



MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN MONTENEGRO

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Funded by
the European Union

B | T | D The Balkan Trust
for Democracy
A PROJECT OF THE GERMAN MARSHALL FUND

 **Norway**



Reporting
Diversity
Network 2.0

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Publishers:

Media Diversity Institute and Center for Investigative Journalism Montenegro

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Reporting Diversity Network 2.0 – RDN 2.0 is established with the objective to effectively influence media representation of ethnicity, religion and gender in the Western Balkans.

Project partners include Media Diversity Institute, Albanian Media Institute, Center for Investigative Journalism, Center for Investigative Journalism Montenegro, South East Network for Professionalization of Media, Institute for Communication Studies, Kosovo 2.0, Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans. The project is funded by the European Union, Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

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This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union, Balkan Trust for Democracy, a project of the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its contents are the sole responsibility of the author and Reporting Diversity Network 2.0 and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the Balkan Trust for Democracy, the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or their partners.



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Introduction

Although different types of disinformation have existed almost since the beginning of (mass) media, today's terms "disinformation" and "misinformation" are a rather new concept in the world, as its effects started being mostly visible with the rise of social networks and online media, which makes it hard to define. The EU defines **disinformation** as 'verifiably false or misleading information created, presented, and disseminated for economic gain or to intentionally deceive the public. **Misinformation** is verifiably false information that is spread without the intention to mislead and is often shared because the user believes it to be true. Some of the effects of both misinformation and disinformation were highly visible during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic all around the globe, whereas the latest Russian invasion of Ukraine has additionally increased the overall effects of disinformation to a new level, not only in these two countries but throughout Europe and especially the Western Balkans, which is traditionally divided between the East and the West.

When disinformation is combined with hate speech, discrimination, or harsh rhetoric, this combination can have extremely dangerous consequences. According to the Council of Europe, hate speech has no concrete definition in international human rights; rather, it is a term used to describe broad discourse that is extremely negative and constitutes a threat to social peace. Montenegrin society has been witnessing different aspects of disinformation for many years now, and in the past two years, many disinformation campaigns were combined with hate speech and discrimination, creating an even higher level of polarisation among Montenegrin citizens, while reducing the level of tolerance among many ethnic/national, religious and political counterparts to a very minimum.

Just like the society, the Montenegrin media scene is also polarised, with rare examples of independent and objective media. Media in the country repeatedly increase the gap between the polarised sides, often broadcasting disinformation and hateful content, yet those several objective media luckily remain the most popular and trustworthy source of information for the majority of citizens. However, with the rise in popularity and use of social and digital media, the intensity and variety of citizens' exposure to disinformation and hate speech is harder to monitor and prevent.

For this reason, The Centre for Investigative Journalism of Montenegro (CIN-CG) has conducted research on the most prominent cases of hate speech, discrimination and/or disinformation campaigns in the past fifteen months, in order to identify the intensity and sensitivity of the level of such negative occurrences in the main traditional, online and social media in Montenegro, as well as the discourse of political, religious and other leaders in the country through their social network pages. To that end, we present the main findings from the analyses, which will serve as the starting point for the future work of CIN-CG and other partner organisations in their work on monitoring, preventing and countering disinformation in Montenegro and the region.



Methodological approach

In recent years, Montenegro has faced an upsurge in hate speech. Therefore, the need for media monitoring was recognised by the project applicant from six countries, and an adequate monitoring methodology was selected to be used in each country. In 2021 and 2022, different content from traditional and online media (newspapers, television, info portals, radio) and social media networks (such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) were analysed and incidents with elements of hate speech and discriminatory content were regularly reported. The special focus was put on hateful statements coming from public officials and politicians, regarding the fact that they have a greater influence on public opinion.

The examination of the extracted materials included quantitative, qualitative analysis, and adjusted discourse analysis of their content. The collected cases were classified according to their topic, type of narrative used, targeted groups or individuals, the profile or profession of the person who committed the incident, what was the reach of the content, what type of media was used, and what was the broader context of these events. The methodology of George Washington University¹ was used for classifying the incidents, by using a 6-point hate speech intensity scale explained below:

- 1. Disagreement** - Rhetoric including disagreeing at the idea/mental level. Challenging groups claims, ideas, and beliefs, or trying to change them.
- 2. Negative actions** - Rhetoric including negative nonviolent actions associated with the group.
- 3. Negative character** - Rhetoric including non-violent characterisations and insults.
- 4. Demonising and dehumanising** - Rhetoric including specifications of sub-human and superhuman characteristics of the targeted individual/group.
- 5. Instigation of violence** - Rhetoric implies infliction of physical harm or aspirational physical harm.
- 6. Death** - Rhetoric implies literal killing or elimination of a group.

