

# **War in Ukraine: Propaganda and disinformation**



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## Summary

This report presents the number, type and format of fake news and other ways of disinformation in relation to and for the period of Russian invasion on Ukraine. The research was initiated by the fact checking platform “hibrid.info” and was conducted in cooperation with “Hasan Prishtina” University/Department of Journalism. The report bases its findings on data acquired from the database of debunked disinformation and fake news, compiled by fact checkers around the world, verified members of “International Fact Checking Network” (IFCN). IFCN granted “hibrid.info” access to its database for the purposes of this report. The idea to establish the database emerged from the Spanish fact-checking platform “Maldita.es” which later launched its online version titled “ukrainefacts.org”. The database contains denunciations and debunks of information related to war in Ukraine, starting from 24 February 2022, when Russia launched its invasion.

The report will summarize, in both narration and graphs, the number, types and forms of disinformation and channels used for such a purpose. The main section of the report contains findings related to dissemination of disinformation in the form of articles/posts (written content) and photo/video/audio content, published in Kosovo and the region. The main section will also discuss the context of misinforming content. Further, the report will discuss the phenomenon of fictional narratives on Ukraine, created by pro-Kremlin media. Recommendations, presented at the last section of the report, are divided into two categories: recommendations addressed to the news editorial offices in Kosovo and recommendations addressed to the general audience of Albanian language media.

## 1. Disinforming media content in Kosovo

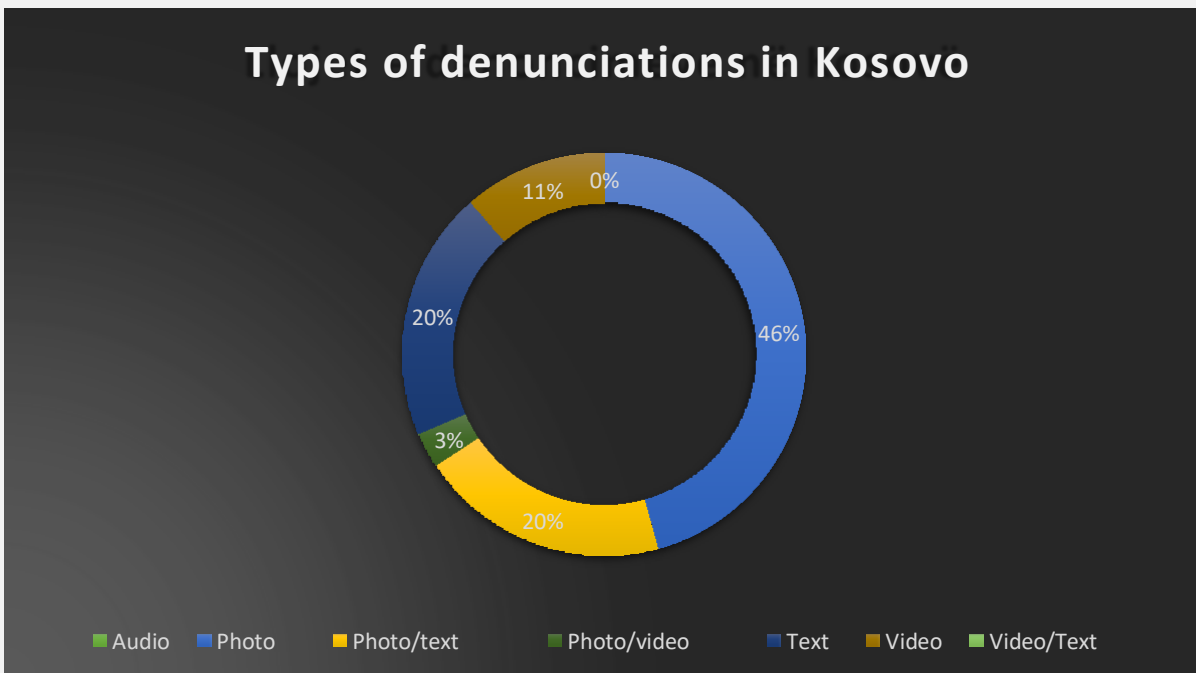
Kosovo data were obtained from two fact-checking platforms, members of IFCN: “hibrid.info” and “kallxo.com”

Between 24 February and 11 March, when the last data were processed, the number of debunks from these two platforms reached 38. This figure does not represent the total number of misinforming and inaccurate information disseminated for the period, which is obviously much higher.

