

STUDY

Requested by the AFET committee



# Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them



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### ABSTRACT

Disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception. A mapping of the disinformation and counter-disinformation landscapes in the region in the period from 2018 through 2020 reveals three key disinformation challenges: external challenges to EU credibility; disinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic; and the impact of disinformation on elections and referenda. While foreign actors feature prominently – chiefly Russia, but also China, Turkey, and other countries in and near the region – the bulk of disinformation in the Western Balkans is produced and disseminated by domestic actors for domestic purposes. Further, disinformation (and information disorder more broadly) is a symptom of social and political disorder, rather than the cause. As a result, the European Union should focus on the role that it can play in bolstering the quality of democracy and governance in the Western Balkans, as the most powerful potential bulwark against disinformation.

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## Executive summary

This study of disinformation in the Western Balkans was conducted in keeping with the European Parliament's (EP) commitment to 'thinking holistically about foreign, authoritarian interference, and tackling the vulnerabilities in all aspects of democratic governance and institutions'<sup>1</sup>. Drawing on existing academic, think-tank and other research, as well as original analysis of online social media data – and devoting equal weight and attention to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia – **the study maps key trends and patterns in disinformation and counter-disinformation throughout the region in the period from 2018 through 2020.**

Disinformation is an endemic and ubiquitous part of politics throughout the Western Balkans, without exception. But **while disinformation is frequently discussed in the context of external threats to the functioning of governance and democracy, this study shows that foreign actors are not the most prominent culprits.** Most of the people and organisations producing and disseminating disinformation are internal. Moreover, this study finds that disinformation is most commonly a symptom – rather than the cause – of a deeper breakdown of social cohesion and democratic governance.

Among the study's key findings are the following:

- In countries – such as Serbia and Montenegro – where politics has been dominated by a single group, disinformation tends to follow the 'party line', serving the interests of the powerful and undermining opposition;
- In more competitive political environments – such as Albania, Kosovo and (to an extent) North Macedonia – disinformation tends to be used opportunistically by all sides, pursuing short-term aims rather than long-term strategies;
- The presence of deep ethnic and/or sectarian divides – such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia – fosters xenophobic disinformation campaigns by both domestic and foreign actors;
- When a government's sovereignty is new or challenged – such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia, and to a lesser extent in Montenegro – politics are especially vulnerable to geopolitically motivated interference;
- Both domestic and foreign actors use disinformation to undermine the credibility of the European Union in the Western Balkans, amplifying and manipulating existing divisions between 'EU idealists' (who are committed to their country's European identity and future come what may) and 'EU realists' (who may not oppose EU integration but do not believe it is likely to happen). While China and Turkey are both active in this field, efforts to discredit the EU are dominated by Russia, which maintains an extensive infrastructure of media manipulation throughout the region;
- The COVID-19 pandemic has provided fertile ground for disinformation. Governments throughout the Western Balkans have sought to falsify their record on handling the pandemic, while others have injected many of the same false claims found elsewhere. In addition, China and, to a lesser extent Russia, have used the pandemic as an opportunity to build leverage in public opinion, at the expense of the EU; and

<sup>1</sup> European Parliament (2019), 'Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes'. Texts Adopted P9\_TA(2019)0031 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html)).

- While disinformation affects many – though by no means all – elections and referenda in the Western Balkans, it is not the case that disinformation is the cause of democratic breakdown. Rather, it is the lack of commitment to democratic governance by domestic political actors that opens the door to the productive use of disinformation as a tool of political competition.

Looking across the region, the study finds that:

- In **Albania**, disinformation is a ubiquitous feature of domestic political competition, but efforts are generally opportunistic and campaigns are short-lived. There is relatively little evidence of attempts by foreign powers to distort Albanian politics or international affairs.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, the disinformation landscape is dominated by Serbian media, often with support from Russian disinformation networks, and the focus is on xenophobia. Bosnia and Herzegovina is the site of large-scale attempts to discredit the EU.
- In **Kosovo**, politics are unusually susceptible to news – and thus disinformation – from abroad. Serbian disinformation plays a major role, sometimes with support from Russian disinformation networks. More recently, interests linked to the Trump Administration have also gotten into the game. There is little evidence of any impact in terms of the country's Euro-Atlantic orientation, however.
- In **Montenegro**, Russian and Serbian media are powerfully present, in particular with relation to the country's NATO membership and the 2016 coup attempt. Most disinformation, however, remains domestic, and has been an important tool in internal political competition – used particularly by the long-standing DPS-dominated government to discredit its opponents.
- In **North Macedonia**, the recent change of government has pushed disinformation largely out of the state and mainstream media and into the margins, where it nevertheless remains a powerful force distorting internal politics. Disinformation was critical in undermining participation in the name-change referendum.
- In **Serbia**, disinformation dominates competition between political forces during and between elections. The country has witnessed significant efforts by the government to falsify the record on COVID-19, as well as large-scale international campaigns to undermine support for the EU and NATO.

Finally, **there is a gap between the causes of disinformation in the Western Balkans and attempts – mostly by domestic civil society, with support from abroad – to counteract it.** The Western Balkans host a robust landscape of counter-disinformation initiatives, focusing on fact-checking, public education/capacity building, and media support, but the existence, location and funding of these projects track donor priorities more closely than the needs of societies on the ground. This problem is exacerbated by the severe lack of social-scientific research on the impact of disinformation or counter-disinformation in the region.

Looking forward, the study identifies four emergent threats:

- (1) Russia's geo-strategic policy – and, to a much lesser extent, that of China – will continue to be focused on the Western Balkans as critical theatre for blocking the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions. Disinformation has been and is likely to remain a key tool in these efforts;
- (2) American geo-strategic policy – in particular, the trans-Atlantic gap opened up by the Trump Administration – creates new opportunities for Moscow, Beijing and Ankara, as well as domestic actors, to use disinformation to undermine European influence;



- (3) The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath will further undermine public trust in governments, as well as the actual performance of those governments. This, in turn, exacerbates the fundamental cause of disinformation, which is the breakdown of governance and social cohesion; and
- (4) The prospect of EU non-enlargement lessens pressure on governments in the region to improve the quality of governance and adhere to democratic practice and removes a powerful lever for civil society to demand political accountability. Apart from once again reinforcing the factors that cause disinformation, this produces further opportunities for Europe's geo-political competitors.

With these findings in mind, the study makes a number of policy recommendations. These include (but are not limited to):

- For the European Parliament:
  - Working to ensure that the EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans incorporates anti-disinformation priorities and bolsters both the quality of governance and public trust in the region;
  - Continuing to call out the malign influence of foreign disinformation actors, chiefly Russia, but also the problematic role played throughout the region by Serbian disinformation campaigns;
  - Convening dialogues with EU actors, Member State governments, Western Balkan civil society and international donors to coordinate anti-disinformation efforts in the region, with an emphasis on research and analysis and the inclusion of regional expertise;
- For the European Commission:
  - Building the infrastructure to produce evidence-based responses to both short-term and long-term disinformation threats in the Western Balkans, including potentially through the creation of a Balkan-focused Centre of Excellence;
- For the European External Action Service:
  - Pivoting to a more proactive stance, focusing on building the EU's credibility in the region, rather than defending it;
  - Expanding StratCom monitoring to focus on cross-border disinformation threats emanating from countries within and neighbouring the Western Balkans; the study finds Serbia and Hungary to be particularly problematic in this regard; and
  - Re-focusing on the efficacy of *EUvsDisinfo* as a tool not for responding to disinformation, but for reducing its prevalence and impact.

# 1 Introduction

The problem of disinformation is globally recognised as disruptive to the normal functioning of democratic societies, economies and political systems. In recent years, ‘fake news’ and coordinated disinformation campaigns have an instrument of geopolitical influence. They have afflicted elections in both established and new democracies, and undermined social and political solidarity in response to global challenges, such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic. It is with these and other instances in mind that the European Union (EU) identified ‘the exposure of citizens to large scale disinformation’ as ‘a major challenge for Europe’ in 2018<sup>2</sup>, undertaking an increasingly ambitious programme of action to counter this evolving threat since.

In few places is this threat more acute than in the Western Balkans. As a theatre of geopolitical dispute and sharply polarised politics, characterised by weak governance and fragile civil societies, the Western Balkans are a uniquely attractive target for both foreign and domestic actors seeking to alter, undermine or delegitimise the outcomes of democratic processes. The region thus presents a critical challenge – and opportunity – for the EU to identify and pursue strategies for restoring order to ‘disordered’ communication, bolstering democracy and building stability.

In light of these developments, **the European Parliament adopted the Resolution of 10 October 2019 on ‘Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes’**<sup>3</sup>, where it:

*strongly condemns [...] the increasingly aggressive actions of state and non-state actors from third countries seeking to undermine or suspend the normative foundations and principles of European democracies and the sovereignty of all EU accession countries in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries, as well as to influence elections and support extremist movements.*

Recognising that ‘foreign electoral interference represents a systematic pattern that has been recurring over recent years’, in the same Resolution, the Parliament:

*considers that only by thinking holistically about foreign, authoritarian interference, and tackling the vulnerabilities in all aspects of democratic governance and institutions [...] can the EU safeguard its democratic processes.*

With that in mind, the study’s aim is to provide Members of European Parliament (MEPs) with information and analysis to support their stated objective of countering disinformation – whatever the source or purpose – in the Western Balkans. In doing so, it aims to bolster the resilience of societies in the region, to foster the consolidation of democratic governance, and thus to enable mutually beneficial relationships between the states of the region and the European Union.

To accomplish this, the study focuses on a two-part empirical investigation. First, it presents a country-by-country mapping exercise, based on an encompassing analysis of recently published research on disinformation and counter-disinformation in the Western Balkans (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia). Second, it presents three comparative case studies: one on disinformation efforts by external actors seeking to discredit the EU; the second on the range of disinformation campaigns that have emerged in response to COVID-19; and the third focusing on the role

<sup>2</sup> European Commission (2018a), ‘Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach’, Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 26 April 2018. COM(2018) 236 final (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0236>).

<sup>3</sup> European Parliament (2019), ‘Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes’, Texts Adopted P9\_TA(2019)0031 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html)).

of disinformation in distorting domestic elections and referendums. The research is based on an analysis of 74 confirmed disinformation campaigns conducted in the Western Balkans over the past two years, as well as a database of some 32 million interactions involving approximately 180 000 relevant messages posted to online social media over the same period. This is accompanied by a country-by-country and comparative review of anti-disinformation initiatives in the region.

The empirical heart of the study is followed by a 'horizon-scanning' exercise, meant to identify core vulnerabilities, key threats and emergent opportunities for addressing disinformation in the Western Balkans. Lastly, it proposes a series of policy recommendations for the European Parliament, the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS).

## 2 State of play

### 2.1 Defining the disinformation threat

The EU defines disinformation as ‘verifiably false or misleading information [...] created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to internationally deceive the public’, which ‘may cause public harm [...] [and] threats to democratic political and policymaking processes, as well as public goods’<sup>4</sup>. This means that:

- a) **disinformation is a conscious attempt to encourage people to believe something that the producers and/or disseminators of the content know to be untrue;**
- b) **the producers and/or disseminators of disinformation act out of malicious intent.**

As such, disinformation is different from misinformation (the simple distribution of falsehoods) or mal-information (the harmful distribution of truthful information, including leaks), but it is part of the spectrum scholars refer to as ‘information disorder’<sup>5</sup>. All three are a departure from ‘normal’ practices of mass communication, in that they involve a breach of trust by the producer of what is commonly called ‘fake news’.

The falsehood at the core of disinformation may take one or many forms. Audiences may be misled as to the authenticity of the purported facts of the matter (e.g., ‘vaccines cause autism’) or the source of the material (e.g. ‘reputable scientists say vaccines cause autism’), and factual material may be taken out of context in order to provoke a particular response. Even the nature of the distribution channel itself may be a lie (such as the recently uncovered ‘Peace Data’ website<sup>6</sup>). In all cases, however, the goal is the same – ‘to manipulate a target population by affecting its beliefs, attitudes, or preferences in order to obtain behaviour compliant with political goals’<sup>7</sup>.

In recent years, much of the public and political debate on disinformation has focused on attempts to disrupt politics within and between third countries. This refers, above all, to Russian-linked disinformation campaigns implemented through a combination of overt and covert channels (e.g. the state-backed RT television network, networks of ‘trolls’ and ‘bots’) to convince foreign and domestic audiences of particular ideas (such as the dangers posed by migrants in Germany) or to sow public doubt and prevent consensus<sup>8</sup>. **In the Western Balkans in particular, Russian-linked disinformation operations appear to be organised in service of non-state interests, including those of organised crime groups, or more broadly to discredit and weaken the global role of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty**

<sup>4</sup> European Commission (2018d), ‘Code of Practice on Disinformation’, DG CONNECT (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>).

<sup>5</sup> Wardle, Claire and Hossein Derakhshan (2017), ‘Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making’, *Council of Europe Report* (DGI(2017)09), Strasbourg: Council of Europe (<https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>).

<sup>6</sup> Frenkel, Sheera (2020), ‘A Freelance Writer Learns He Was Working for the Russians’, *New York Times*, 2 September (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/02/technology/peacedata-writer-russian-misinformation.html>).

<sup>7</sup> Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts (2018), ‘Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics’, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 19 (<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.001.0001/oso-9780190923624>).

<sup>8</sup> Ramsay, Gordon and Sam Robertshaw (2019), ‘Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation’, London: King’s College London, Centre for the Study of Media, Communication & Power (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/weaponising-news>).

**Organization (NATO)**<sup>9</sup>. The Chinese government has also been shown by researchers to deploy disinformation campaigns, sometimes to distract and disrupt (for example, with reference to events in Hong Kong, Xinjiang or the South China Sea), as to push a particular agenda (for example, to win support for its 'Belt and Road' initiative)<sup>10</sup>.

As this study and others show, however, foreign actors are minority players in the disinformation game. **Most of the producers and disseminators of disinformation – in the Western Balkans and around the world – are domestic and pursue local aims.**

It is equally important, meanwhile, to focus on the people who consume disinformation, and on disseminators and influencers at the national and regional level – both witting and unwitting – who are critical to ensuring that disinformation spreads as far and wide as possible. **Even when outside actors are involved, their efforts tend to build upon, amplify and, in some cases, manipulate the actions of domestic players, including social and religious groups, media outlets, political parties, and business interests**<sup>11</sup>. Many of the groups through and around which disinformation flows are, while unsavoury, legitimate. It thus becomes both exceedingly difficult and extremely important to distinguish between malicious acts and actors on the one hand, and natural processes of contestation, change and adaptation on the other. The remedies to disinformation must not themselves undermine democratic institutions, including free media systems<sup>12</sup>.

Finally, the disruption caused by disinformation is made possible by disruption in society itself. Some of this disruption, to be certain, is technological, as modern society has seen tectonic shifts in the ways we communicate<sup>13</sup>. **Disinformation thrives most virulently, however, in environments that are already riven with internal conflicts, and where social and public trust already struggles to bridge political, regional, ethnic, religious or other divides. Information disorder – including disinformation – is most often the symptom of social and political disorder, rather than the cause.**

<sup>9</sup> Milekic, Sven (2017), 'Balkan States Linked to Russian Money-Laundering Scheme', *Balkan Insight*, 21 March (<https://balkaninsight.com/2017/03/21/russian-money-laundering-scheme-present-in-balkans-03-21-2017/>);

Zakem, Vera, Bill Rosenau and Danielle Johnson (2017), 'Shining a Light on the Western Balkans: Internal Vulnerabilities and Malign Influence from Russia, Terrorism, and Transnational Organized Crime', *CNA Occasional Paper Series*, Washington: Center for Naval Analysis ([https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/DOP-2017-U-015223-2Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DOP-2017-U-015223-2Rev.pdf)).

<sup>10</sup> King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts (2017), 'How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument', *American Political Science Review*, 111(3): 484-501 (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/how-the-chinese-government-fabricates-social-media-posts-for-strategic-distraction-not-engaged-argument/4662DB26E2685BAF1485F14369BD137C>).

<sup>11</sup> Marwick, Alice and Rebecca Lewis (2017), *Media Manipulation and Disinformation Online*, New York: Data & Society Research Institute (<https://datasociety.net/library/media-manipulation-and-disinfo-online/>).

<sup>12</sup> Council of Europe (2020), *Press freedom must not be undermined by measures to counter disinformation about COVID-19*, 3 April (<https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/press-freedom-must-not-be-undermined-by-measures-to-counter-disinformation-about-covid-19>);

Silverman, Craig (2011), 'The Backfire Effect: More on the press's inability to debunk bad information', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 14 June ([https://archives.cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/the\\_backfire\\_effect.php](https://archives.cjr.org/behind_the_news/the_backfire_effect.php)).

<sup>13</sup> cf. Benkler, Yochai, Robert Faris and Hal Roberts (2018), *Network Propaganda. Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (<https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190923624.001.0001/oso-9780190923624>);

Bennett, W. Lance and Steven Livingston (2018), 'The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions', *European Journal of Communication*, 33(2): 122-139 (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0267323118760317>);

Stray, Jonathan (2019), 'Institutional Counter-disinformation Strategies in a Networked Democracy', *Proceedings of WWW '19* (<https://doi.org/10.1145/3308560.3316740>).

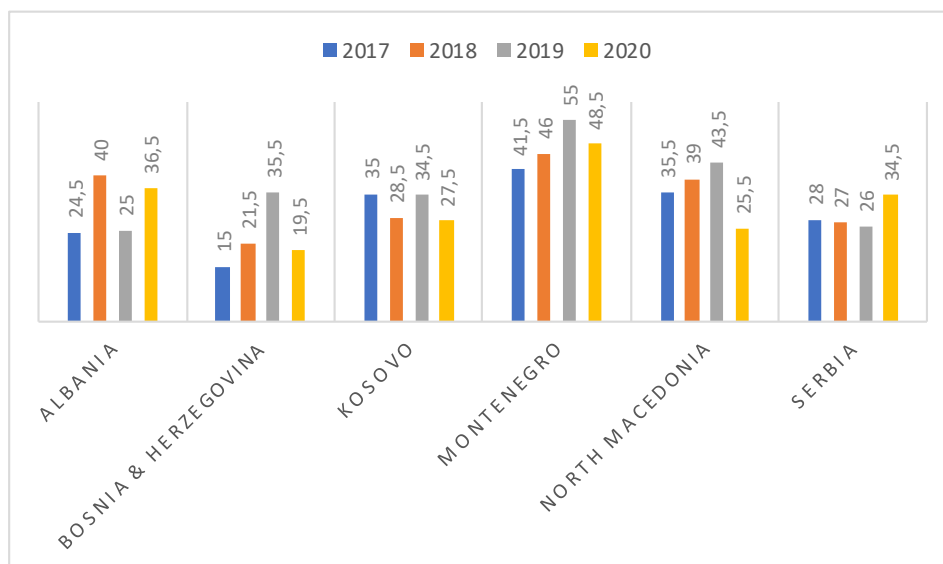
## 2.2 Challenges in the Western Balkans

**Disinformation is a significant problem throughout the Western Balkans and an increasingly important part of the way in which both domestic and foreign actors pursue political ends.** The deliberate production and dissemination of ‘fake news’ – full or partial falsehoods masquerading as journalism – has become a dominant method of contesting elections, shifting government policy agendas, and settling scores between business rivals. Moreover, disinformation is sufficiently pervasive in the region that it hampers the consolidation of democratic media systems, and thus of democratic governance more broadly, as well as heightening the challenges of post-conflict resolution and transitional justice<sup>14</sup>.

**Throughout the region, information disorder reflects social and political disorder, and appeals to identity are particularly potent – even when disjointed from facts – when politics fails to deliver material benefits.** Ethnic and sectarian divisions thus provide easy fodder for arousing passions. A favourite trope in Serbia, in Serb-dominated parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in North Macedonia is the ‘threat’ of a ‘Greater Albania’. In Kosovo and Croat- and Muslim-dominated parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, by contrast, the statements of Serbian nationalists are frequently given exaggerated importance. Misrepresentations or fabrications of Greek policy positions were used to undermine support for the referendum on the renaming of North Macedonia.

**The pervasiveness of corruption, too, creates fertile ground for disinformation.** Accusations of misbehaviour and collusion are always plausible, even when they aren’t true, and a wedge of mistrust is driven between citizens and governments. Indeed, trust in the state is remarkably low. According to data from the Balkan Barometer, trust in the government has not surpassed 50 percent of the population in the past four years anywhere in the region, and usually hovers between 25 and 35 percent (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: State trust in the Western Balkans<sup>15</sup>**



**Source:** Balkan Barometer

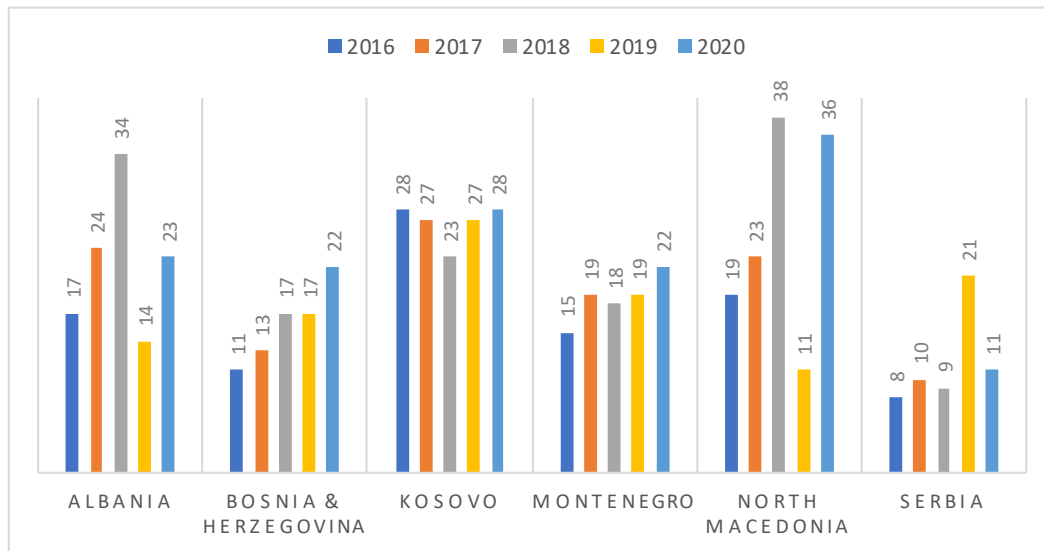
<sup>14</sup> cf. Stafasani, Orjela (2017), ‘Kosovo: Fake news in a struggling democracy’, *Eurozine*, 29 September (<https://www.eurozine.com/kosovo-fake-news-in-a-struggling-democracy/>);

Wemer, David A. (2019), ‘The Western Balkans: A growing disinformation battleground’, *New Atlanticist*, Washington: Atlantic Council (<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-western-balkans-a-growing-disinformation-battleground/>).

<sup>15</sup> Calculated as the average of trust in government and trust in parliament. Source: Balkan Barometer.

Low levels of trust in the state, in turn, lead to low levels of political engagement. With the exception of Montenegro, the Western Balkans have some of the lowest voter turnout numbers in Europe. With the partial exception of certain years that saw extraordinary mobilisation (including around referenda or other major events), non-electoral political participation – such as protests, petitions, debates and other civic activities – is also remarkably low (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Non-electoral political engagement in the Western Balkans**



Source: Balkan Barometer

**Geopolitical insecurity similarly enables disinformation.** Some governments in the region, including Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, operate under limited or contested sovereignty. Others, one way or another, are involved in territorial disputes. This has compound and complex effects on disinformation. For one thing, it entices foreign actors into the region. As mentioned earlier, **the Western Balkans are a key battleground in Moscow’s efforts to maintain and gain leverage in Europe, and to push back against both EU and NATO enlargement and integration. In this struggle, disinformation is only one instrument in a broader toolkit**<sup>16</sup>. From its regional base in Belgrade, Russia’s state-run Sputnik news agency broadcasts disinformation throughout the region, including stories designed to discredit the EU (for example, alleging environmental degradation and exploitation) and NATO (alleging atrocities and *diktat* from Washington).

In Montenegro, for example, Russia is understood to have prepared and begun to undertake ‘information operations’ to lay the groundwork for and help ensure the success of the 2016 coup attempt, on the model

<sup>16</sup> Galeotti, Mark (2018), ‘Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?’, *Policy Brief*, Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations ([https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do\\_the\\_western\\_balkans\\_face\\_a\\_coming\\_russian\\_storm](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm)); Nič, Milan (2019), ‘Balkan Troubles: The six countries of the Western Balkans need the EU’s full attention’, *Berlin Policy Journal* (<https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/balkan-troubles>); Rettman, Andrew and Eric Maurice (2018), ‘EU ‘perspective’ opposed by Russia in Balkans’, *EU Observer*, 15 May (<https://euobserver.com/foreign/141820>); Stronski, Paul and Annie Hines (2019), ‘Russia’s Game in the Balkans’, *Working Paper*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (<https://carnegiendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>).



of earlier hybrid operations in Ukraine<sup>17</sup>. A similar approach has been observed as an attempt to disrupt normalisation of Greek relations with North Macedonia, and even as an additional blockage to the emergence of cross-community developmental and foreign policy consensus in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>18</sup>. These, and other Russian disinformation operations in the Western Balkans, raised high concerns at NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence. As a result, the region was made one of its key areas of focus, including the publication of a series of in-depth research reports earlier this year<sup>19</sup>.

It is not only Moscow that attempts to interfere through disinformation in the region, however. Turkey, like Russia, is understood to have used this tactic as part of its competition with the EU for influence – for example, by portraying itself as a bulwark against migration into the region<sup>20</sup>. China also has a significant presence in the Western Balkans through its 'Belt and Road' initiative, and related lobbying efforts have been supported by disinformation campaigns, as have efforts to shape political and public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as we will discuss later in this report, neither Turkey nor China appear to support anything like the scale and scope of disinformation operations that Russia has in the Western Balkans.

**Geopolitical insecurity creates opportunities for domestic actors to spread disinformation** as well. Kosovo is a key case in this regard. For example, domestic actors linked to the government of Prime Minister Albin Kurti are believed to have manipulated state media to distribute 'fake news' accusing Vjosa Osmani, an opposition candidate for Prime Minister in the 2019 parliamentary election, of being a Russian agent – a damaging accusation in a country with a strong pro-NATO consensus<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, mainstream politicians in Kosovo are understood by anti-disinformation activists and journalists to be among the biggest producers of disinformation operations<sup>22</sup>. Later, opposition parties found common cause with actors inside and aligned with the Trump Administration, thus contributing to the creation of a distorted narrative that led to the fall of Kurti's government.

Dysfunctional governance, geopolitical insecurity and political disaffection are combined with an equally problematic relationship between citizens and the media in the Western Balkans. The most authoritative

<sup>17</sup> Bajrović, Reuf, Vesko Garčević and Richard Kraemer (2018), 'Hanging by a Thread: Russia's Strategy of Destabilization in Montenegro', *Russian Foreign Policy Papers*, Podgorica: Foreign Policy Research Institute (<https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/07/hanging-by-a-thread-russias-strategy-of-destabilization-in-montenegro/>);

Kajosevic, Samir (2020), 'Montenegro Targeted by 'Fake News Campaign', Ministry Claims', *Balkan Insight*, 14 January (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/01/14/montenegro-complains-on-fake-news-campaign/>).

<sup>18</sup> McLaughlin, Dan (2017), 'Russian Propaganda Exploits Ethnic Tensions to Keep Macedonia Looking Inward, Not Westward', *Coda Story*, 21 March (<https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/information-war/russian-propaganda-exploits-ethnic-tensions-to-keep-macedonia-looking-inward-not-westward/>);

Bakota, Ivica (2019), 'Bosnia-Herzegovina social briefing: Political disinformation in BIH media', *Weekly Briefing*, Budapest: China-CEE Institute (<https://china-cee.eu/2019/06/05/bosnia-herzegovina-social-briefing-political-disinformation-in-bih-media/>).

