

Radicalising the Everyday: Digital Narratives and Youth Perceptions on TikTok in Serbia

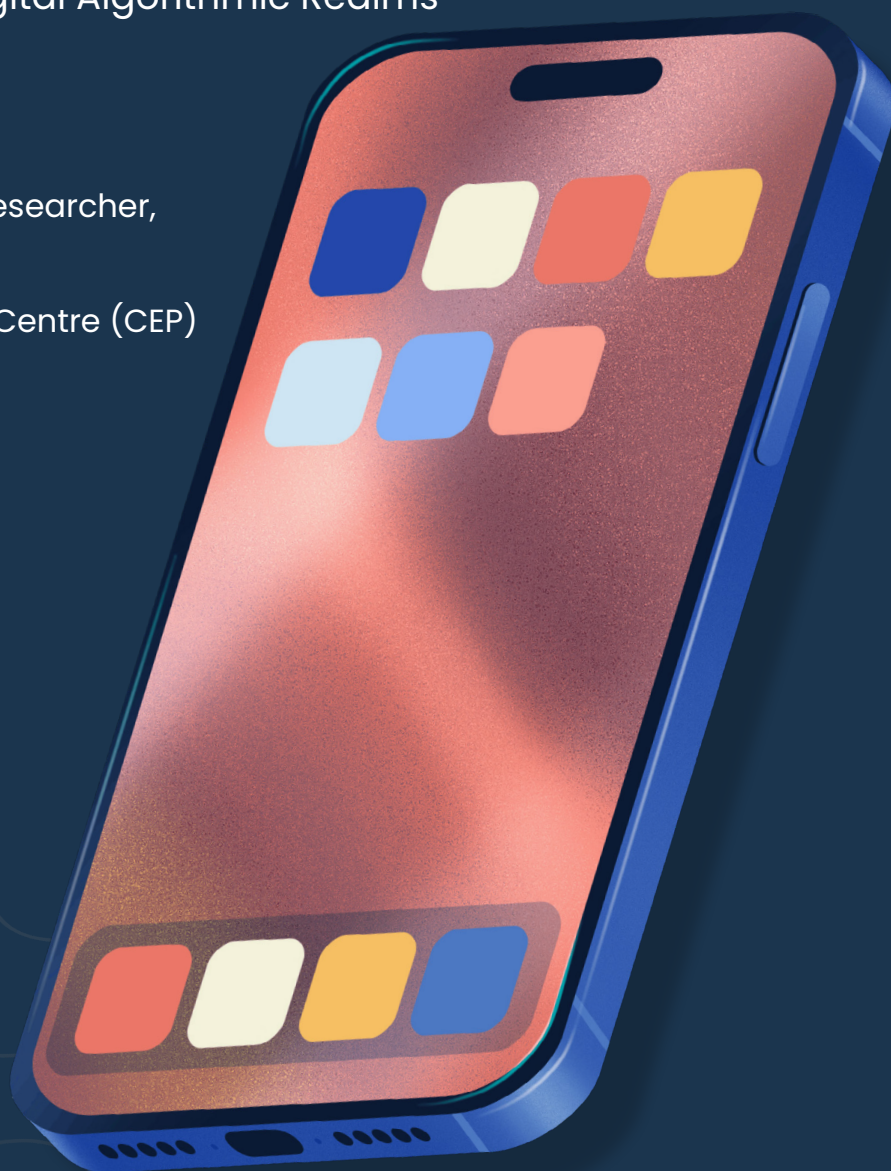
RADAR

Radicalisation Analytics in Digital Algorithmic Realms

Serbia Report

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Executive Summary

RADAR is a regional project examining the early dynamics of online youth radicalisation on TikTok across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, three countries where a shared linguistic space and interconnected digital environments allow extremist narratives to spread quickly across borders. The project responds to a specific gap: despite the region's post-conflict legacy, persistent foreign disinformation efforts, and the platform's outsized influence among young users, no up-to-date, TikTok-specific study of how such content circulates and resonates had existed. This report presents the Serbian findings, drawing on a purposive sample of 334 TikTok posts, coded for stage of radicalisation, dominant narrative, target and emotional tone, alongside two focus groups held in Belgrade in July 2026 that tested how young people from different backgrounds read the same material. The findings arrive at a moment of unusual political intensity in Serbia, one in which questions of accountability, corruption and the limits of legitimate dissent have moved to the centre of public life, a backdrop against which the patterns identified below take on particular significance.

The central finding is that the antagonism in the Serbian sample is directed inward rather than outward. Authoritarian and anti-democratic narratives form the largest category (43.1%), narrowly ahead of ethno-nationalist and identitarian content (38.6%); political opponents framed as "traitors" are the most common target, ahead of ethnic groups. Ethno-nationalist material is less frequent, but it is not lesser in consequence, since a larger share of it sits at the radicalising or mobilising end of the continuum. On the surface, moreover, little of this content appears overtly propagandistic. Radicalising ideas are conveyed through humour, lifestyle advice, calm "explanatory" videos, television and podcast clips, and short montages built around music and archival footage, formats designed to entertain or inform, not to provoke. The underlying intention, however, is often precisely to make hierarchy, hostility or distrust look ordinary: something to laugh at, something to admire, or simply something "everyone knows". The Serbian digital landscape captured here is therefore shaped by two overlapping fault lines: a present-day struggle over who counts as a legitimate political actor and an older one over war, nationhood and historical memory, delivered in forms that rarely announce themselves as political at all.

It is this ordinariness, more than any single extreme post, that makes the Serbian sample difficult to police through conventional content moderation, and it is also what the two focus groups found hardest to see consistently. Participants active in civil society organisations tended to decode framing, aesthetics and manipulation almost on sight, while participants from the general youth population more often engaged with the surface topic and treated the content as harmless, silly, or relevant only to "other" people, usually older or less educated audiences. Neither group is simply resilient or simply vulnerable; the difference lies in what each was trained, by circumstance or exposure, to notice. It is this gap, and not a lack of scepticism as such, that media literacy programmes will need to close.

The findings of this report speak directly to Serbia's European path. Legitimate opposition, independent media and a functioning space for public disagreement are among the political conditions the process is designed to build and protect. A digital environment in which everyday disagreement is routinely recast as betrayal works against exactly that objective, regardless of who currently benefits from it politically. For policymakers and practitioners working on Serbia's EU path, this report's findings suggest that resilience to digital radicalisation deserves the same sustained attention as the rule-of-law reforms it is meant to accompany.

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1. Introduction

For a growing share of young people in the Western Balkans, political information arrives through short videos on platforms designed for entertainment, well ahead of traditional media. TikTok occupies a particular place in that shift: it is the fastest-growing social media platform in Serbia,¹ and its audience is concentrated among adolescents and young adults. Its combination of rapid circulation, strong visual appeal and algorithmic amplification of emotionally charged material makes it a distinctive environment for political socialisation, one in which political messages reach young users arranged as entertainment rather than as a separate category of content. Despite this, the region lacks an up-to-date, TikTok-specific study of what content actually reaches young users, how they read it, and why it resonates. While not originally creating political and social divisions, TikTok offers them a remarkably efficient new form. Disputes that offline would require argument, evidence and context can be compressed into a few seconds of music, captions, archival footage, humour and accusation, stripped of much of the context that would ordinarily signal that the viewer is entering a political argument.

Serbia is a particularly instructive case for examining this dynamic. During the observation period (May–August 2026), the Serbian sample of TikTok content units was collected against the backdrop of sustained student-led and civic protests, sharp confrontation between government supporters and opponents, as well as long-standing issues, such as unresolved disputes over Kosovo, and a regional public sphere in which memories of the 1990s remain politically active. The protest movement that emerged after the collapse of the railway station canopy in Novi Sad in November 2024, which killed sixteen people, has kept questions of accountability, corruption and the limits of legitimate dissent at the centre of public life ever since, sharpening the political stakes of who counts as a loyal citizen and who does not. These issues already existed offline, but what the platform changes is the speed, reach and emotional register in which they are rehearsed.

These dynamics matter beyond the immediate question of harmful content online. Serbia's digital public sphere is embedded in a wider regional information space, in which political debates, historical memories and identity-based controversies travel easily across borders and between closely connected linguistic communities. Because Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro share a language and a densely interconnected digital environment, narratives rarely stay within national borders; content produced in one context is consumed, repurposed and amplified in another. At the same time, Serbia's EU accession process places questions of democratic resilience, political pluralism, social cohesion and good-neighbourly relations within a broader framework of political transformation. Accession is not only a matter of technical reform: it presupposes a public sphere in which disagreement can be conducted without recourse to the language of treason. Online radicalisation therefore warrants attention not only as a security concern, but also as a challenge to the quality of democratic debate and to the social conditions in which European integration takes place.

The purpose of this report is therefore narrower than measuring “how radical” Serbian TikTok is, and broader than counting extremist posts. It asks what kinds of radicalising narratives were found in the purposive Serbian sample of 334 Serbian TikTok posts analysed for this study, how those narratives are framed, and how young people interpret them when confronted with the same material. The central question is how everyday political, cultural and historical material can gradually shift the boundaries of what feels normal and acceptable – and what that means for democratic resilience, social cohesion and Serbia's European trajectory.

¹ DataReportal, Digital 2026: Serbia (Kepios, November 2025), <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-serbia>.

2. Conceptualising Digital Radicalisation

RADAR treats radicalisation as a process rather than a switch between “normal” and “extreme”. The concept itself remains contested: scholars have long warned that “radical” views are context-dependent and that radicalisation is too often used as an umbrella term for very different political, social and security phenomena. For that reason, the project does not assume that unconventional or strongly held political positions are inherently dangerous. Its analytical interest begins where content constructs rigid in-groups and out-groups, delegitimises pluralism, normalises exclusion or presents coercion and violence as increasingly legitimate responses.²

A second distinction is equally important: radical opinions and radical action are not the same thing. McCauley and Moskaleiko’s two-pyramids model separates the *radicalisation of opinion* from the *radicalisation of action* precisely because movement along one dimension does not automatically produce movement along the other.³ RADAR follows that caution. Its four-stage continuum – *problematic*, *polarising*, *radicalising* and *mobilising* – classifies the function and intensity of a piece of content. It does not diagnose the person watching it, nor does it imply that exposure to a polarising video will culminate in violence.

This caution about individual outcomes does not make the platform analytically neutral, however. The digital environment still changes the conditions under which political socialisation takes place. Online platforms are best understood as facilitators and accelerators rather than self-contained causes of radicalisation: political context remains central. Yet recommendation systems can influence which ideas repeatedly enter a user’s field of attention. Research on YouTube, for instance, has identified pathways between milder and more extreme online communities, while also cautioning against simplistic claims that algorithms mechanically drive every user down a single “rabbit hole”. TikTok-specific research reinforces this picture, with some studies finding even stronger evidence that personalised recommendations can reinforce far-right content pathways. Such results should still be read as evidence about platform dynamics rather than a deterministic model of individual radicalisation.⁴

Finally, RADAR pays close attention to form. Research on TikTok and other highly visual platforms shows that extremist and exclusionary ideas can be embedded in ordinary social media practices, such as memes, coded humour, attractive aesthetics, music, pop-cultural references and apparently ordinary lifestyle content.⁵ These formats can lower the threshold at which political or ideological messages are encountered, especially when they resemble the broader stream of entertainment and identity-based content that users already consume. For this reason, the analytical framework treats style, tone, visual presentation and platform-specific conventions as integral parts of how radicalising narratives are communicated and made socially intelligible.

