

## HATE SPEECH ON SOCIAL MEDIA – NORTH MACEDONIA

**Abstract:** The paper deals with the problem of hate speech especially on social media. Hate speech It is a very harsh way of expression accompanied by insults that often become threatening to citizens because it can incite not only hatred but also acts of violence. Due to the many cases of online hate speech, social platforms must take steps together with every country to prevent and fight this phenomenon, enabling everyone to express themselves freely without violating anyone's dignity and integrity.

**Keywords:** *internet, information, freedom of expression, communication.*

### INTRODUCTION

Every person in the world has the right to express himself freely also exchange information with others. Freedom of expression is indisputable and guaranteed by law and other international documents.

When it comes to freedom of expression and information, the issue of the media is also touched upon, which requires greater attention and protection because it represents a channel of communication and information in different forms such as written, visual, digital, and also with different content such as economic, political, artistic, in a word, it covers every sphere of life and its impact is huge.

Today, everything can change because of the media. Although the primary task of the media is to provide authentic information about an event, situation, or phenomenon, it often happens that the data is changed and deformed, which often acts with the strategy of changing our point of view, because even though it is claimed to be a free media, they are constantly controlled and monitored.

Today's media, in addition to television, radio, telephone, newspapers, and other magazines, also includes the Internet, namely, today we have social networks, each of which has millions of users, which have the right to direct and share information with the audience, and this is precisely where the problem arises because not every one of the users has inspiring and positive intentions. Many individuals are trying to use media to incite hatred and violence because social media is currently the most powerful tool that changes the world in a second.

### 1. Hate speech definition

The language of hate speech is a form of expression filled with hatred, intolerance, and bias through offensive and destructive language against a particular person or group in society, which is considered a threat to peace and social well-being. The person or group can be defined based on religion, race, sexual orientation, gender, disability, etc. Hate speech is

so powerful often incites violence and other crimes against the target group. There are cases when hate speech encouraged even wars and genocides, for example, in Rwanda.

When speaking about freedom of expression in social networks, we must consider two sides of the coin. Social media is an influential communication platform because is accessible to everyone, which means everyone has the right to express their opinions and ideas. Today, social media have allowed hearing the voices of people in need who deserve support and help but did not receive it because no one is familiar with their case. Awareness is spread among people for many phenomena, where for different causes, individuals from all over the world come together. The same event connects people to raise awareness and offer support for a specific case.

On the other hand, social networks offer access to all individuals, considering that different users have different intentions including bad ones. Social media are used for posting and sharing offensive and disturbing posts which may incite not only hate but also violence and hate crime.

The question raised about whether the media has a positive or negative impact on society.

When the question is posed as to whether the limitation of free speech is necessary and why, the first answer/reason can be precisely the misuse of speech because unlimited freedom has its negative consequences. Because the state has established legal rules that every citizen must adhere to and ensures rights and freedoms also without discriminatory grounds, but still with a limit so as not to harm others and not to violate the rules documented in other laws and acts. The same applies to freedom of expression. Imagine what the world would be like without sanctions, where everyone would hate even negative things. This also includes freedom of expression because it often follows hatred and hatred, and when the expression of these urges is facilitated, it normally becomes a problem, a threat, and a real danger to welfare and social security. Today, social networks pave the way for the growth of hate speech, thus facilitating the process of calls and incitements for aggression, violence, and purges against different social groups.

## **2. Online Hate Speech**

Today, many international and national organizations address the problem of hate speech, especially the offensive language used today on the Internet and social networks. Before enumerating the ways of fighting it, we must stop and analyze how online hate speech can spread. To provide a unified framework for the United Nations to address the issue globally, the UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech defines hate speech as...“any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour, 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.” (Nations, United Nations) Hate speech online is not intrinsically different from hate speech offline. However, it differs in the nature of the interactions in which it takes place/occurs, as well as in the use and spread of specific words, accusations and conspiracy theories that can evolve, peak and fade very quickly. (Protect & UNESCO, 2021, p. 4) Prejudices and offensive comments have always existed and will always be present in social media. Considering the speed with which news spreads, the hatred expressed through the

