



Adria Digital Media
Observatory

RUSSIAN STATE ACTORS ON FACEBOOK AND FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE IN THE ADRIATIC AND BALKAN REGIONS

Marijana Musladin

Author

Marijana Musladin
University of Dubrovnik

Graphic Designer

Katarina Banović

Dubrovnik, February 2024

Coordinator of the ADMO

University of Dubrovnik

Partners

Faculty of Political Science (University of Zagreb)
Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing (University of Zagreb)
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (University of Zagreb)
Gong
Oštro
Adria news
Xwiki
AFP

Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Health and Digital Executive Agency (HADEA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them. This project has received funding from the European Union's Digital Europe Programme, under Grant Agreement 101083909.

SUMMARY

This report is part of the research activities conducted under the project „Adria Digital Media Observatory“, financed by Digital Europe Program. The main goal of this reserach was to determine whether Russia engages in online information manipulation and interference activities through Facebook profiles of its embassies, aiming to distort the truth and craft narratives that align with its interests. The objective is to identify efforts to distort factual truths and construct narratives aligned to Russian interests. These nations were chosen based on their linguistic similarities and varying degrees of European-Atlantic integration.

Key findings:

- Identified a specific percentage of posts related to foreign disinformation and interference on the Facebook accounts of Russian embassies in the Balkans
- Disinformation and information manipulation efforts were present before the conflict in Ukraine; however, the war in Ukraine marked the period with the largest increase in such activities.
- Identified the most prevalent topics within Russian disinformation and manipulation efforts across the embassies of Russia in the Balkan and Adriatic regions
- The Russian Embassy in Montenegro has been identified as the most active embassy and perpetrator of disinformation in the Balkan region.

INTRODUCTION

This report offers a comprehensive analysis of Facebook posts emanating from Russian embassies in Croatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Montenegro, and Serbia. These accounts are examined for their role in information manipulation and dissemination of disinformation, highlighting the strategies used in these specific geopolitical contexts.

The selection of these countries was based on two primary factors: the similarity of languages spoken across these nations and their varying levels of integration with European and Atlantic institutions. Croatia and Slovenia are both members of the European Union (EU) and the

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Montenegro, while a NATO member, is in the process of joining the EU. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a candidate for EU membership and is negotiating to join NATO. Serbia, on the other hand, is an EU candidate country but is not part of NATO.

The rationale behind focusing on these countries stems from the linguistic similarities, which facilitate the cross-border dissemination of disinformation. As demonstrated by previous research (Brautović 2022; Brautović 2023), disinformation can easily transcend borders when communicated in a shared or similar language.

The European External Action Service (EEAS) has released two comprehensive reports addressing the phenomenon of Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), which it defines as a pattern of behavior capable of adversely affecting values, procedures, and political processes (EEAS, 2023 and EEAS, 2024). FIMI encompasses a multitude of dimensions, ranging from cybersecurity threats to disinformation campaigns.

For the purposes of this research, the focus will be placed on the disinformation aspects of FIMI. According to the EEAS, disinformation is characterized as „verifiably false or misleading information that is created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public, and may cause public harm.“ (EEAS, 2023) Among the vectors of FIMI activities are diplomatic channels, which the EEAS identifies as „integral parts of FIMI incidents.“ (EEAS, 2023) The EEAS further notes that FIMI activities regularly serve as facilitators for broader FIMI operations, deploying across a diverse array of topics. This report aims to explore the extent to which state actor accounts, specifically those associated with Russian embassies in the aforementioned countries, engage in FIMI through diplomatic channels as outlined by the EEAS, contributing to the broader understanding of disinformation strategies in the digital age. As such the following research questions arise:

RQ1: Is there evidence of Russian interference and information manipulation on the Facebook accounts of embassies in the Adriatic and Balkan regions?

RQ2: Were the disinformation campaigns on these Facebook accounts initiated in response to the Ukraine conflict, or were they active prior to the war?

RQ3: What topics are subject to disinformation and manipulation within the Facebook accounts of the embassies under investigation, and which embassy is identified as the predominant originator of these disinformation campaigns?

This analysis aims to shed light on the strategies employed by Russian embassies in leveraging Facebook for disinformation campaigns within these linguistically and politically interconnected regions.

