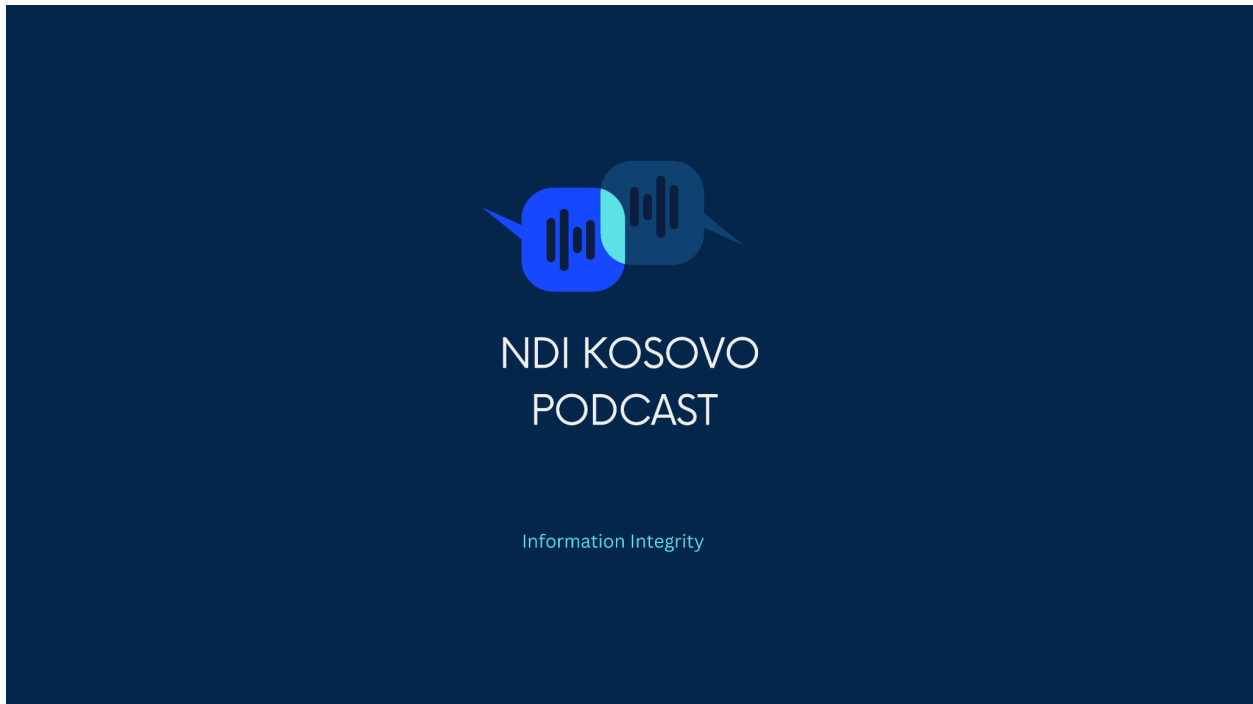


## Information Integrity in Kosovo: A Podcast Discussion



NDI Kosovo has worked to reinforce and safeguard democracy in the Kosovo region by directly combating misinformation and how it impacts the international sphere. This podcast explores the steps that can be taken to safeguard civil society against the instability that comes with fake news.

NDI Kosovo is countering the rising threat of disinformation and the lack of media literacy skills in Kosovo and Western Balkan countries through a podcast series that fosters online discourse on the importance of Information Integrity and methods that can secure the information sphere. In 2022, over the course of three months, NDI tackled a range of topics, from information disorders to digital democracy, the impact of misogyny and sexism as a tool of violence against women in politics, the prevalence of foreign influences, the impact of the lack of information integrity on inter-ethnic tensions in Kosovo, to the role of journalists in the Information war, especially in regards to the war in Ukraine.

Through these episodes, NDI Kosovo engaged various stakeholders to establish an online conversation on the Information Integrity environment and further efforts to promote media literacy and combat information disorders in Kosovo.

