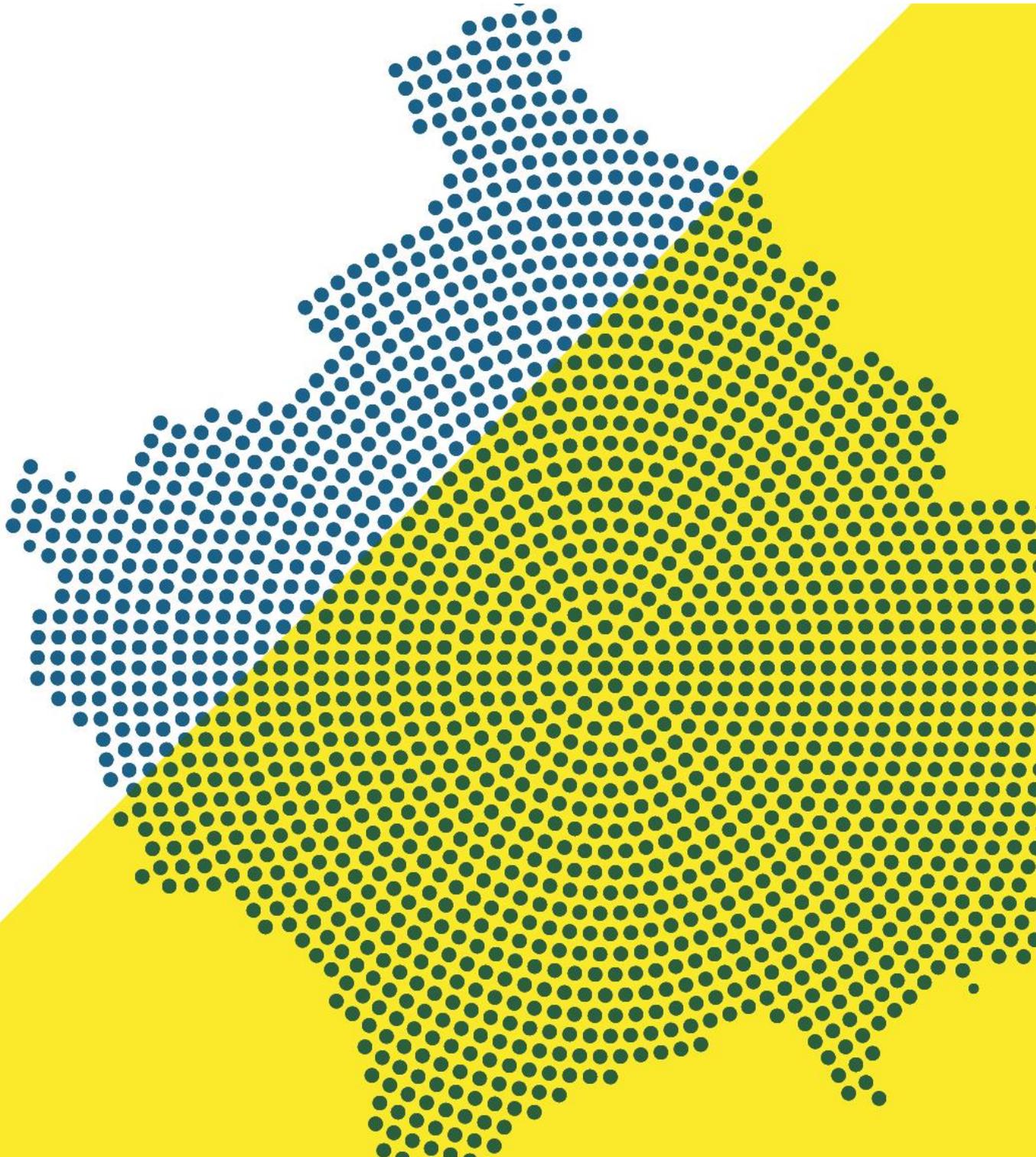


Kosovo Observer:

**Russian Diplomatic Warfare
and Media Disinformation**

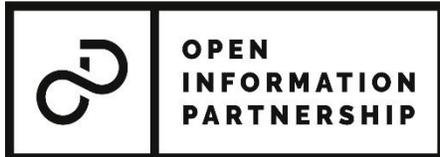
**November 1, 2021 –
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BASIC INFO:

