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Kosovar Centre for Security Studies

# The impact of disinformation and political polarization during **COVID-19** pandemic in Kosovo



Prishtina  
June 2022

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## Executive Summary

Kosovo was not immune to politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a looming political crisis at home, vaccination mandates, lockdowns and protective measures to manage the spread of COVID-19 pandemic became subject of much tension with political parties exploiting health fears and economic and security anxieties to further their political agendas, further eroding the public's response to the pandemic.

This report is an attempt to document instances of disinformation and political polarization during the COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo and to trace their implications in shaping the public's attitudes to the pandemic and the pandemic's management.

Through a set of mixed methods, which include desk research, media monitoring, focus group queries and public opinion instruments, the report identifies the most frequent disinformation narratives encountered in Kosovo's public domain, studies the way they connect to global and regional narratives related to COVID-19 pandemic and investigates how key upheavals in the country's political environment undermined Kosovo's vaccination bid and contributed to public's vaccines reluctance and the subsequent record number of deaths.

Through examples in Kosovo, the report corroborates recent scholarly finds that examine the public's trust in government and that country's vulnerability to disinformation. The report shows that the trust towards the institutions, and the politicization of public health issues, affects the public perceptions around public health issues, resulting in an environment with more potential for the penetration of disinformation.

In this vein, the report concludes that the mainstream media's efforts to produce and provide credible information to the public about COVID-19 is challenged by the presence of false and fake news and conspiracies about the virus and the pandemic disseminated primarily through social media and unverified online sources.

The presence of conspiracy theories, disinformation and fake news digital and social media in Kosovo had deleterious effect on the public and its acceptance of the pandemic as a threat and the institutional restrictions to prevent the pandemic. This effect was further compounded by Kosovo's political instability, which created a fertile ground for fake news and disinformation about COVID-19. The institutions, the media and the public were not prepared to counter the propaganda and disinformation which cast doubt on the existence of COVID-19, the protection measures against COVID-19 and vaccination.

Taken in its entirety the report is a cautionary lesson for Kosovo's institutions and its public and an urgent call to examine its strategic communications efforts as it embraces for the next national crises.

## Introduction

- COVID-19: Media landscape, global and local narratives and definitions
  - DEFINITIONS: Disinformation, Misinformation, Conspiracy Theories and their relation to False Information
    - The prevalent COVID-19 global narratives
  - The prevalent COVID-19 regional narratives





## COVID-19: Media landscape, global and local narratives and definitions

The COVID-19 pandemic in Kosovo began with fake news.<sup>1</sup> The country, which saw its first case of the coronavirus infection in late March 2020, fared better than its neighbors in managing the first two years of the pandemic, in large part due to its government's decision to rely on Pfizer vaccines and an expedient vaccination campaign in mid-2021. Yet, the pandemic exposed institutional fragility, legislation deficiency and strategic communication inefficiency that appears especially harmful to Kosovo's ability to manage a public health crisis.

Kosovo was hardly unique in battling these contributing factors to its mixed response to COVID-19 pandemic, which was also its first major test to manage a global crisis in its 13-year existence as a country. While its institutional fragility and mixed emergency response was elaborated in detail elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> this report is an attempt to document disinformation during COVID-19 in Kosovo and understand its implications in shaping the public's attitudes to the pandemic. As the world grappled with the social and economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first global pandemic in times of digital revolution, countries were compelled to deal with the consequences of another battle of pandemic proportions – the fake information that in the era of social media and 24-hour news cycles and the anxiety over survival blurred the lines between facts and fiction.

Efforts by governments and medical communities to respond to the consequences of the pandemic were often thwarted or complicated by disinformation and misinformation that upended and further polarized societies and undermined the response to COVID-19.

The trend of misleading information, both deliberate and accidental, and the harm that disinformation caused in managing the pandemic and driving an ideological wedge in societies across the world, pushed the World Health Organization to coin the term "infodemic" to describe the phenomenon of "an overabundance of information" to "undermine the public health response and advance alternative agendas of groups or individuals."<sup>3</sup>

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1 "Ekskluzive: Shenohet rasti i pare i infektuar me koronavirus ne Kosove," Arberesh.info, March 11, 2020 <https://www.arbresh.info/arbresh-story/ekskluzive-shenohet-rasti-i-pare-i-infektuar-me-koronavirus-ne-kosove/>

2 Teuta Avdimetaj, Shpat Balaj and Plator Avdiu, "Between a rock and a hard place: Kosovo's challenges in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic," Kosovar Center for Security Studies, Dec. 27, 2020 <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/te-zene-ngushte-sfidat-e-kosoves-ne-perballjen-me-pandemine-covid-19/>

3 World Health Organization, "Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviors and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation," WHO, Sept. 23, 2020

As the pandemic played out, the WHO observed that the effect of malicious information campaigns had a direct impact on the society's contestation and non-compliance with the safety methods promoted during the pandemic. Mask-wearing, distancing and vaccination, measures on which the medical community relied on to contain the spread of the virus and eventually put an end to the global pandemic, became symbols of a global ideological battle.

Aside from these immediate consequences of the "infodemic" of disinformation and misinformation in managing the pandemic and curbing the deaths caused by it, the WHO warned, were the long-term challenge on the democratic standards and the social cohesion that this phenomenon would cause.

During the course of ongoing battle with COVID-19, the "infodemic" did not only come to cost lives, but it undermined the social contract that governs the relationship between governments and the constituents in much of the democratic world. The European Union classified the false narratives as intentional disinformation campaigns disseminated by actors who ranged from foreign players such as Russia and China for political gain to scammers who sought individual economic gain through click baits, cyber-crime and online scams and misinformation.<sup>4</sup> It specifically warned of "foreign actors and certain third countries, in particular Russia and China, have engaged in targeted influence operations and disinformation campaigns in the EU, its neighborhood, and globally."<sup>5</sup>

With social media as the ultimate amplifier and countries and societies ill prepared to respond to disinformation and misinformation on this scale, false information penetrated into the living rooms of audiences at a time of lockdowns and quarantines and uncertainty over its impact on health. The reaction to the pandemic became an ideological marker as political elites, especially in democratic countries where public is susceptible to elites' views, staked out their own political power battles in an effort to mobilize their support base, setting the tone for a fractured national response.<sup>6</sup>

The outbreak of SARS-COV 2 and its different variants have been the subject of fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories promoted in social media and mainstream media. The lack of management of false information and fake news has challenged communities, citizens, and institutions in managing the pandemic and reducing the spread of the virus. The diffusion of disinformation and conspiracy theories about COVID-19 virus undermined the trust of the

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4 European Commission, "Tackling coronavirus disinformation," EC, June 10, 2020 [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/corona\\_fighting\\_disinformation\\_0.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/corona_fighting_disinformation_0.pdf)

5 Ibid.

6 Green, Jon et al. "Elusive consensus: Polarization in elite communication on the COVID-19 pandemic." *Science advances* vol. 6,28 eabc2717. 10 Jul. 2020, doi:10.1126/sciadv.abc2717

citizens on governments and the measures they have introduced to prevent the pandemic.

The globalization of information and many alternative sources of news have rendered efforts to counter false information and fake news related to COVID-19 pandemic inefficient. The report concludes that despite their efforts to communicate daily with the public, Kosovo institutions have failed to create a system of communication to tackle fake news and manage an effective national response to curb the spread of false information – both disinformation and misinformation – about the virus and its consequences.

In the following section, this report will briefly define disinformation, misinformation, conspiracy theories and false information to draw distinctions between the four categories and to clarify and contextualize their use in this report. It will then summarize the dominant global and regional narratives on the COVID-19 pandemic. The report will also identify the local narratives and track the sources of the disinformation and the manifestation on COVID-19 in Kosovo. Additionally, it will discuss the political use of the pandemic by various political stakeholders and the relationship between the public's trust in the government, trust in the country's first responders, the political elites and public's perception on how the government managed the pandemic, including its handling of disinformation.

