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**Policy Report**  
**Countering Russian Malign Information Operations:**  
**Kosovo's Government Institutional Capacities and**  
**Coordination**

**MARCH 2021**



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## **Executive Summary**

This policy report reviews and assesses the Kosovo Government's institutional capacities and inter-institutional coordination for exposing and countering the Russian malign information operations towards Kosovo.

The research findings give sufficient evidence that the foreign policy establishment of Kosovo, namely, the Office of President (OP), Office of Prime-Minister (OPM) and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Diaspora (MFAD), neither have basic capacities nor are coordinated with regard to countering Russian malign efforts against Kosovo.

On the other hand, the other relevant governmental institutions, such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, and Kosovo Judicial Council, have sufficient capacities to provide the necessary information to Kosovo's foreign policy establishment to counter the Russian diplomatic and malign information operations, which are also amplified by media controlled Moscow.

Against this research background, this policy report recommends the establishment of the Strategic Communication Task Force for countering the Russian and other states' diplomatic and malign information operations against Kosovo. Furthermore, this policy report also recommends several policy-making measures. This includes adopting the new foreign policy strategy of Kosovo that must take into the consideration the contemporary international political environment, particularly the Russian foreign politics and an Action Plan for countering the Russian diplomatic war and malign information operations against Kosovo.

Finally, the report recommends several capacity building steps for increasing the capacities of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Diaspora, and of other relevant governmental institutions, as well as for media and civil society, related to Russian disinformation strategies and tactics, countering disinformation, and increasing general knowledge on the Russia's political, military and diplomatic history and its contemporary economy, in order to be able to deal with this threat in a professional manner.

## Introduction

The Russian malign information operations towards Kosovo are systematic, consistent and persistent over time. During the course of the last 20 years, in all posts published by the official web-sites of the Russian governmental institutions and representations, it is impossible to find a single positive statement about Kosovo.

The first post related to Kosovo that can be found at the web-site of the Ministry for Foreign Relations (MFA) of the Russian Federation, is dated on September 19, 2001, a week after 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States. The Russian MFA transmitted a statement by the “Most Holy Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Alexy II and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Acts of Terrorism in America”, in which, among others, he inter-relates the horrible Al-Qaida terrorist attacks in the United States with Albanians in Kosovo and North Macedonia. This statement emphasizes that “Orthodox shrines are still being destroyed, and the civilian population is being subjected to terror, in Kosovo and Macedonia.”<sup>1</sup> Since then until the end of February 2021, on the web-site of the Russian Foreign Ministry were published 826 posts related directly or indirectly to Kosovo, 35 out of them in 2020, and 48 in 2019<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, the first post published during the period from 2000, until February 2021, on Kremlin’s web-site, related directly or indirectly to Kosovo, dates on August 31, 2000.<sup>3</sup>

These Moscow’s malign information operations towards Kosovo in terms of public diplomacy are also coupled with the statements and posts of the Russian missions to the key international organizations, mostly the Russian Permanent Mission to the United Nations (UN),<sup>4</sup> the Russian

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<sup>1</sup> Statement by the “Most Holy Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia Alexy II and the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Acts of Terrorism in America”, September 19, 2001,

[https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign\\_policy/international\\_safety/crime/-/asset\\_publisher/3F5IZsLVSx4R/content/id/572828](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/international_safety/crime/-/asset_publisher/3F5IZsLVSx4R/content/id/572828)

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[https://www.mid.ru/en/search?p\\_p\\_id=3&p\\_p\\_lifecycle=0&p\\_p\\_state=maximized&\\_3\\_struts\\_action=%2Fsearch%2Fsearch](https://www.mid.ru/en/search?p_p_id=3&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=maximized&_3_struts_action=%2Fsearch%2Fsearch)

<sup>3</sup> Kremlin, “Vladimir Putin signed a resolution extending the term of service of Russia's Internal Affairs Ministry and Federal Border Guard Service personnel as part of the international police force in Kosovo, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia”, August 31, 2000.

<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/39077>

<sup>4</sup> The Russian Permanent Mission to the United Nations has published until now 192 post related directly or indirectly to Kosovo, <https://russiaun.ru/site/search/lang/ru?search=Kosovo>

Permanent Mission to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE),<sup>5</sup> and the Russian Permanent representation to the Council of Europe (CoE)<sup>6</sup>, as well as with those of the Russian Embassy in Belgrade.<sup>7</sup>

There is no doubt that the context of the disinformation warfare towards Kosovo is also reinforced by the interdependence of Moscow and Belgrade, in pursuing their foreign policy interests towards Prishtina, Brussels and Washington. As much as Serbia needs Russia for supporting its aims towards Kosovo, so does Russia need Serbia for pursuing its foreign policy interests by instilling instabilities in the Western backyard, and thus rivalling the West in the Balkans.<sup>8</sup> In this regard, a crucial momentum of these efforts against Kosovo was marked by the meeting of the Security Council of Russia that was convened by President Putin on January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2019, a day after his visit to Belgrade, which was entirely focused on Kosovo.<sup>9</sup>

