



DISINFORMATION IN WAR REPORTING

(ALBANIA)



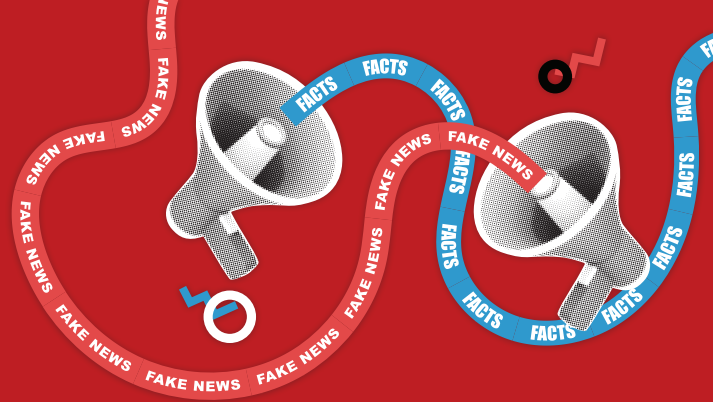
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I. INTRODUCTION



Propaganda has always been vital to war-making, as state and non-state entities involved in warfare require consent-building to justify their actions, keep others from joining the conflict, and maintain the population under control. Contemporary warfare has an additional complicated dimension: it is not simply televised, but increasingly shared and experienced online in real time. In moments of conflict and uncertainty, millions turn to the Internet (and increasingly social media) to receive information. This need for news and information at a moment's notice often clashes with the ability of journalists and reputable media outlets who require time and effort to verify facts amidst fast-moving and unpredictable situations. This clash between the desire for instantaneous information and the reality of what it takes to make that information accurate has been a defining feature of the current media landscape, exacerbated in moments of conflict and in warzones. It is also a feature that is exploited by bad faith actors to manipulate the situation and the narrative to their advantage.

We have seen in real time how disinformation can affect perceptions of war and conflict with Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Starting with the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has used its media apparatus to spread disinformation to frame its actions in Ukraine to its advantage and undermine belief in Western

media and governments. With its disinformation Russia has targeted electoral campaigns across the globe and is now trying to shape public opinion about the reason why it invaded Ukraine.¹ NATO has outlined the disinformation narratives that Russia is using to justify its actions, including claims that NATO is at war with Russia, that the Alliance it had promised Russia not to expand after the Cold War and will eventually encircle the country, or that NATO and its deployments are aggressive and threatening to Russia.² Many of these narratives have found their way into the Albanian media landscape, as we will outline below.

The Western Balkans cultural, political, and social ties to Russia have made of the region fertile ground for the spread of Russian disinformation. As a report by NATO's Strategic Communications Center argues "Russia sees the Western Balkans as an opportunity to undermine the EU and NATO by making use of the countries' own weaknesses."³ In spreading disinformation about the EU and NATO, Russia attempts to weaken trust in these institutions and freeze both EU and NATO enlargement. The war in Ukraine has provided Russia the opportunity for these narratives to spread, using uncertainty and the public's desire for information.

Albania has been seen often as one of the places least vulnerable to Russian propaganda.

¹ OECD, "Disinformation and Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine Threats and governance responses." <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/disinformation-and-russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-37186bde/>.

² NATO, "Setting the record straight: De-bunking Russian disinformation on NATO." <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm>.

³ NATO Strategic Communications Center, "Russia's Footprint in the Western Balkan Information Environment." https://stratcomcoe.org/pdfs/?file=/publications/download/russias_footprint_in_wb_executive_summary_30-04_v2-2.pdf?zoom=page-fit.

In general, surveys of the country's vulnerability to foreign malign influence in the media have deduced that disinformation in Albania is a homegrown affair.⁴ Nevertheless, the war in Ukraine has shown that Albania is still exposed to Russian propaganda and not immune to it. Several portals and Facebook pages routinely publish Russian propaganda and disinformation, while other outlets spread misinformation by relaying statements from Russian politicians and Russian media without providing context, or without debunking these claims. A recent report by the Balkan Investigative Network has found that 88 disinformation narratives identified by the EUvsDisinfo database were presented in Albanian media, about 22% of the larger database. Their researchers were also able to find some 377 articles that contained Russian disinformation across Albanian media.⁵ These findings confirm Faktoje's own research over the past two years on the narratives that have spread across Albanian media, especially as it pertains to the coverage of the war in Ukraine.

In addition to disinformation about the war in Ukraine, Albania has been particularly sensitive to disinformation about conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, especially narratives that predict a war between the two countries or expect another proxy war in the Western Balkans.⁶

Every time tensions escalate in Northern Kosovo, or attempts at dialogue stall, Albanian media report fears of a new war, making claims about the Serbian army at the border. They are fueled further by statements from politicians that likewise fan the flames of a potential war which Albanian outlets republish without confirmation or context. Likewise, while Russia's strategic interests in the Western Balkans mean that the country is vested in exacerbating local conflicts to increase instability, narratives that feed into Russia's own attempts only worsen ethnic conflicts in a self-sustaining cycle.

Reporting on war and conflict demands heightened awareness of the way state and non-state actors use disinformation and propaganda to shape public opinion. Accuracy is paramount when the stakes are high, in particular as it pertains to regional conflict in the Western Balkans that can fan the flames of ethnic clashes that play into the hands of countries like Russia. These narratives can shape public opinion, undermine trust in democratic processes, and in both the EU and NATO. As the report below will show, it is already happening in the Albanian media landscape in relation to both the war in Ukraine and Serbia and Kosovo. Attempts to counter-act it will require responsible journalism that relies on thorough research and fact-checking efforts.

4. European Parliament, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them (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).

5. BIRN, "Russian State-Sponsored Disinformation Narratives in Albania." <https://birn.eu.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Russian-state-sponsored-disinformation-narratives-in-Albania.pdf>.

6. Agon Maliqi, "Russian Information Warfare in the Balkans: How Identity and Religion are Instrumentalized in the Kosovo-Serbia Dispute," Berkley Center at Georgetown, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/russian-information-warfare-in-the-balkans-how-identity-and-religion-are-instrumentalized-in-the-kosovo-serbia-dispute>.

