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**DISINFORMATION-19: CHALLENGES TO THE EU'S INFLUENCE IN THE
WESTERN BALKANS**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the world was shaken by the novel coronavirus pandemic, three actors – the European Union, Russia and China – confronted in an attempt to consolidate their soft power in the Western Balkans. Using aggregated search engine data, this paper analyses the visibility coronavirus-related aid provided by the three has had among the general public in the region. Although the EU provided the largest amount of aid, this went almost unacknowledged by the Western Balkans population. Russia, on the other hand, generated massive amounts of interest, whilst China fell somewhere in the middle. The European Union and its member states need to consolidate their public diplomacy strategy, especially when it comes to communicating to the public. At the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a proliferation of disinformation in the Western Balkans. Serbia appears to be the most affected by this phenomenon, most likely due to stronger links (including media) to Russia. The EU needs to step up its efforts in countering online disinformation, including by enhancing fact-checking efforts and cooperation with the national press.

Short bio

Ana Cojocaru is a PhD student at the National University of Political Science and Public Administration (SNSPA), in Bucharest, Romania. Her research focuses on the Europeanization process in the Western Balkans, with a case study on Kosovo*. Other interests include the rule of law and migration.



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Table of acronyms

17 + 1 initiative	Cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European Countries (China-CEE, China-CEEC, also known as 17+1, formerly 16+1) – an initiative by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to promote business and investment relations between China and 17 countries of CEE (CEEC).
EEAS	European External Action Service
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investments
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SAP	Stabilisation and Association Process
WB-6	The six non-EU members Balkan states: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia



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Introduction

As the world was shaken by the novel coronavirus pandemic, foreign relations were only temporarily overshadowed by national health concerns. Many international actors, including the European Union, have attempted to use the pandemic as a platform to further consolidate their soft power. Some have done so by attempting to become a role model in handling the COVID-19 crisis. Others, by offering aid to those countries most affected or most vulnerable in the face of the pandemic.

The Western Balkans are a region of particular interest to the European Union, with all states being under the EU's sphere of influence, on various levels. However, the EU is not the only international actor interested in consolidating its influence in the region, and the COVID-19 crisis has added a new layer to this "confrontation". China and Russia have also been developing a rhetoric of great displays of solidarity to (most) states in the region, whilst the latter has also been accused of spreading disinformation concerning the pandemic.

This paper aims to analyse how the three actors – the EU, China and Russia – have attempted to consolidate their influence in the Western Balkans states during the COVID-19 crisis and to compare the impact their policies have had in increasing their soft power in the area. In order to do so, the following methods will be used:

1. A quantitative analysis of public levels of interest in the EU, Russia and China during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on search trends analytics provided by Google. Public interest in common disinformation about COVID-19 will also be analysed.
2. A qualitative analysis of the media coverage of the aid received by the Western Balkan states from the EU, Russia, and China. Public discourse concerning common disinformation about COVID-19 will also be analysed.

Note: For the purpose of this paper, only the six non-EU Western Balkan (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*¹, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia) will be taken into consideration. Hereinafter, they will be referred to as the "Western Balkan 6" or "WB-6".

The findings shall be used to develop a set of recommendations to the EU and its member states, targeted at ways in which disinformation can be fought against, and in which the impact of humanitarian / solidarity actions maximized.

Context

EU – Western Balkans relations. The Balkans are a region of significant geopolitical interest to the European Union, with all states being under the EU's sphere of influence, on various levels. Croatia and Slovenia, which are both former parts of the Republic of Yugoslavia, are now fully-fledged EU members. Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia are candidate countries undergoing the complex processes of pre-accession Europeanization. Lastly, whilst Kosovo* and Bosnia and Herzegovina are potential candidates, they have some of the most euro-optimistic populations in the entire region.

¹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.



Cooperation between the European Union and the Western Balkans takes multiple forms. The EU is the WB-6 largest trade partner, accounting for almost 70% of the region's total trade². EU-based companies are the leading investors in the region, accounting for over 65% of FDI stock in the WB-6³.

Apart from that, the EU is also the largest donor of official development assistance (ODA) to the Western Balkans, most notably through the Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP), in which all WB-6 states are partners. On 29 April, the European Commission announced that financial support amounting to €3.3 billion will be allotted to the Western Balkan states to address the COVID-19 pandemic⁴.

Studies carried out before the pandemic indicate that the population of the WB-6 states was well aware of the EU's role as an ODA provider. The European Union was cited as the largest donor to the respective states in 4 out of the 5 Western Balkan states surveyed, with the exception of Albania (not surveyed) and Kosovo* (which cited the United States of America as the largest donor)⁵.

However, the EU is not the only international actor with an interest in consolidating its influence in the Western Balkans, and the COVID-19 crisis has added a new layer to this “confrontation”.

Russia – Western Balkans relations. Russia has considerable historical, cultural, religious, economic, and political stakes in the Western Balkan region. The pre-existing ties are often actively propagated and / or exaggerated by Russian public diplomacy and media narratives, including via alleged disinformation campaigns⁶. It has been highlighted that “*Serbia, in particular, remains not just an ally, but also a base for wider activities throughout the Balkans, from intelligence gathering to cultural outreach.*”⁷

According to EEAS, pro-Kremlin sources and proxies in the Balkans have taken advantage of the COVID crisis to spread messages such as that the EU is failing to deal with the pandemic and that the Union is on the brink of collapse⁸, in order to consolidate their own influence in the region.

