ONLINE

HATE SPEECH

TARGETING WOMEN IN ARMENIA

Online Hate Speech
Targeting Women in Armenia

Research
Research Report and Proposals for Improvements

Gyumri, 2024

TABLE OF CONTENT

Concepts and Definitions

Hate speech	All forms of expression that spread, incite, promote, or justify hatred based on national, sexual, gender, religious, political, social, or other grounds, including xenophobia and other forms of intolerance including aggression, discrimination, hostility, insults, and calls for violence against individuals or groups.
Online hate speech	Hate speech expressed in a digital environment, mainly on two-way and multi-user communication platforms, including social media platforms.
Intensity of hate speech	The degree of hate speech intensity refers to how strongly or forcefully the hate speech is expressed, including the use of offensive language, provocation, threats, or incitement to violence.
Basis of hate speech	The basis of hate speech refers to the underlying biases, stereotypes, expressions of anger, intolerance or discrimination, political and social agendas, literacy, and cultural features that motivate and encourage the use of hate speech against an individual or a particular group. In other words, at the root of hate speech are its reasons and motivations, which may be determined by a person's political views, gender, social, family status, race, ethnic origin, etc.
Nature of hate speech	The nature of hate speech refers to forms of the expression of hate speech, such as dehumanizing language, calls for othering and separation, calls for violence, expression and incitement of hostility, insult, sexual profanity, provocation, exclusion and marginalization of certain groups, stereotyping, etc.
Stereotyping	Stereotyping in hate speech involves using oversimplified and often negative generalizations about a group to justify stereotyping and discrimination. Hate speech relies heavily on stereotypes, and broad and inaccurate statements about a group, targeting individuals and prescribing a range of assumed and negative characteristics to them.

Othering	From the perspective of hate speech, othering involves the process of treating individuals or groups as fundamentally different and inferior, which tends to create an "us vs. them" dynamic. This process is evident in hate speech which emphasizes differences on political, social, cultural, racial, religious, or other grounds.
Exclusion	In the context of hate speech, exclusion refers to language and expressions intended to exclude and marginalize individuals or groups based on their identity and socio-political views. Hate speech can explicitly or implicitly suggest that certain people do not belong or deserve to be part of a community, society, or nation.
Dehumanization	Dehumanization entails presenting a person or group as lacking human characteristics or as being outside the common value system, portraying them as subhuman. This portrayal is used to justify discriminatory actions, hatred, or violence. Dehumanization is a technology aimed at destroying the *human* image of an individual or group, deliberately forming a negative opinion about them. It involves presenting a person, group, state, or ideology as hostile, destructive, demonic, and monstrous.
Linear model of communication	The linear model of communication is a one-way process where a message is addressed and sent to a receiver/addressee or audience without feedback.
Interactive model of communication	The interactive model of communication recognizes communication as a two-way process involving the receiver's response to the sender. Both participants take turns as sender and receiver, creating a more dynamic exchange of information.
Transactional model of communication	The transactional model views communication as a simultaneous, reciprocal process in which all participants are both senders and receivers at the same time. It emphasizes the dynamic and continuous nature of communication: the constant feedback and the mutual influence of information.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the Armenian media landscape, hate speech has reached alarming levels. It is intensely and publicly spread on the social media pages of news outlets. The comment section of posts on social media is a unique public space where any user can post any text with their fake or real account. Many users take advantage of this opportunity to target public figures, including female public and political figures. This phenomenon is harmful and dangerous not only due to its uncontrollable nature but also due to its high visibility and accessibility which increases the scope of its damage and expands the geographic boundaries of hate speech. At the same time, it is very important that news agencies take responsibility not only for their *own publications* but also for the discussions that arise in social media as a result of those publications. They need to control these processes and moderate the content of the comments containing hate speech. A successful example of such practice is the code of conduct of the Media Ethics Observatory, to which over eighty media outlets have joined. It addresses the need for media to moderate hate speech in sections 3.4.6 and 3.4.7 of its Code of Ethics of Armenian Media and Journalists.

This research seeks to answer the following question: What is the nature of hate speech directed at female political and public figures on social media in Armenia, and where do its roots lie? Given the widespread use of Facebook and YouTube and the diverse range of social groups present on these platforms, the researchers have selected the comment sections of posts on these platforms for the study. This is a typical example of the transactional model of communication. It reflects undirected and/or spontaneous interactions from various centers: social and political groups, professional communities, and individual users. In this context, one of the ways to control and regulate these interactions is by deleting comments that do not adhere to the media's ethical standards.

The time frame for collecting and categorizing research material spans from January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023—essentially covering the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh postwar period. To understand online hate speech, specific criteria have been applied, including the presence of targeting individuals, insults, and incitements to violence.

Due to its complex and multifaceted nature, it is difficult to filter out only the expressions containing calls for violence, discrimination, etc. In the first stage of media monitoring, expressions of offensive and humiliating nature were compiled, after which they were classified according to the topic, nature, and basis of hate speech. Apart from the media monitoring, the research also contains focus group discussions and interviews with key individuals. Two one-on-one interviews have been conducted with experts working on gender-related issues in Armenia. Furthermore, two focus group discussions were carried out that included media professionals and civil society representatives who encounter issues of hate speech and gender equality struggles in their work.

The research results indicate that the key patterns and trends of hate speech are of a political and gendered nature. As a response to posts on political topics, the comment sections are filled with hate speech based on political views which are formulated as gender-based hate speech further aggravating people's positions and intensifying insults. As a result, two dangerous phenomena arise. First, criticism of political views exceeds its bounds and begins targeting individuals' personal traits unrelated to their public roles. This shift poses significant risks, as it discourages women from participating in public life and causes current political and social figures to avoid public speaking and sharing their opinions. Additionally, the targeting of women to such an extent can cause long-term psychological harm. The second dangerous phenomenon extends beyond the individual level, negatively affecting the value system and linguistic thinking of those who engage with these texts, whether by writing or reading them. Regardless of whether the hate speech is explicitly aimed at women as a gender group, gender-based offensive language reinforces gender stereotypes and legitimizes gender-based discrimination and violence. From this perspective, hate speech targeting women is particularly harmful when it comes from public figures with authority and influence, rather than from ordinary users. This is due to the large audience these public figures reach and the likelihood that their rhetoric will influence others to follow suit. The research material collected clearly demonstrates how discriminatory and hostile language used by political leaders is adopted by their supporters and actively directed against political opponents. This shows how populist leaders use such language as a weapon to further their political objectives.

The results of media monitoring reveal all the aforementioned patterns and trends in the targeting of female public figures. The developed material has allowed for a more objective view of the process and has brought to light a number of interesting results. These findings summarize the relationship between the intensity of hate speech and current political events, the patterns of targeting women, the content of hate speech, and the context of broader trends. When grouping the main findings, we arrive at the following conclusions:

- Events occurring in the country, especially those that create a sense of tension, alarm, or danger (such as war, pandemics, elections, or protests), significantly increase the volume of comments left under posts. The majority of these comments contain harsher language and more emotional hate speech. In contrast, during periods of relative calm, the volume decreases, and the language tends to be less severe.
- The content of most comments in the studied material is unrelated to the actual content of the publication. Instead, the majority of comments are reactions to the headline chosen by the media, which is often an excerpt from a speech or interview. These headlines are typically sharp, assertive, and bold, provoking strong emotions such as anger, dislike, or sympathy and admiration among media consumers. This, in turn, prompts users to actively respond, sometimes leading to arguments with one another.
- Examples of hate speech observed include a wide variety of expressions, such as profanity (20%), sexual profanity (11%), calls for violence (12%), and insults. This type of hate speech targets individuals based on gender,

appearance, political views, socio-economic and family status, beliefs, and physical or mental abilities. About 42% of the hate speech directed at women in the public sphere is gender-based, exploiting, criticizing, and mocking characteristics associated with stereotypical perceptions of a woman's image or role. It is also important to note that gender-based hate speech does not target women as a social group directly. Instead, it targets individual women based on perceptions of gender roles and the resulting stereotypes.

- The process of fundamentally differentiating and subordinating individuals or groups is evident in hate speech, which creates an "us vs. them" dynamic. This specifically targets female public figures, portraying them in an unreasonable and manipulative manner as serving the interests of a hostile country or being of a different ethnicity or religion. Ethnonyms such as "Turk" and "Azerbaijani" are used to label individuals as enemies or opponents, while terms like "Bosha" indicate a person's low social position. In other contexts, women are attributed with different religious affiliations (e.g., being called "sectarian"), as if exposing their supposed "treacherous" mission in Armenia. Additionally, the substantial volume of hate speech based on political views (20.5%) serves as a stark example of dividing people into camps, presenting them as outsiders and opponents. In the context of political polarization in Armenia, this alienation leads to dehumanization and stereotyping, aiming to depict individuals or groups as lacking human characteristics or being outside the general value system, thus inferior. This is intended to justify acts of discrimination, hatred, or violence.

- The targeting of female public figures is sometimes framed within the context of conspiracy theories. Commenters present "evidence" or imply that the targeted woman is part of international networks and organizations pursuing a divisive agenda in Armenia. These conspiracies can be linked to both local and global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, natural disasters, and healthcare-related legislative initiatives.

This research includes an examination of the legal framework, focusing on local and international legislation as well as case studies. It demonstrates the urgent need to prioritize the fight against hate speech in the Republic of Armenia. It is evident that Armenia's legal framework lacks sufficient regulations to neutralize the problem and prevent hate speech. The incomplete and inadequate nature of the current legal provisions creates numerous opportunities for evading the law and using and perpetuating hate speech either directly or indirectly. Moreover, the vague definitions surrounding hate speech allow authorities to disrupt the balance between freedom of speech and hate speech, using it for political purposes.

The report includes recommendations divided into four main areas:

a) Digital Policy Recommendations

b) Educational Policy Recommendations

c) Mass Media Self-Regulation Recommendations

d) Recommendations for Legal Reforms to Combat Hate Speech

These recommendations outline the responsibilities of the executing party and intervention strategies, including the development of digital tools and solutions, implementation of monitoring and accountability mechanisms, integration of the issue into the educational system, public awareness campaigns, promotion of media ethics and self-regulation mechanisms, defining obligations for social media platforms, and enhancing legal regulations and legislative measures.

The package of recommendations addressed to various state bodies and civil society organisations is a comprehensive one. The recommendations will be able to contribute to the solution of the problems if implemented simultaneously or in parallel. Partial implementation of recommendations may address specific problems in only certain areas or time periods. The development of recommendation-based reform strategies and action plans must be carried out by the joint efforts of governmental agencies and civil society, or else, the implementation will be incomplete and will meet the needs and concerns of only one party. This could lead to the surfacing of a number of other issues such as the unnecessary restriction of freedom of speech and the exercise of power over the free expression of citizens, which is a challenge in both developing and democratic countries.

The report consists of five main sections. The first section includes the literature review, which discusses studies done on hate speech and gender-based discrimination against women in other countries and in different time periods, helping us understand the situation and the context of the Armenian online landscape. The second section covers the methodology of the research, describing the phases of the study and the tools that have been used throughout. The findings section presents the main patterns and trends discovered, followed by the Discussion section, where this data is contextualized to understand the broader situation and overall picture. The legal analysis is a part of the study, presenting the experience of combating hate speech both locally and internationally through the lens of legislative regulations. Considering all available data, legal solutions, and the ethical regulations of Armenian media, recommendations have been developed and are presented in the final chapter.

This research contains explicit content that may be distressing to some readers. It includes extracts of online hate speech targeting women, which involve offensive language, misogyny, and violent rhetoric. The purpose of this content is to analyze and understand the prevalence and impact of hate speech, not to promote or condone such behavior.

Reader discretion is advised. If you find this material triggering, please consider engaging with the content in a manner that feels safe and supportive for your well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The proliferation of hate speech on online platforms has raised concerns since the 1990s when mass accessibility to the internet began in some countries. However, the most significant surge occurred with the spread of social media platforms. At this point, hate speech toward female public figures came to the forefront. This development is due to two main factors: the increased visibility of female public figures' activities and the widespread use of social media platforms, which enable users to create and share their preferred content.

