RUSSIAN STATE-SPONSORED DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES
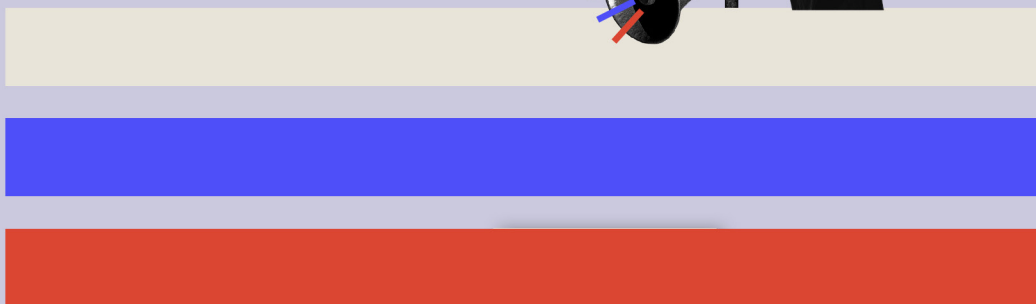## IN ALBANIA

RUSSIAN STATE-SPONSORED
DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES
IN ALBANIA

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Working Definitions:

BIRN Albania has produced two reports into disinformation, false news and decontextualised photos and videos related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine during the period January – August 2022. This report sets out the impact of Russian state disinformation and its spread in Albanian-language media and social media, while the other report looks at how false news stories, based on deliberate falsehoods, and out-of-context images and videos, have been picked up and reported in Albanian-language media and social media. Below are listed some of the working definitions of the main terms used for the purpose of this specific report.

Disinformation: False information which is intended to mislead, issued by a government, often through state-controlled media.

Disinformation articles: These are articles, often published in Russian state-run media such as Sputnik or RT, which first placed misleading comments and narratives into the media ecosystem.

Disinformation reports: These are fact-checking reports of these "disinformation articles" from the EUvsDisinfo database. The reports have debunked claims from the "disinformation article".

Disinformation narratives: These are the broader narratives, or themes, of Russian state disinformation. For example, obfuscating atrocities against Ukrainian civilians committed by the Russian armed forces.

Disinformation republications: These are republications of the disinformation articles in the Albanian-language media. These include written news reports, photos and videos.

I. Context

Over the past decade, the problem of disinformation emanating from the Russian Federation has become a major challenge for the European Union, its member states and aspiring candidate countries. Concern about 'Russian disinformation' heightened following Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimean peninsula and the conflict in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas, incited by Kremlin-backed separatists[1]. Russian-backed influence and disinformation campaigns have continued to develop, both thematically and geographically, targeting democratic processes, electoral campaigns and the global health pandemic sparked by the COVID-19 coronavirus. The Kremlin has fomented social discord spanning the US presidential campaign trail to Africa's forever wars, disseminating its distorted and often false narratives through the Russian state-sponsored media ecosystem and social media platforms.

The US Helsinki Committee considers Russian disinformation campaigns as a transnational threat to democracy, which facilitates the violations of OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) norms by the autocratic regime of President Vladimir Putin, at home and abroad in the 57-member states of the OSCE region.[2] Such violations take different shapes, from internal human rights' abuses in Russia, military interventions in neighbouring states, to election interference in the United States, the European Union and other countries. The most famous example of such electoral interference remains the disinformation campaign in the 2016 US presidential elections, where Russia supported the ascendance of Donald Trump to the White House through the dissemination of

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[1] Google Books Ngram Viewer, Url: https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=Russian+Disinformation&-year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3, Accessed on 28.12.2022

[2] Commission On Security And Cooperation In Europe, The Scourge Of Russian Disinformation, (2017), Url: https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/events/scourge-russian-disinformation, Accessed on 28.12.2022

emails hacked from the Democratic Party Committee.

Open societies face a challenge to protect the integrity of their democratic processes from malign influence and disinformation campaigns. In order to face up to this task, in line with fundamental rights, the EU has put in place a concrete framework for robust action against disinformation.[3] Candidate countries like Albania, which opened accession negotiations with the union in June 2022, are still playing catch-up in this regard.

