



DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN BIH AND THE REGION

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This report will give insights into the most prominent disinformation narratives identified by the fact-checking platform “Raskrinkavanje” in 2022.¹ These narratives have predominantly been in circulation in the media and social media space in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but have also been present in the neighboring countries belonging to the same language area in the region of Southeast Europe.²

Key terms in this report are used in the following meanings:

- **Disinformation** is understood as false information published with the aim to deceive or mislead, and with potential to cause public harm.³
- **Narrative** is a term borrowed from literature, where it signifies a story, or story-telling. The term is also used to describe “a particular way of explaining or understanding events”.⁴
- **Propaganda** is defined as “dissemination of information—facts, arguments, rumors, half-truths, or lies—to influence public opinion”.⁵ While it is not necessarily based on falsehoods, it is commonly understood that false or misleading claims are used in propaganda narratives to achieve the desired effect, i.e. manipulate the opinions of targeted audiences.
- **Disinformation narrative** is understood in this report as a narrative that is primarily based on false claims and uses disinformation for framing of events or worldviews. More precisely, it is a framing of events that incorporates repetitive, mutually referential false claims related to the same topic, offering the same view of events or phenomena and pertaining to having a longer-lasting impact than just one news cycle. It is similar, but not identical to propaganda, appearing rather as a “building block” of broader propaganda narratives.

¹ See more at: *About Raskrinkavanje*

² For a detailed overview of Raskrinkavanje methodology, see: Tijana Cvjetičanin, Darko Brkan, Emir Zulejhić, Biljana Livančić-Milić, *“Disinformation in the Online Sphere - The Case of BiH”*, UG Zašto ne, 2019, p. 89

³ *“Disinformation in the Online Sphere - The Case of BiH”*, p. 11

⁴ Definition, *Cambridge Dictionary*

⁵ Definition, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

METHODOLOGY

Raskrinkavanje fact-checks media reports, social media posts and other publications circulating in the information space in BiH and the region. The claims are selected for fact-checking based on different “signals”, such as questions or tips from the readers, social network proliferation, newsworthiness, potential for harm and public interest. While it primarily concentrates on sources from and topics relevant for BiH, the website’s methodology steers its focus towards the whole Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian/Montenegrin language area. Raskrinkavanje’s methodology has, from the very beginning, included “identification of the source (first appearance of disinformation) and tracking down all the iterations of that same disinformation as it appears in other media (redistributed disinformation)”⁶ for each false claim that is checked and rated. Since disinformation is often spread across borders of the four countries sharing the same language, tracking and rating all the instances of each claim that Raskrinkavanje debunks often leads to sources or redistributors of disinformation from other countries in the region.

Disinformation narratives presented in this report were identified by analyzing all the fact-checks published in the period starting from January 1st 2022 and ending on October 7th 2022.

The fact-checks were grouped into disinformation narratives as defined above, based on the topics of disinformation debunked. One fact-checking article could be a part of more than one narrative, depending on the number and topics of claims rated in it. After the claims and fact-checking articles were categorized into disinformation narratives, a quantitative analysis was performed to establish the prevalence of each identified narrative.

The narratives were then analyzed to establish their broader relevance in the public discourse. This was determined through the number and types of sources promoting each of the narratives, i.e. publishing or broadcasting disinformation belonging to a specific narrative. The higher number and institutional positioning of sources were treated as indicators of a higher relevance of the narrative.

⁶ Tijana Cvjetičanin, Darko Brkan, Emir Zulejhić, Biljana Livančić-Milić, *“Disinformation in the Online Sphere - The Case of BiH”*, UG Zašto ne, 2019, p. 89

For example, narratives promoted by public broadcasters or news agencies were ranked the highest, while anonymous portals or social media posts were ranked the lowest.

Finally, each narrative was given additional weight based on the scope of its content, with narratives tackling locally, regionally and globally relevant topics scoring the highest (5), those relevant on only two out of three of those levels scoring in the middle (3) and the lowest score was given to the narratives relevant for only one or none of these levels.

These steps were used to identify the 6 most relevant disinformation narratives in the selected period. All 6 are related to Russia's invasion on Ukraine, reflecting both the global importance and media attention around this topic and the amount of disinformation created about it in the selected time period.

After the most relevant narratives were identified, each was presented in depth in a series of six analyses published on Raskrinkavanje's website.⁷

Each analysis provides key information about the main claims and disinformation spread within these narratives, the fact-checks where they were debunked, as well as background information about political, societal, or historical context relevant to the building of such narratives.

⁷ Marija Ćosić and Tijana Cvjetičanin, *"Raskrinkavanje's series: Narratives about the invasion of Ukraine"*, Raskrinkavanje, January 26, 2023

Nerma Šehović and Marija Ćosić *"A fictional narrative blaming the West for the war in Ukraine"* Raskrinkavanje, February 6, 2023

Alena Beširević and Rašid Krupalija *"Glorification of Russia's military might as a propaganda tool in the war against Ukraine"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 8, 2023

Elma Murić, Alena Beširević and Tijana Cvjetičanin *"Why the story about Ukraine as a Nazi state?"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 13, 2023

Tijana Cvjetičanin and Mladen Lakić *"Nuclear and biological weapons in Ukraine: Propaganda and facts"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 14, 2023

Darko Brkan and Marija Ćosić *"Who is impacted by the Western sanctions against Russia and how?"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 20, 2023

Marija Manojlović, *"Faking fake news? Yes, you read that right"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 20, 2023