The reasons for the proliferation of hate speech

Apart from the channels of hate speech that are targeted, planned, and controlled by specific sources, the main conditions conducive to the spread of hate speech, particularly in the online domain, are discussed based on the following factors: anonymity, invisibility/visibility, belonging to a community, spontaneity, and a higher degree of harm compared to verbal hate speech[1].

In the context of the research, **the factors of anonymity and invisibility** are essential as many social media users who spread hate speech do not use their real accounts. Even when they do, it is unlikely that the public figure targeted will attempt to identify the user's identity or retaliate against them for the insulting, reputation-harming post.

The factor of belonging to a certain community is also quite relevant. The mechanism of uniting people from different parts of Armenia or beyond, who share similar political positions, and acting together on social media platforms against political opponents is effective. Users living outside of Armenia who are registered on social networks get the opportunity to unite with political supporters in the country and actively express their positions through hate speech. Under other circumstances, in real communication, they would not have the opportunity to participate in the debate. Another important factor contributing to the proliferation of hate speech in the online space is the opportunity for spontaneous expression. A user's response to a post or comment can encourage other users spreading hate speech to join the conversation and respond with similar language. This, in turn, exacerbates the situation, spreads reputation-harming speech even further, and makes it visible to more users. In print media or real communication, the same individuals might hesitate to disseminate hate speech without the technical opportunity for instant expression. However, the ability to express thoughts instantaneously allows for immediate responses influenced by momentary anger and resentment. "If in traditional media it is possible to pre-filter broadcast content in accordance with the organization's ethical rules, in social media content can only be filtered after publication (...) Unlike face-to-face communication, the Internet allows

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[1] Brown 2018, pp. 297-326; Ullmann & Tomalin 2019

for reactions in seconds, leading to expressions that are not sufficiently considered and thought through"[2]. The spontaneity of expression and its consequences can be examined through linear and transactional communication models. When comparing with traditional media, it is important to consider that communication in social media is transactional, allowing for responses to the information provided. In contrast, traditional media like television, radio, and newspapers involve only those who send the information and those who receive it. Responding in traditional media would require writing a response article, shooting a response report, etc.

The collection of communication models (linear, interactive, and transactional) more clearly reflects the communication opportunities provided by social media. These opportunities largely align with the transactional model, where communication participants are both senders and receivers, and where context, personal experience, and other factors become highly significant[3].

Finally, the ability to harm a target group without significant time and effort makes online hate speech even more accessible. In traditional media, these problems are addressed before publishing the material, regulated by ethical rules. However, in online media, by the time the problem is addressed and the comment is removed, the damage has already been done, rendering the measures taken ineffective[4].

The types of caused harm

The harm caused by online hate speech manifests both on an individual scale and a public one. Based on existing literature, it can be stated that the danger of online hate speech is not a mere possibility or assumption. Even if the extent of the harm done is unknown at the moment, this phenomenon always and unavoidably leads to significant damages on both individual and group levels, with consequences that leave a negative impact for months and even years[5]. Due to its unique characteristics, online hate speech can deeply impact the mental well-being of victims, creating feelings of fear, anxiety, and insecurity[6].

At the public level, online hate speech fosters polarizing, discriminatory, and violent attitudes, or strengthens and legitimizes existing sentiments. This is exacerbated when hate speech is voiced by well-known actors, political leaders, public figures, or other influential persons. Verbal digital violence itself causes both psychological and physical harm to the targeted individuals and contributes to the ideological "preparation" for physical violence against the targeted group. While online hate speech may not always directly lead to terrorism or physical violence, it legitimizes ideas that fuel such actions and prepares grounds for it. It contributes to the ideological preparation to use physical violence against people who are

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[2] Brown 2018, p. 311

[3] Akin et al. 2013, pp. 43-62; Woodward 2000, pp. 256-259

[4] Brown 2018; Ullmann & Tomalin 2019

[5] Keipi et al. 2016, p. 75; Saha et al. 2019

[6] Dreißigacker et al. 2024, p. 7

positioned as enemies[7]. One case study shows how the encouragement and spread of hate speech becomes a tool for populist political leaders to demonize certain groups of society, such as journalists[8], and in the case of this particular study, women in politics. The use of hate speech by political leaders with populist approaches generally does not generate discriminatory stereotypes, particularly when it comes to hate speech against women. Instead, it is used as a tool to achieve political goals based on already existing stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes[9]. These claims mainly refer to research on right-wing political leaders, which is fully applicable in Armenian society, considering the approaches and tools used by opposing political forces in recent years, both from the perspective of political struggle and crowd-pleasing, public sympathy, and tradition of permissive decision-making[10]. Political opponents clearly use language that discriminates, stereotypes and targets certain social groups and human characteristics, which is quickly copied and used on a larger scale in social media, appearing in user posts, comments, and elsewhere.

Regulations and preventive measures

Online hate speech directed toward female public figures requires multifaceted solutions and long-term efforts. Discussions on the regulation of hate speech are often conducted in the context of balancing freedom of speech and the protection of human dignity. Therefore, existing solutions encompass not only legal but also ethical regulations. It is necessary to respond to this phenomenon at several levels: individual, institutional, and societal[11]. The suggested options follow these three directions, including the role of civil society activities, and the role of NGOs in raising awareness and educating, which can be implemented through long-term campaigns and by continuously raising the issue.

Efforts with private companies involve lobbying and campaigns against those that promote hate or create ads encouraging such content. Work with internet providers should also be included, with the aim of limiting hate speech on their platforms. Institutional solutions include law packages, the development of ethical norms, and the encouragement of critical thinking through education as a tool in the struggle against hate speech[12].

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[7] Husso et al. 2020: 226

[8] Ullmann & Tomalin 2019

[9] Husso et al. 2020, Waisbord 2020

[10] Nikoghosyan & Ter-Matevosyan 2022; Sukiasyan 2024

[11] Waisbord 2020

[12] Gagliardone et al., 2015

Methodology

This research comprises two main phases, utilizing both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The primary data for this study comes from the comment sections of posts published by news agencies on Facebook and YouTube, which contain hate speech directed at women actively involved in public activities. The choice of these particular social media platforms is based on their popularity and the presence of users from diverse social backgrounds. Although Armenian media users are also active on other platforms such as Instagram, Telegram, and TikTok, only Facebook and YouTube were selected because political and diverse topics are more actively discussed there. The involvement of people from various backgrounds and social groups is a crucial factor, as inclusivity and diversity are important for exposing hate speech and understanding its visibility. Regardless of media users' habit of comment-reading, most media users, either purposefully or while scrolling through the newsfeed, read or glance through the comment section of posts. This visibility factor makes the negative consequences of hate speech even more dangerous, amplifying the damage by both psychologically wounding the targeted person and legitimizing physical and verbal violence in society.

A significant majority of Armenian media users who do not use TV or radio for news prefer following online broadcasts through Facebook and YouTube (Internews 2023[13]). Only a small portion of viewers follow news on the websites of news agencies; instead, they prefer their favorite media outlet's Facebook or YouTube pages, which automatically filter and provide relevant news feeds based on user interests.

According to research data on freedom of speech and media consumption in Armenia, 59% of media consumers receive information through social media platforms. In 2023, only 12% of online news recipients stated that they follow news through news websites, while 88% followed news through social media platforms (Internews 2023[14]). This data indicates the high visibility of news outlets on social media platforms.

In the **second stage** of the research, two focus group discussions and two interviews were conducted with key informants. The participants were media representatives and civil society members who either combat online hate speech as part of their profession or have been targeted as female public figures in their roles as journalists and civil society representatives.

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[13] Study on the freedom of speech and media consumption in Armenia, Internews in Armenia, 2023, **https://media.am/hy/lab/2023/11/14/36724/**

[14] Study on the freedom of speech and media consumption in Armenia, Internews in Armenia, 2023, **https://media.am/hy/lab/2023/11/14/36724/**

Sampling principles and tools for collecting field material

Using Crowdtangle, 3,553 public posts published in 2021, 2022, and 2023 were extracted from 38 news outlets on Facebook based on a pre-made list of female political and public figures. The most discussed posts were selected based on the number of comments, choosing those with more than three hundred comments as an indicator. This time frame was determined for its relevance to current issues and the manageability of the data volume for the research. The list of female social and political actors was compiled based on their public visibility and positions held. It includes all female deputies of the National Assembly, female ministers, and those involved in public activities and who express political views, including active civil society representatives and female public figures. The filter of more than 300 comments ensured that the most discussed posts were selected. Additionally, video content from the same media sample was extracted from YouTube channels for further analysis.

Tools and methods of data analysis

The number of posts that meet the aforementioned criteria is 138. All of these comments were examined by the research team, considering their relevance and the amount of responses they received. Comments containing elements of hate speech were selected, with a maximum of ten comments chosen from each post. The total number of these items amounted to 1,519 comments. In the next stage of data sorting, each element (element = data, item = comment) was coded according to the nature, basis, and topic of the hate speech present. The responses to these comments were also considered to understand the support or resistance certain content faced from media consumers.

Main research findings

There are 138 publications with more than three hundred comments, each including names from a pre-compiled list of female social and political actors. Based on the number of posts, this list includes well-known public figures from Armenia politics whose activities are frequently discussed and reported on. The most frequently targeted group comprises National Assembly Deputies, collectively mentioned 56 times. Among these, several deputies were significantly highlighted, reflecting their prominent public positions. In addition, individuals in high-ranking governmental roles, including a Minister and a former Minister of Justice, were also frequently targeted, totaling 43 mentions. The data also includes mentions of a former National Assembly Deputy and individuals from other specialized roles such as an ambassador and a former minister.

Research Findings

Finding 1:
Interconnectedness of political context

The political situation in the country greatly influences how active the users are and what vocabulary they use, increasing the volume of online discussions and the amount of circulating hate. Moreover, the level of activity in the comments section of posts on political topics indicates the significant presence of hate speech. In this context, it should be emphasized that women who hold political positions, belong to a party, express political views, and are known by the public are targeted on the largest scale in terms of user engagement.

Intensity of publications containing 300+ comments and names of women with political-social roles, by month
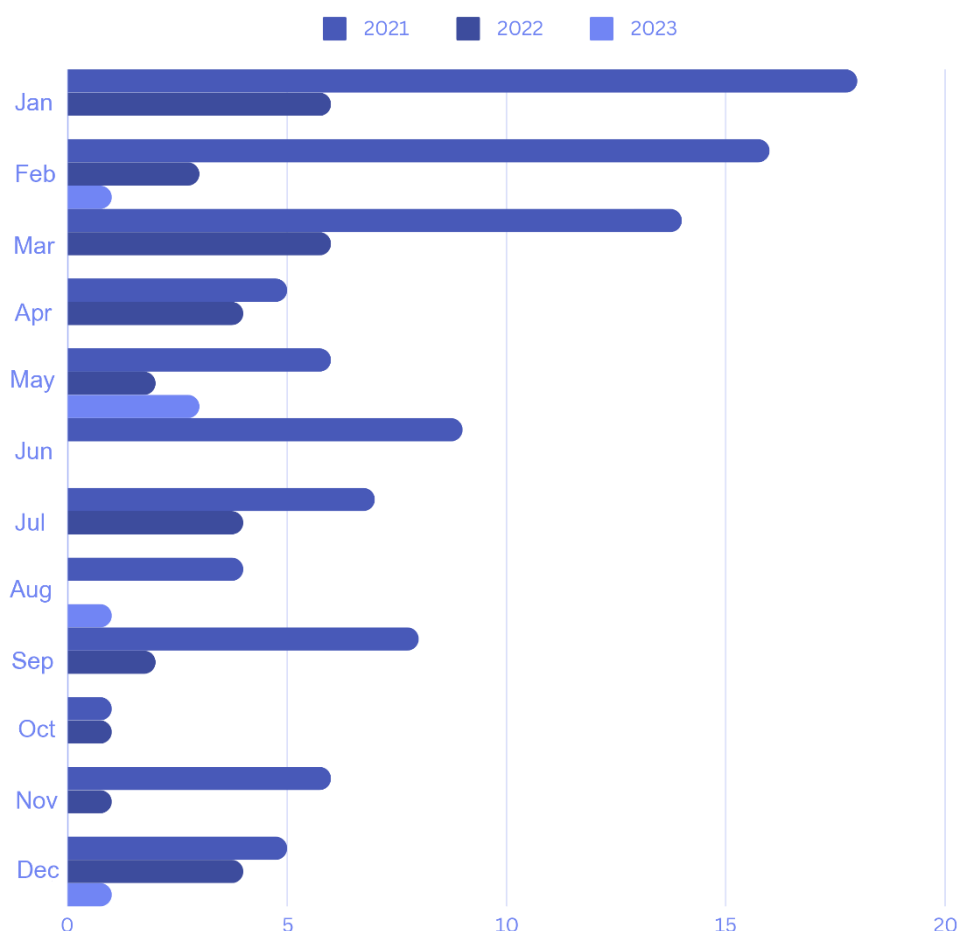
In 2021 - the year following the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, the most hateful comments were recorded against the backdrop of street struggles, and election processes (June 20, 2021), while during the following two years (2022-2023), such activity and the use of derogatory language gradually decreased.

