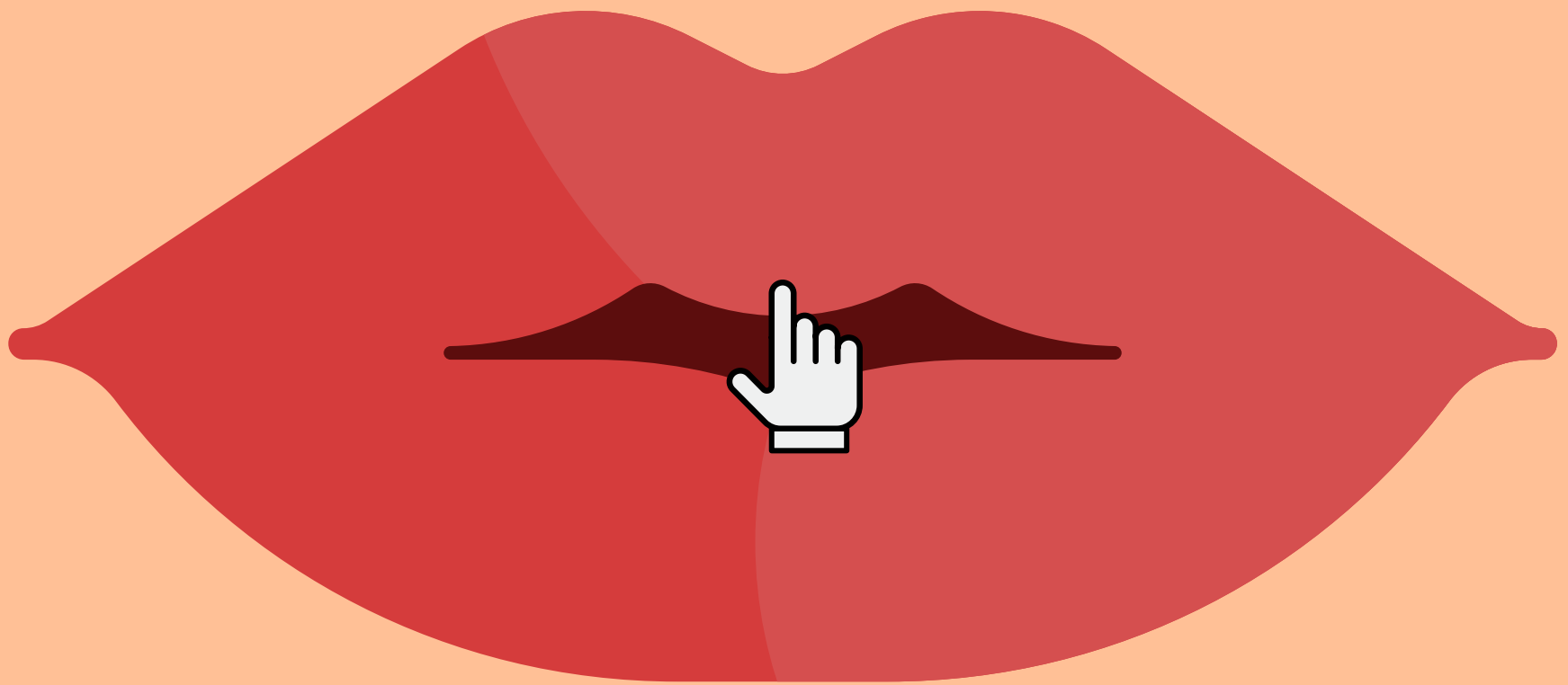


Gender-based content analysis



Gender equality

in a time of gendered
disinformation

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Introduction

Disinformation can be defined as false information deliberately created to harm a specific person, social group or organization, while the false character of the information can also result from so-called “manipulated information”.¹ At the same time, gendered disinformation refers to any false and manipulated information *that* aims to cause harm to women or people of diverse genders and sexualities. One of the original definitions of gendered disinformation encompasses the dissemination of misleading or inaccurate information and images against women who are political leaders, journalists and public figures, following narratives that are based on misogyny and stereotypical gender roles.² Despite the fact that the spread of gendered disinformation is gaining momentum, taking into account its complexity, the concept itself is still in the making, hence proper recognition and addressing gendered disinformation still poses a big challenge.

Gendered disinformation refers to activities (creating, sharing, disseminating content) that attack or undermine the reputation of people based on their gender and abuse gender stereotypes to promote political, social or economic goals.³ One of the simplest ways to recognize the gender component of disinformation is that disinformation is gendered if it targets women based on their identity as women.⁴ The most common examples of gendered disinformation are false content, coordinated campaigns to create and share disinformation that denigrates the character of women, caricaturization and demonisation of

1 Internet Governance Forum. (2021). *Best Practice Forum Gender and Digital Rights: Exploring the concept of Gendered Disinformation*. OUTPUT DOCUMENT. Available at: https://www.intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/62/20661

2 Ibid.

3 Judson, E. et al. (2020). *Engendering Hate: The Contours of State-Aligned Gendered Disinformation Online*. Demos. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Engendering-Hate-Report-FINAL.pdf>

4 Blatnik, A. (2021). *An overlooked Threat to Democracy? Gendered Disinformation About Female Politicians*.

supporters of gender equality.⁵ Gendered disinformation campaigns are mostly aimed at persons with a certain public status or positions, such as women politicians, journalists, activists, artists, etc.

Online media and social media platforms are the main source of disinformation, hate speech and violation of professional standards,⁶ thus social media are the main tool for spreading gendered disinformation in the national context. Social media can shape attitudes about women's political abilities and the importance of women's representation,⁷ as the strengthening of negative gender stereotypes in the online space will influence the strengthening of misogynistic attitudes about the role of women in the public sphere and in society.⁸ In this context, it is crucial to identify and understand gendered disinformation, but also to treat and address it as a problem of democratic institutions, taking into account the negative consequences it can have on gender equality and the overall development of society. That is why, with this analysis, we try to make a contribution to exposing the disinformation that has been shared in the last few months in the news reports, as well as their effects in creating and sharing gendered disinformation and gender-based hate speech, especially aimed at women.

This analysis, titled "Gender equality in a time of gendered disinformation", is the third analysis of gender-based content produced by the Institute of Communication Studies, as part of the project "Fact-Based Journalism for Raising Awareness and Countering Disinformation in the Media Space in North Macedonia", which is implemented with the support of the British Embassy in Skopje.

5 Internet Governance Forum. (2021). *Best Practice Forum on Gender and Digital Rights: Exploring the concept of gendered disinformation*. Available at: https://intgovforum.org/en/filedepot_download/248/21181

6 European Commission. (2022). *North Macedonia 2022 Report*. Available at: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/North%20Macedonia%20Report%202022.pdf>

7 Di Meco, L. (2020). *Online Threats to Women's Political Participation and the Need for a Multi-Stakeholder, Cohesive Approach to Address Them*. UN Women. Available at: https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/65/EGM/Di%20Meco_Online%20Threats_EP8_EGMCSW65.pdf

8 Judson, E. (2021). *Gendered disinformation: 6 reasons why liberal democracies need to respond to this threat*. Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung. Available at: https://eu.boell.org/en/2021/07/09/gendered-disinformation-6-reasons-why-liberal-democracies-need-respond-threat#_ftn1

Methodology

The purpose of this analysis is to identify disinformation regarding the draft Law on Gender Equality and the amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, in correlation with the gendered disinformation that was their direct product. At the same time, the analysis includes gender-based content, the purpose of which is to use gender stereotypes to create content based on untruths, insults, sexualization, denigration and mocking of women, with the aim of silencing them, i.e., excluding them from the public discourse. The analysis will contribute to better recognize and understand gendered disinformation and the discreditation of the female voice in the online space, primarily through the perpetuation of gender stereotypes.

For this purpose, through examining news reports published on online media, the analysis conducts a case study, by applying a qualitative examination of contents published in the period from May to July, 2023, which entails the events that are directly related to the subject of analysis, i.e., the Pride Parade (Skopje Pride 2023) and the protest organized by the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MOC), which took place in June. For the purposes of this analysis, a sample of more than 1,000 news reports published on online media and more than 7,000 comments made in reaction to published news reports on social media, i.e., on the Facebook platform, was analysed.

Gender-based content was analysed through several specific aspects:

- Use of (gendered) disinformation regarding legal regulations and policies
- Use of sensationalist language
- Use of sexist speech and hate speech
- Use of gender stereotypes
- The role of the media in preventing and promoting (gendered) disinformation

The identity of several women politicians who perform public functions was used for this analysis, while the other women were depicted through their professions. The analysis does not contain or refer to content that depicts explicit violence.

Context of the analysis

Gendered disinformation works in such a way that, through the use and emphasis of gender stereotypes, the creators try to convince the audience that women are stupid, sexual, immoral, insidious, weak, unprotected, and their main goal is to show that women have no place in the public sphere, i.e., to exclude women from the public discourse and potential centers of power. Gendered disinformation is a tool to harass women, which can lead to their self-censorship and contribute to their lower representation in the public sphere, which sends a message to all women about their place and role in society.

The spread of this type of disinformation in North Macedonia can be attributed to the actions of the subjects who are connected to the anti-gender movement, which is on the rise.⁹ At the same time, the anti-gender movement campaigns use narratives based on misogyny, homophobia and transphobia, which are actually common characteristics of gendered disinformation.

