FROM WORDS TO WOUNDS:
THE IMPACTS OF HATE SPEECH IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Author
Majda Halilović

Design
Sanin Pehlivanović

Print
#LevelUpYourMedia

This document was created at the initiative of the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Ministarstvo za ljudska prava i izbjeglice BiH /
Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of BiH

FROM WORDS TO WOUNDS: THE IMPACTS OF HATE SPEECH IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Sarajevo, 2024

Contents

1. Introduction

In an effort to highlight the serious consequences of hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees in partnership with the Atlantic Initiative, and with the support of the joint project of the European Union and the Council of Europe and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), conducted a comprehensive study. With this report, the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees is fulfilling one of the activities outlined in 'Mapping responses to hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A situational analysis and mapping report'.[1]

This document was adopted by the Council of Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina on 27 November 2023, on the proposal of the Ministry of Human Rights and Refugees of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The mapping exercise, the development of which was facilitated through the EU and Council of Europe, provides a comprehensive overview of the current situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, setting out a clear roadmap and priority measures in addressing hate speech on a systemic level. Moreover, the mapping document aims to deepen the understanding of the specificities of hate speech and available remedies in BiH, to establish a basis for dealing with the problem more efficiently. It was developed through the inclusive active involvement of 34 relevant entities.

The purpose of this report is to explore the consequences of hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Utilising both quantitative and qualitative methodologies for data collection and analysis, the report explores the lived experiences of those affected

---

1   Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of BiH. (2022). *Mapping responses to hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A situational analysis and mapping report*. Council of Europe. Available at: http://www.mhrr.gov.ba/ljudska_prava/ Mapping%20responses%20ENG_11.04.pdf

by hate speech, shedding light on their struggles, suffering, coping mechanisms, and perceptions of institutional support—or the lack thereof. By examining the profound impacts on its victims, this report aims to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the issue and inspire more effective strategies for prevention and support.

The report is situated in an understanding of hate speech defined as:

> *All types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as 'race', colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. – Council of Europe CM/Rec(2022)16*

Hate speech can be conveyed through any form of expression, including images, cartoons, art, gestures, and symbols. It can spread both offline and online. Hate speech is communication that is biased, fanatical, intolerant, or based on prejudices or stereotypes (i.e., "discriminatory", or it can be contemptuous, insulting, or humiliating (i.e., "pejorative").[2]

While this report primarily examines the consequences of hate speech, rather than providing an analysis of the legal definitions and obstacles in the prosecution and adjudication of hate speech, it is noteworthy that other scholarly works and analyses in BiH are available to offer such perspectives.[3] Still, it is relevant to mention that BiH has ratified all major international acts that directly and indirectly relate to freedom of expression and the prohibition of hate speech. The European Convention on Human Rights and its protocols are an integral part of the Constitution of BiH, directly applicable in BiH, and with priority over all other laws. Moreover, BiH ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime and its additional protocol in 2006. Article 2 of the Constitution of BiH states that the international conventions ratified by BiH have supremacy compared to domestic legislation, which has created a broad constitutional and legal basis for the protection of human rights and freedoms.

Unlike some European states, BiH does not have a lex specialis on hate speech. All crimes concerning hate speech are located within criminal codes. In addition to these, several other laws regulate elements of the prohibition of hate speech, including the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination, the Law on Gender Equality, the Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of Churches and Religious Communities in BiH and Election Law. The criminal laws in BiH do not criminalise

---

2   Ibid.
3   For details of legal challenges related to hate speech in BiH see: Lučić-Ćatić, M. (2024). *Analiza sudske prakse u predmetima govora mržnje i zločina iz mržnje*. Atlantska inicijativa. Available at: https://atlantskainicijativa.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Analiza-sudske-prakse-u-predmetima-govora-mrznje-i-zlocina-iz-mrznje-u-Bosni-i-Hercegovini.pdf Also ECRI. (2024). *Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sixth Monitoring Cycle). Council of Europe. Available at: https://rm.coe.int/fourth-ecri-report-on-bosnia-and-herzegovina/1680b0661f.

the basic form of hate speech but instead define only the aggravated form of hate speech—incitement to hatred—as a criminal offence.[4]

Hate speech can incite violence, perpetuate discrimination, and undermine social cohesion, ultimately threatening the fundamental principles of equality and respect in a diverse society. However, in BiH, hate speech is often misinterpreted, insufficiently prosecuted, and lacks official statistics. According to the OSCE Mission to BiH Hate Monitor[5], on average about ten hate incidents are recorded each month, with roughly half of these receiving a response–such as public condemnation from officials, religious community leaders, or civil society, as well as actions like repairing damaged property, removing graffiti, organising cleaning activities, and conducting peaceful assemblies or parades. These reported incidents include hate crimes, hate speech, and other manifestations of hate.

According to the OSCE Mission to BiH, three convictions for criminal offenses committed out of hatred and criminal offenses of inciting hatred were issued in 2020, and eight cases were pending.[6] The European Union has noted that the prohibition of hate speech in online media is neither monitored nor enforced, and case law regarding hate crimes, including hate speech, remains inconsistent. Incidents of hate speech often involve ethnic and religious motivations and attacks on religious symbols, as well as targeting LGBTI individuals. There has been increasing evidence of hate speech directed at both women and men based on gender. The #nisamtražila (#I didn't ask for it) movement has highlighted testimonies of women facing sexual and gender-based harassment and hate speech. While data on online hate speech is inconsistent, many stakeholders in BiH report a rise in such incidents, with online platforms frequently used to incite hatred and disseminate fake news.[7] The European Union has recommended that authorities implement concrete measures to combat hate speech in print and electronic media and within official discourse.[8]

To contextualise the data obtained in Bosnia and Herzegovina and enhance clarity, this report is structured into four principal chapters:

1. The impact of hate speech: key insights from the literature
2. Methodology: understanding hate speech through personal narratives and survey method
3. Key findings on the consequences of hate speech
4. Conclusion: unravelling the lasting consequences of hate speech

---

4   Ibid.
5   Hate Monitor is available at: https://www.osce.org/hatemonitorbih
6   Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees of BiH. (2022). *Mapping responses to hate speech. Available at:* https://www. mhrr.gov.ba/ljudska_prava/MPBos.pdf
7   Ibid.
8   Ibid.

2. The impact of hate speech: key insights from the literature

Literature addressing the consequences of hate speech recognises its impact at personal, community, and societal levels.[9] Precisely distinguishing the impact of hate speech can be challenging, as the effects at each level intersect with and exacerbate one another. Communities are affected by the suffering of individuals, while individuals experience the negative changes within the community. Nevertheless, to contextualise the data obtained in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this brief overview of the literature highlights the most common consequences experienced by individuals, communities, and society.

Hate speech has far-reaching consequences on a societal level, perpetuating dangerous divisions, undermining social cohesion, and threatening democracy. It leads to the exclusion and silencing of targeted minority groups, forcing them out of public debate and eroding their sense of belonging and self-worth. Hate speech causes a permanent disruption of social relations, leading to community polarisation characterised by an "us versus them" mentality and a cycle of attacks and reprisals, with the potential for escalation. History has shown that the intentional use of hate speech to mobilise groups against each other can provoke violent escalation, and the failure to penalise severe hate speech today can lead to discrimination, hate crimes, and even genocide.[10]

---

9   Calvert. C. (1997) Hate Speech and Its Harms: A Communication Theory Perspective. *Journal of Communication, Vol. 47 (1), 4–19.*

10 Kulenović, E. (ur.) (2016) *Govor mržnje u Hrvatskoj*. Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti. str. 40.

Hate speech is specific because it targets not only an individual but also has broader consequences for the entire group to which that individual belongs. Intergroup emotions theory in social psychology illustrates how hate speech impacts the thoughts, feelings, and actions of community members. When people share common identity traits, experiences, interests, and backgrounds, they tend to form social groups. These groups, whether formal or informal, large or small, create a collective identity, and events affecting the group or its members are emotionally felt by others within the group.[11] Intergroup emotions theory (IET) provides a framework for understanding how emotions arise from group membership and influence intergroup relations. It posits that individuals experience emotions not just as individuals, but as members of social groups, which can significantly affect their attitudes and behaviours towards other groups. The theory predicts that group members may also feel anger, motivating them to support victims and the community as a whole.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina hate speech is most commonly connected to ethnicity, and according to available data this is still the most dominant form of hate speech or hate incidences.[12] The social ramifications of interethnic hate speech, especially in a context burdened with violent history, are profound. Hate speech can exacerbate divisions within communities, leading to social fragmentation and increased tensions between different ethnic groups. Witnessing hate speech or hate crimes can also lead to anticipated rejection among individuals from marginalised groups. Those who are aware of hate speech incidents may become more cautious and withdrawn, fearing further victimisation. This can hinder their participation in public life and community activities, contributing to social isolation and exclusion.[13]

Broader negative implications of interethnic hate speech (as well as hate speech based on other characteristics such as race, sexual orientation, religion etc.) on community cohesion are significant. Hate speech can foster an environment where discrimination and intolerance become normalised, leading to the exclusion of ethnic minorities from social, political, and economic spheres. The ripple effects of hate speech can create a hostile atmosphere that discourages diversity and inclusivity, ultimately harming the fabric of multi-ethnic neighbourhoods.[14] Additionally, communities exposed to hate speech may experience increased polarisation, where groups become more entrenched in their identities and less willing to engage with others. This polarisation can hinder conflict resolution efforts and impede the development of mutual understanding and respect among different ethnic groups.[15]

---

11   See: Mackie, D. M., & Smith, E. R. (Eds.). (2015). *Intergroup Emotions*. American Psychological Association.
12   ECRI. (2024). *Report on Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sixth Monitoring Cycle). Council of Europe.
13   Wickes, R., & Keel, A. (2022). The vicarious effects of hate: inter-ethnic hate crime in the neighborhood. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45(7), 1283-1303.
14   Ibid.
15   Marta Pérez-Escolar and José Manuel Noguera-Vivo, Eds. (2022). *Hate Speech and Polarization in Participatory Society*, Routledge: London and New York

On an individual level victims of hate speech may withdraw from social interactions due to fear of further victimisation. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and social anxiety, hindering their social development and academic performance. Victims may experience intrusive thoughts, nightmares, and feelings of pain and fear that significantly impair their daily functioning and quality of life. Hate speech can make victims feel devalued, violated, and no longer in accord with societal norms. This can lead to a loss of self-esteem and a sense of being "less than" others, with far-reaching consequences for their self-perception and confidence.[16] The OSCE Hate Crime Underreporting Survey (2023) conducted in BiH highlights a clear link between perceived bias motivation and the level of distress experienced by victims. Respondents who believed the incident was motivated by bias were more likely to find it "severely distressing" and less likely to consider it "not distressing at all" compared to those who did not perceive bias motivation.[17]

In severe cases, hate speech has been linked to suicidal thoughts and self-harm behaviours among victims. The emotional toll of persistent victimisation can lead to desperate measures and a sense of hopelessness.[18] The long-term psychological effects on individuals can be severe and far-reaching, including an increased risk of mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, social withdrawal and isolation due to fear of further victimisation, and chronic mental health conditions like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Somewhat different effects have been documented with online hate speech. The widespread occurrence and pervasive nature of online hate speech has led to increasing academic and practical attention on its impact. Online hate speech tends to be more spontaneous, immediate, and far-reaching due to social media, and it leaves a lasting impact. Unlike a one-time verbal assault on the street, an attack on social media persists, visible to both the victim and the perpetrator's network. It can resurface at any time and spread uncontrollably. Moreover, individuals at risk of online hate speech can be targeted even within the safety of their homes if they do not avoid digital communication.[19]

Existing literature shows that the prevalence of hate speech in online environments poses significant risks to mental health, particularly among vulnerable populations such as adolescents. Exposure to online hate significantly affects individuals' psychological states, leading to increased stress and emotional vulnerability among

16   Wachs, S., Gámez-Guadix, M., & Wright, M. F. (2022). Online Hate Speech Victimization and Depressive Symptoms Among Adolescents. *Cyberpsychology, behavior and social networking*, *25*(7), 416–423. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2022.0009. PubMed.
17   Iganski, P. (2023). *Hate Crime Underreporting Survey 2023: Bosnia and Herzegovina – Report with Recommendations*. OSCE.
18   Keum, B. T. (2023). Impact of online racism on suicide ideation through interpersonal factors among racial minority emerging adults: The role of perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 38*(5-6), 4537–4561.
19   Brown, A. (2018). What is so special about online (as compared to offline) hate speech? *Ethnicities 18*(3), 297–326.

those targeted. Exposure to hate speech, especially online, is linked to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. Persistent online hate can trigger depression, with symptoms such as stress, fear, and anxiety being common responses to hate comments.[20]

20 Saha, K., Chandrasekharan, E., & De Choudhury, M. (2019). Prevalence and psychological effects of hateful speech in online college communities. *Proceedings of the ACM Web Science Conference, 2019*, 255–264.

3. Methodology: Understanding hate speech through personal narratives and survey method

To understand the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding the consequences of hate speech, both quantitative and qualitative research was conducted with individuals who have experienced hate speech. This research integrated a combination of desk research, qualitative semi-structured interviews, and a quantitative survey to collect data encompassing diverse experiences of the impact of hate speech at personal, community and societal levels.

The qualitative part of the research, conducted between 2023 and 2024, involved in-person semi-structured interviews with 29 participants (14 women and 15 men) from different towns and contexts in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These participants included returnees, students, members of minority groups, LGBTI activists, and human rights activists. They shared their experiences with hate speech, providing detailed accounts of their encounters and reflecting on the repercussions in their daily lives, and in family and professional environments. The sample was drawn from across communities, showcasing diverse experiences. Participants shared not only their personal experiences but also discussed the observed effects on their communities and society as a whole. The interview guide encompassed an exploration of the impact of hate speech on individuals and communities. The participants also spoke of institutional responses, support mechanisms, and shared their ideas on how to improve responses to hate speech.

While some participants were eager to share their experiences and contribute to the knowledge base in this field, others expressed apprehension and fear for their safety. Notably, activists were willing to speak out and share their perspectives. However, some responses were brief, with participants mentioning that they preferred not to revisit painful memories. Others questioned the value of discussing these issues, with one saying, "What's the use of talking about it?". Fear of sharing experiences was most prevalent in returnee communities. To address these concerns, assurances of anonymity were provided to those who feared potential victimisation due to their participation.

In May and June 2024, an online survey was launched to capture the views of a broader population on the consequences and effects of hate speech. The survey, developed from insights of individuals directly exposed to hate speech and an extensive literature review, aimed to explore the impact of hate speech on those affected. The questionnaire consisted of 36 questions covering general demographics, the context and content of the hate speech, and a series of questions about its impact on their lives, relationships, mental health, and behaviour. Participants were also invited to suggest changes they consider necessary for addressing hate speech and supporting victims. Additionally, they were asked to describe, in their own words, the measures they believe are relevant in combating hate speech.

At the beginning a definition of hate speech, based on the Council of Europe's Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16[21], was provided to minimise the likelihood of individuals who have not been victims of hate speech filling out the questionnaire, thereby ensuring a correct sample. The questionnaire can be found in Annex 1.

The survey initially gathered perspectives from 215 participants. However, after filtering the data, it was narrowed down to 202 participants who had been directly exposed to hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite starting with a clear definition of hate speech, many participants identified themselves as victims of hate speech, even when their experiences involved insults, harassment, or other forms of mistreatment nor defined as hate speech. This highlights a broader issue: people still lack sufficient understanding of what constitutes hate speech.

Before its launch, the questionnaire underwent a pilot testing phase to identify any technical issues or errors. Feedback was solicited from a small group of participants to assess their experience and make any necessary improvements before making it available to a wider audience.

