WHY DO YOU SAY LOVE WHEN YOU MEAN WAR 2.0

А МИСЛИШ НА РАТ? 2

RESULTS OF THE SECOND RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS OF UNDUE INFLUENCE ON THE INCREASE OF VIOLENCE IN SERBIAN SOCIETY BASED ON THE EXAMPLES OF MANIFESTATIONS OF (NON)DEALING WITH THE PAST

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“When cruelty becomes normal, compassion seems radical.”

Unknown author

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This research, analysis and work are a continuation of the project *Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War?*, which the KROKODIL Association began in 2023. This project initially aimed to examine the "prevalence of undue or invisible influence[1]" (we use this term in a loose translation and are aware of its incomplete meaning in relation to local circumstances – the influence that politicians in Serbia exert is often anything but invisible, and those targeted by this influence are aware of it and are willing participants in a joint, systematic project of degrading Serbian society to probably the lowest ebb in its history) and point out various long-term trends that systemically threaten democratic processes and the fundamental rights of all Serbian citizens.[2] The results of this research and further analysis have shown that "in Serbia there is a direct and invisible influence of the state and the media on the maintenance of a specific and widespread 'culture of violence', that narratives dominated by aggressive language contribute to its perpetuation, as does the lack of a strategy to combat violence, and that the increase in violence and aggression in society, among other things, leads to a rise in femicide."[3]

The initial research was conducted in the specific context of Serbia's social and political dynamics. Indeed, in the midst of developing the research and methodology, there occurred a tragedy and mass murder at the Vladislav Ribnikar Primary School and another mass murder in the villages of Dubona and Malo Orašje. These events undoubtedly influenced the results of the 2023 research, primarily in how respondents and focus group participants perceived violence as an instrument used by the ruling elite to govern without democratic accountability.

The team that came together for this project decided to repeat a similar study in 2025, this time using a more comprehensive analysis to understand violence in the political and social life of Serbia. Bearing in mind that the basic hypothesis of the entire KROKODIL program *Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War?* is that the deep, structural causes of violence result from the refusal of the Serbian political elite (and, consequently, society) to confront the crimes committed in the series of tragic wars that devastated the Yugoslav state, special emphasis has been placed on the events of the last decade of the 20th century and their

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1 *Undue influence* (Eng.) – a term from legal terminology that defines influence by which a person is induced to act against his or her will or without proper awareness of the consequences of his/her action. This term originates from English common law. It was first mentioned in the doctrine of 1617 and its author was the English philosopher Francis Bacon, the state attorney and chancellor under King James I.

2 Milena Berić and Srđan Hercigonja, *Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War? – Research Results and Analysis of Undue Influence on the Increase of Violence in Serbian Society?* (Association KROKODIL, 2023)

3 Ibid.

perception today in contemporary Serbia. However, this new research, the results of which are presented on the following pages, was also conducted in the context of the greatest political and social crisis in Serbia since the democratic changes of 2000. For fourteen months, Serbia has been rocked by major protests, marked primarily by a student and even a civic uprising, which arose in reaction to the tragedy in Novi Sad when the collapse of a canopy at the railway station on 1 November 2024 killed 16 people. A large part of the public perceived this disaster as the result of the pervasive corruption that extends to the highest echelons of the authorities and the ruling regime. It initiated months-long protests, to which the authorities responded primarily with violence and repression against students, educators, civil society organisations and independent media. It was in this atmosphere of a "de facto state of emergency" that this research was conducted, together with writing the analysis.

The conclusion will show that in Serbian society there is a direct and invisible influence from the state and the media in maintaining a specific and widespread "culture of violence" rooted in the wars of the 1990s, and in the (non)confrontation of the whole Serbian society with the crimes committed and the refusal to assume the expected responsibility for them. What's more, violence has become an instrument of governance in the country. Given that it is being carried out both openly and deliberately, it is essential to work on developing strategies and measures that will, in the near future, lead to the suppression and dismantling of the culture of violence.

During the analysis and presentation of the research results, parallels will be drawn with the research conducted in 2023, and comparative conclusions will be inferred. It can immediately be concluded that the participants in that earlier study perceived violence in Serbian society more as a diffuse, uncontrolled phenomenon, and that they did not have a clear understanding of how to resist it. In this year's survey, the conclusion is slightly different – participants increasingly perceive violence as an instrument of state governance, find its sources in just a few actors (mainly political), and have clearer visions and solutions for how to combat structural violence, or how the "culture of violence" in general can be fought.

METHODOLOGY

As with the 2023 study, the authors began this research by observing the graffiti and murals around Belgrade, and the messages they convey. The research did not focus on the media as one of the catalysts for violence, primarily because there is a large body of work that addresses that topic. Our aim was to analyse the messages "broadcast through the façades" of buildings and other structures in Belgrade and other Serbian towns, and to establish the connection between the messages these graffiti convey and how, and to what extent, they influence violence in society. Since the beginning of the Russian

invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there has been a kind of "explosion" of political graffiti, and a great deal of the research focus was therefore directed at these, and their function in maintaining a "culture of violence" in Serbia. In 2025, graffiti, murals and stencils still play a huge role in the context of "violent" political communication in Serbian society, but the messages they carry have changed (in terms of themes, not quantity).

However, this research places a specific focus on the events of the 1990s, their abuse, and their use in other potential "transmitters" of messages that contain hate speech. The appearances of public figures, social media, and institutions were all taken into account to analyse where and how citizens become recipients of messages containing hate speech. Certainly, the political and social context in which the research is conducted substantially influences the public perception of the generators of violence and the messages being sent. As for graffiti, in 2023 messages glorifying and celebrating convicted war criminals or supporting the Russian army in its invasion of Ukraine dominated. In 2025, the dominant messages are mainly those relating to the 2024–2025 civil and student protests.

In this analysis, we have inevitably included strategies of manipulation in the sphere of articulating undue influences on the increase of violence in our society, using Noam Chomsky's ten strategies as a model and substantiating them with examples from the Serbian media space and findings on foreign propaganda influence. The analysis concluded that the media continuously divert attention from fundamental problems, gradually erode public resistance, and emotionally manipulate and intellectually incapacitate the public. Nationalist narratives, hate speech, the dehumanisation of "others", sophisticated disinformation campaigns and the legacy of the nineties have been adapted for digital platforms and are turning the media into a powerful instrument in the hands of domestic and foreign actors. The misuse of public resources, media ownership concentration and impunity for manipulative reporting deepen society's vulnerability, while the absence of social justice and systemic corruption further reinforce the sense **of state violence against citizens**.

In addition to the authors' own engagement over many years with the topics of graffiti as purveyors of hate speech and generators of violence in society, an online form containing 36 questions was created as part of the research methodology. It was distributed via mailing lists to civil society organisations, institutions, activist groups, and assemblies (in the context of the 2024–2025 civic protests). The same form was also shared and actively sponsored on social media to reach as large and representative a number of citizens as possible. By mid-December, the questionnaire had been completed by 680 people, although it should be noted that an ideal representative sample could not be achieved, given the context of deep social polarisation in society with numerous people (primarily supporters of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party) not inclined to participate in such surveys, even though anonymity is fully guaranteed. The questionnaire is titled

Survey/Questionnaire on Citizens' Attitudes Regarding Hate, Hate Speech, Aggression, Violence and Nationalism in Serbia and, just as the title suggests, the researchers wanted to assess the extent to which citizens believe that a culture of violence dominates society, how that culture manifests itself, and the correlation between nationalism and hate speech with open aggression and violence.

Out of concern that an online survey would not capture a sufficiently representative sample (i.e. that there was a high chance that those completing the survey would share the same values and opinions on the topics covered by the questions), the researchers conducted three focus groups during November 2025. The groups were divided by age category, with the first comprising young people aged 18 to 30; the second with members of the so-called "middle generation" aged 31 to 55, while the third group over the age of 55. One of the reasons for this separation by age was to identify differences in attitudes towards the culture of violence among different generations.

Although it was not included in the final analysis, the research also involved an analysis of media content. It is not difficult to conclude that the electronic media (above all, pro-government ones) spread hatred and openly call for violence against anyone who publicly opposes the ruling structure. As one focus group participant noted, even the most famous Serbian sportsman, Novak Djokovic, was targeted by regime tabloids for his alleged support of the student protests. A brief overview of how the media influence the culture of violence in Serbia will be presented when the results of the online survey and the focus groups are unveiled.

To further test some focus-group findings concerning the legacy of the 1990s in shaping youth ideologies and radicalization, we also introduced an interview format with one of the leading experts on dealing with the past and memorialization into our methodology.[4]

Finally, the analysis drew on numerous scholarly sources and references addressing citizens' attitudes toward events of the 1990s and their legacy today, as well as attitudes toward violence, from multiple disciplines — history, political science, anthropology, philosophy, communication studies, psychology, and linguistics. This interdisciplinary approach will enable a better understanding of the relationships and links between the events of the 1990s, the legacy manifested in the mythologizing of events and figures, and the nurturing of a culture of violence through covert influences, manipulation, and, as will be shown, the overt use of public resources via instrumentalization of the state apparatus.

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4 See Chapter 20, INTERVIEW: NIKOLA RADIĆ Lucati, Center for Research and Education on the Holocaust.

CULTURE, AGGRESSION AND VIOLENCE

Aggression and violence are the inevitable companions of human existence, present in almost every segment of life. Whether in the physical, psychological, emotional or symbolic sphere, these phenomena permeate the entire culture and everyday life. The whole history of human society is a history of repression, violence and terror. Hegel therefore regarded violence as an ontological phenomenon, believing that it is an essential part of being and existence, that it is not only an immanent part of the rationality of history, but also of the rationalisation of human consciousness.[5]

However, to truly understand the essence and prevalence of aggression, it is necessary first to understand the framework within which it occurs, namely the concepts **of culture and everyday life**. Culture can be primarily defined as **a socially inherited pattern of life** that an individual acquires through **the process of socialisation**, making it their own spiritual possession. Theorists such as Ralph Linton[6] see culture as a collection of ideas and habits that are learned and passed down from generation to generation, while for Kluckhohn it is a "blueprint for living"[7]. This blueprint is crucial because humans, unlike animals, do not possess instincts that would automatically govern their actions.

It is precisely due to the lack of instincts that humans must rely on learned guidelines and patterns of behaviour in order to communicate, cooperate and biologically survive. This reveals two fundamental characteristics of culture. **It is: 1) common to all members of a society and 2) learned**. Finally, culture is not just an external system of rules but also deeply shapes the inner world of the individual. As a system of learned values and feelings, culture determines what we will love, how we will think and behave. The most powerful characteristic of this process is its imperceptibility. Members of a society experience their culture as something self-evident, internalising it as part of their own being, often completely unaware of its influence on their perception of the world. Culture is also not just a static set of knowledge, customs and values; it represents the totality of human experience which is sustained in life exclusively **through its transmission to new generations**. This crucial process of transmission is called **socialisation**.

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5 Luca Illetterati, *Subjectivity and violence: a Hegelian perspective*, in Violence and Reflexivity: The Place of Critique in the Reality of Domination, ed. Marjan Ivković, Adriana Zaharijević and Gazela Pudar Draško (Lexington Books, 2022)

6 Ralph Linton, *The cultural background of personality* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1947)

7 C. Kluckhohn and W. H. Kelly, *The Concept of Culture*, in The Science of Man in the World Culture, ed. R. Linton (Columbia University Press, 1945), 79.

Socialisation can be defined as the process of learning a culture, the medium through which a biological individual acquires the skills, habits and attitudes necessary for survival in a community. It is through this process that the individual becomes **"socially normal"**, integrated and accepted, transforming from a mere individual into a formed personality. During this process, culture imprints specific traits onto the individual, creating what we call **the "basic personality"**. This is a type of character recognisable and specific to a particular culture. However, the relationship between socialisation, culture, and personality is complex and must be seen from two different viewpoints: in relation to the social order and in relation to the individual. From the standpoint of society, socialisation is a mechanism for preserving order. It serves to "tame" the individual, stifle their potential revolt, and integrate them into the existing system. From the individual's perspective, however, this process manifests as shaping through conformity. **Conformity** is, in essence, **the adaptation of the personality to dominant cultural patterns, roles, and standards**. Although it enables the individual to function in society by "doing what everyone else does", **the price of this adaptation is high**. Through conformity, there is a loss of individual autonomy, as the personality relinquishes part of its authenticity to fit into the **collective identity** imposed by the culture.

Over the centuries, man has constantly been subordinate to a higher group entity, whether it be the family, tribe, nation, party or state. What we call "civilisation" is in fact a continuous process of adapting the individual to a group conformist model. To survive biologically and socially, a person is compelled to adopt the feelings, behaviours and opinions dictated by the group, thereby inevitably losing their authenticity. This process takes place on the stage of "everyday life". Everyday life is not an abstract concept, but a concrete reality in which the individual and the social intertwine. It is clear that everyday life creates itself in a culture of everyday life that influences the individual and society as a whole. It is a culture that maintains and reproduces the existing society, socialises, conforms and integrates individuals and social groups into society. The culture of everyday life is not only a culture of personalisation but, among other things, a culture of depersonalisation and violence.[8]

AGGRESSION - CONCEPT, CAUSES AND TYPES

The question of human aggression is one of the most complex challenges for modern science and philosophy. Man stands out in nature as a paradoxical being: on the one hand, he possesses supreme intellectual abilities, while on the other, in the words of Anthony Storr, he represents the most ruthless species to have ever inhabited the planet. Unlike

8 Braco Kovačević, *Agresija i nasilje* (Aggression and violence), Faculty of Law - Centre for Publications, 1999)

animals that kill for food, **man is the only being that consciously inflicts pain and death on members of his own species, often finding true pleasure in it**.

In the literature, aggression is viewed as a complex social and psychological phenomenon. It is not just a physical attack, but a broad spectrum of behaviour that includes **insults, defiance, stubbornness, fits of rage**, and even more refined forms such as **slander, gossip, blackmail, and undermining another's social status**. Psychology, particularly Alfred Adler's, also includes **vanity (ambition), jealousy, envy, harshness, and hatred** among aggressive character traits. Essentially, any activity by which an individual's personality and the well-being of others are attacked against their will can be categorised under this concept.

Rousseau argued that man is born free and good, but is corrupted by private property. On similar grounds, Marx believed that man is a generically good being who only becomes "bad" under class-based, socio-economic conditions. For both of them, aggression is a product of social relations, not human nature. In contrast, Luther and Calvin believed in innate human depravity. Ibn Khaldun emphasised the drive for power, while Machiavelli considered that self-interest was so dominant that "men sooner forget the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony. Thomas Hobbes rounded this off with the concept of Bellum omnium contra omnes, the war of all against all. In the 20th century, Sigmund Freud and Konrad Lorenz provided a scientific framework for the theory of innate aggression. Freud introduces the concept of the "death drive" and emphasises that humans have **an innate love of aggression**. He rejects Enlightenment rationalism, believing that man is a driven being, and therefore "evil", for which reason a classless society without repression is merely an illusion. Lorenz adds that the aggressive instinct is necessary for the survival of the species, but in humans it takes on destructive proportions because the biological "brakes" that prevent animals from killing their own kind are lacking. Abraham Maslow and Erich Fromm take the completely opposite view. Drawing on research in child psychology and ethnology, Maslow argues that aggression is not innate but acquired through cultural influence. He states that anthropoid apes show more altruism than aggression, and that clinical research confirms that aggression is not the trait of a healthy, but of a frustrated and immature personality. Erich Fromm makes the famous distinction between benign aggression, which represents a phylogenetically programmed defence of life and vital interests (common to humans and animals) and malignant aggression, which for him is a specifically human passion for torture and destruction that is not instinctive, but represents a "human potential" that develops under certain circumstances (e.g. in situations of chronic boredom, insignificance, or through the character structure of the personality). According to psychiatrist M. First, aggression is learned through immediate reinforcement: if a child (or an adult) sees that aggressive behaviour leads to a goal, they will repeat it. Furthermore, **economic factors** must not be overlooked. Poverty, destitution and the fear of failure in competitive industrial societies create a constant state of emotional tension and stress, which directly fuels aggressive behaviour.

VIOLENCE - CONCEPT, CAUSES, TYPES AND FORMS

Theorists who define the concept of “violence” seek to distinguish it clearly from the concepts of “power” and “force”. In this sense, they define power as the ability to impose one”s will, interests, and goals; force as a form of power that those subject to it do not consider legitimate; and violence as a form of force and aggression that is used against the opposition and resistance of those upon whom it is inflicted.

There are numerous definitions that emphasise different dimensions of violence: as the physical use of force for the purpose of injury, killing or damage to property, as the unlawful application of physical force, as an act that violates generally accepted legal and moral norms, or as the deliberate use of force for pleasure, revenge, the assertion of pride, or to instil fear in others. Violence is also often conceptualised as the opposite of freedom, that is, as the coercion of subjects into acting against their will, and simultaneously as a form of communication of political power, where the wielders of force send a message through pain and damage. In addition to the classic forms of political, domestic, sexual or sporting violence, contemporary theory also emphasises **structural violence**: systemic conditions (economic, educational, health, legal) which, without the direct application of physical force, deny subjects equal opportunities for development and security. Structural violence implies that inequalities and institutional practices can in themselves have violent effects that, in the long term, prevent individuals or groups from realising their basic rights and potential. The concept of violence is closely linked to that **of coercion**: in the public sphere, a distinction is often made between permissible coercion (e.g. state coercion through law, legislation and institutions) and violence as the impermissible, unlawful use of force. Social coercion, however, can be organised and based on various means, physical, moral, economic or political, with the effectiveness of this mechanism being directly related to the degree of organisation of the subject of coercion. **René Girard** contributes to the understanding of violence by highlighting its mimetic and mutual character: violence often develops as a vicious circle of revenge and retaliation, in which accumulated hatred and suspicion are reproduced through mutual preparations for attack. According to Girard, once a community falls into this cycle, violence is self-perpetuating and difficult to stop without a conscious intervention that breaks the mechanism of imitation and the collective projection of blame onto a scapegoat. In practice, therefore, violence appears on multiple levels: individual, institutional and structural, and requires an interdisciplinary approach: legal, sociological, psychological and political.

