



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

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**HATE AND PROPAGANDA  
MODELS OF MEDIA  
AND COMMUNICATION  
IN THE WESTERN BALKANS  
AND TURKEY**

ALBANIA / BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA / KOSOVO  
MONTENEGRO / NORTH MACEDONIA / SERBIA / TURKEY

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## HATE AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

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## **REGIONAL OVERVIEW**

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# HATE AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

*Sandra B. Hrvatin, Brankica Petković and Sanela Hodžić*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication are integral parts of the propaganda-oriented media systems. Should we wish to understand the key characteristics of a propaganda-oriented media system, we must reflect on where, how and why the system came about. There is a long history of propaganda in terms of the way of influencing people's attitudes, opinions and behaviour. What differentiates the current propaganda-oriented media system from its previous incarnations, which operated mainly through the system of "manufacturing consent", is its totality in the realm of public communication. On the one hand, the present political elites treat the media as a key leverage for taking over power and sustaining it. On the other hand, they consider the media as a powerful economic system creating profit, above all by taking ownership of virtually all working media, channelling public funds into advertising and dismantling the economic base in which the media is rooted. Therefore, it is thoroughly wrong to consider the current propaganda-oriented media system only in terms of taking control of the shaping of public opinion without simultaneously considering the taking over of crucial leverages for the financing of loyal media outlets, verified both by the political elites and by capital.

What differentiates the current propaganda-oriented media system from its previous incarnations is its totality in the realm of public communication.

Comprehending the functioning of this kind of system calls for analysis of the consequences for the communal life of the people that it produces (the disintegration of the community into politically led, oriented and financed groups of opinion-maker warriors). It is equally necessary to investigate how the process of the complete failure of mechanisms protecting the public interest led to a situation in which the liberal principles of the rule of law became a crucial milestone for the new models of the management of society where the "hindrance" represented by respecting the principles of human rights no longer exists. We should avoid falling into the trap of quick reasoning and misjudgement of the present media system as an anomaly connected to the historical characteristics of the transitional period of post-socialist and post-communist societies. We must not forget that the three-decade-long transition was based on recapping and replicating the media

regulation “models” of Western European countries. The question that arises is when did these models turn into propagandist media machines whose intention is the decomposition of democracy? What was the determining factor that shaped the reverse process of turning from democracy towards totalitarianism?

Furthermore, is it not possible that the buds for this kind of development existed (and still exist) in the systems that the SEE countries replicated in their trajectory towards the liberal market economy? Considering that critical media are shutting down irrevocably, we must answer the question of whether the situation of the dismantling of the fundamental postulates of journalistic responsibility allows for the construction of a counter-system that would protect the truth? The vindication and defence of democracy nowadays depends on our ability to protect media systems that serve the public interest.

The search for the answers to these questions requires political thinking: political in the sense of not separating the economy from politics or using the economy against politics. Decisions made by the political elites that shape the future of the people stem from a very specific economic system which produces these very decisions. The same applies to media systems. Canadian lawyer Tim Wu illustrates meticulously in his book *The Attention Merchants* (2016) the way the media system operates, and how our attention is harvested and (re)sold. “To see where and when attention was being harvested, one had only to see where advertising (or propaganda, its noncommercial twin) was to be found.” (Wu, 2016: 83) Wu denominates propaganda as the non-commercial twin of commercial advertising. As we will demonstrate, the present propagandist media systems generate income through a symbiotic connection with public funding controlled by the governing political elites which use this connection to sustain their power, and on the other hand, by mobilizing online communication for selling hate. Nowadays, hate generates economic and political profit.

We must not forget that the three-decade-long post-socialist media systems transition was based on replicating the media regulation “models” of Western European countries. When did these models turn into propagandist media machines whose intention is the decomposition of democracy?

The present propagandist media systems generate income through a symbiotic connection with public funding controlled by the governing political elites which use this connection to sustain their power, and on the other hand, by mobilizing online communication for selling hate.



## 2. WHAT IS PROPAGANDA, AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

In their book *Propaganda & Persuasion* (2012), Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell define propaganda as a deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognition and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist. (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012: 7). Certain words included in the definition require additional explanation.

**Deliberate** means that "propaganda is carefully thought out ahead of time to select what will be the most effective strategy to promote an ideology and maintain an advantageous position." Propaganda is an **attempt** at directive communication with an objective that has been established a priori. The desired state may be perceptual, cognitive, behavioural or all three.

Beliefs, attitudes and behaviours are desirable end states for propagandist purposes and determine the formation of a propaganda message, campaign or both. Because so many factors determine the formation of beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, the propagandist has to gather a great deal of information about the intended audience. Propaganda also seeks to achieve a response, a specific reaction or action from an audience that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2012: 9-10). The final part of the definition is crucial for understanding the model that will be described later on.

Decoding how propaganda works requires a focus that goes beyond analyzing the media and the way it operates but also on several systemic and structural mechanisms operating within society and influencing the possibility of propaganda to work and be effective. Directing the analysis towards discovering the presence of propaganda in specific media or specific publications can never explain the functioning of the entire media system. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky describe in their book *Manufacturing Consent* (2002) the ways in which corporate media manufacture society's consent concerning issues that are included in the agenda of public discussion by the political elites. They point out the existence of systemic bias which allows media outlets to produce specific points of view that were previously coordinated by the political, economic and media elites. Their propaganda model is based on the perception of five filters grounded in the deliberate avoidance of certain topics and their interpretations that minimize the potential financial losses for the advertisers. In other words, the advertising money is allocated to the media under certain conditions connected to an unwritten rule agreed between the media and their financiers about not addressing certain topics. Herman and Chomsky claim that the advertisers won a "de facto licensing authority" over the way the media operates (Herman and Chomsky, 2002: 25-37). In this case, the search for propaganda can be conducted not only through analyzing what has been published and how the publications are systemically partial, but also through the analysis of what is not reported on. If one wishes to stay in the business of the media (and profit from it), one must know how to meticulously choose

the topics to be published and the ways in which they will be reported on. That is the way propaganda works in the case of manufacturing consent in society. This propaganda differs substantially from the propaganda model analyzed in this research.

The propaganda-oriented media system is recognized by its installation in the broader processes of the demise of democracy. It is a system that excludes people from politics; it depoliticizes the people by denying them a space in politics (Mastnak, 2015: 148). The people are pushed out of politics by propagandist techniques which replace them with *populus* in the sense of a nation, based on state-determined ethnic characteristics which enforce differentiation between those granted the right of political participation and those to whom this right is denied. Populism creates the appearance of political participation by exercising politics on a micro level through coordinated and deliberate attacks on those not recognized as part of the (our) people. The media plays an important role in this. On the one hand, economic centres and power networks represent themselves and their interests as politics, while the media takes on the role of the mechanism that enables the people to illustrate the illusion of democracy. The propagandist media system is based on allowing people access to politics under restricted and politically controlled conditions where the people then speak what those in power think and end up doing. The propagandist media system does not look for support in public opinion because, considering the goals of propaganda, public opinion does not exist. As expressed at the summit of Central and Eastern European countries (Serbia, Czech Republic, Poland, Croatia, Slovenia and Bulgaria) at the end of August 2020 by the President of the Hungarian Government, Viktor Orban: "Hungary wants to have a conservative and Christian-democratic approach towards European institutions and politics as such. (...) We would like to go back in history where we could discuss values such as family, nation, cultural tradition, religion." (Mekina, 2020: 19) We are in the midst of a struggle for intellectual sovereignty (Orban) of a state that is being carried out in an illiberal, authoritarian way. This struggle requires the construction of an impermeable media system in which all its parts are subjugated to a common goal, and each part plays an important role in the informational "food chain"—the amplification and systematic spreading of key propagandist messages while simultaneously preventing the formation of media channels of the opposition.

Before we present the key aspects of the propagandist media ecosystem, we must answer a vital question: is the system we are describing an isolated characteristic of Central and Eastern European countries? Should we consider this deformed media system as a result of transition (from socialism and communism to capitalism) and the local political elites discovering the possibility of transitioning from one system to another as an opportunity for the formation of a special kind of capitalism without a market and a democratic system without democratic values? Or can we explain the current events in these countries as a kind of "normal" developmental trajectory of

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capitalism that awaits other European countries—a form of populist anarchy in which the media (especially social networks) plays out as the strongest tool for the spreading of propaganda? It should be pointed out that former socialist and communist states did not start their transition in the 80s at point zero. There was no switch that turned off the previous system overnight and turned on the new one. The idea of equating political pluralism with market economy became the foundation for the most predatory types of privatization, selling of natural resources, the intrusion of Western corporations that were unable to guarantee workers' rights in the West, and political-business liaisons between “East and West” that lasted just long enough for the local political elites to consolidate their authority. President of the Polish government, Mateusz Morawiecki, stated at the same summit of Central and Eastern European countries, held in Bled, that in the 90s nobody was bothered by “Western Europe colonizing Eastern. Now that our companies are trying to establish themselves in the unified European market, they are faced with resistance.” (Mekina, 2020: 19) These are the stances promoted by the media propagandist machine while simultaneously creating a whole range of “enemies” that are said to be working against the national interests of the state. Let us illustrate some of these matters. Hungary was the first transition country that privatized (more accurately sold out) its media. Three decades later, there are scarce foreign media owners that persist in the captured media landscape. The rest has merged into a form of a propagandist conglomerate of a media ecosystem in which everything gravitates towards the centre with the concentration of power (political and economic) of a single political party and an individual, intertwined in a web of friendly business liaisons.

This system makes the media just as much a hostage of the political elites as of the economy. Advocating for neoliberal politics and its derivative populist political power that is usually prescribed with an adjective stemming from nation (“*Hungarian democracy is no worse than the German, Italian or French*”, according to Viktor Orban) does not emerge from an economic vacuum. The propagandist media system does not arise and operate because its owners aspire to obtain complete control over what and how people think. This model emerged and operates because its owners realized that propaganda can be a source of substantial economic benefits. Certainly, within the economic system in question, the economic power of the media is drawn from public funds, state-oriented advertising, and the regulation which aims to legalize specific forms of operating that allows the media not to be held accountable to the market, the public or the state but rather exclusively to specific media owners and their interests for defending the acquired positions of power. Old school media (political party) agitators and propagandists gave way to propagandist experts with no political party affiliations whose role is merely to sell politics as nonpolitical. (Habermas, 1989: 238)

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The propagandist media system does not arise and operate because its owners aspire to obtain complete control over what and how people think. This model emerged and operates because its owners realized that propaganda can be a source of substantial economic benefits.

The aim of this project is a form of mapping the operation of media in illiberal societies. We do not use the term illiberal the same way that the political autocrats use it in these countries. Illiberal refers to the idea that the market does not require a safety catch to protect the rights and liberties of the people. The illiberal system incessantly refers to some general (national) values that used to exist and were destroyed by “importing” liberal values from the West. In this system, we do not treat the media separately like a political or an economic institution. It is a system that allowed for capitalism to be brought to its extreme stages and where the state does not take on the role of supervision of the worst economic excesses but rather justifies them as a necessity to protect the national market within a nation-state. The illiberal system is marked by immense political protectionism. The idea that prevailed at the beginning of the transition about catching up with Europe or returning to the European house of nations has been replaced by the predominant idea of the need to persist with what is “ours” and which does not concur with the needs and desires of “our” people following the Age of Enlightenment. It is precisely at this point that the media must be introduced into the analysis. It is the media that transforms the ideas of the illiberal political project into messages explaining everyday life.

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### 3. HOW DOES THE PROPAGANDIST MEDIA ECOSYSTEM OPERATE?

The propagandist media ecosystem operates as a network of systemic corruption. It is not a question of individual media or individual media professionals that abuse the media for propagandist purposes; rather, it is an issue of the collection of systemic and structural conditions that turn the media players themselves into carriers of propagandist activities. The **legal framework** is of crucial importance among the systemic conditions. Despite the majority of the countries formally granting the media its autonomy and determining freedom of expression as a fundamental human right, the system has developed a complete lack of institutional responsiveness to the blatant violations of these principles. Financially and professionally weakened regulating institutions, which are often directly or indirectly influenced by the governing political elites, are not capable of serving the public interest. Rarely do their attempts at media market regulation, media pluralism protection or their respect for professional standards of media operating find their way past ad hoc solutions. The nonexistence of the state's strategic vision of media development and its role in a democratic society is often replaced by thoughtless changes in legislation that merely worsen the deregulated situation. This environment has given way to the instrumentalization of the media for political goals as a predominant practice.

The prevailing mechanism of control over the media is the non-transparent **media ownership** marked by formal, fictional owners hiding their immediate connections to the leading political elites. This mechanism creates a form of "feedback loop" when it comes to influencing the media: on the one hand, the media owners are aware that they owe their takeovers to the governing political elites, while on the other hand, the survival of their media empires depends on the same politics allocating public funds to advertising. Since the media markets do not work, especially following the economic crisis of 2008, the majority of advertising money intended for the financing of the media comes in the form of **state advertising** or as income allocated by (completely or partially) state-owned companies without clearly predetermined criteria. The financial crisis has directly influenced the position and status of journalists and other media professionals. **Professional journalism and investigative journalism** became "luxuries" only afforded by rare media houses. This gap is usually filled by independent media projects mainly financed by **donations** which makes them the targets of attack by governing politics. The undesirable economic situation prevents independent media from being directly financed by their users. Having lost trust in the autonomy of the media, the users turn more and more to the **online media and social networks** in their search for information. Nobody controls the operating of these media and communication channels. Even worse, the propagandist media ecosystem is taking over this realm of the media as well. The virtual

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space is a place of creation and extinction of “media” whose ownership and financing sources are unknown. It is impossible to address their manipulations, misinformation and lies. It is not the media in the usual meaning of the word; rather, we are dealing with interconnected subsystems that serve to enhance specific messages the political elites leak to the public. The propagandist media ecosystem functions through a system of centrifugal forces: seemingly separated media outlets work in harmony as a machine spreading propaganda messages serving the interests of the political elites. Researching this system presents itself as an extremely difficult task. As Shiva Vaidhyanathan puts it: “we are in the midst of a worldwide, internet-based assault on democracy.” (Vaidhyanathan, 2018: 180) Were we to understand the way this system works, we would analyze the whole ecosystem, not merely its individual parts. We must analyze the centre (mainstream media) as well as its peripheral parts (online media and social networks). The system of information flowing from the centre to the peripheries has been replaced by a reverse system.

The propagandist media ecosystem functions through a system of centrifugal forces: seemingly separated media outlets work in harmony as a machine spreading propaganda messages serving the interests of the political elites. Researching this system presents itself as an extremely difficult task.

The peripheries are “test fields” for information that will later become mainstream. It is necessary to point out the specific form of privatization of accountability for public communication. In contrast to the media, bound by statutory provisions on the prohibition of hate speech and discrimination, and the protection of privacy and people’s dignity, the social networks operate within a completely uncontrolled system of a kind of cyber-libertarianism. Once freedom of expression becomes the key aspect of the business model exercised by social network owners, it is clear that it is of no interest for businesses to limit speech no matter how destructive it is. (Zuboff, 2019: 109-110) The companies defending their business models by appealing to freedom of expression should recognize their responsibility for these actions. It is precisely this point of failure of all the institutions of the state of law that was meant to protect freedom of expression with all its limitations.

What is standing in opposition to this propaganda machine? Even though the space within which independent media can operate has drastically shrunk, their role for the protection of democracy does not cease to be of vital importance. The media propaganda ecosystem operates as an invasive form of colonization of the public communication space. However, it is not the only one. Online communication is used as much by those spreading misinformation as those wishing to share journalists’ stories crucial for understanding the time in which we are living. The bond between the media and the public that has been replaced for decades by the commercial relationship between the media and the advertisers needs to be re-established. There is no media without the public, just as there is no public without its media. In order to revive this relationship, it is necessary to go back to the roots of the journalism profession. The trust in journalism and media, which has never been at a lower point, needs to be re-established by returning the fundamental postulates of public service: transparency, public interest, and journalistic integrity. This can only be achieved by the state’s

The bond between the media and the public that has been replaced for decades by the commercial relationship between the media and the advertisers needs to be re-established.

re-involvement in the process of governance over public matters. The future of this narrative will depend upon the indignant citizens, journalists and scholars drawn to this project: indignant elected officials and policy makers who understand that their authority originates in the foundational values of democratic countries, claims Shoshana Zuboff. (2019: 522)

## 4. RESEARCH OF HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

Within the project “Resilience – Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey”, the research team in seven countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey) have explored the phenomenon of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication based on common methodology, particularly focusing on the political-economic basis of such models of media and communication.

The typical elements of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication were identified at the beginning of the research, including ownership and financing patterns, operational modalities, characteristics of editors and journalists in such media models, distinctive content, and relations with the audience. Taking these elements into account, the researchers in the seven countries provided the assessment of the media landscape and concrete examples of media groups, media outlets, and media and public communication practices with the aim of examining whether and how the hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication operate in their respective countries.

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According to the Resilience project research methodology, the typical elements of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication are the following:

### **Ownership patterns of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication platforms**

- a) non-transparent/hidden ownership, beneficiary owner particularly hidden;
- b) owner affiliated/connected to political centres of power, to the ruling political party or other political parties or groupings, to extremist organizations, to criminal groups (underground), to intelligence services, etc.;
- c) ownership by the government/state/local authorities;

d) ownership by individual businessmen/tycoons with affiliation/connection to political parties or other centres of power, to the government, to extremist organizations, criminal groups, to intelligence services, etc.;

e) ownership by foreign owners, individual or institutional, connected to foreign governments or foreign political and business groups, having connections with political centres of power in the beneficiary country, and/or geopolitical interests in the country;

f) ownership by individual journalists, publicists, opinion-makers, influencers (founders of personalized online media and communication channels) with connections to political parties or other political or ideological groupings, members of the government and other centres of power, or extremist organizations, criminal groups, intelligence services, etc.

### **Financing patterns, material basis, business models**

a) Sources of financing not known/not clear (no advertisements carried out, no data on eventual subsidies, grants and sponsorships, no financial reports available in public databases and business registers, etc.);

b) Sources of financing are other businesses of the owner in the media sector or in other sectors;

c) Advertisements (commercial or related to state bodies and institutions connected to the political centres of power and distributed in a non-transparent manner), sponsorships, etc.;

d) Grants and subsidies by the government or local authorities, including access to tax reduction scheme, loans from state funds, etc.;

e) Community fundraising (micro-donations, crowdfunding, membership, etc.);

f) Blackmailing individuals threatening to publish compromising, manipulative content;

g) Financial support from foreign business entities or governments;

h) Commercial benefits from attracting audiences are one, but not the only purpose of these media; in many cases, they are not the prevailing purpose in this type of media.

### **Organizational/operational modalities**

a) public/state media operating on national level, such as public broadcasters, including entities such as radio, TV and/or online media, having a complex management and governance structure, but having all or some outlets and channels producing and disseminating content with hate speech,



disinformation and/or propaganda, being under the control of individual managers or editors connected to the centres of power, ruling party, government, or think-tanks of the ruling party, etc.;

b) local media under the control of the local authorities/mayor and political party in power on a local level;

c) commercial media groups originating and operating in the beneficiary country, with one or more media outlets or channels producing and disseminating content with hate speech, disinformation and/or propaganda; with management and editorial control provided by individuals with connections to the centres of power, ruling party, government, or think-tanks of the ruling party, etc.;

d) offices/branches of private, commercial media from other countries in the region or internationally, or offices/branches of international divisions of public/state media in other countries;

e) media outlets, particularly online media, operating with a small editorial team, providing no data about who they are, operating with or without offices, on a national or local level, having hidden or open affiliation to centres of power, political parties or ideological groupings, or criminal groups, etc.;

f) individual operations with or without a registered media outlet, based on self-employment or employment in another business;

g) individual operations of social media accounts based on anonymity, often organized and coordinated to replicate or support each other in content/messages distributed; activity, including trolling, sometimes paid for by a political party or other organization;

h) comment sections in the online media of this type regularly publish messages from anonymous authors containing hate speech and disinformation without limitation and moderation, some of these commentators act in an organized and coordinated way and are paid by a political party or other organization for this activity.

### **Editors and journalists**

a) editors of this type of media have no respect for professional standards, are not recruited on the basis of professional qualifications, take part in attacks on media, editors and journalists critical to the agenda and to the patrons they serve, engage in attacks on independent associations of journalists and in attempts to form parallel associations;

b) section with impressum – a list of responsible editorial team members (and founders/publishers) often missing in such media;

c) key personnel, including editors' positions predominantly occupied by males;

d) journalists either a) known for bias reporting, an aggressive propagandist style of writing and communication, or for subtle manipulation of (historical) facts and false presentation of facts, events, and ideas; or b) unknown, almost anonymous journalists, mostly young, not professionally socialized in terms of respect for professional standards and defence of professional integrity, economically dependent, but poorly and unregularly paid; or being c) activists of political parties writing for hate and propaganda media instead of professional journalists or under the pretence of journalists.

### **Content**

a) systematic production and dissemination of content (articles, reports, commentaries, titles, visual images, symbols, video, messages) with hate speech, propaganda and disinformation, including incitement to hatred against target groups and individuals, defamatory claims, prejudices and discriminatory speech, intimidation, harassment and false information, manipulation of facts and images, revisionism of historical facts, brutal negative, defamatory campaigns against targets, propaganda for political or ideological agenda of patrons, "character assassination", exploitation of fear, misogyny, Islamophobia, antisemitism, etc.;

b) such content dominates in these media and communication platforms, or in the main sections of these media;

c) the targets of such content are ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, neighbouring nations, migrants, refugees and asylum seekers, Roma, Muslims, Jews, political or ideological opponents to agenda and patrons of these media and communication platforms, critical journalists and media, critical public personalities, activists of watchdog institutions and civil society organizations, academics and advocates of multicultural societies, feminists, human rights defenders, environmental organizations and activists, George Soros, the EU and other international actors when they support critical voices and express criticism towards the agenda and patrons of these media;

d) such content is particularly intensively carried out in pre-election periods, during the adoption of important political decisions and in polarized public discussions;

e) content/articles/reports/editorials/columns often not signed by authors/authors remain unknown; (anonymous) articles are re-published among groups of such media and run simultaneously as a kind of coordinated campaign; visual material, photos often not signed, taken from sources without referencing or in a manipulated manner;

f) the content of these media outlets and communication platforms is often the subject of infringement procedures by regulatory bodies or self-regulatory bodies because of violation of content regulations in media law or violation of codes of conduct of media and journalists, or challenged and removed from social media platforms because of violation of their rules;

g) the content of these media outlets and communication platforms is often the subject of fact-checking by professional media or civil society organizations and exposed for (systematically, deliberately) producing and disseminating false information;

h) gender-based prejudices and harassment of women in politics, journalism, civil society and academia spread on a regular basis;

i) historical events, wars and conflicts explored in a way that promotes aggressive ethno-nationalism, to justify or negate war crimes and cherish war criminals;

j) ethnic and political divisions and polarizations systematically inflamed.

### **Audience relations**

a) media and communication platforms of this type use propaganda to mobilize supporters of their political and ideological agenda/agenda of their patrons, but also aim at influencing public opinion on general, particularly during elections;

b) strong, emotional verbal and visual solutions, and exploitation of fear are used as well as special formats and techniques, including anonymity, use of algorithms and other techniques to attract audiences and manipulate;

c) media and communication platforms of this type are used as a megaphone, but also as a reference point for politicians, decision makers and opinion makers of similar profile in communications with citizens/audience;

d) hate speech, propaganda and disinformation campaigns in this type of media and communication platforms can lead to organized actions, protests and attacks on targets in the real space;

e) hate speech, propaganda and disinformation campaigns of this type of media and communication, in certain circumstances/periods, attract large audiences, and influence public opinion and voting.

The researchers provided their assessment of the media landscape and concrete examples of media and communication in their countries based on the research conducted between May–August 2020, relying on secondary sources such as monitoring reports and decisions of regulatory authorities, self-regulatory bodies, fact-checking platforms, and previous research on media, hate speech and disinformation in their countries, but also observing the media and conducting interviews with relevant sources. Across all typical elements of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication, the researchers also paid attention to the gender dimension as a horizontal issue.

## 5. REGIONAL FEATURES OF HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

### 5.1. Ownership and funding

The most important bases of hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication pertain to the **patterns of media ownership and funding**. Ownership of many media in the countries of the region is connected to the **government or to major political parties**. **Media outlets are also often funded directly by the government or through business groups connected to the government or to the ruling parties**. For example, in Serbia, over 50% of audience shares are reportedly owned or controlled by a political party, politician or political group, or have an owner with political affiliation (Media Ownership Monitor Serbia). In BiH, there is still a large number of non-privatized local public broadcasters that are founded and directly funded by local and cantonal governments and have no guarantees of editorial independence. Media ownership in Turkey is highly concentrated and marked by political and economic alliances among media conglomerates and the government. With four of the top media owners (Kalyon Group, Demirören Group, Ciner Group and Doğu Group) closely affiliated with the government, having 71% of the cross-media audience share, public communication is clearly dominated by a single interest group. Similarly, significant is the interference and control of the Serbian government in the media sector.

In several countries in the region, **government funding** on the national and local level is regularly provided to media that are partisan towards the government or the ruling political party, including those media that commonly break professional standards and spread hate speech, disinformation and propaganda. For instance, the authorities in Serbia provide most of funding for media outlets infamous for violations of professional standards, and spreading disinformation and propaganda. A local Serb nationalist website Despotovina.info, known for inciting ethno-national hostility in BiH, has been supported by the local municipalities of Srebrenica and Bratunac in BiH, as well as by the government of neighbouring Serbia (as noted on their website). The period of the strongest government capture of media in North Macedonia came to an end with the change of government in 2016, but some of the affiliations persist, with certain media maintaining clientelist relations with political centres of power, primarily the VMRO-DPMNE party. In Turkey, most of the media outlets that engage in hate, disinformation and propaganda have business interests with the government. An important portion of **advertising** also comes from the government or affiliated private companies. The connection of advertisers with the government and political officials, and lack of ethical considerations when placing their ads also leads to politically biased and unethical media

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being financially rewarded. In North Macedonia, for example, major brands advertise on notorious websites.

The hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication in the region can be connected to the interference of **foreign governments**, with ownership and funding of certain media outlets being directly or indirectly connected to the governments of Turkey (media in BiH and Albania), Russia (media in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro), Hungary (media in North Macedonia), Croatia (media in BiH, Serbia and Montenegro) and Serbia (media in BiH and Montenegro).

An important factor that contributes to hate, disinformation and propaganda models and adds to the impunity for it is the **lack of transparency** of ownership and funding. The data on media ownership are in part available in relevant business and media registries. **Transparency** is particularly limited in the online sphere, where many platforms do not even register as media businesses and do not provide information on their ownership or funding. There are some positive steps in this regard, with, for instance, the regulator in Montenegro keeping a registry of online media, and a register of online media being established in North Macedonia in 2020. However, the registration of online media in Montenegro is voluntary, while the register in North Macedonia is intended to increase the transparency of media that adhere to ethical norms, while those that regularly violate them are not eligible to become members of the registry. Financial transparency is even more limited. A good example is a registry of media businesses at the National Business Center in Albania, which makes available the annual balances and respective documents, as well as ownership data of online media. Across various media sectors there are elements of **hidden ownership and funding** that enable the interference of political and business actors in editorial policies, and contributes to the flourishing of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication in the region.

The hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication in the region can be connected to the interference of foreign governments, with ownership and funding of certain media outlets being directly or indirectly connected to the governments of Turkey, Russia, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia.

Across various media sectors there are elements of hidden ownership and funding that enable the interference of political and business actors in editorial policies, and contributes to the flourishing of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication in the region.

## 5.2. Organizational/operational models of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech

The organizational and operational models of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech are numerous across the region. Some of those that the seven researchers identify involve:

**Public service broadcasters (PSB)**, which, in the region covered by this research, are largely perverted into their very opposites: promoters of party-political, rather than public interests. They are widely considered politically biased, even a propaganda tool of the ruling parties. This is similar to the situation with **local public media** controlled by authorities and political party in power. Most notably, there is a large number of these types of media in BiH, which are directly funded by local government and are more likely to serve as their public relations channels than as genuine journalistic platforms.

**Commercial media outlets and groups;** Most of the country reports note that the media outlets belonging to the traditional media sectors, most of all broadcasting, do not regularly disseminate disinformation and hate speech in the strictest sense, but many represent soft-propaganda models, as they engage in selective, one-sided reporting, favouritism towards certain political parties, neglect important perspectives, do not report critically about certain centres of power, and sometimes publish misleading information. Some of the hate, disinformation and propaganda models among the commercial media rely on favouritism of and clientelist relationships with certain political party and/or the government. Some examples include the Serb nationalist website Despotovina in BiH and pro-SBB Dnevni Avaz in BiH, as well as right-leaning IN4S.net and Borba.me in Montenegro. Other media outlets resort to disinformation and propaganda **without clear favouritism of political parties**. For instance, as researcher Ilda Londo points out, otherwise the credible current affairs programme “360 grade” broadcast on Ora TV in Albania has been increasingly releasing misleading reports during 2020, mostly related to the coronavirus and the purported superiority of the Albanian nation and culture throughout history.

**Offices/branches of international divisions of public/state** media in other countries, which engage in misinformation and propaganda models of communication. For instance, the Russian Sputnik has mostly been accused of pro-Russian, anti-EU and anti-NATO rhetoric, pro-Serbian stances and tendentious reporting on instability in the region. **There are also private, commercial media with foreign ownership** that engage in this type of communication. Kurir.mk, Lider.mk, Deneshen.mk, Ekonomski.mk and Vistina.mk in North Macedonia, indirectly connected to the Hungarian government, are mostly reporting against the current government and in favour of the VMRO-DPMNE party.

**Online media and communication platforms represent another model** of propaganda, disinformation and hate. There are different sub-types within this model, including a) social media accounts b) websites of limited capacities and influence and c) established online media outlets. Online platforms that belong to this model are often not registered as a media business, or any type of legal entity, and often lack transparency (with little, if any, information available on persons responsible, ownership, funding and organizational models).

Many of the online communication platforms that belong to hate, propaganda and disinformation models are run by **small editorial teams** and, for the most part, carry news from other sources. Hate, disinformation and propaganda models concerning particular marginalized and minority groups partly also result from the **lack of workplace diversity**. For instance, as the researcher Anida Sokol notes, in BiH only twenty-six per cent of directors of television stations and thirty per cent of directors of radio stations are female. Milica Bogdanović notes that in Montenegro 50% of media editors are female,

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but they do not enjoy full autonomy from the male owners and continue to publish content congruent with patriarchal ideology and gender stereotypes. The hate, disinformation and propaganda models also involve hybrid operating patterns, as in the case of Jeta OSH QEF in Albania, a website that often relies on user-generated content and often publishes misleading content, such as disinformation on the 2020 earthquake.

There is an overwhelming amount of disinformation, propaganda, hate speech and derogatory language in the comments sections of online media across the region.

There is an **overwhelming amount of disinformation, propaganda, hate speech and derogatory language in the comments sections of online media** across the region. For the majority of media outlets, the most evident propaganda, disinformation and hate speech models come not from the main editorial content, but from the user comments on the online platforms of these media. While many of the comments involving hate, disinformation and propaganda are posted by people venting and expressing frustration on the web, others are politically orchestrated and affiliated with political parties. For example, an analysis of a comments section of a popular website shows that there were at least 259 trolls for the main political parties in the pre-election period in BiH in 2018. Similarly, the pro-AKP political trolls in Turkey target political opponents and help consolidate the government's power. Some of these media even engage in the moderation of users' comments, but possibly both as a strategy of attracting audience and because of insufficient capacities dedicated to moderation, propaganda, disinformation and hate models persist in their comments sections.

Another **disinformation, propaganda, and hate model** pertains to numerous social network groups and profiles of public figures and citizens, some of which have a large followership. For instance, public officials have, on occasions, published misleading information on their social profiles (such as a video on an alleged anti-lockdown protest in Spain shared by the Prime Minister in Albania), and expressed hostility towards certain groups (in BiH and Albania, for instance, on the LGBTI+ population). An extreme example is the case when Gani Kocy, the member of PDK and the General Council and the former deputy minister in Kosovo, on his Facebook account called several journalists and media outlets "Serbian septic tanks" that stink and need to be closed. Some examples of other types of opinion makers that spread hate speech that our researchers identified include the Analiz merkezi YouTube platform in Turkey, and social media platforms and posts by Milenko Nedelkovski and Branko Tričkovski, supporters of opposing political options in North Macedonia. On one occasion, the self-regulator in North Macedonia concluded that Tričkovski was bickering and engaging in inappropriate communication, while there is an ongoing court proceeding against Nedelkovski.

Some online platforms form the so-called **portal farms** with a number of Facebook pages and related domains, which not only increases their audience reach but also dissipates the attention of fact-checkers, media monitoring platforms and (self)regulators.

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hate models involve cross-border alliances and carry on content of other similar platforms. This exchange of content is encouraged not only often by direct ideological and political affiliations but also by business models based on the pursuit of profit through disinformation, propaganda and hate speech.

### 5.3. Resisting disinformation, propaganda and hate models: (self)regulation and civil society

The prohibition of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda is, in some form, part of the **laws and regulations** in the region, primarily those related to the broadcasting sector. One of the most active regulators in the region in terms of not only overseeing the implementation of professional norms in the broadcasting sector, but also in terms of collecting and publishing data on the media sector is the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services in North Macedonia. However, the regulation is limited to the broadcasting sector and mostly, like in BiH, to complaints that the media regulator receives, while regular monitoring of media content is not conducted.

The limits of media regulation are also illustrated in the fact that the public service broadcaster RTRS in BiH has not changed its practices after the dozens of fines it has received in the last few years for the violation of professional norms. In addition, media regulators are exposed, to a differing extent, to political pressures and influences. A decision of the Montenegrin Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) from beginning of 2020 on three-month suspension of broadcasting of certain shows of Serbian television stations, including Happy TV and Pink TV, for promoting hatred, intolerance and discrimination against Montenegrin nationals was an important precedent in media regulation, but civil society actors asserted that it only confirms the bias of the regulator as the decision came only when the disseminated content was damaging to the interests of the authorities. In BiH, paradoxically, in mid-2020, the person who had been a director of RTRS in the period of frequent violations of professional norms, was appointed as director of the Communication Regulatory Agency, which is a turn that might mark a disruption of the Agency's previously creditable track record.

Other governmental bodies, such as **Ombudsmen** as well as the **Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination** (CPD) in Albania, currently have a marginal role in fighting hate, propaganda and disinformation models. Of the five complaints on discrimination and hate speech in media outlets that the CPD has received so far, it confirmed discrimination in two of them, requesting a public apology from the media outlet concerned. The body, however, does not have executive powers.

The **legislation and court practice** concerning hate speech in the region have been reticent and insufficient to undermine the culture of impunity. In North Macedonia, there are provisions against discrimination, racial hatred and nationalistic intolerance (with one ongoing court case) but the Criminal Code does not include provisions on hate speech, which diminishes an effective judiciary response. In BiH, the criminal codes address hate speech under somewhat narrow 'incitement to hatred' clauses, and the handful of

The legislation and court practice concerning hate speech in the region have been reticent and insufficient to undermine the culture of impunity.



court cases brought so far indicate that the court practice has been inconsistent. In Albania, there are similar clauses under the Criminal Code, but there has been no court practice concerning hate speech.

In **Turkey**, the media regulatory body has been largely instrumentalized for control of media critical of the government. The Radio and Television Authority of Turkey (the RTUK) has been mainly issuing broadcast bans and fines to channels that oppose the AKP party. In efforts of the ruling AKP party to suppress critical voices in social media in Turkey, Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Wikipedia have been blocked on a few occasions in the past. The Penal Code, and the Anti-Terror Law (TMK) are also misused for silencing critical voices in Turkey and it is feared that if a new bill on social media, being drafted in mid-2020, passes, that will only exacerbate the problem.

**Self-regulatory frameworks** have played an important role in the promotion of professional norms among print, as well as online, media. In BiH, the Press Council does not tackle the content on social media and non-journalistic online platforms, which means that large areas of online communication remain outside of the self-regulatory mechanism. On the other hand, the self-regulator in North Macedonia (CMEM) reacts to reported violations of professional norms on different media and communication platforms, including Facebook posts. In Albania, self-regulation has just been established, while in Montenegro, the polarization within the media community does not allow for the existence of a single, functional self-regulator, and instead, only a handful of media outlets have internal Ombudsmen receiving citizens' complaints.

The **policy of media outlets** on pre-, post- or no moderation of user generated comments differs from one media outlet to another, and is dependent on both the capacities of individual media outlets and whether they value the public interest over financial gains (as heated user comments tend to attract an audience). Media outlets are often inundated with thousands of comments on a daily basis which they do not manage to moderate. An interesting example of clamping down on hate speech, disinformation and propaganda while public health was endangered during the coronavirus pandemic is Vijesti online in Montenegro, which switched from post-moderation to pre-moderation of user comments.

Furthermore, **watchdog and fact-checking organizations** across the region, such as Crithink and Vistinomer in North Macedonia and Istinomer in Serbia, have been debunking content involving disinformation. For instance, in BiH, Raskrinkavanje.ba has been exposing thousands of instances of disinformation and false content reaching tens of thousands of followers on its Facebook page, and being both acclaimed and criticized by media actors. Finally, across the region there is a lack of media literacy programmes and education that promotes a better understanding of hate, disinformation and propaganda models.

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Watchdog and fact-checking organizations across the region have been debunking content involving disinformation, exposing instances of disinformation and false content, being both acclaimed and criticized by media actors.

## 6. CONCLUSION: PUBLIC MONEY MISUSED TO FINANCE HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Our research shows that there are numerous examples of disinformation, propaganda and hate models of media and communication in the region, some of them very powerful in terms of their political and financial background and influence on public opinion.

These hate and propaganda media and communication models are not marginal phenomena that have appeared accidentally. In most of the countries in the region, they are significant elements of the media system and are established and maintained systematically to absorb public money and spend it on serving the political agendas of their patrons in the political parties that benefit from the radical polarization of the society.

The identified models and examples of propaganda, disinformation and hate function as propellers of the populist political narratives and income-acquiring tools. Both the political elites (including domestic and foreign political groups and governments) and the media owners have clear political and/or financial interests in disseminating hate, disinformation and propagandist content. On the other hand, quality, highly professional media that serve an important democratic function increasingly struggle for audience and revenues, and face pressures and a lack of sustainability. This means that hate, disinformation and propaganda models are here to stay, and the countries of the region need to take decisive action against them and in support of those media that stand for professional values.

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The **disregard for professional ethics** is widespread. Broadcasting media platforms seem to be mostly free of hate speech and straight-out disinformation. This may be partly due to the work of regulatory bodies and the presence of editors and media managers still dedicated to professional ethics, but in countries like Kosovo, also a result of a strong international involvement and cross-ethnic cooperation between journalists. Propaganda, disinformation and hate models are particularly present in online media, and they especially permeate social media and user-generated content. Lack of (self)regulation in the online sphere nurtures a culture of impunity for propaganda, disinformation and hate models. However, the self-regulatory bodies in most of the countries of the region have been exposing hate, disinformation and propaganda models. Social media companies are also starting to cooperate with local organizations and to remove disinformation and hate speech originating from this region. The judiciary has been processing some cases of hate speech and panic and disorder through disinformation, but there is a need to improve both the legislation and court practice.

These punitive measures are crucial, but they alone are not a panacea against propaganda, disinformation and hate models. The problems will persist as long as the **political class** acts as a major driver of these models. The governments across the region have been a major lever of hate, disinformation and propagandist communication models, with individual media being captured (through ownership and funding) for political and economic promotion. Ironically, it is public money that often feeds hate, disinformation and propaganda models, as government funding is channelled to some of the most notorious platforms. This is particularly evident in Serbia, where the government directly funds propagandist and tabloid media.

The punitive measures are crucial, but they alone are not a panacea against propaganda, disinformation and hate models. The problems will persist as long as the political class acts as a major driver of these models.

There is a particular need to **increase the transparency of media ownership and funding**, providing region-wide information on direct and related ownership of all types of media outlets and other communication platforms through easily accessible registers. The introduction of an obligation for media outlets to publish basic financial data and information on major sources of funding should also be considered.

The consequences of propaganda, disinformation and hate speech are overwhelming. Hate, disinformation and propaganda are directly inciting hostility and bringing harm to different (ethnic, gender, religious, sexual and other) groups. Furthermore, these models have become the norm and the central feature of the culture of communication (particularly online). The public in the region is increasingly accustomed to the derogatory language and sensationalistic content which resonates in our collective memory as the imagery of the sinister other (foreigners, other ethnic groups, Jews, Roma people, women as a political minority, LGBTI+) becomes more copious, familiar, appearing as credible, and easily available for the next slur.

The consequences of propaganda, disinformation and hate speech are overwhelming. Hate, disinformation and propaganda are directly inciting hostility and bringing harm to different social groups. These models have become the norm and the central feature of the culture of communication (particularly online).

Ultimately, these hate, disinformation and propaganda models **step on the core democratic values**, while distorting our views and shifting attention from real political thought and engagement.

## 6.1. The fight against hate, disinformation and propaganda media and communication models

Imposing **more regulation** on media and communication platforms is not necessarily the way to go. Instead, **the current regulations and institutions need to be strengthened and improved**. The definitions of hate speech in the criminal codes across the region need to be revised to include not only provision against “incitement to hatred”, but also include against expressions of negative stereotypes and stigmatization. It should be particularly ensured that hate speech spread by public figures and media with potentially high reach and influence gets penalized. The judiciary must be decisive in putting an end to the culture of impunity. Relentless policing of online content and penalizing all hate speech is contrary to the principles of democracy and can limit the freedom of expression.

The **political pressures that media regulators face** need to be confronted and regulators enabled and capacitated to promote professional ethics. Independent funding and the appointment of highly qualified personnel is the first condition.

In parallel with penal and self-regulatory mechanisms, the countries of the region need more elaborate, systemic soft mechanisms, including funding for quality journalism, sensibilization of both journalists and the public about hate, disinformation and propaganda, and subjecting those communication models and practices to research, public judgement and disdain. At present, international assistance is the main supporter of quality journalism, but in the future, public funding must be transformed in an instrument of support for quality journalism. Stronger demands from civil society are needed to make the procedures transparent, to establish the criteria for journalistic excellence and to prevent propagandist and sensationalistic media from receiving government funding.

The **self-regulatory bodies, fact-checking and media watchdog platforms, media researchers, NGOs, educational institutions and organizations, public institutions** (such as Ombudsman institutions) and other actors can contribute to these restorative measures by monitoring and pointing out hate, propaganda and disinformation instances and models, condemning hateful, propagandist and disinformation-containing reports and statements, educating media, journalists and the public, etc.

The **companies that manage social networks** are also increasingly engaging in the region. During the pandemic, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram started removing misleading posts from the region, and partnerships with local fact-checking organizations will enable more regular removal and flagging of misleading content from the region.

Importantly, **the political class and public sector need to become a part of the solution**. This means, first, that both direct and indirect interference of the state in media ownership should be prevented. Private and legal entities that are closely affiliated with ruling parties should not be allowed to own media outlets. Secondly, public funding for the media should be put in the service of public interest, i.e. awarded to quality media based on relevant criteria and legitimate and transparent procedures. With a high number of communication platforms belonging to hate, disinformation and propaganda models, and with the associated growing difficulties for the public to get reliable information, governments and the nongovernmental organizations in the region should both provide **media and information literacy promotion programmes**. Media and information literacy should particularly be made an important part of regular formal education, in order to systematically promote the development of skills that will help the public to understand and condemn hate speech and disinformation in the increasingly challenging communication environment.

The political pressures that media regulators face need to be confronted and regulators enabled and capacitated to promote professional ethics. Independent funding and the appointment of highly qualified personnel is the first condition.

There is a need to employ multiple measures and a collective, collaborative effort across numerous sectors, including the media, politics, education, the judiciary, science and technology, culture and other sectors in order to strengthen instruments and institutions, but also to empower individual citizens and communities to oppose and prevent the normalization of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication.

Ultimately, no single measure and approach alone will be sufficient to counter the hate, disinformation and propaganda models of media and communication. **There is a need to employ multiple measures and a collective, collaborative effort across numerous sectors**, including the media, politics, education, the judiciary, science and technology, culture and other sectors in order to strengthen instruments and institutions, but also to empower individual citizens and communities to oppose and prevent the normalization of hate, propaganda and disinformation models of media and communication. We need social and political mobilization, a civil defence movement to protect human dignity and humanity in our communication and in the media as the most valuable institutions where professionals serve the public interest for credible information and plural, critical views.

The political class and public sector need to become a part of the solution.

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**ALBANIA**

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**HATE SPEECH, PROPAGANDA  
AND DISINFORMATION  
IN ALBANIAN MEDIA**

*Ilda Londo*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## HATE SPEECH, PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION IN ALBANIAN MEDIA

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# HATE SPEECH, PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION IN ALBANIAN MEDIA

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The public debate in Albania is increasingly divisive, especially among political parties and individual politicians. The heavy influence of political discourse also further polarizes other areas of life in Albania. The media is certainly not immune to this trend. In fact, since it is one of the main tools of communication and shaping of the public debate, it can also be considered partly responsible, though not necessarily of its own will, for this climate of division and discord. In the 30 years following the change of the political regime, the Albanian media has made significant achievements, but it also suffers drawbacks due to a variety of factors. The lack of transparency in ownership and especially funding patterns, the unclear economic mechanisms that lead to a fragmented and chaotic market, and the failure of a section of the media to improve professionally are only a part of the challenges the media faces in the country. In this context, media are increasingly working with smaller newsrooms, with the staff facing heavier workloads, and with increasing pressure for economic gains. The advent and development of online media has been a significant factor contributing to this economic pressure, leading to a race for faster news, while quality often comes in second.

In this context, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the main models and elements that media in Albania manifest regarding hate speech, propaganda and disinformation. The research focuses mainly on online media, as they are identified as the main carriers of disinformation and hate speech, with a few exceptions, but traditional media are also present. The analysis is based on previous research studies, interviews with experts, and public statements and case studies, but mostly on the direct monitoring of models that are identified as manifesting problematic elements in the framework of this research. The content monitoring was carried out in the period June–August 2020, and focused on several media outlets and social media networks, mainly on particular narratives and case studies. The paper does not intend in any way to single out particular media, programmes or individuals, but rather to provide an overview of the main tendencies regarding hate speech, propaganda and disinformation in Albanian media, and also identify ways of countering these narratives.

## 2. MEDIA LANDSCAPE TRENDS

The media landscape in Albania is quite dynamic in terms of the number of media outlets. Currently, there are 15 daily newspapers, including sports newspapers, even though the population is under three million and the press is not distributed across the whole country. The situation with audiovisual media is also quite significant in numbers: there are five licences issued for national digital platforms and 45 local television stations, and the public broadcaster, which currently operates 12 channels through its digital platform, including two regional television centres<sup>1</sup>. Regarding radio broadcasting, there are two national radio stations, 53 local ones, and four community radio stations. In addition, there is public radio, which operates six radio stations as well as four regional radio centres.<sup>2</sup>

The landscape of online media is much more chaotic, and in the absence of official statistics or ways of documenting online media, the size of this part of the landscape remains prone to speculation. According to estimates by the Union of Albanian Journalists, there are supposed to be more than 800 online media operating in the country<sup>3</sup>. The explosion of online media is also facilitated by the relatively low operational costs compared to other media, and by the spread of the internet across the country. According to the official regulator on electronic communications, at the end of 2019, the internet penetration rate was 75%<sup>4</sup>. The presence of Albanians on social networks, especially Facebook, is also significant, with an estimated 1.4 million accounts on Facebook, or a penetration rate of almost 49% at the end of January 2020<sup>5</sup>.

