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FIGHTING RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION POST-INVASION OF UKRAINE

NEWS

FAKE

June 2024

"In war, truth is the first casualty".

Aeschylus

BACKGROUND

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. 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. 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 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." 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.

When it comes to wars and conflicts, propaganda has always been vital 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 audience under control.

Reporting war and conflicts requires truthfulness, balance and impartiality but exactly these important features are difficult to be found in these specific times. In fact information fabrication is not new. "The use of propaganda is ancient, but never before has there been the technology to so effectively disseminate it", the Guardian columnist Natalie Nougayrède had observed.

The 21st-century 'information disorder' has been widely affected by the use of technology and an endless number of platforms through which the information is disseminated in instant time. 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.

In the Western Balkans, studies have shown that foreign actors are minority players in the disinformation game. Most of the producers and disseminators of disinformation in this region are domestic and pursue local aims.

Albania has been seen often as one of the places least vulnerable to Russian propaganda. 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. 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. 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. Faktoje has published at least 200 verifications related to disinformation narratives in Ukraine. The first one dates back in February 2022 and relates to the claim of Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Lavrov that mercenaries from Albania and other Balkan states were being sent to Ukraine to fight against Russia.

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. 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. While this is already happening in the Albanian media landscape in relation to both the war in Ukraine and Serbia and Kosovo, attempts to counteract it will require responsible journalism that relies on thorough research and fact-checking efforts.

What is disinformation?

Disinformation is false or inaccurate information that a hostile actor uses deliberately to deceive people (Lazer et al., 2018). The EU defines disinformation as verifiably false or misleading information, created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to internationally deceive the public, which 'may cause public harm and threats to democratic political and policymaking processes, as well as public goods'.

As such, disinformation is different from misinformation (the simple distribution of falsehoods) or malinformation (the harmful distribution of truthful information, including leaks). But all three are a departure from 'normal' practices of mass communication, in that they involve a breach of trust by the producer of what is commonly called 'fake news'. The falsehood at the core of disinformation may take one or many forms. Usually, disinformation seeks to stir up a particular strong emotion (anger, fear, disgust) and override rational and critical thinking in the intended target.

Fake news are defined as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false and could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Fact-checkers use this term in the sense of a "unit of content" - a text, photo, or video that is presented in the form of a news story or as a post on social media. In this context we should also address the concepts of fake source as a false source/attribution of information to a known source and fake context – incorrect interpretation or fictitious context.

"Disinformation" is just one element of a broader set of hostile information activities, which can include many tactics, techniques and procedures.

Key concepts and terms regarding disinformation in wartimes and conflicts are:

Disinformation – false or inaccurate information spread deliberately to manipulate the opinions and actions of others

Misinformation – false or inaccurate information spread without malicious intent, although its effects can still be harmful

Propaganda – information designed to manipulate a specific target audience toward a particular behavior or belief, often as part of a prolonged campaign by a state actor with a political agenda

Hostile narrative – a specific story developed to discredit or defame a particular target

Hostile information activities – a wide range of coordinated actions designed to sow distrust and manipulate opinion, usually involving one or all of the above methods and techniques, such as misleading memes, conspiracy theories, deep fake images or videos, quotes taken out of context, or simply outright lies that people tell to manipulate others

Hybrid warfare – use of military and non-military as well as covert and overt means (including disinformation, cyber attacks, economic pressure, deployment of irregular armed groups and use of regular forces) to blur the lines between war and peace, sow doubt in the minds of target populations, and destabilize and undermine societies.

Effects of disinformation

Disinformation destroys people's faith in traditional news sources – which, unlike disinformation agents, have ethical standards and legal responsibilities to report the facts, which are often more complex and less satisfying than a simple hostile narrative.

It undermines people's trust in governments and other public institutions. It is usually designed to appeal to our worst impulses, fears and prejudices, poisoning social groups against each other, validating and inflaming extremism, degrading our feelings of belonging to a community or a country – all in an attempt to divide and conquer a society on the information battlefield.

