Reach and dissemination channels of (selected) disinformation narratives in Serbia[1]

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Abstract

The phenomenon of disinformation has been extensively studied, with its roots traced to shifts in the media economy, declining trust, and rising political polarization and populism. Although there is a growing research on disinformation, the issues of its dissemination and reach remain contested. This study investigates the reach and dissemination channels of selected disinformation narratives in Serbia. Through a survey-based approach (N=800), the research examines seven such cases identified through fact-checking portals: alleged Russian aid superiority, alleged Ukrainian biolabs, purported Western cultural

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censorship, supposed Soros's global influence, claimed Serbian-Sanskrit con-
nections, alleged Western origins of COVID-19, and misrepresented UN poli-
cies on sexuality. The findings reveal a significant reach of these narratives, with
four out of seven being recognized by over half of the respondents. Variations
in exposure and belief across different narratives potentially stem from factors
such as ideological alignment, plausibility, timing, and the presence of coun-
ter-narratives. A "market" of disinformation exists on TV, digital news servic-
es, and social media, while traditional press and radio play an almost negligible
role in disseminating these narratives. This research adds to the growing body
of work examining disinformation in illiberal contexts. It provides initial ob-
servations on how false information circulates in a media environment where
political control is prevalent and media independence is under pressure, point-
ing to areas for future research in this complex field.

Keywords: Serbia, disinformation, narrative, reach, dissemination

Introduction

Fake news, now more commonly referred to as disinformation, has become
one of the most prolific terms employed in different areas of studies, from
media and communications, political sciences, international relations to
computer sciences. Variety of disinformation types, topics and sources have
been explored, with the roots of their emergence found in changing media
economy, declining trust, rising polarization and populism (Freelon and
Wells 2020). However, in less than ten years since disinformation came into
the focus, following the 2016 elections in the US, the reach and impact of
disinformation remain complex issues. Utilization of different measures
that lead to inconclusive findings, does not resonate with widely shared
public concerns about the spread of disinformation. Some authors even
take a highly critical stance, calling the preoccupation with this phenom-
enon 'moral panics' in which both mainstream media, regulators and
academics take part (Jungherr and Schroeder 2021).

Disinformation is increasingly conceived as a context bound phenom-
enon that has different articulations depending on country specific traits
(Hameleers 2023, Humprecht 2019, Janjić and Kleut 2023). Analysis showed
that combination of political and social factors together with media
consumption patterns, make some countries, mostly those in Northern
Europe, more resilient to online disinformation, when compared to the
US and polarized countries of Southern Europe (Humprecht, Esser, and
Van Aelst 2020). Those factors further translate into individual behaviours
related to intention to spread factually incorrect and misleading infor-
mation (Humprecht et al. 2023). Additionally, different countries are to
a lesser or higher degree targets of strategic disinformation use in cross-

37

DINKO GRUHONJIĆ, STEFAN JANJIĆ, JELENA KLEUT
REACH AND DISSEMINATION CHANNELS OF (SELECTED) DISINFORMATION
NARRATIVES IN SERBIA

border campaigns (Lukito 2020; Nieminen 2024), a factor that further invites contextually nuanced exploration of disinformation.

In this context, Serbia stands out as an illustrative example of a country that geo-politically positions itself between East and West – maintaining its orientation towards EU membership, but also having close ties to Russia and China (Marciacq 2020). As such it presents a country at risk from disinformation (Nieminen 2024), a risk that is further fuelled by authoritarian tendencies, growing societal polarization, and declining trust in news (Štětka and Mihelj 2024). With these contextual factors in mind, we present the findings of a study that aimed to assess the reach of disinformation and channels of their dissemination in Serbia. Conducted as part of a larger comparative research, it zooms into specific disinformation narratives and, using a survey-based approach, explores the extent disinformation narratives are known among the Serbian population. In doing so it aims to supplement the existing studies of disinformation in illiberal settings (Štětka and Mihelj 2024; Štětka, Mazák, and Vochocová 2021) and the studies pertaining to the issues of reach and channels of exposure to disinformation.

DISINFORMATION AND DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES – TOWARDS CONCEPTUAL CLARITY

Disinformation is most frequently defined as deliberately falsified information that is intended to cause harm to a person, social group or entire country (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). Its closest synonym, fake news, is also used in academic literature, although there is a declining trend since the term has been frequently abused by the right-wing and populist leaders (Farkas and Schou 2018). In delineating disinformation from other near synonyms, such as false information, junk news, or hoax, two of its core elements prove to be contested – level of falsehood and intentionality. Reviews of literature show that disinformation is wider than completely fabricated information; rather it encompasses different kinds of manipulative merging of false and accurate information (Abu Arqoub et al. 2020; Kapantai et al. 2021). Motives behind the creation of disinformation also vary, and they can include profit, ideological and psychological motives, as well as a range of cases in which intention is unclear (Kapantai et al. 2021, 1317).

