



Adria Digital Media  
Observatory

# **CONTENT ANALYSIS OF DISINFORMATION AND NARRATIVES RELATED TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE**

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with contributions from TakeLab  
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## SUMMARY

This report is part of the research activities carried out within the project “Adria Digital Media Observatory” funded by the Digital Europe Programme. The aim of this analysis was to identify key disinformation and manipulative narratives related to the war in Ukraine spreading in Southeast Europe, using qualitative and quantitative content analysis of the fact-checked information.

Key findings:

- The results of this analysis indicate that anti-Ukraine disinformation and manipulative narratives are present in the SEE region and are being systematically deployed to achieve the 5Ds identified by EEAS: to dismiss allegations, to distort the narrative and change the framing, to distract and shift the blame, to dismay and intimidate, and to divide communities.
- The quantitative content analysis established that the most prevalent content shared in the Croatian disinformation ecosystem is based precisely on the identified narratives, primarily on the narrative of American hegemony and Russia’s right to defend itself, as well as on global conspiracy theories and framing of Ukraine and Ukrainians as Nazis.
- Most of this disinformation comes from Serbia, and more than half of the intensively shared content originates from fringe news sites.

## INTRODUCTION

The content analysis of disinformation and narratives related to the war in Ukraine, conducted by the Adria Digital Media Observatory, aimed to a) determine the key disinformation and manipulation narratives that appeared in Southeast Europe since the beginning of the war in Ukraine in 2022; b) conduct qualitative and quantitative content analysis of selected posts that were extensively shared on Facebook in the region, including Croatia and c) identify common propaganda techniques and persuasive tactics used by various communication sources to promote a particular interpretation of the war in Ukraine.

The 2022 strategic document from the European External Action Service (EEAS) has established that many instances of disruptive

communication constitute *foreign information manipulation and interference activities*. The EEAS has detected five tactics employed in such campaigns: 1) dismissal, which involves denying allegations, and denigrate the source; 2) distortion, aimed at changing the framing and distorting the narrative; 3) distraction, employed to redirect attention toward a different actor or narrative, or to shift blame; 4) dismay, with the intention of intimidating opponents and 5) division, used to sow conflict and widen divisions within or between communities.<sup>1</sup> By analyzing narratives and propaganda techniques in Croatian online sphere, we also seek to recognize manipulation tactics identified by EEAS.

## NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

Qualitative content analysis was conducted on debunked disinformation gathered by the fact-checking network from Southeast Europe – SEE Check<sup>2</sup>, the European Digital Media Observatory (EDMO)<sup>3</sup>, and Agence France Presse (AFP)<sup>4</sup> from February 2022 to October 2023. In addition, two platforms developed by TakeLab from the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computing were used to identify Ukraine-related narratives present in the Croatian public sphere. The *Retriever platform*<sup>5</sup>, which enables search of 36 Croatian news outlets and provides access to more than 8 million news articles, was used to select articles from a specified time frame. The *Claim search* platform enables querying claims from news articles from the *Retriever platform* based on semantic similarity. It was used to identify claims aligned with predefined Ukraine-related narratives.

The results of this analysis align with the findings of other similar studies (see, EDMO briefs<sup>6</sup>, SEE Check report, 2022<sup>7</sup>), indicating that in the (dis)information war against Ukraine, several dominant narratives

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/tackling-disinformation-foreign-information-manipulation-interference_en)

<sup>2</sup> <https://seecheck.org/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://edmo.eu/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://factcheck.afp.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Ćurković, S., Dukić, D., Petričević, M., & Šnajder, J. (2022, November 8). TakeLab Retriever. Retrieved from <https://retriever.takelab.fer.hr/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://edmo.eu/resources/fact-checking-publications/fact-checking-briefs/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://faktograf.hr/2022/08/04/globalni-narativi-i-lokalni-akteri-analiza-dezinformacija-o-ratu-u-ukrajini-u-prvih-150-dana-rata/>

have been systematically promoted through various communication channels, from social media to institutional sources and mainstream media. These narratives are constructed on disinformation, half-truths, manipulative language and content presentation. They include the thesis about denazification of Ukraine, various tactics of reputational attacks against Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the claim that Ukraine is not a state, the narrative that due to the war in Ukraine and sanctions against Russia, the domicile population is suffering, the thesis that Ukrainian refugees are privileged and represent a threat to the domicile people, and the idea that America is waging war against Russia through Ukraine, including biological and nuclear warfare, which forces Russia to defend itself, among others. In the following paragraphs we elaborate each of these narratives in more detail.

**1. Denazification of Ukraine** – this narrative suggests that the goal of the invasion of Ukraine is the liberation of the country from Nazis, which in propaganda studies is known as the *transfer* of emotions (Sproule, 2001). The propagandist aims to link associations of a specific concept, in this case, a negative one (Nazism, fascism), to Ukraine. Within this narrative, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is often falsely portrayed as a Nazi, which falls under the *character assassination* techniques (Shirayev et al., 2022), aimed at reputationally destroying the person who is the target of the attack (see Image 1). More about this technique in the following section.

