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„If words could kill: Personal, professional and legal ramifications
of hate speech towards women journalists in the countries of the
Western Balkans“

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Introduction

The spread of hate speech in public spaces has become a worldwide problem. Given that freedom of speech is one of the basic human rights, people often believe that they are rightfully entitled to say anything they want, having as a result a thin line between their freedom of speech and the spread of hate speech.

Due to the lack of strict definitions, poor implementation of vague laws and institutionalisation of hate speech, this phenomenon has become a serious issue for the modern human. The rise of the popularity of social networks is not helping either, while it certainly is a technological advancement in terms of spreading thoughts, news and information instantly, without borders across the world, it has also provided an ideal platform for spreading words of hate, threats and attacks. Public figures are especially vulnerable when it comes to hate speech, but one group in particular has been emerging in the past years. Media workers, as the ones communicating different types of information to the general public, are often the target, and among them, women journalists, due to the persistent patriarchal context of our society are additionally discriminated against. The work they do is prone to heavy criticism and more often than not the “critics” are bullies who do not choose means nor words when attacking them, both online and offline, threatening them or their families, focusing on their physical appearance and behavioural characteristics they see as not feminine enough. That is especially the case in the countries of the Western Balkans, where the post-conflict atmosphere is such that many political, socio-economic, gender-loaded topics the media reports on are seen as highly controversial, sensitive or provocative. The laws for sanctioning behaviour that can be broadly seen as hate speech do exist but are not precise enough nor do they offer ultimate protection to the victims. As a consequence, many female journalists choose not to pursue legal action against their attackers, since the

implementation of the laws is like a lottery, sometimes hate speech does get processed by the authorities, but in most cases it does not, which victimises them even further and affects their physical and mental wellbeing.

The purpose of this paper is to present the most recent studies that researched hate speech toward women journalists, laws and legal practices that cover it and then provide an actual insight into this issue from women journalists working on the territory of the Western Balkans through semi-structured in-depth interviews and qualitative analysis.

Hate speech as a norm in the society

Even though hate speech, as a form of public expression, is generally condemned, the exact meaning is often questioned when it comes to certain cultural contexts and there is no universally accepted definition of hate speech (Boromisza-Habashi, 2015). One of the reasons for that could be seen in the attempts to balance between the basic human right to freedom of speech, and protection against discrimination and violence (Petersson, 2019). Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights protects the freedom of speech, however, a Guide to the Interpretation and Meaning of Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights states that it “is not an absolute right” (Mendel, 2012). The United Nations characterises it as verbal, written or behavioral way of communication “that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor”. With the rise of social networks, it has never been easier to propagate hate worldwide. In recent years, the spread of hate speech on social networks has increased significantly, primarily due to the option of anonymity these platforms offer, as well as mobility, and the constant change of policies regulating such behaviour online (Zhang & Luo, 2019).

Despite an overall increase in equality, social awareness and political correctness, hate speech still greatly affects the society and is on the rise. The reason for this enchanted circle could be found in desensitisation of the society due to the constant exposure to hate speech. Encouraging the spread of hate speech in public places, especially online, affects the audience in such a way that they are becoming less aware of the harm caused by it. People, when often exposed to hateful comments they see online, become insensitive to them, and

eventually the content of these comments affects, or rather distorts their views of members of certain groups (Bilewicz & Winiewski, 2018).

United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech states the following:

“Hate speech is dangerous because of its potential to legitimise intolerance, which can put into action very serious and violent outcomes. When hate speech is allowed to proliferate, it contributes to the creation of norms: hatred and intolerance become acceptable.” It further states: “When a leader, especially a trusted leader, engages with hate speech, the process of norm creation is enhanced. In such a social climate, actions that may have previously seemed extreme become imaginable or even plausible.”

(Online) Violence and hate speech toward women journalists

One of the most recent documents that addresses the issue of hate speech toward female journalists is a discussion paper published by UNESCO in 2021. The research focused on 17 racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse but so far understudied countries, as a part of a larger intradisciplinary study exploring the issue of violence against female journalists. According to the study, gendered online violence is a combination of several manifestations of violence: “Misogynistic harassment, abuse and threats; Digital privacy and security breaches that increase physical risks associated with online violence; Coordinated disinformation campaigns leveraging misogyny and other forms of hate speech.” (UNESCO, 2021)

When it comes to the manifestations of online violence, preliminary results show that 73% of the respondents said that they experienced online violence, more specifically threats of physical violence (25% of the respondents) and sexual violence (18% of the respondents) which impacted their mental health. One-fifth reported that they had been attacked offline as

well, and that those attacks were connected to the threats they had received online.

Respondents reported being discriminated against based, among other, on their ethnicity, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and gender and that, due to the violence they receive online, they often censor themselves on social media or withdraw altogether from online interactions.

The study also identifies that the topic on which the respondents report most often leads to attacks, more specifically female journalists are vulnerable the most when they report on the issues that deal with gender, politics and human rights. Political actors and high-level political leaders are seen as the biggest instigators of online violence (37%), with the rest being unknown (57%). When it comes to the legislature, 11% of the respondents reported online violence to the authorities, due to the lack of confidence in their legal system.

These preliminary findings are in line with previous studies of online violence and hate speech. One survey showed that 39% of women journalists working in technology changed their work habits, such as stopping writing or censoring themselves in terms of form, style and content, were out of contact with the audience, or became anonymous (Adams, 2018). Women journalists are more likely than men to avoid being assaulted by limiting their interaction with the audience, adjusting the ways they report on certain issues and finally, by quitting journalism (Pain & Chen, 2019; Stahel & Schoen, 2020).

Another study found evidence of online sex based harassment, more specifically the female participants stated that they had received comments in which they were criticised, discriminated against, or threatened because of their gender (Chen et al., 2020). Female journalists detect two types of negative comments they receive; one is focused on their gender and the insults are thus derogatory and humiliating in nature, and the other is an attack on physical appearance (Pain & Chen, 2019). Eckert (2018) interviewed bloggers who wrote about feminism and maternity policies and found that the vast majority of people had

negative experiences on social media, ranging from abusive comments to death threats and offline encounters they described as unpleasant. Other topics that incite hate speech and online attacks are the ones regarding the political ideology and when female journalists report on controversial issues (Pain & Chen, 2019). Research on the psychological effects of online bullying on the victims are scarce when it comes to the adult population, however, research done on adolescents show that hate comments and attacks can lead to social anxiety (Schenk & Fremouw, 2012), stress and loneliness (Kwan et al., 2020) and depression (Gamez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013).

In the Western Balkans region there have not been many studies that have covered the issue of hate speech and online violence directed at women journalists. When it comes to the freedom of speech and hate speech in the journalistic profession, Amnesty International Report 2020/2021 states that there is still much to be done in terms of protecting journalists from physical attacks, hate speech and various threats (Amnesty International, 2020). Article 19 published a report in 2021 and in one paragraph only stated that female journalists are often the targets of online sexual harassment and threats to their family members. They quoted a recent report from Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) which emphasises that in recent years, online harassment of journalists in Serbia has increased exponentially, and women are the main target of such threats (Article 19, 2021).

