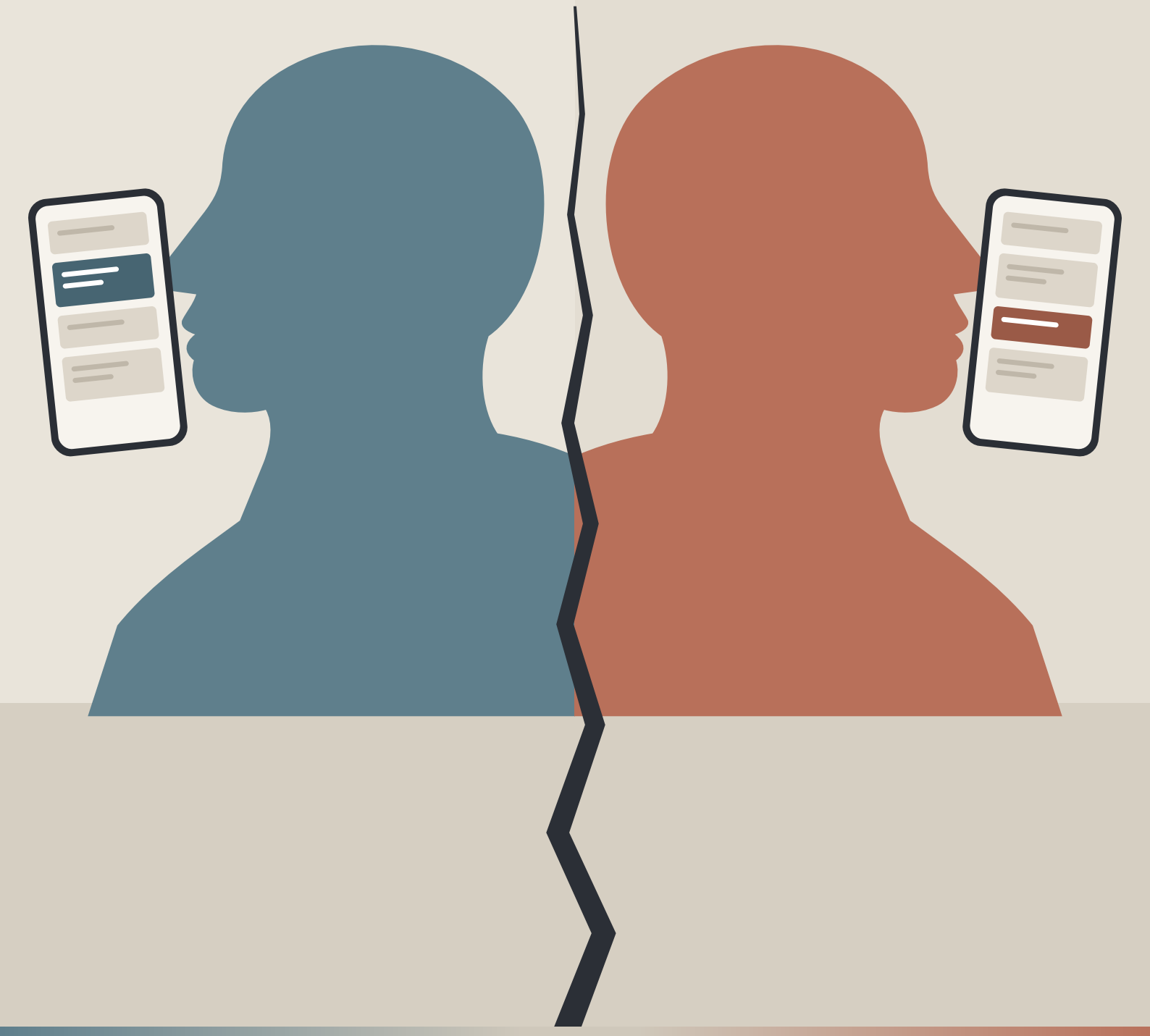


How Disinformation Deepens Conflict Between Kosovo and Serbia

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Some relations are often described as “fire and ice” because of the high tension between two polar opposites. Today, the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia can be described in this way because of historical tensions and the unresolved political conflict. One major barrier to resolving the conflict is the spread of propaganda and disinformation. To understand their impact on Kosovo–Serbia relations, it is necessary to define both terms (Lendvai, 2024). According to the Cambridge Dictionary, propaganda is “information, ideas, opinions, or images that are shared publicly in order to influence how people think, often by presenting only one side of an argument”, while disinformation is “false information spread in order to deceive people” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). In this context, fake news and selective media reporting contribute to the formation of contrasting narratives about the same events, which reinforces ethnic divisions and limits mutual understanding. Through digital media platforms such as social networks and online news portals, both societies are frequently exposed to one-sided representations that frame their own group as victims and the other as aggressors. This continuous exposure can strengthen mistrust and negative perceptions, particularly among younger generations who rely heavily on online information without always verifying its accuracy. As a result, digital media play a significant role in shaping public perception and in influencing whether relations between Kosovo and Serbia move towards conflict or understanding.

