


February 14, 2021 Kosovo Parliamentary Elections



Monitoring of online news
portals and social media

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1. Executive Summary

Information has the potential to be a global threat to democracy that extends far beyond election results. Clear, accurate information is key to ensuring open and transparent governance. Manipulated information or otherwise harmful information can lower public trust in a country's governing and oversight institutions and in the media. This damages democratic processes by impeding informed decision-making and political participation by citizens. Information disorders—language promoting political division, harassment, harsh and sexist language, hate speech, as well as false context, false, skewed, manipulated, fabricated and misleading content¹—threaten Kosovo's democracy.

To address the growing threat, NDI began assessing the presence of such information disorders in Kosovo's online media landscape in 2019, in both Albanian and Serbian language media. In December 2019, NDI hosted Kosovo's first [conference on information integrity](#). This established a platform to discuss and understand information disorders, to inspire action to prevent and counter them, and thereby strengthen democracy in Kosovo.² In March 2020, NDI launched a comprehensive, systematic media monitoring program to examine information in Kosovo's online news portals and social media in both the Albanian and Serbian languages. As part of this effort, NDI monitored online news portals and social media in the lead up to the February 14, 2021 snap parliamentary elections from January 24 to February 13, 2021. A summary of the key findings is below.

Widespread information disorders. In the observed period, NDI found that Kosovo's political environment featured widespread information disorders, including false, exaggerated, or harmful information. Although overall reporting was accurate and professional, it also spread disorders without identifying them as such, providing neither disclaimers, needed context, nor fact-checking. NDI found 264 such items in its election period review, which generated a combined reach of 3.2 million.³ Misogyny was widely spread. There were numerous narratives with information disorders from Serbian leaders in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, as well as Russian-sponsored narratives.

In the Albanian language sample:

- Information disorders spread rapidly and were widely shared, both horizontally (from portal to portal), as well as vertically (between portals and Facebook accounts).

¹ For more information see [INFORMATION DISORDER: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making](#).

² See [NDI DISICON 2019 Kosovo Disinformation Findings](#).

³ The automated tool calculated the reach of portals and social media but was not tracked by geographical location; therefore, the 3.2 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. Reach is defined for online news portals by a click on an article. For social media, 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, not views.

- On average, it took less than an hour (43 minutes) for an article containing some form of information disorder to be reproduced by other portals. On average, news articles were shared by at least seven other online news portals, including many prominent ones with high numbers of followers, some with hundreds of thousands of followers.
- NDI identified 105 news articles containing information disorders on portals. These had a reach of 722,783 and were shared 955 times on Facebook.
- On Facebook, 59 posts (including videos and pictures) containing some form of information disorder had a reach of 1.3 million, and more than 2,900 shares.
- On Twitter, which is not widely used in Kosovo, NDI found 50 Tweets containing information disorders, with a reach of more than 17,000.⁴

On average, it took less than an hour for an article containing some form of information disorders to be reproduced by other portals.

In the Serbian language sample:

- NDI identified 50 news articles containing information disorders on the portals. They generated a reach of 1.1 million, were shared 566 times on Facebook, and retweeted 1,831 times.
- Virtually no original content was produced on Facebook or Twitter, with posts replicating content directly from portals.⁵

Portals and social media accounts created and promoted information disorders, failing to fact check. While overall reporting was accurate and professional, online news portals and social media played a considerable role in promoting content with information disorders.

- **Online news portals contributed to divisive language by creating and publishing their own direct attacks and mischaracterizing statements of politicians.** The electoral campaign was characterized by a high degree of divisive and harsh language among political leaders, which were largely reported accurately by the media. However, NDI also found that in roughly a quarter of such articles, the media itself contributed to the divisive language. Portals mischaracterized the statements of opinion makers and politicians, or directly attacked political parties and individuals.
- **Social media created and spread doctored photos (memes) and videos.** Many doctored or fabricated posts, photos, and videos were created, shared, and reshared. This included those portraying political leaders in unflattering ways, falsely accusing them of calling for violence, or linking them to corruption in the candidate certification process. While not measured systematically, anecdotally, memes containing disinformation were present on social media during this election.
- **Citizens are aware of information disorders but they still affect public opinion.** Seventy-four percent of citizens believe portals regularly or occasionally report

⁴For this review, the automated tool and manual analysis identified a broad sample of 5,482 news articles and social media posts for further investigation in the Albanian-language sample and 1,000 articles on portals in the Serbian language.

⁵The lack of original content on social media in the Serbian language occurred during this election campaign but in other media outside of the campaign period monitoring, NDI did detect original content with information disorders on social media in the Serbian language.

information disorders, although up to thirty percent do not discern some narratives as false or distorted.