Kosovo Observer: Russian Diplomatic Warfare and Media Disinformation – is a quarterly report that analyses public statements and publications of the Russian foreign policy establishment and the features of the news containing disinformation and misinformation targeting Kosovo, published by Russian media in English and Serbian Language

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CONTACT:

Kosovar Institute for Policy Research and Development (KIPRED)

Str. Major Mehmet Bushi, H.III/1, 10 000 Prishtina, Kosovo

Tel: +383 (0)38 542 778

Web-site: www.kipred.org

Email: info@kipred.org

PREPARED BY:

Lulzim Peci

Executive Summary

The Kosovo Observer: Russian Diplomatic Warfare and Media Disinformation is a quarterly report that aims to analyse public statements, press briefings, articles, and other documents, published on the web-sites of Kremlin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the Russian Permanent Mission to the United Nations, the Permanent Mission of Russia to OSCE, the Permanent Russian Representation to the Council of Europe, the Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, and the Russian Embassy to Serbia, which are the key exponents of the Russian diplomatic war against Kosovo. In addition, this Observer analyses the patterns of the news containing disinformation on Kosovo, published by the preselected media, namely Russia Today, Sputnik International, Sputnik Serbia, Meduza, Russia Insider, TASS, The Moscow Times, Newsfront, Unz, The Duran and Pravda Report, which are an extended hand of the Russian Foreign Policy establishment in its diplomatic warfare against Kosovo.

In this regard, the analyses of the statements, briefings, articles, and other documents of the Russian foreign policy establishment, issued from November 1st 2021 to January 15th, 2022, show that during this period that coincides with preparations for the invasion in Ukraine, the Moscow's foreign policy establishment has elevated the level of the misuse of Kosovo in its diplomatic warfare against the West. In addition to Crimea, Moscow is now comparing the behaviour of the Government of Kosovo with that of Ukraine, and that of the northern part of Kosovo with the separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk, at the same time when it is victimizing ethnic Russians in Ukraine and ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. Against this backdrop, it has continued to manipulate the narratives of NATO intervention in former Yugoslavia, undermining the statehood and sovereignty of Kosovo, undermining the credibility of the EU engagement in the Prishtina - Belgrade dialogue in parallel with the Brussels' role in the implementation of the Minsk Agreement, accuse Kosovo and the West that their aim is to have the "Balkans powder keg" explode, by specifically targeting the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Kosovo and the Head of the OSCE Mission, the British Ambassador Davenport, and to portray the Serbian community and Orthodox Church in Kosovo as threatened and oppressed. Most interesting, it is almost obvious that in the meeting between President Putin and Vučić of November 25th, 2021, has been discussed the upcoming Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border, and possible Russian – Serbian coordination on their aims in the Western Balkans in the light of the upcoming Putin's aggression in Ukraine.

The news containing disinformation and misinformation of malign character on Kosovo, published during this period by the media mentioned above, were mainly focused on undermining the credibility of the Western engagement in the state building of Kosovo and in the Prishtina – Belgrade dialogue, followed by those whose focus was on undermining the legality of the statehood and sovereignty of Kosovo, on portraying the Serbian Community and Orthodox Church in Kosovo as oppressed and threatened, and on changing the narratives of war and war crimes in Former Yugoslavia.

Russian Diplomatic Warfare on Kosovo

During this period, the Kremlin, Russian Foreign Ministry, the Russian Permanent Mission to the OSCE, and the Russian Embassy to Serbia have targeted Kosovo, directly, or in a broader context, in a number of statements, briefings for journalists, and press statements, whereas the Permanent Mission of Russia to the United Nations, the Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, and the Permanent Russian Representation to the Council of Europe, have not posted on their web-sites any publications related to Kosovo. Against this background, the following text will present and discuss the topic based on chronological analysis of these targeted activities of the Russian diplomatic warfare against Kosovo.