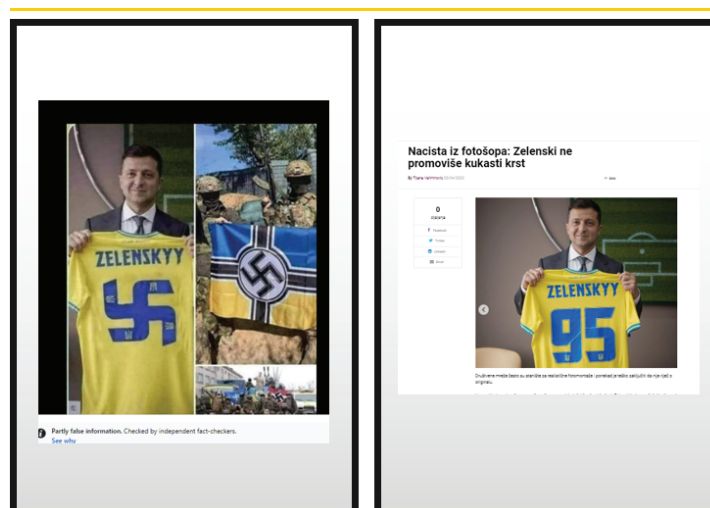


Image 1: Photoshop of Zelensky used within “denazification” narrativ  
Source: Facebook, Raskrinkavanje.me

A common disinformation tactic within the denazification narrative is reporting on Ukrainians (citizens, soldiers, refugees, etc.) allegedly displaying Nazi symbols. This type of disinformation is often created through image or video manipulation<sup>8</sup> or falsely identifying individuals displaying Nazi symbols as Ukrainians, as seen in the case of the bogus “Ukrainian Nazis from Rijeka”<sup>9</sup>. Analyzed sources from Serbia commonly resorted to *name calling* (Sproule, 2001) in order to strengthen this narrative, calling Ukrainians “Ucronazis” (ukronacisti)<sup>10</sup>

The affirmation of the “denazification” narrative in Croatia was aided by the assertion that the slogan “Slava Ukraini” (“Glory to Ukraine”) is a fascist greeting<sup>11</sup>, emphasized by Croatian President Zoran Milanović. The comparison to the greeting of the notorious Ustasha movement from the World War II, “Za dom spremni”, highlighted by President Milanović<sup>12</sup> and other Croatian politicians before him<sup>13</sup>, contributed to the prevalence of this narrative in Croatian mainstream media. Russian media gladly disseminated President Milanović’s statements to support the narrative of justified “denazification of Ukraine”.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Character assassination of the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky

The goal of this tactic has been to tarnish domestic and international image of Volodymyr Zelensky by promoting the narrative that Ukraine is governed by a highly corrupt, incompetent, and devious individual. *Character assassination* (CA) involves a deliberate and sustained effort to tarnish an individual’s reputation or credibility (Icks and Shiraev, 2014; Samoilenko et al., 2020; Shiraev et al., 2022). According to Icks et al. (2020), CA examines the process through which someone’s reputation is ravaged, as well as the outcome of this process, such as damaged reputation. Character assassination may manifest in various

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/lazna-vijest/naci-mladenci-ne-drze-ukrajinsku-zastavu/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/nacisti-u-rijeci-nisu-ukrajinske-izbjeglice>

<sup>10</sup> <https://srbin.info/svet/uznemirujuce-ukronacisti-hicima-u-glavu-ubili-10-ruskih-ratnih-zarobljenika/?fbclid=IwAR0Wac-R1DsJzqcWewbd4Hfo0Qji3c6WUG0x5fdg3uy6zlkz2bRbnj593b0>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/slava-ukrajini-nije-fasisticki-slogan/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/milanovic-izmedu-za-dom-spremni-i-slava-ukrajini-nema-razlike-to-je-poklic-najradikalnijih-sovinista-1294636>

<sup>13</sup> <https://net.hr/danas/vijesti/burno-u-saboru-bulj-izbacen-nakon-4-opomene-slava-ukrajini-je-u-redu-a-zds-ne-smijemo-spominjati-f367ee86-de8e-11ed-875d-a68cba6c07c7>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.index.hr/vijesti/clanak/milanovic-zavrsio-na-naslovnicama-ruskih-medija-nakon-izjave-o-poklicu-slava-ukrajini/2467963.aspx>

forms, ranging from commentaries in mainstream outlets to obscure conspiracy theories circulating on online platforms, and employing different framing tactics. Every CA campaign has two defining features - it is always intentional and it is public (Icks, et al., 2020). The list of common CA methods formulated by Icks and Shirayev (2014) and Icks et al. (2020) includes *name-calling, making allegations, ridiculing, fearmongering, exposing, disgracing and erasing*.

