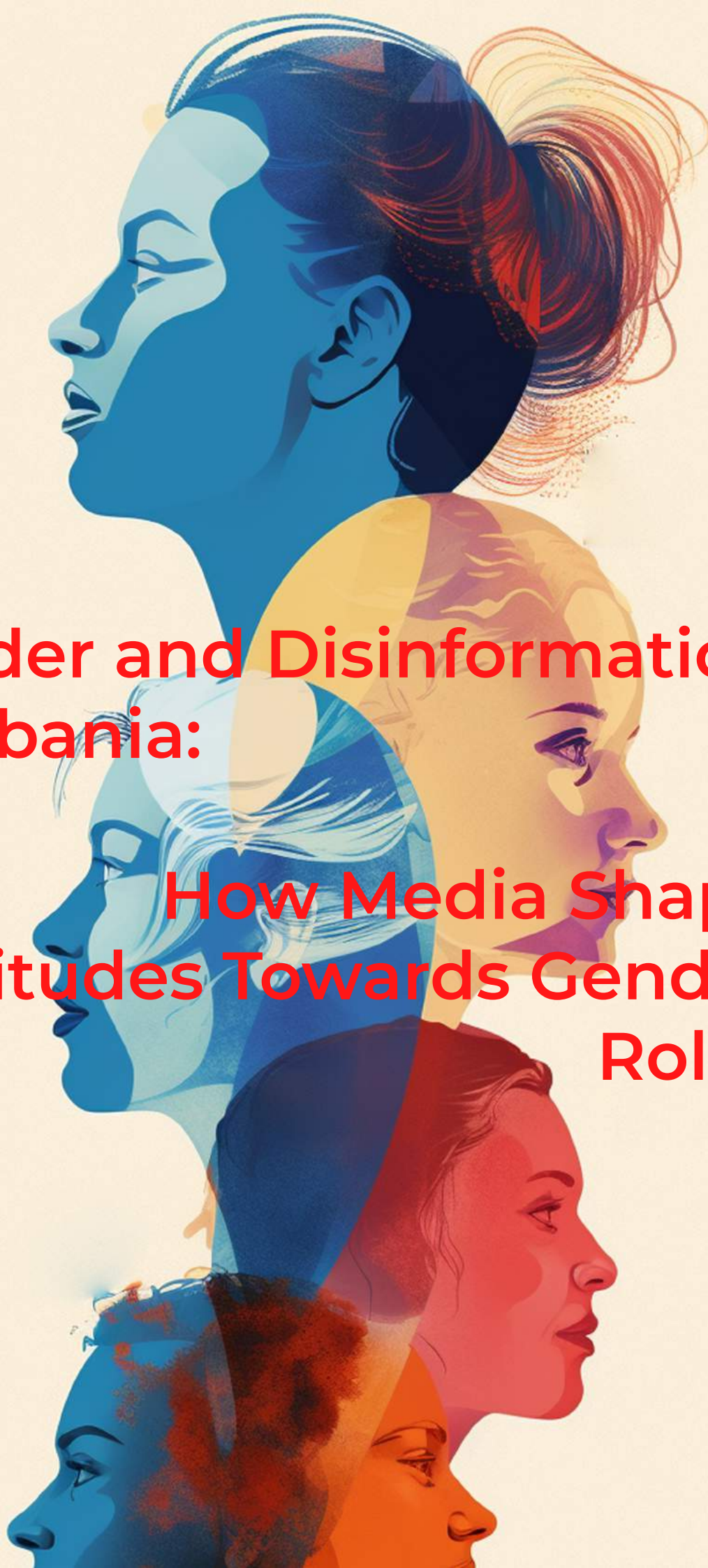




# Gender and Disinformation in Albania:

## How Media Shape Attitudes Towards Gender Roles



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## Introduction

This article analyzes various disinformation campaigns started and amplified by Albanian media with regards to women and the LGBTI+ community. With our work, we sought to address two sets of questions. First of all, what kind of campaigns that target women and members of the LGBTI+ community are being promulgated across Albanian media? And secondly, what are their origins and purpose? Who benefits from these campaigns and through which mechanisms are they promulgated? In looking at the nature and promulgation of these narratives, our goal was to understand the main drivers and beneficiaries of these disinformation campaigns. In addition to broader concerns about how media shape public perception of gender roles, we were also interested in if and how foreign actors (i.e., foreign states) may use this type of disinformation to spread their own agenda and destabilize Albania and its government. We are aware of the attempts by the Russian government, among others, to use cultural issues to fuel anti-West and anti-EU sentiment and undermine local governments.<sup>1</sup> Our article looks at the extent that countries like Russia, Iran, and Turkey (as some of the key geopolitical players in the Western Balkans), may be using media influence regarding such cultural issues for their own agendas. For the purpose of this article, we understand **disinformation** *to be the intentional and knowledgeable spread of false or erroneous information to hurt or damage, especially a government, organization, or public figure.*

The article is the result of an in-depth review of the output of Albanian media. In order to spot major disinformation campaigns pertaining to gender and the LGBTI+ community, we reviewed the output of a range of media outlets, from major news channels to tabloids and social media pages with significant following. We also reviewed social media engagement and comments in posts pertaining to gender issues to gain insights into how the way issues were portrayed by media shaped the public's reaction. This allowed us to distinguish major instances of targeted disinformation campaigns, and list key narratives employed when talking about gender roles. Furthermore, we reviewed reports on Albanian media's treatment of gender and sexuality related issues over the past five years to pinpoint which disinformation campaigns have had the largest impact and how they continue to persist to this day.

Figuring out the beneficiaries required an overview of the Albanian media landscape more generally. Some 900 media outlets operate in Albania, including 60 local and national TV channels, newspapers, radio stations, and online portals. Despite the veneer of diversity, "the Albania media scene is highly concentrated in the hand of few major owners, who have strong political affiliations, and control more than half of the audience share and nearly 90% of the market share," according to the Balkan Investigative Network's Media Ownership Monitor.<sup>2</sup> This concentration of the biggest outlets in the hands of a few, politically-affiliated owners means that often media coverage is itself politically motivated, amplifying the opportunity for manipulation of the public through disinformation for nefarious purposes. Furthermore, as portals fight for attention and clicks to secure their bottom line in a highly competitive market, outside funding becomes crucial to their survival. Funding and ownership were crucial in determining the beneficiaries of any disinformation campaign. Where such data was not available, we analyzed its overall coverage to

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<sup>1</sup> Vanessa Nikolova, "Kremlin speaking: homophobia as geopolitics," <https://factcheck.bg/en/kremlin-speaking-homophobia-as-geopolitics/>.

<sup>2</sup> Balkan Investigative Network, "Media Ownership Monitor," <https://www.mom-gmr.org/en/countries/albania/>.

understand where its affiliations lie, especially as it pertains ties that belie an attachment to foreign actors acting against Albania's interests.

### Attitudes towards gender and sexuality

While exact numbers are elusive, various surveys have shown that television, followed by social media, remain the main sources for news and entertainment for the vast majority of Albanians.<sup>3</sup> Albanians spend hours of their days watching news broadcasts, talk and variety shows, reality shows, and on social media. This article begins from the understanding that the content people consume through media channels shape how they view and engage with the world, specifically how they understand issues and questions pertaining to gender. Over the decades, an expanding body of research has shown there is a robust link between the media that people consume and their attitudes toward gender roles and stereotypes.<sup>4</sup> Depictions that break gender stereotypes and employ positive and complex depictions of marginalized groups (including women, people of color, members of the LGBT+ community among others) have a measurable impact in changing the public's perception.<sup>5</sup>

Albanians continue to have a deep attachment to strict gender roles within and outside the household. This adherence to traditional ideas about gender are the result of Albania's deeply rooted patriarchal traditions.<sup>6</sup> According to a report by UN Women, "One in three male respondents and one in four female respondents believe that girls belong in the domestic sphere, while boys should pursue career and leadership opportunities. A high proportion also believe that women should behave subserviently to their male partners."<sup>7</sup> The report also found that a similar portion of people believe that men should have control over women's bodies, decisions, and finances, with more men accepting this position than women.

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<sup>3</sup> For a breakdown of Albanians' media consumption habits see the "Methodology" section below. For an overview of these numbers, see also Monitor, "Anketimi i INSTAT: Nëntë nga dhjetë shqiptarë janë të ekspozuar ndaj mediave,"

<https://www.monitor.al/anketimi-i-instat-nente-nga-dhjetë-shqiptarë-janë-te-ekspozuar-ndaj-mediave-2/>.