In recent years, much of the public and political debate on disinformation has focused on attempts to disrupt politics within and between third countries. This refers, above all, to Russian-linked disinformation campaigns implemented through a combination of overt and covert channels to convince foreign and domestic audiences of particular ideas. In the Western Balkans in particular, Russian-linked disinformation operations appear to be organized in service of non-state interests, including those of organized crime groups, or more broadly to discredit and weaken the global role of the EU and the North Atlantic Treaty.

In many countries, including Albania, there have been initiatives and concrete steps to establish committees or commissions on disinformation. Many of them encountered criticism especially on the scope, formation as well as doubts on being biased or implying unnecessary interventions in media freedom. Some of them have been short lived and ceased to exist[1].

In Albania, this committee[2] was proposed in March 2024 by the lawmakers of the ruling party and was approved by their votes only in April 2024. Researchers and organizations working on media development in the country raised concerns about the clarity and purpose of the commission and emphasized the need for transparency while calling for detailed consultation on the commission's objectives and international agreements.

Disinformation and propaganda, together with cyber-attacks, in the war in Ukraine, are causing enormous damage with devastating effects on the public opinion. This war is not only fought with missiles, bombs, and tanks, but also by spreading fake news, computer viruses, disinformation and propaganda.

Disinformation thrives most virulent in environments that are already riven with internal conflicts, and where social and public trust already struggles to bridge political, regional, ethnic, religious or other divides. Information disorder – including disinformation – is most often the symptom of social and political disorder, rather than the cause.

Many policymakers are grasping for quick, effective ways to dissuade people from adopting and spreading false beliefs that degrade democratic discourse and can inspire violent actions. Yet, disinformation has proven difficult to define, understand, measure and address. We are living in an environment where simply getting the information to the public space often doesn't lead to change. So, what is the role of journalists in the public sphere, in this complicated political and information landscape?

[1.] See more here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/05/18/disinformation-board-dhs-nina-jankowicz/

[2.] See more here: https://www.reporter.al/2024/04/25/komisioni-i-dezinformimit-vigjilence-apo-kercenim-per-lirine-e-medias/

Researchers and experts are asking for a re-evaluation of journalism's role and impact on democracy. "While increasing polarization and the growing importance of identity over facts challenge traditional journalistic assumptions, we should adjust the way we do things, focusing on building communities, while still adhering to journalistic ethics". (Pomerantsev, 2024)

In Albania, disinformation is a ubiquitous feature of domestic political competition, but efforts are generally opportunistic and campaigns are short-lived. There is relatively little evidence of attempts by foreign powers to distort Albanian politics or international affairs.

Proximity with the war/conflict is justified by using information which allegedly refers to the alleged Albanian involvement in this war. The Case Study below refers to mercenaries from Albania participating in this conflict and information has been classified as false after verification of Faktoje with official sources.

Case Study 1 — Albanian Mercenaries in Ukraine

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. 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 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.

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."

https://faktoje.al/debunking-42-nga-150-mercenare-shqiptare-jane-vrare-ne-ukraine-institucionet-zyrtare-deklarata-eshte-e-pavertete/

Main narratives

Narratives are a form of storytelling that helps to explain and shape perceptions of an issue. Narratives are in essence simple stories that give shortcuts to understanding complex issues. They often express things about identity, community, and purpose. The analysis of narratives in Faktoje debunking database has shown that the use of a series of fakes related to Ukraine' invasion has significantly increased recently.

The research consisted of a qualitative content analysis of 20 Albanian news outlets, major news channels, portals with significant reach, and smaller tabloids. The research identified in average 75 articles per 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. Over the past two years, Faktoje has published more than 150 articles debunking disinformation from Russia and beyond, tracking their sources and their promulgation in Albanian media. Among the articles identified as containing some form of disinformation, the most common war narratives were as listed below:

- Justification of Russia' invasion of Ukraine
- NATO/US involvement in Ukraine
- Russia will begin World War III/Nuclear War
- Proxy wars in the Western Balkans

a) Disinformation narratives justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine

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. 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." 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.

Case Study 2

Beware of Russian triumphalist propaganda on the annexation of 4 regions in Ukraine!

