activities pose challenges to advocacy efforts and sustainability.

**Financial Sustainability:** Reliance on international donors leaves CSOs vulnerable to shifts in donor priorities and funding availability.

### Political Interference and Legislative Scrutiny

Governments in the region often subject CSOs to political scrutiny, legislative changes, and occasional verbal attacks, undermining their independence and operational freedom.

### Public Engagement and Awareness

Despite their critical roles, CSOs across the region face challenges in actively engaging citizens. There is a need for greater public awareness and participation in civil society activities beyond urban centers.

## Comparison of the Numbers of Registered Organizations

### Serbia 36,491

By the end of 2022, Serbia registered 36,491 CSOs, with ongoing growth supported by governmental and political party-backed organizations (GONGOs). The actual number of active CSOs and their operational challenges remain a concern despite recent initiatives to strengthen the sector.

### Kosovo 12,912

Kosovo lists 12,353 local and 559 international CSOs, with challenges in tracking active organizations due to flexible registration rules. The sector faces political interference, limited resources, and donor dependency, impacting its effectiveness and sustainability.

### North Macedonia 15,428

As of early 2024, North Macedonia reports 15,428 registered CSOs. The country provides a supportive legal framework and financial support mechanisms, but issues like reduced public funding and limited consultation opportunities hinder effective governance and collaboration between CSOs and the government.

Despite distinct national contexts, CSOs in Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia share common struggles and strategic responses to external and internal pressures. Addressing these challenges requires sustained efforts to safeguard their autonomy, strengthen public engagement, and enhance financial sustainability across the region.

## 5.2. Challenges and opportunities

### Main Characteristics and Distinctive Tendencies:

#### Human Resources

The primary challenge highlighted by our research across North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo is human resources. In Serbia, many young talents are either leaving the sector or bypassing it entirely due to significantly better financial conditions offered by corporations. To compensate for lower salaries, CSOs often provide remote work options, flexible hours, and other amenities. In North Macedonia, organizations struggle to retain highly skilled professionals, noting, "It is very difficult to attract and keep highly skilled professionals." The Contemporary Art Center cited disappointment among artists, attributing setbacks from 2009-2018 to activists who, upon securing government positions, neglected civil sector interests. Long-term stability concerns were underscored by

SCOOP, which highlighted the time, effort, and financial investment required to train investigative journalists, only to lose them due to financial constraints. Staff turnover and retention pose challenges, as maintaining institutional memory and attracting highly skilled professionals are crucial for ensuring the continuity and effectiveness of any CSO. As one of the interviewees from Kosovo shared:

**'One of our struggles lies in retaining talent amid competitive environments and limited resources. To address this, investing in staff development and creating a supportive work culture are essential'**

### Controversial or Polarizing Topics

#### Disinformation

Across the region, CSOs contend with widespread disinformation undermining their work. In Serbia, state leaders and ruling party MPs generate and amplify disinformation through pro-government media and tabloids, normalizing its use to discredit civil society. In Kosovo, CSOs focus on media literacy initiatives to combat AI-driven disinformation campaigns. North Macedonia emphasizes basic media literacy and partnerships with fact-checking organizations to counter disinformation effectively. Issues such as false narratives targeting marginalized groups further

complicate efforts, as evidenced by the challenges faced by organizations like Inkluziva and HERA in North Macedonia. "Most disinformation in relation to people with disabilities is that they are incapable of work. They are deprived of education and equal treatment in society, which makes them even more isolated. There is a law regulating the rights of these individuals, but it is often disregarded" – said our respondent from Inkluziva. Therefore, this organization needs support to develop their own outreach capabilities and communication capacities to convey messages about the needs of people with disabilities and improve their quality of life.

### Public Attitudes Towards Civil Society

#### Regional Comparisons

Public attitudes towards CSOs vary significantly across North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo, influenced by political climates and media narratives. In Serbia, skepticism is fueled by state-backed disinformation campaigns, while Kosovo's

proactive stance on media literacy is challenged by rapid AI advancements in disinformation dissemination. In North Macedonia, growing public skepticism is exacerbated by political attacks accusing CSOs of serving foreign interests and engaging in money laundering, which affects trust and cooperation with partners and donors.

### Threats to CSOs and Their Functioning

#### Legislative Changes and Financial (In)stability

CSOs face legislative changes across the region that potentially restrict their activities under evolving political landscapes. In addition to legislative threats, physical and media attacks further undermine organizational stability and effectiveness. Financial instability exacerbates these challenges, with CSOs in all three countries heavily reliant on international donors, hindering long-term planning and sustainability efforts. All respondents from North Macedonia indicated they face a lack of financial resources, which prevents strategic planning. The representative from the Contemporary Art Center expressed doubts that, after 30 years of existence, the Center would be able to survive or thrive without strong support. "Like so many other CSOs we find ourselves frequently in a position where if one project application fails, we may have to close the

office. Without sufficient financial support, we are not able to make long-term plans", he mentioned, noting the increasing difficulties in obtaining funds for their activities. He observed that activism has become "trendy", leading to more organizations and initiatives applying for the same funding, often

**'Like so many other CSOs we find ourselves frequently in a position where if one project application fails, we may have to close the office. Without sufficient financial support, we are not able to make long-term plans'**

without proper knowledge and expertise. The interviewee from Inkluziva expressed that their organization's primary need is financial sustainability. Currently, only three people are employed in the organization, and most of their work over the past 30 years has been voluntary, without steady income or regulated working hours. The last 12 months have been particularly challenging for STAR - STAR in securing support from both domestic and foreign donors. To continue their "fight" for the decriminalization of sex work and the protection of sex workers' human rights, and to expand their programs, the organization must ensure financial stability and sustainability.