<sup>19</sup> NATO CoE (2020a), *Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans*, Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (<https://stratcomcoe.org/russias-strategic-interests-and-tools-influence-western-balkans>).

NATO CoE (2020b), *Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija*, Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (<https://stratcomcoe.org/russias-narratives-toward-western-balkans-analysis-sputnik-srbija>).

NATO CoE (2020c), *Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans*, Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (<https://stratcomcoe.org/risks-and-vulnerabilities-western-balkans>).

Doncheva, Tihomira (2020), 'Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media.' Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (<https://stratcomcoe.org/risks-and-vulnerabilities-western-balkans>)

<sup>20</sup> Saatçioğlu, Beken (2019), 'Turkey and the EU: Partners or Competitors in the Western Balkans?', *Analysen*, Berlin: Südosteuropa Mitteilungen (<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=833240>).

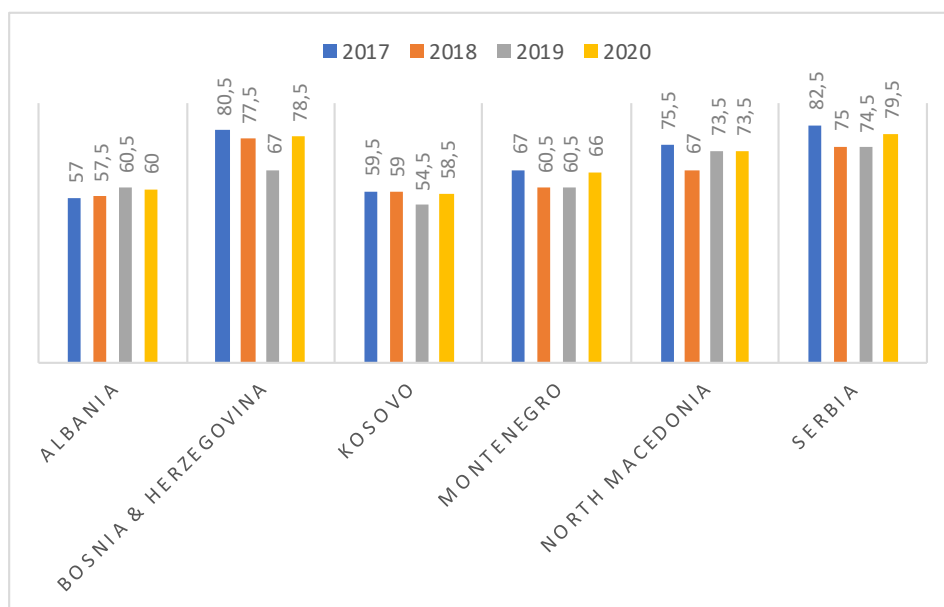
<sup>21</sup> Berisha, Arta (2020)j, 'Kosovo, fake news and politics', Trento: OBC Transeuropa (<https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Kosovo/Kosovo-fake-news-and-politics-200987>).

<sup>22</sup> Fazliu, Eraldin (2019), 'In Kosovo the most common disinformation comes from the politicians', *Meta.mk*, (<https://meta.mk/en/eraldin-fazliu-in-kosovo-the-most-common-disinformation-comes-from-the-politicians/>).



comparative study of media literacy in the region to date, conducted by the Open Society Institute Sofia, found the ability of media consumers to identify and interpret disinformation and other forms of media manipulation to be the lowest in Europe<sup>23</sup>. It found a clear correlation between mistrust of politicians and journalists on the one hand, and low levels of media literacy on the other – a finding that is corroborated by the research on disinformation presented here. Balkan Barometer data confirm that levels of trust in the media throughout the region are even lower than they are for politicians and the state (Figure 3). The result is an environment in which malicious domestic and international actors have ample resources to manipulate the information space and face relatively little resistance from the state, journalists, or from citizens themselves.

**Figure 3: Media mistrust in the Western Balkans<sup>24</sup>**



Source: Balkan Public Barometer

### 2.3 The EU vs disinformation

Countering disinformation in the Western Balkans has proven – as it has elsewhere around the world – to be replete with difficulties. Within the region, international actors including the EU, NATO and others have worked to bolster the ability of governments, journalists and civil society to push back against disinformation<sup>25</sup>. Concerns about its destabilising power in the region led the BBC to re-establish its Serbian

<sup>23</sup> Lessenski, Marin (2019), 'Just think about it. The findings of the Media Literacy Index 2019', *Policy Brief 55*, Sofia: Open Society Institute Sofia ([https://osis.bq/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019\\_-ENG.pdf](https://osis.bq/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019_-ENG.pdf)).

<sup>24</sup> Calculated as the average of the number of respondents who believe that the media are corrupt and the inverse of respondents agreeing that the media are independent of the constitutions.

<sup>25</sup> cf. Marusic, Sinisa Jakov (2020), 'NATO to Help North Macedonia Combat Fake News About Virus', *Balkan Insight*, 15 April (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/15/nato-to-help-north-macedonia-combat-fake-news-about-virus/>);

Perovic, Jelena (2020), 'Media literacy as a long-term response to disinformation', Podgorica: UNICEF Montenegro (<https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/stories/media-literacy-long-term-response-disinformation>);

Rademaker, Michel and Jovana Perovska (2019), 'Strategic Communications Capability Building in the Western Balkans', *HCSS Security*, Hague: The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (<https://hcss.nl/report/strategic-communications-capability-building-western-balkans>);

Tardáguila, Cristina (2019), 'Macedonia has a plan to quit being known as 'fake news land'', St. Petersburg, Fla.: The Poynter Institute (<https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2019/macedonia-has-a-plan-to-quit-being-known-as-fake-news-land/>).

service in 2018<sup>26</sup>. Similar efforts have been undertaken by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Unfortunately, there is far from sufficient evidence to gauge the effectiveness of any of these efforts. What is certain is that **whatever headway these and other domestic projects have made in challenging fake narratives, educating media consumers and reinforcing credible news sources, disinformation operators have themselves adapted to stay ahead of the curve**<sup>27</sup>.

In some cases, **powerful political interests have been able to co-opt anti-disinformation legislation in order to protect their own ability to benefit from disinformation operations**. In Albania, for example, watchdogs have accused Prime Minister Edi Rama of tailoring anti-disinformation legislation to silence opponents, while leaving loopholes for his own extensive media resources<sup>28</sup>. Governmental attempts to regulate against 'fake news' in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been discredited by valid concerns that states may use anti-disinformation laws as a cover for censorship<sup>29</sup>. In Montenegro, in turn, opposition activists have been among the most prominent targets of anti-disinformation prosecution<sup>30</sup>.

In this context, the role of the EU – which can bring to bear both normative power and significant resources – is potentially decisive. Recognising the importance of cross-border collaboration to ensure the integrity of both national and European institutions in the face of information disorder and disinformation, **the EU created a High-Level Expert Group in 2017, whose work then fed into the Commission's development of a 'European Approach' to 'tackling online disinformation'**<sup>31</sup>. This approach and the associated Action Plan are focused on four key pillars:

- (1) transparency of information sources;
- (2) diversity of voices and views;
- (3) credibility of institutions;
- (4) inclusiveness of social interests.

Building on these four pillars, the Action Plan mandates an ambitious, ongoing programme of interventions, including:

- (1) research into the nature of disinformation and media consumption;
- (2) monitoring of disinformation sources and messages;
- (3) education of media consumers, journalists and advocates;

<sup>26</sup> Nardelli, Alberto and Mark Di Stefano (2018), 'The BBC Is Fighting Against Russian Disinformation With A News Service In Serbia', *BuzzFeed News*, 24 November (<https://www.buzzfeed.com/albertonardelli/bbc-serbian-russian-disinformation-fake-news-battle>).

<sup>27</sup> cf. Karović, Alisa (2020), 'Open-source analysis: Foreign instigators and local amplifiers – Disinformation in Bosnia', *Zasto ne*, 22 March (<https://medium.com/dfrlab/open-source-analysis-foreign-instigators-and-local-amplifiers-disinformation-in-bosnia-5125049cf28>).

<sup>28</sup> Mehilli, Elidor (2020), 'Albania's plan against disinformation lets Facebook and powerful politicians off the hook', *Salon*, 29 February ([https://www.salon.com/2020/02/29/albanias-plan-against-disinformation-lets-facebook-and-powerful-politicians-off-the-hook\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2020/02/29/albanias-plan-against-disinformation-lets-facebook-and-powerful-politicians-off-the-hook_partner/)).

<sup>29</sup> Kovacevic, Danijel (2020), 'Bosnia Trying to Censor Information About Pandemic, Journalists Say', *Balkan Insight*, 8 April (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/08/bosnia-trying-to-censor-information-about-pandemic-journalists-say/>).

<sup>30</sup> Kajosevic, Samir (2020), 'Montenegro Detains Opposition Activist Over Fake News About President', *Balkan Insight*, 10 April (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/10/montenegro-detains-opposition-activist-over-fake-news-about-president/>).

<sup>31</sup> European Commission (2018c), 'A multi-dimensional approach to disinformation', *Report of the independent High-Level Group on fake news and online disinformation*, Brussels: European Commission (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/6ef4df8b-4cea-11e8-be1d-01aa75ed71a1>).

- (4) support for journalists and independent, credible and responsible media outlets, particularly in non-democratic contexts;
- (5) both rapid and long-term response interventions, including counter measures against domestic and foreign malicious actors<sup>32</sup>.

In pursuit of this agenda, **the Commission has disseminated an 'EU Code of Practice on Disinformation'**, giving rise to an open-ended interaction with public and private stakeholders, including major internet and social media companies, designed to assure a commonality of standards and interests<sup>33</sup>.

Even before the creation of the High-Level Expert Group and the launch of the EU Action Plan, countering disinformation was an important part of the work of the EEAS, and the Council has continued to put significant emphasis on the Service's Strategic Communications Taskforce as the spearhead of the EU's rapid response capability<sup>34</sup>. As elsewhere, **much of the activity of the Service's StratComms (Strategic Communications) Taskforce has focused on pushing back against Russian disinformation operations**, whether related to Ukraine, or the chemical weapons attack in Salisbury<sup>35</sup>.

Similarly, **the EEAS StratComms taskforce – including under the new 'EUvsDisinfo' branding<sup>36</sup> – has led EU efforts to counteract COVID-19 related disinformation, understood to be disseminated both by domestic interests and by those linked to China<sup>37</sup>**. Increasingly, this has become a cross-institutional policy priority, including interventions from the EEAS and the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and political leadership across the EU and Member States<sup>38</sup>. This is, however, far from the first time that the EU has made countering disinformation part and parcel of achieving its broader policy objectives; it has been an integral aspect of policy vis-à-vis Ukraine since the Euromaidan, for instance<sup>39</sup>. The launch in 2017 of the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid

<sup>32</sup> European Commission (2018a), 'Tackling online disinformation: a European Approach', Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 26 April 2018. COM(2018) 236 final (<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52018DC0236>); European Commission (2018b), 'Action Plan against Disinformation', Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions, Brussels, 5 December 2018. JOIN(2018) 36 final ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation_en)).

<sup>33</sup> European Commission (2018d), 'Code of Practice on Disinformation', DG CONNECT (<https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/code-practice-disinformation>).

<sup>34</sup> European Union External Action Service (2015), 'EU EAST STRATCOM Task Force', Brussels: EEAS (<http://www.tepsa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Kimber.pdf>).

<sup>35</sup> Council of the European Union (2018), 'Outcome of the Council Meeting', 3613rd Council meeting. Foreign Affairs. Luxembourg, 16 April. 7997/18 PRESSE 23 PR CO 23 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/33743/st07997-en18.pdf>).

<sup>36</sup> EU vs DisInfo (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/>).

<sup>37</sup> European Union External Action Service (2020a), 'EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19 Pandemic, 20-27 March 2020', 1 April, Brussels: EEAS ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77996/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-narratives-and-disinformation-around-covid\\_sr](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77996/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-narratives-and-disinformation-around-covid_sr));

European Union External Action Service (2020b), 'EEAS Special Report Update: Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19 Pandemic', 23 April – 18 May', Brussels: EEAS ([https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77996/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-narratives-and-disinformation-around-covid\\_sr](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/77996/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-narratives-and-disinformation-around-covid_sr))

<sup>38</sup> Banks, Martin (2020), 'EU steps up efforts to counter disinformation during COVID-19 crisis', *The Parliament Magazine*, 2 April (<https://www.theparliamentmagazine.eu/news/article/eu-steps-up-efforts-to-counter-disinformation-during-covid19-crisis>).

<sup>39</sup> European Council (2015), 'European Council Meeting (19 and 20 March 2015) – Conclusions', Brussels, 20 March 2015. EUCO 11/15 CO EUR 1 CONCL 1 (<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/03/20/conclusions-european-council/>).

Threats in Helsinki provides a further resource for research and coordination on cross-border disinformation, pursuant to the 2016 EU Joint Framework on Countering Hybrid Threats<sup>40</sup>.

**These measures – while important and meaningful – have been criticised as not fully in proportion with the scale of the challenge, both in terms of the volume of disinformation being produced, and the increasingly sophisticated technology being used to design and perpetrate disinformation campaigns<sup>41</sup>.** To build on the achievements of the European Approach, the Action Plan and the Code of Practice, independent policy analysts have called for the EU to lead a collaborative, cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder process of strengthening institutional and societal resilience<sup>42</sup>. There have also been continuing calls for more research and analysis – and, indeed, the development of a new set of analytical tools and approaches – that would allow the EU, its partners and Member States both to better understand the scale, scope and distribution of the disinformation threat, and to properly evaluate the impact of counter-disinformation responses<sup>43</sup>.

With these imperatives in mind, the European Parliament, in particular, has taken the lead. In **its resolution of 10 October 2019 on ‘Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes’**, the MEPs singled out the Western Balkans for particular attention and called for ‘practical solutions to support and strengthen democratic, independent and diverse media [...] in the countries in the Western Balkans’<sup>44</sup>. Similarly, the European Parliament **recommendation of 19 June 2020 on ‘the Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit’** calls for securing elections and fostering institutional action against disinformation, and for increasing and improving communication about the aid provided by the EU to the Western Balkans, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>45</sup>.

**In support of developing strong coordinated action to achieve these goals, a Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) began work on 23 September 2020<sup>46</sup>.** The Committee’s main role is to ‘assess the level of threats democracies are facing, to propose tools to reinforce [the EU’s] democratic ecosystem and make it more resilient in the face of foreign interference’<sup>47</sup>. One way to approach this is by examining various forms, impacts, and targets of hostile, manipulative interference by external actors in European democratic rules. Moreover, while INGE’s mandate focuses primarily on the EU itself, the Western Balkans, as well as

<sup>40</sup> The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (2019), ‘Montenegro becomes a member of the Hybrid CoE’, 17 May (<https://www.hybridcoe.fi/news/montenegro-becomes-a-member-of-the-hybrid-coe/>).

<sup>41</sup> Scheidt, Mélanie (2019), ‘The European Union versus External Disinformation Campaigns in the Midst of Information Warfare: Ready for the Battle?’, *EU Diplomacy Paper*, Brugge: College of Europe ([https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files\\_force/research-paper/edp\\_1\\_2019\\_scheidt.pdf?download=1](https://www.coleurope.eu/system/files_force/research-paper/edp_1_2019_scheidt.pdf?download=1)).

<sup>42</sup> Pamment, James (2020), ‘The EU Code of Practice on Disinformation: Briefing Note for the New EU Commission’, *Partnership for Countering Influence Operations: Policy Perspectives Series #1*, Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/03/eu-code-of-practice-on-disinformation-briefing-note-for-new-european-commission-pub-81187>).

<sup>43</sup> Pamment, James, Howard Nothhaft, Henrik Agardh-Twetman and Alicia Fjällhed (2018), ‘Countering Information Influence Activities: The State of the Art’, *Research Report*, Lund: Lund University, Department of Strategic Communication ([https://portal.research.lu.se/portal/en/publications/countering-information-influence-activities\(825192b8-9274-4371-b33d-2b11baa5d5ae\).html](https://portal.research.lu.se/portal/en/publications/countering-information-influence-activities(825192b8-9274-4371-b33d-2b11baa5d5ae).html)).

<sup>44</sup> European Parliament (2019), ‘Foreign electoral interference and disinformation in national and European democratic processes’. Texts Adopted P9\_TA(2019)0031 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0031_EN.html)).

<sup>45</sup> European Parliament (2020), ‘The Western Balkans, following the 2020 summit’, Texts Adopted P9\_TA(2020)0168 ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0168_EN.html)).

<sup>46</sup> Special Committee on Foreign Interference in all Democratic Processes in the European Union, including Disinformation (INGE) (<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/committees/en/inge/home/highlights>).

<sup>47</sup> A quotation from INGE’s Chair, Raphaël Glucksmann’s, introduction to the Committee’s first webinar recorded on 21 October 2020 ([https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/special-committee-on-foreign-interference-in-all-democratic-processes-in-european-union-including-di\\_20201021-1300-COMMITTEE-INGE\\_vd](https://multimedia.europarl.europa.eu/en/special-committee-on-foreign-interference-in-all-democratic-processes-in-european-union-including-di_20201021-1300-COMMITTEE-INGE_vd)).

Eastern Partnership countries, represent a key testing ground for the EU's ability to build and extend resilience against disinformation and hybrid warfare<sup>48</sup>.

## 2.4 Methodology

Understanding the impact of disinformation entails answering two questions:

- 1) What were the perpetrators of disinformation trying to achieve?
- 2) Did they achieve it?

Answering the first question – what the targets and goals of disinformation are – requires access to the minds of actors who are practiced in deception, and many of whom are actively seeking to conceal their identity. That access is almost never available to researchers, and the authors of this study are no exception. The solution, then, is to collect and systematise enough evidence to allow us to begin to discern patterns. Thus, if we can observe similar kinds of actors doing similar kinds of things in similar contexts, we can make reasonable judgments about why they were doing it, even if we cannot obtain the equivalent of a confession.

The most insightful and methodologically rigorous studies of disinformation campaigns make up for the lack of access to the minds of disinformation producers by mobilizing vast quantities of data, collected and processed by teams of data scientists, often over the course of years<sup>49</sup>. That kind of approach was not feasible within the confines of this study.

Instead, this study relies, for the first part of its investigation, on a qualitative meta-analysis of published research – conducted by academics, think tanks and investigative journalists – designed to compensate for the scope that would be available through a large-scale quantitative analysis. This includes a review of a rich vein of research, which has made great advances in understanding how disinformation functions around the world, what makes it thrive and – to an admittedly lesser extent – what can help reduce it. This study delves into this data, but not its conclusions, unpacking and synthesising it to produce a uniquely cross-cutting analytical perspective. **In total, 74 confirmed disinformation campaigns conducted over the past two years across the six countries of the region have been reviewed during this process.** (See Figure A1 and Figure A2 in data appendix for details.) Aggregating specific disinformation messages (of which there are millions) into concerted and coherent disinformation campaigns (of which there are dozens) helps to separate the signal from the noise and to see the most significant patterns of disinformation more clearly.

When it comes to the second question – whether the goals of disinformation were achieved, and thus whether people's minds were changed – social and behavioural sciences have the required toolkit, but the sector's sharpest instruments, including mass surveys and targeted focus groups, were likewise not feasible

<sup>48</sup> Hybrid warfare is defined as 'the synchronized use of multiple instruments of power tailored to specific vulnerabilities across the full spectrum of societal functions to achieve synergistic effects'. Multinational Capability Development Campaign (2017), 'Counteracting Hybrid Warfare Project: Understanding Hybrid Warfare', A Multinational Capability Development Campaign project, January ([https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/647776/dar\\_mcdc\\_hybrid\\_warfare.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/647776/dar_mcdc_hybrid_warfare.pdf)).

<sup>49</sup> Ramsay, Gordon and Sam Robertshaw (2019), 'Weaponising News: RT, Sputnik and targeted disinformation', *Report*, London: King's College London, Centre for the Study of Media, Communication & Power (<https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/research-analysis/weaponising-news>);

King, Gary, Jennifer Pan and Margaret E. Roberts (2017), 'How the Chinese Government Fabricates Social Media Posts for Strategic Distraction, Not Engaged Argument', *American Political Science Review*, 111(3): 484-501 (<https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/how-the-chinese-government-fabricates-social-media-posts-for-strategic-distraction-not-engaged-argument/4662DB26E2685BAF1485F14369BD137C>).

within the context of this study. As an alternative, **a series of original case studies have been conducted during the second phase of the research to verify and deepen the conclusions of the meta-analysis. These case studies draw on a combination of primary and secondary sources augmented by an analysis of more than 32 million online interactions across nearly 180 000 relevant social media messages** transmitted within the Western Balkans over the past two years. (See the Appendix for details on how these data were collected and processed.) This allows us to get a sharper view of the scope, scale and potential impact of disinformation in the specific areas studied.

One side-effect of the chosen approach is that individual messages, which do not form part of a campaign, do not make it into the mapping exercise presented in Section 3. Another limitation is that most of the literature, while highly engaging and informative, is anecdotal and qualitative. As a result, the study is careful about the claims that it makes, in order to avoid unfounded conclusions or over-broad generalizations. Finally, while every effort was made to devote equal attention to each country in the region, **the amount of information presented on each country is not exactly equal. This is inevitable: the report reflects what is happening on the ground**, and different countries have different degrees of activity. Moreover, larger media markets generate more data for analysis, and thus allow us to say more and go into further depth.



## 3 Mapping disinformation in the Western Balkans

### 3.1 Albania

Albania's competitive and polarised politics are mirrored by a boisterous and fractious media space. Albania has, in recent years, developed a lively online media market to complement a diverse traditional media landscape, but diversity should not be mistaken for pluralism. Elsewhere in the region, the media market has struggled to subsist on a commercial basis alone. As a result, Albanian media have sought alternative sources of revenue, including serving as mouthpieces for their owners and clients.

**The overwhelming majority of Albanian disinformation is domestic in both its origin and purpose,** and it tends to take one of two forms. **Most prevalent are media-generated attempts to boost traffic** – and thus revenues – through sensationalist reporting, often with little or no regard for the veracity of the information revealed. Alongside commercially oriented disinformation is disinformation produced and disseminated for political purposes. Numerous politicians across the spectrum, including Prime Minister Edi Rama, are accused of using disinformation to boost their own visibility and standing, or sometimes even for no particular purpose at all. In fact, Rama was forced to make a public apology in March 2020 for fabricating allegations that Spanish officials were deploying violent police tactics to stop the spread of COVID-19. His 'evidence' turned out to be a video of Algerian riot police attacking protesters<sup>50</sup>. More nefariously, disinformation is a common bludgeon deployed by the government and its friends against investigative journalists, civil society activists and others seeking to hold powerful interests to account. Rama, however, was on the receiving end of false reports originating from Italy. These were pursued most by Syri.net, a major online news source linked to the opposition Democratic Party, which alleged that Rama's government had allowed the import of 1,300 tons of toxic waste that disappeared from Italy in early 2018<sup>51</sup>.

Simply put, disinformation in Albania is ubiquitous. It is present one way or another across the political spectrum and throughout the media landscape. **Analysis of data from Facebook shows that even the country's highest quality media are important channels for distributing disinformation.** Thus, the most prominent distributors of disinformation on social media include two major television stations – *Top Channel, Albania's*, owned by Vjollca Hoxha and aligned with the opposition, and *Ora News*, owned by Ylli Ndroqi, an oligarch accused of drug trafficking<sup>52</sup>. But the list also includes print and online news outlets with a reputation for high-quality, independent and investigative journalism, *JOQ Albania* and *Gazeta TemA*.

Rarely, however, do any of these instances of disinformation rise to the level of a sustained campaign. The efforts are generally opportunistic, and the goals are superficial. Foreign-source disinformation, on the other hand, is a relatively small part of the Albanian disinformation landscape. There is some evidence of Russian actors seeking to undermine Tirana's commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration. At the instigation

<sup>50</sup> Brakaj, Marjo (2020), 'Si mund tashmangte kryeministri Rama dezinformimin dhe përhapjen e panikut?', *Faktoje.al*, 21 March (<https://faktoje.al/si-mund-tashmangte-kryeministri-rama-dezinformimin-dhe-perhapjen-e-panikut/>).

<sup>51</sup> Baze, Mero (2020), 'Special anti-corruption prosecutor should investigate the story that sought to destabilise Albania', *Gazeta TemA*, 6 June. (<http://www.gazetatema.net/en/special-anti-corruption-prosecutor-should-investigate-the-story-that-sought-to-destabilise-albania/>).

<sup>52</sup> Lindita, Cela (2020), 'Albania Seizes Assets of Media Mogul Accused of Drug Trafficking'. Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, 4 August (<https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/12903-albania-seizes-assets-of-media-mogul-accused-of-drug-trafficking/>).

of the ruling Socialist Party, Albania's parliament passed a resolution in 2019 calling for action against foreign interference in Albanian politics – including through disinformation – and singling out Russia as a particular concern<sup>53</sup>. Albanian fact-checkers have also picked up on reports from the EEAS of Chinese efforts to distort coverage of COVID-19<sup>54</sup>. However, a strong pro-EU and pro-NATO consensus among the Albanian public limits the bandwidth for external actors wishing to undercut the West.

Nonetheless, the European Union, the Council of Europe and the Albanian government have all identified disinformation as a threat to Albanian security and governance (even if the government has itself been accused of using disinformation).

## 3.2 Bosnia and Herzegovina

The media landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to a great extent, mirrors the country's complex constitutional construction, with outlets and audiences divided between the Muslim-Croat Federation on the one hand, and Republika Srpska on the other. News outlets in all three communities and their generally private owners tend to have close relationships with political leaders, hence it is difficult to talk about the media landscape as separate from politics. What we see there is a conglomerate of interests, for whom media messaging is a flexible means to achieve mostly political ends. **The potential of disinformation to exacerbate internal conflicts – and the regional and international conflicts with which they are inextricably linked – is an important tool** in this context. At the same time, escalating ethnic and sectarian struggle does not appear to be an end, in and of itself. Rather, it is a convenient way for both domestic and international actors to achieve other aims, ranging from the attainment and maintenance of power (of importance to domestic actors) to the hindrance of the country's relationship with NATO, in particular (of importance to foreign actors).

While most major media in Bosnia and Herzegovina engage in disinformation in one way or another, they are relatively small players in the game. Among major media, only three outlets are among the most prominent online disinformation channels identified by this study: the private television station *Face TV Sarajevo*, the Serbian-language independent newspaper *Nezavisne novine*, and the Croatian-language news website *Dnevnik.ba*. The bulk of the disinformation flowed from and through smaller news websites and periodicals, such as *Novi Horizonti* and *Cazin Danas*, while myriad dedicated Facebook pages played an equally important role.

The close ties between Republika Srpska and Serbia, meanwhile, mean that media narratives present in Serbia easily and frequently cross the border into the Republika Srpska and vice versa, whether by design or by coincidence. This applies as much to disinformation as it does to any other kind of mediated discourse. COVID-related disinformation, for instance, with a particular interest in views from China, resonated mostly within Republika Srpska, where *Nezavisne novine* reported misleading information about virus mutations in China. *Iskra* – a Serbian-language portal – focused on Chinese assistance to Serbia, while reporting that 'in a series of subtle messages, Xi Jinping hinted that the Chinese leadership consider the coronavirus to be part of a hybrid war waged against China by the United States'.

<sup>53</sup> (2019) 'Ndërhyrje të huaja në proceset elektorale dhe dezinformim', reagon grupi i PS-së me një projektrezolutë', *Top Channel*, 29 October (<http://top-channel.tv/2019/10/29/nderhyrje-te-huaja-ne-proceset-elektorale-dhe-dezinformim-reagon-grupi-i-ps-se-me-nje-projektrezolute/>).

<sup>54</sup> (2020) "EEAS", analizë të lajmeve dezinformuese në "epokën" e koronavirusit "COVID-19", *Faktoje.al*, 21 March (<https://faktoje.al/eeas-analize-dezinformimi-ne-epoken-e-koronavirusit-co-vid-19/>).



