



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES CONTAINING HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION

Milica Bogdanović

MONTENEGRO

RESILIENCE : For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

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ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVES CONTAINING HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, with a lack of adequate self-regulation and an unregulated market, Montenegro has been facing a visible trend of a growing presence of offensive speech in the public space, which frequently escalates into hate speech, as well as the spread of disinformation and propaganda.

The previous research, carried out by the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media (SEENPM), focused on what channels are used for spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in Montenegro and what the political and economic aspects of those different types of media and communication practices were.

The conclusions of the research carried out in seven Western Balkan countries and Turkey are based on publicly accessible relevant research of international and domestic institutions and organizations, regulatory authorities' decisions and the findings of fact-checking platforms. They are also based on interviews with respondents with journalistic and editorial experience or civil activists with many years of media experience.

The main conclusions of the analysis carried out by the Montenegro Media Institute in the period between May and July 2020 are that hate speech, disinformation and propaganda were created and released through media operating in the region, are read in Montenegro and the contents of which are carried by certain online media in Montenegro, thus contributing to the wide distribution of unprofessional releases. These types of contents are also spread via certain right-leaning online media in Montenegro, established/edited by individuals recognized as anti-NATO activists associated with opposition parties and via pages on social networks that continuously spread insults and hate speech against public figures in Montenegro. It is not known what structures/organizations are behind them and fund them (Bogdanovic, 2016).

Having in mind that regional media releasing disinformation, hate speech and propaganda, but also Montenegrin right-leaning media, have some of the most visited websites in Montenegro and that these types of media and communication practices intensify the releasing of unprofessional content in times of political and social crisis, their impact on forming the public opinion is undeniable.

Therefore, the SEENPM decided to go a step further, through the EU-funded RESILIENCE – For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation project, and research the types of hate-speech-containing narratives¹, which are disseminated in domestic media. During the search for narratives containing hate speech, those containing elements of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda were registered, or those that are not necessarily false but are present in reporting on specific target groups.

The purpose of this study is to provide a credible analysis to institutions, civil society organizations, the media community and citizens, to serve as a basis for further activities in building social resilience to these occurrences.

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to provide an answer to the question of what the main patterns and examples of narratives containing hate speech and disinformation released in Montenegrin media and on Facebook are, our research did the following:

1. Based on the previous research carried out in seven countries of the Western Balkans and in Turkey, two target groups have been identified on the regional level—migrants and journalists—as well as a series of narratives containing hate speech and disinformation referring to these two target groups (for example, “migrants are potential terrorists”, “migrants are a danger to public health, they are infected with the coronavirus, they are dirty”, “journalists are foreign mercenaries, liars”, etc.). On a regional level, another target group was identified—political opposition—and narratives referring to it (for example, “opposition members are traitors”, “opposition members are not working in the best interest of society”, etc.).
2. Having in mind current political and social circumstances, we analyzed the political opposition target group in Montenegro in the context of the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion. Thus, political opposition and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) were selected as the third target group, as opponents to the Law.
3. On the national level, depending on the specific characteristics of the country, researchers had the option of identifying additional target groups and analyzing narratives referring to them. In order to gain detailed knowledge of how narratives containing hate speech are spread, in the case of reporting on

¹ The term “narrative”, used colloquially, denotes a “story” (“narration”, translated as “story, storytelling”). In its current meaning, when used in journalism, narrative also denotes contents and a description of the chronology of a story, that is, a report on an event being observed. Thus, narrative is the way in which some media carry information on an event, particular situation, topic or personality. Therefore, it is often the case that information dominating a narrative does not have to be false or inaccurate. During the creation of a narrative, the media can use different kinds of manipulation or disregard the basic principles of professional reporting – from sensationalist or tabloid-like reporting, through releasing unchecked information, leaving out important bits of information, uncritical releasing of many statements, partial and one-sided reporting, to deliberate guiding readers to the desired conclusion. Source: Bogdanović, Milica, Kovačević, Milica, *Narrative Analysis – Powerful Russian Weapon*, CDT, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2B4GYVQ>. Accessed 24 September 2020

the Law on Freedom of Religion, our research team chose the Government of Montenegro and other proponents of the new Law as the fourth target group and analyzed narratives that referred to them. The intention was to obtain a more complete picture of narratives used, which both target groups were exposed to in relation to this topic.

After selecting the target groups, important cases/events associated with these four target groups were identified, which took place in the period between June 2019 and June 2020. For each target group, we chose a period of seven to 15 days, when the media reported on an important event associated with that particular target group, and analyzed the released editorial contents, accompanying comments of readers, contents released on Facebook pages and reactions of the users of this social network.

Following the relevancy criterion, contents released by three most visited Montenegrin online media²—the established³ Vijesti Online, CdM and the IN4S portal, which, in previous research, was recognized as a media spreading disinformation and propaganda. Along with other online media, Facebook pages recognized in previous research as channels for spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda were also analyzed.

Apart from the main research question of what patterns and examples of hate speech containing narratives were, the purpose of this analysis was to find answers to the following questions for each target group and events associated with them:

- what actors and events serve as the main generators of narratives containing hate speech and disinformation?
- what are the main ideas and messages spread through media outlets and social networks about the chosen target groups?
- what are the dynamics of creating and spreading these narratives like?
- what are the reactions?
- what are the possibilities for taking preventive and additional action in the fight against the spreading of hatred and disinformation?

