



BASIC INFO:

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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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

KOSOVO DISINFORMATION ALERTS

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INTRODUCTION

Kosovo Disinformation Alert: Russian Media Monitoring aims to counter disinformation that targets Kosovo, through monitoring on a monthly basis of the preselected media outlets originating in Russia, in both, English, and Serbian Language. 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 the 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 March 2020, the Russia Today has published a total of four news, TASS three news and Russia Insider one news, while MEDUZA, the Moscow Times, Newsfront, Unz, The Duran and Pravda Report have published no news about Kosovo. During March 2020, the most active in publishing news related directly or indirectly to Kosovo was Sputnik Serbia Edition with a total of 103 news, ow which 3 in its English Edition. On the other hand, during this monitoring period, there were no Kremlin news that directly or indirectly relates to Kosovo, while there was one briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson of Russia, Maria Zakharova.

A careful review of the monitored news shows that from the news in English Language published during March 2020 by the above listed media based in Russia only TASS (1), Sputnik International (1) and Sputnik Serbia (2) have disinformation content. The disinformation generated during this monitoring period by the preselected Russian media in relation to Kosovo, indicate its focus on undermining the statehood of Kosovo and discrediting the credibility of NATO alliance. In doing so, these media deny war crimes committed by Serbia in Kosovo, accuse Kosovo and NATO for war crimes against Serbian population, and exaggerate the number of Serb casualties. The disinformation detected during this period will be discussed and deconstructed in the following section.

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE DETECTED DISINFORMATION

Disinformation Alert 1

- **Headline:** *Šesnaest godina od martovskog pogroma na Kosovo i Metohiji (Sixteen years since the March pogrom in Kosovo and Metohija), Sputnik Srbija, 17 March 2020*¹

The article states that according to the Coordination of Serbian Associations of families of missing, killed and dead persons from the Former Yugoslavia, “after sixteen years since the March pogrom in Kosovo and Metohija, no one has been convicted, Serbs have not been allowed to return to their homes nor have they received any compensation for their destroyed property”. Furthermore, the article states that during three days (between 17-19 March 2004) of “mass and organized violence of Albanians against the local Serbs, 10 Serbs were killed, 35 churches and monasteries were demolished and set on fire, 738 Serb houses, 10 public buildings, post offices and health centers were destroyed, and 4,012 Serbs were expelled”.

The deconstruction of the disinformation: Facts and figures

a) Perpetrators have been convicted and Serbs have been allowed to return to their homes

According to the OSCE Legal System Monitoring Report, “The Response of the Justice System to the March 2004 Riots,” as of 18 November 2005, “out of the 426 persons charged with criminal offences related to the riots, 209 persons had been convicted while 12 were acquitted.” At the time of reporting, there were 110 cases still pending and the charges have been dropped in 95 cases.”²

¹ Sputnik Srbija, “Šesnaest godina od martovskog pogroma na Kosovo i Metohiji,” 17 March 2020, <https://rs.sputniknews.com/vesti/202003171122074389-sesnaest-godina-od-martovskog-pogroma-na-kosovu-i-metohiji/>

² “The Response of the Justice System to the March 2004 Riots,” Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Department of Human Rights and Rule of Law, Legal System Monitoring Section, Kosovo, December 2005.

On the other hand, the Human Rights Watch Report “Failure to Protect” published in July 2004 acknowledges that the riots left approximately 4,100 Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, and other non-Albanian minorities displaced, by July 2004, only some 2,000 of them were still displaced.³

a) 8 Serbs were killed, 27 churches and monasteries were demolished or set on fire, and 550 houses of Serbs and other non-Albanian minorities were destroyed

According to the already mentioned Human Rights Watch Report, the March violence left 19 persons dead (11 Albanians and 8 Serbs) while 954 were wounded., which is lower than stated by the article. The report also states that in addition to Serbs, Roma, Ashkali, and other non-Albanian minorities were targeted. In addition, according to the report “at least 550 homes and twenty-seven Orthodox churches and monasteries were burned,” which is less than 738 houses and 35 churches as the article is claiming. It is also worth mentioning that when it comes to destroyed houses, these were not only of Serbs, but also of Roma, Ashkali, and other non-Albanian minorities.⁴