The question **of the causes of violence** is one of the central questions of contemporary social theory. The answers depend on your theoretical standpoint: anthropological, psychological, sociological, Marxist, behaviourist, all the way to contemporary concepts of

structural violence. It is precisely the diversity of these approaches that shows violence **is not a one-dimensional phenomenon**, but a complex phenomenon that lies **at the intersection of human nature, social relations, and politico-economic structures**.

Anthropological research into the lives of "primitive" and "civilised" communities has shown that the aggression of adult humans in modern societies is not fundamentally different from that seen in animals or in early human communities. **Durbin and Bowlby** highlight two key differences. Firstly, adult aggression becomes a normal group activity: murder and assault are not the everyday experience of all, but are most often institutionalised through political parties, economic classes, religious communities, nations and states. A moral distinction is often made between those who kill "for themselves" and those who kill in the name of a "higher purpose" or "group interest". Secondly, human imagination and rationalisation give aggression a special form. Unlike children and animals who "simply fight", adult humans construct complex religious, ideological, racial or class systems before they begin to kill one another, "dying like flies for theories", for a nation, class, religion or "the salvation of culture", and destroying members of their own species for the sake of abstractions. Psychoanalytic theorists find the causes of violence in internal psychological mechanisms such as projection (transferring ones own unacceptable impulses onto others), regression (a return to earlier developmental stages), and displaced aggression (venting anger on "safer" targets). Instinctivist and neo-instinctivist theories (Freud, Lorenz) emphasise that aggression is rooted in human nature and genetic structure: violence, according to them, is an expression of an inherited drive that is activated and articulated under certain conditions. In contrast, behaviourist theorists reject the idea of a genetic "destiny" of violence and emphasise the role of environment and learning. According to them, violence is a product of social conditions: the modelling of behaviour, the rewarding of aggressive patterns, and the creation of beliefs that violence is a "necessary" or "effective" means. Frustration-aggression theories further explain violence as a consequence of the obstruction of goal-directed behaviour: when individuals or groups are systematically prevented from achieving their goals, frustration turns into aggression. Marxist views place the emphasis on economic and class conditions: poverty, exploitation, inequality and class struggle. According to these authors, violence is not just an individual psychological problem, but an expression of political-economic relations and a tool in the struggle over ownership, power and privilege. In this sense, violence is both a means of maintaining class domination and a reaction of the oppressed. However, **none of these approaches is sufficient on its own, and the causes of violence should be sought across the entire spectrum of phenomena: social differences, political conflicts between elites and interest groups, economic inequalities, frustrations and traumas, cultural patterns that glorify aggression, and in the existence and tolerance of socio-pathological phenomena**. Violence is both rational (planned, instrumental) and irrational (explosive, mimetic), depending on the context. The irrational dimension is particularly pronounced in wartime, post-war, anomic or cataclysmic circumstances, whereas rational violence also occurs under "normal" social conditions as a "calculated means".

The diversity of causes is also reflected in the diversity **of types of violence**, distinguishing between **physical violence** (gross violation of physical integrity) and **psychological violence** (violation of psychological integrity), which can be direct (torture, "brainwashing" by chemical or electronic means) or **indirect** (indoctrination, propaganda, manipulative media content). According to the way it is carried out, violence can be direct, personal (directed at the body and identity of the individual) or indirect, where the target is not only the body but also the psyche. Particular significance is attached to the concept of **structural violence**, namely a specific form of violence whose perpetrator is not easily identifiable, but whose consequences are real: **hunger, illiteracy, disease, poverty, systemic discrimination**. Violence can be individual (spontaneous or premeditated violence by an individual) or collective (spontaneous or organised violence by groups). In terms of its prevalence, it is distinguished between point-source violence (directed at individual targets) and mass violence (directed at larger groups, ethnic, class or religious communities). In terms of duration, it can be short-term or long-term; by function, it can be instrumental (a means to an end) or communicative (conveying a message, intimidation), etc. When discussing its forms, we distinguish between **simple and complex**. The simple forms include **coercion, pressure and threats of force**. Psychological abuse and torture are particularly extreme forms of violence: physical and psychological methods are often combined with "additional" forms of degradation such as unsanitary conditions, lack of food, exposure to extreme temperatures, etc.

Violence, however, also permeates several spheres of everyday life. **The family**, which should be a space of safety and support, often becomes a place of the most brutal physical and psychological abuse: against children, women, and the elderly. The causes of domestic violence include economic hardship, patriarchal power structures, alcoholism, addictions, mental health disorders, or broader social norms that tolerate domination and control.

Similarly, violence is also spread through schools in the form **of bullying** (physical abuse, psychological humiliation, exclusion, cyberbullying), and through sport, particularly **hooliganism in stadiums and on the streets**, where **violence** is **intertwined with political frustrations and the activities of criminal groups**. Popular culture further normalises aggression: films, TV series, video games and internet content are full of scenes of explicit violence, often presented as desirable or "cool", which contributes to desensitisation, particularly among children and young people.

Used literature:

- M. Furst, Psychology, Zagreb: Školska knjiga, 1994.
- S. Freud, Selected Works, Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1976.
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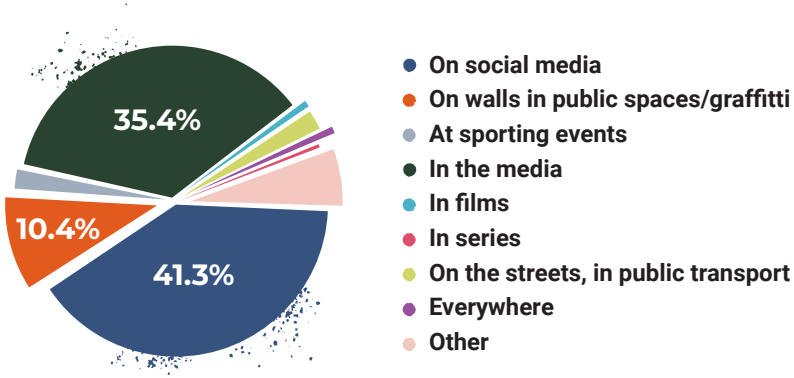
- E. Fromm, Revolution of Hope, Belgrade: Grafos, 1978.

ANALYSIS

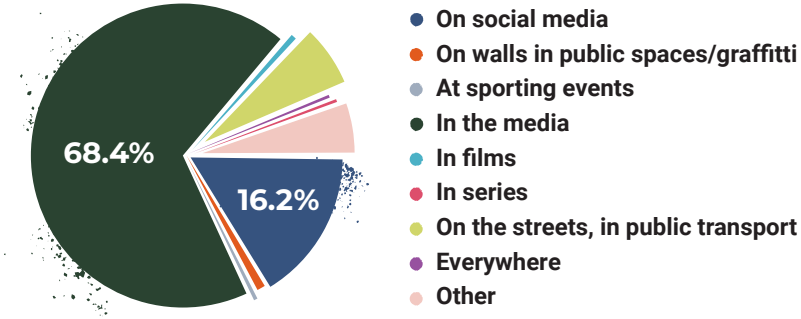
The research began by addressing the sources of hate speech, and the classification of hate speech according to its level of danger. The focus then shifted to questions about the groups most exposed to hate speech, and how history and the mention of historical events influence violence in society. Respondents highlighted social media as the main source of hate speech, while "Everywhere" was the second most common answer (35.4% of responses), which speaks volumes about the ubiquity of hate speech in public spaces. Interestingly, the online survey found that the majority of respondents get their information primarily from social media. Just over 10% stated that they notice hate speech most on walls in public spaces (graffiti and murals). A large percentage of respondents identified the media as the main and most dangerous source of hate speech (as high as 68.4%), followed by social networks and the street as a public space.

Where do you most often notice hate speech?

680 responses



In your opinion, which source of hate speech is most dangerous?
680 responses



When asked, "Towards which nation/ethnic group/nationality/group/minority, etc., do you notice the most hate speech in public spaces?", respondents most commonly answered "against Roma, Albanians, Croats and the LGBTQ community". Interestingly, as many as 74,4% of respondents believe that mentioning certain historical events or figures intensifies hate speech in public (for a deeper analysis, see the essay by Dr Dubravka Stojanović[9] below), while the historical topics that provoke violence are Srebrenica, Jasenovac, and the wars of the 1990s.

These responses are not surprising, given that Serbia's political elite use the consequences of the country's "failure to face the past" as an instrument to fabricate "enemies" or the "Other," diverting public attention from real problems to socially constructed ones. Threats and hate speech directed at Albanians, Croats, and Bosniaks draw on narratives rooted in the wars of the 1990s. "Albanians" here refers primarily to Kosovo Albanians, portrayed as those who, by "provoking NATO's 1999 intervention," permanently took Kosovo ("the historically Serbian land") out of Serbia's sovereignty. Completely suppressing in public discourse the fact that the suspension of Kosovo's autonomy in the late 1980s inaugurated a period of apartheid on that territory—whose primary victims were Kosovo Albanians—as well as the fact that the war in Kosovo began in 1998 (not in 1999 with the NATO intervention), opens a vast discursive space for continued collective demonization of Albanians as an ethnic group. Portraying Albanians as the "ideal enemy" is not only a consequence of the ongoing dispute between Serbia and Kosovo under EU mediation, but also the result of selective erasure of historical facts both in the education system and in public discourse. Thus the so-called "Yellow House," the alleged site of organ trafficking and never-proven crimes against abducted Serbs after the war, acquires a central place (even in contemporary

9 See Chapter 15, *Trauma of History or Strictly Controlled Hatred?*, Dubravka Stojanović, historian.

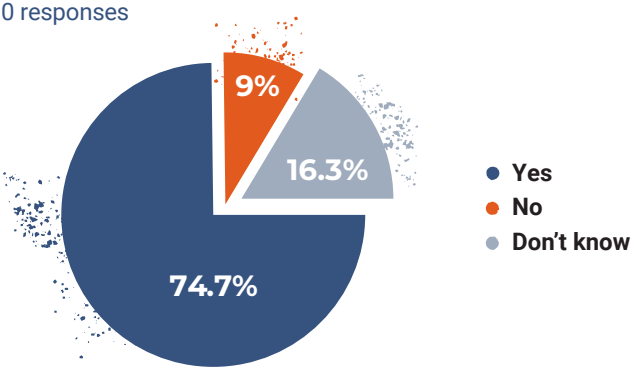
Serbian cultural and film production), while the mass grave in Batajnica, where remains of 744 killed Albanian civilians were found, remains a toponym erased from public memory—remembered mainly by a few civil society organizations and peace activists.

There is little difference when it comes to Croats as an ethnic group, who are also especially exposed to hate speech. Early efforts by numerous civil society organizations to present a factual account of the war in Croatia—whose outbreak was marked by the destruction of Vukovar and the shelling of Dubrovnik—unfortunately failed to find a place in Serbia's official narrative about that war. Moreover, the grand memorial gatherings marking the anniversary of the military-police operation "Operation Storm," during which roughly 200,000 Serbs were expelled from the former so-called Republic of Serbian Krajina, are emphasized in Serbia as a central event of that war and as one of the key historical moments symbolizing the suffering of the Serbian people in the 1990s wars. The open political engagement of convicted war criminals who have returned after serving sentences speaks volumes about how the state treats facts and verdicts issued by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

The almost hysterical reaction of Serbian authorities to the UN General Assembly's adoption of the resolution on the Srebrenica genocide—with slogans displayed in Belgrade such as "Serbs are not a genocidal people"—paints a vivid picture of today's Serbian political elite's attitude toward the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through skillful media manipulation, the Serbian authorities have constructed such an intense self-victimizing discourse that one might conclude Serbs are the victims being commemorated on the thirtieth anniversary of the Srebrenica genocide. The Serbian state also actively participates in commemorating the unconstitutional "Day of the Republika Srpska" each January 9 (the date associated with the proclamation of the Serb Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina), while events of 1992—the bloodiest year of that three-and-a-half-year war—are effectively absent from public discourse. Camps such as Omarska, Keraterm, and Trnopolje, the horrific crimes committed in Višegrad, Ključ, and Sanski Most, and the rape camps in Foča are treated as if they did not exist. As a consequence of this "failure to face the past," Serbian victimhood again dominates public discourse—even in Srebrenica, where genocide was committed against Bosniaks. It is therefore unsurprising that Bosniaks are among the groups most vulnerable to hate speech, as if they themselves were to blame for the so-called "stigmatization of the Serbian people as genocidal" (even though no international organization, court, or other relevant body assigns collective guilt to the entire Serbian people for the Srebrenica genocide).

Do you think that reminders of certain historical events or persons strengthen public hate speech?

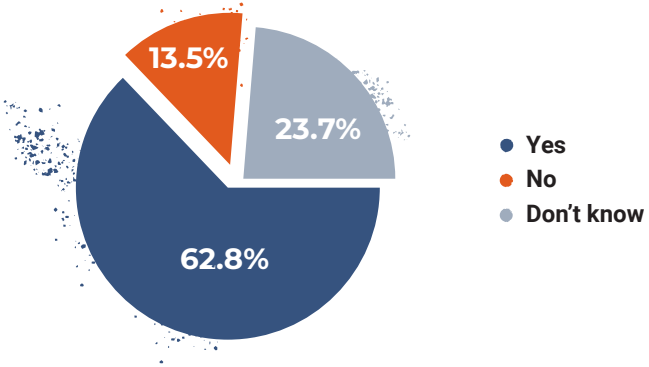
680 responses



The next set of questions in the survey concerned the presence of graffiti and murals in Serbia, and their social and political function. The vast majority of respondents answered "yes" to the question, "Have you noticed an increased number of graffiti and murals on the streets of cities in Serbia since 2023?". When asked which groups or individuals most frequently use walls to express socio-political views, the following answers predominate: hooligan groups, "Ćaciji"[10], groups close to the government, "government bots", " Phalanxes", right-wingers. Finally, the vast majority of respondents are bothered by the content written on walls, and the prevailing view is that it should not be there.

Have you noticed an increased number of graffitti and murals since 2023 on the stressts in Serbian towns?

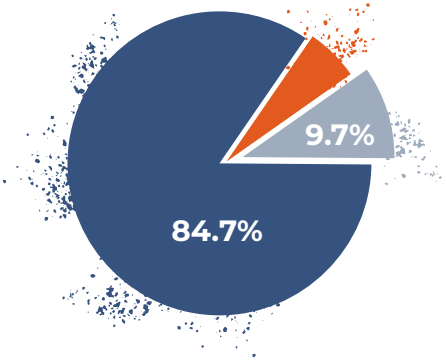
680 responses



10 Translator's note: Ćaci [CHA-tsee] is an informal, pejorative Serbian slang term used during the 2025 student protests to refer to pro-government supporters who confronted, disrupted, or opposed the protesters. The label implies organized backing for the authorities, often suggesting aggression, intimidation, or being mobilized/paid to counter the demonstrations. It is not an official designation and carries negative connotations.

How do you feel about the messages on walls?

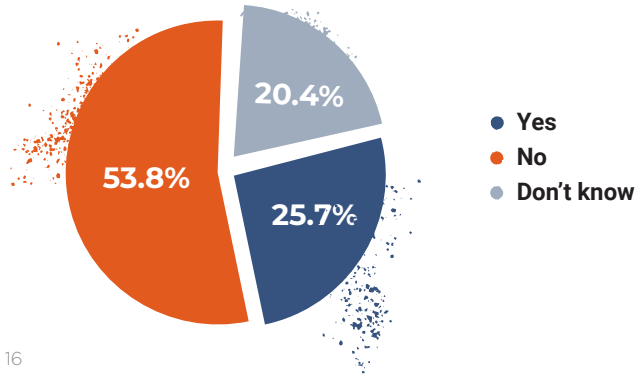
680 responses



In the following series of questions, the researchers focused on who is responsible fo removing graffiti or any messages that spread hate speech written on walls in public spaces. Based on the 2023 research, the researchers' experience was that people generally believe it is the responsibility of the authorities to remove such content. However, the present research showed that there is a growing awareness that the content should be removed by residents of the affected property. Furthermore, during the focus groups, several participants gave examples of how they themselves had "taken matters into their own hands" and painted over the offensive messages themselves. Although a vast majority of respondents still believe that removing offensive graffiti and murals is the responsibility of the local council, this figure is slightly lower than in the previous survey from 2023. An overwhelming majority of respondents also agree with the statements that vandalising walls contributes to an increase in hatred and aggression in society, and to an increase in violence against women. Finally, the majority of respondents agree with the statement that vandalising walls with hateful messages directly contributes to the increase of nationalism in society.

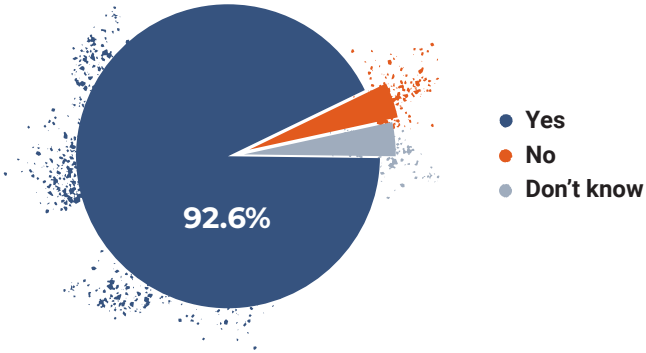
Do you think that the public/residents of buildings with walls vandalised by graffitti should be responsible for removing them?