## Episode One: NDI's Research on Information Integrity in Kosovo



Although over 97% of Kosovo's population can easily access the internet, the majority of citizens lack basic media literacy skills, resulting in Kosovars being vulnerable to dis/misinformation. In episode one, Dren Gërguri, a Professor at the University of Pristina, and Pajtim Gashi, NDI Kosovo's Program Director, examined this alarming situation and its impact on Kosovo's democracy. While Information disorders are not a new phenomenon, the advancement of technology makes the information environment more vulnerable to dis/misinformation. As a result, Professor Gërguri argues that the combination of the lack of basic media literacy and the proliferation of dis/misinformation creates a society that is 'unarmed,' and thus prone to 'beliefs' based on conspiracy theories and false information. Additionally, he stressed the importance of younger generations obtaining media literacy skills in schools and the necessity of equipping educators with the tools to educate students on various methods for identifying dis/misinformation. Furthermore, in a study that he conducted with his colleague, Professor Gërguri found that Kosovar citizens' "lack of skills to differentiate what is true and what is not" directly correlates with the prevalence of dis/misinformation in Kosovo. The rise of 'citizen journalists' with the help of advanced technologies has enabled wider access to a media platform, changing the flow of the news and creating a new way of spreading information. Mr. Gërguri urged podcast listeners to differentiate between credible journalist-given information and non-journalistic sources, as the latter should not be taken as the truth. Furthermore, he emphasized that media literacy skills are crucial for Kosovo, given the significant increase in internet usage and advanced technologies. In his closing remarks, Mr. Gërguri provided recommendations on how to effectively fact-check information and possible solutions to address the proliferation of mis/disinformation and its impact on civil society. These solutions include identifying the author, cross-checking the information with other media sources, searching for and examining potential biases, and verifying its authenticity through official sources. Overall, the episode offered valuable insights into the importance of media literacy skills to navigate the modern media landscape and the need for immediate action to combat disinformation in Kosovo. The discussion can be heard [here](#).

## Episode Two: Digital Democracy: How Disinformation Affects Young People?



Building on the discussion from episode one, in episode two, NDI’s Elona Gashi and Robert Shala, the executive director of Sentry Cybersecurity, explored Kosovo’s youth vulnerability to dis/misinformation. To begin the discussion, Mr. Shala highlighted the correlation between the rise of dis/misinformation among younger generations, the abundance of diverse information, and the lack of media literacy. He emphasized that the youth is currently unprepared to think critically about the information they are digesting due to Kosovo’s “very vulnerable and overloaded” education system. Mr. Shala proceeded by arguing that continued exposure to dis/misinformation can create instability within communities and pose a significant risk to Kosovo’s digital security. The episode concluded with Ms. Gashi and Mr. Shala outlining ways schools and media companies can better equip the youth with the necessary skills to identify false and misleading stories.

Click [here](#) to listen to the episode in Albanian.

## Episode Three: Misogyny and Sexism - Online Violence Against Women in Politics



In Episode Three, Besa Luci, the editor-in-chief of Kosovo 2.0, and Eliza Hoxha, a member of Kosovo’s Assembly, join NDI’s Agnesa Fejzullahu to discuss hostility towards women in politics and expose this growing threat to democracy. While gender inclusion within Kosovo is improving, women still face many barriers, including misogynistic language and attacks in both traditional and online media. Such rhetoric, including sexist, offensive, and insulting language, contributes to a society that excludes women from political discourse.

Throughout the episode, both Ms. Luci and Ms. Hoxha provided their personal experiences and the misogynistic rhetoric and action they face in their respective fields. Ms. Luci started the conversation by noting the gender disparity in the media industry, where men dominate the industry, and women only cover about 10% of news stories and rarely receive air time during the prime time slot. Furthermore, Ms. Luci discussed how when media agencies feature women journalists during prime-time shows, they are often subject to traditional gender

stereotypes, sexist jokes/rhetoric, and comments and criticism about physical appearance. Ms. Hoxha seconded Ms. Luci's experience and stated that, in general, media personalities invite women to talk about social topics rather than pressing political issues.