- 2 Mark Sedgwick, “The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 22, no. 4 (2010): 479–494, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2010.491009>; Alex P. Schmid, *Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review*, ICCT Research Paper (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.19165/2013.1.02>
- 3 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskaleiko, “Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model,” *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 205–216, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>.
- 4 Donghee Shin and Kulsawasdt Jitkajornwanich, “How Algorithms Promote Self-Radicalization: Audit of TikTok’s AI Algorithm Using a Reverse Engineering Method,” *Social Science Computer Review* 42, no. 4 (2024): 1020–1040, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08944393231225547>; Manoel Horta Ribeiro, Raphael Ottoni, Robert West, Virgilio A. F. Almeida and Wagner Meira, “Auditing Radicalization Pathways on YouTube,” in *Proceedings of the 2020 Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency* (New York: ACM, 2020), 131–141, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3351095.3372879>; Maura Conway, “Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 77–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2016.1157408>.
- 5 Ozge Ozduzen, Nelli Ferenczi and Isabel Holmes, “Let Us Teach Our Children: Online Racism and Everyday Far-Right Ideologies on TikTok,” *Visual Studies* 38, no. 5 (2024): 834–850, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1472586X.2023.2274890>; Gilad Karo, Tom Divon and Blake Hallinan, “The TikTok Caliphate: How Jihadist Supporters Exploit Algorithmic Recommendations and Evade Content Moderation,” *Social Media + Society* 12, no. 1 (2026): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051251412167>.

3. Research Design and Scope

COMMON RADAR RESEARCH DESIGN

The Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro reports use the same conceptual framework, sampling logic, codebook, coding template and focus-group approach. This methodological core is intentionally standardised to enable cross-country comparison. What differs between the national reports are the country context, the sampled material, focus-group dynamics and the interpretation of findings.

The full methodology and codebook are provided in the Annex.

For Serbia, 334 public TikTok posts were collected in several rounds between May and August 2026. The study used purposive sampling rather than a representative feed, which TikTok's personalised delivery makes impossible to define: researchers entered the content environment through structured keyword and hashtag searches and then followed relevant account and content connections through networked snowball sampling. The objective was to map a diverse landscape of radicalising content, not to estimate the probability that an average Serbian user would encounter any particular narrative. All percentages in this report therefore describe the sample only.

Each post was coded along the same dimensions used in all three RADAR countries. For each post, researchers recorded its stage of radicalisation, dominant narrative, primary target, dominant emotional tone, and whether it used conspiratorial framing. The stage of radicalisation was assessed on a four-part continuum reflecting increasing intensity. *Problematic* content normalises stereotypes, distrust or exclusionary thinking, often through humour, sarcasm or insinuation, without yet dividing society into a strict us-versus-them. *Polarising* content constructs that division explicitly, portraying an out-group as threatening, immoral or alien and emphasising grievance and moral outrage, but stopping short of advocating exclusion. *Radicalising* content legitimises exclusion, repression or systemic discrimination, glorifying authoritarian solutions and preparing the audience to accept coercion as justified. *Mobilising* content, the highest stage, calls for concrete action: joining a violent protest, confronting opponents, or spreading the message in coordinated ways. The four stages are mutually exclusive, and where a case sat between two, the lower category was used unless there was clear evidence of escalation.

Each post was also assigned one dominant narrative, understood as the primary worldview framing the content. *Ethno-nationalist and identitarian* narratives place ethnic or national identity above all else, emphasising the purity, supremacy or victimhood of one group while depicting others as inherent threats, frequently drawing on historical grievance and revisionism. *Authoritarian and anti-democratic* narratives valorise strongman rule, obedience and unity over pluralism and accountability, framing democracy itself as weak, corrupt or foreign. *Anti-Western and civilisational* narratives cast the EU, NATO or an abstract "West" as morally corrupt and set on destroying local culture, positioning the country as a frontline in a civilisational clash. *Religious-based hardline* narratives promote rigid, exclusionary interpretations of faith that delegitimise pluralism and secular governance. Because radicalising content frequently blends these registers, the codebook also allowed secondary narratives to be recorded where present.

The "demand side" consisted of two focus groups (FG) held in Belgrade in July 2026, with six participants in each. One group (FG1) brought together young people aged 18-25 active in civil society organisations; the other (FG2) consisted of young people from the general population who were, on average, less politically and socially engaged. Both groups watched the same set of ten pre-coded videos spanning the four stages and several target groups. The focus groups were qualitative and could not be generalised to Serbian youth as a whole. They are most useful as a comparison of how two small groups read the same stimuli. The discussions show

what participants noticed first, what they missed, what they laughed at, what they regarded as political, and where they located vulnerability. Focus-group quotations used below are lightly edited English translations from the Serbian transcripts.

4. The Content Landscape

The Serbian sample sits mainly in the early and middle parts of the radicalisation continuum. Problematic and polarising posts together account for 68.2% of the sample (32.6% and 35.6%, respectively), while 27.2% were coded as radicalising and only 4.5% as mobilising (see Table 1). This distribution reflects what RADAR set out to capture: the stage at which hostility is being normalised rather than acted upon, and at which prevention is still possible. Most sampled posts do not instruct viewers to commit violence or join an extremist organisation; their more common function is to intensify antagonism and, consequently, make repressive and coercive solutions easier to imagine.

Table 1. Stage of radicalisation in the Serbian sample

Stage	Count	%
Problematic	109	32.6
Polarising	119	35.6
Radicalising	91	27.2
Mobilising	15	4.5

Source: RADAR Serbia coded sample (n=334). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

Given the region’s history of ethnic conflict, one might expect ethno-nationalist narratives and ethnic groups as targets to dominate. Instead, the antagonism in the sample is directed inward. The breakdown by dominant narrative is shown in Table 2 (the four narrative categories are defined in the Codebook, reproduced in the Annex). *Authoritarian* and *anti-democratic* narratives form the largest category in the sample, at 43.1%, narrowly ahead of *ethno-nationalist* and *identitarian* content at 38.6%, while anti-Western/civilisational and religious-based hardline content account for 10.8% and 7.5% respectively.

Table 2. Dominant narratives in the Serbian sample

Dominant narrative	Count	%
Authoritarian / Anti-democratic	144	43.1
Ethno-nationalist / Identitarian	129	38.6
Anti-Western / Civilisational	36	10.8
Religious-based Hardline	25	7.5

Source: RADAR Serbia coded sample (n=334). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

Political opponents framed as “traitors” are the most common primary target, appearing in 26.3% of all posts, ahead of ethnic groups at 19.8%. The breakdown by most frequent target groups is in Table 3. Beyond the two leading categories, targeting is more dispersed: Western actors and institutions (9.6%), state actors (8.1%) and LGBTIQ persons (7.5%) together account for a further quarter of the sample, while 8.4% of posts carry no explicit target at all. This, however, does not make ethno-nationalism secondary in political significance. In fact, 43.4% of ethno-nationalist posts fall in the radicalising or mobilising categories, compared with 24.3% of authoritarian/anti-democratic posts. Domestic political conflict is therefore more frequent,

while ethno-nationalist material is disproportionately concentrated in the more severe stages of the continuum, meaning a larger share of it moves beyond normalising hostility towards legitimising exclusion or calling for action.

Table 3. Most frequent primary targets

Target	Count	%
Political opponents / 'traitors'	88	26.3
Ethnic groups	66	19.8
Western actors / institutions	32	9.6
No explicit target	28	8.4
State actors	27	8.1
LGBTIQ persons	25	7.5

Source: RADAR Serbia coded sample (n=334). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

The emotional profile follows a similar logic. *Contempt/dehumanisation* and *pride/superiority* are the two most frequent dominant tones, each appearing in roughly one fifth of the sample (see Table 4). *Fear* follows at 14.1%. The pairing is significant: much of the material works by degrading an out-group while elevating an in-group, sometimes within the same edit. The remaining posts divide mainly between anger, irony and grievance registers, none of which exceeds eleven per cent on its own. Yet 12.3% of posts were coded as appearing *neutral or informational*. That share matters because strong ideological claims can arrive without the visual and rhetorical cues that usually tell viewers they are watching propaganda.

Table 4. Dominant emotional tone in the Serbian sample

Emotional tone	Count	%
Contempt / Dehumanisation	67	20.1
Pride / Superiority	65	19.5
Fear	47	14.1
Neutral / Informational	41	12.3
Anger / Outrage	36	10.8
Irony / Mockery / Provocation	35	10.5
Grievance / Victimhood	29	8.7
Intimidation	8	2.4
Duty / Obligation	6	1.8

Source: RADAR Serbia coded sample (n=334). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

A separate dimension of the coding recorded whether a post relied on conspiratorial framing. *Conspiratorial framing* appears in 21.6% of the sample, but it is highly uneven (see Table 5). More than half of *anti-Western/civilisational* posts use a conspiratorial frame and just over a third of religious-based hardline posts do so, compared with fewer than one in ten ethno-nationalist posts. Nationalist content in this sample usually argues through memory, grievance and loyalty; anti-Western conspiracy content more often argues through hidden coordination, secret plans and supposedly suppressed truths. The two registers are not in competition: they offer viewers different routes to the same conclusion about who belongs and who is working against the national interest.

Table 5. Conspiratorial framing by dominant narrative

Dominant narrative	Posts with conspiratorial framing	Total posts	% with conspiratorial framing
Anti-Western / Civilisational	20	36	55.6
Religious-based Hardline	9	25	36.0
Authoritarian / Anti-democratic	31	144	21.5
Ethno-nationalist / Identitarian	12	129	9.3
All coded posts	72	334	21.6

Source: RADAR Serbia coded sample (n=334).

5. Examining Radicalisation Dynamics

5.1 From Political Opponent to Internal Enemy

The most distinctive Serbian finding is the radicalisation of political disagreement itself. Against the backdrop of heightened political tensions in Serbia set out in the Introduction, across the research sample, protest participants, students, opposition figures, academics and government supporters are repeatedly pushed out of the category of legitimate opponent and into the category of traitor, foreign agent, fascist, criminal or enemy of the state. The target changes with the political position of the creator, but the grammar is remarkably stable: a disagreement over policy or power is translated into a judgement about loyalty to the nation.

