Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans

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Organised Chaos: Russian influence and the state of disinformation in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

This research analyses disinformation sources and trends in the Western Balkans and examines how the local context allows disinformation to permeate the information space. The paper examines the activities of both foreign and domestic actors using disinformation in five case countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The authors hypothesised that Russia contributes to the bulk of disinformation challenges throughout the region. However, they found that domestic actors are often the primary source or amplifiers of false narratives, frequently working independently of foreign powers. Furthermore, local politicians are finding innovative ways to use the "threat of disinformation" to curb individual freedoms, attack independent journalism, and consolidate power. The authors also explore how COVID-19 has exacerbated disinformation issues with local leaders capitalising on the public health crisis to further undermine a struggling free press. Finally, the researchers provide recommendations to serve as a roadmap for policy makers facing this evolving threat. In addition to a traditional literature review, the authors conducted a range of interviews with local journalists and disinformation specialists, US government personnel, and former politicians in the Western Balkans.

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Acknowledgements

Disinformation is on the rise and critical professional and independent journalism is under attack in the Western Balkans and across the globe. Luckily, there are dedicated journalists, courageous civil society actors, and energized citizens who, against all odds, continue to report the truth, hold leaders accountable, and improve their societies by standing up for democratic pillars like the free press.

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Introduction

"NATO Willing to See 'Blood in Streets of Macedonia' for Greater Albania Project" - Upon reading headlines like this, one would assume that the Western Balkans are on the brink of dissolving into violence. This hyperbolic and false statement is far from accurately depicting reality for Balkan publics. Still, this eye-catching and divisive headline, published by Sputnik, a Russian state-controlled news agency, is emblematic of many of the false narratives circulating in this corner of the world. This kind of sensationalist disinformation, which plays on existing societal grievances and cleavages, has unfortunately become routine, disrupting the region's democratic progress.

"Disinformation" is the buzzword of the day, but many attribute the origins of the word to *dezinformatsiya,* which Soviet experts in the 1950s defined as "dissemination (in the press, on the radio, etc.) of false reports intended to mislead the public."[2] Experts agree that disinformation (particularly Russian) means purposeful use of information to dismiss, distort, distract, or dismay audiences in support of a broader agenda. This information does not have to include blatant lies or fabrications, i.e. it can be mostly facts paired with falsehoods.

While disinformation is a global problem, democracies are especially vulnerable because of their enshrined commitments to free speech and independent media.[3] Disinformation is a particularly thorny problem for budding Western Balkan democracies, with it only getting more complicated during the COVID-19 pandemic and recent waves of civic unrest. In the Western Balkans, the prevailing narrative is that Russia is behind a vast bulk of disinformation.[4] This paper examines current disinformation sources and trends using Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia as case studies. It illustrates what about the Balkan context makes disinformation so prevalent and hard to tackle.

Still Buffering: The Western Balkans Today

Since the wars in the 1990s, the West (primarily the European Union and the United States) has worked with the Western Balkans to integrate the region into Western European and Trans-Atlantic systems, producing mixed results. While Croatia joined the EU in 2013, countries like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia are far away from EU membership. EU accession has stalled due to lack of meaningful progress on rule of law-related reforms, stagnated negotiations and reconciliation efforts, and a diminishing willingness of EU countries to accept new members. A 2020 poll conducted by the International Republican Institute shows the region's continued preference for joining the EU

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[2] Jackson, Dean. *Issue Brief: Distinguishing Disinformation from Propaganda, Misinformation, and "Fake News."* Available at: https://www.ned.org/issue-brief-distinguishing-disinformation-from-propaganda-misinformation-and-fake-news/ (accessed: 2 June 2020).

[3] Gunitsky, Seva. *Democracies Can't Blame Putin for Their Disinformation Problem.* Available at:https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/21/democracies-disinformation-russia-china-homegrown/ (accessed: 5 June 2020).

[4] Cappello, John T., and Daniel Sunter. 2018. *Kremlin Information Warfare in the Western Balkans,* in *Volume 142: Challenges in Strategic Communication and Fighting Propaganda in Eastern Europe,* edited by Sultanescu, Dan. NATO Public Diplomacy Division: IOS Press Publications.

but also disillusionment with the accession process.[5] The surveys and other reports illustrate dissatisfaction with the status quo in much of the region and frustration with current political leadership, often made up of the same ruling parties and divisive political figures in power since the disintegration of Yugoslavia. These polls show that people in the Balkans are principally concerned with unemployment, corruption, and low quality of life.[6] Disinformation, though not at the forefront of the public's mind, exacerbates the region's problems by keeping societies divided, distracting from reform priorities, and increasing distrust of institutions and government.

Disinformation is hard to address in the Western Balkans because of complex media ecosystems. The Balkan information space is a mix of government-owned or affiliated mainstream news outlets, underdeveloped legal frameworks for online platforms, and an explosion of new media sources along with the decline of local newspapers. Additionally, countries are experiencing shrinking spaces for public debate with citizens and journalists attacked for questioning or criticising the government. Balkan publics consume news mostly via television, and main channels are frequently controlled by ruling parties, who often propagate false or politically motivated narratives. Among younger generations, social media and online portal use is increasing, and this creates its own set of problems as sources of information on these platforms are more obscured, and stories can be quickly shared and widely distributed.

Investing a Little, Frustrating a Lot: Russia's Strategy and Interests
The disinformation picture in the Western Balkans would be incomplete without focusing on Russia, its historical ties to the Balkans, and recent influence campaigns in the region. The Russian Empire, since its Tsarist period, has used the promotion of shared Pan-Slavic and Orthodox brotherhood to justify its military campaigns, which liberated Balkan nations like Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro from Ottoman rule in the 18th and 19th centuries.[7] To this day, Russian narratives hark back to this history to elevate the idea of a shared culture and religion with the region's Slavic and Orthodox communities.

Russian affinity for the Balkans did not disintegrate with the fall of the Soviet Union, and Russia still holds resentment towards the West for its interventions during the Balkan wars of the 1990s. During this time, Russia was in a state of upheaval, suffering numerous economic and political crises. A faction within the Russian body politic saw Western involvement in lands that were part of the Soviet Union or under the influence of the former Russian Empire as an attempt to humiliate Russia while it was down. Pushing to maintain a global balance of power, the Kremlin believes the region should remain connected to Russia or at the very least not gravitate further towards Western nations. Therefore, NATO and EU enlargement into the Western Balkans, coupled with expansion into the

[5] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.* Available at: https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_wb_poll_for_publishing_6.9.2020.pdf (accessed: 4 June 2020).
[6] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*
[7] Bechev, Dimitar. 2017. *Rival Power.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Baltics and perceived incursions into the Caucuses and Ukraine, is seen as an afront to a growingly insecure Russia.[8]

Despite Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggressive agenda, Russia's oil-addicted economy has stagnated. The European Union, the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and now China are competing by pouring resources into the Western Balkans. Russia does not have the resources to project military strength in the region, nor does it present an attractive economic model for nations to emulate. Russia's unattractive track record explains why it uses hybrid tactics to achieve foreign policy goals.

Russia uses hybrid tactics worldwide, applying force sparingly outside of its immediate borders and relying more heavily on cyber tools and disinformation to achieve foreign policy aims.[9] Two primary goals drive Russian disinformation campaigns in the Western Balkans: damaging perceptions of the US and the EU, and preventing or delaying nations from acceding to Trans-Atlantic institutions. Russian disinformation targets fissures within society and excels at amplifying them. Research conducted by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence shows that stories pushed by Russian state-owned enterprises like Russia Today (RT) and Sputnik focus on four critical narratives: 1. The EU is hegemonic, 2. The EU is weak and not unified, 3. NATO is aggressive, and 4. NATO is weak and not united.[10]

Research focusing on Russian media conglomerate Rossiya Segodnya's Belgrade-based Sputnik Srbija outlet indicates that Sputnik Srbija often publishes stories aiming to create an alternate reality for its Serbian and Slavic audiences. This reality both magnifies threat perceptions for Serbian minority groups in the Western Balkans and paints Russia as a vital ally to its Slavic brothers.[11] In Serbia and Kosovo, a recurring storyline warns about armed build-ups on the disputed border, a narrative particularly prevalent after Kosovo announced 100% tariffs on Serbian goods in 2018. Sputnik Srbija's stories focus on instability and corruption and show that the Balkans risk falling into ethnic-nationalistic war due to harmful American and EU initiatives.[12]

[8] Stronski, Paul, and Annie Himes. *Russia's Game in the Balkans: The Return of Global Russia*. *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. Available at: https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235 (accessed: 5 June 2020).

[9] Chivvis, Christopher. 2017. *Understanding Russian "Hybrid Warfare": And What Can Be Done About It*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

[10] Doncheva, Tihomira. *Tracking Russia's Narratives in the Western Balkan Media*. Available at: https://stratcomcoe.org/tracking-russias-narratives-western-balkan-media (accessed: 8 June 2020).

[11] Atlantic Council of Montenegro. 2020. *Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija*. Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

[12] Atlantic Council of Montenegro, *Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans*.

Figure 1: Examples of stories promoting Russian narratives on Sputnik Srbija

Source: Sputnik Srbija

This Western Balkan media environment allows Russian storylines to seamlessly make their way into the mainstream local media ecosystem.[13] One factor in the spread of Russian narratives is a deficiency of local content, usually from a dearth of funding for local journalism. This shortage creates an information vacuum that is often filled by the reposting of articles from Russian state-sponsored outlets based in Belgrade. The mainstream media outlets often republish or feature stories coming from RT, Sputnik Srbija, Russia Beyond, and Glas Moskve.

The shared Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS) language, spoken in several countries, and limited local media content incentivise the dissemination of stories that often are factual but feature sensationalist headlines or contain false elements interwoven that push the Kremlin's narratives. In the Western Balkans, television is still the primary news source, although social media and online portal use has grown, especially among younger generations. The shift

[13] Cappello, John T., and Daniel Sunter. 2018. *Kremlin Information Warfare in the Western Balkans,* in *Volume 142: Challenges in Strategic Communication and Fighting Propaganda in Eastern Europe*

online has corelated with an increased presence of Russian or Russian-emulating troll farms, which retweet and share stories promoting Russian narratives to a broader audience in an exponential way, far outreaching readership of the state-owned enterprise itself.[14]

Speaking with American government officials, they made it clear that it is often hard to determine whether disinformation has been 1. proliferated by Russian actors, 2. produced by local actors with encouragement or funding from Russian entities, or 3. is an independent actor emulating Russian disinformation techniques. These techniques, primarily used on social media platforms, are often characterised by taking both sides of an issue to increase discord.[15] Sometimes these tactics are so effective at increasing hostility in public discourse; it causes actual mobilisation of individuals into the streets. Mobilization occurred in the United States before the 2016 election and in North Macedonia when the country was debating official name changes.[16] The challenge of attribution for these techniques makes individual stories' origins hard to trace. Still, analysts in the space have been able to identify broader patterns of Russian-influenced disinformation. Unable to disclose specific government tools for analysing Russian influence, US officials indicated that they believe the majority of the disinformation in the Western Balkans was coming from Serbia, often supported by Russia. However, it is challenging to attribute what content is from domestic actors versus Russian proxies.

