



MEDIA MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

—
WRITTEN BY
ANJA ANDUŠIĆ

Author: Anja Anđušić

Research methodology expert: Snježana Milivojević

Research methodology expert and editor: Stefan Janjić

Publishers: Media Diversity Institute and
Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans



Reporting Diversity Network 2.0 - RDN 2.0 is established with the objective to effectively influence media representation of ethnicity, religion and gender in the Western Balkans.

Project partners include Media Diversity Institute, Albanian Media Institute, Center for Investigative Journalism, Center for Investigative Journalism Montenegro, South East Network for Professionalization of Media, Institute for Communication Studies, Kosovo 2.0, Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans.



Funded by
the European Union



A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND



This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union, Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and Reporting Diversity Network 2.0 and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the Balkan Trust for Democracy, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or their partners.



MEDIA MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

WRITTEN BY ANJA ANĐUŠIĆ

Content

5	Introduction
6	Methodological approach
7	Narratives and sub-narratives
7	Quantitative analysis
9	Narrative analysis
9	Ethnic hate narratives
10	Hateful narratives against gender
11	Hateful narratives against political and ideological opponents
12	Hateful narratives against sexual minorities
13	Sentiment analysis
14	Visibility analysis
16	Conclusion

Introduction

This report aims to provide a regional overview of the media monitoring of hate speech conducted by partner organisations in Western Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia¹. Reporting Diversity Network has been implementing media monitoring on a regional level since the beginning of 2021. However, this report is part of the second reporting period, covering data collected from May 1, 2022, until December 31, 2023. The first regional and national reports covered the period from January 2021 to April 2022.²

This paper is not only a summary of results collected for each country, but it also goes a step further, providing a comparative analysis of all data collected in this period showing regional similarities and country-specific distinctions. Hateful and discriminatory discourses in the Western Balkan media are analysed by identifying the most targeted groups and the most common hateful and harmful narratives, as well as the main generators of those narratives.

The monitoring covers traditional media such as TV channels, radio, newspapers, and online portals, as well as social media platforms. The highest number of hate speech cases were targeting different ethnic groups, closely followed by reports targeting women and gender minorities. As the previous report showed similar data, these groups remain the most common targets of hateful and harmful discourses in the Western Balkans media landscape. Even though cases of hate speech against sexual minorities and political opponents remained relatively similar, a slight increase was found in political-based targeting.

Understanding the media sphere in the Western Balkan, as well as the challenges journalists and media outlets face is crucial when addressing hate speech. In the latest Reporters Without Borders research report, these countries ranked between the highest 38th place with North Macedonia, followed by Montenegro in 39th place and Serbia and Albania ranked lowest, at 91st and 96th place out of 180 countries.³ Listed as some of the biggest concerns for the freedom of media were widespread misinformation and lack of professionalism contributing to declining trust in the media among citizens of NM, limited development in Kosovo's media market as the result of its small size and strict separation along the ethnic lines and journalists safety and extremely unfavourable political and economic environment in BiH. The state of media freedom in the region, with political and economic influences sometimes leading to (self) censorship, lack of responsible and ethical reporting and prevalent misinformation and disinformation may contribute to creating a more favourable environment for hateful and harmful discourses, especially considering ethnic divisions and other political and social tensions in the region.

When it comes to social media, the region has a well-developed digital sphere as reported by DataReportal⁴, showing high internet usage ranging from 83% of the population in BiH to 96% in Kosovo. When it comes to social media, there are larger variations in the share of the population using social media ranging from as high as 70% in Serbia to as low as 45% in NM. Considering the extensive use of social media and the lack of regulation of hate speech on these platforms, especially the complete lack of automated removal of hateful content in regional languages leaves a fertile ground for the rapid and wide proliferation of hate speech.

1. To avoid repetitiveness, abbreviations for countries in this report are as follows: AL for Albania, BiH for Bosnia and Herzegovina, KS for Kosovo, NM for North Macedonia, MNE for Montenegro, and SR for Serbia, WB for Western Balkan.

2. Norbert Šinković, 2022, Monitoring Report on Hate Speech - A Regional Overview, Media Diversity Institute ([link](#))

3. Press Freedom Index, 2023, Reporters without borders ([link](#))

4. Digital Report, 2024, DataReportal ([link](#))



Methodological approach

Reporting Diversity Network media monitoring applies a broader concept of hate speech, primarily by not limiting the characteristics for identifying a targeted individual or group. Hate speech in this research is defined as targeting individuals or groups based on their identity, and the monitoring findings are not limited to the classification of hate speech in national legal frameworks. The monitoring included harmful representation of marginalised groups as well.

Media monitoring included content in traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio channels, online portals, and social media networks such as Instagram, Facebook, X (former Twitter) and TikTok. The collected findings were classified according to the group or individual targeted, the generator of hate speech, the type of hateful and discriminatory discourse, the reach of the content, the type of media it was identified in, and the broader context of these events. Reported cases were also rated on a scale of one to six based on the intensity of the sentiment conveyed in the message, with one being the lowest intensity and six being the highest. In the sentiment analysis, these cases were classified according to the methodology of George Washington University⁵:

- 1. Disagreement** - Rhetoric includes disagreeing at the idea/mental level. Challenging a group's claims, ideas, and beliefs or trying to change them.
- 2. Negative actions** - Rhetoric includes negative nonviolent actions associated with the group.
- 3. Negative character** - Rhetoric includes non-violent characterisations and insults.
- 4. Demonising and dehumanising** - Rhetoric includes sub-human and superhuman characteristics.
- 5. Instigation of violence** - Rhetoric implies infliction of physical harm or metaphoric/ aspirational physical harm.
- 6. Death** - Rhetoric implies the literal killing or elimination of a group.

