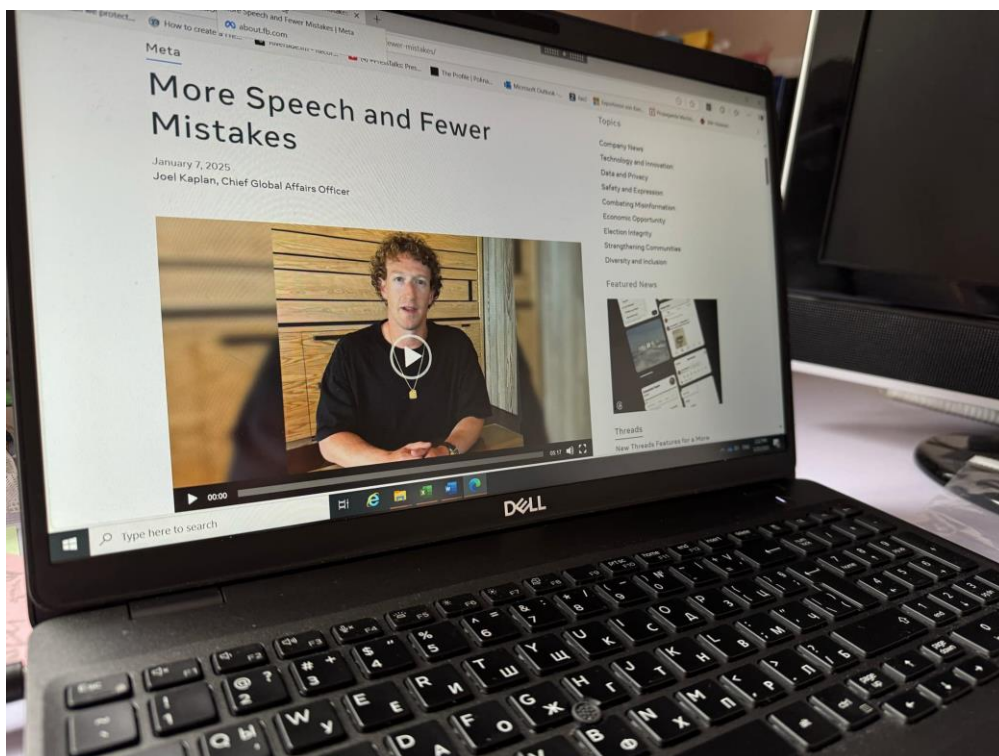


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Media Programme South East Europe

## ***Fact-Checking Organisations in the Balkans after US Funding Cuts***

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On the 7<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, Meta announced the shutdown of its third-party fact-checking programme in the US only.<sup>1</sup> Its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, said they have no immediate plans for a cancellation in the UK and the EU. Besides that, the new policy of Meta cannot be implemented there due to regulations such as the Digital Services Act. This forces very large online platforms<sup>2</sup> to take more responsibility for their content, with a failure to do so making them liable to be fined. It is time to get back to our roots around free expression on Facebook and Instagram, Zuckerberg said in a video statement.<sup>3</sup> Donald Trump and his Republican allies have been qualifying fact-checking as a form of censorship.<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, Zuckerberg's decision came shortly before the inauguration of the 47<sup>th</sup> US President.

<sup>1</sup> [Meta to replace 'biased' fact-checkers with moderation by users \(Last access: 25-03-2025\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/dsa-vlops> (Last access: 14-04-2025)

<sup>3</sup> <https://about.fb.com/news/2025/01/meta-more-speech-fewer-mistakes/> (Last access: 25-03-2025)

<sup>4</sup> [Angered by first fact-check, Trump turns on Twitter – DW – 05/29/2020 \(Last access: 14-04-2025\)](#)

*Meta's third-party fact-checking programme will be replaced by a community notes system, which was previously developed by the social media platform X, owned by Elon Musk. It gives users the possibility of adding notes and context to posts that they find false or controversial. This is a different approach in comparison to fact-checkers with a professional background, who should be doing a thorough verification of information. Moreover, it raises the question of whether the community note is just the opinion of someone or if it is based on evidence. In addition to that, it should be a user-friendly function, which is easy to find, compelling to use and not dependent on algorithms. A clear distinction should be made between fact-checking and content moderation on social media. While the first is about verifying the accuracy of content, the second is about ensuring that posts are not harmful (as they are when they contain, for example, harassment, copyright infringements or hate speech).<sup>5</sup> Still, many users do not understand the differences between fact-checking and Meta's in-house moderation. Sometimes they even blame the fact-checking organisations for issues that are more a matter of internal moderation than of fact verification.*

*What does this decision of Meta mean for fact-checking organisations in South East Europe? What are the biggest challenges? How can fact-checkers keep their jobs and sustain their fight against disinformation? We contacted 12 fact-checking organisations in the region to explore their concerns, possible solutions and how they see their future. The article explores the biggest issues concerning fact-checking in South East Europe after Meta's decision and the funding cuts by the Trump administration.*

