

# INFORMATION DISORDERS IN KOSOVO

2023

MAY 2024

# Key Findings

## Increase in information disorders during crisis

Throughout 2023, Kosovo experienced significant political and security tensions, creating an environment that enabled information disorders to increase, exacerbating interethnic discord and challenging social cohesion. Out of 4859 monitored articles and posts throughout the year, 996 contained information disorders.

## Highest engagement during political tensions in the north

The highest engagement online was observed on May 29, 2023, following the injury of NATO soldiers in clashes with Serb protesters, and on September 24, 2023, following the attack on Kosovo Police in the north.

## Use of AI-generated disinformation and deepfakes

The rise of deepfakes and AI-generated content posed new challenges in the media landscape, with deepfakes used to create false audio and video recordings of political figures, manipulating public perception and spreading disinformation. The spread of deepfake content on social media in Kosovo raises increasing concerns about the ability of fact checkers to detect such content.

## Foreign anti-democratic influence

Russian and Chinese state media played a significant role in spreading malign narratives, with Russian media inciting Serbian nationalism in Kosovo and drawing false parallels with Crimea to undermine Kosovo's independence. Chinese media criticized NATO and Western involvement in Kosovo, portraying them as destabilizing forces, as well as questioning their legitimacy.

## Manipulated content

The dissemination of manipulated and misrepresented images was common, inciting hatred. Examples included false claims about actions by the Kosovo Police and manipulated photos of political figures and journalists, as well as altered videos.



## Online Violence and Bias Target Women in Politics

Women politicians in Kosovo faced systematic attacks through sexist narratives, personal attacks, and threats of violence, with articles and social media posts questioning their competence, legitimacy, and integrity. Threats of physical violence were also made. Online misogyny against women deters them from participating in public life and perpetuates gender stereotypes.

## Fearmongering and false claims of an impending war

The phenomenon of promoting false stories about impending armed conflict between Kosovo and Serbia was significantly destabilizing, exacerbating ethnic tensions. These narratives often spread through social media platforms, where misleading and alarmist content gained substantial traction.

## Use of Bots to amplify political agendas online

Social media bots were widely used to support political agendas, particularly on X. These automated accounts can perform basic tasks, such as posting messages and retweeting content, significantly amplifying political messages.

## Online intimidation of Kosovo Serbs who cooperate with Kosovo Institutions

Kosovo Serbs who cooperate with Kosovo's institutions were intimidated in Kosovo's information space, including by having their personal information and identities posted on social media. Social media posts were used to isolate and threaten those involved in cross-community initiatives or state institutions. As a result of online intimidation, several members of Serb community in Kosovo have resigned from their jobs.

## Hostile Environment for Kosovo Journalists

Journalists in Kosovo faced increased intimidation on social media, including by public officials. These attacks were widely criticized by international representatives in Kosovo and leading international human rights observers, including Freedom House, as well as by the US State Department. Such attacks on social media attacks are creating a threatening environment for journalists.





# INTRODUCTION

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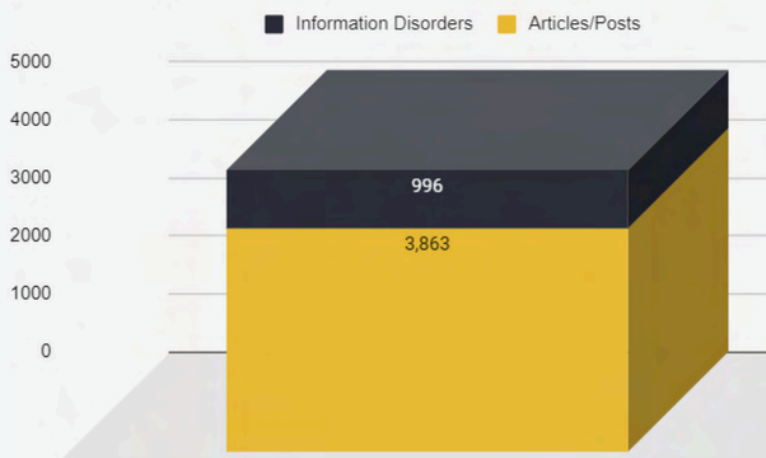
This report assesses the substance, scope, and trends of information disorders in Kosovo throughout 2023 – a year marked by significant political and security tensions for Kosovo. The report documents instances of information disorders spanning various media platforms and social networks. The report highlights domestic and foreign actors driving ethnic hatred, political propaganda, disinformation and other information disorders, which have increased interethnic tensions and undermined democratic process and social cohesion within Kosovo.

Specific political events triggered information disorders that were widely shared during times of high social media engagement in Kosovo. Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia during 2023, including the elections boycotted by Kosovo Serbs in April, the violent clashes between protesters against the Kosovo Police and KFOR peacekeepers in May, detention of three Kosovo Police officers by the Serbian Police in June, as well as the armed attack against Kosovo Police in Banjska in September, were key events during which the information space in Kosovo was flooded with information disorders. As a consequence, the interethnic tensions in Kosovo significantly escalated, exacerbating the already fragile relations among Kosovo’s Albanian and Serbian communities. The escalation was partly fueled by the spread of information disorders, such as exaggerated accounts of violence in many media outlets, leading to fear-mongering among the population, including exaggerated warnings of an imminent war between Kosovo and Serbia.

This report explores how both traditional media outlets and online platforms, including Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram, have been weaponized to spread false narratives, manipulate public opinion, and intimidate individuals. It further explores the external influences that feed these information disorders, particularly focusing on Russian and Chinese state media's portrayal of the situation in Kosovo to serve their geopolitical and anti-democratic interests.

The report reviews the emerging threat posed by deepfakes and AI-generated content in propagating information disorders, the role of bots in amplifying political messages, and instances of online misogyny and manipulated imagery to distort public perception. The report provides a stark overview of the challenges posed by information disorders in Kosovo, emphasizing the need for vigilance, critical media literacy, and robust responses to safeguard the media landscape and support information integrity.



