



KEY FINDINGS

Commonalities and divergences between Albania and region

- As is the case with the rest of the region, the polarized and unprofessional nature of Albanian media is a function of its structure: media portals proliferate under the ownership of powerful and wealthy private owners that have ties to politicians on both sides of the aisle. This makes it difficult for fact-based, investigative journalism to take place without fear of retaliation.
- Likewise, local politicians can be a source of disinformation for their own political gains. Media publish statements by politicians without verifying them leading to confusion, sense of panic and uncertainty.
- Clickbait and sensationalist titles drive a lot of traffic for the sake of profit. Outlets copy from each other and spread disinformation and propaganda for clicks.
- Another point in common across the region and Albania is China's inability to make political inroads in the country. This is compared to Turkey's growing influence at the economic and cultural level across the region.
- However, a major point of divergence remains Russia's and Serbia's ability to influence the Albanian media landscape. This is perhaps due to cultural and linguistic barriers, as well as Albania's geopolitical orientation, with Albanians remaining among the staunchest pro-NATO and EU in the region, despite belief in accession (and its timings more specifically) flailing in recent years.

Serbia

- Russia and China exert strong influence from abroad on Serbian media. More specifically, Russia has several outlets that broadcast or translate into Serbian, with Sputnik, Russia Today, and Russia Beyond being the most prominent vectors of Russian propaganda.
- This propaganda is then taken on and spread even further by right-wing tabloids and outlets.
- Some key narratives spread through Russian propaganda:
 - Disinformation regarding the war in Ukraine: 1) Ukraine attacked first and Russia is merely defending itself and 2), Russia is fighting Nazis in Ukraine.
 - Russia provides more support to Serbia than the EU does, despite the inverse being true. This has influenced support for EU accession in Serbia.



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- Factors influencing or easing the spread of disinformation:
 - Consolidation of media into the hands of a few private owners that are closely aligned with power, with many tabloids being directly financed by the state.
 - The Serbian state has also built a large army of trolls to discredit opponents.
 - Heavy amount of competition and saturated market means tabloid fight for space and create sensationalistic articles to drum up clicks, usually by spreading Russian propaganda.

Albania

- Russian influence in Albania is limited, even disinformation about the war in Ukraine not about spreading Russian propaganda for the benefit of Russia, but rather to generate clicks through sensationalist claims.
- However, alleged susceptibility to Russian influence has mockingly been used as a tool to discredit parties and individuals across the political spectrum
- The growing tension between Kosovo and Serbia has been blown out of proportion across Albanian media, with each incident being portrayed as an advent of a new war.
- Rama has been portrayed as Vucic and Putin's ally and lackey. One clear consequence of this narrative has been an obvious cooling of relationship between Rama and Kurti.
- Iran began its disinformation activities on Albania when this latter agreed to host Iran's democratic opposition group, the MEK.
- Things culminated in 2022 when Iranian state cyber actors launched [destructive cyber attacks](#) against the Government of Albania.
- These massive data hacks that hit Albania in 2022 have fueled fears of national security threats and have reduced faith in Albanian state institutions.
- Faktoje research on Chinese investments and influence in the country has shown that in spite of China's efforts there has been no insignificant influence.
- Turkey continues to grow in political and cultural influence, although some links between the Turkish state and media portals are hard to verify given lack of transparency.

Kosovo

- Most disinformation spread in Kosovo came from external sources, mainly Serbia and Russia, with Serbian state officials are among the main sources of disinformation about Kosovo.



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- Russian and Serbian propaganda is then further reproduced by Kosovar media that publish statements by politician and other outlets without verifying their veracity.
- Kosovo media use clickbait to incite clicks and increase revenue, thus leading to a state of panic among Kosovo citizen.
- This sentiment of panic and uncertainty is how Russian cements its influence in Serbia and the Western Balkans, using its channels like Sputnik Srbija, RT, Russia Beyond.
- Some key narratives that led to disinformation:
 - Warmongering between Kosovo and Serbia, especially around conflicts at the border.
 - Any sort of action by Kosovo police within its borders has instant reaction in Serbia, even when completely unrelated.
 - Another narrative concerns the Open Balkans initiative which is depicted as a pro-Russian project because of an article by Sputnik Serbia that praises the project.
- While China's influence is not as obviously, Kosovo as seen investments from Türkiye and the Gulf States, including increased cultural reach on Türkiye's part.

