

ЗАШТО КАЖЕШ  
**ЉУБАВ** А МИСЛИШ  
НА РАТ?



**RESEARCH RESULTS AND  
ANALYSIS OF UNDUE INFLUENCE  
ON THE INCREASE OF VIOLENCE  
IN SERBIAN SOCIETY**





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*“Rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost.”*

Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, 1969



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# INTRODUCTION

Although we started this research a year ago, writing the final analysis finds us in a time of the most massive protests in our country since 5 October 2000. Tens of thousands of people are coming out to peaceful and, we could say, dignified protests. Every weekend they gather around a single demand. It reads: STOP violence.

The protests were started by the horrific massacre in the Vladislav Ribnikar primary school when, in the early morning of 3 May 2023, a thirteen-year-old boy took the lives of nine of his peers and a school guard. This event was the first mass murder of this type in the history of Serbia, and it can be said that it is only the tip of the iceberg of violence, aggression and hatred that for decades has been entering every pore of our society, forming public awareness, education, mass and popular culture. We cannot but question the responsibility of those who directly or indirectly led to this state of affairs. Thus the analysis entitled “Why Do You Say Love When You Mean War?” in which we attempted to give some of the answers to the many doubts concerning the obvious and terrible increase of hatred in modern Serbian society, to which young people are especially exposed. We aimed to think responsibly about our reality and to point out dangerous social tendencies whose exposure and deconstruction today seem more important than ever.

Through our research, we analysed the prevalence<sup>1</sup> of undue influence. We use this term in a free translation and are aware of its incomplete meaning in relation to local circumstances. The influence that politicians in Serbia exert is most often completely invisible, and those for whom this influence is intended are aware and willing participants in a systematic joint project of reducing Serbian society to probably the lowest level in its history. We pointed to various long-term trends that systematically threaten democratic processes and the fundamental rights of all citizens of Serbia.

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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, who was the state attorney and chancellor under King James I.

Finally, this research attempted to provide reply the question of whether in Serbia, from the wars of the nineties onwards, violence in all its forms has become and remained the ultima ratio and as such retains a high degree of credibility among the elected political elites, the media close to them and, indirectly, a significant part of the population. We believe that the continuation of politics through violence cannot be a valid answer to the general obsolescence of political practices and the impossibility of a real political, economic and social transition. The fact that geographically small, economically weak and politically deficient countries suffer the violence of large, richer, more orderly states is a valid counter-argument, but at the same time, a weak and essentially barren consolation for all of us today.

With the wholehearted help of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Serbia, we have launched a project with this research whose goal is to raise awareness about the dangers of undue influence spread by political actors that systematically legitimize extreme right-wing ideologies with the aim of strengthening nationalist ideas among the general population of Serbia, especially among young people.

In our research, we start from the hypothesis that some politicians exert an unquestionable undue influence that leads to an increase in hatred and violence in society.

In verifying the **general** hypothesis, we will use the following **specific hypotheses**:

- a) The media exert a direct influence on maintaining the “culture of violence” in society;
- b) The absence of a strategy to combat violence in society is responsible for maintaining this specific and widespread “culture of violence”;
- c) The increase in violence and aggression in society, among other things, leads to an increase in femicide;
- d) Narratives dominated by aggressive vocabulary contribute to maintaining the “culture of violence”.



In this paper, the focus is on just one manifestation of that culture, namely stencils, graffiti and murals, a relatively new form of expression and promotion of aggression, while other examples (such as traditional analogue media, a strictly controlled educational system, a captured institution) cannot possibly be ignored.

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## THE QUESTION OF VIOLENCE IN POLITICS

When we talk about politics or history, we cannot help but be aware of the huge role that violence has always played, so it is surprising that it was only in the early sixties of the last century that it was singled out and considered separately, primarily as an attempt to respond to a series of assassinations in the USA (John F. Kennedy, the 35th president of the United States, was assassinated on Friday, 22 November 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. on 4 April 1968, and Robert Kennedy in June of the same year) and to the student revolt in France, which inspired similar protests in many European countries. Kennedy's assassination not only killed the president of the world's most powerful state, but it tore the American nation apart and devastated the global community. It still remains one of the most shocking events of the 20th century.

It was only at the end of that decade that Hannah Arendt pointed out that until then violence and its arbitrariness were taken for granted and thus actually neglected in the public discourse (which unfortunately can be clearly detected in Serbia even today, half a century later). From Renan's thesis at the end of the 19th century that violent interpersonal relations are unavoidably random, thoughtless and imprecise, through similar statements by a large number of philosophers and historians until the middle of the last century (such as Engels' famous sentence about violence as an engine that accelerates economic development) and Sorel's and then Sartre's glorification of violence in his famous Reflections on Violence, where he claims strictly and in an inverted version of the Hegelian opinion that "through unstoppable violence... man recreates himself", violence was persistently and consistently viewed as a phenomenon of secondary importance.

The issue of violence in politics inevitably leads us to consider the term 'power'. If we read discussions, conversations and reflections on this phenomenon during the

20th century, we will see that among political theorists from the left to the extreme right there is an almost complete consensus that violence is nothing but the most expressive manifestation of power. Wright Mills thought that the whole of politics (...) is a struggle for power and the ultimate form of power is violence. Max Weber spoke about the state as the rule of people over people based on the means of legitimate, or supposedly legitimate, violence (The Power Elite, New York, 1956, p.171).

We see that these examples reflect a broad agreement about the equalization of political power and the organization of violence and (from a Marxist point of view) the state as an instrument for manipulation (Hannah Arendt would undoubtedly say "oppression") in the hands of the ruling elite. This agrees with that famous sentence of Voltaire's that power serves to make others do as I want.

It seems that until the horrific massacre that occurred in Serbia on 3 May 2023, violence in its most general form was articulated in the same conservative, patriarchal discourse and represented a political status quo. This is precisely why today more than ever a social consensus is needed around common and general places of social interest, with an acute need among both individuals and various social groups for radical emancipation policies that do not resort to fear as the ultimate mobilizing principle.