An inordinate amount of the disinformation captured by this study focused on Republika Srpska and – unlike in most other countries in the region, where most disinformation is domestic – the most prominent campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina were predominantly international in nature. These included:

- a campaign, culminating in September 2018 and spearheaded by the Russian state media outlet *Sputnik* from its Western Balkans base in Belgrade (and aided by a network of pro-Russian webpages and social media groups in both Serbia and Republika Srpska), to frame centrist presidential candidate Milorad Dodik as a Western agent allegedly contributing to the eventual victory of nationalist candidate Milorad Dodik<sup>55</sup>;
- rumours circulated in various Serbian-language media 2017 of plans by the US and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) to carry out a terrorist attack in Republika Srpska, designed to increase anti-Western sentiment ahead of the presidential elections in 2018<sup>56</sup>;
- two campaigns aimed at stoking xenophobia on the Serbian side from January to June 2018, including allegations that Bosniak paramilitary groups were stockpiling weapons and that Muslims were desecrating Serbian graves, and anti-Albanian diatribes ostensibly authored by the respected American left-wing academic Noam Chomsky.

Most of those campaigns that did not target Republika Srpska specifically focused, one way or another, on sentiment vis-à-vis the European Union. These included, most prominently:

- allegations in the spring and summer of 2017 that the EU was preparing to re-draw national boundaries in the Western Balkans (primarily to the detriment of Serbs)<sup>57</sup>;
- fear-mongering throughout 2018 regarding migration to the Western Balkans, coupled with the accusation that the EU promotes migration in order to undermine national governments<sup>58</sup>;
- xenophobic portrayals throughout 2018 of EU values as incompatible with values held in the Western Balkans<sup>59</sup>.

All these sustained campaigns stretched across multiple media outlets and social media communities, including those that tend to re-transmit pro-Moscow and pro-Belgrade messages. It cannot be determined, however, whether these were coordinated from outside the country.

<sup>55</sup> Cvjetičanin, Tijana, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan, Biljana Livančić-Milić. (2019), 'Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The case of BiH, Citizens', Citizens' Association "Why Not", ([https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation\\_in\\_the\\_online\\_sphere\\_The\\_case\\_of\\_BiH\\_ENG.pdf](https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf)).

Cvjetičanin, Tijana (2018), 'Sputnik Srbija' i izbori u BiH: O Dodiku sve najbolje', Raskrinkavanje.ba, 29 September (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/sputnik-srbija-i-izbori-u-bih-o-dodiku-sve-najbolje>).

<sup>56</sup> Cvjetičanin, Zulejhić, Brkan, Livančić-Milić. (2019) 'Disinformation'; Cvjetičanin (2018), 'Sputnik Srbija'.

<sup>57</sup> Zulejhić, Emir. (2018) "Ruske mape i evropska strategija proširenja". Raskrinkavanje.ba, 1 February (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ruske-mape-i-evropska-strategija-prosirenja>).

<sup>58</sup> Cvjetičanin, Zulejhić, Brkan, Livančić-Milić. (2019) 'Disinformation'; Cvjetičanin, Tijana (2018), 'Kako je "vijest" sa Youtube-a završila na javnom servisu RS', Raskrinkavanje.ba, 1 August (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/kako-je-vijest-sa-youtube-a-završila-na-javnom-servisu-r-s>).

<sup>59</sup> Cvjetičanin, Zulejhić, Brkan, Livančić-Milić (2019), 'Disinformation'; Zulejhić, Emir (2018), 'Ni Švedanima nije potreban papir za seks', Raskrinkavanje.ba, 5 July (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/ni-svedanima-nije-potreban-papir-za-seks>).

### 3.3 Kosovo

Within the context of the Western Balkans, Kosovar politics and media – and, as a result, Kosovo’s disinformation landscape – are peculiarly international, comparable to Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is a result of Kosovo’s contested status, which both exacerbates its governance challenges and subjects it to the logic of much more powerful geopolitical interests. Thus, the absence of normalization with Serbia, while having important direct consequences for Kosovo’s economy, is neither an internal nor simply a bilateral issue: it is a matter of strategic importance not only to Pristina and Belgrade, but also to Moscow and Washington (not to mention Brussels, Berlin and other EU capitals). And while the Western Balkans play host to a great many foreign geopolitical interests, those interests take on a uniquely existential aspect when it comes to Kosovo. Thus, foreign players are not merely interested in manipulating Kosovar politics to their own ends: they have clear stakes in the very success or failure of Kosovo as a state.

As a result, foreign affairs dominate the domestic news agenda in Kosovo to an unusual degree. News coverage focuses heavily not only on Kosovo’s formal diplomatic relations, but also on informal statements by international notables about Kosovo. By the same token, coverage of seemingly domestic affairs, such as corruption in government, often focuses on the question of how the news will affect Kosovo’s perception in the world. As Kosovo’s government relies more on the support and cooperation of foreign actors than most other states, even a symbolic deterioration in relations trigger powerful shockwaves in Pristina.

The most notable case of disinformation in Kosovo – and one of the few cases in which a political outcome can be directly attributed to disinformation – illustrates the complexity of the phenomenon. Early in 2020, US President Donald Trump, to bolster his re-election campaign, turned his sights on negotiating a settlement between Kosovo and Serbia<sup>60</sup>. The task of negotiating was handed to Ambassador Richard Grenell, a former Acting Director of National Intelligence who was appointed Special Envoy for Serbia and Kosovo Peace Negotiations. Frustrated at what he saw as obstruction from Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti, Ambassador Grenell apparently arranged for Senator David Perdue and the US President’s son, Donald Trump Jr., to make a statement on Twitter suggesting that the US withdraw its troops from Kosovo<sup>61</sup>. Ambassador Grenell then carried that threat – which was not made by a US official – into negotiations with Kurti’s coalition partners, engineering a vote of no confidence that brought down Kurti’s government<sup>62</sup>. The move was widely denounced in Europe, including a joint demarche by the French and German ambassadors in Pristina<sup>63</sup>. As this example shows, a foreign actor was able to manufacture an entirely fictional threat and thereby engineer a change of government.

Much of the disinformation reviewed for this study is comparable with the Grenell affair, albeit with less dire consequences. Frequently, **the Kosovar media would pick up on statements made elsewhere –**

<sup>60</sup> Drum, Kevin (2020), ‘Why the Fuss Over the Serbia-Kosovo Treaty?’, *motherjones.com*, 8 September (<https://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2020/09/why-the-fuss-over-the-serbia-kosovo-treaty/>).

<sup>61</sup> *Balkan Insight* (2020), ‘Donald Trump Junior Urges US Troop Withdrawal from Kosovo’, 10 March (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/10/donald-trump-junior-urges-us-troop-withdrawal-from-kosovo/>).

<sup>62</sup> *The Guardian* (2020), ‘Kosovans look on aghast as government falls while coronavirus bites’, 26 March (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/26/kosovo-government-falls-in-vote-of-no-confidence>).

*The Guardian* (2020), ‘Kosovan acting PM accuses Trump envoy of meddling’, 20 April (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/20/kosovan-acting-pm-accuses-trump-envoy-of-meddling>).

<sup>63</sup> France au Kosovo (2020), ‘Ambassadors of [FR] and [DE] joint demarche to Deputy PM Hoti stepping in for Chairman M. Mustafa to voice concerns of both capitals. Stay at the side of Kosovo people in crisis. Invite LDK to reconsider no-confidence vote and maintain trusted and stable government to face challenges.’

(<https://twitter.com/franceaukosovo/status/1242465150134878213?lang=en>).

**often by Serbian politicians or media outlets – and present them to readers or viewers as official slights against Kosovo.** The resulting indignation could be channelled for political purposes (as in the Grenell affair) or, more frequently, simply used as clickbait to boost readership. Three recent indicative examples include:

- April 2020 – Russia’s state-owned Serbian-language outlet *Sputnik Serbia* falsely reported ‘Kosovo to secede from ‘Electric Network of Serbia’ as of Monday’<sup>64</sup>;
- April 2020 – *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’<sup>65</sup>. This report was a misrepresentation of a report in the *EU Observer* in which Serbian civil society organisations called for cooperation with Kosovo in combating COVID-19<sup>66</sup>;
- May 2020 – the Serbian website *Informer* claimed that Kosovar Albanians were planning to kidnap Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic in retribution for statements he made on Kosovo<sup>67</sup>.

These **opportunistic campaigns, however, play at the margins of long-running disinformation campaigns designed to delegitimise Kosovo’s statehood, undermine its relations with Europe and destabilise its governance.** Core narratives in these long-running campaigns include:

- allegations that Kosovo is a mafia state, operating under the protection of Kosovo Force (KFOR) and thus with the implicit support of western powers;
- invention and/or exaggeration of threats to the safety and property of ethnic Serbs and other minorities living in Kosovo;
- insinuations that Kosovo is incapable of sustainable self-governance without support from Serbia.

Looking beyond these campaigns, the key disinformation channels in Kosovo, according to the social media analysis conducted for this study, fall broadly into two categories. These include mainstream media outlets, such as the television station *Klan Kosova* (owned by Tirana-based media mogul Aleksander Frangaj), state-owned regional broadcaster *RTV Besa*, the newspapers *Gazeta Express* and *Zëri*, and politicians including LDK (Democratic League of Kosovo) leader Isa Mustafa and PDK (Democratic Party of Kosovo) leader Kadri Veseli<sup>68</sup>. The social media messaging coming from Mustafa and Veseli furthered the deception of the Grenell affair, in particular.

Finally, Kosovo is not immune to the disinformation narratives that have plagued the rest of the region (and the world). Thus, *Zëri* prominently ran a misleading story about a Kosovar pharmaceutical company that had supposedly developed a promising treatment for COVID-19. The website KultPlus.com, in turn, insinuated a nefarious role for Bill Gates in the pandemic. With the exception of COVID-related disinformation, however, levels of disinformation on other fronts – including geopolitical influence from Russia, Turkey and China, and in elections more broadly – were lower in Kosovo than in most other parts of the region. (See Chapter 4 for more detail.)

<sup>64</sup> *Sputnik Serbia* (2020), ‘Косово се од понедељка отцепљује и од „Електромрежа Србије’, April 15 (<https://rs.sputniknews.com/politika/202004151122348800-lazna-drzava-otcepljuje-mrezu-kosovo-od-ponedeljkan-elektromreza-srbije/>).

<sup>65</sup> *Sputnik Serbia* (2020), ‘Кад је криза, за ЕУ је Косово – српско’, April 1 (<https://rs.sputniknews.com/analize/202004011122228765-kad-je-kriza-za-eu-je-kosovo-srpsko-brana/>).

<sup>66</sup> *EU Observer* (2020), ‘Serbian CSOs call for cooperation with Kosovo in combating COVID-19’, March 30 (<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/03/30/serbian-csos-call-for-cooperation-with-kosovo-in-combating-covid-19/>).

<sup>67</sup> *Informer* (2020), ‘ALBANCI HTELI DA OTMU ĐOKOVIĆA ZBOG IZJAVA O KOSOVU! Otkriveni svi detalji drame, Novak izgubio i pobegao iz Londona!’, May 6 (<https://informer.rs/sport/tenis/515710/albanci-hteli-otmu-djokovica-zbog-izjava-kosovu-otkriveni-svi-detajli-drame-novak-izgubio-pobegao-londona>).

<sup>68</sup> In November 2020 Veseli resigned as PDK leader to face trial at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers located at The Hague.

### 3.4 Montenegro

Montenegro's media environment mirrors the country's political landscape – concentrated, and with limited pluralism and contestation. The landscape is dominated by a small core of establishment media closely linked to President Milo Đukanović and his party, the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) (including the newspapers *Pobjeda* and *Dnevne novine*), and a somewhat larger group aligned with the For the Future of Montenegro (ZBCG) party that currently forms the government (including *Večerne Novosti*, *Kurir*, and the Serbia-based newspaper *Danas*). These media outlets compete for public attention with a host of smaller, often tabloid-style and entertainment-oriented publications.

As elsewhere in the region, Serbian media resonates powerfully in Montenegro. This is a factor related to both the close socio-cultural ties between the two societies, which were part of a single state until 2006, and the relative size and discursive power of the Serbian media system relative to its much smaller neighbour. The result is that significant Serbian media narratives – factual and otherwise – generally make their way into Montenegrin discourse. Moreover, developments in Montenegro are themselves frequently the subject of coverage and commentary in Serbian media, which in turn provokes responses in Montenegro. Major Serbian media outlets are generally understood to support the ZBCG.

Mapping disinformation in Montenegro with any accuracy is unusually difficult. The academic, think-tank and investigative literature that makes up the first pillar of this study is extremely thin. In addition, Facebook – which provided the data for the second pillar of the study – is not particularly popular in Montenegro, with the result being data that is too sparse to support analysis. What follows, as a result, is inevitably impressionistic.

**Montenegro is noticeably the subject of significant external disinformation activity.** First and foremost, this relates to the 2016 attempted *coup d'état* against then-Prime Minister Đukanović. Although the full circumstances remain unclear – and, to some degree, deliberately so – it is generally accepted that Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate of the General Staff of the Armed Forces (GRU) worked with Montenegrin and Serbian nationalists to prevent Đukanović's re-election and, in doing so, prevent the country's NATO accession<sup>69</sup>. Analysis by NATO and the US Department of Defense has shown that the coup attempt was accompanied, preceded and followed by disinformation related activities. These aimed to prepare the ground for a change of power, distracting public attention at the critical moment and then providing obfuscation to cover the GRU's tracks<sup>70</sup>. Moscow has continued to deny its involvement and has deployed disinformation against both Đukanović and independent researchers, including Bellingcat<sup>71</sup>.

Subsequent to the coup attempt – and to Montenegro's 2017 NATO accession – Russian-linked media continued to mobilise public opinion against NATO. This included a prominent 'fake' news story about NATO KFOR soldiers using satanic symbols, which originated on a Montenegrin website (*in4s.net*). It was then picked up by *Večerni Novosti* and *Sputnik Serbia*, eventually making the rounds on a wide network of

<sup>69</sup> Grozev, Christo (2017), 'Balkan Gambit: Part 2. The Montenegro Zugzwang', *Bellingcat*, 25 March (<https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2017/03/25/balkan-gambit-part-2-montenegro-zugzwang/>).

<sup>70</sup> Letic, Slobodan (2019), 'First NATO counter-hybrid warfare team to deploy to Montenegro', 9 November (<https://www.stripes.com/news/europe/first-nato-counter-hybrid-warfare-team-to-deploy-to-montenegro-1.606562>)

<sup>71</sup> [www.bellingcat.com](http://www.bellingcat.com); Bellingcat is an independent, open-source intelligence organisation, known for its investigations into topical and internationally disputed cases of state and state-linked malfeasance. Prominent investigations carried out by Bellingcat have focused on the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH-17 over eastern Ukraine, the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury, the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime in the Syrian civil war, and the use of excessive force against Black Lives Matter protesters in Portland, USA.

major and minor Serbian-language publications around the Western Balkans within a matter of hours<sup>72</sup>. A 2020 campaign – propagated in similar ways and either instigated or amplified by *Sputnik* – concerns distorted (though not entirely fabricated) accusations that the Montenegrin Orthodox Church and the Montenegrin government expropriated houses of worship belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church<sup>73</sup>. Independent observers believe that this helped shift public opinion ahead of the victory of the pro-Russian and anti-NATO ZBCG in August 2020.

In this respect, it may be instructive to compare Russian approaches – and their evidenced impact – in 2016 and 2020. The coup attempt, while bold, was born of weakness. The structural leverage that Moscow once held in Podgorica, by virtue of industrial holdings and the importance of flows of Russian money into Montenegro, had begun to wane for several years prior to the attempted coup. Moscow's international isolation and diminished financial liquidity after the annexation of Crimea, meanwhile, meant that there were fewer resources it could put on the negotiating table in return for a shift in Montenegro's stance towards NATO and the EU. Interestingly, however, the failed coup does not appear to have come at a high cost for Russia. Switching back to soft power, Russia mobilised *Sputnik* and its networks in the Serbian-speaking world to the support of the ZBCG and against Đukanović<sup>74</sup>. While it is not possible to estimate the impact that *Sputnik* and various anti-NATO and anti-EU messages may have had on the 2020 election, it seems inevitable that the ZBCG benefited, at least to some degree, from these efforts.

Not all Montenegrin disinformation is international in nature, however. Đukanović himself poured further disinformation into the uproar around the coup, eventually – and without corroborated evidence – adding opposition leaders Milan Knežević and Andrija Mandić to the list of prosecuted co-conspirators<sup>75</sup>. Separately, in March 2020, the government publicly leaked the identities of the country's first confirmed coronavirus cases, leading to death threats and online intimidation against COVID-19 patients. It is believed this was done both to generate traffic through sensationalist coverage, and to improve the government's record of handling the pandemic<sup>76</sup>.

### 3.5 North Macedonia

North Macedonian society and politics provide no shortage of fissures into which the wedge of disinformation can be fruitfully inserted. **Disinformation campaigns catalogued for this study aimed, in roughly equal measure, to exacerbate internal conflicts** (particularly between ethnic Macedonian and ethnic Albanian communities), **damage North Macedonia's international relations** (particularly with Bulgaria, Greece and the EU more broadly), **and to disrupt or distort critical electoral processes** – chiefly, the September 2018 referendum on adopting the name of North Macedonia, which had consequences for the country's further European integration<sup>77</sup>.

**An unusual proportion of the disinformation campaigns at work in North Macedonia focus on international issues.** In part, this is because many of the key issues on North Macedonia's political agenda

<sup>72</sup> Lekic (2019), 'First NATO counter-hybrid warfare'.

<sup>73</sup> Kajosevic, Samir (2020), 'Serbian Church, Montenegro Govt to Discuss Disputed Religion Law', *Balkan Insight*, 10 March (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/10/serbian-church-montenegro-govt-to-discuss-disputed-religion-law/>).

<sup>74</sup> Stronski, Paul, 'Russia's Game in the Balkans', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 6 February (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>).

<sup>75</sup> Cf Bajrović et al (2018).

<sup>76</sup> Kajosevic, Samir, 'Montenegrin Coronavirus Patients' Identities Exposed Online', *Balkan Insight*, 18 March (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/18/montenegrin-coronavirus-patients-identities-exposed-online/>).

<sup>77</sup> The referendum, which was subject to calls for a boycott, failed due to low turnout.



– the name change and NATO accession, in particular – have a clear geopolitical context, and in part because the country’s domestic divisions involve cross-border and diasporic communities. Unlike elsewhere (in Montenegro, for example), however, support for NATO membership in North Macedonia runs at 79 percent (as of March 2020) and thus transcends ethnic divides<sup>78</sup>. As a result, NATO is not an easy target, if the goal is to exacerbate and manipulate divisions. Instead, **disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia that involve foreign relations focus overwhelmingly on issues of identity** – whether the name change, or inter-ethnic relations – rather than on issues of integration or geopolitical allegiance.

Unlike most countries in the region, where media landscapes have been relatively stable for a decade or more, North Macedonia has seen two significant shifts in the structure of its media systems, both of which have had consequences for the production and dissemination of disinformation.

First, during the rule of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) from 2006 to 2017, and especially in its final years, mainstream media were under the tight control of the party, and were involved in almost all the disinformation activities of the party. These aimed, primarily, to discredit political opponents and promote nationalistic – and often anti-western – standpoints. After the change of government, the key TV stations changed their editorial processes, and reporting became more balanced and professional<sup>79</sup>. Some of these once prominent sources of disinformation and smear campaigns have continued to be active, but mostly without access to mainstream media. Instead, they are now marginalised, and can only be found on selected local TV outlets, or on their own YouTube channels, where their outreach is comparatively lower.

Second, the past few years have seen growing investment activity from Hungary in the Macedonian media market. Hungarian nationals linked to Hungary’s pro-government media market have bought several Macedonian media outlets previously owned by people close to VMRO-DPMNE (such as *TV Alfa*, and the internet portals *Kurir* and *Republika*), which had previously been among the primary sources of pro-governmental propaganda. While VMRO-DPMNE has been in opposition, these media outlets have been involved in numerous disinformation campaigns, not only to discredit the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) government, but also to undermine the Prespa Agreement with Greece and the other Euro-Atlantic efforts of the country.

Macedonian investigative journalists have discovered that more than EUR 3.2 million were injected into North Macedonia’s media sector via several shady transactions for marketing services. The money was mostly transferred from Slovenian firms owned by the same Hungarian citizen, Péter Schatz, who owns two media companies in North Macedonia that received the money for fictitious advertisements of olive oil and refrigerator magnets. These transactions are now under investigation by the Macedonian and Slovenian authorities<sup>80</sup>.

It has been argued that these investments are part of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán’s project of expanding his media influence beyond Hungary to other countries in which his euro-sceptic values of ‘illiberal democracy’ might resonate<sup>81</sup>. It has been argued that this project involves not only Macedonia,

<sup>78</sup> [www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20North%20Macedonia%20March%202020%20Report%20result%20English.pdf](http://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20North%20Macedonia%20March%202020%20Report%20result%20English.pdf)

<sup>79</sup> Gjuzelov, Borjan and Milka I. Hadjievska (2020), ‘Institutional and symbolic aspects of illiberal politics: the case of North Macedonia (2006–2017)’, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 20(1), 41–60. ([www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683857.2019.1672941](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14683857.2019.1672941)).

<sup>80</sup> Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia (2020), ‘Мрсно платената орбанова пропагандна машина под истрага за перење пари’, *IRL.mk*, 29 February (<https://irl.mk/mrsno-platenata-orbanova-propagandna-mashina-pod-istraga-za-peree-pari/>).

<sup>81</sup> Jovanovska et. al. (2018), ‘Right Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans’, *Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia*, 4 November (<https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>).

but also Slovenia and even the United Kingdom, where Orbán has an interest in expanding his illiberal ideology<sup>82</sup>. It is also important to note the close connection between Orbán and Gruevski (North Macedonia's former Prime Minister, and former VMRO-DPMNE leader), who was controversially given asylum in Hungary to avoid a prison sentence in North Macedonia.

Looking across the Macedonian media landscape, including Albanian-language media, prominent disinformation campaigns include:

- Several interwoven campaigns undermining support for the name-change referendum. These have been pushed from various directions, most prominently from the Hungarian owned *Republika* and, to a somewhat lesser extent, by *Sputnik*. They centre around polarising narratives that involve imagined threats to Macedonian identity<sup>83</sup>;
- A suite of disinformation campaigns, mixing anti-Bulgarian, anti-Greek and anti-Albanian sentiment with fears that Macedonian youth would become 'cannon fodder' for NATO wars, and allegations that NATO would force the development of 5G technology with harmful effects for health and public safety;<sup>84</sup>
- Tied to the appointment of Talat Xhaferi, an ethnic Albanian, as parliamentary speaker in early 2017 and the enactment of legislation widening the use of Albanian as an official language, Russian- and Hungarian-linked media and others stoked fears of 'Greater Albania', as well as alleged EU and NATO backing for the supposed project. This aimed to disrupt and distort elections and post-election settlements, and included dissemination by Russia-linked actors<sup>85</sup>;
- Accusations of the 'weaponisation' of COVID-19 by neighbouring countries, including Albania and Greece<sup>86</sup>.

Disinformation campaigns in North Macedonia tend to have important social media components – most prominently on Facebook, as well as YouTube and Twitter – but rely critically on traditional media, especially community and local media, newspapers and periodicals, and television, for their dissemination. Mainstream media, however, are no longer prominently represented among the largest disinformation distribution channels, as per the data analysed for this study. The one exception is *TV21*, which is generally recognised as a high-quality television station, but was involved in spreading COVID-related disinformation. Other large-scale disinformation channels, as uncovered in our social media analysis, include the website *Infomax.mk*, social media accounts associated with the referendum boycott campaign, and the social media accounts of prominent individuals, including opposition leader Hristijan Mickoski, anti-Western commentator Milenko Nedelkovski, and former Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski.

Among widely distributed disinformation 'stories' were the theory that Hydroxychloroquine can cure COVID-19 (most prominently associated with Donald Trump) and Bill Gates's allegedly nefarious plans to vaccinate the world (promoted by *TV21* and *News24* respectively, but both evidently originating in Albania), and a call by Nedelkovski to prosecute Gates for crimes against humanity.

<sup>82</sup> Mutler, Alison (2018), 'Pro-Orban media moguls who destroyed Hungary's media now targeting European outlets', *Codastory*, 28 June (<https://codastory.com/disinformation/orban-media-moguls-targeting-european-outlets/>).

<sup>83</sup> Meta.MK (2019), 'Hungarian funding supports spread of disinformation between Greece, Slovenia and North Macedonia' (<https://meta.mk/en/hungarian-funding-supports-spread-of-disinformation-between-greece-slovenia-and-north-macedonia/>).

Анастасовска (2018), 'Топ-5 дезинформации';

Wemer (2019), 'The Western Balkans'.

<sup>84</sup> Илиевски (2018), 'ТОП 5 најголеми манипулации'.

<sup>85</sup> McLaughlin, (2017), 'Russian Propaganda'.

<sup>86</sup> Meta.mk (2020), 'False news about Greek border regime used for inciting ethnic and religious tensions in North Macedonia', 5 June (<https://meta.mk/en/fake-news-about-greece-border-regime-used-for-inciting-ethnic-and-religious-tensions-in-north-macedonia/>).

### 3.6 Serbia

Despite playing host to one of the region's central distribution channels for transnational disinformation – Russia's *Sputnik Serbia* – **international actors play a relatively minor role in the Serbian disinformation landscape**. Of the major campaigns catalogued for this study, few had any significant foreign involvement. Of those, fewer than half involved Russia directly. More frequently, **Serbian transnational disinformation campaigns were outward looking or reciprocal, with interacting and reinforcing messages crossing borders**, particularly with Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska) and Montenegro.

The Serbian media landscape is dominated by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and President Vučić. Over the past several years, observers have noted a deterioration in the quality of media coverage, characterised by favourable reporting on and a lack of criticism of president Vučić and his circle<sup>87</sup>. A primary role in state-sponsored disinformation campaigns is played by TV stations (prominently, *TV Pink*) and tabloids, including *Kurir*, *Informer*, and *Srpski telegraf*, which have significant reach and are used to echo the ruling party's smear campaigns against the opposition<sup>88</sup>. Social media analysis conducted for this study, meanwhile, found that a suite of nationalist publications (*Nacionalist*, *Tsrvene Beretke*, *Intermagazin.rs*, *Sandžacke*), and a handful of high-profile individuals (including politicians, and a prominent economic commentator) played a particularly important role. These outlets and individuals are characterised by negative reporting about the EU, NATO and the west in general, while at the same time often fostering pro-Russian discourse<sup>89</sup>. Moreover, there have been allegations of a large number of fake social media profiles, groups and pages that have been used for disinformation purposes. In April 2020, for instance, Twitter deleted 8,558 Twitter accounts from Serbia, with the explanation that they were state-backed fake accounts connected to the main ruling party<sup>90</sup>.

An informal arrangement seems to apply to the operations of *Sputnik Serbia*, the Russian state-owned news agency based in Belgrade. While disinformation campaigns spearheaded by *Sputnik Serbia* are prominent throughout the region – particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia – they are not especially visible in Serbia itself. Instead, Serbian and Russian state messaging appears to be broadly coordinated on a higher level. There have, however, been two notable exceptions. First, in 2016, President Vučić supported claims that the Russian GRU had been behind the attempted coup in Montenegro, drawing condemnation from Moscow. Then, in the summer of 2020, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova accused Vučić, in vulgar terms, of selling himself to Washington over the proposed deal with Kosovo on economic normalisation. Vladimir Putin eventually apologised on her behalf<sup>91</sup>. Generally, *Sputnik Serbia* does not appear to engage independently in Serbian politics the way it might elsewhere. It does, however, produce material that Serbian media outlets (and others in the region) can repurpose in order to achieve disinformation aims.

As such, **the bulk of Serbian disinformation aims to shift opinions vis-à-vis elections, public figures or internal Serbian politics more broadly**. The discursive fields in which these battles are fought,

<sup>87</sup> 'Medijski sektor', *Media Ownership Monitor* (<http://serbia.mom-rsf.org/rs/mediji/media-landscape/>).