II. METHODOLOGY



This report seeks to understand what narratives Albanian media employ when covering situations of war and conflict, and how such narratives spread disinformation. We were also interested in understanding the ability of foreign malign influences to shape war narratives in Albanian media and their reach. More specifically, we looked at the influence of Russian disinformation campaigns regarding the war in Ukraine, but also Russia's attempt to destabilize the Western Balkans through its proxies. We moved with the understanding that Russia has vested strategic interests in the Western Balkans and strong cultural, political, and social ties to several countries in the region that enable it to spread its narratives around the war in Ukraine. In this context, we wanted to see how receptive Albanian media have been to Russian influences, and which outlets have direct ties to Russia.

Our methodology is based on a holistic qualitative review of how Albanian media have reported on war and conflict since February 24, 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. In conjunction with the war in Ukraine, we have also investigated how Russian's proxies in the Western Balkans (especially the current Serbian government) have used the occasion to foment conflict in the region and how Albanian outlets have responded to such provocations. To conduct this review, we have relied on the work Faktoje has conducted on disinformation in the Western Balkans and Albania, focusing on foreign malign influences

and their reach in Albanian-language media, including news outlets, tabloids, and social media accounts.

For the past two years, we have maintained an extensive database on disinformation narratives spread in Albanian media in relation to the war in Ukraine, anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment, the Kosovo-Serbia conflict, and related issues (such as the secessionist movement in Bosnia, ethnic conflict in North Macedonia and Montenegro, as well as larger nationalist movements in the region). To maintain this database, our monitoring specialists reviewed the output produced by 20 Albanian news outlets, including major news channels, portals with significant reach, and smaller tabloids. We also implemented a “reverse search” method, whereby we investigated the reach of each claim, article, or narrative beyond the 20 portals, trying to find both the Albanian source, and its foreign equivalent. In this aspect of our research, we relied also on the EUvsDisinfo database which “*identifies, compiles, and exposes disinformation cases* originating in pro-Kremlin media that are spread across the EU and Eastern Partnership countries” to cross-reference our findings.⁷

Our database averaged 75 articles a month that contained some form of disinformation pertaining to the above-cited issues, although these articles coalesced around a core set of 5-7 narratives, as many outlets copied from each other and circulated the same claims, often verbatim. In

⁷. EUvsDisinfo Database, “About,” <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/>.

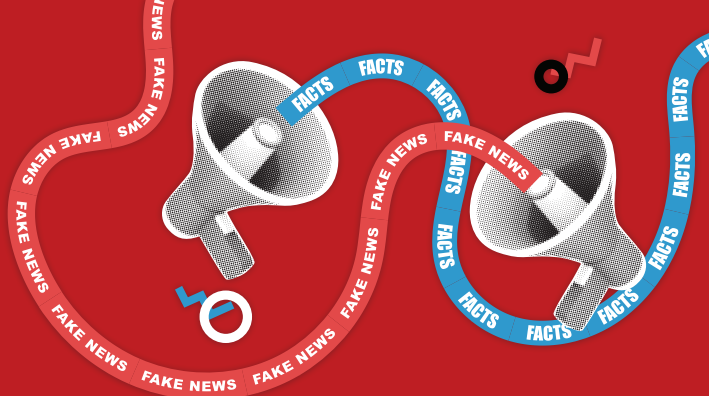
reviewing this extensive database, we were able to gain a broad overview of how Albanian media have covered questions of war and conflict in the region and beyond, instances of disinformation, and the reach of Russian propaganda in Albanian media. The Main Narratives section contains a short overview of the most common narratives about war, with links to the pertinent articles.

The Case Studies section also relies on the work that Faktoje has conducted to debunk the disinformation narratives that have been promulgated in Albanian media by Russian entities and their proxies. Over the past two years, we have published more than 150 articles debunking disinformation from Russia and beyond, tracking their sources and their promulgation in Albanian media. After reviewing Faktoje's debunking

database, we picked five cases that match the most common war narratives we identified during our review of the Albanian media production over the past two years. We summarize the claims and break down the narrative they disseminate and show how it spread across Albanian media.

As we pointed out in the introduction to this report, the role of disinformation in times of war has grown significantly with the rise of the Internet and social media and has been exacerbated by Russia's growing reach. In order to contextualize Albania's situation in relation to broader global and regional affairs, we also conducted a literature review on the question of war and disinformation, as well as the issue of Russian disinformation. Our Bibliography contains key texts on this topic.

III. MAIN NARRATIVES



III.1 Disinformation narratives justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine

Even before Russia began its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Kremlin had laid down the foundations for a propaganda campaign to justify the war. These campaigns have persisted over the past two years and their associated narratives have circulated also in Albania. Over the months, Albanian media have republished statements from Russian politicians, the Russian government, as well as Russian-backed outlets like Sputnik. One clear such attempt to manipulate perceptions of the war is labelling it a “special operation,” which many Albanian outlets have replicated. For example, one portal published a statement by Putin under the title: “Strengthening the army and the ‘special operation in Ukraine’ will be priorities, Putin said in his victory speech.”⁸

Claims to justify Russia's invasion of Ukraine have taken many forms. In general, Russia has tried to create a new axis through which Russia is on the side of good, while the West and NATO are evil. In this framework, one of the earliest narratives that it deployed was that the invasion of Ukraine was being undertaken

in order to save Russian-speaking Ukrainians from “neo-nazis.” Russia claims that a 2014 coup d'état placed Nazi-sympathizers at the head of the Ukrainian government and aligned the country even more closely to the West. Russia used its history in World War II to frame the invasion as one of liberation from Nazis.⁹ These narratives were spread by Albanian outlets which published articles under titles that are clear Russian narratives and spread disinformation: “Denazification according to Moscow: It will take 25 years, forced labor, Ukraine's name will be disappeared.”¹⁰

Russia has also claimed that it has invaded Ukraine to protect itself from the expansion of the West which it represents as a vital threat to Russia—although it would be clearer to say that they are a threat to Russia's imperial ambitions. Following Ukraine's growing rapprochement to the West, including an interest in joining NATO, Putin and his government have framed such geopolitical changes as existential threats to Russia. Putin claims that the West wants to dismember Russia as it currently stands.¹¹ Along these lines, the Kremlin has claimed that the US is founding dangerous biolabs across the Ukraine to produce chemical weapons that will target

⁸. N.D., “Forcimi i ushtrisë dhe “operacioni special në Ukrainë” do të jenë prioritete, tha Putin në fjalimin e tij të fitores, Portalb, March 18, 2024. <https://portalb.mk/forcimi-i-ushtrise-dhe-operacioni-special-ne-ukraine-do-te-jene-prioritete-tha-putin-ne-fjalimin-e-tij-te-fitores/>.

