



# MEDIA MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN SERBIA

—  
WRITTEN BY  
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# Introduction

This report is a part of the regional monitoring of hate speech in the media conducted by partner organisations in Western Balkan countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia, as part of the Reporting Diversity Network. This research paper aims to provide the results of media monitoring of hateful and discriminatory discourse in Serbia, illustrate and analyse the most common narratives, identify the main generators of hateful and harmful narratives in Serbian media and the most often targeted groups, as well as explore preventive measures and reactions of institutions and civil society organisations in an attempt to build social and institutional resilience to hate speech. The Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans has implemented the media monitoring of hate speech in Serbia from May 1, 2022, until December 31, 2023. This is the second report as part of this research, with the first report<sup>1</sup> covering the period from January 2021 to April 2022.

The monitoring primarily focuses on the mainstream media, however, it covers social media platforms as well. The highest number of hate speech reports were targeting gender, closely followed by ethnicity and sexual minorities, as the data from the last report showed as well. However, throughout the previous year, there was a significant rise in hateful discourses aimed at political and ideological opponents compared to the last reporting period. This especially peaked during the election campaign in late 2023.

Understanding Serbia's media landscape is crucial to understanding how hateful narratives operate. Television is the primary news source for the Serbian public, with the public broadcasting service Radio Television of Serbia leading in viewership numbers. Moreover, some of the most popular and influential media are broadcasters with national frequency licenses, tabloids, and their respective online portals. These media outlets often follow narratives set up by the ruling party in their reporting while negatively presenting those critical of the regime. Serbia's politically polarised society is also mirrored in the media scene, both in reporting and concentration in media ownership. Quality investigative journalism usually goes under the radar, only reaching a limited online audience. At the same time, journalists and editors in mainstream media face severe political pressure and often resort to self-censorship.

The legal framework regulating the media in Serbia is usually well-rated in the research of Reporters without Borders, Freedom House, and similar global organisations. However, a new set of media laws was adopted in October 2023 that raises flags according to media experts, relevant civil society organisations, and journalist associations. They warned that these laws would allow the state-owned Telekom Serbia to establish and buy out media outlets, enabling more substantial state control over the media market. The laws also do not oblige the Regulatory Body for Electronic Media to act on citizens' complaints, reinforcing institutional ignorance of unethical and unprofessional reporting and stripping institutions and media outlets of accountability for such reporting.

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1. Reporting Diversity Network, 2022, *Monitoring Report on Hate Speech in Serbia*, Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans ([link](#))



# Methodological approach

This research uses a broader concept of hate speech, primarily by not limiting the characteristics for identifying a targeted individual or group. The Reporting Diversity Network defines hate speech as targeting individuals or groups based on their identity and does not limit its findings to how it is defined in national legal frameworks. This media monitoring includes harmful representation of marginalised groups as well.

The collected findings were classified according to the group or individual targeted, the generator of hate speech, the type of hateful and discriminatory discourse, the reach of the content, the type of media it was identified in, and the broader context of these events. In the sentiment analysis, these incidents were classified according to the methodology of George Washington University<sup>2</sup>:

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

Media monitoring included content in traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio channels, online portals, and social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X (former Twitter) and TikTok. Particular attention was focused on the statements of public officials and other public figures because of their influence on public opinion.

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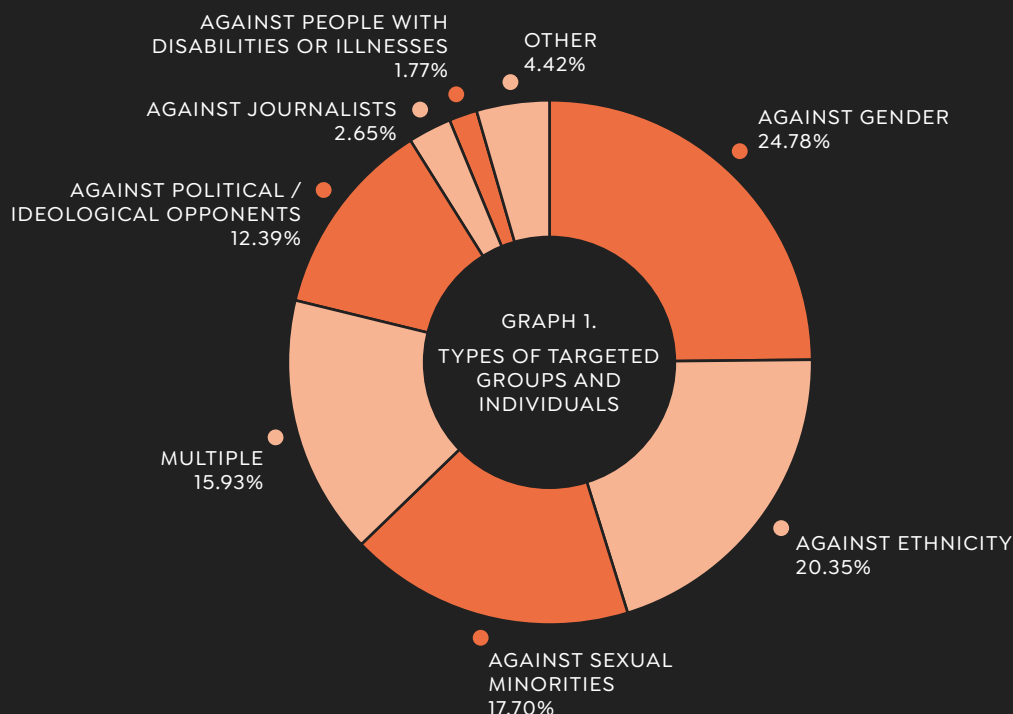
2. Bahador Babak, Kerchner Daniel, Bacon Leah, Menas Amanda, (2019), *Monitoring Hate Speech in the US*, Washington, DC: George Washington University ([link](#))