The number of misinformation may be much higher than the one presented in this report, but the methodology of the two fact checkers from Kosovo has made it impossible to debunk them all. Considering that there are no accurate data/inputs, the report only discusses those entries that were available on the IFCN database.

Online media disseminated most of misinforming and inaccurate information content. This includes all types of media that are present in the digital space.

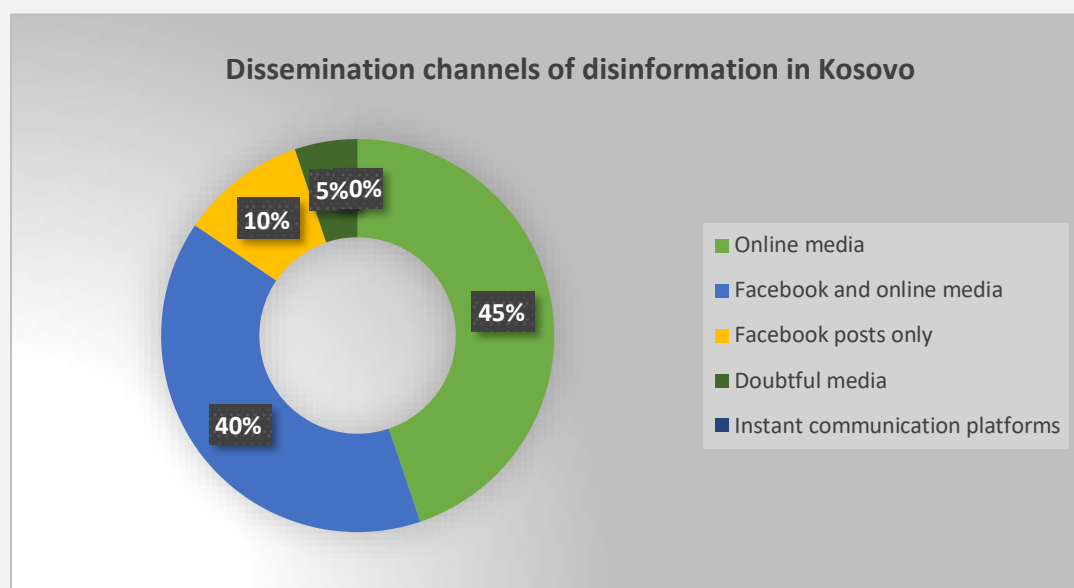
Most of articles published in Kosovo media, that were considered disinformation, were created outside the country and in other languages (non-Albanian). This implies that they were first translated and then disseminated. The format of disinforming or inaccurate information content, in most of cases, was a media article, containing text/video or text/photo. To a fewer extent, there were cases when the format was just a photo, or a single video, that would have been published by a social media profile, page or group.



**Figure 1.** Main forms of disinformation disseminated in Kosovo, according denunciations of IFCN.

The most frequently used channel for dissemination of these articles was social media, dominated by Facebook, which remains the most used social network in Kosovo<sup>1</sup>. A percentage of misinformation

content on Facebook is published only as posts created by private profiles, public pages and groups, while the rest as media articles, shared by media Facebook pages.



