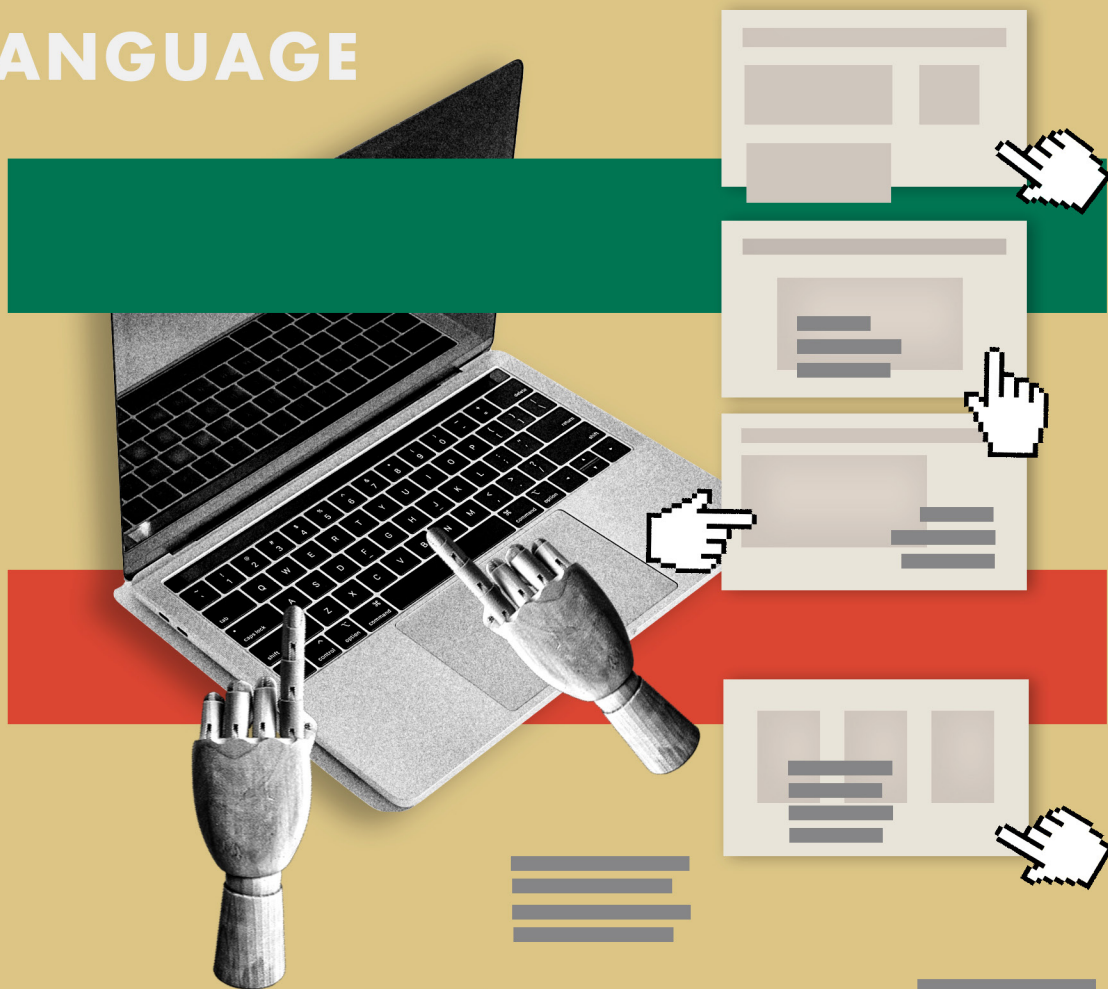


# MEDIA ANALYSIS: IRAN'S PROPAGANDA IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE





MEDIA ANALYSIS:

# IRAN'S PROPAGANDA IN ALBANIAN LANGUAGE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## I. Introduction 7

Iran's Role in the Western Balkans 8

Iran's Role in Albania 10

Methodological Note 12

## II. Findings 14

Key themes 14

World News 15

Geopolitics 16

Army and Security 17

Iranian Politics and Society 18

Selected Themes 19

The European Union 19

Human Rights 20

The Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK) 21

## III. Conclusion and recommendations 23



# I. Introduction

Iran's influence in the Western Balkans through conventional political and economic interactions is modest. However, its engagement in the region via proxies, intelligence operations, and supporting opposition groups hints at the region's importance in Iran's global strategy.<sup>1</sup> While the region's potential to serve as a base for future proxy conflicts between Iran and the West seems small, it warrants careful analysis, given the region's growing strategic significance for Iran.

