HOW DOES DISINFORMATION TARGET AND AFFECT INTERETHNIC RELATIONS IN KOSOVO?

Authors : Ramadan Ilazi, Jeta Loshaj and Tamara Pavlović

2024

How Does Disinformation Target and Affect Interethnic Relations in Kosovo?

Authors:
Ramadan Ilazi
Jeta Loshaj
Tamara Pavlović
Agnesa Bytyçi (Research Assistant)

Table of Contents

About the authors

Ramadan Ilazi

Ilazi currently serves as the Head of Research at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS), where among other is a team leader in the framework of the Horizon Europe-funded SMIDGE project, which investigates the rise of extremist narratives among middle-aged individuals in Europe. He is also a member of the International Republican Institute's Western Balkans Task Force on Threats to Democracy. In this role, he has co-authored a paper on Kosovo's vulnerabilities to malign foreign influence. From 2015 to 2016, Ramadan was Kosovo's Deputy Minister for European Integration, where he contributed to the development of the national plan for implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the European Union and the European Reform Agenda (ERA) for Kosovo. He has also consulted for organizations such as OECD/SIGMA on public administration reform in Kosovo. Ramadan holds a PhD in Politics and International Relations from the Dublin City University (DCU), Ireland, and a Master of Letters degree in Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. His recent book, "The European Union and Everyday Statebuilding: The Case of Kosovo," published by Routledge Studies in Statehood, critically examines the EU's role and agency in statebuilding interventions.

Jeta Loshaj

Has an MA Degree in Russian and East European Studies from Indiana University Bloomington and a Bachelor's Degree in Public Policy and International Relations from RIT Kosova. Ms. Loshaj currently works as a researcher and project officer at the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. She has previously interned at the German Parliament and worked as an associate for Kosova at the Council for Inclusive Governance. Her interests include international relations, focused on Russian influence in the Western Balkans and Kosova's multi- and bilateral relations with the region, the EU, and the USA – topics on which she has published a few papers and op-eds. Apart from her native Albanian language, Ms. Loshaj speaks English, German and Russian.

Tamara Pavlovic

Is a research fellow at the KCSS and an international relations graduate from the Corvinus University of Budapest, specializing in European integration. As of 2023, she is pursuing an LLM from Prishtina University in Human Rights, International Criminal Law, and Transitional Justice. Her work bridges academic research and practical advocacy. Tamara has led and participated in human rights projects across the Balkans, worked and managed an international environment, contributed to impactful policy development, and has a strong background in communications and branding. Currently, she is currently working as Research Fellow in the framework of RYP project.

Key findings

Disinformation is a pervasive issue in Kosovo, with 66% of respondents in the post-focus group survey reporting frequent encounters with divisive narratives. This high prevalence reflects an entrenched disinformation ecosystem that thrives on the vulnerabilities that Kosovo society endures. Disinformation operates at multiple levels, targeting individual perceptions, community dynamics, and institutional trust. It often focuses on emotionally charged and culturally sensitive issues, leveraging partial truths and unverified information to exacerbate divisions.

According to the NDI polling data, 83% of respondents believe that disinformation has a significant impact on trust between ethnic communities in Kosovo. This aligns with our findings that disinformation exacerbates stereotypes and deepens mistrust. Such widespread perceptions underscore the urgent need for targeted strategies to mitigate disinformation and foster interethnic trust.

Disinformation frequently amplifies political disputes, history and negative stereotypes, portraying members of opposing ethnic groups as aggressors or threats. For example: Serbian-speaking media often depict Kosovo Albanians as seeking to undermine Serbian culture and identity in Kosovo. Albanian-speaking media portray some Kosovo Serbs as seeking to destabilize Kosovo. These narratives deepen mistrust, discourage interethnic interactions, and hinder reconciliation efforts.

Warnings of an imminent war between Kosovo and Serbia were widely circulated in social media platforms and online news outlets, exacerbating fear and uncertainty in Kosovo. Alarmingly, some of these claims gained legitimacy through statements made by senior leaders of the Kosovo government, inadvertently amplifying disinformation narratives. Such rhetoric not only heightens public anxiety but also provides fertile ground for misinformation to spread, further destabilizing the already fragile dialogue and reconciliation processes.

Government officials in Kosovo must display a higher level of maturity by refraining from conflict-mongering rhetoric and avoiding statements that contribute to an atmosphere of fear. Instead, they should focus on fostering calm, promoting dialogue, and countering disinformation with accurate and balanced communication.

Ethnically polarized media outlets perpetuate "parallel realities," where Albanian and Serbian communities in Kosovo consume entirely different narratives about the same events. For instance: Albanian media may frame police actions in north of Kosovo as law enforcement measures, while Serbian media depict them as deliberately targeting Serbs. The lack of multiethnic media platforms, or presence of Albanian and Serbian voices in the nightly debate TV shows, or in news reportings, further entrenches this divide, preventing balanced perspectives and shared understanding. Additionally, National Democratic Institute's internal research shows a deep distrust in the news and information from the Serbian Community living in Kosovo, that further complicates the reality in which Kosovo Serbs live.

Disinformation exploits cultural and religious narratives, using them as tools to foster division. For example: Serbian media frame Kosovo Albanians as threats to Orthodox religious sites. Narratives surrounding the 2023 Banjska attack glorified armed group members as heroes in Serbian media, fueling polarization.

False narratives targeting Kosovo's institutions erode public trust and hinder integration and the multiethnic character of the Kosovo state. Examples include claims that Kosovo's Government is engaging in "ethnic cleansing." This and other narratives weaken institutional credibility and complicate efforts to facilitate reconciliation and normalization dialogues.

Disinformation discourages interethnic cooperation by creating a hostile environment for dialogue. For instance: Narratives around the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) frame it as a threat to territorial integrity and sovereignty leading to opposition from the Kosovo Albanians. Serbian media portray the lack of ASM progress as evidence of Kosovo's bad faith, fueling mistrust among Serbs. One of the main narratives regarding ASM is that "the formation of ASM would mean formation of another Republika Srpska in Kosovo", which is

believed by 58% of K–Albanians and 37% of K–Serbs.

Disinformation surrounding major incidents, such as the Banjska terrorist attack in September 2023, further exacerbates divisions and erodes trust in dialogue and reconciliation efforts. Serbian media glorified members of the armed group involved in the attack, labeling them as "heroes," while misrepresenting casualty figures and Kosovo Police operations in the north in general. These narratives, driven by political motives and fueled by disinformation, polarize communities and hinder progress toward normalization and interethnic cooperation.

According to the focus-group discussions and interviews with senior government officials from Serb-majority municipalities suggests that, while social media platforms and online news portals are a major source of disinformation, local rumors or word of mouth serve as informal amplifiers of disinformation, often spreading in everyday settings like cafes and community gatherings. At the grassroots level local rumors or word of mouth can have devastating effects. For example: In Gracanica, thefts within ethnic groups were misattributed to the opposing community, reinforcing stereotypes and mistrust. These rumors gain traction due to social and physical separation between ethnic groups, where limited interaction fosters reliance on hearsay.

In this chaotic environment of heightened tensions and rampant disinformation, legitimate concerns and potential cases of violence against the Kosovo Serbian community in the north are overshadowed. The pervasive disinformation, as well as the lack of consultation and coordination by the Kosovo government on actions implemented in the north of Kosovo, help marginalize liberal voices and members of the Serbian community advocating for integration and multiethnic society in Kosovo. These tensions create an environment where efforts to promote dialogue, trust, and reconciliation are drowned out by divisive narratives. Civil society in Kosovo, but especially those active in the north, have a crucial role in bridging this gap by constructively communicating community concerns, as they often do. However, without coordinated institutional support and measures to counter disinformation, these efforts risk being overshadowed, undermining the vision of a cohesive, multiethnic society in Kosovo.

Low levels of media literacy exacerbate the impact of disinformation. Many individuals lack the skills to critically evaluate the information they consume, making them more susceptible to manipulation. The interconnectedness of digital and traditional media platforms allows false narratives to gain legitimacy, reaching audiences who may otherwise rely on credible sources.

The findings from the polling from NDI Kosovo reveal a critical gap in effective fact-checking practices, as individuals overwhelmingly rely on informal networks, such as family and friends, to verify information (31%), rather than professional or authoritative sources. While 46% of respondents turn to other media outlets, the significant reliance on personal networks and social media (12%) reflects an environment where rumors and unverified narratives are amplified. Only 11% prioritize checking the original source of the information, underscoring a lack of critical engagement with the content being consumed. This behavior not only perpetuates the spread of disinformation but also highlights the role of community-based informal communication in validating and amplifying false narratives.

The reliance on family and friends, while rooted in trust, can unintentionally reinforce misinformation and disinformation, particularly in a highly polarized context like Kosovo where interethnic relations are fragile. This also aligns with the broader observation in this report that local rumors serve as informal amplifiers of disinformation, creating a reinforcing feedback loop that undermines trust and fuels interethnic tensions.

Language as a barrier to building ties and understanding each-other, the lack of communication thereof and the hesitation to promote positive stories also play an important role in allowing disinformation to penetrate through the vulnerability of the reality on the ground. However, while language continues to be a barrier, there are positive stories that do not always, if ever, make the news. More exposure of positive stories where there is good communication and understanding, as well as the solving of ethnically based incidents would serve as a countermeasure to disinformation efforts.

Marginalized and rural communities are disproportionately affected by disinformation due to limited access to education and information resources. This vulnerability underscores the need for targeted interventions. Diaspora communities amplify disinformation, often adopting more radicalized

narratives. For example: Serbian diaspora networks disseminate claims of Kosovo's hostility toward Serbs. Some Albanian diaspora networks amplify narratives framing the normalization dialogue as a concession to Serbia. These dynamics fuel polarization and complicate international perceptions of Kosovo.