Bosnia and Hercegovina

- The media landscape in Bosnia and Hercegovina reflects constitutional construction, with media outlets and audiences separated between the Muslim-Croat Federation on the one hand, and Republika Srpska on the other.
- Many media outlets owned privately by people close to power.
- Influence has international roots, with Serbian media owners and outlets being the main sources of disinformation, and their messages being mirrored across Bosnia, especially Republika Srpska.
 - Key here was the discovery of a "disinformation hub" of media outlets that frequently republished the same disinformation stories and spread similar messages.
 - Republika Srpska public broadcasting serves as an arm of Russian state propaganda
- Some of the main narratives of disinformation concern the Ukrainian war, especially claims that the West provoked Russia into attacking Ukraine, and that Russia is fighting Nazism. Likewise, there are claims that the West wants to undermine traditional Bosnian values.
- Disinformation from entities linked to Serbia show consolidated attempts to undermine the very existence of BiH.



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- China has minor being sustained impact, mostly through cultural attempts, where Türkiye's cultural and economic influence is much more obvious and wide-spread.

Montenegro

- In Montenegro, Russian soft power and influence is in full display through elements like the Orthodox Church and ties to political parties. In this climate, several outlets exist as launching pads for Russian propaganda.
- Serbian influence is also strong: several radio stations and tabloids are owned by people close to Vucic. Likewise, TV stations are mostly foreign-owned.
- Foreign influence in Montenegrin media is a result of a lack of government oversight and interest in media regulation.
- Local politicians spread disinformation by focusing on identity-based issues (ethnic and other forms of minorities) rather than real problems (poverty, corruption, EU accession). They deploy disinformation and fake news for their own political agendas.
- China has deep economic influence in Montenegro given its major investments in the country. It has also sought to increase its cultural influence through collaborations between universities and opening a Confucius institute, but so far its political influence remains limited.

North Macedonia

- Media outlets in North Macedonia are polarized, mostly they represent one-sided opinions of the political parties that they support. Often these online news portals do not have clear ownership, editorship, and internal structure and publish unsigned articles, which makes it very easy for them to spread disinformation.
- Russian disinformation is mostly spread online, both in the news portals and on Facebook. The political party Levica has open support for Russian politics. Other sources of pro-Russian narratives are Serbian tabloids which have a Macedonian version and republish the same disinformation narratives, news portals affiliated with the Macedonian diaspora, and individuals on Facebook that strongly support the Russian aggression.
- The most dominant disinformation narratives in the North Macedonian media sphere are: Russia is conducting a special operation in Ukraine, Russia is fighting Nazis in



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Ukraine, Macedonia should not donate weapons to Ukraine and The West is responsible for the war.

- Anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives are part of general anti-Western efforts to undermine trust in democracy and present the West as “hypocritical, with double standards,” aiming to increase Euroscepticism and decreasing support for self-defense efforts, including the country’s support for defense of Ukraine. These narratives are combined with propaganda and misinformation on various local issues, and as they develop almost always add a component of incitement of inter-ethnic tensions, esp. between Macedonians and Albanians.
- Anti-EU narratives had intensified, exploit current issues and accumulated negative emotions, such as those resulting from the disputes with Balkan EU members (Greece, Bulgaria), to present the EU as nondemocratic and ultimately unwilling to integrate Western Balkans countries, which results in declining trend in support for European Union membership.
- Anti-NATO disinformation narratives are rooted in misperceptions based on recycling the propaganda from the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s, originating from Serbia and the regime of Milošević. Besides exploiting past local grievances, such narratives parrot Russian positions presenting the alliance as a warring side in the war in Ukraine at the expense of Ukrainians.
- Anti-Western narratives heavily rely on spreading fear on one hand, including xenophobia and homophobia, presenting the West as satanic and liberal democracy as threat, while promoting authoritarianism as solution to current issues, from praising Putin as defender of traditional and religious values, to promoting dictatorial regimes (Russia, China) as more beneficial to their people than democracy. This is paired with obfuscation of the actual tangible benefits from the NATO membership and EU accession, incl. the effect of Western development aid and investment.
- Direct investments in the economy, infrastructure, telecommunications, media, academic cooperation with universities, and the functioning of Confucius Institutes are the strategic instruments of Chinese influence. Chinese "soft power" in the country is not reported enough in the Macedonian media, while an abstract, idealized perception of China is created among the citizens.

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