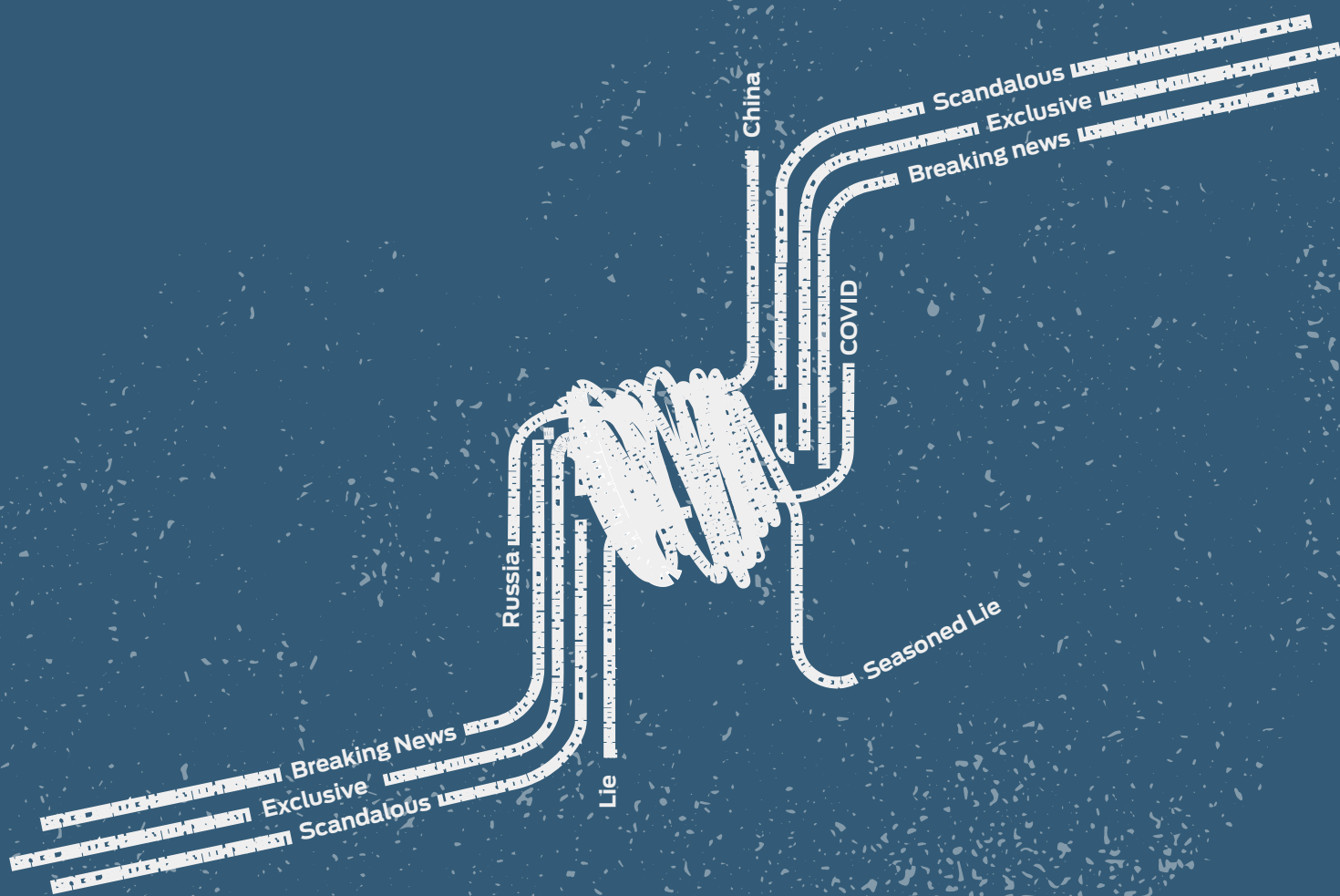


# The Story of Our Lies



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**BIRN**  
BALKAN  
INVESTIGATIVE  
REPORTING  
NETWORK | KOSOVO



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# Executive Summary

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*The media, institutions, and society are facing substantial challenges in effectively addressing the issue of disinformation. There is no clear vision and strategic approach to combating this phenomenon in Kosovo. Consequently, disinformation exerts a considerable influence on public opinion within Kosovo.*

In the absence of sustainable funding, limited human resources, unclear editorial policies and external influences, in some instances, the media became creators and amplifiers of disinformation. The data gathered show that social media and internet platforms which specialise in fictitious news remain the key disseminators of disinformation, however, in some cases, even traditional, professional media have been fallen foul of this.

Kosovo institutions have not been able to establish mechanisms that monitor the dissemination of disinformation, whereas judicial institutions have been unable to handle these types of cases. Key challenges include a lack of media literacy programmes and the capacity of the education system to deliver media education. Consequently, Kosovo society remains vulnerable to disinformation even though data shows that disinformation has a serious impact on public opinion.

This report aims to draw a map of disinformation in Kosovo. Sometimes, this disinformation are influenced from abroad, but mostly they start at home. As a society of 1.7 million people, Kosovo hears these false stories repeated over and over, woven into public discourse until they form narratives. This report maps not only disinformation but also their narratives: It is the story of our lies, not the story of our lives.

BIRN gathered data on disinformation from October 2022 to April 2023. The study's objective is to reveal the impact of disinformation originating from the Russia, China, and other external sources. The research also aims to identify the disinformation narratives that are created from within Kosovo and the impact of information disorders which include misinformation, disinformation, and mal-information (for detailed definition of each form, please see the table on page 102).

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine unfolded, Kosovo also suffered from Russian disinformation campaigns aimed at the entire Western Balkans. This information was largely aimed at impeding Kosovo's NATO and EU integration processes, thus influencing

its relationship with the outside world. Internally, however, the Russian disinformation was aimed at straining already tense interethnic relations between Kosovo Serbs and Kosovo Albanians.

Kremlin-derived disinformation made its way into Kosovo media channels without undergoing editorial scrutiny or without balance from other sources or context. The study identifies examples of Albanian and Serbian language media outlets publishing Kremlin communiqués pertaining to events in the Balkans without proper editorial scrutiny. This has led to the spread of disinformation narratives that misrepresent the actual situation in Kosovo. Additionally, information originating from Kremlin-controlled media sources has been translated into local languages and published without explicitly indicating its source. The report delves deeper on this issue in the section ‘The Kremlin’s warmongering disinformation narratives’, uncovering the strategies used by Russia to sway public opinion and political dynamics in their favour.

Narratives originating from Chinese-government-controlled media have also found routes to media and social networks in Kosovo. These claims are often disseminated without adequately disclosing that they originate from media outlets that explicitly point out that they are ‘State-influenced Media’. In particular, a considerable number of Chinese state-produced articles that deal with the Chinese economy have been republished by local media outlets in Kosovo. This includes the dissemination of news originating from Chinese government platforms translated into the Albanian language. Section ‘Chinese influence in the media and the public’ sheds light on the extent of China’s media influence, from promotional narratives on their economy to their stance on public health. These findings highlight the presence of external influences on disinformation within Kosovo.

Regarding the creation of disinformation originating from within Kosovo, the study proves that both media outlets and politicians have been involved in the production of propaganda which has fuelled tensions between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, as well as disseminating narratives against NATO and EU integration.

Narratives against NATO have been predominantly encountered in Serbian-language media outlets and among Serbian politicians within Kosovo. However, it is worth noting that there have also been instances, albeit to a lesser extent, where certain narratives against NATO have emerged among Albanian politicians in Kosovo. The report discusses these narratives in detail in the section ‘The disinformation narrative that NATO and the West support only Kosovo Albanians’.

BIRN's study also analyses disinformation narratives against the European Union, EULEX, the EU's rule-of-law mission, and the Hague-based Specialist Chambers.

The research shows that the EU-led dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia was accompanied by disinformation about the facilitators appointed by the EU and the USA.

The frustration with the lack of progress in the dialogue is often interpreted in the media as the fault of the facilitators who are unable to impose the implementation of agreements signed. Thus, although over 91% of Kosovo citizens declare themselves pro-EU integration, local anti-EU sentiments have emerged with the failure of the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.

This is then exploited and amplified by Russian disinformation narratives. Similarly, politicians in Kosovo and Serbia were faced with campaigns based on false information, mainly aimed at portraying them as 'traitors' of national issues. The report delves further into narratives against the European Union in the section 'Narratives and Disinformation regarding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and the narratives against EU & US diplomats'.

The research findings have also shed light on the dissemination of disinformation pertaining to Kosovo's economy. One prominent aspect of this disinformation involves the promotion of coal burning as a viable energy solution, despite its environmental implications. Articles reporting that EU countries were returning to coal proved to be exaggerated as many coal fired power stations remained on standby rather than reopening. In the section 'Disinformation narratives related to health and the economy', the report uncovers economic disinformation narratives, from scams using fake articles to misinformation on energy prices.

Various actors within Kosovo contribute to the production of disinformation. This includes politicians, registered and unregistered media outlets, as well as pages on social media. Some media have become spreaders of disinformation simply because they do not apply standards of professional journalism and basic fact-checking.

The analysis of social network data has revealed that certain platforms involved in disinformation production have established specialised distribution networks online. These sources of disinformation utilise multiple pages on social networks, sometimes managing up to 11 pages, to systematically disseminate false information. This activity transforms these platforms into fake-news factories, continuously churning out and propagating misleading content. This research has identified specific instances where articles containing false information were re-posted numerous times in Kosovo, with some cases reaching up to 173 reposts within an 18-month period.

In addition to analysing fake articles, the research conducted a survey to gauge public opinion and perceptions regarding disinformation. The survey included a sample of 1,056 citizens. The findings of this opinion poll demonstrate the ramifications of disinformation on the citizens of Kosovo, revealing that a substantial percentage of the population struggles to discern accurate information and lacks the requisite knowledge to identify disinformation. Consequently, the report underscores the importance of media literacy and the cultivation of critical-thinking skills as essential tools in the fight against disinformation. Most of these citizens are on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, which serves as the primary channel for the spread of disinformation. The data gathered further highlight that the producers of such content employ various techniques, including the manipulation of videos, photographs, and written content.

The situation is equally challenging for public institutions and decision-makers in dealing with disinformation. In order to assess the knowledge and skills of public officials regarding disinformation, BIRN conducted a social experiment involving 50 participants from various professions, including teachers, doctors, judges, and prosecutors. During the experiment, BIRN journalists presented the participants with articles that appeared authentic, complete with genuine media logos and designs. However, the articles contained easily verifiable false information related to their respective professional fields and the majority of participants rated the articles as true and expressed their willingness to distribute them without verifying the information. There are over 200 officials working in public relations offices within Kosovo's institutions. Based on the focus groups conducted with representatives from these departments, it has been concluded that these officials lack adequate knowledge on disinformation, including how to identify and address it.

Although Kosovo has a dynamic, free, independent and relatively democratic media market, some professional media outlets repeatedly fall victim to disinformation. This occurrence is not because of political or business pressures but rather it stems from the absence of robust editorial policies to identify and address the dissemination of disinformation originating from Russia and China.

The lack of trained editors within the media sector exacerbates the problem, as these professionals play a crucial role in verifying information and ensuring editorial standards are upheld. Additionally, the main challenge for young journalists is that they enter the media market after going through almost two decades in an education system which does not train them in critical thinking.



Concurrently, non-majority communities, which have a much greater need for independent financing for their media because of the limited commercial revenues available to them, lack of secure sources of financing to produce information that is resistant to state propaganda.

On the legal aspect, Kosovo's defamation law is one tool to address disinformation but such cases take five to ten years to be resolved in court. At the level of existing state and public policies, Kosovo does not have a single strategy, policy or any other additional mechanism to deal with disinformation and propaganda. These institutional limitations are further highlighted in the section 'Kosovo's capacity to deal with disinformation' which assesses Kosovo's responses to disinformation challenges.

To address the pervasive issue of disinformation in Kosovo, the report presents a series of recommendations for key stakeholders, including policymakers, media organisations, and civil society. These recommendations emphasise the necessity of enhanced collaboration among stakeholders, the development and implementation of media literacy programs, and the establishment of robust fact-checking mechanisms within media organisations.

In conclusion, this report offers invaluable insights into the dynamics of disinformation in Kosovo and the repercussions it has on the citizenry. The report provides stakeholders with a strategic roadmap for addressing the issue, fostering a culture of media literacy, and nurturing critical thinking skills.

# Recommendations

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## FOR KOSOVO GOVERNMENT:

- Kosovo governmental institutions should build the necessary capacities to identify sources of disinformation and address them adequately;
- According to the conclusions of focus groups with public relations officials, officials are only assigned to watch what disinformation is spread about their immediate “boss” (be that a minister or leader of a department). This should change. Public relations officers should deal with disinformation that harms the country, not only the individuals leading the institutions.
- An Artificial Intelligence-based platform should be embedded in all public institutions to assist in monitoring and identifying all types of disinformation;
- Political representatives should be made aware of how to identify disinformation from abroad and how to address it;
- Specialised media literacy programs should be organised by public institutions for public officials who are not sufficiently aware about how to identify fake news and disinformation;
- Kosovo should adopt the Media Literacy Strategy and define its approach on how to implement this strategy through Media Literacy Programs across Kosovo schools and universities;
- Kosovo institutions should create independent funds for initiatives aimed at fighting disinformation and for media education and media literacy programs, especially in non-majority communities.
- In a society already divided by culture, the economy, and education, the government of Kosovo should seriously aim to reduce information that damages inter-ethnic relations.
- At the very least, the government should ensure that they don’t frame entire regions of Kosovo as prone to organised crime or smuggling as this has proven to stigmatise entire communities.
- Programmes are needed to bridge the gap between young people in both communities who are currently educated not only in two different state educational systems but with curricula that create deeper divisions.

## FOR JUDICIAL INSTITUTIONS

- Judges and prosecutors should attend specialised training programmes about how to detect and treat disinformation, copyright and issues related to defamation and libel;
- The justice system, including the police and other security institutions, should intensify investigations to detect dangerous sources of disinformation, especially those inciting violence and hate. Financial investigations of those producing and disseminating disinformation should be intensified;

## FOR MEDIA IN ALL LANGUAGES & ACADEMIA AND EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

- Media in Kosovo should pay attention to the source of sponsored material that is published in Albanian, as this study has detected Russian and Chinese propaganda material translated into Albanian and offered to Kosovo media to republish.
- Media should engage in producing content that educates audiences on media literacy and consequences of disinformation
- The media should strengthen editorial policies and the editing process so that the content they share does not promote disinformation.
- Media should update their editorial policies in order to help journalists detect what is Russian and Chinese propaganda and then decide how to present, edit and contextualise this material in their publications.
- If material sponsored by China and Russia is published in the Kosovo media, they should contain proper disclaimers disclosing the fact that they are known to be sponsored content and indicating the source of the agency sponsoring this material.
- Kosovo media should have their internal fact-checking capacities strengthened as well as their capacities to research disinformation sources.
- Media must avoid inflammatory language that encourages hate between ethnicities in Kosovo. This often involves deleting hate speech from their social media channels.
- It would be commendable if TV anchors of prime time political programming in Kosovo call on their viewers to refrain from using inflammatory commentary on the TV programmes' social media channels and 'comments' section, especially when ethnic tensions rise because of protests, barricades, etc.

- Educational institutions should initiate in-depth research on the consequences of disinformation in all languages that are published in Kosovo (this includes outlets in Albanian and Serbian).
- Social media Influencers should start educating themselves how to detect disinformation and not promote it through their platforms.

### FOR MEDIA BODIES

- The Press Council of Kosovo, PCK, should strengthen its capacities to identify media that republish or transmit disinformation and take adequate measures against media that violate ethical standards.
- The Independent Media Commission, IMC, should strengthen its monitoring capacities and issue adequate sanctions to media that violate ethical standards.
- The Independent Media Commission should strengthen its oversight in order to check problematic content disseminated by channels broadcast through cable TV networks.
- The Independent Media Commission and the Press Council of Kosovo should design and carry out independent media literacy projects as well as looking for suitable media partners.

### FOR KOSOVO PARLIAMENT

- Kosovo Parliament should speed up procedures for amending the Law on the Independent Media Commission, and the Law on Radio Television of Kosovo, RTK.
- Kosovo Parliament should secure sufficient financial resources for the Independent Media Commission to be able to increase its oversight and monitoring of ethical compliance within audiovisual media.
- Specialised programmes should be organised for politicians and members of parliament in order to prepare them with the know-how on how to avoid spreading disinformation from parliamentary sessions.
- MPs within Kosovo Parliament should be supported in educating a wider audience, including their constituents, on disinformation and the consequences of it.



Figure 1. - Map of media disinformation in Kosovo based on Krypometer assessment

## Disinformation in Kosovo Context

Kosovo is a Balkan country with 1.7 million inhabitants. Some 90% of the population is Albanian, while 5% of the population is Serbian. The remaining 5% is composed of various ethnic groups, including Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, Turkish, Bosniaks, and Gorani. Kosovo contains 38 municipalities, of which 27 have an Albanian majority, ten have a Serb majority, and one has a Turkish majority.<sup>1</sup> Kosovo citizens' level of satisfaction with the performance of key institutions averages at 50%. According to the UNDP public opinion poll done on 10 of March 2023, the satisfaction with Albin Kurti's government is 44.9%, with the work of the Assembly at 39.1% and the President's office at 56.8%.<sup>2</sup>

Kosovo is a part of the Western Balkans which has been identified as vulnerable to disinformation by multiple studies.<sup>3</sup> These are the factors that contribute to Kosovo's vulnerability to disinformation:

- **External influences**
- **Fertile ground for interethnic conflicts**
- **Lack of media education**
- **Lack of capacities in Media Control Mechanisms**
- **Lack of knowledge and capacities of other institutions in the country to address the issue**

<sup>1</sup> Kosovo Statistics Agency, *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Kosovo 2022*, September 2022, page 30, <https://ask.rks-gov.net/en/kosovo-agency-of-statistics/add-news/statistical-yearbook-of-the-republic-of-kosovo-2022>

<sup>2</sup> UNDP, *Public Pulse 23*, Mar 10, 2023. <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/press-releases/undp-publishes-public-pulse-brief-23>

<sup>3</sup> *Vulnerability Index of Disinformation in Kosovo*, Democracy Plus, November 2022, <https://dplus.org/publikimet/indeksi-i-cenueshmerise-ndaj-dezinformimit-ne-kosove/15369/>, <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/monitoring-information-integrity-disorders-kosovo>, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2020/12/21/disinformation-in-the-western-balkans/index.html>

In February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence. More than 100 countries in the world have recognised Kosovo, however five EU countries have not.<sup>4</sup> Serbia does not recognise Kosovo's independence and continues to allocate financial resources and personnel to impede Kosovo, both internally through the establishment of parallel structures and externally by engaging in diplomatic efforts to dissuade other nations from recognising Kosovo's sovereignty. Additionally, Serbia has hindered Kosovo's potential membership in international organisations. The Albanian and Serbian communities continue to share very little and live in separate societies.

The two communities have thus far encountered challenges addressing war crimes and achieving reconciliation. Transitional justice initiatives have had limited success. Moreover, Albanian and Serbian populations remain divided about what happened during the war in Kosovo.

Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs continue to have different education systems. The Serbian community pursues their education within the framework of the Serbian government system<sup>5</sup> whereas the Albanian community structures their education within the Kosovo educational system. No school in either community teaches students the language of the other group. The divergence between the two communities extends beyond language. Neither side is familiar with the other's history and culture. The educational curriculum adopted by each community presents different narratives regarding the same historical events, and the cultural perspectives and values of the other community are not included in the curricula.

As a result, the two communities live in almost parallel environments where they are constantly exposed to narratives promoting deep distrust of the other. This produces people who are susceptible to disinformation.

Writing of this report coincided with important international, political, economic, and social developments in Kosovo, which impacted interethnic relations. Since 2011, Kosovo and Serbia have embarked on a dialogue focused on "the normalisation of their relations". Despite an ongoing dialogue that has lasted for over a decade, the actual implementation of agreements between the two countries has been limited. Only a quarter of the signed agreements have been effectively implemented.<sup>6</sup> Implementation of the agreements has sparked debates on various issues, including over car licence plates and the establishment of the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities.

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<sup>4</sup> Spain, Greece, Slovakia, Romania and Cyprus

<sup>5</sup> Although the Ahtisaari package that paved the way for Kosovo's independence permits the Serbs to use the curricula from Serbia, it still requires for this curricula to be in line with Kosovo constitution. See the 'Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement', Article 7, Acts 7.1.1 and 7.1.2 [http://www.unosek.org/docref/Comprehensive\\_proposal-english.pdf](http://www.unosek.org/docref/Comprehensive_proposal-english.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> BIRN was monitoring of agreements signed between Kosovo and Serbia with civil society organisations in Serbia and results of that monitoring can be found in BIG DEAL page in Prishtina Insight <https://prishtinainsight.com/reports/>

The Association is a particularly contentious issue amongst the Albanian public because of the fear that it will become an entity similar to Republika Srpska. According to the Dayton Agreement, power in Bosnia and Herzegovina is split between two autonomous entities (Bosnia Federation and Republika Srpska). The agreement also gave Bosnian Serbs real power at state level and veto in many strategic decisions. There is a fear among Kosovo public that Association of Serb-majority Municipalities could mirror Republika Srpska by threatening the central power of the state.

Moreover, disinformation regarding the potential outbreak of a new war between Serbia and Kosovo further fueled tensions. Serbian members of the institutions in the four northern municipalities, which are predominantly populated by Kosovo Serbs, submitted their resignations.<sup>7</sup> The historical, educational, linguistic, and cultural division that exists between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs also affects the media landscape. Following the war, monoethnic media outlets were established in Kosovo. They often report on issues related to only one community.

According to Ahtisaari's package<sup>8</sup> public television in Kosovo was intended to bridge this gap by establishing two channels, one in Albanian and another in Serbian, to provide media representation for both communities. The Serbian-language channel, RTK 2, was indeed established, but it has, to date, struggled to reach Serbian communities.

Public television in Kosovo (both Albanian and Serbian language channels) has failed to push for a licence fee or any such public financing that would ensure it becomes a media outlet that does not depend on state funds. Considering that private investment is limited, this has created a situation where most Serbian language media in Kosovo is largely dependent on financial support from Serbia, thus hindering its independence. The Albanian language media in Kosovo on the other hand has more diverse funding from private sources and international donors, which makes it more resilient and less reliant on state funding (only the public TV, RTK, relies on state funding). The treatment of disinformation poses considerable challenges, particularly concerning the efficiency of media regulatory bodies. The Independent Media Commission issues licences and oversees the implementation of the ethical code of audio-visual media, while Press Council of Kosovo treats online media through self-regulation. However, the functionality of the IMC has recently been hindered by the absence of a fully constituted board – and the government of Kosovo's refusal to appoint enough members to the IMC during several months in 2022/2023.

Consequently, IMC's ability to supervise the media in that period was limited, resulting in its failure to fulfil its legal obligation of regulating the media. As a consequence, the institution

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<sup>7</sup> "Kosovo: Serbs Agree to Dismantle Barricades After Talks," BBC News, December 29, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64117730>

<sup>8</sup> *Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement. United Nations Security Council Report. March 2007.* <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Kosovo%20S2007%20168.pdf>



has experienced prolonged periods where it is unable to make decisions. Furthermore, IMC's efforts are limited because it only employs a small number of monitors.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, PCK<sup>10</sup> has undertaken several initiatives to implement regulations and order within the online media market such as updating the press code and ethics with clearer instructions on how to deal with disinformation.<sup>11</sup>

The justice system also fails to properly handle breaches by the media. Research conducted by BIRN indicates that fewer than 10% of defamation cases have been adequately processed or resolved thus far.<sup>12</sup> The justice system has also mishandled copyright matters. BIRN's research indicates that some lawsuits pertaining to copyright issues have not been addressed by the courts.<sup>13</sup>

Kosovo's population is especially vulnerable to disinformation because of the country's weak education system. Kosovo's students scored lowly on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Test, which demonstrates that students in Kosovo lack critical thinking skills. Despite this, the government has not started drafting a strategy to address media education in schools.<sup>14</sup>

To address the gap with laws and agencies dealing with cybersecurity, the Assembly of Kosovo approved the Cybersecurity Law in early 2023. This bill establishes an agency to address the challenges related to cyber security.

The Media Literacy Index ranked Kosovo 39<sup>th</sup> of 41 countries in Europe.<sup>15</sup> While media literacy is low, Kosovo has a high rate of media use and internet penetration. In 2022, Kosovo had the greatest number of households in Europe with home-based Internet connectivity

<sup>9</sup> Independent Media Commission, *Annual work report for 2021 directed at the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo*, Page 9, 78, <https://www.kpm-ks.org/assets/cms/uploads/files/Komisioni%20i%20Pavarur%20i%20Mediave%20Raporti%20Vjetor%20i%20pun%C3%ABs%20s%C3%AB%20KPM-s%C3%AB%20p%C3%ABr%20vitin%202021.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Members of Press Council of Kosovo (Këshilli i mediave të shkruara të Kosovës - KMSHK) include Albanian, Serbian and Turkish media, namely, *Arberesh.info*, *Betimi për Drejtësi*, *Bota Sot*, *Botapress.info*, *Buletini Ekonomik*, *Ekonomia Online*, *Epoka e Re*, *Fakte Plus*, *Front Online*, *Gazeta Blic*, *Gazeta Express*, *Gracanica Online*, *Indeksonline*, *Infosot*, *InLajmi*, *Insajderi*, *Jeta në Kosovë*, *Kallxo.com*, *Katror.info*, *Koha Ditore*, *Kosova Info*, *Kosova Live*, *Kosova Post*, *Kosovapress*, *Kosovo 2.0*, *Kultplus*, *Lajmi.net*, *Motilokal.com*, *Nacionale*, *New Perspektiva*, *PaRrotlla*, *Periskopi*, *Portali Radio Kontakt Plus*, *Radio Gorazdevac*, *Radio Kosovska Mitrovica*, *Rajoni-Press*, *Reporter.net*, *Sbunker*, *Shqip.com*, *Sinjali*, *Sporti1*, *SuharekaOnline*, *Tan Haber*, *Telegrafi*, *Tribuna*, *Veriu.info*, *Zëri*.

<sup>11</sup> Press Council of Kosova. *Updated Press Code*, June 2022. [http://presscouncil-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/presscode\\_design\\_47x10.5\\_EN\\_May-2022.pdf](http://presscouncil-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/presscode_design_47x10.5_EN_May-2022.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> "Less than 10% of Defamation Cases Have Received Court Responses," (Më pak se 10% e padive për shpifje me përgjigje nga gjykata) *Kallxo*, April 24, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/gjate/analize/me-pak-se-10-e-padive-per-shpifje-me-pergjigje-nga-gjykata/>

<sup>13</sup> "Copyright filings, courts silent (Dosjet e heshtura të drejtave të autorit)", *Kallxo*, May 27, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/gjate/dosjet-e-heshtura-te-te-drejtave-te-autorit/>

<sup>14</sup> "PISA 2018 Kosovo Test Results (Rezultatet e Kosovës në testin PISA 2018)", *Kallxo*, December 3, 2019, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/dokument-rezultatet-e-kosoves-ne-testin-pisa-2018/>

<sup>15</sup> OSIS, *How It Started, How It is Going: Media Literacy Index 2022*, October 2022, p.9. [https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/HowItStarted\\_MediaLiteracyIndex2022\\_ENG\\_.pdf](https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/HowItStarted_MediaLiteracyIndex2022_ENG_.pdf)



(96%), according to Eurostat.<sup>16</sup> This percentage is the highest in the region and higher than the EU average (91%). The internet penetration rate is approximately 97%.<sup>17</sup> Online media and social media are among the main sources of information in addition to television, which is the most used and most trusted information source in Kosovo.<sup>18</sup> As of January 2022, there were 1.04 million social media users in Kosovo. Facebook is the most used social media with 869.2 thousand users.<sup>19</sup>

The widespread use of media and lack of media literacy provides a fertile ground for disinformation and misinformation. Earlier studies showed that much of the population in Kosovo cannot discern accurate information from false information.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, according to research by the Kosovo Press Council,<sup>21</sup> over 60% of online outlets publishing news content operate without editors or mechanisms for filtering content before publishing. This increases the possibility that inaccurate information is published online.

It is important to note media trends along with political and social processes. In 2022, the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index ranked Kosovo 61 out of 180 countries, 17 positions higher than in 2021.<sup>22</sup> This is the best ranking since 2009; however, it must be noted that the calculation method was changed in 2022. According to this 2022 Index, Kosovo ranks higher than its neighbouring countries, including Montenegro (63<sup>rd</sup>), Serbia (79<sup>th</sup>), and Albania (103<sup>rd</sup>), and some EU countries, including Bulgaria (91<sup>st</sup>) and Greece (108<sup>th</sup>).

Even though the nation's legal framework guarantees freedom of the press, Freedom House, an organisation that monitors press freedom around the world, notes that politicians and business interests influence Kosovo's media editorial stance.<sup>23</sup> The safety of journalists is another issue, especially since there was an increase in the number of attacks against journalists reporting in the north of Kosovo during 2022 and 2023 events.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>16</sup> "Basic figures on the Western Balkans and Turkey - Factsheets, 2022 Edition", Eurostat, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4031688/14589427/KS-05-22-089-EN-N.pdf/35508d49-956b-9f20-2c47-1b38636e38b6?t=1651049579047>

<sup>17</sup> "DataReportal, Kosovo Digital Report 2022", <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kosovo>

<sup>18</sup> "The role of the media in the perception of the Kosovo public about the war in Ukraine, research report, Prishtina, University of Prishtina, July 2022" ("Dren Gërguri et al., Roli i medieve në perceptimin e publikut të Kosovës për luftën në Ukrainë, raport hulumtues, Prishtinë, Universiteti i Prishtinës, korrik 2022; National Democratic Institute, Information Integrity in Kosovo: Assessment of the Political Economy of Disinformation, July 2022, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Information%20Integrity%20in%20Kosovo%20-%20Assessment%20of%20the%20Political%20Economy%20of%20Disinformation.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> DataReportal, Kosovo Digital Report 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kosovo>

<sup>20</sup> Gëzim Qerimi & Dren Gërguri, Infodemic and the Crisis of Distinguishing Disinformation from Accurate Information: Case Study on the Use of Facebook in Kosovo during COVID-19. *Information & Media*, 94, 2022.

<sup>21</sup> Qerim Ondozi, Misinformation, Disinformation and Fake News in Online Media in Kosovo, June 2022, [http://presscouncil-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Raporti\\_Keqinformimi\\_ENG\\_Final-2.pdf](http://presscouncil-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Raporti_Keqinformimi_ENG_Final-2.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> Reporters Without Borders, 2022 Press Freedom Index, <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

<sup>23</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2022: Kosovo. <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kosovo/freedom-world/2022>

<sup>24</sup> Reporters Sans Frontiers. After an increase in attacks on journalists in Kosovo, police and international forces asked to provide better protection. December 30th, 2022. <https://rsf.org/en/after-increase-attacks-journalists-kosovo-police-and-international-forces-asked-provide-better>

# Methodology

The research was conducted in 7 phases: A detailed description of the methodology is annexed to this report:

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## **1st** phase:

Identification of 41 keywords and automatic monitoring platforms;  
Identification and manual review of disinformation outside of the set keywords;

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## **2nd** phase:

Over 10,000 news/information identified based on the set keywords;  
Over 1,065 news/ information reviewed/analysed by Krypometër, BIRN's lie detector, as dubious content;

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## **3rd** phase:

Public opinion survey identified 12 disinformation narratives.

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## **4th** phase:

Social experiment was conducted which identified five institutional groups that are prone to believing disinformation: judges; prosecutors; teachers; social workers; doctors;

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## **5th** phase:

Organisation of five focus groups with stakeholder groups to measure their capacities to fight disinformation/not fall prone to disinformation with members of the Press Council of Kosovo; social media managers; security institutions officials; journalists and civil society organisations.

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## **6th** phase:

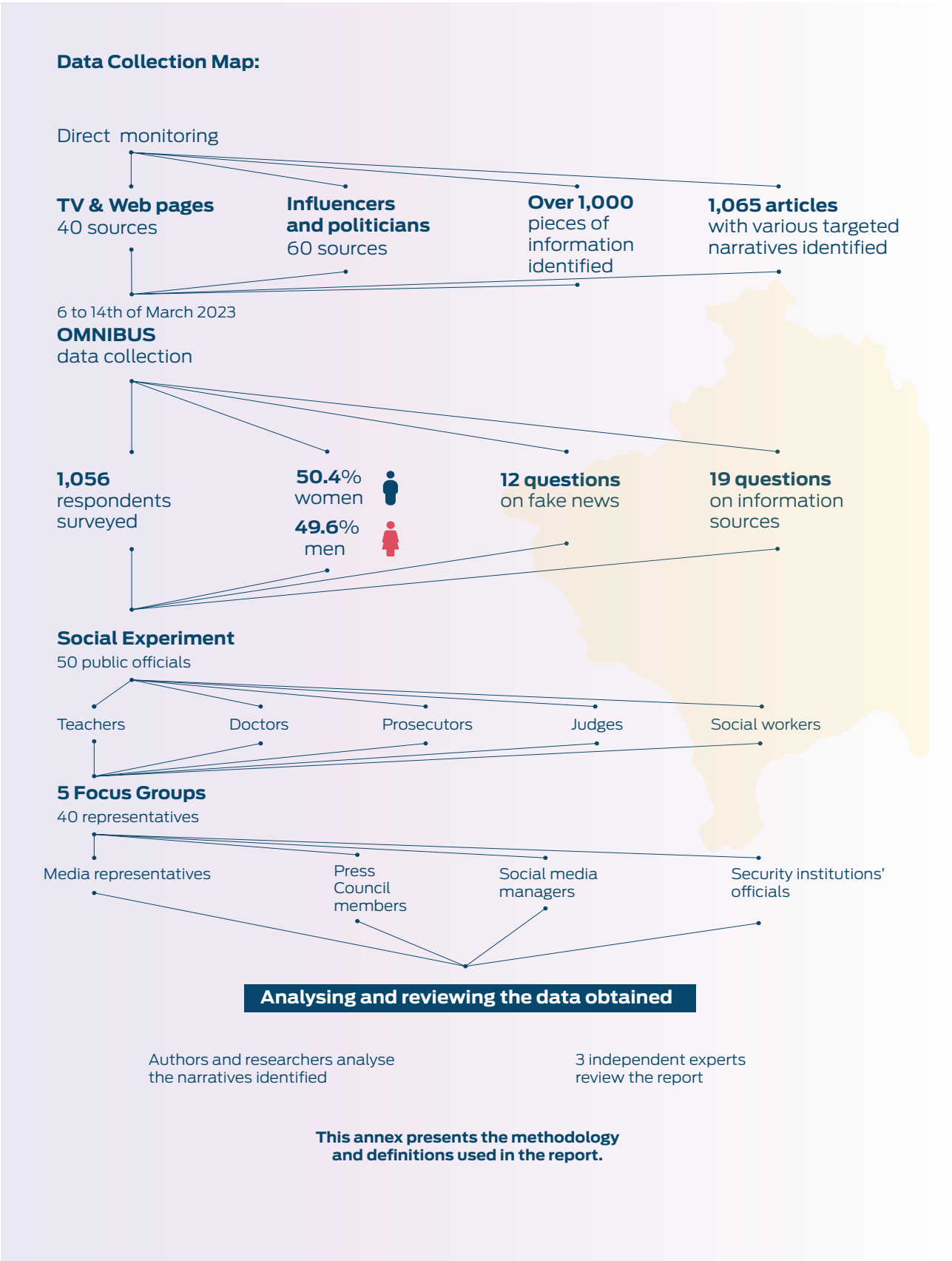
Analysing the data gathered and drafting the report.

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## **7th** phase:

Validating the data and information obtained with experts

Figure 2: Data Collection Map and methods used (detailed methodology enclosed as Annex I.



# I. Findings on foreign influence and anti-integration propaganda

The study found that between October 15, 2022, and March 15, 2023, Kosovo was affected by disinformation and foreign influence. Part of the study focused on identifying Russian and Chinese-influenced articles and how these were spread.