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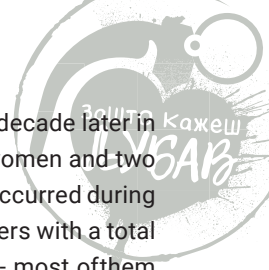
# **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN, FEMICIDE AND THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE IN DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY**

When we talk about the increase in hate speech and undue influence through the media and other channels of communication with the public in Serbia, we cannot avoid considering the dramatic increase in violence against women and femicide in this analysis, at least briefly. In 2013, Serbia ratified the Istanbul Convention, an international agreement of the Council of Europe entitled The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.<sup>2</sup>

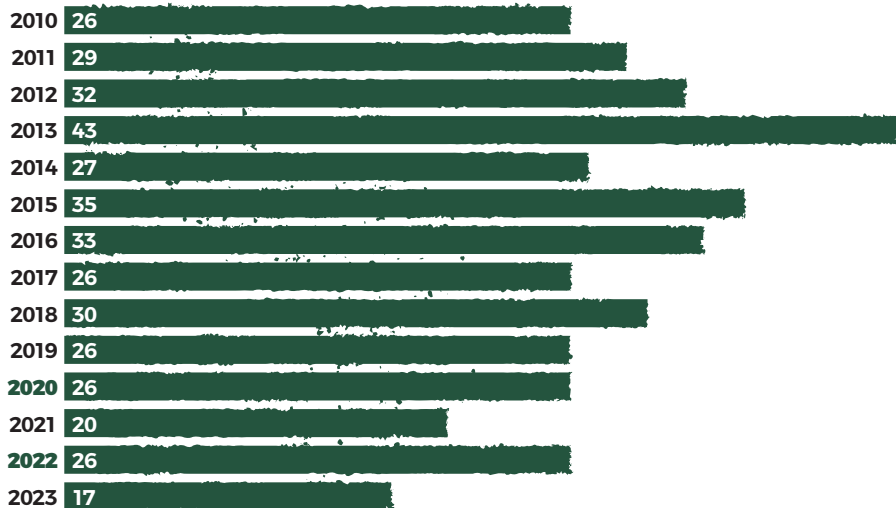
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2 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/council-of-europe-convention-on-preventing-and-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence>





The goal of this convention is zero tolerance for violence. A full decade later in 2023, from the beginning of the year until 17 May, a total of fifteen women and two girls were killed in family-partner violence, of which three femicides occurred during the last ten days of May, at exactly the same time as two mass murders with a total of eighteen victims and almost twenty seriously and lightly injured - most of them children. We recall that the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence<sup>3</sup> entered into force in 2017.



In 2022, there were a total of twenty-six victims of femicide: twenty-five women and one girl. In 2020, the media reported on the violent death of forty-four adult women, including twenty-six cases of femicide in a family-partner context.<sup>1</sup>

The root causes of femicide differ from other types of murder and are related to the general position of women in society, discrimination against women, gender roles, unequal distribution of power between men and women, common gender stereotypes, prejudices and violence against women. In most cases, women had reported the abuser to the competent services, which found it sufficient to issue a restraining order. Gender-based violence can and must be prevented by early detection and reporting to<sup>4</sup> competent institutions, timely reaction of the police

3 [https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon\\_o\\_sprecavanju\\_nasilja\\_u\\_porodici.html](https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/zakon_o_sprecavanju_nasilja_u_porodici.html)

4 <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-femicid-nasilje-zene-cutanje-institucije/32417025.html>

and judiciary, but also by changing social norms such as toxic masculinity and gender-based stereotypes. Associations that fight against femicide demand the examination of institutions and investigation of their actions, the definition of femicide as a separate criminal offense, the provision of maximum protection and support for women in situations of violence, and effective emergency measures and punishment of the perpetrator.

The Femplaz Association of Women Citizens, which has been working together with UN Women in Serbia since 2018 to develop a model of this mechanism, is also advocating for the establishment of femicide monitoring. There are different models of femicide surveillance around the world, and Femplaz is proposing one based on a Croatian and Georgian model. It rests on three pillars: institutional (collection and analysis of data and development of protocols), professional (capacity building for the staff of centres for social work, police, justice, health, education and other institutions to analyze cases and factors that lead to femicide) and the media (raising awareness and building support in the media and online).<sup>5</sup>

"Children are not spared and bear the consequences just like the victim, even when they are not direct victims of violence. Their level of psychological development does not allow them to understand the violence they are exposed to or witness, which directly affects the formation of their personality. This can lead to learning difficulties and even dropping out of school. Children who grow up in a violent environment have a tendency to turn to violence as a method to solve problems. They also face a higher risk of facing the law or becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs, compared to children who grow up in a healthy environment. Psychologically speaking, children who witness violence in the family often develop a fear of injury and abandonment, excessive anxiety or sadness, a sense of guilt, an inability to empathize, and even a tendency to tell lies and have a lower threshold of tolerance, emotional instability, a lacking capacity to judge their situation in life and a feeling of shame or fear for their future. Memories created in moments of stress become permanently imprinted and affect their feelings and beliefs. Finally, these children often become bullies themselves at a later age because they do not know another model of behaviour. This creates an endless circle of violence."(*Interview, psychiatrist Dr Nebojša Vojvodić*).



## METHODOLOGY

Ever since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the authors began to observe and record an increase in graffiti on the facades of buildings in the narrow and wider centre of Belgrade. These graffiti are related to the war that broke out in a country that lies a little over three hundred kilometres from Serbia as the crow flies. The inscriptions that began to appear on the facades of Belgrade and other Serbian cities glorified Russian aggression against Ukraine through the Z symbol, messages of support for Russia and its President Vladimir Putin, Putin's image with the message BROTHER written in Cyrillic script, the emblem of the infamous paramilitary organisation Wagner and similar memes.

The observation and recording of pro-Russian graffiti, murals and other inscriptions on residential and commercial buildings in the centre of Belgrade followed the so-called Mural case, the painting of a mural with the image of convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić at the corner of Njegoševa and Alekse Nenadovića Streets in Belgrade. In that case, and due to the absence of reaction from competent institutions and inspectors, activists tried to remove the mural themselves, which often made them victims of attacks and pressure.<sup>6</sup> The glorification of crime, hatred and symbols of open violence thus spread to society and to the streets. A similar example is observed with symbols that glorify the invading army - attempts to remove or erase pro-Russian graffiti are met with open violence by various groups of people, with physical attacks on activists and a huge number of insults and threats that these groups receive practically every day.