The countries of the Western Balkans are set strong on a path to becoming members of the European Union. The Republic of Serbia became a candidate country in 2012 and so far has opened eighteen chapters and provisionally closed two chapters. North Macedonia has been a candidate since 2005 but they still have not opened the accession negotiation. Bosnia and Herzegovina applied in February 2016 and is waiting for approval to be a candidate,

since their first application was declined. Kosovo*¹ is also a potential candidate, but has not applied officially to be a candidate since it has not yet been ratified by all of the member states. Given the unified principles the member states are set on, it is reasonable to assume that the countries of the Western Balkans would want to contribute to the mission and the vision of the European Union, and uphold its values. In the context of this study this is especially relevant in terms of preserving the independence of the media and the safety of media workers. In the context of the post-socialistic and post-transitional period of the Western Balkans countries, it is relevant in terms of media decentralisation, given that all media outlets were for decades owned by the state (Veljanovski, 2009), and also women's rights given the strong patriarchal discourse in which women are still seen heavily discriminated against (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2018).

The accession of these countries to the European Union unravels the similarities of the Western Balkans countries and the rest of Europe in regards to the safety of journalists. According to the study conducted by the Media Governance and Industries Research Lab of the University of Vienna (2016), in Europe (excluding Russia and Turkey), 58 journalists were attacked. In comparison, that year, in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* and North Macedonia, 19 journalists were attacked, which is why it is important to study and discuss the situation in these countries when it comes to the rise of violence and hate speech toward journalists, and given the state of women's rights and place in those societies, women journalists.

¹ "This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence"
https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/128138.pdf

**Legal frameworks and strategies for the protection of (female) journalists in Serbia,
Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo* against hate speech and
threats**

Republic of Serbia

The Republic of Serbia has several laws under which the protection of journalists against hate speech and threats is, although indirectly, guaranteed.

Article 75 of the Law on public information and media prohibits hate speech by the media as follows: “Ideas, opinions, or information published in the media must not encourage discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or group of persons because of their belonging or non-belonging to a certain race, religion, nation, sex, because of their sexual orientation or other personal characteristics, regardless of whether or not an actual crime was committed as a result of what has been published.”.

The Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, Article 11, states that “It is forbidden to express ideas, information and opinions that incite discrimination, hatred or violence against a person or group of persons because of their personal characteristics, in public media and other publications, at gatherings and places accessible to the public, writing and displaying messages or symbols and otherwise.”.

The Criminal Law provides the following, under Article 54a: “If the crime was committed out of hatred due to race and religion, nationality or ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or gender identity of another person, the court will assess this circumstance as an aggravating circumstance, unless it is prescribed as a feature of the crime.”.

These laws, although very precise in defining persecution measures, still fail to define the phenomenon of hate speech, and by doing so, provide an open space for personal interpretation.

In addition to the laws, the Republic of Serbia has several other mechanisms established for the purpose of dealing with hate speech and threats the journalists receive. A Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists was established in 2016, comprised of public prosecutors, journalists' associations, the police with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe as an observer. The aim of the Group was forming a system of measures that will provide more efficient legal protection of journalists. The Group also set up an 24/7 SOS phone line in 2021 for journalists who feel that their safety has been jeopardised. However, for sex-based violence, no special measures were formed. In 2020, the Serbian Government set up another working group which is to deal with reviewing and amending the existing laws regarding the safety of journalists.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, its entities and the Brcko district, hate speech is indirectly punishable by law. The Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Article 145a), the Criminal Code of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Article 163), (Article 359) and the Criminal Code of the Brcko District of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Article 160) criminalise the following: “the acts incite religious and ethnic hatred”. The Criminal Code of the Republic of Srpska sees “openly provoking and inciting violence and hatred” as a crime, and the aforementioned law also provides sanctions against the perpetrators of the said crimes. Incitement to hatred is also prohibited under the Law on prohibition of discrimination in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Law on gender equality, Law on religious freedom and Law on the legal status of churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bosnia and Herzegovina The Electoral Law.

North Macedonia

In North Macedonia, Article 319 of the criminal law states that: “(1) A person who by coercion, harassment, endangering security, exposing ridicule of national, ethnic or religious symbols, with damaging other people’s objects, by desecrating monuments, graves or on otherwise provokes or inflames national, racial or religious hatred, discord or intolerance will be punished by imprisonment of one to five years. (2) A person who commits the crime from item 1 by abusing his position or authority or if due to those acts there was disorder and violence to people or to large-scale property damage, shall be punishable by imprisonment from one to ten years.”

*Kosovo**

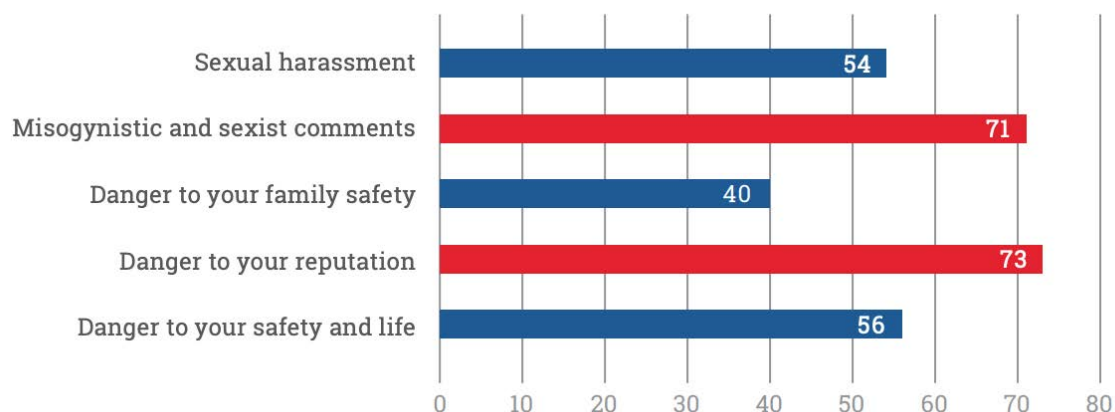
In Kosovo*, Article 147 of the Law on amending and supplementing the criminal code of the Republic of Kosovo No. 04/L-082 prohibits the “inciting national, racial, religious or ethnic hatred, discord or intolerance”, and, similar to Serbia, defines a sentence of an up to five years in prison for such a crime or, if the person committing a crime does so by using their authority or position from one to eight years in prison. Not one of these laws defines the term hate speech, only describes punishable behaviour, and, while its clear from many of the articles that endangering security, provoking, threatening, inciting violence and such is a criminal offense, it is often difficult for the journalists, and others for that matter, to receive justice when faced with hate speech.

All of the countries included in this study have a Code of Ethics when it comes to journalistic profession². However, those documents are more on a self-regulatory basis and are not

² <https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/kodeks-asti-bh-novinara/>
<http://www.uns.org.rs/kodeks-novinara-srbije.html>
https://agk-ks.org/site/assets/files/2614/press-code-for-kosovo_alb_1.pdf
<https://znm.org.mk/kodeks-na-novinarite-na-makedonija/>

legally binding. They serve as a guidance system for journalists, media houses and journalists' associations.

In this region not many studies have been done that cover the issue of how the state deals with hate speech journalists report to the authorities. An analysis “Online Attacks on Female Journalists” published by Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (IJAS) states that in 2020, more specifically from January 2020 to September 2020 there had been 69 reported cases of attacks on female journalists. Furthermore, the study shows that 36% of the respondents replied that they have received threats through online channels or similar in the last five years. The content of the threats can be seen in the percentages in the following table.



Note. The graph is from the 2020 study “Online Attacks on Female Journalists” by Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia (IJAS).

When it comes to Bosnia and Herzegovina, an analysis on online violence and hate speech directed toward both male and female journalists in that country shows that sex-based violence stands for 53% of all online violence (BH Novinari, 2021). The local association of

journalists reported that, in the period between 2016 and April 2019, there had been 52 cases of attacks on female journalists, both online and offline.