## Fact-Checking in the Balkans

Fact-checking in South East Europe is well established. The first organisation in the Western Balkans dealing with this issue was Istinomer, founded in 2009 in Serbia.<sup>6</sup> Its founding mission was to prove the accountability of statements made by politicians. Similarly, the goal of Istinomjer (Zašto Ne) in Bosnia and Herzegovina is to evaluate the announcements of public office holders in terms of their consistency, truthfulness and fulfilment of the promises they make in public. Another example is the Bulgarian organisation Factcheck.bg. It aims to verify allegations on topics of public importance and to help journalists differentiate facts from false information in social networks, traditional media, public statements of politicians and other sources. Most of the fact-checking organisations in the region also organise for journalists, students and citizens training courses on combating disinformation. These media outlets contribute to society by monitoring the media environment and giving citizens a chance for direct engagement when they find false or misleading facts.

Several fact-checking outlets in South East Europe have been actively participating in Meta's third-party fact-checking programme. Ana Brakus from the Croatian fact-checking outlet Faktograf.hr says, "The programme had multiple growing edges, but by all accounts, it has been very effective."

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/769493/EPRS\\_ATAG\(2025\)769493\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2025/769493/EPRS_ATAG(2025)769493_EN.pdf) (Last access: 17-04-2025)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.istinomer.rs/> (Last access: 12-03-2025)

## Financial Cuts and Fear of Disinformation Spread

The third-party programme of Meta was officially launched in December 2016.<sup>7</sup> In the Balkans, it was established three years later, in 2019.<sup>8</sup> The journalist Dusica Tomovic writes in her article for The Fix that a potential shutdown could undermine efforts against disinformation, with studies highlighting Meta's struggles with non-English content moderation in the region.<sup>9</sup>

Meta was relying on fact-checkers certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) and the European Fact Checking Standards Network (EFCN). Most of the fact-checking organisations are members of these organisations and they have additional sources of funding. However, if Meta downsizes its third-party fact-checking programme, this might lead to financial shortages. Fact-checking organisations might be also forced to reorganise their activities. In her article, Tomovic writes that, according to their financial statements, most of those Balkan fact-checking organisations have been earning at least 200 000 € per year from commercial contracts with Meta. Another problem is the freezing of aid funds by Donald Trump's administration. The three important funders for internationally strengthening democracy have been the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the State Department, and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).<sup>10</sup> The financial information of the fact-checking organisations shows that they were receiving NED funding, which was also stopped. Vladimir Petreski from the Metamorphosis Foundation in North Macedonia says, "These cancellations have an outsized financial impact on our organisation, since we have to search for new sources of funding, taking away the energy from our day-to-day fact-checking work."

In an open letter to Mark Zuckerberg, published on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January 2025, fact-checkers worldwide criticised the decision and warned of potential global consequences, such as undermining the efforts to promote accurate information.<sup>11</sup> The letter was signed, among others, by Factcheck.bg in Bulgaria; Raskrinkavanje in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Metamorphosis in North Macedonia; Istinomer in Serbia; Istinomjer in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Faktoje.al in Albania; Faktograf in Croatia; Factual.ro in Romania; and StopFalse.md in the Republic of Moldova.

In the past years, some of the third-party fact-checking organisations worldwide have been accused of being biased. Another criticism was that the fact-checking process is not transparent enough and that it led to conclusions and results that favour certain ideological

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/government-nonprofits/blog/misinformation-resources> (Last access: 12-03-2025)

<sup>8</sup> <https://thefix.media/2025/2/3/metasp-fact-checking-shutdown-sparks-fears-of-disinfo-crisis-in-balkans> (Last access: 12-03-2025)

<sup>9</sup> <https://thefix.media/2025/2/3/metasp-fact-checking-shutdown-sparks-fears-of-disinfo-crisis-in-balkans> (Last access: 14-03-2025)

<sup>10</sup> [Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future? | Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#) (Last access: 25-03-2025)

<sup>11</sup> [An open letter to Mark Zuckerberg from the world's fact-checkers, nine years later - Poynter](#) (Last access: 25-03-2025)

views. Despite this critique, Meta's decision additionally discredits professional and reliable fact-checkers. This makes them vulnerable to harassment and attacks and blocks the strategic development of their organisations and projects. Most of the fact-checking outlets say that this would disadvantage users, since they have limited access to verified fact-checked information. The spread of false facts could also impact negatively the democratic process in the Balkans.

