



RESILIENCE:

For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

HATE NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

Sandra B. Hrvatin, Brankica Petković and Sanela Hodžić

REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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CONTENTS

1. THE DISCOURSE OF THE PROPAGANDIST MEDIA 7

- 1.1. Discourse that strips down 8
- 1.2. Hate thy neighbour 9
- 1.3. Our daily fascism 11

2. RESEARCH OF HATE NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY 12

- 2.1. Typical examples of hate narratives 13

3. CONTENT OF THE HATE NARRATIVES IN THE REGION 17

- 3.1. The sources, contributors and platforms of hate narratives 20
- 3.3. The role of state institutions, self-regulatory bodies
and civil society in the fight against disinformation
and hate narratives 22

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A BETTER SOCIETAL RESPONSE TO HATE 25

- Literature and sources 28
- About the authors 29



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1. THE DISCOURSE OF THE PROPAGANDIST MEDIA

Analyzing the discourse of the propagandist media requires more than merely listing the linguistic excesses they use, enumerating the enemies they are targeting or assuming the futile position of moralizing and condoning their consequences. We are compelled to thoroughly consider the reasons behind the propagandist media's use of this particular type of speech (and not another), the reasons for choosing specific social groups and turning them into enemies, and finally, the reason for public communication becoming a space where hate is nurtured. The same way that the emergence of the propagandist system required a dismantling of the democratic media system, the process required the normalization of hate through political speech as well. It did not happen overnight. It was not the result of a sort of media coup. The propagandist media system was built through the deliberate appropriation of media and public speech, the dismantling of the key safeguards of democracy, and the adoption of legislation that cut back the public interest in the media sphere and reduced it to support for the governing political elites. As pointed out by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (2003), most difficult, yet vitally important for the analysis of the totalitarian governing is analyzing how the national-socialist regime began to function as an "exterminating machine" run by individuals lacking any sense of accountability. For this machine to operate smoothly, it was pertinent to prevent speech (obviously the speech of the Other and the different) which resulted in the prevention of thought. For that reason, analysis of the discourse of the propagandist media is simultaneously an exercise in political thought.

The discourse of the propagandist media creates "portraits" of enemies that incarnate the idea of what we are supposed to hate, realizing it in such a way that we automatically recognize the enemy without thinking about the reasons behind the need to hate them.

The propagandist media system functions as a system of capillaries. Its discourse spreads through the entire "body" of the population, poisoning it. Understanding the functioning of this discourse requires a "double-track" approach. We refer to the work of Victor Klemperer *LTI, Lingua Tertii Imperii* (2014), a professional philologist who was recognized as the archetypal Other by the Nazi regime and gradually stripped of everything except the ability to think. The second approach stems from the illustrative representation in Sam Keen's work *Faces of the Enemy* (1986) that focuses on the analysis

of the visual representation of the enemy. Keen defines these images using distinct archetypes that create the imagination of illustrations of the enemy through different historical periods and environments. The archetypes function as blank forms that the current propaganda can fill out with specific characteristics of the group we are supposed to hate (Keen, 1986: 14).

The discourse of the propagandist media creates “portraits” of enemies that incarnate the idea of what we are supposed to hate, realizing it in such a way that we automatically recognize the enemy without thinking about the reasons behind the need to hate them. The features of these “portraits” are drawn by our frustrations and fears that act like “free-floating hatred” (Keen), attaching itself to a specific group or individual. The imagination of hate of the propagandist media is accompanied by linguistic poverty (as we will demonstrate further on), repeating words that “speak for themselves” and function as all-encompassing. The intent of the propagandist media’s discourse is the unification of “our” community (against “theirs”), enforcing the expression of loyalty, patriotism and love, reserved exclusively for those that are “like us”. As far as hate speech goes, determining the enemy goes along with determining those that are worthy of love. We must not equate the discourse of propagandist media with a lie (even though the latter exists as well). To be effective, this discourse must, at least, play the seeming credibility card, which creates a sort of patchwork of lies, half-truths and actual events misplaced to a different context. The language of propaganda media had to be syncretistic. *Syncretism is not only, as the dictionary says, ‘the combination of different forms of belief or practice’; such a combination must tolerate contradictions. Each of the original messages contains a sliver of wisdom, and whenever they seem to say different or incompatible things it is only because all are alluding, allegorically to the same primeval truth* (Eco, 1995).

1.1. Discourse that strips down

Klemperer’s book describes the experience of a German-Jewish philologist with a looming death sentence under Nazi rule. He considered the analysis of Third Reich speech to be a necessary tool, calling it a balance stick (*Balancierstange*) that kept him alive walking the tightrope stretching above the abyss of a totalitarian regime. *“In the hours of disgust and despair, in the eternal boredom of the most mechanical factory labour, bedside to the sick and dying, on the graves, in personal distress, in moments of complete humiliation, with a heart that was physically worn down, I always sought comfort in a demand I made to myself: observe, research, memorize what is going on.”* (Klemperer, 2014: 18, our translation) Klemperer spent the years of the hardest life ordeals meticulously collecting, describing, writing down and explaining the words that the Nazi regime was producing through propaganda. He observed and wrote down the ways in which he (as a Jew) was dehumanized by the propagandist media through words; words that ultimately materialized as the concentration camps of death. It is possibly the most tragic linguistic experience for the author (and the reader as well)