This meeting gave a clear signal that Kosovo is very high on the agenda of Kremlin and that it is a matter of the entire foreign and security establishment of Russia. After this meeting, the Russian malign information operations intensified with more targeted and structured narratives.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, the data that derived from the media monitoring that KIPRED has conducted from January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020, shows that a preselected media outlets controlled by Russia's government have published 1839 news related directly and indirectly to Kosovo. Namely, Sputnik – Serbia has published 1592, Sputnik International 41, Russia Today 59, Russia Insider 13, Meduza 1, TASS 40, Moscow Times 8, Newsfront 55, UNZ 15, and The Duran 15 news.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE, <https://osce.mid.ru/web/osce-en/permanent-representative>

<sup>6</sup> Permanent Representation of the Russian Federation to the Council of Europe, [https://coe.mid.ru/en\\_GB](https://coe.mid.ru/en_GB)

<sup>7</sup> Embassy of the Russian Federation to Serbia, <http://www.ambasadarusije.rs/>, <https://serbia.mid.ru/ru/>

<sup>8</sup> Lulzim Peci, Special Policy Brief, Russia's Information Warfare Against Kosovo: Political Background and Manifestation, KIPRED, October 2020, p.3. [http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Russia - Kosovo Political Background - Eng - Fin 616233.pdf](http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Russia_-_Kosovo_Political_Background_-_Eng_-_Fin_616233.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> The Kremlin, Meeting with the permanent members of the Security Council, 18 January 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/persons/511/events/59693>

<sup>10</sup> Lulzim Peci, Special Policy Brief, Russia's Information Warfare Against Kosovo: Political Background and Manifestation, KIPRED, October 2020, p.20. [http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Russia - Kosovo Political Background - Eng - Fin 616233.pdf](http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Russia_-_Kosovo_Political_Background_-_Eng_-_Fin_616233.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> KIPRED, Press Release: Fushata Dezinformuese e Mediave ruse dhe serbe ndaj Kosovës: Cfare mësimesh mund të nxirren nga monitorimi i mediave gjatë vitit 2020, February 25, 2020,

A careful analyses of the evidence gathered on the disinformation and propaganda against Kosovo from the Russian official sources (Kremlin, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Russian Permanent Mission to the United Nations, and the Russian Embassy in Belgrade) amplified by Moscow controlled media, shows that they are clustered around following targeted narratives in undermining the statehood of Kosovo<sup>12</sup>:

- Portraying independence and sovereignty of Kosovo as illegal and in violation of the international law, and comparing it with the Russian annexation of Crimea.
- Portraying Kosovo as a quasi, pariah and criminal state, that exercises violence against the local Serbian Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church, a threat to international security, hotbed of Islamic extremism, which also does not honor the agreements achieved in Brussels.
- Manipulating and trying to change the narratives on the Kosovo war by denying the war crimes committed by Serbia in Kosovo, presenting the Kosovo Liberation Army as a terrorist organization, state creature that was created through a “genocide” supported by Western countries against the Serbian population, exaggerating the number of Serb casualties during the war, degrading the international and domestic efforts in dealing with war crimes in Kosovo by putting at the forefront the issue of the Specialist Chambers and alleged “organ harvesting.”
- Undermining the role of the West in the state-building of Kosovo especially for rule of law and transitional justice, as well as for training and equipping the Kosovo Security Force, and accusing the US for the “secrecy” of the Bondsteel military base that functions under the mandate of the NATO’s led Kosovo Force (KFOR).

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<http://www.kipred.org/sq/lajmet/Fushata-Dezinformuese-e-mediave-ruse-dhe-serbe-kunder-Kosoves-Cfare-mesimesh-mund-te-nxirren-nga-monitorimi-i-mediave-gjate-vitit-2020-434>

<sup>12</sup> For further details see: Special Policy Brief, Russia’s Information Warfare Towards Kosovo: Political Background and Manifestation, KIPRED, October 2020, [http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Russia\\_-\\_Kosovo\\_Political\\_Background\\_-\\_Eng\\_-\\_Fin\\_616233.pdf](http://www.kipred.org/repository/docs/Russia_-_Kosovo_Political_Background_-_Eng_-_Fin_616233.pdf) and KIPRED, Press Release: Fushata Dezinformuese e Mediave ruse dhe serbe ndaj Kosovës: Cfare mësimesh mund të nxirren nga monitorimi i mediave gjatë vitit 2020, February 25, 2020, <http://www.kipred.org/sq/lajmet/Fushata-Dezinformuese-e-mediave-ruse-dhe-serbe-kunder-Kosoves-Cfare-mesimesh-mund-te-nxirren-nga-monitorimi-i-mediave-gjate-vitit-2020-434>

The responses of the Kosovo's foreign policy establishment to the Russian diplomatic and malign information operations against Kosovo, in the best case were very rare and ad-hoc. The careful look at the web-sites of the President, Government and the Foreign Ministry of Kosovo shows that there are very few public responses to the Russian efforts against Kosovo.