Further complicating the understanding of disinformation in the region is the challenge of determining its effectiveness. The number of views of a particular story can inform how widespread that article is but does not indicate whether the content was trusted or effectively changed the opinion of the consumer. The authors do not attempt to measure the impact of disinformation in the Western Balkans and instead focus on illustrating how disinformation manifests and spreads in the region.

Looking Past the Usual Suspects: Disinformation and Domestic Politics
Russia creates and disseminates disinformation in the Western Balkans. However, domestic political leaders and local institutions significantly contribute to the problem. Still, their role is often downplayed or overlooked in favour of narratives that say powers like Russia and China pull the strings as the prominent masterminds of disinformation in the Balkans.

Local actors propagate false and misleading stories of their own volition, sometimes aligning with Russian narratives, but which work independently to serve domestic agendas. Some of these Western Balkan leaders are even finding innovative ways to use the "threat of disinformation" to curb individual freedoms and target political opponents, journalists, and private citizens who use traditional and social media to criticise government actions. Politicians

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[14] "The Discord Amplifier; Russian Disinformation." *The Economist*, 24 February 2018, 15-18.
[15] Conley, Heather, Nina Jankowicz, Sophia Ignatidou, Mark Toner, and Alex T. Johnson. 2020. *Disinformation, COVID-19, and the Electoral Process.* Washington D.C. : US Helsinki Commission.
[16] Bertrand, Natasha. *Russia Organized 2 Sides of a Texas Protest and Encouraged "Both Sides to Battle in the Streets"*. Available at: https://www.businessinsider.com/russia-trolls-senate-intelligence-committee-hearing-2017-11 (accessed: 16 June 2020)

throughout the Balkan peninsula label critical voices as vectors of disinformation, despite many providing valuable, balanced, and factual reporting. In Albania, Prime Minister Edi Rama, used a private telecommunications company, Vodafone, to leave voice messages warning Albanians to wash their hands and "protect [themselves] from the media" and the fake news it spreads.[17]

This section analyses the political situations, media climates, and unique disinformation challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina
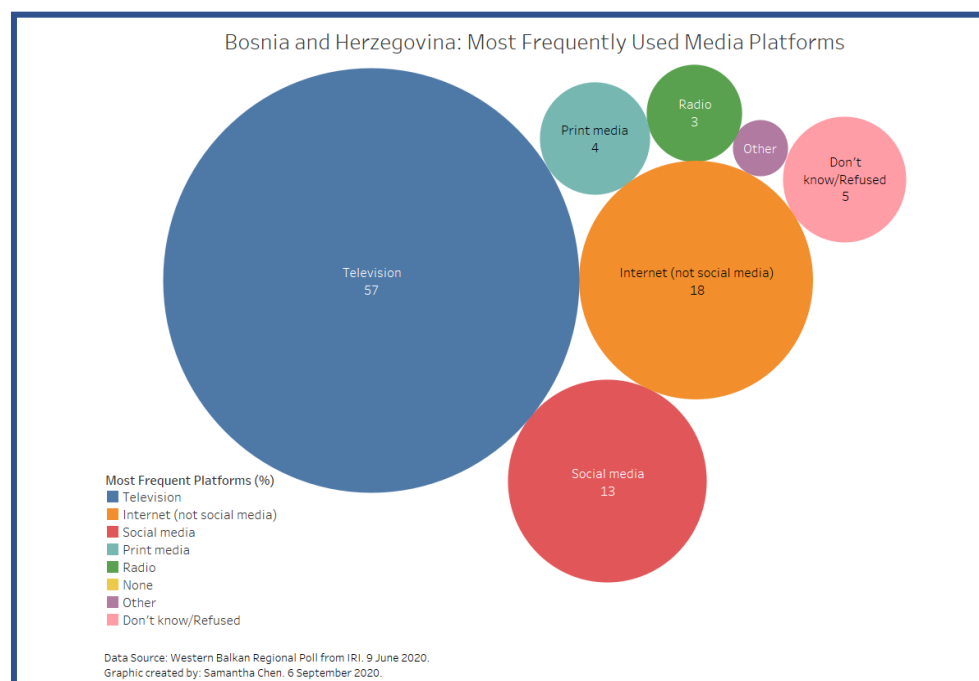
When many think of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they remember the horrific Bosnian war in the 1990s. This conflict led to a new constitution for Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords. Dayton was a landmark agreement that stopped mass violence but legally cemented ethnic divisions, cleavages today reflected in the media environment. Dayton was a complex and decentralised power-sharing agreement focused on two sub-state entities; The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska. The careful structuring of this political agreement intended to protect the rights of each of Bosnia and Herzegovina's constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Bosnian Croats, Bosnian Serbs, and Others) but in turn, set up institutions, primarily based on

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[17] Erebara, Gjergj. *Rama Takes His War on Media to Albanians' Phones.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/06/fear-reigns-in-serbian-town-undercutting-official-covid-narrative/ (accessed: 12 July 2020).

ethnic considerations, which helped entrench divisive elite and breed political disfunction.

While political and even media spheres seem to fragment along ethnic lines, Bosnian society is not as divided as is depicted to the world outside its borders. According to 2020 polling, the most significant issues are unemployment, corruption, cost of living, healthcare, and poverty, not ethnic divisions or fears of a return to ethnically tinged conflict.[18] Still, the three main political parties: Party of Democratic Action (*Stranka Demokratske Akcije,* SDA-Bosniak), the Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska Demokratska Zajdnica*, HDZ-Bosnian Croat), and Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (*Savez Nezavisnih Socijaldemokrata,* SNSD-Bosnian Serb) are delineated by ethnicity. Their leaders regularly play up the public's fears about ethnic-based discrimination, tout harmful revisionist history,[19] and make cooperation on citizen priorities like anticorruption reform challenging.

The main conduit for pushing party narratives is via television, the most popular medium for news consumption in the country. Each major constituent people has its own broadcaster. The ruling parties effectively control all three broadcasters.[20] According to the BBC, there are over 200 commercial TV and radio stations, with Serbian and Croatian networks also saturating the already chaotic media scene. Bosnians, especially young Bosnians, are turning to online portals and Facebook for their news, especially as newspapers are going bankrupt, with many having to shut down completely.[21] (See Annex B for an overview of the main news outlets in each case country.) This political reality and media environment is a perfect breeding ground for disinformation due to a plethora of sources, lack of trust in institutions, and low levels of independent journalism. False and manipulated storylines also spread because they play into existing ethnic stereotypes and associated narratives.

After speaking to local journalists, examining national polling, and conducting a small local survey in the Republika Srpska, it is clear that citizens generally distrust the media. 68% of Bosnians either "somewhat distrust" or "distrust [the media] a great deal."[22] The results from the survey in the Republika Srpska exhibited similar themes of distrust in local news, with respondents stating that they believe most disinformation comes from local public TV, newspapers, and politicians. (See Annex A for complete survey questions and answers.) A few survey participants also said they did not trust foreign-backed media, expressing particular concern about influence from Russia and the United States.[23]

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[18] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*
[19] Karčić, Hikmet. *How Denial of Bosnian War Crimes Entered the Mainstream.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/30/how-denial-of-bosnian-war-crimes-entered-the-mainstream/ (accessed: 8 July 2020).
[20] *Bosnia-Herzegovina Media Profile.* Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17211939 (accessed: 3 June 2020).
[21] Stojanović, Milica. *Pandemic Worsens Crisis for Media in Central, Eastern Europe.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/pandemic-worsens-crisis-for-media-in-central-eastern-europe/ (accessed: 6 July 2020).
[22] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*
[23] Residents in the Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Survey: Local Perspectives on Disinformation in the Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina.* July 2020.

Further research highlighted the challenges confronting local journalists who face pressure to generate content aligned with the interests of the owners of their news agencies. Additionally, journalists are harangued with libel suits for publishing unfavourable stories about politicians. These realities further exacerbate disinformation challenges in the country.

Common narratives often feature misleading figures like those overstating Russian investment and aid to the country like those inflating Russian military cooperation and investment in the energy sector. Other frequent narratives include those exaggerating risks associated with migrants and false information about religious extremism, a popular theme in Croatian news, and parroted by some Croatian politicians. Former Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović allegedly issued false statements that militant Islam controlled Bosnia and Herzegovina.[24] Additionally, both the Federation and the Republika Srpska's media spread disinformation about the West's threat to traditional family values, with SDA-affiliated outlets having taken particular issue with the first Bosnian Pride Parade held in September 2019.
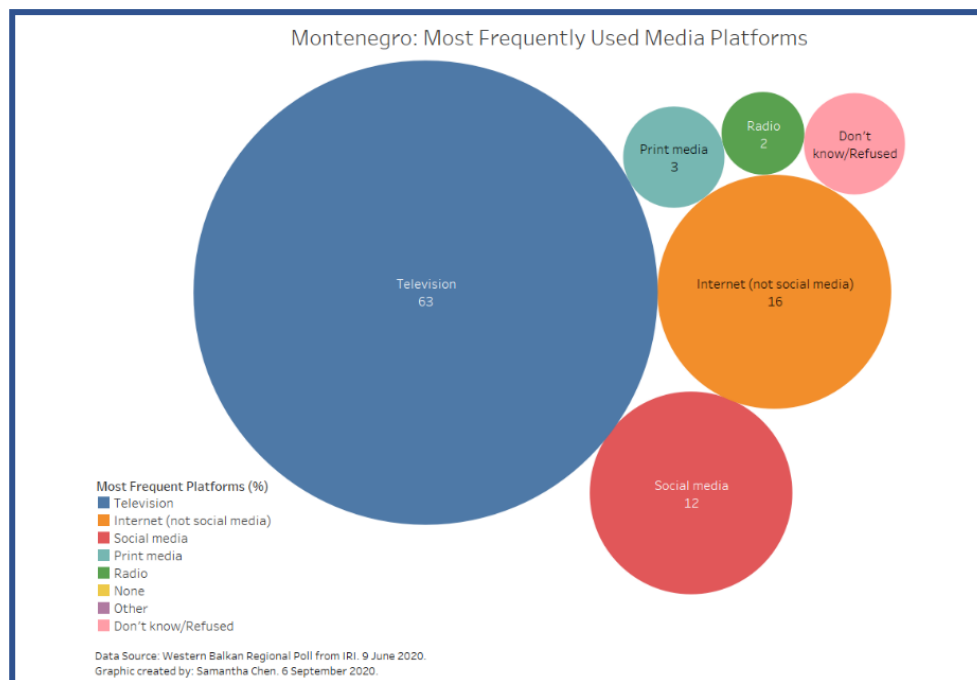
Local outlets and political leaders also spread misleading and fearmongering storylines about Islamic extremism, terrorism, and migration in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This prompted Detektor, to analyse these trends via a December 2019 exposé.[25] Their analysis references a specific case in Matuzići, a village in the northeast part of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where in 2018, a stockpile of old weapons was found in an abandoned house. A local radio station, and several other outlets, associated the discovery of weapons with alleged plans for "inter-entity clashes." However, the police investigation was still underway and ultimately concluded that the weapons were likely leftover from the war and not associated with any group. RTRS (the leading broadcaster in the Republika Srpska) reported that this incident was linked to alleged weapon stockpiles in the Federation tied to the head of the SDA-Bosniak party, Bakir Izetbegović. Some other outlets even linked the contraband to a nearby mosque. Detektor's reporters said that this story is one of many examples showing how reporting on terrorism is sensationalised by taking things out of context and exaggerating threat levels. This recurring warped depiction of events, often featuring statements from those wrongly classified as experts, can over time, become citizens' reality.[26] Bosnia and Herzegovina's wartime legacies and messy political and geographic set-up make addressing disinformation particularly challenging. However, it is not the only country with an environment that fosters the spread of false narratives.

