

Digital Spaces as New Arenas for Ethnonational Conflicts

Case Study of Western Balkans and Policy Recommendations

Young Faces 2024-2025

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May 2025

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Executive Summary

Social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube have become central to the ethnonational discourse formation in the post – conflict era of the Western Balkans, offering a new medium for affective mobilization and political expression. Social media is used to amplify ethnonationalist rhetoric, which was evident in 2018 elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina¹. Hate speech targeting ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups is pervasive in digital spaces, as OSCE reports that online platforms are often used to spread dehumanizing language and incite violence.

Online conflicts often spill over into offline violence as seen in the incidents in North Macedonia (2012)² and elections in Montenegro (2020)³ as well as Kosovo⁴ (2020). The social media had become the favourite tool of the elites and political entrepreneurs to influence the self-identification and wider social categorization.

This policy paper will analyse the gaps such as fragmented international and regional coordination, limited participation of civil society and minority groups in policymaking and digital governance, lack of cross border institutional cooperation in the field of cybergovernance and cybersecurity, resulting in absence of regional digital governance policies and lack of public awareness and digital literacy to counter hate speech and misinformation.

The key solutions I propose focus on establishing of regional cross border regulatory-cooperative bodies, improving existing enforcement mechanisms, enhancing content moderation of social media platforms and leveraging AI tools to identify and flag ethnonational rhetoric and misinformation along with improving structure and capacities of cybergovernance to prevent foreign influence on domestic politics and dissemination of disinformation.

¹ <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Research-publication-1-BiH-ENG.pdf>

² <https://crd.org/2012/03/11/ethnically-motivated-attacks-in-macedonia>

³ <https://cemi.org.me/storage/uploads/7PcumL64x7X88mwwhAkk6N2DRIGtHH9zePYDXJA8.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.europeum.org/en/articles-and-publications/the-double-crisis-in-kosovo-covid-19-as-a-veil-for-power-struggles/>

Introduction

The Western Balkan (WB) is historically known as a politically unstable region with significant presence of politically motivated violence stemming from right – wing ideologies (*Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans, July 2022, n.d.*). Ethnonationalism is a distinct feature of what EU's DG of Home Affairs and Migration has defines as violent right wing extremism, further elaborated as “*acts of individuals or groups who use, incite, threaten with, legitimise or support violence and hatred to further their political or ideological goals, motivated by ideologies based on the rejection of democratic order and values as well as of fundamental rights, and centred on exclusionary nationalism, racism, xenophobia, and/or related intolerance*” (*Violent Right-Wing Extremism in the Western Balkans, July 2022, n.d.*).

Ethnonationalism is an identity-based concept, promoting in-group cohesion by creating commonalities within the group such as myth of common descent, religion, language, usually promoting the congruency of one's nation and its ethnic supremacy (Chandra, 2006). The space of political discourse in the WB is significantly occupied by ethnonationalist rhetoric promoted by the political elite. This is especially prominent in the digital era where social media platforms have become the primary sites for reproduction of ethnonational identities, serving as an arena for creating affective economies – spaces where consistent reproduction of emotions leads to collective embodiment of them (Ahmed, 2014). Thus, emotions such as fear, pride, resentment and nostalgia become embedded in discourses which shape political perceptions and collective action. Social media has become a battleground of discursive struggle, where antagonistic identities are continuously rearticulated through digital narratives. Political elites exploit digital affective economies to reinforce the ethnonational identities and promote authoritarian, xenophobic and violent sentiments, thus escalating real life tensions and causing harm to communities with preexisting historical divisions.

The EU's Digital Service Act (DSA) aims to regulate large platforms but is yet to be fully implemented or adapted to the specific needs of the Western Balkan economies⁵. Governments in the region have weak cyber governance frameworks, often relying on outdated or poorly enforced laws to regulated online behaviour. The absence of effective content moderation in local languages allows the proliferation of hate speech, dehumanisation, and

⁵ https://metamorphosis.org.mk/en/izdanija_arhiva/towards-a-feasible-implementation-of-the-digital-services-act-in-the-western-balkans

misinformation which often translate into offline political tensions and sometimes even leading to violence. The failure of platform governance and national regulatory bodies to adequately respond to these issues further exacerbates the post-conflict vulnerabilities which lead to destabilization of democratic processes and fosters political alienation among youth population. Social media is increasingly being used as a medium for peacebuilding, but it can also be used for inducing polarization among the youth. According to a study conducted by the United Nations Development Programme, 42% of youth in the WB region consider seeing divisive content on social media as common, while 28% was not sure⁶. According to the same study, a large number of young people consider that expressing hate should be permissible: 26% in BiH, 32% in Kosovo, 38% in Albania, 42% in Montenegro, 46% in North Macedonia and 51% in Serbia.

