

A War They Did Not Live Through: Young People and Wartime Narratives on TikTok in Bosnia and Herzegovina

RADAR

Radicalisation Analytics in Digital Algorithmic Realms

Bosnia and Herzegovina Report

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Executive Summary

This report investigates how content that can contribute to the early stages of radicalisation reaches young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina through TikTok, and how they make sense of it. The analysis rests on a purposive sample of 333 posts gathered in Bosnia and Herzegovina from March to September 2026, every one of them coded for stage of radicalisation, dominant narrative, target, emotional tone and conspiratorial framing, and on two focus groups held in September 2026 in which participants with contrasting backgrounds discussed the same six videos. The study forms part of RADAR, a regional project that also covers Montenegro and Serbia, three neighbours whose common language and tightly connected online environment allow divisive narratives to cross borders with ease.

The research took place in a tense political season. The observation period ran into the campaign for the general elections of 4 October 2026, which unfolded amid open disputes over the constitutional order and the powers of the entities, and it included Mladić's death, the wartime Bosnian Serb commander convicted of genocide. Three decades after Dayton, the country holds EU candidate status, yet the first intergovernmental conference that would formally launch accession negotiations has still not taken place.

Three themes run through the sample. The first and by far the largest is the war of 1992–1995, which TikTok content keeps reopening through competing accounts of who attacked, who defended and who suffered, ranging from commemoration to the denial of the Srebrenica genocide and the celebration of convicted commanders. The second is the state itself, as posts promote secession, a third entity or unification with a neighbouring country, and recast domestic political rivals as threats to the community. The third is religion, used to mark ethnic boundaries and, in its sharpest form, to equate a whole faith with violence. Across all three, the content rarely invents new material. Its typical move is to take existing footage, from wartime archives to television interviews, and give it a new meaning through a caption or background music.

Both groups recognised selective editing, missing context and attempts to provoke, and both drew a clear line between remembering a crime and using that memory to mobilise the next generation. The participants from civil society organisations analysed how each video had been assembled, while the university students in the second group engaged more with whether they found the message convincing. Neither group saw itself as the main audience at risk; both located that risk among younger viewers who meet these stories without the background needed to question them.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the findings suggest that the digital space reproduces divisions already embedded in politics, schooling and family memory, and that it does so faster and with less context than any other channel. Responses aimed only at removing content will therefore reach a small part of the problem. What is needed is a shared, fact-based approach to the history of the 1990s in education, together with media literacy that teaches young people to ask where a piece of footage came from and what was left out. Both belong at the centre of the societal transformation that EU accession requires, since a state whose citizens cannot agree on the facts of the recent past will find it hard to build the institutional consensus that membership presupposes.

Contents

- [Executive Summary](#) 1
- [1. Introduction](#) 3
- [2. Conceptualising Digital Radicalisation](#) 4
- [3. Research Design and Scope](#) 5
- [4. The Content Landscape](#) 6
- [5. Examining Radicalisation Dynamics](#) 8
 - [5.1 Three Armies, Three Memories](#) 8
 - [5.2 Contesting the State](#) 9
 - [5.3 Faith as Fault Line](#) 9
 - [5.4 Old Footage, New Frames](#) 10
- [6. How Young People Read Radicalising Content](#) 11
- [7. Conclusion](#) 12
- [Bibliography](#) 14
- [Annex A. Methodology for Mapping Radicalising Content on TikTok](#) 15
- [Annex B. Focus Group Methodology](#) 20
- [Annex C. Codebook: Integrated Coding Guidelines](#) 23

1. Introduction

Short-form video has changed the way young people in Bosnia and Herzegovina come into contact with politics and the past. On TikTok, a clip of a wartime commander arrives in the same stream as music and comedy, often reduced to a few seconds and stripped of the circumstances in which it was originally recorded. The platform's recommendation logic rewards content that provokes a reaction, and in a society where the memory of war remains a live political resource, provocation is never far away. Yet little systematic evidence exists on what this content actually looks like in the Bosnian context and how young people respond to it.

The country's political architecture explains why such material finds fertile ground. The Dayton settlement that ended the war in 1995 divided the state into two entities and built ethnic representation into almost every level of government.¹ Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, who make up about half, a third and a sixth of the population respectively,² continue to hold strongly divergent views of the war, of whether the state is legitimate, and of each other's responsibility for the crimes committed between 1992 and 1995. These differences are reproduced in a fragmented education system in which pupils in different parts of the country may learn substantially different versions of the same events. Young people therefore arrive at TikTok already equipped with partial and often conflicting accounts of recent history.

