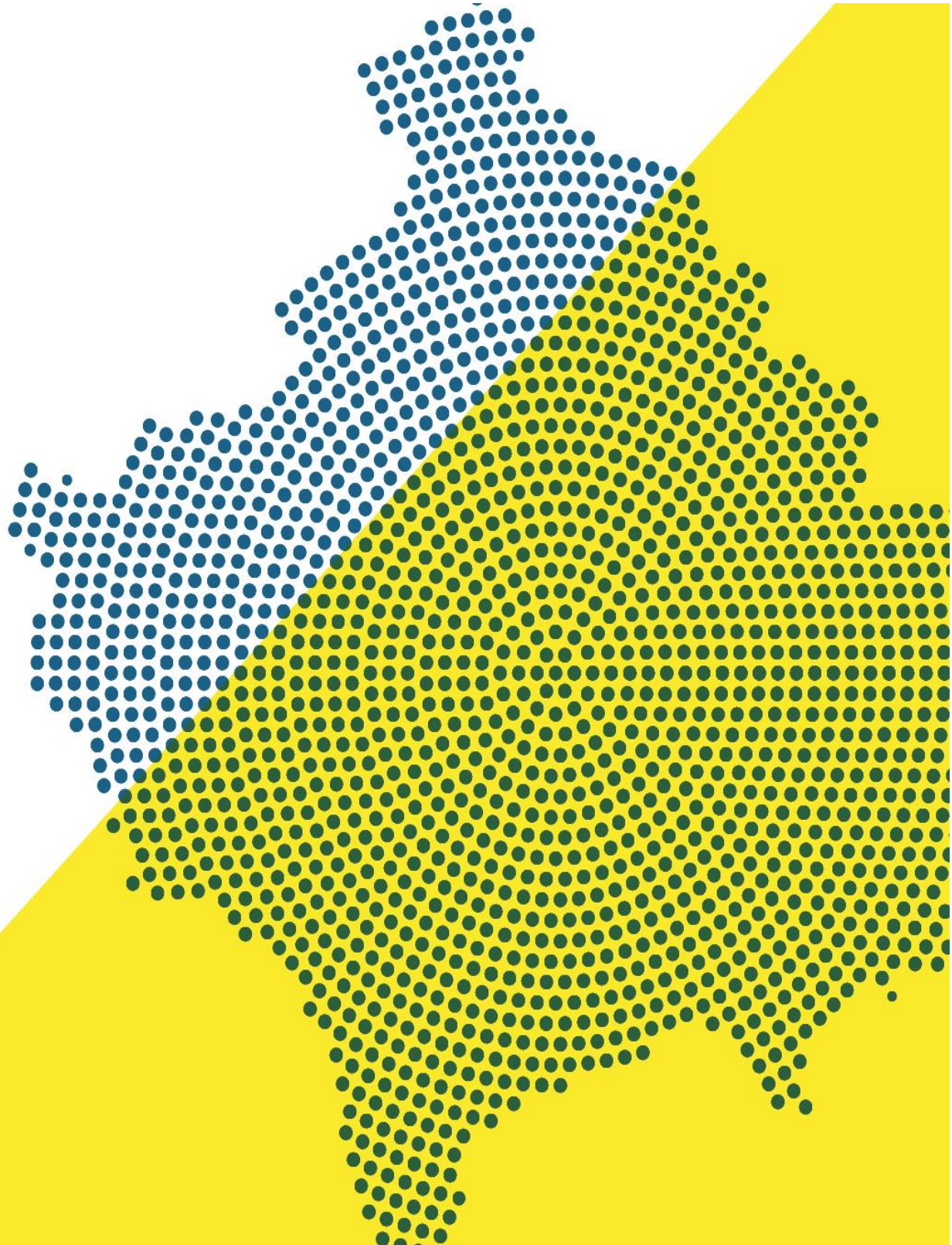


Kosovo Observer:

Russian Diplomatic Warfare
and Media Disinformation

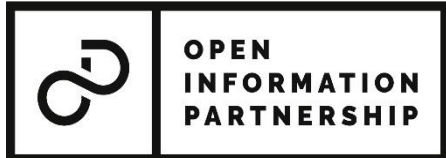
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Kosovo Observer: Russian Diplomatic Warfare and Media Disinformation – is a quarterly report that analyses public statements and publications of the Russian foreign policy establishment and the features of the news containing disinformation and misinformation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

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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 August 15th to October 31st, 2021, shows that during this period the Moscow's foreign establishment was focused on undermining the statehood and sovereignty of Kosovo, and comparing it with the illegal annexation of Crimea, undermining the credibility of the Western engagement in the state building of Kosovo and in the Prishtina - Belgrade dialogue, condemning the actions of the Kosovo Police in the northern part of Kosovo and for waging an “anti-Serbian violence,” and with harsh reactions on declaring of two Russian diplomats accredited at UNMIK as non-grata by Kosovar authorities.

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

Russian Diplomatic Warfare on Kosovo

In this period, the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Russian Permanent Mission to the United Nations, the Russian Permanent Mission to the EU, and the Russian Embassy to Serbia have targeted Kosovo, directly, or in a larger context, in a number of statements, briefings for journalists, and press statements, whereas the Kremlin, the Permanent Mission of Russia to OSCE 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 a topic based chronological analysis of these targeted activities of the Russian diplomatic warfare against Kosovo.

In this regard, in an interview given to the “Euractiv” on September 9th, 2021,¹ which was focused primarily on the situation in Afghanistan and Ukraine, the Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU, Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov, tried to justify the illegal annexation of Crimea by stating that the Western position on this aggressive act has a poor legal standing, and questioning it by stating: “Why should the West consider an arbitrary decision by Khrushchev in 1954, in contravention of all the legislation that existed at that time, to be the legal basis for what is happening today? Whereas the referendum which took place in 2014 was a clear expression of popular will of the Crimean population,” and ironically accusing them for recognizing Kosovo without any referendum, as the independence of Kosovo was questioned by the vast majority of its population.

Against this background, according to a press-release issued by the Russian Foreign Ministry,² the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with the Foreign Minister of Serbia Seljaković on September 25th, 2021, in the margins of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly, in which they noted a “common general approach” towards Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, thus highlighting their coordination towards these two countries. In this vein, in a highly critical speech towards the

¹ Interview by Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU, Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov for "Euractiv", 9 September 2021, [Interview by Permanent Representative of Russia to the EU Ambassador Vladimir Chizhov for "Euractiv", 9 September 2021 - News - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#), posted on September 13, 2021

² Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s conversation with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Nikola Selaković, September 25th, 2021, [Press release on Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s conversation with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia Nikola Selakovic - The UN General Assembly - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#)

West in this session of the General Assembly of the United Nations,³ in which, among others, he accuses the West for creating an “artificial entity of Kosovo” by forcefully seizing it from Serbia and by recognizing it afterwards, and justifies the illegal annexation of Crimea with the internationally non-recognized referendum of 2014, by which “the Crimean people were trying to break free from the ultra-radicals who were behind the coup in Ukraine supported by the West.”

These Russian revisionist policies of the de facto not recognition of inter-state borders of the former Soviet Union republics, and of questioning the legality and legitimacy of the recognition of Kosovo by the West, present one of the reasons of its malign activities in the Western Balkans. These revisionist policies aim also at questioning the validity of inter-state borders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by supporting the separatist tendencies of the leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, by misusing the independence of Kosovo while keeping hostile position towards it, and by comparing it with Crimea, in order to destabilize the South East Europe and undermine the Western long term stability and security involvement in the region.

On the other hand, the Spokeswomen of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, on September 24, 2021,⁴ condemned Kosovar authorities for not allowing a journalist team of Izvestia, two of them Russian citizens, Denis Bolshakov (correspondent) and Oleg Berkach (operator), and one Belorussian citizen, Sergei Belous (translator), to enter the territory of Kosovo at the cross-border crossing Jarinje with Serbia, by stating among other things that “A provocation was perpetrated against two Russian correspondents from Izvestia Multimedia Information Centre (Channel 5), with the involvement of provisional self-government bodies of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija (KiM), which behave like bodies of lawless arbitrariness.” The Russian Foreign Ministry, and journalists of Izvestia, knew very well that for entering Kosovo, Russian citizens must obtain an entry visa issued by the Kosovo Embassy in Tirana, or the General Consulate in Istanbul,⁵ and that the Kosovo Border Police has acted accordingly, but her statement is an obvious attempt to undermine

³ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s address at the General Debate of the 76th session of the General Assembly, New York, September 25, 2021, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s address at the General Debate of the 76th session of the General Assembly, New York, September 25, 2021 - The UN General Assembly - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#)

⁴ Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova’s comment on the Kosovo Albanian information provocation against Russian journalists, September 24th, 2021, [Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova’s comment on the Kosovo Albanian information provocation against Russian journalists - Conflicts - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#)

⁵ Kosovo Foreign Ministry, https://www.mfa-ks.net/en/sherbimet_konsullore/503/kush-ka-nevoj-pr-viza-t-kosovs/503

the independence and sovereignty of Kosovo, and she goes further by using a derogatory term “Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija (KiM),” which cannot be found not even in a single United Nations official document.

Furthermore, in a “Comment on the situation in Kosovo,” posted by the Russian Foreign Ministry on September 28th, 2021,⁶ Zakharova accuses Kosovo Government for escalation of tensions in the north of the country, by claiming that “Civilians, among whom there are victims, are subjected to violence. Several people have been hospitalized.” However, the reality was completely different, given that during this crisis in the northern part of Kosovo, the Kosovo Police did not use force at all during its “preemptive protection” of the border-crossings of Jarinje and Brnjak with Serbia, and that it was solved with an agreement on vehicle registration plates between two countries, facilitated by the European Union and United States, achieved in Brussels on September 30th, 2021.⁷ In this vein, on September 30th, 2021, in a briefing with journalists, the Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Alexey Zaytsev, accused Kosovo authorities for the crisis in the north of the country, and denied the accusations of Kosovo’s President Osmani that “the Belgrade authorities, influenced by Russia, are inciting tensions in northern Kosovo and trying to destabilise the entire region.”⁸

Nevertheless, this statement does not reflect absence of Russian malign involvement in this crisis. On September 26th, 2021, the Russian Ambassador to Belgrade Alexander Botsan-Kharchenko in a company with the Serbian Defense Minister Stefanović, inspected the Serbian military forces near the border with Kosovo, which were in the state of an elevated combat readiness. Paradoxically, from there he supported “Belgrade’s efforts to de-escalate a very dangerous situation,” and accused the EU and the U.S. for “applying double standards and for closing their eyes to a situation that they did not want to understand, including who was to be blamed for what was happening.”⁹ At a joint news

⁶ Comment by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Mikhail Zakharova, on the situation in Kosovo, September 28th, 2021, [Comment by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the situation in Kosovo - News - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4875750)

⁷ Serbia, Kosovo Reach Compromise To End Border Deadlock, Radio Free Europe, September 30th, 2021, <https://www.rferl.org/a/kosovo-serbia-border-agreement/31485862.html>

⁸ Briefing with journalists, the Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Alexey Zaytsev, September 30th, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4875750

⁹ Euractiv.rs, Northern Kosovo situation sparks international response, September 27th, 2021, https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/northern-kosovo-situation-sparks-international-response/

conference following the meeting with Serbia's President Vučić on October 10th, 2021,¹⁰ the Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, among other things, restated President Putin's stance that, as an outcome of the dialogue with Kosovo, Russia will accept any decision that suits Serbia and Serbian people, that this "matter" should be based solely on the UNSC Resolution 1244, and that this final decision should be submitted to the UNSC for approval. Ironically, he added that Russia presumes that the U.S. will use its significant influence on Kosovo to "come to agreements that will be in line with the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and suit our Serbian friends," and he criticized the EU for not being able to convince Kosovo to establish the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities. This statement of Lavrov, in essence indicates Kremlin's intention to play on the card of double veto in order to block achievement of any agreement for comprehensive normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia, firstly, by trying to provide a "virtual veto" to Belgrade in the dialogue, by requiring that the outcome should suit solely the interest of Serbia, in order to keep it as a solid base of its influence in the region, on one hand, and by implicitly threatening to veto at the UN Security Council any agreement that does not suit Russian interests, that is, to block possible Kosovo's UN membership and to keep indefinitely open the Kosovo – Serbian dispute, on the other. The most sarcastic part of this statement is the Russian "presumption" that the US will push an agreement that will suit solely the interest of Serbia and ignore the ICJ Advisory Opinion of July 2010, which, among others, stated that the Declaration of Independence of Kosovo has not violated the UNSC Resolution 1244.

