
Hate Speech Online in Albania

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INTRODUCTION

The right to speech or nondiscrimination has been and remains in the focus of society, which has tried to build mechanisms and find ways to reconcile precisely the competing values of free expression with nondiscrimination. The actors who have faced this issue are the courts, legislatures and the public as well. But today, democratic society is changing its approach to confronting these issues. New media have transformed communication technology, confronting us with previously unknown challenges. The misuse of freedom of expression as a result of the massive use of online platforms has raised the issue of the need for monitoring and responding to dangerous disinformation.

Considering it very important to take measures to prevent and combat the spread of hate speech online, in May 2016, the European Commission established an agreement with Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube on a “Code of Conduct to monitor and combat illegal hate speech online.” They also now create the possibility for users to report illegal hate speech on these social platforms. Following the measures taken in this direction, Instagram, Google+, Snapchat, saw the need and announced their intention to join the Code of Conduct in 2019. The United Nations defines hate speech based on religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, sex or any other identity factor.

Hate speech is certainly not a new phenomenon. But it, thanks to the opportunities created by technology, has adopted new and quite specific qualities in the internet age. Hate speech on the internet tends to reflect a more complex and global nature than most of its pre-digital equivalents. These qualities increase the potential virality of hate speech on the internet. In these conditions, societies facing this trend must seriously address the issues of free speech and censorship on technological platforms, which are experiencing an ever-widening spread. The data speak of a wide use of online media, especially by young people. It is precisely the potential impact of social networks that is the reason there is a legitimate concern for young people and youth organizations. Although it is easier to monitor and combat in the mainstream professional media, the inability to monitor and measure the impact of communication in online spaces remains a challenge. The activity of static websites can be easily tracked, but the bulk of the action is taking place in meet-

ing spaces (e.g. social networking sites), which are much more difficult to monitor and analyze.

The Internet offers the opportunity for any user/participant to create, publish, distribute and consume media content, thus fostering a space of full participation, engagement and self-expression. The development of social networks, in particular, has increased the level of participation of young people in cyberspace in various ways, ranging from maintaining contact with peers and developing new contacts to sharing content and exploring self-expression. The online space, like the offline space, presents new opportunities, challenges and threats for young people.

Freedom of expression and that of the media are the main pillars of a society and find protection in the fundamental act of a state, the Constitution. More precisely, the Constitution of the Republic of Albania (CRRA) in Article 22 sanctions that “Freedom of expression is guaranteed.” The jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights in 2003 states that the limits of freedom of expression and the media can be found in the forms of expression. Regarding the approach that the institutions of the European Union have towards this phenomenon, it is seen that the tendency is to use forms of co-regulation through the negotiation of rules with companies that provide information or communication services online and not only. Despite the guarantees that come to us from the domestic and supranational legal framework, the phenomenon of hate speech on the Internet is growing rapidly, as is the spread of hate messages via the Internet. From a study conducted several years ago in Albania (at the national level) by the Commissioner against Discrimination, the European Union and the Council of Europe, it resulted that over 60% of respondents are of the opinion that hate speech in Albania is widely used.

OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to study hate speech and other forms of intolerance and to explore ways to limit these phenomena, through improving media education of young people and developing a counter-narrative campaign. The aim is to understand the scale and scope of hate content online, taking into account its different forms, from subtle “everyday” actions to overt acts of aggression and criminality. The paper also aims to understand the dynamics and drivers of hate, providing a detailed insight into when, where, and why it appears.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2022 defines the term *hate speech* as more than a descriptive concept used to identify a specific class of expressions. Meanwhile, we find a similarly meaning about definition of hate speech from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus* explaining like “public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence.” Hate speech is turning nowadays in a disturbing phenomenon because of the new media and the power it has to spread messages and to influence specially the new generations. Anyone can publish social media. Purva Grover et al. underlined that social media consists of networks on the internet that have become mobile in abundance and formed a social network, which impacts brands and consumers (Purva Grover et al, 2022). Davis and Hilbert (2013) say social media is a group that includes interactive applications of Internet networks that facilitate and organize collective or individual creation.

- According to Hootsuite Digital the number of active users on social media reached 4.76 billion in January 2023, representing 59% of the global population and reflecting a 3% growth compared to 2022, with an additional 137 million users (Rodríguez and Neira, 2024). Meanwhile, hatred affects individual victims and the groups to which they belong, generates social polarization and silences large swaths of the population, weakening pluralism and undermining respectable democratic public debate. The COVID pandemic and the war in Ukraine have contributed to further polarization and the spread of racist, xenophobic and intolerant speech. Therefore, addressing hate speech is done by increasing cooperation between civil society and public authorities and other interested parties.