For North Macedonia and Kosovo*, an online journalist attack database maintained by the Regional Platform for advocating media freedom and journalists' safety shows that in the period between 2016 and 2021 there had been 20 incidents in Kosovo* and 18 in North Macedonia, eight of which took place in 2020 only³. Information on the results of those cases is unknown.

In 2021 the rank of the Republic of Serbia on the Reporters without borders was 93 with the World press freedom index 32.03, which shows a steady drop since 2016, when the rank was 59. Bosnia and Herzegovina has the World press freedom index 28.34, and a rank of 58, which has varied slightly since 2016 when it was 68. The rank of Kosovo* is 78 and with the World press freedom index 30.32, and has been on the steady rise each year since 2016. North Macedonia is in the 90th place with the World press freedom index 31.67, in comparison to 2016 when the rank was 118 and has also been rising each year (Reporters Without Borders, 2020).

³ <https://safejournalists.net/>

Methodology and sampling

This study was conducted in the summer semester of the academic year 2020/2021, more specifically from 31st May 2021 up until 21st July 2021 using a qualitative approach. Semi-structured in depth interview was used for the collection of the data. Semi-structured interview as a technique uses a combination of close-end and open-end questions, accompanied by subsequent “why” or “how” questions. Approximately one hour is considered the reasonable maximum duration of the interview, to minimise the fatigue of interviewers and respondents (Adams, 2015). The interview used in this study was composed of twenty questions, four of which were optional (Appendix A).

The sampling was done in a manner in which several participants were contacted directly, through personal contacts, and later they all recommended other colleagues that might be interested in participating. Out of the total of 25 contacted journalists, nine did not respond.

All of the contacted journalists were first sent an invitation (Appendix B) to participate in the study, with detailed information on the nature of the research, they were informed that their responses were to be recorded and that they had the option to be signed under their full name or to stay anonymous (Appendix C). One of the participants exercised her right to remain anonymous.

The interviews were conducted online, via Skype and Zoom, to participants’ preference and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

A total of fifteen female journalists participated in the study, varying in their ethnic, religious and national background and belonging to different age groups. The countries participants were from were Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and

Kosovo*, and based in capitals as well as small towns, working for public broadcasting, international outlets, local newspaper, TV stations, regional portals.

All of the interviewees answered the questions in their native language, the audio recordings were afterwards transcribed, bringing the total number to 177 transcribed pages and translated to English. Their responses were then analysed using a thematic analysis, a qualitative research method “ for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set” (Nowell et al., 2017).

Female journalists and their experiences with hate speech - between the perpetrators and legal protection

All of the participants believe that they are the targets of hate speech and hate comments due to the topics they report on, but also their ethnic and religious background. They also receive hate because they work for a certain media house that someone sees as “traitorous” or as an “opposition”. What is interesting is that, even though they are subject to hate comments and threats because of the work they do, the content of those comments and threats have nothing to do with their work or the topics they cover. The comments are mostly of sexist nature, or an insult to their physical appearance, (perceived) ethnicity or religious beliefs and either address them as “promiscuous Muslim girl”, “whore”, “some politicians’ mistress”, “loud mouth”, “hysterical”, “slut”, “Balinkura” which is a derogatory term for Bosniak woman, “ustasa”, or say things such as “look at yourself, you look terrible, not at all what a female reporter should look like”, and such.

They all agree that being a woman journalist has always been hard, and that the hatred toward women is basically institutionalised and that the comments begin as early as their first days at University.

We, female journalists, are more vulnerable, because all of the comments are aimed at the fact that we are above all women, and are sexist and misogynistic. I got my first such comment when I attended my very first lecture at the University, and that attitude towards women in journalism has become a norm. The situation these days is a bit different than it was when I was first starting out (Ljiljana Jovanovic, JUGpress).

It is also nothing new that these comments are something their male colleagues do not face.

I have had situations when certain guests, when leaving the studio, comment on how I am pretty or how nice my dress is, which itself is not something negative, but I have never heard someone say to my male colleagues that their suit is really pretty. I do not understand why someone would have the need to comment on my appearance, I cannot imagine a situation in which a guest, after the show, comes up to my male colleague and tells him he was really cute that morning (Minela Jasar Opardija, N1).

Almost all of the interviewees have worked in journalism for decades, and during the interviews they had recalled some of the first comments and hate speech they had received before social networks were even invented. In the past, they would receive hateful phone calls, emails and letters, but also comments online on the websites of the media houses they worked for. They believe that the reasons why someone feels the need to behave in such a way are diverse, that some perpetrators do act as individuals, or are carried away in an atmosphere of lynch, because every day is a new opportunity to “hook” themselves onto someones’ post or status. However, in severely polarised societies, and such are the Western Balkans countries, all of the major political parties employ bots, who work per assignment, meaning they receive clear instructions from their party leaders on which topics they are to watch for and who to bury with hateful comments on a given day. Even though it is sometimes hard to distinguish between who act on their own accord, and who is being instructed, Minela points out that it is also important to understand that in post-conflict societies many have post-traumatic stress disorder and that the mental instability is certainly one of the more important factors when it comes to objective reasoning and participating constructively in a debate.

Danica Vucenic has only on one occasion filed an official report against an individual, which was solved quickly and the perpetrator was ordered medical treatment because he was mentally disturbed. That was also the situation in which she felt the most fear, because the perpetrator threatened to rape and kill her daughter.

When speaking about the perpetrators, the participants all address them as males and state that, even when it is obvious that some profile on a social network is fake, they are usually under a male name and photograph, or write using male pronouns. Only one of the interviewed journalists said that there is a probability that some of the commentators are women as well. Still, they notice that not all of the profiles are fake and that many do not believe that the anonymity protects them anymore, so they act under their own accounts where they post family photos while, at the same time, attack others and families of those others, sending disgusting threats and insults.

Danica believes that, when speaking about hate speech, one should not forget that that issue is the same one our society has been facing since the beginning of 1990s, and that Serbia has went through an entire decade of wars in which it never formally took part. To this day the Republic of Serbia does not face what certain individuals did in the name of Serbian politics. For the last thirty years, she adds, we live in a divided society and hate speech has become something normal.

This society lives with hate speech, it grew into it. Hate speech became some endemic disease and I am not sure if it is possible to cure it. It is difficult to distinguish between what hate speech is and is not, even though there are laws, institutions, in spite of adapting our entire system to the European guidelines. Hate speech is the official policy (Danica Vucenic, freelancer).

This is something all of the interviewees agree on, and stress out that the society is very polarised in all of the Balkans countries, meaning the situation is relatively the same in those

states. We witness every day the way in which the leading politicians and government officials talk to the media, the citizens and the opposing party, but also the way in which the debates in the Parliament are held, and that is something that has spread over everyone else as a legitimate way of communication.

Ljubica believes that speaking out about hate speech is important, because hate speech has become a common way of communication. However, simply talking about an issue does not automatically mean that the issue will be solved. “In pessimistic days I think this is a new phase of communication, which is the reality, and not simply an incident. It is the product of various social circumstances.” (Ljubica Gojgic, RTV).

Una Hajdari agrees that the political climate and decisions of the policy makers act as a trigger for hate speech and hate comments, and says:

People are angry and I do not have a problem with people being angry, at all.

Generally I believe that citizens should have their voices heard on the things that affect them, but the politicians also know that citizens want their voices to be heard and they place inflammatory issues in the public sphere on purpose, so that citizens feel the need to talk about things that ignite them emotionally. I have always been very torn on whether these people should be punished (Una Hajdari, freelance journalist).

Many abusers seem like they learn from one another, so they often repeat the insults and comments, which spreads like a flame especially when someone comes up with something that rhymes, even though it makes no sense. Una, for example, points out one particularly persistent and sexually explicit insult, that contains a rhyme of her last name with a slang term for a male reproductive organ.

