MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN SERBIA

2025

ANJA ANĐUŠIĆ

Co-funded by the European Union

Norway

SMART Balkans
Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans

Reporting Diversity Network

Author: Anja Anđušić

Methodology expert and editor: Stefan Janjić

Publisher: Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans

Reporting Diversity Network (RDN) is established by Media Diversity Institute. Project partners include Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans, Albanian Women in Audiovisual, Mediacentar Sarajevo, Kosovo 2.0, Center for Investigative Journalism Montenegro, Innovative Media.

Co-funded by the European Union

Norway

SMART Balkans

This publication is funded by the European Union and the "SMART Balkans – Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans" regional project implemented by Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) and Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM) and financially supported by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA).

The content of the publication is the sole responsibility of the project implementers and does not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union, the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA), Centar za promociju civilnog društva (CPCD), Center for Research and Policy Making (CRPM) or Institute for Democracy and Mediation (IDM).

Reporting Diversity Network

MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN SERBIA 2025

ANJA ANĐUŠIĆ

Content

5 **Introduction**

7 **Methodological approach**

8 **Narratives and sub-narratives**

8 Quantitative analysis

10 Narrative analysis

10 Hateful narratives against gender

12 Hateful narratives against political and ideological opponents

13 Ethnic hate narratives

15 Hate narratives against sexual minorities

16 Sentiment analysis

17 Visibility analysis

18 **Comparative analysis**

19 **Preventive and ex post actions to combat hate and disinformation narratives**

20 **Conclusions**

Introduction

This report presents the findings of media monitoring of hateful and discriminatory discourse (HDD) in Serbia from January 2024 to July 2025, highlighting the most common narratives and ways they operate, main sources of harmful content and main targeted groups. It also explores responses of institutions and civil society, as well as preventive measures taken to strengthen resilience to hate speech.

What truly shaped this monitoring period was the growing political crisis that hit Serbia in the aftermath of the Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse on November 1st, 2024, that left 16 dead, and one severely injured. Many saw this as a result of corruption since the station was recently renovated. Mass nationwide protests broke out quickly, led by students who blocked almost all buildings of state universities in the country.

The movement quickly gained momentum across various segments of society. High schoolers blocked their schools, teachers, and lawyers striked, taxi drivers offered transport to protests across the country. Students marched for days through rural areas while residents offered food, shelter, and aid. At first, the demands were focused on holding those responsible for the canopy fall accountable. As the crisis evolved and demands were not met, the main demand is now calling for parliamentary elections. Since then, as the movement and its effects grew, so did the regime's oppression through police brutality, arrests, layoffs in public enterprises, suppression of civil rights and media freedoms.

This further exposed the already deteriorating state of the Serbian media. This year's *Reporters without Borders* and *Freedom House* reports mark only a slight decrease in civil liberties and media freedom, as the data reflects 2024. Highlighted issues persist for years: state control over media, rampant fake news and propaganda, political and economic pressures resulting in self-censorship and attacks against journalists that go unpunished.

However, national journalists' associations reported on worsening issues throughout 2025, including a surge of physical attacks and police violence against journalists, with dozens assaulted while covering protests, and targeting through smear campaigns and spy software.

Hateful and harmful narratives in media flourished in this political atmosphere, often used as a political tool against students and citizens protesting, opposition, civil society and others who opposed the regime, as well as journalists reporting from the ground. Monitoring results highlight a surge in political targeting, but also ethnic, gendered, and other forms of hate manipulated against those perceived as political opponents.

Fake News Tragač found 6420 misleading texts about blockades and protests on the most popular portals during the first six months of 2025. Analysed texts repeatedly breached Serbia's Journalists' Code. This research also notes frequent smear campaigns targeting individuals with hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric based on political views, ethnicity, or gender.

Television, especially broadcasters with national frequency licenses, tabloids, and their respective online portals, remains media that reaches the biggest audiences in Serbia. These outlets often follow narratives set up by the ruling party. They were complicit in creating hostility, targeting individuals, and reinforcing harmful narratives and were identified as the main source of hateful and harmful content in this research. These outlets face little accountability, as the *Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM)* has long symbolised institutional neglect. After the *REM* Council dismantling in November 2024, with no new members elected, a complete regulatory vacuum remains.

This report is a part of the regional monitoring of hate speech in the media conducted by partner organisations in Western Balkan countries, as part of the *Reporting Diversity Network* (*RDN*). The Media Diversity Institute Western Balkans has implemented the media monitoring of hate speech in Serbia since 2021. This is the third national report as part of this research, covering the period from January 1st, 2024, to June 30th, 2025. The first report covered the period from January 2021 to April 2022, and the second report covered the period from May 2022 to December 2023.

Methodological approach

This report follows the same methodology as the previous *RDN* monitoring reports. *RDN* uses a broader concept of hate speech, primarily by not limiting the characteristics for identifying a targeted individual or group. The monitoring also includes harmful representations of marginalised groups.

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis were conducted, as in previous reports. 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 and visibility 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*, on a scale from 1 to 6, from disagreement to calls for death.

Through qualitative analysis, we aimed to identify the main hateful and harmful narratives and ways they operate, as well as events that trigger such narratives and visual elements that accompany them.

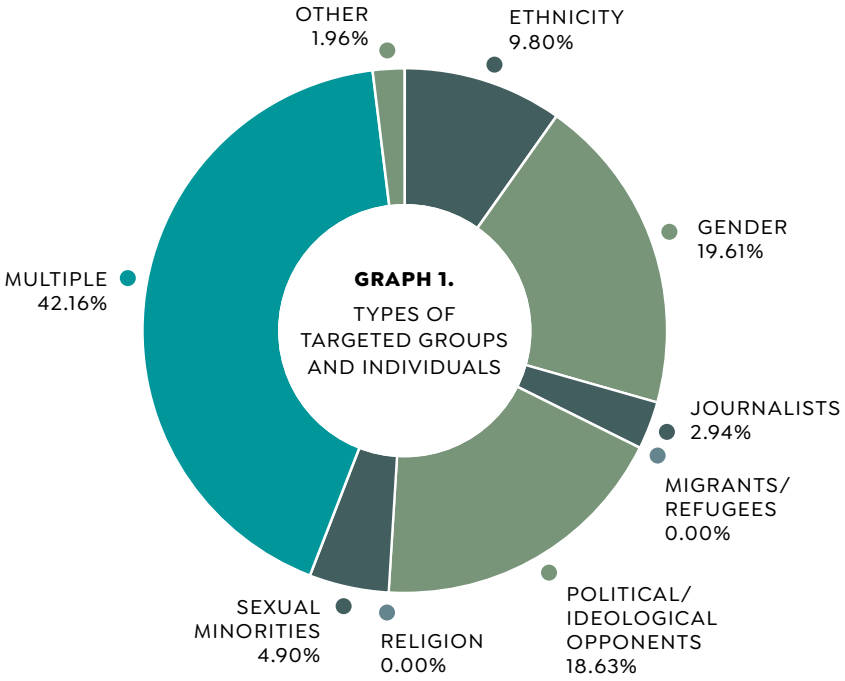
Media monitoring included content in traditional media such as newspapers, television and radio stations, online portals, and social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, X and TikTok. Particular attention was focused on the statements of public officials and other public figures because of their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