In this regard, on November 3rd, 2021, the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry Maria Zakharova¹ accused Kosovo Albanians for worsening the situation in the region and for bringing it to the edge of escalation with the support of the West, by specifically targeting diplomats of the United Kingdom. She stated that “the situation in the Balkans is getting worse, the fuse of the Balkans powder keg can be lit at any moment due to the actions of Kosovo extremists, with the complicity or direct encouragement of Western patrons”. According to her, the source of this problem are “Albanian ultranationalists who took power there and who are especially active in showing their muscles ahead of the local elections,”² as well as their Western supporters that “in 1999 launched a NATO aggression on Yugoslavia with the aim of tearing Kosovo away from Serbia, without taking into account the numerous human casualties”, who are also trying to push Serbia “to give up national interests and historical memory”. In this context, in an unprecedented attack, she accused Great Britain for directly encouraging the “Kosovo provocateurs”, by stating that “anti-Serbian arbitrariness was blessed by the British ambassador in Pristina and his compatriot who is at the head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo”³.

In a press conference on November 13th, 2021, following his visit to Paris, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov accused European Union for its incapability to pressure Kosovo to implement the agreement on the Association of the Serbian Majority Municipalities, by trying to undermine its credibility. He stated that “the European Union, acting as the UN General Assembly’s mediator, is

¹ Sputnik Serbia, Zaharova: Balkansko bure baruta u svakom trenutku može da plane, November 3rd, 2021, [Zaharova: Balkansko bure baruta u svakom trenutku može da plane - 03.11.2021, Sputnik Srbija \(sputniknews.com\)](https://sputniknews.com/srbija/zaharova-balkansko-bure-baruta-u-svakom-trenutku-moze-da-plane-03-11-2021/)

² The first and the second round of the Municipal Elections in Kosovo took place on October 17th and November 14th, 2021, respectively.

³ Ibid.

unable to implement the decisions adopted with its assistance by Belgrade and Pristina in 2013” aiming primarily at the agreement to establish the Community of Serb (Majority) Municipalities in Kosovo, which, according to him, would “allow Serbs to retain their identity in this territory”⁴.

On the other hand, on the occasion of the meeting with the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić on November 25th, 2021, President Putin paid a special attention to the military cooperation between Moscow and Belgrade, whereas regarding cooperation at international stage, he solely underlined the “settlement in Kosovo”, by stressing the support for the position of Serbia.⁵

In this vein, on December 9th, 2021, the Permanent Representative of Russia to the OSCE, Mr. Alexander Lukashevich, started his statement on the security situation in the Western Balkans⁶ by labeling Kosovo as “Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija”, regardless of the fact that the OSCE uses the term Kosovo to address the country. He accused “Kosovar Albanians” for trying to take over the “Serb populated areas” in the northern part of Kosovo and for exercising violence against Serb civilians, when this obviously was not a case.

In this regard, it has to be noted that Kosovo Police did not use force during its “preemptive protection” operation of the border-crossings of Jarinje and Brnjak with Serbia, and that this problem was solved with an agreement on vehicle registration plates facilitated by the European Union and the United States, achieved in Brussels on September 30th, 2021, whereas on October 13th, 2021 Kosovo Police conducted cross-country operation against smuggling and organized crime, including the north of the country.

Furthermore, he accused without any evidence the UK intelligence for organizing “disturbances” on October 13th, 2021, thus putting again London at the forefront of criticism against the West in Kosovo. In addition, he accused Kosovo for incidents involving Serb orthodox religious heritage sites, specifically the case of the Orthodox Church in the town of Zvečan/Zvečan, that was burglarized on 30 November, 2021, by ignoring the fact that this municipality that is located in the north of the country, is almost 100% populated by Serbian population and that Kosovo Police station in this

⁴ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to media questions following his visit to France, Paris, November 12, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1785967/

⁵ Talks with President of Serbia of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, The Kremlin, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67194>

⁶ Statement by Mr. Alexander Lukashevich, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation at the 1348th meeting of the OSCE Permanent Council on the security situation in the Western Balkans.

[Alexander Lukashevich on the security situation in the Western Balkans, 9 December 2021 - Speeches and Interviews of the Permanent Representative - Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the OSCE \(mid.ru\)](#)

municipality is comprised predominantly by Kosovo Serb police officers, who are in charge for the safety of the local population.

On the other hand, the Russian Ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandar Bocan-Harchenko, in his presentation on the topic of “Russian–Serbian Strategic Partnership and the situation in the Balkans”, organized by the Belgrade Institute of International Politics and Economy organized on December 14th, 2021⁷, considered that the condition put to Serbia to recognize Kosovo is a stupidity, and that linking the implementation of the agreements with the recognition of Kosovo by Serbia is impossible and damaging. Furthermore, he insisted that EU should pressure Kosovo to implement all the signed agreements, while stating that in the contrary, the EU will lose credibility.