Anti-gender movements represent an international or transnational movement that opposes what they call a “gender ideology” or “gender theory”, and one way to define anti-gender movements is that they represent an organized form of action that unites different actors against what is defined as a “gender ideology”.¹⁰ What is also important to note is that anti-gender movements, in their essence, are undemocratic and represent a threat to human rights, especially women’s rights and the rights of other marginalized groups in society, and they tend to regressively influence the growth achieved so far in terms of inclusivity and equality.

The anti-gender movements in North Macedonia were intensified towards the end of 2020, stimulated by the reforms envisaged by the new Concept for Primary

9 Kotevska, B. et al. (2023). *Franet National contribution to the Fundamental Rights Report 2023 North Macedonia. FRA*. Available at: https://epi.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/frr_2023_north_macedonia_en.pdf

10 Величковска, М. и Цветковиќ, И. (2022). Кој се плаши од родот? *Анализа на клучните стратегии и наративи на анти-родовите движења во Северна Македонија*. Коалиција МАРГИНИИ Скопје. Available at: http://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/koj-se-plashi-od-rodot_-interactive.pdf

Education. As part of the public discussions concerning the Concept, several groups advocated against gender-sensitive education and the piloting of sexuality education, using terms such as “gender ideology” and “gender indoctrination” to entice mobilization at the local level.¹¹ At the same time, the main narratives around which these groups are mobilized are the “protection of children”, “preservation of the family”, “biology/nature/normal”. Most of these groups and individuals continued their activities in the following years, advocating against changes to certain laws and policies, including the new draft Law on Gender Equality and amendments to the Law on Civil Registry.

One of the “victims” of the impact of anti-gender movements were the proposed amendments to the Law on Civil Registry in 2020. Namely, in 2019, in the case of *X vs The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) found that North Macedonia is in violation of the Convention on Human Rights because the current legal framework in the country does not provide fast, transparent and accessible procedures for changing the registered gender of transgender persons in the birth certificates.¹² With legal recognition of their gender, persons will be able to change their gender in the civil registry, in order to match their gender identity and physical appearance. Thus, by matching the personal identification documents to the adequate gender identity, persons will be protected from a series of potential violations of their human rights and from discrimination, be it in the field of employment, health, etc., as well as from physical and verbal attacks.¹³ Despite the fact that the current law does not forbid a change in the mark for gender in the civil registry, and some of the transgender people have already made the change, it is still left to the will of the institutions, i.e., there still isn’t a clear procedure, which, by the way, can last for years. The full implementation of the ECtHR ruling includes the adoption of a legal framework that will guarantee an adequate legal procedure for gender recognition based on self-determination, by submitting a notary request, and the Ministry of Justice formed a working group for this purpose, comprised of representatives of all relevant institutions, as well as civil society organizations working in this area. The working group worked for two years on making draft

11 Ibid.

12 ECHR, *X vs The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia*, Application no. 29683/16, January 17, 2019.

13 Бошкова, Н. и Раиден, И. (2017). Анализа на позитивни практики за правно признавање на родот. Available at: https://www.nvosorabotka.gov.mk/sites/default/files/kszpmz_Analiza-na-pozitivni-praktiki_a4_pregled-3_0.pdf

amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, including the regulation of the legal procedure for gender recognition, and the amendments were submitted to the Parliament. However, just one day before the start of the debate on the draft, without any public consultation, the Government withdrew the law from the parliamentary procedure, as a direct result of the ongoing advocacy activities of several anti-gender groups. The mobilization against the law resulted in the formation of the “Coalition for the Protection on Children” that includes 26 entities, most of which are associations of citizens and informal groups, but also political parties and religious groups, which, through the use of fake news, manipulation and moral panic, in order to cause paranoia and fear in the population and decision makers, turned the issue of legal recognition of gender into a matter of protection of women and children, warning about the hidden agendas of LGBTI activists for destruction of society and the state, as well as different conspiracy theories.¹⁴ Precisely these changes were the subject of criticism by the MOC, as well as the aforementioned organizations and associations that are part of the anti-gender movement, as well as other religious communities, during the analysed period.

However, the proposed Law on Gender Equality, which should replace the Law on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, first adopted in 2012, became a potential “victim” of anti-gender movements. The need to enact a new law arose from the limited effectiveness of the law and the need to strengthen the capacities (financial and human) of the gender machinery, i.e., the institutional mechanisms for gender equality, as bodies with a mandate to promote gender equality and support the integration of gender equality in the general policies from all areas.¹⁵ These bodies are most often composed by a central government body, i.e., the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, supplemented with an inter-ministerial structure for coordination of gender integration and contact persons or focal points from each relevant Ministry for the integration of gender equality in relevant policies. The identified shortcomings were included in the recommendations of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of

14 Величковска, М. и Цветковиќ, И. (2022). Кој се плаши од родот? Анализа на клучните стратегии и наративи на анти-родовите движења во Северна Македонија. Коалиција МАРГИНИИ Скопје. Available at: http://coalition.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/koj-se-plashi-od-rodot_-interactive.pdf

15 The obligation to establish an efficient and effective institutional mechanism originates from the Beijing Declaration of 1995, of which North Macedonia is a signatory.

Discrimination against Women,¹⁶ which was followed by analyses of the implementation of the law at the local and central level in 2019,¹⁷ and in 2020 a working group was formed, which includes representatives of all relevant institutions, civil society organizations and other experts with many years of experience in the field. The text of the new draft law has also been submitted to the Venice Commission.¹⁸ After two years of work, the law was in its final phase and the text was discussed at several public hearings organized by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (MLSP). To our understanding, the proposed legal text has not come across any substantial objections from any political party.

The policies and commitments for gender equality in North Macedonia predate the term “gender equality” as part of the legislation. The first Gender Equality Strategy 2013-2020¹⁹ was adopted in 2013, pursuant to Article 9 paragraph 3 of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, while the current 2022-2027 Strategy was adopted in 2022.²⁰ Opposed to this, the anti-gender movements started to spread disinformation about the introduction of the term “gender equality” precisely through the new piece of legislation. Furthermore, in their rhetoric, the word “gender” is abstracted from the term “gender equality”, which represents a subject through which further manipulation is carried out, especially through the alleged introduction of the term “gender identity” with the new legal acts.

16 CEDAW. (2018). Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FCO%2FMKD%2FCO%2F6&Lang=en

17 Available at: https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/dokumenti/2020/5.3_Assessment%20of%20the%20Law%20on%20EOWM_CENTRAL%20LEVEL_FINAL_MKD.pdf and https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/dokumenti/2020/5.3_Assessment%20of%20the%20Law%20on%20EOWM_LOCAL%20LEVEL_FINAL_MKD.pdf

18 Available at: [https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-REF\(2021\)044-e](https://www.venice.coe.int/webforms/documents/?pdf=CDL-REF(2021)044-e)

19 Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia number 6/12. Available at: <http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/9d01686c914343d28b15b2605b82272b.pdf> <http://www.slvesnik.com.mk/Issues/9d01686c914343d28b15b2605b82272b.pdf>

20 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 258/20. Available at: <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%81%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%87%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5%20%D0%B8%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%20%D0%BE%D0%B4%20%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0.pdf>

However, the term “gender identity” was introduced much earlier in Macedonian legislation. For example, for several years now, it has been considered as one of the grounds for discrimination regulated by the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.²¹ Also, the draft Law on Gender Equality does not mention legal recognition of “gender identity” at all, this is only foreseen in the Draft Law on Amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, however, both legislative acts have been treated as a part of the same package and labeled as a danger for the social order – an order seen exclusively from a traditional patriarchal point of view.

Despite the fact that statements made by clerics against the laws, but also against gender equality in general, have become louder since March, the anti-gender rhetoric got more intense right before the Pride Parade, which resulted in a protest organised by the MOC against these legislative acts, with the support from other religious institutions, civil society organizations and associations that are part of the anti-gender movement, as well as from political parties.

Social media are one of the key tools for creating and spreading gendered disinformation, considering that, especially in the Macedonian context, they have proven to be fertile ground for creating and spreading gender-based hate speech and gender-based harassment, mostly through the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in the online space.²² In addition, the media play a significant role in the creation and sharing of disinformation, because the publication of news reports on social media platforms is often the basis for the creation of these contents, which are rarely subject to regulation by the media themselves.

21 Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia No. 258/20. Available at: <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/%D0%97%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%81%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%87%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5%20%D0%B8%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D1%88%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B0%20%D0%BE%D0%B4%20%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0.pdf>

22 Јовановска, Б. и Јовановска, Ј. (2023). *Анализа на родово-базирани содржини: Сексистички говор на омраза кон млади девојки*. Институт за комуникациски студии. Available at: <https://iks-edu.mk.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/seksistichki-govor-na-omraza-kon-mladi-devojki-mk.pdf>

The traditional media sphere of public information in North Macedonia is regulated by the Law on Media²³ and the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services²⁴. Although these laws do not regulate online media, there are a number of other laws that regulate them in some way, including: the Criminal Code, the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, the Law on Copyright and Related Rights, the Law on the Protection of Personal Data, The Law on Free Access to Public Information, the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, the Labour Law, the Law on Archival Material, the Law on Electronic Commerce etc. As mentioned in the previous analysis of gender-based content, there is currently no regulation of social media in the country, which creates a vacuum harboring hate speech and the spread of harmful content.²⁵ In addition, although online media are subject to regulation in the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, in which they are covered by the term “electronic publications” as media outlets through which insults and defamations can be committed, this does not apply to hate speech.