**Figure 2.** Main channels for dissemination of disinformation in Kosovo, based on IFCN denunciations

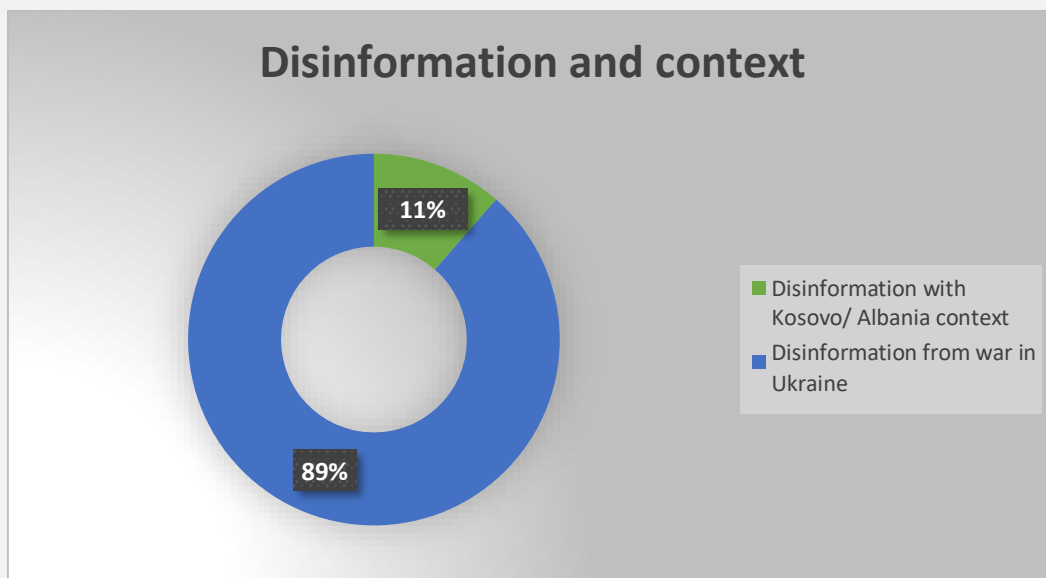
## 1.2 Context of news, published in Kosovo and for Albanian speaking audience in general

A significant number of articles/posts claimed to present events or actions that took place during fighting in Ukraine.

In some instances, events taking place in Ukraine were correlated to developments in the region and Kosovo. This was mainly because of statements of political and

institutional leaders of Russia, including President Vladimir Putin, who have mentioned Kosovo, in an attempt to draw similarities and compare the Russian decision to invade Ukraine, initially of separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk and later of the whole country, with NATO intervention in Kosovo, in 1999.

<sup>1</sup> [STIKK-Internet Penetration and Usage in Kosovo](#)



**Figure 3.** Context of disinformation published in Albanian language media, based on IFCN denunciations.

In some cases, media used entirely fabricated/faked content to make such correlation/comparison between two contexts. This context correlation was constructed mainly by fabricated headlines, claiming that Serbia is preparing a military invasion in Kosovo, following the Russian invasion in Ukraine. Such content was created by webpages that claim to be media, but that according to fact controlling methodology are identified as doubtful media/portals.

Monitoring of such webpages was difficult because of the enormous number and constant changes in their domain address.

For efficiency purposes, “hibrid.info” established a list of fake webpages and social media pages, which is updated regularly<sup>2</sup>. In relation to denunciations in this platform, Kosovo ranked 12 globally. In the region, only Montenegro ranks higher, with 40 denunciations in total.

## 2. World: Misinforming media content

War in Ukraine was an interesting topic also for audiences in distant countries. This is confirmed by a large number of publications/posts with disinforming content in countries such as India and Brazil, which are very far geographically

from Ukraine.

It should be highlighted that the number of denunciations in a certain country is related to the number of inhabitants and fact checkers that operate in that country. Language is also a major factor.

<sup>2</sup> [Hibrid.info – Doubtful media](https://hibrid.info)



For example, Hindu language is spoken by 342 million people and ranks as the fourth most spoken language in the world. Hispanic languages are spoken by 471 million people<sup>3</sup> (which includes most of countries in Latin America). Consequently, the number of debunks/denunciations analyzed in India and Spain was high. In the graph below, we see that debunks from India and Spain are at the top of the list, followed by countries that have been affected economically or had security

concerns, such as Turkey and Balkan countries.

This percentage could be representative in terms of number of disinformation debunks/denunciations. This is related to the fact that in Russia and China, but also in some countries of Central Asia and Caucasus that have good relation with current regime in Moscow, there are no fact checkers, members of IFCN, that operate normally.