"You bunch of wimps, get out of the streets and go to Artsakh, organize protests there with your leaders, and demand the recognition of independence while the Russians are there, instead of demanding Armenia's Prime Minister's resignation. It's our internal business. You have more pressing matters to take care of."

March 5, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 10 likes to the comment

"Lucky us, we won't have to see you during the next elections, especially you. A country that has a politician like you and is governed by you is doomed, you said it yourself, that you didn't manage to have any effective politics and as a result, the war happened. You and the likes of you are clinging to the NA chair, and we can't get rid of your presence. You are disgusting."

January 15, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 6 likes to the comment

"This cheap slut, fed by and in awe of Turkish TV series, is ready to do any kind of political prostitution out of fear of exposing her own sexual prostitution."

March 5, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 5 likes to the comment

"You blind thief shut up, they threw you out from everywhere, you are a worn-out political doormat."

January 17, 2021, directed at an NA deputy and a former minister, 46 likes, 2 loves to the comment

Of the posts that passed the filter for the number of comments (minimum: 300 comments), 135 out of 138 (97.82%) contained more than ten hate speech components. This data indicates that a large number of comments almost always correlates with the presence of insult, humiliation, and hate speech.

The largest share of hate speech revolves around political posts, regardless of whether the targeted individual is a politician or not. Cultural and artistic figures who express political opinions are also targeted for their views. Additionally, the hate speech in the comments on their posts related to their respective area also refers to their political positions.

"Nazeli, what an ugly name they have given to this international animal, you slut, don't compare your life with Mishulik, you slut, all nations' traitors are cowards and defectors, you better start hooking up with clean-blooded fedayi and go to the frontline. There, you will see the guys who live by the real struggles of the country and you will bring[to this world] a real Armenian child, you fake political slut"

September 3, 2021, directed at an actress and TV host, 0 response to the comment

Finding 2:
The connection between hate speech and the content of the post

Most of the comments are a response to the headline chosen by the media, not to the content of the material. These comments, usually discriminatory and stereotypical, are often framed as "funny" and "humorous" expressions and receive a large number of likes. Furthermore, harsh criticism is directed at the person in question or at the opinions that she has expressed. In contrast, insults (especially of a sexual nature) and calls for violence receive far fewer likes.

Media headlines often consist of direct, principled, and bold excerpts from speeches or interviews, provoking anger, dislike, sympathy, or admiration from media consumers. The high number of responses makes such posts more visible, leading to a snowball effect of insults, disgust, hostility, and collective criticisms from supporters of political opponents. This leads to a disconnect between the comments and the topics of the publication. In 86 percent of the comments, the post comments and the topics do not correspond to one another, because users either react to the headline or leave negative insults unrelated to the content or title.

The content alignment between the publication and the comments left

Match 252

Don't match 1519

Match

12 %

Don't Match

86 %
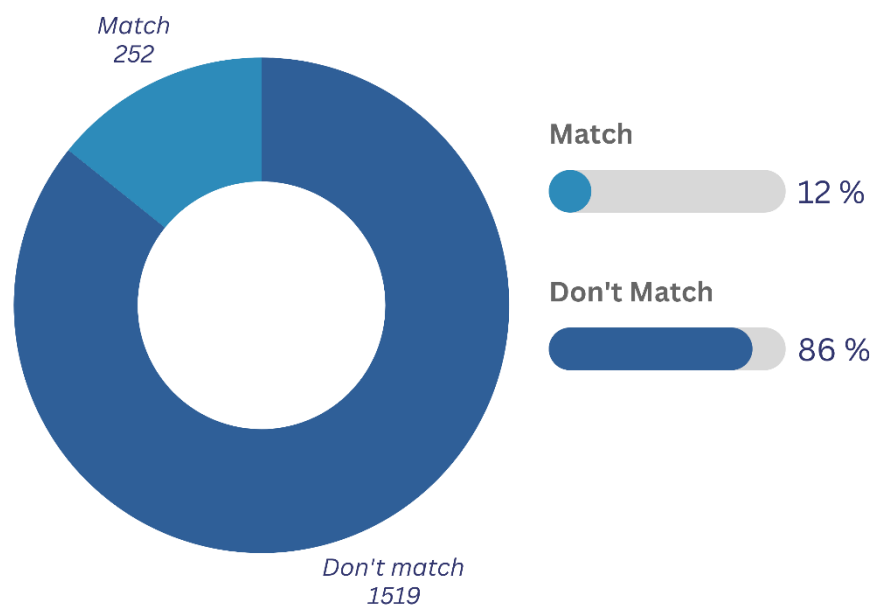
The amount of hate speech is higher in the case of such headlines:

"We lost half of our homeland, this government has to be punished for it: Taguhi Tovmasyan."
February 2, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 357 comments

"Those who support the current government, are complicit in the butchering of our children: Shushan Petrosyan (video)."
February 16, 2021, directed at a singer and a former NA deputy, 343 comments

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"Did anyone in their right mind believe that this political corps can resolve the issues of political prisoners? Arpine Hovhannisyan."
January 11, 2021, directed at a former minister, 324 comments

"I would urge you to kill yourself: Arpine Hovhannisyan."
March 2, 2021, directed at a former minister, 351 comments

In response to these comments, many of the replies focus on the headline or quotes, with little mention of the post's overall content.

Thematic directions of publications and comments

Publication content **Comment content**

Education and Sience
Helthcare
Economy
Security
Social
Human rights
Corruption
Culture
Politics
Environmental protection
Other

0   200   400   600   800   1000   1200   1400

Education and Sience
Publication content: 0
Comment content: 0

Helthcare
Publication content: 313
Comment content: 52

Economy
Publication content: 11
Comment content: 0

Security
Publication content: 242
Comment content: 49

Social
Publication content: 79
Comment content: 9

Human rights
Publication content: 80
Comment content: 9

Corruption
ublication content: 0
Comment content: 5

Culture
Publication content: 10
Comment content: 2

Politics
Publication content: 663
Comment content: 107

Environmental protection
Publication content: 0
Comment content: 1

Other
Publication content: 270
Comment content: 1314

"I would urge you, tramp, to kill yourself instead of lying under so many men and then marrying a sissy, whom we'll show your shots, to that donkey, you slut, prostitute drink some poison and disappear, shame on you, shame on you."

March 2, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 response to the comment

"You are a Turk robber, a traitor, a shameless tart."

March 2, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 response to the comment

"Your husband should commit suicide to get rid of such a bitch like you."

March 2, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 response to the comment

March 2, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 response to the comment

The popularity and support for a comment are evident from the number of likes it receives. While reactions like Love, Care, Haha, Wow, Sad, and Angry can be ambiguous, a Like clearly indicates support for the comment. The reaction patterns show that comments with sexual swear words and other inappropriate expressions are generally ignored. Interestingly, comments that, despite being discriminatory and hostile, are framed in a "humorous" or "funny" way receive the most likes.

Reactions to comments
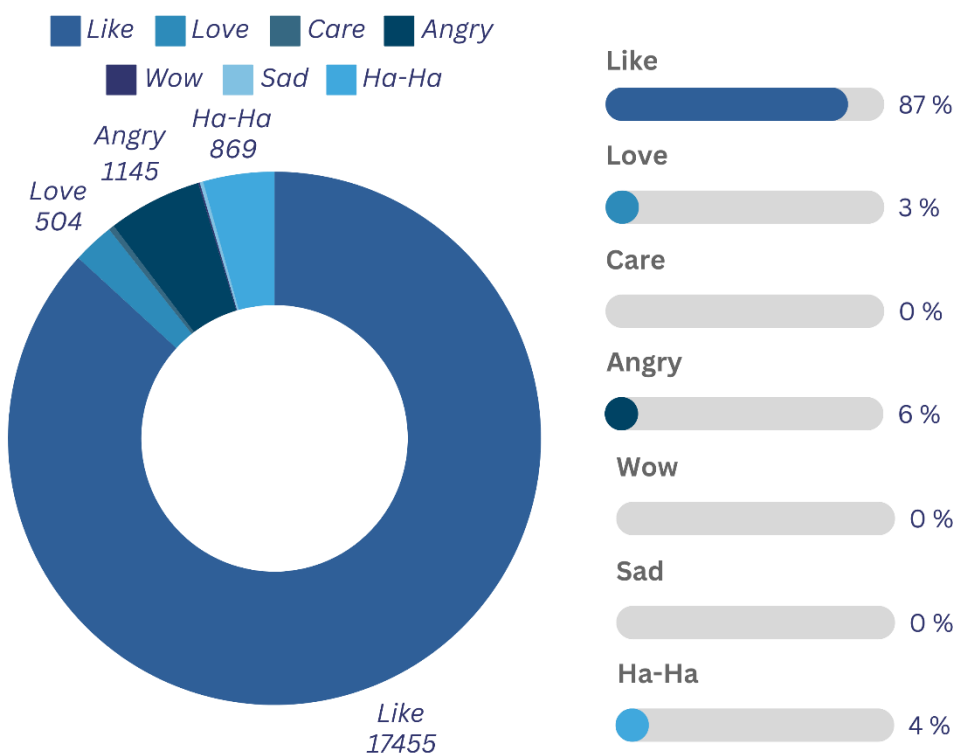
Like — 87 %
Love — 3 %
Care — 0 %
Angry — 6 %
Wow — 0 %
Sad — 0 %
Ha-Ha — 4 %

Like 17455
Love 504
Angry 1145
Ha-Ha 869

June 3, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 256 likes, 6 loves, 2 care to the comment

May 1, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 100 likes, 2 loves, 1 care to the comment

Finding 3:
The spectrum of Hate Speech against Women —Degradation, Violence, and Discrimination

Manifestations of hate speech in the collected material mainly consist of demeaning, humiliating, and mocking expressions, mixed with calls for violence, sexual insults, and discriminatory and hostile remarks. These expressions, based on discriminatory and stereotypical attitudes toward gender, national and religious identities, sexual orientation, appearance, family status, disability, and political views, promote and legitimize discriminatory attitudes against women, as well as simplify and stereotype gender roles.

12% of the published comments are calls for sexual or other violence, and 20% are insults, with 11% percent being of a sexual nature. In these types of comments, it is common to target the woman's family, calling for violence and curses directed at children and parents, and scolding fathers, husbands, and brothers for not dealing with the behavior and image of the woman in question.

