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Disinformation Alerts – Russian Media Monitoring is a monthly report of the news containing disinformation and misinformation targeting Kosovo, published by Russian media in English and Serbian Language

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KOSOVO DISINFORMATION ALERTS

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INTRODUCTION

Kosovo Disinformation Alerts: Russian Media Monitoring aims to counter disinformation that targets Kosovo, by monitoring on a monthly basis the preselected media outlet originating in Russia, in both, English, and Serbian languages. The preselected media in English language are Russia Today, Sputnik, Meduza, Russia Insider, TASS, The Moscow Times, Newsfront, Unz, The Duran, and Pravda Report, whereas in Serbian language is Sputnik Serbia. In addition, the Kosovo Disinformation Alert monitors news, documents, and statements related to Kosovo, published by Kremlin and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

During December 2020, Sputnik International has published 2 news, TASS 1, Unz 1, Russia Today 2, Russia Insider 1, The Moscow Times 1, whereas Sputnik Serbia has published 135 news related directly or indirectly to Kosovo. Meanwhile, Newsfront, Meduza, The Duran and Pravda Report have not published any news related to Kosovo. On the other hand, during this monitoring period, Kremlin had one, and the Russian Foreign Ministry had 5 postings related to Kosovo on their web-sites.

Due to the large number of articles with disinformation content generated by these media, in this edition are analysed only the articles with the most blatant disinformation content. The disinformation published aims to undermine the statehood of Kosovo while trying to draw parallels between independence of the Republic of Kosovo and the illegal annexation of Crimea. For more these media tend to present Kosovo as a state that abolishes basic rights, the rule of law and the functioning of democratic institutions. The preselected articles also aim to distort the truth of the past by denying crimes and atrocities of Serbia in Kosovo during the 1990s, and by portraying the Serbs as victims during the wars which aims at equating the victim with the aggressor.

THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE DETECTED DISINFORMATION

Disinformation Alert 1

Headline: Vladimir Putin's annual news conference, **President of Russia, December 17th 2020**,¹
commented by **Sputnik Serbia, December 17th 2020**²

The article transmits the statement by the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, during the annual news conference. Putin claims that "In Kosovo, it was the parliament that took the decision, and you bought into it saying that this was the right way to go, everything is fine and democratic. In Crimea, people came to the polls and voted in a referendum, but for some reason, you do not like it. Let me remind you that democracy is the rule of the people, and you have to recognise this or stop using the term altogether. Crimean's have been facing sanctions. What have you sanctioned them for? If they were annexed, they cannot be blamed. Why should they be punished?"

The Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, tries to draw comparisons between the Republic of Kosovo and Crimea. Putin has constantly tried to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 with the "precedent" of the independence of Kosovo. In this regard, he justified the illegal referendum held in Crimea prior to the invasion by the Moscow's military forces, by considering it ironically as a legal foundation for the annexation by Russia. In addition, Putin considered Kosovo's independence as an annexation, which has been done after the invasion NATO.³

¹ Vladimir Putin's annual news conference, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64671>.

² Путин: Запад „прогутао“ Косово, а Криму увео санкције [Putin: The West "swallowed" Kosovo, but it imposed sanctions on Crimea], <https://rs.sputniknews.com/rusija/202012171124130404-putin-zapad-progutao-kosovo-a-krimu-uveo-sankcije/>.

³ The Kremlin, Interview with Austrian ORF television, channel, 4 June 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/57675>.

In this regard, it should be noted that, in contrast to Crimea's illegal annexation by Russia, which Russia tried to justify by an internationally unrecognized referendum, Kosovo's independence was consequence of forceful stripping of Kosovo's federal autonomy within Yugoslavia in 1989-1990, expulsion of Albanian majority population from the public sector, grave atrocities conducted by Belgrade's military, paramilitary and police forces (1998-1999), and the UNSC mandated negotiation process led by President Ahtisaari, which ended with the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement that provided for a supervised independence of Kosovo.⁴

It should also be noted that on March 27, 2014, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Resolution 68/262,⁵ in response to the Russian annexation of Crimea. This resolution, "Affirms its commitment to the sovereignty, political independence, unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders; "Calls upon all States to desist and refrain from actions aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and territorial integrity of Ukraine, including any attempts to modify Ukraine's borders through the threat or use of force or other unlawful means."⁶ On the other hand, the UNSC Resolution 1244 (1999), which was supported by Russia as well, expressed its determination to resolve the grave humanitarian situation in Kosovo, and provided for the establishment of the UN Administration in Kosovo and the NATO-led Peace Enforcement Mission (Kosovo Force – KFOR).⁷ Furthermore, on July 22, 2010, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) delivered the advisory opinion confirming that Kosovo's declaration of independence of February 17, 2008, has not violated either the international law, or the UNSC Resolution 1244.⁸

⁴ Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement, February 2nd, 2007, <http://pbosnia.kentlaw.edu/Comprehensive%20Proposal%20for%20the%20Kosovo%20Settlement.pdf>.

