



# DISICON

INFORMATION INTEGRITY CONFERENCE

June 2021, Kosovo

## INFORMATION INTEGRITY CONFERENCE - DISICON 2021

### *The Rise of Disinformation in Digital Democracy*

June 9-10, 2021, Pristina, Kosovo

With the highest internet access in the western Balkans, Kosovo faces vast threats to its information integrity. NDI's global mission in supporting and strengthening democratic institutions recognizes this growing threat to democratic institutions and political and social fabrics globally. While the internet has empowered billions with access to knowledge, it has also empowered those seeking to undermine democracy. Since 2019<sup>1</sup>, NDI/Kosovo has worked to identify the risks to Kosovo's democracy by holding conferences to raise awareness of this threat, and by monitoring and reporting on the online information environment that is especially vulnerable to threats to information integrity.

NDI held its second conference on information integrity, DISICON, in Kosovo on June 9 and 10, 2021. It centered on the overarching theme "The Rise of Disinformation in Digital Democracy." This hybrid event in Pristina brought together representatives of the media, political parties, Members of Parliament (MPs), civil society, academia, and students of journalism to discuss the threat information disorders<sup>2</sup> pose to Kosovo's democracy. Over the two-day conference, 49 speakers, panelists, students of journalism, and guests participated. As the chart below demonstrates, the conference had a reach<sup>3</sup> of nearly 400,000.

#### DISICON objectives:

- Inform key decision-makers and the public about threats to Kosovo's information environment;
- Act as a platform for policymakers, the media, and civil society to engage discuss online disinformation;
- Share media literacy techniques and other tools to combat information disorders;
- Foster a network of actors across the fields of politics, technology, academia, and media; and
- Highlight the latest tools and solutions for addressing the spread and consumption of information disorders.

A consistent line of thought dominated the conference, as it has NDI's research: information disorders are here to stay. It has become abundantly clear that educating citizens on this growing threat is a central part of building and maintaining democracy.

The first day can be viewed [here](#); the second day can be viewed [here](#).

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<sup>1</sup>See NDI/Kosovo's first DISICON in 2019 [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> The term information disorder refers to the 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: [Council of Europe Report on Information Disorders](#).

<sup>3</sup> Reach 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. Reach for videos is counted by the number of views of the conference and interviews about DISICON.

**389,554**  
TOTAL REACH



**270,000**  
REACH ON VIMEO



**37,306**  
REACH IN NEWS  
PORTALS



**26,243**  
REACH ON FACEBOOK



**49**  
PARTICIPANTS  
IN PERSON



**3,927**  
REACH ON YOUTUBE



**22**  
STUDENTS OF  
JOURNALISM



**35,178**  
REACH ON TWITTER



**20+**  
MEDIA STORIES  
ON DISICON

## DAY 1: JUNE 9, 2021

### OPENING REMARKS



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#### Derek Mitchell - NDI President



During his speech, Ambassador Mitchell acknowledged the growing threat of disinformation and the need to safeguard the integrity of information in democratic societies. Mitchell emphasized that our democracies rely on access to accurate information, not only so voters can make an informed decision, but also to hold leaders accountable. He explained that the media industry is constantly changing, often in unpredictable ways. Ambassador Mitchell warned that all democratic societies must be

aware of the growing threat of information disorders and develop ways to protect our societies and democracies against disinformation and information manipulation as a matter of national security.

He noted the challenge of information integrity in Kosovo, specifically:

- He urged intersectoral cooperation among the media, government, and civil society in Kosovo;
- Stressed the importance of helping local journalists and civil society, including the Association of Journalists, to monitor and analyze the information environment

## OPENING REMARKS

### Philip Kosnett - United States Ambassador to Kosovo



Ambassador Kosnett laid out two simple, yet important questions concerning the global trend of disinformation: What information is trustworthy? And, what is disinformation meant to deceive? He emphasized that disinformation is multifaceted, that it can be used as a tactic of authoritarian regimes, and that it is found in well-established democracies. He noted that while disinformation can come from any direction, governments have been one of the prime targets. Ambassador Kosnett also

highlighted the disproportionate targeting of women candidates running for public office in Kosovo, with many subjected to harsh and sexist language. This issue will continue unless political party representatives make a conscious decision to refrain from using such language.