Starting from the thesis that walls filled with symbols of hatred have become one of the numerous generators of violence and using the method of observing, recording and monitoring social dynamics in connection with stencils, graffiti and murals, the authors followed the tendency of violence to spread in society, and its spillover from one social group to another.

The next method of data collection included the creation of a survey entitled: Questionnaire on the Attitudes of Citizens towards Hatred, Hate Speech,

6 <https://autonomija.info/yihr-i-udruzenje-krokodil-dobili-pretnje-zbog-krecenja-grafita/>

Aggression, Violence and Nationalism in Serbia. This online survey was distributed through e-mail and other contacts of the authors themselves, organizations with which the authors collaborate and through an open invitation posted on social networks. The anonymous survey was completed by 355 people. As the name of the survey suggests, the authors sought to discover how and to what extent the public believes that society is dominated by a culture of violence, how that culture manifests itself, and in that context, what is the correlation between nationalism and hate speech and open aggression and violence. The disadvantage of this method is the possibility that the survey was answered by people with similar attitudes and opinions or political affiliation. The authors therefore tried to correct this deficiency by using other research methods, primarily through direct work with focus groups.

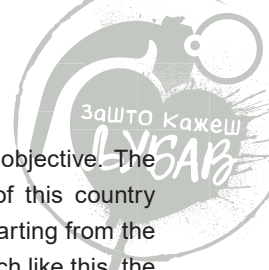
At the end of March and the beginning of April 2023, three focus groups were organized made up of various age groups, with the aim of identifying differences in the opinions and attitudes of citizens of different generations on the topic of the culture of violence in public space. The first focus group gathered citizens aged 18 to 28 years, the second citizens aged 35 to 45 years, while the third worked with citizens over 55 years old.

The media in Serbia, both printed and electronic, greatly contribute to the spread of aggression and violence. The media scene in Serbia is characterized by almost complete control by the executive power over the most popular newspapers and the most-watched television channels, while media freedom is one of the lowest in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Aggressive front pages, a complete disregard for the ethical code of journalists, a disregard for citizens' right to privacy are just some of the characteristics of the dominant tabloid reporting on socio-political events. The radical tabloidization of the media in Serbia affects the level of violence in society, and for this reason this paper will use analysis of the media narrative from three carefully selected events as a method.

Finally, we include an analysis of relevant literature on the topic of violence, trauma, evil and nationalism. Since the authors believe that the culture of violence in Serbia has been nurtured for more than thirty years, and that this culture is, among other things, a consequence of the denial of war crimes committed during the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the nineties, the glorification of war crimes, the glorification of criminals in the eyes of the public etc., a review of critical literature will be made to gain a better understanding of the present.

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7 <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-65467824>



We are aware that no writing on this topic can be completely objective. The authors are independent researchers, but they are also citizens of this country and are part of the social and political dynamics that affect them. Starting from the assumption that it is almost impossible to avoid subjectivity in research like this, the authors tried to approach the topic from the prevailing social and political discourse in which they live and work. Comparative analyses with other countries, especially those in a post-transition context, were helpful in this regard. One of the shortcomings of the research, which the authors hope will be eliminated in the following activities and analyses, is the focus on Belgrade, due to the difficulty of conducting detailed field research in other areas in Serbia.

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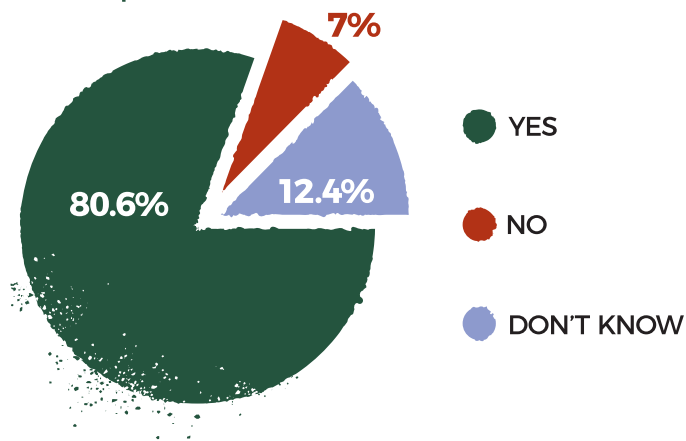
## ANALYSIS

In the research, the starting point for survey methods and focus groups was the influence of nationalist stencils, graffiti and murals on the increase of violence and aggression in society. Next, the connection between politicians, above all the government, and the hate speech that prevails on the facades of buildings in Belgrade, but also throughout Serbia, was reviewed. Finally, the perception of the public on the symbolism and possible political function that graffiti performs for certain holders of political power was examined.

The vast majority of citizens believe that in Serbia in the period since 2020, there has been an increase in the number of stencils, graffiti and murals with messages of hate. Citizens who expressed this attitude also believe that the increasing trend in the number of such stencils, graffiti and murals on an annual basis is increasing strongly. When asked which groups and individuals use walls most to express their political and social views, citizens name right-wing and football fan groups and hooligans. Similarly, the vast majority of the public believe that vandalizing walls has as a direct consequence an increase in hatred and aggression in society, and that messages sent through stencils, graffiti and murals influence the growth of nationalism.

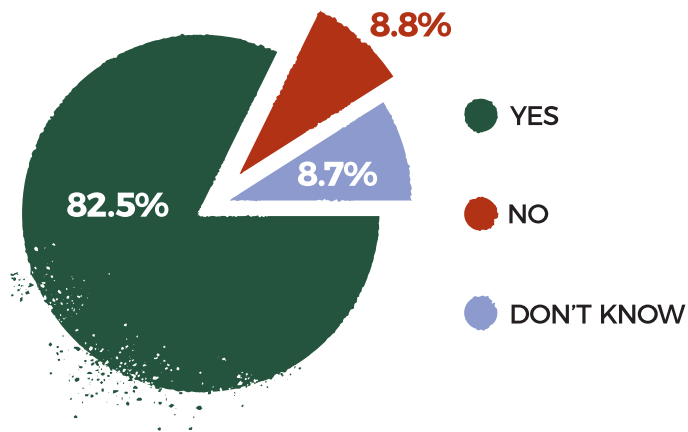
## Have you noticed an increase in the number of graffiti and murals in the streets of Serbian towns since 2022?