The first step in the shift from a political opponent to an internal enemy is often to deny political actors agency by presenting them as *instruments* of someone else. A student speech is cut so that it appears to confirm that the movement serves foreign interests, followed by the caption “Finally confessed!”. Another post shows protesters in Valjevo carrying a red flag and labels it an Albanian flag, despite no Albanian emblem being visible; in the Serbian context, where Albanian national symbolism is often viewed through the prism of the unresolved Kosovo dispute and Kosovo’s predominantly Albanian population, the insinuation recasts a domestic protest as evidence of national betrayal. Elsewhere, a collage of Croatian licence plates is shown without any verifiable context and presented as if the vehicles had been photographed in Kula during local elections, using their alleged presence to suggest Croatian involvement in the protests. This taps into a wider narrative promoted by the authorities, according to which the protests are not a genuine domestic reaction but a “coloured revolution” orchestrated from abroad with the help of domestic interest groups. A cartoon makes the same argument more symbolically, depicting student protesters as sheep using pumps handed to them by a shepherd bearing the face of Tonino Picula, the European Parliament’s rapporteur for Serbia. The choice of a Croatian figure for this cartoon is unlikely to be incidental, given the narrative’s broader emphasis on Croatian involvement. Overall, these are not simply criticisms of the protest movement. Their shared function is to delegitimise autonomous domestic dissent by portraying it as externally directed rather than politically self-generated.

A second step is *humiliation*. Individual protesters are shown chanting, arguing or simply appearing in public and are recast as mentally unstable, sexually deviant or socially contemptible. One woman at a protest is given a mock psychiatric “diagnosis”; in another clip, editing is used to make two people tearing down a poster of the President appear deliberately gender-nonconforming or non-binary, drawing on the stigma attached to such identities in socially conservative settings as an additional form of ridicule. Students are addressed with derogatory labels and compared to “Ustaše”,⁶ while a professor commenting on a religious gathering

⁶ The Ustaša movement ruled the Nazi-aligned Independent State of Croatia between 1941 and 1945 and carried out mass killings of Serbs, Jews and Roma. Used as an epithet in contemporary Serbian political speech, it marks the target as a mortal enemy of the nation rather than a political opponent.

from a sociological perspective is visually depicted as a devil. This kind of low-level personal degradation matters because it shifts the register from political disagreement to contempt: the opponent is presented as not merely wrong, but ridiculous, deviant, diseased or morally contaminated.

A third step moves further up the continuum, where the language becomes more coercive. One post films citizens during a commemorative silence for the victims of the Novi Sad railway station collapse and closes by asking what “normal Serbia” is waiting for before telling viewers to “stop the blockaders”. Another says that a female activist is “asking for a beating”. A third calls on the state to crack down on alleged student “extremists”. The small mobilising tier should not be overgeneralised, but these cases show where the logic can lead: once dissent has been reclassified as national treason, intimidation or force can be presented as defence of the community.

Civil society and the media sit inside the same discursive field even when they are not the primary target. USAID-funded NGOs are described as organisations that conduct revolutions; NGOs become the “deep state” which is allegedly at war against the state; environmental activists are called “eco-terrorists”; and a television guest links activists, influencers, media outlets and ordinary social-media users into a single coordinated network of thousands of operatives. Journalists are labelled propagandists, barred symbolically from the national community, or told that trials may follow political change. In one especially revealing clip, a government minister simply distorts an opposition-leaning journalist’s surname into an insult. Although the technique is almost childish, delegitimisation as its political function works as effectively through mockery as through conspiracy.⁷

The focus groups recognised this dynamic most clearly in an AI-generated image contrasting Serbian soldiers in 1914 with students in 2026 holding slogans such as “Pumpaj!”⁸ and “I don’t want to go to the army”. FG1 immediately noticed that the movement had never taken a position on military service. One participant summarised the manoeuvre:

No representative of the student movement ever took a position on the mandatory conscription, but the passive voter is left with the idea that students despise Serbian war victims.

FG2 also correctly identified the post as an attack on the student movement rather than a debate about conscription, but the conversation quickly moved to participants’ own views on military service. The contrast is instructive: both groups could see the attack, but only one remained focused on how the attack had been constructed.

Taken together, these examples suggest that the main democratic risk in this part of the sample is a shrinking space for legitimate opposition. “Traitor” is powerful precisely because it collapses the distinction between political conflict and national survival. Once that distinction weakens, disagreement no longer requires counterarguments, but exposure, humiliation, or punishment instead.

7 The mechanisms described above, through which a political opponent is turned into an internal enemy, are not confined to pro-government content. Among critics of the authorities, the President and the government are repeatedly portrayed as having betrayed the country to foreign powers or traded away core national interests, most often in relation to Kosovo and lithium extraction, but also over cooperation with NATO and arms exports to Ukraine. Much of this material comes from the radical right, and it too relies on personal degradation rather than political argument. This pattern matters because it shows that the reclassification of political disagreement as national betrayal is not the exclusive property of one political camp. It may also be read, though this study cannot test the claim, as a symptom of a public sphere in which the space for democratic deliberation has narrowed over years: the European Commission has repeatedly warned about pressure on political opponents, civil society and independent media, including through SLAPP suits, and a political culture that treats dissent as disloyalty makes it hard for opponents to stay entirely outside the same register.

8 Literally “Pump it up!”, the central slogan of the student protest movement that emerged after November 2024.

5.2 Recycling the Past

Ethno-nationalist content carries the heaviest historical baggage and is markedly more concentrated at the radicalising and mobilising end of the sample. Kosovo, Srebrenica, Jasenovac,⁹ Operation Storm, wartime leaders and the Hague Tribunal appear not as closed historical topics but as reusable emotional resources. Short-form video often removes chronology and historical argument and leaves a simpler moral sequence: our suffering, their guilt, our heroes, their betrayal.

Srebrenica shows this variation particularly clearly. Some posts relativise the genocide or use fragments of outside commentary to reinforce denial, while others move further into direct distortion of the historical record. For example, a video includes an AI-generated gravestone suggesting that a person “buried in Srebrenica” is actually living in Germany. Other posts use archival footage of Ratko Mladić¹⁰ addressing Bosniak women, telling them that they will be transferred to territory controlled by Bosniak forces and that their lives will be spared. Set to patriotic music and accompanied by selective on-screen text highlighting expressions of gratitude, the clip reframes what was in practice the forced removal of civilians from their homes as an act of protection and benevolence, helping construct a heroic image of the commander. At the most explicit end, footage of Bosniak forces, in which fighters are heard saying that Serbs should be killed, is followed by celebratory images of Ratko Mladić entering Srebrenica on 11 July, set to upbeat music and his dedication of the town to the Serbian people. The juxtaposition casts the subsequent violence as retaliation and turns Mladić’s entry into Srebrenica into a moment of triumph rather than a prelude to mass killing.

Kosovo is even more pervasive because it bridges historical grievance and current politics. One video shows violent clashes in northern Kosovo over a nationalist song promising that “there will be days for battle”; another adds the voiceover, “whoever wants to fight, we are here and we are stronger”. A montage combines soldiers, the Kosovo Liberation Army symbol, wartime scenes and photographs of killed Serbian service members, turning remembrance into a narrative of unfinished territorial duty. In a particularly explicit example, an AI-generated video imagines a hypothetical Serbia–Kosovo war “without international interference”, showing tanks, aircraft, soldiers and explosions before claiming that the Serbian army would complete the operation in less than 72 hours. Here, the unresolved dispute is transformed into an attractive simulation of a future military victory, offering a visual reversal of the powerlessness and grievance that shape much of the Kosovo-related content.

The same logic can become openly intimidating. One video tells Croats that a Serbian pilot who fled Operation Storm as a child now flies a MiG-29 carrying a missile nicknamed “Zagrepcanka”¹¹ ending with the question “Does this seem scary to you, Croats?”. Another imagines the Serbian army entering Zagreb in the unspecified “20XX” year, using AI-generated imagery to place future conquest beside historical photographs of armies entering the city. A further clip overlays patriotic symbols, armed men and fire with the promise that Serbia will be “re-born” and that there will be “no more enclaves”. These posts are intended to aestheticise the idea that military force could settle historical disputes.

Identity itself is also contested. Some content denies the distinctiveness of neighbouring nations or religious communities, for example by presenting Bosniaks as Serbs who converted to Islam or insisting that Montenegrins are Serbs regardless of their own identification. A podcast guest tells Muslims to move to Bosnia and “take their mosques with them”, while presenting Sandžak¹² as exclusively Serbian historical space. On the other side of the regional antagonism,

9 The largest concentration camp in the Independent State of Croatia, where tens of thousands of Serbs, Jews and Roma were killed between 1941 and 1945. Estimates of the death toll remain contested and politically charged in the region.

10 Commander of the Bosnian Serb Army during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, convicted by the ICTY in 2017 of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, including for the Srebrenica killings. The conviction was upheld on appeal in 2021.

11 In Serbian and Croatian, *Zagrepcanka* means a woman from Zagreb. This is not the missile’s actual designation but a nickname coined in the video itself, and the joke carries an intimidating message: that the weapon can reach the Croatian capital and is meant for use against it in the event of an armed confrontation with Croatia.

12 A historical region straddling the border between Serbia and Montenegro, with a significant Bosniak population.

a religious leader warns Muslims that “Greater Serbia” remains a permanent Serbian objective and urges them not to trust Serbs. The sample therefore contains not one nationalist narrative but interacting narratives that can validate each other across communal lines.

The focus groups repeatedly returned to the possibility of reciprocal radicalisation across communities. Discussing an anti-Albanian stereotype, one FG2 participant imagined an Albanian living in Preševo¹³ seeing the post, responding with “Kosovo is Albania”, and triggering another cycle of hostile comments. FG1 arrived at a similar point through personal experience. One of the videos shown to the group juxtaposed attractive images of the Croatian coast with references to Jasenovac and Operation Storm, ending with the caption “The sea is cold after the Storm”¹⁴ while simultaneously advertising a clothing brand built around nationalist symbols and patriotic imagery. A participant contrasted this kind of mediated hostility with an actual visit to Zagreb and concluded:

These things work on people who have had no contact with the other side. It isn't all black and white.

The example is revealing on several levels. The video relies on an imagined and homogenised “other”, while the participant’s own cross-border experience introduced precisely the kind of complexity that such narratives tend to erase. At the same time, the post turns nationalist grievance into a lifestyle marker. The message is not confined to historical memory or political rhetoric: it is attached to clothing, visual identity, travel and consumer choice. The implied call to avoid holidaying on the Croatian coast sits alongside the promotion of nationalist apparel, making political and historical antagonism part of everyday self-presentation and lifestyle. In this form, post-conflict narratives can remain socially and culturally present among younger audiences without appearing as formal political communication.

5.3 The West as a Hidden Hand

Anti-Western and civilisational content is smaller in volume than the two dominant narratives, but it has the strongest relationship with conspiracy. Twenty of the 36 posts in this category use conspiratorial framing. The recurring argument is not simply that Western governments or institutions pursue interests that may conflict with Serbia’s. On the contrary – they claim that visible events are surface evidence of a concealed system: NATO, USAID, the EU, international organisations, foundations, intelligence services and domestic actors are woven into a single architecture of manipulation.