The diplomatic relationship between Albania and Iran, established in 1999, has been historically complex and recently has been fraught with tension. Iran has attempted to extend its cultural influence in Albania through activities such as funding religious and literary publications and establishing active Iranian associations. However, relations soured significantly after Albania accused Iran of launching a massive cyberattack on its digital infrastructure in the summer of 2022. The attack, allegedly conducted by four Iran-affiliated groups, aimed to disrupt public services, steal data and seize control of government communications. Albania's allegations were supported by findings from Microsoft, and the incident garnered solidarity from NATO, the US, the EU and the UK.

Another major point of contention is Albania's hosting of the Mujahedeen El-Khalq (MEK), an Iranian opposition group that seeks to overthrow Iran's theocratic government. With about 3,000 MEK members currently housed in Albania's Camp Ashraf-3, Iran views Albania's support as a direct provocation. The presence of the MEK, combined with the recent cyberattack incident, has escalated tensions between the two nations, potentially impacting on the wider geopolitical landscape and ongoing negotiations about Iran's nuclear program.

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<sup>1</sup> "Geopolitical influences of external powers in Western Balkans", 2021, available at [https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf) accessed 31.03.2023.

Against this backdrop, examining Iran's public diplomacy in Albania through its state-sponsored media outlets is a crucial and relevant task, particularly as information warfare forms a key component of modern geopolitical strategy. In the context of growing tensions between Albania and Iran, this investigation into Iran's messaging is a critical step towards understanding its influence and intentions.

This analysis provides valuable insights into Iran's public diplomacy tactics and focus areas, including its stance on the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK), the European Union, and other themes of interest. Moreover, as disinformation and propaganda campaigns can significantly influence public opinion and potentially destabilize societies, studying these messages is a fundamental part of maintaining national security and public awareness. Despite the modest social media interaction rates for Pars Today's content in Albanian, it is important to consider these messages in the broader context of Iran's diplomatic activities and public diplomacy strategy.



## **Iran's Role in the Western Balkans**

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Iran's relations with the Western Balkan countries date back to the establishment of relations between Iran and Yugoslavia in the Non-Aligned Movement, but its real influence in the region began during Bosnia's war for independence from Yugoslavia, when Iran was involved in sending arms and volunteer troops to support Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegovic, who had established ties with Iran after the Islamic Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Iran's interest in expanding its influence in the Western Balkans is attributed to religious, ideological and geopolitical factors. The changing dynamics of the Western Balkans, and the increasing

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<sup>2</sup> "Iran's pursuit of soft power in the Balkans", 2022, available at <https://thecradle.co/article-view/21690/irans-pursuit-of-soft-power-in-the-balkans> , accessed 31.03.2023.



influence of external actors such as Turkey, the Gulf states and Iran, shed light on the emerging use of religion as a tool for soft power and realpolitik. As these actors weave Islam into their foreign policy strategies, the region is witnessing an evolving landscape of geopolitics intertwined with religious diplomacy. Iran's role in this equation, while not as pronounced as that of Turkey or the Gulf states, still merits attention.