The dehumanizing discourse has become a part of his own. It reveals the urgency of deconstructing the discourse as a part of resistance to the totalitarian system.

when he realizes that the dehumanizing discourse has become a part of his own. It reveals the urgency of deconstructing the discourse as a part of resistance to the totalitarian system, because when the discourse of hate penetrates everyday life and becomes predominant, its first and foremost role is to quell any possibility of resistance. This is the reason why the discourse in question must be not only documented but also stripped down, deprived of its swagger and seeming harmlessness. The rise of the propagandist media (including social media networks) is in many ways a result of the appropriation of freedom of speech. The American “alt right” extreme right movement began its march on the communication public space with the mantra about unlimited freedom of speech. They estimate that hate speech is “the price we have to pay” in order to be able to express ourselves freely. Those who oppose this kind of statement, namely leftist intellectuals and activists, were labelled “snowflakes”. They are seen as overly sensitive to the heated public debate, too wimpy (this is also part of the imagination of hate) when it comes to racist and homo/transphobic discourse. Resisting this kind of speech is not a matter of personal (in)sensitivity, rather it is a public matter, a political matter. And it is the latter, the political elites, that are avoiding taking appropriate measures. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe experience discomfort at the mere thought of limiting the freedom of expression. Because in the past it was the State that misused the limiting of freedom of speech to protect its political interests, the present official institutions authorized to sanction this kind of misuse completely capitulated. Leaving the regulation of freedom of expression (and more importantly, leaving the sanctioning of its misuse) to the owners of communication platforms and their algorithms represents the privatization of a fundamental human right. As Luis Ferreiro, the director of Musealia, said referring to the exhibition titled “Not long ago, not far away” at the Auschwitz Memorial Center, it is impossible to understand the space of freedom, democracy and security that we share today as Europeans without facing this story. *Europe is built on the moral ruins of Auschwitz. It happened in the heart of Europe and just a generation ago*.¹

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1.2. Hate thy neighbour

An important focus of our research is finding the reason behind specific groups and individuals falling victims to dehumanization through hate speech. On this occasion, we will not deal with the concept of dehumanization (Haslam, 2006, for further reading) and its functioning—beyond the fundamental premise that the effect of dehumanization is mostly the erasure of moral boundaries, diminishing of remorse, rationalization of violence and aggressive actions and unconditional execution of orders and instructions of the propagandist media. We must not forget that the propagandist media function as indicators and amplifiers of hate in society. It is they that determine those that must be hated (and the reasons why), those that need to be ridiculed and foremost, they present “instructions” on how to do just

¹ See: <http://www.auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/auschwitz-not-long-ago-not-far-away-exhibition-with-the-european-heritage-award-europa-nostra-award.1419.html>.

that. They function as transmission between the political sphere and its supporters. For those individuals and groups that become the target of the propagandist media, an “order” is transmitted, which calls for the hate to decant from the media discourse to the talk of everyday life. It comes as no surprise that the publication of pieces of this kind in the propagandist media comes followed by bashing on social networks. How are enemies created, and what are their archetypes? Sam Keen has defined thirteen enemy archetypes in his analysis (Keen, 1986, 15-89). We will not deal with all of them for the purposes of this article, but will mention those that stood out in our analysis.

We must not forget that the propagandist media function as indicators and amplifiers of hate in society. It is they that determine those that must be hated.

The first archetype that is listed by Keen understands the enemy as a foreigner. If I am to understand my own position within my own group, I need a foreigner. Foreigners who come and go are welcome. Foreigners who come and want to stay and become a part of our community represent the enemy. They become the permanent re-enforcer of “us” versus “them”. No matter how hard they try to “become like us”, they will forever remain foreigners. The next archetype represents the enemy as a demon, devil, agent of the dark forces. They are determined predominantly by their religious system, which is foreign to our belief system and our social order. This way, the fight against the enemy becomes a fight of good versus evil. A potent archetype is the one that represents the enemy as barbarian or savage—someone whose mere existence is a threat to our culture and values. The archetypal greedy enemy is based on the assumption of insatiability, with no sense of boundaries or limitations. They “devour” whatever you give them— “give them your finger, they will take your hand”.

The next archetype represents the enemy as a criminal who steals, takes what does not belong to them, and is are not used to hard work but makes money quickly by swindling. A very emotionally charged archetype is the one that represents the enemy as a sexual predator/rapist. The enemy as a rapist is the destroyer of motherhood (the homeland as the mother(land)); his lust is destroying the unambiguous innocence of our women. When the archetypes are used to descend from perceiving the enemy as half-human to perceiving them as inhuman, the process of dehumanization is underway. The transition from barbarian to animal, disease, rodent, pest enables their destruction (extermination) without remorse. We have transformed Keen’s enemy archetypes into prevailing narratives that put visual imagery into words so that the latter becomes a part of everyday speech. The selection of the target groups of these kinds of narratives was adjusted to the principal archetype of the enemy as a foreigner.

As revealed by Umberto Eco, “*Ur-Fascism grows up and seeks for consensus by exploiting and exacerbating the natural fear of difference. The first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders. Thus Ur-Fascism is racist by definition.*” (Eco, 1995) To be different from the foreigner, to be better than the foreigner is based solely on where someone was born. In this sense, the foreigner is the one that presents itself as the crucial connecting tissue for the formation of a nation. There would be no

“us” without the foreigner. Therefore, the constant production of foreignness. Even more, any one of us can at a particular moment in time become the archetypal foreigner.

