

MAPPING GENDERED DISINFORMATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS **MONTENEGRO**

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 SMART
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Civil Society for a Safe and Secure
Future in the Western Balkans

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Introduction

On 1 August 2024, a bout at the women's boxing competition in the Paris Olympic Games made global headlines. In Montenegro, several media outlets, including the national public broadcasting service Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG), reported that a "biological male" defeated an Italian female boxer. The case referred to Algerian boxer Imane Khelif who won against Italian Angela Carini. Many media outlets, both regional and international, didn't verify information before publishing their sensational headlines and stories. Khelif is a biological woman, born as a girl. As of the time of writing this report, RTCG has not removed the article with the controversial headline, despite public criticism of such reporting that has emerged worldwide.

This is not the only incident of unethical reporting on the topic of gender and the dissemination of gender misinformation by the national public broadcasting service of Montenegro. There are numerous examples from the past five years alone, covering issues from abortion and violence against women to marriage. They include a program by journalist Sead Sadiković about arranged marriages between Montenegrins and poor Albanian women, where their families receive money for them. The author made inappropriate jokes and presented the topic in a light tone, as if it was not about an issue involving human trafficking. In January 2022 the host of RTCG's morning program, Jovana Božarić Stanišić, while talking to a representative of the SOS Call Centre for victims of domestic violence, stated that sometimes women themselves provoke violence from their partners because they "won't stop," implying that women are to blame for the violence. Furthermore, in 2022, RTCG produced a debate about women's right to abortion, which Montenegrins were granted in 1974 and which has not been questioned since. RTCG invited a priest from the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), Gojko Perović, to comment on the church's stance on this issue. Perović stated that abortion is a sin and that "not everything in a woman's body belongs to her". Perović and gynecologist Vojislav Šimun, who is now Minister of Health, defended the right of citizens and doctors to support the church's stance.

These few examples, as well as the fact they were broadcast by the national public service provider, point to there being a significant problem in Montenegro when it comes to the rights of women and LGBTIQ+ people. In this type of information environment, online media are also prone to targeting women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, often without any repercussions.

It is of little surprise that attitudes formed in a patriarchal society combined with a lack of media space in Montenegro, in which views are critically questioned and challenged to a sufficient extent, have created an environment where gender disinformation, misinformation, and overall information disorders are noticeably present.

Until now, there have been no detailed studies on the topic of gender disinformation in Montenegro. Recently, the fact-checking website Raskrinkavanje started addressing the issue, but this analysis represents the first comprehensive attempt to investigate the patterns of gender disinformation in Montenegro.

The Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) project registered numerous examples of hate speech against women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, some of which include elements of gender disinformation. From January 2021 when monitoring started until the end of 2023, RDN registered 56 cases that represent hate speech on the basis of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. It is the second most common type of hate speech in the Montenegrin media landscape according to RDN methodology.

For the purposes of this research, three interviews were conducted, with Maja Raičević, director of Centre For Women's Rights (CZP), Sara Vujisić, a young woman who became a victim of hate speech upon publicly disclosing sexual harassment from her former professor, and Jelena Jovanović, factchecker from Montenegrin factchecking portal Raskrinkavanje.

Quantitative Overview

For the purpose of this study, we used a sample of 18 examples of misinformation on gender issues. Some of them were detected during RDN monitoring, while others were found through a search of online media as part of this report research.

Out of these 18 cases, 13 were text-based content, while six were speech-based content, with one occurrence marked as both speech and text-based content. The majority of examples targeted political participation of women and their professional achievement, with nine cases targeting both categories, two cases targeting them solely for political participation and one case targeting solely professional achievement. These two categories seem to go hand in hand in the Montenegrin media/public landscape – usually when a woman is targeted for her political participation, her professional achievement is questioned and undermined and attributed to her “suspicious” connections with powerful men. There were three cases featuring victims of gender-based violence, attacking and shaming them, inventing stories about them, and undermining what they went through.

