State of disinformation: SEE region in 2023

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Introduction

This report is a snapshot of the most relevant trends, tactics, actors and content of disinformation in the region of Southeast Europe. The report is based dominantly on contributions provided by members of SEE Check fact-checking network. It combines parts of their individual country reports for the year 2023[1] with information provided directly by member organizations for the purpose of writing this report, or in the analysis, fact-checks, research and other materials published by SEE Check members. Desk research of other existing sources has also been performed in order to provide a comprehensive overview of disinformation phenomena relevant for the region.

The organizations that contributed country reports are: Faktoje, a fact-checking organization based in Tirana, Albania; Raskrinkavanje, a fact-checking newsroom run by the organization Zašto ne based in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH); Raskrinkavanje, a fact-checking newsroom run by the organization Center for Democratic Transition (CDT) based in Podgorica, Montenegro; and Raskrikavanje, a fact-checking newsroom run by the organization KRIK based in Belgrade, Serbia. Additional material published by network members Faktograf (Croatia), FakeNews Tragač (Serbia) and Razkrinkavanje (Slovenia) was used in the writing of this report.

Each country report is based on direct experiences of the newsrooms' fact-checkers, reporters, analysts and researchers; the disinformation phenomena that they encounter in their daily work and findings they consider to be the most relevant for the information environments in their countries. Together, they map out a comprehensive "disinformation landscape" of the Western Balkans / SEE region.

The country reports for Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro include:

- o A review of dominant disinformation topics and narratives based on false claims, especially those that use disinformation to impact framing of events or worldviews throughout the region;
- o Overview of main actors that create and disseminate disinformation, with emphasis on those whose influence extends across borders;
- o Tactics and techniques that are used to spread false claims and/or disinformation narratives;
- o Efforts of various stakeholders active in the field of fighting disinformation, including activities and events aiming to raise awareness, foster networking and improve information exchange between relevant stakeholders; research, analysis and policy recommendations; advocacy efforts of civil society and/or media organizations; programs and projects that contribute to knowledge building in this field, as well as impactful cooperations between stakeholders in different fields, like those of fact-checkers and online platforms. These activities are covered in the section called "Antidisinformation update".

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[1] All the country reports are published on SEE Check's website and available on the following links:
Marija Vučić, Milica Ljubičić, Vesna Radojević, "Serbian Front Pages in 2023: Six Newspapers, Over 1,150 Manipulations", SEE Check, April 2024.
Faktoje.al, "Disinformation Report: Albania in 2023", SEE Check, June 2024.
Raskrinkavanje.me, "Disinformation Report: Montenegro in 2023", SEE Check, June 2024.
Raskrinkavanje.ba, "Disinformation Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2023", SEE Check, September 12, 2024

o   Events that have been observed as particular triggers of disinformation, including both current events and recurring triggers observed by fact-checking organizations.

o   Legislation related to information integrity, particularly disinformation and fact-checking.

The country report for Serbia includes an analysis of all the false information that had appeared in Serbian tabloids during 2023. Other information on the state of disinformation in Serbia, corresponding to that published in other country reports, has been provided by Raskrikavanje.rs for this regional report.

Information environment in the region

In the last few decades, the countries in the region have moved from more or less closed and state-controlled information ecosystems, to seemingly open media markets. For a part of the region, the transition from socialism has included wars and armed conflicts and formation of new states, some of which still remain contested or threatened by political leadership in Serbia that works against the international recognition of the independence of Kosovo; political leadership in Republika Srpska, an entity in BiH that is itself under a strong political influence from Serbia, which ramps up secessionist tendencies threatening the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina; and political actors that still deny the statehood of Montenegro. These remnants of 90's conflicts remain the key generators of both political crisis and political disinformation in the region - often with vocal and welcomed support from foreign actors, most notably the Russian Federation. Politically motivated disinformation is most often coming from this background, being spread through the hyper partisan media reduced to mouthpieces of political parties or governments, often propagating violent nationalist rhetoric.

Many of these countries have also been experiencing considerable democratic backsliding and media capture, at the same time when the media industry has started undergoing major transformations through digital technologies and new advertisement and business models created by large online platforms. This has left the media in the region caught in the crossfire of "creeping authoritarianism" on one side and, on the other, platform incentives to resort to any means to monetize audience attention on social networks.[2]

Commercially motivated disinformation usually manifests through clickbait and copy-paste "journalism" where attention-grabbing content is republished without verification. Moreover, this "opportunistic disinformation" has become the backbone of the business model of many commercial media trying to stay afloat in small and oversaturated digital markets[3] by resorting to "sensationalist tactics, which fall below the standards of the journalist profession, to attract and keep online audiences".[4] Additionally, in

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[2] Perhaps the most distressing examples include exploiting extreme violence like femicide that was broadcast live on Instagram, or mass murders that took place in Serbia in May 2023, to generate clicks. (see more under "tactics" in these report)

[3] The oversaturation of the online media market is easily illustrated with a simple look into the databases of regional fact-checkers. The live database of Raskrinkavanje.ba, at the time of writing of this report, numbered around 3400 media sources of false or misleading claims, located in BiH and its neighbouring countries. These are online portals that were fact-checked at least once since late 2017 (https://raskrinkavanje.ba/mediji). Almost all of these are online sources, mostly news media and anonymous websites that mimic news media. Raskrinkavanje.me, operating with the same methodology and within the same language area, has a database of about 440 rated disinformation sources (https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/mediji). In Albania, Faktoje reports about 800 active web portals, based on the last annual report of the European Commission.

[4] Tijana Cvjetićanin, Emir Zulejhić, Darko Brkan and Biljana Livančić-Milić, "Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH", Zašto ne (2019): 11

the past decade, countless anonymous webmasters have used similar tactics to create a whole new area of grey economy around the business of clickfarms, relying mostly on Facebook for distribution of their content and on Google AdSense[5] for its monetization.[6] Finally, the online information market is rife with scams and hoaxes that are constantly finding new ways to prey on users who lack sufficient digital and information literacy skills to recognize them as fraudulent.

Most of these problems are outlined in the European Commission's yearly reports for all four countries, albeit in varying degrees. In Albania, media concentration, non-transparent ownership and intertwined business and political interests are found to jeopardize media independence and professional standards, with disinformation and smear campaigns described as "recurrent" ([2022](), [2023]()). Serbia remains the most problematic when it comes to media freedoms, attacks on journalists, political and economic influence on media pluralism and independence, but also as a major influence that spreads information manipulation from sources like Sputnik and RT both inside and outside its borders ([2022](), [2023]()). Similarly, in BiH, the entity of Republika Srpska is a fertile ground for the spread of Russian and Serbian disinformation, in addition to proliferation of hate speech and disinformation online, present throughout the country with no efficient self-regulation mechanism to counter it ([2022](), [2023]()). In Montenegro, while mainstream media and public broadcasters are largely found to meet professional standards, disinformation and hate speech remain very present online ([2022](), [2023]()). Low professional standards of online media and proliferation of disinformation and hate speech online are a common problem throughout the region.

A 2021 study of disinformation in the Western Balkans, commissioned by the European Parliament, notes that "disinformation is most commonly a symptom – rather than the cause – of a deeper breakdown of social cohesion and democratic governance".[7] Although some of its conclusions were contested from the region, the study correctly foresees "*four key vulnerabilities that will continue to make disinformation an important and damaging part of the socio-political landscape in the Western Balkans for the foreseeable future - governance, geopolitics, enmity and disunity*".[8]

Disinformation topics and narratives

"**Disinformation narrative**" is understood here as a narrative based on false claims and used to create certain framing of social, political or other relevant events or phenomena, usually aiming for a longer-lasting impact and typically existing within wider frames of reference that provide context for both its creation and its understanding.[9] "**Disinformation topic**", on the other hand, is any subject "processed" with the use of false or misleading information, that can also work as an isolated claim aiming for a short-term, immediate effect, without necessarily carrying any deeper meaning or belonging to a wider narrative. For example, commercially motivated disinformation and misinformation typically aims to trick or manipulate the viewer to make a specific gain - like false and misleading claims used in clickbait,

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[5] Craig Silverman, Ruth Talbot, Jeff Kao and Anna Klühspies, How Google's Ad Business Funds Disinformation, ProPublica, October 2022.

[6] Recommendations of the Information Disorder working group within the Berlin Process Civil Society Forum, in: Southeast Europe Association und Aspen Institute Germany, Civil Society and Think Tank Forum 2022: Conference Report and Policy Recommendations, Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft/Aspen Institute Germany, December 2022

[7] Samuel Greene, Gregory Asmolov, Adam Fagan, Ofer Fridman, Borjan Gjuzelov, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, European Parliament, December 2021.

[8] Ibid: 61

[9] See the operational definition in: "Disinformation narratives in BiH and the region", Zašto ne, 2023.

or to perform scams and hoaxes (see more in *Tactics and techniques used to spread disinformation* in this report).

Broadly speaking, narratives are typically found in the realm of politically or ideologically motivated disinformation, while topics of "stand-alone" disinformation are mostly disseminated with commercial motives. These categories are not always sharply divided - for example, political disinformation can manifest both through elaborate hostile narratives that aim to create a profound effect on politics and society, and through disinformation that is used to achieve some specific short-term goal. It can even be disseminated with financial motives if it is suitable to be "monetized", i.e. to generate considerable attention from the audience. Nonetheless, they can serve as useful analytical tools to help map out and describe disinformation phenomena in the region.

While a "narrative" is a term that originates from literature and relates to storytelling, "disinformation narrative" could be understood as a story that is not factually accurate, but aims to be received as such. The wide frames where disinformation narratives are situated can be described as metanarratives - "large scale" stories accepted by communities, groups or societies and shared as foundational explanations of complex phenomena, usually through longer periods of time. The broadest framework for narratives and metanarratives can be defined as paradigms - broad systems of core beliefs, values and fundamental ideas about the "set up" of the world.

Moving from broader frameworks to more narrow "units" of narration, disinformation narratives sit somewhere in the middle. They often contain stories about different topics, or different versions and variations of the same plot that are reshaped or revisited, depending on particular circumstances, to serve the same purpose within broader metanarratives. The basic building blocks of disinformation narratives are claims that are false and/or misleading. These are typically the basic "units" that are "processed" by fact-checkers. If there is such a need, the fact-checks will provide insight into narratives or metanarratives that are created and supported by false and misleading claims, in order to provide full context that gives claims and stories their meaning.

For example, there is a broad anti-western paradigm present in Russian political and media sources, as well as many of the sources in the region, going at least as far back as the SSSR propaganda at the time of the Cold War. This paradigm rests on the broad view of the world as polarized between the two blocks, where the West is painted as predatory, inhuman, imperialistic and evil and SSSR/Russia as a defender of true values and a world order based on law, justice and equality. One of the metanarratives within this paradigm is that the West has been threatening and provoking Russia with its actions, with the ultimate goal to attack and destroy it.

Stories about those actions constitute some of the common disinformation narratives that have been pushed by Russian state propaganda and their outlets in the region: for example, that Georgia or Ukraine have been used as US proxies and turned into military or political threats against Russia, ultimately forcing Russia to attack its neighbors.

Various other stories were created to support the metanarrative of Ukraine as a threat to Russia and used as a justification for annexation of Crimea and then the 2022 invasion. For example, those about 2014 protests in Ukraine as orchestrated by Western intelligence services to overthrow an uncooperative government and install a puppet regime willing to attack Russia ("colored revolutions" narratives); or those about "bioweapons" or nuclear weapons supposedly being developed there to attack Russia. Many different claims have then been fabricated to support such stories - for example, the narrative about the "biolabs" has seen several iterations over the years, with claims that they were used to produce a bioweapon based on "Russian DNA", to create and spread several different viruses, from HIV to Covid-19 and monkeypox, or even that they produced fictional drug from the QAnon conspiracy theory, called adrenochrome (see fact checks of such claims here: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8).

Disinformation narratives situated within such complex structures are often hostile, political or ideological in nature, containing elements of propaganda and using additional "devices" like hate or discriminatory speech, or even incitement to violence. Conspiracy theories are another common type of disinformation narratives that are usually developed within similar complex structures, given that most of them tend to offer "grand scale" explanations of historical, social and political phenomena, processes, trends or world events.

An example of a complex disinformation narrative structure			
The West is inherently evil (Paradigm)			
The West has been threatening, provoking and aspiring to destroy Russia (Metanarrative)			
The West turned Ukraine/Georgia into a military threat to Russia (Narrative)			
The West is equipping Ukraine with nuclear weapons (Narrative topic)[10] The US created laboratories in Ukraine/Georgia[11] where biological weapons are developed (Narrative topic)			
The biolabs are creating bioweapons that will specifically target "Russian DNA" (Claim)	The biolabs were used to create or spread monkeypox (Claim)	The biolabs were used to create or spread HIV virus (Claim)	The biolabs were used to create or spread monkeypox virus (Claim)

The metanarratives present in the region often have overlapping elements, particularly when they belong to the same paradigm. For example, versions of "colored revolutions" narrative are frequently used in local context to discredit citizens' protests, civil society organizations or political opponents, especially those coming from center or left-leaning parties.[12] Antiscience, anti-Western and "New World Order" conspiracy theories often have the same targets, "borrow" narrative plots from each other or complement each other, depending on how specific topics are framed. Various research shows that belief in conspiracy theories is almost evenly distributed in all demographics in the countries in the region, with very little variation between different groups.[13]

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[10] Tijana Cvjetićanin and Mladen Lakić, "Nuclear and biological weapons in Ukraine: Propaganda and facts", Raskrinkavanje.ba, February 2023.
[11] Some examples of such claims available at:
https://lat.rtrs.tv/vijesti/vijest.php?id=97409
https://lat.sputnikportal.rs/20181219/rusija-sad-gruzija-laboratorija-1118215447.html
[12] See: Emir Zulejhić and Mladen Lakić, "Sve "zavjere" protiv Dodika: Narativ koji ne prestaje iako ga samo vrijeme demantuje", Raskrinkavanje.ba, November 2022.
[13] Florian Bieber, Tena Prelec, Dejan Jović and Zoran Nechev, "The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID19 in the Balkans", BiEPAG (2020): 5
Tijana Cvjetićanin (ed), "Countering disinformation narratives and mapping conspiracy theories: The Case of BiH", Zašto ne, April 2022.

Several large-scale disinformation narratives (metanarratives) can be observed throughout the entire region, even if they are not equally present in all the countries and/or communities.

Global-scale conspiracy theories

Global-scale conspiracy theories are focused on alleged nefarious entities believed to be powerful enough to shape global events, with the intention to hurt, control or destroy specific groups of people, or even the entire humanity. The alleged conspirators change depending on the specific narrative, from science-fiction scenarios involving extraterrestrial species, to governments of powerful countries like the USA, the imagined "world government", "cabals" and occult secret societies and international institutions like the World Economic Forum (WEF) or the World Health Organization (WHO). One of the original targets of the "world government" conspiracy theories was the United Nations (UN), seen by some mid-20 century USA "antiglobalist" counter-cultures as a "global government" that will abolish sovereignty of countries and establish a totalitarian supranational regime deemed the New World Order (NWO).[14] Reflecting the time and place of its origin, the initial narratives envisioned this "world government" as communist or, in its esoteric versions, as the rule of the "Antichrist".[15] In the past decades, this metanarrative has - perhaps ironically - spread internationally, particularly intensely with the global availability of the internet.

