

The Digital Echo of Old Divisions: Youth and Radicalising Narratives in Montenegro

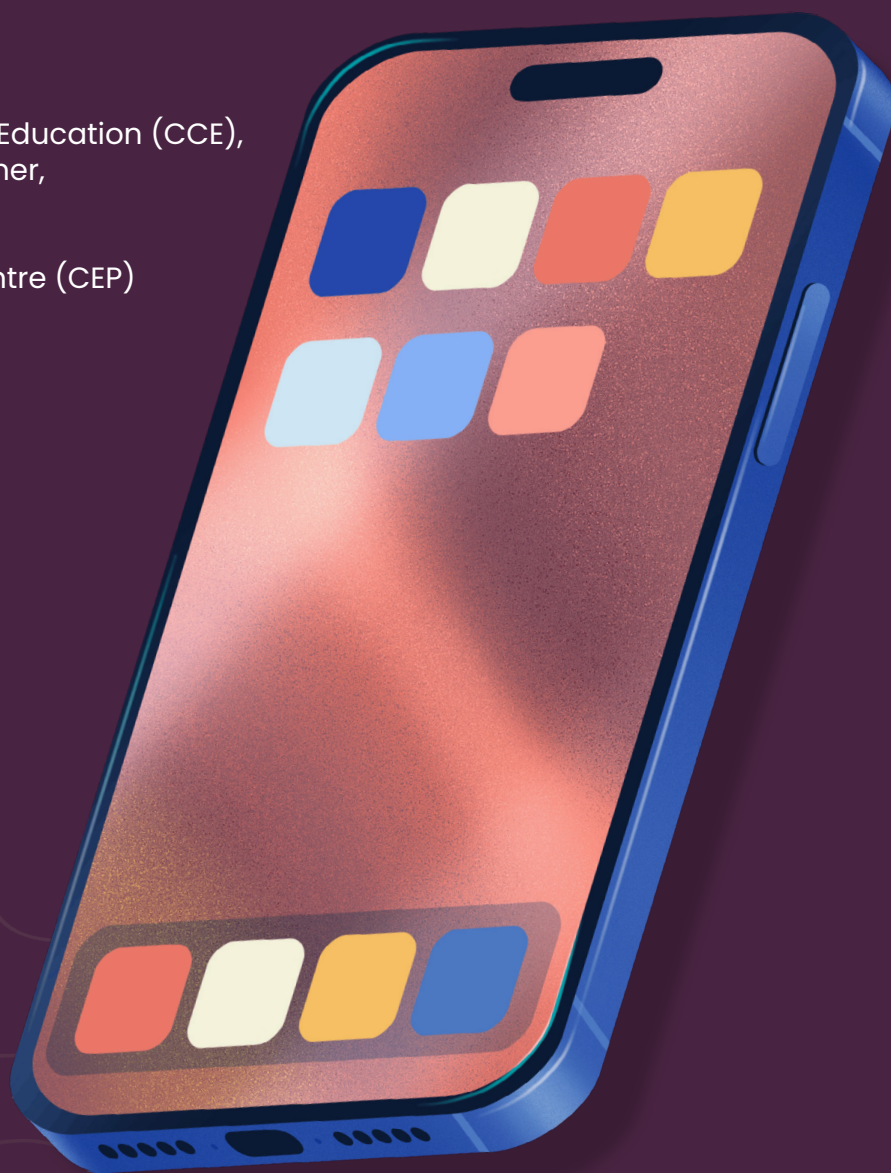
RADAR

Radicalisation Analytics in Digital Algorithmic Realms

Montenegro Report

Author: Željka Zvicer, Centre for Civic Education (CCE),
and Marko Todorović, Senior Researcher,
European Policy Centre (CEP)

Contributor: Pavle Janošević,
Project Assistant, European Policy Centre (CEP)



Executive Summary

This report examines the early dynamics of online radicalisation on TikTok among young people in Montenegro. It draws on a purposive sample of 332 TikTok posts encountered in the country between March and September 2026, each coded for stage of radicalisation, dominant narrative, target, emotional tone and conspiratorial framing, and on two focus groups held in Podgorica in July 2026, where young people from different backgrounds discussed the same videos. It is part of RADAR, a regional project examining early-stage digital radicalisation across Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, three countries that occupy the same linguistic space and thus share a closely interwoven digital space in which radicalising narratives move easily from one to the next.

The findings arrive at a particular moment in Montenegro's political life. The country is the most advanced candidate in the EU enlargement process, twenty years after an independence referendum whose outcome remains settled in law yet still contested in everyday political culture. Questions of nationhood, language and church continue to shape public debate, and accession itself presupposes a public sphere in which such disputes can be argued without sliding into accusations of betrayal.

Three themes run through the sample. The first is a substantial body of content that commemorates and glorifies individuals convicted of war crimes from the 1990s, delivered through funeral footage, tribute songs and archival imagery rather than explicit argument. The second concerns Montenegro's own statehood, as content denies or ridicules a distinct Montenegrin identity, recasts independence as betrayal and revives historical labels for internal enemies. The third is a substantial strand on gender and sexuality, in which more than a fifth of all posts target women, feminists or LGBTIQ persons in the name of a "natural order." Across all three, the material rarely presents itself as an argument that could be answered: it works through memory, humour and belonging rather than through claims that invite rebuttal.

The two focus groups recognised manipulation readily but responded to it in markedly different ways. Participants working in civil society organisations weighed each video against the limits of free expression, drew a clear line at explicit threats, and could name concrete channels for reporting hate speech to the police or state institutions. Participants from the general youth population were no less critical of individual claims, yet knew of no protective channel beyond the platform's own reporting button, and described nationalist content as background noise they had grown numb to. Both groups tended to scroll past rather than report.

For Montenegro's European path, these findings point less to a need for new restrictions than to consistent enforcement of the rules already in place, and to building the procedural knowledge and media literacy that young people currently acquire only if they happen to work in civil society. A public sphere in which identity disputes are conducted without recourse to betrayal, and in which existing protections are known and used, is not incidental to accession; it is among the conditions the process itself depends on.