---

21   Recommendation CM/Rec(2022)16[1]of the Committee of Ministers to member States on combating hate speech *(Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 20 May 2022 at the 132nd Session of the Committee of Ministers).* https://search.coe.int/cm/Pages/result_details.aspx?ObjectId=0900001680a67955#_ftn1

The questionnaire was disseminated across social networks and various communities and was actively promoted to solicit responses. A link and QR code for the questionnaire were available online and distributed through several community networks and non-governmental organisations. The objective was to involve prospective participants from various regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, encompassing diverse ethnicities, religions, genders, and other identity traits.

The survey questions were carefully crafted, and this was recognised by participants who commented that the survey captured a range of problems and challenges experienced by victims. In addition, a number of participants expressed the belief that this research could be potentially useful in highlighting the range of consequences for the victims of hate speech and for society as a whole.

Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were given the option to participate in an in-person interview. If they agreed, interviews were conducted either in person or via Zoom. Participants were not required to provide any personal details, and anonymity was guaranteed.

4. Key findings on the consequences of hate speech

Men represented 38% of survey respondents and 62% were women. 64% of participants were living in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 30% in Republika Srpska, 2% in the Brčko District, and 4% indicated "other". The education levels of participants were as follows: 46% had a university-level education, 25% had postgraduate degrees, 4% were students, 24% had a high school education and 1% primary education only.

Among them, 57% were permanently employed, 21% were temporarily employed, 14% were unemployed, and 8% were retired. Participants worked in the private sector (24%), public institutions (26%), the non-governmental sector (19%), media (5%), the education sector (5%), and other sectors (20%). In the "other" category, participants either specified a type of industry or repeated what was already indicated in the provided option.

As indicated in Chart 1, the majority of participants were between the ages of 25 and 54.

Chart 1: Age

Age	Percentage
65 +	5%
55-64	18%
45-54	23%
35-44	27%
25-34	19%
18-24	8%
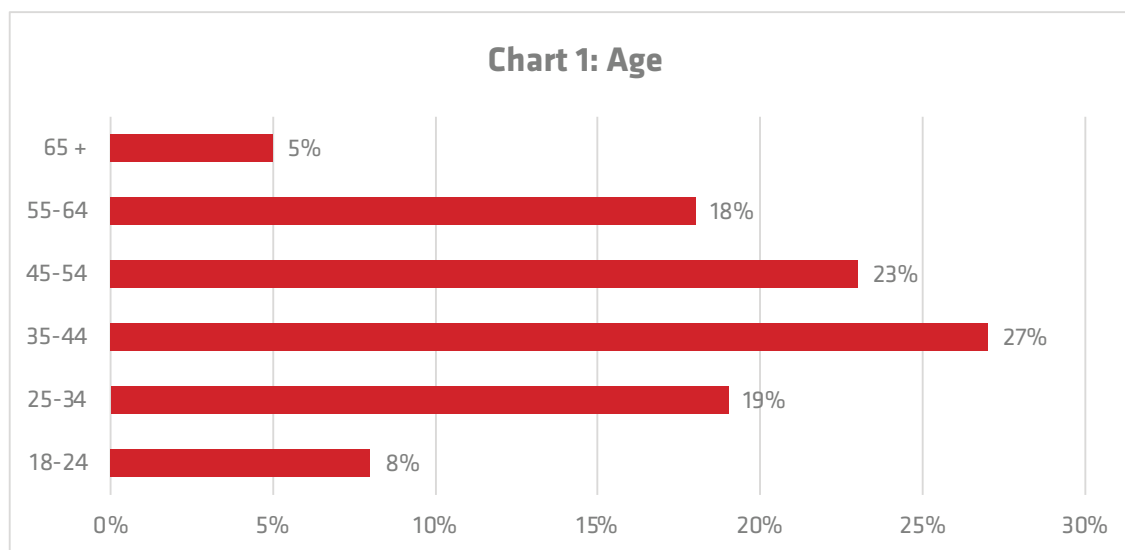
Based on the data obtained, the findings are combined to create a narrative around six key categories:

▶ **Experiences of Hate Speech:** How participants have been exposed to hate speech, including the grounds for and forms of hate speech encountered.
▶ **Responses to Hate Speech:** Personal responses and strategies, as well as institutional responses if hate speech was reported or if a victim sought some form of support.
▶ **Personal Consequences:** Effects on mental health, family relations, and professional satisfaction.
▶ **Community and Societal Consequences:** How hate speech affects communities and society as a whole.
▶ **Support Mechanisms and Resilience:** The types of support participants received and how they find the strength to cope with hate speech and engage in prevention efforts.
▶ **Opinions on Combating Hate Speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Perspectives on how hate speech is addressed at both the institutional and societal levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

To ensure coherence, the interview insights are integrated with survey data rather than being presented in separate chapters.

4.1. Experiences of hate speech

Chart 2: Which group you identify with?

Group	Percentage
Other	15%
Displaced person	7%
Refugee	6%
Migrant	4%
Person with disability	5%
Language minority	7%
Eldarly person	5%
Women	45%
LGBTI community	7%
Religious minority	30%
Racial minority	5%
Ethnic minority	40%
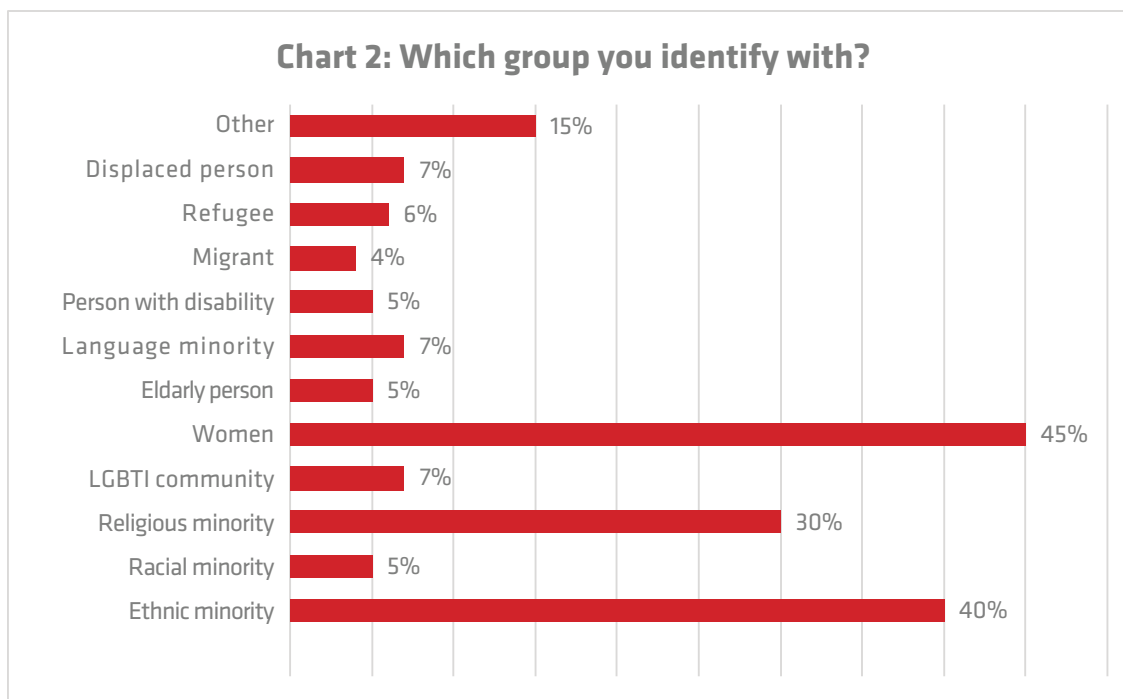
From the above chart, it was evident that many people identified with multiple groups commonly exposed to hate speech. The most frequently identified categories were women, ethnic minorities, and religious minorities. The diversity of identities represented implied that hate speech and discrimination could not be understood through a single lens. Intersectionality—the ways in which multiple aspects of identity (such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and disability) overlapped and interacted—appeared to be significant.

When asked about the grounds on which they experienced hate speech, survey participants provided responses as illustrated in Chart 3. The most frequent grounds for hate speech were national/ethnic identity, religion, and gender/sex. The most significant ground for hate speech reported by participants was their national or ethnic identity, with 63% of respondents indicating this as a basis for hate speech. This high percentage underscored the prevalence of ethnically or nationally motivated hate speech, suggesting that xenophobia, racism, and ethnic discrimination were pressing issues. In societies where ethnic diversity was present, this could have pointed to deep-rooted tensions, historical grievances, or current societal divisions. At times, individuals were targeted due to multiple identity traits simultaneously, or encountered hate speech on different occasions for different aspects of their identity.

Chart 3: Grounds for hate speech

Ground	Percentage
Other	14%
None of the above	5%
Sexual orientation	7%
Gender identity	7%
Gender/Sex	31%
Disability	7%
Age	10%
Religion	37%
Language	14%
Race	3%
National/ethnic identity	63%
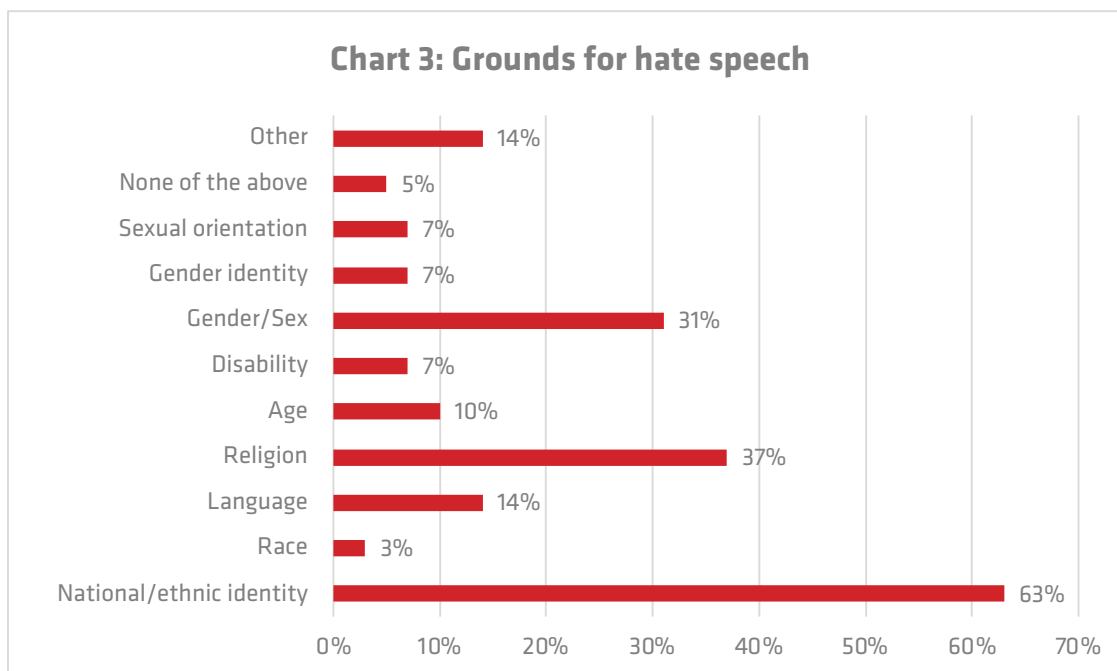
The experiences of hate captured in the in-person interviews were also highly diverse. For example, in returnee communities such as Prijedor, the most prevalent hate speech stemmed from prejudices related to ethnicity and religion. Anti-corruption advocates and peace activists, on the other hand, believed that they were targeted for exposing corruption and criticising politicians; however, the hate was often directed at their protected characteristics, such as their religion, ethnicity,

or gender. LGBTI activists faced both hate crimes and hate speech in their local communities and online, due to their belonging to the LGBTI community or their public support for LGBTI rights. A Roma activist interviewed shared his experiences of enduring hate speech during his school years.
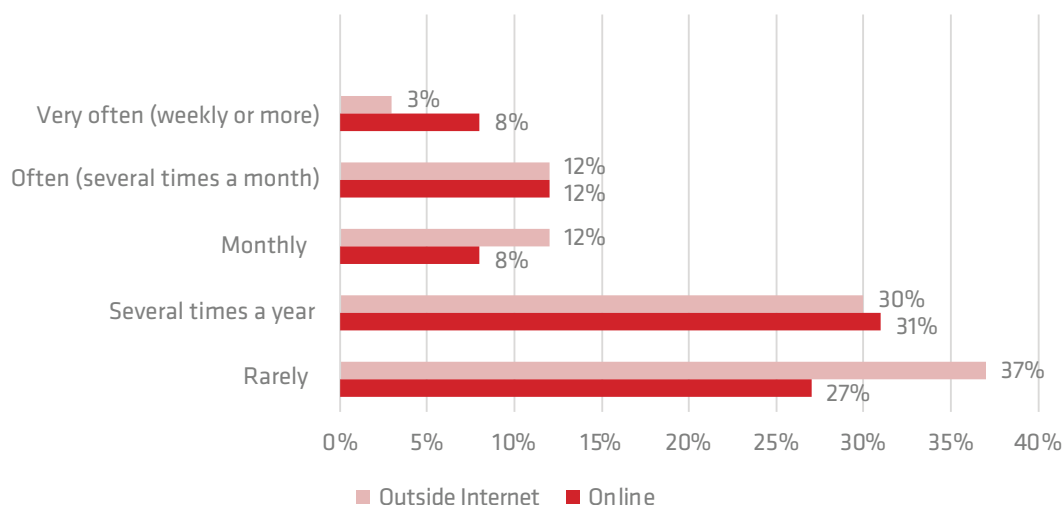
Both the interviews and survey revealed that an individual target of hate speech does not necessarily need to share the same characteristics as a marginalised or disadvantaged community but must have some connection to that community. For instance, a female humanitarian activist who worked tirelessly to help migrants in the Una-Sana Canton was subjected to hate speech over a significant time period, and subsequently to a hate crime. Similarly, a female media editor was subjected to severe hate speech and a hate crime, resulting in a physical attack, even though she does not share the identity characteristics of the LGBTI group towards whom the hate was primarily directed. Another female activist reported frequently being targeted in online attacks for highlighting injustices faced by people with disabilities or supporting the LGBTI movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, even though these are not her own identity characteristics. She also experienced gender-related hate for speaking out about gender inequality in BiH.

Survey participants were asked to indicate how often they have been exposed to hate speech both online and offline. As shown in Chart 4 below, experiences of hate speech are a frequent occurrence. The chart shows a trend in which exposure to hate speech is sometimes more frequent online compared to offline, particularly in the category "Very often". This is reflective of a broader phenomenon where the anonymity and reach of the internet can foster environments conducive to hate speech. A substantial number of respondents report experiencing hate speech outside the internet as well. This indicates that hate speech remains a societal issue not confined to the digital realm but prevalent in everyday physical environments. Participants reported experiencing it in public spaces, workplaces, schools, media portals, social media, public transport, as well as on the street, in private messages, at stadiums, sporting events, and at gatherings with national, cultural, and religious content.

Subjects of in-person interviews revealed that hate speech often occurred in relation to certain events. For instance, LGBTI activists from Sarajevo experienced it most frequently during BiH Pride March preparations and other moments when LGBTI visibility increases in the media. An NGO activist from Tuzla spoke about receiving the greatest amount of hate after criticising the street names in Bosnia and Herzegovina by pointing out that less than 3% are named after women. For members of the Jewish community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, hate speech was triggered by the events of the October 7th, 2023, attack in Israel, and Israel's subsequent response in Gaza.

Chart 4: Online and offline hate speech exposure

Category	Outside Internet	Online
Very often (weekly or more)	3%	8%
Often (several times a month)	12%	12%
Monthly	12%	8%
Several times a year	30%	31%
Rarely	37%	27%

A question related to the forms of hate speech (Chart 5) shows that the most frequent expressions of hate come through spoken or written words. However, survey participants also noted hate speech in pictures, signs, symbols, music, live performances, and videos. The use of pictures in hate speech can be particularly impactful, as visual content often evokes strong emotional responses and can be shared widely online. Furthermore, the use of symbols is significant because they often carry historical and cultural connotations that can provoke fear and intimidation or reinforce hateful ideologies.