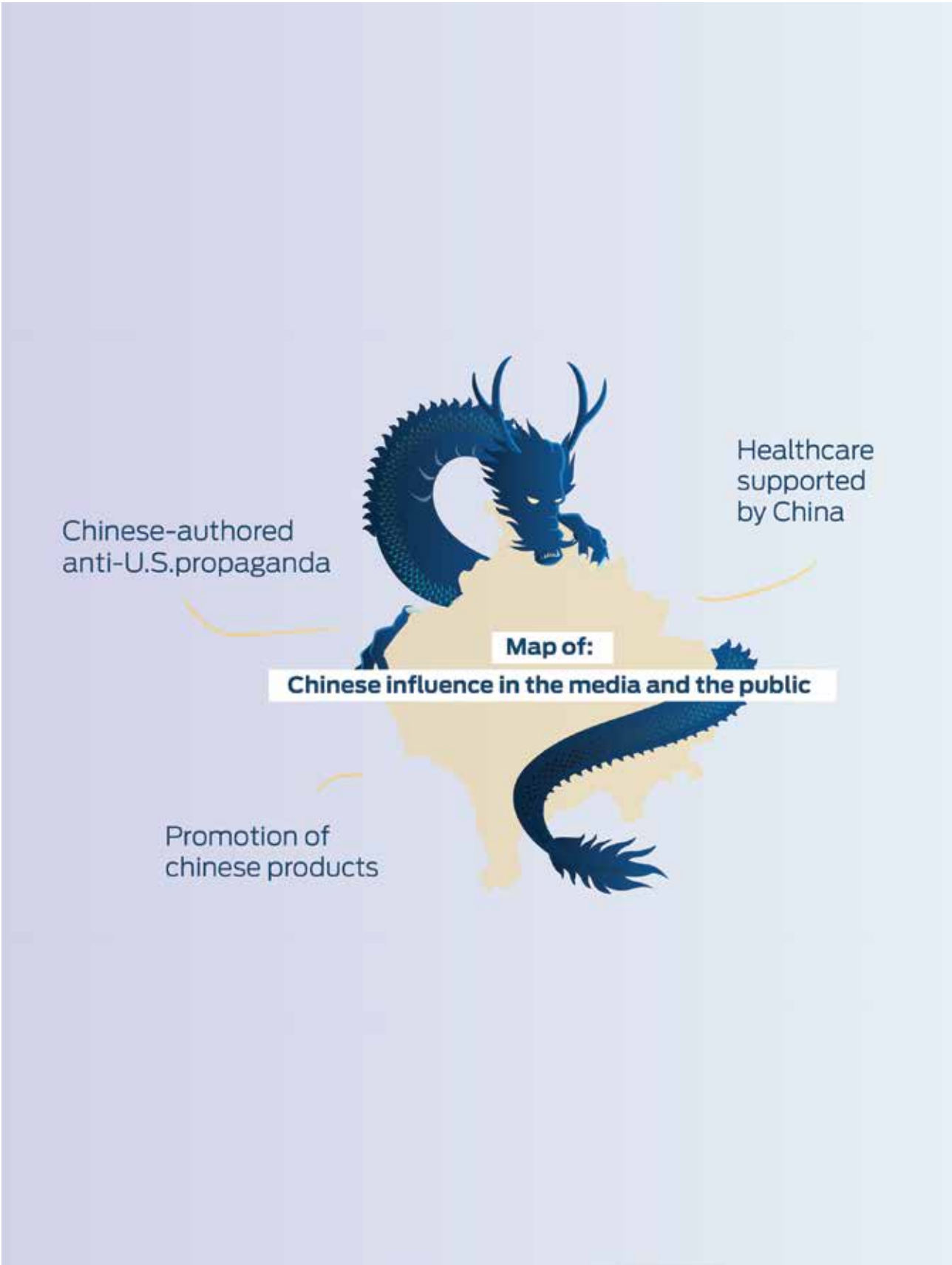
The study identified Russian disinformation centred on anti-NATO and anti-West narratives. The Kosovo-Serbia crisis was inflamed by statements of political leaders of both sides as well as Russian disinformation campaigns that promote narratives that divide communities. Data from monitoring, opinion polls, and social experiments show that Kosovo is directly affected by disinformation narratives about political security and Euro-Atlantic integration from Russia and Serbia.

Additionally, disinformation from China and Russia affected the economy and medical field during a period of inflation by inciting panic about market supply shortages. Politicians in Kosovo have expressed support for the Ukrainian government, while some local Kosovo Serbs have expressed support for Russia and its invasion of Ukraine. In Prishtinë/Priština, there was a massive show of support for Ukraine, while in areas such as North Mitrovica, graffiti with the letter Z supporting Putin appeared. In order to analyse the warmongering narratives that have fuelled tension in Kosovo, we have structured this part of the analysis into the following sub-narratives:

**Figure 3: Map of Foreign influence and anti-integration propaganda based on monitoring data**



Figure 4: Map of Chinese influence in the media and the public based on monitoring data



## 1.1 The Kremlin's warmongering disinformation narratives

BIRN identified various sources coming from Russia that influence propaganda and disinformation narratives about Kosovo.

Looming over the region is Russia. Russia vigorously opposed the 1999 NATO bombing campaign and it sought unsuccessfully to stop NATO membership expansion in the region. Also, as a Security Council member, it has blocked UN recognition of Kosovo's independence. Russia actively spreads its influence in the Balkans and is enormously influential in Serbia. This is the political context in which the disinformation narratives of Russia find a fertile ground to grow and reach Kosovo (not only Serbia).

Disinformation narratives spread through official Russian state webpages and pro-government media were started by President Vladimir Putin and echoed by other Russian senior officials.

One of the main Russian narratives about Kosovo aims at drawing a false equivalence between Kosovo and the Donbas and Luhansk regions in Ukraine. This narrative is anchored to the logic that Russia has the right to intervene in specific regions of Ukraine which can then secede, in a similar fashion to how NATO intervened in bombing Serbia, which resulted in an independent Kosovo.

Another false Kremlin narrative is that Kosovo Albanians are joining the Ukrainian army to fight against Russia. Lastly, the Kremlin also argues that the Kosovo Government plans an operation to expel Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo.

In March 2022, Putin had a conversation with Olaf Scholz, the Chancellor of Germany, during which he claimed Kosovo Albanians were joining the war in Ukraine, noting that "we are increasingly documenting the appearance of mercenaries from third countries, including Albania and Croatia, militants from Kosovo and even jihadists with experience in combat in Syria".<sup>25</sup> Kosovo institutions have denied this.<sup>26</sup>

In the Eastern Economic Forum plenary session on September 7, 2022, President Putin

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<sup>25</sup> Telephone conversation between President Vladimir Putin and Chancellor of Germany Olaf Scholz, March 4, 2022, President of Russia, Events, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67907>

<sup>26</sup> Kosova Press media agency. There are Kosovo citizens fighting in Ukraine. April 2022. <https://kosovapress.com/en/there-are-no-kosovo-citizens-fighting-in-ukraine/>

mentioned Kosovo again in the context of the secession of Donetsk and Luhansk from Ukraine<sup>27</sup>

“The UN Charter has a provision about the right of nations to self-determination. During the Kosovo crisis, the International Court of Justice ruled that if a portion of a territory, a portion of a country chooses to declare independence, it does not have to ask the central government of that country for permission. This was the case of Kosovo. Is the situation with the Donetsk Republic and the Luhansk Republic not the same? It is the same. Since they have this right – and they do have it in accordance with the UN Charter and the right to self-determination – they exercised it and declared independence. Do they have this right under international law and the UN Charter? They do, and this right is reiterated by the corresponding UN Court ruling in relation to Kosovo. It is a precedent.”<sup>28</sup>

Putin repeated this narrative on several other occasions.<sup>29</sup>

In addition, the Russian government repeated the narrative that Kosovo authorities planned to expel Kosovo Serbs from Kosovo.

On July 31, 2022, Maria Zakharova, the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry of Russia, said “a decision by the ‘authorities’ in Prishtina to start applying “unjustified discriminatory rules on forced re-issuance of personal documents and licence plates for local Kosovo Serbs from August 1 is another step towards expulsion of the Serbian population from Kosovo and ousting Kosovo Serbian institutions that protect the rights of Serbian residents from the arbitrary actions by Prishtina radicals led by ‘Prime Minister’ Albin Kurti. Kosovar leaders know that Serbs will not remain indifferent when it comes to a direct attack on their freedoms, and are deliberately aggravating the situation in order to launch a violent scenario”.<sup>30</sup> She further held the US and the EU accountable for these events.

Similar to this, in January 2023, Russia’s ambassador to Belgrade accused Albanians of attacking children and of coordinated attacks against Kosovo Serbs claiming that “radicals from Pristina, led by provincial “prime minister” Kurti, continue to incite serbophobia with the indulgence of westerners”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> *Eastern Economic Forum plenary session - Remarks by President Vlafimir Putin, September 7, 2022, President of Russia, Events, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69299>*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *St. Petersburg International Economic Forum Plenary session - Remarks by President Vladimir Putin, June 17, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/68669>*

<sup>30</sup> *Comment by Maria Zakharova, Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman, Official Facebook page, July 31, 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=364141262575607&set=a.225128283143573>*

<sup>31</sup> *Russian Embassy in Serbia (Посольство России в Сербии), Telegram Channel, January 9, 2023, <https://t.me/rusembserbia/239>*



The Russian narrative also connected the EU's engagement in the Balkans with the violent incidents in Kosovo. Zakharova, the Foreign Ministry spokesperson, said that “few people noticed that the situation in #Kosovo escalated RIGHT after the European Union held a summit in Albania, featuring the Western Balkan states”.<sup>32</sup>

Between October 2022 and January 2023, Russia conducted an extensive campaign to create distrust of NATO, the EU, and the US in Kosovo. The EU's platform on Russian disinformation highlights Russian-made narratives accusing NATO<sup>33</sup> and specific Western countries<sup>34</sup> of instigating a new war<sup>35</sup> in the north of Kosovo to harm Russia.

Media monitoring data show that media outlets in Kosovo republished Russian propaganda without any context, editing or other balancing point of views. BIRN research found articles in Albanian that were reproductions of disinformation originally published by the Russian media or that EU platforms have identified as Russian disinformation narratives.

Media monitoring data show that Russians spread propaganda that NATO and the West have carried out ethnic cleansings of Kosovo Serbs and that NATO is trying to incite a new conflict in Kosovo.<sup>36</sup> These narratives were identified by EUvsDisinfo.<sup>37</sup> On April 23, 2023, one day after the elections in the northern municipalities of Kosovo, Zakharova said that these elections showed “how dangerous Western policy is in the region, and that ethnic cleansing and discrimination cannot contribute to peace and reconciliation”.<sup>38</sup> The same narrative was published in Sputnik,<sup>39</sup> and reached Kosovo media (News 1 and 2).<sup>40</sup>

Her full declaration about the reality of the situation on the ground, no context or additional information, such as statements of the EU and US officials or the decision of Kosovo institutions to postpone the elections until the end of 2022, was added to the text to balance out the Kremlin's disinformation narrative. A post made by the Twitter profile of Russia in the

<sup>32</sup> Russian Foreign Ministry - МИД России - Facebook, December 18, 2022, Opinion by Maria #Zakharova

<sup>33</sup> “Kremlin ABC: Adapt, Focus, Blame Others, Cancel Events,” EU vs Disinfo, December 15, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/kremlin-abc-adapt-focus-blame-others-cancel-events/>

<sup>34</sup> “Joe Biden May Be Planning to Put Together a Team of Neocons to Find the Next Victim for the Pentagon to Try Out New Weapons Systems,” EU vs Disinfo, November 18, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/joe-biden-may-be-planning-to-put-together-a-team-of-neocons-to-find-the-next-victim-for-the-pentagon-to-try-out-new-weapons-systems>

<sup>35</sup> “NATO Escalated the Situation in Kosovo to Distract Russia from Ukraine,” EU vs Disinfo, December 12, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-escalated-the-situation-in-kosovo-to-distract-russia-from-ukraine>

<sup>36</sup> “NATO Decided to Invade the Serbian Enclave of Mitrovica to Punish Belgrade,” EU vs Disinfo, December 13, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-decided-to-invade-the-serbian-enclave-of-mitrovica-to-punish-belgrade>

<sup>37</sup> “Disinformation Cases,” EU vs Disinfo, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=NATO%2C%20Kosovo&date=&orderby=date>

<sup>38</sup> Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova Gives Weekly Briefing, Youtube Video, Timestamp: 1:15:47, April 27, 2023, <https://youtu.be/eCTBAIGezbQ?t=4547>

<sup>39</sup> “The West is an Accomplice of the Ethnic Cleansing of Serbs in Kosovo,” EU vs Disinfo, December 19, 2023 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-west-is-an-accomplice-of-the-ethnic-cleansing-of-serbs-in-kosovo>

<sup>40</sup> <https://nacionale.com/politike/zaharova-serbet-e-kosoves-kane-treguar-dinjitet-kombetar-duk-mos-marre-pjese-ne-zgjedhje> & <https://gazetablic.com/rusia-per-zgjedhjet-ne-veri-te-kosoves-serbet-refuzuan-pjesemarrjen-treguan-dinjitet-dhe-unitet/>



UN<sup>41</sup> and the press release issued by the party Srpska Lista promoted the same claims.

In one of the Russian disinformation narratives identified by EUvsDisinfo, Russian propaganda states that the presence of KFOR in the north “is a constant danger to the population” and that “NATO, just as it has acted in other countries of the world, can also make up a reason to attack Kosovo Serbs”.<sup>42</sup> The same narrative was published by at least 18 Albanian language<sup>43</sup> media and received 63 interactions.<sup>44</sup> This narrative was repeated by non-Russian sources.

The President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, cast doubt on KFOR’s ability to guarantee the security and safety of Kosovo Serbs, prompting a broad campaign against KFOR. This narrative was used in 2019<sup>45</sup> and in 2023.<sup>46</sup> Serbia’s narrative that KFOR is not keeping Kosovo Serbs safe was used by Vučić, president of Serbia to request that the Serbian army be allowed to return to Kosovo.<sup>47</sup> This request for the return of the Serbian army to Kosovo was preceded by several other events. Initially, on November 5, 2022, Kosovo Serbs resigned from all public institutions in the municipalities of Leposaviq/Leposavić, Zubin Potok/Zubin-Potok, Zvečan/Zvečan and Mitrovicë e Veriut/Severna Mitrovica (North Mitrovica). The resignation left a large gap in the police, judicial authorities and civilian presence in the area.

On December 11, 2022, Goran Rakić, the head of the Srpska Lista’s party, warned Kosovo Serbs that an operation similar to Operation ‘Storm’ (Oluja), which took place in Croatia in 1995,<sup>48</sup> was about to take place in Kosovo. Operation Storm (Operacija Oluja in Croatian) was a Croatian military offensive aimed at retaking areas of the Republic of Croatia which had been occupied by rebel Serb forces. The operation led to a significant number of civilian casualties and sparked a mass exodus of Serbs from the region. Serbs perceive Operation Storm as an ethnic cleansing event, marked by widespread civilian displacement and human rights violations including killings. Conversely, many Croats view it as a necessary military operation for the restoration of Croatia’s territorial integrity during the Croatian War of Independence.

<sup>41</sup> RussiaUN, Twitter post, April 21, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RussiaUN/status/1516902544412483588>

<sup>42</sup> “Having NATO in Kosovo is a Risk for the Population as the West is Expert in Creating Conflict,” EU vs Disinfo, January 9, 2023, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/having-nato-in-kosovo-is-a-risk-for-the-population-as-the-west-is-expert-in-creating-conflict>

<sup>43</sup> “Vučić like Putin: The survival of Serbs in Kosovo is at risk” (Vuciq si Putini: Po rrezikohet mbijetesa e serbeve në Kosovë), BotaPress, October 27, 2022, <https://botapress.info/vuciq-si-putini-po-rrezikohet-mbijetesa-e-serbeve-ne-kosove/>

<sup>44</sup> “Data from CrowdTangle”, accessed at <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/auth?view=3>

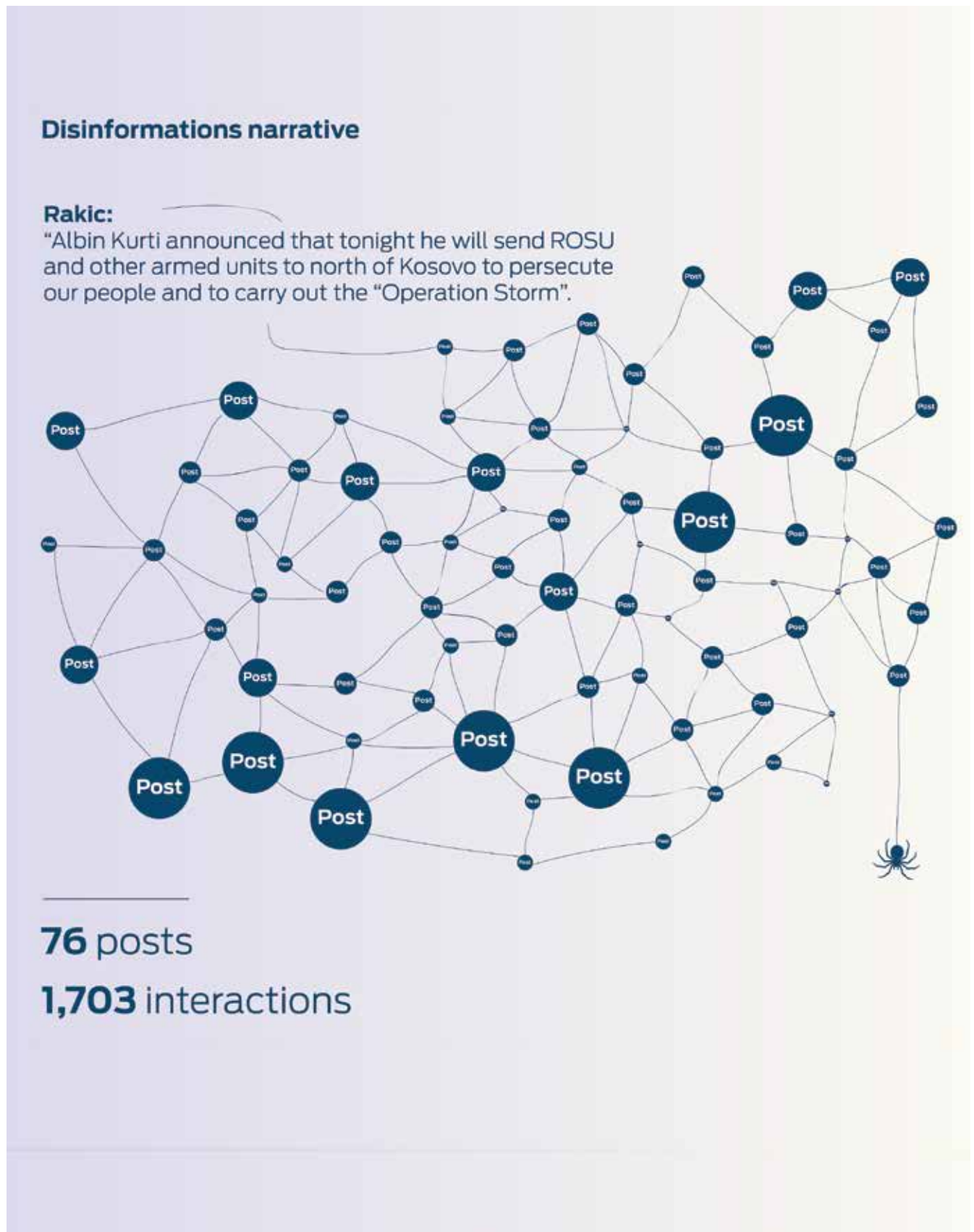
<sup>45</sup> Vučić: If KFOR does not protect the serbs, there is someone who will” (Vuciq: Nëse KFOR-i s’i mbron serbët, ka kush ta bëjë këtë); Insajderi, March 2019, <https://insajderi.com/vuciq-nese-kfor-i-si-mbron-serbet-ka-kush-ta-beje-kete/>

<sup>46</sup> “Serbia initiates a request to KFOR for the return of soldiers and police to Kosovo” (Serbia nis kërkesë te KFOR-i për kthimin e ushtarëve dhe policëve në Kosovë); Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 15, 2022, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/vuciq-kfor-kosova-/32178648.html>

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> “Goran Rakić’s false warning for ‘Oluja’ operation” (Paralajmërimi i Rremë i Goran Rakiqit për Operacionin ‘Oluja’); Kallxo, December 11, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/paralajmerimi-i-rreme-i-goran-rakiqit-per-operacionin-oluja/>

Figure 5: Illustration of narrative dissemination



Rakić's statement was not based on facts, but it was republished in Serbian<sup>49</sup> and Albanian<sup>50</sup> language media. His statement was published 75 times on Facebook pages and received 1.7K interactions (likes, comments, shares, tags etc). Rakić's statement followed Vučić's request to NATO that demanded the return of 1,000 Serbian soldiers to Kosovo<sup>51</sup>. Vučić declared that "the 4,000-strong international peacekeeping force, known as KFOR, has been unable to maintain calm in the ethnic-Serb regions of northern Kosovo and that his government will make its request as early as next week"<sup>52</sup>.

Three weeks passed between the time when the Serbian Government submitted its request to send 1,000 troops to Kosovo (December 15, 2022)<sup>53</sup> and the time when NATO decided to answer (January 6, 2023).<sup>54</sup> In this three week period, 307 articles on social media about the readiness of Serbia's army to enter Kosovo were published. These 307 articles received 10,500 interactions on social media<sup>55</sup>. Two Facebook profiles published news claiming Aleksandar Vučić had a plan to spark unrest. The fact checking mechanism Krypometer found this to be false,<sup>56</sup> but the information was still published on ten Facebook pages and received 20 interactions.

On the other hand, the government of Kosovo was pushing another narrative months prior to the crisis in the north. This narrative was trying to blame Russia and Vucic leadership for all of Kosovo's problems with Serbia. In an August 2022 interview, Albin Kurti, the country's Prime Minister, declared: "We risk war. Putin is behind Serbia. I would not say that [the] risk is very high, because we have a NATO contingent here, but it is certainly high. We are a democracy that is surrounded by an autocracy (neighbouring countries)".<sup>57</sup>

In addition, in December 2022, Kosovo's government claimed to have discovered a Russian plan to heighten tension. Besnik Bislimi, deputy Prime Minister, said on Decem-

<sup>49</sup> "Bursts of fire and detonation were heard, schools in the north of the Republic of Kosovo will not be open from tomorrow (Чуле се рафална палба и детонација, школе на северу КуМ од сутра неће радити)", Radio Television of Serbia (RTS), December 11, 2022, <https://www.rts.rs/vesti/politika/5051638/sever-kosovo-i-metohija-barikade.html>

<sup>50</sup> "Rakić: Kurti will send ROSU and armed units to the north of Kosovo tonight (Rakić: Sonte Kurti do dërgojë Rosu në dhe njësi të armatosura në veri të Kosovës)" InLajmi, December 11, 2022, <https://inlajmi.com/2022/12/11/rakiq-sonte-kurti-do-dergoje-rosu-ne-dhe-njesi-te-armatosura-ne-veri-te-kosoves/>

<sup>51</sup> "Serbia Will Ask KFOR For Permission To Intervene In Kosovo, Vučić Says", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, December 10, 2022, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-tensions-pm-comment/32170704.html>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> "Serbia initiates a request to KFOR for the return of soldiers and police to Kosovo" (Serbia nis kërkesë të KFOR-i për kthimin e ushtarëve dhe policëve në Kosovë)," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 2022, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/vuciq-kfor-kosova-/32178648.html>

<sup>54</sup> "Serbian request to deploy troops in kosovo denied by NATO", Politico January 8 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-denies-serbia-request-deploy-military-kosovo-aleksandar-vucic/>

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

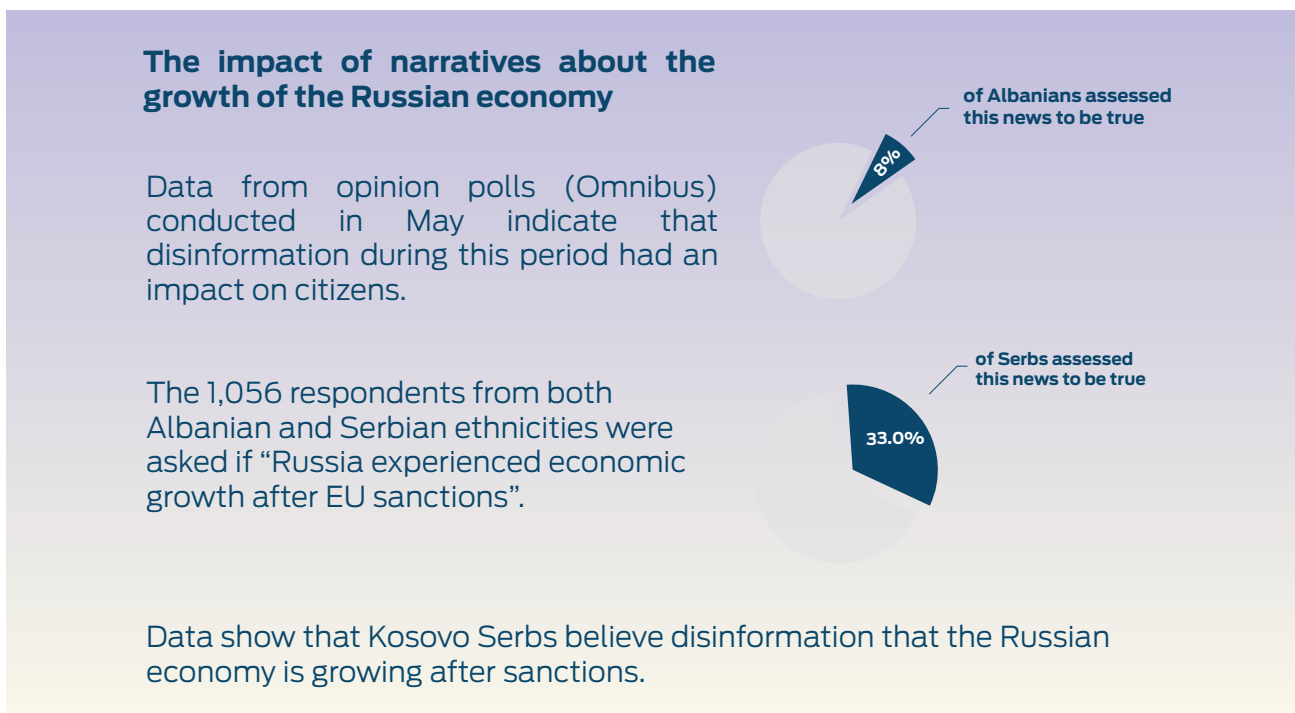
<sup>56</sup> "A title not based on facts about Vučić's scenario for the north" (Titull i Pambështetur në Fakte për Skenarin e Vuçiqit për Veriun,) Kallxo, December 28, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titull-i-pambeshtetur-ne-fakte-per-skenarin-e-vuciqit-per-veriun/>

<sup>57</sup> "Kosovo, il premier Kurti: "Rischiemo la guerra. Dietro la Serbia c'è Putin", la Repubblica, 17/08/22 [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/08/08/news/kosovo\\_serbia\\_tensioni\\_confine\\_premier\\_albin\\_kurti-36077797/?ref=search](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/08/08/news/kosovo_serbia_tensioni_confine_premier_albin_kurti-36077797/?ref=search)

ber 19, 2022, that there was a Russian plan to burn down the northern border crossing in Jarinje.<sup>58</sup> This was never confirmed. Jeton Zulfaj, advisor of Prime Minister Kurti said that Kosovo government decided not to remove the barricades violently because “Russian groups that wanted to escalate the situation were infiltrated in the area”.<sup>59</sup>

In general, there were two contrasting narratives. Kosovo public officials said that protestors who set up the barricades were Russian-linked criminal gangs, while international diplomats in Kosovo concluded that the activities at the barricades in the north were peaceful activities. However, EULEX confirmed that armed people were seen at the barricades. In a joint statement, the US and the EU welcomed assurances from Kosovo’s leadership confirming that there are no lists for arresting Serbian citizens or prosecuting those protesting peacefully or setting up barricades.<sup>60</sup> Tensions began to decrease after the start of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia in Brussels and Ohrid in February and March this year.

Figure 6: The impact of narratives about the growth of the Russian economy according to one Omnibus survey



<sup>58</sup> “Besnik Bislimi: The plan was to burn down border points (Besnik Bislimi: Plani ishte të digjej pika kufitare e Jarinjës)”, Kallxo, December 19, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/besnik-bislimi-plani-ishte-te-digjej-pika-kufitare-e-jarinjes/>

<sup>59</sup> “Kurti’s advisor on barricades: Chance of escalation was existent (Këshilltari i Kurtit për barrikatad: Ekzistonte mundësia e eskalimit të situatës)”, Koha, December 30, 2022, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/359353/keshilltari-i-kurtit-per-barrikatad-ekzistonte-mundesia-e-eskalimit-te-situates/>

<sup>60</sup> “Barricades in the north removed (Hiqen barrikatad në veri)”, Radio Free Europe, December 29, 2022, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/largimi-barrikatad-veri-/32198958.html>

## 1.2 The disinformation narrative that NATO and the West support only Albanians

In addition to the Russian narrative that the EU and NATO are provoking a new conflict in Mitrovica, the arrest of Dejan Pantić, former police officer with the Kosovo Police on December 10, 2022, initiated a barricade crisis and the launch of a media campaign which portrayed NATO soldiers as aggressors in the municipalities in the north of Kosovo and collaborators with Kosovo special police.

This chapter lists the negative portrayal of KFOR in the Serbian-language media, which are largely based in Belgrade and are an important source of information for Kosovo Serbs.

On 7th of December 2022, the Kosovo Serb portal<sup>61</sup> reported that a US KFOR patrol had entered the yard of a nursery in Leposaviq/Leposavić where 300 children slept. It was published without comment from KFOR. The story was republished in another media in Serbia under the fake headline such as: “Unrest in Kosovo, Leposavic under siege: KFOR and ROSU. They entered the nursery while the children were asleep! upsetting the citizens. This republication in Serbia is published without KFOR comment on the incident, probably because it is copied from the initial Kosovo serb portal that did not have the KFOR comment when it was initially republished in Serbia.”<sup>62</sup> It was republished in various media in Serbia, as well.<sup>63</sup> This information was portrayed as an attack on children.<sup>64</sup>

However, KFOR explained that its soldiers had entered the yard to turn its vehicles around because they had missed a turning<sup>65</sup>. After these events, tensions remained high and right-wing and ethnonationalist groups held a protest near Leposaviq/Leposavić on December 18, 2022. A few hours before the protest, the media portrayed this as a crisis situation. Serbian language media also reported information British KFOR was asking the citizens if

<sup>61</sup> Kosovo Online: KFOR: Naša patrola slučajno ušla u dvorište vrtića u Leposaviću (Our patrol has entered the yard of the kindergarten in Leposavic), Kosovo Online 7 December 2022, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/kfor-nasa-patrola-slucajno-usla-u-dvoriste-vrtica-u-leposavicu-7-12-2022>

<sup>62</sup> “KURTI UDARIO I NA DECU! ROSU upao u dvorište vrtića u Leposaviću, specijalci naoružani do zuba, dok mališani spavaju! (FOTO/VIDEO) (KURTI HIT ON THE CHILDREN TOO! ROSU broke into the yard of a kindergarten in Leposavic, special forces armed to the teeth, while the little ones were sleeping! (PHOTO/VIDEO)”, Alo.rs, December 8, 2022, <https://www.alo.rs/vesti/kim/701052/kosovo-vrtic-policija-leposavic/vest>

<sup>63</sup> NOVA DRAMA NA KOSMETU: ROSU naoružana do zuba bornim kolima upala u dvorište vrtića u Leposaviću dok su deca spavala (VIDEO). Kurir.rs. December 8, 2022. <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/4066318/rosu-bornim-kolima-upala-u-dvoriste-obdanista-u-leposavicu-video>

<sup>64</sup> “DŽIPOVI KFORA UPALI U DVORIŠTE VRTIĆA DOK SU DECA SPAVALA! Nisu hteli da razgovaraju, vaspitačice preplašene (KFOR JEEPS BROKE INTO THE YARD OF A KINDERGARTEN WHILE THE CHILDREN WERE SLEEPING! They didn't want to talk, the teachers were scared)”, Mondo.rs, December 7, 2022, <https://mondo.rs/Info/Srbija/a1721896/Kfor-upao-u-dvoriste-vrtica-u-Leposavicu.html>; “KFOR uleteo u vrtić u Leposaviću, u njemu bilo 300 dece (KFOR stormed into a kindergarten in Leposavic, where there were 300 children)”, Telegraf.rs, December 7, 2022, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/srbija/3597019-kfor-uleteo-u-vrtic-u-leposavici-u-njemu-bilo-300-dece>; “KFOR u dvorištu vrtića u Leposaviću naoružani automatskim puškama vršljali dok su djeca spavala (FOTO) (KFOR in the yard of the kindergarten in Leposavic, loomed armed with automatic rifles, while the children were sleeping)”, Večernje Novosti, December 7, 2022, <https://vecernjenovosti.ba/132086/vijesti/srbija/kfor-u-dvoristu-vrtica-u-leposavicu-naoruzani-automatskim-puskama-vrsljali-dok-su-djeca-spavala-foto/>.

<sup>65</sup> NATO KFOR Press Release, “KFOR vehicles entering the parking of a kindergarten”, Email to BIRN Kosova, December 7, 2022



they were going to the protests, thus casting doubt on KFOR's role.<sup>66</sup>

On November 26, 2022, the Albanian-language Bota Sot newspaper published an article supposedly revealing how Vučić intended to start a war with NATO and 'the horror that Serbia will experience if it does not recognise Kosovo'. The news was reported to be fake, according to Kallxo fact-checking. It aimed to create panic and misperception that Serbia was going to war with NATO.

Another article published on December 26, 2022, falsely claimed that the US reacted against Serbs after an attack on journalists in the north of Kosovo.<sup>67</sup> When a couple of journalists were attacked in the north, the US ambassador tweeted a condemnation of the attack and called for journalists to be protected from threats and attacks, but did not mention or blame an ethnicity.

During December 2022, in addition to new disinformation, older disinformation was also recycled, republished and reshared. News regarding the US threatening Serbia in response to any threat to the territory of Kosovo, which was originally published in February 2022, resurfaced and was published by 49 Facebook pages, generating 1,338 interactions on Facebook<sup>68</sup>.

Another false narrative that was identified during the tensions in the north of Kosovo was information that Albania, a NATO member, would send 500 police officers to Kosovo.<sup>69</sup> This was heightened by a story that Albanian soldiers were seen patrolling in the north of Kosovo. More than 30 soldiers from Albania are engaged in the KFOR mission, and KFOR informed citizens that these were standard NATO patrols.<sup>70</sup>

Disinformation was produced on other platforms as well, especially about elections in North Mitrovica.<sup>71</sup> Our fact-checker Krypometer found that a portal published an article deceptively titled: "The deputy head of NATO 'terrifies' Serbia: If stability in the north is

<sup>66</sup> "KFOR installs barbed wire in Jarinja while in Leshka they ask for today's rally" (Kfor tela me gjëmba në Jarinjë, në Leshkë pyesin për tubimin e sotëm,) Kosovo Online, December 18, 2022, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/sq/lajm/politike/kfor-tela-me-gjembera-ne-jarinje-ne-leshke-pyesin-tubimin-e-sotem-18-12-2022>

<sup>67</sup> "Fake reporting that United States' reaction was against serbs (Rrena se reagimi i SHBA se ishte kundër Serbëve)", Kallxo (Krypometer), December 28, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-reagimi-i-shba-se-ishte-kunder-serbeve/>

<sup>68</sup> Lexo.Sot Facebook page. <https://www.facebook.com/lexo.sot/posts/pfbid028T6zwpUKDQTW8iz7hFnU1p5UpTdgdnYE63LjpDogHTP-vdcjtiavc5bWGBX7GzLrl>

<sup>69</sup> "The lie that Albania will send 500 police officers in Kosovo" (Rrena se Shqipëria do të dërgojë 500 policë në Kosovë,) Kallxo (Krypometer), December 21, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-shqiperia-do-ti-dergoje-500-police-ne-kosove>

<sup>70</sup> "KFOR clarifies why the Albanian soldiers went to the north of Kosovo" (KFOR-i sqaron pse ushtarët shqiptarë shkuan në veri të Mitrovicës,) Telegrafi, April 4, 2019, <https://telegrafi.com/kfor-gjendja-ne-veri-nen-kontroll-nuk-ka-deshmi-per-trazira/>

<sup>71</sup> "The false headline that an alert has been raised in Belgrade regarding the elections in North Mitrovica" (Titulli i Rremë se në Beograd është Ngritur Alarm për Zgjedhjet në Mitrovicë të Veriut,) Kallxo, December 17, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-ne-beograd-eshte-ngritur-alarm-per-zgjedhjet-ne-mitrovice-te-veriut>

threatened, KFOR is ready to intervene.” Another article with false content<sup>72</sup> was published on todaynews80.com, titled: A statement from KFOR Commander! We will not leave Kosovo until Serbia recognizes its Independence!<sup>73</sup> This text was republished 15 times on portals and social networks.

A different article falsely<sup>74</sup> said: “USA and NATO terrify Vučić! “Serbia signs its capitulation”.<sup>75</sup>

Simultaneously, propaganda narratives falsely blaming the EU for the situation in the north of Kosovo were circulating. Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, said in December that the situation is “on the verge of war” due to the actions of Kosovo and the “inaction” of the EU.<sup>76</sup> Zakharova also compared Kosovo to South Ossetia. On Telegram Zakharova wrote: “We have already noticed something similar in 2008, when Mishko Saakashvili, inspired by the decisions of the NATO summit in Bucharest (that Georgia was going to join the Alliance), went crazy and started bombing South Ossetia, Russian citizens, and peacekeepers. A proven mechanism of inspired impunity.