The NWO metanarrative is omnipresent in the region. These narratives are "imported" from outside and spread by regionally influential sources of disinformation, with locally specific themes sometimes fitted in such frames. Covid-19 pandemic was a major influence on the "import" and spread of a particularly large number of conspiracy theories. Those were usually narratives targeting international organizations and globally recognized personalities, accused of either faking or creating the pandemic to accomplish their nefarious goals. In some versions, it was claimed that world domination has already been established and that nefarious "elites" are secretly controlling everything that happens; in others, the conspirators are said to be working toward achieving that goal.

The dystopian NWO stories appear under different names, some borrowed from actual documents presented as nefarious plans for "world control", for example "Agenda 2030", a document listing UN's sustainability goals, or "Great Reset", WEF's series on post-pandemic economic recovery (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). While the structure of these narratives remains more or less the same, the focus of specific stories occasionally shifts.

For example, narratives about the pandemic were, at first, particularly focused on the WHO, but more so on Bill Gates, who has already been at the center of many antivaccination and depopulation conspiracy theories. When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, he became the single most targeted individual in the region, appearing in at least 381 single pieces of disinformation debunked by regional fact-checkers in 2020 and 2021.[16] Gates was targeted because of his foundation's work to improve access to vaccines in the underdeveloped regions - seen by antivaccination activists as evildoing - and the narrative was cemented after his 2010 statement on slowing down global population growth was taken out of context

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[14] Myles Flores, The New World Order: The Historical Origins of a Dangerous Modern Conspiracy Theory, Middlebury Institute of International Studies, May 2022.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Tijana Cvjetićanin (ed), "Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic", Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, 2021: 22.

and presented as point-blank "confession" that vaccines are "a tool of depopulation" ([1](#), [2](#)). While such stories about Gates still occasionally surface, the World Economic Forum and its founder Klaus Schwab have emerged as main targets of similar conspiracy theories since the pandemic. In these narratives, Schwab and WEF are painted as supporters and/or descendants of the Nazis, accused of trying to depopulate the Earth, legalize paedophilia, limit people's personal freedoms, force them to eat insects in the name of sustainability and similar ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#)).[17]

The QAnon movement has also spread in the region during the pandemic and, while the craze itself has been relatively short-lived, it has propelled some new conspiracy theory "influencers" that remain active on social networks ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#)).[18] At some point, stories from the QAnon narrative have also seeped into the Serbian tabloids and region-wide conspiratorial websites that published some of the outlandish claims about celebrity "satanists" using a drug extracted from children's blood ([1](#), [2](#)). Sometimes esoteric or pseudoreligious, the term "satanist" is often used by propagators of this and other conspiracy theories to broadly connote wrongdoers, especially in contrast to the "truth tellers", some of whom refer to themselves as "antisatanist". QAnon narrative was also adopted by some fringe political actors, mostly in Serbia, who propagated local versions of "souverenism" as opposed to "globalist satanism" ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#)). Echoes of such narratives can still be encountered in claims that the countries in the region are not states, but "corporations" that work for secret masters, which is one of the narratives propagated by QAnon and similar cult-like conspiratorial communities ([1](#), [2](#)).

Anti-Western narratives

Global-scale conspiratorial narratives usually offer a dualist world view, with "good" (presented either as a natural or sacral world order) on one side and "evil" on another. While the origins of the "New World Order" and similar frames may lie with the anticommunist hardliners of the Cold War, it has since been appropriated and "remixed" by different ideologies, some focused on the liberal-market economy aspects of "globalization", but most, if not all, targeting primarily Western entities - specific governments, alliances, leaders, corporations and institutions, or the "collective West" as such. The global-scale conspiracy theories present in the region (and beyond) are typically built on an illiberal, antidemocratic and pro-authoritarian "substrates", fitting well into the ethnonationalist and/or pro-Russian paradigms present in parts of the region. The "good" is usually embodied in conservative, religiously dogmatic, authoritarian and nationalist or "souverenist" worldviews, movements and ideologies, while "evil" is ascribed to liberal, progressive, secular, egalitarian / democratic and "globalist". Some of the narratives are more explicitly right-wing than the others, including those with elements of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia, such as those targeting migrants, sometimes as a part of a racist conspiracy theory known as "The Great Replacement", or narratives coming from the so-called anti-gender movement that portray LGBTQ and/or women's rights as a part of conspiracies to destroy families and with them the whole society ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#)).

The antiwestern paradigm is often implicitly present in conspiracy theories, even those that were explicitly anti-Western in origin. For example, one of the prominent "depopulation" narratives has originated in the last days of the SSSR as a narrative about an alleged Western plan to drain Russia and the remainder of the world of the scarce resources to assure the survival of the most privileged "Golden billion". It was lifted up to a mainstream narrative in today's Russia and used as one of the justifications

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[17] See also: Raskrinkavanje.me and Faktograf.hr, "No one will make us eat bugs", SEE Check, June 2023.
[18] See also: Dario Hajrić, "Ovo nije igra uvod u Qanon", FakeNews Tragač, November 2021.

for the war on the eve of the full scale invasion of Ukraine.[19] In the region, it gained popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic, when stories of "depopulation of the Earth" were viral, spreading in the variant about the "world governing elites'" plan to reduce the human population down to one billion people ([1], [2]). Terms like "world leaders", "rulers of the world", "elites" and similar are often used in such narratives, understood to refer to the Western entities or the collective West even without an explicit designation.

There are also elaborate conspiratorial narratives in the region specifically and explicitly targeting the West, more present in some countries than others. For example, in Albania these are mostly in relation to the Ukraine invasion, connecting directly to Russian propaganda against Ukraine, glorifying Russia and blaming the US, NATO, or EU countries for the war, or portraying them as a party in the conflict ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]).

However, in some countries where the anti-western paradigm is overtly present in the public discourse like in Serbia,[20] or in those with competing metanarratives across ethnic and/or political lines (BiH, Montenegro), a higher number of more elaborate anti-western narratives can be found. These are often merged with narratives targeting locally specific issues, topics and events, particularly related to ethnic conflicts and political tensions in the region (see below). The Western media are also often presented as propaganda that falsifies accounts of events, especially those like conflicts or the civic unrests, that are regularly presented within this paradigm as geopolitical events orchestrated by the West.

In Serbia, the tabloids close to the ruling party relentlessly promote the personality cult of Russian president Vladimir Putin, mainly on the bases of his support for Serbia's proclaimed goal of reclaiming Kosovo as its territory ([1]). Putin is continuously presented as the country's friend, who will help "keep Kosovo" and/or "free Serbia" from the Western powers, fitting into the general anti-Western narrative promoted by state run and progovernment media. According to tabloid owners, Putin is so popular that putting his face on the front page increases newspaper sales.[21]

Generally, glorification of authoritarianism in contrast with "dysfunctional democracies" is a narrative that appears throughout the region in various versions, presenting different authoritarian rulers like Putin, Gaddafi or Lukashenko ([1], [2], [3]) as being truly "for the people". This narrative draws more or less directly on the "nostalgia" for the former socialist state, at least in the former SFRY countries, which is still seen by many as more functional, just and beneficial to its citizens than both the current governments in the region, or the governments in "globalist", liberal or democratic setup.

Such narratives usually go hand-in-hand with EU scepticism or openly negative campaigns towards it that are present in some countries. The percentage of citizens supporting Serbia's entry into the European Union (EU) has been decreasing for years, partly due to the negative campaign and manipulative news about the EU.[22] The anti-EU narrative remains strong in Montenegro as well, although the majority of Montenegrin citizens support the country's path towards the EU. Disinformation used to portray the EU in a negative light include accusations against EU (and NATO) of being responsible for the Russian aggression on Ukraine; the EU being painted as on the brink of falling apart, or as hostile towards Montenegro - for example, by trying to reinstate visa regime ([1], [2], [3]). The EU is also frequently accused of "destroying traditional values" and "enforcing LGBTIQ values", or incorporated into global-scale

[19] Charles Maynes, "'Golden billion,' Putin's favorite conspiracy, explains his worldview and strategy", NPR, November 2022.
[20] "CRTA Media Monitoring: Anti-West Side Story – Monitoring of Foreign Influence, July 2022 – June 2023", CRTA, July 2023.
[21] Vuk Velebit, "Mediji u službi udaljavanja Srbije od EU", Fondacija Centar za demokratiju, December 2020.
[22] Stavovi građana prema EU, Institut za evropske poslove, October 2023.

conspiracy theories as another supranational "new world order" with supposedly authoritarian ambitions (1, 2, 3, 4). The EU is accused of various bizarre conspiracies, from plotting to "depopulate the Earth" and faking the pandemic, to forcing allegedly dangerous vaccinations, forcing people to eat insects, trying to microchip them or to establish other kinds of totalitarian surveillance, etc (1, 2). These narratives are also present in other countries in the region.

Some of the most enduring and harmful disinformation narratives in the region are nested in ideologies of local ethnonationalisms, many of which also belong to broader anti-Western paradigms that exist, to a lesser or greater extent, throughout the region.

Regionally and country specific narratives

Weaponizing the media and information space against political opponents seems to be a common occurrence in all the countries covered in this report, although not to the same extent.

In Albania, Faktoje reports an upward trend in pro-government disinformation in the government-affiliated media. In Montenegro, Raskrinkavanje.me describes a near-constant election campaign, happening for years on end, with complicated disinformation narratives following the elections, including false claims about alleged violence, clashes, "chaos" or arrests of political actors happening on election day, as well as claims that the elections are actually won by the pro-Serbian political parties or candidates when they were not.

In Serbia, the media capture is almost all-encompassing, with the most popular and most-watched media outlets acting as pro-government propaganda, essentially amplifying talking points and lines of attacks of the ruling party against their opponents.[23] Similar patterns are present in Republika Srpska.[24] Mainstream media display an overwhelmingly positive bias towards the political leaders, Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik, presenting them as heroes and protectors of Serb people.[25] At the same time, opposition parties, as well as journalists, social justice or anti-corruption activists, or any government critics, are vilified in the government-friendly media.[26] SNS and SNSD representatives are known to "return the favor" by praising such outlets while they openly attack other media, deny them access to information, openly insult their journalists and present them as "pawns" in antigovernment or anti-Serb conspiracies, with the the government-controlled media, particularly those in Serbia, actively participants in lynch campaigns against the independent media, as evidenced by the monitoring conducted by the "Slavko Ćuruvija" foundation.[27]

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[23] Edita Barać-Savić, Serbia: Study confirms Serbian media bias in favour of President Vučić, Friedrich Naumann Foundation, October 2022.

[24] Raskrinkavanje.ba, "Disinformation Report: Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2023", SEE Check, September 2024.

[25] Serbia: Study confirms Serbian media bias in favour of President Vučić.

[26] Danica Đokić, "Izveštaj o monitoringu napada tabloida na kritičke novinare i medije 2023.", Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, March 2024.

[27] The foundation is named after Slavko Ćuruvija, a journalist killed in Belgrade in 1999, whose murder remains unresolved after the February 2024 court acquittal of all the defendants in the case
(See: "OSCE Media Freedom Representative and OSCE Head of Mission to Serbia dismayed by acquittals in Ćuruvija murder case", OSCE, February 2024).

In reports for 2022 and 2023, an analysis of hundreds of texts published in 5 pro-government tabloids in Serbia[28] has detected 4 major narratives used to attack the media or journalists: "defense of personality cult of Aleksandar Vučić, demonization and dehumanization of journalists; denouncing journalists as traitors and mercenaries; discreditation and sewing distrust towards a media."[29]

The narrative of "foreign agents" and traitors working in the interest of the country's perceived enemies, which permeates the public space in Serbia, is used particularly aggressively towards the opposition, independent media and/or any kind of public protests, presenting them as hostile to the country and its citizens.[30] Almost identical narratives are used to discredit any views or activities outside of the political majority in Republika Srpska as well.

The region is also very susceptible to hostile narratives that combine disinformation and nationalist ideologies, often drawing on narratives from the 90's conflicts and wars. One of the oldest, most persistent and most harmful such narratives, spreading across the information space of several countries, revolves around Serb nationalism, putting Serbs in the center of various made-up conspiracies and using this alleged ever-present danger to justify anything from current media capture and authoritarian tendencies in Serbia and RS to military aggression during the 90's.

Raskrikavanje's 2023 report on disinformation found on the front pages of Serbian tabloids provides a good illustration of the contemporary content and patterns of such narratives, which portray Serbs "as eternal victims in a world aligned against them",[31] putting them in the center of imagined conspiracies by various perceived enemies. These narratives vilify particularly their regional neighbours, both as ethnic groups and as political entities. Albanians, Croats, Bosniaks, authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia and especially political leadership in Kosovo - particularly its prime minister Albin Kurti - are all presented as enemies of Serbs and relentlessly vilified in the tabloid press, along with the Western countries or political figures, often presented as their co-conspirators.

The narratives within this frame are present dominantly in Serbia and Republika Srpska, but also in some information spaces in Montenegro and Kosovo,[32] where they target Serb communities aiming to stoke ethnic tensions and create distrust. In Montenegro, malevolent and inflammatory falsehoods have turned into a near-regular occurrence during the elections and public protests, usually falsely claiming some kind of violence has occurred and aiming to create an impression of an immediate threat to public safety, or specifically to Serbs, their political representatives, or Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro.[33]

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[28] Informer, Alo, Republika (Srpski telegraf), Novosti and Kurir.
[29] Danica Đokić, "Izveštaj o monitoringu izveštavanja provladinih tabloida o kritičkim medijima i novinarima", Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, September 2022.
Danica Đokić, "Izveštaj o monitoringu napada tabloida na kritičke novinare i medije 2023.", Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation, March 2024.
[30] In one headline, for example, Alo praises the leadership skills of Aleksandar Vučić in comparison with "the NATO-aligned opposition (who) wishes for Serbia not to exist".
[31] Marija Vučić, Milica Ljubičić and Vesna Radojević, "Serbian Front Pages in 2023: Six Newspapers, Over 1,150 Manipulations", Raskrikavanje, April 2024.
[32] False and misleading narratives about Kosovo are significantly present in Albania as well, appearing as the fourth most often fact-checked topic by Faktoje in 2023.
[33] Darvin Murić, Marko Vukajlović, Milica Kovačević and Nina Đuranović, "Podrivanje demokratije Vol 5: Manipulacija informacijama", Raskrinkavanje.me (2022): 9-11; 17.