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 Commemorating the Convicted.....](#) 8
 - [5.2 Contesting Statehood.....](#) 9
 - [5.3 Gender and the “Natural Order”](#) 11
 - [5.4 Making Radical Ideas Ordinary.....](#) 12
- [6. How Young People Read Radicalising Content](#) 13
- [7. Conclusion](#) 14
- [Bibliography](#) 16
- [Annex A. Methodology for Mapping Radicalising Content on TikTok.....](#) 17
- [Annex B. Focus Group Methodology](#) 21
- [Annex C. Codebook: Integrated Coding Guidelines.....](#) 24

1. Introduction

For many young people in Montenegro, TikTok has become one of the first places where political identity is encountered, argued over and performed. The platform's advertising tools indicated that it reached around four in five adults in the country in late 2025, and that its potential reach had grown by more than a third over the preceding year, well ahead of Facebook and Instagram.¹ Because these figures only cover users aged 18 and above, the platform's reach among teenagers is likely to be higher still. Short videos travel fast, reward emotional intensity and blend seamlessly into entertainment, which turns the platform into a particular kind of setting for political socialisation: a song, a flag or a few seconds of archival footage can make a point that would otherwise need a speech. Yet no recent study has looked specifically at what TikTok serves young users in the region and how they interpret it.

Montenegro offers a particularly revealing setting for this question, because the country's central political cleavage is itself a dispute about identity. Twenty years after the 2006 referendum on independence, which passed by a narrow margin,² questions of nationhood, national symbols, language and church remain politically live. In the 2023 census, 41.1 percent of citizens declared themselves Montenegrin and 32.9 percent Serb, while more people named Serbian than Montenegrin as their mother tongue.³ The 2019 Law on Freedom of Religion, which set out to regulate the ownership of religious property, triggered months of mass processions led by the Serbian Orthodox Church and contributed to the end of three decades of rule by the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) in the 2020 elections.⁴ Much of the content examined here responds, directly or implicitly, to that history. The observation period, from March to September 2026, also coincided with an event that shaped the sample substantially: the death of Ratko Mladić, who was serving a life sentence for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity, in United Nations custody in the Netherlands on 27 August 2026.⁵ His death set off a wave of tribute and glorification content that circulated across the region and into Montenegrin feeds.

These dynamics do not stop at the border, and Montenegro's position in the region cuts both ways: a small country in a shared linguistic space absorbs far more digital content than it produces, while also standing furthest ahead in the process meant to guard against exactly this kind of erosion. Montenegro shares a language and a densely connected digital environment with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, so that content produced for audiences in Belgrade, Banja Luka or Sarajevo is watched, reshared and reinterpreted in Podgorica or Nikšić. A considerable part of the material analysed in this report seemed not to be produced in Montenegro at all, yet it reached Montenegrin users and fed into local debates, which is precisely why the study records where content was encountered rather than where it originated. At the same time, Montenegro is the most advanced candidate in the EU enlargement process. It has opened all 33 negotiating chapters, 21 of which had been provisionally closed by October 2026, and the Government has set itself the goal of closing all chapters by the end of the year.⁶ Accession assumes more than legislative alignment. It also depends on a public sphere where arguments about identity do not slide into accusations of treason, and where celebrating a man convicted of genocide is not something young people routinely scroll past. The two facts sit uneasily together: the same openness that lets a small country punch above its weight in accession talks also leaves it with limited room to shape the regional current of content reaching its own young users.

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

2 The May 2006 referendum on independence required a qualified majority of 55 percent of valid votes and passed with 55.5 percent.

3 Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT), *2023 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings: Population by National or Ethnic Affiliation, Religion and Mother Tongue*, release, October 2024, <https://www.monstat.org/eng/novosti.php?id=4012>.

4 The Law on Freedom of Religion or Belief, adopted in December 2019, required religious communities to prove ownership of property acquired before 1918. The Serbian Orthodox Church, to which most Orthodox believers in Montenegro belong, regarded it as an attempt to seize its property and organised mass processions (*litije*) across the country throughout 2020. The disputed provisions were amended after the change of government.

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 Council of the European Union, "Enlargement: EU and Montenegro Close Accession Negotiations on Competition Policy and Customs Union," press release, 14 July 2026, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/07/14/enlargement-eu-and-montenegro-close-accession-negotiations-on-competition-policy-and-customs-union/>.

The aim of the research is neither to rank how radical Montenegrin TikTok is nor to count extremist posts. Drawing on a purposive sample of 332 TikTok posts encountered in Montenegro and on two focus groups held in Podgorica in July 2026, it asks which radicalising narratives circulate in this space, how they are framed, and how young people with different levels of media literacy read the same material. The central question is how inherited conflicts, over the wars of the 1990s and over Montenegro's own statehood, are being passed on to a generation that experienced neither first-hand, and what that means for social cohesion and the country's European trajectory.

2. Conceptualising Digital Radicalisation

In RADAR, radicalisation is understood as a gradual movement along a spectrum, not as a line that separates the "normal" from the "extreme". The term itself is far from settled. The literature has repeatedly pointed out that what counts as radical depends on context, and that the label is stretched to cover political, social and security phenomena that have little in common. The project therefore makes no assumption that unusual or passionately held views are dangerous in themselves. What interests it is the point at which content hardens the boundary between in-group and out-group, casts pluralism as illegitimate, makes exclusion seem acceptable or presents coercion and violence as reasonable answers.⁷

Holding a radical opinion is also different from acting on it. The two-pyramids model developed by McCauley and Moskaleiko treats the radicalisation of opinion and the radicalisation of action as distinct processes, since a shift in what people think does not automatically translate into a shift in what they do.⁸ RADAR builds on that distinction. Its four-stage continuum, running from problematic through polarising and radicalising to mobilising content, describes what a piece of content does and how intense it is. It makes no judgement about the viewer, and it does not assume that watching a polarising clip sets anyone on a path towards violence.

None of this means that the platform is irrelevant. Digital environments alter the setting in which young people form political views, even if they are better seen as amplifiers and accelerants than as independent causes, with the wider political context doing much of the work. Recommendation systems shape which ideas users meet again and again. Studies of YouTube have traced routes from milder towards more extreme communities, while warning against the notion that algorithms push every user down the same "rabbit hole". Research focused on TikTok points in the same direction, and some of it suggests that personalised feeds can entrench far-right content pathways even more firmly. These findings speak to how platforms function, not to a predictable sequence of individual radicalisation.⁹

Form is the fourth element of the framework. Work on TikTok and similarly visual platforms has shown how exclusionary and extremist ideas settle into everyday online habits: memes, in-jokes, aesthetics, music, references to popular culture and posts that look like ordinary lifestyle content.¹⁰ Such formats make it easier to come across political or ideological messages without registering them as such, above all when they blend into the entertainment and identity content that fills users' feeds anyway. RADAR therefore analyses style, tone, visuals and platform conventions as part of the message itself, since they shape how radicalising narratives are delivered and how they are understood.