METHODS

For this report, the author employed a combination of computational, digital, and content analysis methods. These methods were utilized to collect and examine Facebook posts from selected Russian embassies spanning the last four years (2019-2023). The rationale for this period selection is that it encompasses two significant global crises: the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine; which have been fertile grounds for disinformation activities (Brautović, 2022; Faktograf.hr, 2022). From this dataset (N=6,996), a manual content analysis was carried out on specific topics that have been identified as sources of debunked disinformation from various credible entities. These topics include:

- Ukraine: posts that promote false narratives about the war in Ukraine, Crimea, and the mischaracterization of the Ukrainian government as neo-Nazi.
- NATO: posts countering accusations of inciting war
- United States of America (USA): posts claiming of instigating conflict, and allegations regarding the existence of biolabs in Ukraine.
- EU: posts blaming EU about the energy and food crisis, support for Ukraine, and responses to Russian sanctions.
- Host Countries of the Embassies: posts to undermine internal policies and decisions related to Ukraine and Russian sanctions, as well as domestic issues.
- COVID-19: Posts misrepresenting the efficacy of Russian vaccines and treatments for the coronavirus
- Other: additional topics of disinformation

RESULTS

The posts from selected embassies exhibited a numerical range, and a portion of these posts were identified as disinformation. To effectively categorize the posts, the author distinguished them into two classifications: Diplomatic and FIMI (Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference) posts (Figure 1).

Diplomatic posts included content such as congratulatory messages on national independence days, reports on official visits, and similar diplomatic engagements. FIMI posts, on the other hand, were characterized as outlined in the section above, encompassing disinformation and manipulative content aligned with specific narratives.

The total count of posts from each embassy was as follows:

- Russian Embassy in Croatia: N= 196
- Russian Embassy in Slovenia: N= 1,249
- Russian Embassy in Serbia: N= 1,314
- Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina: N= 1,472
- Russian Embassy in Montenegro: N= 2,765