Misogyny. Portals and social media reported, spread, and in some cases produced, inappropriate comments about women candidates during this period, including violence-oriented statements, and failed to identify them as misogyny. Comments made by some political leaders and media about the candidate's physical appearance, family life, and personal conduct were spread. One candidate received a death threat.

External interference. NDI found narratives from Serbian leaders in Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina to be widespread in the sample, as well as Russia-sponsored narratives. NDI's findings suggest that Russia-sponsored media was active in Serbian language around the elections, through Sputnik.rs and other Russia-sponsored media outlets based in Serbia. The media did not make clear which news items came from outside of Kosovo and failed to note when statements were skewed or not factual. Russia-backed outlets produced and spread false and skewed narratives about Kosovo's leading politicians. False narratives included those implying the creation of a Greater Albania, conspiracy theories about the intended results of negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia on normalizing relations, implying an anti-Serb bias by the US, and that leading Americans with an interest in the region were only working against the interests of Serbs in Kosovo. Portals based in Serbia, followed closely by the Serbian speaking population in Kosovo, reported many Serbian-language narratives in favor of supporting the Srpska Lista party (SL).

Bot Activity - fake followers on Twitter: The review, using the [botometer tool](#) for 31 Twitter accounts in the Albanian language, revealed that more than half of them likely had bot activity. For instance, according to the tool, most followers of one portal's Twitter account were bots. Of the 11 Twitter accounts reviewed in the Serbian language, five likely had bots. Posts largely attacked leaders of political parties, contributing to political division. The media did not report the bot activity.

2. Context

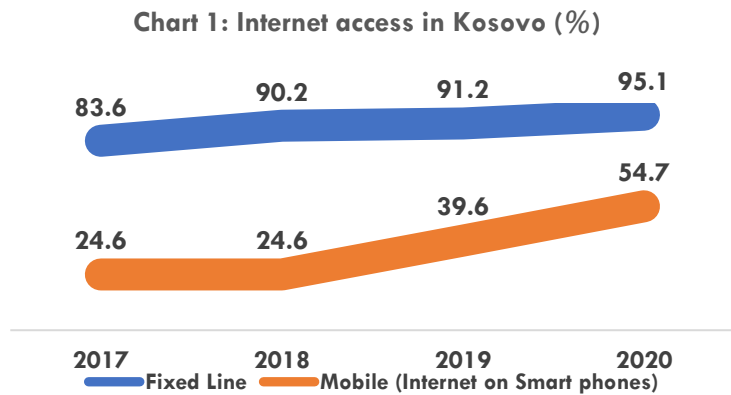
The rapid spread of the internet and social media has created an unprecedented opportunity to provide information to billions around the world, helping to develop informed democracies. Access to the internet in Kosovo is among the highest in Europe and has increased significantly in recent years.⁶ Internet access through fixed connection lines increased from 84 percent in 2017 to 95 percent in 2020, with mobile smartphone access increasing from 25 percent to 55 percent over the same period. Reported

use of the internet is also increasing. For instance, in 2020, 92 percent of the households used the internet on a daily basis, a 26 percent increase from 2018. The use of the internet by age is somewhat equally distributed – with a slightly higher use by the group of 35 to 44 years old. Nearly 57 percent of the population use social media.⁷

Seventy-four percent of citizens believe portals regularly or occasionally report information disorders, although up to thirty percent do not discern some narratives as false or distorted. NDI public opinion research shows that 32 percent of citizens believe that portals regularly report false information stories, with another 29 percent believing that disinformation is shared on social media. Forty-two percent believe that this phenomenon happens occasionally. According to the research, 38 percent believe that this happens for financial reasons, and 17 percent believe that this reporting is done on purpose to push a certain agenda.

However, manipulated or harmful information is increasingly threatening the integrity of democratic discourse worldwide, including in Kosovo. Given Kosovo's history of conflict, partisan division, and long-standing ethnic tension, citizens face a robust domestic marketplace for disinformation. As public reliance on social media and the internet for news and information has risen, political discourse has rapidly moved online, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. NDI's research has found that the country's political environment features false, exaggerated, or harmful information which is reflected in the media. Whether intentional or inadvertent, the widespread sharing of such information disorders by political parties, leaders, and the media undermines the ability of citizens to gain factual information through which to elect their representatives and hold their governments accountable—and thus threatens Kosovo's democracy.

The election on February 14, 2021 selected the Assembly's new 120 members. In these elections, Vetevendosje Movement (LVV) won a historic 50.3 percent of the vote, ushering in Albin Kurti as prime minister and Vjosa Osmani as president. The election occurred amidst the continuing



Source: Kosovo Statistics Agency, Information and Communication Technology Survey, 2020

⁶See: [Kosovo Agency of Statistics](#).

⁷ Digital 2021: Kosovo, available at <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-kosovo>.