The sources of financial support for this relatively sizable number of media across all genres in Albania do not seem numerous or substantial, even though transparency on the media economy has been scarce, especially for online media. According to the data presented by the economic magazine Monitor, the estimate for the country's advertising market ranges from 37–40 million euros in recent years, with a gloomy forecast for 2020 in view of the expenses that advertisers will probably cut to cover losses<sup>6</sup>. The lion's share of this market goes to television stations, with about 70% of the market, and more specifically, to the two national television stations, which account for 11 million of the roughly 30 million euros that goes to all television stations<sup>7</sup>. Radio seems to be stable in its advertising revenue,

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1 Audiovisual Media Authority, List of TV Stations, <http://ama.gov.al/subjekte-audiovizive/>

2 Audiovisual Media Authority, List of radio stations, <http://ama.gov.al/subjekte-audio/>

3 Interview with Aleksander Cipa, chairman of the Union of Albanian Journalists, 25 May 2020.

4 Internet World Stats, <https://www.internetworldstats.com/europa2.htm#al>

5 *Ibid.*

6 Monitor magazine, "Tregu i reklamave në ngërç, furnizonte mediat me rreth 40 milionë euro në vit," [Advertising market stuck, it provided about 40 million Euro per year to the media], 28 March 2020, <https://www.monitor.al/tregu-i-reklamave-ne-ngerc-furnizonte-mediat-me-40-milione-euro-ne-vit/>

7 *Ibid.*

with almost 1 million euros of advertising revenue. Print media's advertising revenue has plummeted and brings in no more than 1.5 million euros, while online media has continuously increased its share of the market, although with a tendency to stagnate currently, amounting to 2.5 million euros in the last report<sup>8</sup>. However, all of these data include a laborious process mainly undertaken by Monitor magazine, in cooperation with advertising agencies, and verifying the data from the annual balances of the media outlets, while an official audit or statistics on the real situation of the advertising market for the media, or media finances in general, are lacking. In this context, given the lack of transparent and reliable data, the questions on the likelihood of a large number of media surviving in this market still do not have a plausible or definitive answer.

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8 *Ibid.*

### 3. HATE SPEECH NARRATIVES IN THE ALBANIAN MEDIA

There is an inherent difficulty in monitoring hate speech trends in the media, due to the challenge of defining hate speech in the first place. In fact, there are not many monitoring reports on this topic. Those that exist are mainly carried out by organizations or activists of minorities, as they feel more threatened and prejudiced in the media. That is particularly the case for LGBTI organizations or organizations that focus on minority rights. For example, representatives of Roma and Egyptian minorities complain of the media nurturing the existing clichés and prejudices against these minorities, leading to negative coverage<sup>9</sup>. In addition, activists indicate that there is sensationalism or discriminatory discourse from public figures vis-à-vis the LGBTI community or individuals<sup>10</sup>. However, even from these organizations, monitoring is sporadic and often limited to a few media, which leads to a general lack of data in this regard.

Earlier surveys and monitoring from the Albanian Media Institute have indicated two main trends related to hate speech in the media. First, the primary source of hate speech in the media seems to come from politicians, especially their direct quotes<sup>11</sup>. The findings from the monitoring of print media by LGBTI organizations, which claimed that 60% of articles containing hate speech elements came from the politics section of the newspapers<sup>12</sup>, confirms this. Another survey carried out among television journalists also led to the Institute's conclusion that 56% of the hate speech discourse in television comes mainly from prime time political and current affairs television debates.

User-generated content is a rich source of hate speech, producing inflammatory comments, insults and derogatory speech against all possible groups, peoples or individuals.

Second, "user-generated content is a rich source of hate speech, producing inflammatory comments, insults and derogatory speech against all possible groups, peoples or individuals" and the source of this content is found almost exclusively in online media.<sup>13</sup> In fact, most online media outlets allow the public to comment and very often do not filter or moderate the comments, leading to the comments section being a battlefield of insults and offences. However, while online media seem most prone to hate speech, this phenomenon is certainly not limited only to online media. A survey of 50 journalists and editors from the country's leading television stations country revealed that half of them believe that there is an increasing trend of hate-speech-related content in television.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, 67% of them said that in their media outlets, little or no attention is paid to hate speech.<sup>15</sup>

9 M. Gremi, "Grupet e marginalizuara ne syte e medias shqiptare," *Historia ime*, 2018, [https://ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/MEDIA-PARA-PASQYR%C3%8BS\\_01.06.2018\\_Tip-1.pdf](https://ahc.org.al/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/MEDIA-PARA-PASQYR%C3%8BS_01.06.2018_Tip-1.pdf)

10 *Ibid.*

11 UNESCO, "Hate speech in online media: Albania."

12 E. Kaziaj, "Monitorimi i Gjuhës së Urrejtjes dhe Gjuhës Diskriminuese në Median Online," *Historia ime*, 2017.

13 UNESCO, "Hate speech in online media: Albania."

14 L. Axhami, "Gjuha e urrejtjes dhe profesionalizmi i gazetareve," in AMA, "Gjuha e urrejtjes ne mediat audiovizive," 2018.

15 *Ibid.*

## 4. MAIN TRENDS FACILITATING HATE SPEECH NARRATIVES IN THE MEDIA

There are several factors or typical elements that are common to the media outlets that engage in or facilitate hate speech directed at various groups or propaganda that benefits particular actors. In this instance, though, rather than narrowing matters down to hate speech, it would be more correct to speak more broadly of unethical coverage, including hate speech.

First of all, one of the factors that are more often connected to the practising of hate speech by media outlets is the degree of transparency of the newsroom and ownership of said media or lack thereof. The media that fall squarely into the category with a remarkable lack of transparency are online media. While print and audiovisual media have to be registered as businesses, and audiovisual media also have other detailed obligations in their licence conditions, the case of online media is quite the opposite. “Most online media do not publish their address, information on their staff, or any other identifying information.”<sup>16</sup> Unless seeking domains ending in “.al”, online media do not even have an obligation to register. Even in cases when they want to have a domain with this ending, there are no particular obligations other than registering with the hosting service.

The media that fall squarely into the category with a remarkable lack of transparency are online media.

In this respect, navigating through the landscape of online media is no easy task; while most of the well-known journalists who migrated to online media do make their ownership or involvement in newsroom known, the overwhelming majority of online media lacks contact information of any kind, and it is even harder to find information on their newsroom staff. An initiative of the Albanian Media Institute to map the online media landscape in 2018 highlighted this problem, concluding that “the endeavour to identify all media outlets in the country is an impossible job at the moment and that even identification of the people behind the portals is a complicated task.”<sup>17</sup> This survey of online media was conducted by contacting news portals and asking them to fill in a simple form, and a number of them refused to provide any data<sup>18</sup>, which shows a lack of willingness to be more transparent in this field. Of the 121 online media that participated in the survey, 12% declared that they were not registered in any form<sup>19</sup>. Having in mind that the survey included only a portion of available news portals, which could number more than 800<sup>20</sup>, it would be safe to conclude that there is a severe lack of transparency and significant anonymity in online media, which can be favourable conditions for engaging in practices that fall into disinformation, hate speech and propaganda models.

16 IREX, “Media Sustainability Index 2019: Albania,” <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2019-albania.pdf>

17 AMI, “Mapping online media in Albania: Survey on online media,” 2018.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 According to the Union of Albanian Journalists, more than 800 online media are operating in Albania.



Along the same lines, and closely tied to the lack of obligation to register, there is also the absence of transparency of funding of online media. Consequently, the fulfilment of other requirements which would be expected in the functioning of media enterprises, such as declaring their revenues, their sources of income, the list of employees and payment of social contributions, paying taxes, etc., are also not easily identifiable with the current landscape of online media. In this respect, it can be said that the landscape of online media seems to be in a phase of total anarchy.

However, this information does not necessarily mean that the traditional media is totally transparent in its funding sources and revenue, as well as the list of staff and the respective contributions paid. Quite the opposite, various research studies through the years have continuously documented the abnormalities in the media market from the economic point of view, as well as the possibilities to have a clear picture from the economic data provided. Nonetheless, traditional media registered with the National Business Center have to provide annual balances and respective documents, which are readily accessible online, along with their ownership status. Such transparency is not a requirement for online media unless they are registered as businesses. In this respect, even though there are constant doubts about the independence of the traditional media, the context allows for even greater speculation on funding sources and financing of online media. In the public debate, there have been constant allegations of news portals supported by particular politicians or political parties. Although it is impossible to prove in this context, looking at the editorial content of some websites, it is clear that they support a particular politician or political party, or that they are particularly active in fighting against some other politician.

Another factor that affects the ethical level of media in general, although it is more pronounced for online media, is the anonymity of staff, coupled with the generally low investments in human resources in journalism. In most online media outlets, it is impossible to find any contact details or name of staff, while in some of them, only the editorials or opinion pieces are signed, while there is no sign of reporters. Furthermore, while there are shortages of staff across all media genres, this applies even more to online media, where, as a rule, the same content or article circulates over several media, only with slight changes. This leads to a situation where there is a large number of media, but the information that reaches the public is more or less the same, with slight tweaks. In the above-mentioned survey of online media, only 19 out of 121 media outlets said that staffing was sufficient, and 67% of the respondents said that if they could, they would increase the number of professional staff.<sup>21</sup>

Another factor that might facilitate the spread of hate speech in the media is related to the overall professional level and ethical awareness of journalists.

Apart from the general business model and the lack of transparency of media outlets, another factor that might facilitate the spread of hate speech in the media is related to the overall professional level and ethical

21 AMI, "Mapping online media in Albania: Survey on online media," 2018.

awareness of journalists. Various studies through the years have indicated that there is no fair, merit-based competition for appointing editors or hiring journalists, and that “there is a major trend towards a decline in the role of editors within the Albanian media and their exertion of weaker influence, as the media owners and other figures, mainly politicians, seem to become more assertive.”<sup>22</sup> A proper and complete discussion on ethics, resulting in a serious self-regulatory process is yet to take place in the Albanian media, thereby affecting the chances for media self-regulation, even in those areas which are not necessarily sensitive to media owners.

Finally, the quick spread and explosion of social media in Albania, especially Facebook, has also facilitated the dissemination of hate speech narratives in some respects. What makes matters worse is that Albanian media tend to report on statements or posts of public figures made on Facebook, often without questioning or following up on them, and even inviting them to participate in television programmes. These opportunities double the audience for these persons, who might have particular agendas, such as anti-government, anti-Soros, anti-LGBT, or who might propagate conspiracy theories, while a fact check or proper verification of the information they spread is generally missing.

The quick spread and explosion of social media in Albania, especially Facebook, has also facilitated the dissemination of hate speech narratives in some respects.

Hate speech in the media appears mainly in the coverage of the combative exchanges between political opponents, as well as in articles engaging in character assassination of critical journalists and media, or persons supporting a view or actor different from the one that the media in question supports. Another favourite target is George Soros, but only by particular individuals, usually but not exclusively linked to conspiracy theorists. The main opposition groups also mentioned Soros as a supporter and mentor of current Prime Minister Edi Rama and as an organization that meddles into and manipulates many aspects of life in Albania, in particular judicial reform. These narratives are covered in the respective media that are closer to these political parties and figures. Another less frequent type of content, but a strong one, is found in those articles where journalists attack their colleagues, not speaking of arguments, but by attacking their privacy, personal choices, looks, career moves in general, etc. Although this kind of narrative is not affected by gender, it often happens that female journalists are more easily prone to these attacks through their appearance or private life.

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22 SEENPM, “The Role of Editors in Albanian media,” 2016.

## 5. MECHANISMS AND RESPONSES TO HATE SPEECH IN THE MEDIA

Unfortunately, there is not any intense, regular, or organized effort against the spread of hate speech narratives in the media. Civil society initiatives include sporadic monitoring efforts on particular topics of media coverage, such as the LGBTI community and ethnic minorities. Efforts to raise awareness among the public and the media are also ongoing, but mainly in the form of public campaigns, and also sporadic training offered for journalists. There is only one fact-checking platform in the country, but its main focus is on verifying public statements from politicians and does not involve media monitoring.

In terms of regulation, Albanian legislation does regulate hate speech in a general manner. Although not specifically mentioning the term hate speech, the Constitution of Albania includes among its founding principles of the state the need to respect human rights and freedoms, religious co-existence and respect for minorities.<sup>23</sup>

Albanian legislation does regulate hate speech in a general manner.

More specifically, hate speech is regulated in the Penal Code, which means that it applies to all citizens, and it is not media-specific. Article 265 of the Penal Code states: “Incitement of hatred or conflicts between nationalities, races, and religions, as well as the preparation and dissemination of articles with such content, is punishable through a fine or up to ten years of imprisonment.” In addition, Article 266 further details the prohibition of hate speech: “Endangering public order by calling for hate against parts of the population by insulting and or defaming them, or by demanding the use of violence or arbitrary actions against them, is punishable through a fine or up to five years of imprisonment.” So far, there have been no public cases of use of these articles against the media.

Regarding media-specific regulation, the Law on Audiovisual Media lists among its principles that audiovisual media should comply with “the right to information, political and religious beliefs, personality, and dignity and with other human fundamental rights and freedoms.”<sup>24</sup> In addition, broadcasts should also be guided by “non-allowance of broadcasts inciting intolerance among citizens,” and “respect for good neighbourly relations among peoples,” among others<sup>25</sup>. Furthermore, Article 32 states: “Audio and/or audiovisual media services must not contain any incitement to hatred based on race, sex, religion or nationality.”<sup>26</sup> Also, Article 120 forbids the public broadcaster from engaging in political and religious propaganda, which, in theory, can also be a source of hate speech.

23 Constitution of the Republic of Albania, Art. 3, 1998, amended in 2007, available at: <http://www.osce.org/albania/41888>

24 Law 97/2013, “On Audiovisual Media,” Art. 4, available at: <http://institutemedia.org/Documents/PDF/Law%20on%20Audiovisual%20Media.pdf>

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*, Art. 32.

The audiovisual media law provides for the establishment of a Council of Complaints at the Audiovisual Media Authority. The Council is in charge of handling complaints on content, specifically ethical ones, based on the Broadcasting Code, a bylaw detailing the main professional rules audiovisual media should abide by. The complaints received by the Council are mainly focused on privacy, treatment of minors in the media, and advertising, while there are no particular complaints regarding hate speech narratives or practices.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from the Council of Complaints of the audiovisual media regulator, citizens can also resort to the Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, in charge of reacting to cases of discrimination of every kind, either following the complaints of interested actors or ex officio. There have been only limited cases of the Commissioner dealing with complaints about media regarding hate speech and discrimination: there were four such cases in 2019, four in 2018 and one in 2016<sup>28</sup>. Most of these complaints came from cultural minority activists and one from the LGBTI community, and only one inquiry was initiated by the Commissioner. The Commissioner regarded only two of these complaints as discriminatory, requesting a public apology from the media outlet in question. However, this is not always issued, as the Commissioner has no binding power.

Apart from audiovisual media regulation, there have been several attempts in recent years to pass regulation for online media, citing mainly the need to impose professional rules on the sector given the numerous complaints concerning its lack of ethics.

In addition to these mechanisms, there is also the Code of Ethics drafted by a group of experts in 2018, led by the Albanian Media Institute and the Albanian Media Council. The latter is an organization that aims to engage the media in the self-regulation process and improve professionalism in the media. The Code contains a specific provision warning journalists against hate speech, and also allows for the deletion or removal of hateful or abusive comments<sup>29</sup>. The Albanian Media Council created the Alliance for Ethical Media in early 2020, intending to start a self-regulation mechanism to take complaints from the public, with the participation of 19 media outlets<sup>30</sup>. However, it is too early to see the progress of such an initiative.

Apart from audiovisual media regulation, there have been several attempts in recent years to pass regulation for online media, citing mainly the need to impose professional rules on the sector given the numerous complaints concerning its lack of ethics<sup>31</sup>. After a controversial process, the parliament approved such a law at the end of 2019, amidst opposition from media organizations and human rights activists. The law was regarded as providing the regulator with quasi-judicial competences to sanction media outlets, suggesting that Albania already has sufficient laws to regulate cases in

27 Council of Complaints Bulletins, <http://ama.gov.al/buletini/>

28 Rulings of the Commissioner for Protection Against Discrimination, available at: <https://www.kmd.al/vendime-te-komisionerit-2017/?lang=en>

29 Code of Ethics of Journalists.

30 <https://kshm.al/2020/02/12/krijohet-aleanca-per-media-etike/>

31 AMI, "Online media regulation and self-regulation," 2016.

which media outlets violate the rights of others. In this context, there are precedents decided on in Albanian courts<sup>32</sup>. In response to this opposition and also criticism of the law by international organizations, the Council of Europe decided to seek the opinion of the Venice Commission on the law.<sup>33</sup> The final opinion, published in June 2020, stated that the amendments “are not ready for adoption in their current form. The law suffers from vagueness and would likely have a ‘chilling effect’ suppressing free discussion and political speech in the Albanian sector of the internet.”<sup>34</sup> While the media organizations reiterated their call for the government to withdraw the law, Prime Minister Rama also appeared determined in a tweet to continue with the approval of the law. He announced that they would take on board the recommendations and guarantee the right of each man to be protected from defamation, as well as the obligation of each news portal to be identified as the subject of the law<sup>35</sup>.

The law suffers from vagueness and would likely have a ‘chilling effect’ suppressing free discussion and political speech in the Albanian sector of the internet.

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32 <http://www.institutemedia.org/2020/01/11/international-and-albanian-media-freedom-organizations-strongly-criticize-the-two-draft-laws-on-online-media/>

33 <https://a2news.com/2020/01/22/paketa-antishpifje-kie-con-draftin-ne-venecia-ps-rrezon-presidentin/>

34 [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD\(2020\)013-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-AD(2020)013-e)

35 <https://www.reporter.al/opinioni-final-i-venecias-rrezon-ligjin-e-qeverise-per-mediat-online/>

## 6. EXAMPLES AND MODELS OF HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION IN ALBANIA

In order to have a clearer picture of the main trends and models of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in the Albanian media, the following section will try to describe and classify the kind of media that fall into this category and the content they disseminate. The media were selected after reviewing previous research, previous monitoring efforts, and public statements by human rights NGOs following the media, as well as interviews with experts. In addition, monitoring of the media was also a substantial part of the analysis, identifying hate narratives and examples of propaganda and disinformation. This list is by no means exhaustive, neither in terms of identifying media outlets, nor in terms of spotting models of functioning of this media; it aims instead to provide an introduction and overview of the main models that randomly appear in the media landscape regarding hate speech, disinformation and propaganda trends.

### 6.1. Influence and propaganda from other countries in the Albanian media

The phenomenon of influence from other countries on the Albanian media has not been strongly visible, at least compared to other countries in the region, mainly due to Albania's history and also various geopolitical interests. In 2018, a news article was published claiming that the Greek Government had established a secret fund that was used to pay Albanian associations, journalists, and media, to further Greek interests in Albania,<sup>36</sup> but this was later exposed as fake news, made up from a personal blog<sup>37</sup>. However, in recent years, it can be said that various online media exhibit increasing closeness and affiliation to other countries, mainly Turkey and Iran. While these are not necessarily influential or highly popular media, they do present hate narratives or publish propaganda content favouring foreign countries and denigrating their rivals or political opponents. Although by no means an exhaustive list, the following is a short description of some of the media that have been identified in this category.

Various online media exhibit increasing closeness and affiliation to other countries.

#### 6.1.1. Gazeta Impakt

Gazeta Impakt is an online news portal covering general news. This media outlet lacks any impressum and is not retrievable in the database of the National Business Center, nor is there any information on staff, registration, contact details, or editorial policy. Almost all the articles are signed as Gazeta Impakt, apart from few republications of foreign journalists. What sets this

<sup>36</sup> <https://shqiptarja.com/video/greqlia-miliona-per-portalet-dhe-gazetaret-shqiptare-tsipras-e-pranon-e-bejme-prej-vitesh>

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.gazetadita.al/nje-person-i-njohur-si-komandat-cami-shperndau-lajmin-e-financimeve-greke-ne-shqiperi/>

outlet apart from most other media outlets is especially its pro-Islamic and pro-Iranian stance. The main format is that of online posts and news, but Gazeta Impakt also has almost weekly video programmes. These are video statements mainly of historian Olsi Jazexhi, whose views are openly pro-Islamic.

Gazeta Impakt has a strong emphasis on exposing what it claims is Islamophobia in Albania, and in covering news from the Muslim population all over the world. They have a special section on their website called Islamophobia<sup>38</sup>, where they report on Albanian or foreign personalities who express dissenting opinions on what they consider symbols of Islam. This section is rather descriptive, mainly publishing the statements, but the fact that all those quoted are labelled as Islamophobes reveals the stance of the newsroom.

Since 2016, part of the Iranian opposition movement the MEK has been permitted to build their camp and live in Albania. The MEK is a constant target of Gazeta Impakt, which treats it in line with the Iranian regime, as a terrorist group. Furthermore, their narrative often depicts the MEK as a dangerous group for Albania and the population near their camp. They have reported that the MEK will spread coronavirus in Albania<sup>39</sup>, or that Albania might become a target of Iranian missiles due to the presence of MEK members<sup>40</sup>. Likewise, Gazeta Impakt also exposes and targets any public figures that become part of MEK activities.<sup>41</sup>

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: GAZETA IMPAKT, ONLINE

Table 1

OWNERSHIP	N/A
FUNDING	N/A
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Pro-Muslim, against Islamophobia, pro-Iranian
REACH	Facebook: 522 followers

38 <https://gazetaimpakt.com/category/tetjera/islamofobi/>

39 <https://gazetaimpakt.com/koronavirusi-i-jep-mundesine-e-vetme-kryeministrit-shqiptar-edi-rama-per-te-kontrolluar-mek/>, <https://gazetaimpakt.com/kulti-iranian-i-mek-ne-shqiperi-paraqet-rrezik-per-shendetin-publik/>

40 <https://gazetaimpakt.com/dritan-goxhaj-tregon-rrezikun-qe-mek-u-sjell-per-shqiperine/>

41 <https://gazetaimpakt.com/ja-se-kush-jane-politikanet-shqiptare-qe-mbeshteten-terrorizmin-e-mek-ut-kunder-iranit/>

### 6.1.2. ePerditshmja.com

A similar news portal is eperditshmja.com [daily.com], which is influenced by and often reports on developments in Turkey. The impressum on the media outlet's web page contains a phone number and a general newsroom e-mail, but no information at all on the staff or the newsroom. The reports are not signed, while the editorials by are a mix of foreign and Albanian authors, including Turkish ones. The only description of the medium is the following: "ePerditshmja.com is an independent online newspaper which aims to establish a new trend in online media, adhering rigorously to the true principles of journalism and the highest values of Albanian society."<sup>42</sup>

Frequently, the website's lead articles come from Turkey, which is an unusual practice, as the news stories on the region or world are usually further down the page in Albanian media. For example, on 23 July 2020, among the ten top news stories that appear first on the page, three of them were related to the reopening of Hagia Sophia as a mosque and the reactions that followed<sup>43</sup>, one to a consumer index in Turkey<sup>44</sup>, Turkey's right and power to search for gas in the Mediterranean,<sup>45</sup> and how Turkey provided 29% of global humanitarian aid in 2019<sup>46</sup>. These are all news stories the primary source of which is the official Turkish news agency Anadolu Agency, and they all cast a favourable light on Turkey and tend to depict it as a powerful actor in the region and the world acting in its own legitimate right. Eperditshmja.com also often includes news from the same agency on Turkey's support or sponsorship of other Balkan countries, such as in North Macedonia, or even more generally, on aid Turkey has distributed regarding coronavirus, and statements of Erdogan and other Turkish government officials are frequently present, perhaps even more than statements of the Albanian Government.

#### MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: EPERDITSHMJA.COM/, ONLINE

Table 2

OWNERSHIP	N/A
FUNDING	N/A
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Pro-Turkish, focusing on republications of Anadolu Agency and supporting Turkish policies
REACH	Facebook: 15,057 followers

<sup>42</sup> <https://eperditshmja.com/turqia-fuqine-e-saj-ne-ekuacionin-e-energji-se-ne-mesdhe-e-merr-nga-e-drejta-nderkombetare/>

<sup>43</sup> <https://eperditshmja.com/cdo-orvatje-per-ta-delegjitime-vendimin-e-turqise-mbi-ajasofjan-eshte-e-kote-dhe-e-paarsyeshme/>; <https://eperditshmja.com/kryetari-i-bfi-se-leter-kryeparlamentarit-te-turqise-per-xhamine-ajasofja-2/>; <https://eperditshmja.com/ajasofja-rihapet-si-xhami-pas-86-vitesh/>

<sup>44</sup> <https://eperditshmja.com/turqi-bie-indeksi-i-besimit-te-konsumatorit-ne-muajin-korrik/>

<sup>45</sup> <https://eperditshmja.com/turqia-fuqine-e-saj-ne-ekuacionin-e-energji-se-ne-mesdhe-e-merr-nga-e-drejta-nderkombetare/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://eperditshmja.com/ndihma-humanitare-boterore-e-turqise-perben-26-per-qind-ne-vitin-2019/>



### 6.1.3. Frekuenca.net

Similarly to Eperditshmja.com, Frekuenca.net is significantly influenced by Turkish sources and pro-Erdogan and pro-Muslim propaganda. Their ownership status is not retrievable in the Albanian business register, but their contact e-mail is akmmediagroup, which is thought to be a Turkish company. They have also reported on the Turkish ambassador visiting this media outlet and meeting the administrator Semih Güler and editor Malik Hasa<sup>47</sup>. Their impressum provides information on their contact address, e-mail, and telephone, but not on the newsroom.

While the general news is not that different from other Albanian media, their analysis section shows marked pro-Turkish and pro-Muslim influence. For example, the editor recently has criticized those who expressed disappointment at the re-conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, claiming that the debate is one-sided as no one mentions the mosques converted into churches over the years<sup>48</sup>. These pieces often present a sort of historical revisionism or the newsroom's perception of history, stating among other things that the "Ottoman army liberated"<sup>49</sup> countries and then turned the churches into mosques as a symbolic act and never forcefully, and considering the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque a return to its own identity. Some of these editorials are also re-published from eperditshmja.com.

This media outlet also often includes republications from Anadolu Agency, featuring news from Turkey, mainly with a positive narrative for the Turkish Government and other aspects of Turkish life. Frekuenca.net also often publishes negative coverage, mainly from Anadolu Agency, on the movement of Fetulah Gulen (FETO) and the successful fight of the Turkish Government against this movement's terrorist acts.<sup>50</sup>

#### MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: FREKUENCA.NET, ONLINE

Table 3

OWNERSHIP	N/A, but supposedly belongs to AKM Media Group
FUNDING	N/A, supposedly from the Turkish company or sources
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Pro-Turkish and pro-Muslim
REACH	Facebook: 21,275 followers

47 <https://frekuenca.net/ambasadori-turk-m-ahmet-yoruk-viziton-ambientet-e-akm-media-group-foto/>

48 <https://frekuenca.net/xhamia-e-shen-sofise-nxori-lakuriq-mediat/>

49 *Ibid.*

50 <https://frekuenca.net/?s=gulen>

## 6.2. Conspiracy theories and disinformation in the Albanian media

The Albanian media is certainly not immune to conspiracy theories and plots, and in recent years there has been increasing space and attention devoted to local proponents of conspiracy theories, including in prime-time slots on important television stations. While topics related to conspiracies at the global level are pushed by ongoing developments, local conspiracies sometimes also tend to emerge from political debate or struggle in the country. In addition, the curious nature of conspiracies as promoting a truth that powerful people want to hide seems to attract many readers, also providing a motive for economic profit for online media. The country's lack of media literacy programmes and education promoting better knowledge and critical judgment of information also does not help in the overall understanding of this content by a good chunk of the country's population. News stories referring to conspiracies are published randomly across various media, and the following examples are only a few of these instances.

There has been increasing space and attention devoted to local proponents of conspiracy theories, including in prime-time slots on important television stations.

### 6.2.1. "360 grade" weekly programme on Ora TV

The emergence of coronavirus gave a more prominent spot and media coverage to several conspiracy theorists, who were already present on Albanian media, even on national television and prime time. Currently, perhaps the most representative programme in this regard is the Ora TV's weekly show 360 grade, hosted by analyst Artur Zheji. In general a serious current affairs programme, the programme's topics in the last few months have shifted to a mix of conspiracies regarding the virus and nationalistic topics regarding the Albanian language and culture, and a more nationalistic stance on Albania's relations with neighbours and its overall geopolitical position in the region.

Regarding coverage of coronavirus, it is difficult to find a programme without the presence of conspiracy theories pushed by individuals who have engaged in promoting conspiracy theories for years, but also other people, even of scientific training or background, who do not believe in coronavirus or on the measures to contain and fight it. For example, one of the June programmes was titled "Coronavirus: Wars and dictatorships?"<sup>51</sup> based on claims made by analysts that the psychological effect of the virus would be such that would lead to a state of war and booming of dictatorships.

In addition to the discussion of conspiracies on coronavirus, the programme often also addresses topics that may be considered nationalist. Often focusing on aspects such as the Albanian language, Albanian hero Scanderbeg, or Albanian history in general, the persons invited to speak on these topics tend to highlight the ancient origin of the Albanian people and language, and

51 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFJq8pinVkc>

the achievements in history, often casting a favourable light on Albanians, especially vis-à-vis their neighbours. For example, the July programme called “Is it worthy being Albanian?”<sup>52</sup> featured several speakers who analyzed several aspects of the Albanian language, history and literature, reinforcing the idea of Albanian being one of the most ancient languages in the region, and how it might be even more ancient than Greek, or the superiority of Albanian culture in various periods of history.

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: ORA TV, “360 GRADE” PROGRAMME

Table 4

OWNERSHIP	Private media, Yldon group, owned by Ylli Ndroqi
FUNDING	Advertising
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Originally a news channel, now transformed into a more generalist television channel, the channel’s editorial policy has been neutral, tending to be closer to the opposition recently. The programme 360 grade tends to be critical of the government and also engages in nationalistic and sensationalistic topics, often related to conspiracies.
REACH	360 grade: Facebook: 16,247 followers, YouTube: views of specific programmes range from 23K to 267K, depending on episodes.

### 6.3. Sensationalism and unconfirmed information in the Albanian media

In general, the Albanian media suffers a shortage of staff in newsrooms, often leading to the practice of publishing unconfirmed news, especially for online media. Furthermore, even in cases when the news is accurate, it is often presented in a sensationalist manner, in an effort to gain as many views or clicks as possible. In the economic battle for readership or audience, even what were considered more reliable and prestigious media outlets have not escaped the trend of using sensationalist headlines, or in general the practice of clickbait. Mentioning specific examples, in this case, would be difficult, as it is a widespread phenomenon and it would not be fair or realistic to single out particular media.

Even what were considered more reliable and prestigious media outlets have not escaped the trend of using sensationalist headlines, or in general the practice of clickbait.

However, a media outlet or platform that deserves more attention in this regard is Jeta osh qef [Life is fun.] This is a platform that started mainly as a User Generated Content platform publishing reports and information from the users. In their page information, they state that this is the “biggest platform of unique, entertaining and social news in the Albanian-speaking area”<sup>53</sup> and that the content comes from the page’s users and the community.

52 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeA6lnBCb6o>

53 <https://joqalbania.com/faqe/rreth-nesh.html>

They state that “all your material is welcome, and we will determine if it is suitable to share with others or not.”<sup>54</sup> They also claim to expose wrongdoing through notifications of the page’s users in the introductory note: “Jetaoshqef.al functions as a regulator for your life, promoting positive phenomena and denouncing negative ones. We will get in touch with you, engage with you in the hope that time after time, we will be able to change your life.” However, various events have cast doubts on whether there is such a verification or filtering process in the information they publish.

The content published on this website and Facebook page can be considered mainly sensationalist, of a light, entertaining nature. More recently, they have started to engage in what they claim to be the exposition of the wrongdoing of particular government officials or businesspeople, a role consisting mainly in monitoring the distribution of official tenders<sup>55</sup>. However, the practice of often relying on information, photos, or videos sent by users without verifying them can lead to the possibility of publishing unverified information, often sensational, and sometimes also tending to spread hate. For example, in June 2020, Jeta osh qef published an article<sup>56</sup> claiming that the increased presence of Syrian refugees in Tirana had made the city unsafe, noting several incidents. They also published a video that claimed that Syrian refugees had threatened some local boys, while the video shows that it is the Albanian boys that push the Syrian refugee, while they claim they took a knife from his hand. Similarly, based on citizens’ reports, there has been a thread of anti-migrant narrative, while at the same time, correct news stories have also been published on this topic.

More prominently, though, the practices of Jeta osh Qef became particularly problematic in the aftermath of the deadly 26 November 2019 earthquake in Albania. A few days after the earthquake, the police pressed charges against the two administrators of the website, claiming they had published fake news and spread panic, and the webpage was blocked. The website had published earlier information sent by citizens that claimed that there was a large number of victims in the Tirana morgue<sup>57</sup>, but this information was kept secret.

**MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE:  
JETA OSH QE, NEWS WEBSITE AND FACEBOOK PAGE**

Table 5

<b>OWNERSHIP</b>	N/A
<b>FUNDING</b>	Advertising
<b>MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY</b>	News website often relying on User Generated Content including light, entertaining information, but also articles claiming to expose corruption.
<b>REACH</b>	Facebook: 41,226 followers

54 *Ibid.*

55 <https://joq-albania.com/artikull/776489.html>

56 <https://joq-albania.com/artikull/745670.html>

57 <https://gazetamapo.al/policia-procedohen-administratorete-joq-perhapen-lajme-te-rreme/>

## 6.4. Hate spread by users in Albanian media

Hate narratives generally are not present in the Albanian media, at least not in an active, repeated, and visible manner. A 2020 monitoring of the most popular online media by the Albanian Media Council concluded that “hate speech in general comes in a camouflaged way. In general, the provocative comments users leave below the article are its primary source, and not the content of the articles themselves.”<sup>58</sup> This finding confirms the conclusions of previous monitoring efforts, too, indicating the comments in the online section as the primary source of hate speech in the media.

Not all online media choose to allow users to comment, but most of them do: a 2018 survey of online media revealed that 80% of the 220 online media that participated in the poll did allow users to comment below their articles and that 74% of them did moderate the comments<sup>59</sup>. However, when looking at the quality of the comments, it is generally difficult to see moderation of any kind.

Many online media manifest the problem of unethical comments, but perhaps the most exemplary case is that of *Gazetatema.net*, partly due to its popularity. It claims to be the most read online newspaper in the country, and the readers tend to flood the articles with comments, a problem that the publisher himself has recognized: “Tema is the most popular online media outlet in the country and the pressure of people who comment is unimaginable. In a 24-hour period, there are about 4,000 people that write to provide their comments and opinions. It is not physically possible to glance at them, let alone edit and moderate.”<sup>60</sup> While in the context of the overall shortage of staff in the newsrooms editors do recognize that having someone to moderate comments is impossible, it is also true that the comments section in online media becomes a space for people to vent their anger, feelings, or even offend gratuitously, just for the sake of it. Offensive language is related mainly to personal life, sexual preferences and behaviour, ethnicity, and religious or political affiliation, becoming in this way an active channel for the dissemination of hate speech.

Many online media manifest the problem of unethical comments.

The situation with derogatory comments by users of online portals and social media led then-MP Majlinda Bregu to propose a bill regulating online comments to the parliament in 2015, also encouraged by the Strasbourg court decision on *Delfi vs Estonia*<sup>61</sup>. After several discussions, in 2016, Majlinda Bregu clarified that she had withdrawn the amendment. However, the situation on this trend is a constant topic of discussion and proposals for regulation are continuous. Editors and journalists also recognize this concern, and some are also in favour of a law regulating this space that is

58 Albanian Media Council, “Ethical media violations in Albanian media,” 2020.

59 AMI, “Mapping online media in Albania: Survey on online media,” 2018.

60 Mero Baze, qtd. in <https://al.ejo-online.eu/etika-dhe-cilesia/lufta-e-komenteve-ose-interneti-qe-flet-shqip>

61 AMI, “Online media regulation and self-regulation,” 2016.

wide open to hate speech. Furthermore, some media representatives claim that this situation is also intimidating to young journalists. “Young journalists are intimidated by derogatory comments and sometimes force themselves to self-censor, due to a fear of the lynching that takes place online. Media should agree among themselves on the practice of moderating comments,”<sup>62</sup> the Dita newspaper editor said during a newsroom meeting on this topic.

## 6.5. Hate speech and disinformation in social media

Hate speech and disinformation is readily available in social networks, due to their ease of access, lack of filtering or regulation, and the immense possibility for fast dissemination of the content. In this respect, anyone with a social media account can potentially become a vehicle for spreading hate speech or disinformation. In Albania, Facebook, which is especially popular, is also widely used by famous people with a large number of followers, such as political leaders, journalists, showbusiness celebrities, or even individuals who push different conspiracies in the public realm.

In the public debate, hate speech has continually been present in the statements or exchanges between politicians, mirroring the political fight in the country. These cases are often depicted as the main proponents of hate speech in the Albanian public sphere, but sometimes, hate speech is directed not only against one another but against other groups. For example, in May 2020, after the Tirana Municipality hung rainbow flags on the façade of its building to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Flamur Noka, former Minister of Internal Affairs, published a Facebook status filled with offensive language against the municipality and the LGBTI community<sup>63</sup>, which was condemned by human rights organizations, and this was by no means an isolated case.

Facebook has also been used to spread disinformation and fake news. Prime Minister Edi Rama distributed a video in spring 2020 to convince Albanians to respect lockdown rules, claiming that the police were being violent in Spain trying to enforce these measures<sup>64</sup>, while it soon turned out the video was actually from Algeria and not related to coronavirus. Former Prime Minister Sali Berisha also is very active on Facebook, often publishing unverified information from what he refers to as Digital Citizen, or information coming directly from citizens. For example, in March 2020, he posted a video of doctors dancing in a hospital, claiming this to be how the health system was preparing for the pandemic<sup>65</sup>. It turned out that the video was filmed in Iran and not related to this at all.

Facebook has also been used to spread disinformation and fake news.

<sup>62</sup> <https://kshm.al/2020/03/02/takim-per-etiken-ne-redaksine-e-gazetes-dita/>

<sup>63</sup> [https://euronews.al/al/sociale/2020/05/16/komuniteti-lgbti-ne-shqiperi-ndihemi-te-paperfaqesuar-nga-asnje-parti-politike?fbclid=IwAR1ym\\_FHuvuPcoBIWgmVxFWlhgE-6ujkJNCceiZvLKvoYZz0rWepA8SaUu](https://euronews.al/al/sociale/2020/05/16/komuniteti-lgbti-ne-shqiperi-ndihemi-te-paperfaqesuar-nga-asnje-parti-politike?fbclid=IwAR1ym_FHuvuPcoBIWgmVxFWlhgE-6ujkJNCceiZvLKvoYZz0rWepA8SaUu)

<sup>64</sup> <https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/ne-radhe-si-ushtare-ose-me-vrap-e-pa-bere-dot-as-pazar-rama-poston-videon-cfare-u-ben-policia-njerezve-respektioni-distancen>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.newsbomb.al/berisha-u-tall-me-mjeket-e-infektivit-ne-tirane-komentuesit-e-nxjerrin-blllof-pamjet-video-jane-bere-ne-iran-198090>

Another category of Facebook users spreading disinformation, propaganda or hate speech are public figures dealing with conspiracies, having a particular political agenda, or even being controversial on their positions. For example, Alfred Cako, who is not politically affiliated, but is heavily focused on conspiracies, ranging from Soros to the Illuminati and the White Brotherhood, uses his Facebook page<sup>66</sup> with more than 11,000 followers to express his opinions and comments on ongoing events, especially in the time of coronavirus, as he also organized a no-vaccine protest. However, he is also present on television.

However, the use of Facebook or social media for disinformation is not limited only to public figures. Following the earthquake of November 2019, the police arrested a citizen, Xhuliana Aliaj, in Durres, claiming she was spreading panic and false information by publishing a Facebook post calling for citizens in the area of the earthquake to evacuate for fear gas deposits might explode.<sup>67</sup> Similarly, after the first infections of coronavirus cases in Albania, a series of prank messages purporting to come from public health officials was circulated via WhatsApp and SMS, spreading false information and causing panic. The information was promptly denied, and citizens were advised to follow only official sources.

Another category of Facebook users spreading disinformation, propaganda or hate speech are public figures dealing with conspiracies, having a particular political agenda, or even being controversial on their positions.

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66 <https://www.facebook.com/alfredcakoKA>

67 <https://www.ocna.com/2019/11/25-year-old-xhuljana-aliaj-arrested.html>

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

Models of hate speech or hate narratives are not obviously visible in Albanian media. Even though the media is rarely active in fighting hate speech in the country, it cannot be said that it is a source of hate speech or that it is actively promoting it. Politicians often push hate speech narratives, which the media publishes or reflects, provoking protest from some human rights organizations. This hate speech is mostly directed within the political sphere and towards personalities, as a reflection of the highly unethical public debate ongoing in the country for many years, but it can sometimes also affect other groups, based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, origin within the country, etc.

On the other hand, something online media are responsible for is the comments section on their websites, which often lack moderation of any kind. In most cases, these sections are an open invitation for readers to express all their hate, frustration, and opposition, not so much against the article, but the journalist, or even the persons the article is focused on. Seen as a highly problematic current trend of online media, this has been used as a justification for proposing legislation that has been considered as vague at best and restrictive at worst.

Contrary to hate speech narratives, which are rarely present, attempts to misinform and spread propaganda are a constant trend in the Albanian media. A very small category of existing online media is clearly under the influence of foreign countries. It engages in spreading their propaganda, putting their achievements and foreign policy in a very favourable light, or continually putting down their opponents, often engaging in the revision of history and referring to biased sources. This situation is also facilitated by the lack of requirement for online media to register and be transparent on their contacts, funding or policies.

While the furthering of foreign propaganda is confined to a limited number of media, the use of conspiracy theories and sensationalism to further media popularity, unfortunately, is not. Few online media outlets have escaped the trend of publishing conspiracy theories, which turned into a frenzy especially with the emergence of the coronavirus. Even television stations, which are supposed to have more filters and be more responsible about their content, have intensified this kind of coverage. Proponents of conspiracy theories are readily present in a few television stations in their main current affairs programmes, amplifying these theories and information, which leads to an increasingly greater influence on the public, especially given the lack of programmes or education on media literacy.

The degree of freedom in the online media does not correspond to an equal degree of professional responsibility on their part.

The degree of freedom in the online media does not correspond to an equal degree of professional responsibility on their part. In addition, even though television channels are more regulated and are under greater supervision from the regulatory authority, they also are far from engaging in professional self-inspection of their practices and self-regulating accordingly. It remains to be seen whether current self-regulation efforts in the country will impact the situation positively.



## 8. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The media should be more proactive in making transparent the data on their contacts, ownership, staff and funding. They should also offer an option for users to reach them for complaints and respect the principles of publishing corrections or confutations if necessary.
- Online media should seriously and responsibly address the issue of the moderation of their comments in such a way that it does not affect freedom of expression, yet respects the right to privacy and dignity.
- Both existing bodies within the regulator of audiovisual media and the self-regulation initiative the Albanian Media Council should be more proactive in monitoring violations, encouraging media to self-regulate and correct their mistakes, and also promote a greater sense of responsibility among the media for their flaws in coverage.
- Civil society organizations should be more vocal when encountering cases of hate speech in the media, calling for the correct coverage of the issues at stake and leading a public debate in this regard. Efforts should not be limited to identification of such narratives or cases, but also to offering their counter-narrative, such as debunking these cases through fact-checking platforms.
- Efforts for the improvement of media literacy efforts should be ongoing from all actors. Government should engage in the adoption of a strategy and clear policies on the adoption of media literacy as part of the curriculum in an appropriate form. Civil society actors should continue and intensify their efforts to raise awareness of critical thinking and media literacy in society. Public institutions and civil society should coordinate in this regard, possibly also engaging the media as a supporter of these initiatives and policies.

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Lutfi Dervishi, media expert, 12 June 2020.

Valbona Sulce, media and diversity expert, 3 June 2020.

Arben Muka, programming director at AMA, 29 May 2020.

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**BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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**PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION  
AND HATE MODELS OF MEDIA  
AND COMMUNICATION  
IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

*Anida Sokol*

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

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## **PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION AND HATE MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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# PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION AND HATE MODELS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

*Anida Sokol*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years after the end of the war (1992–1995), the political climate in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is still permeated with divisive ethno-nationalistic rhetoric and constant disagreements between ethno-national political elites that halt democratic processes and BiH's path to a fully democratic and functioning society. The media and public communication practices are both determined by and contributing to these tendencies. The media in BiH are pliable to the influences of political and business groups, lacking sufficient revenues and capacities for independent and professional journalism and protection mechanisms against political parties' interference into editorial policies. Many media outlets are affiliated with the leading political parties and business circles through non-transparent and arbitrary financing and ownership patterns, while independent media outlets are scarce and usually funded by foreign donors (Hodžić and Sokol, 2018a; 2018b). Even though the regulatory system, which was set up by the international community, has managed to pacify the warmongering and inflammatory content through selective covering of current and historical events, and lack of criticism towards inflammatory and divisive ethno-national politics, the media continue to perpetuate ethno-national divisions and contribute to selective memories of the past. In addition to local political actors, foreign actors have also been trying to assert their geopolitical interests in the Western Balkans through the media (StratCom Nato, 2020).

New technologies and the growing use of the Internet have posed new challenges. Divisive and inflammatory rhetoric has moved online and social media and comments sections of online media are permeated with derogatory language and hate speech, mostly exchanged between ethno-national groups, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, but also targeting migrants, women, LGBTI+ and Roma communities (Cvijetićanin et al, 2010; Hodžić, 2014). Death threats, discriminatory language and insults targeting individuals and journalists are also present in the online media and in user-generated content, the targets of which have been particularly female journalists (Sokol, 2018).

In recent years, numerous anonymous portals have been set up that spread disinformation and propaganda (Cvijetićanin et al, 2019), but research



shows that citizens struggle to identify problematic media content and there have not been any systematic efforts by governments in BiH to introduce media and information literacy in primary and secondary education (Hodžić, Petković and Bašić Hrvatinić, 2019; Sokol, 2019b; Trninić, 2014).

This research analyzes propaganda, disinformation and hate models of media and communication in the country. Its aim is to give an overview of the structural elements in the production, distribution and use of these models and their influence on and support to the existing ethno-national tensions and divisions. The research was conducted based on secondary research, consultations with representatives of the regulator and civil society organizations,<sup>1</sup> analysis of the decisions of the Communications Regulatory Agency (CRA), the Press Council of BiH, the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje, and watchdog media platforms Analiziraj.ba and Media.ba. In order to obtain information on financing and ownership patterns, where available, budgets of the media or local municipalities were reviewed, while more information was obtained through social media accounts of media organizations, the who.is tool and the business registry pravosuđe.ba. In addition, a number of articles of the selected online media were reviewed in June 2020 to gain a better understanding of the media's editorial policies.

Research shows that citizens struggle to identify problematic media content and there have not been any systematic efforts by governments in BiH to introduce media and information literacy in primary and secondary education.