Some of this material is recognisably geopolitical. A television guest describes the West as having killed Serbs “for centuries” and presents closer relations with Russia as the natural alternative. NATO is explained as a fascist organisation animated by secret “evil forces”, while Serbia-NATO cooperation is later framed as proof that every government since 2000 has collaborated with an occupying power. A speaker links infrastructure destroyed in the 1999 bombing with contemporary foreign investors and the exploitation of Serbian natural resources, turning very different episodes into a single historical continuum of external attack. The political argument is powerful because it begins from experiences that are real – bombing, foreign pressure, contested economic projects – and then extends them into a totalising account of permanent Western hostility.

Other posts move much further from conventional geopolitics. Vaccines become a WHO or “pharmaceutical mafia” depopulation weapon directed at the white race; an art installation

¹³ A municipality in southern Serbia with a predominantly ethnic Albanian population.

¹⁴ The caption plays on the double meaning of *oluja*, which in Serbian and Croatian means both a storm and, capitalised, Operation Storm. The line therefore reads simultaneously as a remark about the Adriatic being cold after bad weather and as a reference to the Croatian military operation conducted between 4 and 7 August 1995, which ended the self-proclaimed Republic of Serbian Krajina and restored Croatian control over the territory. Around 200,000 Serbs left the area during and immediately after the operation, and several hundred civilians, mostly elderly people who had stayed behind, were killed. The operation is commemorated in Croatia as a victory that secured the state, and in Serbia as the largest displacement of Serbs during the wars of the 1990s. Both readings circulate widely in the regional online space, which is what makes the pun legible to audiences on either side.

in the European Parliament becomes proof that “humanoid lizards” are revealing themselves; decisions about the standardisation of the Serbian language are said to be made in London in order to destroy the national spirit; and prominent European women leaders are presented as the literal daughters of Adolf Hitler. The specific claims vary wildly, but the commonplace is that institutions are lying, appearances are deceptive, while the creator is offering access to the hidden pattern.

Conspiracy theories also spill directly into domestic politics, where complex political and social developments are frequently recast as the product of hidden coordination. USAID-funded organisations are presented as engines of revolution; universities as producers of “auto-chauvinists” connected to foreign ambassadors; protest organisers as paid networks; and prominent civil-society figures as actors in a broader plan against the country. One video on lithium mining shows a map of Serbia covered with red warning symbols, with no legend, source or explanation of what the markers represent. In the context of the highly contentious debate over lithium extraction and its potential environmental impact, the visual arrangement suggests that all of the marked locations are sites where mining is planned or being prepared, thereby creating an impression of a country-wide threat without providing evidence for that interpretation. In another post, a woman connects public figures, media outlets, billboards and cultural events to an alleged plan to “clean” Serbia of Serbs. Across these examples, conspiracy narratives impose a single hidden intention on otherwise disparate actors and developments, making political conflict easier to read as coordinated subversion rather than as a mixture of competing interests, institutions and public controversies.

Russia appears in this material mainly as a symbolic counterpoint rather than as an empirically demonstrated coordinator. Vladimir Putin is shown praising Serbs as a people who cannot be broken by Western pressure, with Orthodox music connecting national resilience to a broader Slavic-Christian identity. Other clips praise Russian military power or frame Russia as the only actor capable of resisting the “New World Order”. The dataset does not provide a basis for claims about direct Russian orchestration of the Serbian TikTok ecosystem. However, what it does show is that Russia can function as a positive civilisational reference inside a narrative in which the West is corrupt and hostile.

FG1 recognised this geopolitical grammar immediately in the anti-Pride stimulus. A protester did not merely insult LGBTIQ people; she told police officers that they were protecting a “NATO empire” occupying the country. Participants noted how familiar terms – “NATO”, “empire”, “foreign mercenaries”, “traitors” – allow unrelated domestic conflicts to be inserted into the same story of occupation. FG2, by contrast, struggled even to establish that the footage concerned Pride and reacted only weakly when the occupation language was pointed out. What differs here is not simply political knowledge, but the ability to recognise how a local social conflict is being reframed through a much broader geopolitical narrative. In such cases, conspiratorial language does much of its work by supplying a ready-made explanation for events that would otherwise require more context and interpretation.

This pattern is also relevant to Serbia’s EU debate. The purposive sample does not support a claim that anti-EU content dominates Serbian TikTok, yet what appears more significant is the way a broader conspiratorial and civilisational register can delegitimise social actors, institutions and relationships associated with European integration without referring to accession negotiations directly. “The West” becomes a flexible explanation for domestic protest, minority rights, NGO activity, economic policy, or even public health and cultural exchange. This creates a discursive environment in which criticism of particular Western policies can be folded into a much broader narrative of national victimhood, external interference and hidden control.

5.4 Making Radical Ideas Ordinary

A notable part of the Serbian sample communicates radicalising ideas through formats that do not immediately look political or extreme. Humour and ostensibly neutral explanations can carry exclusionary or conspiratorial messages without the visual language normally associated with propaganda. In practice, this can make such content easier to consume, share and absorb as part of an ordinary social media feed.

The clearest focus-group example is a calm video about the “traditional Orthodox family”. A woman presents the subordination of the wife to her husband as the family model supposedly supported by modern psychology. She argues that marriage should be lifelong and without exceptions, while women should influence their husbands through gentleness rather than exercise equal authority within the relationship. The delivery itself is deliberately unthreatening: the speaker is conventionally attractive, the music is pleasant, and the message is framed as advice rather than political or religious mobilisation. FG1 nevertheless identified this packaging almost immediately, arguing that the combination of aesthetics, tone and religious symbolism makes hierarchy appear as affection, stability and common sense. FG2 approached the same video primarily as a question of personal preference; as one participant put it: “If someone wants to live that way, that’s fine” – without initially engaging with the broader claim that this particular family model was being presented as universally desirable and psychologically optimal. The contrast illustrates why apparently benign lifestyle content deserves attention within the wider radicalisation continuum.

Similar “explanatory” formats appear across other targets. A young man directs gay viewers towards so-called “reintegrative” therapy and presents homosexuality as a condition that can be changed, ending with the statement that it is “not from God”. A studio speaker claims there are no blind people who are gay and uses the assertion as evidence that homosexuality is not innate. Priests discuss abortion as murder, women as naturally subordinate, or social change as the reason marriages fail. In each case, authority comes from the performance of certainty in which the speaker appears to be explaining how the world works.

Humour can do the same work from the opposite direction. Old television clips, influencer banter and short meme edits turn LGBTIQ people, women, political opponents or ethnic groups into punchlines. A comedy clip proposes sending gay people to Goli Otok;¹⁵ other videos use homophobic slurs with laughing emojis or deliberately childish insults. Political material is similarly processed through mockery: opposition figures are given distorted names, protest participants are edited to look absurd, and memes construct entire camps as stupid. The humour creates plausible deniability because the viewer can always say it was “just a joke”, while allowing the underlying social hierarchy to be rehearsed repeatedly.

AI-generated imagery adds another layer because it allows impossible scenes to be produced with the visual confidence of a photograph. The student/1914 comparison used in the focus groups is one example. The Srebrenica denial meme with a fabricated gravestone is another. A separate montage imagines Serbian forces entering Zagreb in a future year, visually inserting territorial fantasy into a sequence that resembles historical documentation. AI is not itself radicalising, but it lowers the cost of manufacturing apparently concrete evidence for narratives that previously depended on text or imagination.

Finally, TikTok often functions less as the birthplace of a message than as its second life. A significant portion of videos comes from an off-platform source such as television, a podcast, an interview, a sermon or a public speech. This means that a two-hour discussion can reappear as thirty seconds of the most inflammatory statement, wrapped in new captions and music. The clip may reach viewers who would never watch the original programme and may remove the cues that identify a speaker’s role, the question they were answering, or the argument around them.

¹⁵ A prison island in the northern Adriatic, used by socialist Yugoslavia from 1949 to intern political prisoners. It remains a byword across the region for political imprisonment and repression.

6. How Young People Read Radicalising Content

The two focus groups approached the same videos in noticeably different ways. Table 6 summarises how the two groups diverged across the main dimensions of the discussion. Participants active in civil society (FG1) were generally more inclined to analyse how a message had been constructed, while participants from the general population (FG2) more often engaged first with the issue or claim being presented. They looked for different things: FG1 participants tended to focus on the source, editing choices, intended audience, political context and the relationship between the video and the platform around it, whereas FG2 more often expressed their own view on the subject before turning to questions of framing or manipulation. This difference did not mean that FG2 was unable to recognise manipulation. Rather, recognition was more dependent on the topic, and analytical observations more often emerged after prompting by the moderator.

Table 6. How the two focus groups read the same material

Dimension	FG1 – civil society youth	FG2 – general population youth
Primary focus	Construction of the message: framing, aesthetics, context, manipulation	The subject itself and personal opinion on it
Recognition	Mostly spontaneous and elaborated	More often prompted and short-lived
Context and target	Usually reconstructed quickly	Sometimes missed or left unclear
Humour	Analysed as part of the message	Often used to dismiss or disengage
Perceived vulnerability	Younger adolescents; own desensitisation also acknowledged	Older or “already predisposed” people; own immunity emphasised
View of influence	Reinforcement and normalisation of existing attitudes	Limited influence except on people already inclined to agree

Source: RADAR Serbia focus groups, Belgrade, July 2026.

A useful example came from a video claiming, in an ostensibly informational register, that the Serbian government would abandon its support to Republika Srpska if the ruling party were to lose the next elections. FG2 participants were initially drawn into discussing the claim itself. Some nevertheless became suspicious because the clip gave little indication of who was speaking or on what authority, while a participant with personal ties to Republika Srpska regarded the claim as implausible. After further discussion, one participant described its likely audience as someone

who does not have critical thinking, who is already inclined towards those views.

The exchange suggests that source uncertainty can generate scepticism even where the ideological framing is not immediately identified. At the same time, the tendency to locate susceptibility primarily among people who are already predisposed would recur throughout the session.

Another video focused on a large Orthodox religious gathering by assembling short excerpts of prominent political activists, civil-society representatives, intellectuals and other public figures commenting critically on the event. The clips themselves are then framed by on-screen captions accusing a “self-appointed intellectual elite” of despising believers of the Serbian Orthodox Church, thereby recasting criticism of the gathering as hostility towards the religious community itself. Rather than clearly accepting or rejecting this framing, FG2 largely interpreted the controversy through symmetry. Participants debated the number of people who could realistically have attended the gathering and eventually settled on the view that exaggeration

existed on both sides:

He is exaggerating, but the other side is exaggerating as well – there was provocation from both sides.

This instinct towards balancing competing claims can be a form of healthy scepticism, but in the discussion it also sometimes displaced the question of what the video itself was doing: transforming a set of critical comments into evidence that an entire social group was hostile to Orthodox believers.

Humour produced a similar ambiguity. A heavily edited clip mocking a pro-government singer through the language of Serbia's current political divisions (*ćaci* as a slur word for government supporters) was simply described by some FG2 participants as "funny and cute". Other videos produced comparable reactions: participants could praise one as "very well produced" while saying little about its political framing. In FG1, by contrast, participants tended to regard entertainment value itself as something worth examining. They were particularly attentive to creators who move between ordinary entertainment and ideological content. As one participant put it,

What matters is who serves us the content. The problem is influencers who post some things as entertainment and some as 'Kosovo is Serbia' – and we gradually become desensitised.