The monitoring process is conducted by media analysts, who separately analyse each case. Software or AI solutions were not used for automated monitoring, as the existing models do not recognise connotative elements of a message in the best way. Therefore, this research did not aim to collect all cases of hate speech in the region but instead focused on qualitative analysis of the most notable examples. These cases were selected based on their visibility in the media, the influence of individuals or organisations that spread the hate speech, and their impact on the public. Therefore, particular focus was drawn to cases reported by multiple media outlets or reported on for a more extended period, as well as instances of hate speech on social media platforms with higher visibility and reach. Moreover, relevant cases included the statements of public officials and other public figures because of their influence on public opinion.

5. Bahador Babak, Kerchner Daniel, Bacon Leah, Menas Amanda, (2019), *Monitoring Hate Speech in the US*, Washington, DC: George Washington University ([link](#))

Narratives and sub-narratives

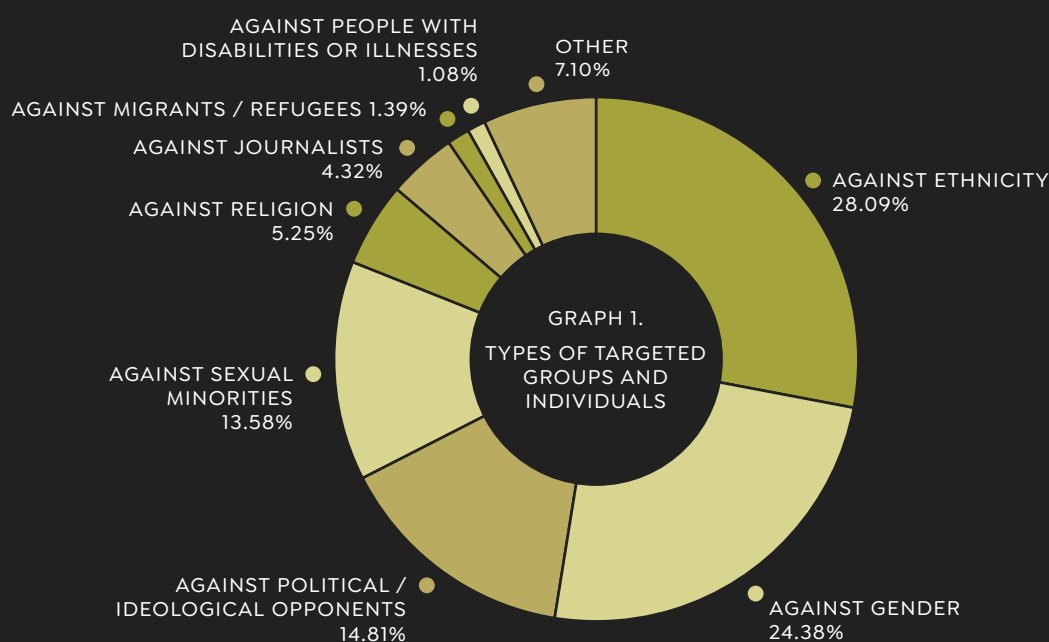
Quantitative analysis⁶

On a regional level, a total of 523 cases of hate speech were recorded during this reporting period. As the last report also found, most cases included hateful and harmful discourses targeting ethnicity (28.1% of all instances regionally) and gender (24.4%), making up more than half of all recorded cases. Individually considered, these two groups scored the highest in all countries. In North Macedonia, there was the same number of cases targeting ethnicity and gender (21.6% of all cases in NM each), ethnic hate was dominant in Kosovo (35%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (29.7%) and Montenegro (27.1%). Finally, gender-based hate speech prevailed in Albania (31.2%) and Serbia (28%).

Even though sexual minorities were the third most targeted group in the previous report, this time, hate towards political opponents slightly prevailed, as it was documented in 14.8% of all cases on a regional level, closely followed by hate based on sexual orientation (13.6%), together making up almost a third of recorded cases. Political-based hateful discourses were exceptionally high in Montenegro (21.1% of cases in MNE) and North Macedonia (20%). Homophobic narratives were highest in Serbia (20.2%), followed by BiH (15.9%) and Albania (14.3%).