All of these methods are intensively present in the analyzed material, aiming to destroy the credibility of Zelensky, who has been globally recognized as a symbol and face of Ukrainian resistance since the beginning of the war. This tactic is applied explicitly and implicitly, intentionally or unintentionally. It often includes dissemination of fake news, such as claims that Zelensky is a drug addict<sup>15</sup>, that he tried to escape Ukraine dressed as a woman<sup>16</sup> or that he and his wife Olena are enjoying luxurious life while the Ukrainian people are dying<sup>17</sup> (see Image 2).

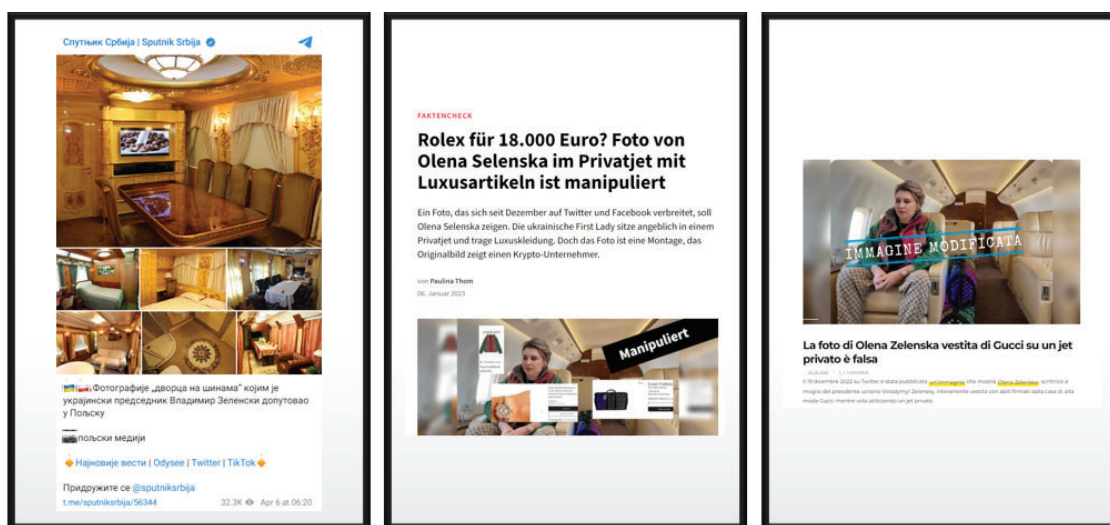


Image 2: Disinformation about Zelensky's and Zelenska's lavish war life  
Sources: Raskrinkavanje, Correctiv, Facta

Implicit and unintentional disgracing can be traced in Croatian mainstream media as well, which occasionally and more recently portray

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/narkoman-zelenski-propaganda-bez-skrupula/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/analiza/bizarne-tvrdnje-zelenski-nije-pobjegao-iz-ukrajine-p-rerusen-u-zenu/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2023/01/06/rolex-fuer-18-000-euro-foto-von-olena-selenska-im-privatjet-mit-luxusartikeln-ist-manipuliert/>

Zelensky as a nuisance or a loser<sup>18</sup>. Nevertheless, such a portrayal contributes to discrediting and ridiculing the person in question.

An automated textual analysis conducted by Laura Majer and Jan Šnajder using the *Retriever platform* (Ćurković et al., 2022) revealed that Zelensky was featured in 7594 online news headlines from 05-11-2021 to 19-02-2024. The outlet with the highest mentions was the left-leaning tabloid news site Index.hr (1518 mentions), followed by the right-leaning tabloid Direktno.hr (774 mentions). Concerning sentiment, despite the majority of headlines being neutral towards Zelensky, when considering the ratio of positive to negative sentiment, it becomes evident that negative sentiment was generally more dominant (see Chart 1). Headlines automatically coded as being negative towards Zelensky, often included other people’s statements about Zelensky, such as “Zelensky’s Opponents: He is Authoritarian, Obsessed with Ratings and Fame, Corrupt...” (Index, 19-04-2023). For a detailed explanation of the sentiment analysis method, sentiment operationalization within Natural Language Processing, and the use of sentiment analysis via the Retriever platform, refer to Barić et al. (2023).