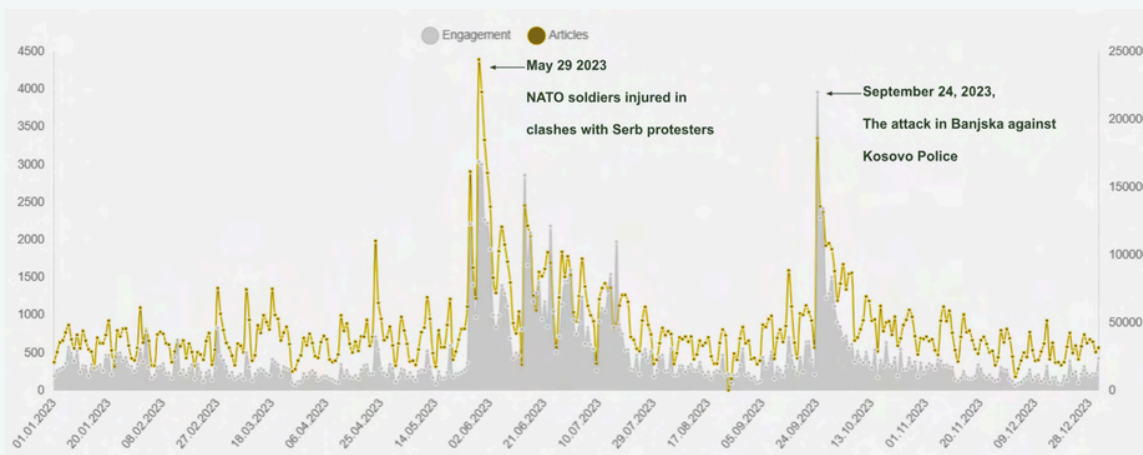


MEDIA ARTICLES AND INFORMATION DISORDER RATIO

Throughout 2023, the highest trending topics were monitored by NDI on different social media/platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok and Telegram. Out of the 4,859 articles and posts monitored, 996 of them were found to have information disorders. The articles and posts with information disorders generally had higher engagement (number of interactions in posts by social media users) and views, indicating the potential for higher impact that information disorders can have.




Throughout the year, NDI noticed several surges in misinformation and disinformation spreading through Kosovo's media and online platforms during security and political crises. News and social media posts about the developments in north of Kosovo dominated the conversation throughout 2023, fueling anger and online hate speech. The most significant spike in social media engagement and articles posted occurred on May 29, 2023, when NATO soldiers were injured in clashes with Serb protesters, generating over 1.7 million engagements in a single day on Facebook only.



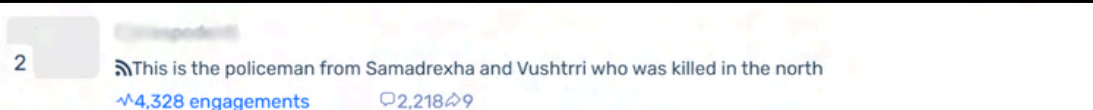
The increase in engagement and articles posted on Facebook on the topic of developments in the north of Kosovo throughout 2023

The second highest level of engagement came on September 24, 2023, when members of the Kosovo police were attacked by heavily armed individuals in Bajskë/Banjska, near the border with Serbia. During NDI's monitoring in September 2023 after the attack against Kosovo Police in Bajskë/Banjska, four out of the five articles with the highest engagement contained information disorders demonstrating the potential risk such disorders pose for exacerbating ethnic tensions.

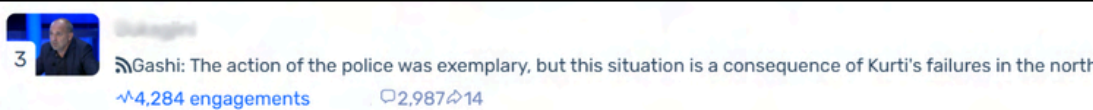
## TOP 5 ARTICLES ON THE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NORTH OF KOSOVO DURING SEPTEMBER 2023

1 

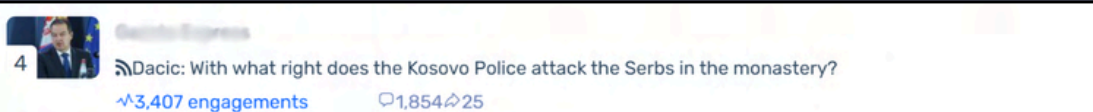
False Information – Manipulated image of solidarity with Kosovo

2 

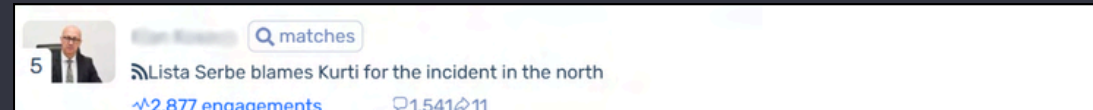
No information disorder

3 

Online violence and defamation present in the comment section of the post and shares against the statements made by the political analyst Dardan Gashi for comments made against Prime Minister Kurti

4 

False Information – Kosovo Police has not attacked any of the individuals inside the monastery

5 

False Information – Unfunded claims by Serbian List that Kosovo Police killed armed attacker who had surrendered.



# INCITING INTERETHNIC HATRED

The use of interethnic relations to incite panic and tensions in the media has threatened stability in Kosovo. Statements that assert the victimization of one group or accuse another of aggression without substantiated evidence have contributed to narratives fueling conflict between Kosovo and Serbia and interethnic tensions in Kosovo. For instance, the Serbian state-owned media Radio Television of Serbia published news citing the Serbian President Vucic who claimed that *"Today, Serbia is in the most difficult*

*situation, Pristina is carrying out silent ethnic cleansing in Kosovo."*<sup>1</sup> In October 2023, the European Parliament urged the Serbian authorities and media to refrain from hate speech against Kosovans and the dissemination of false claims about 'ethnic cleansing' and 'pogroms' in Kosovo, for for which there is no evidence. It called on the National Assembly of Serbia to stop using inflammatory language.<sup>2</sup>



The Kosovo Police released statements informing citizens that such reports about violence against ethnic minorities are false and that citizens must not fall prey to calls for actions that could threaten peace and stability.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the Serbian tabloid Alo! published headlines reading, 'Kurti's Terrorists Kill Serbs' and "The monsters left those wounded to die." These headlines falsely labeled the police force units as "terrorists," and claimed that the wounded attackers were abandoned to die by Kosovo Police, a claim that the Kosovo Police refuted. The University Clinical Center of Kosovo announced that one of the injured attackers was admitted to hospital in Pristina.<sup>4</sup>

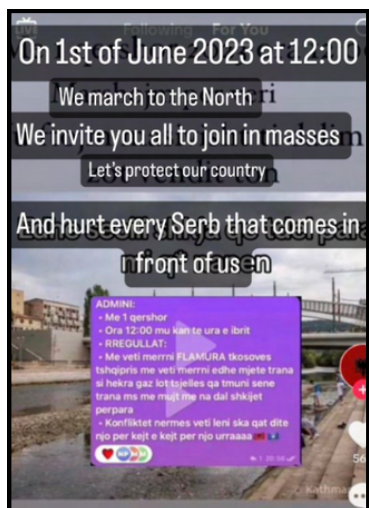


1 International organizations such as KFOR, EULEX, the EU Rule of Law Mission, UNMIK, and the OSCE have not mentioned "ethnic cleansing of Serbs" or Albanian "terror" in their reports and reactions

2 JOINT MOTION FOR A RESOLUTION on the Recent Developments in the Serbia-Kosovo Dialogue, Including the Situation in the Northern Municipalities in Kosovo | RC-B9-0437/2023 | European Parliament. [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0437\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-9-2023-0437_EN.html).

