EDITED BY ANIDA SOKOL AND DENISA SARAJLIĆ

HARMFUL NARRATIVES DURING ELECTIONS: SMEAR CAMPAIGNS, GENDER STEREOTYPES AND HATE NARRATIVES

2022 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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MEDIACENTAR
SARAJEVO

HARMFUL NARRATIVES AS PART OF STRATEGIC, PLANNED AND SYSTEMATIC CAMPAIGNS

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During and after each election cycle in Bosnia and Herzegovina, numerous analyses of the media and public space are carried out, with the aim of detecting the degree of their influence on the election outcome and the political and social situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Namely, a direct cause-and-effect relationship is observed between the way the social situation is presented through the media and by political candidates and their success in the elections, as well as the trend of "sharpening" the already harsh political communication during election campaigns.

What distinguishes the publication edited by D. Sarajlić and A. Sokol from other research of this type is the methodological approach and the interpretation of the research findings. This is one of rare research studies on narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research of narratives is a necessary prerequisite for an in-depth analysis of the discourse construction of political issues, processes, identities and outcomes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Emphasis in the publication is placed on harmful narratives in relation to important social issues and extremely sensitive social topics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including hate speech,smear campaigns, attitudes toward the past, gender stereotypes, etc. The presence of harmful narratives is directly correlated with a low level of media literacy, which results in maximising their impact not only on the outcome of the elections, but also on the (co)relationship of the dominant social groups (ethnic groups, minority-majority relationship, etc.); in that context all the research articles point to the dangerous consequences of the planned and systematic use of harmful narratives for manipulative purposes by the political actors. In other words, it is shown that harmful narratives are almost established as a "legitimate" propaganda method in political communication and election campaigns. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon, but it is becoming increasingly dominant and accepted, and its justification is often observed as a peculiarity of Balkan and/or Bosnian and Herzegovinian political communication, almost as part of its specific "colouration".

Precisely for this reason, it is extremely important to deconstruct harmful narratives, especially in the context of their manipulative potential and the degree of negative energy they bring to election campaigns, in a systematic, methodologically well-founded and result- and recommendation-oriented way. The methodological framework set out in this publication, along with

the precise scientific definition of terms and their unambiguous use in all the research articles, allows not only proof of the existence and influence of harmful narratives in election campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also their contextualisation, taking into account the sources from which they come and the elements used in them, as well as the goals they achieve. It is the starting point for a critical analysis of the political discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the context of the general elections, which were taken as the subject of research. What is particularly significant and what represents an added value of this research effort by Mediacentar's associates is the fact that the online space, that is, the space of social networks, was included in the research sample, considering that from year to year, especially in the period of election campaigns, communication has intensified on those platforms and that we can even speak of its bigger influence on the outcomes of the election processes compared to classic media.

The authors, based on their research findings and their in-depth interpretation and contextualisation, show that harmful narratives are part of strategic, planned and systematic campaigns aimed at ethnic and political homogenisation. For this purpose, the dominant method that is used is manipulation of emotions, which finds fertile ground in the critically unaware and insufficiently media-literate electorate in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although somewhat diverse in depth and breadth of interpretation, all articles in this publication enable a better understanding of how campaigns are conducted during elections in a way that is not immanent to democratic societies and a healthy political environment. The set of recommendations provided by this publication directly targets all observed deviations in political communication during election campaigns. But considering that the implementation of many of them requires the consensus of the political actors, a significant number of whom achieve their political "success" precisely on the described methods of conducting campaigns, a serious effort will need to be made to bring about any changes in this regard. However, what is of essential importance and what reflects the importance and quality of the research whose results are before us is that there is clear and unquestionable empirical evidence of the endangerment of democratic standards and collapse of democratic values through the (mis)use of harmful narratives for ethno-political manipulative purposes. This is an extremely important starting point for mobilising "natural" allies in the process of resisting such methods and forms of political action: professional media, civil society and media-literate citizens. Whether they have enough potential, awareness and conscience to initiate changes in the discourse and oppose it is a question for completely new research. This research, "brought" to us by Mediacentar, that is, by reputable authors led by the editors Sokol and Sarajlić, indicates that such a change is the *conditio sine qua non* of democratic political communication in election campaigns, but also of functional democracy in BiH in general. And that may be its greatest value.

NATIONALISM, POST–CONFLICT RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIETY AND GENDER POLICIES

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This professional collection of papers has ten chapters, written by 13 authors. The selection of the authors, as well as the topics they cover in their chapters, is quite appropriate for the purpose of the collection – to thoroughly investigate the campaign period for the 2022 General Elections (at various levels) and to present the legal frameworks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and other countries, as well as the practices related to media policies in monitoring the elections, especially with regard to "harmful narratives". The authors do this by focusing – through four chapters – on the most prominent problems in this field: harmful narratives about female candidates (Jasmina Čaušević, Kristina Ljevak and Selma Zulić Šiljak), discrediting of candidates on ethnic grounds (Belma Buljubašić), discrediting of central state institutions, especially in the case of the Central Election Commission (Amer Džihana), and attitudes toward foreign actors (Mladen Bubonjić and Amela Delić Aščić).

In addition to these chapters, the collection contains an analysis of the political situation and a description of the political spectrum in the 2022 General Elections (Adnan Huskić), a chapter on political influence on the media (Marija Arnautović), an analysis of the influence of Serbian and Croatian media on political processes in BiH (Nedim Sejdinović), and an overview of how "harmful content" is regulated in the legislation of some other European countries, as well as in the framework of EU regulations (Lejla Gačanica). The two editors (Denisa Sarajlić and Anida Sokol) brought the chapters together into one whole with an introductory chapter in which they also present recommendations.

The collection is very well structured. The chapters are of roughly equal quality and are all written as professional papers, with many examples from practice and in an analytical manner. As this is an analysis of recent elections, the sources on which the articles are based are mostly primary, and rarely secondary (regarding, for example, analyses of general political processes, historical aspects of development of parliamentarism in BiH, etc.). The approach applied by the authors is an objective and insider-

outsider approach, while avoiding taking political sides (at least directly and explicitly). Minor deviations from that standard do not change the overall evaluation, which is positive. A specific value of the collection is that it has nine female authors, i.e. women, which is still a rarity in our publications.

The collection is very critical of the current situation – both in the media and in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina; perhaps in some aspects too critical, considering that similar phenomena exist in other countries too, not just in the Western Balkan region, but also in members of the European Union. The authors identify numerous problems in the media sphere, which is useful, because it is usually assumed that the problems arise only from the political sphere – that is, that they are produced only by people in power, politicians. The responsibility of the media has been mostly treated as secondary, or even denied. The media sometimes take on a moralising role, entering the illegitimate sphere of criticising politicians from a position of moral authority. However, this collection shows that the media – and this is in regard to not only traditional media, but also new media, such as social networks, etc. – are themselves also producers of "harmful content", whether they explicitly create it or promote it for commercial reasons or due to political bias. So what is at play here is not only manipulation of the media by politics, but also the self-assumed and self-designed role of the media, which contributes to discrediting and discrimination.

It is especially important to point out that the editors and authors decided to analyse gender-based discrediting, especially the discrediting of women in politics. Čaušević, Ljevak and Zulić Šiljak show that women are viewed – even when they are successful, in high positions in politics – as a "pendant" of the male politicians who supposedly stand behind them. At the same time, inappropriate speech is used about them, which would never be used for men, associated with sexism, the argument of emotional and intellectual immaturity and unfitness for performing public duties. Admittedly, such a narrative is by no means new; historically, it dominated until the mid-20th century, when women began to be talked about less and less as rulers of the private sphere who have nothing to look for in the public sphere. However, the general retraditionalisation of public discourse – which occurred after 1990 – has brought some (not all) old narratives back into public use. It is interesting that this is happening despite the fact that women ran for the highest positions in these elections, perhaps to a greater extent than ever before: Željka Cvijanović, Borjana Krišto, Jelena Trivić and others competed for the very top of the political pyramid. In one place, the authors also mention discrimination against male politicians, which is situated in the framework of the LGBT population – thus opening up a new field for analysis, perhaps on another occasion.

When it comes to discrimination on ethnic grounds, it is indeed one of the central problems of Bosnia and Herzegovina, although it is not the only problem, and perhaps not even in the most drastic form compared to the neighbouring countries. Fortunately, Bosnia and Herzegovina has not experienced any real attempt of renewed violence and war since the Dayton Agreement, but it has become ethnicised in the political sphere and it appears as though nothing has changed for the better compared to the first elections in 1990. Is ethno-nationalism Bosnia and Herzegovina's fate, a *natural state* that cannot be avoided, or was it deliberately created (by the media, international actors and domestic politicians) for reasons of interest? This is a question to which there are rather diverse answers. But discrimination and verbal discrediting of members of other nations, especially where they are in a minority position, have not disappeared. Keeping the war constantly alive in people's memories and manipulating the emotions associated with the war remain characteristics of the nationalist policies in Bosnia and Herzegovina – although, as I have already said – not only in this country. The analysis provided in this collection of papers by Belma Buljubašić opens up the possibility of further discussion on broader issues, such as that raised by Lea David in her book with the clear title: *The Past Can't Heal Us*, and the one I raise in my book *War and Myth: Politics of Identity in Contemporary Croatia*; they regard the ways in which previous traumatic situations (such as wars) should be treated, without at the same time causing new conflicts. In BiH, we obviously have very different narratives about the past, which are highly ethnicised; should we simply "reconcile" with that or is it possible to influence these narratives to at least not incite new hostilities, if it is impossible to "unify" them through some compromise into one narrative?

When it comes to the role of foreign actors, it is prescribed in BiH by the Dayton Agreement and subsequent developments. Particularly interesting in these elections was the role of Christian Schmidt, whom some actors of Bosnia and Herzegovina's politics recognise, and others do not recognise, as the High Representative. It seems that in the current conditions, he is the unifying factor of the different groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because none of them support him. The criticism of Schmidt, however, is the result of very different motives: some criticise him from a position of resistance to the neo-imperial structure that considers BiH an immature territory that should be controlled externally, others because his specific decisions do not suit them, while still others criticise him from a position of opposition to his Christian profile, which they assume is a source of bias towards some of the actors in BiH. Although Mladen Bubonjić and Amela Delić Aščić cover a wide spectrum of these criticisms in their chapter, at the same time they raise new questions, which in the future can be the subject of new studies

– which are needed. Is it legitimate or not to criticise the externally imposed rule of someone whose appointment is disputed? Is it legitimate to criticise NATO – or is criticism of NATO always problematic given that the critics are problematic on other issues, and not so much on their attitude toward NATO? How can "harmful content" that further antagonises be avoided, while at the same time leaving enough space for freedom of speech and writing?

These issues are covered to some extent in the last chapter, in which Lejla Gačanica presents the practices of legislative regulation of the boundary between what is permissible and what is not permissible in other countries. This overview is good and useful, but it should be used in such a way that the specific context is taken into account. What is permissible in countries that have not had recent wars should not necessarily be permissible in countries where more effort should be invested in preventing extremism, which has had tragic consequences in the recent past.

Overall, this is a useful publication, which is excellently edited and written and which will help us to better understand the political relations and media sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The editors and authors have managed to deliver an analysis that reaches far beyond a mere description of the situation and that raises new and interesting questions that are also discussed outside of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, this collection of papers has significant potential to situate Bosnia and Herzegovina in the broader context of a comparative analysis of elections and analysis of the media, as well as of topics such as nationalism, post-conflict reconstruction of society, gender policies, relations between international and domestic actors, and BiH's bilateral relations with Croatia and Serbia.

For all these reasons, this collection deserves to be recommended and read.

CONTENT

Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY
Denisa Sarajlić and Anida Sokol

1.1. INTRODUCTION

In a sensitive political environment where media and information literacy is not sufficiently developed, in the midst of divisive political rhetoric, and in an insufficiently regulated online space, harmful narratives can thwart democratic processes, influence the outcome of elections and discredit the electoral process. The impact of harmful content in the current information and media environment in BiH can potentially further weaken institutions at the state level, strain relations among the ethno-national groups, and strengthen the interests of certain political groups within the country, as well as of foreign powers. The public in BiH is particularly sensitive to disinformation and political propaganda during election periods, when many actors use the mainly unregulated internet sphere, the lack of incentives for quality journalism and the weak political and media literacy of citizens to manipulate voters for their own particular interests (Hodžić, Petković and Bašić-Hrvatin 2019). However, apart from sporadic analyses, there has been no comprehensive, in-depth research that would expose the scope, sources, patterns and elements of harmful content and narratives that can thwart electoral processes.

The aim of this research is to identify and analyse the types, patterns, sources and elements of harmful narratives that target certain groups and institutions during and after the election period. As pointed out in the study "Regulation of Harmful Content Online in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Between Freedom of Expression and Harms to Democracy", there is no unanimous definition of what is considered harmful because the concept of harm is subjective and largely depends on the context and culture, and can vary from one country to another. Illegal harmful content is content that does not comply with the laws, while potentially harmful content might not be prohibited, but may harm groups and individuals (Sokol and Ćalović 2022).

A study commissioned by the European Parliament, "Reform of the EU Liability Regime for Online Intermediaries: Background on the Forthcoming Digital Services Act," defines illegal content as a large variety of content categories that are not compliant with legislation, such as hate speech. Potentially harmful content, on the other hand, is not strictly prohibited, but

may nevertheless hamper the ability of citizens to make informed decisions (Madiega 2020). Such content includes, for example, disinformation, false information and malinformation. .

In this research, we define harmful content during election periods as content that may harm electoral processes and jeopardise the right of citizens to receive accurate information on the basis of which they will make informed decisions. This is also content that manipulates and misinforms voters by using gender stereotypes, war rhetoric and ethnicity in a still patriarchal, ethno-nationally divided and post-conflict society such as BiH. It includes illegal content, such as hate speech, and potentially harmful content, such as disinformation, as well as various methods aimed at unfairly manipulating voter attitudes and decisions, including disinformation campaigns, smear campaigns against political candidates, and propaganda and biased media reporting.

By analysing the content of the media, profiles and groups on social networks and by detailed deconstruction of selected narratives, in the publication we provide an overview of the types, patterns, sources and elements of narratives that are used during the election process to try to manipulate the public and are aimed at female candidates, ethno-national groups and state institutions, in this case the Central Election Commission, as well as "foreign actors" - representatives of international organisations or individual countries who are active or have significant foreign policy relations with BiH or with individual political actors. With the use of tools for monitoring online media and social networks and with selected keywords, over a period of three months, from the beginning of August to the end of October 2022, content from a hundred different online sources was extracted and analysed, different types of harmful content were identified, and then deconstruction of the main harmful narratives was carried out for each group: female candidates, ethno-national groups, CEC and foreign actors.

The publication represents the first effort of the non-governmental sector, based on a large amount of content and the deconstruction of narratives, to systematically analyse the main harmful narratives, their sources and elements that may influence fair elections in BiH. Although the analysis is not comprehensive, as it does not include other target groups or numerous other sources of problematic content, it provides insight, through a large number of sources and three months' monitoring, into the ways in which the political elites and political parties use the media and social networks to disseminate harmful narratives and influence voters, and deconstructs in detail the most blatant and dangerous examples of such narratives.

The authors are independent experts and the principles that guided them are the principles of democracy and human rights. The publication consists of eight main chapters in addition to the introductory and last chapters, which contain the introduction, methodology and recommendations. The second chapter, authored by Adnan Huskić, provides an overview of the political situation in the country, the political parties and the main socio-political events of 2022. In the third chapter, Marija Arnautović writes about the main challenges faced by the media and information sectors in BiH and the ways in which the political elites influence editorial policies. The fourth chapter, by Jasmina Čaušević, Kristina Ljevak and Selma Zulić Šiljak, provides the results of the monitoring of harmful content about female candidates during the 2022 General Election and shows how gender stereotypes, especially on anonymous portals, are used to discredit female politicians. The fifth chapter, by Belma Buljubašić, provides an analysis of elements of harmful narratives on an ethno-national basis, use of war rhetoric and hate narratives against Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats and their political representatives to mobilise voters. This chapter is particularly focused on the election campaign period, but also on monitoring content on social networks. In the sixth chapter, author Amer Džihana analyses the discrediting campaigns against the Central Election Commission, as an example of the discrediting of state institutions and the entire election process. The seventh chapter provides the results and main elements of harmful narratives involving foreign actors, primarily Christian Schmidt and NATO, and how these narratives were and still are used to label political opponents as traitors. In the eighth chapter, Nedim Sejdinović provides an overview of the influence of the neighbouring countries on the media sector and political processes in BiH and the main narratives about the 2022 General Elections in BiH in Serbia and Croatia. In the ninth chapter, Lejla Gačanica provides an overview of the regulation and self-regulation of harmful content in BiH, as well as examples of good practice in the countries of the European Union, which can be models for establishing better mechanisms for regulation and self-regulation of harmful content.

We would like to thank all the researchers and authors who participated in this extensive process. . We hope that our publication will be an incentive for others to research and cover this topic and that it will stimulate processes for the establishment of better mechanisms of regulation and self-regulation, as well as for the education of citizens, and provide material for various educational activities whereby citizens will learn how to recognise harmful content and, based on accurate information, decide who to vote for.

1.2. METHODOLOGY

The publication contains four main chapters (chapters 4–7), which were written according to the same methodology, each of which is aimed at one target group, or actor. Based on desk research and consultation with the research team, four target groups were identified that are traditionally exposed to harmful content, disinformation and/or hate narratives in BiH, which are particularly vulnerable and "applicable" for researching harmful narratives during election periods in the country. These groups consist of female candidates and their discrediting on the basis of gender stereotypes, ethno-national groups, i.e. the use of ethno-national discourse and the discrediting of politicians and political parties on the basis of ethnicity, the Central Election Commission, and foreign actors, who are often used to accuse and discredit politicians and political parties of working according to the "agendas" of foreign powers and against state and national interests or the interests of one entity or nation.

Gender stereotypes are widely present in the media and public discourse and, as the research showed, they are used to discredit female candidates in elections. Ethno-national groups were chosen as target groups due to the fact that ethno-national fragmentation of the country is the *status quo* in nearly all sectors, including the media, and that targeting ethnicity is the most prominent feature of ethno-nationalist rhetoric, which is present during elections to mobilise voters. The Central Election Commission, as a state institution that oversees the election process, was also chosen because certain political actors repeatedly and tendentiously question its legitimacy and work. Representatives of international organisations and foreign countries were chosen considering that politicians and political parties are often accused of working with "foreign actors", who, according to such narratives, interfere in internal political issues and who, as this research shows, are often presented as biased towards certain ethnic groups and political parties in BiH.

During three months, from 2 August to 31 October 2022, the researchers, using the online content monitoring tool Metricom, reviewed extracted content based on keywords from 100 different sources, including mainstream media, anonymous portals, accounts and groups on social networks, and the websites of political parties. Before starting the research, keywords were defined for each group and a list of online sources for monitoring was made. The sources were selected on the basis of desk research and secondary literature, as well as additional research by the researchers, which included consultations with non-governmental organisations, as well as independent search via the internet. The reason for monitoring different sources of

information – media, social networks, anonymous portals – was to monitor the dissemination of harmful content about these groups. Some of the criteria for selecting sources included popularity and regional representation, based on which the most popular online mainstream media and political influencers were selected; propaganda activity, i.e. that the media and groups on the networks were known for spreading disinformation, conspiracy theories and/or being biased towards certain political actors, which was recognised by organisations such as Raskrinkavanje, Mediacentar Sarajevo and the Press and Online Media Council; and finally, political affiliation, i.e. that media and anonymous portals propagate different political actors and ideological positions, which in the country mainly include Bosniak, Serb and Croat ethno-national discourse. Among the monitored sources were three mainstream online media selected on the basis of their popularity in the country, as well as their registration seat (Klix, Bljesak.info and Nezavisne novine); fifteen mainstream media that, based on previous research, were recognised as sources of biased media reporting (e.g. RTRS, BN, ATV, Stav, Faktor, Dnevni avaz)[1]; twenty anonymous portals, i.e. portals that publish news, but do not have an imprint or information about the people who prepare such content, which are known for propaganda reporting and advocacy of certain political actors and groups; thirty groups and profiles on social networks known for their support of certain political and ethno-national groups and for attacks and discrediting campaigns against other political or ethno-national groups; the websites of the ten leading political parties and their accounts on social networks; and twenty political influencers, mostly politicians, who are exceptionally popular on Twitter and Facebook.

In addition to the sources, keywords were also prepared for each group, based on which, through the tool for monitoring online sources, the content that the researchers reviewed was extracted. The keywords for female candidates contained the names of ten female candidates from different political parties, including those for the highest positions – Željka Cvijanović (SNSD) and Borjana Krišto (HDZ) for the Presidency of BiH and Jelena Trivić (PDP), who was in the race for the president of the Republika Srpska. In the case of the Central Election Commission, the keywords were "Central Election Commission" and "CEC", and in the case of foreign actors the terms were names of representatives of international organisations and countries and names of international organisations and countries: "NATO", "OHR", "Christian Schmidt", "Great Britain", "Russia", "China", "Turkey", "USA", but also terms like "foreign agents" and "foreign mercenaries". With ethno-national narratives, the terms used were terms that could refer

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1   See, for example, research on propaganda and disinformation models in the media (Sokol 2020).

to discrediting and hate speech based on ethno-national affiliation, which included, for example, "enemies", "villains", "genocide", "ustasha", "chetnik", "balija", "counting" (referring to military strength), names of military units and convicted war criminals, as well as words used to discredit members of other ethno-national groups. The researchers and authors went through three trainings, one for using tools for monitoring online content, another for identifying harmful content and coding it in excel tables, and a third for deconstructing harmful narratives.

In total, over 25,000 units of content were extracted and those that had one or more harmful categories were retained for analysis: disinformation, hate speech and hate narratives, discrediting campaigns, biased media reporting, propaganda, denial of war crimes and glorification of war criminals. In addition to these terms, additional categories were included in certain groups, such as sexism for female candidates, incitement for ethno-national groups, and for foreign actors the conspiracies of world powers with local actors, and these are explained separately in each chapter. It is important to emphasise that not only "negative" narratives were mapped, that is, those that target and discredit certain actors, but also positive narratives, propaganda and biased media reporting that greatly influence the electorate. In addition to identifying harmful content in the reviewed articles, their sources were also monitored: the media, politicians, political parties, representatives of organisations, representatives of associations, historians, analysts. Whether the content from these sources was originally produced or copied from another source – and if so from which – was also monitored. The goal was to note the sources of harmful content, the methods of their dissemination, but also the use of "authorities", such as scientists or representatives of institutions, to legitimise the narrative. It should be emphasised that the researchers encountered technical problems during the research, especially in groups with a large number of keywords, such as foreign actors, and that some media had blockers on their pages, so articles had to be retrieved via social networks. Difficulties also arose due to the extensive content that needed to be reviewed, which is why additional researchers were hired, but the authors of the chapters performed an additional check of the categorised content in Excel tables to check the work. The largest amount of extracted content and harmful content come from mainstream media and anonymous portals, which could be expected due to the number of their posts, but also the political influence on their work. The results also indicate that ethno-national political parties and parties in power more often use gender stereotypes and narratives about traitors to discredit political opponents and hate narratives on an ethno-national basis to influence voters.

Based on the obtained results, the most frequent, most dangerous or most unusual main harmful narratives for each group were selected and deconstructed in detail. The elements of deconstruction included: content and main characteristics of the narrative, stereotypes of the narrative, targeted emotions, use of symbols, legitimisation of values/norms in the social/historical/political context and narrative prominence/visibility. The goal was to show, through detailed deconstruction, the elements used to manipulate voters, but also, through their dissemination, the sources and the way they are reported, to show that they are not accidental, but intentional and often well thought out. In addition, in some of the research, additional interviews were conducted with experts in order to analyse the obtained results in more detail.

The goal of the research was not to analyse the policies and activities of political parties and their programmes during the elections. The goal was to map and analyse the sources, types, patterns and elements of harmful content and narratives during the BiH election processes, which were especially directed at female candidates, ethno-national groups, government institutions, and the international community and their representatives. In addition, the goal was to show how the means of information, mainstream media, social networks and anonymous portals, are used to disseminate these narratives, and what kind of influence and how much influence politics has on the media. By researching and comparing the results over three months, it was possible to monitor the volume of harmful content before and during the election campaign period and one month after it, through the use of various sources, as well as what sources and types of sources are most used for the dissemination of harmful content, and how it is transmitted. Although a large amount of content was reviewed during the research, the greatest value of this publication comes from the detailed deconstruction of narratives that show the elements that influence voters.

1.3. TERMINOLOGY AND CATEGORIES OF HARMFUL CONTENT

1.3.1. Disinformation

In this research, by disinformation we mean content that is not true and that has been proven to be false. There are different definitions of disinformation and most often it means false information that is spread with the intention of causing serious social harm, while misinformation is the spreading of false information unwittingly. The European Code of Practice on Disinformation defines disinformation as "verifiably false or misleading information" which, cumulatively, "is created, presented and disseminated for economic gain

or to intentionally deceive the public" and "may cause public harm", as it involves "threats to democratic political and policymaking processes, as well as public goods, such as the protection of EU citizens' health, the environment or security".

1.3.2. Conspiracy theory

A conspiracy theory is the presentation of a phenomenon as the result of some hidden plan; in this publication, mainly as the result of a conspiracy of the world powers and foreign actors. Such theories are based on untrue information and often present cause-and-effect relationships, without offering any credible evidence. Conspiracy theories often use logical fallacies such as *non sequitur* – the fallacy of drawing a wrong conclusion from the available premises, *anecdotal evidence* – a fallacy that occurs when an unconfirmed and unverified experience, an anecdote, is used as evidence for a claim (Delić and Begić 2021), and the *ad hominem* fallacy – an attack on the person, not on their arguments or actions.

1.3.3. Propaganda

Propaganda is communication used to influence the public in favour of the source, and it includes propaganda bias. In the context of elections, political propaganda aims to persuade the reader to vote for a political party or candidate. Propaganda bias, according to Denis McQuail, involves the presentation of facts with the premeditated intent of arguing in favour of a political party or policy without explicit reference (Street 2010). There are different manipulative methods, such as subliminal political advertising and the use of bots and trolls on social networks for manipulative purposes.

1.3.4. Biased media reporting

In biased media reporting, facts and views are chosen that fit a certain narrative. In this type of reporting, facts are presented selectively; those parts that support a certain political group or ideology are highlighted, while those that do not support the group are avoided. Biased media reporting includes positive reporting on a certain group or argument and is contrary to professional media standards that require a journalist to present the complete picture, include all relevant facts and views on a topic, multiple sides of the story and balanced reporting, especially on political topics. In this research, by this term we generally mean propaganda bias, cases of reporting in which the interests and positions of one side are advocated, without explicitly pointing it out; on the contrary, effort is made to give an impression of objectivity and truthfulness (Kurtić 2006, 98). Another type of bias, according to McQuail's classification, is *ideological bias*. Ideologically biased stories "systematically promote one worldview", but "only through a

deeper analysis of the semantic structure of the message can the hidden premises and value judgments that determined the whole story and its bias be recognised and exposed" (Kurtić 2006, 97). Another type of bias is unwitting bias that comes from the epistemology of the journalistic profession, which means that journalists are forced to choose some events over others, frame them, expose them, follow the agenda of other media, and all this in a limited time and space. These are "often routine decisions that cannot be justified by any motive other than a reflexive effort for communication to take place in a given time frame and in a given spatial frame" (Kurtić 2006, 98). A specific type of bias is deliberate, open bias. "It happens when journalists or the media openly promote one part of a story, person or party. It is most often realised in interpretative forms, editorials or extremely tendentiously selected and connected factual aspects of an event." (Kurtić 2006, 98).

1.3.5. Hate speech and hate narratives

In this research, we use a broader definition of hate speech than that specified in the criminal laws in BiH. By hate speech we mean communication that attacks or uses derogatory or discriminatory language for a person or group on the basis of ethnic, religious and national affiliation, gender, sex, skin colour, origin, disability. Here we also include examples that present other groups in a negative light based on ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and other identity factors.

1.3.6. Denial of war crimes and glorification of war criminals

Under this category, we mean public approval, denial, downplaying or attempts of justifying war crimes, the crime of genocide, crimes against humanity targeting persons on the basis of gender, skin colour, ethnic and national affiliation, as well as decorating and glorifying war criminals. It can include claims that a crime did not happen, denial of established facts and questioning the intent to commit a crime. It refers not only to direct denial, but also to various forms of minimising the extent and nature of crimes, their justification and approval (Gačanica and Finkeldey 2019).

1.3.7. Smear campaigns

Under smear campaigns we refer to various methods and harmful categories that aim to ruin the reputation of and discredit a political candidate or institution in an unfair way and often with the use of selective information or disinformation. It can include malinformation – real information that is shared with the intent of causing harm, including the disclosure of private information that is disseminated to harm a person or their reputation.

1.4. NARRATIVE AND NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Narrative can be defined as a logical, internally coherent account with an interpretation of related events and characters or information. The elements of narrative are often implicit and we have to discover them through the process of analysis. Somers and Gibson (1994, 45) argue that the language and concepts of social narratives are so ingrained in our understanding that we do not recognise them as historical products, but consider them universal givens. The examples of political narratives used in election campaigns are additional proof of the lack of critical thinking about the supposed "universal givens" that are used and presented to voters in that way. Accordingly, they offer a definition of political narrative that was used as a theoretical basis for developing the methodology used in this research:

> Narrativity demands that we discern the meaning of any single event only in temporal and spatial relationship to other events. Indeed the chief characteristic of narrative is that it renders understanding only by connecting (however unstably) parts to a constructed configuration or a social network (however incoherent or unrealisable) composed of symbolic, institutional, and material practices. (Somers and Gibson 1994, 59).

According to social psychologist Kenneth J. Gergen (2009), human beings retain the ability to view the present in light of the past and envision the future accordingly. In this way, people change the social context and even revise the meaning of their own history. Such revisions, according to Bruner (1993), come through narration and narrative construction. People tell stories about themselves and others in an effort to give coherence to the past, to legitimise their relationship to past events, and in this way to provide an explanation for the present and set goals for the future. Throughout the chapters in this publication, clear evidence and examples can be seen that demonstrate the construction of narratives that thus connect the past and the future through the campaigns for the 2022 General Elections.

Diez (2005, 99) argues that the language we use is not just a mere description of reality; all our representations of the world, our views, including political views, are embedded in specific discourses that form different narratives. The meaning of words depends on their discourse context and transformations of the discourse context enable the construction of a narrative. Therefore, in each chapter we analysed the language used in the construction of individual narratives and observed the conscious use of war-mongering and military vocabulary, misogynistic vocabulary, use of derogatory words for opponents and female candidates, words that label those for whom the narrative is

to be built that they are "traitors of the people ", "foreign agents", etc. The narratives used during the election campaign period are full of emotional charge, symbolic messages, and have the power to change the perception and influence the consciousness of voters. From the examples given in each chapter, it is clear that the narratives were mostly used purposefully in order to build a new or reinforce an existing political reality, especially those related to divisions in society and maintaining positions of power through voter manipulation.

The foundation on which this approach is built are theories that argue that interests and identities cannot exist independently of the context in which actors (especially political actors) and state structures are interconnected and actively influence each other's shaping, as well as the political processes in the state (Diez 1999; Lucarelli and Manners 2006). Political rhetoric, which is an instrument for the construction of political narratives, is a conscious act that embeds the interests of political actors in a context that is coloured by ethnic divisions, misogyny, inter-ethnic hatred, etc. Such rhetoric is intended to shape the collective understanding of this context in the way that is presented by the political elites, thus legitimising divisions and hatred towards others, as well as political projects that lead to the weakening of state institutions (Lucarelli and Manners 2006, 4). Schimmelfennig (2000) suggests that when citizens are less involved in political processes, the political elites are under less pressure to meet the demands of the international community and institutions that require normative changes, e.g. during the EU accession process. However, Mansfield and Snyder (2002) argue that citizens can actually be "over-mobilised" in new democracies with underdeveloped partisan systems, especially when the "mobilisation" is carried out through nationalist rhetoric.

An integral part of that story is the political culture, which has been gradually built since the first multi-party elections in 1990. The nationalist political culture is strongly expressed in harmful narratives and, through rhetoric that undermines the state and its institutions, harms inter-ethnic relations and threatens the future of the country. Nationalism is also considered one of the main obstacles to the spread of European values in BiH and is used for the purpose of ethnic homogenisation. Nationalism is seen as one of the most pronounced limiting conditions that shape the political culture, as it has "tremendous potential for mobilising identities and political emotions" (Gallagher and Pridham 2000, 16). Political culture is defined as a set of "prevailing beliefs, views, values, ideals, feelings, and opinions about the political system of a country and one's own role in that system" (Diamond 1999, 163). According to this definition, the primary function of political culture is "to balance conflicts and divisions on one hand and the need for

consensus on the other" (Diamond 1999, 166). However, the examples cited in this publication show just the opposite – the use of narratives to create a political culture based on divisions, hatred and distrust.

Not to be ignored is the fact that the construction of narrative does not serve solely to win more votes in elections. Each of the aforementioned narratives is part of a broader political project, which is potentially more dangerous and destructive for the citizens and the state of BiH. Democracy is believed to be threatened in situations where citizens do not consider the state to be legitimate, and according to some authors, "in an extreme case, that threat could take the form of a secessionist movement" (Potter 2005, 525). In the examples given in the following chapters, when talking about election narratives that promote secession of the Republika Srpska from BiH, creation of new entities and deepening of ethnic divisions, it is very clear that we are talking about far-reaching consequences of the construction and use of narrative. Constitutional legitimacy, which is disputed through a number of narratives mentioned in this publication, implies the acceptance of the constitutional order and setup of the state. In the case of BiH, constitutional legitimacy is disputed by different political elites - each in their own way and for their own reasons, but they all consciously construct the political narratives that they also promote through their election campaigns for the purpose of disrupting the constitutional order.

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Chapter 2

OVERVIEW OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION AND POLITICAL PARTIES WITH REFERENCE TO THE 2022 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Adnan Huskić

2.1. SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

The political scene of Bosnia and Herzegovina today consists of long-term ruling ethno-national parties with partners, and their more or less consolidated opposition. This picture is the result of historic processes, resulting in the fact that the parties formed in 1991 and their ideological successors mostly continue to dominate the political space in BiH. The only serious change occurred with the weakening of the SDS between 2005 and 2007, when Milorad Dodik and the SNSD took political primacy in the Republika Srpska. Thus, three ethno-national parties are dominant today – Democratic Action Party (SDA), Croat Democratic Union (HDZ) and Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) – which are fighting a dynamic political battle mainly with their own opposition. The SDA is facing loss of power to the united opposition led by the Troika (SDP, NiP and NS), which has been in power in Sarajevo Canton with short interruptions since 2018 and aspires to replace the SDA at both the Federation and state levels. The HDZ with its partners is the dominant political option that appeals primarily to the Croat electorate, so their opposition is relatively weak. The key opponents of the SNSD and its partners are the SDS and PDP. Of course, the political struggle is not taking place exclusively within these three groups. Particularly interesting is the dynamic that is occurring as a direct result of the so-called "Croat issue",[2] on which two parties, the HDZ and DF, are significantly capitalising politically.

The 2022 general elections took place in an atmosphere shaped by a series of global, regional and domestic crises. The beginning of the year was marked by Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which many believed could "spill over" to other politically fragile areas such as the Western Balkans.

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2   The so-called "Croat issue" is a political project initiated by the HDZ BiH, after Željko Komšić was elected as member of the BiH Presidency for the second time. According to the HDZ's claims, the election of the Croat member of the Presidency with the help of votes from other ethnic groups, primarily Bosniaks, showed that Croats are not equal in BiH. This gave rise to a number of political initiatives related to changes to the Election Law and the FBiH Constitution.

Disruptions in the market, primarily in energy products, which were caused by the Russian aggression against Ukraine as a result of sanctions imposed on Russia by EU countries, the United States and many others, resulted in the rise of global economic uncertainty, increase in prices and costs of living, prices of energy products and fuel, which in a very short time affected the citizens of BiH. Economic insecurity, increased costs of living, withdrawal of deposits from banks due to fear of conflict and inflation are phenomena that considerably marked the period before the elections in BiH, and thus the mood of the voters, who were instilled with the additional fear of poverty and conflict.

A new crisis in Kosovo related to licence plates contributed to this. Serb barricades in the north of Kosovo were originally set up in September 2021, when the Government of Kosovo, without consultation and coordination with the officials in Belgrade, made a decision on how people and vehicles would move between Serbia and Kosovo. After the deadline for harmonising these positions expired in April 2022, the Government of Kosovo decided that on 1 August, a period of re-registration of vehicles with Serbian licence plates of cities in Kosovo (KM, PR, ĐA, etc.) to RKS licence plates would begin. This sparked the erection of new barricades and the exit of Serb representatives from Kosovo institutions, including the judiciary and police. The reaction of the Government of Serbia was also very strong and the new rattling of weapons created a climate of tension and mistrust in the whole region. Parallel with that, elections took place in Serbia, held in April 2022, during which numerous internal political disagreements, political instability and tensions surfaced. The Government of Serbia was formed only in September and was elected for a shorter term than prescribed by law. Serbia also found itself in a clinch between its intention to continue the EU accession process on the one hand, and support for Russia on the other, which is why President Aleksandar Vučić announced during the summer some difficult decisions that were placed before Serbia by Western countries, including the resolution of the status of Kosovo. The pressure on Serbia was also evident through frequent visits of high-ranking American and European officials, their very decisive statements about Russia and the status of Kosovo, as well as through discussions in the UN Security Council.

Signals continuously came from Croatia that further fueled the already hot issues in BiH, such as the "endangerment of Croats", transfer of jurisdiction to the Republika Srpska entity, etc. The positions of Milorad Dodik and Dragan Čović were particularly supported by the President of the Republic of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, whose threatening, aggressive and often offensive rhetoric even went in the direction of insulting the citizens of BiH, constantly crossing the lines of what is acceptable.

High Representative Christian Schmidt himself brought confusion to the election process, first with announcements, and then with direct action related to the BiH Election Law on two occasions (Huskić 2022). His intervention in the Election Law in the middle of the electoral process, with the aim of restoring integrity to the electoral process, had a significant impact on the dynamic of the political campaigns and benefited specifically the parties that were building their campaigns on the saga of Election Law reform. The second intervention took place on the very night of the elections, when interventions were made to the FBiH Constitution with the aim of preventing the blockade of the Federation that we had witnessed in the previous four years. The first intervention did not prove to be sufficient to stop the ubiquitous election fraud, while the second is currently undergoing a test phase at the time of writing this article.

On one hand the election results confirmed the dominance of the established ethno-national parties, while on the other hand, they showed all the shortcomings of the electoral process, which further lost its credibility with these elections (Huskić 2022a). The processes of government constitution are ongoing and the only likely change is the departure of the SDA into the opposition at the level of BiH, and possibly also the Federation. The HDZ and SNSD are each dominant in their own domains and inevitable in the government.

The election campaign cycle was given a positive tone by the reforms and projects implemented by the Government of Sarajevo Canton before the elections, which at least in that part of the country awakened hope in political projects that place the interests of citizens at the centre. A broader political grouping was formed on that political project, which brought together parties that made declarations against corruption, stood behind a common candidate for the member of the BiH Presidency, Denis Bećirović, and promised joint action after the elections.

2.2. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BOSNIAN AND HERZEGOVINIAN POLITICAL SCENE

In general, the framework of Bosnia and Herzegovina's political scene today was laid down by the first democratic elections in 1990. The rise of ethno-national political parties and the clash of reformed communists and parties of the centre, as well as the war that began not long after, cemented the positions of some of the political actors in BiH, especially parties that base their ideology on identity issues. The founding of the so-called national parties followed the matrix of ethno-national stratification,

as a process that significantly influenced the dissolution of the SFRY. Victory in the first multi-party elections in BiH was taken by parties with a national prefix, SDA, SDS and HDZ. The three-party framework created at that time was further strengthened and established in the war that soon followed. The first post-war elections in 1996 were held in an atmosphere of insecurity, fear and uncertainty, with what would today be unimaginable manipulation of the electoral process. The initial reported turnout was over 100% and the elections only confirmed the dominance of the triumvirate of ethno-national parties. Everything else required relatively simple political action. From the very beginning, these parties sovereignly mastered public resources and, through control of public companies and public goods, as well as the public procurement system, all in favour of a narrow clientelistic circle, they went on to establish themselves as inescapable parts of the political mosaic and to a large extent, with the inevitable manipulation of the electoral process, to continuously achieve success in elections. The strong pressure of the active international presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina until the mid-2000s partially succeeded in reducing the total dominance of ethnic parties through insistence on programme coalitions and pressure to implement basic reform processes, but never succeeded in making them less relevant to a stronger extent. On the contrary, the cessation of the active international presence in BiH in the period after 2006 resulted in a spectacular return of identity issues and state organisation issues and an even stronger establishment of ethno-national actors. The constitutional arrangement itself is based primarily on the protection of national interests, so the predominance of the ethno-national system at the level of BiH and the Federation of BiH largely conditions the "functioning" of the government with the participation of established ethno-national parties. In the RS, the institutionalised ethno-national division of power is relatively weak (see Council of Peoples), but the topic of relations in BiH and the position of the RS is a *sine qua non* for all political actors.

The first serious attempt to crack that setup took place in 2000, when for a short period of two years[3] the heterogeneous and very loose Democratic Alliance for Change, led by social democratic, civic and centre parties, took over power. The trend of changes for the better at that moment had a regional dimension as well, because important things were also happening in two neighbouring and extremely important countries for BiH, in Serbia and Croatia. In Serbia, the government of Slobodan Milošević fell during the protests of October 5, while Tuđman's HDZ was removed from power

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3   The 2000 elections were the last elections covering a period of two years. Four-year cycles began from the next elections in 2002.

for the first time. These changes, as it turned out, were rather short-lived (Smailović 2022).

2.3. POLITICAL PARTIES AND IDEOLOGIES

At this point, it is worth taking a look at the issues of the ideologies and activities of political parties, which are very visible in the example of BiH. When we talk about political parties in BiH, the two most important spectrums on which these parties are positioned are individual-collective and progressive-conservative. An additional spectrum or dimension specific to BiH could be centralisation-decentralisation. Although neglected, the economic, social and other spectrums play an important role in the self-identification of political parties and most parties see themselves as left, right, centre or somewhere in between. The parties in BiH are also relatively well connected with related parties outside BiH and are mostly members of large political families in the EU. The most numerous from BiH are members of the European People's Party (EPP), and in addition to the HDZ BiH, among them are the SDA, PDP and HDZ 1990, all of which have observer status. The SDP BiH is an associate member of the Party of European Socialists, while the SNSD was excluded from membership and today maintains relations with Putin's United Russia. As for liberals, there is Our Party as a full member of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE). The majority of parties in BiH are right-oriented parties. The strongest opposition to the well-established ethno-national parties lies in the same or similar ideological space, differentiating on the issues of corruption and state governance. This is the case with the parties People and Justice (NiP), PDP and SDS, as well as some parties with a Croat prefix, which are in opposition to the HDZ BiH.

The opening of the debate on potential changes to the constitutional framework of the state, more precisely the ubiquitous and intractable "constitutional reform", formally began in a relatively positive atmosphere in the mid-2000s in BiH. It coincided with (and was caused by) the intention of reducing international activism and the withdrawal of international actors from BiH. The original intention of these initiatives was to introduce changes to the constitution that would make the state more functional and the decision-making system more feasible by removing redundant mechanisms for the use of vetoes. These initiatives were mainly prepared and headed by the international community with BiH political leaders, but outside the framework of the formal institutions of BiH. Over time, this framework for negotiations resulted in additional politicisation of constitutional topics, significantly moving away from topics and issues that would prepare the country for the EU accession negotiation process. The only more

serious manifestation of constitutional reforms was an agreed package of constitutional reforms from April 2006, which included changes to the constitution that would affirm the supremacy of state institutions in relation to lower levels of government, eliminate existing discrimination in the election of members of the BiH Presidency and House of Peoples, and enable simpler decision-making in the EU rapprochement processes. However, the toppling of this package of constitutional reforms in the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH had far-reaching negative consequences for the political dynamic in BiH, because it was used as an opportunity to radicalise relations, deteriorate political rhetoric in the public space and move away from issues of state functionality and European integration. The side effect of opening a long-lasting and unsuccessful "debate" on constitutional and electoral reform resulted, over time, in a very serious de-ideologisation of political parties. By the loss of the ideological determinant, we refer here to political parties' significant ideological discharge, a deviation from traditional ideological postulates, which make up every ideology, as a coherent set of values and ideas on how society should be organised.

The opening of the issue, and then the continuous debate on constitutional reform, largely deprived all political parties of advanced ideological content, reduced politics to the question of the relationship of the three peoples and the related issues of history and war, thus completely extinguishing, if it had ever even asserted itself in the true sense of the word, the ideological depth of the parties. Moreover, the framework of the debate expanded over time and from the initial desire and need to create a functional state, it gradually became a training ground for numerous contests of opposing visions of the state and internal relations among the dominant ethno-national actors. Essentially, the debate lost its meaning and became an end in itself, because its mobilisation potential, especially in election years, proved to be an inexhaustible source of crises and unresolved issues.

As a result, social-democratic parties have been moving closer to ethnic parties (the SDP to the SDA in FBiH) through coalitions and taking common positions on certain topics or have been moving completely to the right side of the political spectrum, pushing out previous ethno-national champions (like Milorad Dodik's SNSD, which took over the SDS's role).

Since the question of reform of the Constitution of BiH will continue to dominate political life in BiH, the majority of parties in BiH will increasingly abandon programme and ideological activities and necessarily take one of the sides to the detriment of political pluralism and the health of democracy in BiH. Conditioning the further path to the EU by resolving these sensitive and politicised issues makes it even more difficult to open any discussion

on programme activities. Meanwhile, four judgments of the European Court of Human Rights (Sejdić and Finci, Zornić, Pilav, and Šlaku) required the state of BiH to harmonise its legal system with the convention standards by removing constitutional obstacles to establishing an electoral system without ethnic discrimination. However, even these judgments were misused for political purposes and for additionally moving away from programme ideas. This is primarily the case with the so-called "Croat issue", which diverted the attention of the public and the international community from the issue of eliminating discrimination in the constitution to the issue of the position of Croats in BiH in the way the HDZ presented it. This led to the perpetuation of political crises based on this issue and significant mobilisation of voters around the SDA and DF, while the HDZ BiH in majority-Croat areas managed to completely end pluralism among Croats in BiH by fully affirming this issue.

The de-ideologisation of political parties in BiH is partly happening as part of a global trend, but its depth is strongly conditioned by domestic political dynamics. The death of ideologies, as the trend is called, whose proponents come from different ideological traditions,[4] experienced its materialisation in terms of the abandonment of ideology by political parties at the beginning of the millennium. This accounts for some of the reasons for the abstention of part of the electorate as well (Degirmendžić and Dundić 2022; Soldo 2022; M. R. M. 2022; V. A. Z. and F. V. 2022; Kovačević 2022). In addition, Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state held captive by well-established political parties, and the ideological and value-based foundations of the political parties are further undermined by the fact that the parties are losing their original purpose of existence as their struggle for power is reduced to controlling and usurping public funds and assets. In such a system, they become service providers primarily to their own clientele, which benefits the most from their coming to power, and to their own members, who are intensively spread through public institutions when they come to power. The established and not at all incorrect understanding in BiH that without the support of the party one cannot advance professionally, engage in entrepreneurship or exercise basic rights in the true sense of the word, testifies to that, which many independent reports on corruption also speak of.[5] This is partly a matter of the general culture of social networks and connections and essentially transactional relationships in society, and to a large extent the result of the

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4   Francis Fukuyama, Slavoj Žižek, John Horgan, Katie Roiphe, to name a few.

5   Since 2012, BiH has fallen eight index points and, together with Turkey, in this year's Transparency International global report (2023), it was singled out as an example of the biggest fall compared to 2012 in the region of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

state's captivity,[6] which with all its elements is becoming a toy in the hands of political parties. The "cartelisation" of the ruling parties and the almost total politicisation of public administration and public enterprises results in the capillary presence of political parties and their supporters throughout the public apparatus. In these conditions, essential change on the political scene is extremely difficult, and when we add to all this the tremendous manipulations in the electoral process directed by the well-established ruling parties, it becomes almost impossible.

2.4. CRISES AND THE 2022 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The political crises that preceded the October elections in BiH actually represent only different branches of the crisis that BiH has been in since the fall of the April package in 2006 and the ensuing radicalisation of ethnic and political relations. These crises became more serious over time, negatively affecting not only the political but also the security situation in BiH through constant threats in the public space related to the possibility of new conflicts, which resulted in an awakened interest of Western international actors and a symbolic strengthening of military presence in BiH. These changes were also influenced by the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the energy crisis, which led to political, geostrategic and economic uncertainty. The different alignment of political parties in BiH on the side of either Ukraine or Russia further complicated the relations in BiH and was reflected in vagueness in the formulation of BiH's foreign policy towards Russia, i.e. incomplete alignment of positions with the EU's foreign policy. In the period since the last local elections in 2020, BiH was shaken by blockades caused by a decision of outgoing High Representative Valentin Inzko[7] and then by a crisis caused by Dodik's initiation of the process of "transfer of jurisdiction" from state agencies to new or existing entity institutions. Milorad Dodik, the president of the RS, continuously threatened to withdraw Serb representatives from the Bosnian armed forces, tax system and judiciary, i.e. the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, but also from security agencies (State Agency for Investigation and Protection and Intelligence and Security Agency) and create separate entity institutions in the field of control of drugs and medical devices, etc. In the period of 2018–2022, the FBiH government operated in a technical mandate due to the impossibility of forming a coalition after the 2018 elections, resulting in lack of agreement on key reform processes and

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6   The concept of captive state was first explained by the World Bank and is defined as a corruptive practice that establishes control over institutions which then work for the benefit of those who are holding them captive.