<sup>88</sup> Meister, Stefan, 'Understanding Russian Communication Strategy - Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia', *SSOAR Open Access Repository* ([https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article\\_pdfs/Understanding%20Russian%20Communication%20Strategy%20-%20Case%20Studies%20of%20Serbia%20and%20Estonia.pdf](https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/Understanding%20Russian%20Communication%20Strategy%20-%20Case%20Studies%20of%20Serbia%20and%20Estonia.pdf)).

<sup>89</sup> Vuk Velebit (2019), 'Proruski narativ u srpskim medijima (3) – Vučićeva uloga', *Talas*, 24 May (<https://talas.rs/2019/05/24/pro-ruski-narativ-treci-deo>).

<sup>90</sup> *The Guardian*, 'Twitter deletes 20,000 fake accounts linked to Saudi, Serbian and Egyptian governments', 3 April (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/apr/02/twitter-accounts-deleted-linked-saudi-arabia-serbia-egypt-governments>).

<sup>91</sup> *BBC News*, 'Putin apology to Serbia over Russian spokeswoman Zakharova' (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-54120382>).



however, vary widely. Roughly a third of campaigns reviewed focus on NATO or the EU, a third on the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and post-war 'reconciliation', and the rest on electoral politics and COVID-19.

Economic commentator Branko Dragaš, for example, has achieved significant visibility with claims that China engineered COVID-19 to organise a colossal 'short' trade on Wall Street (an idea that was enthusiastically taken up in nationalist and sensationalist media), and that Hydroxychloroquine cures 70% of COVID-19 patients (and 100% if combined with Azithromycin). Not incidentally, messages identical to the latter were also distributed by the likes of politician Balša Božović and Facebook 'influencer' Bora Konj. On another front, the nationalist publication *Tsrvene Beretke* reported that Russian military convoys delivering aid to Bergamo, Italy, flew the Serbian flag in remembrance of NATO aggression against Serbia. In truth, the Russian soldiers had simply affixed the Russian tricolour to their vehicle upside down (a rather common occurrence).

Prominent disinformation campaigns reviewed for this study included:

- Evidently coordinated efforts by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and Chinese actors to portray China as the greatest source of support for Serbia in combatting COVID-19, and in so doing to improve the reputation of the Vučić government's handling of the pandemic<sup>92</sup>. This forms part of a broader effort to frame President and SNS leader Vučić as a uniquely capable leader, balancing Russia and China and independent of all interests;
- Numerous, overlapping campaigns in 2019 aimed at discrediting opposition figures, including accusations of treason and other charges against opposition leaders, reputational attacks on independent journalists, and delegitimisation of peaceful protesters<sup>93</sup>;
- Campaigns targeted against the opposition (see above), including allegations that the opposition and supposed 'allies' are Western spies and that mafia groups were planning a coup against the President<sup>94</sup>. These campaigns are linked, at times, to accusations of the sabotage of Vučić by the Russian 'deep state', including by instigating protests;
- A prominent conspiracy theory promoted by *Sputnik Russia* and wider networks, alleging that the EU had abetted the storage of depleted Uranium in Serbia, causing an epidemic of cancer<sup>95</sup>;
- A long-running narrative portraying European values as detrimental to the development of the Serbian state<sup>96</sup>;
- A particular campaign, from December 2019 through February 2020, aimed at leveraging the influence of Serbian media in Montenegro to diminish support for NATO accession in the country, including the allegation that NATO was forcing Podgorica to declare a state of emergency<sup>97</sup>;

<sup>92</sup> DFC (2020), 'DFC reveals: the bot profile networks has arrived in Serbia with the crown', 13 April (<https://dfcme.me/nova-mreza-bot-profila/>).

<sup>93</sup> Vucic, Marija (2020), 'Najmanje 945 lažnih vesti na naslovnica četiri tabloida u 2019', Raskrinkavanje.rs, 24 January (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.rs/page.php?id=Najmanje-945-laznih-vesti-na-naslovnica-četiri-tabloida-u-2019-557>).

<sup>94</sup> Vucic, Marija (2019), 'Za pola godine više od 400 laži na naslovnica četiri tabloida', Raskrinkavanje.rs, 15 August (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.rs/page.php?id=488>).

<sup>95</sup> Wemer (2019), 'The Western Balkans'.

<sup>96</sup> Cvjetičanin, Zulejhić, Brkan, Livančić-Milić (2019), 'Disinformation'; Zulejhić (2018), 'Ni Šveđanima'.

<sup>97</sup> dfcme.me (2020), 'OTVORENO OBMANJIVANJE JAVNOSTI', 11 February (<https://dfcme.me/otvoreno-obmanjivanje-javnosti/>).

- A number of campaigns, beginning in September 2017 and intensifying in the summer and autumn of 2018, aimed at leveraging the influence of Serbian media in Bosnia and Herzegovina, primarily designed to stoke xenophobic and nationalist sentiment in Republika Srpska ahead of the October 2018 general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>98</sup>;
- A number of campaigns aimed at leveraging the ability of Serbian media and other institutions to influence the political agenda in Kosovo, including through disinformation on the course of bilateral negotiations and misrepresentation of the positions of European leaders including, prominently, Emmanuel Macron<sup>99</sup>.

<sup>98</sup> Cvjetičanin, Zulejhić, Brkan, Livančić-Milić (2019), 'Disinformation'.

Cvjetičanin, Tijana (2018), 'Besprizorno poigravanje osjećajima ljudi: U Sarajevu nisu "prekopani srpski grobovi"- niti bilo čiji drugi', *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, 7 February (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/besprizorno-poiqrvanje-osjecajima-ljudi-u-sarajevu-nisu-prekopani-srpski-grobovi-niti-bilo-ciji-drugi>);

Cvjetičanin, Tijana (2018), "Chomsky nikada nije rekao da su Albanci 'kao divlje pleme'". *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, 1 February (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/chomsky-nikada-nije-rekao-da-su-albanci-kao-divlje-pleme>);

Cvjetičanin, Tijana (2018), "Kad porušena kuća postane 'ogromno skladište vojne opreme u blizini džamije'", *Raskrinkavanje.ba*, 28 June (<https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/kad-porusena-kuca-postane-ogromno-skladiste-voine-opreme-u-blizini-dzamiije>).

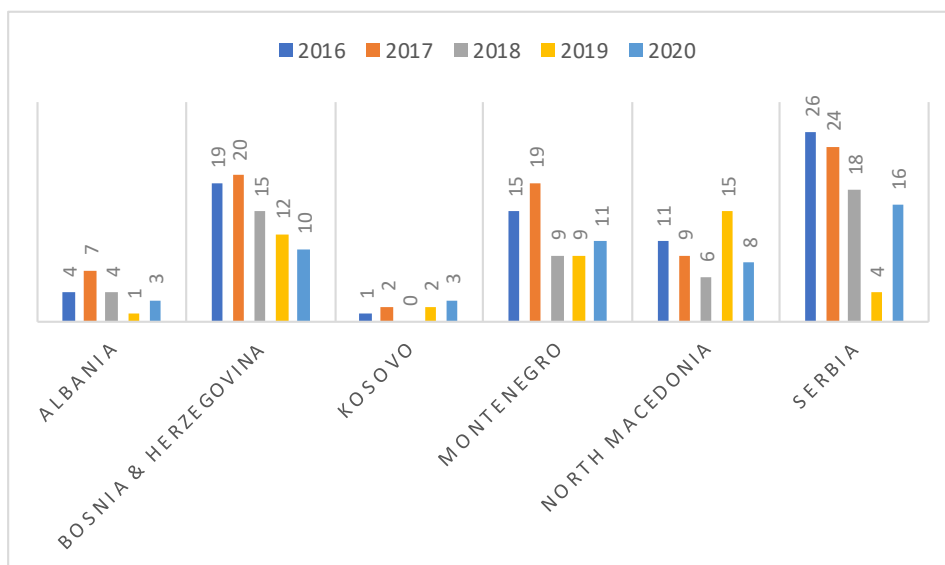
<sup>99</sup> Vucic, Marija (2019), 'Histerija tabloida: „Makronović“ kao mesija, rešiće nam Kosovo', *Raskrikavanje Projekat Portala Krik*, 17 July (<https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=475>).

## 4 Comparative analysis: Case studies of disinformation in the Western Balkans

### 4.1 Discrediting the EU

The EU is the dominant geo-political and geo-economic actor in the Western Balkans, proposing the most encompassing integration agenda and wielding the most normative power. It is not, however, entirely without competition. Russia, China Turkey and – to an increasing degree – the US all have aims in the region that are not entirely compatible with those pursued by Brussels and Member States (some Member States, notably Hungary, also pursue agendas in the region that are at odds with the EU itself). The EU’s competitors in the region, however, face a tough battle. EU integration enjoys broad-based support throughout the region, spanning ethnic, sectarian and party-political divides. According to data collected by the Balkan Barometer, Euro-sceptic sentiment is low and declining in all six countries (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Euro-Sceptic Sentiment in the Western Balkans**



Source: Balkan Barometer

Unlike with NATO, where sentiment is genuinely split, foreign actors seeking to undermine the EU’s power in the Western Balkans find no obvious division between pro- and anti-EU constituencies that could be exploited. Instead, the most common approach is to try and alter the balance between ‘EU idealists’ (people who see the EU as a fundamentally normative project, and whose adherence is based at least partly on a sense of European identity) and ‘EU realists’ (people who tend to see the EU in more pragmatic, materialist terms). The latter camp generally agree that EU membership is desirable, but they are frustrated by a sense that the EU is not committed to enlargement and are thus disinclined to take conditionality seriously. They do, however, tend to take financial transfers, trade, investment and free movement of people for granted, as per Balkan Barometer data.

While there are some commonalities to approach, it is misleading to speak of the EU’s competitors in the Western Balkans in the aggregate. In reality, there is no comparison between Russia, on the one hand, and China and Turkey on the other. As is described in more detail below, **only Russia maintains an entire infrastructure of media influence, stretching across the region and deeply integrated into national media landscapes**. China and Turkey, by contrast, insert messages into the region and attempt to ‘spin’ certain public discussions, but neither country has an equivalent of *Sputnik Serbia* in the region, nor the

ecosystems of news outlets and social media accounts to create resonance. Moreover, **Chinese and Turkish ‘influence operations’ in the Western Balkans (using the term loosely) tend to be much more narrowly focused on shaping perceptions of China and Turkey, respectively. Russian operations are much broader and seek to shape perceptions on a wide range of fronts**, including those not directly related to Russia. Finally, disinformation (per se) appears much less prevalent in Chinese and Turkish media operations in the Western Balkans, when compared to Russia. As Figure 5 shows, disinformation accounts for only 24 percent of social media interactions related to Turkey in the Western Balkans, according to our analysis of Facebook data<sup>100</sup>. The number for China is much higher, at 52 percent, but this is distorted by an abnormally high finding in Albania. Because Russian disinformation is much more broad-based, there is no acceptable way of quantifying it for comparison, but the qualitative research conducted for this study suggests that the volume of Russian-backed disinformation in the region is at least an order of magnitude larger than for China or Turkey.

**Figure 5: Chinese and Turkish Disinformation in the Western Balkans**

Country	China		Turkey	
	Total Interactions	% Disinformation	Total Interactions	% Disinformation
Albania	7 458	71%	164 564	7%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2 360	20%	266 171	25%
Kosovo	—	—	176 747	40%
North Macedonia	—	—	245 000	23%
Serbia	14 672	52%	7 362	30%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>24 490</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>859 844</b>	<b>24%</b>

**Source:** Authors’ analysis, *CrowdTangle*<sup>101</sup>

### *Russia vs the EU in the Western Balkans*

**Russia’s approach to disinformation operations is based on the subversion of adversaries by amplifying any available social, political, economic or ideological divisions that would undermine the adversary’s political, economic and military cohesion.** When it comes to undermining perceptions of the EU, Russian disinformation operations seek to intensify the local (specific to the targeted state) grievances (real or imaginary) about the EU, its policies, aims and motivations. The *modus operandi* is therefore to populate the local information environment with disinformation, misinformation and other distorted interpretations that could feed local political discourses.

The Western Balkans present the Kremlin with a particularly valuable opportunity for two main reasons. First, this region lies beyond what is considered the immediate sphere of Russia’s geopolitical interests. Therefore, unlike various Member States on the EU’s eastern flank (e.g. Poland, Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania), the Western Balkan countries tend not to see Russia in general – and Russian disinformation, in particular – as posing a threat. As a result, the countries of the region lack the infrastructure (a network of designated NGOs, think-tanks, etc.) and the public awareness that is present, for example, in the Baltics. Indeed, public opinion in several countries of the region – particularly Montenegro, North Macedonia,

<sup>100</sup> ‘Interactions’ refers to ‘likes’, ‘shares’ and comments made on the social networking site Facebook, as collected via *CrowdTangle*. For more detail, see the Methodology section and the data appendix.

<sup>101</sup> Missing values indicate insufficient data available on *CrowdTangle* for analysis. This is true in all instances for Montenegro.

Serbia, and in the Republika Srpska entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina – is broadly well disposed towards Moscow.

The second reason is these countries' inherent vulnerabilities, which expose them to information manipulation<sup>102</sup>. Their structural fragility in the fields of politics, economics, society and security allows Russia to exploit and manipulate the information environment not only to amplify existing internal divisions in these countries, but also to undermine the credibility of the EU<sup>103</sup>.

When it comes to Russian disinformation operations aimed at discrediting the European Union in the Western Balkans, these activities can be aggregated under two main narratives: 'the EU is hegemonic' and 'the EU is weak'. The first group includes various sub-narratives, such as 'the EU is the key decision-maker in the Western Balkans', 'the EU dictates conditions to the Western Balkan countries', 'the EU discriminates against Russia'. The second group includes almost diametrically opposite sub-narratives, such as 'the EU is paralysed by disagreements among its Member States', 'the EU is unable to address crises (migration, economy, COVID-19)', 'Brexit weakening the EU', 'the EU fails to deliver on enlargement promises', and others<sup>104</sup>. In other words, Russia's purpose is not to shape a specific perception of the EU among local populations, but to address both 'Europhiles' and 'Euro-sceptics', in an attempt to undermine the confidence of the former and provide 'ammunition' to the latter<sup>105</sup>.

Understanding the complexity of the relationship between the EU and different countries in the Western Balkans, Moscow shifts and shapes its disinformation operations to fit the specific grievances of each one of these countries. **By manipulating political discourses, Russia's disinformation operations stir regional tensions to undermine further integration and discredit the EU.** Since the Kremlin's strategy of influence in the Western Balkans can be generally described by the principle of 'divide and conquer', an understanding of the disinformation operations aimed at discrediting the EU requires specific focus on each one of the states in the region.

**Serbia serves as a launchpad for the Kremlin's disinformation operations in the Western Balkans in general, and in the context of undermining the EU, in particular.** In November 2014, the Kremlin established *Sputnik Serbia* for the purpose of disseminating narratives across the region that would promote Russia's goals of discrediting the EU. Some disinformation seeks to portray the EU as hegemonic and domineering. These include stories that frame the EU as an imperialist power seeking to destroy Serbian identity and autonomy, for example, or that portray the EU as a key decision-maker in the Western Balkans that imposes its rule against the national interests of Serbia. Simultaneously, Russia also portrays the EU as weak. This includes, for example, stories alleging that the EU is not capable of keeping promises (or what are perceived as promises) about the 2025 EU membership perspective for Montenegro and Serbia<sup>106</sup>.

This feeds into other EU candidate countries in the region, namely Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro. Russia's disinformation operations simultaneously try to destabilise these countries by feeding local political, economic and social divisions, while undermining the image of the EU as a stabilising actor in the region. There are several prevalent sub-narratives promoted by Moscow in these

<sup>102</sup> Zamfir, Rufin (2020), 'Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans', NATO Strategic Centre of Excellence, Riga. (<https://stratcomcoe.org/risks-and-vulnerabilities-western-balkans>)

<sup>103</sup> Bechev, Dimitar (2020), 'Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans', NATO Strategic Centre of Excellence, Riga (<https://stratcomcoe.org/russias-strategic-interests-and-tools-influence-western-balkans>).

<sup>104</sup> Doncheva (2020), 'Tracking Russia's Narratives'.

Metodiev, Asya (2019), 'Russian Narrative Proxies in the Western Balkans', Policy Paper, The German Marshall Plan of the United States (<https://www.gmfus.org/publications/russian-narrative-proxies-western-balkans>).

<sup>105</sup> NATO CoE (2020b), 'Russia's Narratives'.

<sup>106</sup> NATO CoE (2020b), 'Russia's Narratives'.

countries. The first is that the EU sends mixed signals and is incapable of formulating a united policy. The main stories used to promote this narrative come from the field of EU-Russia relations (sanctions, Nord Stream 2, etc.) and internal clashes among existing EU members over promised membership to the Western Balkan states. The second is the story of Brexit, which was turned into a sub-narrative by itself. Since Brexit is framed by Russia's disinformation operations as a consequence of the EU's weakness, its context is used to portray the EU as a project doomed to fail, seeding doubts regarding the advantages of further integration with the EU. Another prominent sub-narrative consists of stories about deteriorating relations between the EU and the US. Here, again, stories about Nord Stream 2, the idea of an EU army (as a supposed counterbalance to NATO), disagreement over Iran, sanctions against Russia (and Russia's counter-sanctions) and others, are used to portray the EU not only as institutionally weak, but also as an organisation that works against the national interests of its Member States<sup>107</sup>.

When it comes to Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the content of Russian disinformation operations is slightly different<sup>108</sup>. On the one hand, since these two countries are also on a path towards potential EU membership, the narratives used in candidate countries are present. On the other, since the Kremlin has historical political involvement in regional disputes, its disinformation operations in these countries are shaped to portray the Western Balkans as a playground for a clash of interests between the EU and Russia. In the promoted stories, Russia is portrayed as an historic friend, who would protect the interests of local communities (particularly in Republika Srpska), and the EU as an actor looking to exploit them in order to address its own problems (economic, migration, security, etc.).

### *China vs the EU in the Western Balkans*

Despite having a significant global media presence, Beijing's media footprint in the Western Balkans is small. None of the major Chinese news agencies or television networks maintains a local-language edition, unlike in both Russia and Turkey. The most prominent source of Chinese news in the Western Balkans – *China Global Television Network (CGTN)* – is occasionally followed by Western Balkan media, but drawing on English-language reports. CGTN's own social media presence in the region is virtually non-existent.

Instead, China-related media messaging (including social media messaging) in the Western Balkans serves primarily as window-dressing for more material aspects of the relationship. Chinese investment in the region – and, more recently, aid delivered in response to the COVID-19 pandemic – provides the basis for spin and commentary suggesting that Beijing is a better friend to the Balkans than Brussels or Berlin. Such reports and comments dominated the China-related discussion in traditional and social media spaces in 2020, in particular in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and also in Serbia. In Serbia, the argument was made prominently in the streets as well (Figure 6), and with the involvement of the Serbian government and media outlets friendly to President Vučić.

<sup>107</sup> European Values Center for Security Policy (2020), 'Assessment of the Kremlin's Malign Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia', Prague (<https://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/assessment-of-the-kremlins-malign-influence-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-montenegro-and-north-macedonia/>).

John T. Cappello, Daniel Sunter, 'Information Operations in the Western Balkans', in Dan Sultănescu, (ed.), *Challenges in Strategic Communication and Fighting Propaganda in Eastern Europe*, Amsterdam: IOS Press (<https://www.iospress.nl/book/challenges-in-strategic-communication-and-fighting-propaganda-in-eastern-europe/>).

<sup>108</sup> Tijana Cvjetičanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan, Biljana Livančić-Milić (2019), *Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The case of BiH*, Citizens' Association: Why Not

([https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation\\_in\\_the\\_online\\_sphere\\_The\\_case\\_of\\_BiH\\_ENG.pdf](https://zastone.ba/app/uploads/2019/05/Disinformation_in_the_online_sphere_The_case_of_BiH_ENG.pdf)).

European Values Center for Security Policy (2020), 'Assessment of the Kremlin's Malign Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia', Prague (<https://www.europeanvalues.net/vyzkum/assessment-of-the-kremlins-malign-influence-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina-montenegro-and-north-macedonia/>).



**Figure 6: ‘Thank You, Brother Xi’ Billboard in Belgrade**



Source: RFE/RL

Such appeals, however, do not generally constitute disinformation: they are a matter of interpretation and commentary, rather than distortion. **China-linked discourse has strayed more fully into disinformation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic itself.** In Albania, in particular, China’s ‘infowar’ against the Trump Administration has received significant (and mostly credulous) coverage, despite Albania’s strong relationship with Washington. Albanian media have been awash with disputed Chinese claims about the country’s ability to control the virus, with comparisons between the pandemic in China and the EU, and with angry Chinese responses to those who criticised Beijing for moving too slowly to contain the virus. Similar messages have resonated in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In Serbia, meanwhile, the message of friendship with China has been accompanied by misleading commentary – coming prominently from the economist Branko Dragaš – suggesting that China is manoeuvring during the pandemic to increase its international clout and leverage.

#### *Turkey vs the EU in the Western Balkans*

Turkey’s role in the Western Balkans’ disinformation landscape is ambiguous. The *Turkish Radio Television Corporation (TRT)* has offered web content in local languages that directly favours Turkey’s official positions on international and Balkan politics. Some of these positions are quite controversial and include conservative and/or anti-Western narratives that may influence public opinion in the respective countries<sup>109</sup>. They also include smear campaigns against the Gülen movement and groups and individuals in Western Balkan countries that are allegedly close to it<sup>110</sup>. Unlike other authoritarian or semi-authoritarian actors in the region, however, this media influence cannot be characterised as typical disinformation. More visible disinformation efforts can be found on social media in some Albanian-speaking parts of the Western

<sup>109</sup> Turkish Radio Television (<https://www.trt.net.tr/makedonski/>).

<sup>110</sup> Deutsche Welle (2017), ‘Турски учители во Македонија се плашат од апсење во татковината’, ([shorturl.at/oqzDS](https://shorturl.at/oqzDS)).

Balkans, targeting Islamic communities with content promoting the cult of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Turkey's role in the world as a leader of Muslim countries<sup>111</sup>.

In Albania and Kosovo, for example, the most resonant Turkey-related messaging on social media in the last two years concerns direct relations with Turkey, and has often been promoted by political leaders. Thus, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, Kosovar then-president Hashim Thaçi<sup>112</sup> and then-Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti were all among the most prominent sources of Turkey-related messaging, all focused on fruitful and friendly meetings or conversations with Erdoğan. Albanian media also generated significant resonance with reports of Turkish aid – again attributed to Erdoğan – for those made homeless by the 2019 earthquake. Simultaneously, major media in Bosnia and Herzegovina appealed to the sentiments of Muslim believers; thus, *Dnevni avaz* reported approvingly on the first mass prayers held in the transformed Hagia Sophia mosque, while *Nova Bosna* praised Erdoğan for speaking out against Israel.

None of this, however, constitutes disinformation. Rather, **the overwhelming majority of Turkey-related messaging captured for this study was factual. To the extent that it pursued an agenda, it was a matter of spin and commentary, rather than falsification or de-contextualisation.** Only a relatively small part of that agenda was directly aimed at the EU. While reports on support for Albania in post-earthquake reconstruction may have been designed to contrast with less prominently reported aid from the EU, the overall tone is one not of criticising Europe, but of praising Turkey – and Erdoğan personally. The most prominent exception to this is a long-running distortion by Ankara of the terms and negotiations involved in Turkey's financial aid for migrants. That said, the most powerfully resonant social media story involving the Turkish president in the past two years was decidedly apolitical. As reported by the social media group *Volim te*, president Erdoğan unexpectedly appeared at a parents meeting held in one Turkish school after receiving a written request from a parentless boy to come as his parent. The story, which has been circulating globally on the Internet since 2015, could not be corroborated.

### *Geopolitical Competition and Disinformation in the Western Balkans*

**The EU's geopolitical competitors in the Western Balkans – chiefly Russia, and to a much lesser extent China and Turkey – do not seek to promote a specific perception of the EU among targeted audiences in the Western Balkans. Instead, the object is to amplify existing political-economic division between 'EU idealists' and 'EU realists' by manipulating stories about the EU's intentions, capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, while opportunistically improving their own country's (or leader's) image.** An extensive in-depth focus on these narratives and the ways to counteract them might prove counterproductive, failing, as it were, to see the forest for the trees. Instead, a holistically coordinated system of actions and messages, intended to bolster public trust in EU, might help not only to strengthen the EU's position in the Western Balkans, but also to weaken the effectiveness of attempts to undermine it.

**The Russian disinformation operations in the Western Balkans aimed at discrediting the EU are highly interwoven with other disinformation operations in the region aimed at NATO and the US, as well as different local religious, ethnic, political and economic parties, actors and organisations.** They all should be considered and analysed in the context of Russia's strategic geopolitical goals. On the one hand, the Kremlin has few geopolitical interests in the region's countries, per se. Moscow's main adversaries are the EU, NATO and the US. On the other hand, the destabilisation of the region presents the Kremlin with an opportunity to undermine its main adversaries. The best example of this was the allegedly Russian-backed coup and attempted assassination of the Montenegrin prime Minister in October 2016 as a direct response to Montenegro's bid to join NATO. All six Western Balkan countries are candidates or

<sup>111</sup> e.g. Facebook page: 'Support to Erdogan from Albanians'.

<sup>112</sup> In November 2020 Thaçi resigned as President to face trial at the Kosovo Specialist Chambers located at The Hague.



potential candidates for EU membership after 2025. **Russia’s disinformation operations seek to exploit this to divide the populations of these countries on the question of EU membership.** From Moscow’s perspective, a disrupted accession would amplify disagreements within the EU and intensify existing divisions between Member States. In other words, **Russian disinformation operations aimed at discrediting the EU in the Western Balkans serve a much greater goal than simply discrediting the EU in the eyes of the local populations; they lay the foundations for the ‘drama’ of accession due to play out in a few years’ time.** China and Turkey do not pursue objectives of this magnitude, in the Western Balkans or vis-à-vis the EU more broadly. To countermeasure Russia effectively, the EU should approach these not as stand-alone disinformation tactics, but as pieces of a much larger strategic puzzle, developing a comprehensive holistic response, which aims to bridge existing social, political, economic or ideological divisions in the area (the main target of Russia’s disinformation activities).

## 4.2 Pandemic-related disinformation

The spread of COVID-19 into the Western Balkans was accompanied by the spread of disinformation. Studying how the two phenomena interacted demonstrates the variety of ways in which multiple actors – mostly domestic – have used the COVID-19 crisis in order to achieve their political goals. As **the instances of the various functions of COVID-related disinformation explored below show, it has been used, among other things, to shift general public opinion, to exacerbate internal conflict, and to affect the image – positively or negatively – of political leaders.**

The coronavirus has, of course, been surrounded by disinformation globally, and the rumours and fakes found prominently around the world are also seen in the Western Balkans. This includes false information about homemade treatments (e.g. bleach or exposure to hot water) and arguments that link 5G networks and COVID-19. Two of the most prominent COVID-related disinformation narratives – one suggesting the viability of Hydroxychloroquine as a treatment and another alleging that the pandemic was part of a plot by Bill Gates – were analysed on social media data for this study. As shown in Figure 7, the volume of discussion around these two narratives, as well as the proportion of disinformation, varies considerably (although the overall volume is lower than in a small English-speaking European country like Ireland).