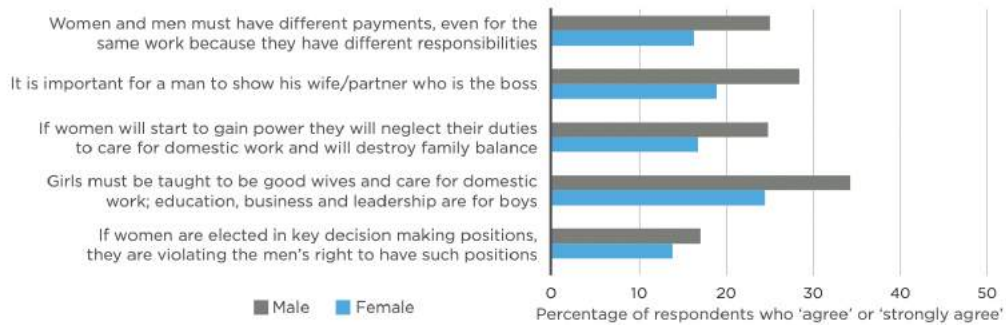
<sup>4</sup> See for example, L. Monique Ward and Petal Grower, "Media and the Development of Gender Role Stereotypes," *Annual Review of Development Psychology* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Phillip Ayoub and Jeremiah Garretson, "[Getting the Message Out: Media Context and Global Changes in Attitudes toward Homosexuality](#)" *Comparative Political Studies*, 50, 8, (2017); Erik Bleich, Irene Bloemraad, and Els De Graauw, "Migrants, minorities and the media: Information, representations and participation in the public sphere," *Migrants, Minorities, and the Media* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> UN Women, *Public Perceptions of Gender Equality and Violence Against Women Albania* (2018), <https://albania.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Albania/Attachments/Publications/2019/05/Albania.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 4. Th

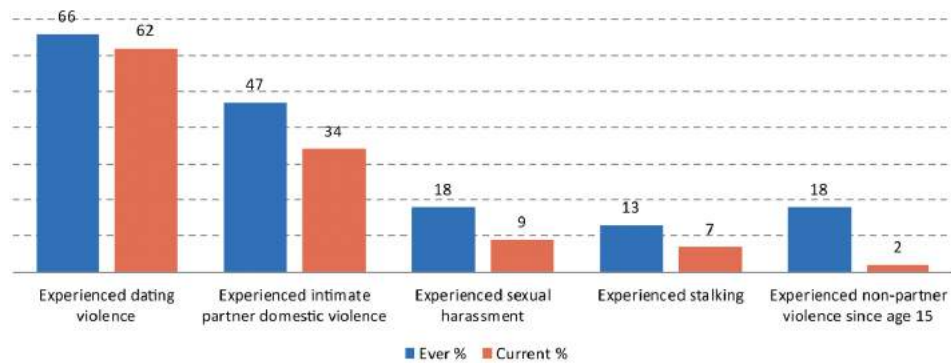
**Figure 3: Women's Roles in Society**



**Figure 1:** Survey results from [UN Women](#) report on the perception of gender roles in Albanian Society.

Likewise, the report found that rigid perceptions about gender roles are used to justify violence against women: from infidelity being seen as justification enough for physical violence, to attitudes towards shame and women’s position within the household enabling the secrecy around domestic violence. A 2020 survey showed that these attitudes remain largely unchanged.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, a report by the National Institute of Statistics has shown that “More than half of Albanian women and girls aged 15-74 years old have experienced one or more of the five different types of violence (intimate partner violence, dating violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment and/or stalking), during their lifetime.”<sup>9</sup>

**Fig. 1 Experiences of violence against women and girls**



**Figure 2:** 2019 INSTAT and UN Women report on violence against women in Albania.

While strict adherence to gender norms and roles may be the inheritance of a long history of patriarchal traditions, it continues to be maintained in the present through a multitude of mechanisms, including through the media that Albanian people consume. NGOs in Albania have published important research on the intersection between gender-based violence and women’s

<sup>8</sup> UN Women, Perceptions of violence against women and girls: A comparative summary (2022) <https://albania.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/04/perceptions-of-violence-against-women-and-girls-a-comparative-summary>.

<sup>9</sup> INSTAT, “Violence against Women and Girls in Albania,” <https://www.instat.gov.al/en/statistical-literacy/violence-against-women-and-girls-in-albania/>.

portrayal in media. Their findings showcase how women are objectified, the prevalence of hate speech directed at women, racial minorities, and LGBT+ people, and how violence against women is justified and perpetuated through media narratives. The Reporting Diversity Network’s “Monitoring Report on Hate Speech in Albania,” found that gender was the second largest category to be the target of hate speech in media, following ethnicity.<sup>10</sup> A monitoring project by the Albanian Media Institute likewise observed that a considerable portion of articles and posts about women in Albanian media display or rely on sexist and misogynistic stereotypes.<sup>11</sup> Women in public-facing positions, like politicians and journalists, receive a disproportionate amount of misogynistic coverage and hate speech, but even more broadly the Albanian media landscape suffers from forms of both overt and covert sexism.<sup>12</sup>

This article confirms the overall ethos of these findings: Albanian media’s portrayal of women and girls is both explicitly and covertly misogynistic. But while these reports are interested primarily in highlighting sexism and misogyny as features of news coverage across Albanian media, this report looks at specific cases of targeted disinformation campaigns and unpacks the mechanisms that promulgate them. Based on this, we contend the way Albanian media twist facts, employ clickbait titles, and weaponize misogynistic language and tone—all these serve to enshrine certain narratives about gender in the mind of the Albanian public. This disinformation pertaining to gender shapes how the public thinks about gender and gender roles, perpetuating harmful narratives and stereotypes that have direct consequences for the lives of women and girls in Albania, and the lives of the LGBT+ community.

## Politics and Foreign Malign Influences

Most Albanian media, especially bigger outlets, have clear or covert political affiliations. To reiterate the findings of the Media Ownership Monitor, “the boundaries between media, politics and business have always been blurry.”<sup>13</sup> While traditional media and their ownership are displayed in the government’s database for registered businesses, online portals do not have to submit to the same level of scrutiny or transparency with regards to their funding.<sup>14</sup> At times, this makes it hard or even impossible to get a sense of the interests involved in particular outlets. Instead, we have to rely on a holistic and comparative review of their content to pinpoint affiliations that belie their connections with specific interests, especially foreign ones.

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<sup>10</sup> Dorentina Hysa and Kristina Lani, Monitoring Report on Hate Speech in Albania.

<https://www.annalindhoundation.org/sites/default/files/documents/network-news/Monitoring-Report-on-Hate-Speech-in-Albania-12072022.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Albanian Media Institute, “Mind the Language,” Project Handbook.

<https://www.annalindhoundation.org/sites/default/files/documents/network-news/Mind%20the%20Language%20-%20Project%20Handbook.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See for example, Albana Metaj-Stojanova, “Media Reporting on Domestic Violence against Women in Republic of Albania,” *European Journal of Research in Social Sciences* (2017); UN WOMEN, Violence Against Women during Elections & Gender Bias in Media Coverage of April 2021 General Elections in Albania; Izela Tahsini and Veronika Duci, “Women and Politics: Coverage of 2021 Parliamentary Election Campaign in the Albanian Online Media,” *Global Social Welfare*.

<sup>13</sup> Balkan Investigative Network, “Media Ownership Monitor,”

<https://www.mom-gmr.org/en/countries/albania/>.

<sup>14</sup> AidData, “Albania: Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels,”

<https://www.aiddata.org/publications/albania-profile-of-media-ownership-and-potential-foreign-influence-channels>.

For instance, portals like [Gazeta Impakt](#) does not have any information line that may help us identify its owners. However, unlike the majority of Albanian media, they publish a preponderance of articles condemning Islamophobia, they are vocally anti-MEK, and have articles that are neutral to positive on Iran. They also follow accounts related to Iran on spaces like Twitter and their articles are republished on the Iranian-owned [Nejat Society](#). This has led us to believe that Iranian interests are at play in the publication of the portal in Albanian. Likewise, there are [websites](#) that routinely publish puff pieces about the efforts of the Turkish government, Turkish organizations and their humanitarian campaigns in Albania, especially around Ramadan. While puff pieces and advertisements are not rare even in major Albanian news outlets, they align with corporations rather than individual countries.