Even though some studies on hate crime show that the perpetrators come from lower socio-economic background (Iganski & Smith, 2011), these interviews show that hate speech

has no ideology, religion, that no one is immune or spared because hate comments come from all sides, even the ones that are perceived democratic, respecting the rule of law and such. Ljubica believes that there is a certain paradox when it comes to her, because she advocates the attitudes that some might label as harder, nationalistic, so the comments she receives come also from those who are considered civic, tolerant, modern, politically and socially conscious. Those attitudes concern mostly the topics she is interested in, dealing with current political issues, sovereignty, national dignity and that of the state, the status of Kosovo* “on which we should constantly debate because this mantra on how everything is lost is unsustainable in international law and practice and we need to determine what did happen in the past, but also what did not happen”. She says how people from one spectrum always find it easy to label her as a traitor, and those on the opposite side think of her as a nationalist, Chetnik, a Nazi. She adds that in a country in which there is no dialogue or tolerance, in which the government is strong and opposition nearly nonexistent, the opposition wants you to be their ally, and those in government see you as an opposition so the journalist is seen as a political enemy, which is another level of danger. She states how “hate speech follows no ideology, you will find it in those saying they are hard democrats whose light in the dark are human rights”.

Ivana is currently most known as an author of the articles that dealt with two biggest stories about sexual harassment and abuse, one about Miroslav Aleksic, an acting teacher accused of the rape of his underage female students and another about a local powerful politician Milutin Jelacic Jutka, who sexually harassed his female secretary for which he was sentenced to three months in prison. She believes that it is important to talk openly about hate speech, because that might be the way to prevent someone from getting hurt, or worse. Each time we remain silent, the next time hate speech gets worse.

“Some often justify hate speech by saying it is the freedom of speech. But the line is clear. It is important to label each hate speech as hate speech, and punish ones that say it and spread it.” (Ivana Mastilovic Jasnica, Blic).

All of the respondents point out that it is important to talk about the issue of hate speech and they use every opportunity they have, but also state that it is important that journalists do not make news of themselves, rather approach this as a problem that needs to be solved. Some feel more empowered when they talk about it in public, some even more vulnerable, some do not speak at all unless it is for the needs of scientific papers because they think it is important to shed light on this problem and that it is important to have academic studies to deal with this topic. Milica believes that it is important to document and protocol hate comments, because in case something changes in terms of legislation, there would be some written proof of what it was like for the journalists that were facing threats and insults, and that the only way to change something is only if we talk about it openly. Because of their lengthy careers all respondents have considered it their obligation to contribute to the profession by fighting hate speech.

When asked if she felt more empowered when speaking in public about the hate she gets, Jelena responded that she does not speak about hate speech, only specific threats, and even then she does not say everything that is happening to her.

This is the first time I speak openly about how I feel and what bothers me, because it is an academic paper and has its purpose. I talk about my feelings, even though I do not like talking about my private life, because it has a purpose, of not letting it happen again. At this moment I feel an obligation to talk to you (Jelena Zoric, Insider).

What is even more important than that is raising awareness and educating not only individuals, but also the media. Milica says:

Unfortunately, not many people can debate properly, with arguments, and distance themselves emotionally when talking about some topics, especially those which are hard, political. Some issues are polarising and it is well known that they will provoke a reaction, so the media has to be educated enough so that, when reporting on a certain sensitive topic, they do not do so wrongly or without having the facts (Milica Andric Rakic, NCI).

Hate comments undoubtedly affect respondents, although they emphasise that such comments had a greater effect on them at the beginning of their careers and that over time they learned to distinguish between the threats that require immediate reaction from the authorities and the comments from the armies of bots and people who simply comment on the Internet, without knowing how it affects those to whom it is addressed. The interviewees point out that they never gave up on a certain topic, even when they expected that it would cause attention and an avalanche of hate, because they believe that their job is to report objectively and impartially, regardless of whether or not someone likes it or agrees with it. The interviewee who wished to remain anonymous said:

It took us a long time to build trust and to make them (Serbs in Kosovo*) understand that we are here to objectively report on everything they have to say. I am an internally displaced person myself and I used to tell them that I also had to flee Prizren. I never changed the essence of what I reported on, I just changed the tactics.

There have been situations where women journalists who come from smaller communities where their families still live, give a certain story to other colleagues because they do not want to endanger their own families.

It happened that female colleagues gave up on the story if they were from a smaller place (and not from Sarajevo) where their parents and family still live and they know

that when the story is published, they will be in danger. It really is that way, chances are high that their family will have problems and no one will protect them, just as they do not protect us when we report. Then they mostly offer the story to other journalists and pass on important information, because they want for it to be talked about, which is understandable to me from a human point of view (Semira Degirmendzic, Fokus).

Still, many of the young female professionals make the decision to work in less heated newsrooms or on non-political topics. Ljubica finds that odd because that kind of reporting is always on demand and leads to employment faster, but while she held classes at the Department of communications she had the chance to speak to future female journalists and states that:

Everyone clearly said that they wanted to do journalism, but not politics. They already know from the start that it is a lot; a lot of conflict, a lot of inconvenience and they want to do culture, sports, travel shows, which is always strange to me because in our country political journalism is the most profitable, salaries are the best, you can easily reach a permanent job. They decide for that because they see how trivial information news is (Ljubica Gojgic, RTV).

This current situation in journalism, together with attacks on journalists that happen on a daily basis certainly affect future journalists in such a way that they decide on pursuing less controversial topics or even completely different jobs. Such is also the case in North Macedonia, where two years ago only 12 students had enrolled in journalism studies, and Dusica adds that these days journalism is only the starting point in the careers of young people who are looking for a job in various companies or political parties after a year or two of journalistic experience.

The discouragement effect hate speech has on young women journalists can also be seen in the following example.

I mentioned a young female colleague who was afraid to go and do an interview, so one of the editors had to go with her, hold her hand and be supportive. This mostly happens to young female colleagues, although we had different situations that motivated some to go to the end and not to give up on purpose (Dusica Mrgja, Televizija 24).

Giving up does not necessarily mean just quitting the job altogether and switching professions, but also reporting on a topic in a manner that does not uphold the criteria of objective and impartial journalism.

On discouragement and quitting, Jelena says:

Almost everyone around me gave up. Either they give up on a good story or they lean to one side. Giving up is not just leaving the profession, it is also giving up when you do not do something that will contribute to the common good.

Milica has similar experiences, she says that “several colleagues gave up on stories, but also on journalistic work due to continuous attacks, as well as endangering personal peace and the reputation of their family.”

Almost all of the respondents said that they do not feel fear, although they have gone through dangerous situations and each of them could single out at least one experience that they still remember vividly, even after many years. They also add that even though they might have gotten used to hate comments and threats, it is still unpleasant and does affect them psychologically because they are aware that someone is constantly following their every step. The general atmosphere also contributes to that fear, as well as the situations that happen to their colleagues, especially if they had the experience of physical threats and even attacks, like someone yelling out at them on the street, smashing their car and the like. Una would never give up on a story even though she knows some female colleagues who, unfortunately, chose to do so.

But I do have to stress out, there is such a difference when you work for a small TV station from Nis and any kind of foreign outlet. Female journalists working on a really sensitive story in Nis are going to get more harassed than us freelancers who live in Belgrade and do international political stuff (Una Hajdari, freelance journalist).

Danica says that hate comments do not affect her greatly, although she does feel uncomfortable.