355 responses



## Do you think that the vandalizing of walls affects the growth of hate and aggression in society?

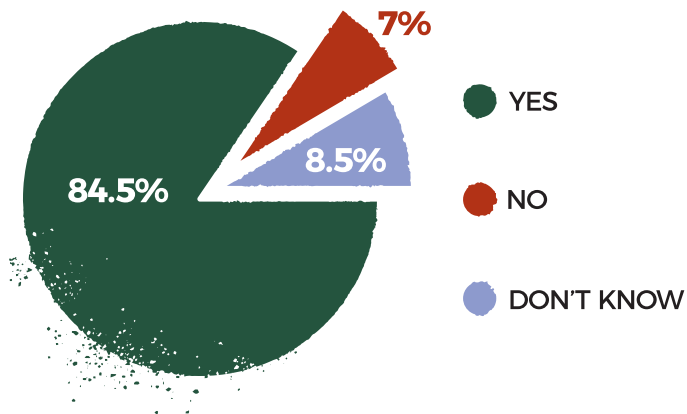
355 responses





## Do you think that the vandalizing of walls with hate messages affects the growth of nationalism in society?

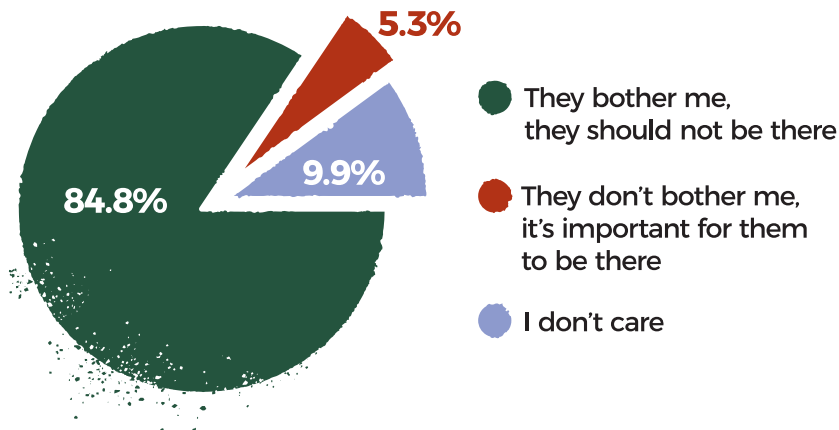
355 responses



Similarly, the vast majority of the public express the opinion that the messages on the walls bother them and that they should not be there. However, what citizens are divided on is the question of who is responsible for removing stencils, graffiti and murals from the walls of residential buildings.

## How do you feel about the content of messages on walls?

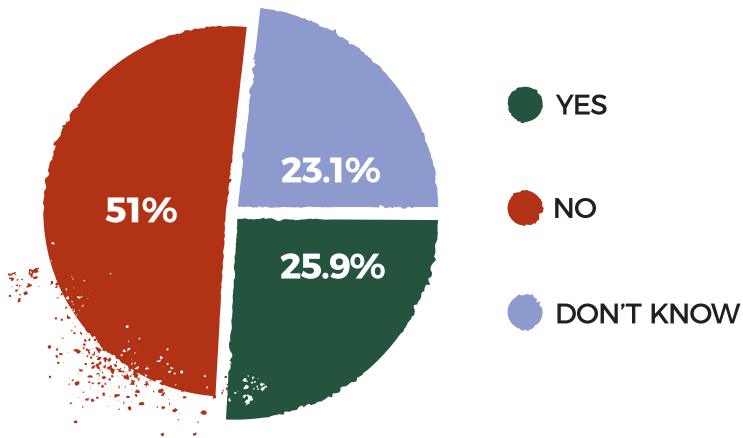
355 responses



There is some confusion among citizens concerning who is responsible for removing stencils, graffiti and murals that potentially contain elements of hate speech, more precisely, those citizens who are sufficiently informed about the legal regulation that governs this. Although a majority of people believe that local government units and the city or state institutions are responsible for the removal of contents on vandalized walls, opinion is divided regarding the responsibility of building tenants.