Several aspects of disinformation received wider acknowledgement. First, it is information that can take various modalities – text, image, video or audio (Wardle and Derakhshan 2017). It contains falsehoods that do not represent mistakes made by creators, and in general its creators are not willing to concede once the mistake is made (Ireton and Posseti 2018). Further, it excludes all instances when the lack of facticity is clearly

labelled, for example in cases of humour, satire or debunking (Ireton and Posseti 2018; Hameleers 2023).

Falsehoods can present themselves in various ways, and some of the frequently mentioned types of disinformation are false context, imposter content, manipulated content, and fabricated content (Ireton and Posseti 2018). Kapantai's et al. (2021) review identifies also other kinds, such as clickbait, conspiracy theories, misleading connection, hoax, biased or one-sided content, pseudoscience, rumours, fake reviews or trolling. Beyond the typologies of falsehoods, disinformation can also be regarded as belonging to different narratives centring on specific polarising topics (Suau and Puertas-Graell 2023), identity-based differences (Reddi, Kuo, and Kreiss 2023) and geopolitical interests (Bánkuty-Balogh 2021; Madrid-Morales, Wasserman, and Ahmed 2024). Viewed as narrative constructions, an approach taken in this study, pieces of disinformation can be seen as recurring, topically connected stories, "supportive of a coherent system of beliefs or a certain world view" (Bánkuty-Balogh 2021, p. 171).

Dissemination channels and reach of disinformation

The spread of disinformation through different media channels is a complex phenomenon, largely studied in the context of elections (Dourado and Salgado 2021; Grinberg et al. 2019; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020). Social media, together with fake news and alternative news websites, have been reported as the most important channels through which citizens access disinformation (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Ng and Taeihagh 2021; Suau and Puertas-Graell 2023). As Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) explain, social networking sites are particularly conducive to the dissemination of disinformation due to a combination of factors: the low entry cost, the fragmentary format that lacks proper context or source verification, and the ideological polarization that social media tends to foster. Among them, Facebook has emerged as a particularly potent channel for the spread of disinformation, providing the majority of traffic to fake news websites (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Guess, Nyhan and Reifler 2020).

In addition, the role of social media in disseminating disinformation is connected to activity of ordinary users and automated bot accounts. Individuals are not just passive consumers of content; they actively share, like, and comment on disinformation, often without realizing the content is false (Buchanan 2020). This peer-to-peer dissemination exacerbates the problem, since it legitimizes the disinformation in the eyes of other users (Vaccari, Chadwick and Kaiser 2023). Bot accounts, on the other hand, play a role in coordinated campaigns by amplifying narratives originating

39

DINKO GRUHONJIĆ, STEFAN JANJIĆ, JELENA KLEUT
REACH AND DISSEMINATION CHANNELS OF (SELECTED) DISINFORMATION
NARRATIVES IN SERBIA

from fake news websites or from closed and less frequently used networks, such as Reddit or Telegram (Ng and Taeihagh 2021; Lukito 2020). Among both groups, research has identified "super-spreaders", accounts with large following that consistently disseminate a disproportionately large amount of low-credibility content (DeVerna et al. 2024).

In comparison to social networking sites, legacy media were initially treated as a separate part of media ecology, relatively resilient to "information pollution". However, mainstream media outlets are known to amplify disinformation that originates on social media platforms, either because it carries substantial news values or because partisan disinformation aligns well with partisan nature of some media (Tsfati et al. 2020). This amplification is also identified in user studies that showed that both social media and traditional media use are positively associated with exposure to fake news stories (Lee, De Zúñiga and Munger 2023).

These general findings on dissemination channels should be taken with some caution. First, the majority of the studies explore social media as sites of exposure (Broda and Strömbäck 2024), thus creating an impression that the channels studied are the ones in which disinformation proliferates. As highlighted by Allen and colleagues (2020), at the scale of the information system, news is only a smaller portion of average media diet dominated by TV, which means that "the origins of public misinformedness and polarization are more likely to lie in the content of ordinary news or the avoidance of news altogether as they are in overt fake news" (Allen et al. 2020, 1). Second, research is mostly focused on USA and Western Europe (Broda and Strömbäck 2024; Murphy et al. 2024), although limited comparative studies show that exposure patterns, together with belief in disinformation, depend on contextual factors and specifics of national media systems (Altay, Nielsen and Fletcher 2024). For that reason, our study aims to answer:

RQ1: What are the main channels of exposure to disinformation narratives in Serbia?

Reach of disinformation

Understanding the reach of disinformation, or the level of citizens' exposure to it, is crucial for assessing its potential impact on public opinion and behaviour. Data about the reach, mostly pertaining to elections in US and Western Europe, are dependent on the type of the measures that are studied, and on the understanding of disinformation – inclusion of different types of falsehoods and use of source specific vs story specific approach.

Research based on a source specific approach that observed consumption of fake news websites shows that their reach is rather limited. Fletcher

and colleagues (2018) demonstrated that fake news websites reached only about 1% of the population in France and Italy. Similarly, Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2020) found that fewer than half of Americans visited fake news websites, and disinformation accounted for only 6% of their overall news diet. Moreover, the majority of these visits were concentrated among 20% of the population, indicating that most people are not regularly exposed to disinformation. Other studies support these findings, noting that news in general constitutes only a small fraction of media consumption (14%), and fake news websites account for just 0.15% of the daily media diet (Allen et al. 2020).