680 responses



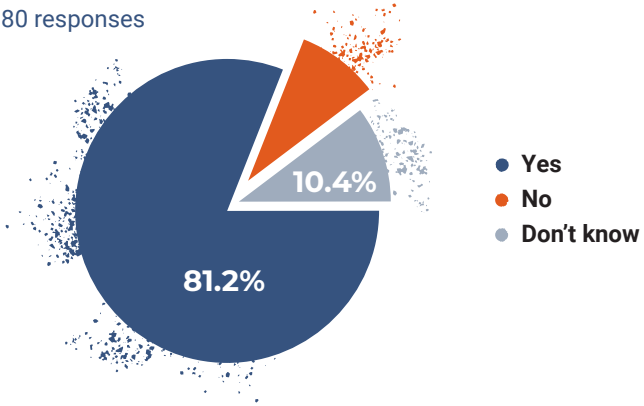
Do you think that local government, the city or state has a responsibility to remove such graffitti?

680 responses



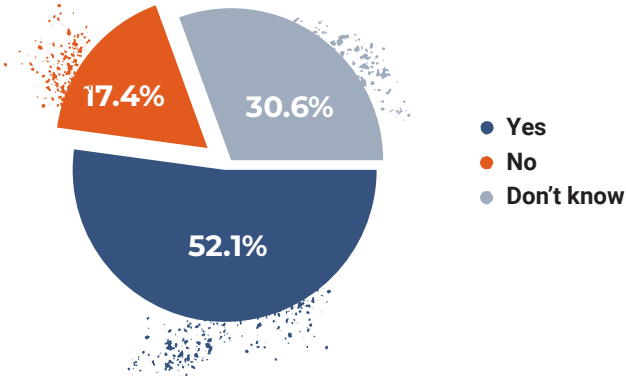
Do you think that vandalised walls affect the growth of hate and aggression in society?

680 responses



Do you think that walls vandalised with hate messages affect the growth of violence against woman?

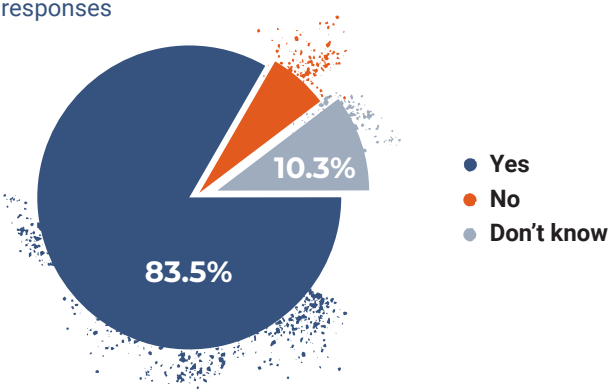
680 responses



When discussing the link between violence against women and the influence of the media and politicians on this form of violence, a topic that is further explored in Lara Končar's analysis, it is interesting to note and highlight that the vast majority of respondents believe that both politicians and the media in Serbia contribute to the rise in violence against women.

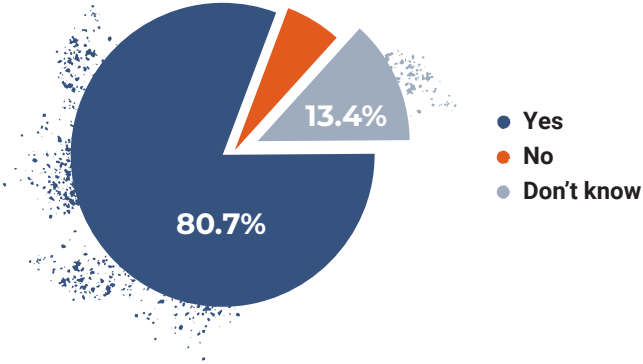
Do you think that politicians in Serbia affect the growth in violence against women?

680 responses



Do you think that the media in Serbia affect the growth in violence againts women?

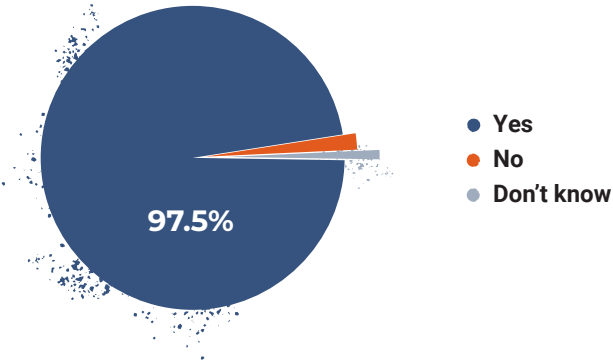
680 responses



Similarly, and when considering the link between politicians' speech and public appearances and nationalism, almost all respondents believe that politicians in Serbia contribute to the rise of hatred, aggression and nationalism in society.

Do you think that politicians in Serbia affect growth in hate, aggression and nationalism in society?

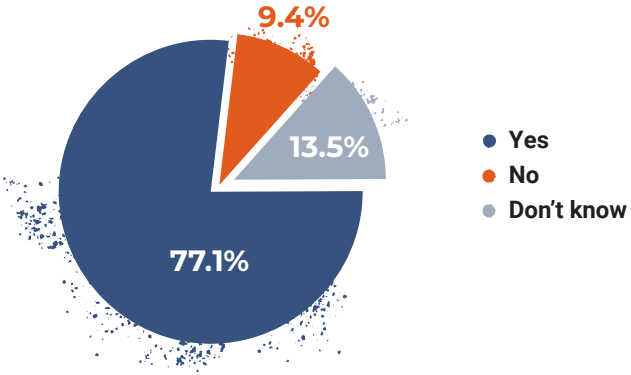
680 responses



This should be immediately correlated with the fact that the vast majority of respondents see a very clear link between nationalism and hate speech.

Do you think that walls vandalised with hate messages affect the growth of nationalism in society?

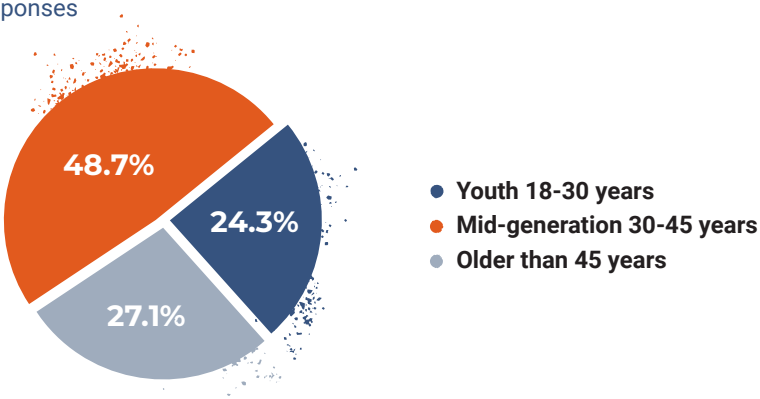
680 responses



Also of interest are the findings concerning the question of which generations are most apt to use hate speech. The majority believe that use of hate speech is strongest among those over 45, and weakest among the youngest generations (more on these findings will be discussed in the analysis of the focus group work).

In your opinion, hate speech is used mostly by:

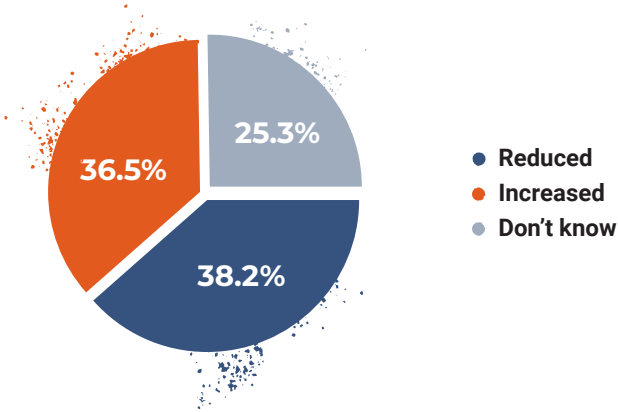
680 responses



We find completely balanced answers to the question of whether student protests have diminished or increased hate speech in public. This result stems from the fact that many respondents recognise that hate speech towards students, opposition politicians and civil society organisations is dramatically high, but that this trend cannot be identified within the civic and student movement.

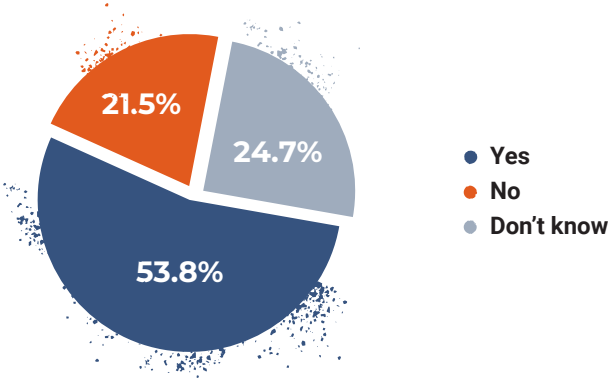
Have the student protests decreased or increased public hate speech?

680 responses



A rather more optimistic view prevails among respondents regarding the future of hate speech in society, namely its elimination, or at least its marginalisation in public life. The vast majority of respondents believe that hate speech in society can be eradicated in the future.

Do you think that hate speech in society can be eliminated in the future?
680 responses



When it comes to differences between generations, all three age groups that participated in the focus groups hold similar or identical opinions on the presence of violence and hate speech in Serbian society. All agree that the authorities use violence to settle scores with political opponents, and that the ruling elites are solely responsible for the presence of a culture of violence in the country. However, there are also some important differences that are worth highlighting.

The youngest generation in the focus group focused almost entirely on the current social and political crisis in the country. Unlike the other two age groups, they found it more difficult to make connections with specific events from Serbia's recent history, such as the wars of the 1990s. The graffiti they notice most are: "Rektoralni Đokica"[11], "Blokaderi štrokaderi"[12], and the red middle finger that pro-government activists painted across the country. They are aware that painting murals and stencils of Ratko Mladić or glorifying other war criminals contributes to a culture of violence in society, but unlike the other two age groups they have more difficulty drawing a parallel between revisionist narratives and the glorification of earlier war criminals and the narratives that the current government uses to "justify" its violence and repression. However, the participants in this focus group indicated that derogatory terms for other ethnic groups, such as "Shiptar", "Gypsy" and the like, are unacceptable in public discourse and contribute to the spread of hatred. Members of the first focus group believe that hate speech is most prevalent among older generations, and they clearly recognise ways in which the authorities deal with dissent through violence.

11 Translator's note: A reference to the university of Belgrade Vice-Chancellor Vladan Đokić who supported the students, with a wordplay on rector/rectal.

12 Translator's note: "Blockaders are filth".

The so-called middle generation believes that it is their generation in which hate speech is most prevalent. Members of this focus group frequently referenced the 1990s and the protests against Slobodan Milošević. They do not consider themselves a "lost generation", but they link the current political and social crisis to nationalism and to events from the last decade of the 20th century. There is so much distrust of institutions among this generation that they plan their lives and try to live without relying on them. Although they have been exposed to nationalist narratives for years, the members of this group have remained "immune" to them. They are very well-informed about developments in the student movement, many are also active members of the civil society movement. They have little trust in politicians in general, but rather "rely" more on students and the student movement. They often feel shocked by the "perverse and morbid" language used by the authorities, especially in events from the so-called "Ćaciland" on 1 November 2025 and the following days, during the commemoration of the anniversary of the tragedy in Novi Sad. Many members of this generation believe that violence has been completely normalised in Serbian society, and that the culture of violence can hardly change.

The oldest generation (the third focus group) also believes that hate speech is most prevalent among their own generation. Members of this group drew a clear distinction between graffiti that spreads hatred, and murals as a legitimate form of artistic expression that should not be removed. They also believe that the state is behind the right-wing and hooligan groups that spray-paint these graffiti, and that little can be done about it. They strongly support the student movement, but unlike the so-called middle generation, they are not sure they can bring about fundamental changes in society themselves. As with other generations, they believe that Albanians and Croats are the most affected by the hate speech coming from ruling politicians and pro-government media.

GENERATIONAL VIEWS ON HATE SPEECH, VIOLENCE, AND THE LEGACY OF THE 1990s — ANALYSIS OF AGE FOCUS GROUPS

Serbia, a country at the crossroads of historical traumas and contemporary social challenges, exhibits persistent narratives and practices from the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars of the 1990s. Analysis of transcripts and other data collected from focus groups with participants from three age cohorts reveals complex processes that prevent dignified memorialization, as well as numerous blockages in facing the past. These dynamics deeply shape today's understanding of and tolerance for hate speech and

violence in the public sphere. Graffiti and symbols, media narratives, and citizens' sense of (in)ability to confront power structures figure prominently in how these issues are articulated.

Young people are most often exposed to everyday encounters with graffiti and hate speech, but they also show varying degrees of rejection and a desire to resist. Most participants in this youngest focus group note an increase in graffiti in Belgrade and other cities, while distinguishing between artistic graffiti and those carrying hateful or threatening messages. Person 5 observes: "I notice more graffiti around the city, mostly targeting blockaders and students… there are also Nazi and nationalist graffiti glorifying convicted war criminals…" While some feel discouraged or fearful of becoming victims or witnesses of violence (Person 8: "I'm afraid I might run into someone ready for physical confrontation just over graffiti"), others give examples of collective resistance and transforming hatred into creative expression. Person 7 describes a school initiative to paint over hateful graffiti and draw flowers. Regarding slogans like "Aco Šiptare," young people clearly recognize their offensive and exclusionary nature, seeing them as propaganda that deepens division and recalls the 1990s as a source of antagonism. Their reflections on institutions' inability to effect substantive change often lead to feelings of powerlessness or passivity — "Our power is weak…," says Person 8 — while other respondents point to a distorted dynamic between citizens and institutions that fail to fulfill their roles: "I think it's the job of the institutions and the city cleaning services…". Among these youngest participants there is awareness of social mechanisms that normalize violence through the media and via intergenerational transmission of narratives. They are especially conscious that hate speech targeting national minorities, Roma, LGBT+ people, and students is often institutionally encouraged or tolerated (Person 1: "The main source starts to be the state…"). We conclude that young people understand graffiti and hate speech as both street phenomena and political tools, and that using historical narratives and figures is a form of mythologizing that functions through manipulation and political influence.

The focus group of middle-generation participants (born or raised during the 1990s and early 2000s) reflects a deep understanding of the origins of hate speech and the politicization of violence, and of how historical revisionism and glorification of war criminals are used to stoke hate speech and nurture a culture of violence. As Person 1 says, they are "a generation raised with media that from the breakup of Yugoslavia to today created an atmosphere of fear and division." For them, graffiti often means more than mere expression: it is a manifestation of social conflict, and attempts to remove it are frequently met with threats and frustration ("When they tried to remove the Ratko Mladić mural, they received physical threats…"). Graffiti that glorifies war criminals, nationalist slogans, and insults toward minorities represent for this generation a continuity of systemic and persistent failure to face the past. Person 9: "The graffiti 'Ratko Mladić

— Serbian hero' directly links to the wars of the 1990s, and now my children ask who Mladić is…" Several participants mention local examples (Valjevo, Požarevac), indicating the problem extends beyond the capital. The middle generation is frequently exposed to an overlap of traditional media narratives and the contemporary digital scene ("Twitter, Facebook, Instagram are used to spread hate and manipulation by algorithms…"), and they report an increased sense of personal and collective responsibility. They clearly see how 1990s narratives have been instrumentalized to mobilize new or "eternal" internal enemies ("Ustaše, Šiptari, Cigani…" are archetypal enemies recycled as needed). Notably, members of this group — including teachers, journalists, and parents — identify the spread of these narratives through education ("Children in primary school literally repeat adult phrases…") and the normalization of violence via reality TV and news programs. Still, they express some optimism, particularly concerning youth, who are increasingly aware and willing to engage in nonviolent resistance.

The oldest focus-group participants agree that hateful and violent graffiti are not only present but organized with systemic support from certain structures. They point to links between nationalism, practices from the 1990s, and today's public discourse. Person 1: "I don't like seeing those graffiti, especially on beautiful facades. Those tied to politics and the state carry hate speech…" They stress their shock at murals that glorify figures from the criminal milieu, the wartime past, and "heroes" whose crimes are silenced or deliberately revised. Interestingly, many of the oldest participants admit their own withdrawal: "An ordinary citizen can't stand up to the force of those who defend the graffiti and such…," while nearly all describe the state either as an accomplice or as an impotent regulator ("These are organized works; the state finances and protects them…"). Their experience of the 1990s, which they see as a period of intense introduction of nationalist narratives, fuels concern for the future. Person 2 notes: "Most educated people have no problem using the word 'šiptar'…", while Person 4 adds that "erasing graffiti changes nothing systemically." Older respondents tend to link internal problems (corruption, institutional violence, fear) to a politicized past and ongoing crisis-management governance. This age group also displays strong feelings of helplessness and defeatism: "For years I've been trying to claim a right and it always breaks on silence or threats from the powerful…", one participant says; others describe deep distrust in institutions that have for years cultivated the impression that no change is possible without confiscation or even violence.

All age groups agree that Serbia still lives in a culture of violence nurtured by the failure to face the past and by glorification of crimes, while institutions often exploit or ignore hate speech. For young people, solutions lie in creative civic resistance. The middle generation points to setbacks in formal education and new forms of negative influence through public communications, while the oldest — though often resigned — tend to support civic actions while acknowledging their limits. A special problem for this group is the lack of a clear boundary between private and public space: graffiti, murals,

and chants from the stands testify to broken barriers and the normalization of violent language, and the use of 1990s narratives in contemporary politics prolongs the spiral of violence. The absence of official societal reckoning with the past leaves room for new cycles of hatred, manipulation, and repression.