The narratives within this paradigm include historical revisionism used for various purposes, such as to deny statehood of Montenegro or BiH, or scapegoat the West for the 90's wars; false "accounts" of Serbs being disenfranchised in Montenegro[34] or in the Federation of BiH (1, 2, 3); made up threats of war or terrorist attacks against Serbia/RS; alleged assassination or coup plots against Aleksandar Vučić or Milorad Dodik (stories about "color revolutions"), narratives about the alleged threat of Albanian expansionism in the region (the narrative about "Great Albania"). Narratives which deny war crimes are also common, mostly those committed by Serb forces against Bosniaks and Kosovo Albanians during 90's wars and especially Srebrenica genocide. These narratives, as noted in Srebrenica Memorial Center's reports on genocide denial, create alternative histories and use conspiracy theories to "present completely fictitious explanations for the judicially established facts about genocide".[35]

The main creators of these narratives are usually political figures from the ruling parties and they are amplified by the government controlled media that publish, republish and build their discourse around them with no critical distance or any due diligence when it comes to their veracity.

Antiscience narratives and conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories and disinformation narratives that deny scientific knowledge fall under a broader paradigm with the main premise being that scientific facts are not real, but rather made up and supported by the "elites" to hide the truth from the masses. Perhaps the most prominent metanarrative within this frame is the one that vilifies evidence-based medicine, accused of being an instrument of bringing harm, rather than helping people. The reasons are found either in pharmaceutical industry's ("Big Pharma") motifs to make profit by making people sick to sell them medication, or in the aforementioned narratives about "depopulation agenda" and the claims that medicine is used to harm or kill people (1, 2). Within that frame, antivaccination narratives are the most enduring, most popular and arguably the most harmful.

Antiscience narratives such as antivaccination or various "schools" of so-called alternative medicine stand somewhere between political and commercial disinformation, depending on which particular metanarrative they propagate. Some lean more towards ideological propaganda, others are solely interested in monetization of conspiratorial narratives, either by attracting views or selling books, products or "treatments".

Antivaccination and anti-medicine narratives have been present in the region for some time before the Covid-19 pandemic, initially dominantly focusing on the MMR vaccine, falsely claimed to cause autism. This narrative was started in the early 2000s, built upon a later retracted study by a former British gastroenterologist Andrew Wakefield, who lost his medical licence due to unethical and irresponsible conduct in promoting unsupported antivaccination claims. Nonetheless, the claim was popularized by new-age and "alternative medicine" propagators, celebrities and communities on social networks, growing to become a global phenomena.[36] Other vaccines and/or their alleged damages were gradually

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[34] For example, claims that the census of population is "rigged" to hide the real number of citizens who declare themselves as Serbs, or that Serb parties' election victories are hidden or overturned.
[35] Monica Hanson Green, Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2020, The Srebrenica Memorial, 2020.
Monica Hanson-Green, Lejla Gačanica (ed), Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2021, The Srebrenica Memorial, 2021.
Monica Hanson-Green, Senad Pećanin (ed), Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2022, The Srebrenica Memorial, 2022.
Monica Hanson-Green, Muamer Džananović (ed). Srebrenica Genocide Denial Report 2023, The Srebrenica Memorial, 2023.
[36] Jan Hoffman, How Anti-Vaccine Sentiment Took Hold in the United States, The New York Times, September 2019.

added to this pseudoscientific "canon", finally shaping the antivaccination movement that made the childhood immunization rates drop in many countries and communities, and very much so in the region (1, 2, 3, 4). The narrative has remained present and continues to threaten public health in the region, both by causing a drop in immunization rates and by opening a lucrative market for frauds who offer dangerous pseudomedical practices that continue to go unsanctioned throughout the region, like "vaccine detoxification" or "curing vaccine induced autism" in children (1).

Another prominent "genre" of antivaccination disinformation narratives was created around the Covid-19 vaccines. Various disinformation "campaigns" aggressively undermined public confidence in vaccine safety and efficacy across the region since early 2020 and these narratives continue to permeate the digital landscape to this day. As the 2021 research showed, the main disinformation topics in 6 SEE countries[37] during the pandemic were false claims about "Covid-19 cures", followed by those about safety and efficacy of vaccines, the origin of the virus and the pandemic being a front for "depopulation".[38] While the made-up "Covid cures" slowly faded from the disinformation spaces as the pandemic started to wane, falsehoods about Covid-19 vaccines remained the dominant disinformation narratives well into 2022 and conspiracy theories about them as a part of a plot to eradicate humanity were still being spread in 2023 (1, 2).

Antivaccination and other antimedicine disinformation are frequently used to promote or sell untested recipes, products or services belonging to the many branches of "alternative medicine", flourishing throughout the region. The common connecting element for most of the alternative medicine narratives is that its products or services are "natural", and therefore safe as opposed to allegedly dangerous "synthetic" pharmaceutical products (1, 2).[39] Another widespread pseudomedicinal doctrine is that most, if not all, diseases can be cured with the right nutrition, or that "food is medicine". However, the narratives within the alternative medicine spectrum are numerous and do not stop there. They vary from home remedies made from everyday groceries that are claimed to "cure" anything from insomnia to cancer, to alleged "ancient medicine" and esoteric "healing energies", to unconfirmed pseudomedine using scientific-sounding terms like "quantum medicine" or "frequency healing" to create an impression of legitimate medical practices based on intricate scientific discoveries.[40]

This type of content can be found everywhere, from TV shows and sections of mainstream media dedicated to health (or, more often, "wellness"), to anonymous websites endlessly recycling "traditional medicine" recipes, to groups and channels on social networks where quackery practices are advertised, promoted and arranged. A particularly worrying trend where actual medical professionals advertise such practices or support such narratives has been observed throughout the region, particularly during the pandemic.[41]

Claims that the cure for cancer exists and is kept deliberately hidden by the "Big Pharma" are particularly widespread and enduring among the many "sub-genres" of the antivaccination and antimedicine narratives. Conspiracies about the pharmaceutical industry deliberately hiding break-through

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[37] Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and North Macedonia.
[38] Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic, 22.
[39] See also: Oglasi u časopisima o zdravlju: Prodaja magle bez glutena, FakeNews Tragač, May 2019.
I časopisima o zdravlju potrebna je terapija, FakeNews Tragač, January 2019.
[40] See, for example: Jelena Jovović and Milica Janjatović Jovanović, "Čitali smo: „Loša nauka" Bena Goldejkera", FakeNews Tragač, August 2023.
[41] Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic, 42-44.

discoveries, peddling products intended to hurt people, or even creating diseases in order to sell medicine for them, have also peaked during the Covid-19 pandemic (1).

Climate science denial

Denial of climate science has reached the region relatively recently. These narratives deny scientifically established facts about global warming and other changes resulting from the industrial revolution, rejecting either the fact that human activity causes it, or the fact that there is a significant climate change at all. The increase of Earth temperature is either incorrectly described as insignificant, ascribed to "natural cycles" rather than CO_2 emissions from burning of fossil fuels, or outright denied and portrayed as propaganda and "hysteria" created by the media.[42] In some cases, climate change denial is fitted into global-scale conspiracy theories about "control", focusing on the measures taken to create more sustainable economies, promote "green energy" and lower emissions and presenting them as a front for the intent of the "rules of the world" to subjugate people, limit their free movement through "climate lockdowns" and "15 minute cities", or abolish private ownership (1, 2, 3). Some narratives focus particularly on Greta Thunberg, the Swedish activist who launched the global "School Strike for Climate" at the age of 15, almost instantly becoming a target of extensive abuse from various right-wing actors internationally (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

With the possible exception of Croatia, most of the regional newsrooms have not seen a considerable amount of anti-climate disinformation in the pre-pandemic time. However, climate change denial has been gaining more visibility, popularity and influence since the pandemic and its influence on the general popularization of conspiracy theories. A particular increase of such narratives was noticed in 2023 with the same or similar false claims appearing throughout the region. Catastrophic events such as the earthquake in Turkey/Syria and fires in Hawaii, or the ever more frequent "megastorms" in the region, seem to directly and immediately lead to a spike in their propagation on social media, where these events are being "explained" by fictitious conspiratorial causes, often paired with explicit climate change denial (see more under *Events Instigating Spread of Disinformation* in this report).

Technophobic conspiracy theories

Much like antivaccination and pseudomedicinal disinformation, conspiracy theories about new technologies presented as deadly or dangerous are a fixture in all the countries in the region. As conspiratorial narratives often overlap and borrow from each other, the antiscience narratives are usually fused with global-scale conspiracies, where medicine or various technologies are presented as tools for the implementation of depopulation or the "total control" ascribed to the New World Order.

During the pandemic, false claims about 5G technology gained particular popularity, providing several fictitious "explanations" for the supposed real nature of the pandemic or the real reason that lockdowns were imposed. HAARP (High Frequency Active Auroral Research Program which researches the ionosphere) has been a subject of conspiracy theories for years with claims that it is used to control the weather or even to perform "mind control". Another prominent narrative that started as a weather control conspiracy morphed into a ubiquitous "all-purpose" conspiratorial narrative - the story that

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[42] FakeNews Tragač, Faktograf.hr, Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, and Raskrikavanje.rs, "Climate Disinformation From Our Alley", SEE Check, August 2023.

condensation trails visible behind commercial airlines at certain weather, are actually "chemtrails", used to spray the population with dangerous chemicals. This narrative also gained particular popularity during the pandemic, with "chemtrails" often listed as one of the "real causes" of Covid-19. The "flat Earth" narrative has also seen a rise in conspiratorial groups across the region in the past few years.[43]

Actors contributing to the spread of disinformation

In this section of the report, we will give an overview of the key actors described in the country reports, with additional insight into the types of actors and most prominent actors influencing the spread of disinformation in the region.

All the newsrooms report similar make-up of actors that contribute or exacerbate the spread of disinformation. Most of the fact-checking newsrooms see disinformation being created and spread by about a dozen same types of actors: politicians, especially those with a long grip on power;[44] the media they control, including some public broadcasters; the pundits that support their narratives; foreign actors spreading political propaganda in the region; commercial media relying on manipulative tactics for financial sustainability; anonymous websites perfecting the same manipulative tactics, often in the form of "click farms"; anonymous "bots" employed by political parties to influence public opinion by posting and commenting online; conspiracy theorists and social media personalities using disinformation to reach wide audiences and/or sell their products or "services"; companies using fraudulent advertising tactics, usually to sell sketchy products and a myriad of scammers running different hoaxes on social networks. In some cases, there is an overlap between countries, where the same individuals or media organizations are named as significant sources or spreaders of disinformation in more than one country. This is typically the case with the tabloids from Serbia, which exert considerable influence across the region.

The media landscape

The news media appear as sources of both political disinformation and hostile narratives and as sources of opportunist misinformation used to monetize the audience's attention. For over a decade now, the incentives of major digital platforms, dominantly Facebook and Google, have pushed the online media to adjust to the logic of their ad services and algorithms that have been "rewarded" with visibility - and, with it, profitability - primarily the highly engaging content and frequent publishing. The online publishers were therefore driven towards creating content that can be published fast, with low information value and tailored to produce a strong and fast emotional response, embodied the most in the infamous *clickbait*. Headlines that use psychological tricks to push viewers to open the link shared on social networks and visit the publisher's website, where they would usually find content that does not match the headline and the social media post that lead them there. Yet another dictate produced by algorithmic models of displaying posts on social media is the need to constantly churn out new content

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[43] See records of the popularity and spread of such narratives in: Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic.

[44] Both Vučić and Dodik have been *de facto* ruling RS and Serbia for over a decade and almost two decades, respectively. In an increasingly authoritarian manner, they both shift the center of political power to whichever position they hold at the time - in Dodik's case, the President and Prime minister of Republika Srpska and Member of the Presidency of BiH, while Vučić has held several ministerial positions, as well as those of President and Prime minister of Serbia. This solidification and concentration of power in one person has contributed to the near-total media capture in both political spheres.

in order to stay visible on social network's news feeds, making "copy-paste journalism" a near necessity for online media to stay afloat.

As noted in an extensive research on the mechanics and effects of media business models driven by algorithms in Serbia in 2023, "...algorithms encourage quantity, interactivity and meeting emotional and unconscious needs - **the opposite of the fundamental and ideological values of media politics and ethics**", leading the media to invest more into development of marketing tricks than in actual journalism.[45] While the research was conducted with the media and data from Serbia, the results ring true for most of the region, as the media operate in similar conditions: small media markets; high competition for viewership; increasing dominance of and reliance on digital content especially in younger generations; fragile democratic climate, with political pressures on freedom of expression and/or media capture; lack of legacy media and traditions of highly professional, quality journalism; and, finally, audiences that are by now already primed for low quality content, with low information literacy, decreasing interest in news, low paying power and no habit to pay for information.

The damage from both of these and other algorithmic incentives that lead to the "platformization of journalism" is already visible in the spread of harmful and clickable narratives, lowering the quality of information, disintegrating professional and ethical standards and additionally fueling the spread of misinformation and disinformation in the region. Lowering the overall information integrity has also damaged audiences' trust in the media, which was low to begin with.

In a 2020 research in Serbia, for example, it was found that only "*20% of respondents agree with the statement that in most cases the news can be trusted[46]* while data from Balkan Barometer *confirm that levels of trust in the media throughout the region are even lower than they are for politicians and the state".*[47] These levels of distrust in the media, somewhat ironically, push the audiences towards even less credible sources such as online conspiracy theorists who, in turn, actively propagate distrust in mainstream media, using that as a tactic of audience building. Another related narrative is instigating distrust in Western media (and/or "liberal media") as a tactic of Russian state propaganda sources and/or local actors coming from ethnonationalist political paradigms.

In a region already plagued by a "*catastrophic lack of trust in governance*"[48] - demonstrably one of the key predictors for propensity to accept conspiracy theories and "alternative" narratives[49] - low credibility of the media additionally undermines efforts to strengthen information integrity and information literacy that crucially depends on availability of credible sources. If such sources can not be found in either institutions or the media, the public is left disoriented and vulnerable to various malign influences. Having strong, credible and professional media would make a major difference; however, as noted in the study commissioned by the European Parliament, "*evidence suggests that most major media outlets in the Western Balkans are at least complicit in one form of disinformation or another, ranging from click-bait sensationalism to the work-for-hire fabrication of fully false narratives. The overwhelming majority of the disinformation campaigns reviewed in the qualitative pillar of this study involved at least one established media outlet; most involved more. Moreover, while disinformation is often associated with social media in*

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[45] Tanja Maksić i Bojana Kostić, "Algoritmi, mreže i održivost medija: Igra velikih brojki", BIRN Serbia, March 2023.

[46] Christopher Nehring and Hendrik Sittig (ed), "Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe", Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (2023): 235.

[47] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 16.

[48] Ibid, 62.