In an interview given to the Bosnian newspaper “Oslobodjenje” on December 24th, 2021⁸, the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov denied existence of Russian malicious influence in the region, and for this narrative he accused the “local Russophobes”, by adding that this “probably serves the interests of some extra-regional actors” [the West] that prefer “fishing in muddy water.” Furthermore, he accused the West for dragging into NATO certain countries of the region by ignoring the will of their people (Montenegro), and blamed NATO for its interventions in 1990’s. Regarding Kosovo he stated the already repeated position of Moscow that Belgrade and Pristina should achieve “a mutually acceptable solution based on UNSC 1244”, and that this should be approved by the UN Security Council.

In a press briefing of January 13th, 2022, the spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, in a reaction to the declaration as a person non-grata by the Foreign Ministry of Kosovo of the Russian UNMIK official Andrey Nikolaevich Antonov, on December 31st, 2021, stated among others that this act is “a continuation of the Kosovo authorities’ provocative policy aimed at purging those UN Mission members who have an objective perspective on the situation on the ground”⁹. Nevertheless, as media in Kosovo have reported, according to an UNMIK official identified with initials as P.T., Antonov was exercising pressure on Serbian political structures in the municipalities

⁷ Sputnik Serbia, Jasna poruka ambasadora Rusije: Uslov da Srbija na kraju prizna nezavisnost Kosova je — glupost, December 14th, 2021, [Jasna poruka ambasadora Rusije: Uslov da Srbija na kraju prizna nezavisnost Kosova je – glupost \(sputniknews.com\)](https://www.sputniknews.com/jasna-poruka-ambasadora-rusije-uslov-da-srbija-na-kraju-prizna-nezavisnost-kosova-je-glupost/)

⁸ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s interview with the newspaper Oslobodjenje on the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations established between the Russian Federation and Bosnia and Herzegovina on December 26, 1996, published on December 24, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1791944/

⁹ Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, January 13, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/fr/press_service/spokesman/briefings/1794251/?lang=en

with Serbian majority and was involved in the blockages in the northern part of Kosovo in September 2021¹⁰.

However, a major change of the Russian narratives towards Kosovo has been introduced by the Foreign Minister Lavrov in an interview given to the Moscow based Channel One's political talk show "The Great Game" on January 13, 2022¹¹. In his statement he put in the same package of comparison the Minsk agreements and the agreement on the Association of Serbian Majority Community Municipalities (ASM) in Kosovo, as well as the ASM with the Donetsk and Lugansk separatist regions. He stated that "the agreement on ASM envisaged providing autonomous rights to the Serbs, which is strongly reminiscent of what is spelled out in the Minsk agreements for the Donetsk and Lugansk people's republics", and presented both of them through the lenses of Pan-Slavism, by emphasizing that "these agreements concern the rights of the Slavs, especially the Orthodox Christian Slavs". It is obvious that by these statements, Minister Lavrov aims to victimize the Serbian Community in Kosovo similarly with the Russians in the separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk that have been used as an excuse for military intervention in Ukraine.

In addition, in his remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2021, Moscow, January 14, 2022, Foreign Minister Lavrov further clarified his comparison of the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities with the separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk by blaming the EU for the lack of implementation of both agreements¹². Interestingly, according to him, the ASM aims to give only the Serbs in the northern part of Kosovo "major rights of autonomy on cultural, humanitarian, language and educational matters, as well as in the area of special ties with Serbia", which are similar to the rights that have "been approved for the Donetsk and Lugansk republics in the Minsk Package of Measures." In this statement, Lavrov clearly aimed at the revision of the agreement of the ASM, and at projecting the northern part of Kosovo similarly with the ambitions of the two separatist regions of Ukraine.