The choice of “people on the move” (migrants), politicians of the opposition, critical journalists and women has somehow established a coordinated system of hate in the discourse of the propagandist media. The narratives concerning migrants embody all of Keen’s archetypes of the enemy. When it comes to these narratives, we must analyze how migrants are dehumanized on a linguistic level. It is one of the worst types of propagandist discourse. Opposition politicians are represented as a foreign object inserted in the political body of the nation. The same goes for critical journalists. The narratives of hate are deeply anti-intellectualist. Critical thinking or even just thinking can be ascribed to someone who does not wish what is good for their nation. These examples reveal that the discourse of the propagandist media follows the principle: obey and do not think. The discourse of the propagandist media is extremely sexist. The image of a (headless) white woman’s body being groped by the hands of black men, published on the cover of a Slovenian newspaper *Demokracija* (*Democracy*, how ironic!), owned by the current prime minister of Slovenia, Janez Janša, is the epitome of this discourse. There are women (wives and mothers) that must be defended from the enemy and others that are worthless in this patriarchal cosmos. The attacks on female politicians, journalists, and critical intellectuals contain a whole arsenal of archetypes that are used as tools and weapons for their dehumanization. Since the propagandist media’s discourse is not based on arguments, the women’s bodies and appearance in general become the “faces of the enemy”.

The narratives of hate are deeply anti-intellectualist. Critical thinking or even just thinking can be ascribed to someone who does not wish what is good for their nation.

1.3. Our daily fascism

Propagandist media speech must be analyzed specifically through language. Their narratives must be taken seriously, deconstructed, and the effects this language produces demonstrated. *“Ur-Fascism can come back under the most innocent of disguises. Our duty is to uncover it and point our finger at any of its new instances – every day, in every part of the world,”* said Eco (1995). Fascism is present here and now, and it is not disguised as innocent imagery. Therefore, the analysis of propagandist media must include analyzing the media system that enables this kind of media as well as the analysis of the political system that approves of it. The misuse of freedom of speech for spreading hate, the incompetence of state institutions to sanction it, the media’s business models which profit from this kind of speech and the silent majority unwilling to reflect on the consequences of this kind of statements are the reasons that turned the space of public communication into a space for nurturing hate. Politics, especially democratic politics that is incapable of establishing and protecting the culture of dialogue in the public space, must be held accountable for the consequences of the effects of the propagandist media.

Propagandist media speech must be analyzed specifically through language. Their narratives must be taken seriously, deconstructed, and the effects this language produces demonstrated.

2. RESEARCH OF HATE NARRATIVES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

After researching hate and propaganda models of media and communication in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey, in spring 2020, the Resilience project research team focused, in autumn 2020, on the content of these media and communication. The emphasis was on main patterns and examples of hate narratives, and to a certain extent also to disinformation narratives. We also checked which actors and events serve as the main generators of hate narratives, what the main ideas and messages disseminated are, what the dynamics of production and dissemination of these narratives are, what the reactions are, and what the options for preventive and ex post actions to combat hate and disinformation narratives are.

Considering the limited resources and time available, we based the research on a case study (sample analyses) approach. For the same reason, we identified the target groups of hate narratives before the case study analyses. This was possible because the analysis of the hate and propaganda models of media and communication models, done in each country in the first research of the Resilience project, already detected the target groups.

The case study approach implied that the cases related to each target group would be analyzed in a limited number of online media and social networks and in a limited period of time.

Three target groups have been identified as common for the analysis of hate and disinformation narratives in all seven countries: migrants, political opponents and journalists. In each country, one or two country-specific target groups were identified by the researchers in addition to the common ones.

The significance of the additional target group(s) was identified based on criteria such as traditional (historical) exposure of the target group to hate narratives, including the recent period; the number, frequency and size of campaigns and cases used for targeting the group with hate narratives in the recent period; power and size of the main source of hate narratives against the target group in the recent period.

TARGET GROUPS OF HATE NARRATIVES, SELECTED FOR THE RESEARCH

Table 1

COMMON TARGET GROUPS ON REGIONAL LEVEL				
TARGET GROUP 1	TARGET GROUP 2	TARGET GROUP 3	TARGET GROUP 4	TARGET GROUP 5
migrants	political opponents (to the government)	journalists	country-specific target group	country-specific target group

For each target group, the researchers identified a case (event, incident) that generated hate and disinformation narratives. The cases (events, incidents) were selected from the period between June 2019 and June 2020. If the case was reported in a longer interval, the main interval for analysis was limited to at least one week and at most two.

The media sample was selected to include one or two online media (web portals) and one or two social media (social networks). Within social networks the number of social media accounts/pages analyzed depended on the specific situation in each country, but the researchers were asked to analyze at least one and at most ten social media accounts.

In online media, articles and comments by readers below articles were analyzed. In social media accounts, the posts of the account holders and members of the group, as well as comments by visitors, were taken into account.

The research of social media was based on content available on the public internet only. We established joint criteria for the selection of online media and social networks as well as for pages and profiles within social networks. Beside ranking or influence, the focus was also put on the media and communication platforms identified in the first Resilience research as “champions” of hate and propaganda models in each country.

For the identification of relevant social media accounts, secondary sources were also used (e.g. reports of fact-checking platforms, etc.) as well as the CrowdTangle application (useful for finding out where the media articles on the case (event) were shared).