What can be done?

> The Kosovo Government needs to urgently implement nationwide media literacy initiatives in schools and communities to empower citizens to critically assess information and resist disinformation.

> The Office of Public Communication within the Office of the Prime Minister should receive targeted capacity-development support to deepen its understanding of disinformation practices and tactics. This should include technical assistance through expertise and training on identifying and countering information disorders while maintaining a commitment to transparency and accuracy. Furthermore, the Office of Public Communication of the OPM should prioritize proactive and transparent communication with the public, particularly regarding developments in the north of Kosovo and the normalization dialogue with Serbia. Our findings indicate that insufficient government transparency and limited dissemination of accurate information about government actions in the north and overall developments there create fertile ground for disinformation. By addressing these gaps, the Office can help build public trust and mitigate the impact of false narratives.

> The Office of Public Communication should enhance its outreach activities to Serbian-speaking media outlets in Kosovo to foster greater engagement and trust. Additionally, the Office should ensure the inclusion of Kosovo.

> Serbs within the OPM's team, if not already the case, could contribute to improving and bridging cultural and linguistic understanding.

This inclusion would strengthen the Office's ability to effectively communicate government actions and policies to the Serbian community in Kosovo, thereby increasing transparency and reducing the susceptibility of this community to disinformation.

> In order to improve the capacities of the public broadcaster (RTK) to counter disinformation and promote factual accuracy, the Law on RTK should be amended or a new policy instituted by the Board of RTK to establish a dedicated fact-checking department. This department would focus on verifying public narratives, especially those affecting interethnic relations, but also verifying news articles from RTK before publication.

> The Government of Kosovo should seek to establish cooperation with the social media platforms such as Facebook, X and Google, and commission a comprehensive policy document aimed at improving transparency and accountability of social media platforms in Kosovo. This document should explore mechanisms for fostering cooperation with the civil society and social media companies to ensure greater transparency and accessibility of platform data for the public and researchers. This is in line with the Platform Accountability and Transparency Act (PATA) proposed in the United States as a bipartisan law. Such a framework would require social media companies to share critical data with the public and researchers, ensuring accountability without compromising user privacy. This initiative should be developed in close consultation with the European Commission to align with Kosovo's commitments under the EU acquis and to ensure compatibility with EU standards and practices on digital governance. Broad stakeholder engagement, including consultations with civil society, academia, and media organizations, should be integral to the drafting process to ensure inclusivity and respect for democratic principles.

Introduction

Disinformation and misinformation are pervasive issues in Kosovo, where they exploit existing societal divisions and low trust in institutional narratives. Participants in focus groups and interviews largely defined **misinformation** as unintentional inaccuracies or partial truths spread due to misunderstanding or lack of verification, while **disinformation** was seen as deliberately misleading information designed to create division.[1] Though malinformation was not discussed, the distinction between misinformation and disinformation highlights the deliberate nature of the latter in destabilizing interethnic relations.

According to a recent NDI Kosovo survey 67% of Kosovo Serbs believe things are moving in the wrong direction, while 41% of Kosovo Albanians believe the opposite. Kosovo Serbs prioritize unemployment (66%) and interethnic tensions (49%) as their primary issues, while Albanians focus more on unemployment (77%) and corruption (56%). There is a significant disparity in perceptions of interethnic relations, while 65% of Kosovo Serbs expect relations to worsen, 53% of Kosovo Albanians are optimistic about improvement. Media consumption is heavily segmented by ethnicity with 79% of the Kosovo Serbs relying on Serbian TV stations daily, with 66% expressing trust in these outlets. Kosovo Albanian respondents primarily use Kosovo TV stations (86%) and social media (50%) as information sources. Trust in information sources remains low across ethnic groups, with reliance on personal networks (friends and family) common for fact-checking.[2] Kosovo Serbian community widely believe in disinformation narratives, such as claims of ethnic cleansing plans and mistreatment by Kosovo Police during incidents like the Banjska terrorist attack. Among Kosovo Albanians, skepticism about these narratives is higher, reflecting ethnic polarization.

A significant factor enabling both misinformation and disinformation is the skepticism toward institutional narratives—whether from the government, international organizations, or national media. These institutions are widely viewed as biased or agenda-driven, misaligned with the priorities of local communities. Conversely, reliance on familiar sources, such as ethnically divided local news outlets and word-of-mouth communication, exacerbates separation and distrust. These sources, while perceived as relatable and acting in the community's best interest, are often biased, incomplete, or inaccurate, further reinforcing community echo chambers.

Relations between Kosovar Albanians and Kosovar Serbs are frequently manipulated through disinformation to fuel distrust. Actions by the Kosovo Government impacting the Serbian community— such as institutional closures—are framed in Serbian media as ethnic discrimination or even "ethnic cleansing." Similarly, uncontextualized or sensationalized reports about past events, like the fabricated claim of Albanian children being drowned by Serbs, continue to inflame ethnic hostility. These narratives exploit the unresolved history, reinforcing grievances that hinder reconciliation efforts.

Socio-economic hardships, such as high poverty rates and employment gaps, increase susceptibility to disinformation. According to the 2024 Democracy Plus Vulnerability Index, which saw Kosovo's vulnerability score rise from 41 to 57, economic instability makes individuals more receptive to emotionally charged misinformation.[3] Limited access to quality education weakens critical thinking and media literacy, leaving many unable to identify biased information. The National Democratic Institute in their report on Information Integrity in Kosovo Assessment of the Political Economy of Disinformation (July 2022) found that the education system insufficiently prepares citizens for assessing online disinformation, further enhancing vulnerability. [4]

1. Read more "Information Disorders in Kosovo 2023 Report", https://www.ndi.org/publications/information-disorders-kosovo-2023-report

2. National Public Opinion Research, NDI, 2024

3. DPlus, "2nd Vulnerability Index of Disinformation in Kosovo", June, 2024, https://dplus.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/25-07-2024_Index-of-Disinformation.pdf

4. NDI Kosovo, "Information Integrity in Kosovo Assessment of the Political Economy of Disinformation", July

The issue of disinformation is not merely a challenge of modern information ecosystems; it is a deliberate strategy employed by internal and external actors to destabilize communities and undermine democratic governance. As digital platforms expand access to information, they also facilitate the rapid spread of false narratives, making it increasingly difficult for communities to discern fact from fiction. This report addresses these challenges with a focus on their implications for interethnic relations between Kosovo Albanians and Serbs.

This report is grounded in qualitative research, incorporating insights from two primary sources: Two focus group discussions were conducted with a total of fifteen participants, comprising a mix of Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs. These discussions provided a grassroots perspective on how disinformation affects interethnic dynamics, exploring lived experiences, perceptions, and community-level challenges. Additionally, nine in-depth interviews were conducted with a diverse range of stakeholders, including local and international experts, representatives from civil society, and government officials. These interviews offered expert insights into the structural, cultural, and political dimensions of disinformation in Kosovo.

The combination of these approaches ensures a nuanced understanding of the issue, capturing both macro-level trends and micro-level experiences. The findings are contextualized within existing literature and complemented by statistical data from surveys

---

2022, https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Information%20Integrity%20in%20Kosovo%20-%20Assessment%20of%20the%20Political%20Economy%20of%20Disinformation.pdf

and prior studies.

The report is structured as follows: A detailed analysis of the main themes and insights that emerged from the focus groups and interviews, highlighting the impact of disinformation on interethnic relations, institutional trust, and reconciliation efforts. The next section explores the structural, cultural, and political factors that make Kosovo particularly susceptible to disinformation. A breakdown of the primary methods and stories used in disinformation campaigns, including the roles of media, political actors, and diaspora communities, is also included. An assessment of how disinformation influences community dynamics, perpetuates stereotypes, and undermines peacebuilding initiatives.

Kosovo's ongoing efforts at normalization of relations with Serbia make the issue of disinformation particularly salient. Disinformation not only perpetuates division but also undermines trust in institutions and mediation efforts to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia. By addressing the mechanisms and impacts of disinformation, this report seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how to better counter disinformation targeting interethnic relations, in order to foster a cohesive and democratic society.

The findings and recommendations presented here are intended to serve as a resource for policymakers, civil society organizations, media practitioners, and international actors working to promote peace and reconciliation in Kosovo. At its core, this report emphasizes the importance of fostering resilience against disinformation where interethnic relations are characterized by trust, cooperation, and mutual respect.

Methodology

This report employs a mixed-methods approach to explore how disinformation affects interethnic relations in Kosovo, exploring the issue from multiple perspectives. The methodology includes qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, combining focus group discussions, in-depth interviews, surveys, and document analysis.

> Focus Group Discussions: Two focus group discussions were conducted on October 9 and 10, 2024, with a total of 15 participants in each group. The first group consisted of younger Kosovo Albanians and Kosovo Serbs, offering insights into how disinformation impacts youth perceptions and interactions. The second group comprised experts, including academics, civil society representatives, and journalists, providing a more analytical perspective on disinformation's structural and societal impacts. Both discussions focused on lived experiences, perceptions of interethnic dynamics, and potential solutions.

> In-Depth Interviews: Nine in-person interviews were conducted during October and November 2024 with a diverse range of stakeholders. These included Kosovo government officials, representatives of the international community (such as the Council of Europe), local government officials, journalists, and civil society experts. These interviews provided detailed insights into the mechanisms and consequences of disinformation, as well as institutional responses and challenges in addressing it.