⁹. Jeffrey Veidlinger, “Putin's claim to rid Ukraine of Nazis is especially absurd given its history,” The Conversation, February 26, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/putins-claim-to-rid-ukraine-of-nazis-is-especially-absurd-given-its-history-177959>.

¹⁰. “Denazifikimi sipas Moskës: Do të zgjasë 25 vjet, punë e detyruar, të zhduket emri Ukrainë,” Albanian Post, April 4, 2022. <https://albanianpost.com/denazifikimi-sipas-moskes-do-te-zgjase-25-vjet-pune-e-detyruar-te-zhduket-emri-ukraine/>.

¹¹. “Duan të shkatërrojnë Rusinë”, Medvedev: Do të arrijmë qëllimet tona në Ukrainë,” Dosja, August 8, 2022. <https://dosja.al/newsmobile//234191/>.

Russians specifically.¹² All these narratives have found their way across Albanian media, often published without clarifications, fact-checking, or context.

III.2 NATO/US involvement in Ukraine

Anti-Western narratives have been key to the story Russia is telling about its reason to invade Ukraine. The expansion of NATO into the former Eastern Bloc and the potential of Ukraine's membership being eventually approved have been cited by the Russian government as motivation for its warfare. In particular, the Kremlin has been pushing narratives according to which NATO has started to organize military action against Russia and the alliance represents an existential threat to the country.¹³ This anti-NATO narrative has persisted across the months and has been used to escalate military action in Ukraine.

Furthermore, the Russian media apparatus and its supporters have often spread disinformation about NATO's involvement in the war, claiming that NATO has been supporting Ukraine directly, including by sending its soldiers in NATO territory. Statements from Western government and politicians about NATO and Western support of Ukraine have also been misrepresented, provoking and threatening escalations.

For example, in March 2024, Albanian media reported that NATO soldiers are already in

Ukraine.¹⁴ They based this claim on the words of Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski as reported by the British Sky News.¹⁵ The media claimed that Sikorski has sparked much debate by saying that NATO military personnel are already present in Ukraine. In a statement, Sikorski praised those countries that had already sent soldiers to Ukraine without mentioning specifics. These claims are dangerous as Russia has often said that any intervention by a NATO member state would mean war with NATO.

III.3 Russia will begin World War III/ Nuclear War

Perhaps one of the most widespread narratives to emerge in Albanian media in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine were narratives concerning the beginning of a Third World War, in particular a Nuclear War that would devastate the world. Using as sources British and German tabloids, and even statements from the Kremlin, Albanian media have been sounding the drums of a larger global war ever since the invasion began. Titles such as "Secret German Dossier/Putin's Plan to Start World War III Next Summer," are commonplace and are published weekly in Albanian portals and news channels.¹⁶ Nuclear threats are also presented as imminent and potentially inevitable as in the title, "The world towards a nuclear war? Russia approves withdrawal from Nuclear Test Ban Treaty."¹⁷ These narratives, which are popular and drive

¹² "Rusia akuzon SHBA dhe Ukrainën: Po bashkëpunojnë për armët kimike," Vizion Plus, March 12, 2022. <https://www.vizionplus.tv/rusia-akuzon-shba-dhe-ukrainen-po-bashkëpunojne-per-armet-kimike/>.

¹³ Zofia Stemplowska, "NATO enlargement is not to blame for Russia's war in Ukraine," LSE, April 22, 2022. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2022/04/27/nato-enlargement-is-not-to-blame-for-russias-war-in-ukraine/>.

¹⁴ "Deklarata e fortë e Ministrit të Jashtëm polak: Ushtarët e NATO-s tashmë të pranishëm në Ukrainë," Lapsi, March 11, 2024. <https://lapsi.al/2024/03/11/deklarata-e-forte-e-ministrit-te-jashtem-polak-ushtaret-e-nato-s-tashme-te-pranishem-ne-ukraine/>.

¹⁵ "NATO soldiers 'already present' in Ukraine, Polish foreign minister says," Sky News, March 11, 2024. <https://news.sky.com/story/russia-ukraine-war-live-updates-putin-election-navy-sky-news-blog-latest-12541713?postid=7367294#liveblog-body>.

¹⁶ "Dosja sekrete gjermane/ Plani i Putin për të nisur Luftën e Tretë Botërore verën e ardhshme," Lapsi, January 15, 2024. <https://lapsi.al/2024/01/15/dosja-sekrete-gjermane-plani-i-putin-per-te-nisur-luften-e-trete-boterore-veren-e-ardhshme/>.

¹⁷ "Bota drejt një lufte nukleare? Rusia miraton tërheqjen nga Traktati i Ndalimit të Provave Bërthamore," Pamfleti, October 19, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2L3byT7hDQ>.

engagement for these news outlets, play into Russian disinformation (as do for example claims that the sanctions against Russia are not working, or that Russia is winning the war). They create panic among the larger population and worries that may pressure them to act politically to stop the pressure on Russia. While it is not outside the question that Russia may eventually try to bring the region or NATO into a broader war, the narratives being spread on Albanian media lack context and are exaggerated.¹⁸

III.4 Proxy wars in the Western Balkans

The close ties between Serbia and certain groupings in places like Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Bosnia with Russia have made the region particularly vulnerable not only to disinformation, but Russia's strategic interests. Great Serbia national sentiment has been growing over the years and only intensified after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has emboldened nationalistic sentiment in countries with a significant Serbian population.

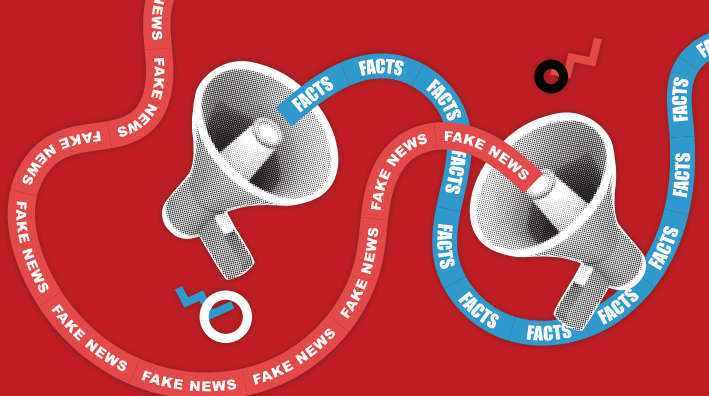
The situation between Kosovo and Serbia, and in particular events and conflicts pertaining to the northern part of Kosovo have been the occasion for disinformation and narratives that

exacerbate tension, conflict, and create a sense of uncertainty. These narratives about a potential escalation that will lead to a war in the region have surfaced every time the two governments have clashed about treaty items such as national IDs, elections, license plates, and the Association of Serbian Municipalities. They have also included news about Serbia sending its army at the border to perform military exercises, terrorist attacks in Banja Luka, but also claims by the Serbian government that Kosovo wants to expel or ethnically cleanse all Serbs from northern Kosovo, or that an Albanian lobby is paying the Serbian opposition. In general, many anti-West narratives and conspiracy theories arrive in Albania by way of statements made by the Serbian government.