The risk of escalation and armed confrontation in the northern part of the territory is increasing. Therefore, instead of a European perspective, Kosovo’s perspectives, it seems, will be completely different.”<sup>77</sup> This was published in at least three Albanian language media without context or balance of other point of views.<sup>78</sup>

Kosovo Serbs organised a protest near the border point in Jarinjë on December 15, 2022. Data show that Russia Today<sup>79</sup> reported on the protest and there were arrests of protesters attempting to enter into Kosovo.<sup>80</sup> The government of Kosovo claimed that there had been a Russian plan in mid-December to burn down the border point in Jarinjë.<sup>81</sup> Some days before

<sup>72</sup> “Another false headline regarding the statements of NATO’s Secretary General in Serbia in 2008” (Një Tjetër Titull i Rremë për Deklaratat e Shefit të NATO-s në Serbi më 2018,) Kallxo, July 29, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/nje-tjeter-titull-i-rreme-per-deklaratat-e-shefit-te-nato-s-ne-serbi-me-2018>

<sup>73</sup> “KFOR Commander with a statement: We will not leave Kosovo until Serbia recognizes the independence” (Komandanti i KFOR-it me Deklaratë: Kosovën nuk do ta Lëshojmë deri sa Serbia të pranojë Pavarësinë,) Lajme.icu, <https://lajme.icu/komandanti-i-kfor-it-me-deklarate-kosoven-nuk-do-ta-ieshojme-deri-sa-serbia-te-pranoj-pavaresine-3>

<sup>74</sup> “The false headline that US and NATO terrify Vučić and that Serbia signs the capitulation” (Titulli i Rremë se SHBA e NATO tmerrojnë Vuçiqin dhe se Serbia Nënshkruan Kapitullimin,) Kallxo, October 13, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-shba-e-nato-tmerrojne-vuciqin-dhe-se-serbia-nenshkruan-kapitullimin>

<sup>75</sup> Post Lajmee, Facebook post, October 8, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100064549185694/posts/471726831655619>

<sup>76</sup> “Russia blames the EU for the situation in the north of Kosovo” (Situata në veri të Kosovës, Rusia e fajëson BE-në,) Zeri, December 12 2022, <https://zeri.info/aktuale/473856/situata-ne-veri-te-kosoves-rusia-e-fajeson-be-ne/>

<sup>77</sup> “Russia blames Tirana for the tensions in the north of Kosovo” (Tensionet në veri të Kosovës, Rusia fajëson Tiranën,) Sot.com.al, December 18, 2022, <https://sot.com.al/bota/tensionet-ne-veri-te-kosoves-rusia-fajeson-tiranen-i556829>

<sup>78</sup> “Data from CrowdTangle”, accessed at <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/auth?view=3>

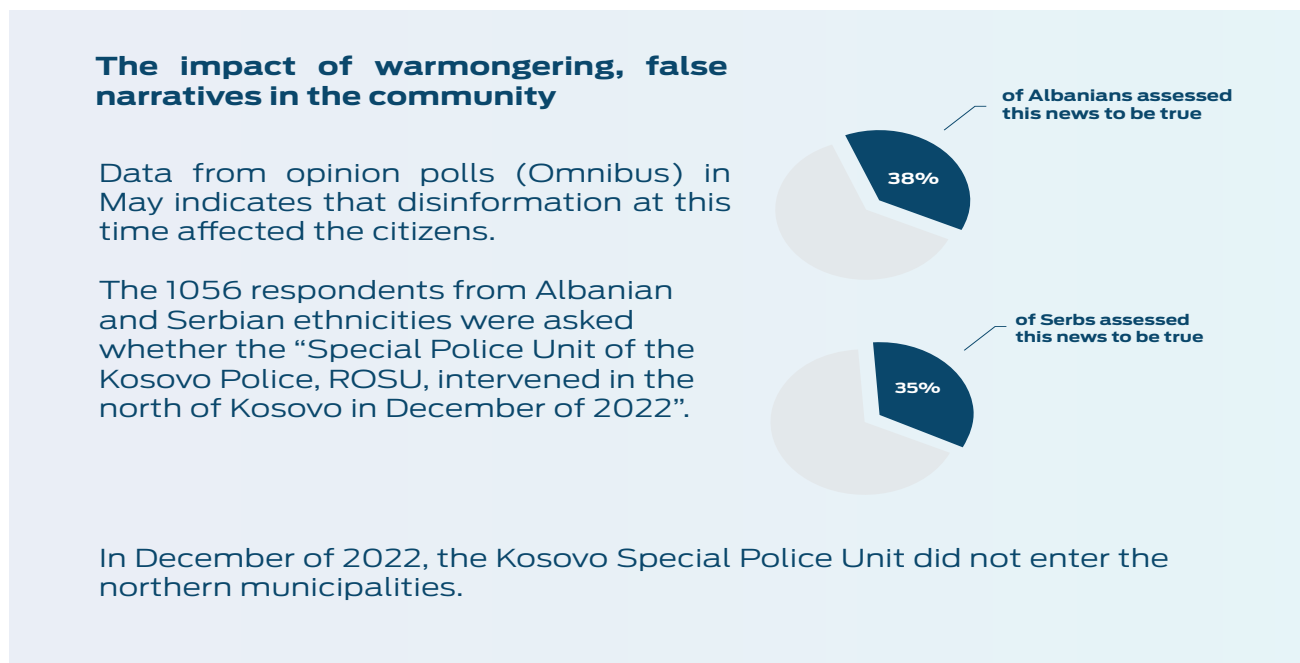
<sup>79</sup> “The developments in Jarinjë” (Zhvillimet në Jarinjë,) Kallxo, December 18, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/zhvillimet-ne-jarinje>

<sup>80</sup> Kallxo.com, Facebook video, December 18, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=external&v=1609655969498356>

<sup>81</sup> “Besnik Bislimi: The plan was to burn down the Jarinja border point” (Besnik Bislimi: Plani ishte të digjej pika kufitare e Jarinjës,) Kallxo, December 19, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/besnik-bislimi-plani-ishte-te-digjej-pika-kufitare-e-jarinjes>

the protest, KFOR increased their presence in Jarinje because of their concern that there were dangerous criminal groups amid protesters.<sup>82</sup> Tensions in this area remained high. Prime Minister Albin Kurti was putting pressure on KFOR to move the barricades, warning that if KFOR would not remove the barricades, Kosovo institutions would, thus risking a confrontation.

**Figure 7: The impact of warmongering, false narratives in the community based on data collected through Omnibus survey**



### 1.3 Narratives that NATO and the West support Serbs<sup>83</sup>

When the NATO Mission in Kosovo refused to transport Dejan Pantić by helicopter, the Albanian-language media created a new narrative, which aimed to create division between Kosovo’s institutions and NATO.

Dimal Basha, a member of parliament wrote on Facebook that: “After 15 days, KFOR said that a dialogue is needed with the Radoičić<sup>84</sup> gang to unblock the barricades.” Considering that Radoičić is a Serbian politician put on a US blacklist for his criminal dealings, this suggested that KFOR was negotiating with criminals. This message was republished in 11 articles and garnered 659 reactions. In reality, KFOR never stated that it needed to speak with Radoičić. Instead, they said that the removal of the barricades must be organised

<sup>82</sup> “KFOR increases the presence of troops in the north of Kosovo” (KFOR-i shton prezencën me trupa në veri të Kosovës,) Deutsche Welle, December 19, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/sq/kfor-i-shton-prezenc%C3%ABn-me-trupa-n%C3%AB-veri-t%C3%AB-kosov%C3%ABs/a-64145284>

<sup>83</sup> “Kfor to protect Serbs (Kfor da zaštiti Srbe)”, FoNet, December 20, 2022, <https://fonet.rs/politika/36240983/kfor-da-zastiti-srbe.html>

<sup>84</sup> Milan Radojic is a black listed politician from north of Kosovo, <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/12/09/kosovo-serbs-close-to-serbias-rulers-join-us-blacklist/>



“through dialogue”, not specifying with whom.<sup>85</sup>

There were also public<sup>86</sup> denouncements and accusations that KFOR did not help the government of Kosovo remove the barricades. Artan Abrashi, another Vetëvendosje MP, posted to Facebook about KFOR writing: “It’s been 11 days that some roads in the north of Kosovo are blocked by barricades. KFOR is yet to respond... The US and the EU have requested the removal of the barricades”.<sup>87</sup> This post received 201 reactions. The information was incomplete because two days earlier KFOR<sup>88</sup> carried out operations to ensure security at the border crossing in Jarinje and increased military presence in that area. The EU and the US also requested the removal of the barricades to be carried out through dialogue.

The narrative that KFOR wanted to meet with criminal groups in the north and was not cooperating with Kosovo’s institutions was followed by calls that Kosovo should not continue to be dependent on KFOR. In January 2023, a few weeks after tensions in the north subsided, MP Dimal Basha declared that Kosovo should buy a helicopter and end its dependency on KFOR.<sup>89</sup> This statement was published in 13 media and received 307 interactions.<sup>90</sup> Kosovo’s airspace is controlled by KFOR, including permits for the use of drones, despite repeated requests for this to be handed over to Kosovo authorities. Fundraising initiatives were launched to raise money to buy a helicopter for Kosovo’s institutions.

Another anti-KFOR and anti-NATO narrative claimed that Serbia’s membership in NATO would have consequences for Kosovo. An article titled “Waiting for KFOR, comes the warning: If it happens, Kosovo will go to war with Serbian soldiers” suggested that if Serbia joins NATO it could send soldiers to the KFOR mission, which would start a war between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs.<sup>91</sup> This narrative portrays Serbia’s potential NATO membership as a danger to Kosovo.

<sup>85</sup> “The KFOR commander on the situation in the north: Avoid the provocation of force, the solution should be achieved through dialogue” (Komandanti i KFOR për gjendjen në veri: Të shmangët shfaqja provokuese e forcës, zgjidhja përmes dialogut,) *Telegrafi*, December 23, 2022, <https://telegrafi.com/komandanti-kfor-per-gjendjen-ne-veri-te-shmanget-shfaqja-provokuese-e-forces-zgjidhja-permes-dialogut/>

<sup>86</sup> Artan Abrashi (abrashi.a), Facebook Post, December 20, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/abrashi.a/posts/pfbid0No9ZrjhNr8E-JGaLKSMzyvmtwjqJt2gXzGRPu7vFoa5VEa8ba7HEsYUptYERBRkl>

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

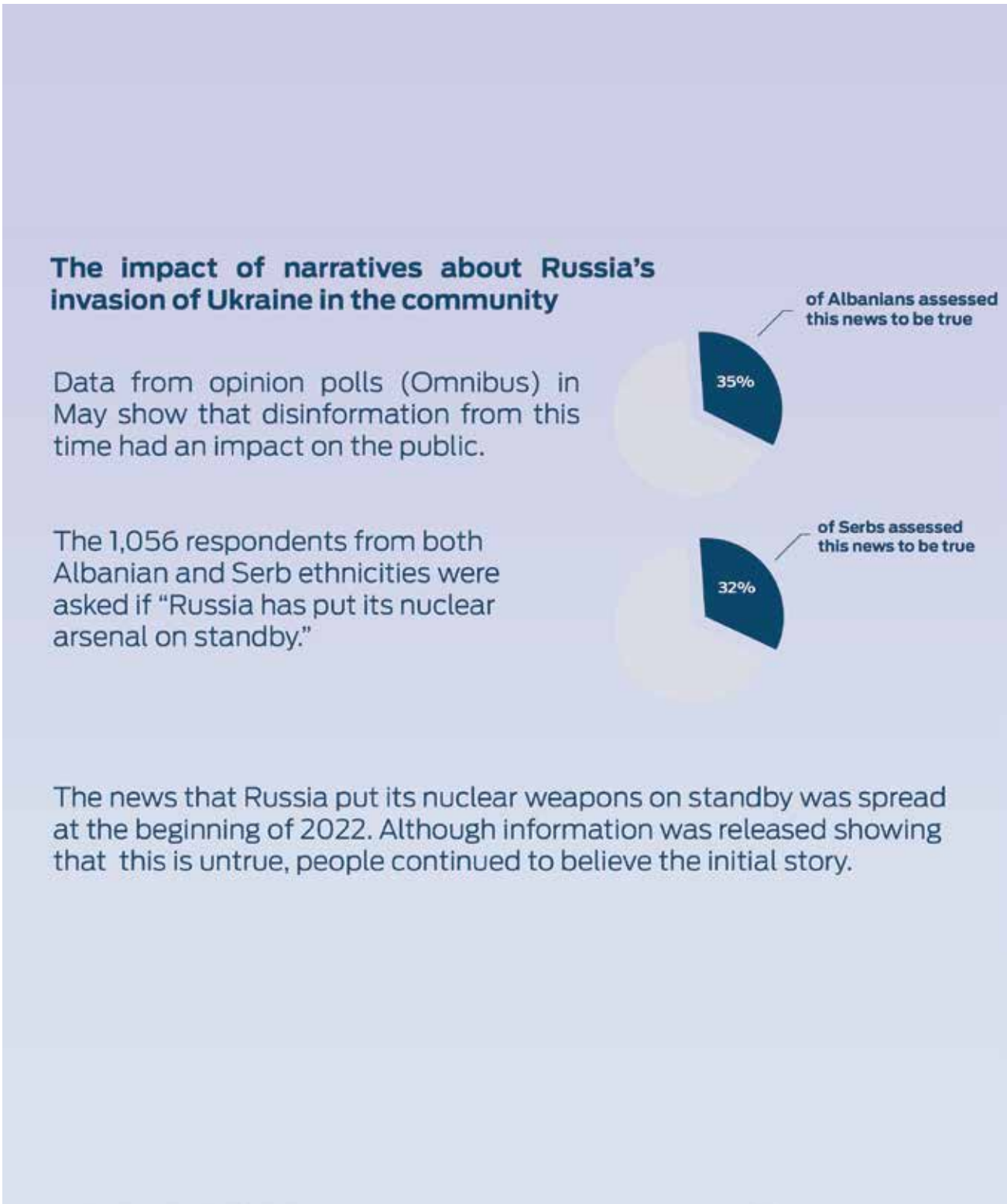
<sup>88</sup> “KFOR had information about criminal groups among the protesters in Jarinja” (KFOR-i kishte informacione për grupe kriminale brenda protestuesve në Jarinjë,) *Kallxo*, December 18, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/kfor-i-kishte-informacione-per-grupe-kriminale-brenda-protestuesve-ne-jarinje/>

<sup>89</sup> “Did the state fail to put Pantic in custody, Basha: We are getting stronger, we must have a helicopter” (A dështoi shteti ta çojë Pantiqin në paraburgim, Basha: Po përforcohemi, duhet të kemi një helikopter,) *Gazeta Express*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/a-deshtoi-shteti-ta-koje-pantiqin-ne-paraburgim-basha-po-perforcohemi-duhet-te-kemi-nje-helikopter/>

<sup>90</sup> Facebook Post, *Veriu.info*, January 13, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/327128460749009/posts/5826263787502088>

<sup>91</sup> “The warning while waiting for KFOR: If this happens, Kosovo will go to war against Serbian soldiers” (Në pritje të KFOR-it, vjen paralajmërimi: Në rast se ndodh kjo gjë, Kosova hyn në luftë me ushtarët serbë,) *Bota Sot*, January 5, 2023, <https://www.botasot.info/politika-lajme/1928010/ne-pritje-te-kfor-it-vjen-paralajmerimi-ne-rast-se-ndodh-kjo-gje-kosova-hyn-ne-lufte-me-ushtarët-serbe/>

Figure 8-The impact of narratives about Russia's invasion of Ukraine in the community according to data collection through Omnibus survey



## 1.4 The disinformation narrative of NATO criminalisation

Russian disinformation narratives include accusing the West of donating weapons to Ukraine, which are used to kill civilians and will cause cancer-related civilian deaths in the future. To support this narrative, Russian-controlled media have spread disinformation about mass deaths of Serbian citizens after the war in former Yugoslavia due to NATO bombing and the use of depleted uranium.<sup>92</sup> For example, an image of a little girl next to her murdered mother from the movie “Fortress of War”<sup>93</sup> has been shared on several Facebook and Twitter posts. These posts falsely report that the photo was taken during the NATO bombings in former Yugoslavia.<sup>94</sup>

Additionally, the Russian Mission<sup>95</sup> to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) wrongly attributed a photo taken from 2003 in Iraq<sup>96</sup> to NATO’s attack on former Yugoslavia in 1999. Former Foreign Minister of Serbia Vuk Jeremic<sup>97</sup> also tweeted the same photo from 2003 in Iraq on the anniversary of the NATO bombings of Serbia on March 24, 2023, suggesting that the photo shows a NATO air strike in Belgrade.<sup>98</sup>

In a later tweet he acknowledged his mistake, but didn’t take down the earlier post, which received 240 shares. In addition, throughout Serbia, many politicians and influencers on their social media accounts and during public debates stated that Serbs were victims of the NATO bombing, without acknowledging that the bombing campaign was triggered by Serbia’s violence against Albanians in Kosovo. One example is Novak Djokovic, the famous Serbian tennis player, who said he found the power within himself “to forgive” the West for what it had “unjustly done to Serbia”.<sup>99</sup>

In addition, the Russian media published false information about the death of thousands

<sup>92</sup> Facebook Post, Sputnik, March 23, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/357990416180/posts/10160483043451181>

<sup>93</sup> IMDB Media Viewer, Fortress of War, 2010, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1343703/mediaviewer/rm1845916672/>

<sup>94</sup> Facebook Post, Српски Ослободилачки Покрет Отаџбина, March 24, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/srpskioslobodilackipokret/photos/a.1647517155461210/3122964021249842/>

<sup>95</sup> Tweet by the Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE (@RF\_OSCE), March 24, 2022, [https://twitter.com/RF\\_OSCE/status/1507085114676756487](https://twitter.com/RF_OSCE/status/1507085114676756487)

<sup>96</sup> “The NATO bombings in Former Yugoslavia illustrated by fake pictures from Russian OSCE mission” (Bombardimet e NATO-s në ish-Jugosllavi ilustrohen me fotografi të rreme nga misionit rus i OSBE-së), Kallxo, March 30, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/bombardimet-e-nato-s-ne-ish-jugosllavi-ilustrohen-me-fotografi-te-rreme-nga-misionit-rus-i-osbe-se/>

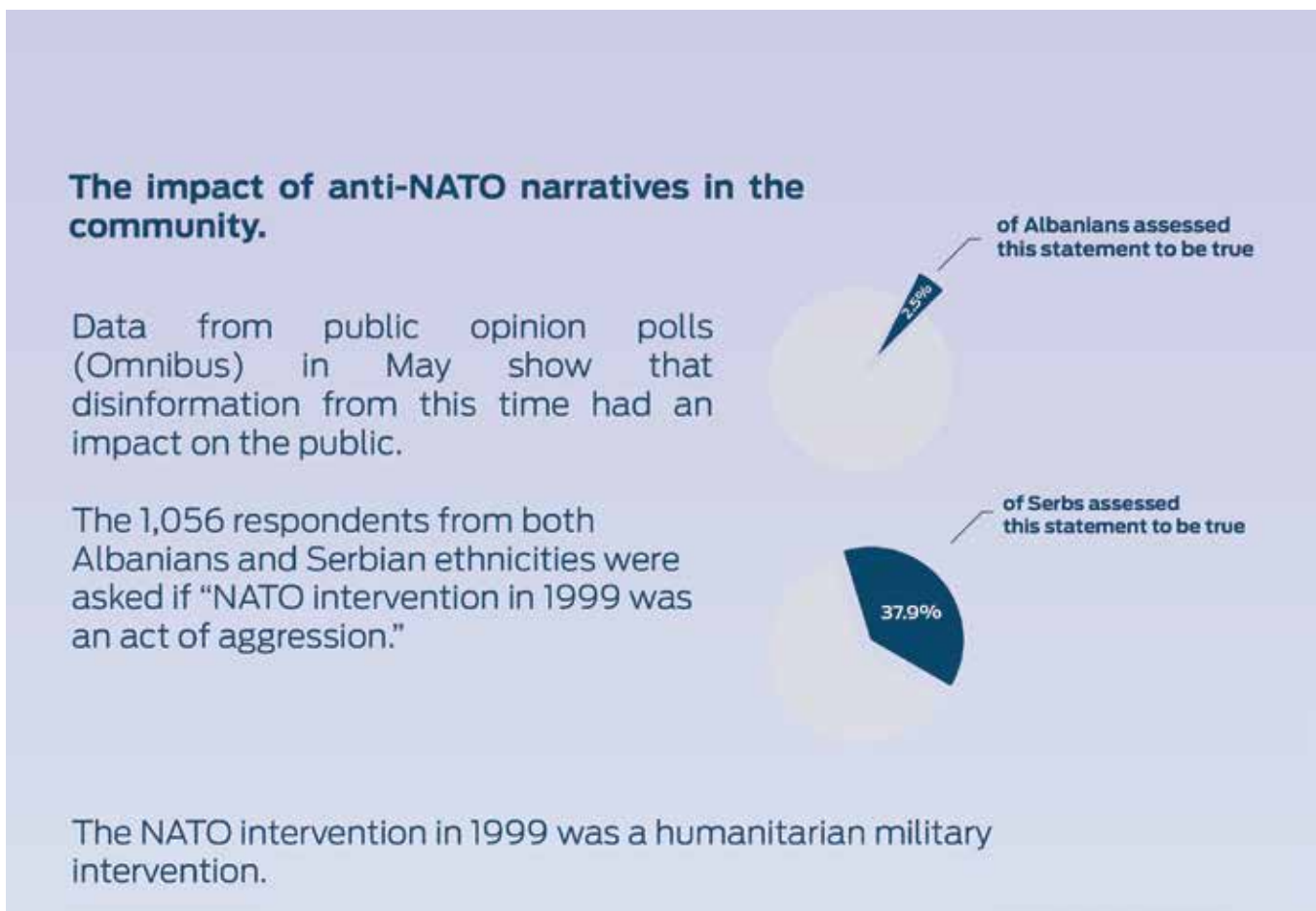
<sup>97</sup> Tweet by Vuk Jeremić (@jeremic\_vuk), March 24, 2023, [https://twitter.com/jeremic\\_vuk/status/1639195915230785536](https://twitter.com/jeremic_vuk/status/1639195915230785536)

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Novak Djokovic’s victim-of-NATO-bombing narrative is amplified in KanekoatheGreat twitter profile with almost half a million followers on 6 of May 2023, <https://twitter.com/KanekoatheGreat/status/1654671932338630657> in an interview that took place initially in August 2022

of civilians as a result of NATO attacks in Serbia (News that 2500, 1500 people have been killed).<sup>100</sup> Meanwhile, the Albanian language media published articles with fake<sup>101</sup> content claiming that NATO and the US are threatening Serbia with war and that Serbia is expected to capitulate once again.<sup>102</sup> The same post was shared on six Facebook pages and received 74 interactions. There were no such threats by the US or NATO. This is a false narrative emanating from Russia,<sup>103</sup> initially published by the Russian media.<sup>104,105</sup>

**Figure 9: The impact of anti-NATO narratives in the community according to data collection through Omnibus survey**



<sup>100</sup> “How NATO forces bombed Yugoslavia (Как силы НАТО бомбили Югославию)” Sputnik Armenia, October 31, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20191112094734/https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/video/20191031/20945059/kak-sily-nato-bombili-yugoslaviyu.html>; “Bombings of Yugoslavia killed between 1200 and 2500 civilians,” EU vs Disinfo, October 31, 2019, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/bombings-of-yugoslavia-killed-between-1200-and-2500-civilians>

<sup>101</sup> “The false alert that US and NATO ‘terrify’ Vučić and that Serbia signs ‘capitulation’” (Titulli i rremë se SHBA e NATO ‘tmerrojnë’ Vuçiqin dhe se Serbia nënshkruan ‘kapitullimin’), Kallxo, October 13, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-shba-e-nato-tmerrojne-vuciqin-dhe-se-serbia-nenshkruan-kapitullimin/>

<sup>102</sup> Facebook Post, Post Lajmee, October 8, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100064549185694/posts/471726831655619>

<sup>103</sup> “US trying to provoke Serbia into a military operation,” EU vs Disinfo, December 14, 2022, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/us-trying-to-provoke-serbia-into-a-military-operation>

<sup>104</sup> Ibid

<sup>105</sup> “Cappture Snapshot,” Cappture, <https://app.cappture.cc/snapshots/1ed7ba93-0763-6e2a-9812-06a13b0e4978>

## 1.5 Disinformation narratives that the West and NATO are preparing Albanians for war against Serbs

The “EuVsDisinfo”<sup>106</sup> report compiled Russian disinformation narratives that blamed NATO for developments in Kosovo and for supporting Kosovo over Serbia. Russian disinformation presents NATO as an enemy of Serbs and portrays the goals of this Alliance as anti-Serbian. These claims have also been published in Albanian language media, including one article that claimed that NATO will attack Serbia again<sup>107</sup> without providing any facts. The same post was shared on four Facebook pages and received 106 interactions.

The first narrative identified is that Albanians are building military bases in North Mitrovica to defend themselves or attack Serbs. Kosovo authorities did start strengthening border points in Jarinje and Brnjak as well as building a controversial police base in the village of Dren in Leposaviq/Leposavić. Thus, the stories that a new “occupation”, “conquest” of the north was happening was not just a Russian influenced narrative but a local one.

In November, Russia Today published an article claiming that construction of an “Albanian” military base is underway in North Mitrovica.<sup>108</sup> The article portrayed police stations as military bases, and claimed that countries such as Germany and the US had promised to help build a military base in Cernushë/Cernusha, Mitrovica. This story had no factual basis. The narrative was then used by Kosovo Serbs to claim that Kosovo Albanians were trying to conquer the north with the help of NATO and the EU. In fact, they were trying to build some additional police bases in the north to address the smuggling routes, but this was being carried out without the help of NATO and the EU.

Another frequent accusation is that NATO is arming the Kosovo Security Force. Various media in Kosovo, including dubious online portals, publish rumours and falsehoods about the Kosovo Security Force. One portal, whose name starts with “BBC” and continues with “NEWSCOM” to deliberately confuse the public that it is linked to the BBC, stated that “A large KSF military base will be established near Serbia, equipped with Anti-Aircraft missiles”.<sup>109</sup> The same information was republished on three websites and 80 times on 15 Facebook pages, which gathered a joint total of 1.2 million likes. This article was first published in May 2022 and most recently re-shared in January 2023.

<sup>106</sup> “There is proof of a formation of a pact against Serbia,” *EU vs Disinfo*, September 13, 2019, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/there-is-proof-of-a-formation-of-a-pact-against-serbia>

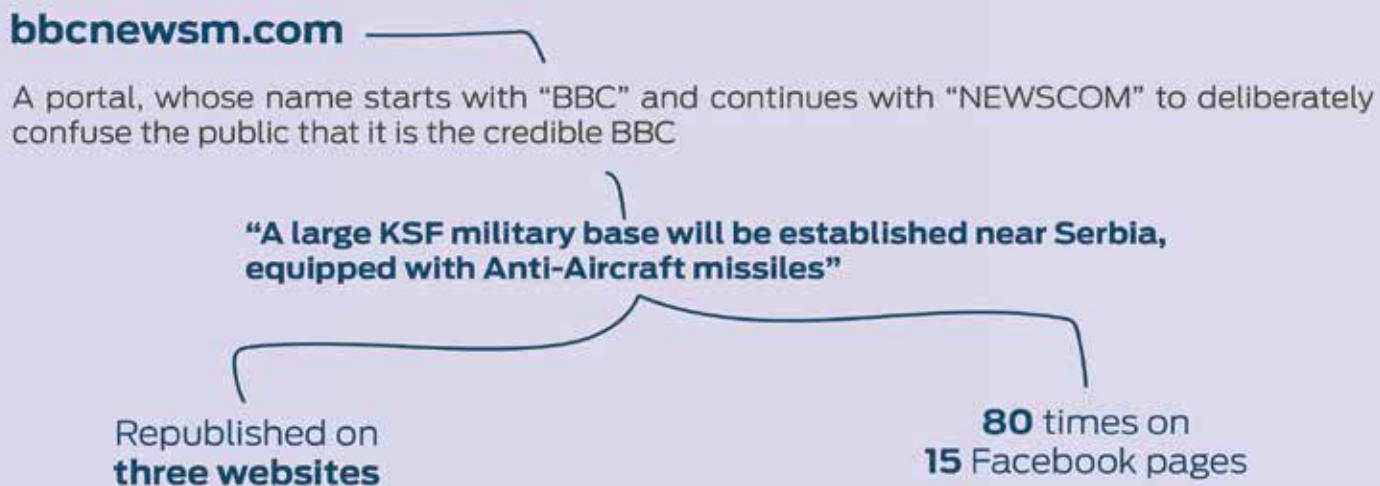
<sup>107</sup> *ShqipPress*, Facebook Post, February 3, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/shqippressoofficial/posts/pfbid0k46kPvbfh1ivVz7fmQ4vifc-Q6Db8SyNkL6MXZQ1FxCvekd7gJJUXpWKv2v7eDc6xl>

<sup>108</sup> “New bases of Albanians in the north of Kosovo and Metohija: The ring of steel around the Serbs is tightening (Нове базе Албанаца на северу КуМ: Стеже се челични прстен око Срба)”, *Russia Today Serbia*, November 12, 2022, <https://rt.rs/news/5458-jarinje-brnjak-policijske-baze/>

<sup>109</sup> “Terror for Serbia, the Bondsteel of Albanians near Serbia is equipped with anti-aircraft system” (Tmerr për serbinë, Bondsteel i shqiptarëve afër Serbisë, pajiset me sisteme kundërajrore,) *BBC News M*, <https://bbcnews.com/tmerr-per-serbine-bondsteeli-shqiptare-afër-serbise-pajiset-me-sisteme-kunderajrore/>



Figure 10: Spreading the disinformation that the West is preparing Kosovo to go to war against Serbs



False narratives are also promoted about donations Kosovo received from the US<sup>110</sup> for the Kosovo Security Force. A donation was made in August 2021,<sup>111</sup> but information about this donation was republished 385 times between 2021 and 2023.<sup>112</sup> Although only one donation was made, it was always framed as a new donation. Similarly, the media published an article claiming "Kosovo purchases 40 planes / USA equips KSF with surveillance and filming drones".<sup>113</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Lajme Reale, Facebook Post, January 30, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/108857771041571/posts/641769774417032>

<sup>111</sup> "Kurti: The US plays an important role in the path of growth and development of our army" (Kurti: SHBA-ja luan rol të rëndësishëm në rrugën e rritjes dhe zhvillimit të Ushtrisë tonë,) Telegrafi, August 31, 2021, <https://telegrafi.com/kurti-shba-ja-luan-rol-te-rendesishem-ne-rruges-dhe-zhvillimit-te-ushtrise-tone/>

<sup>112</sup> Data from Crowdtangle, accessed at: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search?customStartDate=2021-08-03T12:48:00&customEndDate=2023-05-05T12:48:45&platform=facebook&postTypes=&producerTypes=3&q=Dridh%20FSK%20SHBA&sortBy=date&sortOrder=-desc&timeframe=custom>

<sup>113</sup> "Top News: Kosovo buys 40 aircrafts, the US equips KSF with drones for surveillance and filming" (Top News: Kosova blen 40 avione, SHBA pajis FSK me drone, vezhgimi e filmimi,) Top Channel, January 25, 2022, <https://top-channel.tv/video/top-news-kosova-blen-40-avione-shba-pajis-fsk-me-drone-vezhgimi-e-filmimi/>

In addition, a fabricated statement<sup>114</sup> from former NATO General Wesley Clark<sup>115</sup> also received attention in Belgrade. This article was shared 79 times on social networks, receiving 796 interactions. Another news item titled “Vučić won’t like this, the US is determined: If Serbia threatens the territory of Kosovo, you must know that...” has been published 35 times on social networks and has received 1,210 interactions.<sup>116</sup> This news lacked context in its reporting. A similar narrative, aiming to portray the West as against Serbia, was seen in the article published under the title: “GREAT NEWS/ Kosovo receives HISTORICAL news: Serbia has never been a US ally”.<sup>117</sup> It was published 62 times on social networks, receiving 3,272 interactions.

In addition to the disinformation about the arming of KSF and anti-Serbia sentiment in the US, there was disinformation spread that the Kosovo army would enter the north. This information was mainly published when there was a crisis in the north or before dialogue meetings between Kosovo and Serbia.

The Serbia-based portal “Novosti.rs” falsely reported that the Kosovo Security Forces entered Zubin Potok/Zubin-Potok. The disinformation was also published by at least five other media outlets, some of which are based in Kosovo. However, the information was false.<sup>118</sup>

Information linking the KSF to the tensions in the north was published in July 2022, during the dispute over licence plates. Two websites and six Facebook pages posted that “The army will take over the north before August 25”. The information was not based on any official source and was found to be fake.<sup>119</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Artistet Shqiptar Facebook page. July 25th 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/ArtistetShqiptar/posts/3295342284080220/?paipv=0&av=AfbF581Eod8uSkYjiGSydyKCd7JJQyNQEqLkH76VtGGmGIkv2tliik0hFl544McUeE>

<sup>115</sup> “The lie that General Clark’s statement has caused an alert in Belgrade” (Rrena se deklarata e gjeneralit Clark ka shkaktuar tërmet në Beograd,) Kallxo, January 7, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-deklarata-e-gjeneralit-clark-ka-shkaktuar-termet-ne-beograd/>

<sup>116</sup> “The lie about the statement by an American Professor” (Rrena rreth një deklarimi të profesorit amerikan) Kallxo, December 21, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-rreth-nje-deklarimi-te-profesorit-amerikan/>

<sup>117</sup> “Gazeta Parlamenti” Facebook Post, February 16, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/110733877932940/posts/235630658776594>

<sup>118</sup> “The lie about the entry of Kosovo soldiers into the municipality of Zubin Potok” (Rrena për hyrjen e ushtarëve të Kosovës në komunën e Zubin Potokut,) Kallxo, September 9, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-hyrjen-e-ushtarëve-te-kosoves-ne-komunen-e-zubin-potokut/>

<sup>119</sup> “Desinformation that the Army will reclaim the North after 25th of August” (Dezinformatata se Ushtria do ta marrë veriun para datës 25 Gusht,) Kallxo, August 3, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/dezinformatata-se-ushtria-do-ta-marre-veriun-para-dates-25-gusht/>

Figure 11: Illustration of selected articles with disinformation disorders falsely reporting on Kosovo preparation for war

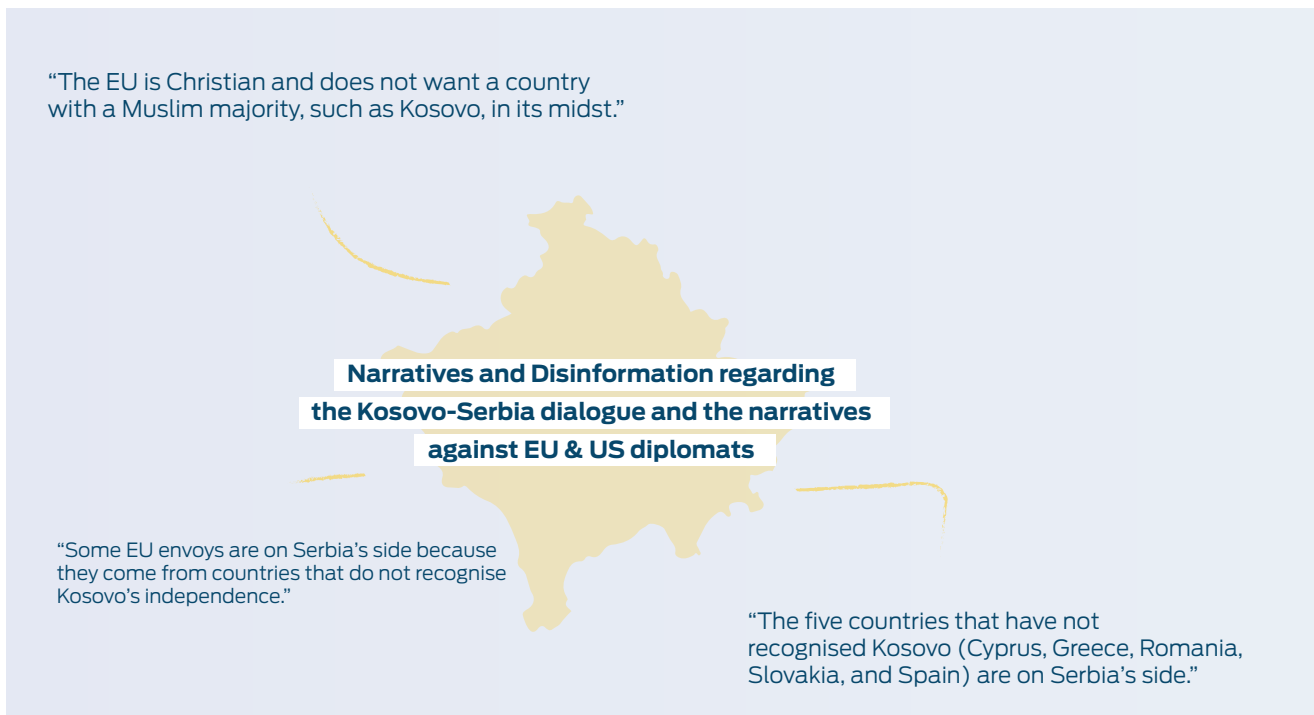
**Title**

Disaster for Serbia: the Albanian Bondsteel close to Serbia is equipped with anti-aircraft missile attack systems!	Publications <b>142</b>	Reactions <b>1,128</b>
A large KSF military base will be built near Serbia, equipped with anti-aircraft missiles	Publications <b>174</b>	Interactions <b>245</b>
Albin Kurti 'shakes' the Balkans with his speech on the U.S. donation for KSF	Publications <b>8</b>	Interactions <b>162</b>
Kurti doesn't hold back on anything: After ROSU the army enters the north	Publications <b>10</b>	Interactions <b>54</b>
So many investments for the Kosovo Army this year: In the next three years, our authorities will buy weapons worth 300 million Euro for the army'	Publications <b>87</b>	Interactions <b>275</b>
Our youth is running away, yet money is being requested. Who will use it?	Publications <b>7</b>	Interactions <b>1,093</b>
Kosovo purchases 40 planes/USA equips KSF with surveillance and filming drones	Publications <b>2</b>	Interactions <b>4</b>
The arming of the KSF is driving Serbia crazy	Publications <b>28</b>	Interactions <b>1,557</b>
Vucis asks the Brits: Why are you arming Kosovo?	Publications <b>101</b>	Reactions <b>2,791</b>
What are "Javelin" and "NLAW", the weapons that Serbia fears Britain has donated to Kosovo	Publications <b>2</b>	Interactions <b>74</b>
Turkey arms Kosovo	Publications <b>2</b>	Interactions <b>837</b>



## 1.6 Narratives and Disinformation regarding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and the narratives against EU & US diplomats

Figure 12: Narratives and Disinformation regarding the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue and the narratives against EU & US diplomats



The European Union is the largest donor<sup>120</sup> in Kosovo and over 91% of citizens have expressed their approval of Kosovo’s integration into the EU.<sup>121</sup> However, there are still some local anti-EU sentiments circulated that are exploited and amplified by Russian disinformation narratives. These narratives portray the EU as discriminatory towards Kosovo because:

1. The EU is Christian and does not want a country with a Muslim majority, such as Kosovo, in its midst.
2. The five countries that have not recognised Kosovo (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain) are on Serbia’s side.
3. Some EU envoys are on Serbia’s side because they come from countries that do not recognise Kosovo’s independence.