Although the Western Balkans remains a theatre of geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West, the impact and influence of the Kremlin's playbook has not been thoroughly studied in Albania, which has often been left out of the list of countries flagged as a target of Russian disinformation and propaganda campaigns. Previous reports have described disinformation in Albania as mainly a domestic affair, the direct result of a polarised political climate and a side-effect of the tabloidization of the local media and its attempts to monetise online traffic.[4]

Russia uses both overt and covert methods to spread its narratives and amplify the reach of its disinformation campaigns in the West and across the globe. The main figureheads of Russia's disinformation campaigns are its state-sponsored media outlets, RT and Sputnik. RT has a network of eight television channels – the latest opened in Belgrade, Serbia – and Sputnik controls some 30 websites in different languages. International fact checkers and former journalists have identified both outlets as major purveyors of disinformation, false news and conspiracy theories, built with the aim to serve the Kremlin's foreign policy goals. Neither RT nor Sputnik have publications in

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[3] European Commision,Report on the implementation of the Action Plan Against Disinformation, (2019), Url: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_report_on_disinformation.pdf, Accessed on 28.12.2022

[4] European Parliament, Mapping Fake News and Disinformation in the Western Balkans and Identifying Ways to Effectively Counter Them, (2021), Url: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/653621/EXPO_STU(2020)653621_EN.pdf, Accessed on 28.12.2022

the Albanian language. However, this does not mean that Russian narratives, misinformation and disinformation - pushed by either the network or Russian officials, do not reach local audiences and readers in Albania through third parties.

II. Methodology

The aim of this study is to outline and map the reach of pro-Kremlin narratives in the Albanian media by tracking the republication of statements and news by state-sponsored Russian media outlets and identifying key narratives. For the purpose of this study, disinformation is defined as a "deliberate generation and dissemination of false information to manipulate public opinion and perceptions."[5]

To research the distribution of Russian narratives and disinformation campaigns in Albanian language media outlets, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network in Albania (BIRN Albania) relied on the disinformation database of Russian-backed news published by the EEAS's East Stratcom Task Force in its EUvsDisinfo flagship database. Created in 2015, the East Stratcom Task Force monitors and raises awareness of the Kremlin's disinformation campaigns by compiling and exposing cases through media monitoring and analysis in 15 languages, gathered in an open-source database with more than 14,700 samples of Russian disinformation.[6]

The period under review for this research is the first eight months of 2022 (January to August), which overlaps with the Russian invasion in Ukraine. During this period, the EUvsDisinfo database

[5] National Demcratic Institute, "Disinformation and Electoral Integrity", (2019), Url: https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Disinformation%20and%20Electoral%20Integrity_NDI_External_Updated%20May%202019%20%281%29.pdf, Accessed on 27.10.2022.

[6] Euvsdisinfo.com, About us, (2022), Url: https://euvsdisinfo.eu/about/, Accessed on 28.12.2022.

has identified and listed 384 cases of disinformation articles. For each of these cases, keywords, search terms and phrases were identified, translated and open search techniques were used, to search for republications in Albanian. Although the main goal of the research was to identify and map the spread of disinformation in Albania, Albanian language media from Kosovo and North Macedonia, as well as the diaspora or international outlets with Albanian language services - which also have readers in the country, and data from these were also collected.

The data collected from researchers were entered in a spreadsheet in Excel, which included the link of the Albanian language publication, the date, name of the media, type of the media, as well as the country where the media is based. Based on the database created, the articles identified in Albanian were analysed and coded based on Russian disinformation narratives identified by the EUvsDisinfo database.

BIRN Albania used the EUvsDisinfo database for a number of reasons. First, because the verification from this database of statements and narratives published by Russian state-sponsored media continuously covers the researched period, January - August 2022. Second, because of the lack of fact-checking services in Albania focused on monitoring the spread of Russian disinformation narratives in the Albanian language, the need arose to use an external data source. Third, the number of fact-checked statements verified in the EUvsDisinfo database includes a considerable sample, which enables the assessment of their circulation in the Albanian language media, as well as the future comparison of data between different timeframes and geographical areas.

In addition to the disinformation identified in the Albanian language media outlets, the researchers also analysed posts made on the official Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Tirana in the first eight months of 2022 to identify recurring Russian disinformation narratives spread through this social media channel.

BIRN Albania used Crowdtangle software to measure the engagement of social media users with Russian disinformation narratives published by this account during the first eight months of 2022.

Limitations: The number of Russian narratives and their distribution in Albanian language media for the period January – August 2022 is likely much higher than those identified by this study due to the following limitations of the methodology. First, for the purpose of this study, the disinformation narratives searched for in Albanian language media are based only on those identified by the EUvsDisinfo database. Second, due to the retrospective data gathering, the number of narratives identified is limited to articles and videos, without covering their distribution in other media formats, such as in news editions and debates in audiovisual media outlets. Third, the data on engagement were collected during the research period August to October 2022 and are subject to slight changes if reviewed, because posts, photos and videos on social media usually register new interactions over time. However, the vast majority of social media engagements are usually recorded in the first 48 hours after publication.