Beyond Kosovo and Serbia, worries have continued that Russia will use the Balkans in order to engulf the region in a proxy war and involve NATO. An example that will be explored below in more detail, were claims attributed to either Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy or the US Department of State according to which the situation in the Western Balkans is exacerbating as Russia is preparing to begin a proxy war in the region. These narratives, like narratives about a potential nuclear war, facilitate discord and conflict which help Russia's overall project.

¹⁸. Mark Toth and Jonathan Sweet, "Will Putin risk World War III?," The Hill, March 21, 2024. <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/4544378-will-putin-risk-world-war-iii/>.

IV. CASE STUDIES



These cases studies have been adapted from Faktoje’s fact-checking efforts against Russian disinformation, following the main narratives we have identified in Albanian media since the beginning of the war.

CASE STUDY 1:

Albanian Mercenaries in Ukraine¹⁹

In June 2022, the Russian Embassy in Albania published a list where it announced that 42 mercenaries from Albania had been killed in Ukraine, while claiming that an estimated 150

Albanian mercenaries have been present in Ukraine since the beginning of the war.

Top News-42 shqiptarë të vrarë në Ukrainë!/Rusia akuza ...

Ambasada ruse në Tiranë akuzoi sërish Shqipërinë dhe Kosovën se po dërgojnë **mercenarë** për të luftuar kundër ushtrisë ruse ...

YouTube · Top Channel Albania · 1 javë më parë

<https://a2news.com> · 2022/06/18 · rusia-150-mercenar... ▾

Rusia: 150 mercenarë nga Shqipëria në Ukrainë ... - A2 CNN

18 qer 2022 — Por Ministria e Jashtme e Shqipërisë i mohoi kategorikisht këto pretendime dhe në shenjë proteste thirrri ambasadorin rus në Tiranë. A2 CNN ...

<https://kohajone.com> · Bota ▾

150 mercenarë shqiptarë në Ukrainë, kemi eliminuar 42

18 qer 2022 — Ambasada ruse në Tiranë: 150 mercenarë shqiptarë në Ukrainë, kemi eliminuar 42 ... Ministria e Mbrojtjes e Rusisë ka publikuar statistikat e plota ...

<https://www.balkanweb.com> · rusia-nxjerr-shifrat-150... ▾

150 mercenarë shqiptarë i janë bashkuar luftës në Ukrainë ...

Rusia nxjerr shifrat: 150 mercenarë shqiptarë i janë bashkuar luftës në Ukrainë, kemi eliminuar 42 (Tabela). 18 Qershor, 2022 11:19. Serbia Russia ...

Embassy of Russia in Albania / Посольство России в Албани

June 18 at 10:19 AM · 🌐

Ministria e Mbrojtjes e Rusisë ka publikuar statistikat e plota për mercenarët e huaj që luftojnë në Ukrainë

Lexoni versionin e plotë të dokumentit:
<https://eng.mil.ru/.../Number%20of%20foreign...>

NUMBER OF FOREIGN MERCENARIES IN UKRAINE

Country	Arrived since 24.02.22	Eliminated	Departed	Total on 17.06.22
Europe				
Poland	1831	378	272	1181
Romania	504	102	98	304
United Kingdom	422	101	95	226
Croatia	204	74	51	79
Belarus	197	69	59	69
France	183	59	45	79
Bosnia and Herzegovina	167	51	46	70
Estonia	164	55	49	60
Kosovo	156	61	60	35
Albania	150	42	40	68
Lithuania	130	50	44	36

The document published by the Russian Ministry of Defense includes statistics from several countries, but includes no information on how this data was gathered and on what sources it is based.

Immediately after the publication, Albanian media shared these numbers widely, using only

Kronikë

Ambasada ruse publikon listën e mercenarëve që luftojnë në Ukrainë: 306 luftëtarë nga Shqipëria dhe Kosova erdhën në Ukrainë, 103 janë vrarë

Ambasada ruse ka publikuar në faqen e saj zyrtare në Facebook, listën e mercenarëve që kanë shkuar të luftojnë në Ukrainë, kundër Rusisë, që kur nisi agresioni rus, që nga data 24 shkurt e këtij viti

IN UKRAINE

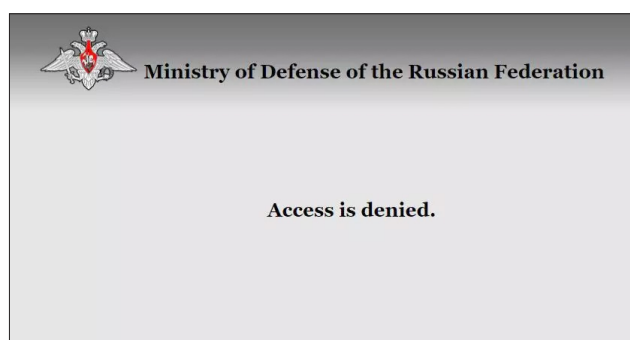
Country	Arrived since 24.02.22	Eliminated	Departed	Total on 17.06.22
Europe				
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Croatia	204	74	51	79
Belarus	197	69	59	69
France	183	59	45	79

¹⁹. Aimana Vogli, “Debunking/ 42 nga 150 mercenarë shqiptarë janë vrarë në Ukrainë Institucionet zyrtare: Deklarata është e pavërtetë,” <https://faktoje.al/debunking-42-nga-150-mercenare-shqiptare-jane-vrare-ne-ukraine-institucionet-zyrtare-deklarata-eshte-e-pavertete/>.

the figures and data declared by the Russian Embassy in Tirana.

Some media added together the alleged number of Albanians from both Albania and Kosovo, publishing articles where the alleged number of Albanians involved in the Ukraine-Russia conflict appeared even higher.