All countries have established independent regulatory agencies for the media, overseeing traditional media broadcasters as well as audio and audio visual media services, as stated in the RAN report “Taking Stock of Approaches to Counter Hate Speech in the Western Balkans”⁷ which also mentions self-regulatory mechanisms which are embedded in via the Code of Ethics adopted by the Association of Journalists (Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia), Code for press and online media (BiH) and Code of Journalists (Montenegro), with all countries having an central election Commission for monitoring election campaigns and sanctioning candidates who use hate speech (*Taking Stock of Approaches to Counter Hate Speech in the Western Balkans, September 2023, n.d.*). Partnerships between the national regulatory bodies and Civil Society Organisations are of great importance as the example of cooperation of the Sarajevo Open Centre and multiple prosecutor’s offices in BiH, shows.

This policy brief will provide a comprehensive analysis of the current practices and policies related to preventing and monitoring hate speech in the online environment and identify policy gaps and propose solutions aimed at mitigating online hate speech, enhancing regional cooperation in cyber governance, employing AI technology to identify and flag ethnonational narrative, and supporting digital spaces that promote democratic dialogue and peacebuilding. Without regional cooperative efforts, digital platforms will continue to be

⁶ <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/eurasia/Shared-Futures---Youth-Perceptions-on-Peace-in-the-Western-Balkans.pdf>

⁷ https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/taking-stock-approaches-counter-hate-speech-western-balkans-september-2023_en

misused by the political elites, thus intensifying the fixed concept of ethnonational identities and promoting dominant elite discourse, evoking affective mobilization of the masses.

Problem Description

According to a Media Monitoring Report on Hate Speech in the Western Balkans⁸ by the Reporting Diversity Network 2.0, the highest number of hate speech cases were targeting ethnic groups along with reports targeting women and gender minorities. This monitoring covered both traditional media such as TV channels, Radio, newspapers, and online portals, along with social media platforms. The report indicates that the WB region has a well-developed digital sphere as internet usage per country explains along with extensive use of social media without the proper regulation of hate speech on these platforms, more specifically the lack of automated removal of harmful content in regional languages, creates a fertile ground for rapid proliferation of hate speech (Reporting Diversity Network, 2024, p. 5). The Western Balkans notes a high internet usage, as noted from data gathered in 2021⁹:

- Bosnia and Herzegovina – With 75.8% of individuals using internet
- Albania – Around 73% of the population with access to internet
- Kosovo – Internet usage noted at 63.4%
- Montenegro – With 78% of population using internet
- North Macedonia – Approximately 90.6 of the population using internet
- Serbia – With notable highest internet penetration rate at 95.9% of individuals using internet

Social Media as Tool of Ethnonational Entrepreneurs

The widespread use of the social media platforms in an increasingly unregulated systems, without any safeguards in place to prevent the spread of hate speech in online environments, leads to an increase of hate speech and to utilization of these platforms by political entrepreneurs/politicians for promotion of violent ethnonational discourse which continue to polarize the already divided society and contribute to the spillover of online violence into real life. The Reporting Diversity Network found that a total number of 523 cases of hate speech were recorded during the reporting period from May 1st, 2022, to December 31st 2023, where

⁸ https://www.reportingdiversity.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Monitoring-Report-on-Hate-Speech_Regional.pdf

⁹ <https://www.rcc.int/files/user/docs/43a521a624cf08523a2268a67a7be2ff.pdf>

ethnicity and religion were the most common targets and that there was an increase in intersectional hate speech targeting multiple overlapping identities (Reporting Diversity Network, 2024, p. 7). This further hinders the reconciliation process as cooperation with members of different ethnic groups is often portrayed as betrayal via the discursive power of the social media and media outlets, which interpret the events according to their group standards.