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 Moskaleiko, "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.

The Montenegrin sample consists of 332 public TikTok posts gathered in several rounds between March and September 2026. Because TikTok tailors every feed to its user, no representative feed exists that could be sampled, and the study relied instead on purposive sampling. Researchers began with structured searches of keywords and hashtags and then traced connected accounts and content through networked snowball sampling. The aim was to capture the variety of radicalising content in circulation, rather than to estimate how likely a typical Montenegrin user is to come across a given narrative. The study also records where content was encountered, not where it was made, so the sample contains a good deal of material produced in Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina that found its way into Montenegrin feeds. Every percentage reported below describes this sample alone and should not be read as representative of TikTok content in Montenegro more broadly.

Coding followed the common RADAR template. Coders attached five pieces of information to each post: its stage of radicalisation, dominant narrative, primary target and dominant emotional tone, plus a yes-or-no judgement on conspiratorial framing. Stages were assigned along a four-step continuum of rising intensity. At the *problematic* stage, content makes stereotypes, mistrust or exclusionary ideas feel normal, typically through jokes, sarcasm or hints, without yet splitting society into two camps. *Polarising* content draws that line openly, presenting another group as dangerous, immoral or foreign and feeding resentment and moral indignation, while stopping short of calling for exclusion. *Radicalising* content goes a step further and justifies exclusion, repression or systematic discrimination, often by celebrating authoritarian remedies and conditioning the audience to see coercion as warranted. At the top of the scale, *mobilising* content asks viewers to do something concrete, whether to attend a protest, confront opponents or spread a message in an organised way. Each post received a single stage, and borderline cases were placed in the lower category unless escalation was evident.

Coders also identified the worldview that primarily frames each post. *Ethno-nationalist and identitarian* narratives put ethnic or national belonging first, stress the purity, superiority or suffering of one group and portray others as a standing threat, often by reworking historical grievances. Content with an *authoritarian and anti-democratic* orientation prizes decisive leaders, discipline and unity above plural debate and accountability, and portrays democracy as weak, corrupt or imported. *Anti-Western and civilisational* narratives present the EU, NATO or a loosely defined “West” as morally degenerate and intent on erasing local culture, casting the country as a front line in a clash of civilisations. *Religious-based hardline* content turns faith into a closed and exclusionary identity, hostile to pluralism and to a secular state. Since these strands often mix within a single post, secondary narratives could be recorded as well. Targets, emotional tones and conspiratorial framing were coded using the descriptive categories defined in the Codebook (Annex C).

To examine the “demand side”, the Centre for Civic Education (CCE) held two focus groups (FG) in Podgorica in July 2026, following the shared RADAR protocol described in Annex B. The first (FG1) brought together seven participants aged 18–25 who work in civil society organisations, several of them on human rights, media or hate speech. The second (FG2) comprised six participants of the same age from the general population, secondary-school and university students from Nikšić, Danilovgrad and Podgorica. FG2 saw six pre-coded videos covering all four stages and three types of target, while FG1 saw five of them, without one AI-generated clip. Being small and qualitative, the groups cannot speak for Montenegrin youth in general. What they offer is a side-by-side view of how two groups with different degrees of media literacy make sense of identical material. The quotations below are English translations lightly edited for readability.

4. The Content Landscape

Measured by stage, the Montenegrin sample sits unusually far towards the severe end of the continuum. More than half of all posts (55.1 percent) were coded as radicalising and a further 5.7 percent as mobilising, while problematic and polarising content together account for less than two fifths of the sample (19.9 and 19.3 percent respectively; see Table 1). Read on its own, this distribution would suggest a digital environment saturated with content that legitimises exclusion or violence. The composition of the sample points to a more specific explanation.

Table 1. Stage of radicalisation in the Montenegrin sample

Stage	Count	%
Problematic	66	19.9
Polarising	64	19.3
Radicalising	183	55.1
Mobilising	19	5.7

Source: RADAR Montenegro coded sample (n=332). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

A single cluster of content accounts for most of the severe end of the distribution. In total, 136 posts, or 41 percent of the sample, are centred on figures from the wars of the 1990s: above all Ratko Mladić, whose death in August 2026 fell within the observation period, but also other wartime figures. All but two of these posts were coded as radicalising or mobilising, because celebrating people convicted of genocide and other grave crimes as heroes legitimises the violence they stand for. Outside this cluster, the picture changes considerably. Of the remaining 196 posts, a third were coded as problematic, slightly fewer as polarising, and just over a third as radicalising or mobilising (see Table 2). The high overall share of radicalising content is therefore less a sign that the Montenegrin information space is uniformly extreme than a record of how quickly a single event can fill young users' feeds with the glorification of wartime violence.

Table 2. Stage of radicalisation within and outside the wartime-figures cluster

Stage	Wartime-figures Cluster (count)	Wartime-figures Cluster (%)	Rest of sample (count)	Rest of sample (%)
Problematic	0	0.0	66	33.7
Polarising	2	1.5	62	31.6
Radicalising	126	92.6	57	29.1
Mobilising	8	5.9	11	5.6
Total	136	100.0	196	100.0

Source: RADAR Montenegro coded sample (n=332). The cluster comprises posts centred on Ratko Mladić, Radovan Karadžić, Milorad Ulemek, Željko Ražnatović or the units they commanded.

Ethno-nationalist and identitarian content dominates the sample, accounting for 72.0 percent of all posts, far ahead of authoritarian/anti-democratic (15.1 percent), anti-Western/civilisational (8.7 percent) and religious-based hardline content (4.2 percent; see Table 3). Two features of this distribution deserve comment. The first is the weight of the wartime cluster, all of which falls under the ethno-nationalist category, although even outside it ethno-nationalist content remains the largest group, with 104 of the remaining 196 posts. The second concerns the two smaller categories. In the Montenegrin sample, content coded as authoritarian or anti-Western rarely deals with the state, elections or geopolitics: 72 of its 79 posts target women, feminists or LGBTIQ persons, framing gender equality either as a threat to a natural hierarchy or as a decadent Western import. These two categories should therefore be read here primarily as vehicles for gender-traditionalist content, which is discussed in section 5.3.