From an economic point of view, Russia's relations with the WB-6 have weakened in the last few years, whilst the former's share in the region foreign trade and investment has been decreasing for

² European Commission (May 2020), *Trade – Western Balkans*. Retrieved from

<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/regions/western-balkans/>

³ European Commission (November 2020), *EU – Western Balkans relations*. Retrieved from

https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/eu_wb_relations.pdf

⁴ European Commission (April 2020), *EU reinforces support to Western Balkans to address COVID-19*. Retrieved from

https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_777

⁵ Center for Insights in Survey Research (March 2020), *Western Balkans Regional Poll*. Retrieved from https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_wb_poll_deck_for_publishing_1.pdf, p.48.

⁶ Stronski, P., Himes, A. (February 2019), *Russia's Game in the Balkans*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Retrieved from <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>

⁷ Galeotti, M. (April 2018), *Do the Western Balkans face a coming Russian storm?*, European Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from https://ecfr.eu/publication/do_the_western_balkans_face_a_coming_russian_storm/

⁸ Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies (June 2020), *Institutions and Foreign Interferences*. Retrieved from

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655290/IPOL_STU\(2020\)655290_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655290/IPOL_STU(2020)655290_EN.pdf), p.52.



several years. However, Russia continues to have a strong influence in the energy sector, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia⁹.

China – Western Balkans relations. What China is missing in terms of historical bonds with the Western Balkan area, it makes up with a promise of economic growth, associated with a general lack of conditionality and / or low political cost¹⁰. China's relations with the region are, by a large degree, shaped by its Belt and Road Initiative (to which Serbia and North Macedonia are particularly relevant) and focus on infrastructure, on procurement to Chinese firms, and on infrastructure-related lending¹¹. With 40 percent of its external debt already owed to China, the highest rate in the Balkans, Montenegro is the most susceptible to the so-called “debt-trap” scenario¹².

China is also building up soft power in the WB-6 through the 17+1 (former 16+1) initiative, consisting of a cooperation framework including education, culture, research and development¹³.

Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Western Balkans. As everywhere in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic had a strong effect in the Western Balkans, significantly decreasing economic activity and exacerbating socio-economic inequalities¹⁴.

The Western Balkan governments have taken a series of extraordinary measures to effectively contain the spread of COVID-19, including serious restrictions to individual freedoms and the introduction of extra powers for the executive branch, to the detriment of legislatures and the judicial power¹⁵. Thus, the ordinary division and balance of powers – both governmental and societal – were disrupted. This has the potential to lead to a decrease of trust in the establishment and in traditional media sources among the population, therefore creating fertile ground for disinformation and foreign interference .

The European Union, Russia and China, which are all interested in increasing their soft power in the region, have all implemented aid schemes aimed at supporting the WB-6 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their discourses on the topic, from public diplomacy to the alleged disinformation campaigns, have been an integral part of their strategy to consolidate their influence in the Western Balkan states. In the Spring of 2020, during the first COVID-19 wave in Europe, there was

⁹ Hake, M., Radzyner, A. (2019), *Western Balkans: Growing economic ties with Turkey, Russia and China*, Bank of Finland, Institute for Economics in Transition. Retrieved from <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bof/bitstream/handle/123456789/16048/bpb0119.pdf?sequence=1> , p.7.

¹⁰ Zweers, W., et al (August 2020), *China and the EU in the Western Balkans*, Clingendael. Retrieved from <https://www.clingendael.org/pub/2020/china-and-the-eu-in-the-western-balkans/> , p.2.

¹¹ Idem.

¹² Garcevic, V., *Russia and China are Penetrating Balkans at West's Expense*, Balkan Insight. Retrieved from <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/08/18/russia-and-china-are-penetrating-balkans-at-west-s-expense/>

¹³ Hake, M., Radzyner, A. (2019), *Western Balkans: Growing economic ties with Turkey, Russia and China*, Bank of Finland, Institute for Economics in Transition. Retrieved from <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bof/bitstream/handle/123456789/16048/bpb0119.pdf?sequence=1> , p.8.

¹⁴ OECD (2020), *The COVID-19 crisis in the Western Balkans*. Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/south-east-europe/COVID-19-Crisis-Response-Western-Balkans.pdf> , p.1.

¹⁵ Tzifakis, N. (October 2020), *The Western Balkans during the pandemic: Democracy and rule of law in quarantine?*, European View. Retrieved from https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1781685820963333?fbclid=IwAR33EncNIXVBuR2cWoYMvcUtJdQXV9toCBrM_Yxp-tYR-7zrFYBda-MuFBs&



widespread concern about the potential effect of the influence campaigns, allegedly run by China and Russia in Europe, in what EU officials have described as a „battle of narratives”. In the first four months of the year, almost 150 cases of disinformation spread by Russia controlled media, especially Sputnik and Russia Today, were reported by EU bodies¹⁶.

Such acts of foreign interference may have multiple and complex effects, ranging from a decrease in trust in EU and national authorities to mistrust in public health systems, increase in stigmatization of certain groups and overall social unrest.

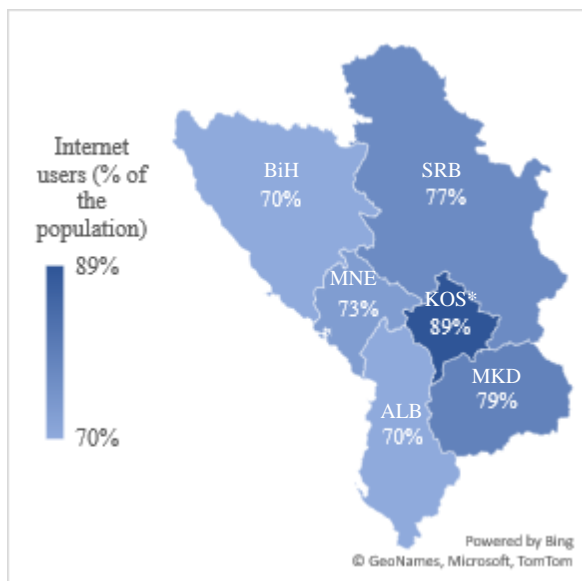


Figure 1 - Percentage of internet users among WB-6 population. Source: World Bank.

