

JULY, 2024

MONTHLY REPORT

METHODOLOGY

[New Social Initiative \(NSI\)](#) monitors media and social media in cooperation with [Pikasa Analytics INC](#), a data analytics company that develops and implements tools, software, and machine learning algorithms. The tool allows monitors to count the nominal number of articles on topics and see the level of audience engagement.

Engagements on websites are defined as news articles from each outlet's website shared on Facebook and the total number of likes, shares, and comments they have collected. Social media engagement encompasses likes, shares, and comments gathered from all social media channels (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, LinkedIn) for all posts, including photos, videos, and text. The assessment of engagement extends beyond the media outlets to encompass a variety of social media accounts, including those of politicians and opinion makers.

The tool aggregates articles, and the NSI monitoring team reviews them to identify potential disinformation and other information anomalies. However, the tool has several limitations. It is tailored, with Pikasa and NSI monitors handpicked for each observed account. Consequently, the total number of posts and articles includes only the observed accounts, excluding other accounts that may also be posting news. Engagement calculation consists of all shares, comments, and other interactions.

Moreover, private accounts can only be observed if officially designated as accounts of political leaders or fan pages. Consequently, some politicians' Facebook accounts may not be included in the analysis. Another limitation is related to access, as NSI can observe articles and posts published as far back as December 1, 2023.

Observed media that report from Kosovo in Serbian language

Alternativna, Gračanica online, Radio Kontakt Plus, Kosovo Online, KoSSev, Medija Centar, TV Most, Radio Kim, Radio Mitrovica Sever, Radio Televizija Gračanica, and RTK2

Observation period:

July 1 – July 31, 2024

The number of online media observed:

126 media reporting in Albanian and Serbian in Kosovo, 126 media reporting from Serbia, and 24 international media outlets

Monitoring goal:

Information disorders on the Internet and social media, including Websites, online news portals, Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram, in Kosovo, focusing on the Kosovo Serb information space.

Specific topics observed:

Preliminary census results in Kosovo, murder of a Serbian police officer by Kosovo Albanian prison escapee, possible lithium exploitation in Serbia

Background information about the topics of observation:

The 2024 Kosovo census, the first nationwide census in over a decade, took place from April 5 to May 17, 2024 (in some municipalities until May 24), after being delayed multiple times due to the COVID-19 pandemic and other procedural issues. Challenges included boycotts in northern Kosovo by Serb-majority municipalities, echoing similar problems from the 2011 census. According to preliminary results of the census published in July, Kosovo has 1.586.659 residents.

In July 2024, a Serbian police officer, Nikola Krsmanović, was killed, and his colleague, Vjekoslav Ilić, was seriously injured during a routine vehicle check in Loznica, near Serbia's western border with Bosnia. The attacker, Faton Hajrizi, identified as a Kosovo Albanian and a recent escapee from a low-security prison in Kosovo, opened fire on the officers before fleeing the scene. The incident sparked a two-day manhunt involving Serbian police and cooperation with Bosnian authorities, ending with Hajrizi's death in a police operation near Loznica.

The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Serbia and the European Union on critical raw materials was signed on July 19, 2024, during a high-level summit in Belgrade. The agreement was signed by Maroš Šefčovič, the European Commission's Vice-President for the European Green Deal, and Dubravka Đedović Handanović, Serbia's Minister of Mining and Energy. The agreement supports the development of value chains for critical raw materials, including lithium, to contribute to the EU's green transition.

Key findings

- Serbian media in Kosovo focused on visa liberalization, a police officer's murder, and the anniversary of the Staro Gracko massacre. The murder of the officer generated the highest audience engagement.
- Albanian media in Kosovo prioritized the same murder case, reactions to Kosovo's independent media commission law, and the absence of Vetëvendosje in consultations called by the President.