ANALYSIS

Identification of disinformation narratives

In the time period of January 1 – October 7, 2022, Raskrinkavanje has published 480 fact-checking analyses, debunking disinformation published in 4,512 media articles and social media posts. Based on the methodology presented above, a total of 22 broader disinformation narratives was identified in 282 fact-checking analyses and 2,501 media articles and social media posts debunked over the course of these nine months. The remaining 198 analyses and 2,011 debunked posts contained claims that could not be classified as part of any specific narrative.⁸

Antivaccination narrative, specifically related to immunization against Covid-19, was the one most represented when it comes to number of fact-checks. This narrative appears in 52 fact-checking analyses published in the first nine months of 2022. Disinformation “campaigns” against Covid-19 vaccination, peddling various inaccurate claims about safety and efficiency of vaccines, have dominated the online space in the region since 2020⁹ and clearly remain omnipresent to this day.

The next four most often debunked narratives are all related to the invasion of the Russian Federation on Ukraine that started on February 24th.¹⁰ These are the narrative glorifying Russia’s military power and Vladimir Putin’s leadership (33 fact-checking analyses), the narrative portraying Ukraine as a genocidal and/or Nazi state (32), the portraying of Western countries as culpable for Russia’s invasion on Ukraine (24) and the accusing of Ukraine of plans to develop and use nuclear and biological weapons against Russia (21).

⁸ For example, Raskrinkavanje published 21 fact-checks of false or misleading claims, coming from 159 posts/articles, related to General elections held in BiH in 2022. The disinformation debunked in these analysis, however, does not constitute a “narrative” in itself. Although related to the same event, these claims cover a range of various topics and do not create any specific or coherent framing of that event.

⁹ Tijana Cvjetičanin, (ed.) et al, *Disinformation during COVID-19 pandemic*, Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung für die Freiheit Bosnien-Herzegowina, Sarajevo, 2020

¹⁰ The disinformation narratives about Russian invasion of Ukraine were first identified in the analysis of Ukraine-related disinformation that circulated in SEE countries during the first 150 days of the war, published by the regional fact-checking network SEE Check. This report builds on definitions and descriptions first outlined in the SEE Check paper, (Darvin Murić, Emir Zulejhić, Ivana Živković, Milovan Nikolić and Vesna Radojević, *“Global narratives and local actors: 150 days of the war in Ukraine and over 1,500 disinformation in the region”*, SEE Check, July 2022)

However, when the number of articles and social media posts debunked in the fact-checking analyses is observed, the most represented individual narratives, each appearing in 262 debunked posts or articles, are the narrative about “biolabs” or nuclear weapons in Ukraine, and the narrative about “natural remedies” as more efficient than science-based medicine. The anti-vaccination narrative, which was fact-checked most often, appears as seventh most prevalent, with 174 pieces of debunked content. Out of the six narratives that have more than 200 debunked posts, four are related to the invasion of Ukraine and all convey messages of Russian state propaganda about the war.

Topic / narrative	Number of debunked articles/posts
Ukraine and Western countries accused of developing and/or planning attacks with biological, chemical and nuclear weapons	262
Pseudomedicinal remedies	262
Fake cancer cures	254
Glorification of Russia’s military might and Vladimir Putin’s leadership	244
Portrayal of the West as culpable for the war in Ukraine	240
Portrayal of Ukraine as genocidal and/or Nazi state, denial of statehood	225
Anti-vaccination (Covid-19)	174
Anti-Western conspiracy theories in local context	172
Elections* ¹¹	159

¹¹ Disinformation about the elections are not counted as a narrative, but appear as a notable group of posts centered around the same topic.

Consequences of sanctions against Russia for Europe	122
"Great Reset" and "New World Order" conspiracy theories	97
Legitimacy and legality of OHR and Christian Schmidt	94
Pro-Ukraine disinformation ¹²	77
"Western fake news" about Ukraine	49
Western moral decadence	42
Poisoning of the population (poisonous food, "chemtrails")	30
Authoritarian "promise lands"	25
"Fitting" the invasion of Ukraine into the narratives of popular conspiracy theories ¹³	24
Climate change denial	18
Anti-vaccination (general)	16
Conspiracy theories about technology (5G, geoengineering)	11
Covid-19, monkeypox, "plandemic" conspiracy theories	10

¹² This narrative is described in previous research as one that "mainly serves to spread unfounded stories about the heroism of the Ukrainian army and civilians. The biggest difference compared to the pro-Russian disinformation discourse is that there is much less news like this, they are not so viral, they do not have sources in officials and institutions, nor do they have a wide range of topics unlike Russian propaganda narratives." (*Global narratives and local actors: 150 days of the war in Ukraine and over 1,500 disinformation in the region*, p. 12)

¹³ Described in previous research as disinformation where invasion of Ukraine was being portrayed as a part of an existing conspiracy, such as "New World Order", "Big Reset" and various QAnon conspiracy theories (Ibid, p. 13) 2022.

There are a total of eight individual narratives related to the invasion of Ukraine, most of which draw on narratives previously identified in the SEE Check network's analysis.¹⁴ Out of those eight, seven parrot the official Russian state narratives and war propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine and only one holds content favorable to Ukraine, mostly the morale-boosting stories about wartime heroes (for example, the famous "mythical" pilot dubbed "Ghost of Kyiv"). When taken together, they create the largest narrative group in the sample.