The report relies on a methodology of mixed methods, which initially included a desk review of emerging global and regional trends and narratives, definitions and practices, followed by a monitoring of mainstream media, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Telegram and Instagram and key influencers to identify the domestic COVID-19 narratives. In this respect, an extensive database of materials containing false information with resources from social media and online media outlets in Albanian and Serbian languages was developed and included more than 800 sources from different social media platforms or online news agencies. Once identified, these narratives were then compared and tested with the findings from three focus groups in Prishtina to distill the most frequent COVID-19 conspiracy theories circulating in Kosovo. Two focus group included a group of respondents that mirrored Kosovo's demographic and socio-economic diversity. The second focus group consisted of representatives from Kosovo's institutions, primarily civil servants, in an effort to capture their perceptions, experiences and insights into the government's response to COVID-19 and disinformation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The first focus group was held in Prishtina on October 27, 2021, with a total of 11 participants. The participants included representatives of key security institutions in Kosovo including Kosovo Security Force, Ministry of Defense, Kosovo Police, Police Inspectorate of Kosovo, Kosovo Intelligence Agency, Kosovo Customs, the Information and Privacy Agency, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and the State Prosecutor Office. The second focus group was organized on February 08, 2022, in Prishtina, with a total of 11 participants. The participants included five youngsters aged

In the second part, the report also examined Kosovo's legislation to counter disinformation through the available legal framework. Through a comparison between infection and vaccination rates against several key instances of politicization of COVID-19 measures, the report also shows the impact of the political polarization on a public health crisis. Finally, the report integrates the quantitative findings of KCSS' annual security barometer, which in 2022 included specific questions about citizens' perceptions of government's response to COVID-19, disinformation and their perceptions about their impact, as well as measured their attitudes to vaccination process.

Following the critical assessment of Kosovo's national framework in 2020 by KCSS, the overall aim of this KCSS report is to identify the domestic manifestation of disinformation and critically assess the impact of trust in institutions on the pandemic's management. It also examines the effect of disinformation in the public's response to the pandemic through a brief analysis of the legal limits and expectations of the Kosovo public from its elected representatives in a bid to identify the weaknesses and shortcomings of the overall response to the pandemic.

### **DEFINITIONS: Disinformation, Misinformation, Conspiracy Theories and their relation to False Information**

Disinformation and misinformation have been a subject of interest and study of scholars studying media and social phenomena and their interaction in shaping public opinion and attitudes. While all are well-defined and well-studied features of our time and predate COVID-19, for the purpose of this report, the authors will rely on the definitions provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to capture the nature of these two categories, their commonality and divergence, as well as their relationship to false information, the methods employed for its dissemination and the intended goal as used during the COVID-19 global crisis.

According to UNESCO's experts, both categories are based on false information, but what sets them apart is the intention and the use of their creator. UNESCO defines disinformation as "information that is false and is deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization, or country." Misinformation, on the other hand, is defined as "information that is false but not created with the intention of causing harm."<sup>8</sup> Both, however, have equally

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between 16-21 years old and senior citizens aged between 65-75 years old. The third focus group was organized on March 18, 2022, in Prishtina with eight students from public and private Universities of Kosovo.

8 UNESCO, Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training, 2018

malicious impact on the wellbeing of their consumers.<sup>9</sup>

Conspiracy theories are defined as the belief in manipulation and orchestration by design of world events by powerful groups or individuals.<sup>10</sup> While conspiracy theories can fall in the disinformation domain, experts set them apart primarily by the intention of their author. As discussed above, disinformation is false information that is deliberately used to cause harm, while conspiracy theories are deeply held beliefs of individuals that spread them. However, as of late, conspiracy theories have also been advanced for profit, but also to radicalize supporters and mobilize followers.

In addition to these three categories that became useful to differentiate the false information in circulation during COVID-19, the EU platform tasked with debunking disinformation also made use of a taxonomy of informational challenges as they pertained to COVID-19 theories in the EU by including “foreign interference” and “influence operations” to further expose the deliberate nature of the deployment of disinformation. Both categories imply coordination and presume a deliberate effort by an actor – an organization or a foreign state – to employ disinformation to cause disruption in the targeted environment.<sup>11</sup>

## The prevalent COVID-19 global narratives

Scholars studying in real time the diffusion of disinformation at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 and tracking it as the pandemic entered its third year, found that false narratives underwent a process of constant transformation and adaptation,<sup>12</sup> but that despite the global networks of information dissemination and the global nature of the pandemic, there is much heterogeneity in their manifestation.<sup>13</sup>

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[https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism\\_fake\\_news\\_disinformation\\_print\\_friendly\\_0.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0.pdf)

9 Posetti, Julie and Kalina Bontcheva, “Disinfodemic: Deciphering COVID-19 disinformation,” UNESCO, accessed March 25, 2022 [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic\\_deciphering\\_covid19\\_disinformation.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/disinfodemic_deciphering_covid19_disinformation.pdf)

10 Michael Butter et al, “Guide to Conspiracy Theories,” European Cooperation in Science and Technology, March 2020 [https://conspiracytheories.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COMPACT\\_Guide-2.pdf](https://conspiracytheories.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/COMPACT_Guide-2.pdf)

11 EUvsDisinfo, EEAS Special Report Update: Short assessment of narratives and disinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic,” April 1, 2020 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

12 Raquel Miguel Serrano et al. “COVID-19 Disinformation: Narratives, Trends and Strategies in Europe,” EU Disinfo Lab, April 2, 2020 <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/covid-19-disinformation-narratives-trends-and-strategies-in-europe/>

13 Samikshya Siwakoti, Kamyā Yadav, Isra Thange, Nicola Bariletto, Luca Zanotti, Alaa Ghoneim, and Jacob N. Shapiro. Localized Misinformation in a Global Pandemic: Report on COVID-19 Narratives around the World. Empirical Study of Conflict, Princeton University, pages 1-68, March 2021. URL <https://esoc.princeton.edu/publications/localized-misinformation-global-pandemic-report-covid-19-narratives-around-world>

At the beginning, when the outbreak was mainly contained to China, the disinformation focused on the origins of the virus, but as it spread toward Europe and the US, the narratives became local in nature and played to the domestic fears and insecurities.<sup>14</sup>

Based on tracking and monitoring of examples in France, Spain and Italy, scholars from EU's platform studying disinformation patterns, typified the overarching narratives into five distinct groups of themes. The narratives extended from those with health fear to elicit feelings of panic among the public to conspiracy theories that blamed the virus on big pharma or a bioweapon in a great power contest for primacy, or on the founder of Microsoft and philanthropist Bill Gates. The other group of narratives drew on false cures, lockdown anxieties and political polarization, especially in sowing and exploiting divisions within and among European countries, including through stories weaving COVID-19 and migration,<sup>15</sup> a highly divisive theme in Europe that has predated the pandemic.