[49] Countering disinformation narratives and mapping conspiracy theories: The case of BiH, 75.

the public imagination and the policy debate – and while social media, including Facebook in particular, does play an important role in the distribution of disinformation in the Western Balkans – the role of traditional media is greater."[50]

The race to publish constantly and make every post look like breaking news has led the web editors of even some previously reputable media to search for fast "clickable" content anywhere, including highly non-credible sources like anonymous websites, hyper partisan media or blogs, tabloids and unverified social media accounts - or even comments sections with virtually no information value. The practice of re-publishing without verifying, or treating articles as simple "reposts" from social networks, has become common both due to the lack of time and due to a shift in motivation that moved from serving a public interest and informing citizens, to amassing clicks and ad revenue. Monetizing attention is also the main reason for the existence of anonymous websites that make up "click-farms" and content farms used to monetize clickbaits and fake news - a tactic also observed in some of the news media in recent years.

Actors of political disinformation narratives

When it comes to roles of states in spreading disinformation, Serbia remains a major influence in the region, with no signs of that influence subsiding. Serbian media and political actors significantly influence the overall disinformation "landscape" in the whole region, as noted by SEE Check network's observations, as well as independent research.[51] Disinformation "*spills over from Serbia to countries that belong to the same language area (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro), and partly also to Slovenia and North Macedonia: research on disinformation related to the pandemic and the war in Ukraine showed that Serbia is the most common source of disinformation in the Western Balkans.*"[52] Antidisinformation hub's monitoring of online media has led to the same conclusion: "*Although each country has its local media outlets, a connection can be inferred between Serbian tabloids and their versions which are present in almost every country of the region. Serbian tabloids even in their original version are read in the region due to the fact that large portion of the WB population can understand Serbian language and use Serbian media as a source of (dis)information.*"[53] The tabloids in question use a "hybrid" model of financing, relying both on public funding and on monetization on social networks, therefore producing both political propaganda and sensationalist and clickbait content - often both in the same articles or posts - which makes them particularly detrimental for information integrity in Serbia and the region.

All partners contributing to this report point specifically to Serbian tabloids as significant, or even dominant media sources of disinformation, particularly that which stirs ethnic tensions, fears and hatred. They appear among the top-rated outlets of the local fact-checking sites in both BiH and Montenegro and even the media in Albania often take their content, specifically narratives about Kosovo that amplify ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs, and repost it "without any scrutiny or thorough analysis", as noted in Faktoje's report. In Montenegro, Borba and IN4S, pro-Serbian and pro-Russian websites based in Montenegro, are the most dominant proliferators of disinformation (1). Serbian tabloids Kurir, Večernje novosti and Alo, which has opened its own branch in Montenegro, come second.

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[50] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 46.
[51] Ibid, 9
[52] Disinformation in Serbia, in: Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe, 231.
[53] Filip Stojanovski, "Disinformation Trends And Narratives In The Western Balkans Media Monitoring Report For The Period January – March 2023", Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society, 2023.

In 2023, Raskrikavanje found more than 1150 false or misleading stories on the covers of 6 pro-government papers (Informer, Srpski Telegraf, Alo, Večernje Novosti, Kurir and Politika) usually targeting opposition parties, independent media, civil society actors, or regional neighbours.[54] This is the result of the control that the ruling SNS party has established over such media outlets using their access to public funds, while at the same time using their "entranchment" in power to suppress independent and critical media. This has resulted in an increasingly precarious situation for independent media in Serbia, where regular reporting on corruption, healthcare, media, and judiciary is reserved only for small professional media, and such topics are almost never covered in major media or public service broadcasting, while local media are quite weakened and lack resources to cover and report on all the issues citizens face.

Serbian tabloids also "branch out" in Republika Srpska, an entity in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina, where their influence is probably the strongest. Raskrinkavanje's research from 2019 points to an interconnected "disinformation hub" of around 30 media outlets that use each other as sources and redistributors of the same disinformation, often in a coordinated manner. The outlets are near-evenly distributed between Serbia and Republika Srpska. Similarly to Serbia, an overlap between political and media actors is so profound that they are almost indistinguishable. This fusion between politics and the media who serve the governing parties also happens across borders, given that ruling parties in Serbia and RS share a common political narrative and are supported by the same group of media.

All of the aforementioned tabloids are present in this hub, along with other media outlets ranging from public broadcasters (RTRS, RTS) and agencies (SRNA and Tanjug - now privately owned); Russian state-owned Sputnik Srbija, the region's only outlet of the multi-language media Sputnik, which publishes in local language and managed to amass 270.000 Facebook followers before this social network blocked its page), to privately owned media in Republika Srpska (Alternativna televizija, Nezavisne novine, Srpska info, Glas Srpske and others) and several right-wing anonymous websites.

Disinformation distributed through this hub usually parrots statements and positions of political figures from ruling parties in Serbia and RS and is instrumentalized to serve their political narratives. Similarly to their Montenegrin counterparts, they display strong Serb nationalist and pro-government bias when covering local and regional topics, as well as anti-Western and pro-Russian bias when reporting on geopolitical topics, particularly the war in Ukraine. These narratives are peddled not just by political actors and the media they control, but have become a subject of intense production of pseudo-academic "knowledge", both true the significant political capture of the academia in Serbia in Republika Srpska and through creation of specialized institution, openly tasked with producing political propaganda along these lines.[55]

While Sputnik Srbija plays a prominent role in this "hub", as do various local allies and pundits directly connected to Russia, it would be wrong to attribute all pro-Russian disinformation to coordinated campaigns, given that a lot of such content is simply an extension of narratives that were already present in the region. As noted in one of the quarterly monitoring reports of the regional Antidisinformation hub:

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[54] Serbian Front Pages in 2023: Six Newspapers, Over 1,150 Manipulations.

[55] Both Srbija and Republika Srpska have a history of creating pseudo-academic commissions and forums dedicated to war crimes denial (Historical project Srebrenica, Commission to establish truth about Srebrenica and similar) or to support war-related political narratives (for example, a commission for investigating health and environmental consequences of 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia). In Republika Srpska, the newest such initiative is the creation of the Center for social and political research in 2022 by the entity's government to basically spread nationalist, anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda (https://cdpirs.org/).

"Russia was able to easily interfere with the anti-Western narratives in the Western Balkan countries because these narratives have already been popular in the region for some time. These narratives date back to the propaganda recycling of the Yugoslav Wars and continue with the distorted representation of Western culture. The message is clear: "all evil comes from the West, including the War in Ukraine," while "Russia is only defending itself and it's traditional values.""[56] Other studies have found that although "disinformation is frequently discussed in the context of external threats to the functioning of governance and democracy, this study shows that foreign actors are not the most prominent culprits" and that most of the actors producing and disseminating it are internal.[57]

As noted before, political actors are a significant factor in shaping narratives and spreading disinformation, especially in Serbia,[58] a country struggling with media capture and continuous decline of political and media freedoms.[59] The main channels they use for that are popular daily newspapers, tabloids, and nationally broadcasted television channels, whose businesses are in large part financed from public funds. Raskrikavanje monitors the public financing of Serbian media, as well as the front pages of daily newspapers and tabloids, where it tracks all the false and misleading headlines (2021-2023 data for both monitorings here: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). The analysis of the front pages shows that outlets which receive large amounts of tax payers money through project-based funding, sponsorships, public procurements, or marketing deals with public institutions, are the same pro-government, highly partisan papers and/or tabloids that consistently push disinformation and violent rhetoric on their front pages.

Pundits and influencers

In addition to politicians and media themselves, this "hub" also relies on pundit-like commentators close to authorities of the Republika Srpska and Serbia who promote the same narratives and reinforce the same disinformation, especially conspiracy theories. Some of them come from political and/or security backgrounds, while others are presented as experts in these fields although they possess no real expertise or relevant professional biographies.

Many of such political commentators, "analysts" and alleged experts are often "swapped" between outlets in the Serbia-RS hub, appearing as regular contributors to both media spaces. For example, Dževad Galijašević, alleged security expert who "specializes" in providing the media in RS with made-up stories of terrorist threats against Republika Srpska, was announced in February 2023 to become a commentator for Serbian paper Politika. In addition to "experts" for this media hub who come from RS and Serbia (1, 2, 3, 4), they also use commentators from Russia and, to a lesser extent, other foreign countries - mostly coming from the right-wing side of the US political spectrum, where Milorad Dodik has made certain alliances despite being repeatedly sanctioned by the US Department of State (1, 2, 3).

Some of the right-wing pundits have also managed to make their own "brands" as conspiracy theorists and/or social media personalities, recognized throughout the region as significant sources of

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[56] "Disinformation trends and narratives in the Western Balkans: Media monitoring report for the period January – March 2023".

[57] "Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them", 5.

[58] Report: Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media, CRTA, 2023.

[59] For example, Freedom House yearly reports show a steady decline in "Freedom of Expression and Belief", as well as in overall country scores since 2017 when it was last ranked as "free" with a score of 73/100, to 2023 when it was ranked as "partly free" with a 60/100 score.

(See: "Serbia: Freedom In the World 2023", Freedom House, 2023.)

disinformation. A key figure among them is Branimir Nestorović, a retired pulmonologist from Serbia, who has been filling the pages of all regional fact-checkers with false claims and conspiracy theories ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]). Nestorović is known for spreading disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccination, even while he was participating in the country's crisis group assembled to fight the spread of the virus. In fact, Nestorović came under a regional spotlight after an infamous statement given at an official press conference just before the lockdown, calling SARS-CoV2 *The funniest virus ever"* and encouraging women to *"go shopping in Milano"* at the time when Italy was already seeing mass deaths from Covid-19.[60] Nestorović had regular media presence before the pandemic as a promoter of various alternative medicine practices, conspiracies and pseudoscientific narratives, from those about secret cancer cures to assertions about extraterrestrial ancestry of blue-eyed people, but his region-wide fame, as well as success in recent Serbian elections, where he won a seat in the national parliament, is likely directly related to the immense popularity he gained by pandemic denial and reckless misuse of his medical background to promote quackery.[61]

Saša Borojević, a former close associate of Nestorović, is another "influencer" notorious for his dissemination of baseless conspiracy theories and misinformation, particularly his anti-vaccination rhetoric and hostility towards minorities ([1], [2], [3], [4]). Borojević used to profile himselves as an "activist" against paedophilia by spreading false claims about child abuse or trafficking, usually as a backdrop for homophobic and transphobic conspiracy theories ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5]). His stance on the Amber Alert system, claiming it to be backed by high-profile figures for nefarious purposes, has drawn considerable attention and criticism. Borojević, who owns four schools in Belgrade,[62] was a source of one of the most viral fakes about the pandemic, claiming it to be a "smoke screen for US invasion of Europe" in March 2020 ([1]). Nestorović and Borojević are regular contributors to Serbian pro-government media, especially TV channels, and both regularly peddle Russian propaganda about Ukraine and other geopolitical topics. Before venturing into politics, Nestorović co-founded an association allegedly dedicated to protection of children's rights with Borojević.[63] The press conference where the association was presented was rife with falsehoods that were thoroughly debunked by FakeNews Tragač ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]). FakeNews Tragač also published a series of analyses of Nestorović's statements in 2022 ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8]).

Actors of conspiracy theories

There are differences between countries in the region when it comes to "production" of conspiracy theories. Conspiratorial global-scale narratives are mostly foreign in origin, taken either from the Western social media personalities and right-wing conspiracy theorists like Alex Jones and David Icke or from Russian propaganda tropes. In Albania, such content is most often just translated or in other ways adjusted for the local audience by profiles and pages that strive to establish themselves as "influencers" in this field ([1], [2], [3]). Similar behavior is observed in all the regional countries, where aspiring "conspiratorial influencers" have developed a particularly intensive "copy-paste" and translation activity during the pandemic.

Serbia, however, is not only a market for the "import" of conspiracy theories, but has been and remains a considerable "exporter" of such narratives in the region. The production of conspiracy theories has been

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[60] Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic, 40.

[61] Marija Vučić, Kad vrag odnese šalu: Pet bizarnih tvrdnji potencijalnog poslanika Branimira Nestorovića, Raskrikavanje, December 2023.

[62] Saša Borojević – od teoretičara zavere do regularnog analitičara, Istinomer, November 2023.

[63] K. Živanović, Predstavljen pokret „Vitezovi reda zmaja", Nestorović ne isključuje mogućnost ulaska u politiku, Danas, December 2021.

strong in Serbia even before their online renaissance, particularly during the nineties war propaganda emitted by the state media under the control of the regime of Slobodan Milošević. This included political narratives blaming the West for the wars and break up of SFR Yugoslavia, with a widespread genre of "political occultism" that flourished in newspapers, TV shows, pseudoscientific books and specialized magazines like "Treće oko". All these sources regurgitated the story about Serbs as the chosen, "heavenly people" targeted by both political and supernatural conspiracies from the West and its neighbours of other ethnicities or religions.[64] Many of the authors that were active in this "industry" have returned to the public in the post-Milošević Serbia, some making successful transitions into the world of podcasts and social media channels specialized in conspiracy theories, others thriving as regular commentators or even "political analysts" in the pro-government TV stations and tabloids in the past decade.[65]

Several conspiracy theorists from Serbia have gained region-wide prominence, especially during the pandemic. Mila Alečković, a clinical psychologist who *de facto* renounced evidence based medicine,[66] who promoted QAnon conspiracies and antivaccination scaremongering, was a near-constant presence on the pages of all BSCM speaking fact-checkers (1, 2, 3, 4). Her baseless and often dangerous claims enjoyed such popularity on social networks and were so proliferant, that it sometimes required simultaneous engagement of several fact-checking newsrooms to debunk them in a timely manner (1).

There are many other influences in Serbia's social media landscape, who wield significant clout and share some similar characteristics - they often express a strong affinity for Russia, many are vocal in their anti-vaccination stance and general anti-science inclinations; they are often connected with right-wing and nationalist politics and more often than not their narratives "mix" those ideologies with new-age spirituality. In some cases, such actors monetize only the narratives they peddle via their social media channels, but others have built entire businesses offering products or services based on their false narratives. Many operate in opaque closed groups on social media where users commission their "healing" products, but some run their operations out in the open with little or no interference from the authorities. For example, Miroljub Petrović, another regionally recognizable conspiracy theorist, became a star of social networks due to his unhinged statements and continues to be a regular figure on national TV networks in spite of the fact that his quasimedicinal "practice" lead to a death of a cancer patient whom he averted from taking actual treatments.[67] Petrović also advocates for abolition of traditional schooling, peddles the homophobic concept of "conversion therapy" for LGBTQ people and runs "educational" institutions offering unaccredited courses in so called natural studies and medicine.
Interestingly enough, while hosting such personalities and being proponents of most, if not all, political conspiracy theories, tabloids from Serbia did not publish anti-vaccination content during and after the pandemic, demonstrating congruence with the official policies of Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić, who took great pride in Serbia's efficiency in procuring Covid-19 vaccines.