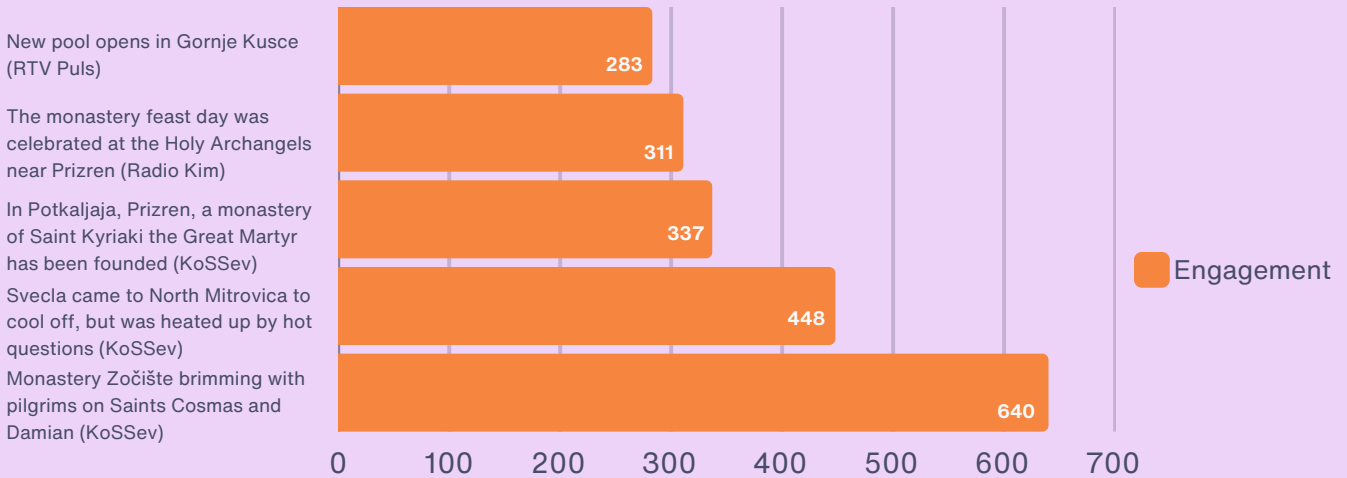
- Serbian-language media saw a decline in overall engagement since May 2024, unlike Albanian-language media, which maintained steady interaction levels.
- Misleading statements on census participation fines were issued by Kosovo's Statistics Agency, exaggerating penalties and downplaying boycotts in northern Kosovo.
- The murder of the Serbian policeman led to conflicting narratives. Serbian officials labeled it as "terrorism, " while Kosovo's Justice Minister implied connections to Serbian organized crime and lithium deals, both unsupported by evidence.
- Tabloids in Serbia escalated ethnic tensions by frequently using racial slurs like "Šiptar" (37 articles in July) and generalizing government actions to entire ethnic groups.
- Manipulative framing included associating road construction in a protected zone with "Albanians demolishing Serbian sacred sites, " fostering collective ethnic blame.
- RTK broadcast an unsubstantiated story from Slobodna Bosna about global leaders covertly exploiting Serbia's lithium reserves, connecting it to nationalist agendas.

Monitoring results

During the reporting period, the most active media outlet reporting in Serbian language from Kosovo was Kosovo Online, which published 2762 articles with 24,221 engagements. The same website also recorded the most engagements on social media.

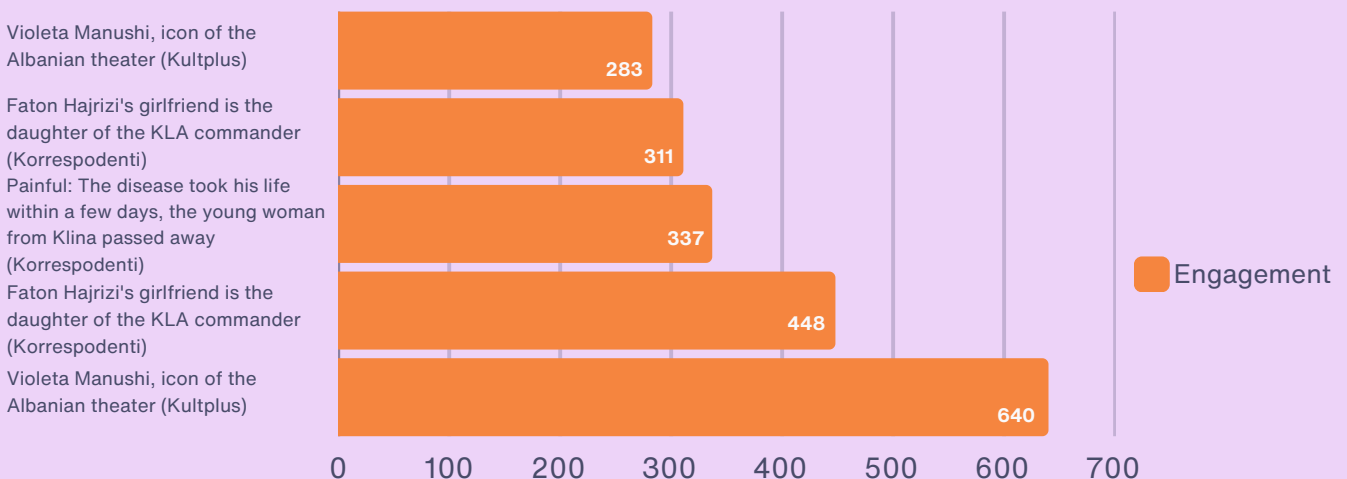
During July, Serbian-language media in Kosovo focused on visa liberalization for Coordination Directorate passports (23 articles). Other two notable topics included the murder of Serbian police officers by an escaped convict from Kosovo and his subsequent elimination (17 articles) and the anniversary of the mass murder of 14 Serbs in Staro Gracko (15 articles). The murder of the Serbian policeman generated the highest levels of audience engagement among the most reported topics. On the other hand, analysis of the most engaged articles on Facebook highlights audience preference for community-related news in July, particularly issues related to religious holidays. However, when compared to previous months, the overall engagement levels were notably the lowest recorded, as this has been noticeable since May 2024; we can now speak of the trend of decline in engagements.