COVID-19 pandemic, and as Kosovo continues to seek to normalize relations with Serbia and gain entrance into the European Union (EU). Political tensions were high as Kosovo's voters went to the polls for the fifth parliamentary election in 13 years since independence, and the second such election in the past two years.

The elections were considered free and fair, within the framework of legal definitions and international standards, according to the nongovernmental organization, [Democracy in Action](#) (DiA), and international observers. The elections saw high turnout despite bad weather and the pandemic. A record number of votes came from the diaspora, largely supporting LVV.

In this context, NDI monitored social media during the campaign period and found widespread information disorders, including false, exaggerated, or harmful information. The detailed findings are below.

3. Methodology

As an expansion of its ongoing media monitoring and analysis, NDI reviewed online content surrounding the February 14 early parliamentary elections in Kosovo. This included social media posts on Facebook and Twitter, and online news portals (hereinafter portals) in Kosovo, as well as those portals in Serbia widely watched and the social media followed among the Serbian speaking population in Kosovo. Two separate online monitoring tools were used to ensure comprehensive monitoring of multiple metrics. The tools provided measurable data of the reach of several narratives during the election campaign in Kosovo.

NDI monitored election-related content from January 24, 2021 through February 13, 2021. The law mandates that all campaigning stop the day before the election, however, social media activities continued on February 13. Social media activities of this nature currently fall in a legal grey area, and therefore the continued social media outreach was not considered illegal.

For both language samples, the portals and social media platforms were selected based on their high reach inside Kosovo, although some of these platforms also have significant reach in the region and diaspora. In Albanian language, NDI monitored 73 portals, 146 Facebook pages, 10 groups, and 31 Twitter accounts. For the Serbian language sample, NDI monitored 48 portals, 10 based in Kosovo and 38 based in Serbia, but which are also widely followed among Serbs in Kosovo. Serbia-based media is widely watched among ethnic Serb populations in Kosovo, and are republished in the Serbian language media that are based in Kosovo. NDI also monitored 49 Facebook pages and 11 Twitter accounts in Serbian language. However, NDI found little substantive original content with information disorders related to the elections in this subset.

NDI collected content that included language in portals and social media promoting political division and harsh language, misogyny, and external influence.⁸ This content illustrates some of the most significant information disorders NDI observed in Kosovo’s media during this election. Definitions of terminology used are noted in the [Appendix](#).⁹

Table 1. List of Online News Portals and Social Media monitored during the elections campaign

By Language	Albanian	Serbian	Other	Total
Facebook Pages	146	49	1	196
Facebook Groups	10	0	0	10
Twitter Accounts	31	11	0	42
Grand Total Social Media				248
Online News Portals	73	48	6	127
TOTAL MONITORING SAMPLE				375

NDI created specific queries for its election-focused media monitoring using a keyword list developed based on Kosovo’s political context. NDI’s review targeted articles and posts with the highest reach and relevance during the election campaign. After the election campaign was over, NDI downloaded the resulting data and analyzed the content.

Based on relevancy and reach assessed through automated and manual reviews, NDI selected a sample of 3693 news articles, 1289 Facebook posts, and 500 Tweets for further investigation in the Albanian-language sample. Of these, NDI found 214 total news articles and social media posts containing information disorders. Of these, 59 were Facebook posts, 50 posts on Twitter, and 105 were news articles on portals. In the Serbian sample, 1000 articles were reviewed, out of which 50 were found to be sharing information disorders. NDI tracked the reach of these articles and posts with software tools.

To explore whether a particular Twitter account had automated robot (bot) followers, NDI used the tool [botometer](#). This software calculates the probability that an account has bot followers. It uses a machine learning algorithm that calculates a score by comparing an account to tens of thousands of labeled examples. A review of the 31 Twitter accounts in the Albanian language revealed that more than half of them had likely bot activity.

NDI manually observed Instagram. NDI randomly collected several photos (memes) which were circulating harsh language and humorous images criticizing political figures. The NDI team also found memes on Facebook spreading political division, along with anecdotal evidence of the same on personal messaging applications.

⁸Other portals in Albanian language included 11 in Albania, 1 in Bosnia-Herzegovina, 4 in North Macedonia, and 1 each in Sweden, Switzerland and the US.

⁹For 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](#).