Disinformation Alert 2

- ***Title: Dan kada je svet nagradio kosovske Albance za egzodus jednog naroda (The day the world rewarded Kosovo Albanians for the exodus of a nation), Sputnik Srbija, 17 March 2020***⁵

The article states that "the pogrom of Serbs on March 17, 2004 is the largest peacetime crime in post-war European history" and that this was “the first exodus of its kind in peacetime conditions after World War II”. Another allegation in the article is that “even today, 16 years later, there is

³ “Failure to Protect,” Human Rights Watch Report, July 2004, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/07/25/failure-protect/anti-minority-violence-kosovo-march-2004>

⁴ “Failure to Protect,” Human Rights Watch Report, July 2004, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/07/25/failure-protect/anti-minority-violence-kosovo-march-2004>

⁵ Sputnik Srbija, “Dan kada je svet nagradio kosovske Albance za egzodus jednog naroda,” 17 March 2004, [https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/202003171122075308-dan-kada-je-svet-nagradio-kosovske-albance-za-egzodus-nad-jednim-narodom-/](https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/analize/202003171122075308-dan-kada-je-svet-nagradio-kosovske-albance-za-egzodus-nad-jednim-narodom/)

an aim to erase the Serbian culture and religion.” Interestingly, the article acknowledges the truth about the number of victims during these riots by declaring that “eight Serbs and 11 Albanians were killed in two days of violence.”

The deconstruction of the disinformation: Facts and Figures

a) The “pogrom” of Serbs on March 17, 2004 is by far not the largest peacetime crime in post-war European history

Such statement in addition of not being true, also seriously undermines the crimes committed by Serbian military, police and para-military forces in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In Kosovo alone during the conflict of 1999, the Human Rights Watch report has documented “torture, killings, rapes, forced expulsions, and other war crimes committed by Serbian and Yugoslav government forces against Kosovar Albanians between March 24 and June 12, 1999.” Moreover, the report has also revealed “a coordinated and systematic campaign to terrorize, kill, and expel the ethnic Albanians of Kosovo that was organized by the highest levels of the Serbian and Yugoslav governments in power at that time”.⁶

More concretely, based on different sources, the Report has concluded that “approximately 10,500 Kosovar Albanians were killed between March 20 and June 12, 1999, with a 95 percent confidence interval from 7,449 to 13,627.” In addition, according to the report “the Yugoslav military and Serbian police and paramilitaries expelled 862,979 Albanians from Kosovo, and 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”.⁷ Having in mind that the crimes in Bosnia and Herzegovina were even more immense, it is clear that by far the pogrom of March 2004 is not the largest peacetime crime in post-war European history.

⁶ For a details related to war crimes in Kosovo during the war in 1999 see “Under Orders: War Crimes in Kosovo,” Human Rights Watch Report, 2001, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/kosovo_full_low.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

It is also important to mention that the article wrongfully and deliberately uses the term “pogrom” though all relevant international organisations have referred to the event of March 2004 as “riot” or “unrest”.⁸

b) This was certainly not the first exodus of its kind after the World War II

As already explained, according to the Human Rights Watch “the Yugoslav military and Serbian police and paramilitaries expelled 862,979 Albanians from Kosovo, and 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”.⁹ It is also worth mentioning that after the end of World War II, one of the largest exodus of people has happened as ethnic Germans were expelled from their host countries throughout most of Europe. Overall, it is believed that between 12 and 14 million *Volksdeutsche* lost their homes in the aftermath of the war. In Yugoslavia alone, around 130 000 ethnic Germans mainly from Vojvodina were expelled in 1946 by the Yugoslav forces, despite the refusal by the Allied forces to permit such expulsion.¹⁰

c) There is no aim to erase the Serbian culture and religion

Article 5 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo¹¹ designates Albanian and Serbian as the two official languages, with equal status before the institutions. The Law on the Use of Languages also makes reference to the constitution and states that the Albanian and Serbian versions are “equally authoritative,” meaning that neither takes precedence over the other when it comes to

⁸ International organisations such UNMIK, OSCE and Human Rights Watch. See for instance HRW report “Failure to Protect”; see also Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe. “Four Years Later: Follow up of March 2004 Riots Cases before the Kosovo Criminal Justice System,” Monitoring Department, Legal System Monitoring Section, July 2008.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thomas Spira. “Worlds apart: The Swabian expulsion from Hungary after World War II,” *Nationalities Papers*, 13:2, 1985, 188-197.