From an ideological point of view, Iran aims to spread its Islamic Revolution throughout the world. Besides being related to the universality of Islam as a faith, the expansion of the revolution is the only way the Iranian revolution can survive.<sup>3</sup> In the post-1990s era, the interplay of religion and politics has become more pronounced in the region, significantly shaped by the influence of these external actors. Unlike Turkey, with its historic links to the Balkans through their shared Ottoman past, Iran's approach to the region has been more tempered and less overt. Yet, the employment of religion as an instrument of foreign policy is a common theme that also applies to Iran, mixing elements of cultural diplomacy with realpolitik.<sup>4</sup>

Iran's economic ties with the Balkans encounter several hurdles. As a revolutionary nation, ideology significantly shapes Iran's stance, often overshadowing strategic considerations in its economic engagements. Tehran does not have a well-defined strategy for economic diplomacy that aligns with the unique economic priorities and needs of each region. Consequently, these factors contribute to the complexity of Iran's economic relationships in the Western Balkans. Serbia stands out among Western Balkans countries for having the most extensive economic ties with Iran. The conflict in Ukraine and the subsequent interruption of Russian oil supplies to Europe have led Serbia to explore alternative sources for oil and chemical fertilizers, turning towards Iran. In exchange, Serbia plans

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Eleni Koppa (2021) Turkey, Gulf States and Iran in the Western Balkans: more than the Islamic factor?, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29:2, 251-263, DOI: [10.1080/14782804.2020.1754769](https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1754769)

<sup>4</sup> Maria Eleni Koppa (2021) Turkey, Gulf States and Iran in the Western Balkans: more than the Islamic factor?, *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 29:2, 251-263, DOI: [10.1080/14782804.2020.1754769](https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2020.1754769)

to export its wheat to Iran.<sup>5</sup>

From a strategic viewpoint, Iran's presence in the region is worth noting for its potential implications. Iran is known to exercise its soft power strategically, often providing support and guidance to various groups and political factions through proxies. Yet, Iran's influence in the Western Balkans remains modest when it comes to traditional levers of power such as economics, politics or military strength.<sup>6</sup> Despite this, Iran's strategic positioning in the world, serving as a bridge between East and West, extends naturally to the Western Balkans. There is an observed increase in Iran's cultural and religious activities in the region, likely as a countermove against EU and US activities on the ground, and a strategic alignment with actors holding anti-Western sentiments. Thus, the region has emerged as an area of strategic interest for Iran.



## Iran's Role in Albania

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Albania and Iran officially established relations in 1999. In the Albanian context, Iran has endeavored to develop its influence in the field of culture, philosophy and literature, funding publications of basically religious content of the Shiite sect as well as publications by Albanian poets who have written in Persian. The two most active Iranian associations in the country are the Saadi Shirazi Cultural Foundation and the Flladi (Breeze) Cultural and Religious Association, established to substitute for the "Quran" Religious Association, which was forced to shut down in 2005. The Saadi Shirazi Cultural Foundation mainly publishes Persian classics as well as Albanian authors

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<sup>5</sup> "Iran's pursuit of soft power in the Balkans", 2022, available at <https://thecradle.co/article-view/21690/irans-pursuit-of-soft-power-in-the-balkans>, accessed 31.03.2023.

<sup>6</sup> "Geopolitical influences of external powers in Western Balkans", 2021, available at [https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Geopolitical-Influences-of-External-Powers-in-the-Western-Balkans_0.pdf) accessed 31.03.2023.

who wrote in Persian.<sup>7</sup> What stands out especially from these literary publications is that they are often taken out of the Ottoman context in which they were written and attired with references to the Iranian Revolution. This appears to be an attempt to create artificial connections between the Albanian and Iranian cultures as well as to disseminate positive narratives about the current political spirit of Iran.

On September 7, 2022, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama announced the immediate termination of diplomatic ties with the Islamic Republic of Iran. This decision followed accusations that Tehran orchestrated a large-scale cyberattack on Albania's digital infrastructure on July 15 that year. Rama stated that four Iran-affiliated groups had carried out the attack, aiming to paralyze the country's public digital services, steal data and hijack government communications. These allegations were confirmed by the US cybersecurity firm Microsoft,<sup>8</sup> revealing that the hackers had breached around 10 per cent of the country's governmental digital network since May 2021. The incident drew official support for Tirana from NATO, the US, the EU and Britain.<sup>9</sup> The cyberattacks on Albania not only disrupted the government's functioning and attempted to erode trust in financial institutions, but also led to the leakage of a vast amount of confidential information.<sup>10</sup> Iran dismissed accusations of carrying out the cyberattacks as baseless and accused the Albanian government of acting short-sightedly in international relations. Iran also maintained that the cyberattack was supported by parties that fund terrorist groups.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "Iran's Cultural Activities in Albania (Western Balkan)", 2021, available at <https://iramcenter.org/en/irans-cultural-activities-in-albania-western-balkan-453>, accessed 31.03.2023.