The methodology did not include the analyses of comments posted online, or on social media, just the content being published by media and influential individuals in Montenegro.

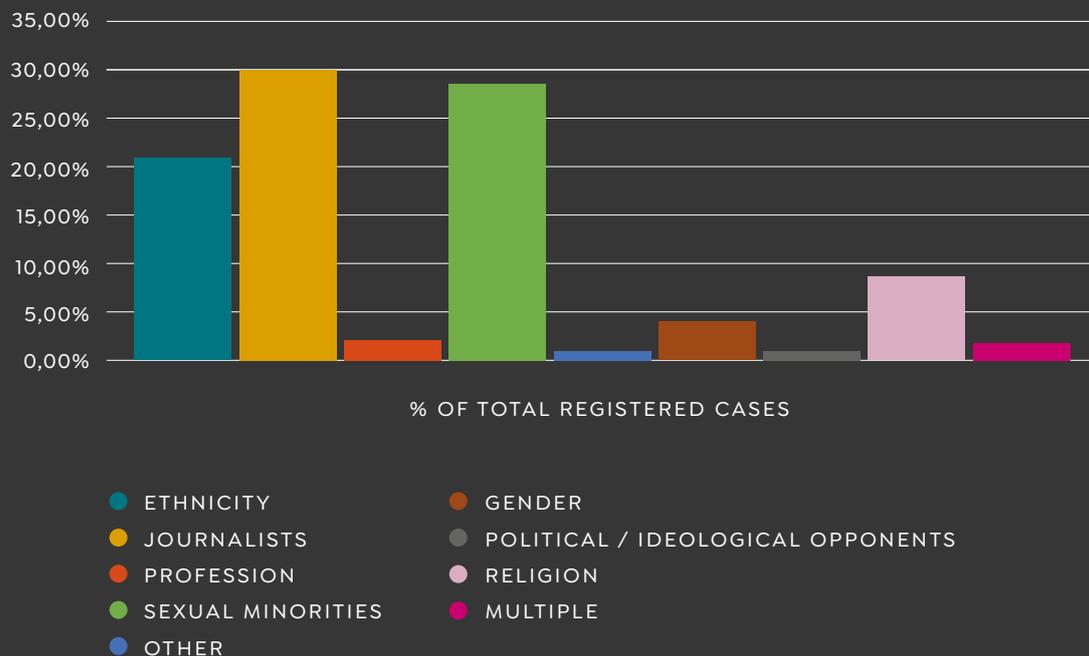
¹ Bahador Babak, Kerchner Daniel, Bacon Leah, Menas Amanda, (2019), *Monitoring Hate Speech in the US*. Washington, DC: George Washington University. https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/8/846/files/2019/03/Monitoring-Hate-Speech-in-the-US-Media-3_22-z0h5kk.pdf