For these participants, the credibility of the messenger and the familiarity of the surrounding content could matter as much as the explicit political message.

The groups differed most sharply when asked who is actually affected. FG1 participants did not describe radicalisation as a process in which a video suddenly converts an otherwise neutral viewer. Their own account was closer to reinforcement: family background, existing attitudes and repeated exposure establish the starting point, while personalised feeds can intensify what is already there. One participant summarised this unusually candidly:

What they actually do is feed each of us our own opinion. We have all become more radical in the views we already held. They do not create someone from scratch – but they considerably radicalise and increase hatred and polarisation.

Importantly, the group included itself in this process. Participants spoke about becoming accustomed to hate speech and violent imagery and about the ease with which AI-generated material can be dismissed as "only AI" while still contributing to a broader process of desensitisation. They were especially concerned about younger adolescents, whom they saw as encountering this material before developing the contextual knowledge needed to interpret it critically.

FG2 located the risk much further away from itself. A recurring view was that young people of their own age were unlikely to be influenced and that potentially the most affected audience consisted of older or technologically less literate people. One participant asked:

Who could believe this – only older people, who maybe are less technologically literate and automatically believe whatever comes up.

There was also a strong assumption that radicalising content reaches only people who actively seek it or are already interested in politics. The session also showed that some of the political context and intended targets of the videos could go unnoticed. The point is not that FG2 participants were therefore more susceptible – two small focus groups cannot establish that – but that confidence in one's own immunity does not necessarily correspond to greater awareness of how political framing works.

This difference carried into the discussion of possible responses. FG1 participants were comparatively willing to discuss media literacy, platform responsibility and protections aimed particularly at younger users, although they were realistic about the ease with which age restrictions could be circumvented. FG2 was more sceptical that schools or civil society could substantially influence attitudes formed elsewhere. As one participant put it,

Our peers think with their own heads – you cannot impose anything on them if they do not want to think differently.

The two positions capture a broader tension in how young people understand digital influence. One sees political attitudes as continually shaped and reinforced by the information environment; the other places considerably more weight on individual autonomy and pre-existing beliefs. Neither focus group can establish which model applies to Serbian youth as a whole. Together, however, they show that resilience is not simply a matter of recognising whether a particular claim is true or false. It also involves recognising when a seemingly ordinary piece of content is trying to organise political meaning in the first place.

7. What the Serbian Case Tells Us about Digital Radicalisation

Early-stage digital radicalisation, as it appears in the Serbian material, is better understood as a shift in the terms on which ordinary political and social questions are interpreted than as the diffusion of a discrete extremist ideology. Most of the content examined in this study begins from recognisable disputes: over the government and the protests, over national identity and religion, over gender, over relations with neighbouring states and Serbia's place in Europe. Disagreement of this kind is unexceptional, and Serbian politics has never lacked it. What makes parts of this content radicalising is the conversion of such disputes into absolute categories. Political responsibility is recast as treason and social difference as moral corruption; uncertainty becomes evidence of hidden coordination, and historical grievance a standing claim on the present.

That process is easier to observe in Serbia because the sharpest fault line in the sample was domestic rather than ethnic. In a post-conflict society one might expect ethno-nationalist narratives to dominate; instead, the most frequent targets were political opponents portrayed as disloyal, and authoritarian or anti-democratic framings slightly outnumbered ethno-nationalist ones. The two are more distinct in the coding scheme than in political speech, and the figure of the traitor is what joins them. It allows a student protester, an NGO activist, a journalist, or an official to be judged in a moral vocabulary once reserved for questions of national survival. This narrows the space in which disagreement can remain legitimate, and it does so asymmetrically: the accusation is available to any political camp, but in this sample, it fell overwhelmingly on those contesting power rather than on those holding it.

This bears on democratic resilience more directly than the presence of openly extremist material. Democracy does not require citizens to hold moderate views or to treat their opponents gently. However, it does require that some distinction survive between an adversary, whose ideas and actions can be opposed, and an enemy, whose participation or even existence is itself illegitimate. The Serbian material tests that boundary repeatedly. Where political competition is narrated as a contest between the authentic community and those acting for foreign powers, hostile minorities or hidden networks, the ordinary democratic question of whether a given argument or policy is acceptable gives way to a question about loyalty. A question of loyalty cannot be settled by debate, because it is not about policy at all.

As for the regional dimension, online platforms do not merely keep the memory of the Yugoslav wars alive; they alter the social form in which that memory is encountered. For a generation with no direct experience of the conflicts, wartime categories now arrive alongside music, humour, fashion, and design. Their political force is not thereby diluted. If anything, antagonism becomes easier to absorb into everyday identity once engaging with it no longer requires at-

tendance at a rally or membership of an ideological community. Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Croatia do not occupy separate online public spheres, and neither do the nationalisms produced within them. A statement made for one audience is easily stripped of context and recirculated elsewhere as proof of what “they” really think. The regional connectivity that has made travel, work and cultural exchange easier also allows mutually antagonistic narratives to sustain one another. The focus groups offered a useful counterpoint: participants with direct experience of people across the border found the homogeneous images circulating online harder to accept.

The findings also reframe the question of European integration. Public debate normally approaches it through stated attitudes: whether citizens support accession, trust the EU institutions, or approve of particular policies. The RADAR material points to another layer. Accession unfolds within a social environment in which citizens form judgements about political pluralism, civil society, minorities, neighbouring states and the legitimacy of institutions, and each of these can be delegitimised without the EU being mentioned once. A narrative in which NGOs are foreign operatives, opponents are instruments of external powers, neighbours are permanent adversaries and cooperation is a form of submission erodes the domestic conditions accession depends on – a functioning civil society, legitimate opposition and workable relations with neighbours – while saying nothing at all about negotiating chapters or membership.

These patterns also help explain why early-stage radicalisation is so difficult to identify, let alone address. It does not necessarily involve an extremist organization or even content that presents itself as explicitly political. More often, it works by gradually changing the terms through which political questions are interpreted. Debates about the European Union, democracy or the wars of the 1990s can therefore be recast without any of these issues being discussed with arguments. On the contrary – what increasingly matters is not whether a claim holds, but who makes it and which political side that person is assumed to represent. This also exposes the limits of content moderation, since very few of the posts examined here would violate platform rules. The Serbian case therefore suggests that interventions need to begin earlier, by helping young people recognise the point at which disagreement over policy, history or identity starts to be framed primarily as a test of political or group loyalty.

8. Conclusion

The Serbian case points to a form of digital radicalisation that is embedded in mainstream political and social conflict rather than confined to clearly extremist spaces. Ethno-nationalist grievance remains an important part of the picture, particularly in more intense forms of content, but the sample also shows how readily the language of national loyalty, betrayal and external threat migrates into contemporary domestic politics. Students, opposition figures, civil-society actors, journalists and government representatives can all be placed within the same moral vocabulary of loyalty and disloyalty, though the sample is clearly asymmetrical: those contesting power were targeted far more often than those exercising it. At the same time, older conflicts are being adapted to the conventions of short-form media: wartime memory is condensed into music, memes and visual montages; nationalist identity becomes associated with clothing, tourism or consumer choice; and conspiratorial claims are often framed as though the creator were simply laying out the evidence presented in the register of explanation rather than advocating for a specific ideology. These developments do not mean that every such post should be regarded as extremist. They do, however, show how the boundaries between legitimate political disagreement, exclusionary rhetoric and more explicitly radicalising narratives can become increasingly difficult to separate in everyday digital communication.

None of this points towards a straightforward remedy. Very little of the material examined here breaks platform rules, and much of it would survive any moderation regime plausible under current regulation, which means the response has to be built elsewhere. The most immediate implication concerns media literacy, which in Serbia still tends to be organised around verification, teaching young people to check whether a claim is true. The focus groups suggest this

addresses the smaller part of the problem, and that building resilience requires familiarity with the techniques of political framing rather than with facts alone. For the institutions responsible for Serbia's EU accession agenda, the finding carries a further implication. Democratic resilience is usually assessed through laws, institutions and formal guarantees, yet the conditions those guarantees depend on are being negotiated daily in a space that sits largely outside the scope of formal accession monitoring. What this study describes is a process still at an early stage. There are no extremist organisations recruiting in this material, almost no direct calls to violence, and likely nothing that a security service would recognise as an immediate threat. That is precisely why it is worth attending to now: the habits of interpretation formed in adolescence tend to outlast the events that produced them, and generations that learn to read disagreement as disloyalty or national betrayal will carry that reading into how they vote, protest and treat their neighbours.

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Annex A. Methodology for Mapping Radicalising Content on TikTok

A.1 Overview and Analytical Framework

The RADAR project was designed to provide a systematic, comparable overview of radicalising content on TikTok encountered by young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia. Rather than attempting to quantify the overall prevalence of extremist messages on the platform, the methodology aimed to map the landscape of narratives and trajectories that may contribute to early stages of radicalisation among youth. It did so by combining a conceptual framework grounded in contemporary research on digital radicalisation with a practical protocol for sampling and analysing public TikTok content.

At the heart of the analytical framework is the notion that radicalisation is a continuum of escalating intensity. Content is not simply extremist or non-extremist; rather, it moves from normalising harmful stereotypes (problematic) through sharpening antagonisms (polarising) to delegitimising pluralism and endorsing exclusion (radicalising) and ultimately encouraging concrete action (mobilising). To capture the ways in which these stages are articulated, the framework also differentiated between major narrative types, namely ethno-nationalist/identitarian, religious-based hardline, authoritarian/anti-democratic and anti-Western/civilisational, and identified targets, emotional tones and conspiratorial framing. The accompanying codebook defines these categories in detail and should be read alongside this methodology.

The time-bounded design acknowledged the fluid and fast-changing nature of TikTok content. The goal was not to provide statistical generalisations but to identify dominant patterns and illustrate pathways of escalation within a specific observation window. The observation period allowed for manageable data collection while capturing enough variation to recognise common themes and dynamics across countries.

A.2 Unit of Analysis and Scope

The unit of analysis was a single, publicly available TikTok post (video or photo) together with its directly observable context. This included the post's visual and audio content, any on-screen text, the caption, hashtags and stickers used. Comments posted by viewers were not systematically coded; they were consulted only to clarify ambiguous cases. Each entry in the dataset represents a single instance of exposure to a TikTok post within a specific national context. The same video could therefore be coded more than once if it was encountered by researchers in different country contexts. The objective was not to eliminate duplication across countries, but to capture similarities and overlaps in exposure patterns.

The research focused strictly on content rather than on account owners or audiences. Researchers did not attempt to profile or speculate about the identity of video creators or viewers. All content analysed was publicly accessible; private or restricted posts were excluded. Because TikTok's algorithm recommends content across national borders, the methodology did not attempt to determine the geographic origin of videos. Instead, it recorded the exposure context, that is, the country in which the content was encountered by the research account. Self-declared locations or obvious regional references, such as flags or place names, were noted in the data, but coders did not infer origins in the absence of clear cues.