<sup>8</sup> Higgins, A., 2023, "A NATO Minnow Reels From Cyberattacks Linked to Iran", available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/25/world/europe/albania-iran-nato-cyberattacks.html>, accessed 23.03.2023.

<sup>9</sup> "Albania– Iran: broken relations and cyberwarfare", 2022, available at <https://www.balkanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Albania/Albania-Iran-broken-relations-and-cyberwarfare-220532> accessed 31.03.2023.

<sup>10</sup> "Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety in Albania 2022", 2023, available at <https://safejournalists.net/resources1/safe-journalists-report-indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-albania-2022-2/>, accessed 31.05.2023.

<sup>11</sup> Official Statement, available at <https://en.mfa.ir/files/Pdf/0692576-newsExportfd543985fd47444f8b29720c824ae5b8.pdf>, accessed 31.05.2023.

A point of contention between Albania and Iran is the Mujahedeen El-Khalq (MEK), an Iranian opposition group hosted by Tirana. The group has had a presence in Albania since at least 2013. The MEK's goal is to overthrow Iran's theocratic government.<sup>12</sup> Currently, about 3,000 MEK members are estimated to live in Albania's Camp Ashraf-3, a heavily fortified compound protected by Albanian private security.<sup>13</sup> The organization, founded in 1965 in Iran, initially opposed the Pahlavi dynasty's policies and took part in the 1979 insurrection that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power. However, ideological differences led to a fallout, forcing the group into exile. The US, recognizing the group's potential as leverage against the Iranian regime, persuaded Albania to host the MEK members, positioning Tirana in a diplomatic conflict with Iran. This move, coupled with the cyberattacks, has intensified tension between Iran and Albania, with repercussions potentially impacting ongoing negotiations on Iran's nuclear program.<sup>14</sup>



## Methodological Note

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In order to monitor Teheran's public diplomacy in Albania through its state-sponsored media outlet, for the purpose of this research we scraped and analysed a sample of articles published by Iran's Pars Today News Agency in the Albanian language for the period 27 June to 26 September, 2022.

The articles were scraped from Pars Today using SentiOne, an AI-powered online listening and

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<sup>12</sup> "How Albania Ended Up in Iran's Cyber Crosshairs", 2022, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/08/albania-iran-cyberattack-mek-us-israel/>, accessed 31.03.2023.

<sup>13</sup> "How Albania Ended Up in Iran's Cyber Crosshairs", 2022, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/08/albania-iran-cyberattack-mek-us-israel/>, accessed 31.03.2023.

<sup>14</sup> "Albania– Iran: broken relations and cyberwarfare", 2022, available at <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Albania/Albania-Iran-broken-relations-and-cyberwarfare-220532> accessed 31.03.2023.

analytics tool. The total sample of articles published by Pars Today over three months was selected and coded to identify the main themes and messages.

After being categorized and labelled in a spreadsheet based on top-level themes, the articles were qualitatively analysed to understand the messaging of Iranian state-sponsored media in Albanian based on specific categories.

Apart from the top-level themes that were identified, an analysis of the articles based on themes of interest listed below was carried out to get more in-depth understanding of Iran's messaging on specific topics, including on:

- The European Union;
- Human Rights; and
- The Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK)

## II. Findings

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During the three-month period of 27 June to 26 September, 2022, Pars Today News Agency published around 715 articles in Albanian, which underwent content analysis to identify key themes covered by the Iranian state-sponsored media.

