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GEO-POWER-EU

Case study: The Serbian Regime Fight Against the “Color
Revolution”

GEO-POWER-EU: EMPOWERING THE GEOPOLITICAL EU IN THE EASTERN NEIGHBOURHOOD AND THE WESTERN BALKANS

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ABOUT GEO-POWER-EU PROJECT

GEO-POWER-EU aims to empower the EU to manage security threats in its Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans amidst a deteriorating geopolitical environment. The project's primary ambition is to surpass current standards and develop a comprehensive EU strategy for these regions, utilising new and reformed policy instruments while considering the strategic ambitions of other geopolitical actors.

To achieve this, GEO-POWER-EU's work plan is built on six specific objectives: proposing adaptations to the EU Enlargement policy to reflect new realities; examining the relevance of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) and providing policy recommendations for its reform; assessing the influence of other geopolitical actors, including the United States, Russia, China, and Turkey, in these regions; offering strategic foresight on the prospects of geopolitical competition in these areas; exploring ways to enhance the EU's ability to contain military threats from beyond its borders; and proposing a comprehensive, multidimensional EU strategy to guide relations with Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries.

The project's research aims to advance beyond the current state of the art by developing a new conceptual and policy framework using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Methodologically, GEO-POWER-EU leverages cutting-edge expertise from various disciplines, implementing a multi-stage plan grounded in a participatory and inclusive approach. This approach involves systematic engagement of researchers from third institutions, decision-makers, stakeholders, and citizens—including those from the regions under analysis—throughout the project cycle.

More about the project: <https://geo-power.eu/>

LIST OF PARTNER BENEFICIARIES INVOLVED

- European Neighbourhood Council (ENC), Belgium
- University of the Peloponnese (UoP), Greece
- Kentro Erevnon Notioanatolikis Evropis Astiki Mi Kerdoskopiki Etaireia (SEERC), Greece
- Alma Mater Studiorum - Universita Di Bologna (UNIBO), Italy
- Wiener Institut Fur Internationale Wirtschaftsvergleiche (WIIW), Austria
- Sveuciliste U Rijeci (UNIRI), Croatia
- Institut Za Demokratija Societas Civilis Skopje (IDSCS), Republic of North Macedonia
- Univerzitet U Beogradu – Fakultet Političkih Nauka (FPN), Serbia
- Vienneast Consulting Gmbh (VE Insight), Austria
- Democratization Policy Council (DPC), Germany
- Institutul Pentru Dezvoltare Si Initiative Sociale Viitorul (IDIS VIITORUL), Moldova
- Odeskiy Nacionalniy Universitet Imeni I.I. Mechnikova (ONU), Ukraine
- Georgian Foundation For Strategic And International Studies - Gfsis (GFSIS), Georgia
- Utrikespolitiska Institutet Informationsavd (UII), Sweden

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GEO-POWER-EU — HORIZON-CL2-2023-DEMOCRACY-01

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the information sphere, domestic elites also drive disinformation. The study shows that **disinformation is domestically produced, locally adapted, and strategically targeted**, even when foreign actors provide content or amplification. Serbia illustrates this mechanism: leaders frame protests as “Western-orchestrated coloured revolutions” for internal audiences while presenting students’ protests externally as pro-Russian manipulation—two contradictory narratives deployed to maximise political gains. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, ruling elites in Republika Srpska blend ethnonationalist and pro-Kremlin messaging to weaken state authority. In Georgia, the government-backed campaign around the “foreign agents law” portrays Western partners as destabilising actors. Ukraine represents a contrasting case, where civil society and state institutions have built comparatively effective information-resilience structures.

Across cases, patrons use disinformation to **delegitimise opposition, reshape public perceptions of foreign partners, and present different narratives to different audiences**. Foreign sponsors—especially Russia—offer templates and amplification, but domestic elites remain the central translators and deployers. The same actors who negotiate corrosive deals often rely on disinformation to defend them, presenting criticism as “foreign pressure” and portraying China, Russia, or Turkey as pragmatic partners. Material and narrative influence reinforce each other, creating a cycle of dependency that shields elites from accountability.

