



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

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# **HATE NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIA AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT**

*Anida Sokol*

**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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

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## **HATE NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIA AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT**

### **BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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# HATE NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIA AND USER-GENERATED CONTENT

*Anida Sokol*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Numerous examples of media and communication that spread disinformation, propaganda and hate exist in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and are mostly found in the online sphere. These are usually sustained through different ownership and financing patterns, including local and foreign centres of power, and are used to promote ethno-national or religious narratives or political agendas, targeting ethno-national, political or minority groups. The efforts of (self)regulators and civil society to prevent the spread of such narratives have been limited, while there has been a lack of progressive media policies and political support for such initiatives. Hate narratives influence public opinion and democratic processes in a country where ethno-national tensions and political and economic stalemates have marked its almost 30 years of independence.

Hate narratives influence public opinion and democratic processes in a country where ethno-national tensions and political and economic stalemates have marked its almost 30 years of independence.

In the previous Resilience project report, an overview and examples of the political-economic bases of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication in BiH were outlined (Sokol, 2020). In this research, examples of hate narratives are analyzed to gain a better understanding of their origins, messages, and dissemination. Some of the main research questions are: a) What actors and events serve as the main generators of hate and disinformation narratives? b) What are the main ideas and messages disseminated through hate narratives? c) How are hate narratives disseminated? and d) How do they influence public opinion?

The research was conducted between September and October 2020 and includes four case studies, targeting migrants and refugees, journalists, political opposition and Jews. Case studies were selected in the period from June 2019 to June 2020 and include: 1) the initiative of the BiH Minister of Security, Fahrudin Radončić, to expel migrants and refugees from the country supported by a media campaign in April 2020; 2) the hate campaign of the Herzegovina web portals and death threats against the journalist Nikola Vučić who, at the end of May 2020, on his Twitter account, commenting on the news that the West-Herzegovina Canton had declared itself a “corona-free zone” sarcastically asked whether it would become a “fascism-free zone”; 3) the physical assault of the Minister of Interior of Republika Srpska (RS), Dragan Lukač, on the opposition member of the RS Assembly, Draško Stanivuković, in the RS Assembly at the end of 2019, presented by the RS mainstream media

as an attempt of the opposition to destabilize the RS government; 4) and hate narratives against minorities, in this case Jews, found in the comments sections of news portals and their Facebook accounts at the end of January 2020 during International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

The first three case studies were selected based on their popularity, i.e. they were highly discussed in the media. International Holocaust Remembrance Day was chosen because it generated the largest number of articles dedicated to anti-Semitism that year. The media and social media accounts in the first three case studies were selected based on their relevance, their connection to particular political and ethno-national structures, and their production and dissemination of hate narratives towards the targeted groups. In most cases, *Klix.ba* was selected as one of the most read news portals in BiH that contains the largest number of user-generated comments. Articles were selected with the use of keywords ("migrants", "Nikola Vučić", "Lukač", "Stanivuković", "Jews") within one week surrounding the incident/event, while the social media outlet Facebook was chosen for its popularity in BiH. Besides analyzing of the articles of the selected media, comments sections of web portals and their Facebook accounts were reviewed, the last using CrowdTangle.

## CASE STUDIES

Table 1

TARGET GROUP	CASE EVENT	PERIOD	SAMPLE OF THE MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS
Migrants and refugees	The initiative of Fahrudin Radončić, the former Minister of Security, that migrants and refugees should be expelled from BiH and sent back to their countries	20–27 April 2020	<i>Avaz.ba</i> , <i>Rtrs.tv</i> , <i>Klix.ba</i> , <i>Antimigrant.ba</i> , <i>USN.co.ba</i> and their Facebook accounts
Journalists	The hate campaign of the Herzegovinian media towards the journalist of N1 television Nikola Vučić	27–31 May 2020	<i>Poskok.ba</i> , <i>Vrisak.info</i> , <i>Dnevnik.ba</i> , <i>Jabuka.tv</i> , <i>Grude.com</i> , <i>Build.ba</i> , <i>Rama-Prozor.info</i> , <i>Otvoreno.hr</i> , <i>Hercegovina.in</i> , <i>RadioJubuski.ba</i> , <i>Bljesak.info</i> , <i>Radio-televizija Herceg Bosne</i> and their Facebook accounts
Political opposition	The RS Minister of Interior Dragan Lukač's assault on the opposition MP Draško Stanivuković in the RS Assembly	23–25 December 2019	<i>Rtrs.tv</i> , <i>Srna.rs</i> , <i>Atvbl.com</i> and <i>ATV</i> Facebook account
The Jews	International Holocaust Remembrance Day	25–30 January 2020	<i>Klix.ba</i> , <i>Vijesti.ba</i> and their Facebook accounts