7   At the end of his mandate and on his departure from BiH, Valentin Inzko resorted to the Bonn powers and imposed changes to the Criminal Code of BiH, criminalizing genocide denial.

the practical halting of all serious reforms in this entity. The recent period was marked and complicated by the election of new members of the Central Election Commission (CEC) in 2020, which happened contrary to the wishes of the HDZ and SNSD; both parties contested the election of new members, calling the CEC, and therefore its decisions, illegitimate (Džihana 2022). In May 2021, the ambassadors of the member states of the Peace Implementation Council Steering Committee officially appointed Christian Schmidt as the next High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, after he was nominated for the post by Germany. This was the pretext for Milorad Dodik and RS representatives to open a new crisis, claiming that the appointment was illegitimate and maintaining that it should have been approved by the UN Security Council (where Russia would probably have challenged it).

The political topic *par excellence* in the pre-election period was, of course, the last stage in the attempt to reform the Election Law (Huskić 2022b), under the auspices of the United States and EU. The disputed issues on which negotiations were held under the leadership of representatives of the US and EU in the previous months were the election of members of the BiH Presidency and the election of the Houses of Peoples, on which the views of Bosniak and Croat representatives were completely opposed. Namely, the proposals of the SDA and the HDZ did not have any points of contact, given that the SDA requested the deletion of ethnic prefixes for the election of members of the Presidency, which is also required by the judgment of the Court of Human Rights in the case of Sejdić and Finci. The SDA proposal was also aimed at reducing the powers of the House of Peoples to the level of the Council of Peoples in the RS, which would only leave the possibility of invoking vital national interest. The HDZ rejected all these models, while some representatives of opposition parties refused to participate in the negotiations held in Neum in January 2022. After the failure of the last round of negotiations, the lack of transparency in the whole process allowed each party to interpret its position and the content of the negotiations through completely contradictory public statements. The public was thus deprived of accurate information about the content and the way in which the talks were held behind closed doors. The HDZ was especially dissatisfied with the lack of agreement and the public began to speculate that the HDZ might block the elections, i.e. their funding, by blocking the adoption of the budget of BiH institutions, which was partly confirmed by the (in)action of HDZ's Minister of Finance Vjekoslav Bevanda. Bevanda blocked the decision on election funding to the point where the High Representative was again forced to intervene by imposing the Law on Amendments to the Law on Funding the Institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina (OHR 2022), which enabled smooth funding of the election process.

The question of integrity of the election process, which is of essential importance for the health of democracy in BiH, was moved to a lower level of importance in the election reform process. After the failure of the last round of negotiations in Neum, the new High Representative in BiH, Christian Schmidt, on July 27, i.e. within the election process itself, imposed amendments to the Election Law with the aim of improving the integrity of the election process and restoring citizens' trust in it (Radio Free Europe 2022). Professionals, including the CEC, mostly criticised the timing, while opinions were divided about the content, but slightly optimistic (E. Ć. 2022). Subsequent analysis showed, however, that the imposed changes were insufficient to improve the integrity of the election process and that manipulation and fraud were ubiquitous this year (Huskić 2022a). The CEC alone submitted 95 reports to prosecutor's offices after the announcement of the 2022 General Elections.[8]

2.5. CAMPAIGN FOR THE 2022 GENERAL ELECTIONS

The analysis of this campaign cycle undeniably shows that, despite the imposed amendments to the Election Law, the parties in BiH did not give up using all possible means and inappropriate practices in order to achieve a better election result. Transparency International (TI) monitoring shows that the political parties spent an impressive 11.5 million KM during the campaign period, while over 2,200 examples of misuse of public resources for their campaigns were noted (Transparentno 2022). Among the many examples of such abuses, those that stand out are "paid promotion of the documentary *From Vision to Victory*, broadcast by RTRS, for whose promotion dozens of billboards were erected with the image of the director of the University Clinical Centre of the RS, Vlado Đajić, who was a candidate for parliament", and "paid billboards for the Public Institution 'Drina National Park' promoting the institution's director Radomir Pavlović, who was also a candidate for parliament" (TI BiH 2022a). Increased budget spending, especially one-time aid for certain categories (TI BiH 2022b), such as pensioners (RS Retirement and Insurance Fund 2022), young people and children of fallen soldiers (Slobodna Bosna 2022), is a characteristic of election years, but BiH is no exception in this regard. In October 2022, at the height of the election campaign period, the Prime Minister of the FBiH promised a third increase in pensions, subsidised electricity costs, and then before the elections, in September 2022, a decision was made on a one-time benefit for the unemployed in the amount of 100 KM (Oslobođenje

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8   Of these, 51 reports were filed against political subjects, because the CEC found the names of deceased persons when checking voter support signatures, while the rest relate to other violations of the election rules and Election Law.

2022). In the same package, the FBiH Government allocated funds for one-time financial assistance of 100 KM to other categories of the population, through the Decree on Assistance to the Population due to the Increase in the Consumer Price Index. The decree provided assistance for pensioners, beneficiaries of veterans' disability protection rights, persons with disabilities, and civilian victims of war. In addition, aid in the form of packages of basic foodstuffs was given to recipients of permanent cash and other material aid (Government of FBiH 2022). Payne (1991) defines this phenomenon as the electoral theory of spending, while other authors emphasise the tendency of especially coalition governments to spend more during election years than single-party governments (Persson, Roland and Tabellini 2007).

This year, the parties did not shy away from premature campaigns and the CEC imposed relatively high fines on four political parties, while the TI submitted a total of 34 reports.

The integrity of the election process on election day and manipulations resulting from the inflated and unrealistic electoral register (Tomić 2022) have been a source of frustration for years for everyone who cares about the health of democracy in BiH. In spite of the imposed measures, the trading of seats in electoral boards experienced a boom for the 2022 General Elections. Lists circulated on social networks of those appointed to electoral boards on behalf of parties with which they have no connection, who were appointed there as part of an illegal agreement among the ruling parties to secure a majority in electoral boards even in places where they are not represented. It is worth recalling here the intervention of the High Representative on 27 July 2022, which was aimed at preventing this practice, because it is precisely the trading of seats in electoral boards that enables one or two parties to control an electoral board. This leads to appalling manipulation, especially in the counting of votes,[9] but also in other aspects of the election process, such as voter identification, steering voters to vote for a particular political option and the like. Failure to introduce technical improvements, such as video surveillance, biometric identification or scanners at polling stations, once again undermined the credibility of the election process.

As for the topics that dominated the campaigns, they are part of the now already standard range of topics resulting from the crises discussed earlier. Very little or nothing was said about socioeconomic topics and plans, while talk about the EU and our path toward it was completely absent.

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9   Adding unfilled ballots, invalidating ballots of political opponents and manipulation with preferential votes.

Another important aspect of the campaign period in BiH was the use of threats and blackmail, which particularly affected budget beneficiaries. They were openly threatened by politicians during this campaign cycle, with Milorad Dodik (BN 2022) again this year taking the lead in this regard.

2.6. ELECTION RESULTS

The proverbially slow process of counting votes again this year caused numerous frustrations, especially due to the sudden turnarounds we witnessed from the time the polling stations closed until the morning of the next day. In the rather uncertain race for president of the RS, opposition candidate Jelena Trivić declared victory in the late evening hours of election day and delivered a serious and conciliatory presidential speech. According to the opposition, the difference was such that a reversal was statistically impossible. By morning, things had changed drastically and Milorad Dodik, the candidate of the ruling party, emerged as the definitive winner. At the request of the opposition, the CEC reacted with a ruling on a ballot recount for this race, which did not find major violations, and the victory of Milorad Dodik was confirmed. What this affair overlooked was ballot manipulation at the polling stations after the polling stations were closed (Huskić 2022a). In addition to manipulation with unused ballots, valid ballots were invalidated and preferential voting within lists was proven to be manipulated. SNSD candidate Željka Cvijanović won the race for the Presidency of BiH in the RS and the SNSD's dominance was also confirmed in the RS National Assembly. In the Federation of BiH, the SDA and HDZ lost the race for the Presidency of BiH and Denis Bećirović and Željko Komšić were elected to this body. For the latter, it is his second consecutive election and his fourth mandate in total, which was initially the key reason why the "Croat issue" was opened. Both parties, however, achieved a good result and had the possibility of acquiring majorities in the legislative bodies with their satellites. The SDA did not succeed in doing that at the state level, where the opposition wrapped up talks with the HDZ and SNSD, while the Federation of BiH is an unfinished story due to the marginal difference in the House of Representatives, largely due to changes to the Election Law introduced by the High Representative in the night after the elections, which were supposed to facilitate the constitution of government and prevent blockades. Namely, the changes increase the number of delegates in the House of Peoples of the FBiH and changed the procedure of nomination and voting for the president and vice-presidents of the FBiH, who are crucial for the appointment of the mandatary and new government. Some delegates were thus elected to the House of Peoples by lot, which gave the SDA a slight advantage in the decision-making

process in this house and additionally complicated the situation regarding the appointment of the Government.

As expected, the results of the elections are only an incremental change, both due to the violated integrity of the election process and due to the manipulation of the media space, because both strive to maintain the situation as it is (TI BiH 2022a; TI BiH 2022b).

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Chapter 3

POLITICAL INFLUENCE ON THE MEDIA AND THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR POLITICAL PROMOTION

Marija Arnautović

3.1. INTRODUCTION

The media can shape public opinion and behaviour, which is why they have always had a significant role to play in politics. Ever since the emergence of the first printed newspapers, social elites have tried to put them under control. The media inform the public, introduce topics for the public to think about, but they also frame reality in a way which may suit certain political elites. Only a well-informed public can make well-informed decisions, but what happens when the public is informed about politics and current affairs via media reporting influenced by politics?

The media in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been under the influence of politics for years. Lack of adequate regulation, non-transparency of media ownership, financial instability and lack of professionalism are among the factors leading to media susceptibility to political influence. Instead of objective, professional and balanced reporting, a political milieu dominated for the last three decades by narratives of division, conflict, permanent impasse, the failure of different political actors to reach an agreement, but also by corruption in the media sphere, has brought about one-sidedness, fanboy journalism and often sensationalism.

The media in Bosnia and Herzegovina often project the opinions of certain political groups, most commonly those in power, they champion their interests and create divisive narratives breaking professional and ethical standards. The presence of political disinformation in the media serves political propaganda and/or commercial interests, whilst bias, as this publication demonstrates, is still the biggest problem in media reporting in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The strong and profound influence of politics on the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina is exacerbated by the complex political setup instituted by the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords which divided the country into two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (RS), each with its own government and media. From the end of the war onwards, this has complicated and polarised the Bosnian-Herzegovinian

media environment made up of a large number of public and private media which are often connected to political parties and have taken on the role of promoters of ethnic interests these political groups represent. All of this exacerbates the polarisation of the public, whilst research shows that the public often follow and trust those media which cast their group in a positive light and reinforce their beliefs and attitudes (Sokol 2022a).

3.2. THE MEDIA SECTOR IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA IN 2022

Bosnia and Herzegovina entered 2023 as an EU accession candidate, in spite of the fact that nothing had been done to improve, amongst other things, the freedom of expression and the press or the protection of journalists, which is part of the European Commission's fourteen priorities assigned to Bosnia in 2019 (Sokol 2023). The latest European Commission Bosnia and Herzegovina Report stresses serious concerns over political pressure, threats and intimidation of journalists, the polarised political climate, continual verbal attacks and nationalist rhetoric which, according to the report, have created a hostile environment for media freedom, but also concerns over the failure to adopt laws on media ownership transparency (European Commission 2022).

In spite of the recommendations issued by the European Commission and media associations, new legislation, above all a law that would regulate the transparency of media ownership and financing, is still missing, as is the law on electronic media which should have been passed in 2016, in accordance with the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (Zablocki 2018). The enforcement of the Freedom of Access to Information Act is still inadequate, and the new law regulating access to state-level information, a pre-draft of which was published in mid-2021, has not been adopted either. Although the pre-draft mandates proactive transparency on the part of institutions, representatives of civil society have criticised it on account of the large number of exceptions it foresees, amongst other things.

In 2022, voices calling for more repressive measures to combat disinformation and "fake news" instead of legislation which would foster more transparent governance and better protection of journalists, grew increasingly strong. Milorad Dodik, the president of the Union of Independent Social-Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata; SNSD) requested the Government of the Republika Srpska to prepare new and amend the existing laws on the prevention of the dissemination of fake news and hate speech, as well as to introduce defamation into the Criminal Code of the Republika Srpska as a

criminal offence, and to expand the list of offences against the constitutional order (Sokol 2023). The introduction of these legal arrangements was justified by claims that such legal frameworks exist in the EU, whereby the fact that the European Court of Human Rights case law states that prison sentences are never justified in defamation cases (Sokol 2023) is ignored. In addition, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Communication and Transport and the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees at the state level are drafting legislation for combating online hate speech which, if passed in an inadequate form, may impact the freedom of expression on the internet.

In 2022, the BH Journalists' Association registered more than 30 physical and verbal threats and attacks on journalists and media organisations (Radević 2022). One example illustrative of the way persons in positions of power treat journalists is the attack by Zoran Čegar, the suspended head of the Uniformed Police Division of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, on a journalist of the Centre for Investigative Journalism (CIN), who asked him for a comment after a hearing at the Municipal Court in Dubrovnik where he stood trial for fraud. Čegar asked the journalist why she had not written that he was a war hero, after which he threatened to "rip her throat out" (CIN 2022). Numerous journalists were targets of inflammatory posts on the Facebook profile of Jasmin Mulahusić, who has been investigated by the Prosecutor's Office of Bosnia and Herzegovina for over a year for inciting national, racial and religious hatred, division and enmity (Fukelj 2022a).

A large number of attacks on journalists remain unprosecuted, in spite of the European Commission's recommendation to ensure adequate prosecution of threats and violence against journalists and media workers. In 2022, a liaison officer for journalists was appointed at the Prosecutor's Office of the Canton of Sarajevo, which was the first concrete step towards providing more effective protection of journalists and prosecution of attacks on them in the canton. In mid-2022, a motion was carried in the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina to codify attacks on journalists as a criminal offence, but it has yet to be put on the agenda of the Council of Ministers (Fukelj 2022b). Research shows that work in journalism is still underpaid and underappreciated, and that more and more journalists decide to seek employment in other sectors.

3.3. MEDIA FINANCING AND POLITICAL INFLUENCE

The political elites most commonly interfere in the editorial policies of the media by leveraging the patterns of media financing, and media ownership. The media sector in BiH is characterised by a large number of media operating in a modestly-sized market, so in order to survive the media often

rely on public funds. According to the data of the Regulatory Agency for Communications of Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are 107 TV stations in the country, 150 radio stations, 12 providers of on-demand audio-visual media services and three public broadcasters at the state and entity level. Although there is no official register of online media, research has identified 614 news portals, 44% of which do not have a masthead (Osmančević 2021). Many broadcasters are publicly owned, their founders being municipal, cantonal, city and entity governments which provide most of their financing through grants and subsidies. This category includes the three state- and entity-level broadcasters, two news agencies and 81 radio and TV stations.

According to marketing agency estimates, the size of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian advertising market (net investment) in 2022 was 40 million Euros, including TV, radio, press and billboard advertising. The media are contending for a slice of the marketing pie with regional TV stations, and increasingly with search engines, social networks and influencers who offer advertising space at much lower rates. To survive, the media need public funds, which they receive at all levels of government, often in a non-transparent and arbitrary manner in the form of grants and subsidies, but also commercial contracts (Sokol 2017). Research from 2017 estimates that public expenditure for the media ranges from 30 to 100 million BAM (Sokol 2017). Local governments contract the media to cover the work of mayors and municipal mayors, and this coverage is often propagandistic and lacks critical reporting (Hodžić and Sokol 2018).

In addition, public enterprises which spend on advertising are connected to the political elites, and the media do not report on them critically. As UN research on the safety of journalists in BiH shows, journalists resort to self-censorship because they cannot report on abuses in the companies which advertise in their medium (UN 2022).

Political and financial pressure was the biggest problem faced by the media sector in 2022 as well. The 2022 general elections showed that many media in the country were nothing but the cat's paw of political parties used for political ends. The results of the research presented in this publication indicate that the most common harmful content was biased and propagandistic coverage by the mainstream media and anonymous portals. The media favoured their candidates, discredited others, and pushed versions of current and past events that fit their ethnic, ideological and political framework.

For instance, bias was obvious in the media reports about the anniversary of Operation Storm, which the media in the Republika Srpska referred

to as a war crime, whilst the Croatian-language media in the Federation of BiH referred to it as a victory. It was also evident in the coverage of the elections, electoral results and the protests – in some RS media the outcome of the elections was presented as the result of electoral fraud perpetrated by the ruling party, in others as a well-deserved victory which did not suit the foreign actors with secret agendas operating in the country (Sokol 2023).

The influence of politics on the media is likewise in evidence in the case of the Regulatory Agency for Communications. Since Draško Milinović, the former director of the Radio-Television of the Republika Srpska (RTRS), became head of the Agency, the RTRS, the medium that used to be penalised most frequently, has not received a single fine, in spite of the fact that even a cursory glance reveals that this broadcaster breaks the rules of the Code on Audio-Visual Media Services and Radio Services, especially the provisions pertaining to fair and unbiased reporting (Bubonjić 2022). In October 2022, Milinović announced draconic measures against FACE TV because, he claimed, Senad Hadžifejzović, the owner and editor-in-chief of that TV station, asked a guest in a programme if Milorad Dodik should be "killed". Milinović announced these measures against FACE TV, to be imposed in an expedited procedure, in an interview for the SRNA news agency late in October last year. He had formed his opinion without establishing the facts first (Fukelj 2022c). The Agency called off the investigation in December following the findings of the Agency for Forensic and Expert Examinations according to which, allegedly, it was impossible to determine whether that word was actually spoken. Such investigations influence the citizens' perceptions of the media and cause them to regard the media as biased and subject to political influence, but they also often follow the media that match their ideological preferences (Sokol 2022a).

3.4. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN – THE MEDIA IN THE SERVICE OF POLITICS

The 2022 campaigns of political parties and independent candidates were mostly covered in a biased manner, without context and additional sources. The information published during the campaign, as this research demonstrates, was mostly based on the statements made by party representatives, primarily the representatives of the parties in power in a particular part of the country. This rendered obvious the divisions in the media, along entity lines above all, as well as the lack of editorial independence, integrity and professionalism, and consistency in adhering to legal regulations.

Favouring certain political groups or individuals in media reporting during the 2022 general elections campaign unmistakably showed the inclination of the media towards the government or the opposition, which was most clearly visible in the media in the Republika Srpska, where the public broadcaster RTRS based its reporting on covering the representatives of the entity government led by the SNSD and headed by Milorad Dodik, whilst on the other hand BN Televizija mostly covered representatives of the opposition. Whereas the RTRS cast the governing party exclusively in a positive light and criticised the opposition, BN's programming could be described as the mirror image of RTRS's.

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina the situation is more complex, and the influence of politics on the media is at first glance more moderate and underhand. Still, political influence or an inclination towards a particular political faction is recognisable in some media. Political influence is most readily observable in the reporting of the news portals Stav and Faktor devoted to promoting the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka Demokratske Akcije; SDA) and criticising the opposition. Former members of SDA are the most frequent targets of these two portals. On the other hand, the Radio-Television of Herceg Bosna founded two years ago is programmatically orientated towards covering Croat parties, as is the case with most internet portals registered in Herzegovina. Most portals which describe themselves as aiming at an ethnic Croat readership have mounted efforts to discredit the Croat Member of the Presidency, Željko Komšić (DF).

It is clear that the parties which have seized a part of the media sphere focus primarily on the three ethnic segments of the public whose votes they vied for in the general elections. How those in power treat the media is illustrated by their refusal to take part in the TV debates organised by the state-level broadcaster BHRT. Out of the ten candidates running for the state Presidency, only one accepted the invitation to participate in a face-off. The BH Journalists' Association is of the opinion that the candidates' refusal to participate in the debates on public-service TV was an act of arrogance and irresponsibility towards the voters and the public in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole (BH Journalists 2022).

The proliferation of anonymous portals which appear during election campaigns with a view to spreading disinformation and other problematic content aimed at discrediting political opponents further divided the media sphere and increased the visibility of political influence on the media. There were cases in which mainstream media republished content from one such portal or tabloid, legitimising that content (Bubonjić 2022).

3.5. REGULATION AND SELF-REGULATION

Media coverage of political entities during election campaigns is regulated by Chapter 16 of the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina[10] and the Rulebook on Media Coverage of Political Entities from the Day Elections are Announced Until the Election Day.[11] Under these regulations, which cover not only political parties, coalitions and independent candidates as direct participants in election campaigns but also the media, political entities are obliged to respect and foster freedom of the press, whilst the media are obliged to support democratic processes through fair and unbiased coverage during the election period.

On 27 July 2022, High Representative Christian Schmidt imposed so-called technical amendments to the Election Law, which in part apply to the media and social networks during election campaigns. The amendments, pertaining to the "integrity of the electoral process", regulate the use of electronic, print and online media as well as social networks in election campaigns. They define hate speech, as well as abuse of public funds and resources, and lay down fines of up to 30,000 BAM for violations, three times the previous amount. There are no clear indicators that the amendments have changed the manner in which the media cover election campaigns, or that the previous legislation had helped reduce political influence on the media.

The High Representative imposed amendments to the Election Law[12] that have to do with the manner in which parts of the government are constituted on the election night of 2 October, a few hours before the preliminary results were published. The decision further complicated reporting and led to a lack of clarity and accuracy (Arnautović 2022), and the media yet again had to rely on information provided by party representatives.

Chapter 16 of the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina grants the Regulatory Agency for Communications the authority in all cases in which electronic media fail to abide by the provisions of the Chapter and the Rulebook on Media Coverage. The Agency is charged with monitoring the coverage of political entities and ensuring that relevant electoral rules and

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10   https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/documents/English/Laws/BIHElectionlaw.pdf

11   https://www.izbori.ba/Documents/Opci_izbori_2018/P/Rulebook_on_media_coverage_of_political_subjects.pdf

12   http://www.ohr.int/decision-enacting-the-law-on-amendments-to-the-election-law-of-bosnia-and-herzegovina-8/

regulations are followed, from the announcement of the elections to the polling day.

The question arises of how a regulatory body in charge of broadcasters will assess their work if it is under political influence itself. There is a regulatory and self-regulatory system for the media in place, but the fact remains that the Regulatory Agency for Communications, although authorised to issue fines and warnings to electronic media, mostly acts on reports filed by citizens and does not conduct regular monitoring and inspection. The Press Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina self-regulates online and print media, but its scope of authority is restricted to mediation and issuing of non-binding rulings on media content in breach of the Press and Online Media Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The effectiveness of the self-regulatory system is especially limited when it comes to anonymous internet portals (Sokol and Ćalović 2022).

3.6. SOCIAL NETWORKS – A NEW FIELD OF POLITICAL BATTLE

The information system in Bosnia and Herzegovina has changed substantially in the last decade, and the internet penetration rate, according to the Regulatory Agency for Communication, was 95% in 2022. Television is still the most important source of information for the general public, but online media and social networks are the most important for younger generations (Sokol 2022a). Political parties have recognised the importance of social media, so a large part of the 2022 election campaign switched to that communication platform in an attempt to find new young potential voters.

The number of social networks users is constantly rising. Facebook is the most popular platform in Bosnia and Herzegovina, followed by Instagram and YouTube (Sokol and Ćalović 2022). TikTok is also expanding, whilst Twitter, although least popular in the country, hosted accounts that provided organised support to political parties during the 2022 campaign, which often included abuse, hate speech and discrediting of political opponents. This was even more evident on Facebook, the network with the largest number of users in BiH.

Many political parties and their representatives have their own profiles on social networks. Compared to politicians from the neighbouring countries, the political marketing of Bosnian-Herzegovinian politicians is underdeveloped, uncreative and uninventive, and in many ways lags behind

modern technologies, so it relies on profiles supporting specific political groups by leaving positive below-the-line comments on articles about a particular party or candidate, and negative comments on articles concerning other parties and candidates.

In addition to social media accounts, political parties also use bots or trolls, that is, fake profiles for communication with social media users. Although the word "bot" means an automated account, when we talk about political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we use it to refer not to software, but to persons who create fake pages and profiles which they use to mislead the public in an organised manner.

An analysis conducted by Radio Free Europe (Kešmer et al. 2022) revealed that in the run-up to the 2022 general elections, party bots operated in the following manner: a single person would create at least 20 Facebook profiles under false names and a minimum of a dozen Twitter accounts and accounts on other social networks. These profiles and accounts would then be used to repost and lavish praise on the content posted by their party and candidates, and to criticise and abuse political opponents, as well as other parties and candidates.

Anonymity affords them the freedom to spread disinformation, slander and insults without fear of litigation. Radio Free Europe documented several such profiles which most often comment on or share content posted by the Union of Independent Social-Democrats and the Party of Democratic Action.

That social networks are increasingly important to political parties can also be seen from the amounts invested in promotion on Facebook. During the one month of campaigning in 2022, the Union of Independent Social-Democrats spent over 64,000 BAM for political promotion on Facebook. If we add to this the expenditure for ads promoting individual candidates and local branches, the party spent around 80,000 BAM. For that amount of money, Facebook provided around 18.8 million views of the party's political messages. Our Party (Naša Stranka; NS) invested 20,892 BAM in political advertising, United Srpska (Ujedinjena Srpska; US) 13,150 BAM, the Social-Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Socijaldemokratska Partija BiH; SDPBiH) 11,927, Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska Demokratska Zajednica; HDZ) 9,507, People and Justice Party (Narod i pravda; Nip) 4,741 and the Party of Democratic Action 2,711 BAM (Zatega and Sijamija 2022). The messaging of three political parties – the Union of Independent Social-Democrats, the Croatian Democratic Union and the Party of Democratic Action – was viewed over 26 million times during the campaign.

Paid political promotion is not allowed before the beginning of the official campaign, but political parties paid for promotion before the campaign anyway. This indicates that the internet is becoming the main platform for promotion and discrediting, and that additional research is necessary, as are improved (self-)regulatory mechanisms.

3.7. CONCLUSION

The consequence of imbalanced and one-sided reporting during election campaigns is an uninformed public ill-equipped to decide who would best represent it over the following four years. The most important task of the media in the electoral process is precisely to facilitate public participation, teach the voters how to exercise their rights and provide political representatives with a platform to convey their electoral messages.

A free, critical and politically literate public cannot exist without professional, unbiased media with autonomous editorial policies. It is hard to expect the Bosnian-Herzegovinian media, divided as they are along ethnic lines, divergent in their approach and topic selection, one-sided, biased and uncritically inclined towards the political elites of their ethnic groups, to resist political pressure.

The media ought to be a societal corrective, the first to critique the government and keep it in check in defence of the public interest. Just as they can be an instrument of democratisation and shaping of a politically literate public, they can be a tool of propaganda and manipulation that creates a dependent society prone to divisions, hate speech and conflict.

Economic empowerment of the media, good legislation and politically independent regulators are a step towards unbiased and professional journalism, free from political meddling. Only that kind of journalism can be a societal corrective, especially in transitional, post-conflict societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, in which professional standards in journalism should play an indispensable role.

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Chapter 4

FROM TRAITORS TO POLITICAL LEADERS' PUPPETS: HARMFUL NARRATIVES ABOUT FEMALE POLITICAL CANDIDATES

Jasmina Čaušević, Kristina Ljevak, Selma Zulić–Šiljak

4.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the mapped harmful narratives about female candidates in the 2022 general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina[13] in online mainstream media content and content deployed via social networks and anonymous web portals. As the analysis shows, media reporting was starkly gendered and could have impacted the female candidates' results. Gendering in this context refers to the media practice of treating male and female candidates, regardless of party affiliation, differently when it comes to presenting their merit and achievements. This comes as no surprise, seeing that gender stereotypes are based on different expectations the electorate (and society as a whole) has of men and women in politics. The way the media treat female candidates corresponds with sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis's claim (1997) that women's membership in national and political collectives is dual in nature, because whilst women, like men, are members of a certain collective, there are always rules that apply specifically to them, because they are women. The analysis of the content deployed via information and communication systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina shows that this claim is important in considering the implications of different ways in which the female candidates who are the subjects of this analysis have been treated in the media and on social networks.

The way in which gender stereotypes are utilised in the election campaigns and in disinformation strategies in general is examined by an increasing number of studies conducted around the world with a view to facilitating the

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13   Monitored content featured Željka Cvijanović of the Union of Independent Social-Democrats (Savez nezavisnih socijaldemokrata; SNSD) and Borjana Krišto of the Croatian Democratic Union (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica; HDZ) who ran for the tripartite state Presidency, and Jelena Trivić of the Party of Democratic Progress (Partija demokratskog progresa; PDP) who ran for president of the Republika Srpska. Also monitored were posts about female candidates for the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina Sabina Ćudić of Our Party (Naša stranka; NS) and Sanja Vulić of SNSD, and Antonija Banožić of HDZ 1990 who ran for a seat in the Parliament of the Federation of BiH. Sebija Izetbegović of the Party of Democratic Action (Stranka demokratske akcije; SDA), Benjamina Karić of the Social-Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovna (Socijaldemokratska partija BiH; SDP) and Miomirka Melank of NS ran for the Assembly of the Canton of Sarajevo, while Amra Babić of the People and Justice Party (Narod i pravda; NiP) ran for the Assembly of the Zenica-Doboj Canton.

preparation of informed responses to this damaging phenomenon. According to a group of experts affiliated with the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS) who have written a set of guidelines for monitoring disinformation based on gender roles, gendered disinformation is content which is either false, inhibiting or damaging, based on leveraging gender inequality, uses gender roles and stereotypes and targets individuals and/or groups. Important aspects of analysis of gendered disinformation include those who produce and disseminate problematic content (sources); the question of who has access to technologies and digital spaces (manner of dissemination); the question of who the audience who read such problematic content are (interpretation); and the question of how the creation, dissemination and consumption of problematic content affects the community and society as a whole (risk) (CEPPS)). These narratives, as global research on the emergence of gendered disinformation shows, aim to devalue the equitable role of women in politics, which ultimately hamstrings democratic social development. They have three purposes, namely to reduce the number of women in politics, influence public opinion and attitudes towards women's participation in political life, and especially to influence political party policies regarding fielding female candidates, and political outcomes.

Analysing harmful narratives through the lens of gender makes it possible to recognise power relations, inequality and ways in which gender roles could be transformed. An understanding of the way in which gender and gender roles are included and used in the electoral processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and how they damage these processes, is of crucial importance for preparing, creating and implementing programmes to offset and counter their impact. It bears stressing that this analysis of harmful narratives does not examine the policies espoused by female politicians, whose interests they represent and whether or not their policies offer dignity to all men and women; instead, it maps and analyses the use of gender stereotypes about female candidates before, during and after the 2022 general elections.

4.2. CONTEXT

Although women make up 51% of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina, they are still underrepresented at all levels of political and public life. One hundred and eight political entities (91 parties and 17 independent candidates) registered for the elections (Pod lupom s. a.). The percentage of women on the electoral lists for the 2022 general elections was 42%, slightly above the legal minimum, but just as in local elections, women's electoral success in general elections is much lower than their rate of representation on electoral lists. A drop in the percentage of women

elected to the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina was recorded in the 2022 general elections – from 21.4% in 2018 to only 16.66% in 2022. At the entity level there was a slight increase in female representation, so that women are now represented in the House of Representatives of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina at 26.53%, and in the People's Assembly of the Republika Srpska at 18%. The percentage dropped in the cantonal assemblies from 31% to 30%.[14]

In the Conclusion to the Sixth Bosnia and Herzegovina Periodic Report , the Committee for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination of Women (CEDAW) expressed concern over the underrepresentation of women in parliaments and governments, insufficient participation of women from vulnerable groups, including Roma, inadequate access of women to public and political life, lack of political leadership, negotiation and campaign training (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women 2019). The question has persisted as to what leads to such modest performance of female candidates in elections, and some of the answers include gender stereotypes, public opinion, but also media coverage of female candidates. Public perception in Bosnia and Herzegovina is such that almost a third (29%) of the respondents in USAID's 2021 Measure Survey thought that men were better politicians than women, whereas a year prior 34% responded that men were better politicians (American Institutes for Research 2022). It is important to point out that this attitude was expressed by both male (40%) and female (20%) respondents. USAID's survey of development priorities of male versus female politicians and voters in the context of the 2016 local elections showed that every other male and every third female respondent who had voted in the elections thought that "men were better political leaders and should be elected over women" (Kadribašić et al. 2020, 49).

These findings are directly bound up with the ubiquity of gender stereotypes in Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, that is, the beliefs that have to do with psychological characteristics, traits and activities appropriate for men or women. These stereotypes result in society expecting men and women to fulfil different roles in the public and private sphere. "Beliefs, attitudes and gender norms traditionally prescribe different roles for the two genders: men have responsible roles in the public sphere – politics, economy, finance and business, whilst women are given the central role in the private sphere – home and family. The way gender roles are socially constructed greatly determines women's ability to run for office" (Kadribašić et al. 2020, 48).

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14   From Sead Numanović's interview with Samra Filipović-Hadžiabdić, director of the Gender Equality Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the Ministry of Human Rights: 'Only 16.66% of elected MPs are women!'

The media have a significant role in shaping and maintaining public perceptions and attitudes and can substantially influence the production of gender stereotypes about the role of women in politics. Women are often represented as spouses, girlfriends and mothers in the media in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Balkan region, and "family values" as the basic tenet of heteropatriarchal tradition are foregrounded. In treating personal accomplishments of women, the media often do not go beyond the clichéd question of how they "reconcile" motherhood and career. In cases where they are not represented as mothers and spouses, when the media write about them in terms of their personal merit in entrepreneurship, pop culture or politics, women are often sexualised, which we can also see in reporting about female politicians (Moranjak-Bamburać, Jusić and Isanović 2006).

Devaluing of women and reducing their agency to their outward appearance and the stereotypical roles of a mother, sister or housewife devalues women's accomplishments and legitimises those who do not think that women deserve equal treatment and rights as men. This is not "merely" a problem of a lack of taste or ethics, it also paves the way for gender-based violence. Continued devaluation of women's accomplishments puts women in a position of subordination thanks to which their husbands, partners or bosses have the right to make decisions about their lives on the basis of their personal assessments of what is right or wrong. The consequences of this approach can be seen in crime sections and court reports on femicide, a criminal offence which is still not coded as such; instead, we read about family tragedies and crimes of passion, which romanticises a man's decision to take a woman's life because she's a woman and because he had, in all aspects of life, continually been given the power over her life (Arnautović 2022; Ljevak 2022).

The 2022 general elections brought greater visibility for women running for high offices and greater visibility of women topping electoral lists compared to the previous elections. One of the criteria for the selection of the candidates monitored in this research was the status of list leader or placement near the top of the list, whilst two candidates – Željka Cvijanović and Borjana Krišto – ran for the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yet, as this analysis shows, this was not the result of efforts to achieve a better position for women in politics, nor has it led to the foregrounding of gender issues and gender equality in campaigns. Also specific was the position of Jelena Trivić, the candidate of a coalition of opposition parties for the president of the Republika Srpska, who was demonised by the mainstream media as well as anonymous portals loyal to the ruling party in the RS, who discredited her with narratives ranging from a lack of personal hygiene to being "in cahoots" (one of the most frequently used terms in the attempts to discredit her) with foreign officials in the country. She was remonstrated

for her disloyalty to her party (PDP), imputed to have been in romantic and erotic liaisons with her party colleagues, and there were insinuations about the existence of private pornographic videos. The burden Jelena Trivić had to bear thanks to online and media terror is not characteristic of any male political experience. The terror she endured contains part of the answer to the question why women decide to participate in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina less often than men.

4.3. RESULTS OF MONITORING: CATEGORIES AND SOURCES

4.3.1. Harmful content

During the three months of keyword-based monitoring, Metricom yielded a total of 7,453 articles and posts about female candidates, of which 4,839 were selected for analysis, placed into different categories of harmful content and used as research material. In August 2022, 1,070 pieces of content were extracted, whilst in September and October the number tripled (3,045 and 3,338, respectively), which was expected on account of the election campaign and the process of determining and disputing the results of the poll. The analysis did not include pieces of content in which a female candidate was mentioned solely in the context of her candidacy, the number of votes won or her passive presence at an event where she did not make an official statement. Most of the 4,839 articles and posts were marked as either neutral or positively toned propaganda. Such reporting was not subject to detailed deconstruction; rather, the analysis focused on mapping harmful narratives about female candidates rooted in gender stereotypes.

The tables below give an overview of the type and quantity of harmful content about female candidates including propaganda, smear campaigns and hate speech, which was also examined in other chapters of this volume. This chapter additionally examines the categories of sexism, sexualisation and morality which were most frequently used to discredit female candidates and will be explained in more detail below.

The largest amount of harmful content about female candidates emerged in September, at the peak of the campaign. Most content pertaining to all the candidates fell into the categories of propaganda (31%), smear campaign against an individual (21%) and content aiming at the moral integrity of the candidates (7%). Such a vast amount of biased and propagandistic media content and smear campaigns is a reflection of the polarisation and the substantial political influence on the media especially of the ruling parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The fact that SNSD leader Milorad Dodik was challenged by a woman, and that two women from leading nationalist

parties SNSD and HDZ ran for the Presidency, contributed to the volume of such content. The media, such as the public radio-television service of the Republika Srpska, RTRS, never missed an opportunity to report on any and all perfunctory activities of Željka Cvijanović who made a number of TV appearances for campaigning purposes as the then president of the Republika Srpska. The media close to the ruling party in the RS covered her visits to municipalities, cities, factories, churches, schools and kindergartens, read her statements and listened to her promises (RTRS 2022; 2022a).

The large number of smear campaigns, especially in September and October (400 in each month) can be interpreted as frequent attempts by the media to discredit certain candidates while they were still vying for votes, and as putting pressure on the public during the vote count. Although it was assumed that smear campaigns would be guided to a significant extent by sexism and sexualisation, as was found by gendered disinformation research elsewhere in Europe (Judson et al. 2020), the findings in Bosnia and Herzegovina show that the most frequent manner in which female candidates in the 2022 general elections were discredited was pointing out their questionable moral integrity and suggesting that they and their actions were treacherous to their people (35% of the total number of cases of discrediting). These findings can be explained by the dominant nationalist politics of the ruling parties based on the preservation/defence of the people/nation. They strongly reflect conservatism and send a message to female politicians that they are not welcome as actors in the public sphere, except to the extent they serve the interests of their ethnic group. Examples of such content were found in the reporting on Jelena Trivić and Amra Babić, who were described as foreign hirelings/agents and traitors to their people or the party which protects the people. On the other hand, Borjana Krišto and Željka Cvijanović were often presented as guardians and custodians of national interests in the analysed content.

In addition to references to the candidates' moral integrity, the analysed content also featured "traditional" ways of discrediting female candidates through sexism and sexualisation. Sexism dismisses female politicians on the basis of the idea that women are inferior to their male colleagues, because of the misapprehension that their sex essentially determines all of their thinking and behaviour. Sexism is bound up with stereotypes, because dismissive attitudes about female politicians are most often based on traditional beliefs and generalisations about women in politics. The candidates who were most discredited in this way were Jelena Trivić, Borjana Krišto, Željka Cvijanović, Benjamina Karić and Amra Babić, and the identified instances of this alluded that they were untrustworthy, had no knowledge or skills to implement the policies promulgated by their superiors, that they never stood up to their superiors and could not hold their own in debates. Their children

were mentioned, they were brought in connection with men, rebuked for their unkempt appearance and it was suggested that they lacked in beauty.

Sexualisation, which is part and parcel of sexism, is added to this analysis because it is the ultimate smear against a female candidate. The instances identified hinted at alleged romantic affairs the female politicians were engaged in, and at the existence of "explicit" videos or photographs. Jelena Trivić was most often the target of such content.

During the monitoring, 112 instances of hate speech directed at female candidates were identified, and it was mostly media content which targeted them ad hominem and used abusive language in the context of their political affiliation. In September and October, 69 instances contained disinformation that had been spread with a view to discrediting. There were no pieces of content from August marked as disinformation, which does not mean that there was no disinformation, only that it was not debunked.

TABLE 1: Harmful content in August

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF INSTANCES
Disinformation	0
Hate speech and hate narratives	80
Propaganda	347
Biased reporting	41
Conspiracy theories*	0
Negation of war crimes and glorification of war criminals	6
Smear campaigns against individuals	155
Incitement against an ethnic group	1
Wartime rhetoric**	0
Reminders of war	3
Sexism	65
Sexualisation	3
Morals	72

*Elements of purposefully constructed conspiracy theories about female candidates were first identified in September, during the election campaign.
**The category war rhetoric was added in September, when the researchers noted use of wartime narratives in campaigning and representation of female candidates.

TABLE 2: Harmful content in September

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF INSTANCES
Disinformation	60
Hate speech and hate narratives	32
Propaganda	1,081
Biased reporting	25
Conspiracy theories	13
Negation of war crimes and glorification of war criminals	9
Smear campaigns against individuals	400
Incitement against an ethnic group	13
Reminders of war with elements of wartime rhetoric	49
Sexism	38
Sexualisation	10
Morals	191

TABLE 3: Harmful content in October

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF INSTANCES
Disinformation	9
Hate speech and hate narratives	28
Propaganda	130
Biased reporting	0
Conspiracy theories	46
Negation of war crimes and glorification of war criminals	0
Smear campaigns against individuals	398
Incitement against an ethnic group	15
Reminders of war with elements of wartime rhetoric	0
Sexism	16
Sexualisation	0
Morals	73

TABLE 4: Total number of instances of harmful content in all three months

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF INSTANCES
Disinformation	69
Hate speech and hate narratives	112
Propaganda	1,558
Biased reporting	120
Conspiracy theories	59
Negation of war crimes and glorification of war criminals	15
Smear campaigns against individuals	953
Incitement against an ethnic group	29
Reminders of war with elements of wartime rhetoric	52
Sexism	119
Sexualisation	23
Morals	336

4.3.2. Sources of harmful content

The most common sources of harmful content about female candidates were anonymous internet portals as well as Facebook groups and private media which republished politicians' statements or content, but also content from anonymous portals. Some of the sources which spread harmful content the most were the anonymous portals Glas Srpske, Patriote Srpske, Banjalučka istina, Banjalučke priče, Banjaluka 24.media, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Faktor magazin, and the Twitter account Autentično Portal[15], mainstream media ATV and Faktor,[16] and the Facebook account Visočki narodni vijećnik. Most sources targeted female candidates from their own ethnic group,[17] which can be explained by the electoral specificities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, such as for example the fact

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15   A portal which was not initially chosen for monitoring, but we noticed it disseminated hate speech only. https://mojportalautenticno.blogspot.com/

16   Faktor magazine is from the Republika Srpska and is categorised as an obscure medium, whereas Faktor online is a medium from Sarajevo whose ownership and editorial structures are known. Both media are under the influence of the ruling parties in their respective entities, although Faktor magazine is more radical in this regard as it is an obscure medium which eschews even the basic criteria in the way it operates.

17   Cf. for example the studies Best Practice Forum Gender and Digital Rights (2021); Judson et al. (2020); Nina Jankowicz et al. (2021a) or even the analysis by Kadribašić et al. (2020).

that in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina one cannot vote for the president of the Republika Srpska or the Serb member of the Presidency, but also by the fact that every candidate's major rivals mostly come from the same ethnic group.

The media which spread concocted harmful narratives before the start of the election campaign most frequently were the anonymous portals Banjalučke priče, Banjaluka 24.media, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Faktor magazin, and the content was often republished from one anonymous portal to the next. A great deal of harmful content about female candidates and opposition politicians in general was also detected on the anonymous blog Banjalučka istina. However, amongst the outlets that published most unverified information created with a view to discrediting political opponents was the web portal of the Banja Luka-based Alternativna televizija, ATV. On account of the fact that it meets, in a formal sense, certain professional standards such as having a masthead, being subject to regulation of TV programming and being attached to a TV station with a long tradition that used to have quality programming, one would expect it to rise above the media filth purposefully created in the run-up to the elections for political and propaganda purposes. That political influence was not exclusive to the media traditionally inclined towards the SNSD was visible from the arranged BHT1 interview with Željka Cvijanović which was aired after the elections.

To a certain extent, online media with a masthead abided by the rules of reporting, at least formally, whilst anonymous portals (which, according to our sources, were mostly based in the Republika Srpska) significantly deviated from the basic tenets of journalism, creating content intended solely to discredit political opponents. The crassest examples of insults, insinuations and disinformation targeting female candidates were found on these anonymous portals, which were sometimes the sources of disinformation which then spread to the mainstream media. One of the strategies we identified in September and October 2022 was based on mainstream media and news agencies republishing harmful content from anonymous portals, which helped legitimise harmful content about female candidates.

The main purveyors of harmful content about female candidates were persons from the political milieu of the Republika Srpska, due to the intense political struggle between the government and the opposition in the elections. Politicians from the parties in power (who in most cases came from the same ethnic group) spread disinformation about female candidates from the opposition, most prominently Sanja Vulić of the SNSD who ran for a seat in the Parliament of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, SNSD's candidate for the president of the RS, Milan Tegeltija, former chair of the

High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Milorad Dodik's advisor, Željka Cvijanović, Snježana Novaković-Bursać, the SNSD's state-level MP, and politicians Srđan Mazalica and Denis Šulić from the SNSD. Mirko Šarović from the SDS spread content aimed at discrediting Željka Cvijanović. Politicians often made statements in the media, but were also active on social networks, for example Sanja Vulić on Facebook and Milan Tegeltija on Twitter.

The second group of disseminators of harmful content comprised private citizens, members of politicians' families (Gorica Dodik, Milorad Dodik's daughter, who was active on Twitter), anonymous "well-informed sources" used by anonymous portals, and alleged experts – for instance "security expert" Ljuban Karan who stated on the RTRS that the goal of the opposition was not for Trivić to win the elections, but to escalate the conflict,[18] or "terrorism expert" Dževad Galijašević who stated for SRNA that the US embassy's financing of Jelena Trivić was not an incident, and that the UK also financed her.[19] Following the publication of the preliminary results, the protests of opposition and government supporters in the RS and the recounting of votes for the president and vice-president of the RS, the SNSD and candidate Sanja Vulić repeatedly made statements containing hate speech targeting Jelena Trivić, which were subsequently reprinted and aired by the media, most frequently SRNA, Banjalučke priče, Banjaluka 24.media and ATV.[20]

During all three months of monitoring, it was noted that the media did not use gender-sensitive language or did so inconsistently (this was the case mostly in the RS, which is closely bound up with the official Serbian language policies). This contributed to the fact that their articles were unclear, factually incorrect, grammatically and logically wrong and inaccurate. Željka Cvijanović was mostly referred to as *predsjednik*, in the masculine, Jelena Trivić as *kandidat* as opposed to *kandidatkinja* (SRNA 2022a), and we also detected instances of obsolete modes of addressing women (*Trivićeva*, *Pandurevićka*, *Cvijanovićeva*). The word "lady" as a synonym for a female

18   "Karan is convinced that the goal of the opposition, rallied round Jelena Trivić, was not for her to win the race for the post of the president of the Republika Srpska, but to escalate the conflict" (SRNA 2022b).

19   "Political analyst and security and terrorism expert Dževad Galijašević told SRNA today that the case of backing PDP candidate for the president of the Republika Srpska Jelena Trivić to the tune of 10 million dollars was not a unique one, as similar things had happened in the past, where Great Britain was involved alongside the US" (SRNA 2022c).

20   Examples of sexist headlines which contained hate speech: "Vulić's message to Trivić: go cry to those who put you up to adventurism without backing" (SRNA 2022d); "Better luck to British with next version of Jelena Trivić, current one in need of update" (SRNA s. a.).

politician was usedinappropriately ; for instance, the portal Srpskainfo wrote the following about the former SDS MP Aleksandra Pandurević, who was on the SDS list for the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina: "Another lady has fought her way to the top of her party's 'lady with most votes won' list" (Novi 2022). This was republished by other web portals.

Although we have exact data on the type and quantity of the content that was examined and presented in this analysis owing to our research methodology, the figures themselves are less important than the pattern of dissemination of harmful content, which in turn reveals something about the general media environment in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Content such as propaganda and biased reporting was prevalent, but it does not tell us much about the specificities of reporting on female candidates. Regardless of its salience, the content which reveals the most about the media approach to women is content featuring sexism, sexualisation and references to morals, written in a way that content about men would never be written, regardless of their party affiliation or whether they are in government or in opposition. A woman is primarily discredited on account of being a woman, that is, her gender influences the approach of the media, and the dissemination of harmful narratives based on insults. Each of the three main harmful narratives about female candidates will be deconstructed in detail below, and numerous examples will be cited.

4.4. ANALYSIS OF HARMFUL NARRATIVES ABOUT FEMALE CANDIDATES IN THE 2022 GENERAL ELECTIONS

In this part of the chapter we analyse harmful narratives about female candidates. The analysis of the content obtained from the media, anonymous portals and social networks reveals three purposeful constructs based on wider categories of gender stereotypes. For the purposes of further analysis we refer to them as harmful narratives about female candidates.

I.   Female candidates as incompetent and out of their depth in politics; content referring to their outward appearance;
II.   Female candidates as turncoats and traitors to their people;
III. Female candidates as puppets of their party leaders, in whose shadow they stand.

Several strategies were used in these narratives, the most ubiquitous being discrediting via sexism, sexualisation and ad hominem arguments (narrative I), concoction and dissemination of disinformation and conspiracy theories

(narrative II) and discrediting via "coupling" female candidates with "real leaders" and presenting them as a kind of interim solution (narrative III). The purpose of these narratives is to dismiss female politicians' knowledge, experience, skills, reliability and competence required for positions of power. The third narrative, according to which there is always a powerful political leader standing by the side of a female candidate, also aimed to influence voters. The construction of these narratives was deliberate in most cases, which can be seen from the use of sources, anonymous portals and gender stereotypes, but it bears pointing out that gender inequality in the media often results from unconscious ideological biases, as well as the routine manner in which the media operate and use certain language constructions. The use of sexism is also on display in sensationalist articles whose headlines contain the words "explicit" or "have a look (at)". Such articles are short, in most cases accompanied by a visual, and the information they contain does not correspond to the headline or is misleading. They are often clickbait created for the sake of generating profit and attracting advertisers. The discussion below analyses the three main narratives in detail, including their multiple, overlapping facets, values, discursive and temporal aspects. It gives an overview of the types of content and the main features of the narratives, the methods used, the harmful categories via which the narratives are deployed, the intent behind them, and the effect they have on the voters and the emotions they arouse.