[24] Vladisavljević, Anja. *Croatia President Denies Insulting Bosnia in Israel.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/31/croatia-president-denies-insulting-bosnia-in-israel/ (accessed: 1 August 2020).
[25] *Episode 108: Bosnian Media Reports on Terrorism Spread Fear and Misinformation* (dir. Semir Mujkić, 2019). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zg6lHk-jO7Y (accessed: 23 June 2020).
[26] Mujkić, *Bosnian Media Reports on Terrorism Spread Fear and Misinformation.*

Montenegro

Montenegro: Most Frequently Used Media Platforms

Television 63

Internet (not social media) 16

Social media 12

Print media 3

Radio 2

Don't know/Refused

Most Frequent Platforms (%)
- Television
- Internet (not social media)
- Social media
- Print media
- Radio
- None
- Other
- Don't know/Refused

Data Source: Western Balkan Regional Poll from IRI. 9 June 2020.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. 6 September 2020.

Unlike stereotypically complex Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro is depicted as a stable country in the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, Montenegro's internal relations and those with neighbouring countries exhibit fissures of their own. Montenegro peacefully split from Serbia via referendum, becoming independent in 2006. Though the two nations' divorce was amicable, their relationship has been particularly strained lately, with tensions rising over a new religious law in Montenegro.[27]

Montenegro's relationship with Russia is also regularly misunderstood, with Western media portraying a significant schism after information came to light about a 2016 alleged Russian-backed coup attempt in Montenegro to halt NATO accession. However, most Montenegrins, including investigative journalists who reported on the case, do not believe the allegations and see them as part of a ploy by the Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (*Demokratska Partija Socijalista Crne Gore*, DPS) to attack leading opposition members. Most Montenegrins express scepticism about these events because of the handling of the case by the courts, which locals classify as unprofessional and lacking concrete evidence. In stark contrast to a supposed schism, 64% of Montenegrins have a "highly favourable" or "somewhat favourable" opinion of Russia.[28]

The political structure of the country, until recently, featured a strong ruling party (DPS); currently centre left-leaning but formerly known as the country's communist party. The President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović, the head of

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[27] *Montenegro Frees Serbian Church Priests Amid Heightened Tensions.* Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-serbia-church-religion-/30615290.html (accessed: July 17 2020).
[28] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*

DPS, has essentially led the republic since the early 1990s. Despite his electoral success, he has been frequently accused of corruption and having ties to regional criminal networks.[29] The opposition in Montenegro is known for being fragmented and split across the ideological spectrum featuring parties pushing European Union trajectories to those cultivating closer ties with Serbia, Russia, and right-wing constituencies. Still, the various parties sometimes unify in efforts to challenge DPS and Đukanović and recently coalesced to win a majority in the August 2020 parliamentary elections.[30] The most influential opposition alliance is the Democratic Front (*Demokratski Front*, DF), a right-wing populist and socially conservative collection of parties, which has a close relationship with the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro and friendly relations with the Kremlin.

The DPS party effectively controls the major media outlets in the country like public broadcaster, Radio Television Montenegro (RTCG), and the government has refused to give public advertising contracts to opposition media, according to Freedom House.[31] As in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the COVID-19 crisis accelerated the closure of many local newspapers, making it harder for news outlets to maintain staffing and produce original content. The local media climate is also very hostile for journalists, especially those reporting on corruption and organised crime. These journalists have faced mounting detentions and violent attacks in recent years.[32]

Montenegrins primarily use television and online media portals to get their news, but 65% of the population either somewhat distrusts or distrusts the media a great deal.[33] New fringe web portals known for spreading disinformation, have also grown in popularity. Local journalists highlighted in4s, a right-wing, pro-Russia, Serbian government-backed site, which has become one of the ten most visited websites in Montenegro.

Much of the current disinformation in Montenegro revolves around the rift between the long-time ruling DPS party (now in the opposition) and the Serbian Orthodox Church. The controversial Law on Freedom of Religion in Montenegro, which passed in December 2019, sparked mass protests. According to the European External Action Service (EEAS) and local journalists, there was disinformation utilised by both sides of the dispute. The EEAS found that false reporting came from media based in Serbia (some of it state-owned), Russian owned outlets in Serbia (Sputnik Srbija), and some Montenegrin news portals.[34]

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[29] *Person of the Year 2015: Milo Dukanovic 2015 Man of the Year in Organized Crime and Corruption.* Available at: https://www.occrp.org/en/poy/2015/ (accessed: 12 June 2020).
[30] *Montenegro President Accepts His Party Lost Election.* Available at: https://www.reuters.com/article/us-montenegro-election/montenegro-president-accepts-his-party-lost-election-idUSKBN25U1QA (accessed: 3 September 2020).
[31] *Montenegro Media Profile.* Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-17670042 (accessed: 3 June 2020).
[32] Radović, Mirjana, Tamara Bulatović, and Tea Gorjanc-Prelević. Procesuiranje Napada Na Novinare U Crnoj Gori [*Prosecution of Attacks on Journalists in Montenegro*]. Available at: http://www.hraction.org/wp-content/uploads/The_Report_1.pdf (accessed at: 24 June 2020).
[33] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*
[34] *Disinformation Sharpened Tensions between Serbia and Montenegro.* Available at: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-sharpened-tensions-between-serbia-and-montenegro/ (accessed: 24 June 2020).
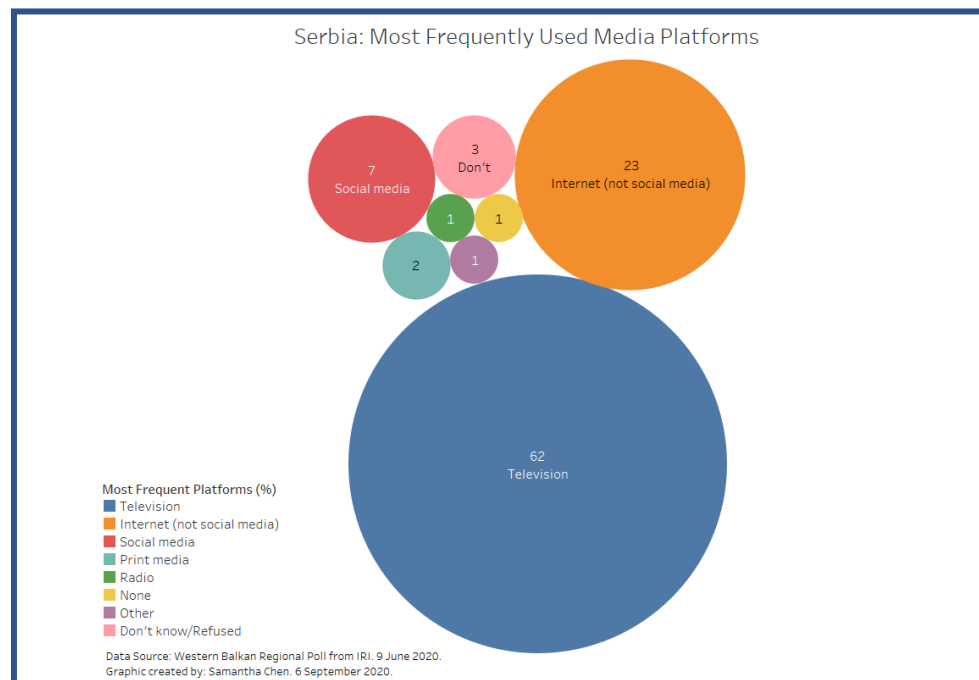
These sources disseminated unverified, sensationalist content created by social network users and pulled from statements made by Russian, Montenegrin and Serbian politicians, including clergy representatives. Some media spread claims that Serbian Orthodox Church property would "end up in the hands of the rival Montenegrin Orthodox Church," a "fake church" writing that the church properties would be nationalised and made into profitable tourist attractions. Another false narrative stated that the Montenegrin government was planning to give church relics to the Holy See.[35]

DPS also participated in disinformation campaigns, downplaying the scale and reasons for protests, which were initially sparked by the religious law but grew to include citizens who took to the streets to protest Đukanović's government, corruption, and lack of progress made over the past three decades. However, DPS-affiliated media stated that the protests were much smaller than they were even though an estimated 60,000 people or 10% of the country showed up to the protests.[36] DPS also painted protestors as trouble-making foreign nationals from Serbia and Russia - a page right out of the Russian government playbook: the Kremlin frequently calls domestic protesters and those in its near abroad, CIA-backed Western puppets. Montenegro touted as a stable nation on a historically turbulent peninsula shows that it too suffers from disinformation, perpetrated by ruling and opposition parties.

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[35] *Disinformation Sharpened Tensions between Serbia and Montenegro.*
[36] EU Reporter Correspondent. *Europe's 'Political Strongmen' Accused of 'Taking Advantage' of #Coronavirus Crisis.* Available at: https://www.eureporter.co/economy/eu-economy/2020/04/08/europes-political-strongmen-accused-of-taking-advantage-of-coronavirus-crisis/ (accessed: 9 June 2020).

Serbia

Serbia: Most Frequently Used Media Platforms

7 Social media	3 Don't
1	1
2	1
23 Internet (not social media)	
62 Television	

Most Frequent Platforms (%)
- Television
- Internet (not social media)
- Social media
- Print media
- Radio
- None
- Other
- Don't know/Refused

Data Source: Western Balkan Regional Poll from IRI. 9 June 2020.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. 6 September 2020.