Against this background, the primary focus of this policy report is to review and assess the Kosovo Government's institutional capacities and inter-institutional coordination for countering the Russian diplomatic and information operations towards Kosovo. In this regard, the research will be focused on the Office of the President, the Office of the Prime Minister, as well as on the governmental ministries and other institutions, whose mandate covers the issues that are targets of the Russian disinformation narratives against Kosovo.

## **The Russian Malign Information Operations: Reflections of the Kosovo's Foreign Policy Establishment**

According to the interviewed high ranking officials of the cabinets of the Prime Minister of Kosovo and the former President, and of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosovo, there are several forms in which the country is affected by the Russian malign information operations.

In this regard, the Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, Teuta Sahatqija, observes that Russia has operated in various forms in the region in the last few decades. According to her, the Russian influence in the region is higher than that in Kosovo given the proximity of the Slavs and the Orthodox Church on the one hand, and the economic and military influence on the other. She argues that Kosovo's advantage is the anti-Russian mood of the majority of the population, while also the level of economic and military influence is negligible compared to the surrounding countries. In this vein, she stresses that the development of the information technology has “enriched” the malign activities of Moscow in the region and Kosovo, and has given to her another tool for asserting its influence.

Furthermore, Deputy Foreign Minister Sahatqija argues that in comparison with countries like North Macedonia and Montenegro, where Russia, in addition to the information warfare, has employed covert operations, including coup d'état attempt in Podgorica in 2016 or destabilization of situation after the general elections in Skopje, in the case of Kosovo the Moscow's malign operations are mainly limited to “cyber space” and diplomacy. Against this backdrop, she observes that the highest influence of Russia is on the international arena, especially regarding the campaign for de-recognition of Kosovo and against its membership in international organizations, which is conducted in coordination with Serbia, and harsh discourse and misinformation narratives presented, especially in the United Nations Security Council meetings on Kosovo.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Personal interview with Ambassador Teuta Sahatqija, Deputy Foreign Minister of Kosovo, February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

A high ranking member of the Prime-Minister's Office observes that it is evident that the Russian/Serbian engagement in Kosovo is systematic, professional, long-term, and against Kosovo's inclusion in Euro-Atlantic structures, especially in NATO. Furthermore, he argues that the long standing ties of Russia in the region have never been broken, and that Moscow's destabilizing efforts in the region cannot be explained as a coincidence, but rather as an implementation of a deliberated policy.<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, a political adviser to former President Thaçi, Ardian Arifaj, argues that although not much is known in the public opinion about Russian malign operations against Kosovo, they are displayed in several forms. Russia acts subtly, mainly by disseminating disinformation through the media controlled by the Kremlin's establishment. In the international arena, Russia is spreading the narratives that aim to contest the statehood and the sovereignty of Kosovo, the role of Washington and Brussels on its state-building, and weaken their authority, whereas, domestically, it is aiming to cause uncertainty about Kosovo's position on the international stage.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, he argues that dealing with the Russian "hybrid war" seems to have not been sufficiently understood by Kosovo institutions and that the depth of this risk is undervalued. Kosovo must respond to this "war" itself. A brief look at the regional and European media shows how far behind Kosovo is in confronting the campaign of Russia and Serbia. He also claims that the political class of Kosovo must understand that from the campaign against Kosovo coming from Moscow, everyone in Kosovo is a loser and there are no winners, given the fact that the very statehood is violated and the right of Kosovo independence is contested by Russia, which represents one of the main risks for Kosovo.<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Kosovo's public diplomacy responses to these Russian malign information operations have been rather ad-hoc and sporadic. The focus of these responses was limited mainly to the debates in the meetings on Kosovo of the United Nations Security Council, in which

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<sup>14</sup> Personal Interview with a high ranking official of the Cabinet of the Prime-Minister of Kosovo, February 2021

<sup>15</sup> Personal interview with Ardian Arifaj, former political adviser to the President of Kosovo, February 19, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Kosovar authorities participate as guests, where the country is usually presented by the Ambassador of Kosovo to the United States, as well as with occasional participation of the country's Foreign Minister, Prime-Minister and President. On the web-sites of Kosovo's President,<sup>17</sup> Prime-Minister,<sup>18</sup> and the Foreign Ministry, one can hardly find any post directly related to Russian malign information operations towards Kosovo, with the exception of the post of Kosovo's Foreign Ministry of February 26, 2021.<sup>19</sup> Against this backdrop, a high ranking official of the Prime Minister's Office, concludes that it is naivety to believe that the response to Russian/Serbian destabilizing actions against Kosovo will be prevented by the international community, as long as Kosovo does not make systematic investments in this regard.<sup>20</sup>

