

# Red, Orange, Yellow – and Narrative: Reading Serbia’s Travel Warning Map

How a routine travel advisory may reflect political signalling, regional narratives, and selective risk framing

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## Travel Advisory Traffic Light System

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The recent travel advisory issued by **Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, presented as a global “traffic-light” system categorizing countries according to travel risk, appears at first glance to be a routine consular tool. However, a closer examination reveals inconsistencies that raise questions about whether the advisory also serves as a vehicle for political messaging and narrative shaping.

While governments commonly publish travel guidance for their citizens, the classification choices and the explanations—or lack thereof—often reflect broader political and strategic narratives.

In this case, several aspects of the Serbian advisory deserve particular attention.

## Selective Risk Framing

The most striking feature of the advisory is the placement of Croatia—an EU and NATO member state—in the orange category, indicating travel should occur only in cases of “extreme necessity.”

The explanation offered is vague: “more frequent incidents, tensions and unfavourable security circumstances.” No specific events or data are cited to support such a severe classification.

By contrast, countries facing objectively higher geopolitical risks are treated differently. Russia, currently under extensive international sanctions due to its invasion of Ukraine, is placed in the yellow category, suggesting only “additional caution.” Even more strikingly, Belarus, a close Russian ally involved in the geopolitical confrontation with the West, appears in the green category.

Such discrepancies raise legitimate questions about whether the advisory reflects purely security-based assessments.

## Regional Signalling and Empirical Contradictions

The classification becomes even more politically sensitive when viewed in the context of regional relations in the Western Balkans. Albania and North Macedonia were partners with Serbia in the **Open Balkan initiative**, a regional project designed to promote economic integration and mobility. By implicitly portraying Albania as a country requiring additional caution—without providing clear justification—the advisory risks undermining the spirit of regional cooperation.

Similarly, portraying **Croatia** as a destination where travel should occur only in cases of “extreme necessity” contributes to a narrative that frames certain neighbouring countries as hostile or unstable environments

for Serbian citizens. In a region with a long history of political tensions and competing narratives, such signals can resonate strongly with domestic audiences.

Independent international indices, however, tell a different story. According to the **2025 Global Peace Index (GPI)**—the world's leading measure of peacefulness produced by the Institute for Economics and Peace—**Croatia ranks 19th out of 163 countries globally**, placing it among the safest countries in Europe and the world. The index evaluates countries across 23 indicators, including societal safety and security, levels of conflict, and militarisation.

A similar inconsistency appears in the treatment of **Albania**, which is placed in the “yellow” category requiring additional caution. According to the same **2025 Global Peace Index**, Albania ranks **52nd globally**, immediately after **North Macedonia, which ranks 51st**. At the same time, the advisory itself states that **there are no serious threats to the safety of visitors in Albania**.

When official classifications imply elevated risk while independent international indicators suggest otherwise—and when the advisory itself acknowledges the absence of significant security threats—the gap between factual assessment and narrative framing becomes increasingly difficult to ignore.

Another telling detail is that **Kosovo does not appear on the advisory map at all**, reflecting Serbia's continued policy of not recognizing Kosovo as an independent state. Even in a document presented as a technical security assessment, political positions influence not only how risks are classified, but also which political realities are acknowledged.

## From Advisory to Narrative: The Information and Media Dimension

Travel advisories may appear to be purely bureaucratic instruments, designed to inform citizens about potential risks abroad. However, they can also play a role in **perception management**. When classifications diverge from widely recognized security assessments, they may contribute to reinforcing domestic political narratives about neighbouring states and sustaining perceptions of external hostility or insecurity. At the same time, risks associated with politically allied states may be downplayed, while public perceptions of regional and global actors are subtly shaped. This does not necessarily mean that travel advisories are fabricated; rather, the **selection and framing of risks** can align with broader political messaging.

In the Western Balkans, where information environments are often polarized and historical grievances remain politically instrumentalised, such signals can have amplified effects. Narratives embedded in official documents—especially those issued by state institutions—can travel quickly through media ecosystems and social networks, reinforcing existing biases and shaping public perception.

The role of media is therefore critical. In many cases, official announcements of this kind are reproduced by news outlets almost verbatim, without additional scrutiny. When journalists relay classifications without questioning their logic, inconsistencies, or supporting evidence, they risk unintentionally amplifying the narrative embedded within the official communication. What appears to be a routine consular notice can thus become part of a broader information flow that influences how audiences perceive neighbouring countries and regional security dynamics.

The screenshot shows a news aggregator interface for TIME.MK. At the top, the headline reads "Србија објави „семафор“ за патување на граѓаните:". Below this, there are navigation tabs for "Вести", "Спорт", and "Магазин". Social media icons for Facebook and Twitter are visible. The main content area features three articles, each with a small image and a title. The first article is titled "Србија објави „семафор“ за патување на граѓаните: Во Хрватска „само во случај на крајна потреба“, во Албанија „со дополнителни мерки на ...". It is dated "Вечер Прес - 05.03.2026" and includes a small image of a city. The second article is titled "Србија објави „семафор“ за совети во кои држави не е безбедно да се патува". It is dated "Фокус - 05.03.2026" and includes a small image of a traffic light. The third article is titled "Србија објави „семафор“ за патување на граѓаните: Во Хрватска „само во случај на крајна потреба“, во Албанија „со дополнителни мерки на ...". It is dated "Проверено - 05.03.2026" and includes a small image of a traffic light. All articles mention that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Serbia announced a "traffic-light" advisory for travel, divided into four categories from green to red, based on risk assessments.

Screenshot from a Macedonian news aggregator illustrating how Serbia's "traffic-light" travel advisory was widely reproduced across regional media with little or no scrutiny.

Responsible journalism requires more than simply quoting official statements. It requires examining their coherence, the evidence behind them, and the possible political messages they may carry.

## Why This Matters

Transparency and evidence-based communication are essential for maintaining trust in public institutions.

If travel advisories are perceived as politically motivated rather than based on objective security assessments, they risk undermining their credibility and contributing to regional mistrust. Over time, such signals can erode confidence in official institutions, distort public perceptions of neighbouring countries, and further complicate efforts to strengthen cooperation and stability in a region already shaped by competing political narratives.

In a region striving for stability, European integration, and improved cooperation, even seemingly technical communications carry political weight—particularly when they rely on misleading narratives or disregard widely recognized data.

Which is why they deserve careful scrutiny.

## Part of a Wider Narrative Environment

Beyond this specific case, the episode should also be viewed within the broader narrative ecosystem that has developed in Serbia over the past decade. Political messaging, state institutions, and a large segment of the media landscape often operate within a shared framework that emphasizes external threats, regional hostility toward Serbia, and a selective interpretation of geopolitical realities. In such an environment, even seemingly technical documents—such as travel advisories—can reinforce established narratives: portraying certain neighbouring countries as unsafe or hostile, while minimizing risks associated with political allies. Whether intentional or not, these signals contribute to a communication pattern that shapes public perception and sustains a particular worldview about the region and Serbia's place within it.

In a region where narratives often travel faster than facts, even the color assigned to a country on a map can serve as a tool of political messaging.

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*The views and analysis expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of The Balkan Forum.*

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