Serbia is Montenegro's neighbour to the northeast and the largest country in the Western Balkans. It is known for having the closest relationship with Russia, illustrated by their energy entanglements, frequent state visits, highly publicised military cooperation, and cultural-religious ties.[37] Serbia is also known for its complicated relationship with the West. Despite tensions, a significant portion of Serbians prefer a Western European orientation; if a referendum were held today, around half would vote to join the European Union.[38] Still, Serbians harbour a deep resentment towards the West, namely the United States, but also Western institutions for their treatment of Serbs. Furthermore, most Serbians vehemently reject NATO and prospects of joining the alliance because of its 1999 bombing campaign in Serbia to end the war in Kosovo.

Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić is a reformed ultranationalist who served as Slobodan Milošević's Minister of Information during the Yugoslav wars. He currently heads Serbia's ruling Serbian Progressive Party (*Srpska Napredna Stranka,* SNS), a centre-right political party. Western European leaders once praised Vučić as a reliable partner in the region, characterising him as an anchor of stability.[39] However, Vučić has shown his authoritarian tendencies with Freedom House labelling Serbia as only "partly free," especially criticising Vučić's government for its chokehold on the media and hostile treatment of journalists and civil society. The hostility is characterised by coordinated smear campaigns, harassment, and physical acts of violence against those critical of

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[37] Stronski and Himes, *Russia's Game in the Balkans: The Return of Global Russia.*
[38] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*
[39] Eror, Aleks. *How Aleksandar Vucic Became Europe's Favorite Autocrat.* Available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/09/how-aleksandar-vucic-became-europes-favorite-autocrat/ (accessed: 2 June 2020).

the government.[40] Serbia has a particularly bad reputation for its treatment of female reporters and media personalities, although gendered harassment of journalists is prevalent throughout the Western Balkans.[41]

Vučić's modus operandi, particularly his strong-arming of the free press, led to mass protests starting at the end of 2018 and starting again in July 2020, where people protested his handling of the COVID-19 crisis and vocalised their concerns over the declining state of democracy in Serbia. Despite widespread discontent with Vučić's leadership, his SNS-led government maintains control of most of the mainstream media outlets. Their reach includes influence over popular tabloids like Informer and Srpski Telegraf, where many Serbians get their news. These tabloids, which are known spreaders of propaganda and disinformation, are mass-produced and extremely cheap, costing only 25 Serbian dinars or 25 cents in USD. Both public and private outlets are linked to SNS, and others with weaker ties are intimidated and often self-censor and report uncritically on the ruling party.

Recent disinformation trends in Serbia, as in most Western Balkan nations, have centred on COVID-19 and distorted media coverage of virus data and related protests throughout the country. In Novi Pazar, the Serbian government downplayed the alarming figures coming out of the southwest region, where the hospitals were on the brink of collapse. Facing criticism, Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić visited the town and branded frantic citizen protestors, "political activists," and planted members of the opposition.[42] During the most recent July 2020 protests in Belgrade, Serbian government officials, like in Montenegro, unsurprisingly blamed foreign nationals for the demonstrations. However, surprisingly, some pro-government outlets and even government officials blamed right-wing Russian nationals for fomenting the unrest.[43]

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[40] *Freedom in the World 2020: Serbia.* Available at: https://freedomhouse.org/country/serbia/freedom-world/2020 (accessed: 18 July 2020).

[41] Šajkaš, Marija. *Two-Fold Risk for Serbia's Women Journalists as Attackers Target Their Work and Gender.* Available at: https://cpj.org/2017/10/two-fold-risk-for-serbias-women-journalists-as-att/ (accessed: 20 June 2020).

[42] Dragojlo, Sasa. *Fear Reigns' in Serbian Town, Undercutting Official Covid-19 Narrative.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/06/fear-reigns-in-serbian-town-undercutting-official-covid-narrative/ (accessed: 22 July 2020).

[43] Samorukov, Maxim. *Beyond Kosovo: How Protests Transformed Serbia's Relations with Russia.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/21/beyond-kosovo-how-protests-transformed-serbias-relations-with-russia/ (accessed: 22 July 2020).

Figure 2: Example of pro-government outlets blaming Russia for Summer 2020 protests

Source: Twitter

The Serbian government has also followed an unfortunate global trend of leaders attempting to discredit legitimate voices, such as journalists, blaming them for disseminating disinformation. At the same time, the Serbian government has tried to amplify its political messaging. The Serbian ruling party adopted Russian techniques to discredit reporters and falsely augment the party and its positions' popularity. Twitter uncovered a more than "8,000-strong troll army promoting Serbia's ruling party" and attacking its opponents.[44] Before Twitter deleted the 8,558 accounts for engaging in "inauthentic coordinated activity," it found that these troll tweets regularly made their way into mainstream Serbian and Russian media.

The Stanford Internet Observatory stated in a recent report that the accounts tweeted more than 43 million times - 85% of them receiving retweets.[45] The average number of followers for each account was only 66, but combined, they reached 2.3 million Twitter users, which does not account for the many viewers who consumed the tweets via traditional media outlets that republished the information.[46] More alarming, local journalists found that a large percentage of these bots were operated by Serbian public sector employees who managed bot accounts during their workday. In other words, taxpayers were indirectly paying for this disinformation campaign.[47] Serbia's current trajectory is alarming, with freedom of the information space quickly deteriorating. Changes consolidating the government's media influence and crackdowns on independent journalists paint a grim picture.

[44] Nikolić, Ivana, and Ivana Jeremić. *"Vox Populi' How Serbian Tabloids and Twitter Bots Joined Forces.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/04/10/vox-populi-how-serbian-tabloids-and-twitter-bots-joined-forces/ (accessed: 28 June 2020).

[45] Bush, Daniel. 2020. *'Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia': An Analysis of Government-linked Influence Operations in Serbia.* White Paper. Stanford, CA: Stanford Internet Observatory.

[46] Bush, *Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia.*

[47] Milivojević, Andjela. *The Castle: How Serbia's Rulers Manipulate Minds and the People Pay.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/18/the-castle-how-serbias-rulers-manipulate-minds-and-the-people-pay/ (accessed: 23 June 2020).

Kosovo

Kosovo: Most Frequently Used Media Platforms

Don't know/Refused
4

Print media
1

Television
67

Internet (not social media)
11

Social media
16

Most Frequent Platforms (%)
- Television
- Internet (not social media)
- Social media
- Print media
- Radio
- None
- Other
- Don't know/Refused

Data Source: Western Balkan Regional Poll from IRI. 9 June 2020.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. 6 September 2020.

Kosovo, the Western Balkans' newest country, catalyses impassioned debate and emotional fervour regionally and globally. The 1999 non-UN sanctioned NATO military intervention to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Kosovo's Albanian population by Serbia, remains a significant source of grievance, for Serbians. Much of Serbia's population mourns the loss of Kosovo, which the Serbian Orthodox Church considers holy land. Furthermore, Russia perceived NATO's intervention in Kosovo as both a violation of international law and a foray into Russia's sphere of influence.

Kosovo declared independence in 2008, but its status is a critical point of contention in the region and the main hindrance for both Serbia and Kosovo on their road to European Union accession. It is this uniquely disputed status and contentious history that leads Kosovo to feature in disinformation touting NATO's hegemonic ambitions in Russian and Serbian narratives. Russia attempts to magnify animosity relating to Kosovo, painting an alternative reality in the region, where Kosovar Albanians are terrorists and narco-criminals, ready to wage war with NATO's support. Kosovo is the protagonist of many narratives pushed by entities like Sputnik Srbija. Common examples include Kosovo is losing international allies, the Kosovar army will destabilise the region, and NATO committed war crimes in Kosovo as well as covered up Albanian war crimes.[48] These sub-narratives fit in with the overarching themes portraying the West as anti-Serb. Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić accused Kosovo of planning the "ethnic cleansing" of Kosovar Serbs. Local media added further false information to the narrative with one tabloid writing, the "CIA [is] sending a ship full of weapons and armaments" to be "distributed in south Mitrovica,"

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[48] Atlantic Council of Montenegro, *Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans.*

(an ethnically divided city in the north of Kosovo) aiming to spread fear about alleged Kosovar Albanian aggression.[49]

Kosovo is unique in that despite being the protagonist of many Russian-Serbian disinformation efforts in the region, these kinds of stories do not reach or mainly target the majority of the population (Kosovar Albanians). Not surprisingly, the media environments in Kosovo are split according to ethnicity and language. Within the Kosovar Serb communities, Serbian media dominates the information space, with Serbian state TV and Serbian media websites being the primary sources of information. For the majority Albanian population, the primary sources of information are mainstream television networks. Both RTK and KlanKosova, two of the three most viewed, are closely associated with President Hashim Thaçi's ruling party, the Democratic Party of Kosovo *(Partia Demokratike e Kosovës*, PDK).[50] Recent polling shows that Kosovars have one of the region's most optimistic views on media reliability, with 75% saying the current status of the media is either very good or somewhat good.[51]

Within Kosovar Albanian media, it appears that widely viewed outlets closely tied to the PDK, like state-funded RTK and news portal Sinjali, have been pushing politically advantageous and false information relating to COVID-19. One highly scrutinised report included misleading statistics and leaked personal data implying that the majority of COVID-19 infections were located in North Mitrovica, a semi-autonomous Serb majority region. The European Federation of Journalists' (EFJ) Secretary-General condemned the misinformation, claiming local politicians were "using the coronavirus crisis to inflame political and social tensions in their own interest."[52] Local journalists interviewed for this report indicated that, within the Albanian language media, domestic political actors have an outsized influence on editorial decisions.

Local journalists described similar incidents of PDK-associated outlets with political motivations publishing misleading narratives. The recently ousted Prime Minister Albin Kurti's Self-determination party (*Lëvizja Vetëvendosje*, LV) faced the immense challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic within a month of assuming power. Unsubstantiated stories regarding corruption within LV were circulated via online portals, attributing the high price of personal protective equipment to the country's new leadership. Similarly, in October 2019, two days before a major election, RTK posted a misleading story about Vjosa Osmani, an opposition party candidate for Prime Minister. The story referenced an American research newspaper named "Open Sources Investigation" and claimed that

[49] Rettman, Andrew. *Serbia Threatens to Invade Kosovo, Stirring Bad Memories.* Available at: https://euobserver.com/foreign/143620 (accessed: 7 July 2020).

[50] Schroeder, Renate. *Examining and Assessing Editorial Guidelines / Codes of Conducts in the Public Service Media of the Western Balkans.* Available at: https://europeanjournalists.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/PSM-Editorial-Giudelines-Report-EFJ-Renate-Schroeder.pdf (accessed: 22 July 2020).

