



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

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# **HATE NARRATIVES IN ONLINE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN KOSOVO**

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**KOSOVO**

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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## HATE NARRATIVES IN ONLINE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN KOSOVO

### KOSOVO

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# HATE NARRATIVES IN ONLINE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN KOSOVO

*Abit Hoxha and Mirishahe Sylja*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The majority of media outlets in Kosovo have social media channels through which they distribute their content. This increases the two-way communication of journalists with their audiences, but also provides ground for the dissemination of hate speech.

In the previous report on *Media Landscape in Kosovo: Hate and propaganda influences*,<sup>1</sup> published within the Resilience project in 2020, we argued that “with social media and the democratization of communication where commentaries on news and media productions are possible, there is an increasing trend of hate speech and propaganda in social media.” (Hoxha, 2020: 19). Furthermore, another research study on Kosovo social media and political communication confirms that most political communication in Kosovo happens in the social media sphere (Gerguri, 2016; Shahini-Hoxhaj, 2018). As identified in our abovementioned report, “some of the media portals are a one-man show, without the filters of news production and they spread disinformation and sometimes also hate content. Above all, one can also see discriminatory language towards women, and gender hate speech is increasing.” (Hoxha, 2020: 20).

As a continuation of the research on hate and propaganda models of media and communication already implemented in the Resilience project, this report highlights some examples of hate narratives in online media outlets and social media in Kosovo, focusing mainly on three target groups – migrants, political opponents and journalists, but also highlighting the practice of targeting of women and practices in ethnic reporting.

Hate narratives on migration and migrants are reflecting sentiments of an increased right-wing agenda globally but possibly in Kosovo as well, while targeting political opponents with hate narratives serves for political gain in Kosovo. Anti-journalist narratives and hate against journalists is a growing concern both for the safety and security of journalists. The approach, especially

<sup>1</sup> See <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Resilience-research-publication-1-KOS-ENG.pdf>.

by those in power, to the work and role of political opponents and journalists remains a concern as it provides opportunities to create a threatening and hateful atmosphere towards these target groups. It especially raises concern when this happens in the media with great impact on public opinion and public debate, such as online media and social media used by a large part of the population, as well as in traditional public media in the country which also disseminate their own content online, and have a particular responsibility for serving the public interest, contributing to social cohesion and preventing hatred.

## 2. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The methodology for this work is based upon a comprehensive cross-country pre-designed analytical framework that examines narratives on various target groups, three of them (migrants, political opponents and journalists) examined in all seven countries included in the Resilience project, and other groups selected in each country to reflect specific circumstances.

On the one hand, Kosovo has a particular media model that does not often include hate speech in traditional and online media content. Social media, on the other hand, is where most of the hate narratives brew. Therefore, in examining particular cases of anti-migration hate narratives, hate narratives targeting political opponents, and anti-journalist narratives, but also highlighting practices of hate narratives against women and practices of ethnic reporting, we focused mainly on the social media sphere in Kosovo. An initial analysis of online media articles was conducted to identify social media posts where comments are made. Data scraping from Facebook as the main social media platform in Kosovo is then collected to analyze the narratives.

The case studies for this report were chosen through a non-systematic approach in order to represent topics of interest. They illustrate fragments of society where hate brews on social media in posts and comments. We focused on the cases reported in online media and commented on social media in 2020.

### 3. CASE STUDIES

The selection of cases for analyses of hate narratives in online media and communication in Kosovo is a combination of a top-down methodological approach for the regional comparative analysis with a bottom-up approach based on challenges identified in the previous report on hate and propaganda models of media and communication in Kosovo, as well as on the basis of other literature research.

## TARGET GROUPS AND CASES SELECTED FOR THE ANALYSIS

Table 1

TARGET GROUP	CASE	PERIOD	MEDIA SAMPLE
Migrants	The expulsion of a group of Syrian refugees from a bar in Pristina (connected to the general situation of asylum seeking by Syrian refugees in Kosovo)	20 November 2020 (10 November 2020)	RTKLive, a website of Radio Television of Kosovo, BotaPress.info, Lajmi.net, Facebook page Gazeta Kosova
Political opponents	A confrontation between political opponents, including an LVV supporter, Tomë Gashi, and a PSD member, Nol Nushi, at “Debat” show on RTK.	5–8 May 2020	RTKLive, a website of Radio Television of Kosovo, Facebook page of Radio Television of Kosovo, Telegrafi.com, Gazetaexpress.com
Journalists	A group of journalists (Jeta Xharra from BIRN, Xhemajl Rexha from KTV at the time, and Fidan Jupolli from T7) targeted by a Facebook page accusing them of being ‘mercenaries’ for one of the political parties.	28 March 2020	Facebook group #LidhjaMePopullin

