

# “From Fake to Check” A Citizens’ Dialogue on Disinformation in the Western Balkans

## About the project

**From Fake to Check (FFTC)** is an innovative project led by Missions Publiques in collaboration with four partners of the Western Balkans region – New Social Initiative (NSI) in Kosovo, Civic Initiatives in Serbia, Institute for Democracy, Media and Culture (IDMC) from Albania, and ZIP Institute from North Macedonia. This project is funded by the German Foreign Federal Office. The initiative supports the Office’s commitment to fight against disinformation threats as well as its strategic support of the Western Balkans in the light of their EU accession process.

## Key findings report and recommendations - Kosovo

The citizens’s dialogue on disinformation in Kosovo took place on **November 4, 2023** in Hotel Sirius in **Pristina**.



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There were **63 participants** taking part in the event.

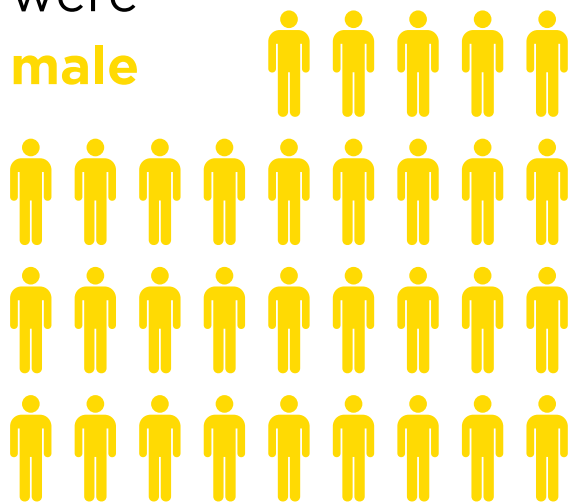
**30**

were  
female



**33**

were  
male



**38**

average  
age of the  
participants

**13** out of **38**, municipalities  
in Kosovo took part in  
the citizen dialogue.

The largest number of  
overall participants was  
from **Prishtinë/Priština**  
and neighboring Serb-  
majority municipality of  
**Gračanica/Gračanice**.



## Topics and discussions

### Aware of the danger of disinformation but not equipped to fight them

A discernible characteristic observed among the **younger participants** is a notable inclination toward aversion to information in general. A heightened awareness prevails within this demographic regarding the pervasive presence of disinformation, leading them to assertively declare a deliberate avoidance of news consumption. They articulate an intentional detachment from news sources, expressing a belief that such disengagement insulates them from the potential distortions prevalent in the information landscape. However, a concern arises among external observers who discern a potential underestimation by the youth regarding the extent of their exposure to (dis)information, despite their proactive efforts to evade it.

Furthermore, it is disconcerting that, in response to the acknowledged peril of disinformation, the younger cohort tends to adopt a strategy of complete disassociation from all news outlets, including traditional media outlets that adhere to established journalistic standards. This avoidance tactic raises questions about the efficacy of their approach and the potential repercussions on their comprehensive understanding of current affairs.

Conversely, **older participants** exhibit a predilection for consuming news through evening television broadcasts. Notably, there exists a perceptible underestimation among this demographic regarding the risks associated with disinformation on messenger platforms such as Viber and WhatsApp. Some participants, however, reported conscientious media consumption habits, emphasizing a commitment to regularly following local media. For global and national developments, they adopt a discerning approach by cross-referencing reports from multiple sources to ensure a more nuanced and accurate understanding.

Moreover, participants, irrespective of age, display a degree of complacency in their approach to agenda setting. The majority tend to focus on a **singular topic of personal interest**, such as sports, and align their attention with whatever is most prominently featured in the media at a given moment, be it politics, the economy, or other subjects. This selective attention to specific themes suggests a potential limitation in their exposure to a diverse range of news topics.

Participants spanning various age and gender demographics universally acknowledge their susceptibility to disinformation, recognizing themselves as easily targeted by misleading narratives. Some candidly admitted to **feeling overwhelmed** by the sheer volume of information inundating them, making it impractical to fact-check every piece of data they encounter. Additionally, certain participants remarked on a societal inclination to both generate and place trust in disinformation, suggesting a pervasive proclivity or even a covert desire for certain falsehoods to be true.

Despite a heightened awareness of their vulnerability to disinformation, participants exhibited a notable **lack of knowledge** regarding proactive measures as responsible citizens. There was a consensus that individuals are ill-equipped to combat disinformation effectively, as evidenced by their limited understanding of the appropriate channels for reporting such instances, whether to organizations or government agencies. Moreover, participants expressed **uncertainty** in distinguishing the true perpetrators of disinformation—whether it be the journalists disseminating the information, the conversational partners, or a combination of both.

