A Balkan Free Media Initiative Report

Social Media and the Information War in the Balkans

March 2022

Foreword

Why should anyone care about what is happening on social media in the Balkans?

That is the question that permeates this insightful new report from the Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI). At a time when the whole world is struggling with questions about how to confront the proliferation of disinformation, hate speech, and other types of pollution of the global information space, why would we look at a small region on the periphery of Europe that could hardly claim to have much influence on the rest of the world? After all, the entire gross domestic product of Serbia, the second-most populous country in the Balkans after Romania, added up to $53 billion in 2021, less than half of the $118 billion in revenues that year of one social media company, Meta, owner of Facebook.

But by taking a deep dive into the social media landscape of Serbia and the Republika Srpska region of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), this report makes an important contribution to understanding a complex global problem. It is only by delving into the political economies of some of the regions most affected by disinformation and other forms of destabilizing information that we may develop an approach that can begin to turn the tide.

As this report goes to press, Russian propaganda is continuing to circulate globally on social media as part of an effort to justify Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. The need to spell out how this propaganda machine is working, and what countries are most vulnerable to it, could hardly be more urgent. And with elections this year in both Serbia and BiH, social media is one of the few avenues available to democratic opponents to counter the dominance of pro-government media.

Indeed, the lessons that emerge from a country-level examination of how social media operates yield several important insights.

For local news media, civil society organizations, and reform-minded politicians: understanding how social media is being used and manipulated is fundamental to developing a healthier information ecosystem. All countries need public support for a media system that ensures freedom of information but also incentivizes accuracy, balance, fairness, and democratic accountability. Without public demand for and awareness of such norms and standards, any

hopes for developing a media system that serves public interests will always fall victim to the ambitions of the rich and powerful.

At the same time, social media has become one of the main ways that people get news and share important information, and any solution to the disinformation problem will have to recognize this critical role. The explosive growth of social media over the past decade, with more than half of all global digital advertising moving to Facebook and Google, has created a thorny paradox for news producers and journalists: they have lost their traditional advertising revenue source to the very companies that now increasingly give them access to their audiences.

For donors and policymakers: studies such as this one provide important context for international donor efforts to support the development of a healthy media environment. Many of the social media policy reforms that have been implemented or are being considered by the United States, the European Union, or other large players have barely considered the issues that arise in small markets like those in the Balkan region. And local stakeholders from civil society or media organizations rarely have a seat at the table when such policies are being designed or considered. This report brings some of those local demands to light.

For the social media companies and their shareholders: more public scrutiny of how social media are being used and abused is already creating pressure for reforms in their business practices. Insufficient transparency in the operational practices of companies like Facebook means that the public has little knowledge of just how the underlying algorithms are favoring certain kinds of content over others. Are the shareholders of companies like Facebook and Twitter satisfied with the deleterious effects their products are having on global peace, security, and stability? Are they prepared to shoulder the blame for eroding global democracy and human rights? Are these companies willing to come up with a viable alternative for news producers to produce enough income to survive? Currently a glaring and uncomfortable spotlight is shining on these companies, particularly in the US and EU. In smaller countries, the impacts are much less well known or understood. Shareholders and company managers should be confronted with the hard truths that emerge from reports like this one, which show clearly just how much damage is being wrought.

To be sure, the social media companies are making efforts to remove false, misleading, and inflammatory content. The companies have also instituted several review processes to address the problems on their platforms. I serve as an independent member of an advisory group that Facebook set up to develop policies to identify and make

more transparent content produced by state actors and their cronies. But it will likely take more fundamental changes in the business model for those efforts to be truly effective. Such reforms will likely require robust regulation in the US, the EU, and other parts of the world. This report outlines how important it is that these regulatory efforts consider the needs of smaller, developing, and middle-income countries where local and foreign disinformation and misinformation is circulating at unprecedented volumes.

Fundamentally, all countries need a news media system that serves public interests. Like other diseases, disinformation, propaganda and hate speech are unlikely to be eliminated. But in countries where these problems are understood, and brought into public debate, we can at least have a chance to curb the excesses of such information pollution. This report, by looking at what is happening in one small corner of the world, makes some important conclusions about what needs to be done.

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Executive Summary

While social media platforms have improved access to information, the negative consequences of their misuse are growing. As Europe experiences its most serious crisis since the end of the Second World War in the form of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the role of these platforms in the wider information war can no longer be ignored. This is especially important in the Balkans, a region where Russian influence is keenly felt.

This report examines the destabilizing effects of social media in two key places in the Balkans: Serbia and Republika Srpska, the autonomous Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). The leaders of both – President Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and President Milorad Dodik in Republika Srpska – are key allies of Vladimir Putin in Europe. Social media has been weaponized by their ruling parties to consolidate political power. This is exacerbated by the control exercised over traditional forms of media such as television, radio and print. Rather than offering a space where political debate and the freedom of the press can thrive, social media platforms have in large part become a tool for advancing pro-government narratives and attacking critical voices. Understanding the role of social media in the declining information environment is of particular importance at this time, as both Serbia and BiH will hold elections in 2022.

Our report identifies three key issues related to the manipulation of social media:

1. Disinformation

- Pro-government, pro-Russian and pro-Serbian disinformation is spreading much faster than independent fact-checkers in the region can document. This is stoking division and is reflected in anti-European and NATO sentiment, leading to growing security concerns for the region.

2. Ineffective labeling and regulating of content

- More robust labeling of state-linked media is needed to allow users to make informed decisions about the content they consume on social media platforms. Existing labels are too narrow in scope, use non-

transparent methodologies and do little to support credible media outlets.

3. Attacks on journalists and hate speech

- Social media platforms are increasingly being used to threaten and intimidate independent journalists. In some cases, public comments made by senior political figures have led to attacks via social media from government supporters.

Social media companies and lawmakers must take preventative action to protect the information environment and combat disruptive forces abusing their platforms to destabilize the Balkans, a region where press freedoms and democratic processes are already under strain. Our recommendations for social media companies are as follows:

1. Expand existing policies for labeling state-controlled or state-affiliated outlets on Facebook and other major platforms
2. Introduce greater sanctions for outlets found to repeatedly violate content policies and publish disinformation
3. Expand the presence of social media companies in the Balkans
4. Escalate efforts to identify and remove troll and bot accounts
5. Develop algorithms that promote media outlets with high journalistic and ethical standards
6. Strengthen capacity to deal with information crises should the security situation deteriorate further in the Western Balkans

For real change to occur, civil society, commercial partners and the EU must do more to make it harder for political actors to manipulate social media platforms. Further recommendations for these parties include:

7. Strengthen internet regulation
8. Consider banning harmful media outlets originating from the Western Balkans that are spreading disinformation
9. Ensure any EU sanctions on political figures target media assets In candidate and associated countries
10. Refuse financial assistance unless clear media reforms are I mplemented
11. Provide greater financial support for programs promoting media and digital literacy

The consequences of failing to act quickly and decisively in response to this growing information crisis should not be minimized. The issues that have been identified cannot be isolated from the democratic erosion occurring in Serbia and Republika Srpska, nor from their growing ties to Russia. For too long, tech companies and lawmakers have been passive when it comes to regulating social

media platforms. There can now be no doubt that this is compromising the information environment in the Western Balkans and could even contribute to the decline of the security situation in the region. However, the response from social media companies to the invasion of Ukraine exemplifies the ways in which they can intervene to label, limit and block disinformation and other harmful forms of content. Similarly proactive steps must now be taken in the Western Balkans. Without action, we risk delivering a significant blow to stability and democracy in the Western Balkans, in Europe, and beyond.

Introduction

The introduction of social media and wider digitalization of societies globally has improved the free flow of information. In countries where governments hold control over the mainstream media, social media platforms were largely celebrated as an alternative resource for independent journalists and others to inform the general population and hold those in power to account. For many countries these platforms are the last remaining lifeline for independent media and independent voices. Yet over time they have also become a means to disseminate false or harmful content, undermining social cohesion and the democratic process.

Social media platforms are increasingly being exploited by governments and other political actors to spread propaganda, misinformation and disinformation. This is designed to undermine critical coverage, intimidate journalists and stoke nationalism and division in society. The Oxford Internet Institute found that social media manipulation by political actors is now an industrial scale problem prevalent in over 80 countries.[1] The 2022 Democracy Report from the Swedish research group V-Dem Institute highlighted that "Governments have continuously expanded their use of digital and social media to spread false information at home since 2000."[2] A further study of 16 countries, including Serbia, by the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) found that manipulation of digital technologies is an important factor in the pattern of democratic stagnation and decline which remains "inextricably linked to the simultaneous erosion of press freedom and independence witnessed over the past decade."[3]

One region experiencing democratic stagnation is the Western Balkans. It is an area where both influence from the EU and the democratic values it represents are being contested by numerous forces, including Russia's efforts to establish allies in a largely hostile continent. This report examines the major problems caused by social media in two areas of particular concern: Serbia and Republika

1 Oxford Internet Institute (2021),' Social media manipulation by political actors now an industrial scale problem prevalent in over 80 countries – annual Oxford report', 13 Jan. 2021, https://bit.ly/3tLqmLp (accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
2 Boese, A., Alizada, N., Lundstedt, M., Morrison, K., Natsika, N., Sato, Y., Tai, H., Lindberg, S.I. (2022), 'Autocratization Changing Nature? Democracy Report 2022', Varieties of Democracy Institute, Mar. 2020, p.35.
3 Musgrave, K. (2021), 'Tipping Point: Democratic Erosion and the Assault on Press Freedom', Center for International Media Assistance, Oct. 2021, p.1.

Srpska, the largely autonomous Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). While many of the issues caused by social media affect BiH as a whole, this report focuses on Republika Srpska (and not the second largely autonomous entity, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina) in order to trace the convergent issues across Serbia and Republika Srpska, such as rising Serbian nationalism and Russian influence, which pose a threat to democracy and stability in the Western Balkan region.

V-Dem Institute recently ranked Serbia as the fifth most "autocratizing" country in the world.[4] A report from the Slovakia-based think tank GLOBSEC, found that Serbia is the country in this region most vulnerable to foreign malign influence, particularly from Russia and China.[5] After Belarus, Serbia is now arguably Russia's closest ally in Europe. The leadership of both Serbia and Republika Srpska stood out in Europe for refusing to condemn Putin's invasion of Ukraine. They have also clamped down on the free press and appear willing to undermine democracy. In this context, it is unsurprising that social media platforms, and especially Facebook, have become tools to foster anti-democratic political movements in the Balkans, as in Russia.

The first chapter examines three key issues related to the manipulation of social media in Serbia and Republika Srpska:

1. Disinformation
2. Ineffective labeling and regulating of content
3. Attacks on journalists and hate speech

The second chapter presents recommendations for social media companies and policy makers to prevent these platforms being used to undermine the information environment at an important political moment for the Balkans.

In Serbia, the deterioration of media freedom has accelerated under the current leadership. President Aleksandar Vučić has been a dominant force in Serbian politics since 2012 when he became leader of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). He served two terms as Prime Minister between 2014 and 2017 before ascending to the presidency in May 2017. This year on April 3 presidential and parliamentary

4 Alizada, N., Cole, R., Gastaldi, L., Grahn, S., Hellmeier, S., Kolvani, P., Lachapelle, J., Lührmann, A., Maerz, S.F., Pillai, S., Lindberg, S.I. (2021), 'Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021', Varieties of Democracy Institute, Mar 2022, p.19.

5 Hajdu, D., Klingová, K., Sawiris, M. (2021), "Global Vulnerability Index 2021: Analyzing the vulnerabilities of eight Central European and Western Balkan countries towards foreign malign influence", GLOBSEC, November 2021.

elections afford Vučić another opportunity to strengthen his grip on Serbia.

Vučić was the Minister for Information under President Slobodan Milošević (1998-2000) and has a sophisticated understanding of how to manipulate the media for political purposes. Since Vučić first came to power in 2014, Serbia has fallen from 54/180 to 93/180 in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) World Press Freedom Index.[6] It has also transformed, according to the V-Dem Institute, from an electoral democracy to an electoral autocracy "after continued assaults on the judiciary and restrictions on the media and civil society."[7] As covered in BFMI's previous report, published in October 2021, there is also growing evidence of state entities such as Telekom Srbija being used strategically to strengthen government control over the commercial media market.[8] In short, the dominance of Serbia's current ruling party has been made possible by a clear and concerted effort to attack press freedoms and undermine the information environment.