According to the “Guidelines for Ethical Reporting of Online Media”,²⁶ online media should not conceal or omit important information, the publication of which could affect the interpretation or understanding of the content of the report by readers, whereas the omission of facts that could significantly affect the forming of an opinion about an event or a person is equal to deliberately distorting reality and creating disinformation. When reporting on statements of political subjects or other sources, the media should try, whenever possible, to verify those statements, i.e., not to merely communicate the “facts that they’ve been served”, thus enabling the audience to make a difference between facts and speculation or disinformation, especially when it comes to important and current events and topics. Furthermore, online media should never incite hatred or intolerance on various grounds, including sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. They should strive to raise awareness of the negative

23 Law on Media, RNM Official Gazette number 184/12

24 Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services, RNM Official Gazette number 184/13

25 Јовановска, Б. и Јовановска, Ј. (2023). Анализа на родово-базирани содржини: Сексистички говор на омраза кон млади девојки. Институт за комуникациски студии. Available at: <https://iks-edu.mk.b-cdn.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/seksistichki-govor-na-omraza-kon-mladi-devojki-mk.pdf>

26 Available at: <https://www.semm.mk/attachments/01-02-2021/%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA%D0%B8%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B8%D1%87%D0%BA%D0%BE%20%D0%B8%D0%B7%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D1%83%D0%B2%D0%B0%D1%9A%D0%B5%20%D0%B2%D0%BE%20%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BB%D0%B0%D1%98%D0%BD%20%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%B8%D1%83%D0%BC%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5.pdf>

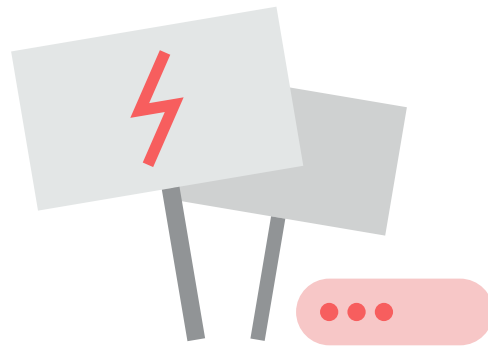
consequences of hate speech, identify and debunk such speech, as well as identify the actors who produce and use it, and create content to counter hate speech and discrimination on various grounds. Also, online media are supposed to regularly review and quickly remove user comments that are posted in reaction to journalistic content on websites or on social media that contain hate speech and have the potential to cause harmful consequences in society.

In terms of gender equality, the role of the media is regulated in the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,²⁷ where particular significance is assigned to their preventive role through the promotion of gender equality, breaking down gender stereotypes, raising public awareness of the forms of gender-based violence and the serious consequences that gender-based violence has on women and society. At the same time, what is important to mention in the context of this analysis is that a section of the draft Law on Gender Equality emphasizes the role of the media, which are obligated to contribute to the development and raising of awareness about gender equality through their programs and contents, as well as the obligation not to broadcast programs that spread ideas of women's inferiority and incite discrimination.²⁸ Additionally, according to the new law, the public display and representation of a person or group in the media must not be made in an insulting, disparaging or humiliating way, on the basis of sex, gender and gender identity, taking consideration that discrimination and hate speech are prohibited by law.²⁹

27 Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Official Gazette of RNM number 24/21

28 ENER. Draft Law on Gender Equality. Available at: https://ener.gov.mk/files/propisi_files/ria1/11_1043522045%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%86%D1%80%D1%82%20-%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD_%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%20%D0%B7%20%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%20%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%20_1.pdf

29 Ibid.



Case Study

Gendered disinformation in the Macedonian media

For the purposes of this study, we analysed more than 1,000 news reports published on social media in the period from May to July, 2023, as well as about 7,000 comments posted in reaction to social media posts, i.e., on Facebook, related to the topic of this study.

This analysis begins with approximately twenty news reports, initially published on May 5. These news reports were published by most of the media outlets in the country and they conveyed a joint statement of five leaders of religious communities in the country: MOC, the Islamic Religious Community (ICC), the Catholic Church (CC), The Evangelical-Methodist Church (EMC) and the Jewish Community (EC), calling for the withdrawal of the draft Law on Gender Equality and the amendments to the Law on Civil Registry. Prompted by the announcement of the enactment of these two laws, the leaders expressed their concern for the future and safety of the believers, for whom, they say, they have a responsibility, especially for women and children, warning that *gender ideology is a reality with tragic consequences*. The published statement says that the draft laws contradict the doctrines of all religious communities and that, according to them, the *legal recognition of “gender identity”, stipulated in these laws, is unacceptable, as is the confusing*

*distinction between: sex, gender and gender identity, and that their enactment creates opportunity for discrimination against those who are most vulnerable – women and children – instead of protecting them. According to the statement, the inclusion of minors in the law is particularly problematic, and they believe this will stimulate the promotion of different gender identities and the “fluidity” between them, which can cause irreparable damage, especially among teenagers, who, guided and educated in this way, should go through a process of self-questioning and exploration that is inappropriate for their age. At the same time, it is important to mention that the contradiction between the legal acts and the religious doctrines is irrelevant, considering that North Macedonia is a secular state and the focus should be on the protection of human rights, instead of religious dogmas. No explanation is provided of how these laws would be discriminatory against women and children, while the Law on Gender Equality aims to protect them, providing a series of general and specific measures for the integration of gender equality in all spheres of society. Moreover, the terms “gender” and “gender identity” are not something unknown or new in Macedonian legislation and do not in themselves “promote” different identities, but on the contrary, they help people who feel excluded from society because they do not belong in the assumed binary categorization of sex, to be recognized and included. Almost all news reports conveyed the statement without any critical review of the information it contained, and on top of that, they used sensationalist headlines, such as **EVEN GOD DISAPPROVES: Religious leaders in Macedonia oppose the idea of the confusing fluidity of gender identities,**³⁰ even headlines containing fallacies, such as: **THE ORTHODOX PRIESTS AND THE IMAMS UNITE AGAINST WOMEN: The leaders of the five religious communities take a common stand against the Draft Law on Gender Equality,**³¹ which in turn is contradictory to the attitude of religious communities, whose narrative is based on the protection of women and children.*

30 Available at: <https://plusinfo.mk/i-na-bog-toa-ne-mu-se-dopa-a-verskite-lideri-vo-makedoni-a-se-protivat-na-ide-ata-za-zbunuvachkata-fluidnost-na-rodovite-identiteti/>

31 Available at: <https://maktel.mk/slider/%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D1%9F%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D1%81%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B4%D1%80%D1%83%D0%B6%D0%B8%D1%98%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%B2-%D0%B6%D0%B5/>



Source - www.vecer.press

In the period that followed, several news reports shared information about a public screening of Matt Walsh's film "What is a Woman?" in Strumica and other cities in the country. Matt Walsh, a self-described "theocratic fascist", is a controversial and conservative American political commentator who was named the New Republic's 2022 Transphobe of the Year.³² The film reaffirms gender stereotypes and uses one-sided arguments (Walsh's), trivializing the expertise of professionals, including doctors, who work for and with transgender people, which basically aims to dehumanize and demonize transgender people and their supporters. However, the media do not provide additional information about the film, nor about the background of its creator. Minister Jovana Trenchevska reacted to these announcements through her Facebook page, referring to Walsh's controversial stands, ironically saying that after 53 years, someone will finally "enlighten" her about whether she is a woman. Several news reports conveyed the reaction of the minister, but also the reaction of the organizers of the screenings to her announcement, in which it is said that she labeled Matt Walsh and his movie, but she failed to mention that she disliked the film because it *discredits in detail the draft Law on Gender Equality, according to which women can have a penis and men can give birth*³³. Apart from the fact that the organizers are obviously

32 Available at: <https://newrepublic.com/article/169609/transphobe-year-matt-walsh>

33 Available at: <https://plusinfo.mk/ministerke-ne-ve-pla-aat-da-si-igrate-ma-tap-na-fe-sbuk-trenchevska-vo-vo-na-na-tema-shto-e-zhena-i-dali-taa-mozhe-da-ima-penis/>

only speculating why the minister does not like the film, linking the film to the Law on Gender Equality is also inappropriate, since the issue of gender reassignment is not regulated by this law. However, none of the news reports counterposed the arguments of both sides, nor did they critically examine them.

On May 24, several media outlets reported on the decision of the municipality of Novo Selo to take out the term “gender equality” from the program for equal opportunities and replace it with the term “equal opportunities for women and men”, following the recent example of the municipality of Strumica. With headlines like **Novo Selo determined what is a man and what is a woman**³⁴ and **BRAVO: THE TERM “GENDER EQUALITY” IS DROPPED, THE MUNICIPALITY OF NOVO SELO DETERMINED WHAT IS A MAN AND WHAT IS A WOMAN!**,³⁵ the news reports convey the statement of the mayor of the municipality that the goal is not to allow the citizens to be *terminologically manipulated*.³⁶

The reports once again reported the news superficially and enabled the spread of disinformation, bearing in mind that the only terminological manipulation in this case was made by the mayor, because, as mentioned, the term “gender equality” has been part of Macedonian policies and legislation for years.