¹⁰ Gazeta Express, Rusi "non grata" i UNMIK-ut, po bënte presion mbi serbët e veriut, December 13, 2021, <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/rusi-non-grata-i-unmik-ut-po-bente-presion-mbi-serbet-e-veriut/>

¹¹ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview on Channel One's "The Great Game" political talk show, Moscow, January 13, 2022, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's interview on Channel One's "The Great Game" political talk show, Moscow, January 13, 2022 - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1794396/?lang=en)

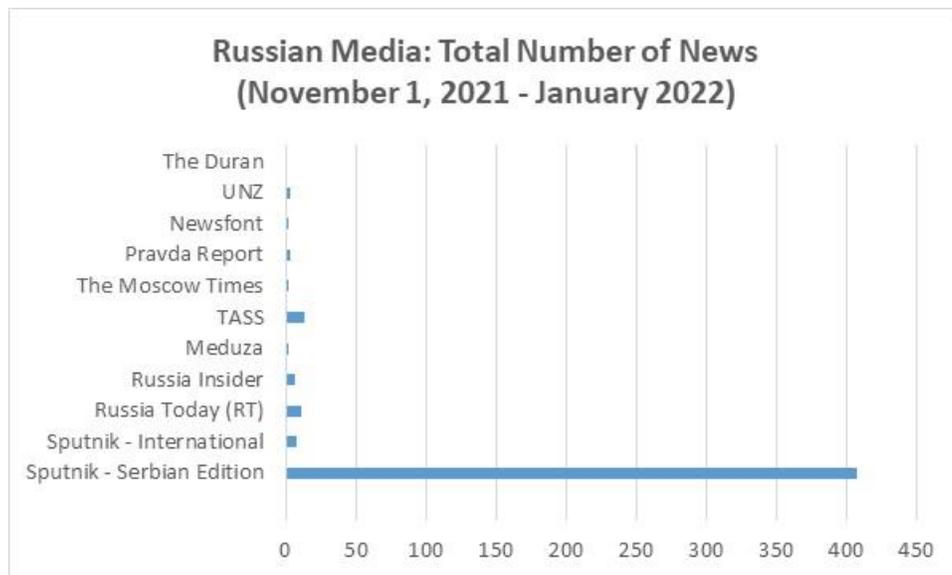
¹² Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a news conference on Russia's foreign policy performance in 2021, Moscow, January 14, 2022, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/1794396/?lang=en

Furthermore, he accused the EU that it was involved in drafting of both these documents, namely, the entire European Union in the case of Association of the Serbian Majority Municipalities, and in the case of the Minsk Agreement, the EU represented by Germany and France in the Normandy format, and that those were not implemented by “Pristina in the case of Kosovo and the Kiev regime in the case of the Minsk agreements”. It is interesting that the comparison of Kosovo with Crimea ceased, and that now Kosovo has started to be compared with Ukraine, simultaneously with the comparison of the situation in the northern part of Kosovo with that of separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk.

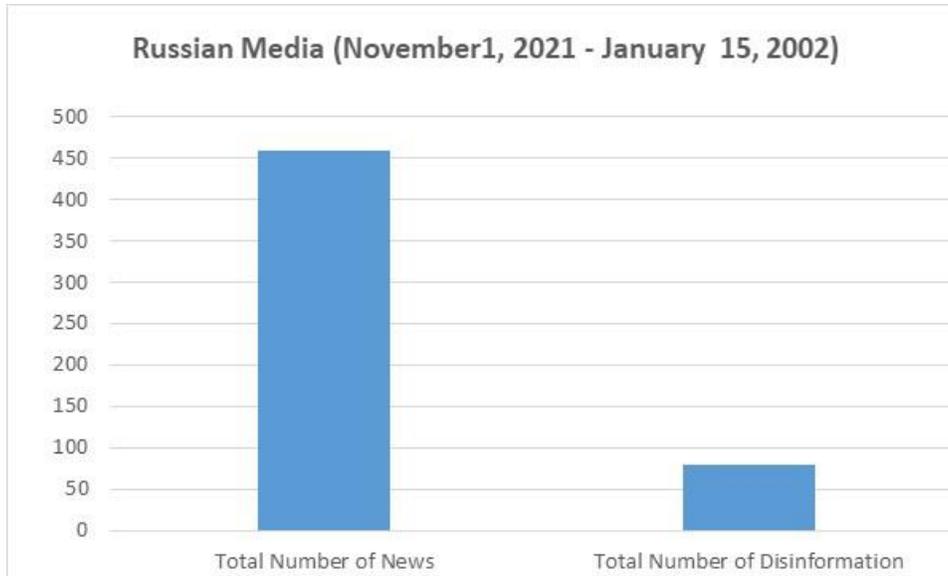
Russian Media Disinformation on Kosovo

The preselected media outlets originating in Russia that were monitored from November 1, 2021, to January 15th, 2021, are Sputnik International, Sputnik Serbia, Russia Today, Meduza, Russia Insider, TASS, The Moscow Times, Newsfront, Unz, The Duran and Pravda Report.