> F Between October 1 and October 15, 2024 KCSS administered a brief post-discussion online survey to gather immediate perspectives following the focus group sessions. The survey included a total of 35 respondents, comprising some focus group participants, a few non-participants, and a small number of randomly selected students and young adults. It is important to note that this survey was not designed to measure broad public opinion or provide a fully representative sample. Rather, its primary purpose was to capture how participants and a limited set of additional

respondents perceived and interpreted the discussion content in real-time. Focusing on immediate reactions and subjective viewpoints, in order to complement the in-depth qualitative data from the focus groups with a brief snapshot of how certain themes were understood or experienced by individuals outside the initial sessions. Regarding demographic data—such as age, ethnicity, and gender—we deliberately chose not to collect these details for two main reasons. First, our interest lay primarily in understanding the qualitative perspectives related to the discussion topics, rather than correlating responses with specific demographic variables. Second, we wanted to keep the survey concise and non-intrusive, hoping to encourage candid feedback. As such, while we acknowledge the value of demographic insights in some research contexts, they were deemed outside the scope of this particular survey's goals. The overall intent was to quantify perspectives in a limited but focused manner, not to provide a statistical breakdown of a general population.

> Document Analysis: The research involved analyzing existing reports and literature on disinformation in Kosovo, including qualitative and quantitative data from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and other relevant studies. This analysis contextualized the findings within broader regional and global trends, providing a foundation for identifying patterns and unique challenges in Kosovo.

> Triangulation of Data: To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, data from focus groups, interviews, surveys, and document analysis were cross-referenced. This triangulation allowed for a better understanding of disinformation's impact on interethnic relations and helped identify key areas for intervention.

By integrating these methods, the report offers analysis and discussion of how disinformation exacerbates divisions and undermines interethnic dialogue and cooperation in Kosovo.

Exploring factors of vulnerability towards disinformation targeting interethnic relations in Kosovo

The state of fragility of interethnic relations in Kosovo makes them particularly vulnerable to disinformation

Kosovo's interethnic relations, especially between Kosovar Albanians and Kosovar Serbs are deeply rooted in unresolved grievances, creating a precarious environment where disinformation thrives. The lingering effects of the war of the 1990s, lack of transitional justice, and limited reconciliation efforts have left both communities with relatively low levels of mutual trust. Civil society experts, focusing on the fragility through the findings of the D+ Vulnerability Index, where interethnic relations were identified as the most vulnerable societal domain.[5] Disinformation further exploits these vulnerabilities by sowing fear and mistrust between communities. Albana Rexha, senior policy analyst at Democracy Plus emphasizes that external actors, particularly Serbia and Russia, are key actors in disseminating false narratives aimed at Kosovo's Serbs.[6] These campaigns are designed to undermine confidence in Kosovo's institutions and Kosovo's Constitution. For example, any measure or intervention by the Kosovo government in the north are represented by Serbian media, as moves to "remove Serbs from Kosovo." Disinformation campaigns targeting interethnic relations in Kosovo, serve a particular goal when it comes to the Kosovo Serbs, which is to convince them that "Kosovo institutions are against them". This vulnerability is exacerbated by both the confrontational approach of the Kosovo Government towards the EU and the US when it comes to coordinating actions in the north of Kosovo and the inability of Kosovo institutions to counter these narratives effectively, leaving Kosovo Serbs more susceptible to external disinformation. The lack of a coherent communication strategy or active reconciliation measures allows these campaigns to take root, perpetuating a cycle of mistrust that inhibits progress in building a unified society.

Disinformation in Kosovo reinforces ethnic divisions by weaponizing cultural narratives and external influence

Disinformation campaigns in Kosovo frequently target cultural sensitivities and identity, using them as tools to deepen ethnic divisions. Serbian media often portray Kosovo Albanians as a threat to Serbian heritage, especially to the Orthodox religious sites. This narrative often tends to be politically motivated, aiming to frame Kosovar Albanians as inherent aggressors in the eyes of both Kosovo Serbs and the international community. The use of disinformation to amplify cultural and religious divisions reflects broader intentions by external actors, particularly Russia, to foster an image of Kosovo as inherently unstable and weaken Kosovo's societal cohesion. In this context, social media platforms are the primary channels for these efforts, where narratives are easily spread and often go unchecked. In addition to cultural narratives, Serbia's political elite manipulate events to serve their agenda. For instance, the members of the armed group that organized the Banjska terrorist attack of September, 2023, were reported in some of the main media outlets in Serbia as "heroes".[7] This starkly different interpretation, fueled by disinformation, not only polarizes the communities but also erodes trust in dialogue processes and reconciliation efforts. To counter such weaponization of culture and history,

5. https://disinformationindex.dplus.org/en/reports p 10

6. Interview with Albana Rexha, Senior Policy Officer at Democracy Plus

7. Perparim IsufiPristina "Kosovo Bans Serbia Sport TV Channels Over Messages 'Glorifying' Banjska Attack" BIRN, October 5, 2023, https://balkaninsight. com/2023/10/05/kosovo-bans-serbia-sport-tv-channels-over-messages-glorifying-banjska-attack/

Kosovo needs to invest more resources in institutional mechanisms to monitor and combat disinformation, promote accurate narratives, and foster cross-ethnic dialogue. Without these measures, the persistent use of disinformation as a tool for division will continue to undermine both the normalization process and efforts at building an inclusive, multi-ethnic society.

The NDI's monitoring of social media platforms and online media reveals widespread information disorders capable of inciting mass panic and violence against law enforcement mechanisms of the Republic of Kosovo. For instance, in some cases false claims that the Kosovo Police were abducting Kosovo Serbian citizens and falsely labeling them as terrorists reached a large audience. Similarly, baseless accusations suggested the Kosovo Police might stage false flag operations in the north. Warnings of an imminent war between Kosovo and Serbia were widely circulated, with some of these claims unfortunately gaining legitimacy through statements made by senior leaders of the Kosovo government. The NDI monitoring also shows that the Serbian-language print media published provocative headlines, portraying Kosovo Police officers as "terrorists" and what appears as attempts to justify the violence against the Kosovo police. Misinformation about the coordinated violent attack involving the Kosovo Police spread extensively. Among the most common falsehoods in both Albanian and Serbian speaking media were exaggerated claims about the total number of casualties in the case of the Banjska terrorist attacks. Additionally, misleading narratives spread about police operations following the arrests, including unfounded allegations about the police's movements and intentions. Some sources, without clear evidence, accused the Kosovo Police of planning harm to local residents. The narratives diverged significantly between Serbian and Albanian-language outlets. Serbian media blamed the violence on Prime Minister Kurti, portraying his actions as discriminatory against the Serbian community. They also glorified the attackers, referring to those killed as martyrs, while not condoning the killing of a Kosovo police officer. In contrast, Albanian-language narratives attributed the violence to the Serbian government, labeling the attackers as terrorists and criminals.

According to a Kosovar Serb interviewed for this report, disinformation narratives always have a focus on history, and such narratives are not merely relics of the past but are repackaged to sustain ongoing tensions, often with direct political motivations. Disinformation exploits this dynamic by framing everyday incidents through an ethnic lens, turning minor misunderstandings into inflammatory events. For instance, a case involving a lost phone escalated into a broader conflict between an Albanian boy and a Serbian family due to misreporting.[8] Such incidents illustrate how disinformation amplifies ethnic divisions, preventing meaningful reconciliation and fostering a climate where mistrust becomes self-reinforcing.

Disinformation deepens fear and isolation among Kosovar Serbs

Disinformation in Kosovo is often designed to exploit the already fragile trust within the society, particularly targeting Kosovar Serbs. Serbian state-sponsored narratives focus on portraying the Kosovo Government as hostile and oppressive.[9] This is not just rhetoric but a deliberate effort to induce fear and uncertainty. For example, narratives suggesting the Kosovo Government is pursuing "ethnic cleansing" or shutting down Serbian schools and hospitals are emotionally charged and highly effective at alienating Kosovo Serbs. As explained by a Kosovo Government official: "One family leaving spreads panic around their friends and family… it's like a run on the bank".[10] This shows that disinformation targeting interethnic relations in Kosovo seeks to potentially trigger migration, exacerbating the demographic isolation of the Serbian community. This climate of fear not only destabilizes interethnic relations but also weakens the very fabric of Kosovo's multi-ethnic identity. As families leave and communities shrink, the prospects for dialogue and normalization diminish, leaving the remaining population more vulnerable to future disinformation campaigns. The cumulative effect is a fragmented society where coexistence becomes increasingly difficult, undermining long-term stability and peacebuilding efforts.

---

8. Interview with a Kosovar Serb working with international community in Kosovo, October, 2024

9. Interview with a senior official from the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, October, 2024.

10. Interview with a Kosovo Government official, October 2024

Lack of media and information literacy exacerbates the impact of disinformation in Kosovo

The spread of disinformation in Kosovo is amplified by low levels of media literacy, especially among marginalized communities. Government officials interviewed for this report argue that disinformation often succeeds because individuals lack the skills to critically evaluate the content they consume, which they argue "is especially true for teenagers, but it applies to everyone." The rapid consumption of digital content, particularly on platforms like Instagram or TikTok, leaves individuals vulnerable to manipulation through deepfakes and other forms of deceit. In other words, disinformation in Kosovo leverages the interconnectedness of digital and traditional media platforms to increase its impact. Kosovo Government officials are concerned because, as they explain, "What goes on a digital platform becomes news on another platform, even screenshots of Instagram appear on the BBC website."[11] This blurring of boundaries allows unverified or misleading content to gain legitimacy, reaching audiences who might otherwise rely on traditional media for accurate information. This interplay exacerbates the problem of disinformation, particularly in interethnic contexts, as it multiplies the channels through which divisive narratives spread. For instance, fabricated or manipulated images—like the deepfake of Prime Minister Kurti's interaction with a Serbian farmer—can quickly shift from digital obscurity to mainstream prominence.[12] In June of last year, an audio recording surfaced on Twitter, purportedly capturing a conversation between Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti and U.S. Ambassador Jeffrey Hovenier about the arrest of Serbs in Kosovo. This recording was later confirmed to be a deepfake, with both the U.S. Embassy and the Government of Kosovo publicly denying its authenticity.[13] By the time such stories are debunked, the damage to public perception has already been done. There is a need for a robust fact-checking ecosystem that operates across media platforms, ensuring misinformation is identified and addressed before it can escalate. However, while this would be an effective strategy, it is questionable whether it is doable without the investment of all relevant stakeholders.