In this vein, the Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswomen, Zakharova, in a comment on the statement of October 10th, 2021, of the Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama, on "the unification of Kosovo with Albania," accused the West as curators of independence of Kosovo, for being silenced on this statement of Rama, while "attacking Belgrade for its justified Serbian World humanitarian concept that does not run counter to international law."¹¹ This statement of Zakharova was followed by the statement of the Serbian Interior Minister, Aleksander Vulin, who "explained" the "humanitarian concept" of "the Serbian World" by stating that the only barrier to "Greater Albania," and the only

¹⁰ Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vučić, Belgrade, October 10th, 2021, [Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks and answers to media questions at a joint news conference following talks with President of the Republic of Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, Belgrade, October 10, 2021 - Conflicts - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#)

¹¹ Comment by Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswomen, Zakharova, on the statement of Prime Minister Edi Rama, October 10th, 2021, [Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the statement by Prime Minister of Albania Edi Rama - Conflicts - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#)

force that will enable the Serbs to not make any decisions influenced by others is the Serbian political unity and the creation of a “Serbian world.”¹²

Yet, in another comment of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, of October 14th, 2021¹³, the Spokeswoman Zakharova, as a reaction to the Kosovo Police cross-country operation against smuggling and organized crime, that took place on October 13th, 2021, accused the Kosovar authorities for invading “the Serb populated areas in the North of Kosovo” by labeling it as a “recurrence of anti-Serbian violence” in Kosovo. Furthermore, she urged KFOR to implement its mandate under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and “bring to heel the rampaging Kosovo Albanian radicals,” by using offensive terms not suitable to any diplomat. This reaction expresses the objective of Russia to keep the north of Kosovo as an area without the rule of law and out of the reach and control of Prishtina, as a place where it may exert its influence among local Serbian radicals, and thus keep the situation tense with an image of a “frozen conflict,” in order to subsequently erode the sovereignty of Kosovo in this part of the country.

In the same vein was also the statement of the Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at the UNSC briefing on the situation in Kosovo, of October 15th, 2021¹⁴, in which he initially offended Kosovo’s President, Vjosa Osmani, by stating that her statement was a propaganda pamphlet and a tail. Among other things, he portrayed the situation of Serbs in Kosovo as a deteriorating one, he condemned the development of military capabilities of the Kosovo Security Force, accused Kosovo government for not implementing the agreement on the Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities, strongly opposed Kosovo’s membership to international organizations, and insisted that only UNMIK is entitled to present the “province.”

Nevertheless, the reactions of Russia got harsher, when, on October 22nd, 2021, the Kosovo Foreign Ministry declared as non-grata two Russians diplomats of the Russian Embassy Office in Prishtina accredited to UNMIK, Denis Vengerski and Alexey Kryvosheev, due to “undermining the national security and the constitutional order” of Kosovo. In an immediate reaction following this decision, the Press Service of the Russian Embassy in Belgrade stated, “We do not recognize the ‘independence’

¹² B92, Serbia's response to "unification of Albania and Kosovo", October 10th, 2021,

https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2021&mm=10&dd=10&nav_id=111942

¹³ Comment by Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswomen, Zakharova, on the recurrence of Anti-Serbian violence in Kosovo, October 14th, 2021, [Comment by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on the recurrence of anti-Serb violence in Kosovo - Conflicts - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](#)