Faktoje tried to verify the information on the website of the Russian Ministry of Defense, trying to find additional information on the source of this data, but we were denied access.



The Albanian Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs denied the statement published by the Russian embassy, reconfirming the position made public by Minister Xhacka in March 2022, when the issue of Albanian mercenaries in Ukraine was first discussed.

At that time the minister wrote: "There are no Albanian mercenaries in Ukraine! This is a lie, which Moscow keeps repeating shamelessly! Albania stands with Ukraine and will continue to work with all allies and partners to help end Russia's unprovoked aggression on the people of Ukraine. God bless them."



The Albanian Ministry of Defense, contacted by Faktoje, said: "Albania as a NATO member country stands by Ukraine and will remain committed to ending the armed conflict and attacks initiated by Russia. Like every other member of NATO, Albania has not sent armed forces to Ukraine. Regarding the statements of the Russian Embassy in Tirana, we maintain the same position as the official statement of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs on this issue."

Meanwhile, a few days ago, Prime Minister Edi Rama spoke publicly about the list. In a press conference in Prishtina, he commented that Russia's claims about Albania's and Kosovo's involvement in the war in Ukraine are not new and in fact are quite deliberate.

In the past, Faktoje has verified similar statements made by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, including statements given only a few days before the beginning of the war. These statements also concerned unfounded claims about mercenaries from Albania involved in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and are part Russia's rhetoric and propaganda about the war, which it uses to promote disinformation and fake news.

CASE STUDY 2:

War between Kosovo and Serbia

Albanian and Serbian media ring the bells of war whenever the governments of Serbia and Kosovo (especially the latter) announce the implementation of new laws that regulate the movement or exchanges of people and goods between the two countries.

In June 2022, Albin Kurti's government passed a law to implement reciprocity measures with Serbia regarding identity cards. According to that law, as of July 1, 2022, Serbian citizens with



Në prag të luftës së madhe diplomatike me Serbinë



Nga **Dren Dushi** - 08:08, 09/08/2022

Kosova

Serbia bëhet gati për luftë! Forca të shumta të ushtrisë zbarkojnë pranë kufirit me Kosovën: Jemi të gatshëm...



E PREMTE 24 SHTATOR 2021, 11:24
GAZETA SHQIP



Serbian documents would be required to provide identity cards from Kosovo while Kosovo territory. This law targets Serbian citizens of northern Kosovo, who very often continued to carry Serbian license plates and documents despite the fact that they live in Kosovo. This decision of the Kosovar government went in parallel with identical policies put into practice by the Serbian government for travelers from Kosovo.

The Government of Kosovo announced its plans at the beginning of June, with the aim of implementing this measure on July 1. The harsh reactions of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and his appeals to the Serbian population of Kosovo escalated tensions in the north, and after the intervention of the USA and the European Union, this decision was postponed until September 1. In the following two months, both sides met in Brussels where on August 27 they reached an agreement: from September 1, travelers from Kosovo will not be required to present Serbian ID cards at the border. Therefore, Kosovo would not implement the law on identity cards in June of this year.

However, in the period between the day when the agreement was reached and the day of implementation (i.e., September 1), Albanian media raised the alarm about a potential war between the two countries.

POLITIKA

Serbia kërcënoi Kosovën me Forca të Armatosura/ Eksperti i sigurisë analizon mesazhin e Beogradit

NGA: N. SH. MË: 2 SHTATOR 2022 NË ORA: 15:22



Even on the evening of August 31, there were news reports about military exercises on the Serbian-Kosovo border which were considered dangerous. This even after the Serbian Ministry of Defense issued a preliminary statement explaining that these exercises were routine and took place every year.

But the morning of September 1 found the borders between Kosovo and Serbia quiet. Reports from the field in media such as Radio Evropa e Lire

Mediat botërore: Kosova dhe Serbia në prag të 'luftës'!



15 JANAR 2017, 09:03 / RAJONI
TEMA



or Klan Kosova showed that the modified laws were being implemented immediately and mostly without problems.

A war foretold

News that Serbia and Kosovo are on the brink of war is not a new phenomenon. There is a relatively long history of the situation described above: the Kosovo government implements a new law, Serbia reacts, the media talks about armed conflict or even war, while the parties are quickly sent to Brussels for dialogue. Various agreements are reached, some more definitive than others, and fear of war subsides. Even if a final agreement is elusive, interim measures are implemented so that the situation does not escalate further, or turns into outright war.

Note the date of this article: January 2017.

A concrete example of the above scenario occurred in September 2021, when the Kosovo government decided to demand that all Kosovo cars have Kosovo license plates, and not Serbian. The situation escalated quickly: Vučić led the army to the border with Kosovo and called on the Kosovo Serbs to resist. Several registration offices in the north of Kosovo were destroyed by improvised explosive devices and the situation was restored only after a 6-month agreement was reached between the parties in Brussels. When the deal reached its April deadline, it was pushed back to another meeting in the Belgian capital.

In these cases, Albanian media easily fall prey to Vucic's rhetoric, reading in his actions the signs that war is inevitable.

00:30 – Sveçla e konfirmon se dokumentet për hyrje-dalje nuk po lëshohen më në pikat kufitare

Ministri i Punëve të Brendshme, Xhelal Sveçla, ka konfirmuar se dokumentet për hyrje-daljet nuk po lëshohen më në pikat kufitare.

“Jemi në Bërnjak, kishim një veturë të kolegëve tuaj që kaloi pa problem, është ndërprerë lëshimi i hyrje-daljeve edhe në Merdarë, Dheu i Bardhë e Muçibabë. Në Jarinjë ende s’kemi veturë që ka kaluar, por mund të konkludojmë që e kanë ndërprerë lëshimin e hyrje-daljeve”, ka thënë Sveçla, njofton Klankosova.tv



Prag lufte Prishtinë-Beograd? Serbia sulmon Policinë e Kosovës, reagon NATO: Do ndërhyjmë

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However, media reports about possible armed conflicts between Serbia and Kosovo are not entirely unfounded. In fact, they often follow messages issued by the countries' respective governments who speak of escalation (in the case of Kosovo) or a strong reaction (in the case of Serbia). Both sides have accused the other

of being willing to create situations that provoke war, which are then covered as such by local and regional media even when the consequences are negligible and not at all violent.