**Figure 7: COVID-Related Disinformation in the West Balkans on Social Media**<sup>113</sup>

Country	Hydroxychloroquine Fakes		Bill Gates Fakes		Combined COVID-19 Fakes	
	Total Interactions	% Disinformation	Total Interactions	% Disinformation	Total Interactions	% Disinformation
Albania	3 921	100%	23 762	69%	27 683	74 %
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2 636	48%	7 918	17%	10 554	25 %
Kosovo	3 941	51%	11 106	46%	15 047	47 %
North Macedonia	1 300	0%	1 984	40%	3 284	24 %
Serbia	10 348	92%	12 751	79%	23 099	85 %
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>22 146</b>	<b>76%</b>	<b>57 521</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>79 667</b>	<b>63 %</b>

**Source:** Authors’ calculations, *CrowdTangle*

<sup>113</sup> Here as elsewhere, Montenegro is missing from the CrowdTangle analysis due to the lack of sufficient data. For more detail, see the Methodology section and the data appendix.

That said, there are important differences between countries. In Albania, for example, the main distributors of COVID-related disinformation include major mainstream media outlets, such as *Top Channel*, *JOQ Albania*, *SYRI.net*, *Lajme.al*, *Gazeta Tema* and *Lajmi Fundit*. A similar picture is found in Serbia, with the caveat being that the most prominent distributors of disinformation were not media, but individuals (including Bora Konj, Balša Božović, and Branko Dragaš). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, by contrast, discussion of Hydroxychloroquine and Bill Gates in relation to COVID-19 is dominated by the fact-checking website *Raskrinkavanje*, while most mainstream media publish predominantly factual information (with the notable exception of *Face TV Sarajevo*). The picture in Kosovo and North Macedonia is more mixed; there, the social media reach of outlets willing to engage in disinformation and counter-disinformation initiatives appears to be more equally matched.

Critical to the spread of disinformation related to Hydroxychloroquine was US President Donald Trump, who publicly and repeatedly endorsed the treatment – leading to headlines and significant social media resonance for *Top Channel* in Albania, *TV21* in North Macedonia, and media spokesperson Bora Konj, politician Balša Božović and economic commentator Branko Dragaš in Serbia. Conspiracy theories involving Microsoft founder Bill Gates emanated primarily from more marginal media and social media groups, but were nonetheless resonant online, according to *CrowdTangle* data. Other COVID-related fakes to circulate widely in the region include:

- conspiracy theories in Serbia alleging that hospitals and patients were being paid to simulate diagnoses and deaths from COVID-19, in order deliberately to exaggerate the spread and deadliness of the virus;
- distortions of economic news from the US and Europe, particularly Italy, in Albanian media;
- misleading stories about supposed medical breakthroughs by local pharmaceutical companies, including (most prominently) in Kosovo.

#### *COVID-19 disinformation and local politics*

**A portion of COVID-related disinformation in the Western Balkans was driven by local politicians' desire to protect their image in light of criticism they faced for their response to the pandemic and to justify restrictions imposed.** Most of these efforts sought to play down the level of threat posed by the virus in order to justify a lack of action on the part of the government. A member of the Serbian Presidential crisis committee, Dr. Branimir Nestorović, for example, called COVID-19 the 'funniest virus ever'<sup>114</sup>. President Vučić later accused media that covered this statement of spreading a lie. President Vučić himself also argued that alcoholic beverages could prevent the disease<sup>115</sup>. Serbian Minister of Health Zlatibor Lončar argued in February 2020 that COVID-19 is weaker than the usual seasonal flu.

In some cases, state officials tried to defend their actions by relying on misleading arguments about the experience of other countries. For instance, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić justified the lack of information about the availability of medical equipment by claiming falsely that this type of data is 'a state secret in all countries'. In another case, Serbian speaker of the National Assembly (Skupština), Maja Gojković, tried to argue that parliament cannot be convened during a state of emergency, though this statement contradicted the Serbian Constitution. In some cases, local politicians also justified new

<sup>114</sup> Tanjug (2020), 'Nestorović: Neću nositi masku a ruke ću prati kao do sada', ([https://youtu.be/sCG5\\_rQJyaU](https://youtu.be/sCG5_rQJyaU)).

<sup>115</sup> Djurdevic, Mila and Andy Heil (2020), 'No Joke! Serbian President Makes Light Of Coronavirus As One More Reason To Hit The Bottle', Radio Free Europe, 5 March (<https://www.rferl.org/a/serbian-president-makes-light-of-coronavirus-as-one-more-reason-to-hit-the-bottle/30468925.html>).

restrictions with reference to supposed recommendations from experts, while the named experts themselves denied issuing such recommendations<sup>116</sup>.

In Kosovo, media supportive of then-Prime Minister Albin Kurti reported that the country was making progress against the pandemic, and even that a Kosovar pharmaceutical company was developing a breakthrough treatment<sup>117</sup>. As reported earlier in this study, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama used a misidentified video – which he claimed was of police in Spain beating people not observing the lockdown – to shift the discussion on enforcement in Albania. In North Macedonia, the state responded to criticism that its response to the pandemic had been insufficient by branding critical media as ‘fake news’ and prosecuting opponents for sowing panic.

Nowhere, however, has the politicisation of COVID-related disinformation been as prominent as in Serbia. Serbia under-reported the number of COVID-19 infections and deaths in the pre-election period, allegedly in order to show that the government had the pandemic in hand, as well as to provide encouraging signs of normalisation before June’s snap parliamentary elections. According to an investigation by the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN)*, released a day after the June 21 elections, ‘twice as many infected patients have died than the authorities announced and hundreds more people tested positive for the virus in recent days than admitted’<sup>118</sup>. At first, President Vučić strongly denied these allegations and used this opportunity to condemn independent media platforms such as BIRN<sup>119</sup>. However, the allegations were confirmed, first by a Belgrade-based retired epidemiologist, and later publicly by Dr Predrag Kon, a member of the President’s crisis committee<sup>120</sup>. Dr Kon openly admitted that in the first months after the outbreak the entire data management system ‘was not accurate enough’ and that ‘until June we might have had three times more deaths than the official number’<sup>121</sup>.

In addition to the controversies mentioned above, prior to Serbia’s parliamentary elections in June there was an evident second wave of misinformation messages intended to create unreasonable pre-election optimism. For instance, Dr Nestorović raised eyebrows when, in May, he claimed that ‘the virus is over and we don’t need protective equipment’, suggesting that citizens would soon get back to their normal lives<sup>122</sup>. Earlier, in March, he had also claimed that Serbs have strong genes, and that unlike the genetically weaker Italians, they would not need to worry<sup>123</sup>.

<sup>116</sup> Global Voices (2020), ‘Six false statements by Serbian government officials on COVID-19’, 22 April (<https://globalvoices.org/2020/04/22/six-false-statements-by-serbian-government-officials-on-covid-19/>).

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/GazetaZeri/posts/3081256175228019>

<sup>118</sup> Jovanovic, Natalija (2020), ‘Serbia Under-Reported COVID-19 Deaths and Infections, Data Shows’, BIRN, 22 June (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/22/serbia-under-reported-covid-19-deaths-and-infections-data-shows/>).

<sup>119</sup> Stojanovic, Milica (2020), ‘Vucic Dismisses BIRN report on COVID-19 Figures in Serbia’, BIRN, 3 July (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/vucic-dismisses-birn-report-on-covid-19-figures-in-serbia/>).

<sup>120</sup> EWB (2020), ‘The Number of Deaths from COVID-19 in Serbia is many times higher, Epidemiologist claims’, 7 July (<https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2020/07/07/the-number-of-deaths-from-covid-19-in-serbia-is-many-times-higher-epidemiologist-claims/>).

<sup>121</sup> N1 Beograd (2020), ‘Kon o podacima Gradskog zavoda: Do juna tri puta vishe umrilih od zvanicnog broja’, 29 September (<http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a655239/Kon-o-podacima-Gradskog-zavoda-Do-juna-tri-puta-vishe-umrilih-od-zvanicnog-broja.html>).

<sup>122</sup> Alo.rs (2020), ‘Doktor Nestorovic Ponovo Sokira: Virus je gotov, ne treba nam zastitna oprema’, 11 May (<https://www.alo.rs/vesti/drustvo/branimir-nestorovic-maske-korona-virus/310744/vest>).

<sup>123</sup> Alo.rs (2020), ‘Doktor Nestorovic otkriva za Alo! Evo zasto Italijane koronavirus kosi, a Srbima ne moze nista!’, 10 March (<https://www.alo.rs/vesti/drustvo/evo-zasto-italijane-koronavirus-kosi-a-srbima-ne-moze-nista/294264/vest?fbclid=IwAR2D8pXPYB4O4bHgp4tsF8NUWYlxBIINqa0BND-pm5OMSKQ6WJ8MRo4vDcw>).

*COVID-19 disinformation and xenophobia*

In several cases, disinformation in the Western Balkans has been used in the form of factual information released in a manner intended to cause harm by manipulating public reactions – for instance, to emphasize cases of infection among migrant communities in order to attribute blame for spreading COVID-19 to specific actors or groups, including national minorities. Such actions have exploited long-established political divisions and socio-political vulnerabilities in order to shift blame and support specific political arguments or ideologies, including those that rely on xenophobia, stigmatisation and hatred toward national minorities and foreigners. These actions have also involved the utilisation of social media to publicly identify and expose infected COVID-19 patients' identities online. In Montenegro, the announcement by the Prime Minister of the country's first two officially confirmed patients was followed with 'outbursts of hate speech' towards the infected individuals, whose identities were exposed online. According to reports from local media, 'the ethnicities and religious beliefs of the patients were then targeted with hate-speech comments by some people on social networks'<sup>124</sup>.

In other cases, several right-wing media outlets in North Macedonia falsely claimed that Greece prohibits citizens of certain municipalities from entering the country. They highlighted that the 'problematic municipalities' with a high percentage of COVID-19 cases were only those with a high presence of ethnic Albanian or ethnic Roma population, while municipalities with majority Slavic and Christian populations were allegedly excluded from the 'blacklist'. The articles in the media emphasised that the population in the municipalities that were included in the 'blacklist' manifest disrespect toward the government's measures against the pandemic. **Blaming specific national minorities for the proliferation of COVID-19 and relying on false arguments about the policies of neighbouring countries can be considered as political manipulation that seeks to use the crisis in order to incite religious tensions and inflame ethnic unrest**<sup>125</sup>. Migrants and tourists from China were also singled out early on in the pandemic for hate speech, driven by media narratives blaming China for the virus<sup>126</sup>.

*COVID-19 disinformation in the context of geopolitical conflict*

Some COVID-19 related disinformation and fake news appear to have been initiated by foreign governments to achieve their political goals in the region. On the one hand, these types of campaigns sought to discredit other geopolitical actors active in the region – mainly the EU, but also NATO. On the other hand, they contributed to the positive framing of the role of China and Russia as two countries that supposedly played a major role in providing COVID-related assistance to Western Balkan countries. The major narrative of these campaigns suggested that the EU has failed to address the COVID-19 crisis and was not able to fulfil its moral duty to provide the assistance the region needed. It also highlighted the alleged failure of the EU as a political and legal framework. In the spring of 2020, Western Balkan social media and Russia-linked websites picked up on reports – evidently originating with *Sputnik* in Poland, Azerbaijan and elsewhere – that the EU would be forced to end the free movement of capital, goods and

<sup>124</sup> BIRN Investigative Resource Desk (2020), 'Montenegrin Coronavirus Patients' Identities Exposed Online', (<https://bird.tools/montenegrin-coronavirus-patients-identities-exposed-online/>).

<sup>125</sup> Meta.mk (2020), 'False news about Greek border regime used for inciting ethnic and religious tensions in North Macedonia', 5 June (<https://meta.mk/en/fake-news-about-greece-border-regime-used-for-inciting-ethnic-and-religious-tensions-in-north-macedonia/>).

<sup>126</sup> Kovačević, Milica (2020) 'Balkan Infodemic – How the Virus Became a Geopolitical Weapon', Balkan Insight, 6 August, (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/06/balkan-infodemic-how-the-virus-became-a-geopolitical-weapon/>).

people<sup>127</sup>. At the same time, these narratives suggested that while Brussels abandoned even EU Member States, Beijing and Moscow came to the rescue of the Western Balkans states<sup>128</sup>.

The Digital Forensic Center (DFC)<sup>129</sup> identified a large network of pro-government bots in Serbia, which was deployed to praise the assistance that came from China and Russia<sup>130</sup>. In addition to praising Chinese help and the government of Serbia, the network was used to promote critical attitudes towards the EU, due to the alleged lack of EU assistance<sup>131</sup>. This disinformation also argued that NATO had failed to assist Western Balkan countries. The pro-Serbian Montenegrin news website *borba.me*, for example, stated that NATO had refused to address Montenegro's request to provide medical equipment to fight the pandemic<sup>132</sup>.

In sum, **the COVID-19 crisis was exploited by geopolitical actors in order to challenge EU credibility by emphasising the EU's supposed incompetence and lack of sympathy for Western Balkan countries. Such campaigns sought not only to damage the image of Western governments and institutions in the Western Balkans, but also to increase the political influence of China and Russia in the region.** In that sense, disinformation can be seen to have acted on two levels. First, it challenged trust in the EU and other institutions, reducing their perceived credibility as sources of authoritative information. Second, the EU's diminished public credibility left more space for other disinformation campaigns, which thrive when there is a vacuum of trust. The overall outcome was a partial shift of public preference away from public and international institutions – governments and the EU alike – and towards alternative sources of information and interpretation that challenge 'official' narratives.

### 4.3 Distorting or disrupting elections

Given the centrality of elections to the functioning of democratic systems, there are justified concerns about electoral interference, fraud and impropriety, particularly in the still relatively new and fragile democracies of south east Europe/the Western Balkans. What has been observed over the past 30 years across the Western Balkans is that domestic electoral malpractice leads to political instability, corrodes new and fragile democratic institutions and processes, and thus poses a significant threat to democracy in general. The ability and willingness to subvert the democratic process in the region is therefore domestic in nature.

As the following analysis reveals, **the fundamental causes of – and most important players in – election-related disinformation in the region are not foreign**, either. This refers to the findings coming from a review of five recent electoral processes:

- 2018 referendum in North Macedonia;
- 2019 parliamentary elections in Kosovo;
- 2020 parliamentary elections in Serbia;

<sup>127</sup> Swiridow. Leonid (2020), 'Bajkowa inicjatywa Trójmorza: Europa-bis Donalda Trumpa', *Sputnik*, 27 May (<https://pl.sputniknews.com/opinie/2020052712477394-bajkowa-inicjatywatrojmorza-europa-bis-donald-trumpa/>).

<sup>128</sup> EEAS (2020), 'Disinformation news analysis in the "era" of coronavirus', *COVID-19 Facts*, 21 March.

<sup>129</sup> Digital Forensic Center is a project of the Atlantic Council of Montenegro with the main goals of countering the problem of disinformation and fake news by researching content of headlines and articles, and providing verified information based on a detailed research (<https://dfcme.me/en/about/>).

<sup>130</sup> DFC (2020), 'DFC reveals: the bot profile networks has arrived in Serbia with the crown', 13 April (<https://dfcme.me/nova-mreza-bot-profila/>).

<sup>131</sup> faktoje.al (2020), EEAS Special Report, (<https://faktoje.al/eeas-analize-dezinformimi-ne-epoken-e-koronavirusit-covid-19/>).

<sup>132</sup> EU vs DisInfo (2020), 'Disinfo: NATO does not care about Montenegro amid COVID-19 pandemic', (<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-does-not-care-about-montenegro-amid-covid-19-pandemic/>).



- 2020 parliamentary elections in North Macedonia;
- 2020 parliamentary elections in Montenegro.

Data was drawn from open sources, including the reports of fact-checking projects, and added to the qualitative meta-analysis conducted for this study. In addition, Facebook data via *CrowdTangle* was brought to bear on cases in Kosovo, Serbia and North Macedonia (referendum). There was insufficient data available on Montenegro and on the parliamentary elections in North Macedonia.

**Figure 8: Disinformation and Elections in the Western Balkans**

Country & Election	Total Interactions	% Disinformation
Kosovo, 2019 parliamentary elections	1 191 184	19%
North Macedonia, 2018 referendum	319 213	28%
Serbia, 2020 parliamentary elections	777 461	33%
Total	2 287 858	25%

**Source:** Authors' calculations, *CrowdTangle*

Broadly, these cases can be divided into two groups: one (Serbia and North Macedonia) in which disinformation is a structural and inevitable element, and another in which it is much more marginal (Kosovo and Montenegro). The distinction between Serbia and North Macedonia on the one hand and Kosovo and Montenegro on the other is not a factor of the interest of foreign actors to insert themselves. Rather, it is a factor of the willingness and ability of domestic actors – first and foremost voters – to cling to truthful narratives and to ignore the noise of disinformation.

In Serbia, President Vučić and his ruling SNS coalition can count on the support of a collection of tabloid newspapers, including *Informer* (the same publication that was responsible for the billboard with Xi Jinping referenced earlier in Figure 6), *Kurir*, *Srpski Telegraf* and *Alo*. While privately owned, these publishing houses have been found to benefit from lucrative state and local government contracts, in what investigative journalists plausibly argue is an effective quid pro quo. In return for state funding, these newspapers run incessant campaigns against Vučić's opponents, before, during and after elections<sup>133</sup>. According to *CrowdTangle* data, these tabloids are joined by a plethora of nationalist and irredentist online media sites and other social media pages, including *Nacionalist*, *Tsrvene Beretke*, *Dosta je bilo*, which are also frequent participants in the redistribution of Russian disinformation described elsewhere in this study. Finally, the messages put out by these media outlets are amplified by a network allegedly run at the behest of Vučić and the SNS<sup>134</sup>.

Missing from this picture is Russia itself. As mentioned elsewhere in this study, *Sputnik Serbia* generally stays out of Serbian politics, and evidence of Russian interference in Serbian elections is scant at best. In both 2016 and 2020, Vučić and the SNS won large majorities – nearly 61 percent in 2020, increasing the party's seat tally by 59 – while parties more closely aligned with Moscow (such as Ivica Dačić's Serbian Party of Socialists) lost ground. Hence, if there was any Russian interference, it was ineffective.

In North Macedonia, despite losing its effective control over the media, former ruling party and now leading opposition party VMRO-DPMNE has reconstituted a network consisting mostly of influential social

<sup>133</sup> Vucic (2019), 'Za pola godine'.

<sup>134</sup> Milivojevic, Andjela (2020), 'The Castle: How Serbia's Rulers Manipulate Minds and the People Pay', *Balkan Insight*, 18 June (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/18/the-castle-how-serbias-rulers-manipulate-minds-and-the-people-pay/>).



media pages, which it uses to campaign against the ruling SDSM. *CrowdTangle* data show that these pages took the lead in pushing distortions of the proposed agreement with Greece over the re-naming of the country and were closely integrated, in terms of messaging and distribution, with the successful referendum boycott campaign. Together with news sites linked to VMRO-DPMNE, including *infomax.mk* and *veritas.mk*, these same pages have also formed an important part of the party's electoral mobilisation, built in large measure around the same identitarian appeals as the boycott. In addition, social media accounts and news sites associated with VMRO-DPMNE, including *infomax.mk* and *veritas.mk*, evidently fabricated evidence of vote-buying ahead of the July 2020 parliamentary election by SDSM<sup>135</sup>. As successful as they were in scuttling the referendum, however, they were unable to prevent SDSM from remaining in power.

In contrast to Serbia, there is some evidence of Russian disinformation interference in elections in North Macedonia. Most prominently, the Macedonian fact-checking project *F2N2* reported a prank played by two Russian media personalities on Prime Minister Zoran Zaev, designed to embarrass him ahead of the election<sup>136</sup>. Our *CrowdTangle* data show the material to have been picked up and re-transmitted by social media accounts linked to the VMRO-DPMNE party and the boycott campaign. *F2N2* and the international open source intelligence project *Bellingcat* have identified a broader pattern of Russian disinformation involving the Russian Foreign Ministry and the GRU, as part of a larger influence and espionage effort<sup>137</sup>.

Unlike in Serbia and North Macedonia, recent electoral processes in Kosovo have been relatively unscathed by disinformation. Snap elections called after the resignation of Prime Minister Rasmush Haradinaj – following his summons to the Hague for questioning regarding war crimes – brought into power Albin Kurti and his Movement for Self-Determination (Vetëvendosje), in what was broadly seen as Kosovo's first genuine electoral transfer of power<sup>138</sup>. Indeed, voters were generally understood to be sending a clear message rejecting the old establishment and the disinformation-saturated politics that had prevailed previously.

The October 2019 vote in Kosovo was not, of course, entirely devoid of disinformation. Most prominently, a story published online by the state broadcaster *RTK* just days before the vote accused Kurti's main rival – Vjosa Osmani, the LDK's candidate for the post of PM – and her husband of being Russian agents<sup>139</sup>. That story was based, in turn, on a report in an anonymously managed American website, *Open Source Investigations*, which does not ordinarily report on Kosovo<sup>140</sup>. According to *CrowdTangle* data, the American story garnered only a few dozen online interactions, but once introduced to *RTK* it garnered nearly 100 000. There is little evidence that the story impacted the election outcome, though, and Osmani's LDK party

<sup>135</sup> Civil Media (2020), 'Лажни вести за поткуп на гласачи', 6 July (<https://civilmedia.mk/lazhni-vesti-za-potkup-na-glasachi/>).

<sup>136</sup> Fight Fake News Narratives (2020), 'Kremlin called meddling into North Macedonia's parliamentary elections 2020', 12 July (<https://f2n2.mk/en/kremlin-called-meddling-into-north-macedonias-parliamentary-elections-2020/>).

<sup>137</sup> Fight Fake News Narratives (2020), 'How Swiftly is Russian propaganda spreading in North Macedonia', 19 May (<https://f2n2.mk/en/how-swiftly-is-russian-propaganda-spreading-in-north-macedonia/>).

Tsalov, Jordan (2020), 'Russian interference in North Macedonia: A View Before the Elections', *Bellingcat*, 4 July ([https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/04/russian-interference-in-north-macedonia-a-view-before-the-elections/?fbclid=IwAR18uIPabKRjRLUPYLcHIsjDVIImJMSkdy7rq1AiEnTl\\_T5TBI-8i5QgYBfk](https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/04/russian-interference-in-north-macedonia-a-view-before-the-elections/?fbclid=IwAR18uIPabKRjRLUPYLcHIsjDVIImJMSkdy7rq1AiEnTl_T5TBI-8i5QgYBfk)).

<sup>138</sup> Heil, Andy (2019), 'Key Takeaways From Kosovo's Watershed Vote', *Radio Free Europe*, 7 October (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-elections-watershed-key-takeaways/30204385.html>).

<sup>139</sup> *RTK Live* (2019), 'Gazeta Amerikane: Kongresisti Prorus, Mentor I Burrit Të Vjosa Osmanit', 4 October (<https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=381283&fbclid=IwAR01jNiZaeRcZMjaKLHNuaq0oUZyzuOhhuLbNvTgrqMz4QbNHb4ZdHX-ZrQ>).

<sup>140</sup> *Open Source Investigations* (2019), 'The Kosovo elections: a Manchurian candidate', 30 September (<https://www.opensourceinvestigations.com/elections/a-manchurian-candidate/>).

entered into a coalition with Kurti's Vetëvendosje. As argued earlier in this study, however, that coalition itself was short-lived and essentially brought down by an American disinformation operation.

The lack of reliable data on Montenegro makes analysis difficult. Compared to the 2016 election and failed coup attempt, the August 2020 parliamentary election was remarkably placid. The Montenegrin fact-checking project *Raskrinkavanje.me* reported on several disinformation narratives in the immediate leadup to the vote, designed to suppress turnout by scaring away voters. Thus, would-be voters were warned that polling stations would supply them with disappearing ink, which would alter their votes after ballots were cast<sup>141</sup>. Other Facebook and social media pages warned of unrest and violence at polling stations<sup>142</sup>. In fact, narratives designed to discredit the elections reportedly lasted into September. The lack of any useable *CrowdTangle* data on Montenegro precludes deeper analysis of the reach or impact of these campaigns. It is noteworthy, however, that even in the heat of the election, most of the disinformation circulating in Montenegro appeared to focus on other issues, including – most prominently – COVID-19.

**While disinformation campaigns that propagate untruths about candidates or spread inaccurate information that distorts public opinion are among the factors undermining electoral democracy in the Western Balkans, it is important to note that they are only one factor – and perhaps not the most critical.** Equally problematic internal and external factors compromising the integrity of elections across the Western Balkans include:

- a) low levels of participation;
- b) a proliferation of new parties;
- c) aspects of electoral systems that are more likely to weaken the integrity of the process (for example 'closed list' systems in which voters have no opportunity to select candidates); and
- d) external support for particular parties (including financial support and overt political endorsements).

#### 4.4 General patterns of disinformation

Disinformation is endemic to all six media systems in the Western Balkans. While no attempt was made in this study to compare the media systems and disinformation landscapes of the Western Balkans to those in other parts of the world, **there is impressionistic evidence to suggest that the disinformation problem is particularly acute in the region.** Indeed, given the evidence available and reviewed for this study, it is difficult to imagine any politician, policymaker, public official, civil society organisation or other social actor attempting to achieve significant social, political or economic ends in the Western Balkans without needing to take disinformation into account.

It is useful to think of disinformation in terms of a market, in which there is both supply and demand. As is often the case in emerging markets (and even in mature markets), media organisations struggle to survive on a traditional advertising-and-subscription model, and the opportunity to produce and disseminate content in the interests of someone other than the reader is lucrative. Thus, **evidence suggests that most major media outlets in the Western Balkans are at least complicit in one form of disinformation or another, ranging from click-bait sensationalism to the work-for-hire fabrication of fully false narratives.** The overwhelming majority of the disinformation campaigns reviewed in the qualitative pillar

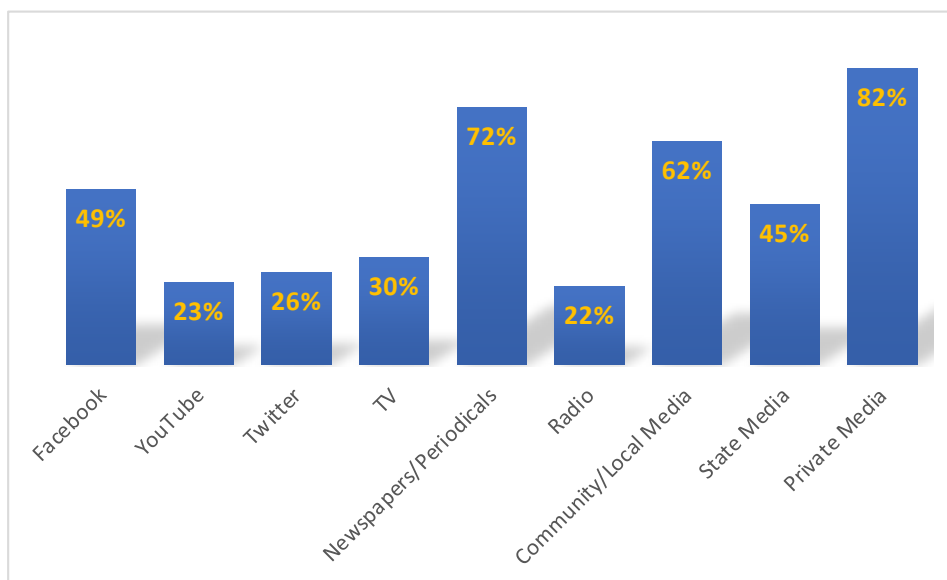
<sup>141</sup> Popović, Jelena (2020), 'Na biralištima nijesu korišćene „piši-briši“ olovke', *Raskrinkavanje.me*, 3 September (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/na-biralištima-nijesu-koriscene-pisi-brisi-olovke>).

<sup>142</sup> Velimirović, Tijana (2020), 'U Budvi nije bilo haosa tokom izbornog dana', *Raskrinkavanje.me*, 3 September (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/u-budvi-nije-bilo-haosa-tokom-izbornog-dana>);

Kovačević, Milica.(2020), 'Najavljenih incidenata u izbornoj noći nije bilo', *Raskrinkavanje.me*, 3 September (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/najavljenih-incidenata-u-izbornoj-noci-nije-bilo>).

of this study involved at least one established media outlet; most involved more. Moreover, while disinformation is often associated with social media in the public imagination and the policy debate – and while social media, including Facebook in particular, does play an important role in the distribution of disinformation in the Western Balkans – the role of traditional media is greater. In our data, television outstripped both YouTube and Twitter as a distributor of disinformation on a per-campaign basis (though Facebook was more prevalent). Newspapers and other traditional periodicals were present in more than 70 percent of campaigns reviewed, and local community media were present in more than 60 percent. This is not an exclusively private business, however – state-owned media took part in the production and dissemination of disinformation in some 45 percent of the campaigns reviewed. (See a country-by-country breakdown in the data appendix).