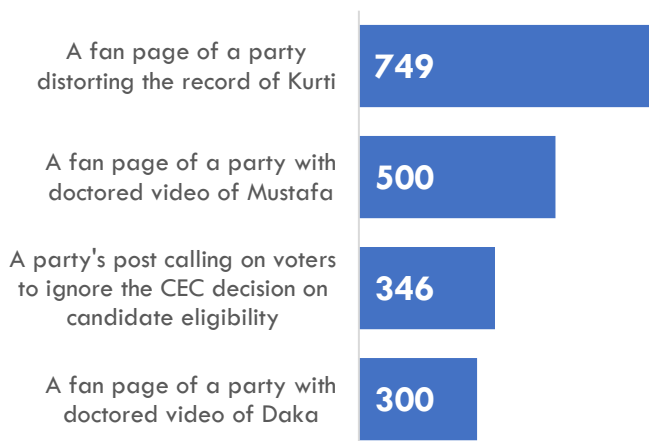
4. Political Division and Harsh Language - Albanian Language Sample

The tense political atmosphere during the electoral campaign triggered harsh political attacks in the media. Reporting on this language was often accurate, including coverage of the harsh public discourse. Nonetheless, NDI’s examination of this sample of portals and social media suggests that both played a considerable role in promoting information disorders, failing to fact check. This information reached a high number of people. Articles were shared rapidly and widely by other highly influential portals. On average, it took less than an hour (43 minutes) for an article containing some form of information disorder to be reproduced by other portals. On average, news articles were shared by at least seven other portals. NDI’s post-election public opinion research indicates that many of the false and skewed narratives influenced or mirrored public perceptions.

Online news portals and social media played a considerable role in promoting information disorders, failing to fact check.

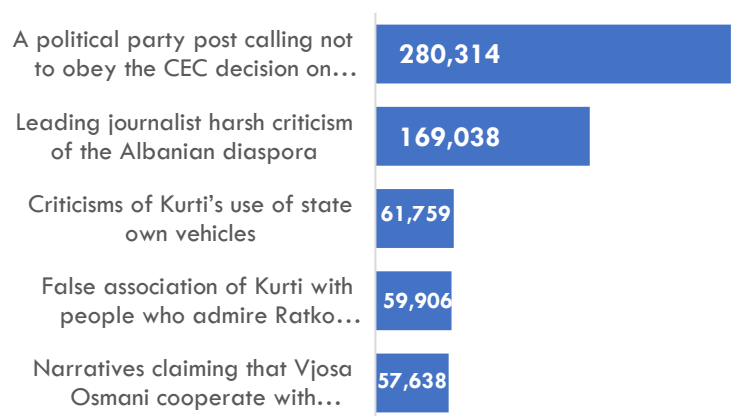
As charts two, three, and four below illustrate, the most shared narratives involved criticism of the LVV’s candidate for prime minister, Albin Kurti; and the 2020 ruling by the Central Election Commission’s (CEC) that Kurti (and 46 others) was not eligible to run in the February elections due to his 2018 conviction for violence in the Assembly in 2015. For instance, a call by a political party through its official Facebook account to ignore the CEC decision on candidates’ eligibility was the most spread narrative on Facebook within the Albanian language sample. It had a reach of 280,314. The most circulated post was from an MP candidate who posted a statement on Facebook calling Albin Kurti a psychopath. It was shared by nine other news portals with high influence, and generated a reach of 117,000+. In addition, the most shared post on Facebook was a narrative from a fan page of a party opposing and distorting the record of Albin Kurti, with a total of 749 shares.

Chart 2: Most shared posts on Facebook



Source: NDI/Kosovo research

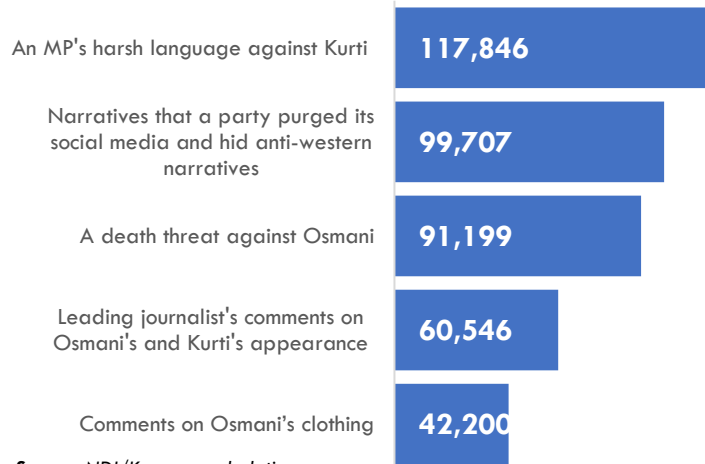
Chart 3: Narratives that reached the highest number of people on Facebook



Source: NDI/Kosovo research

Some news portals skewed statements by government officials, at times using offensive language, taking statements out of context, and spreading false information. They also took photos out of context, exaggerated gestures made in TV debates, and falsely accused parties of being anti-western and anti-Israel. Harsh language included calling one party leader a psychopath, claiming one party leader wanted another one to disappear, and other use of offensive language by political leaders. Unverifiable accusations from political leaders and by the media were also present. These accusations often cited or shared alleged old content, but old content was often removed. This makes verifying these references and statements difficult.