In Serbia's case, President Aleksandar Vucic often uses the threat of war to undermine the sovereignty of the Kosovo government. These

Lajme

Kusari-Lila: Reciprociteti zbatohet nga 1 shtatori, Rusia e Serbia do të krijojnë vazhdimisht situata të luftës



Publikuar: 3 weeks ago (08.08.2022 16:29:05)

threats have increased since the coming to power of the government of Albin Kurti, which has a strong policy focused on the recognition of Kosovo's independence. Kurti's government prioritizes such recognition to dialogue for the normalization of relations, which in some cases requires concessions that undermine this independence and its integrity. The changes to the laws on the recognition of license plates and identity cards issued represent not just a logistical issue: they also recognize the legitimacy of the documents issued by the government of Kosovo as an independent state.

Both in the case of September 2021 and the summer of 2022, Vucic's threats proved empty. Undoubtedly, he was ready to bring tanks and warplanes to the border with Kosovo, as well as to threaten peace in the country through the mobilization of Serbs in the north of Kosovo. However, the results were the same. As a BIRN investigation has shown, in the last two years, Vucic has often spoken about the fact that Serbia is ready to react to protect the borders, or has made other propaganda statements against the Kosovo government. But none of his threats, or catastrophic predictions, have turned out to be true.

The role of KFOR for Peace in Kosovo

On June 9, 1999, Serbia signed the Kumanovo Agreement that ended the Kosovo War – after more than 18 months of fighting, where over 8,600 Albanians killed or missing, and the displacement of 90% of the ethnic Albanian population. This agreement, moreover, contains two points that safeguard Kosovo's security: it defines a security zone of 25 km from the air and 5 km from land. Serbian forces are not allowed to cross this line without the permission of KFOR, NATO's

peacekeeping force in Kosovo. Moreover, KFOR itself is authorized to use force in cases where the peace of the area is in danger. Even though Kosovo is not yet part of NATO, an attack on it would bring into action the NATO forces that are stationed in Kosovo precisely to maintain peace.

As Una Hajdari, a journalist who is an expert in the issues of the Western Balkans and those of Kosovo-Serbia relations, has explained, there are no shortage of tensions in the north of Kosovo. But they are not signs of war, even though Russia may have an interest in Serbia, or Vučić uses Kosovo Serbs for his own political interests. The reality is that so far, all technical issues – even those without a final solution – have ended up at the dialogue table and not in armed conflict. Serbia, and especially Vucic, are more aware that an invasion of Kosovo could not happen within 24 hours, considering the presence of KFOR on the border.

CASE STUDY 3:

Zelenskyy Warns of War in the Western Balkans²⁰

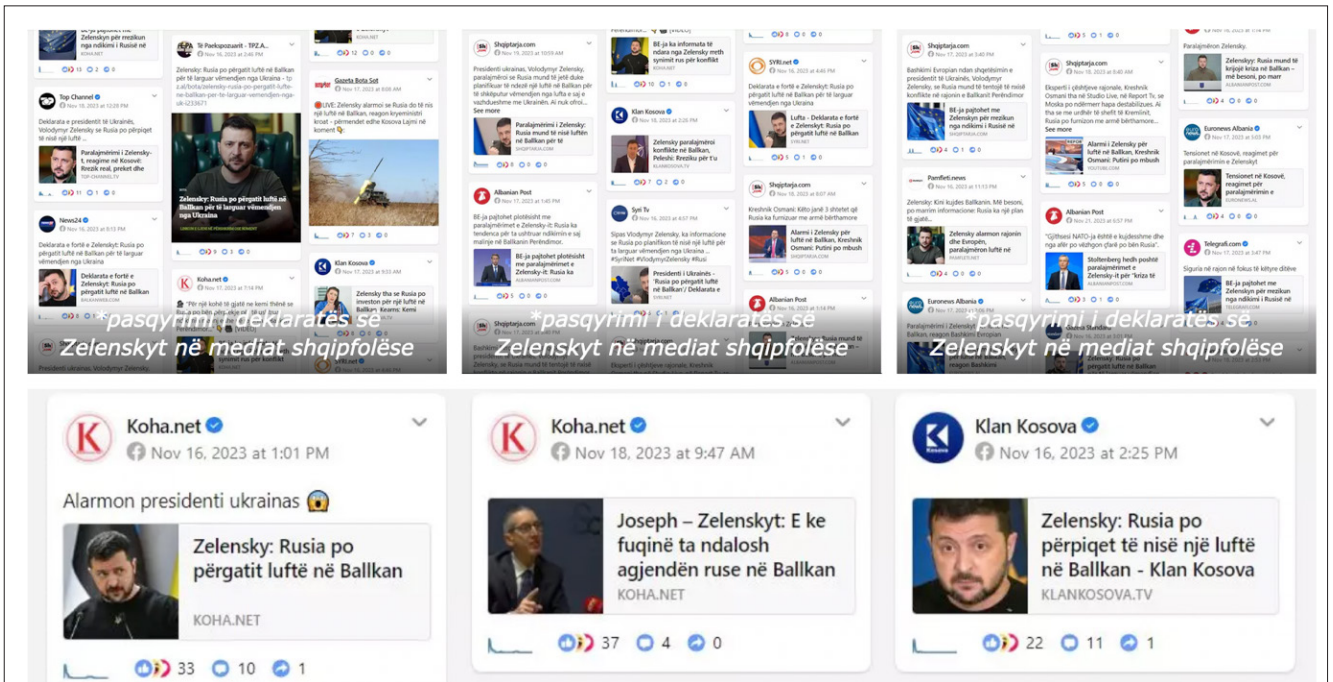
Zelenskyy's warning

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy warned that Russia may be planning to start a war in the Balkans in order to divert attention from the ongoing war in Ukraine.

“Pay attention to the Balkans. Believe me, we are receiving information that Russia has a long-term plan,” the Ukrainian News Agency reported Zelenskyy as saying.

Further, in an interview with the British tabloid “The Sun,” Zelenskyy took the “apocalyptic”

²⁰. Jona Plumbi, “Rikthet fantazma e “luftës në Ballkan,” Fakoje, <https://fakoje.al/rikthet-fantazma-e-luftes-ne-ballkan/>.



scenario one step further by warning of escalation into a Third World War.

“Ukraine is today at the center of a global risk of world war. I really think that Russia will push until the US and China tell it to withdraw from Ukraine. Because Europe cannot do it alone. Russia does not feel the whole world against them. Therefore, we think that they are now preparing other steps in the Balkans and are trying to train or have already started training some people and will not stop, because their idea is to start a conflict and light other fires around. Destabilization through the instigation of new conflicts”. –Zelensky told The Sun.