Social media platforms are no different. Serbia suffers from major issues created by state authorities in Russia, such as pro-government bots and trolls, as well as state-affiliated media outlets publishing disinformation. Some of these problems are well-documented; for example, Twitter deleted almost 9,000 accounts promoting Serbia's ruling Progressive Party and Vučić in 2020.[9]

BiH suffers from many of the same problems. Attacks on journalists from political figures and their allies are commonplace. In addition, the media market is dominated by owners with political ties, influencing coverage and encouraging censorship, but also fostering unprofessional and divisive rhetoric in the mainstream media. In the 2021 RSF World Press Freedom Index, BiH was described as having a political climate marked by constant verbal attacks and nationalist rhetoric, resulting in a hostile environment for press freedom.[10] This has poisoned public discourse, encouraged ethnic division and polarization, and set the stage for Milorad Dodik – president of Republika Srpska between 2010 and 2018 and again from 2020 until the present day – to pursue separatist ambitions leading to the worst

6 Reporters Without Borders (2022), 'World Press Freedom Index: Serbia', https://rsf.org/en/serbia (accessed 23 Mar. 2022)
7 Alizada, N., Cole, R., Gastaldi, L., Grahn, S., Hellmeier, S., Kolvani, P., Lachapelle, J., Lührmann, A., Maerz, S.F., Pillai, S., Lindberg, S.I. (2021), 'Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021', Varieties of Democracy Institute, Mar 2022, p.19.
8 Balkan Free Media Initiative (2021), 'The Invisible Hand of Media Censorship in the Balkans', Oct. 2021.
9 Stojanovic, M. (2020), 'Twitter Axes Thousands of Accounts 'Promoting Serbia's Ruling Party', BIRN Investigative Resource Desk, 02 Apr. 2020, https://bit.ly/3JQVqiu (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
10 Reporters Without Borders (2021), 'World Press Freedom Index: Bosnia-Herzegovina', https://rsf.org/en/bosnia-herzegovina (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

political crisis in BiH since the US-brokered Dayton Peace Agreement of 1995.

Pro-Serb propaganda and genocide denial are commonplace in public discourse in Republika Srpska. The issue has become so widespread that in July 2021 Valentin Inzko, the outgoing head of Bosnia's Office of the High Representative, introduced an amendment to the country's criminal code outlawing genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals. This established prison sentences of up to five years for anyone who "publicly condones, denies, grossly trivialises or tries to justify" the genocide or war crimes committed during the country's 1992-1995 international armed conflict. Dodik's response is illustrative: "Republika Srpska rejects this, genocide did not happen, Serbs must never accept this."[11] Dodik's position directly refutes the findings of the International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice, both of which ruled that the systemic murder of over 8,000 Bosniaks in Srebrenica in 1995 was an act of genocide.[12]

Social media platforms are a natural home for disinformation and polarizing rhetoric, and are being exploited by Dodik to disrupt the political union in BiH.[13] As a result, there are growing concerns that the country may fall back into conflict. The threat posed by social media in this crisis was exemplified when the United States Treasury sanctioned Alternativna Televizija d.o.o. Banja Luka (ATV), a media outlet closely linked to Dodik. One of the explicit justifications for the decision was that Dodik had "engaged in malign social media influence campaigns through ATV to publish content that advances his political and personal goals."[14]

Serbia and BiH are at a crossroads. On the one hand, both profess to have ambitions to join the European Union. Yet Vučić and Dodik represent some of the clearest examples of leaders attracted by closer ties with Russia and China. At present, efforts for reform and EU integration are slow or non-existent. The latest European Commission progress report for the Western Balkans, which records the annual progress of Serbia and BiH towards becoming EU members, found that issues related to the rule of law, corruption, and

11 Al Jazeera (2021), 'Bosnia's peace envoy imposes ban on genocide denial', 23 Jul. 2021, https://bit.ly/3wJ1C8l (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
12 ICTY (2022), "UN International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia", https://www.icty.org/en/about (Accessed 23 Mar. 2022).
13 Latal, S. (2022), "US Targets 'Corrupt, Destabilising' Bosnian Politicians, TV Station', Balkan Insight Research Network, 05 Jan. 2022, https://bit.ly/3qEvyyM (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
14 U.S. Department of the Treasury (2022), 'Treasury Sanctions Milorad Dodik and Associated Media Platform for Destabilizing and Corrupt Activity', 05 Jan. 2022, https://bit.ly/36QKYJ2 (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

stifling of media freedoms are still present.[15] In both countries, the lack of progress on reforms was so minimal that the report concluded that its recommendations from last year still need to be implemented and therefore "remain valid."[16] [17]

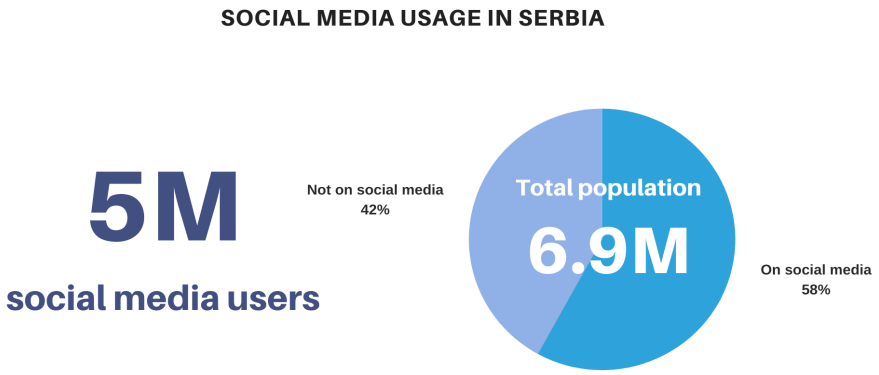
At the same time, both Vučić and Dodik publicly deride the European Union and actively pursue closer ties with Russia. State institutions are being undermined, as is the fragile peace and unity in BiH. The risks this could pose to wider stability and democracy in Europe have been made more urgent with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Serbia was the only country in Europe not to fully condemn the invasion and sanction Russia.[18] While the West boycotted Russian companies, Serbia offered its support to Russia; for example, Air Serbia, which is majority state-owned, doubled the number of flights between Belgrade and Moscow in early March, allowing Russians to flee to Europe and circumnavigate an EU-wide ban on flights to and from Russia.[19] Similarly, Dodik attempted to block BiH from condemning the war in Ukraine[20] and applying sanctions on Russia.[21]

It seems that the leadership of both Serbia and Republika Srpska are not only borrowing mechanisms for manipulating the information environment from Russia but are also open to Russian influence. Until now, the major social media companies have in the main taken a global approach to the problems caused by their platforms and been passive when it comes to the Balkans. One possible explanation is the relatively small portion of the global social media market that the Balkans represents. However, while the market may be small, its importance to regional stability should not be underestimated. With Serbian elections in April and Bosnian elections planned for October, it is crucial that policy makers and social media companies act now to mitigate these problems and by extension support the ability for citizens in the Balkans to engage in meaningful democratic elections.

15 European Union: European Commission (2021), '2021 Enlargement package: European Commission assesses and sets out reform priorities for the Western Balkans and Turkey', 19 Oct. 2021, https://bit.ly/3DgdkbX (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
16 European Union: European Commission (2021), Commission Staff Working Document 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy: 'Serbia 2021 Report', 19 Oct. 2021, p.13
17 European Union: European Commission (2021), Commission Staff Working Document 2021 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy: 'Bosnia and Herzegovina 2021 Report 2021 Report', 19 Oct. 2021, p.11.
18 Popović, S. (2022), 'Serbia's UN vote against Russia's invasion of Ukraine decrypted', EURACTIV, 03 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3tJOm1b (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
19 Neate, R., Topham, G. (2022), 'Russians using Serbian loophole to avoid EU flights ban', The Guardian, 11 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3tLfDk5 (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
20 Reuters (2022), "Bosnia's pro-Russian Serb leader tried to stop country's UN vote -report", 03 Mar. 2022, https://reut.rs/3Lj6SDN Accessed 22 Mar. 2022).
21 Trkanjec, Z. (2022), 'Dodik ready to block BiH's decision to join EU's Russia sanctions', EURACTIV, 01 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3IZmQBz (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

Diagnosing The Issues

Prior to examining the major issues that arise in the realm of social media, it is necessary to set out how important social media has become as a form of communication and information exchange in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.



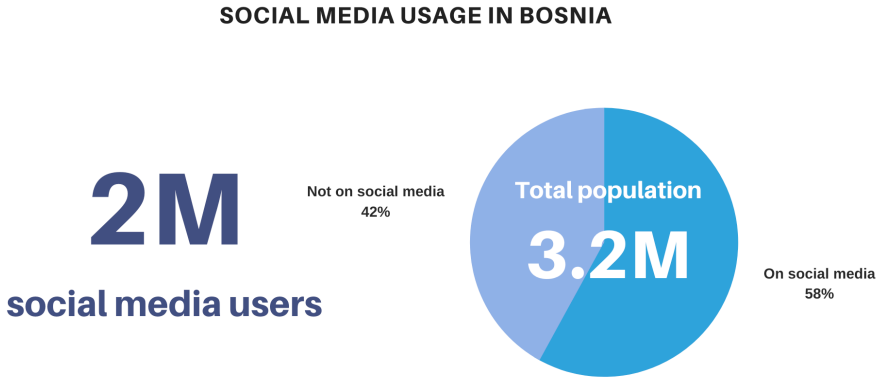
In both countries, Facebook is by far the dominant social media platform and is therefore the main focus of this report. Twitter is also analyzed due to its importance for journalists and the sharing of news.

There were approximately five million social media users in Serbia in January 2022, roughly 58% of the total population. Facebook had approximately 4.8 million users – meaning 95% of all social media users are on Facebook.[22] Twitter had approximately 402,800 users in January 2022.[23]

According to research from the Center for Media and Media Research at the University of Belgrade, social media platforms are the main source of news for 32% of all internet users. This is closely comparable with traditional media (35%) and television (30%).[24] The same study

22 StatCounter, 'Social Media Stats in Serbia - February 2022',https://bit.ly/3886Z6R (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
23 Kemp, S. (2022), 'Digital 2022: Serbia', DataReportal, 15 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3LleZj3 (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
24 Centar za medije i medijska Istraživanja [Centre for Media and Media Research] (2020), 'Informisanje u digitalnom okruženju u Srbiji' [Information in the digital environment in Serbia], 2020, https://bit.ly/3qHdTWS (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

found that Facebook is the main source of news for 77% of those who access news online.[25]



In BiH, there were approximately two million social media users in January 2022, equivalent to 63% of the total population.[26] As of November 2021, Facebook has 2,021,800 registered users in BiH – meaning 97.5% of all social media users are on Facebook.[27] Twitter had approximately 113,600 users in early 2022.[28]

According to an IPSOS poll conducted in March 2021, television remains the most used news source in BiH. Almost three-quarters of the 1003 respondents claimed to watch television daily to receive news. However, 50% of respondents used social networks daily to access news, compared to just a third who used other online media to obtain information.[29]

In both countries, Facebook usage is most prevalent among young adults, with around 50% of all users aged between 18-34.[30][31] With internet and social media users increasing in both countries year-on-year, social media's importance as a news source will only grow. Given the relatively young demographic of its users, and the crucial role

25 Ibid.
26 Kemp, S. (2022), 'Digital 2022: Bosnia and Herzegovina, DataReportal, 15 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3JMNBtT (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
27 StatCounter, 'Social Media Stats in Bosnia and Herzegovina - February 2022', https://bit.ly/38885Q1 (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
28 Kemp, S. (2022), 'Digital 2022: Bosnia and Herzegovina, DataReportal, 15 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3uBHL8w (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
29 Hrvatin, S.B., Hodžić, S., Petković, B. (2021) 'Media Trust in the Western Balkans: Together Apart', Resilience: For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation, Jun. 2021, p.65.
30 NapoleonCat (2022), 'Facebook users in Serbia', Jan. 2022, https://bit.ly/3wJkUdD (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
31 NapoleonCat (2022), 'Facebook users in Bosnia and Herzegovina', Jan. 2022, https://bit.ly/3iGcUlp (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

social media platforms play for independent media and civil society, there is huge potential for social media to contribute to the democratic process. However, for this contribution to have a positive impact on the information environment in the Balkans, it is crucial that the three major issues detailed below are addressed.