CSOs in North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo confront multifaceted challenges including human resources retention, disinformation campaigns, and financial instability. Addressing these issues demands strategic alliances, international support, and innovative approaches to advocacy and funding diversification. Strengthening resilience against legislative threats and disinformation, alongside fostering a supportive work culture and financial sustainability, is crucial for CSOs to maintain their pivotal role in advancing societal progress and democratic values across the Western Balkans.

## 5.3. CSOs needs & gaps

Having in mind the needs and challenges outlined above, we have drawn a list of needs that the CSOs in the Western Balkans pointed out:

### Technological needs and gaps

#### Software

Many CSOs lack access to essential software for project management, data analysis, and communication. This includes both basic office software suites and more specialized tools like customer relationship management (CRM) systems and data visualization tools. Most CSOs become aware of the TechSoup services during the project activities of the Digital Activism Program.

#### Hardware

Limited budgets often restrict CSOs from purchasing or upgrading hardware such as computers, servers, and mobile devices. Outdated hardware hampers efficiency and the ability to adopt new technologies.

#### Services and Tools

Access to high-speed internet, cloud services, and cybersecurity tools is limited. These services are crucial for secure and efficient operations, particularly for organizations working on sensitive issues or in remote areas. Some interviewees indicated that their work websites and email addresses have been subject to cyber-attacks in the past and that digital security training would significantly enhance the stability of their work in the future.

### Technical Proficiency

There is a notable skills gap in basic IT proficiency among staff members. This includes fundamental skills in using word processing software, spreadsheets, email, and other basic tools. Digital transformation was identified as crucial for enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of CSOs, resonating deeply with two interviewed organizations in Kosovo. Civil society encounters challenges in this area; limited access to resources and expertise hampers organizations' ability to fully leverage tech tools and develop the necessary skills to optimize daily operations. Additionally, issues such as data storage and project management present ongoing struggles. To address these challenges, increased support in terms of training and capacity building in digital tools and skills would be invaluable. Moreover, access to affordable and user-friendly tech solutions tailored to the needs of CSOs would greatly facilitate their digital transformation journey.

### Advanced IT Skills

Few staff members possess advanced IT skills such as coding, data analysis, and digital marketing. These skills are increasingly important for leveraging technology to enhance impact.

When it comes to the challenges' in CSOs development, it is most visible in the following areas:

### Fact-Checking Resources

CSOs need more resources dedicated to fact-checking and debunking false information. This includes both human resources and technological tools. "Most disinformation in relation to people with disabilities is that they are incapable of work. They are deprived of education and equal treatment in society, which makes them even more isolated. There is a law regulating the rights of these people, but nobody obeys it" – said our respondent from Inkluziva. Therefore, this organization needs support to develop its outreach capabilities and communication capacities to effectively convey the needs of people with disabilities and improve their lives. Experts who participated in the interview noted that "disinformation in Serbia is normalized and mainstreamed. It comes from both official authorities and conspiracy theorists." They explained that the attacks have been so severe and omnipresent in the past year that civil society has been in a defensive state, striving to preserve previously acquired freedoms and rights. This highlights the necessity for building strategic relationships, gaining international expertise, and applying efficient procedures to counter disinformation.

## Public Awareness Campaigns

Efforts to educate the public about disinformation and how to recognize it need to be scaled up. This requires both funding and expertise in communication strategies. In Kosovo, the use of AI to spread false narratives across the internet has gained momentum. For instance, there are examples of AI-generated videos discrediting public figures and politicians that spread rapidly and influence public opinion. Often, it becomes nearly impossible to convince people that the photos or videos they see are completely fake.

## Educational Programs

There is a need for more comprehensive media literacy programs aimed at various demographics, particularly young people and the elderly. Representatives from HERA noted that there was apathy among CSOs in North Macedonia in 2023 due to the overall political situation in the country and the negative image of the civil sector. CSOs faced constant attacks by anti-gender and anti-democratic movements and politicians who accused them of money laundering and serving foreign interests. This situation led to a standstill, with CSOs appearing disinterested and failing to push back against the attacks. Their relationships with partners and donors were affected, and even cooperation between HERA and the Ministry of Health fell through due to apathy. HERA interviewees stressed that countering disinformation generated by anti-gender and anti-democratic movements requires highly organized efforts. These movements are not random but are part of a broader network investing hundreds of millions of dollars to undermine laws related to sexuality and reproduction across Europe. Comprehensive media literacy programs are essential to enhance the public's capacity for critical thinking and better equip them to recognize and resist disinformation.