3 Kosovo Police Calls Citizens to Ignore Calls for Participation in the Protest - Kosovo Police. <https://www.kosovopolice.com/en/kosovo-police-calls-citizens-to-ignore-calls-for-participation-in-the-protest/>.

4 Bota Sot. The arrested Serbian terrorist is being treated at KKUK, the 49-year-old is out of danger. <https://www.botasot.info/aktuale-lajme/2057760/terroristi-i-arrestuar-serb-po-trajtohet-ne-qkuk-49-vjecari-eshte-jashte-rezikut-per-jete/>.



Following the violent protests in Zvečan/Zveçan in May 2023, several Albanian language pages on TikTok, Facebook and Instagram, as well as public figures, with posts calling for a “march” towards the north of Mitrovica which is inhabited by Serbs. In the announcement of this event, Albanians from Kosovo and other neighboring countries were called to join and bring with them flags of Kosovo and Albania, as well as tear gas and heavy metal bars. In some of the calls, the attendees were asked to hurt every Serb that comes their way. The Kosovo Police issued a press statement calling on citizens not to respond to the call to the march.<sup>5</sup> Law enforcement authorities announced that “some fake profiles” are calling for a rally on the Ibër/Ibar bridge, in a move that police described as provocation. After evaluations by security institutions, it was proven that many of these profiles were suspicious and that the posts may have been malicious, and to the detriment of the citizens and interests of the Republic of Kosovo.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the Kosovo Police invited citizens to remain calm and not to fall prey to any alleged organization by unknown persons, but to let the security institutions, the institutions of the Republic of Kosovo handle the situation professionally.

Targeting and intimidation of individuals based on their ethnicity or perceived political affiliation have been another serious concern for the information space in Kosovo. Posts with the potential of threatening individuals who engage in cross-community initiatives in Kosovo or participate in state institutions were shared on social media. A post was shared on a Serbian-speaking Telegram channel which included photos and names of Kosovo Serbs who recently joined the Kosovo Police, which intimidated both the individuals named in the post and other Kosovo Serbs who may consider working for Kosovo institutions. Furthermore, the Telegram channel threatened that the list is not final and that additional names and identities will be published later. The caption accompanying the photos and names of the individuals said “while our brothers were arrested, kidnapped, beaten in the ‘Šiptar’<sup>7</sup> prisons, they were on training missions in the southern part of the so-called “Kosovo and Metohija” in Vushtrri/Vucitrn.

5 Kosovo Police Calls Citizens to Ignore Calls for Participation in the Protest - Kosovo Police. <https://www.kosovopolice.com/en/kosovo-police-calls-citizens-to-ignore-calls-for-participation-in-the-protest/>.

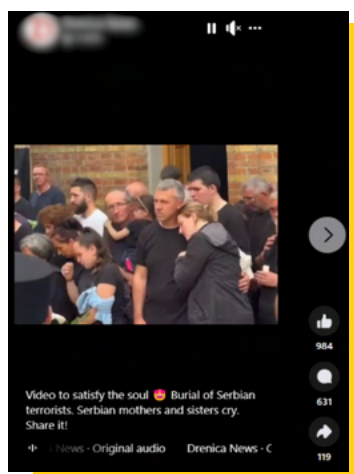
6. Ibid.

7 An extremely derogatory ethnic slur against ethnic Albanians in the Western Balkans.



The U.S. Ambassador to Kosovo criticized the threats and intimidation of individuals serving for the benefit of all Kosovo's citizens, considering them unacceptable and underscoring that the Kosovo Police exists to serve all communities.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the intimidation of these individuals, the post used a derogatory term for those of Albanian ethnicity. A second post from the Serbian-speaking Telegram channel contained the full names and profile photos of Kosovo Serbs who had joined the Kosovo Police. The post also criticized the international community in Kosovo for speaking up against the intimidation of Kosovo Serbs who join Kosovo institutions, claiming that calling the action a "threat" is a total absurdity and criticizing the international community for not reacting "when the Serbian people are attacked, arrested, kidnapped in Kosovo." The post received more than 35,600 views and more than 800 negative reactions from users calling the citizens listed in the post as "traitors" and that there is "no forgiveness" for them. In August 2024, several Kosovo Serb police officers stepped down shortly after being appointed and stationed in northern Kosovo, citing "threats and pressure" as reasons for their resignation.<sup>9</sup>

Emotionally charged accusations that target specific ethnic groups on social media can significantly heighten tensions and contribute to an already volatile situation. The celebration of suffering online can deepen the wounds of historical and ongoing ethnic divisions. The circulation of such online content taps into existing prejudices and polarizes society, making politically sensitive periods more unstable. Following the Banjska attack in the north of Kosovo, several pages on Facebook posted a video of a funeral service with multiple coffins. These pages claimed that the footage shows the burial of the attackers killed in the north of Kosovo by the Kosovo Police during the events of September 24. However, the coffins in the video are those of the students killed during the mass shooting on May 6, 2023 in Serbia.