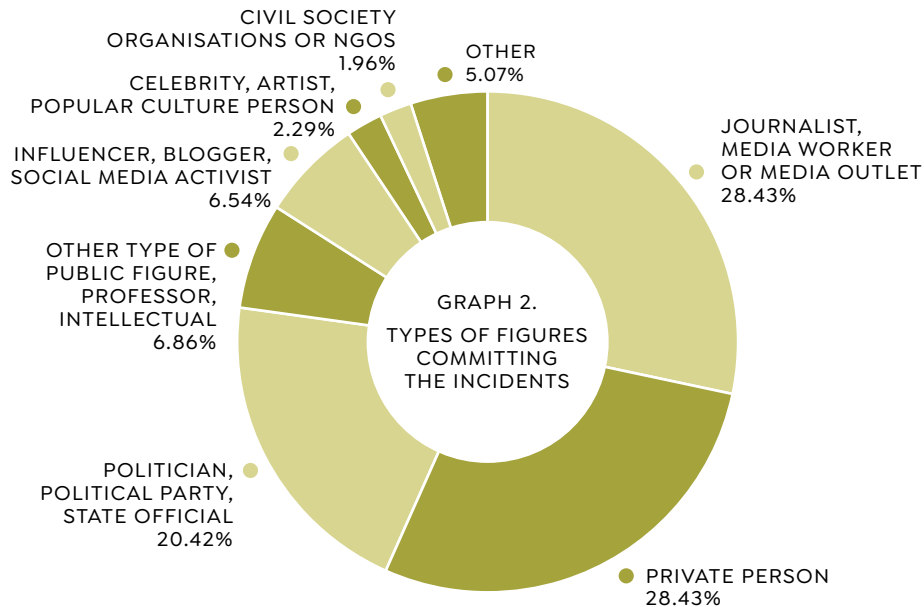
Furthermore, it is essential to note that almost a third of documented cases on a regional level (29.9%) included hateful and discriminative discourse that was intersectional in nature. In such cases, groups and individuals were targeted for multiple overlapping identities. This is mainly reflected in the four most-targeted categories, where someone's gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation plays a role, even if it is not the sole reason why they are targeted. Unlike the previous report, these cases were included in calculations of other individual categories in the quantitative analysis to create a clearer picture of the results.

Compared to the previous report, there was a significant increase in the share of cases of hate speech targeting religion (5.3%) and journalists (4.3%) and a notable decrease in cases regarding migrants and refugees making up only 1.4% of all instances regionally.



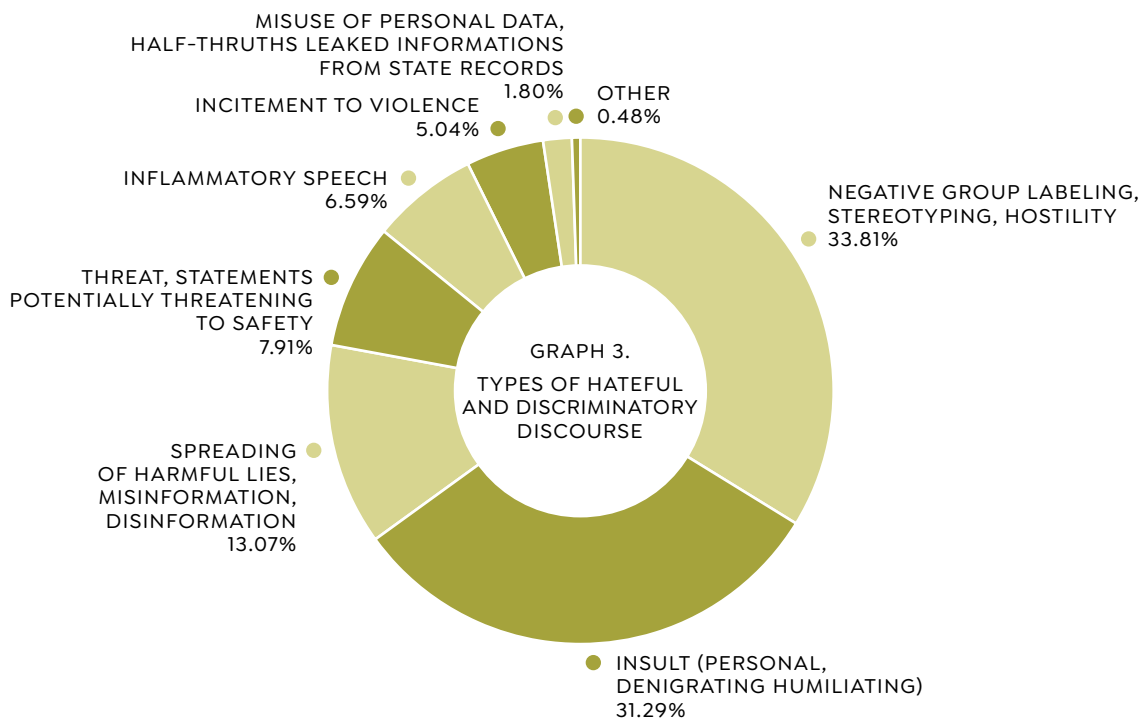
6. The quantitative analysis for this report was conducted separately from each national report to standardise the observed period, leading to certain discrepancies compared to the national reports.

The main generators of hate speech in the WB region are journalists, media workers, media outlets and private persons, primarily users on social media platforms, with the same number of cases recorded (28.4% each). These were closely followed by politicians, state officials and political parties (20.4%). Other significant generators of hateful content included public figures, professors, and intellectuals (6.7%), influencers, bloggers, and social media activists (6.5%), celebrities, artists, and popular culture persons (2.3%), civil society organisations or NGOs (1.96%), and other (5.07%).



Concerning the type of hateful and discriminatory discourse, over a third of all recorded cases contained negative group labelling, stereotyping, and hostility (33.8%), as well as insults (31.29%). The remaining third of the incidents were primarily made up of the spreading of harmful lies, misinformation, and disinformation (13.1%), threats and statements potentially threatening to safety (7.9%) and inflammatory speech⁷ (6.6%).