Table 3. Dominant narratives in the Montenegrin sample

Dominant narrative	Count	%
Ethno-nationalist / Identitarian	239	72.0
Authoritarian / Anti-democratic	50	15.1
Anti-Western / Civilisational	29	8.7
Religious-based Hardline	14	4.2

Source: RADAR Montenegro coded sample (n=332). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

Ethnic groups are by far the most frequent primary target, at 64.2 percent, followed by women and feminists (16.9 percent) and LGBTIQ persons (5.1 percent; see Table 4). Much of the ethnic targeting is implicit. In the wartime cluster, the victims of the glorified commanders, above all Bosniaks, are rarely named, yet the celebration of their persecutors carries an unmistakable message towards them. Beyond the cluster, the range of targets widens. Ethnic groups still lead with 82 of 196 posts, but women and feminists account for 56 and LGBTIQ persons for 17, while migrants, state actors and political opponents appear less often.

Table 4. Most frequent primary targets

Target	Count	%
Ethnic groups	213	64.2
Women / feminists	56	16.9
LGBTIQ persons	17	5.1
No explicit target	12	3.6
Migrants / refugees	10	3.0
State actors	9	2.7
Political opponents / 'traitors'	7	2.1
Religious groups	6	1.8
Journalists / media	1	0.3
Western actors / institutions	1	0.3

Source: RADAR Montenegro coded sample (n=332). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

The emotional profile reflects the commemorative character of much of the sample. *Pride/superiority* is the most frequent dominant tone (31.3 percent), followed by *grievance/victimhood* (18.4 percent) and *contempt/dehumanisation* (17.5 percent; see Table 5). *Fear*, which features prominently in much of the literature on radicalising content, is almost entirely absent and appears as the dominant tone in a single post. Most of this material does not seek to frighten its audience; it seeks to make viewers proud of a particular version of the past and resentful of how that past is judged by others. Just over one post in ten (10.8 percent) was coded as *neutral or informational* in appearance. This group deserves attention in its own right, since claims about nationhood and history can be most persuasive when they come without the signals that normally mark a message as propaganda.

Table 5. Dominant emotional tone in the Montenegrin sample

Emotional tone	Count	%
Pride / Superiority	104	31.3
Grievance / Victimhood	61	18.4
Contempt / Dehumanisation	58	17.5
Neutral / Informational	36	10.8
Irony / Mockery / Provocation	31	9.3
Anger / Outrage	26	7.8
Intimidation	8	2.4
Duty / Obligation	7	2.1
Fear	1	0.3

Source: RADAR Montenegro coded sample (n=332). Percentages refer only to the purposive sample.

Coders also noted whether a post relied on *conspiratorial framing*, meaning that it explained events through the hidden coordination of a concealed actor. Such framing is marginal in the Montenegrin sample and present in only six posts (1.8 percent). Where it does appear, it draws on antisemitic tropes, such as claims that a prominent Bosnian Serb politician is secretly Jewish or that Albania and Kosovo are “Zionist projects”, or on anti-vaccine narratives. The contrast with the prominence of memory, identity and belonging elsewhere in the sample is instructive. In this material, radicalising content rarely relies on a hidden enemy, because the enemies it constructs are publicly known and historically familiar.

5. Examining Radicalisation Dynamics

The four sections that follow move from the most intense and event-driven material to content that is more diffuse but more distinctly Montenegrin. Section 5.1 examines the glorification of wartime figures that dominated the sample after Mladić’s death. Section 5.2 turns to the domestic dispute over Montenegrin statehood and identity, and to the boundaries of belonging drawn against outsiders. Section 5.3 addresses the substantial strand of content on gender and sexuality, while section 5.4 considers the formats through which radicalising ideas are made to look ordinary.

5.1 Commemorating the Convicted

The largest and most homogeneous body of content in the sample honours men convicted of the gravest crimes of the 1990s wars. Ratko Mladić is its central figure.¹¹ After his death on 27 August 2026, dozens of near-identical videos presented him as a “hero, not a criminal” and a “general” whose legend would outlive him. Funeral footage and scenes from church services at which priests commemorated him during the liturgy were set to wartime songs. Residents of Zvornik, Višegrad and Banja Luka were filmed lighting candles and marching in his honour, football supporters paid tribute from the stands, and a young woman filmed herself to a song celebrating him. One clip shows a priest from Kosovo kissing his photograph, while another features a former paramilitary commander explaining that legends are only born and never die. Most of this material seems to have been produced elsewhere in the region, yet it reached Montenegrin users, which shows how little national borders mean in a shared linguistic space. Radovan Karadžić appears less often, but in the same register.¹²

11 Commander of the Army of Republika Srpska during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, convicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in 2017 of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, including for the Srebrenica killings. The conviction and life sentence were upheld on appeal in 2021. More on: <https://cgo-cce.org/en/2026/09/23/strategies-of-relativisation-of-evil-the-war-criminal-as-a-general/>, CCE, 2026.

12 Wartime President of Republika Srpska, convicted by the ICTY in 2016 of genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. On appeal in 2019, his sentence was increased to life imprisonment.

A second strand celebrates Milorad Ulemek Legija and the special police unit he commanded, frequently alongside Željko Ražnatović Arkan.¹³ Dozens of videos show members of the unit training and taking their oath of allegiance, often accompanied by statements in which Ulemek denies responsibility for the crimes for which he was convicted. Arkan appears in interview clips claiming that Serbian forces were only defending themselves, and in footage in which he threatens Croats and calls them “Ustaše”.¹⁴¹⁵ The aesthetic of these videos borrows from action films and military recruitment material, and their appeal lies less in any explicit argument than in the image of discipline, strength and belonging they project.

Glorification and denial often travel together. Some posts relativise the Srebrenica genocide directly,¹⁶ and one reposts a clip in which a Serbian television host calls Mladić a war criminal, using the caption to frame him as a traitor for saying so. This small example captures the logic of the whole cluster, in which acknowledging a court’s verdict becomes an act of disloyalty and celebrating the convicted becomes a test of belonging. Not all reactions ran in one direction. One post takes footage from a press conference at which the Bosniak Party called on state institutions to act against the glorification of Mladić, and recontextualises it with Serbian nationalist music and a sarcastic caption asking whether critics would rather “arrest half of Montenegro” for holding an opinion about the general. The clip does not report the party’s concern but it uses it as material to mock.

The focus groups took place before Mladić’s death and did not watch material from this cluster, but they discussed its roots. Participants in both groups expressed a pronounced fatigue with the 1990s, and several asked why their generation, which did not live through the wars, is still addressed as an audience for them. FG2 watched an AI-generated song set over a photograph of the Second World War Chetnik commander Draža Mihailović.¹⁷ Participants spotted its artificial origin at once and laughed at it:

If they recorded this in a real studio, hats off, but this is 100% AI – it’s hilarious.