Chart 4. Narratives that generated the highest number of clicks on portals



Source: NDI/Kosovo - calculations

Facebook is the most used social media outlet in Kosovo. According to Facebook data, the average number of followers per page is 105,000+ people. In NDI's election-focused observation, information disorders produced or shared using Facebook had a reach of 1.3 million. Therefore, its impact in the information environment is significant. Party leaders attacked each other, and Facebook groups supporting various parties produced or shared posts containing false or unverifiable accusations, derogatory comments, doctored photos, and other forms of information disorder.

Information disorders produced or shared using Facebook had a reach of 1.3 million.

Facebook pages of political parties were used to attack other parties' figures. For instance, doctored videos containing denigrating visual footage were created by Facebook fan pages of political parties and used to attack political leaders. One of the most attacked figures was the then-acting president, and presumed presidential nominee of LVV, Vjosa Osmani. She and her list were

Party leaders were attacked in Facebook posts containing false accusations, derogatory comments, doctored photos, and other forms of disinformation.

subject to disinformation and denigrating or harsh language on social media. Osmani and her family were falsely accused of working for Serbia. The Chairwoman of the CEC, Valdete Data, was another subject of attacks and false accusations charging her of being biased and corrupt. LVV leader Albin Kurti, LDK's party leader Isa Mustafa, LDK's candidate for prime minister Avdullah Hoti, Alliance for the Future of Kosovo's (AAK) leader Ramush Haradinaj, and Endrit Shala, a former minister from the Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA), were also subject to attacks on social media.

The Constitutional Court ruling on candidate eligibility was not accurately reflected in some articles and posts, nor were Kurti's 2015 protests.

While not related to political division narratives, NDI noticed an uptick in the number of posts aiming to financially scam people for betting on the outcomes of the elections.

Twitter is not a popular social platform in Kosovo. The average number of followers per page of the monitored accounts was 6,700+. In the monitored sample, the average people reached per post was approximately 460. Twitter content largely was re-postings from portals. Of the 52 posts found with false or misleading information, eleven posts had the highest reach, and just one account generated five of the eleven posts. The same account had particularly obvious bot activity. Nonetheless, as on Facebook, divisive language, harsh language, and other forms of information disorders were present on Twitter. Party leaders took to Twitter to attack each other. In addition, the Twitter account of one leading party was used to spread false information, by claiming that citizens' votes would count for its leading candidate. In reality, he had been disqualified by the Constitutional Court and was not eligible to run or to be on the ballot.

Party leaders took to Twitter to attack each other and Twitter accounts were used to spread false information.

Additional examples in news portals.

- Unverifiable accusations were present. Old content is often removed, making verification of allegations difficult. For instance, one article published a quote that was, it avowed, originally posted on its social platform in 2014. The quote suggested that one political party alleged that Israel was built on the crimes of the US and UK. This article was shared on at least six other portals, had a reach of 99,000+, and was shared 140 times.
- A photo of LVV candidate for PM Kosovo Albin Kurti leaning on a vehicle was published with a sensational headline that created the impression that Kurti had taken a picture with a citizen who had violated the traffic rules. The article was posted on a portal which has a high influence (344,000+ followers). This news article had a reach of 6,100+ and was shared by two other Facebook accounts.



*Kurti i pështetet në kerr shoferit që duket në krahun e gabuar të rrugës (Foto)
Kurti leans in the car to the driver who looks on the wrong side of the road (Photo)*

Additional examples on Facebook.

- Vjosa Osmani faced a violent death threat on Facebook that also included a picture of a nine-barrel rifle. This news was also reported on Facebook by her staff. That post was shared horizontally when it went viral, spreading quickly to 22 other portals. It ultimately had a reach of 91,000+, and was shared by 44 Facebook accounts.
- Harsh language and doctored photos and videos were used against party leaders. For instance, a Facebook page with 39,000 + followers published a doctored video of Isa Mustafa with his face deformed to make it seem that he is barking like a dog. This post also included content referring to Mustafa as “Serbia’s servant”. This video had 38,000 views, 983 comments and reactions, and was shared 452 times.
- The Constitutional Court decision denying some candidates’ eligibility on the basis of prior convictions (in line with Kosovo law, albeit previously unenforced) incited a campaign of attacks against the chairwoman of the CEC, Valdete Daka. The attacks portrayed her as biased against LVV, given the impact the Constitutional Court decision had on multiple LVV candidates. Attacks also suggested that she was corrupt. Daka stated that she and her family felt threatened. A Facebook page posted a photo in the format of a “meme”, photoshopping Daka’s face surrounded with money and the phrase “PRONTO”, which is a famous corruption case in Kosovo. This page has 50,000+ followers, and the post had 253 comments and reactions, and was shared 87 times.



The only shotgun with nine barrels



Only with Albin Kurti as Prime Minister



Examples on Twitter.