Methodology

In the following, we shall assess the impact of the public communication strategies employed by the European Union, Russia and China, respectively, in the Western Balkan. In order to do so, we shall analyse public levels of interest based on Google search trends analytics.

In a region such as the Western Balkans, where, on average, more than 70% of the population are internet users (see **Figure 1**)¹⁷, people's online behaviours are highly indicative of their interests and preferences.

As Google is not only the most used search engine, but also the most accessed website in the Western Balkan countries¹⁸, its data is the most relevant in analysing organic interest in certain topics.

Google Trends data reflects how often a certain term or topic has been looked up by internet users in a certain territory or state and during a certain period.

The numbers aggregated by Google represent the search interest relative to the highest point on the chart for the selected region and time.

A Google Trends data point with the value of 100 means that the respective term is at the peak of its popularity, whilst a value of 50 means that the term shows up half as much in internet users' Google searches. By analysing this data, we will be able to explore the magnitude of different subjects of interest at different moments, as well as how people organically react to those moments¹⁹.

¹⁶ Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Directorate-General for Internal Policies (June 2020), *Institutions and Foreign Interferences*. Retrieved from [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655290/IPOL_STU\(2020\)655290_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/655290/IPOL_STU(2020)655290_EN.pdf), p.49.

¹⁷ World Bank (2020), *Individuals using the internet (% of population)*. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS>

¹⁸ Alexa, *The top 500 sites on the web – by country*, Amazon. Retrieved from <https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries>

¹⁹ For more information on the topic, Rogers, S. (2016), *What is Google Trends data — and what does it mean?*, Medium. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/google-news-lab/what-is-google-trends-data-and-what-does-it-mean-b48f07342ee8>



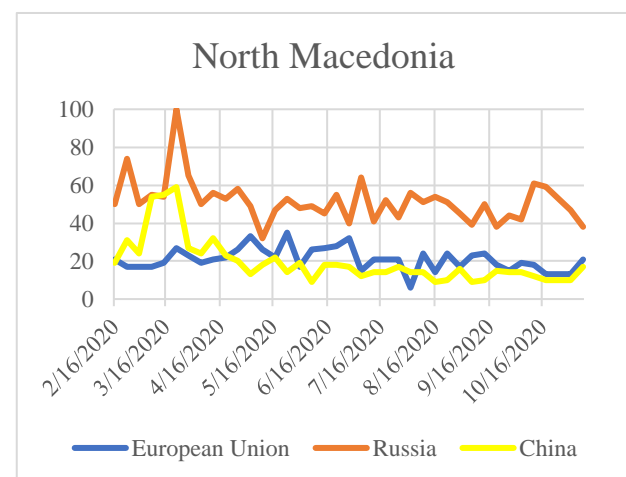
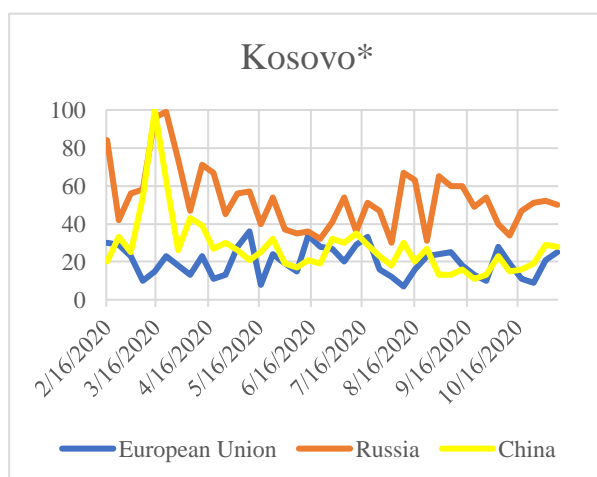
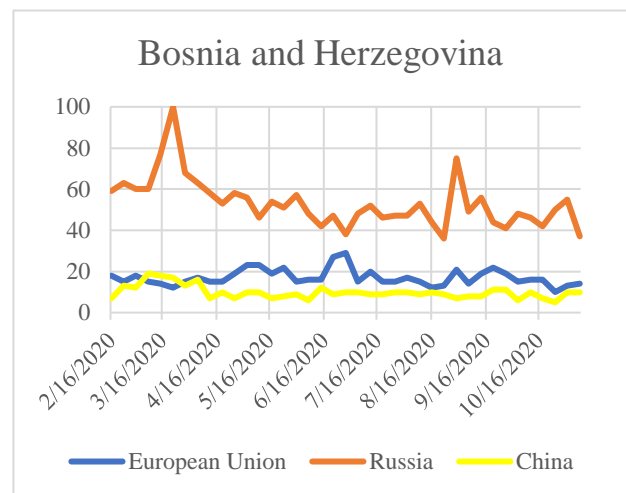
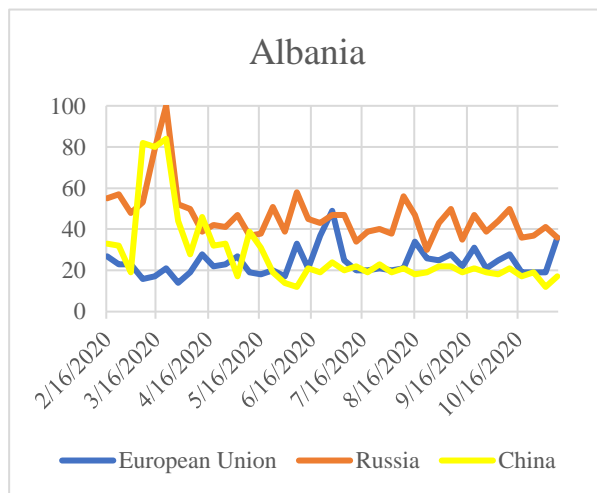
Therefore, by using Google Trends data, we shall analyse the following:

1. The European Union's, Russia's, and China's relative level of popularity in the WB-6, based on the number of Google searches.
2. Prevalence of disinformation in the WB-6.