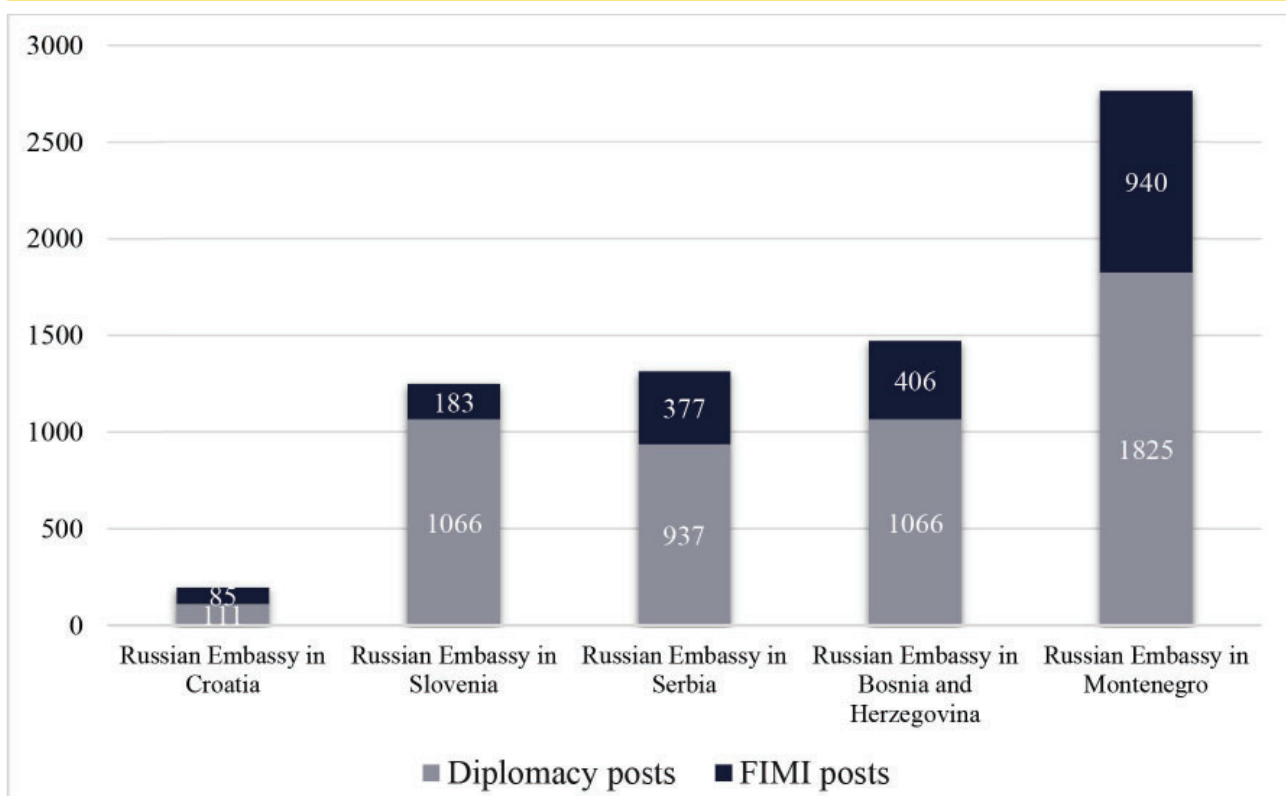


Figure 1: Facebook posts of selected Russian embassies

After discerning which posts fall under the FIMI category, it becomes imperative to construct a timeline of events. This is essential to determine whether these posts originated during 2022, coinciding with the onset of the war in Ukraine, or whether disinformation and FIMI activities commenced prior to this period.

Figure 2. presents a detailed analysis of the frequency of FIMI posts from Russian embassies spanning the last four years. The data reveals a significant uptick in FIMI activity during 2022, with the Russian Embassy in Montenegro being the most active contributor on Facebook. This surge in activity is attributed to the war in Ukraine.

However, in Croatia and Slovenia the case is different due to the restrictions imposed by Facebook on Russian posts (Al Jazeera, 2022) in EU countries following the start of the war in Ukraine, leading to a cessation of activity by the Russian embassies in Croatia and Slovenia shortly after the conflict began. The embassy in Croatia stopped posting on April 16, 2022, and the embassy in Slovenia on March 9, 2022.

Nevertheless, the analysis indicates that 2023 saw an intensified presence of FIMI activities from the embassies in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. This suggests that the Russian embassies in these countries have not only continued their operations but have actually escalated their efforts compared to 2022.