The period covered by this study, from March to September 2026, sharpened these tensions. It coincided with the run-up to the general elections of 4 October 2026, conducted amid open confrontation over the constitutional order, the competences of the entities and the future of Republika Srpska.³ Milorad Dodik, removed from the presidency of Republika Srpska in 2025 but still the leading figure in Bosnian Serb politics, remained a constant presence in the sample.⁴ Within the same weeks, Ratko Mladić died on 27 August 2026,⁵ an event that produced a wave of tributes in parts of the country and in the wider region, and that touched directly on the memory of the Srebrenica genocide.

The European dimension gives these findings additional weight. Bosnia and Herzegovina became a candidate for EU membership in December 2022, and in March 2024 the European Council decided to open accession negotiations, subject to conditions; by mid-2026, however, the negotiating framework had still not been adopted.⁶ Progress has repeatedly stalled on reforms that require agreement among the country's communities and their political representatives. A digital environment that rewards the reopening of wartime grievances and the questioning of the state's legitimacy makes that agreement harder to reach. This report examines a purposive sample of 333 TikTok posts and the reactions of two focus groups in order to understand which narratives circulate, how they are constructed and how young people read them, and what this means for reconciliation and for the country's path towards the European Union.

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- 1 The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, initialled in Dayton in November 1995 and signed in Paris in December 1995, ended the war and established the current constitutional order: a state composed of two entities, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, together with the Brčko District, under a tripartite Presidency and with an international High Representative overseeing civilian implementation.
 - 2 Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2013: Final Results* (Sarajevo: Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2016).
 - 3 Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, "General Elections in BiH Scheduled for Sunday, October 4, 2026," press release, May 2026, <https://izbori.ba/?CategoryID=183&Id=6034&Lang=6>; "Ethnic Division and Polarization to Dominate Electoral Campaign in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *European Western Balkans*, 4 September 2026, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/09/04/ethnic-division-and-polarization-to-dominate-electoral-campaign-in-bosnia-and-herzegovina/>.
 - 4 Milorad Dodik, long-standing leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), lost his mandate as President of Republika Srpska in 2025 following a final conviction by the Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but has remained the dominant figure in his party. See "The 2026 Election in BiH – Between Opportunity for Change and Continued Fragmentation," *European Western Balkans*, 13 May 2026, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2026/05/13/the-2026-election-in-bih-between-opportunity-for-change-and-continued-fragmentation/>.
 - 5 "Convicted Bosnian Serb War Criminal Ratko Mladic Dies," *Al Jazeera*, 27 August 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/27/bosnian-serb-general-ratko-mladic-has-died-un-official-says>.
 - 6 European Council, *Conclusions*, 21–22 March 2024; "Where Do Candidate Countries Stand in the EU Accession Negotiations?," *New Union Post*, updated 15 June 2026, <https://newunionpost.eu/2025/08/12/eu-accession-negotiations-all-chapters/>.

2. Conceptualising Digital Radicalisation

The RADAR framework approaches radicalisation as a matter of degree. Rather than sorting people or content into “moderate” and “extremist” boxes, it looks at how far a message moves its audience along a path that begins with prejudice and can end in calls for coercion. This choice reflects long-standing scholarly unease with the term itself, which has been criticised for depending heavily on the observer’s standpoint and for grouping together phenomena with few shared features.⁷ Firmly held or unpopular political views are not, in themselves, the object of concern here. The analysis focuses instead on content that draws rigid boundaries between groups, denies the legitimacy of political or social diversity, or makes discrimination, repression and violence appear normal or justified.

The framework also separates what people believe from what they do. As McCauley and Moskalenko argue, extreme opinions and extreme actions follow distinct trajectories, and many who adopt the former never move to the latter.⁸ Accordingly, the scale applied here, with its steps from problematic through polarising and radicalising to mobilising, grades posts by what they do and how forcefully they do it. It says nothing about the people who watch them, and it implies no forecast that seeing divisive material will make anyone violent.

Nevertheless, the online environment shapes the conditions in which young people encounter political ideas, even though it rarely acts as a cause in its own right and works through the political context in which users already live. Recommendation algorithms decide which messages are shown repeatedly and which disappear. Audits of YouTube have documented movement from milder to more extreme channels while cautioning against the idea of an automatic “rabbit hole”, and studies of TikTok have found that its personalised feed can reinforce exposure to far-right material even more strongly. These findings describe how platforms behave rather than how any particular individual becomes radicalised.⁹

Finally, the framework treats presentation as inseparable from content. Studies of TikTok and other image-driven platforms document how exclusionary ideas travel in the ordinary vocabulary of online culture, such as memes, ironic humour, music, attractive visuals and references to popular culture.¹⁰ Because these forms resemble everything else that users watch, they allow political claims to be absorbed without being recognised as political. For this reason, the coding pays as much attention to editing, captions, sound and visual style as to what is explicitly said.