## Training for Educators

Educators and community leaders require training to effectively teach media literacy and critical thinking skills. In Kosovo, CSOs face ethnic divisions, complicating communication due to internal conflicts and complexities of the Pristina-Belgrade negotiations, which also impacts the CSO sector. Moreover, in North Kosovo, communication between CSOs representing Kosovo Serbs and state institutions is limited. Civil society organizations can play a crucial role in bridging the gap between Serbian and Albanian communities by fostering direct contacts, promoting dialogue, and facilitating regional events that build mutual trust. However, both Kosovo Albanian and Kosovo Serb CSOs are currently disheartened by their limited involvement in the Pristina-Belgrade negotiations.

# 6. Disinformation Trends

## 6.1. Comparative overview

The main topics of disinformation in Western Balkans can be divided in two categories: those prevalent across all countries and those that are localized and tailored to exploit specific topics or events, particularly in the context of Serbia-Kosovo relations.<sup>29</sup> Common narratives include anti-West sentiments, anti LGBTQIA+ rhetoric, gender-related disinformation, and false information about the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and climate change. Additionally, conspiracy theories surrounding climate change are prevalent.

Since the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, some electronic media, especially in Serbia<sup>30</sup>, have consistently circulated disinformation aimed at justifying the Russian aggression. Although the specific narratives may change, the distribution methods remain the same. The most common narratives on this topic include the following:

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The war in Ukraine is a conflict between NATO and Russia

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Russia is not waging a war in Ukraine, it is only conducting a special operation

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Russia is fighting Nazism in Ukraine

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Ukraine is recruiting children for the front

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Organ trade is occurring in Ukraine

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Ukraine sells donated military aid on the black market

All these narratives portray Ukraine in the worst possible light, depicting it as weak and corrupt compared to Russia, which is portrayed as superior and powerful. They aim to undermine public confidence in state decisions supporting and aiding Ukraine.<sup>31</sup>

Disinformation related to the LGBTQIA+ community is primarily used to attack the EU or the West, with a smaller segment aligning with the pro-Russian narrative of preserving traditional societies and religions. The most frequently represented narratives in this area include: European countries are corrupt because they support LGBTQIA+ values; The LGBTQIA+ community threatens traditional ways of life; The EU, in collaboration with the LGBTQIA+ community, promotes pedophilia.<sup>32</sup>

With the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of anti-vaccination narratives aimed at complicating the immunization process has increased. The most common anti-vaccination narratives during the observed period include: Vaccines are a tool for population depopulation; Vaccines cause cancer; Vaccines affect fertility and cause sterility; Vaccines cause autism; Vaccines are poisonous, unsafe, experimental and do not provide protection.<sup>33</sup>

The most prevalent disinformation regarding Kosovo-Serbia relations is found in the North Kosovo, often originating from Serbia. Common narratives include: Kosovo is a false state; The Kosovo government wishes harm to the Serbian community; Kosovo wants to expel Serbs from the north; Kosovo police do not protect Serbs. A prominent Russian narrative draws a parallel between Kosovo and Serbia and the situation Ukraine and Russia: What happens with Kosovo and Serbia is the same as what happens between Ukraine and Russia.

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**Russian narrative draws a parallel between Kosovo and Serbia and the situation Ukraine and Russia: What happens with Kosovo and Serbia is the same as what happens between Ukraine and Russia.**

## Groups Attacked

Across the analyzed countries, opposition politicians are frequently targeted to undermine their credibility and influence through disinformation. Investigative journalists, who often expose corruption and government malpractice, also face significant attacks. Civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly those advocating for democracy and human rights, are another common target. Additionally, marginalized groups, including ethnic minorities, the LGBTQIA+ community, and activists, face relentless attacks aimed at sowing division and hatred within society. While journalists and CSOs are frequently targeted and featured in disinformation narratives, politicians are less directly attacked but are often linked to current significant topics in a manner that seeks to undermine their credibility.

## Sources and Channels of Disinformation

Disinformation is disseminated through various sources and channels in these regions. Foreign actors such as Russia, China, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey play significant roles, using disinformation to influence geopolitical dynamics in the Balkans. Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and local networks are crucial for the rapid dissemination of false information. Additionally, mainstream media, including television and print outlets, often reflect political polarization and are funded by public money, making them potential vehicles for disinformation.

## Impact of Disinformation

The impact of disinformation is profound and multifaceted. Politically, it exacerbates polarization, intensifying tensions between different political factions and communities. It also fuels anti-Western sentiment, fostering distrust towards the European Union (EU), NATO, and Western countries in general. Public trust in media, government institutions, and democratic processes diminishes, leading to widespread skepticism and apathy. Socially, disinformation contributes to increasing hostility towards marginalized groups, perpetuating hate speech and deepening societal divisions.