All cases consisted of either fabricated or misleading content and there was one case of false connections, where a person was linked to someone despite not actually having such connection with them. It appears that media and online actors who create manipulative content about women use some existing information and events in the lives of these women to produce either disinformation or other types of misleading content that humiliates them and portrays them as not worthy of the public’s support.

Cases	Information Disorder Type	Content Type	Subject Matter	Link/description
1	Fabricated content	Gender-based violence	ARTICLE	borba.me
2	Misleading content	Gender-based violence	ARTICLE	borba.me
3	Misleading content	Professional achievement, LGBTIQ+	ARTICLE	rtcg.me
4	Fabricated content	Political participation, professional engagement	TEXT	instagram.com
5	Misleading content	LGBTIQ+	ARTICLE	borba.me
6	Fabricated content	Political participation, professional engagement	TEXT	facebook.com
7	Fabricated content	Political participation, professional engagement	TEXT	A X/Twitter user, suspected to be astroturfer, insulted Irena Radovic, who is candidate for governor in the Central Montenegrin Bank, by claiming that she has no idea about banking, that she is "whore of Rocen", a former high official in Democratic Party of Socialist and Montenegrin Government, and insinuating that she was involved in the actions of stealing money.
8	False connections	Political participation, professional engagement	ARTICLE	aktuelno.me

9	Fabricated content	Political participation, professional engagement	TEXT	aktuelno.me
10	Fabricated content	Political participation, professional engagement	TEXT	aktuelno.me
11	False context	LGBTIQ+	SPEECH	cemi.org.me
12	Fabricated content	Political participation	SPEECH	The executive director of Serbian House and former journalist called an MP and the former president of Social Democratic Party a gossip girl, chatterbox, woman who talks too much, yells, who can't control herself, who is without any moral barriers, and who talks about everyone and everything.
13	Fabricated content	Political participation	SPEECH	Jovana Kikanovic, a member of political party Slobodna Crna Gora (Free Montenegro) led by Vladislav Dajkovic, is known for hateful statements and plans to run for mayor of Podgorica in the next elections. On her Facebook profile she attacked the SDP president, calling her mentally ill and a female dog that goes into heat.
14	Fabricated content	Political participation, professional achievement	SPEECH	Activist Vanja Calovic was named "starlet of the grants" and "NGO starlet" in two articles by the online media portal Aktuelno.me. It also mentioned that Calovic is "burdened by numerous affairs" and mentioned her involvement in the "zoo-sex affair on Ada Bojana", citing that she participated in sexual activity with her dogs. They referred to the media reporting of Calovic in 2014 as genuine, which was a constructed affair with the aim to destroy the credibility and reputation of Calovic.
15	Misleading content	Political participation, professional achievement	SPEECH	Ivana Vojvodovic, a director of NGO Juventas, was mistreated by Milutin Djukanovic during a show at the public service broadcaster when he associated her with her ex-husband and tried to discredit her and her work for Juventas. Her former husband is professor of Faculty of Political Science and director of NGO CEMI. Yet, Vojvodovic is director and founder of one of the first and most impactful NGOs in Montenegro that deals with human rights. She is also highly educated person, who via scholarship of Chevening completed studies in medical statistics and she is doing serious research in human rights. Connecting her success to her former husband is misleading because she achieved her success by herself.
16	Misleading content	Gender based violence	Text based content	A Montenegrin influencer who goes by the name Radosav Vrbica on social media posted a story following a femicide in Montenegro, in which he defended the perpetrator – whom he knew – by saying that his wife's actions led the man to have a nervous breakdown and commit the murder. "I have to point out that this is a guy whose life was truly ruined by that woman. She took advantage of him, kicked him out of the apartment he was paying for, and left him in debt, which caused him to have a mental breakdown and lose his sanity."
17	Misleading Content, False connections	Gender based violence	Text based content, speech based content	The Centre for the Protection of Men's Rights is a Montenegrin NGO that seeks, in a highly manipulative way, to portray the discourse around women's rights as harmful narratives or "propaganda". By distorting numbers, statistics, and facts, it aims to falsely lead the public to conclude that men are actually the victims. One of their posts attempted to depict women as perpetrators of domestic violence by quoting an article from a Serbian tabloid that listed the number of cases in which women killed their partners in Serbia. However, they omitted the fact that this number is significantly lower than the number of femicides. They also left out the comment by a psychiatrist who, even in the sensationalist tone of the article, pointed out that women usually commit such acts in self-defense. https://www.instagram.com/czpm_2023/