May 17 is the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia and only around twenty media outlets published news reports related to the observance of the day in the Parliament, as well as the state of the LGBTI+ community in the country. Only a few media outlets shared a segment of the speech in the Parliament of the activist for the rights of transgender people - Lila Milić, in which she calls for the adoption of the amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, which will allow transgender persons to use the services as smoothly as all other citizens in the country. At the same time, the reporting in the media was superficial and did not correlate with current events, and they failed to take the opportunity to point out the discrimination that the people from the LGBTI+ community are facing, nor how the changes in the law will contribute to improving their well-being.

34 Available at: <https://nezavisen.mk/novo-selo-utvr-di-shto-e-mazh-a-shto-zhena/>

35 Available at: <https://strumicadenes.mk/opstini/strumica/bravo-isfrlen-terminot-rodova-ednakvost-opshtina-novo-selo-utvr-di-shto-e-mazh-a-shto-zhena/>

36 <https://www.vecer.press/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE-%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%BE-%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B2%D1%80%D0%B4%D0%B8-%D1%88%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B5-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D0%B6-%D0%B0-%D1%88%D1%82%D0%BE-%D0%B6%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B0/>



Source - www.vecер.press

On June 1, a public hearing on the Law on Gender Equality was held in Strumica, organized by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and only a few news reports covered the hearing. The reports only conveyed a minor fragment of the debate on the law, exclusively by transmitting segments of the statements of minister Trenchevska and the mayor of Strumica Kostadin Kostadinov. Minister Trenchevska pointed out that confusion has arisen by mixing the two laws, i.e., that *the Law for Gender Equality does not regulate the legal recognition of gender, it actually deals with the genders mechanisms that exist on a local level, in the Parliament, in the state administration bodies, and that the term gender equality has long been a part of Macedonian policies and laws.* On the other hand, Mayor Kostadinov referred to the behavior of the non-governmental organizations, which he considers to have offended him and the municipality, as well as the MOC, from whom he demanded an apology. Again, the media did not go into the essence of the speakers' statements, nor did they counterpose them, rather they merely superficially conveyed them.

Several media outlets reported on the statement of Minister Trenchevska given at the SDSM tribune in Kavadarci on June 11, where, among other things, she said that *the main goal of gender equality is to ensure equal opportunities for men and women, promoting the principle of equal participation of women and men in all areas of the public and private sector, equal status and treatment in the exercising of all rights and in the development*

*of their individual potentials, through which they contribute to social development, as well as equal benefits from the results derived from that development.*³⁷

The announcements about the protest against the two laws, organized by the MOC in Skopje, first appeared on June 20. More than 50 news reports conveyed the call for protest in the coming days, through headlines like **CHILDREN HAVE A FATHER AND A MOTHER, NOT PARENT 1 AND PARENT 2 The Church is against the Law on Gender Equality and calls for a protest**,³⁸ which, in turn, represents a narrative that was trending within the anti-gender movements' commitments against the Concept of Primary Education and Comprehensive Sexuality Education. The use of this narrative points to a link between the two laws with the right to same-sex marriage, which essentially started to become the dominant narrative in the period that followed, despite the fact that neither of these laws regulate that matter. The reports stated that the MOC calls *for the people of faith, CSOs, organizations and all supporters to join the fight for dignity, freedom and protection of basic religious rights, to protect our faith and tradition from the attempt to "eradicate" it, as mentioned in Article 23 item 5 of the draft Law.*³⁹ The article from the draft Law on Gender Equality referred to in the announcement stipulates one of the competences of the Commission for Gender Equality in the Parliament, according to which it *raises initiatives and promotes activities for social and cultural changes in order to eradicate prejudice, stereotypes, customs, traditions and all others harmful practices in ensuring gender equality.*⁴⁰ Bearing in mind that all previous research, as well as recommendations of international institutions, including the latest report of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women⁴¹, point to the harmful influence of gender stereotypes, prejudice and practices on the persistence and normalization of violence and discrimination

37 Available at: <https://zoom.mk/trenchevska-grizha-za-gra%D1%93anite-zashtita-poddrshka-vo-seko%D1%98-period-vo-zhivotot-e-prioritet-na-vladata/>

38 Available at: <https://plusinfo.mk/decata-imaat-tatko-i-ma-ka-a-ne-roditel-1-i-roditel-2-crkvata-e-protiv-zakonot-za-rodova-ednakvost-i-zatoa-povikuva-na-protest/>

39 Available at: <https://360stepeni.mk/mpts-oa-povikuva-na-protest-na-29-juni-vo-skopje-protiv-predlog-zakonite-za-matichna-evidentsija-i-rodova-ednakvost/>

40 ENER. Draft Law on Gender Equality. Available at: https://ener.gov.mk/files/propisi_files/ria1/11_1043522045%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%86%D1%80%D1%82%20-%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD_%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%20%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%20_1.pdf

41 CEDAW. (2018). Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Available at: https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FMKD%2FCO%2F6&Lang=en

against women and girls in society, the interpretation of the said article by the MOC is manipulative and does not at all refer to the eradication of faith and tradition, as long as they do not have harmful consequences. This emotionally charged narrative of “threatening religious rights” which can only be reduced to threatening the traditionally inferior position of women is used to create a sense of collective fear and threat from the “outside”.

Dozens of news reports conveyed the presentation of Minister Trenchevska at a conference in Montenegro, where she pointed out her concern that *over the last few months, social media have been a place for organizing the first anti-gender movements in our country, which are full of hate speech, denigration, stigmatization*⁴², stating that their target at the moment is the new Law on Gender Equality.

In several news reports published on June 21, the position of the Mayor of Strumica Kostadinov posted on social media was reported, in which he threatened a veto and canceling the cooperation with civil society organizations that have a critical attitude towards his support of the tribunals related to the Laws on Gender Equality and on Civil Registry, organized by the “Eleusa” Foundation. The very next day, several reports were published with the reaction of the Platform for Gender Equality to these statements of the Mayor. In the announcement, the representatives of the Platform stated their belief that the division of civil society organizations made by the mayor *creates additional polarization between the citizens and encourages hate speech, violence and intolerance*⁴³ and they stressed the need to adopt the Law on Gender Equality in order to improve the position of women in society.

On June 24, the Pride Parade took place in Skopje, which was reported by approximately twenty media outlets. Most of the outlets focused on the various politicians who attended the event, without indicating the purpose of organizing this Pride Parade and pride parades in general. Despite the fact that a smaller number of media outlets reported on the parade, the comments in the posts on social media became a source of explicit hate speech and called for violence against the LGBTI+ population, but also against their political supporters, including several female ministers and women MPs.

42 Available at: <https://utrinskivesnik.mk/trenchevska-eliminira-e-na-govorot-na-omraza-i-diskriminacata-se-kluchni-vo-ostvaruva-eto-na-chovekovite-prava/>

43 Available at: <https://mkd.mk/node/518892>

On June 26, only a few news reports were published on the decision of the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (CPPD) which determined that Bishop Jakov Stobiski had committed acts of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in the field of public information and media. However, during the same day, reports were published of the bishop's reaction to the decision of the CPPD, calling it a legal *charade* and *a totalitarian decision* that is related to the Law on Gender Equality, claiming that he will not apologize for his actions even if it meant that he would end up in court.⁴⁴ Despite the fact that CPPD recommended that the bishop refrain from public appearances in which he will talk about gender identity, in the days that followed, numerous news reports were published with his statements from public appearances and interviews, enabling the promotion of his "heroism" in not backtracking from his views, never questioning if his actions were in accordance with the law.

The number of news reports (more than 100) about the protest increased just a few days before it was scheduled. In the news reports with headlines like **Archbishop Stefan: We have a sacred duty to continue what we were given and what we inherited from our ancestors**⁴⁵ the video message from the head of the MOC Archbishop Stefan with a call for the protest under the motto "We have a duty", was published on June 26, in which it was said that *in the draft laws, a series of controversial elements were referred to by professionals, experts and citizens, however, they were not taken into account and that laws are being passed as quickly and non-transparently as possible, to the detriment of citizens, women and children in particular.* The statement was again uncritically conveyed, on the one hand, without questioning the expertise that the church has on these issues, and on the other hand, without taking into account the fact that for the drafting of the two laws, working groups were formed consisting of representatives from all relevant institutions, organizations and experts from the relevant issues in the country, from different political parties, who have been working on the new legal acts for more than two years. Through the one-sided and uncritical transmission of the statements of the archbishop, who spoke from a position of power, the media left room for his views to be unconditionally accepted by the audience, without determining the damage that the implementation of the laws will cause.