 Guess, Nyhan and Reifler (2018) offer further evidence that exposure to disinformation is deep but narrow. They found that in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, one in four Americans visited a fake news site, but the consumption of fake news was concentrated among a small group of individuals – specifically, the 10% of people with the most conservative views. This pattern of concentrated exposure has been observed across various platforms. Baptista and Gradim (2020) found that online disinformation on Facebook did not have a greater reach than real news during the 2019 Portuguese elections, although it was more likely to be shared. A similar dynamic was found on Twitter during 2016 U.S. presidential elections (Grinberg et al. 2019) and 2019 elections for European Parliament (Cinelli 2020),

Studies using specific disinformation news stories bring data that points to broader exposure. One of the first large-scale studies on disinformation, a poll conducted by IPSOS for BuzzFeed, found that 33% of respondents recalled seeing at least one fake news story during the 2016 U.S. election (Silverman & Singer-Vine 2016). Zimmermann and Kohring's research (2020), placed in the context of the 2017 German election, showed that 11.5% of respondents saw one of the disinforming news articles and concluded that exposure is low on average, although for individual consumers it might be high. In a study on polarising disinformation narratives conducted in Spain, Suau and Puertas-Graell (2023) draw attention to the fact that different narratives yield different levels of exposure, ranging from a narrative being heard by 29% of respondents to narratives surpassing 70% reach.

Despite the general claims about the prevalence and impact of disinformation, this overview of previous research leaves the question of reach and exposure to false information open. While fake news websites seem to be attracting a small audience, the exposure to disinformation stories and narratives across multiple dissemination channels seems to vary depending on the story in question, general resilience of the media envi-

41

DINKO GRUHONJIĆ, STEFAN JANJIĆ, JELENA KLEUT
REACH AND DISSEMINATION CHANNELS OF (SELECTED) DISINFORMATION
NARRATIVES IN SERBIA

ronment (Humprecht et al. 2020) or some other factors that need to be explored further. Thus, our study aims to answer:

RQ2: What is the reach of disinformation narratives in Serbia?

Contextual background –
Disinformation in Serbia

The Serbian media landscape has undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades, moving from a polarised pluralist media model at the beginning of a century to a current day competitive authoritarian system (Milutinović 2023) or hegemonic illiberal public sphere, as labelled by Štětka and Mihelj (2024). Media autonomy in Serbia has been largely eroded as a result of political control over media landscape (Milojević and Kleut 2023) and the dynamics of media capture is evident in the media market's structure, where state-backed entities dominate, marginalising independent voices and limiting the diversity of perspectives available to the public. Journalists are often denied access to information, and targeted by harassment, attacks, and SLAPP lawsuits in recent years.

In such a situation, trust in media is very low, with only 29% of citizens trusting news in general and 43% trusting the news they consume (Kleut et al. 2023). Although not trusted, news is frequently consumed, and social media and TV news alike are accessed for information. According to *Report on digital news in Serbia* (Kleut et al. 2023), TV is the main source of news for 34% of respondents, followed by social networking sites (25%), and daily newspapers' websites and applications (22%). The same study showed that a large number of citizens (85%) have encountered fake and misleading information, mostly related to politics and the war in Ukraine.

Unlike in other countries, the legacy media are regarded as the main culprits of disinformation. The annual report of one of the fact-checking organisations showed that in the five national tabloid newspapers there were 1.172 false, manipulative and unfounded news, on the front pages alone (Vučić, Ljubičić and Radojević 2021). Other studies also point to tabloids as the central hubs of dissemination of disinformation (Janjić 2020). A Western Balkan comparative study *Disinformation during Covid-19 pandemic* (2021, 15) established that "among the 20 media outlets with the highest number of published manipulations, as many as 15 are from Serbia". Disinformation is also used by high government officials as a tool to deepen domestic polarisation, and it is disseminated through legacy media, including national and local TV channels (Kleut 2022).

Maintaining its orientation towards EU membership, but also having close ties to Russia and China (Marciacq 2020), Serbian leadership is positioning the country between East and West. As such it can be considered as a country at risk from disinformation campaigns from abroad (Niem-

inen 2024), but the domestic data show that in general this is not the case. Covert influence campaigns that are found in other countries (Bánkuty-Balogh 2021; Lukito 2020) are replaced by, or at least amplified, by domestic political elites and mainstream media (Štětka and Mihelj 2024, 187).

Method

Studies about dissemination of disinformation and their reach use different methods and measures. In our approach we follow the survey-based approach of Suau and Puertas-Graell (2023), that, similar to other research, relies on the existing fake news narratives (Madrid-Morales et al. 2024). Our study was conducted within a larger project "Disinformation and trust – DISINFTRUST" led by Blanquerna-Universitat Ramon Llull, Spain in 2023-2024 period. The project was implemented in the Czech Republic, Germany, France, Italy, Kosovo, Poland, Serbia, and the United Kingdom with an overall aim of establishing conditions and causal mechanisms related to trust in misleading content. In each country, the study followed the same survey protocol. In some countries the ClaimHunter tool was used to identify the most spread disinformation, while in others local teams were formed to identify the narratives.