Qualitative analysis

Event analysis

We observe that almost all cases in our sample were preceded by public events, which prompted media and online actors to respond and spread misinformation. When it comes to the most common content type – the political participation and professional achievements of women – almost all the cases were preceded by the successes of these women or their nominations for high positions. These information disorders are often combined with various insults, or even hate speech, inappropriate language, etc.

That was the case with Draginja Vuksanović Stanković, who was the first female candidate for the President of Montenegro competing in both the 2018 and 2023 elections. As well as being targeted with hate speech, which was quite a common occurrence, other political actors attempted to humiliate Stankovic by issuing statements containing information disorders. Similarly, Irena Radovic was targeted due to her candidature for the Central Bank of Montenegro Governor, through a series of fabricated and misleading content spread across both online media outlets and social media accounts. Other successful female NGO actors were also attacked in a similar manner.

LGBTIQ+ individuals are usually targeted around parliamentary votes on important laws regarding their rights, or events such as Pride. This is what happened with information disorders that appeared on RTCG showing the pressure that SPC is putting on LGBTIQ+ rights and the readiness of representatives of religious institutions to spread misinformation and information without context, in order to justify their positions.

All three cases of gender-based violence content in our sample originated from individuals attempting to defend those who either enabled or perpetrated high-profile gender-based violence incidents that were dominating news headlines at the time.

It is apparent that gender misinformation and gender disinformation spread when women or LGBTIQ+ individuals were, due to public events or events represented in the news, the centre of public attention. Our small, yet focused sample shows that a sole public mention of a particular woman creates a risk of spreading gender disinformation about her. It is not even important whether a particular woman is targeted due to her political participation or for being a victim of gender violence – it is enough that she occupied some public/media space. That proves that simply being mentioned in public as a woman in Montenegro might lead to various sorts of information disorders about her. These patterns explain why women in Montenegrin society mostly shy away from political participation, high positions in business, or public participation in general.

Recurring narratives

Disinformation targeting these women, no matter whether it has to do with being a victim or with political participation, aims to shame them. It depicts a woman as the one “doing harm” to someone else, for “provoking” somebody to be violent, or for accusing someone of enabling or doing violence. Women who are successful are being targeted for their ability to endanger the position of men. That is obvious because disinformation and hate speech against men who are candidates for high political positions, rarely discredit men's success in a similar way.

The main goal of disinformation targeting women is to portray them as untrustworthy. When it comes to political participation and professional success, their achievements are usually attributed to their connections with powerful men and shady pasts, often implying sexual relationships and portraying them as morally compromised. Montenegro is a small country and most families are interconnected. Such news spreads quickly and brings a risk of family members and a wider circle of women in Montenegrin society judging the targeted woman, placing additional pressure on her, even when they are aware that such content represents malicious campaigns.

Linguistic analysis

Linguistic characteristics sometimes clearly indicate that the aim of disinformation is to insult the target woman. That is especially the case with a woman involved in political participation. These cases are usually intertwined with hate speech and insults. Serbo-Croatian language typically contains numerous insulting terms for women, including animal comparisons, words for morally corrupted women, and insults connected with sexual shame such as various forms of the word "prostitute".

Such words are often found in headlines, making the aim of belittling a woman obvious and unhidden. It is interesting that creators of these instances of disinformation are blatantly lacking in objectivity and they manage to provoke negative feelings in public towards these women.