What can be demonstrated by this study is that the mainstream media in BiH are the sources and disseminators of hate narratives towards specific groups and individuals, which are further popularized through user-generated comments. In the case of migrants and refugees and the political opposition, hate narratives come from those in power disseminated by the mainstream media under their influence. In contrast, in the case of journalists, hate narratives were created by web portals from Herzegovina and through user-generated messages on social networks. Hate narratives towards the Jews are user-generated and can be found in the comments sections of the most popular online media in BiH. In the following chapters, we will separately present each case study and describe the main elements of hate narratives towards the target groups. We will then give a conclusion and recommendations for advocacy campaigns and steps that need to be taken to prevent the spread of hate narratives in BiH.

The mainstream media in BiH are the sources and disseminators of hate narratives towards specific groups and individuals, which are further popularized through user-generated comments.

## 2. HATE NARRATIVES TOWARDS MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IN THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

Since 2018, Bosnia and Herzegovina has become a transit route for migrants, refugees and asylum seekers from the Middle East and southern Asia seeking to enter the EU. In 2019, BiH registered 29,232 arrivals of migrants mostly from Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and Syria. According to International Organization of Migration (IOM) estimates, there are around 7,000–8,000 migrants and refugees in the country at any time, even though some sources claim that the numbers are higher (IOM). Most of them live in EU-funded reception centres, which are overcrowded, and many are found on the streets, in abandoned buildings and woods, without water, sanitation and health assistance and as such are vulnerable to violence, exploitation and abuse. They are mostly single men, but there are also families with children, older people, and unaccompanied children, and they are mainly concentrated in the Una-Sana Canton, close to the border with Croatia. The response of the state and local authorities has been poor, particularly due to the lack of coordination between state and local authorities (IOM). The RS government has denied the establishment of reception centres on its territory, while local authorities and populations have been opposing the establishment of such facilities in their localities and occasionally holding protests in towns with the highest number of migrants and refugees, such as Bihać and Velika Kladuša.

Media content on migrants and refugees has increased in the BiH media since 2018. Initially, as has been shown by a recent study of Raskrinkavanje, examples of xenophobic and/or racist disinformation about migrants and refugees were sporadic and mainly copy-pasted from the Croatian media (Cvijetićanin, 2020). The article that marked the start of a negative campaign against migrants in the BiH media was published in May 2018 by Avaz.ba (Cvijetićanin, 2020; Adilagić, 2019; Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). With subtitles such as “murky affairs” and “there are drugs” and an emphasis on unverified information about migrants’ constant attacks on and robbing of Sarajevo’s citizens, and on their connection with illegal businesses and non-hygienic habits, the article initiated the narrative that migrants are a security and health threat for BiH citizens [1].

Since then, the reporting on migrants and refugees in BiH media has often been connected to crime and diseases with sensationalist and discriminatory titles about massive fights between migrants and refugees and their alleged attacks on citizens and their property (Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). Research by the Association of BiH journalists showed that migrants and refugees in the media are either and most often stigmatized, portrayed as perpetrators and dangerous persons or are less frequently shown as victims (Adilagić, 2019). The research also showed that in such media reporting, authors most often use assumptions, anonymous sources (usually citizens) and non-verified information (Adilagić, 2019). Journalists rarely make distinctions between

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migrants, refugees and asylum seekers and use the term migrants or even illegal migrants that stigmatize and homogenize such a diverse group, making them easy targets of different generalizations and hate speech (Buljubašić, 2019). Recent research published by Raskrinkavanje demonstrates that hate narratives towards migrants and refugees are also built upon and retained through disinformation in which they are portrayed as violent, criminal and connected to terrorism and radical ideologies (Cvijetićanin, 2020).

Through this case study, we will present our findings, according to which the leading politicians in the country are the sources of hate narratives towards migrants instrumentalized for political purposes (Ahmetašević, 2019). The case study in this research is related to the initiative of the former Minister of Security of BiH, Fahrudin Radončić, the former owner of *Dnevni avaz* and the leader of the SBB political party, that migrants should be expelled from BiH and sent back to their countries which he particularly reiterated through the media from 20 April until 27 April 2020, after which he resigned from the position of the Minister of Security. In this period, he gave several interviews and statements (*O kanal*, *FTV* and *N1*).

Radončić even pointed out that it is probable that some migrants are members of terrorist groups and that the fingerprints of two migrants in BiH were found on weapons in other countries.