Information thus obtained will be complemented by qualitative, media sources.

The European Union's, Russia's, and China's relative levels of popularity in the WB-6

The EU, Russia, and China – relative levels of interest. When it comes to relative levels of interest in the Western Balkan states, Russia outperformed the EU and China in Google searches in all 6 countries, in the period between 15 February and 12 November 2020 (as seen in **Figure 2**).



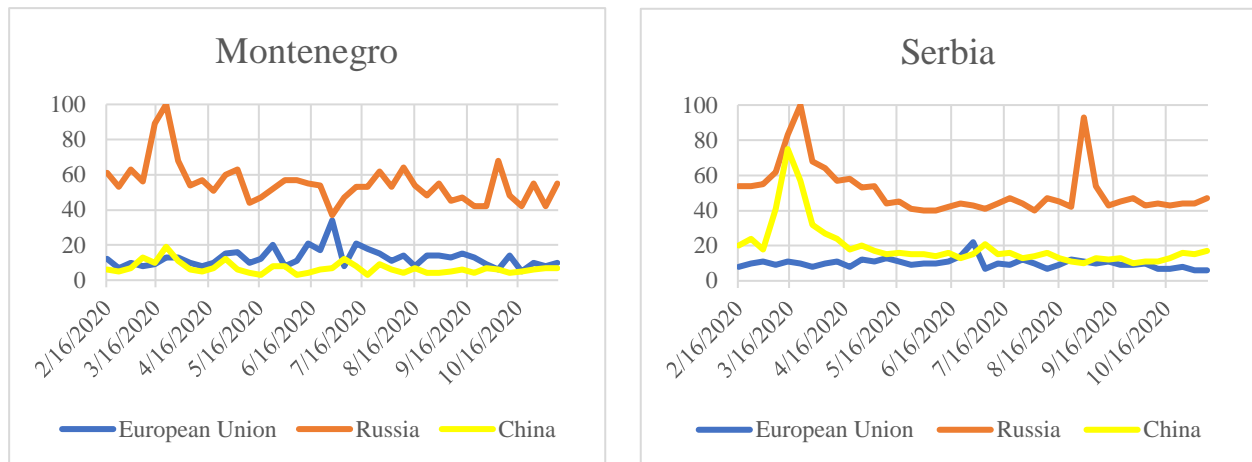


Figure 2 - Relative levels of interest concerning the European Union, Russia and China in Google searches in the Western Balkan states between 15 February and 12 November 2020. Source: Google Trends.

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia showed the largest difference between Russia and the others, with an average difference of more than 20 points (out of 100). Data on queries from Albania and Kosovo*, on the other hand, shows more similar levels of interest concerning the three entities.

Whilst Russia is outperforming the others throughout the selected timeframe, the public interest is usually peaking around early April. This correlates to the moment when the Russian government deployed a large part of its coronavirus-related aid to the region. For example, on 3 April, the Russian Defence Ministry pledged to send 11 flights with 87 army medics to Serbia (in comparison, Russia only sent 14 medical flights to Italy at a time when the country was experiencing the pandemic at its height)²⁰.

At the same time, China saw an increase in Google searches around mid-March, which also correlates to the moment when it conducted coronavirus-related aid to the region. The spike is especially visible in trends from Albania, Kosovo*, North Macedonia and Serbia.

Serbia, in particular, was very vocal in expressing gratitude to China. Its Prime Minister, Aleksandar Vučić, criticized the EU for “abandoning his country,” and for projecting “a fairy tale”. China, on the other hand, was the first country from which the Serbian government officially sought assistance. Vučić personally greeted the first Chinese plane carrying six doctors and medical equipment and kissed the Chinese flag, an act which garnered a lot of national press coverage²¹.

²⁰ Vuksanovic, V. (June 2020), *From Russia With Love? Serbia's Lukewarm Reception of Russian Aid and Its Geopolitical Implications*, LSE Ideas. Retrieved from <https://lseideas.medium.com/from-russia-with-love-serbias-lukewarm-reception-of-russian-aid-and-its-geopolitical-implications-a911b3ec09a7>

²¹ Samorukov, M., (July 2020), *Ventilator Diplomacy in the Balkans*, Carnegie Moscow Center. Retrieved from <https://carnegie.ru/2020/07/08/ventilator-diplomacy-in-balkans-pub-81895>