### **Do you think that the public/residents of buildings with vandalized facades are responsible for removing them?**

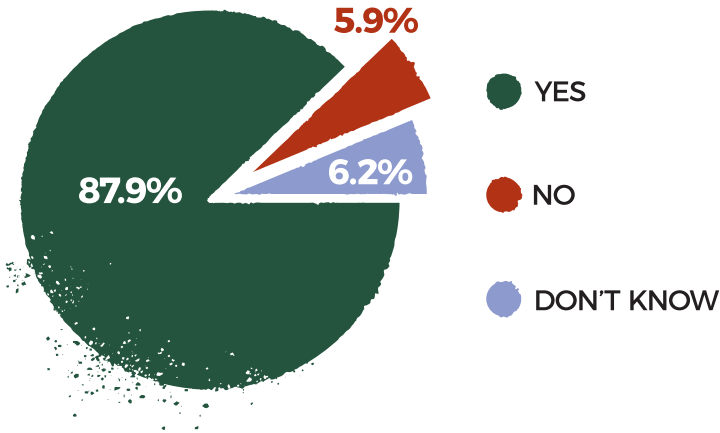
355 responses





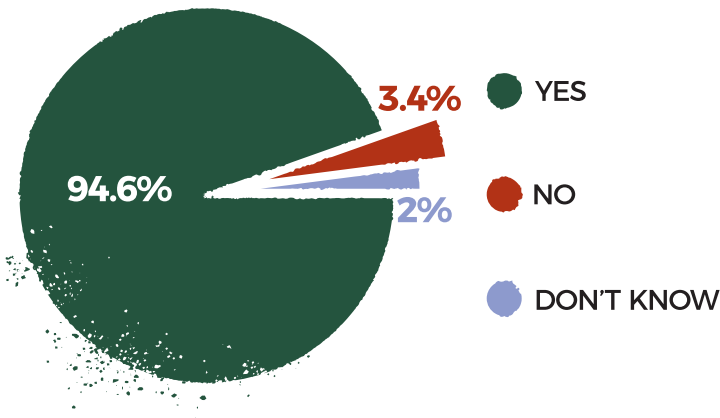


## Do you think that the local government, city or state is responsible for removing these items? 355 responses

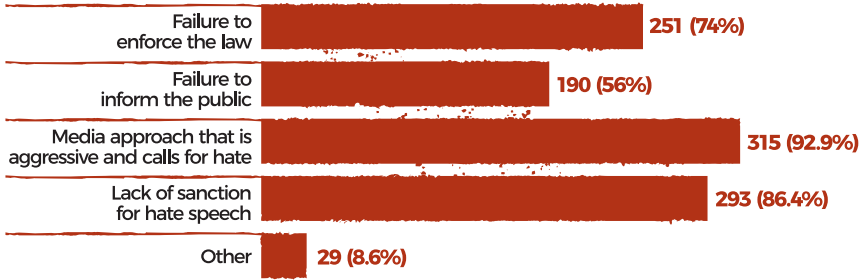


Closely related to these views is the opinion of the public regarding the influence of politicians on the increase in hate speech, violence and aggression in society. People believe that this influence is enormous, and that it is first and foremost exerted by media appearances that are aggressive and often call for hatred, by not sanctioning hate speech, and by not doing what the law requires.

## Do you think that Serbian politicians affect the growth of hate, aggression and nationalism in society? 355 responses

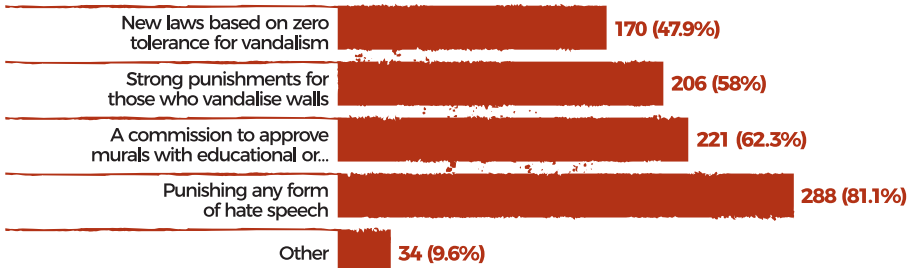


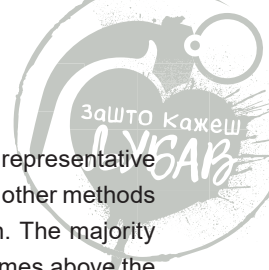
**If your previous answer is YES, please tell us how you think this affect works?**



As a potential response to violence in society that arises as a result of aggressive campaigns of illegal painting on walls with stencils, graffiti and murals that glorify aggressive or criminal activity, people state the sanctioning of any form of hatred, the formation of a commission that will approve murals that have educational or artistic content, and heavy fines for those who vandalize walls.

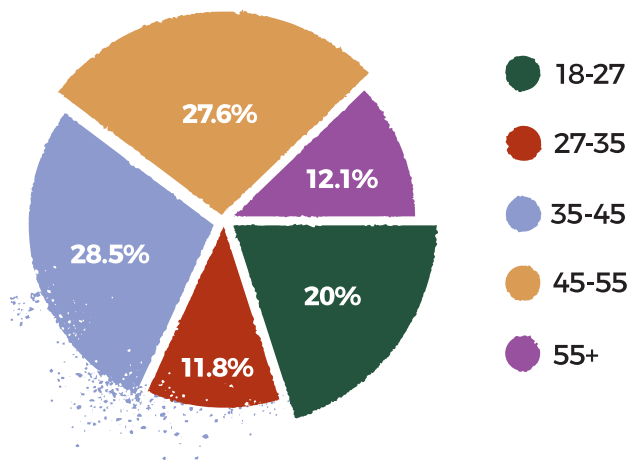
**I agree with:**





It is important to note, however, that the survey does not cover a representative sample of Serbian citizens, and that is precisely why the authors used other methods (primarily focus groups) in order to reach a more precise conclusion. The majority of citizens who filled out the survey have a higher education and incomes above the Serbian average, while as many as 80% of them declared that they get information through social networks and websites, and 61% through news programmes of television stations such as NovaS or N1, i.e. independent media that are not under state control.<sup>8</sup> One factor that can be considered representative is the respondents' ages, because they cover all age groups.

### What is your age group? 355 responses



What was noticeable when working on focus groups in the age group of 18-25 years is the use of slang by young people to express certain attitudes. Thus, when asked to answer in one word the question "How do you feel when you listen to official politicians and their speeches, what emotions do they evoke?", the answers were: bes (anger), blam (ignominy), bespomoćnost (helplessness), krindž (cringe, transferred embarrassment), gnar (same as krindž), gađenje (disgust), uvređenost (insult), frustracija (frustration). It is interesting though that the age group of 35-45 gives similar answers, albeit without using slang: silovanje (rape), vređanje inteligencije (insulting intelligence), beznađe (hopelessness), muka (torment), bes

8 <https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Istrazivanje-javnog-mnjenja-Politicki-stavovi->

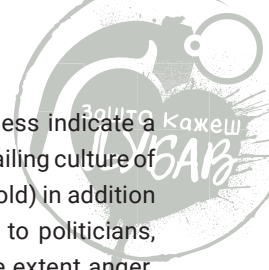
(anger), dosada (boredom), tuga (sadness), strah (fear), uvređenost (insult). And among the older group (55+), similar attitudes prevail, such as: ljutnja (anger), gađenje (disgust), mučnina (nausea), ravnodušnost (indifference), déjà vu.

It is possible to draw a parallel between the questions from the survey concerning the responsibility of politicians for the increase of hatred, violence and aggression in society with the feelings caused by their appearances in the media (both printed and electronic). The vast majority of participants in the focus groups clearly and unequivocally link the aggressive (frequent and simple) behaviour of politicians (primarily those in power) with the growth of stencils, graffiti and murals that symbolize and spread hatred. The majority of focus group participants also believe that politicians are directly or indirectly the initiators of a campaign of a large increase in stencils, murals and graffiti that glorify convicted war criminals, paramilitary units or symbols that represent aggression.

