



**RESILIENCE:**  
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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# **HATE NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION IN ONLINE MEDIA IN ALBANIA**

*Ilda Londo*

**ALBANIA**

## **RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation**

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### **ALBANIA**

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# HATE NARRATIVES AND DISINFORMATION IN ONLINE MEDIA IN ALBANIA

*Ilda Londo*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Narratives in Albanian media reflect the existing state of Albanian society, and in this respect, the content unavoidably mirrors the existing political divide and the increasingly extreme polarization and fragmentation of Albanian society. The advent of online media, coupled with the increasingly widespread popularity of social media, even when it comes to information sources, further exacerbates and speeds up the spread of hate narratives and disinformation. Existing deficiencies and problems with professional reporting in traditional media and the scheme of interdependent relations between media, business, and politics also affect the possibilities of reflecting on and countering the trends in hate speech narratives and disinformation. In addition, the lack of solid reaction and self-regulation mechanisms from within the media community to address these violations is another hindrance in this respect.

Previous research conducted in June–August 2020 sought to provide an overview of the main tendencies regarding hate speech, propaganda, and disinformation in Albanian media, and identify ways to counter these narratives. The current research, conducted between September–November 2020, aims to look in detail at what the actual narratives of hate and disinformation in Albanian media are and how they are spread and reinforced, analyzing the sources, actors involved, techniques used, as well as potential countering mechanisms or episodes. The following sections present an analysis of the hate narratives found during media and social networks monitoring regarding particular target groups in the country, such as political opponents, migrants, and journalists.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This analysis of hate speech and disinformation narratives in Albanian online media focuses on four main target groups. Three of them were selected on a regional basis since these were the most common topics of hate and disinformation for all the countries involved. The target groups of these hate speech narratives include migrants, political opposition, and journalists. Since hate speech is omnipresent in Albanian politics, the fourth target group selected is the opposition vis-à-vis the Government to have a complete view of the techniques, sources, and narratives used by all sides in political hate speech.

The selection of cases to monitor regarding the target groups was made based on major incidents or activities that were likely to incite hate speech narratives and extreme reactions from the actors and media involved. Each case was monitored for approximately two weeks following the onset of the event or hate speech narrative. For example, in the case of the Government versus the opposition, the case focused on the defamation campaign against opposition leader alleging he was a national traitor. Likewise, the Greek Foreign Minister's visit to Tirana and the announcements on the maritime border with Albania were a renewed opportunity for strong narrative by the opposition vis-à-vis the Government. In the case of the target group against journalists, the harsh reaction of the president's spokesman against a journalist who published reports that questioned the president's procedures in granting Albanian citizenship was the main subject of monitoring. The only exception is the case against migrants, where the monitoring is not centred around particular events, but rather on hate narratives noticed in general in the media against this group. As Albania is not part of the migrants' route in the Balkans, articles on migrants are very few, and there are no specific events or incidents on which to focus the monitoring.

The cases monitored extend beyond June 2020, which was the limit imposed for all country research reports. After reviewing all the cases of hate speech present, the relevance and representativeness of cases in October and early November 2020 were significant compared to previous examples in the period June 2019–June 2020, which was the original timeline for the research cases. Given the relevance of the examples and the narratives they entailed, it was agreed to make an exception and include these cases.

The monitoring effort involved different online media outlets and social media accounts for each target group, in view of the particular nature and actors involved in each case. In addition, due to a lack of data with which to define the most popular online media in Albania, existing perceptions of the popularity of these media, combined with some limited data provided by online instruments, were used to determine the potential impact of the media to monitor. More specifically, regarding the case of political opponents, the main criterion observed was the political leaning of the media outlets reporting on each case, as this would easily reveal the differences in

narratives between the media outlets that are aligned with different actors, producing different versions of the same event for the public. The social media profiles of the politicians involved were also under review since they constitute a major source of political hate speech, which is then replicated by media republications of these texts. In the case of hate directed at journalists, the media outlets monitored included the media outlet under attack and the Facebook profile of the officials who produced the hate narrative, in order to see the kind of discourse and “truth” produced by the two opposing poles in this case.

Regarding the monitoring of narratives on migrants, the search had to be extended to several media in order to map the discourse on this group, given the rare articles on this topic, extended over different periods and scattered across different media. In this case, the main approach has been a Google search with keywords related to migrants and the location of problematic headlines and eventually content to include in the analysis. The monitoring of media content also included user-generated content, mainly the comments on the articles, as well as comments of the Facebook profiles monitored.

### 3. Case study 1: MIGRANTS IN ALBANIAN MEDIA

Albania has not experienced the massive arrivals of refugees or migrants that other countries in the Western Balkans have seen in the last few years. Due to geographic, but especially infrastructure and logistical reasons, Albania is not traditionally on the usual route for migrants. In this context, reporting on migrants in Albanian media has generally belonged to the foreign news section, and it has been viewed as a phenomenon that did not affect Albanians at all. In March 2020, the onset of the pandemic in Europe, including in Albania, triggered a change in the media coverage of migrants in Albania. While until that time migrants were only occasionally passing by in Albania, the border closures in all countries led to many of them being trapped in Albania, having no way out due to restrictions brought about by the pandemic. As the presence of migrants in Albania grew, contact with citizens and consequently media coverage of them also became more visible, though by no means a topic of primary importance.