To enable a common understanding of the concept of hate narratives relevant literature was consulted by the researchers, but the examples of typical narratives for the three common target groups were also elaborated centrally.

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2.1. Typical examples of hate narratives

The typical examples of hate narratives elaborated centrally include:

Target group 1: MIGRANTS

Example of the narrative:

The arrival of migrants is a threat to the society.

Examples of sub-narratives:

- Migrants are a threat to public health. Migrants are contagious (infected) and

unclean. They bring infectious diseases with them (in the case of COVID-19 they represent the biggest threat for spreading the pandemic) and endanger the health of the population in the countries they are located in/arriving in (countries of destination/transit countries; countries that they travel through/countries they stay to reside in);

- Migrants are a threat to the core values of the society in which they are arriving. Migrants come from countries that do not respect fundamental human rights;
- Migrants represent a threat to the economic system of the society. The countries should take care of their unemployed citizens instead of allocating public funds to cover the expenses of handling of migration. Migrants are a cause of the worsening of the economic position of the local population (“stealing their jobs”);
- Migrants are a threat to the social security (welfare) system of the state of arrival. Migrants are lazy, they do not want to work and they only come to Western countries to exploit the welfare system;
- Migrants represent a threat to the cultural values of the society. Migrants come from countries with completely different, alien cultural values, incompatible with those of the society of arrival. Migrants are barbarians (under-developed/backwards), coming to the civilized Western world;
- Migrants are potential terrorists;
- Migrants are a threat to population growth. Migrant families have many children. In the long term, this natality policy will cause the white people to become a minority;
- Migrants are poor and uneducated and cannot contribute to society;
- Migrants are not prepared to adjust to the environment of their arrival. They enforce their traditions, culture and values upon the local population;
- Being uncivilized, migrants are aggressive, they attack the police and local population and this is a reason for placing barbed wire on the borders, upgrading protective military equipment etc.;
- Migrants are ungrateful – when they (self)organize for their rights, they never get enough. We help them and it is still not enough;
- Migrants do not respect women. Since it is mostly men arriving, their negative attitude towards women makes them prone to harassment and rape;
- Advocates for the rights of migrants are well paid and employed by various non-governmental organizations financed by individuals wishing to destabilize Western society. If they support migrants so much, they should welcome them in their homes.

Target group 2: POLITICAL OPPONENTS (TO THE GOVERNMENT)

Example of the narrative:

Political opposition/political opponents are working against their own country.

Example of sub-narratives:

- The political opposition does not work in the best interest of its country and its people;
- Politicians of the opposition are mercenaries of foreign countries and organizations. Various conspiracy theories (e.g. antisemitism, the influence of George Soros);
- Politicians of the opposition are traitors;
- Politicians of the opposition should be punished, humiliated, publicly exposed; there are very vivid ideas circulating around representing what should be done to them;
- Various forms of death threats, threatening with injury or, in the case of female politicians, rape threats;
- Politicians of the opposition are involved in numerous scandals. Hateful messages about their family life, public life, customs. Their personal life is nothing but scandal and degeneration – an extension of their politics;
- Politicians of the opposition are part of the deep state;
- Politicians of the opposition are former communists that cannot shake their totalitarian tradition (a narrative generally connected to former member states of Yugoslavia).

Target group 3: JOURNALISTS

Example of the narrative:

Journalists are enemies of the state (and by extension enemies of their people).

Examples of sub-narratives:

- Journalists are foreign mercenaries;
- Journalists are liars;
- Journalists should be physically removed (in the case of female journalists they are usually targeted for their appearance, age, family life – perception of journalists as prostitutes);
- Journalists are corrupt. They publish what they are instructed to publish;

- Journalists publish *fake news* or are a form of fake news themselves;
- Journalists have no values. They are prepared to serve every new master that comes along;
- Journalists deserve everything bad that happens to them.

Based on the research material (content identified) for each case study, the country researchers conducted analyses of the main narrative and sub-narratives, referring to typical examples of hate narratives where possible, but also identifying and elaborating additional hate narratives if they exist in the material. For the additional target group(s) specific for the national level, the researchers identified and elaborated the main hate narrative and sub-narratives on their own.

3. CONTENT OF THE HATE NARRATIVES IN THE REGION

This research starts with the notion that hate narratives, being an important part of the public discourse, threaten to corrupt the culture of public discussion and make the enmity and threats to the physical integrity and life of the Other more and more imminent. Given that hate narratives are being (re)constructed through everyday practices of public communication, the seven researchers did not rely on a common and fixed definition of hate narratives; instead, the project defined and viewed hate narratives in the light of the specific circumstances of each analyzed case, exploring not only hate speech in the juridic sense but also narratives that involve tendentious negative representations, denunciation and stigmatization of the Other.

Hate narratives, being an important part of the public discourse, threaten to corrupt the culture of public discussion and make the enmity and threats to the physical integrity and life of the Other more and more imminent.

The seven researchers gathered a sample of hate narratives against selected targets and on selected media and social network platforms, providing just a glimpse into a small part of the universe of hate narratives, and showing how the content of the disinformation and hate narratives relies mainly on the archetypes and strategies of othering.

The main targets of hate narratives, their content and intensity vary depending on socio-political circumstances and current events, but some features and targets are rather common across the region.