¹⁴ Statement by Permanent Representative Vassily Nebenzia at UNSC briefing on the situation in Kosovo, October 15th, 2021, [Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations \(russiaun.ru\)](#)

of Kosovo and thus the ‘government’ of the province and other ‘structures’. For us, no ‘decisions’ of Pristina have legal force,” and “based on the UN Security Council Resolution 1244, we are cooperating with UNMIK on this issue,” by adding that this is “absolutely unacceptable attempt to obstruct UNMIK-accredited diplomats from carrying out their activities in accordance with international law.”¹⁵ In addition, in a comment of October 23rd, 2021, the Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Zakharova called this decision of Kosovo authorities as a “gross anti-Russian provocation.” Furthermore, she stated that “by all indications,” this is “a purposeful provocation in order to serve the Western project of creating a puppet Albanian-populated state entity pursuing an aggressive policy, not least aimed against Russia, its constructive role in the Balkans.”¹⁶ Furthermore, in a press briefing of October 28th, 2021,¹⁷ she could not deny the existence of a verbal note of the Embassy Office of Russian Federation in Prishtina, addressed to the Foreign Ministry of Kosovo on November 27th, 2020, which the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kosovo, Meliza Haradinaj, posted on her twitter account.¹⁸ Instead, making public of this verbal note Zakharova considered that aimed at convincing Kosovo public that the Russia’s position towards Kosovo and the UNSC Resolution 1244, is “changing and teetering”. Nevertheless, according to the Kosovo Police, the Russian diplomats declared as non-grata left the territory of Kosovo at the Merdare border-crossing with Serbia in afternoon of October 23rd, 2021.

¹⁵ Sputnik Serbia, Rusija odgovorila Prištini: Ne priznajemo ni tzv. Kosovo ni odluke “vlade,” October 22nd, 2021, [Rusija odgovorila Prištini: Ne priznajemo ni tzv. Kosovo ni odluke „vlade“ \(sputniknews.com\)](https://sputniknews.com)

¹⁶ Comment by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry, Maria Zakharova, in connection with the anti-Russian provocation of Pristina, October 23rd, 2021, [Comment by Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova on Pristina’s anti-Russian provocation - News - Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](https://mid.ru)

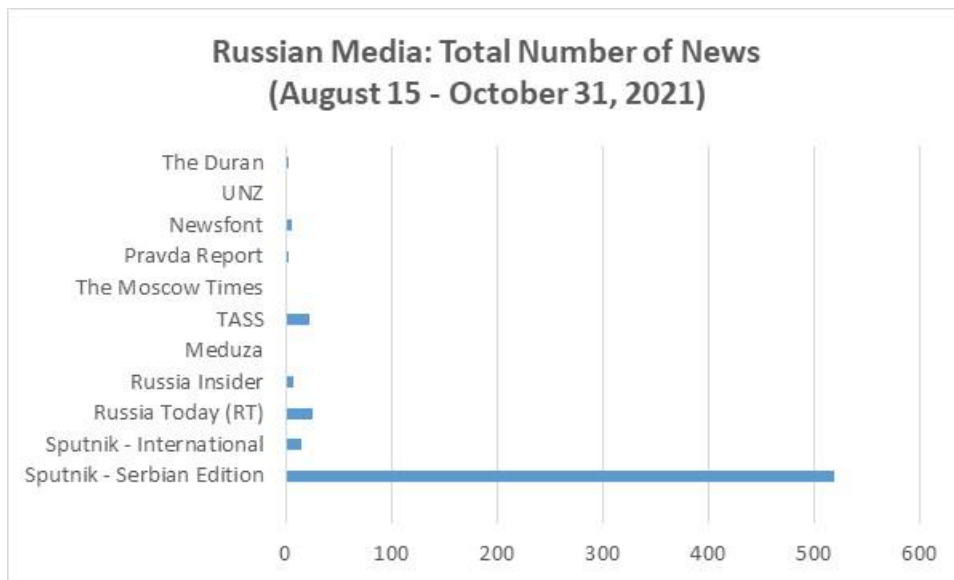
¹⁷ Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, October 28, 2021, [Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, Moscow, October 28, 2021 - News - The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation \(mid.ru\)](https://mid.ru)

¹⁸ https://kallxo.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/FCVL_5cXMAgepHk.jpg