Outside of traditional media outlets, women politicians and journalists also face harsh and violent rhetoric on social media. Both guests then discussed personal experiences with harmful rhetoric on social media and expressed their concerns about how this phenomenon discourages young women from pursuing careers in politics and journalism. For example, Ms. Hoxha said that when she sees comments such as "Eliza Hoxha, you are dead", she worries that individuals may act on this sentiment and belief. Ms. Luci also stressed the thin line between online violence and real-life violence by saying, "Online violence, or online hate speech against women, very often can also lead to offline violence." Together, they stressed that if the media and political parties continue to allow or ignore the violent rhetoric against women, it could negatively impact Kosovo's democracy and Kosovar women in society.

After reflecting on personal experiences, the conversation shifted to focus on solutions that address violent and misogynistic language directed at women in the media and politics. They both agreed that the lack of media literacy skills in Kosovo contributes to the misogynistic environment and makes it more difficult for people to comprehend the impact of negative comments on women politicians and journalists. From a journalist's perspective, Ms. Luci suggested that "All the media agencies must have a gender policy, they must have a gender perspective in terms of language, how they use that language, how they report, and at the same time what topics they cover in their programs." Ms. Hoxha also encouraged women politicians to report violent comments to the police and challenged political parties and media organizations to confront traditional stereotypes and create a welcoming and safe environment for women in politics.

For additional insight on violence against women, please listen to the podcast in Albanian [here](#).

#### **Episode Four (Part One): External Influence: How Information Disorders Shape Public Opinion?**



The rise of technology, globalization, propaganda, and foreign influence in the media creates an increasingly effective tool for shaping public opinion by domestic and foreign political leaders. In Episode Four, NDI and Lulzim Peci, the Executive Director of KRIPEP Institute, examined the impact of Russian disinformation in Kosovo by

analyzing NDI's Report on Information Disorders, which highlights the actions and mechanisms used by domestic and foreign actors to influence public opinion. While the episode looked at multiple foreign actors engaged in interference in Kosovo, the discussion predominantly focused on Russia and the Kremlin's attempt to influence Kosovo's political stability. Mr. Peci noted that "Russian propaganda has not managed to do much damage inside Kosovo, but plenty against Kosovo abroad." NDI's research confirms this phenomenon for parts of Kosovo that are Albanian speaking as this sector of Kosovar society does not have a positive perception or opinion towards Russia. That said, NDI research found that Russian dis/misinformation targets the Serb community to further the ethnic divide in Kosovo. Mr. Peci explained that while Russian propaganda is not new and dates back to the 1990s, new technology helps the Kremlin infiltrate Kosovar society in a way that is difficult to link to Russia. According to Mr. Peci, media literacy skills are essential for protecting citizens from foreign propaganda. Additionally, he emphasized that public institutions must help protect citizens gain media literacy and critical thinking skills because "If knowledge remains passive and does not pass into active knowledge, then there is no result from it. We can be aware of a problem, but if we don't work on it, the problem remains there." Mr. Peci concluded by explaining that currently, Kosovo is ill-equipped to handle foreign influence and lacks institutional coordination to create mechanisms that effectively combat Russian propaganda.

Listen to the full episode in Albanian [here to learn](#) more.

#### **Episode Four (Part Two): Fighting the Information War: Russia, Ukraine, and the Western Balkans**



In times of conflict, accurate information is crucial; however, sometimes third parties interfere in this process by manipulating or shaping public opinion through propaganda, false information, or misleading narratives. With the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, Daria Mescheriakova, a Ukrainian journalist, shared her experience dealing with propaganda and disinformation and the importance of building resilience against false information.

According to Ms. Mescheriakova, Russian propaganda is so powerful her relatives in Russia did not believe her when she told them about what was happening in Ukraine. She explained that "they [her family in Russia] only believe what they see on TV" and when challenged, they proclaim that "everything is fake, Russia is not guilty, and you're making it up" to which she responded by saying "I am leaving my home just because of Russia, how can't you see it".