Linguistic and cultural barriers enable the proliferation of disinformation in Kosovo

Language divides in Kosovo significantly hinder the ability of different communities to challenge disinformation narratives and understand one another's perspectives. Lack of, or poor bilingualism between Albanian and Serbian communities creates information silos, which disinformation campaigns exploit. For instance, a deepfake targeting the Prime Minister of Kosovo Mr. Kurti took longer to address because it originated in Serbian media, but had it first appeared on an Albanian-speaking Kosovo media organization, "the Prime Minister's press office would have heard about it immediately. But because it was in Serbian media, there was less immediate awareness."[14] These linguistic barriers not only delay responses to disinformation but also make it easier for narratives to remain unchallenged within their respective bubbles: "Until we have more people who can speak each other's languages, it is much easier for things to be misrepresented."[15] The absence of shared understanding in Kosovo among the Albanian and Serbian communities allows mistrust to persist and disinformation to thrive. Therefore, prioritizing language learning and cultural exchange to bridge divides and foster mutual understanding further emphasizes that "the openness to picking up one another's media is crucial to correcting misrepresentations."[16] Without mutual access (Albanian and Serbian speaking media) to media and narratives, communities remain confined to their respective information ecosystems, unable to challenge or verify disinformation about the other side.

---

11. Ibid.

12. In person interview with the senior adviser to the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, October 21, 2024.

13. Sbunker, "Deepfake of a pretended conversation between Hovenier and Kurti,", June 28, 2023, https://sbunker.org/en/disinfo/deepfake-i-nje-bisede-te-pretenduar-mes-hovenier-dhe-kurtit/

---

14. Interview with a senior official from the Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, October, 2024.

15. Ibid.,

16. Ibid.,

Marginalized and rural communities are disproportionately affected by disinformation

Disinformation campaigns in Kosovo often target marginalized and rural communities, where access to education and information literacy is limited. This vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of targeted educational initiatives that address the specific needs of these communities. While urban centers may have access to workshops and media literacy programs, rural areas and minority communities are often left out of such efforts, or not sufficiently included. Education on critical thinking and media literacy is crucial to counter these challenges, and they should not be confined to schools but extended to informal settings where older or less educated populations can also benefit.

Disinformation is not only a societal problem but also a direct threat to political processes, such as the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia

The vulnerability of the normalization dialogue to disinformation has been significantly exacerbated by a lack of transparency from the Government of Kosovo. For example, information provided by the government about dialogue meetings in Brussels has been sparse, and unlike previous practices, the government has yet to produce a comprehensive public report on the progress and outcomes of the normalization dialogue. This lack of transparency is further compounded by complaints from journalists regarding limited access to information and delays in government communications related to the dialogue.[17] Such gaps not only undermine public trust but also create an environment where disinformation can thrive, filling the void left by inadequate official narratives. For instance, media misrepresentations—such as portraying Kosovo as pursuing "ethnic cleansing"—damage the trust needed for meaningful dialogue. These narratives not only polarize communities but also weaken Kosovo's position, as the misrepresentations undermine the perception of Kosovo as a multi-ethnic, functional state. For

example, rumors about the shutdown of Serbian schools or hospitals in Kosovo created panic, driving emigration and leaving communities depleted. This undermines Kosovo's argument for inclusivity and coexistence, reinforcing Serbia's narrative of Kosovo as a dysfunctional state. This approach of targeting normalization dialogue through disinformation benefits political elites while it has the effect of undermining or weakening the agency of the local populations who might otherwise support normalization. For instance, narratives such as "the EU is pressuring Kosovo" or "Kosovo is undermining Serb rights" are weaponized to sustain opposition to agreements.[18] The overall disinformation ecosystem in Kosovo is compounded by lack of investment from the government in reconciliation and interethnic cooperation: "Most of the activities we do are supported by embassies or international organizations, there is no money for these kinds of initiatives coming from the government."[19] This reliance on external funding undermines the sustainability of such programs, leaving them vulnerable to discontinuation.

Kosovo journalists perceive certain Serbian media outlets as vehicles for disseminating disinformation aimed at undermining Kosovo's statehood and influencing interethnic relations. This concern is reinforced by data from NDI Kosovo research showing that 79% of the Serbian community in Kosovo relies on Serbian TV stations for daily information, with 66% expressing trust in these outlets. The dominance of Serbian media in shaping narratives among Kosovo Serbs allows disinformation campaigns to gain traction, particularly when these outlets propagate narratives aligned with state-sponsored agendas from Belgrade. These narratives often portray Kosovo as hostile to Serbs or as a failing state, further deepening mistrust and polarization between communities. This is further exacerbated by the lack of qualitative interethnic dialogue. The role of disinformation in interethnic relations between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo is deeply tied to political narratives and state interests, with some Serbian media often helping perpetuate and amplify government narratives about Kosovo. By leveraging state-controlled outlets and tabloid

17. See for instance A2, "Kosovë-Serbi, dialogu vijon në Bruksel, kritika për mungesën e transparencës", October 23, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qwxTs2Yr-bl4

18. Interview with a Kosovar Serb working with international community in Kosovo, October, 2024

19. Interview with a Kosovar Serb working with international community in Kosovo, October, 2024

journalism, the Serbian Government sustains a systematic disinformation campaign aimed at delegitimizing Kosovo's independence and fostering mistrust among Kosovo Serbs. More importantly, the Serbian Government uses the media to maintain a perception about Kosovo that is not false, a perception that shows Kosovo Serbs as under attack and living in repression. According to interviews with Kosovar journalists, Serbian media frequently propagate narratives aligned with Serbia's political agenda, such as portraying Kosovo as a "temporary project" or "Kosovo and Metohija." These efforts, according to a journalist interviewed for this report, aim to sow division. In this context, according to a Kosovar journalist, one particular media portal that stands out in this agenda is Kosovo Online, which is thought to be directed by Belgrade. According to the journalist interviewed for this report "Kosovo Online finds people, e.g., an MP from the German Bundestag in the AfD party, who have anti-Kosovo attitudes and they try through these interviews to appear as credible and not work for Belgrade."[20] This way, some media with a tailored disinformation agenda approach political representatives from far-right parties in Europe in order to further amplify damaging narratives. This tactic demonstrates how Serbian media use external voices to legitimize their internal narratives, creating an image of impartiality while serving state interests. Such narratives intensify distrust between Albanians and Serbs, worsening already fragile interethnic relations and undermining normalization efforts.

Inadequate contextual reporting by Albanian speaking Kosovo media contributes to misinformation, further straining interethnic relations in Kosovo

The interaction between disinformation and misinformation complicates interethnic relations, as even unintentional lapses in journalistic standards can have damaging effects. In Kosovo, structural deficiencies in media practices, such as the pressure for rapid reporting and a lack of historical and political expertise among young journalists, have resulted in the inadvertent spread of misinformation.[21]

Kosovar journalists interviewed for this report explain that some Kosovar journalists fail to critically engage with or contextualize content from Serbian media, often translating it verbatim. This lack of contextual reporting can perpetuate narratives that distort facts and amplify tensions. The pressure on journalists to produce rapid news contributes to these shortcomings, as illustrated by a journalist: "The big pressure is to have an article every ten minutes".[22] These practices inadvertently allow misinformation to seep into public discourse, straining interethnic relations by reinforcing stereotypes and deepening existing divides.

According to Kosovar Serbs interviewed for this report, they observe that in Kosovo, the traditional media often serve political agendas, especially in rural areas where access to diverse information is limited: "Traditional media are mostly targeting middle-aged and older generations, who are bombed by false news or inflammatory narratives."[23] For instance, Serbian media outlets, like Kurir, framed the Banjska terrorist attack of September 2023, as an unprovoked act of aggression by the Kosovo Police against the local Serbs. This portrayal emphasized victimhood, with President Vučić alleging that Serbian men were killed "without reason," and that Kosovo government was "sending" police officers to "liquidate all the Serbs" reinforcing a narrative of oppression against the Serbian community.[24] This one-sided exposure solidifies biases and prevents the audience from engaging with alternative perspectives. Social media platforms, on the other hand, enable the rapid spread of sensationalist and often false narratives, particularly among younger demographics. Often media tend to formulate provocative headlines about ethnic incidents because they quickly gain traction online. The combination of these platforms creates a powerful feedback loop where divisive content dominates both public discourse and individual perceptions, undermining efforts to build interethnic trust.

---

20. Interview with a journalist from Kosovo, October, 2024

21. Ibid.,

22. Ibid.,

23. Interview with a Kosovar Serb working with international community in Kosovo, October, 2024

24. KoSSev, "Vučić: The killing of the policeman was not planned, we suspect that a Serb was killed after he surrendered", September 27, 2023, https://kossev.info/en/vucic-ubistvo-policajca-nije-bilo-planirano-sumnja-mo-da-je-jedan-srbin-ubijen-nakon-sto-se-predao/

Positive stories on interethnic relations and cooperation are underreported, allowing negative narratives to dominate

One of the most overlooked aspects of disinformation in Kosovo is the lack of positive stories that highlight successful interethnic cooperation and coexistence. Kosovar Serbs interviewed for this report lament the Kosovo media outlets that rarely cover these stories, focusing instead more on conflict and division. This selective reporting reinforces a perception of insurmountable hostility between communities, even when everyday realities suggest otherwise. For instance, an example of a contractor building homes for Serbs in the Municipality of Gracanica, a project that went unreported while stories of Serbs selling homes to Albanians dominated the media. Furthermore, the example of the Municipality of Gracanica where members from both Albanian and Serbian communities work in public institutions and address ethnic-based incidents are underreported too. [25]This imbalance in reporting not only fuels disinformation but also robs the public of narratives that could inspire trust and cooperation. Encouraging media outlets to focus on positive interethnic stories could help counteract the divisive impact of disinformation.