This research evidence clearly shows that in despite of the awareness on the risk posed by Moscow, the Kosovo's state authorities have not undertaken so far any serious steps in addressing in a systematic manner the Russian malign information operations and diplomatic war against the country. The lack of Kosovo's strategic response to these Russian efforts in undermining its statehood has detrimental effects on its integration within international community. Failure of Kosovo in joining UNESCO, Interpol and World Trade Organization, as well as withdrawal of recognitions by more than ten countries are also impacted by Prishtina's lack of proactive policy towards Moscow. Furthermore, Kosovo has neither a foreign policy strategy, nor a strategic direction in place for dealing with contemporary hardships with which the country is confronted under the new circumstances of international politics marked by a revival of a Cold War 2.0 between the United States, and Russia and China on one hand, and trans-Atlantic tensions and disunity on the statehood of Kosovo, on the other. Under these circumstances, while Serbia has a powerful ally - Russia that is strong enemy of Kosovo and the West, none of the powerful Western friends of Kosovo is an enemy of Serbia, whose diplomatic war against Kosovo is conducted in full conjunction with Kremlin. These circumstances require undertaking

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<sup>17</sup> <https://president-ks.gov.net/en/search-results/?search=Russia>

<sup>18</sup> <https://kryeministri-ks.net/en/page/2/?s=Russia>

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/single\\_lajmi/4313](https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/single_lajmi/4313)

<sup>20</sup> Personal Interview with a high ranking official of the Cabinet of the Prime-Minister of Kosovo, February 2021.

immediate steps by the Kosovo Government in strengthening its foreign relations capacities to deal with these contemporary challenges.

## **Kosovo's Government Foreign Policy Establishment Capacities**

The Constitution and the legal framework of Kosovo assigns to the President, Prime-Minister and the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Diaspora particular competencies for formulation, implementation and leading of the foreign policy of the country.

In this regard, the Constitution of Kosovo, among others, attributes the President of the country with competences of representation and leading of the foreign policy of the country.<sup>21</sup> The Office of the President of Kosovo is composed by the Cabinet of the President (Chief of Staff, Political Advisers, support staff) and the civil staff that is led by the Secretary of the Office of President.<sup>22</sup> The Office of the President of Kosovo has 79 employees.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, according to Arifaj, the Office of the President of Kosovo has had at least one political adviser that has followed information on the Russian malign information operations and has recommended respective responses. In this regard, the Office of the President has used its key “weapon,” namely the opportunity to address public opinion and to speak in international forums in order to raise the alarm on the Russian threats to Kosovo and the region, and on the efforts of the West in building a sustainable peace in Kosovo and the region.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Art 84 (1) and 84 (10) of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Constitution1Kosovo.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Art 14-17 of Law No. 03/L-094 on the President of the Republic of Kosovo, promulgated on January 2009, [https://president-ks.gov.net/repository/docs/LAW\\_No\\_03L\\_094\\_ON\\_THE\\_PRESIDENT\\_OF\\_THE\\_REPUBLIC\\_OF\\_KOSOVO.pdf](https://president-ks.gov.net/repository/docs/LAW_No_03L_094_ON_THE_PRESIDENT_OF_THE_REPUBLIC_OF_KOSOVO.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> Law No. 07/L-041 on the Budget Appropriations for the Budget of the Republic of Kosovo for the Year 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, No.1, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://mf.rks-gov.net/desk/inc/media/1F14DA73-6925-49B6-883E-014550C6E3C8.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> Arifaj.

On the other hand, the Kosovo's Constitution gives to the Government of Kosovo the competencies of proposing and implementation of the foreign policy of the country,<sup>25</sup> and to the Prime-Minister, the competencies of leading the Government<sup>26</sup> and of consultation with the President on the implementation of foreign policy and on the matters of intelligence.<sup>27</sup> The Office of Prime Minister, without counting the governmental agencies that function under its auspices, has 112 employees, including civil staff led by the Secretary General of the Office of Prime-Minister and political appointees.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, within the Prime-Ministry, the Office of Public Communication that is comprised by six employees, has specific functions and responsibilities, including the one to require information on weekly bases from the Ministries' Offices of Public Communication with regard to policies and other activities of the Ministries, and of providing regular reports from international media for the Prime-Minister, Government Spokesperson and Ministries.<sup>29</sup> But, according to a high ranking official of the Prime-Minister's Cabinet, there is not a specific desk or officer within the Prime-Minister's Office or at any other level of the Kosovo Government, who deals Russia.<sup>30</sup>

The legal framework of Kosovo assigns to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Diaspora the fundamental competency of formulation and implementation of the country's foreign policy,<sup>31</sup> reporting to the President and the Government of Kosovo, coordination with the President and Prime-Minister over the strategic direction and most important issues of the Kosovo's foreign policy.<sup>32</sup> The Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, including the Diplomatic Service of Kosovo

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<sup>25</sup> Article 93 (1), Art 84 (1) and 84 (10) of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, <http://www.kryeministri-ks.net/repository/docs/Constitution1Kosovo.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Article 94 (1) and 94 (5).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, Article 94 (7) and (9).