media is much more powerful. Lim 2020, explored the gowning dimension of hate speech on social media and indicates that because of technological acceptance and improved communications skills the audience response towards online hate speech is rising. (Tareen, Tareen, Noreen, Tariq, & Nazmine, July 2021, p. 5288) Today, prejudices and insults are expressed to people very easily online. Often offensive and insulting comments are caused by posting a photo or video. Their hatred does not stop there. They continue by sending hateful messages or even starting a process of saying that it would destroy the person or the concrete group in many ways. Hate speech brings many negative consequences to individuals. If hate speech against that person is frequent, such a negative effect must be dealt with because it can lead to self-harm and suicide. “You’re going to start feeling more negative, maybe depressed, more stressed, more anxious,” says psychologist Larry Rosen, PhD, a professor emeritus at California State University, Dominguez Hills. “The advice I’d give is to identify where the negative stuff is coming from, and hide it all.” (Germain, 2022) Hate speech on social media is communicated in different ways, not only within textual posts or user comments but also in (audio)visual forms such as videos and memes. Concerning user comments, experimental research has revealed that hateful and/or incivil comments not only induce negative emotions and/or hostile cognitions (Masullo Chen and Lu, 2017) but also influence users’ perceptions of the content commented upon (Prochazka et al., 2018). (Schmid, Kümpel, & Rieger, 2022) Hate speech can be direct and indirect. Direct hate speech occurs when an individual or group is directly attacked through verbal insults. Within indirect hate speech, humorous stylistic devices such as irony, sarcasm, and satire (Filibeli and Ertuna, 2021; Matamoros-Fernández, 2017) are common, particularly within visual presentation forms such as hate memes (Schmitt et al., 2020; Zannettou et al., 2018). (Schmid, Kümpel, & Rieger, 2022) Another challenge for the authorities is the fact that many people, i.e. users of social networks, support, justify and join people who promote hatred because they share the same opinion. The larger the number of people, the higher the number of online attacks against specific categories where it is possible to increase the likelihood of the situation escalating. It's all about the moment until hate speech turns into a hate crime, that's why social networks have enabled options for reporting offensive comments that are indicators of violence and aggression, as well as constantly exercising control and automatically deleting accounts and posts that have malicious intentions, but this is enough. Often, the articles of targeted persons remain for a long time in the media, on different platforms with different names. Another problematic case is that the people whose accounts are banned temporarily or permanently from social networks can easily open new ones and continue the initiative by using hate speech. Facebook provides a number of tools for limiting your exposure to posts you'd prefer to avoid. You can unfollow or block a user or group, or “snooze” them if you just want a 30-day break. (How to Filter Hate Speech, Hoaxes, and Violent Clips Out of Your Social Media Feeds, 2022; Germain, 2022) Twitter is designed as a public space offering greater opportunities for a tweet to be re-broadcast to large audiences and for strangers to respond and engage in public debates. Platforms like Snapchat, in contrast, by deleting conversations among users after they have occurred, offer a greater likelihood that the words will remain within smaller circles. (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, & Martinez, p. 14) Pinterest has some of the strictest rules against posting misinformation and hate speech, and it gives users a number of tools to control what they see on the platform. (Germain, 2022) WhatsApp is strictly a messaging platform. It's end-to-end encrypted, meaning only the sender and the recipients (and not the company) can access what people send. That protects user privacy, but also makes it harder for the WhatsApp to police bad behavior. (Germain, 2022) Although social

networks are constantly trying to implement policies to fight hate speech, it is not enough to detect all cases and potential victims of hate speech.

### **3. Victims of online hate speech**

The categories of persons most at risk from hate crimes are:

1. Women – There is a growing body of feminist scholarship pertaining to various kinds of online misogyny, however, hate speech against woman has been little studied. (Richardson-Self, 2021, p. 81) Misogynistic online attacks are becoming increasingly common. An EU-based survey in 2014 found that on average across the 28 EU countries, 11% of women had experienced online abuse, beginning at the age of 15, ranging from 5% in Romania to 18% in Sweden and Denmark, reflecting the higher numbers of internet users in these countries. (Ging & Siapera, 2019, p. 24) Misogynistic online comments mostly attack women involved in the media and politics, where they often experience physical violence. Online hate speech is present in every place, country, and continent of the world, such as Latin America, Europe, and Asia. Across Asia and the Pacific, women elected to parliament are being targeted with online hate speech, sexual harassment and fake news stories. For example, Thai opposition member Pannika Wanich has experienced “all kinds of harassment”, from online attacks to body shaming and hate speech. (UNWoman, 2021, p. 2) Hate speech directed at women affects not only their mental health but also their social, political, and cultural life, and the Council of Europe is constantly trying to raise awareness about the problem because hate speech does not only cause bullying and stress but also destroys the lives of women who were insulted with hateful comments and threats.