This impact is evident in the research data, which includes the annual mapping reports for North Macedonia, Kosovo and Serbia as well as the media stories and interviews with representatives from civil society.

## 6.2. Country specific analysis



### Serbia

#### Narrative 1: Foreign and domestic actors are trying to gain control of Serbia

One of the most popular narratives in the past year has been propagated by the president, members of the Serbian Progressive Party (SPP), and the Prime Minister. They have claimed that both internal and external malicious elements are conspiring to undermine Serbia's sovereignty and autonomy. This narrative, which warns of "domestic traitors"<sup>34</sup> who allegedly seeking to destabilize the country, has stigmatized not only the pro-European opposition parties but also independent media and civil sector organizations. During the electoral campaign, President Vucic employed hateful and derogatory language accusing opposition leaders of several crimes such as embezzling public funds while in power and failing to contribute to the country's development.<sup>35</sup> This rhetoric set the tone for the campaign

and was immediately adopted and echoed by the PM and Vucic's close associates within the SPP, including government ministers and MPs. Verbal attacks against the opposition reached their peak after the elections in December 2023, when concerns were raised about the integrity of parliamentary elections in Serbia and allegations of electoral fraud were voiced. Verbal attacks extended to independent journalists, particularly those from the United Media Group who were accused of serving foreign interests. Members of the President's party promptly labeled these journalists as "domestic traitors" and used other derogatory terms. The narrative gained such traction that these journalists began receiving life threats on social media from anonymous pro-government supporters.<sup>36</sup>

#### Narrative 2: West is trying to destabilize Serbia

The second dominant narrative revolved around the idea of foreign pressure exerted on Serbia by "malign forces" from the West<sup>37</sup> aiming to destabilize the country, primarily because of Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia and its rejection of Kosovo's independence. It evolved to present Western countries as enemies. After the

December 2023 elections in Serbia, when representatives from the EU and the USA validated election irregularities, the narrative about "foreign mercenaries" exploded, describing Western countries as entities whose objectives were to cause chaos and destabilize Serbia, and even provoke a Serbian Maidan – an alleged civil war similar to the one in Ukraine.

#### Narrative 3: Kosovo is a fake country and a source of crime

The third most prevalent disinformation narrative referred to Kosovo. A key event that instigated negative and propagandistic narratives was the armed attack in the vicinity of Banjska village in the North Kosovo in September 2023. The deadly stand off was interpreted as a rebellion by ethnic Serbs against the repressing regime of Albin Kurti, who was alleged to want to

ethnically cleanse Kosovo. In relation to Kosovo, disinformation narratives of Russian origin spread via Serbian media across the region included claims that "Kosovo is a fake country, that it is a source of crime, that it is a threat to Serbia and the EU, and parallels were drawn between what Russia is doing in Ukraine and what the West had done to Serbia."<sup>38</sup>



### Kosovo

#### Narrative 1: The Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities means Kosovo surrendered to Serbia

The establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) sparked heated debates between the ruling party and the opposition in Kosovo after the draft statute was presented in both Pristina and Belgrade. Political representatives and media in Kosovo continuously evaluated the positive and negative aspects of the ASM, including potential violation of the Kosovo constitution and

possible implications for society. The peak of the controversy occurred when it became evident that Kosovo could not advance towards EU membership without establishing the ASM. The opposition vehemently attacked and discredited PM Kurti, who had built his political popularity on refusing to allow the ASM. Since the text of the agreement is not public, various rumors and disinformation have circulated about its content.

#### Narrative 2: US is not protecting the Muslims

Disinformation about the war in Gaza aims to create anti-Israel sentiment and propagate claims such as 'Israel is against all Muslims' and 'the USA is not protecting the Muslims'. Many people in Kosovo follow news on American or British outlets, and these narratives attempt to

divert citizens from these sources, suggesting that Western coverage of the situation is false.<sup>39</sup> Disinformation about the Hamas-Israel conflict is spread on social media through real and anonymous Telegram channels or FB pages, but it is also circulated extensively by word of mouth.





## North Macedonia

### Narrative 1: North Macedonia will never be part of European Union

Most disinformation content and campaigns in North Macedonia in 2023 revolved around constitutional reforms necessary for starting the EU accessing process, causing deep polarization in the country. The European Commission Progress report for 2023 as well as the fact that North Macedonia did not open any chapter of the negotiation talks with the EU at the meeting in Brussels in December 2023 led to bitter

accusations by the opposition.<sup>40</sup> Negative narratives on Bulgaria and the firm stance of the Macedonian nationalist parties that they would not tolerate "a Bulgarian dictate," were redirected towards the then-government, which was labeled as traitorous and incompetent. With the change of government structure in late June 2024, this narrative is winding down.