44 Available at: <https://plusinfo.mk/nema-da-se-izvinam-i-nema-da-zamolcham-podgotven-sum-za-svoite-stavovi-da-odam-na-sud-episkop-akov-vrati-na-komisi-ata-za-sprechuva-e-diskriminaci-a/>

45 Available at: <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/gg-stefan-imame-sveta-dolznost-da-go-prodolzhime-ona-shto-sme-go-primile-i-nasledile-od-predcite/>

Furthermore, the following day, a press conference was held by the Holy Synod of the MOC, focusing on the protest, led by Bishop Jacob, who stated that with these laws *we feel that the will of the people is being violated*. At the conference, the key points of the laws that interfere with the Church were presented, i.e., the amendments to the Law on Civil Registry that allow changing gender with a notary's statement, which would be based on the subjective and individual feelings of the individual, as well as the limitation of freedom of speech, which, according to the Church, is foreseen through the Article on gender-sensitive language. According to the draft law, the use of gender-sensitive language *implies realization of gender equality in the written and spoken language, which is achieved when women and men and those who do not fall under the binary gender system become visible and included with the language as people of equal value, dignity, integrity and respect*⁴⁶ and is one of the general measures for achieving gender equality. However, the Church made an incorrect interpretation of this Article because, according to the text of the law, this measure has the sole purpose of ensuring the inclusion of certain excluded groups from society, through the use of language that corresponds to the gender with which a certain person identifies, but also to encourage the use of (mostly) feminatives in the written and spoken language, bearing in mind that they are already part of the Macedonian language. Most of the headlines contained sensational statements from the conference, such as **Jakov Stobiski: The laws are a monstrous construct, they create a possibility for various genders to come out every day, and NGOs are mercenaries**⁴⁷ and **Bishop Jacob: The Church will not be able to preach faith if the Laws on Gender Equality and Civil Registry are enacted.**⁴⁸ On the one hand, the bishop sowed hatred and intolerance towards non-governmental organizations, not taking into account that one of the biggest supporters of the protest are precisely NGOs, and he repeated the manipulative statement about endangering religious beliefs with the new legal acts. In doing so, the bishop declared: *we are not against anyone, especially not against the exercise of one's rights. We are protesting the points of contention in the laws, we think that their serious*

46 ENER. Draft Law on Gender Equality. Available at: https://ener.gov.mk/files/propisi_files/rial/11_1043522045%D0%9D%D0%B0%D1%86%D1%80%D1%82%20-%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD_%D0%9F%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BB%D0%BE%D0%B3%20%D0%B7%20%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD%20%D0%B7%D0%B0%20%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B0%20%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%20_1.pdf

47 Available at: <https://telma.com.mk/2023/06/27/jakov-stobiski-zakonite-se-chudovishen-konstruktivnosta-mozhnost-sekoj-den-da-izleguvaat-raznorazni-rodovi-a-nevladinite-se-salatenici/>

48 Available at: <https://republika.mk/vesti/makedonija/episkopot-jakov-tsrbvata-ne-ke-mozhe-da-propoveda-vera-ako-se-donesat-zakonite-za-rodova-ednakvost-i-matichna-evidentsija/>

implementation might contribute to a greater level of exercising of the rights of some individuals, but it would seriously threaten the rights of the majority, or 99 percent of the population in Macedonia.⁴⁹ The news reports again did not address the veracity of the information being conveyed, because this statement by the bishop is manipulative and based on untruths from several aspects. First of all, if it is a matter of gender equality, the law would contribute to the advancement of all institutional mechanisms for improving the rights of (first of all) women in society, who, according to the last population census in the country, make up more than 50% of the population, while the Law on Civil Registry will allow transgender people to exercise their basic rights, such as access to health services. In addition, the bishop exerted manipulation by exaggerating the number of believers in the country.

At the same time, several news reports conveyed the announcement of the Executive Board of SDSM about the decision that a wider public debate on the laws is needed, which again was only a superficial report, without giving a more in-depth view.

On June 28, a dozen news reports relayed the reaction of the Platform for Gender Equality and the Network for Protection against Discrimination, according to which the MOC used incorrect statistics on the number of believers in the country and *manipulated with claims that the draft laws continued forward in an abbreviated form, because of the parliamentary filters, i.e., that the truth is that the Law on Civil Registry is in regular procedure, and the law on gender equality is not in parliamentary procedure at all.*⁵⁰ The announcement points to *the interference of the Church in these draft laws as a direct intrusion in the secularism on the state and disrespect of the Constitution, which was not addressed by the media in the course on this period, though it is one of the pillars on social order in the country.* The news reports, once again, did not provide a deeper review of the information in the announcement and instead of the media being the ones who create the media agenda, they based their reports on reactions and superficial information.

Several news reports also published the answer to a journalist's question regarding the construction of the 20-story buildings at the "Holiday Inn", to which the bishop says that it is not the topic of the press conference, i.e., it is an unimportant topic and a defocus from the threat that lies ahead.⁵¹

49 Available at: <https://360stepeni.mk/video-mpts-oa-spornite-predlog-zakoni-ovozmozhuvaat-prava-na-odredeni-litsa-no-ke-gi-zagrozat-na-99-otsto-drugi/>

50 Available at: <https://meta.mk/reakcii-i-osuda-na-povikot-za-protest-na-mpc/>

51 Available at: <https://utrinskivesnik.mk/video-za-mpc-nebitna-tema-i-defokus-se-prasha-ata-za-izgradbata-na-20-katnicite-ka-holide-in/>

During this period, news reports were published that conveyed the statements of several clergymen and other supporters of the protest. So, for example, multiple reports were published with the headlines **Bishop David warns: MPs who will raise their hand to vote “aye” may be deprived of baptisms, weddings, funerals and religious services**⁵² and **the Church can anathemise the deputies who will vote for the controversial law, the bishop threatened**⁵³ in which Bishop David proposes that MPs who vote affirmatively for the Law on Gender Equality (which he also calls the law on dehumanization) be excluded from the church community, i.e., deprived of baptisms, weddings, funerals and other religious services. He claims that the law will allow a *minority transgender group to impose its lifestyle on the entire society in a totalitarian way*,⁵⁴ and the reports did not mention the fact that the bishop was obviously talking about the other law. In addition, several reports conveyed a statement by Father Pimen headlined: **Father Pimen: You start an NGO and you get the right to position the church on the margins on society.**⁵⁵ Several news reports appeared with statements by Presbyter Ivica with the headlines **If this Law on Gender Equality is enacted, next is same-sex marriage, child adoption and legalization of pedophilia!**⁵⁶ With this series of news reports, the media opened up space for sowing fear by a person in a position of power, which is a propaganda technique to show predominance to the public, which contributed to the solidification on the attitudes represented by that center of power. Instead of preventing the spread of intolerance and hate speech towards certain groups, the media became an instrument for spreading threats, fear and hatred towards certain groups in society.

A day before the protest, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights and several other civil society organizations published a plea for the safety of the LGBTI+

52 Available at: <https://a1on.mk/macedonia/vladikata-david-prerupreduva-pratenicite-koi-kje-krenat-rakaza-mozhe-da-bidat-lisheni-od-krshtevki-venchavki-pogrebi-i-bogoslužhbi/>

53 Available at: <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/crkvata-mozhe-da-im-frli-anatema-na-pratenicite-koi-kje-glasaat-za-spornite-zakoni-se-zakani-vladika/>

54 Available at: <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/crkvata-mozhe-da-im-frli-anatema-na-pratenicite-koi-kje-glasaat-za-spornite-zakoni-se-zakani-vladika/>

55 Available at: <https://maktel.mk/slider/%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%86-%D0%BF%D0%B8%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD-%D0%BE%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%88-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%B2%D0%BB%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-%D0%B8-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B2%D0%B0-2/>

56 Available at: <https://shilomagazine.com.au/2023/06/28/otec-ivica-ako-pomine-ovoj-zakon-za-rodova-ednakvost-sledno-e-istopolovi-brakovi-posvojuvanje-deca-pa-legalizacija-na-pedofilija/>

community on the day of the MOC protest, as a result of the increased number of reported incidents and verbal attacks and threats in recent days.⁵⁷

On the day of the protest, several media outlets, in addition to reporting on the protest, published statements by Minister Trenchevska, who again pointed out that confusion had arisen by mixing the two laws and stated that protest is a legitimate right of everyone, but it is also a legitimate right to tell the truth about the two laws, both about the definitions and about the mechanisms.⁵⁸ In these reports, the minister repeated the arguments regarding the two laws, i.e., that the Law on Civil Registry treats gender identity, through the possibility for transgender persons to change the mark in Unique Citizen Registry Number that identifies the gender, while the Law on Gender Equality focuses on promoting the position of women in society, emphasizing that the law does not treat same-sex marriages.