The 2020 UNDOC report surveyed 901 people, of which 1% were transgender, 20% were male and 80% were female respondents aged 25-55 from 125 different countries, of which 46% were news or investigative journalists and reporters, answered that most of them were victims of hate speech. 73% of women respondents said they had experienced online violence. (Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison,, & Waisbord , 2020, p. 2) 20% of women respondents said they had been attacked or abused offline in connection with online violence they had experienced. (Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison,, & Waisbord , 2020, p. 2). The women journalists surveyed most frequently indicated (30%) that they respond to the online violence they experience by self-censoring on social media. 20% described how they withdrew from all online interaction and 18% avoided audience engagement specifically. (Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison,, & Waisbord , 2020, p. 3)

Race- people of different races are victims of online hate speech. Most of the time, people with different racial backgrounds are discriminated against and hated unwanted because they cause social insecurities and are a source of criminality, which is untrue. National, ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities are a recurring targets of hate speech, including online. According to the Special Rapporteur on Minorities Issues' thematic report 70 per cent or more of those targeted by hate crimes or hate speech in social media are minorities. (Nations, 2021) When we talk about hate speech based on our race, here we also include migrants and

refugees, who in recent years have been the biggest victims of hate on various online platforms with the increase in their number in European countries. As extremist groups and politicians, but also news agencies, fuel hate speech against migrants and refugees to serve their own populist agendas, acts of intimidation and violence have spiked and disinformation has intensified. (Nations, 2021) Additionally, the research conducted by the Center for Refugee Law and Migration Law at the “Iustinianus Primus” Law Faculty - Skopje in 2020, illustrated that social media is widely and often used to promote nationalist, populist and xenophobic messages and ideas and therefore continue to be a focal tool for disinformation that overlaps and dominates the public, media and political discourse in North Macedonia. (Pandeva, Stratilati, & Georgievski, 2022, p. 17)

Religion – Anti-Semitic, anti-Sikh, and anti-Muslim movements are very common in social networks, especially the last one, which is very present not only in social networks but often escalates into direct attacks on people of the Islamic religion. Anti-Muslim hate crime falls under the category of religious hate crime, which is where it is perceived, by the victim or any other person, to be motivated by a hostility or prejudice based upon a person’s religion or perceived religion. (Awan, 2016, p. 7) Hate speech, when directed at a group, such as Muslims, attributes an undesirable or dangerous belief to the group as a whole and treats the belief as an aspect of each believer’s worldview. (Moon, Religion and hate speech, 2019) “Religious” hate speech cases are difficult or contentious for the same reason that all hate speech cases are difficult. There is significant disagreement in the community about whether or to what extent the restriction of hate speech can be reconciled with the public commitment to freedom of expression. (Moon, Religion and Hate Speech (Chapter 1) - Putting Faith in Hate, 2018, p. 1) The relationship between religion and hate speech is complex. On the one hand, it has been central to recent discussions of hate speech directed at religious people, especially members of religious minorities. On the other hand, religious believers sometimes defend their use of derogatory and extreme speech against member of other religious faiths, or people with a certain sexual orientation, as part of their religious freedom. (Religion, 2017) In the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia, the issue of trust is very delicate and often problematic. A March research paper by the NGO Metamorphosis on COVID-19-related disinformation in the country revealed disinformation and conspiracy theories also led to anti-Semitic and hate speech on the internet. (Bureau of Democracy)