4.4.1. Female candidates as incompetent and out of their depth in politics

The manner in which information and communication systems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including social networks, anonymous portals and the mainstream media, reported on the female candidates in the 2022 general elections points to sexism, sexualisation and misogynistic speech constructing a narrative of women as incompetent and out of their depth in politics. This narrative is deconstructed via an overview of numerous harmful categories identified: discrediting, hate speech, sexism and sexualisation of women, stressing a candidate's appearance, her age and marital status and traits often ascribed to women.

Purpose of the narrative: The purpose of this narrative is to amplify the belief that one sex is superior to the other. It discredits female politicians on the basis of the fact that they are women and therefore inferior to their male colleagues, and the misapprehension that the female sex essentially determines a politician's thinking and behaviour. Content based on this narrative was used to discredit female politicians who were rivals to other, male politicians, and to generate profit as it was often sensationalist and helped media and anonymous portals gain extra clicks.

Methods of constructing and deploying the narrative: This narrative is built from sexist, misogynistic and sexualised depictions of female candidates, often in a sensationalist manner, and using bombastic headlines. It is constructed by focusing on the candidate's appearance or her marital status and on whether or not she is a mother, and commenting on what kind of mother she is. As many as 142 examples have been identified in which female candidates were described as "good" or "bad" mothers, "photoshopped beyond recognition", "unkempt", "babushkas", or "greenhorns". It can be deployed in various ways, and we highlight discrediting via hinting at inexperience, ignorance and sexualisation, as well as dissemination of the stereotypes of women as mothers or those that have to do with what women are supposed to look like.

Discrediting via sexualisation: Insinuations about their sexual experiences and references to their appearance are a common practice aimed at discrediting female politicians. In August, the portal Banjaluka 24.media published, and the portal Banjalučke priče republished, an article about an alleged sexual affair in the PDP between Jelena Trivić and Branislav Borenović. Both portals are devoid of a masthead and were the ones that published most discrediting articles about opposition candidates, above all Jelena Trivić. The Twitter account Autentično Portal ran an announcement of an "explicit" video, which was picked up by anonymous portals under the headline "Video shows how sinful Jelena Trivić is" (Banjalučke priče 2022a).

As evidence of this affair they list the correspondence of other party members and the comments on the video which allegedly shows Trivić enjoying sex. Members of the LGBTIQ community are discredited in a similar manner, as is demonstrated by the case of a PDP member who was accused of engaging in gay sex, which was allegedly also captured on video. This discrediting tactic, with some exceptions, is often used against women and members of the LGBTIQ communities, because sexual affairs are commonly interpreted as being to a man's credit and a confirmation of his success. For instance, when a male politician is in a relationship with a young woman, it is said that "his heart flutters again" – the language used in reporting on the new relationship of a high-profile politician from Croatia with "a much younger black-haired woman" (Radiosarajevo.ba 2021) – or that "when love is true, age doesn't matter" (J. M. 2017).

Smears based on lack of experience: One of the ways in which female candidates were discredited were references to their inexperience, age and ignorance. The aim of such content is to discredit the candidates by pointing out that they lack the knowledge and experience required for the offices they run for. A number of articles were published dismissing Jelena

Trivić as an "arrogant matron" who had "embarrassed herself" because she did not know certain facts about banking (lacks knowledge in this area) and did not have either the charisma or a plan to lead the Republika Srpska (Banjalučke priče, Banja Luka 24.media, Faktor magazin 2022a). A narrative was also created about her to the effect that she was a coward, lacked courage, was afraid of Milorad Dodik, a "greenhorn", too young and inexperienced compared to him (SRNA 2022e). In one of the articles about the sex video there were references to Trivić's hysterical behaviour and her attacks on members of her party. The article read: "The reasons for such behaviour are many, from a lack of campaign funds and bad rating in the party, to the above-mentioned video, in which she can be clearly made out". This is another attempt to belittle women's competences and reduce their behaviour to universal stereotypical female traits.

Creation and dissemination of stereotypes: Stereotypes about female politicians are often connected to their role as mothers. Even in cases where people defended Jelena Trivić, they often lost sight of her stature as a politician: "Professor Đorđe Vuković wonders if those who so shamelessly, brutally and unrelentingly conducted a political and media lynching campaign against university professor Jelena Trivić, a presidential candidate in the upcoming October elections, are insane. Vuković quite rightfully wonders how it is possible that no one from the academia in the Republika Srpska has publicly denounced this orchestrated, shameful, barbaric persecution of our colleague, a mother, a wife, a daughter" – without mentioning her political function (Dokić 2022).

There were numerous articles referring to the appearance of a female candidate and suggesting that, for example, that the candidates were made to look more attractive in the posters. The portal Faktor magazin compared the photographs of Jelena Trivić to her billboards, saying that she was almost unrecognisable (Faktor magazin 2022b). The same language was used by Vijesti Srpske, another portal that discredited the ruling party in the RS, in an article suggesting that Željka Cvijanović had had a wart removed from her face through Photoshop (Vijesti Srpske 2022a). In his column titled "Babushka discovers Željo at age 60" republished by the anonymous portal Press from the portal Raport, neurosurgeon Kemal Dizdarević referred to the appearance of Sebija Izetbegović (Dizdarević 2022), the candidate of the Party of Democratic Action running for a seat in the Assembly of the Canton of Sarajevo. The discovery of Željo[21] refers to her presence at a football match where she wore the team kit, and she is called a babushka

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21   Željezničar Football Club.

because she is a 60-year-old woman. Journalist Senad Hadžifejzović in his prime-time show on the FACE Televizija offered a sexist insult to the candidate and the incumbent foreign minister of Bosnia and Herzegovina Bisera Turković – in the first part of the programme he showed footage of a poster with Turković's likeness placed below the place name sign Kobilja glava (Mare's Head), which could have been interpreted as a criticism of the poster placement, but then he made a sexist remark referring to another Sarajevo place name, Širokača (Broad Hill), alluding to Turković's physique. The segment was posted on social networks by many people, with or without a critical comment (Pobrić 2022).

Persuasion and appeal to emotions: The narrative about female candidates as incompetent and out of their depth in politics is based on traditional patriarchal values and traits expected of women: morality, loyalty, good motherhood, but also inferiority to men in strength and knowledge. Such narratives may cause disdain and condemnation if candidates step out of the expected gender roles: if they are not beautiful, loyal or if they engage in proscribed sexual affairs. The narratives about women being less capable, successful and reliable than men also aims to persuade the voters to vote for male politicians.

Personal and social – how the message was formulated: The message was formulated by appealing to socially accepted patriarchal norms of behaviour. Some of the examples cited "citizens" and unnamed "experts" as sources, or unidentified "well-informed sources" used to highlight what is and is not socially acceptable behaviour. Citing citizens as sources also created the impression of authenticity, that is, that the attitudes expressed came from the people rather than being constructed to serve political ends. Some anonymousportals and social media accounts formulated the message by referring to anonymous sources and posing a question to the readers: "Do we want a person like this to lead us?", thereby addressing the electorate directly.

Legitimising the narrative: Although sexist content mostly came from anonymousportals, at times it was used and spread by the mainstream media, which lent legitimacy to the narrative. After around 70 pieces of content were published on anonymous portals in August 2022 containing gender stereotypes targeting female candidates, the narrative was amplified in September via social media statements made by their political opponents, but also in the mainstream media. Content from anonymous portals with statements of ordinary citizens of the Republika Srpska to the effect that Jelena Trivić was afraid of Milorad Dodik gained legitimacy in publicly-owned media in which politicians started to talk about Trivić's lack of experience

(for example, Staša Košarac referred to her as a greenhorn, and to Milorad Dodik as a seasoned politician) (Banjalučke priče 2022b; SRNA 2022e).

Use of vocabulary that conveys symbols and emotional messages: Symbols are closely connected with prominence, that is, sexism is clearly noticeable, visible and shaped through words and accompanying visual elements. Words and turns of phrase such as "wife", "mother", "lady", "babushka", "good mothers" and "greenhorns" were used by the media during the campaign. In an article focusing on Jelena Trivić's personal hygiene published on an anonymous portal, the reader was first warned that she was "a wife, a mother", and "a people's representative and candidate for the office of the president [in the masculine] of the Republika Srpska", who came, according to an anonymous source, "to the meetings with her hair grey (...) and her shoes dirty", after which the author of the article warns: "Seeing that Trivić finds it difficult to take care of her personal hygiene, we wonder how she plans to take care of the Republika Srpska and the Serbian people? The way she takes care of herself?!" This narrative uses visual elements: articles which claimed that female candidates had been photoshopped beyond recognition compared photographs of female candidates taken on the street with the ones on the billboards. The purpose of this was to depict them as unreliable and keen to deceive even by photoshopping their photographs.

Conclusion: In a markedly patriarchal society such as the Bosnian-Herzegovinian, where national surveys show that as many as one third of the respondents agree that men are better leaders and should be elected rather than women, the influence of the narrative of women as incompetent and out of their depth in politics on the electorate is undeniable (American Institutes for Research 2022). This narrative, based on the idea that women are inferior to men, not only belittles the role of women in society but in the long run also discourages women from engaging in politics. It is based on a patriarchal value scheme according to which women and men have different social roles, whereby the roles in the public sphere are better suited for men, and those in the private sphere to women. This aims to arouse emotions in the electorate which are directly connected to traditional values in order to achieve identification where a candidate was cast in a positive light, and disdain and condemnation in the examples where she ventures out of these gender pigeonholes. We may conclude that the purpose of this narrative was to present the female candidates as incompetent by foregrounding facts and topics that had nothing to do with politics, and bombarding the electorate with them on a daily basis in order to dissuade it from voting for female candidates.

4.4.2. Narrative about female candidates as turncoats and traitors

One of the central damaging messages tagged to the female candidates from the opposition was connected with the narrative of "betrayal", that is, the idea that women were unreliable, turncoats, liars and unworthy of trust. As feminist sociology showed long ago, in the collective consciousness women are primarily associated with children, family and the future of the collective/nation. Therefore, the honour of the community rests on the shoulders of women, because with their appropriate, prescribed, permissible behaviour they embody the boundaries of the collective itself (Wilford and Miller 1998, 173). Because of all of this, world-views, habits, customs, that is the tradition of a collective, is used to maintain power over women, by way of controlling and bringing them to heel. The values on which this narrative is based are rooted in a conservative value system and nationalism as a state ideology which rests on patriarchal control over the reproductive power of women, but also over their productive, public engagement. If we refer to Nira Yuval-Davis, who sees this female role both in biological and symbolic terms as the reproductive function of the nation, it is clear that the state apparatus's control of women who disrupt the system, via the media as a powerful agent of the ruling productive ideology, is taking the path of sowing lies, disinformation, conspiracy theories and other forms of discrediting.

This narrative containing elements of the myth of the nation is most commonly constructed through conspiracy theories, disinformation and biased reporting. We find a similar example in research from Poland which found that female politicians were often referred to as "traitors" or communists colluding with the Russians. For instance, the mayor of Gdansk, Aleksandra Dulkiewicz, was a frequent target of online bullying and disinformation, she was labelled as anti-Polish, and a fake photo of her carrying the flag of the Third Reich flooded the internet (Judson et al. 2020, 26).

Purpose of the narrative: The purpose of this narrative was not only to stain the reputation of female candidates and discourage them from engaging in politics, but also to create false content and convince the voters that female candidates could not be trusted. This strategy also shields the attackers, because the defence of a dishonest woman is not legitimate. This is a well-known strategy of political disinformation – criticising the opposition in a way that will keep your own political position strong (Krasodomski-Jones et al. 2019).

Methods of constructing the narrative: The methods used in the construction of this narrative are spreading disinformation via conspiracy theories or by connecting facts in an illogical and stereotypical manner,

as well as via biased reporting. In republishing or creating content with false information about female candidates, with a view to discrediting them politically, the media used hate speech and conspiracy theories. By "conspiracy theories" we mean accusations of colluding with foreign actors, being parties to a secret plot and deliberately plotting, in most cases to destroy the RS. An additional feature of such content was serious slander presented as fact, supported by no credible evidence.

Disinformation and conspiracy theories: A document claiming that Jelena Trivić had received 10 million dollars from the US government to work against the interests of the RS is the most notorious example of disinformation and conspiracy theory during the 2022 general elections. The purpose of this example, along with all the others in which it was claimed that Jelena Trivić was closely connected with the US and other Western countries, especially High Representative Christian Schmidt, was to create a narrative about her as a "traitor to her people", "foreigners' hireling" and someone who is trying to "bring down the RS". The "document" which claims that Trivić received 10 million dollars from the USA was published on the portals Patriote Srpske, SRNA, RTRS, ATV, Faktor magazin, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Banjalučke priče, Banjaluka 24.media, etc. (SRNA 2022f), whilst the fact-checking platform Raskrinkavanje found this content to be fake news (Ćosić 2022). It also contained elements of a conspiracy theory, because the claim was used to make an accusation of collusion with foreign actors and plotting to destroy the RS, while Jelena Trivić was presented as party to a secret plan ("conspiracy"). We identified numerous articles in which it was claimed that the opposition was receiving funds from foreign actors to work against the interests of the RS (Banjalučke priče 2022d; Faktor magazin 2022c; Crna hronika 2022). This kind of narrative used facts, such as the fact that Jelena Trivić had been the recipient of a scholarship awarded by a German organisation, in order to show her connections with foreign actors, in this case Christian Schmidt (Argumenti 2022).

Creation and dissemination of stereotypes: The narrative relies on stereotypes of women as turncoats and untrustworthy, and we find these forms of sexism in the analysis of content about Amra Babić. In the first half of 2022, by the start of the official election campaign, the anonymous Facebook account Visočki narodni vijećnik published dozens of posts about Babić as a "has-been", a "harridan" unworthy of wearing the headscarf, a person "full of malice, rage and hate" (Visočki narodni vijećnik 2021). In September, this content was republished by mainstream media when the portal Faktor.ba wrote about her as a "political mother", citing "a majority of citizens" as the source (M. T. 2022). This phrase, as the portal claimed, came

from "citizens [who were] indignant " because "Babić [had] won the previous election presenting herself as the wife of a fallen soldier, single mother and a woman of faith", commenting that she was now a "vainglorious, vengeful woman who isn't even trying to hide it anymore". Although this example could be used to understand the narrative of the woman as a vengeful traitor, it also shows the way in which "motherhood" in biased reporting is used and contextualised as antithetical to "vengefulness" and "betrayal" of the Party of Democratic Action. The article is signed with initials only, and a CrowdTangle search revealed that it had been read by a significant number of people considering the size of the canton. This example is multi-faceted indeed, and can be used to understand the narrative of the woman as a turncoat and traitor.

Appeal to emotions: This narrative rests on the ideas of the construction of the nation and the role of the woman in that process. Ethnic identity in the former Yugoslavia is based on historical fears which are carefully fostered. The fear of biological shrinking of the nation, loss of culture, language and religious freedoms are elements of the mobilising discourse of nation-building. These threats are especially effective if deployed through female metaphors of the nation – woman as a biological sexualised being, as a mother, daughter, wife, a symbol of purity, a child-rearer and transmitter of the national values, someone who produces warriors and rulers for the nation, but also as a victim who is easily led astray. During the nation-building effort in the 1990s the woman was often used as a symbol of territorial vulnerability and national defilement, therefore, according to ethnocratic experience, the woman has a great potential for betrayal and weakening of the nation (Mostov 2000, 98). Every woman who stops being loyal to the national customs, whether it is just a perception created by the media to influence the electorate or she actually does something to disrupt the national harmony, stirs up a wide spectrum of negative emotions, condemnation and disdain, and finally loses her place in the community.

Personal and social – how the message was formulated: All available sources were used to shape the message of this narrative and secure legitimacy for it: authors of articles with or without a byline who spread disinformation as the unassailable truth or published evidence in the form of documents or photographs, figures of political authority, but also politicians' relatives. It bears stressing that the accusations of being "foreign protégées" levelled against politicians also targeted men – Jelena Trivić accused Milorad Dodik of being a Croatian protégé – but these constructions are more powerful if coupled with gendered stereotypes of women as turncoats and constructed and legitimised via anonymous portals and the mainstream media. Unlike men's, women's actions are observed, measured and judged

through a moral lens, which implies that operating in the public sphere is something "unnatural" for women, that they cannot hold their own, which conceals the message that they should give up.

Legitimising the narrative: This narrative, too, exhibits the trend of legitimising content from anonymous portals in the mainstream media and politicians' statements. For instance, the article with the document claiming that Jelena Trivić received 10 million dollars from the US government to work against the interests of the RS, published on the portals Patriote Srpske, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, was shared by SRNA, RTRS, ATV and others, as shown in the analysis conducted by the portal Raskrinkavanje (Ćosić 2022). We find a similar example in an article intended to depict Trivić's family as problematic, a short article without a byline headlined "Details of incident: family misunderstanding cause of attack on Jelena Trivić's brother-in-law", which describes the fracas between Trivić's brother-in-law and a relative in the town of Čelinac. This article, devoid of elements of public interest, was published on anonymous portals (Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Banjalučke priče), and RTRS reprinted it from the portal Banjaluka.net (2022a). Republication of harmful content by news agencies and the mainstream media significantly increases its reach and potential to influence the election results.

Use of vocabulary that conveys symbols and emotional messages: The symbols and language used in the construction of this narrative paints a picture of female candidates as traitors to their people, turncoats, corruptible persons in cahoots with foreign actors. SNSD candidate Sanja Vulić referred to Jelena Trivić as "Jelena 'Fake' Trivić", pointing to Trivić's insincerity. Milorad Dodik and Željka Cvijanović constantly stated that opposition candidates were working on the destruction of the RS, which culminated in their statements that the Republika Srpska would disappear within six months after the elections if the SNSD did not win the 2022 general elections (Dnevnik.ba 2022).

In addition to particular language constantly repeated in the media as well as in the statements by politicians, photographs were also used showing female candidates – primarily Jelena Trivić – with foreign actors, for instance Christian Schmidt. This was to suggest that women lacked loyalty, consistency, reliability, persistence and moral strength to withstand challenges. Female candidates were denounced as insincere in their motives for engaging in politics, with deliberate use of the gendered stereotype of women as corruptible turncoats. An image was constructed of incompetence and shortcomings of the female nature which was to be monitored, disciplined and re-educated.

Conclusion: As the above examples demonstrate, sexism (woman as a turncoat) was the basic narrative which was further contextualised by making references to the candidates' questionable morality or their betrayal of their people. This narrative, accompanied by elements of the myth of the nation, is mostly constructed through conspiracy theories, disinformation and biased reporting. Thus the label of treachery and fickleness was also put on the female candidates in the Bosnian-Herzegovinian elections, especially those from the opposition, and the reporting on Jelena Trivić, who was cast as part of a conspiracy, stood out in the researched sample. The values on which this narrative is based are rooted in a conservative value system and nationalism as a state ideology which rests on patriarchal control over the reproductive power of women, but also over their productive, public engagement. Every woman who stops being loyal to the national customs, whether it is just a perception created by the media to influence the electorate or she actually does something to disrupt the national harmony, stirs up a wide spectrum of negative emotions, condemnation and disdain, and finally loses her place in the community. Such narratives which criticise female political action in a moralising manner are created with a view to disempowering and represent an attempt to stifle women's political engagement and potential which threatens to shake and subvert the foundations of the patriarchal political system in Bosnia and Herzegovina. All of this has a pronounced ideological streak of patriarchal conservatism and sends a message to women that, as the initiators of change and actors in the full sense of the word, they are not welcome in the public sphere except insofar as they serve the interest of the community and fulfil their natural function of caring for others and displaying loyalty, first in the family and then in the ethnic community as an extended family. Considering the results of the election for the president of the RS we may conclude that all the discrediting content deployed by the media during the campaign, which has been analysed in detail here, had an impact on the voters' choices.

4.4.3. Female candidates as puppets of their party leaders, in whose shadow they stand

In the media we monitored, female candidates were not presented as independent politicians, but were instead tagged to their party leader, and this was the case in positively toned propaganda articles, in smear pieces but also in opinion pieces by experts on the political situation in the country. In August, it was mostly Borjana Krišto who was reported on in this manner – never without mentioning Dragan Čović, while in September this method was used on other female candidates as well: Sebija Izetbegović (always pointing out her husband was Bakir Izetbegović; HercegBosna Hrvati Bosne i Hercegovine 2022a; ABCPortal.info 2022), Željka Cvijanović (always

mentioning Milorad Dodik, sometimes in the same sentence) and Jelena Trivić, who, in September and especially October, went from a relatively independent political figure to a tag on the Stanivuković-Šarović - Bosić trio. There were almost no positively toned articles about female candidates in which the focus was solely on them; they were always mentioned alongside their party leader or a close party colleague.

General goal and purpose of the narrative: The goal of this narrative is to deprive female candidates of their individuality and political autonomy, that is, to render them faceless and belittle their political work, commitment, accomplishment and merit. Its purpose is to present them in the context of patriarchal female roles and to delegitimise any active and progressive role of women in politics. In addition, it aims to show the voters and the audience that female candidates do not act independently, but that there is a strong party leader behind them. Paradoxically, the narrative about the facelessness of female candidates in their party leaders' shadow was aimed equally at their potential voters and opponents. This is precisely what made it interesting for this analysis, and in the long run potentially damaging because of the message it sends to the women who would want to engage in politics – they would never be politically independent and would always be written about as figures from the shadow, even if they occupy the highest posts.

Methods of constructing the narrative: Discrediting and positively toned propagandistic reporting were both used in the construction of this narrative, examples of which were also found in opinion pieces on the election process and in statements and articles written by experts. In one article, historian Dragan Markovina, commenting on the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, said that "Borjana Krišto's name has no gravitas to it. She is on a par with Ana Brnabić in Serbia", and that Dragan Čović chose a bad candidate lest she win (Sarajevograd.ba 2022). Similarly, Croatian analyst Božo Skoko stated that Krišto's electoral results came as a surprise: "She managed to get 160,000 votes, and that's a record. Keep in mind that a few years ago Dragan Čović managed to win a seat in the Presidency with only 130,000. That speaks volumes about how concerned the Croats are for their fate, how attached they have been to a single candidate as they didn't dare risk diluting their vote" (R. I. 2022, portal Stav).

Propagandistic reporting: This kind of content was disseminated in biased and one-sided reporting, that is, propaganda, which means they were targeting potential voters. Željka Cvijanović, who was the subject of the largest number of propaganda articles because she performed the highest political function and ran for the highest office, was often mentioned

alongside Milorad Dodik in September and October. Articles and social media posts supporting Borjana Krišto's bid and calling on Croats to vote for her involved the party leader Dragan Čović. In an article about Croats and the elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina, one author says the following of Borjana Krišto: "Krišto is a candidate who embodies the determination of the Croat people in their demand for sovereignty. This vote is about the Croat people's attitude towards their sovereignty first and foremost, and only incidentally about the member of the Presidency" (Hrvati Herceg-Bosne 2022). In addition, thanks to Krišto's candidacy, the narrative about the first woman in the Presidency appeared in the mainstream media for the first time. Emancipatory elements were noticed in these articles, but their emancipatory effects were ethnically delimited. Articles by Sanja Vlaisavljević (shared by the Facebook page Hrvati Herceg-Bosne) and Marina Pendeš, which stressed the candidate's merit in a positive and articulate way, do not venture beyond ethnic contextualisation.

Discrediting: The fact that female candidates were not perceived as independent but closely associated with their party leaders was also used for discrediting purposes. There was more reposting of smear statements about Željka Cvijanović in September and October than in August. One example, a statement by Mladen Bosić, was taken from an opposition-leaning outlet and depicts Cvijanović as an invisible political figure: "But, what would Željka Cvijanović have done in that situation? Nothing, like she hasn't done anything now, staying in Dodik's shadow again" (BN 2022a). In another example from BN television, in which Milorad Dodik was criticised for playing a "do-gooder" handing out banknotes to children in public, it was said that Željka Cvijanović "just looked on and smiled – what else?" (BN 2022b). Her rival in the race, Mirko Šarović, smeared her by saying that she was Dodik's mouthpiece who had done nothing of substance for the RS: "Željka Cvijanović is a mere mouthpiece of Dodik. She has got no clear policies, she has shown nothing so far and no one takes her seriously, which cannot be good. She has never had a serious official meeting in all this time she has been the president, which is a clear indicator of her diplomatic abilities" (Banjaluka.net 2022b). Articles discrediting Željka Cvijanović were found on the web sites Faktor, Istok Portal slobodne Srpske, BN, Vijesti Srpske, as well as in statements by Slađana Jašarević from the SDS (Vijesti Srpske 2022b; Slobodna Bosna 2022). In the period after the elections, the analysed texts mentioned the fact that a woman had been elected to the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the first time rather superficially, merely stating the fact, without pointing out what that meant and why it was important. In addition to the lack of interest on the part of the media, this can be ascribed to society's general dismissal of women's contribution and to the downplaying of the fact that a female politician has been elected to

the Presidency for the first time, which at any rate tells us something about the treatment of female candidates in the media.

Creation and dissemination of the stereotype: Content about female candidates operating in the shadows of their party leaders came from different sources – expert commentators, political analysts, mainstream media, etc. The ubiquity of this narrative points to the fact that it was constructed with a purpose and that all available means of communication were used to help it penetrate public opinion as deeply as possible. Female candidates were not perceived as independent by the media but were always closely associated with their party leaders. They were always a part of a tandem, never self-sufficient, which is also concealed sexism. This manner of representing female candidates was detectable even before the start of the campaign, and the content was selected in August 2022, but at that time it dealt only with Borjana Krišto. There is always a subtext present when a female politician is in a position of power, even when the writing is not obviously offensive as when stereotyping women in politics. The articles in which Krišto is mentioned talk about her consulting with Croatian prime minister Andrej Plenković about the upcoming elections. In one analysis, sexism typically aimed at female politicians can be read: "Another option is Borjana Krišto. She would be an interim solution of sorts, like Jadranka Kosor for Sanader in Croatia at the time. According to unnamed party officials, Krišto would be a (short-term) interim solution by the time a new leader comes to the fore" (HercegBosna Hrvati Bosne i Hercegovine 2022b).

Appealing to voters' emotions: This narrative was intended for and used in positive reporting aimed at potential voters, but also in articles discrediting female candidates. It relies on the stereotype of a strong man and leader who protects – women are there to be protected, not to be leaders in their own right, but it is also deeply rooted in the narrative of nation-building. Female candidates who protect the interests of the collective stir up the noblest of emotions and garner support, approval and admiration, because they are "our" mothers, daughters, wives. Construction of national identities is still a strong mobilising factor in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the way in which it uses gender and gender roles plays an important role in the creation of commonly held values, traditions and customs.

Personal and social – how the message was formulated: This narrative was especially legitimised or disseminated by "authoritative experts", as the media labelled them. For instance, when asked if the Croats, as Vesna Pusić claims, returned the favour to Izetbegović and the Bosniaks by voting for Bećirović, writer Josip Mlakić first used the occasion to heap insults on Pusić, a university professor, Croatian politician, former foreign and

European affairs minister, etc., then answered that he did not understand how Vesna Pusić had suddenly become an "expert" on Bosnia and Herzegovina, that her hypothesis was misguided and nothing more than clap-trap of a forgotten politician with a sick ego, and gave a hypothesis of his own: "If Bećirović did get the odd vote in places where Croats are a majority, that was out revolt against the HDZ's faceless candidate Borjana Krišto. I don't believe that Dragan Čović was heartsick about her defeat, because her victory would have undermined his authority in the party he rules autocratically, like Andrej Plenković in Croatia" (Bljesak.info 2022). From this we can read that the point of Borjana Krišto was to consolidate the electorate, but that she was above all Čović's puppet.

Legitimising the narrative: This harmfulnarrative was constructed using the sexist tactic of "coupling", that is, borrowing the authority of the party leader behind the candidate. In the analysed content there were few positively toned articles about female candidates or politicians in which the focus was solely on them; they were always mentioned alongside their party leader or a close party colleague. Borjana Krišto was thus coupled with Dragan Čović, Željka Cvijanović with Milorad Dodik, Jelena Trivić with Draško Stanivuković, Mirko Šarović or Mladen Bosić.

Use of vocabulary that conveys symbols and emotional messages: "Coupling", intended to belittle the autonomous political actions of a female candidate and her importance as an independent political figure in the eyes of the voters, reached a new level in September, when the media gave Borjana Krišto a nickname of sorts – "Čović's smartest and prettiest creature", derived from a statement made by Dragan Čović (E. L. 2022, Faktor.ba). "We have the smartest, prettiest creature who offers to the Croat people and all the inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina her values in life and all those things she's been building in politics for the last twenty years. That is Mrs Borjana Krišto" (Dnevni.ba 2022).

Conclusion: At the end of the election campaign, content was aggressively promoted suggesting that no female candidates had the capacity and credibility to win, but seeing that they were part of a broader mission (survival of the people) and context (only the candidate's party is the right party), voters were invited to support them. That is to say, a certain female candidate's success or failure has nothing to do with her as a politician, a larger issue is at stake – the survival of a certain ethnic group. Female candidates were not presented as independent politicians in the media, but were instead tagged to their party leader, and this was the case in positively toned propaganda articles, in smear pieces but also in opinion pieces by experts on the political situation in the country. Representing

female candidates as puppets of their party leaders in whose shadows they operate contained the element of a higher purpose – the consolidation of a nation at an important historical moment, but also the preservation of the party leader's position. They were always a part of a tandem, never self-sufficient, which is also concealed sexism.

4.5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the harmful content published during the 2022 general elections in Bosnia and Herzegovina revealed a large number of instances of such content, as well as purposefully constructed harmful narratives about female candidates that could influence the outcome of the elections. The most represented categories of harmful content were propaganda, smear campaigns against individuals and content referring to the candidates' morals. Such a vast amount of biased and propagandistic media content and smear campaigns is a reflection of the polarisation and the substantial political influence on the media especially of the ruling parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whilst gender stereotypes were an effective tool for discrediting female candidates and mobilising the electorate. Although it was assumed that smear campaigns would be guided to a significant extent by sexism and sexualisation, the findings show that the most common manner in which female candidates in the 2022 general elections were discredited was pointing out their questionable moral integrity and insinuating that their actions amounted to betrayal, which points to the fact that, even when the candidates are women, the narratives about them cannot be separated from the dominant nationalist policies of the ruling parties based on the idea of the preservation or defence of the people/nation. As the analysis has shown and summarised in the chapter conclusions above, there were three types of harmful narratives based on the broader categories of gender stereotypes: female candidates as incompetent and out of their depth coupled with references to outward appearance; female candidates as turncoats and treacherous; female candidates as puppets of their party leaders in whose shadows they operate. All three narratives were based on a patriarchal value system according to which male and female social roles are essentially different. Female candidates were represented in the media through sexist and other misogynistic practices which constructed the narrative about women as incompetent and out of their depth in politics. The focus was not on their individual political merit, but on things unrelated to politics – their outward appearance, motherhood, being "photoshopped beyond recognition", "unkempt" or inexperienced in the political arena. In the collective consciousness, women are primarily associated with children, family and the future of the collective/nation, and it is incumbent upon women to preserve the honour of the community. Every woman who stops

being loyal to the national customs, whether it is just a perception created by the media to influence the electorate or she actually does something to disrupt the national harmony, stirs up a wide spectrum of negative emotions, condemnation and disdain in the electorate. Female candidates were also discredited by claims that they were puppets of their party leaders in whose shadows they operated. This narrative appeared even in positively toned propagandistic content, but what both the negative and positive articles had in common was the lack of perception of female candidates as independent, and that they were always closely associated with their party leaders.

The narrative aims to arouse patriotism and ethnic loyalty and encourage sacrificing personal ambition for the sake of belonging and contributing to the collective higher purpose, but more importantly, it embeds in the message the idea that women are simply not important. What is important is the mission of achieving a higher goal, the brunt of which ought to be borne by women led by their party leaders and leaders of the people. The message subtly enters the consciousness of the voters and general readership of these articles; as we have shown by pointing out the examples, the articles that are seemingly supportive are just as eloquent as those that are obviously malicious and smearing. The general purpose of this and other misogynistic narratives was to show that female politicians were less important in the election process than their male colleagues, but, paradoxically, also the importance of subordinating one's political agency to a higher purpose. This has a double effect on voters – it encourages them to vote, but not because the policies of a certain female politician should be their choice, but because they are in the service of the preservation of the nation. In the long run, all these blatantly sexist narratives discourage women from entering politics, send them a message that they do not belong in the political arena because they are incompetent, lying, lack knowledge and skills, do not make rational decisions, are insecure and merely implement the policies of their superiors.

The most common sources of harmful content about female candidates were anonymous internet portals as well as Facebook groups and private media which republished politicians' statements or content, but also content from anonymous portals. That harmful narratives about female candidates were purposefully constructed can be seen from the examples in which damaging, stereotyping content as well as disinformation and conspiracy theories from anonymous media were republished by mainstream media, which lent legitimacy to this content. Legitimacy was also attained by featuring statements by other candidates, both male and female, as well as experts.

The articles analysed here, published by the portals Banjalučka istina, Banjalučke priče, Banjaluka 24.media, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Faktor magazin and the portal of the Alternativna televizija ATV, are inappropriate for the media sphere in our or in any other country. In addition to potentially exerting influence on the electorate, in the long run they influence everyone who reads them by demonstrating that any kind of abuse of political opponents is permissible and that there is no line separating decent and professional writing from fabricated smears and slander. All this content, narratives and practices are ultimately dangerous because they shape a readership that will find ethical and professional reporting uninteresting and insufficient. It is disheartening to see that there was no analysis of political programmes and commitments of the female candidates as gender issues in the media, and that the fact that a woman was elected to the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the first time was absent as well. Under such circumstances, social networks could have been excellent tools for navigating one's way to information, debunking fake news, and expedited transmission of truth, but this analysis has found that they were nothing more than the means of spreading hate speech, deploying harmful narratives, conveying disinformation, etc. We have witnessed an unusual absence of culture of communication and a complete lack not only of female solidarity but also basic respect for political opponents. The social media accounts of Sanja Vulić, a member of the presidency of the SNSD and a candidate in the 2022 elections, are a textbook example.

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Chapter 5

DISCREDITATION ON ETHNIC GROUNDS: EVOKING THE WAR, REVISING THE PAST AND USING VICTIMS IN ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

Belma Buljubašić

5.1. INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

The 2022 general election campaign cycle in Bosnia and Herzegovina was marked by mutual accusations among party leaders, evocation of wartime events, name-shaming of political enemies (from both their own and the other entity), stories of 'ancient hatred' among the peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina and their different historical roles in different periods of the 20th century. Numerous memorial services for World War II victims were used to this end, as well as inflammatory language on social networks and insinuations about a possible new armed conflict.

Specific problems that the citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have to deal with and any plans that may be realistic or feasible in the next few years gained the least attention (Sokol and Buljubašić 2022; Dučić 2022). Likewise, no specific party programmes or realistic goals for the period were presented, and one of the key themes presented again was the story of an uncertain future for Bosnia and Herzegovina, i.e. whether the state could survive the near future at all, who the principal culprits for such a situation were and who might be able to guarantee security for the population. This effort to create an atmosphere of fear was aided greatly by numerous media outlets, which served solely and exclusively as platforms for relaying the politicians' dramatic statements without offering any analysis, interpretation or commentary of their content, which should be one of the primary tasks of good analytic journalism.

The media stated that the 2022 election was the quietest and the most boring ever held, and it was assessed as unimaginative, bland and full of generalisations (Vukić 2022). Based on the findings of our three-month research (early August to late October 2022) we cannot fully agree with this statement. The campaign cycle was indeed unimaginative, because since the end of the war in BiH all campaigns have been based on more or less the same content, focusing on narratives about the past, much more than on the present or the future, as well as on patriotic phrases that further solidify antagonistic political situations and the dominant nationalist narratives. The statements made by politicians during that period cannot be observed as

bland – they were very passionate, personalised and targeted, and often filled with hatred and provocation. If generalisations can include affirmations of the complex political situation, endless threats and accusations against others for all negative developments, then we must not disregard the revision and relativisation of the past, which run through every campaign, as well as the efforts to use wartime victims to score political points, which is a particular societal problem that leaves deep and lasting effects on society. This also includes inevitable genocide denial, as well as the celebration of the war criminals of the respective peoples as true heroes and saviours of the nation.

Our research results show a very manipulative, inciting and passionate campaign. The central theme of the campaign was the war and wartime events. This does not mean that previous campaigns did not mention wartime events (a simple glance at the texts and posters of those periods will suffice); however, as time goes by, memories of the war need to be intensified, because fear and the creation of a negative political atmosphere are used in an attempt to hide the dysfunctional political system, decades of corruption and the theft of public resources, as well as the lack of prosperity in BiH society, particularly for the younger generation, who are deciding in increasingly greater numbers to leave the country (Vojić 2022); or simply because of the fact that the dominant political elites have nothing to offer. There is also an attempt to burden the new generation of future voters with a war they do not even remember and thus traumatise them as well, so these events are presented to them as a warning of everything that could happen to them should they be as naïve as their parents and the generations before them. In this way a biased electorate is created that is intended to champion the nationalist discourse and the narratives that are constructed and carried over from one campaign to the next.

According to Castells (2014, 272), election campaigns function on the basis of voter predispositions, by activating or deactivating emotional and cognitive processes in order to achieve their goals, because victory is the one and only thing that matters to campaigning parties and candidates.

Based on our research, the most frequent themes in the leading parties' campaigns were: war and wartime suffering, ethnic cleansing, murders and mass graves; also required was (ab)use of the human suffering of World War II, denouncing direct political opponents as traitors of their own people and foreign agents, blaming other constituent peoples for the current political crisis in BiH, targeting certain cities as centres of power, conspiracy and evil, demonisation of entire peoples etc. All this was accompanied by emotionally saturated words, emotional manipulation, scheming and blackmail,

dissemination of fear and creation of an extremely toxic atmosphere in the community. As for the leading parties in BiH, we are referring to those that have won the highest number of votes in the past several election cycles – Party of Democratic Action (SDA), Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) and Union of Independent Social-democrats (SNSD).

The generation and dissemination of fear has been proven to be a successful method, as illustrated by earlier election campaigns. Kuljić (2023) states that fear is generated by reminders of the slaughter of a nation and loss of identity, i.e. that politics is a tried-and-tested tool of the politics of fear, and that a victimised national past is the easiest to mobilise.

The inability to confront the past critically is the consequence, inter alia, of decades of the politics that led to war, many of which are still present in the political arena. However, it turns out that not even the parties that were established after the signing of the Dayton Agreement are prepared to refrain from the manipulative use of wartime narratives for election purposes. This is, of course, not only relevant for SNDS, established in 1996, a pronouncedly nationalist party as evident from their actions rather than their statute; this also applies to *Stranka za BiH, Narod i Pravda and Partija demokratskog progresa* (PDP)*,* but also to *Naša stranka.* For example, Dragan Mioković, a former police officer from Sarajevo who is popular on Twitter, mainly among Bosniaks since his posts are dominated by the Bosniak narrative, was a *Naša stranka* candidate for the Federation BiH Parliament. In an interview for the *Klix* news portal just a few days before election day, he referred to constant accusations by SDA and their propaganda machine that *Naša stranka* was a safe haven for deserters. In defence of *Naša stranka,* he said that his party's candidate lists for FBiH and State Parliaments comprised more than 70% of those who had been in the RBiH Army or RBiH Police Forces (Vasić 2022).

Such examples show that, irrespective of when a party was established or how it is perceived among potential voters (and *Naša stranka* is often targeted by right-wing bots as treacherous and 'unpatriotic'), and also irrespective of which ideological avenue it pursues, no party is immune to populism and memories of war, because they all understand that such stories emotionally impact a considerable part of the electorate, which ultimately gives them mandates and positions.

Even during the 2020 local election campaign, social networks were inundated with posters and posts stating that this or that person was a demobilised solider, the son of a soldier or the holder of wartime decoration. All this is deliberate, because the fact that someone was a solider or is the

child of a soldier would automatically mean that they are an honourable and moral individual who should receive votes and who would not let their voters down. This is also used to hide corruption and various kinds of fraud. One of the numerous illustrations of this is the so-called *Asim affair* of 2020: clear evidence of paying for votes did not prevent Bakir Izetbegović, SDA president, to stand before the media and say that Asim Sarajlić was a minor and a fighter who had been injured several times (Al Jazeera Balkans 2020).[22]

According to Ruth Wodak (2020), populist right-wing parties successfully generate fear in relation to both real and invented threats, they have a clear tendency to re-traditionalise, and right-wing populism refers not only to the form of its rhetoric, but also its specific content.

Namely, according to Wodiak (2022, 2-3), populist right-wing parties act in the following manner:

1. They instrumentalise a minority (political, ethnic, religious, etc.) as the scape-goat, i.e. responsible for the current problems, and subsequently constitute the group as dangerous and a threat against 'us';
2. They call on common sense and anti-intellectualism, which is, in fact, a return to pre-modern, pre-enlightenment thinking.

In the case of BiH election campaigns, right-wing and nationalist parties establish members of the opposition parties and the national parties of the other two peoples as the culprits, accusing them of blocking political processes and being a destabilising force, i.e. that their policies are retrograde and detrimental to the people they represent.

The appeal to anti-intellectualism is clear through selective presentations of very complex issues, in which there is an attempt to simplify things and reduce them to black-and-white representations, so that the party is presented as distinctly positive, while all others are distinctly negative. The same happens with wartime events – the "we defended ourselves, they attacked us" narrative. This is particularly successful through biased media outlets, but also through social networks and party bots, which are active not only during the campaign, but also throughout the year. This indicates a nexus between a considerable number of media outlets and political and economic elites, because economic and political pressures and the media are often connected and interlinked (Turčilo and Buljubašić 2017, 30).

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22   In February 2023, the Municipal Court in Sarajevo acquitted Asim Sarajlić.

5.2. KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS: MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS WITH THE GREATEST HARMFUL CONTENT AND THE MOST FREQUENTLY REPEATED CATEGORIES

During the three-month media monitoring, from August until October 2002, we analysed content published in the media and on social networks. We selected one hundred online media and social network profiles identified as relevant for the research. Before selecting the media outlets and social networks, we conducted a brief analysis to identify the media which are popular, with the most readers, and which most spread multi-ethnic intolerance, publish unverified and manipulative content, and have large numbers of followers. We also mapped out Twitter and Facebook accounts of persons, either under their full names or pseudonyms, and of organisations, whose posts generate considerable user attention. We deemed it necessary to include social networks, since numerous accounts share questionable media content, and also because statuses and posts by selected users, as well as different photomontages and video content, further solidify harmful narratives that reach a large number of users. In addition, recent research confirms that social networks are an important source of information for a large part of internet users and media audiences, and that BiH politicians use them more and more for communicating with and influencing their voters (Sokol and Hasečič 2020). During the research, we also observed other social network profiles that proved to be very influential or harmful, and therefore added them to our research.

Using a number of key words, Metricom marked 7613 texts / content items, and after examination, 2174 were selected for analysis. The selected key words were those that could refer to discreditation, hate speech, ethno-national labelling, including, for example, "enemies", "villains", "genocide", "Ustasha", "Chetnik","'balija", "counting" (referring to military strength), names of military units and convicted war criminals, and words used to discredit members of other peoples. Articles and posts that did not contain any of these harmful categories were not analysed.

The analysis included 811 articles from the month of August, 789 from September and 547 from October. The data show that the election campaign period started before its official opening in September, and this should be attributed to certain dramatic and tendentious statements by political leaders which caused considerable reaction, with days and days of extended media and social network coverage, but also the fact that August is the month that marks the anniversary of the Storm (*Oluja*) military operation, about which Serbs and Croats have diametrically opposed views.

For ease of use, the table below shows the harmful categories present in most of the content we analysed. In addition to categories of harmful content presented in other chapters, this chapter also includes the following: wartime rhetoric (the use of wartime terminology in statements and texts), memories of war (mostly related to memorials of the recent war and World War II, used as propaganda), as well as inciteful content, i.e. inflammatory rhetoric, including, for example, references to secession, the impossibility of cohabitation in BiH etc.

Table 1: Damaging content over three months

CATEGORY	NUMBER OF REPETITIONS OVER THREE MONTHS OF RESEARCH
Biased media reporting	958
Denial of crimes and glorification of war criminals	101
Propaganda content	445
Inciteful content	289
Hate speech and hatenarratives	148
Wartime rhetoric	77
Reminders of war and the past	165

Almost 65% of the analysed content was related to biased media reporting and propaganda, with some inciteful content, reminders of war and hate speech and hateful narratives. This amount of biased media content confirms the theory of economic and political pressure on the media, as well as the fact that the aim of many media outlets is not professional reporting, but rather content that brings the most likes and shares. During the month of August, biased media reporting (678 items) and propaganda (335 items) were the most frequent. In September, when the campaign was officially opened, much of the content was related to references to and the use of the past (165), mainly referring to the 1990s, whereas in October, most of the content contained inciteful speech (280). In October, we noted distinctly biased media reporting in almost three hundred of the items selected for analysis. It should be noted that the volume of harmful content increased during certain events, inciteful statements by politicians and memorial services. For example, if a politician made an inciteful statement that was carried by the media, similar reactions followed from other politicians as well as social network users.

Particularly problematic was the content related to the glorification of war criminals, denial of war crimes, hate speech and hateful narratives. In September, a considerable number of texts in the Republika Srpska was devoted to two convicted war criminals – Ratko Mladić and Radoslav Brđanin. The occasions were Mladić's illness and Brđanin's death, and in the RS media, politicians made statements about their 'wartime achievements', with both the politicians and the media completely ignoring the crimes that the two were convicted for (Grebo 2022). This is a particularly disturbing fact which shows that, despite the changes to the BiH Criminal Code which define the glorification of war criminals as a crime, war crimes are still being denied. The most obvious example of denial of genocide and war crimes during the election campaign was the SNSD promotion material, with a list of reasons why "it wasn't easy for Srpska", including, inter alia, "Muslim propaganda and false stories about killing, rape, aggression, genocide, ethnic cleansing" (Tomić 2022). Some 150 instances of hate speech and hateful narratives were recorded in the three months of research. They often included, for example, derogatory names for certain groups, such as "genocidal", or reducing Bosniaks to a religious group, the "Muslims", which is a term often used by Milorad Dodik.

Most of the harmful content was identified in the mainstream media, but also on social networks. Media outlets that disseminated most of the harmful content were *Glas Srpske*, *Stav*, *Hrvatski medijski servis*, SRNA news agency, *Nezavisne novine* and the RTRS public broadcaster. Without giving amnesty to the commercial / private media outlets for the harm they cause, public broadcasters are nonetheless expected to be far more professional in their work, in view of the fact that they are non-profit, independent radio and television organisations established for the public good, financed by public revenue, and their diverse, balanced, high-quality programmes should meet the needs of the largest possible number of citizens (Veljanovski 2005, 28).

Some of the portals that were particularly active in producing and disseminating harmful content related to ethno-national groups were anonymous, i.e. portals with no impressum: ABCPortal.info (which only states that registration is under way), Poskok.info, Herceg Bosna Hrvati Bosne i Hercegovine and Banjaluka24.media.

As for social media, accounts close to the nationalist parties were particularly active. Although Metricom did not extract content from all the active party bots because their number keeps growing daily and the language used on social networks is different, our team did monitor social networks and mapped the profiles that published problematic content, as well as comments by users who shared such content widely via those platforms.

In regard to that, we refer primarily to persons / bots close to HDZ, SDA and SNSD, since they proved to be the most active and the most numerous. Their closeness to these parties was easy to observe, as their content was particularly manipulative and key data was removed from it.[23] Notable content on social networks also came from sympathisers of the *Demokratska fronta* (DF), with a large part of it being inciteful, and an entire people (Croats in this case) was marked as criminal and dangerous for the future of BiH. All the Croats who, for different reasons, did not support the re-election of Željko Komšić to the BiH Presidency, were marked as followers of criminal politics.

Other parties also had active bots and social network sympathisers who wrote biased content in favour of those parties. Still, parts of that content were based on at least some fact and, unlike the bots close to the nationalist ideologies, no significant volume of explicit incitement against a particular group or individual was noted.

SNSD bots were also very active, particularly on Twitter, trying in different ways to denounce the SDS and PDP candidates, who ran together again this year, presenting them as traitors who do not work in the interests of the Serb people.

Social network profiles that stood out in terms of harmful content over these three months were the Twitter accounts of: Jan Palach, Josip Cvitkovic, Milan Tegeltija, Srđan Mazalica, Sanja Vulić and Patriote Srpske. As for Facebook, harmful content was disseminated the most by Yasmin Mulahusein, Ponosni Bošnjaci, Vildana Hajdarpašić, Bošnjaci Jablanica, Ado Lingo and the Hrvati Herceg-Bosne page. As underscored above, we noted these profiles during our campaign monitoring, because we observed that their content was shared and received numerous reactions, and also that they were discussed on social networks and among those who did not share their views. Jasmin Mulahusić also became known to the general public after his arrest in September 2021, and some media often marked him as an SDA bot, so his content was frequently discussed in the public arena (R. D. 2021).

While the so-called Serb and Croat bots close to SNSD and HDZ were more active on Twitter, the so-called Bosniak bots close to SDA disseminated their harmful content primarily via Facebook. Although some of them do have Twitter accounts too, they are not as popular on that social network as on Facebook. Facebook pages and profiles mainly disseminated photomontages

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23   For example, when they praise a politician linked to corruption or disastrous omissions in office, such details are removed and the politicians are described in positive terms only, often including their wartime service, i.e that they were soldiers during the war.

with malicious comments and video-content, while Twitter was dominated by text posts and comments on certain statements or political moves.

Research indicates a growing and under-researched use of social networks for political ends, as well as the use of political bots, often potentially manipulative because they create the impression of coming 'from the people'. There were some differences in posts disseminated across social networks by the so-called opposition bots. For example, in the Federation FBiH, such content touched upon the ideological differences between the ruling SDA and other parties, particularly the SDP and *Naša stranka,* whereas in the RS they mainly focused on pointing out the crime and corruption of the ruling SNSD, because the ideological positions of the ruling and the opposition parties are identical, and boil down to the struggle to preserve this BiH entity. Let us also note that Gorica Dodik, daughter of Milorad Dodik, is known to the public as one of the "most active Twitterers", and that during the campaign she often confronted those who disagreed with her, defending the political moves of her father and the SNSD.

