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Disinformation Alerts – Serbian Media Monitoring is a monthly report on the news related to disinformation and misinformation targeting Kosovo, published by media in Serbia

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KOSOVO DISINFORMATION ALERTS

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INTRODUCTION

Kosovo Disinformation Alerts: Serbian Media Monitoring aims to counter disinformation through monitoring on a monthly basis of the preselected media outlets originating in Serbia. The preselected media are Tanjug, Informer, Novosti, Kurir, B92, Politika and Naša Borba that are known for producing news with disinformation content that is not limited only to Kosovo.

The monitoring of these media shows that during April 2020 a total of 443 news have been published by preselected media outlets originating in Serbia, of which Tanjug has published 35, Beta 35, Informer 51, Novosti 34, Kurir 7, B92 100, Politika 43 and Naša Borba 4 articles related to Kosovo.

A careful review shows that the news published during this period by Tanjug, Beta, Kurir and Politika did not contain any serious disinformation content. However, other preselected media outlets did have a relatively large number of news and articles with disinformation content on Kosovo. Against this backdrop, KIPRED is focused on the deconstruction of the most blatant disinformation provided by the above listed Serbian media, which will be discussed in the following section.

The aim of the disinformation generated in this monitoring period by the preselected Serbian media in relation to Kosovo indicates that it is focused on undermining the legitimacy of Kosovo's statehood by portraying the war for independence as a religious one and KLA as an Islamist military formation. The preselected articles also aim at discrediting the state of Kosovo and its leadership, as well as its security institutions and its citizens. Most of the articles use denigrating and derogatory language when referring to Albanians and Kosovo's political elites. The preselected articles also try to undermine the support of the West to Kosovo by trying to discredit the EU and its position towards Kosovo.

DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MOST BLATANT DETECTED DISINFORMATION

Disinformation Alert 1

Headline: *“MARKO ĐURIĆ O STANJU NA KOSOVU I METOHIJI: KFOR neće dozvoliti ekstremistima da iskoriste ovu situaciju! (MARKO ĐURIĆ ON THE SITUATION IN KOSOVO AND METOHIJA: KFOR will not allow extremists to take advantage of this situation!)”,
Informer, 28 April 2020¹*

The article transmits the statement of the director of the Office for Kosovo and Metohija [labeling of Kosovo since the times of Milosevic by the authorities of Serbia], Marko Đurić, according to whom KFOR has at the beginning of the corona virus epidemic promised not to allow extremists in Pristina to take advantage of this situation and try to invade the north of Kosovo. He also pointed out that organized Albanian gangs have robbed Serbian property during the curfew in Kosovo, especially in households in which they know that no one lives, by stealing cattle, tractors and other machinery. Đurić has accused Pristina institutions for not paying attention to such phenomena, while at the same time claiming that the Office for Kosovo and Metohija has reacted immediately and tried to compensate the damages. Furthermore, he asserted that nobody knows the real number of patients infected with coronavirus in the Albanian communities in Kosovo, and that the health system is very weak. Đurić claims that the virus has penetrated into KFOR as well, and that in camp Bondsteel, 80 out of 90 tested soldiers were positive, while adding that in six municipalities with a Serb majority south of Ibar river, not a single patient has been diagnosed with Covid-19.

¹ “MARKO ĐURIĆ O STANJU NA KOSOVU I METOHIJI: KFOR neće dozvoliti ekstremistima da iskoriste ovu situaciju! (MARKO ĐURIĆ ON THE SITUATION IN KOSOVO AND METOHIJA: KFOR will not allow extremists to take advantage of this situation!)”, Informer, 28 April 2020, <https://informer.rs/vesti/srbija/513358/marko-djuric-stanju-kosovu-metohiji-kfor-neze-dozvoliti-ekstremistima-iskoriste-ovu-situaciju>

