



## Electoral Disinformation in the Western Balkans

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### Takeaways for the whole region

The Western Balkans, marked by complex history and geopolitics, faces a grave challenge – electoral disinformation. False information spreads via social media, distorting public opinion and politics. Tech advancements fuel vast, damaging disinformation campaigns that erode trust, deepen divisions, and obstruct citizen involvement. Polarization, foreign meddling, emotional appeals worsen vulnerability. Despite progress, persistent electoral disinformation threatens hard-won stability and democratic gains. The issue transcends borders, impacting stability, public trust, and democratic values. A comprehensive response demands cooperation, media literacy, independent journalism, accountable social media rules, and real-time disinformation monitoring.

Government, civil society, academia, tech firms must unite. Fostering transparency, accountability, critical thinking builds resilience against disinformation, safeguarding democracy. This collective effort not only secures the Western Balkans but also sets a global precedent. This paper delves deeper into each country's situation.

### Albania

Albania has a lot of challenges when it comes to electoral disinformation, especially amid election campaigns, such as in other places mentioned above. The intentional spread of false or misleading information through digital channels has the potential to manipulate public opinion and exert

influence on electoral outcomes. Albania's political arena is characterized by deep polarization, which creates a fertile environment for the proliferation of disinformation. Additionally, limited media literacy and the concentration of media ownership add further complexity to the issue. Various actors, both domestic and foreign, exploit social media and online platforms to disseminate deceptive narratives, exploit societal divisions, and undermine public trust in democratic institutions, contributing to the propagation of electoral disinformation in Albania. The ramifications of such misinformation are significant, eroding trust in democratic processes, exacerbating social divisions, and hindering the development of an informed and engaged citizenry.

To effectively address these challenges, Albania should prioritize:

- To bolster independent journalism, establish effective legislation to hold social media platforms accountable and create multi-stakeholder task forces to swiftly counter disinformation campaigns.
- Addressing electoral disinformation is vital for upholding the integrity of democratic processes and ensuring that citizens are equipped to make well-informed decisions during elections. The presence of a polarized political landscape, foreign influence, regulatory complexities, and reliance on emotional appeals underscores the need for a collaborative and vigilant approach to safeguard Albania's democratic foundations.

### ***Bosnia and Herzegovina***

As a country emerging from a violent conflict in the 1990s, tremendous progress has been made in terms of the stability of the state and its institutions, particularly at the state level, from the Ministry of Defence, the Armed Forces, the Intelligence Agency, and many more. However, tensions appear to be stronger than ever in 2023. The quantity of harmful discourse has progressively increased in recent years, particularly in the last two years. This makes the process of healing and reconciliation for the country and its three ethnicities difficult. The apex of the hostile rhetoric is observed in election campaigns, where certain politicians and political parties use nationalist speech as a form of disinformation. Spreading false rumours about candidates, parties, or

election procedures, creating fake social media accounts or websites to communicate inaccurate information, and using divisive narratives to polarize communities are all frequent techniques of electoral misinformation. Electoral misinformation can harm the democratic process. It has the potential to erode public faith in elections, disrupt the political landscape, and result in less informed voters. It may potentially contribute to societal instability or violence in severe circumstances. The only solution to this issue is the implementation of the policy recommendations below with all the ethnicities in the country as it is the only way for maintaining peace and furthering the process of reconciliation in the country and the region in general.

Based on the facts provided, the policy proposals for the issue would be:

- **Legislative Mechanisms:** Creating strong legislation that particularly addresses election misinformation might be a critical first step. During election seasons, laws should specify and ban the dissemination of misleading information, and sanctions should be placed on persons or institutions engaging in disinformation dissemination.
- **Education and media literacy:** It's important to encourage individuals to develop their analytical and critical thinking abilities. People may be taught how to assess the reliability of information sources, identify misinformation tactics, and double-check facts through the use of educational programs. In this sense, cooperation between educational

institutions, civil society groups, and media outlets is essential.