7 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>.

8 Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, “Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model,” *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 205–216, <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>.

9 Donghee Shin and Kulsawasd Jitkajornwanich, “How Algorithms Promote Self-Radicalization: Audit of TikTok’s 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, Virgílio 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>.

10 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, focus-group protocol and codebook are provided in Annexes A, B and C.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the team assembled 333 publicly available TikTok posts over several collection rounds from March to September 2026. Since the platform shows each user a different, personalised feed, there is no stable population of content from which a representative sample could be drawn. Sampling was therefore purposive: researchers began with predefined search terms and hashtags and then widened the net through networked snowball sampling, following linked accounts and recurring material. The goal was to document the range of potentially radicalising material in circulation, not to measure how often an average user in Bosnia and Herzegovina comes across it. What the study registers is the country of exposure, not the place of production, which is why the sample also includes material created in Serbia, Croatia and elsewhere that reached Bosnian users. All figures in this report describe the sample and cannot be read as estimates for TikTok in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole.

Coders assessed every post on the same five variables used in Montenegro and Serbia: where it stood on the radicalisation scale, which worldview framed it, whom it targeted, what emotion it chiefly appealed to, and whether it relied on a conspiracy. The scale itself has four rungs. At the lowest, *problematic*, a post nudges viewers towards prejudice or suspicion, most often through a joke or an insinuation, while still stopping short of dividing the world into opposing camps. A *polarising* post takes that step: it portrays another community as menacing or alien and feeds a sense of injury and resentment, yet does not demand that the community be shut out. A *radicalising* post crosses that line, treating exclusion, persecution or discrimination as legitimate and frequently celebrating force or strongmen as the answer. At the top, *mobilising* content tells its audience to do something, from turning up at a violent rally to confronting opponents or sharing material in a coordinated fashion. A post could occupy only one rung, and borderline cases went to the lower of the two unless the escalation was unmistakable.

The second variable concerns the outlook behind a post. *Ethno-nationalist and identitarian* content makes nation or ethnicity the supreme loyalty, insists on the purity, greatness or suffering of one community and casts its neighbours as an enduring danger, often by reopening old wrongs. An *authoritarian and anti-democratic* outlook prizes a firm hand, discipline and conformity, and treats elected institutions as feeble or foreign-made. *Anti-Western and civilisational* content describes the EU, NATO or the “West” at large as degenerate and bent on eroding local traditions. *Religious-based hardline* content treats one reading of faith as the only legitimate one and rejects both religious pluralism and secular authority. Because a single video often mixes several of these outlooks, coders could add a secondary one. The categories for targets, tones and conspiratorial framing are listed in full in the Codebook (Annex C).

The “demand side” was examined through two focus groups organised by the Foreign Policy Initiative BH (FPI BH) on 11 September 2026, following the common RADAR protocol in Annex B. The first group (FG1) consisted of seven young people active in youth-oriented civil society organisations within FPI BH’s partner network. The second (FG2) brought together six university students, mostly from the Faculties of Political Science and Philosophy of the University of Sarajevo, recruited through their professors. Each group was shown an identical set of six videos from the coded sample, chosen so that every stage and several kinds of target were represented. One limitation deserves emphasis. FG2 was meant to stand for young people without a civic or professional link to the topic, but students of political science and philosophy are likely to be considerably better informed about politics and history than most of their peers. The contrast between the two groups is therefore narrower than the research design anticipated, and the findings should be read accordingly. The quo-

tations reproduced below were translated into English and slightly smoothed, and they are attributed to single participants without naming their group.

4. The Content Landscape

Most Bosnian posts occupy the middle ranks of the scale. Close to two thirds (61.9 percent) fall into the polarising stage and just under a quarter (23.4 percent) into the problematic one. The severe end is thinner: radicalising material makes up 12.9 percent of the sample, and only six posts, 1.8 percent, reach the mobilising stage (see Table 1). The typical post in this sample does not call for violence or exclusion. It sharpens the line between communities and invites them to take a side.