When all the criteria defined by the methodology are applied to the list of individual narratives (presence in the sample, institutional weight of sources, range of relevance), the six disinformation narratives, related to the war in Ukraine, that emerge as dominant in 2022 are as follows:

- Ukraine and Western countries accused of developing and/or planning attacks with biological, chemical and nuclear weapons
- Glorification of Russia's military might and Vladimir Putin's leadership
- Portrayal of the West as culpable for the war in Ukraine
- Portrayal of Ukraine as genocidal and/or Nazi state, denial of statehood
- Consequences of sanctions against Russia for Europe
- "Western fake news" about Ukraine

¹⁴ Darvin Murić, Emir Zulejhić, Ivana Živković, Milovan Nikolić and Vesna Radojević, *"Global narratives and local actors: 150 days of the war in Ukraine and over 1,500 disinformation in the region"*, SEE Check, July 2022

Sources of disinformation narratives

A total of 766 media and social media sources were identified as publishers of content that contained disinformation narratives in 2022. When it comes to the six most dominant narratives about the war in Ukraine, Serbia-based media appear as the most represented sources of disinformation narratives, in addition to social networks. Among 10 top rated sources¹⁵ (excluding social networks Facebook and Twitter, which appear as most frequent sources collectively), 9 of them are from Serbia, including the Belgrade-based Russian state owned outlet Sputnik. Only one media is Montenegro-based (IN4S) and there are no sources based in BiH in the top 10 rated media outlets.

Topic / narrative	Number of fact-checking analysis
Alo	24
Informer	23
Novosti	21
Srbin	20
Sputnik Srbija	19
Srbija danas (.com)	15
Webtribune	11
24 sedam	11
IN4S	10
B92	10

¹⁵ The term “source” is used here to signify any media outlet or social media account where a rated claim was published, not in the sense of being the original/first source of the rated claim.

BiH-based sources appear in significantly lesser numbers. Not a single media outlet from Bosnia and Herzegovina has been rated more than 7 times for disinformation related to the Ukraine invasion. The media whose content was fact-checked more than 3 times by Raskrinkavanje, list as follows:

Topic / narrative	Number of fact-checking analysis
Glas Srpske	7
Istok.rs	6
Cafe	6
Alternativna televizija	6
Vijesti Srpske	5
Prijedor 24h	5
Alo online	5
Srpska info	4
RTRS	4
Radio Sarajevo	4
Novi	4
N1	4
Klix	4
Iskra	4
Ilidža grad	4
BL Portal	4

DOMINANT DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES ABOUT RUSSIAN INVASION ON UKRAINE

As seen from the data, the two broadest disinformation narratives in the observed time period were focused on the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Covid-19 vaccines. Conspiracy theories about the “New World Order”, “chemtrails”, 5G technology and various pseudoscientific narratives about “alternative medicine” or climate change denial, also feature in the sample, but to a smaller degree.

The anti-vaccination narrative has been present since the first year of the pandemic and was relentlessly “recycled” by various conspiratorial sources, mostly those active on social networks. However, narratives about Ukraine and the related geopolitical implications were even more viral and in a shorter amount of time, given that the invasion started in late February 2022. Moreover, these narratives weren’t just spread by websites and social media accounts dedicated solely to conspiracy theories, but also by public broadcasters and news agencies, as well as mainstream media, particularly those based in Serbia¹⁶ and, within BiH, those based in Republika Srpska.

Several factors contributed to the particularly strong circulation of these narratives in BiH and the region. Russia enjoys significant political support in BiH and the region,¹⁷ including open support for its foreign policy goals from various political actors in the region and the official positions of the government in Republika Srpska¹⁸ that has continuously shown resistance to any diplomatic or economic measures taken against Russia after it launched a full scale invasion of Ukraine.¹⁹ Decades-old political, economic and religious ties that Russia built with Bosnia and Herzegovina and the countries in the region, especially in the anti-Western circles, by emphasizing the common Slavic origin, resulted with Russian propaganda strongly resonating in this region after the invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁶ Marija Vučić, Milica Ljubičić, Vesna Radojević, *“Analiza 4.000 tekstova domaćih medija o ratu u Ukrajini: Dominacija proruskog narativa”*, Raskrinkavanje.rs, October 31, 2022

¹⁷ Reuf Bajrović, Richard Kraemer, Emir Suljagić, *“Bosnia on the Russian Chopping Block: Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it”*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2018

¹⁸ *“RS Entity Parliament to Host Russian Ambassador and Discuss World Relations”*, N1 BiH, 2022

¹⁹ See: *European Commission, Bosnia and Herzegovina 2022 Report Accompanying the document Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions: 2022 Communication on EU Enlargement policy*, Brussels, October 12, 2022, pp. 3, 4, 32, 116

Moreover, a network of media outlets and news agencies of similar affiliations, which includes Russian state-owned outlet Sputnik and local proxies, has already been recognized for its production of the highest amount and arguably most impactful politics and geopolitics related disinformation in the SEE region.²⁰ This network has proven ready to spread the official Russian state positions, heavily reliant on disinformation narratives, as soon as the full scale invasion started.

Another contributing factor to the virality of these narratives is the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the public. During the pandemic, a whole new generation of video-influencers, social media gurus, video and meme creators has come to prominence, using all available tools and methods to spread disinformation about the pandemic. With the outbreak of a war in Europe, many of them have just adapted to the next big topic and continued to publish conspiracy theories in a manner that made them popular in the first place. The aftermath of the pandemic also brought higher vulnerability and susceptibility to theories of conspiracy and disinformation²¹, creating an even more fertile ground for the spread of propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine.