# Narratives and sub-narratives

## Quantitative analysis

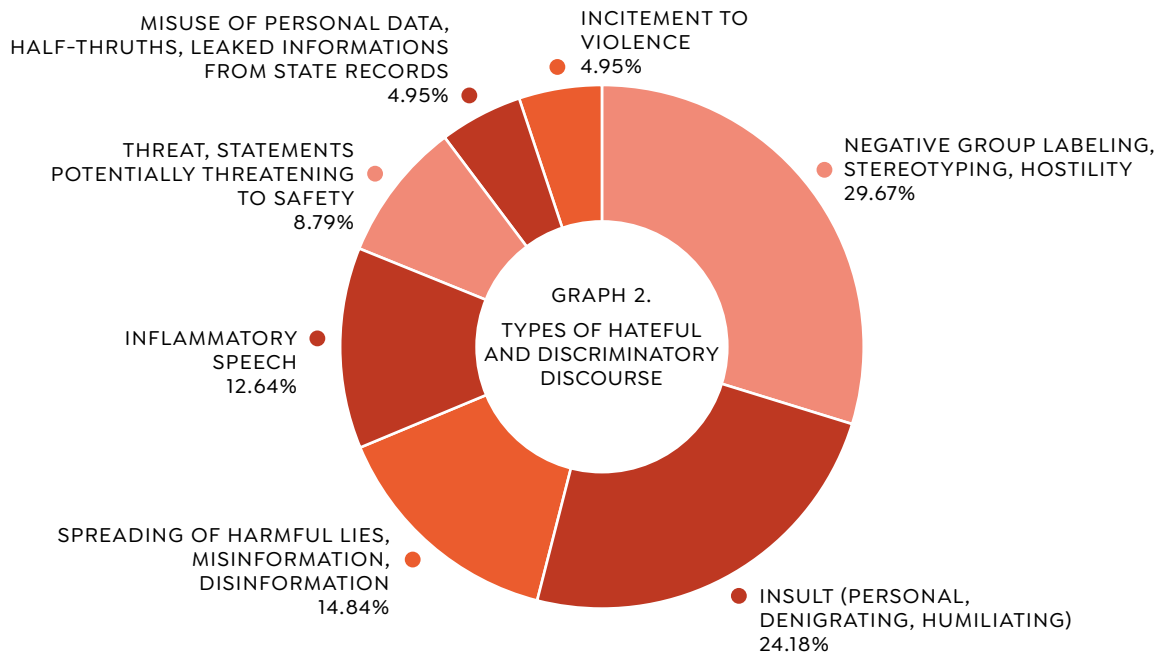
During this monitoring period of 20 months, a total of 113 cases of hate speech were recorded. Similarly to the last monitoring period, most were aimed at gender (24.8%) and ethnicity (20.4%). The third most targeted group was sexual minorities (17.7%), where we can see a slight increase in comparison to the previous report (14.6%), primarily due to the vigorous campaign against EuroPride, held in Belgrade in 2022. An even more significant leap was recorded in hate speech targeting political and ideological opponents, from 6.3% in the previous monitoring report to 12.4% cases in this monitoring period. This is due to the overwhelmingly negative campaign against activists, opposition politicians and many public figures who have spoken up against the regime that has intensified with the political crisis in Serbia.

Furthermore, many documented cases (15.9%) included hateful and discriminative discourse that was intersectional in nature. Here, groups and individuals were targeted for multiple overlapping identities. This is mainly reflected in the four most-targeted categories, where someone's gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation plays a role, even if it is not the sole reason why they are targeted. Journalists and political opponents were also often targeted based on those identities. There were three cases of hate speech targeting journalists and two cases against people with disabilities and illnesses. Compared to the previous monitoring period, there was a significant decrease in cases of hate speech targeting religion and migrants and refugees, with only one case in each respective category.