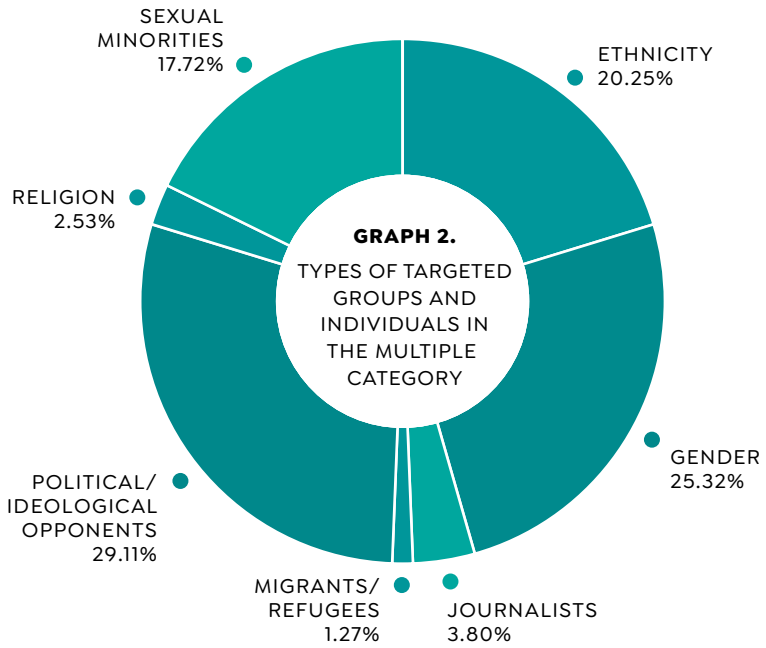
As recorded incidents grow more complex and layered when it comes to targeted groups and individuals, this time we further analysed cases that were intersectional in nature, meaning they targeted multiple identities. The data is presented in more detail, however, the overall data does not shift from the analysis conducted in previous reports. It remains consistent and comparable.

Narratives and sub-narratives

Quantitative analysis

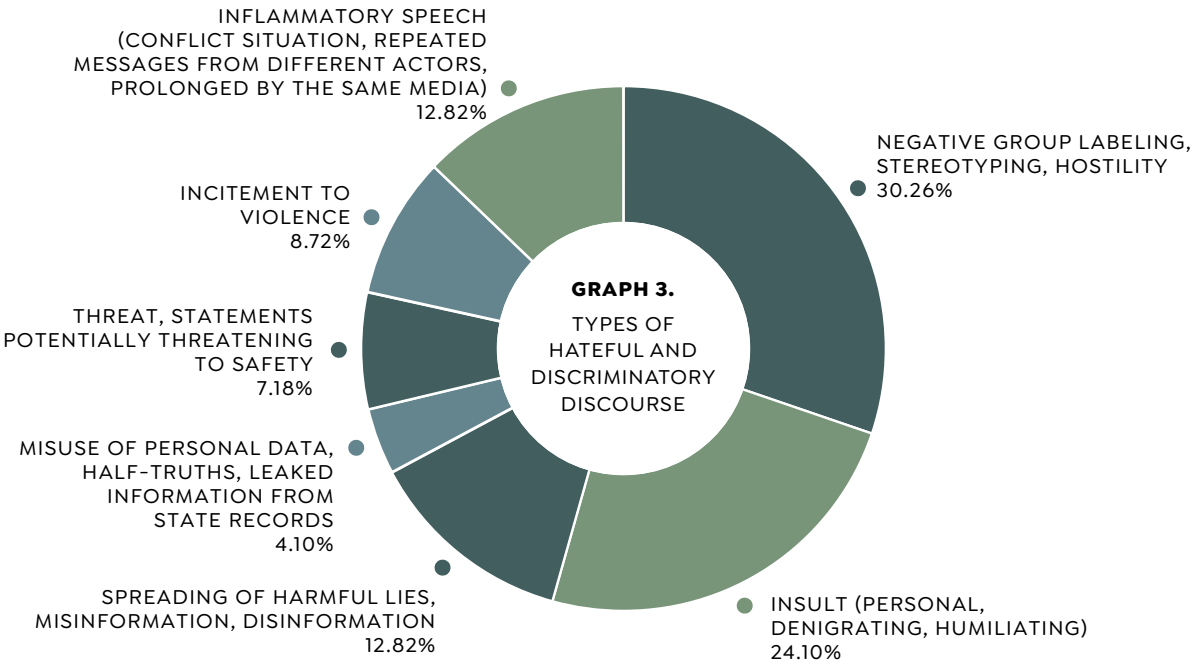
Throughout the year and a half of monitoring, ***a total of 102 cases of hate speech*** were recorded. In this period, a significant shift is noticeable in how HDD operates and how it's used. We have seen ***a growing trend of hateful and harmful speech becoming more complex and layered***, as cases intersectional in nature (42.2%) are prevalent for the first time since *RDN* started monitoring. Here, groups and individuals were targeted for multiple overlapping identities. These cases were further analysed in more detail (refer to Graph 2), revealing that almost every third case in this category included political targeting, every fourth case included elements of gendered hate speech, every fifth case contained elements of ethnic hate, and every sixth had elements of targeting sexual minorities.





Gender remains the primary targeted identity (19.6%) when it comes to individual categories. However, ethnicity (9.8%), which was the second most targeted identity in previous monitoring periods, now takes third place, while sexual minorities (4.9%) move down to the fourth most targeted category.