It is especially concerning that 5% of all recorded cases on a regional level included incitement to violence, especially when considering a not-so-negligible percentage of cases, including threats to individuals or groups.



7. In this research, inflammatory speech is defined as repeated messages from different actors, prolonged by the same media, usually regarding a conflict situation or some of the most common hateful and harmful narratives.

Narrative analysis

Ethnic hate narratives

Hateful narratives targeting different ethnic groups, remain by far the most common among all cases since the beginning of this regional media monitoring process, making up 28% in this reporting period. They are normalised in the region, as these narratives even come from public officials and politicians, who are rarely held accountable and even less frequently institutionally prosecuted for their words.

The media play a crucial role here, and even though some media outlets approach these incidents professionally, criticising hateful speech and explaining the context, many merely replicate these narratives without questioning them. This constitutes most hateful content found in the media, especially when it comes to ethnic hate. However, a large amount of these cases are recorded after certain trigger events, such as sparks in political conflicts, mutual visits and meetings of regional leaders or commemorations of specific war crimes or the genocide in Srebrenica.

In such cases, some media outlets report on these events, and therefore, different ethnic groups, according to their governments' official and unofficial stands. This discourse is commonly shaped as an “us vs. them” narrative where the ethnic group constituting the majority is presented as the victim, and either minorities or neighbouring nations and ethnic groups are presented as a threat or an enemy. These narratives deepen divisions already present in the Western Balkans and negatively impact the reconciliation process. In some cases, this narrative was used against specific individuals, such as activists, opposition politicians or other influential figures who belong to the majority. However, based on cooperating with other ethnic groups or simply advocating counter-narratives of interethnic cooperation and reconciliation, they are labelled as “traitors” working against their people and country.

The largest share of ethnic hate was recorded in Kosovo, where these cases made up more than a third (35%) of all cases, mainly targeting marginalised communities living in Kosovo, such as Serb, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities. In BiH, these cases made up 29.7% of all cases and primarily targeted Serbs and Bosniaks, as well as war victims. A large share of these cases involved genocide denial, often coming from high-ranking public officials, and transmitted by media outlets, resulting in highly harmful narratives. Milorad Dodik denied the genocide in Srebrenica on several occasions during this monitoring period and received a lot of media coverage, amplifying his words. In a separate media monitoring conducted by the Srebrenica Memorial Centre, Dodik was among the foremost genocide deniers.⁸ Even though genocide denial is punishable under the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, since 2021, police authorities have never filed a report on this criminal offence. Reports mainly came from citizens and civil society, and no indictment has been filed to this day by the judiciary. War crime and genocide denial, historical revisionism, and harmful depictions of the war(s) during the break-up of Yugoslavia in the nineties created similar and widely spread narratives not only in BiH but in Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia as well.

In Albania, the most common targets included Serbs, Greeks, and Roma minorities, as well as migrants and refugees and Albanian Kosovars in some instances.⁹ A significant rise of racist hate towards migrants and refugees occurred after Albania and Italy signed an agreement to establish a centre for the reception of immigrants in Albania last November. After the news broke, a wave of hate speech was detected in some online portals, but mainly on social media platforms, generated by users and, to an extent, influenced by biased and harmful reporting. One of the main narratives was that the local population “will be replaced by African population”, presenting African migrants as a threat. Some cases of xenophobia and racism against migrants and refugees from the Middle East and Africa were recorded in North Macedonia as well, where ethnic hate constituted 21.5% of cases, and the most common targets were Albanian and Roma communities.

As ethnic tensions were on the rise in Montenegro during this monitoring period, ethnic hate incidents played a significant part, most referring to either Montenegrins or Serbs, with some cases including derogatory depictions of Albanians. Hateful and harmful narratives targeting ethnicity in Montenegro can be characterised by political biases deepening social cleavages in the country, as public figures, political parties and even media outlets are described as either pro-Serbian or pro-Montenegrin. Along these lines of division, politicians, public officials, religious leaders, and media workers often used hateful insults and derogatory terminology for the “opposing side”.

8. Muamer Džananović, Adem Mehmedović, Nikola Vučić, and Edin Ikanović, 2023, Srebrenica genocide denial report 2023, Srebrenica Memorial Centre ([link](#))

9. Valbona Sulçe Kolgeci and Fjolla Spanca, 2024, Monitoring report on hate speech in Albania, Albanian Media Institute ([link](#))

Hateful narratives against gender

Gender-based hateful and harmful speech made up a quarter (24.4%) of all cases on a regional level however, in countries such as Albania (31.2%) and Serbia (28%), these were the most common cases, making up an even larger share than cases targeting ethnicity. Hateful narratives targeting women and sometimes gender minorities and other minority groups based on their gender or through patriarchal and misogynist depictions are even more similar across the region than ethnic hate narratives. Most of the cases in this category can be presented through four more general subnarratives, including stereotypical representations of women in the media, misogynistic and sexist targeting of women politicians, journalists and other public persons based on their gender rather than their work, extremely harmful unethical and unprofessional reporting on gender-based violence and anti-gender narratives including those undermining already achieved steps in ensuring gender equality and further efforts.