Additionally, the social media algorithms can, by chance or even deliberately, promote and contribute to the spread of hate speech. Stray et al. (2023) found that there is an increase in the accumulation of evidence for explaining the nature of the relationship between social media and political conflict along with significant evidence for positive correlation with political knowledge and participation, showing a dual role of social media. Algorithms often prioritize content which generates significant interactions so controversial or provocative posts tend to evoke strong and often emotional responses, leading algorithms to amplify their visibility and audience engagement.

A common problem with cyberspaces, such as social media, is that the interactions there are often conflictual, while it is contrary to the in-person interactions which may be confrontational but not conflictual (Aspen Institute Germany, 2023, p. 62). One of the major problems of these platforms is the popularity of fake accounts being used for different harmful reasons such as spreading hate speech, smear campaigns with the goal to undermine public debate and harm the public opinion of political opponents. As noted in the Aspen Institute Research (2023), one of the prevalent platforms for this use was X (former Twitter), which denotes a significant rise (around 50%) in hate speech after Elon Musk took over the company.¹⁰ The very same platform was widely used in attacking and disputing the Srebrenica memorial campaign, around 70% profile were created only for such purposes. Similar occurrences were noted in Montenegro, especially during the 2020 elections where there were heightened polarization issues over the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Montenegrin national identity¹¹. BIRN has noted around 782 digital rights infringements in the period from 1st September 2021 to August 31st 2022 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo Hungary, Romania, with most of them being classified as

¹⁰ <https://news.berkeley.edu/2025/02/13/study-finds-persistent-spike-in-hate-speech-on-x/>

¹¹ <https://balkaninsight.com/2021/08/02/call-to-lynch-the-war-of-words-threatening-montenegros-delicate-balance/>

“pressures because of expression and activities on the internet”.¹² Some of the most significant violations included calls for war, spread of ethnic hatred, threats via social media aimed at politicians, media outlets, and journalists along with sexist insults aimed at female politicians.

As we can see hate speech in online spaces is highly prevalent in the WB region and true danger lurks in spillover into physical confrontation and violence as we have seen in certain cases such as the boycott of Albanian run café, Missini Sweets, located in Northern Mitrovica, Kosovo, by the local Serbs. This boycott was initiated by ethnonational rhetoric on social media.¹³ This move caused even deeper polarization within the city. Another case was noted in Serbia, where two tragic mass shootings had shown the true effects of online hate speech spilling over into physical violence. Namely, two shootings happened in only two days, where eighteen people were killed and 21 injured¹⁴. Many had focused on policies and rhetoric of Serbian authoritarian leader, Aleksandar Vučić, attributing him the contribution to the excessive violence in country and its politics and media along with creating a hostile climate and culture of violence which is further fanned by the media and ruling party politicians.

Hybrid Warfare, Disinformation Campaigns and Foreign Influence

Vučić’s ties to the Kremlin, Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik along with Viktor Orban recently, contribute to the foreign hostile influence of actors such as Russia and China which aim to further destabilize the region as a part of their broader hybrid/proxy warfare against the west. According to Dolan (2022), *“hybrid warfare is an all-encompassing term that includes operation in a conflict that do not relate to traditional understandings of war”* (Dolan, 2022,







Country	Total Country Permeability Index				
	Total	Per domain			
		Society	Economy	Politics	Foreign Policy & Security
 Albania	1.52	1.23	1.51	1.86	1.48
 BiH	2.05	2.03	1.87	2.37	1.94
 Kosovo	1.65	1.55	1.51	2	1.53
 Montenegro	1.62	1.6	1.57	1.91	1.41
 N. Macedonia	1.51	1.4	1.41	1.79	1.42
 Serbia	1.73	1.84	1.34	1.91	1.85

Figure 1 - NATO StratCom COE, P.12

p. 5), it involves a combination of both violent and nonviolent tactics. Russia is well known for it’s use of cyberattacks, information warfare, diplomatic coercions along with economic