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

The article brings forward several false claims by the director of the Office for Kosovo , Marko Đurić, who clearly aims at discrediting the state of Kosovo as well as its citizens and security institutions. Since the Brussels Agreement signed in 2013, Kosovo institutions have gradually extended their legal jurisdiction to the Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo. Consequently, there was neither the intention, nor the need for authorities in Prishtina take advantage of the corona virus epidemic and try to invade the north of Kosovo, as Đurić claims.

a) There was no robbing of property in Serbian households

Accusations by the director of the Office for Kosovo, Marko Đurić that organised Albanian gangs have robbed Serbian property from empty households during the curfew are false. There were no reports whatsoever that cattle, tractors and other machinery were stolen from these households where nobody lives. Such claims have not been reported either by Kosovo Police or by KFOR troops, or by any other international organization present in the country.

b) Kosovo knows exactly the number of Covid-19 cases

The claim by the director of the Office for Kosovo that nobody knows the real number of patients infected with Covid-19 in the Albanian communities in Kosovo is also false. The Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Public Health of the Republic of Kosovo report on daily basis the exact numbers of newly diagnosed and recovered cases, and eventual number of deaths by the Covid-19. These data is also sent and afterwards reported by the John Hopkins University database together with other countries in the world. Otherwise, it has to be mentioned that despite relatively weak health system, Kosovo has managed to quite successfully handle the

Covid-19 pandemic, and according to John Hopkins University, it ranks 12th in Europe in terms of the number of coronavirus related deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.²

c) There were diagnosed cases with Covid-19 in municipalities with a Serb majority in the North

The information that in municipalities with a Serb majority south of Ibar River not a single patient has been diagnosed with Covid-19 is also false. In addition of reporting about the exact numbers of newly diagnosed and recovered cases, and eventual number of deaths in the South of Kosovo, the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Public Health of Kosovo have also on daily basis reported about the cases in municipalities with a Serb majority in the North. According to these data, there were a total of 115 registered cases of Covid-19 in the North of Kosovo, of which 105 have recovered and 10 have died from the effects of the corona virus. More specifically, in northern Mitrovica, 43 patients were registered with Covid-19 (40 cured, three dead), 25 in Zvečan (24 cured, one dead), 24 in Zubin Potok (22 cured, two deceased) and in Leposavić 24 (19 cured, four died). It is worth mentioning that since 15th of May, no new cases with Covid-19 have been registered in the municipalities in the north of the country.³

² See "COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU)," 8 May 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

³ "Nga 15 maji asnjë rast me koronavirus në veri", Lajmi, 26 May 2020, <https://lajmi.net/nga-15-maji-asnje-rast-me-koronavirus-ne-veri/>

Disinformation Alert 2

Headline: *“RUSI ISKRENO: Ako Srbija izgubi Kosovo, Rusija gubi Srbiju (RUSSIANS HONESTLY: If Serbia loses Kosovo, Russia loses Serbia)”*, **Nasa Borba, 23 April 2020**⁴

The article claims that Serbia’s integration into the European Union certainly goes through prior membership into NATO and the final renunciation of Kosovo. According to the article, the surrender of Kosovo will also inflict a serious blow to the centuries-old cultural and humanitarian ties between Serbia and Russia. The article warns, that some signs of preparing the Serbian public opinion for such scenario are already visible. It also refers to the meeting in the White House between the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, and President of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi. In this case, the article uses denigrating and derogatory language by referring to President Thaçi as "the leader of the Kosovo separatists, Hashim Thaçi". Similarly, when discussing about former Prime-minister of Kosovo Ramush Haradinaj, the article again uses the same derogatory language by referring to him as "influential terrorist leader".