<sup>28</sup> Law No. 07/L-041 on the Budget Appropriations for the Budget of the Republic of Kosovo for the Year 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, No.1, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://mf.rks-gov.net/desk/inc/media/1F14DA73-6925-49B6-883E-014550C6E3C8.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> The Office of Prime-Minister, Office of Public Communication. 1.2, 1.11 and 3, <https://kryeministri-ks.net/en/the-prime-minister-office/offices/office-of-public-communication-opc/>

<sup>30</sup> Personal interview with a high ranking official of the Cabinet of the Prime-Minister of Kosovo.

<sup>31</sup> Article 3.2, Law 03/L-044 on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diplomatic Service of Kosovo.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 3.2 (h).

has 389 employees,<sup>33</sup> including 33 embassies and diplomatic missions.<sup>34</sup> In terms of organization, the Department of Bilateral Relations of the Ministry is in charge for covering Russia. The mandate of this department is to cover bilateral relations of all the continents of the globe with the exception of Europe, namely USA and Canada, Asia and Pacific, Africa and the Americas, Russia and Eurasia, and Middle East and Arab Countries.<sup>35</sup> This department is, among others, tasked with drafting policies on specific countries of these geographical areas and analysis related to bilateral relations, and cooperation with the Presidency, Office of the Prime Minister and line Ministries with regards to bilateral relations with these states. Nevertheless, within the Ministry there is not a single officer who speaks Russian, or who covers Russia systematically and on daily bases.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the Kosovar MFAD has not a basic expertise on Russia.<sup>37</sup>

Given these evidences, it is obvious that the organization of the MFAD, training and allocation of its personnel are in huge discrepancy with the requirements of Kosovo's foreign policy needs and objectives, especially with regard to the diplomatic war and the malign information operations of Russia against Kosovo. In addition to unfitting organization of the MFAD in dealing with Russia's threat, the Ministry has not drafted a foreign policy strategy that would give a strategic direction to Kosovo's institutions and its diplomatic service.

Against this background, the Deputy Foreign Minister Sahatqija points out that MFAD is an important diplomatic institution, which must deal regularly and systematically with the Russian diplomatic war that thoroughly harms Kosovo in the international arena. Ad-hoc and uncoordinated reactions on social media by Kosovo's officials are far from being sufficient in countering Russian malign information operations against Kosovo. She argues that in addition to institutional capacity building and coordinated efforts with its allies for countering the Russian

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<sup>33</sup> Law No. 07/L-041 on the Budget Appropriations for the Budget of the Republic of Kosovo for the Year 2021, Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo, No.1, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2021. <https://mf.rks-gov.net/desk/inc/media/1F14DA73-6925-49B6-883E-014550C6E3C8.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, Embassies of the Republic of Kosovo, <https://www.mfa-ks.net/misionet/493/ambasadat-e-republiks-s-kosovs/493>

<sup>35</sup> Department of Bilateral Relations, Ministry for Foreign Relations and Diaspora, <https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/ministria/532/departamenti-pr-marrdhnie-dypalshe/532>

<sup>36</sup> Personal interview with a high ranking official of the Prime-Minister's Office, February 2021

<sup>37</sup> Personal conversation with a high ranking official of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora of Kosovo, February 2021

threat, Kosovo Government should invest in digital diplomacy and on improving the image of the country abroad in cooperation with civil society, media and businesses<sup>38</sup>.

The Political Adviser to the former President, Ardian Arifaj, argues that the Russian campaign can be "fought" only in cooperation and coordination of all the institutions of Kosovo, i.e. coordination of civil government institutions, security mechanisms, and NGO-s specialized in security issues, and with the support of Kosovo's international partners, whose interests are at stake from the Russian anti-western stance and its influence in the region. He points out that the political institutions should cooperate with security mechanisms and international partners to prepare respective national foreign policy and security strategies to deal with the Russian threat to Kosovo and beyond. In this regard, he claims that, in addition to diplomacy, one of the most important battlefields of Kosovo in dealing with Russia are domestic and foreign public opinions, and he proposes that civil society and media should be included in education and information campaigns, in order to strengthen the institutional and societal resilience. Furthermore, he thinks that allocating funds for campaigns outside Kosovo is another step that needs to be taken in countering Russia's malign information operations against Kosovo. Although these information, promotion, and lobbying campaigns, are costly, according to him, the price that Kosovo is going to pay will be much higher if it does not counter systematically these Russian operations.<sup>39</sup>

Finally, a high ranking official of the Prime-Minister's Cabinet, observes that, surprisingly, Kosovo institutions have not established institutional mechanisms to monitor developments in Russia and Serbia, and to oppose their destabilizing actions. He points out that in the continuation of Kosovo's efforts for Euro-Atlantic integration, that are also impeded by the Russian influence, investments should be made in the establishment of respective research structures as well as on the opposition to destabilizing actions, both at home and abroad.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Sahatqija.

<sup>39</sup> Arifaj.

<sup>40</sup> Personal interview with a high ranking official of the Prime Minister's Office, February 2021.