The first step in our study was identification of disinformation claims, performed in the period from 10th to 28th April 2023. We followed three fact-checking portals in Serbia – Istinomer, AFP Fact Check, and Fake News Tragač – and on the basis of their work we formed a database of 25 fact-checked and debunked claims.

Most of the observed narratives are related to pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda concerning the war in Ukraine, totalling nine. Narratives N1, N2, and N3 were selected as representatives of this metanarrative. Next are conspiracy theories about wealthy and influential people from the West who allegedly control global politics and the economy. A total of eight such narratives were observed in the monitored fact-checking texts, and they are represented by N4. Following are narratives concerning conspiracy theories about COVID-19 and medicine in general. There were five of these, and the example selected for further study is narrative N6. Two ethno-centric narratives about the exceptionalism of the Serbian people were observed, with narrative N5 being one of them. One narrative included gender-based prejudice, and it is included as N7. The exact wording of the narratives as they appeared in the survey is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Identified disinformation narratives

No.	Narrative
N1	Russian economic assistance to Serbia is larger than the support from the EU.
N2	The Pentagon (USA) has admitted to have 46 biolaboratories in Ukraine.
N3	Western countries are removing cultural artefacts related to Russia.
N4	George Soros and other rich people from the West are controlling the world's economy and politics.
N5	The word Serb (Srbin) has Sanskrit origin which shows that Serbs are one of the oldest nations.
N6	COVID-19 pandemic was artificially caused by the West.
N7	United Nations call for the decriminalization of paedophilia and promotes gay and lesbian culture.

In specific, narrative N1 falsely claims that Russian economic aid to Serbia exceeds EU support. In reality, the EU is Serbia's largest donor, providing nearly 3 billion euros (2000–2018), while Russia is not even among the top ten donors. Despite these facts, a large number of citizens incorrectly believe Russia is the biggest donor (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2018). Narrative N2 misrepresents a U.S. government report about financial support for Ukrainian health facilities as an admission of bioweapons laboratories. The report actually confirms that the U.S. provided support to 46 laboratories, health facilities, and diagnostic locations in Ukraine, but clearly states that Ukraine has no nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons programs (Istinomer 2023a). Narrative N3 exaggerates isolated incidents to claim widespread removal of Russian cultural artefacts in Western countries. A specific false claim circulated on social media alleged that London's National Gallery was removing a famous painting by Jan van Eyck due to the subject's resemblance to Putin. The Gallery's public relations service confirmed to multiple media outlets that this was disinformation (Istinomer 2023b)

Narrative N4 promotes the conspiracy theory that George Soros controls global politics. In the analysed period, former U.S. President Donald Trump and his allies accused Soros of "buying" the Democratic district attorney Alvin Bragg, who indicted Trump. These claims spread on social media, building on previous narratives about Soros as a behind-the-scenes puppet master of world politics (Istinomer 2023c). Narrative N5 falsely asserts that the word 'Serb' has Sanskrit origins, implying Serbs are an ancient people. Three experts in Sanskrit confirmed this claim is unfounded, stating there is no word for Serb in Sanskrit, as Serbs did not exist when the Rigveda was created, from the 15th to 10th century BCE (FakeNews Tragač 2023). Narrative N6 falsely claims that the COVID-19

pandemic was artificially created by Western powers. It often ties into other conspiracy theories, such as Bill Gates' alleged "Golden Billion" strategy, which supposedly aims to reduce the world's population to an 'ideal' one billion through mass vaccination against COVID-19 (FakeNews Tragač 2021). Last narrative, N7, misrepresents UN documents to claim the organization supports decriminalizing paedophilia. In the analysed period, Facebook posts spread false claims that the UN was calling for the decriminalization of paedophilia. This was based on a misinterpretation of a document published by the International Commission of Jurists, which does not mention paedophilia or call for its decriminalization (Istinomer 2023d)

These narratives were included in the survey, conducted from June 7th to June 27th, 2023 by GESOP agency. Self-administered interviews conducted online were based on N=800 participants aged 18 to 74. Sampling method included interlocked quotas by sex, age and zone of residence, with a margin of error ± 3.5%. While this sample can be deemed representative for selected demographic factors, the fact that additional factors are not included (ie. education) and that it was self-administered only online (thus excluding people without access to Internet) lowers its overall representativeness. Conducted as part of a larger project and coordinated simultaneously in five EU countries, the survey granted privacy and protection of data of the respondents, following the principles of the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

The questionnaire was centred around the disinformation claims identified in the first phase. After basic socio-demographic questions, each participant was presented with a disinformation narrative from Table 1, and asked if s/he has heard it before (Have you heard about this topic before?), with binary yes/no options as a response. It also asked from which media respondents heard about the narrative (From which media or format did you hear it?) – with the following variables: Printed newspapers; Digital media; Radio; Social media (including Youtube, Facebook, TikTok, etc.); WhatsApp, Telegram and other messaging apps; TV news; Other TV programs; Forums; Podcasts, By email, Talking with friends, relatives, colleagues at work or similar. In a subsequent step, these are aggregated into four categories: press, radio, TV, digital and social media. Each participant was also asked if they trusted the narrative was true (To what extent do you think is it true?), on a scale from 1 to 8, that was later aggregated into three categories of agreement. Each question also included additional options of 'I don't know' and 'I prefer not to answer'.