<sup>120</sup> “EU and Kosovo,” European External Action Service (EEAS), [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo\\_en?s=321](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kosovo/eu-and-kosovo_en?s=321).

<sup>121</sup> International Republican Institute. (2021). *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Kosovo (September 3-18, 2021)* (p. 53). Center for Insights in Survey Research.

Regarding the role of the EU in the Balkans, EUvsDisinfo has identified some disinformation that portrays the EU as trying to control Western Balkan countries and their markets.<sup>122</sup> Russian disinformation negatively portrays the EU's influence in the Balkans, contests the unity of the EU, and exaggerates the EU's dependence on American policies.<sup>123</sup>

In addition, Russian media claims that citizens of the Western Balkans lack enthusiasm for EU integration.<sup>124</sup> However, apart from Serbia, citizens in Balkan countries trust the EU more than their local governments.<sup>125</sup>

News related to EU visa liberalisation was saturated with fake statements by politicians.<sup>126</sup> Over the past five years, 25 false pieces of information<sup>127</sup> wrongly stated that visa liberalisation for Kosovo will happen soon<sup>128</sup> or within a certain period<sup>129</sup> (News item 1, 2, 4).<sup>130</sup> In addition, media outlets published information that France and the Netherlands were blocking visa liberalisation or imposing additional conditions<sup>131</sup> on Kosovo regarding visa liberalisation. Although the then Prime Minister of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj said that France would not hamper visa liberalisation or impose various conditions,<sup>132</sup> the disinformation still spread. News stories portrayed France as anti-Muslim<sup>133</sup> and claimed

<sup>122</sup> "The EU wants to expand its imperialism in the Balkans," EUvsDisinfo, October 11, 2021, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-eu-wants-to-expand-its-imperialism-in-the-balkans>

<sup>123</sup> "The European Union is obliged to participate in US wars," EUvsDisinfo, April 25, 2019, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-european-union-is-obliged-to-participate-in-us-wars>

<sup>124</sup> "Western Balkans countries have a deficit of Euroenthusiasm," EUvsDisinfo, February 9, 2020, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/western-balkans-countries-have-a-deficit-of-euroenthusiasm>

<sup>125</sup> "Serbia: The only WB country with more trust in the government than in the EU," European Western Balkans, August 6, 2019, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2019/08/06/serbia-the-only-wb-country-with-more-trust-in-the-government-than-in-the-eu/>

<sup>126</sup> "Liars of the visa liberalisation (Rrencat e liberalizimit të vizave)," Kallxo (Krypometër), July 18, 2019, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrencat-e-liberalizimit-te-vizave/>

<sup>127</sup> "Fake news over visa liberalisation continue (Vazhdojnë lajmet e rreme për liberalizimin e vizave)," Kallxo (Krypometër), February 5, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/vazhdojne-lajmet-e-rreme-per-liberalizimin-e-vizave/>

<sup>128</sup> "Fake title on lifting visa requirement (Titulli i rremë për heqjen e vizave)," Kallxo (Krypometër), September 17, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-per-heqjen-e-vizave/>

<sup>129</sup> "Fake title on the exact date of visa liberalization (Titulli i rremë për datën e saktë të liberalizimit të vizave)," Kallxo (Krypometër), August, 9, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-per-daten-e-sakte-te-liberalizimit-te-vizave/>

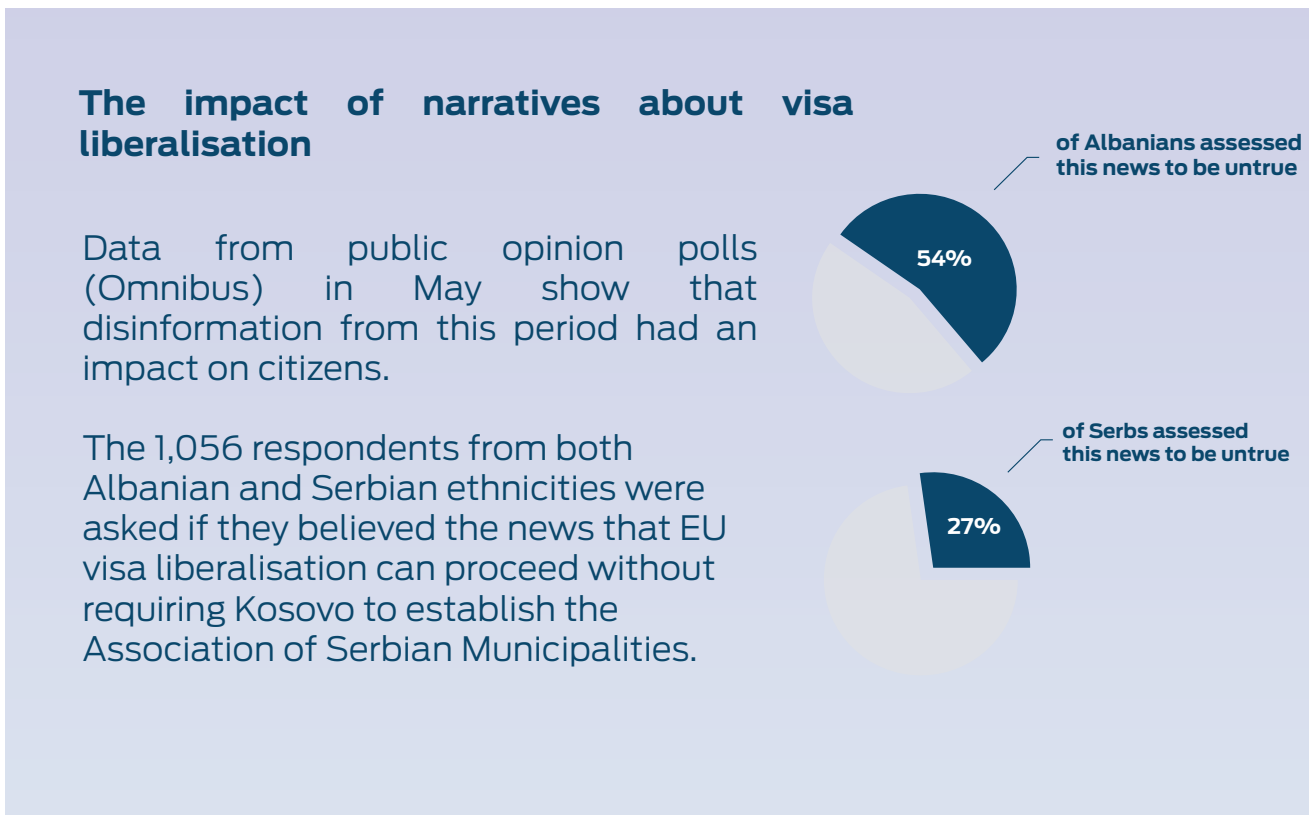
<sup>130</sup> "Fake news on the 'good news' from the EU on visa liberalisation (Rrena për lajmin e mirë nga BE-ja për liberalizim të vizave)," Kallxo (Krypometër), August 6, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-lajmin-e-mire-nga-be-ja-per-liberalizim-te-vizave/> "Fake news on the date of visa liberalisation (Rrena për datën e liberalizimit të vizave)," Kallxo (Krypometër), July 27, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-daten-e-liberalizimit-te-vizave/> "Fake news on visa liberalisation for Kosovo from Netherlands (Lajmi i rremë për liberalizimin e vizave për Kosovën nga Holanda)," Kallxo (Krypometër), October 15, 2021 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/lajmi-i-rreme-per-liberalizimin-e-vizave-per-kosoven-nga-holanda/>

<sup>131</sup> "Fake title stating that finalisation of dialogue is a condition to visa liberalisation (Titulli i rremë se liberalizimi i vizave është kushtëzuar me finalizim të dialogut)," Kallxo (Krypometër), June 25, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-liberalizimi-i-vizave-eshte-kushtezuar-me-finalizim-te-dialogut/>

<sup>132</sup> "Three reasons why France is blocking Kosovo and the Western Balkans (Tri arsyt pse Franca po e bllokoi Kosovën dhe Ballkanin Perëndimor)," Bota Sot, October 8, 2021, <https://www.botasot.info/politika-lajme/1681941/tri-arsyet-pse-franca-po-e-blokon-kosoven-dhe-ballkanin-perendimor/>

<sup>133</sup> "Look what they do to this muslim woman with a headscarf in France (Shikojeni çka i bëjnë kësaj grua muslimane me mbulesë në Francë!)," pcnmedia2.com, November 25, 2022 <https://pcnmedia2.com/2022/11/25/shikojeni-cka-i-bejne-kesaj-gruaja-muslimane-me-mbulesë-ne-france/s>

Figure 13: The impact of narratives about visa liberalisation



visa liberalisation was being blocked because most citizens in Kosovo are Muslim.<sup>134</sup>

Information was also manipulated about Kosovo's talks with Serbia and the creation of the Association circulated between October 15, 2022, and March 15, 2023. These information have not all been qualified as false because some of them are opinions that have been presented in order to portray the EU and EU dialogue representatives negatively without providing any proof for that finding.

The European Union plays a leading role in the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, especially Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs, and Miroslav Lajčák, a special envoy in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Since the appointment of these two to advise the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, news articles have called into question the impartiality of the facilitators<sup>135</sup> because Borrell is from Spain and Lajčák is from Slovakia, two countries that have not recognised Kosovo's independence. The articles attacking Borrell and Lajčák are often opinion pieces written by experts and analysts.<sup>136</sup>

<sup>134</sup> "There are no visas, Kosovo is Muslim (Nuk ka viza, Kosova eshte muslimane)", Botapress.info, February 2, 2019 <https://www.facebook.com/botapressweb/posts/pfbid02GLE83abR8DLUR8f1Xpsp1BFKmcFmzpV2rUphZEtkZuw7xxzbnquxNb9ARD1h3aX4l>

<sup>135</sup> "EU's new leaders, Kosovo: Pessimism for Josep Borrell" (Liderët e rinj të BE, Kosovë: Pesimizëm për Josep Borrell,) Top Channel, 4 July 2019, <https://top-channel.tv/2019/07/04/lideret-e-rinj-te-be-kosove-pesimizem-per-josep-borrell/>

<sup>136</sup> YouTube Video, "Borrell and Lajčák against Kosovo! Analysts say that Brussels is not delivering their duty regarding the dialogue" (Borrell dhe Lajčák kundër Kosovës! Analistët thonë se Brukseli nuk po e kryen detyrën për dialogun) Euronews Albania, April 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WSfsf-tsl-E>

Statements made by Borrell have been interpreted as anti-Kosovo.<sup>137</sup> For example, some media wrote that “Mr. Borrell wants the north of Kosovo outside the control of the independent Republic of Kosovo, and wants to break it away from Kosovo.”<sup>138</sup> These articles were published as opinion pieces, but they negatively portray the EU representatives directly engaged in the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Media discrediting the EU facilitators in the dialogue increased after Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti<sup>139</sup> appeared to have clashed with Borrell following a tense dialogue meeting in Brussels about the Association. The media in Kosovo wrote that Borrell may no longer lead the dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia<sup>140</sup> (31 posts and 3017 interactions),<sup>141</sup> but they failed to provide any evidence. This article led to more local politicians contesting the impartiality<sup>142</sup> of the EU facilitators.

Miroslav Lajčák’s impartiality was also contested.<sup>143</sup> The resistance towards Lajčák was first expressed by former President of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi, who opposed the appointment of Lajčák as an EU envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue.<sup>144</sup> Similar opinions<sup>145</sup> were again published when the dialogue was restarted. Other articles presented a standard meeting between Miroslav Lajčák and the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, as a sensational meeting, with the headline: “The reason why Lajčák met with Vučić has been revealed.”<sup>146</sup> Additional articles falsely alleged that Lajčák’s statement about the Association

<sup>137</sup> “Borel insists in Kosovo’s destruction, comes out openly on the side of Serbia” (Borel, këmbëngul në shkatërrimin e Kosovës, del hapur në anën e Serbisë,) Drini, December 7, 2021, <https://drini.us/borel-kembengul-ne-shkaterrimin-e-kosoves-del-hapur-ne-anen-e-serbise/>; Data from CrowdTangle, accessed at: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search?customStartDate=2021-01-01T12:59:59&customEndDate=2023-05-01T12:48:00&platform=facebook&postTypes=&producerTypes=3&q=Borel%20k%3C%ABmb%3C%ABngul%20n%3C%AB%20shkat%3C%ABrrimin%20e%20Kosov%3C%ABs%2C%20del%20hapur%20n%3C%AB%20an%3C%ABn%20e%20Serbis%3C%AB&sortBy=date&sortOrder=asc&timeframe=custom>

<sup>138</sup> “The EU should stop Mr. Borel and Mr. Lajcak from their unilateral actions in relation to Kosovo” (BE duhet t’i ndalë Z. Borel dhe Z. Lajçak nga veprimet e njëanshme në raport me Kosovën,) Kosova Sot, October 13, 2021, <https://www.kosova-sot.info/opinion/574815/be-duhet-ti-ndali-z-borel-dhe-z-lajcak-nga-veprimet-e-njeanshme-ne-raport-me-kosoven/>

<sup>139</sup> “Kurti and Borrell clash about the Association” (Kurti e Borrelli përplasen për Asociacionin,) Koha, December 7, 2021, <https://www.koha.net/arberi/300252/kurti-e-borrelli-perplasen-per-asociacionin/>

<sup>140</sup> “The Kurti-Borell debate, the latter may no longer lead the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue” (Përplasja Kurti-Borrell në Bruksel, ky i fundit mund të mos udhëheq më dialogun Kosovë-Serbi,) Parrotlla, December 22, 2022, <https://parrotlla.org/perplasja-kurti-borrell-ne-bruksel-ky-i-fundit-mund-te-mos-udheheq-me-dialogun-kosove-serbi/>

<sup>141</sup> Data from CrowdTangle, accessed at: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search?customStartDate=2022-10-14T21:59:59&customEndDate=2023-05-14T12:06:06&platform=facebook&postTypes=&producerTypes=3,1&q=P%3C%ABrplasja%20Kurti-Borrell%20n%3C%AB%20Bruksel%2C%20ky%20i%20fundit%20mund%20t%3C%AB%20mos%20udh%3C%ABheq%20me%20dialogun%20Kosov%3C%AB-Serbi&sortBy=score&sortOrder=desc&timeframe=custom>

<sup>142</sup> “Osmani doesn’t disappoint Kurti, because of him she disagrees with a representative of EU” (Osmani së zhgënjyjen Kurtin, për të e goditi edhe kupolën e Bashkimit Europian) Gazeta Express, November 22, 2022, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/osmani-se-zhgenjen-kurtin-per-te-e-goditi-edhe-kupolen-e-bashkimit-europian/>

<sup>143</sup> Shtypi.net, Facebook Post, March 21, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/shtypi.net/posts/2970781439640221/?paipv=0&eav=AfZk2QJt-9fj7neSti3k7pdljvAdCtaQi5nyYXv4bXzkODoN0aU57XCdbQp4kaRtjQqQ&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/shtypi.net/posts/2970781439640221/?paipv=0&eav=AfZk2QJt-9fj7neSti3k7pdljvAdCtaQi5nyYXv4bXzkODoN0aU57XCdbQp4kaRtjQqQ&_rdr)

<sup>144</sup> YouTube Video, “Thaçi against Lajcak as a representative of the EU” (Thaçi kunder Lajçakut si përfaqesues i BE-se) | Lajme-News, RTV KLAN, May 26, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGr9qpqlgN0>

<sup>145</sup> “Dastid Pallaska: Unbelievable, the bias of Miroslav Lajcak against Kosovo and the government’s silence” (Dastid Pallaska: E pabesueshme, njëanshmëria e Miroslav Lajçak kundër Kosovës dhe heshtja e qeverisë!) Gazeta Blic, April 16, 2021, <https://gazetablic.com/dastid-pallaska-e-pabesueshme-njeanshmeria-e-miroslav-lajcak-kunder-kosoves-dhe-heshtja-e-qeverise/>

<sup>146</sup> “The reason why Lajcak met with Vučić is disclosed” (Zbulohet arsyeja pse Lajçak u takua me Vuçiqin,) Kosova Sot, March 13, 2023, <https://www.kosova-sot.info/lajme/667501/zbulohet-arsyeja-pse-lajcak-u-takua-me-vuciqin/>; “The false headline about Lajcak-Vučić meeting” (Titulli i rremë për një zbulim rreth takimit Lajçak-Vuçiq,) Kallxo, March 28, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/kry-pometer/titulli-i-rreme-per-nje-zbulim-rreth-takimit-lajcak-vuciq/>

of Municipalities with a Serbian Majority was well received in Kosovo.<sup>147</sup> Another post on Facebook (624 interactions) wrongly stated that Miroslav Lajčák said the Ohrid Agreement did not envisage the Association.<sup>148</sup>

On November 29, 2022, several websites published a news article claiming that Serbian officials were anxious and that Serbian PM, Ana Brnabić, said to the German president that the new proposals for the normalisation of relations between Kosovo and Serbia cannot be discussed without the formation of the Association. However, the article does not provide any evidence which confirms that the Prime Minister of Serbia or other Serbian state officials were “anxious”.

As American officials were directly involved in the dialogue process, fake information was also published about the US envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia dialogue. Gabriel Escobar, Special Representative to the Western Balkans, was alleged to be anti-Albanian. A photo with the text “Escobar against the Albanian people of Kosovo”<sup>149</sup> was published on a Facebook page without any supporting facts. Another publication about Gabriel Escobar reads: Gabriel Escobar does NOT represent US foreign policy. Instead, he represents the powerful Serbian lobbies in the US.<sup>150</sup> A photo of Escobar with the Ambassador of Serbia in the US Marko Đurić was presented as proof of this claim, but no real evidence was provided. On February 4, 2023, a Facebook page published a news article titled “Escobar against the people of Kosovo”.<sup>151</sup> While the article speaks about how US envoy Gabriel Escobar does not respect the will of the people of Kosovo who are against the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities, it does not show if it is a news article or an opinion, and has no author. It received 921 reactions on Facebook. It only talks about the Serbian PM’s request to form an Association of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo, without which new proposals for dialogue between the countries cannot be discussed.

Russian media has also negatively portrayed the EU and US’s involvement in the dialogue. For example, on the EUvsDisinfo platform, Russian media disinformation presents the Ohrid Agreement as an extortion of Serbia and one that was only reached under pressure of

<sup>147</sup> Facebook Post, Hitshqipvideo, February 24, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/hitshqipvideo/posts/pfbid0JxeHGMZL5jEYivZ1k-T9QqGS1zPv1ux2FNbUdBKpxWV4EtJoUj33n1ai5qGZR01hal>; “Titulli i rremë se deklarata e Lajçak po gëzon Kosovën,” Kallxo, February 26, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-deklarata-e-lajcak-po-gezon-kosoven/>

<sup>148</sup> “The false headline about news that self-management is worrying Kosovo citizens (Titulli i rremë se lajmi për vetëmenaxhimin po i qetëson qytetarët e Kosovës),” Kallxo, 25 April 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-lajmi-per-vetemenaxhimin-po-i-qeteson-qytetaret-e-kosoves/>

<sup>149</sup> Pelqeje faqen nese e perkrahe Albin Kurtin per kryeminister, Facebook Post, February 3, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/albinkur-tikryeminister2020/posts/pfbid0rgxbSmmA9AVViFugKJAVo1ZJ43kXGi62ERFxdHucu79WUHLrAgLH8trDZj4yHGQl>

<sup>150</sup> Pelqeje faqen nese e perkrahe Albin Kurtin per kryeminister, Facebook Post, February 3, 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/albinkur-tikryeminister2020/posts/pfbid02S8e5SMcJuyJzv6HWBA3o3TYWnqQSoUwtn56nhYwTSYmQQ8MUFshhz5QhYTUeE47yt>

<sup>151</sup> Facebook page: Pelqeje faqen nese e perkrahe Albin Kurtin per kryeminister. 3 Febrary 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/albinkur-tikryeminister2020/posts/pfbid02viRYJRFzMXmHaEuYJDBgqhwEuMAyUToaga7MzRjbbza5RmMpeb2HW3c1E8LxAgvl>

sanctions and the threat of exclusion from the integration path and EU funds.<sup>152</sup> This post said that there is no agreement, dialogue, or negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia, as Serbia has not signed any document and Vučić has said that he will not recognise Kosovo.

## 1.7 The narratives and disinformation that present Europe as anti-Serbia

The dialogue is one of the most covered topics by the media in Kosovo, and the topic about which the most falsehoods have been produced. Fact-checkers<sup>153</sup> have identified 25 articles with incorrect information on this topic during the period that this research covers. A large amount of disinformation aims to present the EU, Germany, UK, and the US as pro-Kosovo and anti-Serbia. The disinformation identified by the EUvsDisinfo<sup>154</sup> platform negatively presents the EU and postulates that the West, NATO, and EU countries are pressuring Serbia to impose sanctions on Russia and China, and are supporting Kosovo.

Disinformation presenting the West as against Serbia was mainly published and republished before different rounds of the dialogue meetings between Kosovo and Serbia. For example, articles portray Western countries opposing Serbia and President Alexandar Vučić. The article titled “The internationals “slap” Vučić and the opponents of Albin Kurti inside Kosovo!”<sup>155</sup> was published 24 times on Facebook. This article is based only on an anonymous source.

Additionally, a fake quote from the US president was published 11 times on Facebook.<sup>156</sup> President Biden did not say “no more compromise with Serbia. No agreement without mutual recognition, and no unconstitutional Association”, though it was reported in the media. Another false article titled: “GREAT NEWS / Kosovo receives the HISTORICAL news: “Serbia has never been an ally of the USA.”<sup>157</sup> presented the West as being against Serbia.<sup>158</sup> Other news resurfaced in January 2023 portraying Angela Merkel as a supporter of Kosovo and a

<sup>152</sup> EUvsDisinfo, *The EU wants to expand its imperialism in the Balkans*, October 11, 2021 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-eu-wants-to-expand-its-imperialism-in-the-balkans>

<sup>153</sup> Krypometer (Fact Checking)

<sup>154</sup> EUvsDisinfo, *Disinformation Database*, [https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=Kosovo+EU&date=&orderby=date&offset=20&per\\_page=10](https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=Kosovo+EU&date=&orderby=date&offset=20&per_page=10)

<sup>155</sup> “Internationals ‘slap’ Vučić and Albin Kurti’s opposition inside Kosovo! (Ndërkombëtarët “shuplakë” Vuçiqit dhe kundërshtarëve të Albin Kurtit brenda Kosovës!), *Lajme Origjinale*, Facebook Post, December 13, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/lajmeorigjinale/posts/pfbid02ZwRb7P6p6bMgDbz5H9EW5hjnEviDvAQMxkrmf5KwBgTrAPsWSJPA9cACFJr1Vz62Kl>

<sup>156</sup> Data from CrowdTangle, accessed at: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search?platform=facebook&postTypes=&producerTypes=3&q=asn%20kompromis%20m%20C3%AB%20me%20Serbin%20Jo%20marr%20C3%ABvshja%20pa%20njohjen%20reciproke%20dhe%20jo%20asociacion%20antikushtetues&sortBy=date&sortOrder=desc&timeframe=1year>

<sup>157</sup> Pamfleti.com, Facebook post, “Great news / Kosovo receives historic news: ‘Serbia was never an ally of the United States (LAJMI MADHESHITOR/ Kosova merr lajmin e HISTORIK: “Serbia s’ka qenë asnjëherë aleate e SHBA-së”); February 17, 2023, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid02HAfvknK7ogtkUibg18HrBWkiUffwFH2U1MKU7rNHdEeboDtBnx24NhoP41Uq49ol&id=101118555235758](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02HAfvknK7ogtkUibg18HrBWkiUffwFH2U1MKU7rNHdEeboDtBnx24NhoP41Uq49ol&id=101118555235758)

<sup>158</sup> Kallxo (Krypometër): “Fake news that Kosovo will receive historic news (Lajmi rremë se Kosova do të marrë lajm historik)”, February 20, 2023 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/lajmi-rreme-se-kosova-do-te-marre-lajm-historik/>



threat to Serbia, although Merkel is no longer leader of Germany. The article titled, “Merkel gives Serbia some schooling: “Kosovo is an Albanian State”<sup>159</sup> has been published 260 times on Facebook on 15 pages in January 2023. This news received 17,792 reactions on Facebook. The fact that this disinformation is old but continues to receive interactions to this date is noteworthy.

## 1.8 Narratives about and Disinformation on EULEX and the Kosovo Specialist Chambers & Specialist Prosecutor’s Office

Disinformation related to EU in Kosovo, mainly the rule of law mission EULEX, has also been circulated. Because of EULEX’s activities in Kosovo there have been many false reports about the corruption among EULEX officials. In addition, the dominant news narrative is that EULEX transferred war crimes files it was investigating to the Serbian government. This narrative has been inflamed not only by the local population, but by former members of EULEX such as Malcolm Simmons, formerly of EULEX, who has sought to discredit the Specialist Chambers.<sup>160</sup> Simmons was invited to the Kosovo Assembly committee to testify against the EULEX mission but also against the Specialist Chambers.

On July 12, 2021, while giving testimony to the Committee on Legislation, Mandates, Immunities, Rules of Procedure of the Assembly, and Oversight of the Anti-Corruption Agency of the Kosovo Assembly, Simmons said that the mission has transferred war crimes files to Serbia in a move to promote dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.<sup>161</sup>

In addition to this, Kosovo media<sup>162</sup> reported on a letter believed to have been written by Malcolm Simmons on July 16, 2020, which was sent to the Kosovo Parliament. In it, Simmons recounts a conversation he had with Boris Johnson, who was serving as the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs at the time. Johnson is reported to have described the Kosovo Specialist Chambers as “a political court bending to the will of Brussels and filled with EU sycophants intent on lining their own pockets”. This narrative is repeated again in 2022 by the same media.<sup>163</sup>

Simmons told Kosovo parliament: “Unfortunately, there are a lot of people in there who basically want to line their pockets with gold”.<sup>164</sup>

<sup>159</sup> NEWZ, “Merkel schools Serbia: “Kosovo is an Albanian state” (Merkel u jep shkollë serbisë: “Kosova është shtet shqiptarë”), January 4, 2023 <https://www.newztype.com/newz/?p=908>

<sup>160</sup> “How a British Judge Caused Turmoil at the EU’s Kosovo Mission”, Bronwyn Jones, BIRN, June 6, 2022, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/06/06/how-a-british-judge-caused-turmoil-at-the-eus-kosovo-mission/>

<sup>161</sup> EULEX has denied these claims <https://www.eulex-kosovo.eu/?page=2,11,2413>

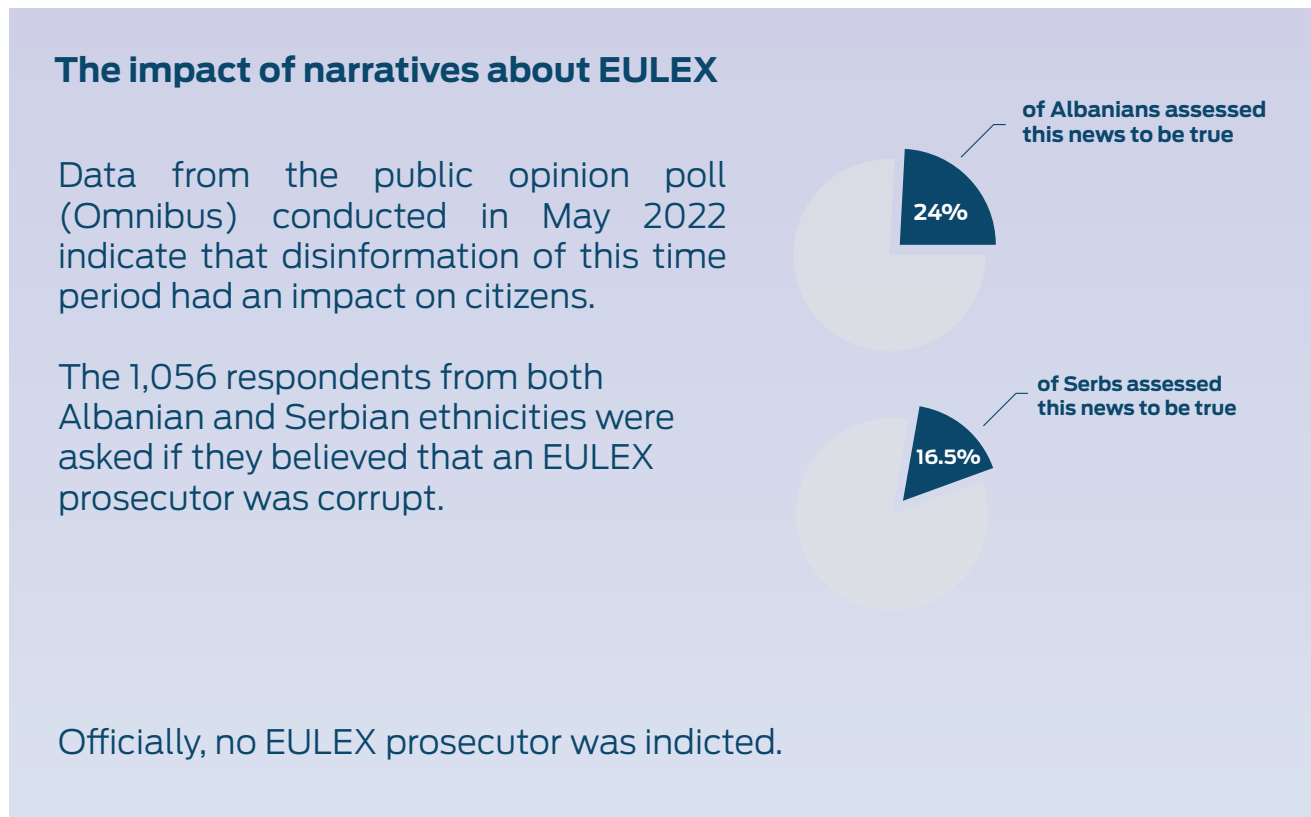
<sup>162</sup> “Simmons: British Prime Minister saw the Special Court as political (Simmons: Kryeministri i Britanisë Boris Johnson, e shihte Gjykatën Speciale si politike)”, Gazeta Express, November 25, 2020, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/ish-gjykatesi-kryesor-i-eulex-it-kryeministri-i-britanise-boris-johnson-e-shihte-gjykatën-speciale-si-politike/>

<sup>163</sup> “British Prime Minister: Special Court is a political court, to fill the pockets of EU sycophants (Kryeministri i Britanisë: Gjykata Speciale është Gjykatë Politike, për t’i mbushur xhepat e lajkatarëve të BE-së)”, Prishtina News, December 18, 2022, <https://prishtinanews.de/kryeministri-i-britanise-gjykata-speciale-eshte-gjykatë-politike-per-ti-mbushur-xhepat-e-lajkatarëve-te-be-se/>

<sup>164</sup> “Michael Simmons Testimony at the Committee on Legislation, Mandates, Immunities, Rules of Procedure of the Assembly and Oversight of the Anti-Corruption Agency.” Kosovo Assembly. 1:31:45. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pLpB-4pkK4&>



Figure 14: The impact of narratives about EULEX



Although Simmons testified in 2021, his statements continued to be used in 2022. His statement was published at least six times in December 2022, but none of the publications contained actual statements made by the UK Prime Minister. What we know is that, at least on the record, Boris Johnson said that citizens should cooperate with the Specialist Chambers in his speech at the Assembly of Kosovo in 2016.<sup>165</sup>

The number of news articles published about the Specialist Chambers increased as the trial of the KLA leaders was nearing. The reports selected for analysis are those that contain accusations that the court is a product of Serbia and Russia. There were 16 news articles promoting these accusations. The unsubstantiated claims were largely made in TV studios with pundits. For example, RTK television studio broadcast a debate with Bekim Qollaku, former adviser to former President Hashim Thaçi, on November 2, 2022. In that debate, Çollaku spoke about the reasons for the formation of the Specialist Chambers and the work done by this court. Çollaku said that, “everything is politically controlled”.<sup>166</sup> Later, he also said that this court “in addition to investing in propaganda, has also started to intimidate

<sup>165</sup> “Johnson: You have to cooperate with the Special court (Johnson Duhet të bashkëpunoni me Gjykatën Speciale)” Portali RTV 21, Youtube video, November 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8ijlRyV8GU>

<sup>166</sup> “RTK Prime - Special Court - Heads of KLA in the Hague for 2 years now.” Television program. RTK, November 22, 2022. Minute 07:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wFY9ukFOugo>

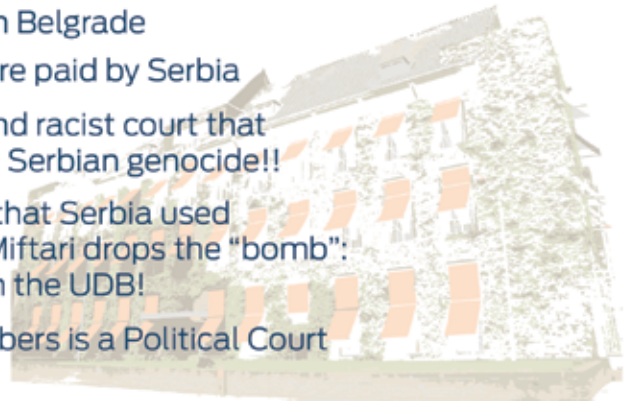
Kosovo citizens; there are people who do not dare speak about it as they fear that any day someone from this court may show up at their door..."<sup>167</sup>

These claims cannot be described as false, but it is clear that they are not supported by sufficient facts or, to say the least, these facts have not yet been publicised by the time this study was published.

### Figure 15: Narratives against EULEX and Specialist Chambers on Facebook

From October 15, 2022, to May 1, 2023, 5,325 Facebook posts that received 190,000 interactions mentioned the Specialist Chambers in general. The main narratives against EULEX and Specialist Chambers have been:

- The Specialist Chambers has an office in Belgrade
- Witnesses at the Specialist Chambers are paid by Serbia
- The Specialist Chambers is a political and racist court that has been put at the service of crime and Serbian genocide!!
- 19 hours and 24 minutes are the videos that Serbia used for blackmailing Hashim Thaçi – Naim Miftari drops the "bomb": Here are the places where they met with the UDB!
- UK Prime Minister: The Specialist Chambers is a Political Court to fill the pockets of EU flatterers."



According to the fact-checking mechanism, Krypometer, 13 articles have been written to document fake, incomplete, or partially fake information regarding the work done by the Specialist Chambers or about the persons against whom Specialist Chambers have filed an indictment.