Sexual orientation – With the increase in the number of people who are part of the LGBTQ community, more controversies arise and, the world now is divided into two groups, the very first group supports and the other group who don't only oppose the community but also encourages more provocations and hate between communities. The biggest and strongest debates occur precisely on online platforms, that is, through social networks, starting with offensive comments, opening incitement groups against them, and even physical attacks against them. States today are challenged to prevent and fight homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia. LGBT activists are targets of online hate speech, and this type of abuse has multiple psychological effects. In a study that focuses on the harmful effects of hate speech on LGBT activists in Moldova and Ukraine, the interviewees state that the online hate content causes them a series of harmful effects. (Stefanita & Buf, 2021, p. 51) Because of the harsh language of hatred, the victims are forced to close and deactivate their accounts. They are also emotionally affected also experience unnecessary stress, fear, isolation, and loneliness Because LGBT individuals are more prone to receiving hateful messages constantly than straight individuals, they end up internalizing negative attitudes toward the LGBT community

(Ghafoori et al., 2019). The perpetual stigmatization of the LGBT community can lead to an internalized homophobia. (Stefanita & Buf, 2021, p. 51) Various calls are constantly made on social networks against the LGBT community to increase security and control of what posts are uploaded, with what goals and content. For example, this year, in Ireland, a group of people uploaded advertisements against the LGBT community that were approved by social platforms such as Facebook, Youtube, and TikTok. The call against this community was terrifying because they were promoting the death and injuries of the members. Both YouTube and TikTok approved for publication every single one of the ten ads, whilst Facebook only rejected two. All three platforms accepted the “burn all gays” ad, as well as one encouraging men to use violence against transgender women. (Extreme and violent anti-LGBTQ+ hate approved for publication by leading social media platforms, 2023)The data protection commission in the state of Ireland, under whose jurisdiction these platforms fall, has been accused of failing to protect the rights and dignity of its citizens.The LGBT community is constantly attacked in the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia in different forms by individuals, organizations, and political parties. The Coalition for the Protection of Children, an anti-gender group coalition, publicly named and mocked LGBTI activists on their website, spreading misinformation. (Europe I. , 2022, p. 109) The antidiscrimination law explicitly protects individuals against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in education, employment, housing, and health care; there is no protection against hate speech based on sexual orientation or gender identity within the criminal code and other laws covering freedom of expression. (Bureau of Democracy)

#### **4. Preventive measures**

The German Network Enforcement Law introduced just over two years ago imposes obligations on social media platforms to establish complaints management mechanisms which must work quickly, transparently and effectively. Where unlawful content (as defined by the German Criminal Code) is identified it must be removed or blocked within a specified deadline. (Hate speech regulation on social media: An intractable contemporary challenge, 2020) The United Kingdom imposes a range of criminal prohibitions on hate speech, both online and in print. The Crime and Disorder Act, Public Order Act, Malicious Communications Act 1998 and Communications Act 2003 prohibit speech that is derogatory on grounds of race, ethnic origin and religious and sexual orientation. (Hate speech regulation on social media: An intractable contemporary challenge, 2020) There is also an EU code of conduct accepted by many social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Snapchat, Instagram, Linked In, TikTok, etc. as regards a form of agreement with the European Commission concerning the increase in hate speech online. This code is a set of rules to combat hate speech on the Internet, by coordination with national authorities, we can combat this phenomenon and provide more security on the Internet. The implementation of the Code of Conduct is evaluated through a regular monitoring exercise set up in collaboration with a network of organisations located in the different EU countries. Using a commonly agreed methodology, these organisations test how the IT companies are implementing the commitments in the Code. (The EU Code of conduct on countering illegal hate speech online). The Council of Europe is constantly engaged and brings positive results in taking measures and activities related to hate speech in social networks. N In this direction, in 2022, the Committee of Ministers has approved the

recommendation CM/REC(2022) 16 on Combating Hate Speech, prepared by the committee of the authorities that address the problem of hate speech and offering instructions always in the framework of human rights. It provides non-binding guidance for member States, building on the relevant case-law of the European Court of Human Rights and paying special attention to the online environment in which most of today's hate speech can be found. (Online hate speech and hate crime - Cyberviolence - [www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int))

## **5. Hate speech regulated by international documents**

For many years, humanity has fought for rights and freedoms, where today not only international documents have been drawn up, but also ratified and implemented, which oblige states to respect and guarantee equal and non-discriminatory rights and freedoms for citizens. One of them is the freedom of expression, which is also provided for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically in Article 19, where it says: In this direction, in 2022, the Committee of Ministers has approved the recommendation CM/REC(2022) 16 on Combating Hate Speech, prepared by the committee of the authorities that address the problem of hate speech and offering instructions always in the framework of human rights. “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (Assembly, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) United Nations General Assembly in Paris on 10 December 1948 (General Assembly resolution 217 A) )

Also, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights in Article 11 describes the freedom of expression and information as follows:

1. Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers.
2. The freedom and pluralism of the media shall be respected. (Rights E. U.)