Those people want me to feel annoyed, that is why they write the things they write. They want to keep everyone from doing their job. I will not allow that, I do not want to be inhibited. I have a female colleague, working on TV, she reads absolutely everything people write to and about her, and then says she starts her show frustrated. It affects her greatly and she states that she constantly thinks about whether or not to ask a certain question, whether or not she phrased something in a good way, whether or not she will get more hate comments later (Danica Vucenic, freelance journalist).

The goal of those comments is to make someone feel scared and helpless, to give up.

One of the pressures that journalists are subjected to are piles of lawsuits submitted by the people they wrote about. Ivana points out that this is a serious problem, but that it does not affect her personally too much because the media house she works for is big and stands behind everything she does. The support of her colleagues means a lot, as well as the media house she works for because at one time, she received over thirty lawsuits from one single abuser. That is something she sees as a great threat and a pressure in journalism, lawsuits and lawsuit threats which are especially dangerous to female journalists working in smaller editorial offices in local municipalities, who barely keep up financially.

The support and protection they receive from the media houses they work for means a lot.

Ljubica states that at her previous work, the policy was that the management keeps the threats

from reaching a reporter, in order for them not to be intimidated or upset, and to report it directly to the police.

I was stopped by B92 security and they told me that I would not go home by public transport that evening, that they called me a taxi because it was better that way. I asked what was going on, they said not to worry, it was nothing serious, but to me it was a signal that the number of threats that evening was higher than usual. The policy of the B92 management was to call the police because of the threats that come if they are serious, and to protect the journalists as much as possible and not to get that atmosphere of fear and threat (Ljubica Gojgic, RTV).

Double-edged (s)words: The consequences of hate speech and hate comments

Hate comments did affect Milica's life in a way. Whenever she works on sensitive topics she consults with people she trusts. She says that she has deleted a tweet from drafts or had someone else read something she finds important first, most often her husband, before she publishes it. That has mostly to do with the Serbian Orthodox Church, because she does not want to additionally fuel a sensitive issue and be mistaken, but she finds it also important to say something about it. Several other interviewees do the same.

Next to me in the newsroom sits my colleague who is also my friend and then I often ask her what she thinks, if maybe I could have done something differently, whether I have spelled it well, whether it can be misunderstood. I often consult with colleagues from the newsroom, I ask them if it is good or to delete the tweet, there are such situations (Adisa Imamovic, N1).

Most of them, though, believe that they have enough knowledge and experience and do not feel as if they need to consult with anyone in regards to what they want to post or publish, because they themselves know best what they want to communicate to the public and the ones following them on social networks. They do not allow hate or any other comments to intrude and have an affect on how they do their job, because the stories they work on have to be dealt with in an objective way no matter the potential disagreement of those who criticise them. On the other hand, it is difficult to remain completely immune to bad comments, especially when they are great in number, which inevitably leads to self-questioning and thoughts on whether something could have been done in a better manner.

How I feel personally depends on how many of those comments there are, if there is one, I do not pay attention, if there are hundreds, then I can question myself because it

is not a small number. We do work that someone needs to consume and if a large number of people do not like what I offer them, then I have to re-examine myself, my values, my words, attitudes, and my professional work. And I do it again. I do this by asking myself if I did it with the best of intentions, if I did the best I could at that moment, if it could have been better, what could have been better, I talk to my colleagues. It is not easy, but I believe that with age you get to the point where you cannot give up or have the space to get those things upset too much. What could have been better, I talk to colleagues (Marina Ridjic, AlJazeera Balkans).

Even though she does not allow that to affect her work, Semira admits that, on a personal level, such comments do affect her and that it is hard to deal with them. She tried to define multiple times what she feels in regards to hate comments and threats, and she states that she does not feel scared for herself, but her family.

That certainly is a life with pressure, because when my child goes out I give them an entire list of instructions, tell them not to answer any questions and deny that I am their mom if some stranger asks. They know that mothers are the weakest when it comes to their children. That is why I do not talk about it when I am a guest on some show (Semira Degirmendzic, Fokus).

Her colleagues feel the same.

“Awful! When it comes to my work I have no doubts, because I have proven myself many times, but when I get home, everything catches up.” (Adisa Imamovic, N1).

Adisa says that when you get so many hate comments, all you want to do is go to your mom, husband, friend, and have a good cry. “Sometimes I do not sleep for days, I analyse things that have happened, even though I did nothing wrong.”

Ivana says that in journalism you get attached to stories, to people, and are inevitably affected by negative comments, insults, and injustice. When she comes home after work, she analyses

her working day and the stories she works on with her husband, sometimes they talk about it all night, and skip the hate speech and threats that she received altogether.

Jelena receives hate comments and threats on a daily basis. She says she would probably get more if she did not do her best to protect herself. “In order to protect myself from those comments and hate speech, I, as a TV journalist living in the 21st century, do not have a single profile, real or fake, on any of social networks.” (Jelena Zoric, Insider).

She does not keep nor does she report hate comments, emails or messages, unless they come from specific people, such as narco dealers she reported on. The trial has recently began for the threats she received while working on a story about Jovanjica, the biggest drug manufacturing laboratory in Europe, and two weeks before the trial she received new threats from one of the accused in the trial, on the run at the moment, with two international search warrants on his name. Nevertheless, he felt strong and safe enough to create a Facebook account and send her threats. “How can I feel safe and protected? It cannot work that way, that both the criminal and myself feel safe.”

As especially traumatic, Jelena mentions the situation when she received a state decoration Silver medal for special merits awarded by the President on the National Day.

I experienced a virtual lynch [...] At that moment the entire public had an opinion on that, and felt the need to say it publicly. Everyone, the representatives of the opposition, intellectuals, all of those who criticise the government for hate speech, those were the ones doing the same to me (Jelena Zoric, Insajder).

At that time the entire country resembled stadium stands, where the spectators fought over whether she should have received or rejected the medal. In her professional life she does her best not to let those comments affect her. She has not changed anything about the way she does her job, because there are no different ways of reporting on organised crime. “When it

comes to my private life, those comments do have an impact. I have the need to be alone, to get myself away from others. I am often worried, and feel depressed and tired.”

Similarly, Danica says that she does not read comments, even though her editor informs her every time a large amount of hate speech appears in the Youtube comment section. She believes that she would be unable to do her job if she dealt with such comments regularly, and states how they are always in regards to the topics she talks about, such as LGBT rights, Kosovo*, war crimes, Srebrenica. She has accounts on social networks, but uses them solely for the purpose of gathering information, since she has no intent to comment on anything. What she has to say, she says it in her show. Danica says that hate comments do not affect her greatly, although she does feel uncomfortable.

Those people want me to feel annoyed, that is why they write the things they write.

They want to keep everyone from doing their job. I will not allow that, I do not want to be inhibited. I have a female colleague, working on TV, she reads absolutely everything people write to and about her, and then says she starts her show frustrated.

It affects her greatly and she states that she constantly thinks about whether or not to ask a certain question, whether or not she phrased something in a good way, whether or not she will get more hate comments later (Danica Vucenic, freelance journalist).

She adds that the goal of those comments is to make someone feel scared and helpless, to give up. She herself has left the profession for a year at one time, because she thought it would be better to do something else if she cannot work as a journalist in full capacity, the way she believes is right.

Ljubica approaches hate comments in another way, she does not block anyone unless they are vulgar or insulting. She does not receive comments as often as she did, and thinks that each person can do something themselves to decrease the number of such comments. She insists

on addressing people formally online, avoids writing to them that they are illiterate, that they are clueless, that they write nonsense whenever she disagrees with them, because that only ensures the response in the same fashion. She believes that everyone can say what they think in a decent way.

