


INFORMATION INTEGRITY CHALLENGES: A GROWING THREAT TO KOSOVO'S DEMOCRACY



Monitoring online and social media
March 2020 - February 2021

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE
PRISTINA, KOSOVO

Foreword

A strong and vibrant democracy is dependent on information integrity to enable citizens to hold their government accountable on the basis of accurate information. Since independence in 2008, Kosovo has made great strides in developing strong democratic institutions. However, the country faces deep partisan divides, unresolved ethnic tensions, marginalization of women, frequent electoral campaigns, and low government responsiveness to citizens' concerns. This environment makes Kosovo susceptible to anti-democratic narratives which spread quickly and widely, affecting public opinion.

"The lack of information integrity threatens democracy in Kosovo"

- Ambassador Nancy Soderberg
Senior Resident Director NDI Kosovo

Kosovo also has the highest internet penetration in the Balkans. While such connectivity provides great benefits to the citizens, it also makes Kosovo fertile ground for disinformation.

To better understand this challenge, in March 2020, with the support of USAID, NDI/Kosovo launched a comprehensive, systematic monitoring program of online portals and social media to examine the integrity of information in Kosovo's media environment in both the Albanian and Serbian languages. NDI/Kosovo evaluated the content across these outlets, flagging content likely to be false, skewed, misleading, or inaccurate to provide insights into the types of disinformation created and shared by online media platforms. The review focused on issues most prevalent in the news during this timeframe, including COVID-19, political division and harsh language, misogyny, external influence, the Special Court, and the Dialogue on normalizations between Serbia and Kosovo. NDI/Kosovo monitoring of the media during Kosovo's February 14, 2021 parliamentary elections can be found in this separate [report](#).

For the first six months, the monitoring was done without data analytics technology. In September, NDI/Kosovo added automated monitoring tools to assist in a more comprehensive and data driven review. In addition to online news portals, this report monitored Facebook and Twitter, as well as a small manual sample of Instagram.

The review found that the country's media environment featured widespread information disorders. Present in the media were false information on the COVID-19 pandemic, harsh language which exacerbated political tensions among the parties, and misogyny. Political leaders used the media to spread false information on negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia and the Special Court. The media played a considerable role in promoting these information disorders without fact checking or identifying them as such.

Kosovo, like much of the Balkans, is vulnerable to information manipulation campaigns engineered from abroad that aim to sow confusion and discord in the region. This review found that Russian portals spread false and skewed information in the media, as did media from Serbia, China and Turkey, which contributed to political division in Kosovo.

The review found that information disorders in Kosovo spread quickly and quickly reached millions. Fan pages and groups on Facebook are widely used to mobilize and promote disinformation and divisive political narratives. NDI's public opinion research complemented this research and found that citizens are aware of the information disorders, even though they often believe the false narratives.

Simply put, this lack of information integrity threatens democracy in Kosovo.

We hope this study will galvanize Kosovo's citizens, media, and government to recognize this urgent threat and develop the tools necessary to combat it, improve its media literacy, and protect its democracy. We thank USAID for its generous support in funding NDI's work to support transparent, responsive, and accountable governance in Kosovo. With this support, NDI/Kosovo is working to identify threats to Kosovo's democratic information environment, increase resilience to these threats, and build tools with our partners to advance systemic responses for a stronger information environment for all of Kosovo's citizens.

Ambassador Nancy Soderberg

Senior Resident Director

NDI/Kosovo

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1. Executive Summary

A vibrant democracy is dependent on information integrity, a critical factor in the ability of citizens to discuss ideas about politics and public affairs in a fact-based manner—and to hold the government accountable on the basis of accurate information. Kosovo, with the highest internet penetration in the Western Balkans, faces a growing threat to its democracy from information disorders.¹ This media monitoring by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Kosovo, from March 2020 to February 2021, seeks to better understand and inform the public of this threat.

Table 1. Summary of all data reviewed and processed from March 2020 to February 2021				
Description	March– August 2020	September 2020– February 2021	Elections report	Grand total
Total articles and posts reviewed	2,500	26,917	6,482	35,899
Total articles containing some form of disinformation	1,157	2,192	264	3,613
Total reach	no data	25,528,270	3,200,000	28,728,270
Total number of shares on Facebook	no data	78,877	2,900	81,777
Source: NDI research				

The review was conducted during a period of intense political activity and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, Kosovo saw the toppling of its government by a parliamentary no-confidence vote, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, the resumed dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia on normalizing relations, and a meeting at the White House leading to the Washington Agreement advancing economic cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo.²

Over the course of the year, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage, the president of the country and other political leaders from the 1999 war period were summoned to The Hague by the Special Court, triggering an interim president. In December 2020, the Constitutional Court invalidated the vote that had elected the government, triggering snap parliamentary elections on February 14, 2021. Kosovo's voters thus went to the polls for the fifth parliamentary election in 13 years since independence in 2008 and the second such election in the past two years. In these elections, the Vetevendosje Movement (LVV) won 50.3 percent of the vote, the first time one party received a majority. This review found that Kosovo's political environment featured widespread information disorders throughout Kosovo's online media environment, including false, exaggerated, or harmful information, without identifying them as such. The use of harsh language, including physical threats, contributed to political division. In many cases, these articles and posts had a reach of millions of people.³

¹For the purpose of this report, the term information disorder is language promoting political division, harassment, harsh and sexist language, hate speech, as well as false context, false, skewed, manipulated, fabricated and misleading content. For more information see [INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making](#).

²See [Background on the Washington Agreement](#).

³Reach is defined for online news in portals by a click on an article. For social media, a reach is measured by whether a post is viewed or opened. However, in regards to Facebook images (videos and photos) found by NDI's manual review, the methodology used tracked only the number of views and interaction (comments, reactions, and shares) as a reference of reach for videos, and tracked only interactions for photos.

The media shared, and in some cases, created, false, exaggerated, or harmful information without identifying it as such or undertaking fact checking. Political leaders, parties, and their supporters used Facebook, including party fan groups, to launch unfounded attacks on each other. Social media also created and spread information disorders. As covered in NDI's separate [election report](#), these practices were especially visible during the snap parliamentary elections in February 2021.

Six broad topics were selected for monitoring, based on political developments and issue prevalence in the media during this period: COVID-19; political division/promotion and harsh language; misogyny in the Albanian language; external influence; the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (the Special Court); and the Dialogue on normalization between Serbia and Kosovo.

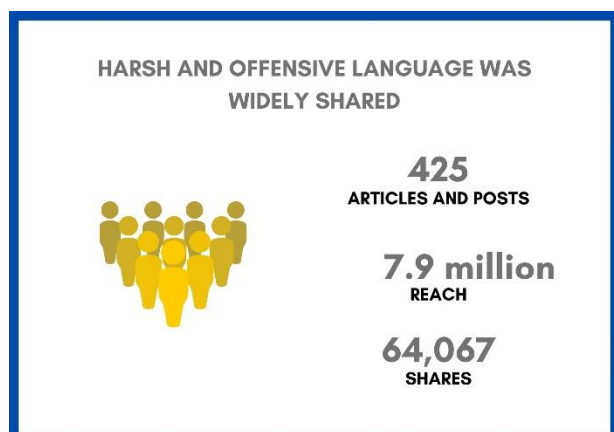
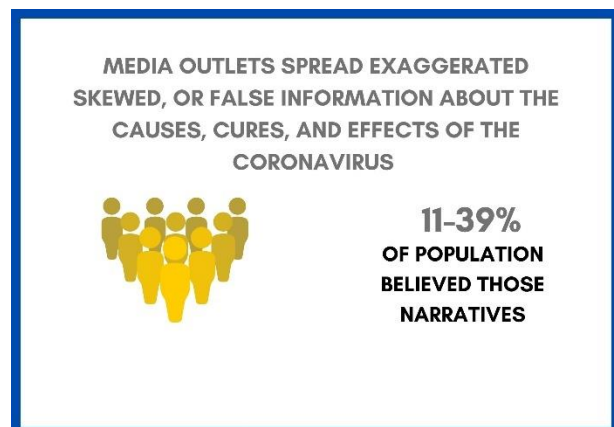
The topics monitored demonstrated that information disorders are widely spread and shared in Kosovo's media landscape. NDI's public polling research reveals that, despite general public awareness that disinformation is present in Kosovo's media, large percentages of Kosovo's population believed false or skewed narratives.⁴ These narratives, their reach, and impact are summarized below.

Findings related to selected topics:

❑ **COVID-19.** While battling a global pandemic, Kosovo's population is fighting conspiracy theories and false information around COVID-19. Misleading or false headlines were common. Four hundred and eighty-three articles and posts included information disorders, with a reach of 3.1 million and 2,385 shares. Misleading or false headlines were common. For instance, false narratives on the sources of the virus, and that those who supposedly created it aimed to reduce the global population, were widespread. [NDI's April 2021 public opinion](#)

[research](#) found that such skewed and false narratives had an impact on general public opinion. Nearly 40 percent of the population believed some of them.

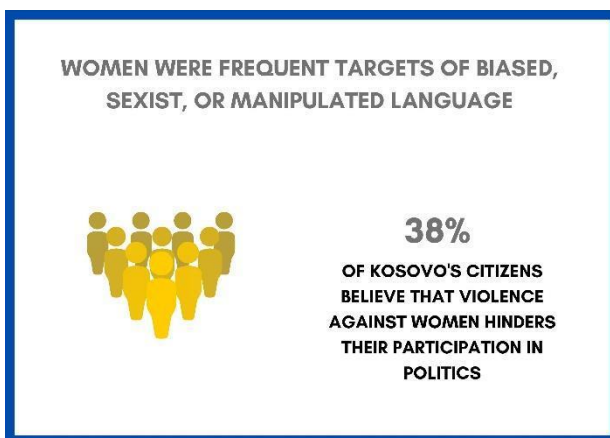
❑ **Political Division.** Political turmoil led to harsh public rhetoric and offensive language, as well as skewed or false narratives. These had a reach of 7.9 million and were shared 64,067 times. For instance, in 2020, the March vote of no confidence, the actions of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, the Washington Agreement, November municipal elections, as well as the snap February 2021 parliamentary elections, drew responses from political actors, journalists, and opinion makers. They hurled harsh political attacks at each other, using false and biased arguments.



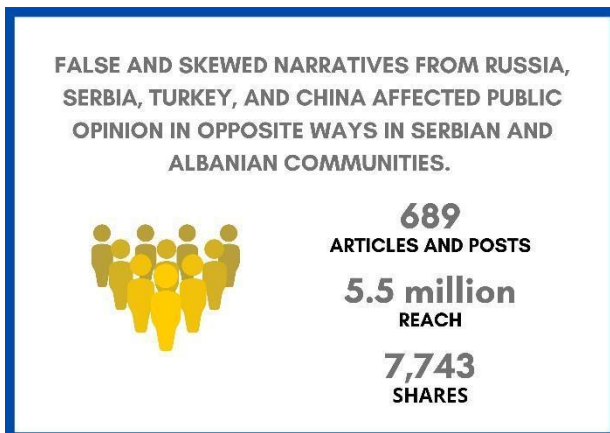
⁴The public opinion figures in this summary are from NDI's public opinion research, April 2021.

The media created and shared news articles with such narratives without fact-checking. NDI's public opinion research found that as many as one third of Kosovo's population believed some of these narratives. Narratives with the highest reach were those critical of the head of the Central Election Committee, false criticisms of Albin Kurti on a variety of topics, involving false information on the Decani monastery, and that only the political party Serbian List (SL) guarantees the survival of the Serbs in Kosovo.

❑ **Misogyny.** In the Albanian-language media, women were attacked for their appearances and subjected to sexist language. Fifty-nine articles and posts focused on diet and wardrobe, ignoring their professional activities. Various articles, posts, and memes belittled women's careers, accused them of putting their personal lives ahead of their party, accused them of cowardice, alleged that they were benefiting from political patronage, or behaved inappropriately in the presence of male colleagues. They had a reach of 428,766 and were shared 154 times. Articles and posts including misogyny impacted the views of citizens regarding women in politics. NDI public opinion research found that 38 percent of Kosovo's citizens believe that violence against women hinders their participation in politics.



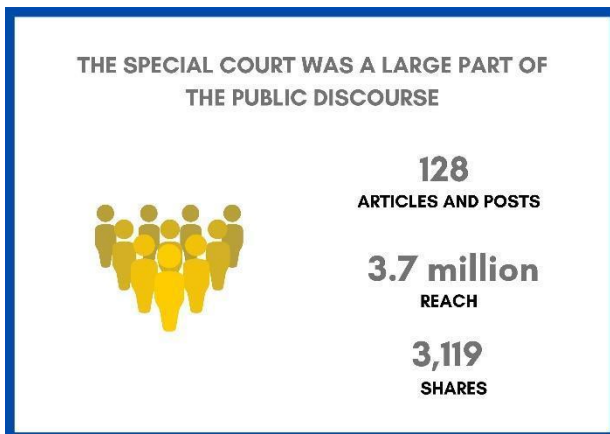
❑ **External influence.** The review found 689 articles and posts containing narratives with information disorders and harsh and skewed rhetoric originating in China, Russia, Serbia, and Turkey. These had a reach of 5.5 million and 7,743 shares. Russia-based narratives, in particular, promoted skewed and false narratives which spread quickly in both Albanian and Serbian languages, although they had a higher reach among the Serbian community compared to the Albanian community. There was propaganda from China and Turkey, glorifying their achievements in contributing to global security, economics and stability, or simply supporting the improvement of their image in the Western Balkans. NDI polling found that these narratives are affecting public attitudes in opposite ways, with the belief that Russia's military is superior to that of NATO split 79 to four percent between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians. Yet, those who believe that NATO's military is superior to Russia are split 92 to seven between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs.