Although Kosovo has no large influx of migration from other countries and is more of a country whose population migrates to the EU, it still faces the small-scale arrival of migrants. They mainly end up in Kosovo while trying to go to the EU countries for various reasons. Despite the small numbers of migrants in Kosovo, anti-migration narratives are present on social media. As argued previously in our report *The Media Landscape in Kosovo: Hate and Propaganda Influences (2020)*, the news media publishes very little in the way of hate narratives against migration. However, this is not the case once these news stories are shared in the respective media’s social channels—which in essence creates an opportunity for interaction and commentary which also includes hate speech.

Political opposition debates in Kosovo are very polarized and often escalate into threats. Even the parliamentary debates have sometimes turned into physical confrontations between opposition and position. The Kosovo National Assembly has been paralyzed on several occasions due to confrontations between the opposition and the government. Insults are part of the everyday narratives in the National Assembly and on social media.

In the case study on hate speech against political opponents, the media outlet that was selected for analysis is *Radio Television of Kosovo (RTK)* as the only public broadcaster in the country, where we focus on the content broadcast on the TV channel with a live stream on the *RTK* Facebook page. Although the possibility of the discussion escalating was very high considering the problematic past of some of the guests, the “Debat” show, which incited hate speech against political opponents, was broadcast on *RTK* and went live on the *RTK* Facebook page on 5 May 2020 without editing and the comments were left open. The debate attracted 80,000 views and 3,300 comments. *RTK*’s official Facebook page has 441,000 likes. A previous analysis of Kosovo’s media landscape shows that “as a public broadcaster, *RTK* is often accused of bias in content regarding the views of the government and opposition.”<sup>2</sup> The selected case shows how media outlets can create a divisive discourse among the people, those who support and those who oppose a certain political party, especially the political opposition.

In the case study on hate speech against journalists, we particularly focused on a post targeting journalists on the most used social network in Kosovo, Facebook. This case was selected to show how political parties themselves can sometimes create hate narratives or attacks against journalists to advance their political interests.

Both cases have incited hate narratives and threats against political opponents and journalists.

We have also highlighted some other cases and practices of targeting journalists in Kosovo with hate narratives and conducted several interviews to hear their views.

We have also tackled hate narratives against women and how ethnic reporting can overcome polarization.

### 3.1. Case study 1: Hate narratives against migrants

On 20 November 2020, a video published by the online media outlet *Lajmi.net* showed a group of Syrian migrants being forced out of a bar in Pristina.<sup>3</sup> The video received 17,381 views on the regional video platform “*GjirafaVideo*”. During the same day, there were many reactions on Facebook, among which the Mayor of Pristina, Shpend Ahmeti, also condemned such behaviour of forcing migrants out of the bar.<sup>4</sup> His statement in support of the migrants was

<sup>2</sup> See <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Resilience-research-publication-1-KOS-ENG.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> See <https://lajmi.net/incident-ne-prishtine-kamarieret-nxjerrin-me-force-sirianet-nga-nje-lokal/>.

<sup>4</sup> See [https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=480145&fbclid=IwAR0FSw5Nyf6\\_eySK\\_WJ9FB\\_7NqPf9sbiM5jJ-Z0idPqusDpdiohqlT-cdY8](https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=480145&fbclid=IwAR0FSw5Nyf6_eySK_WJ9FB_7NqPf9sbiM5jJ-Z0idPqusDpdiohqlT-cdY8).



used by the media, which published his reaction as news. The national public broadcaster, *RTK*, published Ahmeti's Facebook reaction on its own web page platform *RTKLive* which was then the recipient of some 160 comments from Facebook users, most of which were negative and xenophobic.