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

The article uses denigrating and derogatory language when referring to key leaders of Kosovo, with the aim of undermining Kosovo’s statehood and discrediting its political elite. The current President and former Prime-minister of Kosovo Hashim Thaçi to whom the article refers as "the leader of the Kosovo separatists", has for 20 years been present in Kosovo’s political scene. He has served several terms as the Prime-minister of Kosovo as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, while currently holds the position of the President as the head of state and chief representative of the Republic of Kosovo. Throughout this period, he has participated in a great number of high-level bilateral and multilateral meetings, including the negotiations with Serbia’s President Aleksandar Vučić as part of the EU facilitated dialogue between the two countries. On

⁴ “RUSI ISKRENO: Ako Srbija izgubi Kosovo, Rusija gubi Srbiju (RUSSIANS HONESTLY: If Serbia loses Kosovo, Russia loses Serbia)”, Nasa Borba, 23 April 2020, <https://nasaborba.com/rusi-iskreno-ako-srbija-izgubi-kosovo-rusija-gubi-srbiju/>

the other hand, Ramush Haradinaj, to whom the article refers to as "influential terrorist leader", has also twice served as the Prime-minister of Kosovo and has for years been the leader of "Alliance for the Future of Kosovo" political party. Mr. Haradinaj has also been trialled twice by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in Hague, and was acquitted in both cases.

Disinformation Alert 3

Headline: *"Ako neko misli da je došlo vreme da neko fizički zauzima Valač i Gazivode, ja ih molim da to ne čine (If someone thinks that the time has come for someone to physically occupy Valač and Gazivode, I beg them not to do so)", B92, 23 April 2020⁵*

The article transmits a statement of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić about the situation in Kosovo ahead of the UN Security Council session at which the UNMIK report on Kosovo will be presented. Among others, Vučić warns that "If someone thinks that the time has come for someone to physically occupy Valač and Gazivode, I beg them not to do so". He also comments on the decision of the continental European regional group to approve the connection of the Kosovo Electricity Distribution Network (KOSTT) to the European Network of Transmission System Operators (ENTSO), a decision which according to the Kosovo officials will enable energy independence of Kosovo from Serbia. In addition, the president accused the Western powers for undertaking everything that is needed to come to a wanted decision in Kosovo without respecting the existing contract law and international agreements.

⁵ "Ako neko misli da je došlo vreme da neko fizički zauzima Valač i Gazivode, ja ih molim da to ne čine (If someone thinks that the time has come for someone to physically occupy Valač and Gazivode, I beg them not to do so)", B92, 23 April 2020, https://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2020&mm=04&dd=23&nav_category=640&nav_id=1677646

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

a) No indications that someone is planning to physically occupy Valač and Gazivode

The statement of the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić about the situation in Kosovo contains false accusations about Kosovo authorities and governments of the Western countries. The President aims at increasing the tensions in the North of Kosovo by warning that Kosovo authorities were planning to physically occupy Valač and Gazivode. This undoubtedly represents a disinformation since no such plans have been announced or exist. Clearly such insinuations aim at discrediting the state of Kosovo and its security institutions. Since the Brussels Agreement signed in 2013, Kosovo institutions have gradually extended their legal jurisdiction to the Serb-majority municipalities in the North of Kosovo. Consequently, there was neither the intention, nor there is a need for authorities in Prishtina “to physically occupy Valač and Gazivode” as Vučić claims.

b) The approval of the connection of KOSTT to ENTSO is based on an international agreement

President Vučić has falsely accused the Western powers for approving the connection of the Kosovo Electricity Distribution Network (KOSTT) to the European Network of Transmission System Operators (ENTSO) without respecting the existing contract law and international agreements. The decision of continental European regional group, enables KOSTT and the Republic of Kosovo to leave the Serbia, Montenegro and Northern Macedonia Regulatory Bloc, and join the Kosovo-Albania Energy Regulatory Block. In this way, the Agreement paves the way for KOSTT to integrate into the regional electricity market as well as to participate in the Albanian Power Exchange (APEX). It is not true that Western countries did not respect international agreements when the decision was made, since in fact, the decision of the continental European

regional group is based on the “Agreement on Energy” signed between Kosovo and Serbia in 2013 as part of the EU-facilitated dialogue in Brussels.⁶