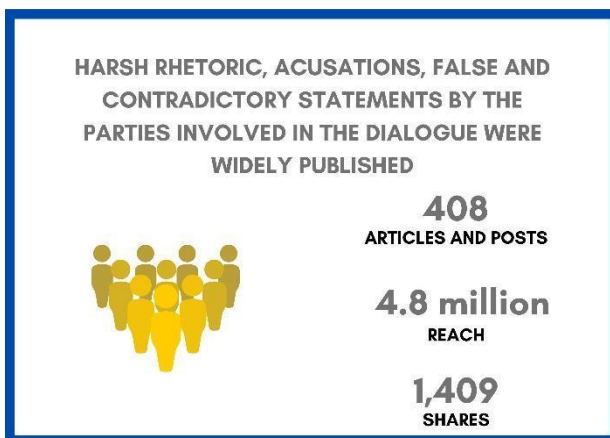
In many cases, Kremlin narratives were first published in Albania and Serbia, and then were widely reproduced and shared by Kosovo local media. The Israel-Kosovo recognition triggered harsh opposition by the Arab League, Turkey, Serbia and Russia, with various criticism and threats of unspecified measures being reported in the media in Kosovo. While the media generally reported statements from external

sources accurately, in some cases, it did not make clear the external sources of such news items, and failed to note that the statements were skewed or not factual.

❑ **The Special Court.** The Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (Special Court) was a large part of the public discourse in both Albanian and Serbian-language media following actions against the president and other prominent former figures of the former Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). One hundred and twenty-eight articles and posts included harsh rhetoric, divisive language and accusations, and false information with a reach of 3.7 million/ 3,119 shares.



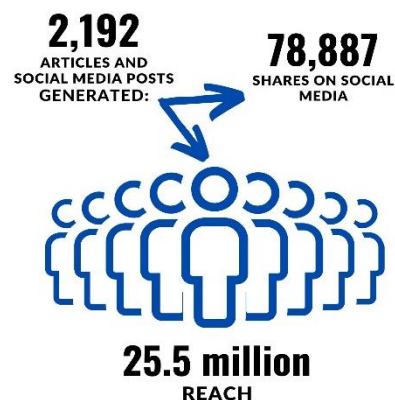
❑ **The Dialogue.** The process of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia (the Dialogue) spurred harsh rhetoric, and false or contradictory statements in Albanian and Serbian languages. The process and negotiations are not transparent and therefore are ripe for contention and information disorders. The media published such statements without the proper context, including 408 articles and posts with exaggerated information, misleading headlines, and misinterpretations of statements, which had a reach of 4.8 million, with 1,409 shares. NDI's public opinion research reveals that Kosovo's Albanian and Serb populations are divided on whether to follow the United States (U.S.)/European Union (EU) policy on the Dialogue, 42 to 13 percent.



Findings related to information disorders:

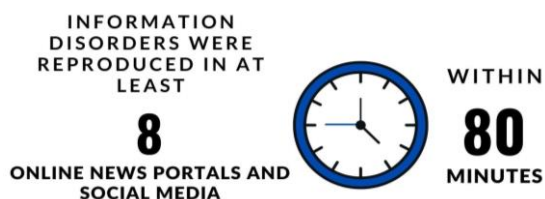
❑ **Citizens are aware of the information disorders, although they often believe the false narratives.** NDI 2021 public opinion research shows that nearly three quarters of the population believe that news portals regularly or occasionally report false information stories. Despite this awareness, NDI public opinion research shows that skewed and false narratives had an impact on the public opinions of Kosovo citizens who believe many of these narratives.

❑ **Disorders spread widely, reaching millions.** Information disorders were often shared thousands of times, within and across media outlets. News articles, Facebook and Twitter posts containing information disorders thus reached millions of people. Horizontal (from portal to portal) and vertical sharing (between portals and Facebook accounts) of information disorders spread false and skewed information rapidly and widely. In this report, the 2,192

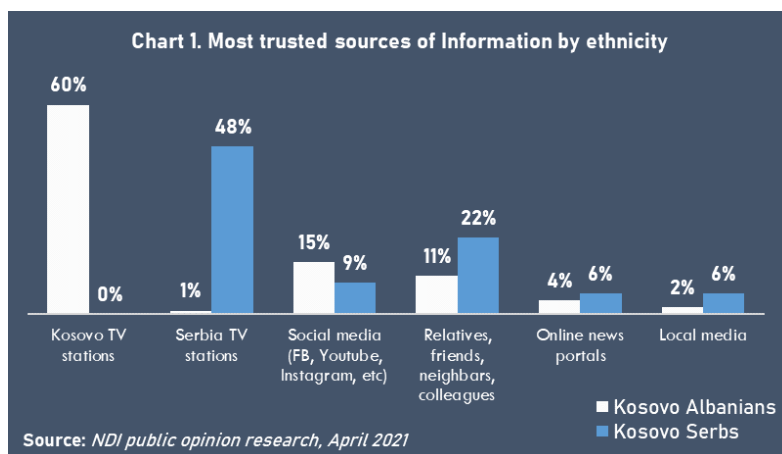


articles and posts found to have some form of information disorder had a reach of 25,528,270, with 78,887 shares on social media.

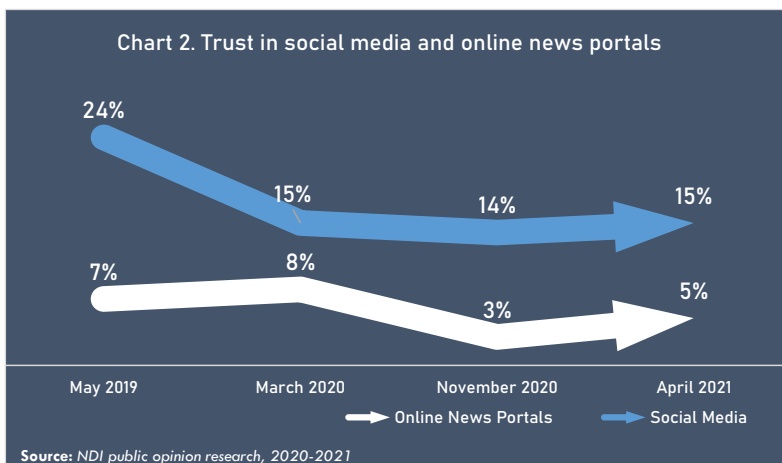
❑ **Disorders spread quickly.** Articles with information disorders in both Albanian and Serbian language samples were reproduced on an average of eight other portals and social media within 80 minutes. In the Albanian-language sample, it took an average of 72 minutes for other portals to reproduce articles and posts containing some form of information disorders. News articles were shared by at least nine other online news portals or Facebook pages, including many prominent ones with a high number of followers. The spread took slightly longer in the Serbian sample, at 88 minutes, with articles being shared by at least seven other portals. However, news articles and social media posts originating from outside Kosovo had a lower reproduction rate, being reproduced at least five times.



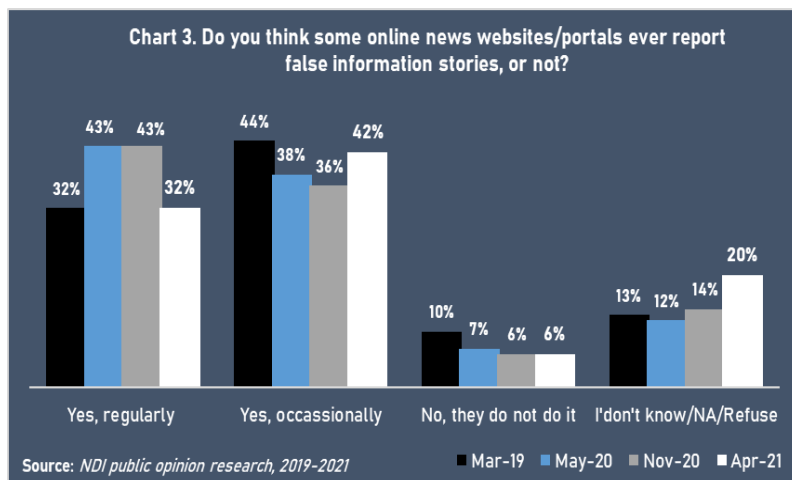
❑ **TV and family/friends are the most trusted sources of information.** According to NDI polling, the most trusted source of information for Kosovo citizens is TV stations (60 percent for Kosovo Albanians; 48 percent for Kosovo Serbs, who watch TV stations in Serbia). Many of Kosovo's citizens turn to family and friends for fact-checking unusual pieces of information (11 percent for Albanians and 22 percent for Kosovo Serbs).



❑ **Trust in portals and social media is declining.** The poll also shows there was a 38 percent decline in trust on social media, and 29 percent decline in trust on online news portals. Kosovo Albanians believe that financial reasons or a political agenda are the main drivers of information disorders, while Kosovo Serbs believe that disinformation is caused by poor fact-checking or accidents.



□ Portals and social media accounts played a considerable role in promoting information disorders and failed to fact check. While overall reporting was accurate and professional, online news portals and social media created and spread false, skewed, doctored or misleading information, often using outlandish headlines, or “clickbait,” to increase their spread. Portals contributed to divisive language by creating and publishing their own direct attacks, mischaracterizing statements of politicians and individuals, and republishing old news without identifying the timeframe or the original content.



□ Facebook groups and fan pages are spreading disinformation. This trend emerged in the spring of 2020 when Albanian-language Facebook groups and fan pages became increasingly used to spread disinformation, especially during election periods.

□ Bot activity. Most of the Twitter accounts in the Albanian-language sample had followers identified as likely bots by an automated tool, further undermining Kosovo’s information.

2. Context of Kosovo’s information environment

Persistent deficits in Kosovo’s democracy—including deep partisan divides, unresolved ethnic tensions, marginalization of women, and low government responsiveness to citizen concerns—have created an environment where anti-democratic narratives, both local and international in scale, are quickly taking root. Public dissatisfaction with political parties and democratic institutions, as well as political division, make Kosovo vulnerable to information manipulation campaigns engineered from abroad that aim to sow confusion and discord in the Balkans. In addition, especially since Kosovo’s declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo occupies a particular place in the Kremlin’s strategic interest in the Western Balkans, including as a point of leverage with both Serbia and the West. Russia, which does not recognize Kosovo, seeks to undermine its sovereignty and recognition by the international community. Russian-owned media and managed media outlets in Serbia spread false information, including on Kosovo.⁵

With 96.1 percent internet penetration, Kosovo’s connected population is the highest in the Balkans and one of the highest and fastest growing in Europe.⁶ Its 1.76 million internet users represent an increase of 9.7 percent (156,000) between 2020 and 2021. There are 1.1 million users of social media.⁷ While a boost

⁵See Pellumb Kallaba, [Russian Interference in Kosovo](#): How and Why? Kosovo Center for Security Studies, October 2017.

⁶See [Rezultatet e Anketës së Përdorimit të Teknologjisë Informative dhe Komunikimit](#), November 2021

⁷See [Simon Kamp, DIGITAL 2021: Kosovo, DATAREPORTAL](#), February 2021.

to Kosovo's society and economy, this high penetration also makes Kosovo vulnerable to the threat of information disorders.

A strong understanding of the origins, nature, and impact of the variety of threats Kosovo faces is critical to countering threats to the democratic information environment. The media monitoring by NDI seeks to inform the public of the extent of this challenge. Responses to manipulated information in Kosovo must be rooted in a detailed understanding of causal environmental factors—particularly its vulnerabilities and the disproportionate impact of manipulated information on women and marginalized communities—to ensure that systemic measures to bolster the information environment are tailored to Kosovo's context.

In 2018, NDI launched its global [INFOTEGRITY](#) framework to draw on experts and front-line practitioners to scale up responses to disinformation in its democracy and governance programming. In 2019, using this framework, NDI began to glean a detailed understanding of patterns within Kosovo's information environment and to determine indications of new or escalating campaigns to manipulate information or to advance harmful speech.

NDI research in 2019 found a robust domestic marketplace for disinformation. Political actors across the spectrum utilize news portals as disinformation sites and regularly generate disinformation, attempting to achieve near-sighted political gains and sway the electorate. Journalists, facing limited opportunities to make their living, often feel pressured into writing inflammatory articles to generate income. The media industry lacks full transparency, with no obligation to publish detailed funding reports. This opacity, together with an underfunded regulatory agency, establishes a foundation for disinformation. In addition, in online media, there is no clear separation between factual reporting and editorializing and analysis, as there is in more established news organizations. The quality and quantity of Kosovo-based media in the Serbian language is limited, and creates a disjointed information environment between Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs.⁸

NDI's public opinion research shows that TV stations remain one of the most trusted sources of information for more than half of the overall population of Kosovo: 56 percent overall, with 60 percent for the Albanian community and 48 percent from the Serb community. As seen in Chart 1, Kosovo's Albanian and Serb communities trust sources in their own language. For instance, the majority of the Albanian population trusts Kosovo TV stations, whereas nearly half of the Serb population trusts Serbian TV stations.

Kosovo's network providers are not accessible to the Serb population in the north of Kosovo, which, together with the growing language barriers, creates a situation where there is limited or no flow of information from Kosovo's media into Serb communities. However, NDI found some flow of information between online news portals in the two languages. For instance, Serbian-language media portals translated and reposted articles originally published in Albanian covering Serbian leaders, and Albanian news portals did the same with some Serbian-language articles.

Online media, however, is much less trusted, with a marked decline during the pandemic. Fifteen percent of the overall population in Kosovo trusts social media (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, etc.), a decline from May 2019 when it was considered the most trusted source of information by nearly one quarter of the population. Eleven percent of the population turns to relatives and friends as their most trusted source of

⁸See discussion from [NDI Kosovo, DISICON Disinformation Conference, December 2019](#).

information, which more than doubled in comparison to November 2020 when four percent considered relatives and friends the most trusted source of information. News portals are trusted by five percent of the population, up from three percent in November 2020. These trends are similar in both Albanian and Serb communities, although the Serb community trusts family and friends slightly more, at 22 percent.