There are, however, visible differences in the way different generational groups express their attitude towards politicians and their influence on the increase in aggression and hate speech, and thus on the increase in the culture of violence in society. First of all, the focus group participants independently presented examples from Serbia's recent past concerning a society dominated by violence (with clear references to the 1990s), and drew parallels with the present. Secondly and closely related, a continuity is identified in the style of governance from the recent past with the one that prevails today. This is observed both in surveys and in focus groups. There is, however, a clear intergenerational difference due to the fact that young people do not have an active memory of the events of the nineties and the reign of Slobodan Milošević (war, sanctions, anti-government protests), while on the other hand, the older groups still clearly remember that historical period, especially the elderly (55+).

The transgenerational transmission of memories is noticeable among young people. They know and understand that the culture of violence was ubiquitous in Serbia in the nineties, but they are unable to understand the context in which such a culture developed nor the way of resistance against it (which does not mean only the socio-political situation, but also information technology).

The views of the focus group participants on the feelings caused by politicians' speeches are therefore also logical. Disgust, indifference and nausea appear among the eldest, which implies that they have been exposed for a long time to a way of governing whose public discourse is dominated by violence, aggression, falsehoods, unfulfilled promises and open pathos. In the case of citizens aged 35



to 45, attitudes such as anger, insulting intelligence, fear and sadness indicate a certain feeling of powerlessness to oppose and fight against the prevailing culture of violence (but also of primitivism). Finally, young people (18-25 years old) in addition to anger and helplessness, as feelings that arise when they listen to politicians, state frustration, “cringe” (transfer of embarrassment), and to some extent anger. Such attitudes among young people lead to the thought that they are the most sensitive to hate speech, aggression and violence, and that they are probably the greatest victims of the dominant culture of violence. Those young people who have a low tolerance for frustration are more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour.

It is interesting that only among young people was it possible to establish a connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and the increase in violence and aggression. Both in the survey and in the focus groups, they identified that the channels for public communication of their own views and opinions are almost non-existent. This should be understood in the context of a captured state,<sup>9</sup> but also in the period of lockdown to prevent the spread of infection. The words of one participant of the focus group are interesting, as she believes that young people were simply bored during the pandemic, that there was no space to express their views, so they did it only where they could - and that was on the walls.

Participants between the ages of 35 and 45, as well as those over 55, believe that there is a correlation between what they perceive as an increase in peer violence with an increase in the number of stencils, graffiti and murals with aggressive content on the walls of Belgrade and other cities in Serbia. The majority of interviewees and participants in focus groups believe that the education system functions extremely poorly, and that it does not perform its educational role as it should. They also point out three important things that contribute to maintaining a culture of violence:

1) the lack of empathy and solidarity that these groups mainly associate with young people, from those that can be identified in everyday life (e.g. not giving up a seat to an elderly person in public transport) to those that are detected in a wider social context such as a complete absence of solidarity between classes, a lack of solidarity towards the weak, powerless and poor;

2) the collapse of the value system, which is a process that has been going on since the nineties, and which results in the inability to distinguish between good and evil, beautiful and ugly, moral and immoral;

3) the inability of the political system and responsible institutions, to respond to problems that arise in society in a timely manner and in accordance with applicable laws and regulations, including violence and hate speech.

<sup>9</sup> <https://bezbednost.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/NED-srb-screen-fin.pdf>

Another difference between adult citizens (35-45 years old and over 55 years old) and young people is the value-normative attitude towards the symbols outlined on the walls of the facades. Adults are very clear about certain symbols that spread hatred, and this primarily refers to stencils and mural(s) dedicated to Ratko Mladić and to the Z signs that represent a pro-war and pro-Russian propaganda motif and a symbol of support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. They know very well who Ratko Mladić is, and most can recognize stencils, graffiti and murals supporting Russia in their war (in addition to the letter Z, murals dedicated to Putin, painted flags of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics). In addition to the prevailing negative attitude towards the aesthetic expression that these stencils, graffiti and murals leave ("messages of love are better"), adults clearly recognize that these images have a political meaning and therefore consequences (regardless of whether someone marks Ratko Mladić as a war criminal or condemns Russia's aggression against Ukraine). On the other hand, young people rarely understand "political" in the stencils, graffiti and murals. They have a fairly precise idea of what the character of Ratko Mladić means, and they have the idea that he represents something negative for certain social groups. This is the same with pro-Russian content on the walls. Young people know that it is about something that is "not accepted in Europe". However, they rarely enter into value or political evaluations of these symbols and prefer to focus on aesthetics without politics. Even when they express certain value or political judgments, they mostly do so in discussions about history, or while comparing the local context with situations in other countries of the Western Balkans.

What is common to all ages in the focus groups is the identification of right-wing and football fan groups as actors who use the walls to express their views. However, everyone is unsure about the relationship between these groups and politicians, especially those in power. While some believe that both fan and right-wing groups are under the direct control of political actors and thus act and leave their messages on the walls following orders, others believe that these groups have nothing to do with politicians, that they act independently, or that they may have something to do with certain holders of political and economic power.



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# STATEMENTS AND THE INSTRUMENTALIZATION OF VIOLENCE

*“For him, statements have much more weight than the ways of simple speech, and however persuasive, statements are also something less contained in authority than in the direct utterances of someone from the ruling power.”*

**Edward V. Said, Foucault and the Imagination of Power.**

*“Violence, in the true sense of the word, becomes in one way or another an active cause of social change only when it interferes with moral relations. The area of these relations is marked by the notions of law and justice. As for the first of them, it is clear that the basic relationship of any legal order is the relationship between end and means. Furthermore, it is also clear that we can look for violence primarily in the area of means, not goals.”*

**Walter Benjamin, Toward the Critique of Violence**

As violence – unlike power, force or strength – always needs tools (as Engels said a long time ago) and thus a technological revolution, or according to Hannah Arendt "a revolution in the making of tools", so the very essence of violent action is determined by the category of means.