He held a press conference during which he said, among other things, that the migrant crisis was not a humanitarian issue but a security one, that the presence of 7–8,000 migrants influenced the commodity of BiH citizens, especially in the period of the pandemic in which 50–60,000 people in BiH would become unemployed, and that he would start a campaign to expel them from the country. He said that he is using the term *illegal migrants* on purpose because most of them are economic and not war migrants and that BiH should get “rid of this economic, social and cultural ballast” (meaning burden) [2]. Radončić even pointed out that it is probable that some migrants are members of terrorist groups and that the fingerprints of two migrants in BiH were found on weapons in other countries. Even though the issue escalated into political skirmishes between Radončić (SBB party) and leading members of the SDA party, in which Radončić also threatened to proclaim the Pakistan Ambassador as a persona non grata in BiH due to his lack of cooperation, the hate narrative about migrants and refugees being a security and economic threat to the country was further popularized. Based on the review of comments on media and social media accounts, Radončić gained broad support from the public. Although there were no legal grounds for executing such a plan, Radončić’s statements were still widely published by the media and served as classic spin and a way to win votes among the public during the coronavirus pandemic and ahead of the local elections.

In period from 20–27 April 2020, *Avaz.ba* published 15 articles about migrants and refugees, among which eight are related to the statements of Radončić (summaries of his interviews for other media and summaries from the press conference) with discriminatory and sensationalist titles. *Avaz.ba* also interviewed Slobodan Ujić, director of the Service for Foreigners Affairs [3], about steps that are being taken to compile a list of migrants who voluntarily want to return to their countries and the Serb member of

the Presidency, Milorad Dodik, who gave his support to Radončić's plan [4]. Avaz.ba also published an article about the number of crimes committed by migrants and refugees in the Una-Sana Canton, which was confirmed by a police commissioner from the Canton, who, in the article, gave his support to Radončić's initiative [5]. The campaign closed with a three-minute video presenting an overview of articles and scenes depicting crimes committed by migrants in BiH [6]. Four articles in this period relate to the deportation and closure of migrants and refugees from Bihać to the new Lipa detention centre, written in a very formal and dehumanized style, emphasizing the engagement of the police and medical staff [7].

Articles about Radončić's initiative had numerous interactions on Facebook and were shared by the *Dnevni avaz* Facebook account, Facebook accounts of the SBB political party and by a community Facebook page *Želim da se pitam-migranti* (*I want to have a choice – migrants*), described as an initiative for the referendum for the removal of migrants from the territory of the Una-Sana Canton [8]. Even though the page is registered as a community page, in addition to the articles on migrants from Avaz.ba and the local media in Krajina, it also shares articles about the SBB party, which points to its possible political background. Most of the comments on Avaz.ba, its Facebook account and community group under the selected articles gave support to Radončić's initiative, reiterating that migrants are a security threat to society and should be thrown out of the country. Some comments cast doubt about the initiative and others stressed that Radončić is also a migrant in BiH; however, none problematized the hate narrative being popularized by a public figure or pointed to the humanitarian side of the issue and the lack of any legal basis for such an initiative.

Radončić's statements were widely published by other mainstream media. Presenting Radončić's initiative as a solution needed to respond to the problem of illegal economic migrants, in this period, the online version of the RS public service broadcaster *Rtrs.tv* published three articles related to Radončić's statements, with titles that connect migrants to terrorism [9], who are hiding their identity [10]. RTRS also appropriated news about migrants within the Serb ethno-national narrative. Nine other articles published by *Rtrs.tv* in the reporting period mostly relate to the transportation of migrants from Bihać to the Lipa camp, near the homes of Serb returnees, presented as an attack on Serbs and a message that they are not welcomed in the Federation of BiH [11]. Such a narrative was emphasized by the statements of Serb politicians, including the president of the Municipality's SNSD committee in Bosanski Petrovac who said that water, electricity and Internet were provided for migrants, but not for the Serb returnees in the area [12].

In addition to the narrative that migrants are a security threat to the country, some comments also relate migrants to the spread of COVID-19, and describe them as people who live at the expense of BiH citizens.