⁵ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, 27th March 2014, https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/262.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UNSC Resolution 1244(1999), 10 June 1999, https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/990610_SCR1244%281999%29.pdf.

⁸ ACCORDANCE WITH INTERNATIONAL LAW OF THE UNILATERAL DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE IN RESPECT OF KOSOVO, <https://www.icj-cij.org/public/files/case-related/141/141-20100722-ADV-01-00-EN.pdf>.

Disinformation Alert 2

Headline: Сва злодела “Касапина” Вокера: Хоће ли албански плаћеник бити оптужен за ратне злочине [All the crimes of Walker “the butcher”: Will the Albanian mercenary be charged with war crimes], **Sputnik Serbia, December 24th 2020.**⁹

The article transmits the statements of Milovan Drecun, the chairman of the parliamentary committee for Kosovo and Metohija. He claims that “Walker's crimes should always be reminded, and should not be left alone and constant pressure should be exerted. At some point, he would have to face responsibility for what he did. He is responsible for being an accomplice and co-perpetrator in a joint criminal enterprise, as defined in the indictment against Hashim Thaçi and others, which aimed to seize Kosovo by force and expel the Serbs and other non-Albanians”; “After that, his greatest responsibility is for the criminal bombing of our country, due to the imaginary massacre in the village of Račak, and the fact that as an Albanian mercenary he participated in the brutal ethnic cleansing.”

The Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

a) The Reçak Massacre

While trying to deny the Serbian crimes during the war in Kosovo, Milovan Drecun accuses the former US Ambassador and the Head of the former Kosovo Verification Mission, William Walker. Regarding the claim on the “imaginary massacre,” it should be noted that on January 15th, 1999, in the village of Reçak, in the municipality of Shtime, the Serbian police and military forces killed 45 Albanian civilians,¹⁰ and William Walker described this act of the Serbian forces as a “crime against humanity.”¹¹ These findings were confirmed also by the Finnish forensic team, sent by

⁹ Сва злодела “Касапина” Вокера: Хоће ли албански плаћеник бити оптужен за ратне злочине [All the crimes of Walker “the butcher”: Will the Albanian mercenary be charged with war crimes], <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analyze/202012241124185596-sva-zlodela-kasapina-vokera-hoce-li-albanski-placenik-biti-optuzen-za-ratne-zlocine/>.

¹⁰ MASAKRA QË NDRYSHOI HISTORINË E KOSOVËS [THE MASSACRE THAT CHANGED THE HISTORY OF KOSOVO], <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/masakra-qe-ndryshoi-historine-e-kosoves/30376954.html>.

¹¹ For more, see, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/kosovo/interviews/walker.html>.

the European Union for investigating the case in Reçak. The leader of the Finnish Investigative Team, Dr. Helen Ranta, stated that they came to the conclusion that the victims were unarmed civilians, and she described this act as “crime against humanity.”¹²

In this regard it should be noted that the massacre of Reçak, as well as the failure of the Rambouillet Accords were the turning points in the war in Kosovo, which eventually culminated with the intervention of NATO.

b) Changing of the narratives on the war in Kosovo and denying war crimes of Serbia

The article talks about “ethnic cleansing” against the Serbs and other non-Albanians of Kosovo, by manipulatively neglecting the fact that it was the Yugoslav military and the Serbian police and paramilitaries that expelled 862,979 Albanians from Kosovo, while several hundred thousand more were internally displaced. These figures indicate that by early June 1999, more than 80 percent of the entire population of Kosovo, and 90 percent of Kosovar Albanians, were displaced from their homes.¹³ On the other hand, according to the last Yugoslav census of 1991, there were 194,000 Serbs living in Kosovo, while, based on the report published by Kosovo Coordination Center of the Government of Serbia, in February 2002 there were 129,474 Serbs living in Kosovo. Therefore, we can conclude that based on these figures a number of, at most, 75,000 Serbs, left Kosovo after the war. Therefore, such statements are completely manipulative, and tend to change the narrative about the perpetrators and the victims.