1. Disinformation

The spread of disinformation is a tool for authoritarian governments and leaders to deepen divisions, sow mistrust and malign their opposition, with the aim of accessing or consolidating their grip on power. Disinformation is defined by the European Commission as "verifiably false or misleading information created, presented and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public" and it is in this sense the term is used in this report.[32] Disinformation is distinct from misinformation, which is the act of sharing disinformation without an intent to harm.

The liberalization of the information economy through social media has provided an opportunity for disinformation to take new forms and to spread at an unprecedented rate. As the use of social media and online news platforms has increased, so too have politically motivated disinformation campaigns. In Serbia and Republika Srpska specifically, three significant and concerning forms of disinformation are:

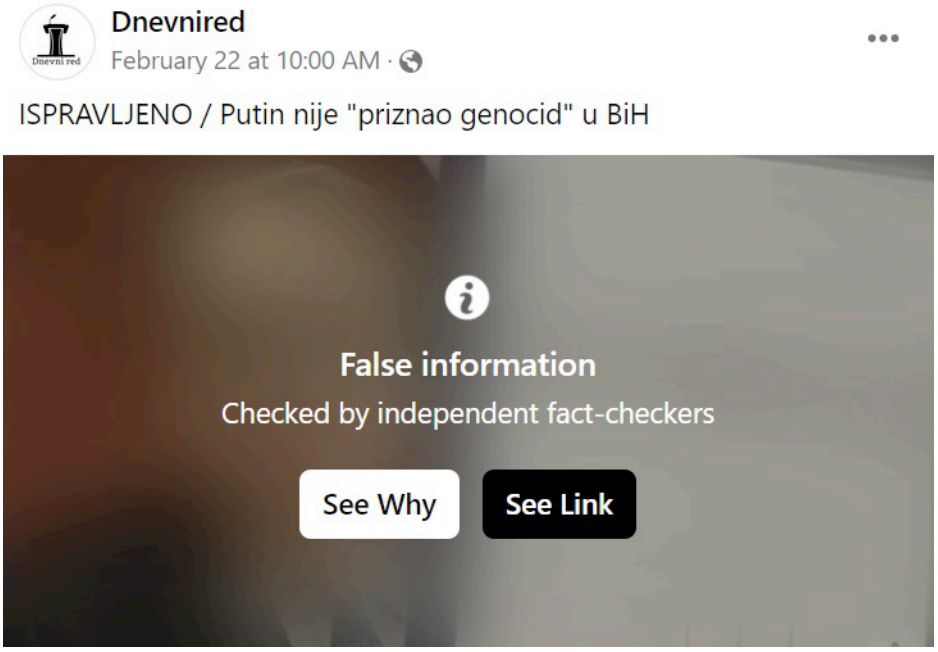
1. Pro-government disinformation
2. Pro-Russian disinformation
3. Pro-Serbian disinformation

Disinformation in the Western Balkans is spreading much faster than independent fact-checkers in the region can document. Often the disinformation originates in a false or misleading statement made by a political figure, which is then reported upon by state-affiliated media. These articles are subsequently shared on social media, especially via Facebook, allowing the disinformation to spread further.

Istinomer is the fact-checking initiative of the Center for Research Transparency and Accountability (CRTA), based in Serbia, with around 10 journalists focused on evaluating claims by politicians and information posted on social media. In July 2020, Istinomer began a partnership with Facebook identifying key disinformation narratives or themes and flagging thousands of posts. Yet Jovana Prešić, Project Coordinator at the CRTA, concedes that it is impossible for the operation to keep up with the pace at which disinformation spreads, telling BFMI that "the problem is getting worse all the time."

32 European Union: European Commission (2020), 'Tackling online disinformation', May 2020, https://bit.ly/3IPP0i2 (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

The sentiment is shared by Darko Brkan, President of Zašto Ne, Facebook's partner in Bosnia and Herzegovina in its third-party fact-checking programme. As with CRTA, Zašto Ne flags problematic content to Facebook and produces fact-checking reports detailing why the information is false or misleading. The post in question is then flagged and a link to the fact-check report is added. Posts are not removed if they are found to contain disinformation by third-party fact-checkers; however, the reach of flagged posts is limited. Brkan told BFMI the main types of disinformation are (I) conspiracy theories related to the Covid-19 pandemic, (II) pro-Serb nationalism, (III) pro-Russia and anti-West content, and (IV) undermining of marginalized groups.



[The above image depicts an example of the content warning Facebook attaches to posts flagged by its 3rd-party partners]

Zašto Ne started flagging posts on Facebook in October 2020 and flags between 500-700 per month from both individuals and media outlets. For Brkan, insufficient resources are available for journalists and editors to effectively combat the spread of disinformation, especially given Facebook's popularity in the region.

Both CRTA and Zašto Ne raised another problem: outlets found to repeatedly post disinformation do not receive adequate sanctions. (See Recommendation Two in the next section for the relevant suggested action.) This speaks to a larger issue – the fact that disinformation is arguably a design feature of social media platforms themselves. Experts from the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School have argued that the

algorithms that run social media platforms are "designed to encourage debate on controversial issues, even though that often means flat-out false information takes center stage as people who disagree or agree with it flock to engage."[33] Furthermore, the same experts highlight that taking steps to thoroughly eradicate disinformation can create "unfavorable political conditions that will ultimately affect profits" in some of the countries where tech companies operate.[34]

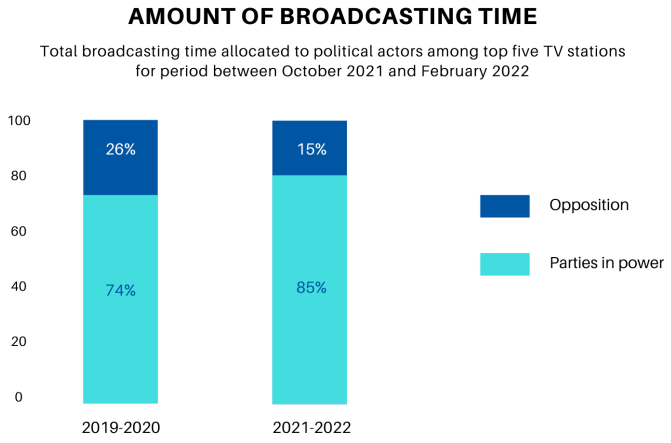
Pro-government disinformation

In Serbia and Republika Srpska, pro-government disinformation is used by state actors to manipulate public opinion and distort information about their own activities and those of their opponents. This is seen through false claims made about government successes and activities, denial of legitimate criticisms, and attacks on opposition politicians. Given the dominance of pro-government media, such narratives are easily disseminated through social media.

Since Vučić was first elected Prime Minister in 2014, there has been a consolidation of the media whereby pro-government narratives dominate the mainstream, while opposition voices are heavily censored. This trend has only accelerated in the run up to the 2022 elections. In its report for the period between October 2021 and February 2022, CRTA's Observation Mission found that state-backed media were used "as a continuous channel for creating an advantage for the ruling majority through the promotion of their work and positions and confrontations with political opponents, civil society and independent media."[35] According to CRTA's data, 85% of the total broadcasting time for political actors among the top five TV stations, including the state broadcaster RTS, was allocated to members of the ruling parties – a deterioration from the period in the run-up to the 2020 elections, when the opposition were assigned 26% of coverage.[36] Much of the attention has focused on developing a cult of personality for President Vučić who received 40% of the total coverage assigned to politicians.[37] There was also a noticeable trend of interrupting regular schedules to show live broadcasts of Vučić's campaign speeches, practically on a daily basis. On the leading

33 Glaser, A., Donovan. J., Ruddock, J. (2022), 'How Silicon Valley's Russia crackdown proves its power – and its threat', The Guardian, 12 Mar. 2022,https://bit.ly/36v0OJJ_ (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
34 Ibid.
35 CRTA (2022), 'Elections 2022 Campaign before the Campaign: CRTA Observation Mission Report on the Period Leading up to the 2022 Elections', Feb. 2022, p.2.
36 Ibid. p.4.
37 Ibid. p.5.

commercial station, TV Pink, the broadcasting schedule was interrupted 356 times over the past 13 months.[38]



This stranglehold over the public broadcasting and general media sector has allowed pro-government disinformation to find further reach on social media platforms. For Jovana Prešić, project coordinator at the CRTA, "in our experience, the government in Serbia is the major source of disinformation, which is shared by mainstream pro-government media before spreading further to tabloids and social media." The primary examples of disinformation in this context are political spin about economic figures and false claims about opposition politicians. For example, President Vučić recently claimed that Serbia had the highest salaries within "the region," according to figures from the Republic Bureau of Statistics dating to December 2020. While it is unclear which countries Vučić considered within "the region", an analysis by Istinomer found that at least four other comparable countries - Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia and Romania - had higher salaries.[39]

Evidence suggests the government has also used trolls and bots to amplify its messaging. Former members of what was termed the "fortress"[40] or "castle"[41] have come forward to detail their experiences running fake social media accounts to spread disinformation and promote the government's agenda. This operation was reported to

38 Ibid.
39 Miletić, M. (2021), 'Srbija ubedljivo prva u regionu po visini plata u decembru 2020' [Serbia is convincingly the first in the region to pay in December 2020], Istinomer, 16 Mar. 2021, https://bit.ly/3iKljV7 (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
40 Rujevic, N. (2017), 'Serbian government trolls in the battle for the internet', Deutsche Welle, 05 Jan. 2017, https://bit.ly/3LgPjEe (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
41 Milivojevic, A. (2020), 'The Castle: How Serbia's Rulers Manipulate Minds and the People Pay', Balkan Insight Research Network, 18 Jun. 2020, https://bit.ly/3wLxj0O (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).

have been strictly regulated and overseen by official managers.[42] In April 2020, Twitter announced that it had removed "8,558 accounts working to promote Serbia's ruling party and its leader", which were identified towards the end of 2019.[43] An investigation by the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network found that the bots had been set up by "employees of state-owned companies, local authorities and even schools", suggesting a significant degree of coordination with the Progressive Party, although this was flatly denied by Vučić himself.[44]

Demonstrating the extent of the government's control over the media landscape, a report by the Stanford Internet Observatory found that the tweets would then be shared on different news websites associated with SNS, notably the official websites of the SNS and Vučić himself, sns.org.rs and Vučić.rs.[45] The tweets were also posted on the websites of different pro-Vučić tabloids and online news websites, such as *Informer* and Pink. A tweet by *Informer*'s editor-in-chief Dragan Vučićević criticizing opposition politician Borko Stefanovi was replied to 64 times by the troll accounts, the report found.[46]

While Twitter has removed these accounts, an investigation by the Digital Forensic Center has found that the bots are still functional in Serbia. Over 30,000 tweets were analyzed between March 9 and April

42 Ibid.
43 Twitter Safety (2020), 'Toward the end of last year, we identified clusters of accounts engaged in inauthentic coordinated activity which led to the (...), @TwitterSafety [Twitter], 02 Apr. 2020, https://bit.ly/3wGolSw (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
44 Milivojevic, A. (2020), 'The Castle: How Serbia's Rulers Manipulate Minds and the People Pay', Balkan Insight, 18 Jun. 2020,https://bit.ly/3j06fmB (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
45 Bush, D. (2020), '"Fighting Like a Lion for Serbia": An Analysis of Government-Linked Influence Operations in Serbia", Stanford Internet Observatory, 02 Apr. 2020, p.12.
46 Ibid. p. 14

9, 2020, with 71.9% originating from bot accounts. The investigation determined that one of the primary aims of the campaign was to promote Serbia's response to the coronavirus pandemic and its relationship with Russia and China.[47]

The issue of bots is also present in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where they are used to spread disinformation from anonymous online news portals.[48] The problem has been exacerbated by Russia's highly sophisticated disinformation campaigns. As noted in a report by the research organization RAND Corporation, "Russia has, perhaps, an even more established track record of using social media to inflame tensions and generally cause chaos. Russian agents have promoted wide-ranging causes, from Texas secessionism [sic] to Bosnian Serb nationalism, to "effectively aggravate the conflict between minorities and the rest of the population."[49] (See Recommendation Two in the next section for the relevant suggested action).