Table 1. Stage of radicalisation in the Bosnian sample

Stage	Count	%
Problematic	78	23.4
Polarising	206	61.9
Radicalising	43	12.9
Mobilising	6	1.8

Source: RADAR Bosnia and Herzegovina coded sample (n=333). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

A large share of the most severe content revolves around two individuals. Fifty posts in the sample refer to Ratko Mladić or Radovan Karadžić, and 24 of them were coded as radicalising, so that these two men alone account for over half of the radicalising material. Most of these posts celebrate the two men as heroes or mourn Mladić after his death, although some attack the people who glorify them. The six mobilising posts are more varied. They include a monologue recorded at the Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial Centre that urges Bosniaks to “stand up” and “not forgive”, a call for every Bosniak man over seventeen to buy a uniform and equipment, a threat from a Croatian nationalist account that “our action begins”, and a song declaring that Sarajevo “must be Serbian”. Mobilisation in this sample comes from all three communities, and in each case it draws its force from the memory of the war.

In terms of narratives, the sample is almost entirely ethno-nationalist. This category accounts for 95.2 percent of posts, while religious-based hardline content (3.0 percent), authoritarian and anti-democratic narratives (1.2 percent) and anti-Western or civilisational narratives (0.6 percent) are marginal (see Table 2; definitions are in the Codebook, Annex C). The dominance of a single category should not be read as uniformity. Within it, the content divides along the lines of the three communities and their competing accounts of the war, so that the same narrative type contains Bosniak, Serb and Croat positions that contradict one another. The few authoritarian posts all concern open challenges to the state, such as calls for the secession of Republika Srpska or its unification with Serbia.

Table 2. Dominant narratives in the Bosnian sample

Dominant narrative	Count	%
Ethno-nationalist / Identitarian	317	95.2
Religious-based Hardline	10	3.0
Authoritarian / Anti-democratic	4	1.2
Anti-Western / Civilisational	2	0.6

Source: RADAR Bosnia and Herzegovina coded sample (n=333). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

The pattern of targets is equally concentrated. Ethnic groups are the primary target in 90.7 percent of posts, far ahead of political opponents (2.7 percent), religious groups (2.4 percent) and state actors (2.1 percent; see Table 3). Content directed at LGBTIQ persons, women, migrants or Western institutions, which plays a substantial role elsewhere in the region, is almost absent from the Bosnian sample. The near-total focus on ethnic communities reflects the structure of Bosnian politics

itself, in which almost every dispute, from the design of a coat of arms to the outcome of a football match, can be read as a contest between peoples.

Table 3. Most frequent primary targets

Target	Count	%
Ethnic groups	302	90.7
Political opponents / 'traitors'	9	2.7
Religious groups	8	2.4
State actors	7	2.1
Western actors / institutions	2	0.6
LGBTIQ persons	2	0.6
Journalists / media	1	0.3
Generalised out-group	1	0.3
No explicit target	1	0.3

Source: RADAR Bosnia and Herzegovina coded sample (n=333). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

The emotional profile of the sample mixes celebration, ridicule and complaint in roughly equal measure. The leading tone is *pride/superiority* (25.2 percent), with *irony/mockery/provocation* (19.8 percent) and *grievance/victimhood* (19.5 percent), with *contempt/dehumanisation* in fourth place (13.2 percent; see Table 4). The three leading tones correspond to three different ways of relating to the war: glorifying one's own side, mocking the other, and recalling one's own suffering. They frequently appear together, as when footage of a massacre is followed by a song celebrating the unit responsible.

A *neutral or informational* register dominates in just 6.9 percent of the sample. The figure is lower than might be expected given how much of the material consists of archival footage, testimony and news clips, and it suggests that coders recognised the interpretative frame added to such material even when the underlying footage looked factual.

Table 4. Dominant emotional tone in the Bosnian sample

Emotional tone	Count	%
Pride / Superiority	84	25.2
Irony / Mockery / Provocation	66	19.8
Grievance / Victimhood	65	19.5
Contempt / Dehumanisation	44	13.2
Anger / Outrage	30	9.0
Neutral / Informational	23	6.9
Intimidation	18	5.4
Fear	2	0.6
Duty / Obligation	1	0.3

Source: RADAR Bosnia and Herzegovina coded sample (n=333). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

Explanations that attribute events to the covert designs of hidden actors, coded as *conspiratorial framing*, appear in 24 posts (7.2 percent), and all but one of these are ethno-nationalist. The clearest pattern concerns international justice. Judgements of the ICTY and other courts are presented not as mistaken but as deliberately biased against one community, and the established facts of Srebrenica are framed as a story imposed from outside. In this material, conspiracy does not form a separate worldview. It works as a reinforcement of existing claims about who was wronged in the

war and who is being blamed unfairly for it.