Roughly three quarters of the population is aware of the presence of false information in news portals and on social media. NDI public opinion research shows that 74 percent believes that news portals regularly or occasionally report false information stories (76 percent of the Albanian community and 52 percent among the Serb community). Seventy one percent of the overall population believes false information is being spread by social media, (73 percent of the Albanian community; 49 percent of the Serb community). Ten percent do not believe news portals ever report false information stories.

Kosovo's Albanian and Serb community beliefs on the reasons for which the media reports false information differs. Forty percent of Albanians believe this happens for financial reasons, 17 percent believe that the political agenda drives information disorders, while 21 percent of Kosovo Serbs believe that disinformation is caused by poor fact-checking or occurs by accident.

In March 2020, NDI launched a review of information integrity in the online media in Kosovo, which this report summarizes through February 2021. This review occurred during heightened political tensions in Kosovo, including the toppling of the government by a parliamentary no-confidence vote in March, the pressures imposed on governance during a pandemic, the resumed dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia on normalizing relations, a meeting between the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo at the White House in September, the indictment by the Special Court of Kosovo's president and other political leaders, the ouster of the government again, due to a court finding, and a snap parliamentary election in February 2021 that resulted in a victory of more than 50 percent by a single political party.

The review revealed widespread information disorders throughout Kosovo's online portals and social media, as well as those tracked in Serbia. Both online portals and social media created and spread false, skewed, or misleading information, often using clickbait to spread their reach. They failed to point out false or skewed information. As described below, NDI observed emerging trends, such as Facebook groups and fan pages, that are increasingly being used to spread false information. In some cases, false information was widely shared on YouTube with millions of views. In most cases, disinformation was shared between online portals and social media. NDI also found in focus groups and polling that some views presented in Serbian-language outlets were reflected in the Kosovo Serb population's opinions.⁹

Articles and posts containing some form of information disorders usually spread quickly and widely. Articles in both languages on average were spread in eight other portals within 80 minutes. In the Albanian sample, it took on average 72 minutes for a news article to be spread by at least nine other portals, while in the Serbian sample, it took 88.3 minutes to be reproduced by at least seven other portals. Over time, they were spread further, deepening the impact in the media environment. However, news from external sources was reproduced and shared at a slower pace and extent than those from Kosovo-based sources. For instance, articles from external sources took an average of seven days to be spread to at least five other portals or

⁹NDI's internal research finds that most of Kosovo's Serb population gets its information from Serbia-based TV stations, media outlets and social media.

Facebook accounts.¹⁰ NDI research found that this widespread disinformation affected the political opinions of the citizens of Kosovo.

3. Main findings

During this monitoring period from September 2020 to February 2021, NDI selected six topics for analysis, based on the issues' prevalence in the media during this period: COVID-19; political division/promotion and harsh language; misogyny in the Albanian language; external influence; the Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office; and the Dialogue on normalization between Serbia and Kosovo. Political division narratives had the highest reach (7.9 million), followed by external influence (5.5 million). Articles and posts on these topics were also the most-shared: they generated a combined 71,000 shares on social media platforms—mostly on Facebook. Of those, 2,192 were found to have some form of information disorder, which had a reach of 25,528¹¹ and were shared 78,887 times through Facebook.¹²

Table 2. Data on information disorders per each category of online media monitoring for the period September 2020 to February 2021

Topics	Number of articles		Reach		Shares	
	Alb sample	Srb sample	Alb sample	Srb sample	Alb sample	Srb sample
1. Covid-19	272	211	2,813,661	323,073	383	2,002
2. Political division	246	179	5,609,619	2,284,769	3,726	60,341
3. Misogyny	59	N/A	428,766	N/A	154	N/A
4. External influence	391	298	3,989,752	1,513,838	6,015	1,728
5. The special court	82	46	3,258,972	417,723	2,873	246
6. The dialogue	219	189	3,380,904	1,507,193	1,141	268
Total	1,269	923	19,481,674	6,046,596	14,292	64,585
Grand total	2,192		25,528,270		78,877	

Source: NDI research

Each of the topics reviewed and analyzed are summarized below.

3.1. COVID-19 narratives

The vast majority of false and misleading information found in this review involved the COVID-19 pandemic. While battling a global pandemic, Kosovo's population faced conspiracy theories and false information around COVID-19. Misleading or false headlines were common. In some cases, information was misreported; in others, it was completely fabricated. Facebook pages and groups quickly repeated and amplified media posts from both Albanian and Serbian-language outlets. Outlets spread exaggerated, skewed, or false information about the causes, cures, and effects of the coronavirus. For instance, news articles spread false and irrelevant information widely, such as inaccurate or unproven information related

¹⁰As the automated tool did not cover all the articles shared due to different wording and headlines, the reach could be even higher than that tracked by the automated tool.

¹¹As the automated tool did not cover all the articles shared due to different wording and headlines, the number of reproductions was likely higher than those tracked by the automated tool.

¹²The automated tool calculated the reach of portals and social media but these were not tracked by geographical location; therefore, the 28,728,270 million number reached includes neighboring countries and the diaspora. It is important to note that one person may engage portals and social media with multiple devices so reach does not reflect precisely the number of people involved.

to medicinal treatments of the virus, the gravity of the World Health Organization (WHO) warning, theories surrounding the virus' origin, vaccine ingredients, vaccination campaigns conducted without vaccine approval, and statistics surrounding COVID-19 deaths. Many of these narratives were most prominent in the first six months of monitoring.

Later in 2020, the narratives shifted to unproven theories about bats spreading the virus, vaccines containing harmful ingredients, vaccination campaigns continuing without approval of a vaccine, and doubts about the numbers reported to have died from COVID-19.

Albanian and Serbian-language outlets differed in their characterization of international actors and responses to the virus. However, articles and posts in both Albanian and Serbian-language media tended to exaggerate China's responsibility for the virus and mischaracterize its citizens' consumption of wild and domesticated animals. In addition, items in both language samples spread false narratives and conspiracy theories, which often served as clickbait, related to a possible COVID-19 vaccine, the virus' origin, possible treatments, death figures, and government responses.

Much of the misleading information originated in media outside of Kosovo, with false or skewed information from the U.S., Europe and Russia quickly spreading in Kosovo.

Public opinion. NDI's public opinion research shows that, while the citizens of Kosovo are aware of the information disorders, they often believe the false narratives. For instance, as summarized in Chart 4, NDI's public opinion research shows that some false narratives on COVID-19 were believed by between 11 and 39 percent of the overall population in Kosovo.

While similar percentages of Serbian (11-30 percent) and Albanian speaking communities

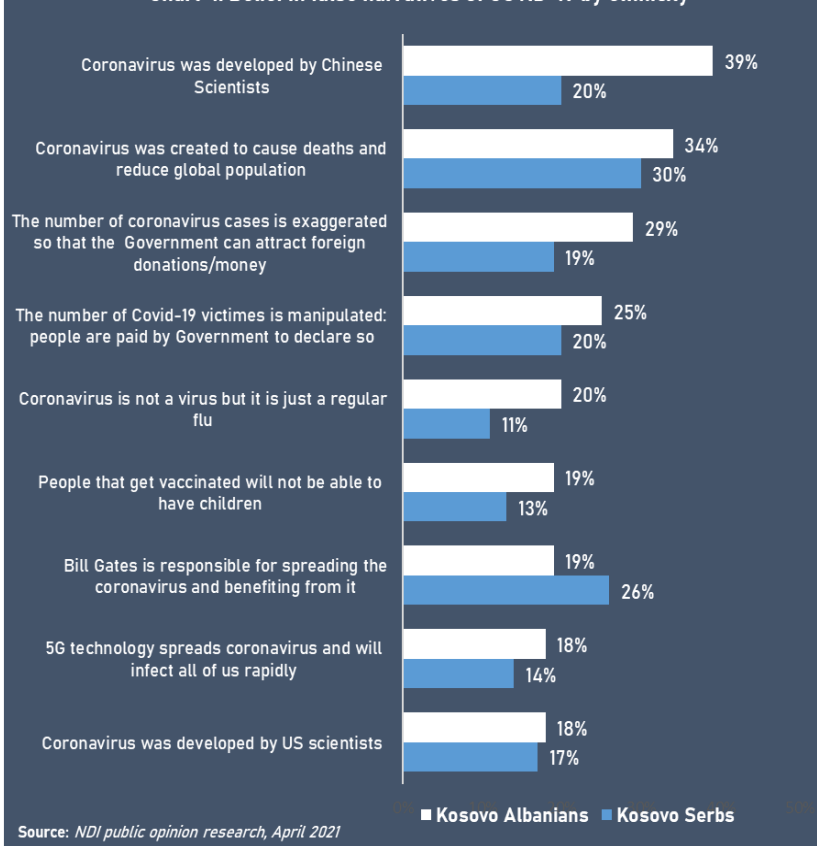
Bill Gates poručio: Od januara nećete moći pristupiti svojim Windowsima bez potvrde o vakcinisanju

Osnivač IBM-a Bill Gates jučer je potvrdio spekulacije kako IBM planira s novim updateom Windowsa 10, koji dolazi u siječnju, onemogućiti korištenje računala svim, koji nemaju potvrdu o cijepljenju protiv COVID-19.



Bill Gates: From January you will not be able to use Windows without the vaccination certificate

Chart 4: Belief in false narratives of COVID-19 by ethnicity



(18-39 percent) generally believe false narratives about COVID-19, there is a difference in which narratives are most-believed in Albanian and Serb communities. For instance, 39 percent of Albanian respondents believe Chinese scientists are responsible for the virus, while 20 percent of the Serb community does. A higher percentage of Kosovo Serbs (26 percent) believe that Bill Gates is responsible for the virus, while 19 percent of Kosovo Albanians believe that to be true. In regard to the vaccines for COVID-19, 34 percent of Kosovo Albanians and 12 percent of Kosovo Serbs believed they are not tested or effective.¹³ Many of these divergent views reflect the influence of external actors as described in [section 3.4 below](#).

Narratives in the Albanian-language media. NDI's monitoring found that the Albanian-language media reported false narratives on research findings, effective tests, fake cures, predictions regarding when the virus would end, and that wearing masks was useless. Outlets promoted unproven and disproven cures and potential treatments, as well as false comparisons to other deadly viruses. Conspiracy theories on the origin of the virus and how it was spread were widely circulated. Official death figures were challenged, and false information on when the virus would peak was disseminated. False narratives about government measurements also appeared, including on government quarantines, movement restrictions, curfews, and protests. Many Albanian-language outlets questioned the motivation of Serbia's donation to Kosovo of 1,000 COVID-19 tests.

Conspiracy theories. False claims circulated that a new charger created by Samsung could kill coronavirus and others, and that Bill Gates was responsible not only for COVID-19 but also for all the world's misfortunes. Other claims were that the world's end was approaching not only because of COVID-19, but also because the internet supposedly "drives people crazy." Some claimed that vaccines will be used to implant microchips into humans to monitor movements. Others argued that the WHO manipulated the world; others showed doubts about the numbers of deceased. Some cited a discredited international organization of doctors that claimed coronavirus was just a seasonal flu and a political maneuver to spread control, fear and panic, as well as that wearing masks was useless.

False information on COVID-19. A Facebook post falsely claimed that people who snore are three times more likely to die from COVID-19. Other false claims included that a United Kingdom laboratory was offering thousands of euros to families to say that their family members had died from COVID-19 or that COVID-19 could be treated with garlic, ibuprofen, or hot lemons. Some items claimed that having COVID-19 even had some benefits, such as making one cool or famous. Others alleged that the virus was a Freemason plot, or claimed that COVID-19 was a bacteria that creates thrombosis. False information persisted about possible cures, the origin of the virus, skewed WHO warnings of a global disaster, unproven theories about bats spreading coronavirus, and that a supposed genius mathematician knew when the pandemic would end.

Narratives in the Serbian-language media. Narratives circulated included anti-Western narratives, false information about possible cures, effects of, and sources of the virus, exaggerations of Serbia's efforts to combat COVID-19, and false information about international efforts to combat the pandemic.

Anti-Western, pro-Serbian narratives. False or skewed anti-Western narratives were widely circulated, blaming American troops for spreading the virus and exaggerating the assistance of Russia and China, while minimizing the EU's help. These narratives claimed that China was now the new world leader

¹³ See [NDI/Kosovo, Public opinion research, April 2021](#).

compared to a weaker U.S. and EU. Others exaggerated the international ranking of Serbia's vaccination rates.

Conspiracy theories. A satirical portal spread a post, which was mistakenly interpreted as news by other portals, claiming that users of the Windows operating system will not be able to access their operating systems without a certificate of vaccination against COVID-19. An article falsely claimed that the coronavirus and the current pandemic were predicted by a comic book in 2017. Others linked COVID-19 to coming disasters, such as WWIII and the end of the world. Others claimed that the official mortality rate in Serbia was 300 times lower than the actual official data.

False information on COVID-19. False claims included that 2,000 euros were sent to Serbia's adult citizens to help with the coronavirus pandemic, as well as that the supposed assistance funds had somehow been stolen. Articles and posts circulated with a variety of false claims such as the exaggerated cost of a COVID-19 test, supposed causes of the coronavirus, aspirin as a treatment for COVID-19, the existence of a mural dating from 1994 proving that the virus had existed for decades, and portrayals of supposed protests in Belgrade over restriction measures. Others included claims that the death rate in Europe had not increased from last year, or that a supposed new cure that can stop COVID-19 within 24 hours can be found inside the human body. A fabricated cover page made to look like a popular news portal attributed false, sensational statements on COVID-19 to Serbia's Minister of Health.