## Capacities of other relevant Governmental Institutions

The large scope of anti-Kosovo and anti-Western narratives that are pursued by the Russian foreign policy mechanisms and its controlled media, requires concerted approach of Kosovo's Government in responding to these features of Moscow's disinformation operations against the country. For building systematic and credible counter-narratives against Russian malign information operations, first and foremost there is a need for building a system of information across the Kosovo Government, which until now was inexistent.

In this regard, in addition to the Office of the President, Office of the Prime-Minister, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, given the scope and clusters of the Russian disinformation narratives against Kosovo, it is of primary importance to have a permanent involvement of the Ministry of Interior Affairs and Public Administration, for providing the data on crime rates in the country, especially on those related to Serbian Community, Orthodox Church, and religious extremism, then, the Ministry of Justice and the Judicial Council of Kosovo, for the data related to war crimes, the Ministry of Defense for the data related to Kosovo Security Force and the international defense cooperation, and the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, for the data related to the Serbian Orthodox Church sites in Kosovo, whereas the other ministries could be involved on occasional bases.

In terms of institutional capacities, the Ministry of Interior Affairs and Public Administration is well equipped for providing the data that are necessary for countering Russia's information warfare against Kosovo. In this regard, within the Department of Public Security there is in place the Division for Research and Statistics (DRS), which, among other things, is tasked to conduct research, statistical analysis and collection of information in the field of general security, and to provide draft analyses and statistical reports on daily, weekly, monthly, semi-annual and annual basis on incidents/crimes and public safety.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration of Kosovo, Division for Research and Statistics (DRS), <https://mpb.rks-gov.net/f/77/Division-for-Research-and-Statistics>

On the other hand, within the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Transitional Justice and support of the crime victims has been established recently. This department, among others, is tasked to support gathering and documentation of the facts related to war crimes committed in Kosovo until the June 10<sup>th</sup>, 1999, and establishing and keeping the database for documentation of the war crimes and war damages.<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the Judicial Council of Kosovo has a fundamental role to play in this venture, due to the fact that it possess comprehensive data on the cases that have been adjudicated within the justice system in Kosovo.<sup>43</sup> If provided in an appropriate format, by including also the cases of war crime trials, these data may become an important tool in countering the Russian narratives against Kosovo.

Within the Ministry of Defense there are in place two departments that are of fundamental importance for dealing with the Russian threat, namely the Directorate for Defense Policies and the Directorate for Intelligence and Security. The Department for Policies and Strategy, and its Section for Development and Analyses that are part of the Directorate for Defense Policies, among others, is in charge for conducting analyses and making assessments of regional trends in the defense and security area,<sup>44</sup> which for the case of Serbia's trends and its defense cooperation with Russia are necessary. The Directorate for Intelligence and Security and its Department for Collection and Analyses, among others are tasked to "collect, process, evaluate, analyze, and distribute data and information as well as present intelligence products related to groups and organizations with threatening activities of foreign countries, [...], that may threaten or endanger the activity of MoD and KSF for the security of the country, protection of integrity, territorial integrity and constitutional order,"<sup>45</sup> and "based on warning indications, makes long-term forecasts for risks and potential threats for MoD/KSF and the Republic of Kosovo."<sup>46</sup> A number of

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<sup>42</sup> Department for Transitional Justice and Support of the Crime Victims, Ministry of Justice of Kosovo, <https://md.rks-gov.net/page.aspx?id=1,162>

<sup>43</sup> See for example: Statistics from General annual report, Kosovo Judicial Council, <https://www.gjyqesori-rks.org/statistics/?lang=en>

<sup>44</sup> Article 10 (1.1), REGULATION (GRK) NO. 07/2019 ON INTERNAL ORGANIZATION AND SETTLEMENT OF JOB POSITIONS IN THE MINISTRY OF DEFENSE 2, April 26, 2019, [https://mod.rks-gov.net/repository/docs/RREGULLOREQRK\\_NR\\_072019\\_P\\_R\\_ORGANIZIMIN\\_DHE\\_SISTEMATIZIMIN\\_E\\_VENDEV\\_E\\_T\\_PUN\\_S\\_N\\_MINISTRIN\\_E\\_MBROJTJES\\_nga\\_ZKM.pdf](https://mod.rks-gov.net/repository/docs/RREGULLOREQRK_NR_072019_P_R_ORGANIZIMIN_DHE_SISTEMATIZIMIN_E_VENDEV_E_T_PUN_S_N_MINISTRIN_E_MBROJTJES_nga_ZKM.pdf)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, Art. 47 (2.10).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, Art. 47 (2.6).

products that these two Directorates of the Ministry of Defense can provide, if delivered in an appropriate form, may have crucial importance, not only on countering reactively or proactively, but also for anticipating specific Russian malign information operations against Kosovo.

Finally, within the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, functions the Department of Cultural Heritage,<sup>47</sup> which is addition of being in charge for the entire cultural heritage in Kosovo, has to deal also with the special protective zones related to the heritage of Serbian Orthodox Church,<sup>48</sup> which are important elements of the Russian malign narratives against Kosovo.