5. Examining Radicalisation Dynamics

The following sections look more closely at the content behind these figures. Section 5.1 examines how the war of the 1990s is fought over again on TikTok through competing accounts of victims, perpetrators and heroes. Section 5.2 turns to content that questions the legitimacy and territorial integrity of the state. Section 5.3 discusses the use of religion as a marker of ethnic difference, and section 5.4 looks at the techniques through which existing footage is given new meanings.

5.1 Three Armies, Three Memories

The war of 1992–1995 is the central reference point of the Bosnian sample, and TikTok is one of the arenas in which its meaning is still being fought over. Each of the three communities has its own heroes, its own victims and its own account of who started the fighting, and the platform allows all three accounts to circulate side by side.¹¹ Posts celebrate the defenders of Sarajevo, the units that held a particular town or the soldiers who “saved” their people, while others document the suffering of civilians on one side and pass over the suffering of the other. Much of this content is not openly hostile. It becomes polarising through what it chooses to show and what it leaves out.

A revealing technique is the use of testimony from the opposing side as evidence for one’s own narrative. In one post, an interview with a former member of the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina describing fighting around Žepče is captioned as “another proof” that the ARBiH attacked the town, while the Croat brigade that held it is praised as “brave men”. The testimony carries more weight precisely because it comes from the other army. In another, courtroom footage of a soldier of the Army of Republika Srpska testifying before the ICTY is labelled as evidence against the “genocidal entity”, turning an individual confession into a verdict on an entire entity and its population.¹²

Srebrenica occupies a special place in this contest.¹³ It appears in some forty posts, ranging from commemoration at the Potočari memorial to outright denial. Denial takes several forms in the sample: a letter disputing that the killings constituted genocide, a speech in the German Bundestag presented as proof of the “myth” of genocide, interviews selectively cut to question the facts, and memes ridiculing the victims. One shows Ratko Mladić smiling beside a coffin wrapped as a gift. Another post records wedding guests singing that Srebrenica has fallen and that Žepa will fall too, a song that turns the starting point of the genocide into an occasion for celebration.

Mladić’s death in late August added a concentrated layer of such content.¹⁴ The sample includes crowds chanting his name in Banja Luka and Zvornik, a mural accompanied by a song in his honour, a poem praising him as a hero, footage from his funeral set to nationalist music and an AI-generated video in which he signs autographs like a celebrity. His death provoked responses in the opposite direction as well. For example, one post celebrates reports that he had suffered another stroke and wishes him prolonged suffering “in hell”. The memory of the war was being contested in real time, in the same feed and within the same days.

Glorification is not confined to one community. Posts feature the Ustaša salute “Za dom spremni”, describe the destruction of the Old Bridge in Mostar as a “beautiful moment of Croatian history” and

11 The Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ARBiH), the Army of Republika Srpska (VRS) and the Croatian Defence Council (HVO) were the three principal armed forces of the 1992–1995 war, broadly associated with the Bosniak, Serb and Croat communities respectively.

12 “Genocidal entity” is a term used by some Bosniak actors to refer to Republika Srpska, on the grounds that the entity was established through wartime campaigns that included genocide. It is widely regarded by Serbs as an insult to the entity and its population.

13 In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces killed around 8,000 Bosniak men and boys after taking the UN-protected enclave of Srebrenica. The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and the International Court of Justice both established that the killings constituted genocide. The victims are buried at the Srebrenica–Potočari Memorial Centre.

14 Ratko Mladić, wartime commander of the VRS, and Radovan Karadžić, wartime President of Republika Srpska, were both convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes and sentenced to life imprisonment. Mladić died in United Nations custody on 27 August 2026.

celebrate the leadership of the wartime Croat entity of Herzeg-Bosnia.¹⁵¹⁶ On the Bosniak side, war-time footage of the ARBiH is accompanied by the promise that “the sons will continue where their fathers stopped, until Bosnia is free”, and wartime commanders are presented as heroes beyond criticism. References to the Second World War, including the Ustaše and the Chetniks, add a further historical layer, connecting today’s communities to the crimes of eighty years ago.¹⁷ The effect is a closed circle of grievance, in which each community’s suffering is presented as the answer to the other’s accusations.