Exactly ten days before this story emerged, on 10 November 2020, *Botapress*, an online portal, published a short story explaining requests for asylum seekers in Kosovo with the title "Kosovo gets filled with Syrians: The ministry reports how many arrived this year"<sup>5</sup> which explains that 1200 asylum seekers had filed requests within the last year in Kosovo, most of them Syrian citizens. The article takes a quick turn by referring to two incidents that allegedly involved migrants. The article depicts these two incidents whereby one person of Palestinian origin had been arrested on suspicion of setting fire to a mosque, and another person had been arrested while attempting to steal from a clothing shop in Pristina. To back up the claim that migrants are becoming a problem, the article uses a Kosovo Police statement where no origin, ethnicity or other information was given for the person arrested. Towards the end of the article, it also explains that only 123 of these asylum-claiming individuals remain in the Centre for Asylum. The rest have either disappeared in their attempt to go to EU countries or moved to other neighbouring countries. Eleven comments on this story are very mild and do not represent an anti-migration narrative, although one of the commentators claims that Kosovar asylum claimants in Europe do not exhibit such negative behaviour, such as stealing, as Syrians do in Kosovo.

In the comments on *Botapress'* Facebook posts, commentators distinguish between Kosovar asylum seekers in the EU and Syrian asylum seekers in Kosovo. This difference is the otherization of Syrian migrants in the framework that they are not as good as Kosovar asylum seekers. On top of that narrative, a second frame emerges: the internal struggle of distinction from Muslims. A comment on the *Botapress* post on Facebook illustrates that by saying that they are brothers for some but we will suffer because of them and they will never be integrated (this word is often framed in relation to "European integration").

Hate narratives are built into social media in Kosovo to reflect anti-migration sentiments and otherization as the main narrative built on two main sub-narratives. These sub-narratives focus mainly on religious and cultural issues, on the one hand, and economic and political issues on the other. All this is manifested in messages that encapsulate this anti-migration narrative with comments such as "we are not like them", "they are not civilized", and "we cannot have them because we are poor". Another important aspect is the fear from the EU of being seen as supportive of irregular migration to the EU.

5 See [https://www.botapress.info/kosova-mbushet-me-sirjane-ministria-tregon-sa-kane-ardhur-kete-vit/?fbclid=IwAR2QQHrldO3RxMRMTyJ5\\_eLq6E8oLuW0mJ0iYZf-CCKTxrJ92EjaWQpDbn8](https://www.botapress.info/kosova-mbushet-me-sirjane-ministria-tregon-sa-kane-ardhur-kete-vit/?fbclid=IwAR2QQHrldO3RxMRMTyJ5_eLq6E8oLuW0mJ0iYZf-CCKTxrJ92EjaWQpDbn8).

## MAIN NARRATIVE AND SUB-NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS

Table 2

MAIN NARRATIVE	Migrants are a cultural, religious, economic and political threat to us.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Migrants are not civilized.
	Migrants are Muslims from the Middle-East, we are not Muslims like them.
	Our economy is not even sufficient for us.
	We don't want migrants because of fear of the EU.

The main narrative on the issue of migrants in Kosovo is built upon the anti-migration sentiment expressed in the commentary on social media. This is expressed *vis-à-vis* the fact that many Kosovars seek asylum themselves in EU countries. The anti-migration main narrative is complemented with sub-narratives of anti-Muslim and anti-ethnic sentiment against Syrians and Afghan nationals who are generalized as “Middle Eastern”. In the comments on migrants, the commentators seldom know the difference between a migrant and a refugee and always generalize ethnic groups. There is very little critical thinking and reference to individual cases in commenting about migration on social media.

### 3.2. Case study 2: Hate narratives against political opponents

On 5 May 2020, *Radio Television of Kosovo* (RTK), the public broadcaster in Kosovo, hosted representatives of Kosovo's political opposition to discuss the latest political developments in the country on a political show called "Debat".<sup>6</sup> Among the guests were two members of the Social Democratic Party (PSD), Teuta Rrusta and Nol Nushi, a former member of the Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Milaim Zeka, and a lawyer, Tomë Gashi. Although Gashi stated that he is not a member of *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!* (LVV), the party that won the majority of votes in the early parliamentary elections of 2019, he has publicly expressed his support for LVV. With these guests, it could be expected that the debate would be tense, especially between Tomë Gashi as a supporter of LVV, and PSD members who were once members of LVV and today, with the departure from this party and the formation of the PSD, they strongly oppose LVV and its policies.