On the other hand, it sometimes does not matter how polite you respond, there is always someone who will insult you without reading a word you wrote, because they know you as someone who works for the media they disrespect or because they know your career. In those situations, and for those people, only one solution, using the unpopular, undemocratic method, which means blocking them (Ljubica Gojgic, RTV).

Una's personal life has been impacted by the work she does, in a way that she now dates exclusively other journalists, the majority of her close friends are journalists, because they understand what that job entails.

Gordana says that hate comments affect her in such a way that she feels more motivated to do her job. She tries to be calm and not to allow the comments to trigger her into behaving the same way her attackers do. She believes that everyone is to blame for the phenomenon of hate speech, and for a journalist it is not enough to be just a journalist. They have to be fighters for the freedom of speech, the freedom of media, and promoters of human rights.

As someone working in the media you have the obligation to fight for justice, to react to every violation of human rights, and many run away from it. The more visible you are, the more responsibility you have to speak up. It is necessary to fight for your colleagues, your profession, integrity and dignity every single time a colleague is attacked (Gordana Bjeletic, Juzne vesti).

Gordana talks often with younger colleagues at various workshops, and listens to how they feel scared of the reactions of the public and potential hate comments, which is why they stay

away from certain topics. She then tries to encourage them, to let them know that the worst thing that can occur is when someone is indifferent to a story they work on. She herself tries to talk about the issue of hate speech in public, because she thinks it is tragic how many do not dare to openly stand behind what they say, that there are so many unsigned stories.

“At the beginning I told you I do not want to be anonymous, and I would never accept such a thing, because I stand by what I say and use every opportunity to speak about the problems I face.” (Gordana Bjeletic, *Juzne vesti*).

What are the laws for? Experiences regarding regulations that govern hate speech in the Western Balkans

Nearly all of the interviewees agree that those who send hate and threatening comments should be reported and sanctioned, that the laws that are currently in place are not as bad, but absolutely all of them agree that the biggest problem with persecuting the attackers is the lack of the implementation of those laws and that it is something that must be changed.

Ana believes that hate speech should be punished, and that after solving a couple of such cases there would be a clear message that that kind of behaviour was unacceptable, at least in such cases where the commentators were posing an actual threat. Journalists' associations, the Union of journalists and the Ethics Council in North Macedonia are vocal and quick in alarming the institutions in charge, "although there is always that question of impact, when we know that the police does not do their job, and at the same time there is an immediate reaction of the authorities each time someone threatens the Prime Minister" (Ana Petrusheva, BIRN).

This is something that is not uncommon in the region, laws are implemented selectively, most often when someone threatens the politicians whose parties are in the government.

That leads to the fact that most of the participants report only what they perceive as serious threats, and simply block everything else. Ana does not document hate comments, nor does she report them anymore. When she once filed an official report of the incident regarding the publishing of her address, she did it because she wanted a written proof and that she did everything she could in terms of the laws of her country.

A very common situation in the Balkans is the targeting of journalists, academics and prominent public figures who do not agree with the ruling party. Targeting refers to the publication of a list of "traitors" in daily newspapers that are in contact with the authorities at the time. North Macedonia is no exception. "I did not expect anything, because there was once that incident when one daily newspaper published a so-called list of the "greatest traitors of our country" who were allegedly to blame for everything wrong happening and thus should be shot" (Ana Petrusheva, BIRN). Ana explains that this sort of targeting is a well-known method in the region, and the particular list of traitors "was constructed by a journalist who was a kind of a media executor of Gruevski". The epilogue of that was, Ana says: "The court rejected the lawsuit because the signature on the list was that of the newsroom, therefore the court believed there was no way of determining the actual person who wrote it and there were no means for prosecution."

Una's opinion on whether hate comments should be reported or not depends on the situation and the content of the comments. She is very unequivocal that threats should be reported and she has always done that through journalists' associations. She also believes that if hate speech comes from politicians it should be sanctioned because it prevents journalists from doing their job.

I have always been very torn on whether these people should be punished. I talked with one female colleague who said that she felt bad for reporting one person, because on the one hand she was scared (he revealed her address), but on the other hand she said she felt bad because she realises that this is a working class person whose life got really messed up because of that. On one hand, it is a criminal offence, but as a journalist I am like wait, these are the people (working class, marginalised...) we are trying to represent. For me it is very conflicting (Una Hajdari, freelance journalist).

The threats she receives she screenshots, she feels safer by knowing what to expect and who is problematic, but has never filed an official complaint in her own name, rather always through journalists' association, and hopes that if enough people reported the same perpetrator or type of threats, the police might do something about that. So far she has not had the satisfaction of any of the threats reported being followed through. In spite of the legal framework she believes exists, there is the lack of implementation. She also noticed that the situation in Serbia in regards to this is much better than in Kosovo*. "Absolutely none of my complaints, which also goes through the journalists' association, were ever followed through."

The scariest thing that had happened to Ivana were the threats of rape directed at her six year old daughter on Twitter. She got scared because she did not know who that person was, it could have been anyone, maybe someone sitting next to her in a coffee shop or on the street, so she reported the threats to the police and prosecution. That same day she received an answer, that the person behind those threats is the daughter of a man whose case she covered, Jeličić, charged for sexual harassment. Ivana says: "I felt relief, but also pity." The police brought the girl in for questioning, she repented and promised not to do it again. Ivana says that she never regretted not prosecuting her. "She was defending her father, which was her right. She had the right to believe he is not guilty, but she had no right to mention my child. I hope she learned something." (Ivana Mastilovic Jasnic, Blic).

Dusica does not feel fear because of hate comments, with the exceptions of two situations for which she says were especially startling. One of those situations was the storming of Macedonian Parliament, Sobranie, on 27th April 2017 (the so-called Bloody Thursday), which was broadcasted live on national television. The supporters of VMRO DPMNE,

dissatisfied by appointment of Talat Xhaferi as the President of the Parliament, stormed in and physically attacked those present, the speakers, journalists, and, among them, her as well. After that scandal she began receiving threats and insults from the same people who caused the chaos, which culminated by someone breaking a window on her car that was parked in her garage. Police did not intervene.

When the police came they said it was a message for me because I talk too much, and that they cannot do anything regarding the broken glass, if it was a bomb then they might. That is when I felt fear, because I was a witness in the process that took place for the incidents in Sobranie and I thought those things were connected (Dusica Mrgja, Televizija 24).

Dusica reports comments that are sexist, or on a nationalistic basis, and the accounts from which such comments are sent she blocks. Other ones, containing death threats she documents, but does not report to the authorities, because she does not trust that it would have any effect. Ana states that she was afraid once, when someone marked her address on a map and posted that with the explanation that that was the place she tweeted from. The address in question is the one from her official documents, but only her parents live there. Given the fact that at that time there were many physical attacks on journalists and their assets (cars being set on fire and such), she reported the incident even though “in most cases, police does nothing”.

Semira reported one incident to the police, with the help of her colleagues who collected all the threats and insults addressed to her, but the case did not have an ending. Because of that, and other situations that happened to her, she does not expect anything from the institutions in charge, nor does she feel safe and protected by the laws of her own country.

I spent hours and hours talking about it to the police, but nothing happened. In our country, the police justify that by saying that there is a lack of adequate legal

regulations that would sanction hate speech and threats on the Internet. They think that it is not a threat if someone says that they will lynch me, that I am a whore, that I am someone's mistress, that I am a traitor, for them it is slander and they cannot do anything about it. All that was left was for me to report it, and I gave up when the policeman asked me how to qualify the crime I was reporting (Semira Degirmendzic, Fokus).