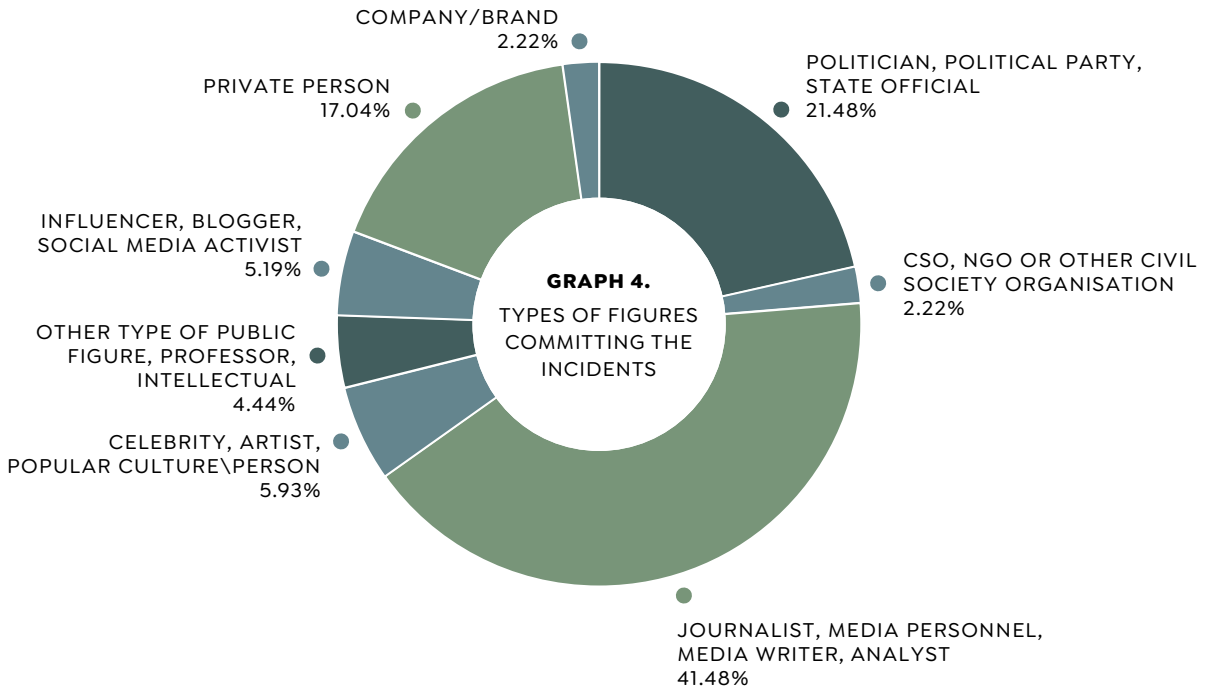
Certainly, the most ***significant shift in this period is seen in politically motivated targeting (18.6%) due to the deepening political crisis and growing suppression of media freedom in Serbia***, especially since November 2024, marked by the Novi Sad train station canopy collapse, leaving 16 dead, and leading to the formation of the biggest student-led movement the country has seen this century. Hate speech targeting political and ideological opponents increased in each monitoring period, from 6.3% in the first period to 12.4% cases in the second now to 18.6% of recorded cases, making this the second most targeted category.



GRAPH 3.
TYPES OF HATEFUL AND DISCRIMINATORY DISCOURSE

When it comes to different types of hateful and discriminatory discourse recorded, the results remained quite similar to the previous report. Almost a third of all cases contained negative group labelling, stereotyping and hostility (30.3%) and a fourth contained insults (24.1%). Another fourth of recorded cases is equally divided by spreading of harmful lies, misinformation and disinformation (12.8%) and inflammatory speech (12.8%). 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.

Compared to previous monitoring periods, a slight increase is seen in cases that included incitement to violence (8.7%). The remaining cases included threats and statements potentially threatening to safety (7.2%), and misuse of personal data, half-truths, and leaked information from state records (4.1%).



GRAPH 4.
TYPES OF FIGURES COMMITTING THE INCIDENTS

Media outlets and media professionals remain the main source of hateful and harmful speech in Serbia (41.5%), surpassing politicians, state officials, and political parties (21.5%). These two categories were tied in the previous monitoring periods, each making about a third of recorded cases. However, it is important to note that both media and political figures often overlap as sources of HDD. Media reports hateful and harmful messages made by politicians, often public officials, failing to provide context and even amplifying their messages by providing media space.

Another significant source of hateful content were private persons, primarily users on social media platforms (17%). Other generators of hate speech were celebrities, artists and popular culture persons (5.9%), influencers, bloggers and social media activists (5.2%), public figures, professors and intellectuals (4.4%) and civil society organisations and citizen associations (2.2%). Companies and brands (2.2%) were also recognised as a source of hateful and harmful speech, as a few recorded cases in this period were commercials and other types of content communicated by private companies.

Narrative analysis

Hateful narratives against gender

Out of the 102 recorded cases, 40 had at least some elements of gender-based hate. As sexist and misogynist narratives remain prevalent in the Serbian public sphere, *RDN* monitoring focused on the most common and visible cases. ***Harmful reporting on gender-based violence***, especially femicide, but also victim-blaming narratives against women who went through obstetric violence and image-based sexual abuse, remains dominant.

There were a total of 26 femicides in Serbia during this year and a half, as recorded by *FemPlatz*, a citizen association recording femicides based on cases documented in the media. Femicide is not recognised as a separate crime and a result of gender-based violence by the Serbian legal system. Even though reporting on femicides is extremely important as it is the only source for documenting them, it remains largely sensational, unprofessional, and unethical. Gruesome details and photos from the crime scenes, often

the victims' homes, are shared alongside other personal details of the victims and their murderers, who are commonly their partners and family members. Most mainstream media rarely use the opportunity to educate the public on gender-based violence and its prevalence in Serbia or hold institutions accountable.