III. Findings

3.1 Proliferation of Russian Disinformation in Albanian Language Media

The research in local media for Russian disinformation narratives was based on the list of disinformation cases distributed by the Kremlin media ecosystem and published in the EUvsDisinfo database in the first eight months of 2022. Of the 384 cases of disinformation debunked by EUvsDisinfo from its media monitoring services in 15 languages from January until August 2022, 86 (22 per cent) were circulated by Albanian language media in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Most of the identified cases of Russian narratives that circulated in the Albanian language media during the research period were published on several news outlets. The researchers were able to identify a total of 377 articles and videos that contained Russian disinformation. More than 65 per cent of these articles were published by Albanian language media in Albania, 19 per cent by

Albania language media in Kosovo, 9 per cent by Albanian language media in North Macedonia and the remaining 7 per cent, by state-sponsored Iranian and Turkish news agencies with Albanian language websites.

Graphic 1:

NO. OF REPUBLICATIONS OF THE DISINFORMATION ARTICLES IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE DIVIDED BY MEDIA HEADQUARTER

Albania
Kosovo
N. Macedonia
Turkey
Iran
Other

7   12   8
34
72
244

DIS
INFO
AL

www.disinfo.al
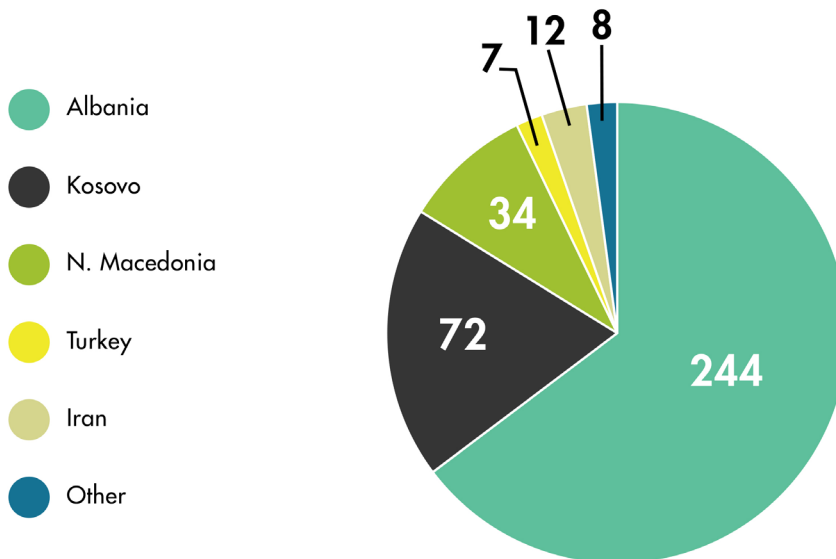
A total of 156 media outlets in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia published stories containing Russian disinformation in the first eight months of 2022. From this group only four media outlets had ten or more stories published, while the other 152 outlets had fewer than ten stories.

The majority of disinformation narratives published in the Albanian language media circulated in digital-only news media outlets, which accounted for 61 per cent of the data points, followed by the online pages of televisions (19 per cent) and newspapers (12 per cent), the websites of news agencies (5 per cent) and pages of radio stations and magazines (3 per cent). The vast majority of these were written articles and only in four cases did these appear as YouTube videos.

3.2 Deciphering the Pro-Kremlin narratives circulating in Albania

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Kremlin media ecosystem has circulated a number of narratives related to the conflict, some of which have spread to Albania. The qualitative analysis of the content shows that all of the 86 disinformation articles from the EUvsDisinfo database were found in the Albanian media related to the Russian invasion in Ukraine. These 86 disinformation articles, which had a total of 377 publications, can be grouped in 31 different recurring Pro-Kremlin narratives.

The ten most common pro-Kremlin narratives that circulated during the period January to August 2022 account for 69 per cent of the articles published with Russian disinformation in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo.

Below we list the ten most circulated pro-Kremlin narratives in the Albanian language media during the first eight months of 2022.