In the chapters that follow, we will present the analysis of the types of narratives spread in Montenegrin media and the Facebook social network about migrants, journalists, and opponents and proponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion.

² Overview of the most visited websites in Montenegro <https://www.similarweb.com/top-websites/montenegro>. Accessed 24 September 2020

³ We define established media as those that became relevant sources of information, after an extended period of producing media contents, and forums for discussions on topics of public interest. Media with a significant following, influence and resources.

3. CASE STUDY – MIGRANTS⁴ IN MONTENEGRIN MEDIA

Although Montenegro is just a transit country on the “Balkan Route”⁵, during 2019 and 2020, this topic was not in the focus of attention of established Montenegrin media outlets (Vijesti Online and CdM) and the right-leaning online media (IN4S). On a monthly level, an average of only a few of up to 20 texts addressing this topic was published by these media.

Problems associated with migrants and the migrant crisis⁶ were, for the most part, reported on in established media through foreign policy sections, in which domestic media outlets carry information from regional and international news agencies. Although the titles of the released texts are mostly informative (for example, “Migrants broke through fence at Serbian-Hungarian border crossing, Hungarian policemen opened fire” [1] or “Greece is building a new fence because of migrants, instituting a moratorium on asylum seeking” [2]), it is noticeable that there are also sensationalist titles in established media outlets (for example, “Migrants at Turkish-Greek border losing hope: Left for dogs” [3] or “EU is sending troops, aircraft and ships to Greek-Turkish border” [4]). However, this is merely a way to send the message that migrants are coming from countries affected by war and in which fundamental rights are not honoured. Montenegrin established media mostly carried articles in which migrants were presented as “people in trouble needing help” [3]. However, rare examples of texts were noticed in foreign policy sections, containing narratives claiming that “migrants are aggressive and they attack the police, which is why it’s necessary to place barbed wire on the borders, use tear gas and shoot at them” [1].

Montenegrin established media mostly carried articles in which migrants were presented as “people in trouble needing help”.

On the other hand, in the local context, migrants are reported on rarely and mostly in relation to an individual event, such as breaking into and burning homes in Vilusi, near Nikšić, putting up tents in the Podgorica neighbourhood of Zlatica and causing a fire in Pljevlja. The Code of Ethics of Montenegrin journalists and the assumption of innocence are immediately violated by publishing such texts as those titled “Fire in Pljevlja, most probably caused

4 An overarching term, which is not defined in international law, reflecting the common, layperson’s understanding of persons moving away from their usual place of residence, within their country or across international borders, temporarily or permanently, for various reasons. The term covers a certain number of well-defined legal categories of people, such as migrant workers; persons with certain types of their movement legally defined, such as migrant trafficking, as well as those whose status or ways of moving are not defined in any particular way, according to international law, such as international students. On the international level, there is no universally adopted definition of a “migrant”. The current definition was developed by IOM, for its own purposes, and it is not intended to make any implications or create any new legal categories. Glossary on Migration, IOM, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3d3q6gM>

5 The Balkan Route is a term most often used to refer to the arrival of refugees from the Middle East, through the Balkans, to Europe. Deutsche Welle, glossary. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3ImF7gB>

6 Complex and often massive migration shifts and mobility patterns, caused by a crisis, which usually entail significant vulnerabilities for individuals and affected communities and generate long-term migration challenge management. A migrant crisis may be sudden or gradual, it can be caused by natural reasons or human-made, and it can happen within the borders of a country or spill over borders. Glossary on Migration, IOM, 2019. Available at: <https://bit.ly/3d3q6gM>

by migrants” [5] or “Residents of Vilusi claim that migrants are breaking into homes and setting them on fire, police remain silent” [6]. The texts are based on what local residents have said, without official information from the police or the Prosecutor’s Office, which would either refute or corroborate the claims that migrants were culpable of the criminal offences committed. These texts are dominated by the narrative that “migrants come from countries in which fundamental human rights are not honoured and they are barbaric”, as well as that “they represent a threat to the safety of the local population”. Sources of such information are frequently unnamed and unofficial.

However, in order to obtain more detailed knowledge about the narratives containing hate speech and disinformation, in line with the methodology, we carried out a separate analysis of the period from 20 November to 30 December, when a case was recorded in Montenegro of some ten persons being arrested on suspicion of being involved in smuggling migrants into Bosnia and Herzegovina [7]. We analyzed the contents released on the Vijesti Online, CdM and IN4S portals, and the main conclusions are as follows:

3.1. There is no hate speech in the editorial content of established media

In the period under review, we did not register the presence of narratives containing hate speech in the editorial content of established media. In this case, the media predominantly carried official information released by the police and announcements containing no details on the victims of human trafficking. During this period, texts were released by CdM conveying the main message that Montenegro has “passed the test” when it comes to handling the migrant issue and that such an approach should apply in the case of vulnerable groups [8]. The Vijesti Online portal published a series of investigative texts in that period after Vijesti’s reporters spent three days in the Montenegrin border zone with migrants from Morocco, Afghanistan, Iran and Syria and witnessed their attempts to cross into neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina illegally [9]. The texts were based on the testimonies of migrants and official announcements of domestic and international institutions, and their main message is that migrants are at risk and facing inhumane living conditions. Although the series of texts contained details on attempts to make illegal border crossings, it is unknown whether the institutions took any action after publication.