Ljiljana filed an official complaint to the police several times, but with no positive outcomes. She believes that the laws are not bad, but implementing them is the problem. She remembers when the Serbian Prime Minister labeled one daily newspaper as a "fascist" and states that if something like that went unpunished, the journalists really have nothing to hope for. In her own country she does not feel as if the laws protect her, rather the audience is what makes her feel safe. She believes that hate speech has to be punishable by law, but it only makes sense if that law is actually implemented, and that the current laws have to be adapted and in some ways changed, because there is no definitive and clear definition of hate speech. That further means that it is up for personal interpretation, and when someone reports hate speech, they are told that it is not clearly defined in the law.

Danica believes that her case was quickly resolved in terms of a quick court verdict because she was at that time one of the leading journalists in her media house and hosted a show that was aired four times per week so she believes that to be the reason why the institutions did their job quickly and efficiently. Milica also has mixed experiences. Together with her colleagues she filed official complaints on several occasions, and her experiences with those processes vary. One complaint was resolved, another did not yield any result, the prosecution never informed them about anything regarding the case.

Although the laws and their applicability differ in the countries from which the interviewees work and live, as well as their opinion on whether the laws could be better, they agree that it is necessary to implement those laws and to bring the cases to an end within a reasonable time. In many situations, the police do their part and find the perpetrator, but the Prosecutor's Office either does not initiate proceedings or the epilogue is that it is someone's personal opinion, not a threat, and as such is not subject to punishment.

Gordana filed some official complaints, but the one that was resolved the quickest was the one that also contained attitudes against the government. The laws, she says, are fine, but the implementation is the problem. What is peculiar about her newsroom is that the hate they receive does not come from the audience, but from government officials and organised bots. She once did an interview with a former bot, so on their portal they began tracking from where the votes on the comments, which can be positive or negative, marked with the signs "plus" and "minus", are coming from. People voting on comments did not even try to hide their tracks, even their IP address was named SNS (Serbian Progressive Party), and was coming from the official address of the party. They discovered a million votes on one article only, 20.000 votes on a single comment.

What is funny is when a person managing the bot machine gets confused and does not know if a certain comment is, according to SNS, positive or negative, so they start reacting in a certain way only to switch the way they vote later, when they have already voted 10.000 times. I think that particular story was what also protected us, because we have made it public and let them know that we, as a part of an IT company, can expose them. This is why I say the public protects us as well, since that story we have had far fewer attacks (Gordana Bjeletic, *Juzne vesti*).

Also, as one way of protecting themselves, they use the fact that they are part of an IT company and very often when they notice a higher flow of hate comments, they make a

public announcement on the portal that a larger visit was noticed from a certain number of IP addresses, after which there is a noticeable reduction of such comments. In a way, they “educate” commentators, because now the official municipality representatives comment the news on their portal, but under their own names and from official emails, so they try to be polite in commenting even though they have their own agenda and the only goal is to praise every move of the ruling authorities.

Limitations and future study

The majority of the participants work on topics that are of public interest, such as politics, corruption, organised crime, the Brussels Agreement and such, and are therefore critical toward current governments in their countries. Given that the audience in those countries is highly polarised, one of the limitations is that it is hard to reach out to the female journalists that are pro-government oriented and who work for media houses that openly support the current government (or support the government openly themselves). Although they also receive hate speech, it was difficult to reach out to them, because the sampling procedure was such that the participants recommended each other for this research.

Furthermore, another constraint could be that some of the things participants reported on during the interviews got lost in translation, because certain phrases, slang, insults and curse words have no exact equivalent in English language, but also do not have the same weight and meaning when translated.

Additionally, fifteen participants were seemed as sufficient for one master thesis, but one recommendation for further research might be the expansion on the participants from Albania and Montenegro, in order to include all of the Western Balkans countries in one such study, which would contribute even more to the unveiling of the situation the female journalists from this region are in. This would be particularly helpful if the equal number of the participants from all of those countries was ensured.

Finally, given the pandemic and geographical constraints, the interviews were all held online, which led to, in some cases, audio and connection difficulties and issues. However, the fact that the interviews were held online had a peculiar advantage, because the participants scheduled them to their preference, when they were already at home in the evening or in the office after hours, which contributed to them feeling more relaxed and comfortable, and open to talk more freely about certain issues.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of hate speech in terms of its normalisation as well as its consequences, the legislation that governs it, and the overall influence hate speech has on the lives of women journalists in the Western Balkans countries. The paper presents the most recent research on hate speech and hate comments towards journalists, more specifically female journalists and their aftermath, the experiences of fifteen women journalists who work and live in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo* and North Macedonia with hate speech and hate comments online and offline with regards to the reasons they receive hate speech, the ways they affect their everyday lives as well as laws and regulations that are supposedly governing this issue.

The majority of the participants noticed hate speech as an issue that became an everyday reality in which they themselves are sometimes unsure about where the line is and when something stops being pure criticism and becomes something more sinister. All of the respondents stated that the comments they receive are with regards to them working on sensitive or controversial topics such as corruption, war crimes, dealing with the past, political responsibility for all of the events that took place in the 1990s, organised crime, but that the contents of those comments have little to do with their work. They all live and work on the territories of Serbia, Kosovo*, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, and come from various ethnic, national and religious backgrounds. The threats and insults they receive are mainly due to the fact that they are women and of various ethnical backgrounds, the contents are sexist, misogynistic and derogatory, and as a result they make them feel uncomfortable, scared, anxious. All of the women interviewed are well established in their profession with decades of work experience so the hate does not affect them in such a

way that they seriously considered withdrawing from the journalistic profession, but they also fear for the future generations and believe that this kind of behavior greatly affects younger women journalists.

Another common theme was the discussion on legal proceedings. It is very important to clearly define what hate speech is, and determine what exactly should be punishable by law. The laws themselves should be improved, and then implemented, regardless of anything, because the current situation is such that some laws do exist, they are vague in description thus allowing for interpretation, such as saying that hate speech is actually a matter of personal opinion, and the lack of punishment sends a message that anyone can say anything without consequences.

The implementation is a serious problem, and the most important thing should be consistency, especially when government officials or people with political power are the ones spreading hate speech, because they then give the impression that it is a legitimate, even desirable way of communication. The support of the media houses and colleagues mean a lot to women journalists, it makes them feel less lonely and more protected if they ever decide to pursue the threats through legal means. Therefore there is a big difference between working in large and small media houses where there may be no financial and legal support.

Hate speech needs to be talked about to make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable and that words on the internet are not just words but also actions that affect the lives of those who read it but also affect the creation of an atmosphere of fear in which it is never known whether someone, who may not have written any comment but simply read them, gets imbued with hatred and react in a way that they physically attack someone because they considers them a legitimate target. The respondents pointed out that they are aware of the fact that someone might spread hate comments because of that on purpose, to encourage

others to react more violently, and that they do so because it is a way of silencing the journalists and “killing stories”.

In conclusion, there are less and less spaces for public debates, the laws are getting passed with little to none public discussion, some even without a parliamentary debate, which leads to people learning to exchange their views on social networks. The situation would be different if people were to come to a public debate, raise their hand in front of several hundred people and speak their mind, that would contribute more to the dialogue of the culture. People should be educated on civil exchange of their views from an early childhood, which would teach them to respond to sensitive topics with arguments, and not insults or threats.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Interview guide:

1. Why do you think it is important to address the issue of hate speech to the public?
2. How often do you receive hate comments?
3. Why Do you think you experience hate speech? When was the first time you encountered it? What was the issue? Do you think you receive more hate when you are particularly critical of some issues (current affairs)?
4. What do you think stands behind hate comments?