Freedom of expression is very important and everyone needs to feel free to express their thoughts and ideas to others in different ways, not only verbally but also in written form where they can share it with the public in the media. as well as non-verbal and artistic visual forms.

Freedom of expression is also included in the European Convention on Human Rights in Article 10, point 1, which states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.

The Council of Europe has also prepared a handbook for legal practitioners regarding protecting the right to freedom of expression under the European Convention on Human Rights. As well as there are EU guidelines on freedom of expression online and offline. The OSCE also offers International Mechanisms for Promoting Freedom of Expression on its

website. Joint declaration by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression. (Europe, 2020)

In the same, they were asked by the states to decide:

ii. States should promote effective access to the Internet and other digital technologies for all parts of population, including by closing digital gaps based on gender, race, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic status and other bases, and putting in place clear requirements and policies to ensure respect for the principle of net neutrality. (Europe, 2020, p. 2)

The media, both legacy and digital, should be exempted from liability during election periods for disseminating statements made directly by parties or candidates unless the statements have specifically been held to be unlawful by an independent and impartial court or regulatory body, or the statements constitute incitement to violence and the media outlet had a genuine opportunity to prevent their dissemination. (Europe, 2020, p. 2) States should put in place a regulatory and institutional framework that promotes a free, independent and diverse media, in both the legacy and digital media sectors, which is able to provide voters with access to comprehensive, accurate and reliable information about parties, candidates and the wider electoral process. (Europe, 2020, p. 2) The First Amendment provides that Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise. It protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition. The First Amendment provides that Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise. It protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (The White House, 2021) Humans are a social being who needs to express themselves and discuss with others. Each person has his thoughts and ideas regarding a case, phenomenon, or event and to share them as he is free to think, he can also express his pure opinion without insults and tendencies to transmit negativity and frustrations. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in article 4 paragraph (a) says:

Shall declare as an offence punishable by law all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination, as well as all acts of violence or incitement to such acts against any race or group of persons of another colour or ethnic origin, and also the provision of any assistance to racist activities, including the financing thereof; (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, & Martinez, p. 21) In this convention, it is emphasized to say in an indirect way hate crime without mentioning the term, but what is implied seems to be that it prohibits the use of words, and ideas related to hatred, insults, and aggression towards races and ethnic groups, so this convention is limited to only these two basis. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has actively addressed hate speech in its General Recommendation 29, in which the Committee recommends state parties to:(r) Take measures against any dissemination of ideas of caste superiority and inferiority or which attempt to justify violence, hatred or discrimination against descent-based communities;(s) Take strict measures against any incitement to discrimination or violence against the communities, including through the Internet;(t) Take measures to raise awareness among media professionals of the nature and incidence of descent-based discrimination. (Gagliardone, Gal, Alves, & Martinez, p. 22)

## 6. Hate speech in North Macedonia

The Republic of North Macedonia, even though it is a small country, is a multi-ethnic country, so there are people with different ethnic, religious, and sexual orientations, and normally, like in any other country, there is a presence of different languages online as well as offline. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights since October 2018 established systematic monitoring of hate-speech in North Macedonia, particularly focusing on social media to include public media discourse on Facebook, Instagram and recently TikTok. (Rights H. C., 2023) The Republic of North Macedonia is constantly dealing with the problem of hate speech. Unfortunately, there is no specific law that foresees sanctions and combats hate speech. A very efficient tool to follow and reflect on the problems with hate speech is precisely the website Govor na Omraza, which is a multifunctional platform because it provides information on the number and type of hate speech so, as statistics, and on the other hand, it offers the opportunity to present cases of such. For all the people who do not know the definition of hate speech and cannot understand when a behavior or a name represents hate speech, this website defines it with examples. This platform was developed by the Helsinki Committee in 2018. Today Govor na Omraza is one of the top effective measures for preventing and combating online hate speech. There has been a drastic increase in online hate speech cases, especially during the covid-19 period when individuals used offensive nicknames in comment sections related to covid symptoms. Most of the cases referred to the situation with the Covid-19 pandemic, the state of emergency and the increased quarantine during the state of emergency, and what is interesting is that hate speech increased before the Christian holiday of Easter and the beginning of the Ramadan fast, i.e. during the longest quarantine period. (Aksentievaska, 2021)