Narratives about refugees and migrants² as a security, economic, cultural or a threat to public health persist across the region (See table 1).

However, in some countries they are more prominent than in others. In Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, some media outlets play a key role in the othering of migrants, including through dominantly negative reporting, selective sources of information, and sometimes through disinformation. In Montenegro and Albania, the hate narratives against refugees/migrants are less present, as the established media show more balanced reporting. However, right-leaning websites in Montenegro report mainly negatively on migrants. In Albania, media reports are not openly hostile, but some portray migrants in a dominantly negative light, relying on unfounded perceptions and claims of individual citizens rather than on data and evidence.

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² Notably, the identified hate narratives tend to reduce this heterogeneous population to the term "migrants" only, and in user comments to essentializing and inaccurate categories such as "Arabs" and migrants from "the Middle East".

HATE NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Table 2

MAIN NARRATIVE	MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES AS A THREAT
SUB-NARRATIVES	Threat to public order, security, health and/or the economy (Albania, BiH, Turkey, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo) (i.e. connected to terrorism, spreading diseases, financial burden, aggressive, criminal, violent, especially against women);
	Primitive, morally inferior and disgusting (BiH, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Kosovo); e.g. implicit in user comments using terms “scum”, “parasites”, “barbarians”, “plague”, “bigoted”, “breeding like rabbits”, “lazy” “opportunists”, in Kosovo “maxhup”- a derogatory term for Roma people.
	Threat to cultural values (North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Kosovo) often expressed as the projected Islamization of the country; In Kosovo, “their” culture and “their” Islam are presented as inferior.
	Treated better than us (BiH, Serbia, Turkey).
	Threatening to take over our country and eradicate our people (Albania)
	Threatening to disable EU accession (Kosovo)
	Should be attacked and destroyed (Montenegro, North Macedonia, Turkey)

The case of hate narratives on migrants in Turkey shows how the socio-political circumstances define the targets and the extent of hate narratives. Namely, during the engagement of the Turkish army in Syria, Syrian refugees have become the principal target of hate narratives. There is a general view that Syrian refugees live a good life at the expense of Turkey—of its soldiers that die instead of Syrians, and the Turkish state and people that provide the migrants with the means of living.

In Kosovo, anti-migrant/refugee hate narratives mainly aim to present a clear differentiation between “us” and “them”, in which the behaviour of “our” asylum seekers in the West is framed as better than that of those seeking asylum in Kosovo, and “their” religion as different and inferior to “ours”.

Hate narratives about journalists and political opponents involved similar content across different cases and the region (See Table 2 for main narratives). Based on the differentiation between “us” and “them”, journalists who originally belong to the “us” group are presented as transgressors, those who betrayed the “us” group and thus must be symbolically ousted from the group. In this light, journalists and political opponents are regularly labelled as traitors (to the state, nation or ethno-national group) and foreign mercenaries. For example, Nikola Vučić, an N1 TV journalist in BiH was labelled (both by online platforms and by users) as a traitor to the Croat people simply because of his sarcastic Tweet on fascism in a Canton with a Croat majority.

HATE NARRATIVES ON JOURNALISTS AND POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Table 3

MAIN NARRATIVE	JOURNALISTS/POLITICAL OPPONENTS AS TRAITORS, MERCENARIES AND MORALLY CORRUPT PEOPLE
MAIN SUB-NARRATIVES ON JOURNALISTS	Enemy of the state/people (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey)
	Betrayers of their ethno-national group (in BiH for instance: "halal Croat" "conformist to Bosniaks", "betrayers of his family")
	Politically affiliated, mercenaries: foreign mercenaries, (Montenegro, Turkey, North Macedonia) politically affiliated (Albania)
	Morally corrupt, e.g. liars, without honour and shame, corrupt, publishing fake news, etc. (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia)
MAIN SUB-NARRATIVES ON POLITICAL OPPONENTS	Enemies of the state/people (Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey), e.g. aiming to destabilize, working against the country's interest, traitors
	Foreign mercenaries (Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo), e.g. proponents of Russian and Serbian (in Montenegro), western or George Soros's agenda (The latter most of all in N. Macedonia)
	Dangerous and corrupt (Albania, BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, Kosovo), e.g. unstable, primitive, instigators of violence, godless, vermin, thieves and turncoats, thieves, liars, irresponsible, coronavirus cluster (in N. Mac.), criminals, cowards, hypocrites and manipulators (in Albania), mentally ill (BiH)

These individuals/groups are also often exposed to a wider character assassination: the moral qualities of journalists and political opponents are questioned based on rumours and manipulated information, and labels such as liars, opportunists or criminals are used. For example, in Serbia, journalist Ana Lalić was exposed to a negative campaign by several media outlets after she published a report about the insufficient capacities of the Clinical Centre Vojvodina to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. She was accused, both by these media outlets and their readers, of being corrupt, spreading fake news, and working against the interest of the state. The clashes between the government and opposition in Kosovo also regularly teem with similar accusations on criminal and immoral behaviour (often ignorant of the judicial facts), with hate narratives sprouting in user comments on social networks.

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Political opponents are also denounced based on far-stretched parallels between them and despised political regimes from the past. In Montenegro, the opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion, for instance, label the proponents of the law as successors of the communist regime, both hostile towards the church. In Albania, parallels with the Milošević regime in Serbia are made to discredit the Other. The spokesman of the Albanian president, for instance, notes that the media critique against the president and “well-known personalities of the Albanian nation” uses “the language of Milošević, Šešelj and notorious Arkan” against “KLA martyrs” in what he labels an anti-Albanian campaign.