Most of the analyzed reports were published on June 29, i.e., the day of the protest organized by the MOC, of which almost 300 conveyed information about the protest itself. Different parts of the speech of the Archbishop of the MOC were used in the headline: **Archbishop Stefan of the MOC-OA - Women don't want false equality and false rights,⁵⁹ LET'S DEFEND THE CHILDREN FROM UNGODLY PROPAGANDA! At the gathering against the gender equality laws⁶⁰ Archbishop Stefan called to end the mutilation of the educational system with gender ideology and sexualization of our youngest,⁶¹ MOC is against the Istanbul Convention, it is a threat to women, Archbishop Stefan said.⁶²** The news reports were primarily focused on conveying the speech of the archbishop, and part of the speech of academic Katica Kjulavkova, according to which the law threatens the rights of women and essentially focuses on the rights of transgender individuals.⁶³ At the

57 Available at: <https://fokus.mk/helsinshki-lgbti-lugeto-da-bidat-pomalku-vidlivi-za-vreme-na-protestot-na-mpts/>

58 Available at: <https://libertas.mk/trenchevska-zakonot-za-rodova-ednakvost-ne-tretira-menuva-eto-na-pol-nitu-gi-tretira-istopolovite-brakovi/>

59 Available at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/poglavarot-na-mpc--oa-gg-stefan---zhenite-ne-sakaat-lazhna-ednakvost-i-lazhni-prava/32482611.html>

60 Available at: <https://plusinfo.mk/da-gi-odbranime-decata-od-bezbozhnite-propagandi-poglavarot-gg-stefan-od-sobirot-protiv-zakonite-za-rodova-ednakvost/>

61 Available at: <https://lokalno.mk/da-prestane-unakazhuvanjetona-obrazovniot-sistem-so-rodova-ideologija-i-seksualizacija-na-nashite-najmladi-poracha-gg-stefan/>

62 Available at: <https://nezavisen.mk/mpc-e-protiv-istanbulskata-konvencija-ja-zagrozuvata-zhenata-reche-gg-stefan/>

63 Available at: <https://novamakedonija.com.mk/makedonija/kjulavkova-zakonot-ne-e-fokusiran-na-zhenite-se-meshaat-poimite-pol-i-rod/>

same time, the reports did not note the contradiction of the theses presented at the protest with the expertise available to the church, which is especially symbolic from the photos published in the reports themselves, with the striking fact that on the stage for the speakers there were 15 men - priests and only one woman. In the transmitted speech of Archbishop Stefan, he says that *these laws are a part of a new ideological propaganda, which introduces the notion of “gender”,⁶⁴ which is incorrect, considering the historical presence of this term in Macedonian legislation and policies. Further on in the speech, it is conveyed that for centuries, the Church has felt a reverential trepidation towards the woman, who holds God Almighty in her fragile arms. Both angels and men tremble before the strength of a woman. The woman breastfeeds the One who feeds all others. The woman, the mother gives hope to the world, love... The woman is an icon of love. They say that they will liberate the woman from the restraints of the church, yet they reduce her to a subcategory, equating her with men who will never be women in the real sense on the word.⁶⁵* This quote confirms the patriarchal categorization of gender roles through which a woman is reduced exclusively to the role of mother, i.e., to her biological function of giving birth, which excludes women who cannot or do not want to have children. In addition to it being untrue, the last part of the statement is full of transphobia, portraying transgender women as a threat to “real” women, i.e., equating them with “not-real” women.

During the day of the protest and in the following days, news reports were published that conveyed the support of the protest by the IRC, the president of VMRO-DPMNE, the president of VMRO-NP and others. A media outlet published a report that showed a video poll of the participants at the protest, from which it can be seen that the participants link these two laws with the right to same-sex marriage,⁶⁶ which is not at all considered with the proposed changes and only serves to incite hatred and intolerance towards the LGBTI+ population.

On June 30, multiple media outlets broadcast excerpts from the interview of President Stevo Pendarovski in which he expresses his concern after the protest of the MOC, i.e., according to him it is strange *that the church calls for a protest for the first time on that occasion. I think that we had much more difficult dilemmas that the church*

64 Available at : <https://plusinfo.mk/da-gi-odbranime-decata-od-bezbozhnite-propagandi-poglavarot-gg-stefan-od-sobirot-protiv-zakonite-za-rodova-ednakvost/>

65 Available at : <https://nezavisen.mk/mpc-e-protiv-istanbulskata-konvencija-ja-zagrozivala-zhenata-reche-gg-stefan/>

66 Available at: <https://www.slobodenpecat.mk/video-kje-dojudat-psihichki-nezdravi-generacii-anketa-megju-uchesnicite-na-protestniot-sobir-na-mpc-oa/>

and the state faced. Pendarovski claims that the protest is pointless because the Government has taken out of procedure both laws that are the subject of the protests - on gender equality and on the civil registry, and requested a broader social debate⁶⁷. However, the main narrative that all the media focused on in the reports was the information that high-ranking MOC officials are cooperating with Russian services, which the President says are based on the reports of relevant bodies that operate in that area. It's not only the Intelligence Agency, we are a member of NATO, there are 30 other countries, I get information from 30 others services because we are part of the common system for sharing intelligence and security information. However, the media, through superficial and sensationalist reporting, again failed to make the relation between the received information with the current events and how they can influence the creation of a certain harmful narrative.

On July 7, more than twenty media outlets broadcast the letter of the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović, to the Macedonian Parliament, in which she encourages the ongoing efforts to adopt the legal framework regarding the legal recognition of gender, in accordance with the standards of the Council of Europe, primarily through the adoption of amendments to the Law on Civil Registry, as an essential step in the execution of the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights. However, as in other news reports, the announcement was conveyed without going deeper, by quoting the letter, not followed by an additional explanation, and some media outlets reported the news using sensationalist headlines, such as: **THE LGBT COMMUNITY WILL GET MORE RIGHTS IN MACEDONIA!? Mijatovic asks Talat Xhaferi for recognition of transgender people!**⁶⁸ On the same day, several media broadcast the television interview of Minister Trenchevska in which she, among other things, talks about the anti-gender movements saying that *everything that was presented to the public was not true, a manipulation and ignorance, but in no way was the essence of the processes of the two laws, especially for gender equality, and that our country,*

67 Available at: <https://nezavisen.mk/pendarovski-imame-informacii-deka-lugje-od-mpc-biznis-zaednicata-i-partiite-sorabotuvaaat-so-ruski-sluzhbi/>

68 Available at: <https://vocentar.com/%D0%BB%D0%B3%D0%B1%D1%82-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B5%D0%B4%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%B0-%D1%9C%D0%B5-%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D0%B8%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%9C%D0%B5-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B0/>

and not only within the region, was recognized as a leading country, which has done a lot for gender equality.⁶⁹

During the analyzed period, there were also news reports that did not refer to the national context, but promoted the anti-gender narrative. Dozens of media outlets were reporting on a new law in Russia banning “gender reassignment” surgeries, with people of different gender identities no longer able to undergo surgery or be prescribed hormones, conveying the news through headlines such as: **Putin bans sex-change operations: “Children are taught that there are multiple sexes.”**⁷⁰ The reports quoted statements by Putin in which he said that in this way, *perversions leading to degeneration and extinction are prevented from being imposed on children in our schools, starting in the lowest grades.*

A very small part of the news reports examined the two opposing narratives and approaches the problem critically.⁷¹ Most of the reports were reduced to merely passing on statements and announcements, usually including only one of the concerned parties. However, even the reports that include the statements of the opposing parties did not provide a critical review of them, nor did they delve deeper into their content and did not at all question the relevance of the expertise of certain persons on the issues they addressed. At the same time, journalists focused on news that can provide sensationalist headlines.

69 Available at: <https://kurir.mk/makedonija/vesti/trenchevska-za-tv24-nashata-drzhava-beshe-prepoznaena-kako-zemja-lider-koja-mnogu-napravi-za-rodovata-ednakvost/>

70 Available at: <https://makfax.com.mk/svet/%D0%BF%D1%83%D1%82%D0%B8%D0%BD-%D0%B3%D0%B8-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8-%D0%BE%D0%BF%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%B8%D1%82%D0%B5-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BC%D0%B5%D0%BD/>

71 See more at: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/crkvata-protestira-vlasta-veli-samo-se-debatira-shto-e-sporno-vo-zakonite-za-rod-/32478030.html> , <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/oznaka-na-pol-mozhe-da-se-smeni-i-bez-noviot-zakon/32483696.html> , <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/poglavarot-na-mpc--oa-gg-stefan---zhenite-ne-sakaat-lazhna-ednakvost-i-lazhni-prava/32482611.html> , <https://360stepeni.mk/video-mpts-za-kako-za-nishto-dosega-se-mobilizira-za-protest-protiv-predlog-zakonite-za-rodova-ednakvost-i-za-matichna-evidentsija/>



Source - Glasot na Amerika

In order to gain deeper insight into the narrative emerging from published news reports, this study analysed more than 7,000 comments made in reaction to their posts on the social media platform Facebook. The analysis of the comments indicates a worrying level of hate speech directed at the LGBTI+ population, shown through numerous offensive comments in which they are called *satanists*, *freaks*, *abnormal*, *pathology*, *a disease*, *twisted*, *nature's mistake*, *immoral*, etc. In addition, a large number of commenters call for violence against the LGBTI+ population, through extermination, use of gas chambers, castration, and on several occasions there was glorification of Hitler. What is significant for the context of this analysis is that almost all comments are directed at the LGBTI+ population, with a focus on the “fear” of legalizing same-sex marriage, while the concept of gender equality, and thus the essence of the law, was not at all discussed. In the comments, a narrative of “us – the normal ones” versus “the others – the abnormal ones” was often used, within which the other is demonized and presented as someone who attacks “their” and “true” values. At the same time, the values of the other are often shown as imposed by the West and Europe, i.e., the EU and which are seen as something *evil* whose goal is *the destruction of the traditional family*. Many of these comments were seen in reaction to news reports related to the Pride Parade, supplemented by comments such as: *parade of shame*,

what are you proud of?; what kind of pride is that?. Some of the comments also promoted conspiracy theories, as well as equating the LGBTI+ population with pedophilia.

██████████ да ама носат закон геј идеологијата да се применува во сите домови ...
Во законот вели жената не смее бесплатно да раѓа

Translation: yes, but they are enacting a law for the gay ideology to be implemented in every home...