Similarly, UNESCO identified nine overarching themes of disinformation related to COVID-19 that undermined the response to the pandemic, with most employing racist and xenophobic tropes.<sup>16</sup> They included false narratives on the origins of the virus, misleading statistics on the pandemic's toll, its economic impact, erosion of trust in credible information sources and commentators/experts, fake treatment and cures for COVID-19, environmental effects of the pandemic, its politization, fraudulent gain and false stories about celebrities' battle with the infection.<sup>17</sup>

A cross-national report from Empirical Studies on Conflict found that during COVID-19, localized narratives trumped global ones that varied across regions. In Europe, the majority of the narratives focused on "false rumors" to government and non-government response to the pandemic, the nature of the virus and anti-vaccination conspiracies.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from widespread conspiracy theories that linked the origins of the virus to 5G network or Bill Gates or anti-Semitic tropes,<sup>19</sup> politically motivated

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14 Raquel Miguel Serrano et al. "COVID-19 Disinformation: Narratives, Trends and Strategies in Europe," EU Disinfo Lab, April 2, 2020 <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/covid-19-disinformation-narratives-trends-and-strategies-in-europe/>

15 Ibid

16 Posetti, Julie and Bontcheva, Kalina. "Disinfodemic: deciphering COVID-19 disinformation," UNESCO, 2020 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000374416> pp. 5

17 Ibid.

18 Siwakoti, S. et al, "Localized Misinformation in a Global Pandemic: Report on COVID-19 narratives around the world," Empirical Studies of Conflict, Princeton University, March 25, 2021 <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1LqoK1IK4ufIQ3OisLVPBT99ikAD87wfX/view>

19 Weiner, Alyssa, "Global Trends in Conspiracy Theories Linking Jews to Coronavirus," American-Jewish Council

disinformation was deployed against the European Union by Russia. A large part of the negative COVID-19 narratives were weaponized to portray the EU as ineffective, dysfunctional and its record of unified response abysmal.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to Russia's strategic goals to undermine the EU and weaken the bloc's unity as it moved to re-establish its presence in the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans through targeted disinformation, China saw the pandemic as an opportunity to revamp its tarnished image by the origins of the coronavirus and project itself as a benevolent superpower. China's main narratives sought to project the country – ruled by an authoritarian regime – as a model juxtaposed to democratic countries' chaotic response to the pandemic and as a humanitarian actor coming to the aid of other struggling European countries abandoned by the EU.<sup>21</sup>

Generally, the majority of false claims concerned the actions or policies of governments and international bodies, such as WHO and other UN agencies.<sup>22</sup> About 88% of the false claims studied appeared on social media platforms, followed by television, newspapers and websites.<sup>23</sup>

## The prevalent COVID-19 regional narratives

Throughout the pandemic, the trends in the Western Balkans mirrored those found elsewhere in Europe and globally. Conspiracy theories that described the COVID-19 virus as a tool in the great powers' competition were abundant across the region and were no different in sowing doubt on vaccination drives as well as on measures to manage the pandemic. The various disinformation and misinformation appeared to shape the public's response to the pandemic, placed unprecedented strain on dilapidated health sectors and adding to political uncertainty and confusion. During this time, scholars and fact-checkers in the Western Balkans found the emergence of a geopolitical pattern among the region's audiences, with publics susceptible to particular theories based on their ideological orientation and alignment,<sup>24</sup> which further

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20 For more see Disinfo Database of EUvsDisinfo platform, which documents the instances of disinformation targeting the EU pandemic response <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/?text=eu%20coronavirus&date=&fbclid=IwAR2J6FG5pJBzzJhdIM57-yZS8CpgPo3q-AMkvjzIazwBZhDkUli5CLKRVxY>, accessed on March 24, 2022

21 Cook, Sarah, "Beijing's Coronavirus propaganda has both foreign and domestic targets," Freedom House, April 20, 2020 <https://freedomhouse.org/article/beijings-coronavirus-propaganda-has-both-foreign-and-domestic-targets>

22 Simon, Felix et al, "Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation," Reuters Institute and University of Oxford, April 7, 2020 <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation#footnote-01>

23 Ibid.

24 Bieber, Florian et al. "The Suspicious Virus: Conspiracies and COVID-19 in the Balkans," Balkans in Europe Policy Advisory Group, July 2021 <https://biepag.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Conspiracies-and-COVID19-in-the-Balkan-English-2.pdf>



polarized and antagonized the societies in question.

Across the Balkans, the most popular conspiracy theories revolved around the origins of the virus. The vast majority of the publics in Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia believed that COVID-19 virus was manufactured in a Chinese lab or it was the work of the pharmaceutical industry. Other popular conspiracy theories included micro-chip injections for population control by Bill Gates and 5G network.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from these fake narratives, the Western Balkans was a target of deliberate disinformation campaigns that affected the region's relationship with the EU and at times exacerbated the already tense relations between the countries in the Western Balkans. This batch of narratives took a local character and became a means to settle scores between the political elites, with expert recommendations a casualty of the internal political bickering, further weakening the public's trust in institutions and the advice of the medical community. Moreover, these narratives, which were peddled primarily by pro-Russian sources, sought to widen the void between the EU and the Western Balkans, often projecting the EU as a self-interested party that abandoned the region as it struggled to contain the pandemic with its limited resources.<sup>26</sup> As the pandemic entered the second year and the vaccination became widely available, Russian and Chinese propaganda channels and their proxies in the region, recalibrated the disinformation tactics to attack the Western-produced vaccines Astazeneca, Pfizer and Moderna and propagate the alleged negative effects of the vaccine in a bid to build a positive narrative for their own vaccines.<sup>27</sup>

Regionally, the main tools used to disseminate disinformation and misinformation in the Western Balkans were social media platforms, namely Facebook and popular messaging applications such as Telegram, Viber and WhatsApp, but also vaccine skepticism made its way into traditional and mainstream media,<sup>28</sup> contributing to vaccine hesitancy and impacting the vaccination rates.

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25 *ibid*

26 EUvsDisInfo, EEAS Special Report Update: Short assessment of narratives and disinformation around COVID-19 pandemic, April 1, 2020 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

27 EUvsDisInfo, EEAS Special Report Update: Short assessment of narratives and disinformation around COVID-19 pandemic, April 28, 2021 <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-short-assessment-of-narratives-and-disinformation-around-the-covid-19-pandemic-update-december-2020-april-2021/>

28 *ibid*



## The Politicization of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kosovo

Kosovo was not immune to politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic. With a looming political crisis at home that saw the country's President Hashim Thaci and speaker Kadri Veseli stepping down to face allegations of war crimes by the Specialist Court in 2020 and ensuing power reshuffle, vaccination mandates, lockdowns and protective measures to manage the spread of COVID-19 pandemic became subject of much tension with political parties exploiting health fears and economic and security anxieties to further their political agendas, further eroding the public's response to the pandemic.

In late March 2020 as the first cases of COVID-19 began to emerge in Kosovo, the longtime political rivals Kosovo's then-President Hashim Thaci and the country's Prime Minister Albin Kurti were locked in a battle over the introduction of restrictions to contain the pandemic. Calling the measures as "unconstitutional," Thaci called on Kosovo's citizens to ignore the restrictions on movement introduced by Kurti's government and warned the police against obeying government orders.<sup>29</sup>

Other disputes that may have contributed to vaccine hesitancy in Kosovo and further weakened the trust in institutions in Kosovo were related to a dispute over vaccine purchases between the outgoing and incoming government, with parties trading accusations over corrupt practices and inefficiency in contracting the vaccines while Kosovo trailed behind the whole region in vaccination rates.<sup>30</sup> One such instance was Kurti's decision to reject Albania's offer of Chinese vaccines to Kosovo in 2021, a decision that the government argued politically and not through public health concerns.<sup>31</sup>

Another such instance was the claim by a Kosovan member of parliament Bekim Haxhiu that Kosovo's government received 130,000 Astra Zeneca vaccines from Norway following that country's decision to discard the vaccines just days before they expired that led to their rejection by Kosovo's public at

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29 Bekim Bislimi and Mimoza Sadiku, "Presidenti Thaci kundërshton masat e qeverisë për kufizimin e lëvizjes së lire," Radio Evropa e Lire, March 23, 2020 <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/hashim-thaci-masat-qeveria-kufizimi-i-levizjes-/30505139.html>