Given the evidence provided above, it can be concluded that Kosovo has basic institutional capacities to deal with the Russian malign information operations, but the key deficiencies in this regard are the weaknesses of the country's foreign policy establishment, especially of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora, that has not built until now the basic capacities to deal with Russia, both, in terms of institutional knowledge and of structure, as well as a total lack of governmental inter-institutional coordination.

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<sup>47</sup> Department of Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports of Kosovo, <https://www.mkrs-ks.org/?page=2,10>

<sup>48</sup> Law No. 03/L-039, Ligji per zonat e veçanta të mbrojtura, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=2529>, February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

## Countering Russian Malign Information Operations: The Way Forward

The current circumstances related to the Russian malign information operations need an immediate response by the Kosovo Government, both in establishing the respective structures, and in capacity building. Since establishing of this structure must start from the scratch, there is a need initially to build a basic structure that in few years can evolve into a strong governmental institution that can effectively counter the malign information operations of Russia and other countries against Kosovo.

In order to meet immediate needs, the Government of Kosovo needs to establish a Strategic Communication Task Force, whose main mandate would be to counter Russian and other malign operations against Kosovo, with the special focus on international organizations like United Nations, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Council of Europe, as well as on diplomatic missions accredited in Moscow and Belgrade, where the heartlands of Russian malign information operations against Kosovo are based. The fundamental duties of this task force should be analyzing Russian malign information operations against Kosovo, drafting counter and proactive narratives for responding to Moscow, as well as anticipating its narratives and operations.

An issue of fundamental importance in this direction is ensuring the coordination of the Office of the President, Office of the Prime Minister and the MFAD, for responding to Russia. In order to ensure concerted efforts of the foreign policy establishment of Kosovo on this matter, the political decision-making structure of the Strategic Communication Task Force may be comprised by the representatives of the President's Office, Prime-Minister's Office and the Cabinet of the Foreign Minister of Kosovo, who will be in charge for deliberating respective political decisions on responding to the Russian diplomatic war against Kosovo.

On the other hand, since the mandate of the General Directorate of the Foreign Ministry, among others is to provide advice in the areas covered by its departments,<sup>49</sup> in this case by the

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<sup>49</sup> General Directorate, Ministry of Foreign Relations and Diaspora of Kosovo, <https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/ministria/528/drejtori-i-prgijthshm/528>

Department of Bilateral Relations that covers Russia,<sup>50</sup> the Director General of the Foreign Ministry of Kosovo can play the role of the Secretary of this Task Force. His/Her main role should be to provide advices on possible responses to the declarations of the Russian officials and media on Kosovo, which should be tracked on the daily bases by at least one responsible officer with appropriate knowledge on Russia in the Department of Bilateral Relations, who should be appointed as soon as possible by the Ministry. The role of the Director General should also entail the tasks of providing advice on counter-narratives and proactive narratives against Russia's malign information operations..

Against this background, the Task Force is necessary to build a permanent liaison with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Public Administration (Department of Public Security and its Division for Research and Statistics), Ministry of Justice (Department for Transitional Justice), Kosovo Judicial Council, Ministry of Defense (Directorate of Defense Policies and Directorate for Intelligence and Security), and the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (Department of Cultural Heritage).

These governmental bodies should provide assistance to the Task Force in order to ensure timely and qualified responses to the Russian malign information operations and narratives against Kosovo. Their main task should be to provide information at their disposal to the Secretary of the Task-Force, either upon the request, or proactively. On the specific matters that cannot be covered by these institutions, when necessary, the Secretary of the Task Force should liaison with other respective governmental institutions of Kosovo in order to get a timely and qualified information.

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<sup>50</sup> Department of Bilateral Relations, Ministry of Foreign Relations and Diaspora,