*Klix.ba*, one of the most popular news portals in BiH, published ten articles related to migrants and refugees in the reporting period, six of them are related to Radončić's initiative and his quarrel with the SDA party, whom he accused of favouring migrants rather than the citizens of BiH [13]. Even

though *Klix.ba* is considered an independent media outlet, none of its articles investigated the initiative or problematized Radončić's statements. The articles of *Klix.ba* were mostly shared on its Facebook account and contained numerous comments, most of which supported the initiative and reflected xenophobic, racist and Nazi stances. In addition to the narrative that migrants are a security threat to the country, some comments also relate migrants to the spread of COVID-19, and describe them as people who live at the expense of BiH citizens and receive better treatment (free housing, food, medical treatment) than BiH citizens. Comments also contained insults such as "scum" (*Šljam and ološ*) or "useless parasites" (*beskorisni paraziti*), and connected migrants to terroristic and criminal activities. Some had very explicit calls for the execution of migrants (that they should be locked up, gassed and executed), but were not removed by the editorial team. Comments that criticized Radončić's statements are rare and mostly found in the Facebook group *Pomoć izbjeglicama u BiH/Help for refugees in BiH* that shared two articles related to Radončić's initiative. One article was shared by the UK human rights organization Refugee Rights Europe, which expressed its concern over the BiH Government's position that lacks legal basis under European law. Overall, there was a lack of condemnation of such hate narratives by public figures and BiH media.<sup>1</sup>

Radončić's statements were further published by the web portal *Antimigrant.ba* that solely published content against migrants and refugees in BiH and the local media in Krajina. During the reporting period, *Antimigrant.ba* published 29 articles related to migrants, among which 14 are related to Radončić's initiative and republished from different media in BiH including *Klix.ba*, *Avaz.ba*, *Nap.ba*, *Oslobodenje.ba*, *Bhrt.ba* and the local media from Krajina. *Antimigrant.ba* also republished an interview from *Srpska.info* with the president the International Police Organization, an obscure Belgrade non-profit organization dedicated to security, who spoke about Radončić's plan, the possible radicalization of migrants in BiH and claimed that many had fought in the wars of Iraq and Syria [14]. The local media in Krajina published articles about Radončić's initiative and depicted migrants as a health threat, especially in relation to COVID-19. For example, a short article on *USN.con.ba* about the press conference from the opening of the Lipa camp points out that COVID-19, in addition to different diseases including scabies, is present among migrants, even though the information was not supported by any source [15].

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<sup>1</sup> Reports that problematized such initiatives are rare. One was published by *Zurnal.info* (Brkić-Radević, 2020).

## HATE NARRATIVES AGAINST MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

Table 2

MAIN NARRATIVE	Migrants and refugees are a threat to the society.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Migrants and refugees are a security threat. They are potential terrorists, are dangerous and commit crime.
	Migrants and refugees are a health threat. They have infectious diseases, including COVID-19.
	Migrants and refugees are an economic threat, especially during the pandemic. BiH should take care of its unemployed citizens rather than of migrants and refugees.

This case study shows that hate narratives that depict migrants and refugees as a security and health threat to the society originate and are disseminated by the leading politicians in the country and the mainstream media and are instrumentalized for political purposes and appropriated within the ethno-national discourse.<sup>2</sup> Such narratives, especially those coming from known political figures, can influence public opinion and further deepen the existing prejudices and xenophobic sentiments among the local population. In all the analyzed articles and online media, there were no positive articles about migrants and refugees or those that problematized hate narratives of politicians, while racist and xenophobic stances identified in comments sections point to a worrying trend.

In all the analyzed articles and online media, there were no positive articles about migrants and refugees or those that problematized hate narratives of politicians, while racist and xenophobic stances identified in comments sections point to a worrying trend.

<sup>2</sup> Resilience group with information for and about people on the move, and solidarity network in BiH and the Balkans/ 3,700 members. See: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/144469886266984/permalink/550123645701604>

### 3. JOURNALISTS AS TARGETS OF HATE

Journalists in BiH face threats, pressure and harassment, but the persecution of these attacks has been inefficient. In, 2019, the Association of B&H Journalists registered 56 cases involving media professionals, including pressure, verbal and physical attacks, and death threats, while during 2020, 29 new cases were recorded (Probić, 2020). A high number of lawsuits have also been filed against journalists, particularly by politicians, directors of public companies and institutions and recently, representatives of the judiciary.<sup>3</sup> Journalists who criticize their own ethno-national parties and narratives, such as Dragan Bursać and Štefica Galić, have been particularly under attack, receiving death threats and insults from users on social networks (Jukić-Mujkić, 2019b; Jukić-Mujkić, 2020). Online harassment has been on the rise in recent years; the targets have been particularly female media professionals (Sokol, 2019), while leading politicians have also been the sources of insults and attacks on journalists. Only media organizations voice their concerns and protests against these narratives, while in the last two years, there has been a rise among the public of those who believe that violence against journalists is justified (in 2018 7%, in 2019 21%, and in 2020 19%) (BH Novinari, 2020). Some media outlets also selectively portray those critical towards the ruling parties or ethno-national narratives, which is particularly visible in the case of *RTRS* and the media close to the SNSD party in Republika Srpska (Vujatović, 2020).