Other narratives claimed that the Serbian government was making it obligatory to wear a "vaccination" badge, that vaccines cause Alzheimer's disease, and that the Chinese vaccine would be disallowed for use in Serbia. A Facebook page also shared a video purportedly of the market selling live and roasted animals in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the new coronavirus strain emerged, failing to note that the video was in fact of a market on Indonesia's Sulawesi island. Several portals published false claims that tall people are twice as likely to be infected with the coronavirus, arguing that "your height determines whether you will be infected with the coronavirus." One portal published a falsehood about the effects face masks have on humans, claiming they reduce blood oxygen and increase carbon dioxide poisoning.

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- One portal with 1,244,000+ followers shared an article on its Facebook page that falsely claimed there was a new cure which can stop COVID-19 within 24 hours. The post, also shared on other portals, had a combined reach of 668,700+ and two shares on social media.
- A Facebook page with 160,000+ followers shared a false prediction that every five years, the world would experience a pandemic. The post had a reach of 7,994 and two shares. Other portals also posted the same content on Facebook, which increased the combined reach to 158,000+.
- A post on Facebook with 6,000+ followers circulated a video falsely claiming people with the coronavirus were being forced into hospital rooms and killed. The video was instead actually taken in

Shkencëtarja angleze bën paralajmërimin e frikshëm: Do të kemi nga një pandemi çdo 5 vite

ME: 29 SHTATOR 2020 NE ORA: 12:38



The English scientists makes a frightening warning: We will have pandemic every 5 years

February 2020 of a family in China which had refused to go into quarantine. This video had a reach of 83,000+ and 890 shares.

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- A post on Facebook claimed that the COVID-19 test wrongly diagnoses people on a large scale, falsely declaring them positive for the coronavirus. This article had a reach of 111,000+ and was shared 108 times.
- A portal with 408,000+ followers shared an article falsely insinuating that the coronavirus and the current pandemic were predicted in the comic book “Asterix” from 1971. This article had a reach of 103,500+ and 85 shares.

POZNATI STRIP PREDVIDEO POŠAST I dalje mislite da je korona slučajnost?



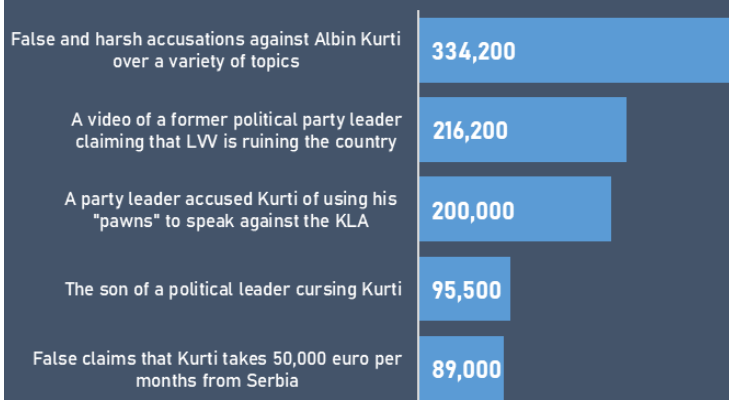
The famous comic predicted the pandemic – Do you still think the Coronavirus is coincidence?

3.2. Political divisions and harsh language

During this year-long reporting period, major political events triggered political division and harsh language in both the Albanian and Serbian-language media. A March 2020 vote of no confidence ousted the Kurti government, leading to a new government in June 2020 led by Democratic League of Kosovo's (LDK) Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti. In the fall of 2020, the sitting President Hashim Thaci and other political leaders were indicted and sent to the Kosovo Specialist Chambers. In September 2020,

the leaders of Serbia and Kosovo signed the Washington Agreement and local elections in Podujeva and North Mitrovica occurred in November. In December, the courts ruled that the Hoti government had been elected unconstitutionally, leading to snap parliamentary elections during February 2021. These events drew responses from political actors, journalists, and opinion makers who hurled harsh political attacks at each other, using false and biased arguments. In response to the vote of no confidence in March 2020, a trend in the Albanian-language social media emerged in which the leading political parties created closed Facebook groups, comprised largely of young activists. These groups promoted their parties' work but also shared negative, and often manipulated, information against their opponents. NDI observed that public Facebook pages associated with leading political parties shared content promoting the party's work, but

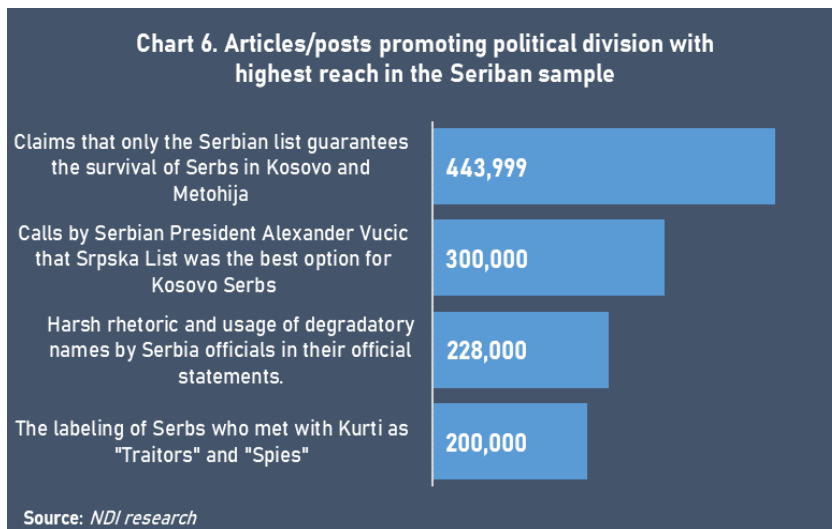
Chart 5. Articles/posts promoting political division with highest reach in the Albanian sample



Source: NDI research

also criticizing political opponents using false information. This practice also occurred in the lead-up to the snap 2021 elections.

The media also facilitated the spread of disinformation. In many cases, they created and shared false information without fact checking. It used third-party opinion as a way of deflecting responsibility for claims in articles. Some portals passed on unverified rumors without acknowledging the content as rumor. For example, the media in both languages repeated allegations from a political party leader falsely accusing Kurti and Serbian political leaders Nenad Rasic and Rada Trajkovic of sensationalizing the beating of Rasic's son. Albanian-language portals also reported a leading political party's false accusation that Kurti and the two leaders had organized the beating.



NDI's public opinion research found that more than one-third of the population believes many of the false or skewed narratives circulated during this monitoring period.¹⁴ Charts 5 and 6 show the articles with the highest reaching narratives in the Albanian and Serbian languages. Those in the Albanian language were critical of the head of the Central Election Committee (CEC) Valdete Daka, while in the Serbian language, the subject with the highest reach involved the Decani monastery.

False or exaggerated information flowed between the Albanian media in Kosovo and the Serbian media in Kosovo. For instance, the false accusation that Speaker Vjosa Osmani was plotting with LVV leader Albin Kurti to oust President Hashim Thaci was shared in the media in both languages. Conversely, comments by Kosovo's Serbian politicians covered in the Albanian-language media spilled over into coverage by the portals in Serbia.

Narratives in the Albanian-language media. Several political leaders issued harsh statements against each other, which the media disseminated widely. False narratives in the media included politicians accusing each other of being part of organized crime or corruption, as well as labeling each other as "traitors" and "spies." Political leaders in Kosovo and Serbia used the media to spread half-truths or incorrect information about the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue and the Washington Agreement. The lack of transparency in the negotiations contributed to information disorders about the process and outcome.¹⁵ Narratives that were spread in the online media contained false charges of anti-Americanism, incompetence of the LVV-

¹⁴NDI/Kosovo, Public opinion research, April 2021.

¹⁵For more information on the lack of transparency in the dialogue, see NGO Aktiv, [Kosovo-Serbia Policy and Advocacy Group's report, "Perspectives on the Technical Dialogue Agreements between Kosovo and Serbia"](#), February 2020.

led government, and unsubstantiated allegations about public officials. A comment made on Facebook against Kurti spread into other portals, an example of a vertical spread of information disorders.

False political attacks. As noted above, the media repeated many false charges against CEC's Valdete Daka. Articles and posts spread false accusations against Member of Parliament Mimoza Kusari-Lila, then Speaker of Parliament (and current president) Vjosa Osmani, former (and current) Minister of Justice Albulena Haxhiu, and MP Behxhet Pacolli. Then (and current) Prime Minister Albin Kurti was accused of being a dictator and anti-American, behaving like a communist, having sat out the 1999 war, and working for the interests of Serbia in Kosovo.

Many online news portals and social media posts claimed that Kurti did not want to participate in TV debates because he only likes monologues and does not accept criticism. The media repeated unverified allegations towards Kurti that he and his party were being financed by Serbia, as well as false claims that LVV was founded by the notorious Intelligence Service of Kosovo (SHIK).

Also reported were posts and articles in which Vjosa Osmani was falsely accused of cooperating with the Special Court and the notorious secret services of Yugoslavia, as well as false claims that she had asked the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Kosovo Force (KFOR) to provide her with security because she did not trust the local authorities. Former Prime Minister Isa Mustafa was falsely quoted that he did not believe in citizens' right to participate in democracy. A video posted on a political party fan group Facebook page was widely spread on Facebook falsely creating the impression that an LGBTQ+ parade in Germany was instead an LVV German diaspora rally. An article took the statements from former MP Ilir Deda out of context, falsely quoting him saying that "Milosevic and Thaci are all the same."

Narratives in the Serbian-language media. Serbian-language outlets followed in Kosovo, and social media based in Kosovo and Serbia, shared false or exaggerated stories promoting anti-Western narratives and accusing Albanian-speaking citizens of Kosovo of belittling the Serb population in Kosovo. The Serbian-language media largely reported on the elections in Kosovo but also on the elections in Montenegro and the U.S., as well as the Washington Agreement. Serbian politicians, through media outlets largely based in Serbia, often distorted political events to promote skewed narratives. They accused political leaders in Kosovo and Kosovo-based Albanian outlets of spreading hate and not acknowledging the existence of Serb-majority municipalities, mostly around the time of parliamentary and local elections in Serbia on June 21, 2020. In addition to the information disorders surrounding the Dialogue and the Washington Agreement, anti-Western narratives were prevalent in the Serbian sample. Serb officials also used derogatory language referring to Kosovo which was widely spread in the media.

Distorted political events. The media reported false claims that could fuel tensions with Kosovo, such as reporting that the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vucic, would visit Ujmani Lake (Gazivode), when in reality a visit to the disputed lake had not been confirmed. A video from a 2013 press conference on the Brussels Agreement between Belgrade and Pristina was edited to imply that Serbian opposition leader Dragan Djilas currently endorsed the governing Serbian Progressive Party's (SNS) support of the Agreement. False claims that no foreign leader congratulated Vucic on his party's victory in the 2020 parliamentary and local elections were prevalent, as were false charges that Kosovo's government would retake Serbian Orthodox medieval shrines during the Decani Monastery road construction. Another skewed narrative focused on

attacks by the media on an academic from Belgrade. Harsh narratives from the 2021 parliamentary election cycle continued to resonate in the Serbian sample in the weeks following the elections.

Anti-Western narratives. False information circulated that the U.S. and “old and infirm” Europe are losing their power and that China is becoming the new world leader, mimicking Kremlin narratives denigrating the reputation of the U.S. in the region, and thus the U.S.-supported government of Kosovo.

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- A party leader accused Kurti of using his “pawns” to speak against the KLA, of protecting Hashim Thaci, and that he will bring “Zajednica” (referring to the Association of Serb Majority Municipalities) to Kosovo. The news article was published by two portals, together having 2,100,000+ followers. The two articles combined had a reach of 200,000+ and were shared 16 times.
- One of the mainstream media outlets published a video with false and harsh accusations by a leading journalist criticizing Albin Kurti over a variety of topics regarding his service during the war and political activities. The post was viewed 334,200+ times, generated 7,997 reactions and was shared 1,075 times on Facebook.¹⁶
- In a video, a political leader used harsh language accusing those who moved from LDK to LVV of supporting a party that will ruin the country, claiming they do not deserve the support of the citizens. The video had 216,200+ views, generated 7,257 reactions and was shared 174 times on Facebook.

Dardan Molliqaj: Albin Kurti nëse bëhet kryeministër do të dialogojë pa kushte me Serbinë, do ta sjellë “Zajednicën”



Dardan Molliqaj: If Albin Kurti becomes prime minister he will negotiate without any conditions with Serbia, he will bring “Zajednica”

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- Narratives from the snap elections regarding statements by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic that the Srpska Lista (SL) was the best option for Kosovo Serbs continued after the elections, with significant reach and shares. One article generated a reach of 300,000 and had 55,000+ shares.
- A high ranking official in the Serbian government issued numerous statements which referred to Albanians in Kosovo by the derogatory name, “Shiptars,” ignoring the verdict of the court in Serbia which deemed the term “politically incorrect and offensive.” In just the month of October 2020, six such statements were published on the website of a ministry. This narrative was published in 14 different articles which had a combined reach of 228,000+ and 170 shares.

¹⁶Reactions are an extension of the Like Button through which users show their reaction to a post. The collection of reactions includes Like, Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Sad and Angry.

- Prime Minister Kurti's political decisions and outreach to the Kosovo Serbian community during the elections continued to be harshly criticized in the Serbian media, even after the 2021 snap elections. For instance, the labeling of Serbs who met with Kurti as "traitors" and "spies" continued to be widely circulated in the media. The narrative was published in 11 different articles, which had a combined reach of 200,000+ and 130 shares.