Hate narratives against women surface in different case studies, from the case of public discourse on the Istanbul Convention to the case of the journalist Miroslava Byrns (Sloboden Pecat) in North Macedonia. In the analysis of the public discourse on the Istanbul Convention, researcher Sinem Aydınli shows how the pro-government platforms in Turkey are framing the convention not as a means of protecting women from violence, but as a threat to patriarchal values and the family, and a means of promotion of immorality and homosexuality. In this light, women are also an essential part of this threat and the user comments involved sexist and misogynist language. In the case of threats, insults, defamation and hate speech against a female journalist in North Macedonia in 2020, comments concerning the journalist’s appearance, personal life, alleged incompetence and immorality permeated a number of websites and social network profiles.

Some case studies from our research also show how the prejudices and stigmatization of historically marginalized ethnic minorities persist. Notably, while the analyzed editorial content in BiH was completely free of disinformation and hate narratives targeting Jews, the user comments contain plenty of the old fascist labels of “hypocritical”, “cunning” Jews that “rule the world”, including explicit apologism for the Holocaust. In North Macedonia, inter-religious hate narratives surfaced when the online media leaning towards the right-wing opposition framed the behaviour of Muslim citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic as irresponsible and disrespectful to the state; this was superimposed by the claims of double standards in which the government tolerates their behaviour, while being tough on Christians during their religious holidays. User comments involved the labelling of the other religious groups as “tribes”, “savages”, “scum” and those that are not true Macedonians.

3.1. The sources, contributors and platforms of hate narratives

In many cases, hate narratives are clearly politically orchestrated, and mainly disseminated through media affiliated with the leading political parties. In Turkey, the smear campaigns against journalists, political opposition, activists and other public figures are a part of the larger state repression of critical voices, whereby pro-government media report on both journalists

and political opposition as enemies of the state and proclaim that the main opposition party CHP has ties with terrorists. Serbia and Republika Srpska (BiH) hold a tight grip over a number of media outlets, which readily denounce politicians and journalists critical of the ruling party. The public service broadcaster RTRS in Republika Srpska (RS) even resorts to disinformation about the opposition in their farcical and pro-SNSD reporting. In the analyzed cases in North Macedonia, several websites and Facebook pages believed to be affiliated with the now opposition VMRO-DPMNE party disseminate hate narratives against journalists and political opponents. As the interview respondents in Kosovo note, the attacks on journalists are often orchestrated through social media platforms and often target critical views of journalists on government policies, dominant ideologies and religious teachings. In other cases, the political affiliations of media outlets are visible in unbalanced reporting. For example, in the case of narratives targeted at the opposition leader in Albania, pro-government media outlets focused on the lack of transparency on the opposition leader's past. In contrast, the pro-opposition media focused on the claims that the accusations against the opposition leader were merely a political instrument and diversion by PM Edi Rama. In such selective reporting, concludes researcher Ilda Londo, the media convey two diametrically different visions of the same phenomenon and thus contribute to polarization in Albania.

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Even when media outlets report in a relatively balanced way on opposing political camps, they may also contribute through the presentation of irreconcilable and diverging discourses to political polarization if they do not provide a critical evaluation of hate narratives and verify information disseminated by different parties. As illustrated in the analyzed cases in Montenegro, despite the largely balanced reporting by established mainstream media on polarized political views, user comments included explicit inter-ethnic hate speech and calls for violence.

Media outlets also play a negative role when they fail (due to lack of resources and/or lack of will) to adequately deal with those user comments in which hate narratives particularly escalate.

Media outlets also play a negative role when they fail (due to lack of resources and/or lack of will) to adequately deal with those user comments in which hate narratives particularly escalate. User comments on migrants reinforce the claims of the migrant threat with offensive and dehumanizing labelling of migrants as "scum", "parasites", "plague", etc. While some of the hateful comments come from the general public, many of them are produced by bots serving a particular political agenda.

Besides the mainstream media outlets, the right-leaning websites and platforms established with a particular agenda have an important role in the devastation of public discourse and dissemination of hate narratives, often aiming to denunciate certain groups (such as migrants).

Public figures are highly influential in setting the tone of the narratives on certain groups. In the case study from Bosnia and Herzegovina, researcher Anida Sokol reports that the then minister of security of BiH advocated for the deportation of refugees/migrants and that his views were not only

overly present on several analyzed platforms but also uncritically reported on by mainstream media (e.g. by the highly read klix.ba). However, the findings of researcher Abit Hoxha in Kosovo show that even the official statements of local officials, who in the analyzed case condemned the expulsion of a group of migrants from a bar in Kosovo, can be followed by largely hateful narratives in comments on social networks. This discrepancy indicates that the causes of hate sentiments and narratives are much deeper and transcend individual cases and the reactions of public figures.

Besides the mainstream media outlets, the right-leaning websites and platforms established with a particular agenda have an important role in the devastation of public discourse and dissemination of hate narratives.

The example of right-leaning website IN46 shows that the hate narratives in the user comments tend to be particularly prominent on the websites that show clear political favouritism, reporting in a farcical and selective way. However, in the case study from Turkey, researcher Sinem Aydınli showed that the hate narratives in user comments also appear on platforms that report in an ethical manner, such as the Deutsche Welle Twitter account. The case study on anti-migrant narratives in Kosovo shows that such narratives are particularly abundant on social networks.