Our research has shown that such portals with clear foreign influence do exist, with Iran and Turkey being two of the more obvious interests involved in their publication. Iran in particular has shown growing interest in Albania because the country's decision to host members of the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK).<sup>15</sup> In the second half of 2022, the Albanian government systems were the victims of several coordinated cyberattacks that were later attributed to Iranian hackers.<sup>16</sup> The attacks paralyzed government systems for days and led Albania to cut diplomatic ties with Iran. Homeland Justice, the group that has taken responsibility for the attacks, has made explicit the fact that these attacks are retaliation for Albania's decision to serve as host to MEK.<sup>17</sup>

The shadow of Russian influence looms large in the Western Balkans, including Albania. Russia does not hide its anti-West and anti-EU agenda in the region, and its aim to impede the Western Balkan six from joining the European Union.<sup>18</sup> Across the Balkans, as in elsewhere in the broader area of Eastern Europe, it has weaponized media and culture, especially homophobic sentiments, to turn the population of places like Serbia, Bulgaria, and Montenegro against the EU. Albania's relationship to Russia, however, must be understood in context. Unlike its Western Balkan neighbors, Albania does not have strong cultural or linguistic ties to Russia. The vast majority of Albanians do not speak Russian or another Slavic language. This means that the ability of Russian-language media to penetrate the Albanian public is in itself diminished.

According to a recent briefing of the European Parliament "North Macedonia and Albania were identified as least vulnerable countries" to Russian influence, including cultural influence.<sup>19</sup> The Research Lab Aid Data, found that "Russia and other external actors appear to have relatively few active channels to influence the Albanian media space."<sup>20</sup> It further found that, only "one Russian state-owned outlet, an office for Rossiyskaya Gazeta, exists in Albania. For media owners,

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<sup>15</sup> See for example, Arron Merat, "Terrorists, cultists – or champions of Iranian democracy? The wild wild story of the MEK," *The Guardian*,

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/nov/09/mek-iran-revolution-regime-trump-rajavi>.

<sup>16</sup> Ayman Oghanna, "How Albania Became a Target for Cyberattacks," *Foreign Policy*,

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/03/25/albania-target-cyberattacks-russia-iran/>.

<sup>17</sup> Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, "Iranian State Actors Conduct Cyber Operations Against the Government of Albania," <https://www.cisa.gov/news-events/cybersecurity-advisories/aa22-264a>.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Stronski, "Russia in the Balkans After Ukraine: A Troubling Actor," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. <https://carnegieendowment.org/politika/87959>.

<sup>19</sup> European Parliament, "Russian and the Western Balkans: Geopolitical confrontation, economic influence and political interference,"

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS\\_BRI\(2023\)747096\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2023/747096/EPRS_BRI(2023)747096_EN.pdf).

<sup>20</sup> Aid Data, "Albania: Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels," 12.

only Koço Kokëdhima, Albanian businessman and owner of Gazeta Shekulli, has ties to Russian oligarchs and the Russian government, though this has not appeared to result in pro-Russian content in Gazeta Shekulli.”

Table 1: Russian state-owned media in Albania, 2021

Television		Print		Radio		News Agency	
Russia I	✗	Rossiyskaya Gazeta	✓	Sputnik	✗	TASS	✗
Russia 24	✗					Sputnik	✗
Russia K	✗						
RTR-Planeta	✗						
TV Centre	✗						
Channel One	✗						
RT	✗						

**Source:** Aid Data, “Albania: Media Ownership and Potential Foreign Influence Channels”

In fact, our research shows that where disinformation targeting women and LGBT+ people is used politically, it is done by local actors and for local purposes. Portals with affiliations and funding from political parties, especially the Democratic Party, are more likely to disinformation that suits their political aims. For the Democratic Party in question, this means an attempt to get voters to side with their new cultural agenda which focuses on traditional family values and anti-LGBT+ rights. It also means often using misogyny and homophobia to attack their political opponents. This does not mean, however, that Albanian media are not vulnerable to Russian (or other foreign influence). As we mentioned, there are several portals that clearly have ties to foreign entities, although their influence at the moment appears limited at the moment. Even when it comes to the Democratic Party, or its ally, the Freedom Party, several members have clear financial ties to Russia or Russian donors.<sup>21</sup> It is own traditional family values agenda, in which it is inspired by the growingly authoritarian Fidesz, showcases the reach that foreign influences can have in shaping Albanian politics. Using disinformation to orient the Albanian public against progressive issues with regards to gender, even without Russian media’s presence in Albania, can still aid Russia’s aim of aligning another Western Balkan country away from the EU using culture.

<sup>21</sup> See for example, Faktoje’s investigations into these matters. Anila Hoxha, “Dosja e lobimit rus, dy vjet sorollatje e kacafytje në sistemin e drejtësisë dhe në fund Basha u harrua,” *Faktoje*, <https://faktoje.al/dosja-e-lobimit-rus-dy-vjet-sorollatje-e-kacafytje-ne-sistemin-e-drejtësisë-dhe-ne-fund-basha-u-harrua/>. And also, Barbara Halla & Jona Plumbi, “Paratë ruse, media dhe drejtësia e re – A po heton SPAK Monika Kryemadhin për pagesa offshore me oligarkë rus?,” *Faktoje*, <https://faktoje.al/parate-ruse-media-dhe-drejtësia-e-re-a-po-heton-spak-monika-kryemadhin-per-pagesa-offshore-me-oligarke-rus/>.



## Methodology

According to the latest estimates, more than 900 online outlets operate in the Albanian media sphere, most of which operate as tabloid-style portals, with the others being the webpages of blogs and legacy news agencies.<sup>22</sup> In addition to the online sphere, there are six national TV broadcasters as well as approximately 56 local broadcaster across the country.<sup>23</sup> Numbers related to media presence and consumption are hard to verify with a high degree of accuracy. Online portals are based on unsustainable business models which means many fold quite regularly, and new appear almost as frequently. This economic aspect of the Albanian media landscape is crucial to the proliferation of disinformation campaigns, as portals seek clicks and engagement to drive up ad revenue and stay afloat.

The media landscape is largely unregulated and viewership numbers remain unconfirmed, but according to 2019 report by the National Institute of Statistics, 91% of Albanian women and 88% of Albanian men watch television at least once a week.<sup>24</sup> While Television continues to be the biggest source of entertainment and news, it is steadily being overtaken by the internet, including online portals and social media. 2,07 million Albanians use the internet (out of a population of roughly 2,8 million) and 1,87 million use social media, or 65.2% of the population.<sup>25</sup> With 1,2 million users, Facebook and Instagram continue to be the most widely used social media platform in the country, while Twitter has a far more modest 94,000 users.

Given the diversity of the media landscape in Albania, we decided not to limit ourselves to a few outlets, but rather contrasted and compared how specific disinformation campaigns with a lasting impact on the public have been promulgated across the Albanian media sphere. The media that we surveyed included major legacy news agencies that command the attention of the Albanian public at home through their TV channels and programs based on media survey data. We also picked tabloids with a large following on social media (more than 100,000 followers on Facebook and/or Instagram), as well as continuous social media engagement. Finally, we also looked closely at social media account with the biggest following (1,3 million followers on Instagram and 2 million followers on Instagram) given that they far outstrip other forms of media for online engagement, including legacy media.

Once these outlets were chosen, we implemented a two-step qualitative approach for our survey. First, we proceeded with a qualitative review of the output of these seven outlets. Our research focusing focused on analyzing news coverage over a period of five years, namely between January 2018 and April 2023. This allowed us to understand which disinformation campaigns had a large reach in the Albanian public and what its impact has been in both the short and long run. Our research looked at both articles published online, as well as news reels, interviews, variety and entertainment programs, as well as social media posts to gain a good sense of the information and entertainment the Albanian public is consuming both online and live. News broadcasts and entertainment programs were included in the survey because while an increasing number of

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<sup>22</sup> Balkan Investigative Network, *Internet Governance in Albania and its Role in Media Freedom*, p. 12. <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Internet-Governance-1-1.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> Balkan Investigative Network, Media Ownership Monitor Albania, <https://albania.mom-gmr.org/sq/gjetjet/perqendrimi-i-medias/>.

<sup>24</sup> Monitor, "Anketimi i INSTAT: Nëntë nga dhjetë shqiptarë janë të ekspozuar ndaj mediave," <https://www.monitor.al/anketimi-i-instat-nente-nga-dhete-shqiptare-jane-te-eksponuar-ndaj-mediave-2/>.

<sup>25</sup> Simone Kemp, Digital 2022: Albania, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-albania>.

Albanians get their information online, variety programming continues to attract a large number of viewers through programs like talk shows, dating shows and even other forms of reality TV.