At this point, we want to look at the term 'bot', because the media and the public often refer to bots and trolls. The first trolls were users with several identities, dating back to the time before internet and web pages. The BBS (Bulletin Board System), an electronic notice board, was popular in the mid-1980s, until the appearance of internet forums and web-presentations. The system included serious forums as well as less serious ones, so trolls started to appear in those dedicated to 'easier' topics such as film, video games or music. This term refers to unpleasant verbal activity on the internet, in electronic media and in live speech. Bot is an abbreviated form of the Russian word robot and it denotes internet users who are often anonymous (although they may also appear under their full names) and focus their activities on different promotions, political parties and movements, online activism etc. Most experts agree that botting and trolling are, in fact, one and the same activity, with a specific purpose, and that they are often part of different online campaigns (Trajković 2021).

5.3. KEY NARRATIVES OF HARMFUL CONTENT DURING THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN PERIOD

The monitoring identified two key narratives, i.e. matrices that marked members of other ethnic groups and competing political parties as enemies, and national parties that protect the interests of that particular ethnic group as protectors. These matrices were noted in different parties and the media outlets close to them, but similar elements were used in their construction.

The first of the two narratives declared political competitors from their own people traitors and 'non-patriots', whereas politicians from other parties and members of other peoples were marked as enemies who do not share the same vision of the state or of the future. In these examples, attention was largely focused on labelling and calling out 'traitors' among their own people, as they are in direct political competition, while politicians from the other two peoples were used in this narrative as partners assisting the 'traitors' in destroying BiH.

The other narrative disseminated through the media and social networks was presenting the national parties as protectors of their own people. Some posts were literally threatening, telling their potential voters that their fate would be uncertain if they did not vote for that particular party. This narrative is linked to the first one, that is, the protectors of the people are there to protect them from traitors from among their own people who come from different political parties, as well as from members of other constituent peoples with whom they do not share the same vision of the future.

The first narrative can be called the *narrative of betrayal,* and the second *the narrative of the protectors of the people.* We will provide a detailed explanation of both, and present their main goals, the methods used to construct them and the vocabulary used in the media and on social networks, and then indicate how they connect to the present and the future, as both narratives are based on the past. Most of the examples used in our analysis are from August and September, i.e. the period before election day.

5.3.1. The narrative of betrayal

Aim / intention of the narrative: The aim of this narrative is the defamation of political opponents, and presenting their policies and positions as particularly dangerous for the voters' future and for the very survival of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or of the Republika Srpska. The RS campaigns did not speak about the state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but rather exclusively about the future of that entity, and BiH as a state was completely erased from political remarks and speeches, clearly indicating a negative attitude towards BiH as a state, which is the same for the ruling SNSD and the RS opposition parties. So this narrative is aimed at direct political opponents, i.e. the politicians coming from the same entity and running for the same office.

Methods of constructing and presenting the narrative: In order to diminish their opponents and present them as dangerous for the future, the published content was particularly biased, spreading propaganda

about 'traitors' concerned only for their own interests and working to the detriment of their own people. Biased media content was easy to identify. It was mainly based on few or no facts, and the evidence it relied on was presented selectively, removing any parts that could create a counter-effect among the public.

The narrative of betrayal takes several forms, with deviations between the entities in BiH, as well as between the different parties in the Federation BiH. This type of narrative can particularly be seen among the media and bots close to the SDA, focused on politicians who spent the war outside BiH, or who were in the country but were not in the RBiH Army, or who were in the army but performed light duty. To illustrate this, it should be noted that for years and years, *Naša stranka* politicians (Edin Forto, Predrag Kojović, and even Sabina Čudić, who was just a little girl during the war) have often been labelled as 'runaways' and 'deserters', and SDP politicians Damir Mašić and Saša Magazinović are often labelled as traitors who spent the war in Serbia. It is enough to Google these terms and names and see the results to confirm this.

Thus, to construct the narrative of betrayal, there is often a sub-narrative about a person as someone who fled the war, i.e. who lived abroad during the war in BiH. This creates an image of these people as unreliable, fleeing from difficult situations, not to be trusted, as they are likely to do the same thing if a similar situation occurs. The narrative of betrayal that comes from the SDA has been present in the public and the media for a number of years now, and it simply intensifies during election campaigns and the post-election formation of governments.

In the Republika Srpska, the narrative of betrayal was constructed by calling out opponents as foreign agents working against the RS and the Serb people. This narrative came from the media and bots close to the SNSD, particularly focusing on Jelena Trivić, who was running for the post of RS president, directly against Milorad Dodik (Ćosić 2022).

Using vocabulary that supports the symbols and emotional messages of the narrative: In order to analyse the narrative of betrayal, it is particularly important to include the process of altering politicians' names and creating different, negative ones. This is done to create an additional negative charge among the voters. This includes distorted, pejorative invented names and nicknames used to label politicians from different parties with different ideologies, which can be encountered almost daily on social networks, particularly on Twitter. Some of the names used most frequently by social network users that were identified included

komunjare [communist filth], *titoisti, yutelovci* [Yutel followers], *jugobalije* [Yugoslav filthy Muslims], *jugozombiji* [Yugoslav zombies], *petokolonaši* [fifth columnists], which is part of the vocabulary of everyday communication on Facebook and Twitter. Each of these words attempts to indicate the alleged treacherous nature of different individuals, since such posts designate Yugoslavia as a prison of its people, where national emotions of Bosniaks - Muslims at the time - were suppressed, and the five-pronged star was the symbol under which Bosna and Herzegovina was attacked, because the JNA [Yugoslav People's Army] sided with the Bosnian Serbs, despite the fact that the five-pronged star had been officially removed as insignia from JNA soldiers' uniforms before the war began. This was, thus, an attack against anyone who said anything positive about Yugoslavia, or took pictures next to a statue of Tito or visited his grave, or displayed the Yugoslav flag. There are numerous examples of this kind on social networks, spread as memes or different photomontages with statements allegedly made by those individuals inscribed over them. Such content is particularly present during election campaigns, used as warnings to the voters as to what will happen if they vote for these politicians, additionally reviving the narrative about Yugoslavia and its human rights violations. *Yutelovci* is also a pejorative marking of fans of both Yugoslavia and Yutel TV,[24] broadcast just before the war as a form of resistance against the biased media of the time, which spread war propaganda.

Another three pejoratives in this group are *krmojedi* [pork eaters], *čvarkojedi* [pork fat eaters] and *slaninari* [bacon eaters], regularly used on social networks in relation to SDP and *Naša stranka* candidates. These labels are again linked to Yugoslavia, indicating that Muslims tried to assimilate by rejecting their religious sensibilities and consuming alcohol and pork, strictly forbidden under Islamic rules. Colloquial speech also includes the labels of *podrumaši* [cellar dwellers] and *titoisti.* The term *podrumaši* indicates a person who spent the war in basement shelters, hiding from both the shelling and the compulsory military service, whereas marking a person *titoist* indicates that the individual is ideologically linked to socialist Yugoslavia, to brotherhood and unity (one of the main slogans of the SFRY) and that such a person is a traitor with no feelings of nationhood.

Discreditation: As for individuals, party bot profiles and party-biased media mainly focused on Denis Bećirović, the SDP candidate for BiH Presidency, Elmedin Dino Konaković, president of *Narod i pravda,* Bakir

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24   According to nationalists, Yutel was a TV station which aimed to present a distorted image of reality and to encourage Muslims that there would be no war, making it directly responsible for the tragic fate of this people during the period from 1992 to 1995.

Izetbegović, SDA president and candidate for BiH Presidency, Jelena Trivić, the candidate for the RS president, and Željko Komšić, candiate for the BiH Presidency.

The media that supported the SDA during the campaign, primarily *Stav* and *Faktor,* focused most of their negative content on Denis Bećirović and Elmedin Konaković, formerly a senior SDA official who established *Narod i pravda* as a new party. They received daily support with this from party bots.

Denis Bećirović was marked as a hypocrite, and in order to substantiate this claim, a magazine cited the information announced in the media in July 2022, that Bećirović did not pray at the *shaheed* funeral in Potočari. The text carried by the *Stav* portal insisted that Bećirović did not respect Bosniaks, but counted on their votes, and the author reminded the readers of a statement made by Hamdija Abdić Tigar, wartime commander and SDA member, regarding voting for Bećirović – "don't play with that" (Alispahić 2022).

The same magazine marked Bećirović as a liar (R. S. 2022), a mascot for a coalition advocating legitimate representation (Faktor 2022a, published on the *Stav* portal), and as a boring candidate who spouts boring platitudes. In addition, his attitude towards religion, namely Islam, and his religious orientation, were cited frequently, aiming to send the message that a person who is not a practicing believer cannot represent the Bosniak people. In one text, *Stav* cited a post by Bećirović copied from his personal account, where he was photographed standing at the Kovači memorial cemetery, with Irfan Čengić, a party colleague. In the background you can see a woman with a hijab. The photograph was posted on a Friday. The journalist, signed R. I., said the following: "Friday, the mosque, Kovači and a hijab walking by is the environment in which Denis and Irfan want to present themselves to the voters on the day of *Jummah.* We know that Irfan does attend *Jummah* and that he is under pressure from his colleagues about that, but we do not know about Denis." (R. I. 2022)

Thus, the SDP is presented as a party that does not favour believers among its members, thus sending a message to the voters not to vote for them, insisting that Bosniaks can only be Muslims, as supported by the results of the 2013 census.

As for Dino Konaković, he was also marked as an 'anti-Bosniak' element, pro-Serb and pro-Croat. As numerous social media posts referred to Konaković, he was sometimes marked as pro-Serb, sometimes as close to the HDZ and its president Dragan Čović. The *Stav* magazine marked

Konaković as Islamophobic, auto-chauvinistic and riddled with complexes, because, as was reported, he made a statement at a pre-election rally in Novi Travnik that Bisera Turković, minister of foreign affairs, spent more time with a headscarf than without it (Drnišlić 2022a).

Stav stated the following about Konaković's party:

> *Narod i pravda* is nothing but a poisonous political watermelon grown in the greenhouses managed by local embassies, with a green exterior, but a rotten red interior. Like the party, like its personalities. Over-ripe yet unpicked, ambitious yet unfulfilled, hungry for power yet unsure if they will win it, the watermelons of NIP simply cannot wait for the autumn and the election, and they are losing the ability to camouflage themselves, simply bursting with nervousness, spilling their seed of evil across the public space. (Drnišlić 2022b)

Thus, Konaković and his party were marked as anti-Bosniak and treacherous, and the remark about the 'red flesh' is an allusion to them being Communists, while Konaković himself was accused by the same magazine that he was joining the *Communist filth* in ridiculing the Raisu-l-ulama Husein Kavazović.

An analysis of this media content leads to the conclusion that all politicians not in the SDA are traitors and a threat to BiH and Bosniaks.

It should also be noted that the Konaković family, Elmedin Konaković and his wife, Dalija Hasanbegović Konaković, as well as her family, are constantly targeted by SDA bots. Bots have often taken information from their private lives in order to insinuate and fabricate different conspiracy theories (Radiosarajevo.ba 2022).

In posts by Facebook bots, Konaković is often referred to as *Gavrilo* or *Adžija* [corrupt form of *hajji*]. The nickname Gavrilo came about because in 2019 the government of the Sarajevo Canton funded the renovation of the Memorial Chapel of the Vidovdan Martyrs (RTRS 2019), at the time when Konaković was the Speaker of the Sarajevo Canton Assembly, and the Chapel includes the name of Gavrilo Princip, a member of the *Mlada Bosna* organisation and Franz Ferdinand's assassin. Since the 1990s, with the change of the political system, the perception of Gavrilo Princip has changed from hero to a very negative figure, marked in the Bosniak narrative as a Serb nationalist and a terrorist, so alternating the name Konaković with Gavrilo is an attempt to indicate his pro-Serb orientation. The situation is similar with the nickname *Adžija,* because Konaković did perform the *hajj*

[pilgrimage] to Mecca, but since bots mark him as a traitor and a pro-Serb politician with numerous concessions to the Serb and the Croat people, they pronounce this word without the *h* sound, as is frequently the case in the Serbian language.

Bakir Izetbegović was also frequently criticised by the Croat media, the media supportive of opposition parties, and also through numerous social network pages, calling him a *trezoraš* [vault dweller] who spent the war in the vault of the Central Bank, calling his party the green gang, and referring to the Izetbegović family as the Izetbegović dynasty, the dynasty from Poljine, etc.

Here are some of the labels appearing during these three months: *velikosrpski zločinci* [Greater Serbian criminals]*, velikohrvatski zločinci* [Greater Croatian criminals]*, UZP-ovci* [followers of joint criminal enterprises]*, ISIL-ovci* [ISIL followers]*, agresori* [aggressors]*, srpsko-hrvatski kuhari* [Serbo-Croatian chefs]*, muslimanski nacionalisti* [Muslim nationalists]*, genocidaši* [genocide lovers]*, prevrtljive komšije* [fickle neighbours]*.* Almost all these labels are notably linked to wartime events, and there is a consistent effort to discredit an entire people and mark them as followers of retrograde policies, nationalists and criminals, who are direct threats to 'our people'.

Pejoratives used to refer to traitors also included coined terms based on first or last names of former or current politicians marked as traitors – *abdićevci* [followers of Abdić][25] and *dritanovici* [followers of Dritan],[26] while Croat media referred to Željko Komšić as Sejdo Bajramović.[27]

These media outlets and HDZ bots refer to Komšić as 'the second Bosniak member of the BiH Presidency', 'an extremist politician', etc. (S. S. 2022, at the *Dnevni avaz* portal). The term *UZP-ovac* was coined using the term

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25   *Abdićevac* was coined using the name of Fikret Abdić, formerly a prominent SDA member who won the highest number of Muslim votes at the first democratic election in BiH. During the war, in 1993, he founded the so-called autonomous region of Western Bosnia, which led to an intra-Bosniak conflict. He was convicted for war crimes after the war, and numerous Bosniaks see him as a national traitor.

26   The name *dritanovci*, refers to the current prime minister of Montenegro, Dritan Abazović, marked as a traitor of Montenegro by numerous media and part of the general public in the Federation BiH, who entered a coalition with pro-Serb politicians and thus betrayed the state of Montenegro.

27   Sejdo Bajramović also indicates a traitor of one's own people, who sided with the pro-Serb communist line, emphasizing that he was in favour of the survival of Yugoslavia. Bajramović was against Albanian separatist policies and was elected member of the SFRY Presidency from the autonomous region of Kosovo in March 1991, when it was already evident that Yugoslavia was about to dissolve.

'joint criminal enterprise' and it refers to all the Croats whom the Bosniak nationalist media mark as nationalists. The term also refers to Bosniaks who question the election of Željko Komšić, and state that every time he was elected to the Presidency, it was with the help of Bosniak votes. The term 'joint criminal enterprise' and the pejorative *UZP-ovac* refers to the ICTY judgement against leaders of so-called Herzeg-Bosnia in the case of Prlić et al., sentencing them to long-term prison sentences for crimes against humanity, violations of the laws or customs of war and serious violations of the Geneva Conventions (Hadžović 2022).

Discreditation: Media outlets and bots close to the SNSD discredited the PDP and SDS candidates, presenting them as incapable of preserving the Republika Srpska, as foreign agents and members of non-governmental organisations (insinuating that they were traitors paid by foreigners), which was further intensified when, following the preliminary results, the Central Election Commission ordered a new vote count for the RS president (Radio Free Europe 2022).

Inter-ethnic incitement that came from representatives of leading political parties was intense throughout the campaign period, covered by numerous media outlets. Certain journalists spiced that up with toxic commentary (*Hrvatski medijski servis, Stav,* ABCPortal.info…), consciously accepting the creation of an even deeper gap between members of the different peoples in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Discreditation is evident in the above examples of Bećirović being described as incompetent for the position of member of the BiH Presidency from the Bosniak people, as he was labelled an *infidel* and *titoist.* An example of discreditation as well as hate speech is contained in a statement by Dodik directed at the PDP and SDS, describing them as Serb representatives who defend Muslim positions and who question his relationship with the Croatian President Zoran Milanović, although Croatia fully observes the Dayton Peace Accords. In his statement, he said that had it not been for him, no one from the opposition would have known when crimes were committed against the Serbs or by whom, and that he had never shied away from calling things their real names. Dodik sent a message to the opposition parties that one does not become a Serb in a campaign, or through denying someone else's patriotism (SRNA 2022a).

On the other hand, Croat media and bots focused most of their rage on the fourth candidacy of Željko Komšić for the BiH Presidency, calling him an illegitimate Croat representative and the second Bosniak member of the Presidency (ABCPortal.info 2022a).Croat media have been referring to Komšić as the second Bosniak member for several years, due to the fact

that he entered the Presidency each time with a predominantly Bosniak vote, which is statistically quite easy to verify (Krajina 2021). This leads to numerous public debates between those who believe that everyone has the right to vote for whomever they want and those who believe that Komšić running for the Presidency is a political game directed against the Croats because, as they insist, Komšić does not enjoy large support from the Croats in BiH.

Linking the past, the present and the future in constructing narratives: The technique of linking positions is highly manipulative: new content is linked to existing positions (Šiber 1992). This technique is frequently used in this type of narrative; for example, when wartime rhetoric is used or when there is an attempt to frighten the public with a new war, it is sufficient to mention the last war and specific traumatic events, most of which the voters remember. Even if they do not, younger voters are constantly exposed to wartime stories from the media as well as from their family members. The technique of linking positions is also used when a politician is specifically compared to a politician who played a decidedly negative role in a specific period or specific situation (to be elaborated on further in the followingsubsection). Different memorials and wartime events are used to establish links with the past.

The *Oluja*[28] anniversary drew considerable media attention, as it does every year, but this is always intensified in election years. This event was used for twonarratives – that about betrayal and that about national parties as protectors of the people.

The RS media covered statements by numerous politicians about the criminal nature of the *Oluja* operation, during which Croatia was ethnically cleansed of its Serb population. Representatives of the ruling parties and of the opposition were in agreement with this conclusion. The media also covered numerous personal statements by *Oluja* survivors, as well as information on which towns and cities organised memorial services for Serbs from Croatia.

Milorad Dodik, the incumbent member of the BiH Presidency, used this opportunity to state that Croats had killed Serbs in two wars, that Serbs did not have detention camps, that Croats had never returned Serb property or flats in Croatia, that Serbia could only defend itself if it remained strong and

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28   *Oluja* [Storm] was a military operation in August 1995 during the war in Croatia; Croatian military and police forces established Croat control over the western part of the then Republic of *Serb Krajina*.

that there was no freedom in the Federation BiH for Serbs who had been expelled or killed (*Hrvatski media servis* 2022).

The media also reported that Dragan Čović, president of the HDZ BiH and of the HNS, congratulated *Oluja* to all the Croat men and women across the globe, and that he also tagged the Croatian prime minister Andrej Plenković in his post (ABCPortal.info 2022b).

Dodik defined *Oluja* as a pogrom, a crime, ethnic cleansing and genocide, drawing a parallel with the suffering of the Serb population during World War II, and underscored that their suffering would not slide into oblivion, thanks to Serbia and the Republika Srpska.

This anniversary, which could have been an opportunity for a more serious confrontation with the wartime past, where all the peoples were, in fact, absolute losers, served as an additional motive for incitement. In addition, the idea of all peoples as absolute losers is often negated by party bots, trying in vain to present the people on whose behalf they speak as the winners. Bosniak nationalists explain this with the fact that the socialist 'atheist and godless' regime that had reduced the Bosniak people to a religious group was crushed, although it was during Yugoslavia that Bosniaks were recognised nationally for the very first time ever. Serb nationalists emphasize that their people won 49% of the territory of BiH, at the same time giving only one people an exclusive right over that territory, while Croat nationalists state that in terms of percentage, they 'own' most of the territory of the Federation BiH, and that they will gain a third entity in the future.

Thus, using the past in the narrative of betrayal is an attempt to target competitors as threats to the present and the future of the state and the voters. This is achieved through different constructs, allusions and comparisons, presenting wartime events in a particularly dramatic way, using them as a warning to the voters about what could happen in the future should they decide to give their votes to those political parties and politicians.

This is done in a particularly deceitful and manipulative manner, and dissemination of this narrative abuses the tragic events of the past; this is carefully planned, because the generation and dissemination of fear among the voters is an effort to control their decisions.

Appealing to voters' emotions: According to Šiber (1992, 31-33), some propaganda techniques include the importance of emotions, the emotional sandwich, the transfer of emotions, the technique of linked positions, words

with emotional weight, name substitution and the use of stereotypes. The author underscores that emotions are of particular significance for propaganda, targeting the most sensitive aspects of the human psyche. The use of emotions in the content being relayed decreases possible resistance and dulls critical views. In this regard, using war as a particularly traumatic experience triggers different emotions – from fear to sadness and anxiety. Any person who points out that wartime suffering is being abused for election purposes and for political communication in general, is quickly declared a traitor, a denier and is targeted by party media and bots.

Since fear is an emotion that is very difficult to control, often paralysing rational thinking, very striking phrases are constructed about political opponents, designed to describe them as 'those who do not belong with us' and those whose actions and attitudes will lead to new ethnic cleansing, expulsion and killing, because they collaborate with those who support criminal politics.

The narrative of betrayal also refers to members of other peoples as unreliable, as traitors, and as those who do not share the same vision of future with 'us'. Speeches delivered at memorials present the past as a central theme, constructing it as a warning for the present and the future, and all those who deviate from the nationalist narrative are marked as traitors who will lead their own people to ruin.

On the other hand, when coming from opposition parties, this narrative is aimed at giving warnings about the crime, corruption and dishonest actions that have taken place under the auspices of the ruling parties in BiH over the past three decades. Leaders and senior officials of those parties are branded as traitors who were involved in criminal operations, thus causing damage to their own people, and references to past events are made to warn voters about what will follow if they support those parties and politicians again.

Conclusion: Narratives of betrayal deliberately manipulate the voters' emotions, using carefully selected vocabulary, war terminology, and comparison of the current situation with events of the past. The media plays a large part in the spread of this narrative, by supporting a particular party or politician from that party and disseminating such statements through biased media reporting. Moreover, supporters and bots active on social networks have played a certain, increasingly important role, spreading videos and photomontages presenting politicians from parties that do not support the official and dominant nationalist narratives as pests and traitors, using their private lives and even the lives of their family members. In the renderings of this narrative, numerous appeals to fear and insecurity were used.

5.3.2. The narrative of protectors of the people

Aim / intention of the narrative: The narrative of protectors of the people is closely linked to the narrative of betrayal. Or rather, the narrative of betrayal and traitors needs to be constructed first, to be followed by the narrative of 'us' as the protectors. On one hand there are enemies from among one's own people, but there are also the national parties of other peoples who do not share the same vision of the future of the shared state of BiH. The aim of both narratives is the same: to win as many mandates and to secure support for their higher political goals.

Methods of constructing and presenting the narrative: In this complex political situation, each of the leading parties in BiH declares itself as the protector of the people and of vital national interests, and as the line of defence from future war and slaughter. They are there to protect their people, and therefore they use words that instil fear in most of the population. They use tragic events that reside in the individual and collective memory (slaughter, ethnic cleansing, massacres, camps), monstrous details of crimes are described, which they present as a fight against oblivion, as if such traumatic experiences can ever be forgotten. This is also referred to as the 'education' of the younger generation, who may meet the same fate if they do not wake up and realise that they are surrounded by enemies.

'Experts' and influential authorities legitimising the narrative: In late July, at a meeting of the SDA Hadžići Municipal Board, Bakir Izetbegović delivered a speech that was discussed and written about throughout August, and which caused a series of chain reactions. He stated the following: 'We have counted ourselves. How many hunters we have, and how many young people, and how many drone instructors, and so on. I will stop here, but this is just so you know.' It is quite clear that Izetbegović was implying a new war without mentioning it. His statement caused different reactions in both entities, and just a few days later, the Raisu-l-ulama of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Husein Kavazović, made a statement. On the occasion of the Days of Bosnian Spirituality – Karići 2022, he stated the following: "I've heard voices asking why we're counting ourselves. Let me speak honestly to you: if we hadn't counted ourselves when we should have, we wouldn't be here today. This place would have been in someone else's hands. Of course we'll count ourselves." Although he did not refer to Izetbegović directly, it was clear that the Raisu-l-ulama was referring to his speech and the reactions it caused. This launched an avalanche of reactions and negative comments in the online arena – both on social networks and on web portals. Leaders of the SDP and *Narod i pravda* reacted, reproaching the Raisu-l-ulama for siding with the politics of the

SDA and its leader, and Serb and Croat politicians used this 'counting affair' to incite their voters against the so-called Bosniak politics of 'political Sarajevo' and the state of BiH itself (Dodik), which the portals with wide readership among those two peoples used for incitement (Hina 2022).

For example, *Katolički tjednik* wrote that the Islamic Community was acting in the interest of national goals, just as the Serbian Orthodox Church had done on the eve of the 1990s wars. *Večernji list* stated that this was a militant campaign against Croats and High Representative Schmidt, which they substantiated by pointing to the campaign of putting up 45 posters with the images and names of members of the BiH Army and Police entitled 'I too defended BiH'. They emphasised that all the individuals on the posters were of Bosniak ethnicity and that there was no room for Serbs and Croats, which they then connected to the statements about counting, underscoring what the official Bosniak policy towards Croats actually is (Dnevnik.ba 2022).

This case was, thus, a deliberate comparison with events from the 1990s, in order to make the fear of a people clearer and more concrete, and to create additional panic. Moreover, the Islamic Community was used to legitimise the statements made by Izetbegović, who thus 'borrowed' their authority in order to give this statement an alleged 'foundation' in religious authority, and thus 'earn' the approval of the Bosniak population. It should also be noted that journalists form certain media outlets (*Faktor*) defended Raisu-l-ulama Kavazović, along with several SDA politicians (Haris Zahiragić) (V. K. 2022, *Klix*).

Linking the past, the present and the future in constructing narratives: Milorad Dodik, a member of the BiH Presidency at the time, used Izetbegović's statement about counting, as well as a statement made by another incumbent member of the BiH Presidency, Šefik Džaferović, to emphasise that Serb youth belonged in the Republika Srpska, not in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and that the Republika Srpska was a state (ATV 2022).

The idea of the Republika Srpska as a state has been present in the public arena for several years. This idea uses past events that speak about the suffering of the Serb people in both world wars, and about the Republika Srpska as an inevitability in order to prevent the same occurrences of the 1990s, completely ignoring all the crimes committed by its military, the VRS, during the war. Therefore, there is an attempt to use past events to justify the idea that the RS should secede from BiH, presenting the RS as the only safe haven for the Serbs of BiH, where they will not be threatened with danger.

The statement by Džaferović that Dodik referred to in this instance was: 'The ideological and political followers of those who were the main organisers of the genocide and a joint criminal enterprise are hindering our progress towards full stability, prosperity and EU and NATO membership.' These two statements show an entirely different perception of the Republika Srpska among the representatives of the two constituent peoples, but also a different vision of the future of BiH, which is always convenient for new conflicts and further deepening of the gap, in which it is quite easy to construct the narrative of protectors of the people who watch over their national corpus.

During the campaign period, numerous anniversaries of suffering were marked – from both wars and on all sides, i.e. all three constituent peoples. In view of the sheer number of such anniversaries, it is impossible to cover them all, but it should be noted that they were used for sending pre-election messages, abusing victims, spreading intolerance among the peoples of BiH, so that these dates served as an occasion to organise rallies to talk about new wars and new suffering. Representatives of the leading national parties talked about the threat against their own people from *the others,* offering the only real solution – vote for us. The technique was the same as in any other advertising campaign – you have problems, choose us and they will be solved.

We will present two such anniversaries:

1. In Bihać, on the occasion of marking 81 years since the execution of Serbs in Garavice, Radovan Kovačević, advisor to Milorad Dodik, Serb member of the BiH Presidency, stated that the existence of the Republika Srpska was the greatest guarantee that crimes like this would not happen again and that they would not be killed again (SRNA 2022b; 2022c).
2. Using the anniversary of the massacre committed by the RBiH Army in Grabovica, when 33 Croat civilians were killed, Poskok.info stated that this had been genocide committed by ISIL, linking RBiH Army to ISIL (Poskok.info 2021; 2022). In a text published on this occasion, Poskok.info referred to a text published in 2021.

We will highlight several other speeches that marked the campaign, which resonated with the public, and which can be identified as narratives of protectors of the people.

Appealing to voters' emotions: At SDA rallies, Sebija Izetbegović, general manager of the Sarajevo University Hospital and an SDA candidate, and Amor Mašović, a candidate, emphasized in their speeches that if they did not vote for SDA, Bosniaks may be facing new mass graves. The speech by Amor Mašović was particularly morbid: he stated that all kinds of paths, narrow and wide, lead towards new suffering, citing names of children killed during the war. His statement caused numerous reactions. SDA officials defended him (minister Bisera Turković in particular), while political competitors condemned this statement, leading to numerous public debates (*Defter hefte* 2022).

A statement at an SDA rally in Mostar by Emir Hadžihafizbegović, an actor and until recently director of Chamber Theatre 55, attracted great attention. Hadžihafizbegović stated that he was no conformist or coward, because BiH is faced with different challenges in which political decisions can lead to genocide, and that he had a profound understanding of Alija Izetbegović's idea.

We note the emotional sandwich technique in his address. This technique is particularly manipulative, as it includes a message that starts with strong emotions in order to attract the attention of the audience, followed by a so-called moderate, or more rational part, so that the sandwich can be completed with strong emotional messages again at the end. Hadžihafizbegović said, inter alia, that if we lived in a properly functioning country, we could have been in a green party, or in a gastronomy or a flower loving party, but in this case, we were forced to be in the SDA, because we were constantly threatened with the dissolution of our homeland and aggression, ever since 1991. He emphasized that the SDA was the only party that offered security to the people, and that there were so many parties in BiH, showing a lack of consciousness. He stated that he had been in the SDA for 32 years because he slept better knowing that there was a party that would protect him from aggression.

He said that Bakir Izetbegović had sacrificed his health for Bosniaks and honest Croats and Serbs. Hadžihafizbegović's speech was interrupted by applause several times, and he ended it with standard phrases about multi-ethnic BiH, only to shout at the very end: 'Bakir, Bakir, SDA, SDA'. We are highlighting this example, as it is a case of pronounced manipulation and intimidation, coming from a person who is not just known locally, but also enjoys great popularity and is known as an excellent actor in the countries in the region.

In his address, the actor used emotionally charged words, disseminated panic and at the end tasked all SDA voters with convincing those who were indecisive to give their vote to the SDA by election day (Elvir Tuzla Cajic 2022).

With Hadžihafizbegović's speech, the SDA wanted to generate fear among the voters, but also to offer them the only salvation. Moreover, this speech also aimed at a sense of pride, patriotic feelings, a sense of belonging and loyalty to the nation.

In this case, the actor was used to cause an echo effect, trying to legitimise the claims made by Sebija Izetbegović and Amor Mašović. Thus, in addition to using the techniques of emotionally charged words and of linked positions, the past was also used as the central part of his speech.

Parallel to this, the SDA ran a campaign against the so-called civic parties. SDA members almost threatened all those who did not vote for them with new mass graves, openly attacking the parties of the current 'troika'.[29] One of the statements of the SDA Cantonal Board Sarajevo said, among other things:

> Bosniaks are led into mass graves by those who did not support the joint presentation of the pro-Bosnian parties in the RS, thus decreasing the opportunity to win a larger number of seats in the RS National Assembly, states the press statement by the SDA Cantonal Board Sarajevo. (…) The fact is that Bosniaks are led towards concentration camps by the same ones who, after 12 years, handed the city of Mostar to those who glorify the crimes committed by the para-state construct of so-called Herzeg-Bosnia. (…) Bosniaks are led towards slavery, concentration camps and mass graves by those who refer to the defenders of Sarajevo as 'peasants', and those who parade with trumpets and Serbian songs and flags through Višegrad, the town of 'living burning stakes'. It is those who have a problem with *adhan* and who want to give lectures to the only religious leader in Europe who was the victim of a concentration camp after World War II. (Faktor 2022b).

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29   A coalition of three parties: SDP, *Narod i pravda* and *Naša stranka.*

Part of the statement that was particularly inciting, stated the following:

> Efforts to move the threshold for allowing Bosniaks to speak loudly and clearly about their suffering, to articulate their national, cultural and political interests, are attempt to *Yutel-ize* the reality, to drive mad and disperse the people that survived genocide. This is a hegemonistic agenda implemented by enemies and destroyers of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who, instead of a functional democratic state and its European perspective, want Bosniaks to be *Palestine-ized* and to disappear. The SDA will not accept this agenda, ever. (Faktor 2022b)

This statement is clearly constructing the narrative of protectors of the people. Serbs and Croats are enemies of the Bosniaks, but their enemies are also all the Bosniaks who are not members of the SDA. This, in fact, means that people are deliberately trapped in the past, constantly called on to be vigilant, thus creating a highly toxic societal atmosphere.

The trend of protectors of the people continued after the election. When the Central Election Commission ordered a new vote count for the RS president, Milorad Dodik called a rally of the leading parties on 25 October, emphasising that he was asked by the people to do this, and that all those who could but would not come were against the RS, as this was the decision of the people (N1 BiH 2022). At the rally, Dodik picked up the Serbian flag, stating that Serbs did not like the flag 'specked with yellow' because no one could like that flag, not even 'they', referring to Bosniaks. In his speech, he said that all those who claimed that no one would do anything to the Republika Srpska were lying, because they were trying to do something to it every day, and that they kept telling Serbs to leave, which would indeed happen someday, but they would take 49% of BiH with them. Dodik also stated that he believed in the ideal of an independent and autonomous Republika Srpska, that he was willing to make the sacrifice, that it was not possible to build a life with people who did not wish them well, that he was no one's servant, unlike the opposition leaders, but that he was only a servant of the people. He also stated that many had given their lives for the Republika Srpska, that they were still in dungeons across the world, and that he had taken an oath to the Republika Srpska. He stated that he did not hate the Bosniaks, unlike Bakir Izetbegović who hated the Republika Srpska, which they (the Bosniaks) call the smaller BiH entity and the RS, cursing the term the smaller BiH entity (FACE HD TV 2022). This statement by Dodik sounded like a threat, and the flag was clearly used as a symbol to trigger patriotic emotions and a sense of belonging to a nation.

Using vocabulary that supports symbols and the emotional messages of the narrative: Milorad Dodik, member of the BiH Presidency and president of the SNSD, used decidedly inciteful terminology directed at the Bosniaks, whom he blamed for the dysfunctionality of BiH which, in his words, the Serb people did not want. He stated that the Serb people would leave this unconstitutional BiH. In his speech, he accused foreigners of implementing anti-Serb policies and for violating the Dayton Peace Accords. Dodik also spoke about the 9 January celebrations, marked in the RS as the Day of the Republika Srpska, referring to the ruling of the Constitutional Court of BiH, which found this date to be unconstitutional, and which he also declared to be a conspiracy against the Serb people, because, as he emphasised, the Constitutional Court included three Muslims and two foreigners (M.D. 2022, Radio-televizija Herceg-Bosne). Milorad Dodik always publicly referred to the Bosniaks as Muslims, both before and during the campaign period, deliberately reducing the nation to a religious group, thereby trying to devalue them. Ten days after this statement, Dodik again said that BiH was an impossible country, imposed by foreigners, that had to disappear. Addressing the RS National Assembly, he stated that BiH as a state was proof that Muslims and Christians could not coexist (Bljesak.info 2022).

In an attempt to further intimidate voters, certain places were described in texts as centres of power where dishonest actions were being launched against a particular people; thus, the Croat media referred to Sarajevo as a *caliphate* in the heart of Europe. In these and the RS media, Sarajevo was referred to as political Sarajevo, and Belgrade and Zagreb were mentioned as nationalist centres of power whose actions are directed against the Bosniaks, and one media outlet wrote about the part of the Federation BiH inhabited by Bosniaks as a special Muslim reservation in the heart of Europe, etc.

The term 'political Sarajevo' has been present in the media for quite some time. This term tries to brand Sarajevo as the principal culprit of dysfunctional politics, but also as the centre of power where conspiracies against Serbs and Croats are forged. Kemal Kurspahić, a renowned editor and journalist from Sarajevo, wrote (2022) that 'political Sarajevo' had become a sticker used frequently by Serb and Croat nationalist headquarters to declare to the local and international public that the project of a Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina had failed and to label 'political Sarajevo' as the principal culprit.

Denial of war crimes was particularly evident in the Serb media reporting about the poor health of the war criminal Ratko Mladić, whom they call General, and in referring to the massacres in Sarajevo as staged. The death of Radoslav Brđanin, a convicted war criminal, was also reported during our research; the Serb media presented him as a hero. The Croat media stated that the aim of political Sarajevo was to assimilate the Croats, memories of Herzeg-Bosnia were evoked. The Republika Srpska was called a state, and Bosnia and Herzegovina referred to as a unitarian Islamist state.

The vocabulary of this narrative is riddled with coined names, labels, accusations, always with a clear connection to the war and wartime events. Entire cities and entire peoples are demonised in an effort to present them as evil, and the vocabulary is often linked to different conspiracy theories and unrealistic prognoses, in the attempt to further complicate the already bad political situation. The very understanding of the future of the state is also different among the three peoples; thus, Bosniaks write about an integral BiH, the Serb media barely mention BiH and just usually talk about the RS, and the Croat media, which disseminated problematic content most widely, write about the revival of Herzeg-Bosnia.

Conclusion: The narrative of protectors of the people is mainly based in the past, but to create a more intense atmosphere of fear, the past is not limited to the 1990s; instead, it stretches across the 20th century, often even using events that took place centuries earlier.

In order to solidify the narrative, emotional appeals are used, and various public figures are used to convince the voters of what is best for them, as well as various academic and religious authorities, through whom voters can compensate for their own ignorance, and blindly trust them. In addition, like in the previous narrative, this narrative also created a special vocabulary for all that it marks as dangerous – 'political Sarajevo', 'greater-Serbian' or 'greater-Croatian aggressor', the 'smaller BiH entity', the 'genocidal creation', 'ISIL followers', 'joint criminal enterprise followers', 'mujahideen' etc. On the other hand, protectors of the people are referred to as persons who are willing to sacrifice themselves, to whom only the people matter, rather than any personal interests. This is evident in the speech by the actor Emir Hadžihafizbegović when he spoke emotionally about Bakir Izetbegović and his party, as well as in Dodik's statement that he was a servant of the people.

This narrative is also dominated by appeals to emotions, as well as different techniques for manipulating voters' emotions.

5.4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Two mutually linked narratives were prominent during the 2022 election campaign period. The first was the labelling of enemies / traitors, with the enemies being all 'those' who did not think the same as 'us', and the second was the defence of one's own national corpus from those branded as enemies, as well as concern for their fate.

Both narratives used harsh words, unsubstantiated claims and insinuation, with demonstrable inter-ethnic hatred and descriptions of entire groups as enemies, while targeting the emotions of the recipients of the message.

Zvonarević (1976, 706-711) divides propaganda appeals into two major groups: 1) appeals to benefits and 2) appeals to vulnerability and insecurity. Appeals to benefits are subdivided into appeals to material, biological, social and psychological benefits. Appeals to vulnerability and insecurity are subdivided into appeals to authority, popularity, the appeal to all, appeal of black-on-white and appeals to mysticism.

The first set of appeals is focused on survival and individual satisfaction, i.e. if you take a particular action, you will draw one of the benefits listed. The second set of appeals is usually used in political or ideological propaganda, directed towards individual fears and insecurities, i.e. these appeals are used to demonstrate vulnerability, with a political option being offered as salvation.

Both narratives used both sets of appeals. Using authorities and popular personalities was aimed at compensating the audience's ignorance about a particular topic, i.e. a deliberate tactic to win people over, where an address by an authority or a person from the so-called entertainment industry can certainly help. It is thus no wonder that Amor Mašović, who was a candidate, was selected to speak about mass graves and cite names of the children killed during the war, because the public knows Mašović as someone who had spent years exhuming victims and is considered the most competent to speak about this. In view of the fact that people trust religious institutions, as confirmed by cited research, active involvement by Raisu-l-ulama Kavazović was also a targeted move, as most people see him as a religious leader, a person of authority, whose statements are not critically examined. In addition to appeals to authority, appeals to popularity were also used, as illustrated by the appearance of one of the best known Bosnian actors, Emir Hadžihafizbegović.

Appeals to all were used by all the national parties, calling on voters to trust them, for they were there to protect their people, they had spent years fighting numerous enemies, both from other peoples and among their own. Appeals to all are based on individual insecurities, so statements that shout out that the entire people is with us and that 'we' are the protector of the entire people, aim at group affiliations, i.e. at the individual as a collective being, who often hides their insecurity inside the collective.

Of all the appeals to benefits, the most frequently used was the appeal to biological benefit, guaranteeing the voters' biological survival if they voted for the national parties, i.e. that they would not end up as tragically as the previous generations, who had followed other ideas.

Our research findings show that both the campaign period and the period after that were highly unprofessional and manipulative, and that most of the content was based on incitement, dissemination of fear, and even threatening messages. A particular problem was the unregulated online sphere, used to disseminate most of the harmful content and hate speech, and also the political bots, whose actions in the unregulated space and with the illusion of coming 'from the people', can be highly manipulative. Moreover, the research shows that there were particularly incendiary speeches during political rallies, and the most incendiary statements were carried by the media with no critical insight.

The official campaign period is one month, but the consequences of all its activities are far-reaching. Statements made during the election campaign were aggressive and most of them were hateful, which is an additional burden for a society already imprisoned by its cruel past and, although this may sound like a platitude – this offers no hope whatsoever that a shared future, different from the situation we are living in at the moment, is even possible.

In a society where the online space is completely unregulated, any such statement triggers a campaign against those with different opinions, and even persons whose statements steer well away from the dominant national narratives are exposed to smear campaigns and violence, but this kind of violence is, in most cases, unfortunately, face no legal consequences.

Although the principal culprits responsible for this regrettable situation are the political stakeholders, particularly the party leaders whose statements have caused the greatest rifts among BiH citizens, the media and journalists should certainly not be disregarded, since by their uncritical actions, or concessions to different conditions and pressures, they consent to further contamination of the atmosphere.

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Chapter 6

DISCREDITING OF STATE INSTITUTIONS: ATTACKS ON THE CENTRAL ELECTION COMMISSION

Amer Džihana

6.1. INTRODUCTION

The political life of Bosnia and Herzegovina since the war has been characterised by a virtually permanent state of election campaigning. The election cycle lasts too long and is repeated every two years. The legal timeframes prescribe a period of 180 days (six months) from the announcement of elections to the confirmation of results (Šehić 2021), but pre-election rhetoric starts significantly earlier than these timeframes, while post-election calculations on the constitution of the government can take longer than four years. Once citizens take a short breath and forget about the general elections, they are already in pre-election year for local elections. And so on indefinitely. The obvious consequence of this situation is that election rhetoric becomes ubiquitous in the public space and the bodies in charge of implementing elections become a very recognisable and important part of the democratic process. And even more importantly, election bodies are often at the centre of debates on election regularity.

After the signing of the Dayton Agreement, elections in BiH were organised by the OSCE according to the Provisional Rules until 2000. As of 2001, when the Election Law of BiH was passed (Šehić 2021), the responsibility for organising elections passed to local bodies – the Central Election Commission of BiH and local election commissions (city and municipal commissions and polling committees). However, the organisation of elections under the direction of these authorities has always caused controversy. Accusations of election irregularities and fraud are an integral part of every election cycle and include the following allegations: that the election administration is under the influence of a political party (Vele 2006; Sladojević 2020), that it does not react adequately to election irregularities, that voter registrationis subject to manipulation (Terzić 2010), that electoral registers are not up-to-date (Terzić 2005), and even that "the dead vote" (Krsman 2006; Hadžić 2016). Hence some authors, such as Šehić (2021, 3), observe that "we cannot say that the past elections were fair and free and produced results that truly represent the freely expressed will of the citizens and voters". Nevertheless, it is important to say that polemics on the subject of election regularity are an integral part of discussions in most

democratic societies (Bencun 2015, 1) and that Bosnia and Herzegovina is no exception in this regard.

What is important to note is that in the case of BiH, not only have there been sporadic objections that always occur in the election process, but after serious analyses certain systemic errors in the organisation of the elections have also been observed, which cast doubt on the credibility of the election process. In these analyses, polling committees were recognised as the weakest link in the election administration (e.g. Batinar 2015, 11; Stojanović 2015, 18; Šehić 2021). Although the law stipulates that a political subject can have only one representative in a three-member or five-member polling committee, due to agreements among political parties and the 'buying' of polling committee members, in many situations these committees did not have any self-regulatory mechanisms and instead implemented the instructions of one political party. In place of committees in which members of several parties would sit and thereby prevent election fraud, one-party committees or committees in which some parties had more than one member were formed (Batinar 2015, 11). In the technical part of the amendments to the BiH Election Law imposed by the OHR in July 2022 (OHR 2022), one section refers specifically to abuses of the legal right to participate in the work of a polling committee through fictitious representation, and the CEC is authorised to prohibit the hiring of a person to work at a polling station, Electoral Register Center, municipal election commission, in counting centres or another election commission established in accordance with the Election Law (Article 4.3 of the Law on Amendments to the Election Law of BiH). As early as September 2022, the Central Election Commission pronounced the first sanctions based on these provisions, establishing that polling committee trade had taken place in Jablanica and penalising two political parties – SDA and SNSD (Patria 2022). It is too early to draw the conclusion that these amendments to the Election Law have solved the long-standing problem of polling committee manipulations; nonetheless there is no doubt that the legal framework has been improved in this regard and that the competent authorities have greater powers to address the problem.

However, in the last two years, there has not been much talk about this problem. Instead, some political parties, using the media and other communication platforms, have tried to define another issue as the biggest problem; that is, the way in which CEC members are elected.

Unlike members of polling committees who are directly nominated by political parties, the members of the CEC's leadership are elected according to a different model. The Central Election Commission is defined by law as

an independent body that reports directly to the Parliamentary Assembly of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Article 2.9). The rules for the election of CEC members are established by the Election Law of BiH (Chapter 2) and the appointment procedures are regulated by the Rules of Procedure for Conducting Public Competition and Appointing Members of the Central Election Commission (Official Gazette of BiH 2016). The criteria established for the selection of CEC members combine professional and ethnic logic. Candidates should be legal experts with experience in the administration of elections and/or election experts and may not hold any office in the bodies of a political party, association or foundations organisationally or financially related to a political party and may not be involved in any political party activity (Article 2.5, paragraph 2), but they are elected from among the constituent peoples and others – two Croats, two Bosniaks, two Serbs and one other (Article 2.5, paragraph 1). The same logic applies to the Commission for Selection and Nomination of CEC Members. Ensurance of the professional principle is sought through nominations that come from various bodies (the High Judicial and Prosecutorial Council, the Administrative Commission of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, the President of the CEC) (Article 2.5, paragraph 3) and the ethnic principle through the fact that the constituent peoples must also be represented in the Commission – two Bosniaks, two Serbs, two Croats and one from amongst 'others' (Article 2.5, paragraph 4).

However, the existing legal solutions have not completely separated the CEC from political parties. The law prohibits the holding of any office in the bodies of a party, but not membership; not to mention close relationships with political parties. In addition, the Parliament has the authority to choose any candidate from the proposed list submitted by the Commission for Selection and Nomination, without taking into account the ranking submitted by the Commission, which further weakens the professional aspect provided for by law (see Judgment of the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina No.: S1 3 U 012027 12 U dated 14.10.2013). Arapović (2021, 21) and Kukić (2021, 191) also talk about the need to depoliticise the election administration, including the Central Election Commission. Hence, it is not surprising that the CEC members are perceived by the public as representatives of specific political parties. Writing about the current CEC members, the journalist Avdo Avdić (2022) says that "no party has managed to install more than one member in the CEC. The SDA nominated Suad Arnautović, the HDZ Vlado Rogić, the DF Željko Bakalar, the SDS Vanja Bjelica, the PDP Jovan Kalaba, the SDP Ahmet Šantić, and a long time ago the SDA and SNSD together Irena Hadžiabdić."

The selection of new members of the CEC in 2022 attracted particular public attention. Arapović (2021, 21) characterises the selection as "highly

controversial given the absence of a transparent and competitive procedure for nominating and selecting candidates and the absence of verification of their partisan independence." What is this, actually, about?

In March 2020, the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH appointed four new members of the CEC, after the mandate of some of the previous members had expired in November 2019. The House of Representatives used the legal possibility to appoint new members because the Commission for Selection of CEC members had not submitted a list of nominees. Members who did not suit the SNSD and HDZ were elected by a majority of votes. A lawsuit was filed against the decision of the Parliamentary Assembly at the Court of BiH, which in April 2022 issued a first-instance verdict rejecting the lawsuit and confirming that the challenged Decision of the Parliament of BiH was lawful and proper because the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH is authorised to propose and appoint CEC members if a list of nominees is not submitted to the House 30 days prior to the expiration of the mandates of the CEC members, which is what happened in this particular case (Court of BiH 2022). The court also assessed the allegations of political connections and incompetence of the elected candidates as arbitrary because no evidence was submitted for the allegations. In the second-instance judgment of the Court of BiH in the same case, the first-instance judgment was changed, in that the lawsuit was rejected in full as inadmissible (Court of BiH 2022a). With that, the case received a judicial epilogue, but not much changed in the public eye. The political parties, primarily the SNSD and HDZ, which had alleged that the election was illegal and that the CEC therefore lacked legitimacy, continued to do so even after the court judgments.

As a consequence, different criticisms of the work of the election administration can also be found in the public sphere. After monitoring the media coverage of the 2022 General Elections, Udovičić and other authors (2022) write that the Sarajevo-based media considered the integrity of the elections above all, presenting the views and data of the Coalition for Free and Fair Elections, *Pod lupom*, an alliance of non-governmental organisations specialising in civic, non-partisan monitoring of elections that strives to protect the election process from different types of manipulation and fraud and to contribute to the free expression of voters' will. On the other hand, the Republika Srpska-based media that were covered as part of the monitoring, especially the public broadcasting service RTRS, highlighted completely different things: the interference of foreign governments that support the opposition in the RS, the "illegal election" of the CEC members, the closeness of the CEC members to opposition parties, etc. (Udovičić et al. 2022).