The spread of fake news and propaganda in the Kosovo–Serbia relationship has become easier because of the development of digital technology and social media. In the past, people mainly received information from television, newspapers or radio, where there was at least some level of editorial control. Today, however, information spreads instantly through platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and online news portals. Because of this speed, false information can reach thousands of people before it is even checked. In divided societies such as Kosovo and Serbia, this can become problematic, since people are already emotionally connected to political and ethnic issues. Many fake news posts include emotional language related to nationalism, fear or anger, leading to stronger divisions between communities. According to Wardle and Derakhshan (2017), disinformation is especially dangerous in politically divided societies because it is designed to manipulate emotions and influence public opinion. In the Kosovo–Serbia case, media narratives are often selective, emotional and politically motivated, which makes objective reporting difficult.

A major example of how media narratives shape public opinion differently was the Banjska attack in September 2023. During the attack, Kosovo police officer Afrim Bunjaku was killed after armed Serb attackers opened fire on the Kosovo Police in the village of Banjska in northern Kosovo. The event immediately became a major topic in both Kosovar and Serbian media, but the way it was presented differed.

A Kosovo 2.0 article by Paçarizi focused heavily on the attack against the Kosovo Police, the danger to Kosovo's sovereignty and the broader security situation in northern Kosovo. The article described the attackers as an armed and organised group connected to Serbia and emphasised the large number of weapons found after the attack. It also included reactions from international actors such as the European Union and the United States, both of which criticised the attack and called it terrorism. The article connected the attack to the long-standing political tensions in northern Kosovo, including protests, failed dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia, and disagreements over the Association of Serb-majority municipalities. A core takeaway of this article could be considered its focus on the attack as part of the ongoing political tensions between Kosovo and Serbia.

A Serbian article from the outlet Novosti, written by Zečević, approaches the Banjska case differently, concentrating on the court proceedings against the Serbs accused of involvement in the attack. Instead of mainly discussing the killing of the Kosovo police officer or the wider political implications, the article highlighted the defence arguments of the accused individuals and questioned the claims made by the Kosovo prosecution. It mentioned that defence lawyers considered the accusations exaggerated and claimed there was no realistic possibility of separating the northern Kosovo municipalities from Kosovo. It also used language such as "so-called Special Prosecutor's Office" and "so-called Kosovo judicial authorities", which indirectly questions the legitimacy of Kosovo's institutions. In addition, the article stated that the families of the killed Serbs were still waiting for autopsy results, focusing attention on the Serbian individuals involved in the incident. Unlike the Kosovar article, the Serbian article mainly discusses the defence arguments, the court process and the reactions of the families involved.

These differences show how the media can shape completely different understandings of the same event. Even when discussing the same incident, the selection of details, language and focus changes how audiences react emotionally to the news. According to Entman (1993), framing in the media strongly influences how people understand political issues, because journalists choose which aspects of reality to emphasise and which to ignore. In Kosovo and Serbia, this often leads to different interpretations of the same event and, as a result, people become less willing to trust the other community or to support compromise.

As part of this essay, I conducted an interview with Erza Preteni, a young activist in South Mitrovica and a political science student at the University of Prishtina, who shared her insights on how the media influence public opinion about Mitrovica. Having taken part in many intercultural activities with people from different ethnicities, municipalities of Kosovo and nationalities, she noticed a variety of opinions about Mitrovica, but always revolving around the idea that Mitrovica is dangerous and a "warzone". She emphasised that many participants who held this idea

had never been to Mitrovica themselves, implying that it was an outcome of media narratives and public discussions. Drawing on her own experience of living in Mitrovica for 19 years, Preteni says that the situation is quite different from how non-residents often perceive it. Preteni has also made a short film, mentored by Eroll Bilbani, on exactly this topic, with the purpose of sharing the message that Mitrovica is a city like any other city in Kosovo.

Another example comes from an interview with Erionita Deliu, another young activist who has taken part in intercultural activities continuously for the past four years. She describes a conversation with a Serbian woman about the war in Kosovo. As the discussion progressed, the woman said that she had not known until then that a genocide had occurred in Kosovo in 1998–1999, Deliu recalls. Deliu further explains how the woman blamed the media for the disinformation she had been fed over the years. These examples show how media narratives and the spread of information can significantly influence public opinion and perceptions of social and political issues. They illustrate that many individuals form their understanding of places, communities and historical events through media representation rather than personal experience.