3.2. Disinformation on migrants in right-leaning online media

During the period under review, the right-leaning online media outlet IN4S did not report intensively on events associated with migrants. Rare texts published by this media in the period from 20 to 30 November were taken from other media in the region. The dominant narrative claims that “migrants are dangerous and violent” [10]. While reporting on migrants in the past, this media outlet used the remarks of Dževad Galijašević, whose claims

have been subject to analysis by fact-checking platforms in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina on several occasions. Galijašević is known for spreading uncorroborated information and conspiracy theories with a dominant narrative claiming that “migrants are terrorists and a threat to the security of countries they come to”, and that they are “an epidemiological threat” (Kovačević, 2020).

3.3. Hatred is spread through readers’ comments

In readers’ comments, which are recognized as a problematic segment of online media, calls for physical violence against migrants [10] were registered as well as contents ridiculing the migrants’ situation [8] and the spreading of conspiracy theories, such as the one claiming that the purpose of the arrival of migrants was the Islamization of Europe [9]. Compared to the number of comments filtered by the administrators each day in established media, however, the number of comments with unacceptable content on migrants is exceptionally low.

3.4. Migrants rarely discussed on Facebook

Previous research highlighted the Facebook social network as a channel for spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda on social networks. However, during this analyzed period, our research team did not come across problematic remarks on migrants. Although there are Facebook pages and groups in the region the contents of which are directed against migrants, such practice was not registered in Montenegro. Also, we did not notice narratives containing hate speech referring to female migrants.

3.5. Overview of detected narratives on migrants

OVERVIEW OF DETECTED NARRATIVES ON MIGRANTS

TARGET GROUP	EXAMPLE OF THE MAIN NARRATIVE	EXAMPLES OF DERIVED NARRATIVES
Migrants	Migrants are a threat to the local population.	Migrants are aggressive and they attack the police.
		Migrants are dangerous and violent.
		Migrants are terrorists and a threat to the security of countries they come to.
		Migrants are an epidemiological threat.

Although the analysis of this content showed that the issue of migrants was not in the focus of Montenegrin media, by extension, frequent deviations from professional standards have not been registered either; due to the absence of organized self-regulation, no cases of professional associations indicating individual cases of unethical reporting were recorded. During this period, we recorded individual cases of fact-checking platforms proving that information published on the IN4S portal was false.

4. CASE STUDY – JOURNALISTS IN MONTENEGRIN MEDIA

Over 2019 and 2020, the media sector in Montenegro was marked by the arrests of journalists and editors creating and carrying fake news, on suspicion of thus causing panic and disorder. By the beginning of January, at the height of the tense atmosphere created by the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the FOS Media portal published a news article entitled “Members of ROSU are at Montenegro’s disposal on Christmas Eve”. The journalist and editor of this media outlet, Anđela Đikanović [11], was later arrested. Seven days later, the editors of right-leaning media, IN4S and Borba.me portals, Gojko Raičević and Dražen Živković, were arrested for releasing the information that an explosion had been heard from the state-owned Villa Gorica, in Podgorica [12].

While analyzing the texts published in the three most visited online media—two established (Vijesti Online and CdM) and one right-leaning (IN4S)—in the period between 5 and 15 January⁷, we researched the narratives containing hate speech and disinformation referring to Montenegrin journalists. Apart from the editorial content, we also analyzed readers’ comments and comments of Facebook users related to the published texts, during which we noticed the following:

4.1. Different narratives on journalists in the established media

In the editorial content of established media referring to cases of arrests of journalists and editors, we did not register narratives containing hate speech. The Vijesti Online portal was releasing announcements of institutions as well as of the attorneys representing the arrestees and numerous reactions of domestic and international organizations involved with the freedom of the media and the position of journalists. The police announcements were dominated by the message that “journalists are releasing fake news, thus causing public panic and disorder” [11], while domestic and international organizations were not denying that the journalists were releasing false information but stressed that “the reaction of the Prosecutor’s Office was too harsh”, that “arrests cannot be justified” [13] and that “the Government was behind the arrests of journalists” [14]. Along with this, the reactions of opposition political parties were released too, the central message of which was that “journalists are victims of state repression” [15] and that this was an “undemocratic act, unbecoming of a developed European state” [16]. Both established media published the message of the Montenegrin Ministry of

⁷ Using keywords relevant to these events, we found 104 texts published by these three analyzed media outlets related to the arrests of Đikanović, Raičević and Živković. It is noticeable that significantly more texts were published on the Vijesti Online portal about the Đikanović case (18) than on the CdM (8) and IN4S (1) web portals. In the case of arrests of Raičević and Živković, of the 68 texts found, most were published on IN4S (40) portal, followed by Vijesti Online (21) and CdM (7).