Regarding the situation in Albania, according to the Monitoring Report of Hate Speech in Albania (2022), the three most widespread categories as the subject of hate speech and discriminatory discourse were ethnicity (38.5%), gender (20.5%) and sexual minority (12%). This annual report describes the situation of the discourse of hatred and discrimination in the Albanian media environment. The report is based on media monitoring carried out from January 2021 to April 2022. The units of monitoring were incidents containing hateful and discriminatory discourse (HDD) produced, distributed or even allowed to be expressed in the media, including traditional media, new and social.

The Albanian Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination (KMD) in the study “Beyond definitions. A call for action against hate speech in Albania,” clarifies that 58% of Albanian respondents think that hate speech is a national issue, especially during and after the pandemic, as the media has a special role in its spread.

Regarding the triggers of hate speech, poverty (54%), social status, political opinion and physical appearance (44%) are perceived as the main bases of discrimination. According to the respondents, hate speech spreads not only in social networks, but also in schools, universities and workplaces, and about 46% of respondents from vulnerable groups have personally experienced hate speech in their lives.”

The Internet is public space—do human rights apply there, as in the rest of society. In sporadic cases we have also seen politicians, artists, intellectuals, professors, celebrities, and other individuals with public influence, expressing views on certain topics with hateful and discriminatory vocabulary (Sulce Kolgeci, 2023: 5). Combating hate speech in Albania through creative youth-led initiatives. Since 2014, Albania is part of the “Movement against Hate,” and hate crimes are foreseen in the Criminal Code. Meanwhile, the latest report of the ISIGURT.AL highlighting data collected between 2018-2022, shows that about 61% of online incidents belonged to hate speech. According to a study of the Council of Europe, 97% of hate speech cases fail to be reported in Albania, based on a survey data.

A report of the European Commission Against Racism and Tolerance notes that for Albania in the last 10 years, very few cases of crimes and hate speech have been tried and denounced. The Society of Professional Journalists, for instance, outlines a Code of Ethics that emphasizes the importance of seeking truth and reporting it, minimizing harm, and acting independently. In Albania, the poor quality of media contents and products are exposing citizens to biased information and propaganda that is ultimately undermining the Albanian path to participatory democracy and EU accession (Nozima Muratova, Alton Grizzle, and Difuza Mirzakhmedova, 2022). According to the *Handbook for Journalists of the Albanian Media Institute*, the digital transformation of the media landscape, from minimal browsing, rumors, and chats to the extraction of data for the purpose of manipulation and destabilization, underlines the growing importance of media and information education.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper, we carry out a comparative approach to the definition given by the Albanian and European legal framework for hate speech, but also to determine the role and responsibilities of social media in the fight against stereotypes and hate speech on the Internet. As a result, an overview is achieved not only of the legal framework but also of the social situation.

The strategy described for achieving the previously mentioned objectives is implemented through the following steps:

1. Systematic quantitative and qualitative monitoring of hate speech and recording of counter-narratives, effective examples in a selection of online media, including social media, in Albania, qualitative analysis and reporting.
2. Conducting a survey that aimed to identify the perception and impact of hate speech among young people.

Through this survey, we aimed to obtain the necessary information to understand and analyze the phenomenon. The questionnaire was dedicated to students at Aleksander Moisiu University of Durrës. The purpose of the questionnaire was above all to understand how many young people (university students) are victims or supporters of hate speech. University students completed the questionnaire in manual format.

FINDING AND DISCUSSIONS

- Can you define what does online hate speech mean?
- Has anyone ever posted something about you or other people you know that you didn't like?
- How often do you identify hate speech in online platforms?
- Could you see hate speech as a concern phenomenon for young generation?
- Have you done any efforts to better confront hate speech?
- Do you think that a regulated law framework according to some more responsibility of social media sites can better control hate speech?

To understand more about the perception created by hate speech, we surveyed a more limited number of two other age groups, 15-18 years old and 26-35 years old (Figure 1). This survey was distributed because these are precisely the age groups most active on the networks and consequently most affected by hate speech.