Yet they identified its intended audience with precision, placing it among older, nationalist-minded viewers rather than their own generation. The reaction is characteristic of how young people in both groups dealt with wartime content: ridicule protected them from the material, but it also led them to treat it as somebody else’s problem.

The cluster shows how an event can convert a long-standing culture of wartime commemoration into a concentrated flow of radicalising content. Much of it would pass as ordinary mourning if the person mourned were not a convicted perpetrator of genocide. For young viewers, the main risk lies less in any single post than in the cumulative normalisation of a moral inversion, in which the verdicts of international justice are treated as insults.

5.2 Contesting Statehood

The second layer of the sample is distinctly Montenegrin and concerns the legitimacy of the state itself. A recurring set of posts denies that Montenegrins constitute a separate nation, presenting them as Serbs who have forgotten or betrayed their origins. A man making the Serbian three-finger salute asks “Milogorci” when they will finally become Serbs, and ends the clip with an obscene gesture.¹⁸¹⁹ Another video argues that Serbian should become an official language on the strength

13 Former commander of the Special Operations Unit (JSO) of the Serbian State Security Service, known as the Red Berets. He is serving a prison sentence for organising the 2003 assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đindić, among other crimes.

14 Leader of the Serb Volunteer Guard, known as Arkan’s Tigers, a paramilitary unit active in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Indicted by the ICTY for crimes against humanity and war crimes, he was killed in Belgrade in 2000 before he could stand trial.

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

16 In July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces under Mladić’s command killed around 8,000 Bosniak men and boys after taking the UN-protected enclave of Srebrenica. The killings were established as genocide by the ICTY and by the International Court of Justice.

17 Commander of the Chetnik movement during the Second World War, executed by the Yugoslav communist authorities in 1946 and rehabilitated by a Serbian court in 2015. His legacy remains deeply contested across the region.

18 A derogatory blend of the name of former President Milo Đukanović and the word for Montenegrins (*Crnogorci*), used to present Montenegrins who assert a distinct national identity as the product of one politician’s project.

19 A gesture made with the thumb and first two fingers, used as a Serbian national and, in many contexts, nationalist symbol.

of the 2023 census, claiming that efforts to promote a Montenegrin linguistic identity have failed. Historical material is recruited to the same end, from a 1918 quotation declaring that “we are no longer Montenegrins, but Serbs” and archival images of the Podgorica Assembly that voted for union with Serbia,²⁰ to a television guest explaining that being Montenegrin means being “twice Serbian”.

Independence, and the political order that followed it, are recast as betrayal. A Montenegrin actor claims that voters in the 2006 referendum were paid, while the politician Vladislav Dajković describes Serbs who sided with the former ruling party or with the canonically unrecognised Montenegrin Orthodox Church as having betrayed their identity for personal gain. Flags carry much of this argument. Several posts contrast the red, blue and white tricolour, which many Serbs in Montenegro use as a national symbol, with the current state flag, in one case placing a full bookshelf beneath the tricolour and an empty one beneath the state flag.²¹ A caption sums up the grievance: there have never been more Serbs in government, yet never less Serbian identity in the Constitution.

Religion is the most emotionally charged front of this dispute. Clergy of the Serbian Orthodox Church appear repeatedly, from the late Metropolitan Amfilohije cursing anyone who opposes what he calls a “one-faith, one-blood and one-language” and describing the Montenegrin Orthodox Church as a sect,^{22,23} to Metropolitan Joanikije calling on Montenegro, at a commemoration of the Battle of Fundina, “to avenge Kosovo together with its sister Serbia”.²⁴ The Montenegrin Orthodox Church is in turn ridiculed, its leader mocked in memes and a stage collapse at one of its ceremonies presented as a sign from above. The clearest threat in the sample comes from this same field. In a speech filmed in front of a monastery in Berane, a man calls for the defence of the “Serbian faith and nation”, insults the residents of Cetinje and threatens the “komite”, a historical label now used for supporters of Montenegrin independence.²⁵ Both focus groups singled out this video as the one that crossed from provocation into incitement.

The dispute also has a reverse side, though a far thinner one. To test whether the same mechanisms operate in the opposite direction, the sample was purposefully supplemented through searches of hashtags associated with Montenegrin nationalist content, and these searches returned a number of comparable posts. In one, an older man argues that people who identify as Serbs are damaging the state. In another, a rally clip set to the music of a Croatian nationalist singer calls on supporters to defend Cetinje Monastery from “Serbian occupiers”, and in a third, former President Milo Đukanović describes the church processions of 2019 and 2020 as a “cleronationalist revolution”. The purposive design does not permit conclusions about the relative size of either camp online. Where these posts do appear, they speak in the same register as the dominant material, casting the other side as occupiers or traitors to the nation.

The boundaries of belonging are also drawn against outsiders, and it is here that most of the sample’s mobilising content outside the wartime cluster appears. After a stabbing in Podgorica in October 2025 that was linked in initial reports to Turkish nationals, protesters gathered near the government building chanting “Turks, get out!”, businesses owned by Turkish citizens were vandalised or set on fire, and the government temporarily suspended visa-free entry for Turkish citizens.²⁶ Videos of these protests, and of later demonstrations against the settlement of Turkish nationals, circulated in the sample alongside clips in which migrants are filmed and insulted in the street and a claim that migrants will “occupy Europe”. Here the distance between online content and offline action is

20 The assembly that in November 1918 deposed the Montenegrin dynasty and proclaimed Montenegro’s unconditional union with Serbia. Its legitimacy remains one of the central disputes between the two sides of Montenegro’s identity cleavage.

21 The red, blue and white tricolour was the flag of the Principality and Kingdom of Montenegro and is widely used today as a national symbol by Serbs in Montenegro. The current state flag, adopted in 2004, is red with a golden border and the state coat of arms.

22 Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church from 1990 until his death in 2020, and a leading figure of the 2019–2020 processions.

23 The Montenegrin Orthodox Church was re-established in 1993 and is not recognised by other canonical Orthodox churches. The Serbian Orthodox Church regards itself as the sole legitimate Orthodox church in Montenegro.

24 Metropolitan of Montenegro and the Littoral of the Serbian Orthodox Church since 2021, successor to Metropolitan Amfilohije. The Battle of Fundina (1876) was a Montenegrin victory over Ottoman forces, and the speech was delivered at the commemoration of its 150th anniversary.