He noted that hard-working scientists, researchers, and journalists are striving to provide citizens and their communities around the world with accurate information. He underscored that everyone has a play in fighting disinformation.

The Ambassador highlighted the responsibilities of the media, the need to uphold the highest standards of journalism, and the need to continue deliberately combatting disinformation and misinformation by:

- Educating journalists and editors on the importance of adhering to high ethical standards of fact-checking and editorial practices and holding them accountable;
- Urging all political parties to refrain from misogynistic language;
- Combatting disinformation through all sectors, including civil society, academia, technology, and public institutions;
- Educating citizens on disinformation;
- Supporting programs that teach students critical thinking and media literacy at an early age; and
- Developing the necessary tools for combating the phenomena of disinformation, including finding solutions to mitigate harmful speech.



**KEYNOTE ADDRESS: Glenn Kessler - Editor and Chief writer of Washington Post Fact Checkers, followed by a moderated discussion with NDI Senior Resident Director for Kosovo, Ambassador Nancy Soderberg**



Mr. Kessler emphasized the importance of holding governments accountable, as well as the need to constantly fight the ever-growing threat of disinformation. In detailing his work, Kessler laid out the model The Washington Post developed for evaluating the accuracy of statements almost 11 years ago. He noted that people are receptive to information that confirms their preconceived notions. Mr. Kessler also highlighted that, in the last decade, the number of political fact-checkers has doubled

from the few that existed when he began his work in 2011. Today, there are more than three hundred fact-checking organizations globally, including in just about every country in Europe and Latin America, including the Balkans.

Mr. Kessler encouraged fact-checking organizations to establish high standards by:

- Committing to fact-check all political parties fairly and without bias;
- Receiving annual assessments by outside experts, such as members of other fact-checker organizations, to help ensure such organizations are living up to the highest principles and standards.



**PANEL: Mapping the Information Integrity Environment in Kosovo**

Valon Kurhasani presented NDI/Kosovo's main findings from its 2021 public opinion research, media monitoring, and its ongoing assessment of information integrity<sup>4</sup>. He cited the finding that Kosovo's political environment featured widespread information disorders, including false, exaggerated, or harmful information. NDI/Kosovo's public opinion research found that 74 percent of people in Kosovo believe that portals publish false information regularly or

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.ndi.org/publications/ndi-kosovo-public-opinion-poll-april-2021>.

occasionally. Citizens believed that false stories were mostly published for financial gains. The poll also showed that both false narratives related to COVID-19 and false political statements were believed by every third person in Kosovo. The panelists discussed the issue of media being divided by ethnicity, involving the lack of trust among Kosovo Albanian and Serbian communities in respective media outlets.

Kosovo Albanians trust the Kosovo media more, while the Serb population trusts the Belgrade media when it comes to information on key national developments, according to NDI/Kosovo opinion research. Considering Kosovo's upcoming fall local elections, panelists noted that it is important to examine citizens' information sources before and during the elections. Ms. Berisha highlighted the importance of making a well-informed decision, as doing otherwise could be detrimental to the future of citizens' livelihoods. Panelists underscored that the role of social media platforms should not be underestimated in Kosovo. Most of the political parties, as well as online media outlets that share their content on social media, facilitate misinformation, leading to ill-informed decisions.

Key takeaways from the panel included these steps to improve information integrity:

- Improve media literacy and financial transparency of online media outlets in Kosovo;
- Increase critical and analytical approach by civil society and especially media representatives on issues related to social media environment;
- Ensure more independent media; and
- Equip individuals with tools to cope with disinformation.



### DISI-STORY I: Dren Gerguri, Lecturer at the University of Pristina

A promotional graphic for DISICON. It features a portrait of Dren Gerguri, a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a red shirt. To the right of the portrait is a quote: "It is common in human nature that the belief you have about a certain thing, even if you see a misinformation about it, you tend to believe it more easily because it matches your previous conviction. If a news report is inconsistent with your conviction, people tend to reject or disagree with it." Below the portrait, the text reads: "Dren Gerguri, Lecturer at the University of Pristina 'Hasan Prishtina' and Editor at the European Journalism Observatory". The background is dark blue with green circuit-like patterns and the DISICON logo at the top.