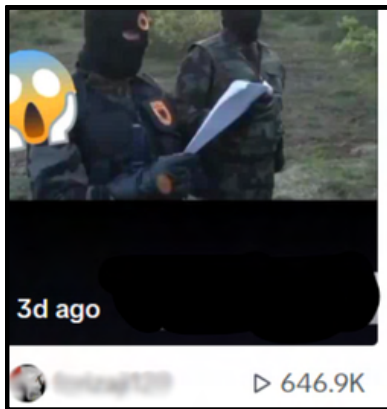
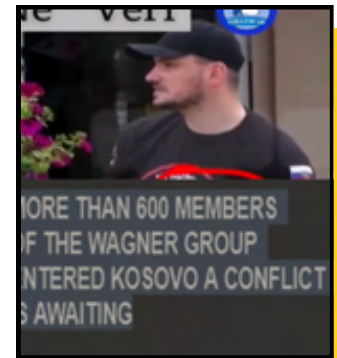


8 X. Ambassador Jeff Hovenier. <https://x.com/USAmbKosovo/status/1684135754233823232>.

9 "Kosovo." United States Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/kosovo/>

Moreover, the shared videos contain captions that celebrate the suffering of the families crying during the funeral service in the video. Captions describe the video as “satisfying” and claim that it is finally time for “Serb mothers and sisters to cry.” The pages encouraged viewers to share the video, which reached over 500,000 views and was shared more than 200 times. This approach leverages the inherent emotional impact of loss and mourning, twisting it to promote divisive content.

Promoting false stories of impending armed conflict between Kosovo and Serbia is destabilizing and promotes ethnic tensions, while at the same time undermining the authority of the state and its security institutions. A TikTok page with more than 10,000 followers and more than 145,000 likes shared a video containing false alarming information. The video alleges that 600 members of the Russian Wagner mercenary group entered Kosovo in July, insinuating a coming conflict. However, there has been no official report confirming their presence in Kosovo.



Similarly, a video posted on TikTok showed individuals dressed in military attire with Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) logos reading a statement claiming that the war against Serbia will begin again and that the men should be ready to fight. The post received 646,900 views. However, the original video was posted on YouTube nine years earlier on the 10th anniversary of the Albanian National Army.

Several remarks made on a Facebook post by the Minister of Internal Affairs of Kosovo, Xhelal Sveçla, triggered condemnation by the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK). They considered his stated “suspicions” on the timing of the protest of the journalists in Kosovo taking place at the same time as other protests in Belgrade as “dangerous.”<sup>10</sup> In the same post, Minister Sveçla also insinuated that wiretaps of sensitive political conversations were leaked to the Kosovo media by Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic.



10 Association of Journalists of Kosovo. Minister Sveçla uses dangerous language towards journalists. <https://agk-ks.org/en/news/gjuhe-e-rrezikshme-e-ministrit-svecla-ndaj-gazetareve/>



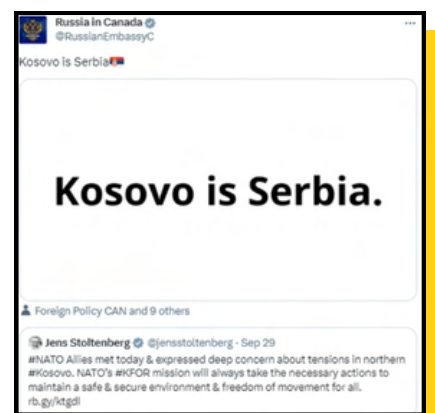
The post was followed by hateful comments made by Facebook users against journalists by calling them traitors and spies working for Serbia. The AJK further stated that such language is part of the government's ongoing attempt to intimidate the media.<sup>11</sup>

# FOREIGN MALIGN INFLUENCE IN THE INFORMATION SPACE

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Throughout the tensions in the north of Kosovo, both Russian and Chinese media have employed malign narratives. While Russia's approach was more directly confrontational, emphasizing Serbian nationalism in Kosovo, China's was mostly focused on criticizing the West and NATO through unfounded claims about Kosovo. Serbian-speaking Kosovars get their news mainly from Belgrade-sourced media.<sup>12</sup> According to Reporters Without Borders, Kremlin propaganda is broadcasted by national media in Serbia, as well as Russian propaganda TV channels such as Russia Today and Sputnik operate freely in Serbia. This has made possible the flow of Russian disinformation narratives into Kosovo.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian media has consistently portrayed Kosovo as part of Serbia, reinforcing Serbian claims to Kosovo. This has been evident through the use of terminology and phrases such as "Kosovo is Serbia" and by referring to Kosovo as a "Serbian Autonomous Province." The terminology undermines Kosovo's independence and is often used to push forward Russia's stance on territorial integrity, which mirrors its own narratives around its unjustified aggression in Ukraine and annexation of territories like Crimea. In a post that received over 1.5 million views on X, the Russian Embassy in Canada quote-retweeted a post from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg in which he expressed his deep concern regarding tensions in northern Kosovo. The Russian Embassy added an image and caption, "Kosovo is Serbia."



11 Association of Journalists of Kosovo. Minister Svecla uses dangerous language towards journalists. <https://agk-ks.org/en/news/gjuhe-e-rrrezikshme-e-ministrit-svecla-ndaj-gazetareve/>

12 NDI Kosovo. Information Integrity in Kosovo Assessment of the Political Economy of Disinformation. July 2022.

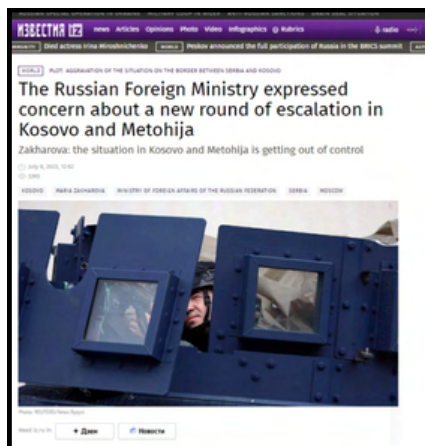
<https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Information%20Integrity%20in%20Kosovo%20-%20Assessment%20of%20the%20Political%20Economy%20of%20Disinformation.pdf>

13 Serbia | RSF. 21 June 2024, <https://rsf.org/en/country/serbia>.

Moreover, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation published an interview with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in which he drew a false comparison between Kosovo and the Russian-occupied territory of the Crimean Peninsula. This statement was later shared in an article in Russia Today titled *"Standoff with west is a 'war of worlds.'"* Russian media continually draws parallels between Kosovo and other regions, notably Crimea, to justify its own invasion in Ukraine and to criticize Western policies.