²⁰ Tijana Cvjetičanin, Darko Brkan, Emir Zulejhić, Biljana Livančić-Milić, *“Disinformation in the Online Sphere - The Case of BiH”*, UG Zašto ne, 2019

²¹ Amar Karađuz, Tijana Cvjetičanin, Marija Ćosić, Semir Džebo, Rašid Krupalija, Maida Salkanović, Nerma Šehović, *“Countering Disinformation Narratives and Mapping Conspiracy Theories: The Case of BiH”*, UG Zašto ne, 2022

Overview of dominant narratives

In a series of analyses published in January and February 2023, the Raskrinkavanje team has provided a detailed overview of the 6 dominant narratives about the war in Ukraine that emerged from the platform's fact-checking work during 2022.

The starting point for most of the themes seen in these narratives were the speeches²² given by Vladimir Putin on the eve of the invasion, reinforcing the propaganda that has been present since Russia first attacked and annexed a part of Ukraine's territory in 2014. These speeches provided a blueprint for most, if not all, of the narratives that were to follow in the coming months, promoted by Russian officials, state-controlled media and their proxies and/or sympathizers in other countries, including those in the SEE region.

Here we will present a short summary of the six narratives identified as most prominent in the sample used for this analysis.

²² *"Transcript: Vladimir Putin's Televised Address on Ukraine"*, Bloomberg News; February 24, 2022; Billy Perrigo, *"How Putin's Denial of Ukraine's Statehood Rewrites History"*, Time, February 22, 2022; W.J. Hennigan, *"Fear Of War Grips Europe As Russia Orders Troops Into Ukraine"*, Time, February 21, 2022

1. "Invasion on Ukraine is a war waged by the West"

One of the most common disinformation narratives revolves around the supposed role of the West in the war in Ukraine, where Russia's aggression is portrayed as instigated or desired by NATO/EU countries, while Ukraine's self-defense is treated as an act of aggression against Russia.²³ Ukraine is painted as an American or Western "puppet": in some instances, a scapegoat manipulated to wage a proxy war against Russia; in others, a war theater where NATO or the US are secretly engaging in actual combat, maintaining military bases or active duty personnel. This narrative rests on a decades-old political myth that, at the end of the Cold War, NATO promised the USSR that it would never expand to the East, only to break that promise a few years later. Based on this premise, Russia's actions are presented as self-defense against NATO's attempts to "surround" it by accepting more of its neighboring countries into the Alliance.

This narrative has been identified in 240 articles and social media posts, which were rated in 24 fact-checking analyses. Most were rated as false news, meaning that the claims used within this narrative are often entirely made up.

²³ A detailed analysis available at: Marija Ćosić and Nerma Šehović, *"A fictional narrative blaming the West for the war in Ukraine"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 6, 2023

2. "The invincible Russian military"

The narrative that glorifies the strength of the Russian military under Putin was mostly based on false or misleading claims which exaggerated, misrepresented, or even entirely made up Russia's military successes at the beginning of the invasion.²⁴ Simultaneously, and sometimes paradoxically, the same sources have often denied that Russia is even engaged in the war (calling it "Special military operation", in line with Putin's discourse) and discredited reports and allegations of war crimes committed in Ukraine.

This narrative has been identified in 244 articles and social media posts, which were rated in 33 fact-checking analyses. More than a half were false news, but a significant number contained a mix of accurate and inaccurate information or a manipulative presentation of real news. Most of the rated content came from social networks, but also from some media, mostly based in Serbia. In BiH, the media that published rated claims from this narrative included the RTRS, Vijesti Srpske, Srpska info, Visegrad 365 and others.

²⁴ A detailed analysis available at: Alena Beširević and Rašid Krupalija *"Glorification of Russia's military might as a propaganda tool in the war against Ukraine"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 8, 2023

3. "Ukraine is a genocidal Nazi state"

Russian war propaganda has repeatedly portrayed the Ukraine government as a "Nazi regime", supporting these claims by various, often quite bizarre, disinformation about omnipresent "Nazi posturing" in the political and social life of Ukraine.²⁵

Russian officials and state media have put a strong emphasis on this narrative. The terms "denazification" and "demilitarization" were consistently used to describe the full scale invasion on Ukraine in the official discourse of Russian state propaganda and in the news published by their proxies and sympathizers in the region. These claims often come in pair with made up war crimes, or even genocide against Russian speaking population, attributed to the supposedly Nazi "Kyiv regime".

This narrative has been identified in 225 articles and social media posts, which were rated in 33 fact-checking analyses. Most of the rated posts (164) contained completely incorrect claims, i.e. false news, while the rest contained various manipulations and conspiracy theories. The sources of this narrative are predominantly social media profiles and Serbia-based media, including Sputnik, Novosti, Srbija Danas, Informer, Krstarica, Alo and Tanjug. In BiH, such claims could be seen on the pages of RTRS, Glas Srpske and Prijedor 24h.