In one month 6 insulting statements for Kosovo Albanians

3.3. Misogyny

In the Albanian media, women were frequent targets of biased, sexist, or manipulated language. Women were attacked for their appearances, subject to sexist language, and articles focused on what they eat and wear, ignoring their professional activities. Women were also subjected to belittlement of their careers, accusations of putting their personal lives ahead of their party, benefiting from political patronage, cowardice and inappropriate behavior in the presence of male colleagues. Furthermore, criticism and scrutiny of women working in high positions were spread throughout Kosovo's media landscape. Such attacks were covered and widely shared among the country's media, without identifying them as misogyny. Much of the observed language constitutes online violence against women in politics (VAW-P) which studies show creates a 'chilling effect' that drives politically-active women offline and even out of the political realm entirely.¹⁷

In the Serbian language sample, all the articles found containing misogyny were directed toward the women political leaders in Serbia, not those in Kosovo.

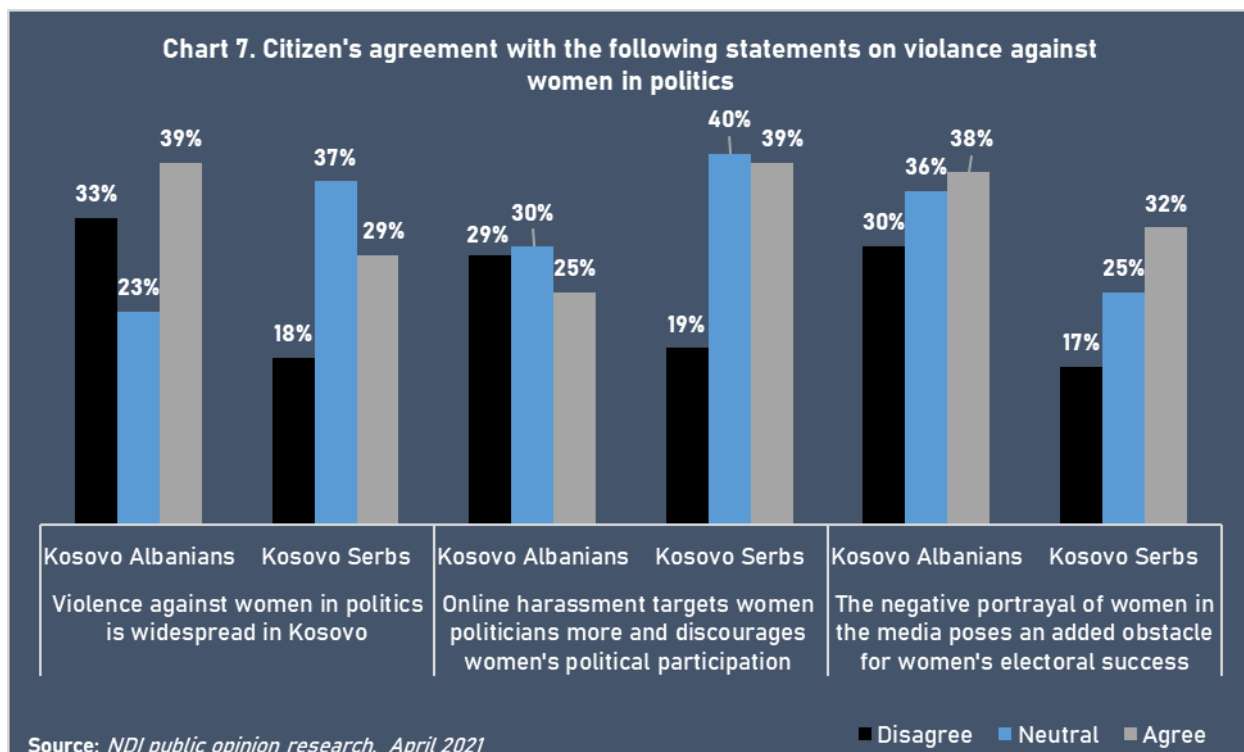
NDI public opinion research from April 2021 showed that 38 percent of Kosovo's citizens believe that violence against women hinders their participation in politics, although attitudes have improved since November 2020 when 51 percent thought so. In addition, 38 percent of the population in Kosovo believe that the negative portrayal of women in the media poses an added obstacle for women's electoral success, down from 49 percent last November. There is also a difference in perspectives among genders. For instance, only 33 percent of men believe that the negative portrayal of women in the media poses an added obstacle for women's electoral success, while 42 percent of women do.¹⁸

Chart 7 demonstrates significant differences in the Serbian and Albanian communities in Kosovo on this issue. Twenty-nine percent of the Serbian community in Kosovo believe that violence against women in politics is widespread in Kosovo, in comparison to 39 percent of Albanian community. Similarly, 32 percent of the Serbian community in Kosovo believe the negative portrayal of women in the media is an added obstacle for women's electoral success, whereas 38 percent in the Albanian community believe so.

¹⁷ For more information, see NDI's report [Tweets that Chill](#), June 2019.

¹⁸ See [NDI/Kosovo public opinion research, November 2020 - April 2021](#).

Regarding whether online harassment discourages women's political participation, 39 percent of Serbs believe so, while 25 percent in the Albanian community do.¹⁹



Narratives in the Albanian-language media. Speaker Vjosa Osmani was the primary subject of attacks. Other female leaders and MPs also faced sexist language and insults, including former President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, LVV member and former legal advisor to the prime minister, Fitore Pacolli, and MPs Duda Balje and Ganimete Musliu. Attacks included comments about their physical appearance or misrepresenting how they spent leisure time. Saranda Bogujevci, an MP and survivor of a war massacre, was attacked on a Facebook page falsely claiming that she is a close friend of Serbian Foreign Minister, Ivica Dacic. Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) MP, Eliza Hoxha, received a death threat. Moreover, female politicians offended each other, such as when a female MP insulted Osmani's career, charging that she only enhanced it by victimizing other politicians.

Attacks against Osmani. Osmani faced criticism of her cooperation with Albin Kurti, her purchase of a house, allegations of disloyalty to her party, LDK, and criticism of her personal appearance. Other comments by party leaders implied that Osmani was manipulative, someone without knowledge, hence the need for her to get "married" to Albin Kurti because she does not have the potential to think or decide on her own. Some news items or social media posts threatened to release her personal information publicly.

¹⁹Respondents were asked: Violence against women in politics is defined as encompassing all forms of aggression, coercion, and intimidation against women as political actors simply because they are women. Can you tell us how much you agree with the following statements?

She also faced allegations against her husband's work ethic and charges that he created a new position for himself as "First Man."

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

Former President of Kosovo, Atifete Jahjaga, was a target of sexist language and comments related to her appearance. An article was published describing her changes in hairstyle and how she looks different and more attractive, especially with light make-up on her face. This article had a reach of 102,000+ and 20 shares. The same content was also shared on other portals with the main headlines emphasizing that one would not be able to recognize her, given how much she has changed.

Atifete Jahjaga vështirë të njihet, fytyra e saj ka ndryshuar shumë



Atifete Jahjaga is barely recognizable, her face has changed so much

- One article included an MP's statement about Vjosa Osmani accusing her of playing the role of a "victim" and of being controlled by Kurti. The article had a reach of 43,500+ and nine shares.
- Articles regarding what Vjosa Osmani cooks and eats were among the most circulated articles in the media, often ignoring her substantive work. For instance, one article detailing her food preferences was widely shared horizontally among several portals, with a reach of 42,000+ people and 12 shares.

3.4. External influence

This review found narratives with information disorders, skewed, and harsh narratives from Serbia, Russia, China, and Turkey that were shared in Kosovo, at times feeding political divisions in Kosovo. While mostly accurately reporting the news from abroad, the media did not make clear which news items came from outside Kosovo and failed to note when the statements were skewed or not factual.

The articles containing information disorders produced by foreign sources, such as those from Russia or Turkey, spread widely and quickly outside Kosovo, while in Kosovo, they took longer to be reproduced. For instance, Kosovo-based articles posted on Facebook or online news portals took less than 90 minutes to spread to at least five other portals or Facebook accounts inside Kosovo, while articles from outside of Kosovo not in the Albanian language, such as from Russia and Turkey, took an average of seven days to spread into Kosovo's domestic based media.²⁰ For instance, as Figure 1 below demonstrates, an article falsely claiming that Germany was selling weapons to Kosovo in Sputnik published July 21, 2020 and was spread two days later in Kosovo.

²⁰Articles in the Albanian language spread at the same pace as those from portals based in Kosovo.

Six days later, then-Director of Office for Kosovo in Serbia, Marko Djuric, commented on the article, criticizing NATO's military support to Kosovo, calling on the West to send books, not tanks, reiterating that Kosovo will not enter the UN. Such reactions increase tensions between Kosovo and Serbia and impact the Dialogue.

Figure 1. Flow news articles flowing from Russia to the Balkans produced by Sputnik showing how Germany is selling weapons to Kosovo Army.



Source: NDI research

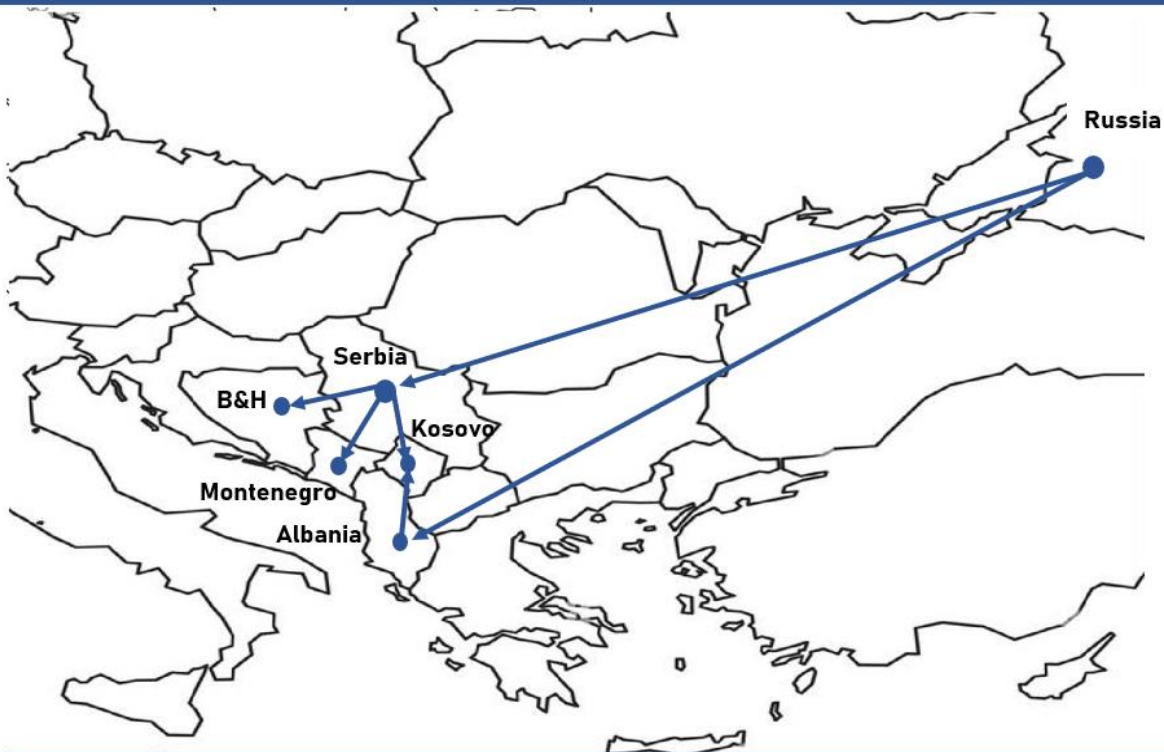
The Serbian government regularly promoted false narratives about the intentions of the West. During the snap February 2021 elections, Serbia called for voters to support the SL, spreading false and biased information about the Dialogue and the Washington Agreement. Serbia also called into question the sovereign right of Kosovo and Israel to mutually recognize each other. These narratives were widely spread in the media in Kosovo and impacted the public opinions of the Serb population.

Russia-based narratives were the most prevalent source of external influence in the Albanian-language sample, but were more common in Serbian-language media. In the Serbian language, these narratives were primarily spread through [Sputnik.rs](https://sputnik.rs), and other Russian-sponsored media based in Serbia. In the Albanian-language media, Russian-sponsored narratives were often translated from Serbian or copied and pasted directly from media based in Albania and spread by the media in Kosovo, often serving as clickbait. The origins of these narratives are not identified by the media. As the Map 1 below illustrates, skewed narratives originating in Russia travel quickly and widely in the region, including between Serbia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as in Kosovo. In many cases, Russian narratives were first published in Albania and Serbia, and then reproduced and shared by Kosovo local media.²¹

Russia-originated topics included skewed narratives about Kosovo's relations with its Western partners, as well as Kosovo's position in the international community. Narratives alleging the promotion by Kosovo political leaders of a "Greater Albania" was one of the most frequent topics. Other narratives claimed Kosovo is driven by Western interests, and that it undermines the interests of Serbia and the Kosovo Serb community. Others emphasized that after 13 years, Kosovo is still not a state and that independent states should not negotiate with it. There was also anti-Biden rhetoric, accusing President Biden of being prone to American imperialism and a war approach in solving world problems.

²¹Internal NDI research 2021.

Map 1. Flow of false narratives from Russia through the Balkans region.