Stereotypical reporting is widely present in the Western Balkans and includes reports that enforce and deepen gender stereotypes already present in the patriarchal societies in the region. This is mainly detected in reports on topics such as culture, lifestyle and other features in magazines and online portals, as well as afternoon TV shows, as the National Report for Albania suggests, where stereotypical depictions of women sometimes even transform into narratives questioning women's rights and freedoms, such as a case of a TV show where a gynaecologist argued women over 30 "are called old women" insinuating they cannot be mothers after they turn 30 or that women "must" bear children before that age. This case is also an example of similar cases in other countries where experts in their fields were provided space in the media to spread gender stereotypes that were not based on fact. Gendered disinformation is also mentioned in the report on Albania, saying stereotypes such as "women belong in the home; adultery is a reason to kill women; degenerated women are destroying families" that cannot be explained or supported by scientific data are used as fact in some media reports. Disinformation, misinformation, and other information disorders often fuel hateful narratives, as was the case here.

Gender stereotypes were not only a common part of news reports and media content but are quite often used to target individuals, primarily women politicians, journalists, activists, and other public figures, based on their gender rather than their professional activities, values, thoughts, opinions or works. Women politicians seem to be the most common target in such instances, sometimes, even wives of male politicians are scrutinised using the same pattern. When reporting on women politicians, media outlets most commonly focus on their appearance, discussing whether they are 'pretty', what they are wearing, and similar topics. National reports for BiH, Montenegro and North Macedonia all highlight this explicitly, suggesting how present these narratives are in the region.

Unethical and unprofessional reporting on gender-based violence has a significant impact on harmful reporting targeting women. These reports are incredibly harmful as they largely influence the re-traumatisation of victims and their families, which are also often included in these reports. The stereotypical and sensational reporting frequently incorporates violent depictions of crime scenes and the violence women have suffered, or their personal relationships with the perpetrator and others involved in the case. This often negatively impacts the public perception of gender-based violence, the media fails to educate the public or hold institutions and public officials accountable for dealing with this issue. The way media reports on these cases, especially on femicide as the most severe type of gender-based violence, is quite similar across the region, and these cases are recorded in all of the countries conducting the monitoring.

One of the worst cases recorded was reporting on a femicide and a multiple murder case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In August 2023, in Gradačac, a man beat up his ex-partner and broadcasted the violence, culminating in her murder live on Instagram. He killed two other people on the same day and wounded three. He live-streamed multiple times throughout the day, and it took several hours for this video to be removed and his accounts blocked on the platform. During that time, his videos reached over 15000 views, and the visibility of broadcasted violence grew even more as the media in BiH republished snippets of the video and reported sensationally, describing this femicide and triple murder as a "family tragedy", a "bloody persecution" and a "bloody feast". Some of the content recorded even praises and sympathises with the perpetrator, presenting him as "a good man" and saying this was "unexpected". Reporting on this case was quite descriptive of many

reports on femicide in the Western Balkans. As many others do, this made regional news and was reported for several days in some countries other than BiH. Even though there is a lack of professional reporting on this topic, and some reports on gender-based violence are incredibly harmful and counterproductive, violence against women has undeniably become a significant and common topic in the Western Balkan media, which may have positive effects in the future.

Significant in this reporting period were anti-gender narratives, namely those that can be defined as backlash narratives against progress made in achieving gender equality, questioning already established women's rights in the Western Balkans, more specifically, narratives presenting the fight for gender equality and LGBTIQ+ rights as a “gender ideology” and new media space created for the promotion of these narratives, such as online communities of young men promoting harmful depictions of manhood and misogynistic and patriarchal values. These online spaces are mentioned in reports for Serbia and North Macedonia, stating there is “a growing trend of creating a culture of machoism for the younger generation of online users”. However, most of these narratives are generated by conservative groups, often religious leaders, and later amplified by certain media outlets and influencers promoting these ideas. For example, after the overturn of *Roe v Wade* by the United States Supreme Court, ending the federal right to abortion, this resurfaced as a topic in Serbia and Montenegro, where influential public officials and religious leaders questioned this right even though it has been introduced in 1974 as a constitutional right in the former Yugoslavia and remained as such in both countries.

Anti-gender narratives deny gender as a social construct, and the distinction between gender and sex is disputed, as well as the fact that these do not always align. Conservative groups present all efforts for achieving gender equality and equal rights for LGBTIQ+ people as a “gender ideology” imported from Western societies and enforced in the Balkans, aimed to destroy the “traditional family” and a threat to the national identity.

Hateful narratives against political and ideological opponents

One of the most significant differences in comparison to the previous reporting period is that political targeting and hate against political opponents has increased, becoming the third most targeted group (14.8%) on a regional level.

Reports on Serbia and BiH show increased political targeting during this reporting period. The general rise of political tensions on a global and regional level is also mirrored on an internal level in most Western Balkan countries. Events such as straining of political relations either internally or regionally, conflicts in the world, protests, elections, and similar are often triggers for this type of narrative. These narratives aim to discredit political opponents, frequently using insults, threats and sometimes even threats of violence. In BiH, political opponents were called “non-Bosniaks”, “sold Serbs”, and washed-up Chetniks. They were presented as traitors working against the “national interest”. Ethnicity was emphasised in such cases, as was the situation in Montenegro. Mainstream media outlets sometimes transmit insulting and harmful language, however, even when professional media do not report blatant insults, the social media platforms remain a suitable space for such narratives. The culture of political dialogue is not widely accepted or encouraged in the region, and most societies remain politically polarised.