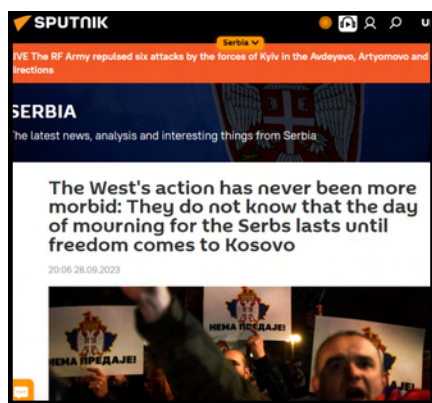
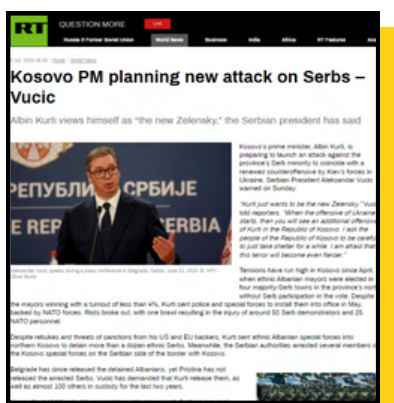


The delegitimization of Kosovo's government is a recurring theme in the Russian media. Russian narratives refer to Kosovo's government, which includes Serb and other ethnic minorities, as *"Kosovo Albanian authorities."* It also refers to it as *"the provisional government in Pristina,"* and accuses it of illegitimate actions, including false claims of installing mayors with NATO's backing. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Russian Federation published a statement which refers to Kosovo as a *"Serbian Autonomous Province."* The Russian MFA Spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, falsely accused Kosovo of employing policies of ethnic cleansing, *"pogroms,"* expulsion, and terror against Kosovo Serbs. Furthermore, Zakharova accused the West of *"fabricating shameless accusations"* against the Serbian people and the Orthodox Church.





Articles from Russian propaganda outlets demonstrate a clear pattern of provocative narratives to destabilize Kosovo and the region. Many articles had content suggesting escalations and potentials of armed confrontation. Such claims can not only raise tensions between Kosovo and Serbia but also within the international community. A post by the Russian news outlet Sputnik had a threatening title implying that the situation in Kosovo may escalate and become more confrontational until Kosovo becomes part of Serbia again. Such claims have the potential to shift the attention from peace-building efforts, complicating diplomatic relations. The article published by Russia Today, titled "Kosovo PM planning new attack on Serbs – Vucic" falsely claims, citing a statement by Serbian President Vucic, that Kurti installed the mayors in the north through the backing of NATO forces. However, according to statements made by KFOR, the presence of the NATO troops in the municipalities was not to install the mayors, but rather to contain violent demonstrations after the newly elected mayors tried to take office.<sup>14</sup>

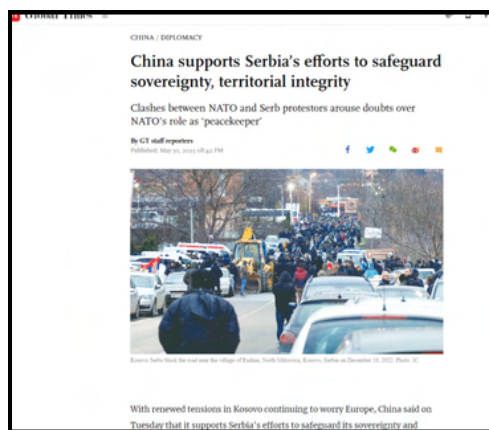


Chinese media has similarly criticized NATO's role in Kosovo during the tensions in the north of Kosovo, suggesting that NATO acts as a destabilizing force and accusing it of raising tensions. This aligns with China's broader critique of Western military alliances and interventions. The Global Times news portal from China published an article titled "NATO is Creating Another Battlefield on the European Continent," which presents a critical view of NATO as a destabilizing entity. The Global Times article implies that NATO's involvement in the region exacerbated tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. The article quotes a Chinese military expert who accused NATO forces of supporting Kosovo in suppressing Serbs.



14 X. NATO Kosovo Force - KFOR. [https://X.com/NATO\\_KFOR/status/1663246339629514770?s=20](https://X.com/NATO_KFOR/status/1663246339629514770?s=20).

The Global Times article implies that NATO's involvement in the region exacerbated tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. The article quotes a Chinese military expert who accused NATO forces of supporting Kosovo in suppressing Serbs. Additionally, Global Times put forth a perspective insinuating that the US is not genuinely interested in peace in Europe and may even benefit from chaos and division in the region. In many of its articles, the Chinese media challenges the legitimacy of NATO and presents itself as an alternative partner. Another article shared by Global Times, titled "*China Supports Serbia's Efforts to Safeguard Sovereignty and Territorial Integrity*," presents Serbia as a victim in relation to the situation in northern Kosovo. The Global Times raises questions regarding NATO's role as a peacekeeper and suggests that its involvement in local conflicts in Kosovo could escalate tensions and trigger a direct confrontation between NATO and Serbia. Another article, titled "*Deeper Reasons Behind the Tensions in Northern Kosovo*," published by CGTN, suggests that Western countries, particularly the Quint countries (US, UK, France, Germany, and Italy), have supported the radical actions of the Kosovo authorities. It accuses Western countries of endorsing the authorities' promotion of "*forcible takeovers*" by ethnic Albanian mayors, despite the election boycott by Serbs in northern Kosovo. The narrative suggests that the US and Western countries may benefit from chaos and division in the region, portraying Western actions as driven by self-interest rather than genuine concern for peace and stability.

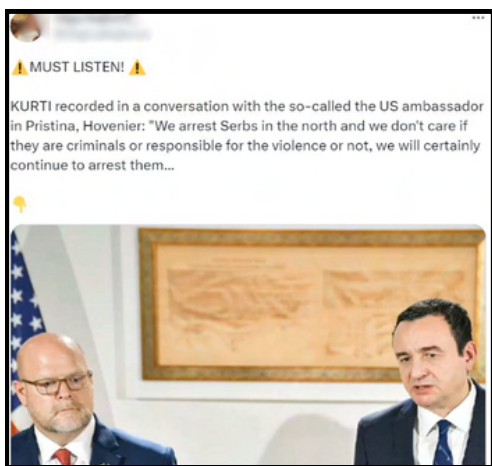




# USE OF AI AND DEEPFAKES

© ILLUSTRATION: EMIL LENDOF/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, ISTOCK

With the rise in prevalence and sophistication of AI, NDI/Kosovo found that deepfakes now play an important role in promoting information disorders. The term 'deepfake' is derived from a combination of 'deep learning' and 'fake,' describing a technique used to create audiovisual content portraying individuals saying or doing things they have not actually said or done.<sup>15</sup> The rapid advancement and increasing accessibility of technology are key characteristics of the deepfake challenge.<sup>16</sup> Deepfakes have the potential to be applied in various digital media formats, including videos, audio, and still images, which are artificially generated using machine learning. According to a publication by NATO's Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence on generative AI and its implications for social media, a portion of Tweets worldwide are made by hyperactive anonymous fake accounts and are now ten times higher than before the war in Ukraine and that this increase may be associated with advancements in generative AI and weak content moderation.<sup>17</sup> The spread of deepfake content on social media in Kosovo raises concerns over the potential for misinformation and manipulation in the political landscape through the use of artificial intelligence.