30 "Publikohen dokumente që tregojnë mos-nëshkrimin e kontratës nga Arben Vitia për furnizimin me 500 mijë doza të vaksinës Pfizer," Telegrafi, April 16, 2021 <https://telegrafi.com/publikohen-dokumentet-qe-tregojne-mosneshkrimin-e-kontrates-nga-arben-vitia-per-furnizimin-500-mije-doza-vaksinash-pfizer/>

31 On April 5, 2021 Kurti claimed that Kosovo would reject Albania's offer to provide Chinese vaccines to Kosovo and would only accept vaccines from countries that have recognized the country's independence, but fell short of providing medical arguments to his preference for Western patented vaccines despite the availability of data on the low efficacy of Chinese and Russian produced vaccines. For more see "Kosova nuk pranon vaksinat kineze nga Shqipëria, Kurti: Do marrim vetëm nga shtete që na kanë njohur," April 5, 2021 <https://abcnews.al/kosova-nuk-pranon-vaksinat-kineze-nga-shqiperia-kurti-do-marrim-vetem-nga-shtete-qe-na-kanen-johur/>

the height of the pandemic's second wave in 2021,<sup>32</sup> the deadliest spike in COVID-19 trajectory in Kosovo .

Similarly, during the summer of 2021, as Kosovo recorded the highest death toll from the Delta variant of COVID-19 amid government's decision to lift all measures, including proof of a negative PCR test and vaccine certificate for those coming to Kosovo from abroad, Kurti's rivals blamed his government's inability to mobilize the public for vaccination<sup>33</sup> and his ministers – namely the health minister – for violating the COVID-19 restrictions and undermining the public's obedience for the pandemic rules.<sup>34</sup>

While this report cannot establish direct causality between the political polarization and politicization of COVID-19 measures and the rate of infections, vaccinations and death, through examples above it can infer that the trading of accusations and the lack of consistent and unified message, coupled with a lack of strategic communication strategy to counter false information – disinformation, misinformation and conspiracy theories – emerged as contributing factors to Kosovo's mixed scorecard in the management of the pandemic.

By May 2022, according to official statistics, Kosovo had 228,000 people reported as infected by COVID-19 and 3,139 deaths – or 1.38 percent of all infections resulting in death – with significant peaks in July–August 2020, November 2020 through May 2021, and August–September 2021.

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32 Bekim Haxhiu: Vaksinave Astra Zeneca te dhuruara nga Norvegjia u skadon afati pas shtate ditesh," GazetaBlic.com, July 3, 2021 <https://gazetablic.com/bekim-haxhiu-vaksinat-astra-zeneca-te-dhuruara-nga-norvegjia-u-skadon-afati-pas-shtate-ditesh/>

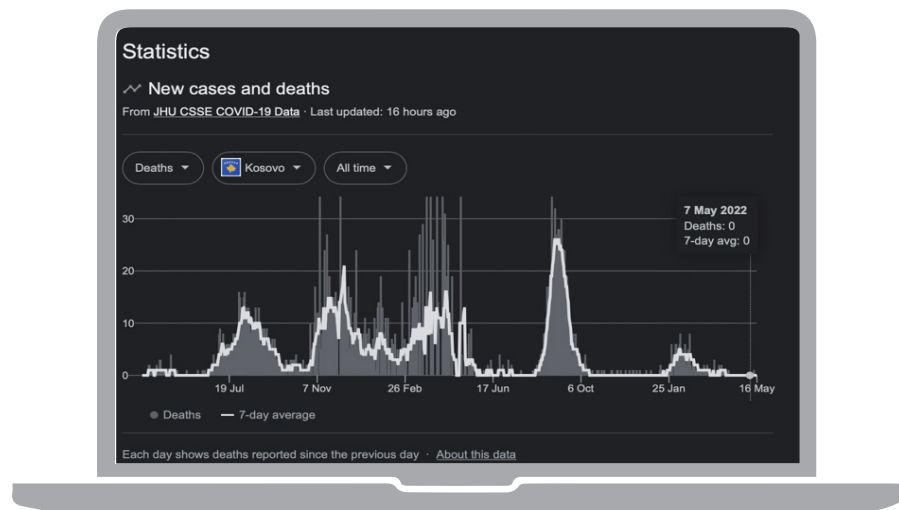
33 "Haradinaj: Kur u shfaq variant Delta i COVID-19, Kurti shetitej ne Greqi e France," Gazeta Express, Sept. 2, 2021 <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/haradinaj-kur-u-shfaq-varianti-delta-i-covid-19-kurti-shetitej-ne-greqi-e-france/>

34 "Flet Arben Vitia pasi u pa duke vallezuar ne nje dasem, nen ritmin e kenges se Afrim Muciqit," Gazeta Express, Aug. 9, 2021 <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/flet-arben-vitia-pasi-u-pa-duke-vallezuar-ne-nje-dasme-nen-ritmin-e-kenges-se-afrim-muciqit/>

**Figure 1**

An overview of all time deaths from COVID-19 in Kosovo. Lastly updated on May 16, 2022.

Source: JHU



While the waves of COVID-19 mirror the trends of infections and death rates of the pre-vaccine in developing world, the most striking feature in Kosovo's COVID-19 statistics are the death rates in August and September 2021.

According to data from Kosovo's Health Ministry, 1,435 Kosovars were reported to have died as a result of COVID-19 between August 5 and December 1 in 2021,<sup>35</sup> despite the availability of vaccines in Kosovo.<sup>36</sup> At the time, Kosovo's government reported to have successfully purchased 1 million Pfizer vaccines in May. Authorities said that 622,000 vaccines were delivered to Kosovo in July and August. Yet, by the end of August, Kosovo's average daily death rate hit 20–30 deaths per day and public health officials found that 89% of the deaths between August 1 and December 1, 2021, in Kosovo were unvaccinated.<sup>37</sup>

35 "Per kater muaj, 89% e te vdekurve nga COVID-19 ne Kosove ishin te pavaksinuar," Koha Ditore, Dec. 13, 2021 <https://www.koha.net/arberi/301104/per-kater-muaj-89-e-vdekjeve-nga-covid-19-ishin-te-pavaksinuar/>

36 "Radio Evropa e Lire, "Vitia: Mos zgjidhni vaksina," REL, Aug. 31, 2021 <https://www.evropaelire.org/a/situata-me-koronavirus/31437058.html>

37 Per kater muaj, 89% e te vdekurve nga COVID-19 ne Kosove ishin te pavaksinuar," Koha Ditore, Dec. 13, 2021 <https://www.koha.net/arberi/301104/per-kater-muaj-89-e-vdekjeve-nga-covid-19-ishin-te-pavaksinuar/>

**Figure 2**

COVID-19 death rates based on vaccination status in Kosovo in the August 5 – December 1, 2021 period.

Source: Ministry of Health, National Institute of Public Health of Kosovo & USAID



The data above provides a glimpse into the vaccine hesitancy in Kosovo. While the death rate corresponds with the spread of COVID-19's more contagious and deadlier Delta variant in the summer of 2021 in Kosovo and the lifting of mask mandates and curfews on gatherings to encourage and accommodate visits by the Kosovan diaspora, the fact that 89% of the deaths were among the unvaccinated at a time when vaccines were widely available in Kosovo, points to widespread vaccine reluctance.

This finding is further corroborated by data from the focus groups organized as part of this study by KCSS in Prishtina and the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) conducted over September 17 – September 21 in 2021 show that disinformation and political polarization undermined the public's trust in the government and played a key role in driving the public's vaccination reluctance and subsequently in challenging the management of the pandemic.

## Legal and Policy Aspect Regulations of Disinformation and Misinformation in Kosovo

Disinformation, even though defined as a harmful phenomenon, is not considered illegal.<sup>38</sup> However, it can be subject to narrowly constructed restrictions when some preset requirements are met. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the harmful impact of disinformation on public health became more evident forcing countries to urgently adopt legal measures to combat false information.