Based on secondary research, a number of media and communication models in which disinformation, propaganda and hate speech are mainly produced and disseminated were identified. They pertain to one of the three types of media and communication: traditional media; new media; and user generated interaction on online media and social networks. They include: 1) traditional media that are affiliated with the centres of power and disseminate political and ethno-national propaganda; 2) anonymous portals and commercial online media that spread disinformation for political or financial purposes; 3) political propaganda websites that mushroom prior to election campaigns; 4) websites and social media groups that spread radical and aggressive ethno-national and religious content; 5) portals that with their narratives target minority groups, such as migrants; 6) hate speech, derogatory language and insults in comments sections on online media and social media platforms.

In the research, we will first briefly explain the disinformation, propaganda and hate models of media and communication and then provide seven examples to gain a better understanding of their organizational modalities, content, financing and ownership patterns. We will look into the (self)regulation frameworks and efforts of different actors to regulate them and conclude with recommendations for steps that need to be taken by institutions, organizations and the media to minimize the spread of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech and create space for media and communication practices that will stir healthy debate and democratic processes.

<sup>1</sup> Representatives from the following organizations were consulted: Communications Regulatory Agency; The Press Council; the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje; The Sarajevo Open Center; The Network for Building Peace; the digital media archive INFOBIRO and the Institution of Human Rights Ombudsman BiH.

## 2. TYPES AND MODUS OPERANDI OF PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION AND HATE MODELS

### 2.1. Traditional Media

The BiH media sector is characterized by a large number of media outlets: 103 television stations, 152 radio stations, three public service broadcasters, eight dailies and 181 periodicals.<sup>2</sup> Many local public broadcasters, which are owned and mainly financed by local governments, lack capacities to critically report on local power-holders and many promote the interests of the ruling parties (Hodžić and Sokol, 2018a; 2018c). Among private broadcasters and the print media, some media, through ownership patterns and allocation of public grants and advertisement revenues (often non-transparent and arbitrary), are affiliated with and promote the interests of political parties and business groups (Hodžić and Sokol, 2018a; 2018b; Krajnc and Kadić-Maglajić, 2018).

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Due to the lack of capacities and revenues, the quality and diversity of information is poor, they publish unverified information, use one-sided official sources and do not provide critical stances towards problematic statements of politicians. Some traditional media are also sources and distributors of disinformation: for example, the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has ranked Avaz, RTRS, Slobodna Bosna and Alternativna televizija as high-risk media for spreading fake news and disinformation.<sup>3</sup>

Many media are divided along ethno-national lines, which is visible in their emphasis on the issues and the agenda of the respective ethno-national group and one-sided interpretations of war events (Aktek, 2018; Irex, 2019; Sokol, 2019a), while content intended for or dealing with minorities and vulnerable groups is largely underrepresented (RAK, 2019b). Poor diversity of information and content is also a consequence of gender stratification and lack of workplace diversity in media outlets. A number of research studies indicate, for example, that women tend to be employed as journalists and members of the administrative staff rather than editors-in-chief and directors (Unkić, 2018; Džihana, 2018). In 2020, only twenty-six per cent of directors of television stations and thirty per cent of directors of radio stations are female and mostly of local public broadcasters.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Obtained from the registries of the CRA and the Press Council.

<sup>3</sup> See the lists of red-flag and high-risk media on: <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/high-risk-mediji>  
Also: <https://raskrinkavanje.ba/mediji>

<sup>4</sup> The percentage of female directors in local public broadcasters is rather high. 63 percent of radio directors and even 78 percent of television directors are women. The percentage has been calculated based on the information from the lists of broadcasters of CRA.

## 2.2. Online Platforms

In recent years, there has been a rise in the number of online platforms that disseminate false or misleading media content, much of which is of political nature and spread for financial gain and/or political purposes. Many of these websites are anonymous, lack impressums and are not registered as businesses, and some form the so-called portal farms that use numerous Facebook pages and related domains to promote their content and generate more revenues (Cvijetićanin et al, 2019).<sup>5</sup>

A number of online media, mainly anonymous, mushroom in pre-election periods and publish favourable news about political parties (mostly the three ruling ethno-national parties the SDA, HDZ and SNSD), lack commercial ads and usually are no longer active after the elections (Blagovčanin, 2019; Turčilo, 2020). Niche anonymous websites, social media groups and internet-based communities that disseminate aggressive radical ethno-national and/or religious content, justify war crimes and glorify war criminals are also present in the BiH online sphere<sup>6</sup> (Sokol, 2019a; Aktek, 2018). Their ownership, the names of authors and financing patterns are not known (many presumably work on a voluntary basis and are established as grassroots initiatives), but the example of Despotovina.info, a radical Serb website, which has been supported by the municipalities of Srebrenica and Bratunac, and, according to its webpage, the government of Serbia, demonstrate that the existence of such platforms could be linked to political parties (Sokol, 2019a).

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Even though most of these platforms target one of the three ethno-national groups and/or certain political parties, in recent years migrants and refugees have become frequent targets of some media platforms, particularly news portals in the Krajina region and Facebook groups (Buljubašić, 2019; Adilagić, 2019; Sokol, 2019c). Some platforms stereotype and stigmatize women, including those of the radical religious spectrum (such as the website of Zijad Ljakić), and those of anti-religious orientation (such as Bosanski nacionalisti) (Aktek, 2018).

## 2.3. User Generated Content

Hate speech rarely occurs in the editorial content of media outlets and even radical right-wing and religious websites (Aktek, 2018), but the comments sections of online media and social media platforms are flooded with large volumes of hate speech, derogatory language and insults, usually related to ethno-nationalism (Aktek, 2018). In 2019, the Sarajevo Open Center documented 104 instances of hate speech online, of which 100 pertained

<sup>5</sup> For example, the semi-anonymous portal *Novi.ba* is connected to 58 Facebook pages and several domains to promote its content (Cvijetićanin et al, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> For example, *Despotovina.info* or *Bosanskinacionalisti.org*.

to comments on Klix.ba,<sup>7</sup> many targeting the LGBTI+ community, particularly in relation to the first Pride March, organized in Sarajevo. Most complaints about hate speech in user-generated content that the Press Council received in 2019 were in relation to the comments sections of some of the most popular internet portals Depo.ba, Klix.ba, and Dnevno.ba (Vijeće za štampu, 2019). Political trolls have also been identified in user sections: one analysis of the comments sections of Klix.ba in the pre-election period in 2018 identified 259 profiles that had the characteristics of political trolls and published comments in favour of the SDA, SBB and SDP political parties (Raskrinkavanje, 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> *Monitoring of the Sarajevo Open Center. Written correspondence. 25.6.2020.*

### 3. EXAMPLES OF PROPAGANDA, DISINFORMATION AND HATE MODELS IN BIH

With the aim to gain a deeper understanding of the structural elements of these models, their financial and ownership patterns, and their relations and influence on the public and democratic processes in BiH, examples will be elaborated in the following sections. Examples were selected based on secondary sources, consultations with media and human rights organizations, reviews of decisions of the CRA and the Press Council from 2018 and 2019, and analysis of the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje (from 2017 until June 2020), Analiziraj.ba and Media.ba. In cases, where breaches of professional norms or instances of disinformation were not registered by self(regulatory) bodies and the fact-checking platform, examples were chosen based on consultations with the abovementioned organizations, secondary sources, estimates made by the researcher and a brief overview of the content of the media in June 2020. Popularity of the media was also taken into consideration: higher number of followers on social networks in June 2020 or media that stirred discussions in the public, such as Antimigrant.ba or RTV Herceg Bosne. The list is in alphabetical order and includes public/private media, local/regional media, TV, radio, online and print as well as media affiliated and supporting different ethno-national political and/or religious agendas. The list is only illustrative and many other examples of propaganda, disinformation and hate models exist in the country.

#### 3.1. Antimigrant

Antimigrant is a radical website which has been publishing hate speech and disinformation about migrants and refugees in BiH and even calling for direct attacks against them. The portal has the official domain of BiH (.ba), which is registered to Fatmir Alispahić, a Bosniak author. Its modus operandi is copy-pasting articles from other media about migrants and refugees and changing their titles into those that are provocative, discriminatory and call for direct attacks against migrants and those who help them. In addition to hate speech against migrants, Atimigrant.ba has been publishing disinformation about individuals, institutions and organizations that operate in BiH and help refugees and migrants (Sokol, 2019c).

The Network for Building Peace filed complaints with the Press Council, the Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees and the Institutions of Human Rights Ombudsmen of BiH, which, however, have not produced any results (Sokol, 2019c). The webpage has no ads and the manner of its funding is not known. In 2019, the Press Council identified five gross breaches of the Press and Online Media Code (Vijeće za štampu, 2019), and, the fact-checking platform identified it as a high-risk medium for spreading unreliable content.

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## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: ANTIMIGRANT, ONLINE

Table 1

OWNERSHIP DATA	The domain is registered on Fatmir Alispahić, who is the author of most of the articles.
FUNDING	N/A
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Publishing articles against migrants and refugees; calling for direct attacks against them.
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	N/A
REACH	N/A
BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES	5 breaches of the Press and Online Media Code of BiH in 2019.
FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM	51 Examples of problematic media content; including biased reporting (24) and manipulation of facts (11).

### 3.2. Despotovina.info

Despotovina.info is a radical Serb news portal from Bratunac, which propagates the Serb ethno-national narrative and glorifies members of the Army of Republika Srpska, including Ratko Mladić, who was convicted for war crimes against humanity and genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (Sokol, 2019a). It also publishes news related to the municipalities of Bratunac and Srebrenica, information about humanitarian events and reports on the local government and the SNSD party. According to its webpage, it was founded in 2016 with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Information and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia and receives support from the Municipality of Bratunac. The portal belongs to the Association Despotovina and one of its founders is a local priest (Kuloglija, 2020). In 2019, the portal received a grant from the Municipality of Srebrenica,<sup>8</sup> which sparked criticism from other non-governmental organizations in Srebrenica (Kuloglija, 2020). It has been identified as a problematic media outlet stirring ethno-national tensions among the local population in Srebrenica and Bratunac, an area with a heavy war heritage and difficult reconciliation process (Sokol, 2019a). For example, in January 2019 it published a photo of the Orthodox Christmas celebration with words almost identical to those uttered by Ratko Mladić, when he entered in Srebrenica in

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<sup>8</sup> See the decision: [http://srebrenica.gov.ba/images/dokumenti/2019/JP\\_UG\\_NVO\\_SPOROT/Odluka\\_-\\_sportski\\_klubovi\\_i\\_NVO\\_za\\_2019.pdf](http://srebrenica.gov.ba/images/dokumenti/2019/JP_UG_NVO_SPOROT/Odluka_-_sportski_klubovi_i_NVO_za_2019.pdf)

July 1995: “Here we are in Srebrenica on the eve of yet another great Serbian holiday”. It has not been the subject of analysis of the fact-checking platform and the Press Council of BiH.

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: DESPOTOVINA.INFO, ONLINE

Table 2

<b>OWNERSHIP DATA</b>	Association Despotovina. One of the founders is a local priest Aleksandar Mlađenović; editors Aleksandar Ćirković and Aleksandar Lesendić Petrović <sup>9</sup> .
<b>FUNDING</b>	According to its webpage, it is supported by the Government of Serbia and the municipality of Bratunac. In 2019, it received a grant of 750 euros from the Municipality of Srebrenica.
<b>MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY</b>	Propagation of the Serb ethno-national narrative and glorification of the members of the Army of Republika Srpska.
<b>NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES</b>	The editors-in- chief Aleksandar Lesendić Petrović and Aleksandar Ćirković.
<b>REACH</b>	22,721 followers on Facebook.
<b>BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES</b>	N/A
<b>FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM</b>	N/A

### 3.3. Dnevni avaz

Political affiliations in the print media are the most straightforward in the case of the daily newspaper Dnevni avaz, held by the Radončić family, and connected to the government coalition party SBB. The newspaper was founded in 1993 by the then-journalist Fahrudin Radončić, who after the war built a real estate empire, formed the SBB party in 2009 and served as the Minister of Security of BiH. He was the owner of the newspaper until 2012 when he sold the company Avaz Roto Press<sup>10</sup> to his former wife (100 million euros) (CIN, 2017; Hodžić, 2014b). The bill of sale and the accompanying annexes enabled Radončić to formally pull himself out of the Avaz-Roto Press while continuing to exert influence on the editorial policy of the newspaper (CIN, 2017).

Dnevni avaz has been reporting favourably on the SBB party, targeting the party’s opponents and its reporting frequently involves non-professional, biased and sensationalist content, with catchy

Political affiliations in the print media are the most straightforward in the case of the daily newspaper Dnevni avaz, held by the Radončić family, and connected to the government coalition party SBB.

<sup>9</sup> Information about editors is published on their Facebook page.

<sup>10</sup> The company Avaz Roto Press also publishes the women’s magazine Azra and a tabloid paper Express.

titles and clickbaits.<sup>11</sup> The media outlet is also known for its campaign against migrants, portraying them in a negative and dehumanizing light (Zulejhić, 2020).

In 2019, the Complaints Commission of the Press Council identified 17 breaches of the Print and Online Media Code (Vijeće za štampu, 2019),<sup>12</sup> including seven breaches of the principle of accuracy and fair reporting, while the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje listed Dnevni avaz as a red flag and high-risk media for the spread of fake news and content of questionable accuracy. As a retaliation, the outlet published seven articles against the fact-checking platform, naming its members as foreign mercenaries (Zulejhić, 2019).

The media outlet manages to have a wide readership through its online version and the use of sensationalist and clickbait titles, reports on accidents, domestic violence and deaths (crna hronika) and showbusiness, which are highly read (Buljubašić, 2020). According to Alexa.com, in June 2020 Dnevni avaz was the most read news portal in BiH, followed by more than half a million people on Facebook. Its circulation is not known, but the media outlet labels itself as the most circulated and influential print and online media in BiH.

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: DNEVNI AVAZ, PRINT AND ONLINE

Table 3

<b>OWNERSHIP DATA</b>	Private media. Owner: Company Avaz Roto Press, owner Azra Radončić.
<b>FUNDING</b>	Advertisement
<b>EDITORIAL POLICY</b>	Affiliations with the SBB party through ownership patterns that influence the editorial policy.
<b>NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES</b>	Editorial staff: 8 (6 male, 2 female) <sup>13</sup>
<b>REACH</b>	The most read news portal according to Alexa; Facebook followers: 617,110
<b>BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES</b>	In 2019, 17 breaches of the Print and Online Media Code.
<b>FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM</b>	185 examples of problematic media content, including clickbait titles (37), disinformation (29), biased reporting (26) and fake news (23).

<sup>11</sup> See for example: Buljubašić (2020).

<sup>12</sup> The outlet published five corrections and denials.

<sup>13</sup> According to its impressum.



### 3.4. RTRS

One of the most known examples of a politically affiliated traditional media is the public service broadcaster of Republika Srpska, RTRS. Even though public service broadcasters, to retain their independence, should be funded through licence fees, in 2013 the government of Republika Srpska adopted amendments to the Law of RTRS according to which the government can finance the public service broadcaster. In recent years, RTRS has been receiving around one and a half million euros annually, under the pretext of its very bad financial situation (RTRS, 2018).<sup>14</sup> Its managerial staff has been affiliated with the SNSD party: for example, RTRS's director Milan Trbojević was head of the Press Office of the President of Republika Srpska.<sup>15</sup>

The CRA, international organizations<sup>16</sup> and media watchdog platforms have identified bias in RTRS's reporting on multiple occasions. In 2019 and 2018, the public service broadcaster was fined by the CRA six times for violating the principle of fairness and impartiality (RAK, 2020; RAK, 2019a).<sup>17</sup> In 2018, the CRA conducted a one-month monitoring analysis of the three public service broadcasters' (BHRT, FTV and RTRS) news content and concluded that RTRS continuously and tendentiously promoted the interests of the ruling SNSD party, constantly presenting the party's members in a positive and affirmative way and mostly reporting critically on the activities of the opposition (RAK, 2019a).

For example, in 2019, RTRS published unverified and sensationalist news that foreign actors and local NGOs, critical towards the governments, attempted to overthrow the government of RS (RAK, 2020). Similarly, through selective reporting, RTRS presented the protest *Pravda za Davida*<sup>18</sup> as an event that will endanger the survival of RS and the protesters as aggressive and dangerous. In both cases, the CRA concluded that the broadcaster abused and manipulated the emotions and fears of the public (RAK, 2020).

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<sup>14</sup> In 2018, the broadcaster received 1,750,000 euros and in 2017 around 1,250,000 euros from the government of RS (RTRS, 2018). In 2019, the total amount of the RS government's subsidies for the public media was almost 2,500,000 euros. Besides RTRS, the government funds the entity's news agency Srna (RS, 2019).

<sup>15</sup> The former director Draško Milinović is also affiliated with the SNSD party. He was chief of staff of the Prime Minister of RS, and in 2020 was elected as the director of the CRA (I.Č, 2020). Appointments of party loyalists to managerial staff take place in other broadcasters.

<sup>16</sup> For example, the media monitoring of the OSCE during the election period 2018 confirmed that RTRS extensively followed Milorad Dodik as the president of the RS and as a presidential candidate, breaching the principle of equal treatment of all candidates (OSCE, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> In 2018, the public service broadcaster of Federation FTV was fined for violating the principle of fairness and impartiality (2018, written warning) and in 2019 for the failure to properly tag content for minors (fine 1,000 euros) (RAK, 2020; RAK, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Mass protests that have been organized in Banja Luka since March 2018 over the death of a 21-year-old boy David Dragičević. The prosecutor's office has classified the death as an accident but the boy's parents claim he was brutally murdered.

One-sided interpretations of war events and neglect of court proceedings over the crimes committed by the Army of Republika Srpska have been part of the SNSD narrative and RTRS. For example, in 2019, RTRS published the conclusions of a report of the Centre for War Research, War Crimes and the Search for Missing Civilians of the Republika Srpska about the 25 May 1995 Tuzla massacre, according to which the deaths of 71 people were caused by local simultaneous terroristic explosions by the Bosniaks rather than artillery projectiles fired by the Army of Republika Srpska, an officer of which was convicted by the Court of BiH in 2014 for the act. The CRA concluded that the broadcaster had failed to present different views on the subject and even violated victims' dignity by stating that 27 victims could be identified as suicide bombers and revealed the names of two (RAK, 2020).

The fact-checking Raskrinkavanje labelled RTRS as a high-risk medium for publishing content of questionable accuracy. Their 2019 research identified RTRS, together with the RS public news agency Srna News, as the single most prolific sources of political disinformation in BiH (Cvijetićanin et al, 2019). The two media frequently use anonymous websites as both sources and amplifiers of the disinformation they publish (Cvijetićanin et al, 2019). The same research placed RTRS in the centre of the so-called disinformation hubs, a network of online media in BiH (Infosrpska.com, Srna, Alternativna televizija) and Serbia (Blic, Informer, Kurir), among which is also the Russian-owned medium Sputnik, that publish the same disinformation. The research concluded that this network is of political nature and is used by local and foreign actors to influence public opinion in BiH (Cvijetićanin et al, 2019).

**MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE:  
RADIO-TELEVISION OF REPUBLIKA SRPSKA (RTRS);  
PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTER; TV, RADIO AND ONLINE**

Table 4

<b>OWNERSHIP DATA</b>	Public, founder is the Government of RS
<b>FUNDING</b>	Licence fees, advertising and government of RS (the latter around one and a half million euros).
<b>EDITORIAL POLICY</b>	Affiliated with the leading political party in RS, SNSD.
<b>NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES</b>	629 (male 367; female 262) (RTRS, 2018).
<b>REACH</b>	73,200 followers on Facebook
<b>BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES</b>	In 2018 and 2019, fined six times by the CRA for breaching the principle of fairness and impartiality.
<b>FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM</b>	216 examples of problematic media content, including biased reporting (56 articles), conspiracy theories (28), fake news republished from other sources (27), disinformation (24) and spin (24).

### 3.5. RTV Herceg Bosne

Calls for the establishment of a public service broadcaster in the Croatian language have been dominating the public discourse of the Croat HDZ party. In 2019, the public media outlet RTV Herceg-Bosne, which has had a radio station since 1993, purchased TV Kiss and started broadcasting its television channel in the Croatian language. It is named after the Croatian Community of Herceg-Bosna, a proto-state during the war in BiH and whose political and military leaders were convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.<sup>19</sup> It is funded by 13 municipalities and two cantons in the Federation of BiH where the HDZ party forms the government in the overall amount of 400,000 euros (Blagovčanin 2018; Grbešić 2019; Transparency International, 2019).<sup>20</sup> For its renovation and equipment the Republic of Croatia allocated around 60,000 euros in 2019, within its programme of support for cultural, educational and other projects of Croats in BiH.<sup>21</sup> On a number of occasions in the past, RTV Herceg-Bosna has received revenues from the budget reserve of BiH, approved by the Croat member of the Presidency (Transparency International, 2019).<sup>22</sup>

Due to its strong political affiliations with the HDZ party, there is a high risk of editorial bias, although none of the media monitoring platforms have analyzed its content. Based on the review of its content in June by the researcher and secondary sources, the media outlet propagates the interests of the HDZ, publishes favourable news on its members and its president Dragan Čović, and commemorates HVO war victories, victims and generals. Its manner of funding has sparked debates and even protests in towns with mixed Croat-Bosniak population, such as Žepče, where, in 2019, citizens gathered in protest against the municipality's decision to fund the media outlet (Grbešić, 2019).

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19 See for example: <https://www.documenta.hr/en/111-years-in-prison-for-herceg-bosna-leaders-sense-tribunal-news-report.html>

20 The municipalities are: Grude, Kreševo, Kiseljak, Livno, Ljubuški, Neum, Posušje, Ravno, Stolac, Široki Brijeg, Tomislavgrad, Žepče, Čapljina, Hercegovačko-neretvanski kanton i Zapadnohercegovački kanton.

21 See the decision: [https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019\\_08\\_74\\_1575.html](https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2019_08_74_1575.html)

22 In 2018, it received 25,000 euros.

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: RADIOTELEVIZIJA HERCEG-BOSNE, RADIO, TV, ONLINE, PUBLIC

Table 5

OWNERSHIP DATA	Public, Croat municipalities and cantons where the HDZ is part of the government
FUNDING	Through public budgets, funded by 13 municipalities and 2 cantons. In 2019, the annual subsidies amounted to 400,000 euros. It also received support from the Republic of Croatia.
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Follows the political agenda of the HDZ political party.
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	N/A
REACH	6,594 followers on Facebook
BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES	N/A
FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM	N/A

### 3.6. SAFF

Saff is a Muslim religious magazine of the Association Saff for the Affirmation of Education, Culture and Morality and founded in 1996. It has a long tradition and large readership (almost 50,000 followers on Facebook) and is mostly followed by the Muslim religious community. It is known for its articles against the LGBTI+ community and has been supporting the Bosniak ethno-national narrative and is mostly favourable about the SDA party and the Turkish president Erdogan. In 2019, the magazine led a campaign against the journalist Kristina Ljevak, who was appointed director of the public media outlet of the Canton Sarajevo TVSA, labelling her as a journalist whose main role is to promote homosexuality and accusing her of broadcasting a film that propagates Great Serbia ideology, the unity of all territories where Serbs live.<sup>23</sup> The magazine also created spin and disinformation that the media in BiH had waged a campaign against the SDA MP in the Assembly of Canton Sarajevo Samra Ćosović Hajdarević, who openly condemned the Pride March and stated that the LGBTI+ community should be isolated and moved as far as possible.<sup>24</sup> The fact-checking platform identified 41 problematic articles and the Press Council in 2019 four breaches of the Press and Online Media Code (Vijeće za štampu, 2019).

In 2019, the magazine led a campaign against the journalist Kristina Ljevak, who was appointed director of the public media outlet of the Canton Sarajevo TVSA, labelling her as a journalist whose main role is to promote homosexuality.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the article: <http://saff.ba/nova-direktorica-tvsa-bit-ce-imenovana-kristina-ljevak-homoseksualna-aktivistica-i-bivsa-novinarka-ftv-a/>

<sup>24</sup> See: <http://saff.ba/sarajevski-novinari-se-utrkuju-ko-ce-se-vise-svidjeti-homoseksualcima/>

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: SAFF, PRINT AND ONLINE

Table 6

OWNERSHIP DATA	Association Saff for the Affirmation of Education, Culture and Morality
FUNDING	N/A
MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY	Religious magazine, supporting the Bosniak ethno-national narrative.
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	N/A
REACH	49,547 followers on Facebook
BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES	4 breaches of the Press and Online Media Code in 2019.
FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM	41 problematic articles, including 7 biased reporting, 6 disinformation and 5 conspiracy theories.

### 3.7. STAV

Besides the influence of local political actors, there are indications that foreign actors have also been trying, through the media, to assert their interests in the Western Balkans (StratCom, 2020). One example is Stav, a magazine published by the Turkish company Simurg Media, which was founded in 2015 with anonymous capital from Turkey (29,000 euros), despite the fall in readership of the print media and advertising revenues.<sup>25</sup> Even though the number of breaches and examples of problematic content identified by the Press Council and the fact-checking platform in 2019 is low (overall seven, see the table), the researcher's review of the magazine's content in June point to strong editorial bias. The magazine has been publishing articles and columns mostly on politics, culture and history, following the Bosniak ethno-national narrative and the political agenda of the SDA party and reporting favourably on its members, and the Turkish President Erdogan (Janusz, 2015). Any kind of criticism against the party has been portrayed as attacks against the Bosniaks and the state. For example, the arrest of the Prime Minister of the Federation and a member of the SDA party, Fadil Novalić, during the coronavirus pandemic in May 2020 in relation to the Srebrena malina corruption affair, has been termed as a coup d'etat and an attack against the Bosniaks (in a similar style as RTRS). In the case, "Fh Srebrena malina", a fruit and vegetable grower and processor, was granted a permit to procure 100 ventilators from China for a much higher price (around

STAV has been following the Bosniak ethno-national narrative and the political agenda of the SDA party and reporting favourably on its members, and the Turkish President Erdogan.

<sup>25</sup> Simurg Media also publishes Faktor.ba and Faktor sport, which follow a similar agenda. Faktor.ba has been ranked among red flag media for publishing disinformation.

5 million euros) than those that can be found on the international market.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, the model of ventilators is used in medical transport rather than hospitals.

The magazine has been following the Bosniak ethno-national narrative and writing positively about the Muslim intellectual Mustafa Busuladžić, who collaborated with the fascist regime during the Second World War and was killed by the communists, especially after an initiative in the Assembly of the Canton Sarajevo in June 2020 to rename the primary school that is named after him.<sup>27</sup>

The manner of the magazine's funding is not known: the magazine and the online portal had only a couple of ads in June 2020, which is not sufficient to sustain a rather large editorial staff. From 2016 until 2018, Simurg Media received support from the budget reserve of BiH approved by the Bosniak member of the Presidency of BiH and the Council of Ministers for its literary award and publishing activities in the amount of 19,000 euros, which points to its connections with the SDA party (Transparency International, 2019).

## MEDIA OUTLET AND TYPE: STAV MAGAZINE, PRINT AND ONLINE

Table 7

<b>OWNERSHIP DATA</b>	Publisher: Simurg Media d.o.o. Sarajevo, founded with anonymous capital from Turkey (29.000 euros), the director of Simurg Media is Evren Utku Gok
<b>FUNDING</b>	N/A. Presumably mainly through advertising. The company received support from the Presidency of BiH and the Council of Ministers from 2016 until 2018 for its literary award and publishing activities in the amount of 19,000 euros from the budget reserve of BiH, which was criticized by the professional media community. <sup>28</sup>
<b>MISSION AND EDITORIAL POLICY</b>	A weekly magazine on politics, society and culture. Ownership, financing and content point to its affiliation with the SDA party.
<b>NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES</b>	Editorial staff: 10: 8 male, 2 female, 29 part-time authors <sup>29</sup>
<b>REACH</b>	20,197 followers on Facebook
<b>BREACHES OF PROFESSIONAL CODES</b>	In 2019, 3 breaches of the Print and Online Media Code (Vijeće, 2019).
<b>FACT-CHECKING PLATFORM</b>	4 examples of problematic media content: fake news (2), spin (1) and biased reporting (1)

<sup>26</sup> The article is available here: <https://stav.ba/pokusaj-drzavnog-udara-novalic-prebacen-u-tuziteljstvo-bih/>

<sup>27</sup> See the article: <https://stav.ba/kako-je-i-zasto-osuden-mustafa-busuladzic/>

<sup>28</sup> See: <https://www.cin.ba/budzetska-rezerva-2/prikaz.php?korisnik=8291>

<sup>29</sup> According to their impressum.

## 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are numerous examples of media and communication that spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech. These are usually sustained through different ownership and financing patterns, often hidden, including local and foreign centres of power, and are used, through selective reporting, for the promotion of ethno-national or religious narratives or political agendas, targeting other ethno-national, political or minority groups. These models act as echo chambers, where audiences encounter views of their ethno-national, religious or political group and disregard other facts and can further prevent reconciliation processes, state building and development of national cohesion. The existence of such media, as has been shown by *Despotovina.info*, can particularly increase tensions among the local population, with heavy war heritage, but could also raise hatred towards other groups, such as migrants and refugees. Ethno-national tensions and divisive ethno-national politics are circumstances that render the existence of such models that make hate speech based on ethno-national affiliation even more serious and increase the probability of violence.

Bosnia and Herzegovina has regulatory and self-regulatory frameworks for the print, online and broadcast media and a legal mechanism for the prosecution of hate speech, death threats and discrimination, but their implementation has been limited. The Communications Regulatory Agency can react and issue fines against fake and manipulative content, biased reporting, discriminatory reporting and incitement to hatred, violence and discrimination in the broadcast media,<sup>30</sup> but lacks capacities for constant monitoring and investigates mostly cases that are reported by the citizens. The print media and online media, on the other hand, are within the self-regulatory framework of the Press Council of BiH, which, based on citizens' complaints, can decide whether a media outlet has breached the Press and Online Media Code, but it depends on the media's editorial team whether they will remove the content, or issue apologies or corrections. Such mechanism is extremely ineffective especially regarding anonymous media, which are the biggest sources of disinformation, propaganda and hate content, and lack accountability for the content they produce or disseminate. It is very easy and cheap to register a website for the state domain (.ba) or buy a foreign domain and there are no any regulations over the content these websites will produce (Blagovčanin, 2019).

Even though hate speech can be prosecuted through penal laws but under the 'incitement' to hatred clauses, the election law and regulations of the CRA, cases of hate speech are prosecuted inconsistently and insufficiently.

Even though hate speech can be prosecuted through penal laws but under the 'incitement' to hatred clauses, the election law and regulations of the CRA, cases of hate speech are prosecuted inconsistently and insufficiently (Hodžić, 2019; Sali-Terzić, 2019; Dragičević, 2019; and Lučić-Čatić et al, 2019). Online

<sup>30</sup> In 2019, the Agency issued 39 fines, many of which for biased reporting. For example, RTRS has been fined three times and FTV once (RAK, 2020).

media have different methods for regulating their comments sections, but sometimes these are left unregulated because they attract more readership and thus revenues, and rarely do media representatives report hate speech to the police or the prosecutor's office.

The fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje has been active in the last three years debunking thousands of instances of disinformation and fake content, yet the amount of disinformation is still numerous.<sup>31</sup> The media community has reacted negatively to the work of this organization, claiming that they do not have the right and the expertise to create lists of media outlets that publish problematic media content.<sup>32</sup> Raskrinkavanje receives negative comments, including insults and threats, as well as positive ones, with almost 60 thousand followers on their Facebook account.

Other media watchdog platforms, Analiziraj.ba and Media.ba, publish articles analyzing and pinpointing problematic media content and manners of media funding and ownership. Professional organizations and the academic community rarely condemn instances of hate speech and disinformation. What is more troublesome, political elites, however, have not voiced their concerns over hate speech and problematic media content but instead are often sources of divisive messages and polarizing and problematic statements. Political centres of power and certain political and religious groups in BiH, but also foreign actors, such as Russia, Turkey, Serbia and Croatia, have ties and support some media that spread propaganda and disinformation, while (self)regulators and civil society efforts have been limited. In circumstances where professional journalism is in crisis due to a decline in revenues and lack of political support and progressive media policies, the exposure of citizens to professional, ethical journalism is low compared to the content of hate and propaganda models which stem from and further contribute to the divisions in the society.

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31 See the analyses of the fact-checking platform raskrinkavanje.ba.

32 See the articles published by Avaz: <https://avaz.ba/vijesti/teme/497387/kako-kvazinovinar-brkan-potvrduje-svoju-pristrasnost>



## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### 5.1. General

- The ministries of communication and finance, including those on the cantonal, entity and state levels (Ministry of Communications and Transport of BiH and the Ministry of Finance and Treasury of BiH) should adopt regulations that will include provisions on the transparency of media ownership and precise criteria for the allocation of public funds to the media in consultation with the media industry and civil society organizations. The criteria should include provisions on professional media reporting and adherence to professional media standards and also the circumstances in which the public media and the public service broadcaster can be funded through public budgets. The provisions on the transparency of media ownership should include all the media, including online, that have editorial policies and editorial staff (and not only the registered ones) and all media-related companies (such as advertising companies).

- In consultation with media organization and educational institutions, the Ministry of Civil Affairs should adopt a strategy for media and information literacy that will provide guidelines and ensure funds for its promotion at all state levels and introduction into primary and secondary schools. Media and information literacy should be promoted by the entities' and cantonal governments and civil society organizations.

- Media outlets should be supported, including financially, by the public sector and the donor community, to enable quality reporting, presentation of pluralistic views, and regular verification of information from multiple sources.

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### 5.2. Specific

#### 5.2.1. Hate Speech

- 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. It is also necessary to ensure, through guidelines for the judiciary, a consistent interpretation of terms such as "incitement", "inflammation", "hatred", "discord" and "hostility" (all terms from criminal laws).

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- Prosecutor's offices should open and prosecute cases of hate speech in the online media and online media platforms particularly of

extreme cases such as Antimigrant. Given that statements containing hate speech made by politicians usually have the highest reach and potential to influence the behaviour of citizens, they should be particularly processed by the judiciary. Information about these cases should be punished proactively. Judges and prosecutors should be capacitated and trained to process online hate speech in particular.

### 5.2.2. Media

- Online media should adopt rules for the moderation of their comments, particularly regarding hate speech. They should undertake training courses for the regulation of comments in users' sections, which could be organized by media civil society organizations and funded from the public budgets and foreign donors. The Press Council, professional media community and civil society media organizations could organize meetings with media representatives on the regulation of comments sections and prepare and distribute manuals for the regulation of comments in users' sections. The media should report instances of hate speech to the police and prosecutor's office.
- The media should receive training courses on hate speech, particularly how to deal with problematic statements of politicians in their reports and training courses on disinformation and verification of information. They should be sensitized to diversity and marginalized groups in their course of formal and informal education, drawing on insights from the role of the media in war propaganda, and examples of crimes incited through hate speech.

### 5.2.3. Civil Society Organizations, the Press Council and CRA

- 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.
- Civil society organizations should organize more training courses on media and information literacy, particularly on news literacy and selective and biased reporting, which can be funded through media projects.
- The Communications Regulatory Agency and the Press Council and the fact-checking platform should regularly monitor media content and take action when they detect breaches of professional norms, disinformation, hate speech and biased media reporting. They should also monitor the content of smaller media outlets that publish propagandistic content, hate speech and disinformation and should publish press statements about these examples. They could be identified in consultation with civil society organizations. The Press Council, the fact-checking platform and media monitoring organizations should receive support (including financial) from the state institutions and the donor community.

#### 5.2.4. Political Representatives and the Government

- Political representatives should refrain from using hate speech and giving problematic statements and not give financial and other support to the media that spread disinformation, hate speech and propaganda.
- The regulator and ministries of communication should adopt a strategy and concrete steps for the prevention of organized systems for the spread of disinformation. The codes of the CRA and the Press Council should be amended to include different types of disinformation and a precise definition of disinformation, taking into account their growing presence and spread.

The regulator and ministries of communication should adopt a strategy and concrete steps for the prevention of organized systems for the spread of disinformation.

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**KOSOVO**

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**MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN KOSOVO:  
Hate and propaganda influences**

*Abit Hoxha*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN KOSOVO: Hate and propaganda influences

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# MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN KOSOVO: Hate and propaganda influences

*Abit Hoxha*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kosovo's media is arguably a very particular model based on its function and the role that journalists assign themselves. In 2004, the idea of media development was mainly focused on international aid. "The unprecedented development boom can be attributed to the circumstances created by liberation from the repressive Serbian regime, and to the support for new media that came from governmental and non-governmental donors that arrived in Kosovo/a after the war." (Berisha, 2004). However, in a research study, Andresen, Hoxha and Godole (2017) argue that the media model in Kosovo is unique and not a copycat with international influence. Journalists have similar roles in Macedonia, Serbia and Albania in the Balkans, where they feel part of the transition or change. In particular in Kosovo, they are assigned more of a role in proactively changing society. This is also reflected in the media model journalists, editors and ownership attempt to build. In his prominent work on the media in Kosovo (Andresen, 2015), Andresen argues that Kosovo's media history is mixed, starting from coexistence with the system in the communist times, builder of national identity in the 1990s and part of the nation-building strategy in post-war Kosovo. After the end of the war in 1999, the media in Kosovo turned from a clandestine to a more pluralistic media that somewhat resembles Western media. However, Kosovar journalists are still under considerable political pressure and often face intimidation (Gonen & Hoxha, 2019).

After the end of the war in 1999, the media in Kosovo turned from a clandestine to a more pluralistic media that somewhat resembles Western media. However, Kosovar journalists are still under considerable political pressure and often face intimidation.

To deepen this argument, the last research carried out through the Worlds of Journalism Study<sup>1</sup> (WJS) found that Kosovar media are in weaker shape than reported, with more than two-thirds of journalists operating under temporary contracts and media barely surviving (Hoxha, et al., 2017). In a research piece published by *K2.0* in 2017, the author argues that something along the lines of the 'squeezing' of Kosovar journalism is happening among Kosovar media as

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<sup>1</sup> <https://worldsofjournalism.org/>

a result of political and economic interests in media ownership<sup>2</sup>. According to the Sage International Encyclopaedia of Mass Media and Society, the Kosovo media market remains overwhelmingly privately controlled. Furthermore, Kosovo did not experience development in stages from authoritative media via public service media to the private market but rather a collaboration of businessmen with politicians to create media agencies for the needs of political development (Andresen, 2015).

In recent years, Kosovo's media landscape has been enriched with new media and changes in ownership and editorial teams. Gazeta Express<sup>3</sup>, the online portal with the largest number of views, widened its organization to include a television channel (T7), and the editor in chief of KTV, Adriatik Kelmendi took on the position of chief executive officer of Klan Kosova, a sister channel of Klan television in Albania. According to his interview on T7<sup>4</sup> on 9 April 2020, Baton Haxhiu resigned from his position of chief executive officer of Klan Kosova due to pressure from political actors and the ownership. Rrokum TV was sold to Arben Ahmeti by the former owner Migjen Kelmendi, who joined the Democratic Party of Kosova (PDK). Ahmeti then established Channel 10, which is still undergoing development. These developments mark something of a change in the media landscape in Kosovo which, despite the unclear political situation, continues to produce mostly political news, debates and other political media productions. The Media Sustainability Index rightly also claims that "the growth of the internet has paved the way for the increase in much smaller, more independent, and professional media outlets in recent years. These outlets have more journalists covering specific beats in a more in-depth manner" (Mehmetaj, 2019).

Many social media users have been spreading fake news, propaganda and to some extent, hate in social media lately, knowing that there is little or no control over social media in Kosovo.

To complement recent changes in the Kosovo media landscape, social media usage by political leaders in political communication started to take a massive turn. As Prime Minister, Hashim Thaci was the first to hire a social media team with a professional presence on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter from 2008. In 2014, the Mustafa government followed the same patterns by not even appointing a government spokesperson, focusing on public communication, and communicated with journalists only via social media. Lately, in regard to the pandemic crisis, social media has been used mostly as a result of lockdown and isolation, making much information and disinformation spread wider than before. In an editorial piece published by the European Journalism Observatory<sup>5</sup>, Dren Gerguri, a lecturer at the University of Prishtina, claims that much disinformation has happened during the pandemic situation, mostly through Facebook as the most used social network in Kosovo. To exacerbate the problem of disinformation, hate and propaganda, many social media users have been spreading fake news,

2 <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/eng/Areas/Kosovo/Political-and-economic-interests-in-media-ownership-are-squeezing-Kosovar-journalism-179036>

3 <https://www.gazetaexpress.com/>

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cDMIFd-8nI>

5 [https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/kosovo-coronavirus-and-the-media?fbclid=IwAR1sZRzX3jRChCvWwyekNgd9iVvvRbbnkODGy2nj2e7ABuvfLyGkIiUP\\_-M](https://en.ejo.ch/ethics-quality/kosovo-coronavirus-and-the-media?fbclid=IwAR1sZRzX3jRChCvWwyekNgd9iVvvRbbnkODGy2nj2e7ABuvfLyGkIiUP_-M)

propaganda and to some extent, hate in social media lately, knowing that there is little or no control over social media in Kosovo. It is also alleged that to claim popularity political parties buy views of their political debates through social media farms abroad.

The media model that developed in Kosovo after 1999 leaves very little room for propaganda and less so for hate speech, in particular after March 2004, when the media reported that two children had drowned into the Ibër River because they had been chased by Serbs, and these reports were used as a starting point of a wider civil unrest. The OSCE in Kosovo confirmed in a report that “the clear spin given by the media in accounts of the fatal drowning of a group of children on 16 March seems to be unsupported by any journalistically valid accounts” (OSCE, 2004). Lessons learned from March 2004 and the media’s role in civil disobedience and violence have been addressed in more traditional media such as RTK as the public broadcaster but also in private media. Media regulation in Kosovo through the Independent Media Commission is of a legal high standard and self-regulation of the press through the Kosovo Press Council is also well organized but there is room for improvement. In 2017, new measures were introduced, where members had to publish information regarding ownership in order to become a member of the Kosovo Press Council (Mehmetaj, 2019).

In terms of ownership of the traditional private media, little has changed from the data provided by Berisha in 2004 and even 2015. (Berisha, 2004, 2015). The private media remain under the same ownership, but more problems have surfaced with journalism and news production with the fading of international donors. Good practices of newsroom filers and routines have changed, and there is more censorship and self-censorship in the newsrooms as a result of political pressure. (Andresen et al., 2017; Hoxha, 2007; Hoxha & Andresen, 2019; Jungblut & Hoxha, 2017).

To date, the majority of national and regional (local) television broadcasters have formally transparent ownership; however, the real ownership is unknown or not confirmed. Businesses such as the Devolli Group are allegedly the real owners of *Klan Kosova*, although no documentation confirms that. The *Klan Kosova* Wikipedia page lists Aleksander Frangaj as the owner, whereas no information on ownership can be found on their web page. Similarly, *Gazeta Express* and the television broadcaster *T7* have no information about their ownership or editorial team on their web page. Other media houses are similar, apart from *RTK* as the public broadcaster and *Koha*, whose ownership is openly known, and *TV21*.

Similarly, other media have significant problems with ownership. The internet-based portal *Insajderi* is engaged in a feud with its alleged owners, and there is an ongoing investigation by the court<sup>6</sup>.

As Kosovo has a unique media model that allows very little room for propaganda and hate speech in its media, this paper explores content in media and social media and how such content triggers hate commentary, propaganda and inappropriate rivalry on social media.

<sup>6</sup> <https://kallxo.com/ligji/video-ceshtja-insajderi-fillon-ballafaqimi-ne-gjykate/>



The director and editor in chief, who are also the owners on paper<sup>7</sup>, claim that they have been attacked and that the ownership was changed without their knowledge by individuals close to Vetëvendosje!

As Kosovo has a unique media model that allows very little room for propaganda and hate speech in its media, this paper explores content in media and social media and how such content triggers hate commentary, propaganda and inappropriate rivalry on social media. It focuses on several mainstream media and a few handpicked Facebook groups and explains some of the significant irregularities. The reality is that these cases represent a larger pool of cases of disinformation and hateful propaganda. This work aims to create a better understanding of disinformation and hateful propaganda models of media and communication in Kosovo's media landscape.

## 1.1. Media landscape and formal regulation

Kosovo's media landscape comprises two levels: national media with national reach, and regional/local media with partial or specific reach within a region or town. According to the Independent Media Commission's<sup>8</sup> (IMC) 2018 report, Kosovo has 20 operational television stations, 83 radio stations, 41 distribution operators and 80 providers of audio-visual media services. Among these, there are 13 Albanian-language television broadcasters, including the public broadcaster, five Serbian-language television broadcasters and one that broadcasts in Turkish. Of the radio stations, 48 broadcast in Albanian, including two public radio stations, 23 in Serbian, three in the Bosniak language, three in Turkish, and two in Gorani. In terms of regulation, the Kosovo media is regulated by the Independent Media Commission and the Press Council of Kosovo (PCK). The IMC is an independent body for regulation, management and oversight of the broadcasting frequency spectrum. IMC regulates the rights, obligations and responsibilities of natural and legal persons that provide audio and audiovisual media services<sup>9</sup>. Also, the PCK is a self-regulating body for the press which includes some of the online media. For the PCK, freedom of speech, the right of citizens to be duly and completely informed and the respect for the Press Code of Kosovo are the foundations on which the Press Council is founded. The aim of the PCK is to protect the citizens from false information and the journalists from baseless complaints<sup>10</sup>. The PCK has 40 regular members from newspaper and news agencies, and three independent members. This is a self-regulating body that includes representatives of newspapers, news portals, magazines, news agencies and blogs, respectively its editors in chief<sup>11</sup>.

7 <https://insajderi.com/dosja-olluri-kajtazi-pjesa-i-dokument-e-verteta-e-pronesise-se-insajderi-com-dhe-mashtrimi-qe-olluri-dhe-kajtazi-ia-bene-publikut/>

8 <https://www.kpm-ks.org/publikime/291/raporte-vjetore/291>

9 <http://www.kpm-ks.org/assets/cms/uploads/files/Legjislacioni/1335250709.2603.pdf>

10 <https://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/?lang=en>

11 <https://presscouncil-ks.org/about-us/?lang=en>

## 1.2. The agenda-setting media landscape

Kosovo has a diverse media landscape, and most of its media are regional/local. The agenda-setting media sit in Prishtina, whereas the greater number of media outlets are based in the regions and municipalities. It is often thought that the concentration of media in Prishtina has created an epicentre of coverage neglecting regional developments which influence and shape political life in Kosovo, such as the Dukagjini, Drenica or Llapi regions. Often, content from the regions does not find itself in the national media.

KTV, T7 and Klan Kosova have increased viewer numbers due to their news and debate programmes. It is estimated that Kosovars still believe that television remains the most trusted source for news, although no scientific measurements take place.

The agenda-setting media in Kosovo is comprised of three or four main television channels. *RTK* remains one of the important television channels in Kosovo simply because of tradition. Lately, *KTV*, *T7* and *Klan Kosova* have increased viewer numbers due to their news and debate programmes. It is estimated that Kosovars still believe that television remains the most trusted source for news (NDI, 2019), although no scientific measurements take place. Most of the estimations come from the perception of citizens in other surveys<sup>12</sup>. *RTK* remains popular, but trust in it has declined in the last few years due to the political influence of the government and party politics. Its government-affiliated management is reflected in the content provided with mostly protocol news and sometimes also in line with party accusations. The national television broadcaster also has a channel with a separate budget, newsroom and management that broadcasts in Serbian.