Graphic 2:

NO OF ARTICLES AND REPUBLICATIONS REGISTERED FOR MAIN PRO-KREMLIN NARRATIVES IN THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE MEDIA

Narrative	
Obfuscating atrocities against Ukrainian civilians committed by the Russian armed forces	
Recurring disinformation narrative justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine	
NATO/US are aggressive and a threat to Russia	
Deflecting responsibility for the growing global food crisis	
West is disrupting peace efforts in Ukraine	
Bioweapons and alleged secret bio laboratories in Ukraine	
Ukraine being taken over by neo-Nazis	
Poland's imperial ambitions	
Belligerent/Russophobe West trying to encircle Russia	
Loss of sovereignty of the EU or member states	

No. of articles

No. of republications

0   10   20   30   40   50   60   70

DIS
INFO
AL

www.disinfo.al

Obfuscating atrocities against Ukrainian civilians committed by the Russian armed forces

Lavrov: Filloi faza e re e operacionit special në Ukrainë, ne po prekim vetëm infrastrukturën ushtarake, jo civilët! S'duam të ndryshojmë regjimin e Kievit

Lajme

Mizoritë në Bucha janë "operacion special britanik", thotë Lukashenko

Rusia mohon sulmin në stacionin hekurudhor: Ukraina dëshiron të përdorë civilët si mburojë njerëzore

During the period January to August 2022, 13 articles were published in the Albanian language media, with a total of 50 republications under this narrative. The main aim of these articles appears to be an attempt to counter and deflect attention from the evidence published by Ukrainian authorities on crimes committed by Russian troops in the town of Bucha during the Kyiv offensive. A similar effort is made through the publication of stories that aim to deflect Russian responsibility for a missile strike on a shopping mall in the city of Kremenchuk that killed 21 people and injured 66 on June 27, 2022. Another story under the same narrative has tried to attribute responsibility for the missile attack on Ukrainian civilians in the city of Kramatorsk on April 11, 2022, to Ukrainian forces. Contrary to these pro-Kremlin media claims, the Kramatorsk railway station is believed to have been attacked by Russian forces, killing 57 civilians and injuring 115 others. Another article under this recurring narrative claimed that Ukrainian forces were preparing a false-flag operation in the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, while alleging that the crimes committed in the town of Bucha were a false flag operation by Ukrainian forces.

"Sanksionet dëmtojnë më shumë ato që i vendosin", Putin: SHBA përpiqet të izolojë shtetet e gabuara

17 Qershor, 2022 13:29

BOTA

Ambasadori rus në Britaninë e Madhe thotë se akuzat për krime lufte janë fabrikime

Lavrov: Perëndimi është përgjegjës për vdekjen e civilëve në Ukrainë

"Perëndimi duhet të kuptojë se është përgjegjës për vdekjet e civilëve, veçanërisht në rajonin e Donbasit dhe rajone të tjera të Ukrainës", tha ministri i Jashtëm rus, Lavrov

The researchers were able to identify eight articles, published 12 times in Albania, North Macedonia and Kosovo that contained this pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative. This narrative includes articles which actively attempt to legitimise Russia's military actions in Ukraine by claiming that the West and Ukraine are responsible for the war. The stories published under this disinformation narrative claim that Russia had no choice but to launch its so-called 'special military operation' because Ukraine and the West planned a military offensive against the Russian population living in the Donbas region. Two of the stories pushing the same narrative falsely claim that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was in accordance with the United Nations charter. On March 2, 2022, the UN General Assembly approved a resolution condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

NATO/US are aggressive and a threat to Russia

Rusia: Zgjerimi i NATO-s do të rrisë tensionet në Europë

NATO është një bllok agresiv, tha Kremlini

Lavrov paralajmëron NATO-n: Ndihma juaj në Ukrainë, rrezik për një luftë të tretë botërore

22:25 | 25/04/2022 në Bota

The third most circulated pro-Kremlin narrative in the Albanian language media during the first eight months of 2022 paints NATO and the United States as a threat to the Russian Federation in order to justify the invasion of Ukraine. This narrative describes NATO, which is a defensive alliance of democratic states, as an aggressive military block aimed at confronting Russia, slowly inching towards its borders since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Under this narrative the researchers were able to identify eight disinformation articles, which were republished 32 times in total by Albanian language media outlets.

Deflecting responsibility for the growing global food crisis

Rusia / Ukraina po paguan armët perëndimore me grurë

BOTA
Kriza globale, Rusia mohon gjithçka dhe akuzon ashpër Perëndimin: Po përpiqen të imponojnë...

Sanksionet ndaj Rusisë, Kremlini: Perëndimi shkaktoi krizën globale të ushqimit

Another pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative circulated during the first eight months of 2022, attempts to shift blame for the global food crises, arguing that it does not come as a consequence of Russia's blockade and invasion of Ukraine and the bombing of its infrastructure, but rather from populist economic policies in the West. Under this disinformation narrative eight disinformation articles were published in the first eight months of 2022, which registered a total of 42 republications in the Albanian language media in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia. These articles include the false claim that the West gave weapons to Ukraine in exchange for the export of food supplies, which aims to shift blame from Russia and the impact of its invasion on global food security.

