# Inauthentic & Malign Influence Activity

**Croatian Presidential Runoff**

Delivered January 6, 2025

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**About This Report**

The following report reviews identified inauthentic and/or foreign-borne malign influence on the Croatian 2024-25 Presidential elections. The report reviews data from X, Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, Telegram, and news websites from the December 4, 2024-January 4, 2025 period, specifically as it refers to "Zoran Milanovic" and "Dragan Primorac."

These findings leveraged AI-based analysis and behavioral algorithms to identify bot-like activity, primarily on Twitter, and other indicators of inauthentic behavior on different platforms.
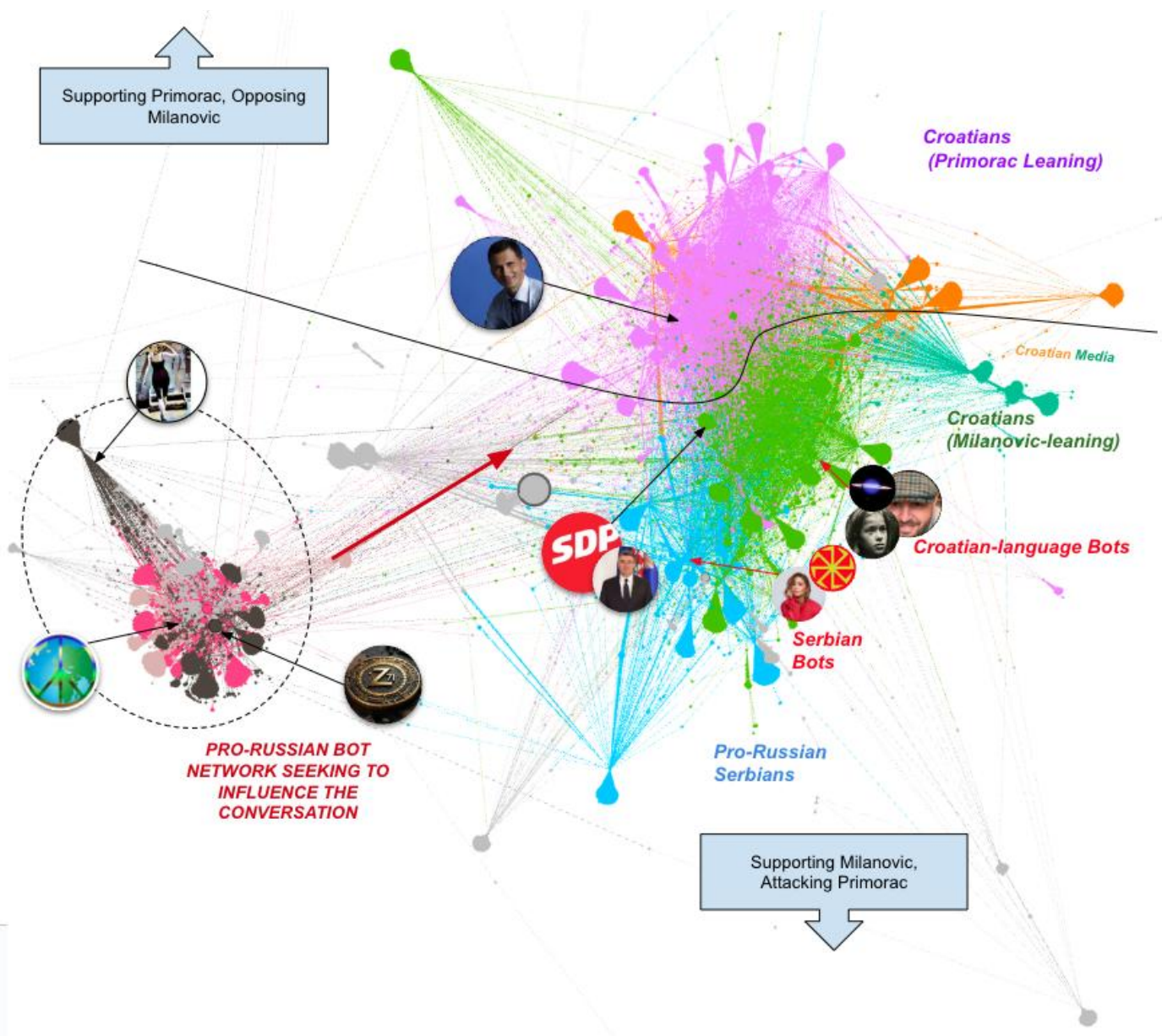
## Executive Summary: Inauthentic Behavior in the Croatian Presidential Runoff

- Pro-Russian, anti-EU, and anti-NATO bot networks consistently praise Milanovic and amplify pro-Milanovic content while disseminating anti-EU and anti-NATO messaging.