Croatia is another significant source of conspiracy theories in the region. Numerous Croatian fringe portals are particularly active in translating and producing antivaccination, NWO and "anti-gender" narratives, while their Serbian counterparts also republish or create a significant amount of anti-Western and pro-Russian conspiratorial narratives. Like in Serbia, there are many high-profile antivaccination

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[64] Renaud de La Brosse, "Politička propaganda i projekt 'Svi Srbi u jednoj državi': Posledice instrumentalizacije medija za ultranacionalističke svrhe", United Nations - International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, January 2003.
[65] Spasoje Vlajić, Svetozar Radišić, Dejan Lučić, Mila Alečković and many others.
[66] Mila Alečković – analiza naučne produkcije, FakeNews Tragač, April 2022.
[67] Nemanja Rujević, Šaman pred zatvorom, Vreme, January 2019.
Jelena Kalinić, Kvazimedicina u službi tragedija: slučaj Miroljub Petrović, Voice of America, February 2019.

activists who have made a name for themselves, and some also achieved regional name-recognition by peddling these narratives.[68]

Tactics and techniques used to spread disinformation

Tactics and techniques used to spread disinformation are determined by the type of disinformation they spread, actors' motivations and goals, the tools they have at their disposal, the audience they try to reach, etc. Depending on combinations of these factors, different tactics are employed to create content in a way that makes it more believable; or to present, distribute and promote it in order to make it more visible, impactful or profitable. In the realm of commercial disinformation, the goal is usually to achieve immediate engagement, usually of social media users, with the content or the publisher (clicking a link, reacting, sharing, commenting or otherwise establishing communication, sharing personal or financial data, buying a product, paying for a service). Political disinformation, on the other hand, usually aims for long-term goals of shaping public opinion (often in an attempt to "spin" current events) and influencing political decisions, particularly about voting. Various actors sometimes publish false claims aiming to instigate hostile engagements with a third party, for example to join a harassment campaign against a person or organization targeted with disinformation. This has become a growing problem for fact-checkers in the region, Europe and beyond, who are often targets of harassment and attempts at intimidation coming from actors that publish disinformation.[69]

Tactics used in political disinformation

The most developed "infrastructure" for distributing and promoting political disinformation rests within the aforementioned "hub" which perpetuates the ethnonationalist paradigm and/or creates support for the ruling parties in RS/Serbia. It is the most prominent source of political disinformation and harmful narratives, continuously and significantly reaching the information space of at least four countries in the region and influencing all others as well.

The tactics it uses include repeated redistribution of the same content, mirroring and mutual referencing between the media and the political actors, amplifying disinformation narratives and aiming to make them seem more credible and believable. The "self-referencing" within this hub is particularly efficient when it is done with a time distance, with false claims re-entering into public discourse many times over, even after they are debunked (a good example is the false story about the destruction of Serb graves in Sarajevo which resurfaced multiple times, either through media claims or statements of politicians (1, 2).

The same group of media often use similar techniques to build their disinformation narratives, a lot of which revolve around "creating sources" to make the published disinformation seem credible or authoritative. "Producing" fake experts is one such tactic, where persons without real expertise are presented and promoted as authorities on the subject they comment on, turning them into regular sources of false narratives (1, 2, 3). Such commentators are often introduced with false or misleading titles implying non-existent academic or professional achievements. Exaggerating pundits' status or

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[68] Darvin Murić, Milovan Nikolić, Nerma Šehović, Petar Vidov, Top lista regionalnih dezinformatora/ki, Faktograf, FakeNews Tragač, Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, October 2021.

[69] See: Tijana Cvjetićanin, Fact-checking in the Balkans While the Sky is Falling, August 2020.

Tijana Cvjetićanin, Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe, Faktograf / International Press Institute, June 2023.

Baybars Örsek, IFCN launches working group to address harassment against fact-checkers, Poynter, July 2021.

seniority is another similar technique - for example, a former CIA analyst who supports Dodik's views has been falsely presented as a former "chief of CIA" or "CIA chief for the Balkans" in countless Serbian and RS media for at least 20 years (1, 2, 3).

Anonymous sources, cited without any independent verification, are also often used to place inflammatory disinformation about political actors, influence public discourse in election time, reaffirm particularly toxic false narratives (war crimes denial, made-up security threats), or to attack political opponents. The media outlet would usually claim that the anonymous source is a person with access to confidential information ("diplomatic source", "high-level source" and similar), but they are often entirely made up to serve as an alibi for false claims (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) or for more material "fakes" like forgeries of official documents (1, 2). Using anonymous sources and/or supposed claims from circles close to news actors is one of the main tactics for spreading disinformation in Serbia. Raskrikavanje rates such news as unfounded because such articles usually do not contain enough information to fact-check them.

Alleged whistleblowers from intelligence agencies play a particularly prominent role in this tactic. However, in addition to making up anonymous "whistleblower spies", sometimes actual intelligence operatives are attributed false statements that supposedly confirm various anti-Western conspiracy theories like those about "breaking up Yugoslavia". The tactic of making up statements has also been observed with other public figures from Western countries (1, 2).

There are many other tactics observed by political actors and/or sources dealing in political disinformation, especially during the elections, at a time when these and other tactics are particularly intensive in attempts to influence the campaign. Some have been observed in more than one country - for example, fake opinion polls are used in BiH, but especially in Montenegro to try to influence public perception of parties and candidates' popularity among the voters (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). In Serbia, the ruling SNS party has perfected the use of "bots" on social media in Serbia, X (Twitter) and on Facebook, where networks of party activists' or automated accounts engage in coordinated and inauthentic behavior to influence public opinion (1, 2). On both networks, thousands of accounts recognized as "bots" of this ruling party in Serbia have been deleted several times. Similar synchronized posting, albeit on a much smaller scale, has been observed in BiH as well (1, 2).

Attributing false statements to public figures is a tactic used by various actors for multiple purposes. The "disinformation hub", for example, uses the tactic to fake Western support for local nationalist narratives (1, 2). Some actors rely almost entirely on this tactic. In BiH, a network of anonymous Facebook pages regularly attributes fake statements to political opponents of SDA, one of the major parties in the country (1, 2, 3, 4).[70] Political battles waged on social networks in BiH also include tactics like creating false accounts of targeted politicians, or presumably satirical pages which are *de facto* used to spread disinformation and slender political opponents (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7).

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[70] Nerma Šehović, Rasvjetljavanje: Društvene mreže kao alat za propagandu, Raskrinkavanje, September 2022.

"For-profit" disinformation

"Commercial" disinformation uses various tactics of information manipulation, present region-wide, to exploit virality of social networks and monetization opportunities of ad services. Clickbait is the most widespread tactic of various actors to manipulate - and often disinform - audiences on social networks, as well as the pages of their websites. Clickbait uses various tactics like announcements (usually false) of shocking or scandalous content, ("Shocking", "Terrible", "Horror", "Incredible", "Scandalous"); unfinished sentences compelling the reader to find out how the supposed story ends; using numbers and lists to make the content seem useful or educational; using "screaming" punctuation and capitalization of letters; directly addressing the readers with invitations sent with the purpose of opening the linked content ("See why this video is conquering the Internet", "You won't believe what happened then", "What followed will leave you breathless") and others.[71] While this broad repertoire does not necessarily involve false information, it is often used as another "layer" of the bait, either by making the headline out of a completely false claim not supported by the text that follows, or by deliberately omitting crucial information, like time or place of events covered, to make the article seem timely or relevant.

Clickbait is monetized in several ways, both directly and indirectly. Directly, by opening a page on the website where ads are placed, with the website owner profiting directly from ad views. Indirectly, by improving the "ranking" of the page which makes its ads more profitable, as the advertisers are willing to pay more for their content to be displayed on most visited pages and those with longer viewing time (readers staying longer and scrolling through the page, thus seeing their ads multiple times)[72]. Online portals therefore use similar tactics not just to bring the readers to the website, but to keep them there as long as possible clicking and scrolling, and to keep them coming back to view more content. Sensationalistic, clickbait headlines are used even for highly disturbing and sensitive topics, as seen in the exploitation of cases of extreme violence and/or personal tragedies (1, 2, 3, 4), pointing to serious problems with the concept of media self-regulation that continues to fail in addressing this and many other manifestations of low or no accountability of the media that pledged to abide by professional codes.[73]

Clickbait is a tactic particularly perfected by "click farms" - networks of mutually connected, usually anonymous websites that resemble news media and share the same Facebook "assets" (pages, groups and user accounts) to place their content and increase audience reach that way (1, 2, 3). Their content largely consists of false or misleading "news" they promote on social networks, with the ultimate goal to drive traffic to websites where they monetize pageviews through ad-services. These Facebook assets sometimes change owners as they are bought, sold and rented to multiple websites, amounting to a whole separate branch of online gray economy, particularly well developed in BiH. Click farms are a decade old tactic that is being increasingly used by mainstream media in the last few years. These are mostly, but not exclusively, tabloids that "rent" existing Facebook pages from their administrators, or maintain their own "farms".

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[71] See more in: Jelena Gajić, "Klik brži od pameti: Kako nas klikbejt naslovi varaju iz dana u dan", Danas, December 2021.
[72] The report lists the most visited pages in Serbia which significantly overlaps with the list of tabloids that are the most prominent disinformation source in the region, featuring Blic, Kurir, Telegraf, Alo, Espreso and Novosti, among others.
[73] Anida Sokol, "Good Models, Limited Implementation: Media Self-Regulation In Bosnia And Herzegovina", Media Centar (2023): 3

Monetizers of disinformation constantly evolve their tactics to stay up to date with the incentives created by tech platforms' algorithms, which are closely monitored by such actors, and to bypass potential restrictions or safeguards that could limit visibility and reach of inauthentic, fraudulent or otherwise problematic content. Many use different technical tools to multiply ad-based revenue, from pop-ups that force readers to engage with ads in order to read the text, to scripts that scrape content from other websites, or multiply the published content by "cloning" an article URL with minor changes to create dozens addresses to share the same text, bypassing the spam/repetition detection on social networks ([1], [2], [3]).

Scams

Various online hoaxes target either personal and financial data of social media users, including bank account information, or attempt to sell products of dubious safety through fraudulent advertisements, increasingly using AI (synthetic media) to defraud viewers of such ads. Numerous such schemes have long been on the "radar" of regional fact-checkers who have been debunking them and striving to educate the public about them for years. A few main types of scams encountered throughout the region include:

- Fake giveaways and made-up sales, usually on Facebook, where scammers impersonate supermarket chains or other well-known brands, are commonly used to obtain the victims' personal information, steal their financial information, hack their social media accounts or to scam them into subscribing for different services ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9]). They employ various tactics to get the users to interact with their profiles and pages, in order to be able to start exchanging private messages and send them to the external pages where the hoax is "implemented". Scammers are often located in far away countries and rely on various automated services like automatic translation, scripts that multiply content and AI tools to create content and perform these interactions.

- Fraudulent advertisement schemes promoting fake medical preparations and supplements stand out in terms of information manipulation tactics they use to deceive users on social media ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]). The "news items" used for such advertising feature fake doctors, non-existent individuals, or reputable doctors who are unaware that their name or image is being used for marketing and fraudulent purposes. Fraudulent ads with manipulated audio/video of celebrities portrayed as endorsing sketchy "medical" products often use AI technology to make the video look and sound authentic, praying particularly on the elderly users with low digital/information literacy.[74] For years, such schemes primarily functioned through a tactic known as native advertising, which uses "widgets" with thumbnails embedded in news media websites, mimicking the surrounding content and blending in with the page. They provide both ad revenue and, through cross-linking with other websites, additional visibility to web portals who use them.[75] However, in the past years, these advertisers have expanded from "native ads" into other spaces via ad services like Google's AdSense or Meta's Audience Network, reaching wider audiences through apps on smartphones and sponsored posts on social networks.

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[74] See a registry of fraudulent websites compiled by FakeNews Tragač in 2021 at: https://fakenews.rs/2021/03/31/prevarantski-oglasi-na-vise-od-stotinu-sajtova/
See also a handbook on how to recognize and avoid online frauds in: Stefan Janjić (ed), Onlajn prevare i kako im se suprotstaviti, Novosadska novinarska škola / FakeNews Tragač, March 2021.
[75] In at least one case, the same entity - a BiH based company Monetize Ad with several subsidiaries - is both the manufacturer of products and the creator of the widget used to advertise these products.

o Pyramid schemes adapted to the online world, with various apps serving as "workplaces" for onboarding of victims. Such schemes perpetrated online were recorded in Montenegro and Serbia in 2022 and in BiH in 2023 (1, 2, 3).

Tactics used in conspiracy theories

As noted before, most of the global-scale conspiracy theories are taken from foreign sources, translated and then distributed to the regional audiences. This is usually content published by English speaking conspiracy theorists, translated and modified by their local or regional counterparts. This is one of the tactics to provide a constant supply of material to publish and/or promote on social networks, particularly for the owners of conspiratorial websites which publish large quantities of content and monetize them through ads services. They often do this through low quality automated translation, sometimes making the claims they republish barely intelligible.

The actors on the "conspiracy scene" profit off of the claims they spread, either directly through online monetization, or by profiting off of the "cult" status they build which is then used to give paid talks, sell books, products, services, etc. Each "genre" of conspiracy theories develops its own specific motives and "conventions" that become instantly recognizable to their dedicated audiences, or even to the broad public. For example, antivaccination narratives will often intentionally misinterpret results of scientific research or other vaccine-related information to feign credibility of their claims; exaggerate intensity, frequency or scope of their potential unwanted effects or make up some that don't exist (autism, sterility, pregnancy loss, cancer, etc.); claim that vaccines contain scary sounding ingredients like "monkey kidneys" or "aborted fetuses", or connect them to technologies that have already been presented as dangerous in other conspiracy theories, like 5G or microchips.

Content wise, the techniques they use are focused on creating an impression of credibility of their information: claiming that the information they are bringing is released by a whistleblower (1, 2, 3) from a powerful institution who has decided to "come clean" about some conspiracy, or that some legitimate institution has "admitted" the harm that conspiracy theories had been accusing it of. One of the most viral and most impactful examples is the false story that courts in the US have "admitted" that MMR vaccine causes autism (1, 2), that was probably the single most shared piece of antivaccine disinformation in the region. prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.

When it comes to "infrastructure" and attention-grabbing, the "conspiracy influencers", who are focused on online monetization, share some of the tactics used by scammers, anonymous websites and commercial media. They usually work to build multiple channels of communication, both on anonymous websites and various social networks. They often use each other for mutual benefit, broadening their audiences by alternating as hosts and guests between their respective podcasts and channels, doing "collaborations", or quoting each other in articles. This is done across the region, with recognizable figures from different countries "visiting" or "collaborating" with each other, effectively building a regional "conspiracy market".

Youtube stands out as one of the favorite platforms for such collaborations, with countless podcasts and channels often dubbing themselves "TV networks", specialized in such content. However, in recent years, many of them have moved partially or entirely to other platforms like Telegram and TikTok. In recent years, TikTok has been emerging as the new prominent channel for various influencers, including the

conspiratorial ones, targeting particularly the younger audiences. The fact-checkers from most, if not all the countries in the region are seeing an increase in false or manipulative content published on this network, as well as the "overflow" of TikTok videos to other platforms like Facebook or Instagram. Similar tactics were previously observed with YouTube - specifically, reuploads of "conspiratorial" videos from that platform to Facebook, especially during the pandemic "hyperproduction" of such content.