Disinformation campaigns targeting interethnic relations are particularly insidious because they undermine grassroots reconciliation efforts

Experts interviewed for this report observe that such campaigns often depict reconciliation initiatives as conspiracies orchestrated by foreign actors, which discourages local participation. The lack of positive reporting on successful interethnic cooperation further hampers the reconciliation process. There is a need for both Albanian and Serbian speaking media to focus on constructive narratives to counteract these divisive effects.

There is a particular danger of utilization of already established fears/myths to spread disinformation. These narratives are designed to create suspicion and fear, making them particularly insidious

For instance, disinformation from some Kosovo Albanian sources portrays Serbia as using northern Kosovo to establish a Republika Srpska or as a hub for organized crime. Conversely, Serbian narratives claim that Kosovo seeks to expel Serbs and create an ethnically pure Albanian state. Such claims exploit the inability of individuals to verify motives, making them difficult to fact-check and disprove. Experts highlight how these narratives are particularly effective because they resonate with pre-existing fears. This constant repetition of divisive motives prevents constructive dialogue and keeps communities entrenched in mutual mistrust. The narratives shift the focus away from facts and policies to unprovable intentions, which amplifies suspicion and hostility. The physical and social separation of ethnic communities in Kosovo exacerbates the effectiveness of disinformation. Limited interaction between Kosovo Serbs and Albanians means that individuals rarely have the opportunity to challenge stereotypes or disprove divisive narratives through personal relationships. The lack of bilingualism further entrenches this divide, as communities consume entirely different media narratives that reinforce their perceptions. Young people are perceived as particularly vulnerable, as they grow up in environments devoid of interethnic interaction. Few schools or extracurricular programs provide opportunities for children from different communities to interact. Without these personal connections, prejudices are more likely to persist, leaving individuals reliant on media and disinformation for their understanding of the "other".

The role of local rumors in undermining interethnic relations is generally underrated

While media outlets and political leaders often attract attention as drivers of disinformation, local rumors—informal narratives shared in everyday settings—play a critical but often overlooked role in perpetuating mistrust and interethnic divisions

---

25. Interview with an official from the Municipality of Gracanica, October, 2024

in Kosovo. These seemingly innocuous exchanges, spread in cafes, community gatherings, and other informal spaces, amplify harmful narratives, fuel stereotypes, and contribute to societal fragmentation. Interviews with senior municipal leaders in Kosovo, show that such rumors often lack malicious intent or a deliberate agenda, yet they incite fear and hatred simply because they are widely repeated and accepted as truth, as noted by a senior official from the Municipality of Gracanica "more than 90% of these informal narratives stem from ignorance or misinformation rather than intentional malice".[26] The emotional appeal and inherent trust in community-based communication make local rumors particularly dangerous. For instance, there were cases in the Municipality of Gracanica where thefts between individuals of the same ethnicity were falsely attributed to members of another ethnic group. These distortions fueled suspicion and reinforced harmful stereotypes, exacerbating divisions between Kosovo's Albanian and Serb communities. Such rumors gain traction in contexts where social and physical divides limit personal interactions between ethnic groups. In these environments, individuals rely heavily on hearsay and informal narratives to form their understanding of other communities, making rumors an effective tool for perpetuating stereotypes and mistrust.

The lack of effective coordination and consultation of the Kosovo Government with the EU and NATO on the actions taken in the north of Kosovo and the dominance of disinformation in north of Kosovo not only exacerbate tensions but also result in the silencing of legitimate concerns and the lived experiences of the Kosovo Serb community

In other words, in this overall context of heightened interethnic tensions in the north of Kosovo and significant levels of disinformation, potential cases violence exercised against the Kosovo Serbian community in the north or south, are somehow lost in this chaos. This is particularly alarming because it denies this community an essential avenue to voice their grievances and contribute to addressing

challenges they face. The absence of such channels risks further alienating the Kosovo Serb population, reinforcing their distrust in institutions, and entrenching divisions within society. In this chaotic environment of heightened tensions and rampant disinformation, the voices advocating for integration and fostering a multiethnic society in Kosovo—both from liberal perspectives and within the Serbian community—are significantly undermined. These voices, from both the north and the south, face increasing marginalization, as the polarized atmosphere diminishes their ability to promote dialogue, cooperation, and coexistence.

In this challenging environment, civil society in the north of Kosovo has a crucial role to play. Civil society organizations (CSOs) are uniquely positioned to act as intermediaries, bridging the gap between the community and institutions. By effectively communicating the experiences and concerns of the Kosovo Serb community in a constructive manner, they can help ensure that these voices are not lost in the broader noise of disinformation. Furthermore, civil society can foster dialogue and explore avenues for cooperation with public institutions in order to explore potential solutions that address local concerns while contributing to a more inclusive and stable environment in the north of Kosovo. On the other hand, public institutions in Kosovo need to do two things. First, they need to communicate in a more effective way their measures in the north of Kosovo, as well as communicate with the local communities from a bottom-up approach.[27] Second, they need to increase their outreach to the Kosovo Serbian community and increase the number of Serbian speaking police officers that work in the north, as a temporary and urgent measure until the government can restore the number of police officers from the Kosovo Serbian community in the Regional Directorate of Police in Mitrovica North. Finally, the bridge of communication between public institutions and the civil society or other relevant parties who could tackle the issue of disinformation also has to do with the Law on Access to Public Documents. Only 50% of documents are published, whereas the others are not, which leaves space for unanswered and therefore prone to being misinterpreted.[28]

---

26. Ibid.,

27. Interview with a representative from the Council of Europe Office in Kosovo, October 2024

28. Interview with a representative from the Information and Privacy Agency, October 2024

Local rumors often serve as informal amplifiers for broader disinformation campaigns orchestrated by political or media actors. For example, according to a senior official from the Municipality of Gracanica narratives questioning the impartiality and effectiveness of the Kosovo Police—disseminated through formal media—are frequently echoed in informal discussions. This informal reinforcement not only extends the reach of disinformation but also lends it an air of credibility, as it comes from trusted community sources. For instance, a theatrical performance at Ulpiana Fest in Gracanica was misrepresented on social media as a religious attack, sparking local tensions. Informal rumors spread rapidly, turning a harmless cultural event into a perceived provocation. Quick intervention by local authorities helped defuse the situation, but the incident underscores how easily rumors can exacerbate tensions.[29]

29. Ibid.,

Half-truths, Parallel Realities, and Disinformation

Disinformation is a well-recognized threat to democratic norms, peace and societal cohesion, but half-truths—statements with lack of context or that combine elements of fact with misleading or omitted information—pose an even greater challenge, especially in fragile interethnic contexts like Kosovo. These partial truths carry a veneer of credibility, making them harder to detect and more likely to gain widespread acceptance. Unlike disinformation, which can often be entirely refuted with evidence, half-truths exploit cognitive biases, evade scrutiny, and create confusion, ultimately exacerbating mistrust and divisions. Half-truths derive their potency from their perceived credibility. By embedding a kernel of truth within a misleading narrative, these statements bypass the skepticism that outright falsehoods might provoke. For example, participants in focus groups highlighted a case where a government decision regarding import restrictions on Serbian goods was misrepresented as fully resolved. In reality, only certain crossings were affected, leaving key issues unaddressed. This partial accuracy allowed the narrative to gain traction, misleading both communities and fostering resentment among Kosovo Serbs who felt the decision had been misrepresented.[30] This deceptive subtlety enables half-truths to spread widely, particularly through trusted networks and media channels. Unlike blatant disinformation, which might immediately raise red flags, half-truths are less likely to be questioned, especially by individuals who lack media literacy or access to alternative perspectives. Participants in discussions pointed out that trusted sources sharing incomplete narratives inadvertently amplify their reach, as audiences rarely critically assess information from these sources.

30. Interview with a Kosovo Serb journalist, October 2024

EVENT/ NEWS	OVERALL PERCEPTION OF K-ALBANIANS	OVERALL PERCEPTION OF K-SERBS
THE BANJSKA ATTACK	A terrorist attack by paramilitary troops	Glorification of the attackers as heroes
THE ASM	A threat to Kosovo's territorial integrity and sovreignity like "Republika Srpska" (53% K-Albs, & 37% K-Serbs)	Evidence of Kosovo's bad faith
MEASURES OF THE GOVERNMENT IN THE NORTH	A law enforcement mechanism	An attempted ethnic cleansing of the Serbian community
THE EU FACILITATED DIALOGUE	The EU is pressuring Kosovo	The EU is undermining Serb rights
CULTURAL EVENTS	No reaction.	Threatening the Orthodox religion

The psychological and emotional impact of half-truths also makes them uniquely dangerous. By aligning with existing biases, these narratives provoke strong emotional reactions such as fear or anger, which overshadow rational discourse.