Disinformation Alert 4

Headline: *“KAD JE KRIZA, ZA EU JE KOSOVO - SRPSKO! LICEMERJU BRISELA NEMA KRAJA, sad od nas traže da spasavamo Šiptare od korone, a čim prođe frka ucenjivaće nas da priznamo Prištinu! (WHEN THERE IS A CRISIS, FOR THE EU - KOSOVO IS SERBIAN! THERE IS NO END TO THE HYPOCRISY OF BRUSSELS, now they are asking us to save the Shiptars from the coronavirus, and as soon as the fight passes, they will blackmail us to recognize Pristina!”*, **Informer, 01 April 2020**⁷

The article discusses the call of the EU National Convention for Chapter 35 to the competent authorities of Belgrade to establish direct and effective cooperation with Pristina in combating the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. It further accuses the EU that they consider Kosovo to be Serbian only in the time of crisis. The article consider such position of the EU as hypocrisy, and claims that now the EU is asking Serbia “to save the Shiptars from the coronavirus”, but once the pandemic is over, they will blackmail Serbia to recognize Pristina!. It also transmits the opinion of the political analyst Dragomir Andjelković, who reminds the audience about the unprincipledness of the EU and notes that EU is exclusively guided by the interests of its biggest members. Andjelković further claims that with EU it is always the same when it comes to Kosovo. They did nothing to suppress Albanian separatism, and have maximally supported Kosovo's independence to the maximum, but when it suits them, “then they ask for something from

⁶ See “Bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia regarding energy sector”, Research Institute of Development and European Affairs (RIDEA), October 2019.

⁷ “KAD JE KRIZA, ZA EU JE KOSOVO - SRPSKO! LICEMERJU BRISELA NEMA KRAJA, sad od nas traže da spasavamo Šiptare od korone, a čim prođe frka ucenjivaće nas da priznamo Prištinu! (WHEN THERE IS A CRISIS, FOR THE EU - KOSOVO IS SERBIAN! THERE IS NO END TO THE HYPOCRISY OF BRUSSELS, now they are asking us to save the Shiptars from the coronavirus, and as soon as the fight passes, they will blackmail us to recognize Pristina!”

Informer, 01 April 2020, <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/505485/kad-kriza-kosovo-srpsko-licemerju-brisela-nema-kraja-sad-nas-traze-spasavamo-siptare-korone-cim-prodje-frka-ucenjivace-nas-priznamo-pristinu>

Serbia, as it is now at the time of the epidemic” - he notes. Finally, for Andjelkovic, the EU policy is one that asks Serbia to treat Kosovo as its territory when it needs to give something, but when it comes to other things, it forces Serbia to accept that Kosovo is independent.

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

The article tries to discredit the EU and its position towards Kosovo by making a number of false claims and by distorting the call made by the EU National Convention, which is a non-governmental body composed by NGOs-s in Serbia.

a) EU did not ask Serbia to save the Shiptars from the coronavirus

The article uses the derogatory term “*Šiptari*” for Albanians, while at the same time accusing the EU for lack of principles and hypocrisy. While the EU National Convention for Chapter 35 has called the authorities of Belgrade to establish direct and effective cooperation with Pristina in combating the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, the article falsely claims that the EU has asked Serbia “to save the Shiptars from the coronavirus”. In fact, the call by the EU states that such cooperation is necessary primarily due to the humanity and responsibility towards human lives in difficult times. As such, the statement is fully in line with good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, as one of the key preconditions for full accession of the countries of the Western Balkans to the EU.