¹¹ The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Article 22, 15 June 2008, http://kryeministri-ks.net/wpcontent/uploads/2018/03/Kushtetuta.e.Republikes.se_.Kosoves-2.pdf

interpretation.¹² In addition, Article 8 of the Constitution states that “The Republic of Kosovo ensures the preservation and protection of its cultural and religious heritage,” while Article 22 states that along with other international human rights instruments, “Council of Europe Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities” is directly applicable in Kosovo.¹³ All these provisions in the Constitution clearly show that there is no aim to erase the Serbian culture and religion as pretended in the article.

Furthermore, the Report published by the “Reconstruction Implementation Commission for Serbia Religious Sites in Kosovo”, states that during the period 2004-2010, “28 religious sites which were damaged during the events of March 2004 in Kosovo were restored, and additional 2 locations were managed and funded by UNESCO, 2 locations were managed and funded by the European Union and a non-religious location was managed and funded by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports”.¹⁴ This report also shows that there is no aim to erase the Serbian culture and religion as pretended in the article.

Disinformation Alert 3

- ***Headline: On This Day 21 Years Ago: NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia in Numbers, Sputnik International, 24 March 2020***¹⁵

The article published on the 21st anniversary of NATO air campaign in 1999 claims to offer relevant figures related to casualties and damages caused by the Alliance’s bombing. The article states that the strikes on Yugoslavia left as many as 5,700 people dead, with 12,500 injured. According to the article, during the campaign alliance warplanes have fired nearly 420,000

¹² Law No. 02/L-37 on the Use of Languages, Articles 2 and 5, as promulgated by UNMIK Regulation No.2006/51, 20 October 2006.

¹³ The Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Articles 8 and 22.

¹⁴ “Reconstruction Implementation Commission for Serbia Religious Sites in Kosovo,” Implemented by the Council of Europe, 20 December 2011.

¹⁵ Sputnik Srbija, “On This Day 21 Years Ago: NATO Bombing of Yugoslavia in Numbers,” 17 March 2020, <https://sputniknews.com/europe/202003241078694857-on-this-day-21-years-ago-nato-bombing-of-yugoslavia-in-numbers/>

missiles, bombs and other projectiles, including the use of 37,000 cluster bombs. On the other hand, the article claims that Yugoslavia had only limited losses of military hardware (only 93 tanks) caused by the bombing. In addition, it states that the bombing destroyed or damaged some 25,000 residential buildings, 470 km of roads, and 595 km of railway infrastructure. 14 airports, 19 hospitals, 20 health centers, 69 schools, 18 kindergartens, 176 cultural monuments and 38 bridges. Finally, according to the article NATO intervention and Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 forced over 200,000 ethnic Serbs to leave their homes.

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

a) Exaggeration of the presented number of casualties

According to the Human Rights Watch Report "Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign" on the basis of available evidence has concluded that as few as 488 and as many as 527 Yugoslav civilians were killed as a result of NATO bombing. It has further clarified that between 278 and 317 of the dead, were in Kosovo, 201 civilians were killed in Serbia, and eight in Montenegro.¹⁶

On the other hand, the detailed data gathered based on 31,600 documents, presented in the publication "Kosovo Memory Book" (February 2nd, 2015) which was prepared by the Humanitarian Law Center based in Belgrade, confirm that the NATO attacks killed a total of 754 people: 454 civilians and 300 members of the armed forces. 207 civilians were of Serbian and Montenegrin ethnicity, 219 were Albanian, 14 civilians were Roma, and 14 were of other nationalities. Clearly, the documented data show that the number of deaths during NATO Air Campaign was much lower than 5,700, as presented in the article.

¹⁶ "Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign," Human Rights Watch Report, Volume 12, Number 1 (D), 2000, <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2000/nato/>

b) Exaggeration of the scope of NATO bombing and understating Serbia losses

According to the data reported to US Congress, during its air campaign in 1999, NATO dropped more than 23,000 bombs and missiles, including also 329 cruise missiles fired.¹⁷ Clearly, NATO reported figures about the amount of bombs and missiles during the air campaign in 1999 are much lower than 420,000 missiles, bombs and other projectiles, and 37,000 cluster bombs, as stated in the article. On the other hand, immediately after the war, the Pentagon and NATO both reported that the alliance had destroyed nearly 800 heavy Serb weapons. According to the Department of Defense, that total included 450 artillery tubes and mortars, 220 armored combat vehicles, and 120 tanks.¹⁸ Again, the number of destroyed heavy Serb weapons including tanks, is higher than the number reported by the article.

c) The manipulation of the number of Kosovo Serbian community post-war refugees.