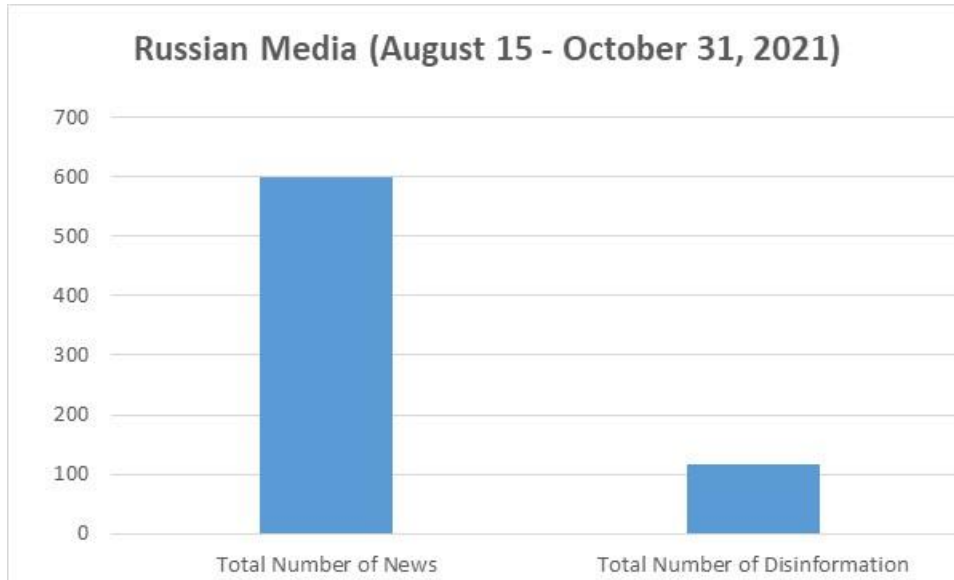
Russian Media Disinformation on Kosovo

The preselected media outlets originating in Russia that were monitored from August 15th to October 31st, 2021, are Russia Today, Sputnik International, Sputnik Serbia, Meduza, Russia Insider, TASS, The Moscow Times, Newsfront, Unz, The Duran and Pravda Report.

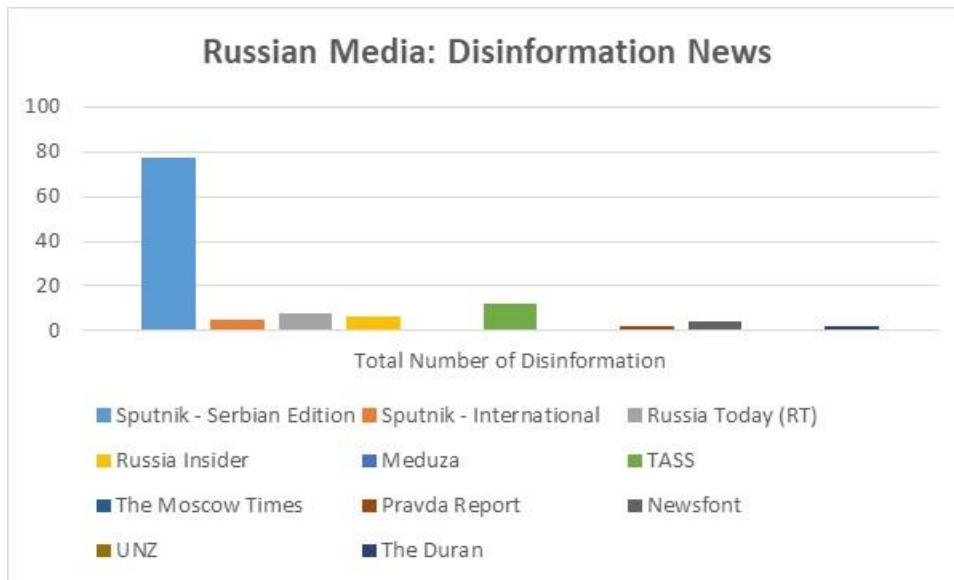
The monitoring of data shows that during this period these media outlets have published 598 news related directly and indirectly to Kosovo. Sputnik–Serbian Edition has published 519, Russia Today 25, TASS 22, Sputnik International 15, Russia Insider 7, Newsfront 6, Pravda Report 2, The Duran 2, Meduza none, Moscow Times and UNZ none.