Fake articles about KLA leaders being indicted and travelling to the Specialist Chambers in the Hague began spreading long before their court procedures began. In 2019, an article aired on Serbian state television, falsely claiming that the leaders of the KLA were transferred to The Hague. In reality, Thaçi was indicted on November 5, 2020. Another article in 2020 stated falsely that Xhavit Haliti, a member of parliament of Kosovo, was summoned by the Specialist Chambers. This article has been shared 153 times on Facebook and received 2,963 reactions.<sup>168</sup>

Another false story shared by Albanian language media on February 2, 2023, reported that Nazim Haradinaj and Hysni Gucati, heads of the KLA Veterans' Organisation (WVO), were convicted for the crimes committed during the war.<sup>169</sup> The heads of the WVO of the

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, Minute 31:22

<sup>168</sup> *Crowdtangle*

KLA were found guilty of distributing confidential and non-public information related to the investigations of the Special Investigative Task Force ('SITF') and the Office of the Specialist Prosecutor without authorisation. They were not guilty for crimes committed during the Kosovo War.

Additionally, another fake article revealed the identity of witnesses<sup>170</sup> testifying against former president Hashim Thaçi. The news claiming that a witness against Thaçi had been revealed was published on the Lajme.Buzz portal, and shared on eight Facebook pages: Gazeta Atdheu, Telegram.info, Janina Press, Der Kosova Albaner, Lajme Buzz, Der Albaner +, Der Albanian, Global INFO. Based on the information extracted from the "CrowdTangle" application, administrators of all these pages were from North Macedonia.

Other fake or incomplete articles were published about the health of the leaders of the KLA<sup>171</sup> who are in The Hague, their plea, and their permanent<sup>172</sup> or temporary<sup>173</sup> release.

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<sup>169</sup> "Fake reporting that Gucati and Haradinaj have been indicted for war crimes (Rrena se Gucati e Haradinaj u dënuan për krime lufte)" Kallxo (Krypometër), February 2, 2023 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-gucati-e-haradinaj-u-denuan-per-krime-lufte/>

<sup>170</sup> "Fake reporting on 'reveal of witness against former president Thaçi in the Hague (Rrena për 'zbulimin e dëshmitarit kundër ish presidentit Thaçi në Hagë')", Kallxo (Krypometër), August, 11, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-zbulimin-e-deshmitarit-kunder-ish-presidentit-thaçi-ne-hage/>

<sup>171</sup> "Fake reporting that Hashim Thaçi has suffered a heart attack" (Rrena se Hashim Thaçi ka pësuar sulm në zemër)", Kallxo (Krypometër), April 28, 2023 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-hashim-thaçi-ka-pesuar-sulm-ne-zemer/>

<sup>172</sup> "Fake reporting on the release of heads of KLA from the Hague (Rrena për lirim të kërre të UÇK-së nga Haga)", Kallxo (Krypometër), September 9, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-lirim-e-krereve-te-uck-se-nga-haga/>

<sup>173</sup> "Fake news on the return of Kadri Veseli to Kosovo" (Lajmi rrejshëm për kthimin e Kadri Veselit në Kosovë)", Kallxo (Krypometër), December, 10, 2021, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/lajmi-rrejshem-per-kthimin-e-kadri-veselit-ne-kosove/>

Figure 16: Illustration of the map of dissemination from sources from North Macedonia on Specialist Chambers

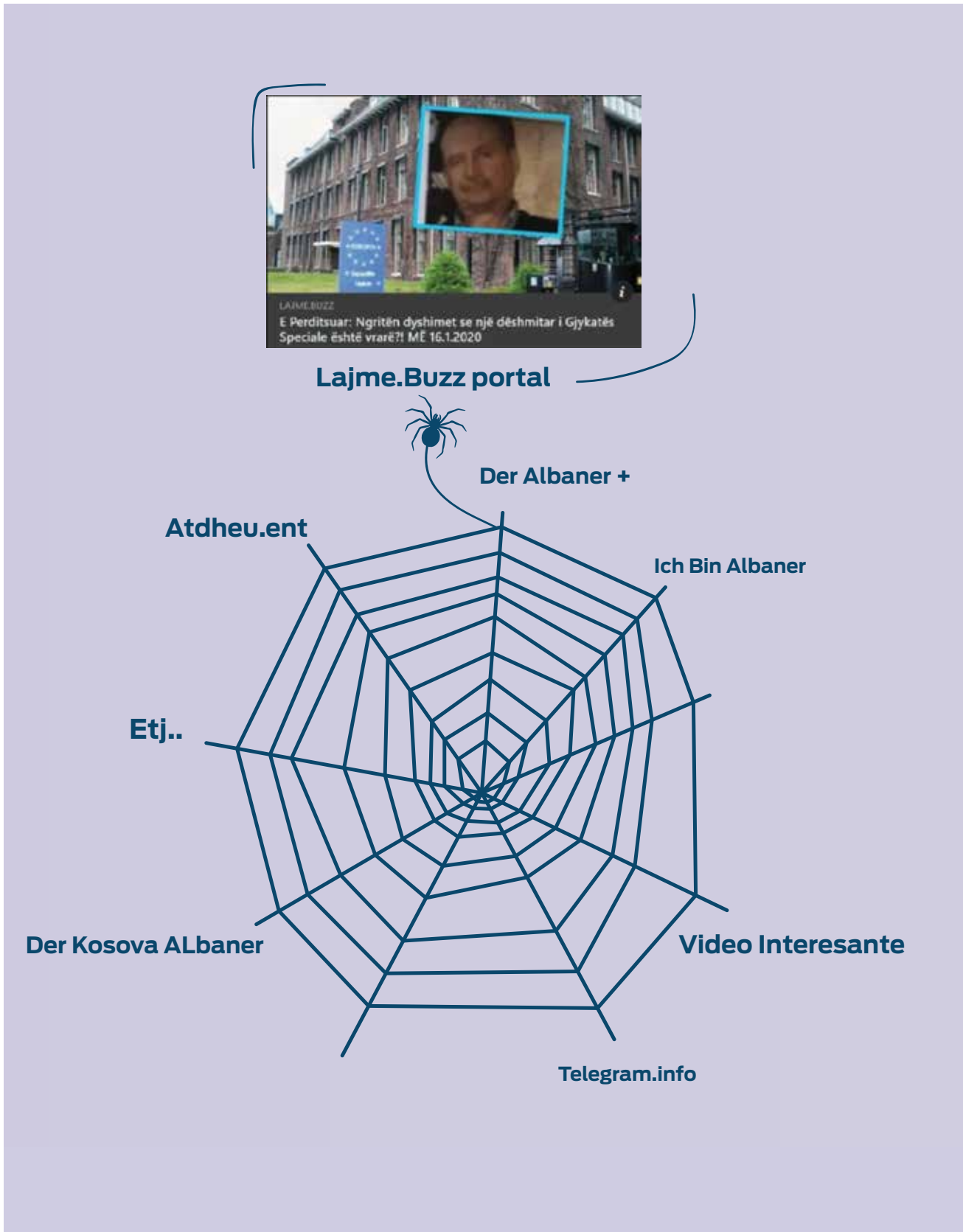
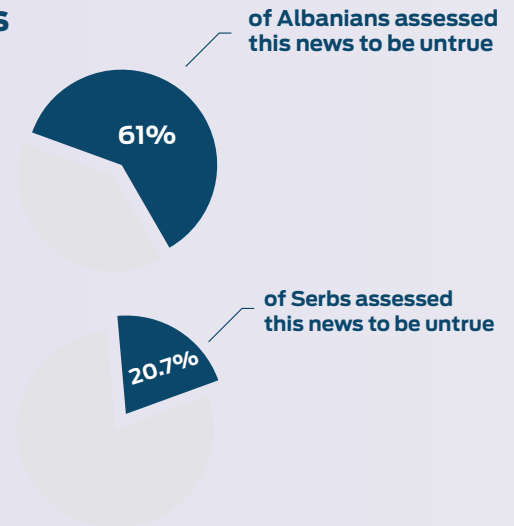


Figure 17: The impact of narratives about the establishment of the Specialist Chambers

### The impact of narratives about the establishment of the Specialist Chambers

Data from opinion polls (Omnibus) conducted in May indicate that disinformation from this time had an impact on citizens.

The 1,056 respondents from both Albanian and Serbian ethnicities were asked if they believed the news that “Hashim Thaci is accused of organ trafficking.”



In the indictment published by the Specialist Court, Hashim Thaci is not accused of organ trafficking; however, false stories have led citizens to believe this claim.

# Chinese influence in the media and the public

## 1.9 Promotional narratives on Chinese economy and products

China does not recognise Kosovo's sovereignty, but this has not prevented it from engaging in trade with Kosovo. In 2021, the value of goods exported from China to Kosovo was 450 million Euros, 30 million Euros more than in the previous year. In Kosovo, there are no known Chinese news agencies. However, there is one Facebook page of a radio station<sup>174</sup> that publishes news in Albanian, is Chinese state-controlled media and has 1.1 million followers on Facebook. While the radio's Facebook page mainly distributes news related to China and the US, the portal also publishes news about Albania and Kosovo from the local media. However, the portal also publishes statements from the Chinese government about developments in Kosovo, such as the arrest of two UN officials<sup>175</sup> by the Kosovo Police.

One topic extensively covered by China is the use of Chinese 5G technology, which has been banned in the US. In an agreement signed between Kosovo and Serbia at the White House on September 4, 2020, Kosovo committed to not use Chinese 5G technology.<sup>176</sup> The Government of Kosovo banned Kosovo's institutions from purchasing technology from countries under sanctions, including some Chinese manufacturers.<sup>177</sup> A partly false story was published in the Kosovo media, saying that the government banned the Chinese manufacturer Huawei. The truth is that state institutions cannot purchase products from this manufacturer, but citizens and businesses can continue to import Huawei products. From October 15, 2022, to March 15, 2023, the China-controlled Radio Station's Facebook page posted 68 stories mentioning the 5G network. Chinese-controlled media articles about the 5G network were also published by media in Kosovo and North Macedonia. For example, an article titled "China's 5G Phone Shipments Soar 70 Percent in January-September" was

<sup>174</sup> Radio Ejani, Facebook, accessed May 17, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/CMGShqip>

<sup>175</sup> "Chinese Deputy Permanent Representative at the United Nations: Arrests of United Nations Personnel in Kosovo are Unacceptable (I dërguari kinez: Arrestimet e stafit të OKB-së në Kosovë janë të papranueshme)," CRI Online Shqip, June 11, 2019, <https://albanian.cri.cn/1552/2019/06/11/28s179825.html>

<sup>176</sup> "Serbia and Kosovo sign economic normalisation agreement in Oval Office ceremony," CNN, September 4, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/09/04/politics/serbia-kosovo-agreement/index.html>

<sup>177</sup> Public Procurement Regulatory Commission, Republic of Kosovo. "Notification on the Prohibition of Equipment Manufactured by Chinese Entities" <https://e-prokurimi.rks-gov.net/HOME/Documents/Lajmet%20levizese/alb/576/Njoftim%20p%C3%ABr%20AK%20-%20Specifikimet%20teknike.pdf>

published and republished in several media in Kosovo<sup>178,179</sup> and in North Macedonia.<sup>180</sup> Kosovo<sup>181</sup> and Macedonian<sup>182</sup> media republished a China-controlled article titled: “Chinese tech giant Huawei announced it will deepen its partnership with leading Austrian drone manufacturer Dronetech in 5G-powered smart agriculture”.

Chinese-controlled media articles about foreign investments were also republished. An article titled: “The inflation rate remains stable in the face of the pandemic, while 2022 marks an increase in foreign investments” was originally published in one media,<sup>183</sup> and then republished in another local media<sup>184</sup> and in China Foreign Radio (albanian.cri.cn).<sup>185</sup>

Another story titled “Hebei’s foreign trade exceeds 310 billion yuan in January-July” was published in one local media<sup>186</sup> and later published also in another Albanian language media<sup>187</sup> and the Chinese-controlled media site, Albanian.cri.cn.<sup>188</sup>

<sup>178</sup> “Delivery of Chinese 5G Phones Reach 70 Percent During January-September (Dërgesat e telefonave 5G të Kinës arrijnë 70 për qind në janar-shtator)”, Infokus, October 25, 2021, <https://gazetainfokus.com/dergesat-e-telefonave-5g-te-kines-arrijne-70-per-qind-ne-janar-shtator/>

<sup>179</sup> “Delivery of Chinese 5G Phones Increases to 70% (Rritet me 70% dergesa e telefonave 5G në Kinë)”, TV21, Facebook post, October 25, 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/673190229477851/posts/2409811612482362/?locale=de\\_DE&paipv=0&eav=AfbrN1aFkbJUoezEQnh-4lxf-wZB\\_jcvGqykotcmJgj9wqLjybv-Z5plMXzjgzSLxo&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/673190229477851/posts/2409811612482362/?locale=de_DE&paipv=0&eav=AfbrN1aFkbJUoezEQnh-4lxf-wZB_jcvGqykotcmJgj9wqLjybv-Z5plMXzjgzSLxo&_rdr)

<sup>180</sup> “Delivery of 5G Phones from China Reach 70 Percent During January-September (Dërgesat e telefonave 5G të Kinës arrijnë 70 për qind në janar-shtator)”, Medial.mk, Facebook post, October 25, 2021, [https://www.facebook.com/www.medial.mk/posts/1822531257956129/?locale=ms\\_MY&paipv=0&eav=AfbXkR-hTVFsCBCyfhRaiZ8h17WEPcCANPbXKpWaE8BnKqP9NiOZEjkYLB-Da1R0qlE&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/www.medial.mk/posts/1822531257956129/?locale=ms_MY&paipv=0&eav=AfbXkR-hTVFsCBCyfhRaiZ8h17WEPcCANPbXKpWaE8BnKqP9NiOZEjkYLB-Da1R0qlE&_rdr)

<sup>181</sup> “Huawei and Austrian Drone Manufacturer ‘Dronetech’ Deepen Partnership on Intelligent Agriculture (Huawei dhe prodhuesi austriak i dronëve Dronetech thellojnë partneritetin në bujqësinë inteligjente)”, TV21, October 6, 2022, <https://tv21.tv/huawei-dhe-prodhuesi-austriak-i-droneve-dronetech-thellojne-partneritetin-ne-bujqesine-inteligjente/>

<sup>182</sup> “Huawei and Austrian Drone Manufacturer ‘Dronetech’ Deepen Partnership on Intelligent Agriculture (Huawei dhe prodhuesi austriak i dronëve Dronetech thellojnë partneritetin në bujqësinë inteligjente)”, ZHURNAL.MK, Facebook post, October 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100064455442235/posts/470146325143878>

<sup>183</sup> “Inflation Rate Remains Stable in the Face of the Pandemic, Meanwhile Year 2022 Marks an Increase in Foreign Investment (Norma e inflacionit mbetet e qëndrueshme përballë pandemisë, ndërkohë që viti 2022 shenon rritje në investimet e huaja)”, Infokus, December 24, 2022, <https://gazetainfokus.com/norma-e-inflacionit-mbetet-e-qendrueshme-perballe-pandemise-nderkohe-qe-viti-2022-shenon-rritje-ne-investimet-e-huaja/>

<sup>184</sup> “Inflation Rate Remains Stable in the Face of the Pandemic, Meanwhile Year 2022 Marks an Increase in Foreign Investment (Norma e inflacionit mbetet e qëndrueshme përballë pandemisë, ndërkohë që viti 2022 shenon rritje në investimet e huaja)”, TV21, December 24, 2022, <https://tv21.tv/norma-e-inflacionit-mbetet-e-qendrueshme-perballe-pandemise-nderkohe-qe-viti-2022-shenon-rritje-ne-investimet-e-huaja/>

<sup>185</sup> “Numbers on the Fight Against COVID-19 in China: Inflation Rate in China Remains Stable Despite Global Price Hikes (Numrat në luftën kundër COVID-19 në Kinë: norma e inflacionit e Kinës mbetet e qëndrueshme pavarësisht rritjes globale të çmimeve)”, CRI Online Shqip, December 24, 2022, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2022/12/24/ARTIUAWnh4qTKR3W8iBid87G221224.shtml>

<sup>186</sup> “Foreign trade of Hebei province exceeds 46 billion dollars in January - July (Tregtia e jashtme e Hebeit tejkalon 46 miliardë dollarë në janar-korrik)”, Infokus, August 21, 2022 <https://gazetainfokus.com/tregtia-e-jashtme-e-hebeit-tejkalon-46-miliarde-dollare-ne-janar-korrik/>

<sup>187</sup> “Foreign trade of Hebei province exceeds 46 billion dollars in January - July (Tregtia e jashtme e Hebeit tejkalon 46 miliardë dollarë në janar-korrik)”, TV21, Facebook post, August 21, 2022 <https://www.facebook.com/tv21hd/posts/tregtia-e-jashtme-e-hebeit-tejkalon-46-miliard%C3%AB-dollar%C3%AB-n%C3%AB-janar-korrik/2674193912710796/>

<sup>188</sup> “Foreign trade of Hebei province exceeds 310 billion yuan in January - July (Tregtia e jashtme e Hebeit tejkalon 310 miliardë juan në janar-korrik)”, CRI Online Shqip, August 21, 2022 <https://albanian.cri.cn/news/china/3124/20220821/777432.html>



The China-controlled media published numerous articles in Albanian praising China, the Chinese economy, and its tourism, and promoting Chinese products, such as electric cars.<sup>189</sup>

### 1.10 China's Anti-US narratives

Another topic extensively covered on the China-controlled page is the US, which was mentioned in 253 posts from October 15, 2022, to April 1, 2023. Posts include responses and counter-responses of Chinese officials to US statements and policies. However, some posts were also about US domestic politics. Chinese media presented the US as violent, awash with weapons, and with a high murder rate.<sup>190</sup>

One post stated “US ‘democracy’ brings social division domestically and causes wars externally”.<sup>191</sup> Meanwhile, another post accused the U.S. of behaving like the “world police” and asked if “the US is pushing its democracy down a path of no return?”<sup>192</sup> Chinese-controlled media dedicated a video to the Democracy Summit organised by US President Joe Biden criticising the U.S. for organising the summit while their own democracy has major issues.<sup>193</sup>

The Chinese-controlled media also reported that “The Middle East is again beyond the ‘US script’”.<sup>194</sup> After 12 years of isolation, Syria returned to the family of the League of Arab States. CNR also presents America as a country where there is no security, no democracy and the economy and health are at a low level.

Through several such articles in Albanian, the USA is presented as a country with a high murder rate creating the perception that the USA is a dangerous place to live, such as the following text:

“St. Louis in the US state of Missouri was one of the most prosperous industrial centres in

<sup>189</sup> “Electric vehicle industry in China with high rates of development” (*Industria e automjeteve me energji të re në Kinë, me ritme të shpejta zhvillimi*), CRI Online Shqip, December 31, 2022 <https://albanian.cri.cn/2022/12/31/ARTIpe4m3ntEcqorrA7IRLQw221231.shtm-l?fbclid=IwAR3OutoS4KcPRj1RbjRX1XplihcqX282dppD6OUBf3mB2QPCyhr4Uw2IAk>

<sup>190</sup> “According to the March 28 announcements of the American television network ABC, in the first three months of this year, shootings were again at the top of the media news. (Sipas njoftimeve të 28 marsit të rrjetit televiziv amerikan ABC, në tre muajt e parë të këtij viti të shtënat me armë përsëri ishin në krye të lajmeve të mediejeve), Radio Ejani, Facebook post, March 30, 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/100069414030566/posts/525862076404256>

<sup>191</sup> “American “democracy” sows social discord domestically and causes wars abroad” (“Demokracia” amerikane, brenda sjell ndarje shoqërore dhe jashtë shkaktën luftëra), Radio Ejani, Facebook post, March 30, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=543321644607955>

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> “Isn’t this like those snails in the fire (A nuk është ajo si ata kërmijtë në zjarr?)”. Radio Ejani, Facebook post, March 27, 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/100069414030566/posts/524390969884700>

<sup>194</sup> Facebook post, “The Middle East is again outside the ‘US Script’ (Lindja e Mesme doli përsëri jashtë “skenarit të ShBA-së), Radio Ejani, May 9, 2023 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=543321644607955>

the US in the 20th century. But today St. Louis is one of the most dangerous American cities with the highest homicide rate in the world.”<sup>195</sup>

Also, to strengthen this narrative, another article talks about how the demand for children’s books that deal with various traumas has increased and underlines the cases of school shootings<sup>196</sup> or the article that shows how “Gun murders and suicides have reached a historic high in the United States.”<sup>197</sup>

In the framework of the anti-US narrative, CNR also occasionally publishes articles that reflect how the American economy has weakened<sup>198</sup> or how it has failed to cope with the pandemic using titles such as “USA, obstacle no. 1 of the joint global response to COVID-19.”<sup>199</sup> Also, CNR tries to build the belief that America, in the name of democracy, carried out anti-democratic actions. American politics is presented as a policy that produces polarisation and social division in its own country, while in other countries it causes wars<sup>200</sup>. Also, another article discusses how the Summit for Democracy “is another American farce in the name of democracy.”<sup>201</sup>

<sup>195</sup> “Real America: St. Louis residents say they have to stop crime themselves (Amerika e vërtetë: Banorë të Shën Luisit thonë se duhet të ndalojnë krim vetë)”, CRI Online Shqip, March 24, 2023, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2023/03/24/VIDEcV7PMq8X3g7J0b6vQ4BH230324.shtml>

<sup>196</sup> “In the US, the demand for children’s books on trauma treatment increases significantly (ShBA, rritet ndjeshëm kërkesa për libra fëmijësh mbi trajtimin e traumave)”, CRI Online Shqip, October 14, 2022, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2022/10/14/ARTI5iDmDh0766VVUB-PorxtT221014.shtml>

<sup>197</sup> “US gun deaths hit record high (Vdekjet me armë në SHBA shënojnë rekord të lartë)”, CRI Online Shqip, October 13, 2022, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2022/10/13/ARTIN7JcBs5MQ6TxTJZxfjz221013.shtml>

<sup>198</sup> “US fourth-quarter GDP weaker than expected (PBB-ja e tremujorit të katërt në SHBA, më e dobët nga sa pritej)”, CRI Online Shqip, February 26, 2023, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2023/02/26/ARTIQxDZRNmc0HpjHh2Clf6o230226.shtml>

<sup>199</sup> “CMG: USA, barrier no. 1 of the joint global response to COVID-19 (CMG: ShBA-ja, pengesa nr. 1 e përbashkët global të COVID-19)”, CRI Online Shqip, January 11, 2023, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2023/01/11/ARTIpesivQfCKc348TtykVF5230111.shtml>

<sup>200</sup> “American “democracy” brings social division inside and causes wars outside (“Demokracia” amerikane, brenda sjell ndarje shoqërore dhe jashtë shkakton luftëra)”, Radio Ejani, March 30, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=543321644607955>

<sup>201</sup> “The USA conducts the Summit for Democracy with selfish goals (ShBA-ja zhvillon Samitin për Demokracinë me qëllime egoiste)”, CRI Online Shqip, March 27, 2023, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2023/03/27/ARTILvCaW5KLQuYt7XYqUO8E230327.shtml>

## 1.11 Narratives on public health supported by China

Throughout the analysed period, health-care narratives disseminated by the Chinese news agency China Radio International Online<sup>202</sup> (CRI Online) in Albanian were republished by Kosovo media. CRI Online posted 317 COVID-19 related posts on their Facebook page,<sup>203</sup> some of which were republished by different portals and websites. One article titled, “Chinese official: The number of people seeking treatment in clinics is decreasing”, was republished by several media<sup>204</sup> platforms and other pages<sup>205</sup> in Albanian.

Another example is the news piece titled, “IMF raises the forecast for global growth in 2023 after the reopening of China,” which was re-published by an online portal<sup>206</sup> after it was published by Chinese state-sponsored media, CRI Online.<sup>207</sup> The same article was shared by five other media outlets.<sup>208</sup>

Chinese government media also republishes articles which have been produced or generated by Kosovo media. This may be done in order to increase outreach and audience and to make the media appear as inclusive as possible. Several other articles, published on local media, can also be found on CRI Online’s website. Noteworthy is the timing of these publications; there have been some instances where a Kosovar portal published the text first, followed by CRI Online. An example of this is the article, “China, the last wave of Covid-19 has ended”, which was initially published by an Albanian language media<sup>209</sup> and then by CRI Online.<sup>210</sup>

<sup>202</sup> China Radio International Online, Chinese state-controlled media, <https://albanian.cri.cn/>

<sup>203</sup> Radio Ejani, <https://www.facebook.com/CMGShqip>

<sup>204</sup> “The number of people seeking treatment in clinics is decreasing (Në rënie numri i njerëzve që kërkojnë trajtim në klinika)”, Infokus, January 16, 2023, <https://gazetainfokus.com/ne-renie-numri-i-njerezve-qe-kerkojne-trajtim-ne-klinika/>

<sup>205</sup> “The number of people seeking treatment in clinics is decreasing (Në rënie numri i njerëzve që kërkojnë trajtim në klinika)”, Javane-ews.al, Facebook post, January 16, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100064036089709/posts/558596142951584>

<sup>206</sup> “IMF raises global growth forecast for 2023 after China reopens (FMN-ja ngre parashikimin për rritjen globale më 2023 pas rihapjes së Kinës)”, Infokus, January 31, 2023, <https://gazetainfokus.com/fmn-ja-ngre-parashikimin-per-rritjen-globale-me-2023-pas-rihapjes-se-kines/>

<sup>207</sup> “IMF raises global growth forecast for 2023 after China reopens (FMN-ja ngre parashikimin për rritjen globale më 2023 pas rihapjes së Kinës)”, CRI Online Shqip, January 31, 2023, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2023/01/31/ARTI4Jqu5rdH7aZOCGOYd80T230131.shtml>

<sup>208</sup> “IMF raises global growth forecast for 2023 (FMN-ja ngre parashikimin për rritjen globale më 2023)”, TV21, Facebook post, January 31, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100076150463072/posts/210532178161796>

<sup>209</sup> “China, the last wave of Covid-19 is over (Kinë, vala e fundit e Covid-19 ka përfunduar)”, TV21, January 30, 2023, <https://tv21.tv/kine-vala-e-fundit-e-covid-19-ka-perefunduar/>

<sup>210</sup> “The rate of infection by COVID-19 during the Spring Festival in China is low (Përçindja e infektimit nga COVID-19 gjatë Festës së Pranverës në Kinë është e ulët)”, CRI Online Shqip, January 30, 2023, <https://albanian.cri.cn/2023/01/30/ARTI3w0Gfmrww0dDQwAzvgXL230130.shtml>

Figure 18: Disinformation distributed from North Macedonia

### Disinformation distributed from North Macedonia

The Facebook page named Lajme.buzz previously published news about Kosovo. From July 2022 to May 2023, according to Krypometri, this profile published 30 articles with disinformation, missing context, etc.

This portal manages at least 10 Facebook pages that post news: Lajme Buzz, Der Kosova Albaner, Atdheu.net, Janina Press, Der Albaner, Telegrami.info, Ich Bin Albaner, Der Albaner+, Info Globale and Video Interessante.

Based on data extracted from “CrowdTangle”, all of these pages have administrators from North Macedonia. News published on the website <https://web.lajme.buzz/> and <https://mainnewsplus.com/> were shared by the Facebook pages. These three websites publish the same news.



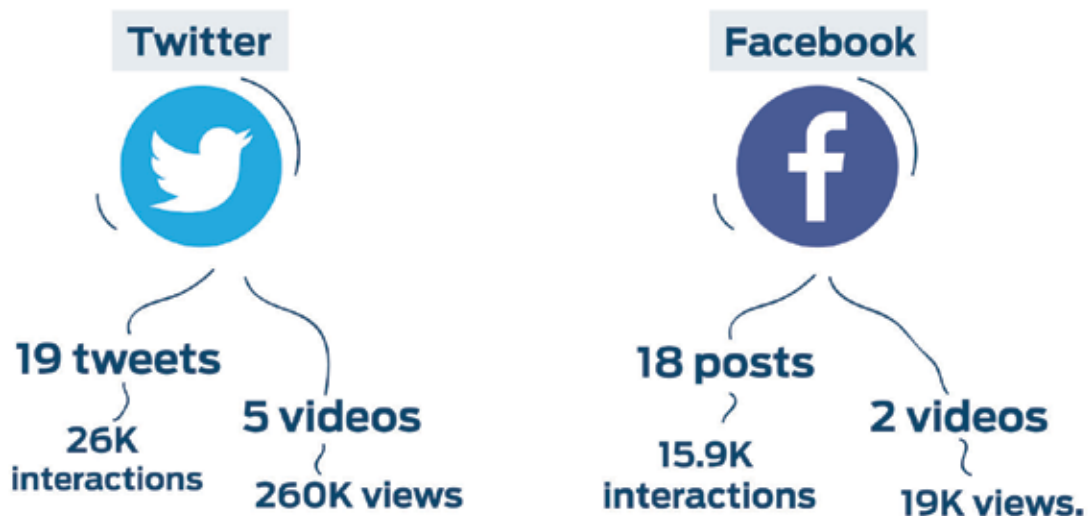
Figure 19: Three disinformation narratives of MEP Bay spread during his visit in Kosovo

## Three disinformation narratives of MEP Bay during his visit to Kosovo

In late October 2022, French MEP Nicolas Bay visited Kosovo and launched a propaganda campaign.

A member of the far-right party "Reconquête," Bay used Twitter and Facebook to spread three key narratives. First, he labelled the KLA as terrorists. Second, he distorted the historical context of Kosovo by claiming that it was never annexed by Serbia.

Third, he portrayed Kosovo as an Islamic state and insinuated Kosovo's lack of tolerance for churches and the practice of Orthodoxy.



Furthermore, his messages were shared 48 times  
on 42 different Facebook pages.

## II. Narratives and disinformation that harm security, reduce trust in the West, and worsen inter-ethnic relations

While narratives that harm security, reduce trust in the West, and worsen inter-ethnic relations also exist in other countries, damage caused by false narratives can be especially harmful due to Kosovo's political situation. Even in the best case scenario, disinformation deepens mistrust between hostile communities, Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs. At worst, it directly harms people's lives. Therefore, this is the main focus of our analysis in this chapter. It aims to increase citizens' and institutions' awareness that this high level of disinformation damages citizens' security and inter-ethnic relations. We have identified these narratives.

Figure 20 - Map of domestic and inter-ethnic disinformation





## 2.1 Disinformation on inter-ethnic relations and incidents

While Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs certainly have different interpretations about the war in Kosovo, current events are also to fit a certain narrative.

We will first examine the events that followed the Kosovo government's decision to stop KM number plates, issued by Serbia and used by inhabitants of northern municipalities of Kosovo (Mitrovica e Veriut/Severna Mitrovica, Zubin Potok/Zubin-Potok, Zvečan/Zvečan and Leposaviq/Leposavić).<sup>211</sup> This move was extremely unpopular amongst the local population, particularly the requirement that local Serb police officers (who comprise the majority of Kosovo police in the north) must issue fines to the local population, largely Kosovo Serbs, who are using KM plates (because Kosovo authorities view these plates as illegal). Serb police officers resigned en masse, and prosecutors and judges in the north followed suit. Cars with Kosovo-issued licence plates were burned. Four mayors of the northern municipalities resigned. In response to these resignations, Kosovo authorities began preparing for new elections.

The Municipal Election Commission was attacked in two municipalities and its offices were ransacked. This led Kosovo authorities to arrest Dejan Pantić, a Serb former member of Kosovo Police who they claimed organised the attack on the Electoral Commission Office. Pantić pleaded not guilty to the charges. Following Pantić's arrest, local Serbs organised barricades blocking roads for a month. The barricades were removed at the same time as Pantić, was eventually released from pre-detention and his measure was replaced with house arrest. The mayoral elections, which were initially scheduled for December, were postponed until April. Before the implementation of the second phase of the licence plate policy, which would have required police officers to issue fines to drivers of KM plates, a new agreement was reached by Kosovo and Serbian leaders in Brussels.

Kosovo authorities agreed not to apply the decision to already registered licence plates, and Belgrade agreed not to issue new licence plates for Serbian majority municipalities in Kosovo.

During this period, the Serbian language media placed special emphasis on content showing the threats and pressure placed on local Kosovo Serbs and the aggressiveness and radicalism of the Kosovo police units<sup>212</sup> and the Prime Minister.

<sup>211</sup> *The population in the north of Kosovo is estimated to be around 40,000 people, most of whom are Serbs. The KM plates derive their name from "Kosovska Mitrovica", a reference to the former Yugoslavian system that used town letters for identification. However, since the end of the war, Kosovo has adopted a different system, using numbers to identify seven regions within the country.*

<sup>212</sup> *ROSU unit "hunts" Serbs around Gazivode and fires bursts from armored vehicles; KP: We shoot in self-defense (kosovo-online.com, December 2022) in Annex the news is translated in english Example 1, Kosovo policemen blocked North Mitrovica, no incidents but*



The Kosovo Albanian media on the other hand also spread disinformation. One example is from the Albanian language portal Faktebuzz. The article said that an alert had been spread about elections in the north<sup>213</sup> and that Vučić had a plan to destabilise the north of Kosovo.<sup>214</sup> Meanwhile, one of the narratives spread in the Serbian community was that an “Oluja (Storm) operation”<sup>215</sup> against Kosovo Serbs was about to happen.

This narrative began after Kosovo police deployed new units in (North Mitrovica) on December 8, 2022, following an attack on the government buildings scheduled to serve as municipal elections stations. The disinformation that police was sending reinforcement to the north<sup>216</sup> to attack the Serbian population was first reported on the Kosovo serb portal,<sup>217</sup> and then republished (with all its disinformation content) by dozens of other Serbian media, including websites such as blic.rs,<sup>218</sup> naslovi.net,<sup>219</sup> pink.rs,<sup>220</sup> republika.rs,<sup>221</sup> kurir.s.<sup>222</sup> Interestingly, KosovoOnline<sup>223</sup> portal removed parts that were false from the published news soon after publication, but other media which had republished this initial news did not amend

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tense (kosovo-online.com, December 2022) in Annex, translated in english as Example 2.

<sup>213</sup> “Fake title that is a raised alarm in Belgrade due to elections in north Mitrovica (Titulli i rremë së në Beograd është “ngritur alarm” për zgjedhjet në Mitrovicë të veriut)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December 17, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-ne-beograd-eshte-ngritur-alarm-per-zgjedhjet-ne-mitrovicë-te-veriut/>

<sup>214</sup> “Unsupported claims on Vučić’s scenario for the north (Titull i pambështetur në fakte për “skenarin e Vuçiqit për veriun)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December, 28, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titull-i-pambeshtetur-ne-fakte-per-skenarin-e-vuciqit-per-veriun/>

<sup>215</sup> Operation Storm (Operacija Oluja in Croatian) was a Croatian military offensive aimed at retaking areas of the Republic of Croatia which had been occupied by Serb forces. The operation led to a significant number of civilian casualties and sparked a mass exodus of Serbs from the region.

<sup>216</sup> “Fake reporting on the special forces blockade in north Mitrovica (Rrena për bllokimin e Mitrovicës së Veriut nga Njësia Speciale)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December, 8, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-blokimin-e-mitrovices-se-veriut-nga-njesia-speciale/>

<sup>217</sup> “Kosovo policemen blocked North Mitrovica, no incidents but tense” (Kosovski policajci blokirali Severnu Mitrovicu, nema incidenata ali napeto)”, kosovo-online.com, December 8, 2022, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/kosovski-policajci-blokirali-severnu-mitrovicu-nema-incidentata-ali-napeto-9-12-2022>

<sup>218</sup> “New forces of the Kosovo police entered North Mitrovica, deployed at several points in the city (VIDEO) (Nove snage kosovske policije ušle u Severnu Mitrovicu, raspoređene na više punktova u gradu (VIDEO))” Blic.rs, December 8, 2022, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nove-snage-kosovske-policije-usle-u-severnu-mitrovicu-rasporedene-na-vise-punktova-u-xb9hhj3>

<sup>219</sup> “New forces of the Kosovo police entered North Mitrovica, deployed at several points in the city (VIDEO) (Nove snage kosovske policije ušle u Severnu Mitrovicu, raspoređene na više punktova u gradu (VIDEO))” naslovi.net, December 8, 2022, <https://naslovi.net/2022-12-09/blic/nove-snage-kosovske-policije-usle-u-severnu-mitrovicu-rasporedjene-na-vise-punktova-u-gradu-vid-eo/32183734>

<sup>220</sup> “ROSU BLOCKED NORTH MITROVICA! More than 200 of Kurti’s armed special forces deployed around the city - TWO SHOCK BOMBS THROWN (ROSU BLOKIRALA SEVERNU MITROVICU! Više od 200 Kurtijevih naoružanih specijalaca raspoređeno po obodu grada-BAČENE I DVE ŠOK BOMBE)”, pink.rs, December 8, 2022, <https://pink.rs/politika/456598/rosu-blokirala-severnu-mitrovicu-vise-od-200-kurtijevih-naoruzanih-specijalaca-rasporedjeno-po-obodu-grada--bacene-i-dve-sok-bombe>

<sup>221</sup> “THE FIRST VIDEO OF THE INVASION IN THE NORTH OF KOSOVO APPEARED: ROSU special forces marched into Mitrovica and blocked it - they also positioned themselves around the city (VIDEO) (POJAVIO SE PRVI SNIMAK UPADA NA SEVER KOSOVA: Specijalci ROSU umarširali u Mitrovicu i blokirali je - postavili se i po obodu grada (VIDEO))”, republika.rs, December 8, 2022, <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/politika/400339/prvi-snimak-upada-rosu-u-severnu-mitrovicu>

<sup>222</sup> “TERROR AGAINST SERBS: Kurti’s police raided North Mitrovica, 2 shock bombs were thrown (TEROR NAD SRBIMA: Kurtijeva policija upala u Severnu Mitrovicu, bačene 2 šok bombe)”, kurir.rs, December 8, 2022, <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/politika/4066640/pocela-drama-na-kosmetu-stotine-kurtijevih-specijalaca-uslo-u-severnu-mitrovicu>

<sup>223</sup> “Kosovo policemen blocked North Mitrovica, no incidents but tense” (Kosovski policajci blokirali Severnu Mitrovicu, nema incidenata ali napeto)”, kosovo-online.com, December 8, 2022, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/kosovski-policajci-blokirali-severnu-mitrovicu-nema-incidentata-ali-napeto-9-12-2022>

their articles. In total, 23 media outlets falsely claimed that special units<sup>224</sup> were stationed along the road and had blocked access to and from the north.

