

Mapping Disinformation Narratives in Albania: First Working Group Report

ALBANIA WORKING GROUP ON
DISINFORMATION

May 2025

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DISINFORMATION

This report summarizes the first meeting of the Albania Working Group on Disinformation held on May 23, 2025. The discussion was conducted under Chatham House Rules. The insights and findings from this meeting will contribute to the CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory and inform regional approaches to combating disinformation across the Balkans.

Most importantly, the working group serves as a real-time testing ground for the observatory's methodologies. The CIDC expects it to provide a living laboratory where theoretical frameworks meet practical application. Over the six-month timeline, the observatory can implement refinements based on expert feedback, test classification systems against emerging narratives, and evaluate the effectiveness of monitoring protocols under real-world conditions. This iterative process will create a continuous improvement loop between the observatory's technical development and the working group's expertise, ensuring that the platform evolves to address the dynamic nature of Bulgaria's disinformation landscape while contributing comparable data to the broader regional initiative.

For more information about the CIDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory, visit, www.disinfobs.com. To find out more about the CIDC, visit www.aubg.edu/cidc. Contact us at cidc@aubg.edu.

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MAPPING DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN ALBANIA

Preliminary Report

June 2025

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Distribution Channels of Disinformation
3. Key Narratives and Disinformation Taxonomy
4. Keywords and Linguistic Patterns
5. Challenges and Gaps
6. Next Steps
7. Conclusion

1. Introduction

This report presents an initial mapping of disinformation narratives circulating within the Albanian media ecosystem, based on the first meeting of the Balkan Working Group on Disinformation. The session marked the kickoff of a **six-month project** dedicated to analysing, decoding, and countering disinformation in Albania.

The project aims to produce evidence-based taxonomies, a searchable database of keywords, and actionable media literacy tools. This report serves as a baseline summary of the discussions and insights generated during the first phase of the initiative.

Key objectives include:

- Mapping dominant disinformation narratives and sources
- Identifying vulnerable audience groups and regional variations
- Analysing the role of linguistic patterns in shaping disinformation
- Designing effective counter-narratives and media literacy interventions

2. Distribution Channels of Disinformation

a. Traditional Media

- **High centralization in Tirana** creates an **information vacuum** in peripheral regions, particularly in areas such as Shkodra and Vlora.
- **Ideological ownership** of many outlets facilitates the unchecked spread of biased or misleading content.
- Legacy media often act as amplifiers of political party narratives and clickbait journalism.

b. Social Media Platforms

- **TikTok** has emerged as a critical vector for disinformation, particularly among younger demographics. However, systematic data on audience segmentation remains lacking.
- The **government-led campaign to shut down TikTok** is an example of an illiberal response to media ecosystem challenges, raising further public distrust.
- Influencers, entertainers, and pseudo-experts play a substantial role in shaping political perceptions and popular discourse.

c. Foreign Media Influence

- Certain narratives are believed to be influenced or seeded by **foreign actors**, notably:
 - **China** and **Iran** via state-backed media and social networks.
 - **Türkiye**, often through cultural and religious soft power channels.

d. Informal Channels

- **Messaging apps** and closed Facebook groups are used to circulate conspiracy theories and politically motivated disinformation, especially during electoral periods.

3. Key Narratives and Disinformation Taxonomy

Based on the initial mapping, the following **persistent narrative clusters** were identified:

3.1 COVID-19 and Public Health Conspiracies

- Vaccine skepticism and **health system distrust**.
- Alternative cures and fearmongering about long-term side effects.
- Claims of a **globalist conspiracy** orchestrated by Western powers.

3.2 Soros-Related Conspiracy Theories

- Depictions of **George Soros** as the architect of Albania's "moral and political decay".
- Anti-NGO narratives painting civil society actors as foreign agents.

3.3 Ukraine War Narratives

- Framing the **West as responsible** for the war in Ukraine.
- Pro-Russian disinformation minimizing Russian aggression and promoting narratives of Western hypocrisy.

3.4 European Integration and Passport Narratives

- Politicization of **EU integration progress**.
- Unrealistic portrayals of visa-free travel and European citizenship opportunities during electoral campaigns.

3.5 Education and Healthcare Disinformation

- Misleading narratives targeting the **education system's quality** and the trustworthiness of healthcare services.

- Exploitation of public sector dissatisfaction for political gains.