But restriction of open flow of information, which is considered a crucial democratic standard, remains an unpopular measure in democratic societies and especially in liberal democracies. Due to the thin line between restricting freedom of expression and combating disinformation, many states hesitate to adopt laws that seek to limit information.

Kosovo is among the countries that took no legal remedies to respond to disinformation even with its newly adopted legislation regarding the prevention and the countering of the pandemic. The country's foundational documents enshrined in its constitution guarantee the freedom of expression,<sup>39</sup> and make no provisions or exceptions that would allow the restriction of this right for the protection of public health. According to the Constitution, this freedom can be revoked only when regulated by law, and when it is necessary to prevent the incitement of violence or hatred. However, since the Constitution defines and guarantees human rights according to eight international legal instruments and agreements,<sup>40</sup> it is important to critically examine the legal implications and responsibilities that the states have according to these instruments. Among the instruments that define and guarantee the freedom of expression are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights.

Both instruments stipulate that the freedom of expression can be restricted when it is necessary to protect a legitimate aim ranging from national security, public order and public health, and when the restriction is allowed by the domestic law.<sup>41</sup> In all cases, the restriction must be the least intrusive mean to achieve the legitimate aim. Given that Kosovo does not have a law that allows the restriction of false information concerning public health, the restriction of false information by state actors could be considered as an unlawful restriction of the freedom of expression. Consequently, even in situations when

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38 European Commission HLGE, 2018, pg.10

39 Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Art. 40

40 Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, Art. 22

41 The ICCPR, Art. 19.3; ECHR, Art. 10.2

disinformation has a harmful impact such as in the case of the pandemic, the state cannot legally act against it.

Nonetheless, there are various means through which such disinformation can be limited. For example, most of the social media platforms have new automatic reporting and flagging algorithms on posts which contain information regarding the pandemic. However, these automatic features are not adapted to different languages, including in Albanian, presenting a challenge to Kosovo.

## Kosovo's Information Environment During COVID-19

Despite large amounts of fake news, disinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, and limited information about the virus and pandemic, most of Kosovo's media have managed to provide credible information about the risks and threats from COVID-19.<sup>42</sup> Public health officials in Kosovo credit media to have helped them raise awareness about COVID-19 and argue that Kosovo's mainstream media have played an important role in convincing the public to respect the government-mandated COVID-19 measures.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, the media efforts to produce and provide credible information to the public about COVID-19 was challenged by the presence of false and fake news and conspiracies about the virus and the pandemic in social and digital media. The presence of conspiracy theories, disinformation and fake news in digital and social media in Kosovo had deleterious effect on the public and its acceptance of the pandemic as a threat as well as the institutional restrictions to prevent the pandemic.<sup>44</sup> This effect was further compounded by Kosovo's political instability, which created a fertile ground for fake news and disinformation about COVID-19.<sup>45</sup> The institutions, the media and the public were not prepared to counter the propaganda and disinformation which cast doubt on the existence of COVID-19, the protection measures against COVID-19 and vaccination.<sup>46</sup>

In the context of Kosovo, we have identified two categories of individuals and groups who have promoted false information on the pandemic. The first group were those who disputed the existence of the virus and proclaimed that the pandemic was created and planned by individuals who want to control the world.<sup>47</sup> This category was influenced by the narratives of global movements, which draw on anti-Semitic tropes in their efforts to spread fake news about the existence and the origins of the virus. This narrative centers on Jews as the people behind the spread of the virus or as people that stand to directly profit from the pandemic to continue their domination over global finances and technologies. The narrative was an off-shoot of similar stories found among neo-Nazi and other far right groups in western Europe and in the US among the white supremacists.<sup>48</sup> In Kosovo these conspiracies sought

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42 Interview with senior representative of National Institute of Public Health of Kosovo. 20 March 2021.

43 Ibid:

44 Avdiu, P., 2021. Between denial and respond: Citizens' perceptions on Kosovo Institutions dealing with COVID-19. Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/mes-mohimit-dhe-reagimit-perceptimet-e-qytetareve-mbi-menaxhimin-covid-19-nga-institucionet-e-kosoves/>

45 Focus Group Discussion with citizens of Kosovo facilitated by KCSS in Prishtina on February 8th, 2022

46 Focus Group Discussion with institutional representative facilitated by KCSS in Prishtina on October 27th, 2021.

47 Interview with senior representative of National Institute of Public Health of Kosovo. 20 March 2021.

48 Debate in a TV station in Albania. Alfred Cako flet mbi axhendën e pandemisë së Covid 19 . Rrethi Katror. Accessed

to portray Kosovo's institutions and politicians as controlled by the Jewish philanthropist George Soros, Jewish-owned companies and billionaires to spread the pandemic to assist the Jewish global agenda.<sup>49</sup>

**Figure 3**

An example of an online narrative comparing COVID-19 with Weapons of Mass Destruction alluding that it was intentionally created by Western powers.

Source: Facebook 



Another narrative disseminated by the disinformation groups was that the COVID-19 pandemic was a result of the great power competition to control the world economy and information. In particular the competition referred to the US, China and Russia, and smaller US allies such as United Kingdom and Israel. This narrative of global competition had two sub-narratives that enforced this particular conspiracy theory but through two different angles. The first related to the US dominance by reducing world populations, targeting specifically the eastern countries. According to this narrative, the goal of the West is the decimation of population of the so-called "Third World" countries as a means to address its own security challenges.<sup>50</sup> By extension, in the Kosovo version of this sub-narrative, Kosovo is considered "a third world" country and is hence the target of the depopulation campaign. The second sub-narrative related to the 5G network race between the West and China. According to the focus group participants, "through the 5G race, China is trying to dominate the world, control the world information and technology and reduce the USA global technological dominance."<sup>51</sup>

on March 18th, 2022.

49 Ibid.

50 TV debate in Albania. "Profecite" e Alfred Cakos per vaksinën, cipat e 5G. Accessed on May 3rd, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncYyjbqKs-4>

51 Focus Group Discussion with citizens of Kosovo facilitated by KCSS in Prishtina on February 8th, 2022.



**Figure 4**

An example of an online post promoting a false narrative that COVID-19 is part of a depopulation campaign.

Source: Facebook 



The second group that spread disinformation in Kosovo, and by all standard the most prominent group, were those who believe in the existence of the virus but disputed the threat of the virus. Part of this groups are anti-vaccination advocates who actively spread false information and fake news to undermine the vaccination process by disputing the licensing process, the potential side effect and long-term consequences to those willing to vaccinate. According to this group, COVID-19 exists, but the risk from it is similar to other viruses and does not cause death. One of the main arguments used in this narrative is the dispute of the quality of the vaccines that are currently on the market.

In Kosovo case, through observations in focus groups and social media for the purposes of this report, anti-vaccination advocates are larger in number compared to those disputing the existence of the virus. The anti-vaxxers in Kosovo think that it is a citizen's own right to decide if they want to be vaccinated or not.<sup>52</sup> According to the anti-vaxxers "if the individuals are doubtful about the quality of the medication or vaccine, he or she has a right to decide to take or not the vaccine." Their main argument is that there was no transparency about the composition of the vaccine, as well as testing period of vaccines.<sup>53</sup> This category of the individuals claims that the anti-COVID-19 vaccines were produced within a year and have not gone through the standard procedures of vaccine testing.<sup>54</sup>

52 TV debate in Kosovo. Protestohet kundër maskave dhe vaksinave. Accessed on March 10th, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knWUtOe7IbM&t=1079s>

53 ibid.

54 ibid.

**Figure 5**

Two examples of the narrative portraying the vaccines as ineffective, deadly and part of a “geopolitical” development.