There was a fierce discussion throughout the show involving all guests. However, the climax came when the debate escalated between lawyer Tomë Gashi and PSD member Nol Nushi,<sup>7</sup> who brought the discussion to a personal level. Nol Nushi mentioned to Tomë Gashi the candidacy of his son in the LVV list for parliamentary elections, calling him a "zero", just as Tomë Gashi had addressed Nol Nushi earlier, saying that he, as a member of the PSD, was just that and how the opposition was a "zero" since they did not get enough votes in the last elections. When Nol Nushi tells Tomë Gashi that he is like his son, Tomë Gashi asks Nol Nushi, "Are you like your mother or sister?", alluding to his sexual orientation. Mr Gashi continues addressing Nol Nushi, saying, "You know what happened at *Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!*, and I believe that it is better to open the archives".

Trying to control the situation, the show's moderator, Ridvan Berisha, draws their attention by telling them that their comments are very personal and that it "seems that you have something with each other that you are not sharing with the public". Tomë Gashi responds by saying, "I am saying that there might be LVV archives that might not be convenient to them (addressing the PSD members), so they do not publish them", alleging that Mr Nushi was sexually abused during the time he was a member of LVV.

It was exactly this part of the discussion that provoked more reaction from both the public and Nol Nushi himself, who admitted he had thrown water at Tomë Gashi after the show. The discussion in this show caused much debate in the online media, with various portals commenting on the language used and the accusations of Tomë Gashi against Nol Nushi as a member of the PSD. There were also numerous reactions in the comments section of RTK's Facebook page where the live show was published, as well as in news articles on other portals that commented on the event.<sup>8</sup>

6 See <https://www.facebook.com/rtklivecom/videos/1537070939804390>.

7 See <https://www.rtklive.com/sq/news-single.php?ID=434167>.

8 See <https://www.facebook.com/rtklivecom/videos/1537070939804390>.

The comments on the *RTK* Facebook page were open so that anyone could comment. Some of the comments attributed the blame to *RTK* for the guests it had invited who had already demonstrated controversial behaviour in the past, as is the case with Tomë Gashi, who was seen some time ago in a video kicking the money collected by a child begging in Pristina city centre<sup>9</sup> and Milaim Zeka, who had previously clashed with another PSD member in another show. Some of the comments condemned the language used by Tomë Gashi against Nol Nushi. However, although the only female guest in the studio that day was Teuta Rrusta from the PSD, and she was not one of the protagonists of the part of the discussion that provoked the most reactions, most of the negative comments, with sexist labels, were addressed to her as a woman. Among these comments were ones such as “Who was that idiot who decided that 30 per cent in politics should be women, I would not have allowed even 3 per cent in politics, how can this type of dog be tolerated”, “You lizard, ask Milaim, and he will tell you because you seem to need sex”, “Oh girl, go home because politics is not for you”.

It seems that the effects of this discussion were felt even after the show. After the show, Nol Nushi published on his Facebook profile that Tomë Gashi’s son had attacked his party colleague Frashër Krasniqi.<sup>10</sup>

Reaction to the behaviour of Tomë Gashi were also shared by the journalist Leonida Molliqaj, who days after the show published an article called “Toma’s misery” where she stated that “It is incomprehensible that this person continues to be present in the media and given space to make public threats.” Knowing that some time ago, a video was circulated where he was seen kicking and verbally abusing a child in the streets, Ms Molliqaj stated that, “the absurdity of the story lies in the fact that not only was he not prosecuted for intimidation but did not withdraw from his hate speech and violent scenes. Days ago, on a TV show, he said that he would repeat the behaviour if he met the beggar again.”<sup>11</sup>

## MAIN NARRATIVE AND SUB-NARRATIVES ON POLITICAL OPPONENTS

Table 3

MAIN NARRATIVE	Political opponents are enemies with no human or political dignity to respect.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Political opponents are involved in scandals.
	Political opponents should be humiliated and publicly exposed.
	The personal life of political opponents is a scandal that can be interpreted as an extension of their politics.
	Political opponents should be afraid for their safety and the safety of their colleagues.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/avokati-tome-gashi-shihet-duke-i-shqelmuar-parate-e-lypsarit-ne-shesh-ge/>.

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/nol-nushi-thote-se-eshte-kercenuar-nga-djali-i-tome-gashit/>.