This research examines the narratives about the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina (CEC BiH) that were observed in the public space during the election campaign period of the 2022 General Elections. The second section presents the results of three months of monitoring content about CEC BiH in the media, on social networks, on anonymous portals and on political party websites. The monitoring showed very intensive attempts to discredit the CEC, spearheaded by political parties, especially the SNSD, with the support of the media close to that political party. In the third section, the main harmful narratives are analysed. The first narrative contains the allegation that the CEC is a renegade/uncontrolled centre of political power that needs to be brought back under political control, while the second postulates that the decisions of the CEC are harmful to certain peoples and to the democratic election process in general. It is very important for political actors to normalise these narratives in the public by constantly repeating the allegations, as this further legitimises the political actions they undertake.

In this paper, the fine line that separates the legitimate and much-needed criticism of the election process and the election administration, which should serve to promote the election process by which the democratic will of the citizens is expressed, from criticism that seeks to further erode the election system and make the elections a mere formality of confirming winners who are known in advance, is constantly walked. The harmful narratives that have been identified serve the latter purpose. The political parties competing in elections seek to gain control over the bodies that lay down the rules and oversee the regularity of elections. This work proposes just the opposite. What is needed is to further strengthen the independence of the regulatory election body, sever the observed political ties of the CEC with political parties, and empower the CEC to act as an independent, professional and impartial agency that will ensure the free and fair conduct of elections.

6.2. RESULTS OF MONITORING

In this analysis, we present the main negative narratives about the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina that are present in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian media space, including mainstream media, social networks, anonymous portals and political party websites. Using Metricom, a tool for monitoring social networks and the internet media, we selected posts and articles related to the Central Election Commission of BiH in the period from 2 August to 31 October 2022.

Two coders, who received instructions on how to code the reviewed content, worked on coding the content. Metricom selected content using

the following keywords: "Centralna izborna komisija" and "Središnje izborno povjerenstvo" (both meaning Central Election Commission) and CIK and SIP (standing for CEC).

The coders were tasked with identifying content related to the Central Election Commission and separating it from other content in which some of the key words are mentioned. For example, the title "Ukrali peškire turistima u cik zore" (They stole towels from tourists at the crack of dawn) contains the keyword "cik", but it does not refer to the Central Election Commission of BiH. In the three months of monitoring, a total of 2,333 content units related to this agency were identified.

TABLE 1: Number of coded texts

MONTH	NUMBER
August	177
September	242
October	1914
Total	**2333**

The next task set before the coders was to identify potentially harmful content. Potentially harmful content refers to texts in which some type of criticism of the CEC was expressed, without presenting the other side. One of the basic requirements of professional journalism is to present the opinions and statements of all those involved, on all controversial issues. In cases where this was not respected, when only criticism was presented, it was assessed that the content was potentially harmful. The coders grouped this content into different categories that were created in the initial stages of coding and later adapted and improved. Out of the total number of extracted content units (2333), 1438 were assessed as potentially harmful, while the remaining 476 were assessed as non-problematic.

The most common disqualifications that were expressed referred to the CEC's political bias and allegedly illegal work. The list of identified disqualifications against the CEC is shown in the following table.

TABLE 2: Types of potentially harmful discreditation[30]

TYPE OF DISCREDITATION	NUMBER OF APPEARANCES
Discrediting the CEC for political bias	639
Discrediting the CEC for illegal work	618
Discrediting the CEC for failure to react to election irregularities	205
Discrediting the CEC for illegitimacy	93
Discrediting the CEC for slow work	52
Discrediting the CEC for lack of credibility	48
Discrediting the CEC for alleged corruption and bribe taking	22
OTHER	118
TOTAL	**1795**

The next step in the analysis consisted of identifying potentially harmful content – that is, whether the content really is harmful, seeking to disqualify the CEC as an institution or seeking to directly influence the work of the CEC in order to achieve political benefit, or whether the content is criticism which, no matter how misguided, is one of the basic postulates of political activity in democratic societies.

The basic premise is that political debate in democracies enjoys the highest level of protection and that speech cannot lightly be declared "harmful". Politicians make a variety of allegations daily, often of very doubtful accuracy, especially during elections. However, such statements, if they do not constitute hate speech, are an integral part of the discussions that take place in political life. Therefore, it is up to voters to make decisions on who to support and who to trust and not for some established state body to assess what may or may not be said.

In this sense, harmful content about the Central Election Commission is defined in this study firstly as content that criticises the CEC without presenting any evidence. For example, the statement "the CEC is suspicious", without explaining why it is suspicious, belongs to that category. In addition, allegations in which some evidence is cited, but is completely

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30   The total number of potentially harmful discreditations is greater than the total number of potentially harmful texts because some texts contain a larger number of discreditations.

arbitrary or incorrect, are also marked as harmful. For example, when the CEC is called illegal, despite the fact that the Court of BiH has confirmed the legality and legitimacy of the CEC members, that is obviously content that is incorrect and harmful. Finally, the third category of harmful content is content that on its own could be labeled as legitimate criticism, but combined with other harmful content, it represents a whole that discredits the CEC. For example, criticism of the CEC's slowness is perfectly legitimate, but when it is used together with allegations that the CEC is illegal and unlawful, then it is labelled as harmful. More will be said about these categories in the section on narratives.

TABLE 3: Amount of harmful content

MONTH	POTENTIALLY HARMFUL	HARMFUL CONTENT
August	39	27
September	37	19
October	1438	1318
Total	**1514**	**1364**

The main actors in spreading harmful narratives were political subjects. Specifically, the SNSD party and its coalition partners represented the backbone of negative criticism of the CEC. The loudest in spreading this narrative was Milorad Dodik, the president of the SNSD, who appeared 229 times in the service of spreading negative narratives about the CEC. He was followed by Željka Cvijanović, the SNSD's candidate for the BiH Presidency, with 140, and Radovan Kovačević, spokesperson of the SNSD, with 93 identified media items. The list of the 20 subjects who most frequently spread harmful content is shown in table 4.

TABLE 4: Sources of content

			AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	TOTAL
1	Milorad Dodik	SNSD		1	228	229
2	Željka Cvijanović	SNSD			140	140
3	Radovan Kovačević	SNSD	2		91	93
4	Milan Tegeltija	Advisor to Milorad Dodik from SNSD			48	48
5	Jelena Trivić	PDP			47	47
6	Nebojša Vukanović	List for Justice and Order			46	46
7	Boris Jerinić	SNSD			40	40
8	Dragan Čavić	NDP			31	31
9	Sanja Vulić	SNSD			21	21
10	Snježana Novaković Bursać	SNSD	4		16	20
11	Nebojša Radmanović	SNSD	1	5	12	18
12	Dragan Čović	HDZ	7		3	10
13	Radovan Višković	SNSD			10	10
14	Nenad Nešić	DNS			9	9
15	Mirnes Ajanović	BOSS			9	9
16	Obrad Kesić	Head of RS Representative Office in Washington	3	4		7
17	Marinko Čavara	HDZ	4	2		6
18	Dino Konaković	NIP			3	3
19	Božo Ljubić	HNS BiH	1			1
20	Nenad Stevandić	Ujedinjena Srpska		1		1

The media that spread these narratives the most are under the control of the SNSD.[31] They are: RTRS with 223 items, ATV with 185 items, Glas Srpske with 103 items. At the same time, the importance of online media, which participate in spreading negative narratives about the CEC, is increasing. Those that stand out in particular are the web portals Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata with 88 items and Banjalučke priče with 87 units of harmful content.

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31   There is extensive documentation that confirms that some media are under the direct control of the SNSD. For example, Monitoring of the 2022 General Elections shows that RTRS is extremely favourable in its approach to the SNSD and speaks about the opposition almost exclusively in a negative tone (Udovičić et al. 2022, 40-44), and that Nezavisne novine, in a somewhat more subtle form, also shows preference for the government during the election campaign period (Udovičić et al. 2022, 60-61). Journalist and analyst Gordana Katana has been publishing analyses on the Analiziraj.ba portal for eight years, in which she points to the obvious bias of RTRS in primetime news programmes, favouring the SNSD to the detriment of all other political subjects. ATV was put on the US Treasury Blacklist because of its closeness to Milorad Dodik. "As stated in the elaboration, although he is not its owner, Dodik used it to spread his nationalist rhetoric, denigrate political dissidents, and interfere directly in programme editing. It is also stated that corrupt activities connected with Dodik were enabled through this television station" (Hadžović 2022). Husić (2011) says that back during the 2010 election campaign, Glas Srpske "placed itself completely at the service of the ruling party (SNSD) and Milorad Dodik".

TABLE 5: List of media that published harmful content

		AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	TOTAL
1	Rtrs.tv	5	4	214	223
2	ATV	6		179	185
3	Glas Srpske	6	3	93	102
4	Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata	2	3	83	88
5	Banjalučke priče		3	84	87
6	Nezavisne novine	1	2	79	82
7	Banjaluka 24.media		1	65	66
8	Infosrpska			65	65
9	Twit			65	65
10	Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina		1	57	58
11	Faktor	2		54	56
12	Dnevni avaz			33	33
13	Klix	4		25	29
14	SRNA	3			3
15	BHDijaspora.net	2			2
16	Poskok.info	2			2
17	Crna hronika	2			2

6.3. ANALYSIS OF THE MAIN NARRATIVES

This analysis identifies harmful narratives aimed at gaining control of the Central Election Commission through non-institutional means. Ultimately, this means that the election process would become a farce and that voters' trust in it would be further shaken. As already said, not every criticism of the CEC is a harmful narrative. Criticising this institution can have positive effects because public criticism draws attention to its work and thus reduces the possibility of the agency acting illegally far from the public eye. In addition, sometimes the criticism of the CEC is expressed "in the heat of the fight", that is, it is expressed impulsively rather than as part of a planned political strategy aiming to bring the CEC under political control. Such statements

are quite common in our political life and more often reflect the political culture and skills of our politicians than indicate that it is an intended political action.

On the other hand, this research established the existence of certain harmful narratives that were thoroughly developed in the "political kitchens" and then systematically disseminated through various media platforms. These narratives have a clear structure, contain different variations or sub-narratives that support them, have a network of actors that promote them and a media infrastructure that supports them, are relatively well integrated into basic media logic and have specific goals that they strive to achieve.

The structure of these narratives implies the promotion of a central message, which in some cases is identical for different actors and sometimes has some variations, but essentially the same message is sent to the public. The sub-narratives are numerous and are determined by context. Sometimes they suggest that the CEC is acting illegally, sometimes that it does not react to election irregularities, in some situations that it is politically biased, etc. However, what connects these different qualifications is that they are associated with explanations that something needs to be done about this type of CEC; essentially, the main goal is to place the election process under the direct control of specific political parties.

When talking about actors who promote these narratives, the quantitative analysis showed that it is possible to identify individuals who are mainly connected to the SNSD political party. Some of them hold the highest party positions, while others are assigned to specific functions. A somewhat similar strategy can be found with representatives of the HDZ, who express identical political messages related to the CEC. However, the intensity of their activity in relation to SNSD politicians is minor. Nonetheless, the correspondence in the actions of these parties is obvious and it would not be surprising if there was a coordinated action on the part of these political allies.

Regarding the media infrastructure through which harmful narratives are spread, it is clear that this structure exists and that some reports are favoured and additionally reinforced through a system of mutual transmission among certain media. The media that spread these narratives the most are under the control of the SNSD. The most prominent members of this media network are the Public Radio and Television Service of the Republika Srpska – RTRS, Banja Luka-based ATV and the private dailies Glas Srpske and Nezavisne novine. It is evident that some online media, such as Banjalučke priče, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Banjaluka 24.media, Infosrpska and others, are affiliated with them.

At the same time, the creators of harmful narratives are aware of how the media as commercial organisations operate and they succeed to a significant extent in promoting their narratives not only through media over which they have control, but also through other media. Thus, it can be seen that there is a relatively large amount of harmful content in media that can hardly be associated with the SNSD (Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina, Faktor, Dnevni avaz, Klix). Several explanations for this behaviour can be offered:

a) The media believe that their task is to report on all political events and in this regard they try to reflect what is happening on the political scene;

b) The media maintain that some "provocative" content is more appealing to the audience and give it space because it will bring them financial benefit;

c) Some media do not have enough content, and publishing everything that is available seems like a good strategy to them;

d) The media usually do not have enough resources to investigate certain issues more thoroughly, so they just expect other political actors to act and then they report it.

Basically, these different explanations make sense for different media and sometimes one media outlet has multiple possible reasons. It is obvious that the creators of harmful narratives are aware of these media shortcomings and successfully take advantage of them to achieve their goals.

Main Narrative I: The main harmful narrative is defined as follows: the CEC is a renegade/uncontrolled centre of political power that needs to be brought back under political control.

Goals of Narrative I: Harmful narratives are created and distributed keeping in mind the clear goals that need to be achieved. As already said, the basic idea is to place the entire election process under the control of certain political parties. The final result that needs to be achieved is twofold, depending on the political actors who promote them. For SNSD actors, the goal is to establish an election commission at the entity level and then place it under complete political control. A backup option, by electing CEC members loyal to the SNSD and HDZ, is to reestablish the control that these two parties had before 2020. This is also the main goal of the HDZ.

Main narrative II: CEC decisions are harmful to some peoples and to the democratic election process in general. Various political parties resort to this narrative - the SNSD again to the greatest extent, but also opposition political parties, especially those from the Republika Srpska.

Goal of narrative II: The goal of this narrative is to prevent the CEC from making decisions that do not suit these political parties, and the basic sub-narratives are that the CEC is biased, unreliable, corrupt and out of date. These two narratives will be analysed in more detail further in the text.

6.3.1. The CEC is a renegade/uncontrolled centre of political power that needs to be brought back under political control

During the three analysed months, the narrative that the CEC is a sort of centre of political power that certain political parties have no control over, was permeated through media reports. It has different sub-narratives and what they all have in common is the aspiration to place the CEC back under political control in one way or another. The basic sub-narratives are that the CEC is illegal and illegitimate, and also that this state agency is not credible. By combining and constantly repeating these allegations, the public is being prepared to see the necessity of undertaking political activities that will correct these irregularities.

6.3.1.1. The CEC is illegal and illegitimate

The basic allegation of this sub-narrative is that the members of the CEC were elected in an illegal manner and therefore this body is illegitimate and illegal. This position is repeated despite the fact that the Court of BiH established that the members of the CEC were elected legally and in accordance with the Election Law of BiH.

Methods of construction and dissemination of the sub-narrative

Discrediting: The basic allegations are that the Central Election Commission of BiH was politically organised by the SDA (Nezavisne novine 2022a), that the appointment of new members of the CEC, close to the SDS and PDP, was made possible with the help of votes of MPs from the Federation of BiH (Infosrpska 2022a), that a number of CEC members were illegally elected, and that the CEC is a political body elected with the help of the international community (SRNA/Srpskainfo 2022).

However, overall, there is very little explanation as to why the CEC is illegitimate. The position that the CEC is illegal and illegitimate is mostly *repeated* and the public is expected to take the allegation for granted. In addition, some allegations contain obvious threats.

> He reiterated once again that the parties that are gathered around the HNS (Croat People's Assembly) consider the current composition of the Central Election Commission of BiH illegal and illegitimate. "It does

not enjoy any trust from the HNS. We accept all its decisions, but we have not come to terms with that and we will not remain silent. I do not expect them to do anything and God forbid they do anything (...)", said Dragan Čović, president of the HDZ. (N1 BiH 2022).

"At some point, the opposition will be held accountable, either before the people's court or before judicial institutions, for everything it is doing. They may think that they will succeed in hiding behind the CEC's illegal decisions, but all illegalities will be analysed, as well as the issue of replacing the already illegitimate composition of the CEC", said Staša Košarac, member of the SNSD Presidency. (Banjalučke priče 2022a).

"With these and similar moves, Arnautović, as one of the key exponents of Bosniak politics in Sarajevo, which are now unfortunately transferred onto the illegitimate and illegal CEC, is trying to divert the public's attention from his illegal activities and the adoption of completely legally unfounded decisions, which we have the opportunity to watch these days," said Snježana Novaković Bursać, head of the SNSD caucus in the House of Representatives of the BiH Parliament. (Banjalučke priče 2022b).

"The illegally, unlawfully elected Central Election Commission makes another decision that is illegal, premature; after all, the procedure is known, what the election law says" – said the mayor of Doboj, Boris Jerinić, after the CEC's decision to recount ballots for President of the Republika Srpska. (Vijesti Srpske 2022).

"And then a whole post-election charade, circus and scandal at the illegal Central Election Commission /CEC/ BiH, in which people from the SDS and PDP sit together with the people of Bakir Izetbegović and Željko Komšić" – said Radovan Kovačević, spokesperson of the SNSD. (Banjaluka 24.media 2022a).

Kovačević pointed out that the Republika Srpska has a say and will decide on the election winners on its own and added that the current composition of the Central Election Commission of BiH /CEC/ is unlawful and their every decision is illegal. (SRNA 2022a).

Nebojša Radmanović from the SNSD gave some sort of explanation as to why the CEC is illegitimate, but he did not even try to refute the arguments of the Court of BiH about the legality of the CEC and instead gave an explanation that, in fact, can neither be confirmed nor refuted (foreigners who set up institutions above the law).

The Chairman of the House of Representatives of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH, Nebojša Radmanović, said that the election of members of the Central Election Commission of BiH is a black mark on the overall political story in BiH, in which some international representatives played a part. The Sarajevo majority, along with the minority from the Republika Srpska, formed the new CEC composition and then started saying that it was a non-partisan body. Basically, it's the other way around. It is now clear that the CEC includes people from the SDA, SDS, PDP, one from the HDZ and another Croat. Part of the international community also had something to do with this – Radmanović told Glas Srpske. According to him, foreigners are obviously constantly working here to create institutions that are above all laws and the Constitution. The Constitutional Court is like that and now they are doing the same with the CEC – emphasised Radmanović. (SRNA/Srpskainfo 2022).

Creation and spread of stereotypes: In cases when the media remind the proponents of the CEC's illegitimacy, which the courts made a decision that is the opposite of what they allege, they resort to the only possible refuge of all nationalist policies in BiH – hiding behind national issues and interests. Thus, Radovan Kovačević, SNSD spokesperson, rejects the decision of the Court of BiH because the court had made decisions that were at the expense of Serbs.

Speaking about the fact that the Court of BiH had passed a decision on the legality of the CEC, Kovačević recalled the court's numerous decisions that had always been to the detriment of Serbs. "We have seen many times how this court makes decisions. The Court of BiH most often, even when it comes to war crimes, judges against Serbs and acquits all those who committed war crimes against Serbs. From that we see how relevant such a judicial instance is," he said. (SRNA/RTRS 2022a).

Use of vocabulary that supports symbols and emotional messages: It is obvious that there are no rational arguments that could support the view that the CEC is illegitimate, so metaphors are sometimes used, such as "black mark" (SRNA/Srpskainfo 2022), and phrases with questionable meaning, such as "scandalous election" and "unprincipled majority" (SRNA/RTRS 2022b), to illustrate the existence of problems related to the legitimacy of the existing CEC members. Therefore, this sub-narrative about the illegality and illegitimacy of the CEC seems to be a good argument that can tie in well with other allegations about the CEC. The political parties HDZ and SNSD, by constantly repeating these allegations,

wish to impose them on their voters as facts despite there being court rulings that say the opposite.

6.3.1.2. The CEC is not credible

The subject of the CEC's illegality is also linked to allegations that the CEC is not credible and a unique narrative is thus created that aims to point to the necessity of setting up an election body at the level of the Republika Srpska entity.

Actors spreading the sub-narrative: This narrative is expressed exclusively by SNSD representatives. The timeline shows that Milorad Dodik first presents the goal that needs to be achieved and then lower ranking members of the SNSD speak up and point out why it is necessary to do what Dodik is instructing. In doing so, they use various methods of narrative construction and dissemination.

Goal of the sub-narrative: The main goal is to transfer the authority for organising elections to the entity level and thus disempower the responsible bodies of Bosnia and Herzegovina. At a press conference on 21 October 2022, Dodik pointed out the need for elections to be organised at the entity level and announced that election authority is being restored to the entity level. The choice of the word "restore" is interesting because it indicates that authority for elections had once been at the level of the Republika Srpska. However, the post-war elections in BiH were organised by the OSCE (N1 BiH 2018) in 2002, under the supervision of the Provisional Election Commission, and were then entrusted to the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina (OSCE 2022). So, the question arises as to what Dodik means by "restoring authority". This politician often uses phrases undetermined in time, which point to an undetermined, but at the same time near, future.

> "Very soon, we will pass a law on elections in the Republika Srpska and restore authority for all levels to the RS, so that everything will be under the authority of the election commission of the republic, and not the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina," said Milorad Dodik, member of the Presidency of BiH. At a press conference in Banja Luka on 21 October, Dodik pointed out that the Republika Srpska entity will continue with the transfer of authority, as in the case, as he stated, of the entity drug agency. (Radio Free Europe 2022).

Through this narrative, intent is also expressed by connecting the present with future activities.

Dodik also stated that "work will be put into strengthening the subjectivity of the Republika Srpska." He said that everything will be done to restore authority for elections to the entity level. "This means that the election law of the RS will give the right to the Republika Srpska through the election commission to implement local elections, as well as elections for the National Assembly and President of the RS, instead of the Central Election Commission, which does not have that right under the Constitution anyway," added Dodik. (Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina 2022).

The next day, 22 October 2022, Dodik's adviser Milan Tegeltija posted a message on Twitter.

He posted Article 1.1 of the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which states: "This law shall regulate the election of the members and the delegates of the Parliamentary Assembly of BiH and of the members of the Presidency of BiH and shall stipulate the principles governing the elections at all levels of authority in BiH." Tegeltija added: "Those who understand anything about law know what that means, I will not explain it this time, I will leave it for another time!" (D. Be. 2022).

Methods of construction and dissemination of the sub-narrative

Appeal to voters' emotions and persuasion: A few days later, on 27 October, Željka Cvijanović spoke out, commenting on a mistake the CEC made, when it declared Ivan Begić, instead of Davor Pranjić, as the new vice-president from among the Croat people.

"This disgrace should be rectified immediately and a credible institution with a credible composition should be set up, in accordance with the law," she wrote. She claims that the citizens already knew what the outcome would be. "Now they understand why we said what we said with regard to the CEC," she added. As previously reported, SNSD President Milorad Dodik recently announced considering the establishment of an election commission in the RS entity. (SRNA 2022b).

The newly elected member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina and until recently the president of the RS entity, Željka Cvijanović, known to the general public for a recording of a telephone conversation in which she talks about bribing elected MPs so they would switch to the majority formed by the SNSD, is suddenly stunned by the incompetence of the CEC and calls for setting up an institution that has credibility.

"After watching the CEC session, and in addition to everything I have said so far, I will now add: The CEC is a real circus. They are not even familiar with the constitutional categories and thus they inform us that there is a Presidency of the Republika Srpska in which a Serb, a Croat and a Bosniak member are now elected after some kind of control count of theirs, instead of there being a president and two vice-presidents," wrote Cvijanović. (Novi 2022).

The President of the Republika Srpska, Željka Cvijanović, said today that the Central Election Commission (CEC) of BiH is a real circus and that this disgrace should be rectified immediately and a credible institution set up. (Nezavisne novine 2022b).

Legitimising the narrative: On 30 October 2022, Branko Petrić, former president of the Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, also spoke out, with specific suggestions on what should be done to restore the credibility of the election process. This could also be interpreted as some sort of expert support to the SNSD's narrative.

Branko Petrić assessed that the current composition of the CEC has lost credibility, which is why the representatives of the Republika Srpska entity need to work on amending the Election Law of BiH, which will clearly define who implements elections in state institutions and who does that in the entity. Petrić specified that the RS should and must work to ensure that the election process is carried out by competent bodies in accordance with the constitutions, which implies that the CEC is responsible for state institutions and a republic election commission is responsible for the election of President of the Republika Srpska, National Assembly and local parliaments and mayors and heads of municipalities. He stated that the present composition of the CEC, which he said "displays obvious amateurism and charlatanism," is not losing, nor can it lose, its reputation, because it never had one. Petrić added that its current composition cannot have such a reputation because it is known how they came to those positions, who appointed them, why, and with what goal. (SRNA 2022c).

Discrediting: There is no doubt that the representatives of some political parties, especially the SNSD, do not accept the current situation, in which they have no control over election administration. Therefore, the present composition of the CEC is continuously, and in times of crisis, emphatically, problematised, by repeating the narrative that this body was not appointed according to the law. By alleging that the CEC was not only illegally appointed, but that it also lacks the capacity to perform the responsible

work of organising elections, the need to solve this pressing problem, as they see it, is demonstrated. According to the promoters of this narrative, the ideal solution would be to transfer authority for elections to the entity level. It is obvious that they have full confidence that they can control the processes at the entity level, so it is enough for elections to be organised at this level in the future and everything will be legal, legitimate and credible again. However, it is quite possible that the possibility of transferring authority in connection with the elections is raised only as part of a negotiating tactic – we are ready to go for this if you do not allow us to have members within the present CEC.

Conclusion: The fact that these narratives come from the very top of the SNSD and that lower officials systematically repeat them, and the frequency of these messages on different media platforms, indicate that it is a planned narrative that is intended to prepare the public and other political actors for the inevitability of activities aimed at bringing the CEC under the political control of the parties that won the elections. Narrative construction methods include discrediting the CEC as an illegal and illegitimate agency without credibility. In doing so, vocabulary is used that aims to influence the emotions of voters, while arguments for the allegations are mostly absent or the allegations are based on arguments of a speculative nature. Thus, all the elements of a political narrative (goal, actors, means, methods) are present in this case, which indicates that the job of discrediting the CEC was approached seriously, with clear expectations of the outcome of this campaign against the agency. It is clear that this narrative is not only intended to express one's own political position, but also to create a common perception and attitude among voters and other political actors.

6.3.2. Decisions of the CEC are harmful to the democratic election process

In addition to the main harmful narrative about the CEC as a renegade centre of political power, there are numerous criticisms of the CEC that try to show that the agency's actions are essentially harmful to the democratic election process itself. The most common allegations in this regard are that the CEC is biased and that it acts illegally in certain situations. However, it is extremely difficult to label all these criticisms as harmful, because they are often not mere allegations, but instead offer specific arguments as to why the CEC is biased or why its actions are not based on positive legal regulations. The function of such narratives is obviously positive in many cases – they try to prevent the CEC from falling under influences that are not visible to the public and to force the agency to act impartially and legally. However, this is not the case with all allegations.

Goal of the narrative: Some of these allegations are general and unfounded, and their widespread distribution and frequent repetition (described in the previously presented quantitative analysis of the narrative spread) indicate that their aim is to create pressure that will result in the adoption of decisions that suit certain political actors, or at least prevent the adoption of decisions that are considered unfavourable.

6.3.2.1. The CEC is acting illegally

The qualification that the CEC is acting illegally is the most common accusation against the agency and can be heard from almost all actors who criticise the work of the CEC. Whatever decision the CEC makes, it can be expected that someone will declare it illegal.

Methods of construction and dissemination of the sub-narrative

In the first two months, before the elections, there were several cases when CEC decisions were called illegal. For example, Klub 99 criticised the CEC for the way in which candidates for the Presidency of BiH were appointed, arguing that the procedure was contrary to the Constitution and the law (BHDijaspora.net 2022). Several media outlets criticised the work of the CEC over its decision to refuse to register a number of voters in the Central Voters Register for voting outside BiH, citing examples that they consider to be an indication of the CEC's improper action (Bljesak.info 2022). However, a real rush of qualifications about the illegality of its work came during and immediately after the elections. Representatives of the ruling parties from the Republika Srpska were again in the lead here.

Discrediting: By illegal work, these parties primarily referred to the decision of the CEC to recount the votes for the president and vice-presidents of the Republika Srpska, after numerous irregularities in the election process were reported. The usual arsenal of accusations was used to discredit the CEC – the security underground, Sarajevo (i.e. "political Sarajevo"), which seek to desecrate the election process.

> Dodik noted that the Central Election Commission of BiH was not elected according to the law, that it does not work according to the law, it did not announce the preliminary results, and it decided to do a recount. (Infosrpska 2022b).

> "That's how we got, I won't say a monster, it's called the Central Election Commission, which was previously created to settle political accounts. The CEC had no right to make a decision on a control count, or any kind of count; it was supposed to establish the preliminary results," said Dodik. (Nezavisne novine 2022c).

"We suspect a scam by Sarajevo and the security underground, but they won't be able to pull it off. Someone did this with the sole aim of again dirtying and delegitimising the election process for President of the Republic, to save their face at the CEC, because they had illegally ordered a recount that only confirmed that Dodik's victory for President of the Republika Srpska was clean," Kovačević said. (Slobodna Bosnia 2022).

Legitimising the narrative: The construction of narratives can have different goals and narratives often target diverse groups and actors. It is often not enough just to send a message to other political actors, but it is also necessary to ensure the support of citizens for the goals they want to achieve. The SNSD made sure to provide that kind of support by holding a rally of government supporters in October 2022 called "The Motherland is Calling", at which representatives of the ruling coalition in the Republika Srpska spoke. The well-known movie director Emir Kusturica also gave support, further legitimising the ruling parties' narrative on election fraud staged by the CEC.

The world-famous movie director Emir Kusturica attended a rally called "The Motherland is Calling" tonight in Banja Luka, where 50,000 citizens gathered in support of the newly elected President of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, who the West, with the help of the Central Election Commission of BiH, is trying to illegally deprive of a well-deserved victory, writes the Russian Gazette. (ATV 2022a).

Use of vocabulary that supports symbols and emotional messages: Opposition parties from the RS did not challenge the CEC and its decisions until the moment the decision was made to announce the election result according to which Milorad Dodik was the new President of the RS. Their statements can be understood more as acting for affect, because the decision had already been made and no comment could change it. Nevertheless, it is interesting that very similar vocabulary was used and therefore it is more likely that such statements were aimed at the voters, in order to create a narrative about the opposition competing with the ruling parties in an unfair election contest. In this way, part of one's own responsibility for election failure is removed, because instead of questions about the activities of candidates in the pre-election period, questions are asked about the corrupt institutions of the system. Nebojša Vukanović refers to the CEC as a mafia organisation, calling them an election cartel, and shrouds the criticism in "the people's demands".

The people do not accept violence and the overturning of their will, many citizens write to me and complain, they are outraged by the behaviour of the members of the CEC of BiH, which they will probably show today at 4 p.m. when we will submit a complaint against their shameful, illegal and scandalous decisions, outside the seat of the Central Election Cartel in Sarajevo. (Istok Portal slobodne Srpske 2022).

Jelena Trivić from the PDP laments in a similar tone, emphasising that the CEC made the decision under pressure.

It is obvious that the CEC succumbed to the pressures that came from the Regime, but very possibly also to other pressures that will be known very soon, just as everything is known in Bosnia and Herzegovina in advance, and it trampled the electoral will of the people, whereby unfortunately another institution that was supposed to serve the people was destroyed – wrote Trivić on Facebook. (Banjaluka 24.media 2022b).

Appeal to voters' emotions and persuasion: Common to all these allegations, whether they come from those in power or the opposition, is that they contain emotionally charged terms ("monster", "security underground", "the West is taking away victory", "election cartel", "pressures of the Regime"), but essentially they remain unverified or, at best, premature. While the narrative of illegal actions propagated by representatives of the authorities from the RS can be said to have served the function of creating pressure on the CEC in order to obtain the desired decision, the narrative of the opposition can be characterised more as desperate lamentation, which is ultimately harmful for the credibility of the election process. It is obvious that for both of them it is more important to build a common perception with voters about the illegal activities of the CEC in favour of one or the other than to consolidate the idea that potential illegalities can be addressed through the institutions of the system.

6.3.2.2. The CEC is biased
The allegation that the CEC is biased is one of the most common criticisms of the agency's work. Again, the SNSD is the loudest. In the first two months of monitoring, allegations about the CEC's bias were related to statements that the CEC did not react to the "irregularities" of their political opponents in the previous period and it was predicted that the CEC would not sanction the SNSD's political opponents even though they were clearly violating the election rules. ABCPortal.info, a portal close to the HDZ, repeated similar

allegations, warning that the CEC would not act on alleged violations of the election rules by political candidate Željko Komšić.

Methods of construction and dissemination of the sub-narrative

Biased and one-sided reporting and propaganda: The allegations made are mostly speculative. Serious journalism should not just report on these speculations, but should establish whether they are based on logical and well-founded premises. Some examples of this narrative describe alleged irregularities that the CEC deliberately did not punish. However, even in these cases, such allegations can hardly constitute strong evidence because there is no reference at all to institutionally proving irregularities in the work of the CEC. No information is given on whether a case was even referred to the appeal procedure, what the outcome was, whether an effort was made to possibly establish the truth in court, etc.

> "We entered the campaign adhering to all obligations, making sure to watch out for potential punishments that we expected from the CEC, to which Christian Schmidt gave much broader powers than he should have," says Nebojša Radmanović. (N. N. 2022, Nezavisne novine).

> "The CEC seems to have no intention of sanctioning the dangerous policy and rhetoric of Željko Komšić, which can also be a big problem," writes ABCPortal.info from Mostar. (ABCPortal.info 2022).

> "It is more than clear that someone consciously and in an organised way chose to add votes for Jelena Trivić and at one polling station for several PDP candidates. Of course, no one responsible at the City Election Commission or CEC of BiH has addressed this occurrence. On top of all that, it should be emphasised that, just a few months later, in February 2021, Jelena Trivić was defeated in her local community," writes the portal banjaluckeprice.net. (Banjalučke priče 2022c).

Discrediting: In October, the CEC's decision to do a recount of votes for President of the RS was the reason for this institution to be characterised as biased. The most engaged elaboration of the CEC's bias, which was carried by numerous media, was presented by an SNSD deputy in the National Assembly of the Republika Srpska, Srđan Mazalica.

> "I think the Central Election Commission is totally compromised after this, since it should be impartial, autonomous in making decisions, possess integrity in making decisions," said Mazalica and added: "We have pointed out since the beginning two and a half years ago when

this composition of the CEC was selected, that it was selected without a position announcement, that it was not done in accordance with the law, and that the members Bjelica Prutina and Kalaba have very clear connections with the PDP and SDS who voted for this composition of members, and that this composition of CEC members cannot be objective to implement the election process in BiH consistently and with integrity. The election process is the foundation of democracy and rule of law in every country, so it is important that the members of the CEC are autonomous in making decisions and that they do not make decisions under pressure from political parties." (ATV 2022b).

Radovan Višković, the Prime Minister of the Republika Srpska, voiced a similar message.

"With this decision, the CEC of BiH contradicts itself, raises doubt about the independence and impartiality of its members, and calls into question the transparency of the vote recount," – emphasised Višković. "With the illegal decision to recount the votes," he added, "the CEC of BiH and the individual members of the CEC have definitely lost all credibility and trust, as legal experts have also pointed out." According to him, the media's unverified, unsubstantiated writings and video posts on social networks, which are published in some media outlets, where the participants and the place are not visible, cannot be an excuse for violating the law. And that, he added, "speaks enough about the credibility of the people who are members of the CEC, who spoke only three days earlier about the impartiality of the CEC and the implementation of the Election Law." (ATV 2022c).

He was accompanied by his party colleague Saša Aulić, member of the SNSD Main Board.

"Such inconsistency calls into question the integrity of the CEC members, as well as the institution itself. Especially if we consider the illegal election and party affiliation of its members, whose bias is fully disclosed by today's decision," said Aulić. (ATV 2022d).

Conclusion: Allegations about the bias of the CEC are quite general and it is difficult to find any meaningful argument in them that indicates that there actually is bias. The fiercely contested decision on the recount of votes for President of the RS, as was shown later, did not exclude the SNSD from the process of the control count and did not enable the count to be carried out away from the eyes of the public and party representatives. Therefore, it is difficult to conclude what is biased in that decision. Other comments about

bias made before the elections are even more problematic because they are mostly speculative and rely on highly selective arguments. However, given that the discrediting of the CEC on the grounds of illegal activity and bias is, in fact, the main criticism of the agency's work, it can be viewed as the basic means of putting pressure on the CEC to act in a way that is desired by political parties.

6.4. CONCLUSION

The Central Election Commission of BiH captured the media spotlight during the period of this research (August – October 2022). SNSD President Milorad Dodik alone appeared more than 200 times in media content talking about the CEC in a negative context. Media close to the SNSD led the way in reporting about the CEC in a negative way, but this research also revealed some previously unknown online media that played an increasingly important role in spreading harmful narratives about the CEC.

The two main harmful narratives that were identified are: (1) that the CEC is a renegade/uncontrolled centre of political power that needs to be brought back under political control, and (2) that the decisions of the CEC are harmful to certain peoples and to the democratic election process in general. What separates these two narratives from other criticisms of the CEC is that these narratives were planned in the political centres and systematically spread in the public. The goals of these narratives are generally to bring the CEC under political control, with a variety of political and media actors involved in its realisation.

This mission is not to be underestimated. It presupposes the denial of court rulings, the generation of conspiracy theories about election rigging, and constant repetition of the same allegations. Every possible omission made by the CEC is to be exploited and inserted into a narrative scheme that demands the establishment of political control over the CEC. Undoubtedly, the resulting collateral damage - which some would define as an added value - is the loss of citizens' trust in the election process. The actors of these narratives often target voters, in their endeavour to create a system of common beliefs, values and perceptions. They use emotionally charged messages, but do not shy away from threats when they feel it is necessary.

The election process in BiH is burdened with a variety of problems that call into question the free expression of citizens' electoral will again and again. Election administration is no exception. In the past years, there have been many criticisms of its work, as well as suggestions on how to depoliticise

the work of the election bodies. However, it is only since 2020 that some parties have tried to make the work of the Central Election Commission the main problem, even though it is clear from all previous analyses that this body, however many shortcomings it may have, does not pose an essential problem. This "distraction" is not only aimed at trying to bring the Central Election Commission under political control, but also greatly hinders the resolution of other problems of election administration, especially the work of polling committees. This research points to the need to further depoliticise the activities of the CEC and to work on strengthening all mechanisms that will enable free and fair elections.

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Chapter 7

FOREIGN ACTORS, SCHMIDT AND NATO: FROM PROTECTORS TO ENEMIES

Mladen Bubonjić and Amela Delić Aščić

7.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter analyses the harmful content and narratives about foreign actors – foreign states, international institutions and their representatives – in Bosnia and Herzegovina published and circulated by mainstream media, anonymous portals, social networks, and individuals and groups on social networks. Harmful content includes disinformation, biased and discrediting content targeting foreign states, international institutions and/or their representatives in order to influence voters in BiH, and often also to discredit political opponents.

Due to the peculiar political arrangement whereby the Office of the High Representative oversees the implementation of the civilian component of the Dayton Peace Agreement, as well as the various ideological attitudes of the major nationalist political parties in BiH towards other states and organisations, the process of EU integration of BiH, and the split opinion of political actors about joining the NATO Alliance, foreign actors take up considerable space in political speech and media reporting in BiH. The election year 2022 saw a further increase in the presence of representatives of foreign states and international institutions in the media and on social networks, for reasons including the changes to the Election Law, the war in Ukraine, as well as the exchange of accusations between candidates and representatives of political parties about working for the benefit or under the patronage of foreign states and international organisations, which were once again, on the occasion of the most recent elections, often used to discredit political opponents.

In order to win votes, political parties and politicians employ narratives about Euro-Atlantic processes, foreign actors, and discredit others as foreign agents in a bid to sway voters. For years, representatives of political parties from both entities have fostered narratives about good and bad relationships with individual countries and their representatives. Thus, for example, candidate for president of RS Milorad Dodik met with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the pre-election campaign and RTRS reported that the Russian president wished Dodik success in the elections (Sijah 2023). During the pre-election campaign, the country was visited by

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who had a special meeting with Bakir Izetbegović, president of the SDA party, which was reported by the media in the Federation of BiH.

All the while, politicians and their political parties are fond of using exclusive narratives portraying certain foreign actors as "friends" and others as "enemies". Though this kind of generalisation is not entirely appropriate, given its exclusive slant, the discursive space in BiH can be reduced to two dominant spaces – that of Republika Srpska and that of the Federation of BiH. The discursive space in Republika Srpska is most often oriented "contra" the civic option in BiH and the Western system of values and "pro" traditional values largely characterised by conservativism. Also, in terms of alignment, it is closer to the "Eastern bloc" made up of Russia and China. On the other side, the discursive space in the Federation of BiH is more "pro" the civic option in BiH, with the exception of the "Croat discursive space", and the Western system of values, and "contra" the "Eastern bloc" led by Russia and China, i.e., the values and political systems in these countries (Bubonjić 2022).

On the basis of these leanings, politicians call their political opponents traitors and foreign agents in order to discredit them by linking them to a certain foreign actor (a foreign official, an embassy, a certain country). During the three months of monitoring, the ruling parties and the opposition in both entities accused each other of cooperating with "foreign agents and embassies". In RS, the opposition and the ruling majority accused each other of cooperating with the West, the US, the UK, and the High Representative, while in the Federation, politicians accused each other of not cooperating with these same actors or for lack of success on the path to joining NATO.

Because he imposed changes to the Election Law, High Representative Christian Schmidt was the most frequent target and actor in the content extracted during the monitoring period. In RS, the Office of the High Representative is consistently portrayed negatively, while in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is more often portrayed positively. However, the election period and intensified activities to initiate changes to the Election Law resulted in opposing interpretations of the High Representative's role even in the media in the Federation of BiH (Delić Aščić, Unkić, and Gadže 2022). Even though most of the negative content about the High Representative came from sources predominantly addressing the Serb population, sources geared towards Bosniaks and Croats did not pass up the opportunity to call Schmidt, the international community and the OHR

"foreign tutors" or to accuse them of cooperating with the other groups to the detriment of the group being addressed.

Alignment with particular foreign actors was also discernible during the election year in the "diametrically opposed" reporting on the war in Ukraine in the media in RS and in the Federation. In the media in the Federation, the war in Ukraine was interpreted as an "aggression" (Oslobođenje, Dnevni avaz, FTV, BHRT), while the media in RS used euphemisms and referred to the "special military operation" (Nezavisne novine, Glas Srpske, RTRS) (Bubonjić 2022). The reporting on narratives about NATO and its role in Bosnia and Herzegovina was similarly split (Delić Aščić 2023).

The aim of this chapter is to investigate to what extent and in what way foreign actors were used in political speeches and media reporting during the elections and how such narratives can influence voters. The aim is to deconstruct in detail some of the main observed narratives on *foreign actors and their cooperation with domestic politicians, as well as their impact on the political and security situation in BiH*. Below is a summary overview of quantified results from the three-month monitoring period, a qualitative analysis of three key harmful narratives about foreign actors, and a conclusion drawn on the basis of these research findings.

7.2. SUMMARY OF QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

Over the course of three months, keywords were used to extract a total of 16,351 articles, and 2,066 of those were analysed, indicating that 12.64% of the articles had problematic content. In August, a total of 1,051 articles were flagged, compared to September when much more content was extracted, i.e., 7,300 articles. The next month had similar numbers, 8,000 articles in total. 136 articles from August were analysed, 946 from September, and 984 from October. The reason for the significantly lower number of articles from August was technical – due to the complex setup of keywords, in August the Metricom platform did not extract (all) articles from certain media outlets that turned out to be leaders in disseminating harmful content, e.g., RTRS, ATV and Banjalučke priče. Also, the database did not properly pull content from social networks, i.e., profiles identified as potentially being sources of harmful narratives. In order to make up for this technical error, the researchers manually searched through the media outlets and social network profiles that had been left out, identifying a further 150 articles and social media posts with harmful content. The research found that certain foreign actors (e.g., Christian Schmidt and NATO) appeared in media content (in general, but also as the focus of harmful narratives) to a significantly higher degree than others that were selected for the study (e.g.,

China, Turkey, and US President Joe Biden). This is most likely due to the media being focused on current events – Christian Schmidt was the subject of many news articles due to his work and concrete actions he undertook as High Representative, as well as the numerous reactions coming from officials and the protests triggered by his decisions. On the other hand, if we take, for example, Turkey, during the research period, the only time this foreign actor was included in current events was when Turkish President Erdogan visited the region in early September.

TABLE 1: Harmful content over three months

MAIN CATEGORIES	DISINFORMATION	CONSPIRACY THEORY	PROPAGANDA	BIASED POLITICAL AND MEDIA REPORTING	HATE SPEECH AND NARRATIVES	DENIAL OF CRIMES AND GLORIFICATION OF WAR CRIMINALS	DISCREDITING	GLORIFICATION	NARRATIVE ON CONSPIRACIES OF WORLD POWERS (RUSSIA, US, UK, THE WEST)
August	2	-	48	78	1	-	23	8	-
September	26	20	194	416	13	-	427	99	87
October	22	47	173	387	8	3	490	52	90
Total	**48**	**67**	**415**	**881**	**21**	**3**	**940**	**1591**	**177**

During the three months of monitoring, most of the harmful content was in the form of biased media and political reporting (42.64%), propaganda (20.08%), and narratives on conspiracies of foreign actors with one ethnic group in BiH to the detriment of the other two (19.36%). The following categories of harmful content were monitored: disinformation, discrediting, fake news, hate speech, propaganda, glorification, conspiracy theories, narrative on foreign agents, narrative on conspiracy of world powers.

Propaganda was most prevalent in September (194), followed by October (173), and was least pronounced in August (48) when there was also less content overall. A tendency was observed for harmful content to intensify in the run-up to the elections, while after the elections, though still present,

harmful narratives were less frequent than during the pre-election campaign. This trend may be ascribed to efforts by political actors, as well as media close to political structures, to influence potential voters by serving up this kind of content in order to spread fear and discredit anyone the political elites and media close to them had proscribed – NATO, the West, the High Representative, political opponents, the other ethnic groups in BiH. Biased media and political reporting involving foreign actors was constant in online media throughout the three months, and was most ample during the pre-election campaign in September (416). In October there were 387 such texts, as opposed to August when there were 78. Conspiracy theories were most frequent in October (47), followed by September (20), while no such texts were found in August. Disinformation involving foreign actors was most frequent in September (26), followed by October (22), with just two examples found in August.[32] Hate speech and hate narratives involving foreign actors were found in September (13) and October (8), with just one example found in August.[33] Narratives on conspiracies of world powers were found in September (87) and October (90), and were based on presuppositions that foreign actors have certain objectives regarding BiH, i.e., their actions in the analysed content were interpreted in terms of efforts by these foreign actors (e.g., OHR, US, UK) to achieve their interests, often at the expense of BiH.

Discrediting of foreign actors was most prevalent in October (490) and September (427), and was mostly targeted against NATO, the High Representative, and the West in general. There were also attempts to discredit political opponents by referring to their relationships with specific international representatives and foreign states. At the same time, the glorification of foreign actors, including the non-critical and subjective veneration of international actors such as Russia or the West, was also dominant, especially in September (99), followed by October (52), and with eight such instances in August.[34] Content referring to conspiracies of foreign actors with one ethnic group in BiH was most frequent in October (244), followed by September (156).[35] Two types of content on conspiracies were observed. One involved domestic actors, e.g., one ethnic group cooperating

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32   One example of disinformation and conspiracy theory is the story that Jelena Trivić's campaign was financed by the United States (RTRS 2022a).

33   Problematic texts are mostly made up of multiple forms of harmful content. For instance, in addition to hate speech, a single text will often also include propaganda and discrediting/glorification (See: Frontal 2022a).

34   An example of a text discrediting NATO, the UK and the US as foreign actors, while on the other hand glorifying Russia: "Za muljaže u režiji Zapada optužuju Ruse" (Zeljković 2022a).

35   An example of an article where Turkey and the Turkish president are presented as actors with an interest in harming the Croat people (Poskok.info 2022a).

with foreign powers against another ethnic group, or one political option cooperating with foreign actors against another political option. The other type of conspiracy content referred to conspiracies of foreign powers without the "help" of domestic "traitors". Content on foreign agents was most frequent in September (66), followed by October (38), and it concerned content where political opponents were labelled as agents of foreign actors, e.g., the US, UK, or Germany.

During the research period, certain portals such as that of the RS Public Service Broadcaster RTRS, as well as government-friendly ATV, Glas Srpske, Vijesti Srpske, Srbin.info Srpske brze internet novine, the Republika Srpska News Agency SRNA, Poskok.info, ABCPortal.info kept coming up as the main distributors of harmful content. Among Facebook groups, the most frequent sources of harmful content were Banjalučki džokej,[36] Defter hefte,[37] Bošnjaci Jablanica[38] and Hrvati HercegBosne.[39]

RTRS and SRNA were identified as the dominant sources of harmful content carried by other media outlets (e.g. Banjalučke priče, ATV, Glas Srpske, Nezavisni portal Prijedor 24 sata, Nezavisne novine, Hrvatski medijski servis, Banjaluka 24.media, Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina). These two media outlets were characterised by biased reporting and use of propaganda to benefit the ruling political structures. When reporting on foreign actors, this bias was mostly reflected in a one-sided approach to topics and issues, without taking into account different opinions. Thus, when reporting on foreign actors, these media outlets would mostly report statements by the same political officials, and statements of interlocutors from other areas (academics, experts, analysts) also came from the same range of narratives about foreign actors that reflect the attitudes of the ruling political party. The anonymous portal Banjalučke priče, on the other hand, mostly featured negative reporting on the opposition, labelling the opposition in Republika Srpska as foreign agents, and referring both to individual members of the opposition (foremost the narrative about Republika Srpska presidential candidate Jelena Trivić as a foreign agent) and foreign actors such as Christian Schmidt, the UK and the US in a negative context. The Poskok. info and ABCPortal.info portals had biased reporting of statements by various actors, mostly statements where politicians and analysts air their

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36   Satirical FB page featuring content to discredit the Mayor of Banja Luka, Draško Stanivuković.