That evening, a Kosovo police team was fired at near Zvecan and one police officer was wounded. After these armed incidents, the Kosovo police send in special police forces in this area.

Two days later, Goran Rakić, the head of the Srpska Lista (Serbian List), the leading Serbian party in Kosovo, published a statement on Facebook which claimed that Albin Kurti, the Kosovo Prime Minister, was going to send armed forces to the north to persecute Kosovo Serbs and to carry out an “Oluja/Storm” operation.<sup>225</sup> BIRN’s fact-checking mechanism, Krypometer, classified this news as fake as no one confirmed the existence of such a plan.

However, panic spread among citizens as photos of special unit police officers deployed in that area were posted. Serbian language media reported that members of the Kosovo Liberation Army, KLA, wearing police uniforms, were stationed in the north. Kosovo Albanian language portals published photos of armed police officers in the north and portrayed them as liberators. Kosovo Police had to stop police personnel from taking pictures in the area due to misinterpretations on both sides.<sup>226</sup>

Meanwhile, Albanian-language media reported inaccurately about operations and arrests of people in the north. For example, on December 8, 2022, there were reports that a person was arrested for assaulting police personnel, when in fact the person was arrested for an assault that happened in 2022.<sup>227</sup>

At this time, Dejan Pantić, a former police officer, was arrested under suspicion that he was involved in attacking the Central Election Commission, CEC, offices in Mitrovica. His arrest generated disinformation, which was discussed earlier in this report in the section about the impact of narratives against NATO.

Dozens of outlets including Serbian tabloids and pro-government media claimed “The Occupation of the north of Kosovo and Metohija began: Kurti sent more than 300 special forces to the north; Belgrade has the answer”.<sup>228</sup> The response to such a narrative was

<sup>224</sup> “Fake reporting on the special forces blockade in north Mitrovica (Rrena për bllokimin e Mitrovicës së Veriut nga Njësia Speciale)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December, 8, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-bllokimin-e-mitrovices-se-veriut-nga-njesia-speciale/>

<sup>225</sup> “Fake warning by Goran Rakiq regarding operation ‘Oluja’ (Paralajmërimi i rremë i Goran Rakiqit për operacionin ‘Oluja’)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December 16, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/paralajmerimi-i-rreme-i-goran-rakiqit-per-operacionin-oluja/>

<sup>226</sup> “Colonel Gazmend Hoxha: Police has been ordered to not publish pictures taken in the north (Koloneli Gazmend Hoxha: Policët janë udhëzuar që të mos publikojnë fotografi nga veriu)”, Kallxo, December 21, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/lajm/koloneli-gazmend-hoxha-policet-jane-udhezuar-qe-te-mos-publikojne-fotografi-nga-veriu/>

<sup>227</sup> “Fake reporting on the arrest of a person who attacked the police on the evening of December 8th, 2022 (Rrena për arrestimin e personit që sulmoi policinë mbrëmjen e 8 dhjetorit 2022)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December 9, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-arrestimin-e-personit-qe-sulmoi-policine-mbremjen-e-8-dhjetorit-2022/>

<sup>228</sup> “POČELA OKUPACIJA SEVERA KOSOVA I METOHIJE: Kurti poslao više od 300 specijalaca na sever; Beograd ima odgovor (The occupation of the north of Kosovo and Metohija began: Kurti sent more than 300 special forces to the north; Belgrade has the answer)”, Novosti, December 8, 2023, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/politika/1180558/pocela-okupacija-severa-kosova-metohije-kurti-poslao-izmedju-200-300-specijalaca-sever>. Translation to English provided in Annex as part of Example 3;

Vučić's request to send Serbian security personnel to Kosovo.<sup>229</sup> When Kosovo police at the checkpoint were allegedly forced to shoot because their vehicle was shot at first, the Serbian pro-government media framed the incident as "Kurti's terror"<sup>230</sup>. The media immediately portrayed the wounded men as wounded heroes, who were visited by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Defence of Serbia.<sup>231</sup>

More false reporting followed. The fake story about Kurti visiting the barricades was published on the web portal of RTK, the national broadcaster, as well as other media.<sup>232</sup> "Kurti does not back down, other units head towards the north" was another source of disinformation. Another narrative aiming to generate panic was the false report that Albanian citizens were being attacked when going to Serbia.<sup>233</sup> During the tensions in the north, an Albanian language media spread news that an expatriate had been attacked in Serbia.

The news published on December 13, 2022, was false because the event had happened two years prior and had nothing to do with the events in the north.<sup>234</sup> Even politicians fell victim to this false story. Vlora Çitaku, former ambassador of Kosovo to the US, admitted that she had fallen prey to disinformation when she tweeted that a bus transporting Albanians had been attacked in Serbia.<sup>235</sup> Another news story shared on Facebook falsely claimed that Albania was sending 500 police officers to Kosovo. This story built on a previous false narrative that Albania was helping Kosovo by sending security troops when ethnic tensions were high in the north of Kosovo.

Kosovo police debunked the news, which had received 78 reactions on Facebook. On December 26, 2022, disinformation that Kosovo had increased its military budget from 60 million to 300 million Euros was published on Facebook. The page claimed that Albin Kurti quadrupled the budget in only two years of government. The actual budget dedicated to the military was 123 million Euros.

<sup>229</sup> "On the sixth day of the barricades in the north, the Serbs do not give up their demand (Šesti dan barikada na severu, Srbi ne odustaju od svojih zahteva)", *kosovo-online.com*, December 15, 2022, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/drustvo/sesti-dan-barikada-na-severu-srbi-ne-odustaju-od-svojih-zahteva-15-12-2022>. Translation to English provided in Annex as part of Example 4

<sup>230</sup> "Srbi ne mogu vise da trpe Kurtijev Terror" (Serbs can't take Kurti's terror anymore), *ATV BL*, 7 November, 2022 <https://www.atvbl.rs/vijesti/srbija/srbi-ne-mogu-vise-da-trpe-kurtijev-terror-nece-albanska-cizma-da-kroci-na-sjever-7-11-2022>

<sup>231</sup> This frame ultimately is contextualised as innocent Serbs are arrested <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3620245-vucevic-obisao-ranjenog-miljana> and <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/rosu-specijalci-rafalima-potpuno-unistili-automobil-u-kome-je-bio-miljan-delevic-23&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1684088324631518&usg=AOvVaw-1jc2OWFoNBxYYoWDVYirqK> (Translated as part of example 5 and Example 6 in the Annex)

<sup>232</sup> "Fake reporting that Kurti visited the north (Rrena se Albin Kurti ishte në veri)", *Kallxo (Krypometer)*, December 11, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-albin-kurti-ishte-ne-veri/>

<sup>233</sup> "Fake reporting on Kurti's statement: "Serbs will see" (Rrena se Kurti ka deklaruar: "Do ta shohin serbët")", *Kallxo (Krypometer)*, December 17, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-kurti-ka-deklaruar-do-ta-shohin-serbet/>

<sup>234</sup> "Fake Reporting that an (Albanian) emigree was attacked in Serbia", *Kallxo (Krypometer)*, March 12, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-mergimtari-pesoi-incidenti-ne-serbi/>

<sup>235</sup> "Citaku apologizes for falling prey to fake news (Citaku kerkoj falje per lajmin e rrejshem)", *GazetaBlic*, March 12, 2017, <https://gazetablic.com/citaku-kerkoj-falje-per-lajmin-e-rrejshem/>

On November 29, 2022, Fakte.buzz page<sup>236</sup> falsely published that the “alarm was raised” in Belgrade because Kurti’s party’s candidate was about to win the elections in the north. There were no facts to support the findings. No alarm was raised in Belgrade regarding the declaration of Vetëvendosje’s candidate for mayor of North Mitrovica. Also, no survey showed that the candidate would win the elections if they were to be held on December 18, 2022.<sup>237</sup>

Another article, published on January 16, 2023, bore the title: “Kurti headed towards the North, again. He takes the decision to...” While the article discusses the decision of the Kosovo government to declare some public properties in Leposaviq/Leposavić as zones of special interest, the images included military cars, creating the perception that Kurti entered the north of Kosovo using military force. The news was distributed by six platforms.

There have been other situations in the country when normal events turned into inter-ethnic tensions. For example, a Customs Agency operation at an alcohol distillery in the village of Hoca e Madhe/Velika Hoča was reported as an attack on local Kosovo Serbs. The Serbian-language media reported that the operation was carried out because the company logo was in the Serbian language.<sup>238</sup> The Customs Agency confirmed that the operation had taken place because the company produced alcohol without a licence.

Interethnic tensions also manage to influence sports. One example is Zana Avdiu, an Albanian analyst who criticised the inappropriate gesture by Granit Xhaka, during the football match between Switzerland and Serbia in the 2022 World Cup .

We found 1,809 posts published which received close to 90,000 interactions on this topic. In about 12% of these posts inter-ethnic tensions surfaced. They claimed that Avdiu “brings delight to Serbian hearts”,<sup>239</sup> that she is “defending Serbs”,<sup>240</sup> and that she is “paid for this and has no Albanian blood”.<sup>241</sup> The most viral article, which was posted over 150 times and had about 6,000 interactions, said Serbs call on Avdiu to seek asylum in Serbia<sup>242</sup>. None of these claims were based on facts.

<sup>236</sup> “Fake title that is a raised alarm in Belgrade due to elections in north Mitrovica (Titulli i rremë së në Beograd është “ngritur alarm” për zgjedhjet në Mitrovicë të veriut)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December, 17, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-ne-beograd-eshte-ngritur-alarm-per-zgjedhjet-ne-mitrovice-te-veriut>

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> “Fake reporting on the reasons over customs confiscation of wines (Rrena për arsyen e sekuestrimit të verërave nga Dogana)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December 8, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-arsyen-e-sekuestrimit-te-vererave-nga-dogana/>

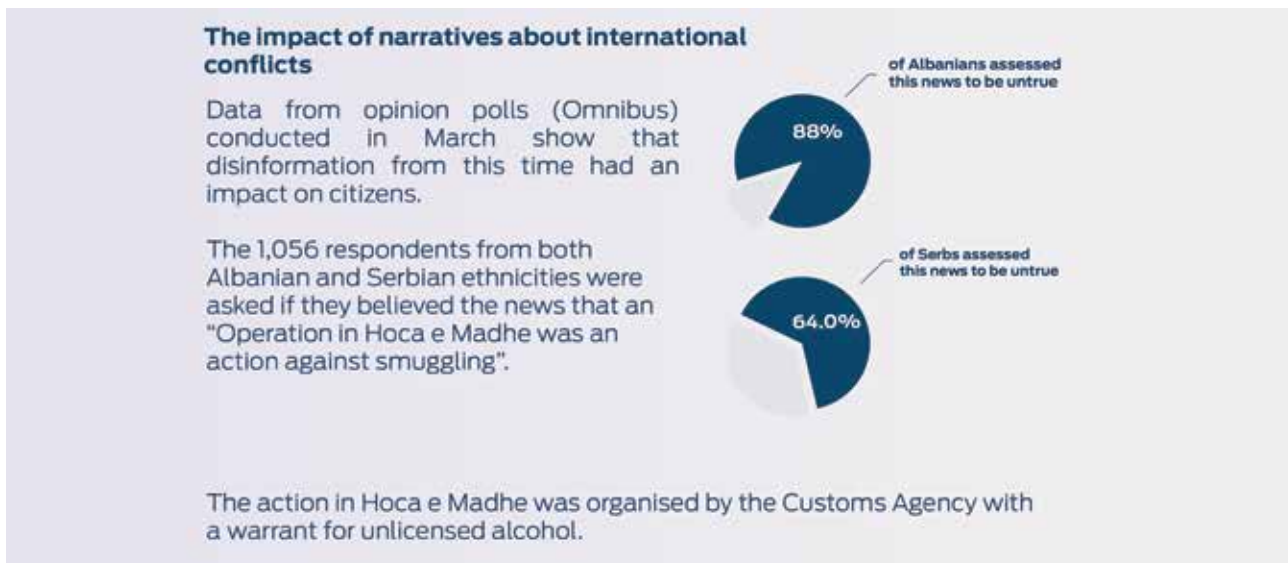
<sup>239</sup> “Zana brings delight to Serbian hearts (Zana ia kenaq zemren serbeve)”, Botapress, Facebook post, December 6, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/614052055328965/posts/5880234742043977>

<sup>240</sup> “Shameful! You are protecting serbs! Called Granit Xhaka a thug, footballer’s father reacts harshly to the Albanian analyst (‘E turpshme! Po mbron serbët! Quajti rrugaç Granit Xhakën, babai i futbollistit reagon ashpër ndaj analistes shqiptare)”, Info Shqip, Facebook post, December 5, 2022 <https://www.facebook.com/351528495625050/posts/1312587529519137>

<sup>241</sup> “You don’t have Albanian blood, who paid you to get out there.” Taulant Xhaka reacts harshly to Zana Avdiu (“Nuk paske gjak shqiptari ti, kush t’ka pagu me dal aty”. Reagon ashpër Taulant Xhaka ndaj Zana Avdiut)”, Kosova Jon, Facebook post, December 6, 2022,

<sup>242</sup> “Serbs call on Zana Avdiu: Come seek asylum in Serbia - after Granit Xhaka’s father’s statement (Serbët i bëjnë thirrje Zana Avdiut: Ejeni kërkoni azil në Serbi – pas deklaratës së babait të Granit Xhakës)”, Kosova ime, Facebook post, December 6, 2022 <https://www.facebook.com/100044244768698/posts/703209814497171> and <https://www.facebook.com/112451600665267/posts/649893073587781>

Figure 21: The impact of narratives about international conflicts



## 2.2 Ethnicity based narratives and disinformation about public profiles

Apart from reporting and often exaggerating the incidents in the north, inter-ethnic-based disinformation has been used to attack political opponents and to label politicians as traitors or accomplices.

However, apart from competing narratives between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, there was an underlying narrative within the Kosovo Albanian community that Albin Kurti and Vetëvendosje were 'traitors' for endorsing the key policy they fought most against: the acceptance of the Association of Serbian Municipalities. The headlines read, "Kurti has fallen into Serbia's trap"<sup>243,244</sup> (10 posts and 576 interactions),<sup>245</sup> "Kurti is legitimising the division of the north", and by highlighting that "Kurti's government is hurting the relations with international allies".<sup>246</sup>

Albanian-language media portrayed Kurti as a man who changed his stance regarding the Association (against which he had previously strongly protested against as an opposition

<sup>243</sup> There are 40 posts titled "Kurti fell into Serbia's trap" throughout the last quarter of 2022, among them: "Nurellari, PDK: Kurti has fallen into Vučić's trap (Nurellari, PDK: Kurti ka rënë në grackën e Vuçiqit)", Zëri, 7/11/23 <https://zeri.info/aktuale/469164/nurellari-pdk-kurti-ka-rene-ne-gracken-e-vuciqit/?fbclid=IwAR2ZCtNvcg0Lo42Xer9AZPxPwNRJE5e2-F-LkKtfoSHbwqvgbotlviOF1VO>

<sup>244</sup> "Abdixhiku: Albin Kurti has fallen into Serbia's trap, he cannot exercise sovereignty in the north (Abdixhiku: Albin Kurti ka rënë në grackën e Serbisë, s'po mund të ushtrojë sovranitet në veri)", demokracia.com, December 19, 2022, <https://demokracia.com/abdixhiku-albin-kurti-ka-rene-ne-gracken-e-serbise-spo-mund-te-ushtroje-sovranitet-ne-veri/?fbclid=IwAR1XlLxPB0n3puNEHPT-5jfm-jR3UkZIHPrH74AA3AWeK3-Qbw00oAmINStc>

<sup>245</sup> Data from Crowdtange, accessed at: <https://apps.crowdtangle.com/search?platform=facebook&postTypes=&producerTypes=3&q=%22Kurti%20ka%20r%C3%ABn%C3%AB%20n%C3%AB%20grack%C3%ABn%20e%20Serbis%C3%AB%22&sortBy=score&sortOrder=desc&timeframe=1year>

<sup>246</sup> "Another no from Kurti in response to US demands (Edhe një "jo" e Kurtit ndaj kërkesave të SHBA-së)", Radio Evropa e lirë, October 21, 2022, <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/raportet-kurti-shba-be-/32109343.html>



leader), while Serbian-language media portrayed Kurti as a man who wants war with Serbia.<sup>247</sup>

In November 2022, Aleksandar Vulin, the head of the Security Intelligence Agency in Serbia, published a statement saying that Albin Kurti, while in prison during the 1999 conflict in Kosovo, had supplied names of KLA members. He called PM Kurti a “liar and a weak man, who while in Serbian prison told everything he knew about his associates and the KLA”. This message was republished by 20 Kosovo media outlets and received over 9,500 interactions. The story later transformed into a narrative that Kurti had testified in Serbia against the KLA. Kurti has not been a witness in any proceeding against the KLA at The Hague or in Serbia.

Another narrative in Belgrade declared the President of Serbia accountable for the release of war prisoners from Kosovo, including Albin Kurti, because he had been part of this decision-making process after 2000.<sup>248</sup>

Another narrative aimed to show Prime Minister Kurti as a Serbian accomplice. Two Kosovo media published a photo of Prime Minister Kurti with Minister Nenad Rašić, saying “Thank you brother, for allowing Patriarch Artemije to visit Kosovo. Yours Nenad”.<sup>249</sup> This message was fake, as Rašić never said this, but the post had 313 interactions on social networks. Another publication portrayed Kurti as a supporter of the Serbian Orthodox Church. One story in March, regarding the Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, was titled “Porfirije brave as Kurti strengthens the Serbian Orthodox Church”.<sup>250</sup> This news was published after a statement by the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church said that “no one can interfere in the affairs of the church and that Kosovo is the heart of Serbia”. In his statement, Porfirije did not mention Kurti, but the media determined without any facts that this statement came as a result of Kurti’s negotiations in Brussel.

Another means of spreading disinformation was falsely labelling politicians and influencers as friends or collaborators of people in Serbia. A photoshopped image of Prime Minister Kurti

<sup>247</sup> “Kurti is looking for war with Serbia” (Kurti bas trazi rat sa Srbijom), Serbian tabloid *Informer*, 28 October 2022 <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/730522/aljbin-kurti-tablice-kim>, “Kurti wants war” (Kurti Zeli rat” Happy TV, 24 March 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/tvhappy/posts/5217130681671842/?locale=hr\\_HR&paipv=0&eav=AfZ9OAVjp4vA68qKU3RNmbaO\\_zFQqOTwKVkanqeB9YQSkZtlfFjc-mtKGS4Gpsn9XM8Y&\\_rdr](https://www.facebook.com/tvhappy/posts/5217130681671842/?locale=hr_HR&paipv=0&eav=AfZ9OAVjp4vA68qKU3RNmbaO_zFQqOTwKVkanqeB9YQSkZtlfFjc-mtKGS4Gpsn9XM8Y&_rdr)

<sup>248</sup> The posters that appeared in March 2023 showed the leaders of Dveri, the NDSS and Oathkeepers – Bosko Obradovic, Milos Jovanovic and Milica Djurdjevic Stamenkovski – wearing traditional Albanian caps behind Kurti and being accused as advisors of Kurti thus putting them in context as traitors They have accused Vuqiq being behind these posters. “DefMin statement on offensive posters provokes opposition reaction”, N1 Belgrade, March 14, 2023, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/defmin-statement-on-offensive-posters-provokes-opposition-reaction/>

<sup>249</sup> “Fake news on minister Nenad Rashiq’s statement (Rrena për një deklaram të ministrit Nenad Rashiq)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), January 13, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-nje-deklarim-te-ministrit-nenad-rashiq/>

<sup>250</sup> “Fake news that Porfirije is encouraged after EU’s proposal for the Kosovo-Serbia agreement (Rrena se Porfirije trimërohet pas propozimit të BE-së për marrëveshjes Kosovë- Serbi)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), March 16, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-porfirije-trimerohet-pas-propozimit-te-be-se-per-marreveshjes-kosove-serbi/>

hugging President Aleksandar Vučić was shared on at least 23 profiles on social networks with the caption “O brothers, we told you this photo would eventually come out”. This photo was identified as fake by fact checkers.<sup>251</sup> The same technique was used to attack opposition members. Former Deputy Prime Minister Behgjet Pacolli was attacked in May with a fake campaign that used an edited photo from a supposed meeting with President Aleksandar Vučić<sup>252</sup> on a yacht in Budva, Montenegro. In reality, Pacolli was photographed on a yacht with Milan Radoičić and the photo was published by KRIK.

Fabricated news about good relations with Serbian politicians was also used to attack political analysts. Dardan Gashi, a political analyst, was attacked by a campaign that distorted the statement he made on TV Dukagjini. Gashi said that minister Rašić was a friend of his; however, a Facebook page distorted his statement to say “Rakić is my friend”. The distortion of the surname Rasić to Rakić made Gashi a friend of the Sprska Lista, when in fact he had said he was a friend of the leader of the party’s opposition. The post, which received over 800 interactions on Facebook,<sup>253</sup> was identified as fake by Krypometër.<sup>254</sup>

Two other strands of disinformation are that Albin Kurti is planning to resign because of relations with Serbia and the disinformation that Aleksandar Vučić is going to resign because of the dialogue with Kosovo. Some 66 articles with over 3,500 interactions were published with the title, “Albin Kurti is preparing his resignation”. The content was based on statements by three local political analysts: Ridvan Berisha,<sup>255</sup> Milaim Zeka,<sup>256</sup> and Baton Haxhiu,<sup>257</sup> who said that Kurti had submitted his resignation to his party’s headquarters. The information was never confirmed and the government denied it. Similarly, news suggested that Aleksandar Vučić had resigned because of the Kosovo process. At least six news articles were published with this content.<sup>258</sup>

<sup>251</sup> “Edited photo of Albin Kurti with Alexander Vučić (Fotografia e modifikuar e Albin Kurtit me Aleksandar Vuçiq)” Kallxo (Krypometër), January 3, 2023 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/fotografia-e-modifikuar-e-albin-kurtit-me-aleksandar-vuciq/>

<sup>252</sup> “Fake news on Pacolli meeting with leaders of Serbian List, Vučić was also present (Rrena se në takim in e Pacollit me kreret e Listës Serbe ishte edhe Vuciqi)”, Kallxo (Krypometër), May 8, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-ne-takimin-e-pacollit-me-kreret-e-listes-serbe-ishte-edhe-vuciqi/>

<sup>253</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0366aukSUfFNJDwjfev8YXWEWUj7sE1AAfG8zjd7vvSX71PV24o6ivzrZfMsdWoZX-3l&id=100084762834687&mibextid=Nif5oz](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0366aukSUfFNJDwjfev8YXWEWUj7sE1AAfG8zjd7vvSX71PV24o6ivzrZfMsdWoZX-3l&id=100084762834687&mibextid=Nif5oz)

<sup>254</sup> “Fake reporting on a statement made by Dardan Gashi (Rrena rreth një deklarimi të Dardan Gashit)”, Kallxo (Krypometër), December 12, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-rreth-nje-deklarimi-te-dardan-gashit/>

<sup>255</sup> “Ridvan Berisha: Kurti has prepared his resignation letter, I have information about this (Ridvan Berisha: Kurti e ka përgatitur letrën e dorëheqjes, kam informacione për këtë)”, GazetaBlic, January 28, 2023, <https://gazetablic.com/ridvan-berisha-kurti-e-ka-pergatitur-letren-e-doreheqjes-kam-informacione-per-kete>

<sup>256</sup> “Milaim Zeka: We have never been closer to Albin Kurti’s resignation (Milaim Zeka: Kurrë s’kemi qenë më afër dorëheqjes së Albin Kurtit)”, Lajmi.net, May 5, 2023, <https://lajmi.net/milaim-zeka-kurre-skemi-qene-me-afere-doreheqjes-se-albin-kurtit/>

<sup>257</sup> “Baton Haxhiu: Kurti was ready to resign only so that the Association is not established (Baton Haxhiu: Kurti ka qenë i gatshëm të jep dorëheqje vetëm të mos formohet Asociacioni)”, Nacionale, February 2023, <https://nacionale.com/politike/baton-haxhiu-kurti-ka-qene-i-gatshem-te-jep-doreheqje-vetem-te-mos-formohet-asociacioni>

<sup>258</sup> “Fake reporting that Vučić has resigned (Titulli i rremë se Aleksandar Vuçiq ka dhënë dorëheqje)”, Kallxo (Krypometër), January 29, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-se-aleksandar-vuciq-ka-dhene-doreheqje/>



Another instance of disinformation occurred after a round of talks in Brussels in November 2022. Some 37 media outlets of Kosovo published: Kurti from Berlin: There will be no Serbian municipalities in Kosovo.<sup>259</sup> This got 6,533 reactions on social networks.<sup>260</sup> The same news, published under the title “Albin Kurti ‘beats’ Vučić from Berlin: There will never be Serbian municipalities in Kosovo,”<sup>261</sup> received 423 reactions on two additional pages.<sup>262</sup>

These titles do not convey what Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti actually said. Kurti said that there are neither entirely Serb or entirely Albanian municipalities in Kosovo, but that instead there are municipalities with majority Serbian or majority Albanian populations. Thus, Kurti’s explanation that there will be no solely Serb or Albanian municipalities was misrepresented.<sup>263</sup> This narrative, that Kosovo and the West are looking to banish the Serb citizens from the north of the country has regularly been reported by the Serbian language media.<sup>264</sup>

**Figure 22: Examples of the most divisive narratives in Kosovo**



<sup>259</sup> “Kurti from Berlin: There will be no Serbian municipalities in Kosovo (Kurti nga Berlini: Nuk do të ketë komuna serbe ne Kosovë)” Veriu.Info, Facebook post, November 3, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/327128460749009/posts/5616427075152428>

<sup>260</sup> Data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook.

<sup>261</sup> Hani i Elezit si Paris, Facebook post, November 23, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/386384411468880/posts/5525298864244050>

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

<sup>263</sup> In the same statement Kurti added: “There are such communities in Serbia as well. Is Serbia ready to have a community of municipalities with the majority of the population being Romanians, Hungarians, Bosniaks, Albanians, etc. You can’t ask for something from someone else, and you don’t even do it in your own house.”

<sup>264</sup> “Kurti Zlo Hoće da Satre Srbe na Kosovu i Metohiji (EvilKurti wants to bury the Serbs in Kosovo and Metohija)” Republika, December 16, 2022 <https://www.republika.rs/vesti/tema-dana/393365/kurti-zlo-hoce-da-satre-srbe-na-kosovu-i-metohiji>

It is not only Kurti that gets to be portrayed as a “traitor” of the cause against the Association of Majority Serb Municipalities. A similar narrative is used against Kosovo public figures (politicians, TV pundits, influencers). This narrative calls Kosovo Albanian businesspeople who trade with Serbia Serbian collaborators and profiteers.<sup>265</sup> Thus, whenever there is tension in the north, there is a new campaign encouraging people to boycott supermarkets that sell Serbian products and companies that import goods produced in Serbia.<sup>266</sup>

Vetëvendosje, the leading party in Kosovo, helped cultivate this narrative. It organised a campaign of overturning trucks carrying goods from Serbia just after the declaration of the independence in 2008 and later. Economic animosity with Serbia has been part of the Vetëvendosje’s campaigning for more than a decade. However, the second year VV was in power, there was an increase of imports from Serbia.<sup>267</sup>

There is a continued narrative against the agreement reached with Serbia and the integration of Kosovo Serbs in the institutions that come as a result of these agreements.

The entire debate after the Ohrid Agreement was directed towards Kurti, who was accused of “selling his soul to the devil” by signing the Association of Serbian Municipalities agreement, something he was aggressively against when he was in opposition. However, Kosovo authorities produce their own narratives to prove that they have not “sold their soul to the devil”, standing behind the social and political capital that they have invested in proving that they are more authentic Kosovo Albanian negotiators than the previous governments.

The examples offered show that media often published news with a similar black-and-white narrative, with two dominant sub-narratives of how actions of the Kosovo authorities, including the ones towards Kosovo Serbs, are entirely fair and just; on the flipside, there are solely negative trends in majority Serbian communities and Serbia in general. Although Kosovo Albanian media also publishes articles critical of Kurti,<sup>268</sup> Serbian tabloids are more

<sup>265</sup> To note, this trade largely occurs in one direction. Kosovo imports goods from Serbia, almost no Kosovo goods are ever exported to Serbia.

<sup>266</sup> These campaigns go to such a degree that people are even encouraged not to drink Coca Cola as the Coke that is sold in Kosovo is produced in a Coca Cola factory in Serbia. Supermarkets are encouraged to get the Coca Cola bottled in Bulgaria etc.

<sup>267</sup> According to Kosovo Statistics Agency, imports from Serbia were EUR 174, 029 mil in 2020, EUR 306, 354 mil in 2021 and EUR 348, 096 mil in 2022. Available at: [https://askdata.rks-gov.net/pxweb/sq/ASKdata/ASKdata\\_\\_External%20trade\\_\\_Monthly%20indicators/07\\_imp\\_country.px/table/tableViewLayout1/](https://askdata.rks-gov.net/pxweb/sq/ASKdata/ASKdata__External%20trade__Monthly%20indicators/07_imp_country.px/table/tableViewLayout1/) and <https://askapi.rks-gov.net/Custom/a9ea2573-d8f0-4045-ad23-c982665146fa.pdf>

<sup>268</sup> There are no print dailies or tabloids in Kosovo, due to high costs. Surprisingly, this contributed to making it more difficult to spread disinformation as entire masses of people cannot be brain-washed through tabloids. In the online sphere, there is more variety, diversity and there is no monopoly where only a few newspapers economically powerful enough to sustain printing, can control the narrative. However even if it may be argued that now it is easier as as one needs only a website or social media page, there is more competition. Another key element making the media less in control of the people in power is the fact that in 2020, the government stopped allocating advertising to the media, a practise that had in the past ensured that government critics would be attacked by tabloids and online portals which were getting government advertisements. <https://prishtinainsight.com/kosovo-telecom-pays-out-politicians-cash-in-mag/> . Only fully state funded media is the Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK).

prone to propaganda. We analyse these below. Disinformation narratives have attempted to present Prime Minister Albin Kurti as anti-American. Disinformation about Kurti's relationship with the US has been published repeatedly in recent years, including in November 2021, when it was alleged that Kurti was denied an American visa.<sup>269</sup> This disinformation was also disseminated in Serbia by Telegraf<sup>270</sup>, Blic<sup>271</sup>, b92<sup>272</sup>, and republished by 22 Albanian media outlets.

Another narrative in public discourse was that Kurti's lack of good relations with the US had a negative impact on the US's attitude towards Kosovo. This narrative has its roots on the fall of Kurti's first government during the pandemic, which is attributed to the requests that Richard Grenell, the Trump administration Western Balkans representative, made to the LDK, the coalition partner of VV at the time. He asked LDK to bring Kurti's government down because allegedly he was not succumbing to signing an agreement that Trump wanted Kosovo to sign with Serbia.<sup>273</sup>

During every crisis, this theme is resurrected in television studios and social media posts. From October 15, 2022, to April 30, 2023, 189 posts that received 8K interactions were made on Facebook in which Prime Minister Kurti was mentioned in combination with the word "anti-American"<sup>274</sup>. The claims in these posts cannot be labelled as fake, but they lack sufficient proof. This narrative against Kurti is also found on Kosovo MPs' social media pages. The post of PDK MP Ardian Kastrati,<sup>275</sup> which was then shared to 18 different addresses,<sup>276</sup> is one example. Another is former MP Milaim Zeka, who said in an interview with Euronews Albania

<sup>269</sup> "Prime minister Kurti is refused a US Visa (Kryeministrit Kurti i refuzohet viza për SHBA!)", KosovaPost, November 3, 2021 <https://kosovapost.net/kryeministrit-kurti-i-refuzohet-viza-per-shba/>

<sup>270</sup> "Albin Kurti was not granted a visa to visit the US (Aljbinu Kurtiju nije odobrena viza za posetu SAD)", Telegraf.rs, November 3, 2021, <https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/politika/3413649-aljbinu-kurtiju-nije-odobrena-viza-za-posetu-sad>

<sup>271</sup> "Kurti was not granted a visa to visit the US (Kurtiju nije odobrena viza za posetu SAD)", Blic.rs, November 3, 2021, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/nista-od-puta-za-ameriku-kurtiju-nije-odobrena-viza-za-posetu-sad/vy693ys>

<sup>272</sup> "Americans rejected Kurti (Amerikanci odbili Kurtija)", b92.net, November 3, 2021, [https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=11&dd=03&nav\\_category=640&nav\\_id=2050758](https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2021&mm=11&dd=03&nav_category=640&nav_id=2050758)

<sup>273</sup> This campaign is elaborated partly in a report: *Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them*; Policy Department for External Relations, European Parliament, February 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO\\_STU\(2020\)653621\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf). In addition to this, Arben gashi, the head of LDK parliamentary group publicly spoke how Grenel was putting pressure on LDK, counting the days he had given the LDK to ensure they arrange for Kurti's government to be brought down in a motion against the government. The government was brought down, but Vetevendosje won the majority in next election.

<sup>274</sup> Data from CrowdTangle, a public insights tool owned and operated by Facebook

<sup>275</sup> "When the Prime Minister works against the United States, he will always be alone (Kur Kryeministri punon kundër SHBA-së gjithmonë ka me qenë vet)" - Ardian Kastrati, Facebook post, February 10, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100063565067362/posts/668641835264646>

<sup>276</sup> "PDK Member of Parliament: I believe we will never have a more anti-American Prime Minister than Kurti" Deputeti i PDK-së: Besoj se s'do të kemi kurrë kryeministër më anti-amerikan se Kurti", Almakos.com, Facebook post, February 10, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/100064756061165/posts/562663489235515>

that “Kurti is anti-American”.<sup>277</sup> This statement was shared on five different pages. Columnist Halil Matoshi, in a television show Kanal10<sup>278</sup> on January 29, 2023, also described Kurti as anti-American. His statement was published by at least 17 Facebook pages. Columnist Ilir Mirena posted a similar statement<sup>279</sup> and his message was shared on 18 pages.

Kurti’s relationship with the U.S. was the main topic on the television show “Debat Plus” on January 30th, 2023.<sup>280</sup> Portal “Periskopi”<sup>281</sup> used a video to prove that Kurti had anti-American attitudes during his time in opposition and did not comply with demands from the US. In reality, the video clip was about the rejection of Serbian elections in Kosovo and the refusal of gas which would come from a US company investment. Still, the video has nearly 200K views, and it has also been shared on ten other Facebook pages.

Concern about the relationship between the government of Kosovo and the US has been rekindled during times of crisis, such as the recent licence plate decision. The US requested that the government postpone implementation. In November 2022, two ministers of the Government of Kosovo, Albulena Haxhiu and Xhelal Sveçla, had planned to visit the US, however, the American Embassy officially stated that it was not the appropriate time for travel due to the ongoing internal crisis so the visit did not occur. Some media sources attempted to portray this development as evidence of a strain in the relations between the government of Kosovo and the US. Articles claimed that America forbade the visit of Kurti government ministers<sup>282</sup> or that the situation was escalating – Hovenier to Haxhiu: Don’t set off to go to the US”.<sup>283</sup> These articles were shared by 24 Facebook pages.

Another narrative circulating is the portrayal of opposition parties as willing to implement the Association solely to regain power. Analysis of various online portals and Facebook pages reveals that certain platforms disseminate messages attacking the opposition and intensifying societal polarisation.