Transcripts make clear that without genuine, systematic confrontation with the traumas of the 1990s and public acknowledgment of the state's responsibility, hate speech and violence will remain long-term tools of division and control. Different generations speak different languages, but they share the sense that change is hard and must often be won through small acts of resistance, community empowerment, and persistent insistence on civic values. Until the past is clarified, it will continue to speak through walls, slogans, and public stages, and the future will remain hostage to the repetition of unresolved traumas.

MEDIA MANIPULATION AS A HIDDEN FACTOR IN THE ESCALATION OF SOCIAL VIOLENCE

Noam Chomsky, a distinguished linguist, philosopher and political activist from MIT, has for decades been dedicated to exposing the complex mechanisms of social control, with a particular emphasis on the role of the media in shaping public opinion. His list of ten manipulation strategies provides a fundamental framework for understanding how dominant structures influence collective consciousness and behaviour. In the context of research into the undue influences on the increase of violence in society, these strategies become particularly relevant, as they reveal the subtle ways in which media rhetoric and practice can not only conceal the causes of violence but also actively contribute to its normalisation and even escalation. This segment of the research will analyse how each of Noam Chomsky's strategies can be interpreted as a factor that indirectly or directly fosters an environment conducive to the increase of violence, whether through its acceptance, passivity in the face of it, or the encouragement of aggressive tendencies, illustrating them with examples from the contemporary and recent history of the Serbian media scene, with a particular focus on the mechanisms of disinformation and foreign propaganda influence. For a better understanding of the subject of analysis – the undue influence on the increase of violence in our society – we also consider the strategy of continuous denial and impunity.

DISTRACTION AND REALITY-CONSTRUCTION STRATEGIES - MANIFESTATION THROUGH NATIONALIST NARRATIVES

The first and perhaps most fundamental strategy, **distraction**, is central to misinforming the public about the real causes of violence. By flooding the media space with irrelevant information and sensationalism, attention is diverted from structural problems such as economic inequality, social injustice, or systemic corruption, which often create deep-seated roots of frustration and potential aggression in society. A passive public, overwhelmed by trivial content, is less capable of critical thinking and collective action against the factors that generate violence.

Similarly, **the strategy of creating a problem and then offering a solution** manifests itself directly in the context of violence. The media, both traditional and new, become an important instrument in shaping the dominant discourse in the community. When so many media outlets almost constantly send nationalist messages that range from veiled to outright hate speech, an atmosphere conducive to the escalation of violence is created. In this environment, hate speech ceases to be egregious but becomes commonplace, losing its recognisable negative connotation and becoming an acceptable part of the media landscape. A concrete example of this strategy is visible in the media coverage of the Novi Pazar student protests. When students from the State University of Novi Pazar travelled to Novi Sad to join a commemoration for the victims of the pedestrian overpass collapse, their initiative, which spoke of solidarity and unity, was met with brutal media manipulation. Televisions such as Informer called them "veiled Hamas members, Islamists and anti-Serb extremists". On Pink, the Bosniak national flag was misinterpreted as "the flag of Sandžak", and the whole situation was presented as "a clear message" of secession.[13] These media interpretations demonstrate a classic pattern of creating an artificial problem or "threat to national security" to discredit the protest and legitimise potential repression. The same scenario has been repeated before, when protests in Novi Pazar were labelled "anti-Serbian hooliganism" and the participants "Islamists and Serb-haters". The Commissioner for Equality has described this kind of reporting as hate speech, but its wide resonance in the national media shows how the problem is manufactured, and then an implicit "solution" is offered in the form of dehumanisation and stigmatisation, which paves the way for the acceptance of violence, whether symbolic or direct.

13 Katarina Stevanović, *Veiled Hamas-ists: Why Informer insults Novi Pazar students on religious grounds, Vreme*, 23 October 2025, https://vreme.com/vesti/zabradjeni-hamasovci-zasto-informer-vredja-novopazarske-stduente-na-verskoj-osnovi/

These messages are deeply rooted in the 1990s, when the dominant nationalist narratives about Serbia as an "eternal victim" and about a "constant external threat" were concocted in the "war kitchen". Slobodan Milošević's regime systematically destroyed the free media, while state media were used as a propaganda machine. The news on public service broadcasting or in the daily newspapers of that era was "written in a parallel reality", with twisting and outright denial of facts, portraying the war policy as legitimate and necessary, and constantly sowing hatred and fear. The media darkness of that era is also illustrated by the example of the total solar eclipse in August 1999 when, unlike in other countries where people gathered to observe the phenomenon, the streets in Serbia were empty and people "watched" the eclipse on television, listening to disinformation and unscientific claims from the ministry about protective measures. This is a paradigmatic example of how artificial fear is created through the media and the public is kept in the dark, perfectly illustrating the strategy of diverting attention from the regime's real problems.[14]

STRATEGIES OF GRADUALISM, DEFERMENT AND DENIAL

Two of Chomsky's strategies focus on the gradual introduction of unpopular measures. These are **the strategy of gradualism** and **the strategy of delay**. In this study, and for a better understanding of the subject, we have also included **the strategy of continuous denial and impunity.**

The strategy of gradualism allows for the introduction of radical changes to the social fabric, which would otherwise encounter strong resistance, over a long period of time. Although it is popular to claim that "nothing has changed since then", the nineties are indeed the foundation upon which today's media narratives rest. Blinding with nationalism and populism is simply adapted to the needs of the present day, while the application of repressive laws, cuts to social welfare or rising inequality – factors that can lead to social tension and outbreaks of violence – are normalised "drop by drop". The public is gradually accustomed to the erosion of human rights or increasingly brutal social circumstances, which contributes to apathy and diminishes the ability to proactively oppose violence.

The strategy of delay works in a similar way, offering relief from difficult decisions for an indefinite future. This may provide short-term peace, but at the same time, it postpones confronting the fundamental causes of violence, allowing them to smoulder and potentially escalate in the future, while the public develops a passive attitude.

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14 Anja Anđušić, *The Traps of Nationalism: How the Media Teaches Us to Hate, Liceulice,* 12 November 2025, https://liceulice.org/zamke-nacionalizma-kako-nas-mediji-uce-da-mrzimo/

Reading certain media outlets today, it is difficult to conclude that wars have actually ended. Tabloids "wield their weapons" and incite violence and intolerance whenever it is deemed appropriate, particularly during times of crisis. The constant rewriting of history, the denial of war crimes, and the glorification and making heroes of their perpetrators create a "convenient nation" that will tolerate not only hateful messages but also their misuse to settle scores with anyone considered an enemy. This continuous narrative is an example **of "gradual"** and **"delayed"** introduction, where the negative elements of the past are constantly recycled and adapted, maintaining a state of latent aggression in society. Thus, the Novi Pazar students were declared "Islamists" without serious consequences, while other students, citizens, journalists and activists were labelled "Ustaša". The narrative of a "genocidal nation", constructed during the adoption of the United Nations resolution on the Srebrenica genocide, was dusted down and used against protestors and independent media, which the Srebrenica Memorial Centre also noted in its report as a means of suppressing student protests.

The strategy of denial and impunity acts as the glue that binds and sustains the previous strategies – gradualness and postponement – turning them into a long-term regime of normalised violence. Its essence is twofold: first, the systematic denial or relativisation of war crimes and responsibility; second, the institutional and media "production" impunity. In this framework, denial does not merely serve to rewrite the past; it creates the present environment in which hate speech, the stigmatisation of "enemies" and latent aggression are socially permitted and politically profitable. The Youth Initiatives for Human Rights report on the denial of war crimes during 2024, entitled State of Denial – Serbia 2024: Lying about Crimes under the Flag,[15] analyses the actions of judicial institutions which, when it comes to prosecuting war crimes, **establish the principle of denial and impunity.**

The institutional architecture of denial rests on signals that come from the top. According to the report by the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, the bearers of the denial narrative range from local authorities to the highest state level, with President Aleksandar Vučić often setting the tone which is then taken up by other representatives of the authorities, particularly during campaigns such as the opposition to the Srebrenica Resolution. Such a framework legitimises reinterpretations in which actors in power are presented as defenders of national interests or even as victims of "other people's narratives", thereby pushing the crimes from public accountability into the realm of political marketing.

In public discourse, denial is fuelled by radicalising language and the targeting of "internal" and "external" enemies. Examples like Aleksandar Vulin's statement calling

15 Branimir Đurović and Marko Milosavljević, *State of Denial – Serbia 2024: Lying about Crimes Under the Flag* (Youth Initiative for Human Rights - YIHR Serbia, 2025) https://yihr.rs/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/WEB-BHS-Stanje-poricanja-2024.pdf

European Parliament rapporteur Tonino Picula "Ustaša trash", push the boundaries of what is acceptable, normalising dehumanisation as legitimate debate.[16] This language is inextricably linked to the practice of impunity: if opponents are ontologised as enemies, then crimes against them are relativised as "patriotic acts", rather than as criminal offences. Such logic facilitates the symbolic rehabilitation of convicted perpetrators through public rituals, commemorations and institutional platforms.[17]

State institutions play a key role in this, amplifying revisionist narratives through protocol and cultural practices. The Ministry of Labour and security ministries have repeatedly provided a platform for convicted war criminals, from the speeches of Vladimir Lazarević at ceremonies to the promotion of films and biographies in Army cultural centres, thereby shifting the war criminal from the realm of legal transgression into that of cultural capital and moral authority. This sends a message to the public that criminal responsibility is a matter of narrative, not fact; consequently, it lowers the threshold of social sensitivity to violence and fuels a readiness to resolve political conflicts by authoritarian means.

The media's misuse of war criminals is inevitable given the high level of media and social polarisation in Serbia. Just as in the past two decades, convicted war criminals have not disappeared from the media scene during 2024 and 2025. While a few media outlets have maintained a critical approach to topics like war crimes, tabloid newspapers like Informer, Kurir, Večernje novosti, Politika, Srpski telegraf and Alo tendentiously invite convicted war criminals as interviewees on a wide range of topics. They are given space to comment freely on the socio-political situation in Serbia and beyond, largely without mentioning that these individuals have been convicted of war crimes by international courts, nor asking questions about responsibility for the crimes.

The frequent hosting of convicted perpetrators of crimes in tabloid and pro-government media, without clearly highlighting their convictions and without questions about responsibility, generates a systemic relativisation, in multiple violations of the Code of Ethics of Serbian Journalists.[18]

This legitimises revisionist discourse and creates an asymmetry towards the few critical voices. When these practices are combined with aggressive headlines,

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16 *Aleksandar Vulin called Tonino Picula "Ustaša trash", and that on the orders of his boss, Aleksandar Vučić"*, Nova, 14 November 2024, https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/aleksandar-vulin-je-nazvao-tonina-piculu-ustaskim-djubretom-i-to-po-direktivi-njihovog-sefa-aleksandra-vucica/

17 Igor Mirosavljević, *Analysis of the Narrative: "New-old attacks on civil society and independent media in Serbia"*, ISAC, 27 January 2025, https://www.isac-fund.org/en/news/analysis-of-the-narrative-new-old-attacks-on-civil-society-and-independent-media-in-serbia

18 Code of Conduct for Serbian Journalists: https://savetzastampu.rs/dokumenta/kodeks-novinara-srbije/

sensationalism and incitement, a "low-frequency" state of mobilisation is produced, in which violence does not have to occur every day to be ever-present.

Legally, the absence of consistent prosecution and public condemnation of crimes fosters the perception of selective justice. Socially, the ritual visibility of perpetrators and the discursive demonisation of "others" lowers inhibitions against violence, reinforcing patterns of intolerance that are easily activated in times of crisis. Thus, the strategy of denial and impunity not only maintains a "latent pocket of aggression" in society, but cyclically renews it through institutions and the media, making violence a predictable outcome rather than a deviation. Finally, the influence of Russian propaganda in fostering this strategy of manipulation should also be mentioned.

The claim that Serbia serves as an extremely fertile ground for the activities, and even the successful spread and proliferation of foreign influence through propaganda, disinformation campaigns and the spread of fake news, is particularly relevant in turbulent geopolitical times. An analysis of Serbia's media landscape over the last two and a half years, since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, shows that almost all national TV frequencies – a public good owned by the people and funded by the state and subscriptions – serve as the primary channel for (pro-)Russian propaganda. This phenomenon is unique in Europe, with the exception of Belarus, and indicates the misuse of media to advance the propaganda of a foreign state. The national frequencies are incomparably more effective in carrying out these activities than any Russian state media operating in the region.[19]

Since the start of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russian state media have been mass-producing a narrative that serves their imperialist policy, systematically delegitimising any journalistic work that deviates from this rhetoric. Schools are even training a new generation of propagandists.[20] In Serbia, this principle manifests itself through the manipulation of public opinion with confusion, conspiracy rhetoric and blurring the line between fact and fiction. Narratives have become deeply rooted, such as those that Ukrainians are "Nazis", that the war is a "special operation", and that independent media are "foreign agents" financed by the "decadent West" in an attempt to undermine Russia's greatness. Russia uses the restrictions imposed on its state broadcasters as proof that the West "fears the truth", twisting the freedom of expression argument into an accusation of censorship. Accusations of "genocide in Donbas" and "Russophobia" are examples of manipulating humanitarian language to justify the invasion and delegitimise

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19 *CIDC Research: Serbia as a Key Target of Russian Disinformation Campaign in the Western Balkans*, Vijesti, 18 April 2025, https://en.vijesti.me/world-a/balkan/755019/CIDC-research-Serbia-as-a-key-target-of-the-Russian-disinformation-campaign-in-the-Western-Balkans

20 *Propaganda Monitor: The Russian Edition,* Reporters Without Borders https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2025/09/Propaganda%20Monitor_%20Rapport.pdf

critics. The use of terms such as “special military operation” instead of “Russian invasion of Ukraine” obscures the level of aggression and undermines the application of obligations of prevention under the UN Genocide Convention, which indirectly contributes to the normalisation of violence and the evasion of responsibility.

A STRATEGY OF EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION AND UNDERMINING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH A LANGUAGE OF HATE

In the context of violence, **addressing the public as a small child** through the media significantly undermines the ability to rationally analyse complex social problems. Simplistic rhetoric and emotionally charged narratives about violence (e.g. the demonisation of “others”, irrational fears, etc.) prevent a critical examination of the context and encourage impulsive, often aggressive reactions. This infantilisation is intensified **by the use of the emotional over the rational**, which is crucial to propagating prejudice and inciting hatred. An emotionally-based media campaign can consciously provoke fear, anger, or aversion towards certain groups, creating the conditions for dehumanisation, which often precedes physical or systemic violence. Overriding rational analysis with emotional manipulation blocks the development of empathy and the ability to resolve conflicts peacefully.

The hateful rhetoric coined in the nineties and used in the media is a paradigmatic example of this strategy. Phrases such as “domestic traitors” and “foreign mercenaries” have been used for years to target activists, civil society, and opposition politicians. This lexicon has been intensified and expanded in reporting on the current protests, targeting both the students in the blockade and the ordinary protesting public, labelling them as extremists, terrorists, fascists and Nazis. In addition, neologisms such as “drugosrbijanci” (other-Serbian), “srbomržnja” (Serb-hate), “antisrpstvo” (antiserbianism) and “autošovinizam” (autochauvinism), inscribed in the nationalist lexicon during the 1990s and early 2000s, are still frequently used in public discourse today.

This linguistic gymnastics creates the image of a false extremism on the part of those who oppose nationalist ideas. In this way, the majority of media users who espouse this everyday vocabulary can recognise “both sides” as extreme, and safely position themselves somewhere in the middle, adopting nationalist ideas to some extent.

This aligns with **Bilig's analysis of "everyday/banal nationalism"**,[21] whose ubiquity and apparent innocuousness create a firm foundation for the legitimisation of extremism and hatred. The consequences of such ideas are also visible in a global context, such as the mass arrests of immigrants in the USA, where conservative media present this as a defence of national security, while civil society warns of growing racism and xenophobia.

LANGUAGE AS A HIDDEN ARCHITECT OF SOCIAL VIOLENCE

In contemporary political theory and philosophy of language, the view is increasingly being established that language is not a neutral medium for exchanging facts, but a potent tool of power that can shape reality, undermine democracy and incite violence. As Justin D'Ambrosio argues in his paper *A Theory of Manipulative Speech*[22], manipulative speech is ubiquitous and pernicious and constitutes a key component of propaganda. However, to understand the true danger of this phenomenon in the Serbian context, we must cross-reference abstract theoretical models with concrete field data. The CRTA report *Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media* (2022)[23] provides empirical confirmation of D'Ambrosio's theses, revealing that manipulation in Serbia is not a sporadic incident nor an "error" in journalism, but a systemically organised, state-funded strategy whose ultimate goal is **the radicalisation of society and the delegitimisation of any critical voice.**

D'Ambrosio builds his theory on a critique of the idealised GRACE model of communication, which rests on the assumption that interlocutors cooperate to share knowledge. In contrast, in the political arena, the goals of speakers are often in direct conflict with the interests of the public. D'Ambrozio defines manipulative speech as the violation of two fundamental norms. These are:

The norm of cooperativeness, i.e. the requirement that speech contributes to truth and understanding;
and
The public norm, i.e. the requirement that the speaker's intentions are transparent.