On the other hand, the article tries to portray a false reality in which the situation with Covid-19 in Kosovo is very bad, and Serbia should help to save Kosovo citizens. In fact, according to the John Hopkins University database Kosovo has managed the Covid-19 pandemic more successfully than Serbia. According to data by John Hopkins University, Kosovo has so far registered a total of 1,302 case (68.77 in 100,000 inhabitants) and 30 deaths (1.657 in 100,000 inhabitants). These

figures in Serbia are much higher, with a total of 11,381 cases (130.26 in 100,000 inhabitants) and 242 deaths (2.8 in 100,000 inhabitants).⁸

b) The EU has a consistent position regarding Kosovo's statehood

The article distorts the statement by the EU National Convention for effective cooperation between Serbia and Kosovo in combating the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, and falsely claims that when there is a crisis, the EU considers Kosovo to be part of Serbia. It calls such position of the EU as hypocrisy, since once the crisis is over, the EU forces Serbia to accept that Kosovo is independent. In fact, since the declaration of Kosovo's independence on 17th of February 2008, the official EU position has been a "status-neutral" one. Although 23 of its member states have recognized Kosovo's independence and five have not, the EU has kept its "status-neutral" position throughout this period.

Disinformation Alert 5

Headline: "Ruševine Klintonove politike na Kosovu: Ostali su samo spomenici, nezaposlenost mladih 80 odsto, a najpoznatiji izvozni produkt su DŽIHADISTI (Ruins of Clinton's policy in Kosovo: Only monuments remain, youth unemployment 80 percent, and the most famous export product are JIHADISTS)", Novosti, 23 April 2020⁹

⁸ See "COVID-19 Dashboard by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU)," 8 May 2020, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

⁹ "Ruševine Klintonove politike na Kosovu: Ostali su samo spomenici, nezaposlenost mladih 80 odsto, a najpoznatiji izvozni produkt su DŽIHADISTI (Ruins of Clinton's policy in Kosovo: Only monuments remain, youth unemployment 80 percent, and the most famous export product are JIHADISTS)" Novosti, 23 April 2020, <https://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:860913-Rusevine-Klintonove-politike-na-Kosovu-Ostali-su-samo-spomenici-nezaposlenost-mladih-80-odsto-a-najpoznatiji-izvozni-produkt-su-DzIHADISTI-FOTO>

The article mainly refers to Michael Waller's text published in the Washington Post on 22nd of April 2020. According to Waller, a political analyst from the Center for Security Policy in Washington, the American political strategy for Kosovo, imposed by President Bill Clinton's administration did not give positive results. The article states that during the conflict between the predominantly Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Serbs, the Albanian majority has forced most of the Christian Serbs to flee Kosovo. Such reality, the article claims has not bothered the international community, and Kosovo has later declared independence from Serbia. Furthermore, it asserts that 80 percent of young people in Kosovo are not employed, and that "the most famous Kosovo export product is jihadists". According to the article, over two decades ago, during the Kosovo's bloody civil war, Mr. Clinton used NATO to run a bombing campaign supposedly to stop the bloodshed. However, the article states that the bombs were not enough, since an Islamist, rebel KLA military formation was established, which, thanks to Elliot Engel's lobbying in Congress, was sponsored by the Foreign Policy Committee of the House of Representatives.

Deconstruction of the Disinformation: Facts and Figures

a) The conflict in Kosovo was not a religious one

The article makes a false claim that during the conflict "between the predominantly Muslim Albanians and Orthodox Serbs, the Albanian majority has forced most of the Christian Serbs to flee Kosovo". Firstly, it has been proved by many scholars that the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 was between ethnic Albanians living there and Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces. The root of the conflict was ethnicity and not religion. Historically, atrocities committed by Serbia against the Albanians of Kosovo were because of their ethnic background and not their religion. During the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, Serbian authorities closed all Albanian-language schools that were opened by the Austro-Hungarian Empire during its occupation of Kosovo in World War I. Instead, the only educational institutions authorized by the Serbian regime were religious schools, both Islamic and Catholic ones. Similarly, though immediately after the WW2 Albanian

language schools were opened in Kosovo, just a few years later the Yugoslav communist authorities closed down most of the schools and banned Albanian national symbols and holidays. Albanians were encouraged to identify as “Turks,” while new Turkish schools were opened. At the same time, a governmental treaty with Turkey that allowed the Turks in Yugoslavia to emigrate was signed in 1953. This unleashed a massive exodus to Turkey, with many Albanian and Slavic Muslims being forced to represent themselves as Turks in order to leave the country.¹⁰ On the other hand, 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.¹¹ These figures clearly project a number of, at most, 75,000 Serbs that left Kosovo after the war, which certainly does not mean “most of the Christian Serbs” of Kosovo as claimed by the article.