Gender disinformation in Montenegro is often part of propaganda against feminists and NGOs dealing with women's and LGBTIQ+ rights. They are represented as something dangerous, usually coming from the West. In these cases, false connections are made with bits and pieces of existing information of various scientific studies. The information is mostly taken out of context. Language can be serious, convincing and articles or speeches can offer a variety of seemingly 'correct' arguments. Yet the way these arguments are put together and the lack of context or sources, makes such statements problematic. Examples include statements by Joanikije, Metropolitan of SPC in Montenegro, when he argued against laws that would help trans people, or language used in columns written in pro-Serbian, SPC supporting media such as IN4S and Borba, where LGBTIQ+ people are represented as mentally ill and sick, due to the fact that outdated science labeled them as such. Language used by the NGO Centre for the Protection of Men's Rights, whose Instagram profile posts are supported by seemingly serious arguments to depict women as those who are violent against men and those who thank "Western agendas", manage to make the system work entirely in their favour and against women. That kind of language creates inaccurate and misleading perceptions. The consequences are that audiences lacking media literacy become particularly susceptible to developing further prejudices and hatred against women.



Case studies

Political/Electoral Context

When it comes to women who are politicians or hold high positions in Montenegro, gender-related disinformation campaigns usually take the form of offensive content that often includes hate speech. Stereotypes are frequently used to undermine their expertise and capabilities, while they are simultaneously criticised for their appearance, behaviour, or even private lives. Such attacks are particularly dangerous as they can affect public perception, decrease trust in women in key positions, and simultaneously hinder the creation of an inclusive political space. Tabloids and bots/trolls on social media are particularly active in spreading this type of disinformation. Although there are almost no tabloids in Montenegro in the sense of the media genre that is present in other countries in the region such as Serbia and Croatia, several, mostly unregistered types of media, often use tabloid language to target political opponents. When women are among those opponents, language is additionally offensive and includes elements that are supposed to shame women.

We would depict here the case of Irena Radovic, Montenegrin economist and current Governor of the Central Bank of Montenegro, who was targeted upon her candidature for that position. She was targeted in several articles, mostly published by unregistered online portals (not registered as media entities) such as Aktuelno, which is recognised for publishing highly problematic articles targeting political figures.

Upon the candidature of Radovic, Aktuelno.me published an article titled 'The Failed Princess of Monaco: Irena Radovic new governor of CBCG'. The subtitle of the article stated that 'the selection of Radovic for the position of governor of CBCG is certainly not the best solution, as this controversial economist, who also unsuccessfully tried her hand at diplomacy, stood out for everything except expertise'. Another problematic article defamed Radovic by portraying her as a manipulative figure, whose career and success are linked to questionable connections with powerful men, improper behaviour, and numerous past scandals. A connection to former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Milan Rocen, specifically adds to the negative portrayal by implying that her professional success is the result of nepotism and an interest-based sort of relationship with Rocen, as well as political manoeuvring rather than merit.

Another insulting article was titled: 'Colourful biography of the candidate for Governor: How Daka's acquaintance chased the Prince of Monaco around Budva'. The article mentions her connections with Miodrag Daka Davidovic, a businessman who is on the U.S. blacklist, implying that she may be involved with shady or unethical individuals, raising doubts about her integrity.

The article gives a detailed account of an incident during Prince Albert II of Monaco's visit to Montenegro in 2013, where Radovic is accused of behaving in an intrusive and inappropriate manner. The article claims that her actions during the visit were so extreme that they became a diplomatic embarrassment for both her and the country. This event is described as a "scandal", implying that Radovic's conduct was unprofessional and damaging to the image of Montenegro.

These articles were republished by other portals with smaller visibility such as Lucha, and Radio Scala. In one case, a user on RDN's registered X/Twitter handle used improper terms for Radovic, also highlighting her business incompetence and alleged sexual relationship with Milan Rocen. The X/Twitter status was obviously written by an astroturfer or troll. It had almost 3,500 views.

While these articles failed to significantly undermine Radovic's candidacy, they are powerful tools for building prejudices against female political actors.

Trans women and disinformation

In March 2024, RTCG came under scrutiny for its coverage of the Draft Law on Legal Gender Recognition Based on Self-Determination. The law, which is expected to be adopted soon in Montenegro, seeks to allow transgender individuals to change their sex on official documents without undergoing medical procedures such as surgery or hormone therapy. This change aims to reduce stigma and allow people to live according to their gender identity.