Journalists who criticize their own ethno-national parties and narratives have been particularly under attack, receiving death threats and insults from users on social networks.

In this case study, we analyze the hate campaign of the Croat media from Herzegovina, mainly web portals, towards the *N1* television journalist Nikola Vučić, who, at the end of May 2020, on his Twitter account, commenting on the news that the West-Herzegovina Canton has declared itself a “corona-free zone” sarcastically asked whether a “fascism-free zone” would be declared soon (Safejournalists, 2020). What followed were numerous threats, calls for violence, and hate speech and insults against Vučić and his family, including those that said he should be brought to “Neretva on a stake”, and that he is a “halal Croat” (meaning a traitor of the Croat people who took the side of the Bosniaks). The Association of BH Journalists called on the Ministry of the Interior of the Federation of BiH and the Federal Police Administration to react and take legal action and the Sarajevo Ministry of Interior opened up an investigation. The Croat media from Herzegovina, however, issued several articles against the journalist labelling him a traitor who betrayed Croats and even his family for money and success.

The anonymous Croat news portal *Poskok.info*, known for its support to the HDZ political party and radical Croat narrative and previous backlashes against journalists, such as Štefica Galić, published an anonymous column concerning Vučić’s status sarcastically recounting his father’s imprisonment

<sup>3</sup> According to the Association of BH Journalists, there have been 289 active libel lawsuits against journalists filed since 2015, and 21 new lawsuits were filed in 2019 (Media.ba, 2020).

during the war by the Army of the Republic of BiH, who ate cigarette butts and returned from prison grey-haired [16]. The journalist's father's past was also mentioned in an article published by news portal *Dnevnik.ba*, a Croat-language portal from BiH, describing the journalist as a Halal Croat [17]. In the article, a journalist, Jurija Milović, labelled Vučić a conformist who insulted 100,000 citizens of the West-Herzegovina canton and, needing affirmation, had naively succumbed to an opinion that was different than his and should apologize publicly.

The apology and sanctioning of the journalist by *N1* were demanded by other Croat online media, such as anonymous Croat portal *Vrisak.info* [18], while the news portal *Jabuka.tv* wrote that the Government of the West-Herzegovina Canton should react and sue the journalist [19]. The anonymous portal *Grude.com* published speculations about the journalist's alleged immoral reasons for leaving Mostar for Sarajevo and labelled *N1* an anti-Croat television station [20]. The portal *Bild.ba*, billed as a Croat-language portal, wrote that the journalist proclaimed not only the West-Herzegovina Canton but also the whole country as fascist [21]. The next day, *Jabuka.tv* and *Bild.ba* reported that the journalist had erased his Twitter account, and that such a scandalous declaration was not condemned by any institution or *N1* [22]. At the same time, the portal *Rama-Prozor.info* wrote that requests had been sent to media organizations and television broadcasters for their statements [23]. Articles were copy-pasted by many other Croat portals from Herzegovina and even Croatia: the article of *Dnevnik.ba* was republished by, for example, *Otvoreno.hr* [24] from Croatia, by the semi-anonymous news portal *Herzegovina.in* [25], the anonymous Herzegovinian portal *Hip.ba* [26] and even by the portal of the public radio station from Ljubiški, *Radioljubuski.ba* [27]. The titles of *Jabuka.tv* and *Radioljubuski.ba* contain disinformation that the journalist wished that the West-Herzegovina Canton would become fascist-free instead of corona-free, which can be interpreted in the sense that the journalist wished bad on its citizens.

The Radio Television *Herceg-Bosna* made a six-minute TV report broadcast during the news programme, with statements from *N1* and Nikola Vučić who explained that he did not call the Neretva-Herzegovina Canton or Croat people fascist and apologized if he had hurt the feelings of the Croat people in BiH. However, the report failed to give a wider perspective, research or mention the death threats that the journalist had received on Twitter. Instead it selected two journalists from Herzegovina news portals *Dnevno.ba* and *Dnevnik.ba* as interlocutors who reiterated the opinion that the statement reflected the anti-Croat sentiment that exists in Sarajevo and that the journalist had succumbed to such an atmosphere [28]. Other Croat online media, such as *Poskok.info*, republished the report with a sarcastic title about the "nice gesture of the journalist", and concluded that, even though he had apologized, the journalist was not being sarcastic with the statement [29].