<sup>11</sup> See <https://sbunker.net/replike-blllogje-tematike/90502/mjerimi-i-tomes/?fbclid=IwAR2twk-HhGvCuEKpFt-jm3FDSPwvnmvAYpm9ssN4BPMQvujXjHqagE25aU>.

### 3.3. Case study 3: Hate narratives against journalists

In recent years, journalists in Kosovo have faced assaults and threats from different public and political actors. Their work as journalists has been the main reason for the attacks. In many cases, the hate speech used against various marginalized communities in the country, from women and the LGBT+ community to ethnic minorities, does not seem to be as explicit as in the discourse targeting journalists. Various assaults that have taken place against them have created an unsafe environment for their work.

In 2020 alone, according to *Civicus Monitor*, there were at least four cases where journalists were attacked, arrested, or threatened in Kosovo.<sup>12</sup> This has created an environment where more people have been motivated to threaten or attack journalists.

Considering this already threatening situation, on 28 March 2020, a case of assault was recorded against journalists Jeta Xharra from *BIRN*, Xhemajl Rexha from *KTV* (at the time), and Fidan Jupolli from *T7*. The report stated that the journalists in question were targeted by a Facebook page accusing them of being ‘mercenaries’ for one of the country’s political parties, namely Lëvizja Vetëvendosje!

The Kosovo Journalists Association (KJA) reacted to this post, saying that “such lynching and labelling are completely unacceptable, and they severely violate freedom of expression and endanger the conditions for journalism in Kosovo. Despite disagreements and discontent, freedom of expression and different thinking must be respected. Anyone with evidence of possible defamation should contact the relevant institutions and take legal action.”<sup>13</sup> The KJA invited the law enforcement agencies to deal with the case so that the offenders could be brought to justice.

The KJA also called on political parties “to distance themselves from such low-grade actions by anyone who comes to them and that polarize society, violate freedom of expression, and endanger democracy in the country.”<sup>14</sup>

Journalist Fidan Jupolli, one of the three journalists threatened, reacted to this threat by asking for a reaction from the KJA, which was published later. In the comments section to his Facebook post, some said that representatives of the party suspected of being behind this post, the Lidhja Demokratike e Kosoves (Democratic League of Kosovo) – LDK, should distance themselves from such groups that lynch journalists. In most cases, the commentators on social media supported journalists.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2020/06/30/journalists-continue-face-physical-and-verbal-attacks/>.

<sup>13</sup> See <http://agk-ks.org/rastet/kercenim-tjeter-ndaj-gazetareve-jeta-xharra-xhemajl-rexha-dhe-fidan-jupolli-prishtine-28-03-2020/>.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://agk-ks.org/rastet/kercenim-tjeter-ndaj-gazetareve-jeta-xharra-xhemajl-rexha-dhe-fidan-jupolli-prishtine-28-03-2020/>.

## MAIN NARRATIVE AND SUB-NARRATIVES ON JOURNALISTS

Table 4

MAIN NARRATIVE	Journalists are mercenaries working for certain party interests.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Journalists have no values or work ethic.
	Journalists lie.
	Journalists should be lynched.

The anti-journalist hate narratives are mostly generated on social media. There are two main streams of narratives in this context. The first one is the narrative stream that comes from Facebook groups that are politically motivated and organized, and the second narrative stream that comes from random individual commentators addressed in personal accounts of journalists on social media.

We will highlight several additional cases of journalists in Kosovo being targets of hate narratives.

Visar Duriqi,<sup>15</sup> a documentary journalist working for *Insajderi* in Pristina, knows the content of hate speech and commentary against journalists very well as he was the target of such actions for a very long time. In his work, covering mostly radicalization and political Islam, he has encountered countless risks and threats. He emphasizes “the fact that most media content is now published through social media and is commented on by the readers. You can see calls for violence from different groups: religious, nationalist, political party sympathizers. Lynching is very common, by accusing targets of siding with Serbia or Russia or belonging to this or that political group. Most of this is baseless, and the readers don’t even read the content of media reports in most cases.” Visar has frequently been on the receiving end of hate comments for his documentaries on Kosovo’s political sphere and his investigations on foreign fighters joining the IS war in Syria. He says that these debates start as hate comments on social media but are often elevated to the political level.