TikTok's dynamic environment means that content is continuously updated and removed, and the study could only analyse videos available at the time of capture. Researchers therefore stored copies of the content, either by downloading the videos through TikTok's share function or through screen recording where downloading was disabled, so that coding could proceed even if the original post was deleted.

A.3 Sampling Strategy and Content Identification

TikTok content is algorithmically curated and continuously changing, which makes probability-based or representative sampling unfeasible. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the study adopted a purposive sampling approach designed to systematically capture diverse forms

of radicalising content encountered by young users during a defined observation period. Content collection was organised into two complementary sampling streams, implemented in parallel by each country team.

Structured keyword and hashtag search. Content collection began with structured keyword- and hashtag-based searches conducted through a newly created, clean TikTok research account in each country. Each account was configured with the relevant local language, age category and geographic settings, and was used exclusively for research purposes. Researchers conducted targeted searches using a predefined and jointly developed list of keywords and hashtags associated with radicalising discourses in the Western Balkans. The list included references to historical events, political slogans, slurs and conspiracy terms known to carry ideological or exclusionary messages. Searches were performed in the local language (BCMS). The keyword list remained iterative: where new relevant terms emerged during fieldwork, they were documented and incorporated following team discussion to ensure consistency across countries.

Networked snowball sampling. Building on content identified through keyword- and hashtag-based searches, researchers applied network-based sampling focused on account-level connections. Starting from accounts that produced or shared radicalising content, researchers followed relevant account linkages, such as accounts that reshared the content, accounts followed by or following the originating account, or accounts that repeatedly circulated similar narratives. The purpose of this sampling stream was to capture clusters of interconnected accounts through which radicalising narratives are sustained, echoed or amplified over time. Researchers used professional judgement in determining which connections were analytically relevant, focusing on narrative continuity rather than exhaustive network mapping. Network-based exploration was bounded and selective, and researchers stopped tracing connections once additional accounts no longer contributed substantively new narratives, frames or escalation patterns.

A.3.1 Rationale for excluding baseline feed sampling

The methodology did not include a passive or baseline For You feed. RADAR did not seek to measure the probability of first-time exposure to radicalising content or to approximate an average new-user experience on TikTok. Fully passive feeds tend to surface limited and highly variable amounts of political or ideologically charged material, and their inclusion would not have substantially advanced the project's analytical objectives. Baseline feeds are also particularly vulnerable to algorithmic contamination once researchers engage in keyword searches, extended viewing or content capture.

The sampling strategy therefore prioritised search-driven discovery and network-based exploration, which together allowed for systematic identification of relevant narratives and a richer analysis of how radicalising content circulates and escalates within TikTok's algorithmic environment.

A.3.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A video was included if it contained verbal, textual or visual material corresponding to one or more categories in the radicalisation continuum, as defined in the codebook. This included humorous or ironic content that normalises prejudice, divisive rhetoric, calls for repression, or mobilisation to act. Videos were excluded if they were purely entertainment without any ideological or exclusionary content, personal vlogs unrelated to social or political issues, or advertisements. Ambiguous cases were flagged for discussion with the research team.

A.3.3 Sample size and distribution across narratives

The target sample size was approximately 300 to 400 videos per country over the observation period. This range was intended to ensure sufficient analytical depth while remaining feasible for systematic coding and quality control. For Serbia, 334 posts were collected in several rounds between May and August 2026.

Researchers were not required to collect equal numbers of videos for each radicalisation stage or narrative type. The sample was intended to reflect the actual distribution of content encountered through the applied sampling strategy, rather than enforcing artificial quotas.

At the same time, researchers sought to ensure reasonable coverage of the different radicalising narratives, namely ethno-nationalist/identitarian, religious-based hardline, authoritarian/anti-democratic and anti-Western/civilisational. Where one narrative type became overwhelmingly dominant in the sample, researchers used targeted searches to supplement under-represented narratives where relevant content existed. The aim was analytical balance rather than statistical proportionality. Final decisions on sample composition were guided by researcher judgement and reviewed by the principal investigator to ensure cross-country comparability.

A.3.4 Sampling documentation

Videos were stored securely in a shared project folder and named using the country code and the corresponding row number from the country coding template, for example SRB_017, BIH_042 or MNE_005.

A.4 Coding Scheme and Classification Logic

After content collection, each video was coded using the structured template provided with the codebook. The coding scheme involved several layers.

- **Stage of radicalisation.** Coders assigned exactly one stage, namely problematic, polarising, radicalising or mobilising, based on the dominant function of the content. Detailed definitions and examples are provided in the codebook. Where multiple elements were present, coders selected the lower stage unless there was clear evidence of escalation.
- **Dominant narrative.** Coders identified the primary narrative framing the message: ethno-nationalist/identitarian, religious-based hardline, authoritarian/anti-democratic, or anti-Western/civilisational. Additional narratives were noted in secondary fields.
- **Target.** Coders selected the single most prominent group depicted as a threat or enemy from the list provided: ethnic groups, religious groups, state actors, LGBTIQ persons, migrants and refugees, women and feminists, political opponents, journalists and media, civil society and activists, Western actors and institutions, a generalised “they”, or no explicit target. Secondary targets were recorded but limited to two.
- **Emotional tone.** Coders assigned the dominant emotional tone and, optionally, one secondary tone from the following: anger/outrage, fear, intimidation, grievance/victimhood, contempt/dehumanisation, pride/superiority, irony/mockery/provocation, duty/obligation, and neutral/informational. The tone reflected the emotion the content most forcefully sought to elicit. Because over-selection diminishes analytical value, coders applied this field conservatively.
- **Conspiratorial framing.** Coders marked this binary field as Yes where the content explicitly stated or clearly implied that events are controlled by hidden plots, secret coordination or deliberate deception by powerful actors. Ambiguous insinuations without clear framing were coded as No.
- **Analytical note.** A concise narrative comment of one to three sentences explaining the reasoning behind the coding choices and noting any ambiguities or contextual factors.

The codebook elaborates each category with examples. Coders familiarised themselves with the definitions before coding and consulted the research team where uncertainties arose, since consistency in applying these categories is essential for cross-country comparability.

A.5 Quality Assurance and Researcher Coordination

Ensuring consistency across country teams was central to the design. The following measures supported inter-coder reliability and data quality.

- **Joint training.** Before fieldwork, all researchers participated in a joint training session led by the principal investigator. The session reviewed the analytical framework, codebook definitions and sampling procedures. Researchers coded a small set of sample videos together, discussed differences and refined interpretations.

- **Pilot coding.** Each team coded a pilot batch of approximately 30 to 50 videos from their initial sampling. Results were compared and discrepancies discussed in a calibration meeting, in order to identify recurring points of divergence and clarify ambiguous definitions before the main coding began.
- **Documentation of edge cases.** During coding, teams maintained a shared log of difficult or borderline videos, including brief descriptions, initial coding and open questions. The principal investigator reviewed these cases, provided guidance and updated the codebook or instructions where recurrent patterns of confusion emerged.
- **Regular check-ins.** Short weekly meetings were held during data collection to raise questions, share observations about emerging narratives and ensure adherence to the sampling schedule. These meetings also provided an opportunity to adjust the keyword list where unexpected discourses emerged.
- **Central oversight.** The principal investigator held ultimate responsibility for methodological fidelity, reviewing coded data, providing feedback, adjudicating contested classifications and ensuring that the methodology was followed uniformly. Where necessary, the principal investigator requested recoding of specific items or adjustments to the sampling strategy.
- **Secure and consistent data management.** All teams stored data in a secure, shared online repository with clearly named folders and version control. Access was restricted to authorised researchers. File naming conventions were standardised, and the project maintained a separate backup of all raw videos and coded datasets.

A.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

A.6.1 Ethical considerations

- **Non-amplification of extremist content.** Researchers did not share or repost extremist or radicalising content outside the research context. Captured videos were used solely for analysis.
- **Anonymity and privacy.** No personal data beyond what was publicly available was collected. Where examples are presented in reports, pseudonyms or generic labels are used and faces are obscured where appropriate.
- **Child protection.** Where content depicted minors or was explicitly directed at children, researchers handled it with heightened sensitivity, in line with national child protection legislation and standard research ethics principles. Content involving minors is not reproduced, circulated or used in public outputs. Any material appearing to involve child abuse, sexual exploitation or serious harm to minors was not stored beyond what was strictly necessary for documentation and was reported to the relevant national authorities in accordance with domestic law.
- **Researcher well-being.** Exposure to hateful or distressing content can be mentally taxing. Teams operated a rotation system to limit continuous exposure and provided space for debriefing. Researchers experiencing distress were able to inform the principal investigator and to be reassigned or given time away from coding.
- **Avoiding engagement.** Researchers did not engage with content through the research accounts by liking, sharing or commenting, since any interaction can alter the feed and artificially influence the sample. Research accounts remained passive observers.

A.6.2 Limitations

This methodology makes no claim to statistical representativeness of TikTok content or of youth exposure in the Western Balkans. The sampling period was limited and the algorithmic recommendation system remains a black box, so certain narratives may be over- or under-represented. The project also focused on Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian language content, and radicalising material in other languages that reaches local audiences, such as English, Arabic or Russian,

may have been missed. The observation window captures a snapshot and may not reflect seasonal or event-driven spikes. Finally, without access to TikTok's proprietary data, the research could not verify view counts or audience demographics.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a transparent and replicable approach to mapping online radicalisation dynamics. The combination of systematic sampling, structured coding and continuous quality assurance ensures that findings are grounded in evidence and that cross-country comparisons are meaningful.

Annex B. Focus Group Methodology

B.1 Purpose and Scope

This annex sets out how the video stimuli for the focus groups were selected, who the participants were, how the sessions were structured and which questions were asked. The protocol was shared across all three RADAR country teams in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, so that findings would be sufficiently comparable to be synthesised in the transnational policy brief. Focus groups could begin in parallel with coding, but only once a team had met the minimum coverage criteria set out in section B.2.

B.2 Selection of Stimulus Material

B.2.1 Minimum requirements before convening a group

Before a team scheduled a focus group, it had to have coded enough videos to assemble a stimulus set meeting all of the following conditions:

- at least one video representing each stage of radicalisation present in the sample to date (problematic, polarising, radicalising, mobilising);
- at least one video with a clearly mobilising or explicitly polarising tone, so that participants' reactions could be tested at the upper end of the continuum rather than only on milder material;
- at least three different types of video in terms of the groups targeted, for example women, migrants or civil society;
- a total of five to seven videos per session, since fewer than five does not generate enough material for discussion, while more than seven tires participants and reduces the time available per video;
- a mix of formats and lengths, from short clips of up to 15 seconds to longer ones of around 60 seconds, so that the set would not consist entirely of one type of content such as meme formats.