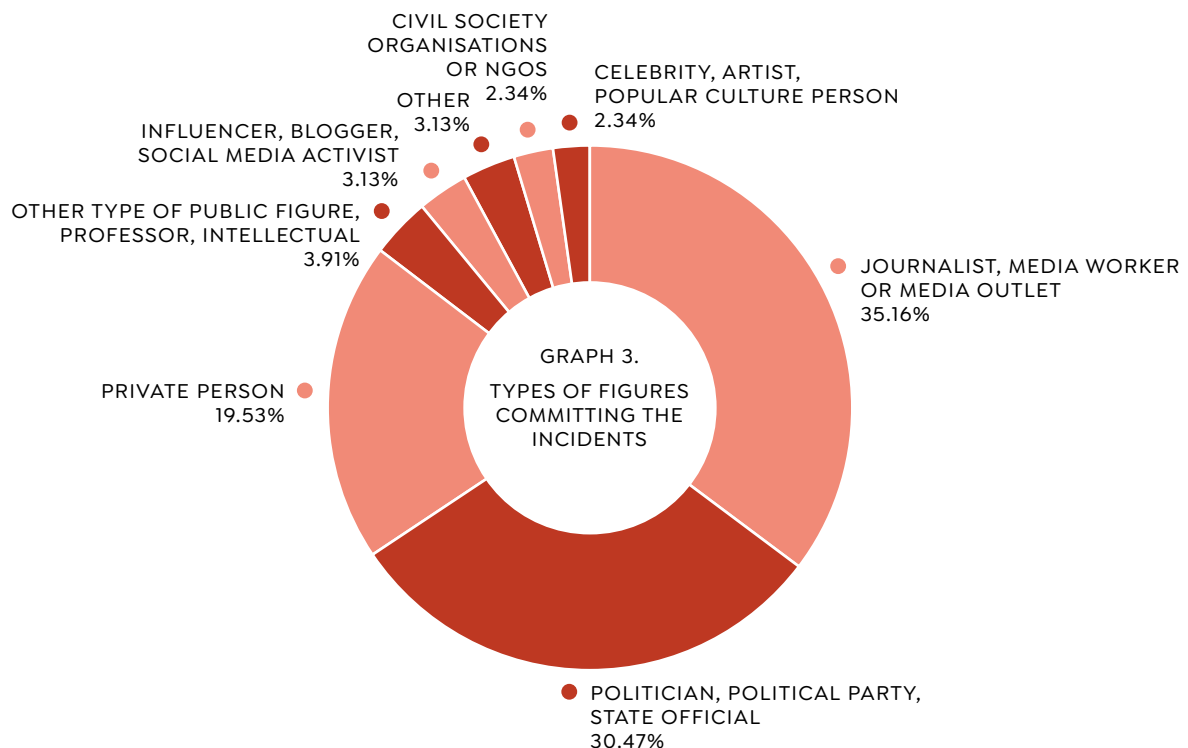


Regarding the type of hateful and discriminatory discourse, almost a third of all recorded cases contained negative group labelling, stereotyping, and hostility (29.7%) and a fourth contained insults (24.2%). This was followed by cases including spreading harmful lies, misinformation, and disinformation (14.8%) and inflammatory speech (12.6%). In this research, inflammatory speech is defined as repeated messages from different actors, prolonged by the same media, usually regarding a conflict situation or some of the most common hateful and harmful narratives.

The remaining cases included threats and statements potentially threatening to safety (8.8%), misuse of personal data, half-truths, and leaked information from state records (4.9%) and incitement to violence (4.9%).



Media outlets and media workers (35.2%), together with politicians, state officials and political parties (30.5%), were the main generators of hate speech in this monitoring period as well. Significant generators of hateful content were private persons, primarily users on social media platforms (19.5%). Other generators of hateful content were public figures, professors, and intellectuals (3.9%), influencers, bloggers, and social media activists (3.2%), celebrities, artists, and popular culture persons (2.3%) and civil society organisations and citizen associations (2.3%).





## Narrative analysis

### Hateful narratives against gender

Harmful and hateful narratives targeting women prevailed in this monitoring period as well (24.8%). Some of the most dominant narratives remained the same, including harmful, sensationalistic reporting on gender-based violence, narratives reinforcing gender stereotypes and the use of sexist tropes for entertainment and commercial purposes. Quite notable is also the significant rise in anti-gender narratives in Serbia, intricately connected to the anti-feminist narratives that belittle the long and lasting fight for women's rights, with the underlying message of questioning the rights women have already fought in Serbia. Both discourses are strongly fuelled by disinformation.

After the United States Supreme Court overturned *Roe v Wade* and ended the federal right to an abortion in June 2022, the right to abortion became a topic in Serbia as well, even though this has been a constitutional right since it was introduced in 1974, in Yugoslavia, making it one of the three countries in the world at the time where the constitution guaranteed this reproductive right.

For example, Vladimir Đukanović, an MP from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, shared a series of posts on X (then Twitter) in support of the decision, saying, “Feminists and all other ungodly people, take your uteruses and cry,” after which he jokingly compared feminists to cows. Upon receiving criticism, he tweeted, “I enjoy monstrous aggression and insulting insane feminists.”

The topic of “a huge number” of abortions in Serbia reoccurred, reinforced by disinformation and insufficient official data<sup>3</sup>, creating a fertile ground for debates on revoking women's rights based on concern over demographic issues. Many media outlets provided space for different experts, namely doctors and gynaecologists, who used their positions to justify harmful narratives on revoking women's rights. In a series of texts on this topic, the online portal Kurir.rs interviewed gynaecologist Vanja Milošević, who stated that “today it's easier to get an abortion than to register a car.”

Anti-feminist narratives shape the fight for women's rights and feminism itself as a threat to the traditional family and values and continue to persist in the Serbian media. However, the rise of the anti-gender movement in Serbia, especially in the previous two years covered by this report, is alarming. This movement is led by conservative and right-wing groups with the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church and some trans-exclusionary organisations. These organisations are namely feminist; however, they deny gender as a social construct, going against feminist theory and practice, and exclude trans people from their activism. However, the foremost leaders of this movement perceive the fight for women's and LGBTIQ+ equal rights as a “gender ideology” or the imposition of Western values, threatening the traditional family, which is seen as the main foundation of the Serbian national identity. The fact that there is a distinction between gender and sex is disputed, as well as the fact that people's gender and sex do not always align.

Many users on social media promoted these narratives, as indicated in the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy research on anti-gender narratives<sup>4</sup>, “in the Serbian ‘manosphere’ - an online community that promotes masculinity, misogyny, and opposition to feminism - certain leading influencers have tens of thousands of followers and young people see them as role models.” However, with the support of right-wing politicians and religious institutions, this became a topic in the mainstream media. When reporting on this topic, it is worrisome that influential media in Serbia usually provide space for these narratives without any critical analysis or debunking of the disinformation that often fuels this rhetoric. Furthermore, in attempts to “see both sides,” the media resort to debates between human rights activists and politicians, representatives of religious communities and other actors who oppose equal rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people, creating a false balance.

For example, in the morning show *Jutro* on TV Prva, debating the topic of gender-affirming health care and the newly imposed law in Russia banning it were Ana Petrović, an activist from LGBTIQ+ organisation “Da se zna” and Aleksandar Šešelj, vice president of the far-right Serbian Radical Party. The host used outdated, incorrect

3. Istinomer, (2023), Milioni abortusa u Srbiji – spekulacija koja opstaje ([link](#))

4. Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, (2023), Onlajn narativi protiv „rodne ideologije” u Srbiji. Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy ([link](#))

terminology, calling gender-affirming surgeries "sex change". She was uninformed on the topic and did not react when Šešelj used misinformation as an argument and addressed gender as an ideology and a "danger to children." Although Šešelj did not have nearly equal knowledge of the subject, he was given more time to present his views, which left less time for Petrović to speak. The disbalance in power in talk shows where activists, usually LGBTIQ+ people, often asked to speak from personal experience, are confronted with politicians and public officials who openly oppose their identities is concerning as well.