*KTV* remains more of a traditional television broadcaster with a high standard of news. Among other agenda-setting media in Kosovo is *Gazeta Express* and its television brand *T7*. This is estimated as the most popular media outlet and portal due to its *celebritization* of news, including political news with gossip and, at times, speculation. The television channel is still underdeveloped, but at its peak, the portal has had some 800,000 views daily in the Balkans. *Express* is using all social media to distribute content and reach out to audiences and, together with *TV Dukagjini*, it is the newest media channel in Kosovo with growing influence. *Klan Kosova*, which has been in existence for about a decade, is a television channel with a good news programme but has recently been the subject of much political pressure.

Other types of agenda-setting media are online portals and web-based news organizations. *Insajderi* is one of the media that became increasingly popular with the publication of the “Pronto Affair”<sup>13</sup> and is becoming more influential with its work of late. *Telegrafi* was bought by a businessman who has close family ties with the owners of *TV Dukagjini*. *Lajmi.net* is a web-based portal with generic news but an increased readership because of non-

*Insajderi* is one of the media that became increasingly popular with the publication of the “Pronto Affair” and is becoming more influential with its work of late.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/NDI%20Kosovo%20Public%20Opinion%20Poll%202019.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> *The Pronto Affair* is a series of stories published by *Insajderi* based upon the wiretapping of Kosovar politicians (mainly from the PDK) and government officials on corruption and other wrongdoings.

conflicting and non-sensationalist content. *Reporteri* is a newly established portal with experienced journalists who found themselves unable to conform with media ownership and influence elsewhere.

Besides the abovementioned agenda-setting media, Kosovo has a phenomenon of non-governmental media as in many places in the world. *BIRN*, *Kosovo 2.0*, and *Prishtina Insight* are only some of the media outlets that are registered as non-governmental organizations and provide qualitative content in the public sphere. Together with these “NGO-media”, Kosovo has some smaller and regional minority media such as *Kosovo Sever Portal*, *Radio KiM* and *Crno I Beli Svet* which produce content for their audience despite their popularity remaining low.

Despite the fact that by law parties are not granted licences from the Independent Media Commission, a new, emerging field of development in Kosovo are the political party television channels. Vetëvendosje announced the creation of a television channel to “reach out to citizens<sup>14</sup>” through their former Minister of Justice. The European Federation of Journalists reacted to this action with a tweet saying “This is not journalism. This is propaganda in the service of politicians”, a statement that the Association of Journalists of Kosovo supported. This sparked a social media frenzy, and civil society reacted along with the Kosovo Independent Media Commission. After much reaction, Vetëvendosje clarified that this would only be a YouTube channel, transmitting interviews, adverts and other materials produced by the party.

### 1.3. Social media networks

Besides well-established media and other organizations with the functional equivalence of media, Kosovo has one of the highest penetrations of internet use in the region with 86.49% according to the IPSOS Media Diary. In comparison, the share of mobile phone users exceeds 96% of the population and inevitably, social media networks play a critical role. Social media networks are also very popular in Kosovo among political leaders, parties, and overall communication channels. For a couple of years, Mustafa’s government (2014–2017) only communicated with the public via *Facebook* and the last coalition government was negotiated through *Facebook* by publishing details even before new developments reached the other party in the negotiations. Similarly, political parties, organizations and individuals with influence use mainly *Facebook* to communicate. The media also has a very high presence in social media networks (Shanini-Hoxhaj, 2018). A report of *Kosovo 2.0* in 2019 found that “the presence of social media has intensified communication between institutional representatives and the public in general and has brought the two parties closer to one another, this communication remains

Kosovo has one of the highest penetrations of internet use in the region with 86.49% according to the IPSOS Media Diary. In comparison, the share of mobile phone users exceeds 96% of the population and inevitably, social media networks play a critical role.

<sup>14</sup> <https://safejournalists.net/agk-e-pranon-me-shqetesim-hapjen-e-televizionit-tvv-nga-subjekti-politik-i-levizjes-vetevendosje/>

one sided and not open to genuine challenge. Social media has facilitated quick communication between institutional representatives and the public, but has simultaneously made the work of journalists more difficult, because statements addressed on social media are often used as justifications by institutional representatives for refusing to be publicly challenged in regard to different issues of public interest” (Kosovo 2.0, 2018).

## FOLLOWERS OF THE TOP 5 MEDIA ON FACEBOOK IN KOSOVO

Table 1

	MEDIA	FOLLOWERS
1.	EXPRESS	1.2 million
2.	LAJMI	882,799
3.	TELEGRAFI	813,230
4.	KLAN KOSOVA	580,765
5.	KOHA.net	554,498

Source: Social Bakers<sup>15</sup>

Inevitably, this leads to a lot of content produced as propaganda and with hate nuances to be distributed via social networks. Several groups with nationalistic content exist in Facebook where hate content can be traced in comments sections and posts by individuals, although this content seldom ends up in the media.

15 <https://www.socialbakers.com/statistics/facebook/pages/total/kosovo>

## 2. PROPAGANDA, HATE AND OTHER INFLAMMATORY CONTENT IN THE KOSOVAR MEDIA

It is not easy to identify straightforward hate speech and propaganda in the Kosovar media but the language framing ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and women remains problematic. The Cambridge Dictionary defines hate speech as “public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation” and in this context, content produced in the media rarely represents hate speech. Even anonymous media portals try to imitate professional journalists by not producing hateful and abusive content. Journalists not only refrain from using hateful and abusive language but continue to collaborate in reporting and informing the public in various forms, especially between Serbia and Kosovo.

Despite the intense feeling of divided communities in Kosovo, and between Kosovo and Serbia, journalists have managed to break down barriers and collaborate in improving the representation of the other sides in their reporting.

In the Kosovar social media networks, however, content that can fall under this category does emerge in the comments sections. Media often deliberately close comments sections due to abusive content and hate speech. Despite the intense feeling of divided communities in Kosovo, and between Kosovo and Serbia, journalists have managed to break down barriers and collaborate in improving the representation of the other sides in their reporting. Research from 2019 on interactions between Kosovar and Serbian journalists finds that collaboration of Kosovar journalists with their Serbian counterparts is better than previously thought. Exchange programmes and projects mainly pushed by international NGO organizations have proven to be very successful. They use these initiatives to reach audiences on the opposite side. (Gonen & Hoxha, 2019).

### 2.1. Propaganda and hate in social media

According to the Cambridge Dictionary, propaganda content in the truest definition of the term is content, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view. Naturally, such content in Kosovo comes from the government and political parties mostly through the media. Looking closely at the news content produced by RTK, one can see the lack of a critical perspective in the content of their news, debates and even stories produced in relation to the dialogue of Kosovo with Serbia (Shahini – Hoxhaj, 2018), the issues of European integration, the so-called pro and anti-American polarization and also domestic politics.

As a public broadcaster, RTK often is accused of bias in content regarding the views of the government and opposition. The opposition has its ways of transmitting news and making headlines as well. With its publications

and strategic communication through social networks, the Vetëvendosje movement, in particular, shows signs of propagating content to suit its political aims. The content is also mostly related to issues of negotiations of Kosovo with Serbia, demarcation of the border with Montenegro (2017–18), and the “Association of Serb Municipalities” in northern Kosovo. Such communication has created the conditions for signs of hate speech in public communication after such saturation of the debate. These hate messages do not get published in the press but are instead part of the social media debates and discussions throughout Facebook.

The Kosovar media often falls under the influence of sensationalizing the news and the desire to be the first to post news on social media. By sensationalizing the news, stories often go unfiltered and unedited but end up going viral by local standards. By the time the news gets verified and checked, it is too late and there are consequences. On such occasions, inappropriate content seldom ends up in the media. On one occasion, the Independent Media Commission had to draw attention to the media coverage of a story about a woman abused by a minor<sup>16</sup> because it was in conflict with the Code of Ethics<sup>17</sup> but what the IMC did not address in its reaction was the issue of such news circulating online was indicating her ethnicity and gender identity, reporting her as a transwoman, which contributed to the attack on her.

Most of the propaganda in social media originates from political organizations and content related to either government or opposition parties' actions. Social media users share and comment on offensive and hateful content from real and anonymous sources.

Social media content does not follow standard journalism practices of editing and confirmation of sources. Often, less or no filter is applied in reporting. Most of the propaganda in social media originates from political organizations and content related to either government or opposition parties' actions. Social media users share and comment on offensive and hateful content from real and anonymous sources. According to Facebook, in 2019, Facebook removed 212 Facebook pages, groups and accounts for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behaviour that originated in Macedonia and Kosovo were removed. The individuals behind this activity operated fake accounts to administer Facebook pages sharing general, non-country-specific content like astrology, celebrities and beauty tips.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, Facebook does not monitor hate content and propaganda in Albanian and Serbian in the comments sections and has not been able to do much about hate and propaganda so far.

16 [http://kpm-ks.org/al/lajmi\\_i\\_plot/3065](http://kpm-ks.org/al/lajmi_i_plot/3065)

17 Code of Ethics for Media Service Providers in the Republic of Kosovo. IMC-2016/03. Accessed in: <https://www.kpm-ks.org/en/legjislacioni/299/aktet-nenligjore-ne-fuqi/299>

18 <https://about.fb.com/news/2019/03/cib-iran-russia-macedonia-kosovo/>

### 3. CREATING THE CLIMATE FOR THE PROPAGANDA AND HATE CONTENT WAR IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

Content in social media networks is difficult to control. The way content is spread in Facebook groups in Kosovo-based political communication is that text is often within the Community Standards<sup>19</sup>. Facebook has been criticized before on the issue of free speech<sup>20</sup> and for restricting the same “on popular demand”<sup>21</sup> without verification of information. Facebook pages in Kosovo operate in such a way that most of the controversial content is not textual in the original posts but is in video format instead, without the possibility of being automatically identified as hate or propaganda. Often, it is also linked from web portals, which can be removed, but the content remains in the original link in the portal.

The way Facebook groups spread propaganda which motivates hate comments is that these groups share content produced on other pages and videos that are linked to YouTube. These videos are edited in an amateur form and are short. The information is very difficult to verify and confirm, but the comments section provides an opportunity for discussion and expression of hate content. Often, pages that are officially managed by political parties spread such content from unverified sources or content doctored to suit their needs. Members of such pages follow these groups and news in these groups because of such unfiltered content. Besides this, such content is provided by influential members of the groups such as lower rank party officials, prominent political figures and even members of parliament. This makes such content in social networks more credible in the eyes of the audience, but is not verified, filtered or curated by any media.

Facebook pages in Kosovo operate in such a way that most of the controversial content is not textual in the original posts but is in video format instead, without the possibility of being automatically identified as hate or propaganda.

The Facebook page #meKryeministrin, for example, was created in support of Albin Kurti as the Prime Minister of Kosovo. In the description, it says that it is “created by responsible citizens who are aware of the political situation in the country. Here we offer our support for Albin Kurti and the work of the Kurti government”.<sup>22</sup> This group numbers some 315,500 members. The page #ndaIDezinformatat<sup>23</sup> is similar, but this one has only a little more than 5000 members who are invited to counter the alleged disinformation of the media in Kosovo. The group banner is hashtagged with “stop disinformation” and calls for the boycotting of the media in Kosovo to “counter the disinformation campaign and particular war against the elected prime minister and democracy” in Kosovo. The group’s banner names and shames various

19 <https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/introduction/>

20 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/facebook-and-the-free-speech-excuse>

21 <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/09/facebook-restricts-free-speech-popular-demand/598462/>

22 Partial description of the Facebook group #meKryeministrin in Albanian (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/514061489305891/about>)

23 <https://www.facebook.com/groups/142926237142890>

media for “abandoning professional neutrality and opening up targeted fire against the democratically elected prime minister”, marking out media in the list as siding with the ‘*putschists*’, which is a term cultivated by Kurti’s party to explain the March 2020 vote of no confidence in his government<sup>24</sup>. Additionally, the hashtag “#*meKryeministrin*” is adopted in the description of this Facebook group, which indicates that fans of Kurti created this group.

When thoroughly observed, the posts in these two main groups comprise content that is circulating in other media. Articles published by other media are discussed here with a commentary by the administrators or members posting them. The comments section is longer, often exceeding hundreds of comments, and when the posts contain negative information about the former government of Kurti, there is an outbreak of comments containing hate speech and inappropriate use of language. What is interesting is that the group #*ndaldezinformatat* is administered from Sweden and Kosovo.

Picture 1: The banner used in the Facebook group #*ndaldezinformatat* names and shames various media for not supporting the Kurti government



24 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/25/no-confidence-vote-topples-kurti-govt-in-kosovo/>



## 4. RIVALRY IN SOCIAL MEDIA

In the comments section of posts in Facebook groups, problematic language is used. Ethnic slurs and hate messages are directed towards subjects of content by calling them names, referring to ethnic identity and sexual orientation. There have been a few cases of comments in which the subjects of content on Albanian ethnic belonging were called 'shka'<sup>25</sup> or 'maxhup'<sup>26</sup> with the aim to offend them. There is very little administration of comments in such groups, as observed in at least three of them<sup>27</sup>, although these groups are managed typically by skilled administrators who also support the political cause and proactively participate in demonstrations against the opposing party<sup>28</sup>. These administrators fail to see or prevent propaganda items, hate speech and other problematic language used in their groups. On some occasions, they have been known to post fake news about political opponents as well, in which cases, legal action was taken against them. On 13 July, at the Kosovo Police, Ganimete Musliu, an MP of the Kosovo Democratic Party, denounced an administrator of two Facebook pages for spreading fake news about her health and public health<sup>29</sup>. The administrator of these two Facebook pages was allegedly the brother of an MP from Vetëvendosje. Later, the police confirmed that it was impossible to see who the administrator of these two Facebook groups is and Fitim Pacolli, who was accused, announced on his Facebook page that he would sue Ganimete Musliu for defamation<sup>30</sup>.

Ethnic slurs and hate messages are directed towards subjects of content by calling them names, referring to ethnic identity and sexual orientation. There have been a few cases of comments in which the subjects of content on Albanian ethnic belonging were called 'shka' or 'maxhup' with the aim to offend them.

How this rivalry is orchestrated and manifested on social media was also illustrated with the attacks against Andi Haxhiu<sup>31</sup> in March 2019. Andi Haxhiu, a student at Edinburgh University, was a student in Kosovo in 2017 and completing a simulation exercise for his Information and Communication Policy class when he opened a Twitter account in his name. To sound more authentic, he used the description "advisor to the Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation for the Danchuana<sup>32</sup> region", because that was the task assigned to him by his course leader. On the morning of 23 March 2019, Haxhiu woke up to thousands of messages and hate mails in his inbox and social media account but also with articles in the media covering the story of how "the son of prominent journalist Baton Haxhiu is an advisor working

25 Derogatory term used for Serbs by mostly Albanians in Kosovo

26 Derogatory terms used for Roma people by mostly Albanians in Kosovo

27 The author joined these Facebook groups to look for content with hate language and propaganda items.

28 Veron Hasani, who interrupted the President's press conference calling him a thief, is an administrator of the page #meKryeministrin which supports Albin Kurti

29 <https://www.facebook.com/ganimete.musliu.9/posts/10158334376743006>

30 <http://www.arbresh.info/lajmet/vellau-i-fitore-pacolli-ngrite-padi-ndaj-ganimete-musliut-per-shpifje-ndaj-tij/?fbclid=IwAR1asX3VTuAGEh406Jft-y4eipaUUXHwr9mN-GwJPKRUcaPAX6cH3SMN93g>

31 Interview with Andi Haxhiu (15 July 2020)

32 The Danchuana region is an imaginary place which served the purpose of a class simulation exercise for Andi Haxhiu

for Russia". Particular attention was given to his father's role as a journalist and activist during the war in Kosovo. Andi Haxhiu followed the trail of the news sources and came to the Facebook post of a professor of Political Science from the University of Tirana who had been a supporter and member of Vetëvendosje (he later became a political advisor to Kurti in Prishtina) who had misconstrued the Twitter handle and purpose, although it was clearly marked as RIT Kosovo simulation. Hysamedin Feraj and Enver Bytyqi posted long stories about how a 23-year-old spy from Kosovo was working for Russia. The web portal Bota Sot in Kosovo used these Facebook posts as a source of news from which to produce a story on Andi Haxhiu and tie this to his father as well. Thousands of items of hate mail calling him and his father a spy and claiming that the business of spying ran in his family came to Andi's address, which appeared in the print media and in social media posts. Not only have Feraj and Bytyqi, along with many others, not apologized to Andi Haxhiu but to date they have not expressed regret for having spread hate and fake news either.

Arberije Nagavci,<sup>33</sup> a member of the Presidency of the Kosovo National Assembly from Vetëvendosje, has also been the subject of these campaigns of organized hate comments. She says that "Social media are truly becoming an arena for political clashes and enable low attacks with the aim of denigration of particular people." Her experience with this is generic, but in particular, she mentions the threatening post made by a PDK member of the General Council and former deputy minister Gani Koci. He posted a status on his personal Facebook account where he threatened journalists<sup>34</sup> by saying: "The time has come not to disinfect, but to close these Serbian septic tanks that remain in Kosovo. They really stink", explicitly naming some journalists<sup>35</sup> and members of civil society. The Association of Journalists of Kosovo condemned the language used by Koci as an "an attack on freedom of expression."<sup>36</sup> Koci is under investigation by the police<sup>37</sup> for his Facebook post. Nagavci says that "generally, comments are orchestrated by political opponents. In my case, the posts on which I received insulting comments are those where I address political issues. I have also seen that in news posted by portals where I have declarations, there is insulting commentary."

Another example of public hate speech is the case of Vetëvendosje MP, Fatmire Mulhaxha-Kollqaku, who was of the target of hate speech comments for her Facebook posts in February 2020. In a remark about the former Prime Minister of Kosovo Albin Kurti, Mulhaxha-Kollqaku used a quote of an analyst from a Serbian television who claimed that it was difficult for Serbia to deal with Kurti because "Kurti does not have a criminal file from the KLA." Her quote was used in social media by her opponents, mainly by the Kosovo

33 *Interview with Arberije Nagavci (16 July 2020)*

34 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/kosovo-politician-threatens-birn-country-director/>

35 <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/07/03/kosovo-politician-threatens-birn-country-director/>

36 <https://safejournalists.net/agk-e-demon-ashper-gjuhen-e-perdorur-nga-zyrtari-i-larte-i-pdk-se-gani-koci-ne-drejtimit-te-gazetares-jeta-xharra/>

37 <https://www.botasot.info/aktuale-lajme/1326323/policia-nis-hetimet-ndaj-gani-kocit-per-gjuhen-lincuese/>

Democratic League (LDK) and Kosovo Democratic Party (PDK), to attack her as a “Serb-sympathizer” and “half-Serb”, also indicating that she is the offspring of a mixed marriage with an Albanian father and a Serb mother. Personal information about her parents and their ethnic background<sup>38</sup> was published on Facebook after she had posted a Facebook status. A photograph of her birth certificate showing the names of her mother and grandparents was presented as evidence supporting the accusation that she had collaborated with Serbs. The names on the birth certificate reveal the ethnicity of her grandparents and mother. However, Mulhaxha-Kollqaku explained that her statement was misinterpreted<sup>39</sup>, no action was taken, and the posts with hate speech and inappropriate language were never removed from social networks.

Cases like this have happened in the past as well, especially against public figures. While he was an MP in 2017, former MP Ilir Deda faced thousands of comments of a similar nature after a public attempt of the ruling parties to dismiss the Special Court. Zafir Berisha, an MP from the government coalition in 2017, insulted him by calling him “Belgrade’s nephew” on Facebook, connotating the ethnic belonging of Deda’s mother. Thousands of hate comments emerged against Deda at the time on social media and in comments on news items on social networks.

## 5. GENDER IN MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA AND HATE AND ABUSIVE CONTENT

Although the mainstream media in Kosovo stand well in not allowing hateful content, gender issues are rarely considered. Women are rarely seen on panels or engaging in political debate, and gender issues are even more rarely discussed. Although the journalist population in Kosovo is 45.5% female (Hoxha et al., 2016), most of the content in the Kosovo media is male-dominated in almost all news beats. Exceptions are evident only when sexual violence as a result of war is covered but, in this subject, too, there is evidence of hateful and abusive commenting online against interviewees and women who speak openly about sexual violence. Although journalists have a good knowledge of privacy and the responsibility for anonymization of such sources, the commentaries in social media are general but hateful.

Women are rarely seen on panels or engaging in political debate, and gender issues are even more rarely discussed.

Politically based gender-based hate content is also launched in social networks. Many female MPs and political activists face hate comments and abusive content for their political actions. Gender-based hate content, including ethnic hate, has been seen in at least two cases where hateful comments were directed at the children of mixed marriages, attacking family members with abusive language.

38 <https://lajmi.net/djali-i-deshmorit-thote-se-fatmire-kollcaku-eshte-e-bija-e-nje-serbe/>

39 <https://kosova.info/cfare-gaboje-deputetja-mulhaxha-kollqaku-ndaj-kryeministrit-kurti/>

## 6. GROUNDS FOR HATE SPEECH AND INAPPROPRIATE LANGUAGE ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Kosovo's education system is weak and unable to address new technological developments in communication and media development. Additionally, education in Kosovo does not correspond with the exposure of pupils of primary and secondary education to the media and social networks. Kosovo scored as one of the lowest-ranked countries where the "mean score in reading performance is one of the lowest among PISA-participating countries and economies<sup>40</sup>."

According to Gentiane Pacarizi<sup>41</sup>, an assistant at the University of Prishtina working on the Media Management course, hate speech is a part of the wider culture. "It is seen vividly in citizens' views and manifested through social media when something important happens. In Kosovo, there is constant polarization in society, and this is reflected in social media." She claims that it is difficult to improve this situation without better education. In a broader sense, she says that the actions that are needed to improve this situation are hidden in the systematic failure of education to address the development of critical thought, tolerance and good understanding. Addressing these issues through education is the key to minimizing hate speech on social networks.

Politically based gender-based hate content is also launched in social networks. Many female MPs and political activists face hate comments and abusive content for their political actions.

Similarly, media expert Violeta Hyseni Kelmendi<sup>42</sup> claims that key to addressing hate speech and inappropriate language in comments is not only education but also a practice that has emerged in Kosovo during last two decades. She says that "first, the authorities only react when it comes to high profile cases, and second, weak education has made people feel no responsibility for the consequences of hate speech." She compares the penetration of the internet, along with the high number of users of social media with the possibility of using hate speech online. She also makes a case for more public engagement through training, seminars and educational opportunities for the younger generation in the field of media and information literacy and social networks.

<sup>40</sup> <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/CountryProfile?plotter=h5&primaryCountry=XKO&treshold=10&topic=PI>

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Gentiana Pacarizi (16 July 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Violeta Hyseni Kelmendi (17 July 2020).

## 7. FIGHTING DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In 2020, the spread of disinformation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic situation motivated many actors to fight disinformation appearing on social networks. Mentor Hoxhaj<sup>43</sup>, a former official of the Kosovo Government Agency on Data Protection, started a company based on an initiative to collaborate with Facebook to remove disinformation and hate content that could cause harm in many ways. Since 14 March 2020, Hoxhaj's Cybersecurity and Privacy (CSP)<sup>44</sup>, in collaboration with Facebook, has been reviewing and reporting to Facebook content, stories and even comments comprising hate speech in Albanian, and often also in Serbian, in order to have it removed from the network. The #FactCheckerKosovo initiative also has a Facebook page where they publicly expose this content through screenshots and short news articles from the media and social media after they have fact-checked it and reported it to Facebook. Hoxhaj says that he plans to widen activity in fighting general disinformation and particularly gender-based discriminatory language, hate speech, cyberbullying and other forms of abuse online.

Kosovo's education system is weak and unable to address new technological developments in communication and media development.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

After the war in Kosovo, many international organizations rushed into Kosovo to work with media development, knowing that an independent and free media is one of the pillars of a democratic society. The March 2004 violence served to confirm that the media has a more prominent role in the post-conflict society but also needs to develop hand in hand with society and democracy. RTK was urged to spend significant sums on further training for staff, and private media organizations were asked to do the same. As a result, Kosovo's media has learned the lesson of hate speech in reporting.

The Kosovar media model built upon the media as a national identity builder, conflict reporting and substantial international intervention with funding for the professionalization of journalists leaves no room for the presence of hate speech. However, 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. Despite this being mostly in the comments sections, prompt action must be taken.

The Kosovar media landscape is diverse on two levels. The first and perhaps more important, is the national media, which consists of the agenda-setting

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Mentor Hoxhaj, initiator and Project Manager of #FactCheckerKosovo (14 July 2020).

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.cybersecurity-privacy.com/>

media which operate in a challenging environment squeezed between the economic influence of their owners along with the family-oriented ownership, on the one hand, and the political environment on the other. The second level is the local media in Kosovo, which is an overcrowded market. Almost every municipality has a local radio station and sometimes several. Some local media operate in minority languages, and that makes the media model more diverse but harder to monitor. Generally, Kosovo's media face financial difficulties and journalists face tough choices of short-term contracts, low wages, censorship and self-censorship.

Kosovo's media face financial difficulties and journalists face tough choices of short-term contracts, low wages, censorship and self-censorship.

Another sphere where disinformation and hate are uncontrolled and without restrictions is the social media and online sphere. 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 see also discriminatory language towards women, and gender hate speech is increasing.

In combination with ethnic slurs, gender-based hate speech is directed against individuals and families of mixed marriages because of political engagement. It shows that comments are mostly made because of public political stands and beliefs and less so because of ethnically mixed marriages.

Some of the steps to be taken in Kosovo to address hate speech in social media should include media and information education. Addressing critical thinking, open discussion, tolerance and difference in opinion should start as early as primary and secondary school. This should be addressed by the institutions in charge of education curricula. Pupils should be introduced to the subject with courses on social media and digital media because they are already exposed to such media as early as in the pre-school period. Thus far, it is seen that there is a lack of coordination between the education system, that would provide media and information literacy and the non-governmental sector, but also with the private sector, of fighting propaganda and fake news in social media and state institutions.

The good news for the professional media in Kosovo is that hate speech in Kosovo's media content is almost non-existent in the case of professional media productions, but the bad news is that most of the offensive content and hate speech in Kosovo is disseminated in non-regulated platforms such as social media. Derogatory hate speech words can be found in Facebook posts, tweets and other comments in media stories. A recent fact-checking initiative to collaborate with Facebook to remove disinformation content, hate speech and abusive commentary is a very welcome development for Kosovo.

## 9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Regarding media and information literacy, the Kosovo Government and relevant education institutions, such as the Ministry of Education, should urgently introduce subjects that will be taught in school to provide better understanding of the media and information literacy.
- Kosovo's education institutions should increase the teaching of critical thinking and the online sphere to improve inflammatory language and inappropriate ethnic slurs in the online space.
- Self-regulation bodies should hold discussions with their members and urge them to take action in the comments sections of their online media, social media and networks when it appears.
- Media organizations should increase their fact-checking mechanisms/newsrooms and remind journalists of the Code of Ethics more often.
- The media should have regular sessions with journalists to speak about and discuss hate speech, inappropriate language and ethnic slurs in order to prevent them appearing in content, comments and other communication.
- The media should collaborate more with the fact-checking institutions and non-governmental organizations in countering hate speech.
- The media should create anti-hate, anti-propaganda coalitions to fight inflammatory language in political communication.

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1a (Anonymous)

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**MONTENEGRO**

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**THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC  
FOUNDATIONS OF THE MEDIA  
AND COMMUNICATIONS IN  
MONTENEGRO THAT SPREAD  
HATRED, PROPAGANDA AND  
DISINFORMATION**

*Milica Bogdanović*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS IN MONTENEGRO THAT SPREAD HATRED, PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

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# THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FOUNDATIONS OF THE MEDIA AND COMMUNICATIONS IN MONTENEGRO THAT SPREAD HATRED, PROPAGANDA AND DISINFORMATION

Milica Bogdanović

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of technology and global political and economic events have brought about a change in how the public is informed and how the media operates, making them vulnerable to hate speech, disinformation and propaganda. Often failing to meet a minimum of professional standards, the content shapes the opinion of the public and indirectly undermines the core values around which democratic societies are built. In facing the challenge of the “infodemic” currently gripping the entire world, the question of who owns and funds different types of media and communication practices that either create or help spread hate speech, propaganda and disinformation<sup>1</sup> becomes an important issue, as well as what centres of power are establishing and controlling them or influencing their work and the content they release.

In Montenegro, the media are facing the problems of financial sustainability and a decline in the quality of professional standards<sup>2</sup>, making them vulnerable to hate speech, disinformation and propaganda. Along with this, there is a strong presence of media from neighbouring countries in Montenegro’s media space, which, thanks to the countries of the region using a common language, release content which often fails to meet a minimum of journalistic standards.

There is a strong presence of media from neighbouring countries in Montenegro’s media space.

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<sup>1</sup> Spreading hate speech is classified as the criminal offence of instigating national, racial and religious hatred and intolerance, used to engage in socially unacceptable public speech spreading prejudice, stigmatizing and demeaning certain social groups, especially minority and vulnerable groups, and does not know any boundaries. Pavlović, Pavle, *Ethical Dilemmas in Reporting on Election Campaigns Containing Elements of Hate Speech*, Montenegro Media Institute, 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2AFzZma>. Accessed on: 18 June 2020.

Classified as disinformation are such media reports that combine facts and untrue or half-true information. Methodology of the fact-checking platform Raskrnkavanje.me. Available at: <https://www.raskrnkavanje.me/metodologija>. Accessed on: 18 June 2020.

Propaganda represents any form of deliberate and organized activities taken with the purpose of influencing attitudes, opinions or emotions of the public, groups or individuals, in order to win them over to the ideas, notions and programmes of social or political organizations engaging in such activities. Šćekić, Radenko, *A Review of Propaganda Development*, Podgorica, Matica Crnogorska, 2017. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3fEtMWv>. Accessed on: 18 June 2020.

<sup>2</sup> IREX, *Media sustainability index 2019*, Washington, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XkNi2w>. Accessed on: 26 June 2020.

Through the project RESILIENCE – Civil Society For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation, funded by the EU and implemented in Montenegro by the Montenegro Media Institute, the South East Europe Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM) decided to analyze the political and economic aspects of different types of media and communication practices creating and spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda. Based on a unique methodology, developed by the Peace Institute from Ljubljana, the research is carried out in seven countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey.

Media and communication practices releasing such content are identified based on several aspects – ownership structure, mode of funding, relationship with the audience, editorial and journalistic structures and the content they are releasing.

For each of these aspects, a list of criteria has been prepared that provides us with an answer to the question of what kind of political and economic background there is for the spreading of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in the media and on communication platforms.

The objective of this analysis is to provide institutions, civil society organizations, the media community and citizens with a better insight into the types and classification of media and communication practices through the content of which hate speech, disinformation and propaganda are spread, as well as to provide the public with a credible analysis, to serve as the basis for further activities of the SEENPM in building society's resilience to such phenomena.

The analysis was carried out in several stages:

- first stage – description of the media environment in Montenegro, with an emphasis on types and models of media and communication practices that spread hate speech, disinformation and propaganda,
- second stage – mapping of concrete examples of types and models of such media and communication practices and the analysis of individual examples and preparing conclusions and recommendations for improvements.
- This analysis mostly covered the events on the Montenegrin and regional media scenes over the past year. No special content monitoring was carried out for this analysis. Instead, we based our conclusions on publicly accessible relevant research by international and domestic institutions and organizations, decisions of regulatory bodies and findings of fact-checking platforms.

With the intention to initiate a discussion and reflection on the issues we research, we base the analysis of types and models of media and communication practices that spread hate speech, disinformation and propaganda on interviews with counterparts possessing journalistic and editorial experience or civic activists with long years of experience in the media. We have presented to them the criteria based on which we make assessments of the media and thus obtained their viewpoints and experience<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> We interviewed: Milka Tadić-Mijović (president of the Centre for Investigative Journalism), Milica Babić (editor of the RTCG Morning Show), Darko Šuković (editor in chief of Antena M), Jadranka Vojvodić (assistant

## 2. MEDIA ENVIRONMENT AND PRACTICES IN MONTENEGRO

There are around 150 electronic, online and print media currently operating in Montenegro.<sup>4</sup> The media market is small and difficult to keep sustainable.<sup>5</sup> Many privately owned, but also public, media have been continuously facing financial adversity. Over the past couple of years, the value of the commercial advertising market has been assessed at around €11m. At the same time, there is no accurate information about what portion of it is controlled by the state and local administrations but the Direct Media company, from Montenegro, assessed that the participation of state-owned assets on this market is around €2m.<sup>6</sup> The revenues from advertising in themselves cannot secure the sustainability of the media—TV stations receive half of the revenues from advertising, Twenty-five per cent is spent on on-street advertising, and 10% on online advertising, while the rest goes to printed and other media.<sup>7</sup>

The civil sector has been highlighting the problem of non-transparent advertising, which brings the media into an uneven position, as government funds for advertising are mostly funnelled towards media that do not take a critical stance towards the authorities<sup>8</sup>. Journalists still make less than the average monthly salary, and one in every three journalists earns less than €400 a month.<sup>9</sup> Montenegrin public broadcaster, Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG) has the most employees (723), and it had a budget of more than €14m last year.<sup>10</sup> The State aided the media occasionally, by writing off debts that privately owned broadcasters had towards the Radio Broadcasting Centre.<sup>11</sup> Assistance for the media sector in Montenegro is also planned in terms of mitigating the adverse economic effects caused by the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>12</sup> The public has not been informed about the dialogue between the representatives of the Government and the media

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director of the Agency for Electronic Media), Goran Đurović (director of Media centar). The interviews took place in Podgorica, in the period between 3 June and 12 June 2020.

4 IREX, *Media sustainability index 2019*, Washington, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XkNi2w>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

5 JUFREX, *Analysis of the Media Sector in Montenegro with Recommendations for Approximation to the Standards of the Council of Europe and the EU, 2017*, EU and Council of Europe. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ZvfDWL>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

6 IREX, *Media sustainability index 2019*, Washington, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XkNi2w>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Nenezić, Ana, Vuković, Dragoljub, *Equal Opportunity for All Media in Montenegro – Annual report for 2016*, CGO, 2017 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zZhbb0>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

9 Trade Union Media of Montenegro, *The Indicator of the Level of Media Freedoms and Safety of Journalists (Montenegro)*, 2018 Available at: <https://bit.ly/2uc5Ur9>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

10 Predrag Nikolić, "Survival of the Media in the Time of Coronavirus – from Bad to Worse", *Montenegro Media Institute*, 8 May 2020, Available at: <https://bit.ly/2A2zWjs>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

11 Government of Montenegro. *Information on assistance to commercial and local radio and TV broadcasters, adopted in the Government's March 2017 sitting*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ekNW7f>. Accessed on: 24 May 2020.

12 RTCG, "More than €250,000 to Support Media", 20 March 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Xopknd>. Accessed on: 24 May 2020.



## 2.1. A strong presence of regional media

about the forms of subsidies and assistance to the media.

The functioning of the media in Montenegro is made more difficult because of the strong influence of the robust competition from neighbouring countries on its media market and the polarization between market participants representing different parts of the political spectrum.<sup>13</sup> Common language, shared by several countries from the former Yugoslavia region, and unlimited online space enable the media from other countries in the region to provide their content to the Montenegrin audience, thus enabling them to establish themselves as important stakeholders in the Montenegrin media market as well.<sup>14</sup> Along with Srpski Telegraf, Informer, Kurir and Alo are the most read tabloids in Serbia, and released at least 945 false and unfounded reports on their front pages alone during 2019<sup>15</sup>.

Along with this, at the beginning of 2020, the Montenegrin Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) suspended the broadcasting of certain shows of some Serbian television stations, such as Happy TV and Pink TV, for three months, because “they were promoting hatred, intolerance and discrimination against Montenegrin nationals”.<sup>16</sup>

Regional media spreading disinformation are frequently the go-to source of information for the right-leaning portals from Montenegro (IN4S.net and Borba.me), which carry their releases without a prior fact-check. The reverse also happens when the right-leaning media from Montenegro create unverified content, which then gets re-released by the regional media spreading disinformation. Thus, it becomes possible for disinformation to reach a large number of people in the countries of the region.

Disinformation predominantly occurs in Montenegro in the unregulated online space.

During 2019, the analyses of fact-checking platforms indicated that disinformation occurred only occasionally in traditional Montenegrin media—press, television and radio—with the assumption that the journalists working in these media had more time to do the fact-checking and that these media still have clearly defined editorial procedures.<sup>17</sup>

Disinformation predominantly occurs in Montenegro in the unregulated online space.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, we are predominantly addressing online media and

13 JUFREX, *Analysis of the Media Sector in Montenegro with Recommendations for Approximation to the Standards of the Council of Europe and the EU 2017*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ZvfDWL>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

14 *Analyses of fact-checking platforms Raskrinkavanje.ba*. Available at: [www.raskrinkavanje.ba](http://www.raskrinkavanje.ba). Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

15 Krik, *At Least 945 False New Stories on the Front Pages of Tabloids in 2019*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XISldM>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

16 Agency for Electronic Media, *Council Suspended Re-Broadcasting of Certain Programme Contents on Happy TV and Pink M TV, 10 February 2020*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2HsW0nH>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

17 Dragan Koprivica, *Milica Bogdanović, Infection with Manipulation, CDT, 2019*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2LWbdQo>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

18 *Ibid.*

## 2.2. There are no false narratives in the established media

platforms in this analysis.

The online space defined by a common language is what dictates that every piece of information from Montenegro reaches the media in other countries of the region in a matter of minutes and vice versa. During this transfer of information, without any fact-checking or source credibility checks, it also happens that established Montenegrin media release an unchecked piece of information, thus partaking in the process of spreading disinformation.

The analyses of domestic fact-checking platforms do not recognize established Montenegrin media<sup>19</sup> as creators of disinformation, hate speech or propaganda.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, it happens that Montenegrin established media too release a piece of information without a due accuracy or source credibility check, thus participating in the process of spreading disinformation.

Some of those with whom we communicated see the “Radio and Television of Montenegro (RTCG) as a prime example of a ruling party’s propaganda tool”. International institutions and part of the Montenegrin public have been trying for years to draw attention to the problem of unlawful political influence on the public broadcaster.

Crisis events in Montenegro, during 2020, such as the reporting on the events surrounding the adoption of the law on freedom of religion, showed that biased reporting and insufficient adherence to ethical standards occur more frequently in Montenegrin established media than the deliberate creation of disinformation and false narratives. During the coronavirus pandemic, there were several oversights in their work, caused by mistakes, lack of editorial capacities or the need for access to a broader audience, not by the desire to create certain false narratives or false representations of reality.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.3. The unregulated online space

The fact that online media in Montenegro are not legally obliged to register benefits the spread of disinformation, hate speech and propaganda in the online space. The AEM is keeping a registry of electronic publications, but registration is still voluntary.

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19 We define established media as those that have become relevant sources of information over an extended period of media content production, and a place for debate on topics of public interest, that is, those media with a significant audience, influence and resources. For the purposes and intent of this analysis, we placed RTCG, Vijesti TV, Prva TV and Nova M in that category, as well as the newspapers Pobjeda, Dan, Vijesti, Dnevne Novine and online media Vijesti, and the Analitika and Antena M portals.

20 Bogdanović, Milica, Koprivica, Dragan, *Infection with Manipulation*, CDT, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2LWbdQo> Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

21 Dragan Koprivica, Milica Kovačević, Tijana Velimirović, *The Network of Disinformation and the Inadequate Response of the State*, CDT, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zZ5U0a>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

Unlike online media, the electronic media are not only obliged to register but also to supply information on their ownership structure to the AEM.<sup>22</sup> There is a significant portion of foreign ownership in the biggest and most influential Montenegrin media.<sup>23</sup>

It cannot be clearly determined whether there is any foreign ownership in the two online media in Montenegro identified in expert analyses as platforms spreading disinformation and propaganda. The information in the online impressum of the IN4S.net portal does not correspond with the name of the person mentioned in public as the editor of this medium.<sup>24</sup> It is stated in the impressum of the Borba.me portal that the owner and founder of the portal is the NGO Zapis Podgorica (Podgorica Record) and that Dražen Živković is the authorized representative.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.4. Social networks as a source of unethical content

At the same time, social networks, an important source of information for Montenegrin citizens,<sup>26</sup> are the source of information for the media releasing disinformation, hate speech and propaganda. Social networks are simultaneously the platform via which those media release the content, which the citizens then share, thus enabling ethically disputable content to reach the broadest audience possible.

Social networks, an important source of information for Montenegrin citizens, are the source of information for the media releasing disinformation, hate speech and propaganda.

In crisis situations, such as the events surrounding the adoption of the law on freedom of religion and the coronavirus pandemic, social networks became a place for spreading hatred, disinformation, conspiracy theories and advice that is not always rooted in science and can be harmful to people's health.<sup>27</sup> Such information was also being spread through communication applications, such as Viber. In the time of the pandemic, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram started removing posts created by the disinformers from the region<sup>28</sup>.

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22 JUFREX, *Analysis of the Media Sector in Montenegro with Recommendations for Approximation to the Standards of the Council of Europe and the EU 2017*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2ZvfDWL>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

23 *Overview of information on the transparency of AVM services providers in Montenegro, Agency for Electronic Media*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2A2XpkJ>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

24 *Information on IN4S.net portal published on the official page*. Available at: <https://www.in4s.net/impressum/>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

25 *Information on the Borba.me portal published on the official page*. Available at: <https://borba.me/impressum/>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

26 NDI, *Public opinion poll, November 2018*, Washington. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2E2dzJA>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

27 Dragan Koprivica, Milica Kovačević, Tijana Velimirović, *The Network of Disinformation and the Inadequate Response of the State, CDT, 2020*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2zZ5U0a>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

28 *Ibid.*

## 2.5. Disputed regulator, inadequate self-regulation

Activities of regulators in suppressing the spreading of hate speech were recorded by the beginning of 2020, when the AEM limited the re-broadcasting of certain content on Serbian Happy TV and Pink M TV for three months.

The civil sector in Montenegro claimed that “the AEM Council had been tolerating serious violations of professional standards to the detriment of the opponents of the Montenegrin regime for years, which had been occurring through Pink M broadcasts, resorting only to warnings after numerous complaints, repeating this same process over and over again, although the rationale for each such decision stated that the next one would be more punitive.<sup>29</sup> However, no such harshness was ever displayed until the lack of professionalism on some TV stations started harming the authorities themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

The media community is divided, and that has had an adverse effect on the possibility of establishing a functional collective self-regulatory body. Several Montenegrin media have their own media ombudsman.

## 2.6. No strategic approach to combating disinformation

Montenegro has no strategy for combating disinformation.

Journalists of the FOS Media web portal<sup>31</sup> and the editors of IN4S.net and Borba.me portals, Gojko Raičević and Dražen Živković,<sup>32</sup> were arrested at the beginning of 2020 for the crime of causing panic and disorder by publishing false news without a previous fact-check.

The trend of institutions, which, for the most part, have fact-checking platforms, taking on the role of “fact-checkers” is also present. Instead of publishing denials, these institutions are announcing that releases by certain media are false news.

## 2.7. Women run half of all media

Research shows that women make up the majority of employees in the

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29 Duško Vuković, Daliborka Uljarević, *Media in Montenegro – Caught Between the Grip of Power and the Fight for Profession*, CGO, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/36pm3l6>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

30 *Ibid.*

31 Čađenović, Ivan, Nikolić, Biljana, “Detention ordered: FOS Media journalist suspected of causing panic and disorder”, *Vijesti online*, 6 January 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3eu0Tft>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

32 Čađenović, Ivan, “Raičević and Živković released pending trial”, *Vijesti online*, 3 January 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hYu2RS>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

established media in Montenegro and that half of them occupy leading positions. However, they do not have full autonomy in making decisions from their, mostly male, media owners.<sup>33</sup>

Women occupy 50% of directorial and editorial positions, while they make 60% of lower-ranking desk editors.<sup>34</sup> Although women run the media, media content still contains stereotypes about women and supports gender roles corresponding to patriarchy, failing to contribute sufficiently to the establishment of gender equality in society.<sup>35</sup>

Women employed in media that spread hate speech, disinformation and propaganda are frequently victims of gender-based prejudice and harassment. Women are also frequently a target for derogatory speech and harassment in online media comments and on social networks.

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33 Pejović, Duška, *The Position of Women Journalists in Montenegrin Media*, Association of Professional Journalists of Montenegro, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Nwj1t9>. Accessed on: 26 June 2020.

34 *Ibid.*

35 Pejović, Duška, *The Gender Image of the Media in Montenegro*, UNDP, 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ewm4NP>. Accessed on: 26 June 2020.

### 3. MAPPING OF CONCRETE EXAMPLES OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Having in mind the typical elements of hatred, disinformation and propaganda models of the media and media communications we analyzed, based on a series of indicators, we recognized multiple media and media communication practice types in Montenegro. Belonging to the first group are the regional media, read throughout Montenegro, followed by the right-leaning online media from Montenegro and Facebook pages, serving as “hotbeds” of hate speech. The second group comprises online media from Montenegro, whose comment sections have become a space for spreading hate speech and disinformation.

#### 3.1. Regional sources of hatred and disinformation

Media from other countries of the region, whose online editions have a large readership in Montenegro, continuously report on events in Montenegro, often using hate speech, disinformation and propaganda as the foundation of their content. According to media reports from February 2020, the European External Action Service (EEAS) concluded that the disinformation related to the adoption of the law on freedom of religion raised tensions and most of the false news about this issue originated from Serbian media. Also, the EEAS said that Serbian media, some of which state-owned, the Russian Serbian-language medium Sputnik and several portals from Montenegro were the sources of false information.<sup>36</sup>

During the period of the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Serbian media “temporarily ceased their campaign against Montenegro”, but it continued with undiminished intensity during the 14<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the renewal of Montenegrin independence, as well as after the Montenegrin authorities decided not to allow the citizens of Serbia, among other countries, entrance to Montenegro during the coronavirus pandemic, until their country met the required epidemiological criteria.<sup>37</sup>

Serbian tabloids and their online editions, among which Alo.rs and Kurir.rs have the biggest readership in Montenegro, are spreading disinformation about Montenegro.<sup>38</sup> Since 2017, the newspaper Alo and its online edition Alo.rs has been the private property of the Alo Media System company, owned by Saša Blagojević. Since 2018, he has been the owner of Belgrade’s RTV Studio B, via his company Global Media Technology. The Serbian public

<sup>36</sup> RTCG, EU recognized and condemned disinformation campaign, 20 February 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2NJJ7ZD>. Accessed on: 30 June 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Gruhonjić, Dinko, *Tabloid Attacks on Montenegro*, Montenegro Media Institute, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2BdYlhK>. Accessed on: 30 June 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Overview of the most visited websites in Montenegro <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/montenegro>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

does not know much about him, as he is relatively new to the media market, but Serbian media have reported that Saša Blagojević was close to the ruling Serbian Progressive Party.<sup>39</sup> Alo sells 45,652 copies a day.<sup>40</sup>

In 2003, Radisav Rodić established Kurir. This newspaper plays an important role in the tabloidization of the Serbian media by fabricating political affairs and spreading incorrect information.<sup>41</sup> This newspaper and its online edition Kurir.rs are now part of the Adria Media Group, officially owned by Igor Zezelj. Since its establishment, Kurir has changed its editorial policies several times, but it has remained the voice of the Serbian government for the most part.<sup>42</sup>

The Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) established that the Adria Media Magazine and Adria Media Group were the publishers of a total of 28 media outlets registered in the Media Registry. Apart from these media, Adria Media Group owns another 13 media that are not registered with the Serbian Business Registers Agency (SBRA).<sup>43</sup> The owner of Kurir is active in other fields of business as well (pharmacy and medical equipment)<sup>44</sup>. Kurir sells 41,223 copies in Serbia, while the online edition has 2.43 million views.<sup>45</sup>

When it comes to transparency of ownership and editorial structure, both Alo<sup>46</sup> and Kurir<sup>47</sup> publish information on editors and journalists on their websites, as well as the information on the companies owning these media.

