



THE SITUATION WITH HATE SPEECH IN NORTH MACEDONIA IN 2023



POLICY BRIEF

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Helsinki Committee for Human Rights

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POLICY BRIEF SUMMARY

In 2023, a total of 1,171 reports of hate speech were registered on the platform www.govornaomraza.mk. The majority of reports were related to ethnic affiliation (646), sexual orientation and gender identity (248), national affiliation (275), political beliefs (149), and sex and gender (80). Hate speech intensified particularly during high-visibility events such as Skopje Pride, sports matches, and public statements made by political actors. Despite the numerous reports, the institutional response remained weak – the Public Prosecutor’s Office took almost no action ex officio.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 1,171 reports: most commonly based on ethnic affiliation (55%) and sexual orientation/gender identity (21%).
 - Public events, elections, and media campaigns are the most frequent triggers for spikes in hate speech.
 - Significant rise in hate speech in June – Pride Month.
 - Only 8 reports submitted to the Public Prosecutor's Office; 7 remain without outcome.
 - The CPAD (Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination) processed only three cases, one of which resulted in an opinion confirming discrimination.
 - A complaint was submitted to the European Court of Human Rights against a statement by the leader of the political party Integra containing hate speech.
 - Two published analyses revealed institutional and legal gaps in addressing hate speech.
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Detailed Overview of the Situation

Analysis of hate speech cases based on ethnic affiliation shows that this phenomenon often stems from lack of critical thinking and public dissatisfaction with state policies. Prejudices and stereotypes towards ethnic communities persist, with minority groups frequently portrayed as the “evil” in society and blamed for systemic dysfunction. Ethnically motivated insults often carry a political dimension. Discourse referring to the 2001 armed conflict was recorded, which further intensifies ethnic hate speech.

Certain events triggered a rise in ethnically motivated hate speech – such as insults and malicious speech against the two largest ethnic communities after news was published about electricity supply to the predominantly Albanian village of Slupčane, or during the raising of the “Greater Albania” flag at the welcoming of Kosovo's Prime Minister and the announcement of naming a street in Tetovo, when the flag was waved among the crowd.

Hate speech is widespread and visible during sporting events – for example, at the football match between Vardar and Shkupi, where offensive nationalist chants caused interethnic tensions and hate speech outbursts on social media.

The second most prevalent form of hate speech targets sexual minorities and people with diverse gender identities. A total of 298 cases (19% of all hate speech reports) were recorded. Social media comments frequently expressed disgust toward the LGBTI community, fueled by prejudice and disinformation.

The number of hate speech cases shows peaks around key dates – for example, the International Transgender Day of Visibility on 31 March, when the annual Trans Visibility March takes place. Transphobic speech was observed on social media, followed by disinformation campaigns that incited hatred toward this marginalized group. Prejudices toward the LGBTI community were particularly visible on 17 May – International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia.

In June (Pride Month), a record 105 cases (57%) of hate speech based on sexual orientation and gender identity were registered, along with 46 cases (25%) based on ethnic affiliation and 13 cases (7%) based on national affiliation.

Prejudice toward the LGBTI+ community became particularly visible during the period from the press conference announcing Skopje Pride (4 June) until the Pride March (24 June) – when online comments encouraged hatred, dehumanization, calls for violence, and even liquidation of the community. Despite the widespread online hate speech targeting this group, the Public Prosecutor's Office did not initiate a single ex officio procedure.

During this period, 8 cases were reported to the Public Prosecutor's Offices in Skopje and Gostivar, and 3 cases of harassing speech were reported to the CPAD. Of the eight cases submitted to the prosecution:

- Four were related to hate speech based on sexual orientation,
- Two based on ethnic affiliation,
- One based on sex,
- One based on multiple grounds (sexual orientation and gender).

Five reports concerned the criminal offense of Dissemination of Racist and Xenophobic Material via Computer System (Article 394-g CC); two concerned Incitement of National, Racial, or Religious Hatred, Discord, and Intolerance (Article 319 CC); one concerned the same offense combined with Endangerment of Security motivated by hate (Article 144(3) CC); and one was for Approving or Justifying Genocide, Crimes against Humanity, or War Crimes (Article 407-a CC) in conjunction with Article 394-g CC.

One case based on sexual orientation was dismissed by the prosecution, while the other seven remain ongoing.

Of the three cases submitted to the CPAD, two were based on sexual orientation and one on sex. In one case, the CPAD found harassment in the form of hate speech committed by the political party Integra against LGBTI+ persons. The other two complaints were dismissed due to procedural irregularities. This highlights the challenge of filing harassment complaints about online hate speech when the CPAD has no mechanism to trace perpetrators.

Strategic Litigation

One strategic case was initiated before domestic courts and subsequently brought before the European Court of Human Rights. The complainant is a human rights and LGBTI activist in North Macedonia, openly identifying as a lesbian, who has dedicated her professional career to advancing and protecting the rights of the LGBTI community. At the time of the incident, she was employed at the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

On 11 April 2023, Ljupčo Ristovski, President of the political party Integra, made a public statement disseminated through several online media portals (24info.mk, a1on.mk, netpress.com.mk, vecer.press) under the headline: “Inappropriate Pressure on the Public through LGBT+ Media Campaigns.”

The statement contained hate speech against LGBTI+ persons, labeling their activities and sexual orientation as “unnatural,” “perverted madness,” calling them something that “should remain private” and “stop being imposed on Macedonian society.”

He claimed that “media campaigns are poisoning children and future generations with twisted, devilish worldviews” – clearly targeting the values of the LGBTI+ community – and called for “stopping and cutting this evil at its root.”

In April 2023, the complainant and the Helsinki Committee filed a criminal complaint against Integra and Ristovski for the offense Dissemination of Racist and Xenophobic Material via Computer System under Article 394-g CC.

In June 2023, the Public Prosecutor’s Office dismissed the complaint, stating that the act was not a criminal offense prosecutable ex officio and that no dissemination of racist or xenophobic material could be established, framing it as merely an expression of personal opinion.

The appeal to the Higher Public Prosecutor’s Office in Skopje was rejected as unfounded, confirming the first-instance decision without properly examining the merits of the appeal.

As a result, the decision not to prosecute became final, exhausting all domestic remedies and leaving such hate speech unpunished. Consequently, the complainant and the Helsinki Committee filed an application before the European Court of Human Rights alleging violations of:

- Article 8 (Right to respect for private and family life)
- Article 14 (Prohibition of discrimination)
- Article 17 (Prohibition of abuse of rights) of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Conclusions

1. **Social media remains the primary space for spreading hate speech, with no adequate institutional control.**
2. **The LGBTI+ community faces organized and systematic online attacks.**
3. **The Public Prosecutor's Office fails to respond promptly and does not recognize the severity of these acts.**
4. **Significant legal and institutional barriers hinder effective prosecution.**
5. **A coordinated, data-driven national strategy aligned with international standards is needed.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Adoption of a National Strategy to combat hate speech.
- Strengthening the capacities of the prosecution, police, and CPAD to address hate speech cases.
- Development of mechanisms to identify and track perpetrators on social media.
- Amendments to the Criminal Code to clearly define hate speech as a criminal offense.
- Creation of institutional tools for recording and monitoring hate speech cases.
- Support for strategic litigation before national and international courts.
- Education programs and media literacy campaigns to combat stereotypes and prejudice.
- Regular institutional reporting and transparency in handling cases.



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