Popular articles in Serbian language on Facebook



Typically, there are no overlaps between the most reported topics in Serbian and Albanian-language media in Kosovo. However, in July, there was one overlap – the murder of Serbian policemen by an escaped convict from Kosovo and his subsequent elimination (519 articles). This was followed by coverage of the adverse reaction of the EU, and some member states to the adoption of the Law on Independent Media Commission, which is not by EU acquis and Council of Europe (CoE) standards (461 articles) and absence of ruling Vetevendosje from the election day consultations set by the President Vjosa Osmani (388 articles). The most covered topic garnered the most engagement, too (7446). However, when examining the most popular individual articles on Facebook, sports and pop culture-related news overtook the audience engagement. In contrast to Serbian-language media, Albanian-language outlets maintained a similar level of engagement as in the previous month of June.

Popular articles in Albanian language on Facebook



During the reporting period, the most active media outlet reporting in Albanian language from Kosovo was Bota Sot, which published 11,332 articles with 62,100 engagements. However, the website that recorded the most engagements on social media was Klan Kosova, with 192,836 engagements, on 3,915 published articles in July.

As in previous instances, information disorders related to genocide were observed in July. The source of the manipulation was the Kosovo Prime Minister, who, on the anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide, praised the Government of Kosovo for establishing Memorial Day for the Genocide in Srebrenica. However, this political manipulation falsely linked the establishment of Memorial Day with the adoption of the 2013 Amnesty Law by Kurti.¹ The 2013 law was limited in time and scope and served as a mechanism to facilitate Kosovo Serb integration. It had no connection whatsoever to the Srebrenica genocide or war crimes committed in Kosovo.²

The preliminary results of the census have been an essential topic of discussion in the media in both languages. However, unverified information was observed in one of the articles by Kosovo Online,³ which reports in three languages that were primarily related to the census. Namely, the interlocutor claimed that “270.000 Albanians left Kosovo following visa liberalization.” There is no reliable data about the number of people or ethnic groups that left Kosovo after visa liberalization with the Schengen zone came into place in January 2024. Still, it could not have been 270k citizens, as this is the approximate overall population decline between the 2011 census and the 2024 census.

Similar to other monthly reports, information disorders related to the census perpetuated by institutional representatives were again observed in July. The head of the Statistics Agency of Kosovo informed the public that people who refused to register would be fined. He claimed that hundreds of people refused to register and that the fine for not registering is between 2000 and 20.000 euros.⁴ The number of people who refused to register must be more significant than hundreds due to the widespread boycott of the process in northern Kosovo.⁵ In contrast, according to the applicable law, the fine for individuals who refuse to participate in the census is 50 euros, not 2000 euros.

¹ <https://www.slobodnapress.org/a/25043461.html>

² <https://ekonomiaonline.com/kurti-11-vite-pas-kur-opozita-miratoi-projektligjin-per-amnistine-ge-i-fal-krimet-e-serbise-geveria-e-shpalli-11-korrikun-dite-perkujtimore-per-gjenocidin-ne-srebrenice/>

³ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/ekonomija/marsenic-popis-demantovao-kurtija-trende-depopulacije-kosova-30-7-2024>

⁴ <https://atvlive.tv/regjistrimi-i-popullise-kastrati-banoret-ge-kane-refuzuar-te-regjistrohen-dre-te-gjohiten/>

⁵ According to KAS estimates, in 2011, there were 39,150 inhabitants in northern Kosovo, while the 2024 census recorded only 6,746 inhabitants.