Foreign Affairs that “releasing disinformation was an attempt by third parties to interfere in Montenegrin internal affairs, intended to destabilize the state and disturb public order and peace” [17], which could be part of a broader narrative that “journalists are releasing content they were ordered to release”.

The CdM portal also released the announcements of Darko Trifunović, who, as a security expert, said that “Raičević was falsely presenting himself as a journalist and that he was the owner of a mercenary NGO tasked with spreading shameful propaganda against Montenegro, trying to drag the Serbian Government into it all” [18]. He also said that “the release and dissemination of disinformation published by the FOS was part of the special hybrid warfare waged against Montenegro, with the Russian secret service being behind everything” [19].

4.2. Conspiracy theories in right-leaning online media

The arrest of Raičević caused the IN4S portal to start spreading conspiracy theories on who gave the order for the arrest. Raičević said it was “a conspiracy between the Prosecutor’s Office, police and the judiciary, coordinated by the US Embassy” [20] and that his arrest was announced by the embassy representative Judy Kuo, when she had said previously that it was NATO that had ordered his arrest and that NATO had used forensic methods, together with analysts from Serbia, (headed by Darko Trifunović), to ascertain who was going to be arrested [20]. In a series of texts that IN4S published on this case, sources from Montenegro and the region were mostly saying that “Raičević and Živković were arrested for being Serbs” [22] and that by arresting them, the prosecution and the police wanted to “set an example to and ‘discipline’ disobedient opposition journalists” [23]. Also, the IN4S portal was a source of information during this period for tabloids and right-leaning media from Serbia, which continuously reported on the arrests of journalists [24].

4.3. Insults against journalists in readers’ comments

In their comments on the IN4S portal, the readers predominantly supported the editor of this media outlet, but they also posted a series of insults against state officials (for example, they called President Milo Đukanović a fascist and the Montenegrin regime’s fascistic, tyrant, liar...) [25]. There were individual cases of insults against media editors who were recognized as pro-government [26]. Raičević and Živković were also called “enemies of the state” [27], who “should have been arrested a long time ago” [28].

The Vijesti Online portal contains the fewest comments on the Raičević-Živković case but also about the Đukanović case. We did not register any comments containing hate speech against journalists, but we did register individual comments that are part of the “journalists are liars” [29] narrative (for example, “All journalists should be shipped off to Goli Otok. The majority of them are not objective, they write lies to attract more readers”). Information on the arrest of the two journalists was published on the web pages of the

media outlets reporting on the case, as well as on many Facebook pages with pro-Serbian or anti-NATO inclinations, where unmoderated comments were being posted further on.

4.4. The Witness of Divine Love case – insults against authors

In the period from June 2019 to July 2020 covered by this study, some other cases of insults were registered against RTCG journalists, Tanja Šuković and Snježana Rakonjac, authors of the documentary *The Witness of Divine Love*, on Metropolitan Bishop Amfilohije Radović. Šuković motioned for disciplinary procedures to be initiated against the then RTCG journalist Nevenka Ćirović and journalist Zoran Leković, for “humiliating and insulting her on their Facebook pages” [30]. Ćirović and Leković motioned for disciplinary procedures to be initiated against Šuković afterwards, for “violating professional standards” [30]. On his Facebook page, Leković called the documentary a “misdeed”, “professionally shameful”, “an ordered miscreant of a TV show, clumsily masked as a documentary” and “journalistic pornography without precedent” [31].

Information on this event was published in the established Montenegrin media *Vijesti Online* and *CdM*, where readers’ comments were dominated by the narrative of “Ćirović and Leković being against the state and traitors to everything Montenegrin” [32]. On the other hand, on the *IN4S* portal, Šuković and Rakonjac’s documentary was labelled a “shameless work”, “the new RTCG’s fall into nothingness” and a “fascist pamphlet”, and in the comments section, a series of insults were posted by readers against the RTCG editorial [33].

4.5. Overview of detected narratives in newspapers

While analysing the content of the narratives on journalists, we recognized narratives containing elements of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda.

OVERVIEW OF DETECTED NARRATIVES IN NEWSPAPERS

TARGET GROUP	EXAMPLE OF THE MAIN NARRATIVE	EXAMPLES OF DERIVED NARRATIVES
Journalists	Journalists publish fake news.	Journalists are victims of state repression. Arrests of journalist are unjustified.
		Journalists publish what they are ordered to.
		Journalists are mercenaries working for third parties (Serbia, Russia, ANB...)
		Journalists are enemies of the state.

Professional associations and the civic sector, mostly not disputing that Đikanović, Raičević and Živković acted unprofessionally by releasing uncorroborated information, were active in reacting to the arrests of the creators and publishers of fake news, condemning the “inappropriate reaction of the state”. However, we did not register additional reactions or analyses referring to the media reporting and the spreading of narratives in these cases.

5. CASE STUDY – POLITICAL OPPOSITION AND THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH (SPC) – OPPONENTS OF THE LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN MONTENEGRIN MEDIA

Almost a decade after Montenegro renewed its independence in a referendum, the Government decided, to regulate by law the status of religious communities by the end of 2019, through the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion. The decision led to several months of mass protests by believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), with the support of several, at the time, opposition parties, over the provision of the Law stipulating that part of Church property, for which there is no proof of ownership, be signed over to the state.