b) KLA was not an Islamist military formation

As explained above, the conflict in Kosovo in 1999 was between ethnic Albanians living there and Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces. The Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) was a guerrilla military formation that was created with the aim of liberation Kosovo from the occupation of Serbia and for protecting Albanian civil population from atrocities committed by the Serbian military, police and paramilitary forces. As a result, throughout the period of the armed conflict of 1998-1999, KLA has continuously emphasized only the Albanian ethnicity and has sought to prevent representation of the Albanian identity to the West as Muslim. Neither KLA, nor any other Kosovo Albanian political group or guerrilla has identified itself with religious affiliations. Thus, the ideology of KLA was almost entirely the one of Albanian nationalism, with emphasis on Albanian ethnicity, nationalist aspirations and culture. Moreover, due to strong ethnic

¹⁰ See for instance Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹¹ 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

homogenization and mobilization of Albanians since 1989, the KLA was able to easily isolate itself from the foreign ideas of Islamic fundamentalists from Saudi Arabia who came to Kosovo in small numbers to infiltrate the KLA ranks.¹² Such reality has among others been evidenced by the Newsweek journalist Stacy Sullivan who wrote “In the two years that I covered the conflict in Kosovo, never once did I see the mujahedeen fighters I saw in Bosnia, or hear KLA soldiers even allude to any kind of commitment to Islam.”¹³

c) Jihadists as the most famous Kosovo export product

The article makes a false claim that “the most famous Kosovo export product is jihadists”. While it is true that since 2012, an estimated number of 255 foreign fighters have travelled from Kosovo to join terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, the article’s claim is certainly false. Namely, since 2014, Kosovo police and its prosecuting and judicial institutions have acted, and in August 2014, 40 Kosovar citizens suspected to have participated in terrorism in Iraq and Syria were arrested. Until January 2015 some additional 80 people were arrested under similar charges including a number of influential radical imams. As a result, since 2016 until today, not a single foreign fighter from Kosovo has travelled to Syria and Iraq during this period. It is interesting that the article does not mention another interesting phenomenon related to foreign fighters, which comes from the Serb population living in the north of Kosovo. According to media reports, around 300 Serbian foreign fighters funded by the Russian organisation “the Kosovo Front” have been fighting in the Ukrainian separatist territories.¹⁴ While not all these fighters are from Kosovo, it is difficult to determine their exact numbers since usually all of them are referred to as Serb nationals.¹⁵

On the other hand, it is worth noting that Kosovo Constitution defines the country as a secular and multiethnic state that is enriched by its diversity. In Kosovo, you will find places in which the

¹² Henry H. Perrit, *Kosovo Liberation Army: The Inside Story of an Insurgency*, University of Illinois Press, 2008.

¹³ Michael J. Totten, “Kosovo's Moderate Muslims: The world's newest country is a model of tolerance,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 2008, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123059201269240805>

¹⁴ Andriy Stelmakh and Pavlo Kholodov (30 October 2017). “How Russia recruits Serbian mercenaries into the ranks of its fighters in Donbas.” *Euromaidanpress*; <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/10/30/how-russia-recruits-serbian-mercenaries-into-the-ranks-of-its-fighters-in-donbas/>.

¹⁵ Vuk Velebit. “Serb fighters in Ukraine continue to worry the West.” *European Western Balkans*, 29 December 2017; <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/12/29/serb-fightersukraine-continue-worry-west/>.

Catholic church, the Orthodox church, and the Muslim mosque, are all situated in the same backyard.