²⁵ A detailed analysis available at: Elma Murić, Tijana Cvjetičanin, Alena Beširević, "[*Why the story about Ukraine as a Nazi state?*](#)", Raskrinkavanje, February 13, 2023

4. "Ukraine is a nuclear / bioweapon threat"

Claims that Ukraine is on a path of developing or acquiring nuclear weapons were built into the narrative about Russia's invasion as a supposed "preemptive" defense against Ukraine as a military threat.²⁶ At the same time, it was Russian officials, including Putin, that have used thinly veiled threats of nuclear war in their public statements.²⁷

Another component of the same narrative was the story about "American biolabs" in Ukraine. Russian state propaganda, as well as many conspiracy theorists, have laid out various outlandish accusations about the supposed biolabs. Claims that they are used to produce bioweapons targeting "Russian DNA" were, among others, spread by the Russian Embassy in BiH. In the most recent installment of the narrative, the Russian ministry of defense has claimed that the labs were involved in "creating Covid-19".²⁸

This narrative has been identified in 262 articles and social media posts, which were rated in 19 fact-checking analyses. A total of 141 media outlets from the region published at least one version of these claims, led by the Serbian edition of Sputnik and other media from Serbia (Srbin info, Novosti, Alo, Vesti-online, Informer, Pravda, etc.), with BiH media RTRS, SRNA, Alternativna televizija and Nezavisne Novine also publishing at least one claim pertaining to this narrative.

²⁶ A detailed analysis available at: Tijana Cvjetičanin, Mladen Lakić, "*Nuclear and biological weapons in Ukraine: Propaganda and facts*", Raskrinkavanje, February 14, 2023

²⁷ Lyse Doucet, "*Ukraine war: Putin not bluffing about nuclear weapons, EU says*", BBC, September 24, 2022

²⁸ "*SAD umešane u nastanak pandemije kovida; Sprovedeni eksperimenti sa HIV-om na ukrajinskim vojnicima*", Sputnik, January 30, 2023

5. "Western sanctions only hurt the West"

Another very present narrative is the one revolving around sanctions that the West imposed on Russia since the beginning of the invasion.²⁹ According to this narrative, the sanctions do not have a very negative impact on Russia - in some instances, it is even asserted that they made the Russian economy stronger.

While underestimating the effect of sanctions on Russia, this narrative overemphasizes the effect that their consequences have had on the countries that imposed them, primarily those in Europe. Claims about "freezing winter" that Europe was going to experience because of a lack of gas and false news about catastrophic food shortages were used to create an impression of devastating "boomerang" effect that sanctions and Russia's counter-measures have, or will have.

This narrative has been identified in 122 articles and social media posts, which were rated in 6 fact-checking analyses.

²⁹ A detailed analysis available at: Darko Brkan and Marija Ćosić, *"Who is impacted by the Western sanctions against Russia and how?"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 20, 2023

6. "Western media spread fake news about the war"

Russian officials continuously present the war reports of the Western and Ukrainian media as "fake news" aiming to baselessly portray Russia as an aggressor against Ukraine.³⁰ The Russian state controlled media therefore, paradoxically, continue to accuse the Western media (most often CNN, or other globally recognizable outlets such as the BBC) of what they do themselves - spreading disinformation and propaganda at the behest of their governments.

This narrative has its roots in the Cold War, but it was particularly widespread in the Serbian state controlled media in the nineties, which denied responsibility for war crimes as a part of its own war propaganda, accusing the Western media of inventing them, or even "staging" such reports. This is probably the reason why certain instances of this narrative were originally created by social media users from Serbia and only spread to Russian sources on social networks from there - the opposite of the usual direction of disinformation spread in most other narratives.

This narrative has been identified in 47 articles and social media posts, which were rated in 10 fact-checking analyses. Most of these - 31 - are fake news published on social networks, while the remaining 16 appear in media articles.

³⁰ A detailed analysis available at: Marija Manojlović, "*Faking fake news? Yes, you read that right*", Raskrinkavanje, February 21, 2023

EVOLUTION OF DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES AND WAR PROPAGANDA

The overview of prevalence and content of dominant disinformation narratives shows an intensive and persistent presence of propaganda used to justify and/or distort the optics of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine that started on February 24th 2022.³¹

Their main premises rely mostly on broader anti-Western narratives that had been the staple of Russian state propaganda for decades. In the content produced and disseminated on social media and news websites operating in the region, it can be seen how disinformation used to shape these same narratives interplays with some of the existing attitudes and worldviews in BiH and the region, mostly those on the right-wing part of the political spectrum.

The disinformation narratives tracked by one fact-checking website do not, however, tell the full story of the presence and development of broader propagandist narratives related to the war in Ukraine. In this section, the identified narratives will be presented in a somewhat broader context and on a timeline related to significant events before and during the ongoing invasion of Ukraine.

³¹ Other research shows that near-identical content, all stemming from Russian state-sponsored propaganda, is present in other countries and regions as well. See: *"Twelve myths about Russia's war in Ukraine exposed"*, EUvsDisinfo, February 20, 2023

Denial of Ukraine invasion

On the eve of the invasion, while tensions were rising due to the build-up of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine, state-controlled Russian media, its officials and various pundits in other countries firmly claimed that Russia was not planning to attack Ukraine. Information about Russian military movements was written off as "Western lies" and warnings coming from Western countries as "Russophobia".³² Even in his speech on 24/02/2022, marking a de facto declaration of war on Ukraine, Vladimir Putin still held on to the claim that these were all "Western lies".³³