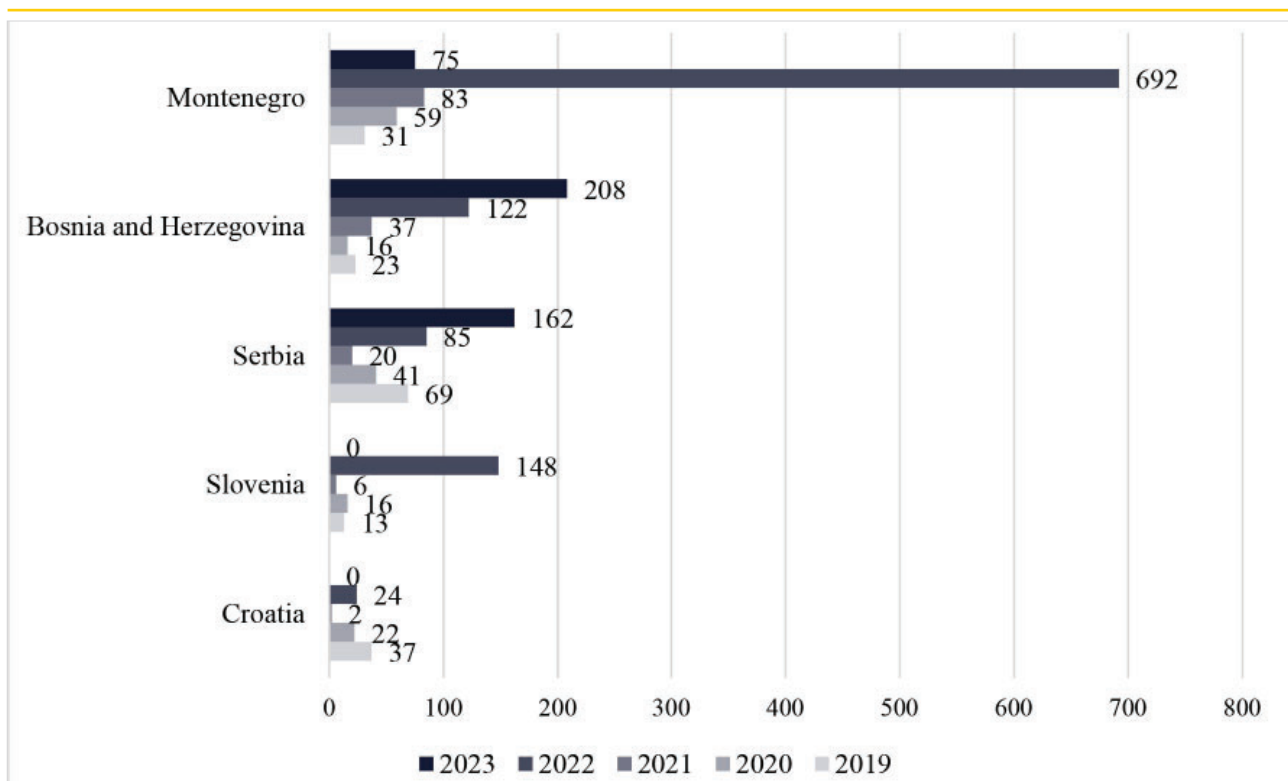


Figure 2: Frequency of FIMI posts from Russian embassies over a four-year period

After examining the existence and distribution of FIMI posts and their categorization, the question arises as to the extent to which they appear in accordance with predetermined topics. The Russian embassy in Croatia published a total of N=85 FIMI posts, a relatively small number. Among these, the majority were related to Ukraine, followed by posts critical of the EU and NATO, as depicted in Figure 3. It is essential to consider that the posting frequency was halted in April 2022, as previously mentioned.

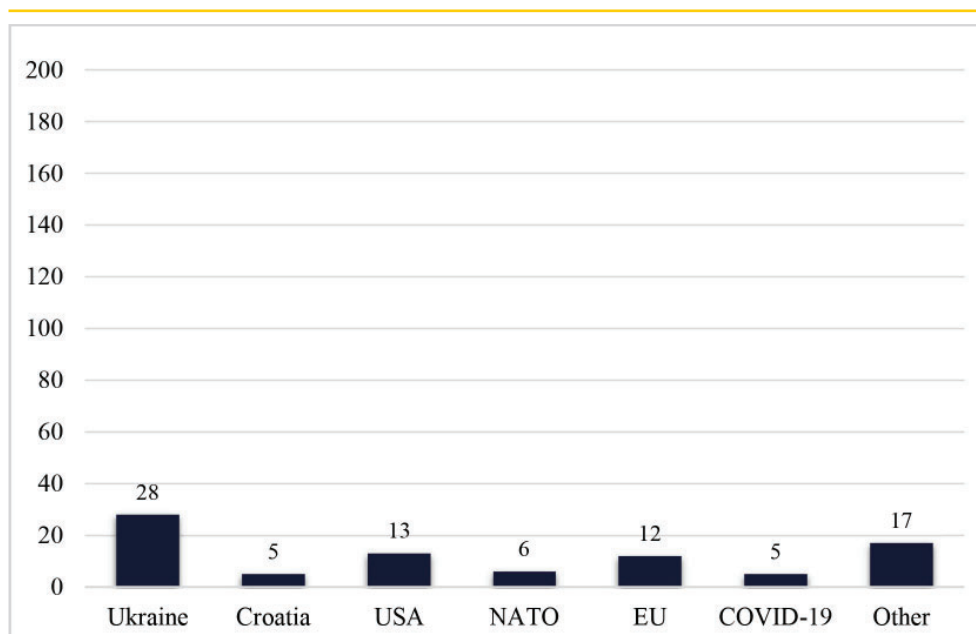


Figure 3: Russian Embassy in Croatia FIMI posts (topics)

In Slovenia, the Russian Embassy posted a total of N=183 FIMI posts. However, this posting activity significantly decreased shortly after the beginning of the war in Ukraine, as previously described. Despite the stoppage of posts there was a relatively high concentration of content disseminating disinformation about the war in Ukraine, as evidenced in Figure 4. This surge can be interpreted as an attempt to shape perceptions of the conflict within Slovenia, potentially to influencing public opinion and reduce support for Ukraine. Other topics were notably scarce, with only a few posts concerning the USA and NATO.