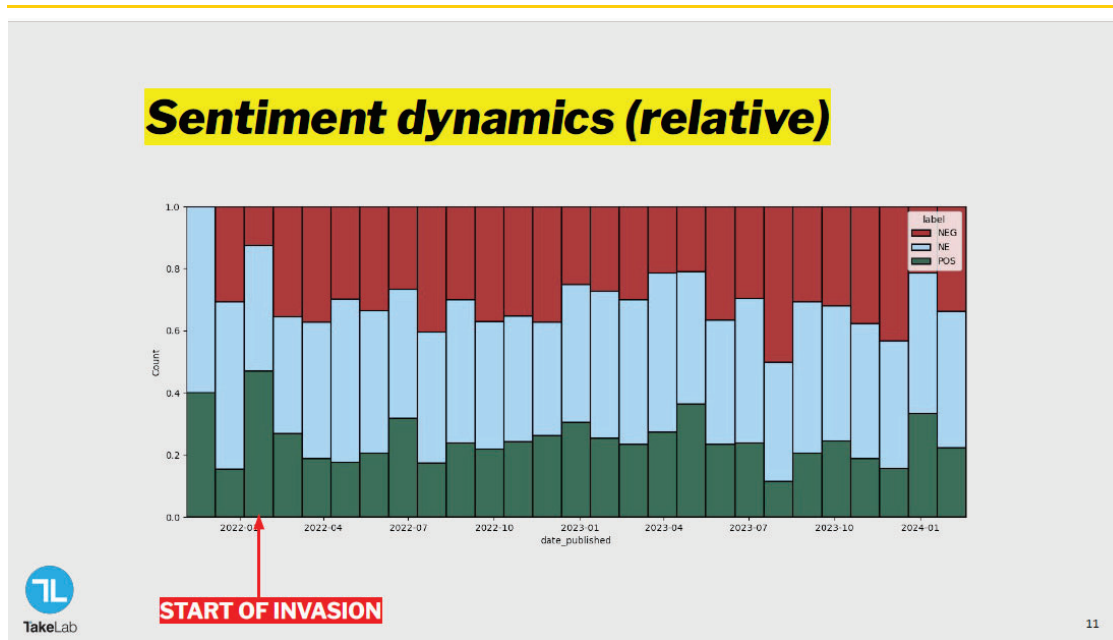


Chart 1: Sentiment analysis of Volodymyr Zelensky’s mentions in Croatian news site headlines

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/nekad-kralj-danas-prosjak-zelenski-kumio-i-molio-za-patriote-docekao-ga-hladan-odgovor-15404514>



**3. Ukraine is not a state** - within this narrative, claims are made that Ukraine lacks state sovereignty. This narrative is mainly based on disinformation that the former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon stated that Ukraine has not registered its borders<sup>19</sup>, and that residents of Donetsk, Lugansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson confirmed in a referendum that they want to be part of Russia.

**4. Lots of money is being spent on Ukraine**, which negatively affects the quality of life of the domicile population. This narrative suggests that the domicile people are suffering economically due to support for Ukraine or the imposition of sanctions on Russia.<sup>20</sup> The narrative is supported by disinformation or manipulations about the need to lift sanctions, such as the „news“ on the portal in4s.net announcing that the World Bank, due to food shortages, has requested that sanctions against Russia be eased.<sup>21</sup>

**5. Ukrainian refugees are problematic** - this narrative primarily employs the technique of “demonization” (Fisher, 2019) or construction of “dangerous others” (Grbeša and Šalaj, 2018). This technique is commonly used by populists to construct a group that supposedly poses a threat to the “people,” thus creating conflict between “us” (the domicile people) and “them” (the others). It creates the impression that Ukrainian refugees are privileged in comparison to “our” people<sup>22</sup>, that they demonstrate problematic behavior, and that in countries that have accepted refugees, residents express revolt and anti-Ukrainian sentiment (for example, graffiti against Zelensky appearing on the streets of European and American cities, etc.<sup>23</sup>). Previous research has shown that narratives related to Ukrainian refugees are an extremely important segment of anti-Ukrainian propaganda. Alberto-Horst Neidhardt in his policy report „Disinformation on refugees from Ukraine: Boosting Europe’s resilience after Russia’s invasion“ (2022), for example, writes that “disinformation depicts migrants and refugees as a threat to Europeans’ health, wealth and/or identity, appealing to

<sup>19</sup> <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/bivsi-generalni-sekretar-un-a-nije-izjavio-da-ukrajina-nema-granice>

<sup>20</sup> <https://faktograf.hr/2022/12/27/fotografija-praznih-polica-u-londonu-je-iz-2020-godine-nema-veze-sa-sankcijama-rusiji/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.in4s.net/svjetska-banka-predlazemo-da-se-sankcije-rusiji-ublaze/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://faktograf.hr/2022/09/15/nije-tocno-da-izbjeglice-iz-ukrajine-u-hrvatskoj-dobivaju-4500-kuna-placeni-smjestaj-i-rezije/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://correctiv.org/faktencheck/2023/01/09/fotos-von-angeblichen-selenskyj-graffitis-in-europaeischen-staedten-sind-manipuliert/>

people's beliefs and anxieties." In his report, he further states that these disinformation attempts "to persuade Europeans concerned about their security that generalized violence is spreading because of the refugees' arrivals," and they also target "those worried about their economic well-being, trying to convince them that they are being treated unfairly while refugees are receiving assistance"<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, Tommaso Canetta from EDMO explains to DW how Ukrainian refugees are a target of disinformation on many levels and in many countries. They are portrayed "as Nazis, violent, parasites, or, it is suggested, that they exploit host countries"<sup>25</sup>. EDMO's brief from January 16, 2022, lists some examples of hostile disinformation targeting refugees:

„In Germany several Tiktok-videos claim that money from German taxpayers will be used to renovate two hotels in Mallorca so that refugees from Ukraine could be accommodated there, and a Facebook post claimed that retirement age for Ukrainians in Germany is only 57. In Poland an old video showing people crossing the Polish-Ukrainian border was shared on social media to suggest an ongoing wave of arrivals, and its description alluded to the conspiracy theory of a secret plot by the authorities to 'resettle' Ukrainians in Poland. In Hungary two videos sharing various unfounded claims about Ukrainian 'fake refugees' abusing the hospitality of the Hungarian state went viral“.<sup>26</sup>

Manipulative narratives observed in Croatian public space are very much in line with the refugee-related narratives in mentioned reports, although the impression is that the mainstream media representation of Ukrainian refugees is still predominantly favorable. However, in the mainstream news suggestive headlines can also be detected, framing Ukrainian refugees and Ukrainians as economic or security threat. For instance: "Empathy has worn down. A number of citizens of Split are openly insulting Ukrainians due to the rent money being provided by the Republic of Croatia: 'This is why apartments are so expensive for us!'"<sup>27</sup> or "In Germany Islamic terrorists from Ukraine were arrested. They were planning attacks inspired by ISIS"<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.epc.eu/en/publications/Disinformation-on-refugees-from-Ukraine-Boosting-Europes-resilience~4c56f8>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.dw.com/hr/provjera-%C4%8Dinjenica-kako-se-%C5%A1ire-la%C5%BEi-oukrajinskim-izbjeglicama/a-64715314>

<sup>26</sup> <https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/EDMO-19-Horizontal-FCB.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/split/dio-splicana-otvoreno-vrijeda-ukrajince-zbog-subvencije-koju-im-rh-islplacuje-zato-su-nama-skupi-stanovi-a-di-smo-mi-1344141>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.24sata.hr/news/u-njemackoj-uhitili-islamisticke-teroriste-iz-ukrajine-planirali-su-napade-po-uzoru-na-isis-920963/galerija-730725>

## 6. Ukraine has biolaboratories for the production of biological weapons.

Disinformation about the existence of facilities for the production of biological weapons in Ukraine<sup>29</sup> is part of a broader (conspiratorial) narrative about American hegemony, its control over Ukraine and America's responsibility for the war in Ukraine. The assumption about the existence of biological laboratories has been conveyed by numerous Croatian mainstream media outlets.<sup>30</sup> This claim has been promoted as factual by websites previously identified as disseminators of disinformation (see Image 3).<sup>31</sup>

### **Bio-laboratoriji pod vodstvom SAD-a u Ukrajini grade biološko oružje za ciljanje određenih etničkih skupina nakon što su prikupili DNK od Rusa**



Image 3: „Bio-labs in Ukraine orchestrated by the USA are designing biological weapons for targeting specific ethnic groups, after they had gathered DNK from Russians“

Source: Logicno.com

This thesis is further extended by the claim that viruses are being produced in these laboratories that could lead to a new epidemic

<sup>29</sup> <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/analiza/rad-americkih-biolaboratorija-u-ukrajini-nije-uzrok-epidemija-opasnih-bolesti>

<sup>30</sup> <https://direktno.hr/eu-i-svijet/rusija-zahtijeva-objasnjenje-od-sad-zelimo-detlje-o-bioloskim-vojnim-programima-ukrajini-263189/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.logicno.com/politika/bio-laboratoriji-pod-vodstvom-sad-a-u-ukrajini-grade-biolosko-oruzje-za-ciljanje-odredenih-etnickih-skupina-nakon-sto-su-prikupili-dnk-od-rusa.html>

or pandemic. This narrative relies on the propaganda technique of inducing fear, as well as conspiracy theories based on the assumption of secret involvement of the United States in international processes. For instance, “Preliminary evidence about activities of the US laboratories for biological weapon in Ukraine are just stunning. These are the main assumptions: American ideologues of biological weapons are the leaders of the Democratic Party ... American specialists tested new medicine in Ukrainian biolabs, contrary to international security standards ...” etc.<sup>32</sup>

This “conspiratorial” narrative suggests in various ways that Ukraine is a pawn in the hands of Americans and NATO, who use it as a proxy for war with Russia, which is forced to “defend itself”. By propagating this narrative, the propaganda technique of “shifting blame” or “distraction” is successfully activated, in which the victim becomes the aggressor, and the aggressor becomes the victim. In other words, Russia is portrayed as the victim forced to defend itself (from Ukraine, USA, NATO).