### Narrative 2: LGBTQIA+ people are undermining traditional values and our culture

Hateful narratives against the LGBTQIA+ community, which started in June 2023 during Pride week, and which gained momentum at the protest organized by the Macedonian Orthodox Church under the slogan "For protection of the children

and family values", continued with the same intensity throughout the year. These narratives manifested as relentless attacks on activists and CSOs supporting LGBTQIA+ community and other marginalized groups.<sup>41</sup>

## 6.3. Regional case studies



### The banning of the dinar is another way of pressuring the Serbs in the North Kosovo.

#### Why it was relevant

Disinformation claiming that Kosovo's ban of the Serbian dinar is another way of pressuring and worsening the life conditions of the Serbs living in the North, with the goal of expelling them. It was used as part of the political campaign in Serbia by the Serbian president Aleksandar Vucic and his political party SNS (Serbian Progressive Party).

#### Source and channels

The sources included mostly Serbian political actors and disinformation-spreading online media, especially Serbian tabloids under government control.

#### Impact and response

The intended impact was to gain political popularity and further worsen the relations with Kosovo, deepening the crisis between the two governments. It also aimed to reinforce the narrative in the media that Kosovo is conducting an ethnic cleansing campaign. More than 30 Serbian online media outlets have reshared the article, leading to social instability and protests in the Serb-majority area of the divided North Kosovo town of Mitrovica. Protesters claimed that abolishing the dinar violates the rights of Serbs in Kosovo and is discriminatory.

#### Example of a post/content

Example 1\*

## 6.4. Countering disinformation responses

### Serbia

In Serbia, disinformation targeting the civil sector primarily originates from state leadership and MPs aligned with the ruling party, and is amplified by pro-government media and tabloids. According to experts interviewed, disinformation has become normalized and mainstreamed within Serbia, emanating from both official sources and conspiracy theorists. Numerous instances have been reported where the government has attempted to curtail or eliminate the rights of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), especially when activists and journalists exposed criminality or corruption among government officials.<sup>42</sup> As soon as certain CSOs and independent media outlets uncovered illegal activities involving individuals linked to the authorities or debunked disinformation propagated by the ruling faction, a coordinated campaign would ensue, ranging from smear tactics to Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs).<sup>43</sup> Consequently, CSOs recognize the necessity for innovative tools and strategies to combat manipulation systematically and effectively.

Some interview participants believe that the most effective tactic for countering disinformation is raising awareness of the problem on an international level. They argue that only pressure from the international community can compel authorities to eliminate entrenched narratives about “domestic traitors and foreign mercenaries”, stop trivializing violence against CSOs, and cease labeling environmental activists as “opponents of progress.”

There is a critical need for effective collaboration between public institutions, CSOs, and the media to curb disinformation. In Serbia, narratives such as “foreign mercenaries” and “Russian brothers” remain deeply entrenched and resistant to change. Therefore, enhancing media literacy, employing tools to verify information, and securing support from professional fact-checking organizations have been identified as the most successful strategies for combating disinformation.

### Kosovo

The BIRN Kosovo report “The Story of our Lies”<sup>44</sup> published on November 30, 2023, reveals that Kosovo remains vulnerable to disinformation and lacks the institutional capacity to confront it. Media in Kosovo occasionally become creators and amplifiers of disinformation due to the absence of sustainable funding, limited human resources, unclear editorial

policies, and external influences. According to BIRN, one of the reasons for prolonged inter-ethnic hatred in Kosovo is the persistence of ethnic insults in TV entertainment. The BIRN study shows that “from comedy series to sport shows, ethnically divisive rhetoric and slurs can be heard in programs broadcast on TV and online in Kosovo, despite regulations prohibiting their use in entertainment

broadcasting.”<sup>45</sup> Such programs are aired by major TV stations such as Klan Kosova and are also available on YouTube, attracting large audiences. While derogatory terms for Serbs are bleeped out on TV, they are not censored online.<sup>46</sup>

The aforementioned BIRN report warned that disinformation in Kosovo is a serious threat, particularly to public-institutions and decision makers. It recommended that the country adopt a media literacy strategy and integrate it in the elementary and high school curricula.<sup>47</sup> These findings are also echoed by the portal Hibrid.info.<sup>48</sup> During the interview, BIRN representative expressed the same opinion and added that a comprehensive media literacy strategy would serve as a blueprint, guiding the activities of all CSOs working in the sector and enhancing their cooperation. While there is a willingness among CSOs, there is insufficient

readiness from the government. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) Kosovo is also making valuable contributions to combating the growing threat of fake news and lack of media literacy in Kosovo and the Western Balkans. They are hosting a podcast series that promotes online discussion about the importance of information integrity and ways to secure the information realm.<sup>49</sup>

In May 2023, **Smart Balkans**<sup>\*</sup> launched a project at empowering young people (aged 18-25) in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. The project’s goal is to address the growing threats of misinformation in modern society, raise awareness - especially among young people - and promote collaboration among CSOs, media, and other actors in the Western Balkans. This initiative aims to build trust and prevent political and ethnic tensions.