The law says that women are not allowed to give birth free of charge

██████████ а знаеш ли дека ако се усвои овој закон , покрај него се наметнува и за педофилите нема да биде казниво туку ќе биде „ нормална определба“?

Translation: did you know that, if this law is passed, it also means impunity for pedophiles, pedophilia will be considered as something normal?

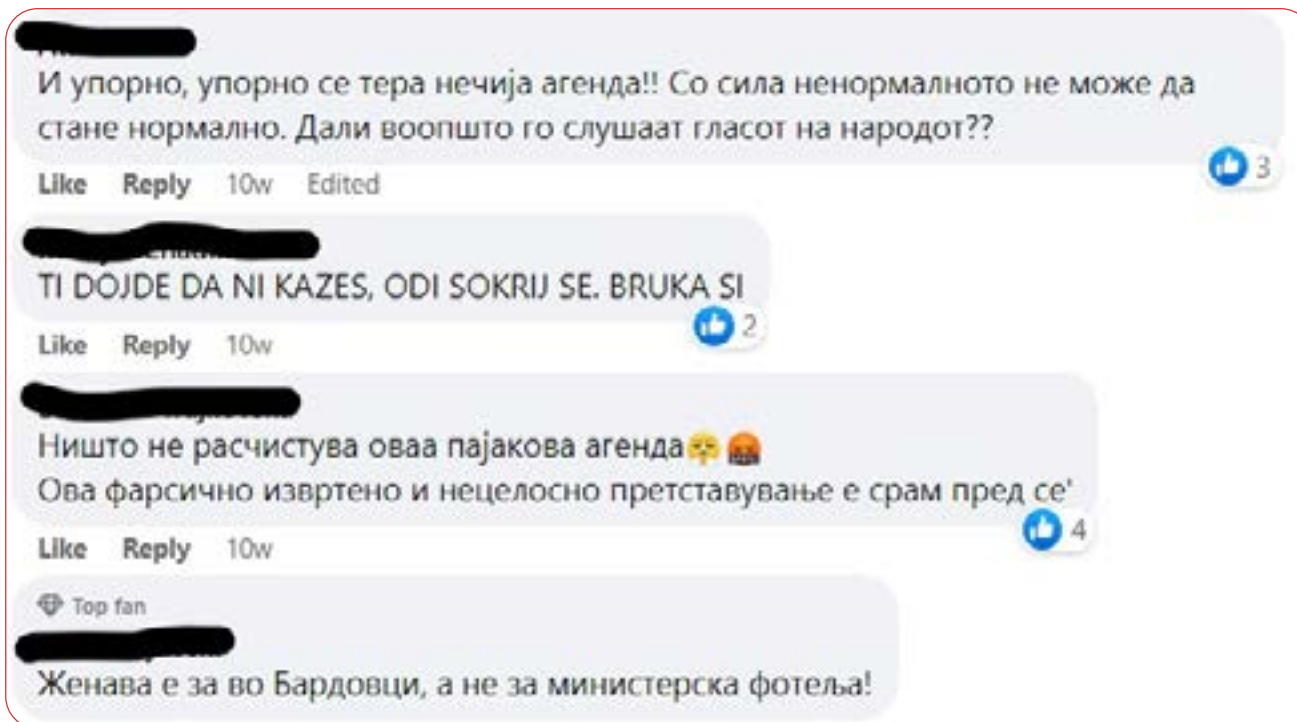
██████████ треба takvi dase obesaat na srede plostat ete taka kako turskoto vreme samo kasmkiot za takvi pederi gej

Translation: they should hang people like these in the middle of the city square, like it was under Turkish rule, the only thing the gays deserve is a whipping

██████████ Samo Hitler od novo da se rodi niti peder ke se vidi niti lgbt ima perduvi da letaat.

Translation: . If only Hitler was reborn, there wouldn't be a single gay or lgbt person, feathers would be flying all over the place

The publications of the news reports that convey the statements of Minister Trenchevska were among the most frequently targeted for producing comments with hate speech and gendered disinformation, directed at the minister. At the same time, a large part of the comments contained explicit insults to the minister's personality, appearance, qualifications, speculations about the minister's sexual orientation used in the context of an insult, as well as comments with sexual connotations that call for sexual violence.

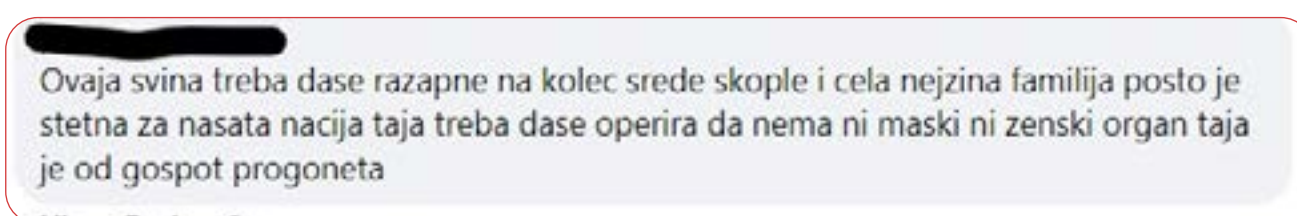


Translation: They continue to push someone's agenda! You can't force something that is abnormal become normal. Are they even listening the voice of the people??

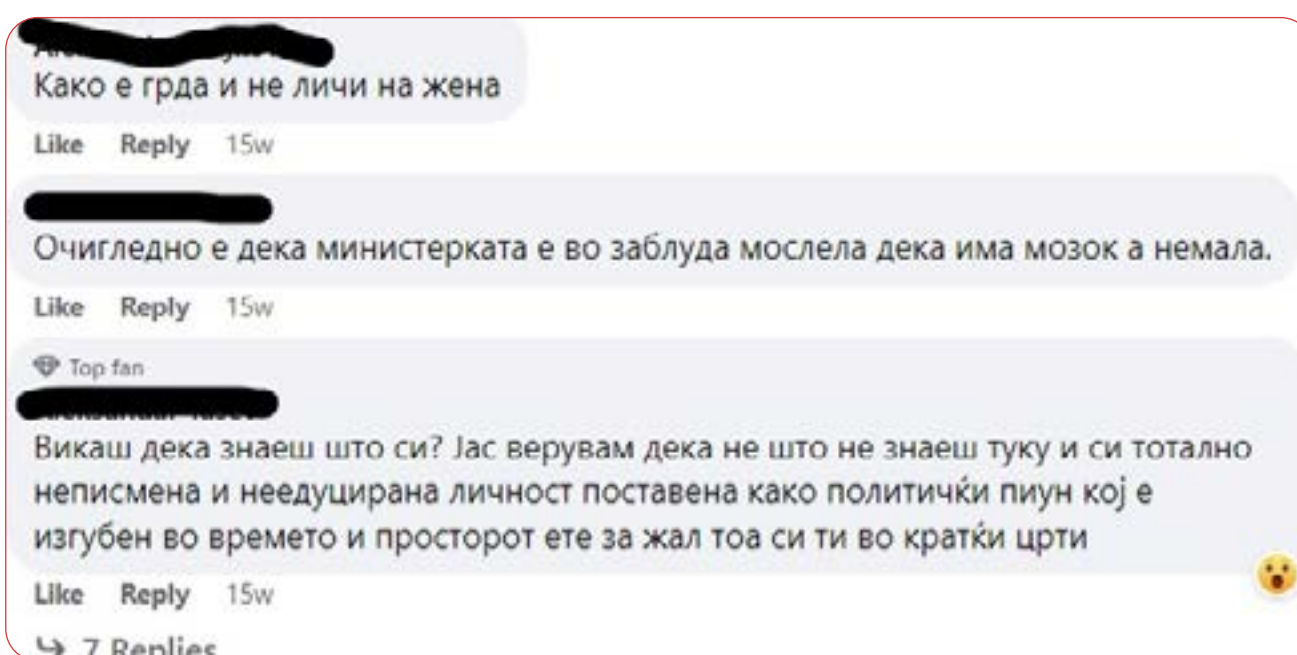
YOU'RE THE ONE TO TALK, GO HIDE SOMEWHERE, YOU'RE AN EMBARRASSMENT

Nothing is made clear with this spider's agenda. This farcically twisted and incomplete presentation is an embarrassment, if anything

This woman should go to a mental institution, not be in a minister's chair!



Translation: This pig should be put on a stake in the middle of Skopje along with her entire family because she is harmful to our nation she should have surgery to have neither a male nor a female organ she is cursed by god



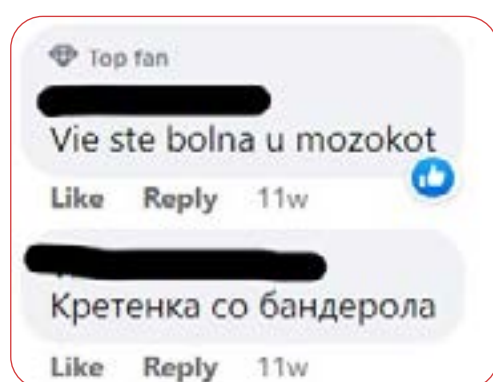
Translation: She is so ugly; she doesn't even look like a woman.

It's obvious that the minister is delusional, she thought she had a brain, but she doesn't.