The study also highlights **actors of resistance**: independent media exposing procurement abuses; civil society groups tracking environmental and social impacts; local communities mobilising against destructive mining or energy projects; fact-checking organisations documenting coordinated disinformation campaigns; and anti-corruption bodies that occasionally resist political capture. These counterweights show that corrosive practices face pushback and that policy interventions can strengthen oversight.

CASE STUDY: THE SERBIAN REGIME FIGHT AGAINST THE “COLOR REVOLUTION”

1. INTRODUCTION

Among the EU candidate states, Serbia is an outlier. It is not only one of the fastest backsliding countries in Europe but also the only candidate state that has proclaimed military neutrality while maintaining close strategic ties with Russia and China. Moreover, Aleksandar Vučić’s increasingly authoritarian regime has relied heavily on a Kremlin-style discourse that labels democratization efforts as Western-funded “colour revolutions.” This stands in stark contrast to Serbia’s official aspirations to join the EU, which appear increasingly disingenuous.

This report aims to analyse how the regime in Serbia uses the master frame of the “colour revolution” to spread disinformation about student and civic protests. The master frame “provides the interpretive medium through which collective actors associated with different movements within a cycle assign blame for the problem they are attempting to ameliorate.” (Snow & Benford 1992, p. 139). Under the master frame of a colour revolution, the regime is conducting a broader set of information manipulation, including disinformation or verifiably false or misleading content, disseminated intentionally and causing public harm. The report is based on desk research combined with 11 semi-structured interviews conducted in the first half of 2025 with journalists, media experts, disinformation scholars, political analysts, and pro-democracy activists. The main finding is that the regime has been using the false narrative of a “colour revolution” to discredit student and civic pro-democracy mobilisation by framing it as a Western-backed attempt to install a puppet regime through violence¹. This overarching false narrative has fueled numerous daily disinformation mini-campaigns, which aim to support it with fabricated or exaggerated claims, often distorting or inventing connections between students, NGOs, donors, and Western countries.

¹ The amount of smear campaigns against students, university professors and NGOs and lies about their involvement in the color revolution has been so overwhelming that several members of the research team have also been personally targeted more than once.

2. DISINFORMATION CONTEXT

Over the past decade, Serbia's democracy has been in continuous decline, while President Aleksandar Vučić has become a textbook example of a spin dictator—an authoritarian leader who monopolises power by engineering (dis)information (Guriev & Treisman 2022). He and his allies have captured all state institutions, weakened the rule of law, and established tight control over the media (Freedom House 2025, p. 14). In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, Serbia ranks 96th out of 180 countries, with a score of 53.55, placing it in the category of “difficult” press freedom situations². While the EU occasionally issues statements of concern about Serbia's democratic backsliding, some of its member states have had a tendency to turn a blind eye to these authoritarian tendencies, prioritising their strategic interests in lithium mining, ammunition exports, and Kosovo, areas in which the regime is regarded as a more predictable partner than the opposition.

The primary sources of information for Serbian citizens remain television stations, with approximately 200 TV channels, including one public broadcaster (RTS) and four private TVs with national coverage (Happy, Pink, B92 and Prva) - all of them under the strong political influence of the regime, and around 100 local and regional stations (CRTA 2023). In Serbia, there are also 1,747 serial publications, of which 11.7% are newspapers (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia 2023). Social media usage is also high, especially with younger citizens, with five million users, representing 70.3% of the population (Kemp 2024).

While the media landscape is highly polarised between pro-government and independent outlets, it is overwhelmingly tilted in favour of the regime. The regime exerts control over most of these outlets through state-funded projects, opaque ownership structures, editorial interference, and advertising contracts with large state-owned enterprises. Independent media and journalists, on the other hand, face serious challenges, including illegal surveillance, SLAPP lawsuits, harassment, smear campaigns, and even physical attacks. The government also invests significant effort into shaping discourse on social media through an army of bots coordinated by the ruling party, which uses workforce from public institutions and state-owned companies to take part in spreading disinformation and smear campaigns against the opponents of the regime (Interview 3, 29 April 2025).