Mainstream media generally reported on the situation with temporary centres for asylum seekers in the country, and this reporting was neutral overall. There were also other reports that focused on particular episodes or echoed the sentiment of Albanian citizens on the migrants, who were not so neutral or correct in the coverage. The following analysis will focus particularly on these reports, as they show the incorrect, biased, and pre-judgmental side of some Albanian media vis-à-vis the migrants. Since there are not many events involving migrants in Albanian media, the monitoring has followed specific episodes involving migrants from March to July 2020, which coincides with the period during which they could not leave Albania, scattered across various online media.

#### 3.1. Analysis of narratives on migrants

When looking at some of the problematic coverage on migrants in Albania, the common thread of the stories is that the main narrative in all of them is that migrants represent a threat to Albania. The primary justification for this comes through interviews and opinions of citizens, media claims that generalize the topic without presenting any facts or evidence, and misrepresentation of videos filmed by citizens and sent to media outlets for publication. While the police have reported several incidents in this period that might have involved migrants, the coverage of the selected media does not use official sources, facts, and figures, but rather is based on perception, unfounded claims, and pre-judgmental projections of what happens once migrants flood to Albania. The following is a more detailed view on the sub-narratives present in the articles on migrants.



### 3.1.1. “Migrants as a threat to public health”

The intensification of coverage of migrants in the media coincided with the confirmation of the first cases of COVID-19 in Albania, as the pandemic was the reason why there was more frequent coverage of migrants on the first place. In this respect, the link between migrants and the threat of disease was inevitable for some of the media. This was further fed by the news that came from Greek camps, where the fear of the spread of the epidemic in crowded refugee camps was often reported on. The transfer of some of the refugees to the Albanian-Greek border naturally led to statements or predictions in some Albanian media that the migrants would be a threat to public health in Albania. One of the articles in question is titled: “There is no calm for Albania, hundreds of Syrians rush to the border, panic on the spread of COVID-19.” [1]. The article states that while neighbouring countries have closed their borders as preventive measures, hundreds of Syrians are arriving in Albania. This sort of contrast immediately sets a state of alarm for the reader, suggesting the imminent change. Furthermore, the article underlines that even though the police have stopped the migrants, they are totally uncontrolled in terms of health and potential infection. Another argument is that neither they nor the state are able to quarantine them at a time when it is well-known that the possibility that they might be infected with COVID-19 is much greater. Even though the article is not openly hostile, the sub-narrative of migrants as an uncontrolled source of spreading the disease permeates the narrative of the article.

### 3.1.2. “Migrants as disrupters of public order”

While the articles linking migrants to the pandemic are quite rare, the prevailing sub-narrative on the migrants is the perception that once they come to our country, they automatically become major disrupters of public order, turning into a constant concern for the local population. One of the articles referred to a report from one of the asylum centres in the suburbs of the capital Tirana, and the only sources used were those of citizens who lived in that area. They said they felt very insecure and had installed barbed wire and nets on their windows, in order to protect themselves [2]. The quotes state that there have been thefts, ranging from clothes and shoes to laptops and cell phones, a phrase repeated by several people interviewed, but whose names are not mentioned.

The article reinforces the feeling of fear that the locals supposedly feel, saying that they are forced to lock everything up, otherwise migrants will come into their homes and steal everything. They add that women and children are afraid to go out in the dark in case they are attacked and that the inhabitants do not even sleep at night and take turns to guard their homes against the migrants.

The prevailing sub-narrative on the migrants is the perception that once they come to our country, they automatically become major disrupters of public order, turning into a constant concern for the local population.

One of the counter-arguments for the racism against migrants in the public debate has been that Albanians used to be the migrants until not long ago, and now they have forgotten how it used to feel and fail to show the same empathy. The article in question touches upon this but makes a clear distinction between Albanians and migrants from Syria or other countries. So, one of the citizens quoted states that “we also used to be migrants, but these are not migrants. They are kamikazes,” conveying another thread of the sub-narrative of migrants as violators of public order: they are certainly terrorists.

Other reports were published by Jeta Osh Qef, on its website and Facebook page, which relies heavily on citizens’ reports, photos, or videos, publishing information that is not necessarily confirmed. These reports bring to the reader’s attention the idea that the migrants pose a threat to citizens, and businesses, and are also very quarrelsome among themselves, often causing public brawls and fights, which all contribute to a very insecure climate [3]. Another specific of these short reports is that they sometimes refer to migrants as Syrians, and other times as Moroccans, highlighting their supposed ethnicity in the title, but not making any effort to confirm it. One of the articles, mentions footage from a security camera where Syrians were threatening some Albanian men with a knife. Eventually, one of the Albanians is wounded on his hand. In fact, the footage shows a group of people, but no knife episodes, and it seems that there are no Albanians involved at any point during the video. In a similar context, another report based on a citizen’s video claims that Moroccans go out with knives and threaten people, demanding money from them. The article also claimed that asylum seekers were terrorizing businesses; however, although it depicts people who might be migrants, the video does not support any such claims [4].