Hinting at what kind of narratives they will promote in the coming months, Serbian tabloids immediately sided with Russia, blamed the West for the tensions, and even published fake news about "Ukraine attacking Russia".³⁴ As soon as it was uttered by Putin in his February 24 speech, the term "special military operation" was embraced by these and similar sources from the region, using it to circumvent the fact that Russia is invading a sovereign state.³⁵ Equally, the warnings of Russia's war plans coming from Western officials, as well as media reports about the topic, have been portrayed as mere expressions of "Russophobia" in many regional media sources that indirectly supported, or overtly parroted Russian officials' talking points.³⁶ Western countries were accused of spreading hatred towards the Russian people and even of trying to destroy Russian culture.³⁷

³² *"Kako su zapadne laži dovele svet na ivicu sukoba"*, Sputnik, February 22, 2022; *"Kolumna Srđe Trifkovića: „Ludilo rusofobije“ na Zapadu"*, Večernje novosti, February 14, 2022; *"Rusija neće napasti Ukrajinu"*, RTRS, February 16, 2022

³³ *"No other option": Excerpts of Putin's speech declaring war"*, Al Jazeera, February 24, 2022

³⁴ Marija Vučić, *"Tabloidi u Srbiji na strani Rusije u njenom sukobu sa Ukrajinom"*, Raskrinkavanje.rs, February 23, 2022

³⁵ *"Nomen est omen: Kako mediji nazivaju rat u Ukrajini"*, Raskrinkavanje, April 12, 2022

³⁶ *"Kolumna Srđe Trifkovića: „Ludilo rusofobije“ na Zapadu"*, Večernje novosti, February 14, 2022, *"Zaharova ljuta zbog papine izjave"*; Politika, November 29, 2022; Nataša Milosavljević, *"Zapad napravio stravični teatar u Ukrajini - pitanje je koliko će još biti jedinstveni"*, Sputnik, February 12, 2023

³⁷ Darko Tanasković, *"Mržnja prema Rusiji sužava svijest i uništava dušu čovječanstva"*, Borba, March 14, 2022; Darko Pejović, *"Zapad nikada neće prihvatiti Rusiju kao ravnopravnog partnera"*, Politika, September 11, 2022; Nikola Belić, *"Zapad je sam porušio sve svoje vrednosti"*, Politika, November 4 2022.

In his speech, Putin also claimed that a "special military operation" was necessary for Russia to defend itself from the threat of expansion of the NATO alliance. He stated that it is necessary to "denazify" Ukraine because, according to him, the country is run by neo-Nazis who commit genocide in the Donbas and plan to develop nuclear weapons. He added that NATO supports alleged extremists in Ukraine in order to achieve its own interests, and accused Western countries of lies, hypocrisy and violation of international law, recalling the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the wars in Iraq, Syria and Libya.

All of these points echoed strongly in the disinformation and propaganda narratives spread in the SEE region and beyond.

Beginning of the invasion: The early triumphalist discourse

In the framework of Russian propaganda, the attack on Ukraine was presented as its "liberation" from supposed Nazis, fascists, right wing nationalists and similar Kremlin-invented villains.³⁸ The Ukrainian army was called to surrender³⁹ and Ukraine's refusal to capitulate was presented as a decision of the West to "sacrifice the Ukrainian people" to, supposedly, harm Russia.⁴⁰ Glorification of Russian army and paramilitary units, triumphalist cheering for Russia's victory and annihilation of Ukraine and celebration of the "independence" of the self-proclaimed people's republics of Donetsk and Lugansk⁴¹ could also be seen taking off on social networks in the SEE region, along with the denial of accusations that the Russian military was targeting civilians.⁴² Some of that support moved into the real world, with pro-Russian rallies, graffiti and even merchandise with the letter "Z" showing up mostly in Serbia and Republika Srpska.⁴³

³⁸ *"Komentar Ambasade Ruske Federacije"*, Ambasada Rusije u Bosni i Hercegovini, February 25, 2022. Petar Vidov, *"Ruski napad na Ukrajinu je invazija, a ne "oslobađanje od fašizma"*, Faktograf, February 24, 2022.

³⁹ *"Putin urges Ukrainians to surrender as Russian soldiers attack"*, CNBC NewsYouTube Video, February 25, 2022

⁴⁰ Nataša Jovanović, *"Zelenski u Kijevu koristi Alijinu strategiju"*, Sputnik, February 28, 2022; *"Kako je Zapad podelio braću u Ukrajini"*, Sputnik, March 1, 2022

⁴¹ Facebook posts, archived here: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#)

⁴² Ivor Fuka, *"Žrtve granatiranja rodilišta u Mariupolju lažno proglašavaju plaćenim glumicama"*, Faktograf, March 14, 2022; Goran Delić, *"Bombardovanje bolnice u Mariupolju nije lažirano, niti je povrijeđena trudnica našminkana glumica"*, Raskrinkavanje.me, March 15, 2022

⁴³ *"Skup podrške Rusiji u Beogradu"*, Radio Slobodna Evropa, March 4, 2022; *"U Banjoj Luci održan skup podrške Rusiji, među stotinjak okupljenih i Petar Đokić"*, Klix, March 12, 2022; *"Navijači u Istočnom Sarajevu bakljadom uputili podršku Rusiji"*, Detektor, April 22, 2022; *"Novi Sad išaran slovom 'Z' uoči festivala Exit: Od svog osnutka pozivamo na mir i naravno da se protivimo ovom činu"*; TPortal, July 6, 2022, *"U Bijelom Brdu osvanuli zloglasni natpisi 'Z'"*; SiB, April 19, 2022; *"Ruski simbol 'Z' na sve strane u Severnoj Mitrovici"* Radio Slobodna Evropa, April 7, 2022, see Facebook post archived here: [1](#)

Taking into account the strength and numbers of the Russian army and the weapons at its disposal, many initially believed that Ukraine would be defeated within days.⁴⁴ At the time, false claims appeared that Russia does not target civilians, but only aims at military targets with precision weapons.⁴⁵ Russia was attributed military successes that did not happen and its army's actions, many in violation of the Geneva Convention, were presented as "genius".⁴⁶

At the same time, it was claimed that the Ukrainian soldiers are surrendering en masse⁴⁷ and enthusiastically crossing over to the side of Russian "liberators".⁴⁸ Stories such as these have gradually disappeared from the disinformation narratives once it became clear that the country will not be subdued in a blitzkrieg and the reality and persistence of Ukrainian resistance became undeniable.