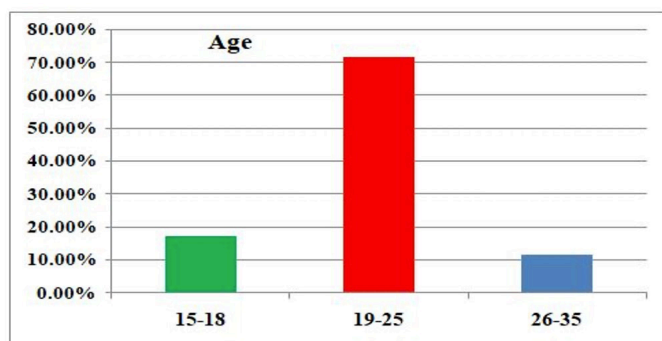


Figure 1: The age of survey participants

In the survey, we see as a limitation the fact that there is a disproportion between male and female students (Figure 2). We found this limitation impossible to overcome due to the almost identical ratio that we obtain from the ratio between the sexes in the university auditoriums. However, this limitation does not significantly

impact the responses and does not deviate the conclusions obtained.

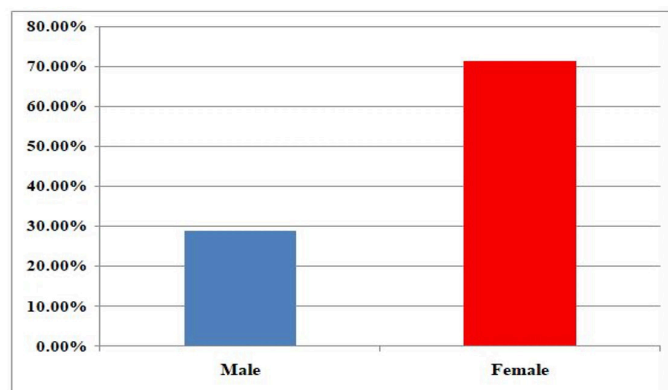


Figure 2: Gender structure of survey participants

In Figure 3, we see a large disparity between the number of students who know the concept of hate speech and those who cannot define it.

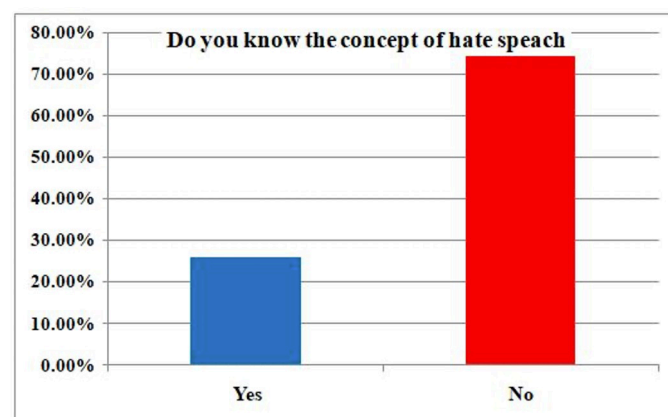


Figure 3: Youth knowledge about hate speech

This fact makes us understand that in the new situation created and imposed by using social platforms, all actors in society must increase efforts for a more complete and broad understanding of this concept. This step further helps in the realization of a broader framework of efforts to prevent the spread of hate speech and to take measures to limit it. But awareness of what hate speech is supposed to be is the cornerstone of any other effort.

In figure 4 to the question have you ever experienced or witnessed hate speech we see a large number of responders have experienced hate speech as their personal experience.

Meanwhile, a considerable number of them respond that even though they have not experienced it as a personal experience, they are witnesses of the use of this language on other people. Because only a small number of them do not recognize it as a phenomenon experienced by themselves or in their wider social circle raises alarm bells because society must act before it is too late for the phenomenon to become dominant in communication. Our concern becomes legitimate when we see that 97%

of respondents see hate speech as a significant problem in Albania.

Do you think that hate speech is an important problem in your country?



Figure 5: Is hate speech an important problem?

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The high number of responses not only speaks to the spread of the phenomenon on the networks, but also shows the importance of the actors who have made hate speech part of the discourse and their imposition in society.

We see that over 50% of respondents believe that hate speech occurs very often in Albania (Figure 6). This result also testifies to the climate of understanding and communication in the country.

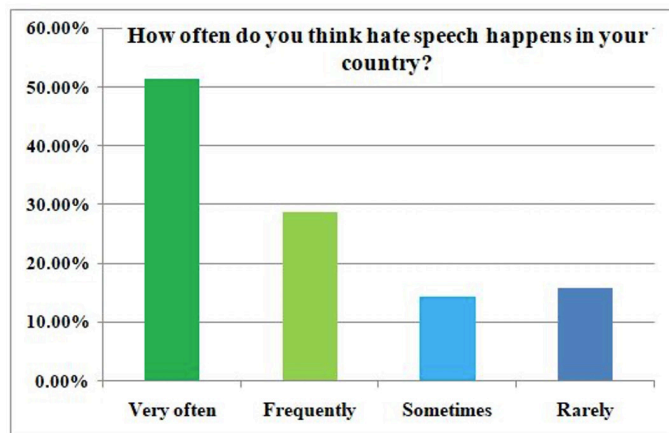


Figure 6: Frequency of hate speech

Figure 7 presents a more optimistic picture, as we see that almost 80% of respondents answered positively to