Another official-initiated campaign that raised concern over possible information disorder was related to the murder of the Serbian policeman in Loznica and the ensuing elimination of the perpetrator from Kosovo. This case represents a crown example of how the same event can be interpreted in Kosovo and Serbia with insurmountable differences. As the perpetrator of the murder of the policeman was identified as a Kosovar citizen who had, days before the incident, escaped a low-security prison in Kosovo, it presented a susceptible case that evoked negative feelings and a degree of inter-ethnic tensions. This did not prevent Kosovo and Serbia officials from interpreting the event through conspiratory lenses. For example, Kosovo's Minister of Justice, Albulena Haxhiu, claimed that the perpetrator escaped the prison with the help of "Serbian criminals."⁶ She also attempted to imply that the incident was connected⁷ to the signing of the lithium extraction deal in Serbia. The first statement incited much criticism toward the minister, with many opinion-makers⁸ asking for her resignation and accountability if any organized criminal groups from abroad can organize escapes of prisoners from Kosovo. Later in the month, the minister was interviewed by the prosecution⁹ about her allegations.

On the other hand, the Serbian Minister of Internal Affairs, Ivica Dačić, speculated that the motive behind the incident was linked to "terrorism coming from the territory of Kosovo",¹⁰ without concrete evidence to support such a claim. Such a claim so early in the investigation carries a risk of misleading the public and fueling narratives that could heighten tensions between Kosovo and Serbia. Given the strong indicators that the murder might have been an isolated act prompted by an unexpected check-up, attributing motives prematurely can distort public perception and potentially incite unnecessary fear or conflict. In fact, Serbia's debunking website, Raskrikavanje, also dealt with the Serbian tabloid's accusations of Albin Kurti for the incident. The article from Raskrikavanje critiques Srpski Telegraf for prematurely blaming Albin Kurti for the attack near Loznica, labeling it a terrorist act orchestrated by Kosovo, despite no evidence supporting this claim. The piece highlights how such speculative reporting fuels ethnic tensions and spreads disinformation, as Serbian officials and media framed the incident as politically motivated without concrete proof. Raskrikavanje emphasizes the lack of facts to substantiate these allegations and the potential harm of such narratives in deepening inter-ethnic mistrust.

6 <https://www.periskopi.com/haxhiu-hedh-dyshime-mbi-vrasjen-e-hajrizit-thote-se-ikja-e-te-burgosurve-u-be-me-ndihmen-e-grupeve-kriminale-serbe/>

7 <https://kossev.info/haxhiu-serb-policeman-shot-dead-on-eye-of-lithium-contract-signing-near-planned-mine-site/>

8 <https://www.periskopi.com/deklarata-skandaloze-e-ministres-haxhiu-per-arratisjet-kerkohet-dorehegja-e-saj-dhe-te-merret-ne-pyetje-nga-prokuroria/>

9 <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/specijalno-tuzilastvo-kosova-hadziu-ispitana-u-vezji-svojih-nedavnih-izjava-22-7-2024>

10 <https://www.rts.rs/vesti/hronika/5490550/ivica-dacic-loznica-.html>

11 <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Srpski-telegraf-oznacio-Kurtija-kao-krivca-za-napad-kod-Loznice-1368>

The case of the murder of the Serbian policeman instigated higher-than-usual frequency of use of the racial slur “šiptar” in the Serbian tabloids, with at least 37 such articles recorded in July.

Potential lithium extraction in Serbia was the topic of an article by Slobodna Bosna, which was broadcast in Kosovo by RTK. In previous months, RTK was already under public scrutiny for rebroadcasting suspected information disorders from the same media based in BiH, which led to significant internal struggles and resignations. This article from Slobodna Bosna, as analyzed by RTK Live¹², is rife with unsubstantiated claims, conspiracies, and inflammatory rhetoric that intertwines local and global political actors around the lithium mining issue in Serbia. It alleges covert agreements between Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and international leaders, including Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin, to exploit Serbia's lithium resources through systemic corruption linked to Rio Tinto. The narrative connects this to Vučić's broader "clero-nationalist" agenda, purportedly supported by the memorandum signed with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

Significant inconsistencies emerge, such as the unverified role of foreign leaders and companies like Elon Musk and Jared Kushner in Vučić's plans, alongside claims that the EU's support facilitates "Serbian World" expansionism.