## Harassment Campaigns against Fact-Checkers

In 2023, the Croatian fact-checking organisation Faktograf, in cooperation with Tijana Cvjetičanin from the Zašto ne association in Bosnia and Herzegovina, conducted the first European survey that aimed at exploring the impact of harassment and disinformation targeting fact-checking outlets.<sup>12</sup> The study has documented experiences of coordinated campaigns against journalists and fact-checkers. A total of 41 out of the 68 verified signatories of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Code of Principles in Europe took part in the survey. Thirty-two of them were part of Meta's third-party fact-checking programme. The results showed that 90 percent of respondents were experiencing harassment from political or other actors. The survey pointed out that cases of intimidation happen more often in Southern Europe than in the other parts of the continent. This indicates that the fact-checkers in the Balkans are already under attack. Three respondents pointed out that they were harassed by other media. All of them come from South East Europe, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia.

These results reveal that fact-checkers are already working in a hostile environment. That is why media experts are warning that Meta's decision could lead to their being further discredited and that it gives autocratic leaders the licence to attack fact-checking organisations.

There is already proof that these fears are well-founded. The fact-checking outlet Istinomer in Serbia claims that it was a target of aggressive attacks from government-aligned media outlets and political figures. Its Editor-in-Chief, Milena Popovic, said that tabloids and mainstream pro-government media falsely framed Meta's decision as a victory against so-called media tyrants and censors, using it as an opportunity to discredit independent media. Increased levels of online attacks against fact-checkers were also reported in North Macedonia after Meta's announcement. The fact-checkers agree that these acts contribute to more dangerous working conditions for independent fact-checkers. It also makes it difficult to engage with audiences in an environment in which disinformation is actively promoted and spread by influential political and media actors.

Another concern is the spread of Russian propaganda in the Balkans. The step back from fact-checking could lead to a more extensive spread of misinformation on social media, especially in South East Europe, which is vulnerable to Russian disinformation. Without fact-checking,

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<sup>12</sup> <https://faktograf.hr/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/preliminary-survey-report-final.pdf> (Last access: 14-03-2025)

the effects of divisive and harmful content would become viral, threatening democracy and media freedom.

Vladimir Petreski from North Macedonia points to an increased level of scams in the past year in the Macedonian language. He explains that the editors and journalists from the Vistinomer.mk fact-checking website, which he runs at the Metamorphosis Foundation, are observing more elaborate and persistent scam posts, with much more refined and believable content. Petreski is also warning about another trend. Russian propaganda is becoming more brazen and open, since Kremlin propagandists are under the impression they no longer have to hide the disinformation they spread behind carefully crafted language, as they need not fear fact-checkers as much as before.<sup>13</sup>

## The Future of Fact-Checking in South East Europe

The regional approach of the fact-checking organisations in the Balkans gives hope that they will be able to deal with crises. Milena Popovic from Istinomer shared the opinion that collaboration through joint investigations and coordinated responses to disinformation must be enhanced. In her view, advocacy efforts should be pushed for increased platform accountability, especially through the new EU legislation that addresses disinformation.

There are already established regional initiatives, such as SEE Check, which was founded in 2020. It is a network of six fact-checking organisations (Fake News Tragač, Faktograf.hr, Raskrikavanje.rs, Raskrinkavanje.ba, Raskrinkavanje.me, and Razkrinkavanje.si) from five countries in South East Europe that aims to promote media accountability, to improve media literacy and to combat disinformation. Some of the goals of SEE Check include enhancing research capabilities in the region for local and regional comparative media analysis, strengthening the capacity to influence policy development in the fields of countering disinformation and promoting media literacy. Vladimir Petreski also sees the solution in regional cooperation. According to him, quoting recent research, 50–80 percent of disinformation in the Western Balkans comes from abroad in the form of Kremlin influence, climate disinformation and conspiracy theories. He thinks that much more research on the issue is needed, both regionally and on the national level, in the form of reports, polls and analysis.

The main issue for fact-checking organisations remains their financial sustainability. Kristina Hristova, the Head of Factcheck.bg, said that fact-checking projects in the region should be supported by other programmes with the aim of filling the gap that will be left with the withdrawal of American funds and the big tech giants. In addition to that, new business models are needed to secure the existence of fact-checking outlets. Ana Brakus from

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<sup>13</sup> Petreski gives examples with social media accounts such as Dali krajot vaka mirisa or Ludata Joci Fan Klub, previously known to spread disinformation, and continue their work unabated in North Macedonia.

Faktograf.hr makes the appeal: "This is a moment to invest in media, in fact-checking, in good journalism. Because facts and verified information have never been so important, and never so belittled, especially in our region." She remarks that the core funding for fact verification is crucial and not one for side projects. In her opinion, a source for developing innovative approaches could come from other parts of the world, such as Africa, where media outlets are also in a difficult situation. She highlighted how journalists on this continent have, for years, found creative ways to produce and share their content, such as short interview formats on radio shows, while also adapting quickly and effectively to multiple languages and diverse communities.

Fact-checking organisations in the Balkans are going through a difficult time. However, they are showing an ability to adapt to new geopolitical challenges in order to sustain their existence. As represented in this paper, cooperation is the key.

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