- Serbian elements of this network are attacking Dragan Primorac and promoting Milanovic.

- The Facebook page associated with SDP/Milanovic demonstrates significant inauthentic activity, particularly in comments and shares.

- Kremlin propaganda outlets and Kremlin-aligned media outlets in other countries take a favorable stance toward Milanovic.

- Flagged disinformation outlets in the region and beyond are also taking a favorable tone to Milanovic.



*Pro-Russian accounts with bot-like attributes promote Milanovic in multiple languages*

# Discourse Map



**About the Discourse Map**
The graph above illustrates discourse on X (formerly Twitter) surrounding Zoran Milanovic and Dragan Primorac in the context of the Presidential Election. Each node represents an account posting at least three times on the topic, while the connecting lines indicate influence (via reposts or follows). Nodes with significant and consistent connections form identifiable communities.

On the top half of the graph (above the line) are mainly Croatian-speaking accounts that lean toward supporting Dragan Primorac. On the bottom half are accounts that lean toward criticizing Primorac or supporting Zoran Milanovic.
Within the pro-Milanovic half is a diverse audience, including Croatian communities, Serbian-speaking

communities, Bosnian-speaking communities, and others.
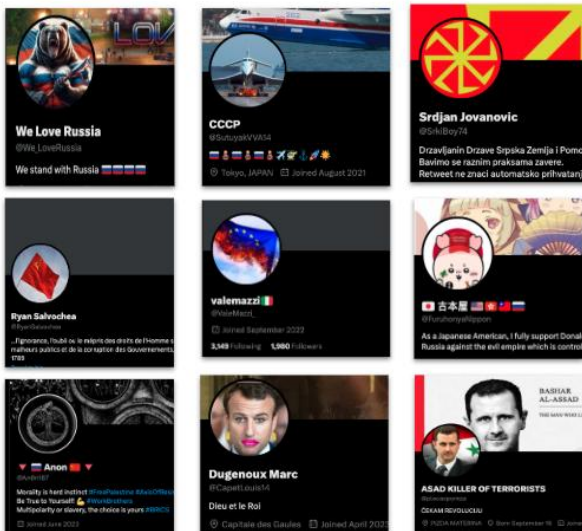
## Identified Pro-Russian/Anti-EU Bot Network

A significant portion of the pro-Milanovic discourse (illustrated in the graph's bottom-left quadrant) originates from bot and bot-like accounts sharing distinct characteristics:

- Profiles featuring pro-Russian government imagery and hashtags.
- Far-left or far-right slogans promoting pro-Russian, anti-Europe, and anti-NATO content.
- AI-generated profile pictures (e.g., GAN images) paired with generic descriptions.
- Equal or unusually high follower-to-followee ratios.
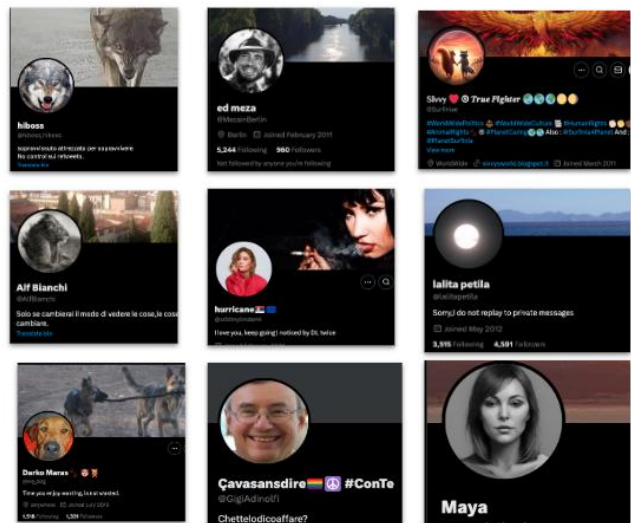- High-frequency, regular posting patterns.