Sources of funding for these two media originate from state funds. According to experts, the system of distribution of money through public competitions has enabled Serbian authorities to influence the editorial policies and financial sustainability of the media.<sup>48</sup> Despite their constant unprofessional reporting, these media continue to receive millions through public competitions for funding media content.<sup>49</sup>

According to the analysis that the Journalists' Association of Serbia (UNS) carried out, in the first half of 2019, tabloids received a total of 27.5 million dinars, or around €250,000, while the Independent Journalists' Association of

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39 BIRN, *Media Ownership Monitor, Belgrade, 2017*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hYSy5h>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

40 Hodžić, S. and Petković, B. (2020). *Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans*. Report submitted for publication. Skopje: EU TACSO 3 Project.

41 BIRN, *Media Ownership Monitor, Belgrade, 2017*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ezlKOM>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

42 Ibid.

43 Pešić, J., Igor Zezelj took over 41 media in Serbia, *Journalists' Association of Serbia*, 18 January.2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/31aH0pH>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

44 Hodžić, S. and Petković, B. (2020). *Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans*. Report submitted for publication. Skopje: EU TACSO 3 Project.

45 Ibid.

46 Official Alo webpage. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hRbVNT>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

47 Official Kurir webpage. Available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/impressum>. Accessed on: 24.06.2020

48 Popović, Pea, *Media: How Serbia Sponsors Violence and Lies*, Noizz.rs, 16.01.2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3846YNe>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

49 Ibid.

Serbia (NUNS) said that 155 public competitions for the co-funding of public reporting were announced in 2019, in which more than 1.6 billion dinars was distributed, most of it among pro-regime media.<sup>50</sup>

Contracts with public enterprises, agencies and the advertising and marketing authority are an important source of income for tabloids in Serbia. For example, in 2019, the publisher of the Alo tabloid had at least 15 contracts, worth a little over 28 million dinars (close to €240,000).<sup>51</sup> Kurir got a little less than 13 million dinars (around €110,000), mostly through the contract with the Electric Power Industry of Serbia (EPS) and the public broadcaster, Radio Television of Serbia (RTS).<sup>52</sup>

Editors and journalists of these media do not adhere to professional standards and frequently violate the ethical code, as indicated by the Serbian Press Council's monitoring.<sup>53</sup>

Judging by the content these media are releasing, their work is propagandist in nature. Their content is subject to frequent analyses of fact-checking platforms in several former Yugoslavian countries. They often release ungrounded information or news impossible to fact-check or news from which the facts necessary for the understanding of the context are omitted, conspiracy theories, and announcements in which the only source of the presented claims is anonymous. These media often target members of different minority groups, political and ideological opponents, civil society activists and international stakeholders, such as NATO, EU, US embassies. On the other hand, the civil society organizations carrying out analyses of media content and media monitoring indicate that these media are issuing predominantly positive reports about the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Russian President Vladimir Putin.<sup>54</sup>

These media often target members of different minority groups, political and ideological opponents, civil society activists and international stakeholders, such as NATO, EU, US embassies.

Alo is also known for its war propaganda. In almost two-thirds of the headlines on the conflict between Serbs and Albanians, this medium suggests the necessity of police, military or paramilitary intervention. Last year, Alo released at least 237 false or manipulative reports, on 358 front pages. Some of the most prominent false reports were the announcements of World War Three and several attempted assassinations of the Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, as well as the incessant warnings about Albanians getting ready for

50 Danas.rs, UNS Research: Money in Public Competitions Still Goes to Media Breaching Code of Ethics, UNS, on 25 May 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/31dl7q2>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

51 Radojević, Vesna, More than half a million euros for false news spreading tabloids, Raskrikavanje.rs, 13 February 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2B32k50>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

52 Ibid.

53 Đurić, Vanja, Press Council: Around 5,000 cases of violations of the Code of Ethics in the second half of 2019, Danas online, 19.02.2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/31bu6rB>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

54 Krik, At least 945 false reports on tabloid front pages in 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2XISldM>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.



war and attacks against Serbia.<sup>55</sup> This media organization has been depicting the NATO bombardment and similar historic events in a manipulative way.

It is not infrequently that these media spread disinformation about Montenegro, its institutions and public officials. The releasing of deliberately incorrect information is intensified in crisis situations, such as the coronavirus pandemic or the events surrounding the adoption of the law on freedom of religion.<sup>56</sup>

### 3.2. Regional source of propaganda

Experts recognize Sputnik Serbia as the main channel of Russian influence in the Western Balkan media space, reaching audiences that speak Bosnian-Croatian-Montenegrin-Serbian language, and its releases are frequently carried by the local media.<sup>57</sup>

Sputnik Serbia is part of the Sputnik news agency, with headquarters in Russia, founded by the Russian state-owned media group Rossiya Segodnya.<sup>58</sup> Sputnik has its own web portal, radio station and multimedia content. Regional branches of Sputnik exist in Washington, Beijing, Paris, Berlin, Belgrade, Cairo, London, Edinburgh, Montevideo, Rio de Janeiro, etc.<sup>59</sup> The Sputnik agency is the successor of RIA Novosti and the Voice of Russia radio broadcaster<sup>60</sup>. The Belgrade office employs 40 people, and according to the editor in chief, Ljubinka Milinčić, it is funded with Russian state money and is not dependent on commercial income.<sup>61</sup> It is not possible to find accurate information on the financing of this media on its official website.

Sputnik releases a significant quantity of information daily, placing photographic and video content at the disposal of local media with limited resources. That is why Sputnik is a very frequent source of information for the local media, regardless of their editorial policies on foreign policy issues.<sup>62</sup>

In the analysis of the Montenegrin Atlantic Alliance, released by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, it is noted that Sputnik promotes such narratives as “the Western Balkans is unstable and there is great risk of conflicts breaking out”, “the EU is a hegemony”, “Western Balkan

55 *Fake News Seeker*, *Alo published 237 false reports on the front page in one year*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/37WQCpk>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

57 *Montenegrin Atlantic Alliance, Russia's Narratives Towards the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Serbia*, NATO Stratcom, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Nn67xD>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

58 *Sputnik Serbia official website*. Available at: [https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/docs/about/o\\_nama.html](https://rs-lat.sputniknews.com/docs/about/o_nama.html). Accessed on: 30 June 2020.

59 *Ibid.*

60 *Nešić, Milan, Donceva: Russia is aspiring to deepen divisions in the Balkans with its narratives*, *Voice of America*. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hWs2d0>. Accessed on: 12 May 2020.

61 *Vučičević, Bojan, The growing influence of global media in the region*, *Media Observatory*, 29 June 2016. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3i3TAgl>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

62 *Bogdanović, Milica, Kovačević, Milica, Analysis of Narratives – Almighty Russian Weapon*, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2B4GYVQ>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

countries are weak and corrupt”, “human rights are at risk”, “the EU and NATO are weak and disunited”, “NATO is aggressive and engages in provocations”, or “Montenegro wishes to revise history, NATO membership is not useful”.<sup>63</sup>

After this report stating that Sputnik was trying to emphasize that the region was divided into a pro-Western and a pro-Eastern bloc was released, the media group’s editor in chief Ljubinka Milinčić denied this, claiming that “it was NATO’s influence that was malignant, not Sputnik’s”.<sup>64</sup> In a statement for the Journalists’ Association of Serbia (UNS), she said that it was a very general evaluation and that the entire report was written without a shred of evidence to back it up.<sup>65</sup>

Over the past several years, Google, Facebook and Twitter have been sanctioning Sputnik—from denying it access to advertising to deplatforming it. By the beginning of 2019, Facebook had removed 289 pages and shut down 75 accounts associated with Sputnik for spreading disinformation.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.3. Montenegrin sources of disinformation and propaganda

Based on the analysis of fact-checking platforms and interviews with experts, we recognized the right-leaning online media—IN4S.net and Borba.me—as domestic sources of disinformation and propaganda in Montenegro.

These media are not registered with the AEM as electronic publications. The Borba.me website states that the NGO Zapis Podgorice (Podgorica Record) is its founder and that Dražen Živković is its authorized representative. During this research, Živković said the “NGO Zapis Podgorica was only the owner of the Borba.me domain and that the portal itself was “a kind of a personal blog and that it is not currently registered as a media organization”.<sup>67</sup>

Together with officials and activists of the anti-NATO oriented Democratic Front (DF), Živković was arrested during the 2015 protests, which this opposition alliance organized just before Montenegro officially joined NATO. Since the establishment of the Borba.me portal, the media has reported that Živković has been questioned on multiple occasions by the Prosecutor’s Office for the texts he published. At the beginning of 2020, he was arrested on suspicion of “committing the crime of provoking panic and disorder by publishing a false report that an explosion had shaken the Villa Gorica, in

63 *Montenegrin Atlantic Alliance, Russia’s Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Serbia, NATO Stratcom, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Nn67xD>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.*

64 *Pešić, J., Milinčić: It’s NATO’s influence that’s malignant, not Sputnik’s, Cenolovka.rs, 28.05.2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Z2z6Mx>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.*

65 *Ibid.*

66 *Brezar, Aleksandar, THE PROPAGANDA NETWORKS OF LIES (II): Media under political influence release the most disinformation, Analiziraj.ba, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2YCjBvU>. Accessed on: 26 June 2020.*

67 *Interview with Dražen Živković conducted online, on 30 June 2020.*

Podgorica, without previously checking the information. The Police Authority, on the other hand, said that this information was false and that there had been “a minor electrical malfunction in the facility, which was quickly fixed”. As he was suspected of committing the same crime, Gojko Raičević, the editor in chief of the IN4S web portal, was arrested as well. Raičević was also arrested in autumn 2015, during the break-up of the DF protest in front of the Montenegrin Parliament building, when, according to media reports, he was brutally beaten.<sup>68</sup>

During this research, Raičević said that “The IN4S.net web portal was established in 2008, by a group of friends and that NGO IN4S was established in 2010. He said that in both cases, he was the primary authorized representative and editor in chief of the portal.<sup>69</sup> His name is not listed in the impressum of this web portal.

As the president of the No to NATO, No to War movement, Raičević actively participated in the campaign against Montenegrin membership of NATO, in 2015. When advocates of Montenegrin membership of NATO made accusations about “certain NGOs receiving funds from abroad to run an anti-NATO campaign”, Raičević said that his organization was not receiving funds from Russia or any other foreign country.<sup>70</sup>

There is no publicly accessible information on possible subsidies, grants and sponsorships or financial reports posted on these two media websites. Commercial advertising is present on the Borba.me website. Živković said he “had no advertisers on his website and that the present banners belonged to his relatives and friends owning businesses and advertising on his website for free.<sup>71</sup>

As Živković asserts, Borba.me has no editorial office or premises. He claims that the company is funded from the money he won in court after suing the newspaper Dan, for which he used to work.<sup>72</sup> On the other hand, Raičević says that “IN4S has its own premises and a studio, but they are not in use, due to the pressure from the police and the Prosecutor’s Office”.<sup>73</sup> There is space on this web portal dedicated for advertising, but Raičević claims that there are no advertisers. As he claims, IN4S had a contract with the M:tel company, the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Office for Diaspora) and the Serbian Ministry of Culture.<sup>74</sup> This web portal also won some funds in the competition for stimulating Serbian-language public reporting in the neighbouring countries, organized in 2018 by the Provincial Secretariat for

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68 PCNEN, Božović: *Police brutally beat editor of IN4S portal*, 17 October 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2Vza6LI>. Accessed on: 1 January 2020.

69 Interview with Gojko Raičević via the Viber mobile application, on 30 June 2020.

70 Portal Analitika, Raičević: *Russia is not funding us, we will continue the anti-NATO campaign*, 29 April 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dAdDvU>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

71 Interview with Dražen Živković via the Viber mobile application, on 30 June 2020.

72 Ibid.

73 The interview with Gojko Raičević took place via the Viber mobile application, on 30 June 2020.

74 Ibid.

## Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.<sup>75</sup>

IN4S, one of the most visited websites in Montenegro, releases content which is often a combination of different journalistic forms, where facts are not clearly separated from comment. According to the experts we talked to, the incitement of hatred towards certain minority groups is recognizable in the content released on this website, as well as the manipulation of facts and photographic material, historical revisionism and campaigning against certain target groups and individuals.

The incitement of hatred towards certain minority groups is recognizable in the content released on this website, as well as the manipulation of facts and photographic material, historical revisionism and campaigning against certain target groups and individuals.

The portal targets different minorities (ethnic or religious), political and ideological opponents, civil activists, fighters for human rights, and international stakeholders, such as the EU, NATO, USA, etc. The publishing of such content intensifies during the period leading up to elections and while critical political decisions are being made or while there is a public debate on issues polarising society, such as Montenegro's membership of NATO or the adoption of the law on freedom of religion.

Fact-checking platforms often prove that texts published on IN4S contain falsified and distorted historical facts. The sources of this unverified data are sometimes political party officials or activists.

On the other hand, the Borba.me web portal often publishes texts based on anonymous sources, and it does not provide sufficient information to enable verification of the presented claims.

Participants in this research perceive these media as those associated with opposition parties. Živković denies this, claiming that Borba.me is exclusively associated with him as an oppositional and critical journalist. In contrast, Raičević claims that there is no cooperation between opposition parties and IN4S.net, although it is justified to think that the portal was closer to the opposition than the regime parties.

In the comments section, without any additional filtering, readers engage in debates abundant in problematic content. According to the experts we interviewed, additional spreading of disinformation and propaganda can be organized and coordinated by different interest groups.

Additionally, they use social networks as an important channel for disseminating the released information. IN4S has around 30 thousand followers on Facebook and Borba.me has around 13 thousand. For the most part, Facebook pages belonging to opposition parties or pro-Serbian and pro-Russian pages are sharing the information they post<sup>76</sup> and then this content is further commented on, without any moderation.

<sup>75</sup> Results of the competition organized by the Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities of the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina, 2018. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dOUqpf>. Accessed on: 1 July 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Findings of the <https://www.crowdtangle.com/> website

### 3.4. Facebook pages as conduits for hatred

The experts we interviewed indicate the problem of propagation of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda on social networks. Their intense use in recent years has opened up new channels for releasing content without any accountability. Furthermore, research carried out by civil society organizations shows that social networks served as support for the propagators of disinformation, especially during the coronavirus pandemic.<sup>77</sup> In a multitude of pages posting problematic content, several stand out for their frequent use of offensive speech or labelling of individuals. Such are, for example, Facebook pages like Stari Liberal (Old Liberal)<sup>78</sup>, Nemojmo politizovati proteste (Let's Not Politicize Protests)<sup>79</sup>, It was very unpleasant/Psalm 118<sup>80</sup>, Dnevna Doza Crnogorskih Dubioza<sup>81</sup>, Milonegro<sup>82</sup>, etc.

The civil sector also recognizes these pages as participants in the disinformation campaign organized during the adoption of the law on freedom of religion. These pages were sharing so-called memes, “caricature-like compressed messages offered to audiences for consumption without prior critical scrutiny”, which served in the coordination of protests.<sup>83</sup>

The content on these pages was aimed against public figures—politicians and civil activists against whom a continuous campaign was waged, accompanied by visual content and text containing offensive messages. Not infrequently, these pages post messages of hate speech against ethnic minorities and women. Such an example occurred towards the end of the coronavirus epidemic, when assistant director of the Institute of Public Health, Dr Senad Begić, “survived internet lynching”, because of his name and position.<sup>84</sup>

It is unknown which organizations/structures are behind these pages, who owns them and how they are funded.

These Facebook pages have an average of 7–22 thousand followers. Followers share their content intensely and comment on them, thus increasing their visibility on social networks. Hate speech is additionally propagated through their comments sections, which are unmoderated.

It is unknown which organizations/structures are behind these pages, who owns them and how they are funded. In the opinion of our interviewees, based on the content they release, it can be inferred that they share viewpoints and ideas of the predominantly right-leaning opposition parties and interest groups.

77 Velimirović, Tijana, *Using urgent circumstances to spread dangerous narratives*, Raskrinkavanje.me, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3hTfXoS>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

78 <https://www.facebook.com/StariLiberal/>

79 <https://www.facebook.com/politizovanje/>

80 <https://www.facebook.com/desnarukaAmfilohija/>

81 <https://www.facebook.com/Dnevna-doza-crnogorskih-dubioza-456398734742710/>

82 <https://www.facebook.com/milolunja/>

83 RTCG, *A Plague of False News*, Digitalni Forenzički Centar (Digital Forensic Centre), 6 January 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VeBgrb>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

84 Kovačević, Milica, *Koprivica Dragan, Network of Disinformation and the Inadequate Response of the State*, CDT, 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VduRwF>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

### 3.5. Hatred and disinformation in established media comments

The experts we interviewed think there is no obvious hate speech in the editorial content of the established media in Montenegro.<sup>85</sup> One of the reasons why the established media do not get involved in releasing such content could be the strict regulations in this field.

On the other hand, according to some of our interviewees, the content released by the established media occasionally contain offensive, provocative and inflammatory speech, which is frequently based on personal insults.<sup>86</sup> AEM assistant director, Jadranka Vojvodić, said the following about this issue:

*“All of the most popular online media release texts with provocative headlines, because they attract attention. However, the line between offensive speech and hate speech is rarely crossed. The kind of editorial content they release could make your hair stand on end, but, once you test the form, context, intention and cause in detail, you cannot say it was not political speech or a contribution to a debate. Also, this is not an issue for the regulator to address anymore; this should rather be a matter for self-regulation.”<sup>87</sup>*

However, there is no unique self-regulation in Montenegro and insufficient decisions by self-regulatory bodies, based on which we could evaluate the extent to which the established media adhere to professional standards. It is the opinion of all of those that we interviewed that the established media in Montenegro are not successful in consistently adhering to professional standards.

Although not frequently, it happens that they too come under the scrutiny of fact-checking platforms.<sup>88</sup> When compared to the right-leaning online media in Montenegro or the regional media, the number of “violations” by the established media is five to ten times lower. They commit these violations mostly when re-releasing disinformation from other sources without a previous fact-check.

Some of our interviewees agree that re-releasing disinformation occurs in these media as a consequence of the difficult economic situation, the need for more readership, and lack of human resources and fact-checking skills. They do not think it is deliberate systemic creation and distribution of disinformation, with a clear intent of manipulating readers.

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85 The reply from the AEM, from 4 June 2020.

86 Vijesti online, Media center: The Agency for Electronic Media needs to stop hate speech, 21 January 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3etR2pX>, Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

87 Interview with Jadranka Vojvodić, AEM assistant director.

88 The Raskrinkavanje.me platform analyzed the released content and found that established media engaged in media manipulation - CDM did so 19 times, portal Analitika 12 times, Vijesti online - eight times, Dan - eight times, the RTCG portal and TV station - eight times, Antena M - 7 times and Pobjeda - three times. Available at: <https://www.raskrinkavanje.me/mediji>. Accessed on: 23 May 2020.

What is recognized as the most problematic aspect of the work of the established media is the inadequate moderation of readers' comments in online media, which have become a platform for anonymous propagation of disinformation and conspiracy theories. Offensive speech frequently occurs in comments directed against ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, as well as insults against political or ideological opponents of the anonymous commentators.

Although it can be organized and coordinated by different interest groups, there is no clear evidence that commenting on these platforms is associated with specific centres of power or that it is supported and funded by a political party or some other interest group. Our interviewees indicated that the intensity of these comments increased during the pre-election period and in crises when society becomes polarized around certain important issues. Some of those we interviewed think that although the presence of a large number of comments could increase online media readership, one of the reasons why such content is insufficiently filtered is the lack of human resources in small editorial offices.

According to our interviewees, almost all online media face the problem of hate, disinformation and propaganda being spread in anonymous comments by readers.

According to our interviewees, almost all online media face the problem of hate, disinformation and propaganda being spread in anonymous comments by readers. We will show the examples of the two leading online media in Montenegro.

Their ownership structure is mostly associated with traditional, printed media, for which they represent an additional interactive space intended as a way of attracting the greatest possible number of readers.<sup>89</sup>

Vijesti online, whose participation in daily visits by readers, compared to other online media, is 21%<sup>90</sup>, operates as part of the Daily Press d.o.o., just like the newspaper of the same name. During the coronavirus epidemic, Vijesti online switched from post-moderation to pre-moderation.

Café del Montenegro (CdM), with a 6.5% participation in daily visits by readers<sup>91</sup>, was established by civil activist Boris Darmanović and later taken over by the Media Nea company, the publisher of newspapers Dnevne Novine and Pobjeda.<sup>92</sup> As of 2013, the First Financial Holdings became the owner of the 99.9% of the Media Nea company. First Financial Holdings is owned by Greek businessman Petros Stathis. Stathis also owns the Adriatic Properties company and Universal Capital Bank. He is also renowned as the investor and manager of some of the world's most luxurious resorts of the global

89 Brkić, Daniela, *Poor implementation of regulations and continued control over the media, Montenegro Media Institute*, 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dvXRWH>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

90 Hodžić, S. and Petković, B. (2020). *Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans. Report submitted for publication. Skopje: EU TACSO 3 Project.*

91 *Ibid*

92 Brkić, Daniela, *Poor implementation of regulations and continued control over the media, Montenegro Media Institute*, 2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3dvXRWH>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

Aman Resorts franchise, which include Aman Sveti Stefan and Aman Grand Canal Venice.<sup>93</sup>

The founders of Vijesti (Miodrag Perović, Ljubiša Mitrović, Slavoljub Šćekić and Željko Ivanović) remained present in the ownership structure of the Daily Press publishing company. At the same time, the co-owners changed from the German media group Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ), which had 50% ownership in the company between 2003 and 2007, to American Media Development Investment Fund, which bought 25% of ownership in the company in 2008, and Austrian Styria Medien AG, which also became a 25% owner in the company, in 2009.<sup>94</sup> Several persons from the Daily Press and Vijesti ownership structure are also mentioned on the list of shareholders of Lovcen Banka<sup>95</sup>. Outside of the media sector, one of the co-owners, Miro Perović, is the founder of the Water Group company, comprising the Suza and Bjelasica Rada bottled water brands.<sup>96</sup>

The EU and Council of Europe's expert team has indicated that the interconnected media ownership structure represents a high risk in Montenegro.<sup>97</sup> Regardless of some media's financial reports being accessible in public registries, our interviewees indicated that there are no accurate data on their websites about leading advertisers, subsidies or sponsorships.

During the coronavirus epidemic, the government provided €310,000 of direct financial aid for the media, €300,000 with delayed disbursement or tax-free, €600,000 of loans with the Investment and Development Fund and subsidies for the salaries of media workers<sup>98</sup>. The most visited web portals, CdM and Vijesti, are on the list of the media that have received government assistance. There is no accurate information on the amount they received. Portal Vijesti is an EU grant beneficiary.<sup>99</sup> In 2018, the Vijesti newspaper and the Vijesti.me web portal accrued €3.08m of income, with advertising accounting for €2.93m. CdM.me accrued €210,000 of income that year, with sales/advertising accounting for 100% of that sum.<sup>100</sup>

The established media that have transparent and consistent ownership structures and operation and that use domestic and international public funding have the additional responsibility to not only resist disinformation and hate speech propagation practices in their media but also to lead self-regulation and other efforts in countering such practices and trends in the media community.

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93 Portal Analitika, Stathis majority owner of the "Maestral" hotel, 07.07.2015. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3etUpwR>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

94 Ibid.

95 Lovcen Banka shareholders. Official website: <https://bit.ly/2Nm5rZk>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

96 Mirjačić, Marija, Suza bids for Bjelasica Rada, Vijesti online, 02.02.2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2B4DcMa>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

97 Ibid.

98 Government of Montenegro, Government provided financial help for the media during coronavirus pandemic, 14 June 2020. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2YuByfE>. Accessed on: 24 June 2020.

99 Hodžić, S. and Petković, B. (2020). Sustainability of Professional Journalism in the Media Business Environment of the Western Balkans. Report submitted for publication. Skopje: EU TACSO 3 Project.

100 Ibid.



## 4. CONCLUSIONS

Political, economic and social circumstances in Montenegro, as well as complicated and complex relations with certain countries in the region, reflect the media environment and communication practices in this country.

Along with outdated regulations, non-existing adequate self-regulation and an unregulated market, an increasing trend of offensive speech in the public space, which frequently escalates into hate speech, propagation of disinformation and propaganda, is visible in Montenegro.

This content is created and released via several channels:

- media operating in the countries of the region, with readership in Montenegro and which spread hate speech, disinformation and propaganda, with certain online media in Montenegro re-releasing their content, thus contributing to a widespread presence of unprofessional media releases;
- certain right-leaning online media, established/edited by individuals known as anti-NATO activists associated with opposition parties. Their sources of funding are not publicly accessible which makes it impossible to establish the connection between the content they release and sources of funding;
- pages on social networks that continuously spread offensive speech and hate speech against Montenegrin public figures, for which it is unknown what organizations/structures are behind them and who funds them.

Having in mind that regional media that publish disinformation, hate speech and propaganda, as well as right-leaning Montenegrin media, are among the most followed online media in Montenegro and that these types of media and communication practices intensify the releasing of unprofessional content in times of political and social crises, their influence on shaping public opinion is unquestionable.

On the other hand, there is almost no open spreading of hate speech in the established Montenegrin media. However, the comments sections of the online media, established to open up towards the broadest readership and achieve commercial success, are becoming a space for spreading hate speech, conspiracy theories and disinformation by anonymous readers.

Based on the quantity of information released daily by the Montenegrin media and based on the content released by the regional media with readership in Montenegro, it can be concluded that the deliberate creation and spreading of disinformation is not common practice for the established Montenegrin media. Such situations occur as occasional incidents and cannot be considered deliberate spreading of false narratives.

However, the findings and analyses used in this study and interviews with relevant media figures conducted by the team of authors for this study indicate that adherence to professional standards in the established media is in decline. This becomes especially apparent in times of political and social crisis. An additional complication is that the attainment of high professional standards is not on the list of priorities for advertisers when choosing which media in which to advertise.

Failure to apply in practice the principle of full managing and financial transparency is a visible shortcoming in the functioning of the Montenegrin media.

There is an obligation to publish information about the ownership structure for the electronic media, while in certain online media, there is no information on their owners or impressum. Although financial reports of the established media are publicly accessible, some media organizations fail to publish accurate information on their main sources of funding and key advertisers in commercial media, which makes it impossible to accurately establish the connection between the released media content and sources of funding.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to improve the current situation in the functioning of the media, based on the analyses, the Montenegro Media Institute put together a list of recommendations for decision makers, the media community and the civil sector:

- **Institutions in charge of enforcing the law** (primarily the AEM and the Ministry of Culture) should take the necessary action to enable the most efficient implementation of laws possible and resolve any potential ambiguities (monitoring of online media, registration of online media, response in cases of failure to register, etc.);
- **Prosecutorial institutions in charge** should respond to cases of hate speech that continuously occur on social networks and certain Facebook pages,
- **Competent institutions** should take measures against the spreading of disinformation and find appropriate solutions instead of the unacceptable arrest of those suspected of spreading disinformation and their passive approach to the problem of disinformation;
- The divided **media community** should make long-term efforts in establishing a common self-regulatory body, which would indicate examples of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda and promote professional standards;
- **Media organizations** should improve transparency and use their websites to publish detailed information on ownership structure, editorial/journalistic structure and sources of funding;
- **Online media** should apply concrete measures to improve comment moderation systems on their websites and on social networks, thus limiting the spread of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in comments sections;
- **Trade associations and professional media organizations** should help reinforce media capacities for comment moderation, propaganda detection and fact-checking through project activities;
- **The part of the civil sector promoting media literacy** should launch educational campaigns and engage in activities to raise public awareness about the importance of professional media reporting and use of professional and ethical media as a source of information;
- **Fact-checking platforms** should continue contributing to the fight against disinformation and propaganda and additionally reinforce their resources, so as to be able to engage in more intense monitoring and analysis of media content in Montenegro.

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Dražen Živković, editor in chief of the Borba.me web portal, via the Viber mobile application, Podgorica, 30 June 2020.

Gojko Raičević, editor in chief of the in4s.net web portal, via the Viber mobile application, Podgorica, 30 June 2020.

Goran Đurović, Media Centre director, Podgorica, 12 June 2020.

Jadranka Vojvodić, Agency for Electronic Media assistant director, Podgorica, 10 June 2020.

Milica Babić, editor of the RTCG Morning Show, Podgorica, 5 June 2020.

Milka Tadić-Mijović, president of the Centre for Investigative Journalism, Podgorica, 3 June 2020.

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**NORTH MACEDONIA**

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**THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC  
BASIS OF MEDIA AND  
COMMUNICATION MODELS  
SPREADING MISINFORMATION  
AND HATE SPEECH**

*Vesna Nikodinoska*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BASIS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION MODELS SPREADING MISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

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# THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC BASIS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION MODELS SPREADING MISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

Vesna Nikodinoska

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hate speech, propaganda and disinformation marked a long and dark period in the political and media sphere in North Macedonia from 2008 to 2016. Although the political atmosphere relaxed after the change of government in 2016, in 2019 and 2020 these phenomena are still present, if not increased, which is especially characteristic of the internet space.

North Macedonia has a long tradition of political manipulation with the media.<sup>1</sup> The period from 2008–2016 was characterized by complete political domination of the ruling party in the entire media sphere, during which the political clientelism relations between the government and the media developed and strengthened.<sup>2</sup> These relations are still maintained in 2020, as there are media outlets that openly favour certain political options, spread disinformation and half-truths in favour of political centres of power. Pressure on non-profit media, some of which cover investigative journalism, has decreased compared to the period before 2016 when journalists and editors were often discredited on a personal basis, and hate speech was used against them for their critical position towards the government.<sup>3</sup> However, in 2020, there were several cases in which a number of journalists and editors were the target of threats, insults, obscene language and hate speech sent through online media and social networks.

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1 Atanasov, A. (2020) "Tuneva: Mediumite ne treba da se tretiraat kako propagandna masinerija za politicko poentiranje", interview for Macedonian News Agency, 13 June 2020. Available at: <https://mia.mk/tuneva-vo-interv-u-za-mia-mediumite-ne-treba-da-se-tretiraat-kako-propagandna-mashineri-a-za-politichko-poentira-e/>

2 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I. (2014) *Zosto e vazen integritetot na mediumite?* Skopje: MIM. Available at: [https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto\\_e\\_vazen\\_integritetot\\_na\\_mediumite\\_MK\\_v2.pdf](https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2.pdf). Pg. 85.

3 Nebiu, B. at All. (2018) *Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in Macedonia*. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-Macedonia.pdf>. Pg.10.

Traditional media often refrain from open hate speech, although since 2015 there have been several separate cases where discrimination, intolerance and hate speech have been reported on several<sup>4</sup> commercial terrestrial television stations at the state level. Still, most disinformation and hate speech is created and transmitted online. Analyses and research show that internet portals are the most common violators of professional standards in 2018–2020,<sup>5</sup> while hate speech is most prevalent on social media.<sup>6</sup> The online media are not subject to media regulation, and many of those that do not have transparent ownership are not part of self-regulatory bodies. Hate speech also persists due to the practice of impunity and inaction of the competent institutions. The editorial policy of many portals is biased in favour of political parties. Moreover, a large part of the audience that uses the internet more intensively for information purposes does not have enough skills to distinguish the truth from disinformation, manipulation and propaganda.

Traditional media often refrain from open hate speech, although since 2015 there have been several separate cases where discrimination, intolerance and hate speech have been reported on several commercial terrestrial television stations at the state level. Still, most disinformation and hate speech is created and transmitted online.

This analysis deals with the identification of patterns of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech in the media and public communication in North Macedonia. The aim is to determine their structure and characteristics, and political and economic support, as well as their impact. The analysis conducted in the period April–June 2020 took into account the decisions made by the Council of Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) in 2019 and 2020, and reviewed the monitoring reports conducted by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMS) and the complaints that it received, and the analysis of organizations conducting monitoring of disinformation and hate speech, such as the Helsinki Committee of Macedonia, CriThink – Critical Thinking for Mediawise Citizens, and Civil – Center for Freedom. Media experts and other reports of media organizations dealing with the monitoring of these phenomena in North Macedonia were consulted as well.

The analysis identified several media models, media groups and individuals who spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech, predominantly in the online sphere, as few traditional media outlets only accidentally published such content in 2019 and 2020. The following models were identified: 1) larger online newsrooms that maintain political clientelism relations with the centres of power and often disseminate disinformation and propaganda in their favour in a coordinated manner; 2) small tabloid-type online media (“one-man newsroom”) that apologetically spread inappropriate information, disinformation, and often hate speech in support of certain centres of power; 3) public figures who through various online channels spread hate speech and offensive and inappropriate speech on political and nationalist grounds;

4 AAVMS (2015-2020) Reports of conducted supervision/measures, public reprimand. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/telma-dooel-skopje/>

5 CMEM (2020) Infographics - Statistical review of the decisions of the Complaints Commission for 2019. Skopje: CMEM. Available at: <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

6 Interview with a representative of the Helsinki Committee, conducted on 18 June 2020 (via email).

4) social media groups with a political and/or nationalist background; 5) individual social media posts and comments with inappropriate content of a political, national, sexual and other nature.

The analysis contains a description of the media system and the extent to which it enables the development and existence of media models that spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech. The organizational structure, ownership and financing of the media will be explained, as well as the self-regulatory mechanisms, regulatory framework and initiatives of the civil society organizations that monitor and analyze their work. In this regard, examples of media, media groups, individuals and other media structures that usually spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech will be presented, as well as recommendations for further dealing with these harmful practices in the media and communication sphere in North Macedonia.

## 2. HOW THE POLITICAL AND MEDIA SYSTEMS ENABLE AN ENVIRONMENT FOR THE SPREADING OF DISINFORMATION AND HATE SPEECH

### 2.1. Political clientelism – the weakness of all governments

During the rule of the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE party in the period 2008–2016, the media served as “the means of mobilization, not a means of information”<sup>7</sup>, as well as spreading the orchestrated propaganda from one political centre, which resulted in narrowing the space for critical media. The primary mechanism for achieving influence was the state advertising in the so-called “eligible media” which strengthened the political clientelism between the government and the media. Pro-government media outlets were established, or smaller regional television broadcasters whose editorial policies favoured the ruling party were bought in a dubious manner.<sup>8</sup> After the change of government in 2016, the country began to advance in the ratings of media organizations that measure media freedoms. State advertising was abolished, and parts of the media that received support through party and State Budget sources were closed, while some media and prominent anchors who openly spread hate speech and propaganda completely disappeared from the media scene. The favouritism of the left-wing government can be seen in the coverage of certain media from 2016–2020 as well, although in a more moderate style and smaller numbers.

7 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I. (2014) *Zosto e vazen integritetot na mediumite? Skopje: MIM*. Available at: [https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto\\_e\\_vazen\\_integritetot\\_na\\_mediumite\\_MK\\_v2.pdf](https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2.pdf). Pg. 68.

8 Apostolov, V., Jordanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2014) “Nova mediumska zetva vo vladiniot reklamen kombajn”, published on [www.novatv.mk](http://www.novatv.mk) on 5 December 2014. Available at: <https://novatv.mk/nova-mediumska-zetva-vo-vladiniot-reklamen-kombajn/>

While the VMRO-DPMNE party was in power, the media sphere was dominated by pro-government media, and internet portals were seen as “the last refuge of critical journalism”. However, several pro-government online media outlets were created at the time, publishing content with an extreme bias towards the then ruling party<sup>9</sup>. In that period, the ownership of some registered offshore destinations was also problematic, and over the years, the media reported on various schemes of affiliation with the ruling party and the diversion of funds from state advertising.<sup>10</sup>

While the VMRO-DPMNE party was in power, the media sphere was dominated by pro-government media, and internet portals were seen as “the last refuge of critical journalism”. However, several pro-government online media outlets were created at the time, publishing content with an extreme bias towards the then ruling party.

Research shows that in 2020 the two largest political parties, VMRO-DPMNE and the SDSM, have information portals that are close to them and that they often use them to spread politically coloured texts or manipulations.<sup>11</sup> Through advertisers affiliated with political parties, funds are allocated for advertising on such portals, which “calls into question the professionalism of journalism in those portals and creates unfair competition for those who work professionally and raise funds from advertising based on readership.”<sup>12</sup>

## 2.2. Online media are the most frequent violators of professional standards

Internet media are a particularly suitable channel for spreading disinformation and inciting hate speech. The growing trends of these phenomena generally make it more difficult for citizens to access news of public interest, given the fact that the internet, as a source of information, has drawn level with television in terms of frequency of use (76%).<sup>13</sup>

The Council for Media Ethics of Macedonia (CMEM) concluded that in 2019 and 2020, the largest number of violations of professional and ethical standards referred to Article 1 of the Code of Journalists, which requires the publication of accurate and verified information. Journalistic content should not rely on one-sided information because it “creates an opportunity for citizens to be served half-truths or lies as verified and real news.”<sup>14</sup> In the context of disinformation, misinformation and propaganda spreading, violations may include infringements related to Article 3 of the Code, which requires journalists to provide correction, denial and response in case of

9 Trpevska, S. and Micevski, I. (2014) *Zosto e vazen integritetot na mediumite?* Skopje: MIM. Available at: [https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto\\_e\\_vazen\\_integritetot\\_na\\_mediumite\\_MK\\_v2.pdf](https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/824/zosto_e_vazen_integritetot_na_mediumite_MK_v2.pdf). Pg. 85.

10 Trpkovski, G. (2020) “Ungarskoto maslo vo makedonskite mediumi”, published on [www.prizma.mk](http://www.prizma.mk) on 14 February 2020. Available at: <https://prizma.mk/ungarskoto-maslo-vo-makedonskite-mediumi/>

11 AAVMS (2020) “Utvrduvanje na vlijaniето na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje i vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi”. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2W7T1c3>. Pg. 37.

12 Ibid. Pg. 37.

13 Ibid. Pg. 7-8.

14 Tahiri, S. and Adamchevski, M. (2017) *Izvestuvanje vo interes na javnosta*. Skopje: SEMM. Available at: <http://www.semm.mk/attachments/izvestuvanje-vo-interes-na-javnosta.pdf>. Pg. 10.



inaccuracy of information, as well as Article 13, which refers to the mixing of facts and opinions, news and comments. According to the CMEM, hate speech (Article 10) was the second most common reason for the violation of professional standards by the media with 20% in 2019, just like Article 13 (20%).<sup>15</sup> By June 2020, out of a total of 84 adjudications of the CMEM's Complaints Commission, 36 were for portals that violated Article 1.

## CMEM ADJUDICATIONS ACCORDING TO THE REPRESENTATION OF THE VIOLATED ARTICLES OF THE CODE IN 2019

Table 1

ARTICLE	DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTICLE FROM THE CODE	NUMBER OF VIOLATIONS
Article 1	Inaccurate and unverified information, lack of "second party" and absence of at least two unrelated sources.	41 (68.3%)
Article 10	Hate speech and incitement to violence or discrimination on any grounds.	12 (20.0%)
Article 13	The journalist does not distinguish between facts and opinions, news and comments.	12 (20.0%)
Article 15	The journalist must cultivate a culture of speech and ethics. Inappropriate communication with the public is incompatible with the journalistic profession.	9 (15.0%)
Article 7	The journalist will respect the privacy of the person, except when it goes against the public interest.	7 (11.7%)
Article 3	The journalist will endeavour to publish a correction, denial or response when inaccuracy of the information is established.	4 (6.7%)

Source: CMEM, 2019, <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

In the context of hate speech, the findings of the monitoring of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights show an increased rise from the end of 2018, as well as throughout the first half of 2019, mostly on the basis of ethnicity and political affiliation, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity.<sup>16</sup> During March 2020, on the other hand, 110 cases were registered, which is 100% more than the same period last year.<sup>17</sup> Most of the cases were related to

<sup>15</sup> CMEM (2020) Statistical review of the decisions of the Complaints Commission for 2019. Available at: <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

<sup>16</sup> Hate Speech Monitoring Website: [www.govornaomraza.mk](http://www.govornaomraza.mk)

<sup>17</sup> Helsinki Committee (2020) "Govor na omraza vo vreme na pandemija". Skopje: HC. Available at: <https://mhc.org.mk/media/helsinshki-komitet-govor-na-omraza-vo-vreme-na-pandemija-zgolemen-broj-na-prijavi-po-osnov-na-etnichka-i-politichka-pripadnost/>

the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the introduction of a state of emergency, as well as the restrictive measures taken by the Government in the period from March 2020. Their monitoring also confirms that the portals are a channel for spreading fake news and inciting hate speech since much of their content is posted on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>18</sup> In the case-law from 2016 to 2020, there is only one court case registered in the Basic Criminal Court for spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system, which is still in the process of being processed.<sup>19</sup>

## REPRESENTATION OF MEDIA THAT WERE THE SUBJECT OF COMPLAINTS TO THE CMEM IN 2019

Table 2

Internet portals	83.1%	69 complaints
Television broadcasters	15.7%	13 complaints
Newspapers	1.2%	1 complaint

Source: CMEM, <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/statistichki-pregledi/690-2019>

These phenomena are not such a characteristic trend for traditional media because they are subject to legal regulation and monitoring by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, including, among others, hate speech (Article 48) and respect for programmatic principles (Article 61) which are part of the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.<sup>20</sup> Research shows that the regulator is particularly engaged in the occurrence and prevention of hate speech and discrimination through the media.<sup>21</sup> From 2015 to 2020, through their control oversight, the Agency concluded that several of the largest commercial terrestrial television stations at the state level sporadically violated these two legal provisions. Specifically, violations were more frequent around the 2016 parliamentary elections,<sup>22</sup> on the television stations close to the ruling VMRO-DPMNE, which fiercely defended its policies.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with a representative of the Helsinki Committee, 18 June 2020 (via email).

<sup>19</sup> Response from the Basic Court 1 at the Request for MIM for free access to information, 18 June 2020 (via email).

<sup>20</sup> Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2013). Available at: [https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon\\_za\\_audio\\_i\\_audiovizuelni\\_mediumski\\_uslugi\\_mkd\\_1.pdf](https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Nebiu, B. at All. (2018) Indicators on the level of media freedom and journalists' safety in Macedonia. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-Macedonia.pdf>. Pg. 9.

<sup>22</sup> AAAMVS (2015-2020) Reports of implemented measures/supervision/public reprimand. Skopje: AAAMVS. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/izdavaci-na-mediumi-televizii/>

## 2.3. Models of online media that spread disinformation, propaganda and hate speech

Although there are no accurate records, there are about 100 online portals in North Macedonia that produce informative content. Many of them face financial difficulties and work in very modest conditions, due to which they employ a small number of journalists and editors, which also affects the quality of the media content. Often, the media that spread misinformation have problems with ownership transparency.<sup>23</sup>

In North Macedonia, online media are mostly in the hands of domestic natural and legal entities. Seven online media outlets and one television station are owned by foreign capital, namely Hungarian. These are media whose editorial policy is inclined towards the right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE.<sup>24</sup> After the SDSM came to power in 2016, media that, in turn, support its policies also emerged. In 2019, the husband of the prime minister's adviser bought several online media outlets, expressing his intention to further expand the media business.<sup>25</sup> These types of media belong to the first model of online media that maintain political clientelism relations with the centres of power and often spread information and propaganda in their favour in a coordinated manner.

Most online media outlets have small newsrooms with one to five journalists, but there are also such daily information portals that number about a dozen journalists. Many of the online editorial newsrooms of the first model employ journalists and editors who have journalistic experience or appropriate education. However, they also publish disinformation and speculation, or their content has been reviewed by the Complaints Commission at the CMEM or the fact-checking services for other reasons. Gender balance in terms of employment exists in most major newsrooms, and some are led by female editors.

The most common remarks about the work of online media are the unsigned texts, mixing the news with the commentary, tendentious or misleading titles, manipulating content and photos, using content from domestic and foreign media without citing the source, and using content from social networks.

The most common remarks about the work of online media are the unsigned texts, mixing the news with the commentary, tendentious or misleading titles, manipulating content and photos, using content from domestic and foreign media without citing the source, and using content from social networks. Often, a group of online media outlets that support the same political and ideological views with the political centres of power share the same text or photo, which might later

23 Nikodinoska, V. and Milenkovski, S. (2019) "North Macedonia's Epidemic of Political Disinformation", published on TOL website, 21.08.2019. Available at: <https://www.tol.org/client/article/28538-north-macedonias-epidemic-of-political-disinformation.html>

24 Jovanovska, M., Bodoky, T. and Belford, A. (2018) "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans". Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>

25 Jovanovska, M. (2020) "Soprugata sovetnik na Zaev, soprugot vo pohod vo pohod vo mediumskiot biznis", published on Irl.mk, 31 March 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/soprugata-sovetnik-na-zaev-soprugot-vo-pohod-vo-mediumskiot-biznis/>

be confirmed as disinformation or misinformation.<sup>26</sup> Depending on the party they support, the narratives promote or criticize political, ideological, ethnic, or religious views.

The second model is the small online media, usually run by one person, who is both the owner and the journalist in the media organization. Some small media outlets, usually with strong political and ideological views, neither publish ownership information,<sup>27</sup> nor an impressum. These media do not hide their political orientation and unapologetically place themselves on the side of the parties they support. Most of them, however, work like “one-man newsrooms” with a limited impact on the public. Some of them publish content that does not respect journalistic, ethical and professional standards, they abound in sensationalist and shocking news and headlines, and often publish unverified information, speculation, insults, and hate speech. The content is conveyed in colloquial language, uncharacteristic of the journalistic form, often with the intention of discrediting public figures.

However, even those online media outlets that continuously violate the Code of Ethics are fighting for a piece of the advertising cake, which disrupts the fair competition in the media market.<sup>28</sup> For those who are registered as legal entities, the financial situation can be checked through the competent institutions. However, not a single online media outlet has an obligation to publish its financial data or sources of funding, as is the case with broadcast media. Portals generally provide revenue from advertising, and online advertising has been on the rise since 2016.<sup>29</sup> The analysis of the financial operations of 35 legal entities that issue more than 40 leading online media and aggregators shows that the total operating income in 2018 amounted to about 4 million euros compared to 2.7 million euros in 2016. For the parliamentary elections in July 2020, in addition to the traditional ones, as many as 230 online media outlets applied to the State Election Commission for the paid political advertising provided for the participants in the pre-election campaign. For that purpose, the budget allocated 3.6 million euros for all media. Media organizations warn that this poses a risk of political influence over the media and media freedom.<sup>30</sup>

Not a single online media outlet has an obligation to publish its financial data or sources of funding, as is the case with broadcast media. Portals generally provide revenue from advertising, and online advertising has been on the rise since 2016. The analysis of the financial operations of 35 legal entities that issue more than 40 leading online media and aggregators shows that the total operating income in 2018 amounted to about 4 million euros compared to 2.7 million euros in 2016.

26 CMEM Complaints Commission has made several decisions against a group of media outlets that shared the same text.

27 IREX (2019) MSI 2019. Washington: IREX. Available at: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-urasia-2019-full.pdf>. Pg. 83.

28 Ibid. Pg. 79.

29 AAVMS (2020) Utvrduvanje na vlijanieto na novite mediumi vrz formiranjeto na javnoto misljenje l vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3emvH0G>. Pg. 27.