It is worth noting that propaganda narratives are not always necessarily based on disinformation or misinformation (for definitions see Grbeša et al., 2023). In this sense, mainstream media play a prominent role in spreading manipulative narratives, often unintentionally, in their efforts to attract attention. For example, some Croatian mainstream media outlets uncritically echoed thesis about the existence of bio-weapons labs in the headlines, thus contributing to the spread of theories about American involvement in triggering the war in Ukraine. Examples of such headlines include: “Russia demands explanation from the USA: We want details about biological military programs in Ukraine”<sup>33</sup> or “Russians claim: We have evidence about American biolabs in Ukraine”.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the disinformation systematically constructed to promote narratives mentioned in this report, numerous other disinformation and fake news related to military operations and war casualties in Ukraine, international negotiations, financial and political support, etc., circulated in the Croatian space.

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.in4s.net/biolosko-oruzje-i-imperija-lazi/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://direktno.hr/eu-i-svijet/rusija-zahtijeva-objasnjenje-od-sad-zelimo-detalje-o-bioloskim-vojnim-programima-ukrajini-263189/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://n1info.hr/svijet/rusi-tvrde-imamo-dokaze-o-americkim-biolaboratorijima-u-ukrajini/>

As determined by the social network analysis which investigated sources of Ukraine-related disinformation on social media (Brautović, 2023), the sources of this disinformation are diverse, ranging from posts on social media to mainstream media and public institutions, especially from neighboring Serbia and Republika Srpska.

## QUANTITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

A quantitative content analysis was conducted on the content of the 68 most shared links retrieved through social network analysis from the Ukraine-related disinformation ecosystem in the SEE region, as mapped by Brautović (2023). The coding sheet comprised 15 categories. Units were coded for:

1. the type of source (mainstream media, fringe media, fact-checking organizations, YouTube, or Facebook);
2. country of origin;
3. presence of any character assassination technique targeting Zelensky;
4. presence of key manipulative narratives, including “denazification of Ukraine”, “sanctions against Russia have backfired, leading to severe consequences for Europe”, “Ukraine is not a state”, “Ukrainian refugees represent a problem or threat”, “Ukraine has biolabs or is engaged in biological warfare” and “Ukraine is an American proxy and Russia needs to defend itself”;
5. presence of conspiracy theories, such as the conspiracy of the “globalists” (e.g., Spark, 2000), the “great replacement” theory (Consentino, 2020), or the “great reset” theory (Christensen and Au, 2023);
6. framing of Russia as a victim;
7. framing of Ukraine as a loser;
8. framing of Ukraine as an aggressor in the examined sample.

Additionally, for each unit, we coded whether it contained debunked information and indicated that the published information was false, and whether it contained manipulated photos or videos.

The unit of analysis was the content contained within the link, including text, photos, and/or videos.

## RESULTS

SNA and VNA analyses have already established that disinformation entangled in the disinformation ecosystem affecting the Croatian online sphere, originates from various countries in the SEE region. Brautović (2023) observes that clusters related to the Ukrainian war exhibit a community character, with the bogus news sites at their core (G3 - 365srbija.com, G4 - Epoha & logicno.com, G6 - Српско-руско братство - духовно и историјско [Srpsko-rusko bratsvo – duhovno i istorijsko], In4s.net & webtribune.rs). Other clusters display a star-shaped distribution with individuals/fake accounts (G2 – The Duran) and mainstream media in the middle (G1 – vijesti.com; G5 – Kurir.rs; G13 – Reublika.rs; G14 – Novosti.rs; G15 – Mondo) (see Brautović, 2023). As demonstrated in Table 1, the most shared content predominantly originated from fringe websites.

Table 1: Source and country of origin

SOURCE	%	COUNTRY	%
<b>Fringe media</b>	<b>52.94%</b>	<b>Serbia</b>	<b>57.35%</b>
<b>Mainstream media</b>	<b>35.29%</b>	Croatia	16.18%
Facebook	7.35%	BiH	13.24%
YouTube	2.94%	Cannot be determined	7.35%
Fact-checking org.	1.47%	Other	5.88%

Mainstream media served as the source in 35% of the examined cases. Among the 24 instances where mainstream media were detected as a source, 10 cases involved content related to the debunking of certain disinformation. Debunked information, indicating that published information was false, was present in 28% of all examined units. Results presented in Table 1 confirm findings obtained by SNA (Brautović, 2023), indicating that Serbia is the primary country of origin for the Ukraine-related disinformation in Croatia. Websites such as Mondo.rs, 365srbija.com, In4s.net, and republika.rs are among them. In terms of sources originating from Croatia, it is noteworthy to mention the podcast “Velebit,” hosted on YouTube, featuring retired Croatian admiral Davor Domazet-Lošo as a guest. In this one hour and 40 minutes long podcast, Domazet-Lošo supported conspiracy theories and disseminated disinformation related to Ukraine. According



to YouTube, this podcast, published on 08-03- 2022, has garnered 843,029 views.

The analysis of 68 units revealed that Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelensky was mentioned in less than 20% of all examined units. However, in almost all these instances, some form of character assassination technique targeting Zelensky was present (see Image 4)<sup>35</sup>.