Obstetric violence was mainly regarded as taboo until a few years ago, when women on social media started sharing their experiences of maltreatment and violence they endured during labour. One of the first cases that the media massively reported on occurred in early 2024 when the sister of a woman who endured severe physical and emotional violence while she was in labour and lost her baby, as she claims, due to maltreatment at the hospital, shared her story on Facebook. One text on the *Novosti* portal questioned whether her statement was true, shifting the blame to the mother of the deceased baby and using quotation marks when referring to obstetric violence. *Novosti* also shared the obituary of the deceased child with personal details about her funeral and their family. Messages negating women's experience with obstetric violence did not only come from some media outlets, but also from a public official. In July 2024, in the morning show on *TV Prva*, the Minister of Family Welfare and Demography of Serbia, Milica Đurđević Stamenkovski, said that the testimonies of women on obstetric violence and poor conditions in maternity hospitals are "part of the global agenda against childbirth in Serbia". She made similar claims on abortion rights before.

Image-based sexual abuse - the nonconsensual creation or sharing of intimate images and videos, including threats of sharing such content, is a widespread form of digital sexual violence, especially affecting young women and girls not only in Serbia, but in the wider region. In early June 2024, this emerged as a topic again when feminist organisation *OsnaŽene* (Empowered women) published an article that investigated Telegram groups with tens of thousands of members in which intimate photos of girls and women are shared without their consent.

Daily newspaper *Kurir* had a front page dedicated to the findings of *OsnaŽene*, where they gave a short interview to this media outlet. Soon after, *Kurir* ran another front page with the headline "Sad: Girls on Telegram offer their erotic photographs for 35€ a month", featuring a photo of a woman in her underwear. In this text, Kurir blamed women for the abuse they endured and called upon alleged experts who stood behind harmful patriarchal narratives. In this way, Kurir was complicit in the normalisation of sexual violence against women. This form of violence is usually mislabelled as revenge pornography, even in professional media reporting on the issue. This is also harmful as it wrongly implies consent and suggests victims did something to “deserve" revenge, while failing to capture the complexity of image-based sexual abuse and affecting how the wider public may perceive it.

Furthermore, ***narratives reinforcing gender stereotypes and roles, as well as sexist stereotypes targeting especially women in the public sphere***, remained present as well. These are most often focused on upholding patriarchal beauty standards and reducing women to their looks. Many cases included references on how women "neglect themselves after getting married and having children". Women are commonly called "grandmas" and "aunties" (tetka) as an insult to their looks. One Instagram post by United Fitness Balkan, a company selling CrossFit merch and equipment, created an insulting and sexist post titled "babizam" (grandmaism), defining the word as "when a female athlete wears panties intended for the elderly population", and including a photo of a bent-over woman exercising and wearing see-through leggings, showing her underwear. Apart from these narratives targeting women in general, they are often aimed at women in public life, particularly politicians, journalists, and activists. For instance, ruling party MP Dejan Bulatović called Marinika Tepić, an MP from the opposition Party of Freedom and Justice, the most famous Serbian "pušačica" several times during a morning show on *TV Happy*. This word in Serbian has two meanings, one being a woman who smokes and the other insinuating oral sex, making this a sexist remark.

Anti-feminist and anti-gender narratives were present, however, less than in the previous reporting period. As the Constitutional Court of Serbia suspended the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality until the completion of the constitutional review procedure, due to criticism that gender is not defined as a constitutional category, while sex is, this is no longer a topic that particularly interests the wider public. The few cases recorded in this period included interviews with prominent public figures, where they shared their stance on feminism and feminists. These messages included denying gender inequality, minimising the relevance of feminist efforts, and reversing the blame onto women or feminists themselves, with common narratives on feminism being about "hating men" and painting feminists as aggressive.

Hateful narratives against political and ideological opponents

A ***significant rise in political targeting*** was noted in the previous report, however, it truly reached a new high in this monitoring period as the political crisis in Serbia deepened, becoming the second most common type of hateful and harmful speech. A major trigger event for this was the fall of the Novi Sad train station canopy on November 1st, 2024, leading to a mass anti-corruption movement. Out of the 102 recorded cases of HDD, 42 included elements of political targeting, while 30 were recorded in the eight months of monitoring after the canopy fell. In comparison, throughout the first ten months of the past year, only twelve such cases were recorded.

Activists, civil society organisations, the opposition, and independent media have long been the main targets of hateful targeting by public officials and smear campaigns in pro-regime media. For instance, misleadingly interpreted statements of journalists Ana Lalić and Dinko Gruhonjić at the Rebedu festival in Dubrovnik were used against them in an ongoing smear campaign. They were portrayed as ***"enemies" and "traitors"***, working against their country.

These are common derogatory terms used to discredit, target, and frighten those perceived as political opponents, alongside "***foreign mercenaries" and "anti-Serbs"***. This 'anti-Serb' discourse is frequently seen in the media in this period and produced several neologisms such as "antisrpstvo" (anti-Serbianness), "srbomržnja" and "srbofobija" (Serbophobia). This is rarely used to describe actual hate against Serbs and commonly used to paint individuals, organisations and now even protests as working against the country.

As the mass protests emerged at the end of 2024, this harmful rhetoric became almost an everyday occurrence in Serbian media and grew in intensity. ***Many individuals and groups affiliated with the protests were now also labelled "violent", "extremists", "terrorists", "fascists" and "nazis".***

Several documentaries by the *Centre for Social Stability* were aired on *TV Prva*, *TV Pink*, both channels with the licence for national coverage, and *TV Informer* during 2025. These presented a heavily biased portrayal of the student-led protests, systematically vilifying the protesters, labelling them as terrorists, extremists, and political agitators. The *Centre for Social Stability* is a GONGO – government-organised non-governmental organisation, meaning it mimics genuine civil society while promoting the regime agenda.

Political targeting was not only present in traditional media. The Instagram profile *Detektor smeća* (trash detector) posted photos of individuals affiliated with the protests for months, until it was taken down. Their personal information was shared, alongside insults, claims that people are drunks, alcoholics, and junkies. Some posts used homophobic slurs, while women were discredited by claims that they "sleep around". Many posts described young people as terrorists.

Ahead of mass protests, such as the one in Belgrade on June 28th, 2025, headlines in tabloids and TV channels with national coverage painted a disturbing picture, referring to demonstrators as a rampaging mob, allegedly "plotting bloodshed" in the capital. This paved the way to legitimise police violence that occurred during and after the protest towards peaceful protesters. Tabloids later legitimised the actions of the police as necessary against "hooligans".

Other dominant hateful and harmful narratives were used as tools in political targeting, especially ethnic and gendered hate. An illustrative example of this is the months-long smear campaign against student and activist Mila Pajić. She was often singled out and scapegoated by tabloids and other pro-regime media. Due to her peace activism in the region, she was labelled a "Serb-hater", "Croatophile" and a "Vojvodina separatist", as well as someone who deems Serbs a "genocidal nation".