30 Selmani, N. (2020) “Novi 3 milioni evra za plakanje partiska propaganda vo mediumite”, Media Reform Observatory, Metamorphosis. Available at: [https://mediaobservatorium.mk/novi-tri-milioni-evra-za-plakjanje-partiska-propaganda-vo-mediumite/?fbclid=IwAR2afBYIxx5c\\_-P6V5AebEVtqPeDKv1-9Irrl\\_fAdVxP](https://mediaobservatorium.mk/novi-tri-milioni-evra-za-plakjanje-partiska-propaganda-vo-mediumite/?fbclid=IwAR2afBYIxx5c_-P6V5AebEVtqPeDKv1-9Irrl_fAdVxP)

## REVENUES FROM THE OPERATION OF DOMESTIC ONLINE MEDIA IN 2016, 2017 AND 2018

Table 3

	2016	2017	2018
REVENUES FROM THE OPERATION OF 35 legal entities (online media)	MKD 167,852,367 €2.7 million	MKD 189,645,002 €3 mil.	MKD 250,906,555 €4 mil.

Source: AAVMS, *Determining the impact of new media on shaping public opinion and the operation of traditional media* (2020)

In addition to politicians, there are journalists, businessmen and influencers who are the main sources of disinformation and hate speech,<sup>31</sup> whose posts are shared virally on social networks. The third model categorizes celebrities who use multiple platforms to convey their views and messages that, in addition to offensive and inappropriate speech on political and nationalist grounds, often contain hate speech. Thus, several former journalists with many followers on Facebook and Twitter, have their own websites, write columns for other media or have their own shows on the broadcast media. The website of a former journalist declares itself as independent from all centres of power, stating its intention to be financed through donations, i.e. there is information on the website about how one can donate.

The fourth model contains various “formations” on social networks that spread hate speech and disinformation. According to the analysis of civil society organizations, some Facebook pages have from several thousand to 30 thousand members,<sup>32</sup> and are politically and ethnically motivated, especially in the run-up to elections. The diversity of topics that generate membership on social network sites and groups comes from the division of society on political, ethnic and religious grounds. Disinformation and propaganda also produce conspiracy theories related to the Coronavirus crisis, as well as various anti-vaccination movements, theories about the influence and impact of 5G, and several people who are influential on the world stage, such as Bill Gates, Soros and others. All these narratives are intertwined with daily politics.

Almost all media, both traditional and online, share their content through social networks, where the comments under the posts are often not filtered by an administrator. This is another free space for disseminating all kinds of information in the communication space, which is often “packed” with nationalistic rhetoric, insults, threats and hatred on any and all bases, which is why it is categorized as a separate model. However, more detailed research on hate speech and disinformation spread through social media user comments has not been conducted.

31 Nikodinoska, V. and Milenkovski, S. (2019) “North Macedonia’s Epidemic of Political Disinformation”, published on TOL website, 21 August 2019. Available at: <https://www.tol.org/client/article/28538-north-macedonias-epidemic-of-political-disinformation.html>

32 Civil (2020) “Pre-election report on the monitoring of Civil”, 11 July 2020. Available at: <https://civilmedia.mk/predizboren-izveshtaj-za-monitoringot-na-tsivil/>

## 2.4. Balancing between self-regulatory “remedies” and regulation

In the past few years, there have been several initiatives for bringing order to the field of online journalism. In 2020, a registry was established the mandatory criteria of which professional online media must meet in order to become members.<sup>33</sup> By May 2020, about 130 online media outlets had become part of the registry. A certain number of online media outlets do not show initiative or, due to multiple violations of professional standards, cannot join the registry. In 2019, the CMEM initiated the Network for Combating Hate Speech in the Media in order to encourage inter-agency cooperation and to create a coordinated system of action of institutions (professional media and journalistic associations, competent state and regulatory bodies, civil society organizations and other entities in the field of media and human rights).

These initiatives are a kind of a response to the dissonance that exists in the media sphere about the need to regulate online media due to non-compliance with ethical and professional standards. Media organizations oppose the requirements for the legal regulation of online media, as it contradicts the recommendations of the Council of Europe, and underline that the laws related to the liability of traditional media (Criminal Code, Copyright Law, Anti-Discrimination Law, n.b.) also apply to online media.<sup>34</sup> In recent years, some courts have dismissed defamation and insult lawsuits through online media because they were not defined as media in the media regulations.<sup>35</sup> According to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), this is due to the “political background” aimed at discrediting the online media, in order to provide evidence to the Government for the case for more robust regulation.<sup>36</sup>

In recent years, some courts have dismissed defamation and insult lawsuits through online media because they were not defined as media in the media regulations. According to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), this is due to the “political background” aimed at discrediting the online media, in order to provide evidence to the Government for the case for more robust regulation.

The Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services has jurisdiction over television and radio stations, and only administers the registry of print media. The regulator exercises control over broadcasters in compliance with the legal provisions regarding programming principles (Article 61) and special prohibitions for programmes that incite or spread discrimination, intolerance or hatred based on race, gender, religion or nationality (Article 48).<sup>37</sup> It has no jurisdiction over online media.

<sup>33</sup> Registry of professional online media. Rules for admission of internet portals for membership. Available at: <https://promedia.mk/rules?lng=mk>

<sup>34</sup> AJM (2017) “Announcement: Analysis of online media presented”. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://znm.org.mk/prezentirana-analiza-za-onlajn-mediu/>

<sup>35</sup> Nebiu, B. at All (2018) Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists Safety in Macedonia. Skopje: AJM. Available at: <https://safejournalists.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indicators-on-the-level-of-media-freedom-and-journalists-safety-in-Macedonia.pdf>. Pg. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Pg. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (2013), Art. 61 and Art. 48. Available at: [https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon\\_za\\_audio\\_i\\_audiovizuelni\\_mediumski\\_uslugi\\_mkd\\_1.pdf](https://avmu.mk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Zakon_za_audio_i_audiovizuelni_mediumski_uslugi_mkd_1.pdf)

Of the civil society organizations working in the field of human rights, the Helsinki Committee monitors hate speech on traditional media and social networks in order to improve the capacity of police officers, judges and public prosecutors to process hate speech cases and provide effective mechanisms for the protection of citizens' rights.<sup>38</sup> The Metamorphosis Foundation administers the fact-checking and deconstruction of disinformation in the media on its websites Crithink.mk and Vistinomer.mk. The project "Fighting Fake News Narratives" (f2n2.mk) is implemented by the CSO "Most" against disinformation on the internet. The CSO Civil conducts election monitoring and publishes information on hate speech and disinformation on social networks.

Regarding social media, in May 2020, Facebook intervened when it was discovered that "disinformation farms" from North Macedonia and the Philippines were working for the Natural News site, known for sharing conspiracy theories and disinformation about Covid-19, by removing the site.

### 3. EXAMPLES OF ONLINE MEDIA THAT OFTEN SPREAD DISINFORMATION, PROPAGANDA AND HATE SPEECH

In order to present the models of dissemination, propaganda and hate speech, the analysis will present examples of media and other communication forms, their organizational set-up, transparency of data in terms of ownership and editorial board/newsroom, and the content they produce, as well as data indicating their connection to the centres of power. Financial data will be displayed for those online media that are available from other surveys, as the media themselves have no obligation to publish them.

The analysis will rely on the findings of the CMEM and fact-checking services, given that only they monitor their work in terms of compliance with professional standards. According to the decisions of the CMEM<sup>39</sup> a dozen online media often appear as violators of multiple professional standards. They are also subject to CriThink and Vistinomer analyses or are indicated in the monitoring of the Helsinki Committee. The starting point were the media against which the CMEM brought several adjudications for violations of Articles 1, 3, 10 and 13 in the period from 2019 to June 2020.

38 See more at: [www.govornaomraza.mk](http://www.govornaomraza.mk); <https://mhc.org.mk/news/povik-za-angazhman-na-mediumski-monitori-za-registriranje-na-govor-na-omraza-na-socijalnite-mediumi-za-periodot-noemvri-2019-septemvri-2020-godina>

39 CMEM - Decisions and Opinions. Available at: <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/arhiva-odluki-i-mislenja>

## CMEM ADJUDICATIONS FOR VIOLATION OF ARTICLES 1, 3, 10 AND 13 OF THE CODE OF ETHICS IN 2019–2020

Table 4

MEDIA	ARTICLE 1	ARTICLE 3	ARTICLE 10	ARTICLE 13
Dokaz M	11	1	2	4
Republika.mk	7	1	1	2
Vecer.mk	4	1	1	2
Lider.mk	3		1	1
Infomax.mk	3			4
Kurir.mk	2	2		2
Maktel.mk	1			1
1TV	3	1		2

Source: CMEM, <https://semm.mk/komisija-za-zalbi-4/arhiva-odluki-i-mislenja>

### 3.1. Group of portals: Dissemination of disinformation from the same ideological matrix

Several media outlets against which the CMEM has brought several adjudications for violations of the Code of Ethics are related to the Hungarian investments in the media sphere in North Macedonia.

The company that publishes the portal Republika.mk, and previously published a weekly under the same name, was founded in 2012 and was initially registered in Belize. In 2016, ownership was transferred to a domestic physical entity, from whom the company Adinamic, owned by the Hungarian citizen Agnes Adamik, bought 51%.<sup>40</sup> This company also bought a majority share in the company EM Media, which owns the online media Kurir.mk, Lider.mk, Deneshen.mk, Ekonomski.mk and Vistina.mk. The company EM Media was previously managed by a person who is related to an official of the right-wing party VMRO-DPMNE. The company Adinamic also bought a part of the shares in LD Press Media, which owns the portal NetPress.com.mk.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike its beginnings, the Republika portal now has transparent ownership and publishes an impressum, according to which the editorial board/newsroom has 11 editors and journalists. Lider.mk has ten employees in the editorial board/newsroom, and information on the owner company and the director is published on the site. The company-owner of Republika.mk and Lider.mk in 2020 was the company Prva Republika DOO, which is managed by the same director.

<sup>40</sup> Jovanovska, M., Bodoky, T. and Belford, A. (2018) "Right-Wing Hungarian Media Moves Into the Balkans", published on [www.occrp.org](http://www.occrp.org), 9.05.2018. Available at: <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/right-wing-hungarian-media-moves-into-the-balkans>; <https://irl.mk/mediumite-na-ungarskata-desnitsa-se-pr/>

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*



## TRANSPARENCY OF OWNERSHIP AND FINANCIAL DATA OF A GROUP OF ONLINE MEDIA

Table 5

MEDIUM	IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS	OWNERSHIP/ PUBLISHER/ REGISTRANT	DIRECTOR	MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REG- ISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA	ADVERTISEMENTS	OPERATING INCOME	ALEXA RANK- ING
Repub- lika.mk	Yes/ 11 journal- ists and editors (7 women/ 4 men)	Prva Republika DOO Skopje	Done Donevski	No	-VMRO-DPMNE (election campaign) - #Because I love Macedonia -Triglav (insurance) -Weight loss products	2018 €234,000  2017 €219,000  2016 €387,500  (The data refer to the company Prva Republika)	Over 50
Lider.mk	Yes/ 8 ed- itors and journalists (2 women/ 6 men)	Prva Republika DOO Skopje	Done Donevski	No	-VMRO- DPMNE (election campaign) - #Because I love Macedonia	(Same data as above for Prva Republika)	Over 50
Kurir.mk	Yes/ 7 ed- itors and journalists (3 women/ 4 men)	EM Media DOO Skopje	/	No	-VMRO-DPMNE (election campaign) -European University -Sinalco.mk (prize game-juices) -Weight loss product	2018 - €390,000  2017 €136,000  2016 €272,000	31
Net- press. com.mk	Yes / 5 ed- itors and journalists (2 women / 3 men)	LD Press Media	Lidija Stancev- ska Kumeva	No	-VMRO-DPMNE (election cam- paign) -NLB Bank -Pekabesko -Weight loss prod- uct -Thrivity.mk (em- ployment site) -Gohost.mk (site domain host)	2018 €117,600	30

Source: Media Websites, MARnet; Financial data from: AAAVMS' Analysis and from Analitika.mk: <https://analitika.mk/biznisot-so-internet-portali-tezi-okolu-tri-milioni-evra/>.

During the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE party, advertisements from government campaigns, institutions and large domestic companies were published on some portals,<sup>42</sup> a practice that was interrupted by a change of government. The media wrote that in 2015 the companies EM Media and Prva Republika had payments of 25,000 euros each, i.e. 32,000 euros from the Government, as stated in the database of budget payments.<sup>43</sup> In the local elections in 2017, according to the report of the VMRO-DPMNE party, some publishing companies of online media received funds for banners from the party—mostly EM Media, which publishes the portal Kurir, and Republika.mk.<sup>44</sup> During the 2019 presidential elections, the company EM Media received the biggest portion of the money allocated for online advertisements – 31,000 euros, while Prva Republika, which is the publisher of the Republika website portal, took 17,650 euros, more specifically for advertising the VMRO-DPMNE presidential candidate.<sup>45</sup> These finances for media advertising, according to the agreement among the political parties, are allocated from the State Budget. In the pre-election period in June 2020, the websites of Republika.mk and Lider.mk ran ads under the slogan #Buy Macedonian products, a campaign supported by the VMRO-DPMNE party. EM Media owning the portal Kurir.mk is in second, and Prva Republika owning Republika.mk is in fourth place among the first five entities that realized the most sales revenues in 2018. In 2018, EM Media increased the 2016 revenues by 50%, while Prva Republika generated much higher revenues in 2016 compared to the following two consecutive years.<sup>46</sup>

During the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE party, advertisements from government campaigns, institutions and large domestic companies were published on some portals, a practice that was interrupted by a change of government.

Common to these portals is their inclination towards the former ruling VMRO-DPMNE party, but even after the change of the government in 2016 and until 2020, they kept their editorial policy close to the opposition party and maintained a critical attitude towards the SDSM government.<sup>47</sup> In some cases, the media itself confirms its critical position: *“Republika’ is the biggest threat to the government: Šekerinska is also threatening us with a lawsuit.”* (24 August 2019). For some, the choice of columnists is such that they mostly support the policies of the VMRO-DPMNE party, or, quantitatively and qualitatively, their content shows a tendency towards one political party and a critical attitude towards the government. It is a common practice of many of these portals to transmit the same content, with almost the same or a similar

42 Trpkovski, G. (2020) “Ungarskoto maslo vo makedonskite mediumi”, published on Prizma.mk, 14 February 2020. Available at: <https://prizma.mk/ungarskoto-maslo-vo-makedonskite-mediumi/>.

43 Ibid; Open database: [www.open.source.gov.mk](http://www.open.source.gov.mk).

44 Jordanovska, M. (2017) “VMRO-DPMNE so najbogata reklama I propaganda na lokalnite izbori”, published on Prizma.mk, 07 October 2017. Available at: <https://prizma.mk/vmro-dpmne-najbogata-reklama-propaganda-na-lokalnite-izbori>.

45 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) “Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni”, published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>.

46 AAVMS (2020) Utvrduvanje na vlijaniето na novite mediumi vrz formiranje na javnoto misljenje I vrz rabotenjeto na tradicionalnite mediumi. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3emvH0G>. Pg. 27.

47 Republika.mk: “Šekerinska laze, ‘Republika’ ne se izvinila I nema da se izvini”, published on Republika.mk, 22 June 2020. Available at: <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/shekerinska-laze-republika-ne-se-izvinila-i-nema-da-se-izvini/>

title, accompanied by the same photo. Even disinformation is replicated and disseminated in this way. Thus, the CMEM Complaints Commission decided that professional standards were breached by the text *“Zaev and Dimitrov took us back to the 19th century, you can state that you are Greek or Serbian at the border, but not Macedonian”* (22 December 2019) published by the media outlet Republika.mk, and under another title by Infomax.mk and Vecer.mk. The text was a transferred Facebook status of a social media user. However, the media neither tried to contact him to confirm the information with the relevant institution nor expressed any reservations with the status in order to avoid possible disinformation and manipulation of the public. The text in all three media was not signed. The Commission concluded that the media had violated the ethical standards 1, 3 and 13, related to reporting half-truths and unverified information, and mixing facts and opinions.

It is a common practice of many of these portals to transmit the same content, with almost the same or a similar title, accompanied by the same photo. Even disinformation is replicated and disseminated in this way.

The fact-checking service CriThink<sup>48</sup> analyzed several texts on Republika.mk, Kurir.mk, Netpress.mk and Lider.mk. The analysis showed false, tendentious or sensationalist titles, misinformation, unverified information and speculations, sensationalist news, selective use of correct information and their manipulation, xenophobic content, unverified information taken from social networks (Republika.mk: 12 February 2019, 29 January 2019, 27 February 2019, 02 June 2020; Lider.mk: 27 March 2019, 17 September 2019; Kurir.mk: 21 March 2019, 24 April 2019, 04 October 2019, 10 March 2020, 26 March 2020; Netpress.com.mk: 12 August 2019). For example, CriThink reviewed the news on Lider.mk, according to which the Assembly dismissed the first minister of Jewish descent in North Macedonia, alluding that she was the target of anti-Semitic attacks by the ruling SDSM party (18 February 2020). This narrative was shared by most media with the same political inclination in order to accuse the government of anti-Semitism. The Minister of Labour and Social Politics from the ranks of the VMRO-DPMNE opposition was dismissed for not using the constitutional name of the country. CriThink assessed the text of Lider.mk as unprofessional and manipulative, creating a distorted image behind the reasons for the dismissal of the minister.

### 3.2. DokazM: Sensationalism and scandals

The DokazM.mk portal is one of the “most controversial” online media when it comes to non-compliance with the standard journalistic expression and publishing accurate and verified information.

The website contains neither an impressum nor any information about the owner of the media, although when checking MARnet<sup>49</sup> the name of the registrant is indicated. The CMEM received the most complaints against this medium in the period from 2019 to June 2020. This medium uses inappropriate

48 CriThink Website, Fact-Checking Section: <https://crithink.mk/category/proverka-na-fakti/>

49 MarNet-Macedonian Academic Research Network: <https://marnet.mk/>

language and has a sensationalist approach to presenting information, often publishing “shocking” and “scandalous” headlines and news. According to the CMEM decisions, in most of the decisions, this medium violated Articles 1, 7 (concerning the right to privacy), 13 and 15 (related to the culture of speech and ethics and inappropriate communication with the public).

MEDIUM	IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS	OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLIS- HER/ REGIS- TRANT	DIRECTOR	MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REG- ISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA	ADVERTISEMENTS	OPERATING INCOME	ALEXA RANKING
Dokaz. mk	/	Marjan Stamenkovski (name of registrant according to MARnet, not listed on the website)	/	No	#Because I love Macedonia -Alkaloid -MaxBet -Vitaminska -Izvorska voda -Kozhuvchanka (water)	/	Over 50

Source: Media website, MARnet.

In the past two years, the CMEM has issued two decisions for hate speech against the media, the last one on 8 June 2020, in favour of a daily newspaper journalist.<sup>50</sup> The CMEM concludes that this is an “extremely unprofessional and frivolous journalistic product, whose sole purpose is to insult, ridicule and personally discredit the journalist”. The texts are full of insults, inappropriate and vulgar language, hate speech and discrimination based on gender and physical appearance.<sup>51</sup> Such qualifications by the media for public figures and ordinary citizens were noticed in other content as well.

Given the criticism it has directed at all political centres of power at certain times in the past, the consistent political bias of the media cannot be pinpointed. However, in the run-up to the 2020 elections, the central position of the news related to the opposition party was obvious, mostly in a positive connotation, and the critical, at times even ridiculous, tone towards the government. Despite the complaints, the portal maintains the image of a sensationalist “press” that publishes speculation and often frivolous content. On their Facebook page, the comments are not viewed or filtered by the administrator, and through them, hate speech, obscene speech and insults are further spread.

50 CMEM (2020) Decision of the CMEM Complaints Commission. Skopje: CMEM. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2WeUYUa>

51 Ibid.

The financial data of the medium are not known. Despite the infamous reputation it has, the medium still publishes ads or has banners from major Macedonian brands, such as the food company “Vitaminska”, the pharmaceutical company “Alkaloid”, the mineral water “Kozuvchanka”, as well as the *#Buy Macedonian products* campaign supported by the VMRO-DPMNE party.

### 3.3. Vecer.mk: violation of standards despite fifteen years of operation

Vecer.mk is a news portal established in 2004 whose editor in chief is Ivona Talevska. She is the president of the Macedonian Association of Journalists (MAJ), a parallel association to the Association of Journalists of Macedonia of which the majority of journalists are members. Until 2016, she was known as the editor and anchor of the news programme on the largest private national television channel, TV Sitel, when she disappeared from the air after the change of government and the opening of a court case by the Special Public Prosecutor’s Office. Although the website does not give the name of the owner, the company Maksmedia, of which one of the co-owners is Dragan Pavlović Latas, is the owner of the portal. Dragan Pavlović Latas is known as one of the editors of TV Sitel, a staunch supporter of VMRO-DPMNE policies while they were in government by 2016 and a fierce critic of the left-wing government led by the SDSM. After the change of government in 2016, he withdrew from his position as editor of the TV channel, while still writing as a regular columnist for the Vecer.mk portal.

Vecer.mk has a consistent editorial policy that has supported the VMRO-DPMNE party ever since its first spell in power, which ended in 2016. Financial data for the portal are not available. However, according to investigative journalism research,<sup>52</sup> during the 2019 presidential elections, Maksmedia received 17,700 euros for advertising the VMRO-DPMNE candidate, which is the second-highest amount spent on an online medium, while in 2020, the company invoiced around 12,000 euros for VMRO-DPMNE advertisements for Vecer.mk.

MEDIUM	IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS	OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLISH- ER/ REGIS- TRANT	DIRECTOR	MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REGISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA	ADVERTISEMENTS	OPERATING INCOME	ALEXA RANK- ING
Vecer.mk	4 editors (3 women/ 1 man)	Maksme- dia LTD (name of MARnet’s registrant)	/	No	-VMRO-DPMNE (election campaign)	/	8

Source: Media website, MARnet.

52 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) “Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni”, published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>

During 2019 and 2020, the CMEM made nine adjudications against the portal Vecer.mk due to violation of several articles of the Code of Journalists – 1, 3, 12 (failure to highlight the source or author of the text), 13, 14 (lack of professional distance from the political subjects) and Article 10 which relates to hate speech.

CriThink reviewed texts published on Vecer.mk in which it assessed that fake news was transmitted (27 February 2019), tendentious and unverified information was taken from social networks (12 February 2019), there were manipulative titles that were not supported by the content of the text were detected (28 June 2020), and announcements of scandals that were officially dismissed (8 June 2020). There are cases when the media has used and shared news from other media that have a similar political and ideological orientation, or published disinformation.

### 3.4. Infomax.mk: Commentary approach to journalism

The portal Infomax.mk has a larger newsroom and publishes an impressum and information about the publisher. The financial data are unknown. The media has a right-wing orientation, i.e. it supports the VMRO-DPMNE party and is critical of the government, which is evident from the positioning of the texts that support the opposition, the tone of the reporting, and the choice of columnists. In March 2020, the editor in chief Aleksandar Mitovski was sentenced to six months' probation for disclosing an official secret. The MAJ, of which the editor is a member, described the verdict as a threat to journalism and the public by the government, the prosecution and the judiciary, which they say are in the service of the ruling SDSM.<sup>53</sup> The sentence was also condemned by the AJM, with the explanation that the public interest should be taken into consideration.<sup>54</sup>

MEDIUM	IMPRESSUM/ NUMBER OF JOURNALISTS	OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLISH- ER/ REGIS- TRANT	DIRECTOR	MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REGISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA	ADVER- TISE- MENTS	OPERATING INCOME	ALEXA RANKING
Infomax. mk	Yes/ 8 editors and journalists (2 women/ 6 men	CIA Re- search and Analysis Center	/	No	VMRO- DPMNE (election campaign	2017 €2,500 2018 €16,000	50

Source: Media Websites, MARnet. Financial data taken from the analysis of Analitika.mk, <https://analitika.mk/biznisot-so-internet-portali-tezi-okolu-tri-milioni-evra/>.

53 The MAJ's reaction to the Court's decision against journalist and editor Aleksandar Mitovski, 4 March 2020. Available at: <https://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/man-sudot-potvrdi-deka-vo-makedonija-vladee-hibriden-rezim-zakanata-kon-site-novinari-e-jasna-i-direktna/>

54 Meta.mk (2020) "Novinarskite zdruzenija ja osudija uslovnata kazna zatvor za urednikot na 'Infomaks'", published on Meta.mk, 5 March 2020. Available at: [https://meta.mk/novinarskite-zdruzheni%25d1%2598a-%25d1%2598a-osudi%25d1%2598a-uslovnata-kazna-zatvor-za-urednikot-na-infomaks/?utm\\_source=rss&utm\\_medium=rss&utm\\_campaign=novinarskite-zdruzheni%25d1%2598a-%25d1%2598a-osudi%25d1%2598a-uslovnata-kazna-zatvor-za-urednikot-na-infomaks](https://meta.mk/novinarskite-zdruzheni%25d1%2598a-%25d1%2598a-osudi%25d1%2598a-uslovnata-kazna-zatvor-za-urednikot-na-infomaks/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=novinarskite-zdruzheni%25d1%2598a-%25d1%2598a-osudi%25d1%2598a-uslovnata-kazna-zatvor-za-urednikot-na-infomaks)

In 2019, the company owner of the Infomax portal received 14,500 euros for advertisements during the presidential elections.<sup>55</sup>

The CMEM has made six decisions against Infomax.mk due to publishing incomplete information and not consulting a second party, as well as due to mixing facts with commentary. Some texts were removed by the medium itself, there were situations when its texts were published by other online media, or the portal shared news and other content with media that have the same ideological and political views.

The content of Infomax.mk is one of those most frequently reviewed by the fact-checking service CriThink. According to CriThink, in the published content, there was speculation and unverified information, and personal attacks against politicians from the government. There were also often texts in which facts were mixed with commentary or references to Facebook statuses, manipulative texts (16 April 2019; 13 March 2020), tendentious speculation (13 February 2019), one-sided and politically motivated texts for denigrating political adversaries (29 April 2019), republishing sensationalist and old texts (14 October 2019), and titles and texts that spread panic and unverified information in emergency situations (19 March 2020).

### 3.5. Maktel.mk: speculations and apologies

Among the group of online portals that often do not adhere to the standard journalistic expression and use announcements such as “shocking” or “exclusive” and inappropriate language is the portal Maktel.mk.

MEDIUM	IMPRES-SUM/ NUMBER OF JOUR- NALISTS	OWNER- SHIP/ PUBLISHER/ REGIS- TRANT	DIRECTOR	MEMBER- SHIP IN THE REGISTER OF ONLINE MEDIA	ADVERTISEMENTS	OPER- ATING INCOME	ALEXA RANK- ING
Maktel. mk	Yes/ 1 editor	Popularni Knigi DOO	/	No	-Alkaloid -Mebel-Vi -Sinalko (prize game) -Replek -Eurofarm -Jamieson -Nikob (security) -Brilliant (oil) -Construction company -Diners -Izvorska voda - Peugeot -Tourist agency -FON -Cable operator -Total TV -Semos	2018 €16,618  2017 €9,000  2016 €8,300	Over 50

Source: Media Websites, MARnet; Financial data taken from the analysis of AAAVMS, <https://bit.ly/3eIRPbz>.

55 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) “Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni”, published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://irl.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>.

This media supports the ruling SDSM and has a critical attitude towards the right-wing VMRO-DPMNE political party, which is visible in the tone of reporting, the headlines and the texts. The journalistic style is non-standard and colloquial, using obscene language to criticize the opposition, and unapologetically favouring the government. This is one of the few media in which only the name of the editor in chief is written in the impressum, but on the other hand, the number of ads from prominent companies on the website is quite significant.

In 2019 and 2020, in three cases before the Council, proceedings against the media were closed due to the reconciliation of the parties. In this period, this media moderated the tone of the reporting: however, in the past, there were violations based on partial and unverified information, hate speech, inappropriate communication with the public, and abuse of the media for confrontation with people and colleagues.

### 3.6. 1TV: From high ambitions to scandalous closure

In this group of online media, 1TV was one of the rare television channels that, in the year and a half of its operation, until September 2019, was dogged by many controversies about hidden ownership, as well as about some of the content it produced. The television station was initially considered close to some politicians of the ruling party, but after the news broke out of the blackmail scandal of a well-known businessman, its owner and the special public prosecutor were sentenced to prison. During the 2019 presidential elections, the SDSM spent 37,000 euros on promoting their candidate on this television station.<sup>56</sup>

1TV was one of the rare television channels that, in the year and a half of its operation, until September 2019, was dogged by many controversies about hidden ownership, as well as about some of the content it produced.

In 2019, the Council of Ethics found three violations for publishing partial and unverified information, and two violations for mixing facts and opinions in certain shows, as well as violations of Article 7 (personal privacy) and Article 16 (reputation and dignity of the profession).

On two occasions in 2019, the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services found violations of programme principles in terms of protection of dignity and privacy, and presumption of innocence, as well as the objective and impartial presentation of events with equal treatment of different points of view.<sup>57</sup>

56 Jovanovska, M. and Cvetkovska, S. (2020) "Drzavni pari za izborni informaciski vojni", published on IRL.mk, 23 July 2020. Available at: <https://iri.mk/drzavni-pari-za-izborni-informatsiski-voni/>.

57 AAVMS (2015-2020) Reports of conducted supervision/measures, public reprimand. Skopje: AAVMS. Available at: <https://avmu.mk/1-%D1%82%D0%B2/>



### 3.7. Public figures with inflammatory remarks

In recent years, public figures have posted hate speech on their social media profiles or websites, especially on the basis of political affiliation.<sup>58</sup>

Former journalists Milenko Nedelkovski and Branko Tričkovski, supporters of opposing political options, post ironic and obscene, but also hate speech content based on political affiliation. On Nedelkovski's Facebook profile, hate speech and obscene language are noticeable not only in his statuses but also in the comments below the posts, which are often not viewed or filtered by the administrator.<sup>59</sup> Nedelkovski has been known to the public for his controversial views since the rule of the VMRO-DPMNE party until 2016. The only case under Article 394-d of the Criminal Code ever to have been opened in the Basic Court 1, for spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system, is against him, but the verdict is not yet final, and the case is pending.<sup>60</sup> Experts pinpoint the problem with the absence of any court verdict on hate speech in the fact that the Criminal Code does not have a specific provision that criminalizes hate speech, but applies articles that prohibit discrimination, racial hatred and nationalistic intolerance, which is a problem for case-law to effectively sanction hate speech promoters.<sup>61</sup> Experts believe that Nedelkovski's outbursts, but also those of other media personalities until 2016, were deliberately tolerated as "a project of the government in the media sphere, as part of the overall situation of a 'captured state'".<sup>62</sup>

Experts pinpoint the problem with the absence of any court verdict on hate speech in the fact that the Criminal Code does not have a specific provision that criminalizes hate speech, but applies articles that prohibit discrimination, racial hatred and nationalistic intolerance, which is a problem for case-law to effectively sanction hate speech promoters.

Against Branko Tričkovski, on the other hand, in February 2020, the Ministry of Interior opened a case due to deciding criminal liability in "spreading racist and xenophobic material via a computer system" and "inciting hatred on a discriminatory basis". On his Facebook profile, he posted a text about the Caretaker Minister of Labour and Social Policy Rašela Mizrahi commenting on her Jewish origins. His column published on the online platform was reviewed by the CMEM's Commission, during which inappropriate communication with the public was established as well as his bickering with personalities, including journalists.<sup>63</sup>

58 Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/MilenkoNedelkovskiDnevnik/posts/3631176286899368>; Hate Speech Website, Registered Hate Speech Case: <http://govornaomraza.mk/reports/view/2025>

59 Hate Speech Website: <http://govornaomraza.mk/reports/view/1738>

60 Response from the Basic Court 1 to the Request of MIM for free access to information, 18 June 2020, Skopje (via email).

61 Živanovski, N. (2017) "Effectiveness of the legislation on protection from hate speech". Skopje: MIM. Available at: [https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1032/Analiza\\_Efikasnosta\\_na\\_zakonskata\\_regulativa\\_za\\_zastita\\_od\\_govor\\_na\\_omraza.pdf](https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1032/Analiza_Efikasnosta_na_zakonskata_regulativa_za_zastita_od_govor_na_omraza.pdf).

62 Ibid. Pg. 12.

63 CMEM (2019) "Decision of the CMEM Complaints Commission". Skopje: CMEM. Available at: [http://sem.mk/attachments/28-11-2019/Branko\\_Geroski\\_za\\_Frontline.mk.pdf](http://sem.mk/attachments/28-11-2019/Branko_Geroski_za_Frontline.mk.pdf).

### 3.8. Social networks: an explosion of hate speech

At the beginning of 2020, a more pronounced rise in reported cases due to hate speech was observed, which was especially present and prominent on social media networks.<sup>64</sup> According to the Helsinki Committee of Macedonia, the traditional (national) media are more aware of hate speech, but the portals are a channel for spreading disinformation and inciting hate speech since much of their content is posted on Facebook and Twitter.<sup>65</sup>

From January to June 2020, the majority of reported cases of hate speech were due to ethnic and political affiliation, and sexual orientation and gender identity. There was a growing trend compared to hate speech during the 2019 presidential election campaign, which was dominated by ethnic and political hate speech.<sup>66</sup> In the database of the Helsinki Committee, there are numerous examples with insults and derogatory names towards minority ethnic communities and political adversaries, especially the leaders of the largest political parties, or on the basis of sexual affiliation and gender identity. In the period from February to May 2020, there was an increase in hate speech on ethnic grounds before the Christian holiday of Easter and the beginning of the Ramadan fasting, when religious leaders had opposing views and recommendations from those of the Government as to respecting measures for preventing the spread of Covid-19, as well as hate speech against the Roma community.<sup>67</sup> The rapid growth of newly infected people with Covid-19 has also created hate speech based on health status, combined with ethnic affiliation.

#### REGISTERED CASES OF HATE SPEECH IN THE MEDIA AND ON SOCIAL NETWORKS IN 2019 AND 2020

Table 5

HATE SPEECH	January–June 2020	2019
Due to ethnic affiliation	172	85
Political affiliation	93	43
Sexual orientation and gender identity	83	111
Religion and religious belief	22	7
Sex and gender	14	28

Source: Hate speech, <http://govornaomraza.mk/main>

64 Interview with a representative of the Helsinki Committee, 18 June 2020 (via email).

65 *Ibid.*

66 Helsinki Committee (2020) "Monthly Report on Human Rights - February 2020". Skopje: HC. Available at: <https://mhc.org.mk/reports/mesechen-izveshtaj-za-chovekovite-prava-vo-republika-severna-makedonija-fevruari-2020/>

67 Helsinki Committee (2020) "Monthly Report on Human Rights - April 2020". Skopje: HC. Available at: <https://mhc.org.mk/reports/mesechen-izveshtaj-za-chovekovite-prava-vo-republika-severna-makedonija-april-2020/>; <https://mhc.org.mk/reports/mesechen-izveshtaj-za-chovekovite-prava-vo-republika-severna-makedonija-fevruari-2020/>.

On the social media networks Facebook and Twitter, those who spread hate speech often do not use their real names, and they are somewhat hidden or use fake profiles. The monitoring report of the Helsinki Committee states that “there is a tendency from certain individuals/portals to continuously spread and incite hate speech. The Committee does not have a mechanism to determine whether a profile is fake or not, because that competence is in the hands of the Sector for Computer Crime and Digital Forensics at the Ministry of Interior.”<sup>68</sup>

Some of the media that have Facebook pages, such as DokazM and Markukule, do not filter the comments under the content they share, thus allowing social network users to spread disinformation and hate speech.<sup>69</sup>

According to the Helsinki Committee of Macedonia, the traditional (national) media are more aware of hate speech, but the portals are a channel for spreading disinformation and inciting hate speech since much of their content is posted on Facebook and Twitter.

In the first half of 2020, attacks on and discrediting of journalists was noticed on social media networks, especially against women journalists on the basis of their gender. A civil servant in the Central Registry threatened the editors of A1On.mk, Meri Jordanovska and Alfa TV, Iskra Korovešovska with insulting and derogatory words and published content attacking them on his Facebook profile. The case provoked reactions from the media community, and the Minister of the Interior launched an investigation into the threats, after which the intimidator received a prison sentence for endangering the security of his ex-wife and for the threats against the journalist Jordanovska.

On the other hand, hate speech is often directed towards persons who are neither prominent figures in society nor holders of public office. A Facebook user wrote a status on her profile against holding wedding parties during the corona crisis period. There were 270 comments under her status, in which there was hate speech, as well as calls for violence against the girl.<sup>70</sup> “... We have witnessed extreme misogyny, homophobia and calls for lynching. It often happens with women who are considered to be public figures or are ‘loud’ on social media,” commented Kalia Dimitrova of Radio MOF.<sup>71</sup>

68 Interview with a representative of the Macedonian Helsinki Committee, 18 June 2020.

69 Hate Speech Website: <http://govornaomraza.mk/>.

70 Facebook status of K.K.: <https://www.facebook.com/kvkriss/posts/10221560773904657>

71 Petreska, E. (2020) “Kako obicen Fejsbuk status go pokaza ekstremniot govor na omrazana internet”, published on Radio MOF, 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.radiomof.mk/kako-obichen-fejsbuk-status-go-pokazha-ekstremniot-govor-na-omraza-na-internet/>

## 4. CONCLUSION

The reasons behind creating and spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda through the media in North Macedonia most often lie in the connection of the media with the political and business centres of power. The themes that “feed” these phenomena are generated by the long history of political and ethnic division of the society and are usually intensified in times of crisis or pre-election periods. Hate speech of a political and ethnic nature, as well as on grounds of sexuality and gender, is on the rise on social media networks.

The outbreak of the global crisis caused by the coronavirus in North Macedonia in early 2020 coincided with the period before the parliamentary elections. These two topics created a “charge” for the escalation of disinformation and hate speech on political and ethnic grounds, but also on the basis of health. In the period of celebrating the Easter and Ramadan holidays, religiously motivated rhetoric intertwined with daily politics was also present.

In 2020, hate speech has increased compared to the previous year. Although this phenomenon has constantly been present in the communication sphere since 2001, and despite the existence of cases when it transformed into hate crimes, in North Macedonia there is practically no confirmed court verdict on this basis. The reason, according to experts, is the lack of a specific provision in the Criminal Code that criminalizes hate speech, which leads to the application of articles that prohibit discrimination, racial hatred or nationalist intolerance instead.<sup>72</sup>

The global crisis caused by the coronavirus in North Macedonia in early 2020 coincided with the period before the parliamentary elections. These two topics created a “charge” for the escalation of disinformation and hate speech on political and ethnic grounds.

Especially in the internet sphere, moments of tension are reflected by creating several narratives with opposing political and ethnic views in which much disinformation and propaganda in support of the centres of power is intertwined. Although in the communication sphere different media, even the neutral and professional, sometimes create and transmit disinformation and hate speech, the analysis shows that one group of media more often than all others applies these unethical and undemocratic practices. The editorial policy of most of them shows a bias for the opposition in the period 2016–2020, which is evident from the way the parties are being criticized and/or favoured. Their relations with the VMRO-DPMNE party date back to the time when the party was in power until 2016, and the research as far as 2014 demonstrates that a group of online media outlets created content in order to construct a negative campaign against the then opposition.<sup>73</sup> Some of them were once registered in offshore destinations, but in the meantime, they have got new owners and that data is

72 Živanovski, N. (2017) “The effectiveness of the legislation on protection against hate speech”. Skopje: MIM. Available at: [https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1032/Analiza\\_Efikasnost\\_na\\_zakonskata\\_regulativa\\_za\\_zastita\\_od\\_govor\\_na\\_omraza.pdf](https://mim.org.mk/attachments/article/1032/Analiza_Efikasnost_na_zakonskata_regulativa_za_zastita_od_govor_na_omraza.pdf). Pg. 1.

73 *Ibid.*

available today. The ownership of seven online media outlets has Hungarian capital, of which the company EM Media who owns the portal Kurir and the company Prva Republika are among the five most successful in terms of operating income in 2018. However, the sources of funding for online media remain untransparent, which leaves room for developing political clientelism relations with the parties.

Most of these online media outlets have larger newsrooms, their own established audiences, and they support each other in conveying their messages. Women editors lead several of the portals, and the gender balance is maintained among those with more journalists.

The motivation for spreading hate speech and disinformation in the small “one-man newsroom” portals also has a political bias. In addition to discrediting political opponents, as well as individual characters who are the target of their publications, the seriousness of the media itself, which is managed and operated by only one person and which does not show basic transparency to its audience, is brought into question. One gets the impression that their role, like that of individuals-public figures active in the internet sphere, is primarily to harm adversaries, rather than to inform the public, and the ultimate goal is to “flatter” the centres of power.

In order to protect citizens from the influence of the unprofessional and unethical media, the media community and citizens should support and use the self-regulatory mechanisms to show their effectiveness more convincingly.

Unlike online media, traditional media, which are regulated by law and monitored by the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, rarely violate professional standards regarding disinformation and hate speech. Some experts believe that one of the reasons for the information chaos in the online sphere is the lack of media regulation. Opponents of the idea, however, argue that there are enough laws that apply to traditional media and that they should apply unselectively to online media as well.

In order to protect citizens from the influence of the unprofessional and unethical media, the media community and citizens should support and use the self-regulatory mechanisms to show their effectiveness more convincingly. This analysis focused only on the most frequent violators of standards. However, the CMEM also makes decisions against media that are considered professional and neutral, which confirms that self-regulation is a neutral mechanism for “regulation” of the profession, rather than the restrictive laws and draconian measures by the institutions.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **The media community and the civil society sector** should support the self-regulatory mechanisms in the media sphere in order to prevent unprofessional and unethical work and to protect the public from misleading and unprofessional information published by certain media. Thus, the media will be able to improve their professional practices, without rigorous sanctions on their work.
- **Online media** should display ownership, editorial and funding data in order to demonstrate to their audience transparency, professionalism and integrity.
- **The public prosecutor's office** needs to show more engagement and be more proactive in prosecuting hate speech, and the judiciary needs to process cases, as the number of registered hate speech cases, which can result in hate crimes, increases.
- **Professional media and journalistic associations, and representatives of the judiciary, civil society and relevant institutions** should offer guidance on the proper improvement of legislation regarding the more precise definition of hate speech as a crime, but also on the punishment of perpetrators, taking into account the legal solutions and their application in European countries.
- **The Sector for Computer Crime and Digital Forensics of the Ministry of Interior** should show a more proactive approach and engagement in processing reports from citizens and civil society organizations that report hate speech and hate crimes that have occurred on the internet.
- **The civil society sector** should implement long-term initiatives that would deal with the monitoring of disinformation and hate speech, as well as their exposure, in order to raise awareness of these phenomena in the general public.
- **Long-term initiatives for the media literacy of citizens**, which will improve their knowledge and skills to distinguish truth and facts from misinformation, manipulation and propaganda through the media, should be encouraged and supported.
- **The civil society sector, educational institutions or other relevant institutions** should conduct regular research on online media and social networks, given the fact that they compete with television as a source of daily information to citizens.
- **Media organizations, the self-regulatory body, the business community and advertising agencies** should continue the debate on the social responsibility of large companies that should take into account the professionalism of the media when deciding where to advertise, and support the work of quality media in particular.

- **Since the Economic Chamber of Macedonia has cooperated with the CMEM and the AJM in the establishment of the Registry of Professional Online Media**, it should advocate that the business community advise companies to take into consideration the data from the Registry when deciding where to place their advertisements.
- **The media and media community** should actively take part in and support the process of preparation of the ethical framework for online media initiated by the CMEM.

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**SERBIA**

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**THE SERBIAN MEDIA SYSTEM  
MARKED BY A MEDIA THAT  
SYSTEMATICALLY SPREADS  
DISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH  
AND PROPAGANDA**

*Dubravka Valić Nedeljković  
Milica Janjatović Jovanović*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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## THE SERBIAN MEDIA SYSTEM MARKED BY A MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREADS DISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH AND PROPAGANDA

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# THE SERBIAN MEDIA SYSTEM MARKED BY A MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREADS DISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH AND PROPAGANDA

*Dubravka Valić Nedeljković*  
*Milica Janjatović Jovanović*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As a country where attempts to establish a regulated media system, including improvements of legislative and systemic measures, have been going on for decades, Serbia shows numerous signs of poor media regulation, and non-compliance with media laws (clearly evident through abuses of systems co-financing media projects), as well as the inefficiency of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (REM). In such a system, public communication is not based on facts, there is neither transparency nor accountability, and society is enclosed in a vicious circle of disinformation, propaganda and narratives that spread hate speech. International reports, as well as internal monitoring of media work done by various journalists' associations, researchers, and civil society organizations, indicate that media practice is often the reverse of laws and good practices, for "media dependence on centres of power, pressures, and poor economic status of journalists result in the spread of self-censorship, tabloidization and the decline of ethical standards that can be singled out as the basic characteristics of the media scene in Serbia" (Jaraković, V. 2019:6).

Public communication is not based on facts, there is neither transparency nor accountability, and society is enclosed in a vicious circle of disinformation, propaganda and narratives that spread hate speech

This research tried to establish how the financial and economic structure of the media market in Serbia affects the decline in the level of professional standards, the collapse of media autonomy and the misuse of disinformation and hate speech for propaganda purposes. For the purposes of the research, various sources were consulted—media research published in previous years, analytical articles of investigative journalists, web portals that deconstruct disinformation and manipulative presentation of information to the public, and decisions and monitoring of regulatory bodies, as well as interviews with one media researcher and one Press Council representative.

The following chapters will present the general framework of media dependence on centres of power, as well as the consequences of such dependence that can be seen in the content that these media place. After that, the different groups of media that can be described as creators and transmitters of information that can be characterized as hate speech,



disinformation and propaganda will be presented by chapters. The most influential and most widely circulated media in Serbia were taken into account, and groups were formed according to the frequency of non-professional reporting. Each chapter indicates the connection of the ownership structure of the media with different centres of power for the presented group of media. After the conclusion, recommendations were formulated for achieving greater transparency of the financial and economic structure of the media and for raising the level of the quality of content, based on the most frequently expressed requests of media professionals.

## 2. MEDIA DEPENDENCE ON CENTRES OF POWER

The media in Serbia show an extremely low degree of autonomy when it comes to economic and financial sustainability. The analysis published by IREX in 2018 showed the worst results for Serbia since 2000. The score for sustainability at that time was 1.64 on a scale from 1 to 4:

*“Private, as well as public media, are neither able to function as efficient and well-run companies nor do they make money. Due to the unregulated market, they do not use business planning or international accounting and financial standards. More than 2,000 media outlets are registered in the country, and therefore sustainability for one average media outlet is not possible”* (IREX, 2018:9).

At the same time, the website of the Media Ownership Monitor in Serbia indicates that media outlets that have an audience share of over 50% are owned or controlled by a political party, politician or political group, or have an owner with political affiliations.<sup>1</sup>

If the government and individuals close to the government are strongly influenced, it is difficult to expect that the work of the media will be independent and that journalism will be autonomous and critically oriented. Thus, the results of the research of the Novi Sad School of Journalism on the diversity of publicly funded projects in Novi Sad, Kikinda and Subotica show “that most money is directed to those contents that carry a high risk of passivation of the media, that is, to their transformation into bulletins of activities of local self-government, and thus of the ruling parties” (Janjić, S. et al. 2018:6).