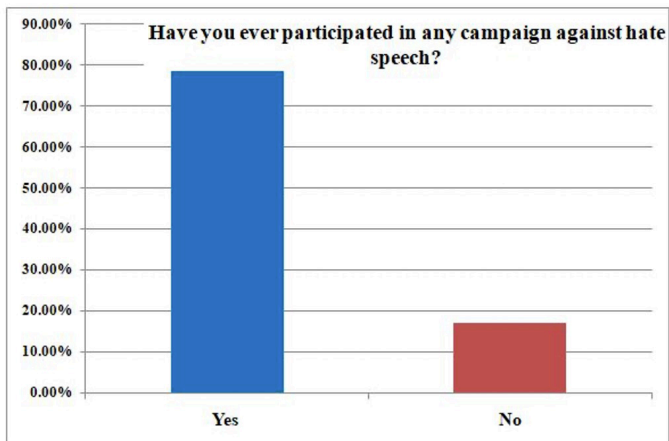


Figure 7: Participation in campaigns against hate speech

the question of whether they have participated in campaigns against hate speech.

This participation testifies to the fact that civil society has increased its sensitivity to the phenomenon and is organizing itself in concrete actions to prevent or combat it. When asked if there is a need for educational programs for young people that help reduce the use of hate speech,

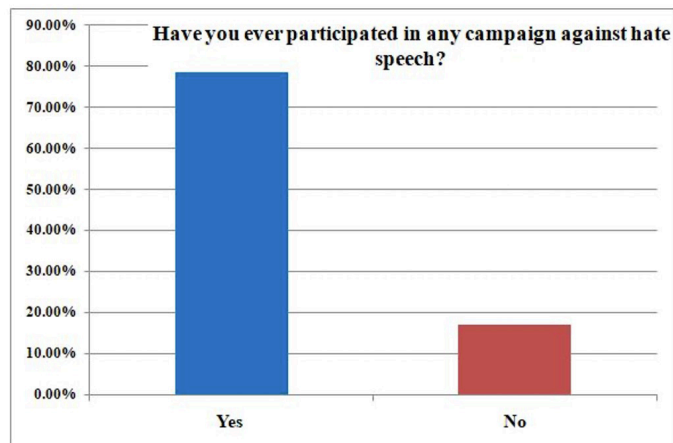


Figure 7: Participation in campaigns against hate speech

75% of respondents answered positively. Figure 8 indicates a lack of genuine programs against the use of hate speech on online platforms specifically dedicated to the youth category.

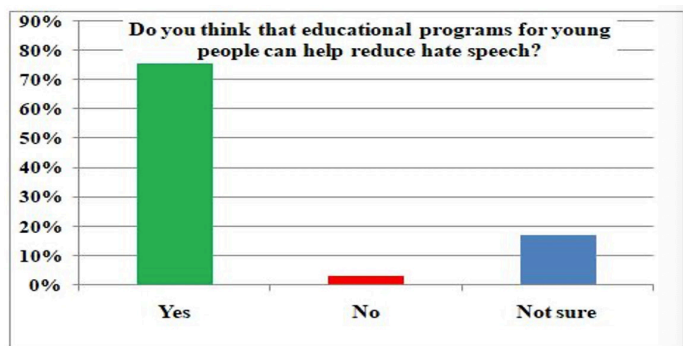


Figure 8: The impact of educational programs

CONCLUSIONS

The phenomenon of the use of hate speech online on social platforms not only in Albania but also worldwide seems to be a growing trend. In addition to aspects related to hatred based on religion and ethnicity, there is also hate speech based on politics, gender, sexuality, language, disabilities, social status, economic, etc. Albanian legislation in the field of discrimination has made important steps by aligning legislation with European and international standards. Regarding the approach that the European Union institutions have towards this phenomenon, it is seen that the tendency is to use forms of coregulation through the negotiation of rules with companies that provide information or communication services online and not only.

The methodology used aims to analyze the phenomenon of hate speech on the Internet, using Albania as a

case study. The analysis of the literature serves to determine the Albanian and European legal framework of hate speech. The research aims to obtain the necessary information to understand and analyze the phenomenon. This analysis will also be accompanied by a questionnaire for young people, who in our case are mostly students. The questionnaire and analysis of the results aim to understand how much Albania needs to build educational programs to prevent or limit the phenomenon.

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