37   FB page critical of political and social events through a combination of discrediting and sensationalism.

38   FB page disseminating Bosniak nationalist views.

39   FB page disseminating Croat nationalist views closely aligned with the ideas and political programme of Herceg-Bosna.

views about High Representative Christian Schmidt. These are media outlets primarily addressing the Croat target group in BiH. However, though to a lesser extent, examples of harmful narratives about various actors were also found in media geared primarily towards Bosniaks (Crna hronika 2022; Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina 2022a).

7.3. ANALYSIS OF MAIN NARRATIVES

An analysis of content from the first two months revealed common patterns of harmful reporting on foreign actors with three narratives being dominant (most frequent in terms of quantity, but also qualitatively having the highest emotional impact in appealing to the public). The main pattern repeated throughout the three months of analysis concerns *foreign actors and their collaboration with domestic government representatives, and their influence on the political and security situation in BiH*. The most frequent narratives accounting for almost all the categories of harmful content, and which will be deconstructed in detail in subsequent sections, include:

1. NATO and the West as friends/enemies;
2. Domestic traitors and foreign agents; and
3. The High Representative, the international community and OHR as "foreign tutors" and agents.

The first and third narrative were analysed mostly in terms of bias, logical fallacies, framing and Aesopian language. All the above methods were frequently observed and their analysis included a detailed deconstruction of framing, argumentation and figures of speech. Biased media reporting means devoting more attention to one side and portraying it in a more positive light compared to the other, out of ideological, political, propaganda-driven and other reasons. Herman and Chomsky note the following bias techniques: "biased choice of topic, biased filtration of facts, biased emphasis on certain aspects of the story (colouring), biased placement of events and figures in explanatory contexts, keeping the discussion within the boundaries of acceptable presumptions, biased hierarchy of news" (Kurtić 2006, 99), and analyse the presence of logical fallacies in media appearances and statements by political and other interlocutors (Stojadinović 2014). Logical fallacies were present in conspiracy theories on foreign actors found in the identified sources. The monitored sources used manipulation and framing (interpretation of events) by having biased definitions of problems, determining causes using false argumentation, making moral judgements appealing to emotions of fear and patriotism, proposing remedies for the problems in line with recommendations from carefully selected interlocutors (Entman, quoted in Tabs 2013, 668). To this end, they also used suggestive

communication or Aesopian language (Kunczick and Zipfel 1998) rife with metaphors, allegories and hyperbole. Thus, for example, NATO was compared to a "vampire" whose "heart needed to be pierced with a stake", alluding to the need to destroy the NATO Alliance without saying as much.

One of the models for evaluating media texts against responsible and serious reporting criteria that we used in our analysis was the SMELL test (McManus 2012). The SMELL test was used to analyse the second narrative. It consists of a series of questions and small tests aimed at revealing intentional and unintentional reporting errors. Questions are asked about the Source, Motive, Evidence, Logic and finally what is Left out of the text. The method is similar to what was used for the previous narrative, given that it also examines bias (which sources were used or left out and what were the motives for their inclusion/exclusion), framing, which sometimes also includes intentionally leaving out interpretations that are not aligned with the ideological/political background of the source, logical ambiguities that confuse the public and are also used in Aesopian communication as a kind of semantic trap for authors to conceal their real intentions in a text or speech. The selected text is appropriate for analysing the second narrative, because it gets to the crux of the motive hiding behind the narrative on "foreign agents". After the narratives were analysed, interviews were conducted with experts and reporters who helped qualify and contextualise the identified harmful narratives.

7.3.1. Narrative I: NATO and the West as friends/enemies

Content and main characteristics of the narrative: In the monitored sources, NATO and the West were often mentioned in contexts where they were meant to be understood as friends or enemies of an ethnic group in Bosnia and Herzegovina, an entity, various states, or specific politicians. These harmful narratives were shared mostly by mainstream media (RTRS, ATV, Glas Srpske, Stav), but also by anonymous portals (Srbin.info Srpske brze internet novine, Banjalučke priče, Logično), Facebook groups (Banjalučki džokej, Bošnjaci Jablanica, Defter hefte), and individuals on their Twitter and Facebook accounts (Sanja Vulić, Milan Tegeltija, @nicollayzrd1, @ PatrioteSrpske). It is important to point out that media from RS mostly focused on keeping BiH out of NATO, where NATO was portrayed as an enemy of the Serb people. Thus, in media mostly addressing the Serb population, NATO was presented in a negative light, and the discourse was filled with symbols rich in connotative meaning, such as the NATO bombing, references to children being poisoned and babies dying, NATO interventions; in their speeches, politicians identified strikes against military positions with attacks on "Serbs and the Serb population", and this discourse was used to

exclude those who were allegedly cooperating with NATO or the West and label them as traitors. For example, the ATV portal wrote about the NATO bombing of Serb positions. They marked 6 September with the following conclusion: "These days, it will be 27 years since the NATO Alliance openly took a side against the Serb people and Republika Srpska by conducting air strikes against the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), its units and facilities". This media outlet was biased in identifying VRS with the Serb People, which is an unfounded generalisation (ATV 2022a). Nenad Stevandić, currently the speaker of the RS National Assembly, gave a very negative comment about NATO for Frontal. He said, among other things: "We are the only people who had oxygen for babies shut off by NATO decision" (Frontal 2022b).

On the other side, in FBiH, the media portrayed NATO in a positive light and the West in general as a "saviour" during the 1990s, as BiH's sure path to peace, using such discourse to slander political opponents as standing in the way of taking that path. Such discourse was used by Bakir Izetbegović (FENA 2022) and Denis Bećirović (Faktor 2022). However, the West was also criticised by Željko Komšić (Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina 2022b) – in an appearance on FACE TV, he implied that we would not be getting into NATO if Schmidt goes ahead with imposing an Election Law suited to the wishes of HNS and HDZ. "If things progress in the direction the media are writing about and further deepen divisions in BiH, then the doors to the EU will be nailed shut for us. This is taking us in the opposite direction from the EU. I think Schmidt is trying to gain sympathies among these NGOs and media and to dull the edge of the protests." The Stav portal accused politicians criticising the Party of Democratic Action for "rows with Western embassies" of political "high treason" (Drnišlić 2022). In a text titled "Cooking the Bosniak Frog" Mustafa Drnišlić writes that "the American patronising tone is not coincidental, but part of a process to infantilise the colonised subject", accusing opposition parties of "the kind of colonial mentality characteristic of those who have consented to 'cooking the Bosniak frog' for someone else's benefit", in other words, to preparing Bosniaks for accepting the imposed changes to the Election Law. According to Drnišlić, the aim is to "gradually sensitise the Bosniak public so that it will calmly and with relish eat the toxic slop cooked up by the Zagreb kitchen and served up by third-rate foreign waiters". He goes on to say that those opposed to "foreign dictate" are on one side, while on the other are "those" who "compete to see who will be the best and most pliable capitulating plate-licker who will act the part of an obedient and well-trained mutt, who will bark louder and bite with more bloodthirstiness anyone who opposes the colonial dictate".

Key actors: The actors of the narrative on NATO's hostility towards Serbs were experts selected with bias, such as Scott Ritter, historian Miloš

Ković, political analyst Srđa Trifković, columnist Veljko Zeljković, editor of the "Kosovo onlajn" portal Miloš Garić, political representatives of Russia – Nikolai Petrushev, Maria Zakharova, Vladimir Putin, Dmitry Medvedev, Igor Kirillov, Sergey Lavrov, Sergei Ryabkov, and RS politicians – Milorad Dodik, Sanja Vulić, Mirko Šarović, Jelena Trivić, Mladen Bosić.

In media mostly addressing citizens in FBiH, the key actors were political representatives such as Bakir Izetbegović, Fahrudin Radončić, Elmedin Konaković, Željko Komšić, and certain reporters such as Rasim Belko and Mustafa Drnišlić.

Main aim/intention of the narrative: When portraying NATO as an enemy of the Serb people, the intention was most often to justify the war in Ukraine and relativise Russia's crimes in that war. To this end, the content used comparison and symbolic and emotional identification of the Serb people with the Russian people. For example, in an article for Glas Srpske Miloš Ković writes that "NATO forces are trying to treat Russians like they treated Serbs in the 1990s", while ATV writes that "Russia has offered cooperation to Republika Srpska worth 200 million dollars" (Zeljković 2022b; SRNA 2022a). There were also frequent appeals to fear NATO and everything coming from the West, and especially the US, in the form of policies or different values and world views, such as for example: "Is America pushing us into conflict with Russia" (Banjaluka 24.media). The ATV portal wrote about the NATO bombing of Serb positions: "These days, it will be 27 years since the NATO Alliance openly took a side against the Serb people and Republika Srpska by conducting air strikes against the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS), its units and facilities". This came as the culmination of challenges to BiH's path to NATO and the discrediting of political subjects that had in any way been cooperating with representatives of Western countries. Thus, Mirko Šarović said Dodik was "Erdogan's favourite" (BN 2022), Staša Košarac accused Jelena Trivić of cooperating with the High Representative (SRNA 2022b), and Sanja Vulić accused her of having a "colonial mindset" (SRNA 2022c).

This is how political representatives both of the ruling parties and the opposition were discredited in the monitored sources mainly addressing the Serb people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the ultimate aim on a micro level being to influence election results, given that texts such as these can make voters feel fearful and unprotected, especially if we take into account the past war and the distrust among ethnic groups, making it possible to see political representatives as "protectors" from "foreign interests".

Methods of narrative construction and placement

One-sided and biased reporting: Numerous articles published by media outlets from Republika Srpska had a strong bias in quoting only one interlocutor, either from Russia or from RS. Examples include "Dodik: China is a pillar of the multipolar world" (SRNA 2022d), "Zakharova: America destabilises the world" (SRNA 2022e), "Volodin: America condemns Europe to hunger, cold and isolation" (SRNA 2022f). Other portals also portrayed Russia mostly through one-sided (Russian) opinions such as those of Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson, who "criticised the international community for not condemning Ukraine over its attacks" (SRNA 2022g); meanwhile Lavrov accused the US of pursuing a racist division of the world and spoke openly about the "golden billion" conspiracy theory (sputniknews.com 2022): "We have been consistently advocating respect for cultural and civilisational diversity of peoples, their right to determine their own fate. At the same time, we categorically refuse to follow the neo-colonial 'rules-based order' that the 'collective West' headed by the USA [is] trying to implement. This so-called 'order' presupposes a racist division of the world into a group of 'exceptional' nations, a priori having indulgence for any action, and the rest of the world that is obliged to follow the so-called golden billion and serve its interests – Russia's top diplomat pointed out". The aim of these articles is to present a one-sided view of events in Ukraine and mislead the public. According to Kurtić, for a media article to meet the conditions of truthfulness, it must "take into account all relevant facts" and "exclude facts that could be differently interpreted" (Kurtić 2006).

Discrediting: Historian Miloš Ković went furthest in efforts to discredit NATO on the RTRS portal during the month of August (SRNA 2022h). His statement was used as the headline for the article: "Nothing good can be expected from NATO and the US". He accuses NATO of "ethnically cleansing Krajina, Sarajevo, Kosovo and Metohija" and of seeking the "assimilation of Serbs in Montenegro and Macedonia". His argumentation contains an appeal to fear as a persuasion technique based on a logical fallacy, for example: "We have to defend ourselves in order to survive", then he appeals to tradition, invoking the narrative of victimisation and glorification of his own people: "Serb history is marked by discontinuities", "Serbs did not have their own state for centuries, but they survived as a people", "Serbs were the bearers of resistance to fascism". Appeals to fear or fear-mongering is used in commercial and political speech and "even a cursory insight into persuasive discourse is sufficient to observe how many statements are based on human fear as a fundamental emotion" (Hrnjić 2008, 48). The above article seeks to show how Serbs as a people may even disappear if they "do not defend themselves". Furthermore, when portraying

the potential enemies that will need to be resisted, a solution is most often proposed in the form of those able to defend us from them (political parties or individuals). This is a method "where the negative impacts of the rival candidate's policy are highlighted as already evident or certain to arise if he comes to power" (Hrnjić 2008, 49). There were more such examples of discrediting in the media that were trying to prove how, for example, a certain people would disappear if a particular political party, most often from the opposition, were to come to power. Several warnings came from DF that the High Representative was working with HDZ to create "apartheid" (Stav 2022), that he was "collaborating with Croatia" (Anadolija 2022), and then the RS government warned that Jelena Trivić was "collaborating" with the British (Banjaluka.net 2022a).

Stereotypes: Stereotypes, or rather the attributes on which stereotypes are based in this discursive approach, mainly revolve around the idea of the proud Serb people, a victimised people, the only people fighting against the "powerful and hegemonic West" (RTRS/SRNA 2022), an oppressed people (Poskok.info 2022b), but similar stereotyping was also applied to the Bosniak (Mehonić 2022a) and Croat peoples (Hrvatski medijski servis 2022) when the West was associated with the planned changes to the Election Law. This idea was also spread through comments from interlocutors who mainly presented themselves as moral authorities, able to interpret history, as experts, in order to lend legitimacy to such claims and by extension the construct of the entire narrative. For example, Rasim Belko claims in one text that a "special war" is being waged against the institutions of the state of BiH with the participation of "agencies" from neighbouring countries. Reference is made to Professor Enver Išerić who allegedly published the instructions followed by these "agencies" (Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina 2022c). Išerić does have a PhD in law, and invoking authorities is one of the persuasion techniques used to "transfer the positive emotions elicited by a symbol, person or institution onto the idea being promoted" (Hrnjić 2008, 45). Sometimes the very term "expert" is misused to contact persons with no expertise for the issues in question. For example, the Hrvati Herceg-Bosne Facebook page has a post marking the anniversary of the 9/11 World Trade Centre attack that refers to the "hypothesis" of Dževad Galijašević, a self-proclaimed "terrorism expert" (ATV 2022b). His "expertise" had previously been debunked by Raskrinkavanje and BIRN BiH (Lakić 2020; BIRN BiH 2019).

Context, linking the past, present and future in constructing the narrative: Media in RS repeatedly forecast "coups" that were being prepared in "foreign centres of power" (Vujatović 2022). Vujatović writes about the "culture of fear" fostered with a view to maintaining the status

quo. This is a "sociological concept where individuals can stoke fear among the general public in order to achieve political or workplace aims through emotional bias". Political actors use persuasion methods relying on fear as a basic human emotion (appealing to fear, intimidation with foreign and domestic enemies, threats of disappearance, as noted above) in media portrayals of reality in order to keep the public stuck in the past and the fears dating from those times. They forecast future wars, conflicts, revolutions, and what Vujatović calls "revolutionary kitchens" are "most active in election years, becoming particularly heated during election campaigns" (Vujatović 2021). Manipulating the past is used to legitimise the present political status and prepare the ground for staying in power in the future. Experts believe that politicians also refer to foreign actors in a negative context in order to justify their own failings during previous mandates when they were in office (Silajdžić 2022; Hasanović 2022). Thus, depending on the political actors and what their political discourses require, NATO appears as either friend or enemy. The "foreign agents" narrative is usually employed in a "derogatory sense" only "for those actors perceived as harmful, hostile or treacherous towards a given ethnic group". Experts believe that some political subjects based their campaigns precisely on narratives about foreign actors and their alleged involvement in the political situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They explain that such narratives can influence voters' attitudes, "shaping and homogenising" their opinions in the future, especially in a world of online media where even users with exceptional media and information literacy skills have difficulty finding reliable information (Silajdžić 2022; Hasanović 2022).

Symbols used: The metaphors used in connection with NATO mostly have negative connotations, for example: "NATO, a force of evil in the world", "crusading fanaticism", "North American hegemony", "colonial mindset", "Western agendas", "American strategists", "NATO barking at Russia's door", "foreign factor", "Brussels bureaucracy", "interventionists", etc. These phrases seek to idealise Russia, but also to portray the governments in RS and Serbia that support Russia as victims, martyrs and as righteous for being the only ones to stand up to Western "hegemony" and thus put themselves on the "right side of history". These symbols influence readers' perceptions and create an aversion towards those who the "experts", "moral and professional" authorities have labelled as "immoral", "hegemonic", "evil", "foreign". All of these methods are persuasion techniques (Hrnjić 2008).

Legitimising values and norms in the social/historical/political context: The vocabulary is mostly made up of military and religious terms and partly those of conspiracy theories, as exemplified by the above metaphors, and its aim is to legitimise and consolidate public opinion

and support for those in power under the guise of a higher cause that traverses even national boundaries and enters the sphere of highly sensitive emotions – those related to religion, as well as fears of an imminent threat of unknown, menacing "values" of "foreign interventionists" who will allegedly "destroy" the traditional, moral essence of the community to which the narrative is addressed. For example, in his column headlined "The West on the Precipice", Srđa Trifković proclaims the West is morally bankrupt. He writes about the "current Spenglerian moral collapse of the West" (Zeljković 2022a). He criticises the West and its values of liberalism and secularism. He talks about the "fatal flaws of the West, including their primary cause – loss of faith – and a host of secondary causes, such as open borders, an invasion of migrants, and a cult of 'diversity' and 'tolerance'". Once again, the author appeals to emotions of fear, fear of God, calling for Christians to unite, appealing to the fear of an invasion of "migrants" and of liberalism with the "immoral" values it promotes. "Persecution and martyrdom are inseparable from Christian Orthodox experience, of course, first under Muslim conquerors in the Middle Ages, and then under communism in the 20th century. In this century, it will be the Western Christians' turn to be severely persecuted" – the conclusion arises out of a logical fallacy, the slippery slope fallacy where conclusions are drawn repeatedly from one premise until the desired conclusion is reached. Arguments about the moral degradation of the West were also used in an article on Istok Portal slobodne Srpske headlined: "'The West is fuelling conflicts in Kosovo' – Ramzan Kadyrov calls for Serbs and Albanians to throw NATO out of their equation". The article quotes Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov who describes NATO as a third, war-mongering party, and points out that "there is never good coexistence with interventionists from this military alliance". Again, the West is portrayed as opposed to moral, traditional values, as corrupt, and therefore as a realm that is collapsing. The article says that "the whole of NATO is trying to corrupt countries with traditional values and turn them into a heap of evil people without faith or honour". Kadyrov further points out that "it is even more offensive that one of the sides, the one being egged on by NATO, is made up of Kosovo Muslims" (Istok Portal slobodne Srpske 2022). Srđa Trifković, identified as a political analysts in the media reporting his statements, uses Aesopian language rife with figures of speech and suggestive phrasing to portray NATO in a very negative context, and by extension from NATO the entire West, with particular emphasis on the US. "Six months since the outbreak of war, Ukraine and Russia in a stalemate" is an article by Veljko Zeljković (published again on the Glas Srpske portal), and the main interlocutor for the article was Srđa Trifković. He claims that currently on the global political scene we have "Oceania", which is made up of "the North American hegemon and its European satellites, which are satellites in a far more crude and literal sense than were the former Eastern

European countries at the time of the Soviet Union". He goes on to say that "today the US keeps its European satellites in a state of complete dependence and obedience by violent means, as we could see also from the NATO summit in Madrid". Oceania is a term used in Orwell's novel *1984*, and in this text, it is used to suggest that NATO and the US have taken on the role of "Big Brother" in a world where they want to control what other countries and nations do, but also what they think (Zeljković 2022c).

Prominence of the narrative: The narrative about NATO and the West as friends/enemies was present throughout the month of media analysis and monitoring. It appeared in the categories of discrediting, glorification, propaganda, bias, in the narrative on the conspiracy of foreign powers. Given the above information about interlocutors (experts, historians, politicians, all prominent figures), it is highly likely that the narrative had a large readership. Prominence is one of the values that accounts for how widely a news article is read (Kurtić 2006).

General aims of the narrative/purpose of using the narrative with respect to the election process and likelihood of influence on voters: The general aims of this narrative can be summed up in a number of ways: maintaining the status quo and staying in power, justifying own position and activities during the time spent in power, defamation of political opponents, intimidation to achieve the effect of urgency among voters who are led to believe that by selecting a certain political subject, they will be protected from the influence of NATO and the West, or, in the case of parties from FBiH, will develop better relations with them. These findings are supported by the above analyses of methods of narrative formation and dissemination – biased reporting, biased selection of interlocutors, topics, facts, invoking authorities, appeals to emotions, especially fear, logical fallacies, discrediting political opponents and foreign actors, as well as opinions of interviewed experts.

7.3.2. Narrative II: Domestic traitors and foreign agents

The focus was on a narrative about domestic traitors and foreign agents, based on the claim that political opponents and critics of the government are propped up by foreign actors with the aim of toppling not just the government, but the country as a whole, and also in order to implement the agendas of foreign powers. Although present across BiH, it was particularly pronounced in RS. This narrative is part of the prevalent narrative matrix in Republika Srpska characterised predominantly by intolerance (Bubonjić and Vujatović 2021) that proscribes all those who disagree, labelling them as domestic traitors working with foreign agents to destroy the entirety of the ethnic group.

The main actors of the narrative about domestic traitors and foreign agents were the politicians and media close to ruling structures in Republika Srpska, while the subject of this narrative were the political opponents of the government, as well as the civic sector and media featuring critical reporting on those in power, on the one side, while on the other the focus was placed on the "collective West" led by the US, the UK and Germany, presented as archetypal enemies of the Serb people.

Appeal to voters' emotions and persuasion: Using disinformation and propaganda, politicians such as Sanja Vulić (SRNA 2022i; 2022j), Staša Košarac (SRNA 2022k; 2022l), Radovan Kovačević (RTRS 2022b; 2022c), and Milorad Dodik (SRNA 2022m), as well as media close to the ruling structures – RTRS (2022e), SRNA (2022n), and ATV (2022c) endeavoured to inspire a sense of fear among citizens by spreading disinformation about "foreign agents and domestic traitors" who wish to "destroy the existing system of values and way of life" in order to provoke uneasiness and a sense of insecurity, as well as contempt for foreigners and anyone critical of the government.

Creating and spreading stereotypes: One of the main stereotypes present in this narrative were the alleged bad intentions of the West, which were insisted on by spreading conspiracy theories, such as the one about the "golden billion" (TANJUG 2022).[40]

Legitimising the narrative through "expert" authorities: The politicians, as well as the media creating and distributing this narrative, present themselves as moral authorities and use an exclusive approach, invoking defence of identity, community belonging and moral values, to elicit negative emotions towards the West and towards hypothetical domestic traitors of national interests: "The current times require the full mobilisation of the Serb people not only when it comes to political opponents from

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40   The "golden billion" theory has been circulating among people who believe in apocalyptic predictions for a few decades. It was comprehensively introduced for the first time in 1994, in a publication of the by that time already deceased Soviet economist Anatoly Kuzmich Tsikunov, "The Plot of World Government: Russia and the Golden Billion". In the book *"Truth" and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature,* Borenstein, a professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University, says that Kuzmich's "golden billion" theory combines historical points with science and pseudoscience, predicting an environmental catastrophe that will reduce the global population to a single "golden billion" made up of the rich inhabitants of Western countries. The theory was further popularised in an article by the Russian chemist and author Sergey Kara-Murza from 1999 titled "The golden billion concept and the new world order" which defends Kuzmich's thesis and claims that the "golden billion" of people left in the world will consist of the countries of the European Economic Community, the United States and Japan (Subotić 2021).

neighbouring camps, but also against tricksters and the evil coming from our own people" (SRNA 2022o).

Linking the past, present and future in constructing the narrative: In general, most narratives from the 1990s, those targeted campaigns of disinformation that were part and parcel of wartime propaganda, have persisted to this day: global conspiracy theories ascribed to governments of Western countries (RTRS 2022f), intelligence agencies portrayed as "instructing" local actors critical of those currently in power (RTRS 2022g), international media portrayed as spreading propaganda: "Just like before, Western media present the situation in completely the wrong context" (RTRS 2022h), independent local media portrayed as traitors "working for the enemy": "The US and Western factors in BiH use every mechanism to this end, not just the funding they provide to so-called independent media" (RTRS 2022h) (Cvjetićanin et al. 2019).

Methods of narrative construction and placement

Using McManus' SMELL test (McManus 2012), it was found that media close to the ruling structures that create and promote the narrative about domestic traitors and foreign agents do not meet most of the criteria for responsible and serious reporting.

In terms of sourcing as the first criterion, it was found that the sources cited by media close to the ruling structures in Republika Srpska (RTRS, SRNA, and ATV) were not independent. In addition to being very biased – "Analysts have ascribed this turnabout in German policy precisely to Dodik's political perseverance and consistency" (SRNA 2022p) – they were often directly involved in the ruling structures, such as for example the head of the Republika Srpska Office in Washington, D.C., Obrad Kesić (RTRS 2022i).

When it comes to motive as the second criterion of the SMELL test, it was found that the content published in media close to the RS government does more to conceal persuasion than to inform. For example, the statement "come out to vote, because this is one way to establish democracy by developing political culture" is an example of principled persuasion. On the other hand, saying "come out to vote because we know best" is an example of unprincipled persuasion: "Only the victory of Milorad Dodik and Željka Cvijanović can guarantee the survival of Republika Srpska, everything else is a perilous adventure with much uncertainty for the fate of Serbs from Republika Srpska" (RTRS 2022j).

Also observed were instances of unprincipled persuasion that also included forms of manipulation: "There's another reason for the arrival of German soldiers – pressure on Republika Srpska" (RTRS 2022j), or lack of relevant facts: "For more than six months, Professor Miloš Ković from the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, has been denied permission by Sarajevo to enter BiH, making it not only difficult for him to work at the University of Istočno Sarajevo, but denying him the right to visit the graves of his ancestors" (SRNA 2022r). The tone of information, or rather the tonality of the text that refers to the positive, negative or neutral emotional tone of the entirety of information provided and its separate parts, was more emotional than logical: "The soul and faith of citizens of Republika Srpska could not be muddied by any lies, any promises from the puppets of foreign embassies, all those irked by our sacred Republika Srpska" (SRNA 2022s), and sentences took the form of slogans with strong calls to action: "Sanja Vulić says – long live Republika Srpska, long live Serbia, long live Russia, while Jelena Trivić cries: 'God save the King!'" (SRNA 2022t).

Analysis against the third criterion of evidence suggests that media close to the authorities in RS did not report in line with the principles of responsible and serious reporting.

They featured texts presenting forged documents as proof, as when alleging that Jelena Trivić was being funded by the US administration (Faktor magazin 2022).

There were instances where content from an anonymous portal or tabloid was carried by a media outlet close to the ruling structure. The pattern was always the same. First, the "information" would be published by an anonymous portal or tabloid invoking "reliable" sources. Then the same information would be carried either first by SRNA and then picked up by RTRS and ATV, or all these outlets would take the information directly from those portals. This was followed by reactions, comments and press releases from "experts", after which the public focus was left only with information on alleged blows against Republika Srpska, coloured revolutions, foreign agents and domestic traitors, while the portal that had initially published the information and its source were not mentioned again. This was a way to ensure that the authenticity of the information was no longer discussed, and disinformation became generally accepted fact (Bubonjić 2022).

Logic as the fourth criterion of the SMELL test indicated that the reporting of media in relation to the narrative about domestic traitors and foreign agents contained numerous logical fallacies, including non sequiturs (does

not follow[41]): "At the special session of the Republika Srpska National Assembly on Wednesday, all those who do not support protecting the vital interest of Srpska stand on the side of those who believe the rights of Serbs and Republika Srpska should be trampled" (RTRS 2022k), fallacies of overgeneralisation: "Today's statement by the special envoy of the German government Manuel Sarrazin, who openly took the side of political Sarajevo and claimed that Republika Srpska was the problem in BiH, shows and proves that Dodik's attitude is appropriate and correct" (RTRS 2022l) and implications that something has been proven as correct without strong evidence: "He could not approve the decision to accredit the German ambassador in BiH because he knew beforehand that this person was coming to implement the malicious policy of his country against the Serb people" (SRNA 2022u), as well as hyperbole: "Behind them are UK and US agencies and they live in Serb Kiev. They have been trained for years for this at UK and US seminars, and in these elections, they won enough votes to be able to take it to the streets. If they could make such a show of David's death, imagine what they will be able to do now with half the citizens of Srpska behind them, and all the Western social networks" (Poskok.info 2022c).

The final criterion of what is left out indicates the discrimination and lack of balance in sources. In the one-sided presentation of facts and attitudes, there was almost no reference to the other side. Representatives of the opposition in RS did not get a chance to present their views regarding the accusation of being domestic traitors funded by foreigners: "For a long time now, information has been available that the international factor in BiH is financing the opposition and that it is quite clear that PDP's candidate for president of Republika Srpska Jelena Trivić is working for the international factor and against the interests of Srpska and its citizens" (SRNA 2022v).

In the analysed period, the narrative about domestic traitors and foreign agents was quite present in the media, especially those close to ruling structures in Republika Srpska (RTRS, SRNA, and ATV). It intensified in cycles, depending on current events in the socio-political arena, often appearing as a reaction and a way to divert attention, with ample use of disinformation, propaganda, manipulation and discrediting of political opponents, all with the aim of maintaining a state of latent fear and contempt for the West and for hypothetical traitors among domestic ranks. Since it is fundamentally exclusive, this narrative is also essentially one-sided and does

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41 The logical fallacy of "does not follow" entails making a logically unfounded leap from a premise to a conclusion, a leap that is not justified by the premise and is not readily apparent as such (Stojadinović 2014).

not allow for the presentation of opposing views because this does not fit in with the process of proscribing and labelling those with a different opinion.

7.3.3. Narrative III: The High Representative, the international community and OHR as "foreign tutors" and agents

Contents and main characteristics of the narrative: Content about the High Representative, the international community and the Office of the High Representative (OHR) was present throughout the three months. During this period, the OHR, the international community and the High Representative were presented in the media in RS in a negative light, while their portrayal in the media in the Federation of BiH varied depending on the status of the decision to impose changes to the Election Law. Media predominantly addressing Bosniaks/Bosnians took a positive approach to the High Representative when he briefly gave up on imposing changes to the Election Law, while media addressing Croats accused him of "succumbing to Bosniak pressure", but when imposing changes to the Election Law was put back on the agenda, the situation was reversed. Thus, media addressing Bosniaks had a negative view of the High Representative, the international community and OHR, while media addressing Croats mostly welcomed the move by the High Representative and the international community. Content from RS predominantly focuses on the High Representative and OHR, content in media addressing the Croat people is mostly focused on the High Representative as a symbol of the international community, while those addressing Bosniaks are equally critical of all three actors – the OHR, the international community and the High Representative. The "anti-Schmidt narrative" aims to proscribe the High Representative to BiH Christian Schmidt, while the change in position of the media towards Schmidt and his decisions reveals their ideological and political affiliations. Up until the imposition of changes to the Election Law, a negative attitude towards the High Representative was almost exclusively the province of RS government representatives and media close to ruling structures, with individual cases of negative sentiment coming from pro-Croat media. After the changes were imposed, some pro-Bosnian and pro-Bosniak media, politicians and public figures also turned on Schmidt. These actors have an almost exclusively negative perception of the High Representative's actions: "What Schmidt is doing to us is like NDH and HZHB" (Bajrović 2022a); "Schmidt is acting like a representative of Serbia and Croatia!" (BHDijaspora.net 2022); "In Dayton they gave us white armbands and now when we're meant to be moving towards Europe and democracy, on the night of the elections the High Representative tattooed those white armbands onto our bodies and our arms. This man is passing racially motivated laws, cementing ethnic divisions and discrimination and ultimately tattooing white armbands

onto our arms" (Cazin.BA Portal grada Cazina 2022d); "Christian Schmidt officially SUPPORTS the results of election fraud. If we consent to Christian Schmidt's deception that 'election theft and fraud could not be completely eliminated', then we have consented to our votes being stolen and to a government established through election fraud. All the parties staying silent and supporting this legalisation of election theft, with the approval of Christian Schmidt, are part of prearranged frauds and divisions of influence zones: from so-called district Sarajevo that will go to the so-called left, and including the reservation for Bosniaks (the Fildžanistan – a private state for Bakir and Sebija) where elections will be rigged for SDA to win, and the appeasement of the so-called Croat entity" (Defter hefte 2022a); "Destroying Bosniaks as a political people as performed by Herr Schmidt" (Bošnjaci Jablanice 2022).

On the other side, pro-Croat politicians, as well as pro-Croat media from FBiH (Poskok.info, ABCPortal.info, Hrvatski medijski servis) had a positive view of Christian Schmidt's decision to impose changes to the Election Law. It is interesting that up until changes to the Election Law were imposed, these same media promoted an exclusively "anti-Schmidt narrative": "Since he did not change the Election Law in line with the Constitutional Court Decision, turning it from pro-Bosniak to Bosnian-Herzegovinian, it is difficult to imagine that he is calling also Jews, Roma, Croats and Serbs to vote in the elections, because it is clear that OHR is preventing them from enjoying their democratic and constitutional right. And all this in the territory of the Federation that the international community evidently plans to make into a Bosniak Republic, while Croats, the people that liberated and created it, will be relegated to a minority in that entity. Meanwhile, the role planned for Serbs is that of decorative plush toy Serbs in FBiH" (Poskok. info 2022d). However, once changes to the Election Law were imposed on the day of the elections, these media outlets changed their narrative and started promoting "pro-Schmidt attitudes": "Schmidt has demonstrated to Sarajevo's radically unitarian clique that Bosnia and Herzegovina does not and will not have a civic order" (ABCPortal.info 2022a); "Schmidt snapped at the notorious Hadžifejzović: Croats are a constitutive people and are allergic to being called a minority" (Poskok.info 2022e). In contrast to the anti-Schmidt narrative that proscribes the High Representative, the pro-Schmidt narrative glorifies him and supports his decisions. Similar to the anti-Schmidt narrative, the latter narrative is also almost exclusive, except that it perceives the actions of the High Representative in a positive light.

Below is a detailed analysis of the methods used to construct, change and intensify the narratives.

Key actors: The most frequent interlocutors commenting on Christian Schmidt were Milorad Dodik, Marinko Čavara, with appearances by Nikola Špirić, Staša Košarac, Sanja Vulić, SNSD spokesperson Radovan Kovačević, Željko Komšić, Zlatan Begić.

Main aim/intention of the narrative: The aim and intention of the sub-narrative was to mobilise the public in support of the dominant opinion of key political actors in BiH about the High Representative, the OHR and the international community, in order to ultimately maintain negative perceptions about the West, thus enabling the preservation of the status quo that plays into the hands of political elites, because it secures the positions and privileges they would surely lose if the state and society were to embark on the reforms urged by representatives of the international community.

Methods of narrative construction and placement

Discrediting: Discrediting the High Representative and the OHR as an institution, often equated with the entire international community, was most often used by politicians of the SNSD.

Thus, for example, the Nula49.com portal portrayed Schmidt as a "bad politician". The article quotes the opinion of Maximilian Popp, who wrote a comment piece for the German newsweekly Der Spiegel titled "Like a Colonial Master" where he presented a host of discrediting claims about Schmidt. Among other things, he writes that Schmidt "did not garner attention by his diplomatic skill" and suggests that Schmidt was sent to Bosnia and Herzegovina "as punishment", which can be seen from the following claim: "After leaving the Bundestag in 2021, Schmidt allegedly wanted to run the Hanns-Seidel Foundation which is close to his party, but was unsuccessful, and instead, as noted by the article in Der Spiegel, the government sent him to BiH" (SRNA 2022z). Other media outlets (Alo! online. ba. 2022; Banjaluka.net 2022b) also carried this text. The text uses strongly coloured words, which is a bias technique noted by Herman and Chomsky (biased colouring of the text, facts), for example: "colonial master", "neo-colonial office", "Neue Zürcher Zeitung compares the High Representative with 19th century imperialist institutions" (SRNA/SB 2022a). This allusion to 19th century "imperialist institutions" seeks to transfer negative connotations associated with these institutions in order to discredit both the role of OHR and the High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which lacks sound argumentation and is a faulty conclusion.

Discrediting of the High Representative continued in RS throughout the three months under analysis through his association with the opposition and by

portraying him as a "foreign agent" or "foreign tourist". For example, Staša Košarac tried to reckon with the opposition candidate for RS president, Jelena Trivić, while at the same time discrediting the High Representative in a text published by RTRS where Košarac had the following message for Trivić: "Yes to Schmidt, no to RTRS" (SRNA/SB 2022b). Nikola Špirić, an MP in the House of Representatives of BiH from the SNSD, said on Telering that "two constituent peoples are dissatisfied because key levers in the country are held by the OHR", and the OHR was presented as a "foreign factor" interfering in the internal affairs of BiH, which was unjustified in his opinion (RTRS 2022m).

Discrediting the High Representative is often accompanied by discreditation of the international community, the OHR and even Germany. For example, in a text published by Glas Srpske, the international community is placed in a negative context because it "remains silent about the suffering of Serbs" (SRNA 2022-1); and ATV also carried a text from Glas Srpske in which the speaker of the RS National Assembly at the time, Nedeljko Čubrilović, said that "Schmidt and a large part of the international community" were directly interfering in the elections in BiH (Glas Srpske 2022). After vetoing the accreditation of the German ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina, member of the BiH Presidency Milorad Dodik stated, among other things, that Germany was "pro-Muslim". "The statement also points out that the Bundestag resolution advocated and lobbied for by Social-Democrat MP Adis Ahmetović 'who openly advocates and supports SDA's agenda' further deepened the rift and laid bare the open favouritism of sides, i.e., of one of the constituent peoples in BiH at the expense of the other two, which is extremely dangerous", says a text in Nezavisne novine. "'German policy took an about-turn after the departure of former Chancellor Angela Merkel and became pro-Muslim in BiH, trying to redesign the political system of BiH through a resolution adopted in the Bundestag that calls for BiH to be organised without entities', Dodik said, adding that Germany was a big and powerful country, but that this did not mean we had to bow to anyone trying to make us less worthy" (Vukić 2022).

"Selak: Unkind behaviour of Germany towards the Serb people" is the title of an article on the RTRS portal that portrays Germany in a negative light because there have "lately been too many resolutions about BiH", so in that context, "Serbia's foreign policy should be followed". All of these are statements by SPS president Goran Selak (SRNA 2022-2). At a session of the Republika Srpska National Assembly, Dodik had also called for refusing accreditation to the German ambassador, accusing Germany of "interfering" in the internal affairs of BiH, and saying that "Christians and Muslims cannot live together". This news was carried by the Dnevnik.ba portal (2022).

ABCPortal.info added Dodik's message to Germany that "BiH is not their fief and this isn't 1945 when Germans lorded over this area". He accused Germany of not being impartial, of acting in line with Bosniak policies in the Bundestag. "'Today, we have Bosnian Muslims in the Bundestag determining German foreign policy in BiH', Dodik correctly observed." The portal itself sided with Dodik's policy, saying that Dodik's observation was "correct" (ABCPortal.info 2022b).

Media from the Federation of BiH joined those from RS in discrediting Christian Schmidt, though to a somewhat lesser degree and depending on his stated intention to impose changes to the Election Law. Thus, Fatmir Alispahić insulted the High Representative on the "Defter hefte" Facebook page in a post titled "Why did Kraut Schmidt squeal?". The post goes on to say: "Kraut Schmidt's squealing is by no means justified. Not even in partisan films could we see such hysteria on the part of various schutzers. Kraut Schmidt is the last person who should be squealing, given that the international community bears the largest responsibility for everything that has been going on in BiH from 1992 to this day. ... From the arms embargo, the genocide in Srebrenica, and the various futile reforms. Perhaps Kraut Schmidt's squealing was caused by the slow pace of the final conspiracy against Bosnia and Bosniaks that would have the Bosniaks choose a reservation of their own volition – in which to end up" (Defter hefte 2022b). In this post, Alispahić connects the international community and Schmidt to emotionally powerful issues such as the genocide in Srebrenica, the arms embargo imposed on Bosnia and Herzegovina during the war and other events that hark back as far as World War II. This logical fallacy known as a false analogy was used to suggest by an unfounded analogy (the role of Germany in World War II, the role of the international community which includes a much broader corpus of states and symbols than Germany) that Germany, and therefore the High Representative as a German citizen, do not wish Bosnia and Herzegovina well and that they are involved, as the post says, in a "conspiracy against Bosnia and Bosniaks". On his Twitter account, Reuf Bajrović posted similar sentiments about Schmidt.

The conspiracy referred to in the media was mainly about Schmidt working with Croat politicians to create a third entity. Representatives of the political party Demokratska fronta often participated in promoting this narrative. Thus, on 8 August 2022, the Facebook group Bošnjaci Jablanica shared a post by Željko Komšić in which he says that "Schmidt is preparing a new ploy in the Election Law, convinced that the citizens of BiH are intellectually backward" (Bošnjaci Jablanica 2022a). Here, Komšić invokes the people and uses a persuasion method known as the "man of the people" in an effort to present himself as a man of the people who has recognised what

is being "done" to that people. The page also shared a text from Faktor headlined: "Mehmedović: Schmidt is only blackmailing the Bosnian side, if they don't consent to Čović's conditions, he will impose what he wants". The post accompanying the article said: "Truth" (Bošnjaci Jablanica 2022b). At the end of August, an editorial was posted from the Stav portal titled "What is Herr Schmidt's problem" in which Schmidt's actions are portrayed negatively. In the editorial, the author misinterprets Schmidt's speech in Goražde (Mehonić 2022b). In an analysis for Mediacentar, Amela Delić Aščić, Hilma Unkić and Kristina Gadže describe how Schmidt's speech in Goražde was misinterpreted in the media. The media often misused Schmidt's statement by putting it into headlines without context. Namely, the question asked by the reporter – "Give me one concrete example, now currently, one concrete example where Croats are not institutionally represented in executive and legislative bodies" – was often left out of the headlines. Talking about the political situation in BiH and insults launched at him, that he was working for one people while discriminating another, Schmidt said the following, among other things: "Rubbish, absolute rubbish. I am not sitting, or standing here, I care about this country. This is a town where people lost their lives and I am not here for you to play political games". The headlines, however, were different: "Schmidt about politicians in BiH: Rubbish, absolute rubbish!", "Schmidt angrily about politicians in BiH: Absolute rubbish! I've had enough", "The High Representative in BiH had a nervous breakdown in front of the cameras: 'Rubbish, absolute rubbish! I've had enough of this!'". An editorial in Stav has it differently. The author accuses Schmidt of wanting to impose "apartheid" in Bosnia and Herzegovina. "Perhaps the nervous derangement of the High Representative was caused by this difficult task. It is not easy to bring together in one law apartheid and human rights. Legal norms from the Republic of South Africa and judgements from the Court in Strasbourg. They cancel each other out", says the text.

A text posted on the Hrvati Herceg-Bosne Facebook account says that the priest of the Mostar-Duvno Diocese and members of the European People's Party for intercultural dialogue discussed the Election Law in BiH. It also said that the High Representative had announced changes to the Election Law, but "in some strange communication with the 'citizens' of Sarajevo, remember the July protests, he retreated and passed only some technical changes" (statement by priest). This is trying to suggest that the High Representative is more sympathetic towards "citizens of Sarajevo" than "Croats" (Hrvati Herceg-Bosne).

The Poskok.info portal also stated that the High Representative was "under pressure from Bosniaks not to implement the Ljubić judgement".

"It should be noted here that the High Representative Christian Schmidt, probably under pressure from political Sarajevo, is hesitant to implement the judgement of the Constitutional Court of BiH in the Ljubić case, which is precisely about how members should be elected to the House of Peoples of the FBiH Parliament" (Poskok.info 2022f).

Disinformation: Completely biased and unprofessional, with insults and discrediting of the High Representative, the ATV portal published disinformation about Schmidt's speech. It said that Schmidt had "lost the plot", called him a "German tourist", saying he had acted like a "raging bull", that his responses were "paranoid" (ATV 2022d). In a text titled "Dodik: Schmidt enraged and furious, his expression reminiscent of some from the past", Milorad Dodik is the only source of opinion about Schmidt and he says, among other negative things: "He said of the politicians in the Federation of BiH that they were rubbish, this does not apply to Republika Srpska, which means that we're the good guys. Schmidt remains an illegitimate High Representative who speaks falsehoods when he says people died for BiH. Our population did not die for BiH, but for an independent and autonomous Republika Srpska and it is an insult to say our fighters died for BiH" (SRNA 2022-3).

One-sided and biased reporting: In content concerning the High Representative, the international community and the OHR, often the source is a single interlocutor. Thus, sometimes the only interlocutor is Sanja Vulić who says that "it has become clear to Schmidt what the false Bosniak embrace means" (SRNA 20224), then in an article headlined "Schmidt being overly theatrical", the only interlocutor is the deputy speaker of the RS National Assembly at the time, Denis Šulić, and the text ends symbolically with the well-established statement that "Republika Srpska does not recognise Christian Schmidt as the High Representative" (SRNA 2022-5). Then there is the RS president at the time, Željka Cvijanović, as the only source in an article titled "Cvijanović: Schmidt's speech is scandalous and shameful" (RTRS 2022n). Here, the reporter joins in the biased opinion of Cvijanović, saying she had "condemned Schmidt's hysterical speech". Aleksandar Pavić, introduced as a political analyst, was the only source in a text where "responsibility for Schmidt's behaviour" is laid at the feet of the "Croats and Muslims that recognise him [as High Representative]" (SRNA 2022-6).

Stereotypes: Multiple stereotypes about High Representative Christian Schmidt could be observed in statements by politicians and in media reports.

One of the most prevalent was that due to his origin (German), he had ill will towards individual groups in BiH (Serbs), because of the historical context, i.e., negative relations of Germans to Serbs in the past: "The Serb member of the BiH Presidency Milorad Dodik said yesterday that the time will come for the High Representative Christian Schmidt to leave BiH, and that he will leave behind a historical period that will be seen as one 'when Germans tried to occupy the Serbs again'" (Bajrović 2022b). A similar stereotype sees Christian Schmidt as a representative of the Christian West with ill will towards the Bosniaks on account of their being Muslim. This stereotype was seen in statements by Bosniak politicians and media outlets primarily addressing Bosniaks: "Bosniaks would become a dominant demographic Muslim majority legally governed by a Christian minority. There is also the possibility that Schmidt will persevere in his Islamophobic intention to Palestinise Bosniaks" (SRNA 2022-7). By using these stereotypes, politicians and the media sought to elicit negative emotions among citizens, linking Christian Schmidt with Germany's historical role in this region during the two World Wars, or with the fact that Schmidt is a Christian from Christian Europe, which had harboured a negative attitude towards Islam and Muslims in the past.

Context, linking the past, present and future in constructing the sub-narrative: Insisting on a negative historical context and linking Christian Schmidt with German imperialism and Nazism from the 20th century, or with the crusading past of Europe, was a way to bolster the narrative about Christian Schmidt as a German trying to subjugate the Serbs again, or of Schmidt as a representative of European crusades against Muslims.

Symbols used: The following symbols, phrases and metaphors were most often used in connection with Christian Schmidt: "not the High Representative", "mentor" of the opposition in RS, "German tourist" who "lost the plot", "enraged and furious", "theatrical", "scandalous and shameful", Christian Schmidt as a "Kraut" who is "squealing", sarcastically "Herr Schmidt", Schmidt "working in the interests of SDA". When it comes to the OHR, we have observed the following phrases and symbols: "foreign factor", "OHR should be abolished", OHR is committing "genocide against Croats". The international community was said to be "directly interfering in the elections", and accused of being the "international factor" that will impose "apartheid" on Bosniaks.

Legitimising values and norms in the social/historical/political context: Given the years of insisting on the narrative about the historical victimisation of Serbs in order to construct a victimisation cult, which is also discernible among the two other dominant groups in BiH, the narrative about

Christian Schmidt as a foreigner interfering in internal affairs for the benefit of one group and at the expense of the other two, it was easy to elicit negative emotions among citizens already primed to form their attitudes based on the conviction that the actions of High Representatives, in this specific case Christian Schmidt, who is German, continue the negative policy towards Serbs, or other groups. Victimisation is used to legitimise this narrative and create a sense of threat and imperilment: "If she [Trivić] were to be given the opportunity to govern Republika Srpska, would Schmidt instruct her to have Hitler as an idol" (RTRS 2022o). The main aim of legitimising the narrative about Christian Schmidt as a foreigner (German, Christian) who wants to harm Serbs, or Muslims (Bosniaks), is the mobilisation of potential voters by creating common values in opposition to those advocated by Schmidt, i.e., garnering a resistance towards international pressure and norms embodied in values diametrically opposed to those advocated by the political elite coming out against Christian Schmidt.

Prominence of the narrative: The narrative about Christian Schmidt not being a legitimate High Representative and being opposed to Serb interests and Serbs in general, which was present in the media primarily addressing Serbs, was observed daily in the election period, and was sometimes directly proscriptive of Christian Schmidt: "From Germany we have a resolution on abolishing Republika Srpska and the imposition of the non-legitimate Christian Schmidt, and this makes it clear that they have bad intentions and we must reject this" (Infosrpska 2022), and sometimes indirectly through a narrative about foreign agents and domestic traitors that linked Schmidt with the opposition in Republika Srpska: "PDP has already announced that its MPs will not be coming in order to please their mentors – the foreign embassies and the tourist in BiH Christian Schmidt. Jelena Trivić enjoys the absolute trust of the British and German embassies and has a deal with Schmidt and the German Embassy" (Trifković 2022). On the other side, this narrative became more frequent in media primarily addressing Bosniaks once changes to the Election Law were imposed.

General aims of the narrative/purpose of using the narrative with respect to the election process and likelihood of influence on voters: Christian Schmidt was portrayed mostly in a negative light in all three dominant ethno-national narratives in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Politicians in Republika Srpska and media outlets primarily geared towards Serbs took a negative stance from when Schmidt first arrived, so that the narrative about Schmidt as a non-legitimate High Representative, a "German tourist", a representative of the West who wants to destroy Serbs with the help of "domestic traitors" from the opposition is merely a continuation of the negative attitude of the political elite and some media outlets in Republika

Srpska towards everything coming from the West. Certain Bosniak politicians and media primarily geared towards Bosniaks started taking a negative approach from the moment the Election Law was changed, while Croat politicians and media primarily geared towards Croats did an about-turn from the moment when changes to the Election Law were imposed and espoused an attitude that was now diametrically opposed to that of the Bosniak politicians and media. In essence, content related to Christian Schmidt, whether negative or positive in context, follows ethno-national aspirations and narrative matrices that have been present for a while now.

7.4. CONCLUSION

The conducted analysis of content related to foreign actors found that more than 10% of the analysed content was problematic. Certain foreign actors, such as High Representative Christian Schmidt and NATO, appeared much more frequently than others, namely China, Turkey and US President Joe Biden, which indicates that the media are focused on current events.