The mounting evidence that Russia is aiming civilian targets were dismissed with claims that Western media are faking or staging those reports.⁴⁹ Decades-old conspiratorial narratives about the 90's wars in the region, built on a similar premise, were quick to follow.

⁴⁴ Wynne Davis, *"Ukraine appears to have stalled Russia's advance. Here's what that could mean"*, NPR, March 18, 2022

⁴⁵ Katarina Škaro, *"Rusija tvrdi da ne gađa civilne ciljeve, a na društvenim mrežama šire se snimke granatiranih stambenih zgrada"*, Telegram, February 24, 2022

⁴⁶ Marija Ćosić, *"Rusi nisu podigli zastavu na Skupštini u Kijevu, niti su osvojili glavni grad"*, Raskrinkavanje, February 25, 2022; Marija Vučić, *"Genijalni ulazak" Rusa u Kijev je kršenje Ženevske konvencije*", Raskrinkavanje.rs, February 25, 2022

⁴⁷ *"Ukrajinci se predali, digli belu zastavu! vojnici položili oružje i prešli na stranu Rusije! (video)"*, Republika, February 24, 2022; *"Udarno: Ukrajinska vojska masovno napušta svoje položaje i ostavlja oružje - Rusi zauzimaju gradove i podižu ruske zastave"*, Webtribune, February 24, 2022

⁴⁸ Amar Karađuz, *"Viralni video ne prikazuje ukrajinske vojnike koji plešu sa svojim ruskim napadačima"*, Raskrinkavanje, March 4, 2022

⁴⁹ *"Russian attacks on civilian targets in Ukraine could be a war crime: UN rights office"*, United Nations, March 11, 2022; Mladen Lakić, *"CNN nije objavio da je 'isti novinar poginuo i u Kabulu i u Ukrajini'"*, Raskrinkavanje, March 3, 2022; Darvin Murić, *"Ratna propaganda: Birmingham završio u Ukrajini"*, Raskrinkavanje.me, March 2, 2022

Sputnik Serbia draws explicit parallels between Kyiv and the besieged Sarajevo, accusing both of “faking massacres” with the help of BBC and CNN.⁵⁰ The same tactic was employed to dismiss reports of massacre in Bucha, the bombing of a maternity hospital and other war crimes, with pro-Russian outlets claiming that they were “faked” like the massacre at Markale market, the village of Račak in Kosovo, and even Srebrenica genocide.⁵¹ Similarly, some of the documented atrocities and hardships of Ukrainian civilians were attributed to the Ukraine government, rather than the Russian army.⁵²

The narrative of Ukrainian falsification of crimes and civilian casualties remained very present throughout, and allegations of civilian victims being “actors” have often intensified after Russian air and missile attacks on Ukrainian cities.⁵³ Ukrainian counter-offensives were followed by unsubstantiated allegations of crimes allegedly committed by Ukrainian soldiers against the civilian population in the regions they recaptured.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Nataša Jovanović, *“Zelenski u Kijevu koristi Alijinu strategiju”*, Sputnik, February 28, 2022

⁵¹ *„Genocid u Buči“ – jeftina replika Markala i Račka: Medijska satanizacija Rusa ne jenjava!*, IN4S, February 19, 2022; Pirko Turpeinen - Sari, *“Srebrenica, Račak i Buča, isto lice zapadne propagande: Finska profesorka razotkriva laži američko - nacističke dijasporu”*, Novosti.rs, April 4, 2022; Sandra Čerin, *“Osuda Rusije po svaku cenu: Navodni masakr civila u Buči - samo početak perfidne igre Zapada”*, Sputnik, April 4, 2022; Dalio Sijah, *“Genocid u Srebrenici nije bio “produkcija”*, Istinomjer, April 4, 2022.

⁵² Marija Ćosić, *“Humanitarni koridori u Mariupolju: Dezinformacije o naporima za evakuaciju civilnog stanovništva”*, Raskrinkavanje, March 14, 2022

⁵³ Nerma Šehović, *“Laž formirana na osnovu ničega: Ne, povrijeđeni ukrajinski civili nisu “glumci”*, Raskrinkavanje, October 20, 2022; Marija Manojlović, Emir Zulejhić, *“Fotografije iz 2016. pogrešno predstavljene kao “lažiranje” ukrajinskih žrtava”*, Raskrinkavanje, January 9, 2023

⁵⁴ Amar Karađuz, *“Slika ukrajinskih vojnika koji siluju ženu “ukradena” iz pornografskog filma”*, Raskrinkavanje, October 12, 2022; Marko Vukalović, *“Neistine o namještanju sagovornika: Ko je davao izjave u Hersonu?”*, Raskrinkavanje.me, December 5, 2022