4. Keywords and Linguistic Patterns

Methodological Approach

The initial phase of the project explored methodological pathways for extracting and analysing keywords and linguistic patterns that underpin disinformation narratives in Albania. Two complementary approaches are being adopted:

1. AI-powered keyword analysis, using tools such as Python-based text mining, as demonstrated by Georgi Angelov, to detect recurring terms, collocations, and phrase structures across large corpora of media content.
2. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as emphasized by Irena, to contextualize and interpret these patterns within the specific cultural, political, and historical discourses of Albania.

Together, these methodologies seek to move beyond surface-level keyword lists and towards an understanding of how language is used strategically to sow distrust, polarize society, and manipulate public perceptions.

Initial Keyword Clusters

Preliminary mapping based on discussions and existing reports (Albanian Media Institute, Faktoje.org) suggests the following keyword clusters:

a. Anti-Western / Geopolitical Manipulation

- “*Perëndimi dekadent*” (the decadent West)
- “*Luftë kundër Rusisë*” (war against Russia)
- “*Shpërbërja e BE-së*” (disintegration of the EU)

b. Anti-Soros / Civil Society Demonization

- “*Plani i Sorosit*” (Soros plan)
- “*Agentët e Sorosit*” (Soros’ agents)
- “*NGO anti-shqiptare*” (anti-Albanian NGOs)
- “*Rrjetet e huaja*” (foreign networks)

c. Health and COVID-19 Conspiracies

- “*Vaksina vdekjeprurëse*” (deadly vaccine)
- “*Kontrolli përmes vaksinës*” (control via vaccine)
- “*Globalistët dhe Covid-i*” (globalists and Covid)
- “*Mjekët të blerë*” (bought doctors)

d. Migration and European Integration

- “*Pasaporta europiane për të gjithë*” (European passport for all)
- “*BE na mashtron*” (EU deceives us)
- “*Emigrimi si shpëtim*” (emigration as salvation)

- “*Shqipëria jashtë BE-së*” (Albania outside of the EU)

Linguistic and Discursive Patterns

Beyond keywords, the team identified discursive strategies that contribute to the persuasive power of disinformation:

1. Binary Oppositions

- Framing the world in stark dualities: *good vs. evil, patriot vs. traitor, East vs. West, traditional values vs. moral corruption*.
- This rhetorical device serves to polarize and simplify complex issues, leaving no room for nuance.

2. Emotional Triggering

- Recurrent use of fear appeals, such as existential threats to national identity or physical safety.
- Frequent deployment of anger-inducing frames, particularly against political elites, NGOs, and foreign actors.
- Use of betrayal narratives to activate a sense of grievance.

3. Personalization and Anecdotes

- Preference for anecdotal "evidence" over statistical or scientific data.
- Use of fabricated testimonials, especially in health and migration-related disinformation.
- Narratives structured around the "ordinary citizen betrayed by the elites."

4. Conspiracy Logic

- Use of causal chains that link unrelated events into coherent but false narratives.
- Construction of hidden power structures allegedly controlling politics, health systems, and education.
- Presentation of disinformation as “truths that the mainstream media won’t tell you”, thus fostering further mistrust.

Observations on Narrative Evolution

- High adaptability: Disinformation actors rapidly adapt their language and narratives to current events (e.g. elections, EU summits, international crises).
- Cross-platform migration: Linguistic patterns are modified to fit the stylistic norms of each platform (memes on TikTok, long-form rants on Facebook, pseudo-academic discourse in Telegram groups).
- Localization: Global disinformation tropes are systematically localized through Albanian-specific cultural codes, linguistic references, and historical analogies

Implications for Counter-Disinformation

- Simple keyword blacklists will not suffice; linguistic patterns must be analysed in context.
- Culturally grounded counter-narratives are needed to neutralize appeals to national identity and moral panic.

- Platform-specific strategies must address the different forms and tones that disinformation takes across various media ecosystems.
- Continuous real-time monitoring is required to keep pace with the rapidly evolving discourse.

Top-Level Categories

Category	Description	Examples
Geopolitical Manipulation	Narratives promoting anti-Western, pro-Russian, or isolationist sentiments.	NATO as aggressor; EU falling apart; Russia defending Orthodox values
Anti-Civil Society / Anti-Soros	Targeting NGOs, civic actors, and foreign donors as destabilizers.	Soros plan; foreign-funded traitors; NGO mafia
Public Health and Science Denial	Disinformation about healthcare, vaccines, Covid-19, scientific consensus.	Vaccines as population control; alternative cures; "bought doctors"
Migration and EU Integration	Misleading or manipulative narratives around EU accession, migration opportunities.	EU cheats Albania; European passports for everyone; emigration as the only solution
Electoral Manipulation	False or misleading information designed to influence election outcomes or perceptions.	Fake promises; manipulated polls; foreign election interference
Conspiracy Theories / Metanarratives	Grand conspiracies connecting disparate events into unified but false explanations.	New world order; depopulation plans; "deep state" in Albania