There was a prevalence of harmful content in the form of biased media and political reporting, discrediting and narratives about conspiracies of foreign actors. A tendency was observed for harmful content to intensify in September and October, as the elections drew closer, while after the elections, though still present, harmful narratives were less frequent than during the pre-election campaign.

The three most frequent narratives were: 1. NATO and the West as friends/enemies, 2. Domestic traitors and foreign agents, and 3. The High Representative, the international community and OHR as "foreign tutors" and agents.

An analysis of the narratives confirmed well-established stereotypes about the hostility and conspiracy of foreign states against the peoples of BiH, especially the West against Serbs, which was prevalent in media outlets primarily geared towards Serbs, though also present for the other groups and mostly promoted by those in power and government-friendly media. The ruling parties and the opposition in both entities accused each other of cooperating with "foreign agents and embassies". In Republika Srpska, the opposition and the ruling majority accused each other of cooperating with the West, the US, the UK and the High Representative, while in the Federation of BiH, politicians accused each other of not cooperating with these same actors or of lack of success on the path to joining NATO. It was observed that some media outlets and FB pages that were mainly geared towards Bosniaks had negative portrayals of the West, the US and the

international community, mostly in connection with imposing changes to the Election Law, while some politicians and media outlets also had negative things to say about Turkey and its president, most often on account of their relationship with the SDA and negativity about the West. On the other side, media outlets addressing Serbs had a very positive portrayal of Turkey in the context of its relationship with Russia, and presented favourable portraits of the Turkish president. In the media predominantly geared towards Croats, there were negative portrayals of Russia and Turkey, but also often the US and Western countries in general. The change in direction of the narrative, from positive to negative and vice versa, mostly depended on current political developments and the needs of pre-election campaigns.

In the NATO narrative, NATO and the West were often referred to in a context where we were meant to perceive them as friends or enemies of an ethnic group, one of the entities, the state, or a specific politician. In Republika Srpska, the focus was mainly on the importance of preventing BiH from joining NATO, with NATO being portrayed as an enemy of the Serb people, while on the other side in the Federation of BiH, NATO and the West were portrayed in a positive light as "saviours" during the 1990s war, as BiH's sure path to peace, and such discourse was used to slander political opponents as standing in the way of this path.

The narrative about domestic traitors and foreign mercenaries was based on the claim that political opponents and critics of the government are propped up by foreign actors with the aim of toppling not just the government, but the country as a whole, and also in order to implement the agendas of foreign powers. Although present across BiH, it was particularly pronounced in RS. The main actors of this narrative were the politicians and media close to the ruling structures in Republika Srpska, while the subject of this narrative were the political opponents of the government, as well as the civic sector and media featuring critical reporting on those in power, on the one side, while on the other side the focus was placed on the "collective West" led by the US, the UK and Germany, presented as archetypal enemies of the Serb people.

When it comes to the narrative about the High Representative, which can be traced through all three months of monitoring, there was a constant negative portrayal of the OHR, the international community and the High Representative in the media in Republika Srpska, while the portrayal of these foreign actors in the media from the Federation of BiH varied depending on plans to impose changes to the Election Law.

In summary, we can conclude that one-sided portrayals of foreign actors that were dominant in the analysis can lead to one-sided perceptions, as well as further divisions, the polarisation of society and the disinformation of citizens. The media, instead of explaining the roles of the different actors, providing the whole story and information from various sides, feature one-sided reporting that leads to disinformation of citizens, keeping them insufficiently informed about the roles of foreign actors. Negative social tendencies, such as harmful narratives that contribute not only to maintaining a state of latent intolerance, but to heightening social stratification, have been persistent for decades, weakening the already fragile state of society. When we add to this new, global social phenomena such as the crisis of trust (mutual trust between institutions and citizens, as the basis of a democratic society, is being eroded by populists spreading fear, bringing undemocratic tendencies to the forefront, even in established democracies), relativising (in the world as mediated by the media where citizens who used to provide feedback have now become sources of information, excessive suspicion caused by distrust of formal authority encourages relativisation even when it comes to universally accepted facts, helping half-truths take the place of arguments and facts in the resulting information vacuum) and post-truth (according to the Oxford Dictionary, relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief), it becomes clearer why negative tendencies, such as the narrative about domestic traitors and foreign agents, have been so persistent.

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Chapter 8

THE ROLE OF MEDIA FROM SERBIA AND CROATIA

Nedim Sejdinović

8.1. INTRODUCTION

The official policies of Serbia and Croatia, which as a rule are reproduced by the most influential media in these countries to a greater or lesser extent, unquestionably influence social and political developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well. In political and media narratives, this has even been made "official", or justified with the signing of the Dayton Agreement in 1995 and the resulting claim that Belgrade and Zagreb are "guarantors" of its implementation. In practice, this is a way to promote a paternalistic attitude towards BiH, which, according to the dominant discourse, is incapable of constituting, determining and sustaining itself, and can by no means secure the expected corpus of rights for the non-Bosniak ethnic communities, which are of particular interest for the two neighbouring countries. Serbia and Croatia, however, are not "guarantors" of Dayton, but its "signatories", "parties" or "participating states", as stated in the Agreement itself (Ašćerić 2019).

Much has already been written about the role of Serbia and Croatia and their state propaganda in the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina during the first half of the 1990s. These lethal and aggressive roles have been illuminated and proven in a series of judgements of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at the Hague, although today's Belgrade and Zagreb politicians – not just those in the government, but also a good portion of the opposition – deny, relativise or ignore them (Vidov 2017). In that sense, it should be noted that Serbia is in many ways a frontrunner in these efforts compared to Croatia, with challenges to Milošević-style nationalist and conquest-driven policies being much less frequent in Serbia, while the discourse on "filling out the Croatian croissant" is less alive today in Croatia.[42] That is to say that today, the 1990s narrative has been completely revitalised in Serbian mainstream media. A little over three years ago, Ivica Dačić, the president of the Milošević-legacy Socialist Party of Serbia, summed up the attitude of Serbia's majority towards the legacy of war, saying that Serbia

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[42]   In 1992, the Croatian president spoke about Croatia's intention to annex Cazinska krajina and western Herzegovina, saying that the "current Croatian croissant is unnatural," and that "among the citizens of these areas, there is great interest in joining Croatia".

had "never been an aggressor, it merely responded to injustice" (TANJUG 2019). This statement is indicative, and not just because it contains the ever-present aspects of revisionism and self-victimisation (Sejdinović 2022), but also because it renews a favourite nationalist thesis that Serbia is the (moral) victor in war and a loser in peace, originated by the writer Dobrica Ćosić.[43]

The war in the former Yugoslavia was preceded by a meeting, never fully illuminated to this day, between Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman in Karađorđevo, in the spring of 1991.[44] What is known is that the Serbian and Croatian leaders discussed the new borders of SFRY at the time, and that one of the key points in that debate was how to "divide BiH" (Sabljaković 2011). It should be said, however, that in the context of SFRY's dissolution, the role of the two nationalisms dates back to before Karađorđevo. At a roundtable held in Sarajevo in November 2011 about the influence of Serbia and Croatia on the political development of BiH (organised by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in BiH), historian Husnija Kamberović said that Belgrade and Zagreb had been active in this area also during the former SFRY. He pointed out that in the case of Zagreb, this tendency was pronounced at the time of the "Croatian Spring", while Belgrade heightened its activities in the 1980s, during the rise of Slobodan Milošević. This thesis was also confirmed by the former high-ranking Bosnian-Herzegovinian and Yugoslav official Raif Dizdarević, who said that BiH "often had to defend its status as an equal federal unit". He referred to the infamous "Agrokomerc" affair, which was used, in his opinion, as a "means of exerting pressure on the Bosnian political leadership" (Huseinović 2019).[45]

This is a brief outline of the more recent turning points of Serbia's and Croatia's influence, or rather that of Serbian and Croatian nationalism, on the internal situation in BiH. An analysis of current statements by politicians and media headlines in these two countries easily leads to the conclusion that

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43   At the session of the Republika Srpska Assembly in 1993 where the Vance-Owen plan was being discussed, the president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia at the time unsuccessfully advocated for accepting the plan and ending the war. He said at the time: "Listen, I am the creator of the paradigm about Serbs as winners in war and losers in peace. But I am now asking that we change that paradigm and understand that today we should gain in peace what we did not manage to in war". Historian Latinka Perović said in an interview that this effectively defines the policy of Vučić's Serbia (Karabeg 2018).

44   There are no reliable sources on this.

45   Many historians and witnesses of the "Agrokomerc" affair from 1987 will go on to conclude that the target of the political and media campaign conducted at that time was not this powerful agribusiness enterprise, but the political leadership of BiH, and that this affair augured the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

the paternalistic policy, which in Serbia's case also contains expansionist elements, has survived. After changes in government in Serbia and Croatia at the end of the second millennium,[46] it seemed like regional relations would be relaxed, and Bosnia and Herzegovina would be able to negotiate its internal relationships without harmful involvement from its neighbours. And in truth, this period saw the signing of a multitude of agreements and treaties between the countries, and to a certain extent, the dominant narrative in Croatian and Serbian media also changed.

However, the nationalist forces in Serbia were always strong – and always part of the government (with either majority or minority influence) – and they sought to preserve the continuity of Belgrade's policy towards BiH as set out in the 1980s. They are powerful, rooted in influential social circles, and constantly working to promote the "special relationship" of Serbia and the BiH entity of Republika Srpska. According to the president of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Belgrade, Sonja Biserko (2011), this policy actually means annexing RS to Serbia "in stages". After coming to power in 2012, Aleksandar Vučić kept stressing the need to improve relations between Belgrade and Sarajevo, but nothing substantial was done in this regard (Vojinović 2017) over the past decade. On the contrary, during this time, his close associates and government-controlled media have fully reconstructed the nationalist narrative of the 1990s. In the dominant public discourse, Republika Srpska is portrayed and perceived as a separate state, and it is just a matter of time before it becomes part of (Greater) Serbia.

It should be pointed out that the ruling political discourses in Serbia and Croatia have a strong echo in BiH thanks to, among other things, the presence of a large number of (regional) media in this country whose headquarters are in Belgrade or Zagreb. Citizens of BiH have access to neighbouring television channels offered by cable network providers, as well as print media and, of course, online portals. They are able to follow, for instance, media content denying not just the genocide in Srebrenica and war crimes from the 1990s, but also the sovereignty and integrity of their country. Moreover, via media outlets based in Serbia, they can consume a daily stream of content promoting anti-liberal, anti-West and pro-Russian values and interests (VOA 2020). This means they are exposed to additional harmful narratives, apart from those found in domestic media, which also often carry content from media outlets based in neighbouring countries.

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46   SRJ and Serbia established official diplomatic relations soon after the fall of the Milošević regime on 15 December 2000.

8.2. MAIN NARRATIVES ABOUT BIH IN SERBIA: AN UNSUSTAINABLE STATE

Most of the relevant domestic and international analyses of the state of Serbian media have found that the vast majority of media outlets are an extension of the government as embodied by Serbia's authoritarian president, Aleksandar Vučić. The main characteristics of the most influential media are: complete dominance of tabloid, sensationalist content, reproduction of stereotypes, continuous breaches of the press code, promotion of the government and horrific campaigns conducted against opposition leaders and parties, as well as any portion of the public critical of the government. When it comes to BiH and the region in general, political leaders of neighbouring states and nations are often targeted as "enemies". It is interesting that these media outlets portray Milorad Dodik, the president of Republika Srpska, as an integral segment of the ruling elite, even as some kind of "spare leader of all Serbs" (Sejdinović 2019).

Set up like this, the media scene is, unfortunately, not just a problem for Serbia and its citizens. We can safely say that it has negative repercussions for the entire region, especially in the context of global political developments and the promotion of authoritarian policies. The strong influence of Serbian media on the region has been noted, for instance, in connection to reporting on Russia's aggression against Ukraine: namely, recent research by the SEE Check network, an organisation fighting disinformation in Southeast Europe, found that Serbian media were the most frequent source of disinformation spreading to the entire region (Grekulović 2022). And it is precisely the war in Ukraine that has reinforced another long-standing characteristic of the most influential media in Serbia, namely Russophilia, which includes strong distancing from Western, liberal, democratic values (Veljković 2022).

When it comes to relations in the region, a discrepancy can be observed between the declared policy of Serbia's leadership, on the one hand, and the reporting of media close to the government and statements by some high officials of the parliamentary majority parties, on the other. This dichotomy has been decreasing and it seems that the media and the more extreme politicians have won that "race". Official policy is increasingly aligning with extremely destructive media and political discourses characterised by revisionism of the recent and more distant past, hate speech, the stoking of nationalism, chauvinism, constant generation of tensions, increasingly abandoning the narrative that, at least formally, called for good neighbourly relations and mutual respect for territorial integrity. Whereas he had mostly avoided making "inflammatory" statements about sensitive regional topics,

President Vučić recently stated that the Prime Minister of Kosovo was "terrorist scum" (KoSSev 2022), which when taken together with similar statements from other top Serbian officials, is an extremely worrying signal and portends a worsening of relations in the Western Balkans.

The major media in Serbia systematically refuse to treat Bosnia and Herzegovina as a single state. Maps for the weather forecast, for instance, symbolically represent Republika Srpska as a separate territory. There is a predominance of content suggesting that BiH is not a "sustainable community" and that the Serb people in it are at risk. In fact, the main message is: all problems would be resolved if BiH were to fall apart. In both statements by politicians and media headlines, the West is continuously and increasingly portrayed as opposed to resolving what is called the Serb national issue as modelled on the 1990s. The unity of Serbia and the RS is manifested through high media coverage of political and cultural events that bring together Serb officials "from both sides of the Drina".

As for the way media in Serbia treat the genocide and war crimes committed in BiH, most outlets are continuously prone to relativising or ignoring (adjudicated) facts. Already in the mid-2000s, at the time of the post-October democratic government, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights issued a report finding that the media in Serbia avoid mentioning war crimes or distort the truth in order to avoid discussing "moral responsibility" (Kisić and Stanojlović 2005). Even at that time, when there was a much higher degree of media freedom and media pluralism than today, the citizens of Serbia never had a chance to find out what happened in BiH in the first half of the 1990s, at least not from the major media outlets. The situation has since then worsened considerably, especially after the war-forging Milošević-Šešelj political structures came to power in 2012. Apart from completing the revisionism of the history of the Second World War and the post-war period, the media have all but removed any content dealing with the real causes of the recent war and the crimes committed by members of Serb military and paramilitary forces. In this sense, the statement of Ivica Dačić quoted above is indicative: in the current perception of the majority of the public, the Serb people are by far the greatest, if not the only victim of the recent wars. Myth was chosen in place of an argued public debate. At the same time, persons convicted or indicted for war crimes are mostly treated like heroes (Ristić 2017).

Serbian media with the highest circulation feature ethno-centric reporting about BiH: when it comes to political and social topics, media content is mostly focused on Republika Srpska. It can even be said that over the past decades, the media scenes in Serbia and in this Bosnian-Herzegovinian

entity have been inseparable and interdependent. On the other side, reports from the Federation of BiH are rare and heavily influenced by current political perceptions, with a very dominant sensationalism aspect. As a rule, this part of the neighbouring country is portrayed as an area that is under the strong influence of Islam, and even Islamic extremism. Depending on the political context, some periods have seen heightened reporting about how "jihadists" threaten Serbs, and even Croats. Deteriorating relations between Croat and Bosniak political representatives are also featured in dominant Serbian media as needed, while many other important topics from the Federation are reported in the form of simple news bulletins, and often go unreported.

Bakir Izetbegović, who leads the SDA, is by far the most prominent "bad guy" of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Serbia's most influential media.[47] It goes almost without saying that as the son of wartime leader Alija Izetbegović, he is seen as continuing his father's "Islamist policy" which is "most to blame for the war in BiH". Surprisingly, that policy had the support of the West (WEBTRIBUNE.RS 2020). This, in effect, fully reconstructs the narrative from the first half of the 1990s that was dominant in the media of the Milošević era (Informer 2022). Other war propaganda discourses from that period are also reproduced with a view to removing or at least relativising the responsibility of Serbia, its authorities and Bosnian Serb leaders for the conflict and crimes, often while also employing non-relevant or misconstrued Western sources (Bojić 2023). There is also a renewal of the nationalist narrative whereby all citizens of BiH are actually Serbs, which is used to justify the continuity of expansionist and paternalistic policies (Republika Portal Srpskog Telegrafa 2021).

Bakir Izetbegović is portrayed as an extremist and the greatest threat to Serbs and peace in BiH (RTRS/Informer 2022), and the West is seen as providing him with support (Struhar 2022). Still, according to this narrative, Izetbegović and the Bosniaks have no chance of succeeding in their efforts to "enslave Srpska" and Milorad Dodik (Fakti/Informer 2022).

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47   In this sense, it was indicative to see the reporting of Serbian media on the 2019 BiH Programme Declaration adopted by the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), which had envisioned defining the country as a regionalised welfare state with rule of law and three levels of government – state, regional, and local. At that time, *Politika* published a text headlined "SDA Declaration is a new story about the Islamic state", while tabloids ran headlines such as: "SDA leader seeks unitarianisation of Bosnia and angers Serbs and Croats! Dodik: Bakir, Srpska will never be part of the Bosnian republic!", "According to Bakir, Allah should decide, not a realistic political agreement! Dodik 'grounding' Izetbegović!", "Izetbegović provoking again! Bakir wants to abolish Republika Srpska. Dodik: He won't get an inch!", "Bakir cowed by Dodik: Alija sacrificed peace for BiH, we'll see what his son will sacrifice it for!"

The image that is being created of Željko Komšić, member of the BiH Presidency, is based on a number of premises: he is an agent of the SDA, an illegitimate representative of the Croat people set on jeopardising the Serbs and Republika Srpska (Kurir 2021), and is also a threat to peace. Sometimes, the media report statements of political actors with elements of hate speech (Kurir 2022), and critical views of leading Croatian politicians about Komšić are regularly reported (Kurir/Klix 2022).

8.3. MAIN NARRATIVES ABOUT BIH IN CROATIA: KEEPING UP WITH THE POLICY OF HDZ BIH

Although there are significant and sometimes even dramatic differences in how Serbian and Croatian media report on political and social issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there are also some similarities. The dominant media in Croatia are also caught in the tight grip of politically and economically powerful individuals, but these relations are much more complex on account of a more complex and diversified political and social scene. The level of respect for the press code, or at least its major rules, is much higher than in Belgrade. There are also significantly more public debates featuring different views on many issues, including those concerning neighbouring countries. Still, experts warn that these discussions afford far less time to views of citizens who do not reproduce the dominant narratives. When it comes to exchanging opinions on BiH, views are most often presented by Croatian nationals or those with corresponding views. Still, reporting on the political situation in BiH is not as sensationalist as in Serbia, and there is not a single media outlet of any significance that would directly negate the integrity of this neighbouring country.

As for the similarity, it is primarily reflected in ethnocentric reporting: Croatian media also place absolute emphasis on members of "their own people", i.e., on the (imperilled) rights of Croats in BiH. Interpreting these "national rights" is approached with bias and superficially, keeping to the trend established by government positions and official policy. As in Serbia, frictions between groups and their positioning take up more space than other important political topics. All in all, much like citizens of Serbia, Croatian citizens do not have an objective or complete picture of the political and social situation in their neighbouring country.

In a conversation conducted for the purpose of this analysis, the Zagreb-based reporter and media analyst Boris Pavelić said that in Croatia, "there is probably not a single reporter, and there is certainly not a single media

outlet that is familiar with the situation and political system in BiH to the extent required by its proximity and the long-standing political crisis in the country". Pavelić says that the main narratives about BiH in Croatia are a "combination of indifference, disinterest and the kind of overt political bias that is inappropriate for media of an EU member state". He adds that any larger media outlet should have at least one reporter covering the Bosnian-Herzegovinian political scene, because this is "warranted by a host of circumstances".

Pavelić's opinion coincides with that of other Croatian media experts, expressed already more than a decade ago and reiterated at various professional gatherings. They also believe that the media in Croatia have no interest at all in events in the region unless they are directly related to Croatia or the Croat national community. Most of the reporting concerns only those issues that have a national dimension. A generally negative image is created about the situation in neighbouring countries, particularly BiH. When Radio Free Europe did a survey on the streets of Zagreb, one citizen said he believed that the aim of such reporting about the neighbourhood was to create a sense that "the best life is in Croatia". "I get the feeling that they want to create a sense that the best life is here, that we are the best and they're lagging behind – which is partly true, but partly not", he said (Barbir-Miladinović 2011; Lasić 2021).

The attitude of the media in Serbia and in Croatia towards BiH was far more similar in the 2000s than it is today, although experts will point out that since their governments changed in 2012, both these countries saw an overall deterioration of relations towards Sarajevo. It was precisely in 2012 that the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung conducted a study to gather and analyse public opinion in these two countries regarding BiH, and it turned out the opinions were often similar. The respondents shared a pessimism about the future of the neighbouring country that would, in their opinion, collapse because of "a lack of desire for reforms and coexistence". They also agreed that Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs in BiH were "three separate worlds, cultures and civilisations". However, while most Croatian citizens did not believe that BiH was becoming increasingly Islamised, respondents from Serbia were convinced that it was. The surveyed residents of Croatia were found to believe that Croats, being the least numerous, were the most at risk, but that Republika Srpska would not secede, while 50% of Serbian respondents were found to believe that secession was a reality, and the majority believed that Serbs in BiH were the most at risk. This survey provided an excellent reflection of the similarities and differences in the narratives about BiH created in Croatia and Serbia (Skoko 2012).

In a recently published study of relations between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Zagreb-based political scientist Dejan Jović states that the strong political and media efforts of Croatia to change the Election Law in BiH constitute interference in the internal political issues of another country. He claims that this discourse means that Croatia is "positioning itself as an advocate and actor of ethno-policy in international relations" and that its attitude towards BiH is being "securitised", which means that it is shifting from the political to the security sphere. This limits the space available for pluralist and critical consideration of this topic in the political sphere. He also recognises 2012 as the turning point in relations between Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In his opinion, this was when the process of "de-Tuđmanising" Croatia and critically reviewing Tuđman's role and legacy in political and historical developments ended, among other things, also in relation to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, according to Jović, this is when the process of "de-Mesićising" Croatia began, which entailed abandoning the policy whereby official Zagreb cooperated primarily bilaterally in BiH with "political Sarajevo" and not, as is the case today, blindly following the policy of HDZ BiH (Jović 2022). This shift in policy was also followed by the dominant media.

8.4. HOW THE MEDIA IN SERBIA COVERED THE GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BIH: FOCUS ON RS AND POLITICAL CONFLICTS

The most influential Serbian media reported on the general elections in BiH in line with official Belgrade policy, actively covering election activities in Republika Srpska and to a large extent ignoring the campaign, and even the election results, in the Federation of BiH, except when reporting on incidents. It was as if these were two completely different processes taking place in separate countries and with nothing in common. Given that Serbia and the RS, as noted before, are practically part of the same media landscape, the reporting of Serbian media certainly had, in various ways,[48] a significant influence on public opinion in this entity. The messages that were sent were exclusively ethnocentric, calling for the "unity of Serb space". In their interpretation, Republika Srpska was primarily threatened by Bosniaks, who desire a unitary Islamic state, but also by the West, which has long conducted anti-Serb policies, especially in the context of dramatically deteriorated relations between the West and Moscow. Media content directly or indirectly addressing the elections in BiH promoted the following "values":

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48   To reiterate, this does not only concern the presence of Serbian media in the territory of BiH, but also of their content often being carried by media outlets from BiH, predominantly from RS.

nationalism, authoritarianism, Islamophobia, Russophilia, relativising or undermining democratic and liberal civilisational achievements. The leading media reported on the elections in BiH and related events in line with their editorial policy, which was based on being anti-European.[49] As a general rule and also in this case, the majority of articles in popular tabloids and on their websites was unsigned, and the emphasis was placed on the headline. The articles were mostly a combination of (edited) copied content and comments.

A question that remains open is who was the government in Serbia – and by extension, the regime's media – supporting in the RS elections, those in power or the opposition. There are arguments to support both claims, but it seems that the analysts saying that Vučić "played both sides" had it right. There is no doubt that his relationship with Dodik is not perfect, but it is equally clear that they need each other very much.

The Serbian media remained mostly silent about the news that broke on Banja Luka web portals, that an official of the Serb Democratic Party and Dejan Slijepčević, a businessman from Novi Sad with ties to Vučić's party, were arrested together in late September in Gradiška, and were found to have a large sum of money, as well as promotional materials of the opposition (Srpskainfo/Mondo 2022). Slijepčević was later arrested at Podgorica airport, again with a hefty sum of money, on the day of the local elections in Montenegro (Sejdinović 2022b).

Also interesting is the conflict between the newspaper Informer, which is completely and unequivocally loyal to the president of Serbia, and the Banjaluka.net portal, which is allegedly propped up by Igor Dodik, the son of Milorad Dodik. Namely, the portal accused Vučić of being behind Jelena Trivić's decision to proclaim victory on the night of the elections (Stojanović 2022), while Informer responded with the harsh claim that Dodik was using his son to "perfidiously attack the president of Serbia" (Informer/Banjaluka.net 2022). Things were smoothed over when the owner of Informer, Dragan J. Vučićević, said his outlet would no longer be dealing with this topic so as not to jeopardise the "unity of Serbia and Republika Srpska" (Vučićević 2022a). It is quite possible that the conflict was brought to a close at the "request" of someone from Serbia's top leadership. It is also interesting that

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49   The Belgrade-based EU integration expert Vladimir Međak had this to say about a recent survey that found a vast number of Serbia's citizens were against joining the EU: "Vučić's government has been feeding citizens disinformation about a great many things. And when you ask them for their opinion, they actually tell you what the government has imposed as the answer. What we have is a decade of anti-European propaganda that can only be resisted by those who are aware that the government distorts the truth whenever it speaks, so to say." (Sejdinović 2022a)

in one of the texts in the "series", Vučićević admitted that his newspaper had "throughout the campaign openly supported Milorad Dodik" because he was "the best solution for Republika Srpska and the Serb people in BiH" (Vučićević 2022b).

Opposition candidates in the RS received quite good coverage and were portrayed positively by leading Serbian media, but so were the incumbents, foremost Milorad Dodik. His appearances on RTS, Serbia's public service, were quite indicative in this regard, especially when he was a guest on the primetime "Oko" show, where his visit to Moscow and Vladimir Putin was promoted in the run-up to the elections in BiH. RTS stated that Dodik's meeting with Putin was "much more interesting" than the elections in "Republika Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina", and he said on that occasion that "the West, Brussels and Washington" had always been "against RS and the Serb people" and that "Serbs can always count on the friendship of Russia" (RTS 2022), which is something many voters in Serbia as well as many Serbs in BiH like to hear.

In any case, it is clear that both official Belgrade and the media based there were deeply involved in the election process in RS, while the elections in the rest of BiH were either ignored or covered with sensationalism in line with the abovementioned "values" (Republika Portal Srpskog Telegrafa 2022a). At best, as short news bulletins.

If he had relied only on leading domestic media, even today, the average citizen of Serbia is by all accounts unfamiliar with Denis Bećirović, the new member of the BiH Presidency from among the Bosniak people, and ignorant of the political ideas he advocates. Actually, his election victory was portrayed primarily as a great defeat for Bakir Izetbegović, the "arch enemy" (Republika Portal Srpskog Telegrafa 2022b; TANJUG/Informer 2022).

The name of Željko Komšić is not well known even in the context of the elections. In Serbian media, he appears almost exclusively in a negative context, most often via statements of political actors (Kurir/Klix 2022; Kurir/RTRS 2022). Although a long-standing high official of the neighbouring country, Komšić's statements mostly go unreported unless they are "controversial" (BSC Happy portal 2022; Republika Portal Srpskog Telegrafa 2022c) or negative towards the West (Informer/Politika 2022).

Serbian media did devote some attention to the "rights of the Croat people" with the accompanying sensationalism and reporting statements of political actors from HDZ BiH and Croatia. Once again, the message was that BiH is an "unsustainable community" (TANJUG 2022a; 2022b; Politika 2022).

As a rule, the High Representative of the international community in BiH, Christian Schmidt, is also negatively portrayed, both in the context of changes to the Election Law and the Constitution of FBiH (TANJUG 2022c) and in the context of "jeopardising the interests of Republika Srpska" (Fakti/Informer 2023). Interestingly, much is made of the fact that Schmidt is German (Dobromirović 2023), which is generally in line with redefining the narrative about Germany in Serbia. During the chancellorship of Angela Merkel, who showed understanding for the actions of President Vučić, Germany was portrayed as a friend and major economic partner of Serbia. After the change in government in Berlin and critical tones coming from there over the lack of democracy in Belgrade, Germany is once again becoming the "traditional enemy" (Petrović 2022).

8.5. THE MEDIA IN CROATIA AND THE GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BIH: RIGHTS OF CROATS AT RISK

In general, when it comes to political reporting, the major media in Croatia are not as unanimous as the leading media in Serbia, and this also pertains to reporting on BiH in general and in particular to the recent general elections. As noted before, this is due to the more complex political and media scene in Croatia and the more complicated political and economic influences on editorial policy, as well as a higher degree of media pluralism and professionalism. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern, with some reservations, certain tendencies and harmful narratives. To reiterate, political processes in BiH are approached in an ethnocentric manner, without deeper or more comprehensive analysis, so even though there are different opinions in Croatian media (particularly voiced through independent portals), there is a general lack of views from the non-Croat and civic segments of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian political scene, and a distinction is made between "real" and "fake" Croats.

The dominant thesis is that the rights of the Croat people in BiH are at risk, primarily due to their inability to elect "their own representative" to the BiH Presidency. It is generally believed that the Croats in BiH are "majoritised" or outvoted (Jazvić 2022). The main Bosnian-Herzegovinian "villain" is the "fake Croat" Željko Komšić, who is subjected to harsh criticism and even merciless insults in a large number of articles. For example, statements are reported that only "Bosniak chauvinists voted" for him (Špoljar 2022), that he "stole the seat" rightfully belonging to Croats (Krešić 2022), and space is also given to similar opinions of analysts from Sarajevo, according to whom there is scarcely anyone as "negative and toxic for relations in BiH as Željko Komšić and his clique of cronies and idle parasites" (Šagolj 2022a).

In an interview with Slobodna Dalmacija, the "famous writer" Josip Mlakić commented on Komšić's policy with elements of hate speech, such as when he said that the member of the BiH Presidency was a "malignant tumour in the tissue of Bosnian-Herzegovinian society whose fatal metastases have destroyed the future of this country for a long time yet" (Šagolj 2022b).

Another commonplace in most Croatian media reports, which is also mirrored by Serbian media, is to characterise Komšić as an agent of the SDA. HRT, the Croatian public service, takes a similar tone in reporting on Komšić when it comments: "'It is important that the BiH Presidency has two members of ours, across from one Serb member' is the message sent even publicly for years by many Bosniak politicians to the Bosniak electorate. We see the same pattern in these elections, too. The Bosniak election machine is once again pushing Željko Komšić into the Presidency of BiH" (Vrbić 2022).

Denis Bećirović's election to the BiH Presidency is interpreted, much like in Serbia, primarily as the defeat of the "enemy" that is Bakir Izetbegović and the SDA (Andrijanić 2022), except that in Croatian media, we can find somewhat more information about Bećirović's political views (Lukić 2022).

HDZ BiH is generally presented as the unambiguous and only real representative of Croat interests, and very rarely is there any negative reporting about this party, except on some independent portals. The appointment of Borjana Krišto as head of the Council of Ministers of BiH is presented as a victory for the HDZ BIH, Croats and Croatia, and she was also very successful in the elections, though not enough to be elected to the Presidency of BiH. Schmidt's changes to the Election Law and the Constitution of FBiH are portrayed as a "great victory of the government and Plenković" (Veljković 2022; Prerad and Boban Valečić 2022). On the other side, statements by Croatian President Zoran Milanović are reported when he calls out the government of Croatia for not doing anything to prevent Željko Komšić from becoming a member of the BiH Presidency (Hina 2022a). The overall impression is that the discourse whereby Croatia not only has the right but also the duty to interfere in the internal affairs of the neighbouring country is so normalised as to become almost dominant.

The elections in Republika Srpska were not of much interest to the Croatian media, and citizens were mainly informed in the news about the "post-elections crisis" in this entity. Slightly more attention was garnered by the statement of Jelena Trivić, candidate for RS president, claiming Dodik was a "Croatian agent straying from the national policy created in Belgrade" and referring to the "special relationship" between the Croatian president and

Milorad Dodik in the context of the election process (G. L. 2022; Prnjak 2022). The latter was probably particularly emphasised and commented on in the context of internal political concerns.

Otherwise, Milorad Dodik is "notorious" in Croatian media because of his "exhibitionist", pro-Russian and ultra-nationalist actions and statements that are readily reported (Večernji list 2022a; 2022b; Hina 2022b; 2022c).

8.6. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

The media, particularly those from Serbia and to a lesser extent those from Croatia, undoubtedly have a strong influence on the internal situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They make the already complicated and toxic political and social scene in this country even more complex and contaminated. This is by no means simply a media problem, but a political problem *par excellence* with deep roots and no solution in sight.

Although significantly different in many aspects, the attitudes of Serbian and Croatian media towards Bosnia and Herzegovina have some similarities, both in the context of the recent elections and in general. Both media scenes are dominated by ethnocentric reporting and a focus on the vulnerability of ethnically Serb and Croat citizens in the neighbouring country. For both, BiH is a state "on the brink of extinction" and, therefore, reporting on it is sensationalist, with a predominance of coverage concerning incidents, and without a relevant analytical approach. In both Serbia and Croatia, the leaders of the SDA and the DF, Bakir Izetbegović and Željko Komšić, respectively, are seen as prominent political "villains" who embody the threat to stability and peace. The political scene in BiH is being "securitised", i.e., the security aspect is becoming dominant, making serious debate impossible.

Media from Serbia and Croatia have a strong influence on audiences in BiH both because of their accessibility and the fact that their content is often carried by outlets registered in BiH. This is a two-way process. Media content from Bosnian-Herzegovinian media (especially those from RS and those under HDZ influence) is carried by media in Serbia, most prominently, but also by media in Croatia, after being suitably "adapted".

Many analyses indicate that Serbian media are the main source in the region of disinformation and of content promoting anti-liberal, anti-Western and pro-Russian values and interests, which is also strongly felt on the media and political scene in BiH. They are characterised by reproducing stereotypes, historical revisionism and campaigns against local and regional political

"enemies" of the governments in Serbia and the RS. Furthermore, there is continuous use of hate speech, stoking of nationalism and chauvinism and content that fosters an atmosphere of constant tensions across the region. The territorial integrity of BiH is constantly brought into question, and the main message could be summed up as: all the problems in BiH would be resolved if the state were to fall apart. The 1990s narrative has been completely revived, whereby Serbs are, if not the only then certainly the greatest victim of the collapse of SFRY and the wars that followed. Convicted wartime leaders of the Bosnian Serbs are portrayed as heroes. Bosniaks are mainly treated like "Islamists", but at the same time, they are said to have the West's support. Their common aim is to threaten the interests of the Serb people.

The situation is better in the most influential Croatian media, but they are, for their part, dominated by views of Bosnian Croats with links to the HDZ or similar and corresponding views. An expert and analytical approach is lacking, so even though BiH is a frequent topic in Croatian media, the general impression is that the citizens of Croatia, much like the citizens of Serbia, are not afforded an objective and complete picture of the political and social situation in their neighbouring country. Željko Komšić is portrayed as the main "bad guy" and is sometimes subject to classic hate speech and portrayed as a "national traitor". To a much lesser extent than in Serbian media, Bosniak leaders, primarily Bakir Izetbegović, are portrayed as "Islamists", but more frequently in the prevailing projection of the major media outlets, they are portrayed as undermining the interests of the Croat people through discrimination.

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Chapter 9

REGULATING HARMFUL CONTENT: LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN BIH AND EXAMPLES FROM THE EU

Lejla Gačanica

9.1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter will address the challenges in the self-regulation and regulation of harmful narratives on the Internet, provide a review of some examples from the European Union (EU) and other countries, and point to the risks which the regulation of harmful narratives may bring about – which means how it may affect the freedom of expression, and what are alternative ways to combat harmful content online. Harmful content online represents one of the most challenging aspects for legislative (mandatory) regulation as well as for self-regulation. New digital technologies affect basic human rights, international standards and norms related to political participation, freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, right to privacy. Multiple different elements intertwine here, creating a unique horizon for introducing rules that will at the same time protect various rights. Just how to translate the dynamic online sphere into rules and laws that will adequately follow technological developments remains an open question, for debate is still underway with regard to striking a good balance between regulation and effective access.

The first element that makes this area complex is defining what harmful content really is. Not all of the harmful content is also illegal, which is reflected through a comparative practice of some of the EU member states. Therefore, usually prescribed as forbidden is that content which is also illegal (such as hate speech, which constitutes a criminal offence). Attempts have been made to regulate some other practices or contents, such as politically biased reporting, through guarantees of equality (ban on preferences) during, for instance, election campaign periods. Examples of such regulation may be found in the legislation of EU members such as Croatia, Germany and Austria. However, even where there are distinct provisions, they are sometimes inapplicable to the online public (lack of institutional competences, inaccessibility of the media and responsible persons, non-executability of punishment, multiterritoriality, etc.), which further requires the adoption of new laws or rules. It is important to also note media regulation, which makes perhaps the most significant difference between online and online media contents: while there are codes for media (journalistic) contents, only general norms concerning a ban on harmful content apply to other content (if any such norms exist at all and if they are implementable).

Another element concerns accountability and competence – who will implement the rules that will be adopted to counter harmful content online? Is it fair to give such responsibility, which is also a power, to platforms (companies), or should it remain within the regulators' scope of responsibilities? This is where we already open up the next element – what is the best way to counter harmful content? In the examples and practice discussed in this chapter (such as Germany, France, Austria), legislators and regulators have opted for content moderation. However, it has resulted in numerous deficiencies, starting from insufficient transparency concerning the content removal criteria and procedures, through lack of complaint systems, all the way to the removal of content that is not illegal.

Restricting freedom of speech is probably the most prominent element of this complex issue. While on the one hand attempts have been made to curb content that jeopardises or restricts someone's rights and freedoms, on the other hand someone's freedom of expression has been encroached upon. It is a fine line between these two rights, particularly concerning content whose illegality is rather difficult to pinpoint. Also, the harm (such as hate speech) should sometimes also be viewed in specific contexts, which may be a challenge by itself. Can we be sure in such cases that self-regulation or regulation, including fear of large financial penalties, will be adequate?

Finally, the issue of implementation of either of the approaches (regulation or self-regulation) should be considered in view of the new mandatory provisions at the EU level. Evidently a lack of regulation is no longer an option, but it is necessary to assess whether self-regulation may be an adequate response to harmful content online. Introducing measures and rules that will ultimately not be implemented, or at least not sufficiently, does not make much sense.

All these layers of regulating harmful content online indicate that quick and "one size fits all" solutions will not work. In the context of electoral processes, and the effect of politics and significance for politics, a specific layer of demands and needs is added on. What was initially a generally positive assessment about the role of social media networks during elections has changed in recent years, giving way to concerns about the risks that the generally unregulated digital sphere poses to electoral integrity and democracies (Krimmer et al. 2022). This paper will thus include lessons learned so far, current debates and processes, and will attempt to offer recommendations for Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) based on the relationship between the needs, lessons learned and the current BiH framework. Particular attention will be paid to the EU practice and the obligations that will apply to BiH in the EU integration process.

9.2. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR HARMFUL CONTENT REGULATION IN BIH

Harmful media content in BiH is regulated by multiple laws, which still lack clear definitions of particular offences (such as hate speech) and, as a consequence, standardisation within the legal framework. Statutory provisions are fragmented throughout various laws, regulations and self-regulatory mechanisms, not fully harmonised with international standards, and their implementation is still inconsistent and especially troublesome for the online sector (Sokol and Ćalović 2022, 40). In addition to the deficiencies in harmful content codification, another problem is the understanding and implementation of the existing statutory provisions by the relevant institutions, which may be seen in the insufficient prosecution of these cases, uneven and inconsistent case law, and the annulment of decisions made by institutions on account of miscarriage of law. This has all contributed to an impression that the field has been unregulated, with complete impunity. On the other hand, one must also address the lack of professional conduct in the work of the media, especially during those periods, such as elections, which have been proven to provide opportunities to encourage and use harmful content.

The lack of legislation and responsibilities for the operations of online media poses a particular challenge in BiH. The issue has been noticed repeatedly in all forms of harmful content, which is worrying, bearing in mind that it was exactly online media that have been taking over primacy in public perception, and are also those that have posted much more harmful content related to electoral processes. That is why what follows here addresses only the legislation related to the online sphere, legislation that regulates harmful content in online media.

Harmful content (we will focus here on hate speech, disinformation and biased reporting) has been regulated through multiple pieces of legislation in BiH. Primarily, it is the criminal codes (state-level, entity-level and Brčko District) that regulate the prohibition of hate speech, but the Election Law of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination surely play an important role in the regulation of these forms of harmful content.

9.2.1. Criminal legislation

In BiH, criminal offences that constitute forms of hate speech are regulated in four criminal codes: Criminal Code of BiH, Article 145a(1); Criminal Code of Brčko District of BiH, Article 160(1); Criminal Code of Republika Srpska, Article 294a(1); Criminal Code of BiH Federation, Article 163(1).

The substance of legal regulation in these laws is rather uniform: "Whoever publicly provokes or inflames national, racial or religious hatred, discord or intolerance among the constituent peoples and others, as well as among other people living or residing in BiH, shall be punished…." Apart from this, the Criminal Code of the BiH Federation (Article 363(2)) and the Criminal Code of Brčko District of BiH (Article 357(2)) include a criminal offence of Violation of the Public Order through Radio or Television Station, covering those situations where, in gross violation of the standards of professional conduct by the media and journalists, they resort to inflammatory speech or hate speech or a type of speech that evidently calls for or instigates violence, national or ethnic conflict, thus endangering public peace and order.

Article 145 of the Criminal Code of BiH titled "Infringement on the Equality of Individuals and Citizens" provides that official and responsible persons in the institutions of BiH may not deny or restrict civil rights on the grounds of differences in race, skin colour, national or ethnic background, religion, political or other belief, sex, sexual orientation, language, education or social status or social origins. The BiH Criminal Code imposes this ban for official or responsible persons in the state institutions only, while the entity-level criminal codes (FBiH Article 177, Paragraphs 1 and 2, RS Article 193, Paragraphs 1-3) impose a broader prohibition for all persons, while official persons who commit this criminal offence are subject to a heavier penalty. The RS Criminal Code has a broader list of grounds, including gender or gender identity and sexual orientation, while the FBiH Criminal Code lists only gender and gender-based proclivity as the prohibited grounds of discrimination.

In 2021, a Decision of the High Representative introduced amendments to the Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which provides punishment for whoever publicly condones, denies, grossly trivialises or tries to justify a crime of genocide, crimes against humanity or a war crime established by a final adjudication pursuant to the Charter of the International Military Tribunal appended to the London Agreement of 8 August 1945 or by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia or the International Criminal Court or a court in Bosnia and Herzegovina, directed against a group of persons or a member of such a group defined by reference to race, colour, religion, descent or national or ethnic origin, when the conduct is carried out in a manner likely to incite to violence or hatred against such a group or a member of such a group. These amendments also prohibit the glorification of persons sentenced by a final judgement for genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes. The amendments now prescribe harsher sentences of between six months and five years of imprisonment (for public approval, denial, gross trivialisation or justification), or imprisonment of at least three years (for glorification of convicted war criminals).

Cases of criminal prosecution of hate speech are rather rare in BiH, particularly when it comes to hate speech online, while court decisions are inconsistent (Sokol and Ćalović 2022, 41). According to a 2019 analysis of case law, the entire case law of cases of hate speech tried in BiH from 2004 to April 2019, pertains only to the criminal offence of Provoking Ethnic, Racial and Religious Hatred, Discord and Intolerance (Ferhatović and Trlin 2019). According to the records available at the BiH Prosecutor's Office, during the 2020-2021 period, judgements for criminal offences under Article 145.a CC BiH were delivered in only two cases involving four persons. Over the same period, two indictments and four orders not to conduct investigation were issued. Lower courts delivered only one conviction for the criminal offence under Article 163(1) CC FBiH. Two guilty plea agreements were concluded in relation to the criminal offence of Provoking Ethnic, Racial and Religious Hatred in cases of the Prosecutor's Office of BiH and the Prosecutor's Office of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. Only 14 individuals were found guilty of this criminal offence during the 2004-2021 period. (Noorlander, Gačanica and Gorjanc-Prelević 2022, 60).

Criminal legislation in BiH does not separately define the offences of creating and disseminating fake news or disinformation, meaning that the offences have not been codified as criminal offences. If disseminating fake news or disinformation leads to the commission of a particular criminal offence, only that particular criminal offence (i.e., the consequence) will be prosecuted.

9.2.2.   Electoral law

Article 7.3, Paragraph 1.7, of the BiH Election Law provides that candidates and supporters of political parties, lists of independent candidates, lists of members of national minorities and coalitions, as well as independent candidates and their supporters, and election administration officials or those otherwise hired in the election administration are not allowed to use language which could provoke or incite someone to violence or spread hatred, or to publish or use pictures, symbols, audio and video recordings, text messages, internet communications or any other materials that could have such effect. The same Article, Paragraph 1.3, proscribes preventing journalists from carrying out their duties, in accordance with the rights of their profession and the election rules.

The Election Law provides punishment for political subjects in cases of use of language that might induce or instigate someone to violence or spreading of hate, or publication or use of images, symbols, audio and video recordings, text messages, internet messages or other materials that can have such effect (Article 19.9, Subparagraph j). Also, no conduct of an election

campaign shall be allowed by way of electronic and printed media where the contents are stereotype and offensive against men and/or women or which encourages any stereotype and offensive behavior on the grounds of gender or any humiliating attitude against the members of different genders (Article 16.14, Paragraph 3). The BiH Central Election Commission (CIK) has a mandate to monitor election campaigns and may sanction candidates who use hate speech, but only if such cases took place during a period of 30 days before the election day. The sanctions include fines and removal of such candidates from the election lists.

An analysis of hate speech-related case law shows that it is exactly the electoral processes (election campaigns) when much more frequent use of hate speech and disinformation has been reported (Noorlander, Gačanica and Gorjanc-Prelević 2022, 68-77). Hate speech cases are thus very common (within the total amount of all court cases related to hate speech in BiH) – for instance, during the 2022 general elections campaign, the Central Election Commission received 32 hate speech complaints, while in two cases a violation of hate speech provisions was found (Šečerović 2022). However, analysing some of the cases in which CIK correctly found a violation of Article 7.3, Paragraph 1.7 (use of language that could provoke or incite someone to violence or to spreading hatred), it violated the formal requirements (time of publication, irregularities in conducting the proceeding), which ultimately resulted in the revocation of decisions before the Court of BiH.[50] This poses a serious challenge, from two aspects: undermining CIK's credibility in the proceedings it conducts, and its success rate in countering hate speech according to the current legal provisions – more specifically, the political parties and candidates begin to promote their candidacies prior to the election campaign, especially online and on social

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50   For instance: By its Decision No. 01-07- 5-1760-1-30/06, the BiH Central Election Commission revoked the verification of the political party *Ujedinjena Srpska* for participation in the 2020 local elections because of its promotional video footage showing three young men talking about how they had "expelled" all the Serbs from Kosovo and Croatia and how they "picked a fight" with them in BiH: "We have chased away and expelled all the Serbs from those regions. Just how we kicked their asses in 'Oluja', if you catch my drift?! Now we have turned them against each other so we will again kick their asses in no time!" After that the footage shows a fourth man approaching them, saying: "Listen up, guys, you might be a little off there, Republika Srpska now stands united!" The three men then run away from the restaurant. CIK ordered that the footage be taken off the social networks and YouTube channel, and also ordered that the political party leader pay a fine in the amount of 10,000.00 BAM. The Decision is based on a violation of Article 7.3, Paragraph 1, Subparagraph 7, of the BiH Election Law. By its Decision No. S1 3 Iž 037327 Iž the Court of BiH revoked the CIK's Decision on formal grounds, having found that CIK did not err in finding correct facts regarding the prohibited speech on the footage – had the *Ujedinjena Srpska* published the disputed footage during the election campaign it would have been banned from participating in the elections under CIK sanctions.

networks, while hate speech is punishable only after the official beginning of the campaign (Sokol and Hasečić 2020). In its report on Bosnia and Herzegovina (fifth monitoring cycle, 2016), the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) recommends broadening CIK's mandate so as to be able to monitor the use of hate speech throughout the election campaign. ECRI particularly stressed the need to counter the use of ethnically inflammatory public speech and statements given by politicians, as well as the use of hate speech in the media.

The Election Law provides that the electronic media shall cover pre-election activities and observe the principle of balance, fairness and impartiality (Article 16.2). The Law prohibits granting any privileged position to any political subject, including officials at all levels of government, who are candidates in the elections. The Law also stipulates that special attention should be paid to respecting the principles of balance, fairness and impartiality in information programmes, especially in news, interviews and discussions on important political issues, which could influence the opinion of voters (Article 16.4), while journalists and moderators in the electronic media must not express their possible party membership or affiliation (Article 16.6). The public electronic media shall provide free broadcast time for direct access by political entities (Article 16.14), which can also be done by the private electronic media, under equal conditions for everyone (Article 16.15). Electronic media shall provide equal conditions for paid political advertising of political entities (commercials, public calls, jingles, video-clips and any other type of promotion of a political entity) in the period of 30 days prior to the election day (Article 16.12). Although the provisions by themselves seem to be specific enough, there is still the issue of their implementation, especially when it comes to online media. There are insufficient mechanisms of supervision of the implementation of these provisions, but also of the general possibility of monitoring online media, bearing in mind the flaws in the general regulation of the field (who are online media, who are their owners, their masthead, etc.).

Article 7 of the Rulebook on Media Coverage of Political Entities reads that each political subject should be provided with at least three minutes for free promotion, that public electronic media must provide for direct promotion of all political subjects in the election unit covered by their signal, and that the order of their promotion will be decided by lottery.