Religious institutions loudly support anti-gender narratives, and high representatives of the church, including Porfirije, the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, have been some of the leading spokesmen of the campaign against gender-inclusive language, that was introduced and prescribed to be used by state institutions and the media, by the newly implemented Law on Gender Equality.

In his Easter address to believers, Porfirije said that "the fight against marriage and the family as of divinely established sanctuaries and natural forms of man's personal and congregational life" is hidden behind gender-sensitive language, presenting it as a threat to the traditional family. This was just one of many occasions when church representatives reinforced this narrative in the fight against gender-inclusive language.

When it comes to reporting on gender-based violence, the situation has not changed significantly since the last reporting period. Even though this is more often a topic in the mainstream media's focus, it is frequently subjected to sensationalism, with reports usually breaching professional standards and facing no consequences. The stories commonly feature detailed descriptions of the violence, especially in cases of femicide, where the murder, as well as the personal life of the victim and her family, are reported on, sometimes even weeks after it happened. This is most common in tabloid media and online portals. The media rarely uses the opportunity when reporting on such cases to educate the public on gender-based violence and its prevalence in Serbia or hold institutions accountable.

One of the most notable examples of harmful relativisation of rape, femicide and other forms of gender-based violence in the previous two years is the interview with a convicted rapist, at the time recently released from prison, conducted by the daily tabloid *Informer*. The sensational headline read, "MEGA EXCLUSIVE! Confession of a serial rapist: I raped for the first time at the age of 10!" This media outlet gave a vast platform to a convicted rapist to speak for almost an hour. This interview violated several points of the Code of Journalists of Serbia, humiliated the victims, and intimidated its readers. Even though the Press Council condemned this interview, and women's associations protested several times, the interview remained public, and *Informer* faced no consequences.

Especially worrisome were the cases of live broadcasting of violence. *Elita*, formerly called *Zadruga*, is a reality show on Pink TV that often broadcasts gender-based violence and other forms of physical and psychological violence between participants in live programs. This is broadcast on Pink TV, a channel with a license for national frequency and their official YouTube channel. Only in January 2023, more than ten incidents involving physical violence occurred in *Zadruga* without consequences for the participants or the broadcaster.

Another case was a photo of a half-naked unnamed woman, claimed to work at the prosecutor's office, published on the front page of the tabloid *Alo* with the title "Thongs shaking up the prosecution." By publishing this photograph, *Alo* unequivocally participated not only in the normalisation of gender-based violence but also in image-based sexual abuse.

Other notable examples included content that reinforces gender stereotypes, such as an article published in lifestyle magazine and online portal *Stil* about the children of Serbia's former Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, who served from 2001 until his assassination in 2003. In the headline, his daughter is described as a "real beauty" while his son is "following in his footsteps," even though they both work in politics. We also recorded four cases of commercials reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes and sexualising and objectifying women, including an ad that made fun of violence against women. A *rakija* company whose name, *Šamar*, means slap, posted a photo of a woman putting lipstick with the caption "Tonight only *Šamar* (slap) takes off the lipstick". After receiving criticism, they changed it to "Tonight, only a glass of *Šamar rakija* removes the lipstick".

## Ethnic hate narratives

The second most often targeted group were ethnic minorities in Serbia and other ethnic groups from the neighbouring countries (20.4%). A third of these cases targeted Albanians (34.8%), followed by hate speech against Croats (21.7%) and Bosniaks (21.7%), as well as Roma (17.4%) and one case targeting Turks and victims of the devastating earthquake in Türkiye and Syria in February last year.

Albanians are often described as an enemy or a threat in Serbian media, which goes hand in hand with the warmongering reporting on relations between Kosovo and Serbia. Sensational headlines usually accompany this, alongside trivialising quite complex issues, often without providing any context. In this monitoring period, Albin Kurti, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, has been labelled as the main enemy and his actions are often referred to as “Kurti’s terror.”

These narratives are also often fuelled by misinformation and disinformation. Such was a case of violence against an older woman in a nursing home in Peć/Peja, Kosovo, when the online portal Alo.rs reported that an Albanian nurse was beating an older Serbian woman. However, this was debunked by fact-checking portals raskrikavanje.rs and raskrinkavanje.me, after which Alo.rs apologised and changed the article.

Some tabloids, such as the daily Informer, continuously use a slur word, Šiptari (Shiptars), to describe Albanians. This word came to Serbian from the Albanian word shqiptar (which means Albanian) and was originally a neutral term, but with time, it acquired a derogatory meaning. This was established with a verdict of the Higher Court in Belgrade, which defined the term as politically incorrect and offensive in the Serbian language for members of the Albanian nationality living in Kosovo and Metohija. This was determined in a 2018 verdict after human rights activist Anita Mitić accused Informer of using the same term to describe her, even though she is Serbian, in an attempt to portray her as a traitor. Discriminatory language violates the Code of Journalists of Serbia as well, and the Press Council has warned Informer of this multiple times, however, they continue to use it.

Hateful narratives against Albanians are usually aimed at Kosovo Albanians. They are often triggered by a rise in tensions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, commemoration days for the victims of war crimes and some international events such as the match between Serbia and Switzerland at the FIFA 2022 World Cup in Qatar. There were multiple incidents fuelled by ethnic hate and nationalism between the Serbian team and Swiss team captain Granit Xhaka and player Xherdan Shaqiri, both ethnic Albanians of Kosovo origin. The incidents occurred both on the field and in the audience. Most media in Serbia reported on these events by further flaming these hateful narratives, resorting to sensationalism, which created even more hostility between Serbs and Albanians.<sup>5</sup>

An attack in Banjska, Kosovo, led by an armed group of Serbs in which a Kosovo policeman, Afrim Bunjaku, was killed, leading to clashes between the Kosovo police and the armed group in which three Serb attackers were killed triggered a wave of harmful narratives. The media in Serbia first published very scant information sensationally, including some misinformation and disinformation, which was debunked later. A National Day of Mourning was later declared in Serbia “because of the tragic events in Kosovo”. On this day, the front pages of national print media referred to the attackers as “Kosovo heroes” and “victims of Kurti’s terror”. This was published after President Aleksandar Vučić used the same terms in an interview on TV Happy. The front page of Kurir even talked about “the legalisation of the hunt on Serbs”, predicting “mass emigration of Serbs from Kosovo”. Such media reporting uses fearmongering and can trigger ethnic hate in a situation where tensions are already present.