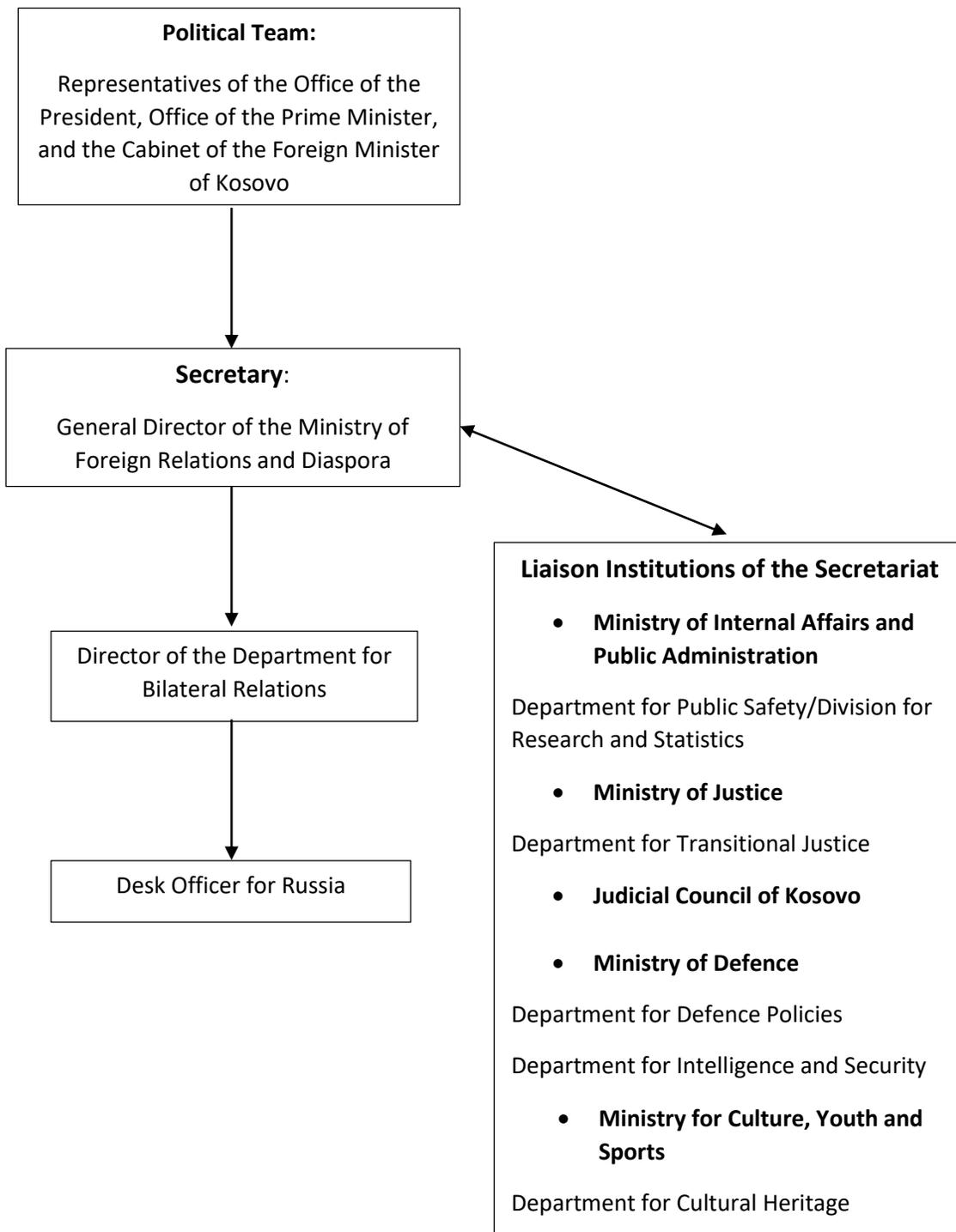


Fig.1. Recommended Structure of the Strategic Communication Task Force

The proposed structure, as such, will not be sufficient for addressing the Russian malign information operations that are amplified by the Moscow controlled media. First and foremost, in order to be able to provide qualified and timely outputs, within this structure should be embedded a profound knowledge on the methods of Russian disinformation strategies and tactics, and getting skills on countering the disinformation and narratives pursued by Moscow.

Secondly, the possession of advanced knowledge on political, military and diplomatic history of Russia, with the special focus on the Putin's era, as well as its economy, is necessary to deal in a professional manner with Moscow. In this regard, Kosovo's foreign policy establishment lacks the basic knowledge on these topics, and not a single investment has been made by the Kosovo Government to build these capacities.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Personal conversation with a senior official of the Foreign Ministry of Kosovo, February 2020

## **Recommendations:**

Having in consideration the findings of this policy report on Kosovo Government's institutional capacities and inter-institutional coordination, KIPRED proposes the following recommendations for overcoming the deep shortcomings of Kosovo for countering and exposing the Russian diplomatic and malign information operations towards Kosovo:

- Kosovo Government should:
  - Adopt as soon as possible a decision for establishing a Strategic Communication Task force to deal with malign operations of Russia and other countries targeted against Kosovo.
  - Draft a new Foreign Policy Strategy that will be adapted to the contemporary international politics, including Russian malign influence on Kosovo.
  - Draft an Action Plan for countering Russian diplomatic war against Kosovo and its malign information operations that are amplified by the media controlled by Moscow.
  - Allocate funds and fundraise for capacity building needs of Kosovo to counter Russian diplomatic war and malign information operations.
  - Allocating funds for promotion and lobbying on Kosovo abroad.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora should:
  - Appoint immediately at least one desk officer on Russia within the Department of Bilateral Relations.
  - Organize courses of the Russian language for the needs of Kosovo's Foreign Service, and other governmental institutions and agencies.
  - Organize courses on the methods of the Russian disinformation strategies and tactics and on countering the disinformation and narratives for the personnel of Kosovo's Foreign Service, other governmental institutions and agencies, think tanks and media.

- Organize courses on political, military and diplomatic history of Russia for the personnel of Kosovo's Foreign Service, other governmental institutions and agencies, think tanks and media.