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21 Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (SAGE Publications, 1995)

22 Justin D'Ambrosio, *A Theory of Manipulative Speech* (Arché Philosophical Research Center University of St. Andrews, 2025), https://philarchive.org/archive/DAMATO-4

23 Jelena Kleut, *Mapping disinformation in the Serbian media: Research Report* (CRTA, 2022) https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Mapping-disinformation-in-Serbian-media_2020.pdf

Whereas a liar simply states an untruth, a manipulator does something more perfidious: he uses **strategic speech** (designed solely to achieve his hidden agenda, e.g. staying in power), but does so covertly. D'Ambrosio's key thesis is: **"Manipulative speech is strategic speech in disguise"**. The manipulator is a "false friend" who convinces an audience they share the same values and goals, while in fact working against their interests.

The findings of a study conducted by the organisation CRTA in 2022 add a concrete dimension to this definition. By analysing 494 news items in 15 of the most influential media outlets over a four-month period, as many as 559 cases of disinformation were identified. A key finding is that in Serbia, it is not outright lies (so-called "*fabricated news*" actually make up a smaller part) that dominate, but rather more sophisticated forms of violating the norm of cooperativeness. These are **manipulation of facts** and **misleading content** (the most common form), i.e. mixing accurate and inaccurate information or taking things out of context.

Extreme bias: this is a direct violation of the norm of public interest – media outlets such as TV Pink or Alo present themselves as news services, but in reality, they act as PR departments for the ruling party, completely excluding the other side of the story. CRTA shows that the generators of this type of discourse are precisely the most influential media: the online editions of the tabloids Alo and Kurir are responsible for more than half of all disinformation, while among television channels, the undisputed leaders in manipulation are TV Pink and TV Happy. D'Ambrosio also introduces the concept of *linguistic trust*, which is the audience's instinctive belief that a speaker is well-intentioned and is saying relevant things. In Serbia, this trust is systematically abused through a mechanism that CRTA calls **a clientelistic relationship.**

The data reveals a direct link: the most manipulative media outlets are also the biggest beneficiaries of public funds. The tabloid Alo, a leader in disinformation, received millions through state advertising and project co-financing. TV Pink, which recorded the highest concentration of manipulative content among television channels, received the lion's share of the state advertising budget (a full 37% of the total for national TV stations in 2020). **This proves that the state not only tolerates the violation of communication norms, but actively finances it. By trusting the "national frequencies" or the "most-read newspapers" (a linguistic act of trust), taxpayers become victims of manipulation that they themselves have paid for.**

D'Ambrosio's typology of manipulative techniques perfectly maps the practice of Serbian tabloids documented by CRTA. These are:

• **Stupefying and hyperproduction.** Referring to Orwell, D'Ambrosio describes a speech whose aim is not understanding but the paralysis of the mind. In the practice of the Alo

portal, this manifests through the technique of **slicing**. During just one day of environmental protests, Alo published 58 news items containing disinformation, sometimes as many as 14 within two hours. The aim of this deluge is not to inform, but to emotionally overwhelm the audience in order to provoke anger and prevent rational thought.

• **Manipulative ambiguity and extreme bias.** The media intentionally use vague terms ("foreign mercenaries", "rioters", "fake environmentalists") which the audience fills in with their own fears.

• ***False connections*** **and** ***imposter*** **content.** Headlines that claim one thing, while the text claims another or misrepresents the source. CRTA records cases where members of the ruling party are presented as "independent analysts" (e.g. from the Centre for Social Stability), thereby falsely suggesting objectivity to the audience. Also, visual manipulations, such as using old photographs or footage from other countries to illustrate events in Serbia or the region, serve to create a false context of danger.

The most dangerous point of intersection between theory and practice lies in **direct targeting**. In over 50% of the analysed disinformation, **the targets are opposition parties, their leaders (most often Dragan Đilas), independent media (N1, Nova, KRIK) and dissenting citizens**. The media do not report on their views; they target them. Through manipulative techniques such as false accusations of violence, treason or theft, an atmosphere of lynching is created. When protesters are systematically called a "mob" that is "harassing honest people" and "blocking ambulances" (common disinformation during the blockades), a moral justification for violence against them is created. It is also interesting how manipulation is used for **foreign policy topics**: the West (the EU, the US, NATO) is often portrayed in a negative context through fake news about sanctions or pressure, while Russia and China are glorified, often with unverified claims being passed off as facts. This further polarises society and encourages xenophobia.

While the mainstream media in Serbia lay the foundations for **manipulation**, this process is finalised on Telegram channels. They do not function merely as a communication platform, but as a closed, parallel information system designed for complete indoctrination.[24] Channels such as "BUNT je stanje duha"[25] (a central hub for distribution with over 85,000 followers) and "Princip" (an ideological authority with a high level of engagement) create hermetically sealed circles in which the D'Ambrosio's concept of "**bewitchment**" is taken to the extreme. In this space, **linguistic trust** is abused through the narrative of a "forbidden truth" allegedly concealed by "treacherous" media and institutions. Here, the violation **of public norms** is reflected in the false representation of the interests of foreign powers (primarily Russia) as authentic Serbian patriotism. The most dangerous aspect of this

24 Miloš Jovanović, *Ekosistem srpskih ekstremno desničarskih Telegram kanala (Ecosystem of Serbian far-right Telegram channels)*, Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2025 https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/ekosistem-srpskih-ekstremno-desnicarskih-telegram-kanala-2/

25 Translator's note: REVOLT is a state of mind

ecosystem is the transition from words to action: channels like "People's Patrol" use this digital infrastructure to **operationally mobilise violence on the streets, turning passive consumers of manipulative speech into active participants in violent actions, thereby closing the loop from media dehumanisation to physical confrontation.**

RAGE BAIT AND THE DEATH OF RATIONAL DEBATE

If Noam Chomsky defined the structure of manipulation in the 20th century, the term *rage bait* describes its digital mutation in the 21st century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, which named the term one of the key words of the past year, *rage bait* is not just an internet phenomenon but **a communication strategy that deliberately provokes anger and outrage in order to increase visibility**. This suggests that we live in a time when rage is no longer a side effect of political conflict, but its primary resource. Politics becomes a series of affective events, and the audience (voters) no longer seeks information, but emotional stimulation and conflict.

If *rage bait* has come to dominate the public online space, the logical consequence is the building of political authority through raised voices, threats and anger, rather than through arguments or a platform. This style is increasingly migrating from social media into parliaments, press conferences, and even traditional media. The media realise that to capture the attention of a fickle audience, they must compete on the intensity of the emotions they provoke, rather than on the coherence and reliability of their information. This shift is profoundly changing the nature of political engagement: politicians who do not generate enough anger, outrage or conflict become invisible. Those who generate too much become algorithmically favoured. Platforms reward more extreme, more direct content, shaping not only the style of communication but also the identity of political actors.[26]

This logic has not only "infected" politicians; it is also transforming the media, which can no longer ignore the economy of affect. Under the pressure of clicks, views, and a constant struggle for visibility, the media is increasingly shifting from an informative to a reactive model of communication. Affective criteria are becoming more important than professional ones, meaning that topics are chosen for the reaction they will provoke, not necessarily for what is publicly relevant. Headlines are written as emotional triggers, not as analyses or

26 Ana Martinoli, *Anger as a Tool of Online Political Communication, Radar,* 12 December 2025, https://radar.nova.rs/radar-kolaz/rage-bait-alat-onlajn-politicke-komunikacije/

previews of content. Polarisation is produced by the media, as algorithmic models reward conflictual narratives. Ultimately, this leads to the erosion of the media's intermediary role. When newsrooms start to operate according to the rules of major online platforms, the distinction between professional journalism and digital propaganda becomes increasingly blurred. Rage bait becomes the "norm of viability", and professional standards a luxury that not every media outlet can afford.

In authoritarian and hybrid political systems like Serbia, *rage bait* has long served as an instrument of state communication, used consciously and with clear intent. The mechanisms are well-known and rely directly on what Chomsky described: the creation of "emotional" enemies who provoke anger, thereby homogenising supporters and diverting attention from structural problems, economic crises and political responsibility. Affective incidents, from media witch-hunts to orchestrated campaigns that alternate at a dizzying pace, impose **anger as an instrument for managing public mood. An oversaturated audience cannot maintain its attention on a single topic long enough to articulate a critical debate.**

Finally, political figures adopt influencer techniques to synchronise with algorithmic logic, using short video formats, personalising conflicts and creating viral narratives to flood the public sphere with various types **of high-intensity anger** to the extent that rational debate becomes practically impossible. In such a system, political relevance and media value are equally measured by their potential to provoke **strong emotional effects. And when anger becomes the basis of communication, democratic dialogue is transformed into a destructive arena of reactive identity conflicts.**

A STRATEGY OF WEAKENING INTELLECTUAL CAPACITIES AND SELF-BLAME

Keeping the public in ignorance and mediocrity is a direct attack on society's ability to understand violence and combat it effectively. The deliberate lowering of the quality of education and the prevention of access to information about the sociological, psychological, and economic determinants of violence results in individuals being susceptible to manipulation. In such an environment, **fostering complacency through mediocrity** contributes to the normalisation of a state in which violence is accepted as an inevitable part of reality, rather than as a problem that requires intellectual engagement and a solution. It is not necessary to watch national television channels or read tabloids to be

aware of today's "parallel reality"; it is enough to attend a family gathering where you hear the language of those who get their information from such media. This is indicated by the results of one of the age-based focus groups, specifically the one in which participants were aged 31 to 55, who stated that they could not recognise the language of their parents, which has become so crude and garbled that it is almost identical to that heard in pro-regime media. This result differs greatly from that obtained from the same sample just three years ago, and it can be concluded that there is a trend of increasing success for this state strategy of manipulating the public.

Finally, **the strategy of reinforcing self-blame** shifts the responsibility for social problems, including violence, onto the individual. Instead of a collective recognition of the systemic causes of violence, victims or marginalised groups are forced to **blame themselves** for the situation they find themselves in. This not only generates apathy and depression, but also **prevents the mobilisation** of **the collective energy** necessary to combat violence, by isolating individuals and leaving them with no capacity for critical thinking.

STRATEGY: KNOWING THE INDIVIDUAL BETTER THAN THEY KNOW THEMSELVES

Through advances in sciences such as neurobiology and applied psychology, the dominant elites gain a profound understanding of human behaviour, emotions, and vulnerabilities. Such superior knowledge allows for the high precision of manipulative campaigns. In the context of violence, this represents the ability to predict and provoke reactions that can lead to its acceptance, or even to active participation in violent acts (e.g. wars, repression, etc.). Such an asymmetry of knowledge allows for deeper control over individuals and society, effectively neutralising resistance and enabling the implementation of agendas that can have violent consequences, with minimal risk of rebellion.

In the digital age, this strategy is enhanced. Nationalist narratives also flourish on social media, where hate algorithms and digital echo chambers become crucial. With less control and moderation, digital platforms are fertile ground for the spread of these ideas through simplified, fast-paced formats (short videos, memes, etc.) that evoke strong emotions. Increasingly sophisticated algorithms push users into **echo chambers** – digital spaces where users are fed content that only confirms their existing beliefs, further polarising already deeply divided societies. This process perfectly exploits

superior knowledge of human psychology and attention mechanisms, directing attention towards content that **stirs up emotion** and **prevents critical reflection**, thereby effectively manipulating individual perception and collective behaviour.

THE TRAUMA OF HISTORY OR STRICTLY CONTROLLED HATRED?

Dubravka Stojanović, historian

I don't know what to make of the results of a survey of citizens' attitudes towards hatred, hate speech, aggression, violence and nationalism conducted in Serbia in 2025. More precisely, I don't know whether they are a reason for optimism or for pessimism? There would be reasons for optimism if we could conclude from these results that the public is very aware of the problems in their society and state, that they realise they are surrounded by hatred and violence, that they agree hate speech spreads from the media and social networks, that politicians are the greatest culprits... And that a large percentage believe that such a situation can be changed. However, a pessimistic conclusion could suggest that this result was achieved because hatred and violence are so dominant in public life that they are impossible to ignore, so prevalent that even those who famously "don't know" could recognise these malignant phenomena.

Whether this research points to optimistic or pessimistic conclusions, what can be said for certain is that the public's powerful sense of being surrounded by hate speech and violence is an extremely important social symptom. I say symptom, because the causes are deep-seated. I would like to dedicate this short essay to reflecting on those causes, insofar as they are revealed by the respondents' answers. They have accurately detected the widespread presence of violent content, but it is up to us to consider where it comes from.

To reflect more deeply on the reasons for the respondents' feeling, we could start with the fact that 74.7% answered that they think mentioning certain historical events or figures intensifies hate speech in public. This fact alone is telling and worrying, because why should history play such a prominent role in a healthy and prosperous society? Why would it be the subject of graffiti and murals on walls surrounding the public? Why would it be a topic debated by politicians, written about in the media, and discussed on social media? Why would messages from the battlefields of the past be sent to the future?

The next question that arises is whether hatred in the public sphere spreads through talk of just any past events, or of specific ones? What exactly do the respondents perceive

as the prevailing content of the past, the combustible basis on which hatred can develop? And what is more prevalent – victory or defeat? Heroes or victims? What kind of culture of remembrance is on offer in the public sphere?

To the question "Which historical periods dominate the discourse on the past", the answers reveal deeper levels of the sources of hatred and intolerance. Although we do not have precise statistics here as respondents answered the question descriptively, a few historical periods and events clearly dominate. By a clear majority, respondents answered that these were the Second World War and the wars of the 1990s.

Why these two historical periods in particular? The first explanation could be that they are the most recent traumatic events, no matter how much time has passed. Or, more precisely, events for which witnesses are still alive, those who were able to personally influence the respondents with their testimonies and stories. But the temporal proximity of an event is not the decisive factor in its dominance of the public sphere. What puts a historical event on the wall, or keeps it alive in the media, is the intended message.

What, then, are the messages conveyed in the public sphere through the misuse of history? Graffiti and murals dedicated to the Second World War do not refer to the celebration of partisan victories, to the Užice Republic as the first liberated territory in Europe, nor to the glorious battles of the Neretva or Sutjeska. On the contrary. What they speak of are traumatic events, such as the crimes against Serbs in the NDH or the new memory of the civil war in Serbia, which aims to glorify the losing Chetnik side.

Why those two topics in particular? Because both have been heavily publicly politicised in recent decades, so much so that they have completely replaced previous models of remembrance of the Second World War. As early as the beginning of the 1980s, a profound revisionism of that part of the past began, a revisionism whose primary aim was to question the ideal of brotherhood and unity as the fundamental values of the Yugoslav federation. Literary works and theatrical productions that began to speak intensely of the crimes committed by Croats in particular, but also other neighbouring peoples, against Serbs, played a key role from the early 1980s in the process of dismantling Yugoslavia through the systematic creation of mistrust, and then fear of a repeat genocide, as it was framed at the time. Mistrust and fear are the most reliable foundations for hatred.

Soon, through culture and later historiography, the foundations of the socialist regime, which rested on the founding myth of the partisan struggle, began to be questioned. The most successful tool in this process was the rehabilitation of the Chetniks, who were first proclaimed an anti-fascist movement and later, with their crimes and collaboration "forgotten", had the halo added of being the only true fighters for Serbian interests.

In other words, there has been a dramatic reversal in the culture of remembrance since the 1980s, and the creation of an entirely new model. The carefully constructed and nurtured image of the epic of the partisan struggle, the victorious and heroic spirit, was replaced by self-victimisation and an identification exclusively with the victims – whether the Serbian civilian victims in the NDH or with the losing side in the Second World War. This new model was successful and effective, as it had the power to simultaneously dismantle the socialist order and Yugoslavia. The immediate political goal was achieved relatively quickly. However, in the long term, it left severe consequences for society.

This self-perception became the psychological basis for mobilising the Serbian side in the wars of the nineties. Although these were classic territorial wars, the propaganda motivation was found in history, giving the war a higher purpose, a mission. It was presented as a war to correct historical injustices and put the course of history back on the right track. In that spirit, the war in Croatia was presented as a pre-emptive one, as one whose aim was to prevent the crimes that had occurred in the Second World War. The rehabilitation of the Četniks was presented as the liberation of historical truth and the correction of an injustice half a century after the end of the Second World War. Both gave the wars of the nineties the force of vengeance.

However, the wars of the nineties not only failed to bring the desired revenge, victory and a new beginning, but they brought a new, bitter defeat. And not just one. The JNA withdrew from Slovenia after 10 days; the war in Croatia ended with the fall of the Republika Srpska Krajina and the expulsion of Serbs from Croatia; the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina did not end with the division of that former Yugoslav republic and the annexation of its territories by Serbia and Croatia, which had been the plan. In the war with the world's most powerful military force, Serbia lost control of Kosovo. It was labelled the aggressor, was hit with sanctions, faced hundreds of thousands of refugees and was bombed. Such an outcome led to a profound frustration from which Serbia has still not recovered over a quarter of a century later.

So now, what does this historical "lecture" have to do with the transmission of violent messages through the misuse of the past in today's Serbian public life? It does this because it first and foremost concerns deep social frustrations that were not articulated after the war as defeats from which lessons could be learned, after which a new page could be turned, enabling them "never to be repeated". On the contrary. For all thirty years since the end of the war in Croatia and Bosnia, and twenty-five years since the end of the war in Kosovo, public discourse has been sending the message that it should all be repeated, that we are just waiting for a more favourable moment, a change in the international situation, and then we will continue from where we left off. Public discourse was emphatically revisionist, in complete continuity with the model that was first established in the early 1980s. This fact alone is quite sufficient if we are looking for the causes of the hate speech

that respondents feel in public, as the constant mental preparation for a new conflict keeps tensions permanently high, placing a heavy burden on society and keeping it in a state of agitation.