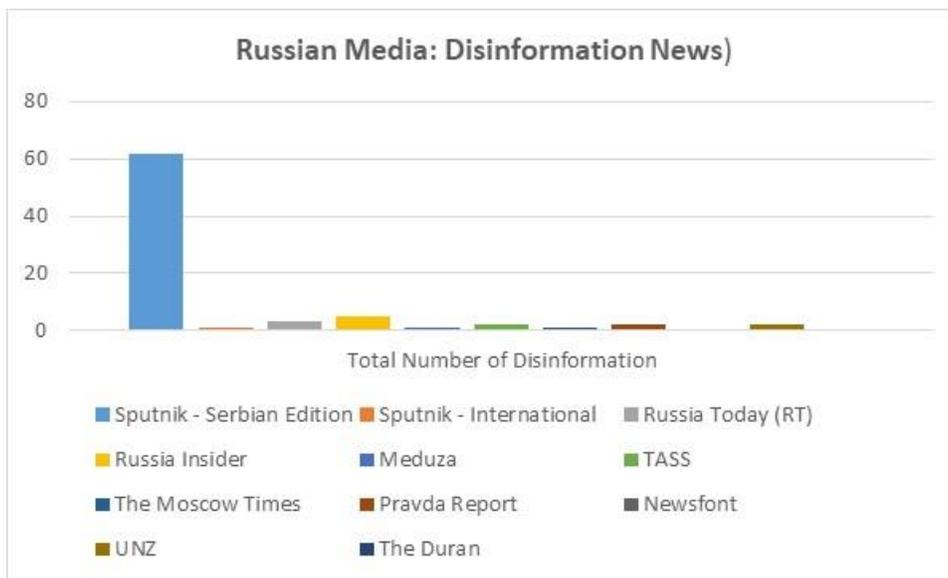
The monitoring of data shows that during this period these media outlets have published 598 news related directly and indirectly to Kosovo. Sputnik–Serbian Edition has published 408, TASS 13, Russia Today 11, Sputnik International 8, Russia Insider 6, Pravda Report 3, UNZ 3, Meduza 2, Moscow Times 2, Newsfront 2, and The Duran none.



An overview of the published news by these media conducted by KIPRED shows that out of 458 news related directly or indirectly to Kosovo, 79 (17,2%) of them contained disinformation.



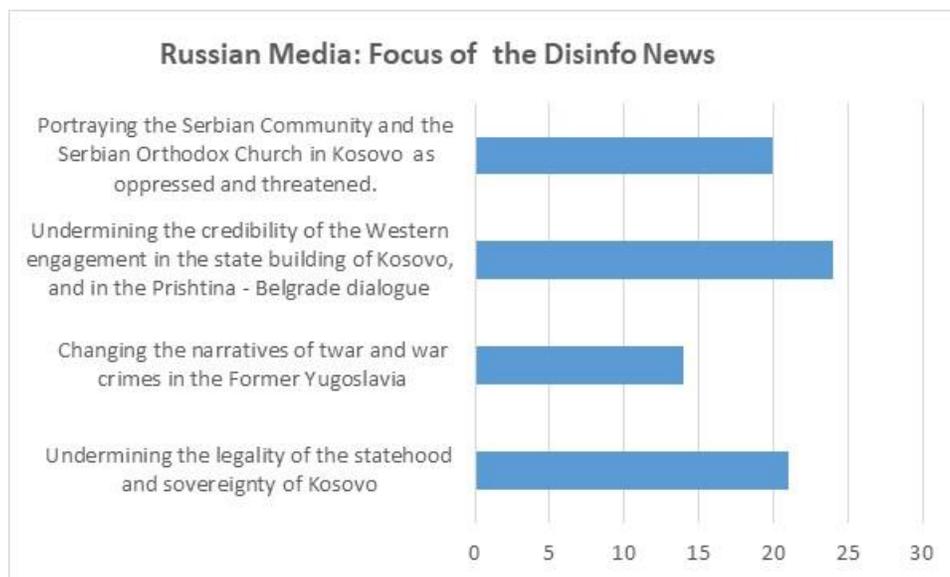
The largest number of disinformation was published by Sputnik Serbia (62), followed by Russian Insider (5), Russia Today (3), TASS (2), Pravda Report (2). UNZ (2), Sputnik International (1), Meduza (1), Moscow Times (1), Newsfront (0) and The Duran (0).