25 Historically, a term for Montenegrin guerrillas who resisted the 1918 union with Serbia. In contemporary pro-Serbian discourse, it is used pejoratively for supporters of Montenegrin independence and a distinct Montenegrin identity.

26 RSE, “Turks In Montenegro Endure Attacks, Threats, And Vandalism” 28 October 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-attacks-turkish-immigrants/33573809.html>

short: the posts document mobilisation that had already taken place and invite viewers to join its next round.

5.3 Gender and the “Natural Order”

More than a fifth of the Montenegrin sample targets women, feminists or LGBTIQ persons, making gender and sexuality the second major field of radicalising content after ethno-nationalism. Around two thirds of this material sits at the problematic or polarising stage and relies on jokes, “advice” and personal opinion rather than open hostility. Its common thread is the claim that there is a natural order of gender roles, in which women belong in the home, men must lead, and any departure from this arrangement signals decline. The coding captured this content under two narrative categories, authoritarian and anti-Western, which mirror its two recurring justifications: hierarchy presented as natural, and gender equality presented as a foreign import.

Self-proclaimed experts give much of this content its authority. A man presenting himself as a psychological counsellor argues that the “third wave” of feminism has damaged women and warns them about their “biological clock”, a popular YouTuber complains that women are ungrateful and that men were the real victims of traditional marriages, and a folk singer explains how women should behave. Other posts are cruder, from a caption about a “song to beat my wife with” to jokes that reduce women to their sexual availability and claims that “our women” work abroad in the escort trade. Abortion forms a distinct cluster, in which priests and religious commentators describe women who have abortions as “graves of their children” and equate the procedure with murder.

Content targeting LGBTIQ persons follows a similar path from ridicule towards pathologisation. Several videos in the sample build jokes around reducing homosexuality to a specific sexual act, two men describe a Pride march as a disease, a man introduced as a professor calls homosexuality both a disease and a sin, and a meme responds to a real government bill equalising the tax treatment of same-sex and married couples when buying a first home, stripping out its substance and reducing it to a punchline: that given Podgorica’s property prices, people will start “bringing a boyfriend instead of a wife” to qualify. One video approvingly shows a woman tearing down LGBTIQ flags and throwing them away.

The focus groups engaged with this strand more intensely than with any other. Both groups watched the counsellor’s video and a clip in which a young man says he would like a wife who stays at home, and in both the first produced the longest and most argued discussion of the session. Participants took the counsellor’s claims apart one by one and noted that the professional title he claimed made his message more convincing to viewers who would not check it. One FG1 participant, who had already reported and blocked the creator, described the video as pseudoscience:

I reported this video. I blocked all of his profiles... The video is full of disinformation. The man has obviously read maybe two articles of some pseudoscience and decided to have an opinion on the topic.

The second video provoked a far milder reaction. Because the speaker used the first person, saying what he “would like” rather than what women should do, participants in both groups saw it as a personal preference rather than hate speech, and several said they would share it only to mock it. The contrast shows how framing, and not only content, shapes perceived severity. FG1 also drew a connection absent from FG2, when one participant argued that misogyny and homophobia spring from the same source:

Homophobia comes from misogyny. The moment people start trampling on the rights of LGBT persons, they will start trampling on the rights of women too. People are not aware of that.

In FG2, criticism of misogynistic content came almost exclusively from young women, while the male participant remained reserved. In FG1, one of the most vocal critics was a young male activist.

5.4 Making Radical Ideas Ordinary

A large part of the Montenegrin material carries its message in forms that hardly register as political. Funeral footage, candle-lit vigils, landscape videos set to folk songs, football chants, flag montages and holiday jokes carry messages about nationhood without stating them. A list of a Montenegrin's five "most and least favourite" countries, a clip about the price of sun loungers on a Montenegrin beach, or an AI-generated fantasy about Montenegro conquering the world may seem trivial on their own, but they rehearse the same distinctions between us and them that the more explicit material states openly.

Institutional voices lend this material a measured tone. Clergy speeches and sermons, delivered in a calm liturgical register, assert that Montenegrin independence is illegitimate or that a rival church is a sect, and several posts coded as neutral or informational take the form of short explanatory clips about the history or canonical status of the Montenegrin church. Participants in both focus groups recognised the pattern: overtly hateful content was easy to dismiss, whereas calm, "expert" or institutional framing was harder to shrug off, even when they ultimately rejected its claims. FG1 noted that a church setting allows exclusionary rhetoric to circulate under religious cover without the institution itself being formally implicated.

Humour does much of the remaining work. Across both groups, initial discomfort almost always gave way to laughter, and participants acknowledged the contradiction in their own reactions. As one FG2 participant admitted:

It's worrying that I find this funny... it's worrying that it's funny, and it has definitely come up on everyone's feed.

FG1 identified the mechanism behind this with precision, observing that creators who are widely mocked become viral precisely because people share their videos in order to ridicule them. Mocking and sharing are, in effect, the same act, and the laughter that allows viewers to distance themselves from content also carries it further.

Often TikTok is where messages are relayed rather than where they originate. Television appearances, broadcast coverage of Mladić's funeral, sermons and podcasts are clipped, captioned and set to music, reaching young viewers several steps removed from the original source and stripped of any framing that would identify a speaker as a convicted war criminal or a claim as contested. This is what makes the material ordinary: by the time it arrives in the feed, it looks like everything else.

6. How Young People Read Radicalising Content

Shown the same videos, the two focus groups responded in markedly different ways. Both recognised manipulation readily, especially in the more overt misogynistic and homophobic content, and neither needed prompting to identify who a video was aimed at when the message was spelled out in words. The differences emerged elsewhere: in how participants framed what they saw, what they believed could be done about it, and where they located the risk. The main points of divergence are set out in Table 6.

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

Dimension	FG1 – civil society youth	FG2 – general population youth
Primary frame	Harm weighed against freedom of expression; line drawn at explicit threats	Harm and normalisation; freedom of expression rarely raised
Mode of engagement	Construction of the message: speaker, rhetorical device, platform warnings, legal threshold	The topic itself and personal opinions on it
Symbolic content	Layered and institutional targets identified quickly	Initially read as harmless until the symbols were unpacked
Humour	Recognised as a driver of virality through mocking shares	Used to cope, with the contradiction openly acknowledged
Protective channels	Criminal complaint to the police and a government reporting portal	Only the platform's reporting button, regarded as ineffective
Proposed responses	Peer education, teacher training, a media-literacy subject, work with families	Individual control, above all scrolling past

Source: RADAR Montenegro focus groups, Podgorica, July 2026.