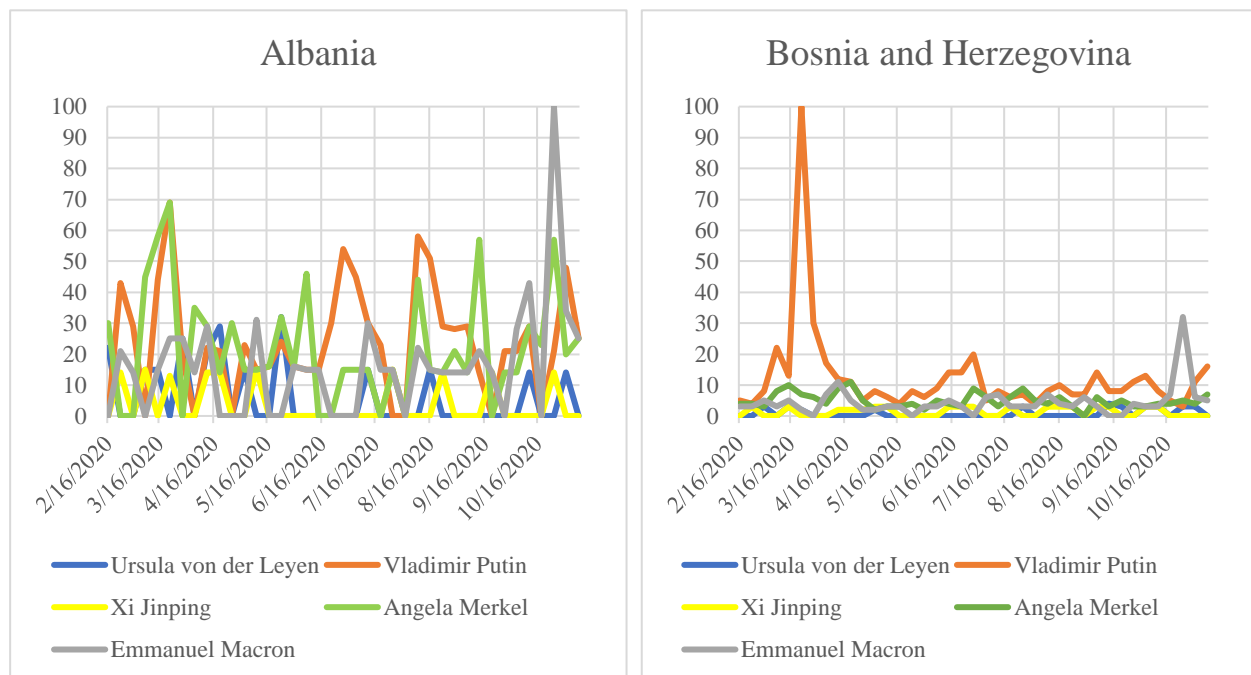
Both Russia and China were accused of using aid for strategic, rather than humanitarian, purposes. Many of the medical supplies they delivered were allegedly flawed²². However, the media campaigns associated with this aid clearly had an impact in the region.

On 29 April, the European Commission announced that financial support amounting to €3.3 billion will be allotted to the Western Balkan states to address the COVID-19 pandemic²³. This has little to no impact on public levels of interest, as reflected in Google searches.

Some have blamed the lack of visibility of such initiatives on the apparent lack of solidarity among EU countries in the first weeks of the COVID-19 crisis response²⁴. This gave space for other international actors, including Russia and China, to challenge its influence in the region.

Political leaders – relative levels of interest. Russia also dominates the chart when it comes to level of interest in political leaders (see **Figure 3**) Vladimir Putin was, by far, the most-searched political leader in all WB-6 with the exception of Kosovo* and Albania, where multiple political leaders had comparable scores.

This may be due to how recognizable Putin is. Comparatively, Ursula von der Leyen and Xi Jinping, whose names are maybe less known to the WB-6 public, have scored low across the region. Meanwhile, Angela Merkel and Emmanuel Macron, who are closely associated with the European Union in the public's eyes, each have raised a medium level of interest, in some cases outranking Putin.



²² Ahmetaj, M., Loftus, S. (July 2020), *COVID-19 and the influence of Russia and China in the Western Balkans*, The Diplomatic Courier. Retrieved from <https://www.diplomaticcourier.com/posts/covid-19-and-the-influence-of-russia-and-china-in-the-western-balkans>

²³ European Commission (April 2020), *EU reinforces support to Western Balkans to address COVID-19*. Retrieved from https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_20_777

²⁴ Cameron, A., Leigh, M. (June 2020), *Has COVID-19 dented the EU's credibility in the Balkans?*, Bruegel Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.bruegel.org/2020/06/has-covid-19-dented-the-eus-credibility-in-the-balkans/>