B.2.2 Selection procedure

1. All videos coded up to that point were filtered in the coding template by the stage of radicalisation and target columns.
2. Coverage across stages of radicalisation was checked, and at least one video was selected from each stage represented in the sample, ensuring in particular that at least one clearly mobilising or explicitly polarising example was included.
3. Coverage across targets was checked, and videos were selected so that the set included at least three different targets, for example women and feminists, migrants and refugees, civil society and activists, or LGBTIQ persons, so that discussion would not focus on a single type of target.
4. A final set of five to seven videos was chosen and ordered by increasing intensity, from problematic towards radicalising and mobilising, allowing the discussion to develop gradually rather than opening with the most extreme material.
5. Each selected video was recorded in a stimulus log with its identifier from the coding template, its stage, its target and a short description.

B.3 Participants

B.3.1 Profile and composition

- Age: 18 to 25 years.
- Group size: six to eight participants, since fewer than five produces a thin discussion while more than nine is difficult to moderate and reduces speaking time per person. In Serbia, each group had six participants.
- Two groups per country, separated by profile rather than randomly, in order to capture a range of reactions. FG1 consisted of young people active in civil society organisations and youth centres, who tend to have more developed media literacy. FG2 consisted of young people from the general population. The contrast between the two was analytically deliberate.

- Gender balance: approximately 50/50 was sought.
- Participants who knew one another closely from the same narrow setting, such as a single school class, were avoided, since this suppresses diversity of opinion and creates group pressure towards conformity.

B.3.2 Recruitment and consent

- Recruitment proceeded through cooperation with local youth organisations and established professional networks.
- The research topic was presented in general terms before consent was given, described as research on how young people experience content on TikTok, without disclosing in advance the specific examples to be shown. This preserved the spontaneity of reactions.
- Written consent was obtained from all participants, with a clear explanation that the session would include content containing offensive material.

B.4 Session Structure

Each session ran for approximately 90 minutes and followed the structure below.

Table B.1. Focus group session structure

Time	Phase	Content and purpose
0–10 min	Introduction and warm-up	Introduction of the moderator and discussion rules (confidentiality, no wrong answers, an invitation to everyone to take part without pressure to do so), followed by a short warm-up question on TikTok use.
10–20 min	General perception of the feed	Discussion of the type of content participants usually encounter, before any specific examples were mentioned, capturing awareness prior to exposure to the stimuli.
20–65 min	Stimulus screening (5–7 videos)	Each video was shown (up to 60 seconds) and followed by four to six minutes of discussion using the question guide in section B.5, giving roughly six to seven minutes per video including screening.
65–80 min	Synthesis and reflection	Comparison of reactions across videos, and questions on recognising such content in everyday feeds, on trust in sources, and on whether and when participants report inappropriate content.
80–90 min	Closing	Debriefing, a reminder about confidentiality, and thanks to participants.

B.5 Discussion Guide

B.5.1 Opening questions

- How much time do you spend on TikTok each day, and what do you mostly watch?
- Do you have the impression that your feed has been full of a particular kind of content recently? What kind?

B.5.2 Questions after each video

- What did you just see? Can you briefly describe what the video is about, in your own words?
- What was your first reaction? What did you feel while watching?
- Is this kind of content familiar to you? Have you seen a similar tone, message or style on your own feed?
- Who, in your view, is the target or subject of this video? Who is it directed against, if anyone?
- Do you think this video is harmless, humorous, or that it carries a more serious message? Why?
- Would you report it, share it further, or simply scroll past? Why?

Moderators did not impose the codebook's own categories of stage or narrative on participants. The questions were formulated neutrally in order to record spontaneous perception rather than to confirm the coding result.

B.5.3 Synthesis questions

- Of all the videos shown, which left the strongest impression on you, and why?
- Do you think this kind of content affects how young people think about particular groups in society? In what way?
- Why do you think the algorithm shows this kind of content? Do you have a theory about how TikTok decides what to show you?
- Would you know whom to turn to, or what to do, if you came across content that disturbed you or that you believed incited hatred?
- What would help young people to view this kind of content more critically: schools, parents, creators themselves, or the platform?

B.6 Ethical and Practical Rules for Moderators

- Participants were never pressed to comment on content that visibly disturbed them, and the option to move on to the next video was always offered.
- Anonymisation: reporting uses labels such as Participant 1 and Participant 2, never names.
- Audio recording was preferred for transcript accuracy, but only with prior written consent. Recordings were retained only until the analysis was complete and then deleted.
- Wherever possible, the moderator was someone who had not been directly involved in coding the videos used as stimuli, reducing the risk of unconsciously steering the discussion towards an expected conclusion.

Annex C. Codebook: Integrated Coding Guidelines

C.1 Purpose and Scope

This codebook provides the common analytical framework used by the RADAR research teams to map and analyse radicalising content encountered on TikTok by young people in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Its primary purpose is to ensure that all teams apply the same concepts and definitions when classifying and interpreting content, so that the project generates a comparable and replicable dataset across the three countries. Although TikTok's algorithm and user feeds are dynamic, consistent definitions enable meaningful cross-country comparison and support policy-relevant analysis.

The codebook is designed to be used together with the RADAR TikTok coding template. All categories and definitions presented here correspond directly to the columns in that template. The codebook provides conceptual definitions and coding guidance, while the coding template serves as the primary data entry instrument.

C.2 Country

Definition. The national context in which the TikTok post was encountered by the researcher: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro or Serbia.

Coding rule. Select the country corresponding to the researcher's location and feed context at the time of exposure, regardless of the origin of the content or the creator.

C.3 Video URL

Definition. The direct URL linking to the coded TikTok post.

Coding rule. Insert the full, publicly accessible URL of the post as encountered. If the content is later removed, the URL is retained for documentation and verification purposes.

C.4 Short Description

Definition. A brief, factual description of the observable visual and audio elements of the post.

Coding guidance. The short description focuses on what is visibly and audibly present in the post, including imagery, symbols, emojis, on-screen text, music, sound effects, tone of voice and explicit spoken or written statements. Coders are descriptive and specific, while avoiding interpretation, evaluation or justification of coding decisions.

C.5 Stage of Radicalisation

Each post is assigned exactly one stage of radicalisation, reflecting the content's intensity and its function in the radicalisation process. The stages form a continuum from the normalisation of harmful ideas to the explicit encouragement of action. The examples below illustrate typical content for each stage; coders focus on dominant purpose rather than on the presence of isolated words.

C.5.1 Problematic content

Definition. Problematic content normalises stereotypes, disinformation, exclusionary thinking or distrust towards social groups or democratic institutions. It often relies on humour, sarcasm or veiled insinuation rather than overt hostility. While such content may lay the groundwork for more polarising narratives, it does not yet frame society in a strict us-versus-them dichotomy or advocate exclusion.

Typical indicators. Negative humour targeting a group; conspiratorial hints without a clear enemy; manipulative use of memes or popular culture to normalise prejudice; vague insinuations that something is wrong.

Example 1: *A clip uses a popular meme template to depict members of a minority group as lazy or corrupt. The video invites viewers to laugh at the stereotype but does not explicitly identify an enemy or call for action.*

Example 2: *A short video asks whether viewers really believe the official account of a controversial event, suggesting hidden truths but naming no conspirators and encouraging no action.*

C.5.2 Polarising content

Definition. Polarising content constructs sharp antagonisms between an in-group and an out-group, either explicitly or implicitly. It portrays the out-group as threatening, immoral, inferior or alien, and emphasises grievance, resentment and moral outrage. Polarisation may be produced through direct comparison, but also through insinuation, selective framing or emotional cues that normalise distrust and a sense of substantive otherness. The content deepens social divisions and intensifies antagonism but stops short of advocating exclusion, repression or violence.

Typical indicators. Explicit identification of traitors, enemies or others; binary moral framing such as good against evil or pure against impure; emotional language conveying anger, grievance or disgust.

Example 1: *A montage contrasts images of our people and their people, accusing the latter of destroying the nation and urging viewers to recognise who is on our side and who is betraying us.*

Example 2: *An influential creator says that the government and its Western supporters are ruining the country, calling them scum and degenerates. The tone is hostile and divisive, though it does not explicitly demand repression or the removal of rights.*

C.5.3 Radicalising content

Definition. Radicalising content legitimises exclusion, repression or systemic discrimination. It undermines democratic norms and pluralism, often glorifying authoritarian solutions. The messages dehumanise or delegitimise the out-group and prepare the audience to accept coercion or violence as justified.

Typical indicators. Rejection of democratic institutions; glorification of strong leaders or purifying measures; portrayal of targeted groups as inherently corrupt, dangerous or subhuman; justification of exclusion from rights or from participation in society.

Example 1: *A video praises a paramilitary group from the 1990s as heroes, implicitly approving extra-legal violence as a solution to contemporary problems.*

Example 2: *A video argues that pluralism and equal rights have gone too far and suggests that political participation should be limited to those who demonstrate unquestionable loyalty to the nation, framing exclusionary governance as reasonable and necessary without explicitly endorsing violence.*

C.5.4 Mobilising content

Definition. Mobilising content calls for concrete action, whether online or offline. It instructs, incites or encourages viewers to spread the message, take part in violent protests, join organisations or engage in direct confrontation. This is the highest stage of the continuum. Symbolic slogans, historical references or aspirational statements without a clear action-oriented component are not sufficient to classify content as mobilising.

Typical indicators. Explicit invitations to join a violent march or vigilante patrol; instructions on how to recruit others, disseminate propaganda or circumvent moderation; glorification of past acts of violent activism as models to emulate.

Example 1: *A video urges viewers to attend an upcoming rally to defend tradition against a perceived cultural threat, giving the date and location and calling for fighters to confront adversaries.*

Example 2: *An account shares a sequence showing how to create multiple social media profiles to spread the truth and encourages followers to coordinate attacks on opponents'*

pages. Although it avoids explicit talk of violence, it directly instructs viewers to mobilise.

C.6 Dominant Narrative

For each post, coders identify one dominant narrative, that is, the primary worldview framing the content. Additional narrative elements may be recorded in the secondary narrative fields, but the dominant narrative is the backbone of the post's ideological message.

C.6.1 Ethno-nationalist and identitarian narratives

Definition. These narratives prioritise ethnic or national identity above all else. They emphasise the purity, supremacy or victimhood of a particular nation or ethnic group and depict others as inherent threats. Historical grievance, myth and revisionism often underpin them, serving to justify exclusion or restitution.

Example 1: *A montage of wartime footage from the 1990s celebrates fighters from one ethnic group as heroes while ignoring or denying atrocities committed by that side, using nationalist songs and captions promising that the group will stand up again.*

Example 2: *A duet mocks speakers of a minority language, captioning them as guests in our country and warning that our people are disappearing, framing demographic diversity as an existential threat.*

C.6.2 Religious-based hardline narratives

Definition. These narratives promote rigid, exclusionary interpretations of faith. They delegitimise pluralism, secular governance and alternative theological views. Salvation, identity and belonging are tightly linked to adherence to a specific doctrine, while false believers or those of other faiths are portrayed as corrupting influences.