The nature of hate speech

Violence` 195

Insult` 1504

Discrimination` 154

Hostility` 318

Profanity` 526

Sexual` 178
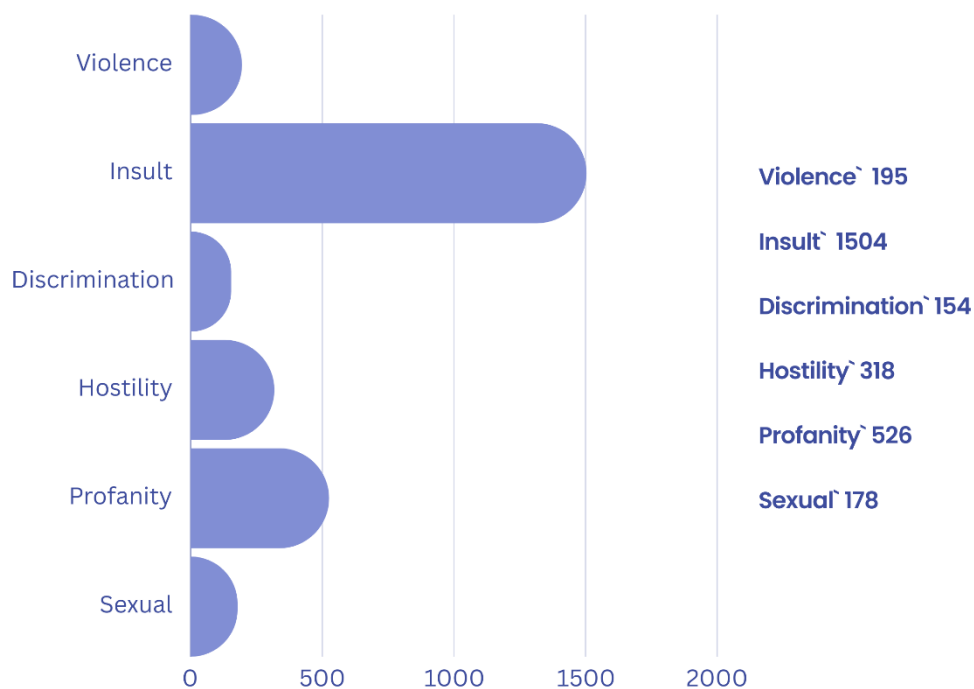
"I will make you suck my **** at the end of each meter of those 2500 kilometers, you and your Nikol piled on top of one another, you whelp of a mother******"

June 14, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 1 like to the comment

"You dimwit, why are you wallowing on the streets and they beat you up with their feet? Waifs like yourself who have no father, mother, or brother(because if they did they wouldn't be loafing on the streets) are getting mixed up with the likes of them and are lying on the roads aimlessly."

June 4, 2022, directed at an NA deputy, 4 likes to the comment

> "What kind of a man, who possesses any noble manly qualities, would ever marry you? And here you are making yourself hard to get, you cheap whore. Get ridden a thousand times then find yourself a coward, spineless, horned jackass."

September 3, 2021, directed at a female actress, 7 likes, 1 love to the

Finding 4:
Prevalence of Gender-Based Hate Speech Against Women active in the public sphere

The research results show that about 42 percent of the time, hate speech targeting women who are active in the public domain is gender-based. It exploits, criticizes, and ridicules women's qualities associated with public stereotypical perceptions of a woman's image or role. It should be noted that gender-based hate speech in the Armenian media does not directly target women as a social group. Instead, it targets individual women based on gender role perceptions and resulting stereotypes, implicitly singling out and subordinating women as a gender group.

Gender-based hate speech prevails in the collected data. It typically includes ridicule, humiliation, and harsh criticism targeting a person's feminine qualities. This includes swear words of a sexual nature, calls for forced sexual violence, or descriptions primarily used against women. Observations and remarks about the targeted person's supposed non-compliance with the traditional role of a woman and accepted behavior are also discussed.

> "How does this blissful donkey go around with his nose up? You son of a bitch, what difference does it make for you who will f*** you? Anyway, you will f*** around with everyone and then dump them."

May 3, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 17 likes to the comment

> "THIS BUTTERFLY STUTTERER, JUMPS FROM ONE'S ARMS TO ANOTHER'S AND EVEN GOT AHEAD OF NARA. (THE AUNT) CAN SILENCE HER, OR DID THEY BRING HER INTO THEIR TEAM SO THAT SHE CAN JABBER NONSENSICALLY?"

June 3, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 137 likes, 2 loves to the comment

The gender roles prescribed to women such as taking care of the family, and family responsibilities, are contrasted with the active coverage of their public activities and their visibility. This way, those who spread hate speech not only harm women engaged in public life but also reinforce and limit their roles by reducing their identities to these prescribed gender roles.

> "Don't you have a home to go to? Probably you have a donkey husband who doesn't give a rat's a** about you."

April 20, 2022, directed at NA deputy, 0 reaction to the comment

February 28, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 reactions to the comment

Finding 5:
Targeting Appearance and Health in Hate Speech

Gender-based hate speech often targets an individual's appearance and/or physical/mental health issues. This serves to marginalize the individual and undermine their credibility by suggesting that their opinions or work are influenced by psychological instability, thus portraying them as inadequate, unreliable, or even dangerous in the public sphere.

14% of the hate speech present in the data pertains to a person's physical appearance, making it the second most common form of hate speech, reflecting underlying gender-based stereotypes. Criticizing a woman's appearance, though seemingly irrelevant to their public role, serves to devalue them by implying they lack the attributes deemed essential to their gender identity.

> "Arghh, you toad, you are too scary, very much like a gorilla."

February 16, 2021, directed at a former NA deputy, 0 reactions to the

> "So you did this much plastic surgery to become moderately ugly from being extremely ugly, disgusting repealing toad"

June 3, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 1 like to the comment

> "Shameless, loose cow both with your brain and face."

July 28, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 3 likes to the comment

This form of hate speech is often combined with disability-based attacks, targeting both visible physical attributes and perceived or actual health issues.

> "Blind fool, keep yourself in check; reckless killer, murderer of the Bread Bringer, you should cover your face with a black veil. May you be cursed with never becoming a mother or hearing a child's cry throughout your life. This is the wish I make in the name of our dear Bread Bringer."

February 28, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 reactions to the comment

In addition to discussing various existing or presumed health conditions, people often attribute mental health issues to women. Terms like "mentally ill," "sick," "mad," "retard," and "crazy" suggest that the person is out of control or disconnected from reality, thereby undermining the validity of their words and actions. This strategy aims to marginalize the individual and exclude them from their sphere of influence.

Examples of this include visible conditions such as vision problems or body weight, which are easily noticeable. In some cases, individuals are also wrongly associated with infectious diseases, particularly sexually transmitted ones, or mental health issues. These labels serve to further marginalize, discredit, and devalue the person.

"Yo are you sick with meningitis in your brain? Are you gonna decide how much salt I should use? Don't tell me you care for our health more than we do😡😡"

March 10, 2022, directed at a minister, 5 likes to the comment

"You crow, are you gonna hibernate and wake up one day and decide we can't use sugar at all, power-hungry psycho."

March 12, 2022, directed at a minister, 9 likes to the comment

"But you are really down, you know"

March 4, 2021, directed at a minister, 7 likes to the comment

Finding 6:
Othering and dividing through hate speech

Hate speech based on gender, religious identity, and beliefs does not target women's actual belonging to the group but rather uses identity-based terms to insult individuals, other them, and portray them as dangerous and outside the community. Such speech expresses hostility and positions the targeted individuals as opponents on the "other side of the barricades." Here, "filthy," "profane," and "one who goes against conscience" are starkly opposed to "pure," "holy," and "Christian." Terms like "devil," "sectarian," and "sorcerer" further signify enmity and opposition, emphasizing the divide between "us" and "them" based on two main identity components: national identity (where individuals are either seen as serving the interests of a foreign land or as enemies) and value systems (where there is a distinction between those who share moral principles and those who do not).

Although the targeting is indirect, the qualifiers used are not genuinely related to a person's national or religious identity. Instead, these identity markers are weaponized to insult and exclude individuals from the group. Such expressions are inherently discriminatory because they suggest to readers that members of certain nations or religious groups are enemies, dangerous, or inferior to them. Hate speech manifests in two ways in these comments: either by depicting someone as a representative of a hostile nation or as part of a nation deemed subordinate by the speaker (often indicated through descriptions of clothing and lifestyle). In the first case, ethnonyms like "Turk" and "Azerbaijani" are manipulated in a derogatory way, while in the second case, the ethnonym "Bosha" is used. It's important to note that "Bosha" is generally not recognized as a real ethnic group; instead, it is often used as a derogatory term to describe a particular style of clothing and lifestyle.

> "Ask for forgiveness from the Turk, you traitor bosha."

June 3, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 2 likes to the comment

> "May you perish facing the terrible judgment of God, may you remain a nonbeliever, you son of a prostitute Turk, may your entire family be cursed."

November 18, 2021, directed at the Prime Minister's wife, 4 likes to the

> "Don't you speak of children, you Turk's brat. Everything is the consequence of the games you, your Turk family, and your damned husband are playing. I only ask God to give a final judgment to those who are responsible for all this loss and hurt. I wish that you also feel the same pain that a parent of a fallen soldier feels, I wish that you feel the same pain that every single person living in Artsakh feels. There will come a day when we will all see God's judgment and then where will you hide, traitors? I curse you from the name of all the people living in Artsakh."

December 25, 2022, directed at the Prime Minister's wife, 19 likes. 2 loves, 2 care to the comment

Assigning individuals different religious beliefs and affiliations is a common tactic used to generate enmity against them. Often, this involves associating them with religious organizations operating in Armenia, labeling them as "sectarians." This term typically implies that these groups are engaged in separatist activities in Armenia under the guise of religion, influenced by international forces.

> "How do you know that, madame sectarian? Tell us what's on your mind. What kind of secret plans does that damned Nikol have against us? The selling of my motherland is not over yet it seems, and now you are preparing ground to lock us inside our houses? People..."

March 4, 2021, directed at a Minister, 4 likes to the comment

The largest portion of religion/belief-based hate speech includes comments accusing individuals of not conforming to religious beliefs and values. These comments often include insulting and derogatory terms such as "devil," "profane," and "immoral."

> "Girl, you saw a man and lost yourself? Fainted, is it? And why are the faggots standing next to you laughing their a**** off? Did you go to the graves of the kids whom you killed by your own hands to enjoy yourselves and get psychological satisfaction? You profane, shameless, Turk-loving, subjects' horde. One day, it will all happen to you as well."

January 31, 2022, directed at a NA deputy, 11 likes to the comment

Hate speech expressing enmity and discrimination is more often based on nationality rather than religion. In cases of enmity, accusations usually center around betrayal of the nation and support for the enemy against Armenia. Humiliating and devaluing comments also fall into this category, often premised on the belief that the targeted individuals lack moral values or do not share the values of the commenter. Comments, featuring discrimination and animosity, often converge when discussing "enemy" nations. Particularly, Turkish and Azerbaijani national identities are ascribed

to targeted individuals or groups to depict them as outsiders, enemies, and traitors to Armenian society. Discriminatory comments are not confined to national identity. They also target individuals based on disability, political views, physical appearance, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other characteristics. In the examples mentioned, some comments target individuals based on their sexual orientation. This category makes up 0.6% of the total comments, and in these instances, insulting language is used to demean individuals based on their sexual orientation.

> "You dimwit, the people belonging to other groups...the faggots, the degenerates...the trans people...the uneducated and half-educated...who are those half-open garbage cans that we let them govern us? You Turk's bitch, idiots who don't differentiate between male and female."

February 26, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 2 likes to the comment

> "You are a Turk robber, a traitor, a shameless whore."

March 2, 2021, directed at a former minister, 0 reactions to the comment

Finding 7:
Methods of Group Targeting in Hate Speech—Political Views and Personal Attacks of hate speech targeting

Hate speech is not always directed at individuals; it often targets groups as well. The research results indicate that the primary groups targeted on social media platforms are those who express specific political beliefs. The families of targeted individuals can also be considered a target group of hate speech. Women are targeted based on their political views not only due to intolerance towards differing perspectives on geopolitical situations and internal political developments in Armenia but more frequently because of their support for certain political parties. Another form of group targeting involves hate speech directed at one's personal life, typically involving the circulation of narrow, personal information and accusations. This portrays the person as indecent and lacking moral values and principles. Such slander is used to undermine a person's professional qualities, professionalism, and integrity. Hate speech targeting one's family is usually directed at the family members of a female public figure, especially those family members, who according to the beliefs of the commenter, should be "responsible" for subjecting these women to violence and restricting their activities in the political domain.