In the period between 27 December 2019 and 7 January 2020, the three most visited online media – the established (Vijesti Online and CdM) and the right-leaning media (IN4S), reported intensively about these events⁸. While analyzing how these three media reported on the then opposition and the SPC, as opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion, and what narratives dominated the readers’ comments on Facebook pages recognized as channels for spreading hate speech and disinformation, we concluded the following:

5.1. There is no hate speech in the editorial content of established media

We did not register any editorial content spreading hate speech in the releases on the opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion on the Vijesti Online and CdM web portals. The CdM portal was releasing party announcements, columns and remarks by sources from Montenegro and the region which were critical of the then opposition and the SPC. These remarks are dominated by the narrative claiming that the opponents of the Law (part of the then opposition and the SPC) “work against the interests of the state and the people” and that “they are traitors working for the benefit

⁸ Using keywords relevant to these events, we managed to find 284 texts published by these three analyzed media, which are related to the Law on Freedom of Religion and events in the period between 27 December 2019 and 7 January 2020. The 123 texts found on the Vijesti Online portal, on IN4s 103 and CdM 58.

of Serbia and Russia". Also, in interviews with respondents from the region, we registered a narrative claiming that "SPC is a parapolitical organization and that the protests were political" and that "Serbia had pretensions towards Montenegro" [34]. Furthermore, in the reporting on the protests, we registered messages stating that "Metropolitan Amfilohije Radović was propagating Svetosavlje and that he was trying to reshape the Montenegrin identity, culturally and politically" [35] and that "he only used protest marches to preserve the Church's huge financial privilege" [36]. Also, the released remarks include on by Serbian politician Čedomir Jovanović, who thinks that the "Church, like a criminal gang, was working in full capacity in both Serbian and Montenegrin societies, determined to push us into civil unrest [37] and that "Russia was directly involved in the events in Montenegro" [38].

On the other hand, significantly fewer releases against the SPC and the then opposition were registered in the Vijesti Online portal's editorial content during the analyzed period. Messages were dominated by the narrative saying that "the opponents of the Law are traitors", that "they are dragging the country back 100 years" and that "they satanize all who support the law" [39] were mostly part of the ruling party's announcements. Both ruling party and police announcements released by both established media are dominated by the narrative claiming that the "SPC is inciting violence and undermining the country's peace and stability" [40].

No texts critical towards the opponents of the Law were registered on the IN4S portal.

5.2. Opponents of the Law insulted in comments

During the analyzed period, a large number of comments were posted on all three portals. On the CdM portal, a significantly higher number of comments by readers supporting the SPC and the then opposition was registered than those advocating the new regulation. Along with texts under which there were up to 300 comments each, a low number of insults against the opponents of the adopted Law was registered (for example, citizens who participate in protest marches are called "Srbadija", Amfilohije Radović is called a "fool" and a "violent and lecherous man" [41], the SPC is called "Sveti Sava sect, heathens and warmongers" [42], and DF leaders are called "vermin, thieves and turncoats who will do anything for money" [43]. On the Vijesti Online portal, releases have been registered with more than 700 comments apiece. Nationality-based insults were detected among the readers' comments as well as profanity and mutual insults among readers. In comparison with the overall number of comments filtered through in the established media daily, however, it can be concluded that only a small portion of them were of this nature (for example, citizens attending processions are called "Srbadija, incomers, scumbags, trash" [44], DF leaders are called "members of a gang of savages, rats and riff-raff" [45], etc. We noticed a negligible amount of comments against the proponents of the SPC and opposition on the IN4S portal.

5.3. Insults for opponents of the Law on Facebook

Facebook pages which can be said, based on the contents posted on them, to share the views of the ruling parties had written about the political opposition that opposed the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion in around ten different releases, by the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. The content on those pages is, for the most part, aimed against opposition party officials, with the predominant narrative claiming they are “traitors to the state” [46]. The content is accompanied by comments containing nationality-based insults [47]. The number of Facebook pages which, based on the content posted on them, can be described as sharing the views of the ruling parties is significantly lower, and they release significantly less content than the pages recognized for sharing the viewpoints and ideas of the predominantly right-leaning opposition parties and interest groups.

5.4. Overview of detected narratives on opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion

While analyzing the content of the narratives about the opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion, we recognized narratives containing elements of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda.

OVERVIEW OF DETECTED NARRATIVES ON OPPONENTS OF THE LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION

TARGET GROUP	EXAMPLE OF THE MAIN NARRATIVE	EXAMPLES OF DERIVED NARRATIVES
Political opposition and the Serbian Orthodox Church – opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion	The political opposition and the Serbian Orthodox Church (opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion) are working against the best interest of the state of Montenegro and the people.	Opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion are dragging the country back 100 years.
		Opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion are traitors.
		Opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion are allies of Serbia and Russia, which interfere in Montenegro’s internal affairs.
		Opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion incite violence and undermine peace and stability.
		The SPC is a parapolitical organization. Protests are political gatherings for the change of power.
		The SPC is defending its money and privilege.