RTCG's coverage of the law sparked controversy due to its unbalanced and problematic portrayal of the issue. On March 11, during the *Dnevnik* news programme, RTCG aired a statement from the Metropolitanate of Montenegro and the Littoral, a religious institution, which opposed the law. The statement described the law as a threat to traditional values and incompatible with the country's existing legal norms. This segment, which featured footage of the Cetinje Monastery, was not balanced with alternative perspectives, and no further discussion was provided in the news programme. The Agency for Electronic Media (AEM) later issued a warning to RTCG, citing concerns about objectivity and balance.

The issue resurfaced on March 14 during the *Arguments* TV show, where RTCG invited several religious leaders to discuss the draft law. Religious figures from the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community, the Catholic Church, and the Jewish community shared their views, which primarily opposed the law. Representative of SPC Metropolitan Joanikije, argued that those who go through gender affirming surgeries often commit suicide, or want to get back to their birth gender. While it is true that trans people might face mental health challenges during the process of transition and after, it has to do with the lack of societal and mental health support during such drastic change and general discrimination that they face. In conservative societies, such as Montenegro, it can also come from family disagreements over the person's decision to go through gender affirming surgery.

The show that aired on RTCG opened the space to anti-trans propaganda, including in the way the questions were framed and the lack of representation from secular institutions that would counter the arguments of religious representatives. That led to criticisms that the discussion promoted religious perspectives over human rights.

LGBTIQ+ rights organisations, including the Coalition for the Rights of LGBTIQ+ Persons – Equality, condemned RTCG's reporting, arguing that it misrepresented the content of the law, which only addresses the administrative change of sex designation on documents and does not refer to gender-affirming surgeries. They also criticised the broadcaster for presenting religious views on a law concerning human rights as if they were the predominant viewpoint in Montenegrin society, violating the principle of a secular state.

New Technologies

So far, there have been no cases of emerging technologies such as AI or deepfakes being used in gendered disinformation campaigns against female public actors. Yet, in Montenegro there are instances of these technologies being used for peer-based violence, mostly against girls. A new technological challenge is image-based sexual abuse (commonly known as revenge pornography), including using deepfakes to create intimate recordings of girls and women. Feminism activist Kriticki told CIN-CG that in the groups where such abusive content was shared, men were also asking for the recordings of Montenegrin women and girls.

In 2014, a defamation case involving political activist Vanja Calovic, that gained high visibility in Montenegro, included photoshopped images. Informer published a photo on its front page of a woman who appeared to be engaging in sexual activity with a dog, with the headline 'Controversial Montenegrin zoo-sex scandal' and the title 'Investigate if this is Vanja Calovic'. Informer followed up with a series of similar articles against

Calovic, causing huge pressure and consequences for the activist. Calovic was targeted because of her fight against corruption in the government led by Milo Djukanovic's Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS). The stories attempting to defame Calovic are still being used to publicly humiliate her, with the unregistered portal Aktuelno playing a key role in the smear campaign. Aktuelno, which politically supports the Democratic Party of Socialists, continues to publish articles from time to time that attack Calovic in the most degrading ways. These articles rarely, if ever, provide any legitimate reference to the fabricated incidents they describe, presenting them as if they are factual events.

Disinformation campaigns against feminism and feminists

"Gender disinformation is a common issue in Montenegro, frequently targeted at discrediting organisations that advocate for women's rights, as well as feminists, activists, politicians, and LGBTIQ+ individuals," Maja Raicevic, director of Centre For Women's Rights (CZP), told RDN.

"Both the organisation I work for, and myself personally have been targeted by attacks and disinformation. There were even blatantly false attempts to blame us for the increase in violence against women, despite the fact that we've dedicated much of our lives to fighting it.