**Figure 9: Channels of Disinformation Distribution in the Western Balkans (2018-2020)**



**Source:** Authors' calculation

But because disinformation is – by definition – produced for a purpose, it has a demand side, as well as a supply side. On the demand side, **political parties play a particularly prominent role throughout the region, often coordinating with affiliated media to produce and disseminate disinformation for electoral purposes. Nationalist organisations and other groups, including religious and veterans' groups, are also well represented.**

**Just under half of the campaigns reviewed for this study involved foreign actors – most prominently Russia, but also Serbia, operating in other countries of the region.** In most instances, foreign actors worked in coordination with domestic 'partners', including both the media organisations through which the campaigns were conducted, and domestic political and social actors with which the foreign actors shared a community of interest.

The range of discursive fields with which disinformation engages is highly diverse and fluid. Despite the seemingly obvious core narratives throughout the region – post-war conflict resolution, Euro-Atlantic integration, and electoral politics – none of these is particularly dominant in the disinformation space. Rather, the space seems to mutate discursively, in response to the opportunities generated by the public discussion, including, most recently, the advent of COVID-19. However, while presence of foreign affairs is notable, the emphasis is still squarely on domestic politics, as a comparison of social media data on various disinformation fronts captured for this study illustrates.

As described in the country sections in Chapter 3 (and as shown in the Data Appendix to this study), however, the regional statistics mask a tremendous degree of variation across and within countries. This speaks to the essentially responsive and instrumental nature of disinformation. In the campaigns reviewed in this study, **disinformation is most frequently used as a means to achieving an end that is often significantly bigger than, and frequently unrelated to, the content of the disinformation itself.** Thus, domestically sourced disinformation regarding COVID-19 is frequently found to be a bludgeon with which to settle political scores fundamentally unrelated to the pandemic, while transnational disinformation inciting inter-ethnic or sectarian strife is generally pursued for geo-strategic purposes, pursuing no real ethnic or sectarian agenda at all. Differences from country to country reflect the political landscapes in each specific setting, including (most critically) the degree of pluralism and competitiveness in the electoral system, the nature and depth of inter-ethnic or sectarian divides, and the degree of geopolitical vulnerability faced by the state.

Some broad patterns emerge:

- Where a country's political system is more highly concentrated and/or dominated by a more or less unified political elite, disinformation is likewise dominated by a cohesive set of interwoven narratives that generally serve the interests of the ruling party and its allies. This has broadly been the case in Serbia and in particular in Montenegro, at least up until the August 2020 election;
- Where a country's political system is more competitive, disinformation is more frequently deployed by multiple and competing political forces, and the disinformation space itself becomes more fluid and fractious. Such settings, which include Albania, Kosovo and (to an extent) North Macedonia are not necessarily characterised by less disinformation, but disinformation campaigns tend to be shorter-lived, less coherent and less strategic in nature. Broadly, this is because disinformation is used as a tool for achieving short-term goals in political combat, rather than for cementing long-term domination;
- Where a country's politics are structured largely around deep ethnic and/or sectarian divides, these become an attractive target for actors – particularly, but not exclusively, foreign – looking for political leverage, which can be gained by inflaming and exploiting animosity. This is broadly the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia;
- Where a country's ability to govern – or, indeed, its ability to maintain sovereignty – are bound up in geopolitical conflicts between larger forces, domestic political agendas are especially vulnerable to distortion and/or capture by transnational disinformation narratives. This is particularly the case in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, and (to a lesser extent) in Montenegro.

## 5 Counter-disinformation in the Western Balkans

### 5.1 General patterns of counter-disinformation

Initiatives to counter disinformation are found in all six countries of the Western Balkans and, while they may seem inadequate given the scale of the problem, they are generally highly professional, regionally and globally networked, and well attuned to the complexity of their missions.

Contemporary counter-disinformation initiatives in the Western Balkans fall broadly into three categories, all of which can be found in all six countries of the region (see Figure 10 for a summary of geographical distribution):

- Fact-checking projects and other initiatives designed to respond to disinformation with alternative, fact-based reporting, both in order to ‘set the record straight’ and to provide readers with authoritative journalism on issues subjected to onslaughts of falsehood. Generally operated by journalists or media-related NGOs, often with support from the EU, Member States and other European governments, a number of these initiatives in the region are joined together in a collaborative network, and even share similar branding, helping to establish something of a quality mark for information ‘health’ in the region. Furthermore, these initiatives are linked into international networks, primarily through the US-based and funded *Poynter Institute*, which allows them to benefit more readily from global best practices, as well as to bring national and regional problems – including instances and trends of disinformation – more quickly to the attention of global audiences.
- While fact-checking initiatives address disinformation on a tactical level, public education projects seek to take a more strategic approach. Also present throughout the region, often with the backing of the European Union, the Council of Europe and the United Nations, these projects aim to improve the media and digital literacy skills of the general population, by developing and implementing school curricula, engaging in online projects to educate adults in the same skills, and working with governments and civil society in the region to increase awareness and capacity.
- Somewhere between fact-checking and public education projects, on the scale between tactics and strategy, lie media support projects. Likewise often delivered with support from the European Union as well as mainly US-based charitable foundations, these initiatives focus on improving the skills of both working and up-and-coming journalists, raising awareness of the problem of disinformation, promulgating and instilling higher journalistic standards. These projects are frequently delivered by, or in conjunction with, journalism departments at universities in the region.

**Figure 10: Overview of Major Counter-Disinformation Initiatives in the Western Balkans**

	Fact-Checking	Public Education	Media Support
<b>Albania</b>	<a href="http://www.faktoje.al">www.faktoje.al</a>	CoE/AMI model media literacy curriculum CoE/AMI training for judges	CoE/AMI information disorder training UNESCO 'Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation' model curriculum for journalists
<b>Bosnia and Herzegovina</b>	<a href="http://www.raskrinkavanje.ba">www.raskrinkavanje.ba</a>	Mediacentar-Sarajevo 'Media for Citizens-Citizens for the Media' project	Mediacentar-Sarajevo journalism training
<b>Kosovo</b>	<a href="http://www.kallxo.com">www.kallxo.com</a>	<i>INTRO</i> journal	AGK code of practice for reporting on COVID-19
<b>Montenegro</b>	<a href="http://www.raskrinkavanje.me">www.raskrinkavanje.me</a>	Montenegrin Media Institute 'Media for Citizens-Citizens for the Media' project UNICEF & government media literacy and digital citizenship curriculum	Journalism training coordinated by Mediacentar-Sarajevo
<b>North Macedonia</b>	<a href="http://www.truthmeter.mk">www.truthmeter.mk</a> <a href="http://www.crithink.mk">www.crithink.mk</a> <a href="http://www.irl.mk">www.irl.mk</a> <a href="http://www.СтопДезинформации.МК">www.СтопДезинформации.МК</a> <a href="http://www.F2N.mk">www.F2N.mk</a>	Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Agenda News and Digital Literacy Project Media Literacy Network Medium (Media Literacy in an Age of News Overabundance)	
<b>Serbia</b>	<a href="http://www.raskrikavanje.rs">www.raskrikavanje.rs</a> <a href="http://www.istinomer.rs">www.istinomer.rs</a> <a href="http://www.fakenews.rs">www.fakenews.rs</a>	Digitalni Pogon media and digital literacy curriculum Generation without Disinformation	South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM)

Source: CrowdTangle

## 5.2 Fact-checking initiatives

Fact-checking initiatives have become one of the dominant methods of responding to disinformation globally and, indeed, feature prominently in the EU's own response. They are present, active and well-funded throughout the Western Balkans. All of the projects listed below are affiliated with the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN).<sup>143</sup>

- The largest fact-checking initiative in the region is a network project, run by a coalition of NGOs, and led by the Belgrade-based Crime and Corruption Investigation Network (KRIK)<sup>144</sup> and the Sarajevo-based NGO *Zašto ne* ('Why not')<sup>145</sup> project. Initiatives include:

<sup>143</sup> Poynter (<https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/>).

<sup>144</sup> The *Crime and Corruption Reporting Network* (KRIK, [www.krik.rs](http://www.krik.rs)) is an investigative reporting project based in Belgrade and affiliated with the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project* (OCCRP, [www.occrp.org](http://www.occrp.org)). KRIK has had funding from the EU, the US National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Foundations, and a range of other private donors. KRIK and OCCRP investigations have played a critical role in pushing the EU and various governments towards tightening controls on money laundering, implementing beneficial ownership registries, and sanctioning corrupt governments, corporations and individuals.

<sup>145</sup> *Zašto ne* (<https://zastone.ba/>).



- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, *raskrinkavanje.ba*<sup>146</sup> is run by the *Zašto ne* with support from the European Endowment for Democracy, as well as from a range of US and international charities;
- In **Montenegro**, *Raskrinkavanje.me*, launched by the Center for Democratic Transition<sup>147</sup> and funded through *Zašto ne* and the US National Endowment for Democracy;<sup>148</sup>
- In **North Macedonia**, *Fighting Fake News Narratives (F2N2.mk)*, a project of the Citizens Association MOST-Skopje with support from the US government and the Open Information Partnership<sup>149</sup>;
- In **Serbia**, *Raskrikavanje.rs*, a project of the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network KRIK, which is funded by the US National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Foundations, the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, the Heinrich Böll Stiftung, and the European Union, among others;
- In **Albania**, a fact-checking website – *www.faktoje.al* – was founded in May 2018, with support from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). It is a member of the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network. The project's initial focus was on supporting courts and the administration of justice, as part of USAID's 'Justice for All' project. The project, however, has taken on a greater breadth, including fact-checking, reporting and public statements on the COVID-19 pandemic;
- The **Kosovo** branch of the *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network* (BIRN) and the US-based media support organisation *Internews* in 2012 launched *Kallxo.com*, a news website focused on investigative reporting, anti-corruption monitoring and fact-checking. The project has been particularly active in fact-checking reporting on COVID-19, going beyond the usual desk-based fact checking to mobilise reporters on the ground to verify the country's preparedness (or lack thereof) for the pandemic<sup>150</sup>;
- In **North Macedonia**, in addition to *F2N2.mk* (mentioned above), four other high-profile fact-checking projects are designed to help set the record straight in various parts of the information space, including:
  - *Truthmeter (Vistinomer, or truthmeter.mk)*, with support from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, the Balkan Trust for Democracy of the German Marshall Fund, and the Foundation Open Society — Macedonia, focusing on holding politicians and public officials to account for disinformation;<sup>151</sup>
  - *CriThink (Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens, or crithink.mk)*, a collaboration of the Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society and the Eurothink Center for European Strategies, with support from the European Union, focuses on fact-checking in

<sup>146</sup> Raskrinkavanje.ba (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.ba>).

<sup>147</sup> Center for Democratic Transition (<https://en.cdtmn.org/>).

<sup>148</sup> Raskrikavanje.me (<https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/o-raskrinkavanju-me>).

<sup>149</sup> Fight Fake News Narratives (<https://f2n2.mk/en/about-us-2/>).

<sup>150</sup> Kallxo (<https://www.kallxo.com>);

Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (2020), 'Kosovo: Reporting, Advice, and Fact-checking After a Month of COVID-19 Crisis', 3 April (<https://birn.eu.com/news-and-events/the-numbers-of-reporting-advice-and-fact-checking-after-a-month-of-covid-19-crisis/>).

<sup>151</sup> Truthmeter (<https://truthmeter.mk/about-truthmeter/>).

the mass media space and on promoting media literacy among the general public through online educational materials;<sup>152</sup>

- The Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia (irl.mk), an NGO founded with support from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) and publisher of the investigative television broadcast *Provereno*, providing fact-based in-depth alternatives to disinformation narratives across a range of media<sup>153</sup>;
- StopDisinformation (СтопДезинформации.мк) is a collaboration of the Macedonian Institute for Media, the Institute of Communication Studies and the Independent Trade Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), with support from the European Union, designed to support civic groups and citizens in responding effectively to disinformation, through capacity building and public information campaigns<sup>154</sup>;
- In **Serbia**, in addition to the *Raskrikavanje.rs* project mentioned above, there are two further fact-checking initiatives:
  - *Istinomer.rs* was founded in 2009 by the Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability and lays a plausible claim to being the oldest fact-checking platform in the Western Balkans. The project's focus is primarily on public officials and politicians from across the spectrum;
  - *FakeNews Tragač* (fakenews.rs), a project of the Novi Sad School of Journalism supported by the Transformation Cooperation Program of the Czech Republic and the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, combines response fact-checking with journalism education and a media literacy training platform aimed at the general public.

There is no robust way of measuring the overall impact of a counter-disinformation initiative – such as the fact-checking initiatives reviewed here – on the prevalence of disinformation in a media environment, or on the degree to which disinformation is absorbed by audiences. That is not to say that there has been no impact, but rather that the evidence for the impact of these initiatives is inherently anecdotal and impressionistic. The *KRIK-Zašto ne* network has forced governments in Belgrade and Podgorica to correct false claims about their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, as has *Kallxo.com* in Kosovo and *Faktoje.al* in Albania. All of the fact-checking resources in the region have become important sources for *EUvsDisinfo* monitoring, as well as for NATO's StratCom research and monitoring, thus helping to shape the international debate about the severity of disinformation in the region. Although not an ongoing project and falling just outside the timeframe of this study, North Macedonia was also home to one of the largest research projects in the region, 'Spooks and Spins: Information War in the Balkans'. A North Macedonia-focused investigative project of the OCCRP, 'Spooks and Spins' aimed to uncover the power structures involved in the production and dissemination of disinformation. The project was completed in 2017<sup>155</sup>. Its investigations provoked an angry response from the Kremlin, which the OCCRP took as a sign of success. The project team also claims a link between their investigations and the election of a new government in 2017, which came in on an anti-corruption mandate, although that link obviously cannot be proved.

The projects themselves and their funders evaluate impact in terms of the number of stories or narratives 'debunked'. Such numbers, however, are a reflection of the initiatives' limited capacity and the interests of

<sup>152</sup> Anastasovska, Ана (2018), 'Топ-5 дезинформации за преспанскиот договор', *crithink.mk*, 26 December, (<https://crithink.mk/top-5-dezinformacii-za-prespanskiot-dogovor/>).

<sup>153</sup> Investigating Reporting Lab Macedonia (<https://irl.mk/about-us/>).

<sup>154</sup> Стоп Дезинформации (<https://stopdezinformacii.mk/>).

<sup>155</sup> Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (2017), 'Spooks and Spin: information war in the Balkans', 4 June (<https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/>).

their staff and funders, more than of the disinformation landscape per se. **These projects do not track the extent to which their efforts cause – or even correlate with – shifts in the production and consumption of disinformation, nor do they have the resources to do so.** The same, not coincidentally, is true for *EUvsDisinfo*. The research conducted for this study, however, does not suggest that there has been any significant reduction in the volume of disinformation produced. Unfortunately, we have no way of gauging shifts in the degree to which this disinformation is then believed or acted upon.

### 5.3 Public-education initiatives

A second pillar in global approaches to counter-disinformation is public education, generally designed to sensitise media consumers to the presence of disinformation, raise the general level of ‘media literacy’ and build social resilience. Such projects – focusing on a combination of childhood and adult education, as well as targeted training and awareness-raising for public officials – are found throughout the region.

- The ‘Media for Citizens-Citizens for the Media: Strengthening the Capacity of NGOs for the Development of Media and Information Literacy in the Western Balkans’ initiative conducts research and facilitated experience-sharing across the region, to develop better governmental, media-sector and civil society responses to the disinformation challenge, with the ultimate aim of improving citizens’ media literacy. The initiative is supported by the European Union and the governments of Slovenia and Sweden. It has three core areas of geographical focus: in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, implemented by Mediacentar-Sarajevo; in **Montenegro**, implemented by the Montenegrin Media Institute, with support from the Ministry of Public Administration; and in **Serbia**, implemented by The South East European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM) and the Novi Sad School of Journalism<sup>156</sup>;
- In **Albania**, the Council of Europe (CoE), the EU framework initiative on Strengthening Judicial Expertise on Freedom of Expression and Media in South East Europe (JUFREX), and the Albanian Media Institute (AMI) are committed to developing a media literacy curriculum for Albanian schools, but this had not been completed at the time this study was written<sup>157</sup>. In 2019, the same coalition ran a programme to train Albanian judges and lawmakers on legal standards for protecting freedom of expression, designed to ensure that efforts to curb disinformation – including the country’s much-critiqued anti-disinformation legislation – do not lead to a reduction of citizens’ rights. Some 171 judges participated, but there is no data available on the impact of the training<sup>158</sup>;
- In **Kosovo**, a collaborative initiative of the Institute for Development Policy (an independent think tank) and the Department of Journalism at Pristina University aims to improve the education and training of journalists at the department, with a particular emphasis on disinformation. The project, which is supported in part by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

<sup>156</sup> Coalition of Information and Media Users in South East Europe (2018), ‘Advancing media & information literacy in the Western Balkans’, 22 March (<http://www.cimusee.org/mil-news-see/advancing-media-information-literacy-in-the-western-balkans/>).

<sup>157</sup> Council of Europe (2019), ‘Standardet Evropiane mbi dezinformimin ndahen me përfaqësues të medias shqiptare’, 29 October (<https://www.coe.int/sq/web/tirana/-/european-standards-on-disinformation-shared-with-albanian-media-representatives>).

<sup>158</sup> Council of Europe (2019), ‘Supporting Freedom of Expression in South-East Europe’, JUFREX highlights (<https://rm.coe.int/supporting-foe-in-see-jufrex-highlights-2019/1680988373>).

(UNESCO), publishes the periodical *INTRO*, to provide both students and educators with a constantly growing and updated source of relevant materials<sup>159</sup>;

- In **Montenegro**, in addition to the project mentioned above, the Montenegrin Agency for Electronic Media collaborates with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to support education in media literacy and digital citizenship for school children and their parents, as well as to improve the factual coverage of issues of children’s rights in Montenegro<sup>160</sup>;
- In **North Macedonia**, four major initiatives should be mentioned:
  - ‘Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Agenda’, implemented by the Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society in conjunction with a network of 30 civil society organizations (CSOs) in North Macedonia and around the Western Balkans, with partners in Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro and Serbia, support from the e-Governance Academy in Estonia, and funding from the European Union, is designed to boost the ability of CSOs to engage with government at all levels to improve the use and regulation of digital technologies<sup>161</sup>;
  - ‘The News and Digital Literacy Project’, implemented by the Macedonian Institute of Media in conjunction with the Institute of Communication Studies, the SSNM and the London-based Media Diversity Institute, with support from the European Union, is designed to work with and through CSOs to boost the level of media and digital literacy in the general public and among journalists themselves<sup>162</sup>;
  - ‘The Media Literacy Network’, administered and funded by the North Macedonian Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services, brings together civil society activists, journalists, academics and other experts to support coordination among CSO initiatives in the media literacy field, the media sector, and the government<sup>163</sup>;
  - ‘Medium’ (Media Literacy in an Age of News Overabundance, medium.edu.mk), implemented by the Macedonian Coalition for Media and Information Literacy with support from the European Union, delivers curricular and general educational materials on media literacy for high school students and young people in North Macedonia<sup>164</sup>;
- In **Serbia**, in addition to projects mentioned earlier, two education and capacity-building projects:
  - ‘Digitalni Pogon’ (Digital Drive), a project of the Belgrade Open School with primary support from the European Union and the government of Sweden, and co-financing from the government of Serbia, develops and implements primary- and secondary-school media and digital literacy curricula, designed to boost societal resilience to disinformation;

<sup>159</sup> Universiteti i Prishtinës Hasan Pristina (2020), ‘Revista E Studentëve Të Gazetarisë Në Up, Pjesë E Platformës Më Të Madhe Të Evropës Juglindore Për Edukim Mbi Medien Dhe Informacionin’, 21 March ([https://uni-pr.edu/page.aspx?id=1%2C4%2C1080&fbclid=IwAR0LI0xn-Zqz3orgUcBnSbOPOSCKCVJfq\\_BaAM39ZPk3Lw7i0W6a\\_Jz9nJA](https://uni-pr.edu/page.aspx?id=1%2C4%2C1080&fbclid=IwAR0LI0xn-Zqz3orgUcBnSbOPOSCKCVJfq_BaAM39ZPk3Lw7i0W6a_Jz9nJA)).

<sup>160</sup> UNICEF Montenegro (2018), ‘Media Literacy’ (<https://www.unicef.org/montenegro/en/media-literacy-launched-2018>).

<sup>161</sup> Metamorphosis Foundation (2020), ‘Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Agenda – ICEDA’ ([https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/proekti\\_arhiva/increasing-civic-engagement-in-the-digital-agenda-iceda/](https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/proekti_arhiva/increasing-civic-engagement-in-the-digital-agenda-iceda/)).

<sup>162</sup> Institute of communication studies (2018), ‘News and Digital Literacy Project: Where Fake news Fails’ (<https://iks.edu.mk/en/portfolio-item/news-and-digital-literacy-project-where-fake-news-fails/>).

<sup>163</sup> Medium (<https://www.medium.edu.mk/>);

Media Literacy Network, ‘MAMIL Placed Among the 10 Best Projects on Media Literacy in Europe’ (<https://mediumskapismenost.mk/mamil-placed-among-the-10-best-projects-on-media-literacy-in-europe/>).

<sup>164</sup> Media Literacy Network (<https://mediumskapismenost.mk/home/>).

- ‘Generation without Disinformation’, a project of the Novi Sad School of Journalism with support from the Open Society Foundations, undertook a small-scale network mapping exercise of media outlets particularly engaged in the production and distribution of disinformation in Serbia, in order to support more targeted counter-disinformation efforts (fabrike.fakenews.rs)<sup>165</sup>. The project has produced an interactive network map, which illustrates some of the distribution channels described in this study. Unfortunately, it has not published any research papers, nor does it release the underlying data for replication and independent research.

Similarly to the fact-checking projects, these initiatives sometimes (but not always) provide data about what they have done (i.e., the number of training sessions held, the number of participants, and so on), but not on what they have achieved. Without data on the attitudes and behaviours of those who participated in these trainings or received the related materials, it is impossible even to speculate about impact. Data presented in Chapter 2, however, suggests that media literacy in the Western Balkans remains the lowest in Europe, and there is little or no visible sign of improvement.

## 5.4 Media support initiatives

The third common pillar of counter-disinformation activity – globally and in the Western Balkans – involves working directly with media managers and journalists to try to address the problem at the source (or at least at one of its sources). Such initiatives are common, but not ubiquitous in the region.

- In **Albania** in 2020, the AMI translated into Albanian and disseminated a model curriculum on ‘Journalism, ‘Fake News’ and Disinformation’ for training of journalists, with content and financial support from UNESCO<sup>166</sup>;
- In **Albania** in 2019, CoE JURFEX and the AMI collaborated to educate Albanian journalists and media managers on ‘information disorder’ – including disinformation – and to disseminate and assimilate CoE standards on disinformation among the Albanian media community. Some 367 media representatives participated, but no data are available on any changes to their behaviours, or on the media outlets represented<sup>167</sup>;
- The London-based consultancy Albany Group, with funding from the UK government, works through Mediacentar-Sarajevo to support media professionals and journalism students in **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and in **Montenegro**. The project aims to build journalists’ capacity for news verification, fact-checking, content production and general reporting competencies, with small grants available for the development and implementation of training and capacity-building projects<sup>168</sup>. The initiative has an additional focus on countering disinformation related to COVID-19;

<sup>165</sup> Fabrike lažnih vesti (<https://fabrike.fakenews.rs>).

<sup>166</sup> UNESDOC Digital Library (2020), ‘Gazetaria, ‘Lajmet e rreme’ & Dezinformimi: manual për Trajnimin dhe Formimin e Gazetarëve’ (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373875>).

<sup>167</sup> Council of Europe (2019), ‘Standardet Evropiane mbi dezinformimin ndahen me përfaqësues të medias shqiptare’, 29 October (<https://www.coe.int/sq/web/tirana/-/european-standards-on-disinformation-shared-with-albanian-media-representatives>).

<sup>168</sup> Mediacentar online (2020), ‘Call for Content Production Grants: Promoting media literacy and accurate information in Bosnia and Herzegovina’, 8 June (<https://www.media.ba/en/event/call-content-production-grants-promoting-media-literacy-and-accurate-information-bosnia-and>).

- The Association of Journalists of **Kosovo** (AGK) and the Association of Journalists of **Macedonia** (AJM) – in conjunction with partners at New York University – have developed and disseminated codes of practice and other supporting materials for reporting on the COVID-19 pandemic <sup>169</sup>;
- In **Serbia**, the Novi Sad School of Journalism plays a central role in many of the country’s counter-disinformation initiatives and includes this focus in its journalism training, both for budding and practicing journalists.

From one standpoint, media support activities have the clearest pathway to impact – they engage directly with the people who produce much of the news that citizens read. From another perspective, such initiatives suffer from the same evaluation problem as the others described above – they measure only what they do, not what they have achieved. **The challenge for media-support initiatives is whether they can secure the participation primarily of those journalists who least think they need it.** While mainstream media are present among the major disinformation distribution channels described above, the core of the problem lies with media for whom the values of professional journalism are secondary – and they are unlikely to participate.

## 5.5 Other initiatives

In response to the ongoing Russian pressure on Montenegro following the 2016 coup attempt, NATO deployed its first ever counter-hybrid warfare team to the country in 2019<sup>170</sup>. Simultaneously, Montenegro became the first Western Balkan country to join the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats<sup>171</sup>. Both initiatives were designed to increase the state’s capacity to counteract externally instigated disinformation threats, but the details of resulting operations have been held in confidence, precluding any evaluation of impact.

On a less formal basis, the Albanian television news network A2 – affiliated with CNN – has sought to establish itself as an alternative to disinformation-saturated media in the country, and its editor-in-chief, Elert Yzeiri, has used the channel’s visibility to become a prominent public advocate for media literacy and higher journalistic standards<sup>172</sup>. Broadly, this effort appears to have been successful. A2 enjoys a strong reputation among professionals and academics, and it was among the very few major Albanian media that did not publish any of the disinformation captured in this study.

<sup>169</sup> Janeski, Ognen and Marina Tuneva (2020), ‘Udhëzime për raportim të sigurd, profesional dhe përgjegjës mbi koronavirusin (COVID-19)’, Association of Journalists of Macedonia (<http://agk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Udh%C3%ABzime-p%C3%ABr-raportim-t%C3%AB-siqurt-dhe-profesional-mbi-koronavirusin.pdf>).

<sup>170</sup> Lekic (2019), ‘First NATO counter-hybrid warfare’.

<sup>171</sup> The European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (2019), ‘Montenegro’.

<sup>172</sup> Gërguri, Dren (2020), ‘Kryeredaktori i A2CNN, Yzeiri: Reduktimi i pagave dhe vështirësitë tjera nuk i kanë ndalur gazetarët, janë edhe më përgjegjës e ngulmues për të ushtruar punën e tyre’, Vertetmates, 9 July (<https://vertetmates.mk/kryeredaktori-i-a2cnn-yzeiri-reduktimi-i-pagave-dhe-veshtiresite-tjera-nuk-i-kane-ndalur-gazetaret-jane-edhe-me-perjegjies-e-ngulmues-per-te-ushtruar-punen-e-tyre/>).



## 5.6 Legal regulation of disinformation

The legal landscape vis-à-vis disinformation in the Western Balkans is mixed.