6. CASE STUDY – THE GOVERNMENT AND OTHER PROPONENTS OF THE LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN MONTENEGRIN MEDIA

The established media, which gave intensive coverage to the Law on Freedom of Religion and the subsequent events, released the viewpoints of both proponents and opponents of this regulation. While analyzing the texts we found on the Vijesti Online web portal, based on the keywords relevant for these events, we found that this media outlet was mostly releasing the views of the opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion, their announcements and the SPC's announcements of protest marches and detailed information after they took place. On the other hand, we found significantly less information on the CdM portal about the SPC's activities, while the IN4S was predominantly releasing information against the new Law, whose respondents or sources were representatives of either the SPC or the opposition parties advocating the repealing of the Law. Based on the amount of released contents that represent or promote the views and interests of one side, we can conclude that all three analyzed media outlets used their editorial space to promote of the standpoints of the sources whose content they were continually publishing.

6.1. There is no hate speech in the editorial content of established media

While analyzing the editorial contents of the established media Vijesti Online and CdM, we did not register any hate speech employed against the representatives of the Montenegrin Government, state institutions, parties, organizations and individuals who proposed or supported the Law on Freedom of Religion. However, we did notice that these media outlets not infrequently released SPC announcements in which the legislators that proposed the Law were called “godless” [48], an “anti-Church gang”, a “remnant of the godless Titoist autocratic regime” [49], and “morally alienated people, steeped in their arrogant wilfulness and pride, prone to all kinds of lawlessness” [49]. Tens of released SPC announcements and remarks by its representatives, parties and organizations supporting its actions, contain the narrative claiming that “the Government of Montenegro wants to seize Church property, employing an unconstitutional law”, and that “the Government of Montenegro created the malformed, anti-constitutional and discriminating Law on Freedom of Religion against the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox majority in Montenegro”, as well as that it was “engaging in anti-Serbian Orthodox Church property seizures, similar to those executed by French revolutionaries in 1789” [50]. During this period, Russian official announcements were also released, dominated by the message that the Law represented “administrative pressure on the SPC in order to completely push it out of Montenegro” [51], as well as the announcements of the SPC representatives from Serbia or Russia and the standpoints of politicians from the region, such as Aleksandar Vučić and Milorad Dodik.

6.2. Inflammatory speech in the right-leaning media

While analyzing the content released by the IN4S portal, from late December to early January, we noticed that this media outlet was advocating the standpoints of the SPC by exclusively releasing content against the Law on Freedom of Religion and its proponents.

We did not register hate speech in the released editorial content dominated by remarks and announcements of the SPC, parties sharing its standpoints and respondents from church and political life from the country and Serbia. However, we did register insults and inflammatory speech additionally instigated in the unfiltered reader comments. The main narrative in those texts is that “the Government of Montenegro and President Milo Đukanović want to seize Church property, by means of the unconstitutional Law, and proclaim it state property” and that “Đukanović was an unbaptized nonbeliever”. Along with the predominant announcements of SPC representatives from Montenegro, parties, organizations and individuals opposing the Law, IN4S also carried the announcements of SPC representatives from Serbia or Russia, politicians and analysts from the countries of the region supporting the SPC and its activities and labelled Đukanović’s policies as “fascistic and leading towards fratricide” [52]. An example was also noticed of IN4S carrying threatening messages of the proponents of the Law telling Đukanović that he would “end up like Zoran Đinđić” [53], the former Serbian prime minister assassinated in 2003 in Belgrade. This media outlet also released a poster containing photographs of MPs voting in favour of the Law with a message that they would be expelled from the Orthodox Church [58]. Also, during the period under review, we recorded the case of the civil activist for women’s rights, Ljiljana Raičević, who said in a post on Facebook that she would “deport” the SPC representative, Velibor Džomić. IN4S carried her comment under the headline “NGO activist Ljiljana Raičević requested the deportation of priest Velibor Džomić” [54] which caused the posting of a series of insulting reader comments referring to her gender, private and professional life (such as “red ustaša”, “Soros’s devil”, “blonde”, “old witch”, “sexually frustrated NATO chick”). Several Facebook pages sharing the ideas and standpoints of the right-leaning media shared the text, which provoked further insults and even calls for violence and the murder of Raičević [55].

6.3. Mutual insults among readers

We have noticed that, at the time of adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion, the number of reader comments in the established online media was significantly higher compared to the number of comments on some other current topics, such as the coronavirus pandemic (Montenegrin Media Institute, 2020). The comments released by the established media, and also in the right-leaning ones, are dominated by content aimed against the Law on Freedom of Religion and its proponents and by the narrative that “the Government of Montenegro wants to seize Church property”. The analyzed content gives rise to the suspicion that this kind of commenting could be

organized and coordinated by different interest groups opposed to the Law. In comparison to the number of comments released by these media outlets each day, there is a small portion containing insults or hate speech, and they mostly refer to nationality-based insults (for example, Milonegrins are like giraffes), and insults against government politicians (for example, they are raised in the spirit of deicide and fratricide). We also noticed that readers are more likely to be insulting each other than actors in one of the published texts. On average, ten times fewer reader comments were published alongside texts published by the IN4S portal than in established online media but with incomparably more nationality- and gender-based insults, disinformation and conspiracy theories (for example, Milogorian convert to Islam, anti-Serbian and anti-Christian regime, Milogorian scum, Montenegro is an Islamic state, Milo Satan, etc.).