Another article by Večernje Novosti, rebroadcasted by Kosovo Online¹³, also exhibited narratives that perpetuate political conspiracies. The article deals with the allegedly increasing number of inter-ethnic incidents against Kosovo Serbs, but the emotive language used in the article e.g. “ethnic cleansing” or “pogrom,” in the absence of a balanced perspective containing information such as results of investigations, raises questions about the honesty of the intent to investigate a potential problem seriously and suggests attempts to amplifying fear and polarizing narratives.

Development in the north, such as the shutdown of unlicensed gas stations, prompted another official-led information disorder. Kosovo's Minister of Internal Affairs, Xhelal Sveci, falsely claimed that one of the gas stations was “a branch of Russian Gazprom”¹⁴ which other analysts used to interpret the existence of the gas station allegedly owned by Gazprom as an attempt to extend Russia's influence in Kosovo. However, the gas station in question was privately owned by a Kosovar citizen as confirmed by the Ministry of Industry, Entrepreneurship and Trade of the Government of Kosovo (MINT).¹⁵

¹² <https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=671626>

¹³ <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/novosti-modrice-od-kurtijevog-jagodnog-zivota-ove-godine-srbi-napadnuti-67-puta-8-7>

¹⁴ <https://www.botsot.info/politika-lajme/2203461/u-mbyll-damari-i-gazpromit-rus-vijne-reagimet-ja-pse-permendet-isa-mustafa-per-rastin-e-kompanise-nis/>

¹⁵ <https://www.dukagjini.com/kush-qendron-pas-qompave-te-mbyllura-ne-veri-te-kosoves/>

An example of an information disorder likely prompted by the haste of a part of the media in Serbia was the rebroadcast of a satirical text by Kosovo playwright Jeton Neziraj titled "Public statement."¹⁶ The text announced a fictional cultural festival that would feature plays from Kosovo in Belgrade. Likely in response to the banning of the Miredita, Dobar dan festival, the author used alleged quotes of his colleagues from Belgrade and a series of other details about the plays that will be played. Several media in Serbia, including N1¹⁷ have published it as an actual public announcement rather than a satirical text.

The Serbian tabloids continued the practice of using inflammatory language to target Kosovo officials such as in this example: *Kurti is afraid of meeting Vučić! Petković: Dialogue is the only way to normalize relations, but the extremist from Priština is not interested!*¹⁸ Labeling Albin Kurti as an "extremist" contributes to a polarizing narrative and can be perceived as information disorder, as it seeks to delegitimize the other party.

Several articles in Serbian tabloids and mainstream online and print media manipulated their audience by using the concept of collective guilt to report on the intent of government authorities in Kosovo to build roads in the special protective zone in violation of the law. The use of the terms "Albanians" in titles *"Albanians are demolishing a Serbian sacred site to build a road"*¹⁹ and *"Albanians are demolishing a Serbian sacred site to build a road"*²⁰ attempts to collectivize the responsibility for specific individuals or government actions rather than attributing them to the relevant authorities or groups directly involved. This framing generalizes the actions as representative of an entire ethnic group, which can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and interethnic tensions.

¹⁶ <https://www.danas.rs/kultura/jeton-neziraj-saopstenje-za-javnost-nedelja-kosovskog-pozorista-u-beogradu-umetnicko-istrazivacki-projekat/>
<https://n1info.rs/kultura/tri-dana-beograd-ce-disati-albanski-iz-pristine-najavljen-nedelja-kosovskog-teatra-u-narodnom-pozoristu/>

¹⁷ <https://www.botasot.info/politika-lajme/2203461/u-mbyll-damari-i-gazpromit-rus-vijne-reagimet-ja-pse-permendet-isa-mustafa-per-rastin-e-kompanise-nis/> and <https://pravda.rs/2024/7/1/kurti-se-plasi-susreta-sa-vucicem-petkovic-dijalog-je-jedini-nacin-za-normalizaciju-odnosa-ali-pristinskog-ekstremistu-to-ne-zanima/>

¹⁹ <https://www.dukagjini.com/kush-qendron-pas-pompave-te-mbyllura-ne-veri-te-kosoves/>

²⁰ <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/625643/Albanci-zatiru-tragove-svetinje>

This report is prepared by New Social Initiative, a civil society organization from North Mitrovica to ultimately impact inclusiveness, trust-building, democratization processes and good governance in Kosovo. While doing so, NSI follows its vision of an inclusive society built on trust and appreciation among its communities, in which citizens from all ethnic groups actively participate in the society and its governance.