“Whataboutism”: Relativization of the aggression as the last resort

Anti-Western sentiment, targeting particularly the US and EU based media, was utilized not only to portray war crime reports as “staged”, but also as a means to divert attention from Russia’s actions in Ukraine. Making the story about the “fake news media” and the “hypocritical West” had a clear intent to “spin” the actual events - an aggression of one country against another - and portray other actors as equally or more deserving of condemnation.⁵⁵

While triumphalist discourse was almost solely present in right wing / nationalist sources, “whataboutism” and claims of Western hypocrisy were equally encountered on both ends of the spectrum, often simultaneously.⁵⁶ When it comes to the left-oriented media or social media users, it is often paired with appeals to pacifism⁵⁷. In such sources, criticism of Russian invasion was occasionally seen as “militant side-taking”.⁵⁸

One of the most common tactics of this “whataboutism”⁵⁹ were allegations of the media’s double standards when reporting from war-torn areas. Claims that the Western media “push” the Ukraine war on their respective audiences, while allegedly ignoring other wars that have happened or are still ongoing, went hand-in-hand with the disinformation about the Western media “staging war crimes”. However, it was more of a propaganda than a disinformation narrative itself, and one that also stood out in terms of its source.

Another angle used to vilify Western media and divert attention from the actual attack on Ukraine, were the claims of islamophobia as the reason they were “screaming” about Ukraine and supposedly ignored the suffering of war-torn countries in the Middle East.

⁵⁵ Velibor Mandić, *“Agresija na Ukrajinu i plimni “whataboutism”*, Faktograf, March 12, 2022

⁵⁶ For example, a caricature of “Uncle Sam” condemning aggression against Ukraine, while at the same time shoving skulls representing Somalia, Syria, Iraq and Libya under a rug, was published on both nationalist-themed pages and those of portals with general anti-war orientation. Facebook posts and archived posts available on these links. [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#).

⁵⁷ A propaganda campaign using a hashtag “Condemn wars everywhere”, reached social media users in multiple countries, including the region (1). It came from MintPress News, an outlet openly supportive of Russia, Iran and other authoritarian regimes, that often publishes disinformation and propaganda. (See: *Mint Press News*, Media Bias / Fact Check, December 20, 2022)

⁵⁸ *“Interview: Slavoj Žižek: ‘Denazification Should Begin At Home, In Russia’*, Radio Free Europe, January 2, 2023

⁵⁹ Definition, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

Several viral Facebook posts, some published just days after the invasion started, have shown war footage from Syria or Jordan, claiming that “we did not see (such scenes) on TV, because Muslims were the ones dying in Syria”.⁶⁰ Another video that gained enormous virality in the region and worldwide, shows a man gesturing “silence” while pointing to scenes from wars in the MENA region, until a scene from Ukraine appears and he makes a gesture that symbolizes speech. The video was published on a local Facebook account on March 11, 2022 with the description “Hypocrisy and double standards of the world explained in a few seconds”. In only a few days, it was shared more than 673,000 times and viewed millions of times on this account alone.⁶¹

Some of the events in the Ukraine war were also used to revive motifs related to the wars in the nineties in the former Yugoslavia countries in the context of “Western hypocrisy”. Sputnik compared the separation of so-called LNR and DNR with the declaration of independence of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991, condemning the Western countries for supporting one, but not the other.⁶² Implicit or explicit comparisons of the invasion of Ukraine with the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1999 NATO operation “Allied Force”,⁶³ which was also mentioned in Putin’s February speech as an example of “Western hypocrisy”, were one of the most prominent propaganda motives, especially in the early days of war. As a part of this narrative, some old disinformation - for example, the claim that the operation of airstrikes against the FRY was called “Merciful Angel” - were brought back to relativize Russian aggression by portraying the West as hypocritical.⁶⁴ NATO bombing was also used to water down the fact that Russia is committing aggression against a sovereign state as, in their view, NATO did the same in the FRY in 1999.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Facebook posts and archived posts available on these links: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#); [6](#), [7](#), [8](#), [9](#), [10](#).

⁶¹ At the time of writing this analysis was no longer available. Similar posts are still online at these links: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#). The TikTok account where it was originally published is no longer available, but it is still online through numerous “duets” made with the original video ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)).

⁶² Nataša Jovanović, *“Da se za trenutak vratimo na 1990: Kako to da se Ukrajina razbija, a Jugoslavija se - raspala?”*, Sputnik, February 25, 2022

⁶³ *“The NATO Bombing Of Yugoslavia”*, Radio Free Europe, March 24, 2019

⁶⁴ Dane Čanković, *“Republika Srpska snažno uz Rusiju: skup podrške bratskoj Rusiji”*, Blog Između sna i jave, March 13, 2022; *“(VIDEO) Podrška prijateljskoj Srbiji! Ministarstvo inostranih poslova Rusije na zvaničnom Tviter kanalu podsetilo na 23 godine od NATO agresije”*, Srbija Danas, March 24, 2022

⁶⁵ Facebook posts archived here: [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)

CONCLUSION

The narratives built on disinformation that dominated the public sphere in BiH and the region in 2022 were mostly related to the invasion of Ukraine and, in the vast majority of cases, repeated talking points and premises of official Russian state propaganda. Various research, including this analysis, shows that these narratives are being placed continuously, consciously and frequently by multiple types of sources, including even some of the public broadcasters in the region, mostly in Serbia and Republika Srpska. This is in line with more or less explicit political support for Russia that is present there.