User comments are also a potential site of resistance to and subversion of hate narratives. In this research, we did not focus on such subversive manoeuvres; however, in one case, the user comments on the Facebook page of Kurir in Serbia involved not only negative stances against journalists critical of the government but also comments criticizing the practices of Pink, Kurir and Informer (media outlets that have run a negative campaign against journalist Ana Lalić).

In the age of new technologies, the instruments of smear campaigns are becoming increasingly diverse. Most notably, in the example of a hate narrative against a journalist in Serbia, the campaign also involved a purely commercial outreach tool, i.e. a paid ad.

In the age of new technologies, the instruments of smear campaigns are becoming increasingly diverse. Most notably, in the example of a hate narrative against a journalist in Serbia, the campaign also involved a purely commercial outreach tool, i.e. a paid ad with the name and photo of journalist Ana Lalić, promoted through the Google Store, reaching everyone that used the app on 14 April 2020.

3.3. The role of state institutions, self-regulatory bodies and civil society in the fight against disinformation and hate narratives

Across the region, there is a reluctance within the judiciary to process discriminatory and hate speech and to consider the hate towards particular social groups as an exacerbating factor in criminal offences. As researchers Vesna Nikodinoska and Jane Dimeski report, since 2016, there has been only one case at the Basic Criminal Court concerning the spreading of racist and xenophobic material via computer systems in North Macedonia. Even in the case from May 2020 when a man drove his car into the Reception Centre for Migrants in Obrenovac (Serbia), the prosecution missed the opportunity

to characterize this act as a crime of inciting national, racial, and religious hatred and intolerance, convicting the perpetrator only of violent behaviour. On the other hand, the recent arrests of journalists (in Montenegro and Serbia in 2020) for the suspected spreading of panic and disorder through false reporting are seen as rather restrictive. If such practices continue, they are likely to have a chilling effect on media freedoms.

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Regulatory bodies in the region's countries sanction inaccurate reporting and hate narratives in broadcasting media to some degree. However, the example of the public service broadcaster RTRS in Republika Srpska (BiH) shows that even multiple fines for biased reporting do not necessarily prevent further unethical reporting. Other state institutions can also have an important role in fighting hate speech and disinformation, such as the Commission for the Protection of Equality in Serbia and the Recommendations to Internet portals on the prevention and removal of content that can incite hatred or violence in Serbia from 2018. The biggest exception here is Turkey, as researcher Sinem Aydinli reports that governmental bodies do not by any means address disinformation and hate speech.

The lack of policies on media transparency, particularly in the online media sector, diminishes media accountability for disinformation and hate narratives. A step forward in this regard are the provisions of the Law on Media, adopted in Montenegro in July 2020, that promote the transparency of online media (including through registration, publishing of information on responsible persons and keeping records on public funding). However, in the absence of stipulations on sanctions and accountability, it is questionable how much these rules will be followed.

Self-regulatory bodies in the region also react to cases of disinformation and hate speech, promoting voluntary respect for journalistic norms, but they cannot be expected to influence those platforms that intentionally or thoughtlessly spread unethical content. Furthermore, the Press Council of BiH, for example, does not have capacities for monitoring the content of online and print media, but instead reacts mostly upon complaints received. Hence, it is likely that disinformation and hate narratives are often not disclosed as such. In addition, the polarized media sector in Montenegro still proves to be incapable of establishing a joint self-regulatory system, while a self-regulatory body has never been established in Turkey either.

Civil society organizations in the region carry out various important campaigns in the fight against disinformation and hate narratives; these involve advocacy, education, and media literacy programmes, increasing the public's resistance to disinformation and hate narratives. Journalists' organizations have a role in the public condemnation of the campaigns and journalists and in issuing calls for legal action against the perpetrators, where appropriate.

The lack of policies on media transparency, particularly in the online media sector, diminishes media accountability for disinformation and hate narratives.

Fact-checking and media watchdog platforms have been contributing to the awareness about disinformation and hate speech. The companies that manage social media are also increasingly engaging in fact-checking initiatives in the region. For example, Facebook and the France-Presse agency initiated an independent fact-checking programme in Montenegro, in cooperation with the local platform Raskrinkavanje.me (CDT, 2020). Media monitoring platforms, (such as media.ba and analiziraj.ba in BiH) and platforms that share otherwise scarce information (such as information on migrants on the platform governamraza.mk in North Macedonia), also play an important role in disclosing disinformation and hate narratives and providing alternative information.

Fact-checking and media watchdog platforms have been contributing to the awareness about disinformation and hate speech.

Finally, there is a lack of public condemnation of hate narratives both by public figures and media outlets. For example, researcher Anida Sokol notes that in BiH, there have not been any efforts from politicians, public figures or representatives of institutions to condemn and prevent such narratives in the analyzed cases.

There is a lack of public condemnation of hate narratives both by public figures and media outlets.

4. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A BETTER SOCIETAL RESPONSE TO HATE

Disinformation and hate narratives should not be taken lightly. In the narrative strategies revealed in both media and user content, we see clear features of fascism, mainly the racism, nationalism and intolerance to difference, labelling disagreement as treason, and misogyny. Across the region, hate narratives feed polarizations, perpetuate political turmoil and inflame animosities.