So, you're saying you know what you are? I think you don't know and you are a totally illiterate and uneducated person planted as a political pawn who is lost in time and space sadly that's what you are

However, the news reports related to Minister Trenchevska were not the only ones that instigated the production and spread of gendered disinformation and

hate speech. Several female politicians whose views were conveyed in news reports, and who expressed public support for the laws by publishing personal and party views, participating in public discussions, etc. became the target of these negative narratives. Thus, for example, for MPs Maja Morachanin, Sanela Shkrijelj, Snezhana Kaleska-Vancheva, insulting words such as *satanists*, *deranged*, *sick*, *witches* were used.



Translation: You're sick in the head

A moron with a banderole



Translation: You are servants of satan

You are worse than witches

You cannot have two masters. You will either obey the Lord's word or you will seek your justice.
Forgive them, Father, they know not what they are doing

Do you think before you speak

You'll even vote for satan if that means you can do some more stealing

You can't serve the Lord and Greed at the same time

Gender equality is if women, mothers use 2 years maternity leave and free public daycare for their children

You're not witches, you're vampires



Translation: You goat, you have no shame, deranged people

There is no equality for the sick



Translation: A degenerate is not a person

You are an embarrassment with deranged opinions, for an intellectual

You're trash.

Scumbag

The posts that share the letter of Commissioner Mijatovic, where the focus is on imposed *EU values*, were also the target of insults and hate speech. Two female academic professors who criticize the position of the MOC also became the target of numerous offensive comments.

Evropski vrednosti. "Izopacenost na umot" i treba da sedime na ista masa.

Like Reply 10w

Translation: European values. "Twisted minds". And we're supposed to sit at the same table.

Укинувањето на традиционалното, природното семејство, на природните улоги на мажот и жената е основна вредност на ЕУ. Основната причина за постоењето на ЕУ требаше да биде обезбедување на мир и благосостојба, ама од тоа нема ништо, остана само уништувањето на се што е од Бога дадено. Народот треба да се реши, на две столице не може да се седи.

Like Reply 12w



Translation: Cancelling the traditional, natural family, the natural roles of man and woman is a core value of the EU. The basic reason why the EU exists was to provide peace and wellbeing, but nothing came out of it. The only thing that is left is the destruction of everything that God gave us. The people should decide, you can't have your cake and eat it too.

Some of the negative comments were also aimed at certain civil society organizations, so, for example, the plea for the safety of the LGBTI+ community during the protest received numerous negative comments. However, civil activists also became direct targets of hate speech. More than 500 comments, almost all of which were negative, i.e., comments with hate speech, calling for violence and insults were detected in reaction to a news report covering the guest appearance of a citizen activist in a television show where the laws, their necessity and what they (do not) contain were discussed.

ОВИЕ ВАКВИ САМО И САМО ВО ХАНГАР ЗА СТВАРАЊЕ НА НАЦИЈА СО БИОЛОШКО ГЕНЕТСКА НАЦИЈА ОД ГЕНЕТСКО СЕМЕ КАКО ХИТЛЕР ОВИЕ КАКО ОВАА ЛЕЗБЕЈКА И СИТЕ КАКО НЕЈА ПОД ХИТНО РЕШАВАЊЕ

Like Reply 11w

Translation: People like this should be put in a hangar to create a nation with biologically genetic nation from a genetic seed, like Hitler, this lesbian and everyone like her should be taken care of immediately

Nozot i popoleka bez brzanje

Like Reply 12w



ГАДУРО, МРШШШШ

Like Reply 11w

Translation: One should take a knife and just go slowly, no rush

You're disgusting, get lost

Не давајте ни секунда простор за промоција на духовно празни и крајно пореметени особи како дотичната. Таа е срам сама за себе а опасност за општеството.

Like Reply 12w



Translation: Do not allow even a second of air time to promote spiritually empty and utterly deranged persons like her. She is an embarrassment to herself and a danger to society.

The content of the comments directed at women in the public sphere who support the enactment of the laws, which in fact equates to supporting the LGBTI+ population, is based on gender stereotypes and prejudice and a culture of gender-based violence. At the same time, their expertise in the field is not taken into account, nor is the substance of their statements discussed, the only task is to defend “our” system of values and condemn and insult anything that is different. Also, despite not being the subject of analysis of this study, it is of particular importance to mention that a large part of the mentioned women are victims of hate speech and threats, which are visible on their personal social media profiles. What should also be considered is that many of these comments are still visible to the public.

Final discussion

As in the previous two analyses of gender-based content, we can see that **the use of sensationalist language, especially in the headlines of news reports**, is again significantly present. Considering that the social media audience very often bases their comments precisely on the headlines, and some do not read the news report at all, sensationalistic headlines can influence readers to reach superficial conclusions.

When it comes to disinformation, from the analysis, we can see that **the media does not adhere to the ethical reporting guidelines of the online media**. Taking into account that most of the reports were reduced to mere transmission of statements and announcements, usually including only one of the opposing sides, the media have reduced only to transmitters of “served-up facts”. The news reports do not delve deeper into the content of the transmitted statements, they do not give a critical review of them, i.e., it is obvious that **the claims that are reported are not verified**. In this way, **the media does not allow the audience to distinguish between facts and disinformation**. In addition, in news reports, the relevance of the expertise of certain persons on the issues they are dealing with **is not questioned at all**. Hence, we have clergymen who promote lies and baseless arguments about the meaning of gender equality and women’s rights and inappropriate and selective interpretation of laws, without indicating the level of expertise in this field.

The analysis of the media space that was allotted to both sides indicates a **disproportionately wide representation of anti-gender narratives in the news reports**, primarily through reporting on the messages and activities of the MOC and various clergymen, through which a lot of disinformation was disseminated. In this way, the media directly contribute to the reinforcement of these narratives that are based on regressive patriarchal understandings and gender stereotypes. Reinforcing gender stereotypes in the online space directly affects the strengthening of misogynistic attitudes about the role of women in the public sphere, thus contributing to gender inequality in society.

By devoting media space to the spread of disinformation, **the media also contribute to the spread of hate speech and gender-based violence.** Instead of creating content to counter hate speech and discrimination on various grounds, the media create fertile ground for inciting hatred or intolerance based on sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. The content analysis indicates the low social awareness of the wider population on these issues, as well as the still deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes. What is particularly worrisome is **the alarmingly high number of hate speech comments against the LGBTI+ community, as well as calls for explicit violence against this population.**

By allowing space for the spread of gendered disinformation, **the media contribute to dehumanization and demonization, as well as direct verbal attacks and threats to supporters of gender equality and the LGBTI+ community, most of whom are women.** As a result of gendered disinformation, social media comments use narratives that are based on and perpetuate gender stereotypes, sexualize women and call for sexual violence. These contents can have serious negative consequences for women's presence in the public sphere, which is one of the goals of anti-gender movements.

Given that this analysis was prepared several months after the events that are the subject of the study took place, and more than 7,000 comments on news reports were analysed, we can see that a large part of the **media outlets do not have a policy of regulating the content of their comment sections, by concealing or deleting content containing gendered disinformation, hate speech, insults and other harmful content.** Taking into account that the spread of gendered disinformation mainly happens through social media, with the absence of regulation, the media contribute to the spread of these contents and enable the mobilization of the public for support and additional creation of new contents.

Concluding observations

From the conducted analysis of gender-based content and the arguments presented in the final discussion, we can derive several key insights regarding gendered disinformation in the online media space:

- Given the frequent use of sensationalist language in the headlines of news reports, journalists must be careful in formulating the headlines, especially when it comes to sensitive issues, because they can influence the audience to make superficial conclusions;
- The media do not adhere to the ethical reporting guidelines of online media, i.e., there is no verification of the claims that are posted, no critical review of the conveyed statements, nor is the relevance of the expertise questioned. In this way, the media do not allow the audience to distinguish between facts and disinformation. Hence, it is necessary for the media to adhere to the guidelines for ethical reporting, by verifying the information, including additional information about the claims they convey, pointing out the disinformation as well as presenting information about the competence of those who are making a statement on a certain issue. The media should encourage investigative journalism and evidence-based reporting;
- The media enable a disproportionately wide representation of anti-gender narratives in the media space, thus contributing to the spread of disinformation. By strengthening these narratives in the online space, it directly affects the strengthening of gender stereotypes and misogynistic attitudes about the role of women in the public sphere, thus contributing to gender inequality in society. The media must take care of the space they provide for narratives based on disinformation, by conducting internal verification of the facts that are published, as well as working to bring reliable sources of information closer to the audience through news reports;

- The analysis points to the still strong influence of gender stereotypes in everyday online communication, which should be addressed through the creation and sharing of content that will promote the principle of gender equality and the benefits of developing a gender-equal society;
- It is necessary for the media to create content that will help the audience to recognize disinformation in the media space, informing them about the phenomenon of creating and spreading disinformation and the harm they cause;
- In addition to gendered disinformation, the media contribute to the spread of hate speech and gender-based violence. In this context, it is necessary for the media to focus on creating content that will counter hate speech and discrimination on various grounds, including sex, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity;
- The media do not have a policy of regulating the content in the comment sections on their posts, by hiding or deleting content with gendered disinformation, hate speech, insults and other harmful content. In this context, it is necessary to establish internal policies and persons responsible for sorting out comments with negative content, in order to prevent their further spread.



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Skopje



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