



# Fake news during the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact in Kosovo

Since the first emergence of COVID-19 cases and to date, in addition to dealing with the infections, all countries had to also face the challenge of dealing with fake news regarding the pandemic. Fake news is defined as “false information presented as news, which the author knew they were false and disseminated them deliberately for political influence or financial gain for oneself or others.”<sup>1</sup> However, fake news is not only spread by the media, social networks, or individuals intentionally. As fake news can also be disseminated unknowingly.

From the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN Secretary General and other senior leaders of the UN and its institutions have called for attention to the challenge of the “infodemic”, namely the disinformation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. According to UN Secretary General, “with the spread of COVID-19, a tsunami of misinformation, hatred, scandals and intimidation begun”.<sup>2</sup> As a result, there is a need for the states to develop strategies to reduce the spread of fake news. So, 132 UN member states have signed a **declaration** in service of this objective, on the risks of the “infodemic” on the coronavirus and a commitment to combat it. Disinformation about COVID-19 started with the ‘myth of the COVID-19 cures’ and information on how to use it, such as “disinfection of the body using alcohol, and eating garlic prevents infection with COVID-19, use of Ultraviolet rays kills the virus”<sup>3</sup> etc.

In addition to the myths regarding the origin of COVID-19, with the discovery of the anti-covid vaccine, room was created for the spread of fake news about the side effects of the vaccine. Kosovo was also affected from this disinformation. Some of the comments on the website of

1 Democracy Plus & Konrad Adenauer Stiftung “Fake News, a Threat to Democracy”, (2019). Available at: <https://dpl.us/acw>

2 United States Mission to the United Nations “Inter-regional declaration on ‘Infodemic’ in the context of COVID-19 (2020). Available at <https://dpl.us/t02>

3 World Health Organization “12 myths about COVID-19”. Available at <https://dpl.us/kpo>

the National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) are: “Stop lying, you can’t protect even yourselves with this vaccine”, “Vaccine destroys your future”, “Who can guarantee that there will no consequences after taking it?”, etc. In addition to such comments, anti-vaccine groups have been created on Facebook, calling for non-vaccination. One of these groups is called ‘Vaccine discussion’. Most of the profiles in this group are fake, even the profile photo is fake, and it is not clear who stands behind them. This type of group has around one thousand members and, in addition to videos and photos distributed and allegedly showing forced vaccination of people in different parts of the world, this group also calls for the avoidance of media information, in search for other information alternatives. One of the posts: ‘Get 2 vaccines and a thrombosis for free’ has 109 likes, and 263 shares’. There are also posts in this group claiming that the anti-covid vaccine contains the COVID-19 virus, and it calls on the members of the group who have received the vaccine but had side effects to wrap their hand in aluminum foil to stop the infiltrated ‘waves’.

According to GeoPost, an organization dealing with foreign influence in the Western Balkans, the Russian propaganda with disinformation about Covid-19 vaccines has also affected Kosovo. Its director, Gynen Venhari, said that “the source of most of the disinformation about the vaccines comes from the propaganda machine of the Russian government, which cultivates and exploits the so-called foreign ‘useful idiots’ against vaccines, causing significant damage to citizens of western countries.”<sup>4</sup> The formation of groups of this type as mentioned above according to Mr. Venhar takes place due to the interests of Russian state actors. To reduce the possibility of establishing such groups, Facebook has shut down a Russia-based disinformation network that spread fake news about COVID-19 vaccines. Facebook had labeled the operation a “Disinformation Factory” seeking to legitimize false vaccine claims.

In addition to the formation of groups, online media in Kosovo also tend to spread disinformation, and according to a research “Monitoring of irregular information in Kosovo”,<sup>5</sup> conducted by National Democratic Institute (NDI), from March 2020 to February 2021, a number of 3613 online media posts had content with irregular information. According to this study, many conspiracy theories have been spread in Kosovo through social networks during the pandemic, showing the ‘cure’ for the virus. These posts reached a high number of likes. For instance, an article that falsely claimed there was a new cure which can be infiltrated inside human bodies and stop COVID-19 within 24 hours had 668,700 reaches and two shares on social media.<sup>6</sup> According to this research, in 2020 a news item on Facebook showing that the PCR test only detects the infection but not who caused it, was shared 108 times on this social network, and 111,000 people liked it.<sup>7</sup> There was another fake news on Facebook, that persons infected with COVID-19 were forcibly placed in hospital rooms and were killed, which post was shared 890 times, and 83,000 people liked it.<sup>8</sup>

Increased suspicion about vaccines and being subjected to fake news comes because of citizens not being informed about the importance of vaccination and the possible side effects. The interest and curiosity to know more about vaccines forces citizens to believe any news that appears on this topic, without any screening whether it is true or not. Consequences from such news may be cause of anxiety and stress, doubts on immunization, and total boycott of the anti-covid vaccine, which, in turn, further spreads the virus, and the emergence of increasingly more new variants. According to researchers from the World Health Organization, “there have been at least 800 global deaths due to misinformation related to COVID-19”.<sup>9</sup>



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<sup>4</sup> Telegraf.com “Russian propaganda groups on social networks against vaccination in Kosovo”. (2021). Available at <https://dpl.us/1sz>

<sup>5</sup> NDI “Monitoring of irregular information in Kosovo”, (2021). Available at <https://dpl.us/7q7>