Most national reports state that hate against political opponents is quite often shaped as personalised ad hominem attacks aiming to discredit, target and demean the person. The report for Kosovo sheds light on the gender aspect usually included in targeting women politicians. As mentioned above, women politicians are one of the most common targets of sexist and misogynistic attacks against women in public life. They are often targeted for their work, however, the comments they receive are widely negative and usually based on their gender identity rather than their policies, claims, and opinions.

Hateful narratives against sexual minorities

Even though hateful and harmful narratives targeting the LGBTIQ+ community accounted for 13.6% of all cases, making it the fourth most targeted group, as opposed to being the third in the previous reporting period, these cases closely follow in number the recorded hate against political opponents and make up a significant amount of all cases on a regional level. In Albania, BiH and Serbia, sexual minorities remained the third most targeted group. It is important to note that hate against this group had a high average sentiment score of 2.96, just as was the case with ethnic hate.

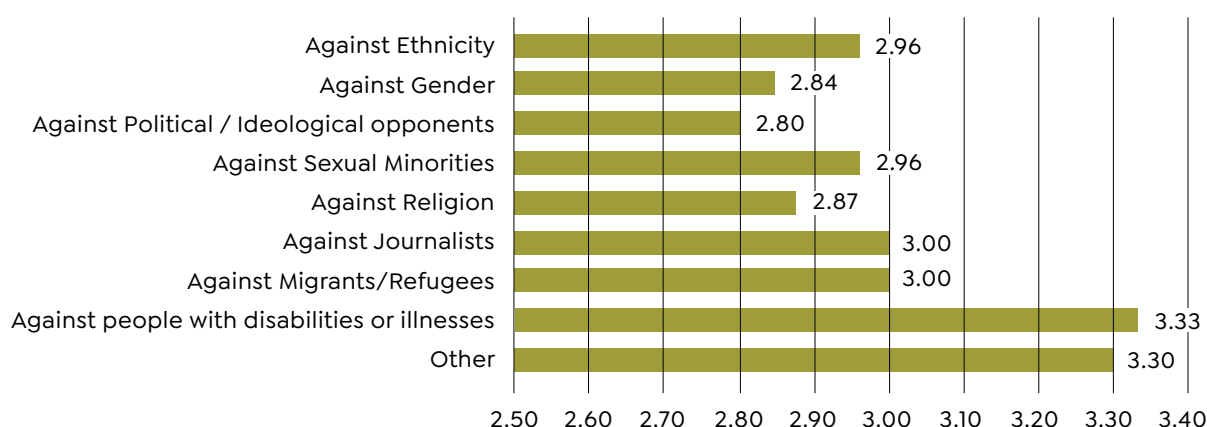
The homophobic and transphobic narratives are, just as those targeting women, quite similar and based on the same ideas across the region. Most common narratives targeting the LGBTIQ+ community include mainly negative stereotypical depictions, presenting sexualities other than heterosexuality as a sickness or mental disorder and linking it to paedophilia, as well as anti-gender narratives similar to those targeting women, described in the section on gender-based hate. When aimed at the LGBTIQ+ community, these narratives also include presenting gender as an ideology imported from the West and aimed at ruining the “traditional family values”. Interestingly, both sexualities and gender, as well as the fight for equal rights, are presented as an ideology, therefore, in some recorded cases, words such as “homosexuality” and “transgenderism” were used, implying these are ideologies rather than identities. These narratives were often generated by politicians, public officials and religious leaders, usually quite influential figures, resulting in the comprehensive visibility of these hateful narratives. They are also frequently fuelled by disinformation and other information disorders and rarely fact-checked by journalists and media outlets replicating these harmful statements.

These narratives were often triggered by Pride parades, Pride month and similar dates when the LGBTIQ+ community receives more visibility, as well as attempts of the community and allies to push for certain rights and freedoms still inaccessible to this community in most WB countries.



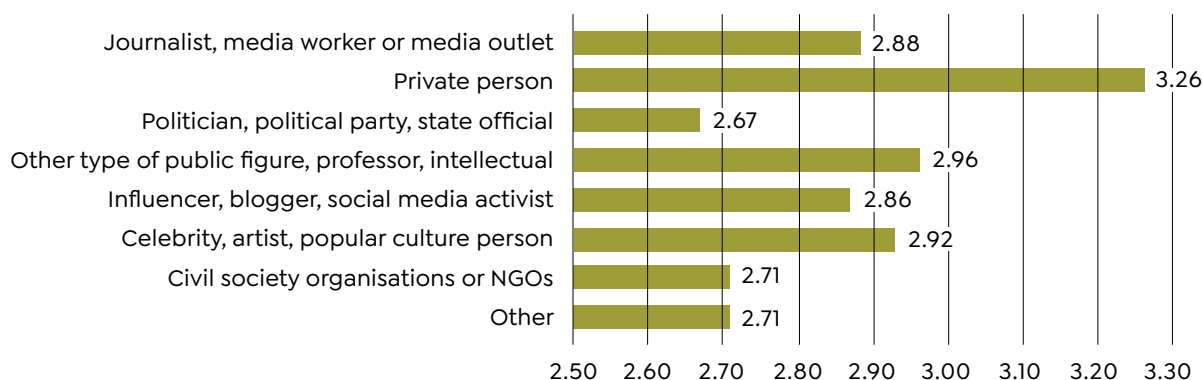
Sentiment analysis

Reported cases ranged in intensity, therefore, sentiment analysis was conducted to differentiate the cases based on the intensity of negative emotions they conveyed. This analysis aimed to identify the overall subjective attitude transmitted in a particular case of hateful and harmful speech. The overall average sentiment was calculated for each country individually and regionally. Average sentiments were also analysed according to the target group and hateful and harmful speech generators. The cases were rated on a scale of one to six based on the intensity of the sentiment conveyed in the message, with one being the lowest in intensity and six being the highest, implying the literal killing and elimination of the group. Due to the regional differences in the data availability, this part of the regional analysis was conveyed for the monitoring period from December 1, 2022, to December 1, 2023. Therefore, results may differ from those represented in national reports.