Through the results of the online survey and the focus groups, it was established that the respondents believe that a culture of violence dominates in Serbia, while the media were identified as one of the most important channels through which that culture is maintained. As a concept used in this work, the culture of violence is understood as a phenomenon that pervades the entire society, and the state, its institutions and the entire state system (primarily educational and judicial) is responsible for combating it. After the unprecedented tragedies that occurred in Serbia at the beginning of May 2023 (the massacre at the Vladislav Ribnikar primary school in Belgrade and just one day later the mass murder in the villages around Mladenovac), terms such as "culture of violence" or "disintegration of the system" have become part of everyday discourse. Examining the genesis of that culture, many experts, professors of the University of Belgrade, independent journalists and cultural workers have made an unambiguous connection between the bellicose nationalist paradigm of the nineties and the dominant culture of violence with current social pathologies, in which war criminals from the Yugoslav wars are celebrated as heroes, and solidarity and empathy towards victims of any form of violence is practically non-existent.<sup>10</sup> The never-broken continuity of the paradigm of the culture of violence in the status quo is maintained by the current holders of political and economic power, precisely because spreading fear (through violent and aggressive messages) is one of the main techniques of governance in Serbia today.

When the issue of hateful stencils, graffiti, murals and generally painting facades of buildings with contents that symbolize violence, aggression and intolerance is brought into the context of the "culture of violence", it is noticeable that holders of the highest state positions are indirectly responsible for them. Such a statement can be concluded on the basis of public statements of politicians at various levels of government. For example, after the removal of the war-mongering graffiti "When the army returns to Kosovo..." in the 'Mitićeva rupa' park near Slavija by activists from the KROKODIL Association and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights, and after the re-painting of the cleansed facade with the same content, Belgrade Mayor Aleksandar Šapić answered a journalist's question about whether the city will do anything to remove political graffiti in the following way:

*"I don't know who determines what is political graffiti and what is not? I have nothing against the graffiti 'Kosovo is Serbia' and Miloš Obilić and Serbian heroes and great figures. Let's just say that the graffiti that was removed by that gentleman was not ugly at all. It was beautiful."<sup>11</sup>*

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10 <https://nova.rs/kultura/dubravka-stojanovic-srbija-je-kuca-obesenog-u-kojoj-se-o-konopcu-cuti/>

11 <https://twitter.com/AcaSapic/status/1629890042200989699>





The mayor, in this particular statement, uses an example that many politicians in power normally use when they are faced with the possible question of responsibility for nationalist and aggressive murals and graffiti, but also other symbols that are generally opposed to something that can be called initiatives of tolerance, peace or solidarity. First, ignorance about the specific case (in this example, graffiti) appears as a reaction, which is often followed by a rhetorical question where the interlocutor (the public in this example) is indirectly accused of "unpatriotic" behaviour. Therefore, anyone who removes such stencils, graffiti and murals is not a patriot and can be considered a traitor and a "foreign mercenary" (usual labels for individuals or groups that oppose dominant nationalist discourses). Commenting on the aesthetic appearance of the graffiti itself ("it's not ugly, it's beautiful"), represents an indirect agreement with the message written on that wall; the positive evaluation of visual aesthetics masks the political message behind it (it could have been a call to murder, but the graffiti is still beautiful). Of course, this quote does not show or conclude that the city and the politicians in power are directly behind every nationalist graffiti or mural, but that they are indirectly responsible for their existence. Finally, their ignoring of the vast number of nationalist murals and graffiti and reactions like the above to their removal indirectly leads to violence against those who try to resist the "culture of violence" by erasing such stencils, graffiti and murals. In this particular case, the organizers of the announced and registered cleaning action were faced with a huge number of threats.<sup>12</sup> They were followed by the reaction of the state in the form of judicial pressure, and at the time of writing this text, eight activists are facing twenty-five different misdemeanour charges in a veritable avalanche of *slapdash* lawsuits, which, on the other hand, as expected, was completely absent in the case of those who illegally left on the walls content of a hateful and warmongering nature, which these activists removed.

Quite impressive proof of the undue influence of politicians on the increase of violence in society is the statement of former Minister of the Interior Aleksandar Vulin, who in September 2022 visited the crew of the film *The Yellow House*, produced by the Ministry of the Interior and the Serbian state broadcaster RTV. As part of the series showing "the truth about the war in Kosovo" (one of the many aspects of the revision of the recent history of Serbia), Vulin praises and with the following words justifies the production of the film about the so-called "Yellow House", as a potential place of crimes against Serbs:

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<https://www.danas.rs/vesti/drustvo/nikome-ne-smeta-tema-kosova-vec-ratnohusacke>

*“The Yellow House is a story about horrors, about monsters. The Yellow House is the story of what kind of evil the Serbs were fighting. The Yellow House is the truth about the fact that the Serbs were not only victims, but they had to fight, and they were neither criminals nor eager for war, but they had to save themselves, their children, and when they failed to do so, they ended up slaughtered like animals, their organs removed for sale.”<sup>13</sup>*

Nationalist discourse is maintained by victimizing narratives, which like this example are full of terrifying examples of the consequences that follow when "the people" are unable to protect themselves. This film was produced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the public information service, and has a double goal: a revision of Serbia's recent past, especially the wars of the 1990s; an attempt to maintain the narrative that Serbia never waged wars of conquest, but only defended itself. The consequence of such a project (of which there are many in contemporary Serbian cultural production) is precisely the indirect threat that members of the modern generation (especially the younger ones) will end up being "slaughtered like animals" if they are not ready to defend themselves. Such a message itself includes violence and aggressive behaviour. It was uttered in the context of the "struggle for justice and truth", for something good, and it is precisely in this example that one can see how the "culture of violence" is often masked by positive value norms and ethical principles.

Analysis of the speeches of the highest political actors shows a large number of examples that illustrate how structural, often invisible, violence is maintained in society. Their statements and performances are often accompanied by threats, insults and a raised tone when addressing journalists, political opponents or even the public itself. In the National Assembly the President of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, accused the public of taking false sick leave, indirectly threatening that with such a practice (taking sick leave) there would be no money for salaries. Claiming that strikes cause financial damage to the state and society, and that many people take false sick leave (a claim made without any evidence), not only disputes the guaranteed right to strike and to sick leave, but indirectly threatens and warns that such behaviour is not welcome. In a country where workers' rights are at a very low level and where "disobedience" in public enterprises often ends in dismissal (whistleblowers are only the most visible example of such practices), such statements only contribute to

the development of fear, anxiety and frustration among a large number of people, and to maintaining "cultures of violence".