At the same time, while also exploring the misfortunes of migrants, including through an interview with one of them, another article highlights the potential problems they might bring to public order, emphasizing that girls and women are particularly at risk, especially of petty thefts and attacks on the street [5].

In one of the articles monitored during this period, there is a variation of the same sub-narrative, which views migrants as parts of local criminal bands. The article suggests that the migrants who went through Albania in 2019 but did not make it to Montenegro are now in hotels and areas administered by local criminal circles, who use them for thefts or other crimes. The article also claims that in one year there has been an increase in thefts and robberies, while hotel owners have stepped up their security measures, fearing “Syrians and Afghans.” All of these claims are put in the open, but without numbers, quotes, or any sources to verify them, as the article highlights that the police remain silent in all of this matter, as they take their share of the profits.

### 3.1.3. “Migrants taking over Albania”

One of the articles monitored claims that there is a political project to replace Albanians who have left the country, suggesting that politicians are aiming to eradicate Albanian people through this plan [6]. According to the article, the Government’s plan involves replacing 1.6 million Albanians who have left the country in the last three decades with people from Syria, Iraq, Algeria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The headline is also sensational, stating that after robbing this country for thirty years, the politicians now want to eradicate the Albanian nation. The trigger for this report was the proposal of a bill on asylum-seeking procedures in parliament, detailing the procedures and the steps involved in asylum-seeking. While the article is directed against the political class, the threat of migrants vis-à-vis the “purity” and existence vis-à-vis Albanians is clear.

### 3.1.4. Hate on Facebook and UGC

The articles monitored on migrants did not have readers’ comments below them, as the media outlet in question did not allow users to comment, so there is no particular trend to report in this respect. A Facebook search with keywords did not reveal any particular groups or movements online against migrants either.

#### HATE ON FACEBOOK AND UGC

Table 1

MAIN NARRATIVE	Migrants represent a threat to Albania.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Migrants are a threat to public health.
	Migrants are thieves.
	Migrants are terrorists.
	Migrants are threats to the safety of our women, girls and children.
	Migrants will take over Albania and become the majority.

The analysis of this case study reveals that while mainstream media, in general, do not focus on migrants and generally report factually on human trafficking and police operations, part of the online media does contain hate and disinformation narratives regarding migrants, presenting them as a threat to society, as spreaders of disease, terrorists, thieves, and as a threat to public order generally. It should be noted that the main sources quoted are interviews from citizens or video and photo content sent by citizens to social media and online media websites. At the same time, there are no particular efforts from media outlets to check citizens’ claims or go beyond their statements.

Part of the online media does contain hate and disinformation narratives regarding migrants, presenting them as a threat to society, as spreaders of disease, terrorists, thieves, and as a threat to public order generally.

## 4. CASE STUDIES ON POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Previous research has identified political figures as the main source of inflammatory language in the public discourse and a common source of disinformation. The exchange of serious and mutual accusations between opposition and government representatives is a daily occurrence in public life, which is mirrored religiously in the Albanian media. Mostly, these exchanges aim to propagate a specific narrative or perception of the opponent. Often, there is no convincing or any proof at all about the claims. All of this leads to a heavy and hostile climate in rhetoric and a gradual devaluation of public statements and public discourse, including in the media coverage. There has been no visible distinction in terms of rhetoric or approaches to public discourse produced by both the ruling majority and the opposition for many years. Therefore, we analyze two target groups and their respective case studies below, where these sides of the political spectrum change place with one another in terms of political assailant and political victim.

The exchange of serious and mutual accusations between opposition and government representatives is a daily occurrence in public life, which is mirrored religiously in the Albanian media.

### 4.1. Case study 2: The Government vs. the opposition

The case selected to analyze narratives of hate and disinformation from the Government vis-a-vis the opposition is the start of a campaign against the opposition leader Lulzim Basha in early November 2020. Because of the indictment of Kosovo's former President Hashim Thaci and his referral to the Kosovo Special Chambers in the Hague, accusations of war crimes that he might have committed during the Kosovo conflict, including the potential use of a base in Albania for the transplantation of the organs of Serbs, surfaced again. In 2010, the Council of Europe produced a special report on the matter, where Dick Marty was the rapporteur, according to which "numerous indications seem to confirm that, during the period immediately after the end of the armed conflict, before international forces had really been able to take control of the region and re-establish a semblance of law and order, organs were removed from some prisoners at a clinic in Albanian territory, near Fushë-Krujë, to be taken abroad for transplantation."<sup>1</sup> Since Lulzim Basha, currently chairman of the biggest opposition party, the Democratic Party, was employed as UNMIK staff after the end of the Kosovo conflict, the ruling majority started a campaign claiming that Basha was part of the previous investigations on this matter and was personally involved in interrogating former KLA fighters<sup>2</sup>. Following a series of accusations from Prime Minister Edi Rama and the head of the parliamentary group of the Socialist Party that called on Basha to clarify his role in that period, the parliament approved the establishment of a special commission to investigate this matter.