Many of the other trends identified in Serbia's media landscape are also replicated in Republika Srpska. The public broadcaster is widely considered to be under the influence of the government.[50] Commercial media outlets are also often owned by individuals affiliated with political figures, affecting editorial policies.[51] The same pattern identified in Serbia therefore recurs in BiH and especially Republika Srpska, where Dodik and his network of advisers, family members and business partners are able to manipulate the information environment. State-backed media (notably the public broadcaster RTRS and news agency SRNA, but also "commercial" outlets like ATV and *Glas Srpske*) are used by president Dodik and politicians from his SNSD party to promote nationalist – and increasingly secessionist – policies. Another key purpose is to develop Dodik's cult of personality. For example, the current Minister for Trade and Economic Relations Staše Košarca has repeatedly made the claim that Dodik won the most votes in the history of BiH's elections, a claim shown to be false by fact-checker Istinomjer.[52] Another SNSD

47 DCF (2020), 'A Bot Network Arrived in Serbia Along with Coronavirus', 13 Apr. 2020, https://bit.ly/35j7GJI (Accessed 17 Mar. 2022).
48 DCF (2019), 'Problem of the Anonymous Portals', 01 Oct. 2019,https://bit.ly/3JO2Oeg (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
49 Alyssa D., Beauchamp-Mustafaga, N., Cheravitch, J., Cohen, R S., Harold, S.W., Hornung, J.W., Jun, J., Schwille, M., Treyger, E., Vest, N., (2021), ' Combating Foreign Disinformation on Social Media: Study Overview and Conclusions', RAND Corporation, 19 Jul. 2021, p.25.
50 Ahmetašević, N., Hadžiristić, T. (2017), 'The Future of Public Service Broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina', Analitika Center for Social Research, 2017, p.37.
51 Pobrić, N. (2019) 'Transparency of media ownership in Bosnia and Herzegovina', BH Novinara, Sep. 2019.
52 Karović, A. (2022), 'Dodik nije osvojio najviše glasova u historiji izbora u BiH' [Dodik did not win the most votes in the history of elections in BiH], Istinomjer, 24 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3Dj2uBT (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

representative in BiH's parliamentary assembly, Sanja Vulić, described the Bosnian Serb president as a "God" to her.[53]

The manipulation observed on state-controlled media also extends to private media. For example, ATV, which has close ties to Dodik's family, has previously reported on alleged plans to assassinate Dodik based on "intelligence documents". Fact-checkers have found no evidence to substantiate the claims.[54] Dodik himself frequently passes off the failings of his government to foreign powers, which he has accused of wanting to create "a Muslim state" in BiH.[55] He also accused the European Union of luring away workers educated and trained at great expense in Republika Srpska. By contrast, a 2017 study by the Center for Electoral Studies, CIS, and the Heinrich Böll Foundation found unemployment to be the biggest driver of emigration, followed by the overall socio-economic environment, healthcare and political instability.[56]

Pro-Russian disinformation

Another area of major concern to policy makers and social media companies is the prevalence in both Serbia and Republika Srpska of pro-Russian disinformation, which aims to discredit western institutions and undermine the authority of the EU and NATO. More recently, this has seen both traditional and social media in Serbia and Republika Srpska become sinister sources of Russian disinformation regarding the invasion of Ukraine.

Second only to Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus, Vučić is arguably Putin's closest ally in Europe. The majority of Serbian citizens have positive views on Russia. A survey published in 2021 showed Russia was the most popular choice when Serbs were asked which power they should rely on most for their national security.[57] Vuk Vuksanović, an analyst at the Belgrade Center for Security Policy think tank, argues that "Putin's and Russia's popularity have reached surreal levels among the Serbian public. Every single politician is afraid that if

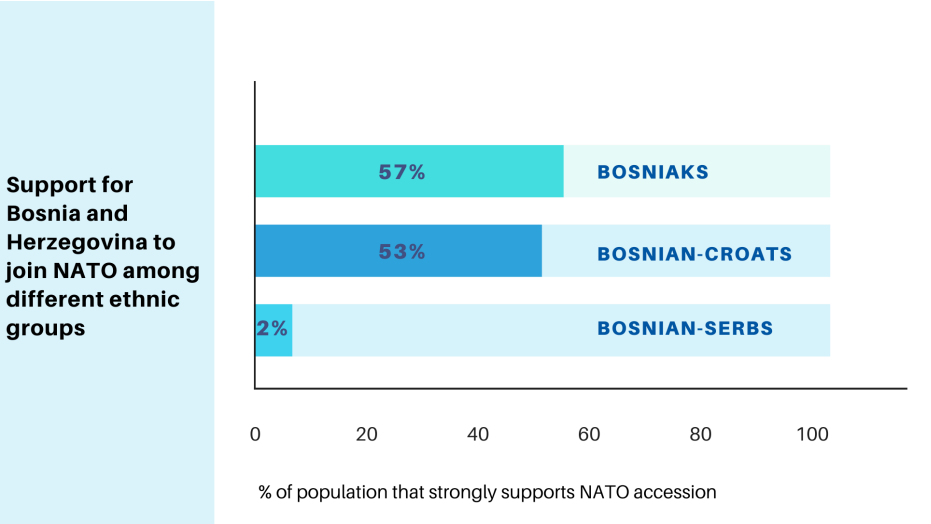
53 Kapetanovic, S. (2020) 'Bosnian MP insults N1 reporter, journalists condemn disrespectful behaviour', N1 Sarajevo, 20 May. 2020, https://bit.ly/3tNlEg4 (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
54 Krupalija, R. (2020), 'Nikada viđeni "dokumenti obavještajnih službi" kao medijski "izvori" za priče o atentatu na Dodika' [Never seen "intelligence documents" as media "sources" for stories about Dodik's assassination], Raskrinkavanje.ba, 21 Oct. 2020, https://bit.ly/36Sx6xV (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
55 Begic, J., Dizdarevic, E., Grebo, L., Kuloglija, N. (2021), 'BIRN Fact-Check: The Questionable Claims of Bosnia's Dodik', Balkan Insight Research Network, 15 Oct. 2021, https://bit.ly/3tWRYNP (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
56 Ibid.
57 Delević, M., Kmezić, M., Nechev, Z., Tzifakis, N. (2021), 'Geopolitically irrelevant in its 'inner courtyard'?: The EU amidst third actors in the Western Balkans', BiEPAG, Dec. 2021, p.9.

they do anything that is considered to be anti-Russian, it will anger a significant portion of their constituents."[58]

Russia's popularity can be explained by its positive depiction in the media in Serbia. A report from CRTA published in January 2022 found that domestic media outlets in Serbia presented Russia and China primarily as positive, while the European Union, the United States and NATO typically came out as negative.[59] Russian state-owned media outlets are also prominent in the region. A report published by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation in January 2022 studied the influence of RT (formerly known as Russia Today), Sputnik and other state-backed Russian media outlets in the Balkans.[60] It found that both Serbia and Republika Srpska welcome Russian media and that "Moscow's Kremlin-controlled political system and the exceptional position of its President Vladimir Putin match the political ideals of almost all top Serbian politicians."[61] Russian media outlets were also found to push anti-NATO and anti-EU narratives, which were subsequently picked up by local outlets and politicians. A separate study by the Clingendael Institute found that the Serbian government in its public discourse increasingly presents Russia as a key partner.[62] The authors concluded that this discourse had successfully swayed public opinion with polls revealing that Russia is viewed more favorably than the EU and the US.

There is also strong pro-Russian sentiment among Serbs in BiH and, under the leadership of Milorad Dodik, Republika Srpska has been closely aligned with Putin. This needs to be viewed within the context of BiH's different ethnic groups. Bosniak Muslims and Croats are, according to opinion polls, pro-NATO oriented while Bosnian Serbs gravitate towards Russia. According to an International Republican Institute opinion poll carried out in 2017, Bosniak Muslims are most eager to join the alliance.

58 Hajdari, U. (2022), 'Pandering to Putin comes back to bite Serbia's Vučić', Politico, 07 Mar. 2022, https://politi.co/3NvSvh6 (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
59 Istinomer (2022), 'Media outlets – positive on Russia and China, negative on the EU and the USA (CRTA)', Istinomer, 26 Jan. 2022, https://bit.ly/3Dj8zhI (Accessed 24 Mar. 2022).
60 Brey, T. (2022), 'Russian Media in the Balkans.Case study: How Moscow's propaganda influences Serbia', Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit [Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom], Mar. 2022.
61 Ibid. p.4.
62 Bajić, D., Zweers, W. (2020), 'Declining media freedom and biased reporting on foreign actors in Serbia Prospects for an enhanced EU approach', Clingendael, Jul. 2020.



In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, government-controlled media in Serbia immediately began pushing pro-Russian disinformation narratives.[63] An analysis from Balkan Insight found newspapers reported enthusiastically about Moscow's troops "reaching Kyiv in a day", called the Russian attack on Ukraine a "response to NATO threats", or repeated Putin's justifications for the invasion, including the denazification of Ukraine.[64]

On social media, many of the same themes can be identified. For example, on February 28, 2022, a video circulated widely among Serbian Facebook users appeared to show a projected swastika on the staircase of a shopping mall in Kyiv. The caption read: "If we're going to line up, I know which side I'm not on. A shopping center in Central Ukraine. This video will probably be removed." The video was shared 3,700 times and has over 60,000 views.

While the video is authentic, an investigation by Istinomer found that it dated from 16 February 2019 and was the result of unidentified hackers who accessed the IT system in Kyiv's "Gorodok" mall and projected the image.[65] This was followed by an explanation and apology from the Gorodok Facebook account, on 18 and 19 February.

Some of the most sensationalist examples of pro-Russian disinformation come from the tabloid media, such as *Informer* and *Kurir*, which are then disseminated further on social media. (See

63 Stojanovic, M. (2022), 'Serbian Pro-Regime Media Praise Russia 'Overrunning' Ukraine', Balkan Insight, 25 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3JMdHxa (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
64 Ibid.
65 Tančić, T. (2022), 'Projekcija svastike u tržnom centru u Kijevu je hakerski napad' [The projection of the swastika in the shopping centre in Kiev is a hacker attack], Istinomer, 02 Mar 2022, https://bit.ly/3iFOtok (Accessed 19 Mar 2022).

Recommendations One and Two in the next section for the relevant suggested action). On February 22, 2022, *Informer* (one of the most popular tabloids in Serbia) ran with the headline "Ukraine Attacks Russia!"[66] This mirrored Russia's false claims the day prior that Ukrainian shelling had destroyed a border facility and that the Russian army had killed five Ukrainian soldiers who tried to cross into Russian territory. The false flag operations were then used as a justification for the invasion on February 24. *Informer*'s headline led to widespread debate on Facebook and Twitter, however, it was not an isolated incident. A study from CRTA found numerous examples of Serbian print and television media outlets presenting Ukraine as the aggressor and Russia as the victim, as well as blaming the West for causing the crisis.[67]

As the conflict has developed, the parroting of the Kremlin line has been a consistent feature across a range of pro-Russian media outlets. Fabricated stories – again, often originating in the Russian media – also appear regularly in the tabloids, largely to malign Ukraine and the West while painting Russia as a victim of NATO aggression. On March 6 2022, *Informer* led with a story stating that Ukraine had been in the process of making atomic weapons prior to

66 Informer (2022). 'Štampano Izdanje Za Dan: 22.02.2022' [Printed Edition For The Day: 22.02.2022], 22 Feb. 2022,https://bit.ly/3NrGmtM_ (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022)

67 Šljukić Bandović, M. (2022), "Rat u Ukrajini: Za režimske medije Rusija je žrtva, a ne agresor" [Rat u Ukrajini: Za režimske medije Rusija je žrtva, a ne agresor], Istinomer, 25 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/35hucIS (Accessed 24 Mar. 2022).

Russia's invasion, referring to articles published by "Russian agencies and media" and "one competent source."[68] This accusation has its source in a conspiracy theory, spread on social media by Russian propagandists since at least 2018, that the US is operating secret biolabs in Ukraine.[69] When Russia invaded Ukraine, a rumor began to trend on Twitter claiming that Russian missile attacks aligned with the supposed locations of these biolabs.[70] While the account and thread were deleted by Twitter, the disinformation continued to spread on social media in the Western Balkans, notably via accounts on Facebook.

In Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik has pushed for BiH to remain neutral in the Ukrainian conflict, stating that Republika Srpska would not allow decisions that would jeopardize relations with Russia.[71] Dodik also attempted to block Bosnia and Herzegovina from imposing sanctions on Russia. The decision needs the backing of all three presidency members. The two others, Šefik Džaferović and Željko Komšić were in favor of sanctions.[72] In addition, far-right political groups in Republika Srpska have organized pro-Russian rallies and been active on social media supporting the invasion. It is reported some members of these groups have volunteered to fight for Russia in Ukraine.[73]

The Republika Srpska government's support of Putin and Russia is reflected in the coverage of the Russia-Ukraine war by local media outlets. These outlets often feature Putin's claims and statements on news headlines, take a pro-Russia stance and paint Ukraine as the attackers. This is achieved by publishing articles and headlines that quote directly from senior Russian officials, or Putin himself.[74] For example, *Glas Srpske* has published articles with the headlines "Zakharova: Russia did not start the war, it is ending it"[75] and "Rudenko: The focus of the negotiations will be denazification and

68 Informer (2022), 'MOSKVA OPTUŽILA KIJEV DA JE PRAVIO "PRLJAVU BOMBU"! Ruska obaveštajna služba tvrdi da je došla u posed konkretnih dokaza! Zelenski poziva na otpor "ruskom zlu"!' [MOSCOW ACCUSES KIEV OF MAKING A "DIRTY BOMB"! The Russian intelligence service claims that it has come into possession of concrete evidence! Zelensky calls for resistance to "Russian evil"!], 06 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3NsWc7d (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

69 Evon, D. (2022), 'Ukraine, US Biolabs, and an Ongoing Russian Disinformation Campaign', Snopes, 24 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3iKKjLQ (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

70 Ibid.

71 Trkanjec, Z. (2022), 'Dodik tries to push for BiH's neutral stance towards Russia', EURACTIV, 03 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3tNvEFW (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

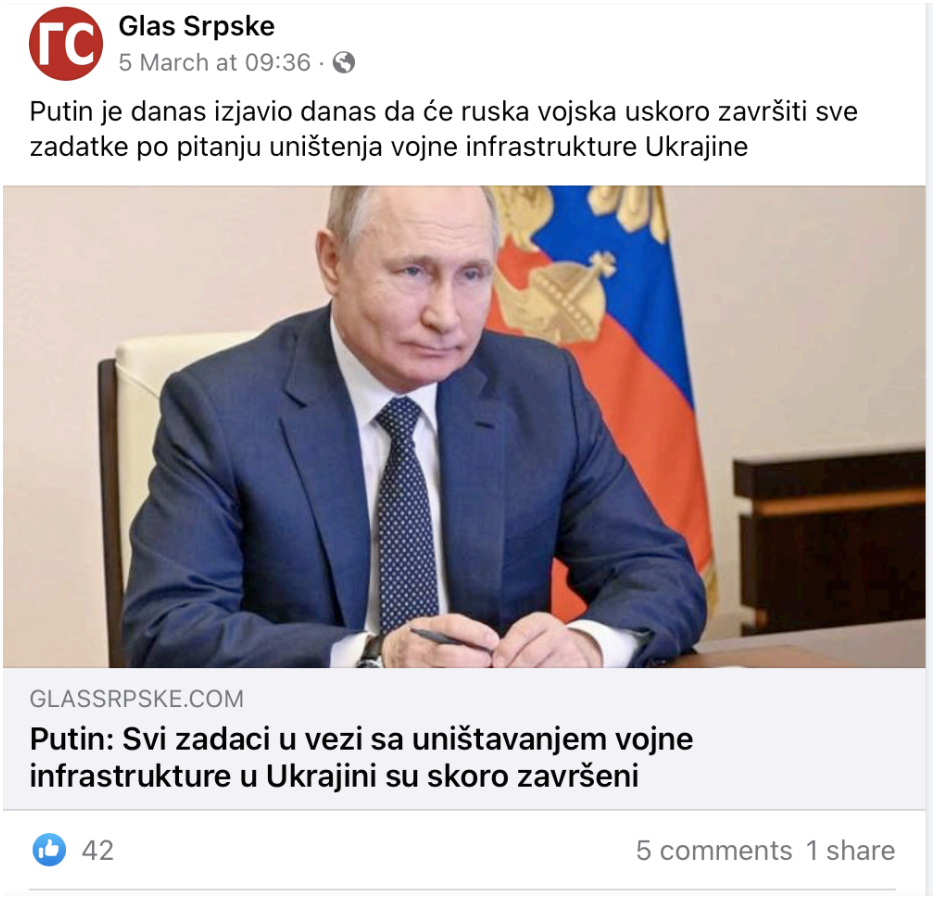
72 Trkanjec, Z. (2022), 'Dodik tries to push for BiH's neutral stance towards Russia', EURACTIV, 03 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3DgwM8t (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

73 Mujkic, S., Zoric, T., (2022), 'Support for Russia among Some Pro-Russian Bosnian Groups, but Not All', Balkan Insight, 07 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/36BmF1R Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

74 Glas Srpske (2022), 'Glas Srpske', @GlasSrpskeBanjaluka [Facebook], https://bit.ly/389Iqq7 (Accessed 22 Mar. 2022).

75 Glas Srpske (2022), 'Захарова: Није Русија покренула рат, она га завршава' [Zakharova: Russia did not start the war, it is ending it], 28 Feb 2022, https://bit.ly/3qHX9yX (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

demilitarization."[76] The articles are then shared on *Glas Srpske*'s Facebook page, which has over 52,000 followers.



[Headline: Putin said today that the Russian army will soon complete all tasks related to the destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure.[77]]

The pro-Russian media in BiH also re-published articles directly from Russian state media blaming Ukraine for the humanitarian crisis caused by the invasion. For example, on March 9, BiH's public broadcaster RTRS re-published a story from sputniknews.com praising Russia for reopening humanitarian corridors, a decision made "despite the constant disruption of Kiev's measures" to do so.[78]

76 Glas Srpske (2022), 'Rudenko: U fokusu pregovora biće denacifikacija i demilitarizacija' [Rudenko: The focus of the negotiations will be denazification and demilitarization], 27 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3DluRQ4 (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

77 Glas Srpske (2022), "Putin je danas izjavio danas de će ruska vojska završiti sve zodatke po pitanju uništenja vojne infrastrukture Ukrajine" [Putin stated today that the Russian army will complete all the tasks related to the destruction of Ukraine's military infrastructure], @GlasSrpskeBanjaluka [Facebook], 05 Mar. 2022, https://www.facebook.com/GlasSrpskeBanjaluka (Accessed 22 Mar. 2022).

78 РТРС [RTRS] (2022), 'Руска страна у сриједу поново отвара хуманитарне коридоре' [The Russian side reopens humanitarian corridors on Wednesday], 08 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3qJV99j_ (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).

(See Recommendation Four in the next section for the relevant suggested action).

Indeed, the fact-checking outlet Raskrinkavanje has found that the Serbian-language arm of Sputnik "appears to be one of the key links between media outlets situated in Serbia and those in Republika Srpska".[79] These articles – which Raskrinkavanje described as "disinformation", "clickbait", "fake news", "conspiracy theories" and "factual manipulations" – are republished by local outlets both in Serbia and Republika Srpska and shared on their social media accounts where they are subsequently flagged by fact-checkers.[80] Research by the Atlantic Council of Montenegro NGO found that "Sputnik Serbia is the most popular Russian state media outlet in the Western Balkans, whose content is passed on by local media".[81]

Pro-Serbian disinformation

Pro-Serbian propaganda is becoming increasingly prevalent in both Serbia and BiH, encouraging divisions and polarization between the nation's different ethnic groups and creating major security concerns. At the heart of the issue is the question of Republika Srpska's secession from BiH and unification with Serbia. Disinformation has become an important tool for Milorad Dodik and other senior Bosnian Serb politicians to galvanize nationalist support for their secessionist ambitions. This usually takes the form of denial of genocide and war crimes linked to conflicts following the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. Serb revisionism sees war criminals painted as heroes and the Serbs as victims of western lies and conspiracies. Much of this disinformation originates with Dodik's public statements. In a speech celebrating the inaugural Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and National Flag, held in Banja Luka last year, Dodik affirmed: "We have two states, Serbia and the Republic of Srpska, but we aspire to be a single state."[82] His Serbian counterpart, President Vučić, has been more cautious about the issue. In a recent appearance on the popular TV show Tvit, he asked "imagine how it would sound if some of us had said that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia should be united, but we haven't."[83] Yet this statement was fact-checked by the website Istinomer and found to be false, given

79 Obrenovic, M. (2020) 'How Fake News Spreads: Mainstream Media Republish Suspect Sites' Stories', Balkan Insight, 31 Aug. 2020, https://bit.ly/3tK3Dz5_ (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid.
82 Čodanović, N. (2021), 'None of us said that the Republic of Srpska and Serbia should be united', Istinomer English, 03 Dec. 2021, https://bit.ly/3LnS3ja (Accessed 19 Mar. 2022).
83 Ibid.

the support for unification explicitly expressed by officials in Vučić's government.[84]

Dodik's secessionist provocations have led to international concern and condemnation. In a report on the Implementation of Common Foreign and Security Policy, members of the European Parliament called on the EU to impose targeted sanctions on Dodik and his allies for his corrupt activities, continued destabilization of the country, and for undermining Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity.[85] The report condemned the unconstitutional secessionist moves by the Republika Srpska authorities, aimed at creating parallel institutions in medicine and medical devices, justice, defense, security and taxation, thereby undermining the state structures of BiH and posing an existential threat to its unity and territorial integrity.

In this environment, genocide and war crimes denial now commonly features in state-affiliated media in Republika Srpska and regional Serbian and Russian outlets. These false narratives are subsequently disseminated across different social media platforms. For example, throughout April 2020 Žarko Kovačević – a member of the United Srpska party and deputy mayor of Prijedor – posted images of the convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić and parroted Dodik claiming "there was no genocide in Srebrenica".[86] In June 2021, Facebook removed a separate video posted by the SNDS with a voice over from Dodik that praised Ratko Mladić despite his conviction for genocide and other wartime crimes.[87]

The Institute for Research of Genocide Canada (IRGC), which tracks genocide denial online, has found that most content originates in Serbia, followed by Republika Srpska and then Russia.[88] In response to a request by the IRGC, Twitter and Google announced their intent to remove such content from their platforms. A spokesperson from YouTube stated "we have a clear and established hate speech policy that prohibits content that minimizes or negates well-documented violent events including the genocide in Srebrenica… If the content is found to violate these guidelines, we will remove it."[89] However,

84 Ibid.
85 European Parliament (2022), 'Implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2021', 17 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3uCQfvR (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
86 Šušnjar, A, (2021), 'NEGIRANJE GENOCIDA: Kako to radi Žarko Kovačević, zamjenik gradonačelnika Prijedora [DENIAL OF GENOCIDE: How does Žarko Kovačević, Deputy Mayor of Prijedor, do it], Inforadar, 29 Mar. 2021, https://bit.ly/388Dge2 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
87 Grebo, L., Kovacevic, V. (2021), 'Facebook Removes Video Glorifying 'Legend' Ratko Mladic', Balkan Insight, 17 Jun. 2021, https://bit.ly/3INVrSX (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
88 Al Jazeera (2021), 'Twitter, Google to ban content denying Srebrenica genocide: RFE', 11 Aug 2021,https://bit.ly/3JIIx9Y_ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
89 Ibid.

Facebook has yet to take any similar action as specifically regards denial of the Srebrenica genocide.[90]

The growth of nationalist disinformation in Republika Srpska is now part of wider security concerns in BiH. In the United Kingdom, for example, a parliamentary debate entitled "Bosnia and Herzegovina: Stability and Peace" was held in December 2021. Alicia Kearns MP stated "We know that as part of their support to Dodik, the Russians and even the Chinese and the Serbians are spreading disinformation in Bosnia" and suggested establishing a counter-disinformation capability at NATO headquarters in Sarajevo.[91] While social media platforms have undoubtedly proven to be an important source of information and debate for millions of people in the region, the extent to which disinformation is flourishing means that a new approach is necessary to counterbalance the unintended negative consequences. It is therefore urgent that policy makers and social media companies like Meta and Twitter take swift and decisive action to fight the different forms of disinformation that are being shared on their platforms.