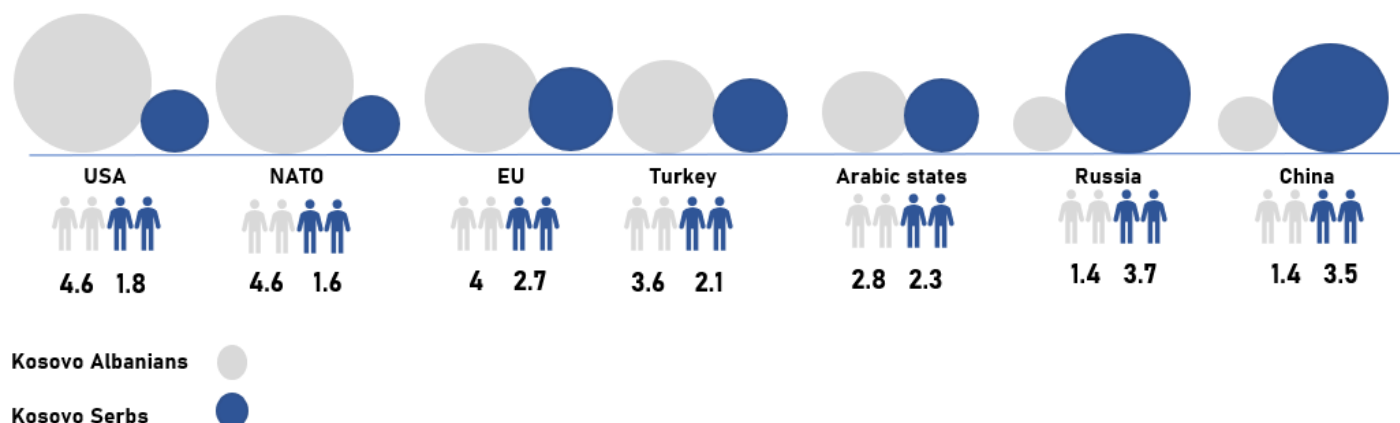


Source: NDI research

In November 2020, NDI research found that a new trend emerged in which the Russian media openly criticized the fact-checking efforts and initiatives that are happening around the world.

NDI public opinion research found that these anti-Western narratives resonate with different audiences in the region. For instance, Kosovo Albanians see the West, including the U.S., NATO and the EU, as more favorable than China, Russia and Arab countries, while Kosovo Serbs have the reverse view, with a higher favorability towards Russia and China and lower favorability towards the U.S. and NATO. Chart 8 illustrates this phenomenon. These attitudes reflect the fact that anti-Western narratives are believed by significantly more of Kosovo Serb populations than Albanian. NDI's regional public opinion research shows that 79 percent of Kosovo Serbs think that Russia's military is superior to that of NATO, while four percent of Kosovo Albanians have the same opinion. Ninety-two percent of Kosovo Albanians believe the opposite, that NATO's military is superior to Russia, with seven percent of Kosovo Serbs believing this narrative. These attitudes reflect the fact that anti-Western narratives are believed by significantly more of Kosovo Serb populations than Albanian. NDI's regional public opinion research shows that 79 percent of Kosovo Serbs think that Russia's military is superior to that of NATO, while four percent of Kosovo Albanians have the same opinion. Ninety-two percent of Kosovo Albanians believe the opposite, that NATO's military is superior to Russia, with seven percent of Kosovo Serbs believing this narrative

Chart 8. Favorability views of countries and international institutions on a scale of 1 to 5



Source: NDI public opinion research, April 2021

Turkey-based media mainly promoted Turkey's military prowess, its armed forces and its role in supporting the Albanians in the Balkans. Online articles and posts published in Turkey were reproduced, mainly in the Albanian language, in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. They were then shared on Facebook pages and groups, often those focused on Islamic concepts. Facebook groups and pages located in North Macedonia and Southern Serbia spread narratives promoting Turkey's armed forces, its support of Albanians in the Balkans, and continued pressure from Turkey for Kosovo to oppose the Fethullah Gulen movement.

China, with a minor presence in the media in Kosovo compared to other external actors, glorified its achievements in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to global security, economics and stability, or simply promoting its positive image in the region. NDI's regional public opinion research found that these narratives had an impact on Kosovo's citizens' perception of China. Thirty-one percent of Kosovo Albanians and 32 percent of Kosovo Serbs think that Kosovo should not follow its European path if it means spoiling its good relations with China.²²

The topic of mutual recognition between Kosovo and Israel sparked widespread criticism from abroad, including by the Arab League, Turkey, Serbia and Russia. Narratives largely involved foreign countries calling for Kosovo to reverse its decision to open an embassy in Jerusalem, accusing Kosovo of betraying the Muslim world. Such criticism contributed to political divisions in Kosovo.

3.4.1. Influence from Russia

Russia-based narratives were the most prevalent in the Serbian-language sample, with anti-Western narratives spread primarily through Sputnik.rs, and other Russian sponsored media based in Serbia.

²² NDI public opinion research across Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovakia, March 2021

Articles produced by the Russian media containing skewed narratives penetrated the whole region. They were rapidly spread and shared among the media in Serbia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kosovo.

Narratives in the Albanian-language media. Russia's military superiority and its role in combating COVID-19 were common topics of Russian origin in Albanian-language media. Exaggerated and skewed narratives about Russian military achievements and power were present, promoting themes of Russia's military supremacy over Western countries and NATO. As noted above in Section 3.1, Russia promoted skewed narratives about the capabilities of its COVID-19 vaccine, including its timeline and effectiveness before its verification. Other articles included the promotion of the idea that Russia is a country which supports human rights.

Kosovu ni posle 13 godina nisu javili da nije država

19:01 17.02.2021 (Osveženo: 14:55 30.08.2021)



Even after 13 years, Kosovo has not been informed that is not a state

Narratives in the Serbian-language media. As shown in Chart 8, the Kosovo Serbian community is highly vulnerable to Russian influence, due in part to the media's promotion of exaggerated Russian military and weapons potential, promotion of regimes close to the Kremlin, and anti-Western narratives. Russia-based media spread false information about the West and its role in the Balkans, such as warning Serbs about "the return of America in the Balkans," urging Serbs to be "ready" for this. Accusations of U.S. dishonesty and that the power of the U.S. and the West are waning were also present. Narratives detailed false claims that the U.S. intended to steal Russia's military secrets, and that the provision of U.S. arms to Kosovo destabilized the Balkans. Skewed claims that Reuters praised the Russian discovery of a COVID-19 vaccine to demonstrate Moscow's "scientific ingenuity and superiority," were also published, along with false claims that the U.S. is biased against the Serbs and hides its true motivation to control the region.

Sputnik.rs also used skewed statements about Albanian politicians looking for Serbs who would betray the interests of Kosovo Serbs and blindly obey the directives of Kosovo Albanians for some financial benefits. The Russian news media Sputnik.rs published an article falsely claiming that Germany was secretly arming and training the Kosovo army, accusing Germany of hypocrisy for supporting the Dialogue, yet arming Kosovo. Narratives biased against the then-U.S. presidential candidate Joe Biden were also prevalent, warning against American imperialism and a war approach in solving world problems.

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- One article sought to portray Russia in a more favorable light than the West. The narrative overstated the impact of a proposal by a Russian MP that women should be paid for their housework, claiming it demonstrated that Russia was a promoter of human rights. The article had a reach of 105,000+ and was shared more than 60 times.
- A two-minute video posted by a Russian media outlet, promoted the superiority of the Russian military capabilities over that of NATO and Western countries. The news article had a reach of 85,088+ but no shares.

- Sputnik.rs published an article falsely claiming that Kosovo's army was being secretly armed and trained, with the support of Germany, claiming Kosovo spent about 170 million euros on German weapons. The article was widespread in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Russia, and Serbia and had a reach of 60,000+ and was shared 38 times on Facebook.
- A portal published narratives from tweets posted by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs falsely alleging that there is an arbitrary time frame on normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia and that LVV was being provocative, using radical rhetoric. The article had a reach of 44,100+ and two shares.

Helikopteri rus kryen lëvizje të pabesueshme në manovrat stërvitore



Russian helicopter performs incredible movements in training maneuvers (video)

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- An article from Sputnik.rs claimed that, under the Biden administration, the world should expect new bombings and war. The article had a reach of 165,000+ and 85 shares.
- Sputnik.rs posted an article claiming that Wesley Clark, Madeleine Albright, political analyst Daniel Serwer and others were working against Serbia and the interests of Serbs, trying to ensure that Serbia and Serbs would not receive anything from the normalization negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia. The post had a reach of 40,000+ and 47 shares. Other portals reposted the narrative and had a reach of 79,000+ and 72 shares on Facebook.
- Another Sputnik.rs article claimed that the West was using its fact checking efforts to influence public opinion, by advancing various lies and half-truths, without any verification. This article had a reach of 148,000+ and 62 shares.

Pod Bajdenom sledi još bombardovanja kao u Jugoslaviji i Libiji: Prošlost njegovih aduta otkriva sve

18:45 24.11.2020 (Osveženo: 17:27 25.11.2020)



Under Biden more bombing will happen like in Yugoslavia and Libya: His past shows his approach

3.4.2. Influence from China

While present, Chinese influence in Kosovo's media is minimal, with very low penetration, on average one news item reached no more than 2,000+ people. Shares of Chinese-origin content on Facebook were low. In the Albanian-language media, China was promoted as a global power in economic and scientific achievements. In the Serbian language, narratives promoted China's help on COVID-19 and in supporting Serbia against U.S. pressure, although the majority of articles focused on China's investment in Serbia's economy.

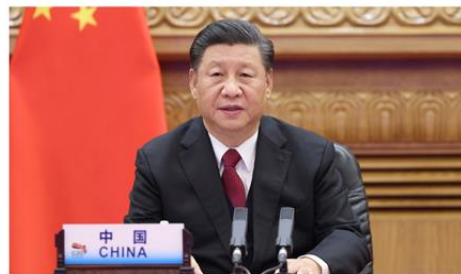
Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- An article claimed that China was ahead of other superpowers in global affairs. This narrative had a reach of 158.
- Another narrative criticized the protectionist policies of governments of developed economies during the pandemic, praising the efforts of China to prioritize development and debt relief for developing countries. This article had a reach of 263 and two shares.

Kina nxit G20-n t'i japë përparësi zhvillimit dhe të sigurojë lehtësimin e borxheve për vendet e varfra

2020-11-23 21:40:08

Printoni



China urges G20 to prioritize development, ensure debt relief for poor countries

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- One portal argued that China and Russia would stop the Biden Administration's pressure on Serbia to recognize Kosovo. It stated that China and Russia would now protect the world order they had developed in the last decade, and support and protect its friends. This narrative had 37,600+ reach and 24 shares.
- Articles also discussed the billboards in Belgrade supported by the New Communist Party in Serbia, which portrayed a photo of Chinese President Xi Jinping and an inscription calling for a statue of "our friend Xi." The articles claimed the statue would symbolically repay China's help in the fight against COVID-19. This had a reach of 27,000+ and 22 shares.
- One portal claimed that Serbia would expect much stronger pressure about Kosovo with the new leadership in the White House, and that with China's stronger economic power and support to Serbia, the "space" for pressure on Serbia is much smaller for the U.S. and the West. This narrative had a reach of 23,200+ and 19 shares.

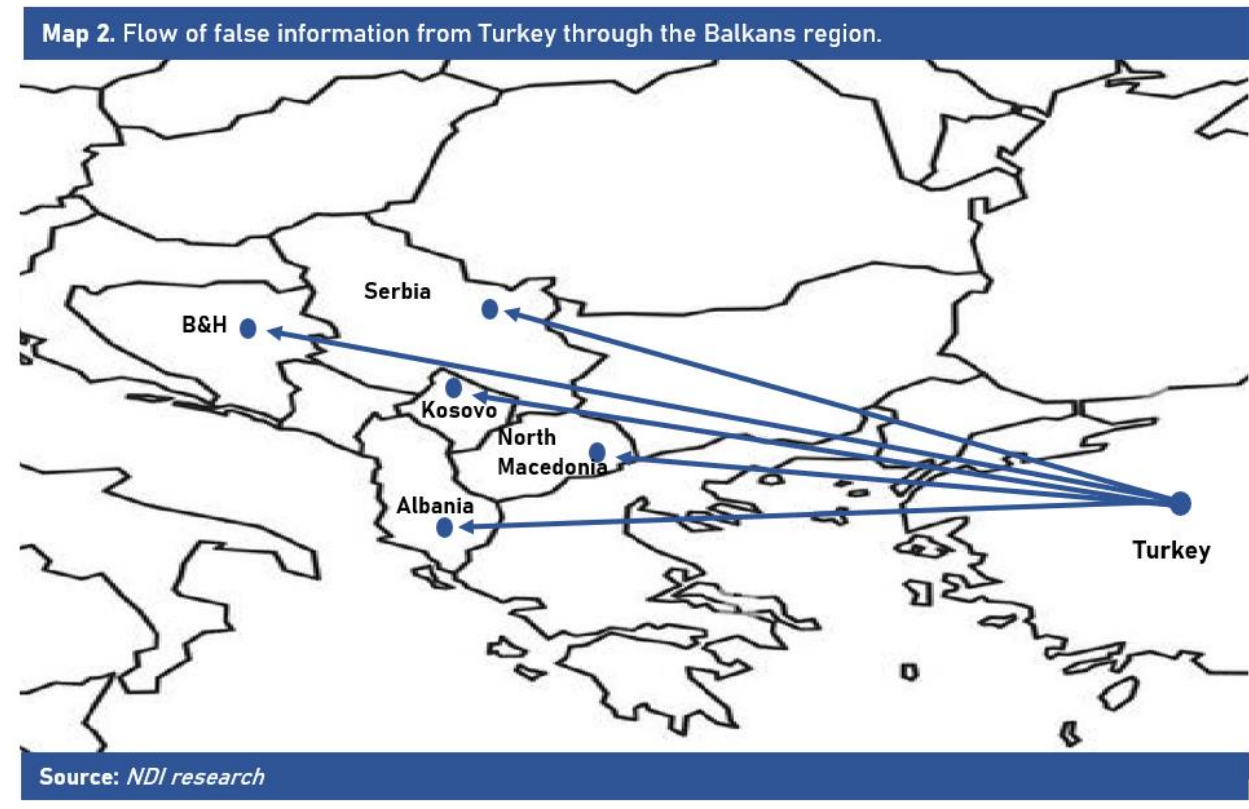


We want a statue for our friend Xi

3.4.3. Influence from Turkey

Similar to Russia-based influence, in which articles are created by government controlled and funded news agencies, most of the articles promoting the image of Turkey were also produced by news agencies controlled and funded by the government. However, unlike the Russia-based media, Turkish news agencies operate in many languages, including Albanian and Serbo-Croatian with easy reach in Kosovo. Narratives related to Turkey mainly promoted, and in some cases exaggerated, Turkey's armed forces and its role in supporting Albanians in the Balkans. Narratives promoted Turkey as an upcoming military superpower able to compete with the U.S. or Russia. The media also reported continued pressure from Turkey on Kosovo in fighting the Fethullah Gulen movement. Such articles spread mainly in Albanian-language portals and

social media, including Facebook pages and groups focused on Islamic concepts. While media in these countries were not systematically monitored, NDI also found some narratives promoting Turkey in social media in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia as part of its manual review. Map 2 illustrates the spread of Turkish narratives in the region.