This case shows how public officials, especially those in high positions of power, create hateful narratives on events, which are later amplified by the mainstream media. A similar chain of events happened when Vučić insinuated that the current Croatian government is against Serbia and is implementing the Ustasha policy when he was at the Prague Summit of European leaders. While discussing how Serbia would no longer be able to import Russian oil through the Croatian oil pipeline, he implied that Croatia had not changed its policies since 1941, during the Ustasha regime. Still, he did not use the term itself. However, after this, Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Minister of Internal Affairs at the time, Aleksandar Vulin, continued this narrative, openly naming Croatian government Ustasha and using this term for all Croats. These statements were reported by TV channels with

5. Anja Andušić, (2022), *HISTORY OVER FOOTBALL: Tensions between Kosovo and Serbia rise during the 2022 FIFA World Cup*. Belgrade: Reporting Diversity Network. [\(link\)](#)

national coverage and tabloids, which continued the narrative with headlines such as "Vučić slams Ustashe". This term is used to describe a Croatian fascist and ultranationalist organisation active during the Second World War, however, when inaccurately used to describe all Croats today, it has a derogatory meaning. There were multiple cases of media in Serbia using it as a slur word in this monitoring period.

A rise in ethnic hate against Bosniaks in Serbian media is also triggered by commemoration days for victims of war crimes and usually culminates around the commemoration for victims of the Srebrenica genocide on 11<sup>th</sup> July. Last year was no exception, as the media reported on two students from Sarajevo, one of which glorified war criminal Ratko Mladić, sentenced to life imprisonment before the Hague Tribunal for genocide, crimes against humanity and violations of laws or customs of war during the 1992-1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in posts on their social media. After this case reached the prosecutor's office, Aleksandar Vulin, director of the Security and Information Agency in Serbia at the time, invited them to continue their education in Belgrade, Serbia. This showed that public officials and institutions in Serbia not only normalise hateful narratives but also support them politically and financially. Some public officials publicly deny war crimes and the genocide in Srebrenica following the spread of these false narratives in mainstream media.

Roma is one of the largest ethnic minority communities in Serbia, however, they are systemically discriminated against, often live in segregated areas and are heavily underrepresented in the media. Recorded in this monitoring period were several cases of videos and other social media posts disguised as jokes that ridicule the Roma community and reinforce harmful stereotypes. The mere number of cases recorded in this report, as well as reactions of civil society and institutions that followed, show progress, as the criticism of racist remarks made the news. However, Roma people are still primarily visible in the media when certain trigger events take place – such as discriminatory statements by public officials, when International Roma Day is celebrated or when government officials hold press conferences talking about Roma and specific issues this community faces. The media often fail to discuss the real struggles this community faces and especially the root causes of the oppression they face.

At a press conference, the mayor of Belgrade, Aleksandar Šapić, was asked to comment on solving the issue of the Roma community living in informal settlements. He said that "the integration of Roma into normal life is impossible if they themselves do not want that." In this way, he blamed the community for the discrimination and segregation they face. He explained himself by stating that the Roma people refuse to integrate into society and that the aid the state offered in the form of social housing was in vain because they either misused it or did not use it at all because, as he says, they "tear out carpentry and sanitary ware, sell everything that can be sold, they cause problems for their neighbours and in the end, they return to their unhygienic settlements." Although many media outlets critically reported on Šapić's statement, condemning it as racist, some of the most popular media, such as Kurir and Informer, did not report on this at all. At the same time, Blic and Telegraf only quoted his statements without questioning them.

## **Hateful narratives against sexual minorities**

As indicated in the quantitative analysis, there was a slight rise in hateful discourses aimed at the LGBTIQ+ community, from 14.6% in the last report to 17.7% cases in this monitoring period. The vigorous campaign against EuroPride, held in Belgrade in 2022, had a significant impact on this. Efforts of queer organisations, especially those in advocacy and policymaking, as well as the Pride Parade are common triggers for hate speech against the community, however, in 2022, this escalated to a larger extent.

Serbian media provided substantially more visibility for those opposing the Pride parade taking place than for activists and the LGBTIQ+ community.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, these harmful narratives were not only promoted by right-wing politicians but also further established by public officials and influential representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The community and EuroPride march were often presented as a threat to the traditional family and the Serbian national identity. The fight for equal rights of the LGBTIQ+ community was also perceived as an ideology or an agenda promoted by the Western nations, NATO and even the European Union, who are perceived as enemies as well. These narratives are also intricately connected to the anti-gender narratives targeting women

6. Snežana Miletić, (2022), *Serbia's EuroPride debacle highlights media bias*. Belgrade: Reporting Diversity Network. ([link](#))

and trans people. Hateful discourses escalated on social media too, and the hostility against the community gradually built up and escalated after the government suddenly banned the march “due to security reasons.” The Pride march was held regardless, however, many extremist groups gathered to protest it at the same time. There were multiple incidents during the march, including physical attacks, journalists receiving threats, 64 people detained and 13 police officers injured.

Media reporting months before EuroPride 2022 significantly influenced the hostility towards the LGBTIQ+ community. However, hateful narratives came from high representatives of the government and the church. One of the cases with the highest negative sentiment was a speech given by Bishop Nikanor, who cursed everyone attending EuroPride and claimed that if he were to have weapons, he would have used them against those taking part and organising the event.