- **Fact-Checking and Media Cooperation:** Supporting independent fact-checking groups and encouraging media collaboration are two ways to counteract misinformation. Fact-checkers are essential in the process of confirming information, refuting untrue assertions, and disseminating accurate information to the general public.
- **Grassroots Activities:** Grassroots activities play an important role in combating election misinformation by encouraging civic involvement and boosting community awareness.

## ***Kosovo***

Since its independence in 2008, Kosovo has been able to establish a functional and ever-improving level of democracy, however, we are far from being safe from misinformation during election periods. Although there are rules set out to safeguard a democratic and fair process, they are not always efficient, since misinformation can take many forms in Kosovo. I would specifically mention the polarized political spectrum, improper levels of media literacy and informal campaigning as the main issues in the information system in Kosovo during elections. With any democracy, political pluralism is key to furthering proper growth and development. However, despite having many political parties, Kosovo has reached a level of polarization that has made pluralism stagnate. During the Covid pandemic, Kosovo went through three governments: the first one, the Kurti I government, was brought

down by a vote of no-confidence and was succeeded by the Hoti government. A majority of the population disagreed with this transition. When the constitutional court of Kosovo decided that the Hoti government was established by unconstitutional means, leading to new elections, Kurti was able to win the elections with approximately half of the total vote. Ever since, the political spectrum has been divided into those who support Kurti and the opposition. This polarization has created an environment of deep divide between the two sides and has enabled a stronger fight between those in power and the opposition. Arguments are based on the individuals rather than the policies they try to push. A lack of media literacy in Kosovo exacerbates this issue. Media literacy in Kosovo is greatly affected by the previous issue mentioned. Many media outlets, especially in the age of social networks, prioritize quantity over quality when pushing out news stories and articles, focusing on "clickability" instead of thorough and direct reporting. Many people in these social media circles are quick to share a "scandalous" headline that an outlet has published, often without thoroughly reading the article or even not reading it at all. Lack of media literacy has created an environment where this behavior is considered normal, resulting in misleading article titles that create a false narrative and spread misinformation. The same goes for the spread of outright fake news, where outlets report without any credible sources and are not held accountable to the extent they should be. These factors make it evident that a lack of media literacy leads to a lack of accountability by viewers and readers, creating a vicious cycle of misinformation and poor journalistic conditions, which in turn undermines democratic processes.

As a result of the multifaceted issues that facilitate misinformation in Kosovo, finding a one-size-fits-all solution is not a possibility.

- Facilitating cultural change: the polarised system solution would be based on cultural change within the electorate which can be achieved by the actors of the political scene opting towards showing a detailed program of governance instead of basing their political campaign and platform towards why the other candidates are not right to lead. It is essential to keep in mind that the people need to vote based on policy and not on the person and informal education in this field, together with efforts by the political actors to keep their agenda oriented towards policies and not petty disputes with opposing parties, could lead to a less toxic information system that does not base itself on smear campaigns.
- Education: Both formal and informal educational systems has to be set in place, to educate people on the importance of free, fair and correct media. Media education will lead to a direct system of accountability where the public will be able to correctly filter out news outlets that promote and push misinformation while also pushing forward outlets that are based on the principle of factuality and correct information. This will result in the return of confidence in the profession of journalism while also ensuring a more dignified work environment for journalists.