6.4. Hatred is also spread on Facebook

Texts dominated by the narrative saying that “Montenegrin authorities want to use the Law to seize churches and monasteries”, apart from on IN4S’s Facebook page, are also continuously shared on Facebook pages sharing the standpoints and ideas advocated by this media outlet (such as Ludacki Pokret Ne Damo Svetinje, Nikšić Ponosni Srpski Grad, Srpsko u Crnoj Gori, Srpska Crna Gora, Crna Gora – Srpska Sparta, etc.). These pages have, on average, from several up to around 10,000 followers, thus enabling one text created by the media outlet to reach up to 100,000 readers via some ten Facebook pages.

The Democratic Front (DF) political alliance, which is close to the Serbian Orthodox Church and opposed the adoption of the Law, has a pivotal role in instigating the spreading of insults and labelling of individuals. On its official page [56], DF posted photos, names, surnames and official e-mail addresses of MPs voting in favour of the Law. Comments that readers posted on Facebook contained personal insults against MPs, based on their nationality, religion and gender.

Since Facebook pages are one of the channels for spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in Montenegro, several of them that are recognized as sources of problematic content, through which insulting speech and labelling of individuals are not infrequently spread, got involved in the campaign against the Law on Freedom of Religion. Apart from actively promoting the narrative claiming that “the Government is using the Law to seize Church property”, popular Facebook pages also labelled civic activists, journalists, authors and cultural workers who criticized the SPC in public or who supported the adoption of this regulation [57] and instigated additional spreading of insults against them in their releases.

6.5. Overview of detected narratives on proponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion

By analyzing the content of the narratives on the proponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion, we recognized narratives containing elements of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda.

OVERVIEW OF DETECTED NARRATIVES ON PROPONENTS OF THE LAW ON FREEDOM OF RELIGION

TARGET GROUP	EXAMPLE OF THE MAIN NARRATIVE	EXAMPLES OF DERIVED NARRATIVES
Government and other proponents of the Law on Freedom of religion	The Government of Montenegro and Milo Đukanović want to use the unconstitutional Law to seize Church property and proclaim it the property of the state.	The Government is engaging in anti-church property seizures similar to French revolutionaries in 1789.
		The Government is carrying out an anti-Serbian project presenting Serbs in Montenegro as a destabilizing factor.
		The Government created the malformed, anti-constitutional and discriminatory Law against the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox majority in Montenegro.
		The Government made a Law compatible with the maleficence and greed of certain individuals in power.
		An anti-church gang is in power, a remnant of the godless communist regime.

This content analysis showed that this was the main topic in Montenegrin media, discussed not only by local but also regional and international actors. This was proven by the events in 2020 when the issue of the Law became the key topic of the campaign before the parliamentary elections. Regardless of the previous editorial policies of the analyzed media, there is an impression that the established media, in this case, failed to be consistent in full adherence to professional standards and provide for the released content to be continuously balanced and to give an equal presentation of both sides in the conflict in every release. In comparison to the amount of published material in which we detected inflammatory speech and nationality, religion and gender-based insults, we have noticed reactions of only certain institutions (Vijesti Online, 2020) and civil society calling for peace and tolerance. Along with this, local initiatives for fighting disinformation indicate, through their analyses, the spread of disinformation on these topics (DFC, 2020).

7. ACTIVITIES IN THE PREVENTION OF AND FIGHT AGAINST NARRATIVES CONTAINING HATE SPEECH AND DISINFORMATION IN MONTENEGRO

Although online media and communication practices employed on the Internet have been recognized for years as channels for spreading hate speech, disinformation and propaganda, the field of online media has never been regulated in Montenegro prior to the adoption of the new Law on Media⁹.

In July 2020, the law defined an internet publication (portal) as a media outlet whose contents are disseminated via the Internet and which is registered in the media records kept by the Ministry of Culture. Portals will be obliged to have an impressum and provide information about their ownership structure, to keep and present records for inspection on financial means the organization has received from public funds and meet other obligations from the Law. However, legal experts indicate that the Law does not stipulate a sanction of an unregistered portal, and it is unclear who is held accountable if the organization does not have an impressum (Gazivoda, 2020). Also, portals are obliged to issue rules for publishing reader comments, while the founder is obliged to remove a comment representing illegal content, without delay, and at the latest within 60 minutes of finding out about the comment or receiving notification one of it from another person.

Although new legal solutions represent a step forward in regulating online media, there is still no strategic approach in Montenegro to media literacy and the fight against disinformation (Nikolić, 2019). Around the beginning of 2020, there were several cases of journalists being arrested, as well as citizens creating and disseminating fake news, which, according to the Ombudsman “was a misunderstood authorization of the state in the control of the freedom of speech” and “disputable, to say the least, from the aspect of the application of convention standards” (Rajković, Nenadić, 2020). Since then, we have not recorded any activities or initiatives by competent authorities to find an appropriate solution instead of the unacceptable arrests of those suspected of disseminating disinformation and a passive approach to the problem of disinformation.