Sensational headlines or selectively framed facts fuel hostility between communities, deepening divides and reinforcing stereotypes. For instance, misleading reports during tense moments, such as those related to incidents in northern Kosovo,

often present events in ways that heighten ethnic animosities. Compounding the issue is the difficulty in countering half-truths. Unlike outright lies, which can be clearly debunked, half-truths require nuanced responses that address both the accurate and misleading aspects. This complexity often results in delayed or ineffective debunking efforts. Moreover, corrections rarely achieve the same level of reach or resonance as the original misleading information, leaving communities to grapple with the lingering effects of mistrust and misinformation. The long-term consequences of half-truths are particularly pernicious. Repeated exposure undermines trust in media, institutions, and even reconciliation processes. In Kosovo, where interethnic relations are fragile, this erosion of trust is deeply damaging. Participants in the focus-group discussions organized for this report emphasized that half-truths have contributed to the creation of "parallel realities" where Serbian and Albanian communities consume entirely different narratives about the same events. This fragmentation not only deepens divisions but also hinders meaningful dialogue and reconciliation. While some argue that full disinformation, with its deliberate falsehoods, poses a more immediate risk due to its potential to incite violence, the danger of half-truths lies in their insidious nature. They destabilize societies gradually, undermining

the foundation of trust necessary for coexistence. Addressing this challenge requires tailored interventions, such as fostering media literacy, promoting fact-checking initiatives, and encouraging cross-community dialogue to mitigate the subtle yet pervasive impact of half-truths. In fragile contexts like Kosovo, half-truths are not just misleading; they are corrosive. They thrive in the shadows of ambiguity, exploiting the fractures in society and eroding the trust needed to build a peaceful, multiethnic future. Recognizing and addressing their unique danger is essential to fostering resilience against the manipulative tactics of disinformation.

Lack of institutional transparency creates fertile ground for disinformation to thrive in Kosovo. For example, when public institutions fail to proactively share accurate information especially about developments in the north of Kosovo or Serb-majority areas, they leave space for speculation and manipulation. Misleading headlines, designed to attract clicks, often present information that diverges significantly from the content of the articles. This practice perpetuates public misinformation and feeds into divisive narratives. Disinformation is frequently used as a tool to obstruct progress in the Eu-facilitated normalization dialogue.

Diaspora Dynamics and the Amplification of Disinformation

Diaspora communities often serve as vital links between their homelands and host countries, influencing perceptions, public discourse, and even policymaking. In the context of Kosovo, however, diaspora networks have become significant amplifiers of disinformation, particularly concerning interethnic relations and the overall relations between Kosovo and Serbia, including the dialogue for normalization of relations between the two countries facilitated by the European Union (EU). These dynamics are shaped by the diaspora's physical and emotional distance from on-the-ground realities, their consumption of sensationalist narratives, and their tendency to adopt radicalized positions.

A key characteristic of diaspora-driven disinformation is the tendency toward extremism. As participants in focus groups observed, members of the diaspora frequently adopt more radical stances than those living in Kosovo. This phenomenon is not unique to Kosovo but is consistent across many diaspora communities worldwide, where distance from everyday realities fosters idealized or adversarial views. In the case of Kosovo, some diaspora members amplify polarized narratives on social media, often through anonymous accounts that lack accountability or transparency. These accounts, while not necessarily shaping discourse directly, serve as echo chambers that magnify existing divisions.

As noted in the focus groups discussion for this report and supported by regional analyses, diaspora members often adopt more radical stances than residents of their home countries. This is particularly evident in the Western Balkans, where historical grievances and bilateral disputes, especially between Kosovo and Serbia, create fertile ground for polarizing narratives. This is both true for the Albanian-speaking and Serbian-speaking diaspora. For instance, Serbian-speaking diaspora communities seem to frequently consume disinformation that frames Kosovo as inherently hostile toward Serbs or vice versa, with narratives claiming that Kosovo seeks to ethnically cleanse

Serbian communities in the north remaining prevalent. For example, the narrative that Kosovo's prohibition of the Serbian dinar as currency is part of a broader strategy to harm Serbs was widely circulated by Serbian diaspora networks, intensifying mistrust. On the other hand, Albanian-speaking diaspora seem to frequently consume disinformation that frames the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia as highly asymmetric, serving only Serbia's interest, where any agreement by Kosovo is often seen as concession. For example, there has been a significant amount of disinformation consumed and, in some cases, propagated by diaspora communities on social media platforms regarding the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities (ASM), as something forced on Kosovo to establish another Republika Srpska style entity. Focus-group discussions and expert interviews show that diaspora communities are not fully aware of the legal and policy framework in Kosovo regulating the rights of non-majority communities. This ethno-political radicalization is further fueled by a lack of firsthand experience. Diaspora members often rely on politically skewed media or state-controlled outlets for information. For instance, Serbian diaspora networks extensively share disinformation originating from state-backed outlets like the Russian Sputnik Srbija, which portrays Kosovo as a failed state and its leaders as puppets of Western powers, and the West as working against Serbian interest.

Social media platforms serve as powerful vectors for the diaspora's role in spreading disinformation. Diaspora members frequently share content that combines partial truths with inflammatory claims. A recent media monitoring report highlighted the dissemination of narratives framing Kosovo as a militaristic threat following the U.S. decision to sell Javelin anti-tank missile systems to Kosovo. Such claims, while loosely tied to factual events, were exaggerated to depict Kosovo as preparing for ethnic conflict, further straining interethnic

relations.[31] Similarly, diaspora networks amplify regional and geopolitical disinformation campaigns. Russian-backed narratives, for example, exploit existing divisions by portraying Serbia as a victim of Western conspiracies and Kosovo as a proxy for "NATO aggression". These narratives resonate strongly within diaspora communities, where they are recycled and localized through social media and community channels. One striking example

is the response to the Banjska attack in northern Kosovo, where Serbian diaspora networks circulated unverified claims that Kosovo's security forces were targeting Serbs indiscriminately. These claims fueled outrage among the Serbian diaspora and increased calls for international intervention, despite evidence that the attack was orchestrated by specific criminal groups. Moreover, disinformation narratives related to the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue often target diaspora audiences to influence broader international discourse. For instance, the portrayal of the EU's role as biased or ineffective in facilitating the dialogue is a recurring theme that undermines confidence in the process .

---

31. Disinformation Trends and Narratives in the Western Balkan Region: Media Monitoring Report for the Period January-March 2024, https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/izdanija_arhiva/disinformation-trends-and-narratives-in-the-western-balkans-media-monitoring-report-for-the-period-january-march-2024/

Understanding disinformation targeting interethnic relations in Kosovo through numbers

To complement the qualitative analysis, we conducted a post-focus group survey with all participants in the focus group discussions organized for this report. Additionally, we disseminated an online survey to a select group of well-informed young adults. This approach aims to provide a degree of quantification and statistical insight into how disinformation is perceived. It is important to note that this section is not intended as an analysis of public opinion or a representation of broader public perceptions. Instead, it seeks to offer a statistical overview to support the qualitative findings, offering some numerical context to better understand how disinformation is viewed by the specific groups engaged in this study. This approach ensures that the analysis is grounded in both qualitative depth and a limited but meaningful quantitative perspective.

Based on the data, a majority (66%) of respondents encounter disinformation about interethnic relations frequently, significantly affecting trust between communities (83% perceive a very significant impact). Lack of media literacy (25%) and political manipulation (18%) are the main factors making communities vulnerable to disinformation. 79% of respondents attribute disinformation to internal actors, indicating local dynamics and political incentives play a major role. While 71% perceive their communities as vulnerable, only 57% confidently believe their community can effectively counter disinformation. Stronger fact-checking initiatives (35%) and media literacy programs (30%) are viewed as the most effective strategies for reducing disinformation.

Prevalence of Disinformation:

The data indicates that disinformation related to interethnic relations is a common experience for the majority of respondents, with 66% reporting that they encounter it "very frequently" or "frequently." This high level of exposure reflects the entrenched nature of disinformation in public discourse and its potential to exacerbate divisions within Kosovo's multiethnic society. Only a small minority (3%) report rarely encountering such content, indicating that disinformation is nearly ubiquitous and affects most segments of the population. This prevalence has significant implications for social cohesion and trust between communities. Constant exposure to divisive narratives risks reinforcing stereotypes and deepening mistrust, making reconciliation efforts more challenging. It also suggests a well-coordinated dissemination of false narratives, possibly by external or internal actors seeking to destabilize interethnic harmony.

Figure 1: Prevalence of Disinformation

How often do you come across disinformation related to interethnic relations in Kosovo?

Very/Frequently ■ 66%
Rarely ■ 3%
Sometimes ■ 31%

Confidence in Identifying Disinformation:

While 60% of respondents express confidence in their ability to identify disinformation, 37% feel only "somewhat confident," and 3% lack confidence entirely. This mixed level of confidence underscores a critical gap in media literacy and critical thinking skills. Although a majority are self-assured in their discernment, the substantial percentage of less-confident individuals highlights vulnerabilities that disinformation campaigns could exploit. The lack of full confidence, particularly among certain groups, suggests that even if individuals recognize

some false information, more subtle or emotionally resonant disinformation may still influence public perceptions and attitudes. This is particularly concerning in a context where interethnic relations are already sensitive and prone to manipulation.

Figure 2: Confidence in Identifying Disinformation

How would you rate your ability to identify disinformation when you encounter it?

Very/Confident	60%
Somewhat Confident	37%
No Confident	3%

Sources of Disinformation:

When asked about the primary sources of disinformation targeting interethnic relations, respondents identified Facebook (27%) as the dominant platform, followed by international news websites (22%) and local online news websites (20%). Other platforms, such as Instagram (15%) and "word of mouth" (5%), also play notable roles, while Telegram (2%) and WhatsApp/Viber (4%) are perceived as less influential. The dominance of Facebook as a disinformation vector highlights the critical role of social media in spreading false narratives. Facebook's widespread use and the ease with which unverified content can be shared amplify its role as a platform for disinformation. Similarly, the substantial influence of online and international news websites suggests that professionally produced disinformation, alongside user-generated content, plays a significant role in shaping narratives about interethnic relations. Interestingly, while social media platforms dominate, the role of interpersonal communication ("word of mouth") cannot be ignored, even if it accounts for a smaller proportion. This indicates that disinformation is not limited to digital spaces but also finds resonance in everyday human interactions, which can perpetuate false narratives within communities.

Figure 3: Sources of Disinformation

In your opinion, which platforms are the main sources of disinformation targeting interethnic relations?