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

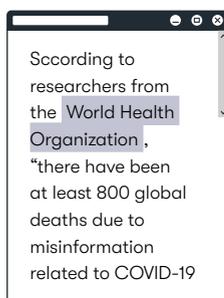
<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Newsy “How to identify pandemic news online”. (2021). Available at <https://dpl.us/fac>

Fighting fake news and providing accurate information to citizens regarding the COVID-19 pandemic has been one of the priorities of the Kurti Government.<sup>10</sup> The governmental program states “The Ministry of Health will continuously develop communication strategies for effective and concrete information with citizens, which will be translated into a campaign, not only for the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign will also provide accurate information, to prevent fake news about the pandemic, paying particular attention to mental health.”<sup>10</sup> According to the Ministry of Health, a communication campaign is to be prepared by the Ministry of Health supported by the **Japan International Cooperation Agency**.<sup>11</sup>

However, the main challenge remains the rapid dissemination of such fake news and the inability to control it. As there is practically no possibility for citizens and institutions to screen news, as true and fake, and since media control of news coverage is not a democratic method, it is important to use legal mechanisms for the sanctioning of dissemination of disinformation. Mechanisms for the sanctioning of the media are **Independent Media Commission (IMC)** established by law<sup>12</sup> as independent institution subordinated to the Assembly of Kosovo and addresses violations by traditional media such as TV and Radio. However, since the problem with fake news is not related to traditional media because it is created and shared from social media and different websites, the role of the IMC in this regard is limited. The other institution which serves as the complaints mechanism which scrutinizes complaints about breaches of the **Press Code of Conduct** by the media (including online), is the **Press Council of Kosovo (PCK)**. The PCK is a self-regulatory body established for and by the print media. According to the PCK code of conduct “1. Journalists and editors shall respect the factual truth and the public’s right to know the truth. 2. “Journalists and their publications have a professional obligation to promptly correct any published information that is found to be inaccurate.”<sup>13</sup> In case of a violation of these principles, PCK issues an opinion, which is court-accepted evidence in a matter of a defamation or insult. At the beginning of the pandemic, the PCK called on the print media to verify the information from official sources when reporting on the pandemic, and “In the case of spreading fake news, the PCK called on the media to publish rebuttals and materials denouncing them as false information.”<sup>14</sup>

However, according to the PCK director, Imer Mushkolaj, in 2021 there were no complaints from citizens regarding fake news. “In the lack of complaints from citizens, PCK has no possibility to take action against fake content, fake news, but also fake links, profiles and web addresses”, said Mushkolaj.<sup>15</sup> One of the reasons for the lack of complaints from citizens is the inability of citizens to distinguish between fake and true news. For this reason, it is important that institutions such as the Government of Kosovo, the Ministry of Health, and the National Institute of Public Health (NIPH) form manuals through which citizens are informed about the difference between fake and true news. So far, these institutions have not done enough in this regard, as the Ministry of Health only had information and awareness campaigns about vaccination, but no campaign for the prevention and ‘immunization’ of citizens from fake news. In this regard, the media have an important role, as broadcasters of news and information, and the responsibility in this regard falls specifically on news editors who must ensure that the news is based on facts, and who do not allow the spread of fake news and disinformation, especially in times of pandemics.



<sup>10</sup> Government Program 2021-2025 (2021). Available at <https://dpl.us/wjs>

<sup>11</sup> Meeting with Faik Hoti, department for communication, Ministry of Health, October 15, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Law no. 04/L-044 on the Independent Media Commission, available at: <https://bit.ly/3b0RzzC>

<sup>13</sup> Kosovo Press Council (PCK) “Kosovo Press Code”, (2019). Available at <https://dpl.us/uyu>

<sup>14</sup> Press Council of Kosovo (PCK) “Recommendations on how to report on COVID-19”, (2019). Available at <https://dpl.us/pfd>

<sup>15</sup> Kallxo.com “No complaints on fake news in the media, PCK encourages citizens to complain”, (2019). Available at <https://dpl.us/rm0>

## Recommendations:

- The Ministry of Health should in cooperation with PSC, through the support of donor agencies, design a communication campaign where disinformation and fake news impact on COVID-19 are central part of the campaign.
- The campaign should illustrate cases showing how to distinguish real vis-à-vis fake news and design activities targeting youth to prevent creation and distribution of disinformation and fake news about COVID-19. Illustrations, scenarios should be used to better convince citizens for vaccination as well as prepare against fake news and disinformation.
- The campaign should be targeted, for instance targeting youth, or media outlets, certain region, certain group age and deliver the messages accordingly. As such, campaigns through which general messages to the general audience are provided should be limited.
- The Ministry of Health, the PSC and Kosovo Police should cooperate closely in identifying fake news including sources of fake news and coordinate the fight against fake news and disinformation.
- The PSC should continuously work with the online media to prevent from publishing misinformation and fake news from translated articles from international media.
- The Ministry of Health and the PSC should work with the Kosovo Police to inform the latter on fake news cases either created or shared by Facebook fake accounts. Kosovo Police should then report such cases to the Facebook to close such accounts and remove fake news from Facebook.
- The Ministry of Health supported by donor agencies should draft instructions informing citizens about fake news during the pandemic, mitigating their effect in the vaccination process.
- Education and online training on fake news should be made available for citizens. A good example can be the D+ platform on fake news to learn more about the difference between true and false news. <https://fakenews.dplus.org>