Chart 5: A form of hate speech

Form	Percentage
Videos	17%
Performances	3%
Music	11%
Simbols	23%
Signs	16%
Pictures	27%
Spoken words	79%
Written words	68%
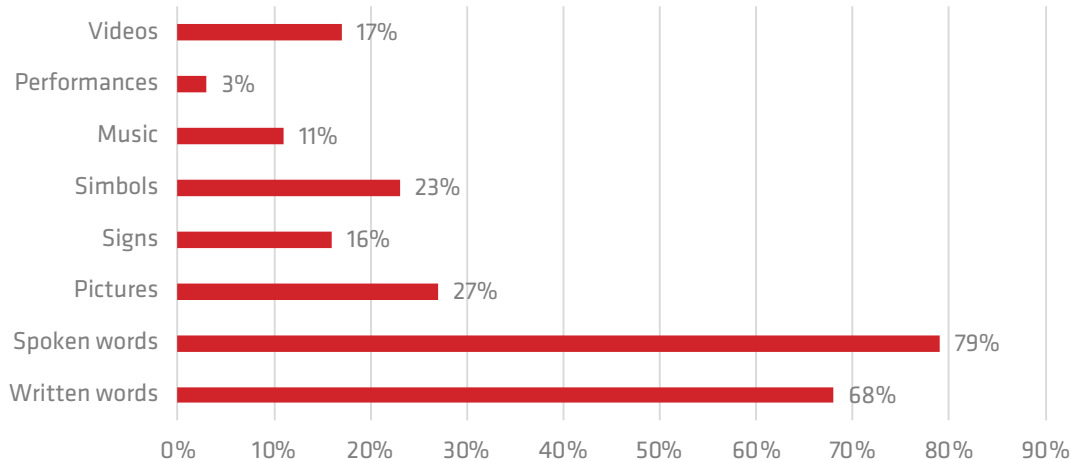
In the open-ended online survey questions, participants shared the contents of hate speech and their experiences of being subjected to derogatory names, insults, and offensive remarks about their religious affiliation, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender. Some of these comments included threats and were aimed at intimidation and exclusion. A swastika drawn on the building where she lives was a stark example provided by a woman from the Jewish community.

A wide range of responses regarding content were noted in the comments section of the survey, such as:

▸ 'Look at yourself, how you look (overweight, without makeup), who would want to sleep with you like that?'; 'Menstruation is unnatural, women are dirty because they have it, so don't act like you're better than me (a man) because you're not,'; 'I have nothing to talk about with you; women are lacking in intelligence and lacking in faith.'
▸ Being called derogatory names (e.g., 'balija'), threats in other environments where another ethnic community predominates, etc.
▸ I was told I am a 'genocidal'.
▸ That I am a 'četnikuša' (a derogatory term for Serbs).
▸ Cursing the 'Chetnik mother,' saying that my family and I should return to Republika Srpska even though we never lived there. When they learned about my disability, which is physical and not mental, they started calling me crazy and retarded, especially since I have a defect in pronouncing the letter 'r' correctly.
▸ Glorification of convicted war criminals.
▸ Hatred towards atheists.

In the in-person interviews, a number of participants shared their experiences of hate speech. One participant from the Jewish community described how he was subjected to intense hate speech and even death threats after October 7, 2023. He had expressed solidarity with the victims of the attack in Israel, which led to terrible reactions. He received a barrage of aggression on social media, with threats directed at both him and his family. While many of the threats came from fake profiles or bots, some were from real accounts, with individuals openly using their real names, surnames, and pictures.

A woman from Bihać, an activist who provided aid to people on the move during the humanitarian and security crisis of 2017 and 2018, became the target of severe gendered hate speech and threats. The hostile atmosphere created by this hate speech eventually escalated into physical violence when two individuals assaulted her. This incident illustrates how hate speech is not confined to words; it can have dangerous consequences. By dehumanising individuals or groups, hate speech can foster an environment where violence becomes more acceptable.

An activist involved in organising the Pride March in Bosnia and Herzegovina was attacked in Banja Luka in March 2023. She and her colleagues had planned a film screening and social gathering, but the event was interrupted by hooligans who physically assaulted them, identifying them as part of the LGBTI community. This attack occurred after prominent politicians in Republika Srpska publicly made derogatory comments about LGBTI people, which, in her view, fuelled the aggression.

A female student and feminist active on social media shared her personal experience with hate speech, which mainly occurred online. She described the hostile environment she faced:

> *"I have had several experiences with hate speech, fortunately always on a purely discursive level, most often through social media, because those individuals who are 'aggressive' rarely have the courage to say it to someone's face. However, on social media, I frequently received threats in comments or direct messages. These threats, which were primarily gender-based, ranged from offensive names to discussions of what should be done to me, claims that someone would find me and harm me, to explicit threats of sexualised violence. There was a bit of everything."*

Regarding the content of hate speech, a female LGBTI activist proposed her own classification of the broad spectrum of hateful and inappropriate harassing content she regularly receives:

- *Direct Threats: Threats to my life, being told that they know where I live, and warnings to watch which streets I walk on.*
- *Harassment: Messages like "Hey, can you explain something to me?" or "Hey, lesbian, I want to ask you something", or sexualised comments about wanting a third person in their relationship.*
- *Sexual Nature and Connotations: Men send pictures and messages saying they want to have sex with me.*

About 90% to 95% of these messages come from men, and most of them who contact me on my social media or send me private messages use fake profiles, though about 10% come from real profiles. When women write, it is more about harassment, such as "You are a plague on this world." I haven't received direct threats from women.

This account illustrates the deeply gendered and sexualised nature of hate speech and harassment directed at female LGBTI activists. It demonstrates how hate speech intersects with gender, sexuality, and identity, revealing underlying misogyny and homophobia. Furthermore, this account reveals the pervasive and multifaceted nature of hate speech that LGBTI activists face, demonstrating that such speech is not only about words but about power, control, and the intent to silence or harm.

The different forms of aggression, whether subtle or overt, all contribute to a hostile environment that can limit personal freedom and safety.

One female activist from Tuzla told us that comments such as "only ugly women engage in activism" are common. While no one ever threatened to kill her, they suggested she should do it herself just because she believes women deserve to have streets named after them. Subsequently, there were comments telling her to go back to the kitchen, calling her pathetic, and making the classic accusation of her being a foreign mercenary. One profile exclusively directs hate speech at every video she posts.

The comments suggesting she should "kill herself" for her beliefs represents a particularly harmful form of hate speech, as they encourage self-harm and can have severe psychological impacts on the victim. The suggestion that she should end her life merely for advocating that women deserve the recognition of having streets named after them reveals how extreme and irrational the backlash against even moderate feminist ideas can be. It showcases the extent of hostility toward women advocating for gender equality.

When asked in a survey if they knew the person who expressed the hate speech, participants' responses varied. They included mentions of different politicians, colleagues, neighbours, acquaintances, and in a few cases, police officers, doctors, media personnel, and others. About half of the respondents in the survey indicated that the hate speech came from fake profiles or real profiles of people they do not know. Responses given in interviews mostly indicated that hate speech came from people they did not know, although several did mention acquaintances or less known classmates from their school days. Roma activists recalled being exposed to discrimination and hate speech in school by some teachers. A Jewish woman who experienced hate in her neighbourhood discovered, with the help of the police, that the perpetrators were her neighbours, who were known for disorderly behaviour.

An LGBTI activist analysed the profiles of individuals who spread hate online, observing that they are often middle-aged and younger men. Organised comments on social networks have led to serious backlash, particularly on Instagram, where young people aged 15-25 are active. She argues that it is these young men, who spend their lives online and have hatred instilled in them, who are often responsible for spreading hate speech. In her experience, over the last year she has noted a significant campaign of hate on Instagram, while Facebook–used more by older people–remained quiet. This suggests that younger people are more likely to spread hate. She added that the presence of many bots amplifies this issue, especially during elections when political hate increases, making it clear which political faction is behind it.

4.2. Responses to hate speech

Participants' reactions to hate speech varied, influenced by their perception of the situation, knowledge about the legal system, and their ability to garner support. In returnee communities, the fear of repercussions, a perceived lack of impartiality within the criminal justice system, and feelings of marginalisation often lead victims to refrain from taking remedial action. On the other hand, activists are more inclined to report and seek justice, but the outcomes are frequently unsatisfactory, as highlighted in the subsequent sections of the report. Overall the responses encompassed fear, distrust in institutions, inadequate reactions from institution employees, and, ultimately, the absence or perceived leniency of penalties.

Chart 6, "Responses to hate speech", shows that the most common reaction among participants is to ignore the hate speech, followed by blocking or stopping following the perpetrator, and reporting the incident to authorities. While a significant number seek support from friends, family, or professionals, some also change their usual routes, engage in self-help activities, or stop using the internet platform where the hate speech occurred. This suggests that while many participants take steps to protect themselves, such as blocking perpetrators or reporting incidents, there is also a significant reliance on passive responses like ignoring the hate speech, reflecting either a lack of confidence in formal recourse or a preference for avoiding conflict.

Chart 6: Responses to hate speech

Response	Percentage
Ignored hate speech	43%
Engaged in self-help activities	13%
Sought support from friends, family, or professionals	27%
Reported the incident to the authorities	28%
Blocked or stopped following the perpetrator	37%
Changed my usual route	15%
Stopped using that internet platform	13%
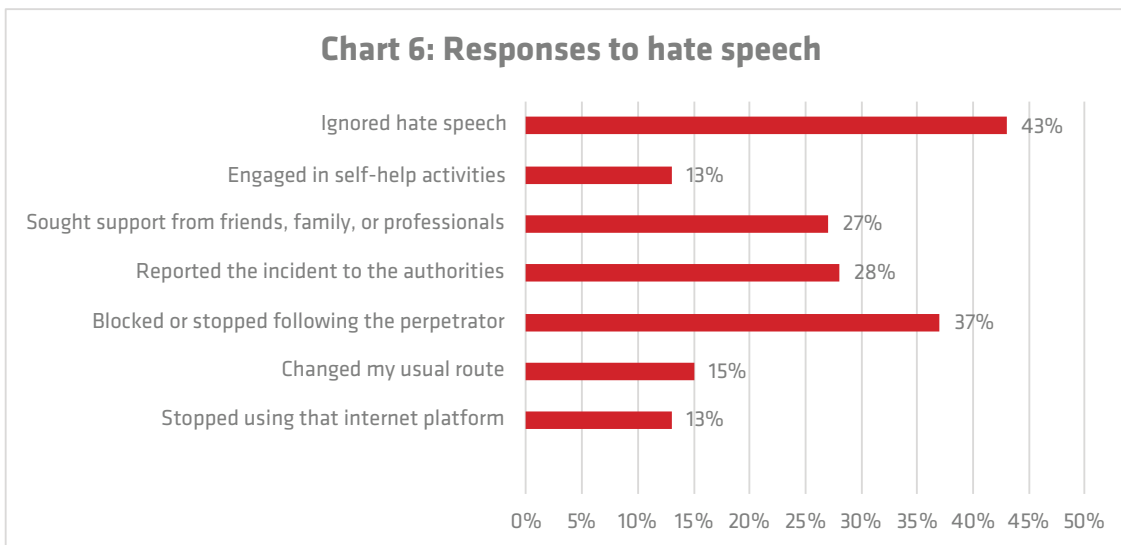
The reluctance to report incidents stems, according to some participants, from apprehension regarding possible consequences and, in some instances, a perceived connection between the police and authorities and those being reported. Some participants shared that they abstain from reporting to the police due to prior negative experiences which eroded their trust in institutions. Citizens may struggle to identify where they should report to, and even when they do, encounters in which

police personnel discourage and humiliate them are not uncommon. In cases of online hate speech, participants reported that accountability and investigation are lacking, especially when dealing with anonymous profiles on social media platforms, as shared by those who reported incidents to the police.

As already indicated in Chart 6, many victims seek help from family or friends. Chart 7 further explores the most frequent sources of support. The majority of respondents said they shared their experiences or confided in someone, usually a friend, family member, spouse, colleague, or, to a lesser extent, a superior. This suggests that participants primarily turn to their close social networks for emotional support and advice after experiencing distressing incidents such as hate speech. Friends and family are seen as trusted and reliable sources of comfort and understanding, indicating the importance of personal relationships in coping with the psychological impact of hate speech.

Chart 7: Who did you confide in?

Category	Percentage
I kept it to myself	16%
Superior	19%
Colleague	38%
Friend	58%
Spouse or partner	35%
Family member	50%
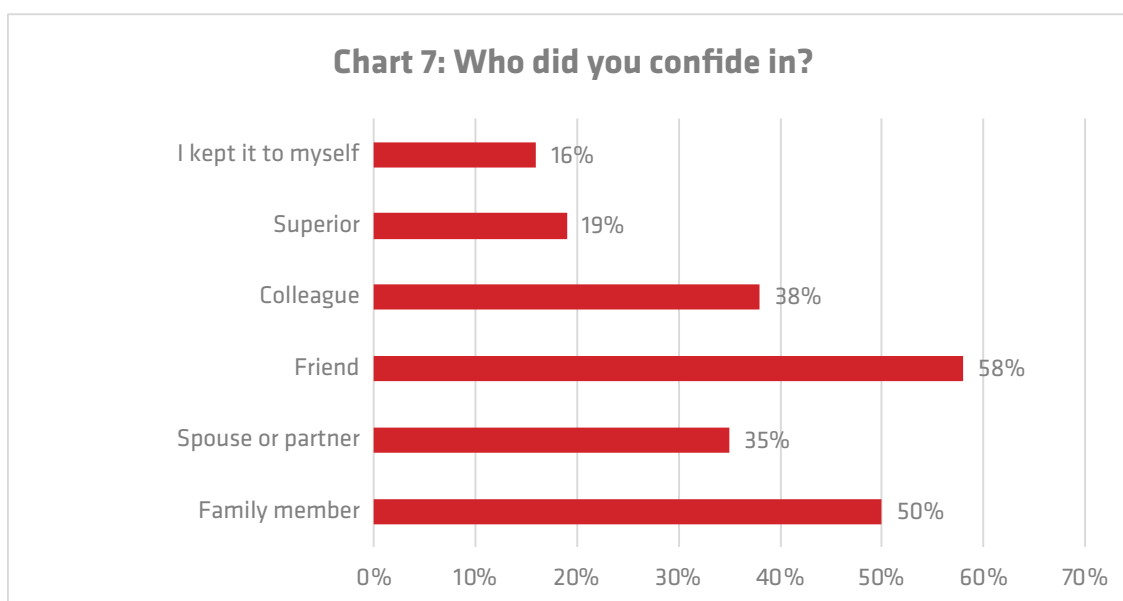
That said, 16% of participants chose to keep their experiences to themselves. One student, a feminist activist, explained why she decided not to share her experiences with others:

> *"I haven't reported it because I don't expect anything at the institutional level. As for my family and friends, I try not to talk to people about it because they would be worried. For example, I've never had the heart to tell my parents, "this happened to me" or, "I received this kind of threat", because in the end, as much as it frustrates me personally because I know it's wrong, I know it would frustrate them even more. My closest friends, and everyone else, would all be collectively frustrated and concerned."*

It also comes as a surprise that less than half of those exposed to hate speech know their rights, as presented in Chart 8. This points to a significant gap in knowledge or understanding regarding what protection or recourse is available to them under the law.