While Serbia has a comprehensive regulatory framework that provides a basis for protecting freedom of expression and media freedoms, its implementation is weak, selective, and undermined by political pressure and state influence (Media Freedom Rapid Response 2025). The two media laws adopted in 2023 deviated from the previous media strategy and, most controversially, allowed the state to legally own media outlets (Petković 2023). Moreover, although the laws include provisions on media ownership transparency, in practice, media ownership remains opaque. Since its establishment in 2014, the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM)—the key regulatory body in the field of electronic media- has

² This is Serbia's lowest score in the 23-year history of the index, marking a further deterioration in media freedom and positioning the country among the worst performers in Europe, surpassed only by Turkey, Belarus, and Russia, <https://rsf.org/en/world-press-freedom-index-2025-over-half-worlds-population-red-zones>.

demonstrated a strong pro-regime bias. Since 2024, REM has been inactive due to delays in appointing new members to its council.

3. AGENTS OF INFLUENCE

However, the main source of disinformation is not the foreign government but rather the Serbian regime. As one of the interviewees argues, “Most of the disinformation originates not from the Kremlin, not from Beijing. It originates from the Serbian political elite. It originates from Serbian media and tabloids controlled by the Serbian elites” (Interview 8, 28 April 2025). Unlike in the West, where Russia exploits societal vulnerabilities to undermine democracy, in Serbia, it works hand in hand with the regime in Belgrade to prevent the country’s democratisation. Russian state-owned outlets such as RT and Sputnik operate freely in Serbia, while social media platforms like Telegram, along with regime-controlled media such as Happy TV and tabloids like *Informer* and *Večernje novosti*, routinely recycle Russian propaganda (Crta 2022). While Chinese soft power has grown in Serbia over the past decade, Beijing has generally refrained from actively engaging in major disinformation campaigns (ibid.) aside from occasionally warning about Western infiltration through NGOs (Glas Amerike 2024). As one of our interlocutors explained: “They oppose direct interference and won’t get involved in domestic matters. If you look at their media or their official statements, the message is always the same: support for state policy, opposition to foreign interference, and no interest in delving into the details. This isn’t a big topic in Chinese public discourse, and Chinese media don’t really have significant influence here in that sense.” (Interview 5, 2 May 2025).

While the regime-controlled media are often praising Russia and China and amplifying their propaganda, they are often blaming the EU and running disinformation campaigns against it, which have all contributed to declining support for EU membership (from over 70% in the 2000s to around 40% today). However, this is not necessarily only the result of this disinformation but also because of policy discourse and actions of the EU that are not always appreciated by the Serbian public, including everything that has to do with highly unpopular lithium mining in Western Serbia. As one expert put it: “I think EU integration kind of fell out of vogue recently—not just because of the disinformation, but also because of what the EU does.” (Interview 4, 2 May 2025).

4. DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN

4.1. OVERVIEW

This report explores a disinformation campaign launched by the regime of Aleksandar Vučić in late 2024, which aimed to portray student protests as an attempt to instigate a ‘colour revolution’³. Since coming to power in 2012, Aleksandar Vučić and his political allies have increasingly portrayed the 2000 Revolution as the work of foreign intelligence services with the help of domestic civil society organisations that allegedly led to Serbia’s political and economic decline between 2000 and 2012. Over the years, they have repeatedly characterised various opposition mobilisations—such as the 2016 protests against the Belgrade Waterfront project, the 2017 “Against Dictatorship” demonstrations, and the 2019 “1 of 5 million” movement—as attempted colour revolutions.

In subsequent years, this narrative became embedded in Serbia’s official policy discourse⁴. The regime’s strategic narrative of ‘colour revolutions’ became central to the latest political crisis, which began with the collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad’s train station, killing 16 people on 1 November 2024. On 22 November, following a violent incident instigated by regime provocateurs against students paying tribute to the victims, students from virtually all public universities in Serbia launched blockades and mass protests across the country. These protests, including intercity marches, reached a scale unprecedented in Serbian history, reaching hundreds of thousands of participants. The student movement gained the support of 60%, including many traditional voters of the ruling party (Crta 2025). In response, the regime organised a series of counter-protests. However, the movement ultimately contributed to the resignation of the government on 19 March and the appointment of a new one on 16 April 2025 (see Annex 1 for the chronology of events).