On September 30, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the annexation of four regions that make up the vast majority of southeastern Ukraine: Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zhaporizhzhia. International media reports, including some in Albania, 'sold' this event as a triumph for Russia and a failure for the West, specifically NATO.

But an analysis of Faktoje brings some truths that Russian propaganda has managed to hide from the eyes of the public who are taking for granted that the 4 Ukrainian regions have been annexed to Russia "of their own free will".

On the last day of the month, Putin signed documents through which he claims to take control of the sovereignty of 15% of the Ukrainian territory, in what the American newspaper New York Times called the creation of "a parallel reality in which Russia claims to exercise sovereignty over thousands

of square kilometers of territory that its military does not actually control." This is exactly where the absurdity of this annexation, which came a few days after the conclusion of several dubious referendums that probably showed the peace's support for annexing Russia as the latter's territory: no matter how many documents Putin signs, he has no control over full military control over none of the four territories and moreover, in the international arena, only North Korea takes the annexation for granted.

In general, the Albanian media portrayed this annexation with the skepticism with which it was received by governments and international media. However, there were some who took Putin's messages out of context, thereby spreading Russian propaganda about the events in southeastern Ukraine. In the case of the Koha Jonë newspaper, it is written:

"Dear friends, we will do everything to support our brothers and sisters in Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, in Donetsk and Luhansk. We will do everything to raise the level of security in these territories for these people. We will do everything to restore the economy. To restore the infrastructure, to build schools, new institutions, hospitals" - said Putin. "We have become stronger because we are together. We have the truth. And truth means power. Father means victory. The victory will be ours," Putin said. He repeated that today is a "historic day, a day of truth and justice". He accused Ukraine of "trying to wipe out" the culture of the people living in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions. The Russian president added that residents in these regions "made this choice to be with their ancestral homeland" in the so-called referendums. Ukraine and the West have denounced them as illegal. "Russia is not only opening its doors. Russia is opening its heart. Welcome home," Putin said.

https://faktoje.al/kujdes-nga-propaganda-triumfaliste-ruse-mbi-aneksimin-e-4-rajoneve-ne-ukraine/

b) 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.

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.

Case Study 3 — NATO has troops in Ukraine

Albanian spread claims that Polish foreign minister, Radoslav 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 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. 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.

https://faktoje.al/nato-nuk-ka-derguar-trupa-per-te-luftuar-ne-ukraine/

Example 1

News on US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin killed in Kiev

Another fake news was considered the news article on US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin who was said was killed in Kiev on 3 January. A meticulous verification showed that he was hospitalized because of an emergency health condition and was re-hospitalized after complications he had. While media declared him dead in Ukraine, he admitted he had been in Ukraine, but had returned to the U.S. after his official visit.

How to verify photos and videos generated by AI?

- Reverse image search Google
- Deepware tool
- AI or not tool
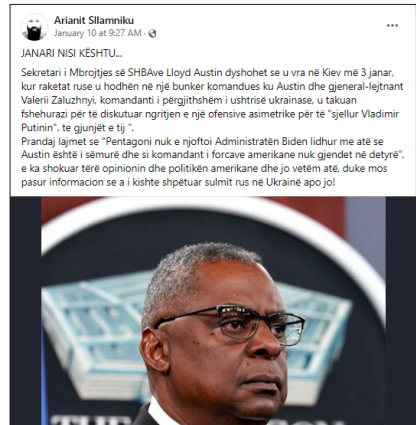
## c) Russia will begin World War III/Nuclear War

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. These narratives, which are popular and drive 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.