### North Macedonia

The state’s preventative measures include the government’s **Draft-Action Plan for Countering Disinformation**<sup>\*</sup> (2019), the **National Strategy for Building Resilience and Combating Hybrid Threats**<sup>\*</sup> (2021), and the National Strategy for Cyber Security (2023-2026). There have been no evaluations of their actual impact and effectiveness; the latter began only last year, and the former was never monitored. In response to requests from national terrestrial TV channels Kanal5 and Telma, the **Agency for Audio and Audio-Visual Media Services**<sup>\*</sup> discussed the need for preventing hate speech in the media in December 2023. This discussion focused particularly on internet portals, video sharing platforms (such as YouTube), and services where content is created and posted without editorial responsibility and filtering. The Agency, being a member of the Network for Combating Hate Speech in the Media,<sup>50</sup> signed a Declaration against hate speech in the media on

January 30, 2024. This step aimed to operationalize activities in 2024, especially before the parliamentary and presidential elections held in April and May 2024, when inflammatory speech was anticipated to peak. According to the Secretariat of the Government, the Network activities have already been incorporated in the Government Strategy 2024-2028 along with the necessary financial resources for its implementation.<sup>51</sup>

The Metamorphosis Foundation contributed to preparing the government’s work program for countering disinformation in 2024. The Foundation proposed an initiative to create a national strategy aimed at building social resilience against the harmful effects of manipulative content. Prior to that, the Foundation, along with several other CSOs, provided recommendations and clear directions on how to build resilience against fake news.

# 7. War in Ukraine – CSOs and disinformation trends

## 7.1. Civil Society's response to the war in Ukraine

### SERBIA

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Serbia has neither imposed sanctions on Russia nor has aligned its foreign policy towards Russia with that of the EU. However, Belgrade has provided substantial aid to Ukraine as acknowledged in a joint statement signed by ambassadors from all EU countries to Serbia and the Ukrainian ambassador.<sup>52</sup> In the statement, they expressed gratitude for Serbia's efforts, including sending 14 trucks of humanitarian goods and donating three million euros to help children and displaced people in Ukraine and abroad. The country welcomed Ukrainian children and athletes to a summer camp, donated two medical vehicles, and provided other essential equipment. Since the beginning of the war, about 50,000 people from Ukraine have entered Serbia, with 7437 of them receiving protected status in 2023.<sup>53</sup>

Serbia has provided humanitarian aid, financial assistance, and some quantities of ammunition for Ukraine.<sup>54</sup> **ADRA Serbia\*** and the center "**Balkan for You\***" offer humanitarian support and counseling for

the most vulnerable Ukrainian refugees, particularly mothers and children.<sup>55</sup> The association **Krokodil\*** collected and delivered humanitarian aid to Ukraine in 2023. In 2024, they organized a week of solidarity with Ukraine in February, marking the second year of the Russian invasion.<sup>56</sup>

**The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration\*** is the primary state institution assisting Ukrainian and other refugees. In accordance with the Law on Refugees, the Commissariat recognizes/terminates refugee status; manages the registration and care of refugees; coordinates assistance provided to refugees by other authorities and organizations, both domestically and internationally; arranges accommodation and placement of refugees within local self-government units; implements measures for the repatriation of refugees; addresses housing needs in accordance with the law; keeps records and databases within its jurisdiction, and performs other tasks specified by the law.

### KOSOVO

In relation to the war in Ukraine, Kosovo has fully aligned its foreign policy with the EU, despite the lack of bilateral relations with Kyiv due to Ukraine not recognizing Kosovo's independence. Kosovo has adhered to EU sanctions against Russia, updating its stance in accordance with each new set of punitive measures imposed by the EU. In 2022, Kosovo government abolished the visa regime for Ukrainians, although there has been limited interest from Ukrainians in traveling to Kosovo. In March 2022, CSOs from Kosovo and Serbia united in the **Balkan Forum\***, issued a joint statement on the potential consequences of Russia's invasion

of Ukraine for the Western Balkans. They emphasize that the Russian invasion of Ukraine has negatively impacted the international rule-based order and could significantly impact the Western Balkans.<sup>57</sup> The CSOs jointly condemned the aggression and called upon Kosovo and Serbia governments to align with the EU stance. They also urged the EU to adopt a practical and proactive approach to the European perspective of the West Balkans and called on the wider international community to support the region in securing sustainable peace and security. The statement contains a full list of the signatories.

## NORTH MACEDONIA

North Macedonia condemned the Russian aggression against Ukraine from the very beginning and has provided political, military, and humanitarian support to the Ukrainian people. On February 26, 2024, the Embassy of Ukraine in North Macedonia and **CIVIL\*** - Center for Freedom organized a multimedia conference titled "Ukraine – Two Years of Heroism".<sup>58</sup> The President and Prime Minister of North Macedonia, as well as Ambassadors from Ukraine and many EU countries participated in the event. Several exhibitions took place during the conference, including the project "War through Virtual Reality" and the promotion of the book "Ukraine - Years of Heroism". Additionally, there was an interview with Igor Krivolapov<sup>59</sup> from the Ukrainian NGO "**The Game Changer\***", who is the creator of the virtual reality project.