Tabloids published accusations regarding her alleged mental health condition and private life. Dozens of sensational headlines claimed she is "falling apart" and "on the verge of a mental breakdown", and even that she is "secretly being treated in a mental health facility". These claims are backed by supposed "statements by her closest associates" as well as photos of her that are supposed to prove the claims. Pajić was exposed to harassment and political persecution due to sexist narratives on women being "crazy" and "hysterical". The *Press Council* found tabloid *Alo!* violated Serbia's Journalists' Code when reporting on Pajić.

In March, days before a mass protest in Belgrade, several TV channels simultaneously aired a recording of a meeting of activists, where Pajić was present, secretly taken by the Security and Information Agency. This was used as proof that riots are being planned. Twelve people, members of *the Movement of Free Citizens* (opposition party) and student organisation *STAV*, were accused of several criminal acts. Six of them spent over two months in prison and are now in house arrest (as of September 2025), while a warrant has been issued for the remaining six people, including Pajić.

Ethnic hate narratives

The third most common hateful narratives are ethnic and racial hate narratives, found in 26 out of the 102 recorded cases. Usually, these ***target ethnic minorities in Serbia and other ethnic groups in neighbouring countries***, primarily Bosniaks (26.9%), Croats (23.1%), as well as Albanians (19.2%) and Roma (19.2%). This period, we marked the same narratives also commonly used against political opponents. Even though ***racial hate*** directed towards Black people and other people of colour was not as present in previous reports, during this period, we noted several such cases (11.5%).

For instance, in early 2024, *RDN* reported a hate page on Instagram that was later removed, *Crnac Spotted* (Black man spotted), posting photos of Black people in Serbia, taken in public without their consent. The description called followers to send in pictures of Black people with the location and time they were "spotted". In this way, the creator not only promotes racism and harassment of Black people in public but also potentially poses a threat to their safety. In addition to this, the creator used racist "jokes", such as creating fake giveaways of bananas and *KFC* food, both of which are anti-Black racist tropes. An overwhelming number of racist comments were found under these posts as well, including some that call for violence. The account reached 1300 followers before being removed by *Meta*.

Another case of racism that got huge visibility happened in January 2025, when singer Jelena Karleuša shared a photo of a black student at one of the protests with a racist comment saying he is her "delivery man" and does not speak Serbian. Brahim Dieye, the targeted student, made a video in Serbian discrediting her claims, saying he is a student at the University of Belgrade, which was later confirmed. Karleuša at the time had a huge platform on Instagram with two million followers, and her racist comment targeted a foreign student who did not have Serbian citizenship. Her account was later removed due to hate speech. Tabloid Informer published a text promoting her claims and further targeting the student, saying Karleuša "exposed a fake protester".

Hateful and harmful narratives targeting Bosniaks are often triggered by the commemoration of victims of the Srebrenica genocide on 11th July. In May 2024, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted the Resolution on Srebrenica, establishing July 11 as an International Day of Remembrance of the genocide in Srebrenica and condemning the denial of that crime.

The resolution only reaffirmed what international courts had already established, while Serbia or Serbs as a people and a nation are not mentioned. Nevertheless, this set off harmful narratives, increasing ethnic tensions. A months-long campaign portrayed the resolution as an attack on Serbs and Serbia. The central message of the campaign, "We are not a genocidal nation", appeared not only all-over mainstream media but in public spaces as well, including billboards across Belgrade, the Belgrade Tower, and the official social media pages of President Aleksandar Vučić. Reporting from the commemoration last year featured a headline in tabloid *Informer* stating, "Sarajevo wants a war with Serbs" and in tabloid *Alo!* stating "Srebrenica was used for a new brutal attack on Serbia".

The "genocidal nation" narrative resurfaced in 2025, around a mass protest in Belgrade on June 28th, but with a twist. It was weaponised against protesters, students, activists, civil society organisations, opposition politicians, journalists, and media outlets in Serbia that report professionally. Pro-regime tabloid Informer branded *Al Jazeera* as "Islamist" and *N1* as "anti-Serb" media, claiming they plan to "overthrow Vučić and teach Serbian children that Serbs are genocidal". *The Srebrenica Memorial Centre* noted how genocide denial was used as a tool to suppress growing student-led protests in Serbia in their latest research.

Real or perceived ethnicity or even just affiliation with neighbouring nations, especially Croats, was also often used in hateful targeting of political opponents. Students, activists, opposition politicians, public figures, and other citizens participating in protests or even journalists reporting from the ground were often called Ustaša (Ustasha). This name is used to describe the Croatian fascist movement that nominally ruled the Independent State of Croatia during World War II. It is commonly used in the Serbian public sphere as a slur to describe all Croatians, or in this case, to also mark political opponents as foreign enemies.

Several tabloids ran the headline "Ustaša media call for the destruction of Serbia" in late 2024 as a reaction to Croatian media reporting on the ongoing protests in Serbia. Furthermore, in January 2025, daily tabloids *Novosti* and *Alo!* published the names and (Croatian) passports of two University of Belgrade students, targeting them by saying they are Croats and insinuating it is not their place to participate in student blockades. Apart from breaching their privacy, the text also states this is proof of "strong Croatian influence on destabilising Serbia".

Manipulating nationalist sentiments, the high-level government officials and tabloid media targeted young people based on their political views and ethnicity. This very dominant rhetoric in the pro-regime media also strengthens and fuels ethnic hate towards non-Serbs.

Hateful and harmful narratives on Albanians were often triggered by sports events. For instance, the media reported on numerous incidents before and during the matches that marked the 2024 European Football Championship, which included violence and ethnic hate. Mostly nationalist, but also some sexist narratives moved from the stands to tabloids and online portals, some of which completely unethically and unprofessionally reported on the matches, promoting nationalist messages with sensational headlines and thus fuelling hate speech in the comments. Informer took the lead in this, referring to the Albanian and Croatian national teams as "Shiptars" and "Ustashas". Many tabloids regularly employ the slur Šiptari (Shiptars) when referring to Albanians. The term originates from the Albanian word shqiptar (meaning Albanian) and was once neutral, but over time it has taken on a derogatory connotation in Serbian.