VIJESTI

## UKRAJINKA RASPALILA PO ZELENSKOM I ŠOKIRALA SVE U STUDIJU: "Zelenski je ubojica"



Published 2 godine ago on 5 ožujka, 2022

By Uredništvo



Image 4: The Ukrainian woman blasted Zelensky and shocked everyone in the studio: "Zelensky is a murderer"

The primary focus of our analysis was to determine whether the examined units could be associated with any of the narratives established through qualitative content analysis. As indicated by the results in Table 2, we found that at least one narrative and/or conspiracy theory was present in more than 72% of the examined units.

<sup>35</sup> <https://croativ.net/ukrajinka-raspalila-po-zelenskom-i-sokirala-sve-u-studiju-zelenski-je-ubojica-31140/>

Table 2: Presence of manipulative narratives

NARRATIVE	PRESENT (%)
Ukraine is the US proxy	30.88
Conspiracy theories	29.41
Denazification	28.36
Ukraine presented as an aggressor	25.37
Sanctions have backfired	20.59
Ukraine presented as a loser	19.12
Rusia presented as a victim	17.91
Ukraine has biolabs	11.94
Ukraine is not a state	2.99
Ukraine refugees are problematic	1.49
ANY OF THESE NARRATIVES	72.06

Units that did not contain any narrative or conspiracy theory were typically short videos or fake news about specific events. For instance, one such unit included a segment from a video game that falsely suggested it depicted Ukrainians shooting down a Russian plane (see Image 5).

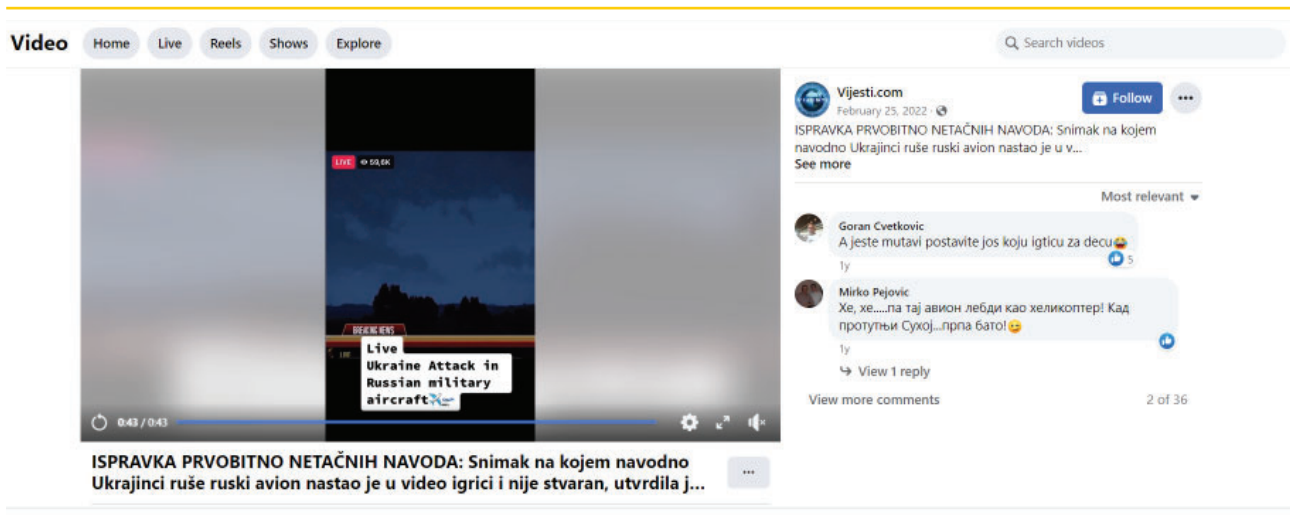


Image 5: Correction: The footage in which Ukrainians are allegedly shooting down a Russian plane was actually taken from a video game and is not real



As evidenced by the results from Table 2, 31% of the examined cases contained the narrative that “Ukraine is an American proxy and that Russia needs to defend itself.” For example, in4s.net published a text which declares: “The Washington Post reveals how the United States worked with its European allies to draw Russia into the war in Ukraine. However, some things could not be foreseen”.<sup>36</sup>

Conspiracy theories were present in nearly 30% of the examined units, with many revolving around American imperialism and global control. For example, “Zelensky quietly adopted propositions of the World Economic Forum and signed the law about first steps towards a great reset”<sup>37</sup>

The narrative related to the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine was present in 28.36% of the examined units. In this context, Ukraine is often framed as an aggressor (25.37%), while Russia is portrayed as a victim (in 18% of cases). For example, a text published by nultatačka.rs with the title “Ukraine announces Holocaust of Russians who support Putin” illustrates this scenario.<sup>38</sup>

A narrative present in 20.59% of the examined units relates to sanctions against Russia, labelling them as irrational and advocating for their reduction or termination. In 19% of the examined units, Ukraine is depicted as a loser. In 12% of the cases, it is asserted that Ukraine has biolabs or has engaged in biological warfare. Although this narrative was not prevalent in many cases, it was extensively elaborated upon. For example, one title on logicno.com argued, “Exclusive from Ukraine – Russia has destroyed 11 American, 3 Israeli, and 4 German dangerous biochemical laboratories”.<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, a narrative describing Ukrainians as problematic, violent, lazy, or portraying their refugees as privileged was present in only one unit. In two units, Ukraine’s state sovereignty was questioned.