These accounts, posting in English, Serbian, Italian, Spanish, French and Croatian, have coordinated to promote Milanovic on multiple occasions, including:

- Following Milanovic's first-round first-place finish, when he was celebrated as an "anti-NATO" candidate.
- After his statements opposing potential Croatian involvement in the Ukraine War.
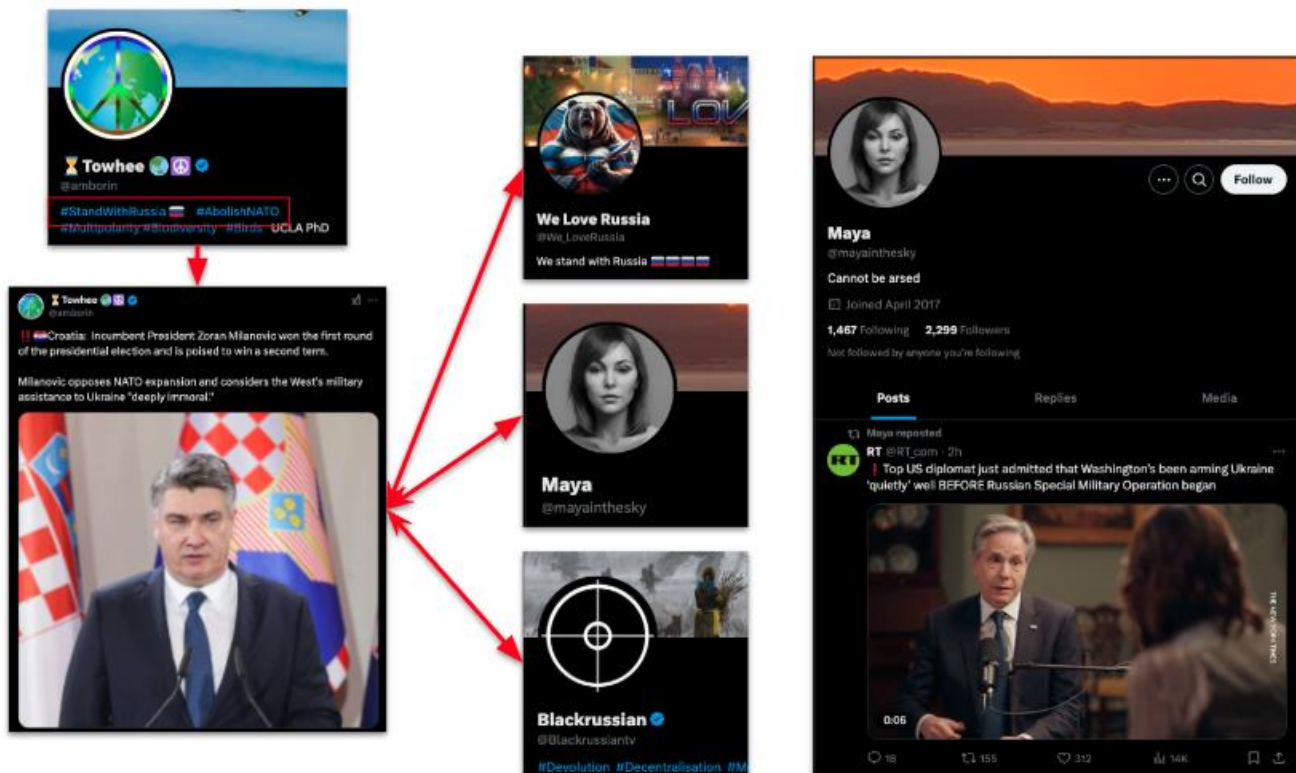