Following this review of the media output concerning gender and sexuality, we picked a set of disinformation campaigns that we consider to be illustrative of the genre. We analyzed these campaigns on two levels. **First**, to understand how the gender and sexuality of the targets informs the disinformation campaign. Why was this particular person, or this particular group targeted? How did their gender or sexuality feature in the campaign and what beliefs about the group as a whole were maintained or challenged through this campaign? **Secondly**, to understand how the disinformation campaign was mounted and spread. Where did the campaign originate? What was the purpose of the campaign? How did other media react to this disinformation campaign? How did the public react to it, to the extent that we can gauge?

Using these questions as our guidelines, we proceeded to fact-check these disinformation campaigns, paying close attention to the sources they were using, to the language employed in describing individuals at the center of the story, as well as the narratives and interests that these campaigns serve. We paid particular attention to potential for foreign influence, but also to the political motivators behind specific campaigns, looking at how and by whom they had been amplified. We produced a set of articles that debunked the campaigns in question, while also looking at the impact they had on the public and how they fit within the larger narratives that Albanian media use to talk about women and/or the LGBTI+ community.

On the question of foreign malign influence in these disinformation campaigns, in addition to looking at the disinformation campaigns and their sources, we tried to trace ownership and/or potential donor affiliations. While the ownership of major Albanian media outlets, especially TV stations and newspapers, can be found online, on the government's trade register, online portals are trickier to trace. In the case of these online portals, we had to conduct a holistic review of their content and compare to the overall content produced by comparative outlets, to understand what its affiliations may be. We also used reliable online sources such as the online Media Ownership Monitor to determine ownership, as well as ties of individual business owners to Albanian political forces and other entities of interest. Using such sources and relying also on the research work of other NGOs on the matter of media freedom and influence in Albania, we were able to pinpoint which media may have a vested interest in aiding through their coverage, including through orchestrated disinformation campaigns, the political agenda of specific parties.

## **Gender Narratives in the Albanian Media**

The disinformation campaigns that we have identified in the subsequent section may appear as disparate incidents. In order to better situate their source and impact within Albanian society at large, we have also identified the most common narratives employed across Albanian media. Albeit more theoretical than straightforward disinformation campaigns, these narratives showcase how Albanian media are shaped and shape Albanians' perception of gender roles. These narratives must be understood as serving the same function: whether consciously or unconsciously, they repeat and sustain a strict and patriarchal vision of gender roles and relations that harm women and other marginalized groups.

### **1) Women belong at home/A Woman's purpose is marriage and family**

As the UN Women report highlights, adherence to strict gender roles in Albania relies on the attachment to a traditional patriarchal family where men have authority over the women of the household, controlling everything from the women’s bodies to their finances. Albanian media maintain the public’s emotional attachment to the traditional family, despite how it harms women, by perpetuating a set of narratives that rely precisely on naturalizing things like domestic work and motherhood, such as “women belong in the home,” and “women must make sacrifices to keep the family together.”

While most Albanian media continue to employ narratives that perpetuate strict gender norms and roles, they do so in more subtle ways when it comes to the articles they publish. As will be discussed below regarding objectification and women’s bodies, tabloids and even major news agencies publish a preponderance of articles in their “Gossip” and “Showbiz” sections that highlight pregnancy, motherhood, and romantic relationships with men. These articles are rarely focused on the father figure and women are much more likely to be talked about when their “achievements” fall within these categories than professional.



**Figure 3:** Screenshots of articles from one Albanian tabloid that emphasize pregnancy and motherhood.

The perusal of even one tabloid showcase how pregnancy and marriage announcements are staples of their pages: they appear on a weekly basis. The language and images used in these articles also showcases how they praise and glorify motherhood, as one article describes a singer’s pregnancy as birth with the following terms: “The singer and her partner, Alberto Botia, are experiencing the happiest days of their lives, as they have a newborn son at home,” before emphasizing “the singer gently holds her son in her arms and breastfeeds him, giving us these sweet photos.”<sup>26</sup>

Other articles draw attention to women who are single or struggling to find a partner, positioning marriage as a woman’s ultimate goal in life. While some articles have a tone that criticizes Albanian men, others play into the patriarchal fantasy with articles that highlight women who are looking for

<sup>26</sup> Newsbomb, “U bë nënë për herë të parë, Eleni Foureira publikon foton me djalin duke u ushqyer me gji,” <https://newsbomb.al/u-be-nene-per-herë-te-pare-eleni-foureira-publikon-foton-me-djalin-duke-u-ushqyer-me-gji/>.

domineering men. One article about an Albanian model bears the title: “Who is the ‘boss’ in Adrola’s life? The model says: Can’t live without love.”



**Figure 4:** Articles on another tabloid that focus on marriage and traditional masculinity.

While taken individually these articles may not draw the attention, analyzed together they showcase what image the Albanian media have and push about women. But while the narratives in these articles may at times appear implicit, more explicit narratives continue to dominate the conversations in talk shows and other variety entertainment which command the public’s attention even more so than articles published online. This particular bias is readily apparent in the guests invited to talk shows to discuss various issues, related to gender or otherwise: these tend to include religious figures (both Christian and Muslim), and even unlicensed psychologists that shape the conversation around a woman’s duty towards her family and her husband.

In a four-part conversation that has garnered more one million views from the country’s biggest channel, a group of people were brought to discussion the question of how a woman’s role and behavior in the household.<sup>27</sup> While the program included the perspectives of women who tried to address their own expectations and burdens, it also included harmful bits where the words of one of the guests, imam Elvis Naci, took center stage. Naci had been at the center of a controversy for publishing a video where he explained and justified why men cheat on their wives. The segment included several misogynistic comments from various Facebook users that supported Naci and were broadcast to millions of Albanian viewers. Naci’s comments, which he defended during the interview, emphasized a woman’s sexual and domestic duties towards her husband and the duty to remain attractive to him, while still retaining her modesty vis-à-vis the outside world.

These narratives once again emphasize that a woman’s place is within the household and in the space of the home, she is meant to be a second-class citizen whose needs and wishes are subsumed to that of her husband (or at times, any other male figure in the home). The narratives supported by Naci (and other guests of the show, despite the female guests’ disapproval) enable and justify violence. As shown by various reports, only 56% of Albanians surveyed by UN Women “believed

<sup>27</sup> Top Channel, “Pasdite ne TCH, Roli dhe modeli gruas në familje, 2 Tetor 2017,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHeWiH6vpLM>.

someone would be punished for forcing sexual relations on a spouse/partner,” as these respondents may “believe that one partner has ‘rights’ over the other’s body within the context of a relationship.” Such narratives are aided by Albanian media and the conversations that they share and moderate.

In fact, Albanian media not only enable narratives that circumscribe women’s roles within the household, but they also continue to champion a vision of womanhood as eternal sacrifice. A 2013 report showed that “[Albanian women] are supposed to be complete in their roles as spouses and mothers and stand prepared to sacrifices their lives for the sake of their marriages... Women still have to act according to rules put by the males. Violations of the traditional gender roles and expectations lead to physical and psychological abuse.”<sup>28</sup>

## **2) Women who cheat deserve to be beaten/killed**

Cheating scandals are certain engagement fodder for Albanian media. From celebrities to regular people stories of infidelity drive clicks and are profitable for portals and news agencies alike in the Albanian-speaking media sphere. When it comes to regular people, however, allegations of cheating concerning women are far more prevalent and they tend to emphasize infidelity, especially in cases where the male partner or his family retaliated with physical violence. This is not surprising given that “1 in 3 male respondents and 1 in 4 female respondents agreed that infidelity was a ‘good reason’ for a male partner to hit his female partner,” with similar percentages agreeing that even suspicion of infidelity could be enough to justify violence.

This attitude is prevalent among Albanian media. Although they don’t directly incite violence, their framing makes such conclusions easily deducible. In Spring 2022, an Albanian tabloid posted redacted pictures of a young woman being physically assaulted by her in-laws who claimed to have found her in bed with another man while their son worked in Germany. Tabloids had a field day with the news, posting pictures and videos of the scene of violence and facilitating a public condemnation of the young woman.

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<sup>28</sup> Counseling Line for Women and Girls, “Study about Victims of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault in Albania,” [http://www.cp-project.al/archive/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/DOMESTIC\\_VIOLENCE.pdf](http://www.cp-project.al/archive/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/DOMESTIC_VIOLENCE.pdf).