Around the same time, *Mirëdita, dobar dan*, a festival that promotes and brings together the contemporary cultural scenes of Kosovo and Serbia, was set to be held in Belgrade on 27th June 2024. However, hours before the opening, the Ministry of Internal Affairs cancelled it. Several weeks leading up to it were marked by a negative campaign led by government representatives and several online portals. Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vulin called the festival "an insult to which the state of Serbia should respond", and Minister of Culture Nikola Selaković said that organising the festival on Vidovdan is "more than a provocation". Vidovdan is a national and religious holiday, celebrated on 28th June.

This narrative was heavily distributed in tabloids that described the festival as a "provocation", "unconstitutional", "anti-Serb", and "shameful", prompting further hate and ethnic division. Tabloids also personally targeted Sofija Todorović, one of the organisers and director of *Youth Initiative for Human Rights*, as well as opposition politicians and public figures who supported *YIHR* and the festival. Hate towards the organisers and Albanians thrived on social media as well, including insults and threats, saying they are unwelcome in Serbia.

The hate and threats were manifested physically as well. On the day of the planned opening, far-right extremist groups, including *Srbska akcija*, *Narodne patrole*, *Zentropa* and *Klub 451*, as well as fans of *Crvena Zvezda Football Club*, gathered near the venue in an attempt to stop the festival and intimidate the participants. They stayed even after the festival was banned by the government. The following day, Todorović received a package of half a pig's head and a threatening message signed by *Narodne Patrole*.

Hate narratives against sexual minorities

As opposed to a slight rise in hateful discourses aimed at the LGBTIQ+ community noted in the previous report, we have now seen a significant ***decrease in homophobic and anti-LGBTIQ+ narratives***. Only 19 out of 102 cases recorded included elements of hate against sexual minorities, while many of them also included gender and political components. Furthermore, compared to previous reporting periods, when hate usually escalated around Belgrade Pride and other political events, this time, ***cultural events were the main trigger***.

After the *Eurovision Song Contest (ESC)*, several tabloids published texts that scrutinised performers and queer people. When reporting on the 2024 *ESC*, tabloids had sensational headlines and mentioned "satanic" performances. Vladimir Đukanović, ruling party MP, commented on the national TV channel *Happy* about "the blasphemy" on *ESC*, saying "a freak won" when referencing the winner of the 2024 ESC Nemo, who is non-binary. Theologians and other figures were asked to comment as well, strengthening homophobic narratives. The success of some queer contestants was seen as a ***"gay agenda"***, and their sexuality or gender identity was claimed to have influenced their success.

Similarly, the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Paris, featuring a drag performance, was called "demonic" by the portal *Republika* and "satanic" by the *Blic* portal. ***Narratives labelling queer people and their artistic expression as "satanic" and "demonic"*** are often rooted in religious fundamentalism and moral panic. They frame sexual and gender diversity not as natural expressions of human identity but as dangerous, evil, or corrupting forces.

A drag performance in Novi Sad at the cultural centre *Crna Kuća 13 (CK13)* called "Halfway to Halloween" received a lot of hateful comments online. Soon after, citizen association Lokalitet reacted on Instagram, calling this a "satanist party" and a ***"threat to children"***. They made a public appeal to the city authorities to condemn "this type of propaganda of anti-human and anti-Christian ideology in our city and Serbia" and take measures against the event.

In the comment section, far-right groups and individuals made threats and incited violence and hate. Tabloid Informer published a text titled "Satanist blockaders in Novi Sad?! Drag queen LGBT show in the middle of the city - people in shock!" on the same day. Informer called drag queens "blockaders" as they are active in student-led protests and have organised several charity drag performances to support teachers who lost their pay checks because they were on strike. This is another example of how groups and individuals were targeted based on various motives. During the party, a lighted torch was thrown in the yard of *CK13*. Earlier the same day, a large anti-war poster on genocide in Srebrenica was torn from the outside wall of *CK13*. This is not the first time *CK13* has been attacked by far-right groups, and tearing down anti-war posters is a somewhat regular occurrence.

Similar narratives are not only reinforced by far-right groups and certain media outlets, but also by some ***public officials***. Newly appointed Prime Minister Đuro Macut gave his first foreign interview to the Russian news agency *TASS*, where he stated that the LGBT agenda goes against Serbia's traditional values. Commenting on, as *TASS* reports, "the LGBT agenda promoted by Brussels", Macut stated that "we cannot accept what contradicts our traditional and Christian principles". Several outlets in Serbia republished his statement. It is especially concerning when high-ranking officials use such harmful rhetoric.

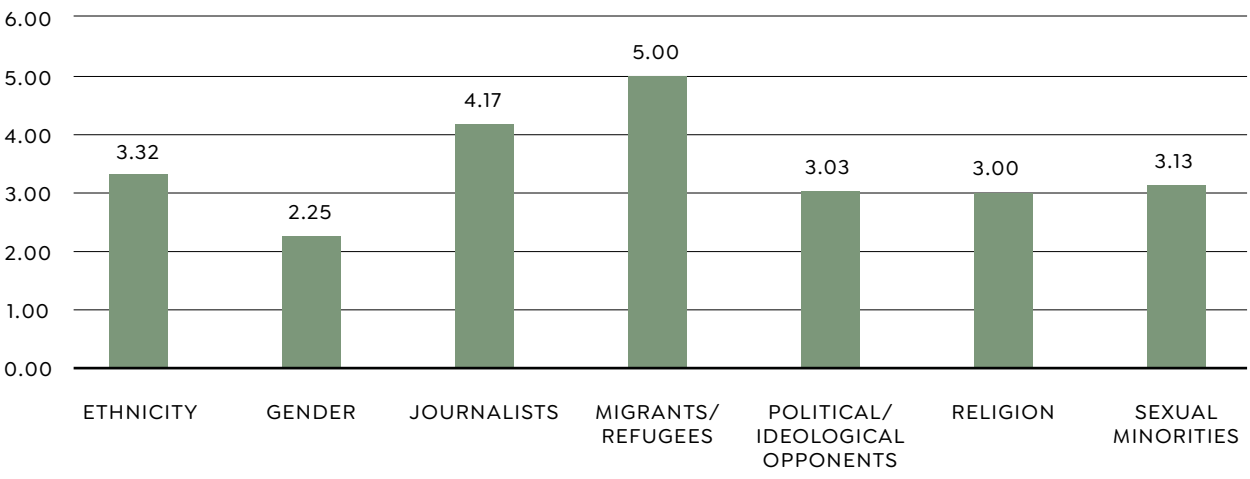
Apart from hateful narratives, RDN noted the ***lack of reporting on issues that queer people face***. In February 2024, Serbian police raided the apartment of two young queer people in Belgrade under the premise of suspected drug possession. According to the young man and woman, the special police forces tied them up and knocked them down whilst pointing guns at their heads. Upon noticing the LGBTIQ+ symbols in the apartment, including the rainbow flag, further abuse followed. The members of the police physically, verbally, and sexually abused two queer people, humiliating them, beating them, and insulting them based on their sexual orientation. Institutional reactions were lacking, as police members who committed the violence did not face any consequences yet. Most mainstream media in Serbia did not report on this case.