Openly Pro-Russian/Anti NATO/EU



Posting & Amplifying Pro-Russian/Anti EU/NATO content

Cat/Dog images, Stolen Images, AI-Generated Images

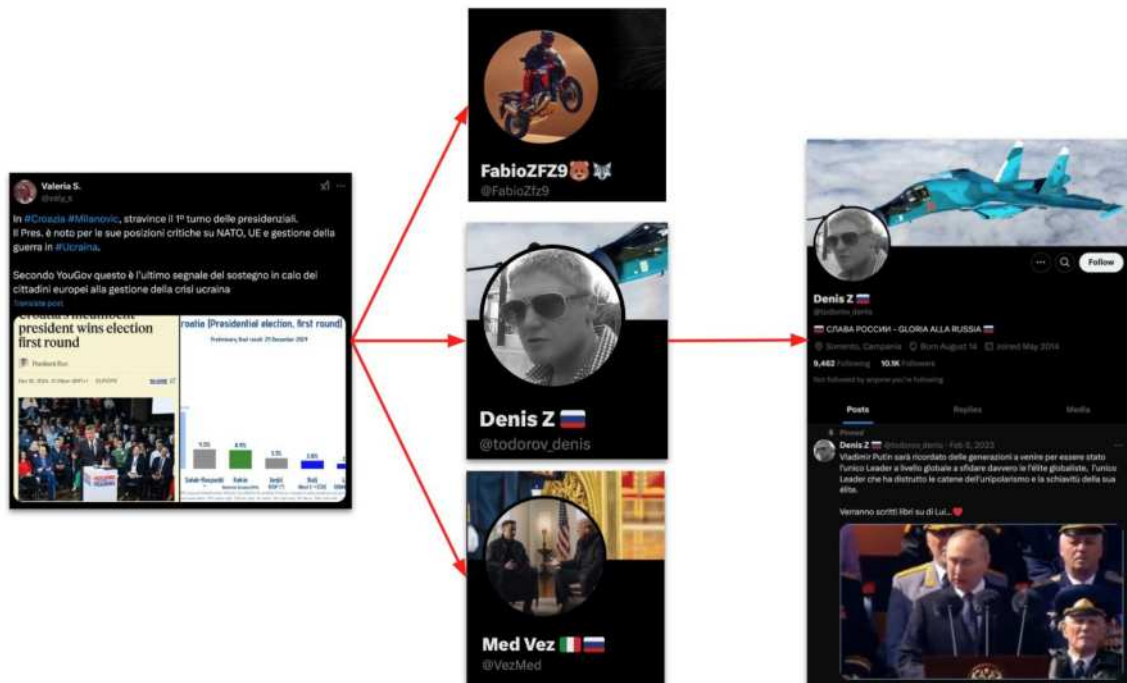**Example: Anti-EU Russian Bot Networks Backing Milanovic**



The graphic above highlights how the account "@towhee," an inauthentic profile claiming to be based in California and exhibiting pro-Russian attributes, published a post praising Zoran Milanovic. A vast global network of Russian bot accounts immediately amplified this post.

Some of these bot accounts are overtly pro-Russian, while others, like "@mayainthesky," use AI-generated profile images and regularly disseminate Russian propaganda. All of these accounts display distinct bot-like characteristics, including:

- Equal or nearly equal follower-to-followee ratios.
- High-volume posting activity sustained around the clock.

@valy_s is a seemingly authentic account posting in Italian. The Account posted in favor of Milanovic, citing what she claimed to be his anti-NATO, anti EU stance, and was subsequently amplified by a host of pro-Russian bot and bot-like accounts.



@Zlatti_71 is a pro-Russian troll account which posted in support of Milanovic, and is subsequently promoted by a network of bot/bot-like accounts that disseminate Russian propaganda consistently.