Source: Facebook  & An online news agency



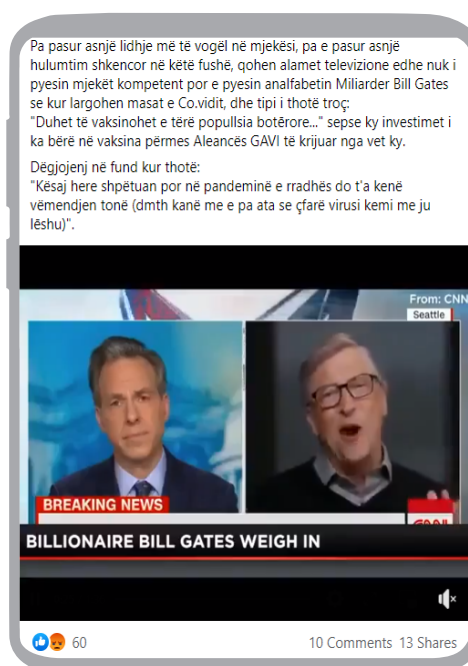
## COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation

In line with global trends, the first category promoted the idea that COVID-19 was generated by organizations and the so-called “big pharma” to cater to their business interests. This narrative was adapted to the local context and has targeted Kosovo citizens through social media platforms including Facebook and YouTube, both influential across generations. Social media feeds were strewn with posts claiming that powerful international organizations and individuals such as George Soros, Bill Gates, Rockefeller Foundation were the masterminds behind the pandemic.<sup>55</sup> These individuals and organizations, the conspiracy theories followed, controlled governments, media, political parties, and academia into producing hoax theories about the existence of COVID-19 to enable the implementation of their agenda. The promoters of this theory believe that the WHO is the most important international institutions controlled by wealthy companies and individuals who through it exert control on a global scale. They claim that doctors are gagged to speak the truth about Covid-19.<sup>56</sup>

**Figure 6**

An example of the portrayal of vaccines as an agenda for financial gains by powerful individuals.

Source: Facebook 



These followers make similar claims of control for the anti-COVID-19 vaccination. They believe that the vaccine was produced to destroy the body's immune system to make the body more vulnerable to illnesses such as cancer and heart attack among the older generation and that target the

55 TV debate in Albania. Divorci i çiftit Gates, Alfred Cako zbulon teorinë konspirative që e shoqëron. Accessed on March 4th, 2022. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSC5HmyqhkE>

56 ibid

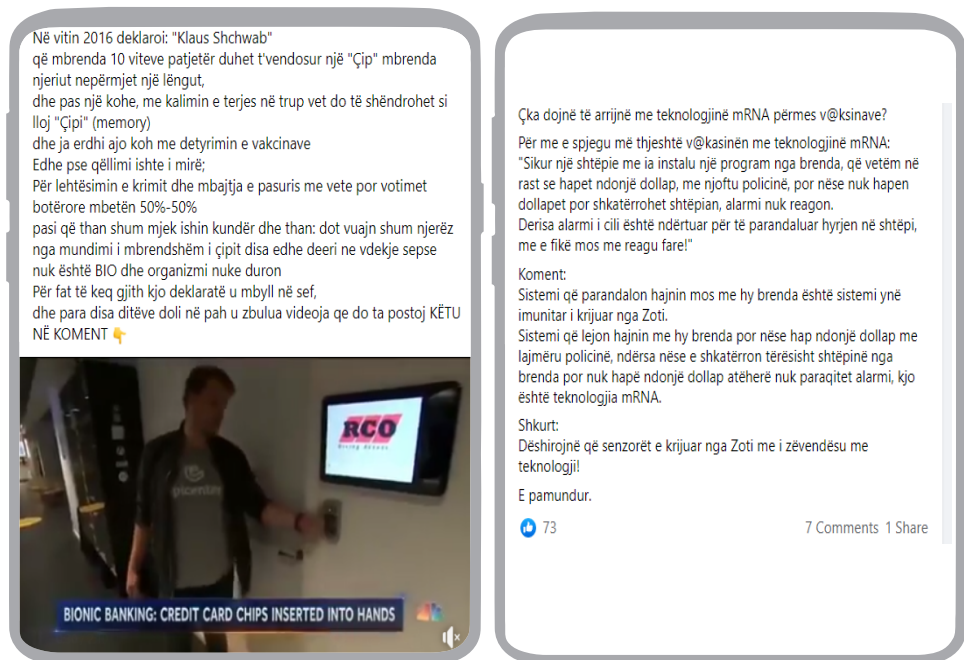
young generation’s reproductive system with the main objective to reduce the world populations in the so-called third world countries. This narrative played out in various social media platforms in Kosovo, raising vaccine suspicion among the young generation, which accounts for the majority of the country’s population.

The narrative of control also included theories about potential tracing of the citizens through the implant of an electronic chip in the body through vaccines. This group found the culprit in the big tech companies and their supposed goal to trace and control the world’s population. This conspiracy theory was largely disseminated in Kosovo and influenced citizens’ attitudes to resist vaccination.<sup>57</sup>

Figure 7

Two examples of the dissemination of theories about potential tracing of the citizens through the implant of an electronic chip in the body through vaccines.

Source: Facebook 



Kosovo is a country which has among highest internet penetration and users in region and Europe. The open credible data shows that Kosovo has 1.72 million internet users in January 2022. The numbers shows that Kosovo’s internet penetration rate stood at 97.0 percentage of the total populations in the start of 2022. Data published from META’s advertising resources indicates that there are some 869.200<sup>58</sup> Facebook users in Kosovo. In addition, Kosovo has 582.900 active Instagram users. Adding the numbers of Kosovo citizens who have access to other social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Twitter, Telegram, this numbers is close to 2 million users.<sup>59</sup> The whole adult population in Kosovo has access to at least one or two social media platforms, making

57 Digital 2022: Data for Kosovo. Link: <<https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-kosovo>> Accessed 17 April 2022.

58 ibid.

59 ibid:

the public highly vulnerable to disinformation.

In focus group discussions, respondents raised suspicion over Kosovo's healthcare system and its management of COVID-19 blending these concerns with conspiracies over population reduction. According to these respondents, doctors intentionally killed COVID-19 patients to reduce the number of the population, in particular the elderly.<sup>60</sup> This narrative acted as a deterrent to report COVID-19 infections to health institutions in Kosovo, complicating the pandemic's management and leading many to seek alternative cures for treatment, at times with deadly effect.<sup>61</sup> To date, Kosovo has no official projection about the true number of those infected by the coronavirus.

For instance, a respondent in a focus group in Prishtina was told that "there is an agreement between Ministry of Health, doctors, hospitals, and politicians to not treat patients who are infected with the virus and have other serious illness and let them deal with the virus and other illness on their own." Similar sentiments and reports echo in social media.

It is precisely these conspiracy theories and hearsay that have set back the early vaccination efforts in Kosovo. Despite the progress in late 2021 and in 2022, the vaccination campaign had a challenging start, with citizens' attitudes to vaccination possibly shaped by disinformation and driven by general mistrust in institutions as shown in examples above and elaborated further in the following section of this report.

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60 Interview with Senior Official of the Ministry of Health of Republic of Kosovo.

61 *ibid*:

# The Perceived Realities and COVID-19 an Overview of Public Perceptions

- Public perceptions towards the management of COVID-19 pandemic
  - Public perceptions towards disinformation



## Public perceptions towards the management of COVID-19 pandemic

Scholars studying the pandemic's management and the public's response have shown a direct link between the public's trust in institutions with a better track record in the handling of COVID-19.<sup>62</sup> Public health experts have highlighted the negative impact of the politicization of the pandemic and argued that the political connotation around public health issues shrinks the space for adequate information and undermine the legitimacy of public health institutions.<sup>63</sup> Both, the trust towards the institutions, and the politicization of public health issues, affects the public perceptions around public health issues, resulting in an environment with more potential for the penetration of disinformation.