In this case, the media monitored are both pro-opposition and pro-government to have a more complete picture of the highly polarized political debate.

1 [http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2010/20101218\\_ajdoc462010provamended.pdf](http://assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2010/20101218_ajdoc462010provamended.pdf)

2 <https://javanews.al/raporti-i-dick-marty-balla-akuza-bashes-pd-sot-drejtohet-nga-nje-hetues-i-uck/>

However, there is a heavy copy-paste tendency in content among online media, so choosing other media outlets would likely yield similar results. Furthermore, the Facebook and Twitter posts of the politicians involved were monitored.

#### 4.1.1. Analysis of narratives

The main narrative that prevails in the public statements of the Socialist Party representatives is that the opposition leader is not patriotic and has committed national treachery by his alleged involvement in the investigation of KLA fighters. This claim is also extended to include the two main political parties in opposition, respectively through their former leaders (one of whom is currently president) whom the SP officials repeatedly ask to state why they voted to approve the Dick Marty report in the Council of Europe at the time. In all of this, the main sources come from the politicians of the ruling majority and the opposition, and their word is the main proof or argument used in the media coverage when reporting on this story. At some point, the ruling majority also refers to a witness later ridiculed by media close to the opposition. The following is an analysis of sub-narratives to the main narratives noticed in the monitored text.

#### 4.1.2. “The leader of the opposition has worked against Kosovar interests”

In several public statements, Taulant Balla, general secretary of the ruling SP, refers to the traitor of Kosovo, the KLA, and the Albanian nation. He says that “using a mask, not showing his face, he interrogated KLA commanders to precede Dick Marty’s reports.”<sup>3</sup> In so doing, Basha has contributed to throwing mud against the noble intentions and the liberating war of the KLA, and the Albanian population needs transparency on this, the narrative of the Socialist Party goes.

Furthermore, at some point during the debate, the SP refer to an eyewitness, Melaim Bellanica, who claimed he had met Basha in Kukës in 1999, and had provided him with a tape of registered Serbian war crimes, which he sent to the BBC, but deleting most of the 45 minutes and leaving only 2 minutes of tape instead. Although the eye witness also made some questionable statements about seeing dead people and smoking cigarettes with them, which led to his ridicule by opposition media, the SP leaders the continued to insist he was right, with no proof other than his word. “Basha has certainly taken that tape... Between Bellanica and Basha, I certainly believe Bellanica.” [7]

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vizionplus.tv/rrezojme-pretendimet-e-dick-marty-balla-basha-te-ndahet-nga-mendimi-i-berishes-nese-ka-kellqe/>

#### 4.1.3. “The leader of the opposition is a coward for not clarifying his role”

A continuous line of political attack by the current Government against the opposition leader is that he is not courageous enough to be a leader and that he waits for power to be bestowed upon him, which makes him weak and far from a leader. The prominent voices of the ruling majority in this affair, PM Rama and MP Taulant Balla, repeatedly call on him to be “courageous” and admit what he had done in front of everyone. When Basha said that this was just a diversion from the failure of the Government to manage the pandemic, PM Rama again called on him to not hide behind COVID, but “instead answer to the fact that, together with the Peruvian doctor, you compiled the file on the Yellow House!” [8]. While presenting a claim as a fact, the PM also continues to reinforce with his rhetoric the image of a manipulator and coward in the role of the opposition.

#### 4.1.4. “The leader of the opposition is unable to distance himself from his predecessor”

Another favourite way for the ruling majority to attack the opposition is to point out that he is still not the real leader of the party and that former PM Sali Berisha and historical leader of the Democratic Party is the one that still pulls the strings. This narrative has continued again with the case in point. So, at one point, MP Balla calls on Basha to distance himself from Berisha, if he has the guts to do it: “Basha, at least for this matter, should separate from Berisha, if he is strong enough to do this. Voting for this report is national treachery.”<sup>4</sup>

#### 4.1.5. “Opposition leaders are hypocritical towards Kosovo”

The whole debate on this matter started with a tweet by PM Rama, demanding that former PM Berisha and current President Meta, former leaders of two now major opposition parties, explain why they chose to vote for the resolution for the Dick Marty report, even though it was anti-Kosovo and against Albanian interests. [9] The vote on the report is mentioned throughout the whole discussion and developments of this matter, to point the finger at the current opposition as traitors to the national interest. In fact, there were several replies and exchanges between political figures on a vote that took place ten years ago, exchanging accusations with one another. This part of the narrative came when some media and politicians had been continually accusing PM Rama of being a close friend of Vučić and selling out the national interest and Kosovo for his own interest, following some friction with certain politicians in Kosovo. After these exchanges and the politicization of the matter, several opinions and editorials were published in Albanian media by Kosovo journalists and analysts, who called on all Albanian politicians to

4 *Ibid.*

stop using Kosovo politically for their own battles, as they were significantly harming the ongoing proceedings in the Kosovo Special Chambers with their futile debates.