Graph 4. Average sentiment score per targeted group/individual

The overall average score was 2.92 for all cases, with the highest average score recorded in Albania (3.33) and the lowest in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2.50). On average, the highest-scored incidents per type of targeted group were the only six cases of hate aimed at people with disabilities or illnesses (3.33), closely followed by cases of hate against journalists (3.00) and migrants and refugees (3.00). When comparing the four most targeted groups, the highest average sentiment was identified in hate targeting ethnicity and sexual minorities (both 2.96), followed by gender-based hate (2.84) and targeting of political opponents (2.80).

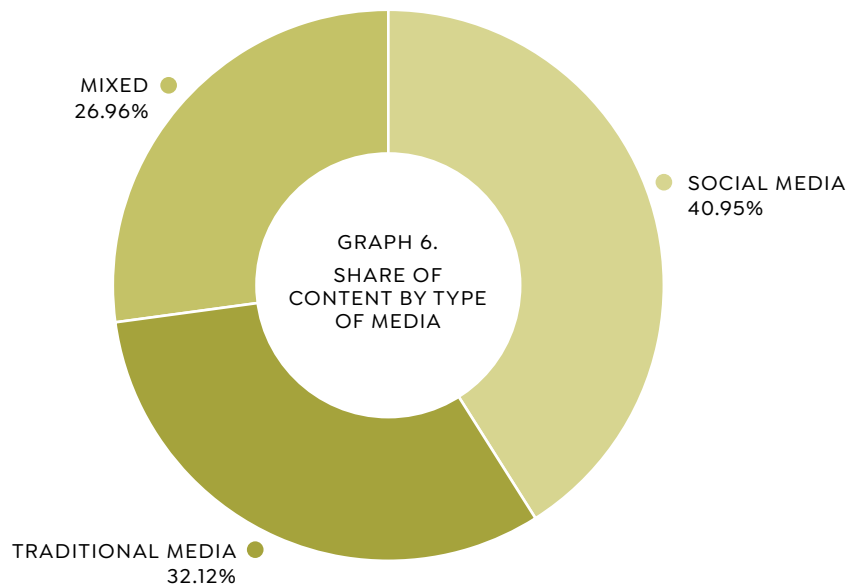


Graph 5. Average sentiment score per hate speech generator

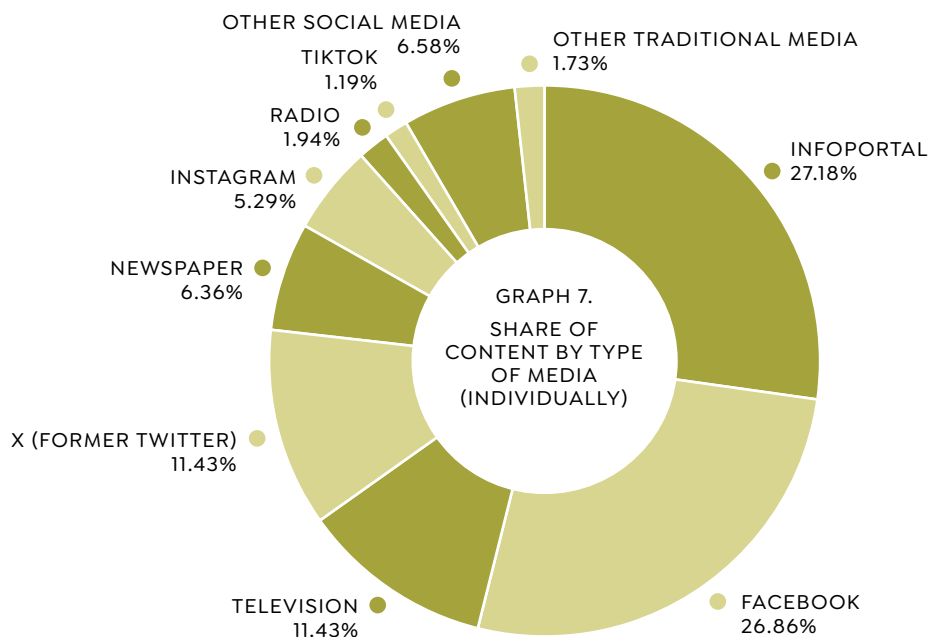
The highest average sentiment score based on the different generators of hateful and harmful speech was noted in hate speech coming from private persons (3.26), primarily users on social media platforms, which can indicate how the lack of regulation of hate speech on these platforms incites the lack of accountability with users leading to a large amount of generated online hate. High average sentiments were also found in hate speech generated by public figures, professors, and intellectuals (2.96), as well as celebrities, artists, and popular culture persons (2.92). The lowest average sentiment of hate speech was generated by politicians, political parties, and state officials (2.67).