The West is disrupting peace efforts in Ukraine

Lavrov: Perëndimi nuk e lejon Ukrainën të zhvillojë negociata me Rusinë

Kryediplomati rus tha se sanksionet ekonomike po e dëmtojnë Perëndimin më shumë se Rusinë

Bota

Lavrov: SHBA dhe Britania e Madhe duan ta shtyjnë Rusinë kundër Evropës

"NATO, me qëllime imperialiste", Putin: Operacioni në Ukrainë, sipas parashikimeve

Another false narrative that was spread by the Kremlin-funded media ecosystem and found space in Albanian language media outlets in the first eight months of 2022 was the false claim that Western countries were undermining efforts to make peace between Russia and Ukraine. Researchers were able to identify five disinformation articles with a total of 28 republications during the period January to August 2022. This is a recurring disinformation narrative from pro-Kremlin outlets claiming that the West is disrupting peace efforts in Ukraine and that its real aim is to spread its influence in the region to the detriment of Russian interests.

Bioweapons and alleged secret bio laboratories in Ukraine

"Hunter Biden lidhje me kompaninë Metabiota që dyshohet për biolaboratorët në Ukrainë – Daily Mail

Rusia akuzon SHBA dhe Ukrainën: Po bashkëpunojnë për armët kimike

Maria Zakharova: Gjermania e përfshirë në "aktivitetet bio–ushtarake" në Ukrainë

The presence of alleged US and German run or funded biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine is another favourite pro-Kremlin media disinformation narrative that aims to justify Vladimir Putin's decision to invade its neighbour. The researchers were able to identify four stories with a total of 15 republications during the period January to August 2022, which contained this disinformation narrative. The most circulated article linked Hunter Biden, the son of the US President Joe Biden, with the alleged biological weapons laboratories in Ukraine. This disinformation narrative aims to discredit and vilify the family of the US President. The United Nations has stated that there is no evidence of the presence of such biological weapons laboratories in the territory of Ukraine. Claims on alleged bioweapon laboratories in Ukraine have also been used to obfuscate crimes and human rights abuses by Russian forces.

Ukraine being taken over by neo-Nazis

Lajme
Rusia akuzon Francën për nxitje të neo-nazizmit

Lajme
Denazifikimi sipas Moskës: Do të zgjasë 25 vjet, punë e detyruar, të zhduket emri Ukrainë

Rusia akuza Izraelit për mbështetje të neo-nazistëve në Ukrainë

One of the most circulate pro-Kremlin narratives that the researchers were able to identify in the Albanian language media in the first eight months of 2022, which also aimed to justify the Russian invasion, is the false claim that Ukraine has a neo-Nazi leadership. The researchers were able to identify five disinformation articles and 28 republications in Albania media under this narrative. The most circulated false claim was linked to Russian claims that Tel Aviv is supporting a neo-Nazi regime in Kyiv. The false claim was reportedly circulated in an attempt to deflect attention away from another statement - made by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov - about Jews being the worst anti-Semites as part of his attacks against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. Another story under the same disinformation narrative claims that France is inciting Ukrainian nationalism and neo-Nazism. The false claim is used to justify the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Poland's imperial ambitions

Kreu i inteligjencës ruse: Polonia dhe SHBA do të pushtojnë Ukrainën perëndimore

Zëdhënësi i Kremlinit kritikon retorikën e Polonisë kundër Rusisë

Inteligjenca ruse: Ukraina ka rënë dakord të aneksohet nga Polonia

Another pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative that has circulated in Albania in the first eight months of 2022 centres on the false claim that Poland has imperial ambitions to annex western Ukraine. The researchers were able to identify four articles with a total of 13 republications during the period January to August 2022, which included this narrative. Casting Poland as a state that has imperial ambitions is a recurring narrative for Russian disinformation channels. The claim tries to exploit schism in Polish-Ukrainian history in order to revive the threat of disintegration for Ukraine.