In order to have a better overview of the disinformation patterns targeting Kosovo, in the news published by the above-mentioned Russian media outlets, the main focus of their content was clustered around the following disinformation aims:

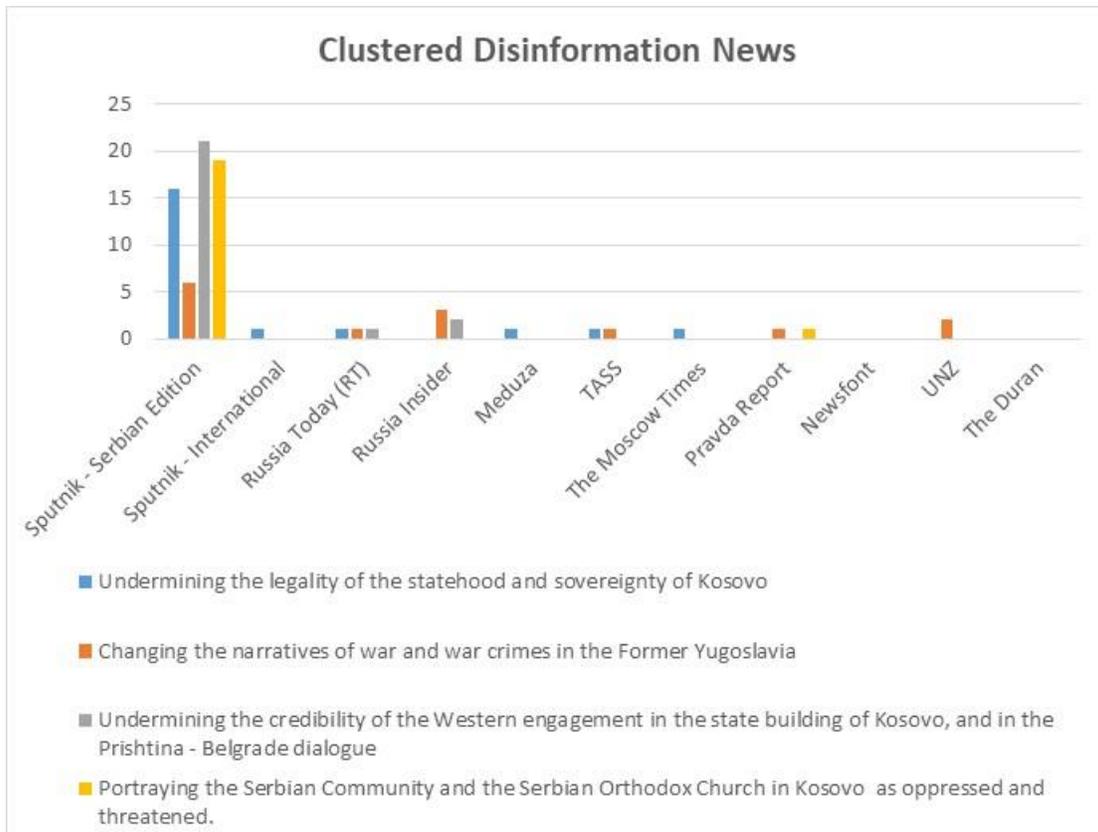
- Undermining the legality of the statehood and sovereignty of Kosovo.
- Changing the narratives of war and war crimes in Former Yugoslavia.
- Undermining the credibility of the Western engagement in the state building of Kosovo and in the Prishtina – Belgrade dialogue.
- Portraying the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo as oppressed and threatened.

Regarding the content of the news containing disinformation, published by these Russian media outlets, the largest number of them was aiming to undermine the credibility of the Western engagement in the state building of Kosovo, and in the Prishtina – Belgrade dialogue (24), then, to undermine the legality of the statehood and of sovereignty of Kosovo (21), followed by the portraying of the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo as oppressed and threatened (20), and changing the narratives of war and war crimes in Former Yugoslavia (14).