FINDINGS

## DISINFORMATION REACH AND AGREEMENT

The results obtained through the survey show that four out of seven narratives have been heard by more than half of the respondents, with even the least heard narrative (N2) still reaching a third of the survey population (Figure 1). Narrative N6 that states that COVID-19 pandemic was artificially caused by the West is the highest reaching narrative, followed by N3 narrative on Western countries removing cultural artefacts related to Russia, and N5 narrative on the word Serb having Sanskrit origin. Three least heard narratives (N1-N3) are those describing the relations between Russia and the EU/USA.
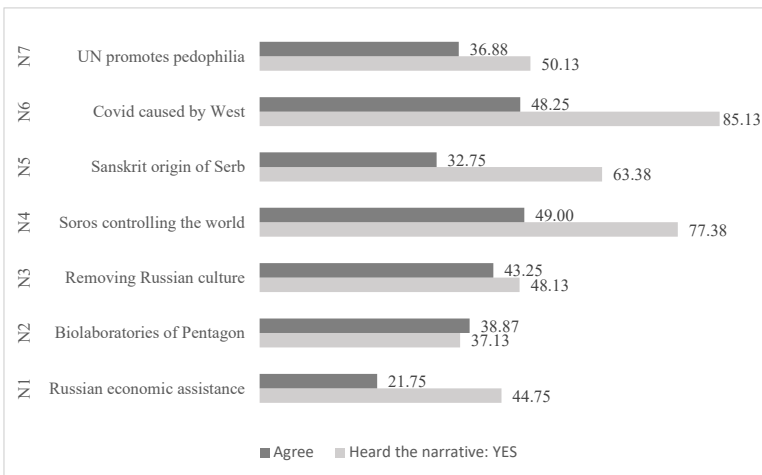
Figure 1: Reach of disinformation narratives
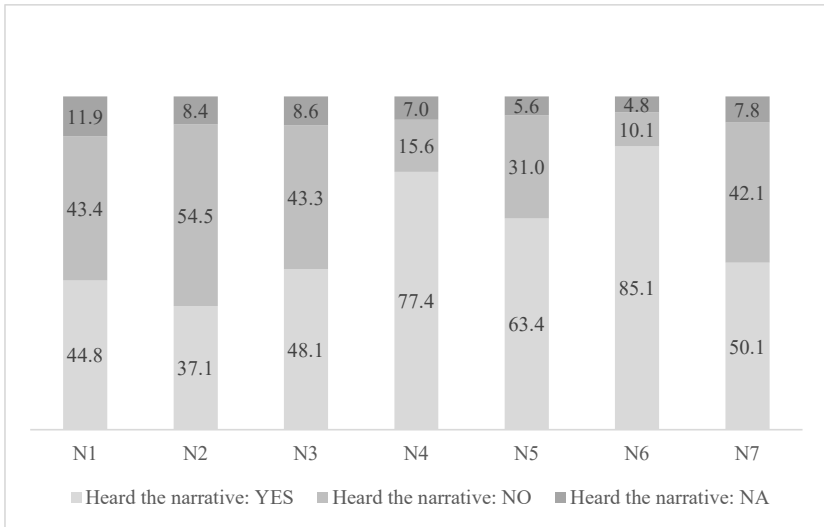
Agreement with the narrative claims, or in other words belief that the narrative is true, ranges between 21.75% of participants agreeing with N1, up to 49% of participants agreeing with the N4 (Figure 2). Similarly, a high level of agreement can be found with the N6, and to some extent with N3. The only narrative that reaches a higher percentage of disagreement in comparison to agreement is N1 related to the disinformation about the Russian economic assistance to Serbia. Two narratives N7 and N5 reach almost the same level of agreement and disagreement.

Figure 2: Agreement with disinformation narratives
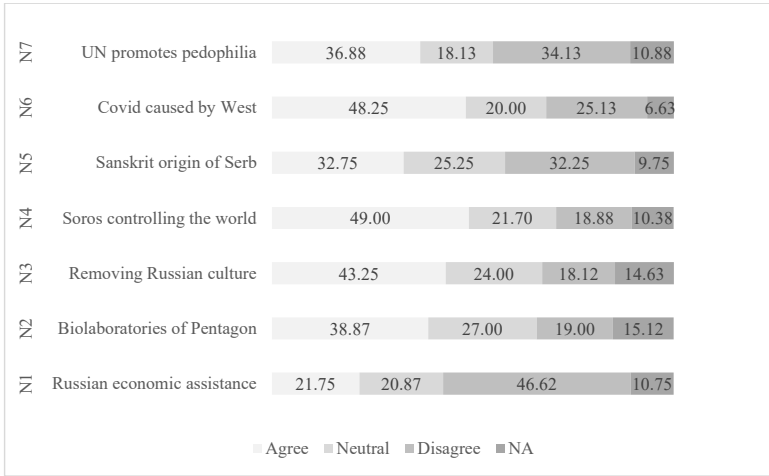
Findings show that reach does not necessarily entail agreement – and vice versa – as can been observed from Figure 3. Highest discrepancy between the reach and agreement exists when comparing the two in the cases of N5 and N6. The lowest discrepancy can be found in relation to N2 that presents a specific case in which agreement with the disinformation narrative is slightly higher than its reach.