Apart of the articles was shared on the news portals' Facebook accounts, some of which have many followers (*Poskok.info* 33,932; *Dnevnik.ba* 46,235; *Rama-Prozor.info* 24,760) and some featured the journalist's picture with a hashtag

apology (*isprika*). Most of the comments under the articles on the portals and their Facebook accounts reflect the opinion that the journalist is a betrayer of the Croat people and a conformist who knows how to succeed in his career. They also say that the West-Herzegovina Canton is fascist-free compared to Sarajevo, and some used offensive words demanding his demission. Three articles were copy-pasted and published by one of the most read news portals in BiH from Mostar *Bljesak.info*, generating additional comments about the journalist's betrayal of his people [30].

Most of the comments under the articles on the portals and their Facebook accounts reflect the opinion that the journalist is a betrayer of the Croat people and a conformist who knows how to succeed in his career.

One sarcastic statement of a journalist written on his Twitter account with which he expressed his criticism towards the governing structures of the West-Herzegovina Canton turned into a backlash and a media campaign against him. Instead of problematizing attacks on journalists and elaborating on the concept of freedom of expression, the Herzegovinian media saw the journalist's statement as an attack against the Croat people and started an orchestrated campaign against him. Only some of the country's media outlets, including organizations such as Media.ba and Analiziraj.ba, reported about the attacks, while, for many, this topic was not of interest (for example, *Klix.ba* or *RTRS*) and public figures did not condemn the threats.

### HATE NARRATIVES AGAINST JOURNALISTS

Table 3

MAIN NARRATIVE	Journalists are enemies of their own people.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Journalists are conformists and would do anything for their careers, even betray their own people and family.
	Journalists cannot be trusted.
	Journalists do not speak the truth.

This case study demonstrates the vulnerability of BiH journalists, particularly those who criticize the regimes of their own ethno-national group. The case study shows how the BiH media and the public are divided along ethno-national lines and that ethno-national sentiments are used to mobilize hate narratives that can be very dangerous and further create tensions among the public and hatred towards particular groups.

## 4. POLITICAL OPPOSITION AS VICTIMS OF BIASED REPORTING

Biased media reporting favouring one ethno-national group or political party present in media content is a consequence of political and financial influences of the ruling political parties and ethno-national divisions and also the overall lack of professionalism in the media (Sokol, 2020). Through financing and ownership patterns, many public and private media are under the influence of political parties, mostly visible in the favourable reporting and lack of criticism. In these media outlets, political opposition, political parties of other ethno-national groups and voices critical of the ruling structures, such as non-governmental organizations or journalists, are often portrayed in a negative light (Vujatović, 2020).

Instead of problematizing attacks on journalists and elaborating on the concept of freedom of expression, the Herzegovinian media saw the journalist's statement as an attack against the Croat people and started an orchestrated campaign against him.

In this case study, we will analyze the reporting of the mainstream media in the RS when the RS Minister of Interior Dragan Lukač, a member of the ruling SNSD party, physically assaulted the opposition MP Draško Stanivuković in the RS Assembly on 23 December 2019. The special session on the BiH reform programme of the Assembly was marked by constant remarks and interruptions from opposition MPs and verbal clashes between the ruling and the opposition party. It culminated during Lukač's speech, which at one point addressed Stanivuković and told him not to bring the NATO flag that he had been carrying in the Assembly. Lukač also invited Stanivuković to approach him and see how he would end up if he continued to carry the NATO flag, after which he hit Stanivuković (Cvijetićanin, 2019; Vuković, 2019).

The RS mainstream media described the incident as a result of constant provocations of the opposition, portraying their members as provocative, dangerous, and unstable with the aim to provoke riots and cause instability in the RS. The media also published specific disinformation, such as that Lukač had to push away Stanivuković for his own safety and failed to include statements of the opposition.

On the evening of 23 December, *Rrts.tv* published four articles related to the incident. In one article, the event is described as a result of constant provocations of the opposition MP who walked around with NATO flags provoking the Serb member of the BiH Presidency Milorad Dodik and the Prime Minister of the RS, Radovan Višković, and irritated the Minister of Interior to such an extent that he had to push him [31]. The article did not mention Lukač's insults and the fact that he hit him, and did not include other voices and statements of the opposition, other than Lukač's statements in which he, among other things, compared the opposition's behaviour to the dancing of American Indians, full of noise, howling and throbbing. In another article, more of Lukač's statements were published, in which he said that what had happened in the Assembly was a circus and that he had been forced to push Stanivuković for his own safety, comparing the behaviour of the opposition to that of football fans [32].