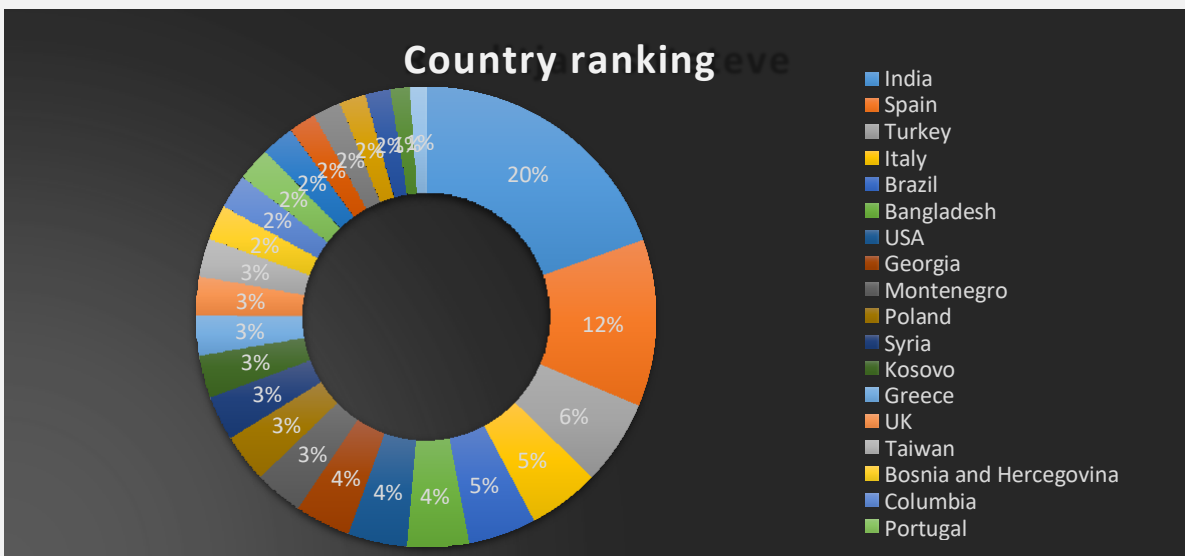


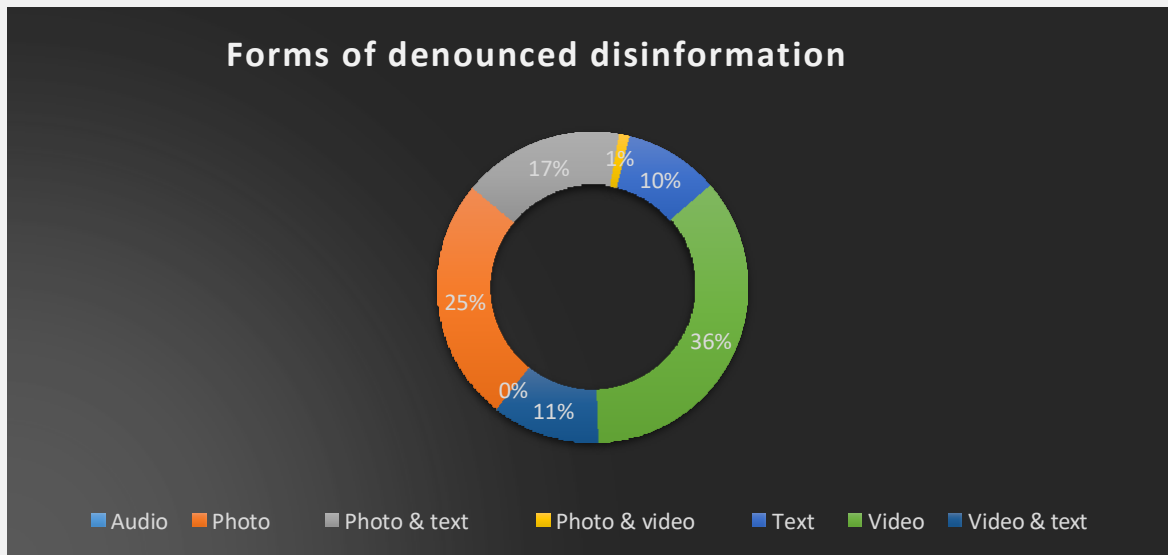
Figure 4. Percentage of denunciation of disinformation in IFCN, per country.