90 Dzaferagi, N. (2020), 'Facebook Urged to Ban Srebrenica Genocide Denial', Balkan Insight, 27 Oct. 2021, https://bit.ly/3LnT4aY (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
91 HC Deb (02 December 2021), Vol 704, Available at: https://bit.ly/3NtyWWU (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

2. Ineffective Labeling and Regulating of Content

Understanding the context behind a source of information is vital to judging its veracity. As social media platforms become an increasingly important way of accessing and sharing news, they must take responsibility for supporting users to make informed decisions about the content they consume and take steps to prioritize credible sources. This is especially important given the known prevalence of disinformation on social media. Without providing context, social media platforms allow for political actors to present partisan information to users as neutral and impartial. As politicians and their media partners increasingly utilize social media to wage their campaigns, this is especially damaging during election periods when citizens may lose the right to make informed decisions at the ballot box. Furthermore, the duty for social media platforms to provide their users with accurate information is particularly crucial during times of crisis, as seen in recent months with the invasion of Ukraine.

Social media companies are aware of these issues and have introduced policies for labeling outlets which are linked to or controlled by political entities. However, our study suggests these policies are limited in four ways:

- Existing labels are narrow in scope
- Transparency of methodology used for assessing outlets is lacking
- Existing labels are not applied widely
- Policies for assessing outlets do little to support credible media outlets

In the Western Balkans in particular, social media companies are not only failing to regulate the distribution of content on their platforms, but they also fail to effectively label content. The result is that the issues present in the wider media sector are also present on social media, i.e. pro-government media outlets dominate despite a lack of journalistic standards and ethics. Social media companies could provide a more regulated alternative resource for information; instead, they amplify existing issues.

Existing policies

Facebook began labeling “state-controlled media” in June 2020, stating “We want to help people better understand who’s behind the

news they see on Facebook."[92] The policy commits to labeling media outlets that are "wholly or partially under the editorial control of their government" and to have the labels appear on the Ad Library Page view, on pages, and in the Page Transparency section.[93] Criteria assessed include ownership structure, sources of funding, and governance and accountability mechanisms.[94] Facebook also claims to consider "country-specific factors, including press freedom."[95]

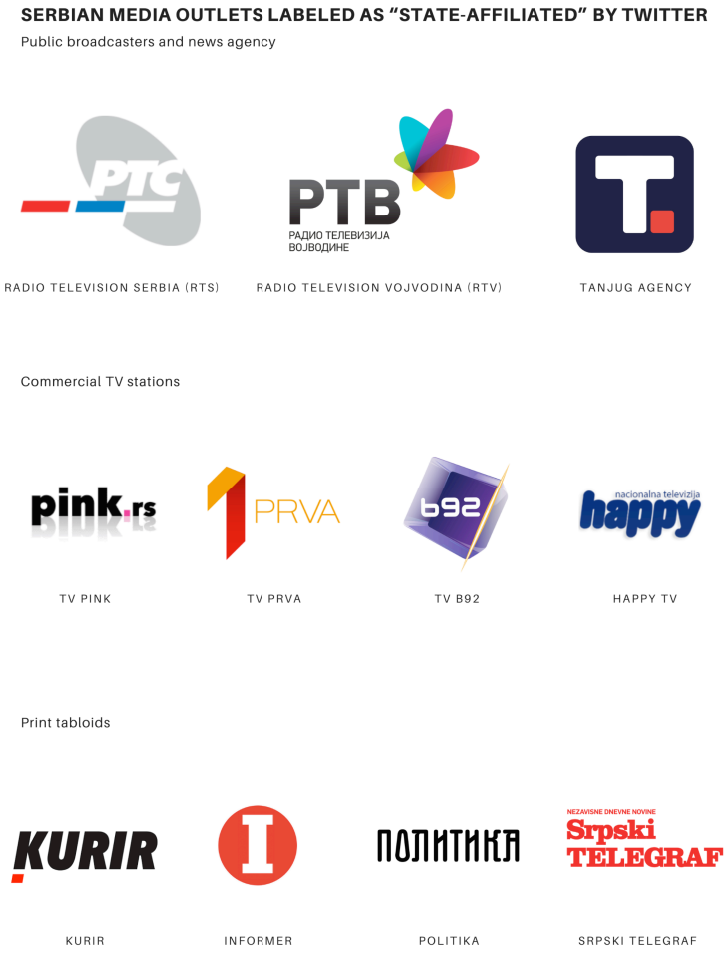
Twitter introduced its own labeling policy in August 2020 under which media outlets and senior officials can be labeled as "state-affiliated".[96] The labels appear on the profile pages and tweets of the relevant accounts. Tweets from labeled accounts cannot be recommended or amplified by Twitter, restricting their reach. Twitter defines state-affiliated media accounts as those where "the state exercises control over editorial content through financial resources, direct or indirect political pressures, and/or control over production and distribution."[97] State-financed media organizations with editorial independence, like the BBC in the United Kingdom or NPR in the United States, are not defined as state-affiliated media under this policy.

Both policies highlight the issues mentioned above. Limiting the policy to outlets where some form of control or affiliation with the state can be ascertained does not include outlets with no discernible ties but which produce pro-government disinformation. This is a common issue in the Balkans, with opaque online news portals popular throughout the region. Assessing how to strengthen these policies is rendered more difficult by the fact that Facebook and Twitter do not publish detailed information about their methodologies. Nor do they publish comprehensive figures on which accounts have been labeled, making it difficult to ascertain the exact reach of these policies. Twitter has stated that it labeled accounts in Serbia, as well as China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Cuba, Ecuador, Egypt, Honduras, Indonesia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Spain, Thailand, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.[98]

To date, the action taken by social media companies in the Balkans has been insufficient, though Twitter has been more active than

92 Gleicher, N. (2020), 'Labeling State-Controlled Media On Facebook', Meta, 04 Jun. 2020, https://bit.ly/3tLCz2A (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
93 Ibid.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Twitter (2022), 'About government and state-affiliated media account labels on Twitter' https://bit.ly/3NtzbB7 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.

Facebook. In August 2021, Twitter labeled 11 Serbian accounts, including the state-broadcaster RTS. This made Serbia the first Balkan country to have outlets labeled.[99] Twitter's decision did not go unnoticed by Serbia's leadership. Indeed, the Serbian newspaper *Novosti* reported that President Aleksandar Vučić criticized the labeling as "a political weapon in the hands of the CIA or the Pentagon."[100] However, Twitter has not labeled any accounts in BiH. Facebook does not appear to have labeled a single account in either country.



99 Jeremic, I. (2021), 'Twitter Labels Numerous Media Accounts in Serbia 'State Affiliated', Balkan Insight Investigative Network, 16 Aug. 2021, https://bit.ly/3qHZRED (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

100 Novosti (2021), '"OVAKVE CENZURE NIKADA NIJE BILO": Vučić o potezu Tvitera - "To je političko oruđe u rukama CIA ili Pentagona"' ["SUCH CENSORSHIP HAS NEVER BEEN": Vučić on Twitter's move - "It is a political tool in the hands of the CIA or the Pentagon"], 23 Aug. 2021,https://bit.ly/3tKyRGm_ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

Replicating the wider information environment

The weaknesses in labeling policies mean that examples of state-controlled or state-affiliated media are not labeled, as is detailed in the next chapter. This allows the problems present in the wider media environment in Serbia and BiH (whose markets have undergone significant capture by pro-government voices) to be replicated on social media platforms. Media laws intended to protect media freedoms are regularly flouted, public broadcasters fail to operate with independence, and transparency of ownership is poor.

In Serbia, the leadership of the state broadcaster RTS, which receives more than a quarter of its funding from the state budget, is populated by individuals close to the ruling SNS party.[101] In 2019, widespread protests against Vučić included demonstrations at the offices of RTS. Protestors were responding to the state broadcaster's decades-long failure to be independent in its output, including its efforts to stifle criticism of the government by preventing the political opposition from appearing on RTS.[102] As mentioned above, CRTA's analysis of political coverage ahead of April's elections found the government received a disproportionate amount of coverage from TV stations including RTS. Despite clear evidence of state influence, Facebook has not labeled RTS as "state-controlled" media.

Owners of private media outlets often have ties to the ruling SNS party, which dominates politics. These government-backed media companies receive funding from the state, as well as favorable treatment by regulators. Part of this clientelism is driven by Telekom Srbija, the country's largest cable operating company which is 58% owned by the state.[103] Telekom Srbija, whose leadership has close ties to Vučić, has emerged as an important vehicle for maneuvering the president's allies into positions of control at major media outlets.[104]

In 2019, Telekom Srbija was allegedly involved in the changing ownership of the newspaper *Kurir*. Founded in 2003, *Kurir* is widely considered a main driver of tabloid journalism in Serbia and, as addressed above, disseminated a number of inflammatory articles on social media during Russia's invasion of Ukraine.[105] In 2019, *Kurir*

101 Mapping Media Freedom (2020), 'Serbia's public TV "is being used against the public"', 10 Jan. 2020, https://bit.ly/36T46Gi (Accessed 23 Aug. 2021).
102 Balkan Free Media Initiative (2021), 'The Invisible Hand of Media Censorship in the Balkans', Oct. 2021.
103 Telekom Srbija (2020), 'Consolidated Annual Business Report for 2019', 2020, p.7.
104 Balkan Free Media Initiative (2021), 'The Invisible Hand of Media Censorship in the Balkans', Oct. 2021.
105 Kurir (2022), 'UBIJANJE RUSA VODI U TREĆI SVETSKI RAT! Analitičari upozoravaju: Moraće da umre mnogo više Ukrajinaca!' [KILLING A RUSSIAN LEADS TO THE THIRD WORLD WAR! Analysts warn: Many more Ukrainians will have to die!], @KurirVesti [Twitter], 08 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3NpqYxY (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

was bought by its current owner Igor Žeželj. Prior to purchasing *Kurir*, Žeželj's company Wireless Media had become a partner of the website Mondo. In 2019, Žeželj stated that Mondo was a joint commercial project with Telekom Srbija.[106] The exact value of this partnership is not known. However, in August 2020 the Vice President of the opposition Freedom and Justice Party, Marinika Tepić, claimed that Telekom Srbija had simply gifted the website to Žeželj, increasing the value of Žeželj's assets from €2 million to €40 million. Apparently evidenced by a leaked contract, Tepić claimed part of this sum was used to buy *Kurir*. The Serbian Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, denied the claims made against Telekom Srbija.[107] In 2021, it was revealed that a second contract, worth some €60 million, had been awarded to Žeželj's Wireless Media and Telekom Srbija by the Ministry of Finance, with N1 reporting that this was allegedly 1,000 to 2,000 times the estimated usual price.[108] *Kurir* is labeled as an outlet that "cooperates with the government of Serbia" on Twitter. However, Mondo, which has the same owner and commercial ties with Telekom Srbija, has not been listed. Facebook has not labeled either outlet.

The picture is similar in Republika Srpska. The main public broadcaster RTRS is a regular platform used by Milorad Dodik to make claims of genocide denial and Serb nationalist messaging.[109] The National Assembly, dominated by Dodik's SNSD party, has the power to veto any appointments made to the board of RTRS, undermining its independence.[110] The state-owned news agency, SRNA, is another platform used regularly by Dodik and his political allies to deny genocide.[111]

Again, private media stations are linked to political figures. This includes Dodik himself whose ties to ATV led to the outlet being sanctioned by the US. The Treasury highlighted that: "Dodik has awarded ATV-related contracts directly to members of his family, which he has used as yet another avenue for corruption. He has funneled money directly from public companies to ATV for corrupt purposes. Dodik has substantially increased funding for ATV in

106 Živanović, K. (2019), 'Žeželj: Telekom je naš poslovni partner' [Žeželj: Telekom is our business partner], Danas, 16 Jan. 2019, https://bit.ly/3INqaiI (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
107 European Western Balkans (2020), 'State-owned company in Serbia financed pro-government media, opposition claims', 26 Aug. 2020, https://bit.ly/3JRlIRI (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
108 N1 Belgrade (2021), 'Wireless Media paid 2,000 times more than cost for software deal', 25 Feb. 2021, https://bit.ly/3wJrMI5 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
109 AFP Srebrenica (2021), 'Srebrenica victims buried 26 years after genocide', France 24, 11 Jul. 2021, https://bit.ly/36Bw8q3 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
110 Boev, B. (2012), 'Analysis Of The Laws Pertaining To The Public Service Broadcasting System Of Bosnia And Herzegovina', OSCE, Sept. 2021.
111 Danas (2021), 'Dodik zvanično pokrenuo peticiju protiv nametnutog zakona o zabrani negiranja genocida' [Dodik has officially launched a petition against the imposed law banning genocide denial], 23 Jul. 2021, https://bit.ly/3usKFMI (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

recent years and engaged in malign social media influence campaigns through ATV to publish content that advances his political and personal goals."[112] As of March 2022, there was an active Facebook page for ATV with 98,500 followers – more than the public broadcaster RTRS, which has 93,000 followers.[113] Evidence of political ties and the threat they pose to stability in BiH were enough for ATV to face US sanctions, yet neither Facebook nor Twitter have attached any label to ATV's social media accounts.