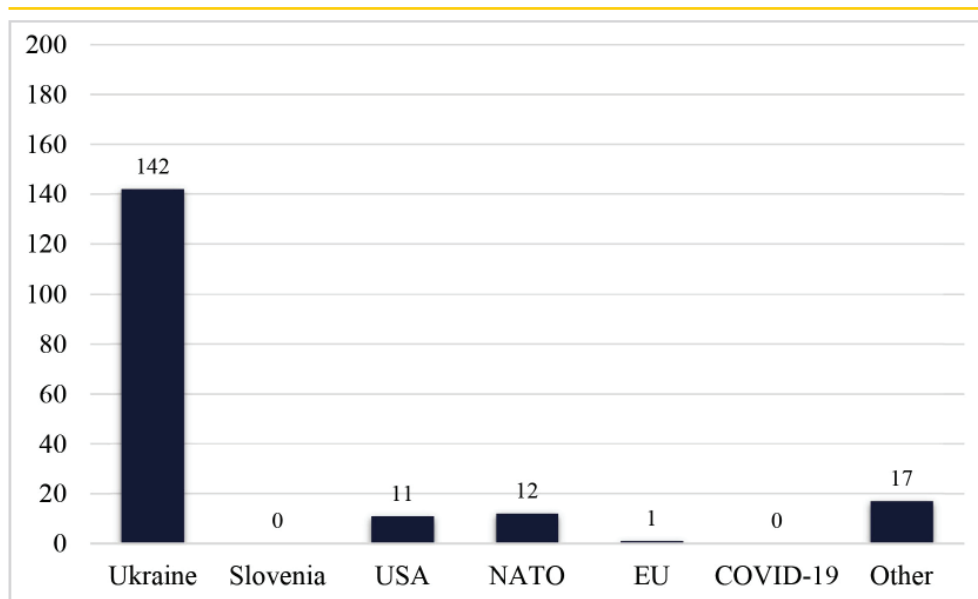


Figure 4: Russian Embassy in Slovenia FIMI posts (topics)

The Russian Embassy in Serbia (Figure 5) posted a total of $n=377$ FIMI posts. The predominant topic was categorized as “other.” However, out of the 190 posts falling under this category, a significant portion, $n=159$, were disseminating disinformation about Kosovo, questioning its right to independence and even denying its existence. Disinformation posts about Ukraine and NATO were nearly evenly distributed. Similarly, disinformation targeting the USA and EU was present, albeit at around half the frequency of posts concerning Ukraine and NATO.