## **Montenegro**

Montenegro, like many other countries globally, faces the challenge of disinformation campaigns targeting divisive political and identity issues. Pro-Russian web portals, social networks, and platforms like Telegram have been employed to deceive the public. Anonymous "disposable" portals often emerge during election cycles, indicating the significant impact of disinformation on political discourse. Notably, during the recent parliamentary elections in Montenegro, the absence of disinformation related to identity or religious issues, but rather focusing on topics such as the economy, social policies, crime, corruption, and investments, suggests a correlation worth exploring further. The media landscape in Montenegro is susceptible to manipulation, particularly online portals, due to weak regulation and the prevalence of negative reports on political events. Some media outlets exhibit a pro-Russian and pro-Serbian orientation, disseminating narratives that align with the official positions and policies of Moscow and Belgrade, aiming to influence public opinion. Mainstream tabloids and television from Serbia, in addition to spreading questionable information, often propagate hate speech and denial of Montenegrin identity, culture, and nation. Disinformation narratives in Montenegro primarily exploit ongoing complex events within the country, taking advantage of dysfunctional institutions and increasing polarisation. The post-election periods witness a prevalent narrative suggesting that political processes in Montenegro are controlled by Western embassies and foreign power centres, often carrying anti-NATO and anti-EU connotations. Russian aggression against Ukraine is frequently invoked within this context. Although identity topics were

previously targeted by malicious campaigns, such trends were not evident during the recent parliamentary elections. However, the upcoming census, scheduled for this year or the next, poses a potential topic for disinformation campaigns, both domestically and externally, as it is viewed from an identity and political perspective. The lack of strong institutions, the relativization of foreign interference, and the prevalence of disinformation have created opportunities for foreign and domestic actors to conflict with the principles of liberal democracy and Montenegro's foreign policy. Therefore, Montenegro must strengthen its regulatory frameworks, and portal, enhance its Media Literacy and Education programmes, strengthen cooperation with international partners, encourage self-regulation and accountability among media outlets, and support the development and funding of independent fact-checking organizations.

### **Recommendations:**

- Establish a dedicated self-regulatory media body, battling all the disinformation, including electoral ones.
- Conduct comprehensive research and analysis to understand the specific dynamics of disinformation campaigns in Montenegro, including their sources, dissemination channels, and target audiences.
- Develop a public awareness campaign to educate citizens about the tactics used in disinformation campaigns, highlighting the importance of critical thinking and

responsible information sharing.

- Foster cross-sectoral collaboration by creating platforms for regular dialogue and information exchange among government, media, civil society, and tech companies to address emerging challenges and develop effective strategies.
- Allocate resources to support the implementation of policy measures, including funding for media literacy programs, fact-checking organizations, and the training of journalists and educators.

### ***North Macedonia***

North Macedonia, which is located in the Balkans, has been struggling with the issue of electoral disinformation in recent years. Disinformation during election campaigns is the deliberate dissemination of false or misleading information to manipulate public opinion and affect electoral outcomes. In the digital age and social media, disinformation has grown in reach and impact, posing significant challenges to democratic integrity and fairness. Throughout its history, North Macedonia has undergone various political transitions, including a name change in 2019 to resolve a long-standing dispute it had with Greece. This has resulted in a political environment that is polarized, which is conducive to the spread of disinformation. Further complicating the issue is North Macedonia's lack of media literacy, training and the concentration of ownership. North Macedonia's electoral disinformation causes are multifaceted. Various actors have an impact on the spread of disinformation during the elections. Those especially include



several political actors, both domestic and foreign, who use digital platforms to spread false narratives, exploit divisions, and undermine public confidence in democratic institutions. Election disinformation has far-reaching consequences. Election misinformation can erode trust in democratic processes, fuel social divisions, and undermine public trust. Furthermore, disinformation has the potential to distort public debates, limit the diversity of viewpoints, and hinder the development of an informed citizenry. Ultimately, election integrity is compromised, casting doubt on elected officials' legitimacy and weakening democratic governance. A range of policy options to help the case include media literacy programs amongst the citizens, removing censorship, supporting independent journalism and enhancing media regulations.

Based on the analysis that was conducted, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Enact legislation that holds social media platforms accountable for disseminating false or misleading information during elections, imposing appropriate penalties for non-compliance.
- Establish a multi-stakeholder task force consisting of government, civil society, academia, and technology companies to monitor and respond to disinformation campaigns in real time.
- Allocate funding and resources to support independent media organizations and promote investigative journalism, with a specific focus on fact-checking political claims and exposing disinformation tactics.