Recent events in Ukraine have shown that social media companies are able to better regulate their platforms, ensuring users pay attention to the reliability of the source of the content they consume, and therefore its reliability. Both Facebook and Twitter escalated their policies towards Russian state-controlled outlets following the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Access to RT and Sputnik was restricted by Facebook across the EU, and content from Russian state-controlled media outlets, as well as posts linking to such outlets were "demoted" on Facebook globally in order to make them "harder to find."[114] Facebook further promised to "label these links and provide more information to people before they share or click on them to let them know that they lead to Russian state-controlled media websites."[115] Twitter added specific labels for "Russian state-affiliated" media. This was in response to 45,000 tweets a day in the first week of the conflict sharing links to Russian state-affiliated media outlets.[116]

While these are positive steps, social media companies need to ensure their policies are applied in nuanced and targeted ways. If the policies are applied too broadly there is a risk that content from higher quality outlets also have their reach limited. (See Recommendations One and Five in the next section for the relevant suggested action). It should also be noted that other social media platforms went further than Facebook and Twitter. YouTube, for example, which is owned by Google, blocked content from all Russian state-funded media channels globally on 11 March 2022.[117]

112 U.S. Department Of The Treasury (2022), 'Treasury Sanctions Milorad Dodik and Associated Media Platform for Destabilizing and Corrupt Activity', 05 Jan. 2022, https://bit.ly/3qLxyVN (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
113 Atv Banja Luka (2022), 'Atv Banja Luka', @novosti777 [Facebook], https://www.facebook.com/novosti777 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
114 Meta (2022), 'Meta's Ongoing Efforts Regarding Russia's Invasion of Ukraine', 26 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3tNTYrz (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
115 Ibid.
116 Yoel, R. (2022), 'Since the invasion, we've seen more than 45,000 Tweets a day sharing links to Russian state-affiliated media outlets. While we've (...)', @yoyoel [Twitter], 28 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3uB3ZHB (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
117 The Guardian (2022), 'YouTube blocks Russian state-funded media channels globally', 11 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3uz5V3m (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

Nevertheless, the response to the war in Ukraine proves that social media companies have the ability to expand their assessment, labeling and limiting of the reach of those outlets undermining the information environment. However, to date, their activity has been reactive and insufficient, especially in Serbia and Republika Srpska, and steps must be taken to ensure media outlets that serve the interests of the state are labeled appropriately.

3. Attacks On Journalists

The issue of the safety of journalists – and more broadly the freedom of the press – has become increasingly urgent in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past decade. In a polarized political context across the Balkans, independent journalists have borne the brunt of attacks, a trend that has accelerated with the development of social media outlets as platforms to consume news and share political views.

The growing frequency of attacks on journalists and the curtailing of their freedom of expression needs to be viewed in the wider context of the slide into autocracy occurring in Serbia and BiH. In both countries, the lack of a strong independent press and the increasing proximity between ruling parties and mainstream media outlets has emboldened political leaders to paint journalists as enemies of the people.

In Serbia, a government-led smear campaign was carried out against KRIK (the Crime and Corruption Reporting Network), a non-profit organization focused on improving investigative journalism in the country.[118] This began when a KRIK reporter asked Vučić at a press conference about the government's alleged links to organized crime. Governing party politicians and pro-government media outlets proceeded to level the same claims against KRIK. Stevan Dojčinović, KRIK's editor-in-chief, told the Committee to Protect Journalists that reporters were targeted personally by both the tabloid media and leading ruling party politicians.[119] "For weeks, we had to stop all our ongoing investigations and deal with defending ourselves and explaining to the public that we are victims of a smear campaign," he said. This led to KRIK and its staffers receiving death threats in comments on the outlet's Facebook page.[120]

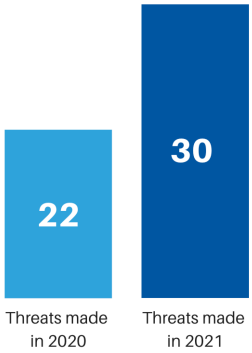
Similar cases exist in BiH. In September 2021, for example, Milorad Dodik accused BN Television (BN Televizija or BN TV) in Republika Srpska of being "part of a joint criminal enterprise" and "the greatest villains in Republika Srpska."[121] The dangers of this rhetoric are all too clear given that a BN TV journalist, Vladimir Kovačević, was in 2018 the victim of an assault by two masked men who beat him with steel

118 Mong, A. (2021), "The most dangerous situation: Serbian journalists accused of links to organized crime', Committee to Protect Journalist, 30 Jun. 2021, https://bit.ly/3qINZIN_ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
119 Ibid.
120 Committee to Protect Journalists (2021), 'Serbian outlet KRIK faces smear campaign after journalist questions president', 01 Apr. 2021, https://bit.ly/3uy5GFH Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
121 BH Journalists Association (2021), 'BH Journalists: Representatives of the RS authorities must stop targeting journalists!', BNH, 01 Oct. 2021, https://bit.ly/3JI0sh3 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

bars outside his home in Banja Luka. Kovačević had received threats on social media prior to the attack and repeatedly reported them to the police, but no action was taken.[122]

Social media platforms have been used as a weapon to threaten and intimidate independent journalists. The Serbian Journalist Association (NUNS) told BFMI it had recorded a total of 44 threats in 2021, including 30 across social networks. This was a significant increase from 2020, where 22 threats across social platforms were recorded. This includes death threats, as experienced by the Serbian journalist and professor Dinko Gruhonji via direct messages on Facebook.[123] In BiH, a report by safejournalists.net found a total of 26 registered cases of attacks, threats and pressure in 2020, including three physical attacks, six death threats and seven attacks and threats directly against media outlets.[124] The report noted that the threats and intimidation of journalists often had their source in representatives of government institutions.[125]

THREATS MADE AGAINST JOURNALISTS USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN SERBIA



Another problem is presented by political influencers who have established large followings, often by promoting far-right or nationalist causes. Increasingly, these influencers incite their followers to collectively attack journalists online. In May 2019, a group of right-wing nationalists began a hate campaign against Sofija Todorovi, project coordinator at the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, insulting her on social media and even attempting to hack

122 Reporters Without Borders (2018), 'RSF sounds alarm after TV reporter badly beaten in Banja Luka', 30 Aug. 2018,https://bit.ly/3qJBx5k_ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
123 IJAS (2021), 'Threats against lives and limbs of journalists, Dinko Gruhonji, Novi Sad, 10.2.2021', SafeJournalists.Net, 10 Feb. 2021, https://bit.ly/3JOHtS5 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
124 BHJA (2021), 'Report "Indicators for the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in BiH 2020" presented', SafeJournalists.Net, 16 Jul. 2021, https://bit.ly/3wHjcJW (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
125 Ibid.

her Twitter account.[126] This came after Todorovi reported live from a gathering of pro-Serb nationalists outside a bakery belonging to an ethnic Albanian in her hometown of Borca. According to an article in BIRN, the group "shouted nationalistic slogans, played Serbian patriotic songs, put stickers reading 'Kosovo is Serbia' on the windows, and threw pigs' heads at the bakery – a reference to his being a Muslim."[127] In response to Todorovi's reporting of the event, right-wing nationalists launched a targeted attack intended to intimidate and harm her reputation.

Other journalists targeted via Facebook posts include Borka Rudic, secretary general of BH Journalists Association and two journalists from CNN-affiliate N1 in BiH: Nikola Vučić and Amir Zuki.[128] Nikola Vučić has written a useful analysis of online violence and hate speech against journalists.[129] Vučić was also on the receiving end of a coordinated attack, leveled via social media:

> *Orchestrated attacks by pro-rightist activists on social networks over my critical and sarcastic post about the necessity to declare a part of Bosnia and Herzegovina "a fascist-free zone" had culminated into a public call for violence. That was, unfortunately, expected, given the fact I was labeled a 'halal' Croat, traitor and persona non grata. The posts wrote that my father was a war prisoner as a Croat in a camp run by the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1993 and 1994, thus implying my betrayal of the Croat people.*[130]

Some attacks have been serious enough to lead to arrests. However, influencers can still promote their hate campaigns through Facebook and Twitter profiles.[131] These hate campaigns and the trolling of journalists online are almost certainly designed to silence opposition voices and sow further divisions. (See Recommendation Two in the next section for the relevant suggested action.)

Another more recent technique is the targeted use of cyberattacks against journalists and independent media outlets. This occurred in February 2021 against the online news publishers Žurnal and Nomad from Sarajevo and Buka in Banja Luka.[132] According to the outlet's

126 BIRN (2019), 'Serbian Nationalists Target BIRN Staffer for Defending Baker', BIRN, 06 May. 2019, https://bit.ly/3uxDItW (Accessed 22 Mar. 2022).
127 BIRN (2019), 'Serbian Nationalists Target BIRN Staffer for Defending Baker', BIRN, 06 May. 2019, https://bit.ly/36U1fwI (Accessed 22 Mar. 2022).
128 IJAS (2021), 'SJ: Impunity and tolerance of online violence against journalists by BiH judiciary and police are unacceptable', SafeJournalists.Net, 23 Sep. 2021, https://bit.ly/3IQVBc2 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
129 Vučić, N. (2021), 'Online violence and hate speech against journalists', BHN, 04 Aug. 2021
130 Ibid. p.6.
131 N1 Sarajevo (2021), 'Luxembourg police raids home of Bosnian Jasmin Mulahusic upon request from BiH', N1, 18 Dec. 2021, https://bit.ly/3qEkjpZ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022)
132 N1 Sarajevo (2020), 'Bosnia's independent news website 'Buka' under serious cyberattacks', N1, 06 Aug. 2020, https://bit.ly/3NvUy4Q (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022)

editor-in-chief, Aleksandar Trifunovi, Buka was the most visited independent news website in BiH.[133] He stated that "someone invested a lot of effort and money in the attack, because the owners of the firm maintaining our servers told us the attack was so strong it could damage their whole system."[134]

Again, social media companies are aware of the challenges and risks of hate speech and attacks on journalists. In April 2018, Facebook admitted it had been "too slow" to stop the hate speech on its platform that was used to "incite violence" and ethnic cleansing against Muslim minorities in Myanmar.[135] This led to renewed efforts to curtail hate speech on the platform and in February 2021, Meta claimed it was removing more than 90% of hate speech on its platform.[136] However, this figure was disputed after private internal communications came to light suggesting that the figure was in fact only 3-5%.[137] Whatever the exact figure, it is clear that more must be done to limit hate speech and attacks on journalists through social media.

133 Ibid.
134 Ibid.
135 Stecklow, S. (2018), 'Why Facebook is losing the war on hate speech in Myanmar', Reuters, 15 Aug. 2018, https://reut.rs/3wKeP0F_ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
136 Schroepfer, M. (2021), 'Update on Our Progress on AI and Hate Speech Detection', Meta, 11 Feb. 2021, https://bit.ly/3LhFAgQ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
137 Giansiracusa, N. (2021), 'Facebook Uses Deceptive Math to Hide Its Hate Speech Problem', Wired, 15 Oct. 2021, https://bit.ly/3tK7n3N (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

Conclusions

In places like Serbia and Republika Srpska, where strongmen leaders have control of most mainstream media, social media can provide a crucial alternative platform for public discourse and serve as a tool supporting democratic participation. Indeed, journalists and civil society groups around the world are as concerned about the closing down of access to social media as they are about its manipulation by governments. However, as this report shows, social media platforms are being weaponized by malign political actors in the Western Balkans to promote nationalism and authoritarian practices. A rebalancing is necessary to ensure that social networks can provide value, rather than amplify disinformation in the rest of the media.