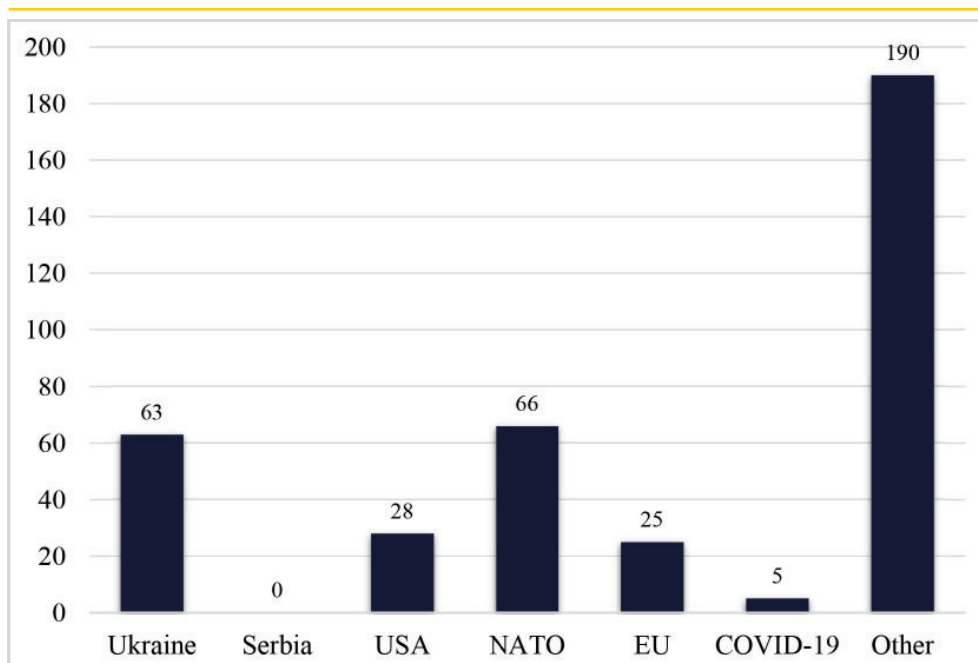


Figure 5: Russian Embassy in Serbia FIMI posts (topics)

The Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina has exhibited significant FIMI activity on Facebook, with a total of N=406 posts over the past four years. This activity notably intensified in 2022 and even more so in 2023.

The topic of Ukraine remains the most prevalent, mirroring similar trends observed in other instances (Figure 6). Additionally, there is a substantial focus on the USA, EU, and NATO, with a comparable distribution of posts. However, in contrast to other countries examined, the Russian Embassy's FIMI posts include a considerable number of posts concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal politics. Specifically, discussions revolve around the status of Republika Srpska, critiques of the Dayton Agreement's efficacy, and concerns regarding perceived EU interference in Bosnian decision-making processes regarding diplomatic policies.

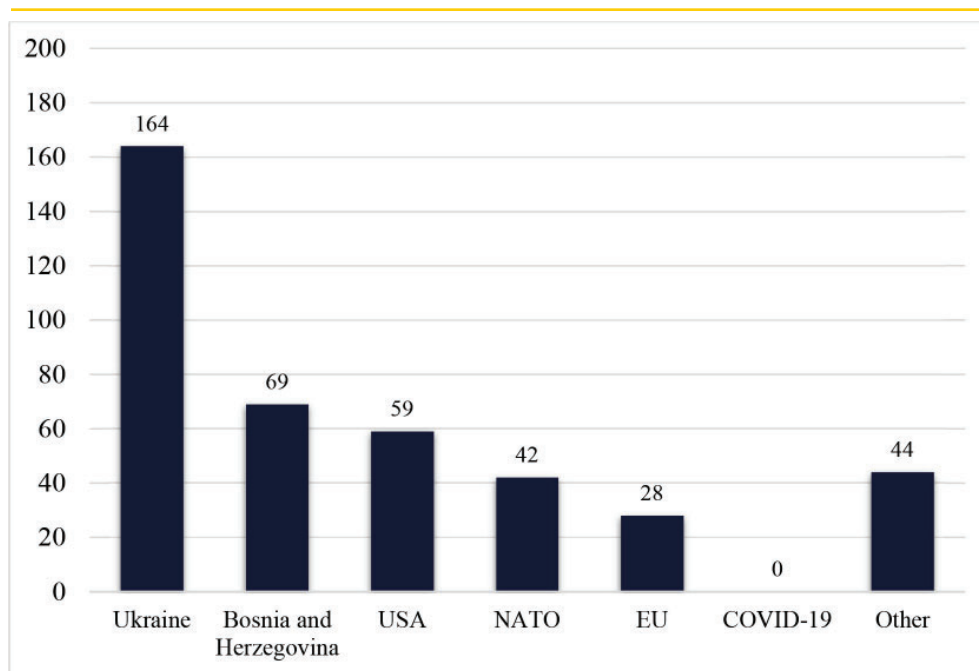


Figure 6: Russian Embassy in Bosnia and Herzegovina FIMI posts (topics)

In Montenegro, the Russian Embassy conducted the most intensive campaigning on FIMI posts, totaling N=940 (Figure 7), with nearly three-quarters of those occurring in 2022 (N=692). The primary focus of these posts was the war in Ukraine, which dominated with N=468 posts, far surpassing discussions on other topics such as the USA and NATO, which garnered only a fraction of this figure. Internal

politics within Montenegro and the topic with of EU comprised only a tenth of the posts compared to those concerning Ukraine.