Other cases of hateful narratives against sexual minorities include harmful stereotypes often fuelled by misinformation and disinformation. Such was a case of reporting on the monkeypox infection in Europe, when several media outlets reported on this as a disease “transmitted by gay sex” since there were cases recorded in men who have sex with men. In a text titled initially “MONKEYPOX TRANSMITTED BY GAY SEX! Still no cases in Serbia, BUT IF THE HUSBAND HAS THEM THE MARRIAGE CAN FALL APART” online portal Kurir.rs, used misinformation in support of homophobic narratives. Another text on the portal of the public service Radio Television of Vojvodina was titled “NO NEED FOR PANIC: Mostly homosexuals get infected with monkeypox,” spreading fear and mistrust towards gay and bisexual men.

### **Hateful narratives against political and ideological opponents**

The monitoring has shown that the hateful and discriminatory discourses against political and ideological opponents significantly increased since the last monitoring period (6.3%), becoming the fourth most targeted group (12.4%). Political tensions in Serbia have been on the rise in the past two years, culminating in environmental protests, right-wing protests in response to crises in Kosovo-Serbia relations and the most numerous Serbia Against Violence protests. This wave of protests started in early May 2023 when tens of thousands of people took to the streets in protest after two mass shootings in a school in Belgrade and villages Dubona and Malo Orašje, leaving 18 dead, many of whom were children. These tragic events urged the Serbian public to a dialogue about violence, primarily focusing on hate and violence present in the media, pervasive in most tabloids and television channels with national coverage.

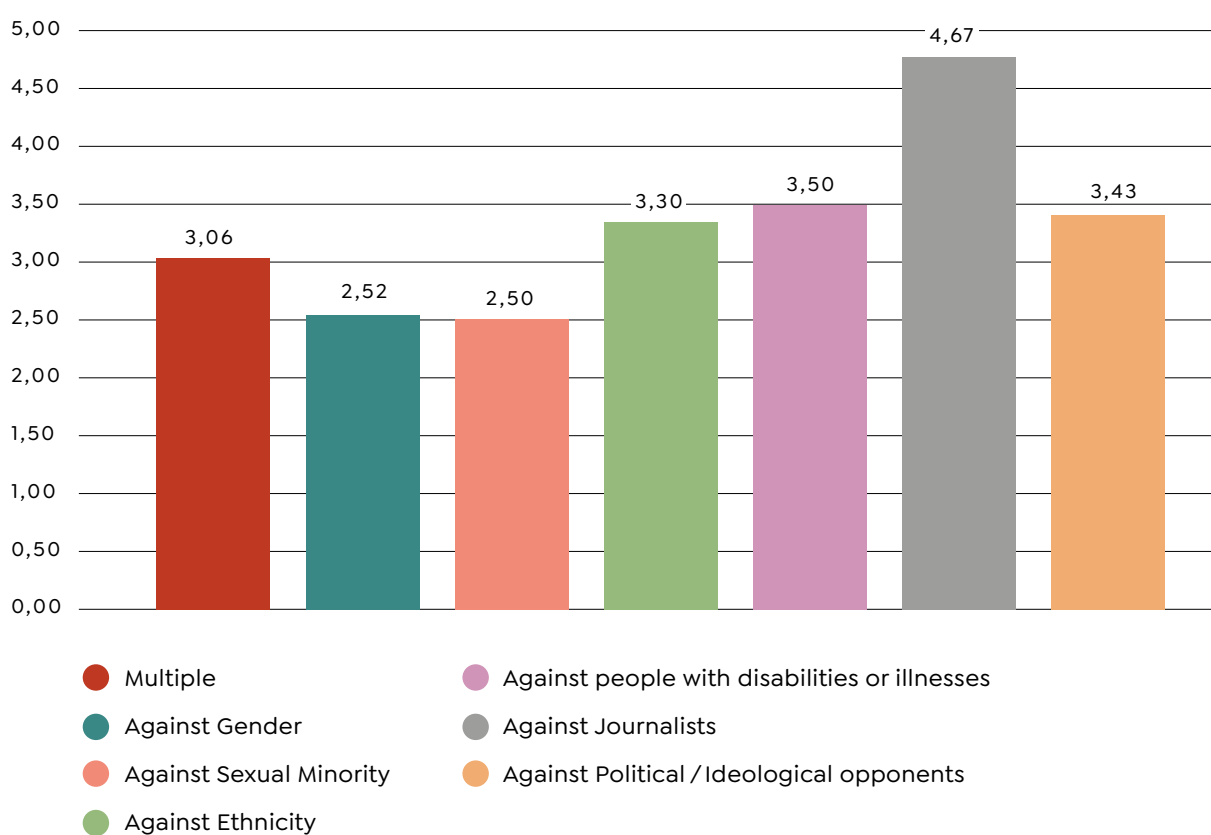
In response, many public officials initially targeted opposition politicians and, shortly after, activists and celebrities who supported the protests. President Aleksandar Vučić called the protesters hyenas and vultures in an interview for TV Pink, and Nebojša Bakarec, an MP from the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, said that the opposition in Serbia is “armed to the teeth” and that they “oppose the action of disarmament of citizens”. Some media later amplified these narratives, and some activists, actors and other celebrities were targeted by hate speech and even threats on social media.

Another peak in targeting political opponents was the election campaign, which contained offensive and discriminatory content and intensified as Serbia approached elections on December 17th, 2023. One of the most extreme examples of this was the broadcast of a private video of MP Đorđe Mikić in the morning show *Novo jutro* on TV Pink, where he was shown in sexual intercourse with an unidentified woman. The faces and intimate parts of the bodies of the people shown were blurred. However, the pornographic nature of the video was quite clear from what was shown. Also, the MP was unambiguously named in the show several times. By publishing this video, TV Pink violated the right to privacy of Mikić, as well as several media laws and regulations in Serbia. Tabloid media picked up on the story and shared screenshots with sensationalistic headlines in print and online portals. A few days before this, Mikić stated he was blackmailed with threats of publishing this video. At the same time, the president of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, called Mikić a “human disgrace” in a show on the same channel. The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media initiated proceedings against Pink for showing explicit content in the morning program.