After the end of each year, a report is given on how many cases were registered and what type of hate speech was used, where the last report is that of 2022, where there were a total of 142 cases. Of these 145 reports, 61 reports or 36% refer to hate speech based on political affiliation, 51 reports or 29% refer to hate speech based on ethnicity, 37 or 21% reports refer to hate speech based on sexual orientation, and 8 or 5% reports refer to of hate speech based on sex and gender. (Rights H. C., 2023) The Republic of North Macedonia fails to protect citizens and vulnerable groups of individuals where very few cases are presented to the police and even fewer end with trials because hate speech often turns into hate crime. Online hate speech was also present during the opening of the Center for the Bulgarian Community, where it caused many reactions and anti-Bulgarian statements from prominent figures of the country. All of their statements give the impression that the name of the Bulgarian cultural centre, 'Ivan Mihailov', is 'Nazi' or 'fascist'. (Dzhambazki) The Helsinki Committee cautioned that inter-ethnic hate speech on social media contravened legislation against spreading racist and xenophobic material online. NGOs and international actors expressed concern at widespread discriminatory speech fuelled by Bulgaria's opposition to North Macedonia's EU accession. (International) In order to deal more efficiently with hate speech in North Macedonia in January 2019, the "Network for Combating Hate Speech in the Media" was established, initiated and coordinated by the "Council for Media Ethics of Macedonia" (CEMM). (Dzizal & Nikodinovska, p. 12) The network also formulated a statement to combat hate speech in the public sphere, raising awareness among citizens about hate speech and its consequences, raising awareness of being careful when expressing and avoiding offensive and prejudicial terms that incite violence. In his speech in 2020, Guy Berger, the UNESCO Director for Freedom of

Expression and Media Development, said that journalists, not technology, are key to fighting hate speech online. He said that the media should emphasize the risks of hate speech, while avoiding the trap of normalizing and inciting hatred with their own reporting. (Aksentievskaja, 2021) Radio MOF is one of the few online media (also broadcasting platform) that is promoting responsibility regarding the published content online and is making efforts to promote media literacy and help the citizens to recognize the hate speech. Under their hashtag #Dehejtizacija ("Dehatesation") they published around 40 stories<sup>9</sup> related with analyzing forms of hate speech or unethical reporting in traditional and social media. (Penev, p. 6) They take the initiative to prevent hate speech on social networks by sharing real cases of such using the hashtag #Dehejtizacija ("Dehatesation").

The Guidelines for Ethical Reporting of Online Media contain provisions regarding users' comments published under journalists' articles on websites or on social networks that contain hate speech. (Nikodinoska, October 2021, p. 13) Regarding social media, in May 2020, Facebook intervened when it was discovered that "disinformation farms" from North Macedonia and the Philippines were working for the Natural News site, known for sharing conspiracy theories and disinformation about COVID-19, by removing the site. (Nikodinoska, October 2021, p. 15) The "Fighting Fake News Narratives" (f2n2.mk) project is implemented by the civil society organization "Most" against disinformation on the internet. (Nikodinoska, October 2021, p. 15) Nansen Dialogue Center Skopje <https://ndc.org.mk/> is non-governmental dedicated to reducing the ethnic based segregation in schools and promotion of interculturalism in the educational system. (Penev, p. 5) The center tries to design strategies and implement projects based on cultural diversity and tolerance between different ethnic groups. The goal is to encourage and promote respect among others, starting from an early age, by connecting them to various educational projects. Peace Action <http://mirovnaakcija.org/> was formed in 2001 by many informal groups of pacifists and antimilitarists. They promote peace and culture of non-violence. (Penev, p. 5) Macedonian Civic Education Center (<https://www.mcgo.org.mk/>) was founded in 2004 with a mission to develop educational programs and provide services to educational and other public institutions, local communities, the non-governmental sector, the business sector and citizens, in order to contribute to the continuous development of the civil society. (Penev, p. 5)