4.2. ACTORS, KEY NARRATIVES AND AUDIENCES

The key actors in this campaign have been President Vučić, the government and its ministries, and regime-controlled media. Vučić would typically set the message and tone, either at a rally or

³ The notion of color revolutions emerged in the early 2000s to describe a wave of democratic uprisings that led to political change in several post-Soviet states—such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan. More broadly, the term is also used to describe similar movements, including the 2000 Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia and the Arab Spring uprisings of the 2010s. By the late 2000s, the Russian national security establishment had adopted the term to describe what it perceived as malign Western influence and one of the main threats to its security (German 2020).

⁴ In December 2021, then-Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin signed a cooperation agreement in Moscow with Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, establishing a working group focused on combating color revolutions (Danas 2021). As a result of this cooperation, Belgrade surveilled Russian activists and deported some of them (Nikolić 2025) while the FSB reportedly assisted the Serbian regime in suppressing protests following the electoral fraud of December 2023 (Vreme 2023).colour.

during one of his lengthy evening interviews, after which an army of ministers, party officials, public servants, analysts, and journalists would further develop and disseminate the narrative. One should also add to the list of actors Serbian Patriarch Porfirije, who, during his visit to Moscow in May, told President Putin that Serbia was facing a ‘color revolution’ (Rus.. цветная революция) (Vreme 2025).

While this strategic narrative has its origins in Putin’s Russia, it has, for the most part, been domestically developed and deployed as a disinformation campaign aimed at delegitimizing the student protests by framing them as a Western-financed and orchestrated attempt to destabilise a sovereign state in the service of foreign interests. These domestic actors were supported by the Kremlin and its media, although in a secondary role⁵.

As one interviewed expert explains, “One of the main narratives is the disinformation that the protests are part of a foreign-led attempt to overthrow the government, and that the students involved are foreign-funded agents. This builds on narratives that have been circulating for over 30 years but is now reinforced with fabricated materials — such as fake photos, forged documents, or alleged SMS messages exchanged between students, suggesting they’re being paid to protest. The idea is to frame the protests as externally orchestrated, not organic or legitimate, and to portray protesters as privileged individuals rather than citizens who are genuinely affected by current issues.” (Interview 10, 20 May 2025). As this interviewee puts it, “The individuals allegedly behind the colour revolutions are usually described as aligned with Western values. This creates a narrative link between the protests and the European Union, which then becomes a target of criticism, with claims that the EU is trying to impose values that are not compatible with our own.” (Interview 10, 20 May 2025). The list of sinister goals sometimes grows to also include other bad things like recognising the Serbian people as genocidal, halting the Serbian economic growth, independence of Vojvodina (province) or Raška (region), collaborating with Serbia’s enemies, including the Croatian secret service, etc.

Furthermore, the alleged attempt at a colour revolution is said to be carried out through Western-funded NGOs, with the designation of USAID as a “criminal organisation” by Elon Musk and its subsequent closure in January cited as a convenient justification. In the disinformation campaign, not only the regime-controlled media but also state representatives shared disinformation that FBI Director Kash Patel sought investigations of USAID-funded organisations (Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Belgrade 2025). Following the closure of USAID, the narrative framed the “colour revolution” as largely the result of Biden-era funding, reinforced by continued support from the EU. In contrast, Russia and China are portrayed as loyal friends and strategic allies whose experience in resisting colour revolutions is invaluable and whose cooperation on the matter is highly valued.

The main target audience for this narrative is domestic, more specifically, the support base of Aleksandar Vučić and the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. This largely includes less educated and older individuals, socially and economically disadvantaged groups, as well as those living in rural areas. As one media expert explained: “The answer here is pretty clear: less educated

⁵ One illustrative example is a report on foreign-funded NGOs allegedly behind the student protests, published by Russia-based internet personality Chay Bowes, an Irish national, known pro-Russian commentator, and an employee of RT (Jankovic 2025). The video played a minor role in the overall campaign but nevertheless recycled the same narratives promoted daily in the regime-controlled mediacolour

people are more susceptible. People with lower education generally have lower incomes and therefore buy cheaper media, cheaper newspapers, which are tabloids, specifically pro-government tabloids” (Interview 7, 2 May 2025). Another interviewee explained it in the following way: “It’s the most conservative part of the SNS voter base... Because the younger people and the educated people, they are not buying that narrative about color revolutions. But the older citizens and those citizens who are the core voter base of SNS, that narrative is actually for them.” (Interview 6, 30 April 2025).