Another example of being on the receiving end of hate speech and comments is Valon Sylja, the director of the online media outlet *Gazeta Metro*, for his commentary on the Kosovar diaspora and political analyses in Kosovo. He is known for his critical views on the Kosovar diaspora. A journalist by profession and a former correspondent in Belgrade for the public broadcaster, he has very often found himself lynched on social media. His most commented public lynching was when he took part in a panel on *KTV*<sup>16</sup> discussing the Kosovar

15 Interview with Visar Duriqi, *Insajderi* (18 December 2020).

16 See [https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=662419054432422&external\\_log\\_id=798ca26b-424e-4724-b28f-811535689914&q=valon%20sylja%20nana%20serbe](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=662419054432422&external_log_id=798ca26b-424e-4724-b28f-811535689914&q=valon%20sylja%20nana%20serbe).

diaspora and explained how the diaspora that moved abroad has stagnated and Kosovo has evolved, hence the difference in identity. When asked by the debate moderator to elaborate his critical view, he said that those in the diaspora are more primitive than Kosovars, exemplifying that “For example, let’s take the primitive aspects of lifestyle, marriages, low education with the diaspora.”<sup>17</sup> This five-minute post, curated by a Facebook group called *Gazeta Kosova*, was commented on more than a thousand times with derogatory and hate speech against Sylja. Commentators built a narrative that he is a thief, traitor, supporter of Serbia in Kosovo and other serious accusations.

The same happens with other curated videos of him from the same debate. Videos also ridicule him by altering his voice. One of the videos that has received much attention was posted by another Facebook-based group called *Gazeta Plisi*, which posted a video from the debate with the addition of Serbian-language background music. This resulted in Sylja being lynched online and accused of siding with Serbia in Kosovo. This can be seen in the thousand or so comments on the video containing negative and hate speech elements.

Valon Sylja believes that this is orchestrated, referring to Facebook groups that specifically deal with lynching and verbal abuse.<sup>18</sup> He is convinced that the reasons for the attacks against him are his liberal views in relation to religion, his declared opposition to the tax imposed by Kosovo on Serbia, his anti-populist views, and anti-Vetëvendosje commentary. The comments on social media also target his family and bring up his grandmother’s ethnicity. Sylja was brutally attacked in Pristina in the middle of the day on 21 December 2020, allegedly for his comments on the diaspora. He predicted this in an interview a week before the attack. He hinted that hate speech on social media can and will be translated into actions at some point due to bubbles on social media and its influence on citizens. This act, recorded both by the perpetrators and a taxi driver who witnessed it, went viral and sparked much commentary on social networks. Most of the commentary supported the attack against Sylja with the main argument that he should be careful not to insult the diaspora. This hate speech has not been condemned by political leaders who have turned a blind eye to it, but the court in Pristina found the perpetrator guilty and issued him a EUR 4500 fine on 8 January 2021.<sup>19</sup>

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17 See <https://www.facebook.com/Prestigjioze/videos/662419054432422>.

18 Interview with Valon Sylja, *Gazeta Metro* (19 December 2020).

19 See <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/denohet-me-4-mije-e-500-euro-personi-qe-sulmoi-fizikisht-gazetarin-valon-sylja/>.



### 3.4. Hate narratives against women

Women are often targeted on social media and in hate comments in Kosovo. This is a problem that has been addressed previously in the media and by regulatory bodies in Kosovo. Because of that, the Kosovo Gender Studies Centre, the Kosovo Independent Media Commission and the Gender Equality Agency, together with the public broadcaster *RTK*, came up with a joint statement for eliminating sexism in the media.<sup>20</sup> This declaration for the elimination of sexism in the media calls for the media to voluntarily sign the declaration to respect the code of ethics and eliminate sexism and the incitement of hate speech in the media. Although there has been no follow up or campaigning from this joint declaration, it is a good initiative to go beyond the code of ethics.

This has to do a lot with the language used in the media against women in general. In cases of gender-based violence when women are victims, the media covers such events with language that leans towards blaming women for the violence used against them and implies that the violence is merely a consequence of their 'wrongful behaviour', often making violence sound like a necessary step to be undertaken by husbands. Similar language that justifies and celebrates violence is also used to trigger anti-women narratives on social media where women are represented with inappropriate and hateful language.