## **7. Cases of online hate speech in the Republic of North Macedonia**

The ease of access, size of the audience, anonymity, and instantaneousness lowers the cost of engaging in cyberhate. The number of Internet users in North Macedonia<sup>14</sup> rose from 49.6 percent in 2010 to 81.4 percent in 2020. (Pankovski & Popovikj, p. 4) There have always been problems in a country with the issue of polarization, discrimination, language, and hate crimes. This polarization was at its most extreme during VMRO-DPMNE's leadership between 2006 and 2016.<sup>41</sup> At the time, key media outlets worked in favor of the ruling party, ignoring journalistic standards and ethics. (Pankovski & Popovikj, p. 11) Hate speech was a big issue, and the state was the one that monitored the content of the Internet and the media, allowing offensive language to be translated and distributed to the audience, especially on ethnic and political grounds. Strong Cities Network (SCN) is a network whose goal is to prevent and fight extremism and hatred through projects and analysis of events and realities to increase awareness and enable the cooperation of policymakers and other competent persons who

operate at the municipal level. This network also dedicates space to the part of the Western Balkans, including our country, where in 2022 it published a report entitled "Online Extremism in North Macedonia: Politics, Ethnicities, and Religion", where it identified the presence of online hate and provided research and findings of which he presented a report. SCN identified 18,371 relevant hateful pieces of content under the category political polarisation; 13,562 were in Macedonian and 4,809 were in the Albanian language. Almost half of the Macedonian language data was identified on Twitter (7,025) followed by Facebook (3,263) and web forums (2,596), while most of the Albanian language content came from web forums (4,598). (Dukic, 2021, p. 9) SCN has detected such cases in the period after reaching the Prespes Agreement, where hashtags such as '#северджани/#severdzeni' began to circulate, especially on the Twitter platform. After a deep analysis, the experts concluded that the individuals against this agreement expressed hatred by using this polarizing term and trying to insult the history of the state of RMV and its citizens. The name change of the Republic of North Macedonia also provoked many debates, especially on social networks. For example, the 'Bojkotiram' (Boycott) campaign aimed to get citizens to snub the 2018 name referendum. (Dukic, 2021, p. 12) #NeverNorthOnlyMacedonia was also a hashtag trending on social media such as Twitter and Facebook, whichever also incited debates and a series of offensive comments. In our country, there are not only political and nationalist tensions between the peoples or ethnic groups who live there, such as Albanians, Turks, and Vlachs, but also with the nationalities of neighboring countries, and especially recently with the Bulgarian people, because of the issues of dialogue and problems that seem to set on between theirs. For instance, Bulgarian media identified a public Facebook group called 'Let's spit at Bulgarians and Bulgarian sympathisers' where members post hateful comments and advocate using physical violence against Bulgarian tourists and Bulgarophiles. (Dukic, 2021, p. 15) Hate speech without exception is present between the two nationalities such as Albanian and Macedonian, where the report has emphasized the keywords used which have incited debates and hatred on online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter by using derogatory names and provoking with offensive terms or labels of both nationalities. The top five words in the list include three references to Macedonia and its citizens, as well as a derogatory term for Albanians ('Shiptar') and the Albanian acronym for the National Liberation Army (UCK). (Dukic, 2021, p. 16) Names such as "Baliistet", "Great Albania", "Kaurw", etc were also used. There was a Facebook group called "Death to the Shiptars", where one could find pictures only with the character of hatred and ridicule of the Albanians. In this group, there have been numerous hateful comments such as "ONLY A DEAD SHQIPTAR IS A GOOD SHQIPTAR!!! (Hate) Online hate speech is used against the Roma nationality, offending and abusing their photos. In one of the examples, published on social media by a high school teacher from Tetovo, members of the ethnic Roma community are described as: intolerant, lazy, "bad and dangerous", and "soulless". (Dzagal & Nikodinovska, p. 10) Hate speech cases have also been used with political leaders and prominent figures in the country. There are cases when police officers are verbally attacked or insulted through offensive comments. In another case, a family member of the ex-Minister of Justice (MoJ), Bojan Maricic, was targeted. A photograph of Momir Maricic, father of the ex-MoJ, taken from his Facebook profile, next to a statue of Adolph Hitler and a copy of the "Mein Kampf" book, was published with the title: "The father of the Minister stands proudly next to the statue of Hitler". (Dzagal & Nikodinovska, p. 8) Many politicians and foreign countries have also been attacked with insulting comments on social networks, as was the case with the Bulgarian veto regarding our country's EU membership negotiations. In our country, hate speech is done not only on ethnic and political grounds but also based on religion