Facebook	27%
Online News Website	5%
Telegram	22%
Instagram	20%
International news Website	4%
World of mouth	2%
Twitter/X	5%
WhatsApp/Viber	15%

The Impact of Disinformation on Trust Between Ethnic Communities:

An overwhelming majority of respondents (83%) believe that disinformation has a very significant impact on trust between ethnic communities in Kosovo. A smaller portion (11%) perceives a moderate impact, while only 6% consider the effect to be slight. This consensus underscores the destructive power of disinformation in eroding social trust. Trust is a foundational element of interethnic cooperation and peacebuilding; when disinformation undermines it, the consequences can include heightened tensions, reduced willingness for dialogue, and a more polarized society. These findings suggest that addressing disinformation is not just a matter of countering false narratives but also of fostering trust and resilience between communities.

Figure 4: The Impact of Disinformation on Trust Between Ethnic Communities

How much do you think disinformation affects trust between ethnic communities in Kosovo?

Very/Significant impact	83%
Moderate impact	11%
Sight impact	6%

The Sources of Disinformation: Internal vs. External Drivers:

Respondents overwhelmingly attribute disinformation to internal actors, with 79% identifying these as the primary drivers. Only 9% view external actors as the main source, while 12% believe that both internal and external actors are equally responsible. This finding highlights the role of local dynamics in fueling disinformation campaigns. Internal actors—whether political, social, or media-related—likely exploit existing ethnic divisions to serve their interests. However, the acknowledgment of external influence, albeit smaller, indicates that disinformation campaigns may also be supported or amplified by external state or non-state actors seeking to destabilize the region. Efforts to counter disinformation must therefore target both local narratives and external influences to be effective.

Figure 5: The Sources of Disinformation: Internal vs. External Drivers

Do you believe that disinformation targeting ethnic relations in Kosovo is primarily driven by internal or external actors?

Driven by internal actors ■ 79%
Driven by external actors ■ 9%
Driven by internal and external actors ■ 12%

The Contribution of Disinformation to Community Tensions:

When asked about the role of disinformation in contributing to tension or conflict, 37% of respondents report that it "frequently" plays a role, while another 37% say it "sometimes" contributes. A smaller portion (12%) indicates that it rarely or never contributes, while 14% are unsure. These findings highlight the pervasive and tangible impact of disinformation on community dynamics. By creating or exacerbating misunderstandings and mistrust, disinformation fuels tension and makes reconciliation and even interethnic cooperation more challenging. The high percentage of respondents recognizing its role underscores the need for targeted interventions at the community level to mitigate the effects of false narratives and prevent escalations.

Figure 6: The Contribution of Disinformation to Community Tensions

In your experience, has disinformation contributed to tension or conflict between ethnic groups in your community?

Frequently ■ 37%
Sometimes ■ 37%
No (rarely/never) ■ 12%
Not sure ■ 14%

Community Vulnerability to Disinformation:

The survey reveals that a majority (71%) perceive their community as vulnerable to disinformation related to interethnic relations, while 23% consider it somewhat vulnerable. Only 6% believe their community is not vulnerable. This perceived vulnerability reflects the significant risks posed by disinformation campaigns. Communities that feel vulnerable are likely aware of their limited capacity to counter or resist false narratives. This awareness, while important, also highlights a critical need for building resilience through media literacy programs, stronger local leadership, and proactive community engagement. NDI Kosovo survey findings show that 65% of Serbs expect interethnic relations to worsen, in contrast to 53% of Albanians who expect improvement. This divergence reflects the 'parallel realities' created by ethnically segmented media consumption, where 86% of Albanians rely on Kosovo TV stations, and 79% of Serbs turn to Serbian TV channels for daily information. The Serbian community in Kosovo demonstrates significantly higher favorability toward Russia and China, scoring 4.0 and 3.8 respectively on a 1-to-5 scale, where 5 indicates the highest favorability. This contrasts sharply with the Albanian community, which exhibits the greatest favorability toward the U.S., NATO, and Germany, at 4.6. These differences underscore a pronounced divergence in geopolitical alignments and perceptions between the two communities, potentially influenced by disinformation. Vulnerability is particularly pronounced in marginalized and rural areas, where access to media literacy programs is limited.

Figure 7: Community Vulnerability to Disinformation

How vulnerable do you think your community is to disinformation related to interethnic relations?

Vulnerable ■ 71%
Somewhat vulnerable ■ 23%
Not vulnerable ■ 6%

Factors Contributing to Vulnerability:

Respondents identified **lack of media literacy** (25%) as the leading factor making communities in Kosovo vulnerable to disinformation, followed by **political manipulation** (18%) and **social media influence** (14%). Other notable factors include the **lack of trust in media, lack of government reaction**, and unresolved **narratives about the past**. This data underscores the multifaceted nature of disinformation vulnerability. A lack of media literacy limits individuals' ability to critically assess information sources, leaving them susceptible to manipulation. Political manipulation exacerbates these challenges, as divisive narratives are often weaponized for political gain. The influence of social media platforms further compounds the issue by serving as primary vectors for spreading disinformation. The findings highlight the need for a multi-pronged approach that addresses these vulnerabilities, including education initiatives, strengthened institutional accountability, and efforts to build public trust in credible information sources.

What exacerbates the community's vulnerabilities to disinformation is that most cannot identify disinformation content. According to the NDI Kosovo survey data only 11% of Kosovo's citizens check the source of information when encountering interesting/ unusual pieces of information to confirm whether it's accurate.

Figure 8: Factors Contributing to Vulnerabi

Do you believe that disinformation targeting ethnic relations in Kosovo is primarily driven by internal or external actors?

Factor	%
Foreign interference	2%
Social media influence	11%
Economic instability	2%
Political manipulation	15%
Competing narratives about the past in community	9%
Lack of dealing with the past	10%
Lcak of normalization of relation between Kosovo and Serbia	9%
Lack of government reaction to disinformation	10%
Lack of trust media	10%
Lack of media literacy	22%

Perceived Capacity to Counter Disinformation:

When asked about their community's ability to counter disinformation, **57% of respondents agreed** that their community can do so, while **29% slightly agreed**, and **14% did not agree.** This mixed confidence suggests that while a majority believe in their community's resilience, a significant proportion remains uncertain or doubtful. These reservations likely stem from the systemic factors contributing to vulnerability, including limited media literacy and perceived inefficacy in addressing the issue at the institutional level. Building confidence in community capacity will require empowering local actors, fostering collaboration, and demonstrating tangible successes in countering disinformation campaigns.

Figure 9: Perceived Capacity to Counter Disinformation

How much do you agree with the following statement: "The community I belong to can counter disinformation"?

Agree ■ 57%
Slightly agree ■ 29%
Do not agree ■ 14%

Who Should Lead the Fight Against Disinformation?

Respondents identified **government institutions (25%), civil society organizations** (20%), and **local media** (20%) as the groups most responsible for leading efforts to counter disinformation. **Teachers and educational institutions** (15%) were also seen as important actors, while **community leaders** (10%) and **international organizations** (8%) were considered secondary. This data underscores the public's expectation for a coordinated, multi-stakeholder response. Government institutions are seen as pivotal due to their capacity to enact policies and regulate media platforms. Civil society organizations and local media are recognized for their grassroots outreach and ability to foster public trust. Educational institutions, meanwhile, play a critical role in promoting long-term resilience through media literacy and critical thinking education.

Figure 10: Who Should Lead the Fight Against Disinformation?

In your opinion, which groups should take the lead in countering disinformation in Kosovo?

Teachers and educational institutions	14%
Community leaders	6%
Religious leaders	1%
International organizations	5%
Local media	23%
Civil society organizations	25%
Government institutions	27%

Approaches for Reducing Disinformation:

The most favored strategies for addressing disinformation include **stronger fact-checking initiatives** (35%) and **media literacy and education programs** (30%). Enhanced cooperation between government and civil society (20%) was also seen as a vital step, followed by **stricter regulation of media platforms** (10%) and **increased transparency in media** (5%). These priorities reflect a clear recognition of the need for proactive and preventive measures. Fact-checking initiatives address the immediate challenge of debunking false narratives, while education programs build long-term resilience. Collaboration between government and civil society is essential for creating sustainable solutions, and regulating media platforms can mitigate the structural drivers of disinformation.

Figure 11: Approaches for Reducing Disinformation

Do you believe that disinformation targeting ethnic relations in Kosovo is primarily driven by internal or external actors?

Increased transparncy in media	2%
Enhanced cooperation between government and civil society	11%
Stronger fact-checking initiatives	2%
Media literacy and education programs	15%
Sticker regulation of media platform	9%

Disinformation poses a serious threat to interethnic relations in Kosovo, as it perpetuates stereotypes and mistrust across communities. While many individuals trust their ability to discern disinformation, the considerable percentage of respondents lacking full confidence indicates a gap in critical media literacy. This gap might make certain groups more vulnerable to manipulation, especially if the disinformation is sophisticated or emotionally charged. Social media platforms, particularly Facebook, serve as the primary vectors for spreading disinformation. This shows the need to examine options for regulating and monitoring these platforms in Kosovo, however, online and international news websites are also seen as sources of disinformation in Kosovo, which suggests that disinformation is not limited to user-generated content but also stems from professionalized sources. Additionally, "word of mouth" is also seen as an important channel to spread disinformation, which indicates that interpersonal communication remains a channel for disinformation, albeit to a lesser extent.

CONCLUSION:

Impact of Disinformation on Interethnic Relations in Kosovo

Disinformation is a pervasive and potent challenge to interethnic relations in Kosovo, deeply embedded in societal divisions and historical grievances. It exploits vulnerabilities such as low media literacy, institutional mistrust, and limited interethnic interaction, amplifying stereotypes, fostering mistrust, and undermining reconciliation efforts. The findings of this report underscore how disinformation operates at multiple levels—shaping individual perceptions, community dynamics, and broader institutional credibility—while hindering the normalization dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia.