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.in4s.net/vashington-post-otkriva-pozadinu-rata-u-ukrajini/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://epoha.com.hr/2022/03/21/zelensky-tiho-usvojio-prijedloge-svjetskog-ekonomskog-foruma-i-potpisao-zakon-o-prvim-koracima-velikog-resetiranja/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://nultatacka.rs/ukrajina-najavljuje-holokaust-rusa-koji-podrzavaju-putina>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.logicno.com/politika/ekskluzivno-iz-ukrajine-rusija-je-unistila-11-americkih-3-izraelska-i-4-njemacka-opasna-biokemijska-laboratorija.html>

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this analysis was to identify key disinformation and manipulative narratives related to the war in Ukraine spreading in Southeast Europe, using a qualitative content analysis of the fact-checked information. Additionally, the analysis sought to detect propaganda and persuasive techniques used to construct these narratives. Based on the identified narratives, a quantitative analysis was conducted of the content found on the links that were shared the most on Facebook, as previously determined by a social network analysis conducted by Brautović (2023). Research on the spread of disinformation in SEE, particularly in the countries of ex-Yugoslavia, is crucial due to the susceptibility of these areas to disinformation activities, as confirmed by previous research (see for instance results of the project “Pro-fact: Research, education, fact-check and debunk COVID-19 related disinformation narratives in Croatia”)<sup>40</sup>. The Report on EEAS Activities to Counter FIMI (2022) also states that: “Despite ongoing considerable efforts, the Western Balkans’ resilience towards FIMI remains weak due to local specifics such as low media literacy, low trust in institutions, limited space for professional journalism, and a low level of media freedom”<sup>41</sup>.

The results of this analysis indicate that the detected narratives and pervasive tactics, such as character assassination, are present in the SEE region and are being systematically deployed to achieve the 5Ds identified by EEAS: to dismiss allegations, to distort the narrative and change the framing, to distract and shift the blame, to dismay and intimidate, and to divide communities. The ultimate goal is to weaken the sympathy of the local population for Ukraine in the European countries and, consequently, to deter support of the European countries for Ukraine.

The quantitative content analysis established that the most prevalent content shared in the Croatian disinformation ecosystem is based precisely on the identified narratives, primarily on the narrative of American hegemony and Russia’s right to defend itself, as well as on global conspiracy theories and framing of Ukraine and Ukrainians as Nazis. Most of this disinformation comes from Serbia, and more than half of the intensively shared content is from fringe news sites. This

<sup>40</sup> <https://pro-fact.gong.hr/en/publications/>

<sup>41</sup> [https://euhybnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EEAS-AnnualReport-WEB\\_v3.4.pdf](https://euhybnet.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/EEAS-AnnualReport-WEB_v3.4.pdf)

finding is particularly interesting because it suggests that disinformers choose to use “sources” that mimic news sources.

It is worth noting that propaganda narratives are not always necessarily based on disinformation or misinformation (for definitions see Grbeša et al., 2023). In this sense, mainstream media play a prominent role in spreading manipulative narratives, often unintentionally, in their efforts to attract attention.

Manipulative narratives are far more influential and therefore more dangerous in the long term than fake news, such as photo manipulation or fake videos. These narratives are often inaccurate but can also be based on partially true yet manipulative information. However, their goal is always to sow doubt, undermine trust in the opposing side, and gradually foster animosity toward the other party. Media outlets often unwittingly contribute to the promotion of such narratives, and their role in disseminating information, misinformation, and disinformation, and thus the interpretative frameworks through which the public perceives reality, remains crucial, as suggested, for example, by Claire Wardle’s concept of the “trumpet of amplification”.<sup>42</sup> This underscores the importance of raising awareness about the functioning of disinformation and propaganda campaigns, and the responsibility of the media in reporting on crisis situations becomes even greater.

## LIMITATIONS

The limitation of this analysis is that it is based on a population of debunked information that were arbitrary selected by independent fact-checkers, which must have a bearing on the results. Therefore, the results of this analysis should be understood as indicative rather than conclusive. For more comprehensive conclusions, a larger and more representative sample should be involved. Similarly, research on construction of narratives should be expanded towards mainstream media, as suggested in the conclusion of this report.

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<sup>42</sup> <https://datajournalism.com/read/handbook/verification-3/investigating-disinformation-and-media-manipulation/the-age-of-information-disorder>

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## **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.



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