The events that respondents cited as serving to convey hate speech speak unequivocally. Let us recall that the responses are dominated by the wars of the nineties and the Second World War, and among the specific events or figures are Jasenovac, Bljesak, Oluja, Srebrenica, Košare, the 1999 bombing, Ratko Mladić, and Draža Mihailović. The Battle of Kosovo. With the exception of Srebrenica, all these events belong to the model that Aleida Assmann calls the traumatic defeat. Of these, Srebrenica is the only one that does not fit: the question is why it is so present, what message does its prominent presence in the public sphere convey? Certainly, the first aim is the denial of genocide. But the second aim is a threat, as made clear by a recent graffiti in Pančevo: "[Novi] Pazar a new Vukovar, Sjenica another Srebrenica". Not to mention the hooligan's chant: "Knife, wire, Srebrenica". If this interpretation is correct, then Srebrenica is also part of the same narrative, the one that calls for revenge, only this time not as a defeat but as an example of good practice.

But, alongside this deep-seated model of a dominant culture of remembrance, other answers in this questionnaire also suggest that there is another, more banal, entirely political reason for the selection of these events. These are the answers to the question of which nations or groups were the target of the most hate speech. By a clear margin, these are Croats and Albanians. Alongside them are the Roma, which reflects traditional racism. Why Croats and Albanians in particular? You would think that this is logical because they were the enemies in the recent wars. But this is not the case. For if the recent wars were the only factor driving hate speech, then Bosniaks, or – in the rhyme of the traditional pantheon of enemies – the Turks, would also be on that list. But they are completely absent. There are no Slovenes for example, and we can easily recall what analyses also show, that it was precisely the Slovenes who were the first target of local hate speech, especially in 1989, after the gathering at the Cankar Cultural Centre, the very widespread boycott of Slovenian goods, and the intense targeting of figures from the Slovenian political leadership of that era. But that has been completely forgotten. The reckoning with the Slovenes is finished.

We can therefore conclude that in Serbian public discourse, the enemy and historical events have been selected, that what we see all around us is not just a random choice. Ultimately, the choice of "enemy" has been shown to depend on the current political situation, not on "real" history. The Croats and Albanians are not there because of the previous war, but because of the next one.

To keep readiness for a future conflict at a consistently high level, memories of defeats are needed. The theory of the culture of memory has established that to mobilise a nation, defeats and victims are far more important than victories and heroes, because they create

empathy for one's own people and homogenise them. Defeat strengthens cohesion, because, as Ernst Renan said as early as the late 19th century, "suffering unites more than joy". The strong public presence of the very events and defeats singled out by the respondents serves to maintain tensions and hatred towards Croats and Albanians, as a permanent mobilisation for the second half, for revenge.

Fixating on the enemy and fostering self-victimisation create the inflammatory mixture that the respondents experience as being suffocated by violence in the public sphere. This model of remembrance, which Alaida Assmann calls the traumatic defeat, is particularly dangerous for a society because it insists on the trauma; it is constantly renewing it. Such remembrance paralyses society, preventing it from moving on from defeat. The very call to move on is perceived as betrayal. The memory becomes part of the trauma, and the only exit on offer is revenge. According to Asman, a trapped society loses its developmental potential, is buried in the past, loses its connection with reality, and is obsessed with its pain, which it masochistically relives time and again. In such a situation, violence becomes an inherent part of society because the build-up of frustration and the inability to see a way out create an aggressive atmosphere which the respondents recognise very accurately. The research unequivocally shows that, whether the violence in public life is organised or spontaneous, it is systematically cultivated in Serbia for very specific political and, if you will, territorial objectives. It is not scattered, dispersed in various directions and at different targets, but is clearly focused, using precisely those messages from the past that can provoke the most emotion, to mobilise the general public most effectively. In other words, hate speech and incitement to violence are strictly controlled. So, to return to the original question – does this inspire optimism or pessimism?

MODELLING VIOLENCE

Dr Roberto Grujičić, pediatric and adolescent psychiatrist, co-author of the podcast Two and a Half Psychiatrists

When we speak of the increase of violence in society, we most often think of sporadic incidents such as physical assaults, murders, public threats, brutality in public discourse and similar. This is because these are the most visible, disturbing and "media-attractive" incidents that evoke a sense of unease in us. Consequently, such events often remain etched in our emotional memory as disturbing or potentially threatening occurrences. However, it is important to remember that they represent the end result of a process that can often take decades.

The findings of the latest research conducted as part of the project *Why Do You Say*

Love When You Mean War 2.0 express the impression we also personally gained from participating in it. Indeed, through workshops and conversations with young people, we gained an impression that was confirmed by the research: that violence is becoming an ever more present and increasingly acceptable way of reacting. A key theme emerges from the conversations with focus group participants and from the quantitative data: violence does not appear as a choice, but rather as a psychological response to chronic frustration, fear, and a sense of powerlessness. We also see this in our clinical work with children and adolescents, where aggression is generally not the primary problem, but almost exclusively a secondary symptom. It is often an attempt to regulate overwhelming emotions that the young person lacks the capacity or appropriate technique to process in another way. In focus groups, particularly with younger participants, violence is not described simply as hatred, but as anger, anxiety, discouragement, and even apathy. Graffiti, slogans and hate speech become a kind of release valve, and violence ceases to be a deviation; it becomes functional. What is worrying is that this form of "functionality" becomes normalised over time. The repetition of violent messages leads to habituation: what was once shocking now goes unnoticed.

The genesis of the development of violence in a social context is difficult to identify. However, it is certain that it is a process that is long-nurtured, grows stronger over time, and whose components often slip under the radar of both experts and the general public. Metaphorically, we can represent all these factors as cracks in society that at first seem harmless and almost imperceptible, but over time they widen, multiply and connect with one another, creating a structure in which violence becomes an acceptable way of reacting and behaving.

The first crack, which appears at the earliest point of human development, is the modelling of violence. Modelling represents the process of implicit learning through observing the behaviour of significant others during upbringing, and is one of the most dominant ways of learning through experience. The most famous research in the field of developmental psychology, specifically concerning the modelling of violent behaviour in young people, comes from the work of the renowned Canadian psychologist Albert Bandura. Experiments he conducted in the 1960s and 1970s showed that after children observe adults behaving violently, they themselves begin to exhibit the same behaviour, even without any encouragement or reward. The effect became stronger when this behaviour went unpunished or when it brought control and power. The influences of aggressive behaviour by significant adults or figures of authority were particularly pronounced. In these cases, children not only imitated the violence more often, but they also performed it more intensely and with greater confidence, because the authority figure sends the message that such behaviour is legitimate and "permitted". It is important to emphasise that verbal messages and prohibitions have a significantly weaker effect than what a child observes and participates in on a daily basis. In this sense, the increase of violence in society cannot

be understood as an isolated issue of “problem individuals”, but rather as a developmental and social outcome of prolonged exposure to violent role models in the family, institutions, the media, and public space.

People will often say that psychological experiments are one thing, but real life is something else entirely. In line with this, one question arises for me: “If public space is oversaturated with hate speech, if aggression pays or goes unpunished, do young people perceive violence as a moral problem, as desirable behaviour, or merely as part of everyday reality?”. For me, one of the most striking findings of the research conducted as part of this project is the fact that young people are often mentioned as the “performers” of violent messages, but rarely as their actual authors. Focus group participants repeatedly emphasise that children repeat what they hear in the family, in the media, and on social media. This is a particularly important point in the context of the dominant narrative here, which attributes the responsibility for the rise in violence exclusively to young people.

If we look at social processes as opposed to the individual ones we have mentioned, one of the first social cracks that underpins violence is the normalisation and rationalisation of verbal aggression in everyday interaction. Some of the most common we see in everyday speech are taking an insult as a sign of “candour”, or dismissing threats as an “overreaction”. This leads to a gradual, almost imperceptible shifting of the boundary and a deepening of the problem. When this way of speaking becomes commonplace (e.g. by being repeated, justified or unpunished for long enough), verbal aggression ceases to be recognised as violence and begins to be perceived as an acceptable, and even expected way of communicating. Throughout this process, not only does collective behaviour change, but so do the beliefs about what is “too much” and what is “normal”. Consequently, verbal aggression loses its status as a warning sign and can become a prelude to more serious forms of violence. A society that, like a “boiling frog”, has been simmering for years in an abundance of insults, threats and humiliation, certainly becomes less sensitive to the escalation of violence and reacts more weakly to acts of violence themselves.

Another major factor is dehumanisation, that is, viewing people through numbers or labels. We do this when we apply labels that divide us into “us” and “them”, “defenders” or “attackers”. In the context of propaganda, such labels are applied with the aim of devaluing, dehumanising or ridiculing. In the context of the perpetration of more widespread violence, I would say this is a key point, since aggression becomes psychologically easier because it is no longer directed at a person, but at an enemy category. It is in this segment that I also observe a kind of paradox in the findings of the Krokodil research, where the youngest are often the bearers of messages of violence, while the older generation are its source and instigators. Viewed through the prism of unresolved generational traumas, this paradox can make sense. Indeed, older generations in the Balkans were exposed to the most brutal forms of violence, war propaganda and collective losses during crucial developmental periods.

These experiences could not be adequately processed and integrated, given the then unreflective social climate and undeveloped support systems. This approach led to such traumatic experiences being lived through silence, the rationalisation and the normalisation of aggression. These patterns are then passed on to younger generations, most often through everyday speech, narratives about "others", the way conflicts are explained and aggression is justified. Young people thus become vocal carriers of violent messages that they have not produced themselves, but have adopted. In this way, the unresolved trauma of older generations does not remain in the past, but is transformed into contemporary hate speech and social division.

All of this is fuelled by a climate of chronic insecurity and vulnerability that has been fostered in our region for decades. Indeed, feelings of powerlessness, injustice, invisibility or constant pressure lead to a build-up of frustration and unexpressed anger. If there are no suitable mechanisms for expressing pent-up emotions, aggression seeks the nearest outlet, and this is often the wrong one, directed at another person or oneself. When all these processes last for a very long time – and by that I mean years and decades of living in such a climate and culture – it can lead to the exhaustion of the main resource for defence, namely psychological resilience. In that case, the most dangerous point in a social context is reached, and that is indifference. At this stage, a person comes to perceive violence and aggression as part of their daily life, which they accept and no longer react to. The findings of this research are encouraging to me, as they suggest that young people, despite prolonged exposure to violent narratives and social divisions, still recognise various forms of violence. Furthermore, a large number of them do not remain indifferent, but instead react to violence with a sense of unease, resistance, and a need to distance themselves from such patterns. This indicates that the capacity for empathy, moral judgement, and social responsibility has not been lost. It is precisely in this willingness of young people to recognise and name the problem that lies the possibility of preventing social rifts from deepening further, and instead gradually healing them.

If we view violence as a monolithic phenomenon (e.g. a security or moral problem), we are highly likely to fail to fully understand where it begins and where it ends. The findings of this research, together with decades of studying violence, clearly show that it cannot be explained by a single, unique factor. Violence arises in the space between unaddressed emotions, weakened institutions and problematic social narratives. Working with young people and their families teaches us that lasting change does not happen through prohibition and criticism, but through strengthening the capacity for understanding and emotional regulation. This also applies to a society's system, which functions much like a family system. This text, like the research itself, does not offer quick solutions. But it offers something perhaps more important: a call to linger on uncomfortable questions, not to accept violence as inevitable, and to continue exploring what is not immediately visible. I believe that this is precisely where real change begins.

FAMILY VIOLENCE, VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND FEMICIDE

Domestic violence is a serious social problem that requires the attention and engagement of all members of the community to ensure the safety and protection of women and children. Regardless of whether the participants in the study had experienced violence or not, their responses to questions about domestic violence reveal deep-seated and often worrying attitudes that shape perceptions of and reactions to this problem.

As part of the quantitative survey[27] entitled Why Don't Women Report Domestic Violence?, whose results were published in March 2023, the respondents first answered questions concerning general attitudes towards domestic violence, particularly regarding its reporting and the role of institutions. Personal beliefs and attitudes towards domestic violence were measured through sets of statements that served as indicators for various aspects of this issue. One of the key indicators is the perception of sexual violence. Many women express the worrying belief that "a raped woman or girl is often more or less to blame for finding herself in such a situation". This statement reflects a deep-rooted prejudice and stigma surrounding victims of violence, which further discourages the reporting of violence. Such thinking indicates that many women do not see themselves as active agents in their own lives, but instead blame themselves or their surroundings, leading to re-victimisation. Furthermore, attitudes about protecting family honour play a significant role in why women do not report violence. For example, sayings such as "women or girls should not report domestic violence, as this protects the family's honour" suggest that there are expectations that keep women in abusive relationships and situations. This concept of honour and stigma often prevent them from seeking justice, as they fear shame and judgement. Statements such as, "an attempt at resolving issue of violence should first be made within the family, and only if that is impossible should it be reported to the authorities", further emphasise the idea that the family is the primary space for resolving problems, regardless of the level of violence. Such attitudes downplay the urgency of the situation and discourage victims from leaving abusive partners. Finally, the consideration of a partner's right to be violent is another alarming aspect. Many of the female respondents agreed with the statement that "there are situations when a man has the right to hit his wife and when it is justified". This common narrative further perpetuates the hindrance of women from seeking their own rights and protection.

27 https://www.undp.org/sr/serbia/publications/zasto-zene-ne-prijavljuju-nasilje-u-porodici-rezultati-istrazivanja - The research was conducted under the project Integrated Response to Violence against Women and Girls in Serbia III, which is jointly implemented by UNICEF, UN Women, UNFPA and UNDP, with the support of the Government of Sweden and in partnership with the Government of the Republic of Serbia.

Violence against women in Serbia manifests itself through social norms that normalise violence, institutions that fail to recognise and respond to the risk, and a public space where women who fight for change are subjected to additional forms of pressure and violence.

Data from a 2022 CeSID survey[28] show that societal perception of domestic violence largely shapes victims' willingness to report it. Only about one-third of women openly disapprove of violence; 49.4% show a low level of rejection, while a significant portion holds neutral or even justifying attitudes. Many accept narratives of self-blame and preserving the family's honour: 73% believe that only serious physical injuries justify reporting, while 64% cite child abuse as the main reason for intervention. The main barriers are clearly defined: fear of the abuser (75%), shame (51%), a lack of safe options (50%), and financial dependence. Only 28% of women would first turn to the authorities (the police), while 38% seek support from family and friends. Trust in institutions is medium in most cases (72.1%); 17.5% have high, and 10.5% have low trust. This combination of fear, stigma and limited institutional support creates high thresholds for reporting and leads to victims not recognising, or not considering, many forms of violence (psychological, sexual, economic) as sufficient for intervention.

Data for 2025[29] show at least 14 women killed by current or former partners, sons, grandsons or stalkers (8 killed by current or former partners; 4 by sons). Almost half of the victims (6) had previously reported violence; at least three cases had multiple reports. At least 10 attempted femicides were recorded in the same year, which indicates that the number of fatalities could have been higher without successful intervention. Five of the perpetrators had previous arrests or convictions for violence, and one, in addition to murdering his partner, also killed a seven-year-old child. The age profile shows that women over the age of 46 are particularly vulnerable (11/14). Methods of murder: 9 by knife, 1 by illegal firearm, 2 beaten to death, 2 drowned. In at least five cases, there were clear indicators of high risk (threats with a weapon, previous strangulation attempts, displaying violent behaviour), but institutions often overlooked these signals – due to inconsistent remand decisions, the easy use of house arrest, a failure to issue restraining orders and inadequate supervision during contact with children. The High Judicial Council has not consistently investigated the accountability of judges who make such decisions.

Coordination and cooperation groups, intended for a multidisciplinary response in high-risk cases, operate inconsistently. Cases have been recorded of meetings being simulated,

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28 CeSID, *Research on the underreporting of domestic violence*, field research and qualitative interviews, conducted 10 November – 5 December 2022, representative sample n = 1,004.

29 Records and reports on femicides and attempted femicides in Serbia, 2025 (media reports, independent records of women's rights organisations) https://www.womenngo.org.rs/88-femicid-memorijal/femicid-u-srbiji

with prosecutors making decisions in the absence of the police and social services, and subsequently signing pre-prepared minutes. The groups do not invite high-risk victims to participate in drawing up individual protection plans, do not monitor offenders' return from prison, nor do they check access to illegal weapons or previous serious threats (suffocation). The lack of designated coordinators in higher prosecution offices and the absence of a systematic risk monitoring system further compromise prevention.

The Femplatz research "Between the Megaphone and Silence" (2024/25)[30], which included 170 participants from various cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Leskovac, Pančevo, Vršac, Kraljevo, Novi Pazar), shows that women are often at the forefront of social change. Motivations include responsibility towards children and young people, the fight against corruption, solidarity and a sense of justice; activism provides a sense of emancipation and pushing boundaries. Solidarity is expressed through informal support networks, student stewards, first aid, logistics (food, hygiene) and mutual protection, including interfaith and intergenerational support. **At the same time, the protests have become a new field of exposure: between November 2024 and September 2025, 48 incidents were recorded involving 71 women**. As many as 73% of those affected suffered minor or serious physical injuries, **often multiple types of violence simultaneously: physical, sexual, psychological and digital**. Police interventions included the excessive use of force (baton charges, being thrown to the ground), invasive searches, strikes, hauling, and verbal and sexual threats; women also report humiliating practices such as being strip-searched during arrest. Digital violence – the sharing of intimate images and personal data, receiving death threats – prolongs the trauma and serves as a means of discrediting and intimidating.

The inaction of the authorities, the lack of systematic incident recording and the absence of public condemnation normalise gender-based violence against women at protests. Institutions that should protect and prosecute perpetrators often ignore or minimise the cases. This pattern is also present in domestic cases, from inadequate police response to court decisions that disregard risks.