Misinforming video content remains the most shared content worldwide. Video content is disseminated as standalone product, but often appears in combination with text.

Standalone photos and photos combined with text follow as the next most shared content. Text as standalone product is the least shared content while audio was never shared during the research period.

<sup>3</sup> [Babbel Magazine- The 10 Most Spoken Languages In](#)

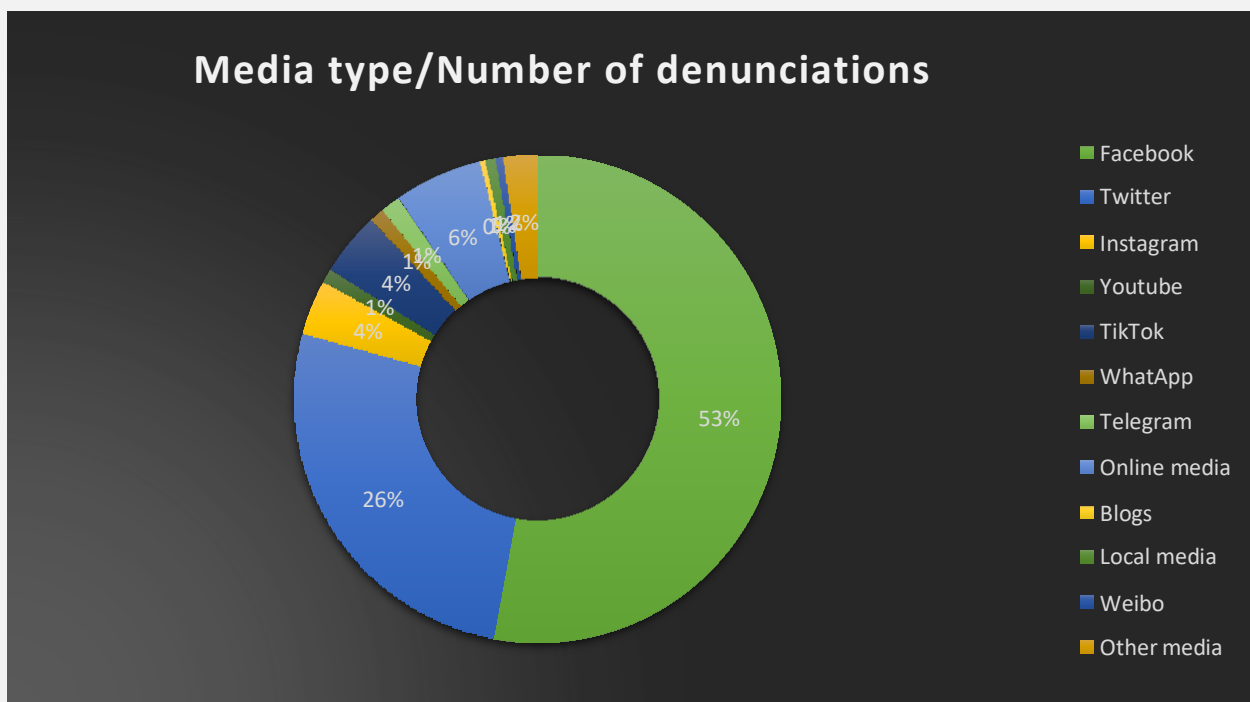
[The World](#)



**Figure 5.** According to IFCN data, video and photo dominated the denounced disinforming media content

Social media, dominated by Facebook (with over 50 %) and followed by Twitter, Instagram and YouTube were the most used channels for dissemination of misinforming content. Communication platforms known as “Instant Messaging”, such as WhatsApp