Chart 8: Knowledge about the rights

Category	Percentage
I never thought about this	7%
I don't know my rights	18%
Not sure of my rights	40%
I fully know my rights	35%
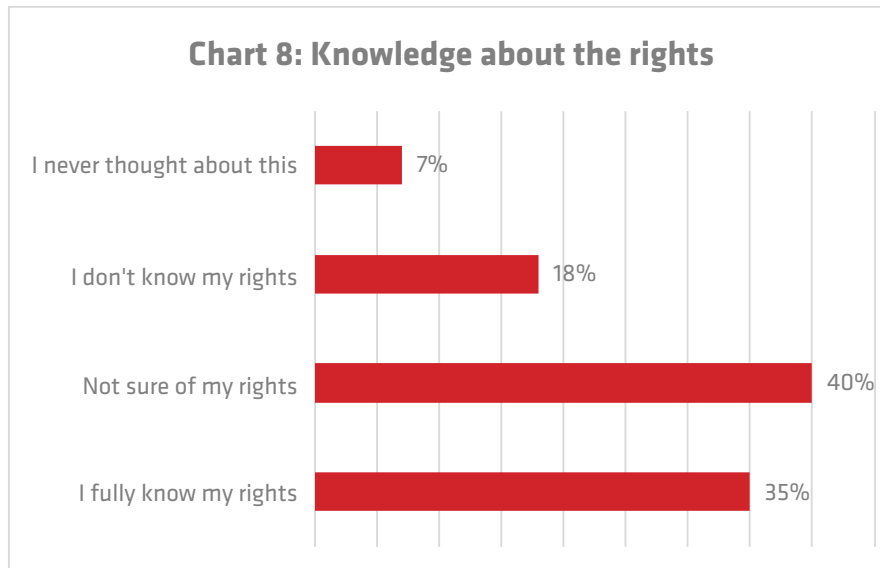
Those who reported hate speech to institutions expressed varying levels of satisfaction with the outcomes. The majority of participants (54%) being "Not satisfied at all" suggests systemic issues with the effectiveness of how hate speech is addressed by the institutions responsible. Whether it is due to lack of enforcement, inadequate resources, poor follow-up, or dismissive attitudes, this dissatisfaction indicates a pressing need for improvement. If a majority of people reporting hate speech are not satisfied with the outcomes, it could discourage them and others from reporting future incidents. This disengagement can lead to a cycle where hate speech goes unchecked, perpetuating a hostile environment. The levels of satisfaction with reporting are illustrated in Chart 9:

Chart 9: Level of satisfaction with reporting outcome

Level	Percentage
Extremely satisfied	1%
Very satisfied	4%
Moderately satisfied	24%
Slightly satisfied	17%
Not satisfied at all	54%
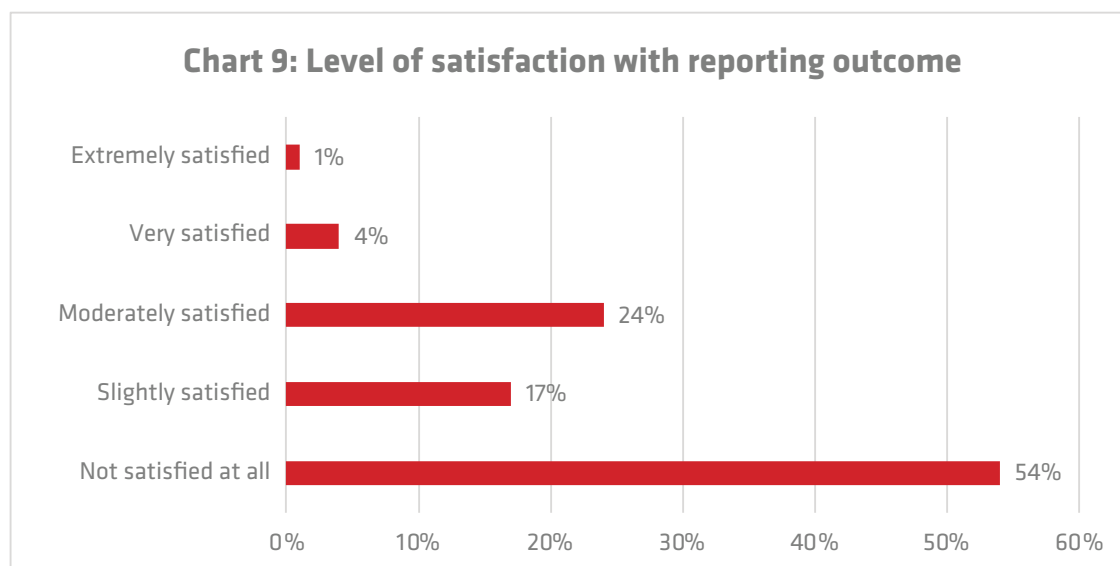
Interviewees also expressed dissatisfaction with the police and prosecution's response to reports of hate speech, including to what they perceived to be personal threats.

A participant from the Jewish community shared what happened in Zenica after reporting hate speech and threats, describing how *'the police advised them not to gather, which sent a bad message and caused people to become very worried. "How is it,"* he commented, *"that the police cannot guarantee the safety of about 15 Jews in one city?"*

Participants viewed this kind of police response as problematic because it essentially places the burden of safety on the victimised community rather than addressing the root cause of the threat or taking concrete steps to ensure their protection. The police advice not to gather implies an inability or unwillingness to protect the community, which can be seen as a failure to uphold their duty to provide safety and security for all citizens.

A different experience with law enforcement was reported by a woman from the Jewish community in Sarajevo: "*A few months ago, a swastika was drawn on the apartment I moved into. Everyone knew it was the apartment of the Jewish community. I became afraid. The police did an excellent job; they were humane and professional in their conversations.*" This contrasting experience highlighted a positive interaction that helped reduce fear and build trust.

Participants in this research emphasised that the way authorities respond to victims plays a critical role in shaping the community's sense of safety and their confidence in law enforcement.

LGBTI activists in Sarajevo frequently report unsatisfactory experiences with law enforcement when addressing hate incidents. One activist shared that despite consistently reporting threats over the years, most cases are simply recorded with no follow-up. In one instance it took a year for the police to respond to a serious threat, and in other recent cases, no feedback has been provided. The activist noted that, at one point, they had to involve a lawyer to request information under the Freedom of Information Act to learn that minimal action had been taken.

This participant and many others shared their frustration over a recurring pattern of inaction or minimal effort by law enforcement when dealing with reported cases of hate speech and threats. Many explained that reports are frequently dismissed or not taken seriously, leaving them feeling that reporting is pointless. Furthermore, the absence of follow-up communication or updates from authorities underscores a lack of transparency and accountability. This lack of information on any actions being taken leaves victims feeling ignored, heightening their insecurity and eroding trust in the police.

A disability activist and lawyer from Banja Luka has been targeted multiple times on social media by politicians from Republika Srpska due to her publicly voiced views. When reporting hate speech, she stated that the prosecutor assigned to her case treated other civil activists similarly, neglecting to find grounds for prosecution. A male activist and returnee from Prijedor stated that he had been exposed to numerous hate incidents and found an unsatisfactory response upon reporting them. As a result, he has lost confidence that reporting hate speech will lead to any adequate response.

Participants expressed frustration with the police's handling of threats and hate speech from fake profiles, often being told that nothing can be done. One activist noted that the police only take direct threats seriously, overlooking the broader context of online hate. Comments like, "this is all sick, I want to eradicate it" are dismissed as indirect, while only explicit threats like "I'm coming to kill you" are acted upon. The activist emphasised that even veiled threats, such as "I have a litre of gasoline and a lighter, see you soon", are dangerous. Participants argued that the police and prosecutors must better understand how hate and threats are often subtly packaged and take these cases seriously. They also argued that lack of investigation of online hate speech reflects a lack of capacity, resources, or willingness on the part of the police to investigate digital threats thoroughly. They think that the use of fake profiles should not be a reason for inaction; rather, it should prompt the use of digital forensic techniques to trace perpetrators and hold them accountable.

These examples highlight a widespread disappointment and loss of trust in the system, with many respondents choosing not to report incidents, as discussed earlier, due to scepticism about institutional processes. This trend aligns with

experiences across the EU, where evidence from the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) reveals alarming levels of underreported bias-motivated violence and harassment against ethnic minorities, immigrants, LGBTI individuals, Muslims, and Jews. Common reasons for not reporting include belief that nothing will change, bureaucratic and time-consuming procedures, and a lack of trust in the police. This underreporting denies victims access to protection, support, and justice, allowing perpetrators to act with impunity. Addressing this issue requires not only encouraging victims to come forward but also improving national hate crime recording and data collection systems to ensure effective identification and documentation of these crimes.[22]

Disappointment with systemic responses and the lack of institutional support often leads victims to take their own measures to prevent hate speech or protect themselves. These measures can include self-censorship, limiting public visibility or engagement, creating private support networks, using digital tools to block or report hate speech, or engaging in community awareness campaigns to educate others about the impacts of hate speech. A youth activist from Tuzla described how, at times, they collectively decide to take a break from actively addressing certain issues to avoid provoking hate. This young woman also shared how she and her colleagues have tried engaging with those who voice hateful comments, attempting to communicate and present arguments that challenge their views. Unfortunately, this strategy usually does not yield any results.

4.3. Personal consequences of hate speech

The analysis of survey responses related to the psychological and emotional con-sequences of hate speech reveals results that show a lasting and profound impact on victims, their relationships, and the environments they live in. Participants predomi-nantly reported experiencing stress, anger, fear, and depression as psychological and emotional consequences of hate speech. They were asked to indicate the emotions they felt, and Chart 10 clearly shows that anger is the most dominant, followed by stress, anxiety, and fear. This finding is consistent with research from other contexts, which also highlights anger as a common emotional response among victims of hate speech and hate violence. Various studies have explored the emotional and behav-ioural consequences of such victimisation, offering significant insights into how an-ger manifests in these situations.[23]
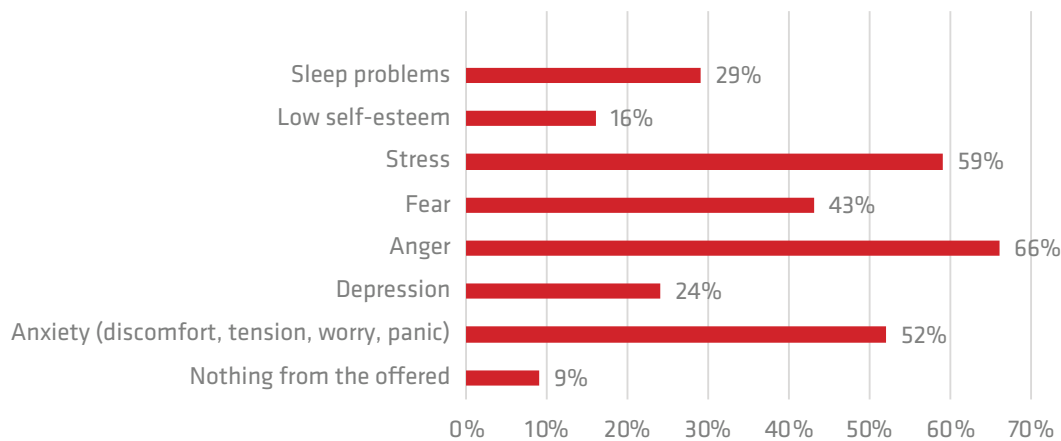
22 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2021). Encouraging hate crime reporting: The role of law enforcement and other authorities. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2021-hate-crime-reporting_en.pdf
23 Barnes, A., & Ephross, P. H. (1994). The impact of hate violence on victims: Emotional and behavioral responses to attacks. Social Work, 39(3), 247-251.

Anger, as an emotional response to hate speech, often stems from a sense of injustice and powerlessness, while fear and anxiety arise as reactions to the perception of threat and insecurity. Stress, which many participants reported, is often a consequence of continuous exposure to a hostile and insecure environment, while depression can result from a prolonged sense of isolation and marginalization.

These emotional responses not only negatively impact the mental health of victims but can also strain their relationships with loved ones and have further adverse effects.

Chart 10: Psychological and emotional consequences of hate speech

Category	Percentage
Sleep problems	29%
Low self-esteem	16%
Stress	59%
Fear	43%
Anger	66%
Depression	24%
Anxiety (discomfort, tension, worry, panic)	52%
Nothing from the offered	9%

Anger emerges as a dominant emotional response in situations involving hate speech for several reasons. Firstly, anger often stems from the deep sense of injustice that victims feel when they are targeted based on their identity, beliefs, or characteristics. This emotion is a natural reaction to the violation of personal dignity and the unfairness of being singled out or attacked for something intrinsic to one's identity.[24]

Secondly, anger can be a response to the perceived powerlessness that victims experience in these situations. When individuals are subjected to hate speech, they often feel vulnerable and exposed, with limited recourse to defend themselves or seek justice. This sense of helplessness can intensify feelings of anger, as it reflects frustration over a lack of control and inability to prevent or stop the harm being inflicted. Moreover, anger can also be a defensive emotion, serving as a psychological mechanism to cope with the fear and anxiety[25] provoked by hate speech. Instead of

---

24   Zembylas, M. (2023). Political anger, affective injustice, and civic education. Journal of Philosophy of Education, 57(6), 1176–1192.
25   Seltzer, L. F. (2008, July 11). What your anger may be hiding: Reflections on the most seductive—and addictive—of human emotions. *Evolution of the Self*. Psychology Today. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/evolution-the-self/200807/what-your-anger-may-be-hiding

succumbing to fear, victims might channel their emotional energy into anger as a way to reclaim some sense of power and agency in the face of aggression.

Lastly, the recurrence of hate speech and the absence of adequate societal or institutional responses can exacerbate this anger. When victims perceive that their suffering is ignored or that perpetrators are not held accountable, their anger can become more entrenched, reflecting both their personal pain and a broader disillusionment with the systems that fail to protect them. This cumulative effect of repeated victimisation and systemic neglect further explains why anger often becomes the most pronounced emotion in these contexts.

Fear was reported by 43% of survey participants. This pervasive sense of fear is intensified by the belief that perpetrators of hate speech face no repercussions and are free to continue their harassment unchecked. These findings underscore the profound and far-reaching consequences of hate speech for those subjected to it, highlighting its severe impact on both personal and professional aspects of their lives.

In the responses to open-ended questions, participants expressed being afraid of their helplessness and the possibility of needing to physically defend themselves. Fear of social isolation, feelings of inferiority, and a sense of helplessness are common, and a decreased desire to fight against injustice is evident. One participant stated that, given the experience of war in BiH, anyone would fear hate speech. Several participants said it is not so much fear they feel anymore, but rather an inability to endure the same experience again, as well as concern for their loved ones.