*„There is no-one to defend the country, every strike in the country, no matter what happens, everyone supports some strike. And then they wonder, why is there no money for me? Well, no, because you supported a previous one. And now they will come, for example, from Namenska in Kragujevac to strike. Every day, 696 people are not at work out of 2,130 people, and 434 people have one to three years until retirement. You can imagine what kind of success we can make. But Vučić is guilty because he pays the salaries of those who have false sick leave, and there are not 40,000 of them, but as many as you want.”<sup>14</sup>*

In this example there is also self-victimization, which often occurs in the statements of politicians in power, and above all the president of the Republic. But even in such examples of self-victimization, violence is promoted, all for the purpose of maintaining power and deflecting political (or any other) responsibility. Not infrequently, politicians in high public positions respond to "blackmail" in cases when the public and other actors call them to political responsibility. These "blackmails" have different forms, but they often contain violent messages (for example, suicide threats). In the context of a series of protests called "Serbia against violence", which has gathered tens of thousands of protesters in Belgrade, the President of the Republic stated at a meeting of the leadership of the ruling Serbian Progressive Party:

*“I will call all the elections, I am fed up with all the scams, I am ready to die, I am not afraid at all! Here, I'm waiting for those cowards to come and kill me, but I will never hand over power to them without elections!”<sup>15</sup>*

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14 <https://nova.rs/vesti/politika/vucic-optuzuje-ljude-da-imaju-lazna-bolovanja-ima-ih-ne-40-000-vec-koliko-hocete-video/>

15 <https://www.politika.rs/sr/clanak/556223/Vucic-na-sastanku-najuzeg-rukovodstva-Srpske-napredne-stranke-Spreman-sam-da-poginem-boricu-se-do-kraja>

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# CONCLUSION

The research has shown that aggression and violence are so dominant in Serbian society that they have penetrated into all its pores. That is why it is so difficult to identify and map all of their "sources", which in this paper are collectively labelled as "the culture of violence". The broadest framework for maintaining the "culture of violence" is identified – both in the literature and research – in the terrifying consequences of the wars of the nineties, in the traumatic experiences that Serbian society was exposed to, but even more so in the disastrous refusal of the majority of society to face the trauma. Moreover, that trauma, which takes the form of a social anomaly, is "fed" by the glorification of war crimes, and by the maintenance and active promotion of a distorted value system that once served as a cultural support for wars and still serves as the main tool for the radical negation of the crimes committed. A break with this dominant cultural framework and the undue political influences on the increase in violence has never occurred.

Three decades after a series of bloody conflicts on the territory of the former Yugoslavia, convicted war criminals, after serving their sentences in foreign prisons, return to Serbia where they are gladly accepted, the highest state officials show them open respect and they are showered with positive media attention from the pro-regime media. It is therefore unsurprising that many years after the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, people in Serbia still live with such distorted views of the negative legacy of the 1990s. Young people show a fundamental lack of knowledge about the wars and the violent breakup of Yugoslavia. Trapped in the space between ethno-national and cosmopolitan identity, they are the main targets of abuse and are often pawns in the hands of the powerful. Tools used to promote retrograde, hateful policies and to openly glorify convicted war criminals, promote hate speech, and even directly incite violence are, unfortunately, all too well-known (stencils, graffiti, murals) and in the last few years have resulted in the unprecedented scale of aesthetic-ideological pollution of our cities.

In this regard, the results of the Alternative Report on the Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia for 2023 are not surprising (the Alternative Report has been published by the Youth Umbrella Organization since 2017 as the result of the largest research on youth in Serbia). They show that this year, for the first time, the majority of young people supported the return of control over Kosovo by military means (in two years, support for this option has increased from 18.7% to 31.1%), but also that a positive attitude towards the EU is at

a record low, that young people believe that the political system in Serbia does not at all allow young people to influence political processes and decisions (54.2% – more than half of respondents), and that they do not trust the electoral system (76.4% of respondents).<sup>16</sup>

Owning to the active instrumentalization of young people over many years by the state authorities, the focus in this paper was placed on only one manifestation of the culture of violence, namely stencils, graffiti and murals, as a relatively new form of expression and promotion of aggression. Other examples, however, such as traditional, analogue media, a strictly controlled educational system, kidnapped institutions, cannot be ignored. The political elite uses this type of media (urban spaces) as just one of the legitimizing formulas of their rule, because spreading fear and avoiding political responsibility through this becomes the rule and not the exception, which opens up the possibility of a long-term grip on power and democratic regression.

The people of Serbia are largely aware of the devastating effect that ubiquitous violence has on society, and of the state's unwillingness to deal with that problem. Although economic problems trouble people more than violence, the absence of social justice and the systemic corruption are still recognized as violence by the state against its own citizens. An extremely large number of citizens are not only concerned about the prevalence of peer, family and other evident forms of physical and psychological violence, but are also aware of the burden of invisible violence (three quarters of citizens believe that peer violence is somewhat or very widespread in Serbia, violence against women 83%, domestic violence 81% and generally violent crimes 74%).<sup>17</sup>

We conclude that in Serbia there is a direct and undue influence of the state and the media on the maintenance of a specific and widespread "culture of violence" and that narratives dominated by aggressive vocabulary contribute to its maintenance, which is also due to the absence of a strategy to combat violence, and that the increase in violence and aggression in society, among other things, leads to an increase in femicide.

In Serbia and beyond, from the wars of the 1990s onwards, violence in all its forms became and remained the ultima ratio and as such maintained a high degree of credibility among the elected political elites, the media close to them and, indirectly, among a significant part of the population. We believe that the continuation of politics through violence cannot be a response to the general obsolescence of political practices and the impossibility of real political, economic and social transition.

Induced violence has become a painful everyday fact for the people of Serbia.

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16 <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Alternativni-Izvestaj-2023-Finalna-verzija-Aug7.pdf>

17 <https://crta.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Stavovi-gradana-Srbije-o-nasilju-septem-bar-2023.pdf>

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