During the public debate on **the Draft amendments to the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence at the end of November and the beginning of December last year,** the Autonomous Women's Centre (AŽC)[31] supported alignment with the Reform Agenda and European standards (Council of Europe Convention, EU Directives 2012/29 and 2024/1385), proposing a number of concrete solutions: mandatory completion of a specific

30 Research Between the Megaphone and Silence: *Women in the Struggle for Change*, fieldwork 2024/25 (170 participants, in-depth interviews, focus groups, incident database) https://femplatz.org/library/publications/2025-11_Protesti_Istrazivanje.pdf

31 Autonomous Women's Centre (AŽC), comments and proposals on the Draft Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence, public debate 12.11–02.12.2025. https://preugovor.org/Vesti/1945/Od-vlasti-koja-urusava-ustavni-poredak-ne-mogu-se.shtml

risk list for each victim; the extension of the remit of coordination groups to include cases of perpetrators on the run, in hospitals, or following their release from prison; mandatory, timely notification of the victim upon a convicted person's release; the introduction of additional risk factors into the assessment (threats with a weapon, strangulation, control, violation of protection measures), the delivery of decisions on the extension of emergency measures via the e-Government Portal, and the obligation for higher public prosecutors' offices to appoint a coordinator for the consistent application of measures.

In Serbia, there is a need for a profound change in societal awareness of domestic violence. Education and raising awareness about victims' rights, the importance of reporting violence, and dispelling myths about victim "blame", are of crucial importance. Only through changing these deeply rooted attitudes can we create an environment where women will feel safe to report violence without fear of judgement or stigma. The support of an institutional network, strengthened by understanding and empathy, also plays a crucial role in creating a safer space for victims. By implementing effective protection mechanisms, society will demonstrate that it values and respects the life of every woman, enabling them to free themselves from the violence and trauma that haunts them. The under-reporting of domestic violence, institutional failings, and violence against activists are not isolated issues, but one manifestation of a deep systemic crisis. If society and the state do not recognise this and act in a coordinated manner, the chance of preventing further loss of life remains jeopardised.

A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIRECT AND STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Lara Končar, anthropologist, researcher and associate at the Centre for Women's Studies in Belgrade

When I was invited to write an essay for the research project *Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War 2.0: Research Results and Analysis of the Undue Influence on the Increase of Violence in Serbian Society* as a researcher, anthropologist and feminist, my primary aim was to demonstrate the importance of a feminist perspective for understanding the "invisible", "hidden" forms, forms and consequences of violence. For this reason, the issue of violence against women and the LGBTIQ+ community in today's Serbia was also identified as a separate topic

in the surveys and focus groups conducted. According to the results of the processed data, 52.1% of respondents who participated in the survey believe that vandalising walls with hateful messages contributes to the increase in violence against women, 83.5% believe that politicians contribute to the increase in violence against women, and 80.7% of those surveyed believe that the media has the same influence. In this sense, *the role of politicians and the media* in the production and reproduction of nationalist, patriarchal, misogynistic, chauvinistic and sexist norms, values and ideologies remains unequivocally important for understanding (the rise in) violence in the context of contemporary society in Serbia. As the research participants explain, this is recognised through discourses that produce and reproduce negative representations of women, in the form of humiliating statements by politicians and through media content; through the relativisation of the problem of violence against women and other forms of socio-economic inequalities in public discourse; within the framework of public and institutional policies (or the lack thereof) concerning gender equality and the issue of gender-based violence. On the other hand, in the focus groups, female and male participants point out that hate speech is mostly directed at Roma, Croats, Albanians, Hungarians, students participating in current protests, and the LGBTQ+ community. Of particular note are those graffiti / inscriptions / slogans which have a figurative or literal meaning intended to create negative connotations, incite violence, intolerance and hate speech towards various gender, national and ethnic groups. Some of the examples highlighted in the research are: "Aco the Albanian", "Vučić, faggot", "Rectal Đokica" , "Anal Rector", "Death to faggots", "Look what we've come to: a whore amusing herself with the president of the country" (about Dijana Hrka), "Ustaša", and so on. Or as one of the participants in the focus groups explains: "The most hatred is directed at Roma and LGBT people, and now also at students, because they all spoil the image of the state and nation that they [the authorities] want to maintain."

However, what particularly caught my attention was the fact that 30.6% of the survey participants *were not sure* whether vandalising walls with hateful messages contributes to the rise in violence against women. One explanation could be that the connection between the content on the walls and the position of women or other social groups, if not explicitly highlighted (as in the examples of graffiti about Marija Lukić or against the LGBTQ+ community) – does not have to be obvious. I'll give two contrasting examples of the invisibility of this connection. On the one hand, the murals dedicated to Ratko Mladić are not a matter of the "life and work" of a specific figure in recent history, but rather a justification and legitimisation of right-wing values, narratives and policies that deny war crimes, genocide, and violence against women and various ethnic and national groups. The fact that his mural carries certain meanings and connotations is also made clear by one of a series of reactions from the feminist movement in 2021, a year when activist Aida Ćorović, in protest of the glorification of war crimes and those who participated in them, pelted the Ratko Mladić mural in Belgrade with eggs, an act that resulted in police repression and legal proceedings against the activists. On the other hand, murals dedicated to exceptional women, painted in collaboration with local artists across cities in Serbia, including Mitra Mitrović, Jelica Načić and others, are not only visual representations

of women who fought for spaces and positions in society and history – but a political project that supports progressive, emancipatory, feminist, peace, and anti-fascist ideas[32]. In other words, murals/graffiti/inscriptions/slogans are not just a tool for conveying political and social messages, but they represent spaces of conflict and negotiation over the meanings, interpretations, norms, values and ideologies that are encouraged in a culture and society.

A vivid example of how a single graffiti on a wall can (come to) signify an entire socio-political group and express a political stance is the inscription "Ćaci u školu" (a misspelled "Pupils should be in school") which appeared at the entrance to the "Jovan Jovanović Zmaj" grammar school in Novi Sad, during the protests by students and school leavers that were triggered by the collapse of a canopy at Novi Sad railway station in 2024 in which 16 people were killed. Due to the spelling mistake by the graffiti artist, where the letter "Ć" was written instead of "Đ", a new label for those in power and their supporters was born and spread widely in popular culture and political discourse in the region – Ćaci.

What I want to show is the ways in which "a culture of violence" shapes and constitutes the discourses through which the practices of direct and structural violence in contemporary society are internalised and legitimised, which means understanding the social, cultural, political and economic *conditions* that enable the production and reproduction of violence against different social groups. To clarify this concept, the insights of the sociologist Galtung (Johan Galtung) are considered particularly relevant. Under "violence culture" he refers to certain aspects of culture, the symbolic world of our existence – embodied in religion and ideology, language and art, the empirical and formal sciences – which can be used to justify and/or legitimise direct and/or structural (systemic) violence. The basic level of understanding "violence culture" is that we are always speaking of *aspects of culture*, and not of "violent cultures". In an anthropological sense, cultures cannot be viewed as totalities, nor as homogeneous entities, and therefore, there can be no such thing as a "violent culture"[33]. Another significant level is that the bearers of the "culture of violence" are predominantly those actors and institutions that have social, cultural, political and/or economic power – governments, the church, various types of elites, the military, corporations, etc. – and it is therefore not surprising that in the results of this research, it is precisely politicians, members of religious institutions and the police, hooligan and other right-wing groups, as well as the media, are considered one of the key actors responsible for supporting the culture of violence and the increase of nationalism in society. A third, and the most important level, is the understanding of the concepts of "direct" and "structural" violence and their inter-conditionality, which are often considered separately in public discourse. Namely, while direct forms of violence are generally obvious (as is the case with physical violence),

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32 More about the *Exceptional Women of Serbia* project is available at: https://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/izuzetne-zene-srbije/

33 Indeed, the views and claims that some cultures are inherently "violent" are largely the result of colonialist and imperialist views on societies considered "primitive" and "uncivilised", and are often a consequence of Western-centric views on The Other and otherness.

structural forms of violence generally remain invisible, or rather, unrecognised. The collapse of the overpass in Novi Sad is a case in point of structural violence, the consequence of which, due to systemic neglect and profit-driven projects shaped by corruption, is direct violence: the deaths of 16 people. A further level of (class) analysis is that those with political and economic power were not under the canopy, but rather members of the "middle" and "lower" classes, predominantly women, children, young people and the elderly, who are the dominant users of public transport. Alternatively, to approach the issue of the interconnectedness of direct and structural violence "from the other side", examples of direct violence such as cases of femicide and the event at the "Vladislav Ribnikar" Primary School in Belgvrade are just as important for the contemporary context. What these examples have in common is that the problems of domestic and relationship violence and peer violence that result in fatalities, are framed as tragedy (and the same narrative was used in the case of the canopy collapse), where the violence committed is understood only within psychological frameworks – when the behaviour of the perpetrator and their attitude towards the victims is relativised and the murder is viewed as an isolated case, rather than as a consequence of structural violence. Or, to put it more precisely, every form of direct violence is shaped and constituted by the social, economic, cultural and political conditions and circumstances that have encouraged, or at least enabled, the threat to someone's life, body, dignity or rights.

Finally, to understand this relationship, we must also explain the connection between the culture of violence, direct violence, and structural violence. As Galtung states, a culture of violence makes direct and structural violence appear "correct", or "as if it is not wrong", when the act of direct violence and the conditions produced by structural violence are legitimised and accepted in society. Galtung calls this connection the "violence triangle", where violence can begin in any corner of this triangle: in the symbolic realm, as direct or systemic violence, and is then transferred to the other corners, manifesting through other forms of violence. To illustrate this interconnection between different forms of violence, the issue of women's reproductive rights is one example, which was also highlighted in several of the survey's explanations. Firstly, the ban on abortion is a form of structural violence: when state, religious and political groups seek to institutionalise the ban on abortion in laws and policies, if not explicitly then at least implicitly – through, for example, the mechanisms and strategies of population policies. The unavailability of this medical procedure becomes a particular structural problem when the socio-economic status of women and the conditions they find themselves in are taken into account: their precarious position in the labour market, various forms of economic and social dependency and the general unavailability of services from the health and social care system. These conditions, furthermore, mean that abortion is not accessible to all "classes" of women, that the spaces in which this medical procedure can be performed are narrowed, and that unregulated markets concerning women's reproductive rights are created, which can result in direct violence: the endangerment of women's lives, bodies, and health. Finally, to legitimise these practices, mechanisms and strategies in a specific socio-cultural context, various right-wing and populist actors, such as "pro-life" groups and anti-gender movements, will produce

entire narratives and iconography about "traditional values" which encourage women to give birth and label abortion as murder, where the stripping of rights from women becomes normalised with the aim of being fully institutionalised.

Given the space available, the above account is of course simplified. A distinct and crucial level of analysis would be one that details how neoliberal, capitalist, nationalist and patriarchal values and ideologies always go "hand in hand", and that at the centre of this relationship are invariably various forms of violence and exploitation. Ultimately, Galtung's insights speak precisely of this. The "violence triangle" model, however, provides a good explanation for the question raised at the very beginning of the text, and which tentatively emerged from the research findings, namely: "How are we to understand the connection between a single piece of graffiti on a wall and the position of women in contemporary Serbian society?". Indeed, through this model, it is possible to explain the entire cycle and process of violence from all angles – from the well-known graffiti/slogan "Abortion is murder" to the endangerment of women's lives, health and bodies, the consequence of which can be death.

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FROM STREET GRAFFITI TO THE WALLS OF SOCIAL MEDIA - HATE SPEECH IN PUBLIC LIFE

Dr Ana Mirković, director and co-founder of the Institute for Digital Communications

Hate speech on the walls of social media

The results of the survey conducted in 2025 as part of the project *Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War 2.0* show that a high percentage of respondents noticed that hate speech comes mostly from social media (41.3 per cent) and the media (35.4 per cent).

My focus is therefore on understanding the phenomenon itself, the ways in which hate speech is created, its implications for society and the individual, and the mechanisms for preventing and combating this extremely toxic communication trend for societies that strive for democratic values.

The term hate speech is defined very broadly in various laws and codes, but no formal definition can fully encompass all forms of media content and communication practice that fall under this phenomenon. In everyday language, hate speech is most often used to describe messages that carry and encourage negative emotions (aggression, anger, threats and belittling) directed at individuals, social groups, and even institutions. In the year this research was conducted, this was clearly evident in Serbia through campaigns targeting young people (pupils and students), activists, journalists, and those who publicly express disagreement with the government's policies, where criticism was turned into labelling, discrediting, and dehumanisation. While national legal frameworks offer relatively precise guidelines, and social networks and internet platforms are developing their own regulatory mechanisms adapted to the dynamic and viral nature of digital communication, in reality, their impact cannot be discerned – hate speech has become so dominant, overwhelming and unsettling for every user.

Hate speech is not a new phenomenon, nor did it originate with social media. In the past these messages were scrawled on the walls of buildings, underpasses and schoolyards – remaining for a long time as a trace and a testament to anger, fear and the need to mark someone out and exclude them from the social community. These graffiti were always messages of domination, clear signals about who belonged to "us" and who was marked as the "enemy". Today, these same patterns of behaviour have moved from the physical to the digital space, from the streets to screens, from concrete to the walls of social media. Instead of spray paint, they use compromising photographs and videos (often AI-generated), emoticons, memes, tabloid front pages and coordinated online campaigns. Although the goal is always the same – to discredit, intimidate and silence – the difference is that hateful messages in the digital space no longer remain local or transient. Instead of messages being sent from one wall to people in the neighbourhood, they become visible to thousands, are multiplied through sharing and are given new life through comments, reactions and algorithmic ranking. Thus, for example, insulting narratives about students fighting for freedom and justice and about people participating in public gatherings are not confined to individual posts, but are transformed into broader media campaigns that shape public perception. Like graffiti, they are often created impulsively, but unlike it, digital messages remain permanently available and have a more long-term social impact. In this way, hate speech from the streets seeps into everyday communication and becomes part of the public discourse that influences relationships between people, political culture, and the sense of security in society.

To understand hate speech in the digital environment, it is essential to examine how communication patterns flow between different spheres of social life. Negative patterns are constantly transferred from the analogue sphere (political speeches, television programmes, tabloids and public appearances) to the digital world and vice versa, with their effects mutually reinforcing. When public discourse is characterised by labelling, aggression, and divisions into "right" and "wrong", this style of communication becomes socially acceptable and is easily transferred to social media. At the same time, the normalisation of hate speech on platforms facilitates its presence in everyday life – at home, at school, at work, and on the street – something we have all been able to witness first hand.

Another dimension of digital communication is that communication via (behind) screens further intensifies the emotional charge of the communication, particularly anger and frustration, which are then carried over into real-life social relationships. Dominant stereotypes, prejudices and patterns of speech from wider society are also reflected in online communication, while anonymity and the ability to conceal one's identity encourage users to express views they often would not in direct contact. The result is more intense, more visible and more widely accessible hate speech, whose social effects are thereby further deepened.

We thus see a phenomenon that is inextricably linked with discrimination, hostility and violence directed towards certain social groups, and it also reflects existing inequalities and power relations, marking certain communities as "dangerous", "undesirable" and "illegitimate". In Serbia, this is seen, among other things, in the targeting of all those whom the regime sees as dissidents, who are often presented as a threat to stability, order, and the national interests. Respondents recognise this responsibility of politicians in the production and spread of hate speech, with as many as 68 per cent of them believing that the phenomenon is most dangerous when it comes from holders of state office. Whenever they are the source of hatred, when they aggressively convey messages of intolerance towards those with whom they disagree, they contribute to the normalisation of hate speech and lend it legitimacy.

Although the media should have an important social role in promoting equality, freedom and human rights, in practice they often prioritise sensationalist and polarising content under pressure from political, ideological and commercial interests, which 68.4% of respondents in our survey consider to be very dangerous. A society's narrative largely depends on the communication that comes from the dominant and most influential media. They not only inform, but also shape the values, norms and boundaries of acceptable public discourse. In an environment of heightened competition and the struggle for audience attention, the emotional charge of messages becomes increasingly pronounced, while professional standards and ethical guidelines are often pushed into the background. As a result, hate speech is increasingly becoming the rule rather than the exception in political and public

discourse, directly contributing to a decline in the quality of dialogue and the normalisation of an aggressive, polarised, and intolerant social climate.

In a broader social context, hate speech represents a complex challenge that transcends the confines of individual platforms, institutions, and regulatory mechanisms. Everyone who participates in public communication becomes part of the process of shaping public discourse. The words, attitudes, and manner of expression of each individual can contribute to the normalisation of aggression and intolerance, or to strengthening a culture of dialogue, solidarity, and mutual respect.

The psychological and communicative context of hate speech

Hate speech does not arise from nowhere; it is a reflection of power relations, dominant values and the decisions of the majority, often driven by emotion rather than argument. In such an environment, those who are different and think differently become "others", "opponents" and "dissenters", and in our society they are given much harsher labels and descriptions – "Ustasha", "blockaders", and even "Dirt". Although the term itself is at first associated with words, hate speech today encompasses much more – texts, images, videos, audio recordings and various media formats, and so its impact on people's attention is stronger, more complex and far more disturbing. In analysing the phenomenon of hate speech today, we must therefore consider both the diversity of channels and the nature and tone of messages of intolerance and aggression, which more easily than ever before influence the shaping of attitudes, people's behaviour and emotions, all through subtle and sophisticated methods that have one goal - exclusion and dehumanisation.

Social media, driven by the "attention economy", favours content that, like hate speech, provokes strong emotions such as anger, frustration, and hatred. Even the Oxford Dictionary named "rage bait" its Word of the Year for 2025 – a term that denotes content intentionally designed to provoke strong negative emotions (primarily anger, outrage, and disgust) in order to encourage a mass response, commentary, and sharing, particularly on social media. Instead of information and dialogue, the aim of such content is attention, while polarisation and conflict are used as a means for greater visibility.