The systematic financing of the media from the centres of power directly connected with the governing structure inevitably leads to a media system in which many media are imbued with an uncritical attitude towards the government’s actions.

One of the causes of the non-functionality of the project co-financing system introduced at the state and local community level, which should support media projects of public interest, is the way of selecting members of the competition commission, which is marked by numerous abuses:

*“The ten most frequently appointed members decided in almost every third competition; Every tenth member of the commission was appointed contrary to the Law; Certain members decided in each of the project cycles; The European Commission, even after three years of implementation, points out in its reports the problem of the political influence of the administration on the allocation of subsidies for co-financing media content, especially at the local level”* (Strahinić, J. 2019:11).

Thus, the systematic financing of the media from the centres of power directly connected with the governing structure inevitably leads to a media system in which many media are imbued with an uncritical attitude towards

<sup>1</sup> Media Ownership Monitor in Serbia. Available at: <http://serbia.mom-rsf.org/rs/nalazi/indikatori/#1895a26c9d314c00bdf16f9afd8ebe78b> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

the government's actions. This leads to the transformation of the media into the propaganda machinery of the governing structure, which is contrary to the Law on Public Information and Media and the ethical norms of the journalistic profession.

## 2.1. Content placed by the media with direct or indirect government support

It is precisely the wide range of narratives characterized by hate speech, disinformation and propaganda that the media scene in Serbia carries, as one of its most significant characteristics. The fact that this is a significant phenomenon that indicates the existence of a high concentration of several media actors who systematically publish such content is proven by the research of the Raskrikavanje portal, which established that the tabloids *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf* and *Alo* published over 700 fake news stories on their front pages in 2018,<sup>2</sup> while the same tabloids, along with the tabloid *Kurir*, published 945 fake and unfounded claims on their front pages in 2019.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, these tabloids are among the highest-circulating newspapers in Serbia—100,239 copies of *Informer* and 41,223 copies of *Kurir* are sold daily.<sup>4</sup> If we keep in mind that these tabloids also have their highly visited online editions<sup>5</sup>, it becomes clear that their reach is significant. At the same time, this way of work of tabloids reflects the dysfunction and inefficiency of the regulatory framework of the media system, given the fact that although sanctions for such work exist, they are not a corrective factor that would make it possible to stop the spread of false news in a systematic way. Attorney Vladimir Gajić commented for *Danas* newspaper on the inefficiency of court measures and suggested how this problem could be overcome: “If the tabloids had to pay a great sum of money for the way they defame and slander people, they would think twice before deciding to do so. However, the courts award fees of 1,000–2,000 euros, which is the amount that a tabloid earns in just a few hours of selling newspapers. The court could, therefore, stand in the way of the tabloids”.<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, the statements of high-ranking state officials rarely criticize the unprofessional work of the media, in which disinformation, labelling and hate speech are often used as a way to deal with political dissidents (see below), yet such practices are characterized as pluralism of opinion and a

2 Đorđević, J. and Radojević, V. (2019). *More than 700 lies on the front pages of three tabloids in 2018* (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Vise-od-700-lazi-na-naslovnim-stranama-tri-tabloida-u-2018-godini-346> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

3 Vučić, M. and Radojević, V. (2020). *At least 945 fake news stories on the front pages of four tabloids in 2019*. (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Najmanje-945-laznih-vesti-na-naslovnicama-cetiri-tabloida-u-2019-557> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

4 OVERVIEW: SERBIA (unpublished research)

5 *kurir.rs* is visited by an average of 971,538 people daily, *alo.rs* by 497,085, while *Informer.rs* is visited by 249,448 people (Gemisu audience, 2020). Available at: <https://rating.gemius.com/rs/tree/32> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

6 Živanović, K: (2020). *The courts are pandering to the tabloids*. (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/sudovi-podilaze-tabloidima/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

reflection of media freedoms. One of the examples of such attitudes is the statement of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić: “There is freedom of the media, the media here can express their views, criticize the government, the president, and they usually do so. There are media in Serbia that believe the Government is doing its job well and those who think the opposite. But all of them have a place to say that publicly and, as in other European countries, not be sanctioned”<sup>7</sup>. The Prime Minister’s statement is the attitude that can most often be heard from government representatives when it comes to media freedom in Serbia. The fact that there are media in which criticism of the government can be heard does not deny the numerous abuses of the media for propaganda purposes, which the public warns about<sup>8</sup>.

Given the great role of the state in financing media that do not have the capacity to ensure financial sustainability in the market, an important contribution to the sustainability of professional media would be high quality in the work of state-funded media, which would mean working in accordance with the law and public interest. Thus, the Rulebook on co-financing projects for the realization of public interest in the field of public information stipulates that when selecting projects, it must especially be assessed “whether the bidder has been imposed measures by state, regulatory or self-regulatory bodies in the last year, due to violations of professional and ethical standards” (Official Gazette of RS, No. 16/2016 and 8/2017, paragraph 4, Article 18). However, on the contrary, the analyses of researchers show that the media that receive the most money from the state budget are exactly the media that are characterized by unprofessional work, spreading disinformation, panic and propaganda.

The self-regulatory body Press Council, which monitors the work of print and online media, points to violations of the Code of Journalists of Serbia, publishes public warnings to media that violate the Code, and also conducts regular monitoring of the number of violations committed by print and online media. The monitoring results from the second half of 2019 indicate that the media that received significant financial assistance from the state are precisely the media that most often violated the Code of Journalists of Serbia. The following table shows the media that took the first four places in terms of the number of violations of the Code in that period.

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7 *Nezavisni.rs* (2019). Brnabić: The government does not influence the editorial policy of any media. (online). Available at: <https://nezavisni.rs/2019/03/29/brnabic-vlast-ne-utice-na-uredjivacku-politiku-nijednog-medija/> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

8 In March 2020, Academic Action sent a request to REM to dismiss members of the RTS Board of Directors and to ban the broadcasting of news and political programmes on the Pink, Happy and Studio B television channels due to “non-compliance with the laws regulating the media space and misuse of the media for the purpose of a deceptive cover-up of scandals of members of the ruling party and propagandistic glorification of its president” (Cenzolovka. 2020: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisci-i-napadi/akademska-akcija-od-rem-trazi-zabranu-emitovanja-pinka-hepija-i-studija-b/>, accessed on 3 June 2020)

## NUMBER OF ARTICLES IN THE FOUR TABLOIDS IN WHICH THE CODE WAS VIOLATED

Table 1

MEDIA	NUMBER OF ARTICLES IN WHICH THE CODE WAS VIOLATED (July-December 2019)
ALO	214
KURIR	163
SRPSKI TELEGRAF	137
INFORMER	103

Source: Press Council, available at: [http://www.savetzastampu.rs/cirilica/uploaded/szs\\_monitoring\\_jul-dec\\_2019\\_V1.pdf](http://www.savetzastampu.rs/cirilica/uploaded/szs_monitoring_jul-dec_2019_V1.pdf)

The web portal Raskrikavanje collected data on state co-financing of media for the period 2017, 2018 and the first three months of 2019, and compared these data with the number of cases of disinformation and manipulation published by these media in the given period. The following table shows the data for the four media which, in the given period, spread the most false and manipulative news.

## FUNDS FROM THE BUDGET AND THE NUMBER OF PUBLISHED FAKE NEWS STORIES IN FOUR TABLOIDS FOR THE PERIOD 2017, 2018 AND THE FIRST THREE MONTHS OF 2019

Table 2

MEDIA	BUDGET-ALLOCATED FUNDS	NUMBER OF PUBLISHED FAKE NEWS
INFORMER	RSD 14,800,000 (EUR 123,000)	82
ALO	RSD 11,400,000 (EUR 95,000)	72
SRPSKI TELEGRAF	RSD 17,207,000 (EUR 143,000)	63
KURIR	RSD 850,000 (EUR 7,000)	47

Source: Raskrikavanje, available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/kesformisanje/>

Almost without exception, the media that receive the most support from the state publish the most propaganda content, and are not critical of government decisions, while often labelling political dissidents, and spreading disinformation and hate speech.

Having conducted the research “Communicative Aggression in Serbia 2019”, Marko Nedeljković, researcher and director of the Center for Media Professionalization and Media Literacy, points to a significant phenomenon that turned out to be a media practice in Serbia in the context of labelling and spreading hate speech:

The media that receive the most support from the state publish the most propaganda content, and are not critical of government decisions, while often labelling political dissidents, and spreading disinformation and hate speech.

*“The results show that every day the media in Serbia publish about 80 articles in which they directly declare individuals or groups as ‘traitors’, ‘foreign mercenaries’, ‘Ustashas’, or ‘Shiptars’. This means that on an annual level, we come to a figure of at least 30,000 citizens who will be labelled in one of the above ways. If we add to that the already common terms used today for dissidents, such as ‘thief’ and again popular terms such as ‘terrorist’ and ‘fascist’, the number becomes even more alarming because we come to a figure of at least 50,000 citizens. I especially highlight these expressions as they belong to the domain of the most extreme ones, especially those using the terms ‘Ustasha’ (508 articles per month) and ‘Shiptar’ (491 articles per month) which also contain elements of hate speech and as such, should not even be used in the media, and yet you can see from the results that the use thereof is not an exception, but a rule applied daily” (Nedeljković, M, interview).*

In addition to labelling, hate speech, and discrediting political dissidents, a significant feature of the tabloid media is the use of extremist narratives in the form of announcements of war with a neighbouring country, World War III, or a war of great powers.<sup>9</sup>

It follows that the state not only does not use the legal and regulatory framework to sanction media that spread propaganda, disinformation and hate speech but rewards such media by continuously supporting their work through competitions for co-financing media projects that should pursue the public interest. It can be concluded that the work of such media, the production and spreading of such content is de facto part of the media policy of the state or government structures. Given the impact of such media content on citizens, the question arises as to whose interest it is in to expose citizens to media that spread hate speech, propaganda and disinformation and how can we ensure that freedom of speech, which government institutions claim exists, is not equated with hate speech, false information and propaganda.

On the media scene in Serbia, there is a conflict between two paradigms—‘ideal’ and ‘power’. Namely, it is indisputable that there are laws that regulate the work of the media in a good way, yet at the same time, there are media that violate the laws without consequences, which clearly indicates that the paradigm of power is stronger than the “ideal” found in the laws.

## 2.2. Non-traditional media as an appropriate ground for the spread of extremist narratives

During the research of the Liber New Media Center on the experience of Serbian citizens with hate speech in public discourse, most respondents said that hate speech is most commonly found on Facebook (607 answers or 74% of respondents), while the next place in terms of frequency of hate speech or verbal abuse was the section where citizens leave comments on media

<sup>9</sup> Fakenews tragač (2019). War is the cheapest word of Serbian tabloids. (online). Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/03/11/rat-je-najjeftinija-rec-srpskih-tabloida/> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

posts (397 answers, i.e. 485 respondents), followed by Twitter (279 answers – 34% of respondents), then articles and television shows in the media (228 answers – 28% of respondents), and blog comments (209 or 26%) (Kišjuhas, 2016:15).

A significant example of the spread of hate speech and false news in the online sphere in Serbia is the Facebook group “STOP naseljavanju migranta” (STOP Migrant Settlement)<sup>10</sup> with over 330,000 members. The group publishes content on government decisions and incidents related to migrants and refugees, presenting them as a threat, often using unverified or false information, images with inappropriate descriptions and similar content. This content has the function of intimidating citizens and creating an atmosphere of intolerance, which is evident from the comments that citizens leave below the posts in that group, which are often explicit hate speech directed towards refugees and migrants, as well as towards local politicians.

The Internet has enabled various groups with extreme views to reach directly to citizens, to communicate with them and spread their ideas more efficiently and massively than before.

The Internet has enabled various groups with extreme views to reach directly to citizens, to communicate with them and spread their ideas more efficiently and massively than before. “Researchers agree that organizations with extreme attitudes use internet communication to effectively create and strengthen a collective identity. Internet communication gives them the ability to do so in a cheaply and anonymously” (Nikolić, 2018:163). Although these groups rarely get space in traditional media, their representation on social networks and internet platforms, as well as the number of people they manage to reach, point to the need to create an appropriate regulatory framework for the placement of media content in this way, as well as the deconstruction of the narratives that are placed through these channels.

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<sup>10</sup> Available at: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731/?ref=group\\_header](https://www.facebook.com/groups/512775282720731/?ref=group_header) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

### 3. SYSTEMATIC PRODUCTION OF DISINFORMATION, HATE SPEECH AND PROPAGANDA

The latest Reporters Without Borders report indicates that it is often dangerous to be a journalist in Serbia and that fake news is gaining more and more visibility and popularity, so Serbia has dropped three more places on the media freedom list and is now ranked 93rd.<sup>11</sup> The poor situation in the media in Serbia was also documented by the Government of the Republic of Serbia in the latest media strategy for the period 2020–2025, in which, in the section Review and analysis of the current situation, the following is established:

*“The role of the government includes a large number of goals that can be concluded to be largely unfulfilled. This applies in particular to: creating a favourable environment for the development of freedom of expression, given the large number of threats, intimidation and attacks on journalists, inadequate protection of information sources, poor socio-economic position of journalists and media workers, insufficient openness of institutional sources of information, discrimination of certain editors and journalists by public authorities, violation of legal obligations and human rights in the media content of certain media (endangering the privacy of people who are the subjects of the writings, the so-called discrediting of campaigns, endangering personal dignity, hate speech, fake news, non-compliance with special rights of children and minors and victims of violence, leaks from investigations, media promotion of convicts, promotion of problematic lifestyles, etc.)”.*<sup>12</sup>

The latest Reporters Without Borders report indicates that it is often dangerous to be a journalist in Serbia and that fake news is gaining more and more visibility and popularity.

The research portal Fakenews tragač performed a statistical analysis of the connection between the sources of disinformation, as well as a catalogue of the media that have published the largest number of cases disinformation in the previous two years. The leaders of the practice of spreading disinformation are the tabloids Alo, Kurir and Informer.<sup>13</sup>

Research conducted in previous years, analytical and research articles, complaints, lawsuits and decisions of regulatory bodies, provided an insight into the existence of several different media groups, which systematically place disinformation, hate speech and propaganda, as well as the existence of several different objects that such narratives target. Although there are still media in Serbia that have maintained a high professional standard, the simultaneous existence of numerous and influential media that systematically

<sup>11</sup> Reporters without borders. (2020). Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/serbia> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

<sup>12</sup> Strategy of the public information system in the Republic of Serbia for the period 2020–2025. Available at: [https://www.media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/medijska\\_strategija210\\_cyr.pdf](https://www.media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/medijska_strategija210_cyr.pdf) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

<sup>13</sup> A complete list of media and a graphical representation of their connections are available on the Fakenews tragač website. Fakenews tragač. (2020). Hubs and network manipulation (online). Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2020/03/31/habovi-i-mreze-manipulacija/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)



produce content full of hate speech, fake news and propaganda contributes to Serbia being a documented country in which such a model has become an important element of the media system.

### 3.1. Tabloids as the most active generators of disinformation, hate speech and propaganda

In Serbia, in addition to the usual columns characteristic of this type of media (reporting on the lives of celebrities in a sensationalist way), tabloids focus on political topics and thus significantly influence public opinion. In an interview for N1 television, Vesna Radojević, an investigative journalist from the Raskrikavanje portal, pointed out this problem:

*“The topics of our tabloids are focused on local and foreign policy, which is unbelievable. Tabloids all over the world deal with the private lives of public figures, and these are not topics of public interest. In our country, the situation has completely changed, for the focus of the tabloids is politics. Therefore, fake news is a government project because they support the government and deal with destroying political enemies.”<sup>14</sup>*

Many analyses and research studies have been conducted on the role of the tabloids in Serbia, as a means of discrediting and fighting political dissidents. It turned out that the newspapers that violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia the most are also the media that most often confront opposition leaders. Among the mentioned media, Informer stands out as the media that most often and most openly attacks the opposition. According to Kvartalni medijametar, in the last three months of 2019, most of the articles in Informer belonged to a topic marked as political life in Serbia, and among the published articles, as many as 95% had a negative value context in relation to this topic (Jarić and Laban, 2019:60). In comparison, the percentage for the same parameter in Kurir is 77% (Ibid: 61) (with twice as many articles as Informer), and for Alo 18% (Ibid:55). On the front pages of these papers, among the most frequent words is the last name of opposition leader Dragan Đilas, as well as its variation Đilas's; In addition, the words “Boško” and “Ćosić” are used in Informer, which refer to the other opposition leader, Boško Obradović, and the programme director of N1 television, Jugoslav Ćosić, which is considered to be the media outlet that criticizes the current regime the most. Kurir uses “Lutovac” and “Democrat” the most, referring to the current leader of the party that was previously in power (Ibid:34-35).

It turned out that the newspapers that violate the Code of Journalists of Serbia the most are also the media that most often confront opposition leaders.

In the discursive analysis, the authors of the mentioned research identify Informer as a leader among daily newspapers in “creating a negative image of the current opposition” (Stanković, 2019:136). Patterns in reporting on

<sup>14</sup> N1 (2020). Radojević: Prime Minister Brnabić especially picks on N1 TV journalists. (online). Available at: [rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a565246/Radojevic-Premijerka-Brnabic-ima-poseban-pik-na-novinare-televizije-N1.html](https://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a565246/Radojevic-Premijerka-Brnabic-ima-poseban-pik-na-novinare-televizije-N1.html) (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

political dissidents can be noticed both in regular articles and columns of Informer editor-in-chief Dragan Vučićević. They include but are not limited to: strictly personalized criticism of opposition leaders, questioning the moral credibility and political capacity of the opposition, highlighting its lack of patriotism which is reflected in loyalty to Western powers, and presenting the moves of the opposition as an attempt to overthrow the ruling system with the aim of coming to power for personal gain (Ibid). Hate speech and disinformation, in addition to dissidents and critics of the ruling structures, are also aimed at vulnerable social groups (national minorities, women<sup>15</sup>, migrants), as well as at people from neighbouring countries.

*"In recent years, we have witnessed a sudden rise in explicit hate speech against national minorities and neighbouring nations on the front pages of tabloids. Informer's labelling practice, according to which the good one is declared a Serb (Trump, you Serb! Putin, you Serb!), and the one who is not good is declared a Shiptar (Trump is a Shiptar?!) is the lowest form of public communication"* (Jovović et Al., 2018:30).

The media in Serbia will declare someone Shiptar 491 times a month (Nedeljković, M, interview), which indicates the frequent practice of labelling and creating negative narratives about Albanians. As the journalists of the Fakenews tragač portal found, narrative matrices with negative-value connotations, disinformation and open hate speech towards Albanians range from declaring Albanians "criminals and haters of Serbs", labelling them as ungrateful and abusing hospitality in Serbia, to proving by alleged DNA analysis that they are actually Serbs<sup>16</sup>.

Along with Albanians, Croats are the most frequent targets of hate speech in the domestic media. The term "Ustasha" appears in 508 media articles per month (Nedeljković, M, interview), while the tabloid Informer, more precisely its editor, offered non-existent evidence that at least 90% of Croats are Ustashas (Đorđević, J. 2019).<sup>17</sup> Apart from the constant identification of the neighbouring people with the fascist movement, the constant militarization of neighbourly relations is also noticeable. Croatia is presented in the tabloids as a country that constantly poses the danger of a new war

<sup>15</sup> Female politicians and journalists are frequent targets of attacks by tabloids and their editors. In response to this practice, the group of Journalists Against Violence issued a statement stating, among other things, the following: "For years, the owner and editor of the tabloid "Informer" has been posting sexist insults in his media and on his Twitter profile, aimed at female journalists whose reporting he does not like. The latest in a series of his targets is N1 journalist Žaklina Tatalović, whose photos he frequently publishes insulting her physical appearance, and he also recently "renewed" the practice of attacking journalist Tamara Skrozza. Vučićević's pattern of insulting women is always the same: focused on the physical appearance or sex life of his targets" (N1 Belgrade, 2020). *Novinarke protiv nasilja: Država da zaštiti novinarke izložene provokacijama* (online). Available at: <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a593114/Novinarke-protiv-nasilja-Drzava-da-zastiti-novinarke-izlozene-provokacijama.html> (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

<sup>16</sup> Mihajlović, D. (2019). From "Little Schengen" to big stereotypes: The image of Albanians in the media. (online) Fakenews tragač. Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/11/27/mali-sengen/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

<sup>17</sup> Đorđević, J. (2019). How Informer's mathematics "proves" that almost all Croats are Ustashas. (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Kako-Informerova-matematika-dokazuje-da-su-skoro-svi-Hrvati-ustase-373> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

(Marković, T. 2018)<sup>18</sup>, (Janjić, S. and Šovanec, S, 2018:54), and the tabloids further dramatize the situation with false claims such as “Serbs in Croatia hunt like wild beasts” (Vučić, M. 2019).<sup>19</sup>

The tabloid media in Serbia also use disinformation when reporting on women. Such an example is the sensationalist reporting on the murder of the singer Jelena Marjanović. For more than four years (since April 2016), tabloids have been spreading inaccurate information while reporting on this murder. Some of them have published more than 200 articles about this case, with numerous instances of disinformation (Maksimović, S, 2019).

### 3.2. Propaganda, hate speech and disinformation as characteristics of commercial television channels

Television is an essential source of information for the citizens of Serbia. Serbia tops the list of European countries in terms of the period during which its citizens watch television (on average 5 hours and 32 minutes daily), according to the 2019 report of the European Broadcasting Union<sup>20</sup>. That is why it is important to point out the continuous and systematic practice of certain television channels in the production of propaganda content, which often consists of open hate speech, spin and disinformation, most often to discredit opposition movements, parties and politicians, as well as defending the current government. In the show Tačka 2, Insider’s research team describes the media lynching matrix, claiming that it is more dangerous than any censorship.

It is important to point out the continuous and systematic practice of certain television channels in the production of propaganda content.

*“It all starts with the tabloids first publishing information that is often inaccurate or only partially accurate – about individuals or groups. Such placed information is taken over, as true, by commercial televisions with a national frequency, and often by local ones. Then there are all-day tv specials. The image of the targeted individual is being presented all day. Many analysts in television studios comment on such information, and the most dangerous thing of all is that representatives of state institutions, i.e. the authorities, take part in the lynching with their comments.”* (Insajder, 2020).<sup>21</sup>

According to the five-month monitoring of the Bureau for Social Research (BIRODI), from September 2019 to January 2020, Pink TV was the leader

18 Marković, T. (2018). *The media keep Serbia in a state of combat readiness.* (online). Al Jazeera. Available at: <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/mediji-drze-srbiju-u-stanju-borbene-gotovosti> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

19 Vučić, M. (2019). *In half a year, more than 400 lies on the front pages of four tabloids.* (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=Za-pola-godine-vise-od-400-lazi-na-naslovnicama-cetiri-tabloida-488> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

20 Bojković, B. (2019). *The Internet is advancing, but television is still being watched* (online). RTS. Available at: <https://www.rts.rs/page/magazine/sr/story/411/film-i-tv/3612995/internet-napreduje-ali-televizija-se-i-dalje-gleda.html> (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

21 Insajder (2020) Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-\(EMISIJA\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-(EMISIJA).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

in the negative representation of the opposition party and their boycott of the elections, as well as of their leaders. Those parties were negatively portrayed 90% and their leaders 97% of the time on this television channel (BIRODI, 2020:6). The situation was no different in the period before the election campaign: monitoring of the main news on television channels with national coverage conducted by the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) shows that among the five most represented politicians, the only representative of the opposition, Dragan Đilas, is also the only primarily negatively portrayed actor, with his most negative portrayal being once again on Pink TV (CRTA, 2020:12). Quantitative-qualitative analysis of the main news programme of this television channel conducted by the Novi Sad School of Journalism shows an “extremely high” percentage of journalistic bias towards the topic and the subject, reflected in the fact that Pink journalists and editors did not sanction or leave out “statements with offensive elements against opposition representatives” (Valić Nedeljković and Isakov, 2020:24). As an example of Pink’s journalistic bias, there is an article that begins with the words: “On another fabrication of the Alliance for Serbia” (Ibid:25), with a similar tone being highlighted in the analysis of this television channel’s morning show, in which the host Predrag Sarapa uses the phrases “Đilas’ madness” and “empty dreams of the opposition” (Ibid:80-81). In addition, Pink is characterized by open letters from the channel’s owner, Željko Mitrović, intended for his political dissidents, which are read in their entirety in the main news programmes by the newscaster. In these letters, Mitrović uses “extremely inappropriate language and insults against the person he is talking about” (Ibid:17).

For the Belgrade local elections of 2018, according to the monitoring of Transparency Serbia, in support of the electoral list around the SNS, as well as in the feature stories that speak negatively about the opposition, Pink and local Studio B were in the lead (Transparency Serbia, 2018). However, this television channel came into the spotlight in December of the same year, when its reporter Barbara Životić, in her live coverage of the civil protests “Stop the Bloody Shirts”, labelled Dragan Đilas as the organizer of the protest and described the protest slogan as astounding hypocrisy as the protest organizers call for “lynching, rape, violence, coup” (zivstepa, 2018). Numerous reactions and condemnations of relevant persons and associations followed. However, the fact that this is not an isolated case is supported by a similar example from this year (2020), when the newscaster of Studio B’s news programme stated that “The alliance led by the media tycoon and kleptomaniac Đilas, the bully and fascist Obradović and the international fraud Jeremić today showed all its misery and sleaziness, as well as there being no limit for them in their desire to humiliate and harm Serbia and the Serbian people” (Direktno, 2020:p.5).

Another example of the use of hate speech to defend the governing structure, which was not prosecuted or sanctioned despite the report, is the ethnic profiling and discrediting of Professor Sinani of the University of Belgrade on the basis of his ethnicity, in the morning show of commercial television

Happy. The host insultingly pointed out the professor's nationality for the purpose of defending the Minister of Finance Siniša Mali, whose doctorate was being investigated at that time due to suspicion that it was plagiarism<sup>22</sup>, which has been proven in the meantime. After that, the criminal charges against Milomir Marić, the editor of Happy TV, were filed by the Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation and media associations; however, the Higher Public Prosecutor's Office rejected the criminal charges<sup>23</sup>.

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22 "Marić stated in the programme that Hashim Thaci and Ramush Haradinaj would decide on the doctorate, explaining that "one of their representatives is a member of that commission", alluding to Sinani. "He cannot be a moral judge. How do we know what Thaci and Haradinaj told him?" (...) The media also reported that Marić had highlighted Sinani's "suspicious surname" and said that he could not be a moral judge, because in Kosovo, "Thaci and Haradinaj would shoot a Serb who would try to do so." (Insajder (2020). REM initiated proceedings against TV Happy for insulting Professor Sinani; Prosecutor's Office: We will act within our authority (online). Available at: <https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/vazno/15709/REM-pokrenuo-postupak-protiv-TV-Hepi-zbog-vre%C4%91anja-profesora-Sinanija-Tu%C5%BEila%C5%A1tvo-Delova%C4%87emo-u-okviru-ovla%C5%A1%C4%87enja.htm> (accessed on: 28 June 2020)

23 Kolundžija, D. (2020) The Third Basic Prosecutor's Office also rejected the criminal charges against Milomir Marić. (online) Slavko Ćuruvija Foundation. Available at: <https://www.slavkocuruvijafondacija.rs/truce-osnovno-tuzilastvo-odbacilo-krivicnu-prijavu-protiv-milomira-marica/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

## 4. OWNERSHIP AND FINANCIAL SOURCES OF MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREAD HATE SPEECH, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

Observed narratives that spread hate speech, propaganda and disinformation indicate the primary mission of tabloids and pro-regime television in Serbia—to favour or defend the current regime and fight with political dissidents, as well as encourage hatred towards members of individual nations in the region and vulnerable social groups. Several different methodologies have been noticed as a way to achieve this. First of all, a direct attack on any important actor who tries to criticize the regime, then spinning the public with a sensationalist story, which often has elements of hate speech and contains disinformation, as well as continually keeping citizens in fear of new conflicts in the region while ignoring current topics of public interest.

Numerous reports by media researchers and investigative journalists point to a close link between the media spreading fake news, hate speech and propaganda with the governing structure.

Dragan Vučićević, owner and editor-in-chief of the tabloid *Informer*, openly supports the Serbian Progressive Party in his public appearances and articles, as well as the editorial policy of his media, which could be seen in the analysis presented earlier in the article. It was precisely *Informer* that was awarded 14,800,000 dinars in the competitions for project co-financing of the media during 2017 and 2018 (EUR 123,000).

Saša Blagojević, the owner of the tabloid *Alo* and TV Studio B, media that unequivocally support the current government, while at the same time being characterized by fake news, propaganda and hate speech, received multimillion amounts from the city of Belgrade through project co-financing of the media:

*“As usual, the city television channel Studio B was awarded even more than 17 million dinars for three projects (EUR 143,000.00). If we take into account that since last year, the owner of that television channel, Saša Blagojević, who also owns the company that publishes Alo, and who received five and a half million dinars in this competition for the project ‘I love Belgrade’, 22.5 million dinars (EUR 1,875,000) were poured into the same coffers, i.e. almost a third of the entire amount. According to media reports, businessman Saša Blagojević is a school mate and close acquaintance of the current Minister of Finance and former Mayor of Belgrade Siniša Mali” (Nikoletić, 2019).<sup>24</sup>*

During 2017 and 2018, the owner of the tabloid *Kurir*, Igor Žeželj, received RSD 850,000 (EUR 7,000) from the government through project co-financing,

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<sup>24</sup> Nikoletić, I., (2019). *Millions to tabloids and companies associated with the progressives* (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/milioni-tabloidima-i-firmama-povezanim-sa-naprednjacima/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

and there are indications that the work of this tabloid is also supported by the public company Telekom Srbija (Insajder, 2020)<sup>25</sup>.

The tabloid Srpski Telegraf, which received the most money from the government during 2017 and 2018 through project co-financing – RSD 17,207,000 (EUR 143,000)<sup>26</sup> (Raskrikavanje, 2019) has four owners, one of whom—Lazar Simić—was found to have a connection with the governing structure: “According to data from KRIK’s database of politicians’ property, Lazar Simić is a lawyer who worked in the office of Igor Isailović, a business partner of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and the right hand of former Belgrade mayor and now finance minister Siniša Mali.” (Vučić, M. and Radojević, V. 2020)<sup>27</sup>

Željko Mitrović, the owner of Pink television, has openly supported every government through the work of this television channel since its foundation, which was confirmed by the media advisor to the current president of Serbia, Suzana Vasiljević: “Željko Mitrović was a friend of both Boris Tadić and Zoran Đinđić, which means that Željko Mitrović was a friend of everyone in power” (Insajder, 2020).<sup>28</sup> Pink Television and the tabloid print media are connected business- and programme-wise. Thus, the editor of Informer was the author and host of the political show on Pink TV “Teška reč”, for which Pink paid Informer multimillion amounts, far beyond the market value, while at the same time the content of the show was characterized by their usual practice of supporting the current regime.<sup>29</sup> The fact that Pink TV has certain privileges and government support for the content it broadcasts is also evidenced by the data that shows that this television channel has been allowed to defer the repayment of the tax debt for the previous four years, in the amount of RSD 1.52 billion (EUR 12,600,000).<sup>30</sup>

The following table shows, through different categories, the ownership structure, as well as the circulation and share of the media that are leaders in spreading propaganda, disinformation and hate speech in Serbia.

25 Insajder. (2020). Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-\(EMISIJA\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18855/TA%C4%8CKA-2-Mediji-kao-mehanizam-uz-pomo%C4%87-kojeg-se-lak%C5%A1e-vlada-(EMISIJA).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

26 Raskrikavanje. (2019). Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/kesformisanje/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

27 Vučić, M. and Radojević, V. (2020). At least 945 fake news stories on the front pages of four tabloids in 2019 (online). Raskrikavanje. Available at: <https://www.raskrikavanje.rs/page.php?id=557> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

28 Insajder (2020). Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/saji/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-\(VIDEO\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/saji/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-(VIDEO).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

29 Kostić, V. and Čodanović, N. (2020). Pink paid millions for Vučićević’s show (online). CINS. Available at: <https://www.cins.rs/milionske-isplate-pinka-za-vucicevicevu-emisiju/> (accessed on: 29 June 2020)

30 Milivojević, A. (2019). Millions from the citizens’ pockets go to entitled media. (online). CINS. Available at: <https://www.cins.rs/podobnim-medijima-milioni-iz-dzepa-gradjana/?fbclid=IwAR296srLax7NuPn3C6oIS9IT5ITXqy4Nia8Ph7w8m5z51ZZVJzn88gH3WDM> (accessed on: 28 May 2020)

## REACH AND OWNERSHIP OF MEDIA THAT SYSTEMATICALLY SPREAD HATE SPEECH, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA

Table 3

MEDIA	CIRCULATION/ SHARE	MEDIA GROUP	OWNER	RECENT CHANGE IN OWNERSHIP
INFORMER	135,874 printed copies 100,239 copies sold	/	Dragan Vučićević 100%	/
ALO	75,027 printed copies 45,652 copies sold	/	Saša Blagojević 100%	Ringier Axel Springer owned it until 2017
SRPSKI TELEGRAF	2%	/	Ljubomir Dabović 55% Lazar Simić 15% Milan Lađević 15% Saša Milovanović 15%	/
KURIR	69,325 printed copies 41,223 copies sold	Adrija medija grupa	Igor Žeželj 100%	/
PINK	15,46%	/	Željko Mitrović 100%	/
STUDIO B	0,6%	/	Saša Blagojević 59,75%	It was owned by Maksim medija (Ružica Krdžić) until 2018
HEPI	9,03%	/	Predrag Ranković 100%	/

## THE OWNER OF SEVERAL MEDIA COVERED BY THE ANALYSIS

Table 4

OWNER	MEDIA OWNED BY HIM	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM THAT ARE NOT IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT/ POLITICIANS
Saša Blagojević	Alo, Studio B	Global Media Technology (owner of Studio B)	Marketing and consulting agency Trilenium	The media state that Blagojević is a friend of the Minister of Finance, Siniša Mali, with whom he went to school <sup>31</sup>

31 Nikoletić, I. (2020). State millions to fund lies, hate and government propaganda (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/drzava-i-mediji/drzavni-milioni-za-finansiranje-lazi-mrznje-i-propagande-vlasti/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)



## 5. PROPAGANDA OF MEDIA WITH THE NATIONAL FREQUENCY

Media unprofessionalism, as a symptom of a lack of autonomy, is a general feature of the media in Serbia, while reasoned debate or criticism, as well as fact-based professional reporting, can be seen in a very small number of media. The latest Freedom House report cites N1 television and the daily newspaper Danas as examples of professional media, pointing out that their influence is limited (Šajkaš, M., 2020).<sup>32</sup>

Propaganda bias and the use of illegal practices are primarily the characteristics of tabloids in their print and online editions, although such approaches can also be seen on television channels with the national frequency. In Serbia, two public broadcasting services currently have the national frequency—RTS and RTV, as well as commercial television channels B92, Prva, Pink and Happy. Although public broadcasting services and some commercial television channels (except Pink and Happy TV) do not use open and systematic propaganda reporting and direct hate speech, nor is the disinformation in their programmes produced in a systematic way, research has shown that their coverage of important topics serves the same purpose—the promotion of the governing structure and the simultaneous discrediting or invisibility of political dissidents and critics of the government. These conclusions were reached through several studies conducted by organizations in Serbia. Thus, CINS investigative journalists came into possession of an unpublished REM report on media coverage during the 2016 election campaign, from which it can be concluded that “almost all television channels with the national frequency broadcast shows, regular and special, in which Vučić was mostly promoted” (Kostić, V. and Đorđević, D, 2019).<sup>33</sup> After monitoring the main news programmes of commercial television channels with the national frequency, the researchers of the Novi Sad School of Journalism concluded that these programmes “avoid all scandals or sensitive topics that could indicate that political and economic elites and centres of power are not doing the job for which they have been adequately mandated by citizens and/or are not credible people themselves” (Valić Nedeljković and Isakov, 2020:104). At the same time, BIRODI, after monitoring national television channels and N1 television, concludes that “most pro-regime private television channels have almost no neutral content, that is, analytical, objective shows and confrontations, but are instead dominated exclusively by advertising, praise, propaganda and PR materials, when it comes to the leaders of the current government” (Nikoletić, I, 2020).<sup>34</sup>

32 Šajkaš, M. (2020). *Freedom House report: Serbia is abandoning democratic principles, most of the media are under the control of the ruling party* (online). *Cenzolovka*. Available at: <https://www.cenzolovka.rs/pritisici-i-napadi/izvestaj-fridom-hausa-srbija-napusta-demokratske-principe-vecina-medija-pod-kontrolom-vladajuce-stranke/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

33 Kostić, V. and Đorđević, D. (2019). *A secret REM report: Television channels in the service of Vučić before the elections*. (online). *CINS*. Available at: <https://www.cins.rs/tajni-izvestaj-rem-a-televizije-pred-izbore-u-sluzbi-vucica/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

34 Nikoletić, I. (2020). *RTS criticized Vučić for an entire 13 seconds in a month and a half*. (online). *Danas*. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/rt-s-kritikovao-vucica-citavih-13-sekundi-za-mesec-i-podana/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

The practice of biased and incomplete reporting on important social issues, which also promotes the governing structure, can also be attributed to public broadcasting services. During 2019, the Novi Sad School of Journalism analyzed the work of public broadcasting services and found that both RTS and RTV left out topics of public interest from their reporting, topics that would jeopardize the transparency of work of state institutions and unsuccessful operations of public companies, as well as cover up scandals and cases of corruption. Also, manipulative and self-promotional statements of high state officials, as well as direct hate speech, were broadcast without critical review (an example of that is the addressing of Albanians as Shiptars, done by the Minister of Defence Aleksandar Vulin, and RTV did not distance itself from such a statement, nor did it criticize it) (Valić Nedeljković and Isakov, 2020).

RTS and RTV left out topics of public interest from their reporting, topics that would jeopardize the transparency of work of state institutions and unsuccessful operations of public companies, as well as cover up scandals and cases of corruption.

Although neither RTS nor RTV can be characterized as generators, nor as constant broadcasters of disinformation or hate speech, investigative journalists still notice that some of the public broadcasting services publish disinformation. By searching for deconstructed fake news on the Fakenews tragač portal, analysts of this platform for the analysis of the credibility of reporting found that RTV ranks 14th on the ranking list of media that publish fake news. Among such content on RTV was a news story in which the victim of violence was presented as a hooligan (Fakenews tragač, 2019),<sup>35</sup> as well as false news about the owner of a bakery in Belgrade who allegedly showed the symbol of Greater Albania with his hands (Čovs, L, 2019).<sup>36</sup> At the same time, RTS rarely publishes fake news, so the fake news published in September 2019 served all the more to confirm the findings of both indirect and direct support for the governing structure. On that occasion, RTS, in its main news, published a tweet by the editor of the tabloid Informer, Dragan Vučićević, in which he accused the president of the opposition Democratic Party, Zoran Lutovac, of keeping a framed photo in his office showing him (Dragan Vučićević) behind bars. After this, numerous media associations and journalists reacted; however, RTS did not further mention this mistake. (Živanović, K, 2019).<sup>37</sup>

Who are the owners and how are the television channels with the national frequency, included in this group of media in which the use of a biased propaganda approach for the purpose of promoting the current government has been noticed occasionally or around certain topics, financed? According to the Law on Public Broadcasting Services, public broadcasting services

35 Fakenews tragač. (2019). Public broadcasting service of Vojvodina in the service of lies: it is the victim's fault. (online). Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/10/16/javni-servis-vojdovine-u-sluzbi-lazi-kriva-je-zrtva/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

36 Čovs, L. (2019). Bread and circuses with human lives. (online). Fakenews tragač. Available at: <https://fakenews.rs/2019/05/01/hleba-i-igara-ljudskim-zivotima/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

37 Živanović, K. (2019). Why did RTS quote Informer's lies in their news? (online). Danas. Available at: <https://www.danas.rs/drustvo/zasto-je-rts-u-vestima-citirao-informerove-lazi/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

are financed through a subscription mechanism, which is mandatory for all citizens who have an electricity meter, then from the budget of the Republic of Serbia, under strictly limited conditions, as well as from other sources of income.

At the same time, commercial television channels with the national frequency have very concentrated private ownership, which can be seen in the tables below. The change in the ownership of Prva and B92 television channels happened in 2018 with numerous suspicions that the state then re-entered the ownership of private media through the public company Telekom Srbija: “Srđan Milovanović, the former owner of the Kopernikus cable system, bought two television channels with the national frequency – B92 and Prva, from the Greek Antenna Group at the end of 2018. Due to the transaction that took place between Telekom, Kopernikus Cable System and two television channels in just one month, the public got the impression that the state had thus become the owner of two television channels through Telekom” (Insajder, 2020).<sup>38</sup>

## REACH AND OWNERSHIP OF MEDIA OUTLETS WHERE PROPAGANDA REPORTING HAS BEEN OBSERVED

Table 5

MEDIA	SHARE	MEDIA GROUP	OWNER	RECENT CHANGE IN OWNERSHIP
PRVA	9,63%	Kopernikus corporation	Srđan Milovanović 100%	Owned by Antena Group until 2018
B92 (previously O2)	4,58%	Kopernikus corporation	Srđan Milovanović 100%	Owned by Antena Group until 2018

## THE OWNER OF SEVERAL MEDIA COVERED BY THE ANALYSIS

Table 6

OWNER	MEDIA OWNED BY HIM	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	COMPANIES OWNED BY HIM THAT ARE NOT IN THE MEDIA SECTOR	RELATIONS WITH THE GOVERNMENT/ POLITICIANS
Srđan Milovanović	Prva TV, Prva TV (Montenegro), B92, B92.rs, Prva.rs, Play radio + cable channels	Kopernikus production, Content & Rights	Kopernikus Hotel Prag, Kopernikus Logistics, Kopernikus Hotels and Restaurants, Kopernikus Real Estate, Partner Gradnja ZND, Kopernikus Cars (Switzerland)	brother of Zvezdan Milovanović, a senior official of the ruling SNS

<sup>38</sup> Insajder. (2020). Available at: [https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-\(VIDEO\).htm](https://insajder.net/sr/sajt/tema/18750/Ta%C4%8Dka-prvi-deo-(VIDEO).htm) (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

## 6. CONCLUSION

Many years of attempts to ensure media autonomy and reporting in the public interest, starting with the adoption of the Law on Public Information and Media, abolition and sale of state ownership in the media to private owners, and the introduction of co-financing of media projects of public interest, to the establishment of regulatory and self-regulatory bodies – REM and the Press Council, indicate that there is a formal basis for the work of professional media that would report in the public interest. However, inadequate sanctioning of controversial media practices, as well as abuse of the mechanism for co-financing media projects, which results in co-financing of media that systematically place content that spreads disinformation, hate speech and propaganda, indicate that the formal legal framework is not functional.

Civil society in Serbia has mechanisms and platforms that monitor and analyze the work and funding of the media, such as the research portals Fakenews tragač, Raskrikavanje, BIRODI, CINS and BIRN. The self-regulatory body of the Press Council is also active. They all continuously deconstruct media manipulations and disinformation and point out violations of laws and codes. However, their work is subject to insults and threats from high-ranking state officials, who even obstruct their work with numerous lawsuits.<sup>39</sup>

The citizens of Serbia are primarily presented with media content in which topics of public interest are neglected, i.e. these topics are dealt with by short-reach media.

The citizens of Serbia are primarily presented with media content in which topics of public interest are neglected, i.e. these topics are dealt with by short-reach media, whose reports are neglected or attacked by media with national coverage. At the same time, citizens are systematically provided with content that propagates power, spreads disinformation and incites hatred towards dissidents or neighbouring nations. In that way, the general public is prevented from accessing credible information and developing critical awareness. In most media outlets, which place controversial narratives, research has shown a close connection between media owners and governing structures. These indicators point to the possibility that the sustention and spread of such a media model in Serbia is in the interest of the current governing structure, in order to keep citizens in a constant state of existential concern through the media, with daily encouragement of polarization, hatred and intolerance. Through the most popular television channels and newspapers, citizens are deceived by the media being silent about issues and problems of public interest, along with simultaneous hateful, disinformation and propaganda attacks on anyone who tries to point to any of the problems or abuses. The state uses the money of its citizens to pay and support the media to deceive

<sup>39</sup> Jovanović, B. (2018). Popović's fourth lawsuit against KRIK (online). Krik. Available at: <https://www.krik.rs/cetvrta-popoviceva-tuzba-protiv-krik-a/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020); Vojinović, M. (2020). Vučić: Danilo is an honest young man, I promise I will defeat their lies (online). Krik. Available at: <https://www.krik.rs/vucic-danilo-je-posten-mladic-obecavam-pobedicu-njihove-lazi/> (accessed on: 25 June 2020)

those same citizens, which is an obvious sign of the non-functioning of the democratic media system. Such a media policy is not in the interest of the citizens. It is possible to assume that the goal of such a policy is to maintain power, control state resources and public opinion.

Deception with constant encouragement of hatred and intolerance ultimately leads to passivation of citizens and their refusal to participate in public life. The work of public institutions thus remains completely non-transparent, left to elected representatives, who will not report their work to the citizens but will leave it to them to fight media-constructed battles in which the citizens themselves will remain eternal and the only losers.

## 7. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Assembly should amend the Law on Public Information and Media in order to prevent abuses in the selection of the commission for project co-financing of media projects of public interest and establish an efficient system of decision-making on co-financing that prevents public funds from being allocated to media violating legislation and ethical norms.
- The Assembly should amend the Law on Public Information and Media in order to avoid the possibility of political influence when electing members of the Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media.
- The judiciary should review case-law regarding the sanctioning of cases of spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in the media.
- The government should legally prescribe a mandatory media register that could transparently monitor media ownership, revenues, expenditures and ways of financing registered media.
- Media associations should create a proposal for a regulatory framework for the placement of content of public importance in the online sphere, which would prescribe significant transparency and credibility of these media platforms and a system of responsibility for the placement of unverified information and hate speech.
- Independent journalists' associations should organize advocacy campaigns to change media policy and the media system, based on investigative findings on institutional abuses that have allowed the spread of hate speech, false news and propaganda, and the operation of a media model based on these controversial practices.

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Tamara Skrozza, journalist and member of the Press Council, online interview, June 2020.

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**TURKEY**

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**HATE AND PROPAGANDA  
MEDIA IN TURKEY:  
Affiliations, Models and Patterns**

*Sinem Aydınli*

## RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

The regional project 'RESILIENCE: Civil society action to reaffirm media freedom and counter disinformation and hateful propaganda in the Western Balkans and Turkey' is implemented with the financial support of the European Union by partner organizations [SEENPM](#), the [Albanian Media Institute](#), [Mediacentar Sarajevo](#), [Kosovo 2.0](#), the [Montenegro Media Institute](#), the [Macedonian Institute for Media](#), the [Novi Sad School of Journalism](#), the [Peace Institute](#) and [Bianet](#).

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## HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA IN TURKEY: Affiliations, Models and Patterns

### TURKEY

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# HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA IN TURKEY

## AFFILIATIONS, MODELS AND PATTERNS

*Sinem Aydınlı*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

One of Turkey's most prominent Armenian voices, the editor-in-chief of the bilingual Turkish and Armenian weekly *Agos* newspaper, Hrant Dink, was murdered on 19 January 2007, after a campaign of prebense and planned hate speech by some of the Turkish media organisations<sup>1</sup>. Dink was not the only one targeted by the Turkish media. As indicated in the media monitoring reports for hate speech in Turkey, news items that may seem to be directed solely at an individual or specific group can broaden out into hate speech that targets "others" more generally: Kurds, Armenians, minorities living in Turkey, Syrians, Rums, Greeks, Jews, Alevis, women, or LGBTI+s. In hateful media, and always tinged with a negative bias, these "others" are mostly portrayed as different from the "us" of the majority. Initially, hate media generally find their targets through proclaiming their "love" of country, as well as their support for Turkishness and/or Sunni-Muslim identity, with other context-specific targets that change according to the political agendas of the day.

Hate media find their targets through proclaiming their "love" of country, as well as their support for Turkishness and/or Sunni-Muslim identity, with other context-specific targets that change according to the political agendas of the day.

Regarding disinformation in the media, this can be illustrated through a striking example the media dubbed "the Kabataş Incident": During the Gezi Park protests it was widely reported in the media that a woman wearing a headscarf and her baby had been attacked by dozens of protesters, who were mostly half-naked men with leather gloves, in Kabataş Square on 1 June 2013. The story was later proven false, but it had already attracted the attention of the then Prime Minister Erdoğan. On 13 June, the journalist Elif Çakır from the pro-government daily *Star* published an interview with the alleged victim and this sparked huge public unrest. Several columnists and journalists from the mainstream media followed Erdoğan who said his "headscarf-wearing sister" had been attacked. Some media has produced Photoshopped visuals to add credibility to this bogus story<sup>2</sup>. When footage from security cameras was eventually released, it turned out that the story was fabricated and completely false.

<sup>1</sup> See İnceoğlu and Sözeri (2012); Göktaş, K. (2010); Çavdar A. & Yıldırım A (2010).

<sup>2</sup> Bektaş, H. (2015) Footage reveals truth behind Kabataş attack. *Daily Sabah*. Available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2015/03/11/footage-reveals-truth-behind-kabatas-attack> [Accessed 15 June 2020]



These incidents that occurred during the AKP regime indicate partisan media's role in feeding polarization in society; however, the nationalist but non-partisan media also do not refrain from creating hostility in the society when "the national interests" of Turkey at stake. Depending on the issues, both encourage disinformation in violating the rights of disadvantaged or the most vulnerable groups<sup>3</sup>. Further, the current role of these media eventually causes the entrenchment of the culture of impunity in cases of hate crimes. This is also a matter of democracy that concerns not only the target of hate crimes but the whole society in Turkey, where the judiciary arbitrarily defines the limits of freedom of speech. Thus, it is essential to reveal from where different media derive their power to disseminate hate speech. This mainly pertains to either their economic and/or political ties with the government or other centres of power, otherwise other political parties.

In Turkey, it is mostly human rights defenders, civil society and NGOs who are challenging the practices of hate speech and disinformation in the media and communication. Among them, the Hrant Dink Foundation (HDV) and KAOS GL (Kaos Gay and Lesbian Cultural Research and Solidarity Association) have been publishing reports based on their media monitoring activities in order to render hate speech visible. Until January 2020, the Media and Refugee Rights Association had also been conducting media monitoring. We used the reports of these NGOs and conducted email interviews with them. Further, previous academic publications were used to analyse the ownership structure and political affiliations of hate media and communication in Turkey (Binark 2010; Çınar 2013; Inceoğlu 2012; Inceoğlu & Çoban 2014; Saka 2018). Based on these works, the current report portrays the political and economic background of the production of hate and propaganda in the media during the AKP's rule.

The following part, entitled "Ownership Structures of Hate and Propaganda in Media" provides an understanding of the mediascape in relation to their financial structures and political affiliations. Countering activities are also mentioned. In the next part, titled "The Organisation of Hate, Disinformation and Propaganda in the Media", particular examples of hate, disinformation and propaganda models via various media in Turkey with their patterns are mentioned in terms of their content. The concluding part summarizes the main findings of the research and signals the urgent needs in relation to the current mediascape in Turkey. At the end, we list several recommendations for further action in countering hate speech and disinformation in general and specifically concerning media ownership in Turkey.

This report is a part of the regional research within the Resilience Project carried out from May to mid-July 2020, providing an insight into affiliations, models and patterns of hate and propaganda media in Turkey under the AKP regime.

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<sup>3</sup> *Discrimination is prohibited in Turkey both by Article 122 of the Turkish Penal Code (TCK) and Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), to which Turkey is a party.*

## 2. OWNERSHIP STRUCTURES OF HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA

The market structure of Turkey's mediascape is currently highly concentrated. According to the latest comprehensive ownership report, the Media Ownership Monitor Turkey 2018, "the government [the AKP] not only openly endangers media pluralism through recent closures of news outlets [with decree-laws after the coup attempt in 2016] but there is also a deeper dimension of economic leverage, which allows almost complete control of the mass media."<sup>4</sup> Again, the same report says, the four owners of the top media (Kalyon Group, Demirören Group, Ciner Group and Doğu Group) have close relations with the government, and they share approximately 71% of the cross-media audience, meaning a high concentration of four major companies, which results in a high risk (MoM 2018): Out of 10 most-watched TV channels and 10 most read dailies, 9 belong to owners that are affiliated with the government. Mainly, the pro-government media have business interests with the government.

Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has imposed a range of legal and financial pressures on critical media leading to governmental intervention in Turkey's mediascape which has resulted in the eventual reshaping of the ownership structure. Since the AKP's third term, in 2015, onwards, and specifically after the coup attempt in 2016, highly concentrated ownership structures, and political and economic alliances among media conglomerates and the government have increased the vulnerability of critical media outlets and professionals to legal and financial risks.

Highly concentrated ownership structures, and political and economic alliances among media conglomerates and the government have increased the vulnerability of critical media outlets and professionals to legal and financial risks.

Not only has critical reporting been exposed to governmental sanctions but dissidents or their rights-based opinions have also been targeted and threatened by predominantly pro-AKP media, mostly depending on but not limited to public contracts with the AKP. Some of those groups such as nationalists, conservatives, and racist and sexist individuals in the media and communication industries in Turkey as well as journalists, editors or opinion makers who are mostly men, also target and react against people who do not take their side. Their popular image is being intolerant to any differences to them. Consequently, they continuously produce hate speech which provokes, slanders and otherizes various segments of society, especially during times of conflict, Turkey's military operations, electoral periods and any polarized political crises.

### 2.1. The AKP's Turkey

The AKP came to power immediately after the economic crisis in 2001 that led to the collapse of several banks and caused the restructuring of the

<sup>4</sup> MoM Country Report: Turkey. (2018). Available at <http://www.mom-rsf.org/en/countries/turkey/> [Accessed 18 June 2020].

media sector as some of these banks had already had business interest in it. The crisis has provided the AKP the opportunity to initiate a new state authority, i.e. the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF), operating under the office of the Prime Minister, to seize and resell the assets of those banks, including their media outlets. This caused a dramatic change in the ownership structures and the mediascape by transferring the companies to pro-AKP business people (Yeşil 2018). Regarding the radical transformation of the economy in Turkey under the AKP, it is observed that the media sector has become “an area where business people do not just receive favours from, but actually do favours for, the government.”<sup>5</sup> This change in the mediascape of Turkey in the 2000s can be thematised through “the concentration of media ownership, the breakup of unions by media owners, and government legislation that restricted critical reporting” (Christensen 2007). Not surprisingly, Turkey ranks 154th out of 180 countries in the RSF 2020 World Press Freedom Index, and Freedom House 2020 results indicate that Turkey is in the “not free” category where “the mainstream media, especially television broadcasters, reflect government positions and routinely carry identical headlines”<sup>6</sup>.

Turkey ranks 154th out of 180 countries in the RSF 2020 World Press Freedom Index, and Freedom House 2020 results indicate that Turkey is in the “not free”.

The AKP has also enhanced its own mechanisms of control over the critical media in terms of the regulations in relation to the Press Law, sanctions of the Radio and Television Authority of Turkey (the RTUK) as Turkey’s media watchdog, the Penal Code, and the Anti-Terror Law (TMK). In July 2020, the AKP government started to work on regulations that would control social media<sup>7</sup> where the TMK is most commonly used against journalists who use social media as a space in which they can do their work after the crackdown on press freedom. It has been argued that if the bill passes, it will strengthen the AKP’s efforts to suppress critical voices in social media in Turkey<sup>8</sup>, where Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and Wikipedia have been blocked from time to time in the past.

However, the sanctions available through these kinds of regulations are not imposed against the dissemination of hate speech targeting particular groups, rather it is justified and normalized. This has increasingly been nourishing the social polarization in society as they use target-pointing statements and hate language against Jews, Kurds, Armenians, Syrians, Greeks, Alevis, atheists, women, LGBTI+s, feminists, secularists, socialists, communists, Kemalists through the columns, the comments on TV shows and Tweets.

5 Buğra, A and Savaşkan, O. (2014).

6 Freedom House Report: Turkey. 2020 Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2020> [Accessed 18 May 2020]. [Accessed 17 July 2020]

7 Erdoğan says his party will draft a bill to ‘either completely ban or control’ social media. [Accessed 3 July 2020] Available at: <http://bianet.org/english/politics/226703-erdogan-says-his-party-will-draft-a-bill-to-either-completely-ban-or-control-social-media> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

8 Fears of Draconian Social Media Law in Turkey. Available at: <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/fears-of-draconian-social-media-law-in-turkey/> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

## 2.2. Mediascape

The ownership structure and political affiliations of the hate media and communication during AKP rule in Turkey clearly indicate the fact that they are predominantly connected to the AKP government. Apart from those, there are also many other significant generators of hate speech in some nationalist and patriotic media, critical of the AKP, in terms of influence on public discussions.

The journalists affiliated with those companies mentioned here as producing hate speech, not only write in their columns but also continue producing content and spreading hate speech through their Twitter accounts. Furthermore, in addition to pro-government fact-checking sites, Turkey has some opinion makers in online media channels who can also spread hate propaganda. Power networks are also active on social media such as Twitter. For instance, pro-AKP political trolls, as a general cyber and a kind of propaganda tool, being motivated to produce hate speech, are targeting and threatening the perceived enemies of the AKP in a very manipulative manner (Saka 2018). They not only disrupt political conversations but also consolidate the government's power by networking among the scattered masses (Erdem and Yörük 2017).

According to the report "Blocked Web 2019: The Unseen Part of the Iceberg"<sup>9</sup> published by the Freedom of Expression Association (İFÖD), Turkey is the country that has been sending the highest number of court orders for content removal requests to Twitter<sup>10</sup>. However, it ranks 11th amongst the countries that have requested the removal of hate content on YouTube.

### 2.2.1. TRT and RTUK

Founded in 1964, the state broadcaster TRT is Turkey's first national television channel and was the only TV channel until 1990. As a state channel, TRT is not supposed to side with any power group; however, TRT has continued to promote the AKP during pre-election periods, highlighting the negative news in relation to the other parties' election speeches—which is, as stated in the report of Transparency International,<sup>11</sup> a violation of "impartiality" according to RTUK law.

RTUK, as Turkey's media watchdog formed in 1994, consists of nine members who are elected by Parliament among the candidates nominated by political parties. Regulating broadcast organizations, providing licences and auditing broadcasters are among the RTUK's responsibilities. Since August 2019,

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<sup>9</sup> The report is available at [https://ifade.org.tr/reports/EngelliWeb\\_2019.pdf](https://ifade.org.tr/reports/EngelliWeb_2019.pdf) 3 July 2020. [Accessed 17 July 2020]

<sup>10</sup> Twitter Transparency Report Available at: <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/removal-requests.html#removal-requests-jan-jun-2019> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

<sup>11</sup> The report is available at: <http://www.seffaflik.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Yerel-Se%C3%A7im-%C4%B0zleme-%C3%87al%C4%B1%C5%9Fmas%C4%B1-10.pdf> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

RTUK has also been authorized to inspect online broadcasting which includes foreign news websites, and it has begun to supervise the media organizations broadcasting on the Internet.

Considering the broadcast bans and monetary fines imposed by RTUK on channels that oppose the AKP such as Halk TV and Fox TV, it appears that RTUK acts as a government tool to threaten news outlets critical of the government and silence the critical, independent media in Turkey through its punishments<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, pro-government TV channels such as ATV, ÜLKE TV and TGRT News received only a total of two warnings and one administrative fine between January 2019 and 25 March 2020.<sup>13</sup>

It appears that RTUK acts as a government tool to threaten news outlets critical of the government and silence the critical, independent media in Turkey through its punishments.

The RTUK's pattern of singling out critical media can be highlighted through a recent example. On 8 May 2020, in a programme on pro-government Ülke TV (details can be seen in Table 1) a media figure, Noyan commented on the coup attempt in 2016; she began to direct threats towards a section of society and said that her family would kill at least 50 people in the event of a new coup attempt against the government. Elönü, the programme's presenter, supported her, saying those people should watch their step. RTUK imposed a three-episode broadcast suspension on the programme over her remarks that "incited hatred"<sup>14</sup> it was not until public reaction from both the opposition and some pro-government camps that RTUK imposed a three-episode broadcast suspension on the programme<sup>15</sup>.

According to bianet's Media Monitoring 2019 report, RTUK issued 57 monetary fines and 24 programme suspension to TV channels due to violation of articles in "the Law No.6112 on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Media Services"<sup>16</sup>. The council issued a total of YTL 4,090,999 [approx. €644,251] of fines to TV channels<sup>17</sup>.

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12 IPI condemns 5-day broadcast bans on Turkey's Halk TV, TELE 1 1 July 2020 Available at: <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/ipi-condemns-5-day-broadcast-bans-on-turkeys-halk-tv-tele1/> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

13 Turkey's Media Authority Issued 39 Fines in 1.5 Years, 36 of Them were for Critical Outlets. 18 May 2020 Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/media/224453-turkey-s-media-authority-issued-39-fines-in-1-5-years-36-of-them-were-for-critical-outlets> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

14 Media Authority Fines Pro-Government Broadcaster over 'Coup' Remarks Available at: <https://bianet.org/5/100/224705-media-authority-fines-pro-government-broadcaster-over-coup-remarks> [Accessed 18 May 2020]. [Accessed 17 July 2020]

15 Turkey's media watchdog fines pro-gov't TV channel over Islamist commentator's death threats. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/media/2020/05/22/turkeys-media-watchdog-fines-pro-govt-tv-channel-over-islamist-commentators-death-threats/> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

16 The Law No.6112 on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Media Services Available at: <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/en/audio-visual-media-law/5350/5139/the-law-no6112-on-the-establishment-of-radio-and-television-enterprises-and-their-media-services-march-3-2011.html> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

17 Bia Media Monitoring 2019 Available at: <https://bianet.org/5/100/218959-the-ends-justify-the-means-in-purging-critical-media> [Accessed 18 June 2020].

### 2.2.2. Press Advertising Authority (BİK)

The state-controlled Press Advertising Authority (BİK) was established in 1961. Public announcements and advertising handed out by BİK make up an important source of income for newspapers. Its structure was changed in 2013 to enable it to impose bans for breaches of its code. Independent newspapers in Turkey depend on income raised via BİK advertisements. The BİK does not provide public reports on how the advertisements are distributed to the various newspapers, nor on the penalties on media<sup>18</sup>. In 2019, BİK began to cut public ads of the opposition in print media such as the dailies Evrensel and BirGün, an action which is seen as its attempt to silence critical media in Turkey.

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### 2.3. Political and Economic Affiliations

This section exemplifies various hate and propaganda media along with ownership structure in order to provide a general understanding of who are behind these media and what their political and economic affiliations are.

According to HDV's report, the Islamist, conservative, extreme rightist and pro-government newspaper *Yeni Akit* is one of the top three Turkish newspapers featuring systematic hate speech. Not only do its writers disseminate hate speech, but their editorial choices are also full of implicit hate language against Syrians, Jews, Armenians, Greeks, Yazidis, Alevis, atheists, LGBTI+s, feminists, secularists, socialists, communists, and Kemalists. *Yeni Akit* was founded by Mustafa Karahasanoğlu and has been owned by Ramazan Fatih Uğurlu since 2004. The paper's editor-in-chief frequently pens articles praising President Erdoğan in order to publicly support him.

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In terms of circulation rates,<sup>19</sup> the biggest selling newspaper in Turkey, *Sabah*, owned by Kalyon Group/Zirve Holding, which operates in sectors such as construction, energy and infrastructure, also features on the list of hate media. The construction company Kalyon İnşaat topped the list in terms of total value of public contracts won between 2015–2019<sup>20</sup>. The vice chairperson of Turkuvaz Medya Group, a media company under the Kalyon Group and Zirve Holding, is Serhat Albayrak, brother of the Minister of Finance and Treasury, Berat Albayrak, who is the son-in-law of President Erdoğan.

<sup>18</sup> IPI-led international press freedom mission: Turkey must end public ad ban on independent newspapers. Available at: <https://www.evrensel.net/daily/397150/ipi-led-international-press-freedom-mission-turkey-must-end-public-ad-ban-on-independent-newspapers> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

<sup>19</sup> The circulation rate of 2019 was received by Presidency's Communication Center (CİMER).

<sup>20</sup> ENR (300) 2019 Ranking Available at: <https://www.enrturkiye.com/top300-2019/?lang=en> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

*Yeni Şafak*, another of the best-selling newspapers in Turkey, is also in the list of hate media. It is owned by the Albayrak Group, which is active in other sectors such as construction, transportation, waste management, mining, and the defence industry. Both newspapers have targeted dissenters who do not consent to the AKP. When the government begins to associate any dissident (such as Kurdish legal actors) with the problem of terror, these media follow the same path. The notion of “terror” is thus used as a significant component of hate speech to normalize it. Not only Kurds but also Armenians and LGBTI+s (to protect the concept of “family”), are being targeted in their columns. Both newspapers openly support the AKP.

The newspaper *Hürriyet* had maintained its secular, nationalist and liberal values until it was sold to a member of the pro-government conglomerate the Demirören Group in 2018 (signalling the end of mainstream media and media pluralism in Turkey). After this, some of journalists, who are known for their use of hate language feeding the polarisation in the society, switched to this newspaper and found a secure position at the Demirören Group. Its shares are entirely owned by the Demirören family, which openly supports the ruling AKP and has close ties with President Erdoğan. For the main part, most of the pro-government media also have business interests with the government.

Newspapers critical to the government, such as *Sözcü* and *Yeniçağ*, also produce hate speech when “national interests” are at stake. Third in the top ten print media outlets in Turkey, *Sözcü* newspaper is owned by an individual businessperson who was accused of aiding the terrorist organization FETÖ. Although infamous for its loud and Kemalist critique of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the ruling AKP, it is still among those media outlets producing and spreading hate speech, particularly against Syrian refugees. Like *Sözcü*, *Yeniçağ* newspaper is also cited in the HDV report as disseminating hate speech in the media; however, it is close to the nationalist, patriotic, liberal-conservative, secularist İYİ party (Good Party) and propagandises the statements of its leader. The newspaper’s grant holder is the İstanbul MP of the İYİ Party, Kemal Çelik.

## OWNERSHIP OF HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA EXAMPLES IN TURKEY<sup>21</sup>

Table 1

MEDIA OUTLET	MEDIA GROUP	OWNER(S)
Sabah (Print)	Kalyon Group (Zirve Holding)	Ömer Faruk Kalyoncu (100 %)
Hürriyet (Print)	Demirören Group	Demirören family
Yeni Şafak (Print)	Albayrak Holding	Shareholders: Albayrak Brothers (6.4%) Albayrak Tourism (64%)
Yeni Akit (Print)	Uğurlu Gazetecilik Basın Yayın Matbaacılık Reklamcılık	Ramazan Fatih Uğurlu

21 Information about media company owners and their shares can usually be found in the Trade Registry Gazette archive on [ticaretsicil.gov.tr](http://ticaretsicil.gov.tr). The above-mentioned companies do not publish their revenues and profits through updates.

Yeniçağ (Print)	Yeniçağ Gazetecilik Matbaacılık	Kemal Çelik
Sözcü (Print)	Estetik Yayıncılık A.Ş.	Burak Akbay (100%)
Ülke TV (TV)	Beyaz İletişim (Beyaz Holding)	İsmail Karahan, Aykut Zahid Akman, Zekeriya Karaman ve Mustafa Çelik (25% each)
TRT (TV)	State	
Analiz merkezi (YouTube channel)	Fatih Tezcan	Open to Crowd Fund

Source: MoM 2018 Available at: <https://turkey.mom-rsf.org/en/>

In addition to the above-mentioned media outlets and their correspondents, there are also individual opinion makers in Turkey who have their own personalized online media and communication channels for systematic dissemination of hate, such as Analiz merkezi.<sup>22</sup> There is no transparency regarding the financing of this channel. Its owner is calling on people to financially support him.

According to SimilarWeb's ranking, the top sites for news and media in Turkey<sup>23</sup> are the online editions of the newspapers belonging the Demirören family (such as hurriyet.com.tr and milliyet.com.tr), Kalyon Groups (sabah.com.tr) and Akbay's sozcu.com.tr. This means that the hate and propaganda produced by these media can also be accessed online.

Table 2 below shows the details of the owners of the hate and propaganda media examples, indicating that some of these groups are, in fact, conglomerates as they also have activities in sectors other than media.

## OWNERSHIP OF HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA EXAMPLES IN TURKEY

Table 2

OWNER	MEDIA OUTLETS OWNED BY THAT OWNER IN TURKEY	COMPANIES (CO)OWNED BY THAT OWNER IN MEDIA-RELATED SECTORS	COMPANIES OWNED BY THAT OWNER IN NON-MEDIA-RELATED SECTOR	CONNECTIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT/ LOCAL AUTHORITIES OR POLITICAL PARTIES
Ömer Faruk Kalyoncu	Sabah; Takvim; A haber (TV); A haber (radio) ahaber.com.tr; ATV, Sabah, sabah.com.tr	Distribution Turkuvaz Dağıtım Pazarlama A.Ş. Publishing Turkuvaz Kitapçılık Yayıncılık Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş., Turkuvaz Matbaacılık Yayıncılık Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş. Production Turkuvaz Prodüksiyon ve Tanıtım A.Ş. News Agency Turkuvaz Haber Ajansı Digital Media Turkuvaz Media Digital, Turkuvaz Mobile Services	Kalyon İnşaat; Kalyon Concession; Kalyon Energy; Kalyon Gayrimenkul; Kalyon Energy	Pro-government business interests with the AKP (in the construction sector such as Istanbul Airport, the Northern Marmara Highway)

<sup>22</sup> Available at: <https://www.analizmerkezi.com/> As at June 24, 2020, he has 65.9K subscribers.

<sup>23</sup> Top websites ranking: Turkey. 15 July 2020 Available at: <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/turkey/category/news-and-media/> [Accessed 17 July 2020]



Albayrak Brothers	Yeni Şafak; TVNET (TV)	Magazine Publishing Online Media Publishing and Broadcasting Advertising Distribution	Construction; Transportation Waste Management; Mining; Recycling; Machinery; Production of Paper; Textile; Moulding; Fleet Leasing; Port Sector.	Pro-government
Demirören family	Hürriyet, Milliyet, Posta; CNNTURK, KANAL D, TEVE 2, Dream TV, Dream Turk, Radyo D, CNN TURK Radio	Printing and Publication; Demirören Printing Center, Hürriyet Kitap; News Agency (DHA)	Energy (Milangaz, Oto Milangaz, Total Oil Turkey) Heavy Metal Industry (Demirören Ağır Metal); Real Estate (Demirören Shopping Center, İstiklal Palace), Tourism (Kemer Country Hotel), Education (ATA High School)	Pro-government: Openly supports the AKP and President Erdoğan through its media <sup>24</sup>
İsmail Karahan, Aykut Zahid Akman, Zekeriya Karaman ve Mustafa Çelik	Kanal 7; haber7. com, radio 7; Ülke TV; Ülke News		Etkin Education Organization; Kare Education Logistic; Lapis Education Organization; Zirve Communication	Pro-government: Beyaz Holding companies have won certain tenders from Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality for 8 years which was under AKP governance until 2019 <sup>25</sup>  The former RTÜK chairman Zahid Akman was on the company's board of directors <sup>26</sup>
Kemal Çelik	Yeniçağ (print)			Patriotic but not pro-government.
Burak Akbay	Sözcü (Print) Sozcu.com.tr			Nationalist and opposing the AKP

Source: MoM Turkey 2018<sup>27</sup>

24 See Demirören Group Available at: <https://turkey.mom-rsf.org/en/owners/companies/detail/company//demiroeren-group-1/>

25 Kanal 7 ve Ülke TV'nin sahibi Beyaz Holding, son sekiz yılda İBB'den 1 milyar 123 milyon TL'lik ihale aldı Available at: <https://medyascope.tv/2019/09/23/kanal-7-ve-ulke-tv-nin-sahibi-beyaz-holding-son-sekiz-yilda-ibbden-1-milyar-123-milyon-tlik-ihale-aldi/>

26 Beyaz Holding'in kilometre taşları. 4 Sep 2008. Available at: <https://t24.com.tr/haber/beyaz-holdingin-kilometre-taslari,5113> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

27 The information about the above companies (except Yeniçağ) was received by the MOM report on Turkey 2018 published by bianet and RSF Available at: <https://turkey.mom-rsf.org/en/>

## 2.4. Countering

Mainly civil society organizations monitor and report on hate speech findings, particularly in print media. Furthermore, there is no monitoring mechanism for rendering hate speech in online and social media visible. However, public outcry and opposition parties raise awareness of the hate speech in pro-government online media via counter actions and counter narrative in posting and commenting on posts in which hate speech appears.

The Hrant Dink Foundation has been monitoring and categorizing hate speech findings in the national and local press since 2009. Thus, they draw attention to the discriminatory language directed against ethnic and religious identities, sexist and homophobic discourse and news containing hate speech. Secondly, Kaos GL have been monitoring and reporting hate speech in the media against the LGBTI+s. The Media and Refugee Rights Association also aims at resisting hate speech against refugees and supporting refugees to raise their own voices via the media and the visual arts, and published media watch reports until January 2020. The Research Centre on Asylum and Migration (IGAM) published its own media watch report on Syrian refugees for a limited period (in 2019). As the content of hate speech in local media creates a faster and more devastating outrage, these organizations also conduct research on the local press to render hate speech visible. It is also used as a reference to understand the dynamics of a part of society, as local media are still quite effective in determining what is discussed in the local agenda and how<sup>28</sup>.

Furthermore, the Coalition for Ethical Journalism Turkey (CEJT) was initiated in 2018 to support independent and ethical journalism. They have begun preparing a glossary of hate speech or discriminative language produced by journalists<sup>29</sup>. International organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International periodically call on Turkey to make hate speech against certain groups visible.

On the other hand, in order to counter the manipulated facts and bogus news, verification platforms<sup>30</sup>, like teyit.org as a non-partisan and independent fact-checking organization, scans, chooses, investigates suspicious information and delivers it to readers by turning it into analyses. *Sabah*, *Yeni Şafak* and *Yeni Akit* were among the newspapers whose news was mostly subjected to investigation by teyit.org<sup>31</sup>.

28 Dilan Taşdemir, *Media and Migration Association*, May 2020.

29 Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ceren Sözeri, *email interview* June 2020.

30 Although teyit.org is the most popular, "dogrulukpayi" was the first fact-checking initiative and it went online in 2014. See more *Fact-Checkers and Fact-Checking in Turkey*" 29 June 2020. Available at <https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FactCheckers-and-FactChecking-in-Turkey-H.-Ak%C4%B1n-%C3%9Cnver.pdf> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

31 Kızılkaya, E. (2020). Google's 'outrageous support to partisan media' puts Turkey's fragile communities at risk. July 9, 2020. Available at <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/googles-outrageous-support-to-partisan-media-puts-turkeys-fragile-communities-at-risk/> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

Turkey has web portals such as [freewebturkey.com](http://freewebturkey.com) and [@engelliweb](https://twitter.com/engelliweb) [blockedweb] listing the increasing amount of Turkey's banned content and websites in accordance with Law No. 5651 on "Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Combating Crimes Committed by Means of Such Publication" and other provisions of the Information Technologies and Communication Authority (BTK) of recent years. These portals specifically allow us to see blocked content that is critical of the AKP. They thereby support to raise public awareness of violations of freedom of expression in Turkey, a territory where even Google fuels partisan media outlets, many of which produce disinformation and propaganda, despite warnings from vulnerable communities.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See note above.

### 3. ORGANISATION OF HATE, DISINFORMATION AND PROPAGANDA IN MEDIA

According to the HDV's latest "Media Watch on Hate Speech" report published in December 2019<sup>33</sup>, Syrians, Rums, Greeks, Jews and Armenians were among the most targeted groups in the print media of Turkey and *Yeni Akit*, *Diriliş Postası*, *Yeniçağ*, *Milli Gazete*, *Milat*, *Türkiye*, *Star* were listed as the national newspapers that were most active in the production of hate speech in 2019. These newspapers have an influence on their own communities in terms of promoting violence, even though they are not powerful enough to frame the national political agenda. Still, the political climate supports them and impunity expands the scope of the hate speech produced by these newspapers. Even though these are small newspapers in terms of readership, their online versions and Twitter accounts, through which they disseminate hate speech, are still reachable from all over Turkey. Furthermore, Google keeps featuring their online edition in the top search results of important keywords.<sup>34</sup>

The most targeted groups in print media were Syrians, Rums, Greeks, Jews and Armenians, and *Yeni Akit*, *Diriliş Postası*, *Yeniçağ*, *Milli Gazete*, *Milat*, *Türkiye*, *Star* were listed as the newspapers that were most active in the production of hate speech in 2019.

#### 3.1. Hate Speech, Disinformation and Propaganda in Media: Patterns

In the media disseminating hate speech, individuals and/or various groups fall into the range of hate speech depending on the policies that create the political agenda. As an example, we can point to the accusations, blame and allegations used against the Kurdish legal bodies between the June and November elections in 2015 when the political atmosphere in Turkey changed dramatically and so did the moderate media discourse on the Kurdish issue. For instance, the signifier "HDPKK" combines the letters of the HDP and the PKK used in news reports. It implies that a legal party, the HDP, supports the PKK or that they work together: It is used to silence the political opposition and criticize other media outlets in re-creating the enemy-other in *Yeni Şafak*<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, media outlets of the Demirören Group also targeted not only Kurdish legal bodies but also other opponents of the AKP government when the AKP changed its way of dealing with the Kurdish conflict, and these outlets have published bogus news and fabricated quotes<sup>36</sup> –as seen ahead of the March 2019 local elections<sup>37</sup>.

33 Media Watch on Hate Speech Available at:

<https://hrantdink.org/attachments/article/2375/MNS%C4%B0-rapor-may%C4%B1s-agustos-2019.pdf>

34 Kızılkaya, E. (2020)

35 Albayrak, Ö., (2016, Feb 26). *İhanet ve daniskası [Betrayal and more]*. *Yeni Şafak*. p.13 See also Lekesiz, Ö. (2015, Oct 13). *Vahşetle sırtan kelleler [The heads grinning brutally]*. See Korkmaz, T. (2015, Oct 21). *Demek ki neymiş [So what was it?]*. *Yeni Şafak*. p.18

36 Posta, *Hürriyet* ve CNN Türk'ten Sezai Temelli çarpıtması. Available at: <https://www.evrensel.net/haber/375777/posta-hurriyet-ve-cnn-turkten-sezai-temelli-carpitmasi>

37 Kızılkaya (2020).

Famous for its criticism of the ruling AKP, nationalist, patriotic and conservative *Yeniçağ* still shares common ideals with those pro-government media supporting the national interest of Turkey, such as the idea of the Turkishness of official ideology. As also noted by Media Watch on the HDV Hate Speech project team<sup>38</sup>, when it comes to “foreigners” (Jews, Armenians, Christians, Greeks, Rums, Syrians, Western), both partisan media, whose owners have close economic and political ties with the AKP, and opposition nationalist media, such as *Sözcü* and *Yeniçağ*, share the same language of enemy-other towards those “foreigners.”

According to the KAOS GL monthly media watch report on hate speech, the pro-AKP media mostly disseminate and promote hate speech against the LGBTI+s. While *Yeni Akit* and *Milli Gazete* produce hate speech supposedly with “religious references” (by criminalizing anyone defending the rights of LGBTI+s)<sup>39</sup>, newspapers like the nationalist *Aydınlık* associate the LGBTI+ movement with “imperialism”<sup>40</sup>. Both refer to the “external enemies” allegedly taking part in the LGBTI+ movement. The use of hate against LGBTI+s increases during May and June as 17 May is the “International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia” and Pride Week is held in June. According to Kaos GL’s 2019 Media Monitoring Report, the number of newspapers targeting LGBTI+s, and discriminatory language based on prejudices increased in 2019.

In May 2020, on a TV programme on TRT, the former Preacher of Istanbul, Ramazan Sevinci targeted the Istanbul Convention aiming to prevent violence targeting women and penalizing those inflicting that violence, and used hate language against the LGBTI+ community<sup>41</sup>. In another television programme named “What’s the Truth?”, airing every day on TRT, LGBTI+s were targeted with the following words: “All kinds of illegitimate sexual intercourse.”

Moreover, after the head of Turkey’s top religious authority had once again targeted LGBTI+s by calling them evil during a sermon in April 2020, which the Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office<sup>42</sup> did not deem worthy of investigation, journalists affiliated with the pro-government media began to comment on the issues concerning women’s and LGBTI+ rights, discrediting their rights<sup>43</sup> and blaming LGBTI+s for all the evils in society.<sup>44</sup> This was not the only instance indicating the arbitrariness of sanctions in the scope of

38 Email interview with the HDV Team, June 2020.

39 *İslama Düşman Teroriste Kalkan*. [Enemy to Islam, shield to terrorist] Available at: <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/kart/haber/islama-dusman-teroriste-kalkan-lgbtiyi-savunan-bazi-barolar-terorden-hukum-giyen-avukatlari-da-kolluyor-1213308.html> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

40 Kaos GL editor, Aslı Alpar, email interview, June 2020.

41 TRT 1’de İstanbul sözleşmesi ve eşcinsellere yönelik nefret söylemi Available at: <https://gazetemanifesto.com/2020/trt-1-de-istanbul-sozlesmesi-ve-escinsellere-yonelik-nefret-soylemi-355201/>

42 ‘No Need to Investigate’ Religious Affairs President’s Remarks, Says Prosecutor’s Office Available at: <http://bianet.org/english/lgbti/224293-no-need-to-investigate-religious-affairs-president-s-remarks-says-prosecutor-s-office> 15.05.2020

43 Kaplan H. (28 Apr 2020). *Durma Haykır, Eşcinsellik günahtr*. [Don’t stop, shout, homosexuality is a sin]. *Sabah*.

44 Kaplan, H (3 May 2020). *Aile için tehlike çanları çalıyor*. [Alarm bells start to ring for the family]. *Sabah*.

freedom of speech and the impunity for the offence of “openly degrading a section of people based on differences of class, religion, sect, gender, region” when the rights of disadvantaged groups are at stake. Given the statement of the Interior Minister Süleyman Soylu: “I regard LGBTI+s as a threat”<sup>45</sup>, we can say that impunity is inevitable in cases of hate speech against the LGBTI+ community as it is seen as a threat at the governmental level.

Regarding the portrayal of Syrians, disinformation related to them is not rare in national and local media in Turkey which eventually results in outbursts of social lynching and threats, and reinforces the social polarization. Syrian refugees are generally portrayed by mainstream media as a “backward society”.<sup>46</sup> Those asylees were also on the agenda of the media before the local elections of 31 March 2019, particularly after the Interior Minister Soylu said that 53,099 Syrians, who had acquired Turkish citizenship, would be able to vote in the local elections. This statement turned the “Syrian voters” into an opportunity in both the pro-AKP media such as *Sabah* and those opposed to the AKP such as *Sözcü* and *Yeniçağ*. In particular, discriminatory use of language and visuals, wrong terminology, manipulation of facts and images, criminalization, exaggeration, false information, and negative defamatory<sup>47</sup> campaigns towards them is being encouraged by both pro-AKP and its opposing nationalist media. In these media, the presence of refugees is seen as the cause of social and economic backwardness in the country and they blame them for the unemployment of Turkish citizens<sup>48</sup>. This situation seems to agitate hatred against Syrian refugees.

### 3.2. Propagandising for the government: Pro-AKP trolls

On 1 May 2020, the AKP issued a twelve-clause ethical guideline that includes the principles not to use hate language and to fight against “disinformation” in social media. The AKP’s deputy chairman Mahir Ünal, who manages the AKP’s Publicity and Media, encouraged the use of a “green dot” emoji accompanied by the “Turkish flag” on Twitter profiles to signify that these accounts are “national” [milli] accounts, that is compliant with this guideline. This also means that these accounts openly support the AKP. The most frequently mentioned expressions in the green-dotted profiles were “Fatherland”, “Atatürk”, “Allah”, “Turkey”, and “Turkey” and “Erdogan” as analysed by Onur Mat<sup>49</sup>. It later turned out that some of the messages published on Twitter to insult and harass and target female journalists and politicians such as CHP Istanbul Provincial President Kaftancıoğlu and journalist Mengü were

45 Minister Süleyman Soylu targeted LGBTI+s again!

<https://www.kaosgl.org/en/single-news/minister-suleyman-soylu-targeted-lgbtis-again> 22 August 2019.

46 Cavidan and Soykan (2018). AKP döneminde medyada mülteci temsili. Available at: <https://halagazeteciyiz.net/2018/12/25/akp-doneminde-medya-da-mul-teci-temsili/> [Accessed 17 July 2020]

47 Bulut, A. (7 Jul 2019). “Mülteciler Stratejik Silahdır” [Refugees are the strategic weapons]. *Yeniçağ* newspaper.

48 Çölaşan, E. (17 Mar, 2019) “İş Arıyorum Abi”, *Sözcü* newspaper and Çölaşan E. *Sözcü* (30 Mar 2019) “Zafer mi Olur Yenilgi mi” *Sözcü* newspaper.

49 The Green Dots of Twitter in Turkey 26 May 2020 Available at: <https://dokuz8haber.net/english/politics/the-green-dots-of-twitter-in-turkey/> [Accessed 15 June 2020]

disseminated from some of these accounts with green dots. Lastly, another green-dotted account has used sexist statements and verbally attacked Başak Demirtaş, the spouse of the jailed then co-president of the HDP, Selahattin Demirtaş. On 17 July, after a wave of threats targeting female journalists and politicians and dissemination of sexist statements, the AKP announced that was ending “the green dot” campaign<sup>50</sup>.

On 11 June 2020, Twitter announced that it had disclosed 32,242 accounts to their archive of state-linked information operations. Among them, 7340 accounts attributed to the youth wing of the AKP were in Turkey, mentioned above as pro-AKP trolls for pushing propaganda by criticising the opposition parties CHP and HDP, and for spreading disinformation and targeting and discrediting critical accounts and individuals and movements. It is also revealed that retweet rings such as “AK devam” (My AK case) and “AK Hilal” (AK Crescent) were used frequently by AKP supporters to amplify tweets from AKP officials and AKP supporters specifically. Considering this, as Saka notes, “Twitter may be the most convenient venue to circulate hate narratives publicly [...] those people know that there is impunity”<sup>51</sup>.

### 3.3. Pro-government Opinion Makers and Other Groups

Turkey also has individual opinion makers who have their own personalized online media and communication channels such as “Fatih Tezcan ile Analiz Merkezi” on YouTube. Describing himself as anti-imperialist and anti-Kemalist, the founder is infamous for his threatening and aggressive propagandist style of comments, and for targeting various groups such as CHP representatives, Kemalists and women, and LGBTI+s<sup>52</sup>. He has a “report line” through which he receives the names of people who criticize and oppose the AKP and President Erdoğan to mark them as targets<sup>53</sup>. Recently, in one of his broadcasts, he referenced the death threats in the name of “love for President Erdoğan”. As this statement includes crimes according to the Turkish Penal Code, an investigation launched against him but no charges had been pressed as of 20 June.

Furthermore, the projects of Bosphorus Global (BG) include the sort of fact-checking services which, in various languages, aim to counter critical coverage of the AKP published in the international media. It was allegedly stated that its employees salaries were financed by a private hospital<sup>54</sup>. Its Global Affairs Chair is Suheyb Oğut (spouse of Hilal Kaplan, a columnist

50 Ruling AKP ends green dots social media campaign 40 days after initiating it. Available at: <https://www.duvarenglish.com/politics/2020/06/17/ruling-akp-ends-green-dot-social-media-campaign-40-days-after-initiating-it/> [Accessed 15 June 2020]

51 Assoc Prof. Erkan Saka. E-mail interview, June 2020.

52 Rainbow colors on Turkey's Bosphorus Bridge upsets pro-akp journalists Available at <https://www.birgun.net/haber/rainbow-colors-on-turkey-s-bosphorus-bridge-upsets-pro-akp-journalists-165412>

53 Available at <http://www.diken.com.tr/yok-mu-artiran-diyenlere-yanit-tezcandan-geldi-erdoganin-canina-kastedenlerin-cani-alinir/> [Accessed 15 June 2020]

54 Turkey's Pelican Group: A state within a state. 17 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkeys-pelican-group-a-state-within-a-state/a-52798624> [Accessed 30 July 2020]

from the pro-government Sabah daily) and the co-Chair is Ceyhan Aksoy. They are not that effective in shaping the public agenda. Still, one of their websites called “fact-checking Turkey”<sup>55</sup> appears to take a stand against the independent fact-checking sites such as teyit.org in order to counter the so-called disinformation from their side.

On 5 July 2019, the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), which has allegedly received significant financing from a group having close connection with the government<sup>56</sup>, published a report entitled “International Media Outlets’ Extensions in Turkey”<sup>57</sup>. The SETA report listed the professional backgrounds and social media posts of journalists working at international media organisations. The report accused these organizations of “carrying out a perception work”<sup>58</sup>. Citing social media posts and retweets of the journalists, the SETA report was seen as “blacklisting” and “targeting” by journalism associations in Turkey where, in 2019, 33 journalists and media workers had already been sentenced to a total of 63 years, 11 months in prison as part of journalism or political cases as per the TMK<sup>59</sup>. These cases are all listed in bianet’s Media Monitoring Database that aims at monitoring and reporting violations of freedom of expression towards media employees and organizations in Turkey<sup>60</sup>.

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55 More Fact-Checkers and Fact-Checking in Turkey 29 June 2020. Available at <https://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/FactCheckers-and-FactChecking-in-Turkey-H.-Ak%C4%B1n-%C3%9Cnver.pdf>

56 Erdogan's AKP basks in glow of think tank financed by influential family, DW finds Available at: <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogans-akp-basks-in-glow-of-think-tank-financed-by-influential-family-dw-finds/a-51258757> [Accessed 15 June 2020]

57 Uluslararası Medya Kuruluşlarının Türkiye Uzantıları 5 July 2019 Available at <https://setav.org/assets/uploads/2019/07/R143Tr.pdf> [Accessed 15 June 2020]

58 SETA Report on Journalists to be Taken to Court, SETA Says It is a ‘Scientific Study’ 7 July 2019 <http://bianet.org/english/print/210168-seta-report-on-journalists-to-be-taken-to-court-seta-says-it-is-a-scientific-study>

59 Medya Gözlem Raporu BIA Media Monitoring 2019. The Ends Justify the Means in Purging Critical Media. Available at: <https://bianet.org/5/100/218959-the-ends-justify-the-means-in-purging-critical-media>

60 Available at <https://mediamonitoringdatabase.org/> [Accessed 15 June 2020]



## 4. CONCLUSION

This report shows the political and economic affiliations of hate, disinformation, and propaganda media and their patterns in Turkey during the AKP's rule. It demonstrates through specific examples where hate speech and disinformation media get power from, and what rationale they follow while producing hate speech and disseminating disinformation. This report thereby argues that new regulations for media ownership are needed in order to break the domination of hate media in a hopefully pluralistic media environment.

It also reasserts that the individuals and/or groups other than those supporting official ideology become "divisive of national unity" so that they easily become hate objects targeted by both partisan and non-partisan but patriotic media. Currently, disinformation disseminated by pro-government media with political and business interests in the government is spread in the name of "love for President Erdoğan" and "propagandizing for his government." Furthermore, those media that position themselves as nationalist, patriotic and critical of the AKP share a common language with the partisan media when they see threats to the founding ideology of Turkey. It can thus be concluded that this report reaffirms the commitment not only of the pro-government media to spreading propaganda and disinformation but also of the patriotic media's hate-filled news reporting when the "national interests" are at stake.

Ownership pluralism, one of the pivotal conditions of a democratic media environment, should be ensured through new regulations that break down the conflicts of interest between media groups and power.

This is seen through news reporting in terms of hate media, which obviously do not practice a rights-based journalistic approach, with their contents promoting violence against or harassment of individuals and disadvantaged groups. These media repeat and cause egregious violations of these groups' rights and go along with a polarizing rhetoric that fosters fanaticism and again encourages violence in targeting their hate objects.

This report principally suggests the urgency of the need for a self-regulatory mechanism developed by civil society and independently from the government to monitor hate speech, disinformation and propaganda. This mechanism would also need to be applicable to social media in Turkey where the government's control of the media and communication conflicts with fundamental principles of freedom of speech. This is because its decisions in relation to sanctions are arbitrary and do not guarantee the rights of the most vulnerable members of society nor protect them from being targeted by hate speech.

Furthermore, ownership pluralism, one of the pivotal conditions of a democratic media environment, should be ensured through new regulations that break down the conflicts of interest between media groups and power. This would eventually pave the way for a freer media atmosphere involving independent actors and critical voices who do not please the government.

All in all, the highly concentrated media market and the inexplicit and non-transparent financial structures of media ownership are the biggest obstacles to media pluralism in Turkey. The media owners' political and economic affiliations undermine the task of countering the hate speech and disinformation in the media. This situation stands as a major barrier to social cohesion and democracy in Turkey.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Monitoring of financial connections between media owners and government should be performed on a regular basis by the NGOs conducting media ownership watch to indicate interdependence between the ruling party/government and hate and propaganda media and their owners. This raises awareness of the need for new regulation of media ownership and concentration as well as inviting those media to provide full transparency concerning their finances specifically in terms of public contracts.
- Data mapping for “media owners and their other investments” through networks such as the “Network of Dispossessions” should be updated on a regular basis otherwise a new open access database or map should be established by the NGOs and volunteers working with them and the reports should be published at least quarterly. This would help to evaluate the financial background of hate and propaganda media.
- Journalists, academics, lawyers, representatives of NGOs, human rights defenders, independent volunteers, listeners, readers, viewers and those groups who are most exposed to hate speech in the media should work together under a shared platform and/or coalition in order to create a common mechanism through which hate speech and disinformation can be scanned, monitored, reported and countered regularly and consistently.
- These reports should be shared with the government, Parliament, law makers, local authorities, media regulatory bodies, professional associations, media literacy educators and fact-checking platforms to be able to develop common strategies and policies.
- A self-regulatory body should be established and developed by the non-governmental organisations who conduct media monitoring in order to render hate speech and disinformation in all media visible.
- Social media monitoring in relation to hate and propaganda media should be conducted effectively by non-governmental organisations. They should develop the mechanisms and tools to facilitate the monitoring and publishing of “Social Media Hate Watch” reports weekly, monthly, and yearly.
- A glossary and booklets should be prepared together with journalists, academics, and NGOs monitoring hate speech in media to preclude the hate language in the media.
- In order to distinguish which institutions or individuals benefit from impunity, a monitoring mechanism should be established to render the judiciary’s different interpretations of the boundaries between hate speech and freedom of expression visible.
- Parallel to this, the judiciary bodies such as lawyers or judges can be trained in relation to the provisions in the international documents and practices of European Court of Human Rights on this issue.

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This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The first series of research reports examines THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF HATE AND PROPAGANDA MEDIA MODEL in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

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