#### 4.1.6. Different media narratives for the same events

The analyzed media did not have any editorial content that can be classified as hate speech, other than the republication of politicians' statements containing elements of such speech. However, when presenting the narratives, in view of the political line the monitored media support, there were differences in the choice of presentation of information and the decision to omit certain information. One such dividing line between the two media monitored is the editors' choice to republish articles from other media and journalists, both from Kosovo and Albania. While Syri.net emphasizes the narrative that Rama is making these claims for his political diversion and gain rather than out of justice, Gazeta Tema focuses on the opposition instead and, especially, his leader, pointing at his lack of transparency on his past.

Another difference in narratives is related to the attitude of the village where the massacre on tape took place. While Syri.net claimed that in its statements the inhabitants do not want the massacre to be politicized [10], Gazeta Tema published an interview with the commune leader calling on Basha to give them the tape [11]. In addition, while pro-opposition media highlights the statements that make the eyewitness seem as they have mental problems [12], pro-government media package this as an opposition claim and refer to a BBC article as proof that the tape exists, even though the article just stated that the BBC published distressing images from the massacre, which is a known fact but does not shed light on the dispute on the tape [13].

The analyzed media did not have any editorial content that can be classified as hate speech, other than the republication of politicians' statements containing elements of such speech.

In this respect, while the media do publish the public statements and interviews rather factually, the reality they reconstruct is different from one another. Both media chose to omit certain information, while emphasizing another fact or opinion, conveying to the reader two different perceptions of what is going on, mirroring the political divide and contributing to a further polarization of opinion and trust in Albanian media and society.

#### 4.1.7. Hate on Facebook and UGC

The media outlets monitored for this case study do not filter or moderate the comments, and since this was a highly politicized case, there was a flood of comments below most articles. Many of them were blatantly unethical, containing curse words, and only a few of them questioned the arguments provided by politicians or sentences of the article. Comments considered the leader of the opposition a Serbian agent, as a seller of national interests, and were far from ethical about it; other comments also focused on the PM, derogating him, as well. It is to be noted that there was also repetition

of identical comments and users who repeated arguments that each political side had provided, suggesting that there is an underground army of commenters employed by political parties, a phenomenon that has been noted for several years now.<sup>5</sup>

## HATE ON FACEBOOK AND UGC

Table 2

<b>MAIN NARRATIVE</b>	The leader of the opposition is a traitor.
<b>SUB-NARRATIVES</b>	The leader of the opposition is a coward for not clarifying his role.
	The leader of the opposition has worked against Kosovar interests.
	The leader of the opposition is unable to distance himself from his predecessor.
	Opposition leaders are hypocritical towards Kosovo.

The reporting of highly polarized and politicized cases is undoubtedly fertile ground for speculation and biased information. In this case, the fact that the media conveys statements from each actor involved while not really verifying or investigating them does not provide a clear picture to the public. In addition, the biased selection of information in some cases further attests to the problem of editorial policies aligned with particular parties or politicians.

The biased selection of information in some cases further attests to the problem of editorial policies aligned with particular parties or politicians.

### 4.2. Case study 3: The opposition vs. the Government

The case selected to analyze narratives of hate and disinformation from the opposition versus the Government is the reactions of the opposition after the visit of Greek Foreign Minister Nikos Dendias to Tirana on 20 October 2020. In the joint press conference with Prime Minister Rama, it was announced that an agreement had been reached to refer the Ionian Sea maritime border dispute to the International Court of Justice in Hague. The maritime border agreement has been a somewhat contested issue for a long time; a previous agreement reached in 2009 between Greece and the then Democratic-Party-led government was challenged at the Constitutional Court by the then opposition, led by Edi Rama, and the court ruled the agreement was unconstitutional. During the same visit, it was announced that Greece “would soon nullify the formal state of war still in place between the two countries since World War II, when fascist Italian forces invaded Greece through the Albanian border before being forced to retreat deep into Albania.”<sup>6</sup> The fact that—even though just formally—this state of war existed in Greece has been another source of hostile political rhetoric and perception towards Greece,

5 <http://www.albeu.com/shqiperi/koment-partite-organizojne-skuadrat-online-/195936/>

6 <https://apnews.com/article/turkey-netherlands-united-nations-athens-tirana-f0ce45b211011db379b2ea3c9828e95c>



even though relations and exchanges between the two countries have carried on independently of this. In addition, the relationship between Greece and Albania has at times been uneasy due to minority rights and the legalization of Albanians living in Greece, and the issue of the maritime border has been a renewed opportunity for the politicization of this matter by political opponents in the country in the name of the national interest.