¹² <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/30/hate-speech-and-disinformation-fuel-digital-rights-abuses-in-balkans/>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/ethnic-tensions-dominate-life-divided-kosovan-city-decades-after-war-2024-10-24/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/15/vucic-created-this-atmosphere-of-hate-serbians-wary-of-presidents-gun-pledge>

intimidation and disseminated disinformation through social media platforms, and reliance on network of proxies and intermediaries in dissemination of various online campaigns (Dolan, 2022). When it comes to the Western Balkans Russian state-run media outlets such as Sputnik and RT, disseminate the content which aligns with Kremlin narratives, thus influencing local media and public perception (European Parliamentary Research Service, 2023). It is also important to mention that Russia cooperates with local proxies, mainly political actors and media organizations to disseminate disinformation. This networks further amplify the already existing ethnonational narratives and tensions (Metodieva, 2019).

Apart from Russia and China, European Union, United States, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are also active in their promotion throughout the Western Balkans. These actors exploit the structural vulnerabilities of the WB region, which are most measured by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence's "Risks and Vulnerabilities in the Western Balkans" report along with the GLOBSEC Vulnerability Index. The STRATCOM report indicates that North Macedonia has the overall lowest permeability (level of vulnerability to foreign influences) score, at 1.51 while Albania peaks at 1.52 with second lowest total score, Montenegro is the third with 1.62, followed by Kosovo at 1.65 and with the two last and most concerning scores of 1.73 for Serbia and 2.05 for Bosnia and Herzegovina (NATO StratCom COE, 2019 p. 11-12.).

The structural vulnerabilities increase the permeability which allows for greater influence of the foreign agents which further contributes to the spread of disinformation which is often perpetuated by state-controlled media outlets and political parties which coordinate with nationalist leaders and religious groups, to boost the spread of disinformation, especially during campaigns and elections (Dolan, 2022). The same vulnerabilities allow for the spread of misinformation which is often aligned with supporting the ethnonationalist rhetoric of the leading parties, which further contribute to the perpetuation of nationalism and destabilization of the region. This indicates that these actors lead a sort of a proxy war in the Western Balkans, exploiting different vulnerabilities to their advantage and promotion of their national interests and advancement of their agenda.

Cybersecurity Vulnerability

Cyberattacks are often part of the hybrid warfare strategies exercised by foreign influences in addition to the disinformation campaigns and other strategies. To further delve into the specifics of the cybersecurity infrastructure of the WB countries, I will focus on the Global

Cybersecurity Index (GCI) which evaluates countries commitment to cybersecurity across five pillars: **legal measures, technical measures, organizational measures, capacity development and cooperation.** The most recent data available is from the 2020 GCI report. Namely, North Macedonia and Serbia ranking 38th and 39th respectively, however there is still some lack in terms of capacity and professional trained technical experts in North Macedonia and lack of capacity in Serbia, while Albania and Montenegro have moderate scores, suggesting the need for additional efforts, especially in fields of capacity, cooperation, organizational measures and technical measures, on the other hand Bosnia and Herzegovina takes the last place in this region when it comes to the CGI, with significant struggles in all of the CGI sectors which is reflective of the countries polarized administrative and decentralized structure, lastly while Kosovo was not included, institutional weaknesses are present and inhibit the development of cyber regulations (International Telecommunication Union 2021; Dolan,2022).

Policy Solutions

In the context of above explained problems, I have identified the following policy solutions:

Solution 1: Develop and implement national digital governance strategies that would address online hate speech and misinformation along with goals of improving the overall structure of the cybersecurity of the WB countries. This would lead to pooling of resources, knowledge, and expertise, which would significantly contribute to combating hate speech and misinformation, in the context of digital rights infringements.

Solution 2: Establishing a regional task force to harmonize definitions, regulations, and enforcement mechanisms related to hate speech and misinformation. Regional cooperation would lead to overlapping of identities, thus enabling actors to reap more benefits if they work together than if they isolate themselves due to identity politics.

Solution 3: Promoting the autonomy of media regulatory bodies and ensuring that hate speech laws are applied equitably and ensuring enhanced intelligence and best practices sharing in collaboration with regulatory bodies to identify and counteract foreign influence operation effectively.

Solution 4: Developing AI tools tailored to detect and monitor ethnonationalist rhetoric and misinformation in local languages.

Solution 5: Strengthen the capacity and independence of regulatory bodies to enforce law against hate speech and misinformation effectively.

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