With the help of foreign donations, the civic sector is actively implementing media literacy projects and initiatives for fighting disinformation and hate speech.

With the help of foreign donations, the civic sector is actively implementing media literacy projects and initiatives for fighting disinformation and hate speech. Along with this, local analysts are continuously publishing the findings of studies indicating the increasingly serious problem of disseminating disinformation, which intensifies in social and political crises, such as the coronavirus pandemic or the period leading up to elections. To contribute to the prevention of dissemination of disinformation and the reduction of

⁹ Law on Media (“Official Gazette of Montenegro”, no. 46/2010, 40/2011 – second law, 53/2011, 6/2013, 55/2016, 92/2017 i 82/2020 - second law)

the number of people releasing incorrect information, Facebook and the France-Presse agency initiated an independent fact-checking programme in Montenegro, in cooperation with the local platform for fighting disinformation, Raskrinkavanje.me (CDT, 2020).

8. CONCLUSIONS

The current social and political circumstances and complex relations between Balkan states also reflect on media reporting. The analysis of media content showed that, depending on how current a topic is in Montenegro, the media interest in reporting on it grows. Regardless of the countries of the region facing an influx of migrants, Montenegro was already a transit destination for migrants, which is why this issue was treated as marginal by the domestic media. On the other hand, the arrest of journalists for spreading fake news, which marked the beginning of 2020, was in the focus of domestic media attention for a short time, while the predominant topic, by the end of last and throughout this year, was the adoption of the Law on Freedom of Religion and the ensuing events.

While searching for narratives containing hate speech that accompanied these important topics in Montenegrin media and on the Facebook social network, we registered a series of narratives containing elements of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda.

Established online media are not successful in full adherence to professional standards.

Regardless of which target group (migrants, journalists, political opposition – opponents of the Law on Freedom of Religion, proponents of this Law) the narratives containing hate speech, disinformation and propaganda refer to, types of media and communication practices which were recognized as disputable in previous research proved to be the channels for disseminating unacceptable content in this analysis as well.

While analyzing narratives for these four target groups, we noticed that hate speech is absent from the editorial content of established media. However, established online media are not successful in full adherence to professional standards.

For the most part, they carry announcements, remarks or information which often feature narratives that contain inflammatory speech or disinformation. Balanced content, which equally presents different opinions of counterparts in a dialogue and provides citizens with an objective picture of an important social or political topic, is becoming a rarity. The segment recognized as problematic in the work of the established online media is the inadequate moderation of reader comments. These comments not infrequently contain offensive speech against ethnic, religious and sexual minorities, and personal insults against political or ideological opponents of the anonymous commentators.

This analysis showed that the editorial content of the right-leaning media can contain elements of hate speech and that these media outlets nurture inflammatory rhetoric and incite additional spreading of hate speech, insults and conspiracy theories through unmoderated comments.

Such content is additionally disseminated via Facebook pages sharing the viewpoints and ideas of the right-leaning parties and interest groups. Also, civic activists, journalists and other public figures whose viewpoints are different from those advocated by these pages are labelled on these Facebook pages.

There is still no organized self-regulation or reactions of professional associations in Montenegro that would indicate the dissemination of narratives containing hate speech and disinformation. The new legal solution, in accordance with which the state is establishing the Fund for Media Pluralism to fund future self-regulation, was criticized by representatives of the media and civic sector (Popović, Rudović, 2020).

Adequate reaction from the competent institutions is still missing in the dissemination of hate speech and fake news in the media or on social networks. An adequate solution for this problem, which would be applied instead of the unacceptable arrests of those suspected of spreading disinformation and the passive approach to the problem of disinformation, remains to be found.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to contribute to the regulation of professional standards in preventing the dissemination of narratives containing hate speech and disinformation, based on this analysis, the Montenegro Media Institute put together a list of recommendations for decision-makers, the media community and the civic sector:

- Institutions in charge of implementing the Law on Media (primarily the Agency for Electronic Media and the Ministry of Culture) need to take specific steps in order to provide for the most efficient possible implementation of this regulation and resolve possible ambiguities (registration of online media, reactions in case of failure to register, media transparency, etc.)
- Institutions in charge of implementing the Law on Media must ensure transparency in the work of the Fund for Media Pluralism and accurately regulate the issue of funding self-regulation from public funds to prevent any unintended influence on the media and self-regulatory bodies.
- Competent institutions must react in cases of dissemination of hate speech and find an appropriate solution for the fight against the spreading of disinformation.
- The divided media community must make long-term efforts to form a common self-regulatory body that would point out examples of dissemination of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda and work on the promotion of professional standards.
- Online media must take concrete action to improve comment moderation systems on their websites and social networks, thus limiting the dissemination of hate speech, disinformation and propaganda in reader comments.
- Professional associations and professional media organizations must help strengthen the capacities of the media for moderating comments, propaganda detection and fact-checking.
- Local media analysts and the fact-checking platform must continue giving their contribution in the fight against disinformation and propaganda and additionally reinforce their resources, to be able to engage in more intensive monitoring and analysis of the media contents in Montenegro.

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This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The second series of research reports examines HATE AND DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

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