## Librazhd/ Vjehri dhe vjehrra kapin 'mat' në krevat nusen e djalit me dashnorin dhe ushtrojnë dhunë psikologjike ndaj saj

Shkruar nga: G Hasani | Publikuar më: 26.05.2022, 13:05



**Figure 7:** Screenshot from one such tabloid showing scenes from the woman's bedroom<sup>29</sup>

While the article ends with the wish that the young woman is being protected by the police, the tabloids did nothing to protect her identity from the larger public, posting more pictures of her in a vulnerable position. These photos accentuated her vulnerability, but also her supposed guilt, as did the click-bait titles. "Father-in-law and mother-in-law catch daughter-in-law in bed with her lover and inflict psychological violence on her," or "Caught with her lover in the bed in her husband's house, Librazhd bride ends up in the hospital after her father beat her." These titles emphasize the violence, but they never separate it from her infidelity, essentially goading a public judgment. Eventually, the tabloids even released pictures of her father's face which undermined her security given that she comes from a small town.

KOSOVA TË FUNDIT

Detaje tronditëse nga vrasja e 18-vjeçares/ Krivaja dyshonte se Marigona e tradhëtonte me kushëririn, e dhunoi për vdekje, shoku e ndihmoi...

024/08/2021 13:19

"Dyshonte se e tradhëtonte gruaja", 45 vjeçari shqiptar që vrau vajzën në Itali: Do të vras dhe djalin

**Figure 8:** Two articles, over one year apart that emphasize the link between infidelity and femicide.

<sup>29</sup> JOQ, "U kap me dashnorin në krevatin e shtëpisë së burrit, nusja nga Librazhdi përfundon në spital, e rrahu babai i saj," <https://joq-albania.com/artikull/1024965.html>.

Such conspicuous connections between male violence and women’s alleged infidelities abound. The titles of these articles emphasize the infidelity, often framing male violence as crimes of passion. In doing so, they naturalize gender-based violence as the natural reaction of a slighted husband. Even more importantly, they amount to victim blaming, often making women responsible for the violence they have suffered. As with narratives that restrict women to limited visions of what their gender can achieve or how it can behave, by highlighting or present these two things as equivalent, they justify violence against women.

### 3) Men who commit rape are monsters/Men are naturally more violent

In fact, the essentialization of male violence is among the most prevalent narratives that enshrines rigid gender roles and norms. In the case of infidelity, the narrative that Albanian media push is that women are men’s property and when that property is violated, they have the right to retaliate with violence. Alternatively, Albanian media also spread the narrative that men react violently because it is in their nature to be more passionate and/or violent. These types of narrative essentialize male violence, rather than consider it a systemic issue that can be addressed and eradicated.

A typical way through which Albanian media essentialize male violence is by portraying as men who commit gender-based violence (whether domestic violence, or sexual assault and rape) as monstrous. “Shocking evidence: The monster who abused the minor tried to rape the boy’s daughter-in-law,” writes on particular title about a 65-year-old who had was found guilty of raping an underage girl in the Summer of 2020. Likewise, rapists usually get labelled as monstrous, adhering to long debunked ideas of male sexuality as incontrollable. “Monstrous father who fathered seven children with daughter confesses to 25 years of heinous crimes,” is another similar title.



**Figure 9:** Two different articles from two different tabloids that both refer to women who have committed sexual violence as “monsters.”

By casting these men as “monstrous” and employing words like “disgust” or “repulsive,” these narratives about gender-based violence pretend that this violence happens only at the fringes of society and are individual, isolated cases. These narratives also pathologize violence instead of seeing it as a result of institutional failures and systemic issues. The solution then becomes casting aside

individual perpetrators away from society, instead of working towards broader changes in attitudes and thinking.

Furthermore, if men are monstrous and cannot be helped, this justifies away conscious behavior and places the blame on girls and women, who are often the victims of rape myths that suggest their behavior is at fault rather than the perpetrator's. An investigation by BIRN which reviewed hundreds of articles that addresses violence against women, including sexual violence, found that Albanian media treated victims and survivors with little care. “[An] analysis of domestic violence reporting over the same period turned up 142 articles directly or indirectly trying to justify the violence and 364 articles revealing personal data of the victims, their photos and /or videos,” the study found.<sup>30</sup>

#### **4) Promiscuous women are ruining the Albanian family**

Victim-blaming and slut-shaming are pervasive across Albanian media, even beyond instances of sexual violence. The web pages of both news agencies and the three tabloids under review contain tabs that purport to provide coverage for news about culture and what is often labelled “pop news.” Often, these “pop news” pages function essentially as gossip pages that humiliate women and normalize their objectification. These pages will publish pictures from modelling shoots, or the Instagram pages of Albanian and foreign women—often choosing pictures they hope will titillate viewers. The pictures are accompanied with titles that emphasize the subject's sex appeal, using words like “sexy,” “bombastic,” “half naked.” Articles of these nature further women's objectification, presenting them to readers as objects for the consumption of the viewer's gaze through both the pictures and the language used.

For instance, an article about an Albanian influence shows two pictures from her Instagram under the title: “Pictures/ Morena Tabaku more seductive than ever in Dubai, shows off her bombastic curves.” It is worth paying attention to the use of words such as “seductive,” “tempting,” and “temptress” which very consciously portray women who don't present themselves as what is conservatively considered modest, they are deserving both of objectification and sexualization, and scorn. This terminology is directed towards both men, who are invited to consider these women as objects to be consumed for their gaze (while elsewhere these same women are vilified), and towards women who are invited to scorn them as “temptress” who wiles will attract their husbands or boyfriends.

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<sup>30</sup> Valbona Bezati, “Women in Albanian Media: From Secondary Victimization to ‘Slut-Shaming’,” Balkan Insight, <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/05/27/women-in-albanian-media-from-secondary-victimisation-to-slut-shaming/>.



Foto/ Morena Taraku më joshëse se kurrë në Dubai, ekspozon format e saj bombastike

© 07/04/2023 10:39



### **E veshur me bikini, Kida pozon joshëse pranë pishinës**

29/08/2021, 11:53

Kida ka menduar që të ngrejë temperaturat edhe më shumë në këto ditë të nxehta fillim-vjeshte. Këngëtarja bukuroshe ka publikuar disa foto në Instagram, teksa...

**Figure 10:** Screenshots of women in bikinis taken from their social media accounts and published on Albanian news websites.

These pictures are published without the person's permission and used to pad up content for the online pages of even major and reputable news agencies. While individual cases may be excuses away, the frequency and language of these articles, taken together, showcases an attempt by Albanian media to craft and further a broader narrative that falls within what feminist scholars identify as the "whore/Madonna" dichotomy. If, on the one hand, narratives that promote family values try to stifle women's independence and self-expression, trapping them within the narrative of the ideal and self-sacrificing mother, the media attention on "seducers" tries to both humiliate them a priori (a woman who posts pictures in bikinis cannot be taken seriously) and present them as competition and models of what not to be.

## Disinformation Campaigns and Their Beneficiaries

Above, we highlighted several narratives about gender that dominate Albanian media. Here, we will proceed to describe and debunk five disinformation campaigns that drew the attention of the Albanian public and had or had the potential to have serious consequences for the impacted communities. The section on disinformation campaigns builds upon the work done by the Faktoje team in debunking a set of campaigns promulgated by Albanian media over the past two years and expands on those cases with further examples of disinformation campaigns that target women, girls, and members of the LGBTI+ community. In this section, we also unpack the ways that these disinformation narratives are employed for the sake of driving engagement and ad revenue, but also often for the political and social gain of specific actors. In particular, we found that media with ties to political parties used disinformation about gender and other marginalized groups to further their political agendas (including by attacking their opponents), energize their base, and take control of the conversation with the public, both online and off. While Albanian media is vulnerable to foreign influence, we have not found evidence that such agents have managed to

In our review of Albanian media over the past year, we pinpointed a series of disinformation campaigns that targeted women or members of the LGBTI+ community. As explained in our methodology section, we analyzed these campaigns on two levels. **First**, to understand how the gender and sexuality of the targets informs the disinformation campaign. Why was this particular person, or this particular group targeted? How did their gender or sexuality feature in the campaign and what beliefs about the group as a whole was maintained or challenged through this campaign? **Secondly**, to understand how the disinformation campaign was mounted and spread. Where did the campaign originate? What was the purpose of the campaign? How did other media react to this disinformation campaign? How did the public react to it, to the extent that we can gauge?