5.2 Contesting the State

A second strand of content concerns the state itself. The most explicit posts come from the Serb political leadership. In one widely shared excerpt from a press conference, Milorad Dodik announces that Republika Srpska is ready to draw a border between the two entities and dismisses the journalists laughing in the room, while a caption summarises the clip as an announcement of secession. Other posts present the unification of Republika Srpska with Serbia as a natural goal, show Dodik and Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić together at a military exercise under the caption that Republika Srpska and Serbia will always stand together, or film a gathering on the Drina under the message that no passport is needed because there is no border. It is in this cluster that the sample’s few authoritarian narratives are found.

Challenges to the state are not limited to secession. A Croat member of the European Parliament advocates a federal reorganisation that would give Croats their own unit, a long-standing demand known as the third entity.¹⁸ A post describes Bosnia and Herzegovina as a failed state governed by the “dictatorial” powers of the High Representative. On the other side, a Bosniak politician warns that any attempt at secession would lead to conflict, and a man shouting “genocidal entity” at Republika Srpska presents the entity’s very existence as a provocation. Flags and emblems serve as proxies in this dispute. Flags with golden lilies are displayed defiantly and confiscated by the police in Republika Srpska, and the dispute over who may fly them stands in for the dispute over whose state Bosnia and Herzegovina is.¹⁹

The election campaign added a further layer, in which political rivalry within each community was framed in terms of loyalty to it. Several posts present rival parties or candidates as weak defenders of their people or as collaborators with the other side, and compromise across ethnic lines is treated as a sign of betrayal. A stimulus used in the focus groups captured this mechanism well. It juxtaposes a Bosnian Serb opposition politician who rejects secession and speaks of coexistence with Dodik dismissing a question about the United States with a vulgar remark, leaving viewers to decide which of the two speaks for their community.

This strand matters beyond its size in the sample. Content that questions whether the state should exist in its current form turns ordinary political disagreement into a dispute about survival, in which every institutional reform can be presented as a threat to one community or another. That is precisely the kind of reform on which the country’s European path depends.

5.3 Faith as Fault Line

Religion appears in the Bosnian sample mainly as a marker of ethnic identity rather than as a theological position. The religious-based hardline narrative is rare, but religious identity is present in a much larger share of content, where being Muslim, Orthodox or Catholic stands in for being Bosniak, Serb or Croat. Posts ridicule religious practices, mock conversions and turn the faith of the other community into a source of jokes, such as a film excerpt turned into a joke about Muslims eating

15 The Croatian Republic of Herzeg-Bosnia was a wartime Bosnian Croat political entity. In 2017, the ICTY Appeals Chamber upheld the convictions of six of its former leaders for crimes committed against Bosniaks as part of a joint criminal enterprise. *Za dom spremni* (“Ready for the homeland”) was the salute of the Ustaša regime.

16 The sixteenth-century Old Bridge in Mostar was destroyed by HVO shelling in November 1993. It was rebuilt in 2004 and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

17 The Ustaše were the fascist movement that ruled the Nazi-aligned Independent State of Croatia (NDH) between 1941 and 1945; the Chetniks were a Serbian royalist and nationalist movement of the same period. Both carried out mass crimes against civilians, and both labels are used today as epithets for members of the respective communities.

18 A recurring demand among some Bosnian Croat political actors for a separate Croat-majority federal unit, which would require a reorganisation of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

19 The flag of the wartime Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, bearing golden lilies, is associated primarily with the Bosniak community. Its display in Republika Srpska has repeatedly led to police intervention.

pork despite the religious prohibition.

The sharpest example, which both focus groups watched, shows a bearded man with his eyes blurred, accompanied by dramatic music and a caption claiming that he is a “Wahhabi” who would kill in the name of Allah.²⁰ Nothing in the footage supports the claim. The video works entirely through appearance, caption and sound, associating a recognisably religious look with violence and inviting viewers to extend that association to Muslims in general. A related technique surfaces in footage of a Salafi preacher, edited so that he seems to recommend a return to Orthodoxy, turning his own words into a joke at the expense of his community.

Another stimulus used in the focus groups adopts a calmer register. It contrasts Muslim rule in Spain and Greece, where the local population did not convert in large numbers, with Ottoman rule in Bosnia, where it did, and ends with the question “How so?”. The video presents itself as historical information, but its selective comparison invites viewers to treat the Islamic identity of Bosniaks as something that needs to be explained, and implicitly as something foreign. Religious institutions are also targeted directly. One post claims that the Serbian Orthodox Church has been “convicted of genocide”, while others show a cleric singing a Chetnik song or reproduce a story about an imam who refused to help an injured Serb child.