The next day, 21 articles about the incident were published on *Rtrs.tv* with statements of different politicians, experts and veterans' associations, who condemned the opposition's behaviour and blamed the management of the Assembly that failed to punish their behaviour [33]. The day started with Dodik's statements about the opposition's plan to demolish the Assembly and the RS [34] and continued with statements about the savage and primitive behaviour of the opposition [35] and how the incident had been staged to pave the way for protests [36]. *Rtrs.tv* also published an interview from the Srna News Agency with a political analyst from Belgrade, who said that the strategy of provocation of the opposition was aimed at discrediting the Government of the RS and presenting it as violent and non-democratic and that such activities were usually supported by the West [37]. Veterans' associations condemned the behaviour of the opposition, whom they described as the sons of war profiteers who were not involved in the defence of the RS and gave their support to the war hero Dragan Lukač [38].

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Similar articles were published and republished by other mainstream media of the RS, namely the public News Agency Srna and the private television station ATV. On 23 and 24 December *Atvbl.com* and *Srna.rs* published around 12 articles each about the incident, presenting only one side of the story and leaving aside criticism of the actions of Dragan Lukač. *Srna.rs* even published disinformation that Stanivuković had thrown papers at Lukač, which was the other way round [39]. In contrast, *Atvbl.com* published false statements made by Lukač, who said that Stanivuković had pushed his microphone and prevented him from speaking, which did not happen [40].

The articles published on ATV's Facebook account had numerous comments and engagements,<sup>4</sup> which either condemn the behaviour of the opposition or Lukač and some even point to the fake portrayal of the event by the media. Many comments, however, congratulate and support Lukač for his assault on Stanivuković and describe the opposition MP as a foreign mercenary, the son of a war profiteer and, in some instances, as a mentally ill person.

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<sup>4</sup> CrowdTangle does not work on the RTRS news portal, while the Srna News Agency does not have social media accounts.

## HATE NARRATIVES AGAINST THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Table 4

MAIN NARRATIVE	Political opponents are working against the Government.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Political opponents are dangerous, primitive and unstable.
	They aim to create disorder, destabilize the Government and pave the way for protests.
	Political opponents are mentally ill.
	Political opponents are sons of war profiteers.
	Political opponents did not defend their own people during the war in BiH.
	Political opponents are mercenaries of foreign countries and organizations.

This case study attests to the ruling political parties' influence on the mainstream media, including public service broadcasters, in BiH, which is most visible in the case of RTRS. The mainstream media in the RS under the influence of SNSD depicted the Lukač-Stanivuković incident in a biased and farcical way, failing to include opposition voices, using disinformation and the statements of politicians, war veterans' associations and even political experts who supported their version of the incident. Even though some readers in the comments sections criticized such reporting, many supported it, which attests that it can be dangerous, influence and divide the public and thwart democratic processes in BiH.

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## 5. HATE SPEECH TOWARDS JEWS

Within the consociational political system that rests upon the notion of the three constituent peoples—Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats—and within constant tensions between the three ethno-national groups, minorities in BiH are largely marginalized. The seventeen officially recognized minorities in BIH (including Jews and Roma) cannot run for the Presidency or the House of Peoples (one of the two chambers of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH), even though the European Court of Human Rights ruled in 2009 that these exclusions put BiH in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights. However, necessary reforms to the electoral system have yet to be implemented (Council of Europe, 2019).

Minorities are targets of disinformation in the media as well as hate speech in comments sections.

Media reports about minority groups are occasional, mostly connected with certain dates or events. Research by the Communications Regulatory Agency showed that content intended for, or dedicated to, minorities and vulnerable groups—and adapted for persons with disabilities—is extremely underrepresented in television and radio programmes in BiH (CRA, 2019). Minorities, as shown by recent research of Raskrinkavanje (Cvijetićanin, 2020), are targets of disinformation in the media as well as hate speech in comments sections. These comments are mostly exchanged between ethno-national groups, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, but also target migrants, women, LGBTI+ and Roma communities (Aktek, 2018).

In this case study, we will present the findings on hate narratives towards the Jews in user-generated content of online media and their Facebook accounts. Even though it is often noted that antisemitism is not present in BiH, small-scale research of comments on some of the most popular news portals in BiH can demonstrate that hate narratives targeting Jews are present among the public and are not removed by editorial teams. At the end of January 2020, the media in BiH published articles in relation to International Holocaust Remembrance Day, held on 27 January. *Klix.ba* published seven articles dedicated to the event, including information about the commemorative academy held in the Jewish Municipality in Sarajevo dedicated to the victims of the Holocaust and statements of the president of the Jewish community in BiH, Jakob Finci [41]. *Vijesti.ba* published 15 articles, including interviews with historians [42], statements of the members of the Presidency Dodik [43] and Džaferović [44] and *Oslobođenje* 7 articles, including commemorations in other countries. Although the articles are written in a non-biased way, mostly containing brief information about commemorations, some historical facts and statements from different personalities, comments on the Facebook accounts of the selected media and the online portals contain hate narratives and prejudices against Jews. One article about the Holocaust being the biggest stain on human consciousness generated many hate comments on the Facebook account of *Vijesti.ba*, including calls that Hitler should come back and repeat what he did during the Second World War [45]. Some of