<sup>277</sup> “Milaim Zeka: Kurti, anti-Kosovar and anti-American (Milaim Zeka: Kurti, nje anti-kosovar dhe anti-amerikan)”, *Gazeta Tema*, Facebook post, January 31, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/151865931528249/posts/5985787844802666>

<sup>278</sup> “Matoshi: Kurti is anti-American (Matoshi: Kurti është anti-amerikan)”, *Nacionale*, February 2023, <https://nacionale.com/live/matoshi-kurti-eshte-anti-amerikan>

<sup>279</sup> “...I continue to believe that Kurti is ...the anti-American and anti-Western leftist academic, a state in which he is trapped, ideologically crippled, and he is not able to get out of... (...Une vazhdoje te besojte qe Kurti eshte vetem nje keqlexues akademikeve te majte antiamerikane dhe anti perendimor ne te cilet eshte kurthuar, sakatuar ideologjikisht, dhe nuk po ia del ta nxjerr kryet...)” Ilir Mirena, Facebook post, January 28, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/ilir.mirena/posts/10159710087305326>

<sup>280</sup> “Debat Plus me Ermal Pandurin - WILLIAM WALKER / KURTI VS AMERIKA”, RTV Dukagjini, Youtube video, Minute 14:45, January 30, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Doiv2FLJBzY>

<sup>281</sup> “Is Prime minister Kurti anti-American? (A është kryeministri Kurti anti-amerikan?)”, *Periskopi*, Facebook post, May 27, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=983941638978184>

<sup>282</sup> “Amerika ua ndalon vizitën në SHBA ministrave Sveçla dhe Haxhiu (America prohibits the visit of ministers Sveçla and Haxhiu to the US)”, *Paparaci.com*, November 9, 2022, <https://paparaci.com/235623/amerika-ua-ndalon-viziten-ne-shba-ministrave-svecla-dhe-haxhiu/>

<sup>283</sup> “Escalating situation - Hovenier to Haxhiu: Do not leave for the US (Situatë eskaluese – Hovenier, Haxhiu: Mos u nis për SHBA)”, *Insajderi*, November 9, 2022, <https://insajderi.org/situatw-eskaluese-hovenier-haxhiut-mos-u-nis-per-shba/>

From October 15, 2022, to March 15, 2023, monitors of these platforms identified 40 instances of news articles or posts that were deemed disinformation or misinformation. Some of these claims were verified as fake by fact-checkers. The page “Diaspora me Albinin” published five posts from November 2022 to March 2023 spreading disinformation that the opposition parties want to establish the Association. These posts were re-shared nearly 200 times, and some contained videos with 68K views.

These posts said that PDK wants the Bosnianization of Kosovo, and the opposition supports the Association due to business interest.<sup>284</sup> They show statements of various opposition actors<sup>285</sup> insisting that the Association should be established.

In addition to disinformation or other types of manipulation, such as ‘clickbait’, satire is also used to strengthen certain beliefs. Such examples are found on the satirical website, “Specbuk”. One post says “LDK, AAK, and PDK have promised the Serbian lobby that they will implement ‘Zajednica’ in exchange for help to return to power”<sup>286</sup>, using the Serbian word for association. In this post, there are no supporting facts for this statement and the photo shows the leaders of the opposition who are manipulated and controlled by Serbian President Vučić. This information was found to be untrue by fact-checkers.<sup>287</sup>

<sup>284</sup> “Vlora Citaku: On Monday, 27th February Albin Kurti will accept the association (Vlora Çitaku: Te henen me 27 shkurt Albin Kurti pranon asociacionin.)”, Diaspora me Albinin, Facebook post, February 23, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/DMalbinin/posts/pfbid-0Qz2HPx7x3Ju55uqEf3oP8TicU31ENxGP3yftdumAJgCq1TrwX6SUQv5LDWboNYKYI>

<sup>285</sup> “Patriots: The association will be established (Patriotat: Zajednica do bëhet edhe Pik)”, Diaspora me Albinin, Facebook post, February 28, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1329351680972820>

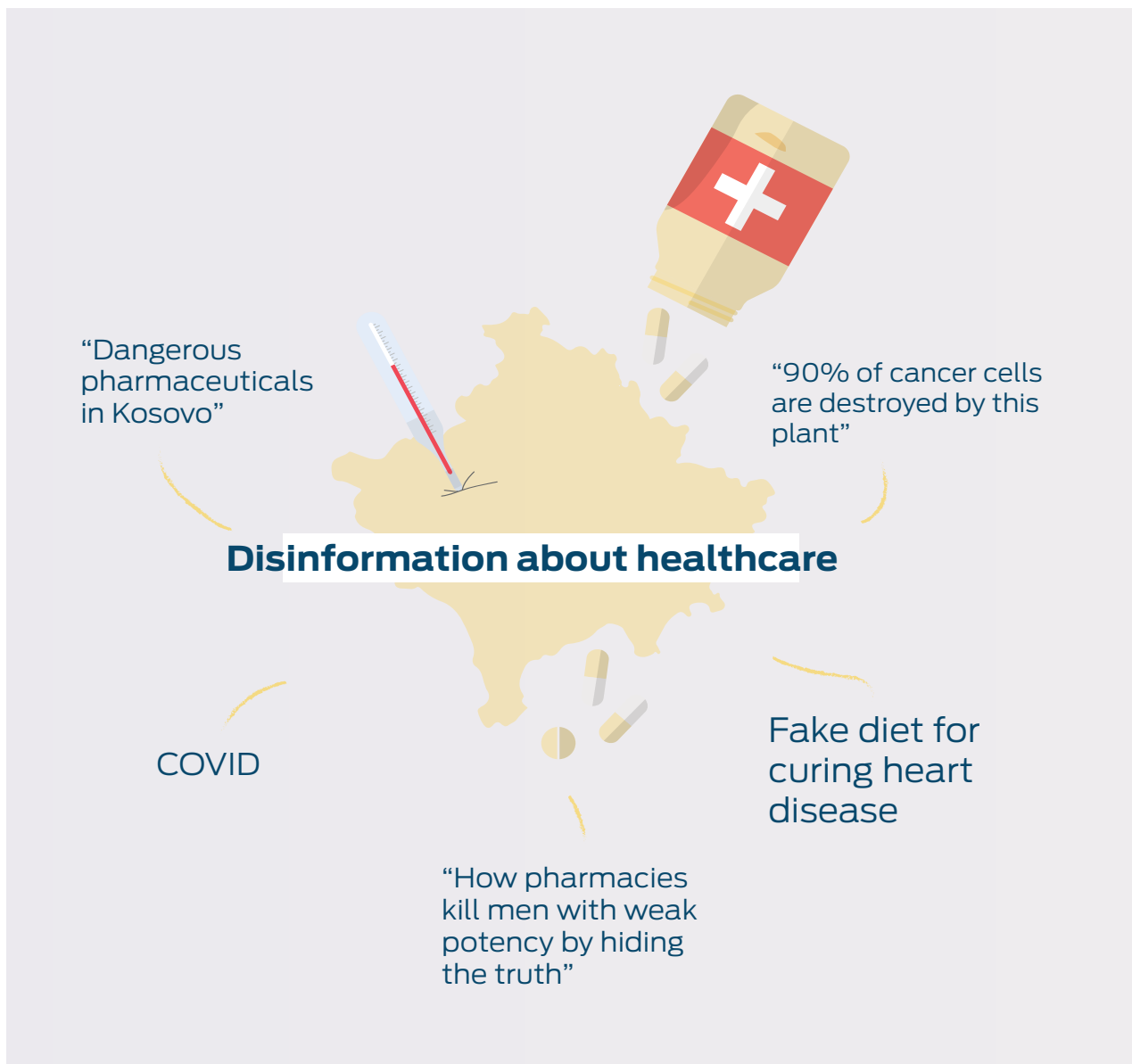
<sup>286</sup> “LDK, AAK, and PDK have promised the Serbian lobby that they will implement ‘Zajednica’ in exchange for help to return to power (LDK, AAK dhe PDK ia kanë premtuar lobit serb që do ta zbatojnë Zajednicën në shkëmbim të ndihmës për rikthim në pushtet.)”, Specbuk, Facebook post, February 13, 2023,

<sup>287</sup> “Fake news on the promise received by LDK, PDK and AAK (Rrena për premtimin që kanë marrë LDK, PDK & AAK)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), February 24, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-premtimin-qe-kane-marre-ldk-pdk-aak/>

### III. Disinformation narratives related to health and the economy

Data from monitoring various portals and Facebook pages from 15 October 2022 to 15 March 2023 show different types of disinformation related to the economy and health.

Figure 23: - Disinformation about healthcare





**Figure 24: Disinformation about the economy**

Disinformation is used to convince citizens to buy certain products by presenting them as cures for various diseases, including cancer, lung diseases, diabetes. Disinformation about rising prices and market shortages is frequently shared. This study found that disinformation that stirred up panic about rising prices caused prices to be further inflated. The publications warning citizens about huge price increases or about the scarcity of certain products influenced citizens of Kosovo to buy products at enormous prices under the misapprehension that the product would run out.

### 3.1 Selling of products via scams that use fake articles

Disinformation presented as medical advice about the benefits of various health products have been identified on 173 different Facebook pages. We found 519 posts published in these pages, including sponsored content targeting audiences that do not follow these pages. Of these, an article exaggerating the harm caused by the consumption of cabbage had the highest number of posts, totalling 133 posts on 35 Facebook pages. In this article, the title “Exaggeration on the damages caused by the consumption of cabbage” is hyperbolic and the content does not mention any harm or disease caused by consuming cabbage.

Sponsored Facebook posts obtained a higher level of interactivity, with over 11,000 likes, comments, and shares in total. The article with the highest interactivity was one promoting a drug that supposedly cures prostate cancer, with 5,300 likes.

Different types of falsehoods were used in 17 identified articles, including fabricated content<sup>288</sup> (false connection (inconsistency of the title with the text,<sup>289</sup> clickbait (exaggeration or use of hyperbole),<sup>290</sup> and partially false information.<sup>291</sup>

For example, the article “Dangerous pharmaceuticals in Kosovo 2011. How pharmacies kill men with weak potency by hiding the truth”<sup>292</sup> is completely fabricated. It claims that a certain product was discussed in a televised debate on RTK but this was denied by Bashkim Vishaj, RTK’s producer. Other examples include articles where different people are falsely presented, for example, “A well-known German endocrinologist has given an honest interview to Kosovar television”.<sup>293</sup> The article falsely presents a German actress as a doctor. Similarly, another article falsely claims that Croatian doctors ‘give’ medicine that is ‘shocking the world’,<sup>294</sup> but the text quotes nothing related to Croatian doctors.

Disinformation, once identified, not only promotes false narratives but also spreads panic based on unsubstantiated facts. An example of this is the article entitled “The Deadly Food that we all eat, everyday!”<sup>295</sup> Despite its powerful title, the article does not mention any specific food. Other fear-inducing disinformation narratives usually revolve around chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes and hypertension. The high level of public interest and concern about these diseases allows fake narratives to spread easily. Examples of such articles include false claims that kerosene<sup>296</sup> or grape seeds<sup>297</sup> can cure cancer, based only on conspiracy theories and unproven conclusions.

<sup>288</sup> “Fake news on natural oil that increases body length (Rrena se vaji natyral zgjat gjatësinë trupore)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), February 2, 2023m <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-vaji-natyral-zgjat-gjatesine-trupore/>

<sup>289</sup> “Fake title on the medicine used by Croatian doctors (Titulli i rremë për ilaçin e mjekëve kroatë)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), February 23, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-per-ilacin-e-mjekeve-kroate/>

<sup>290</sup> “Exaggeration on the damages caused by the consumption of cabbage (Ekzagjerimi rreth dëmeve që vijnë nga konsumimi i lakrës)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), January 25, 2023 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/ekzagjerimi-rreth-demeve-qe-vijne-nga-konsumimi-i-lakres/>

<sup>291</sup> “Fake news on a plant substance used to destroy cancer cells (Rrena për shkatërrim të qelizave të kancerit nga një substancë bimore)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), February 25, 2023 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-shkaterrim-te-qelizave-te-kancerit-nga-nje-substance-bimore/>

<sup>292</sup> “Dangerous pharmaceuticals in Kosovo 2011. How pharmacies kill men with weak potency by hiding the truth (Farmaceutiket e rrezikshëm në Kosovë 2011. Si i vrasin farmacitë meshkujt me potencë të dobët duke fshehur të vërtetën)”, Lajme SR, May 3, 2023 [https://xkemajoje.shop/?acc=%7B%7Bcampaign.name%7D%7D&adset=%7B%7Bbadset.id%7D%7D&ad=%7B%7Bbad.id%7D%7D&placement=%7B%7Bplacement%7D%7D&ev=Lead&pxl=1244387882781474&adname=%7B%7Bbad.name%7D%7D&fbclid=IwAR3M\\_4TghQH-dP9-RrBHHiC2\\_cHdMulpqnm5LfFoWuY6LTMJI7SY3eUIDuWA](https://xkemajoje.shop/?acc=%7B%7Bcampaign.name%7D%7D&adset=%7B%7Bbadset.id%7D%7D&ad=%7B%7Bbad.id%7D%7D&placement=%7B%7Bplacement%7D%7D&ev=Lead&pxl=1244387882781474&adname=%7B%7Bbad.name%7D%7D&fbclid=IwAR3M_4TghQH-dP9-RrBHHiC2_cHdMulpqnm5LfFoWuY6LTMJI7SY3eUIDuWA)

<sup>293</sup> [https://qwt.d.nakerod.com/?ad\\_id=%7B%7Bbad.id%7D%7D&adset\\_id=%7B%7Bbadset.id%7D%7D&fbp=923110779047392&placement=%7B%7Bplacement%7D%7D&fbclid=IwAR0AUjdIhUunk7Vrp48lfKfkgd-hEaqyOKcuMCF6lQfUX1C304eftjrYPGk](https://qwt.d.nakerod.com/?ad_id=%7B%7Bbad.id%7D%7D&adset_id=%7B%7Bbadset.id%7D%7D&fbp=923110779047392&placement=%7B%7Bplacement%7D%7D&fbclid=IwAR0AUjdIhUunk7Vrp48lfKfkgd-hEaqyOKcuMCF6lQfUX1C304eftjrYPGk)

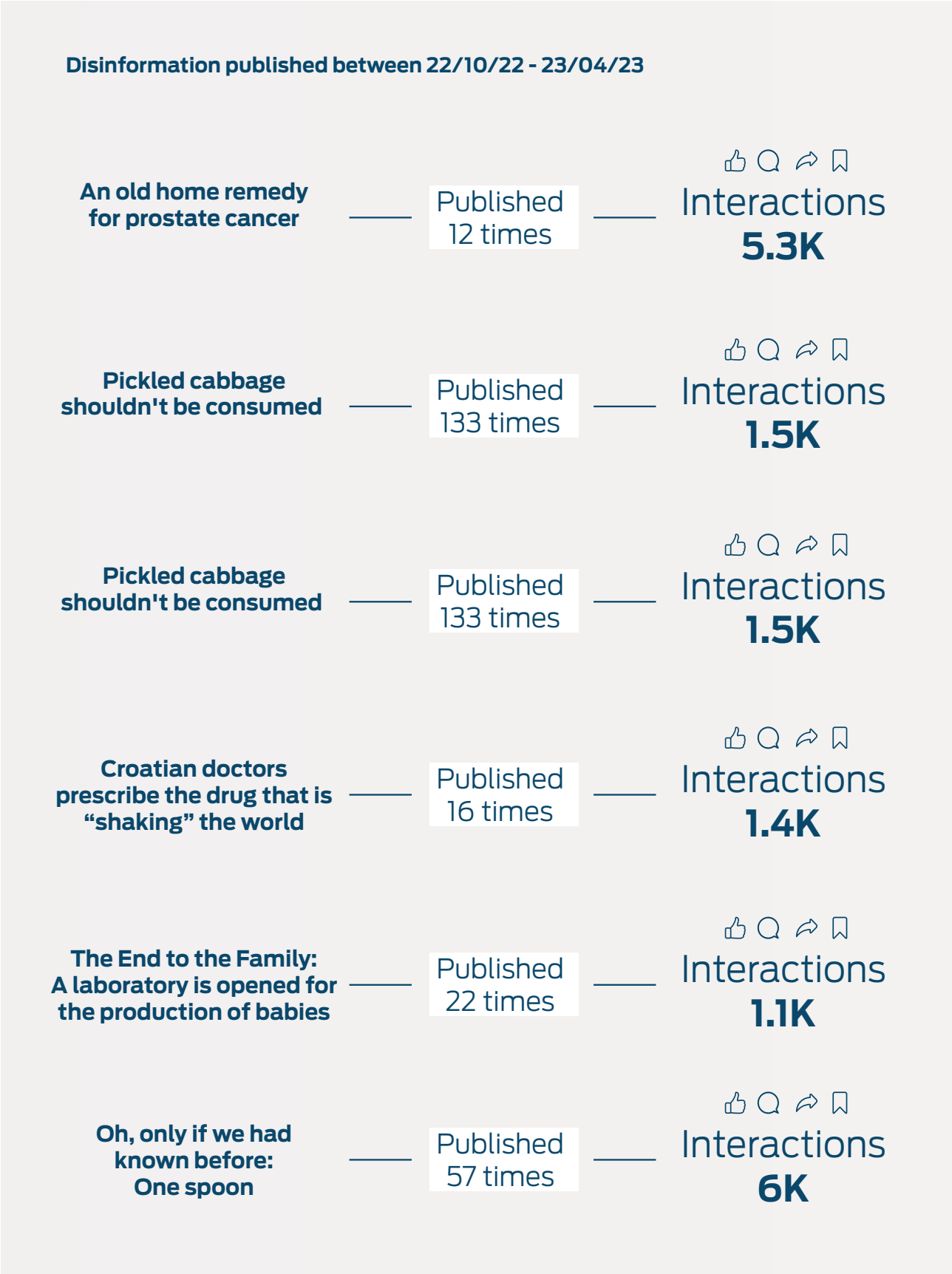
<sup>294</sup> “Fake title on the medicine used by Croatian doctors (Titulli i rremë për ilaçin e mjekëve kroatë)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), February 23, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/titulli-i-rreme-per-ilacin-e-mjekeve-kroate/>

<sup>295</sup> “Fake news on deadly foods (Lajmi i rremë për ushqimet vdekjeprurëse)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), February 27, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/lajmi-i-rreme-per-ushqimet-vdekjeprurese/>

<sup>296</sup> “False claim that kerosene cures cancer and leukemia (Pretendimi i rremë se vajguri e shëron kancerin dhe leukemin)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), October 26, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/pretendimi-i-rreme-se-vajguri-e-sheron-kancerin-dhe-leukemin>

<sup>297</sup> “Fake news that grape seeds cure cancer within a few days (Rrena se fara e rrushit e shëron kancerin për disa ditë)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), July 16, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-fara-e-rrushit-e-sheron-kancerin-per-disa-dite/>

Figure 25: Disinformation published between 22/10/22 - 23/04/23



Similarly, disinformation around diabetes is often aimed at promoting the sale of specific products.<sup>298</sup> One article claims that a certain tea will cure diabetes.<sup>299</sup> The article goes so far as to reference a fictitious Kosovar endocrinologist and a non-existent ‘Institute of Endocrinology of Kosovo.’ Another article<sup>300</sup> promoting the same product references a fabricated German endocrinologist.

### 3.2 Disinformation on COVID - 19

Titles containing fear-provoking findings about COVID-19 have been common disinformation narratives. At the outset of 2023, Botapress portal published an article titled “The virus is wreaking havoc in Kosovo: This many cases of COVID.”<sup>301</sup> The article only mentioned 12 cases of infection, therefore contradicting the alarming title. This is not only clickbait, it is also misleading, since it exaggerates the current state of affairs in Kosovo. Similar articles<sup>302</sup> were published on the same portal<sup>303</sup> for three consecutive days.

Posts on numerous Facebook pages<sup>304</sup> about deaths resulting from COVID-19 infection spread further disinformation,<sup>305</sup> stoking COVID-19 fears. These articles were also published on at least four other sites. There were also instances where the same disinformation about COVID-19 was republished at the end of 2022 or early 2023, either by re-circulating the disinformation or by manipulating the timeline by re-publishing old information.

In December 2020, it was reported that Albanians residing in Switzerland couldn’t travel to Kosovo because Switzerland had expanded its list of “risk countries”. This article’s re-publication two years later was misleading,<sup>306</sup> as Switzerland removed Kosovo from risk

<sup>298</sup> “Promotion of medicine through false facts (*Promovimi i një ilaçi përmes fakteve të rreme*)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), November 4, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/promovimi-i-nje-ilaci-permes-fakteve-te-rreme/>

<sup>299</sup> “Fake news on curing diabetes through a certain tea (*Rrena për shërimin e diabetit përmes një çaji*)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), November 9, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-sherimin-e-diabetit-permes-nje-caji/>

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> “The virus is wreaking havoc in Kosovo: This many cases of COVID (*Virusi po bene kerdi ne kosove kaq raste me COVID*)”, Botapress.info, January 15, 2023, <https://botapress.info/virusi-po-bene-kerdi-ne-kosove-kaq-raste-me-covid/>

<sup>302</sup> “What is happening in Kosovo: The number of infections with Covid 19 is increasing (*Çka po ndodh kështu në Kosovë: Shtohen infektimet me Covid 19*)”, Botapress.info, January 17, 2023, <https://botapress.info/cka-po-ndodh-keshtu-ne-kosove-shtohen-infektimet-me-covid-19/>

<sup>303</sup> “What is happening like this: The number of cases of COVID-19 in Kosovo is increasing (*Çka po ndodh kështu: Rritet numri i rasteve me COVID-19 në Kosovë*)”, Botapress.info, January 16, 2023, <https://botapress.info/cka-po-ndodh-keshtu-rritet-numri-i-rasteve-me-covid-19-ne-kosove-2/>

<sup>304</sup> “Fake news that three people have died from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours (*Rrena se tre persona kanë vdekur nga Covid-19 në 24 orët e fundit*)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), November 16, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-tre-persona-kanen-vdekur-nga-covid-19-ne-24-oret-e-fundit/>

<sup>305</sup> “Fake news on the death of a 29-year old from COVID-19 (*Rrena për vdekjen e 29 vjeçarit nga COVID-19*)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), December 26, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-per-vdekjen-e-29-vjecarit-nga-covid-19/>

countries and later no longer maintained a list of COVID-19 “risk countries”. This misleading information was shared 102 times on Facebook by 16 different pages from October 2022 to April 2023.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, disinformation<sup>307</sup> about COVID-19 in Kosovo has varied, ranging from the virus’s origin to the vaccine and its effects. The intensity of disinformation led some people to believe that the virus doesn’t exist. The information environment was littered with numerous conspiracy theories, including theories about Bill Gates inventing the virus and implanting microchips through vaccines. Many of these conspiracies went viral on social media.<sup>308</sup> During the pandemic, the way people sought information<sup>309</sup> significantly changed.

The percentage of people spending five hours or more per day seeking information online tripled. Because of the fact that disinformation about Covid was largely spread online and in social media, there is correlation between the tripling of information seeking habits online with the data that by June 2020, nearly 30% of Kosovo citizens did not believe in the existence of COVID-19 according to Pyper opinion poll.<sup>310</sup>

Moreover, disinformation narratives against vaccines made citizens hesitant about getting vaccinated. By August 2021, around 60% of Kosovo citizens<sup>311</sup> were either undecided (37.9%) or unwilling (22.7%) to get vaccinated, primarily due to fear of the vaccine’s side effects. Consequently, over 133,000 “AstraZeneca” vaccines<sup>312</sup> went unused and expired at the end of August 2021. From March 2020 to January 2023, at least 55 disinformation articles and posts about coronavirus were debunked.

<sup>306</sup> “Fake news about COVID-19 at the time it was published (Lajmi i rremë për COVID-19 për kohën kur është publikuar)”, Kallxo (Krypometer), January 29, 2023, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/lajmi-i-rreme-per-covid-19-per-kohen-kur-eshte-publikuar/>

<sup>307</sup> “Disinformation about COVID-19, its trajectory and globalization (Dezinformatat për COVID-19, trajektorja dhe globalizimi i tyre)”, European Journalism Observatory, Dren Gërguri, October 11, 2020, <https://al.ejo-online.eu/profesionalizmi-ne-media/dezinformatat-per-covid-19-trajektorja-dhe-globalizimi-i-tyre>

<sup>308</sup> “Top 5 Disinformations during COVID-19 in Albanian language”, Dren Gërguri, May 23, 2020, <https://drengerguri.com/top-5-disinformations-during-covid-19-in-albanian-language>

<sup>309</sup> “Infodemic and the Crisis of Distinguishing Disinformation from Accurate Information: Case Study on the Use of Facebook in Kosovo during COVID-19”, Vilnius University Press, Gëzim Qerimi and Dren Gërguri, December 29, 2022, <https://www.journals.vu.lt/IM/article/view/29379/29839>

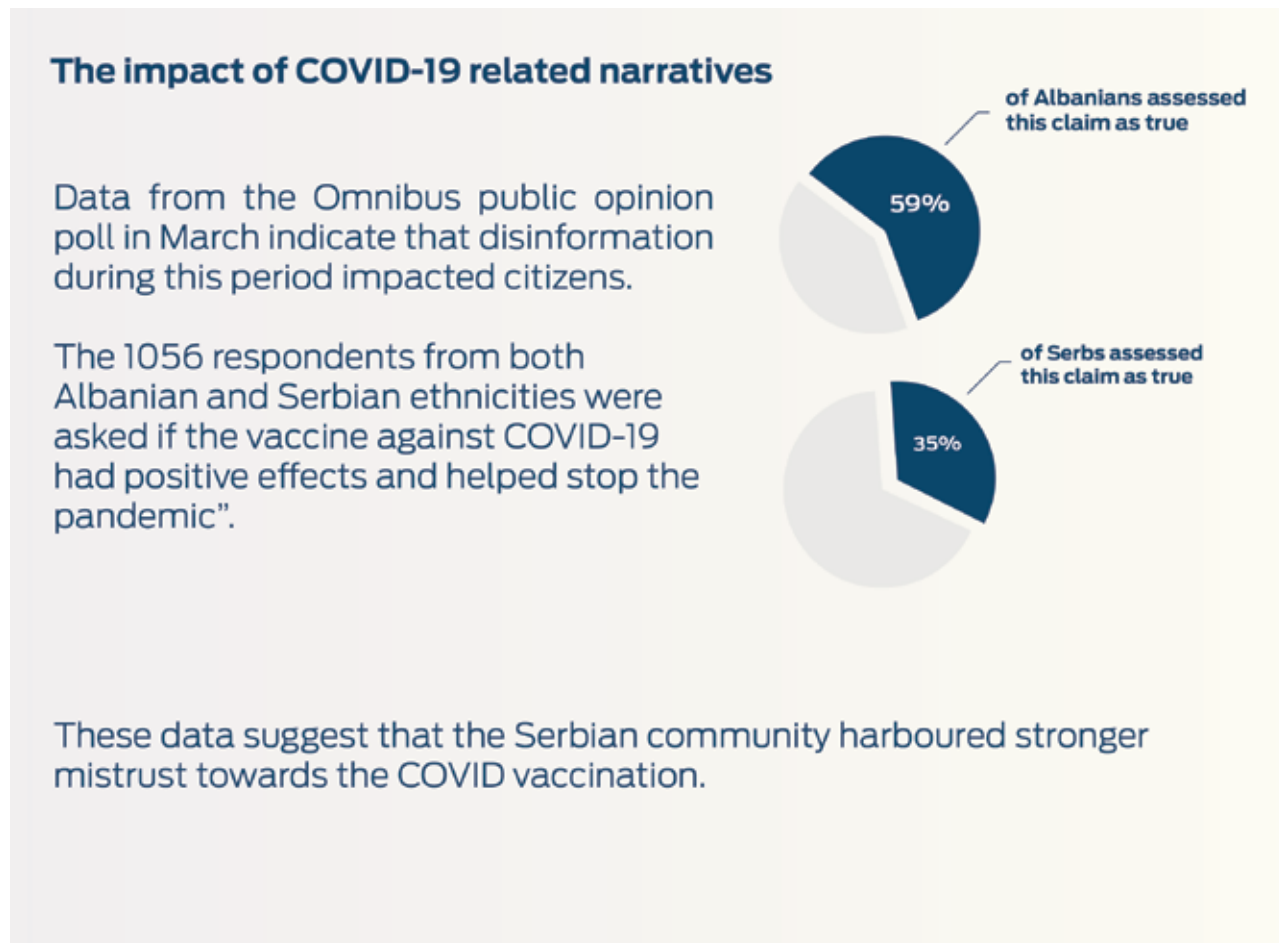
<sup>310</sup> “Poll by Pyper: 29.03 percent of citizens do not believe that COVID-19 exists in Kosovo (Sondazh nga Pyper: 29.03 për qind e qytetarëve nuk besojnë se COVID-19 ekziston në Kosovë)”, Telegrafi, Pyper, July 3, 2020, <https://telegrafi.com/sondazh-nga-pyper-29-03-per-qind-e-qytetareve-nuk-besojne-se-covid-19-ekziston-ne-kosove/>

<sup>311</sup> “Why are the Kosovo citizens reluctant to be vaccinated? (Pse qytetarët e Kosovës hezitojnë të vaksinohen?)”, Telegrafi, Pyper, August 11, 2021, <https://telegrafi.com/pse-qytetaret-e-kosoves-hezitojne-te-vaksinohen/>

<sup>312</sup> “Over 133,000 vaccines are thrown away (Mbi 133 mijë vaksina hidhen në bërllok)”, Kallxo, September 1, 2021, <https://kallxo.com/shendeti/mbi-133-mije-vaksina-hidhen-ne-berllok/>

In early 2023, the alarm was raised about new viruses using sensational headlines. For example, the article “Red alert raised - First case confirmed, 9-year-old girl infected with A-H5 virus”<sup>313</sup>(a clickbait piece insinuating that the virus had spread in Kosovo) was published by 38 different Facebook pages.

Figure 26: The impact of COVID-19 related narratives



<sup>313</sup> “Red alert raised - First case confirmed, 9-year-old girl infected with A-H5 virus(Ngrihet alarm i kuq – Konfirmohet rasti i parë, 9-vjeçarja infektohet me virusin A-H5)”, Insajderi, January 12, 2023  
<https://insajderi.org/ngrihet-alarm-i-kuq-konfirmohet-rasti-i-pare-9-vjecarja-infektohet-me-virusin-a-h5/>



### 3.3 Disinformation on energy prices

In recent years, Kosovo has grappled with waves of price increases. The inflation rate in 2021 was 7.6%, while in 2022, the price increase hit 11.6%.<sup>314</sup> Attempts have been made to blame the war in Ukraine for the price surge, but disinformation also appears to have played an important role.

Kosovo suffered a significant energy crisis at the end of 2021. It was first managed with electricity reductions at the end of 2021, and then with high electricity prices at the start of 2022. Debates on energy have occurred since December 2021. One narrative discussed is that “Europe is going back to coal”<sup>315</sup> and that 26 coal-fired power plants have resumed operation. Despite these articles indicating a resurgence in coal usage, the latest data presents a more nuanced picture. It has been reported that a significant proportion of coal-fired power plants were actually in standby mode, not generating electricity. In fact, primarily due to a mild winter in 2022/2023, Europe’s electricity production was lower by 18.9 terawatts than the previous winter. Despite this information, Kosovo media has used the ‘resurgence of coal’ to distort the narrative in Kosovo, pushing the notion that Kosovo is being unjustly prevented from building new coal-fired power plants and simultaneously advocating for a return to coal.<sup>316</sup>

In addition to energy and the reasons for the price surge, the media also reported extensively on the price of wood pellets.<sup>317</sup> From October 15, 2022, to April 1, 2023, pellet prices were reported on over 284 times. Reports on pellet prices peaked during the summer of 2022, when the price jumped from 180 euros to 740 euros.<sup>318</sup> This pellet price increase was inflated due to the reporting of shortages, because the increase was more than in other countries in the region.<sup>319</sup>

Alongside reports about the pellet price surge, the media falsely reported meteorologists’ forecasts for a harsh winter, causing further panic that was aiming at selling more pellets faster.<sup>320</sup>

<sup>314</sup> *The harmonised Index of Consumerism Prices, Statistical Agency of Kosovo, December 2022, <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/7248/indeksi-i-harmonizuar-i-%C3%A7mimeve-t%C3%AB-konsumit-ih%C3%A7k-dhjetor-2022.pdf>*

<sup>315</sup> “Europe is turning back to coal and nuclear energy due to the energy crisis (Evropa po i kthehet qymyrit dhe energjisë bërthamore për shkak të krizës energjetike)”, *Gazeta Blic*, February 24, 2023, <https://gazetablic.com/evropa-po-i-kthehet-qymyrit-dhe-energjise-berthamore-per-shkak-te-krizes-energjetike/>

<sup>316</sup> *European Electricity Review, Ember, January 31, 2023 <https://ember-climate.org/insights/research/european-electricity-review-2023/>*

<sup>317</sup> “The price of pellets in Kosovo is increasing, 1 ton costs up to 400 euros (Rritet çmimi i peletit në Kosovë, 1 ton kushton deri në 400 euro)”, *Kallxo*, July 15, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/rritet-cmimi-i-peletit-ne-kosove-1-ton-kushton-deri-ne-400-euro/>

<sup>318</sup> “Rizvanolli: Last year a ton of pellets cost 180 euros, while this year 740 euros (Rizvanolli: Në vitin e kaluar një ton pelet 180 euro, ndërsa këtë vit 740 euro)”, *RTV Dukagjini*, Facebook post, October 20, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/372642049429223/posts/6439761946050506>

<sup>319</sup> “Difficult winter: The most expensive pellet in the Balkans is in Kosovo (Dimër i vështirë: Peleti më i shtrenjtë në Ballkan është në Kosovë)”, *Radio Star*, July 20, 2022, <https://radiostargjilan.com/web/dimer-i-veshtire-peleti-me-i-shtrenjte-ne-ballkan-eshte-ne-kosove/>

Over the last two years, Kosovo has seen a record increase in oil prices. Often these increases are above the average price increase in the market, which led the Kosovo government to set a ceiling price for oil products in 2022.<sup>321</sup> Business owners' warnings about price increases were published in the media without any independent verification by journalists or relevant institutions. Furthermore, the warnings were sometimes taken out of context. For example, the owner of one of Kosovo's largest derivative companies was cited by many news portals saying, "within a few days, the price for a litre of diesel can go up to 3.5 euros".<sup>322</sup> This headline was published 186 times on Facebook and received 4,696 reactions, yet the text did not supply official data from any reliable institution to support this fake forecast.

Despite the alarm raised, it was confirmed that there were sufficient oil reserves in Kosovo, which were imported beforehand. Kosovo's primary oil imports come from the United Arab Emirates, Albania, Austria and Bulgaria. Similarly, a fictitious article stating that a compatriot decided to transform his car to a bus trailer due to the price surge<sup>323</sup> was shared 29 times on social media, drawing 509 reactions.

Fake reporting and disinformation inciting panic amongst consumers were also noted on the price of bread products, raising the alarm that prices could spike to 10 euros.<sup>324</sup>

Reports about the scarcity of cooking oil also emerged<sup>325</sup>, stirring panic among citizens as a consequence of the war in Ukraine.<sup>326</sup> Misinformation about the absence of cooking oil on the market allowed traders to hike their prices, causing the cost of a litre of vegetable oil to jump 2.5 euros. The data showed that the highest price for imported cooking oil was only 1.45 euros yet it was sold at prices up to 3.49 per litre.<sup>327</sup>

<sup>320</sup> "An arctic blast wakes residents, meteorologists issue their predictions about what will happen to the energy supply (Një shpërthim arktik zgjon banorët, meteorologët nxjerrin parashikimet e tyre çfarë do të ndodh me furnizimin e energjisë)", Sot.com.al, December 10, 2022, <https://sot.com.al/bota/i-ftohti-acar-godet-europen-dhe-do-te-testoje-furnizimet-me-energji-fare-pa-i554999>

<sup>321</sup> "Administrative Instruction (GRK) no. 03/2022 on price regulation of petroleum products and renewable fuels and other protective measures", Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, August 27, 2022, Accessible at: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=62315>

<sup>322</sup> "Jusaj: In a few days, the price for a liter of diesel can go up to 3.5 euros (Jusaj: Brenda pak ditësh, çmimi për një litër naftë mund të shkojë në 3.5 euro)", Klan Kosova, March 8, 2022, <https://klankosova.tv/jusaj-brenda-pak-ditesh-cmimi-per-nje-liter-nafte-mund-te-shkoje-ne-3-5-euro/>

<sup>323</sup> "Fake news on why the compatriot transformed his car to a bus trailer due to oil price surge (Rrena se mërgimtari barti makinën në rimorkio të autobusit të shkak të shtrenjtimit të derivateve)", Kallxo (Krypometer), August 8, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/krypometer/rrena-se-mergimtari-barti-makinen-ne-rimorkio-te-autobusit-te-shkak-te-shtrenjtimit-te-derivateve/>

<sup>324</sup> This is the last thing we needed, the price of one bread is expected to be EUR 10. Kosovo Sot, 27/03/22 <https://www.kosova-sot.info/lajme/609688/edhe-kjo-na-mungonte-cmimi-i-bukes-pritet-te-behet-10-euro/>

<sup>325</sup> "Kurti warns of measures following the price increase, inspectors are documenting the violations committed (Kurti paralajmëron masa pas rritjes së çmimeve, inspektorët janë duke i dokumentuar shkeljet e bëra)", Kallxo.com, March 10, 2022 <https://kallxo.com/lajm/kurti-paralajmëron-masa-pas-rritjes-se-cmimeve-inspektoret-jane-duke-i-dokumentuar-shkeljet/>

<sup>326</sup> "Disinformation that caused panic and price increases (Dezinformatat që shkaktuan panik dhe ngritje të çmimeve)", Kallxo, June 29, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/komuna/fact-check/dezinformatat-qe-shkaktuan-panik-dhe-ngritje-te-cmimeve/>

<sup>327</sup> "The most expensive cooking oil imported to Kosovo cost 1.45 cents, but was sold up to 3.49 (Vaji më i shtrenjtë i importuar në Kosovë kushtoi 1.45 cent, por u shit deri në 3.49)", Kallxo, March 11, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/lajm/vaji-me-i-shtrenjte-i-importuar-ne-kosove-kushtoi-1-45-cent-por-u-shit-deri-ne-3-49/>

## IV. Kosovo's capacity to deal with disinformation

Kosovan society faces serious challenges in establishing effective mechanisms to mitigate the spread of disinformation.