Only a small number of posts carry religious content in the narrower sense, such as speeches addressed to wartime soldiers by Islamic clerics or a Salafi video describing officials of the Islamic Community as enemies of religion. Their scarcity is itself instructive. In this sample, faith rarely appears as an independent source of radicalisation. It is mobilised as one more boundary between communities that are already defined by the war.

5.4 Old Footage, New Frames

The most characteristic feature of the Bosnian sample is how its content is made. Much of this material originated outside TikTok. It consists of wartime footage, ICTY testimony, television interviews, news reports, parliamentary speeches and sports broadcasts, shortened and given a new caption, soundtrack or juxtaposition by the person who uploads them. In many cases, the original footage is neutral or even critical of the narrative it is used to support. The persuasive work is done in the editing.

The sample offers numerous examples of this technique. Archival footage of Serb civilians leaving Croatia during Operation Storm in 1995 is presented as showing Serbs leaving Sarajevo after the war. A clip of a television host criticising the cult of Mladić is reposted by a nationalist account to present him as a traitor. A woman who argues that every society should confront the crimes committed in its name is shown in a post claiming she needs psychiatric treatment. AI-generated videos extend the technique further, showing children in the colours of the Bosnian flag dancing to a song mocking the wartime Bosniak leader, or Dodik fleeing from Ottoman soldiers. In each case, the viewer encounters a finished interpretation rather than the material from which it was made.

The same space also carries voices that work against division. The sample includes the testimony of survivors of the Srebrenica executions, a Bosnian Serb commentator calling on Serbs to distance themselves from the crimes committed in their name, a man whose family was killed explaining why he would never take revenge on the families of those responsible, and archival footage of the wartime Bosniak leader urging his people to seek justice rather than revenge. These posts did not escape the logic of the feed, as the reposting of critical voices to discredit them shows. Their presence is nonetheless important. It shows that TikTok in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not only a channel for division but also a contested space in which counter-narratives circulate and can find an audience.

²⁰ In regional usage, “Wahhabi” is a pejorative label for adherents of Salafi interpretations of Islam, frequently used to imply extremism or a propensity for violence.

6. How Young People Read Radicalising Content

Both groups approached the six videos with considerable scepticism. Participants identified the political and historical references without help, recognised the communities and actors targeted, and frequently distinguished between the underlying footage and the way it had been packaged. The differences between the two groups lay less in whether they recognised problematic content than in how deeply they analysed it. Table 5 summarises the main contrasts.

Table 5. How the two focus groups read the same material

Dimension	FG1 – civil society youth	FG2 – university students
Mode of engagement	Systematic analysis of framing, omitted context and emotional techniques	Critical, but centred on immediate impressions and on whether the message was convincing
Recognition of context and target	Immediate, including indirect targeting through selective history	Immediate for political figures, the war and Srebrenica
Humour	Limited; humorous content discussed for its underlying message	Occasional laughter at political figures; none on war or religion
Location of risk	Younger and less informed viewers; themselves not fully immune	Younger and less informed viewers
Main concern	Cumulative effect of repeated exposure	Missing context and one-sided presentation

Source: RADAR Bosnia and Herzegovina focus groups, 11 September 2026.

The dominant reaction in both groups was to question the frame. Participants repeatedly described videos as one-sided, selective or taken out of context, and they paid close attention to captions, music and editing. They paid particular attention to the video about Žepče, noting that the use of a former ARBiH member's testimony to support an HVO narrative made a partial account more credible to viewers who did not know the wider story. In the words of one participant:

You take one part of history that suits you and build the whole story around it.

The videos about religion and Srebrenica provoked the most serious reactions. The clip of the man described as a "Wahhabi" was condemned in both groups as stigmatising, and participants singled out the combination of appearance, caption and dramatic music as a way of creating fear and associating a religious identity with violence. The monologue recorded in Potočari was approached with visible respect for the setting, but participants in both groups distinguished between commemoration and mobilisation. For them, the appeals to the "Bosniak people" to stand up and not to forgive turned remembrance into a message directed at the next generation.

The juxtaposition of the two Bosnian Serb politicians drew more laughter, particularly among the students. Humour was most common in reactions to contemporary political performance and almost absent where the war or religious stigmatisation was concerned. One participant summed up the intention behind such material:

This is made to make you angry, not to explain something to you.