### 1) Misogynistic Disinformation Campaigns Driven by the Click Economy

Above we outlined the gendered narratives that underpin coverage of women and the LGBT+ community in Albania. We did so to show the ideas the Albanian public has about gender, and how the media reinforces them. In general, we found that disinformation campaigns targeting women play into the Albanian public's attachments to traditional family values and gender roles. Tapping into these sentiments, Albanian news outlets create or get involved in disinformation campaigns for their own financial gains. Per our research, disinformation campaigns that feature women, girls, or members of the LGBTI+ community tend to have higher engagement than other forms of content. This is especially true if the titles and content is sensationalistic (i.e., features violence, insults, or outrageous claims).

In the Albanian media economy, where revenue is often ad-driven and the competition for the reader's attention fierce, there is a strong incentive on the part of editors and journalists to publish outrageous claims they know are fake or wrong as long as they arouse people's curiosity or play into their biases, in order to receive clicks. As it will become evident when we examine the disinformation campaigns below, in the majority of cases, even when there is a political reason for the disinformation campaigns, the need for reader and viewer engagement is still a crucial motivator. A key finding of our research is precisely that financial incentives determine content.

Whether it is traditional media worried about how online outlets may be driving away viewers from their channels, or hundreds online portals competing for clicks, Albanian media are in constant competition with each other. Misogyny and homophobia incite the public to click, especially if it confirms their biases (say for example that LGBT+ people want to dismantle the Albanian family, or that women lie about rape allegations for attention). But as we will see below, financial needs and precarious funding situation leave Albanian media also vulnerable to foreign influence.

## 2) Homophobia and Politically Motivated Disinformation Campaigns

Our project is interested in how disinformation campaigns enacted by Albanian media shaped attitudes towards gender. But it also looks into how local politics and broader geopolitical interests play a role in the types of disinformation campaigns spread by Albanian media. A statement by Dunja Mijatović, Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, speaks to the fact that “Scapegoating LGBTI minorities has become a tactic applied by ultra-conservative and nationalist politicians posing as defenders of so-called ‘traditional values’ to strengthen their base and gain or stay in power.”<sup>31</sup> The populist forces identified by Mijatović in her speech include Russia, but also EU members such as Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic. While the movement identified in this speech refer to local policies, both [Hungary](#) and [Russia](#) have attempted to weaponize the idea of traditional family values and homophobic sentiment to increase their own influence abroad, especially in Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans.

Russia, in particular, has used homophobia to rile up anti-EU sentiment, [connecting](#) progressive causes to the West and portraying them as wanting to undermine traditional society. The Russian government has often found a fertile terrain for its disinformation campaigns in places that have historical ties to Russian and [Slavic culture](#), as Vanessa Nikolova [demonstrates](#) in the case of Bulgaria. According to [Global Voices](#), “After 2013, Moscow emerged as a major generator of homophobic narratives that exploited existing endemic intolerance in the Balkans region.” Albania’s lack of cultural ties to Russia have undermined Kremlin’s reach, even in matters of culture. While it has slightly dipped in recent years, with the promise of enlargement wavering, Albanians [continue](#) to be predominantly pro-EU and US.

In general, disinformation in Albania is homegrown. A 2020 study by the European Parliament on fake news and disinformation in the Western Balkan [found](#) that in the region at large, the bulk of disinformation is produced domestically and for domestic purposes. In the case of Albania, “disinformation tends to be used opportunistically by all sides, pursuing short-term aims rather than long-term strategies.” The report argues that in Albania, “there is relatively little evidence of attempts by foreign powers to distort Albanian politics or international affairs.” Instead, disinformation is used by media outlets to generate clicks and boost traffic and by political actors and their affiliates for political purposes. Our own research found little evidence that gender-related or homophobic disinformation campaigns, even when politically motivated, were the result of campaigns started or funded by foreign actors.

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<sup>31</sup> Dunja Mijatović, “Pride vs. indignity: political manipulation of homophobia and transphobia in Europe,” Council of Europe.  
<https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/pride-vs-indignity-political-manipulation-of-homophobia-and-transphobia-in-europe>.

That does not mean, however, that Albania is immune to foreign influence in regards to cultural disinformation. In fact, two factors render Albanian media susceptible to foreign disinformation campaigns. First is financial. As we explained above, the precarious financial situation of Albanian online media means they may turn to a slew of donors with their own interests and agendas. Some already appear to have done so, like portals with covert ties to [Iran](#) and [Turkey](#). Online portals are not under the same scrutiny or duty of transparency as major media outlets whose owners appear in government trade registers. The second factor is the entanglement between Albanian media and politics. Albania's largest media owners [have close](#) ties to Albanian politicians. Individual political parties also have their own portals and media outlets that they use to further their own political agendas. But Albanian politicians or media owners are themselves liable to fall under foreign influence, and there is evidence some have done so.

While homophobia has long been a defining feature of Albanian media coverage, Albania's main right-wing party, the Democratic Party, has [embraced](#) a more traditionally conservative image over the last election cycle, organizing round tables and meetings with constituents around the topic "Let's protect the family and the future of our families." The party has also increased their collaboration with conservative forces in Europe, like Victor Orbán's Fidesz, participating in Hungary's [CPAC](#). The influence of Orbán's populist project is also apparent in the Democratic Party's [anti-Soros line](#), which is often accompanied by remarks about Soros's financial support for progressive causes. In June 2022, Orbán even [penned](#) a letter to Democratic leader Sali Berisha, thanking him for his commitment to conservative values. The DP's pivot to conservative cultural values have been accompanied by extended coverage in the portals, newspapers, and individuals aligned with the Democratic Party. LGBTI+ people and causes are often the victims of this agenda, as portals aligned with the party weaponize disinformation to rally supporters around their cultural causes or undermine their political opponents (Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama's close ties to Alex Soros, including homophobic insinuations about their relationships).

Furthermore, members of the Democratic Party and their closest ally, the Freedom Party, have been plagued by accusations that they have received money from Russia or Russian entities. In [2019](#) and 2022, Mother Jones [reported](#) that the Democratic Party may have used Russian money to pay for an American lobbyist and garner favor with Donald Trump. According to the article, American intelligence believe this was part of Russia's \$300 million campaign to influence politics across the globe. The news led to [squabbles](#) in the Democratic Party about the amount received, how it was used and by whom. Meanwhile, Monika Kryemadhi, former leader of the Freedom Party and wife to ex-President Ilir Meta, allegedly [received](#) thousands of dollars from shell companies tied to Russian oligarchs. The Freedom Party, formerly the Socialist Movement for Integration, has been a key ally of the Democratic Party in opposition in recent years. Albanian politics are not devoid of Russian influence, although the exact benefits that Russia may have received for these monetary favors remain obscure.

On the whole, the disinformation campaigns that we identified, while at times serving political causes of the Democratic Party, do not appear to have been directly informed by foreign actors. But as we explained above, the media ecosystem in Albania is fragile and susceptible to such overtures. The Democratic Party's own questionable ties to Russia and its growing populism, aided by forces like Hungary's Orbán, showcase that the threat of foreign interference is always looming. Furthermore, the entanglement between Albanian politics and the media makes such interferences

even more likely. As of now, the disinformation campaigns that we outline below, serve mostly local political and financial concerns.

### 3) Disinformation Campaigns

#### 1) Albanian politicians and media label anti-bullying campaign as LGBTI+ propaganda

In 2018, Aleanca LGBT+, the country's main organization advocating for the rights of LGBTI+ people, [held trainings](#) in Albanian high schools to raise awareness about bullying, LGBTI+ issues, and speak to teenagers about their experiences.

This anti-bullying campaign received backlash and was fodder for a long-lasting disinformation campaign in Albanian media. Democratic MP Tritan Shehu was among the first to publish a [Facebook post](#) where he denounced the event as LGBTI+ propaganda and said the aim of the organizers was to push kids to “deviate from sexualities that are the norm.” Shehu also referred to LGBTI+ people as dangerous and described any deviation from heterosexuality as abnormal. His statement was picked up by [major](#) and [minor](#) media outlets and over the ensuing weeks, his claims were amplified without verification.

Home > Kryesoret

## Takimet e LGBT në shkolla reagon deputeti i PD: Janë të rrezikshme për adoleshentët!

**Figure X:** Title from Albanian tabloid from Shehu's statement, “LGBT Meetings in Schools, DP members reacts: They are dangerous for teenagers”

Not only did Albanian media fail to push back against the narrative that being a person of the LGBTI+ community is not dangerous, nor abnormal, they also did not provide context for the event when reporting on Shehu's statement. Others [jumped](#) on the bandwagon [reiterating](#) Shehu's talking points that the meeting was organized to convince Albanian teenagers that they are gay and therefore dangerous. In general, opposition politicians [used](#) this event to rile up supporters against the ruling Socialist Party in order to score political points. Nard Ndoka, then leader of the Demochristian Party, said that “Rama of the LGBT now wants to educate our children,” insinuating that the Albanian government is spreading dangerous LGBT propaganda.