Belligerent/Russophobe West trying to encircle Russia

Statusi kandidat për Ukrainën dhe Moldavinë, zëdhënësja ruse: Liderët e BE-së nuk mendojnë pasojat negative

Lavrov: Perëndimi i ka shpallur luftë totale botës ruse

Putin e Lavrov thonë se Perëndimi s'mund t'i bëjë gjë Rusisë (VIDEO)

Another highly circulated Russian disinformation narrative identified by the researchers in the Albanian language media is the claim that a belligerent West is trying to encircle Russia by expanding its influence on the former Soviet sphere. The researchers identified three disinformation articles published a total of 29 times under this pro-Kremlin narrative during the first eight months of 2022. These articles accuse western countries of Russophobia, which is a recurring disinformation narrative from pro-Kremlin outlets.

Loss of sovereignty of the EU or member states

Kreu i Dumës ruse: SHBA e ka dënuar Europën me uri, të ftohtë dhe izolim

"Asgjë nuk do jetë si më parë!"/ Tërbohet Vladimir Putin – 'kërcënon' Amerikën dhe Perëndimin

Putin: BE ka humbur plotësisht sovranitetin

Another narrative spread by the Kremlin media ecosystem, and circulated by the Albanian language media, is that the US controls the foreign policy of the EU and its member states. This is a recurring pro-Kremlin disinformation narrative, which likes to portray EU countries's decision to sanction Russia as simply following the orders of the United States. The researchers were able to identify two disinformation articles with 10 republications under this narrative for the first eight months of 2022 in the Albania language media in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

## 3.3 Russian disinformation on social media in Albanian

Apart from disinformation distributed by the pro-Kremlin media ecosystem, the researchers also analysed posts and messages of the Russian embassy in Tirana over the first eight months of 2022. During this period the Russian embassy made 322 posts on Facebook in Albanian, English and Russian. Roughly 76 per cent of these posts were photos accompanied by texts, followed by links and videos. Out of 322 posts, 303 contained text messages that were analysed by researchers for disinformation and categorised though previously identified recurring themes of Russian disinformation narratives.

Some 127 posts with disinformation narratives were identified by researchers.

Around 74 per cent of the posts with disinformation narratives came from statements made by Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova. The researchers were able to identify 15 different disinformation narratives in the posts of Russian institutions and officials posted on the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Albania. The most recurring narrative, present in 33 per cent of the posts of the Russian Embassy in Albania in the first eight months of 2022, was "obfuscating atrocities against Ukrainian civilians committed by the Russian armed forces in the war". The second most recurring narrative with 15 per cent of posts was aimed at painting "NATO or the United States as aggressive and a threat to Russia", while the third group with 13 per cent of pro-Kremlin messages was "recurring disinformation narrative justifying the Russian invasion of Ukraine" attempts to justify the invasion of Ukraine often on the pretence of a possible attack by Kyiv on the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk.

Graphic 3:
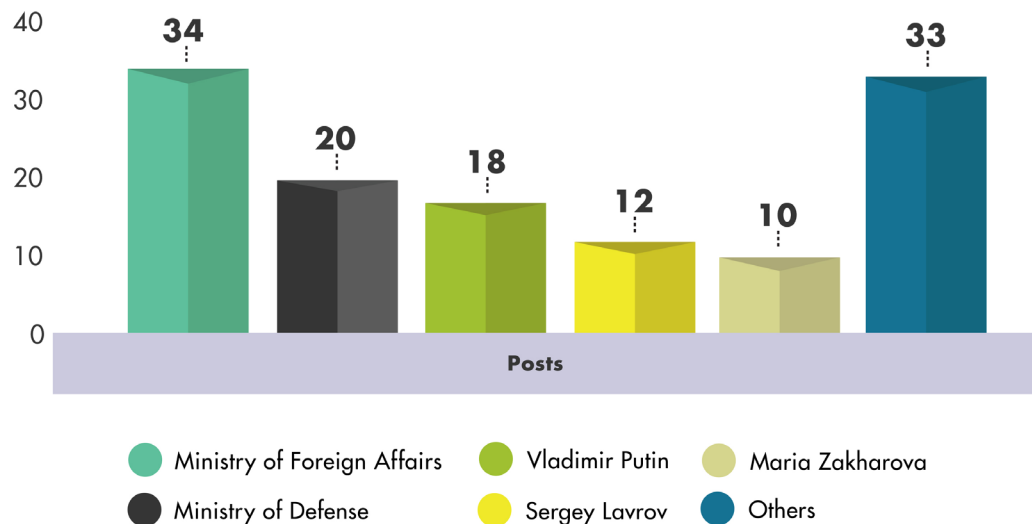
According to data from Crowdtangle, the 127 posts with disinformation narratives registered 11,409 interactions, which are defined as reactions, comments and shares on posts, photos and videos. Interactions are also known as engagement.[7] This high number of interactions suggests that these posts have reached a large number of Albanian speaking people who have seen or read them.