Figure 3: Comparison of the reach and agreement with disinformation narratives

PATTERNS OF DISSEMINATION OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES

Taken as a whole, for all seven examined narratives, the results show that "market" of disinformation exists on TV, digital news services and social media, while traditional press and radio play almost negligible role in dissemination of disinformation narratives. However, when focusing on specific narratives, there are some differences.

Table 2: Patterns of dissemination of disinformation narratives

		Press	Radio	TV	Digital	Social media
N1	Russian economic assistance	5,80	2,05	33,11	27,65	31,40
N2	Biolaboratories of Pentagon	2,89	2,53	24,19	36,10	34,30
N3	Removing Russian culture	1,99	2,56	28,98	37,78	28,69
N4	Soros controlling the world	2,66	3,61	25,24	34,35	34,16
N5	Sanskrit origin of Serb	2,49	6,77	18,45	31,17	41,15
N6	COVID-19 caused by West	2,40	4,44	14,97	33,64	44,55
N7	UN promotes paedophilia	2,49	3,24	16,22	31,86	45,72

* Data on respondents who have heard the narrative before

In comparison to other news sources, narratives N5, N6 and N7 have the highest frequency of dissemination on social media, and relatively low frequency of dissemination on TV, with the highest difference found with N7. Narrative N6 also has somewhat higher frequency on radio, compared to all seven disinformation items under study. Narratives N2 and N3 are most frequently encountered through digital news sources, with N2 also reaching an almost similar number of consumers on social media. Narrative N1 stands out as being the only narrative most frequently heard on TV, with a relatively high number of respondents who read the narrative in the printed press.

DISCUSSION

The survey results concerning the selected seven narratives offer insights that prompt an examination of factors potentially shaping disinformation dynamics. This discussion focuses on some of the key findings while also addressing several unresolved questions and uncertainties.

Research suggests that these narratives, despite being manipulative or inaccurate, often align with established news values, potentially contributing to their spread and acceptance. Tsfati et al. (2020) note that false information tends to be negative and emotional, aligning with traditional

news criteria. This observation is supported by Tandoc's (2021) content analysis of 886 fake news articles, which found that 89.2% included the news value of negativity. Tandoc's study also revealed that timeliness (98.6%) and prominence (79.7%) are prevalent in fake news, while impact (32%) is less common. Furthermore, Hallin (2021) argues that certain news biases inherently favour populist messages. These biases include a distrust of elites and experts, a focus on conflict, and a negative portrayal of governments, politics, and politicians, all of which can serve as a basis for discussing the results.

Ideological alignment

A significant factor influencing the acceptance of disinformation narratives is their ideological alignment with pre-existing beliefs (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017; Madrid-Morales et al. 2024) Most of the examined narratives (6 out of 7) reflect global geopolitical tensions, particularly the East-West confrontation. The narrative about George Soros and Western elites controlling global politics (N4) was the most widely accepted, with 49% of respondents believing it. Notably, N4 is the only narrative focusing on a specific individual, tapping into broader conspiracy theories about elite control, similar to ideas about Bill Gates and the "golden billion" depopulation plan.

Research indicates that disinformation often targets political actors and elite figures (Tsfati et al. 2020). This focus on prominent figures may increase a narrative's perceived relevance and newsworthiness. Wells and Rochefort (2021) note an inherent distrust of elites and authority in populist discourse, which can fuel speculation about hidden motives behind official actions. For instance, in Turkey, Yesil (2021) identifies several recurring elements in disinformation and conspiracy theories, often featuring the United States, Europe, Israel, George Soros, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as key actors in manipulative narratives. These entities are often portrayed as external forces attempting to undermine Turkey's sovereignty or manipulate its internal affairs. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Karađuz et al. (2022) highlight the conspiracy theories centred around figures and organizations perceived as powerful global actors: George Soros, the Rockefellers, the Rothschilds, and the World Health Organization. These entities are frequently depicted as orchestrating various plots, from controlling global finances to manipulating public health crises.