The opposition spoke against the decision to send the maritime border dispute to Hague, considering this a national treason, claiming it would place Albania in an unfavourable position vis-a-vis Greece. One of the most vocal personalities in the opposition is the former leader of the Democratic Party, Sali Berisha, a former prime minister and president. Very active on Facebook and social media in general, he continually uses these platforms to continue his opposition to the current Government, among other things. Therefore, his Facebook profile is the main social media site monitored, because his posts are published on many media outlets. The Democratic Party's online newspaper, rd.al, was also monitored, and the statements from other opposition personalities, especially the PDIU, a pro-Cham party, were also included. The monitoring period ranged from 20 October 2020 to 3 November 2020 but also includes some other interventions on the same topic in December 2020.

#### 4.2.1. Analysis of narratives

The main narrative that is noticeable in most of Berisha's posts is that the Albanian Prime Minister has betrayed and sold out Albanian national interests. Furthermore, he considers the Government and the Prime Minister very weak and incapable of protecting Albanian territory in front of an ever-advancing Greece on the border dispute matter. The following is a more detailed analysis of the sub-narratives noticed in the posts and articles analyzed for this purpose.

#### 4.2.2. "The Prime Minister works against the national interests"

Several posts during this period identify the Prime Minister as someone who works against the national interest. For example, in a Facebook post following the joint press conference, it is stated that "With his treacherous silence, Edvin Kristaq the Zoographer signed the loss by Albania of hundreds of square marine kilometres, as well as air space and giant deposits of trillions of euros in oil and gas that studies show are found in Ionian waters, which, in a range of 6 to 12 miles of territorial waters belonged to Albania." [14] The same post mentions that "Rama was forced to remain silent in front of the decision of the Greek government to expand the Hellenic fatherland at the expense of the Albanian fatherland, to which Rama is related only by high treason." The idea that the current intention to send the matter to the Hague while the Albanian Government only nods is high treason is a recurring theme in the opposition's statements in this regard. In all these posts and the rhetoric generally, the main term referring to Prime Minister Rama is the "Zoographer", referring

both to the provenance of the term from Greek, and also referring to Rama's education and his profession as a painter.

Furthermore, the idea that PM Rama is a traitor of Albania is emphasized by Rama's attitude to the Greeks compared to the Cham issue.<sup>7</sup> During Dendias' visit, protests were organized by the PDIU, a party with a largely Cham basis, and protesters were also arrested. Former PM Berisha considered these events a way to distract the population from his treason against the country. "To distract from the treason he is committing against the Cham issue, about which he did not dare say a single word, undoing in this way the work of 30 years, he illegally arrested the leaders of the Cham community and former MPs of PDIU, showing himself as being more anti-Cham than the notorious Napoleon Zervas." [15] This rhetoric is not advanced only by former PM Berisha, but also by representatives of the Cham party, referring to Rama as the "Trojan horse" of the Greeks, who had sold out the interests of his own country to advance the Greek agenda. All of these serve to maintain a harsh line against the Government, as always, but especially in a time of ambiguities and tension created by issues of national interest.

#### 4.2.3. "The Prime Minister is unable to stand up for his country"

Part of the rhetoric against Prime Minister Rama from the opposition is that he is protecting the interests of Greece or other countries at the expense of Albania because he cannot stand up for his country. The idea that he works for other countries' interests, being subordinate to Turkey and protecting Greek decisions on the maritime border with Albania, is repeated continuously. For example, Rama is referred to as a "vassal" of Erdogan, referring to the subordination system imposed at the time of the Ottoman empire. Along the same lines, he is referred to as "politically circumcised in Topkapi," again suggesting a powerless Prime Minister [16]. One of the Facebook posts states that Dendias informed the Albanians that one of the main issues discussed had been Albania's relations with Turkey, implying that these relations further increase Albania's distance from the EU. By referring continuously to the country's Ottoman past and comparing the present to the state of subordination that Albanians had in that historical framework, the rhetoric also suggests that this political behaviour is drawing Albanians further away from the EU and closer to being a vassal of Turkey, marking historical regress.

#### 4.2.4. Hate on Facebook and UGC

While the Democratic Party's online media outlet does not allow users to comment, there are numerous comments and reactions on Berisha's Facebook account. His Facebook page has a significant number of followers, reaching almost 1.1 million. For example, one of his most popular posts in

<sup>7</sup> *The Cham Albanians, residing in Northern Greece, were expelled from Greece at the end of World War II, on the grounds of having collaborated with the Nazis. The issue of property they owned in Greece and which they cannot use remains an open problem that Greece is unwilling to recognize.*

this monitoring counted 2,900 reactions, 53 shares, and 238 comments. The comments are mixed and generally far below ethical decency. While some of them vent anger towards what they consider fabrications and remind him that he is one of the reasons why Albania is lagging behind, others side with his posts and reactions and confirm the narratives he is providing, which shows again the polarization that is inherent in Albanian society at the moment.

The use of strong narratives by the opposition against the Prime Minister and labelling him a traitor further divide politics and society in Albania and further deepen the status quo.