- Attacks on the CEC were present not only on portals and Facebook, but also on Twitter. For instance, LVV published a post on Twitter urging people to vote for Kurti, even though he was not on the ballot, nor was he eligible to run. It said “Every vote counts, don’t listen to those who say otherwise”. This tweet had a reach of 1,700+ and it was re-tweeted eight times.
- A news portal tweeted that Kurti would only join debates in which he would not be criticized, claiming that he was copying former President Hashim Thaci. This post had a reach of 670+ on Twitter.

Mememes on Social Media

While memes were not systematically monitored, NDI noticed the presence of memes in social media during this election, including on Instagram, through an anecdotal manual review. The automated monitoring tools used in this review are not capable of monitoring memes, because they do not have a written image description for the automated monitoring software to capture. While NDI was, therefore, unable to conduct more detailed numerical analysis, several illustrative examples gathered from its manual review are included here.

One meme showed a man doing housework and compared him to the husband of Vjosa Osmani. In another, LVV leader Albin Kurti was edited to appear in the car of the comedy character “Mr. Bean,” holding a broom: implying that he will clean up the state’s institutions. Another featured former Prime Minister Hoti taking the place of the Christ statue in Rio de Janeiro, while a fourth alleged PDK corruption in the construction industry.



Albin Kurti (LVV) and the broom representing his aims to clean up the state institutions

Burri i Vjosa Osmanit



The husband of Vjosa Osmani

"A i PDK-se po f'dokna une me maru shpi n'gurthyse a?"



Do I look like I belong to PDK to build a house in a quarry?



Avdullah Hoti (former Prime Minister) posing as the Christ in the famous statue in Rio de Janeiro

5. Misogyny

During the election campaign, NDI observed that the media reported the abuse women endured during the campaign, often without pointing out the misogyny involved. Women were frequent targets of biased, sexist, or manipulated language. They were subjected to verbal attacks for their political positions, for their personal life choices and their appearances, and subject to sexist language. Much of the observed language constitutes online violence against women.¹⁰ Women faced sexist comments, accusations of putting their personal lives ahead of their party, belittlement of their careers, accusations of benefiting from political patronage, cowardice, and even death threats. Many articles and posts referenced the looks and appearances of women politicians. Acting President Vjosa Osmani, who was also a leading candidate during the elections, was a particular target of such attacks. Although not systematically monitored, NDI observed that these issues were discussed by analysts in the prime time shows, spreading beyond online portals and social media. The other most-frequently targeted women included prominent figures, such as Vadete Daka, Duda Balje, Adriana Hodzic, Vlora Citaku, and Lumturije Kurtishaj. NDI did not detect misogyny in the Serbian language sample.

Women were frequent targets of biased, sexist, or manipulated language.

Examples of misogyny.

- The misogynistic article that generated the highest reach involved a statement made by a journalist who ridiculed a photo of Vjosa Osmani and Albin Kurti, labeling it “*like in the Turkish movies*”. This sexist reference to Turkish soap operas popular in Kosovo indicates that she is looking at Albin Kurti with very loving eyes. The post went viral and was spread by nine other portals. It had a reach of 73,000+ and was shared by ten Facebook accounts.
- 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 among several portals, with a reach of 42,000+ people and 12 shares.

Çdo të shtunë, Vjosa Osmani thotë se në sofrën e saj ka “fli dhe krelanë me duqa”



“Every Saturday for lunch, I have “fli and krelan me duqa”

¹⁰ For more information on NDI’s global research on this subject, see <https://www.ndi.org/tweets-that-chill> and <https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>

- A portal made comparisons between Social Democrat Initiative MP, Lumturie Kurtishaj, and the actress Cameron Diaz. The focus of the picture and headline was her appearance rather than her work for gender equality in Kosovo. This article had a reach of 7,000+ and was shared five times by other Facebook accounts.

Kandidatja e Nisma-s që i ngjason aktores së hollywood-it dhe angazhohet për barazinë gjinore



Nisma candidate who resembles the Hollywood actress is committed to gender equality

6. Political Division and Harsh Language - Serbian Language Sample

Due to the lack of political pluralism in the Kosovo Serb community, and the mainstream Serbia-based media supporting the Srpska List (SL) in Kosovo, there was no intensive campaign in the Serbian language media by political entities participating in these elections. Coverage of the two citizen initiatives put forward by Kosovo Serbs was low.¹¹ These initiatives did not have a strong political infrastructure and or access to Serbia’s main media portals, likely contributing to this disparate coverage.

Key politicians in Serbia made statements in support of SL, which was covered extensively in the media. As seen in chart five, NDI found that the most widely spread narrative on Serbian news portals was the claim by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic that the SL was the best option for Kosovo Serbs. It generated a reach of 300,000.