In the case of Kosovo, as argued earlier in this report, the pandemic period was characterized with political instability that overshadowed the public health issues and reduced the public's trust towards institutions. In 2020, according to the Western Balkans Security Barometer (WBSB) survey, only 13 percent of the respondents said they trust or completely trust the Government of Kosovo.<sup>64</sup> That same year, Kosovo citizens expressed dissatisfaction with the management of the pandemic by central institutions which developed and approved the policies related to the management of the pandemic and shaped the national response.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, institutions tasked with the implementation of those policies and the first responders such as doctors and hospitals and the Kosovo Police, were positively assessed in dealing with the pandemic crisis.<sup>66</sup> The latter also enjoyed higher level of trust as opposed to the central institutions.<sup>67</sup> These data show a potential link between the citizens trust towards the institution and their satisfaction with the management of the pandemic crisis from the respective institutions

In the WBSB 2021 survey, the trust in the Government improved. Thirty-six percent of respondents said they trust or completely trust the Government, while 41 percent said they have very little trust or no trust at all.<sup>68</sup> The increase

62 Taylor, A., 2021. *Researchers are asking why some countries were better prepared for covid. One surprising answer: Trust.* [online] Washington Post. Available at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/01/trust-lancet-covid-study/?fbclid=IwAR3FFlgZmhw-ur\\_-01RNuKCW24NKx9Cf9DcCh9zIND7VMd1OWLsXuu6Km1w](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/02/01/trust-lancet-covid-study/?fbclid=IwAR3FFlgZmhw-ur_-01RNuKCW24NKx9Cf9DcCh9zIND7VMd1OWLsXuu6Km1w).

63 RTK Live, 2021. *SHBA, politizimi krijoi probleme në menaxhimin e pandemisë.* [online] Available at: <https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=495714>.

64 Balaj, Sh., 2021. *Kosovo citizens' trust towards security and justice institutions.* Kosovar Centre for Security Studies.

65 Avdiu, P., 2021. *Between denial and respond: Citizens' perceptions on Kosovo Institutions dealing with COVID-19.* Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/mes-mohimit-dhe-reagimit-perceptimet-e-qytetareve-mbi-menaxhimin-covid-19-nga-institucionet-e-kosoves/>

66 Ibid.

67 Balaj, Sh., 2021. *Kosovo citizens' trust towards security and justice institutions.* Kosovar Centre for Security Studies.

68 Balaj, Sh., 2021. *Citizens' perceptions of integrity of public institutions in Kosovo.* Kosovar Centre for Security Studies. Available at: <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/perceptimi-i-qytetareve-per-integritetin-e-institucioneve-publike-ne-kosove>

in trust also reflected the level of satisfaction of citizens with the management of the pandemic by the Government and other central institutions.







In this respect, as opposed to 2020 when 26 percent of WBSB respondents assessed the management of the pandemic by the Government as good or excellent, in 2021, 40 percent of the respondents held a positive opinion. An increase in satisfaction in this regard is also noticed in the Assembly and the President of the country, although the latter has not had a direct role in policy-making or pandemic management. Thirty-four percent of the WBSB respondents see the work of the Assembly towards the management of the pandemic situation as good or excellent, while 46 percent approve of the President.

On the other hand, the satisfaction of the citizens with the management of the pandemic from the "front-line" institutions, respectively the hospitals, the Kosovo Police and the municipal authorities continued on an upward trend. In this regard, 69 percent of the WBSB respondents consider the management of the pandemic situation from the hospitals as good or excellent, while 60 percent share such opinion for the municipal authorities. Kosovo Police enjoys the most positive perception in relation to how they handled the pandemic with 73 percent of the respondents assessing their work in this regard as good or excellent. At the same time, Kosovo Police is one of the most trusted public institutions in Kosovo which potentially shows the link between trust and the perceptions for the preparedness for pandemic management



**Table 1**

**Citizen perceptions as to how the Kosovo institutions handled the COVID-19 pandemic situation<sup>69</sup>**

	I don't know/No opinion	Very Poor	Poor	Somehow	Good	Excellent
 Government	1%	12%	18%	29%	31%	9%
 Assembly	2%	13%	19%	31%	28%	7%
 President	2%	12%	14%	26%	31%	15%
 Municipalities	2%	7%	9%	22%	44%	16%
 Health institutions	1%	6%	7%	14%	46%	26%
 Kosovo Police	1%	6%	6%	14%	47%	26%

69 The data have been retrieved from Western Balkans Security Barometer - Kosovo Database. For more information on this project and the methodology of data collection, please refer to: <https://qkss.org/al/publikimet/perceptimi-iyetareve-per-integritetin-e-institucioneve-publike-ne-kosove>

The satisfaction of Kosovo citizens with public institutions in dealing with COVID-19 pandemic extends to the management of the vaccination process as well. Hence, 61 percent of the WBSB respondents believe that the Government in general and Ministry of Health in particular was good or excellent in managing the vaccination process, while 67 percent hold such opinion for the health institutions/hospitals and the municipal authorities.<sup>70</sup> The perceptions for the management of the vaccination process may be related to the direct experience of citizens as 73 percent of the WBSB respondents declared that they are vaccinated. However, in this regard, ten percent of the respondents declared that they refuse to get vaccinated and when they were asked why, 56 percent said they did not trust COVID-19 vaccines, while the rest expressed lack of trust towards the WHO, local health institutions or linked their reasoning with health-related issues.

### **Public perceptions towards disinformation**

As explained earlier in the report, the internet penetration rate in Kosovo is amongst the highest in Europe, while the usage of social media by Kosovo citizens stands at a very high rate as well. This has potentially affected the focus of media outlets to shift to an extended online presence, which in recent years has resulted with a new state of play of media landscape in Kosovo. This has led to an “overcrowded market” of local media, while also raising the potential for unfiltered news production and the spread of disinformation and other harmful content.<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, media came under unprecedented pressure during the pandemic. In 2021, several journalists were subject of different forms of assaults and threats, including the case of the director of an online news agency who was interrogated by the Kosovo Police for the agency’s reporting on an issue related to COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>72</sup>

The hostility against the media has potentially fueled a negative perception of Kosovo public towards the media and Kosovo’s exposure to disinformation. In this respect, according to the WBSB data, 40 percent of the respondents have very little trust or do not trust the media at all, 31 percent trust them to some extent, while 28 percent expressed trust or complete trust towards the media. Moreover, the majority of participants of a focus group facilitated by KCSS for the needs of this report see media as politically biased and driven

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70 Ibid.

71 Hoxha, A., 2020. *MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN KOSOVO: Hate and propaganda influences*. SEENPM, Peace Institute & Kosovo 2.0. Available at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Resilience-research-publication-1-KOS-ENG.pdf>

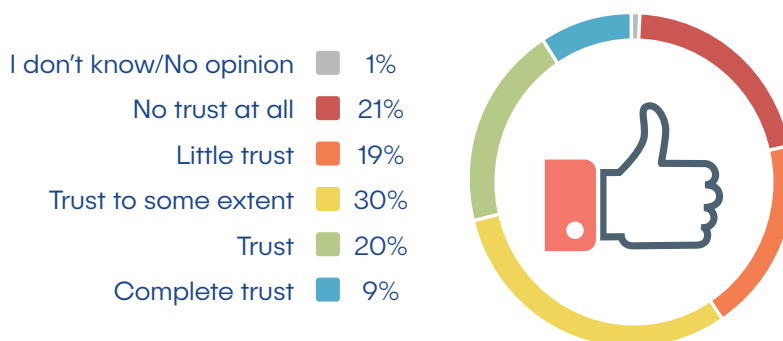
72 2021 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Kosovo. US Department of State

by financial interests of their owners.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, representatives of different institutions in Kosovo that participated in another focus groups discussion facilitated by KCSS link the role of media misinformation with the negative perceptions of institutions in Kosovo.<sup>74</sup>

Despite the low trust towards media and the perceived media landscape, 57 percent of the WBSB respondents consider the public television (RTK) and other private television networks as the primary source of information, while 39 percent consider the online news agencies and social media as their primary information sources.