Despite these fears, one participant reported feeling both sadness and strength, and a motivation to endure until retirement. Another participant expressed feeling that his existence and statehood were being denied. Frequent feelings of disappointment and a lack of security, deepens the conflict, according to several participants. Another participant said that he does not care anymore because he left Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A section in the survey asking participants to write how they felt about the hate speech they experienced shows how much of an emotional and psychological toll hate speech can have. Altogether 200 participants provided their responses, with these ranging between: *humiliated, scared, bad, distraught, very bad and hurt, traumatised, unprotected, frozen, sad, disappointed, helpless, awful, worried, angry, hard to describe, vulnerable, discriminated against, disgusting, like I don't belong to this environment, worthless, ostracised, lonely.* Several longer responses provided deeper insight into the feelings of the participants who were exposed to hate speech:
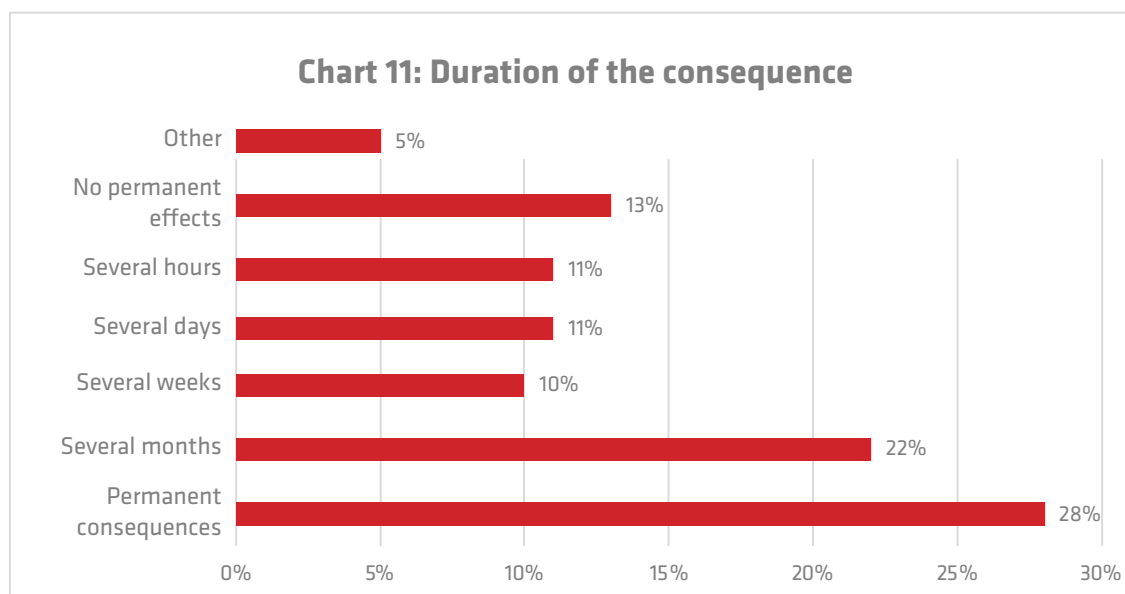
- "At first it was not pleasant at all, but later I unfortunately got used to it, and the worst part is that everyone knew about it, but no one wanted to protect me."
- "Honestly disappointed that there is so much hatred between people."
- "How would a 9-year-old child feel? Sad. I did not know the difference between Serbs, Croats, or Muslims; I was not raised that way."
- "I did not eat or sleep for days; I was stressed."
- "It was unpleasant, but I better understood the consequences of such situations."
- "How could one feel then? Terrible. War traumas flashed back (I was in Sarajevo for the whole war); at that moment, I was in Lukavica and called a taxi...I left without looking back. I never contacted that person again, although they tried to reach me several times."
- "I felt terrible because the only division I recognise is between good and bad people. I love my Bosnia and Herzegovina and want to feel free to say which ethnic group I belong to without nasty looks. I was born during the war and am not guilty of the actions of a group of people of the same ethnicity who did evil to others in my country. NOT IN MY NAME!"
- "Pretty bad, upset for days, professionally demotivated, and sometimes completely broken. I was afraid because I am a single mother and have no family in the city where I live."
- "At first, I was in shock and disbelief, but later I felt fear, not so much for my safety, but because of the amount of hatred that people feel."
- "Stressed, mentally unwell, with absolute distrust in the police, prosecutor's office, courts, feeling pretty helpless and hopeless, with a great deal of fear for my safety and my family's safety, concerned about my livelihood."
- "I didn't feel bad at all because if you are a stable and normal person, hate speech and any word cannot harm you."
- "Pretty indifferent no matter how frequent it was because I go by the belief that in this small town where everyone knows who is who and what they are like, and I can walk anywhere and walk the streets with my head held high without shame."
- "Humiliated. Attacked. Devalued. Later depressed until I finally became physically ill."
- "Defeated because I believed that people in leadership positions must have zero tolerance for it, both because of professional ethics and human ethics."
- "I experienced stress, and now I am being treated for PTSD."
- "Disappointed and offended. Discouraged and depressed."

The responses reveal profound and multifaceted impacts of hate speech on individuals, affecting both their mental and emotional well-being and their overall quality of life. Many respondents describe an initial shock or disbelief, followed by a sense of helplessness and a loss of trust in societal systems meant to protect

them. The normalisation of such abuse, as some individuals reported becoming accustomed to it, underscores a distressing acceptance of hostility as a part of daily life. For some, the experience reawakened traumatic memories, such as war-related flashbacks, exacerbating their suffering. Others expressed a profound disappointment in humanity, a loss of faith in social cohesion, and an enduring sense of alienation and vulnerability.

Even among those who managed to detach emotionally or maintain resilience, the underlying acknowledgment of a pervasive atmosphere of hate and ignorance points to a broader societal malaise. The frequent mention of stress, anxiety, and professional demotivation illustrates how hate speech can permeate every aspect of life, eroding both personal dignity and social trust. In some cases, this erosion was so severe that it led to long-term psychological conditions, such as PTSD, highlighting the enduring and debilitating effects of such targeted hostility.

Chart 11 shows that the impact of hate speech varies widely among individuals, from no lasting effects to consequences that last for weeks. This variability could depend on several factors, including personal resilience, the severity of the hate speech, social support networks, and prior experiences with discrimination or trauma. The chart also illustrates the enduring consequences of hate speech, revealing that a staggering 28% of respondents reported experiencing permanent effects from the hate speech they endured.

Chart 11: Duration of the consequence

Category	Value
Other	5%
No permanent effects	13%
Several hours	11%
Several days	11%
Several weeks	10%
Several months	22%
Permanent consequences	28%

The consequences of hate speech were also vividly expressed during the interviews when participants spoke about the severe stress caused by hate speech. The majority reported symptoms of anxiety, panic, and persistent thoughts about what was written, especially in the early stages of experiencing hate speech. A

woman from the Jewish community shared how hate speech triggered feelings of vulnerability, but she chose to cope with it on her own:

> *"I didn't have psychological support, but I prefer to go through my experiences on my own. I previously had an anxiety disorder and managed to heal it by myself. This situation also affected my family. My parents are elderly, so I avoided telling them. It deeply affected my sister, because it evoked our war traumas when we lost our sister."*

Another participant from the Jewish community stated that hate speech affected him and his family on many different levels. His autoimmune medical condition was triggered by severe stress, which required medical attention. The situation had a particularly negative impact on his wife because she had to stop and then reduce her online work, as she was also exposed to hate speech there. She continued to work only with a small circle of people she knows, which negatively affected their income.

An LGBTI interviewee mentioned that her reaction varies, depending on the type of messages, when they are sent, and the context of her personal life at that moment and how stable it is feeling. For example last year, when there was an attack on LGBTI activists in Banja Luka, she had a very hard time dealing with it because she was already emotionally sensitive and vulnerable, which caused her to experience more fear and anxiety.

One of the social groups most frequently targeted by hate speech is women, particularly those who advocate for gender equality and challenge traditional gender norms. The recent trend of retraditionalisation and discourses that confine women to roles aligned with traditional, patriarchal norms and views has led to a gender backlash targeting feminist activists.[26] The impact of misogynistic hate speech can be extremely severe, often driving women out of public spaces.[27] A female youth activist shares how this has affected her psychologically, noting that it has likely contributed to the development of anxiety. This anxiety surfaces in crowded spaces, particularly at youth events, where she fears becoming the target of comments, even though this has never actually happened. She attributes her anxiety to past experiences with hate speech. Through her work with other young activists, she has observed that the fear of hate speech, even before it occurs, is highly discouraging for young women who wish to engage online.

A male LGBTI activist shared that hate led him to undergo psychotherapy for an extended period because he had to learn to live with those comments:

---

26   Zlatiborka Popov Momčinović (2013). Govor mržnje u Bosni i Hercegovini/Rodna perspektiva. BH novinari. https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/2013/01/15/govor-mrnje-u-bosni-i-hercegovinirodna-perspektiva-mr-sc-zlatiborka-popov-mominovi/

27   **Ging, D., & Siapera, E. (2018). "Special issue on online misogyny."** *Feminist Media Studies, 18*(4).

"My approach now is to avoid reading the comments. It's not pleasant to see them, but even when I do come across them or hear what people say, I don't lose control. I'm not surprised, and I still feel in control. It's unsettling to live in a society and world where people are persecuted and killed because of their sexual orientation. It's especially distressing when they mention family members. It was particularly hard for me when the comments targeted my mom, who is supportive."

The impact of hate speech on LGBTI individuals has gained increased attention due to recent violent incidents and rising anti-LGBTI rhetoric. Research shows that exposure to homophobic hate speech can significantly worsen mood, leading to heightened anxiety, depression, and isolation. A recent study found that hate speech triggers these effects, especially when individuals feel personally targeted or when it's widespread in their environment. [28] Additionally, the fear and intimidation caused by hate speech can discourage LGBTI individuals from participating fully in society. A report by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights highlights that many experience distress and avoid public life due to the threat of hate speech and hate crimes, further exacerbating mental health issues.[29]

Psychological support was also sought by a female participant from Bihac. She talked about severe psychological and physical consequences and the need to see a psychotherapist. Hate speech has also affected her professionally:

"This has certainly taken a toll on my health...and even today, I occasionally see a psychotherapist I work with. Hate also carried over to my workplace. Certain colleagues wrote a petition stating that I am not a good example, that I cannot teach children any values when I don't possess them myself. My child had problems; I later transferred him to another school because one of my colleagues, with whom I worked at the same school, also a teacher, told my son to sit in the back because he is 'dirty' and that he could infect other children because his mom takes him to squats, he eats with migrants, sleeps with migrants."

This woman endured two years of suffering due to the hate she experienced. The impact on her life was profound, affecting her in countless ways. During the interviews, she spoke of her ordeal with visible distress. Beyond the personal pain and fear, she faced professional degradation and family struggles, compounded by the deep disappointment she felt in her colleagues and many members of her community. Although she remained in the same community, the experience continues to linger with her, casting a dark shadow over her life.

---

28   Zochniak, K., Lewicka, O., & Bilewicz, M. (2024). Homophobic hate speech affects well-being of highly identified LGBT people. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 42(4).

29   Hate Speech and Hate Crimes against LGBT Persons. (2009). *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*. https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/1226-Factsheet-homophobia-hate-speech-crime_EN.pdf

A powerful account of personal struggle was shared by a woman with a disability who faced insults from a popular and influential politician. She felt that this kind of power imbalance made it especially difficult and threatening. The sense of vulnerability was exacerbated by her position: *"At that moment (during verbal attacks), I am someone who is unemployed, someone engaged in civic activism."* This vulnerability becomes even more pronounced in the face of such targeted hate, amplifying the severity of its effects.

Violence against minorities often begins with derogatory language and hate speech, which can quickly escalate into physical harm. During this research, several participants shared that hate speech was a precursor to physical attacks that they experienced. They also explained how, even after these attacks, they continued to face hate speech. An activist supporting the LGBTI community in Banja Luka, who was attacked in 2023 alongside her colleagues, recalls the profound impact it had on her life. Following the attack and the ensuing hate speech, she and her colleagues were forced to relocate from Banja Luka to Sarajevo for 15 days.

> *"When the attack happened in which I was involved, I had to leave my hometown of Banja Luka for safety reasons. I was forced to go away for 15 days because the police officer told me he couldn't protect me. It affected me more psychologically, and even today, I occasionally feel fear when I see a group of guys with black hoodies. I avoid places where supporters might be, although I didn't go there before, but today I am more cautious."*

This experience reflects the deep psychological impact that trauma and targeted violence can have on an individual. Overall, the story of this interviewee underscores how acts of violence and hate speech can have enduring psychological consequences, reshaping how an individual navigates the world, instilling a persistent sense of fear and a need for caution that extends well beyond the initial event. The trauma has ingrained a heightened sense of fear and vigilance in her daily life. The specific mention of her fear when seeing groups of men in black hoodies suggests that she has developed a conditioned response, where certain visual cues trigger anxiety and fear, reminiscent of the attack. This is a common reaction in individuals who have experienced traumatic events, where certain stimuli can bring back the emotions and memories of the trauma.[30] The activist's avoidance of places where potential aggressors might gather reflects a state of hypervigilance which is mentally exhausting and disrupts her daily life.

Several participants shared experiences of hate speech from their childhood, highlighting how such experiences can leave a profound and lasting sense of hurt.

---

30   Kaysen, D. (2005). Cognitive Processing Therapy for Acute Stress Disorder Resulting From an Anti-Gay Assault. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice*, 12(3), 278–289.

The narratives of the participants—one from the Jewish community and another from the Roma community—highlight the diverse ways in which hate speech can shape a child's behaviour and self-perception. For example, a woman from the Jewish community reported feeling deeply hurt and withdrawn when exposed to hateful comments from a peer during her school years, while a Roma activist shared that his response to hate speech was to become disruptive:

> *"That hate speech evolved from discrimination into insults, etc., where I, as a child, began to react violently. It was my way of defending myself because I was little. I physically fought back. I was problematic then because I didn't know how to deal with it. In those moments of anger, sadness, and rage, I reacted violently. For a while, through those physical confrontations, I created an image where it was easier for my peers to say 'don't mess with him, he'll beat you up', rather than 'don't mess with him, he's a Gypsy.'"*

At the international level, hate speech against the Roma community is recognised as a pressing issue that has garnered attention from various human rights organisations and scholars. Antigypsism can further exacerbate the social exclusion that Roma children and adults have traditionally faced. It can have significant ramifications on psychological well-being, as well as on the educational achievement of children and young people. According to the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), hate speech and hate crimes against Roma are widespread and often inadequately investigated, with many instances being readily accepted or excused. Consequently, there has been a significant increase in hate speech against the Roma, as evidenced by the data.[31]

A very telling example was shared by one interviewee who is frequently exposed to hate speech online. He receives frequent threats and insults based on his ethnicity or because he is perceived as a traitor by his "own" people.

> *"People don't realise that when the hunt begins, you can't do anything for days, you are unfocused. You shouldn't be the one deciding what to do and what action to take; you're not in the mood for that at that moment. You just want it to stop. Yet, I have to go to the prosecutor's offices and the police, which mostly lack understanding, and we don't have examples to say, 'Okay, she was attacked, exposed to hate speech, reported it, and won, so I'm going too.' It's a waste of energy, time, and even money, especially when you're a freelancer. You spend two, three days on these reports, and no one will reimburse you for that."*
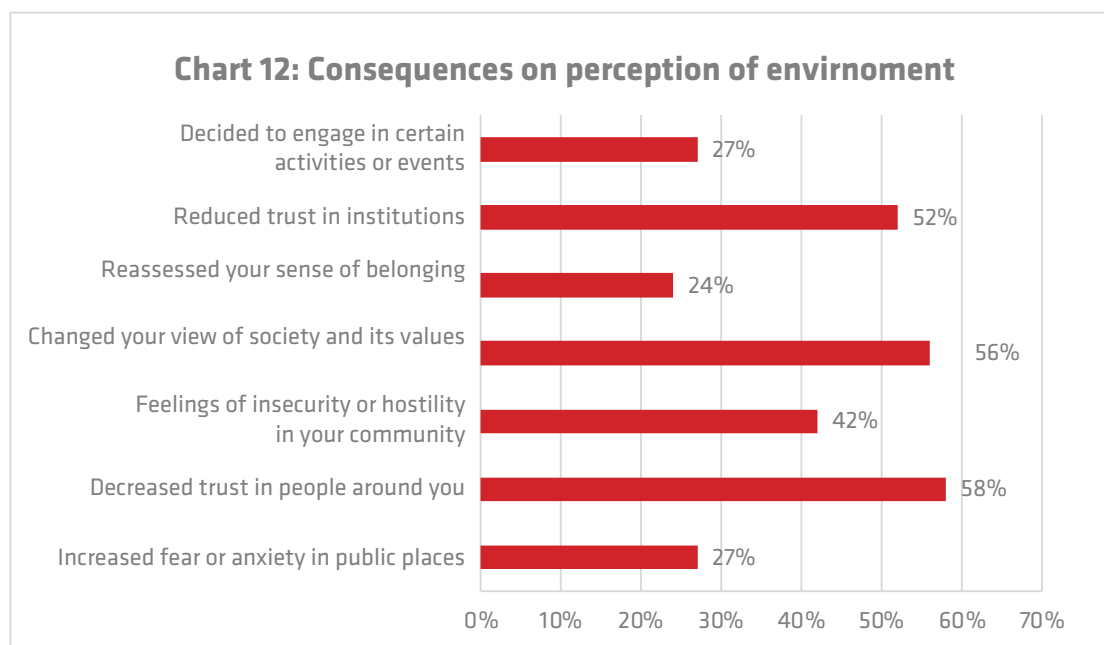
---

31   European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2016). *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey: Roma – Selected Findings*. Retrieved from https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/second-european-union-minorities-and-discrimination-survey-roma-selected-findings.