Sub question: Should people who anonymously write hate speech be tracked down and given a punishment?

5. Do you in general feel fear because of that?
6. Do you protocol hate comments?
7. Have you taken any legal actions?
8. What kind of expectations did you have?
9. If you did not have any, why so?
10. Do you feel secure and protected by the law of your own country?
11. Would you say most of the hate you receive related to your profession?
12. How does hate affect your daily life(personal) and your professional?
13. How do you think hate speech would be regulated in the future? Do you have any expectation/recommendation/suggestion?
14. Do you think it is journalists responsibility to try combat hate speech in order to prevent it from happening in the future to other young journalists?

15. Does it personally make you feel stronger or empowered when you openly talk/raise these issues into a public domain?

16. Do you think the women who decide to ignore the hate/not pay attention to it trigger/increase even more hate?

Optional questions:

1. According to one study, female journalists on Twitter receive roughly three times as much abuse as their male counterparts. Did you experience something similar on social platforms? What did you do? Do you usually report/block the trollers on such platforms?

2. How do you think social network platforms could improve themselves when it comes to regulating the comments section or etc.

3. Have you ever felt like you have been pressured to keep a low profile and steer clear of issues like to ignite cyber bullying?

4. Do you think receiving hate speech discourage other journalists from writing critical articles on sensitive issues/politics?

Appendix B

Invitation for the interview

Dear Ms,

On behalf of Professor Sarikakis and myself, Nevena Buvač, we would like to request a research interview with you from your experience as a journalist.

The research project explores *hate speech against women who speak* and in particular is part of the *Media Democracy under pressure* series of the Media Governance and Industries Research lab led by Professor Sarikakis.

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences with and effects of hate speech on the work of female journalists as well as their everyday lives. Additionally, the study will explore the ways in which the professional and public sphere respond to hate speech to which female journalists are subjected.

We are interviewing female journalists, regardless of the type of media they work in, currently working in their perspective fields and on the territories of Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The interviews would be held either in person, or via some online communication tool when personal contact is not an option. The time duration of the interviews is estimated at 30 to 60 minutes.

Given your background, status and field of work, we would like to kindly ask you for the opportunity to interview you on the topic of hate speech you have encountered/encounter for doing your job.

All of the data and information that would arise from the interview would be used strictly for the purpose of this research. Data processing and lastly the reporting will be done under scientific ethics standards and, if you wish so, your anonymity will be guaranteed.

We would greatly appreciate your participation in this study and would kindly ask for your feedback on whether you are interested or not and if yes, your availability in the following month.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Kind regards,

Katharine Sarikakis and Nevena Buvač

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Appendix C

Consent to participate in a research study

Hereby declare that I agree to participate in research on the subject of hate speech *against women who speak*.

I understand that all of the data and information that would arise from the interview would be used strictly for the purpose of this research and under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (EU) 2016/679, and that there is a legal duty to protect any information collected. Data processing and lastly the reporting will be done under scientific ethics standards and, if I wish so, my anonymity will be guaranteed. My decision whether or not to participate in this study is voluntary.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification, information and the summary of the research outcome - contact details: Univ. Prof. Dr. Katharine Sarikakis katharine.sarikakis@univie.ac.at and Nevena Buvač nevena.buvach@gmail.com.

My signature below indicates that I have decided to participate in the study after reading all of the information above and I understand the information in this form, have had any questions answered and have received a copy of this form for me to keep.

Signature _____ Date _____

Research Participant

Appendix D - List of participants

	Name	Work place	Duration of the interview
1.	Anonymous	RTK, Kosovo*	1:01:28
2.	Milica Andrić Rakić	NSI, Kosovo*	1:05:33
3.	Adisa Imamović	N1, Bosnia and Herzegovina	1:00:27
4.	Ana Petrusheva	BIRN, North Macedonia	1:38:24
5.	Jelena Zorić	Insajder, Serbia	1:02:28
6.	Semira Degirmendžić	Portal Fokus, Bosnia and Herzegovina	1:10:00
7.	Minela Jašar Opardija	N1, Bosnia and Herzegovina	57:12
8.	Gordana Bjeletić	Južne vesti, Serbia	1:17:54
9.	Ljiljana Stojanović	JUGpress, Serbia	1:00:53
10.	Danica Vučenić	Freelance journalist, Serbia	1:05:58
11.	Ljubica Gojgić	RTV, Serbia	1:25:47
12.	Una Hajdari	Freelance journalist	1:17:32
13.	Dušica Mrgja	Televizija 24, North Macedonia	42:11
14.	Ivana Mastilović Jasnić	Blic, Serbia	45:20
15.	Marina Riđić	Al Jazeera Balkans, Bosnia and Herzegovina	45:30

Abstract

In the modern society we live in today, with democracy being something many of the world countries are striving for and freedom of speech is considered to be a basic human right, hate speech seems to be taking advantage of it. Hate speech has become an issue on a global level, but particularly in the transitioning countries where journalists, who are by the nature of their work in charge of transmitting the information, the truth to the public are seen as enemies of the state, liars, puppets. This is particularly problematic when it interferes with those whose job is to spread the words of truth - the journalists. Even more so if the journalists are women, the violence becomes intersectional. This paper investigated hate speech in terms of the normalisation and consequences of hate speech, laws that regulate it and the impact hate speech has on the lives of women journalists in the Western Balkans countries. Literature review and thematic qualitative analysis of personal experiences of fifteen female journalists acquired through fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews showed that hate comments women journalists receive are high in numbers and mostly of sexist, misogynistic and chauvinistic nature which does affect them mentally and physically, which is amplified by prevailing lack of trust in the implementations of the laws that should protect them.

Keywords: hate speech, feminism, female journalists, online violence, the Western Balkans

Zusammenfassung

In der modernen Gesellschaft, in der wir heute leben, in der Demokratie etwas ist, das viele Länder der Welt anstreben, und in der die Redefreiheit als ein grundlegendes Menschenrecht gilt, scheint sich die Hassrede diese Freiheiten zunutze zu machen. Die Hassrede ist auf globaler Ebene zu einem Problem geworden, besonders aber in den Transformationsländern, in denen JournalistInnen, die aufgrund ihrer Arbeit für die Übermittlung von Informationen und der Wahrheit an die Öffentlichkeit zuständig sind, als Staatsfeinde, Lügner und Marionetten angesehen werden. Besonders kritisch wird es, wenn dadurch die Ausübung der journalistischen Tätigkeit, und damit auch die Verbreitung von Wahrheit, beeinträchtigt wird. Hinzu kommt dass, wenn es sich bei den JournalistInnen um Frauen handelt, die Gewalt intersektional wird. In dieser Arbeit wurde Hassrede im Hinblick auf deren Konsequenzen, dessen Normalisierung, die gesetzlichen Regelungen zu Hassrede, und die Auswirkungen von Hassrede auf das Leben von Journalistinnen in den westlichen Balkanländern untersucht. Die Literaturrecherche und die qualitative Analyse der persönlichen Erfahrungen von fünfzehn Journalistinnen, die in fünfzehn halbstrukturierten Tiefeninterviews gesammelt wurden, haben gezeigt, dass die Hasskommentare, die Journalistinnen erfahren, zahlreich und meist sexistischer, frauenfeindlicher und chauvinistischer Natur sind, was sie psychisch und physisch beeinträchtigt, was durch den vorherrschenden Mangel an Vertrauen in die Umsetzung der Gesetze, die sie schützen sollten, noch verstärkt wird.

Schlüsselwörter: Hassrede, Feminismus, Journalistinnen, Online-Gewalt, Westbalkan