Nevertheless, the regime has also used this strategic narrative and disinformation campaign in its foreign communications, particularly with Russia and China. In contrast, when communicating with Western governments, the regime has attempted to spin the situation differently, blaming Russian disinformation instead (KosSev 2025). One of our interviewees summarised it well: “The Serbian government and the wider propaganda apparatus tell the domestic population that this is a colour revolution, and they repeat the same to the Russians. Meanwhile, there is growing evidence that both Serbian Foreign Minister Marko Đurić and Serbian ambassadors stationed in Western capitals are being instructed to tell their Western interlocutors that these protests are actually organised by Russian intelligence services.” (Interview 8, 28 April 2025).

The claim that the West is orchestrating a colour revolution in Serbia certainly does not help public support for the country’s EU integration, which has already been declining over the past several years. However, what has occurred in recent months is even more striking: support for EU accession has begun to decline even among opposition voters who were previously more in favour of the EU. This growing disillusionment began with the EU’s endorsement of the lithium mining project in western Serbia in August 2024. The trend continued with the EU’s weak initial response to the anti-corruption protests following the collapse of the canopy at the Novi Sad train station on 1 November 2024.

As time passed, and particularly after students undertook symbolic acts like cycling and running to Strasbourg and Brussels, the European Commission began to more vocally express support for the student demands, framing them as aligned with the EU’s own expectations of Serbia (European Western Balkans 2025). The regime, however, made significant efforts to downplay this shift, not only in the eyes of its core supporters but also among segments of the opposition, in an attempt to neutralise the growing alignment between the protest movement and the EU’s values and demands⁶.

⁶ One case in point was the visit of Marta Kos to Belgrade in April. As one media expert explained: “Currently, there’s a disinformation incident involving Marta Kos, the European Commissioner, visiting Belgrade. She met with protesting students, opposition parties, and sent supportive messages. But a delegation of ‘Vučić’s students’ also insisted on meeting her and later spread a photo implying she supported them too. Regime bots then amplified the narrative on social media: ‘Student protesters must cycle to Strasbourg or run to Brussels to appeal to Europe, but European officials come willingly to meet Vučić’s students.’ This misrepresentation gained traction online, prompting corrections and clarifications on social media. The broader context was ignored, creating the impression that those students who protested by foot or bicycle had done so in vain.” (Interview 7, 2 May 2025).

4.3. STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

The regime's disinformation campaign, built around the "coloured revolution" frame, employed the full spectrum of contemporary disinformation tactics. These included the circulation of forged documents and photoshopped images; systematic denial of wrongdoing and institutional gaslighting; the use of bots, trolls, and fake social media accounts; and coordinated amplification through synchronised posting, algorithmic boosting, and audience segmentation. These efforts were further reinforced by special newsroom coverage, GONGO-produced documentaries, and short-form social media content, all aimed at smearing, intimidating, and harassing activists and their supporters. Together, these practices constituted a multilayered process of information laundering that blurred the boundaries between state institutions, intelligence agencies, regime-aligned media, and ostensibly independent digital actors.

The disinformation campaign relied on both traditional and social media. Unsurprisingly, the regime leaned heavily on state-controlled television stations and tabloids to push the narrative. While tabloids such as *Informer* fabricate minor lies daily to support the narrative of a 'colour revolution,' regime-controlled media occasionally broadcast or publish more extensive analyses, such as the documentary series by the GONGO Centre for Social Stability, which target NGOs critical of authoritarian tendencies, accusing them of channelling Western funds to destabilise Serbia and spark a colour revolution⁷. However, the same messages are also disseminated via social media, often using bots, trolls, and fake accounts. The regime considered this particularly important, as social media was the only domain where it appeared to be losing the information battle to the opposition-minded, digitally savvy youth of Serbia. As one of our interviewees put it: "But what was interesting this time is that, for the first time, people reported getting most of their information about the protests from Instagram." (Interview 2, 29 April 2025). The campaign has not used deepfakes but did include bots, fake accounts and doctored images. As one interviewee reminds: "This was evident in cases like the photoshopped images of students holding a Croatian flag, which were intended to provoke negative reactions." (Interview 10, 20 May 2025).