9.2.3. Law on Prohibition of Discrimination

The Law on Prohibition of Discrimination does not have a particular provision on hate speech, but contains a prohibition of discrimination and harassment, which is also read in the context of hate speech. The Law

defines the responsibilities of the Institution of BiH Ombudsman as the central institution for protection from discrimination, charged with providing opinions and recommendations that are not legally binding.

Discrimination is any different treatment including any exclusion, limitation or preference based on real or perceived grounds towards any person or group of persons, their relatives, or persons otherwise associated with them, on the grounds of their race, skin colour, language, religion, ethnic affiliation, disability, age, national or social background, connection to a national minority, political or other persuasion, property, membership in trade union or any other association, education, social status and sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual characteristics, as well as any other circumstance serving the purpose of or resulting in prevention or restriction of any individual from enjoyment or realisation, on equal footing, of rights and freedoms in all areas of life. Prohibition of discrimination applies to all public bodies, all natural and legal persons, in the public and private sector, in all spheres. Harassment, as a form of discrimination, is considered to be any unwelcome behaviour motivated by some of the mentioned grounds, which aims at, or constitutes violation of a person's dignity and creation of an intimidating, hostile, degrading, demeaning or offensive environment.

9.2.4. Anti-defamation legislation

The FBiH Law on Protection Against Defamation and the Republika Srpska Law on Protection Against Defamation regulate civil responsibility for the damage caused to the reputation of a natural or legal person by making or disseminating an expression of false facts. For defamation made through media outlets the following are jointly responsible: author, editor, or publisher of the expression or the person who otherwise exercised control over its contents (Article 6 of the FBiH Law; Article 5 of the RS Law). However, the anti-defamation laws operate only on the level of individuals, and do not represent a tool that may have a broad application in the fight against disinformation (Gačanica 2022, 279).

9.3. SELF-REGULATION

The Press and Online Media Council is a self-regulatory body for online and print media, but its activities are limited to mediation and non-binding decisions on media content that violates the standards set in the Press and Online Media Code in BiH. The Code distinctly provides for the prohibition of hate speech, untruth and disinformation.

Hate speech (and instigation) are regulated in Article 4 of the Code, which provides for the accountability of journalists, editors and publishers with

regard to instigating hate and/or inequality based on a person's ethnic group, nationality, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, physical disability or mental disability.

Article 8 of the Code deals with misrepresentation, providing that journalists and editors in print and online media must be aware of the harmful effect of publishing and transmitting disinformation. The Code further provides that transmitting disinformation from other media or sources does not exonerate the editors of the transmitting media.

As for bias, the Code stipulates that editors and journalists shall at all times perform their work in the spirit of fairness, honesty and civility when collecting information, reporting and presenting opinions (Article 2). Publishing false information, plagiarism, falsification, deliberate suppression of facts are this profession's gravest moral offenses. The Code also stipulates that journalists and editors must not publish false content or incorrect quotes, nor conceal and/or withhold important information whose publication might affect the interpretation of the published report and readers' understanding thereof (Article 7).

It is important to note that the Code also regulates the operations of the media. According to the Code, editors and publishers are responsible for the entire content of their print or online media, and thus also for the publication of user comments in the online communication space. Online media editors must remove user comments that constitute hate speech, incitement to violence, instigation, intolerance, insults, threats and any other form of inappropriate and socially unacceptable communication.

The operation of the Press and Online Media Council is limited to mediation between the users and the media, and to decisions stating that particular codes have been violated and that the given media should remove them, or publish a corrigendum, or retraction, but without any competence to punish those who refuse to comply. Although the mechanism is important for raising professional standards among the producers of professional content without imposing any sanctions, its reach nonetheless remains limited, especially with regard to unprofessional content producers and anonymous websites (Sokol and Ćalović 2022, 64).

9.4. FACT-CHECKING ORGANISATIONS

As online disinformation tends to disseminate increasingly, the professional standards of journalism and the values represented by the traditional media – such as verification of content and publications in the public interest –

remain crucial. Currently, two fact-checking organisations operate in BiH: *Istinomjer* and *Raskrinkavanje*. The focus of both organisations is to check the accuracy and truthfulness of media/public content.

Istinomjer is an initiative focused on the promotion of accountability of political parties that participate in the government, as well as public office holders who are accountable to the citizens of BiH. *Istinomjer* monitors and verifies statements given by public office holders with regard to their consistency, truthfulness and delivering on the promises made in their public addresses. In addition, *Istinomjer* monitors the fulfilment of election promises within the election programmes of political parties who were given a mandate to govern. Their statements are being subject to verification on a daily basis, in terms of their truthfulness, consistency and fulfilment. Once a year, *Istinomjer* publishes a report on the progress in delivering on the promises made. In election years, right before elections, a final report on the fulfilment of the promises made at the beginning of a mandate is published.

Raskrinkavanje checks online media and social network content, using a methodology that identifies 15 forms of problematic media content, including disinformation and fake news, albeit not hate speech. *Raskrinkavanje's* goal is to contribute to debunking fake news, propaganda narratives and commercial and political interests wrapped in the form of news reporting. The platform has been a full-fledged member of the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). The platform became operational in 2020 in the framework of its partnership with Facebook in which, after the fact-checkers mark a content as fake, Facebook flags the disputable content and by so doing narrows its reach, while notifying those who have disseminated such content. However, the criticism against the fact-checking platforms basically refers to two issues: the professionalism of those who make checks of media content, and the potential censorship the fact-checkers' activity may bring about (Stokić 2021).

9.5. COMPARATIVE PRACTICE OF REGULATING HARMFUL CONTENT ONLINE

As already said, it is the context that to a large extent shapes the approach to countering harmful content. Naturally, this to a certain extent becomes simpler when we talk about EU member states, bearing in mind the recently adopted Digital Services Act (DSA) which will set the standard for the EU territory. Still, it was interesting to analyse different approaches to the regulation of harmful content online, or to monitor the development of

various approaches combining certain interventions in "traditional" laws such as election laws, all the way to the development of entirely new laws regulating the area.

Designing an adequate set of rules and obligations for online media in the field of countering harmful content represents a challenge. Balanced acts would thus have to be guided by the three basic principles: the provisions (measures) must be necessary, adequate and proportionate to the objective one wishes to achieve. This is certainly much easier to require than fulfil, especially if we bear in mind that the most frequent solutions thus far have actually "cured" the consequence of the inundation of the online space by harmful content, while there has been no systemic approach that would include a broader social aspect and non-legislative, educational and inclusive approaches. The approach that has been used was focused on the moderation of content or its removal, which has been rather challenging for the purpose of fulfilling all of the three aforementioned principles.

Individual national regulations of EU member countries have brought about problems concerning the multiplication of national laws dealing with all sorts of "undesirable" content online, which has led to a confusing legislative patchwork in Europe. For companies and users, it means uncertainty and blurs their understanding of which law applies to them (Berthélémy 2019).

Presented below are three examples of national laws that regulate harmful content in the online media, and a brief summary of national provisions set forth in election legislation.

9.5.1. Germany: NetzDG

Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz – the Network Enforcement Act (NetzDG) – was adopted in 2017 and entered into force on 1 January 2018, being the first of its kind in the western democracies. The NetzDG aims to promote a more efficient fight against hate crimes, criminally punishable fake news and other illegal content on social networks. This includes insult, malicious gossip, defamation, public incitement, incitement to hatred, sharing images of violence and threats of crime commission. NetzDG applies to all profitable social media platforms with at least two million registered users in Germany. Exceptions include message exchanging services, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, designed for individual communication.

The law defines obligatory standards for efficient and transparent management of reports/complaints about content. Social network providers are subject to the following obligations:

– They have to offer the users easily identifiable, directly accessible and permanently accessible procedure for reporting criminally punishable content.
– They must immediately review the content reported by users and examine whether the content may be in violation of criminal law.
– They must remove or block approach to evidently illegal content within 24 hours of the moment when the complaint was received. Other illegal content must generally be removed or blocked within 7 days of the day when the complaint was received.
– They must notify their users about all decisions made in response to their complaints, and provide explanation.

Social network providers are under an obligation to submit bi-annual reports on the steps taken in response to complaints about criminally punishable content. These reports must include information about, for instance, the scope of complaints and the practice of making decisions within the network, as well as about the teams responsible for the processing of the reported content. Those social networks that fail to establish a complaint management system or fail to set it up properly, commit an offence that carries a fine of up to 5 million EUR against the person responsible for the complaint management system. The fine against the company itself may go as high as 50 million EUR. A fine may also be imposed if the social network fails to comply with its reporting obligation.

In order to make sure that the law is implemented more effectively, social networks are under an obligation – regardless of where they are located – to designate a person in Germany who would be authorised to receive complaints. Social networks also must designate a person in Germany who would be authorised to receive requests for information from the law enforcement agencies. Violation of the obligation to designate a person authorised to receive requests for service or information may also result in a fine.

Advocates of this law see it as a necessary and efficient response to hate speech and extremism online. Its critics, however, see it as an attempt to create a new draconian censorship regime, forcing social media platforms to resort to unnecessary removal of their content. Relevant data indicate that NetzDG has not resulted in mass removal requests, nor has it forced online platforms to adopt the "take down, ask later" principle (Echikson and Knodt

2018). The removal rates among the three large platforms have ranged from 21.2% for Facebook to only 10.8% for Twitter. At the same time, it remains uncertain whether NetzDG has produced significant results in achieving the set objective of countering hate speech.

Criticism also pertains to the responsibility for the content placed on online platforms as "shifting", but also the absence of judicial/institutional oversight over illegal content in the online sphere. The UN Human Rights Committee has thus voiced concern that the NetzDG forces tech companies to act as the "internet police" with the powers to decide what freedom of speech is and what hate speech is. The absence of judicial oversight over content removal has been deemed to be particularly alarming, for it limits "access to redress in cases where the nature of content is disputed" (Baghdasaryan and Gullo 2021).

NetzDG was amended in 2022 with a requirement that online platforms with more than two million users, such as Google or Facebook, must forward information to the relevant authorities for criminal prosecution. They are also under an obligation to remove any content that is in violation of criminal law and report it to the Federal Criminal Police Office. The new amendment is expected to result in some 250,000 complaints per year lodged under the NetzDG, which would lead to some 150,000 criminal proceedings. However, these obligations have been put on hold for the time being, since Google, Meta, Twitter and TikTok have filed a lawsuit against the amended law with the Administrative Court in Cologne (Noyan 2022).

The trail-blazing law in this area, NetzDG, has served as an example for at least thirteen countries – including Venezuela, Australia, Russia, India, Kenya, the Philippines and Malaysia, which have proposed or adopted laws based on the NetzDG regulatory structure. However, these regulations have in numerous cases assumed a more invasive and censorship form (Mchangama 2019). NetzDG was also floated as a possible draft for the DSA.

9.5.2. France: the Avia law

On 13 May 2020, the French Parliament partly followed the German example and adopted a law that imposes an obligation on social media platforms to remove content that is in evident violation of particular provisions within 24 hours of receiving notification. The law was adopted despite fierce criticism from the European Commission (risk of violating Articles 3, 14 and 15 of the E-Commerce Directive), digital rights organisations, and LBGTQI+, feminist and anti-racist organisations. However, in June 2020

the French Constitutional Council declared the main provisions of the law unconstitutional. This judgement was seen as a major victory for digital freedoms, not only for the French but potentially for all Europeans (bearing in mind the DSA that was at the time under consideration).

In order to properly understand the proposed legal model and decision on unconstitutionality and annulment of the Avia provisions – and certainly of the arguments for the annulment – provided below is, first, a summary of the law itself as it was originally adopted, and then an analysis of the decision on annulment.

Even before the Avia law, the French legal framework used to apply a special regime pertaining to the removal of web content glorifying or provoking terrorist acts or pertaining to child pornography. The Avia law does not significantly alter the existing framework, but shortens the time-frame for submitting a request for removal from 24 hours to 1 hour (60 minutes). In addition, Avia increases the amount of fines to be imposed for any failure to comply with the rules on notification and removal. The maximum penalty now amounts to 250,000 EUR for individuals, and may go as high as 1,250,000 EUR for companies.

Most of the new rules set forth in the Avia law are supposed to apply to online platforms and search engines that have reached a particular threshold of activities in France (the threshold was to be specified subsequently by a decree), regardless of where the companies are located or seated. According to the Avia law, the qualification of "online platforms" is rather broad, and includes any professional person or body offering online services that allow mediation of multiple parties for the purpose of exchanging public content online.

According to the Avia law, contents that represent "hate content" are set in a broad manner, and particularly include any content that manifestly represents a defamation or instigation to discrimination, hate or violence against individuals or groups on the grounds of their background, ethnicity, race, religion, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation or disability; glorifying criminal offences (especially criminal offences against a person's physical integrity or calling for the commission of terrorist acts or public justification of terrorism); denying or trivialising crimes against humanity, genocide, war crimes or crimes against humanity; content on sexual harassment or content related to child pornography. Anyone can report a hate content, on condition that the report complies with the obligations set forth in the law. Avia significantly simplifies the general formal rules of reporting, especially when the report pertains to hate content.

The French Broadcasting Regulatory Body (Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel – CSA) is a regulatory body responsible for the implementation of the new regime, having various investigative and regulatory authorities, which include CSA's right to seek any relevant information from online platforms and search engines, and especially the methods of all algorithms used to ensure compliance with the law.

In its decision on the annulment of Avia law provisions, the French Constitutional Council has found that certain provisions encroach upon the "freedom of speech and communication, and that they, as such, are not necessary, adequate and proportionate to the desired objective". The Council declared part of the measures to be in clear violation of the French Constitution. This pertains to the content removal powers, or decision on whether certain content is illegal. The Council notes the lack of involvement of the judiciary in deciding whether certain published content is illegal or not, as well as possible punishments that would – in combination with tight deadlines – bring about a removal of legal content as well. Setting strict deadlines will *de facto* lead to the use of filtering technology, which will result in the excessive removal of content. Besides, the draft law includes an obligation to prevent the repeated uploading of hate speech content. That will bring about a general filtering of all content uploaded on platforms, which is not compatible with the ban on general oversight of the E-Commerce Directive. The Council has also dismissed the provision requiring that any speech related to terrorism and child pornography be removed within one hour of the moment when it was flagged.

According to an EDRI analysis from 2019, the Avia law also has some positive aspects, such as providing safeguards for procedural justice by setting certain requirements for individuals reporting potentially illegal content. Moreover, the law imposes obligations on companies to establish internal complaints mechanisms for both the person filing a report and for the content provider. It also introduced an obligation to have in place transparent content-moderating policies.

9.5.3. Austria: KoPl-G

In Austria, the Communication Platforms Act, Kommunikationsplattformen-Gesetz (KoPl-G), entered into force on 1 January 2021, which imposes an obligation on social media providers to remove illegal content, and introduces reporting procedures similar to those laid down in NetzDG. KoPl-G is related to domestic and foreign providers of for-profit communication platforms with more than 100,000 users in Austria, or with revenues made in Austria that exceed 500,000 EUR. There are special exemptions for non-profit online

encyclopaedias (Wikipedia), commentaries on web sites with news (der Standard, Krone) and e-commerce platforms providing goods or services (Amazon, Geizhals, MyHammer). The regulatory body (KommAustria) is requested to keep a list of platforms to which the law applies, for the platforms do not have an obligation to notify the body about the beginning or termination of their services.

The Law regulates a catalogue of 15 criminal offences, including hate speech, defamation, harassment, juvenile pornography, racist, discriminatory or national-socialist content, unauthorised photographs, telecommunication stalking. Platforms must provide a reporting function for this type of illegal content and immediately react to notifications. If content is manifestly illegal, it must be blocked within 24 hours following notification. If illegality is not that apparent, the platform may take no more than 7 days to respond. The removed content must be kept on the platform for 10 weeks for the purpose of evidence and redress. Law enforcement agencies may obtain these data or extend the period by 10 more weeks, if necessary. There is no obligation of reporting blocked illegal content to the relevant authorities. Both the person who complains against content and the person whose content is subject to complaint should receive information on the procedure, grounds for the decision and legal remedy note. A major improvement in relation to the German NetzDG is that there exist complaint and redress mechanisms in order to oversee decisions of the platforms and increase the quality of their content-moderating processes. Subject to major criticism is the fact that the final decision on whether a content was illegal or not is no longer made by the court.

The Law provides for annual reports (quarterly reports for large platforms) in which to explain how exactly the content-moderating process works, how many cases of allegedly illegal content have been reported, how much time it took to check them and how much time it took for a decision to be made. Apart from the statistics, also required is a description of content moderators' training and the technical system used. A flaw in the German NetzDG was that the content which according to the complaint was potentially illegal would disappear from the obligation of transparency if removed based on the provisions and requirements. In Austria, such content that has been reported as illegal would also have to appear in the statistics, even if subsequently removed based on the provisions and requirements. Finally, the relevant regulatory body, KommAustria, also has a possibility to issue guidelines for drafting reports.

All the platforms that are subject to this law must appoint an authorised representative – a natural or a legal person located in Austria or particular

EU member countries. The objective is to establish communication with the local legal system so that, for instance, law enforcement agencies could approach a locally available person in order to obtain user data, or so that courts may issue illegal content removal orders.

Any failure to comply with the obligations set forth in the Law may result in fining the platforms with up to 10 million EUR (depending on several factors, such as revenue, the number of users, previous unbecoming conduct, gravity and duration of offence). It is also possible to impose a fine of up to 1 million EUR on steering board members if, at the relevant body's request, they fail to appoint an authorised representative for receiving official documentation sent by the relevant body.

In a letter to the Austrian government, the European Commission noted that the Act would probably jeopardise the freedom of providing services, and voiced concern about the additional costs and administrative burdens related to the implementation of the reporting and removal mechanism, and about the need to possess the required linguistic skills and local cultural and legal knowledge in order to be able to assess the content and maintain communication with the authorities. Besides, the Commission also raised the question of why Austria chose to adopt its own set of rules now, at the time when the Digital Services Act is at the drafting stage , which aims to harmonise, at the EU level, numerous items now regulated by the KoPl-G. Since the Digital Services Act will take the form of a regulation and thus must be directly applicable in any member country, the Commission notes that Austria will have to repeal parts of the provisions laid down in its Act once it enters into force (Staber and Stütz 2021). Despite the concerns voiced by the Commission, the Austrian government did not postpone the adoption of KoPl-G.

9.6. REGULATION IN ELECTION LAWS

In some countries, provisions regulating harmful content are included in the electoral legislation. This means that the legislator has realised that election processes are particularly susceptible to hate speech, disinformation and fake news, as well as biased reporting.

Digital election campaigns carry inherent risks, and legislatures can hardly keep up in an adequate manner. Political parties sometimes use communication platforms for (paid) political advertising, and through micro-targeting practices the platforms deliver customised advertisements to particular target groups. Some election laws provide general provisions prohibiting, for instance, hate speech, discrimination, political advertising, and, as such (in countries that have bodies in charge of the online sphere),

may also secure their application online, in order to counter harmful content. On the other hand, other countries, such as Ireland, have realised that certain segments related to the online sphere require separate regulation.

Provided below is a summary of regulations from various countries.

COUNTRY	NAME OF LAW	REGULATION
Serbia	Law on the Election of Members of Parliament	Should any participant in the election campaign by his/her conduct call for violence, spread national, religious or racial hatred or incite gender inequality, the Supervisory Committee shall without delay prompt initiation of proceedings before the competent state authorities. In their programme content intended for presentations, public service media shall provide submitters of the proclaimed electoral lists and candidates from the proclaimed electoral lists conditions for impartial, fair and balanced presentation.
Montenegro	Law on the Election of Councillors and Members of Parliament	Participants in pre-election campaigns shall adhere to the Constitution of Montenegro, laws and codes of professional ethics and commit themselves to fair behaviour which excludes insults and libel, breach of rules of decency or insults to public sentiments. During election campaigns, all public and commercial media in Montenegro shall make public the assessments, findings and decisions of competent bodies stating that a certain public media had breached the provisions of this Law which impose an impartial, equal and objective information provision to citizens on the programmes and candidates of political parties and other candidate list submitting entities.
Ireland	Electoral Act (1992 and 1997) Online Advertising and Social Media (Transparency) Act	Every notice, bill, poster or similar document having reference to an election shall bear upon its face the name and address of the printer and of the publisher thereof. A person shall be found guilty of an offence for failure to include the above details on any such document. Section 22 imposes the need for disclosure of donations for political purposes. Despite the existing regulatory restrictions for traditional advertising, such requirements are missing in the case of online advertising. This was the motivation for drafting the Online Advertising and Social Media (Transparency) Act. The Act pertains to online advertising, which it defines as "any communication which is placed or promoted for a fee on an online platform". Also, online political advertising shall display a transparency notice in order to disclose information on financing in a clear and conspicuous manner. The Draft contains vague formulations in defining harmful content online, which may bring about disproportionate restrictions of the freedom of expression.

9.7. REGULATION OF HARMFUL CONTENT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION

The European Commission has been dealing with the problem of fake news, or disinformation, since 2015. The EU has realised that the threats affecting democracy in any of the member countries may hurt the Union as a whole. As stated in the Action Plan against Disinformation (2018), disinformation often targets European institutions and their representatives, and aims to undermine the European project in general. Continuous disinformation campaigns targeting the EU, its institutions and policies intensified ahead of the elections for the European Parliament in 2019. In 2018 the Commission introduced measures to ensure free and fair European elections, and recommended sanctions where necessary, calling on the member countries to take steps to preserve the integrity of their election systems and infrastructure, and test them prior to the European elections.

In December 2020, the EU adopted two documents constituting a framework for the regulation of online platforms: the European Democracy Action Plan and the Digital Services Act. These documents follow up on previous documents, such as the Action Plan against Disinformation (2018). In addition to the above, also important to note is the EU self-regulatory mechanism – the Code of Good Practice on Disinformation, whose application began in 2018.

9.7.1. Code of Good Practice on Disinformation

The Code of Good Practice on Disinformation is the first tool of its kind by which the relevant actors agreed on the self-regulatory standards to counter disinformation. This is also the first time that platforms agreed, on a voluntary basis, to adopt self-regulatory standards to counter disinformation. Representatives of online platforms, leading social networks, advertisers and the advertising industry have agreed on a self-regulatory Code that covers a broad range of obligations, from political advertising transparency to shutting down fake profiles. The Code defined obligations for the online platforms Facebook, Google and Twitter, Mozilla, as well as advertisers and the advertising industry in October 2018; Microsoft joined in May 2019, while TikTok signed the Code in June 2020. A Code revision process was initiated in June 2021 and, ultimately, after a revised Code was signed and promoted on 16 June 2022, the new Code became part of a broader regulatory framework, in combination with the legislation on the transparency and targeted political advertising, and the Digital Services Act. By early 2023 the signatories will submit to the Commission first basic reports on the Code implementation.

Online platforms submitted their first reports in January 2019, stating the status of the measures that were taken in order to fulfil their obligations set forth in the Code. The reports confirm that the Code signatories have shown greater transparency. A more intensified dialogue with the platforms with regard to their policy on disinformation has taken place. However, providing data and search tools is still occasional and arbitrary, and does not meet the needs of researchers in undertaking independent examination. Besides, the scope of activities any platform takes in order to fulfil its obligations varies significantly.

Between January and May 2019, the European Commission carried out a targeted monitoring of obligations fulfilment by Facebook, Google and Twitter, with a particular stress on the integrity of elections for the European Parliament. The Commission particularly requested from the three platforms that signed the Code of Practice to submit monthly reports on the steps taken to improve control of advertisement placement, ensure transparency of political advertising and issue-based advertising, and deal with fake accounts and malicious bots. Monitoring has shown a continuous progress achieved by the platforms in fulfilling their obligations to increase transparency and protect the integrity of the upcoming elections. However, all three platforms should intensify their efforts to broaden cooperation with fact-checking organisations and strengthen cooperation with traditional media concerning the development of transparency and reliability indicators for information sources so as to be able to offer to the users a just selection of relevant and verifiable information.

Notwithstanding the revolutionary step forward in setting rules in the online sphere concerning harmful content, which have been voluntarily accepted by online platforms, it is still necessary to note several important deficiencies. First of all, these are self-regulation measures based on voluntary compliance and a "consensus" of the stakeholders on what exactly constitutes illegal content. Besides, these systems lack the aspect of legal certainty. Another challenge is the risk of jeopardising freedom of speech and information, because the removal (filtering) of content is still carried out by way of inadequate procedures, which leads to a risk that a content that is actually legal might be removed by mistake. The next problem follows from this: insufficiently transparent procedures or standards of harmful content assessment and removal. The platforms, according to the Code implementation and monitoring reports, tend to apply the set measures unevenly, failing to provide adequate (complete) data. Finally, measures against illegal content are often ineffective.

9.7.2. European Democracy Action Plan

The purpose of the European Democracy Action Plan is to strengthen the role of citizens in building more resilient democratic societies in the EU through the promotion of free and fair elections, strengthening of media freedom and countering disinformation. Envisioned in the framework of the promotion of free and fair elections are measures of draft laws that would ensure greater transparency in the field of sponsored political content (i.e., political advertising) as well as supporting measures and guidelines for political parties and member countries.

The Action Plan includes the European Media Freedom Act, which aims to ensure that the media, public and private alike, conduct easier cross-border operations in the internal EU market without unnecessary pressure. Also taken into account is the digital transformation of media space. The European Media Freedom Act will strengthen editorial freedom of media houses and protect them from unwarranted, disproportionate and discriminating national measures, with the aim of protecting the pluralism of the European media environment. Also to the benefit of media houses is a more equitable and transparent distribution of national advertising funds. The Act paid particular attention to the public media and the challenges they have been facing – it has been proposed that the public media be funded in an appropriate and stable manner, guaranteeing editorial independence. Public media are also obligated to impartially provide diverse information and opinions. The Act also imposes obligations on the media, which include ownership transparency, independence of editorial decisions, and preventing any real or possible conflict of interest. The Commission will propose additional measures to increase transparency in the field of media ownership and national advertising by way of a new media ownership monitoring tool.

The Action Plan also provides for activities as regards the media freedom and pluralism (with the focus on strategic lawsuits against public participation, or SLAPP), journalist safety and countering disinformation (strengthening self-regulatory mechanism). The Commission will gradually implement the Action Plan by the year 2023, the year before elections for the European Parliament, after which it will assess the progress made and ascertain whether other measures are necessary as well.

9.7.3. Digital Services Act

The Digital Services Act (DSA) was published in the Official Journal of the EU and entered into force on 12 November 2022. The DSA, together

with the Digital Markets Act,[51] provides a framework for a safer digital world in the EU. The DSA represents a long-awaited amendment to the E-Commerce Directive, by which important issues concerning the provision of digital services and rights of users were regulated back in 2000, before the appearance of large platforms. The new rules will apply to all online intermediaries offering their services in the EU, and it is this extraterritorial principle that represents a key innovation in relation to the E-Commerce Directive (the DSA will apply to intermediaries offering their services to users that have business seats or places of residence in the EU, regardless of where the service provider was established).

The DSA was adopted in the form of a regulation, which means that the regulations are obligatory, and will apply fully and directly in the member states. Candidate countries should harmonise their legislation with the EU legal framework, including the DSA. In the legislation harmonisation process, BiH will also have to harmonise its current laws with the provisions set forth in the DSA. This in practice means the adoption of a whole set of new provisions (presumably through amendments to the current laws) that will regulate the online sphere, of distinct criteria on what constitutes harmful content, whose responsibility the content control really is, and who will have responsibility for its implementation.

In order to implement the new rules, the DSA has introduced a new institutional organisation, which will in each member state appoint, or designate from among the existing bodies, a digital services coordinator. National coordinators will cooperate and operate in mutual coordination through the European Board for Media Services, which will be under the overall direction of the Commission. In carrying out its tasks, the Board is supposed to operate completely independently.

The law defines a set of obligations and a clear framework with regard to responsibilities and transparency for online intermediary service providers, such as online markets, social networks and content-sharing platforms. The DSA establishes a "notice and action" mechanism, as well as protective measures for the removal of illegal products, services and content. Having received a notice, hosting service providers should act without any unnecessary delay, mindful of the type of illegal content reported, and the urgency of taking action. Other measures set forth in the

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51   The Digital Services Act aims to secure equal conditions for all digital companies, regardless of their size. The objective of the Digital Services Act is to ensure a competitive and fair digital sector. Bearing in mind that the scope of the regulation is not essentially relevant to the topic addressed here, the document will not be individually presented.

DSA include imposing an obligation on social media platforms to enable their users to label illegal content in a "simple and efficient manner" so it can be quickly removed. Large online platforms and search engines will be required to share with the regulators and researchers all data related to their algorithms.

The DSA introduces stricter rules for very large online platforms (VLOP) with more than 45 million users in the EU on account of their huge influence. VLOPs will have to make regular assessments of systemic risks, such as disinformation, misleading content and revenge pornography, and take adequate mitigation measures, subject to independent audits. The regulatory body of the European Commission will oversee the VLOPs, while supervision of the other platforms will be carried out by the member states.

The *primary focus* of the document is the curbing of illegal content such as hate speech, death threats, revenge pornography, or defamation. Social networks now have the obligation to block, remove or restrict illegal content and disclose transparently which mechanisms they introduced to prevent its distribution. Besides, VLOPs will have to undertake comprehensive assessments of "systemic risks" posed by the design, algorithm systems, functioning and use of their services or related thereto, and take reasonable and effective measures to reduce that risk. Apart from "spreading illegal content", systemic risks include possible negative effects on fundamental rights (human dignity, privacy, personal data, freedom of expression), civic discourse and electoral processes or public safety, gender-based violence, juveniles, public health and physical or mental well-being. It is envisioned that the DSA be a mechanism for tackling complex problems such as mass disinformation and their impact on democratic processes or public health. The DSA notes that hate speech and disinformation online have been spreading more rapidly, and that, importantly, they have been used to increase polarisation, which is then used for political purposes.

The *second focus* of the DSA is the obligation of transparency concerning the algorithms determining what to show to users in order to improve the level of their information and their possible choices. VLOPs and search engines will have to additionally offer to their users a content recommendation system that will not be based on profiling.

The *third focus* is related to regulating targeted advertisements, so that in the future users will know why a particular advertisement has popped up on their screen, who is behind it, and what data have been used in making that decision. The DSA expressly forbids that targeted advertising rely on the

use of sensitive data such as health condition, sexual orientation, ethnicity, political positions or religious beliefs, while targeted advertising is strictly forbidden towards juveniles and/or children.

With regard to the effect on elections and electoral processes, it is stated that the EU believes that misleading or vague political advertising constitutes a particular type of threat online for it affects the central mechanisms that enable the functioning of a democratic society, especially when such content is sponsored by third parties or foreign entities. It is noted that the use of large-scale profiling for political micro-targeting for the purpose of manipulating the voting process may seriously undermine the foundations of democracy, which is why digital service providers are called on to take the measures necessary for identification and flagging of content uploaded by bots, while the Commission is expected to issue guidelines on the use of such digital technologies for persuasion in election campaigns and policies of political advertising, hence the call for the establishment of strict requirements with regard to transparency in displaying paid political advertisements.

The importance of the DSA is also reflected in defining the concept of "unlawful/illegal content", that is, what is to be considered prohibited, resulting in the platforms' obligation to block, remove or restrict such content. It is important to note that, in the light of implications for freedom of expression, the content removal obligation should apply to illegal content only. The DSA states that the concept of illegal content should be construed as relating to information, regardless of its form, which, according to the applicable law, or in and of itself, is illegal, such as hate speech or terrorist content and illegal discriminatory content, or which is made illegal by the applicable rules given the fact that it pertains to the activities that are illegal, such as, for instance, illegal sharing of private images without consent, online stalking, or unauthorised use of copyrighted material. Therefore, it makes no difference whether the illegality of information or activities ensues from the EU law or from the national law of member states, since the latter is harmonised with the former. An additional reason why EU-level regulation is important, terminological standards included, is the ever-growing fragmentation of rules and the lower level of fundamental rights protection in

the EU, caused by the new national laws aimed at curbing hate speech and disinformation.[52]

In the context of defining illegal content, the matter of disinformation has not been regulated in a distinct manner, yet the DSA does not directly target the practice of spreading disinformation, but it strengthens the Code of Good Practice on Disinformation. However, the big difference between the Code and the DSA lies in the fact that DSA provisions are not optional, but obligatory for all platforms, whereas joining and operating in line with the Code is part of a self-regulatory (ergo voluntary) approach.

Notwithstanding the need to moderate or curb harmful content, it is necessary to make sure that such obligatory documents (especially bearing in mind the territorial principle, or the coverage of the EU territories – member states) contain distinct and precise formulations in order to prevent online platforms from arbitrarily and unilaterally removing journalistic content. Yet, there still exists concern that the mechanism for reporting and removing the allegedly illegal content will probably lead to excessive removal of legal content.

On the other hand, the obligatory document remains vague or insufficiently precise in certain parts, which will potentially lead to misunderstandings and leave room for various interpretations and, consequently, uneven application. For instance, Article 26, which prescribes new verification obligations for VLOPs, including indirect reference to the effect on human rights, does not include guidelines on how to carry them out. It will, in practice, leave huge discretion for the companies and the Commission to decide how the risks should be mitigated. A similar situation can be seen in Article 27, which identifies possible measures that could be put in place, such as "adapting content moderation or recommender systems" or "initiating or adjusting cooperation with other online platforms through the codes of conduct and the crisis protocols". Although "reasonable" and "proportionate" measures are mentioned, there is no reference to the types of measures

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52   In the past years, member states have increasingly introduced legislation on digital services and online platforms in an effort to supervise them and reduce the harms associated with the spread of illegal content and goods. One of the main drivers of the DSA proposal is therefore the urgency to limit the normative fragmentation resulting from the initiatives undertaken at the national level. More recently, national laws such as the German NetzDG, the French Avia Law and the Austrian KoPl-G have imposed more stringent obligations on the platforms, requiring them, under the threat of high fines, to ramp up their efforts in limiting the spread of certain types of illegal content, including illegal hate-speech. All these national-level initiatives have caused fragmentation and legal uncertainty on the liability regime applicable to providers, affecting in particular smaller service providers and hindering their capability to compete effectively on the market (Buri and Hoboken 2021, 6).

the Commission could ultimately deem reasonable and proportionate for addressing the given systemic risk (ARTICLE19 2021).

9.8. CONCLUSION

Although harmful content regulation in the online sphere represents a relatively new area whose reach and effects at the national and EU levels are still being assessed, one may say it is an area that necessarily requires regulation. Bearing in mind the major influence of social networks, the online media and in general the rate of disseminating and the availability of information online, political "fighting" is now moving to the digital world with rather real implications offline as well. Nationalist and divisive rhetoric has been intensifying year after year, especially ahead of elections (Šečerović 2022). The electoral process is exactly where the lack of regulation as well as professionalism in media reporting most acutely manifests. The online sphere is a particular subject of manipulation – it is still considered a space in which anything is permissible, but through which a message is most easily transmitted. Hate speech and spreading disinformation online have become tools in election campaigns, still without an adequate and efficient response in BiH, as attested by repeated findings presented in annual reports of the European Commission.

Speaking about regulation, it does not necessarily have to be restrictive, meaning it does not have to focus primarily on prohibitions – in order for the response to harmful and illegal content to be adequate, those aspects within which a proper climate for development, distribution and consumption of harmful content is created must become involved in deliberations on how to find a solution and a systemic response. This primarily pertains to media literacy, empowering online media professionalism and becoming free from political influences. This is getting additionally complicated when it comes to elections and electoral processes, since the online sphere – as it is still quite unregulated – becomes a place of manipulation, promotion and political/ private spin and disinformation.

Thinking about a model that would be efficient but less precarious in terms of jeopardising the freedom of speech, one should limit content removal (especially if automated) and avoid measures that turn internet companies into *de facto* regulators. It is also necessary to remove the burden of proof from citizens, and provide transparent redress channels (EDRi 2019b). Online content regulation often treats the symptoms only, not the causes, by addressing manipulation through information separately from the lack of public trust.

In BiH, these regulation processes are still in their infancy. Although one should understand that BiH is a small market, and thus probably not that interesting for large online platforms, it is still necessary to analyse and regulate the area in a systemic manner. This is all the more so because of contextual reasons, in which numerous political and social phenomena turn into eruptions of harmful content online, while an election period makes all this additionally heated. A special challenge BiH will face on this regulation path is the fact that the implementation of the current legal framework, and curbing harmful content offline, have been going on rather slowly, sluggishly and insufficiently. This multiplies the existing problems such as the regulation of online media, transparency and ownership of media, creates an atmosphere of impunity, and contributes to a perception of online sphere as completely free from rules and respect for human rights. This is especially visible during election campaigns, in which social networks, websites and commentaries are used to sharpen rhetoric and raise tensions. The existing self-regulation system is simply not sufficient or efficient in curbing harmful content, and the legal framework is nowhere near what the *acquis* requires. It is, therefore, necessary for the state to take a more active attitude against harmful content in general, particularly in the online sphere, which is unregulated in BiH. This certainly must include an implementation plan and coordination with other initiatives (media literacy, media pluralism and alike) so that a response to the problem could be comprehensive, for in that way only can we expect full enjoyment of rights and freedoms. The legal efforts made in the fight against harmful content should not view the protection of elections and protection of freedom of expression as mutually exclusive objectives.

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Chapter 10
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS
Denisa Sarajlić and Anida Sokol

The research results, presented in this publication, point to a large presence of biased media content and propaganda during electoral processes, which may disinform the public and deny them the right to have accurate information. Political elites have used disinformation, sexism, hate speech and conspiracy theories in order to influence voters and discredit their political opponents.

The research has confirmed the premise that political elites in BiH engage in deliberate and pre-designed campaigns to employ harmful narratives during election campaigns and thus create socio-political constructs that are in the service of ethnic and political homogenisation. Fear is an emotion that has long swayed the voters' mood ahead of any elections in BiH, and this research shows how it is possible, through manipulation of emotions, to affect the electoral will. Each chapter has clearly signalled that the main objectives of such narratives are some sort of emotional manipulation – whether through a construct of narratives about national traitors, or foreign forces that have conspired against one of the BiH peoples, or the discreditation of opposition parties, or the creation of stereotypes based on gender, ethnic background, inter-ethnic relations, conflicts, victimisation of peoples (living under threat or oppression), or elements of certain conspiracy theories. Their objectives also included the discreditation of the state and its institutions, in particular the CEC, in order to undermine the already weak public trust, which then paves the way for creating different visions of the future of the state and the Entities.

The narratives used in the campaigns are militaristic, religious, partly related to conspiracy theories, war-mongering, offensive (especially to women), threatening and often disturbing for the public. Such narratives are often accompanied by ethno-national symbols, metaphors that legitimise voter intimidation and the insinuation of 'higher causes' that are meant to consolidate voter support and politically homogenise the constituency. Voters are also targeted through calls for the protection of tradition, morality and traditional values, and through stoking fear of threats to those traditions (by other ethnic groups, foreigners, immigrants, the phantom 'West', and western values, etc.). This became particularly noticeable in the reports on the Russian aggression in Ukraine and by taking positions on the conflict based on the alleged traditionally friendly ties between Serbs and Russia. The Ukraine crisis has, even without all this, caused great anxiety among BiH

citizens, who see in each global or regional crisis the risk of new conflicts in the Balkans; and this has automatically made them susceptible to all kinds of political manipulation.

As confirmation of the political positions presented through the analysed narratives, most cases also include so-called merit-based support, which means individuals whom the public holds in high moral or professional regard, or who simply have a strong influence among particular segments of the population. They often call for the defense of identity and affiliation to the community and moral values, in an attempt to stress the need for negative emotions towards anything that is different.

What is clearly visible in every narrative analysed during the research is the basic element of narrative constructs which are a revision of the past, linking the past to the present, and creating a future following the pattern drawn by the political elites. Using methods of persuasion that appeal to basic human emotions, the political elites try to keep the public deep in the past, and the fears that arose from it, through media representations of reality. In that way, a version of the past cooked in the kitchens of those political elites, shapes our future through political and ethnic homogenisation. In the already established atmosphere of fear and mistrust, and in a society with a rather high degree of media and information illiteracy, it is quite difficult for the citizens to establish the facts and find credible information. That is why the greatest responsibility lies specifically with the political elites and institutions at all levels of government to protect the public from this sort of manipulation. It is necessary to work on strengthening media, information and political literacy, regulatory and self-regulatory frameworks for the media and social networks, independent media that will operate in the public interest, a culture of dialogue between the political elites and a political culture based on compromise rather than conflict.

The recommendations that ensued from the research are as follows:

1. At the state level, the Council of Ministers should devise a comprehensive strategy for the prevention of and fight against harmful content, including all relevant media actors and civil society. Closer cooperation between government representatives, regulators and self-regulatory media bodies is also necessary in order to facilitate the identification, processing and prevention of harmful content. Setting up processes and mechanisms for monitoring, data collection, and reporting on the presence and regulation of harmful content online should be one of the strategic priorities.

2. Given the clear direct impact on the production of hate speech, disinformation and biased reporting, measures that require transparency of media ownership, and mandatory mastheads for online media, must also be a priority.

3. It is necessary to regulate the processes of media financing, which should be transparent, based on precise criteria and evaluations made by independent expert commissions, and in the public interest. For the purpose of strengthening independent media and professional media reporting, it is possible to set up funds for financing and supporting independent media, and regulate the modalities of their financing based on transparent and clearly defined procedures.

4. In drafting new regulations, rules, strategies and measures, it is important to ensure their compliance with *the acquis* and international standards in relation to both the suppression of harmful content online and human rights.

5. Any restriction of the right to freedom of expression should be in line with the tripartite test of legality, legitimate purpose and the necessity of the solution.

6. It is necessary to broaden the scope of the CEC's responsibilities with regard to hate speech supervision and sanctions so as to cover periods outside official election campaigns. It is of particular importance to update electoral legislation in order to respond to the new challenges in the digital age, including the fact that digital political campaigns take place outside strict election periods. During the period between elections, it is necessary to work on establishing and maintaining cooperation between the CEC and civil society in order to better identify harmful content, and to improve the involvement of civil society in reporting harmful content during campaigns.

7. The Code on Audiovisual Media Services and Radio Media Services and the Print and Online Media Code should be improved so as to provide a more precise definition of harmful content and its types, especially bearing in mind the local context and the delicate political situation in the country. The Codes should include provisions on condoning, denying and justifying crimes of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, in accordance with the amendments made to the Criminal Code. Since ethno-national and/or politically biased media reporting is the dominant problematic media content in the traditional and online media, the regulator, and the self-regulator as well, should increase their capacities for periodical monitoring of traditional, online and print media. They could also consider including a definition of disinformation in the Code on Audiovisual Media Services and Radio Media Services.

8. Additional self-regulatory initiatives and measures, aiming specifically at elections, should also be considered. For instance, a code of practice could be drafted that would set standards for free and fair elections, in consultation with political parties, private sector stakeholders, civil society and the public. The Code could set forth procedural safeguards in relation to content removal, political advertising management, the establishment of expedited complaint/appeal procedures, and regular reporting on measures against disinformation and misrepresentation, as well as on transparency regarding the use of platforms.

9. Besides self-regulation, it is necessary to introduce responsibility for applying legal provisions with regard to illegal content to the online sphere as well. The process of drafting laws and regulations must take an open and participatory approach.

10. Regulation and self-regulation of online platforms should focus on the transparency of procedures and on accountability, and then possibly also on the needs of limited moderation of content. Online content restrictions must be exceptional, subject to distinct criteria and strict supervision. Legislation should define, clearly and precisely, what exactly is prohibited and who may be held accountable for failure to enforce such prohibitions.

11. BiH regulations should be amended with rules that aim directly at bolstering public trust in the media, including civil education, digital and media literacy and public interest journalism.

12. It is necessary to work on the promotion of professional media reporting in all aspects of pre-election and election processes.

13. It is necessary to educate and sensitise reporters and editors to identify harmful content during election processes, the use of sexism to discredit female candidates, the use of conspiracy theories, disinformation and hate speech. The media should have content-checking mechanisms in place, and should report on election processes in an unbiased manner, based on facts, providing context. The media should steer clear of broadcasting inflammatory speeches and remarks by politicians, or should at least broadcast such remarks with critical distance and additional analysis. To that end, it is possible to develop editorial media guidelines for reporting on inflammatory and provocative ethno-national language, and for reporting on denial of war crimes and topics that are sensitive in the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is also necessary to organise training of reporters on constructive media reporting and to develop tools and manuals for the media on checking facts and providing information to the public in a constructive manner, without further inciting hatred.

14. It is necessary to develop and adopt a media and information literacy strategy that will provide guidelines and action plans for its introduction into the education system of Bosnia and Herzegovina, including provisions on educational materials and additional training for teachers. In addition to formal education, it is also necessary to provide informal education in media, information and political literacy, especially on harmful online content during election processes.

15. State level institutions, such as the CEC, should have developed communication strategies and recommendations in place for responding to crisis situations and discreditation campaigns.

16. Politicians should refrain from using harmful content and build their campaigns on well-defined political programmes. Political parties should adopt codes of conduct that would include modes of communication on the internet and in the media. They should also receive instruction about the use of social networks and about the rules of political campaigning and advertising, especially during election periods.

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Dr. Mladen Bubonjić graduated in 2008 from the University of Banja Luka, Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Journalism. The same year he enrolled in master's studies at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, study programme of Communicology, which he completed in 2010 with the successful defense of his final paper on the topic of "Digital Colonialism and Technological Apartheid". At the same Faculty, he enrolled in doctoral studies in culturology – studies of culture and media. He received his PhD degree in September 2018, having successfully defended his doctoral thesis of "Information-Communication Technologies and Downtime of High School Students in the Republika Srpska." From 2012 to 2017 he was engaged at the Banja Luka College of Communications. Since 2018 he has been working at the Independent University of Banja Luka. He has participated in multiple academic gatherings, either as a keynote speaker or as an organising committee member, and has taken part in a number of projects, academic as well as practical/professional. He was also engaged as an external evaluator at the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He has published several articles in academic magazines, as well as reviews. He has been an editor and proof-reader of three books. He is a co-founder of the Gerila.info website and its editor-in-chief.

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Kristina Ljevak graduated with a degree in comparative literature, and completed the Media Plan High College of Journalism. She has been working as a journalist, editor and manager in the media for more than 20 years, most notably for Federal TV. She writes articles for most of the non-profit BiH media, most often about human rights, with a particular emphasis on the human rights of LGBTI persons and women. She has been working with Mediacentar on the Mediacentar_online website, where she provides analyses of the dominant approaches in the modalities of mainstream media reporting. She has co-authored a number of analytical papers and has been a publishing editor. She won an award presented by the Sarajevo Open Centre for her contribution to the human rights of LGBTI persons, as well as the journalist award "Srđan Aleksić" for a series of articles on LGBTI topics. She is a feminist and LGBTI activist.

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Selma Zulić Šiljak comes from interdisciplinary fields with a master's degree in democracy and human rights in South East Europe, and a master's degree in comparative literature and library science. She has conducted research in social justice, facing the past and gender equality. At Mediacentar Sarajevo she has contributed to media education and research and advocacy projects. Selma authored an analysis of a comprehensive research study conducted by Mediacentar on the media evidence used before the ICTY, and edited the publication "First draft of history: journalists – witnesses before the ICTY", which pointed to the significance of standards of professional journalism in war and post-war environments. She has particularly focused on debunking and analysing narratives as a researcher of policies and narratives related to memories of war in local communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ABOUT MEDIACENTAR

Mediacentar is an organisation dedicated to raising the standards of journalism, improving the working environment of journalists, and promoting and protecting media freedoms in BiH and the West Balkans region.

We contribute to the work of the media community through programmes of education, media research and advocacy and communication activities. The education/training of journalists in the field of journalism, media production and use of information technologies is the primary and long-term activity of the Mediacentar Foundation. Each year our workshops and training sessions are regularly attended by dozens of journalists, editors and students of journalism from all over BiH and the region.

The research projects carried out by Mediacentar are focused on media policies in BiH and issues such as transparency of media ownership, media financing, hate speech in traditional and social media, media use habits, and the communication needs of citizens. Based on our comprehensive media research, we have published dozens of significant publications.

We carry out advocacy programmes that serve to promote media freedoms, raise professional standards in journalism, raise the awareness of threats to freedom of speech, and enhance the media literacy skills of citizens. All our projects are based on research and on continued monitoring of global and local trends affecting journalism and communication.

This is a useful publication, which was drafted and edited in an excellent manner, and will help us all to better understand the political relations and the media sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The editors and authors have managed to present an analysis that reaches far beyond a mere description of the situation, raising new and interesting questions that are being discussed beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina. That is why this collection has significant potential to position Bosnia and Herzegovina in the broader context of comparative analysis of elections and analysis of the media, and topics such as nationalism, post-conflict reconstruction of society, gender policies, relations between international and national stakeholders and bilateral relations of BiH with Croatia and Serbia.

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The authors, based on their research results and opinions, and their thorough interpretation and contextualisation, demonstrate that harmful content is part of strategic, planned and systemic campaigns aimed at ethnic and political homogenisation. The dominant method used for that purpose is manipulation of emotions, which finds fertile ground in the uncritical and insufficiently media literate voters in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although to a certain extent diverse in the depth and width of interpretation, all the papers in this publication facilitate a better understanding of how campaigns are led during elections in a manner that is not immanent to democratic societies and a healthy political environment.

Prof. Lejla Turčilo, PhD, Faculty of Political Science, University of Sarajevo

A particularly strong aspect of this publication is the sorely needed critical reassessment of the media themselves, to what extent they have ceased to pose a "threat" to the ruling ethno-political regime by their market conformism, lack of ownership transparency, and insufficient self-regulatory mechanisms, while plunging into the promotion of radical positions that encourage the tensions on which the regime survives. In that regard, I wish to single out the conclusions and recommendations as the key elements for the reconstruction of the entire media picture in BiH. We must not disregard the fact, which this publication confirms, that the "revolutionary zeal" of nationalist policies and projects, following the frontlines of the war, has made itself rather comfortable in a good part of the domestic media, where it has been kept alive by continual fanning, to suit the ethno-nationalist oligarchies, as the real masters of life and death in BiH.

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