Eurisa Rukovci, the founder of a feminist newspaper *Grazeta*,<sup>21</sup> thinks that verbal abuse and violence is concerning in Kosovo. "Because of social media and the possibility that people have to communicate directly with the media and journalists, this phenomenon is multiplied and worrying," she told us in an interview. To her, being a woman and an author makes it more difficult to work in journalism, and she sees that through the comments of women journalists and authors on social media. "There are many sexist comments directed at our authors which can be identified as verbal abuse". Overall, Ms Rukovci believes that it is a combination of political orientation and gender that makes women more vulnerable to such commentary. "Being a woman makes you more exposed to verbal abuse. In a patriarchal culture, women are perceived as vulnerable and more easily hurt. Consequently, those who participate in verbal abuse are encouraged to attack a woman rather than a man. Be that in politics or journalism," she said.

<sup>20</sup> See <http://kgscenter.net/en/news-and-events/nenshkruhet-deklarata-e-perbashket-per-eliminimin-e-seksizmit-ne-media/>.

<sup>21</sup> *Grazeta* is made of the word "gra" (women) and "zeta" from *gazeta*, which is a term for a newspaper in Albanian.



### 3.5. Ethnic reporting

Ethnic reporting in Kosovo was seen as an important issue even before independence. Nowadays, Kosovo's public broadcaster *RTK* has its Serbian and other minority newsrooms and channels. *RTK2* is a Kosovo public broadcasting channel with a Serbian newsroom and separate editorial lines. This is not to say that media productions are completely one-sided at *RTK2*. Often, *RTK2* reaches for Albanian sources, and *RTK* reaches for Serbian sources.

We would like to highlight an example of ethnic reporting and narratives created after the articles were published on *Kossev*, a portal established by the Centre for Community Development in Mitrovica. This portal "aims to accurately and in a timely fashion inform the Serbian community in North Kosovo on current events, the post-Brussels period and the upcoming political and social processes, as well as the wider public about the Kosovo Serbian community."<sup>22</sup> In July 2020, the *Kossev* portal published a series of articles about the origin of the term "Kosovo and Metohija" with authors from Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. The two interesting articles relevant to our report are those by Agon Maliqi<sup>23</sup> and Sava Janjić.<sup>24</sup> Agon Maliqi wrote an article, "Why 'Kosovo and Metohija' offends?"<sup>25</sup>, where he argued from the Kosovo Albanian perspective which triggered an interesting debate both on the *Kossev* portal and on Facebook. The commentary on the portal was small but significant where comments were publicized in the context of comparing Maliqi's eloquent analysis to an Instagram post by the Kosovo-born pop star Dua Lipa where she published a map of Albanian territories with the word 'autochthonous' on it. Her action caused a global outcry with reactions from the Balkans academics to many hate speech comments on social media. The other article is that of Sava Janjić, which explains the historical context and religious importance of describing 'Kosovo and Metohija' as a 'land belonging to the church.' Both articles were part of an intellectual debate and refrained from hateful language and the otherization of Albanians and Serbs.

It is important to recognize such debates and reporting in media and social media in the context of ethnic reporting in Kosovo. Despite disagreements and political differences, such reporting caused a healthy debate. On Facebook, Maliqi is praised for good arguments and concise explanations of the issue while he also published Janjić's response despite disagreeing with him.

<sup>22</sup> See <https://kossev.info/o-nama/>.

<sup>23</sup> Agon Maliqi is a policy analyst, civil society activist and media writer. He is a creator and co-founding editor of *sbunker.net*, an opinion and analysis blog gathering a young generation of intellectuals and activists from Kosovo.

<sup>24</sup> Sava Janjić is an Archimandrite and Abbot of Decani monastery.

<sup>25</sup> See <https://kossev.info/why-kosovo-i-metohija-offends/?fbclid=IwAR2FjUOT9r2H-ynWNqOIGOeUUTA-EvD3YoygRNtqi8Xliv7u4f15eAxqrWzM>.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

As we have already emphasized in the report on hate and propaganda media models, the Kosovo media has little room for hate speech in its established media productions due to good regulation and the basic training of journalists in education systems as well as in media internally. However, hate comments on social media remain a large problem.

Hate comments are mainly present on social media through Facebook and organized groups through political activity. Target groups for hate speech are various and depend on the mainstream news coverage of events that trigger hate commentary. Until recently, Kosovo had no anti-migration narratives in media outlets or on social media, but with the more recent migration resulting from conflicts in the Middle East, especially from Syria, and the groups of migrants reaching Kosovo, these narratives have been enhanced. Partially, in this regard, the media contributes to the pre-conditions for such hateful narratives. This contribution is because of the limited knowledge of migration issues.