The expert from the **Red Cross\*** (RCNM) interviewed for this report explained that the procedure for helping refugees is the same regardless of their country of origin. After their registration with the Ministry of Interior, people in need are referred to and registered with the Red Cross (RC) Skopje or any of the branches throughout the country. In line with the initial assessment, activities focus on providing humanitarian assistance and meeting basic needs through referral services; Macedonian language classes for adults and children; health support and medication; mental health and psychological support services; after-school activities for children and activities in a child-friendly space; cash and voucher assistance; and social inclusion. All these activities continue in 2024. Additionally, the Red

Cross supplies consumer cards for food, hygiene, and household items, vouchers for shoes and clothing, medicaments, and medical interventions, with a special focus on women with children, pregnant women, single parents, and older people, particularly those with health problems or traveling alone. Protection activities as part of the response focus on humanitarian service points (HSP) (where food parcels will continue to be distributed), and child-friendly spaces (CFS).

The interviewee from Red Cross explained that, unlike migrant groups who are mainly transiting through the country since 2015, people who fled Ukraine plan to stay in North Macedonia until the conflict in Ukraine ends and live among the local population. Their accommodation was not provided by the government, so people rented on the open market, stayed with relatives, or with host families who offered free housing. Refugees from Ukraine were well accepted by the local community without visible signs of intolerance and prejudice. No hate speech or xenophobia towards this group was observed in public communication. Support for Ukrainian refugees is provided through a dedicated framework within the **International Federation of Red Cross (IFRC)\***. Their needs are regularly monitored, and all activities correspond to the identified needs. All regular activities of the Red Cross, including support for the local vulnerable population and other vulnerable groups such as refugees and people on the move are ongoing without any delay and in accordance with the needs.

## 7.2. Ukraine war related disinformation

### Serbia

Serbia has not aligned with the EU sanctions against Russia. Consequently, the number of media spreading Russian disinformation has not decreased. The online news media identified by our interviewees as extremely influential are Alo.rs, Informer.rs, Kurir.rs and Telegraf.rs, as well as TV channels such as B92, TV Pink, Happy TV, and RTV Pancevo. An example is the program "Aktuelnosti"<sup>60</sup> on Happy TV, which is broadcast daily and offers a completely different perspective on the war in Ukraine, thus shaping public opinion in favor of Russia. All guests in the program, including historians, politicians, and analysts, are pro-Russian. They claim Russian successes on the front, discuss Russia's invincible power, and highlight the failures of the West.

The YouTube channel My View (Moj Pogled)<sup>61</sup> and the YouTube podcast X33<sup>62</sup> promote and support conspiracy theories, including claims that the USA is on the verge of civil war due to migrant issues; the EU is suffering financially because of sanctions imposed on Russia; Ukraine is losing significant amounts of land and military personnel; and that Russia will ultimately win the war.

**Slavko Ćuruvia Foundation\*** published an analysis demonstrating that four TV stations, despite receiving permits for national coverage, continue to violate laws and their own program guidelines.<sup>63</sup> These stations broadcast content promoting hate speech, disinformation, denial of war crimes, violence, anti-LGBTQIA+ narratives, contrary to established rules and regulations. The CSO CRTA has monitored Happy TV programs and found out that the station promotes the demonization of the EU and the so-called collective West, vilifies dissenters, builds personality cults, and glorifies Russia.<sup>64</sup> To date no legal steps have been taken in response.

### Kosovo

Misinformation about the war in Ukraine is primarily disseminated by the Russian channel Russia Today and its Serbian counterpart, RT Balkan. Both channels are included in the 11<sup>th</sup> package of restrictive measures imposed by the EU against Russia. Despite the Government of Kosovo's decision to ban pro-government Russian media, research conducted by hibrid.info<sup>65</sup> has verified that access to the RT Balkan portal<sup>66</sup> remains possible.

There's limited information (including disinformation about Ukraine in Kosovo), primarily due to the country's internal political issues. These stem from tensions between the government and opposition, with opposition politicians accusing PM Kurti of steering the country away from its strategic partners, the USA and the EU.

It is also worth mentioning that the majority of the population in Kosovo is Muslim, which naturally shifts their attention and interest more towards the Israel-Hamas conflict. Sbunker reports that this conflict has not only altered the international community's approach to the war in Ukraine but has also diminished the attention and support that Ukraine received from Western countries.<sup>67</sup>

## North Macedonia

The war in Ukraine was the most prominently covered topic in the North Macedonian media last year, with a significant amount of disinformation surrounding it.<sup>68</sup> A study by the **Citizens' Association MOST** confirmed that Russian propaganda was widespread, particularly through posts on social media like Facebook.<sup>69</sup>

49%

of people in North Macedonia believe that war in Ukraine is a proxy war between Russia and NATO