At present, pro-government and nationalist disinformation on social media platforms is commonplace, while dissenting voices are subject to attack. Furthermore, these platforms have become a means for Russian disinformation to enter the public discourse. This is occurring at a time when Russia has embarked on a war with Ukraine and security concerns are growing in BiH. For too long, tech companies and lawmakers have been passive when it comes to regulating social media platforms. There can now be no doubt that this is compromising the information environment in the Balkans and could even contribute to the decline of the security situation.

These problems are compounded by the fact that social media companies have for many years neglected their role in regulating abuse of the global information environment. State actors have been able to use their platforms to spread propaganda, even while violating policies against disinformation. This can partially be explained by the global reach of social media; regulating content for an audience of billions in jurisdictions across the world creates enormous challenges.

Yet the response to recent events in Ukraine has demonstrated that more substantial efforts to prevent the misuse of social media platforms can be implemented both quickly and effectively. The steps taken to label, limit and block disinformation and other harmful forms of content from distorting Russian state-backed sources should be applauded. But they must also be expanded, especially to countries such as Serbia and Republika Srpska where, as this report shows, pro-Russian disinformation appears in the media and social media platforms are being used to distort public discourse. As BiH's political crisis deepens, concerns about a potential return to conflict in the Balkans grow. Social media companies and lawmakers must

take preventative action to protect the information environment and combat disruptive forces abusing their platforms to destabilize the Balkans, a region where press freedoms and democratic processes are already under strain.

Recommendations

Recommendations for social media platforms

Below are the key recommendations for social media platforms to introduce as soon as possible:

1. Expand existing policies for labeling state-controlled or state-affiliated outlets on Facebook and other major platforms

- Full methodologies and criteria for existing labeling policies should be made public to allow for accurate assessment.
- Current policies need to be applied properly in Serbia and BiH. For example, Facebook should immediately assess whether to label RTS in Serbia and RTRS and SRNA in Republika Srpska as state-controlled outlets under its existing policy.
- Labeling policies should be expanded to include non-credible outlets linked to state actors that publish disinformation and/or propaganda.
- Social media companies should engage with existing organizations providing transparent, accountable trust ratings. One example is NewsGuard, an online tool which has developed trust ratings for more than 7,500 news and information websites and which has been integrated directly into the Microsoft Edge web browser.[138] Unlike Facebook and Twitter, Newsguard's methodology for rating the credibility of news sources is fully transparent. It is also based on a wider set of variables made up of nine journalistic criteria which are used to assess the credibility and transparency of a website or information source.[139]
- Outlets which receive labels either for links to state actors or for other credibility issues should have their reach limited.

2. Introduce greater sanctions for outlets found to repeatedly violate content policies and publish disinformation

- Media outlets that frequently publish disinformation or misinformation must receive sanctions. These should include reducing access to advertising, demoting content and in the worst cases blocking accounts. This would limit the reach of non-credible and harmful news sources and incentivize better journalistic practices.

138 NewsGuard (2021), 'NewsGuard FAQ', https://bit.ly/3IMKXTG (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
139 NewsGuard (2021), 'Rating Process and Criteria', https://bit.ly/3tK8qRh (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

- Efforts introduced to tackle Russian disinformation in response to the invasion of Ukraine must be comprehensively applied to the Western Balkan region.

3. Expand the presence of social media companies in the Balkans

- At present Facebook has a Central and Eastern Europe office in Warsaw, while Twitter has no offices in Eastern Europe.[140] Both companies should appoint staff in Serbia and BiH and develop further partnerships with local organizations.
- Existing third-party fact-checkers are having a positive impact, yet they do not have capacity to address the volume of disinformation on social media platforms. More funding should be provided to support existing partnerships and develop new ones with local fact-checkers, experts, members of civil society and independent media outlets to assist in regulating content and defining policies.
- Social media platforms should employ more nuanced policies regarding labeling and regulation of content. This should include adapting algorithms to support credible news sources and increase their reach.

4. Escalate efforts to identify and remove troll and bot accounts

- While there has been some success in removing troll and bot accounts, the problem still exists. More extensive monitoring and removal of such accounts is needed.
- Repeat offenders should be banned from platforms and any new accounts they set up should be removed quickly.

5. Develop algorithms that promote media outlets with high journalistic and ethical standards

- While scrutinizing potentially problematic outlets, social media companies can act to support credible and responsible ones. For social media companies to improve the information quality on their platforms, the priority needs to shift away from engagement (which can be based on divisive and false content) and towards promoting reputable news sources.
- Another possibility for social media platforms to consider is boosting content from outlets which have been certified as meeting certain standards. The Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) is another organization developing and implementing standardized indicators for trustworthiness of journalism.[141] JTI – which was initiated by Reporters Without Borders and has several international partners – supports media outlets to

140 Twitter (2022), 'Where we work', https://bit.ly/3wJ5hD0 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
141 Journalism Trust Initiative (2022), 'About Us', https://bit.ly/3uDDVLY (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

voluntarily self-assess their editorial processes, publish the results and be independently audited. Social media platforms should consider partnering with such organizations to assist with this process and establish widely recognized indicators and measures of professionalism which can be incorporated into algorithms.

- This will also help prevent credible media outlets being unfairly affected by other policies designed to limit poor quality information.

6. Strengthen capacity to deal with information crises should the security situation deteriorate further in the Western Balkans

- Linked to all the policies above, social media companies must have contingency plans in place in case of other security crises in Eastern Europe.

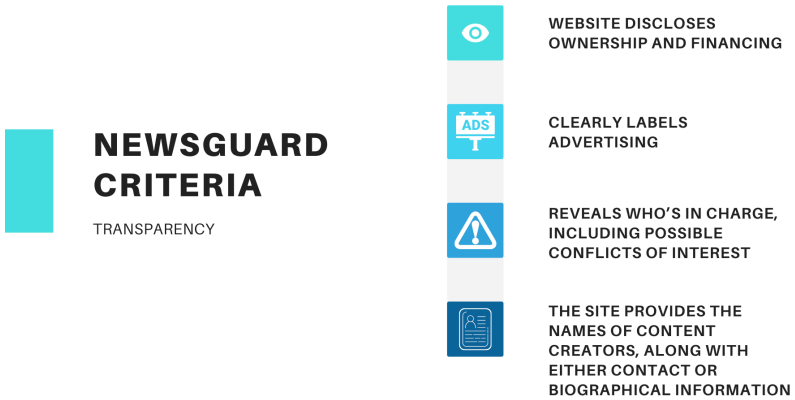
Alongside the above recommendations, BFMI has compiled the following shortlist of media outlets in Serbia and Republika Srpska which it believes should be assessed and potentially labeled by social media platforms.

OUTLETS THAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED FOR LABELING BY SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES

SERBIA	REPUBLIKA SRPSKA
RTS	RTRS
Alo	SRNA
Srbija Danas	ATV
Pink	Glas Srpske
Informer	
Vecernje Novosti	
Kurir	
Mondo	

The process for selecting these outlets included independent research and consultation with local fact-checkers, journalist associations and independent media outlets. These are outlets which have engaged in some or all of the abuses of social media listed in

this report. Many have already been labeled as state-affiliated by Twitter and they are also outlets which fail to meet the positive journalistic criteria set out by Newsguard.



Alex Cadier, Newsguard's managing director in the UK, told BFMI:

> *In the last three years, we've seen how online misinformation can be a real-world threat to democracy and public health in the context of COVID-19 and the insurrection in the US Capitol. More recently, we've seen how state-sponsored disinformation can be used to devastating effect in Ukraine. State-backed outlets with opaque editorial practices, including some found in the Balkans, remain problematic in the fight against disinformation. Platforms have been ill equipped to deal with these crises, often relying on changing content policies on the fly or removing content using entirely opaque processes. NewsGuard's criteria set an editorial floor which clearly distinguishes reliable sources from bad actors; this distinction*

is done transparently and never relies on content removal, instead, users are the final decision-makers when it comes to which sources to use.

While criteria and current labels vary across different platforms and organizations, all of these outlets should be closely scrutinized by the major social media platforms and their existing policies should be applied immediately where appropriate.

Recommendations for policymakers

For real change to occur, local and international policy makers – and especially those in the EU – must take steps to encourage action from social media companies and limit the activities of harmful state-backed media outlets and sources of disinformation. The lack of preparation for tackling these issues online was made clear with the rushed response to ban Russian outlets after the invasion of Ukraine.[142] This in turn has put a spotlight on the inadequacy of current media laws. The French Secretary of State for Digital Affairs Cédric O warned in March 2022: "We need to rethink a number of our regulations in light of the situation of conflict, including when it comes to the media. The issue of freedom of the press cannot be considered independently from the transmitter." Given the current security situation in Europe, coupled with improved awareness about the risks social media platforms pose to the declining information environment, policy makers must urgently adapt and develop new policies, regulations and strategies. At the same time, governments must recognize that these platforms play an important role in promoting independent media and critical voices. Reforms must be nuanced in order to tackle the issues without preventing access where it is needed.

The March 2022 Resolution of the European Parliament on foreign interference in democratic processes recognized that the Western Balkans candidate countries are particularly affected by foreign interference and disinformation campaigns, especially from Russia and China.[143] The European Parliament called for the European Commission to:

- Conduct regular dialogues with Western Balkan civil society and the private sector to coordinate anti-disinformation efforts in the region, with an emphasis on

142 Goujard, C., Kayali, L. (2022), 'Europe faces moment of reckoning on state-media propaganda', Politico, 10 Mar. 2022, https://politi.co/35iq456 (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).
143 EU Parliament (2022), 'Foreign interference in all democratic processes in the European Union', 09 Mar. 2022, https://bit.ly/3iHadAa (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

research and analysis and the inclusion of regional expertise.

- Build the infrastructure required to produce evidence-based responses to both short-term and long-term disinformation threats in the Western Balkans

These actions must be taken as soon as possible. At the same time, governments and the EU should consider the following key recommendations (numbering continued from above):

7. Strengthen broader internet regulation

- Introduce new regulations that incentivize social media platforms to introduce rigorous policies for combating disinformation, propaganda and hate speech, and to ensure the proper enforcement of such policies.
- Require social media platforms to provide regular and comprehensive reporting on their existing policies and research regarding disinformation and other violations of content policies.

8. Consider banning harmful media outlets originating from the Western Balkans that are spreading disinformation

- Governments should revoke the licenses and accreditation of state-backed media outlets found to be spreading disinformation outside of their countries of origin or engaging in foreign influence campaigns.
- Governments should also put pressure on online platforms which allow users to spread disinformation, for example through financial penalties.

9. Ensure any EU sanctions on political figures target media assets in candidate and associated countries

- The European Parliament has already called on the EU to impose targeted sanctions on Milorad Dodik and his allies.[144] It is not for this report to present any judgment on whether or not sanctions should be applied. However, if sanctions are applied, to be fully effective they should target Dodik's media assets which bolster his social media campaigns, as seen with the US sanctions against ATV noted above.

144 European Parliament (2022), 'Implementation of the common foreign and security policy – annual report 2021', 17 Feb. 2022, https://bit.ly/3wMwxAQ (Accessed 20 Mar. 2022).

10. Refuse financial assistance unless clear media reforms are implemented.

- This is especially important with regard to EU funding for Serbia, which is in the process of joining the European Union but has so far failed in its obligations to introduce reforms.

11. Provide greater financial support for programs promoting media and digital literacy

- This should include programs which teach the general public about disinformation, how to recognize it, and where to report it.

Finally, civil society should continue monitoring social media platforms and drawing attention to their role in undermining the information environment. In particular, further research into newer or less high-profile platforms (which are nonetheless gaining in popularity in the region) is needed. Potential subjects for this research could include TikTok, as well as messaging platforms such as Telegram and Viber.

Without concerted action, we risk delivering a significant blow to stability and democracy in the Western Balkans, in Europe, and beyond.

About the Balkan Free Media Initiative

The Balkan Free Media Initiative (BFMI) campaigns for the protection of media freedom and journalists' rights in the countries of SouthEastern Europe. The organisation was founded in April 2021 by Antoinette Nikolova. Antoinette is a Bulgarian journalist who has worked for a host of international news organisations for the last 20 years, including Deutsche Welle International, News Corp television stations bTV and SkyItaly, the Bulgarian National Television, TV Nova, the Economist Life and the Brussels-based media network Euractiv. She is also a regular contributor to the Italian broadcaster RAI. Antoinette began her journalistic career reporting on the aftermath of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. As a member of the Board of the Foreign Press Association in Italy, she has campaigned for the integrity and independence of journalists.

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