Another example related to this narrative is found in various articles related to the use of chemical weapons as in the case below:

Example 2

War in Ukraine and chemical weapons
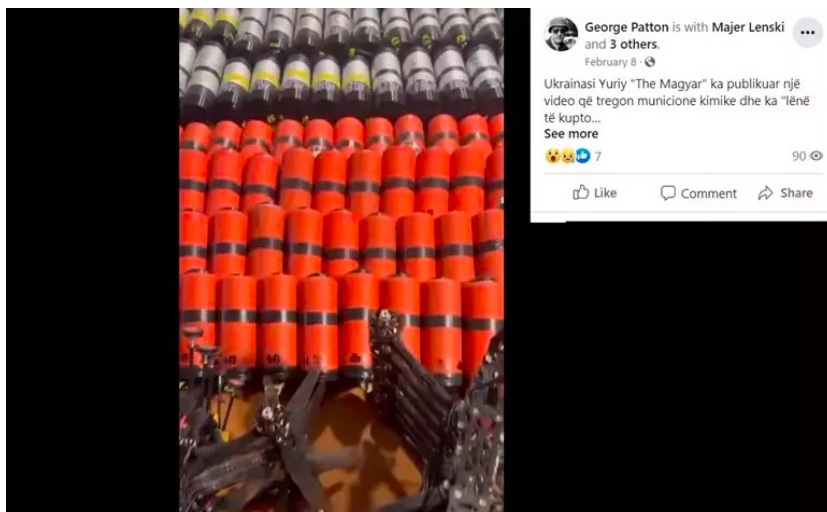
Since February 5, several pro-Russian accounts have been sharing images that they claim document the use of chemical weapons by Ukrainian troops. The verifications reveal that there is no convincing evidence to support these accusations that would constitute serious violations of international conventions. Since February, some pro-Russian accounts have been sharing videos on their social networks claiming that Ukrainian soldiers are using chemical weapons in the war against the Russians. Like nuclear weapons, chemical weapons are strictly forbidden to be used in war by international conventions and are classified as weapons of mass destruction. Although these claims have no basis from observations in the field, various users on the network have shared the film images, including an Albanian profile on the Facebook social network.Ukrainian Yuriy "The Magyar" has published a video showing chemical munitions and has "hinted" that the Ukrainians are preparing to use banned munitions in Bakhmut [Artemovsk]" - wrote on February 7, the person in question, while publishing the video that has caught the attention of dozens of other Facebook users. The video shows

an impressive amount of red and black cylindrical cartridges surrounded by drones, which appear to be used to deliver bombs to areas where the Russian military is stationed. Cylindrical containers, presumed to contain chemicals, are shown stored in a refrigerated facility. There is music in the background and a man commenting on the scene in a loud voice. From the verifications made by our France 24 colleagues, more light has been shed on what it is about. French journalists have managed to contact the Ukrainian soldier, Robert Madia, who appears in the published video, thanks to the name he wears on his uniform. It is this soldier himself who explains through another video that it is about explosive charges that are being prepared to be transported by drone and attack military vehicles or other enemy targets. France 24 colleagues have consulted these data with experts in the field, who agree that it is not a question of dangerous chemical weapons. In such case, experts confirm that the bombs would not be caught and assembled without any protective measures (masks or gloves). Of course, the use of chemical weapons in combat would not go unnoticed and immediately denounced by the Russians. To date, there is no such case reported, even without evidence, by the official Russian authorities.

https://faktoje.al/e-rreme-video-qe-provon-perdorimin-e-armeve-kimike-nga-ukrainasit/

d) 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. These narratives, like narratives

about a potential nuclear war, facilitate discord and conflict which help Russia's overall project.

Disinformation remains a challenge and various times it is difficult to be detected. But in general there are markers which can be easily used for detection of disinformation.

Case Study 4 — 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 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.

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 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.

https://faktoje.al/perse-jane-te-paqena-paralajmerimet-per-lufte-midis-kosoves-dhe-serbise/

Case Study 5 — Zelenskyy Warns of War in the Western Balkans

Zelensky's warning

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky 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 Zelensky as saying.

Further, in an interview with the British tabloid "The Sun," Zelensky took the "apocalyptic" 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.

International reaction

Two days after Zelenskiy'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 by 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. 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.

Example 3

US Intelligence Report predicts war in the Balkans

"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 is a report by ODNI, the Office of the Director of National 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 ODNI 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 ODNI media report.