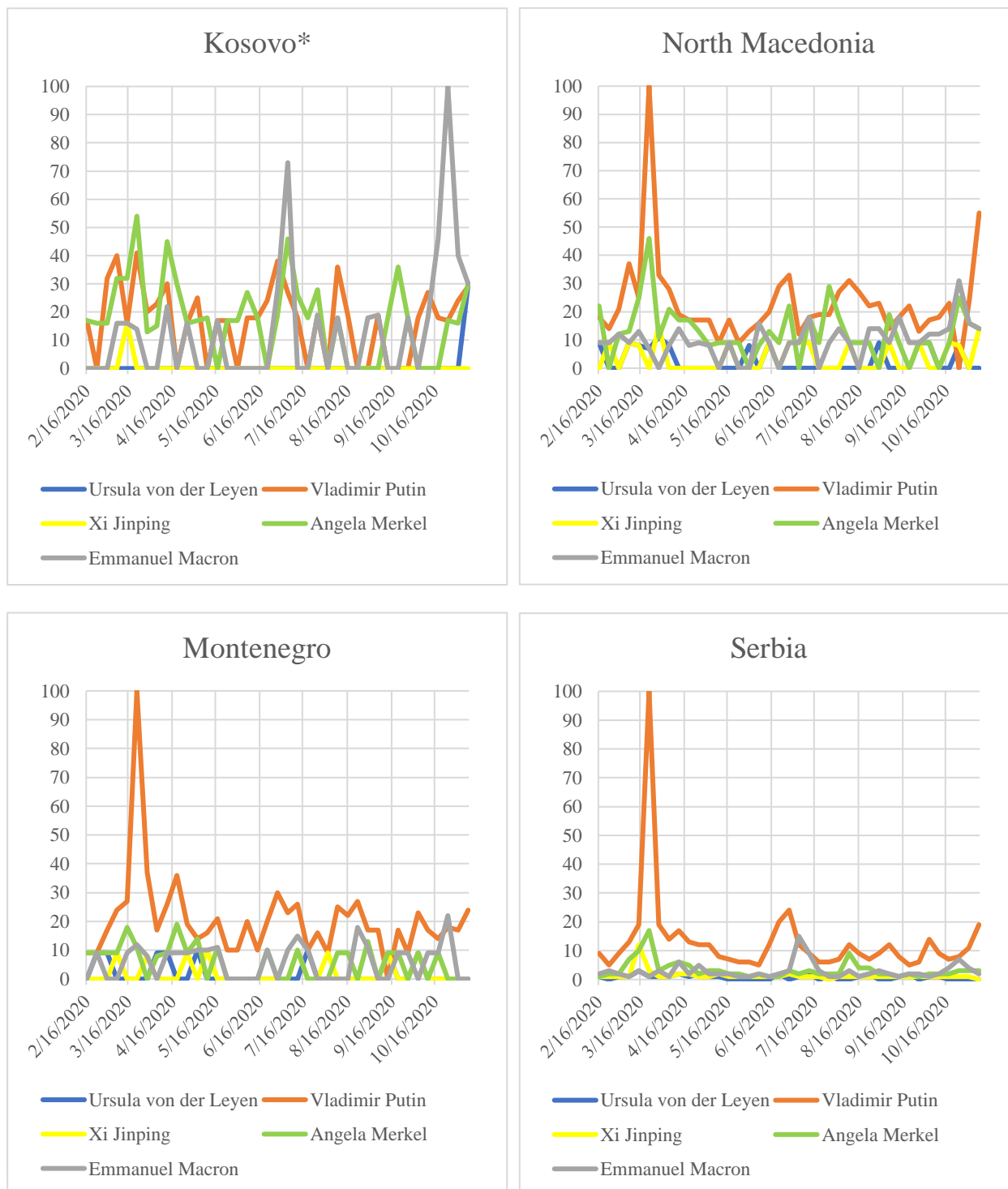


Figure 3 - Relative levels of interest concerning various political leaders in Google searches in the Western Balkan states between 15 February and 12 November 2020. Source: Google Trends



Pervasiveness of coronavirus-related disinformation

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories all over the world. The EU raised alarm over coordinated campaigns that “*have been running across EU Member States and neighbouring regions, promoting false health information and disinformation about the EU and its partners, including from foreign state-controlled media and social media channels*”²⁵. In the following, we shall attempt to evaluate the prevalence of disinformation in the WB-6 by correlating relative levels of interest to related queries, according to Google Trends data.