Furthermore, among all the previously examined embassies, the topic of COVID-19 was most prevalent in Montenegro, although it still remained relatively low in numbers compared to other topics.

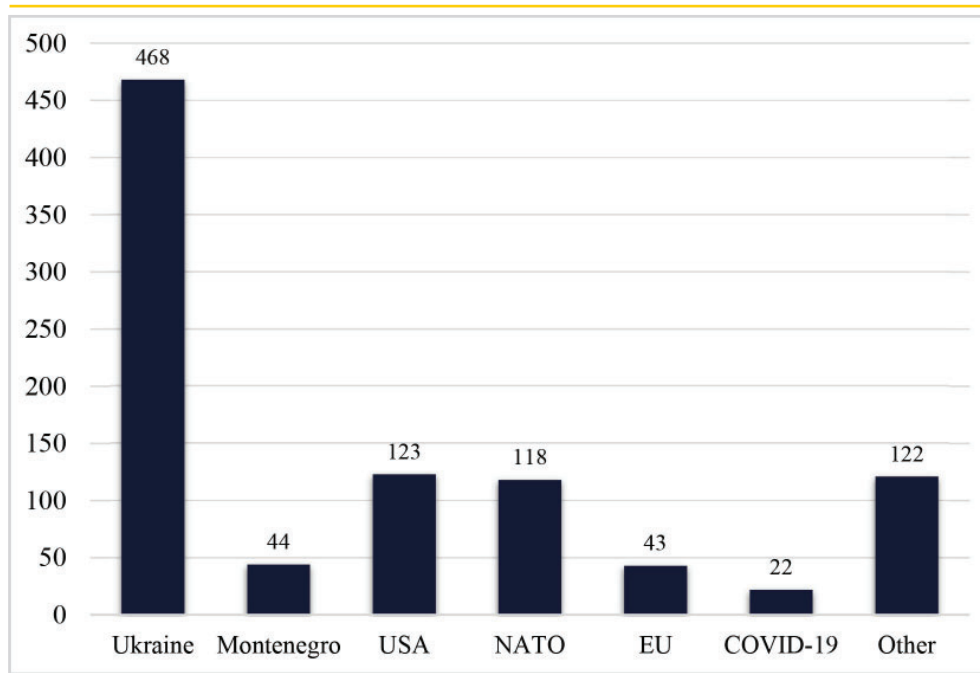


Figure 7: Russian Embassy in Montenegro FIMI posts (topics)

CONCLUSIONS

After examining the FIMI posts and their categorization across various Russian embassies in different countries, several conclusions can be drawn. Firstly, the distribution of FIMI posts varied among the embassies, with certain topics being more prevalent in some countries compared to others. Secondly, across most embassies, the topic of Ukraine emerged as the most prevalent theme, indicating a consistent focus on influencing perceptions of the conflict within the selected countries. Notably, the Russian Embassy in Serbia stands as an exception, exhibiting a significant presence of disinformation campaigns, particularly targeting topics such as Kosovo's independence. Thirdly, there is considerable variance in posting frequency both across embassies and over time. Embassy in Montenegro displayed the most intense posting activity in

2022, while those in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia increased their efforts particularly in 2023. Fourthly, embassies showed a keen interest in regional politics and dynamics, with posts often delving into internal political affairs, such as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where discussions centered around the status of Republika Srpska and critiques of the Dayton Agreement. Similarly, in Montenegro, topics included discussions about Montenegro's diplomatic actions, such as imposing sanctions on Russia. Finally, the topic of COVID-19 was only minimally represented across all examined embassies.

In conclusion, these findings underscore the nature of Russian embassy activity on Facebook in the Adriatic and Balkans region, revealing a strategic utilization of FIMI posts to shape narratives, influence perceptions, and advance specific agendas.

LIMITATIONS

This study offers a comprehensive overview of FIMI activities carried out by Russian embassies in the Adriatic and Balkans regions, focusing particularly on disinformation campaigns. However, questions persist regarding the sources and manipulation tactics employed, as well as the extent of interconnectivity between posts across different Russian embassies. Further research should delve deeper into these aspects, employing qualitative methods to examine the types of posts gaining traction, the frequency of shares, and the utilization and promotion of other media and links included in the posts.