While the dis/misinformation campaigns in Ukraine are widely known around the world, Russian propaganda also targets the Western Balkans to create instability and further divide ethnic and religious groups. To better understand the scope and reach of Russian dis/misinformation in Kosovo, NDI monitors online and social media platforms. Through online and social media monitoring, NDI identified narratives with information disorders and skewed and harmful language from Serbia, Russia, China, and Turkey, with the goal of attempting to create and deepen political and ethnic division in Kosovo. Ms. Mescheriakova confirmed NDI's research by presenting her personal experience using and monitoring Albanian-speaking media. According to Ms. Mescheriakova, the comments sections are full of fake profiles and bots, adding, "At the beginning of the war, I followed a lot of Albanian-speaking media on Facebook. I see that there are many bots on social media that try to speak as if they are locals or Americans." However, she added that people in Kosovo tend to fight this propaganda by blocking Sputnik, RT, and Russian social media. To continue combatting dis/misinformation, Ms. Mescheriakova encouraged people to continue being vigilant and check reliable sources, recheck it through other media outlets, and verify the profiles of those who comment/respond on social media.

For more information on how to protect oneself from information disorders, listen to the full podcast in English [here](#).

### Episode Five: Journalist's Role in the Fight Against Disinformation



Journalists play a crucial role in mediating between the public and the world around them by providing a balanced perspective, reliable information, fact-checking unverified statements, educating the general population, and mobilization. However, the advent of new technologies has changed the traditional order of information flow, including among journalists, political parties, and the public. As a result, anyone can now assume the role of a 'journalist', leading to the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and conspiracy theories. In our fifth podcast episode, we speak with Getoarë Mulliqi, Executive Director of the Association of Journalists of Kosovo, to explore the challenges and responsibilities of modern journalism to combat and mitigate dis/misinformation.

One of the newest practices in the flow of information is citizen journalism, where any individual can send and receive information with no regulation or oversight to ensure accuracy. According to Ms. Mulliqi, journalists are often burdened with the task of fact-checking and debunking fake news, leaving them little time to report on

breaking and verified stories: “The main problem of journalists is that, in addition to informing, they have to fight fake news, disinformation, misinformation, and I believe that this is a very big burden for journalists” In addition, the lack of ethical codes or standards in the media and poor working conditions further exacerbate the challenges journalists face. Our podcast delves deeper into the multiple roles of journalism, the challenges they face, and the importance of their job. [Tune in](#) to learn more.

### **Episode Six: Interethnic Tensions and Information Integrity: How False Information Affect Inter-ethnic Relations in Kosovo?**



In this episode, our guest is Miodrag Milicevic, Executive Director of NGO Aktiv. Together with his expertise, we delve into how false information affects inter-ethnic relations in Kosovo and the correlation between information integrity and inter-ethnic tensions. The disruption in information integrity during these events resulted in an increase in inter-ethnic tensions and influenced public opinion on these events. Mr. Milicevic noted that in the current climate of ethnic division in Kosovo, dis/misinformation has an even bigger negative impact on various social phenomena. “The key problem, talking about Kosovo as a multi-ethnic environment, with a still pronounced multi-ethnic distance, the appearance of disinformation often had a negative impact on various social phenomena.” He added that the language barriers also result in a lack of information exchange between communities. NDI conducted media monitoring in both Albanian and Serbian languages in Kosovo, which revealed a high degree of disruption in the integrity of information during various political events in Kosovo, particularly those with inter-ethnic connotations. Positive messages and the altering of public discourse used by politicians are some of the changes that Mr. Milicevic says would foster improvements in the current situation. In addition, he emphasized that the media should also do their part: “And the media, for their part, would have to do everything in their power to narrow the room for maneuver of different interest groups for the spreading disinformation”.

For more about interethnic tensions and information integrity in Kosovo, listen to our podcast and this episode in Serbian [here](#).

The first season of the NDI Kosovo podcast covered a wide range of topics and took a significant step toward initiating online discussions about media literacy. By fostering an online discourse on critical issues such as

information disorders, digital democracy, misogyny and sexism, foreign influences, and inter-ethnic tensions, the series engaged various stakeholders in discussions about the importance of information integrity. Adding to this, the podcast offered practical advice to its listeners on navigating the online/media landscape. Given that Information disorders are a global issue that requires action, NDI Kosovo is dedicated to promoting information integrity. Whether you're a student, journalist, or simply a concerned citizen, this podcast can offer you valuable insights and an understanding of these topics.