**Amplification of Anti-Primorac and Pro-Milanovic Posts by Serbian Bot and Troll Accounts**
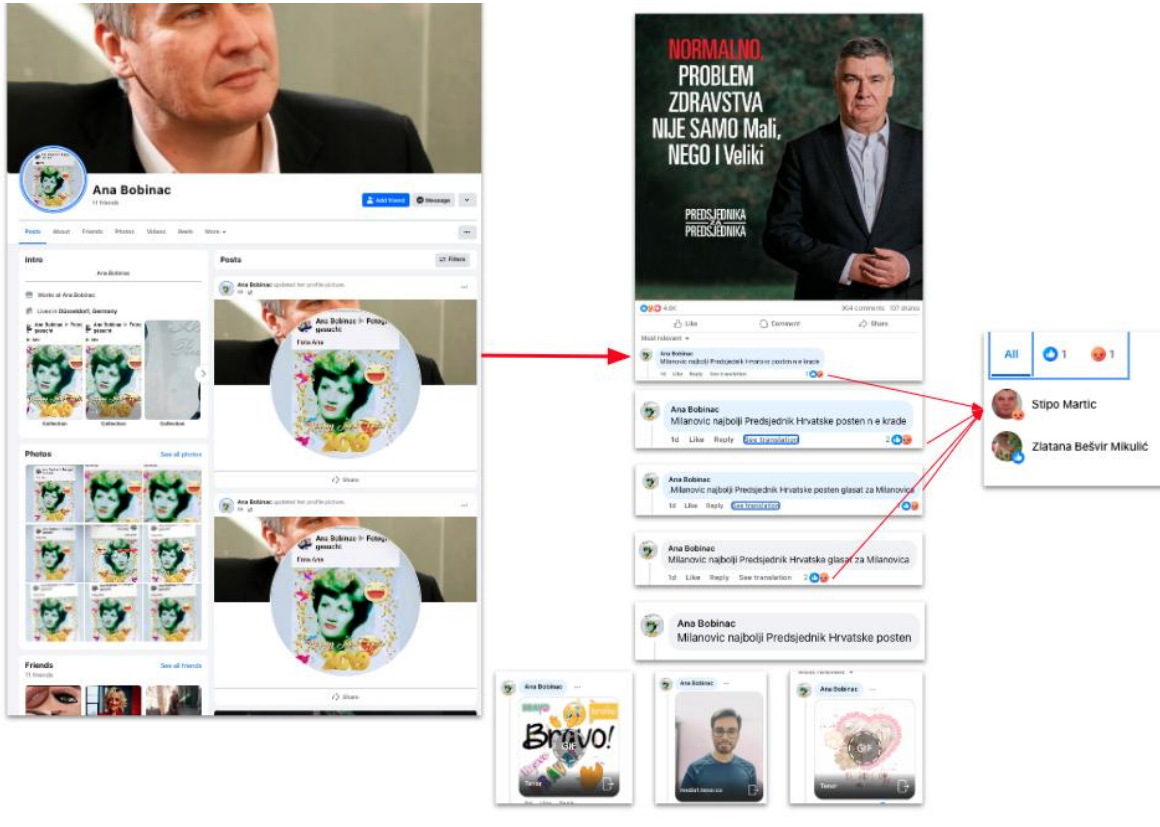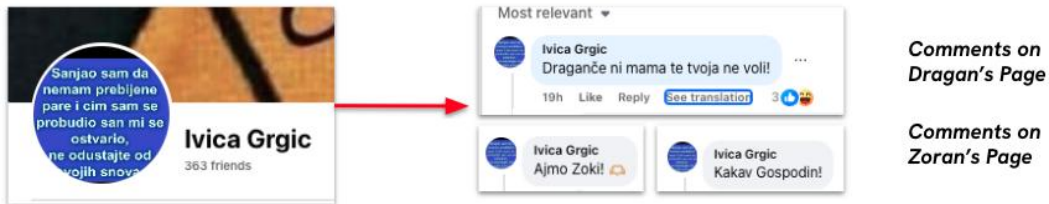
@darkolesinger is an example of a legitimate Croatian account of a former journalist, criticizing Primorac, whose posts receive amplification from Serbian bot-like accounts.

## Bot-like activity on candidate Facebook Pages

We analyzed +4,000 comments and shares on Facebook posts from January 3-5, from the SDP Facebook Page, the official Page of Zoran Milanovic, and Dragan Primorac for Bot and Bot-like Activity. We identified numerous accounts with bot-like or inauthentic attributes, such as lack of authentic post content, low engagements/friends, and recent creation dates, who were posting numerous comments on supporting Milanovic on his related pages.