However, the conspiracy theorists who relied more on Facebook have particularly invested in creating new audiences on other platforms since Meta's Third-Party Fact-Checking (TPFC) program has started in the region (see: Antidisinformation update). In fact, claims of "censorship on Facebook" have become both a material for new conspiracy theories and a tool to rally followers around this type of "content creators". Many of the fringe conspiratorial websites now end each article with a call to their supporters to join them on places like Telegram or TikTok, where they can "still tell the truth". Some use similar "slogans" in all the materials they publish, aiming to drive engagement by asking their followers to share it in order to "spread the truth", "wake up" and "be the media for others", etc. Similar wording is used in calls to financially support these outlets and individuals, usually through services like Patreon that enable direct donations. These calls often contain more or less explicit "dog whistles" targeting fact-checkers, portrayed as "censors" and mercenaries of entities such as the world government, cabals, big pharma and similar (See more in *Backlash against fact-checking* in this report).

Backlash against fact-checking

All the newsrooms report experiencing harassment from nearly all types of actors involved in creating and spreading disinformation. These attacks usually include a combination of inflammatory or hate speech, incitement, threats and disinformation that targets the fact-checkers themselves. It is a tactic that disinformation sources use to attempt to intimidate and avert fact-checkers from debunking the falsehoods they publish. For some of them, however, it serves an additional purpose as a tactic of promotion and monetization. Conspiracy theorists and similar "disinformation influencers" who operate on social networks have leaned into the narratives about "censorship" they allegedly endure from powerful conspirators who attempt to silence their "truth telling". This narrative is used to give their stories an aura of relevance and credibility and to portray themselves as courageous and undeterred in the face of the alleged intimidation. Claiming to be a victim of censorship is also used as a fundraising tactic, particularly suitable for the social media personalities who build direct relationships with their audiences. This is either done directly, by asking followers for donations to support the alleged struggle against powerful enemies, or by inviting them to "uncensored" platforms like Telegram, where conspiracy theorists have begun to cultivate new audiences, especially after Meta's TPFC program entered the region. Vilifying fact-checkers as censors has thus become an integral part of the "brand building" strategies of online conspiracy theorists, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The tendency to attack fact-checkers was present before 2020 ([1](), [2]()), but the explosion of conspiracy theories and hostile narratives during the pandemic has made it significantly more pervasive and aggressive. Another impactful factor that increased exposure to harassment is the participation in the TPFC program, as evidenced by the 2023 study of harassment experienced by European fact-checkers.[76] The study, published by Faktograf and International Press Institute (IPI), confirms that harassment is a problem for the whole community, already recognized by IFCN in 2021[77] also finding that perpetrators of

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[76] Tijana Cvjetićanin, "Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe", Faktograf / International Press Institute, May 2023.

[77] Baybars Örsek, IFCN launches working group to address harassment against fact-checkers, Poynter, July 2021.

harassment are disproportionately men and its targets are disproportionately women fact-checkers[78] and that the region of SEE / Western Balkans is the most problematic in Europe by nearly all observed parameters.[79]

For a large part of the region where the TPFC partnership started right after the pandemic lockdown, it has exacerbated the abuse they had already endured, particularly on social networks. Soon after the lockdown happened, fringe websites, conspiracy theorists and various self-proclaimed experts, analysts and "influencers" started profiting off of spreading disinformation about the pandemic. Some were peddling conspiracy theories about the origin or even the very existence of the virus, others connecting the pandemic to geopolitics or local political battles and countless websites and social media users were offering recipes and advice on "natural protection" against the infection while spreading baseless claims about the alleged dangers of masks and social distancing.

The disoriented public, hungry for information and distrustful of the authorities, responded intensely to such content, making it instantly profitable. The antivaccination movement also saw the pandemic as an opportunity for its moment in the spotlight and relentlessly stoked up fear of vaccines that were being developed, managing to persuade many of their followers that vaccines are more dangerous than the virus or, at the very least, ineffective against it. Fact-checking newsrooms were nearly the only ones regularly and systematically debunking this content, proactively communicating their findings with the public and labelling such claims as false on Facebook and Instagram - creating virtually the only disruption for the disinformation "entrepreneurs".

They responded with frequent and aggressive attacks, often presenting fact-checkers as culprits in one of many Covid-19 conspiracies and, depending on their specific "infodemic" brand, accusing them of being "satanists", co-conspirators in "depopulation of the Earth", agents of foreign intelligence services, "censors" and shills for their respective governments, "Big Pharma" or online platforms. Those with regional audiences, who found their material debunked by more than one regional fact-checker, would often attack them "in bulk", sometimes presenting their collaborations or networks such as IFCN or SEE Check as additional "evidence" of alleged international conspiracy to silence the truth.[80]

These actors would often instigate their followers to partake in harassment campaigns against fact-checkers that included threats to individuals or whole newsrooms; spamming their social media accounts with insults, posting their names and photographs on social networks accompanied by slanderous or violent comments, publishing their personal information ("doxxing"), cyber-attacks and similar. Getting their followers to engage in such behavior was not hard, as many were already successfully led to believe that they were being "attacked" by nefarious conspirators rather than affected by a random, unforeseeable event that was the spread of a new virus. Some were also additionally radicalized by QAnon and similar dehumanizing narratives which included particularly gruesome accusations, for example those of cannibalism, or child trafficking and molestation.

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[78] Maida Salkanović, "The Year in Disinformation: 2023 Through the Eyes of Fact Checkers", SEE Check, January 2024.

[79] Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe, 12.

[80] One of the first such "reports", titled "*CENZURA PREKO ORWELLOVSKIH „KONTROLORA ISTINE"* – *Od Faktografa.hr, Raskrinkavanje.ba do Istinomer.rs"* was compiled in 2020 by Logično, one of the prominent conspiratorial websites in the region (available at: https://www.logicno.com/politika/cenzura-preko-orwellovskih-kontrolora-istine-od-faktografa-hr-raskrinkavanje-ba-do-istinomer-rs.html)
See also https://www.logicno.com/politika/plan-porobljavanja-ljudske-rase.html and
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojcclKFeby8, a video by a YouTuber who propagates the Flat Earth theory, claiming that fact-checking newsrooms are financed by the CIA.

One of the tactics observed especially during the pandemic, is mimicking and mocking names, logos, or other recognizable features of the fact-checking organizations (targeting particularly Faktograf as the longest-running TPFC partner - 1, 2, 3, 4, 5), corresponding to similar behavior observed in other countries, especially in attempts to disparage the TPFC program.[81] In addition to harassment, several attempts to impersonate existing fact-checkers or to create obscure websites or social media accounts posing as fact-checking initiatives (usually by political parties) have also been observed in the region.[82]

Attacks on fact-checkers do not only come from "niche" conspiracy theorists and their followers, but also from other actors, usually as a response to a specific fact-check they did not like. These include, but are not limited to foreign state representatives like the Russian embassy to BiH, political actors, typically from fringe right-leaning parties with little political relevance, but with considerable online following (Mirnes Ajanović in BiH, Nikola Sandulović in Serbia, Mislav Kolakušić in Croatia), influential and/or popular public figures (Semir Osmanagić in BiH, Nenad Bakić and Gordan Lauc in Croatia)[83] and even the mainstream media like Avaz in BiH, or Tanjug in Serbia). Fact-checkers from the region, particularly those active in international networks, have also been exposed to attacks from international actors, particularly the right-wing pundits, media and political actors from the US invested in building the narrative about fact-checking as a "censorship industrial complex". One such piece of targeted disinformation received special attention after being retweeted by Elon Musk, with the thread on X/former Twitter quickly picked up and hailed by local conspiratorial sources (1).

Fact-checkers also increasingly face legal harassment, predominantly in the form of SLAPPs - "strategic lawsuit against public participation", which aim to silence the target and deter other media or individuals from speaking out on the same issue, or, in this case, from fact-checking falsehoods published by specific actors.[84] The 2023 report on harassment against European fact-checkers finds that fact-checkers in the SEE region are hit with this type of intimidation more often than others. Lawsuits against fact-checkers have particularly gained momentum in Serbia, where Raskrikavanje has been sued twice by the publisher of the Kurir on the basis of being "unfair competition" for stating that the tabloid publishes disinformation - even while correcting the same disinformation debunked in Raskrikavanje's reports.

There are many records of harassment campaigns over the years. Nonetheless, even though such cases are well documented throughout the region, in most of the countries there is an acute lack of professional solidarity from media associations and other organizations created to support journalists and uphold professional standards in the media.[85]

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[81] Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe, 30-31.
[82] For example, "Trash news" (Smeće vijesti) website created by HDZ prior to 2018 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina (See: Emir Zulejhić, Ko podržava i prenosi HDZ-ovo "Smeće vijesti"?, Raskrinkavanje, October 2018), or "Lie detector" Twitter account in Serbia (See: Detektor laži: resursni centar za „istinu" i „podsećanje", FakeNews Tragač, July 2022).
[83] See examples of such campaigns in "Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe"
[84] Maida Salkanović, Is the Pen Mightier than the Sword? SEE Journalists SLAPP-ed by Vexatious Lawsuits, SEE Check, October 2023.
[85] Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe, 23.

Events instigating the spread of disinformation

Current events

When it comes to events of global significance, the only major new topic of disinformation noted by the newsrooms in 2023 was the escalation of conflicts between Israel and Palestine, including both the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7th and Israel's retaliatory invasion of Gaza. As noted by Faktoje, in Albania most of the disinformation content is in the form of misrepresented, manipulated or synthetic photos and videos, usually taken from foreign sites and shared to gain clicks rather than to promote any specific narrative, even though some of the debunked content has an explicit pro-Palestinian or pro-Israel tone (1, 2, 3). Similar observations come from Bosnian Raskrinkavanje, noting that most of the content on social networks is footage from other conflict zones being misrepresented as recorded in Gaza (also a common occurrence in the early days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine), but also noticing that some echoes of the "Pallywood" narratives, a globally present hostile narrative propagated by Israel-based sources.that falsely accuses Palestinians of fabricating war crimes and civilian victims, are observed in the region (1).[86]

Natural disasters that happened in 2023 have sparked the spread of narratives promoting climate change denial, gaining particular momentum after apocalyptic events like the earthquake that hit parts of Turkey and Syria in February 2023, or wildfires that broke out in Hawaii. Natural disasters triggered viral "explanations" of these events based on false claims and conspiracy theories: a special kind of "tectonic weapons", or the famous HAARP, were said to have caused the earthquakes; some falsely reported "a strange light in the sky" above Turkey and some even blaming NATO for the earthquake, or connecting it to "QAnon deep state tunnels" (1, 2, 3, 4). Unusually strong and destructive storms that have hit several countries in the region during 2023, were also used to propagate unfounded claims about made-up "weapons" being used to create extreme weather, along with many other false and fantastic "explanations" for the storms (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9). These events work almost like a case study on how various actors exploit catastrophic events to peddle their agenda or reaffirm their narratives, however unrelated to the actual event they may be.[87]

When it comes to the events in the region, several particularly violent crimes have instigated spread of disinformation and manipulative reporting: the mass shootings that took place in a Belgrade school and in villages Dubona and Malo Orašje (Serbia), a particularly gruesome femicide in Gradačac (BiH) that was "broadcast" live on Instagram and the armed attack in Banjska (Kosovo).

Murders that happened in May in Serbia particularly demonstrated the ruthlessness of Serbian tabloids, but many other media outlets in the region as well, in their pursuit of clicks (1, 2).

On May 3rd, a 13-year-old boy shot and killed nine classmates and the school security guard in a Belgrade elementary school Vladislav Ribnikar. Shortly after, on May 4th, another mass murder happened, where a 20-year-old man killed nine and injured twelve in a shooting spree in the villages of Malo Orašje and Dubona near Mladenovac in central Serbia. These events, particularly the murder of schoolchildren by another child, shocked the entire region but also triggered an onslaught of "reporting" by Serbian

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[86] Emina Kuštrić, "2023. u retrospektivi: Dezinformacije potaknute ratom u Gazi", Raskrinkavanje.ba, December 2023.
[87] Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, Fake News Tragač and Faktograf.hr, "HAARP, Geopolitics And Other Fantasies: What Was Made Up About The Earthquake In Turkey And Syria", SEE Check, March 2023.

tabloids that included false and unverified news about details of the event and its aftermath and sensationalist clickbait, with grave transgressions of the journalist code. These included revealing the names of the killed children, publishing the name and the address of the minor who committed the crime, publishing unconfirmed statements from the boy who committed mass murders or the members of his family, "stalking" the victims' funerals and similar ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10]). The murders were also "explained" with conspiracy theories about "mind control" executed by cults or the US government ([1], [2], [3], [4]). This content was regularly redistributed by multiple media in other countries, particularly BiH.

Despite appeals of various journalists' and even psychologists' associations to stop such harmful practices,[88] this media exploitation continued for months after the murder and never really stopped.[89] As noted in Krik's 2023 report, tabloids like Srpski Telegraf kept the murders on their front pages throughout the year, publishing junk "information" with no other purpose than to increase readership or gain clicks, or details from the Ribnikar mass murder investigation, often citing anonymous sources.[90]

These events led to a series of protests called "Serbia against violence", which were held every week and lasted several months, leading to the forming of an eponymous opposition coalition that entered the local elections on December 17. The protests themselves became another target of pro-government media presented them as an opportunistic act of the opposition to attempt a power grab. This was in line with the usual negative reporting about the opposition, rife with bias and unfounded news, in the context of parliamentary and local elections in December, contrasted with dominance and positive portrayal of Serbia's president Aleksandar Vučić, who did not participate in the elections.

On August 11th, a man killed three people in Gradačac (BiH). The murders started with the killing of Nizama Hećimović, his former partner who reported him for domestic violence and was in hiding with her baby when he found her, beat her up and killed her in front of their baby daughter, while broadcasting the murder on Instagram. After killing two more people and wounding one, he shot himself amidst the police pursuit. The recording of the murder was live on Instagram for several hours, creating a region-wide outcry and leading to several protests against femicide. Similar patterns of exploiting tragedies or extreme violence for clicks were seen in the media reports about this case as well ([1], [2], [3], [4]), once again with Serbian tabloids and anonymous websites taking the lead in exploiting the tragedy.

Ongoing tensions in northern Kosovo, with several incidents involving Kosovo police, KFOR, and Serbian protestors, culminated with the incident in Banjska Monastery in northern Mitrovica on 24 September, where a Kosovo police officer was killed in a shootout with four attackers from the Serbian side, three of whom were killed as well. Several people were wounded ([1], [2]). This and other events, amid developments on the ground and diplomatic tensions, were followed by extreme narratives in media from both sides, including sensational headlines and unverified information contributing to ethnic tensions, with Kosovo and Serbia each blaming the other for the situation ([1], [2], [3], [4]). Additionally, narratives from Serbian media that amplify ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbs, were copied and propagated in some media outlets in Albania as well, without any scrutiny or thorough analysis ([1], [2]). In this context, a narrative of a possible war within the Western Balkans has been repeatedly used for clickbait and sensationalist reporting by the media ([1], [2]).