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.

https://faktoje.al/raporti-i-inteligjences-amerikane-nuk-parashikoi-lufte-ne-ballkan/

Example 4

Serbia training children on arms

"Serbia po trajnon fëmijët për luftë"

TemA 10 MAJ 2023, 12:05 / RAJONI
TEMA

Burimi: Gazeta Tema

A similar photo story was published on 13 May 2023 by Albanian newspaper Tema entitled: "Serbia is training children soldiers". The original posting refers to the security expert FB video in Twitter (now X platform) after a 13 years old killed 8 children in a Belgrade school. The expert underlined that this situation has been affected by children being trained to use arms. Faktoje verified the post to understand if that is true that Serbia children are being trained by Russian forces. Verification by reverse image in Google showed that the photo dates 5 years ago.

https://faktoje.al/31949-2/

Red Flags - Disinformation Markers

- the headline does not match/support the text and the text focuses on something entirely different;
- there is no specific reference & dubious or anonymous sources are being used
- the images and videos accompanying the news article are questionable;
- the news contains an excessive amount of emotions, questions or exclamations;
- the news article is based/relies on biased experts

Examples of disinformation

Images of WWII being used for war in Ukraine

https://faktoje.al/foto-nga-lufta-ii-boterore-po-shiten-si-pamje-nga-lufta-ne-ukraine/

Images of children during war in Ukraine have been used early on and continuously to illustrate the war. Albanian media published this news photo in February 2022 which was republished many times later. Using TinEye search motor this photo's real date and origin was found to be the year

1945 by Tony Frisell with the caption: "An abandoned boy holding a stuffed animal in his hands during air bombardments in London in 1945".

How to detect misinformation and disinformation during conflicts and wartimes?

Analyze who the author of this information is, what could be the purpose of creating this post or article, and what background they have.

- Check if anyone else is spreading similar information, especially if it's being done by reputable, authoritative sources.

- If the information is being spread only by this one source, it's worth considering where they got such exclusive information that others haven't discovered.

- No matter how authoritative the source may be, it's worth checking the primary source.

- Pay attention to the date of the information: sometimes an old event/ statement is presented as if it happened/was made recently.

Ukrainian soldiers leaving their families

Another news story brings images of Ukrainian soldiers meeting for the last time their wives and fiancees. A simple use of Google Reverse Image and Youtube showed that the images did not depict the reality but were taken by a Ukrainian move entitled "The War of Chimeras".

#ShqiperiaLive #TopChannel
Ushtarët ukrainas puthin të dashurat para se të ikin në luftë, moment prekës-Shqipëria Live
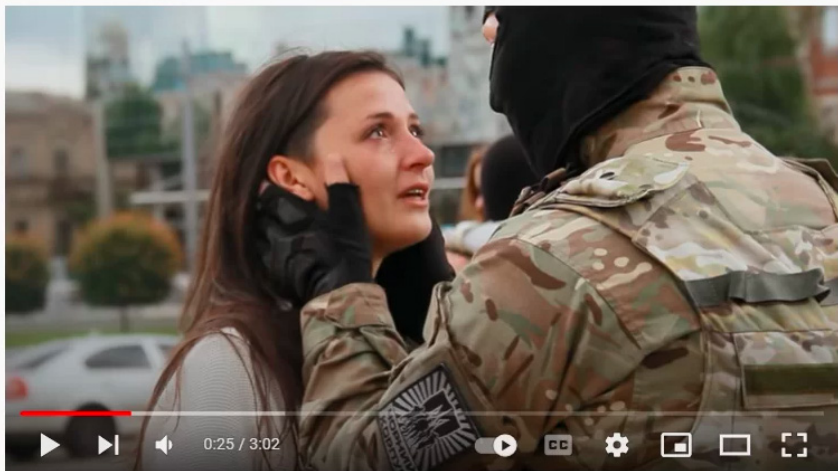
The War of Chimeras \ Війна химер (2017) - Trailer

60,336 views • Jul 7, 2017

The use of deep fakes during war

Deep fakes is a method of creating fake media content, such as videos, audio, or images, using artificial neural networks, based on deep learning and artificial neural networks, particularly using generative models.

- Most often associated with official authorities, military personnel who make decisions or issue orders.
- Created in conditions of heightened crisis, when the audience has limited opportunities to verify and clarify information.
- Spread through social media or specially created pages for this purpose.
- To disseminate such disinformation, Russia most often uses anonymous
- Telegram channels.