¹² Massacre a ‘crime against humanity’ in Kosovo, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/massacre-a-crime-againsthumanity-in-kosovo-1.164160>.

¹³ “Under Orders: War Crimes in Kosovo,” Human Rights Watch Report, 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2001/10/26/under-orders/war-crimes-kosovo>.

Disinformation Alert 3

Headline: Dačić otkriva nepoznate detalje: Amerika nudila gašenje suda protiv OVK, Vučić odbio [Dačić reveals the unknown details: America offered to close the court against KLA, Vučić refused], **Sputnik Serbia, December 12th 2020.**¹⁴

The article transmits the statement of Serbian Parliament Speaker Ivica Dačić about the Kosovo Specialist Chambers. He falsely claims that “In the preparations for the meetings, Richard Grenell pointed out that one point should be that we all work together to abolish international war crimes tribunals. Of course, the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, refused.” Furthermore, he states that “the Albanians have been working with the American administration for a year, on how to avoid this situation with the trials of KLA members.”

The Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

The statements made by Ivica Dačić are completely incorrect. First of all, the Kosovo Specialist Chambers were formed by the vote of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, so this court was established by Kosovo itself. Secondly, it was especially the US administration that constantly called for the establishment of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers, while, Joe Biden, sent a letter to the former Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi where he says that “he encourages Kosovo to fully collaborate with the European Union for the establishment of the Special Court on war crimes.¹⁵ Moreover, after the publication of the indictment, the U.S. State Department reacted by stating that the indictments was “a step forward in the justice and reconciliation process in the Western Balkans, essential to advance the rule of law and justice for victims in Kosovo, as well as to move the country beyond this terrible period and join the Euro-Atlantic community.¹⁶

¹⁴ Dačić otkriva nepoznate detalje: Amerika nudila gašenje suda protiv OVK, Vučić odbio [Dačić reveals the unknown details: America offered to close the court against the KLA, Vučić refused], <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/vesti/202012121124075316-dacic-otkriva-nepoznate-detalle-amerika-nudila-gasenje-suda-protiv-ovk-vucic-odbio/>.

¹⁵ US vice President, letter to PM Thaçi: Kosovo must establish the Special Court on war crimes, <https://balkan.eu.com/vice-president-letter-pm-thaci-kosovo-establish-special-court-war-crimes/>.

¹⁶ Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi Indicted on War Crimes Charges, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/kosovo-president-hashim-thaci-indicted-war-crimes-charges>.

Regarding Dačić's statement that one of the points was to "abolish international war crimes tribunals," it should be noted that no statutory limitation can be applied to the following crimes: genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.¹⁷

Disinformation Alert 4

Headline: Манастир Дечани међу 12 најугроженијих у Европи [The Dečani Monastery is among 12 the most endangered ones in Europe], **Sputnik Serbia, December 9th 2020.**¹⁸

The article highlights the issue of the monastery of Visoki Dečani in Kosovo, by stating that the civil society organization Europa Nostra has ranked it among the 12 most endangered objects of cultural heritage for 2021. The article, as well as the report from Europa Nostra, claim that "It is unfortunate that today the Dečani monastery, with its cultural and natural heritage and monastic community, has become hostage of the unresolved status of Kosovo. Since June 1999, the Dečani Monastery has been under 24/7 protection by the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping troops. In spite of this, the monastery was a target of four attacks by mortar grenades by local extremists during the period from 1999 to 2007 as well as an attempted terrorist attack by ISIS in 2016. At the same time, the monastery, with its special protective zone, is facing serious environmental threats. The local municipal spatial plan is not in compliance with the strict protection rules for a UNESCO World Heritage Site, or the related national laws and regulations. There is a constant risk of unsuitable urban facilities being constructed in the vicinity of the monastery, as well as the danger of expropriation of the land belonging to the Dečani Monastery. Especially dangerous is the plan to have a major international highway pass next to the monastery gates."

¹⁷ Convention on the Non-Applicability of Statutory Limitations to War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120508073422/http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/warcrimes.htm>.

¹⁸ Манастир Дечани међу 12 најугроженијих у Европи [Decani Monastery is among 12 the most endangered ones in Europe], <https://rs.sputniknews.com/vesti/202012101124060160-manastir-decani-medju-12-najugrozenijih-u-evropi/>.

The Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

First of all, it should be noted that Annex V of the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement defines the issue of the religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo.¹⁹ This annex stipulates that “The Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) in Kosovo shall be afforded the protection and enjoyment of its rights, privileges and immunities as set forth in this Annex. The exercise of such rights, privileges and immunities shall carry with it duties and responsibilities to act in accordance with Kosovo law, and shall not violate the rights of others.”²⁰ Furthermore, this annex stipulates that “A select number of Serbian Orthodox Church monasteries, churches, other religious sites, as well as historical and cultural sites of special significance for the Kosovo Serb Community, shall be provided special protection through the establishment of Protective Zones.”²¹ And, among the objects classified as protective zones is exactly the Visoki Dečani Monastery. Regarding the issue of security, it is determined that “The Serbian Orthodox Church, its monasteries, churches and other religious and cultural sites of special significance to the Kosovo Serb community shall be provided the necessary security.”²² Annex XII defined the legislative agenda, which lists the laws that the Assembly of Kosovo had to approve during the 120-day transition period, which included, among others, the Law on the Establishment of Protective Zones.²³ In this regard, it should be noted that on 20th February 2020, the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo adopted the Law on Special Protective Zones,²⁴ which includes all the rights and obligations provided by the Ahtisaari Plan. Therefore, it should be noted that the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Monastery of Deçan enjoy special protection as well as other religious objects defined by this law. Moreover, the Deçan Monastery is under the daily protection of KFOR forces. The claim made in the article, that in 2016 there was an attack by ISIS terrorist groups, does not stand and it was not confirmed by KFOR forces, state security, or the

¹⁹ Comprehensive Proposal For the Kosovo Status Settlement,

<http://www.kosovocompromise.com/2008/pdf/Ahtisaaris-Proposal-full-version.pdf>.

²⁰ Ibid, Annex V, Article 1 [Name, Internal Organization and Property of the Serbian Orthodox Church].

²¹ Ibid, Annex V, Article 4 [Protective Zones].

²² Ibid, Annex V, Article 3 [Security for Religious and Cultural Sites].

²³ Ibid, Annex XII, Article 1.

²⁴ LIGJI PËR ZONAT E VEÇANTA TË MBROJTURA [LAW ON SPECIAL PROTECTIVE ZONES], <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDocumentDetail.aspx?ActID=2529>.

international community, while the issue of the Deçan-Plava highway has been resolved, with the mediation of the Italian Ambassador to Kosovo.²⁵

Disinformation Alert 5

Headline: „Косово је мафијашка држава“: Европски посланик жестоко критиковао Приштину [“Kosovo is a mafia state”: MEP fiercely criticizes Pristina], **Sputnik Serbia**, **December 10th 2020.**²⁶

The article transmits the statements of the French member of the European Parliament, Thierry Mariani. He states that “Kosovo is a region of Serbia, which was never allowed to remain in the hands of those who lead it today. Pristina abolishes basic rights, the rule of law, the functioning of democratic institutions. There is human trafficking, organ trafficking. “Kosovo is a cancer wound in the Balkans today.” At the end of the article, he accuses Von Cramon, by stating that “Hashim Thaçi is charged with war crimes, and Von Cramon did not even mention that fact.”

The Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

a) Kosovo is independent and not a region of Serbia

The French member of the European Parliament, Thierry Mariani falsely states that “Kosovo is a region of Serbia.” Kosovo has declared independence on February 17th, 2008, based on the Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement that envisaged a supervised independence for Kosovo.²⁷ The declaration of independence was an outcome of the UN

²⁵ Manastiri i Deçanit rrezikon të shpallet në mesin e 7 vendeve më të rrezikuara të trashëgimisë në Evropë, <https://telegrafi.com/manastiri-decanit-rrezikon-te-shpallet-ne-mesin-e-7-vendeve-te-rrezikuara-te-trashegimise-ne-evrope/>.

²⁶ „Косово је мафијашка држава“: Европски посланик жестоко критиковао Приштину [“Kosovo is a mafia state”: MEP fiercely criticizes Pristina], <https://rs.sputniknews.com/politika/202012101124063082-kosovo-je-mafijaska-drzava-evropski-poslanik-zestoko-kritikovao-pristinu/>.