Narratives and Sub-narratives

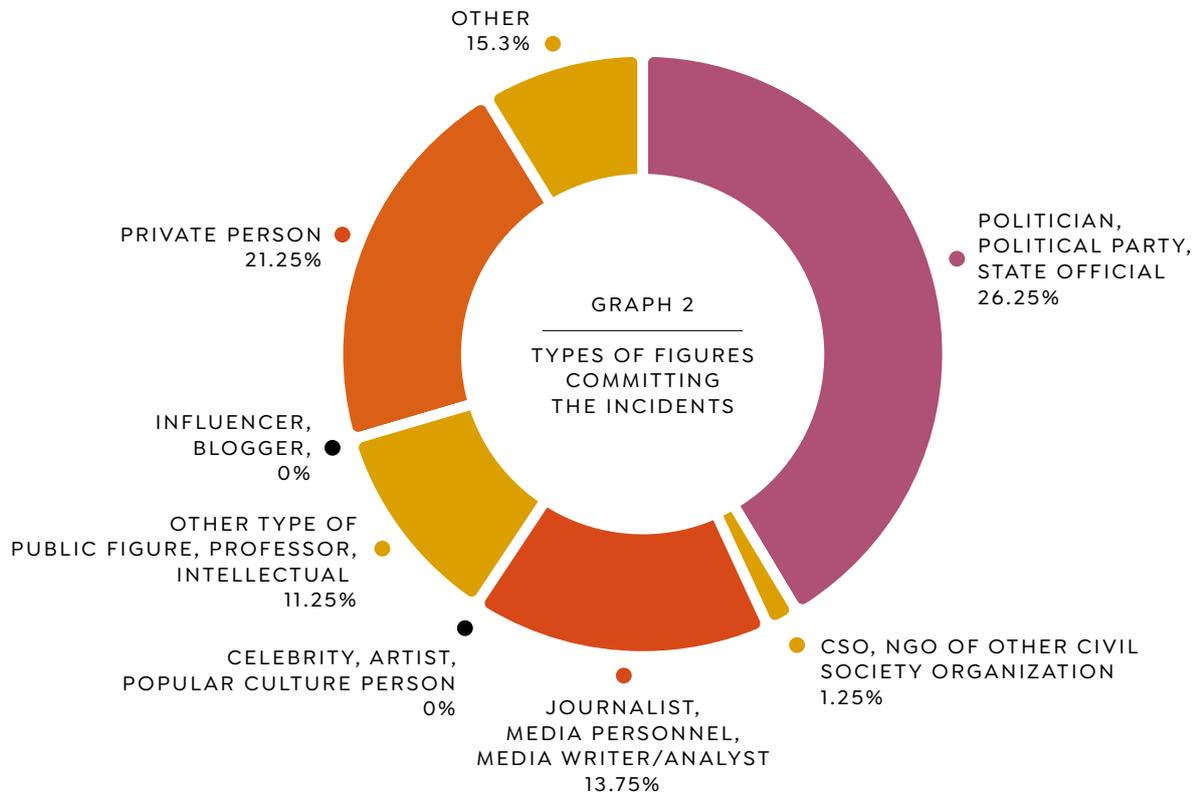
Quantitative analysis

During the assessment period, between January 2021 and April 2022, a total of 80 different cases of hate speech, disinformation and/or discriminatory language (incidents) were noted by CIN-CG in Montenegro, mainly in various online media and social media networks of politicians, or influential individuals. Unfortunately, many of these reported cases had a wide influence on the public, on average reaching tens of thousands of users/readers.

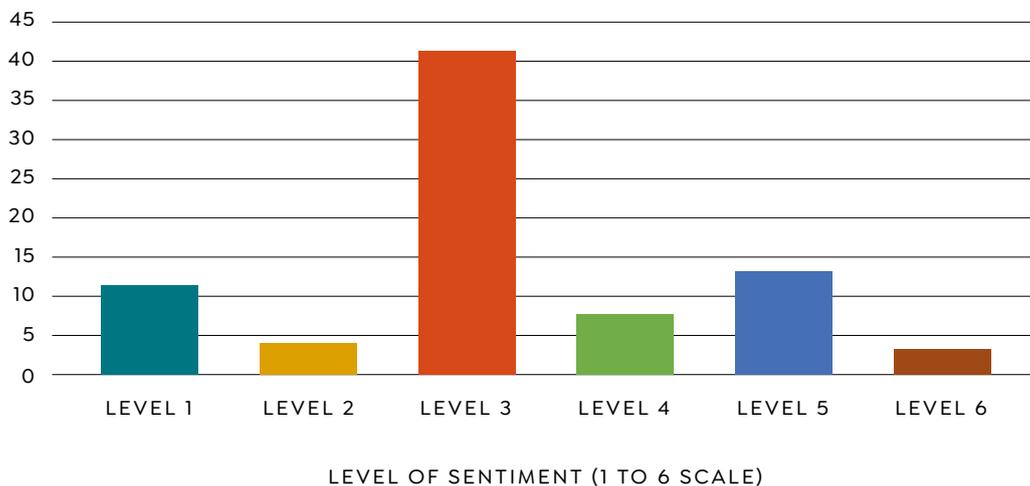
As shown in Graph 1 of this document, the largest number of reported cases of hate speech, discrimination, and similar content were aimed at gender issues (30%), ethnicity (21%), and political, or ideological contexts (29%). Having in mind the overall polarisation of Montenegrin society along ethnonational and political lines, which are often intertwined, it is visible that half of the noted cases of hate speech and discrimination were politically motivated, aimed at discrediting the opposing political faction, either on an ethnonational or ideological basis. A significant percentage of hate speech and discrimination was gender motivated, usually targeting women and the LGBTQ+ population, another considerable issue in the country. There were also many cases of hate speech that involved different insults, or discrimination on different grounds, which were marked in the presented graph below as multiple:



Politicians, political parties, and state officials make up almost half of the perpetrators of hate speech in this monitoring (46.25%). Other figures committing the hate incidents were private persons (21.25%), then journalists, media personnel, media writers/analysts (13.75%), other public figures, professors, intellectuals (11.25%), others (6.25%) and CSOs, NGOs or other civil society organisations (1.25%).



Another important aspect of quantitative analyses was to assess the number and intensity of incidents (reported cases), according to the previously described methodology, on a six-level scale, where 1 is the lowest intensity (usually at the level of a disagreement) and 6 being the highest in intensity level, often calling for death, or elimination of a certain individual or a group (Graph 3). To that end, more than half of all reported cases were in the middle, neither mild nor extreme (ranging from 2 to 4), which normally includes non-violent and negative rhetoric, insults and/or dehumanising content. A high number of cases (11 out of 80) fall under the level 1 category, being the mildest, yet three reported cases were noted among the 80 reported cases that fall under the most extreme type and intensity of cases, aimed at public threats to the life of certain ethnic and religious groups, as well as one individual.



Narrative analysis

For this research, we have used the Council of Europe's [manual](#) *»WE CAN! Taking Action against Hate Speech through Counter and Alternative Narratives«*. And its definition of the concept of a *»narrative«* is as follows: *A narrative can be defined as a logical, internally coherent report and interpretation of connected events and characters or pieces of information that makes sense to the reader/listener. The report and interpretation combined give meaning to the story, connecting singular instances to a more general, collective story. Narratives are important in defining, reinforcing, or changing unequal social and political power structures, which sustain and legitimise hate speech and all forms of discrimination and extremism. (...) Narratives often combine real and fictional elements so that they resonate as plausible, interesting, and convincing.*

In this research, we didn't limit the analyses of hate narratives to unlawful/illegal hate speech, as recognised in national or international legal norms, but instead, we applied the concept of hate (speech), discrimination, and disinformation in media and communication in broader sociological terms in our research, which included other narratives, such as those about gender, ethnicity, ideologies and similar. To that end, the most common hateful narratives were made in relation to gender, political, or ideological differences, ethnicity, and similar.

Hate narratives towards women and/or LGBTQ+ persons

As evident in the graphs above, there were many hate narratives against women and members of the LGBTQ+ community in the public discourse of Montenegro, often made by politicians, individuals in high public positions, celebrities, and others. Most negative and even hateful narratives were made by politicians and some media against their political opponents while discriminating and insulting representatives of minority genders during the spreading of such narratives. Some of the examples include the following:

One incident was against Vanja Čalović Marković, Executive director of the Network for Affirmation of the NGO sector - MANS and Member of the Council of the Agency for Prevention of Corruption. She was named *»the last rural rascal woman«* and she was compared to hoofed animals.

Another case of gender related hate speech was made against Deputy Prime Minister Dritan Abazović and President of the Parliament Aleksa Bečić, who were called *»fagots«* by party representative of DPS (former ruling party - Democratic Party of Socialists).

A member of one of the government's commissions made several brutal insults against Draginja Vuksanović Stanković - an MP of the Montenegrin Parliament.

MP Dragan Ivanović stated at the Parliament session that he *condemns selective abortions, but that everyone has the right to influence the gender of their children.*

To our knowledge, none of these cases were adequately processed by the competent institutions, although they were made in public, with wide visibility and very broad audiences.