Examples in the Albanian-language sample.

- A narrative exaggerating the prowess of Turkish marine forces was published by an Albanian portal and reposted on several Kosovo portals. The narrative promoted the power of Turkey and its progress in building a strong fleet amid its recent crisis with Greece. It had a reach of 11,000+ and 15 shares.
- One article reported the request by the foreign minister of Turkey for Kosovo to enhance its cooperation with Turkey in fighting the Gulen movement, claiming it was a danger not only for Turkey, but also for Kosovo. Turkey's anti-Gulen campaign exaggerates the threat, especially as it relates to Kosovo. The article was shared by several other portals. It had a reach of 5,300+ and three shares.
- A Facebook fan page located in North Macedonia, with 130,000+ followers, posted a long narrative exaggerating the military power of Turkey vis-à-vis its NATO allies and Russia, including its air force and pilotless drones. The post was shared on one fan page and reposted within five minutes on another Facebook page. The first post generated 588 reactions and was shared 36 times on Facebook, while the second post generated 1,200 likes, 75 comments, and was shared 44 times on Facebook.

- An online news media posted an article on Facebook with a title falsely suggesting a Turkish intervention in the Adriatic Sea in order to protect Albania from Greece. The post generated 2,811 reactions and was shared 57 times on Facebook.

3.4.4. Reaction to mutual recognition with Israel (Turkey, Israel, Serbia, EU, Arab League)

The decision of Kosovo's government to open an embassy in Jerusalem triggered opposition from different countries and international organizations, including from Serbia, Russia and Turkey, the Arab League and the EU. While such criticisms were accurately reported, it is important to note that such external influence contributes to political division in Kosovo. Russia falsely claimed that Kosovo is not a state and thus did not have the right to recognize other states. Serbian politicians reacted negatively to the decision by Kosovo to open an embassy in Jerusalem, equating Israel's Jerusalem to Serbia's claim that Kosovo is the "Jerusalem of Serbia." Serbia falsely claimed the step was a breach of the Washington Agreement that suspended lobbying for international recognition by countries and the step was harshly criticized in Serbian media. The agreement, however, referred only to lobbying for membership in international organizations. These events were widely covered by the media in Kosovo in both languages. Prime Minister Kurti has said that he will review the decision.

Erdogan sjell anijet në Vlorë për të na mbrojtur nga Greqia, Ngjela: Kush e qeveris Shqipërinë?!



Erdogan brings the Turkey fleet to Vlorë to protect Albania from Greece, Ngjela: Who governs Albania?!

Dacic i nervozuar: Izraeli njohu Jerusalemin tonë Kosovën, do ketë pasoja



Dacic gets nervous: Israel recognized our own Jerusalem - Kosovo. There will be consequences

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- A portal reported the statements of the Arab League's Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit strongly condemning the decision of Kosovo to open its embassy in Jerusalem. Also reported was the statement by the Ambassador of Palestine in Belgrade threatening that the Arab league will take "measures" against Kosovo. Overall, the reactions from the Arab league were shared in horizontal form – meaning that at least 14 online news portals have written about it – with a combined reach of 117,000+ and 41 shares.
- A portal published an article about a letter from Turkish President Erdogan criticizing Kosovo's decision to open an embassy in Jerusalem. "Erdogan gets nervous: You have betrayed Turkey by opening the embassy in Jerusalem." Narratives describing the pressure from Turkey had a reach of 97,000+ and 100 shares.

- Portals reported statements by Serbian politicians, such as the head of Serbian Parliament Ivica Dacic, claiming that Kosovo is Serbia's "Jerusalem" and threatening consequences in relations between Serbia and Israel. Portals also reported the new patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Serbia also declared that "Kosovo is the Jerusalem of Serbia." These articles had a combined reach of 10,000+ and 13 shares.
- Russia also opposed Israel's and Kosovo's legal right to make a deal with Kosovo. A portal published criticism by the Russian foreign minister falsely claiming that: "Under the resolution 1244, Kosovo is not a state, therefore, the issue of mutual recognition is meaningless." The same news article was also republished by another portal. This article had a combined reach of 3100+ and seven shares.

Erdogan nervozohet pasi Kosova vendosi të hapë ambasadë në Jerusalem: E tradhtuat Turqinë



Erdogan gets nervous after Kosovo decides to open the embassy in Jerusalem: You betrayed Turkey

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- Articles reported Turkish President Erdogan's opposition to Kosovo's opening of an embassy in Jerusalem, by directly asking Kosovo Prime Minister Kurti to reverse the decision. He claimed establishing the embassy will directly damage relations between Kosovo and Turkey, fueling political divisions. This narrative had a combined reach of 24,000+ and 17 shares.
- Articles reported that Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, urged Prime Minister Kurti to ensure Kosovo remained dedicated to the process of normalization and should not back out from it, even with a new government being elected. While not an information disorder, it is important to note this example of support for the decision amidst the harsh criticism from other capitals. This narrative had a combined reach of 21,000+ and 11 shares.

3.5. The Special Court

The Kosovo Specialist Chambers and Specialist Prosecutor's Office (Special Court) was a consistent part of the public discourse in Kosovo during this reporting period. The fact that prominent former figures of KLA who became political leaders are subject to the Special Court's jurisdiction drove heightened media interest in Kosovo and Serbia. The narratives of the liberation war, the complex past of Kosovo and Serbia, and the Special Court often include harsh rhetoric, divisive language and accusations. Since the beginning of interviews in November 2020 of suspects and witnesses, matters related to the Special Court have been widely present in the media.

Narratives in the Albanian-language media. Narratives surrounding the Special Court often included accusations and harsh rhetoric, especially towards individuals involved with the KLA and individuals subject to the Special Court. In some cases, these accusations were baseless. Stories included false information about the Special Court's arrests and invitations for interviews for Albin Kurti, Xhavit Haliti and Baton Haxhiu, false accusations against former MP and KLA commander Daut Haradinaj, and misrepresentations of indictments and official statements from the Special Court. The media also reported accusations against

Kurti of manipulating the Special Court, accusations against Thaci that “in order to save himself, he wanted to send others to the Hague,” and accusations that Osmani had a secret agreement to cooperate with the Special Court. There were also narratives regarding the murders of prominent politicians in Kosovo right after the 1999 war, falsely implying that those cases would be taken up by the Special Court. The media also reported calls for those who supported the KLA to be sent to the Special Court, including the German government, President Bill Clinton and other NATO states, although they would be outside of the Special Court’s jurisdiction.

Deputetja turke/NATO mbështeti
“kriminelët” e UÇK-së



**Turkish MP / NATO supported the
“criminals” of the KLA**

Narratives in the Serbian-language media. Similarly, many false narratives were present in the Serbian-language sample, often including accusations and harsh rhetoric, especially towards individuals involved with the KLA and individuals subject to the Special Court. In some cases, these accusations were baseless. False information was published about the Special Court’s arrests and invitations for interviews to certain individuals, as well as false and misleading information regarding the Special Court’s indictments. False narratives in news articles were also translated from Albanian to Serbian and published on news portals in the Serbian language.

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- A portal with 1,270,000+ followers streamed live on Facebook (and broadcast on TV) a statement by a leader of a war veterans’ organization falsely claiming that evidence from the Special Court had been leaked from the Israeli intelligence agency, MOSSAD, as a gift for the mutual recognition of Israel and Kosovo. It had a reach of 470,000+ and was shared by 17 Facebook accounts.
- A portal published an article arguing that the Special Court should also judge actions of those who supported the KLA, including the German government, President Bill Clinton and other NATO states. Doing so would be outside the Court’s jurisdiction. The article was shared by several other portals with high reach and had a combined reach of 200,000+ and had more than 200 shares on Facebook.
- A portal reported falsely that Kosovo’s Prime Minister Albin Kurti was going to be interviewed by the Special Court. This article had a reach of 111,800+ and 17 shares on Facebook.
- The confrontation involving harsh and offensive language over implications regarding the Special Court between a journalist (and now commentator) Milaim Zeka and KLA’s Organization of War Veterans



Milaim Zeka: Burimet E Mia Konfirmojnë Që Albin Kurti Do Të Merret
Në Pyetje Nga Gjykata Speciale

**Milaim Zeka: My sources confirm that Albin
Kurti will be questioned by The Special
Court**

lawyer Tome Gashi made headlines and was widely spread on social media. The argument involved accusations by Gashi that Zeka had become a traitor to the KLA and had testified about KLA's camps, while Zeka called Gashi a spy. Several articles with these accusations had a combined reach of 77,019 and were shared 135 times on Facebook.

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- An article promoted a conspiracy theory that an “invisible” group of people, called “Flash” because they are extremely fast and elusive, were responsible for stealing the secret documents of the Special Court. One such article had a reach of 427,000+ reach and 33 shares.
- A prevalent narrative claimed that the Special Court was created by the West to enable it to “cleanse” all the politicians with military backgrounds. The article had a high reach of almost 394,000+ and 24 shares.
- Several Kosovo Serb online news portals reported falsely that Prime Minister Kurti was going to be interviewed by the Special Court. The article did not contain any official source, but quoted an unverified statement by Kosovo Albanian commentator Milaim Zeka. One such article had a reach of 19,830+ and 48 shares. This narrative originated in the Albanian media and then travelled to the Serbian media, and is an example of how, as noted above, information disorders proliferated across media markets.

IZA SVEGA STOJI ZAPAD: Evo zbog čega je Hašim dospeo pred sudije



West is behind it all. This is why Hashim is called by Special Court

3.6. The Dialogue on normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo

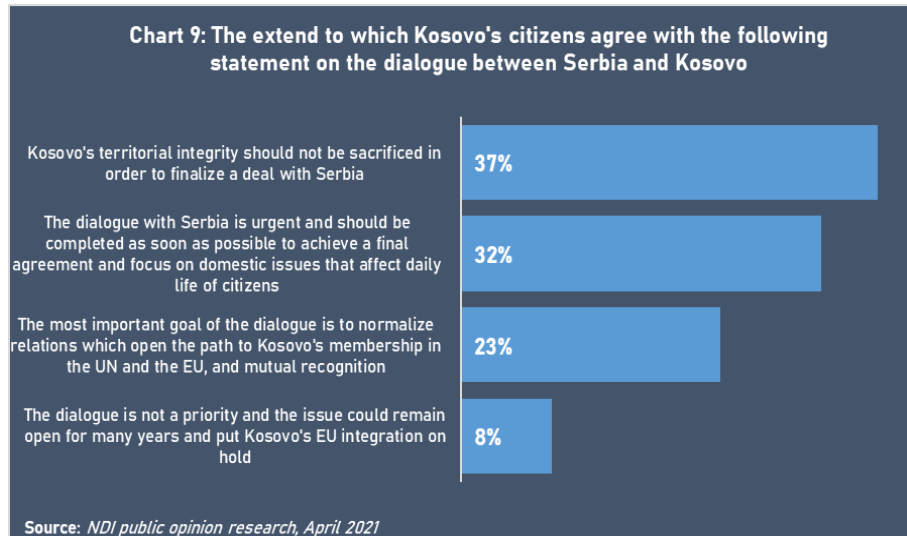
The process of normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia was a main topic in both the Albanian and Serbian-language media. Overall, the parties in the Dialogue process were not transparent, issued contradictory one-sided statements, and discussed publicly various drafts of the agreement. That lack of transparency complicated the task of verifying the facts of the process and gaining concrete, reliable information for the media to accurately inform citizens of Kosovo about the Dialogue. These were often reported by the media accurately, but at times lacked proper context, which fueled political division and contributed to the publication of inaccurate information, misleading headlines, and misinterpretations²³.

As shown in Chart 9, when asked in public opinion polling which of four key issues were closest to their view, 37 percent of respondents chose the statement that Kosovo's territorial integrity should not be

²³For more information on the lack of transparency in the dialogue, see [Kosovo-Serbia Policy and Advocacy Group's report, "Perspectives on the Technical Dialogue Agreements between Kosovo and Serbia,"](#) February 2020.

sacrificed in order to finalize a deal with Serbia. Thirty-two percent agreed with the statement that the Dialogue is urgent and should be completed as soon as possible to achieve a final agreement, and focus on domestic issues that affect daily life of citizens. This is followed by 23 percent who believe that the most important goal of the Dialogue is to normalize relations which will open the path to Kosovo's membership in the UN and the

EU, and mutual recognition. Eight percent do not consider this issue a priority and think that it could remain open for many years in the future.



Narratives in the Albanian-language media. Stories included false claims that Kosovo will get visa liberalization after the Washington Agreement and that the Trump administration ended the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia. Stories also included contradictory statements regarding the Washington Agreement, the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities, and the possible final agreement.