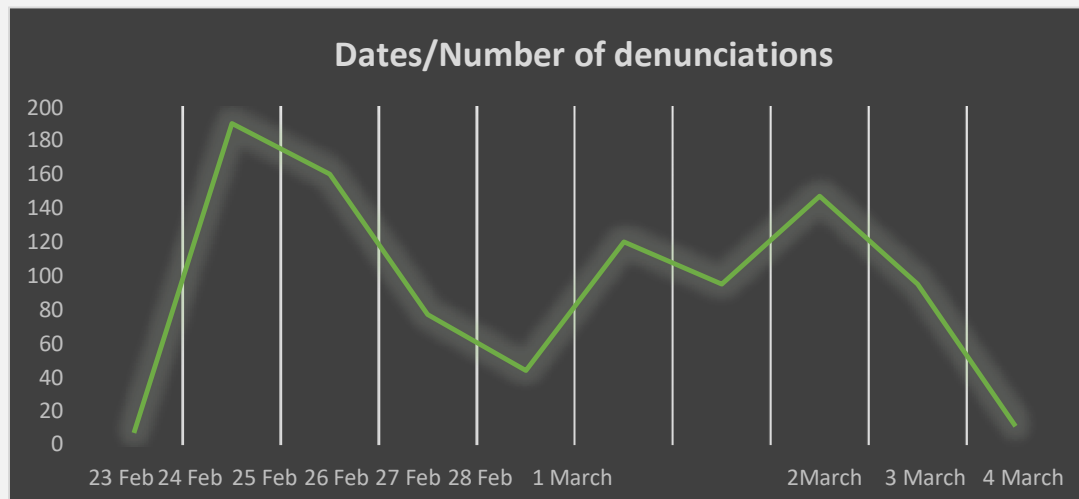
and Telegram were also used for disseminating disinforming content. Online media have their considerable share of disinforming content, but they mostly used abovementioned channels for dissemination.



**Figure 6.** Number of disinformation denounced at IFCN, and channel of dissemination

The number of news and information with misinforming content started to grow exponentially (as reported by fact checkers) on 24 February, which is the date of Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the following graph, we can see that the

increase was evident during the first two days of the invasion (24 and 25 Feb) and then there is a decrease. The curve of denunciations increases again in the following days, but not at the same intensity as with the beginning of invasion



**Figure 7.** The number of denounced disinformation showed a steady increase in the first days of Russian invasion of Ukraine.

## 2. Falsified narratives

Disinformation on and around Ukraine has started years ago and long before the invasion. According to west organization reports, this disinformation was mostly conducted by Russian, pro-regime media, known as pro-Kremlin media and affiliated actors. Credible western media raised concerns about how Russian audiences are being served with a parallel reality by state controlled media, a reality that differs to the one on the ground<sup>4</sup>. Weeks before the invasion, Russian state controlled media disinformation intensified, especially in the separatist regions of Donetsk

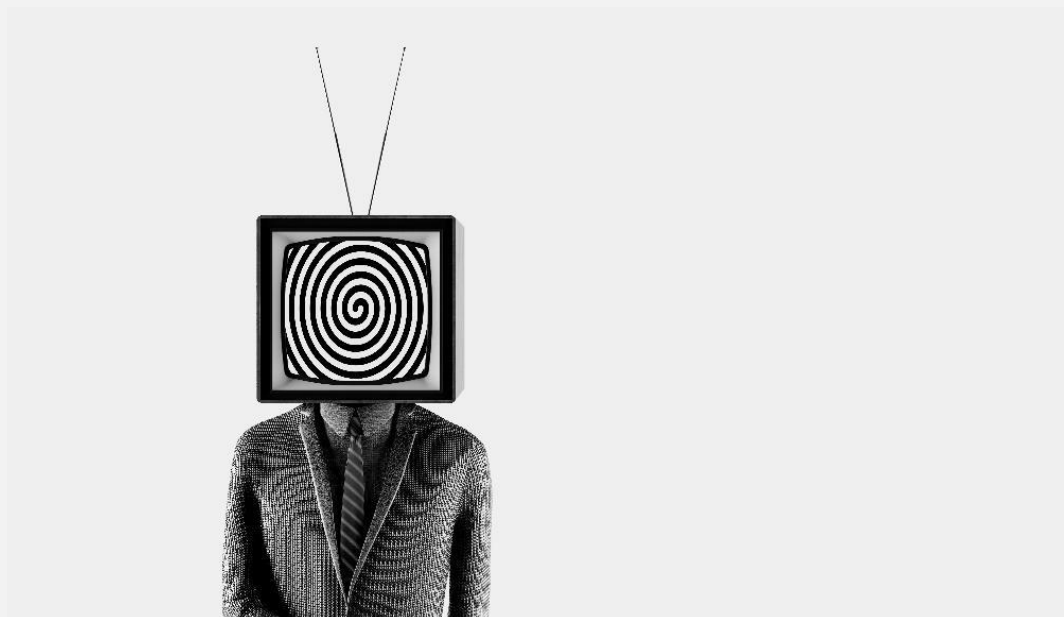
and Lugansk, by depicting the military intervention as humanitarian<sup>5</sup> mission aiming at supporting local Russian speaking population<sup>6</sup>. This phenomena was identified as worrisome by western countries, European Union, Great Britain and United States of America.