Example of identified suspected inauthentic account. The account posts numerous short supportive comments and/or GIFs to Milanobic's FB page. Notably, the same two accounts also engage with this poster's comments.
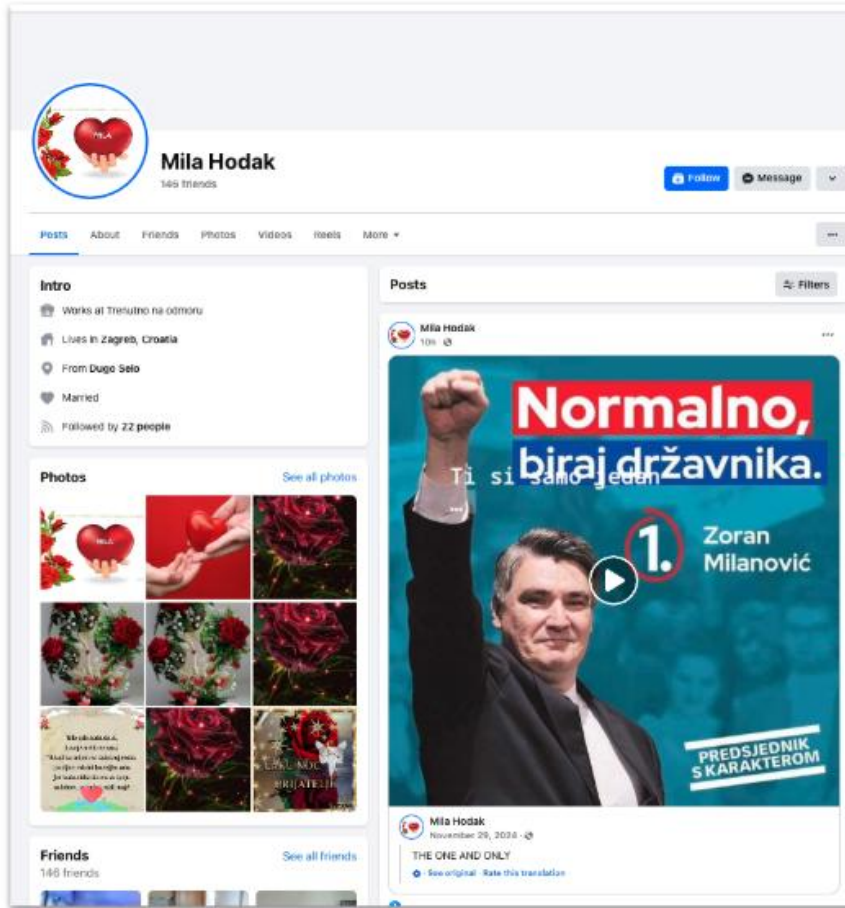


The account 'Ivica Grigic' exhibits trolling behavior and attacks Primorac's Page while supporting Milanovic. This account has been engaging in other trolling attacks in the past, including those flagged by EU disinformation monitors.[12]

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[1]https://euvsdisinfo.eu/it-can-happen-in-the-eu-too-public-smear-campaign-and-hacker-attacks-against-faktograf-hr-in-croatia/

[2]https://www.facebook.com/petra.m.maric?comment_id=Y29tbWVudDoxMTQ0Mjk5NDYzNzIzMTgxXzk0MjM

The account Mila Hodak posts over 100 times a day, and at all hours, mainly sharing and posting images that attack Dragan Primorac or support Milanovic. The account has no identifiable authentic attributes, posts, or behaviors consistent with a normal user.

# Support for Milanovic by Known Disinformation Media
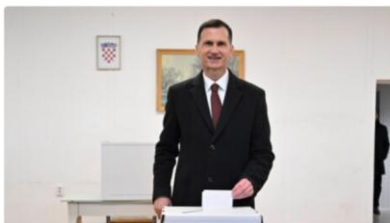
### Russian Propaganda Outlets

During the coverage period, Kremlin-affiliated and aligned media outlets predominantly published favorable or neutral-to-favorable coverage of Milanovic.

For instance, *RT Balkans*, the regional arm of the Russian state-controlled network RT, has published 14 articles on Milanovic since December 2024. Of these, 10 conveyed a favorable or neutral-to-favorable tone toward the incumbent.



**Milanović poručio Plenkoviću: Hrvatski vojnik neće voditi tuđe ratove**

3. jan 2025 | 16:38

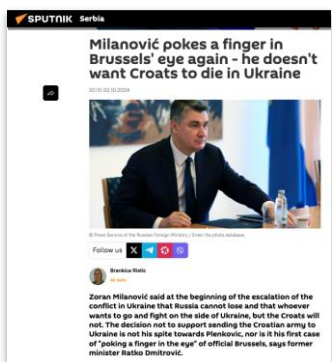**Kako je Primorac iskoristio sarajevski bend u kampanji: Da se Hrvatska više ne crveni (VIDEO)**