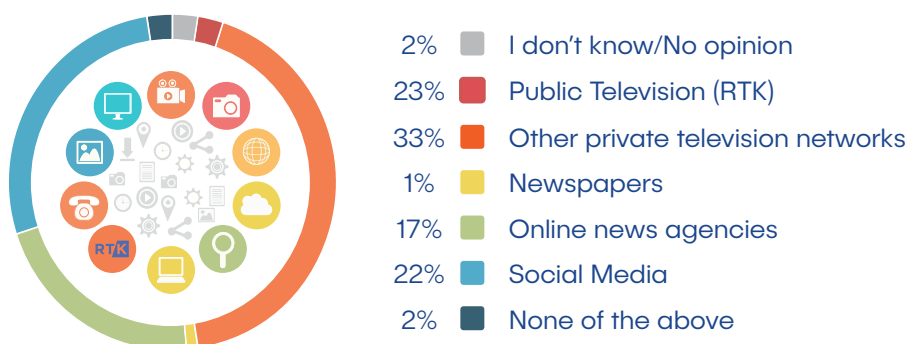
**Table 2**

**Kosovo citizens trust towards Media**



**Table 3**

**Kosovo citizens primary sources of information**



Even though a large proportion of WBSB respondents rely on social media and online news agencies for information, a majority of 78 percent of them

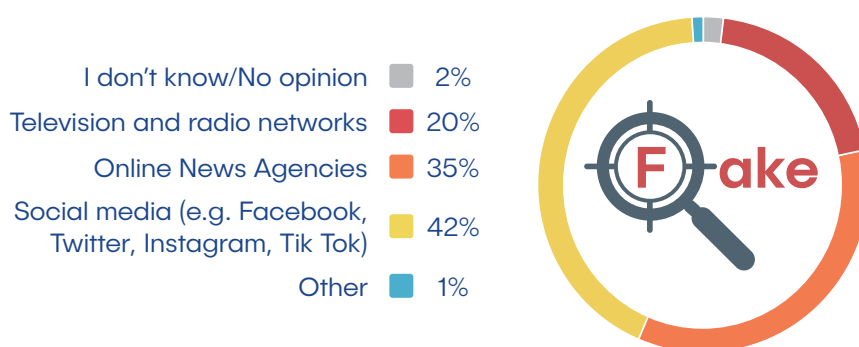
73 Focus Group Discussion with citizens of Kosovo facilitated by KCSS in Prishtina on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

74 Focus Group Discussion with institutional representative facilitated by KCSS in Prishtina on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

believe that social media and online news agencies are the primary source of disinformation in Kosovo, while 20 percent hold such opinion for television networks. Furthermore, focus group participants see a correlation between small online news agencies and those financially dependent on businesses or political interests with disinformation.<sup>75</sup> Under these perceptions, at a time of information fog as was the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus groups participants said that they relied on foreign news agencies and medical experts with whom they had personal connections for information related to the pandemic.<sup>76</sup>

**Table 4**

**Kosovo citizens perception on who consists the main source of disinformation for them**



Notwithstanding the opinion of focus group participants regarding their sources of information for COVID-19 related issues, the WBSB results show that only 11 percent of the respondents believe that disinformation affects public health issues. This indicates in the absence of awareness of how disinformation can affect aspects of public health, consequently indicating a higher potential for consumption of non-accurate information regarding public health. The majority of the WBSB respondents recognize the effect of disinformation in politically-related issues, with 45 percent of the respondents holding the opinion that disinformation affects the trust of the citizens towards public institutions and 28 percent of the respondents that believe that disinformation influences the political orientation of the citizens.

75 Focus Group Discussion with citizens of Kosovo facilitated by KCSS in Prishtina on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

76 Ibid.

**Table 5**

**Kosovo citizens perception on which are the areas where disinformation has the greatest impact in Kosovo**



- 6%  I don't know/No opinion
- 45%  The trust of citizens towards public institutions
- 29%  The political orientation of the citizens
- 11%  Public-health issues
- 7%  National Security
- 2%  Other
- 2%  None of the above

## Conclusions

This report finds that the institutions, the media and the public were not prepared to counter the propaganda and disinformation which cast doubt on the existence of COVID-19, the protection measures against COVID-19 and the vaccination process. In this regard, despite their efforts to communicate daily with the public, Kosovo institutions have failed to create a system of communication to tackle fake news and manage an effective national response to curb the spread of false information – both disinformation and misinformation – about the virus and its consequences.

The focus of this report is not to establish a direct causality between the politicization of COVID-19 measures and the rate of infections, vaccinations and deaths, but to point out through different examples and methods how the lack of a consistent and unified message and the trading of accusations on the management of the pandemic that marred Kosovo's political landscape in 2020 and 2021 were contributing factors to Kosovo's mixed scorecard in the management of the pandemic.

The report further concludes that the media efforts to provide credible information to the public about COVID-19 was challenged by the presence of false and fake news and conspiracy theories about the virus and the pandemic in social and digital media. The presence of conspiracy theories, disinformation and fake news in digital and social media in Kosovo had deleterious effect on the public and its acceptance of the pandemic as a threat as well as the institutional restrictions to prevent the pandemic.

The report has identified two categories of individuals and groups who have promoted false information on the pandemic in Kosovo. The first group include those who disputed the existence of the virus and proclaimed that the pandemic was the work of powerful actors, while the second includes those who believe in the existence of the virus but disputed the threat of the virus. The report further finds that these groups are also influenced by the narratives of global movements, which draw on anti-Semitic tropes in their efforts to spread fake news about the existence and the origins of the virus. Within these group, the report identified different narratives used to disseminate disinformation. Such narratives include the conspiracy theory that COVID-19 pandemic was a result of the great power competition to control the world economy and information, while also portraying COVID-19 as a tool of the West to decimate population of the so-called "Third World" countries to address its own security challenges. By extension, in the Kosovo version of this sub-narrative, Kosovo is considered "a third world" country and is hence the target of the depopulation campaign. Furthermore, the report finds that a dominating narrative was the idea that

COVID-19 exists, but the risk from it is similar to other viruses and does not cause death. The report further concludes that anti-vaccination advocates are larger in number compared to those disputing the existence of the virus, hence a frequent narrative encountered in Kosovo is the contestation of the licensing process of the vaccines that are currently on the market.

Based on the findings of this report, the need for a centralized strategic communication plan by Kosovo institutions takes a renewed emergency. Consequently, based on the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lessons learned from the examination of Kosovo's information environment in which the pandemic's management played out, Kosovo institutions should develop a clear and comprehensive communication strategy on issues related to public's well-being – including health crisis, natural emergencies and national security threats – which provides concrete and clear divisions of roles and actions at all levels of governance. Moreover, such a strategy should also foresee the conception of counter-narratives to combat disinformation and misinformation on public health issues and other critical emergencies. Kosovo institutions should also conduct systematic analysis and debunk disinformation on public health issues, their effect in the society and the forms in which they are disseminated so that the response towards them is effective and concrete. In this regard, the communication of institutions should be in line with digital developments and advancement of different communication platforms, so that the reach of verified and official information is consistent with the use of different online platforms used by the citizens of Kosovo.

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