[51] *Western Balkans Regional Poll.*

[52] *Kosovar Media Urged Not To 'Intensify' Tensions During Coronavirus Crisis.* Available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovar-media-urged-not-to-intensify-tensions-during-coronavirus-crisis/30533735.html (accessed: 7 July 2020).

Osmani was likely under Russian influence.[53] Further investigation shows the original site is not a reputable source, with no contact information, no address, and poor English that indicates translation from another language. It appears that the majority of disinformation in the Kosovar-Albanian ecosystem comes from poor journalistic standards and politically motivated reporting from mainstream media entities closely affiliated with politicians in power.
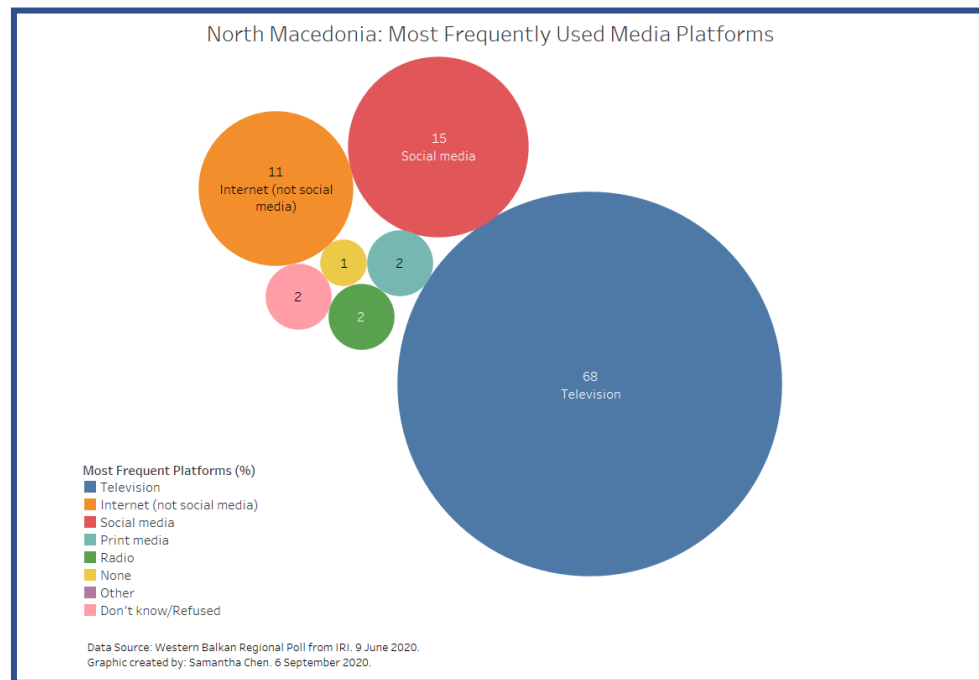
Kosovo does not lack local independent media and internationally funded organisations. For example, the regional Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) appear to be independent, professional and operate within the country. Interestingly, many Kosovars see BIRN as biased toward the LV political party. Unfortunately, their type of investigative reporting places organisations like BIRN in the crosshairs of the politicians in power. Recently, the ruling PDK party filed a lawsuit against BIRN for defamation after reporting exposed illegal lobbying for a land swap between Kosovo and Serbia.[54] Following a regional trend, political parties in power are attempting to silence legitimate reporting by labelling it as disinformation.

Kosovo, due to the majority population's linguistic and cultural differences, has less Russian and Serbian originated disinformation than other nations in the region. Nevertheless, disinformation is still prevalent, and media independence still threatened. Kosovo is one of the most explicit illustrations that disinformation in the region is often domestically produced, with domestic political actors' interests in mind.

[53] *American Newspaper: Pro-Russian Congressman, Mentor of Vjosa Osmani's Husband.* Available at:https://www.rtklive.com/sq/newssingle.php?ID=381283&fbclid=IwAR01jNiZaeRcZMjaKLHNuag 0oUZyzuOhhuLbNvTqrgMz4QbNHb4ZdHX-ZrQ (accessed: 15 June 2020)
[54] Buda, Klara. *PDK's Lawsuit against BIRN Can't Hide the Truth.* Available at: https://prishtinainsight.com/pdks-lawsuit-against-birn-cant-hide-the-truth/ (accessed: 11 July 2020).

North Macedonia

North Macedonia: Most Frequently Used Media Platforms

Most Frequent Platforms (%)
- Television
- Internet (not social media)
- Social media
- Print media
- Radio
- None
- Other
- Don't know/Refused

Data Source: Western Balkan Regional Poll from IRI. 9 June 2020.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. 6 September 2020.

Bordering Kosovo to the south is NATO's newest member, North Macedonia, a battleground in the information space, known internationally for its network of internet troll farms. One of the most notorious instances of disinformation, "Pizza-Gate," originated in North Macedonia. The absurd debunked story about an alleged child-prostitution ring run by the Clintons went viral before the highly polarised 2016 election.[55] In recent years, North Macedonia has not only exported false information but also experienced internal disinformation efforts from domestic and foreign actors like Russia and Hungary.[56] Both Russian and Hungarian entities have stakes in Macedonian media outlets and web portals. A BIRN and Organized Crime and Corruption Investigation Project uncovered a group of Hungarians associated with Hungarian Prime Minister, Victor Orbán who financed a pro-opposition, local TV station called Alfa TV.[57] Similarly, a 2017 report, produced by the Macedonian Security and Counterintelligence Service, outlined Russian attempts to influence Albanian minority media outlets "in order to spread information and disinformation in support of Russian policy goals."[58]

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[55] Davey-Attlee, Florence and Isa Soares. *The Fake News Machine - Inside a Town Gearing Up For 2020*. Available at: https://money.cnn.com/interactive/media/the-macedonia-story/ (accessed: 28 July 2020).

[56] Cvetkovska, Saška, Blanka Zöldi, and Anuška Delić. 2020. *Oiling Orbán's Propaganda Machine*. Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project.

[57] Apostolov, Vlado. *Switched off: North Macedonia's Media Reforms Fade Away*. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/23/switched-off-north-macedonias-media-reforms-fade-away/ (accessed: 7 July 2020).

[58] Tsalov, Yordan. *Russian Interference in North Macedonia: A View Before the Elections*. Available at: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/07/04/russian-interference-in-north-macedonia-a-view-before-the-elections/ (accessed: 17 July 2020).

From 2006 until 2016, North Macedonia was governed by strongman President Nikola Gruevski, who stoked division amongst the Christian Slavic majority and mostly Muslim Albanian minority. Under Gruevski's rule, media outlets simply became extensions of political parties.[59] In 2016, Gruevski's party, The Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (Внатрешна македонска револуционерна организација – Демократска партија за македонско национално единство, VMRO-DPMNE), which fostered a working relationship with Russia during its time in power, lost to a centre-left party, the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (*Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija,* SDSM). SDSM came to power by rebuking ethnic divisions and forming a coalition with the major Albanian party, the Democratic Union for Integration (*Demokratska Unija za Integracija*, DUI in Macedonian). The new SDSM government, headed by Zoran Zaev, had campaigned on fighting corruption and extensive reforms, including eliminating state funding for private media. In practice, the media is considerably freer since the Gruevski years. However, there have been limited formal changes to the media landscape and none to the state broadcaster, Macedonian Radio and Television.[60]

After Gruevski's removal, Russia tried to prevent reforms that would push North Macedonia closer to EU and NATO accession by attempting to amplify dissent around the 2019 Prespa Agreement, a controversial name change deal between North Macedonia and Greece. This was a critical hurdle to overcome to accede to NATO and the EU. The agreement was signed in July 2018 but still needed approval via a referendum vote. A Greek-Russian businessman named Ivan Savvidis began working to undermine the agreement at the Kremlin's behest.[61] The Kremlin's efforts included promoting violent protests against the name change and an active social media campaign to suppress voter turnout for the referendum.[62] The attempt to defeat the agreement failed, but it exposed Russia's ongoing efforts to push its foreign policy goals via disinformation campaigns.

Many Macedonians feel like Russian influence has decreased since the signing of the agreement, but local disinformation specialists say that Russia remains present, peddling disinformation behind the scenes. One expert added that because there are no Russian outlets openly operating in the country people believe there is less Russian influence, i.e. there is no Macedonian equivalent of Sputnik Srbija. However, much of the population understands Serbian and local cash-strapped outlets often translate stories from Serbian sources like Sputnik Srbija into the local language. They regularly repost articles with sensationalist content because sensationalism sells. Local NGO, Citizens Association MOST, which runs the platform "Fighting Fake News Narratives" highlights the ways

[59] Apostolov, Vlado. *Damjan Mancevski: We'll Revisit Media Reforms After Elections.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/06/09/damjan-mancevski-well-revisit-media-reforms-after-elections/ (accessed: 7 July 2020).
[60] Apostolov, *Switched off.*
[61] Cooper, Helene and Eric Schmitt. 2018. US Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote. *New York Times*, 9 October 2018.
[62] Tsalov, *Russian Interference in North Macedonia.*

Russian-originated information and disinformation make it into the Macedonian media scene.[63]

A recent example is, Ruptly, a Berlin-based division of RT news network, posting a factual story about 6,000 US troops deployed to Germany in February 2020 for a routine NATO exercise. In March, Kurir.rs, a Belgrade-based, pro-government tabloid, published the story adding that US troops may have been vaccinated with a secret COVID-19 vaccine and that Germans were panicking amidst 70,000 US troops landing in Hamburg. Magazin.mk, a popular Macedonian portal, republished Kurir's article using the same language. These allegations of Western troop build-up were also conveniently published around the anniversary of NATO bombings which started in Yugoslavia in March 1999.[64]

In North Macedonia, Russian information campaigns are well-documented. However, examples like this show the evolving ways Russia accomplishes regional goals by cultivating relationships with allies like Serbia who on its own manipulated factual Russian reporting to further anti-NATO rhetoric in the region.

Figure 3: Macedonian headline, which reads "Germany in Panic: 70,000 American Soldiers Landed in Hamburg-Tanks on All Sides!"

Source: https://www.magazin.mk/

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[63] *Attention! A Spread of Fake News in Serbian Language Has Been Noticed Through Private Messages on Facebook.* Available at: https://f2n2.mk/en/attention-a-spread-of-fake-news-in-serbian-language-has-been-noticed-through-private-messages-on-facebook/ (accessed: 12 July 2020).

[64] *How Swiftly is Russian Propaganda Spreading in North Macedonia.* Available at: https://f2n2.mk/en/how-swiftly-is-russian-propaganda-spreading-in-north-macedonia/ (accessed: 15 June 2020).