One of the most intense campaigns against us took place in 2002, when we were providing protection to victims of trafficking who were being abused by state officials. Back then, we were accused of working against the state, with regime-backed magazines like Crnogorski književni list leading the charge, spreading lies about us and even about my family, with no accountability whatsoever," states Raicevic.

Misinformation against feminists and feminism often comes from conservative political actors and individuals. Such disinformation mainly consists of manipulations aimed at creating a perception of feminism and feminists as harmful, lazy, self-serving promoters of "Western agendas".

Pro-Serbian media, which promotes conservatism and is closely aligned with Serbian parties in Montenegro, such as Borba and IN4S, often publish articles that contribute to disinformation campaigns against feminism and women's rights activists in Montenegro. Although these media often don't directly target individual feminists, or particular organisations by name, they contribute to the overall perception of feminism and women's rights defenders as "harmful legacies of the West".

Here are some examples: In an article published in IN4S: 'Serbian Patriarchy – The Most Dangerous and Greatest Enemy of Feminists', feminists' critique of patriarchy is framed on a national basis and presented as a conflict between the West and Serbian tradition that feminists and NGOs are "trying to suppress". Another example 'The Bitter Fruits of Radical Feminism', also published in IN4S in 2024 refers to LGBTIQ+ individuals as psychiatric cases who need treatment, but who, due to "Western agendas", have become socially acceptable.

The Montenegrin organisation The Centre for the Protection of Men's Rights, led by lawyer Bojan Vujovic, promotes gender disinformation through manipulative posts on Instagram. They use sensationalist headlines and misrepresent media content to campaign against feminist movements, women's rights defenders, and those fighting gender-based violence. Their posts distort facts, such as implying that men face equal or greater victimisation from gender-based violence, and they spread misogynistic attitudes. For example, they shared an article about men being victims of domestic violence, omitting key context about women's experiences with abuse. They also claim that female judges and social workers favour women in custody and domestic violence cases, using misleading statistics to support their claims. However, it is well known that men are the predominant perpetrators of domestic violence, often receiving light sentences for serious crimes.

"Our reactions to gender disinformation against us have varied depending on whether the disinformation is malicious or based on ignorance, prejudice, and a lack of information about gender issues. In some cases which we assessed as hate speech, we informed the prosecutor's office, although with little success. We also wrote public responses, complaints to the Ombudsman, organised protests, and so on," explains Maja Raicevic.

Yet, Raicevic and the organisation she works for, are more concerned with the gender disinformation that appears online in general. The most common incidents of disinformation concern media reporting on violence against women. For example, we often see media referring to femicide as a "crime of passion", which is absolutely incorrect because "passion" is not the cause of violence against women; it is deeply ingrained gender roles that support the idea of male dominance and control over women. Sometimes, gender disinformation stems from ignorance and lack of information, explains Raicevic. "We fight through media appearances in which we explain gender prejudices, organise trainings, lectures, informational sessions for citizens, professionals, etc."

Counternarratives

Sara Vujisić, a young woman who alleges she was subjected to sexual harassment from her former professor Radoman Čečović in 2021, became the target of gender disinformation when she decided to publicly disclose the case at the end of 2024. The case sparked a huge backlash both online and offline. For the purposes of this study, we spoke with Sara Vujisić.

"There was a lot of false information, especially about the case itself such as the rumors that I was a porn actress at school and that he was the only professor who rejected me... the story went so far that even people who knew me had to ask me if it was true. Then there were stories that he and I were in a secret relationship, and then I got tired of it and decided to reveal everything." She would categorise such disinformation as conspiracy theories about her past and hidden motives behind the story she revealed.

Vujisić was additionally under scrutiny and targeted by disinformation because she told the then director of the gymnasium (school), Biljana Vučurović, about what she went through with Čečović, yet Vučurović didn't report Čečović to authorities or dismiss him. Vučurović, who is the wife of Jole Vučurović, a high official of the New Serbian Democracy (NSD) party in the Government of Montenegro, was supported by political actors and the media, with the NSD targeting Vujisić. They tried to turn the story into an ethnically motivated attack on Vučurović who is a Serb, contributing significantly to disinformation about Vujisić. Even Vučurović herself targeted Vujisić during a press conference after the case appeared in the media, stating that Sara didn't have support of her father to report the case to the authorities. "I reacted publicly when Vučurović mentioned my father. It was not right, it was personal, and I felt the need to react," says Vujisić, who reacted via social media. Vučurović and the media connected to her and her husband's party tried to depict the case as the "lynching of Vučurović and Serbs in Montenegro".