Hate narratives against ideological opponents (religious, political and similar)

Due to a turbulent political year in Montenegro, many hate and disinformation narratives were made by different political, religious, and other leaders towards one another, as well as media and civil society, most of which were also not adequately processed. These are just several examples of hateful statements and narratives during the reporting period:

One case was against the previous government i.e. Prime Minister and independent media outlet Vijesti. The owners of the media outlet were called *Masons, Soros' bots, anti-Orthodox, anti-Serbs, anti-Montenegrins, anti-Christians, followers of the global deep state, guardians of the legacy of Đukanović's communist-mafia regime* and similar, while the previous Prime-Minister Zdravko Krivokapić was named *their henchman*, by Mr. Medojević, at that time an MP of Montenegrin Parliament.

Another report included President Đukanović's statement against the government, accusing them of inciting "*Chetnik*" ideology (meaning radical, right-wing Serbs who fought against Partisans in WWII and who do not recognise Montenegrin nationality today) by failing to prosecute an unknown person who urinated on a monument dedicated to a Partisan hero. He also made a public threat by saying: "*We expect an adequate reaction, or we'll know what to do*".

Former Liberal Party leader Miodrag Živković stated on Facebook "*What a jerk you need to be to receive an EU report on your own catastrophic results with a smile like this*", insulting the Prime Minister at that time.

During the reporting period and bearing in mind that the Serbian Orthodox church was heavily involved in previous elections and the establishment of the government in 2020, a lot of tension and numerous examples of hate speech and propaganda were recorded in Montenegro, owing primarily to the *Law on religious rights and freedoms* that was previously adopted by the ruling DPS. However, aside from the ongoing clashes between the supporters of the two Orthodox churches in Montenegro and political leaders in this regard, not as many narratives were visible in mainstream media and by politicians, but mainly in comments below online news media articles and in the social media posts of citizens, which were not included in these analyses. However, it is worth mentioning that although this segment is not visible in the report, the amount of religious hatred, tensions, and disinformation campaigns within society exploded during this period and at times threatened to endanger the overall stability of the country.

Hate narratives against different ethnic groups and nationalities

Given that Montenegro is a highly polarised society, where ethnic/national polarisation is often intertwined with political/ideological and sometimes religious polarisations, between similar national groups, there were a number of incidents during the reporting period linked to hate narratives towards different ethnic groups and nationals. Some of the examples of such cases include the following:

One example of hate speech and discrimination occurred on the online portal "*In4S*" against: Croats, Albanians, American diplomats, Deputy Prime Minister of Montenegro Dritan Abazović, Montenegrins, DPS voters and other groups. For example, Albanians were called "*Shiptari*" (the most common insult towards Albanian nationals), while *Kosovo* was named "*Shiptaristan*" (an offensive slur, which combines Shiptari and "stan" countries), DPS voters were called "*Milogorci*" (an offensive word combining the followers of Milo Đukanović) and Crnogorci (Montenegrins in native language), and so on.

One outlet reported about a couple who made public insults and expressed racism against children of African origin, whom they called "*niggers and monkeys*", in the middle of the day and at the most popular shopping mall in Podgorica.

Director of a public company Hydro-Plant Piva named the Albanian minority as "*aggressive and dirty Shiptars*", while he called all Montenegrins: "*Montenegrin cattle's ass*"... ("*stoka guzičarska crnogorska*").

Although hateful comments, narratives, and tensions between Serbs and other ethnic groups in Montenegro are becoming an everyday occurrence in the country, hatred towards other races is very rare, with only a few examples ever being reported in Montenegro, which is why the second example listed above was very shocking for the society. At the same time, although hate speech against the Roma population is very frequent in society, no public comments or any public narratives against Roma were recorded during the reporting period.

Other: hate speech towards journalists/media, CSOs, academics and other civil society members

Besides the examples of hate narratives mentioned earlier, which include different aspects of hate speech, discrimination, insults, and similar examples made by, or against political, religious, and other leaders of society, there were also cases of hate speech in the past year aimed at discrediting members of civil society, including media/journalists, CSO representatives, members of academia and others. Some of the examples are listed below:

National public broadcaster - RTCG was called *“ustaška TV”* (meaning nationalist and right-wing Croatian paramilitary movement from the Second World War), Tamara Nikčević (journalist) and Draginja Stanković Vuksanović (MP and a former president of Social Democratic Party were called *“jastrebi ustaški”* and *“ustašice runjašice”* (insults also related to the previous term *“ustaše”*), by the Director of a public company Hydro-Plant Piva, who was later dismissed from his position and investigated by the Prosecution.