North Macedonia, even under new leadership, struggles to recover from years of overt media capture by Gruevski's government. In efforts to appear more democratic, media outlets are attempting to give balanced airtime to pro-government (SDSM) and pro-opposition (VMRO-DPMNE) voices. Unfortunately, many VMRO-DPMNE associated figures have regularly used this opportunity to spread disinformation.[65] Additionally, political parties receive public funding to allocate to media entities of their choice before elections, creating a client-like relationship between politicians and the press, a political tradition set during Gruevski's tenure. [66] This lack of independence jeopardises journalistic integrity as politically motivated and unprofessional reporting among Macedonian media outlets prevent objectivity and encourage misreporting and disinformation. North Macedonia's current media ecosystem is in great need of reform, as it currently features significant partisan and internationally funded disinformation.

COVID-19: A Health and Disinformation Crisis
The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic problems, political fissures, and institutional shortcomings in the Western Balkans. COVID-19 also worsened disinformation issues, including local leaders capitalising on the public health crisis to undermine an already struggling free press.

Examples include Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's June 2020 announcement about the opening of borders. This was mistranslated by Macedonian media which stated that borders would only be open to ethnic Albanians. Whether deliberate or not, the opposition VMRO-DPMNE party seized upon the narrative as ethnic discrimination against Slavic Macedonians to stoke ethnically charged anger against the government. In a country with pronounced ethnic tensions, the story featuring the misquote went viral.[67] A week later, the incident inspired a follow-up article, propagated by right-wing affiliated websites in North Macedonia. This article falsely claimed that Greece was closing the border to Macedonian citizens from municipalities that have significant Muslim (used to refer to Albanian or Roma) populations. The disinformation implied that the Albanian communities were culpable for the spread of COVID-19.[68] Coronavirus disinformation magnifies the ethnic tensions on which the far right in North Macedonia depends.

Disinformation during a pandemic can also be deadly. A disturbing amount of false information about the COVID-19 virus has circulated in the region's fragile

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[65] *A Party Statement with Manipulative Content Combined with an Old Photo Is Used to Accuse Zaev*. Available at: https://f2n2.mk/en/a-party-statement-with-manipulative-content-combined-with-an-old-photo-is-used-to-accuse-zaev/ (accessed: 30 July 2020).

[66] *Macedonia Prosecution Probes Vice Prime Minister*. Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/11/macedonia-prosecution-investigates-vice-prime-minister-10-11-2018/ (accessed: June 12 2020).

[67] *Nationalists in North Macedonia Use Border Closures to Sow Confusion and Mistrust*. Available at: https://globalvoices.org/2020/06/25/nationalists-in-north-macedonia-use-border-closures-to-sow-confusion-and-mistrust/ (accessed: 29 June 2020).

[68] Burns, Miroslava. *'Vecer' and 'Sitel' Published Misinformation That Greece Banned Entry for Residents of Macedonian Municipalities with the Most Infected*. Available at: https://crithink.mk/vecher-sitel-objavija-dezinformaczija-deka-grczija-zabrani-vlez-za-zhitelite-od-makedonskite-opshtini-so-najmnogu-zarazeni/ (accessed: 23 July 2020).

information space. Conspiracy theories blaming COVID-19 on 5G technology have spread rampantly on social media and online news portals.[69] The slew of conspiracy theories and sowing of doubt in scientific evidence regarding COVID-19 have downplayed the severity of the virus. Government officials have made absurd and harmful statements. Serbian official Branimir Nestorović, a member of the government's emergency response team, stated that Serbians have superior genes that would protect them from the virus and that women are protected from infection by their hormones.[70] Serbia leads the region in cases.

Crackdowns on journalism and free expression in the name of national security are also troubling. In Serbia, local journalist Ana Lalić was arrested after reporting on the poor conditions within a local hospital.[71] Her crime - breaking a dangerous new law that requires the central government's approval of articles regarding COVID-19.

In a region with already fragile media ecosystems, COVID-19 has made matters worse. Local news outlets previously struggling to survive face an existential crisis. They are rapidly closing like Koha Ditore, one of Kosovo's largest national daily newspapers, which ceased printing during the pandemic. In the Western Balkans, COVID-19 is not only a subject of false narratives but is also magnifying the media deficiencies that allow disinformation to flourish.

Beyond Band-Aid Solutions: Looking Forward
The Western Balkans, like the rest of the world, are grappling with an endless onslaught of disinformation, increasingly coming from local political leaders. In Montenegro, social media giant Facebook initiated new transparency rules on political advertising, taking effect just a few weeks ahead of Montenegro's August 2020 parliamentary elections.[72] Western Balkan governments have employed a variety of approaches to address local disinformation challenges, especially focusing on criminal liability for false narratives associated with COVID-19.

During their Spring 2020 monitoring activities, Balkan Investigating Reporting Network and SHARE Foundation found that citizens, journalists, and politicians were arrested and fined for sharing allegedly false and panic-inducing information on social media without consistent legal justification.[73] Radovan Rakočević, an opposition activist in Montenegro, was jailed for 72 hours for

[69] *From Cures to Curses, Manipulation Flourishes in the Digital Environment.* Available at: https://bird.tools/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/From-Cures-to-Curses-Manipulation-Flourishes-in-the-Digital-Environment.pdf (accessed: 1 July 2020).
[70] Bieber, Florian. *Conspiratorial Corona: Hoaxes and Conspiracy Theories in the Balkans.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/07/conspiratorial-corona-hoaxes-and-conspiracy-theories-in-the-balkans/ (accessed: 14 July 2020).
[71] Mong, Attila. *Serbian Reporter Ana Lalić on Her Arrest and Detention over COVID-19 Report.* Available at: https://cpj.org/2020/04/serbian-reporter-ana-lalic-on-her-arrest-and-deten/ (accessed: 29 June 2020).
[72] *Facebook Tightens Rules on Political Ads in Montenegro.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/06/facebook-tightens-rules-on-verifying-political-ads-in-montenegro/ (accessed 8 August 2020).
[73] Emiri, Geri. *Albania's War on "Fear Mongers" Leaves Rights Activists Uneasy.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/29/albanias-war-on-fear-mongers-leaves-rights-activists-uneasy/ (accessed 3 August 2020).

sharing an article stating that Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović had the virus. While disinformation needs addressing, BIRN and SHARE show that recent government attempts to stop flows of disinformation have been ineffective, selective, incommensurate, and often harmful.

Policy Recommendations

There is no silver bullet solution to combatting rising disinformation in the Western Balkans, and while many Western Balkan governments have tried to stop disinformation with an iron fist, their knee-jerk and punitive measures fail to address the complexity of the problem. Unfortunately, if current trends persist, nations in the Western Balkans risk eroding into illiberal democracies and even autocratic regimes. Despite the daunting disinformation challenges, a combination of the following strategies could help mitigate current threats and build resiliency.

1. Promote Long-Term and Context-Specific Media Literacy Initiatives

One en vogue solution is increasing media literacy campaigns. There is no agreed-upon definition of this buzzword, but according to the European Commission, media literacy, "refers to all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, and creative capacities that allow us to access and have a critical understanding of and interact with media."[74] The media literacy programming of organizations like the Baltic Center for Media Excellence and the Finnish government have proven impactful in combating Russian-backed disinformation. However, critics of media literacy programs say they are usually oversimplified and misrepresented as a panacea for countering disinformation. Bosnia and Herzegovina is not Finland, and media literacy campaigns in the Western Balkans often don't take into account local context and social, economic, and power imbalance barriers to successful implementation.

Additionally, in some countries, the legacy of communist regimes has led to unwillingness to challenge authority or the status quo, either for fear of retribution or the thinking that speaking out won't make a difference. Therefore, media literacy campaigns, which usually teach participants to critically question news sources and content, can be met with resistance by government and citizens. One journalist from Montenegro also mentioned that for media literacy campaigns to be effective, one-off, one-day, or one-week media literacy camps aren't sufficient. If people want actual media literacy, the government needs to invest in early childhood education programs that last throughout secondary schooling. Finally, countries need to think about how media literacy initiatives reach older populations. Far-reaching, media literacy programming is a long-term, impactful, and cost-effective investment that can help prevent the spread of conspiracy theories and false narratives.

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[74] Garcia, Cynthia. 2018. *The Baltic Center for Media Excellence: A Case Study on Media Literacy as a Tool Against Russian Disinformation.* Tufts Digital Library.

2. Support and Increase Reach of Fact-Checking Resources

Another powerful tool for fighting disinformation is consistent, accessible, and trustworthy fact-checking. Luckily, the Western Balkans already has a handful of quality fact-checking organizations, but many remain outside the mainstream media scene. An additional challenge for fact-checking portals is many scrutinize ruling parties and politicians and receive large amounts of funding from foreign donors, leading many locals to discredit them as simply pushing foreign agendas or supporting the opposition. Breaking through individuals' echo chambers and convincing people to trust new sources and change their opinions is a further obstacle for these types of organizations to overcome. Still, there are some good examples of professional and increasingly popular fact-checking mechanisms like Faktoje in Albania,[75] Truthmeter and F²N² in North Macedonia, and the Serbian portal, Raskrinkavanje,[76] which aim to correct misinformation and disinformation and expose media outlets' sources of funding and influence.

Also gaining popularity are regional media networks committed to professional reporting and tracking and compiling online violations. SHARE Monitoring is one of these portals, which not only monitors digital threats and trends but also raises awareness about digital freedom rights and issues policy recommendations.[77] This year SHARE, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network and 19 other regional organizations formed the SEE Digital Rights Network and other local organizations started the Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans).

Another encouraging trend are initiatives aiming to address both disinformation problems as well as societal divisions, which disinformation often targets. One such project is, "Describing Mediation," an initiative carried out by KoSSev in the ethnically divided North Mitrovica in Kosovo. Journalists from Kosovo and Serbia put together training videos in the local languages and talked about media literacy and disinformation, also addressing challenges related to ethnic divisions.[78]

3. Hold Social Media Companies More Accountable for Disinformation

Regional efforts to fact-check stories are positive steps forward. Still, more influential parties, like social media companies, need to understand their role in the disinformation equation and should take more aggressive steps to mitigate its negative effects. These businesses have a responsibility to develop and sharpen tools which combat disinformation on their platforms, content which directly harms democratic processes. For example, a former Facebook data scientist wrote a scathing memo detailing the company's role in disinformation

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[75] *Young Journalists Start Albania's First Fact-Checking News Platform*. Available at: https://www.usaid.gov/results-data/success-stories/young-journalists-start-faktoje-albania%E2%80%99s-first-fact-checking-news (accessed: 28 July 2020).
[76] *Methodology of the combat platform against media disinformation for Raskrikavanje.rs*. Available at: https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/RaskrikavanjeMethodology.pdf (accessed: 30 July 2020).
[77] SHARE Monitoring: Keeping track of online violations in Southern and Eastern Europe. Available at: https://monitoring.bird.tools/ (accessed: 2 August 2020).
[78] *OpisMEDIJavanje (Describing Media) Project*. KoSSev 2020. Available at: https://kossev.info/international-democracy-day-un-department-of-peacekeeping-operations-recalls-opismedijavanje-campaign-and-fight-against-misinformation/ (accessed: 15 September 2020).

campaigns which she found to influence elections in Ecuador, Honduras, and Ukraine.[79] At the very least, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube should label posts as suspect or require transparency about the original source. Even more effective would be integrated fact-checking partnerships with local organizations. In countries like the United States, these tech giants have faced pressure to more quickly remove or alert users about false information which recently led Facebook and YouTube to ban all posts connected to QAnon, a far-right conspiracy theory movement.[80] Facebook and Twitter have also increased labeling posts containing false information, and Facebook now prevents mass forwarding on its Messenger app.