The other primary narratives were to vote for SL, to stop any attempt to destroy unity among Kosovo Serbs, and calls to stop any attempt to use reserved seats of Kosovo Serbs for the interests of Kosovo

Albanians. Articles promoted the argument that SL is the bulwark defense of Kosovo Serb interests. Others alleged that Kosovo Albanian political leaders aimed to divide the Kosovo Serb community and push the Kosovo Serb community to leave Kosovo.

Compared to the SL media coverage in the monitored sample, coverage of opposition political options representing the Kosovo Serb community was thin. Harsh language was used to criticize Kosovo Serb opposition leaders, calling them liars, traitors, and corrupt. For example, Twitter featured harsh accusations traded between SL and one of the more vocal opposition candidates,

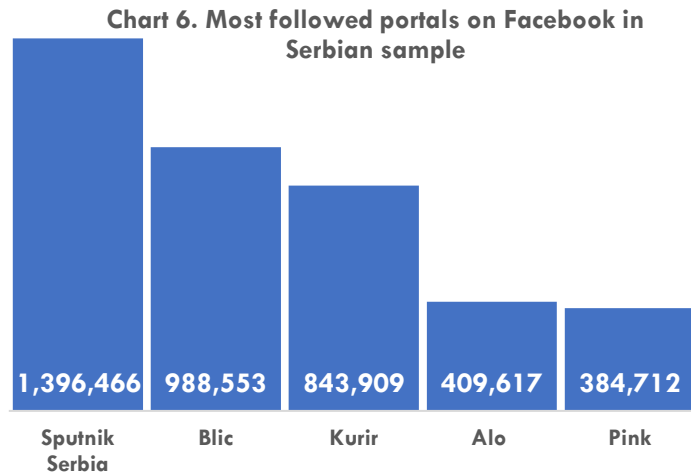
Chart 5. Narratives that generated the highest number of clicks on the Serbian language portals



Source: NDI/Kosovo - research

¹¹One initiative was from the citizen initiative for Freedom, Justice and Survival and the other was from the Serbian Democratic Alliance.

the president of the European Movement of Serbs from Kosovo and Metohija, Rada Trajkovic. There was also coverage criticizing the interference of SL in supporting the creation of and promotion of the new Roma and Bosniak parties and their candidates. This activity spurred harsh language, which was accurately reflected in the media. Otherwise, any mentions in the sample of opposition parties, their activities, or statements were sporadic and rare.



As noted in chart six, and in the section on external influence below, the Serbian language version of the Russia-backed Sputnik portal was the most followed portal within the Serbian sample that NDI monitored on Facebook.¹²

Source: NDI/Kosovo research

Examples.

- As an example of the common pro-SL narratives observed in the sample, one such article in Kosovo-based Serbian language portals claimed the Kosovo Serbs need to be united in support of SL and Republic of Serbia. It described SL as the bulwark defense of Kosovo Serb interests. This had a reach of 10,000+ and 23 shares.
- While most of the posts on Twitter were not original content, one Serbian official posted a tweet falsely accusing Kosovo Serb opposition politician Rada Trajkovic of cooperating with Kurti for the creation of Greater Albania. The post was retweeted 424 times and had 628 likes.
- The above Tweet was in response to Trajkovic’s criticism of the Serbian government’s support for SL, accusing it of intimidation and drawing parallels to the dictatorship in North Korea. This post had eight retweets and 137 likes.
- In contrast, the Serbian language media largely reported accurately the accusation by political leaders in the Bosniak community that SL interfered in the election of non-majority non-Serb candidates. One article with this narrative had a reach of 10,000+ and 14 shares.

Balje: Srpska lista namerava da osvoji više mesta manjinskih zajednica u parlamentu



Balje: Srpska List is planning to win more seats, through reserved seat of other communities in Assembly of Kosovo

¹² The total number of followers listed includes followers in all locations, and is not specific to Kosovo.

7. External influence

As in past elections, Russian-sponsored Serbian language media was active in the elections in Kosovo, through Sputnik.rs and other Russian sponsored media outlets based in Serbia. Narratives invoked the threat of a Greater Albania, (which is commonly used to stoke fear among Kosovo's Serbian population), spread false narratives that Kosovo's politicians were seeking Serbs who would betray interests of Kosovo Serbs and paying Serbs to blindly obey the directives of Kosovo Albanians, as well as statements of international stakeholders, especially the EU and United States, which the Russian media distorted.



Can Kurti find any Albanian Serb like Zeljko Komšic

The main narratives of the Russian based stories were those urging Kosovo Serbs and Serbia to turn their backs on western countries and look for support from Russia and China. In addition, leading international politicians, including Wesley Clark, Madeleine Albright, and others, were accused of working against Serbia and the interests of Serbs, as well as trying to ensure that Serbia and Serbs did not receive anything from the ongoing negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia on the normalization of relations. This rhetoric further undermines attempts to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, and raises fears among Kosovo Serbs.

In most cases, the Sputnik.rs narratives were widely shared among Serbian language portals and Facebook pages, without being identified as Russia based information.