Subcategories and Audience Targeting

Subcategory	Typical Target Audience	Distribution Channels
Anti-NGO / Anti-Soros	Politically disaffected adults; pro-government media consumers	Facebook, mainstream TV, partisan outlets
Vaccine Skepticism	Parents; poorly educated rural audiences; religious groups	Facebook, messaging apps (Viber, WhatsApp), TikTok
Emigration Myths	Young people seeking better prospects	TikTok, Instagram, influencers, clickbait portals
Electoral Fraud Claims	Supporters of losing parties; anti-system voters	Facebook groups, Telegram, partisan TV
Metaconspiracies (deep state, globalist plot)	Cross-generational; conspiracy-driven communities	Facebook groups, YouTube channels, clickbait websites

Linguistic Features to Monitor

Feature	Examples
Loaded keywords	decadent West, Soros mafia, vaccine genocide
Binary oppositions	patriots vs traitors; people vs elites
Emotional triggers	fear, shame, betrayal, anger, indignation
Anecdotal evidence	"I know a doctor who said..."
Appeals to secrecy	"Things the media won't tell you"; "Wake up!"

5. Challenges and Gaps

Data and Methodology

- Lack of **standardized taxonomy** tailored to the Albanian context.
- Limited **demographic data** on vulnerability and media consumption habits.
- **Youth disengagement** from quality information and critical analysis.

Structural Factors

- **Media concentration** in Tirana hampers coverage of rural and peripheral regions.
- Absence of comprehensive **digital literacy education** in schools.
- **Political ownership of media outlets** skews the public discourse environment.

Technological Gaps

- Inadequate **platform-specific monitoring tools** for TikTok and encrypted apps.
- Insufficient **cross-sectoral collaboration** between tech, civil society, and academia.

6. Next Steps

Data Collection

- Analyse reports from the **Albanian Media Institute** and **Faktoje.org**
- Develop **platform-specific mapping** of disinformation (TikTok, Facebook, closed groups).

Methodological Development

- Build a **searchable keyword database** for journalists and researchers.
- Combine **AI analysis** (Python-based text mining) with **qualitative discourse analysis**.

Media Literacy

- Create **practical classroom materials** on media literacy, targeting both students and educators.
- Address **youth media engagement** by promoting deeper understanding of information ecosystems.

Community Engagement

- Facilitate **regional focus groups** to map localized disinformation impacts.
- Engage **journalists outside Tirana** to diversify coverage and narratives.

7. Conclusion

The first phase of this project confirms that Albania's disinformation landscape is **highly complex**, influenced by:

- Internal political dynamics.
- Foreign influence operations.
- Structural weaknesses in the media system.
- Gaps in public media literacy.

Moving forward, the success of the mapping effort will depend on **multi-disciplinary collaboration**, **rigorous methodological refinement**, and **broad civic engagement**. Understanding linguistic patterns, audience segmentation, and regional disparities will be crucial to building a **robust counter-disinformation ecosystem** in Albania.

AWG Members and Meeting 1 Attendees List

May 23rd, 2025

Member Name	Affiliation	Position	Sector	Attendance
Alba Cela	AIIS	Executive director	Civil Society	Yes
Ersida Teliti	Qendra "Konsumatori Shqiptar"	Executive director	Civil society	Yes
Ines Stasa	University of Tirana	Lecturer	Academia	Yes
Irena Myzeqari	European University of Tirana	Lecturer	Academia	Yes
Juliana Cici	Indepe	Senior legal consultant	Private sector	No
Klea Muka	AUBG	Researcher	Academia	Yes
Klodiana Gorica	University of Tirana	Lecturer	Academia	No
Migena Kalthi	CSO - Qendra e konsumatorit shqiptar	Project manager	Civil society	Yes
Noela Mahmutaj	Institute of European Studies	Researcher	Academia/ Civil society	No

Sector Representation:

- Academia/Research: 5
- Civil Society: 4
- Government/Policy:
- Journalism/Media: 0
- Private Sector: 1

Meeting Leadership:

- **Coordinator:** Irena Myzeqari, Dr.
- **Moderator:** Ines Stasa
- **CIDDC-Sensika Disinformation Observatory overview:**