## Sentiment analysis

Reported cases were rated on a scale of one to six based on the intensity of the sentiment conveyed in the message, with one being the lowest in intensity and six being the highest, implying the literal killing and elimination of the group. The average score was 3.00 for all cases, slightly higher than the previous reporting period. On average, the highest-scored incidents per type of targeted group were the three cases of hate aimed at journalists (4.67) since these were threats of violence and death. However, sentiment analysis is most significant when comparing the four most targeted groups. Among the four groups, the highest average sentiment was identified in hate targeting political and ideological opponents (3.43), followed by ethnic hate (3.30). Slightly lower average sentiment was identified in cases of hate targeting gender (2.52) and sexual minorities (2.50).

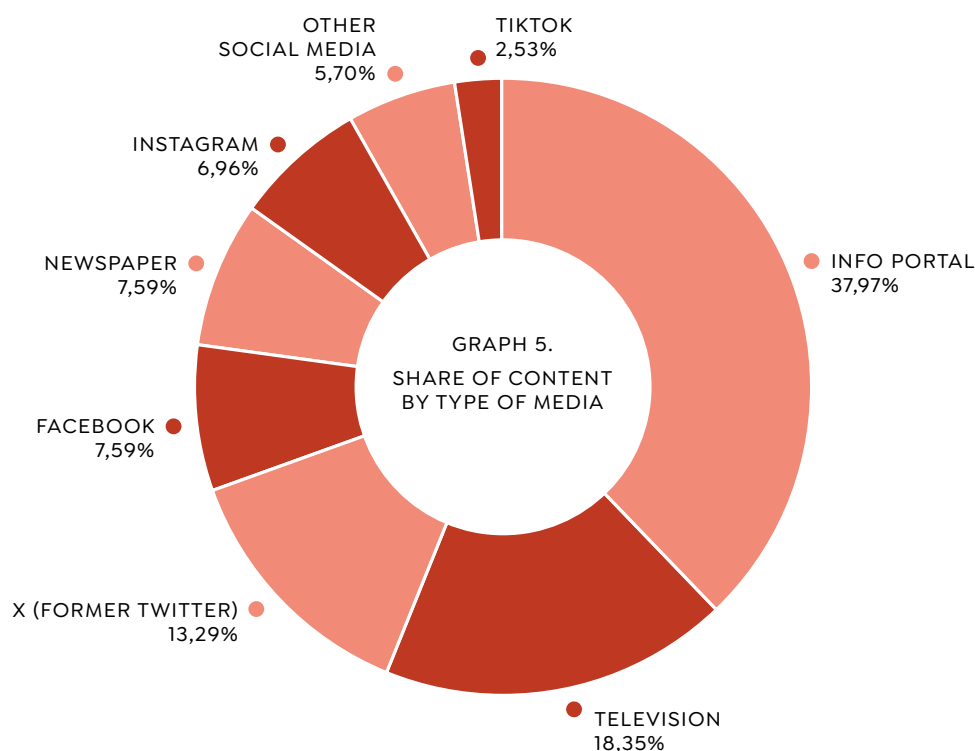


**Graph 4. Average sentiment score per targeted group/individual**

Out of the twenty most extreme cases recorded, implying physical violence, killing and elimination of a group (scores 6 and 5), fourteen were against the aforementioned most targeted categories. This indicates that hateful narratives targeting women, ethnic minorities in Serbia and other ethnic groups in the Western Balkans, as well as sexual minorities and those critical of the regime, are widely accepted in the media.

## Visibility analysis

This monitoring covered both traditional media outlets and social media. When recording cases, we primarily focused on those with high visibility, often those that made the national news or were recorded on influential social media pages with high reach. Out of all cases, more than half (54.9%) came solely from traditional media, almost a third came from social media (30.9%), and the rest (14.2%) were recorded both on social media and traditional media. Observed individually, most were recorded in info portals (37.9%) and television channels (18.4%), followed by cases recorded on X (13.3%), former Twitter. This is relevant as TV channels and online portals of traditional media remain the primary sources of information for citizens in Serbia.<sup>7</sup>



Most recorded cases came from these info portals, often online portals of the most widely circulated newspapers in Serbia, usually tabloids, and the most accessible and most watched TV channels, those that possess a license for national frequency. Hateful and discriminatory social media posts and comments had a significantly lower reach. However, it is essential to note that comment sections on info portals and social media are fertile ground for hate speech and are usually left unmoderated. As META and other social media companies do not have a developed automatic removal of hate comments in Serbian language, they usually remain visible permanently if they are left unreported by users.

7. Centre for Research, Transparency and Accountability CRTA, (2023), *Analiza medija - Prepoznavanje relevantnosti i značaja medija*. Belgrade: CRTA ([link](#))

## Comparative analysis

Hateful narratives in Serbian media have many commonalities, the first being the fact that they most often target marginalised groups. However, it is essential to note that some harmful narratives, such as anti-gender narratives, are on the rise as they are a backlash at the feminist and queer fight for freedom. As media in Serbia and the general public become more open to topics such as LGBTIQ+ rights, gender-based violence, gender roles and gender-sensitive language, backlash narratives become more robust as well. Additionally, anti-gender narratives target both women and the LGBTIQ+ community, especially trans people.