Media coverage

The news of Zelensky’s statement was widely reported in Albanian-language media as a threat for the Balkans.

Soon Zelensky’s warning of a possible war was reported as confirmed fact, even claiming that the European Union is worried by the possibility of war in the Western Balkans.

In fact, the statements published by NATO and the EU recognize Russia’s ongoing efforts to extend its influence in the Balkans, but at no point did they support claims about a possible war in the Balkans.

- Top News/ NATO ndez alarmin: Rusia, luftë në Ballkan! Stoltenberg sot në Kosovë, tur edhe në rajon
- Plas LUFTA?! Rusia gati të hapë front luftë në Kosovë e në Ballkan! Kosova dyfishon MBROJTJEN
- Plani rus për luftë në Ballkan, BE konfirmon alarmin e Zelenskit: Kemi informacione!
- “Rusia po përgatit luftë në Ballkan”, BE e shqetësuar, Stano: Pajtohemi me presidentin ukrainas, Rusia po bën gjithçka që...
- Peter Stano konfirmon frikën për luftë në Ballkan nxitur nga Rusia
- Si e parashikoi “Komploti” i Ben Blushit një luftë në Ballkan
- Alarmi i Zelenskyt për luftë 'ngre në këmbë' NATO-n, Stoltenberg 'zbarkon' sot në Ballkan

International reaction

Two days after Zelensky’s statement, at the start of his Balkan tour in Bosnia and Herzegovina, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg expressed concern about malign foreign interference, including from Russia, which threatens to undermine stability and impede reforms in region. Asked journalists in North Macedonia about Zelensky’s warning, Stoltenberg emphasized

that NATO is ready for any escalation, but stated that at moment there is no obvious danger to its members.

“We do not see any imminent military threat from Russia against any NATO Ally or region. But of course, we remain vigilant. We monitor closely what Russia is doing, and we remain united. We have a military presence in this region with KFOR, with a headquarters in Sarajevo and actually also an office in Belgrade. And we are ready to quickly reinforce and to do what is necessary to defend and protect every Ally against any threat. But again, we don’t see any imminent military threat against any NATO Ally.” – Stoltenberg said on November 21, 2023.

The European Union followed a similar line. In a press conference, the spokesperson of the European Commission answered a similar question about Volodymyr Zelensky’s warning.

“We have been saying for a long time that Russia is trying to exert its malign influence on the territory of the Western Balkans. So yes, this is a concern, but it’s not a new concern, we’ve had it for a long time, so we align ourselves with the Ukrainian president on this, and we know that Russia is doing its best to sow discontent, political instability, foreign influence, manipulation of information and so on.” – Peter Stano, European Commission declared on November 20, 2023.

This is also how international relations expert Ledion Krisafi sees the situation, who believes that although Russia has historically tried to influence and extend its presence in the Balkans, such influence and presence is at its historical lowest.

“The vast majority of the region’s population has no sympathy for Russia. Between Russia and the EU, without question they choose the EU. In addition, most countries in the region are part of NATO, so Russia’s efforts to influence the Balkans are quickly neutralized,” Krisafi explains:

“Unlike the former Soviet Union, which at least had communist ideology and the Russian Empire which was based on protecting the Christians of the Balkans, today’s Russia has little to offer the region, apart from oil and gas. Russia’s economic presence in the region is much smaller than that of the EU,” he said.

The parties now have a tacit agreement that the conflict will be limited within Ukraine, as it has been until now. Even more so given that at this moment it seems that neither Russia nor Ukraine can win the war, that is, they cannot defeat each other and it is unlikely that in the near future there will be significant changes on the front line,” Krisafi concluded.

Conclusion

Statements by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, that Russia wants to start war in the Balkans and that the conflict in Ukraine could turn into a global conflict, were reported with bombastic headlines across Albanian-language media. Compared to the statements released by the European Union and NATO, these claims tell two different stories.

The European Union considers this threat to the Balkans, which Ukraine claims to have receive intelligence about, a continuation Russia’s earlier policies, as the country to expand its influence in the region. The EU however does not see it as an imminent military threat to the Balkan countries.

Researcher Ledion Krisafi is of the same opinion when he argues that a major conflict in the Balkans is very unlikely to happen, precisely because of the presence of NATO in the region and Serbia’s inability to survive alone in case of isolation.

“Besides causing small regional problems and crises, sometimes in Kosovo, sometimes in Bosnia and sometimes in Montenegro, I don’t think that

Serbia has the capacity either to start a big war in the Balkans or to withstand such a war. Serbia would face European and American backlash, including sanctions and isolation that a country like Serbia cannot afford.” - argues Krisafi.

What Serbia can cause, Krisafi continues, are events like the one in Banjska: small local conflicts that last several months and give Serbia the opportunity to postpone as much as possible the moment when it will have to sign a final agreement with Kosovo.

CASE STUDY 4:

NATO has troops in Ukraine²¹

Albanian spread claims that Polish foreign minister, Radoslaw Sikorski, had declared that NATO soldiers are already present in Ukraine. The statement was interpreted to mean that NATO’s army is now directly involved in the war between Russia and Ukraine. First, the news was spread in foreign media such as British Sky News and then it was translated into Albanian.

“It is not clear in what capacity the soldiers are being used.” – Albanian media wrote, hinting that



NATO soldiers are already involved and fighting in Ukraine.

This statement was also echoed across Russian media, which has been claiming for a long time that NATO troops are already involved in the war.

However, upon closer investigation, the Polish Minister’s claims have clearly been distorted. Polish media contain transcripts of the full speech and other media that have faithfully translated the news. The full remarks tell the truth of what soldiers Sikorski was referring to.

“This is not about troops that will take an active part in military operations, but about soldiers involved in training Ukrainians on the ground, as well as in the use of military equipment.” - Minister Sikorski is quoted as saying.

Faktoje addressed a request for information to NATO about the claim raised by some media. In

²¹ Jona Plumbi, “NATO nuk ka dërguar trupa për të luftuar në Ukrainë,” Faktoje, <https://faktoje.al/nato-nuk-ka-derguar-trupa-per-te-luftuar-ne-ukraine/>.

his response, a NATO official informed Faktoje that the alliance is providing unprecedented military support to Ukraine, which began in 2014 after the annexation of Crimea and increased even more after Russia's attack on Ukraine.