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the comments include insults and offensive words, exhibit prejudices towards Jews as people controlling the world, who are hypocritical and cunning and downgrade the Holocaust by comparing it to the occupation of Palestine. Hate narratives are mostly expressions of hatred towards Jews for the actions of the state of Israel and the occupation of Palestine, but in some cases, they were directed towards the local Jewish population and its representative, Jakob Finci. They reflect stereotypes towards Jews, the notion of collective responsibility for the actions of individuals or a state, and point to a worrying trend of antisemitism among the BiH public which, so far, has not been addressed.

### HATE NARRATIVES TOWARDS JEWS

*Table 5*

MAIN NARRATIVE	Jews deserved the Holocaust.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Jews deserve the Holocaust because of the actions of Israel towards Palestinians.
SUB-NARRATIVES	Jews are cunning and hypocritical.
	Jews control the world.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The case studies demonstrate that the mainstream media and the leading politicians in the country are one of the primary sources and disseminators of hate narratives towards the selected target groups, particularly towards migrants and refugees and the political opposition. Hate narratives also stem from user-generated content, particularly towards journalists and minorities, in this case Jews. Mostly, these hate narratives are not isolated instances of specific individuals but results of orchestrated campaigns that use different methods, such as biased reporting, disinformation and spread of fear. Hate narratives towards migrants and refugees, political opposition and journalists are mostly constructed based on portraying the targeted groups as threats to the country's stability and targeting the emotions of security, fear and ethno-national sentiments. Such sentiments are very powerful in the country where fear of political instability and the endangerment of one's own ethno-national group have constantly been present.

The efforts of civil society and (self)regulatory bodies against these practices have been limited. The Regulatory Agency for Communication has, for example, fined RTRS multiple times. However, its biased reporting favouring the ruling party SNSD has not changed, while the decisions of the self-regulatory body about the breaches of professional codes of online media, including about migrants and refugees, has not yielded results. Voices that criticize hate narratives in the media are marginal and connected to civil society organizations, and there have not been any efforts from politicians, public figures or representatives of institutions to condemn and prevent such narratives. The efforts of online media to remove comments containing hate speech have been minimal.

Hate narratives are not isolated instances of specific individuals but results of orchestrated campaigns that use different methods, such as biased reporting, disinformation and spread of fear.

Voices that criticize hate narratives in the media are marginal and connected to civil society organizations, and there have not been any efforts from politicians, public figures or representatives of institutions to condemn and prevent such narratives.

## 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Journalists should be sensitized to diversity and marginalized groups in their course of formal and informal education and receive training courses on hate speech, particularly how to deal with politicians' problematic statements in their reports and training courses on disinformation and verification of information.
- Journalists and editors should be encouraged to investigate and publish reports about hate narratives in the media, problematize hate narratives of the leading politicians, write inclusive reports about the position of minorities and other marginalized groups in society and provide critical stance towards hate narratives of politicians and public figures.
- Online media should adopt rules for the moderation of their comments, particularly regarding hate speech. They should undertake training courses on the regulation of comments in users' sections, organized by civil society organizations and funded from the public budgets and foreign donors. They should receive training on how to report hate speech to the police.
- Civil society organizations should regularly monitor the media and report disinformation, propaganda and hate speech to the self(regulator) or other institutions and organizations. They should organize press conferences and issue reports and statements about the condemnation of hate speech and biased media reporting. They should receive financial and other support from governments and foreign donors.
- The Communications Regulatory Agency and the Press Council should regularly monitor media content and take action when they detect breaches of professional norms, disinformation, hate speech and biased media reporting. They should organize press conferences and issue reports and statements about the condemnation of hate speech and biased media reporting.
- Criminal laws should be amended to include hate speech with a precise definition. A broader definition of hate speech should be considered which, in addition to "incitement to hatred", would include the spread of negative stereotypes and stigmatization.
- Prosecutor's offices should open and prosecute cases of hate speech in the online media and online media platforms and those made by politicians and public figures. Information about these cases should be punished proactively.
- Judges and prosecutors should be capacitated and trained to process online hate speech in particular.
- Media and information literacy should be strengthened through education, the media and civil society organizations. Education and media reports should include developing skills to detect and report disinformation, hate speech, hate narratives and biased media reporting.

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