## HATE ON FACEBOOK AND UGC

Table 3

<b>MAIN NARRATIVE</b>	Albanians are betrayed by this government and the Prime Minister.
<b>SUB-NARRATIVES</b>	The Prime Minister works against national interests.
	The Prime Minister is unable to stand up for his country.

The case of the maritime border with Greece and relations with Greece in general are sensitive issues for the Albanian public and likely to polarize reactions. The use of strong narratives by the opposition against the Prime Minister and labelling him a traitor further divide politics and society in Albania and further deepen the status quo.

## 5. Case study 4: JOURNALISTS

In recent years, the general climate of verbal abuse and debasement of journalists and their lack of integrity has been a constant feature of the public debate, often promoted by politicians. Although this trend has been present in Albania in the last 30 years, it has further intensified. It has often become the norm that when politicians do not like journalists' work, they dismiss and try to discredit them, contributing to lower public trust in the media. Probably the most visible example in recent years is that of Prime Minister Edi Rama, who often is far from diplomatic with journalists, describing the media as a "rubbish bin," ridiculing journalists and claiming they are incompetent or unprepared, that they do not know what they are talking about, referring to their bosses, etc. However, he is not the only one, and the role of and trust in journalists' work have been further undermined because of this rhetoric, even though this is not the case only in Albania.

The case analyzed within this target group is that of journalist Adriatik Doci, a reporter at online media Shqiptarja.com and Report TV. In October 2020, he published a series of reports exposing the disproportionately large number of Albanian passports issued by President Meta compared to his predecessors and claimed that the procedures had not been followed correctly. He also published reports of security concerns, as some of the persons who received passports were under investigation or were suspected to be involved in crimes. Following these publications, the President's office, mainly through the spokesperson, engaged in a series of verbal assaults against the journalist and later against the media outlet's owners, Carlo Bollino and Alba Malltezi.

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### 5.1. Analysis of narratives

The main narrative that is served against journalists in this case is that the journalist and media outlets in question are liars who make up reports for political and economic gain. In this case, the statements do not refer to the media as a whole category, but rather to one specific media outlet and journalist. The sub-narratives come in different forms, ranging from a lack of objectivity, corruption, anti-patriotism, incompetence, etc., as described below in more detail.

#### 5.1.1. "Journalists and media are heavily politicized"

The first sub-narrative that arises in this case is that the journalist in question is heavily politicized, and the spokesman considers him a militant of the Socialist Party. They republished an e-mail of the journalist that had been leaked previously, where he wrote to an MP asking for his wife to be employed, given the history of his family and himself as a long-time supporter of the

Socialist Party [17]. In this respect, because of his Italian nationality, the media outlet owner is referred to as “Malavita,” to convey the perception that he is connected to organized crime in some way.

#### 5.1.2. “Journalists and media publish fake news and avoid real news”

They also accuse the journalist and the media outlet owner of playing the Government’s game, “fabricating news” [18] to divert public attention from the Government’s corrupt affairs and the mismanagement of the pandemic”. In another statement, the President’s spokesman repeats the idea, inviting the media to “stop fabricating fake news, but focus on the real news: the Mafia of incinerators!”, referring to other ongoing reports on the potentially corrupt affairs of private-public partnership.

#### 5.1.3. “Journalists and media work against the national interest”

In another statement, the Spokesman labels this media outlet’s campaign against him as defamatory to the martyrs of Albania, stating that they “have started a fierce anti-national campaign, completely Milosevic-like, against the most well-known personalities of the Albanian nation!” [19] Claiming that the passports they refer to were for the family members of KLA martyrs and well-known intellectuals of the Albanian diaspora, they state: “these media, serving as spokespersons of the Government, use the language of Milosevic, Seselj, and notorious Arkan, to qualify the KLA martyrs as ‘not worthy of being Albanian’ and ‘a breach of national security.’” [20] By so doing, these statements clearly associate the journalist and media in question with the Government and the anti-patriotic stance they claim the ruling majority has been following. The statement also refers to the media as “disgusting media puppets” [21], adding to the inflammatory language used.

#### 5.1.4. “Journalists and media are corrupt”

Finally, the President’s spokesman’s statement and exchange with the Shqiptarja.com owners revert to a long-running debate in the Albanian media: the potential economic benefits of media owners in the framework of public tenders and similar schemes in exchange for favourable coverage of the ruling party. He reposted a series of questions related to this matter that former journalist and Socialist Party MP Alfred Peza put to Bollino. The questions essentially cast doubts on the business practices of the media outlets Bollino owns with his wife, questioning about previous investigations and charges of money laundering, illegally obtaining public funds, using double books for the company’s finances, incorrect treatment of labour relations, etc. [22].

This verbal exchange and assault was heavily politicized. The Prime Minister called this an attack on free media and journalists who are only doing their job

and referring to the President as someone who had already taken more than his fair share from the country [23]. This statement was followed by a series of government ministers, the Tirana Mayor, and other persons expressing their support for Shqiptarja.com, condemning the President’s attack on free media [24]. While there were no particular reactions from the media community, an investigative journalist, a former employee of Shqiptarja.com, noted that it would be more appropriate to protect the journalist who published the story, rather than the owner [25].