## Shpërthen Nard Ndoka: Rama i “LGBT”, tani po na edukon edhe fëmijet

22 Mars, 2018 22:31

**Figure X:** Title from Albanian tabloid from Ndoka’s statement: “Rama of the LGBT now wants to educate our children.”

In fact, the Ministry of Education responded after the backlash, stating that the event was part of the Ministry’s attempt to increase awareness about human rights in Albanian teenagers and combat bullying. “The activities to raise seek to reduce discriminatory practices, and the materials have been developed with the support and supervision of local government representatives and school leaders and subject teachers,” the statement [said](#). Aleanca head, Xheni Karaj, also responded about the situation, [clarifying](#) that the event was organized with input from school teachers and psychologists to tackle the pervasive bullying that Albanian LGBTI+ people face in school environments, and that often pushes them to drop out.

While these claims were first made in 2018, they continue to resonate with the Albanian public and Albanian political figures to this day. In 2022, Altin Goxhaj a lawyer running for Ombudsman, said during his campaign that if he were to be elected, he would never let LGBTI+ people enter Albanian schools. “If it were me, LGBT people would not set foot in Albania’s schools until the age of 18. This is Soros’ agenda. They want to replace us in 20 years,” he [argued](#) with no push back from Albanian media.

### 2) Disinformation campaign regarding birth certificates

As [outlined](#) by Faktoje’s article debunking these claims, in 2021, outrage broke out in Albanian public discourse following alleged demands from the LGBT community to replace the words “mother” and “father” with the nondescript “Parent 1” and “Parent 2”. This disinformation campaign [started](#) during a TV appearance by LGBT rights’ activist Xheni Karaj where she advocated for legal solutions that will bestow full parental rights to same-sex couples in Albania, given that such solutions do not yet exist.

Karaj’s statement was [twisted](#) by Albanian outlets which transformed the demand for legal recognition into a demand of erasure. A disinformation campaign exploded across portals which claimed that LGBTI+ activists want to erase the word “mother” and “father” from birth certificates and replace them with “Parent 1 and Parent 2.” In addition to click-hungry tabloids, other politicians and public figures joined the fray and used homophobic speech and sentiments to fan the fires of public opinion and score political and social gains. Evangelical pastor Akil Pano founded the [Albanian Coalition for Family and Life](#) and his part in the disinformation campaign

against Karaj and the LGBT community earned him an [accolade](#) from then President of Albanian, Ilir Meta.

A slew of fake claims accompanied this disinformation campaign, including Pano's allegations that a mock form with the words "Parent 1 and Parent 2" were being distributed in Albanian kindergartens, and accusations that LGBT rights are Soros propaganda that wish to harm Albanian society. On the certificate front, according to Faktoje's investigations, the form shared by Pano on social media was was [disowned by the Tirana municipality](#) and [LGBT organizations](#).

What is now commonly known as the "Parent 1 and Parent 2" case echoed well into 2022. And it showed how Albanian portals are quick to twist claims made by activists in the knowledge that, even if unverified, outlandish claims that play to people's biases will land them hate clicks. Likewise, Albanian politics and public figures use the same tactics to garner public attention and support to their own causes.

### **3) Demand for LGBT+ rights in Albania painted as Soros propaganda**

Albanian portals are a hotbed for conspiracy theories and anti-Soros conspiracy theories tend to be among the most popular. Because Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has a [close](#) relationship with Alex Soros, often anti-Soros propaganda has been used also in campaigns targeting Rama as political fodder against him. In fact, both disinformation outlined above both [refer](#) to Soros as the culprit at [some point](#) or another. As the screenshot below shows, when Goxhaj was running for Ombudsman, he stated that LGBT rights are part of Soros's agenda and he will never allow LGBT members to set foot in Albanian schools.

**Altin Goxhaj ka shpallur kandidaturën për Avokatin e Popullit, ku ai është shprehur se LGBT është në axhendën e Sorosit. Ai tha se nuk do të lejojë asnjë pjesëtar të grupit LGBT në shkollat shqiptare deri në moshën 18 vjeç.**

Allegations that Albanian politicians are in Soros's pocket, especially when it comes to LGBTI+ rights and activism are rampant. If the examples above refer to specific, time-bound disinformation campaigns (despite their long-lasting effect), claims that Soros is funding and spreading LGBT propaganda through its close relationship to the Albanian government surface on the regular. And usually, these claims are accompanied by further fearmongering that LGBT people want to annihilate the Albanian family and pose a danger to Albanian society.

These claims date as far back to 2017, when a [visit](#) by Prime Minister Rama's to an Albanian elementary school was described some factions of the Albanian media as a "gay gift" that Rama was making Alex Soros. The supposed [evidence](#) cited in the article was a rainbow flag included in Rama's picture of the visit. This despite the fact that in the [past](#), Rama (who fashions himself a painter) has used the rainbow as his personal brand as an artist-leader. Furthermore, even the

children's school uniforms were put under scrutiny. Altin Hoxha, a lawyer that heads the Anti-Soros league, insinuated that Rama had purposefully asked the girls in the classroom to wear "lesbian clothes," despite the fact that many schools in Albania have gender neutral uniforms.

VIDEO

## **“Rama vendosi flamurin gay në shkollë dhe veshi vajzat si lesbike”, avokati zbulon skandalin në vizitën e Soros**

Publikuar: November 25, 2017

Title: “Rama put a gay flag in the school and dressed the girls like lesbians,” a lawyer unveils the scandal of Soros’s visit.

In reference to the Parent 1 and Parent 2 controversy, the leader of the Democratic Party (DP), the country’s biggest opposition party, [stated](#) that the LGBT+ community is being funded by Soros to undermine the Albanian family. While Berisha never mentioned the LGBT+ community by name, he did mention two opposing streams in Albanian society, one that is trying to erode the family and transforming parents into numbers. And despite Berisha’s reluctance to mention the word “LGBT,” Albanian [portals](#) used [titles](#) that made this connection explicit, writing for example: “LGBT demands, Berisha: They threaten the Albanian family, Soros heads this movement.”

Politike

## **Kërkesat e LGBT+, Berisha: Kërcënojnë familjet shqiptare, në krye qëndron Soros**

Rarely if ever do Albanian media push back against the narrative that the LGBT+ community is destroying the Albanian family, relaying statements about LGBT+ propaganda as fact despite them not being based on any evidence. As we have seen with the Parent 1 and Parent 2 case, even when activists speak out in order to demand rights for the community, their words are twisted for clicks or political gain with the larger public, taking advantage of anti-LGBT sentiment in Albania.

With regards to the Soros portion of the equation, two things should be noted. While it is true that the Open Society Foundation in Albania is among the biggest donors to social causes, including those that benefit the work done by LGBT+ organizations, this is materially no different from institutions like the European Union who also provide funds for similar causes. Although it is



worth noting that at times, anti-Soros sentiment goes hand in hand with anti-EU sentiment regarding Western influence in Albania, although these cases are usually relegated to niche portals.

In general, attempts to portray LGBT+ activism as Soros propaganda tends to undermine the work done by local LGBT+ activists and paint LGBT people as a foreign influence on the traditional Albanian family, rather than accept that LGBT individuals are already part of Albanian society. They are not a foreign product.

#### 4) Albanian tabloids advocate for abortion bans

While foreign influence in Albania on issues that pertain to gender and the LGBTI+ community tends to be home-grown, it is not unlikely for Albanian media or public figures turn to foreign sources and foreign events to push their own political agendas in Albania. This was the case with the abortion debate in the United States in the period leading up to, and after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the US Supreme Court. During this period, several Albanian outlets published opinion pieces or interviews with religious public figures that spread disinformation about abortion.

For example, [some](#) Albanian portals [published](#) an opinion piece claiming to contain 11 facts about abortion. On the contrary, the “facts” listed in this piece were no such thing, but rather the writer’s opinion and beliefs, as well as incorrect data.