Example 5

Deep Fake Video of Volodymir Zelenskyy

This video shows the Ukrainian President asking his forces to lay down arms. The images are manipulated by using movements in order to create a video. Anything unnatural in this video as the repeated movements or the voice can lead a journalist to have doubts, dig deeper and further verify it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X17yrEV5sl4&t=7s

Example 6

Photos of Ukrainian soldiers praying for salvation

Another deep fake case is the one referring to the images of Russian President Vladimir Putin being arrested. The images were posted in Twitter (now X platform) in March 2024. Further verification by fact-checkers has shown that these images were generated by an artificial intelligence program.

Example 7

Putin' arrest images - created by artificial intelligence

Although most of the media have reported that the images showing President Putin being 'arrested' are the product of artificial intelligence (AI) programs, these images are also circulating on social networks taken out of this context. The photo above was created by an artificial intelligence (AI) program. The above image was posted on March 20 on Twitter, attached to other images showing scenes from Putin's 'arrest', accompanied by the description "neural network draws beautiful things". Neural network refers to how artificial intelligence programs work. "Faktoje" has previously verified AI-generated images that have been taken as truth on social networks.

https://faktoje.al/arrestimi-i-putin-krijim-i-inteligjences-artificiale/

Advice for young fact-checkers

- Identify the primary source: find the quote, the report, the origin of a photo.
- Take the time to read and understand the primary source.
- Be transparent: explain why and how you do it.
- Always call the person whose words you are verifying.
- Remain neutral and avoid expressing personal opinions on social media.
- Provide a nuanced or clear-cut answer, but always clear.
- Commit to correcting your own errors by publishing an erratum in a clearly visible manner

Digital research - Practical tips

Google
Recognizes text in images/ Changing the keywords for a more precise search is possible

Bing
Search of image sections (visual research) recognizes faces and sometimes extracts text in images

Yandex
Search of image sections reads, extracts and translates text in photos, recognizes faces.

TinEye
Sort by date/image size is possible

Google Lens
Analyzes photos and recognizes car types, plants, animals and objects partly obscured. Open in Google Chrome via context menu, or use add-on Search by Image

To be effective, it is crucial for fact-checkers to:

- Utilize all methods and tools of verification, both digital and traditional;

- Personally communicate with witnesses;

- Pay attention to details;

- Identifying patterns and repetitions in stories, detecting fundamental narratives;

- Develop a network of communication partners

GUIDELINES TO COMBAT DISINFORMATION

Combatting disinformation during times of conflict is critical to maintaining stability and ensuring accurate information reaches the public. Here are some guidelines to help combat disinformation:

Transparent Communication: Governments and authoritative sources should provide timely, accurate, and transparent information to the public. Open communication builds trust and reduces the spread of rumors and falsehoods. Transparency includes being open and truthful in social media platforms.

Fact-Checking: Establish independent fact-checking organizations or initiatives to verify information disseminated through traditional and social media channels. Rapid fact-checking can debunk false narratives before they gain followers.

Counter-Narratives: Develop and disseminate counter-narratives to debunk false information and propaganda. Highlighting the truth undermines the credibility of disinformation campaigns.

Collaboration: Foster collaboration between governments, media organizations, civil society, and technology companies to address disinformation effectively. Joint efforts can amplify the impact of initiatives and promote truthful messaging.

Empower Independent Journalism: Support independent journalism and investigative reporting to uncover and expose disinformation campaigns. Journalists play a crucial role in holding power to account and informing the public.

International Cooperation: Strengthen international cooperation to address transnational disinformation threats. Collaboration between

countries can facilitate information sharing, intelligence gathering, and coordinated responses to disinformation.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Launch public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the dangers of disinformation and the importance of critical thinking. Encourage individuals to question sources, verify information, and think critically before sharing content.

Invest in Technology: Invest in technologies to detect and counter disinformation, such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, and natural language processing. Automated tools can assist in identifying false information and analyzing its impact on society.