4.4. RESPONSES AND COUNTERMEASURES

In terms of response, since the campaign was orchestrated by the regime itself, there was no reaction from state institutions. Civil society organisations and independent media outlets, on the other hand, either did not take the campaign seriously or chose to respond with mockery. As one media expert explained: "So far, mockery has proven most effective. But I think mocking misinformation alone leads nowhere. What's necessary is synergy between multiple factors: mockery, debunking misinformation, fact-checking wherever possible, and various civic actions.

⁷ For their latest documentary featuring disinformation about SHARE Foundation (including our team member Djordje Krivokapic), Trag Foundation and Women in Black as the agents of the color revolution see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xc_I3gFxx6w.

For instance, with Marta Kos's recent visit, debunking misinformation was relatively effective and spread quickly on social media. That was a semi-successful example. But responses should vary depending on the type of misinformation." (Interview 7, 2 May 2025).

When it comes to the EU and the West, they did very little to confront the regime and its crackdown against civil society organisations. For example, neither the U.S. Embassy nor anyone else from the U.S. government issued a single statement criticising the crackdown on U.S.-funded NGOs. The EU also remained silent for far too long, while some EU leaders met with Vučić and appeared unbothered by the crackdown and democratic backsliding in Serbia (B92 2025). This is partly the result of Trump's second term and the weakening of the transatlantic link, but also of the EU's growing lack of clarity on how to deal with backsliding regimes in its geopolitical vicinity. In the words of one disinformation expert: "I didn't hear any EU answer to that. The EU integration and the EU process are not just attacked by disinformation - they are also attacked by the fact that EU officials don't do anything about it." (Interview 6, 30 April 2025).

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISINFORMATION

This case study reveals how the regime in Belgrade has become the primary source of disinformation in Serbia. Despite the existence of a regulatory framework intended to combat disinformation, it remains ineffective in practice. Institutions that are supposed to uphold media integrity have been either captured or sidelined, leaving only civil society organisations and independent media as the remaining checks on state-sponsored disinformation.

Serbia operates as a hybrid regime, where control over the media and manipulation of the information space are essential tools for maintaining power. Over the years, political and media freedoms have steadily deteriorated. Journalists and government critics face a climate of fear marked by intimidation, surveillance, SLAPP lawsuits, and even physical violence. At the same time, foreign actors, particularly the Kremlin, find Serbia to be a welcoming environment. These actors frequently engage in disinformation campaigns, often through proxies, with little to no pushback from the state.

The outbreak of student protests in late 2024 triggered a well-coordinated disinformation campaign by the regime, which sought to frame the demonstrations as part of a foreign-backed “colour revolution.” This narrative served a dual purpose: to delegitimise the protest movement at home, and to discredit it on the international stage. The campaign was disseminated through both traditional and social media. While the regime maintained dominance over television and print outlets, it struggled to win the narrative on social platforms, where younger, more digitally literate citizens were active.

Ultimately, the regime used this campaign not just to shape public perception but as a pretext for more aggressive measures, raids, arrests, and intensified repression. Despite the blatant nature of the disinformation, independent media and CSOs largely chose to mock or dismiss it rather than treat it as a credible threat. Western actors, meanwhile, remained mostly silent, failing to offer a meaningful response to a campaign that targeted not only democratic dissent but also the very idea of European integration. EU-US passivity in relation to this affront against Serbia’s democracy is not just a diplomatic failure on behalf of the democratic West but also a narrative weapon used by the regime in Belgrade, which is rapidly descending into full authoritarianism.