Distortions on the Washington Agreement. Differences over what was in the draft agreement regarding the sharing of Ujman/Gazivode Lake and point 10 of the Agreement regarding Serbia's recognition of Kosovo circulated widely, fueling harsh statements repeated by the media. The disagreements involved harsh rhetoric and accusations on both the Albanian and Serbian side. While the statements were accurately reported, the reporting lacked context. There were contradictory narratives on whether Serbs would be permitted to visit Kosovo.

Narratives in the Serbian-language media. The narratives surrounding the Dialogue and the signing of the Washington Agreement included accusations and denials regarding whether Serbia would recognize Kosovo in the alleged point 10 of the Agreement. Reports also included skewed narratives about Serbia's political leaders pushing for the implementation of Association of Serb-majority Municipalities as part of the Dialogue. Western countries were portrayed as completely biased against Serbia and Kosovo Serbs, in line with anti-Western sentiment among Kosovo Serbs, as described in Chart 8 above.

Distortions on the Washington Agreement. The removal of point 10 was the main focus of all statements from political leadership in Belgrade. Narratives discussed whether point 10 had been removed, and whether the Agreement was bilateral between Serbia and the U.S., or a trilateral one with Kosovo. The Serbian media contained rhetoric that the non-recognition of Kosovo in the Agreement was a great victory by the Serbia delegation. Prior to the meeting, based on the exaggerated statements of Serbian officials, the media reported that the Agreement would bring only bad things to the Serbian side and that Serbia could expect a lot of pressure to recognize Kosovo. Other narratives argued that Serbia should pull out of the Dialogue and recreate parallel institutions in Kosovo. Narratives from commentators included a warning

that Serbs should be aware that Kosovo does not want any compromise solutions, arguing that Serbs should fight harder for Serbian interests outside of the Dialogue platform.

Anti-Western narratives. Portals contained a skewed narrative claiming Germany had a hidden plan to support the independence of Kosovo. The decision by the Kosovo Constitutional Court annulling votes in the snap parliamentary elections for some SL-backed political candidates in Kosovo triggered narratives that the Western countries were again allowing Kosovo political representatives to do whatever they wanted, and that the West seeks to undermine all the agreements that Kosovo has reached with Serbia so far.

Examples in the Albanian-language sample

- In a post on Facebook, then-Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti declared that there will be no agreement without mutual recognition and there will be no partial agreement, a contradictory statement from his Serbian counterpart. This post had a combined reach of 733,000+ and 105 shares on Facebook, all within seven hours, one of the fastest shared narratives in this report. This narrative also proliferated in online media, becoming the most reproduced article in 107 news portals.
- While the media accurately reported contradictory statements by leaders over the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia, it failed to provide proper context, thus fueling political division. For instance, one of the most circulated posts was by a portal reporting the declaration by President of Serbia, Alexander Vucic, that there will be no recognition of Kosovo until his presidential term comes to an end. The article had a reach of 79,820 and one share. This narrative was also reproduced in at least two other news portals with a combined reach of 238,606.
- False narratives that the U.S. would waive visa requirements for Kosovo's citizens as part of the Washington Agreement were widely spread on portals, with one such story having a reach of 173,000+ and 12 shares on Facebook.
- Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic's statement comparing the conflict with Kosovo to the one in Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia sparked numerous reactions in Kosovo and was deemed a "threat of war" by some political leaders and media. News portals were flooded with exaggerated articles and headlines stating that "Vucic threatens war." This narrative had a reach of 61,769 and was shared 21 times on Facebook. (In the Serbian sample, an article with this narrative had a reach of 103,000+ and 734 shares.)

Shumë shpejt do të hiqen vizat me Amerikën



Visas with America will be removed very soon

Examples in the Serbian-language sample

- After the signing of the Washington Agreement, news portals in the Serbian language reported the false claims by Aleksandar Vucic that recognition of Kosovo, known as point 10 of the Agreement, had been

removed and that Kosovo negotiators had strongly protested against its removal. The article had a reach of 300,000+ reach and 52 shares.

- An article in Sputnik.rs stated that the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina would fail under Biden because his administration would completely side with Pristina and that Belgrade should rely more on Moscow and Beijing. This article had a reach of 148,000+ followers and had 51 shares.
- A portal reported President Vucic's claim that "Kosovo politicians may think that the Government in Belgrade is mentally demented, but they will never agree to continue without implementation of the agreement about Association," which had a reach of 51,000+ and was shared 11 times.

Vučić: Hoti misli da su u Srbiji svi idioti



Vucic: Hoti thinks that everyone in Serbia is an idiot

4. Methodology

From March 2020 to February 2021, NDI undertook a review of information disorders to better inform the public of this threat to Kosovo's democracy. To detect, record, and analyze information disorders, NDI reviewed 375 sources of information: online portals of newspapers, magazines and television, and Facebook and Twitter accounts. NDI selected sources read and followed by Kosovo's population in both the Albanian and Serbian languages. For both language samples, the portals and social media platforms were selected for their high reach inside Kosovo, although some of these platforms also have significant reach elsewhere in the Western Balkans or the region and diaspora.

Over the course of this monitoring, NDI also conducted a number of public research polls and focus groups, some of which included Kosovo's information environment. Relevant findings of that research are included in this report.

Based on the number of users, Facebook is the most widely used social media platform in Kosovo (910,000 users), followed by Instagram (750,000 users). Twitter is not widely used (63,200).²⁴ NDI anecdotally reviewed Instagram, mostly due to the presence of widely circulated memes during the snap elections.²⁵ While widely used — and misused — NDI did not monitor YouTube. Similarly, while TV is widely watched in Kosovo, disinformation is most prevalent in portals on social media. Thus, live TV stations were not monitored, but their online portals were monitored. This report monitored only the online version of Kosovo's only remaining weekly printed newspaper, Koha Ditore, until it stopped its printed version in January 2021. All other magazines and newspapers stopped the printed version with the onset of the pandemic. NDI

²⁴See [Simon Kamp, Kosovo digital, 2021](#).

²⁵The review did not include Instagram because the software was not able to collect data on its platform since it uses mostly pictures without the captions needed for the data collection.

manually reviewed additional articles and portals as needed to track the flow of information from external sources, and to fact check.

The Albanian-language portals reviewed included media based in Kosovo, as well as Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and North Macedonia (included as “other” in Table 3), as they

included identified narratives circulating in Kosovo’s media and social media in the Albanian language. In total, NDI examined 73 Albanian-language online portals, of which four are based in North Macedonia, one in Bosnia, and 10 in Albania. It also examined 146 Facebook pages in Albanian, and beginning in September 2020, 31 Albanian-language Twitter accounts of political parties, leading politicians and activists in Kosovo.

The Serbian-language sample included 48 online portals, of which 38 are based in Serbia, with 10 based in Kosovo. The majority of Kosovo’s Serb population gets its news from Serbia-based portals, with such information often repeated in Kosovo’s Serbian-language media. Serbia-based outlets and social media were selected for monitoring based on their reach, impact, and particular salience to the topics monitored. They included main online portals in Serbia covering Kosovo, as well as the social media with reference to issues relating to Kosovo, including those of Serbian leaders. While Serbia still has print media, it is not largely followed in Kosovo. In addition, NDI examined 11 Serbian-language Twitter accounts and 49 Facebook pages of political parties, leading politicians, and activists.

Process: NDI used two assessment methodologies as the review’s needs and methodologies evolved. From March to August 2020, NDI manually reviewed articles that pertained to the six broad topics of focus. From September 2020 to February 2021, NDI employed two additional software tools to increase the number of articles captured for potential review and allow for more comprehensive analysis of data related to targeted articles. Data collected with the tools, during the last six months covered by this report, included reach, shares, and views for the articles and posts.

The first tool enabled monitoring of portals, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages, including reach, but, due to privacy rules, it was not permitted to monitor Facebook groups which are largely run by party fans and often active in spreading disinformation about opponents. The second tool enabled the monitoring of Facebook groups, providing data on total interactions, although not reach. Due to the use of these different tools, some articles in this report had different tracking methodologies for the reach of articles and interactions on Facebook.

With the two software tools, NDI created queries based on keywords relevant to the topics monitored, generating data on all articles within the sample that matched the specified parameters. NDI filtered the resulting suite of articles to include those with the most reach and confirmed topical relevance. NDI

Table 3. List of online news portals and social media monitored from March 2020 - February 2021

By language		Albanian	Serbian	Other	Total
By source					
Facebook pages		146	49	1	196
Facebook groups		10	0	0	10
Twitter accounts		31	11	0	42
Total social media		187	60	1	248
Online news portals		73	48	6	127
Total monitoring sample					375
Source: NDI research					

reviewed this smaller resulting sample for information disorders. The tools also enabled an efficient way to monitor the date, time, location, and language of portals. Thus, it was possible to track the flow of information disorders from one platform to another (Facebook to online news portals or portals to Facebook and/or Twitter), and the pace and frequency of spread of these articles and posts.

For each piece identified with information disorders, NDI cataloged the time of publication, subject matter, political parties/party members mentioned, and whether they were social media posts of political parties or party members. Each assessed item, including links and screenshots, was entered into a database to permanently document and record the piece. For this public report, the names of the portals and social media were removed to focus on the content spread and not the perpetrators, with the dates of publication and posting added to identify the context at the time of publication. However, the Sputnik portal is hyperlinked to underscore Russian influence in Kosovo. In some cases, the posts have been removed, although the screenshots have been preserved for use in this report.

NDI used the tool botometer to investigate whether Twitter accounts had automated robot (bot) followers and found that more than half of the 31 Twitter accounts in the Albanian language reviewed likely had bot activity. NDI manually observed some randomly selected Instagram accounts and found some memes using harsh language criticizing political figures. Memes were also present on Facebook spreading political division.

Scope: From March to August 2020, NDI manually reviewed roughly 2,500 articles for possible information disorders. Of this sample, nearly half (1,157) of articles or posts analyzed in this manner were found to contain some form of information disorder. Reach was not monitored during this period. From September 2020 to February 2021, NDI, using the automated tools, reviewed 26,917 articles and social media posts identified by the automated tools as potentially relevant based on their reach and relevance to the topic.²⁶ The vast majority were not relevant but 2,192 of them were found to have some form of information disorder. Using the new tools, NDI was able to identify the reach of articles and social media posts with information disorders. The reach for this period of these 2,192 articles was 25,528 million²⁷ with 78,887 shares through Facebook. As described in Table 1 above, including those reviewed in the snap 2021 elections covered in NDI's separate report, a total of 3,613 articles were found to contain disinformation, which had a total reach of 28,728 million.²⁸

5. Conclusions

This extensive twelve month monitoring of Kosovo's online and social media revealed widespread misuse of information in Kosovo in both the Albanian and Serbian-language media. Kosovo's high internet penetration, political tensions fueled by external influence, the lack of normalization of relations with Serbia, and a stalled pathway to EU integration make Kosovo vulnerable to false and skewed narratives and

²⁶The automated tools initially identified over one million articles, which NDI then filtered based on reach and relevance, leading to the 26,917 potentially relevant articles then manually reviewed for information disorders.

²⁷As the automated tool did not cover all the articles shared due to different wording and headlines, the number of reproductions was likely higher than those tracked by the automated tool.

²⁸The automated tool calculated the reach of portals and social media but these were not tracked by geographical location; therefore, the 28,728,270 million number reached includes neighboring countries and the diaspora. It is important to note that one person may engage portals and social media with multiple devices so reach does not reflect precisely the number of people involved.

conspiracy theories. Disparate narratives in the Albanian and Serbian language fuel ethnic tensions. NDI's public opinion research shows that such narratives are shaping a significant portion of public opinion and fuel political divisions.

Democracies are dependent on their citizens' ability to make informed decisions. Thus, this lack of information integrity in Kosovo threatens the young country's vibrant democracy.

Through this reporting, NDI sought to strengthen the democratic information environment in Kosovo through identifying and exposing threats to it. This report should help galvanize efforts across Kosovo's society to establish new norms to protect information integrity. The solution must involve developing increased resilience to information manipulation and harmful speech, as well as developing and implementing systemic and sustainable solutions to mitigate the use of information manipulation and harmful speech.

A successful strategy to prevent disinformation in Kosovo and reduce the challenges it presents to Kosovo democracy must involve all actors that contribute to Kosovo's information environment, including the technology and media community, political parties, the legislative and executive branches of power, civil society organizations, and the wider electorate. A successful solution will require political parties to refrain from misogynistic language, hurling skewed and false attacks against opponents that fuel division and distrust. The media must fact check its reporting and deliver accurate news coverage, as well as work to more fairly portray women in the media. Civil society should monitor the media and statements of political leaders to help hold all actors accountable. The government must consider institutional and legal mechanisms to support this effort. Additionally, a comprehensive approach is needed on media literacy. Working together, Kosovo's citizens and government can promote critical analysis among citizens and cross-ethnic reconciliation to build resilience to disinformation that exacerbates ethnic tensions or promotes violence.

NDI appreciates the support of USAID for this program. It is committed to continuing this important work with political parties, the media, the Assembly, and other relevant actors to build individual and organizational resilience to information manipulation and harmful speech as well as build longer term, systemic responses to harmful information. Future monitoring reports and other programmatic activities will help the people and institutions of Kosovo develop these important tools to protect the country's democracy.

6. List of Acronyms

Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK)
Ashkali Party for Integration (PAI)
Central Election Commission (CEC)
Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)
Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)
European Union (EU)
Kosovo Force (KFOR)
Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)
Kosovo's National Intelligence Service (SHIK)
New Democratic Party (NDS)
North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)
Serbian List (SL)
Serbian Progressive Party (SNS)
Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA)
Social Democratic Union (SDU)
Turkish Radio and Television (TRT)
Vetevendosje Movement (LVV)

* * *

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