Group targeting comprises 15.3% of the total comments or 233 out of 1,530 comments. This category includes comments targeting one's personal life and family, as well as hate speech targeting one's political views. However, comments that contain hate speech based on religion, nationality, gender identity, or disability are not included in this category. As mentioned earlier, hate speech based on these categories does not target women as a gender group, or as a group with disabilities, or as belonging to a certain nation. Instead, it exploits existing vulnerabilities and common stereotypes and discrimination already present in society, reinforcing

negative positions with dishonesty against specific individuals, particularly women active in the public domain.

Type of targeting

Group
233

Individual
1413

Group

14 %

Individual

86 %
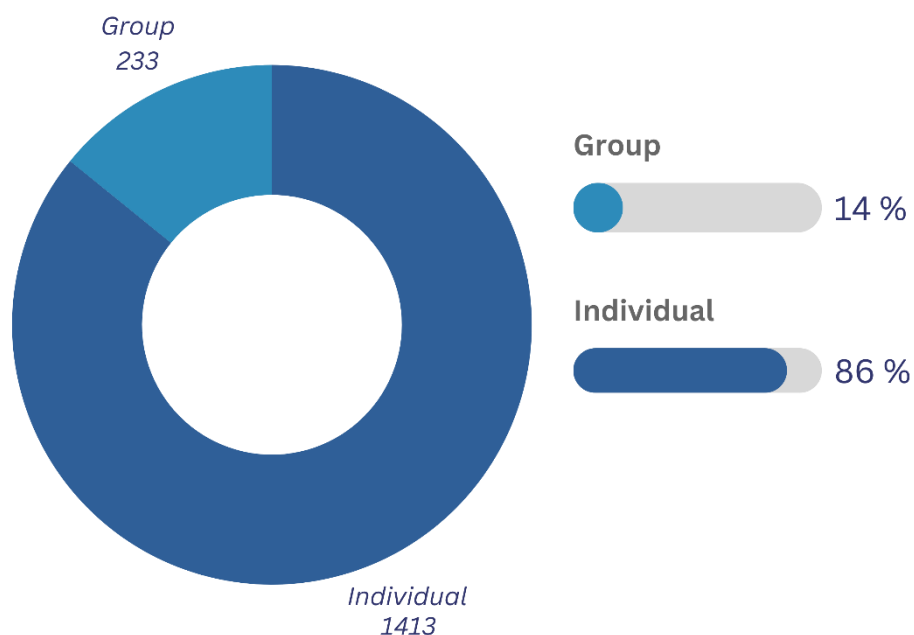
> "Idiot, [it has to be done] at the expense of your own children. How could you murder all those innocent children and give away the lands, more precisely sell them? Are we gonna bring them back on the expanse of our children's lives and disability, you whelp of a whore. Are your brats more precious than my brother? Is the blood of your brats more valuable than ours? They should execute you all at the tribunal, and send your bastards to the frontlines so that they can bring back with their own blood the lands that their shameless parents sold."

January 15, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 7 likes to the comment

Targeting based on political views comprises 20.5% of the total comments or 313 out of 1,530 comments. In these cases, the context of hate speech involves generalizing an individual's qualities both personally and in terms of their political leadership.

> "[They] are gonna finish off the likes of you and Khoch's mob."

July 16, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 3 likes to the comment

> "If there is anyone who is enjoying [this] it's you. Innocent boys are paying with their lives because of your robbery of 30 years.
> Shut up and go to hell, you shameless people, think before you speak at least."

February 25, 2021, directed at a former minister, 53 likes to the comment

Comments targeting one's family or personal life make up 4.4% of the total. These comments usually expose "embarrassing" information about a woman's

personal life, including her past or current relationships and romantic associations with other political leaders. This devalues her professional success and the broad public recognition and acceptance she receives.

The basis of hate speech

Basis	Value
Race	0
Ethnicity	132
Religion/belief	55
Politival view	313
Personal/life/family	67
Age	6
Sexual orientation	10
Gender	648
Physical attributes	213
Disability	48
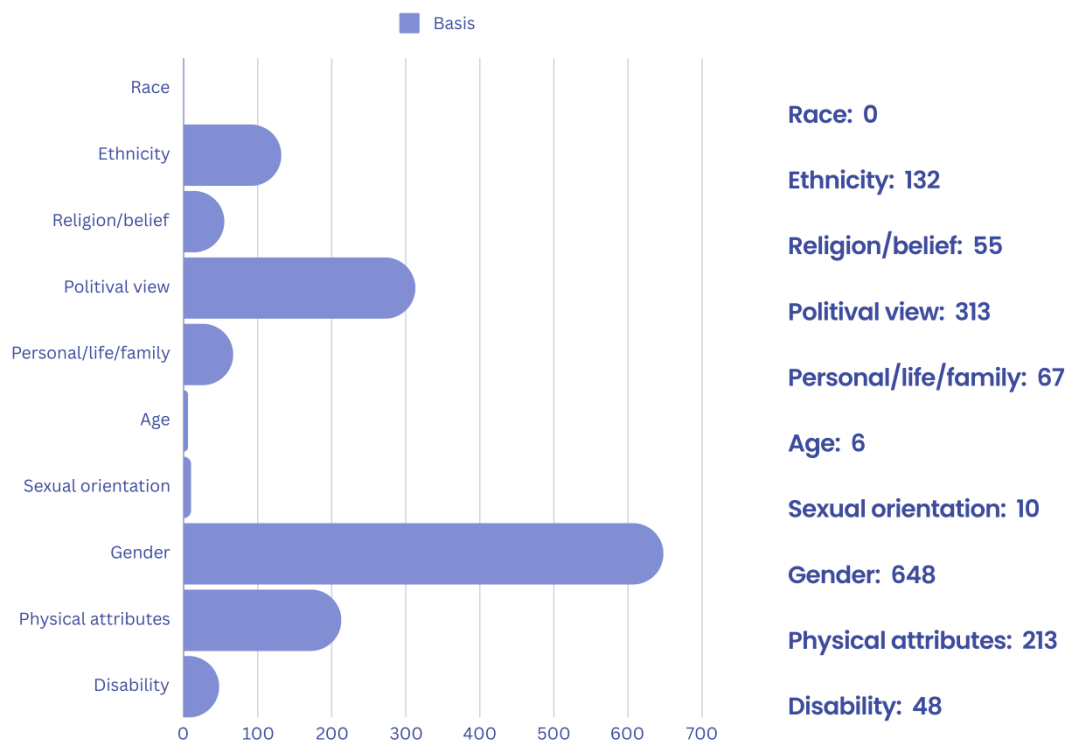
"A promiscuous woman has no right to talk about the image of the Armenian woman."

March 8, 2023, directed at the politician, 41 likes, 1 care to the comment

"I really don't get it, don't the likes of you realize that when you whore around, you cannot think of marriage?"

September 3, 2021, directed at an actress, 0 reaction to the comment

The targeting of women's family members and their public criticism indirectly pressures women in the public domain, especially when their family members are not publicly involved. In such cases, the discussion often revolves around the dignity of these women's male family members and their ability to "handle" their families.

"Her parents should be ashamed for having raised such a dumba**."

March 28, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 0 reactions to the comment

> "You dimwit, why are you wallowing on the streets so that they beat you up with their feet? Waifs like yourself who have no father, mother, or brother (because if they did they wouldn't be loafing on the streets) are getting mixed up with the likes of them and are lying on the roads aimlessly."

June 4, 2022, directed at an NA deputy, 4 likes to the comment

Finding 8:
Hate speech containing conspiracy theories and misinformation

The research also found that hate speech is sometimes accompanied by conspiracy theories and misinformation that target not only individuals but also systems, institutions, and various political, legal, security-related, and social processes. These instances often arise during times of change, such as when new laws are being considered or adopted, or during emergency situations like the escalation of conflict, war, or a pandemic. Hate speech of this nature spreads significantly unscientific information, which can directly or indirectly impact public safety and health.

> "Enough of you lying to the people… There is no virus and there has never been one. Are you gonna make us wear diapers next? f*** you!"

July 9, 2021, directed at a minister, 0 reactions to the comment

> "As if you and your junkyard mates including Nikol have gotten the shots. Why are you wearing your mom's panties over your mouth then? I left for Russia because I couldn't stand your obscene mob, where there are no crippled clowns like you, and where vaccinations happen only on a voluntary basis. So you cannot force any conscious person to get vaccinated with that suspicious shit from abroad that aims to shorten the human life span. Let your shitty families, relatives, friends, and supporters get those shots - all your dump sites full of whores."

July 9, 2021, directed at a minister, 0 reactions to the comment

> "Don't you realize that you have crossed all the boundaries, you stupid, write a resignation letter and leave? Let children study properly and go to kindergartens. Your plan is not gonna work, you want to vaccinate people through it, but it won't work, leave!"

July 9, 2021, directed at a minister, 1 like to the comment

> "You listen to me now, mrs. Lilu, you sold Artsakh…along with your illiterate group… you, along with your moochers, didn't respect the Soldier … you traitors distorted my culture…the day to pay for it all is nearing, remember this… and now you got to Syunik???"

November 16, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 6 likes, 1 care to the comment

DISCUSSION

Collecting this data helps us understand the basis of online targeting of women actively involved in social and political processes. It also provides insights into the nature of hate speech used against women in this field. This is essential in this study as it allows us to determine whether hate speech is linked to the specific professions of these women or their political views. It is crucial to understand the circumstances under which hate speech on social media platforms (the extent of which is evident both visibly and in the study results) gains popularity in Armenian society. While new waves of hate speech are typically driven by the political context (such as the pandemic, war, elections, and changes in internal and external politics), the study seeks to discern whether gender perceptions contribute to such targeting or if the intensity and nature of the targeting are due to the political views of women active in the public sphere. Additionally, it aims to identify patterns of interconnectedness between political views and the nature of hate speech.

The research results indicate that gender-based hate speech dominates, accounting for 42.6% of the comments. The second most common type is hate speech based on political positions (20.5%). There is also a significant quantity of insulting expressions that are difficult to categorize, as they typically convey the writer's anger and dislike using various offensive terms.

Gender-based hate speech/targeting as a woman

It is hard to state that gender-based hate speech directly targets women as a social group. Instead, this type of hate speech is indirect, targeting women as individuals based on perceptions of gender roles and stereotypes associated with them. This is particularly evident in public and political activities where qualities not traditionally associated with women's roles, such as determination, self-confidence, and visibility, are required. The use of gender role stereotypes in hate speech exemplifies the absolutization of qualities attributed to a certain sex. Both women and men possess feminine and masculine qualities that are expressed depending on the situation[15]. In politics, there is little room for the expression of traditionally expected feminine qualities. Those who spread hate speech by absolutizing gender-dominant qualities criticize and judge women in the public domain, portraying them as lacking feminine attributes. They often claim that women with strict political views are deprived of femininity and cannot express it in their relationships with their children and partners/husbands.

Gender-based hate speech operates through stereotyping and exclusion. This is done by denying their womanhood or not considering them the "right" kind of woman. It includes ridiculing one's physical appearance, labeling them as not "beautiful," "feminine," or "desirable," and calling them "promiscuous," "unfaithful to their husband," "providing sexual services," and "acquiring money and advancing

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[15] Lippa, 2005

their career through sexual means." These women are represented as objects of other men's (including the hate speech spreader's) violent sexual desires.

> "But who told you you are a woman, you are a degenerate animal."

July 3, 2021, directed at an NA deputy, 32 likes, 1 love to the comment

> "She is not gonna have a child because of her wickedness."

January 11, 2021, directed at a former minister, 19 likes

These types of gender-based hate speech that are found in the Armenian online domain are particularly dangerous and harmful because they, directly and indirectly, target the family members and relatives of women engaged in public activities. They discuss a woman's personal and family life, accusing and criticizing the woman for not sticking to the traditionally gender-assigned role and her relatives for not being in the "right" role and associating with her.

> "I wonder if you change through husbands as effortlessly."

July 1, 2022, directed at an NA deputy, 2 likes to the comment

> "I am saying this to pashinyan's family, the Turk will use you up, no one likes traitors (on the assumption that if you betrayed your motherland you will betray us as well). They are gonna throw all your family members in the hands of the soldiers to be raped, they will cut off your children's heads and play soccer with them in front of anna and nikol, in the end, the two of you, husband, and wife, will sit on spikes and the story will end. There will be no Armenians, no Armenian question, there will be no Armenia."