An overview of the published news by these media conducted by KIPRED shows that out of 598 news related directly or indirectly to Kosovo, 116 (19,4%) of them contained disinformation.



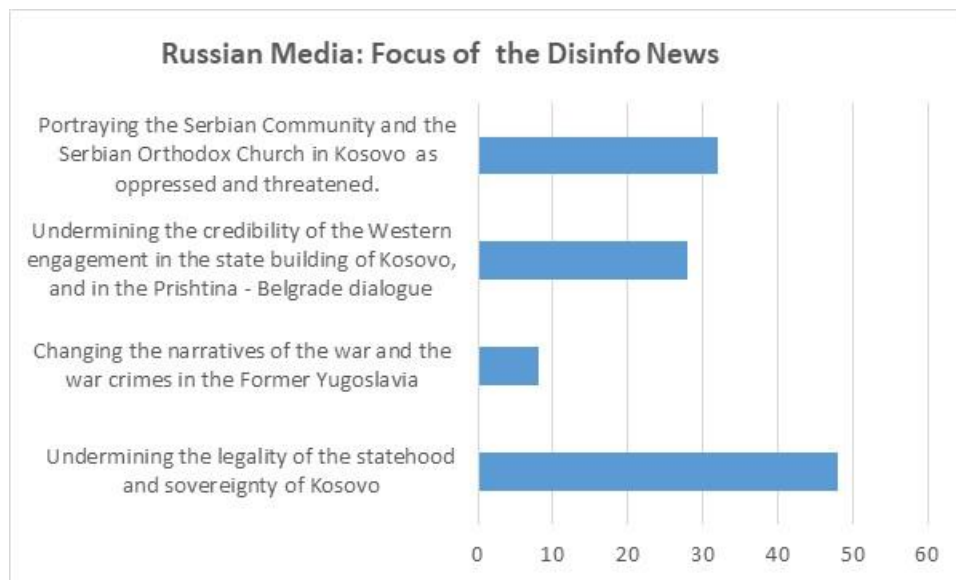
The largest number of disinformation was published by Sputnik Serbia (77), followed by TASS (12), Russia Today (8), Russian Insider (6), Sputnik International (5), UNZ (4), Newsfront (4), The Duran (2) and Pravda Report (2).



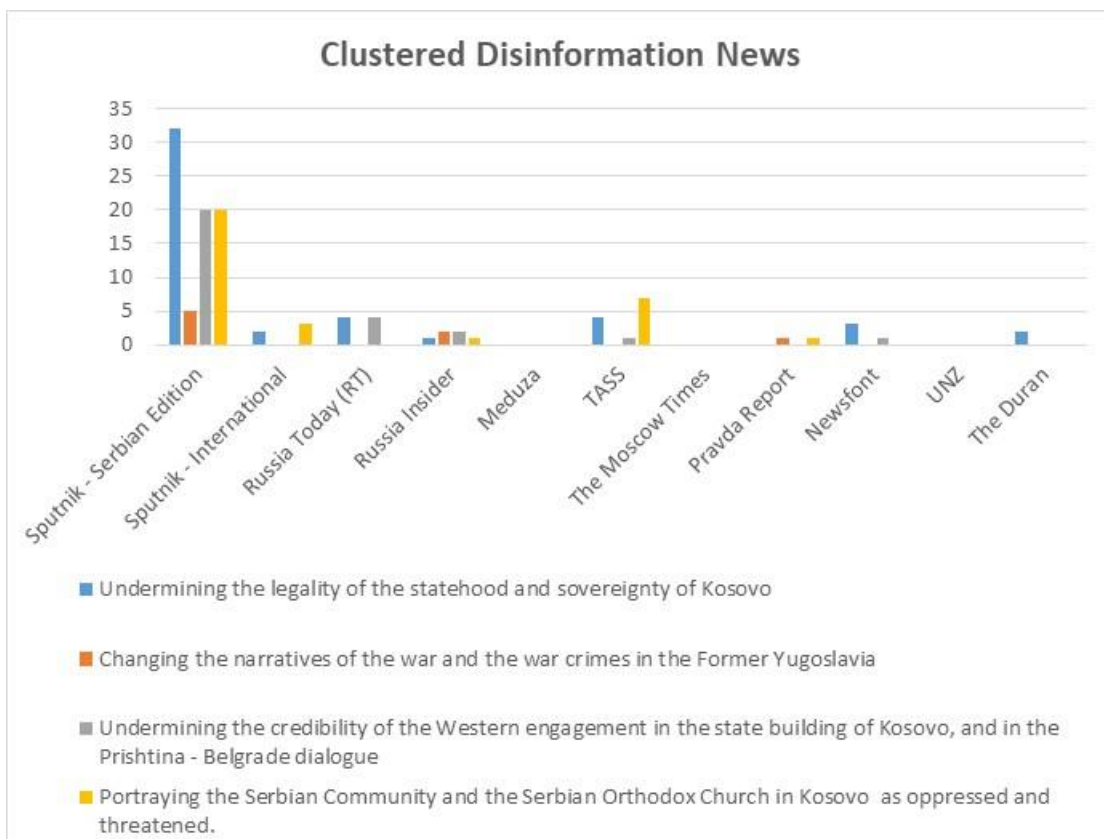
In order to have a better overview of the disinformation patterns targeting Kosovo, in the news published by the above-mentioned Russian media outlets, the main focus of their content was clustered around the following disinformation aims:

- Undermining the legality of the statehood and sovereignty of Kosovo.
- Changing the narratives of the war and the 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 legality of the statehood and of sovereignty of Kosovo (48), followed by portraying the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo as oppressed and threatened (32), undermining the credibility of the Western engagement in the state building of Kosovo, and in the Prishtina - Belgrade dialogue (28), and changing the narratives of war and war crimes in Former Yugoslavia (8).



The analysis of the patterns of the clustered disinformation news published by the above-mentioned Russian media outlets show that they are mainly focused on undermining the legality of the statehood and of the sovereignty of Kosovo, and disinformation aiming at portraying the Serbian community and the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo as oppressed and threatened, as well as on the undermining of the credibility of Western engagement in the state building of Kosovo, and in 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 momentum for intensification of Russian – Serbian cooperation against the statehood of Kosovo and on stability and security in the Western Balkans may occur during the visit of Serbian President to Moscow and his meeting with the Russian President Putin on November 25th, 2021. In this regard it should be noted that the latest clashes between Prishtina and Belgrade, as well as those between Prishtina and Moscow, accompanied with the lack of progress of the Brussels' facilitated dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, have created a fertile ground for further intensification of Russia's diplomatic warfare against Kosovo and undermining the efforts of the West for finding a viable solution of the dispute between the two neighboring countries.

As mentioned in the above analyses, the Russian revisionist policies of de facto not recognizing the inter-state borders of the former Soviet republics and of questioning the legality and legitimacy of the recognition of Kosovo by the West, are one of the reasons of its malign activities in the Western Balkans. These Kremlin's revisionist policies aim also at questioning the validity of the inter-state borders in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by supporting the separatist tendencies of the leader of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, misusing and keeping hostile position towards the independence of Kosovo and by comparing it with Crimea, in order to destabilize the South East Europe and undermine the Western long term stability and security involvement in the region.

In this regard, the analyses of the public statements, briefings, articles and other documents of the Russian foreign policy establishment from August 15th to October 31st, 2021, show clearly the continuation of the narratives' aim to undermine the statehood of Kosovo and of Western engagement in Kosovo and in the region, as well as to accuse Kosovo authorities for exercising violence over Serbian community and deny its right to fight the organized crime in the entire territory of the country. The public activities of the Russian foreign policy establishment against Kosovo during this period have intensified since the second part of September 2021 with the starting of a short lived crisis in the northern part of Kosovo and the expulsion of two Russian diplomats of the Embassy Office of Russia in Prishtina, in the end of October 2021.

Finally, the analyses of the discourse of the news containing disinformation and malign misinformation (116) 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, whereas the Sputnik

Serbia, Russia Today and TASS are at the forefront of these malign information activities against Kosovo.