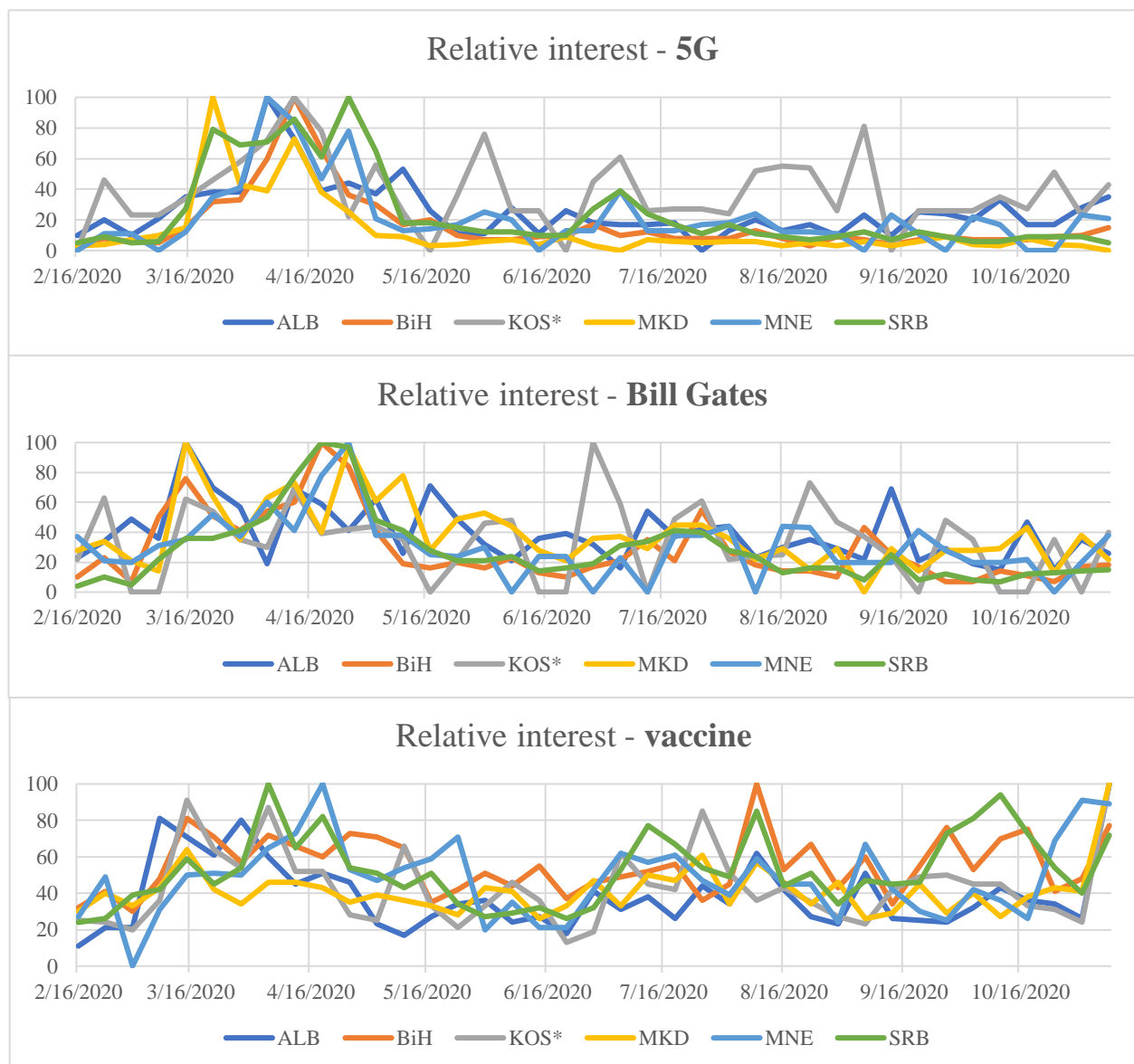


Figure 4 - Relative levels of interest concerning terms often related to conspiracy theories in Google searches across the Western Balkan states between 15 February and 12 November 2020. Source: Google Trends.

²⁵ European External Action Service (April 2020), *Short assessment of narratives and disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic 2-22 April*, EU vs. Disinfo. Retrieved from <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/ceas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>



The search terms featured in **Figure 4** are, by themselves, innocuous. However, in certain associations, they are at the centre of today's most popular conspiracy theories. For example, Bill Gates is at the centre of disinformation campaigns stating that he has orchestrated the entire COVID-19 pandemic in order to either forcibly vaccinate the population or to depopulate the planet. Many media outlets, including notable examples owned by the Russian state, have disseminated this disinformation²⁶. One such example is the Russian-owned Sputnik network in Serbia²⁷.

Similarly, disinformation efforts have blamed 5G technology for the spread of COVID-19. This theory was even supported by high-ranking politicians in the Balkans, such as a Serbian MP and former Minister of Health²⁸ and was disseminated by at least 4 popular media outlets, according to fact-checking organizations²⁹.

According to **Figure 4**, all featured search terms enjoyed a relatively high level of interest throughout the region. In order to separate "regular" Google searches for the three terms from disinformation, related search terms were also consulted. The related Google searches in four of the six Western Balkan states returned red flags – associations that presented a high risk of disinformation. For example, the search term "5G" was associated in Bosnia and Herzegovina with "Wuhan" and in North Macedonia with "radiation" and "risk". The search term "Bill Gates" was associated in Serbia with "vaccines", "arrest", "5G" and "George Soros", and in Albania with "virus". All red flags were compiled in the table featured in **Figure 5**.

Country	5G	Bill Gates	Vaccine	TOTAL
Albania (ALB)	1	1	1	3
Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)	2	2	1	5
Kosovo* (KOS*)	0	0	0	0
North Macedonia (MKD)	3	1	1	5
Montenegro (MNE)	0	0	0	0
Serbia (SRB)	4	6	2	12

Figure 5 - Number of red flags appearing in the "Related entities" category for the respective search terms in each of the WB-6 between mid-February and mid-November 2020.

²⁶ EU vs. Disinfo (April 2020), *Pro-Kremlin media and the "gates of hell"*. Retrieved from <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/pro-kremlin-media-and-the-gates-of-hell/>

²⁷ I.e. Sputnik Serbia, *Skoro pola miliona Amerikanaca traži istragu protiv Bila Gejtsa: Zločin protiv čovečnosti?*. Retrieved from <https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/svet/202004241122429378-skoro-pola-miliona-amerikanaca-trazi-pokretanje-istrage-protiv-bila-gejtsa-i-njegove-supruge/>

²⁸ Bieber, F. (July 2020), *Conspiratorial Corona: Hoaxes and Conspiracy Theories in the Balkans*, Balkan Insight. retrieved from <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/07/conspiratorial-corona-hoaxes-and-conspiracy-theories-in-the-balkans/>

²⁹ Velimirović, T. (April 2020), *Nema dokaza o povezanosti 5G mreže s korona virusom*, Raskrinkavanje. Retrieved from <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/nema-dokaza-o-povezanosti-5g-mreze-s-korona-virusom>



Based on the number of red flags raised in their lists of associated search terms, Western Balkan states fell in three categories:

- Green – no red flags raised, lower risk of disinformation. Kosovo* and Montenegro fall under this category.
- Yellow – some red flags, medium risk of disinformation. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia fall under this category.
- Red – many red flags, high risk of disinformation. Serbia falls under this category.

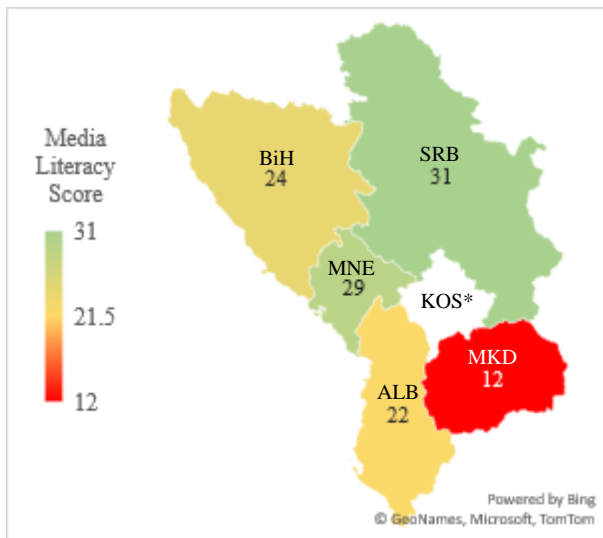


Figure 6 - Media literacy scores across the WB-6 (out of a maximum of 100 points). Source: Open Society Institute Sofia.