NATO goes on to explain that Russian aggression against Ukraine violates international law, which gives Ukraine the right to self-defense and NATO to support it.

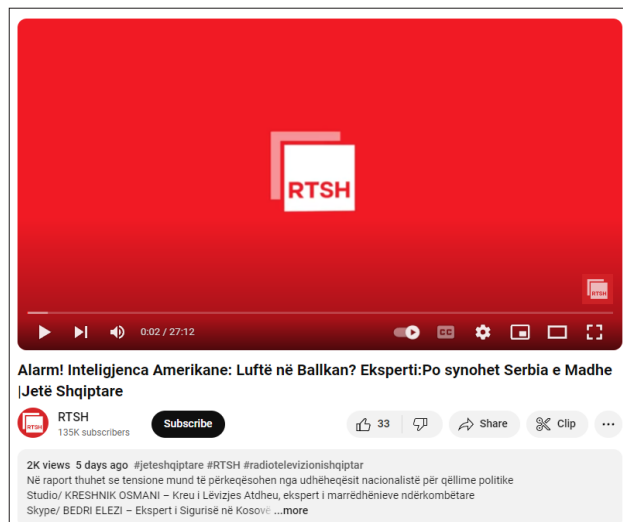
“This is what NATO allies are doing and will continue to do” - says the response of the North Atlantic Alliance to Faktoje.

The narrative of NATO involvement in the fighting in Ukraine is dangerous as it has often been used by Russia to escalate its threats, from declaring war on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to threats of nuclear war.

CASE STUDY 5:

US Intelligence Report predicts war in the Balkans²²

“Alert! American Intelligence: War in the Balkans? Expert: Greater Serbia is the goal”.



This is what Albania's state broadcaster, RTSH, announced on March 15, 2024, citing a US Intelligence report that, according to them, predicted a possible war in the Balkans.

“American intelligence predicts that within 2024 the Western Balkans may enter a situation of instability, there will be violence, there will be inter-ethnic riots” - announces RTSH, which held a 30-minute studio discussion on this topic.

What RTSH is referencing here about is a report by ODNI, the Office of the Director of National

The Balkans

The Western Balkans probably will face an increased risk of localized interethnic violence during 2024. Nationalist leaders are likely to exacerbate tension for their political advantage and outside actors will reinforce and exploit ethnic differences to increase or protect their regional influence or thwart greater Balkan integration into the EU or Euro-Atlantic institutions.

- Clashes between Serb nationalists and Kosovar authorities have led to deaths and injuries, including injuries to NATO peacekeepers, in 2023.
- Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik is taking provocative steps to neutralize international oversight in Bosnia and secure de facto secession for his Republika Srpska. His action could prompt leaders of the Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) population to bolster their own capacity to protect their interests and possibly lead to violent conflicts that could overwhelm peacekeeping forces.

²² Jona Plumbi, “Raporti i Inteljencës Amerikane nuk parashikoi luftë në Ballkan,” Faktoje, <https://faktoje.al/raporti-i-inteljences-amerikane-nuk-parashikoi-lufte-ne-ballkan/>.

“Ballkani Perëndimor me shumë mundësi do të përballlet me rrezikun e shtimit të dhunës ndëretnike gjatë vitit 2024. Udhëheqësit nacionalistë ka të ngjarë të thellojnë tensionet për qëllime politike. Faktorë të jashtëm do të përforcojnë dhe shfrytëzojnë dallimet etnike për të rritur ose mbrojtur ndikimin e tyre rajonal ose për të penguar integrimin e Ballkanit Perëndimor në strukturat e BE-së apo në ato euroatlantike.”

Intelligence of the United States government.

This report has predicted that during 2024 the Western Balkan region may have an increase in the risk of localized inter-ethnic violence.

“The Western Balkans probably will face an increased risk of localized interethnic violence during 2024. Nationalist leaders are likely to exacerbate tension for their political advantage and outside actors will reinforce and exploit ethnic differences to increase or protect their regional influence or thwart greater Balkan integration into the EU or Euro-Atlantic institution,” stated the ODN report for 2024.

The report includes examples of such localized inter-ethnic clashes, such as the attacks in Banjska during 2023 and Milorad Dodik’s

provocations in Bosnia regarding the secession of Republika Srpska.

At no point does the report talk about a potential war in the Balkans, or even between two states who are currently in a situation of conflict with one another, unlike what the state broadcaster RTSH is hinting.

The news about “instability in the Balkans” was reported in several major media outlets in the country.

Another news outlet announced that the Washington Report warns that the Western Balkans “risks being destabilized by conflicts fueled by countries that have an interest in controlling the region, such as Russia.”

The article goes on to misquote the report:

“The Western Balkans will most likely face the risk of increased inter-ethnic violence during 2024.” - writes the article, which notes the exclusion of the word “localized” from the original report.

* Misquotation of ODN media report.

International relations researcher, Ledion Kristafi, told Faktoje that the risk of localized conflicts in the region exists, as evidenced by the case of Banjska, but a broader Balkan war is pretty much impossible.

“I don’t think a war in the Balkans is possible. The risk of localized conflicts in the region exists, but they should not be exaggerated, because today



the region is not the same as it was 20 or 30 years ago. Today, NATO's presence in the region is many times greater, and especially in Kosovo, it is crucial for its security. We're not in the 90s anymore. The Serbs, who were the initiators of the wars in those years, have learned from their mistakes," Kristafi said.

According to Kristafi, the presence of NATO is a red line that Serbia is neither read nor prepared to cross.

"So, in this situation where we are, the risk is theoretical. In order for Serbia to make it true, well that is difficult, because the Serbs and Serbia in the Balkans would face such consequences and sanctions at a level that they cannot afford them," argues Kristafi.

In November 2023, following a warning by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky for increased caution in the Balkans due to Russian

interference in the region, NATO Secretary General Jans Stoltenberg also stressed that he "did not see any imminent military threat against any of our allies."

A decisive factor for the future of the region, according to researcher Kristafi, will be the outcome of the war in Ukraine.

"A possible Russian victory in Ukraine would weaken the EU and encourage the Serbs, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to act. But Bosnia is a dysfunctional state, and the EU and the US, with or without Russia's victory, must find a final solution for Bosnia," assesses Kristafi.

The use of exaggerated headlines or misreading of reports or statements to "warn" of future wars is a repeated offense on the part of Albanian media and beyond. Faktoje has often refuted such headlines used as "clickbait" that spread fear among readers rather than informing them.

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