Sentiment analysis

This part of the analysis aims to identify trends in HDD intensity based on monitoring data. Each case was rated on a scale of one to six, with one being the lowest in intensity, implying disagreement, and six being the highest, implying the literal killing and elimination of a group or individual. The second rating in the scale is reserved for negative nonviolent actions, three for negative nonviolent characteristics of those targeted, while four implies demonising and dehumanising and five infliction of violence.

The average score was slightly lower this period, 2.86 for all cases. Anti-migrant rhetoric had the highest average score, as this was only found in one case. Hate aimed at journalists remains high in intensity as in the previous report (4.17), as these cases included threats of violence and death. However, sentiment analysis is most significant in comparing the four most commonly targeted groups. Among the four groups, the highest average sentiment was identified in ethnic hate (3.32), followed by hate against sexual minorities (3.13) and political opponents (3.03). Slightly lower average sentiment was identified in cases of hate targeting gender (2.25).

Out of the fourteen most extreme cases recorded, implying violence and death (scores 6 and 5), most included elements of ethnic hate, as well as homophobia and political targeting. Sources of these most extreme cases were mainly users of social media platforms.

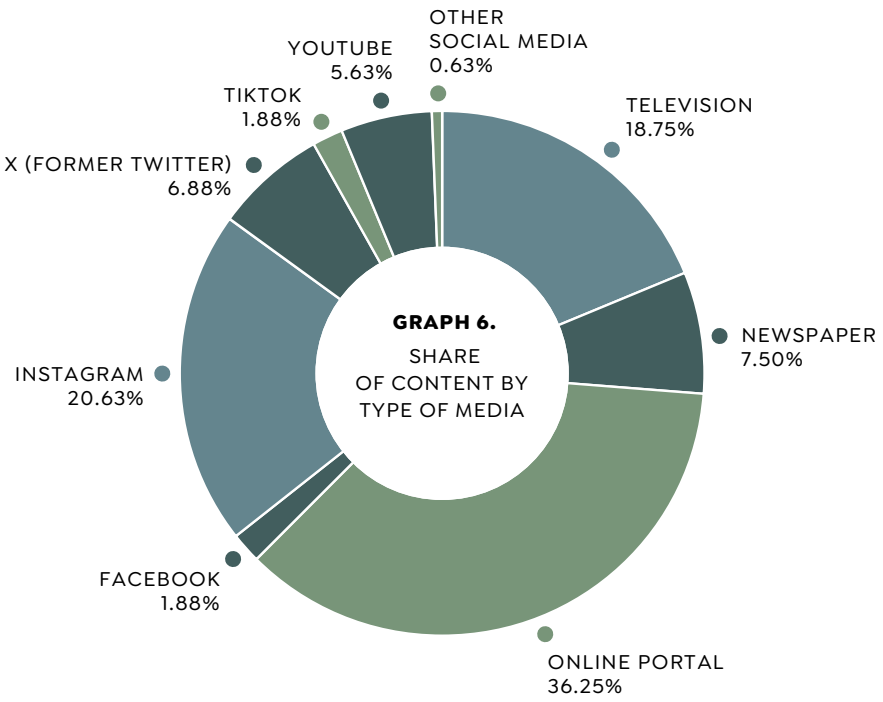


Graph 5. Average sentiment score per type of targeted group/individual

Visibility analysis

The primary focus in this research is HDD cases with high visibility, often those that made the national news or viral social media content. Half of the cases were recorded in traditional media outlets - TV channels, online portals, and newspapers (50.98%). A quarter of recorded cases came from social media platforms (23.53%), and the remaining quarter was recorded both in social media and traditional media outlets (25.49%).

A third of the cases were recorded solely in online portals (36.25%), while much hateful and harmful content was also observed on Instagram (20.63%) and TV channels (18.75%). Other relevant platforms of distribution were also newspapers (7.50%), X (6.88%), and YouTube (5.63%).



GRAPH 6.
SHARE OF CONTENT BY TYPE OF MEDIA

Most cases we analysed reached thousands of people and remain visible. Decisions and recommended measures adopted by the *Press Council* are largely ignored by newspapers and their respective online portals. The *REM* Council often did not act according to the law and take available measures against TV stations that breached media laws. As of November 2024, the mandates of previous Council members expired, while new members have not yet been appointed, after one failed and one unresolved elective process. Social media platforms rarely removed hateful content reported by *RDN*.

Comparative analysis

This monitoring period truly showed how ***a political crisis amplified hateful and harmful narratives***. Established narratives, such as those targeting gender and ethnicity, were often used as political tools in an attempt to target and discredit individuals and, by doing so, discredit larger political groups.

For instance, the *Serbian Radical Party* leader and convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj was a guest on an *Informer TV* talk show where he discussed ongoing protests and student blockades. During the show, he insulted and threatened one of the female students in blockade, calling her "little slut", "stupid woman" and "trash", while naming all her female colleagues blocking faculties "chickens" and "geese" (these are common sexist insults in Serbian). This was a reaction to a video of her not allowing another student to enter the blocked faculty building. Šešelj added, "I've never hit a woman in my life. I was so angry when I watched that, if she were there at hand, I would have pulled out all her hair." *Informer TV* played photos from her social media accounts in the background while Šešelj insulted and threatened her. Apart from targeting a young woman with sexist insults and breaching her privacy, Šešelj attempted to discredit the entire movement she is a part of and threatened violence on live TV, while the host did not even attempt to intervene.