The consequences of creating hatred, intolerance and conflict are serious, quickly crossing over from the digital to the real world, and when hate speech is directed at minority communities (such as LGBTQ people, migrants, Roma, national and ethnic minorities, and religious communities that lack equal access to the media) it leads to their dehumanisation, and aggression against them is slowly normalised in everyday life. Deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices further reinforce these messages, allowing hate speech to become a permanent and visible part of both digital and analogue public life.

The evolution of hate speech and new media formats

Hate speech is constantly evolving, adapting to new communication channels and formats. While it was easier to recognise in the era of traditional media through overt attacks and offensive tones, today it often disguises itself behind sophisticated narratives, pseudoscientific patterns, and seemingly independent, rational analyses. These subtle forms require a high level of media and digital literacy for audiences to spot them, and for the public to critically analyse and suitably interpret them.

Understanding the origin and purpose of hate speech is crucial for understanding power relations in society. Political and economic actors often profit from it, using it as a means to divert attention from fundamental problems and to reinforce identity divisions. The increased frequency of hate speech in the media is a result of the relatively "low cost" of such behaviour – penalties are often symbolic, and the controversial content attracts greater audience attention and brings a certain symbolic and social capital within communities that accept the values on which such speech is based.

The effect of online disinhibition further intensifies communication – users feel empowered to express opinions they might keep to themselves in the physical world (as they are socially unacceptable), while anonymity and the ability to hide one's identity in the digital world contribute to a loss of self-control. Long-term exposure to such content not only normalises hatred but also increases users' feelings of anxiety, anger and social insecurity.

Empirical data from the 2025 public opinion survey in Serbia indicates that the majority of respondents recognise social media as the primary space for hate speech, but few are actively involved in combating it through reporting and public criticism. Long-term exposure to such content increases feelings of tension, frustration and insecurity, and for certain groups, can lead to the development of learned helplessness. From a psychological viewpoint, the dehumanisation of individuals and communities through digital channels represents the first step towards justifying real-life violence.

The psychological mechanisms of hate speech

Hate speech is often an expression of frustration, projection and social identification. Social networks allow users to articulate personal frustrations and a sense of injustice through attacks on "other and different people", different on the basis of nationality, religion, gender or politics. The phenomenon of the "bystander" further contributes to implicit approval, as non-reaction to offensive content is interpreted as agreement, and even passive support.

Emotionally charged language in digital communication makes constructive dialogue difficult. Hatred is rarely cold and rational; it is almost always coloured by fear, anger and

resentment. Understanding these emotional drivers is crucial for designing educational prevention programmes, as it helps young people and adults to recognise their own reactions and the consequences of their words.

When people are exposed day in, day out to aggressive messages, labelling, division and public confrontations with those who disagree, a process of desensitisation occurs – an emotional numbing to violence in language. The boundaries of what is considered acceptable in public communication are slowly shifting, so speech that was once recognised as offensive, dangerous and unacceptable is now increasingly being relativised and justified as a personal opinion, a different political view, and very often, due to a very low level of media literacy, some people claim that this is freedom of speech. Our respondents say they are bothered by aggressive content on walls and believe it should not be there at all (84.7%).

This process is particularly visible In the context of Serbian society over the past year, through the increased polarisation of the public sphere, rising tensions between citizens and the systematic targeting of certain groups – primarily young people (pupils and students), activists, journalists, teachers and all those who publicly express disagreement with the dominant political narratives. Instead of a reasoned debate, we are faced daily with discrediting, labelling and dehumanisation, where criticism of the government or social phenomena is presented as hostile action, treason and an attack on the state. Such rhetoric has long since left the political stage and spilled over into everyday conversations, social media, and interpersonal relationships.

In a society like ours, where such discourse is repeated and multiplied, it becomes part of everyday life and ceases to provoke shock and resistance. Citizens become accustomed to the raised tone, insults and public humiliations, and aggressive communication becomes the new normal. This is where its greatest danger lies – in the normalisation of hate speech, which creates a social climate in which intolerance, exclusion and verbal violence no longer appear as a problem, but as legitimate forms of expression. This further narrows the space for dialogue, deepens divisions and weakens trust between people, which in the long term undermines social cohesion and democratic processes.

Social and political consequences

Hate speech is often associated with nationalist discourse and the need for clear boundaries between two sides. In periods following open war, social insecurity, economic instability and political crises, these needs become more pronounced. Social media then functions as a resonating chamber in which similar views reinforce one another, while differing opinions are excluded and attacked.

I would particularly point to the responsibility of those actors who have the power to shape public opinion: political leaders, representatives of the authorities, influential public figures and

the dominant media. Over the past year, we have witnessed how the aggressive, humiliating and polarising discourse coming from the top of the political hierarchy is becoming a pattern of communication that is then mirrored in wider society. When holders of institutional power publicly label dissidents as traitors, foreign mercenaries, internal enemies, Ustaša, blockaders, such language does not remain at the level of political rhetoric; it becomes a socially acceptable way of dealing with anyone who asks questions, criticises or resists.

In such an environment, hate speech gains a kind of institutional verification. When it comes "from the top", it is no longer perceived as a deviation, but as a justified means of political struggle. This creates an atmosphere in which pressure on students, activists, professors, journalists and citizens participating in protests and public gatherings is not only tolerated, but often encouraged. Public campaigns of discrediting, targeting on the front pages of tabloids, exposing personal data, insults, threats, and even physical attacks are part of a wider strategy of intimidating and disciplining the critical ideas of free-thinking citizens.

This pattern of communication has profound psychological and social consequences. Over time, citizens internalise the message that aggression is an acceptable response to disagreement, that the use of force is more acceptable than conversation, and that power and domination are more important than argument. At the same time, those who are the target of such attacks develop a sense of insecurity, fear and social isolation, which further narrows the space for free expression and civic activism. In this way, hate speech becomes a tool of political control, not just a communication problem – it becomes a mechanism for shaping behaviour, silencing criticism and maintaining the power imbalance in society.

Combating hate speech

The fight against hate speech does not begin with bans and punishments, but with the way we talk to one another. The key step is creating a space for open, two-way, calm and respectful communication, where different opinions are not a cause for conflict, but an opportunity for understanding and connection. When we encourage respectful dialogue, we develop empathy and tolerance, and we also learn to recognise the moments when communication crosses the line into belittling and exclusion. The words we choose, the images we share, and the tone we use when addressing others have real power – they can soothe and wound, connect and alienate.

Removing offensive content and sanctioning those accounts that incite aggression and intolerance through hate speech are certainly important, but they do not bring about lasting change on their own. The roots of hate speech lie deeper, in fears, insecurities, frustrations and a sense of powerlessness. Long-term solutions require investment in education, developing empathy and strengthening critical thinking skills. Digital and media literacy are not just technical skills – they involve the ability to recognise the emotions and motives behind the

content we consume and share, and to consciously choose how we will respond. In this way, we learn how our words and actions affect others, both in the digital and the analogue worlds of life (if it is even possible to completely separate these two aspects today).

Often, we are not even aware of our own contribution to spreading hatred – sharing offensive content "for a laugh", relativising aggressive comments, and passively observing without reacting are all forms of participating in the creation of an atmosphere of aggressive and confrontational communication. Psychologically speaking, such behaviour can serve to preserve a sense of group belonging and avoid conflict, but in the long run, it contributes to the normalisation of violent discourse and the erosion of social norms and civil society. Conversely, active participation in a dialogue based on respect and critical thinking strengthens a culture of tolerance and shared responsibility.

Hate speech in the media and on social networksdoes not exist in isolation; it is a reflection of a broader social and psychological context. Its impact is reflected in the degradation of the quality of public space, the jeopardising of individuals' mental health, and the weakening of social cohesion. Therefore, combating hate speech is not about restricting freedom of expression, but about advocating for responsible dialogue, mutual respect, and social responsibility. Understanding the psychological and communication mechanisms, developing critical thinking, media and emotional literacy, and active civic participation are key prerequisites for reducing the harmful effects of hate speech and building a safer, more inclusive social space.

INTERVIEW: **NIKOLA RADIĆ LUCATI**

Centre for Holocaust Research and Education

Following the age-based focus groups we conducted in November 2025. we noticed one important difference compared to the answers we received three years ago, which is that the youngest participants – those aged 18 or 19 – equated young nationalists and neo-Nazis in their answers, telling us that there is now a trend of these groups uniting both nationally and internationally.

CHRE has not conducted detailed research but, following developments, we see that neo-Nazi organisations and actors are behaving in an organised way in an attempt to steer the development of the political scene in Serbia. On an international level, Belgrade is a place of joint action for the American far-right and local, Russian, Duginist groups[34]

34 https://theins.ru/en/politics/285889

supported by Konstantin Malofeyev. Since the SPP came to power, James Porrazzo (American Front /AF/, New Resistance, Fourth Position) and Joaquin Flores (Centre for Syncretic Studies[35], Fort Russ News, Geopolitika.ru[36] and others[37]), and until his expulsion in 2022, Robert Rundo (Rise Above, Patriot Front), while Nick Griffin and others were there as needed. In Serbia, right-wingers are apparently being indoctrinated, trained, and recruited for the Russian Federation's forces, and participants in the war in Ukraine have threatened citizens while protecting the authorities, together with members of neo-Nazi and far-right groups, without police intervention. Cooperation between neo-Nazis (group 451) and nationalists (New DSS), as well as pro-Russian elements, is also evident in the rightward shift of the student movement's politics[38]. The traditional structures of the neo-Nazi BG right are still active and in their second generation, and there is also part of the coalition, pro-Russian SPS party, whose senior functionary owns the private museum of Draža Mihailović, and whose surroundings have become a gathering place and gallery for neo-Nazi groups (451, SA, Zentropa, Golden Dawn, etc.) which carry out strong local activity, from the museum's billboard campaign and the opening of at least two venues, to marking their territory with graffiti and stickers. The SPC is a constant presence, supporting the narrative of rehabilitation and further efforts to distance Velimirović and Ljotić from their legacy of antisemitism, while simultaneously remaining the main distributor of books such as "Through the Prison Window", "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", and the like. All these actors work with nationalist youth of different profiles, from hooligans and religious groups to students. Your findings are a logical result of this.

Furthermore, in analysing and commenting on the responses of this group, the Dutch historian Ger Duijzings emphasised that this trend is also part of his research and that in a conversation you mentioned to him that it is precisely Adolf Hitler's book Mein Kampf, which is on open sale in Serbia, that is one of the best-selling books among this group of young people and that they most often buy it for their peers as a birthday present. Could you tell us a bit more about these findings?

Nešić also mentioned this in 2016[39], when Mein Kampf was released onto the open market. Booksellers have confirmed these anecdotal experiences to me on several occasions. In the last year or two, groups of 14- to 16-year-olds have been seen in shopping centres reading Mein Kampf in bookshops. Though the supplied print runs sell out within a month, staff assume that the majority of sales go directly through the websites

35 https://www.companywall.rs/firma/udruzenje-centar-za-sinkreticke-studije/MMz166i0

36 More in the text by Marina Lažetić: https://aseestant.ceon.rs/index.php/jouregsec/article/download/19429/pdf_1/

37 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/beograd-protest-studenti-blokada-desnicari/33275568.html

38 http://Geopolitika.ru

39 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-i-politika-zlocina-mein-kampf-na-izvolte/27483660.html

of the publisher Leo komerc (owned by Stevan Marčeta, father of Saša Marčeta, owner of the MaxBet betting shops, Eldorado currency exchange shops, the "Saša Marčeta Art Foundation", part of the disputed privatisation of Beograd film and a significant financier of the SPP), and Edicija (owned by members of the Bokan family — relatives of Dragoslav Bokan, the former leader of the paramilitary unit White Eagles, a convicted criminal, self-styled "Donetsk Republic" ambassador, frequent participant at SPP rallies, and head of the National Theatre's repressive committee). The opinion of surveyed sales assistants at the DELFI and Vulkan chains, and smaller distributors, is that the number of copies sold is nevertheless slowly declining, and that not even Mein Kampf can escape the general crisis of reading. Also, more recent books are gaining in popularity, such as the 14th edition of "The Spirit of Self-Denial"[40] by Milo Lompar[41] and the sustained work of historian Rastko Lompar[42] on the re-evaluation of Dimitrije Ljotić[43]. The recontextualisation of National Socialism is an important part of the process of rehabilitating local quisling and collaborationist actors, in preparation for the reconciliation and unification of the Serbian right-wing as the basis for a new national consensus.

In your opinion, how dominant is this trend and what segment of the youth population is it engaging?

The trend of normalising and spreading neo-Nazism and introducing it into the context of an acceptable, *mainstream*, national policy is carried out across age and social groups, encompassing all dominant socio-educational profiles. This process does not take place in the vacuum of small, exotic nationalist publishers, nor is it carried out solely by state and church actors. Large corporations, such as distribution chains and publishers, have become the chain of dissemination and rehabilitation for Velimirović, Mihailović, Prince Pavle, Kalabić, the Nedić regime, and others... Media houses, TV and film productions profit from spreading not only hatred as such, but its re-contextualisation and normalisation. This conversion of rehabilitation into usable narratives through their publications is enabled by the state's institutions—once scientific, but now wholly or partially propagandistic: its scientific institutes, from SANU, through INIS and ISI to IFDT, as well as its faculties, ZUOV and school textbook publishers, as well as memorial institutions, such as the MŽG and the memorial centres and museums subordinate to it, whose content rehabilitates the Chetnik movement and Velimirović. Minority communities are also important, whose leaders have stopped reacting to incidents, thereby becoming a factor in preventing the internationalisation of the problem. The end product is a nationally-formed society in

40 https://catenamundi.rs/shop/milo-lompar-duh-samoporicanja/

41 https://www.novidss.rs/srl/news/41981/details/w/0/politika-na-srpskom-prof-dr-milo-lompar-srpski-integralizam-je-nacionalna-ideja-za-21-vek/

42 https://catenamundi.rs/shop/dimitrije-ljotic-ucitelj-ili-farisej-rastko-lompar/

43 https://standard.rs/2024/03/29/ljotic-perom-mladog-lompara-1/

which post-war renazification has been applied as a permanent process, with the aim of positioning each period of nationalist rule historically as an understandable, if not justified and socially desirable, phase in the nation's construction and defence. Such a society is kept in a state of majority indoctrinated readiness so that if needed, it can quickly adopt rationalisations for new regional military ventures.

CONCLUSION

The second phase in the research series entitled *Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War? 2.0* has once again shown that aggression and violence are so dominant in Serbian society that they have permeated its every fibre. It is therefore difficult to identify and map all of their sources, which in our previous work were collectively labelled and now used as "the culture of violence". **The matrix** that serves as the broadest framework for **maintaining this culture** has been identified, both in the literature and during the research, in the terrifying consequences of the wars of the nineties, in the traumatic experiences to which society was exposed, but even more so in the refusal of the majority of society to confront this trauma. This trauma, which takes the form of a social anomaly, is fed by the glorification of war crimes and the maintenance of a distorted value system that once served as cultural support for the wars, and which today still enables the radical denial of the crimes committed. **A break with this dominant cultural matrix and the invisible political influences on the rise in violence has not occurred**.

Three decades after the war, convicted war criminals are returning to Serbia with the open respect of certain state officials and positive attention from pro-regime media, contributing to the perpetuation of distorted attitudes about the legacy of the nineties. Young people show a significant lack of knowledge about these events and find themselves in a limbo between an ethno-national and a cosmopolitan identity, making them **an easy target for instrumentalisation**. Stencils, graffiti and murals, as relatively new forms of aesthetic-ideological pollution of urban space, are used to promote reactionary and hateful policies, glorify convicted war criminals and incite violence. Due to the years of instrumentalisation of young people, this paper has once again focused specifically on **urban forms of propaganda**, though we have not neglected other channels in our analysis, such as traditional media, a strictly controlled education system, and captured institutions. **The political elite uses urban spaces and media control to legitimise its power, where the spread of fear and the avoidance of responsibility become the norm, opening the door for the long-term maintenance of power and democratic backsliding**.

(...)

We conclude that in Serbia, there is a direct and invisible influence of the state and the media in maintaining a specific and widespread "culture of violence". The narratives of aggressive discourse, the glorification of crime, and the absence of a systemic strategy to curb violence contribute to the increase of various forms of violence, including femicide. Induced violence has become a painful everyday reality for the citizens of Serbia, and violence has remained the *ultima* ratio of political practices.

Serbia is in a spiral of institutionalised production of conflict and violence. Breaking this cycle requires urgent, coordinated and multi-layered measures: a systemic strategy to combat the culture of violence (including educational programmes for dealing with trauma), reform of media regulation and transparency of ownership, protection of journalists, raising public awareness of the dangers of disinformation and strengthening institutional capacities to detect and counter foreign interference. **Only through the deconstruction of manipulative practices, a break with the dominant cultural matrix that denies a traumatic past, and the renewal of the media and public space as a public good, is it possible to build a fairer, more resilient and less violent society.**

As Dubravka Stojanović concludes: "The bloody breakup of Yugoslavia was not an unwanted slip-up... What happened was the logical finale, the mandatory and only possible outcome when nationalism is realised. Today's media scene in Serbia, riddled with manipulation and financed by public money, is actively working on a reprise of that scenario, feeding the "crocodile" in the hope that this time, the outcome will be different.[44]

44 Dubravka Stojanović, *Nacionalizam naš nasušni* (Nationalism, our daily bread), Liceulice, 25 November 2025, https://liceulice.org/nacionalizam-nas-nasusni/

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А МИСЛИШ НА РАТ? 2

WHY DO YOU SAY LOVE WHEN YOU MEAN WAR 2.0