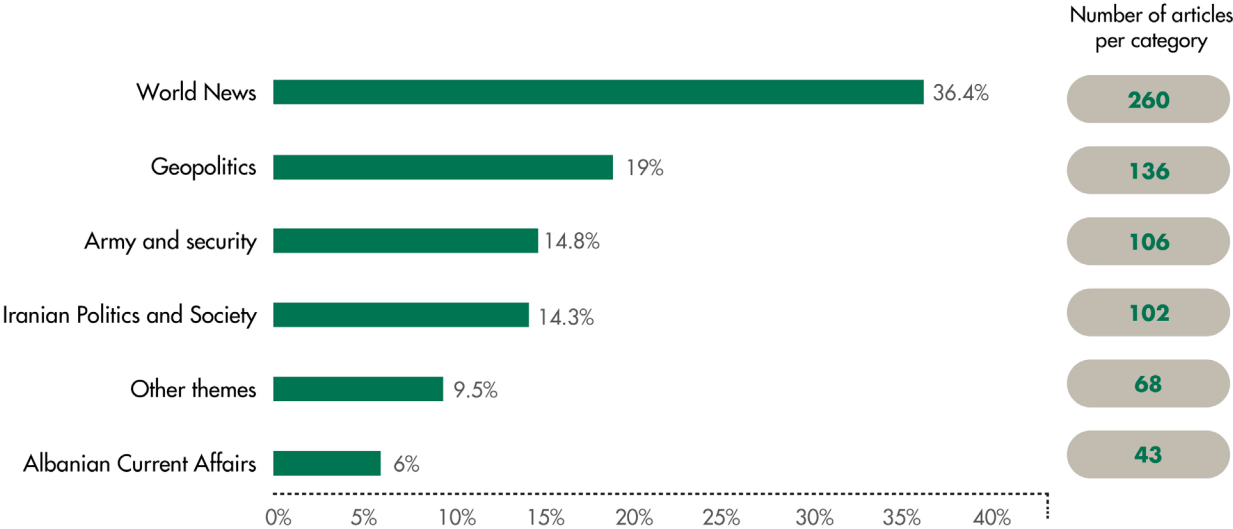


### Key themes

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Through qualitative analysis, the most recurrent themes covered by the articles published by Pars Today in Albanian are: World news, Geopolitics, Army and Security, Iranian Politics and Society, as well as Albanian Current Affairs. The remaining articles covered other topics, such as Economy, COVID-19, the Environment and Human Rights.

SHARE OF KEY THEMES COVERED BY PARS TODAY IN THE ALBANIAN LANGUAGE



The main narratives identified from the qualitative analysis of the articles published under each key theme covered by the Albanian service of Pars Today are summarized below.



World News

In the sample of 715 articles taken in review from Pars Today in Albanian, published during the

three-month period, 260 articles, 36.4 per cent of the total, belong to the “World News” theme. From the total of 260 articles under this theme, 112 mention Russia. The vast majority of the articles on Russia focus on its aggression against Ukraine – 109 out of 112. In general, coverage of the Russian invasion of Ukraine followed the views and statements of the Russian authorities, except for some isolated cases, when talking about the victims, or when some political/diplomatic developments were consistent with Iran’s public diplomacy narratives. One example was Ukrainian President Zelensky’s statement that Israel was acting with indifference to Russia’s aggression against his country. Russia was portrayed in the Pars Today articles as a powerful global actor that is succeeding in the war and is a reliable partner and a solid alternative vis-à-vis the US. Other actors described positively included China, Yemen, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Armenia and Uzbekistan. Actors described negatively under this theme included the United States, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Britain and Japan.

#### Quote:

*“The Russian Foreign Minister said that Western countries have become the cause of the loss of trust in international institutions and international law.”*

### Geopolitics

From the total number of articles reviewed by the researchers, 136 belonged to the theme of “Geopolitics”, comprising 19 per cent per cent of the total articles in the sample taken in analysis. The news articles classified in this theme mostly reflected Iran’s statements and positions on international events in the Middle East and the world. The three most important issues in this theme were:

1. Iran’s attitude against border changes in its neighboring region (Azerbaijan-Armenia)
2. The US-Iran agreement on nuclear weapons



### 3. Reestablishment of ties with Iraq

The vast majority of statements attacked the United States, which was cited in 35 articles under this theme out of total of 136, except in cases where US positions were consistent with Iran's, for example related to the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. Statements attacked various US policies towards Iran, such the US sanctions imposed against Teheran, or top US officials, including US President Joe Biden.