5.1. RECOMMENDATIONS

To the European Union and the EU Delegation in Serbia

- Publicly counter disinformation by promptly, clearly, and consistently refuting false narratives. Explicitly attribute disinformation to domestic sources, including state-controlled media and officials, when credible evidence exists. Insist on consistency in Serbian foreign policy messaging, especially in cases where Serbian diplomats present divergent narratives to international and domestic audiences. The objective should be to expose the role of the regime in propelling or facilitating anti-EU narratives and face it with a necessity and urgency to make a clear geopolitical choice where they want Serbia to belong.
- Link IPA funds, macro-financial assistance, and political dialogue directly to progress in media pluralism, transparency, and protection of civil society. Introduce a “disinformation clause” within financial instruments and accession frameworks, establishing penalties for deliberate state-sponsored disinformation campaigns. The indicator for success could be the number of contracts signed that include the said clause.
- Expand direct support to independent media by scaling up funding for investigative journalism, fact-checking initiatives, and media literacy programs. Channel this support outside of state-controlled mechanisms, while also investing in legal protection, training, and infrastructure for watchdog organisations. The indicator for success could be the number of projects funded with this goal in mind.
- Support legal reform efforts by advocating for the repeal of the 2023 media laws that legalise state ownership of media outlets, which contradict both Serbia’s strategic EU commitments and fundamental European standards. Assist in the development of national regulations to detect and remove coordinated bot networks and disinformation campaigns connected to political parties or state institutions. The indicator of success would be whether the 2023 media laws legislation was repealed.
- Launch a coordinated EU strategic communication campaign in Serbia that rebuilds credibility and engagement, particularly among youth. Utilise influencers, social media platforms, and culturally relevant formats, rather than relying solely on official press conferences. This should result in higher trust in EU institutions and reversal of the downward trend in support of Serbia’s EU accession. The indicator of success would be the number of organised campaigns, their outreach and the improved standing of the EU in the opinion polls.
- Advertisers from the EU should withdraw from the media that take part in disinformation campaigns against the EU. By raising the cost of broadcasting disinformation, private media will be encouraged to abide by the laws and resist political pressures.

To Civil Society Organisations and Media in Serbia

- Fact-checking should not be done by independent organisations alone, but also by traditional media. The indicator of success would be the number of media organisations that introduced fact-checking as a part of their mandate.
- Recognise disinformation as a tool of strategic authoritarian governance, rather than viewing it as mere episodic lying or political mockery. Adapt advocacy efforts and public messaging to reflect the systemic nature of disinformation campaigns. The indicator of success would be the number of campaigns with such a message.
- Strengthen cooperation and build coalitions to coordinate debunking efforts and amplify the reach and credibility of counter-narratives. Establish joint rapid response units to prebunk, detect, debunk, and track disinformation trends. Share verified data, align messaging strategies, and collaborate with international watchdog organisations for greater protection and visibility. The indicator of success would be the number of these units established.
- Partner with international media outlets, particularly in the EU and neighbouring countries, to increase global awareness of domestic repression, attract international scrutiny, and amplify independent reporting.
- Go beyond reactive fact-checking by equipping journalists to strategically frame stories that expose the falsity of the disinformation narratives.
- Create legal defence alliances in collaboration with EU and international human rights organisations to support journalists and activists targeted by lawsuits and other forms of intimidation by the government. The indicator of success would be the number, the size and the scope of those newly formed alliances.
- Expand outreach to vulnerable demographic groups, including older, less educated citizens and youth, who are particularly susceptible to state-sponsored disinformation. Pool resources to produce engaging multimedia content and activate rapid response teams to counter viral falsehoods in real time.

Indicators

The following indicators can measure the extent to which the recommendations are being applied. They can be used to measure the societal and institutional resilience in dealing with disinformation compared to the state of the art. However, they cannot measure the individual/collective belief change or the individual resistance to disinformation. As such, they can be used as a measure of capacity building that the recommendations above aim to achieve.

- The EU officials are openly addressing the issue of disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda in Serbia.
- Withdrawal of EU financial assistance explicitly due to disinformation and pro-Russian propaganda.
- Increase in funding for investigative journalism and fact-checking initiatives.
- The repeal of the 2023 media laws (or amendments).

- The increase in pro-EU messaging on social media, podcasts and informal media vis-à-vis regime and pro-Russian propaganda. This can be measured through an increase in accounts with such messages, as well as through views of such content on different platforms (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok).
- The withdrawal of advertisements of companies from the EU on propaganda channels (Pink, Happy, Informer).
- The emergence of new coalitions (s) of civil society organisations targeting the spread of disinformation.
- The spread of legal support for SLAPP targeted journalists and the decrease in
 - a) successful SLAPPs;
 - b) frequency of SLAPP attempts.

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Interview 3, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 29 April 2025.

Interview 4, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 2 May 2025.

Interview 5, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 2 May 2025.

Interview 6, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 30 April 2025.

Interview 7, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 2 May 2025.

Interview 8, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 28 April 2025.

Interview 10, Interview by University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science Project Team, 20 May 2025.