Normalisation was the most consistent pattern in both groups. Nationalist and polarising content was described as background noise, and TikTok as a place people go precisely in order to switch off. When FG2 watched a video of a young man in a Chetnik uniform with Serbian symbols blocking traffic in Nikšić, several participants said they had not even noticed the platform's warning that the content might offend. One of them explained why:

It has become part of everyday life here. I have grown numb to it – my reaction is just: oh, I'll scroll past this video.

FG2 initially read the same video as harmless, since it contained no hateful words, and only after discussing the uniform, the three-finger salute and the political moment in which it appeared did participants conclude that it carried a serious message. FG1 reached that conclusion faster, but then divided over whether such content should be allowed. Some participants insisted that it breaks no law and pointed out that parties holding similar views sit in government, while others saw it as a step back into the 1990s:

I think this only encourages hatred again, we are going back thirty years... It is far from harmless, because there are people who will react to videos like this.

This tension between freedom of expression and harm ran through the entire FG1 discussion. Participants repeatedly defended the right to publish offensive content and warned against giving the state the power to decide what counts as fact, pointing out that schools in different countries of the region teach different versions of the 1990s wars. They drew the line at explicit threats. The video filmed outside a church in Berane, in which a man threatens the “komite” while framing the defence of the Serbian nation as an obligation, was the only stimulus that several FG1 participants said they would report immediately, and it prompted the observation that Montenegro's existing legislation on hate speech exists but is rarely applied. The position resembles the threshold approach of the Rabat Plan of Action, which distinguishes offensive expression from incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence.²⁷ It also shows the limits of that position. In some FG1 exchanges, principled

²⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred That Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence*, UN Doc. A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, 11 January 2013.

tolerance slid into dismissing concrete harm, as when one participant said the Nikšić video did not threaten him “in the slightest”.

The sharpest difference between the groups concerned what young people can do. FG2 named no institution, organisation or adult they could turn to, and regarded the platform’s reporting button as futile because the next video would already be waiting. FG1 named a criminal complaint to the police and a government portal for reporting harmful content, but participants were clear that this knowledge came from their jobs rather than from any general awareness:

We all come from the NGO sector, so we have picked up the procedure to some extent. But ask a 23-year-old who works any other job – they most likely wouldn’t know what to do, or that they even have the right to report it.

In practice, however, both groups tended to scroll past rather than report while actually watching. The gap between what participants said should be done and what they did was common to both profiles, and FG1’s procedural knowledge did not close it.

FG1 also provided the clearest evidence that the harms under discussion are not merely hypothetical. One participant described having been targeted with homophobic insults at school, and read aloud an abusive comment containing an explicit call to violence against LGBTIQ people that they had received. Another recalled a case in Bijelo Polje in which a list of names of LGBTIQ people was circulated on social media:

Someone decided to make a list, write your name down and publish it. That is how ten to fifteen families were destroyed – because we gave someone the freedom to publish whatever they want.

The groups differed, finally, in the responses they proposed. FG2 was skeptical about schools and parents and trusted almost entirely in individual control. FG1 proposed peer education through youth ambassadors, teachers who build critical thinking into regular subjects, a dedicated media-literacy subject, age limits for younger users, and work with families, which one participant described as the primary source of political views:

Take this gentleman from Berane, he has children. Even if his children are never on social media, the household itself will influence them. Most children pick up their political views from their parents.

Side by side, the two groups reveal a wider tension in how young Montenegrins make sense of radicalising content online. Both groups see the content, and neither is simply vulnerable to it. What separates them is whether they know what to do next, and in this sample that knowledge depended almost entirely on whether participants happened to work in the civil society sector.

7. Conclusion

The Montenegrin material shows that early-stage digital radicalisation can be driven as much by events as by ideology. A single death produced a surge of content glorifying a man convicted of genocide, and for several weeks it dominated the political content that young users in Montenegro were likely to encounter; the glorification itself drew on a culture of wartime commemoration that long predates the event and will outlast it, so what the event revealed was how quickly that culture can be mobilised online, and how little the region’s borders matter when it is. Alongside this event-driven layer sits a distinctly domestic one, in which the question of who legitimately belongs to the political community is not settled even at the level of the nation itself: content that denies a Montenegrin identity, treats independence as betrayal or revives labels such as “komite” and “Milogorci” turns the ordinary contest between parties into a contest between peoples, so that disagreement moves from what the state should do to whether it should exist in its present form. Both layers are inseparable from a third, regional one, since much of the content in the sample was produced in Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina and its heroes and villains belong to a shared regional past, delivered through the same feed that brings young Montenegrins music and entertainment from Belgrade, Sarajevo and Zagreb: the shared space that allows cultural exchange also allows the rapid transfer of grievance. A fourth strand, on gender, shows that radicalising content does not always concern the nation at all – more than a fifth of the material targets women or LGBTIQ per-

sons, relying on the same device as ethno-nationalist content, presenting a hierarchy as natural and those who question it as a threat to the community, which helps explain why participants in FG1 saw misogyny and homophobia as expressions of the same intolerance.

The focus groups add a further dimension to this picture, showing that young people do not all meet this material on the same terms. Both groups recognised manipulation, and both largely scrolled past rather than reported it, but they differed in what participants knew they could do and in how they framed the limits of acceptable speech: young people from civil society knew how to report hate speech to the police and institutions, and defended free expression while drawing a line at threats, whereas their peers from the general population knew of no channel beyond the platform itself and described nationalist content as background noise. This gap matters more than the content itself in a country where unresolved questions of identity, church and statehood supply an almost inexhaustible stock of symbols, ready to be revived online whenever a new occasion arises.

European integration, too, looks different in the light of these findings. Montenegro's accession negotiations are the most advanced in the region, and much of the remaining work concerns the rule of law and fundamental rights, yet the conditions that accession presupposes – among them a public sphere in which statehood is not perpetually contested and in which convicted war criminals are not celebrated as heroes – are being worked out every day on platforms that progress reports touch on only indirectly, so that progress on negotiating chapters and resilience in the digital public sphere can move at different speeds, with a real risk that the first will be mistaken for the second.