[88] Vanja Stokić, "Kodeks Vijeća za štampu BiH kršili i članovi Vijeća", Mediacentar, May 2023.
Selma Fukelj, "Novinari, poštujte dostojanstvo djece, žrtava i njihovih roditelja", Mediacentar, May 2023.
[89] Fake News Tragač, Raskrikavanje.rs, Raskrinkavanje.me and Raskrinkavanje.ba, "The Violence Shocked The Region, But Not The Tabloids", SEE Check, May 2023.
[90] Serbian Front Pages in 2023: Six Newspapers, Over 1,150 Manipulations.

The incident occupied the Serbian media for weeks, with the pro-government media going as far as to declare the attackers heroes, blaming everything on Albin Kurti, and claiming that the incident was aiming to "protect the Serbs in Kosovo".[91] Meanwhile, in line with the usual tactics that shape reporting on Kosovo, the same media were silent about details on one of the leaders of the attackers, Milan Radoičić, a controversial businessman from Kosovo with links to Serbian authorities and a criminal past that got him sanctioned by the US Department of State ([1], [2], [3]).

Historic and recurring events

There are a few historic events with either global or regional significance that regularly trigger the surge of disinformation - mostly those that were a subject of conspiracy theories. For example, the anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center "Twin towers" in New York is frequently used to resurface old conspiracy theories about the attack as an "inside job", including some with antisemitic undertones ([1], [2], [3]).

When it comes to the region, it is usually anniversaries of events related to the wars from the nineties that have that effect. March 24th, the beginning NATO bombing of FRY in 1999 is usually followed by various disinformation, most of which originated from the then-state propagandist narratives about and during the bombing. Anniversaries of different war crimes that took place in BiH are known to be a particular trigger for the disinformation coming from denialist narratives, especially in BiH entity Republika Srpska and in Serbia, with Srebrenica genocide denial[92] dominating the political and media spheres covered by the "disinformation hub" described above ([1], [2], [3], [4]).

The denial of war crimes like those in Račak, Markale and especially Srebrenica ([1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7]) were also used by Serbian and Russian propagandist sources as a "prop" to support denial of war crimes in the Ukraine town of Bucha, using the same narrative about the Western media "making up" crimes to vilify Russians as they supposedly did Serbs. Soon after the media reporters entered Bucha and disturbing videos of the aftermath of the crimes were shown to the world, false claims about "dead body moving" circulated in the region, along with other denialist disinformation, as supposed evidence that the Bucha massacre was staged. These claims started making rounds again in 2023, as did the narrative about the "Western propaganda". In April 2023 Večernje Novosti published an article titled "Srebrenica, Račak, Buča - one face of propaganda", peddling the Kremlin narrative "wholeheartedly supported and promoted by several of our media outlets, claiming that the West is "framing a massacre of civilians against Russia, like it did to Serbia in Račak in 1999"".[93]

[91] Tijana Đorđević, Mediji i Banjska: Šta se od vesti izgubilo na putu od Prištine do Beograda?, Istinomer, October 2023.
[92] Raskrinkavanje.me and Raskrinkavanje.ba, "Genocide In Srebrenica: Denial And Lies About Blaming All Serbs", SEE Check, July 2023,
Alena Beširević, "Genocide Denial On The Anniversary: Most Victims Are Not "Soldiers Killed In A Battle"", SEE Check, September 2023
[93] Mihaela Šljukić, "Slučaj Račak: Istine, laži i video trake", Istinomer, January 2023.

Antidisinformation update

Fact-checking in the region

Anti-disinformation initiatives have seen considerable development in the SEE region in recent years, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic. This activity is particularly noticeable in the development of the fact-checking "movement" in the region, which has grown significantly since first such projects were started in Serbia and BiH (Istinomer in 2009 and Istinomjer in 2010).

Today, each country in the region has at least one fact-checker verified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN)[94] and/or by the European Fact-Checking Standards Network (EFCSN).[95] In some countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia) there is more than one active IFCN/EFCSN verified signatory.[96] These international networks aim to connect, support and capacitate fact-checkers, as well as to establish, promote and advance professional and ethical standards set out in the **IFCN's Code of Principles (CoP)** and **EFCSN's Code of Standards (CoS)**.

To become a verified signatory of IFCN or a member of EFCSN, a fact-checking newsroom must demonstrate adherence to their respective codes. This is done through a three-step process designed to assess if the applicant's work meets the criteria set out in the codes, which includes requirements like having a clearly outlined methodology, consistently applied to all the fact-checked claims, regardless of who made them; being non-partisan and independent; being transparent about sources of funding; publishing regularly; being inviting and responsive to audiences' questions or suggestions of claims to check; fact-checking matters of public interest, having transparent corrections policies, etc. The process includes both self-assessment and external evaluation to establish integrity and quality of the fact-checker's work. Public complaints mechanisms are also set up as an additional safeguard to ensure the highest level of transparency and accountability of verified signatories/members.

An aspiring member fills out and submits an application with a detailed record of its work and evidence that it meets the code's requirements. The applications are then assigned to assessors, trained to evaluate the adherence to the code, who possess adequate qualifications and professional reputation in a relevant field (journalism, media studies and similar), speak the language used by the fact-checker and have substantial knowledge about the context of the country and/or the region where the fact-checker works.[97] For IFCN's Code of Practice, one assessor reviews the application and audits the applicant's website, providing detailed comments on their compliance with the code. Upon review, the application with the assessor's comments and conclusions is sent to the IFCN's Advisory board, composed of 15

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[94] Established in 2015 by Poynter Institute from USA: https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/. By the end of 2023, IFCN had 122 verified CoP signatories from all over the world.

[95] Established in 2022 with the support from the European Commission by a consortium of fact-checking organizations from five EU countries: Correctiv from Germany, AFP from France, Pagella Politica/Facta News from Italy, Demagog from Poland and Maldita from Spain. (See "Annex 1: EFCSN Consortium Members" at: https://efcsn.com/statutes/). By the end of 2023, EFCSN had 41 verified members (CoS signatories) from around Europe.

[96] Serbia has four (the two SEE Check members, Fake News Tragač and Raskrikavanje, as well as Istinomer and AFP Činjenice); Bosnia and Herzegovina has two, Istinomjer and Raskrinkavanje (both projects of Zašto ne) and Kosovo also has two, Hibrid and Krypometri. Other verified signatories in the region include Faktograf in Croatia, Raskrinkavanje (CDT) in Montenegro, Vistinomer (Metamorphosis Foundation) in North Macedonia and Razkrinkavanje (Oštro) in Slovenia.

[97] The application forms, along with information about the process and guidelines for applying are available on the IFCN and EFCSN websites: https://ifcncodeofprinciples.poynter.org/application-process and https://efcsn.com/application/.

representatives of fact-checking organizations from all over the world, who serve voluntarily in this body. Members of the board then vote to accept or reject the application, on occasion requesting additional information from the applicant or the assessor to inform their vote. If accepted, the signatory is added to the list of verified organizations which is published on IFCN website. The process is repeated each year for each verified signatory of the Code and all applications, including those filed for renewal of the signatory status, are publicly available on the website.

For EFCSN's Code of Standards, the process is near-identical, except the application is evaluated separately by two independent assessors, the Governance body that votes on applications is composed of representatives of European fact-checkers, and the verification process is repeated biennially. All signatories are obliged to publish IFCN/EFCSN "badges" on their website and to provide their readers with information on the complaints mechanisms, where they can report the fact-checker if they violate the codes they signed.

Most of the SEE Check network members have been verified signatories of the CoP since it was put in place, or shortly after they established their newsrooms. The CoS was established in 2022 and the application process was opened in 2023. All of the network members became verified signatories in 2023. In addition to being signatories, SEE Check members, as well as other regional fact-checkers, are active members of the European and global fact-checking communities, holding seats in the IFCN Advisory body and EFCSN Governance body.[98]

Regional initiatives and collaborations

Fact-checking is a journalism genre at the forefront of fighting disinformation. It identifies disinformation, conducts research and verification of public claims, viral images and videos, establishes facts and provides counter-evidence to false claims, provides contextual clarification for misleading information, creates data-bases and, in the long term, a body of knowledge about various disinformation phenomena.

Fact-checkers are particularly agile in responding to current events that have the potential to trigger intense flow of disinformation, like elections or other significant political processes, as well as major and/or catastrophic events like the Covid-19 pandemic, natural disasters or armed conflict. Some of the first activities of the SEE Check network were to connect and join forces in debunking particularly viral pandemic-related disinformation and conspiracy theories. Soon after the "infodemic" broke out in the region, the network created a "Covid-19 verified" community on Viber (a messaging app particularly popular in the region) to reach its users with debunks of dangerous disinformation; organized an online roundtable to share their experiences and educate the audiences and later created a video podcast that "dissected" specific pandemic-related disinformation narratives. The network members also collaborated on a timely research and analysis of pandemic-related disinformation narratives, offering a comprehensive deep dive into how the "infodemic" manifested itself in the region.[99] The members also contributed to IFCN's Corona Virus Facts Alliance, with the database of Covid-19 misinformation created and maintained by Poynter. Similarly, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the network maintained a live blog with fact-checks of disinformation about the invasion throughout 2022 and well into 2023, until this type of disinformation had somewhat diminished. Many regional fact-checkers,

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[98] Tijana Cvjetićanin (Zašto ne, BiH) has been serving on the IFCN Advisory board since 2019, while Ana Brakus (Faktograf, Croatia) and Bardhyl Jashari (Metamorphosis, North Macedonia) serve on the EFCSN Governance body.
[99] See: Disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic.

including three of the network members, have also contributed to an [international fact-checking database of this conflict](#), set up by the IFCN.[100]

In addition to their mutual cooperations, whether regional or global, the fact-checkers from the region also cooperate with other organizations from fields like media and information literacy, human rights and digital rights, investigative journalism, foreign influence, security, etc. There are several networks and coalitions, active both on country level and regional level, organized to tackle information disorder and other issues related to information integrity.

Some relevant initiatives active in the region, other than the SEE Check Network, include:

o [Anti-Disinformation Network for the Balkans (ADN-Balkans)](#) is a network of fact-checking and journalistic organization from the wider region, where Faktoje is a member. The network performs continuous monitoring of online media in the region since the beginning of 2022 and publishes [bi-annual reports](#) on disinformation trends and narratives observed through the monitoring. Zašto ne and CDT participate in the network's project [Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub](#), along with partner organizations Metamorphosis (North Macedonia), ISAC International and Security Affairs Centre (Serbia) and Sbunker.net (Kosovo). The project is [focused](#) on "exposing foreign malign influence in Western Balkans by debunking and mapping the flow of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda originating from external actors through the region."

o [SEE Digital Rights Network](#) was initiated [in 2020](#) by Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, and SHARE Foundation with the goal to "advance the protection of digital rights and address the growing challenges posed by the widespread use of advanced technologies in society". Zašto ne and Open Data Kosovo are members.

o [Coalition for Freedom of Expression and Content Moderation in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), established as a follow-up to UNESCO's "Social Media 4 Peace" project to advocate for "more adequate and transparent management of harmful content by social media companies". Raskrinkavanje.ba is a member.

o [The South East European Network for Profession-alization of Media (SEENPM)](#) is a network of 19 media centres and institutes across 13 countries of Central and South Eastern Europe. It does not deal directly with disinformation and fact-checking, but is dedicated to research, analysis and advocacy in relevant areas such as media accountability, professionalism and integrity, media and information literacy, freedom of speech and digital rights. Novosadska novinarska škola (the publisher of FakeNews Tragač) is a member.

o [Open Information Partnership](#) is a counter-disinformation project operating across more than 20 countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Raskrikavanje.rs is a [member](#).

o Informal regional networks for DSA advocacy have started to form following the Berlin Process' Civil Society Forum in 2022/23 where the working groups on Information Disorder (2022) and Digitalization and connectivity (2023) put a strong emphasis on the need to adopt a regional approach to transponing the EU legislation such as DSA and DMA, as well as coregulatory

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[100] Faktoje (Albania), Raskrinkavanje.ba (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Faktograf (Croatia), Hibrid.info and KALLXO (Kosovo), Raskrinkavanje.me (Montenegro), Vistinomer (North Macedonia), AFP Činjenice and Istinomer (Serbia).

mechanisms such as strengthened [Code of Practice Against Disinformation](#) (2022), aiming to both advance the digitalization processes in the region and to improve the accountability of very large online platforms in the region.

Knowledge sharing: Relevant research and events

Regional communities centered around the field of information integrity have been very active in producing knowledge about information integrity and literacy, analyzing various disinformation related phenomena and organizing or participating in many public events dedicated to these topics.

Some of the relevant research published by SEE Check members in the recent years includes (see detailed information in *Bibliography*):

- o [Disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic](#)
- o [Disinformation in the Online Sphere: The Case of BiH](#)
- o [Disinformation narratives in BiH and the region](#)
- o [Harassment of Fact-checking Media Outlets in Europe](#)
- o [Global narratives and local actors: 150 days of war in Ukraine and over 1500 disinformation in the region](#)
- o [Countering disinformation narratives and mapping conspiracy theories: The Case of BiH](#)
- o [Gender-based disinformation in Albania: How the media shape attitudes towards gender](#)
- o [Dezinformacije o izborima u Srbiji i u Crnoj-Gori](#)

Other research and studies relying on contributions from individual SEE Check members as authors, interviewees, or citing their work - or otherwise relevant for the field of information integrity - coming from the SEE region, includes (see detailed information in *Bibliography*):

- o [Civil Society & Think Tank Forum 2022 Conference Report and Policy Recommendations](#)
- o [Harmful narratives during elections: Smear campaigns, gender stereotypes and hate narratives 2022 General Elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)
- o [Key Recommendations of the Thematic Working Group on Digitalization and Connectivity](#)
- o [Information war and fight for truth - Tactics and harmful effects of foreign perpetrated disinformation in Western Balkans](#)
- o [Pandemic For Digital Rights - Central and South East Europe Report](#)
- o [Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them](#)
- o [Content Moderation and Local Stakeholders in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#)
- o [Blurring the Truth: Disinformation in Southeast Europe](#)
- o [Regulation of Harmful Content Online in Bosnia and Herzegovina - Between Freedom Of Expression And Harms To Democracy](#)
- o [Propaganda, Disinformation And Hate Models Of Media And Communication In Bosnia And Herzegovina](#)
- o [Geopolitical Perspective Of Disinformation Flows In The Western Balkans](#)
- o [Good Models, Limited Implementation: Media Self-Regulation In Bosnia And Herzegovina](#)
- o [Weak Mechanisms And Outdated Code Of Ethics: Media Self-Regulation In Montenegro](#)
- o [Https://Seenpm.Org/Wp-Content/Uploads/2024/01/Ourmedia_al-Eng_23-11-20.Pdf](#)

- o Imperative Of Boosting Capacities And Reinforcing Effectiveness: Media self-regulation in North Macedonia
- o High Professionalism With Limited Reach: Media Self-Regulation In Serbia
- o Weak Mechanisms And Outdated Code Of Ethics: Media self-regulation in Montenegro

Fact checkers and antidisinformation practitioners continue to meet, cooperate, organize and participate in public events around these topics. Some of the relevant regional or region-focused events in 2023 included:

- o Berlin Process' Civil Society Forum's Thematic Working Group on Digitalization and Connectivity - SEE Check members contributed to the working group and the conference in 2023, as well as that held on Information Disorder in 2022, producing papers with recommendations for EU and regional stakeholders on tackling information disorder.