Key findings from focus groups, interviews, and surveys reveal that disinformation not only thrives on existing societal vulnerabilities in Kosovo but also actively undermines liberal voices and integration efforts. The voices advocating for multiethnic cooperation, particularly in the north, are drowned out in the chaotic disinformation ecosystem, leaving communities increasingly polarized and alienated. The lack of coordinated government action and institutional transparency further exacerbates the issue, allowing harmful narratives to gain traction unchecked. Civil society north of northern Kosovo emerges as a critical actor in bridging divides and fostering dialogue, especially with public institutions. Investments in media literacy, fact-checking initiatives, and platforms that amplify positive interethnic stories are essential for fostering trust and resilience.

Reinforcement of Negative Stereotypes

Disinformation thrives on the amplification of stereotypes, which are deeply rooted in historical grievances and ethnic divisions. Participants in the focus groups noted that disinformation often portrays members of the opposite ethnic community as aggressors or threats. For example, Serbian media frequently frame Albanians as violent or hostile towards Serbs, while Albanian media may depict Serbs in the north of Kosovo as criminal or militant.

This selective framing entrenches preconceived notions and dehumanizes the other group, creating significant barriers to mutual understanding. One participant shared an example of disinformation during a recent incident in the north, where Serbian media reported that Albanians were systematically targeting Serbs, despite a lack of evidence. Similarly, Albanian media circulated exaggerated claims about Serbian intentions to destabilize Kosovo. These narratives, amplified by both traditional media and social platforms, perpetuate a cycle of fear and hostility, discouraging open dialogue between communities. Almost all participants and interviewees highlighted the 2004 riots in Kosovo as a historical example of how disinformation can lead to violence. The riots were sparked by false reports that Serbian individuals had forced Albanian children into a river, resulting in their deaths. Although the claims were later debunked, the disinformation had already incited widespread violence, leaving lasting scars on interethnic relations. This incident underscores the profound and destructive potential of disinformation to exploit existing tensions and provoke conflict.

Creation of Parallel Realities

Disinformation contributes to the formation of "parallel realities," where Albanian and Serbian communities consume entirely different narratives about the same events. This fragmentation is fueled by ethnically polarized media outlets that prioritize partisan agendas over objective reporting. Participants noted that Serbian-language media, particularly those controlled by the government in Belgrade, often frame Kosovo-related events in a manner that reinforces the narrative of Serbian victimhood. Conversely, Albanian-language media may focus on portraying Kosovo's actions as justified, regardless of their implications for the Serbian minority. The divergence in media narratives was particularly evident during discussions about incidents in the north of Kosovo. For example,

while Albanian media described police actions as efforts to uphold the rule of law, Serbian media framed the same actions as targeting the Serb population. This lack of shared understanding creates an environment where mutual mistrust thrives, as each community perceives the other as living in an alternate reality shaped by biased media reports. Participants also pointed out that the absence of multiethnic media outlets further entrenches these parallel realities. Without platforms that present balanced perspectives, communities lack opportunities to engage with narratives that challenge their biases. As one participant noted, "The media isn't helping us understand each other. It's just reinforcing what we already believe." This dynamic not only deepens divisions but also hinders efforts to address common challenges collaboratively.

Undermining Trust in Institutions

Disinformation erodes trust in both local and international institutions, complicating their ability to facilitate reconciliation and governance. Participants highlighted several examples where disinformation targeting institutions created skepticism about their intentions and actions. For instance, false reports about the Kosovo Government's alleged plans to replace the national flag with the Albanian eagle fueled fears among the Serbian community of ethnic domination. Similarly, disinformation about the Kosovo Police's operations in the north led to allegations of bias and misconduct, undermining their credibility among both Serbs and Albanians. This erosion of trust is particularly detrimental in the context of the Kosovo–Serbia normalization dialogue. Disinformation campaigns frequently portray agreements as disproportionately favoring one side, sowing doubt about their fairness and feasibility. For example, during recent negotiations, media reports falsely claimed that certain provisions would significantly disadvantage the Serbian community. These narratives, shared widely on social media, prompted backlash from Serbian communities and reduced public support for the dialogue process. Participants observed that such disinformation not only disrupts negotiations but also discourages citizens from engaging constructively with the reconciliation process. International actors involved in Kosovo's peacebuilding efforts are not immune to disinformation. Participants noted that sensationalist

claims about the role of the European Union and the United States often depict these actors as biased or manipulative. For instance, false narratives about international pressure on Kosovo's government to make unilateral concessions to Serbia have fueled mistrust among Albanians. Conversely, claims that international actors are undermining Serbia's sovereignty have resonated with Serbian audiences, further polarizing public opinion.

Amplification of Fear and Insecurity

Disinformation frequently exploits fear to destabilize interethnic relations. Participants emphasized how false or exaggerated claims about security threats heighten tensions and provoke defensive reactions. For example, during the Banjska attack, disinformation spread rapidly on social media, with both Albanian and Serbian accounts accusing the other community of orchestrating the violence. These narratives incited fear and anger, with some individuals expressing a willingness to take up arms to protect their communities. As one participant noted, "The biggest danger is that people take matters into their own hands without knowing the whole truth."[32] The spread of disinformation also undermines efforts to build trust between communities by perpetuating the belief that the other side poses an existential threat. This perception is particularly pronounced in the north, where both Albanian and Serbian residents view each other's actions through a lens of suspicion. Participants pointed out that disinformation often frames routine incidents, such as police checkpoints or protests, as deliberate provocations, escalating tensions unnecessarily.

Impact on Reconciliation and Peacebuilding

Disinformation poses significant challenges to reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts by creating a hostile environment for dialogue and cooperation. Participants highlighted how disinformation about the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue undermines public support for compromise, as communities fear that concessions will be exploited by the other side. For

---

32. Focus Group Discussion II, October 2024

example, false reports about the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM) often depict it as a "state within a state," fueling Albanian fears of territorial division. Conversely, Serbian media portray the lack of progress on the ASM as evidence of Kosovo's unwillingness to honor agreements, reinforcing perceptions of bad faith. The focus groups also revealed that disinformation complicates grassroots reconciliation efforts. Participants described how false narratives discourage interethnic interactions by creating an atmosphere of mistrust. For instance, disinformation about violence in the north has deterred Albanians from visiting the area, while Serbs in the north avoid traveling to predominantly Albanian regions due to fears of hostility. This physical and psychological separation perpetuates the cycle of division, making it difficult to foster meaningful connections between communities. Moreover, disinformation erodes the credibility of civil society organizations and community leaders working on reconciliation. Participants noted that these actors are often targeted by disinformation campaigns seeking to discredit their efforts. For example, false claims about NGOs being funded by foreign entities to undermine national interests have fueled skepticism about their motives. This hostility toward civil society further undermines initiatives aimed at bridging interethnic divides.

Historical Grievances and Dehumanization

Disinformation often weaponizes historical grievances to deepen divisions and justify hostility. Participants cited examples where media narratives revive past conflicts to frame current events, reinforcing negative stereotypes and dehumanizing the other group. For instance, Albanian media's portrayal of Serbs as perpetrators of violence and Serbian media's depiction of Albanians as aggressors evoke memories of the Kosovo War in 1999, entrenching resentment on both sides. This weaponization of history also manifests in the language used to describe the other community. Participants noted that terms like "fascist militia" and "terrorists" are frequently employed in media reports, painting entire communities with a broad brush. Such language not only dehumanizes individuals but also legitimizes discriminatory attitudes and behaviors.

As one participant observed, "Disinformation helps dehumanization." The focus groups underscored the need for nuanced narratives that acknowledge historical grievances without perpetuating cycles of blame. Similarly, in an interview with a Kosovo Albanian journalist, it was stated that during joint trainings for journalists from Kosovo and Serbia, some journalists from Serbia stated that it would be too difficult to explain to some people in Serbia that Kosovo Albanians are also human beings. Therefore, by fostering a more balanced understanding of the past, media and civil society can contribute to breaking down barriers between communities.

Erosion of Critical Thinking and Information Literacy

Finally, the focus groups highlighted the role of disinformation in eroding critical thinking and information literacy. Participants expressed concern that many individuals lack the tools to differentiate between credible news and false narratives. This deficiency is exacerbated by the speed at which disinformation spreads, often outpacing efforts to debunk it. As one participant noted, "If you publish the truth a few days later, it won't reach the same audience as the disinformation." The lack of critical thinking not only makes individuals more susceptible to disinformation but also perpetuates a culture of passive consumption.

Impact of Limited Albanian-Serbian Media Interaction:

The interviews conducted for this research point to the lack of Serbian-speaking capacity within Albanian-language media in Kosovo as a significant barrier. Reliance on automatic translation tools often leads to distorted reporting, which inadvertently spreads misinformation. This insight highlights the need for capacity-building initiatives, such as hiring bilingual journalists and fostering collaboration between Albanian- and Serbian-language media outlets.

Marginalization of Voices for Integration:

The chaotic information environment and the heightened interethnic tensions in the north have overshadowed legitimate concerns of the Kosovo Serbian community and their potential experiences with violence and exercise of their rights. Very importantly the current situation has marginalized voices advocating for multiethnic cooperation and integration. This not only alienates liberal actors and civil society organizations but also discourages grassroots initiatives aimed at bridging divides.

How Disinformation Targets and Affects Interethnic Relations in Kosovo?

Authors:
Ramadan Ilazi
Jeta Loshaj
Tamara Pavlović
Agnesa Bytyçi (Research Assistant)

About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Center for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organizate. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice.

Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development; identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime; foreign policy and regional cooperation; and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

For more details about KCSS, you can check on the following official platforms:

qkss.org
securitybarometer.qkss.org

@KCSSQKSS
#KCSSQKSS