These examples also show how disinformation can influence the way communities react to different parts of this situation. People often share information that supports their own beliefs without verifying whether it is true. This can create online spaces where users mostly see opinions similar to their own. According to Sunstein (2017), these echo chambers can increase political polarisation, because people become more extreme when they are exposed only to one-sided views. In the context of Kosovo and Serbia, this can make mutual understanding and reconciliation more difficult, as people are repeatedly exposed to narratives that deepen division.

Fake news, propaganda and selective media reporting continue to influence relations between Kosovo and Serbia by shaping public opinion and reinforcing existing divisions between communities. Through digital media and social networks, information spreads quickly and often reaches audiences before it can be verified. The examples discussed in this essay show how the same event can be presented differently depending on the media source and political perspective, leading to contrasting interpretations of reality. In addition, the interviews included in this paper demonstrate how media narratives affect perceptions of places, historical events and other communities, especially among people who rely mainly on online information. As technology continues to develop, the role of the media in either encouraging understanding or increasing division between Kosovo and Serbia will remain significant.

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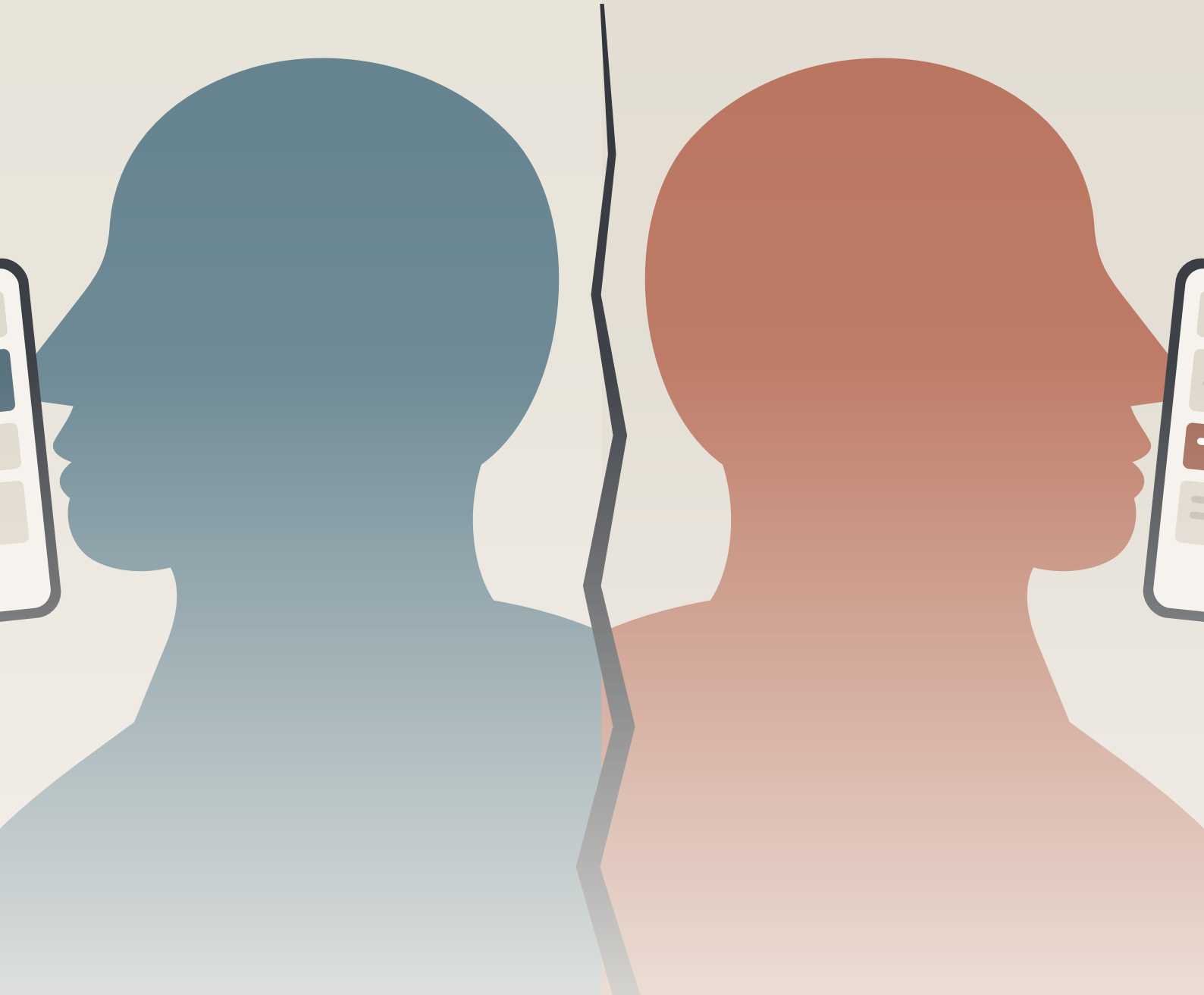
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