## **Serbia**

According to various studies, the majority of Serbs have increasingly negative views of Serbia's integration into the West, while the popularity of Russia and China is high. Serbian citizens see Russia and China as the country's 'best friends', while more than half do not support Serbia's EU membership bid. Most respondents (40%) perceive Russia as Serbia's best friend, followed by China (16%)<sup>1</sup>. Russian and, to a lesser extent, Chinese sources have been involved in the dissemination of disinformation. As stated in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation<sup>2</sup>, the Balkan region is of great geostrategic importance for Moscow, due to historical and cultural ties, as well as its role as a potential economic hub linked to Western and Central Europe. In this respect, sharing what is perceived as similar ethnic and religious origins with Russia, with its size and global position, Russia sees Serbia as a key pillar of its interests in the Western Balkans. The Kremlin's support for Serbia's cause in Kosovo and Russia's rejection of Kosovo's independence has been the cornerstone of Russia's positive image and strong political leverage in Serbia in its most recent history. Traditional pro-Russian and pan-Slavic attitudes in Serbia have been strengthened by targeted pro-Russian media campaigns and the socio-political activism of pro-Russian groups in Serbia. The strong Rusophile base in Serbia is enabling the penetration of Russian information and

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<sup>1</sup> Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing  
<https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/many-faces-of-serbian-foreign-policy-public-opinion-and-geopolitical-balancing/>

<sup>2</sup> Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation  
[https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/asset\\_publisher/CptlCkB6BZ29/content/id/122186](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/asset_publisher/CptlCkB6BZ29/content/id/122186)

disinformation narratives either directly or through pro-Russian media outlets (which often happen to be pro-governmental concerning the Serbian executive too). Such outlets have promoted the Russian version of world events through different means, e.g. providing free Russian media content, emphasizing perceived Russian strengths or denouncing perceived Western weaknesses, appealing to Serbian nationalist feelings, etc. Russian disinformation has been masterfully used in Serbia to sow distrust of the EU and NATO by distorting Western political messages, inspiring conspiracy theories about the true intent of Euro-Atlantic institutions and providing counterarguments to the key points behind the support for Euro-Atlantic integration.<sup>3</sup>Beyond that, however, many citizens of Serbia simply lack accurate information about Serbia's historical ties, bilateral assistance, exchange programs, and partnerships in various sectors, with the West. Consequently, the media landscape in Serbia is bipolar: pro- and anti-regime. State-controlled national frequency broadcasters alleged corruption in national media-regulatory agencies, disinformation and non-stop political campaigns are what differentiates the Republic of Serbia from other Western societies. This is why Serbia doesn't have as much electoral disinformation per se, but the situation is more challenging – Serbian citizens live in a society of continuous disinformation and political campaigns, so when the elections come – it is practically already decided. For example, a pro-NATO candidate has lost the elections race before it's even started. This is how Russia (and China) secure their control over Serbian

foreign and internal policies, officials and other cultivated political assets.

The possible solutions are twofold:

- Building resilience to the disinformation: media education of citizens, media literacy subjects in schools, regulatory changes, inter-agency counter disinformation task forces, funding, independent media outlets and civil society organizations.
- Deterrence: legislative changes, criminalizing intentional spread of disinformation, changes in criminal procedural law.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, in all countries of the Western Balkans urgent action is needed against electoral disinformation. The countries must unite to tackle the multifaceted challenges posed by disinformation campaigns. This involves robust media literacy programs, supporting independent journalism, enacting effective laws, and forming multi-stakeholder task forces to enhance resilience. Collaboration between governments, civil society, academia, and technology firms can swiftly monitor and counter disinformation. Upholding transparency, accountability, and informed decision-making is vital for democratic integrity. Concerted efforts are essential to overcome disinformation, strengthening democratic foundations for citizens and the international community.

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<sup>3</sup> Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia  
<https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/handle/document/59979>