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[7] Crowdtangle, "Understanding and Citing CrowdTangle Data", (2022), Url: https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/articles/4558716-understanding-and-citing-crowdtangle-data, Accessed on 6.11.2022.

CASE STUDY: Albanian Mercenaries in Ukraine

In addition to the Russian disinformation identified in the EUvsDisnfo database by EU's Stratcom, this report also analysed a statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov about the presence of Albanian and Kosovo Albanian mercenaries in Ukraine. These claims were carried by local media outlets and constitute a pro-Kremlin narrative aimed at justifying the invasion of its neighbour. In an interview with RT television on February 18, 2022, Lavrov declared that Russian authorities were checking reports that mercenaries were being sent from Kosovo, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina to Donbas.[8]

"There is information that militants from Kosovo, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina are being recruited to knock Russia off balance, which includes sending them to Donbas [in eastern Ukraine]. We are working to verify it right now," Lavrov told RT.[9]

Lavrov's claim was made amid heightened tensions on the eve of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and was picked by many Albanian language media outlets. The researchers in this study were able to identify 112 stories in Albanian language media between February 18 and February 24, 2022, which made reference to the claim made by the Russian foreign minister. These articles were published in 69 Albanian language media outlets in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia.
While most of the stories simply cover Lavrov's statement to RT, some of the stories are follow-up reactions by the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Minister Olta Xhacka, former

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[8] TASS, "Russia checking reports about mercenaries for Donbass from Kosovo, Albania, B&H — Lavrov", (2022), Url: https://tass.com/world/1406183, Accessed on 07.01.2023.

[9] Russia Today, "NATO's campaign made European region 'a hotbed of crime' – Lavrov to RT", (2022), Url: https://www.rt.com/russia/549845-lavrov-nato-yugoslavia-kosovo/, Accessed on 07.01.2023.

Albanian Prime Minister Pandeli Majko or former Foreign Minister Paskal Milo. The 112 posts on Facebook from 69 media outlets referencing and countering Lavrov's statement registered a total of 2,318 interactions. Videos of news reports based on Lavrov's statement received tens of thousands of views on YouTube.

A similar allegation was made in June 2022, after the Russian Embassy in Tirana reposted a statement from the Russian Ministry of Defense on its Facebook page on the alleged number of foreign mercenaries fighting in Ukraine. The post included a table with data on the number of alleged mercenaries from different countries and the statement: "Russian Ministry of Defense publishes complete data on the number of foreign mercenaries fighting in Ukraine." The Russian MoD claimed that 150 mercenaries from Albania were present in Ukraine, of which 42 had already been killed.

The post from the Russian Embassy in Albania was picked up by 25 Albanian language media outlets. According to data from Crowdtangle in total on Facebook these articles registered 1,568 interactions. One of the posts was an article debunking the information posted by the Russian Embassy as false. It was published by

Embassy of Russia in Albania / Посольство России в Албании ✓
June 18, 2022 · 🌐

Ministria e Mbrojtjes e Rusisë ka publikuar statistikat e plota për mercenarët e huaj që luftojnë në Ukrainë

Lexoni versionin e plotë të dokumentit: https://eng.mil.ru/.../Number%20of%20foreign...

NUMBER OF FOREIGN MERCENARIES IN UKRAINE

Country	Arrived since 24.02.22	Eliminated	Departed	Total on 17.06.22
Europe				
Poland	1831	378	272	1181
Romania	504	102	98	304
United Kingdom	422	101	95	226
Croatia	204	74	51	79
Belarus	197	69	59	69
France	183	59	45	79
Bosnia and Herzegovina	167	51	46	70
Estonia	164	55	49	60
Kosovo	156	61	60	35
Albania	150	42	40	68
Lithuania	130	50	44	36
Portugal	103	19	16	68

the local fact-checking service Faktoje[10]. The fact-checking service quotes in the story the Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which says: "There is no evidence of Albanian citizens fighting as mercenaries in the war in Ukraine."