The quote highlights the intense emotional and psychological toll that being a target of a "witch-hunt" or sustained harassment takes on an individual. The phrase "hunt" suggests a relentless and irrational persecution, where the victim feels powerless and overwhelmed. This participant describes a state of being so consumed by the stress and fear that he becomes unfocused and unable to make decisions or take action. The overwhelming desire is simply for the harassment to stop, rather than engaging in the necessary but exhausting steps to seek justice or protection.

For freelancers, who often rely on continuous work to sustain their income, taking several days off to deal with such issues can have a direct financial impact. Unlike salaried employees who might have some protections or benefits, freelancers lose potential earnings during these periods of inactivity. Moreover, the lack of reimbursement for the time and effort spent adds to the financial strain, making the experience not only emotionally draining but also economically damaging. This situation underscores how targeted harassment and the subsequent legal and bureaucratic processes can lead to a significant loss of income, exacerbating the overall negative impact on the victim's life.

In addition to its psychological impact, hate speech profoundly affects how individuals perceive their environment. Our perception of the environment plays a crucial role in shaping our mental health and well-being. How we interpret and experience the world around us—whether positively or negatively—can influence our emotional state, stress levels, and overall psychological health. Chart 12 illustrates how hate speech affects individuals' perceptions of their environment. It shows that many participants (27%) feel significant fear, as well as insecurity and hostility in their communities (42%). Furthermore, it shows that many people lose trust in those around them and in institutions, reflecting a deep sense of disillusionment with society. Hate speech often leads individuals to reassess their sense of belonging and feel insecure or hostile within their communities. Some people may choose to avoid certain activities or events and experience heightened anxiety in public spaces. Overall, the chart emphasises that hate speech influences not only personal well-being but also broader social dynamics and relationships.

Chart 12: Consequences on perception of envirnoment

Category	Value
Decided to engage in certain activities or events	27%
Reduced trust in institutions	52%
Reassessed your sense of belonging	24%
Changed your view of society and its values	56%
Feelings of insecurity or hostility in your community	42%
Decreased trust in people around you	58%
Increased fear or anxiety in public places	27%

In the survey's open-ended responses, one participant affected by hate speech related to their ethnic identity said that it had triggered childhood war-related traumas. Others reported experiencing fear when close to areas where hate speech had occurred. There was also a comment noting that victims of hate speech, along with people they know, fear its impact on future generations. This fear can discourage individuals from expressing their opinions publicly, effectively silencing them and creating social boundaries that inhibit free speech.
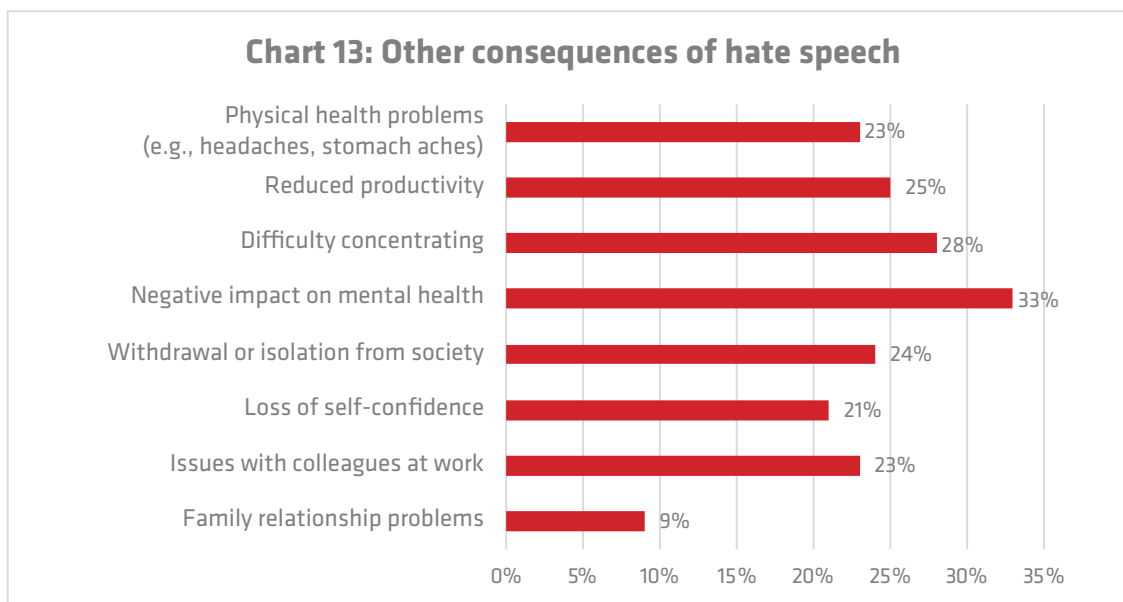
This phenomenon impacts broader social dynamics, as people become more cautious about expressing their views due to fear of retaliation or further harassment. Through these mechanisms, hate speech not only affects immediate victims but also creates a climate of fear and insecurity that can last for generations.[32] At the same time, some participants expressed a strong desire to educate others and promote respect and acceptance, considering it a personal success if they could change even one person's mindset.

However, hate speech impacts not only the psychological well-being of victims but also their physical health and relationships with family members and colleagues, as shown in Chart 13. This demonstrates that the effects of hate speech extend beyond an individual's internal experience, influencing a broader network of significant relationships. Furthermore, 24% of participants reported withdrawing or isolating themselves from society as a result of hate speech, which can further intensify feelings

---

32   Fladmoe, A., & Nadim, M. (2017). Silenced by hate? Hate speech as a social boundary to free speech. In A. H. Midtbøen, K. Steen-Johnsen, & K. Thorbjørnsrud (Eds.), *Boundary Struggles: Contestations of Free Speech in the Norwegian Public Sphere.* Cappelen Damm Akademisk/NOASP

of loneliness, anxiety, or depression. Additionally, 28% of participants reported difficulty concentrating due to hate speech, indicating that it can impair cognitive functions, such as focus and attention. Another 23% of participants experienced issues with colleagues at work, suggesting that hate speech can create a hostile work environment, leading to conflicts or strained relationships. This aligns with findings from open-ended responses and interviews that suggest the workplace can be a setting where hate speech occurs, affecting team dynamics and the individual's sense of belonging and safety.

The impact of hate speech in the workplace can further deteriorate professional relationships, reduce productivity, and create a climate of distrust among colleagues, while broader social isolation leads to a decline in mental health, creating a vicious cycle of consequences that negatively affect all aspects of victims' lives.

Chart 13: Other consequences of hate speech

Category	Value
Physical health problems (e.g., headaches, stomach aches)	23%
Reduced productivity	25%
Difficulty concentrating	28%
Negative impact on mental health	33%
Withdrawal or isolation from society	24%
Loss of self-confidence	21%
Issues with colleagues at work	23%
Family relationship problems	9%

In one interview someone engaged in activism on online platforms explained how she feared that her family, particularly her younger sister and mother, would be exposed to hate if people realised they were connected. To prevent this, she avoids engaging with her family's comments to ensure followers do not realise they are related. However, there were times when her mother, deeply hurt by the comments directed at her daughter, tried to defend her, only to become a victim of hate speech herself.

Several participants reported severe physical consequences they attributed to stress induced by hate. Negative symptoms such as discomfort and sweating were also reported. For some, this stress led to medical conditions such as bladder problems, heart palpitations, and cardiovascular issues. One participant even required hospitalisation, undergoing gallbladder surgery and needing antidepressants.

The experiences of participants in this study are in line with the literature that demonstrates that our bodies are well-equipped to handle stress in small doses, but when stress becomes long-term or chronic, it can have serious repercussions on our health. Prolonged stress affects all bodily functions and can lead to chronic painful conditions such as migraines, shortness of breath, and rapid breathing. It also poses long-term risks for the heart and blood vessels, increasing the likelihood of a heart attack. When under stress, individuals may experience changes in appetite, leading to either overeating or undereating. Stress also impacts digestion and can alter the absorption of nutrients in the intestines. Chronic stress, which involves prolonged exposure to stressors, creates a significant drain on the body. [33]

In-person interviews revealed various strategies that victims of hate speech adopt to protect themselves, their family members, or their partners. These strategies can sometimes help, but they can also negatively impact on quality of life. When exposed to online hate speech, the most common response was to block the perpetrators or stop publishing content altogether, withdrawing from the online space. One participant mentioned that she stopped posting on TikTok because she experienced an emotional blockage. Another common strategy mentioned was that victims learned to avoid reading comments directed at them or any hateful comments in general. However, several participants reported that their family members or partners often read the comments, which causes them significant distress and concern.

Those exposed to severe forms of hate speech or death threats significantly changed their behaviour in the physical world due to persistent feelings of insecurity. A woman from the Jewish community avoided being alone at home, isolated herself from people and greatly reduced her time outside. A man from the Jewish community reported examining his car every morning because he feared someone might try to kill him. In addition, he and his family isolated themselves in their own 'microcosm,' as he calls it. Some members even stopped sending their children to activities at the synagogue. An LGBTI activist spoke about how she changed her daily activities in response to hate speech: "I stopped walking alone, I stopped going out at night. I also avoid certain streets and neighbourhoods that I know are not safe for me. These changes have become normal for me, but at the same time, they have restricted my freedom of movement."

A male LGBTI activist said he has a comprehensive strategy and knows exactly how to behave to avoid incidents and ensure his safety:

---

33   American Psychological Association. (2023, March 8). *Stress effects on the body.* (Originally created November 1, 2018). Available at https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body

> *"I avoid certain places. I stick to my circles. I'm very aware that some places are dangerous, and that's the compromise with violence. Most of my friends have a strategy for getting around. One of my friends, when walking at night, makes himself appear bigger to show that he's strong."*

These strategies, while necessary for personal safety, further restrict freedom and increase feelings of insecurity, which in the long run can further deteriorate mental health and the sense of belonging to the community.

Another LGBTI activist discussed how, in response to hate speech, she changed her daily activities:

> *"Sometimes it affects me to the point where I limit my movement, especially during the organisation of the Pride March. In the period leading up to the march, I very consciously choose not to walk, to travel by car, and try to park as close as possible to where I need to go. I especially avoid groups of younger men and teenagers because I've had experiences where they would shout something at me, so I consciously choose to avoid them. But this is part of my everyday life. I don't go into large groups or concerts, especially when I know there could be a diverse crowd, where I might encounter football fans. I avoid places where I assess there might be some form of violence. It's limiting for me. I have to think about where to go out with friends. I can't go to all cafes; I go where someone will defend me in case that is needed."*

Experiences shared in our Bosnia and Herzegovina research align with those from other contexts. Research from Germany shows that experiencing hate speech, particularly in online settings, impacts victims' sense of security, influencing not only their digital experiences but also their everyday lives. Individuals who face online hate speech report a stronger sense of insecurity compared to those who have only encountered offline hate speech or have not been victimised at all. This heightened insecurity stems from the pervasive and uncontrollable nature of online hate, which frequently targets personal characteristics and group affiliations, leading to a fear of repeated victimisation in both online and offline spaces. Victims may feel vulnerable and anxious, fearing social interactions and potential harassment, which can result in social withdrawal and a diminished sense of safety within their communities. The psychological impact of online hate speech highlights the urgent need for comprehensive interventions that not only curb the spread of such content but also provide support for the emotional well-being of victims, promoting a safer and more inclusive environment.[34]

In response to hate speech, several participants expressed a strong desire to quit their jobs, with a few actually following through on this decision. This suggests

---

34 Dreißigacker, A., Müller, P., Isenhardt, A. *et al.* Online hate speech victimization: consequences for victims' feelings of insecurity. *Crime Sci* 13, 4 (2024).

that the workplace may become so hostile and psychologically damaging due to hate speech that some individuals feel leaving their job is the only viable solution to protect their mental well-being. This response also reflects a lack of confidence in the organisation's ability to address or prevent such incidents, indicating possible gaps in workplace policies and support systems. Several participants also reported that hate speech makes them question their professional choices and resent their choice to tackle hard topics instead of lighter ones.

4.4. Perceptions of community and societal consequences

As illustrated by the earlier examples, the psychological toll of hate speech can lead individuals to withdraw from social and political discourse, a phenomenon known as the "silencing effect". This withdrawal not only affects the victims but also undermines democratic processes by reducing participation in public discussions. The consequences of hate speech extend beyond individual mental health issues to affect social functioning and community cohesion.
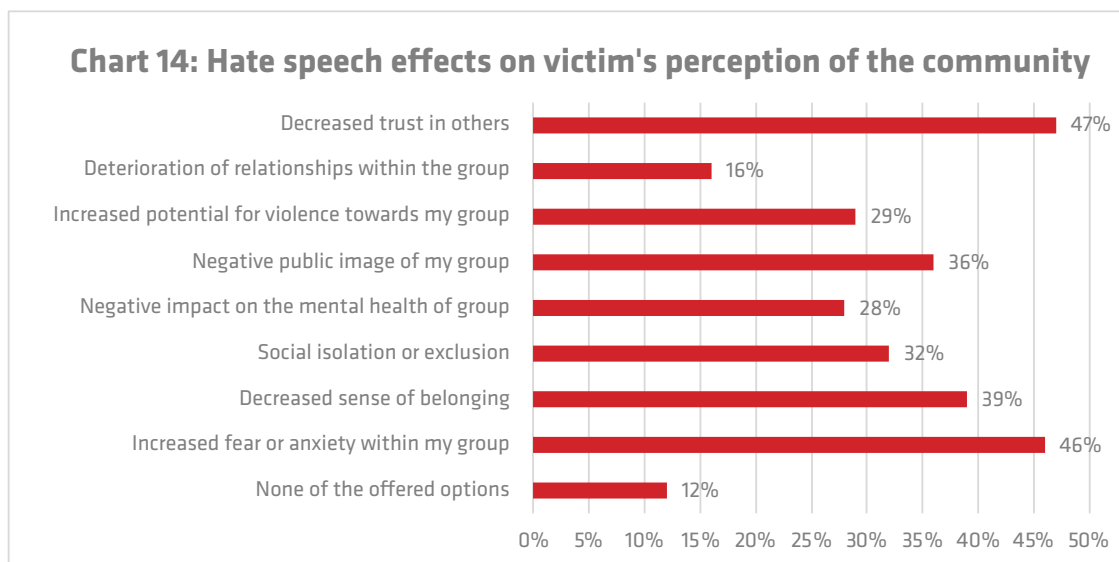
Hate speech contributes to a divisive social environment, normalising intolerance and prejudice. This environment can hinder meaningful dialogue and the development of empathy among individuals, posing a threat to societal harmony and progress toward inclusivity. In several instances in a survey, participants reported feeling compelled to seek homogenisation within their own community or avoiding social interactions with individuals of other nationalities to prevent further insults. This behaviour indicates a form of self-protection, where victims withdraw from potentially hostile situations to avoid further insults or discrimination. However, this also points to the broader social consequences of hate speech—reinforcing divisions between communities and hindering intercultural communication and integration. Over time, such avoidance can lead to increased isolation, reduced social cohesion, and a loss of diverse perspectives, ultimately affecting both personal and societal dynamics.

These reactions demonstrate that hate speech not only affects individuals emotionally and psychologically but also disrupts their ability to fully engage in professional and social environments, impacting both personal growth and broader community relationships.

Chart 14 titled "Hate Speech Effects on Victims' Perceptions of the Community" illustrates various ways that hate speech affects victims and their communities. It shows that hate speech leads to a significant decrease in trust in others, along with increased fear or anxiety within the group. There is also a notable impact on the group's sense of belonging, with some experiencing social isolation or exclusion.

The chart further reveals that hate speech contributes to a negative public image of the group and increases the potential for violence against them. It also has

adverse effects on the mental health of group members and causes a deterioration of relationships within the group. Overall, the chart highlights that the effects of hate speech are widespread, influencing both interpersonal trust and the broader social cohesion and safety of targeted groups.