REFERENCES

- Al Jazeera. (March 1, 2022). Facebook, Instagram demoting posts from Russian state media. <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/3/1/facebook-instagram-demoting-posts-from-russian-state-media>
- Brautović, M. (2022). Mapping COVID-19 Disinformation Ecosystem in Croatia. In A. Brakus & N. Blanuša (Eds.), *COVID-19 Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Croatia* (pp. 18-31). Gong. ISBN 978-953-7960-47-6. <https://pro-fact.gong.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/COVID-19-Disinformation-and-Conspiracy-Theories-in-Croatia.pdf>

Brautović, M. (2023). *Mapping Ukraine War Disinformation Ecosystem in Croatia and Slovenia*. https://admohub.eu/download/hr/istrazivanje/izvjestaj-dezinformacijski-ekosustav-u-hrvatskoj-i-sloveniji-o-ratu-u-ukrajini/WebHome/ADMO_report_1%20%282%29.pdf?rev=1.1

European External Action Service (EEAS) (February 2023) *1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats Towards a framework for networked defence* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/trade-and-technology-council-fourth-ministerial-%E2%80%93annex-foreign-information-manipulation-and_en

European External Action Service (EEAS) (January 2024) *2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats A Framework for Networked Defence* https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/2nd-eeasreport-foreign-information-manipulation-and-interference-threats_en

Faktograf.hr. (2022). *Globalni narativi i lokalni akteri: analiza dezinformacija o ratu u Ukrajini u prvih 150 dana rata*. <https://faktograf.hr/2022/08/04/globalni-narativi-i-lokalni-akteri-analiza-dezinformacija-o-ratu-u-ukrajini-u-prvih-150-dana-rata/>.

ABOUT AUTHOR

Marijana Musladin is an Associate Professor at the Department of Mass Communication of the University of Dubrovnik. She received her bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees (social sciences, political science, international relations and national security) from the Faculty of Political Science, University of Zagreb.

She is the author and co-author of many scientific papers in Croatian and foreign scientific publications in the field of international relations, national and international security.

She is the President of the Publishing Committee and a member of the Ethics Committee of the University of Dubrovnik. She is the head of the graduate programs Media and Public Relations at the Department of Mass Communication.

Her research areas are national and international security, contemporary security challenges, European security policy.

ADMO

Project Adria Digital Media Observatory (ADMO) ensures the establishment and continuation of the Croatian and Slovenian hub operation for tackling disinformation and cooperation with EDMO on multiple levels by a multidisciplinary and intersectoral approach. As an effective response to the challenges for democracy and society, the project sees a combination of different expertise and methods - attacking sources/actors, networks, reasoning, and disinformation narratives from different spheres and combining techniques. The implemented activities will contribute to the general objective - creating and ensuring the long-term development of a broader Croatian/Slovenian hub on digital media composed of a multidisciplinary community of academic researchers, fact-checkers and media practitioners, journalists and civil society advocates capable of detecting and analyzing disinformation campaigns; and supporting the government and regulator in strengthening the collective response to disinformation threat to democracy.

The project comprehensively approaches the social, political, and health problem of spreading disinformation campaigns through research, awareness-raising, and capacity-building methods. The key projects' outcomes/deliverables are: the project's website and its integration with the EDMO platform, production of the continuous flow of fact-checks, publication of analytic reports on disinformation content, disinformation sources, origins of disinformation narratives, the role of international actors in spreading disinformation, disinformation acceptance and debunking, on the reasoning behind conspiracist and anti-conspiracist behavior, training for journalists and student of journalism, media literacy education activities for citizens, reports on Code of Practice on Disinformation in Croatia and on the financial viability of the Croatian and Slovenian news media sector.



fpzg Sveučilište u Zagrebu
Fakultet političkih
znanosti



FER
Faculty of Electrical
Engineering and
Computing

Filozofski fakultet
Sveučilišta u Zagrebu



oštro

N1
ONLINE NEWS
CHANNEL AFFILIATE

*WIKI

AFP

EDMO
European Digital Media Observatory



Co-funded by the European Union.