Many Western Balkan countries have underdeveloped online regulatory regimes. Social media companies should take steps to stem disinformation in all their countries of operation. Still, Balkan governments can further develop laws for the online sphere which can put pressure on the Facebooks and YouTubes of the world to take disinformation more seriously. Local governments should follow the European Union model which places more restrictions on certain types of free speech like in France and Germany where legislation was designed to prevent hate speech and election-related disinformation. Many of the false narratives making their way around Southeastern Europe feature ethnically-charged claims and the region's leaders need to enact stronger legal measures to curb this rising problem.

4. Use Counternarratives Tactfully

Answering false storylines with a truthful and compelling counternarrative has also been a popular tool employed by actors in the Western Balkans, especially by foreign powers active in the region like the European Union and the United States. Deputy Assistant Secretary and Special Representative to the Western Balkans, Matthew Palmer said that part of the US strategy to assist with this issue is bringing attention to false information, calling it out publicly when it's occurring but also amplifying counternarratives.[81] Correcting false information is key but sometimes people inadvertently strengthen a false storyline by giving it extra air time or worse, report inaccurately on disinformation. For example a recent New York Times story sounded the alarm about the "broad reach" of an obscure Russian web portal, a story which then got shared by Former American President Barack Obama. The story also reported inaccurately about this portal's connections to Russian energy giant Lukoil and Cambridge Analytica. This example shows not only how disinformation about disinformation is

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[79] Bazelon, Emily. The First Amendment in the age of disinformation. Available at:
https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/magazine/free-speech.html (accessed: 20 October 2020).
[80] Argentino, Marc-André. *Facebook and YouTube's moves against QAnon are only a first step in the battle against dangerous conspiracy theories.* Available at:
https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/10/facebook-and-youtubes-moves-against-qanon-are-only-a-first-step-in-the-battle-against-dangerous-conspiracy-theories/ (accessed: 20 October 2020).
[81] Palmer, Matthew. *Perspectives from the State Department: A conversation with Deputy Assistant Secretary and Special Representative to the Western Balkans Matthew Palmer* (event hosted by Balkan Insider on 5 August 2020).

unhelpful but that "the tiny whimper of disinformation [can be] transformed into something far louder and more dangerous."[82]

5. Increase Funding for Independent Media

The classic line is you can't just throw money at the problem. Still, increasing funding (transparent funding) of legitimate, professional, and investigative news organizations in the region would go far in keeping critical, independent media alive. Local news outlets in the Western Balkans and around the world were already struggling with funding and maintaining staff, but the COVID-19 crisis accelerated these discouraging trends. This money should go to individual outlets but also go to funding more professional exchanges (especially transnational programs and those which bring together different ethnic groups). These funds should also support journalist training, and the codification of journalistic standards, of course, understanding each country's particular challenges.[83] For example, sometimes disinformation isn't spreading due to a lack of appropriately trained journalists, but instead, there is more of a political influence problem where if journalists report accurately on a sensitive issue, they are subject to harassment, loss of employment, or even physical violence.

6. Frame the Disinformation Threat as a National Security Issue

One disinformation specialist in North Macedonia stated that long-term solutions like media literacy curricula can be a positive step in building societal resilience to false narratives but expressed that this alone is insufficient. She stressed that countries in the Western Balkans don't have the luxury of waiting ten years for a new generation to become equipped to take on disinformation. Therefore, governments need to immediately reframe and reprioritize the threat of disinformation as a security issue. This would hopefully spark more follow-through on recent politically popular but often toothless government pledges to combat disinformation.[84] Furthermore, governments need to disentangle these government strategies from their association with being blanket attacks on free speech. Then, in practice, national disinformation security initiatives should not be used as an excuse to actually attack political opponents and journalists. Curbing disinformation and maintaining media freedom is a tough line to walk but heightening disinformation problems to the status of national security concerns is necessary to more swiftly address the havoc disinformation is wreaking on Balkan societies.

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[82] Toler, Aric. *How (Not) to Report on Russian Disinformation.* Available at: https://www.bellingcat.com/resources/how-tos/2020/04/15/how-not-to-report-on-russian-disinformation/ (accessed: 10 May 2020).

[83] Schroeder, *Examining and Assessing Editorial Guidelines / Codes of Conducts in the Public Service Media of the Western Balkans.*

[84] Marušić, Siniša-Jakov. *North Macedonia's War on 'Fake News' Meets Suspicion.* Available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2019/08/15/north-macedonias-war-on-fake-news-meets-suspicion/ (accessed: 1 August 2020).

Conclusion

Democratic societies are inherently vulnerable to disinformation, and many governments have attempted to tackle this challenge by censoring or manipulating the information space. However, if the fundamental values of democracy are to be preserved and leaders aim to be more effective, the solution is not limiting debate and channels of information and instead requires addressing the underlying deficiencies and grievances that disinformation preys upon and aggravates. This includes developing sustainable plans to transform inter-group distrust and make progress on structural governance issues plaguing many Balkan countries.

Finally, important to understand, for locals and non-locals alike, is that populations in the Western Balkans are not on the verge of violent conflict, arming themselves with NATO-supplied rifles en masse, any moment ready to capitalise on "ancient hatreds." Instead, the region is grappling with complex questions, including how to best arm itself to weather an evolving disinformation storm, one that will rage on for the foreseeable future.

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Annex A: Survey: "Local Perspectives on Disinformation in the Republika Srpska, Bosnia and Herzegovina"

Question 1: How do you primarily get your news (i.e. television, newspapers, social media-Facebook)?

I Google it.
Theater staff, Male, 32

I Google it.
Student, Female, 25

I Google everything I'm curious about to see what other countries' media say about it.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

I mostly use social networks or TV sometimes.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

I Google what I need to know.
Psychologist, Female, 32

I mostly use online sources.
Manager, Female, 32

I Google about things I'm interested in.
Economist, Male, 30

I mostly use online sources or social networks.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Mostly social media and some web portals.
Waitress, Female, 29

I mostly read newspapers at work, sometimes news on Facebook.
Waiter, Male, 21

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 2: What news sources do you trust the most (which newspapers, websites, etc.)? Why do you trust them?

Don't trust much to any.
Theater staff, Male, 32

Don't trust much to any.
Student, Female, 25

I don't trust much in any of the media.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

I mostly like balkans.aljazeera and Mondo BiH. They seem more objective than others.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

Don't trust much to any local media.
Psychologist, Female, 32

I guess some are better and some worse. I choose a few and just see what they say.
Manager, Female, 32

Don't trust much to any media in particular.
Economist, Male, 30

I don't think any of the sources are much better than the rest.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

My favorite is balkans.aljazeera, as they seem very objective.
Waitress, Female, 29

I don't trust much. I read it and try to make my own conclusions.
Waiter, Male, 21

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 3: What sources do you distrust the most? Why do you distrust them?

Public papers, public TV, because they are biased.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

Public papers and public TV. They proved unreliable.
Theater staff, Male, 32

Public papers, public TV, most media. They transmit false news or "beautify" the stories.
Psychologist, Female, 32

Public papers, public TV, even small media outlets, because many times they spread lies.
Economist, Male, 30

I distrust national TV stations and their news as they seem very biased.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

I think I distrust all of them with certain topics.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Public papers and public TV. Most media transmit false news.
Student, Female, 25

Most media transmit false news. I mostly distrust state-run media.
Waiter, Male, 21

I never trust media that are not very famous, who knows who is behind that, or the ones with foreign names (Balkan insight, Aljazeera).
Manager, Female, 32

Public papers and public TV. Most media have shown they can't be trusted.
Waitress, Female, 29

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 4: In your opinion, do people in Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina trust the media?

I think it is slightly changing and people are starting to see the other side of the story, thanks to social media mostly.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

Many people sadly still trust them.
Psychologist, Female, 32

No.
Theater staff, Male, 32

I think most people (80%) still do.
Economist, Male, 30

Some people do and some people don't trust them. I think it's a 50-50 situation.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

I think most people still trust the media about most things.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Most of them don't, but a significant number still does.
Student, Female, 25

I think many older people still trust public TV and everything they say.
Waiter, Male, 21

I think most people know whom to trust by now, so they act accordingly.
Manager, Female, 32

I think mostly older people do.
Waitress, Female, 29

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 5: Is disinformation or fake news a problem in RS? Is it a problem in BiH? (i.e. is disinformation common and how does it affect people's opinions and actions)?

I think in both entities it is a huge problem and makes people know less instead of more.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

In both entities it is a big problem, and I think its main goal is to help improve the image of politicians.
Psychologist, Female, 32

Yes and yes.
Theater staff, Male, 32

In both entities it is a big problem, so instead of informing the people, they do the opposite.
Economist, Male, 30

I think this problem exists in both entities, and it makes people be misinformed and then act like they're misinformed.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

I think it is a problem in both entities and it causes people to be misinformed and admire politicians.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Yes and yes. It makes people trust politicians.
Student, Female, 25

In both entities, but I'm not very familiar with the FbiH (the Federation entity). It usually makes politicians appear as they would like to be seen.
Waiter, Male, 21

I am sure it is a problem everywhere in the world and it is difficult to fight, especially now with internet media.
Manager, Female, 32

It is common in both entities and it is a problem as it deceives people.
Waitress, Female, 29

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 6: Can you tell me about an instance of disinformation you remember? What was the story and how was it received by the local population?