This is not an isolated case in our findings, as almost 16% of all recorded cases refer to hateful and discriminative discourses targeting multiple identities. This is especially common in hate targeting individuals based on their identities, as opposed to groups. Many cases included activists, journalists or politicians being targeted based on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or other identity. For example, when a photo of a family at the Serbia Against Violence protests, wearing shirts saying, "mom vulture", "dad vulture", and "little vulture", written on them, circulated social media, and was even shared by some mainstream media. The writing on the shirts was in reference to President Aleksandar Vučić calling protesters "hyenas and vultures" and accusing them of taking advantage of the recent mass murders that struck the country.

Later, portal 24sedam.rs published a text targeting activist Lazar Pavlović, the "dad vulture" from the photo. Photos from his personal social media accounts were shared in an attempt to discredit him by describing his work as an activist in the Gay Straight Alliance and Otpor (a movement that fought against Slobodan Milošević regime during the nineties). Pictures of him with his ex-boyfriend were also shared, implying that a man who had a male partner once could not be in a relationship with a woman and have children later. Names and pictures of his friends and colleagues were also shared to discredit him. This text also talks about the Serbia Against Violence protests and protesters in a negative light, calling them "pro-West", just like some of the media who report from the protests and the civil society in Serbia. Online portal Politika, a well-known and one of the oldest print media in Serbia, shared a similar text based on this one, targeting and discrediting Pavlović, his family, friends and colleagues and negatively labelling protests, some of the media and the civil society.



# Preventive and ex-post actions to combat hate and disinformation narratives

In Serbia, hate speech is defined and prohibited by several laws, including the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination. However, it is often tolerated by the institutions and in the institutions, as findings from this monitoring period show public officials are still one of the main generators of hate speech and hateful and harmful discourses (HDD). They often bear no consequences for their words, however, some independent institutions such as the Commissioner for Protection of Equality, the Press Council and civil society often resist these narratives. In this monitoring period, it was notable that mainstream media occasionally reported on reactions coming from these institutions and civil society. A positive change is even some smaller, local, or recently established organisations working on combating hate speech and discrimination against marginalised groups also sporadically made the national news. This indicates that the media is slowly opening up to these topics and is ready to call experts to talk about the harmful effects of HDD in the public sphere.

The Commissioner for Protection of Equality, currently Brankica Janković, who is in her second mandate, closely follows HDD in the media and almost never fails to address and condemn especially harmful cases that have a broad reach in the media, such as those that make the national news. However, her mandate, power, and influence are limited, as is the case for the Press Council. This institution is a self-regulatory body that focuses on the print media and online portals and resolves complaints about violations of the Serbian Journalists' Code of Ethics by media outlets.

The Code dictates journalists "must stand up to anyone violating human rights or advocating any kind of discrimination, hate speech and incitement to violence" as well as that journalists "must be aware of the danger of discrimination that can be spread by the media and must do everything to avoid it."

As hate speech remains present most often on social media and in the comments section of online portals, while traditional media very rarely use explicit hate speech, especially towards a whole group of people, this type of borderline content, most numerous in tabloid print media, often does not violate the Code. However, it may promote extremist narratives, incite violence, or have a polarising effect on society. Due to limited resources and power, as many tabloid media ignore decisions and measures taken by the Press Council, harmful content often remains in the media, while the media outlets are not held accountable for producing such content.

The Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM), however, has a much wider mandate, holds more power and a broader legal framework to use, with many detailed rulebooks such as the ones on the protection of minors or the protection of human rights. Despite that, REM has not fulfilled its legal obligations for several years and almost never responds to complaints from civil society about broadcasters violating media laws and regulations. This is especially concerning as television is the primary source of information for most citizens in Serbia.

When it comes to combating disinformation, which sometimes includes hateful narratives, or hateful narratives appear on social media platforms as a result of disinformation, the extensive amount of work is done by only a few fact-checking and media organisations in Serbia, such as FakeNews Tragač, Raskrikavanje and Istinomer.



## Conclusion

During this monitoring period of 20 months, 113 cases of hate speech were recorded. Similarly to the last monitoring period, almost half were aimed at gender and ethnicity, indicating women and national minorities, as well as neighbouring nations, were the most common targets. Prevailing targets were also the LGBTIQ+ community, where a slight increase in cases was found due to the intense media campaign against EuroPride 2022 led by right-wing politicians and conservative groups, but public officials as well, which is especially concerning. Political opponents were also commonly targeted by public officials, some media outlets, and supporters of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party. This culminated during the Serbia Against Violence protests last summer and the campaign leading up to general elections at the end of the year, deepening the political polarisation of Serbian society.

Dominant narratives targeting women mostly remained the same, reinforcing gender stereotypes and the use of sexist tropes for entertainment and commercial purposes. The most common and harmful was the sensationalistic reporting on gender-based violence. The rise of anti-gender narratives in Serbia was particular for this monitoring period, as conservative and right-wing groups with the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church continuously denied gender as a social construct, portraying the fight for women's and LGBTIQ+ equal rights as a “gender ideology” or the imposition of Western values, threatening the traditional family, which is seen as the main foundation of the Serbian national identity.

Albanians were the most targeted ethnic group in Serbian media, usually described as an enemy or a threat, supporting the warmongering reporting on relations between Kosovo and Serbia. The mere number of cases of HDD targeting Roma recorded in this report, as well as the reactions of civil society and institutions that followed, show progress. However, Roma people are still primarily visible in the media when certain trigger events take place – such as discriminatory statements by public officials. Hateful narratives against Roma remain strong but well hidden.

The media, politicians and public officials remain the main generators of hate speech in this monitoring period. Apart from them, significant generators of hateful content were social media users, with hate speech often multiplying quickly on social media platforms which, due to limited resources and tools, often remains visible permanently.

Furthermore, intersectional hateful and discriminative discourses are quite common, as groups and, more often, individuals are targeted for multiple overlapping identities. A person's gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation frequently plays a role in the hate they receive, even if it is not the sole reason they are targeted. Journalists, activists, and political opponents are often targeted for their work and activism based on those identities.





## MEDIA MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN SERBIA

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