On June 26, 2023, a deep fake audio recording emerged on X, allegedly presenting a conversation between Prime Minister Kurti and U.S. Ambassador Hovenier. The audio recording focused on discussions related to the arrest of Serbs in Kosovo. No such conversation occurred between Prime Minister Kurti and Ambassador Hovenier. The original tweet has now reached more than 150,000 views. The caption of the tweet reads "Must Listen! Kurti recorded in a conversation with the so-called US ambassador

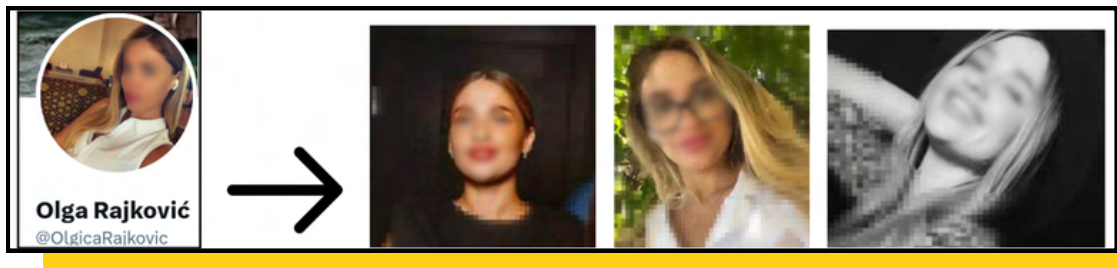
in Pristina, Hovenier: "We arrest Serbs in the north and we don't care if they are criminals or responsible for the violence or not, we will certainly continue to arrest them..." The tweet, containing the deepfake audio of Hovenier and Kurti, received 140 retweets and 245 likes, most of which come from anonymous and impersonating X accounts.

15 Korshunov, P., & Marcel, S. (2018). Deep Fakes: a new threat to face recognition? assessment and detection. arXiv:1812.08685.

16 Giles, K., Hartmann, K., & Mustaffa, M. (2019). The role of deepfakes in malign influence campaigns. NATO StratCom COE.

17 Stratcom. Virtual Manipulation Brief 2023. <https://stratcomcoe.org/publications/virtual-manipulation-brief-2023i-generative-ai-and-its-implications-for-social-media-analysis/287>.

NDI investigation found the supposed author of the Tweet, utilized photos of a real Russian adult web-cam model for impersonation.



After its initial appearance on X, the deepfake audio recording was disseminated through various Serbian-language online media portals, resulting in the publication of several articles that cite the content of the deepfake audio. Articles containing false information were cross-posted on numerous Facebook pages and groups. While the articles and posts on Facebook spreading the deepfake audio have been labeled as false information by Facebook, the post and video remain available and uncensored on X.



In response to the spread of the deepfake audio, the U.S. Embassy in Pristina issued a Disinformation Alert, urging citizens to exercise caution and critical thinking when encountering information on social media or messaging apps. The alert advised the audience to not believe everything they read or hear.<sup>18</sup>

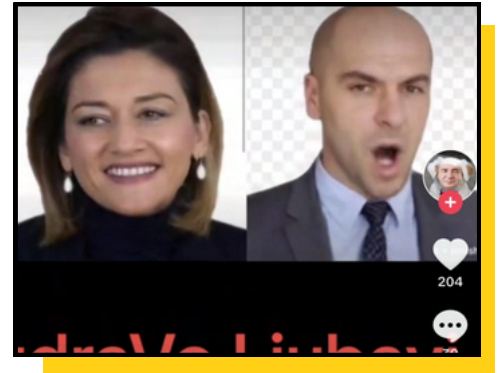
Furthermore, Perparim Kryeziu, the spokesperson of the Government of Kosovo, released an official statement about the existence of a "disturbing deepfake audio" circulating through various channels and social media platforms, accompanied by a screenshot of the tweet shared by the impersonating X user.<sup>19</sup>

18 X. U.S Embassy Pristina. <https://X.com/USEmbPristina/status/1673553312626671617?s=20>.

19 X. Perparim Kryeziu. <https://X.com/KryeziuPerparim/status/1673627296257769472>.



Deepfake videos also emerged on other social media platforms, such as Facebook and TikTok. Women politicians are among the targets. For example, a deepfake video surfaced on TikTok depicting MP Mimoza Kusari-Lila, the head of the parliamentary group of LVV, and Slavko Simic, Member of Srpska Lista Presidency, appearing to sing together in Serbian. The now deleted AI generated video received more than 20,700 views during a period when the Assembly of Kosovo was engaged in discussions concerning several actual recordings between Kusari and Simic which Kosovo media outlets had made public.



## USE OF BOTS FOR ONLINE POLITICAL SUPPORT

Social media bots are automation software that operate an account on a specific social network, enabling them to carry out basic tasks, such as posting messages and sending connection requests.<sup>20</sup> As a platform known for real-time status updates and swift responses to news and political developments, X has become a prominent space for online political discussions, allowing it to also become a fertile ground for the proliferation of social media bots with a significant political impact on the platform.<sup>21</sup> A study by the University of Southern California and Indiana University suggested that the percentage of bots on X may be between 9 percent and 15 percent of total users, which would mean that 28.7 million to 47.9 million bots may currently be in use.<sup>22</sup>

Significant bot activity was present in tweets by politicians from the ruling party in Serbia, about events in Kosovo. The tweets about Kosovo posted by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its members appear to have an unusually high number of likes and retweets from accounts that engage in rapid and consistent retweeting which amplify specific tweets to boost the visibility and reach, indicating a high probability of bot activity.

20 Shen, F., Zhang, E., Zhang, H., Ren, W., Jia, Q., & He, Y. (2023). Examining the differences between human and bot social media accounts: A case study of the Russia-Ukraine War. *First Monday*.

21 Ibid.

22 Varol, Onur, et al. "Online Human-Bot Interactions: Detection, Estimation, and Characterization." *Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media*, vol. 11, no. 1, May 2017, pp. 280-89. DOI.org (Crossref), <https://doi.org/10.1609/icwsm.v11i1.14871>.