Chart 14: Hate speech effects on victim's perception of the community

Category	Percentage
Decreased trust in others	47%
Deterioration of relationships within the group	16%
Increased potential for violence towards my group	29%
Negative public image of my group	36%
Negative impact on the mental health of group	28%
Social isolation or exclusion	32%
Decreased sense of belonging	39%
Increased fear or anxiety within my group	46%
None of the offered options	12%

In the survey's comments section, participants emphasised the profound impact of their experiences on both the groups they identify with and society as a whole. One participant, deeply affected by hate speech, expressed anger and a strong commitment to supporting others in their community facing similar challenges for the first time. Although they did not retreat from their activities, they noted a growing trend of self-censorship within their circles, particularly regarding expressions of faith. Despite the many negative consequences, several participants articulated a renewed determination to persevere in their efforts, viewing their confrontation with hate speech as a necessary stand against inhumanity. This resolve was fuelled by a conviction that they must actively work to prevent, detect, and publicly expose those responsible for spreading hate.

As shared by participants in interviews, when an incident occurs, members of the victimised group and the community, upon becoming aware of it, often alter their actions and behaviours. Individuals who are not members of the victim's social group but belong to other minority groups may behave similarly, fearing for their own safety. Hate speech, therefore, has the potential to create widespread fear. These victims may include family members, friends, or others associated with the group to which the victim belongs, as illustrated by one participant:

> *"In the city I come from, there is constant hate speech directed towards people of other nationalities, LGBTI individuals, and even political dissenters. This is orchestrated by armies of bots and local club supporters closely aligned with the power structures in the city, which is why no one dares to oppose them. A large*

number of people live in perpetual fear, either trying not to draw attention to themselves or simply conforming to the majority that engages in such behaviour. If that's not an option, they leave the country. There are individuals who resist this, but they lack the infrastructure for significant change, and public support is scarce due to fear. As a result, they end up painting a target on their foreheads."

The societal ramifications of hate speech against LGBTI individuals are concerning. Experts warn that hate speech can incite violence, and last year's attacks on LGBTI activists in Banja Luka confirm this. These acts underscore the connection between hate speech and real-world violence, highlighting how inflammatory rhetoric can embolden individuals to commit acts of aggression against marginalised communities. Additionally, the normalisation of hate speech in public discourse can contribute to a broader culture of discrimination and intolerance. Anti-LGBTI hate speech not only harms individuals but also undermines societal cohesion and acceptance, perpetuating stereotypes and fostering an environment of hostility.

The normalisation of hate speech can also result in societal polarisation and profound community changes, as evidenced and elaborated upon in the research. This phenomenon is exemplified by a specific case where hatred against migrants proliferated.

"Then the protests started, attended by municipal council members, including future councillors. 2020 was an election year. Suddenly, they targeted people on the move as the main culprits, claiming that if it weren't for them, our economy would be better, our tourism would be flourishing, we wouldn't be in crisis, our population wouldn't be leaving, and so on. And of course, that hatred spilled over; I suddenly became the main enemy of the state, number one, as they called me, the one who works there for some services, who brings those people…"

The above example also demonstrates the harmful social practice of scapegoating. The American Psychological Association defines scapegoating as the process of blaming an individual or group for problems or negative outcomes that they did not cause. This definition highlights scapegoating as a psychological mechanism where feelings of aggression, frustration, or hostility are displaced onto another, often less powerful target. This behaviour allows individuals or groups to deflect responsibility for their own issues by projecting their frustrations onto others.[35]

Another example of how hate speech affects a whole community is shared by LGBTI activists:

"We talk with the community, and they feel uncomfortable, stressed, and frightened, especially before the Pride March. Hatred is always louder and more visible than the support we receive. Support doesn't resonate as much in their minds as the hateful comments do, increasing fear, anxiety, and depression, which leads

---

35   APA Dictionary of Psychology. Available at: https://dictionary.apa.org/scapegoating

them to seek therapy more often. They are also afraid of their parents, depending on their age at the time. A wide range of fears exist and are triggered by the hatred they encounter, leaving them unsure of how to protect themselves. They think they can prepare for life by reading those comments, but in reality, those comments unconsciously have a direct impact on their lives, leading to various problems like insomnia, isolation, and not leaving their homes."

One activist, a woman with a disability who faced hate from a powerful local politician and later from others, highlighted the following consequences which also impacted on the community as a whole: damage to her professional reputation, insults targeting the entire population of people with disabilities, the creation of an atmosphere of fear, and the fostering of discord even among friends within the community. She emphasised the significant challenge of countering hate messages from influential politicians due to their influence and public standing, which amplifies the reach of their messages. This narrative encourages hate speech against a multiply marginalised woman based on gender, disability, views, preferences, and beliefs, but also against other people with disabilities. Such actions are contrary to the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The examples above demonstrate how the psychological and emotional impacts of hate crimes extend far beyond individual and interpersonal dynamics. Hate-motivated aggression is recognised as a distinct form of violence, driven by the intent to harm and serving both symbolic and instrumental functions for the perpetrators. Symbolically, such acts send a message of hostility to entire communities, neighbourhoods, or groups. Instrumentally, they restrict the behaviours and choices of large numbers of people, instilling fear and limiting their freedom.[36] Hate crime offenders, through their actions, not only enact ideas of difference but also reinforce existing structures of oppression and solidify the boundaries that separate groups. This dynamic is underscored by the concept of hate crimes as "message crimes".[37] A similar dynamic is observed in cases of hate speech.

Although often dismissed as "just words", hate speech profoundly affects communities by eroding social cohesion, fostering division, and creating an environment of fear and mistrust, as evidenced by the experiences shared. It marginalises targeted groups, leading to social exclusion and discrimination, thereby weakening the community's overall fabric. As demonstrated by the examples, hate speech can also incite violence, perpetuating a cycle of hostility and retaliation that destabilises communities. The ripple effects extend beyond immediate victims, shaping the attitudes and behaviours of others and reinforcing prejudice and intolerance—an all-too-familiar reality for those who have experienced it firsthand.

---

36   Perry, B. (2001). In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes. Routledge
37   Iganski, P. (2008). *Hate crime and the city*. The Policy Press.

4.5. Support mechanisms and resilience

The shared experiences in this research vividly illustrate how hate speech erodes social cohesion and undermines individual well-being. It fosters fear, deepens societal divisions, and perpetuates systemic discrimination, compelling individuals to confront these challenges while navigating their complex implications on personal and communal identities. In the survey, when asked if they knew where to seek help after being exposed to hate speech, the majority of respondents either did not know or were unsure, as indicated in Chart 15. This highlights the urgent need to develop and make accessible support mechanisms for those affected by hate speech.

Chart 15: Do you know where to seek support?

Category	Percentage
Not sure	27%
No	35%
Yes	39%
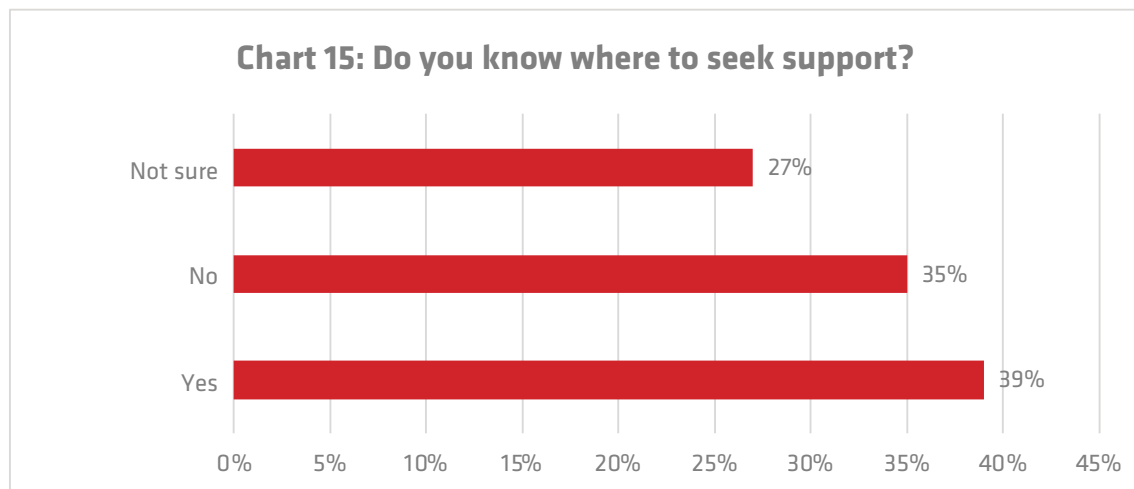
However, the research also reveals that victims of hate speech are not merely passive recipients of hostility. On the contrary, many actively resist hate speech, channelling their personal experiences into advocacy for others and working towards the creation of a society that values diversity and inclusion. Against all odds, they leverage support networks and strive to transform their struggles into meaningful action.

Interviews show that victims of hate speech frequently rely on the support of their close personal networks, including family members, partners, friends, and colleagues. Additionally, the international community and local non-governmental organisations were highlighted as crucial sources of support, particularly in advancing human rights and combating hate speech. One participant underscored the indispensable role of international backing in her case, noting that without it, accountability would have been improbable. Another interviewee received protection from the European organisation Front Line Defenders, further emphasising the importance of external support. Similarly, a disability activist who was supported by a prominent European disability organisation reported a decrease in direct pressure. Meanwhile, a journalist participating in the research highlighted the lack of assistance available to small local media and individuals, emphasising the urgent need to address the unique challenges faced by those in smaller communities.

One interview participant recalled how much collective support meant to her:

"I mean, what else can you do besides applying pressure? Non-governmental organisations are a good example. In my case 200 non-governmental organisations signed a petition demanding protection for me. Even if it didn't mean anything in the end, it was significant for me at that moment. If, for every case, they all jumped in, starting with non-governmental organisations and then people taking to the streets, there will be change, because the authorities only get scared when there's a rebellion in the streets; that's when they... get frightened."

An activist from Bihać who worked with migrants faced numerous consequences that impacted her health and relationships within the community. In her case family support was crucial, while the support from the community was not extensive and open. She shared:

"My family, especially my husband and friends, have been my pillars of support. I've always dedicated myself to activities that benefit the local community. It's been quite a journey, from receiving appreciation while walking down the street to finding people actively avoiding me. Soon, messages started arriving, urging me to understand the complexities of the situation. People who wanted to contribute would discreetly approach me, leaving blankets, food, and clothes by my car. Bags would mysteriously appear around my vehicle. The reluctance of individuals to publicly expose themselves, fearing potential danger, became more apparent. We even had to hide migrant families from attacks by local right-wing groups. During that period, these groups targeted and assaulted individuals, even going as far as smashing buses carrying migrants and breaking windows. It's been an experience, to say the least."

An LGBTI activist described her personal support system:

"My friends, and the large number of close friends I met through activism—they are my family; they have learned to live with me as an activist. They reorganise their lives when there is a Pride March, to walk my dogs, to help me... that has kept me going. My partner is a great support, full of understanding, full of patience, and that is huge. I get a lot of encouragement from people and fellow citizens I meet on the street, the neighbour across the street, the lady who works in the market. It's important to me that the guy who sells fruit and vegetables says, 'Well done, I'm on your side,' and anyone on the street. The community, of course, the LGBTI community, is a source of inspiration and energy. When I see that people's lives have improved because of our work and activism, that motivates me. I know some people who came to counselling sessions and who were afraid to leave their homes. Those stories from the community are important to me. I see people who are now managing to live their authenticity."

A participant from the Jewish community shared her experience of receiving support from classmates and her teacher during her school years, when she was excluded by another fellow pupil, and how it had meant a great deal to her.

A Roma activist shared how support, amidst the discrimination and hate insults, transformed his perspective and steered his life in a positive direction. Unlike his two friends who gave up on school due to discrimination, he said how, in the long run, his painful experiences of hate and discrimination motivated him to engage in activism and education to help others. He mentioned that he will soon be delivering a workshop on anti-discrimination to the staff at the very same school where he was once exposed to hate speech. His primary sources of support were his mother, family, and his teacher. He explained:
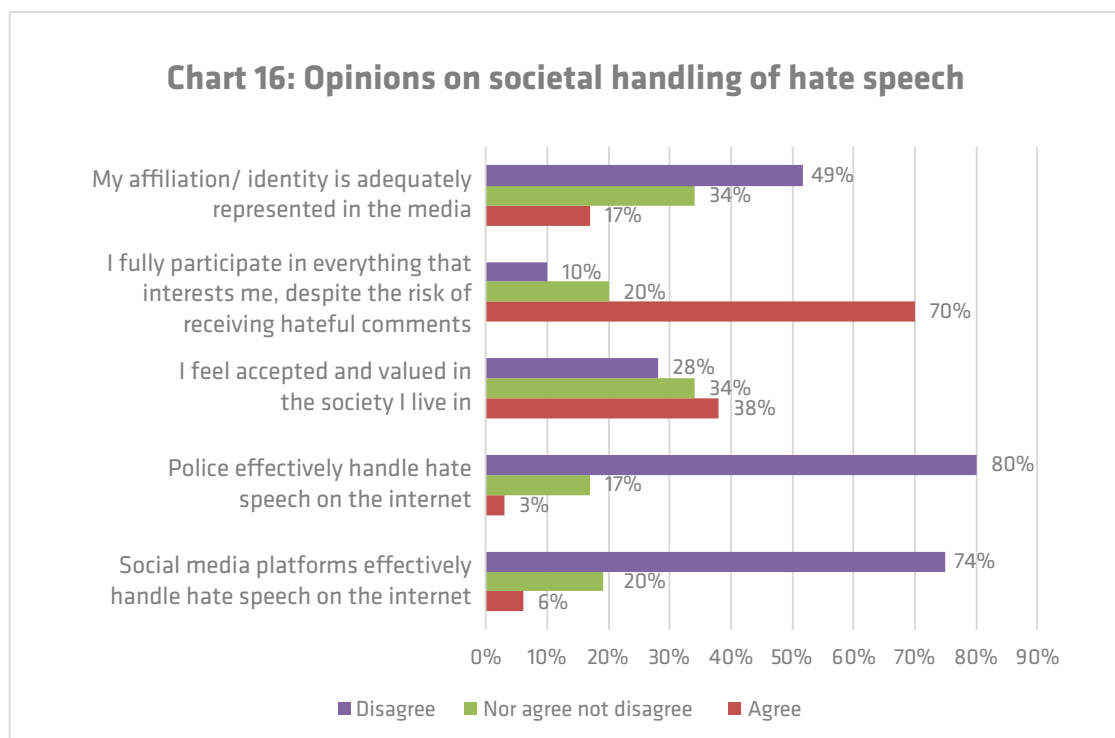
> *"My teacher was important to me. I wouldn't have finished the grade if it weren't for her. She really stood up for me, and that made things much easier. I was problematic at the time because I didn't know how to cope with my emotions. In those moments of anger, sadness, and rage, I reacted intensely. But with the support of my mother and teacher, I focused on achieving success and proved myself through success in education."*

In the survey comments, several participants shared a similar compelling response: that rather than deterring them, being the victim of hate speech had deepened their commitment to the causes they advocate for. It acted as a catalyst, reinforcing their resolve to uphold the principles they believe in. This sentiment was echoed in the interviews, with one Roma activist noting that the hate and discrimination he experienced as a child were pivotal in his decision to become an advocate for Roma rights and human rights.

Despite the discouragement and the lack of effective responses from state institutions or social media platforms as illustrated in the chart below, the majority of participants have not been permanently excluded from pursuing their interests. However, it is disheartening to note that only 38% feel valued in the society in which they live. Additionally, almost half of the respondents feel they are not adequately represented in the media. This data suggests that a significant portion of the population feels marginalised or underrepresented in the media. When people do not see their affiliation or identity accurately represented, it can contribute to a sense of alienation and decrease trust in media institutions.

Moreover, the overwhelming lack of confidence in the effectiveness of the police (80%) and social media platforms (74%) in handling hate speech reflects a deep concern about the capability and commitment of these entities to address and prevent hate speech. This can lead to a sense of insecurity and mistrust, making people feel less safe and less willing to engage openly in public or online spaces.