July 25, 2021, directed at a former NA deputy, 2 liked the comment

> "You garbage cans, look! Soon the Turk will rape your children in front of you and that prostitute is gonna enjoy standing by and looking. You are fighting for eggs, this is what you should fight against, otherwise, they are gonna come with their yataghans and cut out your stomachs."

April 2, 2021, directed at the Prime Minister, 3 likes to the comment

Othering and Stereotyping: Hate speech targeting someone as a political traitor or enemy of the country, nation, or dominant religion

The research results reveal that the second most common basis for hate speech is targeting individuals based on their political views. This often involves targeting someone for their association with a particular political party or for holding specific political beliefs. More frequently, individuals are targeted for their allegiance to a political team or support for a political leader. Despite evidence from key informants that such comments are part of organized campaigns against individuals with particular goals, hate speech based on political views "prepares" for failure and

tends to undermine a woman's position in the professional sphere. It contributes to her decreased involvement or even leads to the termination of her activities (see the previous reference). This form of targeting, whether intentional or not, typically creates a divide between 'us' and 'them.' While theories of othering are usually based on gender and racial identities, in the context of political polarization in Armenia, othering—characterized by dehumanization and stereotyping—is prevalent in political dialogues, especially on social media. In recent years, political polarization and populism have become particularly widespread in the context of democratization crises in various countries. At the same time, the presence of social media is changing the nature of political discourse, bringing the periphery closer to the center [16]. Studies indicate that under such conditions of polarization, political orientation, and party affiliation often merge with social identity[17], becoming crucial in defining 'us' versus 'them.'

Through media monitoring, we identified various forms of othering related to targeting based on political views, including dehumanization, exclusion, and stereotyping. These manifestations include hate speech tied to one's national and religious identity. This form of discrimination is not just based on religion or nationality but functions as an allegory to distance and other an individual by comparing them to and perceiving them as representatives of a different nationality and religion. Such othering is also an example of dehumanization of a person by implying an 'absence of humanity.' At the same time, exclusion occurs because the targeted individual is typically Armenian and likely Christian (or perceived as such). This targeting is an attempt to exclude them from the group. In addition to exclusion based on religion and nationality, the term 'traitor' is frequently used in this context. Here also, the underlying context holds the idea of leaving the group. Moreover, the one targeting assumes the responsibility of identifying that the targeted individual no longer belongs to the group, has betrayed them, and therefore needs to be excluded from the 'us' group and included in the 'them' group.

The other process that targets people based on political views, which is again a component of othering, is stereotyping. This entails generalizations and simplifications, emphasizing only negative characteristics (or their imagined existence). Examples include attributing negative traits to all members of a political team and assuming that if someone supports a political team or is a member, they possess some negative, often inhuman, characteristics. Apart from targeting based on gender and political views, there is another category of hate speech that either occurs alongside the previous two or separately. This category includes targeting based on physical or psychological/mental characteristics, as a manifestation of stereotyping, othering, excluding, and dehumanization all at once. Considering or representing a person as having physical or mental issues, in other words as 'lacking,' assumes that her opinion, words, and presence/existence in her position are unusual and abnormal. Consequently, this woman is seen as illegitimate in holding that position."

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[16] Haynes 2018

[17] Levendusky 2019

Hate speech as a political tool

There are cases discussed in the literature where political leaders, particularly populist ones, use gender role stereotypes and prejudice to achieve political goals and increase their public visibility[18]. Public figures, especially those in high state positions or party leaders with significant influence, often use gender-based (and other) hate speech, promoting gender stereotypes in their speeches. This behavior contributes to the spread of gender-based hate speech, further reinforcing stereotypes about gender roles and simplifying the qualities attributed to any gender.

In the year following the war, particularly during the pre-election period, hate speech was especially evident in the speeches of political leaders. This included calls for violence, derogatory remarks about women, and stereotypical expressions based on gender roles. This period saw the highest intensity of hate speech in the collected data, particularly from various months in 2021. While it would be incorrect to attribute the intensity of hate speech solely to the actions and neglect of political leaders, the tendency of social media users to mimic these leaders and use similar tactics against political opponents is a significant factor.

For example, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, when speaking about an opposition politician who creates video content from his kitchen, said, '...[he] says I am a man, I don't get out from under the kitchen table… You first get out from under the kitchen table then advise others to get out of Facebook.'[19] Such remarks legitimize the stereotype that politics is a male domain and belittle his political opponent by reinforcing the notion that the kitchen is a woman's place. Another example is a quote from opposition member and former Justice Minister Arpine Hovhannisyan, actively shared in the media, where she advised the Prime Minister to commit suicide.[20] When media outlets shared this news, they used hate speech as a headline, inciting more anger and sparking new waves of hate speech in the comment sections.

Such actions by people with large audiences are a threat on multiple levels. The strengthening and legitimization of hate speech, the propagation of violence, and gender stereotypes are influential factors that deter women from public positions and professions, discourage them from taking stands on various matters, or prompt them to leave the field altogether. Another significant negative consequence is the creation of new waves of hate speech as a result of its circulation on social media platforms and its proliferation in comment sections and elsewhere. In this context, it can be stated that the media themselves contribute to the intensity and volume of hate speech by choosing headlines that promote anger and dislike, knowing that many users read only the headline rather than the article's content.

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[18] Waisbord 2020

[19] Nikol Pashinyan's speech from Parliament Podium, 25.06.2020, **https://factor.am/264683.html**

[20] Arpine Hovhannisyan's post on Facebook to Nikol Pashinyan, 02.03.2021, **https://mamul.am/am/news/204255**

CONCLUSION

The results of the study make an important contribution to understanding hate speech in the Armenian online space, its gendered aspect, and its use in political discourse. This work proves that in online, unregulated spaces, hate speech can reach uncontrollable levels. Even news agencies that delete all comments containing hate speech are unable to ensure its complete absence on their platforms. The study also demonstrated that the targeting of female public figures is primarily gender-based and intensifies during political posts. Against the backdrop of events in the country, elements of online hate speech, such as profanity and other types of offensive and derogatory language, are regularly gaining momentum. These and other indicators provide a solid basis for developing sound proposals for legislative changes, promoting self-regulation mechanisms, and creating educational policies.

To achieve the desired results, in addition to public administration bodies, public and business sector organizations can also benefit from the data obtained. They can do this by developing ethical rules for their organizations or professional communities and contributing to the fight against hate speech in the Armenian online domain by preventing their online spaces from becoming venues for hate speech propagation.

However, there is still a large area to be covered with further research to better understand the conditions under which each component of hate speech spreads. In particular, it is very important to understand the use of hate speech in political struggle, to identify the mechanisms used, and to reveal their directionality or the conditions under which it occurs spontaneously. All this can contribute to healthier public communication by reducing the marginalization of certain groups in society (e.g., gender groups, political teams, people with disabilities) and the spread of stereotypes about them.

LEGAL STUDIES

Online harassment and hate speech have become widespread problems, significantly affecting women, especially those who are public figures, such as politicians, journalists, and human rights activists. This targeted hate speech not only violates individuals' rights to free expression but also has a "freezing effect," discouraging women from participating in public roles or expressing their opinions.

Local Regulations

The Constitution of the Republic of Armenia guarantees freedom of speech and expression[21], but prohibits incitement to national, racial or religious hatred[22]:

The primary regulation against hate speech in Armenia is provided by the Criminal Code, but there are also clauses in civil and administrative legislation that may address related issues.

The combination of criminal, civil, and administrative measures in the fight against hate speech provides a framework that is somewhat similar to the approaches of several European countries. However, significant gaps remain that need to be addressed to ensure a comprehensive and effective fight against hate speech, particularly in terms of distinguishing the grounds and forms of hate speech and their legal regulation. Civil and administrative laws provide additional means for individuals to seek redress and for authorities to regulate and prevent the spread of hate speech, thereby promoting a more inclusive and respectful public discourse.

Criminalizing hate speech balances between the protection of free speech and the prevention of harm caused by hate speech. Armenia's approach, as reflected in its Criminal Code, aligns somewhat with international standards, focusing on incitement to hatred in public environments and the media. However, the articles primarily address hatred based on national, racial, and religious grounds, while hatred based on gender, political, sexual, and other social characteristics is largely excluded from this scope. In particular, Article 329 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Armenia criminalizes actions aimed at inciting national, racial, or religious hatred that are carried out publicly or through the media or the Internet, against individuals or groups based on nationality, race, or religion. Penalties for such actions[23] may include fines, correctional work, or imprisonment, depending on the severity and scale of distribution.[24]: Compared to punishments in European countries such as Germany or France, the punishments in Armenia are generally lighter.

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[21] RA Constitution, article 42, **https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=143723**

[22] RA Constitution, article 77, **https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=143723**

[23] RA Criminal Code, article 329 **https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=191266**

[24] RA Criminal Code, article 330 **https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=191266**

However, the articles do not address hatred manifested on many other grounds, thereby excluding them from the scope of legal regulation. For example, hate speech based on political views is often omitted from legal provisions, allowing such expressions to evade appropriate punishment. Similarly, gender-based hatred, which is also widespread, is not specifically mentioned in the law. Hate speech based on social status is also frequently overlooked. For instance, hate speech targeting individuals based on poverty or unemployment often escapes legal scrutiny, allowing discrimination to spread. Similarly, hate speech based on sexual orientation and cultural differences is often neglected. For example, hate speech against sexual minorities and certain cultural groups frequently does not receive an appropriate legal response.

Thus, in order to ensure a comprehensive fight against hate speech, it is necessary to include all grounds of hate speech in the legal regulations.

The Civil Code of the Republic of Armenia provides mechanisms that can indirectly address hate speech.

- *Defamation and insult:* Under civil law, individuals have the right to seek compensation for defamation and insult. If hate speech includes defamatory statements or insults that harm a person's honor, dignity, or business reputation, the injured party may file a civil lawsuit for damages.

- *Non-material damage:* The Civil Code allows for compensation for non-material damage (moral damage) caused by actions that violate personal rights, including dignity and honor. Hate speech that causes psychological harm or distress may fall under this provision.

Administrative legislation of Armenia[25] includes provisions that may address hate speech in certain settings, particularly in the contexts of public and media. For example, Article 182 of Code "On Administrative Offenses" provides for liability for the violation of public order, including the failure to comply with the legal requirement of a serviceman or police officer while performing their duties of maintaining public order and ensuring public safety. This includes cases of expressing hate speech at public events. Such provisions may also be used to address forms of hate speech or violations of public order through social media or the media, thus preventing the spread of hate speech in the public domain.

Law "On Mass Media" in Armenia[26] regulates the activities of the media and includes a provision to prevent the spread of hate speech, in particular Article 7 prohibits the spread of information promoting criminal acts. Therefore, the media is prohibited from disseminating content that incites hatred or discrimination based on nationality, race, or religion. However, it does not explicitly address hate speech

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[25] RA law on administrative offenses, **https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?docid=73129**

[26] RA law on mass media, **https://www.arlis.am/documentview.aspx?docid=137**9

based on gender, sexual orientation, political views, or other categories, leaving significant gaps in the law. Moreover, it should be emphasized that this does not refer to comments made under posts published by the media, even though these comments also fall within the media's responsibility.

Law "On ensuring equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men"[27] is aimed at preventing discrimination and promoting equality in Armenia. It includes provisions that can be utilized to combat hate speech.

- The law provides mechanisms to address and review acts of discrimination, which may include hate speech. It outlines the rights of individuals to seek redress and the responsibilities of public authorities to prevent discriminatory practices.

Case Studies from ECHR

The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) case "Delphin v. Estonia".[28]

Moderation of comments on media websites and social media pages is a crucial process for preventing hate speech, discrimination, and offensive content. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) case "Delfi AS v. Estonia" clarified that media outlets are responsible for user comments published on their platforms if these comments contain hate speech or other illegal content. International and national laws require media and online platforms to prevent and remove comments containing hate speech, holding them responsible for their dissemination. Moderation plays a crucial role in preventing the spread of hate speech and discrimination, thereby helping to maintain public order and safety. It also fosters the development of healthy and constructive discussions by eliminating offensive and hateful content. Furthermore, moderation enhances the quality of posts by encouraging reasoned and respectful comments. It protects users from hate and abuse, which can improve the platform's reputation and increase user trust.