As part of NDI's research on the use of bots to advance Serbian anti-Kosovo campaigns, NDI examined a tweet sent by the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabic on April 23, 2023.<sup>23</sup> In the tweet, Prime Minister Brnabic commented on the elections conducted in the Serb-majority northern municipalities of Kosovo. She referred to Kosovo as the "last European ghetto" and characterized the elections as a "charade." Additionally, she labeled the QUINT countries as "hypocrites."



After analyzing the accounts that retweeted and liked the post shared by the Prime Minister of Serbia, NDI found that more than 600 out of the 1,190 likes received in the tweet had characteristics of bots and impersonal accounts.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, all three replies made by Brnabic to the original tweet received a little more than 700 likes each. This is one of the characteristics of automated bot behavior, as static numbers of likes are often indicative of bot-driven activity.

Coordinated inauthentic activity is not new in Serbian language social media. In 2020, X announced that it removed more than 8,000 bots linked to Serbia's ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) and its leader, President Aleksandar Vucic.<sup>25</sup> X claimed that the government-backed bot campaign violated X's policy and was a "targeted attempt to undermine the public conversation."<sup>26</sup>



Other possible accounts that amplify their content through bots include those of the Serbian President, Serbian Prime Minister, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Vucevic, the Director of the so-called Office for Kosovo and Metohija, and the official X account of the SNS party. These bot accounts exhibit similar characteristics: they lack personal content (they do not express their own opinions, but instead like and retweet pro-government content), they were created at roughly the same time (the majority of them are less than a year old), they share the same profile photo, and they have similar usernames that begin with a name and end with numbers (for example, (@Nikolina\_Nina87 and @jelenala14). These traits are often associated with coordinated and bot behavior.

<sup>23</sup> X (formerly Twitter). Ana Brnabic. <https://x.com/anabrnic/status/1650084953525305345?s=20>.

<sup>24</sup> As of July 26, 2023.

<sup>25</sup> X Safety. <https://x.com/XSafety/status/1245682441865646080?s=20>.

<sup>26</sup> "X Removes Thousands Of Accounts 'Promoting' Serbian Ruling Party." Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 3 Apr. 2020. [www.rferl.org](http://www.rferl.org), <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-x-vucic-sns-serbian-progressive-party/30526199.html>.



Additionally, the fact that many of these accounts follow and are followed by other bots that engage in similar activities further support the basis that these accounts are part of a network of automated accounts aimed at promoting and amplifying specific political content.

#### SAMPLES OF X PROFILES OF SUSPECTED BOT ACCOUNTS



Moreover, in Meta’s Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report published in 2023, the tech giant announced that it had taken action against bots linked to employees of the Serbian Progressive Party, known as its “Internet Team” and other state employees from around Serbia.<sup>27</sup> The report confirmed that these bots have spread across Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Meta claimed that these bots were used to “create a perception of widespread and authentic grassroots support for Serbian President Aleksander Vučić and the Serbian Progressive party.”<sup>28</sup>

NDI continues to monitor social media for possible bot activity of political parties in Kosovo. However, it has not found extensive use of bots. While some political parties have engaged in bot activity, it is not widespread, nor have any of the major tech companies announced that they have taken down vast amounts of government or party-sponsored bot activities.

<sup>27</sup> “Meta’s Quarterly Adversarial Threat Report.” Meta, 23 Feb. 2023, <https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Meta-Quarterly-Adversarial-Threat-Report-Q42022.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

# ONLINE MISOGYNY

The phenomenon of online misogyny in Kosovo involves systematic attacks against women politicians through sexist narratives, personal attacks, defamation and threats of violence. This phenomenon extends its harm beyond the targeted individual and poses a threat to democracy, gender equality and women's political participation. Such online misogyny throughout the past year has helped perpetuate gender stereotypes and undermined democracy in Kosovo.

One prevalent tactic has been the deployment of sexist narratives that question the competence and legitimacy of women in politics. The Serbian news portal Informer published an article covering the violence in the Kosovo Assembly on July 13, 2023. The article titled *"A woman saved Kurti from the beating! The cowardly policy of the Albanian extremist,"* exhibited a sexist narrative, questioning Prime Minister Kurti's actions by suggesting that he acted in a cowardly manner for standing behind a woman during the altercation. Moreover, the article inaccurately referred to Prime Minister Kurti as the "so-called prime minister of the fake state" and labeled him the *"main terrorist from Pristina."*



Following the physical altercation in the parliament, a tweet labeling opposition MP Ganimete Musliu as an "imbecile" and asserting that she is undeserving of being in the parliament gathered 40,000 views and 372 likes. This tweet sparked a large number of sexist and negative comments as replies, with Musliu being subjected to derogatory terms such as "cow," "animal," and "waste of oxygen," among others.

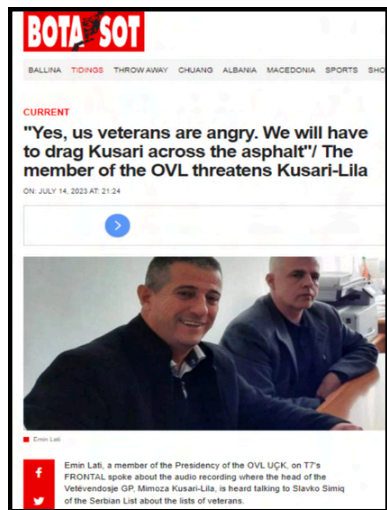


The phenomenon of online misogyny in Kosovo involves systematic attacks against women politicians through sexist narratives, derogatory language and threats of violence. This phenomenon can not only harm the targeted individuals



but also pose a threat to gender equality and democratic participation of women in politics. Such online misogyny throughout the past year has helped perpetuate gender stereotypes and undermined democracy in Kosovo.

Another approach used by those contributing to online misogyny in Kosovo was the use of personal attacks and defamation. The attacks go beyond critiquing a politician's policies or actions to attack their character and integrity. MP Ganimete Musliu was further targeted on social media from an anonymous account which posted a tweet suggesting that she relies on votes from "an uneducated base whose collective IQ matches a pack of wild squirrels." The tweet reached more than 10,900 views. This tweet was a cross-post from another tweet questioning how Musliu obtained a position in the parliament because she "lacks education and is incapable of engaging in an argument."