Interestingly, despite strong pro-Russian sentiment in Serbia (CRTA 2023), the narrative about Russian economic assistance (N1) showed surprisingly low belief (21.75%). This discrepancy might be explained by several factors. A "reality-check" effect could be at play, where citizens'

49

DINKO GRUHONJIĆ, STEFAN JANJIĆ, JELENA KLEUT
REACH AND DISSEMINATION CHANNELS OF (SELECTED) DISINFORMATION
NARRATIVES IN SERBIA

observations of their surroundings, including foreign investments, contradict the narrative of dominant Russian economic influence. Among the studied narratives, this one is distinct in its focus on a direct, immediate, and tangible impact on Serbia, whereas the others address issues that are more distant from everyday Serbian realities. Consequently, this aligns with the finding that, although Russia is perceived as a key political and security partner of Serbia, the EU ranks as the primary economic partner (CRTA 2023). On the other hand, the narrative highlighting anti-Russian sentiment in the West (N3), which portrays Russians as victims but is not directly related to the Serbian context, is believed by twice as many respondents.

Alignment with cultural or national identity may potentially contribute to a narrative's persistence. The narrative about the Sanskrit origin of the word 'Serb' (N5), while showing lower believability, persists possibly due to its appeal to national pride. This suggests that narratives tapping into deeply held cultural beliefs may have staying power even when not widely accepted as factual.

Plausibility

There is an ongoing tension between a narrative being outlandish enough to attract attention and too bizarre to be accepted. While some narratives, such as N7 ("The UN promotes paedophilia"), border on the absurd, they still manage to capture the belief of a notable portion of the population. The biolaboratories narrative (N2) was believed by a higher percentage than the number of respondents who had heard of it, raising questions about how certain narratives gain credibility despite limited exposure. Similarly, the UN narrative (N7) combines provocative concepts that likely contribute to its persistence. Although this claim includes both false (paedophilia) and true (LGBT rights) elements, the emotional weight of these terms explains its resonance with a significant portion of respondents (42.7% agreement). Despite their bizarre nature, these narratives can be kept alive by incorporation into broader conspiracy frameworks, allowing for their repeated use in different contexts.

Timing

The longevity and spread of disinformation narratives are influenced by several interconnected factors. Ongoing relevance to current events, such as geopolitical tensions or health crises, can sustain narratives like those about Ukrainian biolaboratories or COVID-19's origin. The duration of a narrative's existence and its dissemination across various platforms significantly impact its reach and potential acceptance (Zimmermann and

Kohring 2020). The frequency of exposure to a narrative plays an important role in its perceived credibility. Tsfati et al. (2020) highlight the "illusory truth effect," where repetition breeds familiarity, leading to increased trust in the information. This effect may explain why some dubious narratives, like those about COVID-19 or George Soros, gained additional traction.

However, the impact of time on disinformation presents a complex question. On one hand, a longer lifespan allows disinformation to spread more widely, potentially connecting with other similar narratives and conspiracy theories, thus reinforcing its perceived validity. On the other hand, the passage of time also increases the likelihood of fact-checking efforts and the dissemination of counter-narratives by politicians, institutions, or academia, which can debunk or weaken the disinformation.

Counter-narratives

It is important to consider the impact of counter-narratives on the dynamics of disinformation. This consideration is particularly relevant in our study, as the initial selection of narratives was based on the analyses from fact-checking portals.

While some studies suggest fact-checking can significantly reduce belief in misinformation (Porter and Wood 2021), others highlight its limitations. Guess et al. (2018) found that fact-checks rarely reached the consumers of fake news on Facebook. However, it is reasonable to hypothesize that the current landscape may differ significantly from these earlier findings, given the evolution of Meta's policies. Meta (formerly Facebook) has developed the Third-Party Fact-Checking Program, collaborating with independent fact-checkers to identify content deemed manipulative or inaccurate.

In the Serbian context, the impact of fact-checking may be further limited by low awareness of fact-checking initiatives. Hrvatin, Petković and Hodžić (2021) report that only about a third of Serbian citizens are aware of fact-checking organizations in their country. This lack of awareness, combined with potential distrust in mainstream media and fact-checkers themselves, could diminish the effectiveness of fact-checking efforts.

Fact-checking initiatives, while perhaps the most visible model of disinformation countering strategies, are not the only approach. This process occurs at multiple levels. Mainstream media, politicians, and scientific institutions often respond to certain disinformation narratives. Pre-bunking or inoculation campaigns are also implemented to pre-emptively address potential misinformation. Another important concept to consider is "people-powered correction" (Bode and Vraga 2021). This approach involves corrections coming from other social media users, either through structured systems like Twitter/X's "community notes" or

through spontaneous interactions where users challenge misinformation, offer accurate information, or even respond with ridicule to false claims. Despite these varied approaches, challenges remain. Swire, Ecker and Lewandowsky (2017) warn that repeating a false claim, even in the context of retraction, might inadvertently increase its familiarity and acceptance.

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GENERAL NEWS CONSUMPTION PATTERNS AND
CHANNELS OF DISINFORMATION

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Patterns of dissemination of the selected narratives, especially low frequency of press and radio, and on average similar distribution among TV, digital news and social media, highly resemble general news consumption patterns (Kleut et al. 2023). Or in other words, the patterns presented in Table 2 can be more indicative of the salience of news sources that citizens use, than necessarily of the disinformation channels of dissemination.