- o "Connecting Media Communities in the Age of Disinformation" was an event organized in Sarajevo on February 24-25 by the European External Action Service and the Delegation of the EU in BiH. A panel discussion "The evolution of propaganda narratives about Ukraine" presented the research on disinformation narratives about Ukraine, with the participation of two SEE Check members.

- o "The Growth of the Fact-Checking Movement: How to Ensure the Truth is Heard" was an online event organized by the Global Democracy Coalition in March, featuring representatives of the SEE Check network who discussed fact-checking in the Western Balkans.

- o Fact-checking week in the Western Balkans was organized in April 2023 in Tirana by Faktoje and the Dutch Embassy. The conference hosted members of the Anti-disinformation Network Hub, led by Metamorphosis from North Macedonia and presented the key findings of a joint study from the hub's six member organizations on the spread of disinformation in the Western Balkans.

- o In May, CDT organized a regional conference "Are there fair elections in the disinformation era" in Podgorica, where leading regional journalists, fact-checkers, politicians, heads of institutions and other stakeholders discussed how to combat election disinformation.

- o In June, the POINT conference in Sarajevo featured several panels dedicated to fact-checking, fight against disinformation and the systemic solutions for information integrity in the Balkans based on the recently developed EU regulation and coregulation models. These included:

  - Fixing the digital environment - how can the Balkans use the EU toolbox
  - Disinformation Inc. – Monetization built on deceit
  - Shining a light on invisible harassment: The perspective of fact-checkers and women journalists
  - Trying to get ahead of the curve: Innovations in fighting disinformation
  - How to spin an invasion? The mechanisms and goals of Russian propaganda

- o OSCE's Annual Forum for Media Development was held in September 2023 in Tirana, with a focus on fact-checking.

- In September, Digital forensic center ([DFC](#)) had their annual conference in Podgorica with regional experts on disinformation.

- In October, Metamorphosis Foundation for Internet and Society organized a [networking meeting in Ohrid](#), for the regional members participating in the "Western Balkans Anti-Disinformation Hub". Several members of the SEE Check network participated.

- A third event within the "[Connecting Media Communities](#)" project was organized in Chisinau in October, with a panel "Community building: Collaboration among fact-checkers" dedicated to exchange of experiences between fact-checkers.

- In November, EEAS held their [EU-WB Media literacy conference](#) in Podgorica, with a strong focus on fighting disinformation and foreign information manipulation.

Partnerships with online platforms

Since 2022, all the countries in the region have been covered by Meta's [Third Party Fact-checking (TPFC)](#) partnership, a uniquely elaborate program that incorporates the work of fact-checkers and enables them to clearly label false and misleading content on Meta's platforms. The program is based on two general premises: that false or misleading content should not be removed, but that the same users who were exposed to it should be given an opportunity to view quality, fact-based information on the subject matter; and that spread of disinformation should be reduced.

The "warning labels" that appear on the fact-checked content contain two basic elements - the rating that was given to the content (ranging from "false", to "missing context"), and the link to the article published on the fact-checker's website, where the users can read the fact-based information established in the verification process. All TPFC partners have to be IFCN or EFCSN verified, to ensure the quality, objectivity, impartiality and high professional standards of their work. When it comes to curbing the spread of disinformation on Meta's platforms, the visibility of fact-checked content in users' news feeds is decreased, as is the visibility of pages or accounts whose content is repeatedly labelled as false. In some cases, they can also lose the ability to advertise or earn money on Meta's platforms.[101] Profiles or pages whose posts are labelled as false or misleading, have a 7-day window to correct the factual inaccuracies and communicate this to the fact-checking partner who rated the post. If a correction is done in accordance with Meta's standards, the label is removed and the status of the post is restored.

The first regional fact-checker to enter the partnership on the eve of the 2019 European Parliament elections was Faktograf (Croatia). Another expansion of the program happened in the summer of 2020, when Covid-19 related disinformation became omnipresent on social networks.[102] Two members of SEE Check became Meta's partners at that time, Raskrinkavanje.ba (BiH) and Raskrinkavanje.me (Montenegro). Istinomer and AFP (Serbia) and Vistinomer (North Macedonia) became partners at the

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[101] A detailed description of actions taken on such publishers reads as follows: "To stop misinformation from going viral, we will reduce its spread and show warning labels on top of content that's been rated by fact-checking partners. Pages groups, accounts, or websites that repeatedly share content rated false by fact-checkers will have some restrictions, including having their distribution reduced. Pages, groups, and websites may also have their ability to monetize and advertise removed, and their ability to register as a news Page removed."
(Available at: https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/third-party-fact-checking-how-it-works).
[102] See a detailed report on the "infodemic" in the region in: Disinformation During Covid-19 Pandemic.

same time. In 2022, two fact-checkers publishing in Albanian language, Faktoje (Albania) and Krypometri (Kosovo), also joined the program.

While it is not a silver bullet for viral online disinformation, TPFC did produce some tangible results and changes in the information environment in the region. The corrections mechanism, for example, has made a significant impact in countries where media accountability for veracity of published content was severely lacking. For example, in the time before Raskrinkavanje.ba entered the TPFC (2017-2020), some of the media whose articles were fact-checked would publish a dementi of the information established to be false, or, in some cases, delete the article or the social media post, but almost none have ever corrected the false claims in a clear and transparent way. After the newsroom entered the program, the commercial media that monetizes their content through social networks started regularly correcting the fact-checked content. Overall, about 4000 individual instances of corrections by publishers (covering about 800 false or misleading claims) were recorded by Raskrinkavanje.ba since it entered the TPFC.[103]

Raskrinkavanje.me reports that by the end of 2023, around 300 disinformation were corrected after their fact-checks, out of that 130 just in the first half of 2023.[104] As noted by the fact-checker, most of the corrections that were made were published by Serbian tabloids which, as previously noted, have a hybrid business model that relies in large part on clickbait/sensationalist content promoted on social networks, predominantly Facebook. This corresponds with the experience of Raskrinkavanje.ba, which also received hundreds of corrections from the same sources, including the corrections of disinformation published before the TPFC program was established in the region - often in bulk. It has to be noted, however, that some types of disinformation actors rarely or never publish corrections, unlike the media outlets that depend on online monetization. One are conspiracy theorists, whose elaborate narratives feed each other and would "crumble" if corrected - this is why a lot of them resort to new tactics, alternating between multiple profiles they create on Facebook, to bypass the "sanctions" like lower visibility (often tagging their own multiple profiles to increase visibility), or getting the audiences to move to other platforms that do not have TPFC type programs. Others are the highly politicized public / state owned media, financed through public funds and are equally unwilling to deconstruct any disinformation claims they use in political propaganda.

Another noticeable impact it has had is the correction of some particularly malign disinformation, including those aiming to stir ethnic tensions in post-conflict societies, like the fabricated claim that authorities in Sarajevo are "digging out Serbs' graves" (1).[105] This is a significant contribution to information integrity, given that certain types of publishers rarely or never correct that type of disinformation, as that would undermine the foundations of political or ideological propaganda that is at the core of their editorial policy. These range from mainstream sources like public broadcasters or foreign state-owned outlets, that rely on public budgets and are not significantly impacted by lowered reach on social networks; to fringe sources like conspiracy theorists and hyper-partisan or extremist websites, that respond to programs like TPFC by trying to cultivate audiences on other platforms and/or to get their readers/viewers to support them with direct donations. Between these two "poles", having the

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[103] All the fact-checks that got the "Corrected" rating are available at the following link: https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analize-sa-clancima-kategorisanim-kao-ispravljeno.
[104] See "Ispravljeno više od 300 dezinformacija za pet godina", Volim Podgoricu, November 2023;
and CDT Portal, "Nakon analiza Raskrinkavanja ispravljeno više od 130 dezinformacija", Centar za demokratsku tranziciju, May 2023.
[105] Dating as early as 2017 and first fact-checked in 2018, it has been corrected by multiple outlets - mostly located in Serbia - not after the original fact-check was published in 2018, but in 2020 (Kurir) and 2023 (Kurir, Mondo, Espreso, Telegraf, Politika), after the TPFC program was established.

commercial media - which still heavily invest in their presence and audience reach on social network - correct such claims creates at least some cracks in these narratives built on lies and fearmongering, especially if corrections are issued by an outlet that was the original source of disinformation republished by others.

Some regional fact-checkers also point out that the commercial mainstream media have become "somewhat more cautious about spreading explicit disinformation, possibly influenced by Meta's program that limits the reach of false content".[106] This is not to say that such sources have started to adhere to good practices and high professional standards, given that they still publish misleading or otherwise problematic information, but that the number of "explicit lies" has possibly dropped as a result of the program.

The program, it can be concluded, did not influence the inner workings and motivations of many of commercial media in the region in the sense of improving their accountability to the readers: many of the same outlets continue to publish the same or similar problematic content, arguably because they are able to reap the same rewards from online platforms. It did, however, put in place incentives to correct the falsehoods that were published - provided they are spotted and labelled within the TPFC - and possibly to restrain from publishing outright fabrications. The motives of the media for this are purely financial, but some of the results are palpable and measurable nonetheless.

Other VLOPs, in spite of signing the EC Facilitated Code of Practice against disinformation, are still not matching these efforts, thus allowing (or, in some cases, actively inviting) the "professional disinformers" to migrate there and build new audiences without disruption.

Legislation overview

The legal systems of countries in the region generally do not have comprehensive laws that recognize or attempt to regulate disinformation. Some of the legal systems still recognize criminal acts such as "causing panic and disturbance of public order" by use of false information (Serbia), while in others such stipulations have been abandoned (Montenegro), or have been withdrawn in the stage of draft law after public criticism (Sarajevo Canton in BiH). Libel is another legal concept similar to disinformation, as it refers to false statements which are damaging to the reputation of a physical or legal person. Libel has been decriminalized in the whole region, in accordance with good practices and international standards of protection of free speech. However, in 2023 it was re-criminalized in the BiH entity of Republika Srpska and similar attempts have been made in Albania several years before.

In Serbia, Article 343 of the Criminal Code recognizes disseminating false news or claims "leading to panic or severe disruption of public order or peace", or obstructing "the implementation of decisions and measures of state organs or organizations exercising public authority" as a criminal offense. Financial fines and a jail penalty ranging from three months to three years are prescribed for such acts, with a provision stating that if the act is committed through the media or at public gatherings, the penalties raise to a minimum of six months and maximum of five years of imprisonment. This article is, however, not being enforced in practice, with prosecutors stressing that it is difficult to prove consequences, i.e. disturbance of public order when it comes to, for example, tabloid headlines where false claims are used to incite fear of war.

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[106] Maida Salkanović, "The Year in Disinformation: 2023 Through the Eyes of Fact Checkers", SEE Check, January 2024.

The Criminal Code of Montenegro (Article 398) previously had a near-identical stipulation as the one still in force in Serbia, differing in sentence length only (up to one year of imprisonment for the basic offense and up to three years if the act is committed through the media or at public gatherings). This provision has been enacted on several occasions, against editors and journalists of websites that published false claims about an explosion in the presidential residence in Gorica, but also against five citizens for their posts on social networks during the pandemic. These arrests were met with strong criticism of human rights and media organizations, calling for such measures to be abolished.[107]

In December 2023, the government proposed amendments to the law, changing this provision, which prescribes the same penalties for inducing panic or public disturbance by threatening to commit a criminal act punishable by imprisonment of five or more years. The law no longer has any references to false news. The government of Montenegro adopted the country's first Media strategy in October 2023. The strategy calls for amending the existing laws in a way that would enable a more efficient fight against disinformation and foresees a creation of National media literacy council, a body that would be tasked with advancing media literacy and oversee efforts to fight hate speech, online harassment and disinformation.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a few attempts were made to adopt similar provisions on entity and cantonal levels, specifically in Canton Sarajevo in 2023 and in Republika Srpska in 2020. These were a decree adopted by the RS government during the Covid-19 lockdown prescribed financial penalties for "causing of panic and disorder during a state of emergency"; and Sarajevo Canton government's draft Law on Offenses Against Public Order and Peace, which envisioned financial sanctions for spreading or disseminating false news or claims that *cause panic, severely disrupt public order or peace, or obstruct the implementation of decisions and measures by public authorities*. Both were met with widespread criticism and were quickly abandoned. The decree has been enforced a few times before it was abolished and similar cases were recorded in Serbia and Montenegro during the Covid-19 lockdown as well.[108]

Two new media laws were enacted in Serbia in 2023: the Law on Public Information and Media and the Law on Electronic Media. The new laws stipulate citizens' right to be truthfully informed about matters of public interest; prescribe that journalists and editors should verify information before publishing, and clearly state the origin of information if it is taken from another media source. The laws, however, do not explicitly deal with disinformation, nor prescribe sanctions if these provisions are violated. More emphasis is put on media responsibility for publishing false information that targets individuals and the right of such persons to seek corrections and compensation for damages through legal proceedings.

In BiH, there is no law that defines or addresses disinformation, but some relevant provisions exist in the Code on Audiovisual Media Services and Radio Services. Article 7 of the code prescribes that the electronic media are not to air content that is "known or can be established based on common sense or through a routine check that it is false or misleading", under the threat of financial penalty for violating this provision (Article 22 of the Overview of Violations and Corresponding Sanctions Ruled by the CRA). The Code also prescribes penalties for reaffirming false premises used to promote alternative medicine, quackery, "paranormal" and "parapsychological" phenomena (Articles 12-14 of the Code and 27-29 in the Overview of violations). The enforcing institution for the Code is the state Communications Regulatory

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[107] Podrivanje demokratije vol 5: Manipulacija informacijama, 21.
[108] Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, 58.

Agency (CRA), which rarely enforces these provisions. Additionally, the fines themselves are not high enough to serve as a real deterrent.

A tendency to criminalize libel and/or make defamation laws more harsh can be observed in several legal systems in the region. In Albania, such attempts were made in 2018, when the government drafted a defamation law that would give the Albanian Media Authority and the Authority of Electronic and Postal Communications jurisdiction to enforce financial fines, or even suspend the operations of media based on complaints against them. The law never entered into force, due to strong opposition and criticism from both national and international actors, including the European Commission and the Venice Commission.

The National Assembly of Republika Srpska, however, did go through with a law that re-criminalizes libel, disregarding widespread protests and criticism from the media, civil society, international organizations and other actors. In August 2023, the Criminal code of RS was amended to make libel a criminal offense, some twenty years after it was decriminalized.

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