A particularly alarming tactic has been the direct threat of physical violence against women politicians in Kosovo. Such threats contribute to the intimidation and silencing of women, making it clear that their participation in the political arena comes with personal risks. Following the publication of the wiretapping of Mimoza Kusari Lila, a member of the veterans organization made a threatening statement towards Kusari. During a live interview on T7 Channel, the individual threatened Kusari with physical violence, stating intentions to "drag her across the street and break her bones." Such calls for violence can deter women from participating in public life or advocating for their rights and perspectives.

The lack of women participation in policy making has an impact on the creation of inclusive policies which resonate with the needs of all the population.

# UNRELATED AND MANIPULATED IMAGES

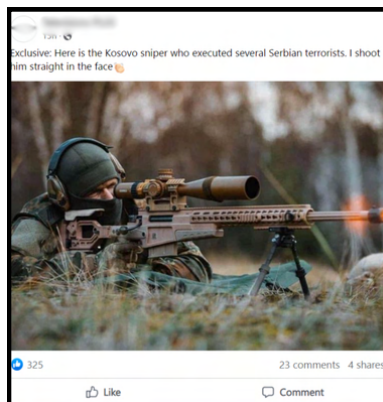
A manipulated photograph was disseminated by a user on X, who claimed that the famous municipal Vijecina building (the headquarters of the Mayor of Sarajevo) was illuminated with the flag of Kosovo in a gesture of solidarity following the attack on the Kosovo Police. The municipality of Sarajevo did not take this action.

This image amassed more than 140,000 views and was cross-posted by various Kosovo online portals and pages, including 'Suhareka Online,' 'Zeri,' 'Televizioni Festa,' 'albinfo.ch,' 'Portali Alt,' 'Kosova Ime,' 'Korrekt Press,' 'Reçaku dhe UÇK-ja,' 'Jeta n'Podujevë,' 'O7 Press,' 'Gazeta Rozë,' among others. 'Televizioni Festa,' 'albinfo.ch,' 'Portali Alt,' 'Kosova Ime,' 'Korrekt Press,' 'Reçaku dhe UÇK-ja,' 'Jeta n'Podujevë,' 'O7 Press,' 'Gazeta Rozë,' among others.

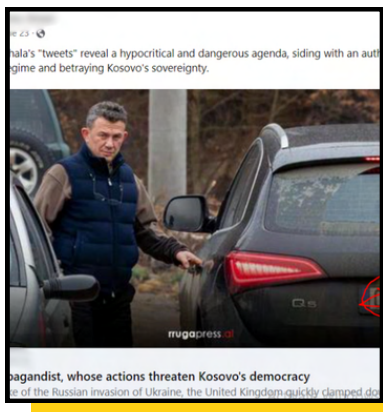


Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo Emilija Redzepi also shared the photo on Facebook but later deleted it. The Minister of Security of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Nenad Nesic, also shared the image with the caption "I don't know when BiH recognized the so-called independent Kosovo. Who now does not respect the positions of BiH's institutions? When you destroy and redraw the borders of neighbors, mayor, know that yours will be destroyed too."

Several social media news pages shared an image of a sniper, accompanied by a caption falsely alleging that the individual depicted is a member of the Kosovo Police who had opened fire on the armed group during the attack in Banjska/Bajskë. The post, which received over 3,700 likes and 300 comments, was cross-posted by several other online portals. However, the picture used is that of a German sniper sourced from the internet and not of a member of the Kosovo Police.



Several Facebook pages published doctored images. The manipulated image depicted a Kosovo Albanian journalist, Berat Buzhala, entering a car with Serbian car plates, while the original photo showed the car with Kosovo plates. Buzhala is the editor in chief of Nacionale.com, an online portal known for its critical stance towards the Kurti government. The doctored image was subsequently created by a social media page that acts as a legitimate media portal but which also shares mainly pro-government posts in Facebook groups and pages. The post's caption by the page insinuates that Buzhala is associated with the Serbian Intelligence Service, BIA. In response to the dissemination of this image, Berat Buzhala released a statement on Facebook, explaining that the photo was taken during a flood incident in Skenderaj, Kosovo, and the reason why he was there was to provide assistance to citizens.<sup>29</sup>



<sup>29</sup> Facebook. Berat Buzhala. <https://www.facebook.com/berat.buzhala/posts/pfbid0faF59ce4GUaPtiKMAwEVKM6LgQ3HCB3ArsRAhuCFvVydFffys4zujHovH5tXQIQtl>.



# METHODOLOGY

NDI conducted automated monitoring of online and social media in Albanian and Serbian languages, drawing from Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, online media portals, and Telegram public groups. NDI utilized a list of accounts, pages, and keywords to gather data on information disorder related to democracy and political developments. Keywords/Topics monitored included developments in the north of Kosovo, Kosovo-Serbia dialogue, political division and instability, foreign interference, online misogyny and hate speech. Automated reviews of the social media environment were made through Artificial Intelligence supported software designed to detect and analyze social media disorders, as well as to assess social media engagement in posts containing information disorders. A targeted list of keywords, accounts, and pages were compiled to extract relevant data on information disorder trends. This targeted selection was pivotal in filtering the vast online chatter to pinpoint instances of information disorder. Online articles and social media posts from sources previously known to spread information disorders were reviewed to find the use of derogatory, racist, xenophobic or sexist terms. Using the same software, analysis was provided by examining the timing and the frequency of information disorders to identify peaks in activity. This approach has uncovered coordinated efforts to influence public opinion at politically sensitive times.

The scope of analysis was expanded to include content in multiple languages, including English, Albanian, Serbian, Russian and Chinese. Recognizing the influence of foreign actors, the methodology includes dedicated research of news published about Kosovo from state-owned or influenced media in Serbia, Russia and China. This approach helped recognize the transnational nature of information disorders and its spread across linguistic boundaries, providing a better understanding of the narratives being propagated and their sources.

The integration of tools specifically designed to detect deep-fakes and other forms of synthetic media were included in the research. As these technologies become more sophisticated, their role in spreading information disorders grows, necessitating dedicated efforts to identify them and mitigate their impact. Extending monitoring efforts across a wider range of platforms such as messaging apps was included in the process. This ensures a more

comprehensive understanding of the information ecosystem and the narratives that may not be prevalent on mainstream platforms. User engagement and behavior in response to information disorders was also observed. This involved analyzing comments, shares, and reactions to understand public sentiment and understanding the effectiveness of information disorders campaigns, especially in posts that sparked significant hate speech.

Beyond textual analysis, the methodology incorporates a manual review of visual content, including memes on platforms like Instagram and Facebook. The research provides insights into the role of imagery and humor in shaping narratives and perceptions for the audience.





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