According to the report published by Kosovo Coordination Center of the Government of Serbia in February 2002, there were 129,474 Serbs living in Kosovo. On the other hand, according to the last Yugoslav census of 1991 there were 194,000 Serbs living in Kosovo, with a very unlikely trend for that number to increase during the 90's.¹⁹ These figures project a number of, at most, 75,000 Serbs that left Kosovo after the war, which is far less than 200,000 as claimed by the article.

Disinformation Alert 4

- ***Title: Serbia blasts NATO's 1999 aggression as crime against humanity, TASS Russian News Agency, 24 March 2020***²⁰

The article cites a statement by a group of Serbia's non-governmental organizations of diplomats, political scientists, military officers and medics according to which NATO's air campaign in 1999

¹⁷ "Report to Congress: Kosovo/Operation Allied Force After-Action Report," 31 January 2000.

¹⁸ William S. Cohen, "DoD News Briefing," U.S. Department of Defense, June 10, 1999.

¹⁹ For further exploration see: The Lausanne Principle: Security, Territory and the Future of the Kosovo Serbs, European Stability Initiative, June 7, 2004, https://www.esiweb.org/pdf/esi_document_id_53.pdf

²⁰ TASS Russian News Agency, "Serbia blasts NATO's 1999 aggression as crime against humanity," 24 March 2020, <https://tass.com/world/1134651>

“was an aggression and a crime against humanity.” The statement also points out that "the act of aggression and subsequent occupation of Kosovo and Metohija, illegal creation of the US military base Bondsteel, unilateral proclamation of Kosovo’s independence and violations of the UN Security Council’s Resolution 1244 were dangerous precedents and heavy blows on the European and global system of security." The article further claims that this act of aggression left an estimated 3,500-4,000 people dead and 12,500 others injured. In addition, the article states that the 15 tonnes of depleted uranium bombs dropped by NATO was a long-term hazard to the people and environment in Serbia. According to the article due to this, Serbia’s cancer rate became the highest in Europe with about 30,000 people developing cancer and 18,000 of them dying during the first ten years following the bombardments. Also, it cites military experts according to whom, a total of 3,000 cruise missiles were launched and 80,000 bombs were dropped, including cluster and depleted uranium ones.

The deconstruction of the disinformation: Facts and Figures

Similarly to the previous article, this one also makes statements that intend to portray NATO alliance as an aggressor that has committed crimes against humanity by killing 3,500-4,000 people and by dropping depleted uranium bombs and other prohibited weapons. It also brings forward about information about the amount of the number of missiles launched and bombs dropped, including the cluster ones. The facts and figures that were deconstructed in the previous article will not be repeated here, and will focus only on the accusation of NATO campaign being a crime against humanity and the false allegations about the consequences of depleted uranium bombs. However, it is worth noting that the two articles published on the same day in Russian media bring forward contradictory data about the number of deaths (5,700 versus 3,500 – 4,000) and the number of NATO fired missiles (420,000 versus 80,000 bombs and 3,000 missiles).

a) The NATO air campaign in 1999 was not a crime against humanity

As it can be seen from the title of the article, Serbia considers NATO's air campaign in 1999 as a crime against humanity. However, it was Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces that committed atrocities against the people of Kosovo in flagrant violation of international law. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) has on 27 May 1999, while the NATO air strikes were still ongoing, charged Milosevic and four of his senior aides with crimes against humanity. Even before this indictment, the United States had clear evidence that implicated nine Yugoslav military officers in crimes against humanity.²¹ As already mentioned, the Human Rights Watch report has documented "torture, killings, rapes, forced expulsions, and other war crimes committed by Serbian and Yugoslav government forces against Kosovar Albanians between March 24 and June 12, 1999."