Mr. Gerguri offered his personal experience with disinformation on COVID-19, an academic overview of how disinformation spreads and underscored the importance of fact-checking news. To help minimize daily exposure to fake news, citizens should at least stay alert and remain vigilant while moving through their news consumption. He acknowledged that even being aware of fact-checking models, it is not feasible to factcheck all mass news media.

Mr. Gerguri shared a step-by-step model of tools citizens can use:

- Check news sources. Does the news you are reading come from a well-established news source locally or internationally? If it is a suspicious or an unknown news source, then it is crucial that you do the research of how the news link ended up in your news feed in the first place, and what measures you can take from there.
- Check the author. Has this report been through editorial filters? Even after checking the source and its credibility, it is still possible to fall prey to false information.

## DISI-STORY II: Nina Jankowicz, Disinformation Fellow at Wilson Center



Ms. Jankowicz described her personal experience with disinformation, then discussed how disinformation is weighing down the fabric of democratic society. She explained that disinformation deals with emotions, such as fear or grievances in society. These emotions are further amplified by governments that use fear to push their specific agendas. She pointed out that this is something seen recently with the rise of populist parties around the world, with distant external actors amplifying their

messages on outlets like Facebook and Twitter. She underscored the importance of education and media literacy as an antidote to disinformation and emphasized the need for active citizen participation in democratic environments to combat this phenomenon.

## PANEL: ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION IN KOSOVO



NDI/Kosovo's research has found a strong domestic disinformation market. Online portals and various social media accounts have created and promoted information disorders, bypassing fact-checking, while disinformation activity by political parties was evident during election campaigns. This panel discussed the presence and spread of disinformation in Kosovo's media environment, the lack of regulations for online media, the need to involve regulatory bodies in promoting media literacy, social media's role in

the spread of disinformation, security issues on social media platforms, and efforts needed to combat information disorders.



Key takeaways from the panel included:

- Establishing a government institution-led media education platform for media literacy in Kosovo involving all stakeholders from independent media, regulatory commissions, professional journalists, and NGOs that would promote media education and awareness-raising;
- Creating a real-time mechanism to counter false news, through a centralized platform powered by professional journalists, that would inform citizens daily;
- Educating citizens on consuming online news through media literacy programs;
- Increasing merit-based representation of women in leadership positions in the media, countering the current trend that women are disproportionately attacked in online media;
- Encouraging all online media platforms to include hate-speech management tools on social media posting and commenting;
- Creating transparency of financial sources of revenue for the monitoring of online content in Kosovo; and
- Holding fact-checkers to professional standards with monthly audits to ensure professional fact-checking services in Kosovo.



## DAY 2: June 10, 2021

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS: Opening remarks and discussion with Marketa Gregorova, followed by a moderated discussion with NDI Senior Resident Director for Kosovo, Ambassador Nancy Soderberg**



Markéta Gregorová is a Czech activist and politician. She is a member of the European Parliament serving her 9th parliamentary term. Ms. Gregorova discussed the EU perspective on information integrity challenges, foreign threats and EU integration, and reforms in the media and information industry. Ms. Gregorova addresses the lack of EU legislation in combating disinformation. Firstly, the EU focuses mainly on two aspects of disinformation, one in establishing communication with social platforms with great challenges along the way, and the other on social media platforms that are based outside the EU and how difficult it is to create legal frameworks for them.

Secondly, the EU Commission is taking an efficient approach in trying to create voluntary codes of conduct, including urging big corporations to make political advertising more transparent or in general create safe designs so that the disinformation does not spread more quickly, as well as creating fact-checking cooperation with NGOs. Ms. Gregorova highlighted that this approach is more efficient, since it can test what works and what does not, as well as help us understand the limits of communication with big tech corporations in order to draft proper legislation, where the limits of both sides were already tested.

During the discussion, Ms. Gregorova called attention to the foreign media spread of disinformation and financial transparency of social media platforms. Understanding who spreads disinformation and interferes in foreign countries is an essential key to identifying the source of disinformation, as well as being responsible and accountable for spreading disinformation.