As these hateful narratives become more frequently used in the public sphere, there is less and less time for counteractions in each case. ***They lose shock value, sources and those disseminating hateful content are rarely held accountable, leading to HDD becoming more normalised***. Subsequently, we see a shift in the severity of the language used. For instance, in political targeting, labels such as "foreign mercenaries" and "traitors" were common in previous reporting periods. This period, we see words such as "terrorists", "extremists" and "anti-Serbs" more commonly.

Preventive and ex post actions to combat hate and disinformation narratives

In December 2024, a ***new Serbia's Journalists' Code*** was adopted for the first time in almost two decades, updated to reflect the challenges of today's media environment. Notable changes were introduced, especially in relation to hate speech and diversity. The previous Code only required journalists to "oppose all who violate human rights or advocate for any kind of discrimination, hate speech and incitement to violence." The new version adopts more proactive language, explicitly prohibiting journalists from using such rhetoric themselves. This is significant, given that media are identified as the main source of hateful and discriminatory discourse in this research. The list of protected characteristics now also includes gender, not just sex, and is defined more openly, protecting a wider range of identities.

The new Code also strengthens the emphasis on diversity and inclusivity in reporting, beyond just insisting on avoiding discrimination. ***Journalists are required to use gender-sensitive language and to actively include diverse voices in reporting***. The mere name of the Code in Serbian now equally represents women and men journalists (Kodeks novinara i novinarki Srbije). The *Press Council* and journalist associations collaborated with civil society in developing the new Code. The *Press Council* website now also includes a platform with specific guidelines on reporting on different marginalised groups and specific issues such as mental health and human trafficking, as well as crisis events. These changes could foster more fair and nuanced reporting on various social groups and mark a huge step forward.

However, the *Press Council* is a self-regulatory body, and its decisions are not legally binding, limiting its overall influence, much like the *Commissioner for the Protection of Equality*, who consistently reacts to visible cases of hateful and discriminatory rhetoric in the media but operates under a restricted mandate. The *Regulatory Body for Electronic Media (REM)*, despite having a much broader jurisdiction, has largely failed to exercise it and remains inactive, particularly in the absence of an acting Council since November 2024.

As a result, ***preventive measures and awareness-raising campaigns are driven primarily by civil society***. Larger initiatives are launched by local offices of the *Council of Europe* and *UN Women*, alongside numerous grassroots activities, particularly in education, conducted by local organisations.

Conclusions

The past 18 months have shown a ***marked escalation in hateful and harmful discourse amid Serbia's deepening political crisis***, triggered by the Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse that left 16 people dead. Pro-regime media actively fuelled social divisions, deploying longstanding gendered and ethnic hate to discredit and delegitimise student protesters, activists, journalists, opposition figures, and civil society. ***Smear campaigns, doxxing and violent rhetoric became routine tactics aimed at those linked to the student-led movement***.

Hateful rhetoric grew more complex and layered, as for the first time since *RDN* started monitoring, ***nearly half (42.2%) of the 102 recorded cases of hate speech targeted multiple, overlapping identities***, which compounds harm and complicates remedies. ***Gender remained the most frequently targeted identity (19.6%), with political targeting close behind (18.6%),*** which marked a significant rise this monitoring period.

Broadcasters with national coverage and leading tabloids shifted to more intense language, beyond labels like "traitors" and "foreign mercenaries" to harsher framings such as "terrorists", "extremists" and "fascists", normalising and justifying political persecution and police violence that followed.

Harmful coverage of gender-based violence, particularly femicide, remains pervasive. The media often resorted to victim-blaming narratives in cases of obstetric violence and image-based sexual abuse. Sensationalism prevails, while only a few independent outlets refer to systemic causes or hold institutions accountable. At the same time, ***sexist tropes that reduce women to their appearance and reinforce patriarchal roles are widespread, particularly against women in public life***. Anti-feminist narratives also persist, dismissing gender inequality, minimising feminist efforts, and painting feminists as "man-haters" or inherently aggressive.

Ethnic groups (9.8%) and sexual minorities (4.9%) were also common targets of hateful and harmful discourse (HDD). ***Ethnic hate was frequently weaponised around events like the commemoration of the Srebrenica genocide and sports events***, often amplified by tabloids and official rhetoric. ***Main targets remain Bosniaks, Croats, Albanians, and Roma***, however, these narratives were often weaponised against political opponents as well.

Hate against LGBTIQ+ people declined in the number of cases collected but peaked around cultural events such as *Eurovision*, the opening ceremony at the *Olympic Games* and local drag shows. ***Queer people or queer expression was framed as "satanic" and "demonic"***, provoking moral panic and sometimes threats of violence.

Pervasive issues, especially the state capture of media, disinformation and misleading news, grew during this period, making fertile ground for hateful and harmful messages. ***Media outlets were the dominant source of HDD***, producing almost half of the recorded incidents. Together with politicians and public officials, who generated a fifth of these cases, they generated a mutual system for amplifying harmful narratives.

As media freedom deteriorates, attacks on journalists are more common. Journalist associations reported an increasing number of physical attacks and police violence against journalists reporting live from protests. In cases *RDN* recorded, ***hate against journalists was the highest in intensity***, as it included calls for violence and death threats, while institutional responses were lacking.

As hateful and harmful content more often occupies mainstream media and prime-time TV slots, the dismantling of the already insufficient *REM Council* in November 2024 created a regulatory vacuum at precisely the moment oversight was most needed. New Council members have not been elected yet, after one failed and one unfinished elective process. ***The media sphere in Serbia is left unregulated, while outlets breaching ethical and legal standards faced almost no consequences***.

Normative progress has been made, as ***the new Journalist's Code was adopted in December 2024***, after nearly twenty years. It now requires journalists to use gender-sensitive language and explicitly prohibits them from resorting to hate speech, using more proactive language to dictate protection for a wider range of identities and encourages active inclusion of diverse voices in reporting. However, its impact is limited, as the *Press Council* is a self-regulatory body and its rulings are not legally binding.

Civil society and fact-checkers provided pushback, exposing falsehoods and offering media literacy trainings, but these efforts cannot substitute independent media regulation. If structural gaps are not closed, particularly with ensuring an independent and credible regulator, it is highly unlikely to see any positive change in reducing hateful and harmful media discourse.

Reporting Diversity Network

MONITORING REPORT ON HATE SPEECH IN SERBIA

Co-funded by the European Union

Norway

SMART Balkans
Civil Society for Shared Society in the Western Balkans