This collective lack of clarity underscores a crucial gap in the participants' civic literacy, signalling the need for comprehensive education on media literacy, critical thinking, and the responsible dissemination of information to empower individuals to navigate the complexities of the contemporary information landscape.

## “Independent” an adjective that no longer sticks to the media

Participants articulated a growing recognition of the media as a quasi-branch of government, emphasizing its propensity to exert influence on the judiciary and executive branches. They observed a discernible polarization within the media landscape, noting that most outlets align with distinct political value systems. It is worth noting, particularly in the context of regions with a multiparty system like the Western Balkans (WB), that the older audience may not be fully acclimated to the conservative-liberal dichotomy; instead, the primary division centres around pro-government and pro-opposition media.

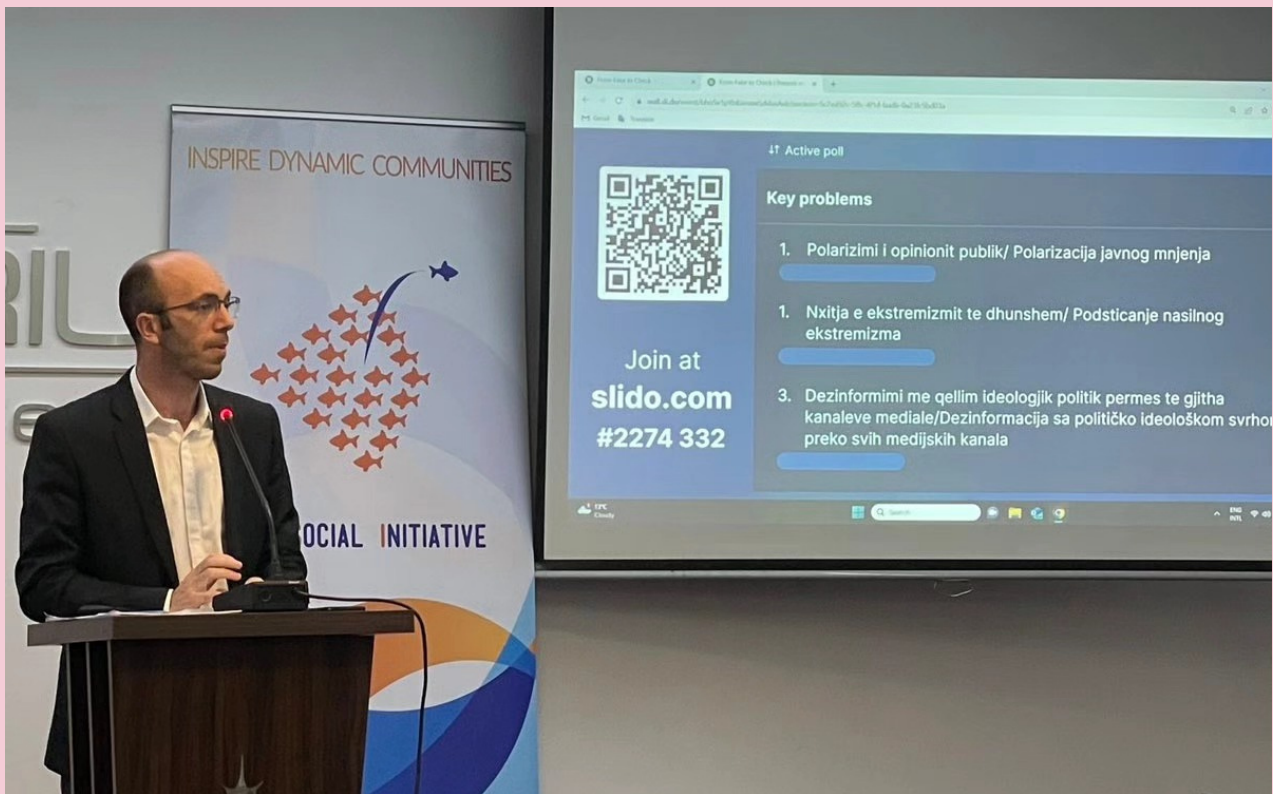
Interestingly, younger participants challenged the concept of independent media, contending that all media outlets inherently promote specific value stances or policies, precluding true impartiality. Despite this scepticism, participants, regardless of their media preferences, expressed an expectation for media to provide a platform for analysts and thinkers with opposing views.