- In **Albania**, as described in Chapter 3 of this study, the parliament passed anti-defamation legislation in 2019, ostensibly designed to criminalise disinformation. The law, which allows the government to fine media outlets up to EUR 16 000 for publishing ‘fake news’, has been sharply criticised by Albanian journalism and human rights groups, as well as by the OSCE and the CoE<sup>173</sup>.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, Republika Srpska and the district of Brčko introduced in March and April 2020 rules allowing authorities to fine media for publishing ‘fake news’ that could cause a panic. Outwardly designed to combat disinformation related to the Coronavirus pandemic, these measures have likewise been criticised by the OSCE and other observers as potentially damaging to freedom of expression.<sup>174</sup>
- **Kosovo** does not have legislation or regulation targeting disinformation, beyond standard libel laws;<sup>175</sup>
- In **Montenegro**, as described in Chapter 3 of this study, authorities have used existing anti-defamation and public safety legislation against media and individuals accused of disseminating ‘disinformation’, primarily with regard to the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Montenegrin opposition and international observers have criticised this as an abuse of power.<sup>176</sup>
- **North Macedonia** does not currently have legislation or regulation targeting disinformation, beyond standard libel laws. However, the newly re-elected SDSM-DUI coalition government is widely expected to introduce legislation designed to reduce disinformation, including by reforming the public broadcaster (MRT), increasing transparency of media ownership, and breaking up media monopolies.<sup>177</sup>
- Authorities in **Serbia**, similarly to their counterparts in Montenegro, have used existing anti-defamation and public safety legislation ostensibly to combat disinformation. The effect, according to independent media organisations, has been to dampen criticism, particularly of the government’s handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Semini, L Lazar (2019), ‘Albanian lawmakers pass fake news laws over media protests’ AP News, 18 December (<https://apnews.com/article/dd6a3063803a116f4ff109a90fca250a>); Erebara, Gjergj (2020) ‘Rights Groups Urge Albania to ‘Rethink’ Disputed Media Law’ *Balkan Insight* 16 September. (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/16/rights-organizations-concerned-by-plans-to-reinstall-albania-anti-media-law/>); Venice Commission (2020) ‘Opinion on Draft Amendments to Law No. 97/2013 on the Audiovisual Media Service’, Opinion No. 980/2020 of 19 June 2020. (<https://rm.coe.int/vc-opinion-albania-0620/16809ec9c9>)

<sup>174</sup> Radio Free Europe (2020), ‘OSCE Concerned About Measures Against ‘Fake News’ In Bosnia’, 24 March (<https://www.rferl.org/a/osce-concerned-about-measures-against-fake-news-in-bosnia/30507012.html>); OSCE (2020), OSCE concerned about decree against ‘fake news’ in Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and calls on authorities to withdraw it’, 14 April (<https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/450115>).

<sup>175</sup> Rama & Palushaj (2019), ‘Legal environment related to media in Kosovo’ (<http://agk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/03-2019-Draft-Legal-Analysis-1.pdf>) .

<sup>176</sup> Koprivica, Dragan (2020), ‘Montenegro Took Wrong Route in Tackling Pandemic Disinformation’, *Balkan Insight*, 14 September (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/14/montenegro-took-wrong-route-in-tackling-pandemic-disinformation/>).

<sup>177</sup> Apostolov, Vlado (2020), ‘North Macedonia’s Media Awaits Reforms Under New Govt’, *Balkan Insight*, 3 September (<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/09/03/north-macedonias-media-awaits-reforms-under-new-govt/>).

<sup>178</sup> Maksimov, Vlagyislav (2020), ‘Serbian journalist detained for coronavirus reporting’, *Euractiv*, 2 April (<https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/serbian-journalist-detained-for-coronavirus-reporting/>).

## 5.7 Challenges of counter-disinformation

The evidence above points, in our view, to three core challenges facing the counter-disinformation landscape in the Western Balkans.

First, there is no empirical basis on which to judge the impact of counter-disinformation initiatives in the Western Balkans. There are no substantive evaluations of the real impact of any of the initiatives described above, only accounts of activities undertaken. As a result, while counts are available of the number of untruthful articles corrected, the number of journalists trained and the number of school-children reached, there is no real indication that the situational or structural factors that combine to produce disinformation-rich environments have been reduced in any appreciable way by these projects. This situation is not, however, entirely the fault of the initiatives. Producing such evaluations would require the presence of a better research infrastructure in the Western Balkans, including social scientists working in universities or consultancies, regular tracking polls, and so on.

Second, unlike disinformation itself, counter-disinformation in the Western Balkans is primarily a foreigner's game. With virtually no exceptions, all the initiatives described above rely on foreign funding and would cease to function if that funding were withdrawn. The lone significant exception is a coordinating group convened by the North Macedonian Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services<sup>179</sup>, which meets for an annual conference and supports public information campaigns. National governments provide some support to these initiatives in Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, but that support is dwarfed by that provided from outside the region – and particularly by the EU. Even beyond funding, there is unevenness in the degree of domestic buy-in. This unevenness is reflected in the quality and diversity of projects. Thus, fact-checking and media support projects throughout the region are generally active and grounded in national expertise and experience. Media literacy projects aimed at the general public, by contrast, tend to rely on research and curricula produced outside the region, and the domestic contribution is frequently (but not always) limited to translation and dissemination.

Finally, there is a structural mismatch between the factors that produce disinformation and the initiatives that arise in response to them. While the disinformation landscape, as discussed throughout this study, tends to mirror a country's political landscape, the scope and scale of counter-disinformation initiatives is produced almost entirely by a combination of the abundance of available external funding and the capacity and ingenuity of domestic journalists and activists. To date, the most vibrant counter-disinformation ecosystems in the region are found in North Macedonia and Serbia (and more specifically in Vojvodina), while the biggest disinformation challenges are arguably faced in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. More importantly, counter-disinformation initiatives operate in and focus on the information space itself, and are poorly integrated into broader social and political development processes. As a result, the root causes of disinformation remain broadly unaddressed by those who have the most expertise on the subject.

<sup>179</sup> Media Literacy Network (<https://mediumskapismenost.mk/home/>).

## 6 Concluding remarks and policy recommendations

### 6.1 Concluding remarks

#### 6.1.1 Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans

Most policy studies of disinformation tend to conceive of vulnerabilities in pseudo-military terms, focusing on the 'permeability' of a state, a society and a media system to hostile actors, whether of domestic or foreign origin. This, in turn, suggests that states need to take action to decrease that permeability and thus reduce their vulnerability to attack<sup>180</sup>. This approach is intuitive, but it is misguided. It assumes – wrongly, in our view – that disinformation is the product of bad actors attacking a vulnerable media system, and this leads to generally fruitless recommendations to strengthen the governance of media systems, rather than the political and social environments in which they operate.

This study takes a different approach. As noted repeatedly, information disorder reflects social and political disorder. Disinformation in the Western Balkans (as around the world) is not an attack on political and social life in the region: it is generated by the political and social life of the region<sup>181</sup>. To believe that Western Balkan politics can somehow be healed by changing the way that media in the region operate – or by protecting those media from outside manipulation – is to send policymakers on a fool's errand. Instead of focusing on the factors that make disinformation possible (such as the regulation of media systems, or the permeability of borders), policymakers should turn their attention to the factors that make it an effective tool for achieving political goals.

The research and analysis presented above points to four key vulnerabilities that will continue to make disinformation an important and damaging part of the socio-political landscape in the Western Balkans for the foreseeable future. These are:

- **Governance:** Functional states are less vulnerable to disinformation than dysfunctional ones. When citizens see that governments are effective providers of welfare and social services, and that elections bring real changes in policy (for better or for worse), they are more likely to vote on the basis of material interests. When they see the state as corrupt, captured by self-interested elites and unconcerned about the fate of ordinary people, they are more likely to vote on the basis of identity and emotion. The same pattern holds for other kinds of political behaviour, including protest, and even discussing and sharing materials on social media. Governments throughout the Western Balkans are at the wrong end of this spectrum, as a result of which citizens' trust and engagement are almost catastrophically low (see Chapter 2 for more detail). The Coronavirus pandemic has made the situation worse. Unless governance improves radically it will remain too easy to sway publics in the Western Balkans through disinformation.
- **Geopolitics:** Citizens and even political leaders in many countries care little what foreigners think of them. That is not true in the Western Balkans, however. The region is home to states and publics for whom international opinion is a defining, and often existential, issue. This is true for states that are new (particularly Kosovo and Montenegro), as well as for states whose sovereignty is challenged (Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo). As a result, media throughout the region

<sup>180</sup> For example, see Bayer et al (2019);

European Parliament. (2019) 'Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States'. 28 February ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL\\_STU\(2019\)608864](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2019)608864)).

<sup>181</sup> Global Focus. (2019) 'Propaganda Made to Measure: Dimensions of Risk and Resilience in the Western Balkans'. 22 May (<https://www.global-focus.eu/2019/05/propaganda-made-measure-dimensions-risk-resilience-western-balkans/>).

resonate with messages produced elsewhere, creating an additional vulnerability to externally generated disinformation. Local governments, media and civil society are thus pushed to react to agendas that are not of their own making and over which they have no leverage, and the resulting instability undermines the quality of governance further. New states cannot be turned into longstanding ones overnight, of course, but bolstering the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo will reduce their vulnerability to disinformation.

- **Enmity:** Ethnic and religious divides provide an easy lever for prying public sentiment away from material concerns and provoking an emotional response, which can then be manipulated for political gain. Portrayed as rooted in hundreds or thousands of years of history and thus fundamentally irreconcilable – as populist politicians and media often argue with respect to Albanians, Roma and other minorities in Slavic-majority countries – such divides may be perceived to have a degree of legitimacy in a way that many other disinformation narratives may not. Their effectiveness and malleability make them inviting opportunities for disinformation producers, both domestic and foreign, thus making disinformation an attractive strategy where it might otherwise not have been. Such divides also tend to undermine the quality of governance, exacerbating other vulnerabilities. Without more successful anti-chauvinism initiatives, all states of the region will continue to be easy targets for disinformation actors.
- **Disunity:** Public trust in governance, institutions and society itself tends to break down still further when there is a lack of trust between institutional actors themselves. The vulnerability of the EU's interests in the Western Balkans stems in part from the lack of common purpose and coordination – perceived and real – among some EU Member States, as well as between the EU, its allies (particularly the US) and its partners in the Western Balkans. Mixed messages between Brussels and Member State capitals over assistance in the COVID-19 pandemic or over migration, and especially over enlargement itself, create the gaps into which the EU's ill-wishers (domestic and foreign) can insert disinformation. Restoring public confidence in the EU as an authoritative source of both information and policy requires closing these gaps.

### 6.1.2 Emergent threats in the Western Balkans

If vulnerabilities, as described above, refer to the structural factors that make disinformation an effective means to an end, threats refer to the more dynamic factors that can turn those vulnerabilities into clear and present dangers. We can currently identify four emergent threats, all of which, in one way or another, represent a continuation of dynamics already at play in the Western Balkans. These are:

- **Russian Geo-strategic Policy:** Russia, as has been noted, does not have traditional geopolitical interests in the region beyond the presence of hydrocarbon trans-shipment routes. Nevertheless, the era in which the Kremlin was prepared to cede the region to the EU (and NATO) has passed. Increasingly since 2008, and with greater vehemence since 2014, Moscow is strategically committed to blocking the expansion of Euro-Atlantic institutions where it can. This is not just, or even primarily, about NATO and hard security. The Kremlin finds the expansion of the European economic project threatening, as the integration of markets into EU regulatory and competition standards contributes to Moscow's isolation and increases pressure for structural reforms, which would in turn upend Russia's current governance practices. As a result, beginning in Ukraine in 2014 (or, some would argue, in Georgia in 2008), Russia has been fundamentally interested in preventing or at least delaying the accession of further Western Balkan countries both to the EU and to NATO. Even after accession, Moscow seeks ways to minimize EU and NATO influence. As Russia's economy continues to flounder and the country's political isolation mounts – including

the imposition of further EU, UK and US sanctions in the aftermath of the poisoning of Alexey Navalny – Moscow’s commitment to this strategic goal is only likely to strengthen.

- **American Geo-strategic Policy:** While Russia and, to a lesser extent, China are generally seen as the most problematic global and regional actors when it comes to disinformation, it is Washington that has recently contributed to the downfall of a sitting government in Kosovo (to the consternation of America’s European allies). The campaign of disinformation and distortion that accompanied and enabled the Trump Administration to fell the government of Albin Kurti is one of the very few instances where we can point to a concrete, tangible impact and tie it more or less directly to the disinformation itself. More problematically, together with the September 2020 ‘Washington Agreement’ on economic normalisation between Kosovo and Serbia, it represents a fundamental shift in American policy in the region, away from a concert with Europe and, indeed, away from established American policy since the 1990s. The larger decoupling of US and EU policy in the region exacerbates the disunity described above and invites Russia, China and Turkey to exploit the transatlantic rift. This problem may partially resolve itself when the Trump Administration is replaced by a Biden Administration, but a bi-partisan commitment in Washington to trans-Atlantic partnership on the Western Balkans can no longer be assumed.
- **COVID-19 and its Aftermath:** COVID-19 pandemic is a tragedy in (at least) two acts. The first is the health and mortality crisis, of which we are still in the midst. The second is the accompanying economic crisis, of which we are potentially still only in the earliest phases. The latter will require a long-term program of investment and reform to overcome. While most COVID-related disinformation in the Western Balkans has focused on the first ‘act’, it is the second ‘act’ that poses the greater disinformation threat in the region for the future. A significant and protracted regional, European or global economic downturn would compound the already catastrophic lack of trust in governance in the region, producing further hardship and disaffection. As discussed above, that immediately widens the space for disinformation, and it will exacerbate the problem unless governments in the region are able to deliver a robust socio-economic response. The European Union’s EUR 9 billion economic and investment plan for the Western Balkans, announced on 6 October 2020, is a welcome step in this direction. Particularly helpful is the plan’s emphasis not simply on infrastructure and private-sector investment, but on improving the efficiency and efficacy of social service delivery, strengthening the civil service and reforming health care, all of which should contribute to boosting public trust in the state (and in the EU)<sup>182</sup>. Unfortunately, while present in the Commission’s communication, these declared priorities seem to fade into the background in the plan’s ten ‘Flagships.’ Moreover, critics of the EU in the Western Balkans can be expected to note the relative ungenerosity of the plan for the Western Balkans, compared to the level of assistance provided to EU Member States, five of which border the region, as well as the lack of stringent conditionality attached to those packages.
- **Non-Enlargement:** While enlargement is a source of tension both within the region (as described in Chapter 4) and within the EU itself, the enlargement perspective is also one of the region’s greatest potential sources of stability. The apparent evaporation of that perspective is among the key catalysts of public disaffection and thus the salience of disinformation. As noted earlier, efforts to discredit the EU often motivate accusations that the enlargement perspective is somehow fictitious, and thus that the EU is demanding sacrifice from the region without offering reward.

<sup>182</sup> European Commission (2020), ‘Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the regions. An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans’, Brussels, 6.10.2020 COM(2020) 641 final ([https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication\\_on\\_wb\\_economic\\_and\\_investment\\_plan\\_october\\_2020\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/communication_on_wb_economic_and_investment_plan_october_2020_en.pdf)).



Even if the EU does not take enlargement formally off the table, it will be effectively scuttled by a combination of information manipulation and public disaffection, as governments shirk conditionality and citizens cease to believe in a European future. That, in turn, would shatter the structure of political party systems and economic landscapes geared towards EU integration, causing further dysfunction and dislocation – fertile ground for disinformation.

## 6.2 Policy recommendations

As this study has sought to demonstrate, disinformation is not the product of poorly regulated digital media ecosystems or exogenous security threats. Rather, it is the result of a combination of structural vulnerabilities – poor governance, geopolitical exposure, deep-seated internal enmities, and disunity – and a dynamic field of opportunities to deploy false information for the attainment of political goals. As a result, the policy responses recommended here do not reside entirely in the media or security domains, but place significant emphasis on the domains of governance, public engagement and diplomacy.

### 6.2.1 For the European Parliament

As the EU's primary means for innovative policy analysis and development, it is imperative that the European Parliament begins to move the discussion of disinformation into its proper context. Thus, our first recommendation for the European Parliament is that it continues to shift the debate on counter-disinformation away from approaches that focus overwhelmingly on the regulation of media environments, towards approaches that focus on the structural factors that make disinformation an attractive tool for accomplishing political ends, mainstreaming it into broader policy discussions.

With this in mind, we further recommend that MEPs:

- Welcome and support the European Commission's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans and use their oversight and scrutiny powers to bolster the Plan's emphasis on supporting public services, the civil service and health care. This should include ensuring that the priorities vis-à-vis improving state capacity and performance, as well as conditionality related to the rule of law, are observed throughout the plan's implementation;
- In support of the oversight described above, convene a standing forum of experts and stakeholders from the region to identify key post-COVID priorities for investment and development, as well as the monitoring of governance and conditionality, and ensure that these are worked into the implementation of the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans.

Turning from the causes of disinformation to disinformation itself, we have drawn attention in this study to the role that Serbian media in particular play in propagating disinformation throughout the Western Balkans. Thus, it is recommended that:

- Alongside noting the malign presence of extra-regional disinformation actors in the Western Balkans, including (most notably) Russia, European Parliament standing Rapporteurs and other lead MEPs on the Western Balkans, including Delegation Chairs and Vice-Chairs, coordinate their efforts and, when exercising Parliamentary scrutiny and in external communications, draw attention to disinformation practices by regional governments aimed at destabilizing governments and societies elsewhere in the region as being particularly problematic. This applies first and foremost to Serbia, whose media – including those linked to the state and ruling circles – are critical to destructive disinformation campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro;



- MEPs consider expanding the mandate of its Democracy Support and Election Coordination Group (DEG) – which already includes a mission to strengthen democratic parliaments and institutions in the Western Balkans – to include support for strengthening the environments in which parliaments operate. Specifically, this would involve the DEG working directly with actors in regional media and civil society to identify ways of encouraging greater accountability, closer adherence to the norms of democracy and human rights, and a strengthened sense of the political franchise among ordinary citizens. In addition to informing the European Parliament’s own work, these engagements would allow MEPs to exercise more effective oversight of the work of the Commission and the EEAS in the region.

Having noted (in particular in Chapters 3 and 5) the shortage of high-quality research in and on the Western Balkans, particularly (but not only) as it relates to the efficacy of counter-disinformation initiatives, we recommend that the European Parliament:

- Convene a dialogue in whatever format MEPs deem appropriate with international funders active in supporting counter-disinformation initiatives in the Western Balkans – to include the various EU funding bodies, Member State government funders, the German political foundations, Norwegian, Swiss and UK government funders, US government funders, and the prominent US private foundations – in order to encourage a common approach to data collection and sharing on disinformation in the region and the efficacy of counter-disinformation projects. As an initial step, this could take the form of a hearing, but MEPs should encourage funders to establish a more permanent forum.

Finally, we build on and extend the recommendations made by Bayer et al to LIBE in 2019, as follows<sup>183</sup>:

- Encourage the extension of digital transparency legislation and regulation, including for the declaration and record-keeping of political advertising, together with quality marking for media that are compliant (given the likelihood of non-compliance in the region);
- Encourage the extension of GDPR to the region, again with kite-marking for compliance;
- Include concern for the Western Balkans in the EP’s and EC’s ongoing scrutiny of the major online social media companies, particularly Facebook, Twitter and YouTube/Google. Add an obligation to make data available to public-interest researchers.

## 6.2.2 For the European Commission

Guided by the same imperatives we elaborated for the European Parliament, we have three overarching recommendations for the European Commission, as follows:

- In addition to the effective counter-disinformation initiatives in the Western Balkans already funded by the European Union, the Commission should also direct funding to robust sociological and socio-psychological research, which applies cutting-edge techniques to the study of disinformation and counter-disinformation in the Western Balkans. One troubling finding of this study is that such research is entirely absent (see Chapter 5). The task, then, is to build the foundation for evidence-based responses to immediate disinformation challenges, as well as to increase the capacity of academic researchers in the region to conduct valid research in the field. This could be accomplished through targeted Horizon-2020 calls, supporting collaboration with academic research centres in the EU;

<sup>183</sup> European Parliament. (2019) ‘Disinformation and propaganda – impact on the functioning of the rule of law in the EU and its Member States’ 28 February ([https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL\\_STU\(2019\)608864](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document.html?reference=IPOL_STU(2019)608864)).

- Alongside in-depth academic research, the Commission should – in collaboration with the Eurobarometer and the Balkan Barometer – consider organising high-frequency tracking polls to monitor the prevalence and socio-demographic distribution of key disinformation messages and beliefs related to them, as an open-access resource for policymakers, researchers and activists in the region;
- The Commission should foster the creation of a Balkan-focused Centre of Excellence on disinformation, akin to the NATO Centre in Riga, to serve as a hub and clearing centre for research and data, a convener for the exchange of experience and analysis, and a coordinator of regional networks, as well as a conduit for communication and coordination between EU and regional initiatives. This should be done in cooperation with NATO, but autonomously, to avoid becoming a party to information conflicts.

### 6.2.3 For the European External Action Service

This study recommends that the EEAS, as the EU's diplomatic arm, undertakes three general action points:

- 1) In communicating the EU's presence and role in the Western Balkans, the EEAS should pivot from a largely responsive stance, responding to disinformation narratives promulgated by a combination of regional governments and foreign actors (primarily Russia and China), to a more proactive stance, designing and promoting narratives that serve European interests and counteract those of the EU's strategic adversaries in the region. Specifically, these narratives should underscore and reinforce the EU's material relevance to citizens in the region. The new Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans provides an ideal opportunity for this.
- 2) The EEAS should convene an ongoing dialogue with key stakeholders among EU institutions and in Member States' foreign ministries, designed to sensitise them to the importance of projecting a common core message when it comes to the geopolitical vulnerabilities of the Western Balkans. This includes messaging about the status of Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the commitment to enlargement. Even where Member States disagree over these issues, they should be aware that EU disunity undermines support among Western Balkan publics for the EU, and thus decreases the pressure on Western Balkan governments to deliver on conditionality.
- 3) Strengthen long-term pre-election monitoring methodologies to add a focus on disinformation.

In addition, we recommend four actions with direct reference to the EEAS StratCom and *EUvsDisinfo* activities:

- 1) Add Serbia to StratCom priorities for countering malicious disinformation and monitor and report on the involvement of EU Member States' actors in such disinformation activities in the region;
- 2) Ensure maximum cooperation and coordination with disinformation researchers in the region, at NATO, and in the UK and US;
- 3) Establish a new basis for judging the efficacy of *EUvsDisinfo*, moving away from the volume of disinformation 'debunked' to the volume of disinformation that continues to resonate and generate online social media interactions. Insist on negotiations with Facebook, Twitter and other social media companies on collaborating with *EUvsDisinfo* to provide relevant data and develop methodologies;
- 4) *EUvsDisinfo* to maintain a system of verification of kitemarks for use in the Western Balkans, in cooperation with (but independent of) the International Fact-Checking Network.

## 6.2.4 General and Country-Specific Recommendations

As alluded to above, all actors interested in the future of the Western Balkans – including but not limited to the European Parliament, the Commission, the EEAS, other governments, donors and civil society organisations – should find common cause in addressing both the causes and mechanisms of disinformation in the region. In addition to the recommendations already made, it would be advisable for the European Union to work with its friends and partners (and its friends and partners should work independently) on the basis of two overarching imperatives:

- (1) Given the link between poor governance and disinformation, it is of vital importance that the Western Balkans remain a key locus of democracy and governance assistance programmes separate from and beyond those associated with enlargement and conditionality; and
- (2) These democracy and governance assistance programmes must include media-support initiatives designed to bolster the commercial viability of media that seek to maintain their independence from political and corporate interest groups, as the financial vulnerability of media increases their propensity to engage in disinformation.

With respect to the specific issues facing particular countries of the region, the following priorities should be borne in mind:

- In **Albania**, the imperative must be to increase the separation between the state – including the ruling elite – and the media, and to increase the transparency of media ownership in the process. In addition, the implementation of the new media law must be closely monitored, and pressure on the government to alter the law must be maintained, especially (but not only) if serious abuses are identified.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, media-support initiatives must focus on building resilience to efforts – whether generated internally or externally – to exploit ethnic and religious division. Moreover, media-support initiatives in Republika Srpska must be targeted towards increasing the independence of the local media system from Serbia.
- In **Kosovo**, it must be recognised that vulnerability to foreign-sourced disinformation will persist for as long as Kosovo's sovereignty is a matter of international controversy. Pristina's supporters must thus coordinate international messaging in order to reduce the gaps into which the wedge of disinformation can be inserted.
- In **Montenegro**, media-support initiatives must focus on bolstering the domestic media system's independence from Serbian media. In addition, pressure on the government must be increased, to ensure that anti-defamation and other laws do not infringe on freedom of speech.
- In **North Macedonia**, the lack of transparency of media ownership is a particular cause for concern, as is the close relationship between major media outlets and leading political parties. Here, it is particularly important that attention be paid to the malign behaviour of some EU member states.
- In **Serbia**, pressure must be maintained (and in some areas increased) on the government to cease the hounding of independent and opposition-minded journalists, to revisit the arrangement that allows Sputnik to use Belgrade as a base for disinformation operations in the region, and to cease the practice of using Serbia-based media as a tool for destabilising neighbours.