1. jan 2025 | 20:47

**Milanović u fotofinišu stare godine i izborne trke: Tražim podršku da Plenkovića vratim u korito**

31. dec 2024 | 21:30

*Articles Published on RT Balkans Discussing Milanovic.*



Although HDZ President Andrej Plenkovic attended Primorac's address, no one from that party, not even the prime minister, stood behind or alongside their candidate on stage.
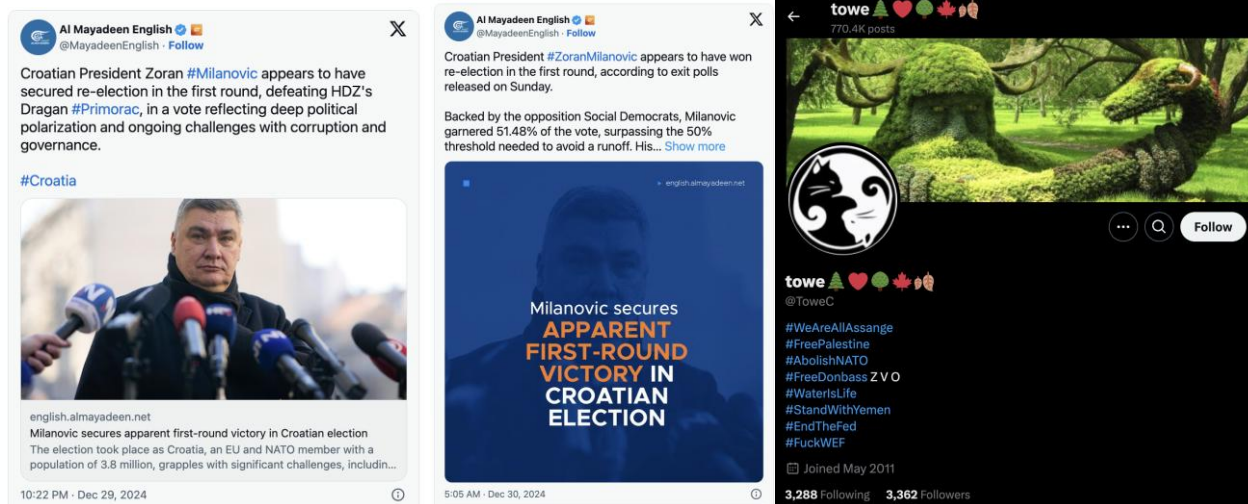
Although very optimistic in his address, Primorac received lukewarm applause from a fairly small number of attendees.

*Sputnik,* another well-known Kremlin propaganda outlet, published several articles on its Serbian-language website. Notably, one article covering the first-round election results emphasized negative aspects of Dragan Primorac's rallies while casting Milanovic in a positive light.[3]

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[3]https://sputnikportal.rs/20241230/izlazne-ankete-milanovic-pobedio-u-prvom-krugu-predsednickih-izbora-u-hrvatskoj-1181107747.html

## Propaganda Outlets Linked to Kremlin Allies

Other Kremlin-aligned outlets also produced content favorable to Milanovic. For instance, Al Mayadeen's English website, a known Hezbollah-affiliated propaganda platform, published two articles falsely asserting that Milanovic had won the first round of elections. Bot accounts amplified these claims.
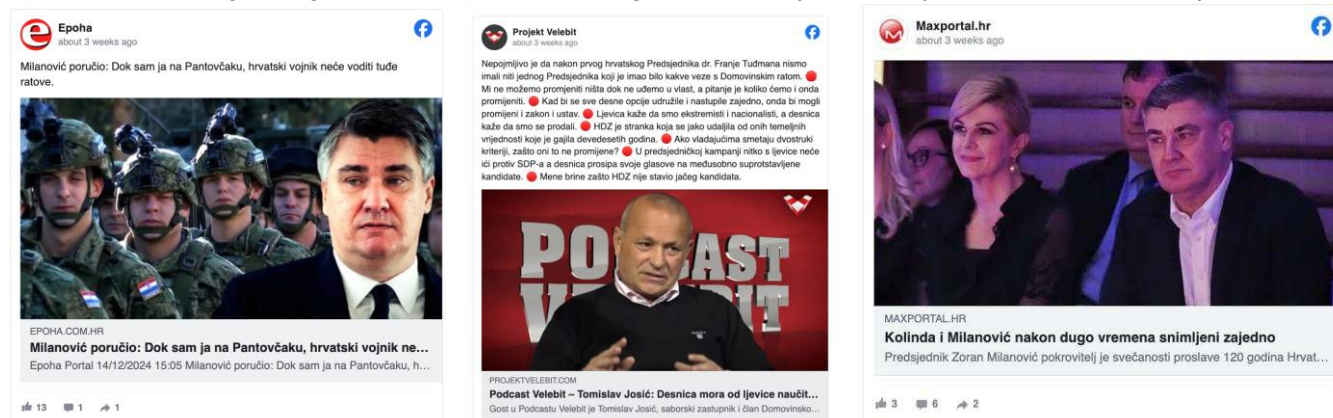