By implementing these guidelines, governments, media organizations, and civil society can work together to mitigate the harmful effects of disinformation during war times and conflicts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For journalists/editors

● *Conduct systematic monitoring and narrative analysis aimed at identifying thematic and substantive changes to anticipate new threats.*

As disinformation narratives evolve under the influence of various factors such as political processes and events, unforeseen crisis, it is essential to regularly re-assess narrative analyses to anticipate threats and identify key target groups and communities. We recommend utilizing various observational and computational tools for monitoring disinformation, while enhancing the capabilities of analysts and fact-checkers regarding threats and the way they are disseminated.

● *Improve and provide support for fact-checking operations and efforts*

Media outlets and fact-checkers should do more to debunk disinformation narratives circulating in the Albanian language media outlets. The media should raise awareness of the threat of narratives of Russian disinformation in Albania. Support training for journalists, editors and fact-checkers to identify Russian information narratives, aiming at identifying and debunking these narratives.

● *Analyze technologies and tools used by disinformation for the production of fake news.*

In the process of disinformation campaigns various technologies has been used to reproduce false, manipulative information – deep fakes, fake audio, and photo/video messages. Regular monitoring and analysis allow us to track not only the narrative but also the technological aspects behind disinformation production and distribution, as well as to prepare strategies and methods of verification and refutation.

● *Inform and educate various stakeholders about disinformation trends on a regular basis.*

Develop a system for regularly informing all stakeholders. Include the results of systematic analysis of disinformation narrative trends in public reports and discussions, articulate the trends and threats at all levels, and engage a wide audience in this process.

● *Encourage cross-disciplinary cooperation between researchers.*

Editors, journalists, researchers and fact-checkers should strengthen their knowledge and capacities to identify pro-Kremlin narratives circulated by its state-sponsored media ecosystem or statements made by Russian institutions and officials through social media platforms.

● *Set up a publicly available repository of disinformation examples.*

Based on data assembled by fact-checkers, develop a publicly accessible repository of disinformation examples annotated with narrative features across various types of content to be used by the fact-checking community and other stakeholders.

Recommendations for regulatory bodies/government

● *Develop criteria to identify agents and sources of disinformation.*

While disinformation tends to change and adapts to bans and sanctions, the government, in close cooperation with fact-checking organizations and academia, need to work to define wider criteria for disinformation agents, actors, and disruptors of information processes.

● *Involve fact-checkers in the policymaking process regarding countering disinformation.*

The systematic activity of fact-checking organizations allows to identify technological, narrative and behavioral features of the processes related to the transmission and consumption of information by different groups. Media regulators and the government can use their experience and observations in developing policies and formulating legislation in the field of information and countering disinformation.

● *Increase public awareness by supporting public campaigns and Media Literacy.*

Include issues related to disinformation and propaganda and information verification in the curricula for different age groups at different stages of national education on a regular basis. Support media education initiatives that develop and promote information campaigns raising awareness about the role of fact-checking and media literacy and involve various types of media (educational, television, radio, online media) organizations in such campaigns.

● *Support inclusion of fact-checking efforts and methods in journalism education as well as public' education*

Public education on being able to filter and sift information is very important in countering mis and disinformation. Regulatory bodies and government should think of supporting public education through different activities involving fact-checking methods and tools and most importantly, support and promote inclusion of fact-checking efforts in journalism education as well.

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INTRODUCTION

When it comes to wars and conflicts, propaganda has always been vital 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 audience under control.

Reporting war and conflicts requires truthfulness, balance and impartiality but exactly these important features are difficult to be found in these specific times. In fact information fabrication is not new. "The use of propaganda is ancient, but never before has there been the technology to so effectively disseminate it", The Guardian columnist Natalie Nougayrède had observed.

The 21st-century 'information disorder' has been widely affected by the use of technology and an endless number of platforms through which the information is disseminated in instant time. 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.

This manual will serve as a comprehensive guide for young reporters and students of journalism and communication in understanding, identifying, and combatting disinformation in wartime and conflicts' contexts, contributing to the reductions in the consumption of disinformation and creation of more resilient information environments in Albania and the wider region.