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## Data appendix

Figure A1: Sources, fields, and channels of disinformation – a country-by-country breakdown

	Albania	BiH	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
<b>DOMESTIC SOURCES OF DISINFORMATION</b>						
Commercial Organization	16.7 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	--	0.0 %	7.7 %
Nationalist Organization	0.0 %	12.5 %	22.2 %	--	0.0 %	3.8 %
Traditional Media	0.0 %	75.0 %	61.1 %	--	37.5 %	76.9 %
Other Media	33.3 %	12.5 %	11.1 %	--	54.2 %	7.7 %
Political Party	0.0 %	37.5 %	11.1 %	--	29.2 %	15.4 %
Other Organization	50.0 %	0.0 %	27.8 %	--	12.5 %	19.2 %
State Involvement	83.3 %	50.0 %	16.7 %	--	8.3 %	30.8 %
<b>TARGETS OF DISINFORMATION</b>						
Exacerbate Internal Conflict	16.7 %	37.5 %	22.2 %	0.0 %	16.7 %	0.0 %
Exacerbate International Conflict	50.0 %	25.0 %	66.7 %	25.0 %	20.8 %	30.8 %
Shift General Public Opinion	16.7 %	25.0 %	11.1 %	50.0 %	33.3 %	38.5 %
<b>FIELDS OF DISINFORMATION</b>						
COVID-19	16.7 %	0.0 %	5.6 %	25.0 %	0.0 %	7.7 %
Electoral Politics	33.3 %	25.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	8.3 %	11.5 %
EU	16.7 %	25.0 %	11.1 %	0.0 %	4.2 %	7.7 %
General Foreign Policy	16.7 %	0.0 %	16.7 %	0.0 %	25.0 %	0.0 %
NATO	0.0 %	0.0 %	16.7 %	25.0 %	29.2 %	15.4 %
Post-War Conflict Resolution	0.0 %	25.0 %	16.7 %	0.0 %	4.2 %	23.1 %
Post-War Memory	0.0 %	12.5 %	16.7 %	0.0 %	4.2 %	3.8 %
<b>CHANNELS OF DISINFORMATION</b>						
Facebook	66.7 %	75.0 %	77.8 %	25.0 %	70.8 %	7.7 %
YouTube	50.0 %	12.5 %	33.3 %	25.0 %	20.8 %	3.8 %
Twitter	33.3 %	0.0 %	33.3 %	25.0 %	25.0 %	15.4 %
Television	0.0 %	75.0 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	41.7 %	23.1 %
Newspapers & Periodicals	100.0 %	75.0 %	33.3 %	0.0 %	54.2 %	84.6 %
Radio	100.0 %	37.5 %	33.3 %	0.0 %	0.0 %	3.8 %
Community/Local Media	100.0 %	75.0 %	33.3 %	25.0 %	75.0 %	34.6 %

	<b>Albania</b>	<b>BiH</b>	<b>Kosovo</b>	<b>Montenegro</b>	<b>North Macedonia</b>	<b>Serbia</b>
State Media	83.3 %	62.5 %	100.0 %	0.0 %	33.3 %	30.8 %
Private Media	83.3 %	87.5 %	100.0 %	25.0 %	79.2 %	88.5 %

Figure A2: Disinformation mapping summary table

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
Albania	2019	European Union	Council of Europe report warning about the dangers of disinformation in Europe/ discussion with journalists and policymakers in Albania. Publication translated into Albanian.	Contested Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other organisation	Russia, other	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, newspapers/ periodicals, radio, community/ local media	Community/ local media
Albania	2020	COVID-19	Albanian PM Rama posts a video claiming citizens are beaten up in Spain because they don't respect restrictions.	Fully False Information	Shift Local Public Opinion	Other media organisation		General Population	Facebook, newspapers/ periodicals, radio	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Albania	2020	General Foreign Policy	COVID-19 crisis is the product of US and other Western countries with the aim to harm China, Iran, others.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other media organisation, nationalist organisation	Other	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/ periodicals, radio	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Albania	2020	Other	A2CNN Director explains the sources and the way disinformation gets spread in Albania.	De-Contextualized Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Commercial organisation, political party		General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/ periodicals, radio	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Albania	2020	Electoral Politics	Italian TV Rai3 reports about increasing drugs production in Albania.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other organisation, commercial organisation	Other	General Population	Newspapers/ periodicals, radio	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Albania	2019	Electoral Politics	Albanian Parliament drafts resolution to fight foreign interference naming Russia, into internal affairs.	Contested Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other organisation	Russia, other	General Population	Newspapers/ periodicals, radio	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2017	European Union	EU accused of supporting re-writing Western Balkans maps in process of accession.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other media organisation	Other, Russia	General Population	Facebook	Private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinfor- mation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018	Migration	Provoking fear of non-European migrants (EU weakness or conspiracy)	Fully False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Traditional media organisation, other media organisation	Czech YouTube, Russia	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, TV, newspapers/ periodicals	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2017	Electoral Politics	US and Britain accused of planning attentat in the RS to destabilise the region and reduce Russian influence.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Political party, nationalist organisation	Russia, Serbia	Ethnic Group	Facebook, TV, newspapers/ periodicals, community/ local media	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018	European Union	Portrayal of EU values as harmful.	Partially False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Traditional media organisation	Serbia	General Population	Newspapers/ periodicals,	Community/ local media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2017-2020	Post-War Memory	Serb media accusing Bosniaks of exhuming Serb graves in Sarajevo.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Traditional media organisation		Ethnic Group	Facebook, TV, newspapers/ periodicals, radio,	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serb media accusing Bosniak paramilitary stocking up weapons.	De-Contextualized Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Traditional media organisation, political party		Ethnic Group	Facebook, TV, newspapers/ periodicals, radio,	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serb media claiming Chomsky called Albanians a 'wild tribe'.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation		Ethnic Group	Facebook, TV, newspapers/ periodicals,	Community/ local media, private media
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018	Electoral Politics	Sputnik against Serb presidential candidate Ivancić as Western agent.	Contested Information	Affect a Political Campaign	Traditional media organisation, political party	Russia	Voters	TV, newspapers/ periodicals, radio	State media
Kosovo	2020	Other	Kosovo has no legal tools to combat disinformation.	Contested Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other organisation, traditional media organisation	Other	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/ periodicals, radio	Community/ local media, state media, private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
Kosovo	2017-2020	Other	Media spreading news that international actors, athletes and politicians are Albanians.	Contested Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other organisation, traditional media organisation	Other	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/periodicals, radio	Community/local media, state media, private media
Kosovo	201-2020	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Media & politicians claim and argue that Kosovo and Serbia are negotiating land-swap deal.	Leaks	Exacerbate International Conflict	Nationalist organisation, political party	Serbia, Russia	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/periodicals, radio	Community/local media, state media, private media
Kosovo	2018-2020	Post-War Memory	Media & politicians argue about certain periods and aspects of history related to the relations to Serbia.	Partially False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other organisation, nationalist organisation	Serbia, Russia	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/periodicals, radio	Community/local media, state media, private media
Kosovo	2018-2020	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Russia disinformation in Kosovo - Russia Today, Sputnik, Meduza, Russia Insider, TASS, The Moscow Times, Newsfront, Unz, The Duran and Pravda Report, in Serbian language: Sputnik Serbia	Fully False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Nationalist organisation, other organisation	Russia, Serbia	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/periodicals, radio	Community/local media, state media, private media
Kosovo	2019-2020	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Media & politicians in Kosovo claim that Kosovo Government is further isolating the country and source of Anti-Americanism.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Nationalist organisation, political party	US	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, newspapers/periodicals, radio	Community/local media, state media, private media
North Macedonia	2016-2017	Electoral Politics	Russian media allegedly used the threat of 'Greater Albania' to exacerbate post-election unrest in Macedonia.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict		Russia	General Population		
North Macedonia	2018	General Foreign Policy	Russian-backed disinformation campaign in response to deal with Greece over new name.	Contested Information	Exacerbate International Conflict		Russia	General Population		



Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinfor-mation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
North Macedonia	2016	Other	Teens in Veles run over a hundred websites to pump out often false viral stories that supported Donald Trump.	Fully False Information	Other	Other media organisation		Other	Facebook, Twitter	
North Macedonia	2020	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Macedonian nationalists spin the statement of Albanian Prime Minister reopening of the borders of Albania for ethnic Albanians only.	Partially False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Traditional media organisation, other media organisation		General Population	Facebook, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2020	Post-War Memory	Right-wing media falsely claim that Greece prohibits citizens of certain municipalities with high no of COVID-19 cases to enter the country, including only municipalities with high presence of ethnic Albanian or ethnic Roma population.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Political party, traditional media organisation	Hungarian companies	General Population	Facebook, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2019	General Foreign Policy	Hungarian-owned media in Slovenia distort news from Greece that Zaev and Tsipras took 30 billion euros in bribes for Zaev and 'probably' one trillion for Tsipras from the EU in order to expedite the speedy deal.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation, other media organisation	Other	General Population	Facebook, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2017	European Union	Russia accused EU & NATO of supporting greater Albania.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other media organisation	Russia	General Population		Private media
North Macedonia	2018	General Foreign Policy	Ahead of referendum on name change, Russian state funded Sputnik pushes distorted and polarizing narratives.	Fully False Information	Disrupt an Election/Referendum	Other media organisation	Russia, Serbia	General Population	Twitter	Community/local media, state media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	General Foreign Policy	Ahead of referendum on name change, high number of new FB and Twitter accounts spreads the #bojkotiram (#boycott) message.	Other	Disrupt an Election/Referendum	Other media organisation, political party	Russia, Serbia	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram	Community/local media, private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
North Macedonia	2020	Electoral Politics	Media outlets close to right-wing party accuses SDSM for vote-buying.	Fully False Information	Disrupt an Election/Referendum	Other media organisation		General Population	Facebook	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	NATO	Ahead of referendum on name change, online media accuse government of using depleted uranium in an anti-NATO campaign.	Fully False Information	Disrupt an Election/Referendum	Other media organisation	Russia	General Population	Facebook	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	Other	Serbian Politika claims Gruevski escaped Macedonia through Tirana with Malev Airlines.	Partially False Information	Shift Local Public Opinion	Other media organisation	Serbia	General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	Other	Hungarian media decontextualize remark and publish sensationalist headlines claiming Gruevski crossed borders dressed as a woman.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other media organisation	Hungary	General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	NATO	NM at the NATO summit in Brussels didn't get anything more than what it already got in 2008.	Fully False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	Facebook, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2018-2019	NATO	NATO conditions name change and erasure of the Macedonian history, tradition and culture, while we can defacto join NATO without name change.	Partially False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	Facebook, Twitter, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	NATO	We will send our children to die / to kill for NATO / the imperialists.	Partially False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	Facebook, Twitter, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	NATO	NATO membership will cost NM a lot.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, other organisation		General Population	Facebook, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinfor- mation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
North Macedonia	2020	NATO	Three days before NM joining NATO an aggressive anti-5G campaign starts with 15 infoportals sharing disinformation narrative including old Stoltenberg statement on safety of 5G as 5G being a precondition for NATO membership.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other media organisation	Serbian involvement	General Population	Facebook, YouTube, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	General Foreign Policy	VMRO accuses that with Prespa Agreement the identity and all connected to Macedonian identity will be deleted.	Contested Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	Facebook, YouTube, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2018	General Foreign Policy	VMRO leader spins that with Prespa a commission for history revision will be formed.	De-Contextualized Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	Facebook, YouTube, TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
North Macedonia	2017	NATO	Serb journalist and MP Miroslav Lazanski as advised by Serbian secret agent writes an anti-Albanian column 'We will not give up on Macedonia' for daily Politika supporting Gruevski and Russian politics.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate Internal Conflict	Other organisation, traditional media organisation	Serbia, Russia	Ethnic Group	Newspapers/periodicals	
North Macedonia	2019	Other	Ahead of the elections in US, a NM businessman hijacked FB page 'Vets for Trump'.	Other	Other	Other organisation		Other	Facebook	Community/local media
North Macedonia	2018-2019	Other	Right-wing media glorifies Putin, Russian military strength and technology, and Russian positioning and activity in Crimea, Ukraine, and the Syrian conflict.	Contested Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other media organisation	Russia, Serbia	General Population	Facebook, YouTube	Community/local media, private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
North Macedonia	2019	Other	Info leaked to the public indicate that a troll army with several branches is connected to the Center for Communication of VMRO-DPMNE.	Contested Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other media organisation		General Population	Facebook, Twitter	Community/local media, private media
Montenegro	2019	NATO	Montenegrin portal reporting on NATO soldiers using satanic sign.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other media organisation		General Population	Facebook, Twitter	Community/local media, private media
Montenegro	2019-2020	Other	Russian/Serbian media accusing MN church of claiming Serbian church properties.	Contested Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation, other media organisation	Russia, Serbia	Religious Group		
Montenegro	2020	COVID-19	Names of COVID-19 positive patients leaked at social media.	Leaks	Affect an Individual (other than a political candidate)	Other organisation		General Population	Social media (not specified)	
Montenegro	2019	Other	Alternative media informing of presumed dangers of 5G and vaccines.	Partially False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other organisation		General Population	YouTube	
Serbia	2017	European Union	Sputnik spread rumours of storage of spent uranium in Serbia causing cancer epidemic.	Fully False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other organisation	Russia	General Population		
Serbia	2018	European Union	Portrayal of EU values as harmful.	Partially False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, private media
Serbia	2017	Post-War Memory	Serb media accusing Bosniaks of exhuming Serb graves in Sarajevo.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation	BiH	General Population	Facebook, TV, newspapers/periodicals, radio	Community/local media, private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
Serbia	2018	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serb media accusing Bosniak paramilitary stocking up weapons.	De-Contextualized Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation	BiH	General Population	Facebook, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
Serbia	2018	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serb media claiming Chomsky called Albanians a 'wild tribe'.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation	BiH, Russia	General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
Serbia	2020	COVID-19	Serbian government manipulates information COVID-19 seriousness and its response.	Fully False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, other organisation		General Population	YouTube, TV	State media, private media
Serbia	2019	Migration	Serbian Military Trade Union accuses the government of pro-migrant policies.	Fully False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other organisation, nationalist organisation		General Population		Community/local media
Serbia	2019	NATO	Tanjug accused NATO of killing more civilians in Afghanistan than the Taliban.	Partially False Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Traditional media organisation		General Population	TV, newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
Serbia	2019	NATO	Serbian media reporting on NATO soldiers using satanic sign.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Other media organisation	Montenegro	General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Community/local media, state media, private media
Serbia	2020	Other	Serbian media discrediting protesters and omitting police brutality.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	TV, newspapers/periodicals	State media, private media
Serbia	2019	Electoral Politics	Pro-governmental media accusing opposition leaders of treason.	Fully False Information	Affect a Political Campaign	Traditional media organisation		Voters	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serbian media falsely claiming Macron promised to counter Kosovo's independence.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media

Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
Serbia	2019	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serbian media accusing Kosovar Albanians of preparing attacks on Serbs/removal of organs.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	Electoral Politics	Vučić is under constant attack by spies, mafia, planned coup	Fully False Information	Affect a Political Campaign	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Twitter, Instagram, TV	Private media
Serbia	2018	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Putin defends Serbia's interests in Kosovo.	Partially False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	Other	Serbian media accusing N1 director of being paid by Albanian mafia.	Fully False Information	Affect an Individual (other than a political candidate)	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	Other	Regime media attacking media critical of government.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Traditional media organisation, commercial organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	NATO	Serbian media accusing NATO of arming Serbia's neighbours.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	Other	Serbian media claiming US Embassy had a document proving Stefanović innocent.	Fully False Information	Affect an Individual (other than a political candidate)	Traditional media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019	Other	Serbian media accusing KRIK of unethical journalism.	Fully False Information	Other	Traditional media organisation, commercial organisation		General Population	Newspapers/periodicals	Private media



Country	Time Frame	Field	Narrative description	Disinformation type	Desired Effect	Domestic Sources	Foreign Sources	Target Audience	Media Channels	Media ownership
Serbia	2019	Other	Pro-government Serbian media accusing Obradović of espionage.	Partially False Information	Affect an Individual (other than a political candidate)	Traditional media organisation, other media organisation		General Population	Newspapers/ periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2018	Other	Pro-gov Serbian media accusing S.Trifunović of stealing humanitarian money.	Fully False Information	Affect an Individual (other than a political candidate)	Other media organisation, traditional media organisation		General Population	Twitter, newspapers/ periodicals	State media, private media
Serbia	2018	Post-War Conflict Resolution	Serbian media announcing new war in Kosovo starting within 48h.	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Traditional media organisation		General Population	TV, newspapers/ periodicals	Private media
Serbia	2019-2020	NATO	Serbian portals informing that NATO demanded Montenegro proclaims state of emergency	Fully False Information	Exacerbate International Conflict	Other media organisation	Montenegro	General Population		Community/ local media, private media
Serbia	2020	COVID-19	China as Serbia's biggest support during COVID; lack of EU solidarity.	De-Contextualized Information	Shift General Public Opinion	Political party, traditional media organisation		General Population	Twitter, Instagram, TV, newspapers/ periodicals	Community/ local media, state media, private media
Serbia	2018	Electoral Politics	BOT campaign in support of SNS and Vučić.	De-Contextualized Information	Affect a Political Campaign	Political party		Voters	Twitter, newspapers/ periodicals	Private media

Figure A3: Counter-disinformation mapping summary table

Country	Time Frame	Project Title	Narrative Description	Domestic Actors	Foreign Actors	Desired Effect	Action Type	Media Channels
Albania	2019	Council of Europe-European Standards of Disinformation shared with representatives of Media in Albania	The report 'Information Disorder. Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making' was presented to researchers in Media Studies and active journalists. Its translation and publication was supported by Joint Programme 'Reinforcing Judicial Expertise on Freedom of Expression and the Media in South-East Europe (JUFREX)' funded by CoE and the EU.	CSO/NGO, media organisation	Council of Europe	Improve general media quality	Targeted journalism training, policy advocacy	Facebook, TV, radio
Albania	2020	European Union & Council of Europe 'Elections, pandemic and disinformation' online round table for media regulatory authority	EU and CoE's joint project to set the standards on Freedom of Expression and Freedom of the Media in South-East Europe to ensure that citizens receive factual information and can participate in processes such as elections.	Media organisation	Council of Europe	Improve general media quality	Targeted journalism training, fact checking	Facebook, TV, radio
Albania	2020	UNESCO 'Journalism, "Fake news" & Disinformation: manual for the purpose of training of journalists'	A manual that aims to serve as a 'model curriculum', designed to provide journalism educators and trainers, as well as journalism students, with a knowledge base and tools for dealing with issues related to 'fake news'.	N/A	UNESCO	Improve general media literacy	Targeted journalism training, fact checking	Facebook, TV
Albania	2020	A2CNN Director explains the sources and the way disinformation gets spread in Albania	A2CNN Director explains the sources and the way disinformation gets spread in Albania.	CSO/NGO, media organisation	N/A	Improve general media quality	Targeted journalism training, fact checking	Facebook, TV, radio
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2017	Raskrinkavanje.ba ('disclosure/unmasking')	NGO run media fact-checking platform aimed at verifying false and misleading all sorts of information published in Bosnia and Herzegovina.	CSO/NGO	US Government, IFCN, EED	Improve general media literacy	Fact checking	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2020	Promoting Media Information Literacy and Strengthening Independent Media in the WB	Building the capacity of media professionals and journalism students in verification, fact-checking, content production and other reporting competencies.	CSO/NGO	EU Member State Government	Counteract a specific disinformation campaign	Targeted journalism training	TV, radio
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2018-2021	Media for Citizens – Citizens for Media	A project that strives to contribute to strengthened and vibrant civil society actively advocating for advancement of MIL policies and practices.	CSO/NGO	European Commission, EU Member State Government	Improve general media literacy	Policy advocacy	

Country	Time Frame	Project Title	Narrative Description	Domestic Actors	Foreign Actors	Desired Effect	Action Type	Media Channels
Kosovo	2018-2020	NGO INDEP & Department of Journalism - University of Pristina - 'INTRO' Magazine	The INTRO Magazine provides a learning material for Journalism students at the University of Pristina on issues such as 'disinformation'.	CSO/NGO, educational institution	UNESCO-MIL CLICKS	Improve general media literacy	Targeted journalism training, policy advocacy	Facebook, TV
Kosovo	2017	Association of Journalists of Kosovo	Publication on 18 recommendation how to deal with disinformation.	CSO/NGO, educational institution	N/A	Improve general media literacy	Targeted journalism training, targeted media literacy education	Facebook
Kosovo	2020	Association of Journalists of Kosovo	Instructions for secure and professional reporting on COVID-19.	CSO/NGO, educational institution	N/A	Mobilize civic response to disinformation	Targeted journalism training, fact checking	Facebook
North Macedonia	2017	Investigative Reporting Lab Macedonia	An NGO aiming to provide residents of NM and cross-border readers with clear and accurate information about NM and the Balkan region through critical journalism focusing on corruption, organized crime, and rule of law.	CSO/NGO	International media organization	Improve general media quality	Broad public anti-disinformation education	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram
North Macedonia	2016	Spooks and Spins: Information Wars in the Balkans	International research project aiming at discovering the centre of power and money movement in the global information wars.	CSO/NGO	International media organization	Improve general media quality	Fact checking	
North Macedonia	2018-2020	Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens – CriThink	NGO run fact-checking and media literacy project.	CSO/NGO	European Commission	Improve general media literacy	Broad public anti-disinformation education	Facebook, Twitter
North Macedonia	2011	Vistinomer (Truth-o-Meter)	NGO run project as a fact-checking tool for increasing the political parties' responsibility and accountability to the citizens.	CSO/NGO	US Government, National Endowment for Democracy, Balkan Trust for Democracy of the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Foundation Open Society – Macedonia	Mobilize civic response to disinformation	Fact checking	Facebook, Twitter

Country	Time Frame	Project Title	Narrative Description	Domestic Actors	Foreign Actors	Desired Effect	Action Type	Media Channels
North Macedonia	2020-2023	Increasing Civic Engagement in the Digital Agenda – ICEDA	NGO run project aimed at increasing the capacity of CSOs and media for tackling challenges related to the Digital Agenda.	CSO/NGO	European Commission, e-Governance Academy (Estonia), CRTA - Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (Serbia), NGO 35mm (Montenegro), Open Data Kosovo (ODK)	Improve general media quality	Targeted media literacy education	
North Macedonia	2018-2020	News and Digital Literacy Project: Where Fake News Fails	NGO run project to assist CSOs to deal more effectively with false news and unethical media reporting.	CSO/NGO	European Commission, Media Diversity Institute London	Mobilize civic response to disinformation	Targeted media literacy education, fact checking	
North Macedonia	2018-2020	СтопДезинформации.мк	Project initiated counter-disinformation online platform.	CSO/NGO	European Commission, Media Diversity Institute London	Mobilize civic response to disinformation	Fact checking, broad public anti-disinformation education	Facebook, Instagram
North Macedonia	2018	Fighting Fake News Narratives - F2N2	NGO run media fact-checking platform aimed to systematically combat disinformation on online media space.	CSO/NGO	US Government, Open Information Partnership	Mobilize civic response to disinformation	Fact checking, broad public anti-disinformation education	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram
North Macedonia	2017	Media Literacy Network of the Republic of Macedonia	Public institution (Agency for Audio and Audio-visual Media) launched network of various stakeholders active in media literacy.	National government	N/A	Improve general media literacy	Targeted media literacy education, broad public anti-disinformation education	
North Macedonia	2016-2018	Media Literacy in an age of News Overabundance: Macedonian Coalition for Media and Information Literacy	School of Journalism run project aiming at media literacy education primarily for high school students, but also other target groups.	Educational institution, media organisation	European Commission	Improve general media literacy	Targeted media literacy education, broad public anti-disinformation education	Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram

Country	Time Frame	Project Title	Narrative Description	Domestic Actors	Foreign Actors	Desired Effect	Action Type	Media Channels
Montenegro	2020	NA	Montenegro's government using term 'fake news' on information discrediting their effort in fight against COVID-19.	National government	N/A	Counteract a specific disinformation campaign	Fact checking	Twitter
Montenegro	2018	Raskirnkavanje.me	NGO run media fact-checking platform aimed at verifying false and misleading all sorts of information published in Montenegro.	CSO/NGO	US Government, IFCN	Improve general media quality	Fact checking	
Montenegro	2020	Promoting Media Information Literacy and Strengthening Independent Media in the WB	A project building the capacity of media professionals and journalism students in verification, fact-checking, content production and other reporting competencies.	CSO/NGO	EU Member State Government	Counteract a specific disinformation campaign	Targeted journalism training	TV
Montenegro	2018-2021	Media for Citizens – Citizens for Media	A project to contribute to strengthened and vibrant civil society actively advocating for advancement of MIL policies and practices.	CSO/NGO	European Commission, EU Member State Government	Improve general media literacy	Policy advocacy	
Montenegro	2018	Media Literacy/ Let's Choose what we watch'	UNICEF campaign to promote media literacy among parents and children, to improve the quality of media reporting on child rights issues and to raise the quality of media programs for young people in Montenegro.	National government	UNICEF	Improve general media literacy	Targeted media literacy education	Facebook, YouTube
Serbia	2017	Fakenews Tragač	University run media fact-checking, journalist education and media literacy/training platform aimed at verifying different false and misleading information.	Educational institution	EU Member State Government, US Government	Improve general media literacy	Fact checking	Facebook, Twitter
Serbia		Digitalni pogon	Media school run project aimed at increasing media literacy amongst adolescents and incorporating media literacy classes into primary and secondary school curriculums.	Educational institution	European Commission, EU Member State government, OSCE	Improve general media literacy	Targeted media literacy education	Facebook, Twitter
Serbia		raskirkavabje.rs	NGO run media fact-checking platform aimed at verifying false and misleading information published in Serbia and revealing financing of media outlets/connections to government.	CSO/NGO	N/A	Improve general media quality	Fact checking	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram
Serbia	2020	Promoting Media Information Literacy and Strengthening Independent Media in the WB	A project building the capacity of media professionals and journalism students in verification, fact-checking, content production and other reporting competencies.	Educational institution	EU Member State Government	Improve general media quality	Targeted journalism training	

<b>Country</b>	<b>Time Frame</b>	<b>Project Title</b>	<b>Narrative Description</b>	<b>Domestic Actors</b>	<b>Foreign Actors</b>	<b>Desired Effect</b>	<b>Action Type</b>	<b>Media Channels</b>
Serbia	2018-2021	Media for Citizens – Citizens for Media	A project that strives to contribute to strengthened and vibrant civil society actively advocating for advancement of MIL policies and practices.	Educational institution	European Commission, EU Member State Government	Improve general media literacy	Policy advocacy	
Serbia	2019-2020	Generacija bez dezinformacija	Project mapping online disinformation hubs in Serbia and increasing MIL.	Educational institution	Private international foundation	Improve general media quality	Fact checking	



## CrowdTangle methods – an explanation note

Some data for this study was provided by CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook<sup>184</sup>. CrowdTangle collects and makes available interactions – views, shares, likes, and so on – on content posted to Facebook by public pages and groups and verified profiles.

Data were collected from CrowdTangle in two ways. First, seeded searches – based on search terms – were collected from all pages and groups domiciled within the six countries of the Western Balkans. (See Table 1 for the details.) Second, to avoid the possibility that we were missing important posts from accounts not domiciled in the region or that our search terms did not catch important stories, we harvested all of the posts published in the relevant periods from the regional media outlets with the largest Facebook followings. (See Table 2 for the details.)

Once collected, the data were filtered by a human coder to remove obviously irrelevant material. Across the topical areas of interest – broadly tracking the three case studies in this study – a sample of roughly 850 posts was extracted. These were then coded by human coders, to determine whether they represented disinformation, based on the definition used in this study. Each post in the sample was read by two coders: the first was a native-level speaker of the language in which the material was written; the second was a native-English speaker, who verified the first coder's determination with the assistance of a machine translation tool. The patterns found in the sample were then used to extrapolate expected distributions in the overall dataset.

**Figure A4: Topical Searches (CrowdTangle)**

Search Topic	Search Terms <sup>185</sup>	Search Dates
China	CGTN "Си Ђинпинг" or "Си Јининпинг" or "Xi Jinping"	12 Oct 2019 – 12 Oct 2020
Turkey	"Erdogan" or "Ердоган" and "EU" "Ердоган" and "ЕУ" "Erdogan" and "BE-ja"	12 Oct 2019 – 12 Oct 2020
EU	EU, ЕУ, BE-ja	13 Oct 2019 – 13 Oct 2020
North Macedonian politics	Грција, Зоран Заев, референдум, Северна Македонија	1 Jan 2018 – 29 Dec 2018
Montenegrin politics	Milo Đukanović, Zdravko Krivokapić, NATO, Evropska unija, Мило Ђукановић, избори, izbori, Здравко Кривокапић, НАТО, Европска унија	1 Jan 2020 – 13 Sept 2020
Albanian politics	zgjedhjet, Alban Kurti, Ramush Haradinaj, Vetëvendosje, LDK	1 Jan 2019 – 29 Dec 2019
COVID fakes	hidroksiklorokinë, hidroksiklorokin, хидроксихлорокин, hydroxychloroquine (Kina ndihmon pandeminë) OR (Kineska pandemija pomoći) OR (Кина помага во пандемија) OR (Кинеска пандемија помоћи) Gates AND COVID	15 Oct 2019 – 15 Oct 2020
Serbian politics	Александар Вучић, Ивица Дачић, Косово, НАТО, Европска унија, Aleksandar Vučić, Ivica Dačić, Kosovo, NATO, Evropska unija	1 January 2020 – 13 Sept 2020

<sup>184</sup> [www.crowdtangle.com](http://www.crowdtangle.com)

<sup>185</sup> Searches allowed for grammatical variations.

**Figure A5: Media Accounts (CrowdTangle)**

Albania	JOQ Albania Top Channel TVklan NOA Ora News SYRI.net News24 LajmiFundit.al Revista Anabel Gazeta Express	Bosnia and Herzegovina	24h.ba Dnevni avaz Al Jazeera Balkans Haber.ba Klix.ba Radio Sarajevo Fokus.ba Hayat.ba Nezavisne novine Doznajemo.com
Kosovo	Lajmi.net Telegrafi.com Klan Kosova Koha.net Zeri Revista Kosovarja IndeksOnline RTK GazetaBlic Gazeta Express	Montenegro	Vijesti Aktuelno Montenegrin Football PljevljalInfo.me
North Macedonia	GRID.mk Styling Magazine Gazeta Lajm Канал 5 Телевизија Press24.mk Alsat-M Portalb Puls24.mk Shkupi pres	Serbia	NAXI RADIO 96,9 TDI Radio Blic Kurir NOIZZ.rs PRVA Telegraf Kuhinjica B92 Radio JAT

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