On the other hand, the Final Report to the Prosecutor of the ICTY by the "Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign Against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia" stated that "there is simply no evidence of the necessary crime base for charges of genocide or crimes against humanity." Furthermore, in the particular incidents reviewed by the committee with particular care "the committee has not assessed any particular incidents as justifying the commencement of an investigation by the Office of the Prosecutor."²²

a) There is no proof of harmful effects caused by NATO depleted-uranium weapons

The claims that the depleted uranium bombs dropped by NATO are responsible why Serbia's cancer rate became the highest in Europe with about 30,000 people developing cancer and 18,000 of them dying during the first ten years following the bombardments. The United Nations Environment Programme has in 2000 conducted an assessment about the environmental impact in Kosovo of depleted uranium NATO bombs. Reports concluded that "there was no detectable,

²¹ "Press Conference Given by NATO Spokesman, Jamie Shea and SHAPE Spokesman, Major General Walter Jertz," May 23, 1999.

²² International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, "Final Report to the Prosecutor by the Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign Against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia," 13 June 2000, <https://www.icty.org/x/file/Press/nato061300.pdf>

widespread contamination of the ground surface by depleted uranium” and that there is “no significant risk in terms of possible contamination of air, water or plants”.²³

On the other hand, On the other hand, the already mentioned ICTY Committee has among others also reviewed the legality of the use of depleted uranium projectiles, and whether or not the bombing campaign had an adverse impact on the environment. The Committee has concluded that so far there is no specific treaty ban on the use of DU depleted-uranium bombs. Furthermore, the opinion of the Committee, based on information available was that the OTP “should not commence an investigation either into use of depleted uranium projectiles” or “the collateral environmental damage caused by the NATO bombing campaign”.²⁴

Disinformation Alert 5

- **Title:** *Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Moscow, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Moscow, 19 March 2020*²⁵

In her Briefing on 19 March 2020, the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson of Russia Maria Zakharova, when answering a journalist question about measures of Kosovo government related to Covid-19 has said that such decision “has endangered the delivery of supplies, including medicine, to the north of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo”. It further stated that the complicated epidemiological situation should “not be used as a pretext for disrupting the region’s logistical ties with central Serbia” and that it “is absolutely inhumane to raise artificial obstacles to medical deliveries, including those sent to the healthcare facilities in Kosovska Mitrovica.” Ms. Zakharova also accused Kosovo government for continuously sabotaging implementation of the 2013 and

²³ United Nations Environment Programme, “Depleted Uranium in Kosovo: Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment,” Geneva, 2001.

²⁴ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “Final Report to the Prosecutor by the Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign Against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia,” 13 June 2000, <https://www.icty.org/x/file/Press/nato061300.pdf>

²⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova,” Moscow, 19 March 2020, https://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/foreign_policy/news//asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4090761

2015 (Brussels) Agreements with Serbia by not allowing life supplies to people on both sides of the administrative line.

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

During this briefing, the Foreign Ministry Spokesperson of Russia Maria Zakharova has stated a serious of allegations and insinuations against the Kosovo government measures related to the Covid-19. The aim of the briefing was clearly to damage the image of Kosovo state and its government by portraying it as one that missuses the Covid-19 pandemic as a pretext for “disrupting the region’s logistical ties with central Serbia” and endangering the delivery of supplies, including medicine, to the north of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo”.

However, all these claims are false since Kosovo government has during COvid-10 pandemic undertaken measure of border closing and lock-down similar to those of other states in Europe and the world. Throughout this period, throughout Europe food was treated as “essential service” and special procedures through the so-called “green channels” for food and trade were kept open to ensure functional supply chains between countries. On the other hand, Kosovo government has offered medical supplies and services equally to all its citizens, including those in the North. Moreover, for the first time, Ministries of Health of Kosovo and Serbia have cooperated to jointly handle the Covid-19 pandemic.

The accusation that Kosovo government has continuously sabotaged the implementation of the 2013 and 2015 Brussels Agreements with Serbia is also false, especially when it comes to free movement of goods and people. It was Serbian government that has continuously prolonged and even blocked the implementation of Brussels agreements between two countries. According to the European Commission “Progress Report 2019” for Serbia, the problem with the licence plates and other related elements of the agreement on freedom of movement are yet to be solved. The Report states that “Serbia has yet to address the issue of re-located Serbian administrative customs structures with Kosovo denomination that operate from within Serbia, and to cease the

issuance of documentation or affixing of stamps with denomination that contravenes the related agreement”.²⁶

²⁶ European Commission, “Serbia 2019 Report,” SWD (2019) 219 final, Brussels, 29 May 2019.