*(Left, Center) Al Mayadeen's English accounts post articles and infographics covering Milanovic's first-round "victory," which are amplified by bot accounts (example-right)*

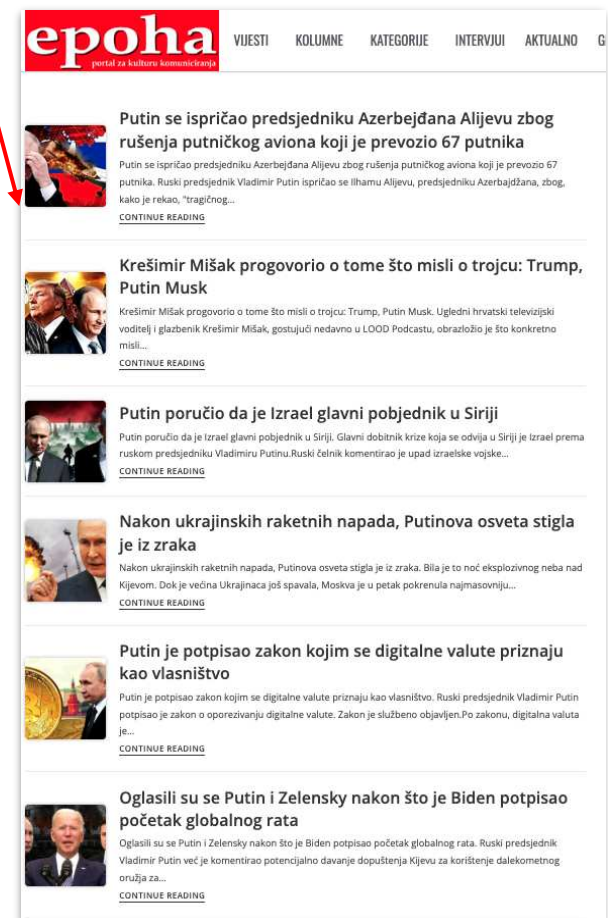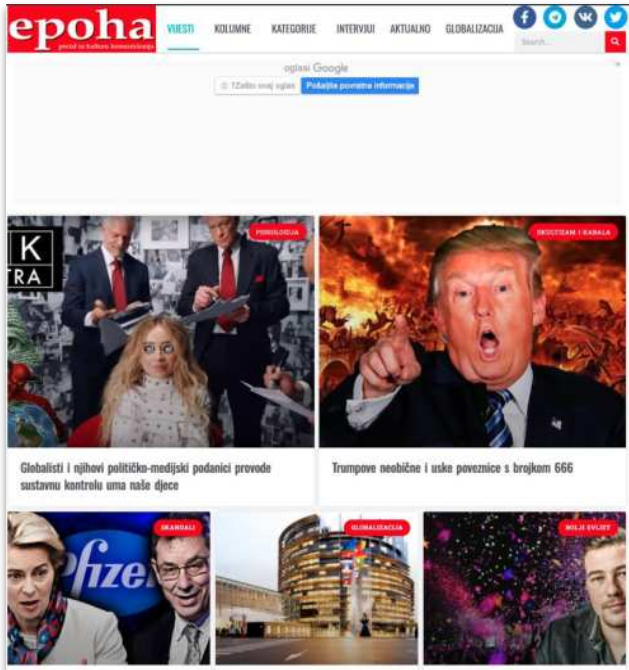## Support for Milanovic by Flagged Regional Disinformation Outlets

We have detected that numerous Croatian and regional "fringe" outlets flagged for peddling disinformation about the war in Ukraine have also promoted Milanovic.[4]

The research paper from Edmo.eu called "Mapping Ukraine War Disinformation Ecosystem in Croatia and Slovenia" identifies several outlets that have been used to "nodes" to, on occasion, spread disinformation regarding the Ukraine war. Among them are Epoha, Projekt Velebit, and Maxportal.hr.



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[4]https://edmo.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ADMO_Mapping-Ukraine-War-Disinformation-Ecosystem-in-Croatia-and-Slovenia.pdf

The outlet Epoha, flagged in in the Edmo research, posts pro-Putin, as well as conspiratorial and disinformation content, but has also published content favoring Milanovic.

-ENDS-