MTE & Index.hu Zrt. Against Hungary[29]

The case concerns comment moderation and control. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that holding a news website liable for offensive comments made by its users violated the website's right to freedom of expression. The court emphasized that while online platforms must have mechanisms to combat

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[27] RA Law "On ensuring equal rights and equal opportunities for women and men", Article 19, **https://www.arlis.am/DocumentView.aspx?DocID=83841**

[28] European Court of Human Rights, CASE OF DELFI AS v. ESTONIA, (Application no. 64569/09), **https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22appno%22:[%2264569/09%22]}**

[29] European Court of Human Rights, Magyar Tartalomszolgáltatók Egyesülete and Index.hu Zrt v. Hungary - 22947/13, **https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng#{%22itemid%22:[%22001-226196%22]}**

illegal content, states must also balance freedom of speech with restrictions on hate speech.

Sanchez v. France[30]

The case is a significant precedent regarding liability for the spread of hate speech on social media platforms. It drew the attention of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) due to its implications for the balance between freedom of speech and restrictions on hate speech. The ECtHR found that the decision of the French courts violated Sanchez's freedom of speech.

The court emphasized that individual responsibility for user comments on social media platforms should be governed by clear rules and principles. The ECHR stated that while politicians can be held accountable for the content on their social media pages, such responsibility must be proportionate and justified. The court emphasized that content moderation mechanisms on social media platforms must be effective in preventing the spread of hate speech while not infringing on freedom of speech. Thus, the Sanchez v. France case is important for several reasons. It underscores that freedom of speech does not entail unlimited rights. Social media platforms and users should be held accountable for the opinions they express, especially when these contain hate speech or discrimination. The court's decision illustrates the need to balance freedom of speech with the protection of public order, national security, and individual dignity.

These precedents emphasize that the moderation process must be both efficient and transparent, while simultaneously protecting freedom of speech and maintaining public order.

International Regulations

Turning to international regulations, the following are national laws and policies from various countries that address measures to combat online harassment and hate speech against women.

In the United States, the legal framework for online harassment and hate speech is fragmented. While the First Amendment to the US Constitution protects freedom of speech, it does not shield individuals from hate speech that escalates into threats or harassment. However, some forms of hate speech can be prosecuted under other laws, such as those addressing harassment, threats, or hate crimes. Various states also have anti-discrimination laws that address hate speech. The main legislative measures include:

- Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act (CDA)[31] grants online platforms immunity from liability for user-generated content, which makes it

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[30] European Court of Human Rights, Sanchez v. France [GC] - 45581/15,
https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#{%22itemid%22:[%22002-14074%22]}

[31] Congretional Research Service,Section 230 of the Communications Act of 1934
https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46751]}

more challenging to prosecute online harassment. However, recent discussions have centered on reforming Section 230 to increase platform accountability.

- The Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)[32], re-enacted in 2022, includes provisions against cyberstalking, online harassment, and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. It also introduces new violence prevention programs that focus on restorative and trauma-informed practices. In this context, the National Resource Center for Cyber Crimes Against Individuals was established.

- Despite these measures, enforcement remains difficult due to jurisdictional issues and the rapid development of technology.

The European Union and its member states have adopted a more comprehensive approach through the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and specific directives targeting hate speech.

The Digital Services Act (DSA)[33] aims to create a safer digital space with stricter regulations on how platforms deal with content that is illegal and against human dignity, including online harassment and hate speech[34]: It primarily focuses on very large online platforms (VLOPs), compelling tech giants such as Facebook, Google, and YouTube to moderate content in accordance with the Act's provisions. Additionally, the Act mandates transparency reports as a key operational mechanism. This means that these platforms are required to provide the supervisory authority with detailed reports on their moderation activities, which supports the comprehensive implementation of the Act's provisions. Violation of the provisions of the Act within the EU territory can result in fines of up to 6% of the global annual turnover of very large online platforms, an amount that exceeds, for example, the annual budget of Armenia. This is part of the EU's efforts to ensure that online platforms are held accountable for illegal and harmful content on their services, and to promote a safer and more responsible online environment. *For example, in 2023, Meta Platforms, the parent company of Facebook, is expected to have an annual global revenue of approximately $134.9 billion. If Facebook were to violate the Act's provisions in the EU, it could face fines of up to $8.1 billion.*

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[32] S.3623 - Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization Act of 2022 - **https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/senate-bill/3623/text**

[33] Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC (Digital Services Act), **https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32022R2065**

[34] European Union, The main goals of the Digital Services Act, **https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/safer-online**

The General Data Protection Regulation[35], which is primarily a personal data protection law, grants individuals the right to request the removal of personal data that is offensive or disturbing.

The EU Framework Decision on Combating Racism and Xenophobia (2008)[36] requires member states to criminalize incitement to violence or hatred directed against a group of people or a member of a group based on race, color, religion, nationality, or ethnic origin. Sanctions in EU countries can range from fines to imprisonment. Thus:

- **Article 130 of the German Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuchs)** [37] **criminalizes** incitement to hatred and/or calls for violent or arbitrary measures against different groups of the population. Excerpt from the article: "Anyone who disturbs public peace by a) inciting hatred, calling for violence or arbitrary measures, or b) attacking the human dignity of others by insulting, maliciously insulting, or defaming a particular group or individual due to their membership in a segment of the population shall be punished by imprisonment for a period of three months to five years."

- **Germany's Law to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks** (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz - NetzDG [38]) was adopted to implement consistent measures against hateful comments, fake news, and misinformation on internet platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, ensuring their quick removal. However, the law has also faced criticism, particularly from media representatives, human rights defenders, activists, and various media and economic associations. In 2017, David Kaye, the UN Special Report on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, also criticized the law in his June 1 report. The criticisms primarily highlight concerns that the law could limit freedom of speech and opinion, posing a risk of censorship. According to the law, social networks are required to remove or block hate speech within 24 hours. Violations of the law or procedures can result in fines ranging from €500,000 to €5 million, and in some cases, up to €50 million.[39]:

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[35] General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR, **https://gdpr-info.eu/**
Council of Europe Decision No. 2016/679, a decision of the European Union through which the European Parliament and the European Commission strengthen and implement the protection of personal data of all persons in the European Union (EU). The decision is also aimed at exporting data from the EU.

[36] Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA of 28 November 2008 on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law, **https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32008F0913**

[37] German Criminal Code (Strafgesetzbuch – StGB), **https://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/englisch_stgb/**

[38] The Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz, NetzDG), **https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2021-07-06/germany-network-enforcement-act-amended-to-better-fight-online-hate-speech/**
Gesetz zur Verbesserung der Rechtsdurchsetzung in sozialen
Netzwerken (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz - NetzDG), **https://perma.cc/RW47-95SR**

[39] Hate crime on the Internet, Die wichtigsten Themen des Bundesamts für Justiz, (The Ministry of Justice oversees the enforcement of the law),

- **Criminal Code of France[40] and laws on press** prohibit public or private communication that is defamatory or offensive, or that incites discrimination, hatred, or violence against a person or group based on place of origin, ethnicity, nationality, race, religion or belief, gender, sexual orientation, or disability.Articles 225-1 and 225-2 of the Criminal Code address public and private communication that is defamatory, offensive, or incites discrimination, hatred, or violence. Article 225-4 of the same law establishes penalties for crimes related to provocation, defamation, discrimination, or violence.

- **The bill on the Fight Against Hate Speech in French Social Networks[41]** , introduced in July 2019, requires that websites are required to delete content containing hate speech within 24 hours of publication. Failure to comply with this requirement is punishable by up to one year in prison and a fine of up to €15,000. However, on June 18, 2020, the French Constitutional Council rejected a significant portion of the draft law.[42]

France's law on "Information manipulation"[43] , (which was adopted on November 20, 2018, during the pre-election period to combat fake news) strengthens control over social media publications and the activities of foreign media. According to the law, registered candidates or parties have the opportunity to challenge the spread of false information that may disrupt public order or influence the fair outcome of the vote. Online platform operators are required to create an easily accessible and visible system that allows users to report such information, especially when it involves content advertised on behalf of a third party[44]:

According to the Dutch Criminal Code[45], anyone who publicly, verbally or in writing, or by images or gestures, incites hatred or discrimination against people, or commits violence against a person or an individual's property on the basis of their

https://www.bundesjustizamt.de/DE/Themen/HasskriminalitaetInternet/Fragen/Fragen_node.html#faq10 018916

[40]Code pénal https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/texte_lc/LEGITEXT000006070719/

[41] Lutte contre la haine sur internet, https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/dossiers/lutte_contre_haine_internet

[42] Reuters, "France's top court rejects core of law targeting online hate speech,"2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-tech-regulation-idUSKBN23P32O/

[43] The French law against the manipulation of information, known as the "Law on the Fight Against the Manipulation of Information," https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000037847559/

[44] LOI n° 2018-1202 du 22 décembre 2018 relative à la lutte contre la manipulation de l'information (1), https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000037847559

[45] Netherlands Criminal Code (Wetboek van Strafrecht), https://wetten.overheid.nl/BWBR0001854/2024-01-01/#BoekTweede_TiteldeelV_Artikel137c

race, religion or belief, sex, physical, psychological or mental disability, shall be punished with imprisonment for no more than two years or with a fine of the fourth degree (Articles 137c, 137d).

Sweden's Incitement to Population Group Hatred Act was enacted in 1948 and initially only criminalized incitement to hatred based on "origin" and religion. In 1970, the law was amended to specifically include race, color, and national and ethnic origin. In 2002, it was further expanded to cover hate speech based on sexuality, and in 2018, it was extended to include cases of gender identity and expression.[46]

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[46] Sweden's law on incitement to hatred against a population group, **https://skma.se/2017/06/gorel-granstrom-den-antisemitiske-bokhandlaren-och-kriminaliseringen-av-hets-mot-folkgrupp/**

LEGAL SUMMARY

In summary, despite certain efforts, the legislation of the Republic of Armenia in combating hate speech has significant gaps and faces challenges, particularly in the online domain.

Lack of online hate speech legislation

Comprehensive laws and effective supporting frameworks specifically addressing hate speech in the online domain are lacking. While there are general provisions against hate speech, they are not detailed enough to address the nuances and specific challenges of the internet, nor do they adequately identify the common grounds and forms of hate speech expression.

Lack of legal definitions

There is no clear definition of hate speech in Armenian legislation; instead, there are only certain legal provisions that can refer to hate speech, which are broad, vague, and indirectly related to the topic. This lack of a clear definition leads to several legal and social problems, including legal uncertainty and potential restrictions on free speech. While freedom of speech must be protected, the absence of a clear definition of hate speech can result in ambiguous restrictions that may harm free speech and serve as leverage for authorities. Without a clear definition, it becomes difficult to determine what expressions and actions constitute hate speech, leading to inconsistent and varied interpretations.

Definitions of hate speech can be found in various international documents, but there is no universal definition according to international human rights standards. Below are some examples where explanations and definitions of hate speech have been provided:

- Recommendation No. R (97) 20 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe to Member States on the Scope of Hate Speech**:** "The term hate speech should be understood as encompassing all forms of expression that spread, incite, promote, or justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, or other forms of hatred based on intolerance, including intolerant expressions of aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, as well as discrimination and hostility towards minorities, migrants, and people of different origins."

- The UN Strategy and Action Plan on Hate Speech provides a unified framework for the UN to address this issue globally. In this strategy, hate speech is defined as: "any kind of communication, by speech, writing, or conduct, that expresses contempt or uses discriminatory language against a

person or group based on their identity, such as their religion, ethnic origin, nationality, race, gender, or other identity factor."

- According to Article 20 of the UN International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, hate speech is defined as "any propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence."

A clear definition of hate speech in the legislation of the Republic of Armenia is a crucial step toward ensuring legal and social justice. Precise and unambiguous wording will aid in combating discrimination and hatred while maintaining a balance between freedom of expression and individual rights.