The differences between the groups were consistent with their backgrounds. The civil society participants discussed how each video had been constructed, which information had been omitted and how emotional devices were used, and they reflected on how the same content might be read by viewers with less knowledge. The students were no less critical, but their discussion more often turned on whether they found a message convincing or offensive. Given that FG2 consisted largely of students of political science and philosophy, this contrast is likely to understate the gap that would emerge with a more representative group of young people.

Neither group saw itself as the main audience at risk. Both placed that risk among younger users and among people without sufficient knowledge of the historical and political context, who might

recognise the figures and symbols in a video without understanding what had been selected or left out. Participants in FG1 added that they did not consider themselves immune. Their concern lay less with any single video than with the accumulation of similar messages:

One video isn't the problem. The problem is when TikTok shows you the same story ten times in ten different ways.

Participants also linked this concern to the wider environment in which young people learn about the war. A video that confirms what a viewer has already heard at home or at school is likely to be accepted without question, while a viewer from another part of the country may have learned a completely different version of the same events. As another participant put it:

Someone who doesn't know much about the war could watch this and really think that's the whole story.

The focus groups did not cover participants' knowledge of reporting mechanisms or their own sharing practices in detail, and their findings should be read with the composition of FG2 in mind. What they show clearly is that educated young people in Sarajevo read this material critically and are aware of how it is made. The open question is how far that capacity extends to the many young people in the country who do not share their education, their access to diverse sources or their exposure to the perspectives of other communities.

7. Conclusion

Almost all of the content analysed in Bosnian sample draws on the war of the 1990s and the divisions it left behind, and the bulk of it belongs to the polarising stage, sharpening the boundaries between communities rather than calling for action. What TikTok adds is speed, repetition and the removal of context. Existing footage is trimmed, captioned and given a soundtrack in ways that turn testimony into accusation, commemoration into mobilisation and a single crime into a verdict on an entire people. Because each community has its own account of the war, the platform does not so much spread one dominant narrative as reproduce three competing ones, each confirming the grievances of its own audience and the guilt of the others.

The few posts that move to the mobilising stage come from all three communities and share a common source of energy: the memory of the war turned into an obligation for the present. Mladić's death in late August showed how quickly that memory can be reactivated, with celebration and condemnation circulating side by side. Content that disputes whether the state should exist, from calls for secession to demands for a third entity, adds a further dimension, translating historical grievance into contemporary political projects and coinciding with an election campaign conducted along the same lines of division. Alongside all this, the sample contains survivors' testimonies, calls for responsibility and appeals against revenge, which shows that the space is contested and that counter-narratives are present, even when they are themselves reframed by those they challenge.

The focus groups offer grounds for cautious optimism. The young people who took part recognised selective editing, missing context and attempts at provocation, and they drew a clear line between remembering crimes and using that memory to mobilise. Their capacity, however, appears closely tied to their education and civic engagement, and both groups located the risk among peers who lack the same background. In a country where schools in different areas can teach different accounts of the same war, many young people meet this content with only one version of the past at their disposal.

For Bosnia and Herzegovina, the main implication is that digital radicalisation cannot be addressed separately from the divisions that feed it. Removing individual posts will reach only a small part of the material, since much of it consists of authentic footage given a misleading frame. More durable responses lie in education. A shared and evidence-based approach to teaching the history of the 1990s, grounded in the facts established by international and domestic courts, would give young people a common reference point against which selective content can be tested. Media literacy should focus on the questions that the focus groups themselves raised: where a piece of footage comes from, who is speaking, and what has been left out. If courts and regulators applied the provisions already in force against hate speech, genocide denial and the glorification of war criminals

without exception, they would signal that the line drawn by the participants between remembrance and incitement is also recognised by institutions.

These measures are closely connected to the country's European path. Accession requires reforms that depend on agreement across communities, and online spaces where the war is fought again day after day make such agreement harder to reach. The material analysed here does not yet amount to organised extremism, but it maintains a climate in which every political question can be traced back to the war and every opponent can be cast as the heir of a historical enemy. Whether that climate hardens or eases will depend in large part on whether the generation now growing up with these videos is given the tools to see how they are made.

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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 Bosnia and Herzegovina, 333 posts were collected in several

rounds between March and September 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 border-line 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 radicalis-

ing 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 Bosnia and Herzegovina, FG1 had seven participants and FG2 six, the latter composed of university students recruited through their professors.
- 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: 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: *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: *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: *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: *A video praises a paramilitary group from the 1990s as heroes, implicitly approving extra-legal violence as a solution to contemporary problems.*

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

Example: *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: *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: *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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