The prevention of disinformation is not adequately addressed by security institutions, the justice system, the regulatory bodies controlling national radio and TV frequencies, national, and the educational system. Various research studies, including this one, highlight the inadequacy of institutional capacities to address disinformation, as it is predominantly perceived as a problem concerning only the media. Consequently, public institutions evade their responsibility to tackle the issue.<sup>328</sup> Unlike other reports that have highlighted the lack of institutional coordination,<sup>329</sup> this BIRN study undertook deeper research to unveil serious challenges to combat disinformation.

In order to measure the public's vulnerability to disinformation, BIRN conducted a public opinion survey that involved surveying 1,056 respondents. Additionally, to assess the preparedness of institutional officials to address disinformation, BIRN conducted a social experiment with 50 participants, including teachers, doctors, prosecutors, judges, and social workers. To measure the readiness of the media, civil society, and institutions, BIRN also organised five thematic focus groups during April 2023. These focus groups included over 40 participants from various sectors, including representatives from the media, civil society organisations (NGOs), security officials, and PR officers in private businesses.

The legal framework and the lack of its enforcement does little to protect the society from disinformation

Kosovo has an established legal framework to address the issue of disinformation; however, this legal basis is ineffective in practice. Kosovo also currently lacks effective media education. Furthermore, the formulation and implementation of a cybersecurity strategy is still in the drafting phase. In 2023, Kosovo adopted a law on cyber security, which paved the way for the establishment of essential mechanisms, such as the Agency for Cyber Security. However, the Agency's capabilities are currently in the early stages of its development.

Additional serious challenges are identified in the libel law which tackles the issues of

<sup>328</sup> Conclusion from the focus groups held in April 2022 for the purpose of the study, see the conclusions in Annex 1

<sup>329</sup> "Vulnerability Index of Disinformation in Kosovo", Democracy Plus, November 2022, [https://dplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/30-12-2022\\_Vulnerability-Index-of-Disinformation-in-Kosovo.pdf](https://dplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/30-12-2022_Vulnerability-Index-of-Disinformation-in-Kosovo.pdf)

disinformation. According to BIRN court monitoring research, the legal institutions have addressed fewer than 10% of the total of defamation lawsuits<sup>330</sup>. Furthermore, the law itself has not undergone any amendments since its inception in 2011, and thus does not account for modern methods of content manipulation (such as deep fakes).

Enforcement of the law for the protection of copyright is low. Despite the Press Council of Kosovo identifying 53 instances of copyright violations throughout 2021 and 2022, the courts have only managed to resolve a single copyright case.<sup>331</sup> The persistent non-implementation of the copyright law has resulted in a state of chaos concerning the republication of materials, ultimately undermining the efforts made by the Press Council to identify and address violations of author's rights.<sup>332</sup>

Implementation of the privacy law has its challenges as well. Government institutions have thus far been unable to establish standards for the execution of this privacy law while the media has faced difficulties in adhering to the required standards set forth by the law in various cases throughout the year. During focus group discussions involving members of the Press Council of Kosovo and the media, a particular issue that emerged is the lack of awareness among journalists regarding the rules and regulations advocated with the Privacy Law.<sup>333</sup> Another identified legal issue is the absence of in-house rules and regulations regarding basic standards and guidelines for managing the online presence of public institutions and public servants. Only a limited number of institutions have established regulations concerning the management of social networks used by their staff, and very few institutions have security protocol rules specifically for electronic devices.

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<sup>330</sup> "Less than 10% of defamation lawsuits are answered by the court (Më pak se 10% e padive për shpifje me përgjigje nga gjykata)", Kallxo, April 24, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/gjate/analize/me-pak-se-10-e-padive-per-shpifje-me-pergjigje-nga-gjykata/>

<sup>331</sup> "Copyright filings, courts silent (Dosjet e heshtura të të drejtave të autorit)", Kallxo, May 27, 2022, <https://kallxo.com/gjate/dosjet-e-heshtura-te-te-drejtave-te-autorit/>

<sup>332</sup> The discussion was held in April 2023 as a part of focus groups with members of the Press Council. See Annex 1 at the end of this report for detailed findings of the focus groups.

<sup>333</sup> Focus group discussion with members of Press Council

## 4.1 The general population in Kosovo remains vulnerable to disinformation

Referring to the PISA<sup>334</sup> data that measures children's literacy around the world, Kosovo has one of the lowest levels of critical thinking. In addition, various reports<sup>335</sup> have found Kosovo to be particularly susceptible to disinformation. The evidence collected through this research demonstrates that disinformation affects the citizens of Kosovo.

This BIRN study, which involved 1056 respondents, revealed that more than 30% of the respondents believed at least one of the twelve disinformation narratives that were presented to respondents.<sup>336</sup> According to the same research, Facebook remains Kosovans' primary source of information.

Approximately 40% of respondents identified Facebook as their main news source. The research also tested citizens' abilities to discern real sources from false ones. The public opinion survey asked respondents if they believed news from Kosovo Agency for Information and London Today, two media that do not exist at all in Kosovo. The survey indicated that 12% of citizens trusted the non-existent Kosovo Agency for Information and 5.6% trusted non-existent London Today. This means that a portion of Kosovo's citizens pay no attention to the source of the information they consume.

The social experiment conducted by BIRN to assess the willingness and readiness of Kosovar society in dealing with disinformation provides valuable insights into the behaviour and attitudes of public officials towards the false information. The experiment indicates that a lack of media education and lack of verification procedures contributes to the vulnerability of public officials to false information. The experiment involved 50 participants from five different public professions: judges, prosecutors, doctors, teachers, and social workers.

Each profession had ten individuals who were given false information related to their field of work. BIRN's research team met with these professionals, identified themselves as BIRN staff and gave judges, prosecutors, doctors, teachers and social workers an article designed like an article printed from a media website to read.

The news was a text with the name of the author, a photo, advertising that made it look like a real article from a real news portal, but the text contained false information. After the

<sup>334</sup> Kosovo, *Student Performance, Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, OECD, 2018, <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?primaryCountry=XKO&treshold=5&topic=PI>

<sup>335</sup> "Vulnerability Index of Disinformation in Kosovo", *Democracy Plus*, November 2022, [https://dplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/30-12-2022\\_Vulnerability-Index-of-Disinformation-in-Kosovo.pdf](https://dplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/30-12-2022_Vulnerability-Index-of-Disinformation-in-Kosovo.pdf)

<sup>336</sup> *Results from the OMNIBUS research conducted in March 2023*

first reading, these professionals were given a questionnaire that asked if the news was true, and if they would share this article. Five minutes later, the participants filled out a second questionnaire where they were asked if they verified the information or if they would take measures to verify the information they just read. They were also asked if they remembered the name of the author of the article or which media published the article they read.

The survey showed that 44% of the participants rated obviously false news as true, while 50% of them failed to identify the evident false information in the survey. Furthermore, 72% of the participants could not provide a definition of false information .

Below is the false information given to each group.



Figure 26: Data from social experiment with teachers

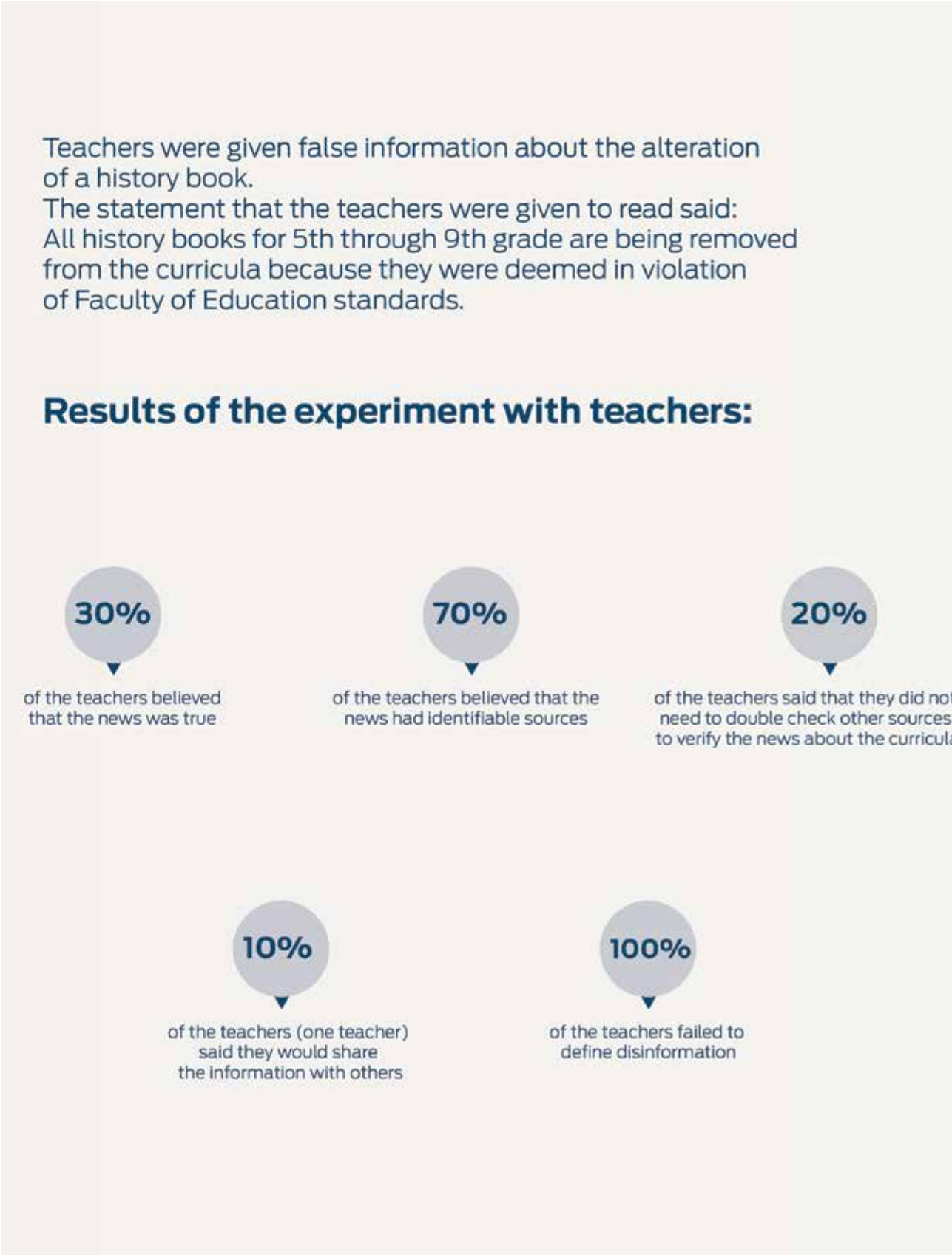


Figure 27: Data from social experiment with judges

Judges were given false information about The Hague Tribunal and the European Court of Justice.  
The statement that the judges were given to read said:  
The European Court ruled in favour of providing compensation to Fatmir Limaj.

### The results of the social experiment with judges:

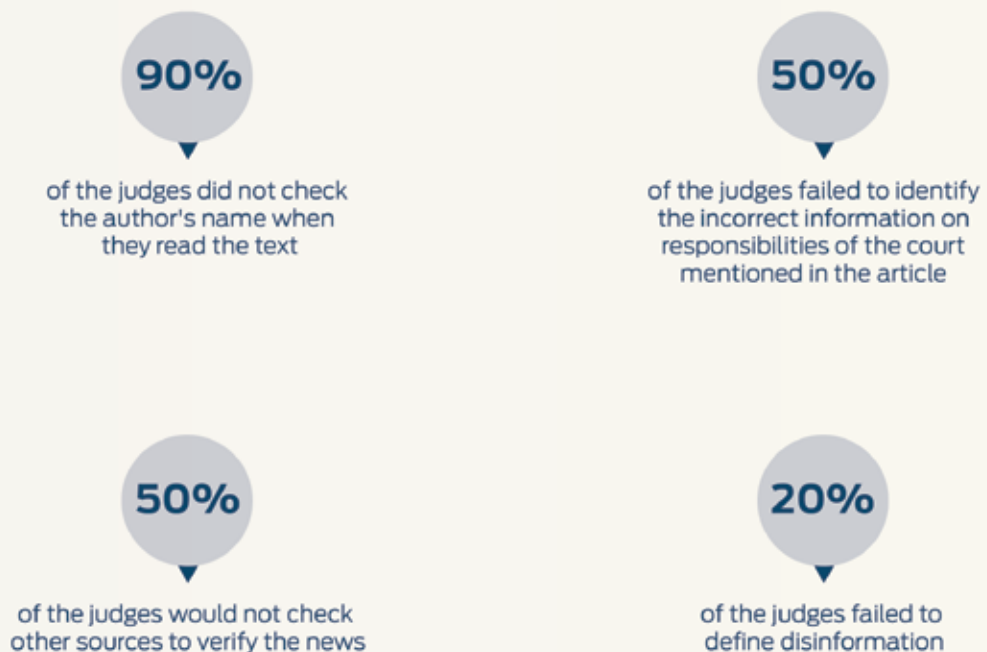


Figure 28: Data from social experiment with doctors:

Doctors were given false information about stopping the use of an antibiotic and replacing it with a vitamin.  
The statement that the doctors were given to read said:  
The Ministry of Health prohibits the use of antibiotics.

### The results of the experiment with doctors:

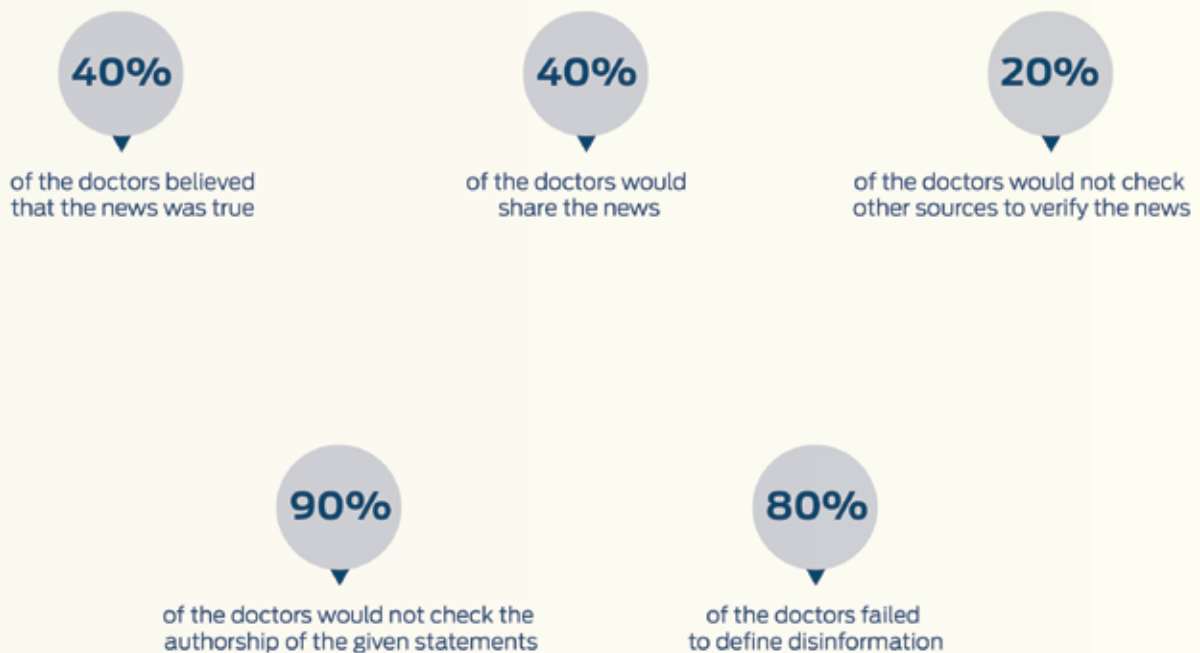


Figure 29: Data from social experiment with prosecutors



Figure 30: Data from social experiment with social workers



The findings of the social experiment reveal the fragility and lack of basic knowledge regarding safe information consumption among public officials. Public officials play a crucial role in making decisions that directly impact the lives, health, and safety of citizens. The fact that a substantial number of officials trusted false information is alarming.

The general data is disconcerting, especially the fact that a large number of officials would share the information with other parties or even distribute it without verifying the information. This study underscores the need for promotion of media literacy and critical-thinking skills to prevent the spread of misinformation.

## 4.2 The limited capacities of institutions in addressing disinformation

The cyber security strategy of Kosovo has not been ratified by its institutions. The country also lacks a well-defined strategy and framework for promoting media literacy.

The data from the research highlights the inability of public officials to identify and address disinformation. The information below discusses the inability of institutions to address disinformation. The disregard of disinformation in key strategic documents has resulted in a cascading series of challenges regarding the management of this problem within the country's institutions. The limitations can be categorised into three key areas:

- Absence of coordination and guidelines for identifying disinformation
- Absence of criminal investigations and impact analysis of disinformation
- Absence of institutional response to disinformation

More than 200 public relations officers, who are tasked with engaging with the public, work in Kosovo's public institutions. It is evident from the data that this workforce is primarily focused on promoting the institutions' work, rather than addressing and analysing disinformation. Kosovo public institutions have consistently failed to discern the funding behind the sources spreading disinformation and the hacker networks perpetrating attacks on media outlets. In a broader context, the country lacks a clearly defined structure and approach to respond to instances of disinformation.

Problems in the institutions, as confirmed by the research, can be categorised as follows:

- The lack of consistent positions on specific issues: The institutions of Kosovo lack clear and unified stances on international and regional developments. Public officials use different terminology and approaches when addressing the same matters. For example, the war in Ukraine is described as "Invasion of Ukraine", "Conflict in Ukraine", or "War between Ukraine and Russia". This lack of clarity and uniformity in the institutional discourse on regional and international relations creates confusion among journalists and the general population. This affects disinformation because it might spread the preferred narrative of the culprit. For example, "Russia's Invasion of Ukraine" conveys a very different narrative than "War Between Russia and Ukraine".



- Absence of basic knowledge on the flow of disinformation: A significant portion of public officials, as indicated by their participation in the focus groups, demonstrated a lack of knowledge of disinformation campaigns orchestrated by external influences. Moreover, they acknowledged their lack of specialised knowledge concerning the various forms and mechanisms through which disinformation spreads.
- Lack of cooperation and communication among agencies: The focus group discussion highlighted that there is no existing mechanism for interagency cooperation and communication to respond to disinformation. This makes it difficult for agencies to work together to identify, flag, and address disinformation, particularly foreign influence.
- Absence of a guiding document or rule: There is no guiding document or rule that classifies information as propaganda or disinformation, making it challenging for agencies to respond effectively. The lack of guidance also makes it difficult for members of institutions to report suspected disinformation.
- Inadequate monitoring of media: The group noted that there is no software or mechanism to monitor media, and many media outlets cannot be monitored due to timing constraints. The majority of public officials lack access to artificial intelligence tools or analytical reports that can collect the information within specific groups and instead rely on manual monitoring of the media. The data derived from the focus groups highlights a duplication of the efforts among officials who could benefit from artificial intelligence technology, which could automate media monitoring processes.
- Limited resources and misallocation: There are no specialised departments that deal with disinformation in Kosovo institutions.<sup>338</sup> While some resources are available for education and investigation, they are not being used effectively. The group discussed the need for capacity building within institutions to better understand the disinformation ecosystem and allocate resources accordingly.
- No proactive strategic communication: The current approach to information management is outdated, with information offices only responding to requests rather than proactively addressing disinformation. The group suggested that these offices should become more proactive in countering disinformation based on specific instances or narratives. Kosovo lacks 'statewide' strategy to combat false narratives.
- Lack of directives from higher authorities: There is a need for guidance from higher

authorities (Government, EU, other international stakeholders) to help identify and flag disinformation. This would help institutions develop a more robust response to disinformation.

- The absence of analytical capacities to analyse the flow of disinformation has resulted in a dearth of analytical reports within state institutions. This deficiency extends to critical institutions such as the State Prosecutor's Office, the Courts, and various ministries, where the production of documents presenting factual information and key points about disinformation is lacking. Consequently, these institutions are vulnerable to being targeted by misinformation campaigns.
- A great concern lies in the absence of criminal investigations within institutions such as the state prosecutor's office, particularly pertaining to suspected financing of disinformation and foreign influence. The lack of criminal investigations into cyber attacks targeting the media represents a serious problem as well.<sup>1</sup>

#### **4.3 Both media and educational institutions face serious limitations in protecting society against disinformation**

Research conducted through focus groups, a public opinion survey, and the social experiment shed light on serious problems related to the capacities of media and educational institutions in addressing disinformation.

- The institutions of Kosovo have not yet adopted a strategy to advance media education. Thousands of school teachers and staff lack adequate training and capacities to address disinformation. Furthermore, within the Ministry of Education, there are no studies or analysis that identify the sources of information that pose a threat to the well-being of the children within the country.

'The institutions of Kosovo have not funded or produced any educational television programs or online content, including cartoons (in Albanian and Serbian), that would be available on Youtube and provide educational messages, including how to read news properly. Consequently, children of Kosovo resort to consuming dangerous and suspicious materials disseminated through social networks that originate from different regions worldwide and are governed only by algorithms.

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<sup>339</sup> Conclusion from Focus group with media, see Annex 1 for detailed findings of these focus groups.

- The existing audiovisual regulatory mechanisms in Kosovo face limitations in combating disinformation. The Independent Media Commission lacks sufficient capacities to adequately monitor licensed broadcasters and impose appropriate penalties for ethical violations. For instance, during the Ukrainian invasion, this commission failed to prevent the dissemination of Russian propaganda through licensed channels.
- Media in the country lack adequate professional training to discern and identify instances of foreign disinformation. A very small number of journalists are trained in monitoring and tracking foreign influences. Consequently, editorial offices within the country have occasionally inadvertently transformed into unwitting disseminators of propaganda.
- A considerable portion of online media operates without the presence of an editor or editorial standards. As a result, young or inexperienced journalists often publish materials without conducting thorough analyses regarding the credibility of their sources.
- The media landscape persists in promoting single-source journalism and “easy journalism” where statements and content from social media platforms are published without contextualisation or proper sourcing.

## ANNEX 1: Focus Groups Summaries

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BIRN held focus groups to explore the vulnerability of Kosovo society to disinformation, particularly in relation to security and inter-ethnic relations, to identify key sources of disinformation, and to determine ways in which institutions, businesses, and civil society could counter this phenomenon. The focus groups were held in combined physical or hybrid formats and brought together five to ten participants from different backgrounds, including editors and members of the Press Council of Kosovo, managers of businesses' social media profiles, officials from security institutions, journalists who had shared disinformation, and civil society organisations dealing with disinformation. The guiding questions for the focus groups covered a range of issues, including the vulnerability of Kosovo society to foreign influences and disinformation on security and inter-ethnic relations; the use of social media; the differences in the use of social networks and sources of information between ethnic and societal groups; and the capacities of institutions and media to counter disinformation and fact-check information. Some of the guiding questions included:

- What are the differences between ethnic and social groups in the use of social networks and information resources?
- What are the capacities of institutions/media to counter disinformation and verify information?
- What are the capacities of businesses and civil society to combat disinformation?
- What are the sources of funding for disinformation?
- What are the most dangerous platforms for the distribution of disinformation?
- What are the main sources that spread disinformation?

The focus groups explored the capacities of businesses and civil society to counter disinformation, sources of financing for disinformation, the most dangerous platforms for disseminating disinformation, and key sources of dissemination of disinformation. The discussions were based on preliminary data obtained from the research. The focus groups aimed to provide a nuanced understanding of disinformation in Kosovo society and to identify strategies to counter this phenomenon. The following is a summary of discussions held within the scope of the focus groups:

## Focus Group 1: Editors and members of the Press Council of Kosovo

Ethical Adherence:	Participants emphasised the importance of adhering to the Press Council of Kosovo's Code of Ethics as a crucial preventive measure against publishing disinformation.
Capacity building:	The need for strengthening the PCK's capabilities was underscored, given its role as a self-regulatory body for written and online media.
News Verification Training:	The focus group identified a clear necessity for specific training on verifying false news, considering recent advancements in technology.
Role of Social Networking platforms:	Participants noted the role of social networks as the primary platforms for disinformation dissemination, and the importance of addressing this issue.
Public Media Literacy:	It was recommended that not only journalists and media entities, but also the public, need to be educated and made aware of the kind of media content they should consume.

## Focus Group 2 - Managers of businesses' social media profiles

Challenges for Media Companies:	Media companies face specific challenges in combating disinformation, including diverse social media usage across ethnic and social groups, the ability of institutions to counter false news, the financing of disinformation, and the protection of individuals' in news stories.
Adherence to Ethical Journalism Standards:	The focus group stressed the importance of maintaining ethical journalism standards and enforcing existing regulations to mitigate the effects of disinformation and to hold those responsible for violations accountable.
Businesses and Disinformation:	The issue of businesses unintentionally spreading disinformation through deceptive advertising or overstated product benefits was discussed. A collaboration between media companies, governments, and civil society organisations to create a transparent and credible evaluation system for media outlets was proposed as a solution.
Sensationalist Headlines and Clickbait Tactics:	The problem of sensationalist headlines and misleading clickbait tactics, commonly used by media outlets to drive traffic, was highlighted. The group emphasised the need for ethical reporting that avoids such tactics and focuses on accurate and informative content.
Comprehensive Strategy to Counter Disinformation:	The group underscored the need for a comprehensive governmental strategy to tackle disinformation, involving robust legal and regulatory measures, media literacy initiatives, accountable reporting practices, and collaboration among all relevant stakeholders.

### Focus Group 3 - Security Institutions

Lack of cooperation and communication among agencies:

The focus group discussion highlighted that there is no existing mechanism for interagency cooperation and communication to respond to disinformation. This makes it difficult for agencies to work together to identify, flag, and address disinformation, particularly when it comes to foreign influence.

Absence of a guiding document or rules:

There is no guiding document or rules that classifies information as propaganda or disinformation, making it challenging for agencies to respond effectively. The lack of guidance also makes it difficult for members of institutions to report suspected disinformation.

Inadequate monitoring of media:

The group noted that there is no software or mechanism to monitor the media, and many media outlets cannot be monitored due to timing constraints. This allows disinformation to spread unchecked.

Limited resources and misallocation:

While some resources are available for education and investigation, they are not being used effectively. The group discussed the need for capacity building within institutions to better understand the disinformation ecosystem and allocate resources accordingly.

No proactive strategic communication:

The current approach to information management is outdated, with information offices only responding to requests rather than proactively addressing disinformation. The group suggested that these offices should become more proactive in countering disinformation based on specific instances or narratives. A statewide strategy to combat narratives is also lacking.

Lack of directives from higher authorities:

There is a need for guidance from higher authorities (Government, EU, other international stakeholders) to help identify and flag disinformation. This would assist institutions in developing a more robust response to disinformation.

In conclusion, the focus group discussion revealed significant gaps in the current approach to addressing disinformation. To address these challenges, there is a need for better interagency cooperation, a guiding document or rules, improved media monitoring, proper allocation of resources, proactive strategic communication, guidance from higher authorities, and capacity building within institutions.



## Focus Group 4 - Journalists

Three main challenges of the media on accurate reporting:	The focus group discussion highlighted that the competition to release news quickly, political influence, and the pressure to maintain relationships with institutions often leads to the spread of inaccurate or misleading information.
Lack of specialised departments to fact-check:	The group noted that there is a need for specialised departments within media outlets to deal with disinformation. Some media outlets, i.e. Kallxo.com, have access to 'big tech' tools for flagging disinformation on social media platforms, such as Facebook.
Limited information about the sources of funding for disinformation:	There are no clear indications of funding sources for disinformation in Kosovo. However, the focus group mentioned the case of a radio station in Albania, which spreads Chinese propaganda.
Politicians' approach towards the media:	The focus group emphasised that political actors are using the 'fake media' narrative to undermine trust in journalists and established media organisations. The group noted that there is considerable abuse of freedom of speech in Kosovo, with many social media pages and portals misusing this right. Established media organisations may struggle to be heard amidst the noise created by less credible sources.
The digital age has created a chaotic ecosystem for the dissemination of information:	The focus group highlighted the need for self-regulation and adherence to ethical standards. Journalists should prioritise the public interest and avoid being influenced by money or other interests.
Necessity to develop information-seeking and information-exchanging habits:	The public should be educated about the importance of seeking information from official sources rather than relying on social media. In a democratic society, statements from officials and institutions should be obtained through proper channels, rather than through unofficial platforms. In conclusion, the focus group discussion identified important challenges in the existing approach to addressing disinformation. To address these challenges, there is a need to improve media literacy and critical thinking skills in society, which will impact how citizens use and understand media content. Another step is to create a specialised fact-checking department in media outlets and improve the adherence to ethical standards.

## Focus Group 5 - Civil society organisations dealing with disinformation

**Prevalence of Disinformation:** Online portals in Kosovo, including those in the Serbian language, are subject to widespread disinformation. These instances often revolve around categories and topics such as the Specialist Court, Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, online violence, misogyny, COVID-19, and foreign influence on domestic politics. The business-driven approach of many portals was also identified as a contributing factor to this problem. Women politicians are frequently targeted, especially during significant events such as elections.

**Disinformation vs. Unverified Information:** A distinction needs to be made between unverified information, which may be disseminated by genuine media driven by a click-bait approach for financial gain, and disinformation, which is inherently more deceptive and damaging. The latter increases during incidents in the north, inciting violence and sowing discord among communities, primarily stemming from media in Serbian language.

**Disinformation Targeting Minorities:** A disturbing trend of disinformation incites violence and hate speech against minority communities, such as LGBTQI+ and Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. Similar concerns were raised about disinformation targeting refugees coming from the Middle East and North Africa, namely, Syria and Morocco. The media, especially online media, often plays a significant role in amplifying this type of content and rhetoric.

**Role of Media and Journalism Integrity:** The media can play a crucial role in amplifying or reducing disinformation. While the Kosovo Journalist Association is working to improve journalistic quality, there is a need for media outlets to fact-check their information, avoid divisive language, and improve their editorial policies. New journalists and citizens over the age of 60 were considered to be particularly susceptible to disinformation.

**Institutional Transparency and Information Access:** Lack of institutional transparency and limited access to information is a significant issue affecting journalists, especially those starting their careers. This issue only exacerbates the disinformation ecosystem and undermines the credibility of institutions and media alike.

**Recommendations to Combat Disinformation:** Key recommendations include the need for media outlets to verify facts before publishing, building citizen resilience against disinformation, and strengthening the capacities of media regulatory bodies. State institutions must also improve their capabilities and develop strategies to counteract information campaigns against Kosovo.

## ANNEX II: DETAILED METHODOLOGY OF THIS STUDY

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This report defines disinformation as all forms of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented and promoted to intentionally cause public harm or for profit. This definition is similar to the one used by the European Commission Report on Disinformation.

The research methodology focused on three pillars in order to analyse the impact that information manipulation and disinformation had on the general public.

For the purpose of this study, at least 100 sources of information were monitored. They were divided in the following groups:

- Content distributed online by 40 television and online media platforms who are active in both national and local level, including foreign media present in Kosovo;
- Content distributed online by 63 social media accounts of 35 politicians and high-level public officials and 28 ‘influencers’ across different platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter);
- Content discussed in 10 political talk shows of central TV stations distributed through YouTube.

This report based its terminology on the key concepts of disinformation used in the 2018 EU report, “Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation,” and the report of the Europe of Council about information disorder (see table below). Information Disorder understands all phenomena that happen to the information universe divided into three categories: misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (further explained in the table below). The report served as the starting point for a series of disinformation reports from different Western Balkans countries that were commissioned by the EU Stratcom division.

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<sup>341</sup> European Commission, *Final report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation*, 12 March 2018 <https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

<sup>342</sup> 10 TV Debates that were analysed were designed to be geographically and ethnically diverse: Context, ATV, Dasma TV (DTV), Debat Plus, TV Dukagjini, Kendi i Debatit, Teve1, Politiko, Kanal10, Pressing, T7, RTK Prime, RTK, Rubikon, Klan Kosova, TV DANKOS and TV MOST

<sup>343</sup> Claire Wardle & Hossein Derakhshan, *Information disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making* (2017). <https://edoc.coe.int/en/media/7495-information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research-and-policy-making.html>

<sup>344</sup> "High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation. 'Final Report of the High Level Expert Group on Fake News and Online Disinformation.' European Commission", March 2018. <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/library/final-report-high-level-expert-group-fake-news-and-online-disinformation>

**TABLE: Terminology on the key concepts of information disorder**

<p>1. Disinformation: False or misleading content that is created, presented and disseminated with an intention to deceive or secure economic or political gain and which may cause public harm.</p> <p>2. Misinformation: false content, but the person sharing doesn't realise that it is false, misleading or harmful.</p> <p>3. Malinformation: genuine information that is shared with an intent to cause harm.</p> <p>4. Missing context: Content that implies a false claim without directly stating it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) False connection: when headlines, visuals or captions don't support the content.</li> <li>b) Misleading: misleading use of information to frame an issue or an individual.</li> <li>c) Clickbait: misleading and/or exaggerated media headlines or social media shares.</li> </ul> <p>5. Fabricated content: new content that is 100% false, designed to deceive and harm.</p> <p>6. Hidden advertisement: promotional material presented as news.</p> <p>7. Redistributing information disorder: re-distributing disinformation, misinformation and/or malinformation published by other media outlets.</p> <p>8. Satire or parody: no intention to cause harm but has potential to fool.</p>	<p>9. Pseudoscience: presenting non-scientific or pseudoscientific claims as scientific facts.</p> <p>10. Imposter content: when genuine sources are impersonated by false, made-up sources.</p> <p>11. Conspiracy theory: an explicit or implicit claim of the existence of a hidden malevolent plan, without presenting evidence for it.</p> <p>12. Altered: image, audio, or video content that has been edited or synthesised beyond adjustments for clarity or quality, in ways that could mislead people.</p> <p>13. Partly False: content that has some factual inaccuracies.</p> <p>14. Narrative is "an open-ended set of stories, events and ideas which are grounded in values and beliefs to resonate with the targeted audiences. The narrative seeks to provide an understanding of an issue by reducing its complexity and offering a path towards a desirable end state."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Disinformation narrative is a series of untrue or partially true stories forming a chronological whole that aims to deliberately deceive, mislead or manipulate the public. Therefore, disinformation should not be assessed as separate unique pieces, but as a part of a bigger whole, within a defined period of time, using several topics to support the narrative.</li> </ul>
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## Data scraping, content monitoring, coding, and social experiments

In order to identify disinformation trends published in television, online and social media, the researchers used a BIRN fact-checking platform, which was developed to tackle disinformation published by Kosovo media outlets. This platform serves as an automated solution to assist human fact-checkers. The platform has a Red Flag mechanism and the engine can be used by searching for the source, publishing date, URL, or topic. BIRN used this internal platform's data to identify disinformation in addition to other online tools such as CrowdTangle.

In addition, BIRN Kosovo used Krypometer, its International Fact-Checking Network verified fact-checker that contains an archive of 500 disinformation and misinformation stories published in the past two years. Krypometer helped identify trends that came prior to the timeline of this report.

The BIRN Network across the Western Balkans has been monitoring violations of digital rights. From September 1, 2021, to August 31, 2022, BIRN documented 782 digital rights' violations in its database.<sup>1</sup> The breakdown of these cases is: Bosnia and Herzegovina (77 cases), Croatia (70), Hungary (146), Kosovo (89), North Macedonia (83), Montenegro (65), Romania (128) and Serbia (124) recorded by the SHARE Foundation, a non-profit that promotes digital rights and a partner of BIRN's. Specifically, in Kosovo, the most frequently reported digital rights violations recorded by BIRN were classified as manipulation and propaganda (54 incidents).

## Quantitative and qualitative analyses

After the data scraping and content coding process, all of the monitoring forms were qualitatively analysed to decide the main narratives of information manipulation for each topic. Also, based on the primary data, the project researchers calculated the number of articles published on the same topic; their republications in other media or shares in other social media platforms; video views; and reach of social media posts across platforms.

## Validation of data

The data found during the monitoring have undergone a two-tier validation, through organisation of five focus groups (detailed under Annex I) and an independent review.

For this purpose, the draft of the study was shared with three independent reviewers for feedback. The feedback obtained was incorporated in the final draft.

<sup>345</sup> "Distorting the Truth: Hate Speech and Disinformation Fuel Digital Rights Abuses in the Balkans", Annual Digital Rights Report 2022, Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, <https://balkaninsight.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DISTORTING-THE-TRUTH.-HATE-SPEECH-AND-DISINFORMATION-FUEL-DIGITAL-RIGHTS-ABUSES-IN-THE-BALKANS.pdf>