Example 1: *A preacher declares that only those who follow the true faith will survive a coming purge, calling moderate believers and secular people traitors and warning against associating with them.*

Example 2: *A viral video remixes a fundamentalist sermon with dramatic music and battle imagery.*

C.6.3 Authoritarian and anti-democratic narratives

Definition. These narratives undermine democratic norms and institutions. They valorise strongman rule, obedience and unity over pluralism, rights and accountability. Democracy is framed as weak, corrupt or foreign, while centralised power and repression are celebrated as necessary for stability or national revival.

Example 1: *A video glorifies an autocratic leader as the only one who can save the country, mocking parliament and free elections as pointless talk.*

Example 2: *A clip ridicules Western democratic politics by portraying debate, protest and electoral competition as signs of decay and weakness, while praising a foreign leader as decisive and respected.*

C.6.4 Anti-Western and civilisational narratives

Definition. These narratives frame the West, whether the European Union, NATO, the United States or an abstract set of Western values, as morally corrupt, imperialist and determined to destroy local cultures. They contrast traditional or Eastern, Slavic and Balkan values with decadent Western lifestyles and cast local society as a frontline in a civilisational clash.

Example 1: *A slideshow combines images of Pride parades in Western capitals with scenes of war and natural disaster, suggesting that acceptance of LGBTIQ rights leads to divine punishment, captioned as a warning about abandoning tradition.*

Example 2: *A popular creator warns that the EU is replacing the local population with migrants and describes European integration as the slow death of a civilisation, calling on*

followers to resist all Western institutions.

C.7 Targets

After identifying the dominant narrative, coders indicate which social group is primarily targeted in the content. The target is the entity constructed as the enemy, threat or illegitimate actor within the narrative. Secondary targets may be recorded separately, but the dominant target captures the main focus of exclusion or hostility.

C.7.1 Ethnic groups

Content that presents ethnic groups, for example Roma, Serbs, Bosniaks, Croats, Albanians or Montenegrins, as inferior, dangerous or parasitic. The tone may be explicit or insinulative.

Example: *A video blames economic decline on Roma residents, depicting them stealing and claiming that they live off the labour of others.*

C.7.2 Religious groups

Content that targets believers of another religion, or non-believers, as morally corrupt or disloyal. It often calls for exclusion, segregation or conversion.

Example: *A video suggests that members of certain religious communities are fundamentally incompatible with national interests, implying that their presence undermines social cohesion.*

C.7.3 State actors

Content in which the state, including its institutions, territorial integrity or sovereignty, is the direct target of attack. This includes narratives advocating secession, territorial reconfiguration, the dismantling of state authority, or the use of violence against the state.

Example: *A video calls for the secession of a region, or advocates acts of terrorism against a state perceived as illegitimate.*

C.7.4 LGBTIQ persons

Content that portrays lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer people as threats to family, tradition or national survival. It can include slurs, disinformation and calls for repression.

Example: *A video shows footage of a Pride parade with captions warning viewers about what is intended for their children and encouraging them to stop the phenomenon from spreading.*

C.7.5 Migrants and refugees

Content that depicts migrants, asylum seekers or refugees as invaders, criminals or cultural contaminants. It often links migration to conspiracy theories about demographic replacement.

Example: *A creator stitches news clips of refugee arrivals with horror music, urging locals to wake up before it is too late and to form patrols to defend the borders.*

C.7.6 Women and feminists

Content that delegitimises women's rights or feminist movements. It may insist on rigid gender roles and accuse feminists of undermining family and nation.

Example: *A meme ridicules women who work outside the home as failed mothers, claiming that feminism is a plot to reduce birth rates among the majority population.*

C.7.7 Political opponents

Content that frames political opponents, critics or dissenting voices as illegitimate, disloyal or harmful to the nation. Rather than treating political disagreement as a normal part

of democratic pluralism, such content delegitimises political actors by portraying them as agents of national betrayal, foreign influence or internal subversion. The category applies irrespective of whether the targeted actors belong to the government or the opposition, and focuses on the logic of treating political disagreement as treason rather than as legitimate debate.

Example: *A clip accuses an opposition leader of selling the country's interests to Brussels and calls him human garbage.*

C.7.8 Journalists and media

Content that targets independent media, journalists or fact-checkers, alleging that they are part of conspiracies or enemy propaganda. It may encourage censorship or violence against the press.

Example: *A video claims that all mainstream media are liars in the pay of foreign donors and implies that attacking journalists could be justified in defence of the truth.*

C.7.9 Civil society and activists

Content that frames NGOs, human rights advocates or activists as foreign agents and a danger to society. It can call for restrictions, expulsion or violence against them.

Example: *A video labels a youth organisation working on environmental issues as traitors funded by the West and calls on parliament to pass a foreign agent law.*

C.7.10 Western actors and institutions

Content that explicitly targets the European Union, NATO, the United States or other Western institutions as the enemy. It may portray them as colonial rulers or as architects of moral decay.

Example: *A montage shows the EU flag burning and asserts that the West is destroying the nation through exploitation, debt and moral corruption, calling for withdrawal from all Western alliances.*

C.7.11 Generalised out-group

Content that constructs a vague enemy, such as the elite, them or globalists, without specifying a particular group. It builds an amorphous threat narrative.

Example: *A video warns that they control everything viewers watch, eat and think, accompanied by stock footage of masked figures. No specific group is named, but a hidden enemy is implied.*

C.7.12 No explicit target

Content that does not clearly identify an out-group or enemy. It may criticise social conditions or institutions in general without assigning blame.

Example: *A short clip laments the decline of local culture without blaming any group, focusing instead on nostalgia and loss.*

C.8 Emotional Tone

Each post receives one dominant emotional tone, capturing the main affective response the content seeks to elicit. Additional secondary tones may be recorded where present, but coders assign no more than one or two.

C.8.1 Anger and outrage

Content communicates intense anger or rage, often expressed through shouting, insults or threats. It aims to inflame viewers against a target.

Example: *A creator swears repeatedly at politicians and traitors, calling them scum and filth.*

C.8.2 Fear

Content seeks to instil fear or a sense of imminent danger. It frames the target as an existential threat to the viewer's identity, safety or livelihood.

Example: *A video warns that the West is imposing genetically modified food and implies that viewers' families are in immediate danger unless drastic measures are taken.*

C.8.3 Intimidation

Content that directly threatens, intimidates or issues warnings of harm towards a targeted group. The message is framed as a promise or intent of punishment, violence or retaliation, and is addressed explicitly or implicitly to the perceived opponent.

Example: *A speaker addresses the LGBTIQ community in the second person, telling them that they are being awaited, in the context of anti-Pride rallies.*

C.8.4 Grievance and victimhood

Content emphasises long-standing injustice and portrays the in-group as victims who have been wronged by the target group. It encourages self-pity and resentment.

Example: *A montage of historical traumas, overlaid with text about centuries of oppression, ends with a call to remember the victims and a suggestion that a time for revenge will come.*

C.8.5 Contempt and dehumanisation

Content expresses disgust, contempt or dehumanisation towards the target. It uses animalistic metaphors or slurs to suggest that the out-group is less than human.

Example: *A clip refers to a minority group as uncivilised and as a disease, showing them in humiliating footage.*

C.8.6 Pride and superiority

Content encourages feelings of pride, moral superiority or chosenness within the in-group. It frequently emphasises tradition, honour or divine favour.

Example: *A video celebrates a glorious heritage with emotional music and declares that no other people are as brave and pure.*

C.8.7 Irony, mockery and provocation

Content uses sarcasm, irony, memes or mockery to ridicule the target. Humour is weaponised to demean opponents or controversial groups, often normalising prejudice.

Example: *A prank video mocks feminists by pretending to interview them and editing their responses to appear foolish.*

C.8.8 Duty and obligation

Content invokes a sense of duty, honour or responsibility to act. It frames participation in the cause as a moral or patriotic obligation.

Example: *A clip shows a marching line of men and proclaims that every man of honour must stand up when called, appealing to viewers' sense of duty to protect their community or faith.*

C.8.9 Neutral or informational in appearance

Content appears neutral or informational on the surface but contains a subtle biased frame that directs the viewer towards a particular conclusion.

Example: *A short news-style report presents statistics about crimes committed by migrants without context, leading viewers to draw conclusions about inherent criminality even though the tone is ostensibly neutral.*

C.9 Conspiratorial Framing

Conspiratorial framing is recorded as Yes or No. It is considered present when the content explicitly states or clearly implies that events or social change are the result of hidden plots, secret coordination or deliberate deception by powerful actors. Vague suspicion is not sufficient; the narrative must indicate that a covert enemy is deliberately orchestrating events for malicious purposes.

Examples coded Yes.

- A video claims that global elites are engineering demographic change in order to erase the nation, naming no individual group but presenting a hidden plan and warning viewers to prepare for resistance.
- A clip suggests that all mainstream media are controlled by foreign intelligence services and that nothing reported can be trusted because everyone involved is complicit.

Examples coded No.

- A video criticises government policy as misguided or corrupt but attributes the actions to incompetence rather than to secret coordination.
- A clip asks who benefits from a situation without naming a conspiratorial plot or asserting that events are planned.

C.10 Analytical Note

Coders may include a brief analytical note of one to three sentences where the coding decision involved ambiguity, overlap between categories or contextual uncertainty. The note briefly explains the reasoning behind the selected stage, dominant narrative or target, and indicates which cues or indicators were decisive. Analytical notes support transparency and quality control by enabling the lead researcher to review borderline cases, address inconsistencies and refine the coding framework where necessary. Notes remain concise and descriptive.

C.11 General Coding Principles

- **Dominant meaning first.** Code according to the most salient function and narrative of the content. Do not assign categories on the basis of isolated words or images that are not central to the message.
- **One stage per post.** The four stages are mutually exclusive. When in doubt between two stages, choose the lower stage unless there is clear evidence of escalation.
- **Multiple narratives allowed.** Additional narrative elements beyond the dominant narrative can be noted in the secondary narrative fields. Radicalising content frequently blends ethno-nationalist, religious, authoritarian and anti-Western themes.
- **Primary and secondary targets.** Identify a single primary target for each post. Secondary targets can be recorded. Where no clear target is present, record no explicit target.
- **Emotional tone hierarchy.** Assign one dominant emotional tone and at most one secondary tone. Do not record every emotion detected; focus on the tone the post aims to provoke.
- **Conspiratorial framing is binary.** Record Yes only where hidden plots or secret plans are explicitly stated or clearly implied. Imprecise or speculative language does not constitute conspiratorial framing.
- **Context matters.** Consider captions, hashtags, on-screen text and cultural context in interpretation. Where content relies on inside jokes or memes, consult colleagues to avoid misinterpretation.
- **Do not profile creators or users.** The analysis focuses on content, not on the intentions or identities of creators. Avoid assumptions about motive.

- **Consult when uncertain.** Flag ambiguous cases and discuss them with the team to ensure consistency.
- **Maintain confidentiality and professionalism.** Do not share extremist content beyond the research context, and take care to protect your well-being when exposed to disturbing material.



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