Online media portal Borba, which is connected to NSD, targeted Vujisić by labeling her as a Montenegrin nationalist, Komita, who wants to bring down the government and the Serbs in Montenegro, which she also debunked on her social media. "I didn't care much about it because I am not easily shaken when it comes to such things as what would people say. Yet, when I think about my situation in general, it's not fair that anyone in my place, after the courage they gathered to speak publicly, has to go through this kind of lynching and comments that insult physical appearance, intelligence, morals, and pride," says Vujisić.

"Gender-based disinformation poses a significant threat to society, especially for vulnerable groups. Not only do they distort reality, but they also actively encourage hate speech, division, and discrimination, as unchecked narratives lead to societal polarisation," states Jelena Jovanovic, factchecker from Montenegrin factchecking portal "Raskrinkavanje".

During the last five years, Raskrinkavanje has analysed media content and social media posts, related to politics, human rights, and democracy, suspected of containing disinformation or manipulation. "Some of the analysed posts have included disinformation targeting women's rights, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. These disinformation campaigns are often accompanied by manipulative narratives and conspiracy theories, presented as a fight against "gender ideology," defending family values, or opposing the "deviant West," says Jovanovic.

Public opinion research by NGO Centre For Democratic Transition in 2025 showed that 64.6% believe that homosexuality is a disease, and 23.1% said they did not know whether it is a disease, while only 12.3% do not think so. Such misconceptions, amplified by disinformation, contribute directly to discrimination and hate against the LGBTQ+ community. Similarly, smear campaigns and disinformation narratives targeting women in politics and public life have strengthened gender stereotypes, severely limiting women's participation in decision-making processes, Jovanovic explains.

"Women often report to us severe forms of gender disinformation, which carry criminal liability, and some cases are so serious that they pose a significant threat to women's mental health and safety. For example, an unregistered portal published confidential data and medical documentation about a victim of sexual violence, who was a minor, in an attempt to intimidate her and prevent her from testifying in the case against the perpetrator, who was connected to the portal's owners. We reported this case to the prosecutor's office, but they referred the victim to file a private lawsuit, and the court did not respond appropriately. Such situations are terrifying for the person involved and for all other women who could easily find themselves in a similar situation, as long as institutions fail to act."

"Moreover, disinformation targeting women's health undermines scientific and medical knowledge, such as false claims that HPV causes infertility or that mammography is harmful. The spread of such disinformation highlights the need for comprehensive education on women's health and greater involvement of authorities in combating disinformation," says Jovanovic.

Montenegro's legal framework addresses gender misinformation through various laws, including the Law on Gender Equality, the Criminal Code, the Constitution, and media regulations. The Law on Gender Equality ensures equal rights and opportunities for all genders. The Constitution protects freedom of expression while prohibiting hate speech. The Criminal Code bans discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and other factors, and the Law on Media mandates that the media must not incite discrimination or violence.

However, misinformation is mainly addressed in the Cybersecurity Strategy (2022-2026) and the Media Strategy (2023-2027), which focus on tackling fake news and improving media standards. Until 2023, misinformation was penalised under "Incitement to Panic and Disorder," but this was criticised for threatening media freedom. Montenegro lacks an explicit law for addressing misinformation, which is seen as a potential risk to press freedom. The Media Strategy plans to create a body to combat misinformation and hate speech, but it has not yet been formed.

Conclusion

We analysed our findings through the lens of six fundamental rules of gender disinformation, identified by Judson et al. (2020) in their study 'Endangering Hate: Contours of State Aligned Gendered Disinformation Online'.