²⁷ Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement,

mandated negotiation process on the Kosovo status, led by the United Nations Secretary General Envoy, President Marti Ahtisaari. Furthermore, there is not even a single UN resolution or international act that explicitly assigned Kosovo to Serbia as such; the only one in force (1244), recognizes Kosovo as part of the non-existent Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It should also be noted, that France is one of the first countries to have recognized the Republic of Kosovo as an independent and sovereign state.²⁸

b) There are no proofs whatsoever about the human organ trafficking Thierry Mariani falsely states that “There is human trafficking, organ trafficking.” Such accusations were first mentioned in Dick Marty’s Report that was published on December 14th 2010, and was presented to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on January 7th 2011. The Report claimed “inhuman treatment of people and killing of prisoners with the purpose of removal and illicit trafficking in human organs in Kosovo by the members of the Kosovo Liberation Army.” However, statement by Clint Williamson, the Chief Prosecutor of the of the European Union Special Investigative Task Force of 29 July 2014 states that the prosecution of offenses related to human organ trafficking “requires a level of evidence that we have not yet secured.”²⁹ On the other hand, the indictments against Thaçi, Veseli, Krasniqi, and Selimi, does not mention at all any accusations related to human organ trafficking. The statement by the Specialist Prosecutor’s Office (SPO) of the Kosovo Specialist Chambers (KSC) of November 5th 2020 clearly states that “The indictment, as confirmed, states that the war crimes of illegal or arbitrary arrest and detention, cruel treatment, torture, and murder, and the crimes against humanity of imprisonment, other inhumane acts, torture, murder, enforced disappearance of persons, and persecution were committed,”³⁰ but it does not mention human organ trafficking.

https://web.archive.org/web/20091015082628/http://www.unosek.org/docref/Comprehensive_proposalenglish.pdf.

²⁸ France Recognises Kosovo, <https://balkaninsight.com/2008/02/18/france-recognises-kosovo/>.

²⁹ Clint Williamson, “Statement of the Chief Prosecutor of the Special Investigative Task Force,” Brussels, European Union, 29 July 2014.

³⁰ Press Release, Kosovo Specialist Chambers & Specialist Prosecutor's Office, <https://www.scp-ks.org/en/indictment-against-hashim-thaci-kadri-veseli-rexhep-selimi-and-jakup-krasniqi-confirmed-ksc-pre>.

Disinformation Alert 6

Headline: Шпанија на ивици политичког офсајда због Косова: Како играти против земље која не постоји [Spain on the brink of political offside over Kosovo: How to play against a country that does not exist], **Sputnik Serbia, December 9th 2020.**³¹

The article highlights the issue of draw for the qualification groups of the World Cup in football, where Kosovo and Spain have been drawn in the same group. Sports journalist Vladimir Stanković presents this as a political dilettantism of UEFA and FIFA. He claims that “Spain is in a very serious problem due to the draw for the qualification groups of the World Cup in football: One of the solutions is to play on a neutral field, but the group is generally complicated, because apart from Spain, the other two members of the qualification group, Greece and Georgia, did not recognize Kosovo as well, so everyone except Sweden.”

The Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

The article tends to raise this issue as a big problem, and it also accuses UEFA and FIFA in connection with the draw of Kosovo and Spain in the same group for the qualifications for the World Cup. The article in the title refers to Kosovo as “a country that does not exist.” It should first be noted that Kosovo is an independent state, that is a member to UEFA³² and FIFA,³³ with full rights like all the other members. Secondly, it should be noted that even in the past, the issue of countries that have not recognized Kosovo has not presented a major problem, taking into the account that Kosovo recently played two matches against Greece. Finally, it should also be noted that Kosovo's matches with Spain are not banned and do not pose a problem or risk in terms of playing a football match. UEFA has listed six "prohibited team clashes" that are currently on the list and should be prevented in European competitions: Ukraine against Russia (since 2014),

³¹ Шпанија на ивици политичког офсајда због Косова: Како играти против земље која не постоји [Spain on the brink of political offside over Kosovo: How to play against a country that does not exist], <https://rs.sputniknews.com/analyze/202012091124051012-spanija-na-ivici-politickog-ofsajda-zbog-kosova-kako-igrati-protiv-zemlje-koja-ne-postoji/>.

³² Kosovo becomes member of UEFA, paves way for FIFA application, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-uefa-kosovo-idUKKCNOXU11D>.

³³ FIFA Admits Kosovo, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/05/14/friday-13th-lucky-day-for-kosovo-05-13-2016-1/>.

Kosovo against Serbia (2016), Bosnia-Herzegovina (2016) and Russia (2019), Armenia against Azerbaijan (2010) and Spain against Gibraltar (2013).³⁴

³⁴ EURO 2020: Why Serbia can't face Kosovo - and UEFA's other 'forbidden' matchups, <https://www.dw.com/en/euro-2020-why-serbia-cant-face-kosovo-and-uefas-other-forbidden-matchups/a-51338370>.