OP-ED

## Vendimi i gjykatës amerikane dhe 11 fakte mbi abortin



POLITIKO  
29 QERSHOR 2022, 19:04

The article makes a claim against women’s right to bodily autonomy, arguing for fetal “personhood” and arguing for the “life begins at conception,” which is a religious line and not a statement of fact. Furthermore, it equates abortion with the death penalty, states that abortion was first legalized for the purpose of eugenics, and that it enables a promiscuous lifestyle. These same religious ideas have been presented and given a platform by some of the country’s [biggest channels](#) who have invited evangelists pastor Akil Pano and spread his message that “abortion is murder.”

## “Aborti është vrasje”, Pano: A mundet dikush të marrë vendimin të jetojë apo jo një qenie njerëzore

© 30/06/2022 21:58

These statements, which are presented as fact by some outlets and amplified by others, are personal opinions, often informed by religion. As an article [published](#) in the National Library of Medicine by Dr. Richard J. Paulson, “It must be pointed out that the concept of ‘life begins at conception’ is neither scientific nor a part of any (ancient) traditional religious teaching.” He goes on to explain that “we need to focus specifically on this observation: life does *not* begin at fertilization. The egg is alive; the sperm is alive; and after fertilization, the zygote is alive. Life is continuous. Dichotomous thinking (0% human life for the egg, 100% human life for the zygote) is not scientific.” Furthermore, abortion has a [long history](#) that far predates its legalization or political uses that may tie it with eugenics.

Albania legalized abortion in 1995 and debates about its practice have mostly focused on the high rate of [selective abortions](#) which do constitute a crime. In general, conservative approaches that tend to want to limit a woman’s right to choose and bodily autonomy are fewer, but they do exist and are usually used by religious figures for their own social agendas. Nevertheless, they are also often republished and given a platform in Albanian media without pushback, spreading disinformation about the nature of abortion and its dangers.

### **5) Albanian lawyer claims that rape victims “feel pleasure” during the rape and stop fighting their assailant**

In an interview for Albanian channel Syri TV, lawyer and politician Spartak Ngjela made a [statement](#) that justifies and minimizes rape. In his statement, he says the following:

“There comes a moment when a woman who has been coerced to be raped begins to surrender and feel pleasure... I don’t know the percentage, but there are moments when a woman can’t resist a man’s gaze. It’s a psychological moment, a weakness. It exists in women only, not men... For example, in English law if the woman hasn’t resisted, she can’t accuse a man of having raped her.”

The website associated with the channel used a harmful and sensationalized title to report Ngjela’s statement, writing: “Women pretend not to like it... Spartak Ngjela loses his mind: even when a woman is raped, she succumbs from pleasure.”

# 'Shtiren sikur s'duan'- Lajthit Spartak Ngjela: Edhe kur p\*rdhunohet, femra dorëzohet nga kënaqësia!

20:02, 15/04/2023

There are two layers at work in this particular disinformation campaign. On the one hand, there is the disinformation being spread by Ngjela himself in his perpetuation of rape myths that contend that women cannot be raped because they actually like violence and derive pleasure from it. As multiple studies have shown, this statement is [incorrect](#). No woman asks to be raped, nor does she “deserve” for it to happen in any way. Furthermore, involuntary body responses do not annul the fact of rape. As pertains to Ngjela’s claim that under British law, resistance is necessary to prove rape, that is an outdated view that has since been updated to account for the way violence and the threat of violence impact survivor’s ability to resist verbally or otherwise. New laws on rape, in the UK and beyond, now [contend](#) with an expanded understanding of what constitutes consent, including under duress.

# 'Shtiren sikur s'duan'- Lajthit Spartak Ngjela: Edhe kur p\*rdhunohet, femra dorëzohet nga kënaqësia!

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There still remains the fact that Syri decided to publish Ngjela’s statements despite knowing that they are wrong and would invite controversy. Instead, in the original article themselves they end the piece stating: “Spartak Ngjela’s scandalous statement is expected to provoke reactions from politics and associations for the protection of women’s rights.” This line shows that they expected a reaction and [continued](#) to publish articles with his statements in the title, amplifying his claim despite knowing it to be wrong and harmful. Other [outlets](#) also did the same, even when they referred to the harm these statements represent and challenged it.

## Video/ 'Femra kur përdhunohet ka moment kënaqësie', Robert Aliaj reagon ashpër pas deklaratës shokuese

As with other instances of gender-related disinformation campaign, Syri's campaign sacrificed survivors for the sake of both engagement and clicks, but also politics. One of the main outlets aligned with the Albanian opposition, Syri refers often in its article and even to the title to Ngjela's relationship to Prime Minister Rama. They call Ngjela Rama's lawyer and call out Albanian institutions for not reacting to the statement that they amplified. Politics continues to be a strong vector of disinformation, both through politicians and other public figures, but also as a motivational force behind disinformation campaigns like this one.

### Recommendations

**1. Trainings for journalists on how to cover issues pertaining to women, gender, and the LGBTI+ community.** Stories about gender and members of the LGBTI+ community require a deep understanding of how discrimination, bias, and violence operate both intentionally and unconsciously. To better understand these dynamics, we recommend that journalists and editors participate in yearly trainings on the latest research and techniques for covering issues pertaining to gender and marginalized communities, with the input of people from these communities and facilitated through the involvement of civil society in Albania. These trainings can focus on statistics, narrative and editing skills, personal experience, as well as the appropriate and sensitive language to use when writing about these issues.

**2. Fact-checking training for editorial and journalist team.** Incorrect or incomplete information is among the key drivers of the disinformation narratives surrounding gender. To implement best practices in the newsroom when it comes to verifying sources and information, even and especially in high pressure situations where the evidence is constantly changing, we recommend a fact-checking training for both journalists and their editors. Such training could include information on how to spot reliable sources, how to check that the information you have received is correct, and even what to do when you don't have enough information to proceed. Fact-checking may be of particular importance for identifying malign influences and how foreign agents may be trying to shape public opinion in Albanian through hot button issues.

**3. Beware of the gender narratives and avoid using stereotypes.** In addition to disinformation, which is conscious and intentional, journalists and editors can spread misinformation by not paying attention to their biases and perpetuating gender stereotypes. We encourage editors and journalists to consider how ideas about gender may shape their work and review their own work for biases that show how their editorial team may perpetuate this same narrative in their coverage. This step could also be implemented by hiring an outside consultant to

review the coverage that each outlet produces on gender and propose modifications tailored to the needs and biases of each newsroom.

**4. Avoid putting unfounded speculations in the title, especially if they help further biased narratives.** Disinformation narratives can proliferate when journalists focus on getting out the story before facts have been verified. In the rush to inform the public, speculations can take center stage. But what begins as mere unverified fact can have a snowball effect: the public will accept one narrative and it is much harder for that narrative to be corrected. This may fall under the fact-checking training, but when covering cases of domestic or gender-based violence for example, be careful with allegations and accusations thrown towards the victims. Err on the side of caution until you have all the facts and avoid using language or allegations that may infer justification for violence.

**5. Ensure inclusion of testimony from affected communities.** When interviewing for an article, or inviting guests for your show, consider who your guests are and if you are reporting on an issue fairly. Is your reporting centering communities affected by a particular event? Are they being juxtaposed to figures who wish them harm and are using your outlet as a springboard for their personal agendas and to gain support among the public? Whose perspective are you centering and who are you harming with the guests that you invite, or do not?

**6. Seek out the input of experts.** In addition to hearing from the affected individuals and communities, it is often worthwhile to invite and amplify the input of individual experts who are knowledgeable about the dynamics at play and are not tied to a personal agenda.

**7. Do not amplify hate speech.** Statements can be factual and still contain hate speech. While these statements need not be censored, they also do not need to be amplified by including them word for word, through sensationalistic titles. Opt for safer titles and include ample context and rebuttal to hate speech in the content of the article instead.

**9. Hire journalists from communities affected and fact-checkers.** Sometimes the best people to report on issues pertaining to a community are people from those same communities that can provide a balanced perspective on their issues. Hiring more women and LGBTI+ journalists can help spot disinformation, biases, or hate speech. Likewise, while newsrooms should endeavor to instill good fact-checking principles to their journalists and editors, fact-checking is a job and skill on its own. For that reason, we also recommend that newsrooms consider hiring individual factcheckers or a team of them to ensure the veracity of the information they publish.

**10. Diversity funding and improve financial stability.** A key finding of our report spoke to the way that the precarious funding available to online portals and other forms of media may leave them vulnerable to foreign donors with malign interests. Media outlets must diversify their funding and seek opportunities to create a stable funding infrastructure. This may require close cooperation with the Albanian government, the EU presence in Albania (among other civil society organizations) to address the precarity of Albanian media and devise new funding models and opportunities.

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