because there are citizens who have different beliefs, nonetheless, religious affiliation is not a reason for discrimination and hate speech. An example of this is the case of a local female NGO activist being attacked as an alleged “jihadist”<sup>15</sup>. A photo of the activist wearing a “hijab”, the Islamic women’s head covering, near the former prime minister, Zoran Zaev, was included in the article with the title “Scandal: Terrorist-Jihadist cell in the ruling SDSM party”. (Dziganal & Nikodinovska, p. 10)

## **8. How to combat online hate speech (Recommendations)**

Hate speech and nationalism online evade easy regulation. Internet technologies and online platforms are difficult to regulate, and since online media does not fall under state regulation, this is a pernicious issue for North Macedonia. (Pankovski & Popovikj, p. 19)

In order to fight hate speech, which in most cases also determines hate crime, there should be a special legal regulation that will define the notion, types, form, and punitive measures, because currently this phenomenon, as long as it is not foreseen in legal documents, is still undefined, unclear and many individuals do not understand the weight and effect of hate speech. If hate speech was provided for in the law, it would be much easier for the justice bodies to take preventive measures and perhaps there would be provisions that would force the public prosecutor to act *ex officio*. It would also be good if the ministries in our country would unite, and compile a strategy to fight hate speech through the division of jobs and functions. For example, the Ministry of Education should provide training opportunities for educators and teachers, and also provide students with an introduction to this topic so that they understand and know more about this phenomenon because tomorrow they will know how to protect themselves and not are affected because hate speech brings psychological consequences, where to turn and realize that they should not do the same, so a general preventive. So it would be ideal and appropriate to design programs for each age group to inform more about hate speech.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs should every year publish cases and statistics about the number of hate speeches in the country, types, and forms and normally take measures for each of the cases. In addition, it is necessary to hold continuous training for police officers about hate speech and how they should react when they are required to take action. Training on the detection of hate speech should also be carried out among prosecutors and judges in the country.

Often, the media fails to prevent hate speech by not adhering to ethical rules and standards, thus allowing the spread of offensive terms or language. Taking into account the effect and power that the media have, they should more strictly adhere to the rules and condemn any type of hate speech and for the same promote through campaigns, the need for tolerance, equality, and removal of prejudices. Journalists' unions and organizations must regularly demonstrate compliance with high ethical standards. (Dziganal & Nikodinovska)

## CONCLUSION

From what was said above, it can be concluded that today online hate speech is present everywhere, it affects individuals and different groups, and it is constantly increasing, regardless of the state policies and strategies that are constantly undertaken.

In addition to the need for the adoption of a specific law that would include provisions that would define hate speech, its types, and how it occurs, but also foresee sanctions, because in this way the citizens will be notified of this phenomenon and will much more easily they would recognize it and will take adequate measures. Social networks must constantly implement policies for the protection of personal data and policies that do not in any way use posts that are offensive, insulting, and that incite hatred and violence.

Social media should also promote tolerance, understanding, and equality through games, posts, and photos, but also develop campaigns that will present the negative consequences of hate speech and cases where they have escalated. In this way, not only awareness will increase, but it will be known that even a simple insulting comment can constitute a threat of violence.

The number of online hate speeches will continue to grow as long as individuals are not properly educated to accept differences in religion, race, ethnicity, political beliefs, and different sexual orientation. Due to the lack of feeling of acceptance and understanding, these prejudices and negative thoughts will be presented, making a person or group feel discriminated and insulted, when in reality each of us is special in its own way and the same should be embraced.

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