Such feelings might discourage individuals from reporting incidents or seeking help, ultimately perpetuating the problem of hate speech and its harmful impacts on affected communities.

Chart 16: Opinions on societal handling of hate speech

My affiliation/ identity is adequately represented in the media
- Disagree: 49%
- Nor agree not disagree: 34%
- Agree: 17%

I fully participate in everything that interests me, despite the risk of receiving hateful comments
- Disagree: 10%
- Nor agree not disagree: 20%
- Agree: 70%

I feel accepted and valued in the society I live in
- Disagree: 28%
- Nor agree not disagree: 34%
- Agree: 38%

Police effectively handle hate speech on the internet
- Disagree: 80%
- Nor agree not disagree: 17%
- Agree: 3%

Social media platforms effectively handle hate speech on the internet
- Disagree: 74%
- Nor agree not disagree: 20%
- Agree: 6%

Legend: ■ Disagree ■ Nor agree not disagree ■ Agree

During the interviews participants emphasised the importance of encouraging victims to speak out against hate speech. Creating a supportive environment where individuals feel safe to report incidents is crucial. This includes improving institutional responses to reports and ensuring victims receive adequate mental health support. Participants highlighted the need for 'more support for victims', with one participant stressing the importance of providing 'free mental health sessions', as well as legal support. Several participants also mentioned the need to work on fostering an environment and a society with greater empathy, equality and inclusiveness.

> *"We should all stop feeling fear of the hate speech and start taking more decisive steps towards a safer and better environment. Politicians should stop projecting hatred towards those who disagree with their views. We need to be stronger, more educated, and more self-aware. In my opinion this is easy, but difficult to achieve in some communities."*

Another youth activist argued that there is a concerning tendency to focus on the victims of hate speech, while the needs of those who perpetrate it are often overlooked. Although these individuals can be difficult to reach and may not recognise their need for help, the lack of psychological support for them results in broader societal harm.

This, in turn, increases the demand for therapy among others—a resource that is not universally accessible due to financial barriers.

As expressed by the participants, community support plays a vital role in addressing the impacts of hate speech by providing emotional and psychological assistance, fostering social cohesion, promoting education, and facilitating collective action. Such support not only aids individuals directly affected but also strengthens the community's overall resilience against hate and discrimination. Community backing can validate the experiences of those targeted by hate speech. When communities collectively acknowledge the harm caused by hate, it empowers victims to speak out and seek help, reducing feelings of helplessness. Supportive communities can create safe environments where individuals feel secure to express themselves without fear of retaliation or further harassment. This is particularly important for marginalised groups who are often the targets of hate speech. During the in-person interviews, the majority of participants argued that it would be necessary to establish institutional (systemic) support for victims, which could be established via mental health centres, the police, social work centres, the Ombudsman Institution, and other relevant bodies.

5. Conclusion: Unravelling the Lasting Consequences of Hate Speech

This research on the impact of hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals a complex web of experiences and consequences that extend beyond the individual to affect families, communities, and society as a whole. The findings underscore the deeply personal and widespread nature of the harm caused by hate speech, as well as the urgent need for comprehensive, multi-level strategies to address this issue effectively.

At the individual level, hate speech inflicts profound psychological and emotional damage. Victims frequently report feelings of fear, anger, and isolation that can evolve into severe mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These consequences are not just transient reactions; they represent a sustained impact on victims' quality of life, affecting their ability to function in daily life, their self-confidence, and their overall well-being. The psychological toll is often compounded by inadequate institutional responses, where law enforcement and judicial bodies fail to provide timely and effective support. This lack of institutional responsiveness not only leaves victims feeling unsupported and vulnerable but also erodes their trust in the very systems designed to protect them. As a result, the failure to adequately address hate speech can lead to a vicious cycle of distrust and disengagement, further isolating victims and diminishing their sense of security within their communities.

Beyond the direct impact on victims, hate speech also profoundly affects their immediate families, who bear the emotional and psychological burden of supporting their loved ones through trauma. The stress and anxiety experienced by victims

can permeate family dynamics, leading to strained relationships and emotional exhaustion. Additionally, there are significant economic consequences associated with hate speech. Victims often experience reduced productivity at work due to difficulty concentrating and increased absenteeism, resulting in potential loss of income. This economic impact further compounds the social and psychological toll on victims and their families, highlighting the multifaceted nature of the harm done by hate speech.

At the community level, the repercussions of hate speech are equally significant. In a post-conflict society like BiH, where ethnic and religious identities are still sensitive and politicised, hate speech can exacerbate existing tensions and rekindle historical grievances. This research reveals that hate speech can erode social cohesion by fostering an atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and division. Targeted communities may withdraw from broader societal engagement as a protective measure, leading to increased segregation and social fragmentation. Such divisions weaken the social fabric, making it more difficult to build inclusive and resilient communities. Moreover, the normalisation of hate speech within certain circles or by public figures can create an environment where discrimination and prejudice are perceived as acceptable, further deepening societal divides.

For the broader society of BiH, the unchecked proliferation of hate speech poses a threat to the development of a just, equitable, and democratic society. Hate speech undermines the principles of equality, human rights, and mutual respect that are foundational to democratic governance and social harmony. When hate speech becomes normalised in public discourse, especially when endorsed or left unchallenged by influential figures, it can embolden others to adopt similar language and attitudes. This normalisation reinforces harmful stereotypes and prejudices, which not only damage intergroup relations but also weaken society's ability to address shared challenges cooperatively. As such, the consequences of hate speech extend far beyond the immediate victims, contributing to an increasingly polarised society where constructive dialogue and collaboration become more difficult.

The insights gathered from this research underscore the complexity of addressing hate speech in BiH and highlight the need for a coordinated, multi-faceted approach involving various stakeholders. It is crucial to provide accessible support systems for victims, including psychological support, legal assistance, and safe platforms for reporting incidents. Institutional, systematic support is essential, requiring the collaboration of all relevant institutions and stakeholders.

In conclusion, addressing hate speech in Bosnia and Herzegovina requires more than just policy changes; it necessitates a cultural shift towards greater empathy, understanding, and solidarity across all levels of society. By prioritising the protection of human dignity and fostering an environment where diversity is celebrated rather

than feared, BiH can move towards a future where hate speech no longer undermines social cohesion and progress. This research calls for an integrated strategy that not only combats hate speech but also builds a more inclusive and resilient society for all its citizens.

Annex 1: Questionnaire

Research on the consequences of hate speech on individuals

Welcome!

Thank you for your interest in participating in our survey. Please read the following before you begin:

In this research, we are interested in your direct experiences with hate speech and consequences you experienced because of hate speech. Please take part in the survey if you, individually or as a member of a group, have been exposed to hate speech, defined as:

All types of expression that incite, promote, spread or justify violence, hatred or discrimination against a person or group of persons, or that denigrates them, by reason of their real or attributed personal characteristics or status such as 'race', colour, language, religion, nationality, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. - CM/Rec(2022)16

The survey takes about 10 minutes to complete. Participation is voluntary and anonymous, so it does not pose any risks to you. Your responses will not be linked to you in any way.

Section A: General information

Q1. Gender (tick one)

Male
Female
Others

Q2. Please select your age group:

1. Under 18 years old
2. 18-24 years old
3. 25-34 years old
4. 35-44 years old
5. 45-54 years old
6. 55-64 years old
7. 65 years old and over

Q3. Where you live _____

▸ Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
▸ Republika Srpska
▸ Brcko District

Q4. Do you identify as a minority or a member of a group targeted by hate speech?

▸ Yes
▸ No

Q5. Which groups targeted by hate speech do you identify with? (Check all that apply)

▸ Ethnic minority
▸ Religious minority
▸ Racial minority
▸ LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) community
▸ Women
▸ Elderly people
▸ People with disabilities
▸ Language minority
▸ Migrant
▸ Refugee
▸ Internally displaced person
▸ Other (please specify): _____
▸ None of the above

Q6. Education (circle one)

1. No education
2. Primary education
3. Secondary education (3 years)
4. Secondary education (4 years)
5. Higher education
6. Master's/Doctorate
7. Currently studying

Q7. Employment status (circle one)

1. Unemployed
2. Employed temporarily
3. Employed permanently
4. Retired
5. Earning money during studies (specify how, e.g., scholarship, occasional work…) _____

Q8. Where do you work?

1. Private sector
2. Public institutions (local, entity, state)
3. Non-governmental sector
4. Media
5. Educational institutions
6. Other, please specify _____

Q9. Have you ever experienced hate speech personally?

▸ Yes
▸ No

Q10. If your answer is Yes, on what basis have you experienced hate speech? Please mark all that apply to your experience.

▸ National or ethnic origin
▸ Race
▸ Language
▸ Religion
▸ Age
▸ Disability
▸ Sex
▸ Gender identity
▸ Sexual orientation
▸ Other, please specify _____

Q11. How often have you been a victim of online hate speech?

- ▶ Rarely (Once or twice)
- ▶ Occasionally (Several times a year)
- ▶ Sometimes (Monthly)
- ▶ Often (Several times a month)
- ▶ Very often (Weekly or more frequently)
- ▶ I have not been a victim of online hate speech

Q12. How often have you been a victim of hate speech outside the Internet?

- ▶ Rarely (Once or twice)
- ▶ Occasionally (Several times a year)
- ▶ Sometimes (Monthly)
- ▶ Often (Several times a month)
- ▶ Very often (Weekly or more frequently)
- ▶ I have not been a victim of hate speech outside of the Internet

Q13. In what contexts have you encountered hate speech (e.g., social media, workplace, public spaces)?

[Open-ended response]

Q14. What form of hate speech did you encounter?

- ▶ Written words
- ▶ Spoken words
- ▶ Pictures
- ▶ Signs
- ▶ Symbols
- ▶ Paintings
- ▶ Music
- ▶ Plays
- ▶ Videos
- ▶ Other, please describe_____

Q15. Can you share what the content of the hate speech was?

[Open-ended response]

Q16. Is the perpetrator a person known to you and if yes, how? Please explain.

[Open-ended response]

Q17. **If you have the information, can you share who the perpetrator was of the hate speech you experienced?**

[Open-ended response]

Q18. **Have you taken any actions in response to hate speech, such as reporting it, confronting the perpetrator, or supporting the victim?**

▸ Yes
▸ No

Q19. **Do you know what your legal rights are in dealing with hate speech? Please tick all that apply:**

▸ Yes, I am fully aware of my legal rights.
▸ I have some knowledge, but I am not entirely sure.
▸ No, I am not familiar with my legal rights.
▸ I have never considered this aspect before.

Q20. **If you reported the hate speech, please indicate how satisfied you are with the outcome of reporting hate speech to the relevant institutions. If you did not report it, please skip this question.**

▸ Not satisfied at all
▸ Slightly satisfied
▸ Moderately satisfied
▸ Very satisfied
▸ Extremely satisfied

Q21. **Did you confide in anyone about the hate speech you experienced? Please mark all that apply to you:**

▸ A family member
▸ A spouse or partner
▸ A friend
▸ A colleague
▸ My supervisor
▸ I kept it to myself
▸ Other, please specify in the provided space: _____

Q22. **How did you feel when you personally experienced hate speech?**

[Open-ended response]

Q23. Based on your experience, what were the consequences of hate speech for you? Please mark all that apply:

▶ Increased fear or anxiety within your group
▶ Decreased sense of belonging
▶ Social isolation or exclusion
▶ Negative impact on the mental health of group members
▶ Negative public image of my group
▶ Increased potential for violence against my group
▶ Deterioration of relationships within the group
▶ Reduced trust in others
▶ Other (please specify): _____

Q24. Have you experienced any of the following after being exposed to hate speech? Please mark all that apply:

▶ Anxiety (discomfort, tension, worry, panic)
▶ Depression
▶ Anger
▶ Fear
▶ Stress
▶ Low self-esteem
▶ Sleep problems
▶ Headache
▶ Stomach pain
▶ Other (please specify): _____

Q25. Do you feel fear when you think about the possibility of being exposed to hate speech again in the future? Please explain.

Q26. As a result of hate speech, have you taken any of the following actions? Please mark all that apply:

▶ Stopped using that internet platform
▶ Changed your route
▶ Blocked or unfollowed the perpetrator
▶ Reported the incident to the authorities or the platform
▶ Sought support from friends, family, or professionals
▶ Engaged in self-help activities
▶ Ignored the hate speech and continued as usual
▶ Other (please specify): _____

Q27. Has hate speech in your case resulted in any of the following? Please mark all that apply:

▶ Problems in family relationships
▶ Problems with colleagues at work
▶ Loss of self-confidence
▶ Withdrawal or isolation from society
▶ Negative impact on mental health
▶ Difficulty concentrating
▶ Reduced productivity
▶ Physical health problems (e.g., headaches, stomach pain)
▶ Other (please specify): _____

Q28. Has hate speech affected your perception of the environment in which you live? Please mark all that apply to you:

▶ Increased fear or anxiety in public places
▶ Reduced trust in the people around you
▶ Feeling of insecurity or hostility in your community
▶ Changed your view of society and its values
▶ Forced you to reassess your sense of belonging
▶ Reduced trust in institutions
▶ Affected your decision to participate in certain activities or events
▶ Other (please specify): _____

Q29. How long did the effects of hate speech last? Please explain.

▶ A few hours
▶ A few days
▶ A few weeks
▶ A few months
▶ Permanently
▶ Not applicable / No lasting effects
▶ Other, please explain: [Open-ended response]

Q30. To what extent do you agree with the following statements regarding your experience with hate speech:

▶ I believe that social media platforms handle online hate speech effectively. (Scale: 1 - Strongly agree to 5 - Strongly disagree)
▶ I believe that the police handle online hate speech effectively. (Scale: 1 - Strongly agree to 5 - Strongly disagree)
▶ I feel accepted and valued in the society in which I live. (Scale: 1 - Strongly agree to 5 - Strongly disagree)

- I fully participate in everything that interests me, despite the risk of receiving hateful comments. (Scale: 1 - Strongly agree to 5 - Strongly disagree)
- I feel that my affiliation/identity is adequately represented in the media. (Scale: 1 - Strongly agree to 5 - Strongly disagree)

Q31. Do you know where to seek additional support when you are a target of hate speech?

- Yes
- No

Q32. How do you think platforms or institutions should respond to hate speech? Rate each statement on a scale from 1 to 5 (Scale: 1 - Strongly agree to 5 - Strongly disagree):

- Increased moderation and removal of content
- Faster and more effective police response
- Faster and more effective response from judges and prosecutors
- Providing automatic psychological support to victims
- Providing education and resources on prejudice, stereotypes, inclusion, and diversity
- Introducing stricter penalties for perpetrators
- Other (please specify): _____

Q33. In your opinion, how effective are the following measures in combating hate speech? Please rate each measure on a scale from 1 (very ineffective) to 5 (very effective):

1. Legal regulations in criminal and civil law
2. Self-regulation through ethical councils and anti-discrimination commissions
3. Support measures for those targeted by hate speech
4. Educational and awareness-raising activities
5. Better data collection and analysis of hate speech
6. Stricter reporting and moderation by online companies/social media
7. More regulations concerning hate speech from politicians, political, and public figures
8. Better coordination and cooperation of institutions at all levels

Q34. What changes would you like to see in the way society addresses hate speech? [Open-ended response]

Q35. In the provided space, please add anything you consider relevant to this research. [Open-ended response]

Q36. **If you would like to have a more detailed conversation about your experience, please leave your email address or phone number, and we will contact you. The conversation will be led by a psychotherapist who will provide psychological support and guide you to further support resources in your community.**

Thank you very much for participating in this research.

ENG

The Member States of the European Union have decided to link together their know-how, resources and destinies. Together, they have built a zone of stability, democracy and sustainable development whilst maintaining cultural diversity, tolerance and individual freedoms. The European Union is committed to sharing its achievements and its values with countries and peoples beyond its borders. www.europa.eu

www.europa.eu

The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

www.coe.int

Co-funded
by the European Union

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

EUROPEAN UNION

CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Co-funded and implemented
by the Council of Europe