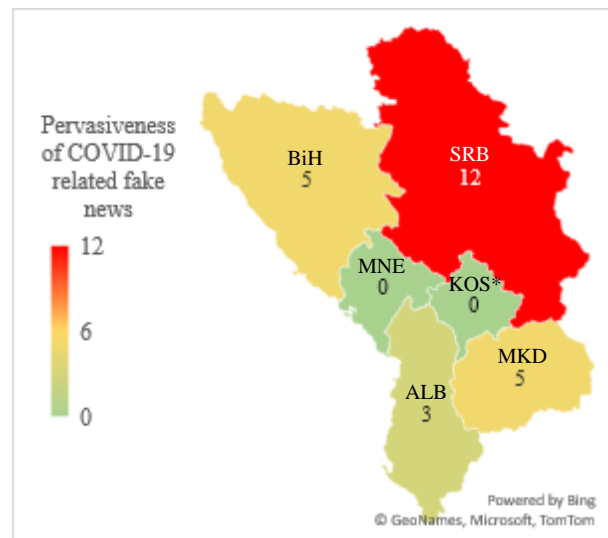


Figure 7 - Pervasiveness of coronavirus-related fake news across the WB-6.

The level of susceptibility to disinformation may be justified considering the Western Balkan states' low scores in the Media Literacy Index, where all scored 31 and lower (out of 100), which are the lowest in Europe³⁰. However, a higher media literacy score does not necessarily guarantee a lower level of pervasiveness of COVID-19 fake news, as it is shown in **Figure 6** and **7**. Serbia, which is the main outlier, is also the host of Sputnik Srbija, which enables Russian media narratives to proliferate through mainstream Serbian-language media outlets.

However, disinformation campaigns such as the ones concerning Bill Gates and the 5G technology usually fall under the category of outright conspiracy theories. However, the media in the Balkans contains many other examples of disinformation that are trickier to disprove, such as declaration of politicians concerning the evolution of the pandemic at national or regional level. Such examples include Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, who allegedly re-tweeted fake news³¹, and

³⁰ Open Society Institute Sofia (November 2019), *Media Literacy Index 2019*. Retrieved from <https://osis.bg/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/MediaLiteracyIndex2019-ENG.pdf>

³¹ Faktoje (August 2020), *Prime Minister, Edi Rama, falls into the trap of disinformation again?!*. Retrieved from <https://faktoje.al/en/kryeministri-edi-rama-bie-serish-ne-kurthin-e-dezinformimit/>



a list containing tens of misleading declarations of Serbian politicians, compiled by a fact-checking organization³².

Combined with pre-existing instability and the negative social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of disinformation contained in Western Balkan states' media has the potential to further erode public trust in the state and create societal divisions.

Conclusions and recommendations

As the coronavirus pandemic continues to rage on, the European Union, Russia and China faced off in the Western Balkans, in an attempt to consolidate their soft power through the narratives they promote.

Some narratives, particularly those promoted at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, revolve around solidarity. This paper showed that, even though the aid provided by the EU to the Western Balkans in the context of COVID-19 appeared to be significantly larger than the what was offered by China and Russia, it generated much less interest among the population of the WB-6. The European Union and its member states need to consolidate their public diplomacy strategy, especially when it comes to communicating to the general public.

At the same time, the pandemic was accompanied by a so-called “*infodemic*”, during which foreign interferences and fake news proliferated. The EU and its member states need to step up their efforts in combating online disinformation. Disinformation, fake news and related phenomena have high de-stabilizing potential, as they may erode trust in public authorities and health systems, contribute to fearmongering, and divide societies.

In order to consolidate their public diplomacy strategy and combat disinformation, the EU and its member states should:

1. Consolidate the activity of EEAS in the field of of strategic communication and combating disinformation. Strategic communication Task Forces, especially those targeting the Western Balkans, need to be provided with appropriate funding and staffing. Regional expertise needs to be taken into consideration in all matters surrounding the Task Forces.
2. Increase their engagement with local and national elites – political elites from national and / or local level can be strong ambassadors for international efforts, as they are recognizable to the general public and already have their own platform. As it was visible in the case of Serbia, the engagement of Prime Minister Vučić with some of the donors seemed to be correlated with significantly higher levels of interest among the population.
3. Increase their engagement with local and national media, including by providing training and grants to journalists interested in reporting on EU matters. Local media, particularly independent outlets, continue to be underfunded in all Western Balkan states. Training topics may include general information about the EU, its institutions and how they work,

³² Istinomer (September 2020), *Šta su nam sve pričali o koroni za ovih šest meseci?*. Retrieved from <https://www.istinomer.rs/analize/sta-su-nam-sve-pricali-o-koroni-za-ovih-sest-meseci/>



their countries' paths to EU accession, and about identifying and countering disinformation / fake news.

4. Make sure that accessible and relevant news content is available in the languages spoken in the Western Balkan states, in order to counterbalance the amount of Russian-produced content on the market. This is particularly relevant, as local media trusts often lack the resources to produce and / or translate large quantities of content.
5. Continue to support initiatives aimed at improving media literacy. Even though this study did not conclude that a higher media literacy score is necessarily connected to less interest in conspiracy theories, media literacy is generally proven to be one of the strongest weapons against disinformation efforts.
6. Enhance cooperation with fact-checking initiatives. Whilst fact-checking initiatives exist in most of the Western Balkan states, their resources are limited and, thus, they tend to limit themselves to domestic matters.
7. Facilitate cooperation between national stakeholders and social media platforms. At the moment, fact-checking organizations from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are involved in Facebook's platform against disinformation. It would be advisable for similar organizations from Albania and Kosovo* to be involved in such initiatives as well.



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