The content of hate narratives is similar across the region, mirroring the historically familiar negative labelling of the Other. Under the dominant and persistent differentiation between “us” and “them” the “them” groups are regularly presented in a dominantly negative light, as less competent and morally inferior, even less than human (“parasites”, “scum”, “tribes”), which are all mechanisms of othering that have historically proven to be both a sinister and a rather persuasive and widely accepted justification for violence. Some platforms in the region engage in evident hate narratives and disseminate disinformation. However, others contribute to the negative presentation of the “other” just by focusing on negative events, carrying arbitrary statements, and when failing to provide alternative views. In both cases, media outlets participate in the spiral of disinformation and hate, feeding distorted views and negative sentiments.

Finally, hate narratives escalate in users’ comments, permeated by xenophobic sentiments, stigmatization, prejudices and hostilities, distributed both by political bots and by a part of the general public.

While the hate narratives identified by the seven researchers are not new, what is most troubling is that they are largely normalized. Rather than being consistently condemned, they are often instrumentalized for political campaigns and increasingly seen as a regular part of public discussion.

If we are to prevent further devastation of the public discourse, we need more consistent reactions to hate narratives, and preventive structural mechanisms. Firstly, the fight against politically instrumentalized hate narratives requires a holistic struggle that should involve progressive media policies that would minimize political interference and increase media transparency. Secondly, in order to hinder hate narratives disseminated in pursuit of more revenues, the journalistic standards should be further promoted, including through the work of self-regulatory bodies and media associations. For the media to completely stride out of the spiral of hate narratives, it is not sufficient to provide a balanced representation of polarizing views and opposite hate narratives. In addition, media outlets need to provide critical reflections on problematic, polarizing and hateful statements, and should aim to provide in-depth insights into complex polarizing issues through well-informed,

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analytical reporting, and carefully chosen and knowledgeable sources. A good example is the series of articles published on the Kossev website about the use of the term “Kosovo and Metohija” in which renowned authors presented well-argued opposing views on this controversial political issue, inciting a constructive user debate (see the report on Kosovo).

The fight against politically instrumentalized hate narratives requires a holistic struggle that should involve progressive media policies that would minimize political interference and increase media transparency.

Media dedicated to journalistic integrity should be seeking to sensitize their journalists for more inclusive reporting on minority and marginalized groups. In order to protect journalistic integrity and enable quality media reporting, furthermore, public funds need to be provided, under independent and legitimate procedures, for quality journalism. Government funding for media that engage in disinformation, negative campaigns and hate narratives should be put to an end. Given that disinformation and hate narratives are particularly prolific in user-generated content, often containing hate speech based on sexual, ethnic, religious and other identity, media outlets need to dedicate more attention and resources to the moderation of user comments.

Global communication companies need to deprioritize hate narratives and disinformation in online searches and limit the dissemination and reach of such content. International donors and fact-checking and media monitoring organizations can provide support and incentives for such engagement.

More decisive action of the judiciary in penalizing discriminatory speech, hate speech and hate crimes would send a clear message and discourage similar future offences. The media regulatory bodies should be provided with enough resources to consistently monitor and penalize hate speech and disinformation in the broadcasting sector. The judiciary and the media regulator must be provided with all guaranties of independence to prevent political instrumentalization. In the circumstances of substantial political interference, the most evident being in Turkey, the struggle for independence will necessarily be intense and ongoing.

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Furthermore, we need public condemnation of hate narratives and disinformation and reactions to smear campaigns orchestrated by public figures, political parties, media outlets and other actors. For the time being, such condemnation is limited to isolated reactions of self-regulatory bodies, fact-checking and media-monitoring platforms and some civil society organizations. The countries of the region need a wider civic front (involving CSOs, citizen initiatives, the academic community, media outlets, companies that manage social networks, etc.) that would jointly and consistently react to hate narratives and provide alternative information and voices. Such a civic front must also keep a close eye on media policies across the region and condemn negative developments such as the bill on online media adopted in October 2020 in Turkey, feared to be a further step in online media censorship. The anti-hate civic

front would utilize different strategies, formats and platforms in order to maximize its impact.³ For instance, actions aimed at informing the public and countering disinformation should involve humour and satire,⁴ art, ridicule, stunts, and emotional and satirical content, all of which can effectively divulge the banalities and brutalities of hate narratives and the underlying fascism.⁵

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³ Research in psychology shows the resistance of formed beliefs even when people are exposed to well-based arguments and information (Lewandowski et al. 2012, Bail et al. 2012).

⁴ Reportedly more effectively reaching (especially young) audiences than the classical news reporting. See Mitchell, Gottfried and Matsa 2015. An example from the region that instantly received significant regional attention in 2020 was the stunt of Mustafa Sejdinović who joined a regional Facebook group "Flat Earth Balkan" (Ravna zemlja); the group accepted him as admin after he volunteered, not bothering to check his profile that clearly shows that he does not support their views. Once he became an admin, he changed the group's name to "Round Earth Balkan" (one that, in accordance with the Facebook rules, they would have to keep for 28 days) and wrote a post about their twisted logic and denial of science.

⁵ There is increasingly reported favouritism of the public towards polarized rhetoric, and controversial, surprising content imbued with an emotional and moral tone (Scheufele and Krause 2019, Vosoughi, Roy and Aral 2018, Brady et al. 2018).

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