Hate narratives against journalists mainly serve the agenda of political parties and are an organized way of promoting anti-journalistic narratives on social media. The cases of these narratives inspire violence, including the latest attack, from December 2020, on a Kosovo journalist for his opinions on the diaspora. Additionally, there is a link between hate narratives against journalists and women. When journalists are women, these hate comments intensify and become more far-reaching because of political siding and opportunity.

Hate commentary directed at the political opposition is vast and appears throughout all social media. The language used against political opponents, for example, is a narrative often created by people in power or those who claim to have power. By creating such narratives about the opposition, talking about their private lives as something scandalous that, according to the people who create these narratives, is also reflected in their politics, the opposition tends to be delegitimized, thus creating a space where the opposition cannot express their criticism openly. Although opposition parties, as they have proven many times, usually find ways to express their criticism, the narratives towards them created by people in power also put them at risk as members of opposition parties. In such an environment, opposition members can easily become the target of various attacks by supporters of those in power.

Derogatory language and hate speech are very present in political institutions and transmitted to social media comments. The reflection of anti-women narratives at the National Assembly by political leaders continues to expand on social media by attacking women on the same subjects. Support and approval for sexist and derogatory language are very much inspired by the political elite.

Creating hate narratives against journalists and political opponents with the language of strongly implicit hatred is dangerous because it provides a space for creating an order where critical voices must be silenced for fear of being threatened or attacked by those in power or even by ordinary citizens.

Ethnic reporting is also very important to Kosovo, considering the importance of internal debate. Although there is hateful commentary by both sides, there are positive examples of good debate and constructive disagreements, such as the debate on *Kossev*.

Overall, social media has democratized and enabled communication in many good ways in Kosovo. Journalists feel much more connected to their audiences and can spread their media productions even to the diaspora. However, this has proven to be a double-edged sword when it comes to two-way communication and feedback from audiences. Hate speech, mobilization and organized attacks on social media are very much present in the social media sphere, where vulnerable parts of society are attacked mercilessly. Sexual minorities are often bullied with derogatory language, and ethnic minorities are attacked with ethnic slurs and racial comments. Finally, political debate is contaminated the most with hateful language, often resulting in physical violence after such hateful comments normalize violence.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Kosovar political parties should refrain from using derogatory and hateful language in accusations and opposition actions. Political parties should also instruct members and, in particular, their youth organizations to refrain from hateful and abusive language against one another.
- Kosovar political parties should agree to ban hate speech and comments on social media, especially during electoral campaigning. A joint letter or agreement should be signed in public where they all commit not to feed hateful narratives that are damaging to the overall public sphere.
- Kosovar political parties should organize social media camps and training for their active members, leading members and youth organizations to train them in the use of social media and elevate the debate into structured argumentation and political platforms instead of responsive commentary with offensive language.
- The Kosovo Police should investigate hate speech on social media where applicable by law as well as xenophobia and gender-based derogatory language. Furthermore, the police should work proactively with political organizations, civil society and the media to explain the public consequences of hate speech, xenophobia and derogatory language.
- Kosovo media regulatory bodies such as the KPM and Press Council should reach the media with suggestions to jointly fight hate speech on social media through campaigns and proactive actions in schools and other education initiatives. This could include youth centres and community centres throughout Kosovo crossing inter-ethnic borders.
- Media outlets should refrain from spreading unverified news and sensationalist narratives. A pack or joint statement from media houses, ownership and editors should commit to refraining from publishing unverified news and generalizing language against migrants, women, LGBTIQ+, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups.
- The media should use competition to improve the quality of reporting and in the general interest of Kosovo's citizens. News-reporting competition should not be a reason for inciting hate speech against journalism colleagues.
- Online media and traditional media channels present in the online sphere should create a mechanism for monitoring and regulating hate speech in the comment sections of their media (and their social media accounts), where people express unfiltered hate speech.

- Media outlets should document and report to law enforcement bodies hate speech and threats disseminated on their platforms without dismissing any threat.
- Media outlets should address and regulate the instances of sexist and homophobic language on own their platforms, including online editions and social media accounts.

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