<sup>4</sup> [BBC- Ukraine: Watching the war on Russian TV - a whole different story](#)

<sup>5</sup> [EUvsDisinformation- The Kremlin's Playbook:](#)

[Fabricating Pretext To Invade Ukraine - More Myths](#)

<sup>6</sup> [EUvsDisinformation - Forcefully Relocating 700,000 People, All To Spin More Disinformation](#)



Illustrating photo /Propaganda

In an attempt to seriously tackle Russian disinformation, EU member countries have requested from prominent digital platforms known as Big Tech (Alphabet-Google, Amazon, Apple, Meta-Facebook and Microsoft) to reduce and ban content produced by two main Russian state controlled media Sputnik and Russia Today<sup>7</sup>.

State Department exposed what it identified as falsified or manipulated Russian narratives aiming to depict Russia as a victim of an intended western aggression<sup>8</sup>.

## 4. Methodology and data

This report analysed only content of media that have digital presence and that use online platforms for dissemination. Such media can be newspapers, TV, radio and online media (portals). In addition to media, the report

analysed content disseminated by social media and online communication platforms (Instant Messaging). The sample for Kosovo, in this report, is made of 35 denunciations from “hibrid.info” and “kallxo.com” platforms, made

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<sup>7</sup> [Politico - Europe seeks a legal route to switch off Russian TV](#)

<sup>8</sup> [U.S. Department of State - Russia's Top Five](#)

to IFCN database (from 24 February to 11 March). In the countries of the region, such as Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Bulgaria and Croatia there were 156 denunciations. No denunciation was made for North Macedonia. Globally, there were 1403 denunciations made worldwide, in just two weeks of the Russian invasion of Ukraine

(24 February – 9 March). Drafters obtained data from IFCN, following an official request for access. “IBM SPSS Statistics” program. The report examined statistical data with relevant quantitative methods, comparative data with data variables and scrutinized content and context with content analysis.

## 5. Recommendations

### 5.1. Recommendations for editorial boards

- Considering the high level of disinformation that erupted with war in Ukraine, it is recommended to apply vigorously all steps of source verification, by giving more relevance to news accuracy then to speed of dissemination.
- Information sources in a war zone often aim to disseminate propaganda on purpose. Therefore, it is very important to balance information sources within news. When content is based on a single source, caution should be exerted and publication should be postponed until new facts, that depict a clearer picture, are acquired.
- Often the context of videos and other materials displayed on internet by ordinary citizens or institutions of countries at war could be manipulated. Therefore, when reporting from these zones, it is recommended to analyze the content of events before publication.
- When reporting for such crisis, editorial boards should use informative headlines, connecting them to the content of news. It is recommended to avoid sensationalist headlines, considering that some readers get the news only by reading headlines, not managing to read the whole content.
- Even with the most rigorous control measures of editorial boards, inaccurate information may find its way to publication. It is recommended that whenever mistakes happen, corrections should be made and media should notify on corrections, as this increases their credibility.

## 5.2.Recommendations for the general public

- Considering that disinforming content about Ukraine war on social media platforms is high, it is recommended to limit the usage and time spent on these platforms.

- Doubtful media, especially those that have no address and no public editorial boards are more prone to disseminate disinforming content.

It is recommended to read/view/listen only to those media that are considered credible.

- Before sharing content, develop a critical judgment on that content, otherwise you may be turning yourself into a disseminator of disinformation, without knowing.