Rule No. 1. is to "convince others that women are devious: they are not fit for politics, and as such should be excluded". Disinformation spreading with the aim to prove that women are not fit for political engagement is often created around narratives that women are "devious, unreliable and fake" state Judson et al. In our sample most of the cases related exactly to these narratives. Women were represented as unreliable through various narratives in order to be politically discredited. Their professional engagement was undermined and represented as a consequence of the morally compromised behaviour they undertook in order to achieve their political goals.

Rule No. 2, is to denounce women as too stupid for public life. In our sample this rule came out whenever there were information disorders about women in political life, such as candidate for Montenegro's President, Draginja Vuksanović Stanković, or candidate for the Governor of The Central Bank of Montenegro, Irena Radović. That was achieved through depicting them as prone to stereotypical female activities such as being preoccupied with relationships with powerful men through whom they will get what they want, alleged involvement in "affairs" with famous personalities, "gossiping" and "backbiting," and so on. These types of disinformation target these serious, professionally accomplished women with the aim of attempting to portray them in a false manner.

Rule No. 3 is to "make women afraid to talk back". In Montenegrin society this rule is reflected through a reduced visibility of women in the public sphere. Women are afraid they would be judged, and all the available data shows they would. Through RDN monitoring we have seen that each woman who strongly defends her attitudes, or opposes powerful men who are leading the system, ends up as the target of insults and hate speech, at least in the comments section. Moreover, it is almost impossible to find examples of women that are politically engaged who were not subjected to any kind of targeting. The lack of reaction from institutions when it comes to such cases of hate speech and insults clearly shows that women are not protected in Montenegrin society and that they are going to stand alone against perpetrators.

Rule No. 4 deals with praising women for being feminine and ideal sexual objects, while condemning them for being sexual. We didn't clearly find this particular trend in our disinformation sample which is not to say that such narratives are not present in our society. In the case of Irena Radović, we noticed the media attempts to humiliate her for alleged attempts to have relationships with certain men. Women in Montenegrin society are condemned both when they fulfill the idea about "ideal" femininity as well as when they do not, as well as when they are perceived as sexual beings. RDN registered and reacted to many cases where women were objectified and humiliated on a sexual basis. That proves that Montenegrin media and online landscapes are "fertile ground" for such types of disinformation.

Rule No. 5 is to show that there are strong men that would "save" society. They encourage an undermining discourse towards women and others, to support their policies such as banning abortion, their anti LGBTQI+ sentiments and their ideas on where women belong. In our sample we see such examples in the behaviour of the SPC Metropolitan Joanikije, especially in his statements against trans people, or in statements of the Centre For The Protection of Men's Rights who represent themselves as "defenders" of "women's rights agendas". Many powerful men in Montenegrin society have demonstrated proclivity for such behaviour- without necessarily producing information disorders. Yet, they promoted propaganda of conservative values, and against women and LGBTIQ rights, such as former Prime Minister, Zdravko

Krivokapić who stated that "women should bear children and men should defend (be soldiers)". Such a political landscape clearly allows for harmful anti-gender narratives from men in leading positions, which poses a risk for further information disorders.

Rule No. 6 is that gender disinformation appears in societies where conservative and right-wing governments portray feminism as anti-governmental and oppositional. In Montenegro we can find elements of this rule – especially when it comes to the conservative parties such as NSD, that, together with the media close to them, such as Borba, contributed to the disinformation against Sara Vujisic, as mentioned beforehand.

We can conclude that elements of all the six rules from Judson et Al (2020) are clearly present in the Montenegrin media landscape and public discourse in general. This finding represents important guidance for future actions of stakeholders in Montenegrin society. It is clear that in order to prevent gender information disorders work must be done on multiple fronts. Although it is difficult to categorise disinformation as a criminal act, because such legal clauses could potentially be dangerous for media freedom, it is important to focus on the media literacy of citizens, especially youth, and children from an early age. It is also essential to withdraw financial support from media outlets that spread this type of disinformation and to prevent authorities from engaging in shameful attempts to spread harmful anti-gender narratives.





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