None of this points towards a straightforward remedy, and the focus groups themselves cautioned against answers built on censorship. Moderation has little to work with here, because commemorations, flags and jokes seldom breach platform rules, and counter-narratives have little to push against, because there is rarely a single claim to disprove; the more promising path lies earlier in the chain, in consistent enforcement of the hate-speech and incitement laws already on the books, which participants saw as rarely applied, combined with media literacy that goes beyond fact-checking to cover how content is framed, who is speaking and on what authority. Procedural knowledge matters just as much – young people need to know, well before they enter the workforce, where and how to report content that threatens others, rather than acquiring that knowledge only if they happen to work in civil society – and institutions steering Montenegro's accession would do well to treat these digital spaces as part of the democratic resilience agenda, alongside the laws and formal guarantees by which progress is usually measured. The processes documented here are still at an early stage: apart from the mobilisation against Turkish citizens, which spilled into violence offline, very little of the material calls for concrete action, and almost none belongs to an organised extremist project. This is exactly why they deserve attention now, while young Montenegrins are still working out whether a political opponent is someone to argue with or someone to be protected from, a question far easier to keep open than to reopen once it has closed.

Bibliography

- Al Jazeera. "Convicted Bosnian Serb War Criminal Ratko Mladic Dies." 27 August 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/27/bosnian-serb-general-ratko-mladic-has-died-un-official-says>.
- Balkan Insight. "Anti-Turkish Protesters Rally in Montenegro After Stabbing Incident." 29 October 2025. <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/10/29/anti-turkish-protesters-rally-in-montenegro-after-stabbing-incident/bi/>.
- Conway, Maura. "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>.
- Council of the European Union. "Enlargement: EU and Montenegro Close Accession Negotiations on Competition Policy and Customs Union." Press release, 14 July 2026. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2026/07/14/enlargement-eu-and-montenegro-close-accession-negotiations-on-competition-policy-and-customs-union/>.
- DataReportal. *Digital 2026: Montenegro*. Kepios, November 2025. <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2026-montenegro>.
- Karo, Gilad, 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>.
- McCauley, Clark, and Sophia Moskalenko. "Understanding Political Radicalization: The Two-Pyramids Model." *American Psychologist* 72, no. 3 (2017): 205–216. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000062>.
- Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. *Rabat Plan of Action on the Prohibition of Advocacy of National, Racial or Religious Hatred That Constitutes Incitement to Discrimination, Hostility or Violence*. UN Doc. A/HRC/22/17/Add.4, 11 January 2013.
- Ozduzen, Ozge, 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>.
- RSE, "Turks In Montenegro Endure Attacks, Threats, And Vandalism" 28 October 2025, <https://www.rferl.org/a/montenegro-attacks-turkish-immigrants/33573809.html>
- Ribeiro, Manoel Horta, 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*, 131–141. New York: ACM, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3351095.3372879>.
- Schmid, Alex P. *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>.
- Sedgwick, Mark. "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>.
- Shin, Donghee, 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>.
- Statistical Office of Montenegro (MONSTAT). *2023 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings: Population by National or Ethnic Affiliation, Religion and Mother Tongue*. Release, October 2024. <https://www.monstat.org/eng/novosti.php?id=4012>.
- Uljarević, Daliborka and Čabarkapa, Sara "Strategies of Relativisation of Evil: The War Criminal as a "General", <https://cgo-cce.org/en/2026/09/23/strategies-of-relativisation-of-evil-the-war-criminal-as-a-general/>

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 Montenegro, 332 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 borderline videos, including brief descriptions, initial coding and open questions. The principal investigator reviewed these cases, provided guidance and updated the codebook or instructions where recurrent patterns of confusion emerged.
- **Regular check-ins.** Short weekly meetings were held during data collection to raise questions, share observations about emerging narratives and ensure adherence to the sampling schedule. These meetings also provided an opportunity to adjust the keyword list where unexpected discourses emerged.
- **Central oversight.** The principal investigator held ultimate responsibility for methodological fidelity, reviewing coded data, providing feedback, adjudicating contested classifications and ensuring that the methodology was followed uniformly. Where necessary, the principal investigator requested recoding of specific items or adjustments to the sampling strategy.
- **Secure and consistent data management.** All teams stored data in a secure, shared online repository with clearly named folders and version control. Access was restricted to authorised researchers. File naming conventions were standardised, and the project maintained a separate backup of all raw videos and coded datasets.

A.6 Ethical Considerations and Limitations

A.6.1 Ethical considerations

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

A.6.2 Limitations

This methodology makes no claim to statistical representativeness of TikTok content or of youth exposure in the Western Balkans. The sampling period was limited and the algorithmic recommendation system remains a black box, so certain narratives may be over- or under-represented. The project also focused on Bosnian/Croatian/Montenegrin/Serbian language content, and radicalising material in other languages that reaches local audiences, such as English, Arabic or Russian, may have been missed. The observation window captures a snapshot and may not reflect seasonal or event-driven spikes. Finally, without access to TikTok's proprietary data, the research could not verify view counts or audience demographics.

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

Annex B. Focus Group Methodology

B.1 Purpose and Scope

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

B.2 Selection of Stimulus Material

B.2.1 Minimum requirements before convening a group

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

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

B.2.2 Selection procedure

1. All videos coded up to that point were filtered in the coding template by the stage of radicalisation and target columns.

2. Coverage across stages of radicalisation was checked, and at least one video was selected from each stage represented in the sample, ensuring in particular that at least one clearly mobilising or explicitly polarising example was included.

3. Coverage across targets was checked, and videos were selected so that the set included at least three different targets, for example women and feminists, migrants and refugees, civil society and activists, or LGBTIQ persons, so that discussion would not focus on a single type of target.

4. A final set of five to seven videos was chosen and ordered by increasing intensity, from problematic towards radicalising and mobilising, allowing the discussion to develop gradually rather than opening with the most extreme material.

5. Each selected video was recorded in a stimulus log with its identifier from the coding template, its stage, its target and a short description.

B.3 Participants

B.3.1 Profile and composition

- Age: 18 to 25 years.
- Group size: six to eight participants, since fewer than five produces a thin discussion while more than nine is difficult to moderate and reduces speaking time per person. In Montenegro, FG1 had seven participants and FG2 six.
- 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 con-*

troversial 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 strongman rule, obedience and unity over pluralism, rights and accountability. Democracy is framed as weak, corrupt or foreign, while centralised power and repression are celebrated as necessary for stability or national revival.

Example: *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 insinuating.

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.



Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

This project is financed with the contribution of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy. The content of this document represents the views of its authors and in no way represents the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.