Implementation mechanisms

Enforcing hate speech laws online presents significant challenges that require a comprehensive approach. Legislative reforms, the development of technical and professional resources, raising public awareness, and expanding international cooperation are all necessary to address these challenges effectively.

Monitoring hate speech on online platforms requires highly qualified professionals with expertise in digital analytics, data mining [47], and other technological fields. Additionally, since social platforms are often based outside the borders of Armenia and are not legal entities within the country, enforcing laws against them is challenging and necessitates international cooperation.

As Robert Adilkhanyan, Head of the Cybercrime and High-Tech Crime Investigation Department of the Republic of Armenia's Investigative Committee's Main Department for Investigating Particularly Important Cases and First Class Counselor of Justice, stated in an interview, obtaining evidentiary data about actions that occur on the internet within seconds often requires investigators to make inquiries to the competent authorities of several states. For example, the victim may be located in one country, the criminal in another, the internet service provider in a third, and the stored data in a fourth. Certainly, the volume of data, the vast number of computer systems, the use of various concealment methods, electronic fund transfers, and other features specific to cybercrime present significant challenges for investigations. These difficulties necessitate that investigators master modern technologies to effectively obtain accurate evidence and solve crimes.

Additionally, the Republic of Armenia ratified the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime in 2008, which is a fundamental and comprehensive international agreement in this field, defining a core list of crimes considered cybercrimes. The computer laboratory operating within the Committee since 2019 is regarded as one

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[47] Data mining is the process of extracting and discovering patterns in large data sets involving methods at the intersection of machine learning, statistics, and database systems.

of the best in the region due to its high level of technical sophistication and professional capabilities.

Despite the efforts made in this field, the timeliness of requests for legal assistance sent to the competent authorities of other states remains a significant issue. In cases involving such requests, it can be challenging to obtain critical information for the investigation within a reasonable timeframe. Additionally, even when such information is received, the technical capabilities of Armenian internet operators often fall short. For instance, they may struggle to obtain subscriber data due to the provision of the same IP address (NAT-IP) to hundreds of subscribers simultaneously.

Lack of comprehensive warning and monitoring systems

Balancing free speech and platform accountability remains a contentious issue. There is a lack of robust online reporting and monitoring systems for hate speech incidents, which leads to underreporting and inadequate data collection. This hampers efforts to understand the scope of the problem and develop targeted interventions. Many women do not report online harassment due to fear of retaliation or a lack of confidence in legal remedies. Detecting and combating hate speech are crucial for maintaining public order and preventing discrimination. However, when restricting freedom of speech, it is essential to apply clear mechanisms to prevent potential abuses by the state. In this context, it is important to ensure that hate speech definitions are not used as tools for silencing dissent. As mentioned, laws should provide a clear definition of hate speech, on which all decisions should be based. These definitions should include specific criteria to differentiate between hate speech and free speech.

Obligation of intermediaries

The legal framework does not clearly define the responsibilities of internet intermediaries (e.g., social media platforms, hosting providers) regarding the management and removal of hate speech content. This uncertainty can result in either over-censorship or under-censorship by these platforms.

Public awareness and education

There is a gap in public awareness and education regarding what constitutes hate speech and the legal consequences of engaging in such behavior online. This lack of awareness contributes to the continued spread of hate speech on digital platforms. It is also noteworthy that the RA law on the "State Program for the Development of RA Education until 2030" does not reference hate speech, online hate speech, cybercrimes, or cyberbullying.

Balancing freedom of speech and its regulation

RA legislation struggles with the need to balance the protection of free speech against the regulation of hate speech. Achieving this balance is crucial but challenging, particularly in the context of diverse and politically sensitive online discourse.

Addressing these gaps requires a multifaceted approach, including legislative reform, capacity building for law enforcement, development of reporting and monitoring mechanisms, public education campaigns, and cooperation with international bodies and internet intermediaries.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for digital policy

The recipients of the proposals presented in this section are the Ministry of High-Tech Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Justice. Supporting parties include international and local donor organizations, as well as representatives from civil society and media organizations.

Proposal 1. Develop digital solutions capable of automatically identifying content containing hate speech in Armenian, including variations using the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets, within the comments section of social media posts. These tools can enhance the monitoring process by quickly detecting and flagging offensive content, thereby contributing to more effective enforcement and moderation efforts.

Proposal 2. Support the establishment of the "Digital Ambassador" institution in Armenia, which will serve as a representative of the Republic of Armenia and its society in relations with global technological platforms. This role will be crucial in protecting the digital rights of Armenian citizens, promoting a reliable online environment free from discrimination and hate speech, and ensuring democracy and human rights protection in the digital domain. The NGO "Multilateral Information Institute," as part of the "Media Development Program of Armenia" implemented by Internews Network through USAID, has already initiated steps towards establishing this institution.

Proposal 3. For local registered mass media, develop policies for moderating content (in particular, comments) published by third parties (users) in the online environment under the posts (articles, photos, videos, etc.) on the social media platforms of the mass media, with implementation as a mandatory condition. The policy and/or legislative initiative should include oversight, transparency, and accountability, as well as monitoring mechanisms. In this regard, obligations towards social media platforms can be defined by including certain provisions in the RA Law "On Electronic Communication". Content moderation responsibility for local media can be stipulated in the RA Law "On Mass Media".

Proposal 4. To create favorable relations and cooperation initiatives with global media platforms, within the framework of which hate speech control by these platforms will be possible in Armenian, as well as in Armenian language with Latin and Cyrillic alphabets. This aligns with the terms and conditions of use of these platforms and international standards, which are mandatory for regulating public communication and ethics in the online environment.

Recommendations for education policies

The recipients of the proposals presented in this section are the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports. The supporting parties are international and local donor organizations, representatives of civil society, and media organizations.

Proposal 1. Include in the state education strategy an action plan focused on combating hate speech and enhancing students' awareness and knowledge of ethical communication, human dignity, and online behavior. This plan should align with national education goals for addressing hate speech. Develop steps and support activities to implement formal, curricular, and informal extracurricular initiatives (such as training programs, textbook content revision, and the establishment of groups) and public awareness campaigns. Propose legislative reforms and initiatives to eliminate hate speech in educational institutions, ensuring they meet international educational norms and standards.

Proposal 2. Develop policies on anti-hate speech, ethical communication, and online behavior for all types of educational institutions (pre-school, secondary, and higher education). Implement control mechanisms to ensure these policies are localized and applied effectively. Organize extensive awareness campaigns and collaborate with civil society organizations to promote and enforce these policies.

Policies 3. Collaborate with the Public Television Company to develop educational and awareness TV projects aimed at raising public awareness about the harmful effects of hate speech, promoting ethical communication, and encouraging responsible online behavior.

Recommendations for mass media self-regulation

The recipients of the proposals presented in this section are public and media organizations involved in mass media self-regulation, as well as the Media Ethics Monitoring Body (MM). Supporting parties include representatives of civil society and media organizations.

Proposal 1. Review the Regulations of ethical principles of Armenian media and journalists[48] (hereinafter referred to as the Regulations) and in addition to clauses 3.5.6 and 3.5.7 of the "Editorial independence" section of the third chapter of the Regulations, add:

A) a clause on the media's obligation and responsibility regarding the blocking of hate speech initiated by the same user,

B) a provision on the exclusion of steps that attract public attention and create a breeding ground for hate speech through artificial, unnecessary, and non-essential headlines that capture the audience's attention, out of context, emotional, and anger-inducing, as well as the process of targeting an individual or a certain group caused by these actions.

Recommendations for legal reforms to Combat Hate Speech

The recipients of the proposals presented in this section are: the RA Government, the National Assembly, and the Ministry of Justice. Supporting parties include international and local donor organizations, as well as representatives of civil society and media organizations.

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[48]Code of ethical principles of media and journalists of Armenia **https://ypc.am/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Code-of-Ethics_arm_edites_May-18-2024.docx.pdf**

Proposal 1. Legislatively define "hate speech" and related terms, including online hate speech, hostility, incitement to violence, blasphemy, sexual blasphemy, and discrimination. Establish penalties and forms of liability for both legal entities and individuals involved in moderation or propagation of hate speech. Develop local legislation to combat hate speech, addressing its use in both online and offline environments by citizens, officials, mass media, state, private, and public institutions, as well as individuals with public authority, public actors, political figures, and civil servants. Clearly delineate the boundary between freedom of speech and hate speech, defining criteria for measurement and identification while preventing restrictions on freedom of speech and unjust prosecutions based on accusations of hate speech.

Proposal 2. To ensure accountability of social media platforms, it is necessary to amend the RA Law "On Freedom of Information" by expanding the list of entities required to provide information.

A) **Add to Article 3 of the law:** "Article 3. Basic Concepts Used in This Law: *'Information management'* includes state and local self-government bodies with information, state institutions, organizations financed from budgets, as well as public organizations and their officials, and social media platforms providing services **in the digital domain of the Republic of Armenia and/or operating as legal entities and/or digital providers**."

B) **Add to point 2 of Article 7 of the Law:** "Article 7. Ensuring Accessibility and Publicity of Information: 2. The person responsible for information must promptly inform the public through immediate publication or by another accessible means about information under their control that could prevent threats to state and public security, public order, public health and morals, the rights and freedoms of others, the environment, and individuals' property, **as well as dangers related to the spread of hate speech online.**"

C) **Edit Article 7 of the law by adding point 3.1** - "Article 7. Ensuring accessibility and publicity of information. "3.1 Social media platforms are required to publish an annual report including the following data: a) the number of removed content containing hate speech, analytical and demographic statistics related to them, b) chronological information about the actions taken. Annual reports are submitted to the authorized body and published on official websites of social media platforms.

Proposal 3. Make an amendment to the RA Law "On Administrative Offenses" to apply fines to platforms (or companies serving the platforms) that do not comply with the requirements of the RA Law "On Freedom of Information." **Article X. Breach of Obligations by Social Media Platforms:** Social media platforms that do not submit reports to the authorized body within the prescribed period and procedure, or who fail to publish, publish incompletely, or publish reports containing false information as required by the RA Law "On Freedom of Information," are subject to administrative responsibility.

Proposal 4. Require media platforms to monitor hate speech and misinformation more strictly and remove such content upon user request. Through legislative change or initiative, this can be aligned with international practices, including the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) and the NetzDG. (Legal research has already addressed these two models.)

Develop a Digital Services Regulation Act that governs information shared on digital platforms and addresses the following: a) Social media platforms are required to develop and implement clear policies aimed at controlling and preventing hate speech and misinformation taking into account the political context at the national level where they operate. b) Social media platforms are required to publish annual reports containing data on removed content and actions taken. c) Social media platforms must create a simple and accessible system that allows users to file complaints about content containing misinformation and/or hate speech. d) Social media platforms are obligated to remove misinformation and/or content containing hate speech within a specified period after receiving a complaint from users. e) Social media platforms must maintain reports on the registration of complaints and removed content, which must be submitted annually to the authorized body.
In case of non-compliance with the requirements of this law, social media platforms are subject to administrative liability in the manner and to the extent prescribed by the Law of the Republic of Armenia.

To ensure point "D" of this proposal, the state can support social media platforms by creating a national official platform for reporting content containing misinformation and hate speech. This could follow the example of the PHAROS portal[49] in France, a specialized portal developed by Thales for the French Ministry of the Interior, which allows Internet users in France to report illegal online content and behavior.

Proposal 5. Cooperate with the Bar and engage independent lawyers to investigate hate speech cases and work with the police and government (e.g., the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) in the US). Independent lawyers can conduct neutral investigations and protect the rights of victims of hate speech. Collaboration with the government and the police will enhance information exchange and process coordination, contributing to the efficiency of justice. Independent research and transparency will increase public trust and support. Lawyers and paralegals can also implement legal education programs and training to improve the knowledge and skills of the public and law enforcement officers regarding hate speech.

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[49] Pharos Portail, **https://www.internet-signalement.gouv.fr/PharosS1/etape/contenu**

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"Get out of the "kitchen" and then advise others to get out of Facebook. Pashinyan" - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFsUFK7E7bU/