During the 2014 floods there was a lot of disinformation about the number of victims and also about the distribution of funds (foreign donations).
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

Even the weather forecast can be wrong, but it doesn't mean they meant to deceive people. Sometimes media make mistakes and probably for lack of practice or education of reporters.
Manager, Female, 32

Often on public TV the news will tell you one thing for days until the old folks start to believe in it. I don't.
Theater staff, Male, 32

During the Covid-19 outbreak there was a lot of news regarding the numbers of infected people, so when it was convenient they said there were more, and vice versa.
Economist, Male, 30

Election campaigns are very commonly followed by sensational media coverage, which mostly prove to be wrong.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

During a peaceful protest campaign to clarify the murder of a young man, most media reported there were much less people, even though on many Facebook profiles one could see a huge numbers of protesters.
Waitress, Female, 29

Whoever points out a bad move by the government is immediately classified as a "traitor" of the people and accused of attacking the entity/state.
Student, Female, 25

For example about the Covid-19 – that it is an invented story with an excuse to shut people down in their houses and it had an effect people so they didn't want to stay indoors and were not cautious during the peak of

During election campaigns for example – media report on roads being built, things fixed, and a few weeks after the campaign is over you can see those same things falling apart.
Psychologist, Female, 32

Election campaigns are an example of this. Many things in the entity are controlled by media which promote political candidates and of course present only the best stories about them.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

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Question 7: If disinformation is a problem, where is it mainly coming from, local people like politicians or is it coming from Russia, China, the EU or the US? Other sources?

Public TV, public papers, politicians and probably some of the countries listed have a say through funding.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

Probably big powers have their own agents everywhere to deal with the spread of information that is useful to them, and probably here too.
Manager, Female, 32

Public TB and public papers.
Theater staff, Male, 32

I don't think big countries have much influence in this, it is mostly run my politicians of the region.
Economist, Male, 30

I don't know. I think Russia and the U.S. have their interests in this region and they could be influencing many things, not only media.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

I'm not sure. I never really thought about big powers being in the back of it but maybe that's true.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Public TV, public papers and politicians. I'm not sure how those countries would be involved.
Student, Female, 25

Not sure about that, probably politicians and maybe some of their allies from abroad.
Waiter, Male, 21

Not sure. It could be intertwined interests of all those countries expressed through media and politicians here.
Psychologist, Female, 32

Probably politicians trying to use media as their weapon.
Waitress, Female, 29

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 8: Does the government in RS or in BiH do anything to combat disinformation (i.e. media literacy campaigns, censorship, fines or jail for people that create or spread disinformation)?

They actually do the opposite. They combat real information and then present it as fighting misinformation.
Psychologist, Female, 32

Don't know.
Theater staff, Male, 32

I think the government is busy with so many other problems that we have.
Manager, Female, 32

They actually combat real information and then present it as fighting misinformation, so people are often confused about what is the truth.
Economist, Male, 30

They actually do the opposite. They combat real information and then present it as fighting misinformation.
Student, Female, 25

I don't have that kind of impression, I think disinformation is something they aim for.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

I think the government says it fights misinformation but it doesn't really do much about it.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Not really. I think they actually encourage it.
Waiter, Male, 21

Some people in high positions might be trying to fight misinformation, but I think they are few.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

They actually do the opposite, they combat real information and then present it as fighting misinformation.
Waitress, Female, 29

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Question 9: Does the government in RS or in BiH use the excuse of fighting "disinformation" as a way to silence actual professional investigative journalists? If so, can you tell me more about this?

During the floods, during Pravda za Davida protests – they reported there were much less people in the protest.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

Everything the ruling politicians do is presented with a slightly "improved" description.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

I can't remember any, maybe during elections. There were many false accusations about the rival candidates.
Manager, Female, 32

Information about the 2014 Floods, Protests of Pravda za Davida and every election campaign.
Psychologist, Female, 32

During the 2014 floods when the media presented "all that politicians do for the people." They didn't do much really.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

Yes, during the above mentioned protest many reporters were fired or warned to pay attention to how they report on the entire case.
Waitress, Female, 29

They use rhetoric to kill any sane brain cell. There is no disinformation according to them.
Theater staff, Male, 32

Yes, but I can't think of a specific example.
Student, Female, 25

I can't think of an example right now.
Economist, Male, 30

I can't think of an example.
Waiter, Male, 21

Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Question 10: In your opinion, what can be done to address the problem of disinformation in BiH and more generally?

Maybe by having more media outlets.
Economist (unemployed), Female, 35

We need a more diverse structure of media broadcasting.
Shop Assistant, Male, 33

Showing more than one side of each story with more evidence.
Psychologist, Female, 32

Start showing all sides involved, give time to all sides and stop being biased.
Theater staff, Male, 32

We need more media outlets.
Manager, Female, 32

Probably having more skilled reporters and changing the structure of media outlets and practices.
Economist, Male, 30

Maybe have more media and have it owned by someone else.
Waitress, Female, 29

Showing more material while reporting and more "evidence."
Student, Female, 25

Having much more insight into the events I think.
Waiter, Male, 21

Probably more media presence and evidence in articles they publish.
Make-Up Artist, Female, 29

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Sandra Branković, a translator and language teacher in the Republika Srpska, administered this in-person survey, designed by the authors. The survey was conducted in Banja Luka in July 2020 and includes responses from the ten participants. Questions were asked in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS) language and responses were translated by Ms. Branković into English. This survey is not representative of the region but serves as a snapshot of local perspectives.

Annex B: Major News Outlets by Country

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Main News Outlets

Al-Jazeera Balkans - commercial, regional outlet of well-known Qatari broadcaster	Hayat TV - commercial	O Kanal - commercial	OBN - commercial	Dani - Sarajevo, weekly	Glas Srpske - Banja Luka, Bosnian Serb government, daily	Nezavisne Novine -Banja Luka, daily
Alternativna televizija (ATV) - commercial, Banja Luka-based Bosnia Serb network	N1 - commercial, news, CNN affiliate	Radio and TV of Bosnia and Herzegovina - state-wide public broadcaster, operates BHTV1		Dnevni Avaz - Sarajevo, daily	Oslobodjenje - Sarajevo, daily	
Federation TV (FTV) - public TV service of Bosniak-Croat entity	Nova BH - commercial	Serb Republic Radio-TV (RTRS) - operates public TV service of Bosnian Serb entity		Dnevni List - Mostar, daily	Slobodna Bosna - Sarajevo, weekly	

Anadolu Agency - Bosnian outlet of Turkish official news agency	Klix - news site	SRNA - official Bosnian Serb agency	Bobar Radio - commercial, Bijeljina based Bosnian Serb service	Radio Stari Grad (RSG) - private, Sarajevo-based	Radio and TV of Bosnia and Herzegov-ina - public broadcast-er (BH Radio 1)
Faktor.ba	Onasa - private, Sarajevo-based, English-language pages		Radio FBiH - public radio service of Federation		
		Stav.ba			
Federation News Agency (Fena) - state-run, Sarajevo-based, English-language pages	Radio Sarajevo - news site		Radio Herceg Bosna - Bosnian Croat network, Mostar-based	Serb Republic Radio-TV (RTRS) - operates public radio service of Bosnian Serb entity	

Type
- Major News Agencies/Internet Portals
- Major Press Outlets
- Major Radio Outlets
- Major Television Outlets

Data Source: BBC and local sources.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Montenegro: Main News Outlets

Analitika - news site	CdM (Cafe del Montenegro) - news site	MINA - private agency	Nova M - private	Prva TV- private, pro-govern-ment	Antena M - private	Radio D - private
Borba.me -right wing, pro-Kremlin	IN4S - right wing, pro-Kremlin	Radio AntenaM	RTV Budva - public	TV Montenegro (TVCG) - public, operates two networks and a satellite channel	Radio Elmag - private	Radio Montene-gro (RCG) - public, op-erates two networks
Dan - daily	Monitor - political weekly	Vijesti - private, daily				
Dnevne Novine -private, pro-government	Pobjeda - daily		TV Vijesti - private			

Type
- Major News Agencies/Internet Portals
- Major Press Outlets
- Major Radio Outlets
- Major Television Outlets

Data Source: BBC and local sources.
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Serbia: Main News Outlets

Blic - private, daily, English-language pages	Glas javnosti - private, daily	Politika - private, daily	Vecernje Novosti - daily	Beta - private	FoNet - private	Association of Independent Electronic Media - representing private local radio and TV stations	B92 - private, English-language web pages
Danas - private, daily	NIN - private, weekly						
		Vreme - private, weekly					
B92 TV - private, English-language web pages	Prva Srpska TV - private, formerly Fox TV	Studio B TV - run by Belgrade city council	TV Pink - private, pro-government	Tanjug - state-run, English-language pages		Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) - government-funded	
Happy TV - private	Radio-Television Serbia (RTS) - government-funded			Informer - pro-government		Srpski Telegraph - pro-government	

Type
- ■ Major News Agencies/Internet Portals
- ■ Major Press Outlets
- ■ Major Radio Outlets
- ■ Major Television Outlets
- ■ Influential Tabloids

Data Source: BBC and local sources.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

Kosovo: Main News Outlets

Channel 10	Kosovo Radio-Television (RTK) - public, runs RTK TV1 national network and three cable-based outlets	T7	TV 21 - private, national	Bota Sot - daily	Zeri - daily
KTV - private, national	RTV Dukagjini (only available in some parts of Kosovo)			Koha Ditore - daily	
KlanKosova TV - private, national	Rrokum	Tribune		Kosova Sot - daily	
Express - news site	KALLXO/Gazeta Jeta në Kosove	Kosovapress - online agency	Periskopi	Kosovo Radio-Television (RTK) - public, operates Radio Kosova 1, Radio Kosova 2	Radio Urban FM - private, Pristina-based
Insajderi	KosovaLive - online agency	Lajmi - news site	Telegrafi - news site	Radio 21 - private	
				Radio Dukagjini - private	

Type
- ■ Major News Agencies/Internet Portals
- ■ Major Press Outlets
- ■ Major Radio Outlets
- ■ Major Television Outlets

Data Source: BBC and local sources.
Graphic created by: Samantha Chen. The Fletcher School. 6 September 2020.

North Macedonia: Main News Outlets

Kurir - private, pro-opposition	Makfax - private	Plusinfo - private, pro-opposition	Sakam da kazam - private	Koha - private, daily, in Albanian	Nova Makedonija - state-subsidized, daily	Antenna 5 - private, national	Kanal 77 - private, national
Libertas - private, pro-government	Media Information Agency (MIA) - state-run, English-language pages						
Alfa - private, national, pro-opposition	Kanal 5 - private, national	Sitel TV - private, national	Telma - private, national	Sloboden Pecat - private, daily	Vecer - state-subsidized, daily	MRT - state-owned	Metropolis Radio - private, national
Alsat-M - private, national, in Albanian	MRT - state-owned, operates three national networks and satellite network						

Type
- ■ Major News Agencies/Internet Portals
- ■ Major Press Outlets
- ■ Major Radio Outlets
- ■ Major Television Outlets

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