Mainstream media outlets from Serbia—closely watched in Kosovo—were active during the election campaign. Media outlets did not qualify problematic statements in their reporting. As in the Kosovo-based Serbian language, the leading election-related narratives were biased in favor of SL, and described “dark scenarios” if SL did not win all ten MP seats reserved for Kosovo's Serb community in the Assembly of Kosovo. The most widely shared were statements by Aleksandar Vucic, President of Serbia urging votes for SL. The Serb Member of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina and prominent political leader from Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, echoed similar themes. His statements were likewise covered in Serbian language media. Some Serbian public figures' statements, without proper context, were translated into Albanian and published in Albanian portals and social media.

The influence of Serbia in elections in Kosovo was very high.

Examples.

- Sputnik.rs posted an article with the headline falsely accusing Kosovo Serbs who had discussions with Kurti of betraying Serbia and interests of Kosovo Serbs, like the Bosnian

leader Zeljko Komsic.¹³ This article had a reach of 53,000+ and 60 shares. It was then reposted by other Serbian language portals in both Kosovo and Serbia with more sensational headlines and distorted background information, such as “Kurti’s Serbs will never win” and “Kurti’s Serbs can go with him but Serbs will always be with President Vucic.” These narratives had a total reach of 131,000+ and were shared more than 40 times on Facebook.

- Sputnik.rs posted an article 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.
- Several portals shared the Sputnik.rs narrative about the threat of a Greater Albania. The original post had a reach of 84,000+, with 43 shares. This narrative was then re-posted by several Serbian language portals with a reach of 66,000+ people and 15 shares on Facebook.



Wesley K. Clark exposed the US intentions about Kosovo: They do not even offer "crumbs" to Serbia, to give away Kosovo

¹³ Serbia accuses Komsic of betraying the Serbian heritage of his mother.

8. Appendix

8.1 List of Abbreviations

Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK)

Automated robot (bot)

Central Election Commission (CEC)

Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK)

Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK)

European Union (EU)

Social Democratic Initiative (NISMA)

Vetëvendosje Movement (LVV)

Srpska (Serbian) Lista (SL)

8.2 Glossary

Bots are social media accounts that are operated entirely by computer programs and are designed to generate posts and/or engage with content on a particular platform. In disinformation campaigns, bots can be used to draw attention to misleading narratives, to hijack platforms' trending lists, and to create the illusion of public discussion and support.⁴ Researchers and technologists take different approaches to identifying bots, using algorithms or simpler rules based on number of posts per day.¹⁴

Disinformation is false information that is deliberately created or disseminated with the express purpose to cause harm. Producers of disinformation typically have political, financial, psychological or social motivations.¹⁵

Information Disorder. For 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.¹⁶

¹⁴ Howard, P. N. & K. Bence (2016) *Bots, #StrongerIn, and #Brexit: Computational Propaganda during the UK-EU Referendum*, COMPROP Research note, 2016.1, <http://comprop.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/89/2016/06/COMPROP-2016-1.pdf>.

¹⁵ Wardle, C. & H. Derakshan (September 27, 2017) *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*, Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>.

¹⁶ One year on, we're still not recognizing the complexity of information disorder online

Memes are images, videos, pieces of text, etc. that are passed very quickly from one internet user to another, often with slight changes that make it humorous.¹⁷

Misinformation is information that is false, but not intended to cause harm. For example, individuals who do not know that a piece of information is false may spread it on social media in an attempt to be helpful.¹⁸

Reach is defined for online news portals by a click on an article. For social media, reach is measured by whether a post is viewed or opened. For images (videos and photos) found by NDI's manual review on Facebook, the methodology tracked only the number of views and interactions (comments, reactions, and shares) as a reference of reach for videos. For photos, interactions (not views) was the metric used.

Violence against women in politics encompasses all forms of aggression, coercion and intimidation against women as political actors simply because they are women and is used to control, limit or prevent women's full and equal political participation. While political violence happens against both men and women, violence against women in politics targets women because they are women, in ways that apply particularly to women (e.g., sexual violence and sexist attacks), and discourages all women from political activity, with a particularly negative impact on young women or new entrants to politics.¹⁹

https://firstdraftnews.org/latest/coe_infodisorder/.

¹⁷ Oxford dictionary available on

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/meme#:~:text=meme-noun,oftenpercent20bypercent20peoplepercent20copyingpercent20it>.

¹⁸ Wardle, C. & H. Derakshan (September 27, 2017) *Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making*, Council of Europe, <https://rm.coe.int/information-disorder-toward-an-interdisciplinary-framework-for-research/168076277c>.

¹⁹ See NDI report <https://www.ndi.org/reporting-violence-against-women>.

This report and the National Democratic Institute's (NDI) research 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 and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID, or any individual of the aforementioned organizations.

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