Gregorova highlighted the need for:

- Tackling the transparency and money flow of the media platforms so that disinformation is not viewed as a business model;
- Cooperating with social media, so that misinformation doesn't spread quickly without checks and balances;
- Educating the citizens to be vigilant in consuming the daily news.

#### PANEL: ONLINE AND SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION IN KOSOVO



The panel discussed the emergence of online media, citizens' use of social networks, and the ways that political communication has fundamentally changed in recent decades. Panelists noted that the interwoven triangle of politics, media, and citizens is constantly evolving in new and sometimes unpredictable ways. This, they described, has enabled politicians to convey their messages directly to citizens through social networks that offer unprecedented opportunities for interaction, but also for conveying false narratives.

The discussion focused on how inter-state political communication and multilateral talks are essential and go beyond national electoral processes. Panelists noted that disinformation adds a degree of uncertainty among democratic processes around the world, and that citizens are beginning to lose their connection to the central level and that it is important to examine disinformation in this context. Panelists highlighted polarization in Kosovo during elections, especially given the political landscape with governmental instability and regular snap elections. The panel speakers highlighted that, as long as there is social media presence, there will be fake news and disinformation. Therefore, the need for regulatory bodies becomes essential.

Key takeaways from the panel included:

- Establish regulatory mechanisms for political parties' media presence, spending, and advertising on online social media;
- Ensure political party leaders publicly condemn polarization and hate speech; and
- Increase awareness of political parties to be cautious of their language and approach after developing a mass following online.

### DISI-STORY III: Rasa Nedeljkov, Program Director at Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA)



Mr. Nedeljkov shared his experience with disinformation disorders and the challenges of combating disinformation in Serbia. He laid out the questions of who is benefiting the most from disinformation? And how groups that spread disinformation should be identified? He recalled that, during parliamentary elections in Serbia, among thousands of news items circulating per day, only a few of them were spreading true information. More than 70 percent of information spread in Serbia, Mr.

Nedeljkov claimed, is false and contains misleading information.

## DISI-STORY IV: Katarina Klingova, Senior Research Fellow, Democracy & Resilience at GlobSec Policy Institute



Ms. Klingova shared her story and perspective on disinformation and best practices for combating it. Ms. Klingova pointed out that social media companies should invest more in local moderators and fact-checkers, as they can more effectively identify and take down misinformation. She added that, while smear campaigns are usually part of the political debate, and disinformation has been present for ages, that does not mean we should accept it as a norm.

## PANEL: INFORMATION INTEGRITY FROM THE REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE—HOW CAN THE FACT-CHECKING COMMUNITY HELP?

### Panelists:

- Dario Jovanovic, Pod Lupom (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- Filip Stojanovski, Director for Partnership and Resource Development at Foundation (North Macedonia)
- Kristina Voko, Executive Director of BIRN (Albania)
- Marija Vucic, Journalist at Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (Serbia)
- Milica Zrnovic, Coordinator and Policy Researcher at the Centre for Monitoring and Research – CeMI (Montenegro)
- Moderated by Miodrag Milicevic, Executive Director NGO Aktiv (Kosovo)



Panelists shared the main findings and trends of media monitoring reports from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Information integrity problems are a rising phenomenon accompanying the fast-growing industry of modern media, panelists noted. They described how the growing presence of people on social media platforms is making the western Balkan region vulnerable to information disorder challenges, such as disinformation,

misinformation, and mal-information. They concluded that the region faces a significant level of information disorders, with only minor differences across the region. Ms. Vucic highlighted the extensive propaganda in Serbia and the lack of critical voices there.



Key takeaways from the panel included:

- Including academia in countering disinformation, as it is an untapped group that needs to play a proactive role in the media and media literacy education;
- Establishing international organizations in the Western Balkan countries to fact-check news production in real-time;
- Increasing media accountability in self-checking;
- Improving hiring policies for professional journalists, and Extending media literacy outreach to journalists.



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This conference summary and the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) Information Integrity Conference - DISICON - in Kosovo are made possible through the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors/speakers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, or United States Government.

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