According to the research titled "The Effect of Disinformation and Foreign Influences on the Democratic Processes in North Macedonia in 2023"<sup>70</sup>, a **prevailing opinion among respondents is that Russia's military is stronger than NATO's. Widespread disinformation narratives include the belief that the war in Ukraine is actually a conflict between Russia and NATO, a view held by 49% of the respondents, half of whom have higher education. Additionally, 39% of the participants believe in the existence of American biological weapons labs (43% Macedonians and 27% Albanians), and 31% trust that Russia is fighting Nazism in Ukraine, while 26% reject this claim. Although 43% of respondents do not justify Russia's attack on Ukraine, 21% do.** In this context, it is important to note that political events in 2023 and the disinformation narratives that emerged have influenced public opinion in relation to the Euro-Atlantic integration. The percentage of citizens who felt more secure due to North Macedonia's NATO membership has dropped from 40% last year to 30% this year.<sup>71</sup>

Research conducted by the **Institute for Democracy – Societas Civilis**<sup>a</sup> indicates that the support for EU integration in 2023 was at its lowest in the past nine years, particularly among young people in the country. While these results reflect growing dissatisfaction, they do not necessarily indicate a shift towards other partners such as Russia or China.<sup>72</sup> The same research confirmed that anti-European i.e. pro-Russian sentiment remains strong in the country. 35% of citizens, predominantly of Macedonian ethnic origin, believe that North Macedonia would benefit more from an alliance with a Slavic and Orthodox power like Russia, while 26% disagree. Half of the population in North Macedonia believes that an alliance with Russia and access to cheaper Russian gas would be crucial for improving the country's economy. In this context, **42% of respondents believe that imposing sanctions on Russia (in relation to the war in Ukraine) is not a good policy for North Macedonia.** Opinions on North Macedonia's support for Ukraine are divided: 35% support continuing aid to Ukraine, while 23% oppose it.

42%

of respondents believe that imposing sanctions on Russia (in relation to the war in Ukraine) is not a good policy for North Macedonia.

Although most people in North Macedonia acknowledge that the Russian leadership is responsible for the invasion of Ukraine and do not justify the attack, many also subscribe to the pro-Russian myth that the US and NATO share some of the blame.

These beliefs, shaped by malign foreign influences, may jeopardize the country's fragile democracy, distort public perceptions, and ultimately impact its geopolitical stance and future direction.



# 8. Future developments

Without resolving its existing issues, the Western Balkans will continue to be a fertile ground for disinformation, which will hinder the region's integration into the European Union and other international structures.

## Serbia

In September 2023, the government established the Council for Creating a Stimulating Environment for the Development of the Civil Society, with its first session held in December. The council comprises 20 members, 11 of whom are civil society representatives. The formation of this council was a commitment made under the government's Strategy for the Development of Civil Society, which was adopted in February 2022.<sup>73</sup> The quality of civic space is deteriorating, and the demands from the CSOs and the media professionals can no longer be ignored. Many of the demands from the Serbia Against Violence protests were focused on media freedom. Protesters called for a ban on violent reality shows, the revocation of national broadcasting licenses for propagandistic TV stations like Pink and Happy, a ban on pro-government tabloids, and the resignation of the REM council. It remains to be seen how the government will address media freedom and the widespread use of propaganda by national broadcasters. These issues are likely to be among the most pressing topics for the remainder of 2024.

## Kosovo

In mid-February 2024, senior US officials publicly expressed concern about a “deteriorating relationship” between Kosovo and the United States. Relations with the EU also appeared strained. On June 14, 2023, the day of the kidnapping of the three Kosovo police officers in the North Kosovo, the European Commission announced “negative measures” (= **sanctions**) against Kosovo. Since then, the European Commission has not proposed lifting these sanctions. They were maintained following the attack on 24 September and despite the European Parliament's call for **their removal in October 2023**.<sup>74</sup> The issue of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities remains unresolved.

## North Macedonia

Immediately after the conservative coalition won the elections, and even before formally taking office, they passed a law to restructure the executive power. Consequently, North Macedonia now has 20 ministries instead of the previous 16. This new law outlines a revised structure for the ministries and executive bodies, and it remains to be seen how this significant and complex change will unfold. “The Ministry of Economy is too large and does not adequately address the needs of modern times. Instead of having a single sector covering energy, mining, and mineral resources, we will establish a new Ministry for Energy, Mining, and Mineral Resources”, Mickoski stated in a television interview.<sup>75</sup>

The program of the new government outlines full EU membership as its key strategic goal. “The Government will remain committed to the European and Euro-Atlantic security framework and to full alignment with the EU's foreign, security, and defense policies”. In 2024, it remains to be seen how the new government will navigate both domestic and international pressures. The dialogue concerning constitutional changes is expected to continue.

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This report was funded by Google.org as part of TechSoup's Digital Activism Program. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Google.org.

## TechSoup's Digital Activism Program

TechSoup's Digital Activism Program (DAP) is striving to increase CSOs' understanding of the issues connected with direct disinformation threats through research, strengthening their capacity, boosting their knowledge, and building connections within the nonprofit network.

To learn more about the Program click [here](#).

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