The analysis of the patterns of the clustered disinformation news published by the above-mentioned Russian media outlets shows that they are mainly focused on undermining of the credibility of Western

engagement in the state building of Kosovo, on undermining the legality of the statehood and of the sovereignty of Kosovo, then, on portraying the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo as oppressed and threatened, as well as on the Prishtina - Belgrade dialogue. Interestingly, the disinformation news aiming at changing the narratives of war and war crimes in the Former Yugoslavia have caught much less attention of these media outlets than in the previous report.



Conclusion

An important development in the Russian diplomatic warfare against the West and Kosovo that occurred during this period is the shift in its narratives on the verge of Putin's aggression in Ukraine. In his two declarations, given on January 13th and 14th, 2022, Foreign Minister Lavrov compared the two Russian dominated separatist regions of Ukraine, Donetsk and Lugansk, with the Serbian dominated northern part of Kosovo, and the Minsk Agreement with that of Association of the Serbian Majority Municipalities in terms of the rights of the Russian and Serbian populations in these two respective territories. Furthermore, for the "lack of implementation", Lavrov blames the "impotence" of the European Union to push Kyiv and Prishtina to honor these two agreements, respectively.

The attacks against the West in Kosovo were specifically focused on the Embassy of the United Kingdom in Kosovo, the Head of the OSCE Mission in Kosovo – UK Ambassador Michael Davenport, and on the British Intelligence for plotting against Serbian community in Kosovo by supporting the Kosovo Police intervention in the northern part of Kosovo that was part of an anti-organized crime operation that took part across Kosovo on October 13th, 2021, and for "supporting" the decision of the Kosovo Government and Parliament not to let the referendum on the constitutional changes of Serbia to take place within the territory of Kosovo.

On the other hand, Kremlin has issued short introductory statements of the meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Serbian President Alexander Vučić that took place on November 25th, 2021 in Sochi,¹³ in despite of the fact that the meeting itself lasted around three hours. Furthermore, according to the Serbian TV Pink, quoted by the Radio Free Europe, Vučić left the meeting by being proud on the military-technical cooperation with Russia, and he prayed for a fast arrival to Serbia of certain tactical weapons, by citing specifically the anti-tank weapons. Most interestingly, Vučić stressed the urgency of shipment of these Russian weapons since according to him *"there will be other important major things of strategic interest for Serbia in the future, and not in the distant future,"* where he added "so we will have the first things before the end of the year in Serbia".¹⁴

¹³ Talks with President of Serbia of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, The Kremlin, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67194>

¹⁴ Radio Free Europe, Russian, Serbian Presidents Emerge From Meeting With Talk Of Gas Deal, 'Tactical' Weapons, 25 November, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/putin-vucic-gas-weapons/31579354.html>

Having in mind these declarations of Vučić, it is almost obvious that in the meeting with President Putin they have discussed the upcoming Russian military buildup on the Ukrainian border, and possible Russian – Serbian coordination on their aims in the Western Balkans in the light of the upcoming Putin’s aggression in Ukraine. It has to be noted that one week after Vučić’s meeting with Putin, the US media reported about the military aims of Kremlin towards its neighbor¹⁵. In this regard, the comparison of the separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk with the northern part of Kosovo by Minister Lavrov, remains a matter of concern regarding possible coordination of Serbian and Russian actions in relation to Kosovo and the Western Balkans.

Against this backdrop, the absurd comparisons of Kosovo and NATO’s intervention, with Crimea and separatist regions of Donetsk and Lugansk of Ukraine, as well as the past ones with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, used by Putin’s regime leaves no doubts that they are pursued to justify the aggressions and hegemonic policies in the Russia’s “near abroad” that are naked from the basic norms of respect for human rights and of international law.

Finally, the analyses of the discourse of the news containing disinformation and malign misinformation (79) of the preselected media outlets, which are an extended arm of Moscow, show that, in general, they follow the narratives of Russia’s foreign policy establishment, and that the Sputnik Serbia, Sputnik International, Russia Today and TASS remain at the forefront of these malign information operation against Kosovo.

¹⁵ Washington Post, Russia planning massive military offensive against Ukraine involving 175,000 troops, U.S. intelligence warns, 3 December 2021.