#### Quote:

*"Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said he has no plans to meet with his American counterpart Joe Biden on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly."*

### Army and Security

From the total sample of articles taken in review from Pars Today, the researchers categorized 106 of them, 14.8 per cent, under the theme of "Army and Security". Most articles in this theme covered Russia's aggression against Ukraine. A total of 32 articles out of 106 in this theme outlined Iran's stance on various developments related to Russia's invasion. The stories reflected recurring pro-Kremlin narratives on the war, including the threat of nuclear escalation and the risks associated with supplying weapons to Kyiv. The articles also included updates on military operations based on Russian sources, mainly the Russian Ministry of Defense. Under this theme, military actions undertaken by Palestinian armed groups against Israel were also reflected and, to a considerable extent, Iran's military achievements, especially joint drills held with other countries, like the "Vostok-2022" military exercises held in Russia, etc.

### Quote:

*"Russia said it had hit some Ukrainian positions after the Ukrainian side bombed several points near Europe's largest nuclear power plant, Zaporizhzhia."*

A subtheme identified under this category relates to the fight against terrorism by Iran and its allies in the Middle East – Iraq, Syria and Russia. Seventeen articles were identified under this subtheme and included coverage of terrorist attacks by Islamic State and anti-terrorist operations by Teheran and its allies, a statement critical of the presence of forces from Western countries in Syria and coverage of the exchange of hostages between the United States and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

### Quote:

*"...the Iraqi army and its security forces are still trying to wipe out completely terrorist elements in the area."*

## Iranian Politics and Society

The researchers reviewed a total of 102 stories in the sample that were coded under the theme of "Iranian Politics and Society", with almost half of the stories under this category covering topics related to Iraqi cultural and religious events. During the period under analysis, many articles focused on the social unrest triggered by the death of Mahsa Amin, a 22-year-old Iranian woman who died in suspicious circumstances in a Teheran hospital after being detained by the Guidance Patrol, also known as the morality police, allegedly for not wearing a hijab. Anger at Amin's death sparked widespread protests in the Islamic Republic, posing a serious challenge to the Iranian

regime. The stories published by Pars Today that related to Amin’s death focused only on the counter-protests held in Iran. Protests against the government were portrayed as incited by foreign intelligence agencies and by the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), the Iranian opposition group that has set up base in Albania. In this theme were also news reports on summoning foreign ambassadors about international statements criticizing Iran’s regime. The sample of articles included news reports on messages of the President of Iran, Ebrahimi Raisi, on the judiciary, regarding the investigation into the causes of Mahsa Amin’s death.

**Quote:**

*“Millions of people have taken to the streets in the Iranian capital Tehran to denounce acts of vandalism and desecration of Islamic shrines by rebels over the past week, following the death of a young Iranian woman after she was taken to a police station.”*



**Selected Themes**

Apart from analysis of the top-level themes of the articles published by Pars Today in Albanian, the researchers also analyzed news under selected themes of interests, including articles on the European Union, Human Rights and the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK), sparking a diplomatic row between Tirana and Tehran.



**The European Union**

The European Union, or various EU officials, were the subject of 40 articles from the sample

analyzed from Pars Today in Albanian. The news articles covering European affairs reflected on the continent's economic downturn, the energy crisis, strikes and negative effects of the economic recession/Covid-19, such as an increased crime rates, etc. Most news under this category reported on European Union countries that have dissented from the imposition of sanctions against Russia, or where Russia's threats to escalate the conflict are considered serious and dangerous. Hungary was the main European actor covered in the European context for its stance against sanctions against Russia, clashes with the EU, cooperation with Russia, etc.