Some of the ideas introduced above – news value status of disinformation, timing and plausibility – can be used to explain some of the differences. The three narratives – N5 on Sanskrit origin of word Serb, N6 on COVID-19 being caused by the West and N7 on UN promoting paedophilia and LGBT rights are more prevalent on social media than on TV. Two of them, N5 and N7 are least plausible and it can be hypothesized that they were not perpetuated by mainstream media, but rather found its audience on social media. Dissemination of narrative N6, being the least frequent narrative on TV, can perhaps be attributed to the fact that COVID-19 related news was to some extent controlled by the government in the first stages of pandemic, and later exhausted their news value of timeliness.

Narratives N1-3 are more frequently encountered on news media (TV and digital) than on social media, perhaps because their overall topics of economy and war in Ukraine fit well with the news values of relevance and timeliness. Narrative N1 on Russian economic assistance surpassing that of the EU has highest dissemination on TV and in printed press, compared to other narratives, serving perhaps as an additional argument in favour of this interpretation.

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CONCLUSION

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The results of the study show that disinformation narratives, selected by monitoring fact-checking and debunking news, are relatively known among the surveyed population (N=800). With four out of seven narratives being heard by more than half of the respondents, and with even the least heard narrative reaching a third of the survey population, Serbian data place it ahead of other countries such as Spain, U.S., Germany (Suau

and Puertas-Graell, 2023; Silverman & Singer-Vine 2016; Zimmermann and Kohring 2020). Similar to findings of some previous research (Suau and Puertas-Graell, 2023) exposure to specific narratives and agreement with narrative claims varies between the narratives. As we hypothesize, these differences could be explained by ideological alignment, plausibility, timing and counter-narratives.

Channels of exposure to disinformation narratives identified in the study demonstrate that disinformation is not the issue that can be conceptualized predominantly in the context of social networking sites (Broda and Strömbäck 2024). Television, as well as digital news outlets, play almost an equal role as social media in disseminating false information in Serbia. Although the identified distribution can be attributed to general news consumption patterns, it nevertheless shows that legacy media audiences cannot be taken to be more resilient than social media users (Humprecht et al. 2020).

The results of this study should be investigated further due to several limitations related to the study design. First, none of the examined narratives pertains to the on-going political struggles in the country in which the regime dominates the media landscape and frequently uses both social and legacy media to spread disinformation that targets critical voices (Kleut 2022). Study design included only the narratives debunked in a period prior to the survey and in that period no such narratives have been identified. To obtain a more nuanced findings, future studies should include disinformation narratives perpetuated by Serbian political leadership, that way capturing a broader array of polarising topics.

Second, the study did not adequately treat the issue of false recall by including the placebo disinformation. Other studies that examined the reach of fake news established relatively high (14%) false recall of fake news headlines (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017, 226), showing that the effect is not negligible. Our design attempted to respond to this challenge by using the logic of time proximity, i.e. identifying disinformation narratives debunked just two months before the survey. However, the specific narratives have been disseminated prior to being debunked so the inclusion of the false recall would provide more robust findings.

Third, measuring agreement with disinformation narratives is challenging because these narratives often mix true and false information. Disinformation narratives frequently build upon actual events by introducing misleading claims or overstating their importance. For example, narrative N3 about Western countries removing Russian cultural artefacts combines some real isolated cases with exaggerated claims about widespread anti-Russian cultural censorship. In our study, we chose to present N3 using a general statement: we did this instead of asking about specific

false stories, like the debunked claim about a painting being removed from the London National Gallery. This approach allowed us to capture how such narratives circulate in public discourse, though we acknowledge that respondents' interpretations likely varied – ranging from those who considered actual isolated events to those who responded to claims of systematic cultural policies. This highlights a broader challenge in disinformation research: how can we effectively measure people's belief in false narratives when they contain elements of truth?

Finally, in relation to the channels of dissemination it should be highlighted that cross-media news consumption (Schrøder 2011) and the fact that Serbian citizens access news from various media sources (Kleut et al. 2023), make it hard for citizens to self-report on where they have seen the disinformation. As previous data shows, respondents exaggerate their exposure to news (Prior 2009) and this can, at least in part, explain such small differences in reported channels of disinformation narratives. In general, social media data are regarded as a more accurate identification of disinformation channels (Ng and Taeihagh 2021), but they do not provide insights into legacy media consumption and can be prone to distortion due to astroturfing campaigns and other forms of inauthentic behaviour. For that reason, a combination of these two approaches can be a fruitful way towards a more comprehensive understanding of the disinformation environment.

In conclusion, this study underscores the critical need for ongoing research into the dynamics of disinformation narratives in Serbia, particularly as they relate to political contexts and media consumption patterns. By addressing the identified limitations and expanding the scope of future research, we can enhance our understanding of how disinformation operates and inform strategies to combat its effects on public perception and democratic discourse.

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57

DINKO GRUHONJIĆ, STEFAN JANJIĆ, JELENA KLEUT
REACH AND DISSEMINATION CHANNELS OF (SELECTED) DISINFORMATION
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