### 5.1.5. Hate on Facebook and UGC

While traditional media published the exchange but did not take particular sides on it, the readers’ comments below the monitored articles in Shqiptarja.com are heavily against the President, degenerating into cursing, defamation, and threats. They are clearly not filtered in any way and go beyond the President, focusing on his wife and family too. However, this is not peculiar to this case, but it is general practice in all media outlets that have their user comments open and unfiltered. It is notable that the journalist under attack also responded with a Facebook post directed at the President’s spokesman, subtly threatening to expose details of his private life, becoming, in this case, part of the hate narrative [26]. However, he later admitted in an interview that he had overstepped the mark.

The lack of realization of such transparency leads to public exchanges that become politicized and interest in public-oriented journalism is paid lip service to, but is often cast aside.

#### HATE ON FACEBOOK AND UGC

Table 4

<b>MAIN NARRATIVE</b>	<b>Journalists should not be trusted.</b>
<b>SUB-NARRATIVES</b>	Journalists and media are heavily politicized.
	Journalists and media publish fake news and avoid real news.
	Journalists and media work against the national interest.
	Journalists and media are corrupt.

This case study shows the vulnerability of journalists who publish reports against political figures on the one hand, and the deep polarization of the Albanian media and society, often seen as heavily aligned with one party or another, on the other. In these cases, although all actors appear to call for transparency, the lack of realization of such transparency leads to public exchanges that become politicized and interest in public-oriented journalism is paid lip service to, but is often cast aside.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The case studies analyzed here show that, in general, the mainstream media does not produce hate speech narratives on its own, but does become a vehicle for carrying them. The greatest producers of hate narratives, division, disinformation, and polarization remain the political actors, partly because of their pervasive presence in the media and their use of social media. Nonetheless, while online media do not usually start hate narratives on their own, their political alignment and interests lead them to be selective in the information they convey. As a result, it is often the case that the Albanian public receives two or more versions of the same story, contributing, to some extent, to the reinforcement of the existing political and social divisions in the country.

In general, the mainstream media does not produce hate speech narratives on its own, but does become a vehicle for carrying them.

Hate narratives towards journalists have intensified in recent years, reflecting a global trend as well as the increasingly harsh rhetoric of the political class against them on some occasions, which has certainly leaked through in the public's trust and attitude vis-à-vis journalists and the media. On the other hand, hate narratives on migrants are rare due to Albania's scant experience has in this regard. However, they can be found in various media outlets, with the primary sources being citizens or anonymous, showing that proper reporting on this topic is needed in order to have a more educated public in this regard and face the existing prejudices and stereotypes.

Finally, the lack of proper mechanisms to counter hate narratives in the media is another deficiency, which leads to a lack of reflection on ethical and professional standards. While civil society organizations focusing on human rights do their own work and issue statements, reflecting on these statements and improving media coverage has proved more difficult. Some of the online media have closed their comments to the public, which automatically produces an improvement in the language present in these outlets. However, the main generators of hate narratives do not seem interested in changing their rhetoric for the moment, and the media seems to follow suit and convey this language to the public.

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## 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Both traditional and online media should consider self-regulating themselves, either individually or as a community, to commit to ethical standards in reporting, including avoiding hate speech and narratives.
- Online media should seriously and responsibly address the moderation of their comments in line with respecting the right to privacy and dignity.
- Both existing bodies within the audiovisual media regulator and the self-regulation initiative, the Albanian Media Council, should be more proactive in monitoring violations, encouraging the media to self-regulate and correct their mistakes, and also promote a greater sense of responsibility from the media on the flaws in their coverage.
- Civil society organizations should be more vocal when encountering cases of hate speech in the media, calling for the correct coverage of the issues at stake and leading a public debate in this regard. Efforts should not be limited to identifying such narratives or cases and should also offering a counter-narrative, such as debunking these cases through fact-checking platforms.
- Efforts for the improvement of media literacy efforts should be ongoing from all actors. The Government should establish a strategy and clear policies on adopting media literacy as part of the curriculum in an appropriate form. Civil society actors should continue and intensify their efforts to raise awareness of critical thinking and media literacy. Public institutions and civil society should coordinate in this regard, possibly also engaging the media as a supporter of these initiatives and policies.



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This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The second series of research reports examines HATE AND DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

Nine media development organizations in the Western Balkans and Turkey have joined forces under an EU-funded project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey'. The three-year project is coordinated by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM), a network of media development organizations in Central and South East Europe, and implemented in partnership with: the Albanian Media Institute in Tirana, the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0 in Pristina, the Montenegro Media Institute in Podgorica, the Macedonian Institute for Media in Skopje, the Novi Sad School of Journalism in Novi Sad, the Peace Institute in Ljubljana, and Bianet in Istanbul.