Member of the National Commission for UNESCO, Jovan Markuš, made a series of public insults against the executive coordinator of the Civic Initiative *“21. May”*, Mr. Ljubomir Filipović, as well as NGO CDT. Several organisations requested for Mr. Markuš to be sanctioned for misconduct, but without success.

Besides these examples, hateful attacks against journalists and CSO activists by different political and religious structures are very common in Montenegro. Many similar instances of hate speech, and threats have not yet been processed by the authorities, and journalists and civil rights activists are often forced to issue personal lawsuits against perpetrators, with questionable and often uncertain outcomes, which poses a threat to their work and sustainability.

Trigger events in Montenegro

Due to an extremely turbulent period in Montenegro in the past year, largely caused by the first change of government in the elections and the fall of the DPS party after 30 years of rule, there were several so-called *“trigger events”* - particularly sensitive moments, which triggered a visible increase in hate speech, discrimination, and similar incidents in (social) media. Some of these events include: the protests and barricades in Cetinje due to the inauguration of the new leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Montenegro, who had to arrive at the monastery together with the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox church by helicopter; the fall of the previous government of Mr. Zdravko Krivokapić; the constituting of a new *“minority”* government; the Russian invasion of Ukraine; the adoption of the Resolution about the Srebrenica war crime case by the parliament. During these events, the amount of hate speech, discrimination, and even disinformation campaigns largely increased, both in quantity and intensity, especially in the comments on online media and on social networks.



HATE
SPEECH

Preventive and ex post actions to combat hate and disinformation narratives in the country

Although the problem of organised disinformation campaigns, especially through social media, is a rather new phenomenon in the world, instances of hate speech, propaganda, and other negative occurrences of inadequate legal frameworks of freedom of expression have been evident in Montenegro and the region for almost 40 years now, where harsh rhetoric and propaganda have been marked by many academics, activists, and politicians as one of the main causes of the war in ex-Yugoslavia. However, most of the Balkan countries have not been successful in adequately and efficiently preventing, or processing such occurrences, nor those responsible for spreading of hate, discrimination, or propaganda. Although the legal framework, especially the Criminal Code recognises certain aspects of harmful propaganda and discrimination, the number of cases and persons processed in this regard is very low compared to the scale of hate speech in the country.

Social media poses a new threat to regulating and responding to disinformation campaigns and hate speech, as the authorities are often trapped in defining the freedom of speech concept and monitoring social media ex officio. Most of the work in combating disinformation, preventing, and exposing harmful and hateful content, and increasing of media literacy in Montenegro is conducted by civil society. Some of the organisations that have been active in this regard include DFC, CIN-CG, CeMI, CGO, Media institute, Juventas and several other organisations, although their work is limited and project-oriented, whereas an actual state response lacks any clear strategy to prevent and counter hate and disinformation narratives in the country.

Conclusions

The intensity of hate speech and disinformation in Montenegro has steadily increased over the last decade, primarily through online and social media. The most common hateful narratives in the past year made in relation to gender, political, religious, or ideological differences, ethnicity, had a wide audience and highly negative effects on the already polarised society. Some media (domestic and foreign) and certain political leaders, together with posts of influential individuals on social media remain the most common sources of hateful content and disinformation, without any major consequences for the offending party.

The regulatory framework is too ineffective and outdated to adequately respond to this extremely dangerous threat for the peace and stability of the society, while the public authorities' interest, will and capacities to prevent and counter disinformation and hate speech are very low, where even the public officials in Montenegro are often not held responsible for spreading or inciting hate speech, disinformation and other similar behaviour. Although the Police and Prosecutors have acted upon most violent cases of public hate speech in the past, these activities seem sporadic, inefficient, and organised only after strong public and media pressure. Also, Montenegro urgently needs a Public Strategy and Action plan for monitoring, preventing, and countering disinformation and hate speech, with adequate political will and funds for its implementation.

Civil society organisations remain some of the rare societal actors trying to monitor cases of hate speech and disinformation together with several responsible media, to prevent such occurrences, increase media literacy of citizens and counter these dangerous events in society. However, the civil society organisations need stronger and continuous support to be able to conduct their work continuously, professionally and with adequate capacities, as this is not possible with ad hoc and project-based support. The state and civil society also need to increase the level of cooperation to jointly respond to hateful and discriminatory narratives and other similar and negative phenomena in the society.





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