Indeed, Kosovo’s media landscape, a distinctive feature is the prevalent culture of debates, with major TV stations hosting nightly live discussions featuring numerous commentators. However, participants highlighted a noticeable **gender imbalance** favouring male commentators. Additionally, they raised concerns about journalists inadequately intervening to prevent hate speech, particularly towards LGBTQI and ethnic minorities, and the dissemination of disinformation by guest contributors.

Furthermore, participants underscored the sluggish and protracted nature of the process for reporting or sanctioning online media behaviour, often requiring **three to four years** through the judicial court. They advocated for enhanced measures to verify the authenticity of online accounts and emphasized the need to address instances where media use photos without consent.

Participants signaled out **three main risks** of disinformation:

- ◆ Polarization of the public opinion;
- ◆ Incitement of violent extremism; and
- ◆ Distribution of disinformation with political and ideological agenda were the three main problems emphasized by the participants.





## What participants **wondered** about?

- What are the methods of preventing misinformation?
- How can one report discriminatory language/communication channels?  
Despite our ability to differentiate between true and false news, how can we overcome the issue of "confirmation bias," which makes us inclined to believe what aligns with our pre-existing beliefs?
- What are some "tips and tricks" or recommendations for distinguishing genuine news from disinformation?
- What are the characteristics of fake news, as opposed to true ones?
- What are the skills one should have to be able to identify false information?
- Can political campaigns be monitored for disinformation and who to report them to?
- Are there any legislative initiatives in Kosovo aimed at regulating social media?
- Who is responsible to stop or sanction the spread of disinformation in live debates?





## Conclusions

The media sector is currently facing a growing decline in reputation, contributing to a devaluation of the information disseminated. While sources of information have become more diversified, the prevalence of short videos is particularly noteworthy, gaining increasing traction among younger consumers. Despite the abundance of commentators in the public domain, the proliferation of perspectives is not necessarily ensured. Effectively combating disinformation demands a concerted, cross-institutional effort; it should not solely reside within the purview of media regulators and line ministries but extend to a broader spectrum of stakeholders.

## Recommendations

- ***Regulation of online media - monitoring, disclosure of ownership, disclosure of journalists' identity***

This is a recommendation that was the prevalent in most discussions, but only after the media expert explained that Kosovo lacks mechanisms to systematically monitor and sanction online media.

- ***Cross-institutional cooperation on betterment of the media legislation***

The discussions lead to a conclusion that non-media institutions, like the Ombudsperson (in cases of the spread of hate speech or ethnic intolerance) or Agency for Privacy and Information (disclosure of suspect's, domestic violence victim's



or murder victim's and similar full identity or disclosure of gory details of a crime), Ministry of Education (development of critical thinking or combating disinformation curriculums) should also be active in updating media legislation and the Code of Ethics.

— ***Better safety and working conditions for the media workers***

The participants noted that journalists were physically threatened, either due to their critical position toward some individuals, or recently, due to the high ethnic tensions in the Serb-majority northern Kosovo where dozens of Albanian journalists were attacked. At the same time, compensations for the work in media are small and other working conditions challenging and such an atmosphere drives more talented journalists to other countries or discourages young people to start a career in the media.

— ***Wider social mobilisation against disinformation***

In some working groups discussion arose about the responsibility of non-institutional actors and civil society in contributing to the fight against disinformation. They stated people should be encouraged to report disinformation and hate speech on social media and conduct media literacy campaigns. They also stated people should be encouraged to read more than just the title and focus on the whole news item.

### **— *Internal capacity building for existing media platforms***

The participants noted that media workers, including the experienced ones too, need constant capacity building. They expressed belief that a lot of newsrooms do not have fact checking units and are not equipped to identify AI generated disinformation promptly.

### **— *Increase the visibility and the support of the debunking media***

Participants largely agreed that the public in general is not too interested to read about articles that debunk the fake news or the source of the fake news. Yet, they are somewhat familiar with the specialized debunking or fact checking websites that exist in Kosovo and in the region. Some participants even claimed to have sent the suspected disinformation to these platforms to debunk. However, they note that these platforms need more support and promotion from CSOs, but the traditional media as well. The participants also had a recommendation for the debunking websites themselves – to create multimedia content as more and more young media consumers are not interested in reading elaborate articles and want summary videos or interesting info-graphics.

### **— *Better cooperation between media reporting in Albanian and media reporting in Serbian language***

The participants noted lack of Albanian perspective in Serbian reporting media and vice versa. They believe this causes misunderstanding and the spread of misconceptions in the communities fuelling ethnic tensions. They see joint reporting and closer cooperation between Serbian and Albanian journalists as a precondition to alleviate some of these issues.