CASE STUDY: Javelin missiles and Albanian licence plates

VIDEO/ Raketat "Javelin" bien në duar të shqiptarëve, shiten në tregun e zi

21:20 : 13/07/2022   në AKTUALITET, BOTA, KRONIKE

Another case of Russian disinformation directly targeting Albania involved the publication of a video purporting to show the alleged trafficking of Javelin anti-tank missiles from Ukraine into the Balkan illegal arms market. The video was first shared on July 13, 2022, by a Twitter account called AZmilitary1 and claimed to be a video recording of the sale of several weapons provided to Ukraine by NATO. The 85-second clip shows a Volkswagen with Albania number plates, two men shaking hands and the boot of the car with missile cases. [11]

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[10] Faktoje, "Debunking/ 42 nga 150 mercenarë shqiptarë janë vrarë në Ukrainë Institucionet zyrtare: Deklarata është e pavërtetë", (2022), Url: https://faktoje.al/debunking-42-nga-150-mercenare-shqiptare-jane-vrare-ne-ukraine-institucionet-zyrtare-deklarata-eshte-e-pavertete/, Accessed on 07.01.2023.

[11] Newsweek, "Misleading Posts Peddle Russia's Ukraine Weapons 'Smuggling' Propaganda," (2022), "https://www.newsweek.com/misleading-posts-russia-ukraine-weapons-smuggling-propaganda-newsweek-fact-check-1725107, Accessed on 07.01.2023.

According to the US magazine Newsweek, the video appears to be fake because it was posted by an unverified Twitter account, with no geolocation tags, timestamps or any other details that could bolster its credibility. Although the Twitter account appears to be anonymous, it is followed by a number of pro-Kremlin propaganda accounts. Also the alleged Albanian licence plate that appears in the video (AA851EE), according to the Albania licence plate database belongs to a Mercedes Benz.[12]

However, before it was debunked, the video circulated among some Albanian language publications, with a headline alleging the trafficking of Javelin missiles.[13]

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[12] Faktor.al "Si depërtoi Rusia ne mediat shqiptare me një video fakenews!" (How Russian penetrated Albanian media with a fake video), (2022), "https://www.faktor.al/2022/07/15/si-depertoi-rusia-ne-mediat-shqiptare-me-nje-video-fakenews/, Accessed on 07.01.2023.

[13] Newsbomb.al, "Raketa JAVELIN në tregun e zi, makina me TARGA SHQIPTARE bën "trafik armësh" në UKRAINË (VIDEO)" Uel: https://newsbomb.al/raketa-javelin-ne-tregun-e-zi-makina-me-targa-shqiptare-ben-trafik-armesh-ne-ukraine-video/, Accessed on 07.01.2023.

IV. Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the fact that state-sponsored Russian media outlets do not publish stories in Albanian language, the research data show that pro-Kremlin narratives, particularly on the invasion of Ukraine, have circulated in Albanian language media outlets during 2022. Nearly one in four stories debunked by EUvsDisinfo from January until August 2022 were circulated by Albanian language media in Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia. Such percentage of identified fake or distorted Russian narratives published in Albanian language media is quite high when taking into account that the EUvsDisinfo database includes data from media monitoring services in 15 languages, but does not include the Albanian language. The high circulation of Russian narratives during this period in Albanian language media coincides with the Russian invasion in Ukraine, a topic that has received significant amounts of coverage in local outlets.

The findings of this research have shown that the 86 disinformation articles that have circulated in Albanian language media have been widely republished, by registering a total 377 articles and videos that contained Russian disinformation. These articles have been published by 156 media outlets, with the majority of them based in Albania and the others in Kosovo and North Macedonia. This data suggests that there is no clear ideological influence in spreading Russian disinformation, from a small group of media outlets that are part of a covert influence operation. It is more likely that pro-Kremlin narratives filter through to local media outlets from the Russian media ecosystem or republications in other foreign media outlets. One concern is related to the number of stories (19) published by the state-sponsored Iranian and Turkish news agencies with Albanian language websites, which suggests that they are amplifying some Russian disinformation narratives.

Although Albania might not always be a direct target of Russian disinformation, pro-Kremlin narratives have circulated in local media outlets at a higher rate than previously reported, which suggest that that local information environment is not immune.

Based on the findings, below are listed some recommendations for future actions required in the fight toward disinformation in the Albanian language media:

• Media outlets, editors, journalists, researchers and fact-checkers should strengthen their knowledge and capacities to identify recurring pro-Kremlin narratives, which are circulated by its state-sponsored media ecosystem or statements made by Russian institutions and officials through social media platforms.
• The media should raise awareness of the threat of recurring narratives of Russian disinformation in Albania.
• Media outlets and fact-checkers should do more to debunk Russian disinformation narratives circulating in the Albanian language media outlets.
• There is a need to train journalists, editors and fact-checkers to identify recurring Russian information narratives, in order to weed out fake news before publications or provide the necessary context for statements from Russian officials that are not true.

RUSSIAN STATE-SPONSORED DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES
IN ALBANIA

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