### Quote:

*"Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said his country opposes any new sanctions against Moscow, especially in the energy sector, and considers such bans "a clear red line".*

## Human Rights

In total, 11 articles from Pars Today in Albanian were published under the theme of "Human Rights". Most of the articles were critical of the human rights situation in the West. The West was accused of double standards in the treatment of human rights, illustrated on occasion by human rights abuses registered in the US, Britain and Greece. The US was accused over the CIA's use of torture, and the silence about the Guantanamo prison in Cuba. The articles also reported on criticism of inhuman conditions in prisons in Britain. Greece was singled out for its violations of citizens' privacy, and Saudi Arabia for imprisoning activists. Biased and hateful reporting against the writer Salman Rushdie stood out among other news in this category. In August 2022, Rushdie was stabbed as he was about to hold a speech in Chautauqua, New York and lost an eye in the attack. For decades, Rushdie had been the subject of a *fatwa* – a death sentence issued by Iran's supreme leader, for the publication of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*.

## Quote:

*"A Greek newspaper revealed that Athens violated democratic principles and espionage laws in the name of protecting the safety of thousands of people."*

## The Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK)

From the sample of stories published by Pars Today in Albanian, the researchers identified 21 stories which feature reporting on the Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MEK). Tehran considers the Iranian opposition group, which has found refuge in Albania, a terrorist organization and often accuses it of inciting unrest in the country, as in the case of the protests that followed the death of Mahsa Amin. The news articles also reported on Iranian counter-intelligence efforts to thwart alleged terrorist attacks plotted by MEK and its sympathizers in Iran. The MEK was also accused of inciting anti-Tehran policies in Albania and of damaging diplomatic relations between Albania and Iran. The stories published by Pars Today reflect Teheran's opposition to Albania's decision to host the Iranian opposition group, which Teheran says is plotting to violently overthrow the regime. Many of the stories published by Pars Today presented the reactions of Iranian officials, after Tirana accused Teheran of being behind a debilitating cyberattack against Albanian government networks. In the articles, Iranian officials also deflected US and UK statements that Teheran stood behind the cyberattacks. The articles also included stories on the MEK's violent past as an armed group and placed the organization in a negative light for its dealings with its rank-and-file members.

## Quote:

*"The intelligence organization of the Revolutionary Guard announced the prevention of terrorist acts by the MEK and a monarchist group through the explosion of home-made bombs in the city of Tabriz, in the province of Eastern Azerbaijan."*

### III. Conclusion and recommendations

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The analysis of Pars Today articles in Albanian during the period of September 2021 to September 2022 reveals several thematic biases in the news narratives. It is evident that Iran heavily leverages the media to shape public perceptions in accordance with its geopolitical interests and ideology. The media coverage appears significantly tilted towards Russia, representing it as a successful global actor, particularly with regards to the Ukraine conflict, whereas Western countries are frequently portrayed negatively. It is noteworthy that Albania's hosting of the MEK is a recurring point of contention, as reflected in the articles. Similarly, the EU, particularly countries opposing sanctions on Russia, is another prominent theme in the articles. The analysis also underlines Iran's narrative on human rights, with criticism directed largely at the West, despite the internal unrest following the death of Mahsa Amin. Overall, the media analysis suggests a consistent, strategic effort by Iran to project its preferred narratives to an Albanian-speaking audience.

Some recommendations include:

- *Media and Information Literacy*: Enhance media literacy among Albanian-speaking audiences to promote a discerning and critical consumption of news. This can include educating the public about the nature of state-sponsored media, understanding media bias, and the importance of cross-checking information.
- *Diverse News Sources*: Encourage access to and the consumption of news from a variety of sources, including those that are independent and internationally recognized for their standards of journalism. This would provide alternative viewpoints and a more balanced perspective on global and regional issues.
- *Transparency in Reporting*: Advocate for transparency in media outlets, including the disclosure of funding sources, affiliations, and any potential conflicts of interest that might influence their reporting.

- *Research and Monitoring*: Regularly monitor and analyze media content, especially state-sponsored foreign outlets, to identify patterns, bias and misinformation. Publicize findings to alert the public, policymakers and relevant institutions about potential propaganda efforts.
- *Support for Independent Journalism*: Strengthen and support independent journalism in Albania to counterbalance potentially biased narratives from foreign state-sponsored outlets. This can involve training, funding and providing resources to promote investigative journalism and fact-checking.
- *Cybersecurity Training*: Increase investment in cybersecurity training and infrastructure for media and journalists.





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