Visibility analysis

Both traditional media outlets and social media platforms were covered during the monitoring. The primary focus was given to cases with high visibility, often those that made the national news or went viral on social media platforms. In some countries, most cases were recorded on social media, especially in Kosovo, where 82.1% of cases came from these platforms and North Macedonia, where 71.2% originated on social media. However, in Serbia (54.87%) and Albania (54.84%), over half of the cases were recorded solely in traditional media. In Montenegro, most cases were found both on traditional and social media (66%). Observed regionally, around 41% of all instances originated on social media, while 32% were found in traditional media, and the remaining 27% appeared in both.



Observed individually, more than half of all cases recorded in the region came from info portals (27.2%) and Facebook (26.9%). Almost a quarter originated from TV channels and social media platform X (former Twitter), both making up 11.4% of the cases individually. Other notable sources include newspapers (6.4%) and Instagram (5.3%).



Most recorded cases came from these info portals, often online portals of the most widely circulated newspapers in Serbia, usually tabloids, and the most accessible and most watched TV channels, those that possess a license for national frequency. Hateful and discriminatory social media posts and comments had a significantly lower reach. However, it is essential to note that comment sections on info portals and social media are fertile ground for hate speech and are usually left unmoderated. As META and other social media companies do not have a developed automatic removal of hate comments in Serbian language, they typically remain visible permanently if left unreported by users.



Conclusion

From May 2022 until December 2023, a total of 523 cases of hate speech were recorded on a regional level. More than half contained ethnic hate (28.1%) and gender-based hate (24.4%) and these two groups were the most common targets in all countries individually as well. Political targeting (14.8%) slightly prevailed over hate against sexual minorities (13.6%) in this reporting period, becoming the third most targeted group. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina noted a significant increase in share of cases with hate targeting political opponents. This trend may be attributed to the rise of political tensions on a global and regional level mirroring on an internal level in most Western Balkan countries as well. The straining of political relations either internally or regionally, conflicts in the world, protests, and elections are common triggers for this type of narrative.

Nearly a third of documented cases (29.9%) included intersectional hateful and discriminative discourses, where groups and individuals were targeted for multiple overlapping identities. This is mainly reflected in the four most-targeted categories, where someone's gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation plays a role, even if it is not the sole reason why they are targeted. Moreover, an increase in hate towards journalists and religious groups was noted, as well as a decrease in hate towards migrants and refugees on a regional level. Most hate speech in the region was generated by journalists, media workers, media outlets and private persons, primarily users on social media platforms, with the same number of cases recorded (28.4% each), and politicians, state officials and political parties (20.4%).

Sparks in political conflicts, mutual visits and meetings of regional leaders or commemorations of specific war crimes or the genocide in Srebrenica often triggered waves of increased ethnic hate. Dominant narratives often included an “us vs. them” dichotomy where the ethnic group constituting the majority is presented as the victim, and ethnic minorities or neighbouring nations as a threat and an enemy. Individuals advocating counter-narratives of interethnic cooperation and reconciliation were labelled as “traitors” working against their people and nation.

Gender-based hate apart from women occasionally targeted gender minorities, however generally contained patriarchal and misogynist depictions harmful to societies in the Western Balkans in general. Common narratives included stereotypical representations of women in the media, misogynistic and sexist targeting of women politicians, journalists and other public figures based on their gender rather than their work, extremely harmful unethical and unprofessional reporting on gender-based violence and anti-gender narratives including those undermining already achieved steps in ensuring gender equality and further efforts.

Homophobic and transphobic narratives contained mainly negative stereotypical depictions, presenting sexualities other than heterosexuality as a sickness or mental disorder and linking them to paedophilia, as well as anti-gender narratives similar to those targeting women. When aimed at the LGBTIQ+ community, these narratives also include presenting gender as an ideology imported from the West and aimed at annihilating the “traditional family values”.

When it comes to combative and preventive measures taken to address hate speech in this period, many efforts were detected across the region, from grassroots civil society actions and projects implemented by international organisations raising awareness among citizens to media regulation and self-regulation mechanisms in place, and legislative and institutional efforts focusing on this issue. However many issues prevail in this process, as these actions often lack sustainability and coordination.

As misinformation, disinformation and malinformation often fuel hate speech, media literacy is becoming a crucial life skill not only in recognising these information disorders but also in critically approaching hateful and harmful content. Western Balkan countries are rated quite low in the European Media Literacy Index¹⁰, all ranking among the 10 countries in Europe with the lowest media literacy index. These issues must be considered in attempts to combat hate speech.

Furthermore, as AI technologies are becoming more accessible and widely used, they can play a critical role in both spreading and preventing hate speech. As they use automated content, AI tools can amplify and disperse hate speech, however, these tools can also be used in combating hate speech if ethically designed, transparent and trained in region-specific languages and context. New technologies must be considered and responsibly integrated in future efforts of monitoring, detecting and countering hateful and harmful content in the digital sphere.

10. Marin Lessenski, 2023, “Bye, bye, birdie”: Meeting the Challenges of Disinformation: The Media Literacy Index 2023 Measuring Vulnerability of Societies to Disinformation, Open Society Institute – Sofia ([link](#))



**MEDIA MONITORING REPORT ON
HATE SPEECH IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**



Funded by
the European Union



The Balkan Trust
for Democracy
A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND

